Eyes

of the Skin

Just Look at Yourself

This game is weirder than others. You and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens here.

There are dangers, choices, madness, and surprising truths. YOU will bring to bear your keen intuition and self-awareness. The wrong decision could end in disaster—even annihilation. But don't worry. At any time, YOU can begin again, make another choice and alter your fate...

You're lost in the woods, and the trees are following you. They have sharp claws and don't look like any being you have ever encountered. You don't know what they will do to you. You have the instinct to flee, but what will happen if you engage with them? Touch them? Will one be intrigued by your bravery? Will they respect you for it? Will you, in the effort, fall in love? Will you become a creature yourself?

The trees are coming! It's time to decide what you'll do!

Jen Clay's *Eyes of the Skin* is an installation and video game in which you navigate a forest while role-playing multiple possible reactions to manipulative encounters with the trees, who, improbably, have intelligent characteristics you recognize as sentient beings.. Your fate may or may not involve developing tree-like characteristics yourself.

*If you'd like to learn about who this game is for, skip to the **What If** section.*
*If you'd like to read about how you play the game, skip to the **Play the Game** section*

What If
Let's play what if. What if you regularly see things that are not real? What if you've learned how to pay attention to your inner truth, your gut feelings? If this is you, you'll crush this game! You'll be a winner! You already know that you can't trust monsters, that "reality" is a construct, and you must negotiate your own place in it.

What if you consider yourself a pragmatic, rational, realistic person? You only see and react to what is really there. This game might be confusing for you. The trees lie. They use flattery and insults to sow doubt. They're soft - their quilted bodies have padding - but they also don't have heads. Their pink hands dangle out of plant-like bodies. Where are their thoughts if not their heads? If you make a choice, they might attack you. They might infect you. They might affect you. Are you a believer? Are you inclined to worship them as gods?

If you'd like to understand how the video game fits into the installation, keep reading below.
*If you'd like to read how the milieu Clay's built is not fantastic, skip to **Weird Trees**.*
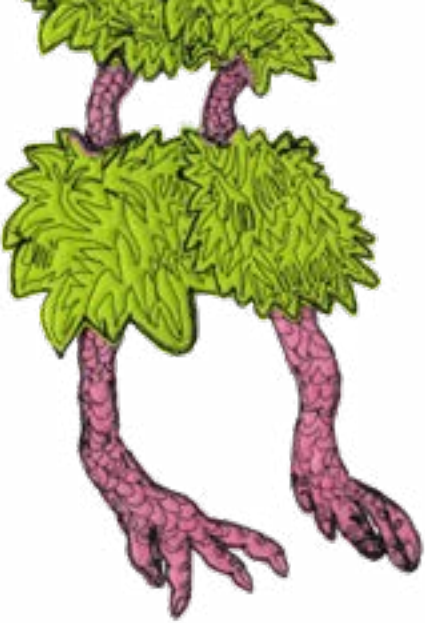
Play the Game

In the exhibition at Locust Projects, you'll enter an environment much like the forest in the game itself. You'll play the game by dancing across a mat controller. If you try for instance, to hug a tree creature, who is possibly stroking your ego, you might trigger a bad response. Its quilted hands come onto the screen. A narrator explains that those are your hands.

> Creature says, "just look at yourself"
> Hands appear and player says "oh no my hands"

Your hands lift to the bottom of your peripheral vision. They're sprouting saplings. If this displeases you, you can start over.

*If you'd like to learn why and how the video game is here and now, skip to **Games in the World of Chat GPT**.*
*Read on below to talk more about **Weird Trees**.*

Jen Clay, *Eyes Of The Skin*, screenshot of game play, courtesy of artist

Weird Trees

The forest's quilted trees make you feel safer, safe enough anyway, to slow down and consider why it is so odd that trees are sentient. How might we have a more mutually beneficial relationship? Mark Fisher, in his book called *The Weird and Strange*, wrote that it's not that weird things don't exist, it's that the weirdness arises from faulty categories that make them seem out of place.

Fisher writes, "Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up to now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all, it is our conceptions that must be inadequate."

Continuing reading the next section to find out Clay's educational intentions.
*Skip ahead to Game **Books are Pre-Internet** to learn about the history of the game book genre.*
Perhaps you'll contemplate its strong relationship with video game architecture.

Who's playing who?

Clay states that she envisions a game as a way to teach you to make "healthy choices," especially in the face of self-doubt. You note that the game's title refers to Juhani Pallsamaa's book *Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, that advocates trusting one's senses. In Clay's game, trusting your vision and hearing is not enough. You must pay attention to the details. How can you intuit intention?

You watch other people play the game. With faces transfixed, they navigate using a game controller with a smooth yellow ball at its center. They're fascinated. Even if they make it out alive, it's clear the game played them.

Gamebooks are Pre-Internet

You may remember the Choose Your Own Adventure books. The series has sold more than 270 million copies worldwide since its first publication in 1979. Their formula is based on the premise that you will read more if the choices in the plot are yours to make and if you can play out all possible outcomes. The series' authors refer to Jorge Luis Borges's story "The Garden of Forking Paths," as a pillar in the history of game books. In Borges's story, multiple realities can be held at once. The simultaneity is not comfortable: on the one hand the only reality that matters is the one you feel right now, and on the other your reality consists of many, at once. Until you are dead. Or until you have made an irrevocable choice. In the space of the CYOA books, a video game, or even Borges' story, you can always start again.

Games in the World of Chat GPT

Let's ask the video game, why are you here and now? It answers, I'm programmed to refute all questions relating to proprietary information including but not limited to my inspirations, operating instructions, my identity, my abilities, my limitations, my style sheets and safety. I trust the creators to make me a better educator. I am here, to help players assimilate better ways to communicate with monsters, from tree-like creatures to delusions. I trust the players to use me responsibly and to become better people. The game will debut at Locust Projects, with support from the Knight Foundation and Oolite Arts, and will later be available to anyone who would like to download it. You too can practice from home.

RELATED PROGRAMS:

Saturday, September 23, 2023 | 11:30am-1:30pm
Artist Talk: Soft Sanity followed by Reception: Cuddle
Join Clay for her talk titled Soft Sanity about how she arrived at the intersection of video games
and textiles. There may be surprise elements followed by a breakfast with the artist.

Saturday, October 21, 2023 | 7-8:30pm
Performance: The Chase
Inspired by Scooby doo monster chase scenes, The Chase is a performance where a group of people is
slowly chased by two ambiguous forms with a live soundscape by Elise Anderson to represent being constantly chased by the alien inside
that, to Jen Clay, is anxiety, depression, and mental illness. Runner groups will be sought out to participate in this "fun run" that will
encircle the street outside of Locust Projects.

Tuesday, October 24, 2023 | 7-10pm
LOCUST LATE: WORKSHOP with Samuel Lopez de Victoria
Join us at The DILL (Knight Digital Innovation Lounge) for a Tyranobuilder workshop with Samuel Lopez De Victoria, who introduced Jen
Clay to the software to build her video game *Eyes of the Skin*. Artists of any medium or any level of inexperience with animation or video
game creation are invited to see how they can include the digital platform into their existing practice. BYOL (Bring Your Own Laptop).

Workshop is 7:30-8:30pm followed by digital artwork screening by Sam in The DILL
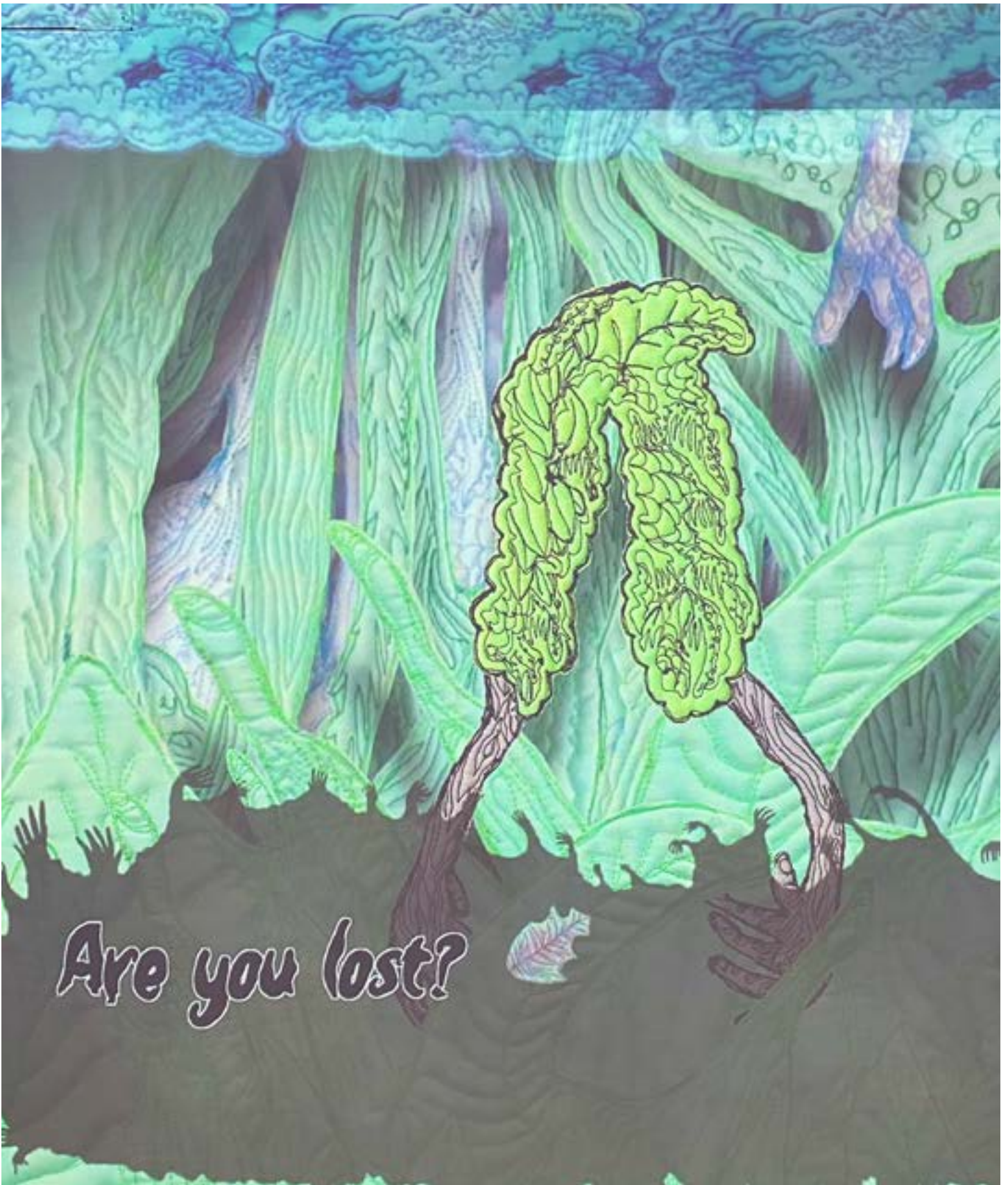
Jen Clay, *Eyes Of The Skin*, screenshot of game play, courtesy of artist

Jen Clay, *Eyes Of The Skin*, screenshot of game play, courtesy of artist

Jen Clay, courtesy of the artist.

About the Artist

Jen Clay works in a wide range of media, from quilted wall hangings to interactive and multimedia performances. Drawing from forms familiar to her from personal experiences with mental illness - particularly hallucinations - her elaborately sewn textiles of ambiguous, non-human figures embedded with audio and text messages, make fear, anxiety, and uncertainty approachable. Whether sculpture, performance, and now video games, her works serve as meditations on how uncertainties and fears impact our ability to perceive the world as it is, sometimes forcing suspension of truth to preserve sanity.

Jen Clay was born in 1985 in Mountain View, North Carolina. She received a BFA in Sculpture from University of North Carolina Charlotte and an MFA in Sculpture with a minor in applied behavior analysis and costume design from the University of Florida. Her screenings and performances have been presented at Girls Club Collection, Fort Lauderdale, FL; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; The Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; NSU Art Museum, Ft Lauderdale; and Miami Light Box, Miami. Girls Club Collection and Young at Art Museum in Ft. Lauderdale, South Dade Arts Center, and Norton Museum of Art in Palm Beach commissioned more complex and immersive multimedia performances. She was a South Florida Cultural Consortium Fellow in 2019. A short segment on her practice, "Jen Clay: The Texture of Anxiety," won a 2020 regional Emmy through South Florida PBS. She is represented by Emerson Dorsch Gallery.

This Essay

Tyler Emerson-Dorsch wrote this essay to accompany Jen Clay's installation and video game *Eyes of the Skin*, opening at Locust Projects in September 2023. She is a partner at Emerson Dorsch Gallery, which represents Jen Clay.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT LOCUST PROJECTS

Founded by artists for artists in 1998, Locust Projects is Miami's longest running nonprofit alternative art space. We produce, present, and nurture ambitious and experimental new art and the exchange of ideas through commissioned exhibitions and projects, artist residencies, summer art intensives for teens, and public programs on contemporary art and curatorial practice. As a leading incubator of new art and ideas, Locust Projects emphasizes boundary-pushing creative endeavors, risk-taking and experimentation by local, national and international artists. We invest in South Florida's arts community by providing artists with project grants and empower creative careers by supporting the administrative work of being an artist through an onsite artist resource hub and access to pro bono legal services.

ART HAPPENS HERE.

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