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## Expanding and Shedding the Self: Processing Selfdom Through Painting

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EXPANDING AND SHEDDING THE SELF:  
PROCESSING SELFDOM THROUGH PAINTING

by

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B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The absurd perpetual struggle, although entirely without hope of resolution, is the key to life's meaning, or perhaps, meaninglessness. The artist must work to live and live to work and find their place in an absurd world. Find joy in the questioning act of art making, make no attempt to escape the meaninglessness through pacifism, and face the chaos with awareness. I employ self-portraiture as a means to dig deeply into my experience and response to living. Self-portraiture morphs along with my experiences and keeps a record of my thought patterns. My body of work is the harvest of my seeds of reflection. Tying together past influences, existential questioning, and a Sisyphean philosophy to a life of art making, I unravel the inner outcomes of my studio practice. It is in retrospect, through distance, that these connections are fully realized.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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“Self-portraits are not innocent reflections of what artists see when they look in the mirror. They are part of the language painters use to make a point, from the simple ‘this is what I look like’ to the more complicated ‘this is what I believe in’.” -Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women’s Self-Portraits*

## SELF-PORTRAITURE

I paint in response to living, and to better understand myself. Self-portraiture enables introspection, supports the navigation of experiences, and processes reality. I am able to explore personal and ubiquitous feelings simultaneously, by pulling from the life I know and exposing it to others. Through investigating deeply, self-portraiture illuminates fears, and allows for perception changing meditations and reflections. I have been creating self-portraits, almost exclusively, for the past five years. When I began I could not have imagined how it would later affect me. I could not anticipate the heightened awareness. Painting was a physical act of skill building for me, but now I see it as a state of mind. At its best, a state similar to meditation and at its worst, compulsive unwanted thought generation.

### Early Influences: Theater and Punk

I grew up in a theater loving household, driving into New York City to catch Broadway plays and musicals every year, attending my actress sister's local performances, and spending all I had at age seventeen to take my sisters and I to the Metropolitan Opera House for a performance of Don Carlo. I fell in love with opera, not just the music, but the figuration of it; the blocking of human beings within a frame. I especially adore minimal interpretations, with vacuous spaces, that allow you to focus entirely upon the human drama, materializing out of, and fading into emptiness. In contrast to my highbrow interests, I performed in punk bands as a lead guitarist, and frequented counterculture shows. I obsessed over the in-your-face theatrics of legendary punk rockers like Johnny Rotten, Joe Strummer, Jello Biafra and the lesser known

“Tamata Du Plenty”. Any amount of over the top physicality was not enough to satisfy my love of awkward human bodies.

The performative aspect of visual art in comparison to theater interests me. When I create a work of art, I am performing for an audience who is not yet present. The drawing or painting is evidence of my energy and sense of direction. The adrenaline of a live performance cannot hinder or help me. I must cultivate that pressure within myself and dance like no one is watching, because no one is.

### Rockwell

My childhood home was ornamented with Norman Rockwell reproductions. Rockwell was, in fact, my introduction to visual art in many ways. How could I not be influenced by those exaggerated caricatures, and their awkward, gangly bodies floating in theoretical space? His dramatic blocking of figures and props echoed my theatrical interests. I am not responsive to Rockwell’s kitschy content, indicative of advertisement and mid-century American social propaganda, but I admire the skill it takes to make a plausible figure. I am interested in the art of making smudges of dirt elicit the same response as the warm face of another human being. I think, in that regard, Rockwell had an undeniable gift.

### Figurative Art

I subscribe to the intellectual vigor of figurative art. Serving as a perfect marriage between the physical and the intangible, the human body reveals the inescapability of the past and the inevitability of mortality. Figurative art has experienced intervals of challenge throughout time. Author and critic Donald Kuspit relayed the inherent value of figuration.

The best of abstract art gives us “lived sensuousness”, it conveys our alienation from ourselves. We get this, supposedly, higher experience, refined esthetic experience, but it separates us from the larger more existentialist situation. What interests me about this art (figurative art) is that it has existential relevance, it has existential value, and it reminds us that we exist despite the fact that we live in a world which seems, some say, inimicable to human existence...There is some sense of something being preserved here that is slowly being eliminated, eroded and having a problematic existence.<sup>1</sup>

In my view, anatomical knowledge of another has the ability to cultivate strong feelings of empathy and kinship that are necessary in a world where opinions are polarizing to a hateful level and human life is considered cheap.

#### Early works: Ophelia and Caryatid Series



**Figure 1** *Ophelia III*, 2016. Painted and photographed by the author in 2016.

During my undergraduate research I developed skills in figuration from painting and drawing nude models and through the act of making self-portraits. The initial appeal of self-portraiture was a strong desire to simply paint flesh. Figurative art has always captivated me. Even as a small child, I developed a love for Caravaggio. As time progressed I became driven to

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<sup>1</sup> Booth Gallery. “The Future of Figurative Art and Painting”. Filmed June 2016. YouTube video, 2:03:31. Posted July 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KoT65s8-O0>.

hone my skills in rendering the human body to greater understand the work to which I was so closely drawn.

While working as an undergraduate I created claustrophobic nude self-portraits framed in deep shadow boxes. Several iterations were explored, culminating in a large sepulchral box on the floor, with a small painting deep inside. This recumbent placement of the painting conveyed the sense of looking into a well or chasm. It was around this time that I attended a S.T.E.A.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) lecture, by a prominent civil engineer, dealing with the faulty integrity of modern-day columns and bridges. It provoked thoughts about literal and figurative pressure, and antiquitous structures. I expanded my focus to include gender roles and the relationship between antiquitous figures and contemporary “women’s work.” Caryatids became a jumping off point.



Figure 2 Caryatid, 2016. Painted and photographed by the author in 2016.

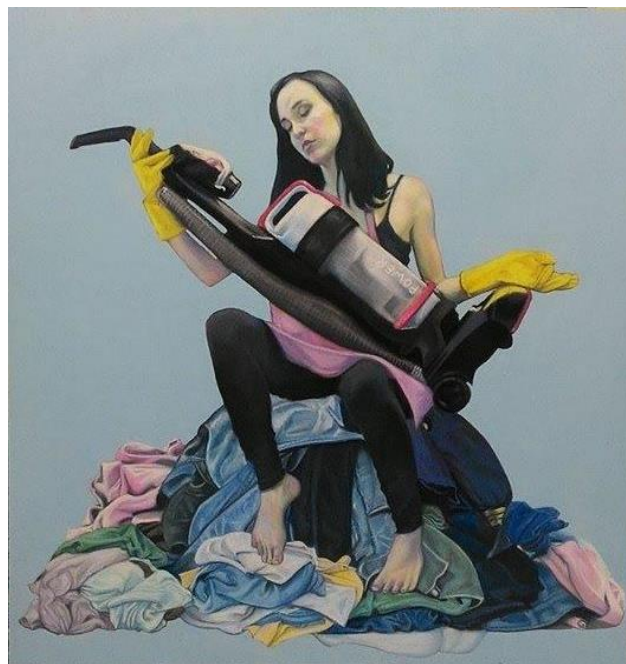


*Figure 3 Caryatid II, 2016. Painted and photographed by the author in 2016.*

In the paintings Caryatid I and II, I conveyed the trappings of domestic anxieties that weighed upon women. Serving as contemporary counterparts to the architectural female figures of ancient Greece, these caryatids embodied the treatment of women as domestic beasts of burden. The classical nature of the poses peaked my interest in timelessness.



*Figure 4 Atlas, 2016. Painted and photographed by the author in 2016.*



*Figure 5 Pieta, 2016. Painted and photographed by the author in 2016.*

I continued this theme into graduate school, borrowing from more recognizable antiquitous figures, such as Atlas and the Pieta. I painted these self-portraits not knowing why I



was drawn to the subject matter personally. I felt that social justice was important, and personal enough, but I did not yet have a particularly personal connection. Those first few graduate paintings did succeed in making me reevaluate my relationship to the work. I started to question why I was painting myself in claustrophobic, oppressive surroundings and what I found specifically uncomfortable. What was I reacting to? Being a woman, or being a human being?

### Egon Schiele

I am highly influenced by Egon Schiele. Perhaps a result of my childhood love of punk theatrics, his extreme physicality caught my eye. Egon Schiele represents a lot to me. In particular, I am fascinated by Schiele's ability to look at his own body. In his self-portraits, I envy his openness, crudeness, unapologetic portrayals and the illustration of feeling *in the body*. Perhaps in time, I may view his work differently, but at this moment I am 27 years old. Egon Schiele died at 28. Schiele represents the mountain a young artist must climb to achieve timelessness, and the burning star you must cultivate in yourself. "He had, 'Hans Tietze wrote in an obituary, 'extended all his vitality racing across a narrow space.'"<sup>2</sup> I connect Schiele with my other great obsession, Mozart. Both Austrian born, both living in Vienna, both with a debauchorous reputation, both died far too young and yet, it seems they made two lifetimes worth of work in less than one. Art is making a thing, and then making a better thing, then you keep doing that until you die. My strongest asset as an artist is my sense of urgency. My passion for figures like Mozart and Schiele has instilled this in me. I feel the pressures of borrowed time and I use that negative and turn it into a positive. That is the alchemy of the artist.

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<sup>2</sup> Marlow, Tim. *Schiele* (New York: Mallard Press, 1992), 6.

## PERCEPTUAL DISCREPANCIES

Delving into why I am specifically drawn to self-portraiture reveals hyper-personal details. I am compelled to share for the sake of context but hesitate to spell out the emotional specifics. Due to my past medical history dealing with minor strokes and aphasia, I have experienced a lack of self. Retroactively, through the act of painting, I have come to realize a lot about this personal absence. Peace of mind, I have come to understand, is found through the shedding of the self. Yet I am not pacified by this understanding. Self-portraiture is, for me, the inner battle between expanding and/or shedding the self and holding on as tightly as I can. Painting is an extension of thinking; and so, through the act of making, I may let these thoughts pass, and welcome the next, or dwell on them in detail.

When I create a self-portrait, my limits of self-perception are a source of frustration. I cannot get over what I am under enough to comment objectively. The most difficult thing about self-portraiture is that the self is changeable, fading and impermanent. The self is everything but singular. So I create self-portraiture in mass quantity. My hope is that my repetitive process will offer and reveal a deeper meaning for my body of work. Diving into the deep end and attempting to dig up every aspect of myself can be overwhelming, but the only remedy is continuation. Self-portraiture is embarrassing and uncomfortable, but it is my hope that this discomfort will yield the most wisdom.

### Pastel

When I began to paint, soft pastel was my medium of choice. There is an immediacy to chalk that appeals to my sense of urgency. Additionally, I fell in love with the transparency of chalk. It is a fast, reactionary process of questioning. I need that immediacy to maintain the

energy of the piece. I liken it to cooking rather than baking. Unfortunately, due to pastel's respiratory dangers I had to find some way of simulating that quality elsewhere, for a time. And so, I ventured out into matte medium and acrylics, watercolors, and gouaches in an attempt to maintain some translucency. For me, a veil-like quality helps emphasize internal substance and my need to reveal it.

## NUDE SELF PORTRAITURE

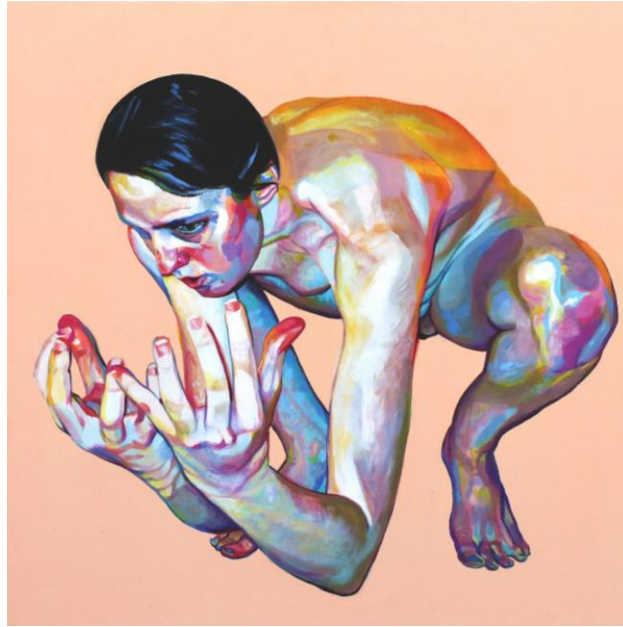


*Figure 6 Untitled, 2017. Painted and Photographed by the author in 2017.*

My instincts are figurative and nude. Nude self-portraiture allows me to tackle fear with defiance. In figure 6, an untitled self-portrait, I constructed a sense of confinement related to my early shadow box paintings. The pose is frontal and intimidating; the expression and gesture is austere. Tension is being created through the historical context of nudes with the tension of possible denial, indifference or maybe even rage.

It was Alice Neel's belief that, "nudity helps bring the viewer closer to the sitter." Her philosophy inspires me to paint the human form in all of its honesty and to navigate my interests in gender and self. As Jenny Saville would explain "the body is not a neutral ground of meaning,

but a copper plate to be etched”.<sup>3</sup> In my eyes the body is a story. It is transformative to make a body out of paint, and I am interested in the vulnerability and boldness I can capture through that process.



*Figure 7 Self, 2018. Painted and photographed by the author in 2018.*

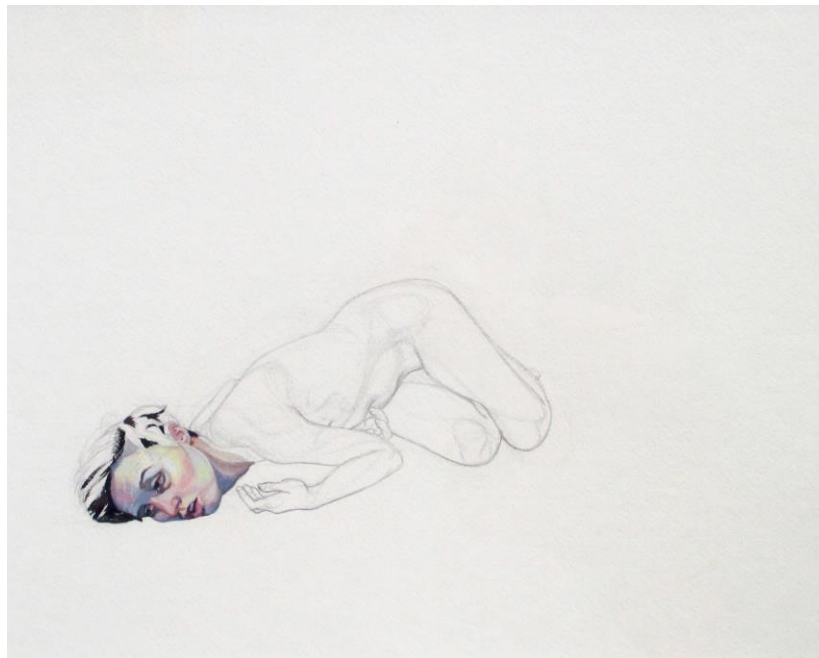
A relatively small piece entitled *Self*, done with acrylic on birch, further manipulates the nude. The polychromatic saturation of the figure is pressurized by the surrounding flat pink background. The exaggeration of form, acidity of color, and a central elongated eye conceivably harken to a transcendental, or metaphysical state of mind. Throughout history “nude self-portraits are evidence of the curiosity with which women artists were turning their gaze on themselves. They were not merely interested in what their bodies looked like, but also seem to

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<sup>3</sup> National Galleries. “Talks & Lectures | Jenny Saville”. Filmed March 2018. YouTube video, 1:03:51. Posted March 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2NQZ5ggYJQ&t=1220s>.

have been reaching for some kind of inner reality.”<sup>4</sup> It is that inner reality, the shock of living within a human figure, I am addressing in the pieces I create.

For the betterment of my process, I started to generate smaller, faster works with fewer preconceptions. I wanted to work through any hesitations and was craving more inference and discovery out of my work. Small, sometimes partially painted drawings were the outcome. Unfinishedness became a part of my language by virtue of the Pre-Raphaelites. Their incomplete underpaintings and ghostly drawings were something I could pull from and expand upon. I found the isolation of the figure from its head, through the use of color, shocking. I explored this in several iterations. In one particular work I kept the drawn body plain, to maintain the quiet bleakness of the image. The snow-blind whiteness of the page was important to capture the solitude.



*Figure 8 Untitled, 2017. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017.*

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<sup>4</sup> Borzello, Frances. *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 157, 158.



*Figure 9 Yopp, 2017. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017.*

A larger piece on untreated, unstretched canvas, entitled *Yopp*, came out of these smaller drawings and paintings. A centrally located, partially dislimbed figure is depicted in a state of transformation. Transparency, translucency, and opaqueness are working together. It is not clear if the figure is coming into or ebbing out of existence. Is this a reaction to being in a body or the anticipation of eminent impalpability?

### Theoretical Space

In my work, I often employ emptiness to surround my figures. When I was first honing my skills in drawing, I felt the Siberian emptiness of the page was something to fight against, but I later recognized the physiological usefulness of emptiness. In addition, I've experimented with using raw canvas because of the material relationship to paper and the act of drawing, along with its open-endedness, negation of information and void-like symbolism in painting. As in theater,

the pauses between delivered lines, and the balance of figures in negative space, is where the poetry often lies. At times, I use only what is necessary to state what must be stated. Or as realist painter Vincent Desiderio potently stated, “What is a painting? It is a void... and when you populate it with things you are coating the void to protect yourself against falling into oblivion, to non-identity.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Booth Gallery. “The Future of Figurative Art and Painting”. Filmed June 2016. YouTube video, 2:03:31. Posted July 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KoT65s8-O0>.



## GENDER, QUEER THEORY, OPERA AND CINDY SHERMAN

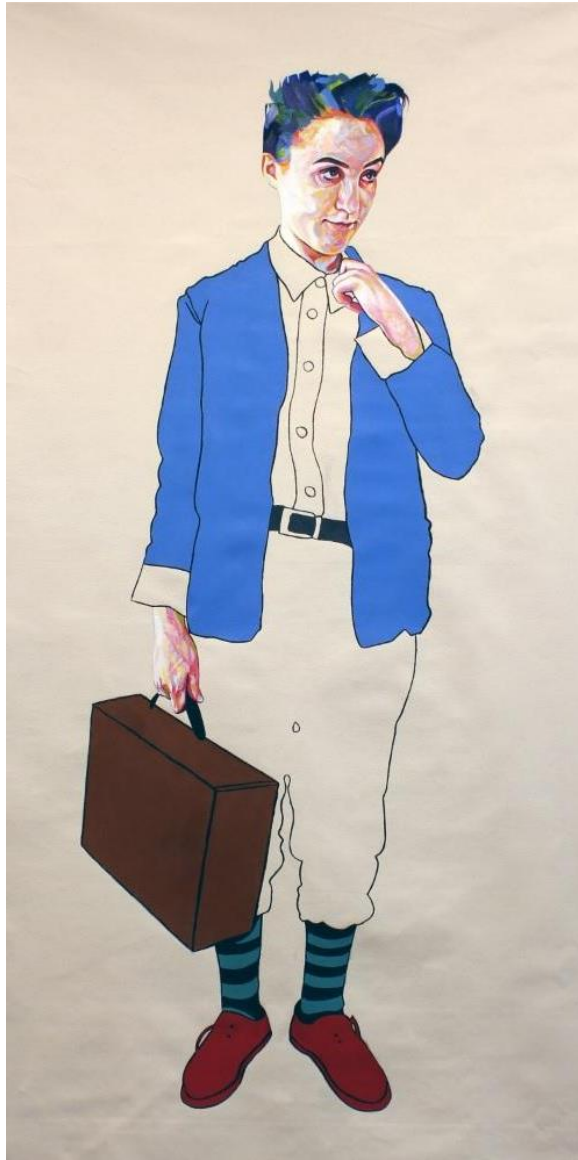
I am interested in *The Social Self*, and the work of American philosopher George Herbert Mead, “for whom the self is not a fixed inner essence of the individual, but is always in process by virtue of its reflexivity.”<sup>6</sup> Or better yet, the expoundation of this philosophy by Gagnon and Simon, who state that, “...gendered and sexual selves are reflexively renegotiated or reconfirmed throughout our lives, allowing for some fluidity.”<sup>7</sup> If it is the job of the artist to ask questions, and to set the table for others to join, I find it important to question the largest societal structures and foundations of self, such as gender. After all, it is not difficult for a studio artist to imagine that the self is a process without answer.

I was introduced to the “mythic twin motif” through operas such as Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, or Wagner’s *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*. In which the completion of one’s soul is made through the joining of gendered opposites. Mozart’s Papageno and Papagena, Wagner’s Siegmund and Sieglinde, or even the literary examples of Frankenstein and his promised wife represent that obtainable peace when your mirrored self is found.

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<sup>6</sup> Messerschmidt W, James, Patricia Yancy Martin, Michael A. Messer, and Raewyn Connell. *Gender Reckonings: New Social Theory and Research* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 147.

<sup>7</sup> Messerschmidt, Martin, *Gender reckonings: New Social Theory and Research*, 147.



*Figure 10 Papageno, 2017. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017.*



Figure 11 *Papagena*, 2017. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017

My experience with depersonalization allowed me to identify the performative nature of gender. It became apparent in the work when I created the paintings entitled, *Papageno* and *Papagena* within the first year of my graduate research. In exploration of theoretical space, voids and oversimplification I boiled down the gendering objects to the two-dimensional clothing of paper dolls. In contrast, I sought for complexity in the skin, and breaking the facial planes into vivid color. These pieces were painted directly onto untreated unstretched canvas. I was

exercising what Cindy Sherman referred to as “a productively shattered ego” in reference to her 1976 piece, *A Play of Selves*. In which Sherman “parses her psyche into discrete facets” through the use of photography and pantomime. The painting of the feminine figure was ironically and unfortunately destroyed, leaving me with Chaplinesque masculine figure to contemplate. This allowed me to isolate the piece’s significance.

### Large Works



Figure 12 *Höchste der Gefühle*, 2017. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017.



Figure 13 *Voi Che Sapete*, 2017-2019. Painted and photographed by the author in 2017-2019.

Within my pieces, *Höchste der Gefühle*, (The Highest of Feeling) and *Voi Che Sapete* (You Who Know) I utilized these variations of self to experiment with medium, scale and composition. In both pieces I am utilizing a resting point of view and manipulating the perception of reality. Perhaps these paintings depict something parallel to reality, like a thought bubble, or a dream, but stationary, like a moment seen through a window or on a stage.

Within *Voi Che Sapete*, the rhythm of the image lies in the strange balance of voids, line, flatness and figuration. The decorative pattern of the ottoman defines the pictorial space of that painted object, but conflicts with the lack of illusionistic depth of the rest of the image. The

curtain has a weight unlike the flattened props and costumes. The rug breaks all notion of plausibility, as if the “actors” within its parameters could plummet through it, like a cartoonish trapdoor. The relative veracity of the flesh forms islands of coloration, that guide the viewer's eyes through a funnel like composition. This is a very odd painting.

### Control and Letting Go

One of the greatest challenges when it comes to painting, in my opinion is getting out of your own way. It can be very tricky to create a compelling image without forcing ideas. My relationship with control is one of my central concerns, artistically and personally. I am always striving to loosen my grip on my work in ways that matter, like letting go of the preconception of the final image. Conversely, I believe in tightening up to a point of excellence, when it comes to the execution. I want to draw accurately and use design concepts to create tension. This harmony between control and letting go is the challenge when I aim to create plausible figures.

### Alice Neel

In returning to the previously mentioned Alice Neel, I must further explain her significance. I very much admire Alice Neel. When I look at Neel’s wobbly oil portraits I recognize the looseness in her work as an ingredient to embrace. “Her portrait gallery is a personal chronicle, a means of defining her life in terms of the people who enter it.”<sup>8</sup> This brings the value of portraiture into view as a humanitarian art form, with the ability to serve a social function. This elevates the individual and enforces the power of empathy. “In 1960, she described herself as a collector of souls-- It is in the nature of portraiture to memorialize, but here

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<sup>8</sup> Allara, Pamela. *Pictures of People: Alice Neel's American Portrait Gallery* (Hanover, University Press of New England, 1998), xvi.

Neel does more than this: she uses the genre to bring her subjects to visibility and so ascribe to them an autonomy that they were habitually denied-- Each sitter, no matter how pared down are spare in setting and situation, was conceived as a historical agent whose subjectivity was captured in paint.”<sup>9</sup> I view this as a noble act. Great paintings, as with time capsules, encase what is contemporary and deserving of timelessness; bringing the past into the future for the enrichment of others. Portraiture preserves our humanity and relationships.

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<sup>9</sup> Allara, *Pictures of People: Alice Neel's American Portrait Gallery*, xv.

## PORTRAITURE OF OTHERS AND ITS EFFECT ON SELF- PORTRAITURE



*Figure 14 Cornicello, 2016. Painted and photographed by the author in 2016.*





*Figure 15 Cross, 2016. Painted and photographed by the author in 2016.*

When you've painted yourself as many times as I have, portraiture of others becomes essential for balance and perspective. Repeated self-portraiture can start to have the effect of saying a word too many times. So, in order to reinvigorate an investigative process of finding likeness and essence, I sometimes turn to portraiture of others.

I am interested in capturing the personalities of the people in my life through the use of props and pose. I experiment with scale, repetition, and injecting improvised elements within the space. Painting and drawing human beings gives me the chance to be kind. In fact, I think painting a portrait can be a fulfilling exercise in generosity. It gives me the control to show someone exactly how I feel about them. I am exercising empathy by taking time out of my life to recognize others, to ask them questions, visually, and to just listen instead of waiting for my turn

to talk. This relates to my entire process of making visual work. Ask questions. Do not force “right” answers.



Figure 16 *Dogs Can't Eat Chocolate*, 2018. Painted and photographed by the author in 2018.

In the large portrait entitled *Dogs Can't Eat Chocolate* I utilized a cyclical composition indicative of clockwork; in this way the piece expresses the passage of time. This is also affirmed by the painted objects littered about the surface. Strong diagonals inject drama and movement into an otherwise passive scene. The slight cropping of the positive space implies the

infinity of the blue void; suspending the viewer in an intimate take on a bird's eye view, and creating a voyeuristic vantage point.



*Figure 17 Untitled, 2019. Painted and photographed by the author in 2019.*

The close analysis of another can actually change my paint application and process of working when I return to self-portraiture. There is more evidence of inquiry. After working through portraits of friends, in the spirit of rebirth, I am always excited to return to self-portraiture. Sometimes this return inspires a change of medium or approach. Adding an unfamiliar element, such as media I have not worked with before, prevents my tendency to pre-visualize the final product or illustrate forced answers. When using oil paint for the first time, in

the untitled self-portrait above, I additionally denied myself an underdrawing. This invigorated a sense of investigation.

In a subtler way, the following untitled self-portrait harkens back to the antiquitous poses of my earlier pastel paintings, but instead of props, it utilized the shadow as a psychological indicator, clutching onto those exaggerated feet, anchoring the figure to the void.

### Most Recent Paintings



*Figure 18 Untitled, 2019. Painted and photographed by the author in 2019.*

Recently I have been exploring a quieter side to this course of thought, in combination with the lessons I learned from the Pre-Raphaelites. In one particular Untitled drawing the



cerebral and formal use of the shadow, as a bridge between figuration and the void, was further explored. In comparison to previous pieces, I am excited by the gradual impact of this image. Through transparency, internal significance, pictorial arrangement, and execution this piece may best synthesize my concerns.



*Figure 19 Monster, 2019. Painted and photographed by the author in 2019.*



*Figure 20 Two-Headed Octopus, 2019. Painted and photographed by the author in 2019.*

It is in retrospect, through the prism of time, that I gain more perspective and am able to comment on my work. Or as Jenny Saville would say, “Painting is my natural language. I feel in my own universe when I am painting. But...there has been a drive in art schools to describe and to rationalize what it is that you're making, and that is a death knell to painting. Painting doesn't

operate like that. It works on all the irrational things.”<sup>10</sup>As In Chuck Close’s larger than life self-portraits, his likeness is obscured by your close proximity to the abstracted form and coloration. It is only as you distance yourself from the work that clarity comes and completes the image. That is my journey of art, and self-portraiture.

### Practice

The outcomes of my practice can be somewhat sporadic. Stepping back from my body of work over the last three years has revealed this to me. I jump mediums, I shift from local to fauvist coloration. I work transparently and opaquely. I frequently canter from intention to intention, making a few pieces in each vein. I view this as evidence of my mastery. An artist that relies upon style finds comfort in knowing that they can repeat themselves. I make leaps because I want to learn what I do not understand. I want to stay uncomfortable. With every piece that I make, my standard for myself rises and I am empowered by that trajectory. This, I believe is the purpose and outcome of a graduate level understanding of process.

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<sup>10</sup> Cooke, Rachel. “Jenny Saville: ‘I want to be a painter of modern life, and modern bodies!’.” The Guardian, June 9, 2012.

## CONCLUSION

All art is self-revealing. Without the act of painting I would not be able to distil my experiences. Painting does not offer answers to life's questions, but it acts as a diagnostic tool to help the brain survive, and accept the hardest of truths. The repetitive process of the artist may be embodied in Sisyphus. Who, as stated in Greek myth, was foredoomed to push a large boulder up a steep hill only to have it roll down again for eternity. This destitute figure is elevated to an almost heroic level by French philosopher and absurdist, Albert Camus. Camus says of Sisyphus, "This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."<sup>11</sup> This is the existential backbone of my process. The absurd perpetual struggle, although entirely without hope of resolution, is the key to life's meaning, or perhaps, meaninglessness. The artist must work to live and live to work and find their place in an absurd world. Find joy in the questioning act of art making, make no attempt to escape the meaninglessness through pacifism, and face the chaos with awareness.

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<sup>11</sup> Schneider J, Kirk, and Rolo May. *The Psychology of Existence: an Integrated, Clinical Perspective* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 72.



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