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Portrait: A Graphic Novel and Artist's Book

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At this exact moment, graphic novels are enjoying a heyday of popularity, profusion and attention. As the graphic novel medium matures and detaches itself from the "non-serious" reputation of comics, it is becoming clear that graphic novels are a powerful and effective art form, using the both verbal and the visual to relay their narratives. Portrait, the short graphic novel that is my senior art project, is intended to emphasize the artist's book character of the graphic novel, and serve as an example of how a graphic novel's artist's book characteristics allow communication of the artist's message effectively.

Due to the present explosion of not just new graphic novels, but film adaptations and a wider readership, situating my own work as a graphic novel required looking into the differences between comics and other sequential art genres. Through this exploration, it became clear that graphic novels evolved out of comics and have become actual artists' books, art objects in and of themselves. The narrative power of the comic form, and the familiarity of readers with it, gives graphic novels accessibility and the possibility of

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being true "novels" with complex storylines; at the same time, their nature as artists'

books allows a deeper and subtler conveyance of tone, theme, and message. In examining

the differences between the individual works and between the genres, a sense emerged of

how the graphic novel is uniquely situated between the visual and the verbal, giving it a

communicative edge that is definitely related to its popularity today. <u>Portrait</u> attempts to

exploit this dynamic in telling its story, while at the same time reflecting on the nature of

graphic novels themselves through its content and appearance.

Chapter 1: The Development of Comic Books

While a graphic novel is markedly different from a comic book, the form owes

much to comics and has more in common with them than with any other genre of art. Key

similarities that define both genres are the combination and words and pictures integrated

together on the page, stylized art in the form of caricature, exaggeration or simplification,

and the use of sequential pictures to move the narrative forward. Today, we are so used to

these forms that they seem very basic, intuitive ways to relay plot using images.

However, these traits were at one time new and innovative, developing out of cartoons in

newspapers into an art form with many variations.

Even before serial comic books rose to popularity, the comic medium developed

starting in the eighteenth century, growing alongside the newspaper business. The

Histoire de Monsieur Jabot by Rodolphe Topffer, is frequently referenced as the first

comic, "a sophisticated satire in images greatly admired by Goethe, [which] differs from

contemporary comics only for having the text written in captions under each image,

instead of inserted in balloons." (Bettley p. 122) Written between 1833 and 1845, the

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Histoire de Mr. Jabot was never published; Topffer feared that a frivolous activity such as authoring comics would hurt his academic reputation as a university professor. Goethe's fondness for Topffer's work saved it from total historical obscurity, but it cannot be known how many such pictorial narratives were created by artistically inclined storytellers and were never made public because they were not considered serious works.

Topffer's work, though it precedes almost everything we can compare it to, was already pioneering a number of techniques that characterize comic art. "With Topffer the

A page from "L'Histoire de Monsieur Jabot" by Rodolphe Topher

captions were evidently composed or written after the drawing was done… despite the many signs revealed by the sketchbooks of careful plotting of the scenario in advance." (Kunzle, p.23) Using the caption to supplement the art, but allowing the pictures to primarily drive the action, is a crucial difference between a comic and a very thoroughly illustrated picture book.

Comics later tended to feature grid-like, uniform panels, and it was not until much later, in the twentieth century, that innovative cartoonists took more creative liberty with layouts and scale. However, Topffer was already surprisingly uninhibited in his use of space. "…in *Crepin*, the frame grows a skull in sympathy with those being thrown at the phrenologist in the picture above, while in *Vieux Bois 44* the bottom frame line seems to vocalize the squealing of a cat just above…The frame becomes pictorial and in doing so suggests a fluidity of time between scenes." (Kunkle, p.22) This flexibility with framing disappeared during the early years of comic publication to accommodate the spatial demands of the newspapers they were published in, but its gradual resurfacing represents "part of the maturation of the genre." (Kunkle . 23). Unrestrained by the conventions of

print media, however, Topffer was already demonstrating some of the expressive techniques that give sequential art its power.

The first published comics were far more limited in format. Comic art became widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the advent and rapid rise in popularity of newspaper cartoons. The word cartoon was first used in the English magazine Punch, launched in 1841, and referred to the humorous caricature drawings that appeared in magazines (Harvey p. 26). "Cartoon" itself comes from the Italian word for "card" as in cardboard, and refers to the loose, sketchy nature of early cartoons, which, compared to other published art, resembled unfinished studies. In the same vein, early cartoons were sometimes called "pencillings" (Harvey p. 27). These early comics consisted of a single drawing, no panels or sequential narrative, and featured titles and captions that further explained the joke, which was usually political. Though not all modern comics use words, the use of words and pictures together, each explaining the other and neither able to stand alone, was a new development unique to the cartoon medium. The humorous effect of the cartoon is enhanced if the caption only makes sense with the cartoon to clarify its meaning, giving an element of surprise to the joke (Harvey p. 29).

Before word bubbles and dialogue appeared in cartoons, the "single speaker" cartoon was invented; the first ones are credited to Harold Ross, the founder of the *New Yorker*, and Peter Arno, one of the first cartoonists he hired (Harvey p. 30). Of course, such a basic idea cannot be entirely attributed to one moment in time and two men, but the *New Yorker's* use of single speaker cartoons popularized them and they are thus remembered as linked. A single speaker cartoon is one in which multiple characters are

portrayed, and the speech is presented in text below the drawing. Although there is no speech bubble, it must be clear to the reader which character is speaking, either by context or because that character is drawn with his or her mouth open. Because the character's speech is less of an omnipotent explanation than a simple caption, single speaker cartoons allowed more subtlety in how the joke was crafted. They also relied more heavily on the art to communicate what is going on in the scenario, since a line or two of speech is often a less thorough explanation. "It would be natural in the normal progression of things for the cartoonists to realize the superiority of the comedy inherent in the economy of single-speaker captions." (Harvey, p.34) As before, though, the humor is found when the reader makes the connection between picture and text, giving the single-speaker model a very satisfying simplicity- the "economy" that Harvey describes.

The speech bubble did not appear until the turn of the twentieth century, by which time a sequence of panels, not just one, was becoming a widespread technique to narrate through time. Frederick Opper's *Happy Hooligan* is mentioned by Harvey as one of the very earliest works to exploit these novel forms. "Opper's strip summed up all the previous experimentation and combined all the basic elements from the start." (Harvey p. 38). The speech bubble is important because it allows dialogue to occur between multiple characters without confusion as to who is speaking, but its significance goes beyond organization. "In all other static graphic representations, characters are doomed to wordless pantomime. In comics, they speak…in the same mode as they appear- the visual not the audio mode." (Harvey p. 39). Readers today are accustomed to the appearance of speech bubbles, but their transformative effect on a drawing can still be striking. Because speech bubbles mimic the real-life experience of hearing someone's words as you watch

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them speak, they imbue the characters with life. A drawing of a person with a speech

bubble seems surprisingly more active and alive than exactly the same drawing with no

speech bubble, or with the words written below the drawing.

If the comic had reached its fully mature form with the use of panels and speech

bubbles, still further development defined the advent of the graphic novel. Comics

escaped the limits of the newspaper and began to be issued as books with the British *Ally*

Sloper; the comic book medium fully took off following Siegel and Schuster's 1938

Superman, and a quarter-decade of superhero-comic obsession took off. " 'Superman'

heralded the birth of the superhero genre…aimed at children and young adults…the most

successful of all comic genres." (Bettley 122). While superhero comics did not

necessarily broaden the horizons of comic art beyond a certain splashy style and a

formulaic narrative, they are responsible for the popularization of the comic book, an

entire book, albeit thin and cheap, in comic form. This format paved the way for other

books entirely of comic art, and created a generation that was "literate" in reading

sequentially illustrated stories with the dialogue in bubbles. Thus, Will Eisner's *A*

Contract With God, considered by many to be the first graphic novel, came out in 1978 to

a population of readers ready to understand such a work. With *A Contract with God*,

however, important differences were apparent from preceding comic books, making it a

landmark work that alerted readers to the birth of a new genres or sequential art.

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Chaper 2: The Artist's Book

The graphic novel is strongly rooted in comic book tradition, but is crucially set apart by its artist book character. Artists have long experimented with the book form and narratives in pictures. Lynd Ward, in 1929, published *God's Man*, a wordless tale- its thickness and multiple peaks in plot make calling it a "novel" reasonable- in woodblock prints. Through Ward's skill, the story is completely understandable without text. By totally forgoing words, usually the default companions of the book form, Ward was investigated the boundaries of what makes a book, testing the ability of images alone to convey his message. *God's Man* could arguable by considered a graphic novel; through its self-conscious use of the book form, it is an artist's book, and it has a novel-length complex plot.

Like graphic novels, artists' books are a genre whose boundaries are blurry, the source of contention and differentiating opinions. Any beautiful book with pictures is not an artist's book, nor is an book authored by an "artist". In *The Century of Artists Books,* Joanna Drucker distinguishes between artists' books, which "interrogate the conceptual

or material form of the book as part of [their] intention". (p. 3), and books about, by, or featuring the work of artists. These may boast the fine-printing techniques and attention to beauty that are associated with artists' books, but without a reason to be a book, they are just well-made books about art, not art objects themselves.

In addition to investigating the limits of the book form, graphic novels push the boundaries of picture and word use. Combining text and images to tell a story allows the graphic novelist to utilize the strengths of both. According to Ulises Carrion in the *New Art of Making Books,* this also emphasizes the shortcomings of both, and allows one medium to fill in the gaps left by the other. Neither stands alone: "In a book of the new art words don't transmit any intention; they're used to form a text which is an element of a book, and it is this book, as a totality, that transmits the author's intention." (p. 34) In a graphic novel, the words, images and aesthetic elements of the book object itself combine in an attempt to communicate the story, atmosphere, themes, and message the artist wishes to convey.

There is no way to avoid the effects of space, layout and style in a graphic novel, and these facets of the graphic novel will affect how the reader perceives its contents. For example, Art Spiegelman in *Maus* tends to fill his negative space with black or with blocky black-and-white lines, which, though they may have begun simply as an aesthetically pleasing way to fill up space, are instrumental in creating the bleak, dark, shadowy tone in *Maus,* which is a Holocaust memoir. "Attention to materials, their interactions, and the conent bound within the book are an integral feature of a book…" (Drucker p. 10) Space cannot be neglected, and as *Maus* and other works show, in most graphic novels it is not.

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Because graphic novels are more dependent upon images and space to progress the story, they make a statement about the use of space by their very nature. "A book is a space time sequence." (Carrion p. 32). The graphic novel uses this sequence to relay its story in such a way that the author has control over the reader's pacing through the images. Comic books, of course, also use the sequential nature of books to tell a story chronologically. In a comic the narrative stretches on, relying on books only to contain it- the books are "containers of literary text" (Carrion p. 32), in this case a text created by comic illustrations. However, for graphic novels, the entire narrative is completed and contained within a single book object- unlike a serial comic, the graphic novel's narrative is bound to the object of the book. It is in this self-conscious reflection on the meaning of the book form and structure that the graphic novel's nature as an artist's book is undeniably clear.

In *The Century of Artist's Books,* Joanna Drucker emphasizes the difference between the artist's book, which is an artwork in the form of a book, and the *livre d'artiste*, which is a book displaying works by the artist. This difference is also what seperates a sophisticated, adult-level comic like *Sandman,* or Robert Crumb's 1960's underground sensation *Zap,* from a true graphic novel like *A Contract with God.* Gaiman's work is communicated via the book, whereas Eisner's book is his work.

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Chapter 3: The Graphic Novel

More than illustrated books, whose illustrations only cover key scenes and are not integral to moving the story along, graphic novels take full advantage of the pictorial and the verbal to communicate with the reader. Comics might appear to share the same advantages, and to an extent they do, but graphic novels share some important traits with artists' books that comics do not, and these add to their effectiveness in using the entire book object to reinforce the message in the narrative.

In *A Contract with God,* we see the artist's hand is present in every aspect of the book object, a hallmark of the artist's book. This allows a uniquely high level of effectiveness in communicating with the reader. For example, *A Contract with God* is "…printed in sepia ink, which seems in keeping with the idea of an old man recounting his memories." (Bettley p. 135) Its smallish size is in keeping with the humble American tales of tenement life, and its layout creates a rhythm of narrative in which "…each panel links seamlessly to the next to create a real sense of time and movement." (p. 135) While they might escape the reader's conscious attention entirely, aspects of the physical book

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object such as those just mentioned help create an immersive experience in which not just

a story is conveyed but an entire atmosphere, tone, and visual message.

One important aspect that marks the graphic novel as an artist's book is the

involvement of a single author who writes the story, draws the artwork, and makes

decisions regarding the form of the book. In a comic book, it is very common to have one

writer, one primary artist who does the pencil drawings, and supporting artists who ink,

letter and color the work. An example of this is the *Sandman* series by Neil Gaiman. With

their complex, multifaceted storylines and serious, sometimes sexual content, the

Sandman comics are clearly targeted at adult readers. However, they cannot be

considered graphic novels because their book form is an incidental vessel for a story line

that is written by Gaiman and drawn by various other artists in each volume.

Graphic novelists generally create longer narratives with more slowly building plots, true

novels rather than episodic serial stories with many peaks in action over time. Because of

this, character development is more important, as is using a greater variety of views to

immerse the reader in the desired narrative atmosphere. To this end, the many spatial and

aesthetic variables of the book can be used to communicate implicitly the character's

perspective, temperment, and personality. For example, in *Jimmy Corrigan*, author Chris

Wares rarely shows faces other that the main character's own, even when Jimmy is

interacting with other people. Without it ever being described, the viewer comes to a

visual understanding of Jimmy's emotional isolation and loneliness. Wares also often

breaks the page up into tiny panels of barely one inch, letting the moments follow one

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another like the ticking of a clock, thus creating a sense of the silent, desolate passage of time in Jimmy's life.

Another graphic novel, *Asterios Polyp* by David Mazzuchelli, uses a limited but effective color palette to define its characters. The novel's central romance flourishes between Asterios, a perfectionist architect, and Hana, his delicate, sensual sculptor wife. Before Hana is introduced in the story, Asterios' life and his career in flashback are narrated in purple and blue only. Asterios' spare, linear life philosophy is reflected in the perfectly hemispherical curve of his forehead and clean lines of the pages, which at this point in the book are not dominated by panels, but rather are intersected by lines and

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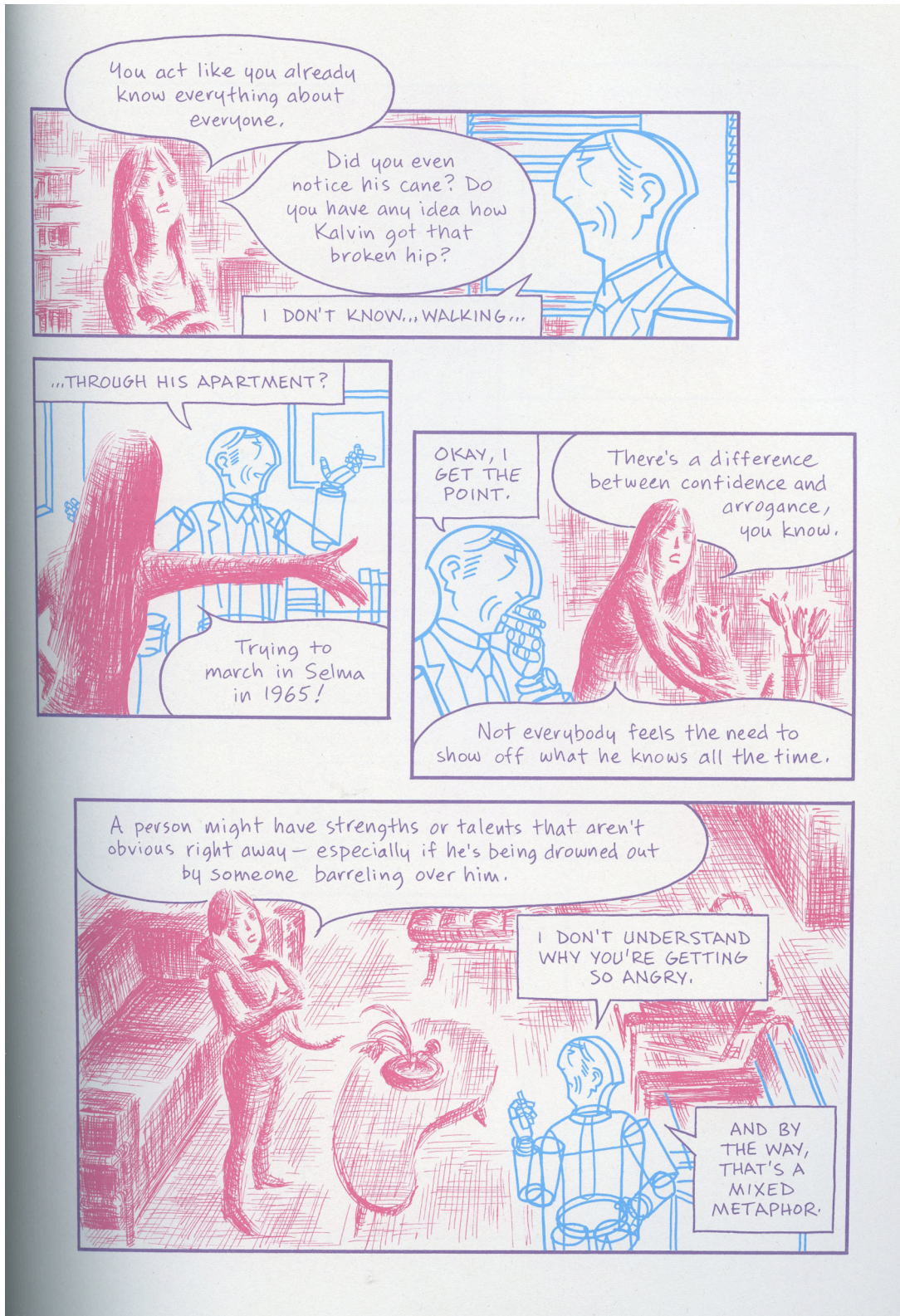
A page from Asterios Polyp by David Mazzuchelli

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linear arrangements of elements that create an orderly architecture on the page. With

Hana's introduction, red begins to appear, often in the form of her red scarf, which will

be the only item of that color on the page. The use of color in Mazzuchelli's character

development is most striking when Asterios and Hana argue: in these scenes, Asterios is

drawn in blue lines delineating geometric shapes that make up his body: robotic cylinders

for his limbs and a flat wedge for his head. Hana is rendered in red crosshatching with no

outlines of any kind. In the panels depicting their fight, Hana yells at Asterios from her

half of the room, which matches her red crosshatched appearance, and Asterios turns his

back on her in his half of the room, which is all blue outlines.

Two different sets of colors also mark the temporal separation of the two major

time frames of the book. *Asterios Polyp* is told partially in "present tense" during a later

part of Asterios' life in which he leaves his job and home to work anonymously in an

autoshop in a small town, isolated and disconnected from his past. This past is narrated in

flashbacks and uses purple, blue, and Hana's red. In the small town to which he has

exiled himself, Asterios' story is drawn in purple and yellow. The cool blue and clean

lines used in the "flashback" sections are not present, and as a result Asterios' character

seems less linear and dispassionate, and even more disjointed from everything that

previously defined him. In his autobiographical teenage love story *Blankets*, author Craig

Thompson alternates between more orderly panel layouts that progress the plot, and

much freer images that tilt and spiral out of their frames, bursting the bounds of the

chronological narrative like flights of childhood imagination and adolescent fantasy, or

volatile moments of emotional pain. *Blankets* is an example of a graphic novel that

exploits these artist-book characteristics to create a compelling emotional memoir; to

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give a more thorough impression of how an artist can use layout and artistic styling to

communicate plot, atmosphere, and emotion, three segments from *Blankets* are examined

more deeply in the following paragraphs.

A childhood scene early in the first chapter of *Blankets* illustrates Harvey's

observation that characters are brought vividly to life by the inclusion of word bubbles,

the "simultaneity and proximity of words and pictures" (Harvey p. 39). In this scene, two

brothers are squabbling in their shared bed, until their father comes in and separates them

by making the younger brother sleep in the closet on a cot. Thompson uses text in three

general forms: First, captions, which are not boxed in, and exist either outside the panel

or inside, written in white over a large area of black in the picture- for example, in one

panel the caption is written in the shadow behind an open door. The second vessel for

words is a fairly traditional word bubble, in this case usually round, or with multiple

lobes to accommodate longer phrases; the third type of text is a label, similar in

appearance to a text box but with an arrow pointing to the labeled item. In the varied

styles of word bubble, the tone of the speech is made clear by visual cues. For example,

the portion of the word bubble that points to the speaker's mouth is straight or gently

curved for speech in a normal, relaxed tone, but jagged for the harsh, scolding words of

the angry father and wiggly for the plaintive whine of the children being punished.

While the appearance of the text conveys the tone of the dialogue, the pictures do

most of the work of dramatizing the scene. The father, who in this scene and throughout

the book is domineering and authoritative, looms over the scrawny boys, who are drawn

as mostly head with small bodies, all limbs. In one panel, he arches over them like a tidal

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A Page from "Blankets" by Craig Thompson

wave about to crash, yelling, "DON'T QUESTION YOUR PARENT'S AUTHORITY!" His visible hand larger than the boys' heads and his eyebrows and hair seem trained back, as if he were really rushing at them through the air. Combined with the bold, scratchy lettering and the thick dark border around this panel, the artwork creates an impression of the boys' intimidation and the father's noise that is absorbed by the reader as if they were experiencing it themselves- visually and verbally.

Another scene, in which the teenage protagonist is reunited with the girl he loves, uses almost no words at all. Their parents' cars arrive in the same lot, and the two teens spring from their seats. Thompson has drawn the entire lot, crisscrossed with arcing tire tracks that mimic the car doors swinging open, the characters jumping out, and their motion towards each other. In the next panel, the protagonist's shyness and hesitation are apparent from his upright posture, while the girl is streaming towards his outstretched hand in an arclike motion, similar to the preceding panel. When they embrace, Thompson has drawn them alone on the bottom corner of an otherwise blank new page- there is literally nothing else in the world at that moment. The following panels show the two climbing into one car, and the protagonist meeting the girl's parents- all of which is wordless, the action apparent from the pictures alone. The reader, like the lovestruck main character, is deaf to whatever conversations are happening, so overwhelmed is he to be back with his love interest. When the dialogue boxes begin to reappear, the reader is seamlessly transitioned into the next event after the wordless four-page reunion scene.

Blankets occasionally moves beyond artistic portrayal of the plot into pure, non-narrative art to capture a particularly exciting or poignant moment. An example of this is

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A Page From "Blankets" by Craig Thompson

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a scene where the two young brothers play together with some animal bones they found

in the forest. The scene begins with a fairly linear sequence of panels detailing their

progress into the woods. Once the bones are found, however, the next page seems to blow

up in a craggy explosion of dancing skull-headed figures. At the edge of the page, some

simple figures refer drawings the boys create earlier in the book, communicating that the

fantasy world they create in their drawings has come to life in their imagination. The

voice of a parent, along with the return of panel structure, ends the moment.

Thompson doesn't just tell the story using words and pictures; he selectively uses

text and space to create a work where the verbal, pictorial and spatial are all dependent

upon each other. *Blankets* uses the book medium, the timing and spacing of the pages,

and not just the content of the words but the nature and very presence of the text to create

a story that is also a book-shaped work of art- an artists' book.

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Chapter 4: My Own Work

The central act in <u>Portrait</u> is Hana's creation of Cecily as she grows into adulthood and is faced with its challenges. From the first moment she sees Cecily's portrait in the hall, Hana imagines a character that is plucky and brave, someone with the confidence to face the literal monster in her life. As a young child who looks up to and admires her mother, Amelia, Hana is content to follow in her footsteps. Cecily, however, is distressed to discover that she was pulled from a portrait of Amelia and worries that she may not have full agency over her life, that is might be inextricably linked to Amelia's. The girls test this boundary in the scene with the knife in the kitchen, but Hana is afraid to go too far. Hana walks past the suits of armor in her house, which are Amelia's past lovers in enchanted form, without a second thought. Cecily, however, investigates further into the lives of these enchanted suits, which were once men, and sees them as a sign of her romantic future- a threat. She is eager to defy that future by making herself vulnerable to love at the first opportunity and by flouting the rules that governed Hana's childhood.

While Cecily comes into the world already endowed with age-appropriate knowledge and behavior, her personality and indeed her entire existence are the result of Hana's expectations and needs. Hana's creative process of constructing her ideal, older alter ego as she grows up has parallels with the creative process of making an art object. Like an artist with an existing skillset, Hana has predetermined elements of her life that are present in Cecily- for example, her resemblance to Hana's mother and her fixation on the same forbidden jar that fascinates Hana. At the same time, Cecily is endowed with the confidence and gustiness that Hana would like to possess herself. As in an art project,

parts of the creation happen purposefully, such as when Hana first enlists Cecily to help

her catch the monster in the yard. Other elements of Hana and Cecily's story spiral out of

Hana's control, although they reflect the destination she is subconsciously working

towards- the prime example of this being Cecily's flirtation with the merman that leads to

Hana's drowning.

Using a character or personality as a creative project is a trope often used in

literature and art throughout history. For example, the movie *My Fair Lady* is based on

George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion,* in which a professor grooms an unrefined girl

into his ideal woman. More closely paralleling Hana and Cecily's story is *The Picture of

Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde. Rather than springing from a painting, Dorian Grey has an

element of his self captured in one. By capturing Dorian Grey in the portrait, artist Basil

Hallward ensures that Grey never ages, and the portrait ages instead, displaying the scars

and marks of Dorian's actions and experiences. Dorian's nascent debauchery is not

evident in his physical person, but is illustrated by the widening discrepancy between his

corporeal appearance and his painted image. By creating her idealized alter ego as one

would create a work of art, Hana is shaping her identity in a way that mimics the creative

process- informed by both her conscious drive to grow and change, and the

characteristics that she unconsciously craves and admires. Like a reverse of Dorian

Grey's situation, Hana's developing courage, self-introspection and desires find

expression in Cecily's personality and actions.

Cecily is the project of identity formation and maturation for Hana, a project she

starts out of necessity without knowing where it will end; this project is mirrored by the

process of creating an artwork, such as an artists' book. With the broad array of visual,

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spatial and verbal techniques made available by the graphic novel medium, <u>Portrait</u>

attempts to guide the reader through the dreamy fantasy world Hana inhabits while

implicitly communicating its metaphorical plot about Hana's identity formation. In terms

of angle of view, the panels tend to be inwardly focused on the faces and gestures of the

characters, especially Hana, rather than displaying wider views of the environment or

angles showing action and movement. When the view is not trained on the face, what is

often shown instead is the scene though the eyes of the character- Hana's feet as she runs

up the steps, Amelia speaking from slightly above. By focusing on emotions as shown by

faces and showing action from a first-person angle, <u>Portrait</u> tells the story from a more

intimate and experiential point of view, intended to help the reader see the underlying

story of personal growth beneath the action.

By putting the reader behind Hana's eyes, so to speak, <u>Portrait</u> is also intended to

give a feeling of Hana's creative process in building her mature identity. The aesthetic

feel of the book object itself is important in communicating this, not explicitly, but

through its texture and atmosphere. Rather than Photoshopping and editing the images to

smooth perfection, the panels are shown with their original variations of warmer and

cooler greys, uneven washes, and blacks that aren't quite opaque. Similarly, the speech

bubbles and narrations boxes are hand-lettered and outlined, usually ending up with far-

from-straight edges. The feel of the pen and brush behind each scene is important to the

atmosphere of construction and creation that is intended to hum in the background of the

story.

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  Perhaps the current popularity and increased awareness of graphic novels is actually because of their ability to communicate with and create understanding in the reader from more angles than simply through words. The graphic novel genre is powerful because it draws from the development of comic art and from the conceptual possibilities of book art. With <u>Portrait</u>, I hope to make my readers aware of these influences and take advantage of their effectiveness at the same time.

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