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THE SELF, MY SELF, AND FEMALE PORTRAITURE

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR GONZALES-DAY

PROFESSOR BLASSINGAME

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I. ABSTRACT

Growing up in Mexico was a privilege for many reasons. I am most grateful for its history of preservation and storytelling through art, specifically portraiture. I learned about my country's history and its most influential figures primarily through visuals. From mesoamerican sculptures to Mexican modern mural art, one did not have to be literate or speak vernacular Spanish to understand the story of our culture through time. It is this visual way of recording history that I have decided to turn to for interpretation and self exploration. Throughout the course of this academic year, I will be creating a series of self-portraits by following a conceptually driven practice on changing reflections of my image through the lens of other female artists.

This project was inspired by a conversation I had with my doctor in June. He suggested trying a more intuitive lifestyle that followed little to no schedule so it would be “more exciting” or “easier” for me to get out of bed in the mornings and my fatigue would “decrease or go away” during the day. His advice resonated with me; maybe I did need to be more spontaneous with my quotidian life and routines. My intention for this project is to explore a more intuitive lifestyle through the practice of consistent artmaking. My chosen medium is collaging. To meet my goal, I created a set of rules, or framework, from which I could experiment freely. I designed this framework to keep me on track, while still leaving space for ambiguity.

II. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

As soon as I committed to my series of self-portraits, I knew my research would start with works of Frida Kahlo. Her pieces are a reflection of her life, as she delicately explores

identity, nationality, and illness. Kahlo focuses on the body and fertility, investigating what it means to be female. After a severe bus accident left Kahlo bedridden, she turned to portraiture as a means to better understand her body, recovery process, and thoughts. Kahlo was no longer able to walk, and painted dozens of self-portraits from her wheelchair. Whenever she portrays her full body in her works, she is sitting down, despite this, she is not recognized as a disabled artist. In fact, most people do not know she was disabled at all.

Claude Cahun also inspired me as I drafted this project. Born Lucy Schwob to a Jewish Family in Nantes, France in 1894, Cahun continually and rigorously explored their identity and navigated their political surroundings through self-portraiture. Their work challenged gender constructs and sexuality norms by stylizing themselves in both traditionally masculine and feminine ways. Throughout their life, they changed their name a total of three times, landing on Claud Cahun, for its gender neutrality. They photographed themselves in mens clothing and with a shaved head, a controversial move for someone born female in the late 19th century. They once said: “under this mask, another mask; I will never finish removing all these faces.”¹ I am moved by this unrelenting desire for self-expression and the understanding that one can never fully grasp their own existence. Cahun involved themselves with politics, openly resisting the Nazi occupation of France during the Second World War.² Their collage works embody their spirit of activism, juxtaposing personal and political symbols. The integration of the political realm and other conflicts of the outside world merge with the inner world of the artist, and together, greatly

¹Museum of Modern Art, “Untitled Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob), Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe).”

²Artnet “Claude Cahun (French, 1894–1954).”

influence identity. For my own purposes, this blend of the inner and outer fascinates me due to my awareness that my context, including Mexican politics, have shaped me greatly.

My favorite piece by Cahun is *Sans Titre*, (1936). Isolated body parts pepper the canvas, initially confusing the viewer before they ultimately make sense of each floating cut-out. *Sans Titre* includes two images of herself, a tactic that represents the confrontation of oneself through art, something I would like to bring into my own work. In my own collages, I want to make use of several images of myself, so the piece itself connects to the act of creating it. On the paper, I confront myself, just as I do in the three dimensional world. Cahun also uses negative space in intricate and thoughtful ways, amplifying a sense of the disjointed self. I will try to incorporate this technique, as pulling my image apart on the paper, may help me land on fresh interpretations of my emotional self.

I knew going into this project that I was going to encounter days when my thoughts and emotions would not be adequately conveyed through literal human figures and landscapes. To understand abstract visual storytelling, I turned to Julie Mehretu's work. Mehretu is a contemporary painter born in Ethiopia in 1970 and developed her artistic voice in the United States. While her work is not defined as portraiture, her pieces address current events, which similarly tell an important story infused with personal significance. Her work consists of abstractions based on landscapes and the built environment, yet are incredibly human as they tackle themes of "migration, capitalism, and climate change."³ Her work informs mine as it displays the possibilities of abstractions to powerfully depict emotions, just as more obvious mediums of portraiture may. However, because Mehretu's work is abstract, the audience may be

³Whitney Museum of American Art "Julie Mehretu."

less inclined to consider the emotional messages of the pieces. Nevertheless, I ask, if the work was created with an intention and with emotion, does it matter if the audience understands it? This is a question I think is relevant to my project, and one I will continue to ask myself as I create my portraits. This project is for my own discovery and exploration, rather than a greater audience. This liberates me from any attempt to make my work comprehensible or palatable to many others, which would contradict my motivations and generate inauthentic results.

Cindy Sherman is another artist I chose to study when creating my thesis. Her project *Untitled Film Stills*, created from 1977-1980, is a series of 69 black and white photographs that mimic scenes from film noir and European art-house films.^{4 5} In most stills, Sherman depicts herself performing stereotypes of femininity, including donning stereotypical clothing and doing chores. Sherman explains, “what I didn’t want were pictures showing strong emotions, which was rare to see; in film stills there’s a lot of overacting because they’re trying to sell the movie.”⁶ Since women have been historically categorized and stereotyped as having “strong emotions,” I wonder if she chose to abstain from being obviously emotional in the stills to create a contradiction, allowing the viewer to question these norms themselves. In doing so, she also sets herself apart from the images that inspire her by adding her own sensibilities, including elements of irony and satire. These images canonized the idea of female performability.

Untitled Film Still #10, for example, displays a woman on the kitchen floor picking up groceries from a torn paper bag. We can assume that there is someone else in the room because

⁴Blessing, Jennifer. “Untitled Film Still #15.”

⁵ MoMA Learning, “Untitled Film Still #21.”

⁶Ibid.

she looks past the camera with a fearful expression. It feels as though someone out of frame is yelling and punishing her. The subject wears a very feminine outfit and heavy makeup with a blunt hairstyle. Historically, kitchens are distinguished as part of the female sphere; a place where women are supposed to provide meals for their husbands and families. I found this film still powerful because, although kitchens are associated with women, they are not always where women feel most comfortable. Many women may have a complex or negative association with this part of the house because at some point in their life, they may have had to put everything on pause, turning to cooking and domestic life rather than their education or career. The kitchen may also represent exhaustion, as women may be held to high, gendered standards that are almost impossible to meet without sacrificing a portion of their individuality. These are just two possible scenarios out of an infinite amount of examples. In the still, I can see the panic in Sherman's eyes, and in my head, I imagine that a man is yelling at her because of the torn bag and fallen groceries. Just in this one still, Sherman creates a feminine character that evokes a story capable of continuing in a million different directions. Costume choices, props, and compositions go very far to add nuance and intrigue to the image, and unite the work under one core understanding: a woman sits in the kitchen, and probably, a man stands near.

These stills are relevant to my project because Sherman set up a conceptual framework. All 69 images are film photographs in black and white printed in 8x10in paper. All images are only of one subject: a female performing or acting extremely feminine, and they were all based on movies from the 50s and 60s. Based on this structure, she is able to recreate and photograph any scene she desires. The possibilities within these simple constraints are endless.

III. PROCESS

For this project, I have decided to create a system in which I can freely explore and understand relationships with my physical health, mental health, and home space through a series of collages. I chose collageing as a medium because this summer I completed an internship at the architecture firm, Tatiana Bilbao Estudio in Mexico City, in which I explored the relationship of physical space and culture through collages. Bilbao, an important female figure in the architecture world, creates formal presentations of her work as collages instead of as computerized renderings. Her choice to bend conventions in her field and optimize her messages through visual mediums deeply intrigued me and I would like to do the same.

Similar to Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, I have created my own conceptual framework to help me formalize my creation process for this project. I have allowed myself to use any medium, as long as it remains two dimensional (but I know I will primarily use paint and photographs, either scavenged or taken by me). I have chosen to work exclusively on plywood. As an Environmental Studies and Art double major, plywood seemed like an obvious choice. More specifically, I have been examining affordable housing solutions in Mexico, so using a material that connects to construction felt appropriate. In high school I helped build plywood houses in the slums near Monterrey, the city where I was born and grew up, so it is familiar as a medium and connects to my experiences both as a student of Environmental Analysis and a Mexican. For my exploration, each piece of plywood will be all cut in 16x12in pieces. I chose this size because it is similar to the dimensions of Kahlo's portraits and it fits my face proportionally.

I initially mapped out a strict schedule for making my portraits. I decided that two pieces per week, each one created in four hours, would appropriately serve my goals. I chose these

times in accordance with thesis guidelines that required we allot 10 hours per week to our project. My schedule allowed me eight hours for creation with two hours per week for research.

I put a lot of thought into whether I wanted to choose a specific orientation for all my work. This decision was significant because it would influence how the work would look when displayed all together. Also, because the spring art show involves other artists, I know I do not want my space to be messy or disturbing to others' work. I ended up deciding that I would start by creating both horizontal and vertical pieces and based on how they add up at the end of the semester, I would reassess and decide if it would be worth sticking to one orientation until the end of the school year or not.

The last part of this framework consisted of documenting each piece every thirty minutes, and journaling my thoughts on each piece as I created them. Based on speaking with various professors and visiting artists, it became evident that my journal would not be a part of the exhibition. Either the work would speak for itself, or I could find a way to incorporate a caption for every piece. Showing the thirty minute interval images would only be useful if I decided that my intention was to have the piece be performative in some way, because the display of a booklet of sorts with the images of each piece changing would be a performance of the evolution of my work. I don't know that sharing my process is important in conveying the information I want to get across to my viewer, which is a ritualized practice of my emotions this semester, and I think a process booklet will distract from whatever is up on the wall. However, I will keep collecting photographs of my works at the same interval to archive and maybe I use them later to inform an individual piece or another project.

I begin all my pieces by choosing a wooden board based on the knots, lines, and shapes already in the plywood, then, I sand the edges to make sure there are no splinters. Finally, I

decide whether I want to gesso them with a thin translucent layer that shows the shapes of the wood, or cover the sides completely with a heavier more opaque gesso. I make this decision based on how much paint I am going to use. This process can take a minimum of twenty minutes and can last up to a couple hours. Once my canvas is primed and sanded, I begin.

Sin Nombre I is the first piece I created following my framework. It was made our first month back in school since being sent home in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After two and a half semesters quarantined with my family in Mexico, and minimum contact with the people outside my close family-friend nucleus, immersing myself into daily activities felt very different and bizarre to me. Being alone for so long and adjusting to a new, unnatural process of deep introspection during lockdown felt unsettling, especially at the very beginning. But, reintereginting myself into society was unexpectedly very overwhelming. Suddenly, I was subject to an outrospection that I never experienced before, being very conscious of how I was acting and being perceived by others, and also fully aware of how I was seeing myself and overthinking. This is what the two cutouts of myself looking at each other in the bottom left corner of the piece symbolize.

For this reason, I decided to print multiple full-body images of myself and arrange them looking away from each other in all directions. When I first envisioned this, I thought I would be in Jaqua Quad in Scripps College because it is somewhere I was used to feeling isolated, yet in reality, I was always surrounded. However, because coordinating with a student photographer was taking a long time, I decided to shoot myself, and did it in a hallway with indirect sunlight on a bright day.

The background of three different images of formations that are found both in nature and also created by humans. College is a very structured and formal experience, so I thought it would

be fitting to place the cut-outs of me over these formations. To make myself stand out over the collaged background, I decided to paint over the images with modge podge and a little bit of beige paint. Ultimately, the beige paint was too overpowering and it made the background almost invisible.

My final step for the portrait was to sketch some lines over my work, similar to a technique of Julie Mehretu. Aside from her use of color, what draws me most into her immense paintings are her black lines. Some are thick and straight, while others are thin and squiggly, but they somehow all work together and the abstraction tells a story. I wanted to be intentional about where I placed these lines, so I ended up creating various options and placing them over my work with tracing paper. I finally decided on one configuration that conveyed me looking out of myself while also narrowing into overthinking and messy lines.

The main note I got from professors during a critique was that my ideation on tracing paper contradicted my conceptual framework. How was my project going to be about intuition and trusting myself if I was planning what I was going to do? I agreed with this input and since, I have planned anything before permanently marking the panels of plywood. Of course, I move papers around a few times before placing them, but I now don't sketch things out or think about my work visually outside of the actual image that I'll be showing.

Another piece I created is *Ophelia Drowning*. It is the only piece I have made, and probably only one I will make, that is inspired by a male artist. Painted in 1851 by John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* is a scene depicting Hamlet's Ophelia drowning. That particular week, I felt as though I was drowning in assignments and schoolwork. I was at a point in time where, in the framework of fight or flight, I had chosen a third option: freeze. I felt incredibly paralyzed as I tried to navigate my growing workload.

I've always been captivated by Everett Millais' interpretation of the scene and the beauty of such a tragic event, so I thought it was right to put myself in that landscape. Since my first year at a women's college, I have become very aware of the portrayal of women through the male gaze. It is interesting to me how Everett Milais' paints a woman that was created by a man (if Shakespeare was even a single male person). Both versions of the Ophelia were created at times when it was unacceptable in society for women to paint or write, especially about themselves. I cannot help but wonder what would change about Shakespeare's Ophelia if she was created by a woman, or how Everett Millais' Ophelia would be different if she was painted by a woman. So, I colorblocked the scene, and placed myself in a body of water, drowning in my tank top and jeans, and holding a bouquet of Alcatraz flowers. I chose these flowers in particular, as their stems appear flimsy and delicate yet are deceptively difficult to break. What's more, Alcatraz flowers are symbols of women and feminine strength for Mexicans. I put them in my hands because, although I appear that I am drowning, I have hope that I am strong enough to push through, take care of myself, and meet my goals.

Now that I am in the last few weeks of the semester, I have learned that I might have expected much more than what I was able to produce. Unfortunately, I was unable to organize myself to stick to my original format, as I struggled with time management and balancing the personal and academic sides of my life. I shifted my framework to only one piece a week for a while, and I worked on a single piece at a time. Based on feedback I received from professors, I have decided to embrace incompleteness and show incomplete pieces as part of my process. Now, I start a new piece every four hours, no matter how unsatisfied I am with the piece I am currently working on, so that I can keep the flow going and step away from my perfectionist nature.

Through this practice and conceptual framework, I have learned that the most important part of the creation process is showing up every day. It does not matter if I can only be in the studio for a short amount of time, what matters is that I go. This has been the hardest part of the creation process. I chose this project so that I could understand my pains, my difficulties and also articulate my joys and confusions. Frida Kahlo once said: "I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration." My initial intention was for this project to be an outlet for me to understand myself.

With my new formula that involves embracing incompleteness, I still attempt to create two pieces per week in the spring semester. Instead of having a strict four hour time based on nothing but timekeeping, I will log my studio time elsewhere and end each piece when I feel as though it is time to move forward. What I will try to do though, is to divide my week in two parts and start a new piece mid-w. Otherwise, if I am too invested in a piece, I know I will never stop working on it.

To make my process move faster and flow better, I will start every piece by color blocking with a few colors and a few photo cut-outs. This way, I will not be too focused on specific details before even having an outline to work from. If I move on and the piece is unfinished, there is already some color.

IV. CONCLUSION

I will continue working on my conceptual framework throughout next semester and think more deeply about how my work relates to female self-portraiture in the broader scope of history. Will I be more explicit about my physical and mental health like Kahlo's portraits? Or will I

imagine myself occupying different selves and scenarios like Cahun and Sherman? I still don't know, but I do know that I will hold myself accountable to going to the studio every day. Based on the nature of how I set up my framework and my exploration of my thoughts and emotions, "anything" means moving in the right direction, or simply spending time making art. I must trust that I have set up the correct structure to successfully complete my project and move forward as much as I can.



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