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NARRATIVES IN INK: A JOURNEY THROUGH LINEAGE AND LAND

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the convergence of personal heritage and artistic expression through a series of pen-and-ink portraits, deeply rooted in the familial stories and cultural tapestry of Rajasthan. The project, initially envisioned as a broader exploration of underrepresented narratives, evolves into a more intimate journey of self-discovery and cultural reclamation, guided by ethical considerations and feedback from peers and professors. Drawing theoretical inspiration from figures like Richard Meyer and Edward Said the work delves into themes of cultural representation, appropriation, and the power dynamics of artistic creation. The shift towards personal narratives allows for a respectful, authentic portrayal of my heritage, transforming oral histories into visual experiences that resonate universally. This thesis reflects on the transformational process of art-making, the ethical responsibilities of representation, and the profound impact of embracing one's cultural identity through artistic mediums, offering insights into the complexities of cultural exploration and the significance of personal narratives in art.
Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank all the people who made Scripps feel like home- Sumedha, Seerat, Perbhaat, Tara, and especially Richa- who convinced me to be an art major, and Drishti- for always motivating me and making me better. I love you all so much and couldn't have made it through without you.
History and Theory

Through this artistic endeavour, I wished to explore my heritage, brought to life through pen-and-ink portraits that delve into the rich familial stories from Rajasthan. Rajasthan, with its kaleidoscope of colours, profound cultural depth, and intricate folklore, serves as more than just a backdrop for this artistic exploration, it is a realm of narratives and memories, echoing the intricacies and vibrancy of the art it inspires. Salman Rushdie, in 'Midnight's Children', captures the essence of such storytelling: "We all owe death a life" (Rushdie, 85). This project seeks to honour this sentiment, breathing life into the tales and legacy of my lineage through the medium of art.

Each portrait in this series is a visual representation of the oral histories that have been the cornerstone of family gatherings, transforming spoken words into a visual lexicon. In doing so, the work aligns with Walter Benjamin's philosophy in 'The Storyteller', where he states, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (Benjamin,3). Here, the drawings are more than mere representations; they are a conduit, transforming oral narratives into visual experiences that resonate with the audience. Through this series, I seek to infuse my art with the warmth, depth, and intimacy that the stories of Rajasthan have endowed upon me, offering a unique perspective on the complexities and beauty of cultural identity.

Concept

Exploration of Personal Heritage

At the forefront of this exploration is a deep dive into my own lineage, tracing back to the vibrant land of Rajasthan. This journey through art is not just a visual representation of familial stories but a reclamation and celebration of cultural identity.
The Power of Storytelling

The project leverages the power of storytelling, an ancient tradition that has long shaped human experience and understanding. As Jerome Bruner in "The Narrative Construction of Reality" suggests, narratives are a fundamental way in which humans organize their experiences and comprehend the world. My drawings aim to transform these narratives into visual experiences, allowing stories that were once spoken to be seen through the people who told these stories.

Through this project, I aim to create a dialogue between the past and the present, using pen-and-ink drawings to bridge generations. It is an endeavour to capture the physical likeness of how I imagine my ancestors looked like, through the stories I was told and the emotional and cultural essence that they embody. In doing so, the project becomes more than an artistic pursuit; it becomes a medium through which the untold stories of my heritage find a visual voice, resonating with anyone who seeks to understand their place in the history of time and culture.

Relevant Art Theory

Theories of Cultural Representation and Appropriation

As the project evolved, theories surrounding cultural representation and appropriation became increasingly significant, steering the direction of the artistic work. Stuart Hall’s ideas on representation, as discussed in "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices", provided critical insights into how cultural experiences are depicted and interpreted in various media. Hall argues for a careful consideration of how these representations shape and are shaped by cultural contexts and power dynamics. This reflection on representation and its ethical implications led to a pivot in the project’s focus. The concerns echoed by Edward Said in
"Orientalism" about the portrayal and understanding of Eastern cultures by the West became particularly relevant. Said’s critique of how the ‘Other’ is often exoticized or misrepresented in Western discourse guided the decision to shift towards a more personal and authentic exploration of my own heritage, rather than attempting to represent cultures and experiences to which I did not inherently belong.

Influence of Other Art Theorists

The work of other theorists also influenced the project’s progression. The writings of Bell Hooks, particularly in "Art on My Mind: Visual Politics", provided valuable insights into the intersection of art and race, emphasizing the importance of creating art that is true to one's personal experience and cultural background. Her views on the power of art as a medium of self-representation and resistance offered a framework for understanding the potential impact of my work. Additionally, the ideas of John Berger, as presented in "Ways of Seeing", were instrumental in shaping my understanding of how art creates and communicates meaning. Berger’s exploration of how the context and perspective of both the artist and the viewer influence the interpretation of art pieces informed the approach to how my drawings could communicate the narratives of Rajasthan. Through the integration of these theories, the project transformed into a personal exploration of heritage and identity, underscored by a nuanced understanding of the complexities and responsibilities involved in artistic representation. This theoretical backdrop not only informed the thematic direction of the artwork but also deepened the ethical and cultural sensibilities integral to its execution.

Intended Audience

The intended audience for this series of pen-and-ink drawings is multifaceted, encompassing art enthusiasts, individuals with a deep interest in cultural narratives, and those on
a journey of exploring their own heritage. Each segment of this audience engages with the artwork from a unique perspective, bringing their own experiences and interpretations to the narratives depicted.

This project aims to resonate with those on a quest to explore their roots and identity, much like the journey I undertook. It aligns with the thoughts of James Clifford in "Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century", where he discusses the journey of self-discovery through the exploration of one's heritage. Clifford suggests that such explorations are not merely about uncovering the past but about understanding one's place in a continuously evolving narrative. For these viewers, the artwork is not just a representation of Rajasthani culture but also a mirror reflecting their own search for identity and belonging in the larger tapestry of human experience.

Each segment of this audience brings a unique set of perspectives and experiences to the artwork, creating a dynamic interaction between the viewer and the piece. This interaction is not a passive experience but an active dialogue, where each viewer's engagement with the art deepens the collective understanding and appreciation of the stories and heritage it represents.

**Historical Contextualization**

*Genre/Medium Analysis: Pen-and-Ink Drawings*

The tradition of pen-and-ink drawing, characterised by its precision and detail, boasts a rich history that spans centuries and cultures. Historically, this medium has been revered for its capacity to convey intricate narratives, both personal and cultural, with a simplicity and clarity that belies its complexity.

The roots of pen-and-ink drawing can be traced back to ancient civilizations where it was used for manuscripts and illustrations. In the Renaissance, artists like Leonardo da Vinci and
Albrecht Dürer revolutionized this medium, utilizing it to convey depth, emotion, and detail with remarkable finesse. Dürer, in particular, was a master of detail, using pen and ink to capture the essence of his subject matter, be it human, animal, or landscape, with unparalleled precision.

This medium has been employed to tell stories, capture daily life, and document historical events. Its versatility allows artists to express a range of themes from the deeply personal to the broadly cultural. The intimacy of pen-and-ink drawing lies in its directness and the tactile connection between the artist's hand and the paper, a quality highlighted by philosopher and art critic Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin speaks to the 'aura' of original art, which is profoundly embodied in the unique strokes of ink drawings.

Influential Artists and Theorists

Albrecht Dürer's mastery of pen-and-ink drawing, particularly his detailed studies of nature and human figures, provides a foundational influence on my work. His ability to blend realism with emotive expression has informed my approach to capturing the essence of my subjects. Käthe Kollwitz’s work, predominantly in pen and ink, is a powerful testament to the use of art for social commentary and personal expression. Her intense, emotional portrayals of suffering and war have influenced my understanding of how art can be a medium for conveying profound human experiences. John Berger’s insights, particularly in "Ways of Seeing", provide a modern perspective on how art is perceived and interpreted. His theories on the relationship between the viewer and the artwork have shaped my approach to ensuring that my drawings invite engagement and introspection.

These artists and theorists, each in their unique way, have shaped the trajectory of pen-and-ink drawing as a medium. Their influences are evident in the way I strive to weave
personal and cultural narratives into my work, ensuring that each piece is not just a visual representation but also a story in itself.

The distinctive style of my pen-and-ink drawings lies in the blend of traditional technique with a contemporary narrative approach. Utilizing stippling not just for its aesthetic value but as a narrative device, each dot and line is intentional, contributing to the emotional and thematic depth. This technique, though rooted in tradition, is applied in a manner that is deeply personal and reflective of my cultural heritage. The thematic focus of my work sets it apart. While drawing inspiration from the rich history of pen-and-ink art, my pieces diverge from the conventional subjects of this medium. By delving into the realm of personal heritage and familial narratives specific to Rajasthan, my art offers a unique perspective, intertwining the personal with the cultural, and the past with the present.

This comparative analysis underscores how my work aligns with and differentiates from the masters of pen-and-ink art, both in technique and thematic exploration. My approach, while acknowledging these influences, carves out its niche by weaving personal and cultural narratives into the rich tapestry of this traditional medium.

**Effectiveness of Medium/Genre**

Pen-and-ink drawing, with its ability to capture extraordinary levels of detail and precision, is particularly suited for my project. The fine lines and stippling, characteristic of this medium allow for a nuanced portrayal of each subject. This precision is crucial in capturing not just the physical likeness but also the emotional depth and cultural nuances embedded in each portrait, echoing the layered complexity of the stories I aim to tell.
The stark contrast inherent in pen-and-ink drawing lends itself to dramatic and emotive portrayals, a key aspect of storytelling. This medium can evoke a range of emotions, from the subtlest of expressions to the most powerful of narratives. This emotional depth is vital for my project, as it seeks to translate the rich oral histories of Rajasthan into visuals that resonate on a personal level.

**Process, Changes and Reflection**

Embarking on this artistic journey, my initial vision was to create a series of pen-and-ink portraits that would bring to light the beauty and stories of underrepresented individuals. This project was envisioned as a blend of art and social commentary, drawing inspiration from various theoretical frameworks, including Julia Kristeva's 'Powers of Horror'. However, as the project progressed, influenced by ethical considerations and introspection, it transformed into a more intimate exploration of my own heritage and the rich tapestry of family stories. This paper delves into the nuanced evolution of my project, discussing the artistic process, the integration of theoretical and historical contexts, and the key learnings that emerged from this creative endeavour.

The project's redirection was significantly influenced by the insightful feedback from faculty and peers, which brought to light the ethical challenges in representing marginalized groups to which I do not belong. Their observations raised critical questions about cultural appropriation and misrepresentation, challenging me to reflect on the intentions and implications of my work. This feedback was not just a critique but a pivotal learning moment, prompting me to reconsider the direction of my artistic endeavour.

In response to these concerns, I had a series of discussions with Prof. Gonzales-Day, whose expertise in the intersection of art, culture, and ethics provided invaluable guidance. These
conversations illuminated the nuanced power dynamics involved in artistic representation, particularly the complexities of portraying cultures and experiences outside one's own. Alongside these discussions, I engaged with a range of literature suggested by Prof. Gonzales-Day, that delved into issues of cultural representation in art, including works by Mapplethorpe and Ligon. Through these dialogues and readings, I gained a deeper understanding of the power dynamics at play in art and representation. I came to realize that art is not merely an expression of creativity but also an act that can have profound implications on how cultures and identities are perceived and understood. This realization led me to critically assess my initial approach, which, though well-intentioned, risked oversimplifying or inappropriately representing the complex narratives of marginalized communities.

With these insights, I made a conscious decision to redirect my artistic focus towards exploring my heritage, particularly the rich cultural and familial legacy of Rajasthan. This shift was not merely a strategic pivot to avoid ethical pitfalls but a deeper, more authentic alignment with my artistic voice. By drawing on my family's stories and experiences, I aimed to create art that was deeply personal yet resonated with universal themes of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity.

The artistic process involved revisiting family stories, memories, and the essence of my cultural heritage. Drawing from memory and imagination, I sought to capture not just the physical likeness but the emotional depth and history embedded in each portrait. The challenge was to imbue each piece with authenticity and personal significance, ensuring that they resonated with the themes of heritage, ageing, and beauty I initially set out to explore. Moving away from a broader cultural representation to a more personal narrative required a reevaluation of my artistic techniques and thematic focus. Each portrait became a journey into my own history, exploring
the intricate details that define my cultural identity. Focusing on my Rajasthani heritage offered inspiration deeply embedded in my life. The stories I grew up with, the traditions, the folklore, and the personal experiences of my family became the foundation of my artworks. This approach allowed me to explore themes of heritage, identity, and belonging in a way that was respectful, authentic, and true to my own experiences. It also provided an opportunity to explore the nuances of my cultural background, celebrating its richness while acknowledging the personal journey of understanding and connecting with it.

In addition to the profound shifts in the project's thematic focus and ethical considerations, there was also a notable technical and stylistic evolution that played a significant role in shaping the final artwork. This project was my first-ever attempt at stippling, a technique characterized by the creation of images through the application of multiple individual dots. Stippling allowed me to achieve a level of detail and precision that felt essential for the project's new direction. The transition to stippling presented a steep learning curve, as it required a different approach to rendering than my previous methods.

This project has been a profound learning experience, illuminating the responsibilities and complexities inherent in artistic representation. It has taught me the importance of introspection, ethical consideration, and the power of personal narrative in art. While different from the original concept, the final series of portraits stands as a testament to my journey as an artist and my connection to my culture. They are not merely images but narratives that intertwine personal and universal themes, inviting viewers to engage with the stories they tell and reflect on their own journey through life and heritage. The project's evolution, prompted by ethical considerations and a deepening understanding of cultural representation in art, led to a body of work that was not only more personally resonant but also more ethically grounded. By focusing
on my own heritage, I found a path that allowed for artistic expression that is both authentic and respectful, offering a unique lens through which to view the complexities and beauty of cultural identity.
**Works Cited**

Benjamin, Walter. The Storyteller - Cornell University,
- Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" provides profound insights into the art of storytelling and its impact on human experience.

- Berger's theories on the interpretation of art helped shape the approach to how the narratives in the drawings would be conveyed and perceived.

- Clifford's exploration of heritage and identity informed the thematic focus on personal narratives and cultural exploration in the project.

- Edwards’ discussion on the emotional and perceptual aspects of drawing resonates with the project’s focus on emotional depth and personal connection.

- Hall’s discussion on cultural representation and identity informed the ethical considerations and the shift in the project's direction.


- This work provided insights into the power of art as a medium of self-representation, influencing the project's narrative approach.


- Sonsini’s artworks were a means to explore artists who depict groups they themselves do not belong to and the ethics surrounding that.


- The Museum of Modern Art’s resource on Käthe Kollwitz offers a comprehensive overview of her work in pen-and-ink.


- Meyer's article discusses the intersection of art, politics, and social issues, providing a critical lens through which to view the responsibilities and impact of art in society. This is relevant to my project's underlying themes of ethical representation and the social role of art, particularly concerning cultural narratives.
   - Rushdie offers a narrative of storytelling, blending personal and historical narratives. The novel's exploration of identity and memory resonates with the focus of my project.

   - Ruskin’s insights into the precision and effectiveness of pen-and-ink drawing influenced the choice of medium for this project.

   - Said's critique of the portrayal of Eastern cultures influenced the project's redirection towards a more personal exploration of heritage.

   - Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' of original art influenced the approach to creating a personal and intimate connection through the artwork.

- Wisse’s essay provides insight into Albrecht Dürer's techniques and themes in pen-and-ink drawing, relevant for understanding the historical context and influence on my work’s precision and emotive portrayal.


- Documents the artworks of Robert Mapplethorpe from his series, “X-Portfolio”


- Hamed Yousefi’s article discusses cultural appropriation, race, and authorship in the context of art, using the works of Ligon and Mapplethorpe as a case study. This source significantly influenced the redirection of my project towards a more personal and culturally responsible approach.