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Authenticity and the Representation of Self: Communicating Identity through Self-Portraiture

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An abstract of  
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## Abstract

### Authenticity and the Representation of Self: Communicating Identity through Self-Portraiture

By Bethany Studnicky

This thesis serves as an interrogation of the representation of identity in visual media. The primary goal of this thesis is to investigate the subjectivity of perceived authenticity as it relates to self representation in two visual mediums: painting and digital media.

I address three goals in this research. The first is to better understand the process of representing identity visually. The second is to experience and analyze the dialogue that occurs between an artist and their audience through art. Finally, the third is to view how components of the two visual mediums impact the way viewers perceive the authenticity of the represented images.

In this research I apply the notion of authenticity presented in John Berger's collection of essays *Ways of Seeing* to the two visual mediums. Specifically, I present a critical analysis of the perceived authenticity associated with original artwork as compared to the contrived authenticity of reproduced and marketized images. I use a series of my own abstract self-portraiture as an intimate case study to analyze the perceived authenticity associated with self-portraiture in original artwork. I then provide an analysis of the contemporary social media platform Instagram as a means to view the contrived authenticity associated with self-portraiture in digital media.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis serves as an interrogation of the process of representing self. The primary goal of this thesis is to investigate the subjectivity of perceived authenticity as it relates to the representation of identity in visual media. Specifically, I will look at the process of representing oneself through self-portraiture in two visual mediums.

The first medium is painting. I will view self-portraiture in 2D visual artwork in order to observe both the constructs of representation through visual rhetoric by the artist, and the subjectivity of perception by the audience. Observing self-portraiture in painting offers the opportunity to discuss perceived authenticity in original artwork, the evocation of interpretation, and the perpetual dialogue that occurs between the artist and the audience through visual artwork. In this chapter on self-portraiture in original artwork, I analyze my personal experience with representing my identity in a series of abstract self-portraiture. This case study serves as an intimate exploration of self-portraiture, and offers insight on the ongoing dialogue between artist and audience, audience and art, and artist and their own perception of self.

The second medium is digital media. When observing digital media in the context of social media, I shift my focus from the foundational properties of representation in visual artwork to the agency of the individual during the process of representing their identity online. I view the representation of the individual's own concept of self as a foundation of self-portraiture. Social media platforms, however, provide an environment that is heavily saturated with the opportunity for alteration and manipulation because editing tools are so readily available. Photo editing tools offer the individual more overt opportunity to refine or alter their self-representation. Unlike 2D visual artwork, digital media is subjected to a different—more



superficial—perceived authenticity. Therefore, bringing digital media into the discourse on representation builds upon the complexities of subjectivity, audience perception, and individual intent. This chapter offers unique insight on how the aestheticism of social media and intent impact perceived authenticity. In order to study the role of digital media in self-portraiture, I will discuss a popular social media platform: Instagram. Instagram offers insight on the agency of the individual and how the potential for manipulation evokes further complexities in the subjectivity of the representation of identity.

Discussing these two mediums of representation presents a unique opportunity to interrogate authenticity as it relates to the representation of identity. Both mediums highlight the concepts of subjectivity and the evocation of interpretation, but inherent differences between the two mediums also illustrate how context, content, and intent impact the dialogue. In short, they are both processes of representation using visual media, but the different ways that both the artist and audience approach them highlights the complexity and elusiveness of authenticity. This thesis argues that original artwork is approached by the audience with the assumption that is in some way more authentic than a reproduced image. This assumption of originality impacts the way the viewer perceives the authenticity of the original artwork. Conversely, this thesis also argues that the marketization of images in original artwork and digital media shifts the focus of the perception of authenticity off of the originality of the image, and on to the market value of the image. This process of marketization on images highlights the nature of contrived authenticity.

Before discussing visual artwork and digital media, I will look to Rene Magritte's surrealist paintings to view art's capacity to evoke thought and bring new ideas into the world, as well as John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* for a theoretical framework of the notion of authenticity as

it relates to original artwork, reproduction, and fragmentation of meaning. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* provides a foundation of thought on how different methods of representation impact the ways that images are viewed by an audience.

As a visual artist, I find that the critical analysis of the representation of self in visual media is directly applicable to my visual artwork. As seen in this thesis, I choose to manifest my concept of self in abstract self-portraiture. For me, painting is the most effective way to reflect on and illustrate my interpretation of my most authentic self. Through this thesis, I hope to gain a better understanding of how visual artwork can encapsulate abstract concepts such as identity, and serve as a means to approach more authentic communication.

## CHAPTER 1. THEORIES OF AUTHENTICITY

### MAGRITTE: PAINTING THE IMAGE OF RESEMBLANCE

What one must paint is the image of resemblance  
if thought is to become visible in the world.

—René Magritte

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, René Magritte, a Belgian surrealist artist, challenged the social acceptance of visual images by recontextualizing familiar ideas in unfamiliar circumstances through art. His surrealist works, such as *Empire of Light*, a landscape painting that depicts the juxtaposition of a bright, mid-day sky with a dark, nocturnal city street, force viewers to reconsider their basis for interpreting the image. *Empire of Light* unsettles the viewer because it disrupts the status quo of representation of landscape by departing from the naturalistic representation of light. Through his paintings, Magritte reveals the nature of social conditioning in the interpretation of visual rhetoric, as well as the power of artwork as a medium to challenge accepted conventions of imagery and representation. This questioning of the visual rhetoric status quo is important for viewing the subjectivity of context, content, and perspective when looking at representation.

In the epigraph above, Magritte highlights the complexity of manifesting abstract concepts in the world. He also writes that “Visible things can be invisible. However, our powers of thought grasp both the visible and the invisible – and I make use of painting to render thoughts

visible.”<sup>1</sup> Magritte is not insinuating through this statement that he is attempting to communicate or translate meaning through his artwork. He is not rendering thought as comprehensible.

Instead, he is suggesting that through art, the audience can experience the provocation of thought. Magritte’s paintings exhibit the unique capacity for artwork to challenge the accepted ways of seeing images, and invoke original thought. Art’s capacity to change the way we view the world around us, as well as bring new concepts in to the world renders it as valuable.

Magritte harnesses the power of visual media to redefine the ways we look at images. Recontextualization incites new opportunities for the images represented in artwork to take on new substance. Magritte suggests that “between words and objects one can create new relations and specify characteristics of language and objects generally ignored in everyday life.”<sup>2</sup> In this statement, Magritte is referencing a series of paintings that incorporate both image and text. These works appear to challenge the assumption of meaning behind images. For example, the front cover of John Berger’s collection of essays *Ways of Seeing* shows Magritte’s painting *The Key to Dreams* (1935).<sup>3</sup> This painting provides simple yet powerful commentary on the “ever-present gap between words and seeing,” where it presents images that are most likely assumed to be a horse, a clock, a briefcase, and a pitcher but juxtaposes them with words that belie these images’ assumed meanings.<sup>4</sup> Due to the proximity of the images and words, the audience is left to ponder what the relationship might be, if any, and if not, why Magritte chose those images and those words. Magritte’s multi-media approach leads the audience to recognize the potential for the images to represent more than originally assumed. He accomplishes this by forcing the

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<sup>1</sup> Solso, Robert L. *Cognition and the visual arts*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Magritte, René. 1898-1967.

<sup>3</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

audience's gaze away from the context of normalized thought. Even in paintings that do not utilize text, Magritte offers commentary through visual rhetoric on artwork's ability to transcend some of the limitations of communication and to create the potential for new values to be associated with any one given image. He does so by suggesting to the audience that they should question what they think they assume to be true about images.

Magritte serves as an example of how original artwork establishes its own and acquires the recognition of perceived authenticity. Not only is Magritte challenging the pre-existing ways that images are viewed, he is also invoking original thought from the viewer. Additionally, his style of producing artwork is idiosyncratic to him; though there are other surrealists, Magritte's work is easily identifiable as his own. Therefore, viewers of Magritte's artwork not only perceive authenticity in his work, but they also deem his original artwork as valuable. The perception of the authenticity of original artwork is a key concept to reflect on when examining John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

### BERGER'S *WAYS OF SEEING*

In 1972 John Berger wrote a four-part television series called *Ways of Seeing* with the help of producer Mike Dibb. The series was first broadcast on BBC Two in January 1972. The television series was then adapted into a collection of essays that was also titled *Ways of Seeing*. The television series and collection of essays are considered seminal works in the visual culture, visual arts, and art history disciplines. For the purposes of this thesis, I will review the notions of authenticity and subjectivity presented by Berger in Episode 1 and Essay 1 of *Ways of Seeing*.

The theoretical framework that Berger provides will serve as guideposts for the following discussions on the perceived authenticity of self-portraiture in various visual mediums.

### *BERGER'S NOTION OF AUTHENTICITY*

Berger's notion of authenticity highlights the differences between the perceived authenticity of artwork that evokes original thought, the inauthenticity of reproductions, and the contrived authenticity of marketized images.

In Episode 1 of the television series *Ways of Seeing*, Berger states that “reproductions distort.”<sup>5</sup> Reproductions include anything that is not an original image presented in its original context; photographs, prints, reflections, recreations, and copies are all included. Each of the reproductions produced of an original painting lack some component of the original painting that was constitutive of its perceived authenticity. Distortions of coloration, change in form, or pixilation are all examples of manipulations that could impact the way the viewer sees and understands the artwork. Berger also highlights that change of context is a characteristic of reproductions that distorts the meaning of the original image. Berger states, “The camera, by making the work of art transmittable, has multiplied its possible meanings and destroyed its unique original meaning.”<sup>6</sup> Through this statement, Berger highlights the capacity for reproductions to remove an original image from its original context and place it in a new one. Transmitting the image of artwork to a new context changes all of the information surrounding

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<sup>5</sup> John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis. *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

the artwork. Therefore, the reproduction, because it cannot maintain the full meaning of the original image, becomes a fragmented version that carries its own meaning.

Berger presents an example of the inherent difference between original artwork and reproduction through Da Vinci's paintings *The Virgin of the Rocks* and *Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist*. First, Berger visits the original painting *The Virgin of the Rocks* in the Nation Museum in London, England.<sup>7</sup> In Episode 1, as Berger stands in front of *The Virgin of the Rocks*, he states, "This painting by Leonardo is unlike any other in the world. The National Gallery has the real one. It isn't a fake, it's authentic. If I go to the National Gallery and look at this painting, somehow I should be able to feel this authenticity."<sup>8</sup> Through this example, Berger highlights the perceived authenticity of the original artwork. Somehow, the notion of authenticity is embedded within this original piece, and can be sensed by a viewer who is in the presence of it. No reproduction of this painting would be capable of capturing the essence of authenticity embedded within this original work.

Berger then presents an example of reproduction through the cartoon *Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist*.<sup>9</sup> While standing in front of this drawing, Berger draws attention to the facsimile of the cartoon, rather than to the cartoon itself. He states, "The National Gallery sells more reproductions of this Leonardo cartoon than of any other picture. But what are the meanings these reproductions acquire in each home when they are hung or pinned on the

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<sup>7</sup> da Vinci, Leonardo. *The Virgin of the Rocks*. 1495. Oil on Canvas. National Gallery, London.

<sup>8</sup> Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. Episode 1.

<sup>9</sup> da Vinci, Leonardo. *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist*. 1500. Charcoal on Tinted Paper. National Gallery, London.

wall? And how different are all of these meanings from the original one, when Leonardo first worked on it to work out an idea for a painting?”<sup>10</sup> In this statement, Berger highlights the nature of the fragmentation of the meaning of images when they are reproduced. By asking the question, “what are the new meanings these reproductions acquire in each home when they are hung or pinned on the wall?” Berger shows that each image, when removed from the context of the National Gallery, is brought in to a new context that alters the way it is viewed by the audience. This recontextualization, though, is not the same as the recontextualization of images in Magritte’s original artwork. Rather than challenging the accepted interpretation of visual rhetoric like Magritte, the process Berger is referring to simply takes a pre-existing image and places it in a new context with no implicit evocation of original thought.

The meaning of the original work is carried on in part by each of these reproductions, yet is fragmented with each of them as well. Each reproduction is transmittable—capable of being altered, manipulated, and removed from its original context. In every form of reproduction, the new, recreated artwork feels as though it is lacking something: it is not providing the viewer with the most authentic, genuine experience they would have had if they had viewed the original art. This deficit of perceived authenticity decreases the value that the viewer places on the reproduction in comparison to the original work. This decrease in perceived value is evident in the comparison of market value between the original painting and a reproduction of it. In 1972, Berger stated that “For this drawing by Leonardo, the Americans wanted 2.5 million pounds.”<sup>11</sup> In 2017 a small print of the same painting purchased through the National Gallery would cost

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<sup>10</sup> Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. Episode 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



17.50 pounds.<sup>12</sup> A patron of the National Gallery would never pay two and a half million pounds for a print of *The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist* when the original painting still stood at that market value.

*The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist* is an example of the intimate relationship between market value, perceived value, and perceived authenticity of art. The marketization of original artwork exhibits how the perceived authenticity of the artwork determines its value. Berger outlines this concept when he states, “It acquires a kind of new impressiveness, not because of what it shows, not because of the meaning of its image. It’s become mysterious again because of its market value. And this market value depends upon it being genuine.”<sup>13</sup> There is an ongoing relationship between the market value of the original artwork and the reproductions produced. Though the reproductions of an original work are stripped of the perceived authenticity of that work, the market value they add to the original work further enhances the perceived authenticity of it. The market value and perceived authenticity of original artwork illustrates the cultural capital associated with “authenticity.”

The final concept to observe in Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* is the bogus religiosity of art. Berger states that “the bogus religiosity which now surrounds original works of art, and which is ultimately dependent upon their market value, has become the substitute for what paintings lost when the camera made them reproducible.”<sup>14</sup> In this statement, Berger shows how the reproducibility of images has forced original artwork to take on a “mysterious” impressiveness. Because reproductions have made the access to images common, the access to the original

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<sup>12</sup> National Gallery Shop, "The Burlington House Cartoon | Prints | National Gallery Shop," [https://www.nationalgallery.co.uk/products/the-burlington-house-cartoon-print/p\\_NG6337](https://www.nationalgallery.co.uk/products/the-burlington-house-cartoon-print/p_NG6337).

<sup>13</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 23.

becomes more exclusive. Coming into contact with original art work now holds a new value in the eyes of the audience. In the next chapter, I will illustrate how original artwork takes on this mysterious value through a series of my self-portraiture. In the following case study, I will narrate my approach to self-representation in original art. When I exhibit the series to an audience, I will highlight how the audience approaches my art with this same notion of perceived authenticity outlined in Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

## *CHAPTER 2. SELF-PORTRAIT SERIES 6: INTERACTIVE VISUAL ARTS GALLERY*

### INTRODUCTION OF THE EXHIBITION

I produced *Self-Portrait Series 6*, a six-piece series of self-portraiture, from October 2016 through January 2017. I exhibited this series in the Chace Gallery of the Schwartz Center for Performing Arts at Emory University from Thursday, January 26, 2017, through Wednesday, March 1, 2017. During that period, members of the public could view the series on weekdays from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m., in addition to five separate events that included the award ceremony for Emory Center for Creativity and the Arts, three public guided tours, and a private viewing with me. Signs prompted gallery visitors to participate in a brief, anonymous survey as they viewed the artwork. The survey asked them to interpret the artwork and to identify characteristics of the artist based on the content of the series. The creation of the series and this survey serve as the primary components in this discussion of authenticity and the representation of self.

The Chace Gallery served as an advantageous location for the study due to the high-traffic location of the gallery during Arts at Emory events, which attract members of the public

who are generally unfamiliar with my original artwork and components of my identity. In addition, the Schwartz Center is an important location on Emory's campus for faculty, students, and staff to attend arts events. The location garnered attention from the Emory community for the exhibition. The combination of audience members from outside and within the Emory community offered a variety of responses to the survey from both people that knew me prior to the exhibition and people that did not. The variety of responses offers intriguing information about the reception and interpretation of my representation of identity in visual artwork.

There are three core insights that I hoped to gain through the production, exhibition, and analysis of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. First, I wanted to gain an intimate understanding of the process of representing identity in art. Second, I wanted to view the ongoing discourse between the audience and artist through the art. Finally, I wanted to view the perception of authenticity as it relates to representation of self in visual artwork.

## METHODOLOGY

My methodology for this chapter is two-fold: the creation of *Self-Portrait Series 6*, and a survey of those who saw the exhibition on how they interpreted it and who they imagined the artist to be. This project offers insight on my process of representing my perception of myself through visual artwork. My reflections on the process of art-making convey an intimate understanding of my process of approaching my "authentic identity,"<sup>15</sup> as well as broader insight on the conventions of representation that complicate the dialogue between artist and audience

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<sup>15</sup> The term "authentic identity" is not to be confused with the attempt to communicate a finite, conclusive version of myself such as a "true self," but merely my attempt at the most accurate articulation of my perception of self at the time of the creation of the series. I will also refer to "authentic identity" as my "concept of self."

through art. In other words, *Self-Portrait Series 6* is my attempt at creating a representation of how I perceive my most authentic self, and at viewing how the process of representing my identity evokes reaction and thought by viewers of my art.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am defining authentic identity as the self I tried to encapsulate in my art, rather than an essential, finite, finished version of my identity. In order to observe the process of representing identity, and how an audience might interpret my self-portraiture, I compare my artistic intent—the version of my identity I wanted to encapsulate in the series—and my audience’s interpretation of my art.

First, I created a body of artwork that expressed who I believe I was during the act of making it. I drafted a private artist’s statement, which I kept to myself until after the exhibition. I also completed the same survey I asked gallery visitors to complete in order to have a basis for comparing the audience’s interpretations of the art to my artistic intent. Additionally, I provide elaborate reflections on the process of manifesting my perception of self in visual artwork.

Second, I exhibited the series in a public gallery. A major component of the exhibition was the participation of my audience in completing an anonymous survey based on their interpretations of the artwork. The audience received very little supplementary textual information about the artwork apart from the fact that it was a self-portraiture series: there was no artist’s statement, contextual information, or individual titles of the pieces provided for the audience (Figure 1).

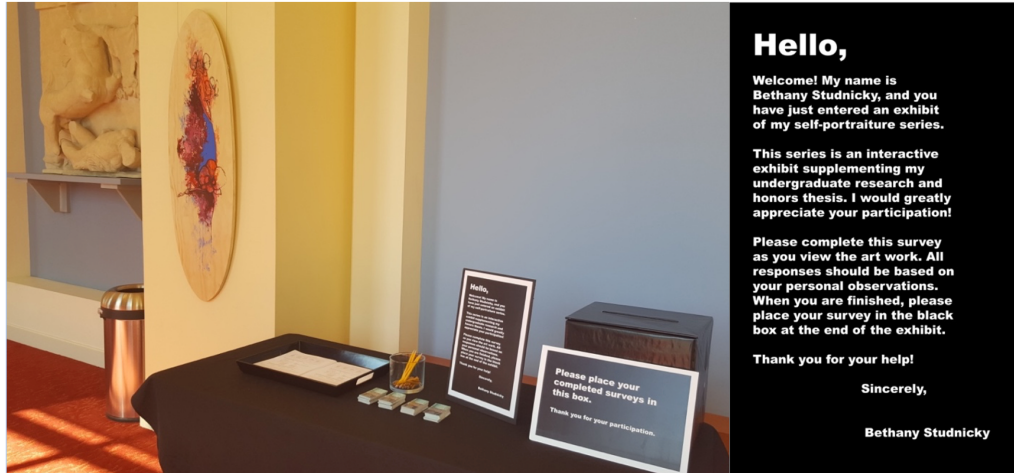


Figure 1. Gallery table with signage prompting visitors to participate in the study.

I hoped to gain three insights from this exhibition. First, I wanted to gain an intimate understanding of the process of representing identity in art. Second, I wanted to view the ongoing discourse between the audience and artist through the art. As the artist, I am rarely given access to the ways that my audience interprets the images that I produce. I am interested to see if and how each individual views the artwork differently from one another, and how their individual perceptions add to or create new meaning for the artwork. Finally, I wanted to view the perception of authenticity as it relates to representation of self in visual artwork. In the discussion of Berger's notion of authenticity, I identified that original artwork maintains a perceived air of authenticity. I am curious if my viewers approach my artwork with that assumption. I tailored my survey questions to provide information regarding these insights. I asked two questions regarding overall theme to gain a basis of understanding of the various ways my audience members interpreted the visual rhetoric embedded in the art. Next, I asked the audience to identify demographic information about the artist behind the work to see if and how their interpretations impacted their perception of the artist. I also asked them to identify what

component of the artwork they thought best represented the identity of the artist in order to observe what component they most likely based their interpretations on. Finally, I asked them to rate the work on a scale of one to ten on the effectiveness of the art's communication. Though this case study is not focusing on effective communication, this question, in conjunction with the audience's additional comments, allows me to view how the audience approached the artwork.

Finally, I synthesized the audience responses and observed the ways that their responses compared to one another's, as well as to my artistic intent. I looked at patterns in answers given to the survey, common motifs of visual rhetoric noted in the responses, and parallels and divergences in vocabulary used to describe the work. I also reflected on my personal observations of audience behavior while viewing the series during the guided tours. These questions, along with the feedback given through them, help situate *Self-Portrait Series 6* in the greater narrative of authenticity, subjectivity, and the representation of self.

## THE CREATION OF THE SERIES, SYMBOLISM, AND ARTIST'S INTENT

### *PRE-PRODUCTION*

Before I began making the art, I established my intentions for the series. I wanted to paint my understanding of my authentic identity. Although I created this series for a public exhibition and analysis, I did not create it as a means to translate as many literal details about my identity to an audience as possible. I tried to refer only to my personal reflections on who I was, rather than cater to my potential future audience. This means that I tried, as best I could, to make paintings for me, as if the communicative imperative of art were suspended.

Rather than approaching this self-portraiture series as a coming-of-age series, I chose to reflect on my understanding of my identity as I saw it at the time of the creation of the series. I identified three primary themes of my self-conception that I wanted to represent in *Self-Portrait Series 6*: introspection and self-reflection; femininity and sexuality; and confidence and strength of self. I organized the series based on these three concepts, breaking the series down into thirds, each third delineated by size, color, and content.

*NARRATIVE OF PRODUCTION: COMPOSITION, SYMBOLISM, AND METHOD*

I did not know what *Self-Portrait Series 6* would look like when I began conceptualizing it. Apart from the rough thematic categories I identified above, I did not have a specific plan for the painted content, and created no rough drafts. The process of creation was organic and fast-paced. Overall, *Self-Portrait Series 6* took approximately 260 hours to complete, and was separated into four sections of production.

The first period of production was dedicated to composition and canvas choice. As a self-portraiture series, I wanted to emulate the natural, raw formation of identity as unique and idiosyncratic to the individual, while recognizing the process of refining one's identity through personal choices and life experiences. Raw palette boards offered both the complexities of naturally occurring, unique, organic patterns in wood grain, and the ability to refine the raw material through inorganic means such as cutting, sanding, and priming—all of which methods were used to refine the wooden frames. It took approximately 50 hours to complete this process.

The frames started out as four by eight foot pallets, which were then cut down into six ellipses of varying heights and widths. I organized these frames into pairs by size. The two smallest frames measure forty-eight inches in height and eighteen inches in width. The two

medium frames measure seventy-two inches in height and twenty-four inches in width. The two largest frames measure ninety-six inches in height and thirty-two inches in width. In the gallery space, which was shaped like a hall, the paintings hung in the order of their creation on a single wall opposite windows, with the smallest near the entrance, the medium ones in the middle, and the largest at the end of the gallery.

I chose to format each frame as an ellipse for the same reasons I chose refined wood: the symbiotic juxtaposition of both naturally occurring, unique shapes, with the refined perfection of symmetry. Each planet follows a predictable and elliptical trajectory around the sun—measurable and finite. The reason is that the inertia of a celestial body compels the body to move forward in a straight line, but the gravity of the sun curves the path of the orbiting planet, forming the ellipse. After I obtained the wood panels and needed to decide the composition of *Self-Portrait Series 6*, my mind continually returned to this shape. I had hoped that the frames would be less eccentric,<sup>16</sup> wider at the center of the ellipse. I was limited, however, by the parameters of the gallery space. Each piece of artwork was hung on a distended section of wall in the gallery, approximately thirty-eight inches wide, so the wooden frames could not exceed thirty-four inches in width.

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<sup>16</sup> Eccentricity is a mathematical parameter referring to the amount an ellipse deviates from being a circle.





*Figure 2. Refined wooden frames.*

I produced the paintings in three 70-hour sittings, spent painting the series in thematic pairs. I began with the smallest pair of panels and progressed in order through the largest pair. When painting, I utilize color, form, and texture to narrate content. I designed my color palette based on the clothing that I wear. My wardrobe and other superficial aesthetic choices typically lean towards burgundy, red, magenta, navy blue, royal blue, and electric blue. While I knew I would be using acrylic paint to create this series, I wanted the paint to look and feel like a cross between watercolor and oil paints. Watercolor paintings typically rely on translucent layering of matte colors while oil paintings have opaque layers with distinct luster and vibrancy. I also knew that I wanted the grain of the wood panels to be present throughout the series. In order to achieve these three goals, I chose to alter the consistency of the acrylic paints by adding heavy gloss medium. Adding the gloss medium made the acrylic paint both dense and translucent. When dried, the thick layers of paint are shiny and reflective, and feel like plastic.

I used only six colors of paints to create this series. I did not alter the color of the paint, except for opacity, before applying it to the surface of the painting, but the translucent layers

allowed me to create complex color patterns. Every panel received over fifteen applications of layers of paint. I would scrape a thick layer of heavy-body pigment on to the wood frame using a large metal palette knife. Once the layer dried, I would sand down the paint using both coarse and fine grain sandpaper. Sanding allowed me to alter the texture, weight, and hue of the paints. I repeated this process until I was satisfied with the abstract underlayer. Once the abstract underlayer was set, I began visualizing the form of the painting based on the pattern of the underlayer. I specifically looked for movement, directionality, and specific spaces where I wanted to highlight the texture and color of the underlayer. Below is an image of the two small panels in progress (Figure 3). In this photo, *Exhibition Piece 1*'s overlayer had already been mapped out, while *Exhibition Piece 2* was still in the conceptualization phase. I had not planned for either painting to incorporate the opaque cobalt blue in the over layer. That decision came after an aesthetic choice was made for *Exhibition Piece 3*.



*Figure 3. Exhibition Pieces 1 and 2, in progress.*

The three pairs consist of one painting with and one painting without human figural representation. When exhibited, the series alternates paintings without and with human figural representation. Orchids are a common motif in composition and symbolism throughout the series. The stems, buds, and flowers help guide the audience through the abstract portraiture, while adding complexity and symbolism. In the more abstract pieces, the orchids are the only concrete imagery offering information to the audience. In the pieces with human figuration, the orchids are inlaid with scenes of a woman's body: hair and arm, breast and hip, a clutching hand.



Figure 4: *Exhibition Pieces 1 and 2, finished.*

The first, smallest pair centralizes the concepts of introspection and self-reflection (Figure 4). These pieces embody these characteristics through the symbolism of the orchids and young woman, the texture of the paints, and the size of the wooden frame. Because these frames are the smallest in the series, the audience is forced to stand the closest to view their details. This proximity, for me, helps simulate the intimacy of self-reflection. The young woman depicted in *Exhibition Piece 2* looks at an orchid, which she grips tightly. Looking into the flower suggests looking into oneself. The young woman is unconcerned with the audience outside of the painting looking at her. She is within herself, safeguarded by her hair, the closed position of her arm, and the opaque, muddied colors that mask her face and body.

The element of orchids is sustained through the entirety of *Self-Portrait Series 6*, but their form changes based on the conceptual theme—as does that of the figural representation. The second couplet of paintings, medium in size relative to the others, reflects on femininity and sexuality. This pair of paintings, in my opinion, is explicit: *Exhibition Piece 3* shows a blossoming flower at the top of a stem, bountiful with unopened buds, and *Exhibition Piece 4* alludes to the profile of a matured female body in the negative space between orchids. The buds, the pre-sexed organs of the flower, signify potential. The blossoming flowers represent my awareness of my own femininity.

I had not planned to use orchids or the female body as recurring imagery prior to production. Upon reaching the juncture where I needed to transition from the abstract underlayer to the detailed overlay, orchids came to the forefront of my conceptualization. Orchids have become an integral component of my identity throughout my development from adolescence to young adulthood. I had arbitrarily selected these exotic flowers as my favorite around age sixteen. Shortly after, I entered an emotionally abusive relationship where my boyfriend gave me orchids as apologies to reinforce our relationship and his hold on me. I would wear orchids frequently, either in my jewelry or real flowers, for events such as prom and graduation. Orchids became extremely sentimental for me. I began collecting the dried flowers on a decorative wicker panel next to my bed. I still maintain this collection of orchids as my garden of memories. They help me remember how I've become who I've become. It was only fitting for me to use them as I reflected on the culmination of life experiences that aided in creating my current concept of self.

*Exhibition Piece 3* was the first piece I used the matte cobalt blue in. The decision to use the cobalt blue as negative space—forming the content out of the background of the

painting—was purely utilitarian. I had originally completed *Exhibition Pieces 1 and 2* with no cobalt blue. When I drew the orchids in *Exhibition Piece 3*, they were not visible. I had already used the cobalt blue sparingly in the background, but it was not meant to be at the forefront of the paintings. Out of sheer desperation to reveal the indecipherable flowers, I began filling the spaces between with blue. After completing *Exhibition Pieces 3 and 4* (Figure 5), I retroactively painted cobalt blue in to *Exhibition Pieces 1 and 2*.

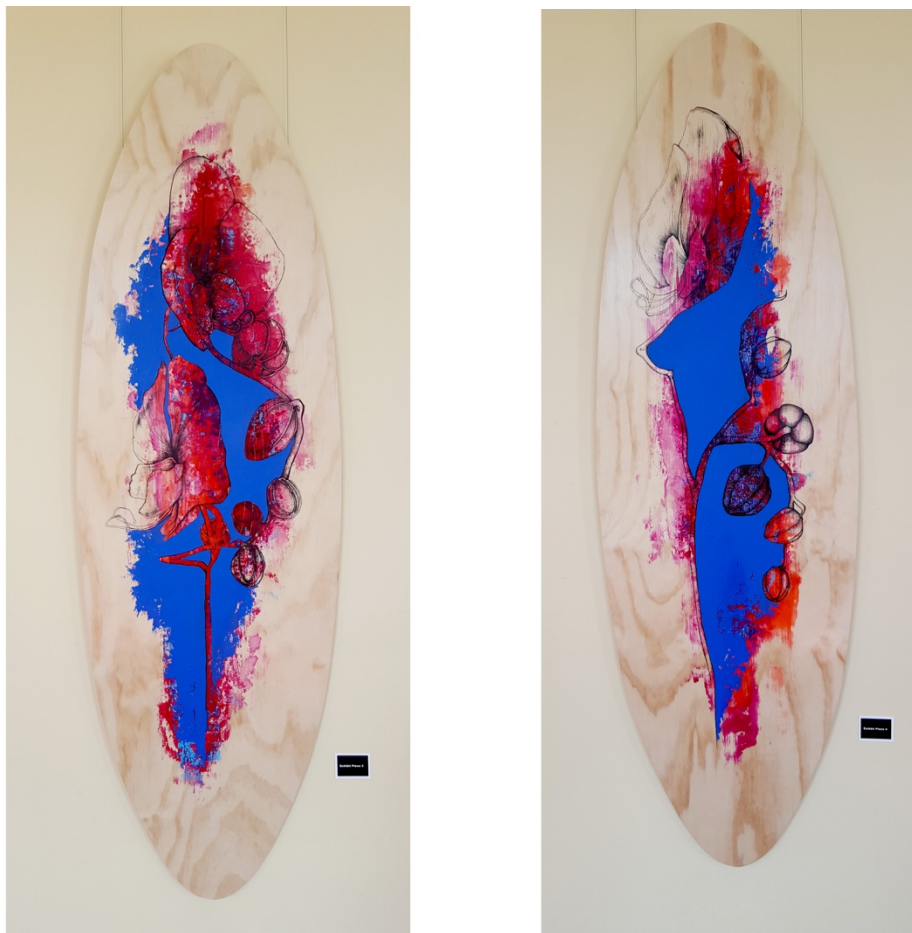


Figure 5. *Exhibition Pieces 3 and 4*

As a child, I did not identify, nor portray myself, as a particularly “feminine” individual. I did not question my heterosexuality, nor my given gender, but the way I presented myself was never perceived as feminine. Specifically, the way I dressed (in all black), the sports I played

(rugby), and the friendships I kept (primarily with boys), altered not only my peers' perception of me, but also my perception of myself. I found myself either being bullied for my lack of feminine traits, or, later, chastised for my overt sexuality. Ironically, far before I began viewing myself as a sexual being, people projected their insecurities about sexuality on me. I was only ten years old when I began "developing early," and only thirteen when my peers decided that I was a "slut." At fourteen, I had my first kiss. Just before I turned sixteen and fell in love with orchids, I changed the way that I presented myself, partly based on a desire to assimilate with my ever-so-distant female peers, partly based on a desire to stand out, but also in a way to come closer to my changing concept of self. I changed. Amidst the critique of my family and peers, I began to look at my femininity and sexuality less as a weight bearing down on me, and more as a foundation upon which to build my selfhood. The culmination of my awareness of my femininity and sexuality is now constitutive of my present "authentic identity." *Exhibition Piece 4* reflects on the physical, mental, and emotional development of my awareness of my own sexuality. The hints of a woman's figure, constructed out of the stems, buds, and blossoms of orchids, speaks to the overt oversexualization of my body, and my grasp on my own confidence in my sexuality.

The final couplet of *Self-Portrait Series 6* portrays confidence and strength of self (Figure 6). Though I do not view identity as a final destination that is achievable or finite, I do view confidence in my identity and conviction in my decisions as important characteristics of my "authentic identity." The culmination of a series of life experiences has given me confidence in my concept of self, fueling the ongoing process of my cultivation of self. These concepts, however, proved to be the most difficult to represent in my artwork. I ruminated over potential compositions for hours before I finally settled on two fully bloomed orchids, forward facing and unobstructed, for *Exhibition Piece 5*. *Exhibition Piece 6* was by far the most difficult work to

produce in the series. I could not determine a composition that *felt* confident to me. I began drawing different options in chalk on the wooden frame: a full woman's figure wrapped in vines of budding flowers, long billowing hair, a body made of orchids; they were all too complex, too forced. It was the only drafting I did in the entire production of the series.

Confidence, to me, is simple, yet bold. I realized that it was not my body, or my orchids that made me feel strong. It was my hands. My hands gave me the opportunity to gain a firmer grasp on my concept of self, and how it changes, through the creative process. From my creations came my ability to reflect on my self, to observe my relationships with others and with my self, and to manifest my thoughts into paintings—the most authentic way I know how to communicate. What could be more fitting then, than my hand grasping the symbol of my memories? The orchids symbolize formative life moments, while the buds represent potential for change.



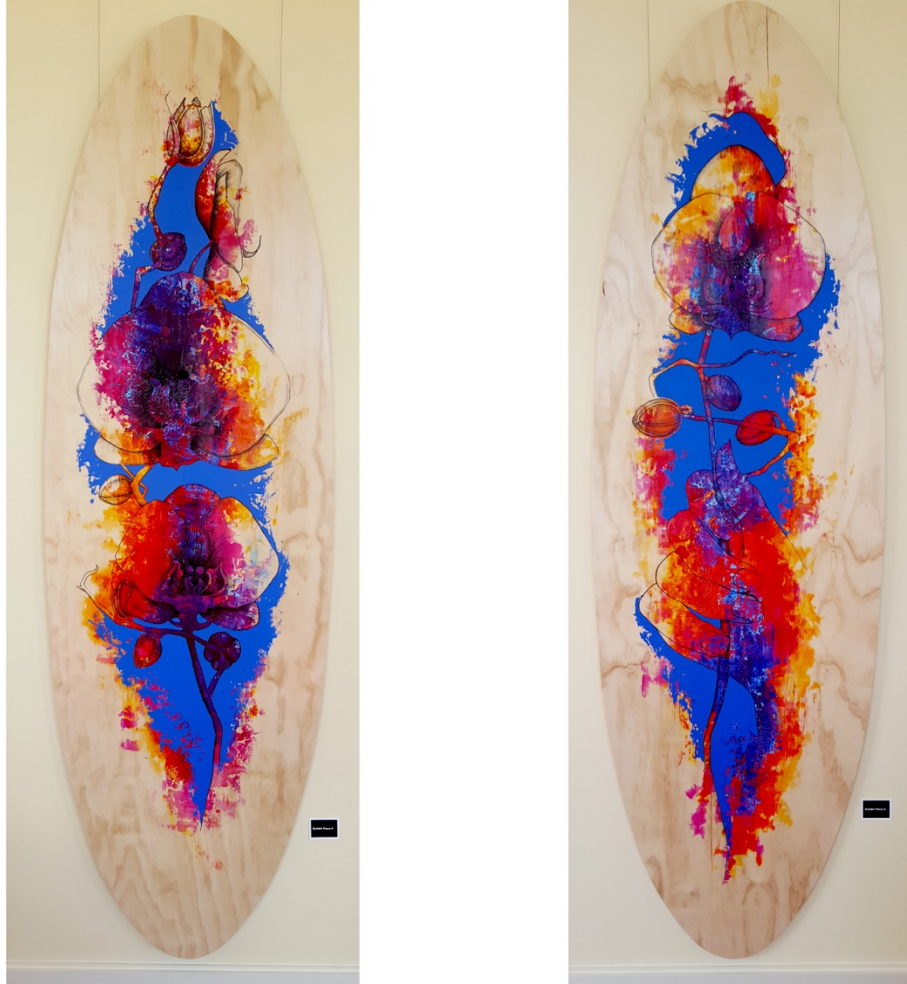


Figure 6. Exhibition Pieces 5 and 6

The production of *Self-Portrait Series 6* provided me with insight into the process of attempting to represent my identity in visual art. This narration of my creative process is my attempt to preserve the thought processes that occurred throughout production. The themes discussed in this section will parallel the themes discussed in the next section, “Artist’s Intent,” as both the narration of production and my written supplements help express my intent of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. After providing the artist’s statement and answers to my survey in “Artist’s Intent,” I will examine my audience’s responses to their surveys. I will then highlight

common trends in audience response, compare my audience's survey responses to my own, and reflect on my observations of my audience.

## ARTIST'S INTENT

When creating *Self-Portrait Series 6*, I intended to represent my contemporary concept of my most authentic identity. I tried to create a self-portraiture series that represented the way that I viewed my perception of my identity at the time of the creation of the series. It was not my intent to produce a series of artwork that presented a representation of my desired identity, or the way that I wanted others to perceive me.<sup>17</sup>

I wrote my artist's statement during the production of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. I have not edited this statement since December 7, 2016.<sup>18</sup> The statement reads:

*Self-Portrait Series 6* is an intimate interrogation of authentic identity and my personal concept of self. This series was created with acrylic paint on refined plywood, with a heavy glaze and varnish. The plywood, damaged with knots and cracks, yet rounded into ellipses, one of few naturally occurring perfect shapes, offers an organic foundation upon which to explore my most natural, authentic concept of self—refined with time and experience. These pieces, coupled in pairs of two, explore facets of my identity as I presently see myself. This series explores the concepts of introspection and self reflection; femininity and sexuality; and confidence and strength of self. Motifs of organic imagery, inlaid in vibrant abstract self-portraiture, offer an expressive testament

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<sup>17</sup> I cannot deliberate on the success of my ability to separate the ways that I want my peers to perceive me from my personal reflections of my present state of being. For the purposes of this study, it is assumed that I did not intentionally project desired characteristics of my identity to my audience through the production of this series.

<sup>18</sup> This artist's statement was written prior to the completion of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. I still regard this statement as a reflection of the series as a whole.

to my identity as well as an intimate introspection of my growth from adolescence to adulthood.

Flowers, to me, are synonymous with memory. I keep a “garden” of dried flowers from significant life events in order to preserve these moments of growth. Thus, when reflecting on my life experiences and their impact on my present identity, flowers are omnipresent. Orchids played a significant role in my life from my adolescence to my ascension to femininity in womanhood. A symbol of sexuality, orchids traced my first relationships, loss of innocence, and later, revitalization of confidence in independence.

This artist's statement reflects many of the motifs that were previously discussed in the narrative of the production of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. The vocabulary used in the statement that sticks out to me includes: concept of self, damaged, perfect, organic foundation, natural, authentic, refined, time, experience, introspection, self-reflection, femininity, sexuality, confidence, strength of self, organic imagery, introspection of my growth, femininity in womanhood, and confidence in independence. Of these words and phrases, some, but not all, are evident in my responses to my survey. Reflecting on my survey now, in March 2017, some of the responses I produced on January 26, 2017, surprise me. There are concepts in my responses that I did not include in my artist's statement. I will review my responses by question:

Question 1: “Please circle five adjectives<sup>19</sup> from this list you believe best describe the content of this series.” The options included: calm, passion, anger, sadness, love, femininity, pride, melancholy, youth, greed, confidence, lust, death, sexuality, masculinity, fear, strength, aging, disgust, and introspection. Out of these terms, I chose: femininity, pride, confidence, sexuality, and introspection. The terms femininity, confidence, sexuality, and introspection are

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<sup>19</sup> Not all of the terms in this list are "adjectives"; "adjectives" could have been replaced with "words" to be less misleading.

all used in both my artist's statement and my narrative of the production of the series, so I am not surprised that I chose them on my survey. I am, however, surprised that I chose the word "pride" rather than either passion or strength to describe this series. Strength, much like the aforementioned terms, was used in both my artist's statement and my narrative, and yet I did not select it on my survey. Passion was not used in either my artist's statement or my narrative, but it is a term I commonly use to describe myself in other exercises of self-reflection not pertaining to this study.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines pride as, "the quality or state of being proud, such as: inordinate self-esteem, conceit; a reasonable or justifiable self-respect; delight or elation arising from some act, possession, or relationship," or as, "proud or disdainful behavior or treatment"<sup>20</sup> Additionally, "pride" is one of the seven deadly sins in Christianity. I cannot detect any plausible reason why I would have selected the word pride based on the latter definition, so I presume (and remember) that I selected pride based on the connotation of the use of the word as in "taking pride in myself," or "self-respect." Of the 79 respondents to the survey, only 7 selected the word pride to describe the series. A mere 8.9% of the people who took this survey chose pride, whereas 53 respondents (67.1%) chose passion, and 34 respondents (43%) chose strength. Reflecting on my selection now, with the input of my audience in mind, my perception of the word pride is distorted, and the terms passion and strength seem more applicable to the series, and to my concept of self.

Question 2: "If you were to title this body of work, what title would you give it?" I wrote: As I Am. This response is neither surprising, nor intriguing to me in my reflection. I stated in

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<sup>20</sup> "Pride | Definition of Pride by Merriam-Webster," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pride>.

every supplementary text prior to the present that this series was based on my perception of my identity at the time of its creation. While I do not find this title compelling now, I cannot say that I do not find it appropriate.

Question 3: “Based on your personal observation of this self-portraiture series, what characteristics do you believe would describe the artist?” This question then asked the respondent to fill out basic demographic data questions pertaining to gender, ethnicity, and age. I am female, I am white, and I am in the age bracket of 18-24 years old.

Question 4: “In your opinion, what component of the artwork best represents the artist's identity?” The question asked the respondents to select from five choices: color, composition, imagery/symbolism, texture, or other. It then prompted the respondents to explain their selection. I chose “imagery/symbolism,” and stated, “The abstract paintings contain a lot of symbolism that indicate components of my identity: flowers=orchids=memories, red and blue blend=internal conflict and resolution, ellipses and wood=natural, organic, yet refined.” Considering the symbolism behind various visual elements in *Self-Portrait Series 6* that I expounded upon in both the artist's statement and my narrative of production, this answer does not surprise me at all. For instance, I referenced the intimate meaning behind the orchids, and the symbolic meaning behind the wood panels numerous times. I am astounded, though, that I stated that the “red and blue blend=internal conflict and resolution.” The terms “internal conflict” and “resolution” are not used in any of my other supplementary texts, nor did I use these words once while explaining the series verbally to my peers. I even stated in the narrative of production that the use of the cobalt blue to create negative space was purely a utilitarian aesthetic choice. I completed this survey before speaking to anyone about the symbolism embedded within these works, and before I presented this series to an audience, so my audience's responses would not have led me to

respond to my survey with this, because no audience responses existed when I took my survey. This response came from me. I can only speculate that it is derivative of a change in how I either viewed the artwork, or viewed myself at the time of completing the survey as compared to when I produced the work, wrote the artist's statement, or wrote the narrative of production.

Question 5: "Do you know the artist of this series outside of this study?" My answer was self-evidently "yes."

Question 6: "On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being least effective, and 10 being most effective, how effective do you believe this series is at communicating the identity of the artist?" I considered giving myself a "10." I gave myself an "8," writing, "I think there are a lot of components of abstract art that intimidate audiences, but this is an accurate representation of me." I do not believe that any medium of communication, not just abstract art, has the ability to effectively communicate a comprehensive representation. So, the phrase "effective communication" impedes me from being able to answer "10." I myself, in three separate reflections on this series, gave different answers to the same basic questions about it. These different answers made me think about the artwork in different ways, and in turn altered my own perception of what I was trying to represent about my own identity. At each individual instance of viewing and reflecting on *Self-Portrait Series 6*, though, I did not view anything in the artwork that I felt was misleading or unrepresentative of my perception of my concept of self at those various times of viewing the series. Therefore, I cannot state that this series is not a representation of my "authentic identity"; I can simply state that it is not comprehensive of every facet of my "authentic identity."

Merely two weeks after the closing day of the gallery exhibition of *Self-Portrait Series 6*, I am questioning myself. Having written the narrative of the production of *Self-Portrait Series 6*

over three months after I wrote my artist's statement and one month after I completed my survey, I feel my perceptions of the artwork, and subsequently, my perception of self, changing. The way that I write about the artwork now is different from how I wrote about the artwork then. I utilize different vocabulary, and highlight different components of the work as important or symbolic. I speculate that there are three primary culprits responsible for this transition: the practice of explaining my intent behind the series to audience members *after* they completed the survey; the impact of my review of my audience's responses; and finally, changes in my perception of self due to the cultivation of more life experiences over the past few months. I also speculate that in the future I will write about *Self-Portrait Series 6* in a different way than I write about it now: my reflections on this series will change based on my new perceptions of my concept of self. This phenomenon of changing perception shows how the dialogue between artist and audience through art impacts the perceived meaning of the work. This is a key insight for me in my pursuit to better understand the process of self-representation in art.

## AUDIENCE RESPONSE

In this section, I analyze various components of the feedback I received from my audience as they viewed *Self-Portrait Series 6*. I present my personal observations of the behavior of my audience members as they walked through the gallery, qualitative analysis of the data collected through the survey responses, and comparisons between the trends in survey responses to my personal survey responses and artist's statement. These survey responses provide insight on how viewers approach original artwork, and in turn, how original artwork evokes thought and interpretation by the audience.

During the one-month gallery exhibition, I received 79 survey responses. As previously stated, the Chace Gallery in the Schwartz Center for Performing Arts aided *Self-Portrait Series 6*

as a case study. The public gallery drew in attendees of various arts events at the Schwartz Center such as the Youth Symphony Orchestra and a free poetry reading by the US Poet Laureate, Juan Felipe Herrera. The guests of these events were unlikely to have any prior knowledge of me before viewing my self-portrait series because they were not necessarily affiliated with the immediate Emory community. They most likely answered the survey based primarily on their interpretation of the artwork, and not based on preconceived notions of my identity from any prior interactions. Of the 79 respondents, 27 (34.2%) did not report having any prior knowledge of me before viewing *Self-Portrait Series 6*. That means that 52 respondents (65.8%) reported having some form of prior knowledge of me before completing the survey. These 52 respondents primarily consisted of Emory students, faculty, and staff I have interacted with over the past four years of my undergraduate education at Emory, the majority of whom attended the five aforementioned viewings of the exhibition, all of which, I attended as well.<sup>21</sup> I analyze the data collected through the surveys all together, highlighting trends and outliers of all 79 responses. When pertinent to the analysis, I also isolate the collective responses of those who knew me from those who did not.

In the context of my original artwork, observing the audience response to this exhibition helps me better understand the role of the audience in the dialogue between artist and audience through art. I anticipated that viewers of *Self-Portrait Series 6* would look at the series in a

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<sup>21</sup> In the event that I was present during a viewing of the exhibition, I prompted my audience members to complete the survey and turn it in *before* I explained any component of the artwork or the study. I also prompted my audience members to complete the survey based on *their observations of the artwork* (also outlined in the directions of the survey) rather than their understanding of me from any other interactions they may have had with me. Various components of this study—including my presence at the gallery, my verbal promptings to the audience members, and my marketing efforts (which included my name and a very general context of the study)—surely impacted the responses to the survey.



variety of ways. However, in my past experiences with exhibiting art, I was not aware of how my audience viewed my art or why they saw it the way that they did. This survey offers me the unique experience of viewing some of the ways that my original artwork evokes interpretation, information to which I seldom have access. These survey responses show the many ways that viewers create new value for the art when they engage with it. As seen in these observations, they do so by applying their own life experiences to the art. Furthermore, receiving responses from both viewers who knew me and viewers who did not highlights the complexity of the subjectivity of interpretation.

#### *SURVEY QUESTION 1: FIVE THEMES*

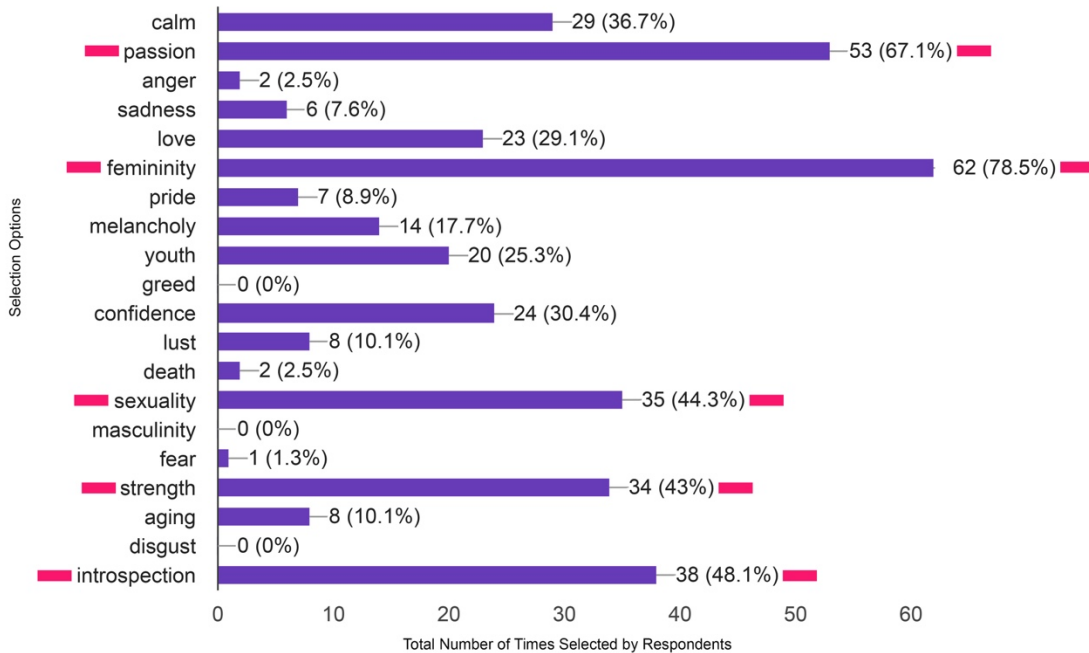
The first survey question asked my audience members to select five words from a list of twenty that they believed best described the content of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. I asked this question in order to observe what the audience perceived as the overarching themes of the series. Common trends in audience selections generally indicate that the audience perceived similar themes in the work, while a wide, decentralized variety of selections indicate that the audience members perceived different, and perhaps conflicting themes.

The potential choices for Question 1 were diverse and included some conflicting terms such as "femininity" and "masculinity," and "calm" and "anger." Survey Response Chart 1, a chart showing the cumulative statistics of the responses to Question 1, indicates that the top five selections from all 79 responses were: femininity (62 total responses, 78.5% of total respondents), passion (53 total responses, 67.1% of total respondents), introspection (38 total responses, 48.1% of total respondents), sexuality (35 total responses, 44.3% of total respondents), and strength (34 total responses, 43% of total respondents).

Please circle 5 words from this list you believe best describe the content of this series

(79 responses)

■ = Top 5 overall selections from survey respondents



Survey Response Chart 1

For the most part, the overall themes my audience selected to describe *Self-Portrait Series 6* were similar to the words I used to describe the series. As stated in the previous section, Artist's Intent, my five selections were: femininity, pride, confidence, sexuality, and introspection. In comparison to my own selections, my audience members also selected three out of five terms I used to describe the series. For the terms that did not align, there appears to be similar strains of thought: where I chose “confidence,” they chose “strength;” where I chose “pride,” they chose “passion.” I spoke briefly on my choice of the word pride in my explanation of artistic intent. I want to revisit this choice now because I only questioned my choice of the word after I viewed the responses to the survey. Therefore, I received feedback from my

audience regarding the content of my artwork that then altered my own perception of the meaning of the work. This process of sharing and interpreting information is constitutive of the dialogue between artist and audience. From this experience, I now recognize that I view *Self-Portrait Series 6* differently than I did before because I was influenced by my audience.

Though there is continuity in the most popular themes the audience and I selected for the artwork, there is an underlying theme of sadness and pain that the audience identified that I had not. While the survey respondents did not select words such as “greed,” “masculinity,” and “disgust,” that were available on the survey, a cumulative 25 responses included terms that could be associated with depression such as “sadness,” “melancholy,” “death,” and “fear.” One respondent even went so far as to circle only one word, “death,” and wrote in “cancer” beside it. In the context of the probable identity of the artist behind these works, applying the concept of terminal illness could drastically impact the viewer’s perception of the meaning of the series. Though this underlying pattern does not constitute the majority of responses, it does indicate that a subgroup of respondents, individually of one another, interpreted *Self-Portrait Series 6* as a type of tragic narrative rather than the confident cultivation of self I had conceptualized.

#### *SURVEY QUESTION 2: TITLING THE SERIES*

The second question prompted my audience members to title *Self-Portrait Series 6* in their own words. A title is commonly considered a brief descriptive summary of the key concepts of the subject being titled. A University of Southern California writing guide on social science research papers states that “the title summarizes the main idea or ideas of your study. A good title contains the fewest possible words needed to adequately describe the content and/or purpose

of your research paper.”<sup>22</sup> According to this definition, in the case of research, the objective of the title is primarily utilitarian—the title should efficiently translate the core concepts that the research study will investigate. In the case of visual artwork, there are additional elements of suggestion and intrigue involved in titling the artwork. The title is typically the first, and sometimes the only, textual supplement to the artwork that offers the audience context clues pertaining to the content of the work. The consonance or dissonance of the title and visual rhetoric depicted in the artwork can either help clarify or further distort the concepts presented through the artwork. For example, another painting by René Magritte illustrates the relationship between title and content in visual artwork. Magritte’s painting *The Treachery of Images* alludes to the conflicting content of his painting. Magritte’s painting depicts a tobacco pipe, with the words, “This is not a pipe” underneath. In this painting, Magritte asserts that his painting is not a pipe, it is the image of a pipe. Magritte foreshadowed the conflict between image and text in his title.

I chose two different titles for this series based on the context in which I was exhibiting it. On one hand, for the purpose of this research study, I chose the title *Self-Portrait Series 6*. This title offers limited contextual detail because the purpose of this study was to view how the audience interpreted the work through their personal observation. The only information conveyed through this title is that this is a self-portraiture series, and that there are 6 pieces in the series. I selected this title in order to provide my audience with the bare-minimum amount of contextual information for them to be able to complete the survey. On the other hand, according to my personal survey, in the context of the visual artwork outside of this study, I would have

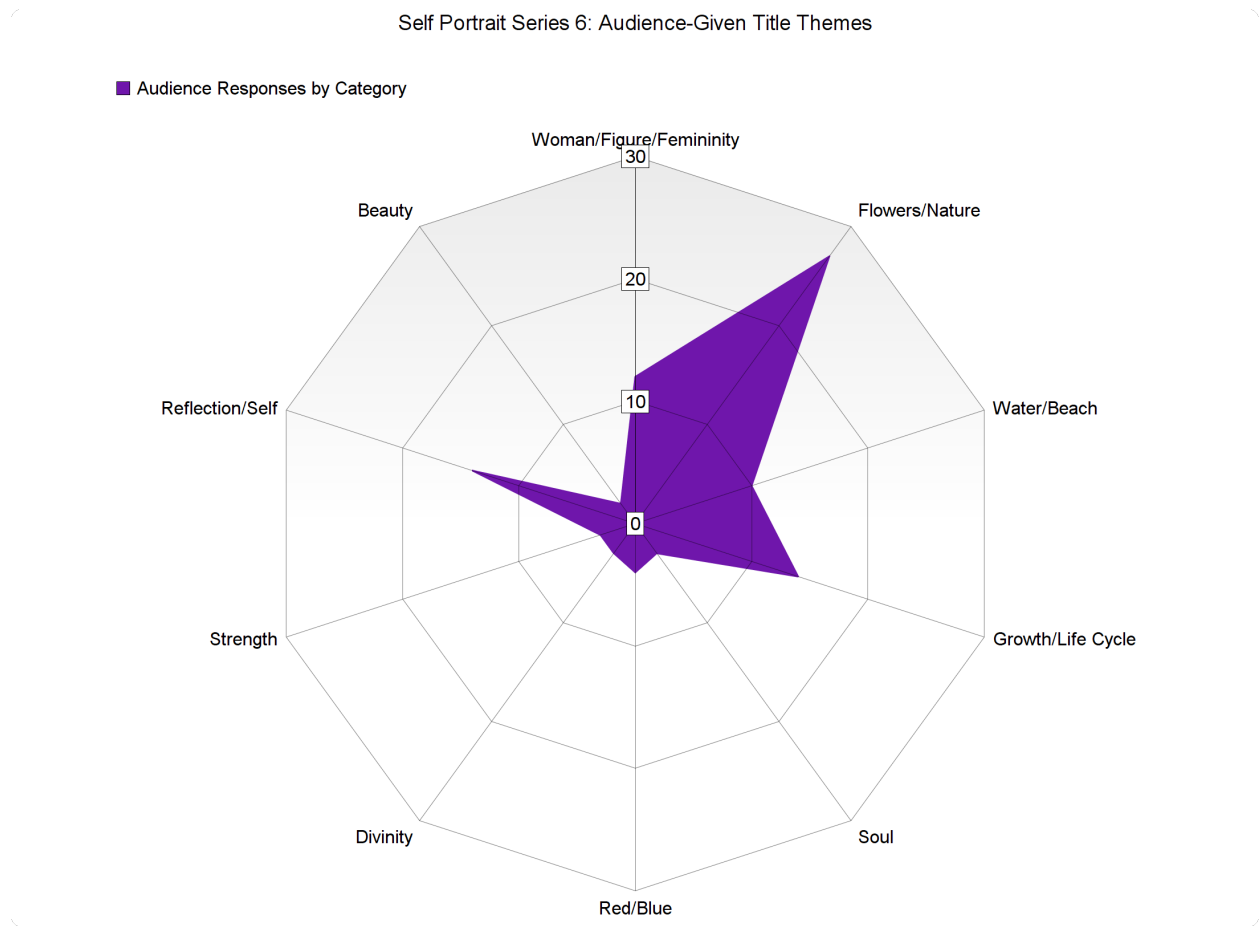
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<sup>22</sup> "Choosing a Title - Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper - Research Guides at University of Southern California," <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/title>.

titled this series *As I Am*. As previously stated, the purpose of this self-portraiture series is to reflect on my current perception of my most “authentic identity.” Thus, the title *As I Am* lends the audience some inclination that this is a self-portraiture series that reflects on my current state of being. Rather than leaving my audience members to their own devices, *As I am* would help them navigate this abstract self-portraiture in a more guided manner. For me, the most important component of this series is my reflection on my present concept of self. My title therefore reflects that. By allowing my audience to title the series based on their personal observations, this question offers insight on which elements of the artwork the audience members felt were the most compelling, or best described the content of the series.

This open-ended question permitted the respondents to use their own vocabulary to describe the content of the artwork. Though the respondents could have used any vocabulary in their title, popular themes were evident across all suggested titles. The general theme categories I identified in the audience-given titles are: Woman/Figure/Femininity, Flower/Natural, Water/Beach, Growth/Life Cycle, Soul, Red/Blue, Divinity, Strength, Reflection/Self, and Beauty. I derived these theme categories from the vocabulary used in the titles given by the audience. In order to examine the prevalent themes of these titles, I first identified the ten theme categories, and then organized each title by theme. Some of the titles included vocabulary associated with numerous of the identified theme categories, so I counted them in each category I believed they fit in to. The theme categories with the most number of corresponding titles are: Flowers/Nature (27 titles), Growth/Life Cycle (14 titles), and Reflection/Self (14 titles). Survey Response Chart 2 shows the distribution of titles associated with each theme category. As seen in the top right quadrant of the chart, a significant portion of the responses reflect tangible imagery more-so than abstract concepts: a woman’s figure, flowers, nature, water, beaches, and botanical

life cycle, with the exception of “reflection/self” (Survey Response Chart 2). This could mean that the audience recognized the imagery depicted (i.e. the flowers and figure of a woman) as the most important concepts in *Self-Portrait Series 6*.



*Survey Response Chart 2*

Interestingly, the titles the audience wrote did not reflect the five most popular adjectives they had used to describe the artwork in the previous question. Though 78.5% of respondents selected “femininity” as a descriptive term for the series, only 12 audience-given titles reflected the theme of femininity. Similar patterns occur for “strength,” which was selected by 43% of respondents yet is only reflected in 3 titles, and “sexuality,” which was selected by 44.3% of respondents and yet is reflected in only 2 titles under the category of

Woman/Figure/Femininity.<sup>23</sup> Only one theme persists through both Questions 1 and 2: Introspection. 48.1% of respondents to Question 1 chose “introspection” as a descriptive word, and it is the second-most alluded to theme in the audience-given titles (tied with Growth/Life Cycle). Because the open-answer question permitted my audience members to use their own vocabulary, they were given the ability to refine the way they described the work. These discontinuities with the previously selected adjectives show further fragmentations of the audience’s interpretations of the artwork based on their personal perspectives. Therefore, this question highlights the subjectivity of the audience’s gaze.

Survey Response Chart 2 indicates that the majority of respondents identified Flowers/Nature as the most important theme in *Self-Portrait Series 6*. Not only did 27 titles include natural and floral imagery, but 10 of them included a variation of the synonyms “bloom/blossom.” With no prompting in the question’s directions, nor contact with one another, 10 respondents chose the same vocabulary words to describe what they believed to be the most important theme of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. Titles such as “Bloom,” “The Blossoming of a Woman,” and “A Body of Flowers” appear to allude to the representations of orchids and the figure of a woman depicted throughout the series. The common vocabulary words used by the audience members to describe *Self-Portrait Series 6* indicates that the series conveys themes that are identifiable to a variety of audience members. This shows that audience members may have been socially conditioned to view the imagery depicted in the series in the same or similar ways. This concept of social conditioning and accepted visual rhetoric will become more important in the following chapter on social media.

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<sup>23</sup> The two titles reflecting sexuality were “Love Embers,” and “Exploration of Lust.”

Contrary to the indication that the audience members intuitively perceived similar themes in *Self-Portrait Series 6*, many audience members chose not to respond or even wrote notes next to their response stating that titling the series was too difficult or they did not feel qualified to do so. Out of 79 completed surveys, 9 respondents chose not to complete Question 2. One of the respondents who omitted the question wrote, “I left the title question blank, only because the fact that it was untitled affected my experience so positively. It allowed me space to connect with it on a deeper level.” Another respondent who did answer the question (their title was “Becoming”) put in parentheses that “this was perhaps the hardest question” (Survey Response 64). The same respondent then added another note in the “additional comments” section that provided further insight on their perception of the series. The comment stated: “I found the imagery very feminine + life-affirming. Especially intrigued by the hand in the final image, reminiscent in positioning of images I have seen of jazz musicians (saxophone) (see cover of Jazzfest card as example)” (Survey Response 64). The positioning of the hand in *Exhibition Piece 6* invoked the memory of a Jazzfest card for this viewer. The additional note shows that the individual thought processes of my audience members may have been impacted by images, knowledge, and paradigms that they experienced and carry with them from their life prior to this gallery exhibition. Bringing new information in to the context of the art adds potential for new meaning in the art itself. Referring again to the dialogue between artist and audience, when the audience brings in new information and applies it to the art, it adds complexity to the art that could potentially impact my interpretation of the work as well.

The application of cultural connotations to the symbols in *Self-Portrait Series 6* is another example of outside information being brought in to the context of the exhibition that could impact the audience’s interpretation of the art. 10 respondents titled *Self-Portrait Series 6*



using vocabulary I perceived as associated with water, islands, and beaches. One of the most common pieces of verbal feedback I received on the composition of the artwork was that the wooden frames resembled surf boards, and the Orchids could be easily confused with the Hibiscus flower, which is commonly associated with the culture of the Hawaiian Islands. The absence of references to surfing, water, and tropical islands in my artist's statement, personal survey, and narrative of production indicate that it was not my intent to convey the theme of Water/Beach. This is because I am not Pacific Islander, and do not consider myself associated with the cultures of the Pacific Islands. In my opinion, titles such as "Waves," "Surfing Through Struggles," "Personal Islands," and "Hibiscus" are misinterpretations of the visual rhetoric used in *Self-Portrait Series 6*. Therefore, even though the audience brought these cultural connotations in to the context of the series, it did not impact my interpretation of the work. However, both audience members who knew me and those who did not inferred that they would think the artist was Pacific Islander. For the audience members who knew me, this phenomenon suggests that the cultural connotation associated with water, hibiscus flowers, and surfboards was powerful enough to override their knowledge of my identity from our prior interactions. For the audience members who did not know me, this phenomenon suggests that they relied on their education of or experiences with the cultures of the Pacific Islands when interpreting the art.

Overall, the responses to Question 2 indicate that though there are similar themes evident in the perception of this series, there was not a universally accepted core theme or way of interpreting *Self-Portrait Series 6*. It appears that my audience members derived their titles from a variety of elements of visual rhetoric in the artwork. According to Survey Response Chart 2, these elements appear to be: the figure of a woman, the orchids, the contrast of the colors red and blue, and the shape of the wooden panels.

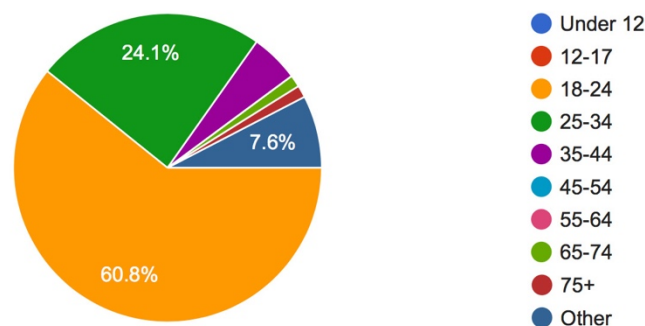
*SURVEY QUESTION 3: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION*

Question 3 prompted my audience members to identify the basic demographic information they thought would characterize the artist who created this series. This demographic information included: gender, ethnicity, and age. Overall, the responses to these questions were extremely diverse, aside from the question of gender. Only two respondents indicated that they believed the artist could be transsexual, or “either,” rather than female, but no respondents stated that they interpreted the artist as male. This is most likely because my name, which is stereotypically female-gendered, was presented on the materials for the exhibition. The distribution of variety of answers, however, increased significantly for age and ethnicity.

60.8% of respondents answered that they perceived the artist to be between 18 and 24 years old. Just under one quarter of the respondents (24.1%) placed the artist in the next age bracket, from 25 to 34 years old. Seeing as I was 21 at the time I produced this series, my audience’s perception of the probable artist’s age was not very far fetched. It is interesting, however, that any respondents would suggest that the artist was probably in the age brackets 35-44, 65-74, or 75+ years old. While these responses are certainly outliers, 4 respondents (5.4%) suggested the artist could be between 35-44 years old (Survey Response Chart 3). Additionally, one of the respondents who stated that they did know me outside of the study answered that they perceived that the artist was 75+ years old. Similarly, one respondent who did not know me outside of this study suggested that the artist was probably between 65 and 74 years old. Though there are not a significant number of these deviant responses (only 7.5% cumulatively), it still indicates that a component of *Self-Portrait Series 6* somehow conveyed to my audience members that the probable artist behind these works might be an age drastically different from what I am. The context that *Self-Portrait Series 6* was exhibited in could have impacted my audience

member's responses to this question. Not only is the Schwartz Center for Performing Arts on Emory University's campus, but in my instructions for the survey and my marketing materials I stated that I was a student at Emory completing my honors thesis. This information would indicate that I am an undergraduate student at Emory.

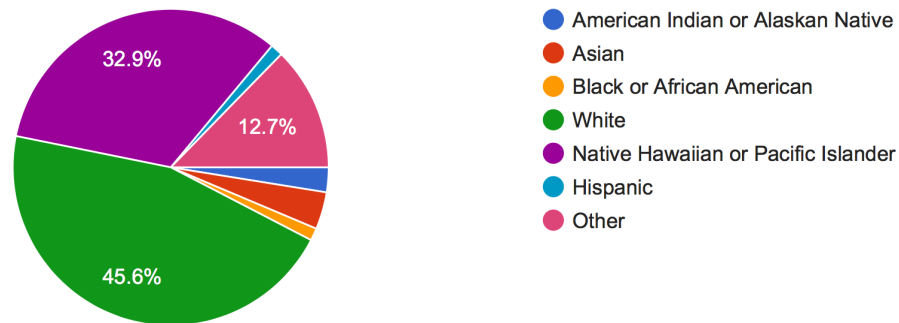
Age (79 responses)



Survey Response Chart 3

When asked to identify the ethnicity of the artist, even though 65.8% of the participants of this survey stated that they had interacted with me outside of this study, only 45.6% of respondents suggested that they perceived the artist as most likely white. I am a conglomeration of Italian, German, Polish, and a little French—a regular European mutt. My ancestral ethnicity was publicized in the marketing materials for the event. My Polish last name, Studnicky, appeared on the event flyers, in the directions for the survey, and on every invitation sent out for the exhibition. Therefore, even those who had never seen me in person were given context clues regarding my ethnicity, and yet visual rhetoric embedded in *Self-Portrait Series 6* compelled over half of my audience members (54.4%) to answer this question in a different way than what all of the given context clues suggested. Survey Response Chart 4 shows the distribution of perceived artist's ethnicity.

### Ethnicity (79 responses)



Survey Response Chart 4

As previously stated in the observations on Question 2, there appears to be correlation between the cultural connotations of the visual rhetoric in *Self-Portrait Series 6* and the audience's perception of the artist. When asked to title this series, many respondents identified motifs of water, islands, and beaches. I speculated that this phenomenon occurred because of the confusion between an orchid for a hibiscus flower as well as the oblong ellipse wooden frames for surf boards. Based on the verbal feedback I received from my audience members and the general trends in the survey responses, I can infer that the composition, color, and content of *Self-Portrait Series 6* led my audience members to perceive that the artist of this series was Pacific-Islander. 32.9%, just under one third of all respondents, stated that the artwork suggested the artist was Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Though this survey was not intended to check the accuracy of my respondents' answers, it is significant that when I segregate the survey responses of people who knew me from people who did not, I observe that only about half (51.9%) of the respondents who claimed they knew me answered that they perceived the artist as white. Survey Response Chart 5 shows the comparative distribution of perceived ethnicity by respondents who claimed they knew me

versus those that claimed they did not. I anticipated a higher rate of accuracy in the answers from respondents that knew me because they could rely on their prior knowledge of me to answer the demographic questions correctly. Many of the audience members who claimed that they knew me expressed that it was difficult for them to separate their prior knowledge of me from their observations of the artwork when answering the survey. With all of this in mind, though, it is striking that almost half of the respondents that claimed they knew me chose to answer this question in a way they knew to be wrong. This phenomenon indicates that the visual rhetoric embedded within *Self-Portrait Series 6* challenged those audience member’s perception of my identity.

**Knew the Artist** (52 responses)

**Did Not Know the Artist** (27 responses)



*Survey Response Chart 5*

It is even more significant that approximately one third of both those that knew me and those that did not answered that the artist of this series was most likely Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The fact that both respondents that knew me and those that did not had similar inclinations that the artist might be Pacific Islander indicates that it was the cultural connotations of the symbols used in *Self-Portrait Series 6* that impacted my audience’s perception of the artist’s identity.

Based on these observations, it is likely that my audience members applied their perceptions of the cultural connotations associated with the symbols discussed above to the imagery depicted in *Self-Portrait Series 6*. Therefore, the symbolism behind the orchids, ellipses, and wood that I viewed as pivotal in my self-representation was perceived in a very different way by my audience. The visual rhetoric I utilized to craft my representation of my concept of self was subjected to the paradigms of each individual audience member. As each audience member applied their perspective to my self-portraiture, it appears that their perception of my identity subsequently changed.

#### *SURVEY QUESTION 4: COMPONENTS OF THE ART*

Question 4 asked my audience members to explain what component of the artwork they thought best represented my identity and why. The first three questions of this survey offered me insight on what the audience was taking away from the series. This question offers insight more specifically on what the audience was actually looking at when they were observing the series and why they were deducing their perception of my identity the way that they were.

When I completed my survey, I chose Imagery/Symbolism as the component of *Self-Portrait Series 6* I believed best communicated my “authentic identity.”<sup>24</sup> According to the survey responses, my audience agreed. 45.6% of my respondents chose Imagery/Symbolism on their surveys. When I explained my choice, I stated: “The abstract paintings contain a lot of

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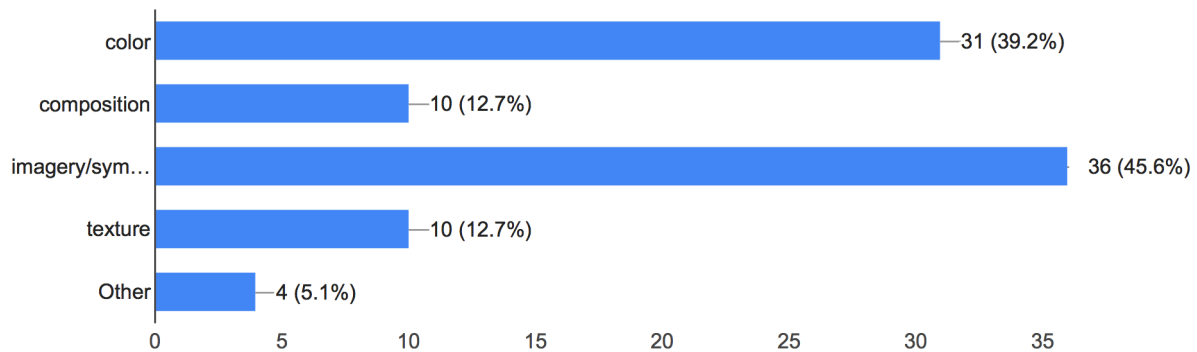
<sup>24</sup> When completing this survey, I was looking from the perspective of an observer. During the production of *Self-Portrait Series 6* it was not my intent to attempt to communicate the most effectively with my audience through this artwork. My intent was to encapsulate my perception of my most “authentic identity” and perception of self. When discussing this question, I am observing the effectiveness of communication from the standpoint of an observer, and the overall reception of the visual rhetoric by the audience as indicated by their survey responses.

symbolism that indicate components of my identity: flowers=orchids=memories, red and blue blend=internal conflict and resolution, ellipses and wood=natural, organic, yet refined.” As previously outlined in the section on Artist’s Intent, my explanation is problematic for a variety of reasons. I chose Imagery/Symbolism not only because the imagery depicted in the series contains important visual rhetoric necessary for interpreting this series as I intended but also because I believed the less abstracted symbols would communicate meaning more effectively. Based on the observations of the answers to survey questions 1, 2, and 3, I was wrong.

This question, in using the phrase “best represents,” is asking about the *effectiveness* of the methods I used to manifest my perception of my “authentic identity” at communicating with my audience. Though it was not my intent when creating *Self-Portrait Series 6* to cater to my audience, it is important to reflect now on how my manifestations of self translated information about me to my audience. This information is relevant in the context of the dialogue between artist and audience through art. Survey Response Chart 6 shows the overall selections by my survey respondents of what component of the series they felt best communicated my identity.

**In your opinion, what component of the artwork best represents the artist's identity?**

(79 responses)



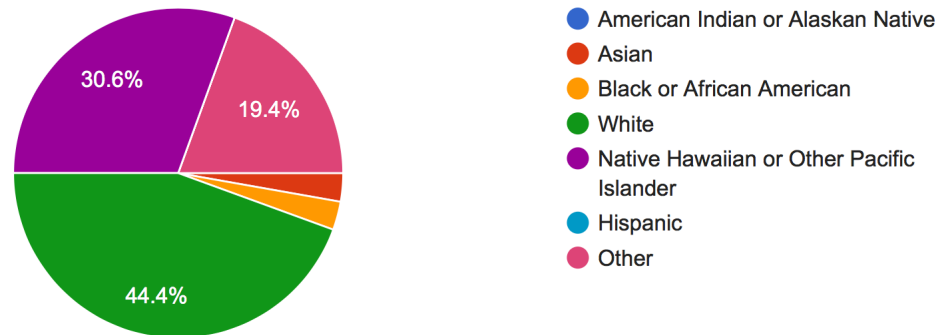
Survey Response Chart 6

As indicated by this chart, Imagery/Symbolism was the most popular selection, closely followed by color. I used symbolism to embody abstract concepts such as introspection, sexuality, and confidence. To review, I used orchids, a female figure, ellipses, and wood as the symbols for these abstract concepts. I selected each of these symbols solely based on experiences in my life that made me feel as though they would best encapsulate my perception of self. I did not anticipate my audience members to be capable of interpreting and understanding the intricacies of my experiences with each of these symbols through *Self-Portrait Series 6*. For example, it would have been incredibly difficult, if not impossible, for my audience members to trace orchids back to a failed relationship from my past, or the collection of them that I keep in my private bedroom, without prior knowledge. However, I still believed, before observing my audience's responses, that the tangibility of more representational imagery would in some way help my audience. One of the respondents who chose Imagery/Symbolism confirmed my suspicions that the orchids and woman's body would be the most pervasive symbolism by stating, "flowers and the female form are the most immediately striking components." It does not appear, though, that the Imagery/Symbolism I used helped or hindered my audience in any way more significantly than the other components of the artwork. The following chart, Survey Response Chart 7, shows the distribution of perceived ethnicity by respondents who chose Imagery/Symbolism as the most effective means of communicating my identity.



## Perceived Ethnicity by Respondents Who Chose Imagery/Symbolism

(36 responses)



*Survey Response Chart 7*

Overall, as seen in *Survey Response Chart 7*,<sup>25</sup> the distribution of perceived ethnicity by respondents who chose Imagery/Symbolism is very similar to the distribution of perceived ethnicity by all of my respondents, shown in Survey Response Chart 5.

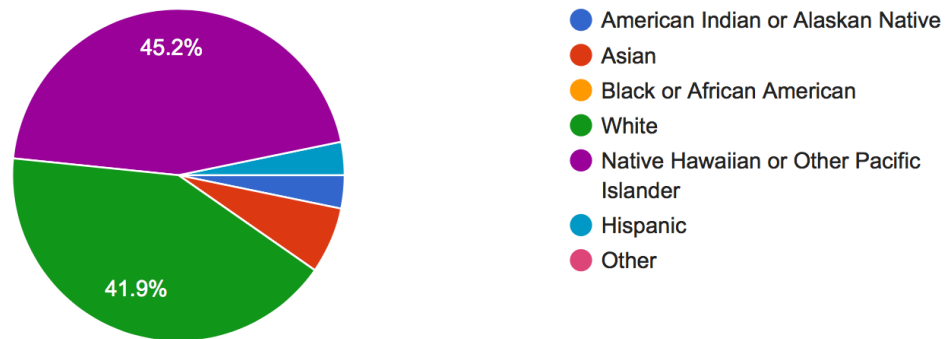
Interestingly, after receiving verbal feedback during the exhibition, I thought that the confusion of orchids and the wooden ellipses for hibiscus and surfboards would skew my audience's perception of my identity towards Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander the most. I thought this because the titles that were associated with Ocean/Beach scenes were *only* given respondents who had selected Imagery/Symbolism.<sup>26</sup> In addition, when I was creating the series, almost every person that saw my wood palettes made a comment about them resembling surfboards. It turns out, however, that audience members who selected Color were more likely to answer Pacific Islander. The greatest percentage of respondents who chose Color (45.2%)

<sup>25</sup> When organizing the data, I separated the responses by the categories: Color, Composition, Imagery/Symbolism, and Texture. If a respondent chose more than one category, I counted their responses in every category they selected, so some of the responses were included in two or three different categories.

<sup>26</sup> There was one respondent who provided a title associated with island/beach scenes that chose Imagery/Symbolism and color.

answered that they believed I would be Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In this circumstance, the perception that I would be Pacific Islander surpassed the perception that I would be white by over 3% (Survey Response Chart 8). When viewing the distribution of all responses, 12.7% more respondents indicated that they perceived me as White than Pacific Islander, and similarly, in the distribution of responses from those that chose Imagery/Symbolism, 13.8% more respondents indicated that they perceived me as White than Pacific Islander. The fact that the respondents who chose Color were more likely to have believed I was Pacific Islander than respondents than chose Imagery/Symbolism indicates that there may have been a common conception between these respondents regarding the meaning behind the colors I chose to create *Self-Portrait Series 6*.

**Perceived Ethnicity by Respondents who chose Color (31 responses)**



*Survey Response Chart 8*

Aside from the numbers, the commentary from the audience members offers insight on the reasons they perceived my identity the way that they did. One of the most prevalent comments was made by a respondent who first viewed the series, submitted their survey, and then wrote an additional letter after further reflection.

The letter read:

I viewed your exhibit before the Bach Bowl Concert and filled out my survey while waiting for the concert to begin. Afterward I returned and submitted my survey, then looked at the work again. I did notice details I hadn't completely noticed before, but with little change in my overall impression until the final frame. The hand which I had earlier seen as possibly ambiguous became more threatening, perhaps largely due to the contemporary political context. I saw it now as a symbol of male control over female bodies, especially in terms of reproductive rights.

This letter not only detailed this audience member's perception on my intent behind *Self-Portrait Series 6*, but offered insight on how and why they contextualized the visual rhetoric the way that they did. Their analysis of the meaning behind the symbols in the series, in this case the hand in *Exhibition Piece 6*, shows that the audience members bring with them knowledge and life experiences that they then apply to the visual artwork during the process of viewing and interpreting the art. By no means had I intended to allude to the contemporary socio-political context of women's reproductive rights in America. And yet, the simple fact that it appeared that I was a woman, that I used symbols (orchids and a woman's body) that are commonly associated with reproduction, and that this gallery exhibition took place in America (where women's reproductive health is controversial) altered this respondent's perception of my artwork. This respondent was not the only one to articulate why they interpreted the artwork in a certain way. Another respondent, who chose Composition for this question, stated, "The use of flowers transforming from new young buds to mature flowers in addition to the changes in the woman's body represent clearly the message of a woman's journey to find herself." The motif of growth could have been interpreted because of symbols such as the budding flowers or increasing size of the frames. This respondent also chose terms in Question 1 such as "calm," "melancholy," and "youth" that could be associated with the concept of growth. Additionally, their title in Question

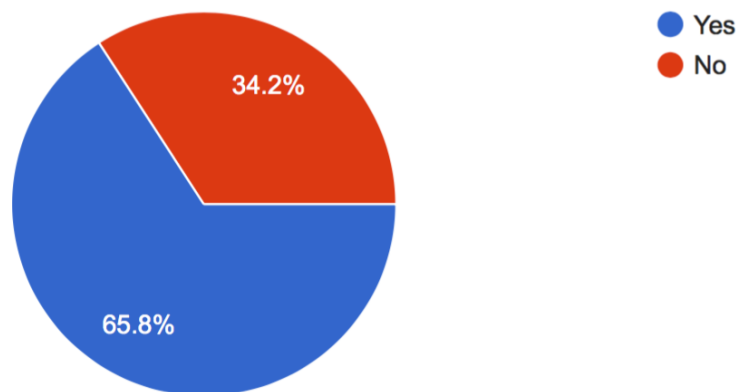
2 was “Blossoming of a Woman,” which also conveys the concept of physical and emotional growth over time.

Question 4 offers powerful insight on how inherent constructs of subjectivity impact the perceived meaning of visual rhetoric. Through these observations, it is evident that the cultural connotations associated with elements of the artwork, the context of the exhibition, and the individual paradigms the audience was viewing the artwork through all played a part in distorting the interpretation of the artwork.

*SURVEY QUESTION 5: DID YOU KNOW THE ARTIST?*

Survey Question 5 asked respondents to indicate whether or not they had ever interacted with me prior to completing this survey in the context of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. As previously stated, and as indicated by Survey Response Chart 9, 65.8% of respondents claimed to have some sort of prior knowledge of me before taking this survey.

**Do you know the artist outside of this study** (79 responses)



*Survey Response Chart 9*

Numerous respondents who claimed that they knew me outside of the study indicated on their surveys that their prior knowledge of me would impact their responses. One respondent noted next to Question 3 on the demographic information, “Trouble being disinterested because I know you” (Survey Response 30). However, as previously stated, even respondents who claimed that they knew me did not answer all of the questions in ways they perceived to be “true” in the real world. Therefore, the survey respondents that knew me dealt with two different sources of information. In the same way that it would be difficult for me to completely forget about my audience when trying to produce a self-portraiture series I knew would be exhibited, it would be difficult for my audience to forget about their previous interactions with me when trying to be objective while completing a survey regarding my identity. I view this conflict of perception as a component of the dialogue between artist and audience. When looking at representation, it is almost impossible to isolate one side of conversation.

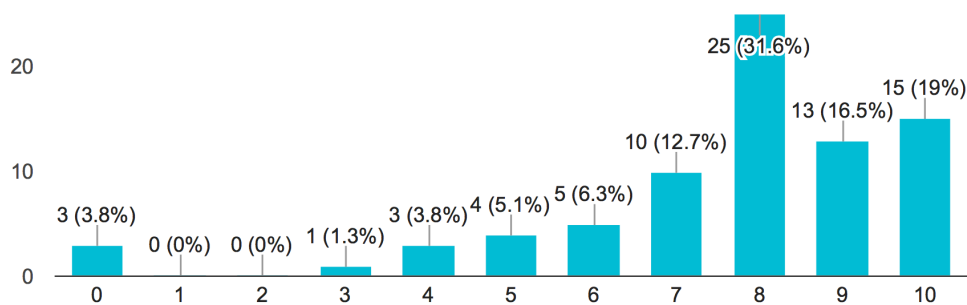
#### *SURVEY QUESTION 6: RATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ART*

The final question of the survey asked my respondents to rate the effectiveness of *Self-Portrait Series 6* at communicating the identity of the artist. Though it was not my intent to translate information about my identity to the audience through the art, this question offers insight on how the audience approached *Self-Portrait Series 6*. As seen in Survey Response Chart 10, the majority of audience members rated *Self-Portrait Series 6* relatively high on the scale, centering around about an 8. Even though almost every other question on the survey indicates that there was a wide variety of interpretations applied to *Self-Portrait Series 6*, here, the majority of my audience members are indicating that they think the series effectively communicated the identity of the artist. I believe that this has more to do with the perceived authenticity of original artwork than the actual effectiveness of the art at communicating identity.

For example, one respondent who rated this series a 10 in effectiveness of communication stated, “Intriguing composition, drawing me in and making me want to understand what the artist wants to communicate” (Survey Response 19). This audience member appears to be extremely open and receptive to the artwork, and is approaching it with the idea that this artwork is presenting information about my identity that would be otherwise unseen.

**On a scale of 1-10, 1 being least effective and 10 being most effective, how effective do you believe this series is at communicating the identity of the artist?**

(79 responses)



Survey Response Chart 10

Many of the “Additional Comments” supplementing this final question indicate that the viewers of *Self-Portrait Series 6* were not skeptical of the series, but rather, believed the series exposed realities and truths about my identity. They were extremely complimentary, and did not indicate that they felt deceived in any way. One survey respondent stated, “The color, texture, and the mix of imagery feels intentional and honest, which I think can express the deepest truths” (Survey Response 44). This respondent explicitly states that they believe this artwork reveals “the deepest truths,” indicating that they believe original artwork has the capacity to transcend

some of the limitations of communication. This supposition that the artwork revealed truth brings back the mysterious aura of perceived authenticity of original artwork that was introduced by the example of Magritte as well as Berger's notion of authenticity.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Through the creation of *Self-Portrait Series 6*, I gained an intimate understanding of the process of representing identity in art. Prior to *Self-Portrait Series 6*, I had approached my self-portraiture as a way to either show the image of my body, or to show things about my self to people that I did not think they could see. Both of these approaches are perfectly acceptable for self-portraiture, but they suggest that art is either a stagnant image, or simply a means of translating information. With new knowledge of the dialogue that occurs through art and my ever-changing perception of self, I recognize self-portraiture now as an instigator for the provocation of thought. Rather than presenting an image of myself with one voice and one goal and getting frustrated when others do not see it, I see now that creating art is an opportunity to engage in dialogue.

*Self-Portrait Series 6* offered the opportunity to hear both sides of the dialogue. As an artist, I am typically expected to provide information about my art in order to guide my audience through looking at it. While artist statements and verbal presentations are valuable, they remove the audience's ability to interpret the art free of the influence of the artist. Though this case study also did not offer an environment that allowed my audience to view the artwork completely free of my influence, these survey responses provided me the ability to observe what my audience thought before they heard anything about the meaning of the artwork from me. Experiencing the first-hand accounts from my audience expanded my understanding of the impact my audience

has on me, my perception of my artwork, and my perception of myself. I recognize now the power of the dialogue between the artist and audience to change the way we look at the art, and thus, the cumulative meaning behind the art as well.

Finally, *Self-Portrait Series 6* offered insight on the perception of authenticity as it relates to representation of self in visual artwork. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* suggested that original artwork maintains a perceived authenticity very different from reproduced images. After observing *Self-Portrait Series 6*, I believe this series upholds that theory. The way that my audience approached *Self-Portrait Series 6*, and the way that they appear to have received it (as seen in Question 6), shows me that they looked at the series as authentic. In the next chapter, I will observe the representation of identity in digital media. Chapter 3 discusses how the change in medium of self-portraiture and the introduction of individual agency reveals more of the complexities of representing self in visual media.



## CHAPTER 3. AGENCY, CHOICE, AND MOTIVES IN REPRESENTING IDENTITY

### INTRODUCING THE AGENCY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

This final chapter focuses on individual agency when representing identity. Agency is the capacity for an individual to act independently and to make their own free choices.<sup>27</sup> In the context of representing one's identity, agency is the capacity for an individual to choose *how* they will present their own identity.

*Self-Portrait Series 6* illustrates an example of me exercising my agency by painting my “authentic identity.” Every step in the production of this series was directly motivated by a decision I made. I chose the wood pallets that became the frames, what shape I would cut them into, and how big or small they would be, down to the centimeter. I chose the paints I would use and the colors of the pigments; the viscosity and texture; the content and form. I chose the elements of my identity that I wanted to highlight in the series, and the symbols I would use to represent them in the artwork. I had complete control over every detail of the production of *Self-Portrait Series 6*. This series, though, was only *one* representation of *one* version of my identity. It is neither comprehensive of my identity as a whole for my entire life, nor is it even comprehensive of my identity at the time of the creation of the series. Over the span of my life, I have the agency to represent my perception of my identity in an infinite combination of ways. For the context of this thesis, I will continue to focus on visual rhetoric in self-portraiture as the

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<sup>27</sup> "Theories of Agency," <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/tburke1/agency.html>.

means of representing identity. To direct attention to the next topic, I will now shift my focus from 2D visual artwork to the representation of identity in social media.

Though agency is evident in visual artwork, social media demonstrates a more explicit example of the power given to an individual to refine and alter how they represent themselves. In this chapter I will discuss how tools such as photo-editing applications allow individuals to alter the ways that they present themselves to their peers. Specifically, I will view how the social media platform Instagram creates a culture of deceit by offering the individual an oversaturated experience of agency and offering the audience an oversaturated experience of manipulation. I will investigate the various motives an individual may have that lead them to present their identity in a specific way, especially within a social context.

The processes of representing identity in visual artwork and social media share similarities. For example, both mediums allow an individual to represent their identity through visual rhetoric. However, the ways that the two mediums are approached are different. In John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, Berger highlights the inherent differences between original artwork and replications. Berger states that because original artwork is unique, it maintains a perceived authenticity. The replications of original paintings "take on new meaning," and change the way that the viewer approaches the image. Digital media parallels Berger's notion of fragmented meaning because, in the same way as photography, digital media images are reproductions and thus inherently inauthentic. They do not have the capacity to maintain the same "bogus religiosity" of authenticity that original artwork does. They do, however, have the power to contribute to the contrived authenticity associated with the market value of the identity they represent online.

## THE ART OF SELF INVENTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

To any social media user, it is common knowledge that the profiles you see online are not comprehensive representations of a person's identity. Instagram serves as a clear example of this. Instagram is a social media website that boasts participation from over 600 million active monthly users<sup>28</sup> and advertises itself as a "fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures."<sup>29</sup> A typical, noncelebrity user profile on Instagram usually consists of a page of photographs or videos, primarily taken by and/or of the user themselves, with short captions and a brief introductory bio. In short, an Instagram profile is a repository of digital portraits of the owner of the profile.

Every image posted to an Instagram page is built into a broader narrative of the user's self-portraiture, even if the images are not of the user themselves. Other images commonly published on Instagram pages are food, travel destinations, vacations, and events chosen by the user. This additional content works in combination with the images of the user to create an overall aesthetic. This "aesthetic" becomes a sort of brand that represents the identity of the individual, but is comprised of only the content the user *chooses* to share on their page. Therefore, the viewer of an Instagram profile only views images that the user themselves gives the viewer permission to see.

Instagram does not hide the omnipresent reality that the photos published on these profiles are cropped and edited to present a well-engineered aesthetic.<sup>30</sup> As a matter of fact,

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<sup>28</sup> This approximation is presented by Instagram as of March, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, "FAQ," <https://www.instagram.com/about/faq/>.

<sup>30</sup> Every image that is posted to Instagram is edited. This does not mean that every image always has a filter applied to it, but Instagram's interface at minimum restricts the dimensions of the image.

Instagram promotes the practice of editing photos on the 'About' page of its website. Instagram's general instructions are to "snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever."<sup>31</sup> Instagram provides 40 pre-designed filters, advanced editing tools, and additional content such as stickers and text, not to mention the 524 photo-editing applications available in the Apple App Store (this does not include the additional applications made specifically for Android or Windows smartphones).<sup>32</sup> With knowledge of the abundant editing opportunities embedded within the platform, Instagram users anticipate that the photos they are viewing have been altered. Conversely, because of the nature of painting, viewers of original artwork are not conditioned to immediately anticipate that the images represented in the artwork have been altered. Photo editing applications are tangible examples of the easy access social media users have to the ability to alter their self-portraiture. Selecting, editing, and presenting the content of their personal profile is an example of how Instagram users are given the opportunity to exercise agency in the way they present themselves online.

For example, a self-portrait I painted in the fall of 2014, during my freshman year of college, contains various alterations that I applied to my representation of self. *Self Portrait 2014*, in my opinion, resembles me, but does not offer a realistic rendering of my face at the time of the creation of this painting. I have always wished my hazel eyes were a little greener, my crooked nose was a little straighter, and my thin lips were a little fuller. *Self Portrait 2014* exhibits subtle alterations to my facial structure that reflect these desired physical attributes. When I created the painting I did not consciously intend to alter my face to reflect my desired

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<sup>31</sup> Systrom and Krieger, "FAQ."

<sup>32</sup> "iPhone Apps, iPhone Games and App Sales," <http://www.appstoreapps.com/>.

aesthetic. However, reflecting on the piece now, I can clearly see the alterations that I subconsciously made, and can trace those alterations to deep-rooted insecurities about my physical appearance. Image 1 shows a replication of *Self Portrait 2014*: notice the full red lips, straight button nose, and piercing green eyes painted in this portrait.



*Image 1: Self Portrait 2014*

Even though *Self Portrait 2014* exhibits alterations to my physical characteristics, it is still perceived as “authentic” because it is my original artwork. Though it may not depict an image of my face as equivalent to how it looks in reality, the painting illustrates information about my perception of my self. *Self Portrait 2014* reveals that that I have the ability to manipulate the representation of my identity in painting. However, going back to Berger’s notion of authenticity, the irreplicability of the original painting makes the viewer perceive the artwork as more “authentic” than a reproduction of it would be. In comparison, the nature of social media fosters an environment of inherent image replication. As previously stated, photographs and digital images are reproductions of original images. Social media platforms duplicate these

digital images and dispense them to innumerable new contexts via the Internet. Unlike original artwork, viewers of social media images can access them anywhere, at any time.

In order to demonstrate the nature of social media, I will refer back to my own self-portraiture. I currently maintain two Instagram profiles. One of my profiles is dedicated primarily to my artwork, and is attached to my professional website, blog, and online resume. This profile is public, meaning I permit anyone on the internet to view the photos that I post to my page. My second profile is private, meaning that only viewers that I approve have access to my photos. Both of these pages show photos of me. Every photo that I have posted to these pages has been edited. I ensure that I present content appropriate for each page when I post photos. I only post images I would be okay with a potential customer viewing on my professional arts Instagram. On my personal Instagram where only my friends can see my images, I can be a little more liberal with the content I present. However, because this content is seen by many of my friends, I still only select the images that I want them to see. This could mean taking over 100 photos of a night out with friends, and only posting one of them online. Take this photo from my private Instagram account Buffistud, for example (Image 2). I selected this image for my profile because it depicts an image of me and my friends and I thought my hair and makeup looked good. I applied a filter called Inkwell to this image, and used Instagram's editing tools to alter the contrast and exposure of this image. This image is contrived to make me seem sociable, physically attractive, and well-liked by my peers.



*Image 2. Instagram Photo from Buffistud.*

Another image of me, taken from my public account Bstudart, presents a very different representation of my identity (Image 3). In this photo, I am standing with a table of my artwork at what appears to be an art fair. Even though I have photos with other artists at the fair, I chose this photo because I wanted my audience to associate only my face with my artwork. In my caption, I advertise for my website. Image 2 and Image 3 present very different representations of me. Where one is focused on my sociability and physicality, the other is focused on my individualism and professionalism.

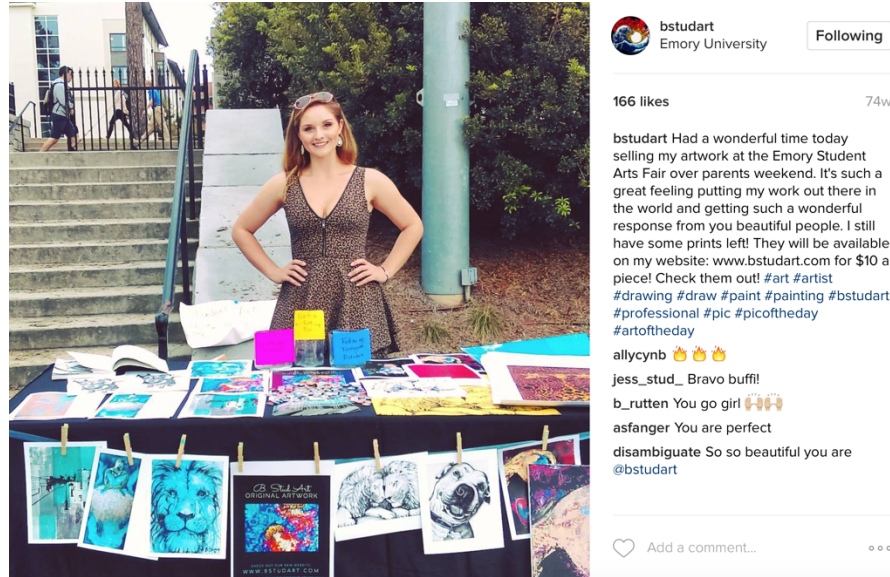


Image 3. Instagram photo from Bstudart.

Our identities incur subtle alterations at every juncture that force us to decide how we want to represent ourselves. In a book titled *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture*, author Joanne Finkelstein comments on the formulation of identity in visual media—specifically, film. Finkelstein states,

At the moment when we begin to interact with another, a series of calculated decisions are made. These calculations take place in another dimension of the social moment, a separate back area where we estimate the degrees of fictionality that the immediate situation can sustain. In that moment, and throughout the encounter, we continuously consider how earnest, bland, amusing, comedic, threatening or polite we can be.<sup>33</sup>

Though Finkelstein is referring to live interpersonal interactions, the process of calculating the degrees of representation appropriate for a specific context is applicable to visual media as well. These calculations are important to recognize when analyzing the art of self

<sup>33</sup> Joanne Finkelstein, *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 13.



invention on social media. Instagram offers their users the ability to harness these calculations by taking a photograph—which is already edited because of the framing, choice of content, and quality of the image—and then further allowing them to retrospectively determine how much of the original image to keep, and how much to skew the image through the application of filters and other editing techniques. Finkelstein also provides commentary on the nature of these distorted images when she states that, “appearances are both revealing and deceiving, that identity is both apparent at the surface of social life and inaccessible to the observer, deeply concealed in the privacy of the interior.”<sup>34</sup> The viewer’s assumption that the images they engage with on Instagram are most likely edited creates a complex structure of revealing exteriority and concealing interiority; the line between the two is distorted by the subtleties of photo-editing. Even if the viewer of an edited image anticipates the content to be edited, there remains difficulty in deciphering what content was edited and what was not, thus distorting their perception of the content of the image.

Many social media users have found ways to utilize the opportunity presented by photo-editing in order to benefit their invention of self online. There are various tangible ways to measure the value and cultural currency of an Instagram profile, including the ratio of the number of followers the page maintains to how many profiles they follow, the number of ‘likes’ and comments that their posts receive, and verification that the page is “authentic” (meaning, by Instagram’s standards, that the profile is actually the “account for the public figure, celebrity or global brand it represents”).<sup>35</sup> When a page is verified as “authentic,” the page receives a small

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<sup>34</sup> Finkelstein, *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Systrom, and Krieger, “What is a verified badge?” Instagram Help Center. Accessed April 01, 2017. <https://help.instagram.com/733907830039577?helpref=search&sr=1&query=what is a verified badge>.

blue check mark next to its name, denoting to the viewers of the profile that the content shown is representative of the brand or person depicted. Common Instagram users are not able to request a Verified Badge, rather, they are administered to specific pages that “have a high likelihood of being impersonated.”<sup>36</sup> This small blue check mark is a powerful symbol that highlights the cultural currency of “authenticity.” A page with a Verified Badge is unanimously perceived to be more valuable than a page without one.

These “authentic,” verified accounts typically present content at the highest caliber of artistry; the images are impeccably edited, refined to present the most alluring representation of the brand or public figure possible to the intended audience of the page. Finkelstein sums up the irony of the “authenticity” of these professionally manicured profiles: “The ubiquity of deception in popular culture is an invitation to consider the possibility that behind the surface of appearances there are other realities.”<sup>37</sup> Instagram defines the parameters of “authenticity” as the creation of content by and for the subject of the images, but it does not stipulate that the “authentic” pages must present a comprehensive representation of the identity of the brand or person. Therefore, behind the façade of visual rhetoric used to characterize the identity of the Instagram profile, there may potentially be representations that have been manipulated in order to purposefully elicit a specific reaction from the audience of the profile. One verified Instagram user, a model and social media personality from Australia named Essena O’Neill, exposed the implications of superficial representation of identity on Instagram in November 2015.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Finkelstein, *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> The story of Essena O’Neill is still too contemporary for scholarly articles to have been written on the phenomenon. The referenced articles are contemporary, nonacademic news sources.

## THE STORY OF ESSENA O'NEILL

On May 16, 2013, Move Nourish Believe (MNB), an online blog that provides “Your daily practice of active living,”<sup>39</sup> introduced their newest Active Living Advocate: Essena O’Neill. The MNB team featured various aspects of Essena’s healthy lifestyle, including recipes, favorite workouts, and her dream to “inspire girls around the world to love their bodies.”<sup>40</sup> In a brief interview published on the page, The MNB team asked Essena, “What’s your story, how did you get to where you are today?” Essena responded:

I started just posting little quotes and workouts onto my Instagram, and then created my blog on Tumblr, where I personally answer questions about everything from fitness, to confidence, beauty, even study tips! I honestly just decided to just be me and show others how freeing it feels to do so. I guess more and more people started to follow! Now I have over 42,000 followers on Instagram, 20,000 on Tumblr! Started both blogs January 2013, so it’s been such a crazy but magical journey!<sup>41</sup>

Within four months of starting her Instagram page, Essena had become “social media famous.”<sup>42</sup> Her Instagram and blog duo became one of the fastest growing sources of vegan lifestyle and “female empowerment” for young women online, growing to include a vastly popular Youtube channel, Facebook page, and Vimeo profile. Her audience grew to over 612,000 followers on Instagram and 200,000 subscribers on Youtube,<sup>43</sup> with individual images

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<sup>39</sup> "Meet Active Living Advocate: Essena O'Neill." Move Nourish Believe. Last modified May 16, 2013. <http://www.movenourishbelieve.com/interviews/meet-active-living-advocate-essena-oneill/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Kate Knibbs, "How Social Media Has Changed What It Means to Be a Celebrity," <http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/celebrity-social-media-anger/>.

<sup>43</sup> Joyce Chen, "Teen Instagram Star Essena O'Neill Has Crisis of Conscience," *Us Weekly*. <http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/teen-instagram-star-essena-oneill-has-crisis-of-conscience-2015211>.

on Instagram receiving over 29,000 likes.<sup>44</sup> It appeared that Essena had a dream life. In her Instagram photos, she was fit, healthy, happy, and beautiful, had expensive clothing, wealthy boyfriends, and 612,000 followers supporting her every move.

On Monday, November 2, 2015, Essena revealed another side of the story. An emotional video surfaced of Essena herself denouncing the social media empire she had created. She sobbed into the camera as she exclaimed that “social media is not real.”<sup>45</sup> Essena then altered all of the captions of the images on her Instagram account, exposing intimate details about each image: how it was constructed, how much she was paid for it, how many apps she used to edit it, and how vulnerable she felt when the photos were taken. In Image 4 she confesses that this is “a perfectly contrived candid shot. Nothing is candid about this,” and sarcastically adds, “Like my photo for my efforts to convince you that I’m really hot” (Image 4). Essena used these captions to divulge what seemed to be hidden information: that her images were not representative of her perception of her own identity. However, based on a comment on the photos from an Instagram user, the knowledge that Essena’s profile was extensively edited does not seem to come as a surprise. Image 4 shows that the comment states, “what you’re doing with your social media is beautiful and powerful”<sup>46</sup> (Image 4). This comment insinuates that the reality of excessive editing of Instagram photos was not hidden at all, but rather that it was a well-known issue in the Instagram community and a begrudgingly accepted practice.

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<sup>44</sup> Jessica Elgot, "Social Media Star Essena O’Neill Deletes Instagram Account | Technology | The Guardian." *The Guardian*.

<sup>45</sup> Kerry Chan-Laddaran, "Instagram Star Essena O’Neill: Social Media is Not Real" CNN. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/03/entertainment/social-media-essena-oneill-irpt/>.

<sup>46</sup> O’Neill, Essena. Instagram Post. October 2015.



*Image 4: Essena O'Neill*

In stark contradiction to Essena’s original statement of her intent to “inspire girls around the world to love their bodies,” the edited and contrived content on her Instagram profile resulted in the degradation of Essena’s perception of her own identity. In another image taken from Essena’s re-written profile, Essena exposes some of the insecurities and motivations behind the editing techniques she employed. Essena lists, “Maybe I should cover up my blemishes so people will like my appearance. Maybe I should straighten and redye my hair so I get more likes. Maybe I should stuff my bra so I appear more sexualized... Maybe I should spend more hours and dollars on perfecting myself so you will like me”<sup>47</sup> (Image 5).

<sup>47</sup> O’Neill, Essena. Instagram Post. October 2015.



*Image 5: Essena O'Neill*

The conventions of beauty that Essena references in her caption encapsulates a broader practice of categorizing identity into archetypes based on motifs in visual representation. Unblemished skin, well-kempt hair, and a voluptuous female figure are common physical characteristics of female archetypes such as the “girl next door,” or a “femme fatale,” a stock character in film who uses her looks to seduce and ensnare her unsuspecting victims. The unsuspecting victims, in this case, are not the handsome male protagonists of 1950s film noir. The victims now are the viewers of Instagram profiles who cannot decipher the difference between a candid photo of a stereotypically attractive girl on a beach from a well-engineered advertisement for an online personality that does not exist in the non-digital world.

The blurred lines between digital identity and the individual’s more authentic perception of self could impact the viewer’s interpretation of that person’s identity. Joanne Finkelstein refers to the process of categorizing identity into archetypes based on visual representation as “coding.” She states that “in mainstream film, for example, codes are repeated to the point where they seem natural; blondes are beautiful, the young are guileless and truthful, muscular men are

heroic. Slowly these associations are standardized and audiences become complicit in mainstreaming them.”<sup>48</sup> The “mainstreaming” of standardized visual rhetoric regarding a person’s physical appearance could impact not just the *individual* who has those physical characteristics, but *all people* who have those physical characteristics, and those who do not. The people within the culture who standardize archetypes by combining visual rhetoric with assumed identity characteristics (i.e. muscular men with heroicness), are then conditioned to anticipate certain personality traits when they encounter the specific physical characteristic associated with them. Finkelstein concludes that “these associations seem too simplistic to be effective, yet it continues to be the case that identity is collapsed onto visual signs.”<sup>49</sup> Though this phenomenon (of anticipating specific identity characteristics associated with visual rhetoric) occurs from the perspective of the audience, knowledge of this “coding” of perceived identity could impact the way an individual chooses to represent their own identity.

Essena insinuated that by altering components of her identity for her social media page, she could potentially be perceived in specific ways by viewers of her profile. The culture that Essena was a part of conditioned her to believe that if she wanted to appear sexualized, she needed to have larger breasts. Essena believed that by exercising her agency (i.e. stuffing her bra), she could potentially garner the specific response she was looking for out of her audience. In this case, agency becomes infused with intent.

Shortly after posting her critique of social media and photo editing, Essena announced her dissension from her various social media platforms. She then published a website focused on “vegan culture, and authentic living:” [letsbegamechangers.com](http://letsbegamechangers.com), which is no longer active.

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<sup>48</sup> Finkelstein, *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Essena received a combination of positive and negative feedback on her transition from contrived social media personality to out-spoken activist on the role of social media in mental health and wellness. Some praised her for presenting an unrefined, “authentic” version of her identity, while others were skeptical that her emotional outburst was merely an attempt at gaining more media attention, more corporate sponsors, and misrepresenting herself as an “authentic” person. On one hand, Essena experiences the benefits, just like the Instagram pages with Verified Badges, of being perceived as “authentic” and therefore more valuable by her audience. On the other hand, critics of her movement challenged the genuineness of her activism, thus devaluing her even further based on the premise that she was even less “authentic” than she had been before.

Essena is only one of over 600 million users of Instagram who have a wealth of photo-editing capabilities at their fingertips. The opportunity to manipulate the representation of identity through these digital platforms is another example of how individuals can exercise agency in the process of representing their identity. Similar to *Self-Portrait Series 6*, the user of a social media profile assumes the ability to control the ways that their identity is represented in visual media.



## CONCLUSION

Prior to completing this research, I had understood my self-portraiture to be snapshots, like photographs, of images of who I was at the time I created the painting. When I first approached self-portraiture, I focused purely on the aesthetic representation of my body. However, with the cultivation of knowledge of various methods of representation, this thesis has challenged the way that I view the capacity of art. As I developed my understanding of self representation through *Self-Portrait Series 6*, I began to recognize the capacity of art to bring abstract thought in to the world. Rather than viewing my work as a stagnant image, I now view my self-portraiture as a living document that is constantly changing with the dialogue that occurs through and around it.

Berger's *Ways of Seeing* provides a strong theoretical framework for how mediums of representation change the viewer's perception of authenticity. Through this research, I recognize two versions of perceived authenticity. The first is the immaterial, perceived authenticity that Berger refers to when he references original artwork. Berger states that "somehow you can feel the authenticity of it," as though authenticity is a sensation produced by the inherent originality of the painting. The discussion on Magritte and the case study on *Self-Portrait Series 6* help illustrate this version of perceived authenticity. The second is the contrived authenticity associated with marketized images. This is evident in the example of Leonardo's cartoon and the "verified badge" on Instagram. The mass distribution and reproduction of images somehow adds to the perceived value of the original, but it is built on the superficial construct of market value. Overall, this research has impacted the way that I will approach self-portraiture in my future visual artwork.

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