

## How to Make a Self Portrait

A thesis film by Zoe Black

Integrative Project 2017-18

*"How to Make a Self Portrait"* serves as both a documentary and autobiography. The idea began as a research paper I did for a writing class in which I researched my methods of self-identification and realized that I have constructed my identity by looking for visual reflections of myself. One case in particular stuck with me: when I was young, I would go to my local art museum to stare at the life size portrait of a young girl. I loved her long dark hair, her light skin, and her big brown eyes. I would find myself shifting my weight onto one foot and leaning as she is in the painting. Facing each other in the gallery, she was looking out at me and I was looking back at myself. Growing up, I looked for reflections of myself in TV shows, books, artworks, and movies. The characters I liked the most always had dark hair, light to medium skin, a strong personality, and were female.

These girls began to manifest in my daily life. I turned myself into characters by dressing up as Disney's Pocahontas, Belle, Meg (from *Hercules*), and Snow White. I read books about young English, Inuit, and Mexican girls. I wrote stories about girls my age. I drew self-portraits in the style of Disney princesses. But this phenomenon wasn't contained to my childhood. I am still drawn to media that includes a dark haired, light skinned

woman. The long list of these reflections includes the female protagonist in *The Little Prince* movie, Ariel's Daughter in *The Little Mermaid II*, *Jessica Jones*, *Wonder Woman*, and any character Zooey Deschanel plays.



Me reimagining Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)

Before I decided to make a documentary about representation in media, I knew I wanted to create work around women since real women and female characters have undeniably impacted my worldview. But instead of just paying homage, I wanted to uncover why women have been so central to my development. This led me to a list of questions that ended up directing the content my documentary. Why didn't I connect with male characters like Harry Potter who also has black hair and light skin? Why are appearance and gender so linked in my mind and in the creation of my identity? How are men and women represented differently in popular media? What is media's stake in

acknowledging the impact of their content? And if people seek affirmation of their identity in media, what happens when we don't find a reflection?

## CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

### Contemporary movements for media inclusion

Currently, many forms of media are being pressured by audiences to become more "inclusive". This term serves as an umbrella for diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, ability, appearance, and gender, among other categories.

Going into this project, I was aware of movements that are pushing for inclusivity. A couple years ago, Netflix acknowledged the power of content and launched a hashtag that promoted films and TV shows that people can identify with. People used #FirstTimeISawMe on social media posts that referenced movies and TV shows where they first connected to a character<sup>i</sup>. People mentioned characters like Brandi's *Cinderella*, an Anglo-Indian soccer player named Jess in *Bend it Like Beckham*, and the all-black cast of *Black Panther*. Part of the campaign included interviews with prominent people of color in the film industry about what representation means to them. Some people used the hashtag to say that parts of their identities were never represented in media<sup>ii</sup>.

But this was not the first contemporary instance of backlash against lack of diversity in films. Netflix's hashtag followed the viral 2015 hashtag #OscarsSoWhite which formed

after people noted the Oscars nominees' lack of diversity despite blockbuster hits that year by artists of color<sup>iii</sup>. Another hashtag whose popularity rose on the red carpet was #AskHerMore. This hashtag was launched by the Representation Project to press interviewers at awards shows to talk about more than what designer an actress was wearing<sup>iv</sup>. Within the films themselves, The Bechdel Test has held the film industry accountable for representing women as whole people. The test has only 3 requirements to pass but somehow movies continually fail it. The requirements are: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other about (3) something besides a man<sup>v</sup>. Every time I check the website, I am surprised at the number of blockbusters and even children's movies that fail this test each year.

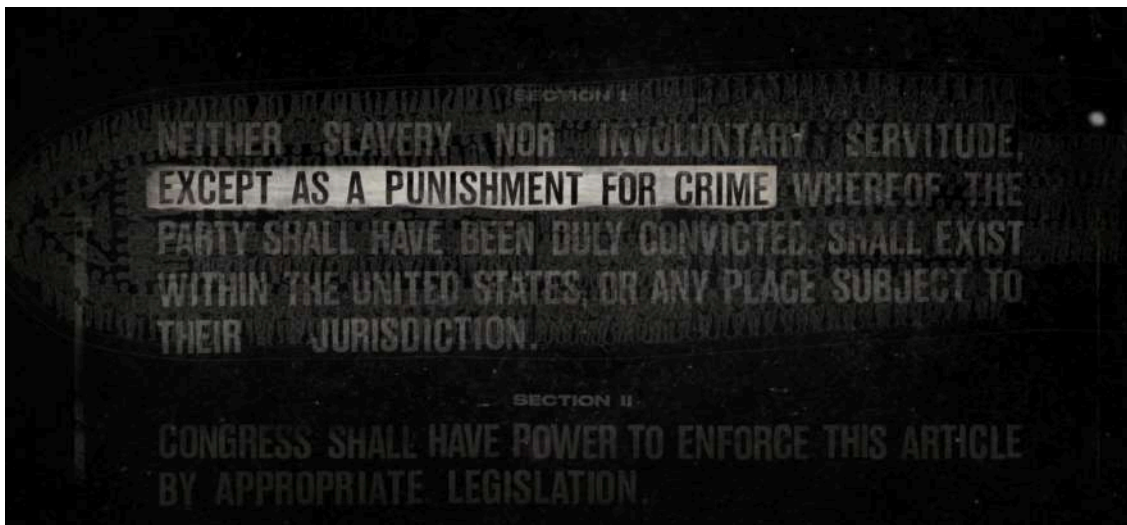
For my project, I want to tackle more broad forms of media and visual culture because representation doesn't stop at Hollywood. Moving into social media and beauty trends, Rihanna recently launched a makeup line called Fenty Beauty "so that women everywhere would be included" in a makeup industry that favors people with light skin. Fenty Beauty includes 40 shades of foundation, and its advertising and social media posts highlight (pun intended) women of color.<sup>vi</sup> Although many makeup brands have argued that they also sell a wide spectrum of shades, the popularity of darker spectrum of Fenty Beauty has snowballed into more diverse advertising from brands who also want to be seen as inclusive<sup>vii</sup>.

### Documentaries

After rolling around with questions about women's representation and constructing my own identity, I decided to make a documentary that would directly address these issues. Luckily for me, the reputation of documentaries is becoming less stuffy and niche and more exciting and accessible to younger audiences. The practice of relaying real life stories via film now takes many forms and operates under many names. News sources now have short videos on the front pages of their websites. Some companies, such as Vox, are concentrating heavily on video-centered content<sup>viii</sup>. Vox currently creates fantastic video essays that are generally under 10 minutes and wrap up larger concepts into palatable packages. Their consistent use of animation and branding reminds the viewer that they are watching a Vox video. Vice created a stirring "Vice News Tonight" segment that told the story of Charlottesville alt-right protests by following one of the alt-right members<sup>ix</sup>. A reporter interviewed an alt-right leader and his posse as they marched through protests and caught occasional downtime while navigating political bureaucracy. The millions of views of these videos shows that audiences are interested in short documentary-style online videos, which is the form my documentary takes.

When I officially decided to tackle a documentary for my IP project, I rewatched Ava DuVernay's *13<sup>th</sup>* - a documentary about racial inequality and its link to mass incarceration<sup>x</sup>. When I first saw this film, I was struck by the urgency of the information. *13<sup>th</sup>* gave me fuel to speak up about social issues as well as knowledge to do so in an informed manner. I hope that my project will give a coherent voice to a subject that has been floating around in dialogue around representation and identity.

13<sup>th</sup> also creates an exciting visual brand over the course of the film. The choice to exclude color in b-roll and animation makes a unified visual landscape. Outlined images and sparse text used throughout the film helps the narrative draw comparisons and explain statistics and ideas in a coherent way. I admired the animation use in 13<sup>th</sup> so much that it inspired me to pursue a similar use of animation in my own documentary; I also unified the b-roll by making it gray scale and animated using a single style of movement (“2.5D”, or moving the foreground independently of the background) in all animated images.



Animation (Source: 13<sup>thxi</sup>)



Animated image (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)

I also drew inspiration from the way the interviews were shot in *13<sup>th</sup>*. The Angela Davis interview floored me; she sits in a cavernous hall that was once elegant but is now decaying. And the cinematographer positioned her in the center of the lower half the frame, so her powerful environment takes up the majority of the visual space. It was a gorgeous shot that inspired me to pay close attention to my spaces for the film. I even mimicked that particular shot for my interview with Stamps professor, Marianetta Porter.



Angela Davis interview in a large hall (Source: 13<sup>bxiii</sup>)



Marianetta Porter interview in a collegiate event hall (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)

The environments I chose for my interviewees sometimes reflected their areas of interest (art museum for the art historian, the drama school for the actor) but my



primary concern was finding places with the ability to augment the status of the speaker without creating a distraction from their words. Depth was key in location scouting- I did not want a compressed-feeling space with background elements perpendicular to the camera. Or if I positioned my interviewees against a wall, any potential flatness was disrupted by distance from the wall or visual interest between the speaker and the wall behind them. For instance, D's interview took place in their small studio packed with art making materials, which created a visual disruption from the back wall that was 8 feet away.



D Wang Zhao interview in their studio (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)

While researching visual and narrative styles of documentaries, I also re-watched the 2013 Academy Award-winning documentary *20 Feet from Stardom*<sup>xiii</sup>. I fell in love with this film the year it came out and it continues to hold a spot at the top of my favorite movies list. Since the narrative revolves around the musical competence of backup

singers, the score is driven by the interviewees' musical repertoire. Singing weaves its way through the narrative and serves as topics of conversation as well as transitions to new ideas. The audio/visual combination of impassioned interviews and equally heartfelt singing makes the film so fun to watch. Watching *20 Feet from Stardom* was one of the first times I realized that documentaries could be exciting and compelling as well as informative. This gave me the confidence to create a documentary that could exist without the stigma of boring talking heads.

### Interviews

As in all research-based work, I discovered more interesting ideas and connections between them than I knew going into the conversations. For instance, I learned about the gaps that exist in our visual culture that I did not notice before. Some interviewees only saw themselves visually reflected in a single TV show or nothing at all and instead turned to books to find personality-based reflections. Many conversations revolved around how it feels to search for reflections and have to settle for negative representations or none at all. Through these conversations, I realized how prevalent black-haired, light skinned female characters are in comparison to other identities like black girls or gender nonbinary characters.

One avenue of representation I knew I needed to address was the representation we make for ourselves. As Tara Ward (Art History lecturer) points out in the film, portraiture is an art form that is no longer limited to artists. Anyone with a phone

camera and social media outlets can construct a visual identity for themselves and project it to the world. Social media gives people freedom to curate their visual identity but has also developed standards of representation that reinforce beauty norms and gender roles. I had been subconsciously viewing and adhering to these rules in my social media use, but until Tara’s interview, these thoughts had not been given a coherent voice.



Tara Ward interview in University of Michigan Museum of Art (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)

In my conversation with Tara, I also learned more about gendered visual culture in terms of objectification. She talked about how men’s idealized bodies (muscular) are “inherently tied to *action*” and *doing* whereas judgment of women’s bodies relies on aesthetics instead of action. And this withdrawal of agency from women’s bodies makes it easier to use them as symbols of abstract ideas (Nature, Beauty, etc.) than men who are grounded in action and humanity.

Anthony Mora (associate professor of Latino Studies and American Culture) and I talked about how media creators control narratives and attitudes around people who look or act a certain way. I related this to my struggle with identifying with black haired, light skinned female characters since many of them were evil (while blonde girls were the heroines). Our conversation led me to realize that media creators can intentionally demonize or otherwise devalue anyone. He noted in the film that lesbian characters had historically been used as a tool to scare the heterosexual female characters back to their male love interest.



Anthony Mora (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)

One sentiment that was echoed by all of the interviewees is the collective breath of relief as artists are taking control of their own image. Across fields of fine art, fashion, theater, and film, more diverse storytellers are creating content that features more fully

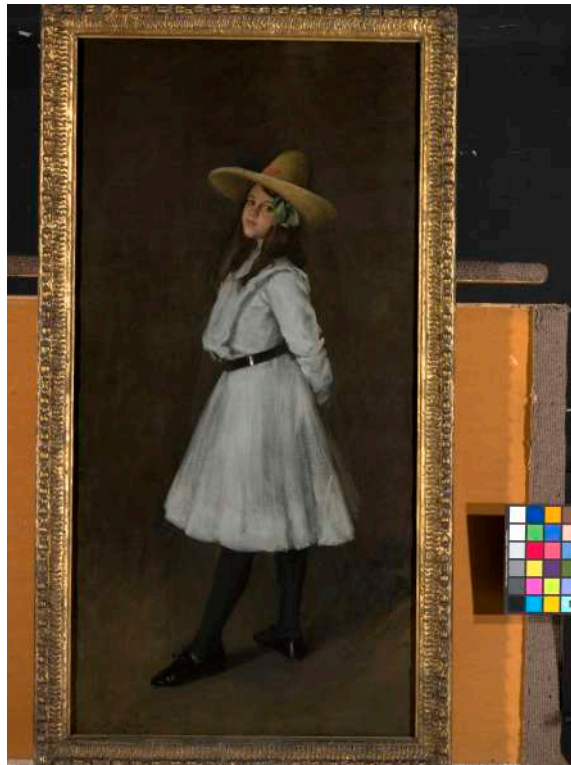
formed stories that deviate from stereotypes. I used this sentiment as the final subject in the narrative structure to end on an optimistic note.

In creating a documentary, not including exciting parts of conversations is inevitable. I talked to each interviewee for roughly an hour, but I could only use a fraction of that footage in the final piece. On many occasions, I gave a lot of our interview time to a topic that I had initially wanted in the film but eventually got cut. This happened when a topic would last too long in the film or when I thought another interviewee would back up a point someone else had made but they didn't end up saying what I anticipated. The toughest parts to cut were due to sporadic speech patterns that I couldn't fix- mumbling and run-on sentences that seemed to go on forever.

### **METHODOLOGY + CREATIVE WORK**

The biggest obstacle I encountered after I decided to create a documentary was narrowing down the subject. I wanted to explore women's representation at large but that topic is too broad to cover in a single film. It took a couple weeks to narrow the scope, and months after that to realize that my interest in representation was tied to the creation of my own identity, and that my piece would subsequently have to be autobiographical.

As I realized how personal this topic is to me, it became difficult to avoid including my own story through identity. I eventually resigned to using it as bookends and as a thread through new topics. My journey in the film is visually cued with animated images and footage of me painting a self-portrait. The painting symbolizes the attainment of knowledge and confidence around my own visual identity. In preparation, I drafted many miniature self portraits but ultimately was not satisfied with the symbolism- or lack there of- in any of the styles I chose. After talking to professor Katie Rubin about the style of my painting, she suggested referencing the beginning of my story- seeing myself in *Dorothy* by William Merritt Chase.



*Dorothy* by William Merritt Chase<sup>xiv</sup>. (Source: Newfields)

As all of the ideological pieces started coming together, I got more and more questions from friends about my project, and trying to articulate the premise of the film helped me focus on what I wanted it to be. After free writing and blogging about the film on a regular basis, I developed a log line: *“A documentary about how media’s representation of women Influences how they create their identities.”*

Once I was comfortable with the subject, I then narrowed down who I would want to talk to for the film. My first interviewee was Musical Theater senior Jo Ellen Pellman, who I wanted to interview since she is an active agent of representation as an actor on stage. Next, I interviewed documentarian and UM grad, Sophia Kruz, who was conveniently visiting Ann Arbor the month after I contacted her about being in the film. The only man in the list of interviewees, American Culture associate professor, Anthony Mora, focused on representation of gender and sexual orientation. At UMMA, I interviewed art history lecturer, Tara Ward, about representation of women in Western fine art and the gender structures within that sphere. At the Women’s Convention in Detroit, I asked a panel of women in film (including Alia Shawkat) who they wish they had seen on TV growing up. After the panel had wrapped, I asked Alia if she could repeat her answer for my documentary.

During this time, I was told repeatedly that my cast was too whitewashed and similar. So I brainstormed more interviewees to speak to identity-based diversity and not just discipline-based diversity. I reached out to my classmate and fellow artist, D Wang Zhao to talk about Asian and gender nonbinary identities as well as creating art around their

identity. Finally, I interviewed professor and artist Marianetta Porter about her artwork that highlights narratives of African-American women.



Jo Ellen Pellman (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)





Sophia Kruz (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)



Alia Shawkat (Source: *How to Make a Self Portrait*)

And I enjoyed every conversation. Being completely in the moment for the duration of the interviews reminded me how much more I enjoy documentary filmmaking than the staccato feeling of narrative film where each shot is planned and lasts a matter of seconds. In the documentary setting, I got to have exciting conversations in real time and not know what gem was around the corner.

Before each interview, I met with potential speakers to pitch the project and gauge interest. When the speakers were confirmed, I sent them a list of questions so they knew what specific directions I wanted to take the conversation. For the female interviewees, I asked how media's representation of girls affected how they saw themselves while growing up. I discussed my project with Stamps MFA student, Stephanie Brown, who makes work about colorism and black identities. And even

though she didn't have enough time to be interviewed for my project, she gave me great insight into how the representation of speakers reflects on my film, and I got to learn about how she makes work that generates conversations around identity.

As a one-woman crew, I was responsible for more than just the interviews. I put together all aspects of shooting- from acquiring the location to adjusting camera settings. I overlooked details here and there, but I got pretty efficient with my set up and taught my volunteer crewmembers how to use equipment such as sound recorders and reflectors. I tested a couple cameras before landing on the accessible and surprisingly high quality Canon Rebel t6i that I could rent from school. I have also dramatically enhanced my Adobe Premiere skills, as I had primarily used Final Cut Pro before this project.

I jumped through a lot of logistical hoops in order to gain access to locations with the visual interest I wanted. Luckily when I asked UMMA if I could use the galleries to film, everyone I talked to in the chain of communication was eager to help and I eventually got to film in the exact spot I wanted. For the other interviews, I rented and commandeered academic spaces.

Closing in on December, I had an official log line and multiple interviews under my belt. But I still saw a distinct dichotomy in the basis of my film: the criteria for my identity were appearance (black hair, light skin) and gender (female). These concepts can be mutually exclusive but were linked in my mind. I didn't identify with boys who had light skin and dark hair, and I didn't identify with girls who didn't have those characteristics.

How do I address these two things together? What was my rationality for that? Over winter break, I had a breakthrough: gender and appearance are inextricably linked since women are valued based on their appearance. Of course I would be tied to both gender and appearance since, as a girl, I have been conditioned to equate appearance with self worth and, by extension, identity.

And then my hard drive broke. Well, I dropped it. After running frantically to various computer stores, I realized I would have to re-shoot almost everything. The silver lining I came up with (as one must do in these occasions to forego giving up) is that, the second time around, I will know exactly what I want based on my clear understanding of my project and the context of everyone else's ideas. I could go back and ask them to expand on ideas that I realized were important after I had started editing the last time.

I re-shot the interviews I had lost (everything but Sophia and Alia) and began editing. I also tried different animation styles to spice up the black and white b-roll images that were layered on top of the talking heads. All the while, I had been painting my self portrait and getting footage of myself during that process.

In editing, I chose to group idea "chunks" into six consecutive sections: *Intro* (interviewees talk about where they found reflections in media), *Time We Live In* (acknowledging the current movements for inclusive representation), *Objectification* (exploring how women are shown in contemporary media as well as historical fine art and the differences between white/nonwhite and men's/women's objectification), *Self Portraiture* (how female artists have balanced objectification and agency in taking

control of their representation, and self-portraiture via social media use), *Don't See Yourself* (what happens when you see only parts of your identity validated by media or don't see yourself at all?), and *Push to Future* (how artists and media consumers can change representation).

For the score, I sent rough cuts of each chunk to the musicians (piano and violin) who came up with moods and motifs for each chunk. We met in a practice room and they played improvised examples of what each chunk could sound like, then we discussed any changes. The next week, we met in a recording studio and they improvised over each chunk three or four times. I gave them notes after each take and we decided which of the takes was to go on and be used in the film. Nathan, the violinist, then helped me place the score in the editing timeline so all of the nuances they played fit exactly where they intended.

## CONCLUSION

In terms of how this piece fits into the larger narrative about representation, *How to Make a Self Portrait* explains the basic premise for the contemporary push for more media inclusivity to those who are not aware of the revolution we are experiencing. It also addresses the current gaps in representation. This information is not new to people who are interested in social movements in popular culture. I asked viewers during test screenings and after the premiere if they “learned anything” and those who are already cognizant of social trends said they were aware of the content. That said, the

documentary also explores more nuanced ideas such as how media has informed our subconscious notions of identity by using old tropes and stereotypes (e.g. women as aesthetic decoration as seen in fine art dating back centuries) as well as creating new ones (e.g. movies using lesbians as evil foils to “normal” heterosexual women).

The biggest takeaway, according to the test audiences and premiere attendees, was the curiosity they shared around *their own* reflections in media. This film leads the audience to wonder what impacted their sense of identity, where their reflections were, and how they can help turn the tide toward more inclusive representation using their creativity and/or viewership. Contemporary rhetoric around representation has vocalized the need for inclusive representation and has noted the real-life impact of positive representations. The gap I believe that this film is filling is in-depth reflection on a personal level.

I hope that the documentary medium makes the issues clear and digestible for the audiences it encounters. I believe hearing directly from experts without any filters validates their ideas more so than if I claimed to be the expert and manifested their words in a different artistic medium. I expect the quality of the form (the visuals, sound, music) to also enhance the speakers’ words and help validate their ideas.

As far as my own growth due to this project, I have developed a passion for documentary storytelling and attachment to women’s issues. I would like to work in a creative position where I can combine these interests, and I know I will continually make work on my own in these areas.

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