

TO LOOK WITH DESTRUCTION

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To Look With Destruction is a puzzle that must be deciphered. This Surrealist oil painting is laden with coded words, veiled imagery, and object symbolism. It explores the experience of body dysmorphia through visual metaphor and seeks to mirror the distorted reality that is created by this experience. In my practice, poetry and painting are deeply intertwined. My research for this painting began with a period of reading poetry, including Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, and Margaret Atwood, as well as writing my own poetry to help develop the imagery found in the painting. The poems you see mounted on the wall expand the visual narrative and are an integral part of my storytelling. In this project, I work outside of the body because body dysmorphia is a disembodied experience. I am seeking to explore the hidden, disturbing, and uncanny, portraying a poisoned mode of seeing the world and living in the body.

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BODY DYSMORPHIA

Body dysmorphia is a disorder of self-perception. It is predominantly focused above the neck, most frequently the surface of the skin [75%], but is also often focused on the shape of the head, hair, and facial features¹. Body dysmorphia is an issue that is very prevalent in today's society - affecting about 1 in 50 people. It is even more prevalent in specific demographics, including women, teens, and people with existing psychiatric conditions². Despite its pervasiveness, the psychological effects of this condition are rarely openly discussed.

In, "Being seen or being watched? A psychoanalytic perspective on body dysmorphia," printed in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, clinical psychologist Alessandra Lemma explores the development of body dysmorphia in children and its later-stage effects. She states that, "...from early childhood development a child acquires a sense of himself as attractive and loveable through the earliest, preverbal, interactions with others, most notably with the 'object of desire' [Britton, 1998], typically the mother". The desirable body is established as the foundation for the expectation that the self will be loved. This mindset persists throughout all of life's stages to various extents. It fluctuates throughout time, as the perception of one's body image is elastic and not static. Yet, with individuals who experience body dysmorphic disorder, the resulting distress from a perceived flaw in one's appearance is so extreme that it can create obsessive behavior and lead to surgery or dangerous DIY surgery³.

Alessandra Lemma also explores how BDD creates a sense of self-hatred that spurs a process of self-objectification within affected individuals. Lemma writes, "[t]he patient-as-object now vilifies himself as object, that is, he turns against the split-off part of his ego identified with the object [Freud, 1917]". This experience is described as a "splitting" in which "[t]he body becomes the object". This objectification and sense of disembodiment is something that I am trying to portray in my own work. Lemma also writes that within the second archetype, the patient "is malignantly identified with a harsh and ruthless observer, where looking is in the service of destruction, not love."⁴ I found this line, looking is in the service of destruction, not love, particularly powerful. This inspired the creation of a new poem I titled "To Look With Destruction", and subsequently the title for my exhibition as a whole.

All of these experiences culminate in feelings of humiliation under the scrutinizing gaze of others. The foremost anxiety raised is that of ugliness and being unlovable. Affected individuals view themselves from an observer's perspective. As described in Lemma's paper, people experiencing BDD "have lost ... the 'rose-tinted glasses' - the self-serving bias that protects many of us from too many narcissistic wounds as we look in the mirror." People with BDD describe not wanting to look "perfect," just to look "normal" or to "fit in," but this is a target with constantly changing goal posts⁵.

1 Lemma, Alessandra. "Being Seen or Being Watched? A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Body Dysmorphia." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 90, no. 4 (August 21, 2009): 753-71.
2 "Body Dysmorphic Disorder." Cleveland Clinic. Accessed November 8, 2022.
3 Lemma, Alessandra. "Being Seen or Being Watched? A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Body Dysmorphia." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 90, no. 4 (August 21, 2009): 753-71.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.

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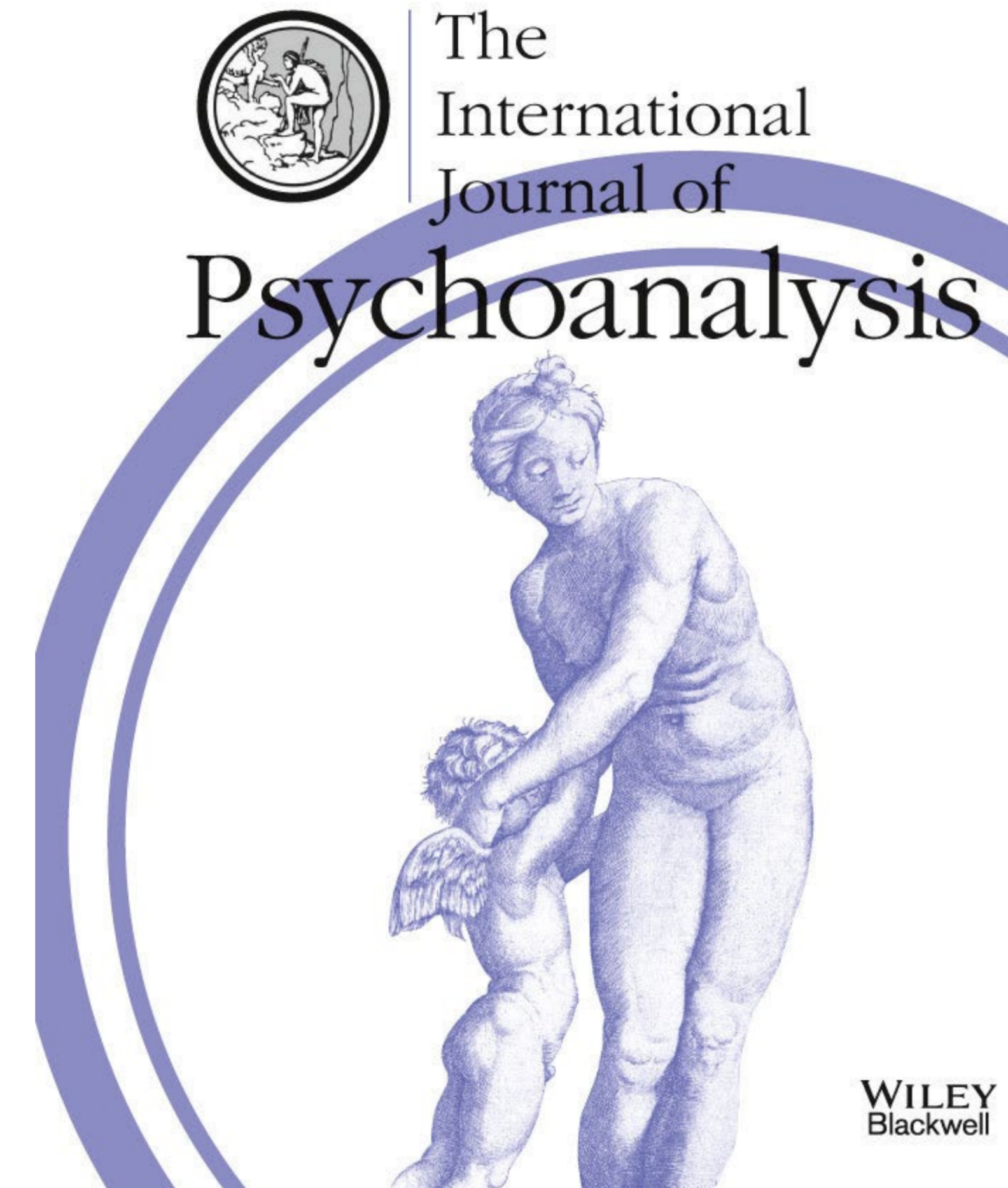


Fig. 1: *The international Journal of Psychoanalysis*.

SURREALISM

Surrealism claims to unlock the subconscious and expand into a world beyond the rational, yet it simultaneously has remained rooted in the reality of a world inherently close-minded and patriarchal. The portrayals of women as passive, sexualized, or inanimate objects persists through the subconscious to the dream world of Surrealism. Understanding these narratives is critical to my own work as I seek to enter the world of Surrealism as a woman artist striving to explore women's experience of mental and bodily issues in society. In my work, I explore body dysmorphia through the perspective of surrealism. At the same time, I want to challenge the predominant surrealist portrayals of women. I believe that it is impossible to be a woman artist in Surrealism without also being in conversation with the movement's problematic past. I am seeking to challenge and subvert while also affirming my right of belonging as a female Surrealist.

I convey my personal experience of body dysmorphia through Surrealist self-portraiture. Surrealism as a movement has historically been used to access the subconscious and portray the uncanny landscapes of dream worlds. Rather than using Surrealism as a tool to portray a world beyond our reality, I am seeking to use surrealism to convey the lived reality of an individual living with body dysmorphia. The attributes of Surrealism that make it appear so unnerving and unnatural are exactly what is necessary to illustrate this concept. I am interested in exploring how Surrealists use objects as motifs in their works, and how I can incorporate symbolism.

The text *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, edited by Surrealist scholar Patricia Allmer, examines a comprehensive history of women Surrealists from the early 20th century through the present day. This book includes a series of essays on a range of topics including representation, the body, still-life, and portraiture, as well as selections of work from a wide array variety of artists that have been largely written out of a Surrealist art history. In her essay, "Of Fallen Angels and Angels of Anarchy," Patricia Allmer declares, "...whilst Surrealist thought radically challenged hierarchies, it often remained blind to its own gender politics, locked in heterosexual, sometimes homophobic, patriarchal stance positioning and constructing women (and never men) as artists' muses, femme-enfants, virgins, dolls, and erotic objects". She also notes that no woman had ever been listed as official members of the original Surrealist movement. This information challenges just how radical Surrealism truly is and it highlights the hypocrisy embedded within the movement¹.

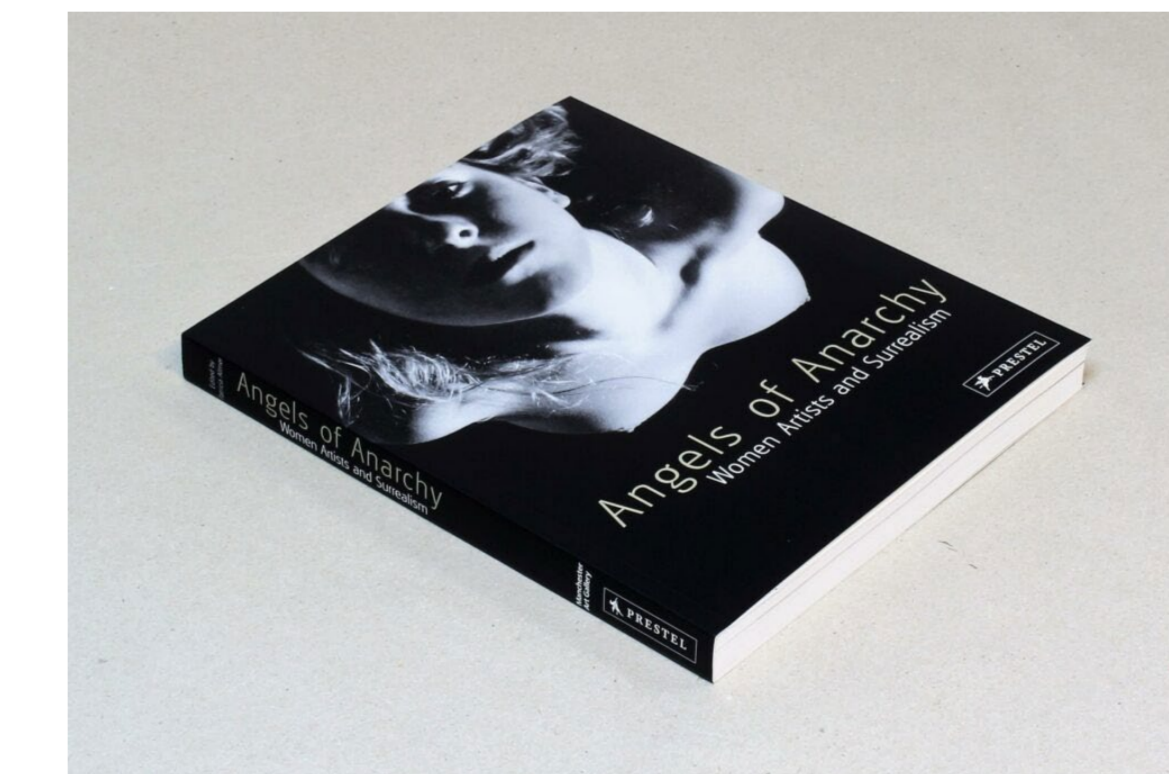


Fig. 2: *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* edited by Patricia Allmer, 2009.

Later on in the essay, Patricia Allmer delves deeply into the specific history of self-portraiture in Surrealism. She highlights the dichotomy between male portraits of women as muse [read object] and the portrayals of men through self-portrait as "masterful creator" and "tortured soul". In reference to Rosy Martin's "Foreword" in *The Art of Reflection* by Marsha Meskimmon, Allmer writes, "[f]or women Surrealist artists the genre of self-portraiture is a 'way of coming into representation [...] in which the artist is both the subject and object and conceives of how she sees rather than how she appears'"². This quote highlights the powerful capabilities that self-portraiture can bring to women Surrealists.

This holds significance for my own work in that by painting my own self-portrait, I can convey exactly how I see myself and the world around me through my unique perspective. As mentioned above, traditional, patriarchal Surrealists tend to objectify women in their paintings, either sexually or as inanimate doll. My own experience of body dysmorphia results in feelings of disembodiment and self-objectification. However, my work is a departure from the past in that I am translating the way in which I experience dehumanization to advocate for greater awareness and personal expression. My experience of body dysmorphia and self-objectification is due in part to the patriarchal and voyeuristic world that we live in, and so I am intentionally drawing attention to the detrimental effects of such experiences.

1 Allmer, Patricia, and Roger Cardinal. *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*. Prestel, 2009.
2 Ibid.

SELF PORTRAITURE AND MOTIFS

The first artist that I discovered that really transformed my thinking around Surrealist portraiture was Iranian artist, Afarin Sajedi. Sajedi's works immediately mesmerized me. Sajedi's work masterfully deals with color, light, and emotion. She successfully creates the ethereal and mysterious. I was particularly drawn to the way in which Sajedi utilized objects as motifs. Sajedi incorporates a variety of objects into her compositions, but one recurring image is the motif of the fish¹. I was captivated by this fish and the various ways that Sajedi weaves it into her portraits. I was so intrigued by Sajedi's work and her fish that I reached out to her inquiring about her work- unfortunately, she has yet to respond. However, I began to brainstorm how I incorporate this idea into my own work as a result. Afarin Sajedi's work may forever remain a mystery to me, yet still it launched my creative thinking on this project.

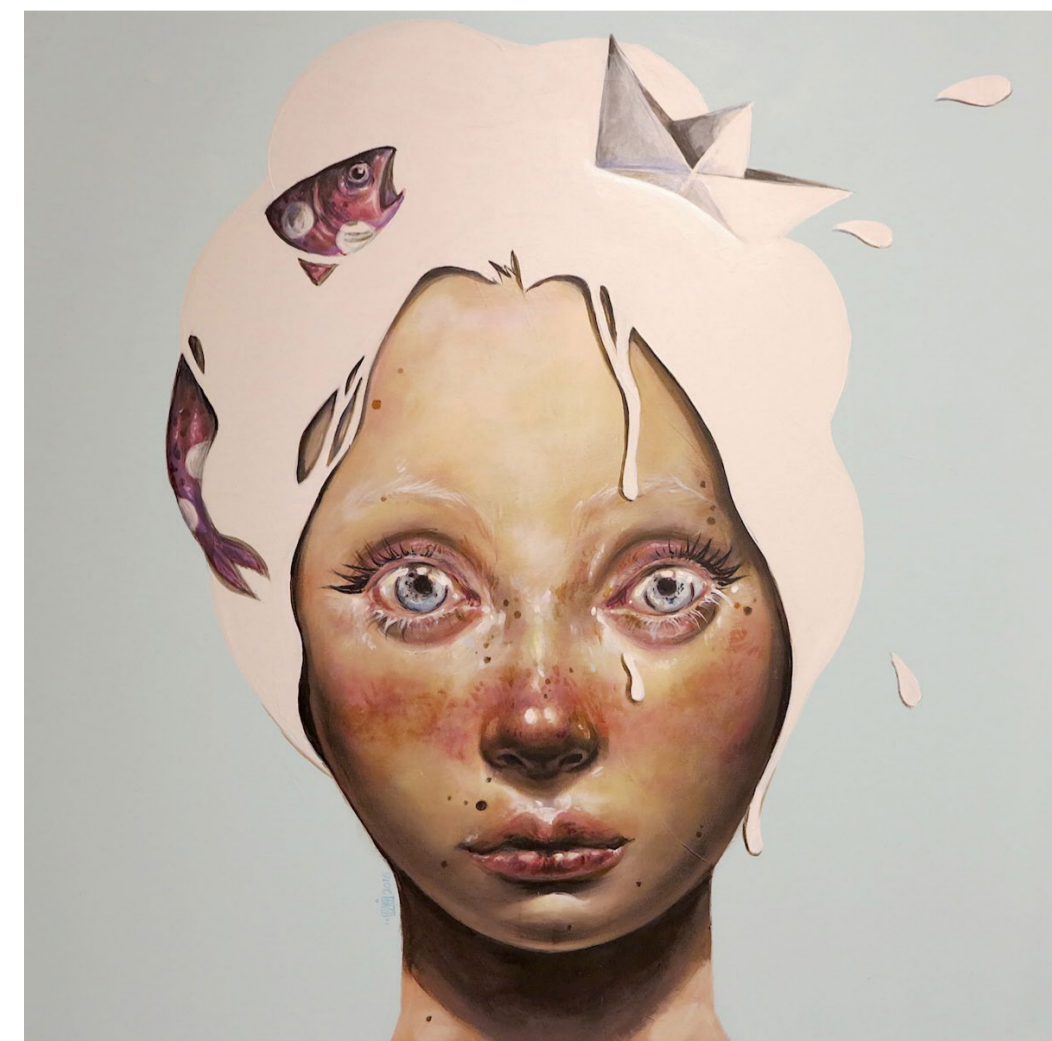


Fig. 3: *Illusion 5* by Afarin Sajedi, 2016.

Another artist that I have drawn great inspiration from is Argentinian-Italian Surrealist Leonor Fini. As a young artist in Paris, Leonor Fini defied the traditional roles of student, muse, or lover- the roles traditionally open to young women of her stature. Instead, she pioneered her own path and practice of painting powerful and striking Surrealist landscapes and portraits.

In the painting, *The End of the World*, painted by Fini in 1948, we can see an eerie portrayal of Fini herself in the center of a murky lake shrouded in fog. The figure appears statue-like, it has a waxy appearance and an unnatural aura. It reflects into the dark waters, surrounded by dead plants, carcasses, and skulls. The background of the image reveals a vast, desolate landscape. The objects in this work are extremely symbolic, signaling the end of times, death, and destruction. The portrayal of the figure as an object-like form reveals the resulting dehumanization from chaos.

This work was central to the development of my project and the way in which I approached self-portraiture. Prior to discovering this image, I was focused solely on how I would depict my own self-portrait and I was less concerned with the background imagery. This image opened me up to the possibility of working my figure into a Surrealist landscape. The landscape in this work is dark, ominous, with an eerie sense of vagueness. It adds to the overall impact of the portrait and expands the narrative created by the stone bust figure.

This painting inspired me to consider painting my own self-portrait in a similar statuesque manner. I am seeking to intentionally dehumanize myself, as Fini does. I want to paint myself in this style to represent the sense of distance that I experience when viewing myself from a third person perspective- the body as object or vessel, one that does not match what it contains inside.

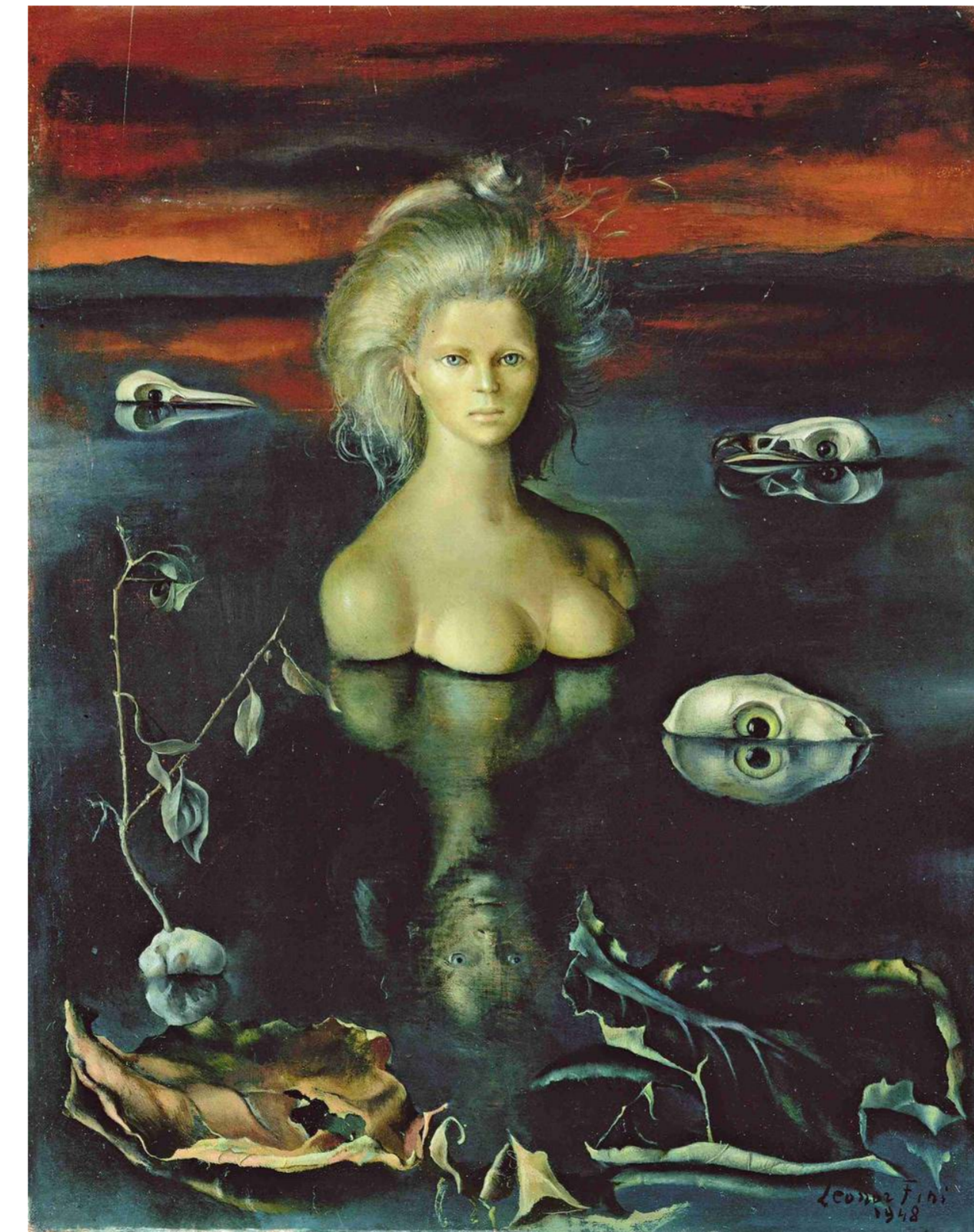


Fig. 4: *The End of the World* by Leonor Fini, 1948.

1. Sajedi, Afarin. Afarin Sajedi. Accessed November 8, 2022. <https://www.afarinsajedi.com/>.
 2. Mcdermon, Daniel. "Sex, Surrealism and De Sade: The Forgotten Female Artist Leonor Fini." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, November 6, 2018.

EARLY IDEATION

At the start of this project, I felt stuck. Sketching was getting me nowhere- I had a vague sense of what I wanted the painting to convey, but no idea of how to portray that abstract idea. I struggled to formulate my composition and develop motifs like Sajedi's fish and Fini's skulls and carcasses. My first attempt to break out of this rut landed me in the process of mind-mapping. I developed a large list of objects that were all vaguely connected to my topic, but none of them felt quite right. They did not feel personal enough, and I felt they lacked authenticity.

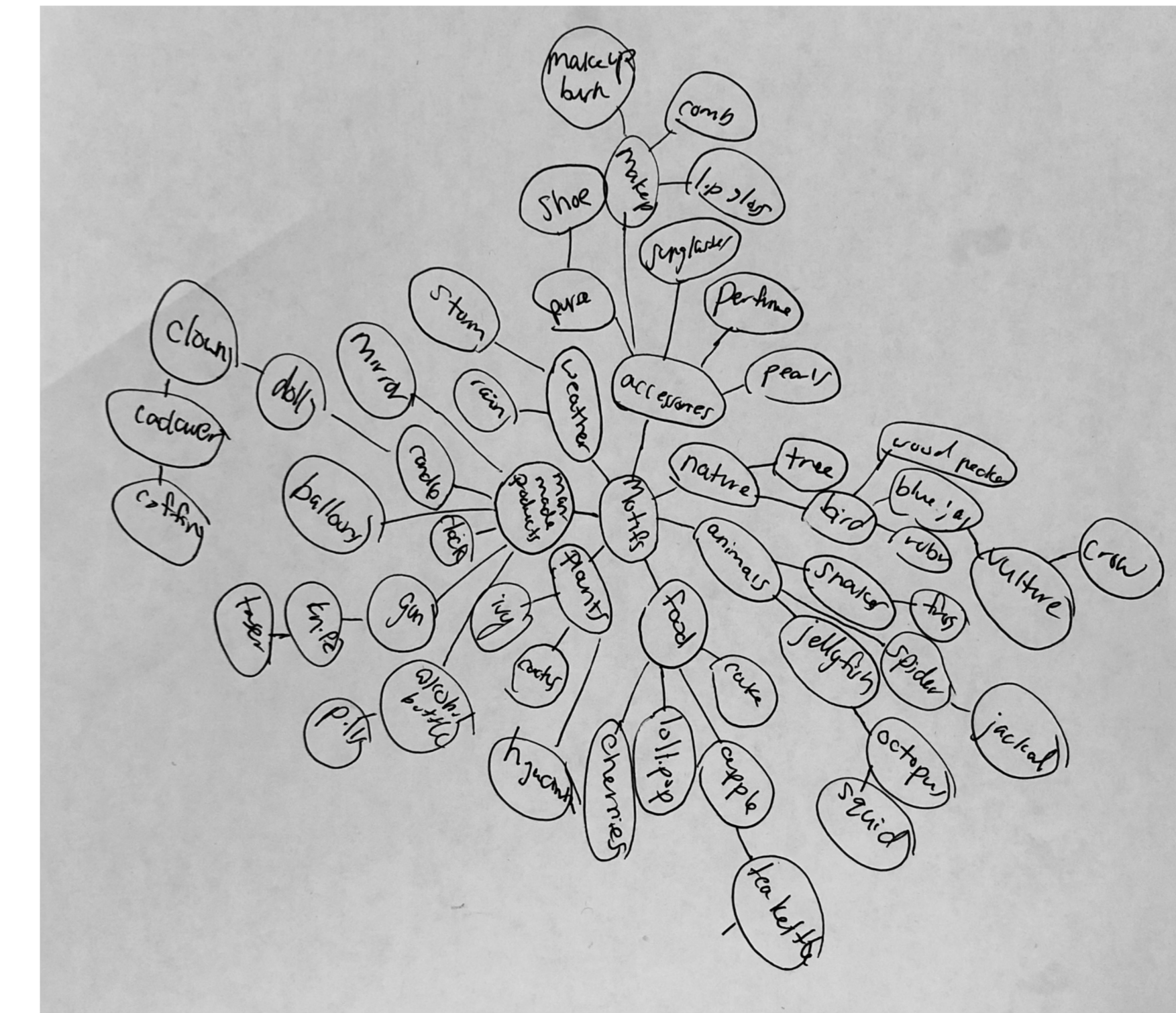


Fig. 5: Mind-mapping exercise.

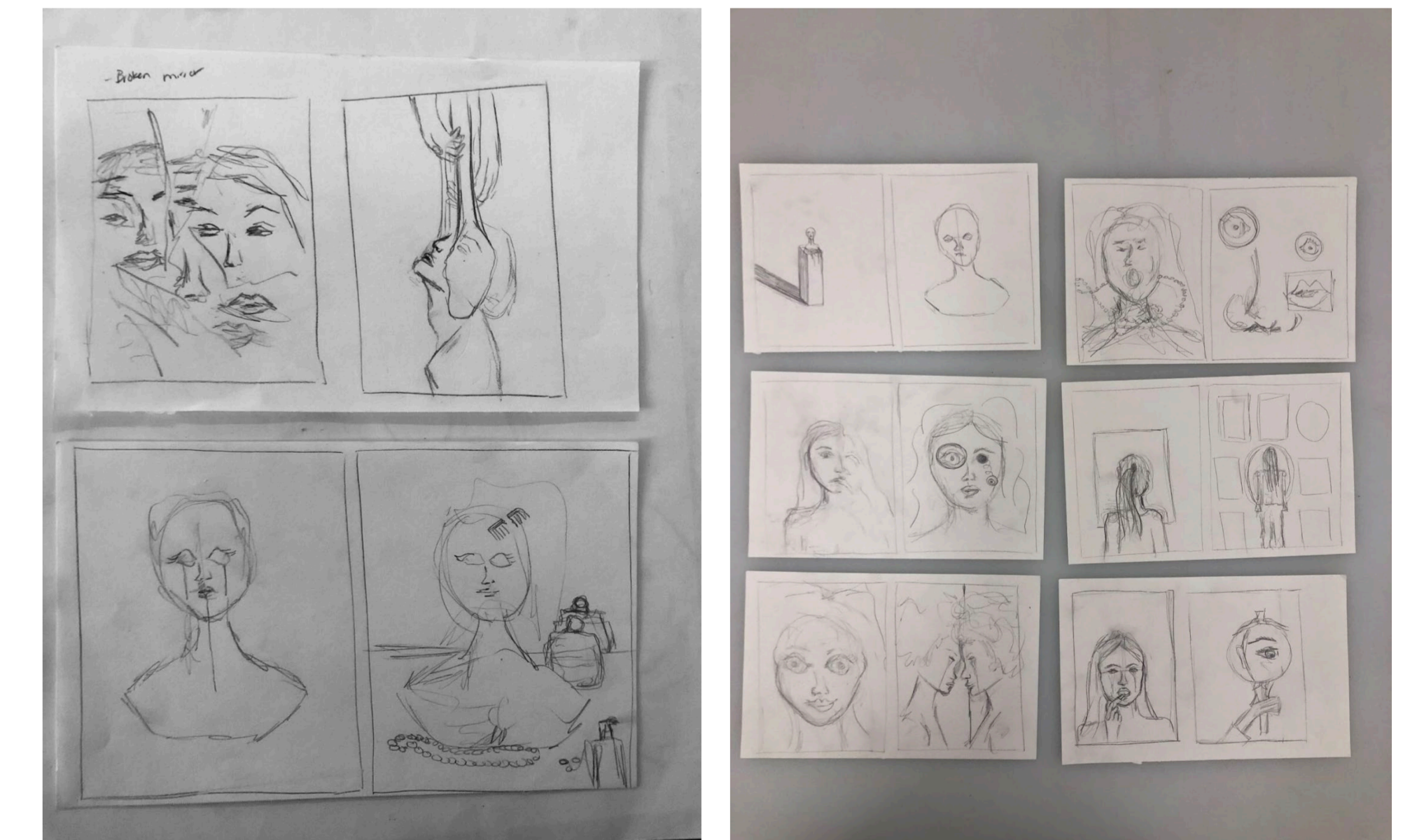


Fig. 6-9: Early sketching iterations.

METHODS: POETRY

I then decided to look to poetry for inspiration. I immediately felt success with this mode of research. As I've previously discussed, I feel that Surrealism is an excellent artistic form for portraying the experience of body dysmorphia. Similarly, I think that poetry's ability to convey emotion in unconventional ways and transcend logic was perfect for exploring my subject matter. I discovered a variety of poems that connected with me and inspired my thinking, but one in particular stuck out to me - Sylvia Plath's poem "Mirror".

This poem is written from the perspective of the mirror and it deals with body dysmorphia in the context of anguish around an aging body. In the poem, the mirror transforms into a lake, and an old woman leans over it searching for herself in its reflection. The woman becomes distraught and sobs at the lie she sees reflected back to her. Everyday, the woman returns to the mirror, searching for herself, yet everyday instead of seeing the young woman that she imagines herself to be, the mirror reflects back to her the image of an old woman that is likened to a "terrible fish".

In many of my early iterations, I found myself feeling stuck in the usage of the mirror as a motif- all my ideas felt trite and played out. Yet, in this poem, Plath does not shy away from the mirror but rather turns the traditional concept of the mirror within the context of body dysmorphia on its head by telling the story from such a unique perspective. This poem pushed my thinking and inspired me to investigate creative new ways of handling the mirror.

I also began writing my own poetry for inspiration. I have always been drawn to poetry throughout my life as a creative outlet for dealing with dark emotions and persisting through difficult times. However, I have never used my poetry as inspiration for other forms of art. Now, I began writing poetry around the topic of body dysmorphia and just letting myself see where my writing would take me. When I am writing poetry, I feel the least confined and often develop unconventional imagery and perspectives- exactly what I was searching for in this project. By writing poetry, I was able to further explore my own emotions as well as to pull new imagery from my diction. I have found that because poetry does not follow the same rules as regular forms of writing, the freedom allows for greater exploration. Writing poetry has helped me access the metaphorical and discover surprising connections and symbolic representations that I would not have been able to develop otherwise.

Mirror

Sylvia Plath

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful,
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Fig. 10: "Mirror" by Sylvia Plath, 1963.

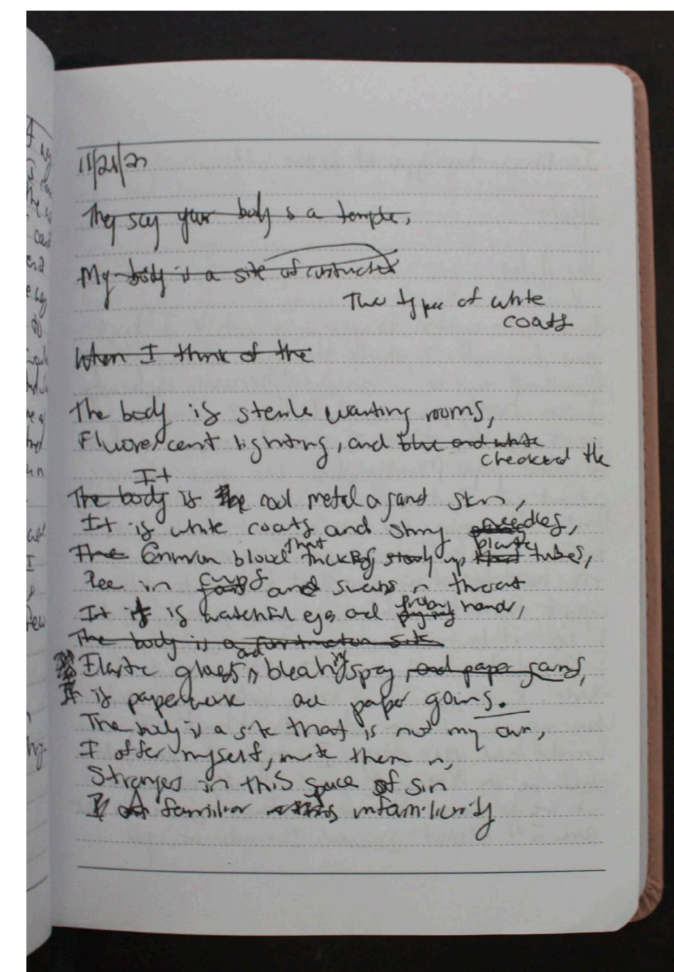


Fig. 11: Early version of my poem, "Bon Appétit"

METHODS: COLLAGE



Fig. 12: Manual Collage

I have found another extremely helpful method to be the process of collaging. At first, I experimented only with manually collaging with paper images. Through the process of physically cutting the paper and playing with the images by hand, I did not feel confined by the restrictions that I sometimes experience in Photoshop and Illustrator. This process enabled me to move objects with ease and I achieved a sense of surprise and delight that I have a harder time realizing when I overthink my design. Like my poetry writing process, collaging allowed me to create interesting object relationships and develop uncanny juxtapositions. After the hand collaging, I then moved into creating digital iterations of my collage. I explored many different compositions, before settling on my final concept.

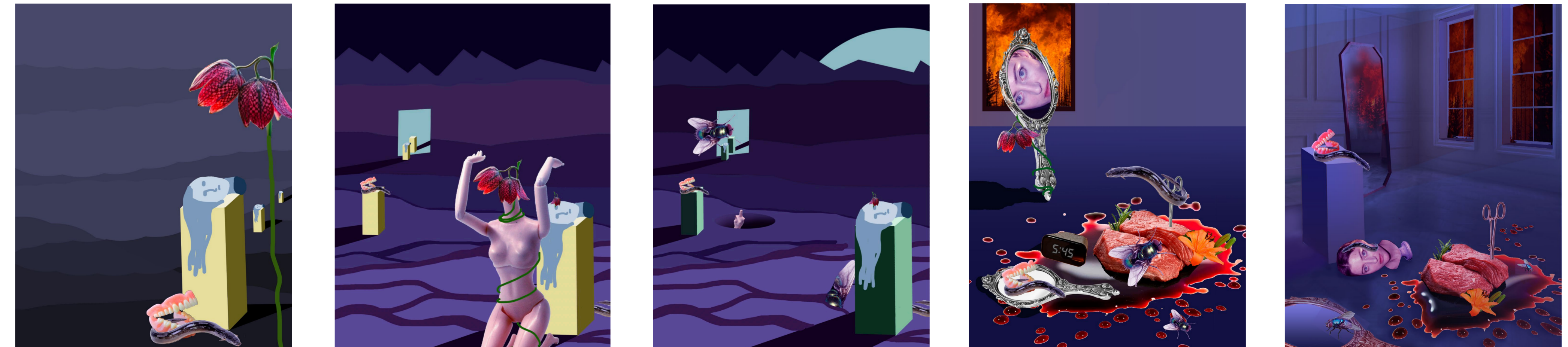


Fig. 13-17: Digital Collage



EXHIBITION DESIGN

In developing my exhibition plan, I wanted to maintain a sense of symmetry and balance throughout the space. The piece itself is very large and has so much visual weight that I wanted to ensure that there was plenty of negative space in the rest of the studio for the eye to breathe. The poems that hang across from each other are small enough so that they do not detract from the painting, but flow naturally with the rest of the work. The viewer is meant to walk through the room and read the poems while engaging with the painting to create one holistic experience. The painting and poems are in dialogue with each other and the viewer.

Fig. 18: Complete exhibition view.

DETAIL SHOTS



Fig. 19: Detail shot of podium, dentures and eel.



Fig. 20: Detail shot of mirror and fly.



Fig. 20: Detail shot of meat, flower, forceps, and fly.



Fig. 21: Detail shot of podium head and eel.

To Look With Destruction

It does not speak.
It sits in silence, biding its time.
It lingers, crouching, shrouded in the darkness of sooty corners.
It waits.
It is patient.
It crawls out from the shadows.
It slides slimy skin across dusty wooden paneling.
It slithers between your teeth, crawls into the caverns of your skin.
It lodges itself between the fibers of your tissue.
It slinks its way into the recesses of the eye socket.
Its putrid poison slowly seeps out.
It clouds the iris.
It is foggy, then red.
It is a vision forever contaminated.
It is blinding, disorienting, deplorable.
You have become your own worst enemy.
You now know what it means to look with destruction.

Fig. 28: Poem, "To Look With Destruction"

Free Fall

She's
falling,
cutting
through
owl's air
like a knife
in the night.
Slicing open
the suffocating
heaviness of July.
A free fall in the black,
her body is just a whisper,
a whistle, a secret told with no
one as witness. Here her body is
weightless, watch how she dances,
the dance of a girl who's been given too
many chances. See her body stiffen into
the dive of an osprey, wind rippling off
that electrified skin. The shapes
below her loom ever larger,
eyes narrowed, prey
in sight. Cutting
through the
night, she
slices
herself
open.
Feasts.

Fig. 29: Poem, "Free Fall"

Decay

My body decays at the trace of your fingertips—
Arms devolving into pixelated remnants,
A figment of what they once were.
I am just a nostalgic blur.

My chest shrivels up and falls away—
Floating to the ground like ashes,
Forming a field of gray.
I am the deadly quiet at close of day.

My face obscures itself in a masked oblivion.
All that remains is the smear
Of old paint left on the palette.
I am the crevices that crack in fear.

I am a body infected.
The rot sets in a little more each hour—
Spots of wretched green,
A patchwork of sickly white,
Pressing ever inwards.

Fig. 30: Poem, "Decay"

Bon Appétit

The body is sterile waiting rooms,
Fluorescent lighting and blue checkered tile.
It is cool metal against skin lost in forgotten tombs,
White coats and shiny needles leading into gleaming vials.

It is crimson blood that trickles slowly up plastic tubes,
Watchful eyes and swabs in throats.
It is paperwork and paper gowns,
Probing hands protruding from white coats.

The body is something that is not my own.
I offer myself, invite them in.
A familial unfamiliarity as I sit here alone
With strangers in this space of sin.

I will make myself digestible,
Head on a platter,
A body that is theirs to batter.
Dinner is served—
Let there be no leftovers,
Not a crumb left.
Consume me.

Fig. 31: Poem, "Bon Appétit"

Unholy Flesh

A dusty mirror marred by fingerprints,
Smudged by the same fingerprints that mar the face.
Each day I reflect this familiar sight,
Gray light of a winter morning pushing out the night.

Shrill rings pierce through the quiet,
Disturbing the peace which came before.
I watch bare feet stretch and hit the floor.
She makes her way across the room,
Until she reaches me with that familiar gloom.

Carving into the skin, a deadly caress,
Dirty fingernails scrape away unholy bits of flesh,
Flesh that has betrayed the body,
That body which has betrayed the mind.

Clawing against the meat that sits atop the face,
She is just a passenger in this space.
Lattices of white,
Rotting strips of sinew,
Clusters of green creeping into the tissue.

The hand is a limb disconnected.
It ravages the skin till the eyes go blind,
And all that is left behind,
Is a surface unrecognizable—
Raw and bloody.
The putrid stench lingers on.

Fig. 32: Poem, "Decay"

Snow Angels

If I could burn it all,
Set fire to the crimes of my skin,
I would delight in its smoldering, suffocating heat,
Laugh as the undignified dust chokes in my lungs.

I would skip across the ashes,
Make snow angels in the smoldering embers,
Bury the grave I had built for myself,
The embers cementing that hole,
The one that lies in wait only just out of sight.

It looms in the corners,
Tickles at the periphery,
Waltzes across my eyelids that close at shut of day.

I would strike the match,
Eyes drawn to the flame,
Buzzing flies to that fluorescent bulb,
The one that hangs outside my doorway.

Black cloud forming in the cool dusk of a fading summer,
Each fly fighting for that beguiling glow,
Each one unfazed by the metallic zapping,
Electrocuted, they fall.

Collecting on my driveway,
Faint remnants of decay,
The electric glow of irresistibility.
I stand in front of the mirror.

Each day I swarm,
Black cloud filling my bathroom sink.
I hit the porcelain bowl,
A clinking reminder of my failures.
Metallic death.

If I could set fire to it all,
Burn the sickly remnants of those unholy flies,
I would make snow angels in the ashes.

Fig. 33: Poem, "Snow Angels"

CONCLUSION

My subject matter is centered around the experience of body dysmorphia, and so one might expect that I would focus on imagery of the body in my work. However, I am not interested in portraying the body, but rather, I want to symbolically portray the feeling of body dysmorphia. For example, imagining the slimy surface texture of an eel sliding through a disembodied set of unnatural dentures creates a visceral feeling of bodily discomfort. This imagery replicates the sense of internal disgust created by body dysmorphia. As previously mentioned, Alessandra Lemma examines how body dysmorphia creates a process of self-objectification, described as a "splitting" in which "[t]he body becomes the object". This is why I focus on the object rather than the body in my work.

In creating *To Look With Destruction*, I hope to open a narrative on body dysmorphia and shed light on a world shrouded in secrecy. Through this project, I have discovered just how much Surrealism and the experience of Surrealism and body dysmorphia mirror each other, and the power of the self-portrait. However, perhaps one of the most significant findings from my research is the capacity for poetry to aid in my creative process, spur self-reflection, and complement my painting pursuits. Moving into the future, I plan to continue fusing painting and poetry to develop rich, meaningful work.

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