

**Depiction: Understanding Identity**

Doug Galante  
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IP Thesis



Think about the way people act within our social surroundings and for what reasons. At what point do we recognize this behavior within society as an act of independence or free will? Our individuality is defined by the choices we make within society, yet our society seems to be the most influential part of our identity. It is our experiences within our social context that build our sense of self. Are our personal choices truly an act of independent thinking, or are they purely a result of the culture that we exist in? My work is an attempt to visualize my identity through a non-essentialist point of view. Non-essentialist meaning that I am not inherently born with a sense of self, but that is defined by the historical, cultural and social context of my life.

My piece, Depiction, contains five images from my past experiences and thoughts that are structurally intertwined within a pyramidal landscape to create a self-portrait that is both fragmented yet whole. Every perspective of the landscape offers a newly constructed view of my person whether it contains a clear view of one of the five original images, or something abstract. Depiction strives to be more truthful and more metaphorically accurate to the way we perceive people in life than is conveyed in traditional portraiture. I hope that this piece will allow myself and others to contemplate what social and cultural aspects of our lives define us as individuals as well as allow us to re-evaluate our decisions in order to

recognize ourselves as more independent people – people who can come closer to understanding his or her true identity.

Our past experiences essentially determine the choices that we make, and through these experiences we begin to understand and shape our identity. I believe the key to understanding our values is through these experiences, but we have no control over what type of experiences or culture we will be born into. Thus, our actions become a result of an environment that is forced upon us, and our identity becomes defined by an abundance of historical influences. Stuart Hall explains how these cultural and social histories influence our cultural identities:

There are critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak very long, without any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side. Cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, pg. 52)

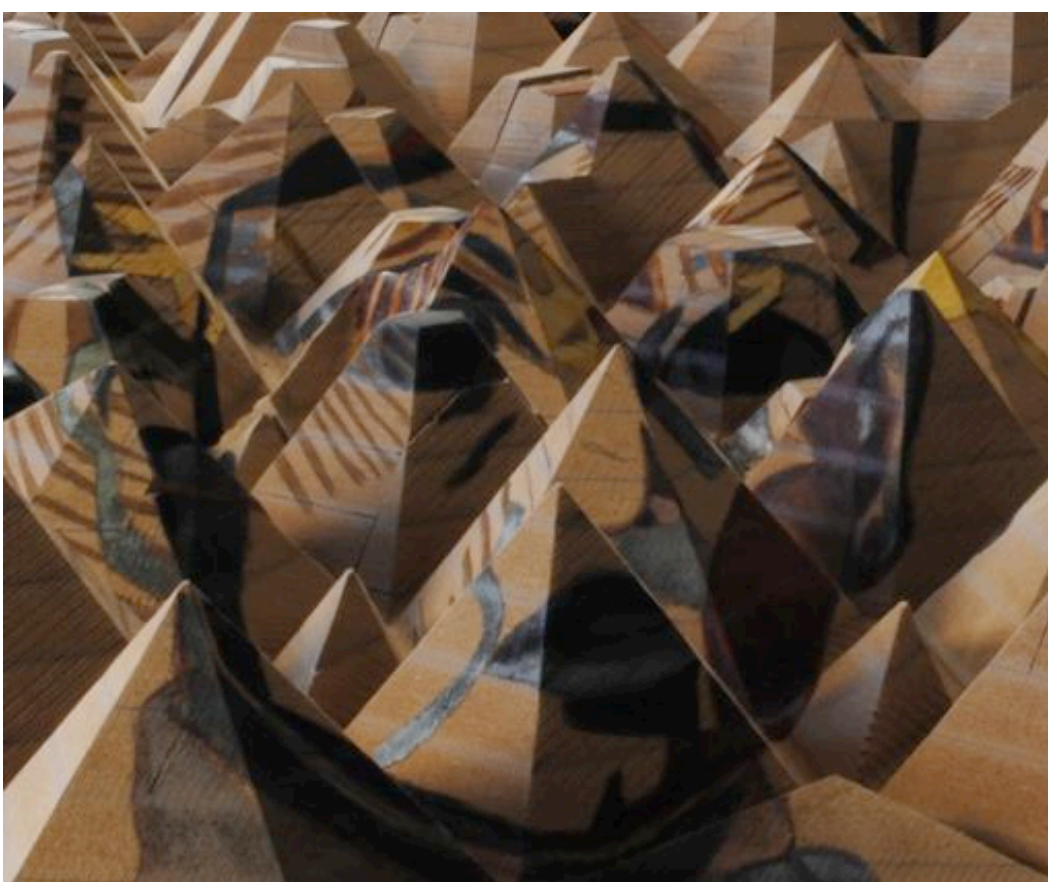
My work is a representation of this “constant transformation”. It is a realization of the differences that I have recognized as clashing ideals within myself, and why I have chosen to change my values. This struggle began when I recognized myself as a vegan after being raised as a hunter. It was only when I chose to act against my initial values that my identity came into question. So if I

truly had no control over my initial submersion into culture, why did I decide to embrace contradicting ideals? My insecurities about this contradiction not only support that the idea of right and wrong being a cultural construction, but also demonstrates the power that cultural expectations have on ones way of thinking.

Understanding where I am today makes it hard to accept some of the decisions I have made in the past. It makes me think of different choices I would have made having the experiences I have now, which is essentially what my project encompasses. At what point did I make the decision to change my mentality and personal values? In the past I was a hunter. I loved hunting and I was proud of it. I was proud that I was with my family and I was proud that I had the skill and knowledge to kill an animal, clean it, and use its body. I was proud that my parents approved of me when I performed these actions and hoped that in the future I could be doing the same with my children. I can't say that I regret these actions because I don't. Whether it was a result of the way I was raised or not, it was an extremely valuable time in my life. It is naïve to think that my actions in the past were wrong or worthless. If I had not done those things then, I would have never come to the point in my life where I disagree with them. It is where I chose to place myself culturally within that point of my life. This Part of my life is represented by two of the images in my piece: *Child* and *Deer*. *Child* is a symbol of innocence and of a person being prone to influence while *Deer* is a representation of the 'hunter identity.'



*Deer*



*Child*

As I grew older, I began to question what I was doing not only by hunting, but in many other aspects of my life as well. It wasn't until a major change in my life that I began to truly embrace my uncertainties. Spending four years away from home, in a new social and cultural environment, proved to be a catalyst for

more independent thought. It helped me put my life into perspective, and through this new perspective came the desire to explore my identity completely.

Deciding to become vegan was the most immense change I underwent. It exists on the opposite spectrum of hunting, yet I embrace both hunting and veganism fully as a part of my identity. My reasons for becoming vegan are not limited to my experiences with hunting (or the killing of animals), but I feel that there is a strong connection in these two aspects of my life because of their specificity. I once killed to eat meat, now I refuse to eat meat because of killing. The dynamic between these two parts of my identity and the reason for this change in mentality has become the main focus of the piece. The work is about the transition and interpretation of how I came to this part of my life. The movement towards veganism are represented through the three images: *Place*, *Field* and *Thought*. *Place* and *Field* are meant to be transitional images between *Child/Deer* and *Thought*. They represent less stable, abstract imagery that symbolizes the initial questioning of the ‘hunter identity’ and begin to work their way towards the ‘vegan identity.’ *Thought* is the image that represents the ‘vegan identity.’ It is representative of a new cultural setting through figurative imagery. The idea of veganism has become just as much about living in a more aware state as it is about cultural practices, thus the imagery isn’t literal in its representation.





*Place*



*Field*



*Thought*

My project is also an exploration of the transition into a certain state of mind. This state of mind is a realization of yourself and how you exist in relationship to your surroundings. It is a type of intelligence that Gardner describes as ‘intrapersonal intelligence.’

“Knowledge of the internal aspects of a person; access to ones own feeling life, ones range of emotions, the capacity to effect discriminations among these emotions and eventually to label them and draw upon them as a means of understanding and guiding ones own behavior. A person with good intrapersonal intelligence has a viable and effective model of himself or herself.” (Gardner pg 25)

It is my transition from valuing ideas of worth and independence driven by culture to realizing the potential in questioning those values, and embracing a state of mind that values self awareness and perspective, and avoids naïve thoughts and stubbornness.

To present the work visually I have chosen a mixture of sculpture and painting. The paintings exist on the various faces of the sculpture. The sculpture is an arrangement of pyramid-esque shapes that form a geometric topographical array over a horizontal plain. The sculpture was modeled digitally and then machine carved out of wood (MDF). The MDF was chosen for its durability and textural quality. The CNC router used to cut the wood leaves a distinct surface texture. Visually the wood appears soft with small ripples running up and down its faces, but to the touch it is hard. The pyramids were chosen as a form that would allow for multiple images to exist within the sculpture. Having five plains to work on allowed for different angles to produce different images. The pyramids shape also serves as a means of geometric abstraction inspired by modernist work. The deconstruction of imagery was essentially the starting point of the project. I



was attempting to create a similar type of two-dimensional abstraction through the use of a three-dimensional form. My project took off from a previous print that was inspired by modernist work (untitled).



*Untitled*

On the surface of these pyramids is where the oil paintings will exist. Oils were chosen primarily for their lasting power. They seemed natural to use to create an image on wood. Although the oils will be used to create the images, the sculpture is really what drives the color and composition of each image. Each image must exist clearly from a certain angle, while still containing pieces of other images.

Depiction represents the realization and transition of identity using forms that speak of the concept itself. The sculptural elements of the piece demand that the paintings be viewed from multiple perspectives, and each of these

perspectives contains a new image that must be accounted for in order to understand the piece. As the viewer encounters each image it is possible for the image to fade away before it is fully realized. Every angle of the sculpture must be examined and analyzed in order to fully understand its potential, just as one must approach oneself in determining identity.

I have been asked if I have finished Depiction. In contemplating the answer to this question I don't think I would feel comfortable saying that the piece will ever be finished. The process of art making is the process of redefining thoughts and constantly questioning the social and cultural aspects of society. This is what Depiction represents, and there will always be potential for the piece to change. I think the concept behind depiction doesn't allow for the piece to be completed. This piece is a reminder to constantly question your surroundings, and to strive to understand a true sense of personal and cultural identity.

## Bibliography

Hall, Stuart. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* from Identity and Difference. Edited by Dr. Kathryn Woodward. Sage, 1997.

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