

Mindscapes
A Series of Conceptual Self Portraits

Integrative Project Thesis
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“Everything is a self-portrait. A diary. Your whole drug history’s in a strand of your hair. Your fingernails. The forensic details. The lining of your stomach is a document. The calluses on your hand tell all your secrets. Your teeth give you away. Your accent. The wrinkles around your mouth and eyes. Everything you do shows your hand.”

- Chuck Palahniuk

My fascination and borderline obsession with producing self-portraits has been going on as long as I can remember making art. When I was very young and taking classes in foundation drawing and painting I always gravitated towards human subject matter and particularly the human face. Partially out of necessity, and partially out of a fascination with my own identity, more often than not the face that I was reproducing was my own. During high school, when my art practice began to take on a more serious form, I concentrated on doing finely rendered, realistic colored pencil self portraits with various animals positioned on top of my head. The concept was that the animal on top of my head would connect to the facial expression exhibited in the portrait and the two elements would express to the viewer an emotional state that I had experienced. I didn’t realize it then, but this idea of using visual representations of myself in combination with symbols, icons, and specific techniques of creation, to express a personal state of feeling and being would dominate my practice for years to come.

In the spring of 2010 after my freshman year of college I decided upon moving out of my dormitory that I wasn't going to move back to my parent's house for the summer. I didn't exactly have a plan but I knew that I wanted to spend my summer somewhere new and interesting where I would be stimulated creatively and intellectually. I got into contact with a close friend who had spent his winter out west working at a ski resort in Colorado and he informed me that he was moving to Salt Lake City Utah and could get us both jobs working summer operations at another ski resort in nearby Park City. I'd never been to Utah and the only associations I had with the state were mountains and Mormons. This sounded good to me, so the plan was set in motion and a week after moving out of Ann Arbor we're on an Amtrak train bound for Salt Lake City.

As I said my main reason for wanting to spend my summer halfway across the country in a strange state was to stay inspired and avoid descending into the state of creative purgatory that would have been living at my parent's house. So I kept my sketchbook handy at all times and started making use of it from the very beginning. In my freshman year of art school I took the opportunity to liberate my drawing practice from the traditional "from observation" work that had consumed the entirety of my classroom practice up to that point, to a more imaginative and stylized type of drawing that I had been honing outside of the classroom for years. I felt a powerful personal connection to this type of work and I could really feel and see my hand in the marks on the page. This type of drawing was immediately very empowering. I was working responsively, almost never using references just putting down lines and responding to them with more lines. Most of the subject matter

consisted of fantastical monsters and creatures with an emphasis on pattern and intricate line work. I began to realize that this was the way I had preferred to work my entire life but I was only now developing the skills and confidence to accept it as a legitimate form of creative expression.

My breakthrough in Utah came after I had been living in Salt Lake for a little less than a month. I was sitting on the living room floor of our unfurnished, rent controlled apartment, drawing away in my sketchbook as usual. I was putting down lines and putting together faces and forms with no preconceived concept or composition like I had been doing all spring/summer when I looked down at what I had on the page and something clicked in my mind. I realized that what I had drawn was a self-portrait. I hadn't set out to draw a self-portrait, and this certainly wasn't like any self-portrait I had ever seen or done before, but when looked at it I could see myself in a multidimensional, extremely personal way that was at once both familiar and completely new to me. The drawing (below right) is crudely composed of symbols and representations that I was immediately able to connect to thought processes and feelings I was experiencing at the time. I was really taken aback by this subconscious connection between my hand and my brain and the way that it seamlessly played into my natural urge to visually depict myself. I decided that this was an epiphany and I was hooked. I spent the rest of my summer obsessively making 36 of these portraits chronicling separate parts of my experience bouncing around the American West with my best friend. I decided

that after I returned to school in the fall I would curate and assemble them into a large-scale piece I called *Utah (A Self Portrait)* pictured below left.



This experience resonated with me as a very true and pure artistic endeavor that resulted in a type of self portrait that was accurate and expressive in ways I hadn't even been able to previously conceive of. However after time passed and I was able to step back and reflect on the piece in a more objective light, I realized that there was much room for improvement and progress. I still felt a sense of duty and purpose in creating representations of myself that are part literal and part symbolic, however I knew that I had many kinks to work out in my practice. After a period of thoughtful reflection and distillation, I was ready to produce a new series of conceptual self portraits.

In this body of work, I intend to visually express my perception of self identity through the intentional combination of literal representations of myself, and a variety of symbols and icons derived largely from my subconscious and mediated through my hand. I want to express to the viewer the intertwined relationship between the way I perceive myself as a person, and the drawings and paintings I produce as a visual artist.

I've always found myself best able to express my emotions and opinions through drawing and painting and I've cultivated what I consider to be a uniquely cathartic and personal relationship with the act of mark making. I will express this relationship visually by collaging elements of portraiture and pseudo narrative expressive illustrations in a way where neither overpowers the other begging the question, how much of my identity as a person is tied up in my expression as a visual artist?

Because I have spent most of my life drawing in a stream of conscious style trying to limit as much as possible the time between thinking and doing, I'm very practiced and comfortable at recording my immediate thoughts and feelings in my free flowing illustrations. However this can be problematic when composing largescale pieces for show, as I don't always want to lose myself in a freeflow of markmaking on the canvas and end up cluttering the picture plane with elements I don't necessarily want in the final composition. To solve this problem I will compose a large portion of the final portraits out of collaged pieces of my own drawings and paintings on various types of paper. This way I will amass a large collection of drawings and paintings before I go into composing the final portrait so that I have

the option of picking and choosing which elements to include to achieve the most poignant and poetic representation possible. Working in collage allows me to achieve a more painterly and expressive quality in the final portraits because I can work responsively with various cut out elements. It also visually expresses a disjointed and pieced together aesthetic that I feel is indicative of the human thought process that I am trying to represent]. I will use pen and ink, gouache, watercolor, colored pencil, and some unconventional natural dyes along with various types and qualities of paper to achieve a multi faceted mixed media quality in the final portraits.



Self portraiture has a very established history and framework in the art world and this is something that I've taken into account. Before the twentieth century self portraits we're almost always formal physical representations of the artist. I believe that this can still be the best way to describe oneself both physically, and internally, through the artists manipulation of subtle aspects of facial expression, body language, color palette, and stroke quality. However in the twentieth century many artists such as Frida Khalo, Andy Warhol, and Robert Rauschenberg, turned to abstracting the self portrait and aestheticising their outward image in a way that employs symbolism and abstraction to better reflect their inner self. These are the portraits that I looked to for inspiration and this is the type of self portraiture I will draw upon and push further in this body of work. These artists have abstracted the features of the face and parts of the body and also included elements in the background and foreground of their self portraits to instill meaning into the work. I will use some of these same techniques, while at the same time pushing them further as well as going as far as to work symbolic elements and forms into the composition of the figure itself.

Frida Khalo wrote, " I paint self portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to. I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration." This is a quote that resonates with me and inspires me. I do self portraits out of creative necessity, and I do stream of conscious drawing for the same reason. For me, they are a form of pure catharsis and intimate personal expression. With this series of self portraits I hope to compose a body of truly self reflective and

emotionally representational portraits. I will visually represent the relationship between the drawings and paintings that form in my subconscious and spring from my hand, and the perception of self identity within my head.

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