



Cognitive Distortions

Abigail Zrike
Cognitive Distortions
Senior Thesis
Penny Stamps School of Art & Design
Due April 21, 2017

Artists Statement:

“My first anxiety group meeting was really weird. I don’t know if weird is the right term. I didn’t speak. I was not in the mood for it. I was judgmental of the other patients. This one girl was violently anxious. She said she was going through withdrawals off of Benzos. It makes me scared to take the medicine. She went into a detailed story about how terrible she had been feeling—paranoid. This other woman said that holding knives calm her down. Everyone was on edge, all ages, probably like ten people total. I looked down the whole time pretty much and doodled scary shapes. I don’t know why I was being like that. It was hard for me, I guess. I started to think about the benefit of making art about these feelings. How do I represent myself? I was so self-aware. The boy next to me was shaking his leg so fast, and then I realized I was doing it too.

I have spent the year creating a series of self-portrait paintings that showcase my struggle with anxiety and how it results in distorted thinking.”

The summer before senior year started, I was restless. I lay awake in bed at night mulling over the notion that I had to represent my four years of schooling in one project. One final, purposely chosen, and self directed project. No matter what ideas I flirted with, I couldn’t soothe the disquiet. *What was I going to make? What would it be about? How do I represent and do justice to my time here?* I started avoiding thinking about the project. When summer came to and end, I was terrified. I started to reach for concepts I had no connection to. I began thinking about making the project about how much I didn’t know what to make the project about. Nothing sat right in my stomach. After many failed attempts, I decided to turn the camera inward.

“Self portrayal is a complex and contemplative act. The private nature of the task, and the intensity of self-scrutiny that it entails has challenged artists though the ages”¹ Some artists show evidence of this, while others may hide it, but all artists make decisions during the process of representation. This is even more so pertinent in self-portraiture; due to ones bias and stake they have in how they want to depict their own identity. It is interesting to me in a contemporary art world that seems to be driven by the truth, authenticity, and voyeurism, that in fact it is innate in the act of creating a representation, (essentially recreation) that biases, alterations, and other variables apply. It makes me wonder if there will ever be an accurate representation or reproduction of an image that is fully informed, furthermore; one that is not split from the artists who created it. I spent the year exploring representation and mental health through my own image.



Abigail Zrike, “Cognitive Distortions.”
Documentation of Final Gallery Set-Up.

For my thesis project, I explored self-portrait paintings that showcase my struggle with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and how it results in distorted thinking. In my project, I depict my self

¹ Michael Koortbojian, “Self Portraits Themes in Art”. (New York, 1992), 7

through a series of self-portraits that were then photographed and digitally layered in a video that was projected on one single canvas. The culmination of this process became a video that was projected onto a 45' by 60' canvas. The final element of my work was the destruction of the physical copies of the work. I filmed myself ripping up and destroying the portraits I had created all year. These ripped up remnants were displayed in a pile on a podium that stood directly in front of the projection.

The History of Self-Portraiture

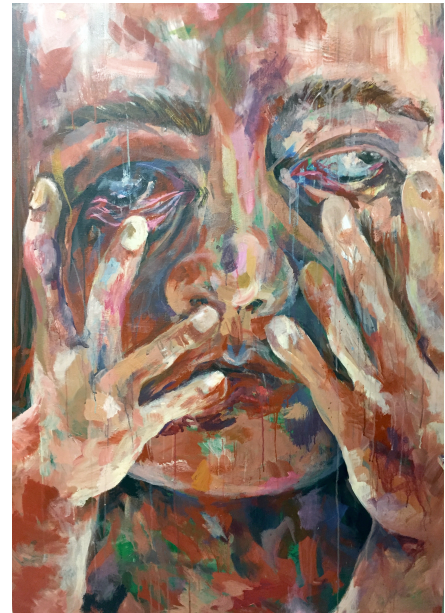
Millions of artists through history have created works of art containing the likeness of themselves for numerous reasons. Self-portraiture occurs out of



Abigail Zrike, "Self-portrait" 4in. x 6 in.

convenience, a want to teach more about ones individual identity, and sometimes as an intended signature. In order to achieve accurate likeness, mirrors have been used to help bounce back a reference image. The first 'mirrors' were likely reflections found in a still body of water. Through history, the advancement of mirrors has made an artist able to see the image more clearly, but the question remains: do artists ever truly see themselves?

There is something so interesting about the separation between the artist, and the portrait of the artist. I discover that even when using a mirror, there is still wiggle room, and there is agency in me to ultimately create the image, regardless of what is physically present. In this particular self-portrait study, I pay closer attention to my lips than my hand, which is left gestural. I exaggerate the colors, and I use the mirror as a plane and barrier between the viewer and myself. There is a deliberate feeling of confrontation that I chose to accentuate when referencing the reflection.



Abigail Zrike, "Self-portrait" 45in. x 60 in.

In the same way, a lot of what creates an "accurate" or "veracious" self-portrait is the artists' ability to capture the mood of the subject. This is not something that is always deliberate. When I was painting these portraits— I never set out with a particular agenda, things just sort of happened. I will discuss this more in my methodology section, however it is important that it is know that I these portraits were not planned out and I tried my best to be present in the moment and paint what I saw each time.

Influence

A creative practitioner and important influence these ideas is the work of the 20th century painter, Francis Bacon. In interviews he has revealed that, in

fact, the unknown is vital to his process as well. He is clear about giving his materials, process, and an element of chance a sense of agency to create his completed work. Spoken to art critic David Sylvester he confirms this notion of accidental success by saying:

“You know in my case all painting — and the older I get the more it becomes so— is accident. I foresee it in my mind, I foresee it, and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I use very large brushes and in the way I work I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things, which are much better than I could make it do. Is that an accident? Perhaps one could say it's not an accident, because it becomes a selective process which part of this accident one choses to preserve. One is attempting of course, to keep the vitality of the accident yet preserve a continuity.”²

What I realized, and what Bacon touches on in this interview, was that the experience of painting myself was a discovery process. Not every mark is planned, but what I subconsciously choose to keep in the picture helps me discover more about my inner intentions and myself.



Francis Bacon, “Studies for Self-Portrait,” 1973.

² David Sylvester and Francis Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), 26.

Bacon's work also gives viewers a window into his unique inner struggles. Bacon also said to Sylvester in 1975, "I loathe my own face...I've done a lot of self-portraits, really because people have been dying around me like flies and I've nobody else left to paint but myself."³ Francis Bacon has commented on how his works are about his anxiety and feelings of alienation. He uses disturbing imagery and distortion to create and convey this feeling. People often view Bacon's work as "raw" and "emotionally charged." This type of mentality is what creates veracity and a sense of candor in his work that I feel is integral to successful art.

Beverly McIver is another artist, a more modern artist, who uses paint to express the inner workings of her mind. The way McIver handles her paint is what first attracted me to her work. Her series of self-portraits titled "Depression" is inspirational because she connects the emotion in her brush strokes to her own battle with depression.

³ Ibid, 29.



Beverly McIver, "Depression" 2010.

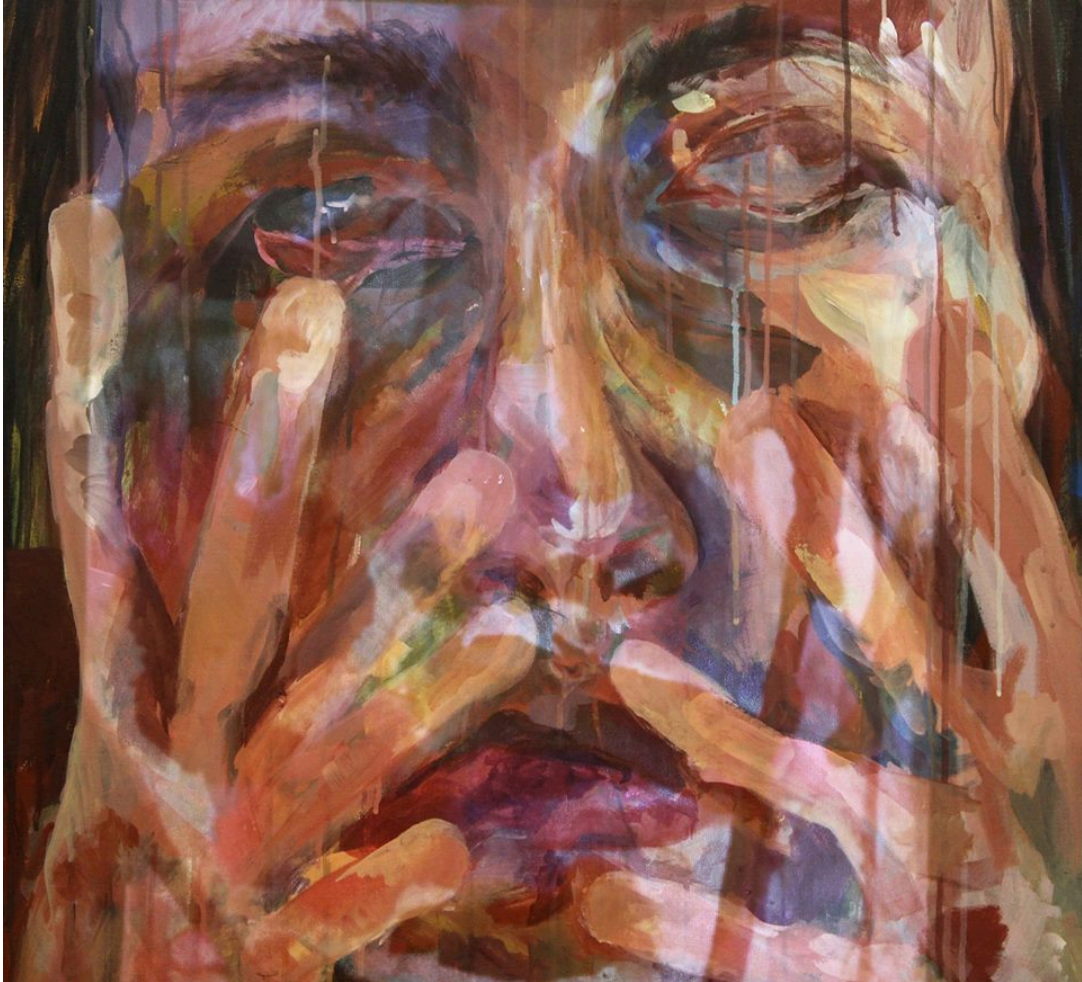
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McIver was quoted in Duke Today saying, "People come up to me and say 'I was depressed too,' Paintings give me permission and a way to share these feelings without guilt. I have to keep telling that very human story."⁴

I started this self-portrait exploration with no idea what I would discover. What I found was a voice for my anxiety.

⁴ "Beverly McIver: A Life That Is 'Good and Scary and Joyous'" Duke Today, accessed April 20, 2017, <https://today.duke.edu/2014/09/mciver>.

Anxiety



Abigail Zrike. 'Cognitive Distortions' Painting and Projection 30 X 40

As someone who suffers from Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Depression, I am always conscious of the way I am representing myself and paranoid that I am misrepresenting the me I want people to see. The possibilities allotted to an artist to fashion an image, overwhelms me and causes me to experience the bitter form of anxiety. A lot of people believe that anxiety ensues when there is a lack of control, however from my experience I am most anxious when there is too many variables left to me to control. My project gives viewers a

peek into how my brain functions, and how I view myself through a series of self-portraits paintings projected onto the portraits themselves.

It's hard to describe what my disorder feels like. A doctor explained to me that while most people have anxiety, and that it's a normal response to help us engage in 'fight or flight', some people suffer from excess anxiety that causes harm, and prevents them from living a 'normal' life. Whereas a 'normal' amount of anxiety propels most people forward to complete tasks, live up to responsibilities, etc., my experience with anxiety is immobilizing. It interferes with my artistic practice, and daily life and paralyzes my body with racing thoughts. I am very overwhelmed by the possibilities in every interest or sector in life. This project aims to tap into an experience that most people are aware of—how they are portrayed— to help them see what is like for someone who experiences constant anxiety. The combination between 2D and 4D media, paint and projection, showcase and play this relationship between reality and distortion.

Mission

During the duration of this project and my senior year, I served on a Mental Health Task Force at the University of Michigan. The Central Student Government's Mental Health Taskforce was commissioned last fall to



Mental Health Task Force Report Cover. Created by the Mental Health Task Force.

analyze data from three campus-wide surveys sent out last October. These surveys measured student and faculty opinion on mental health classroom climate and campus resources. Through our findings we hope to provide concrete recommendations to the Office of Student Life and the Provost on mental health policy, initiatives, and/or programs based on data from the surveys. One of which, I am proud to say my recommendation to bring Wellness Zones to North Campus have been approved and funded. The data was influential to my projects purpose. 43% percent of campus admits to having anxiety that interferes with their ability to complete their work. As I was analyzing these responses, I couldn't help but become frustrated that something that is so common and relatable to many is so stigmatized.

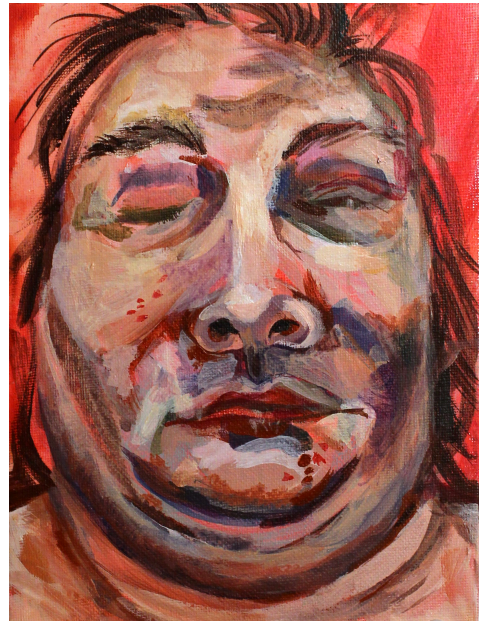
In addition to being cathartic, this project is significant because it aims to help those unaffected by anxiety understand the intricacies of a mind suffering from a mental health disorder. It aims to give agency to sufferers of anxiety, as well as create an understanding for others who experience trouble with self worth, and integrity in one's identity.

Methodology

Every studio day, I created self-portrait painting using watercolor or acrylic paint by looking into a mirror I had in my studio. I dropped the mirror I was using and it broke at one point, but I still used the same mirror. It was important to me in a series that I knew would have many variables, that I kept some things consistent.

These artworks took varying lengths of time— from 10 minutes up to 3 hours.

This is how I plan out my ideas and research for the larger canvas. An integral part of my process is documenting my work as I go. This helps me ensure that I am adding to the piece and not detracting from it. Here are some examples:



Once I got bored, sick, or in the rare occasion liked the portrait, I would stop. The next day, I would create another. These portraits allowed my indecisiveness to shine. The series is eclectic and nonlinear.

It was during this time that I also began to film myself painting myself. I liked the possibility for a double self- portrait.

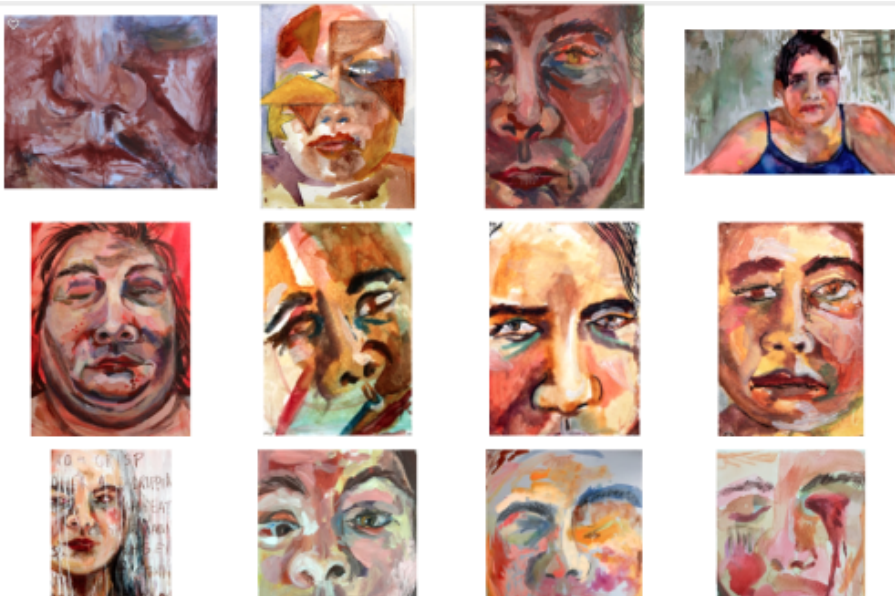


Abigail Zrike, Screen Shot from Time Lapse Video, 2016.



Abigail Zrike, Screen Shots from Time Lapse Video, 2016.

Upon my mid- year review I discovered that the documentation of these self-portraits, especially projected large, were more successful than the physical portraits themselves. This is when I started to think about the ability to utilize projection to add to the elements of layering. I purchased a camera thanks to a grant from Arts at Michigan, and began to rent out the photo studio to take high quality photographs of the self-portraits.



Abigail Zrike, Photographic Process of Self Portraits.



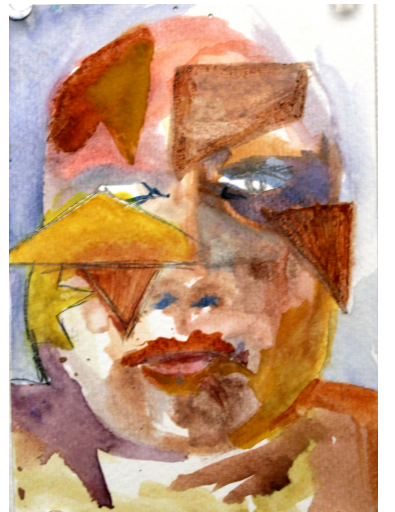
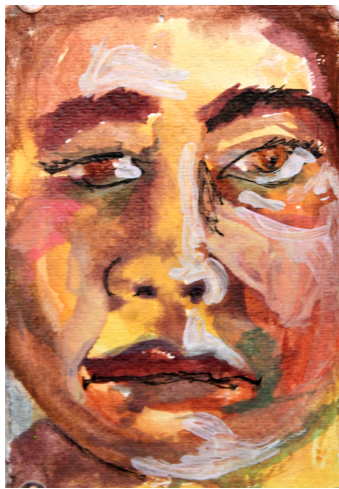
Abigail Zrike, Photographic Process of Self Portraits, Utilizing zooming and cropping to create many out of one.

Creative Work:

Images from the Self Portrait Series:



Abigail Zrike, Image of studio.



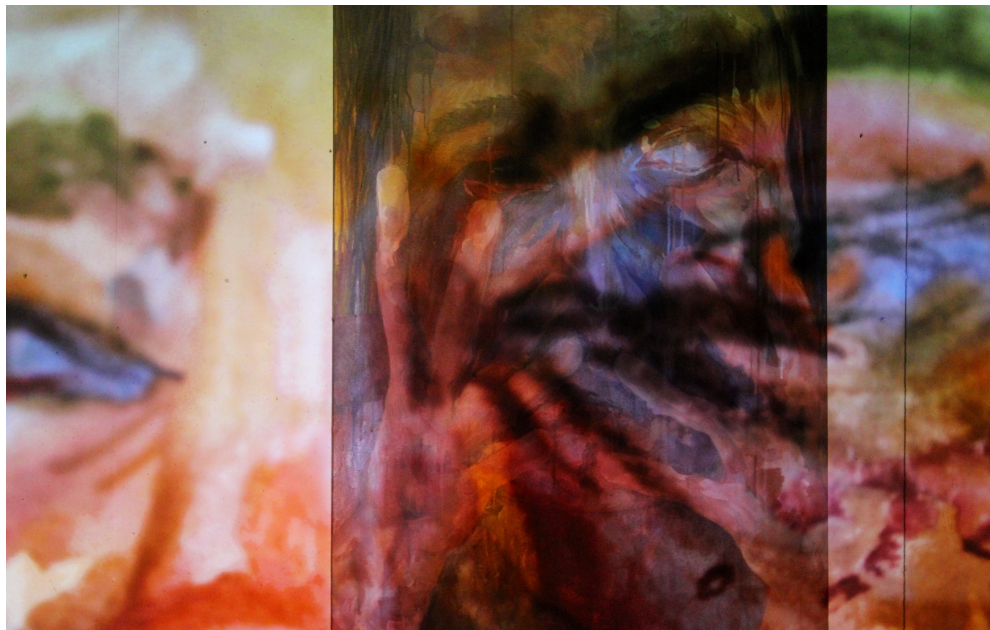
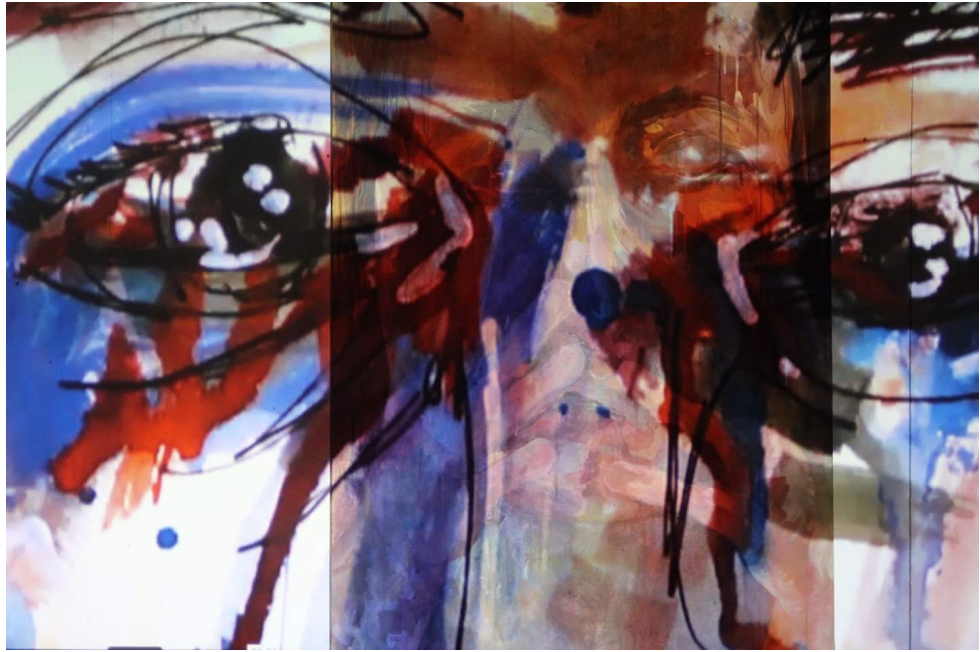
After I had documented the portraits, I started to experiment with layering the portraits on top of each other using projection. The pace at which they flashed through helped give viewers a sense of unrest. The layering of the self-portraits helped describe what I had been feeling— and indecisiveness to commit to one representation. The flooding of varied representations, some too ugly, some too pretty, some too skinny, some too fat, some too bright, and some even violent.



Abigail Zrike, Series of Self- Portraits Projected onto my Senior Graduation Portrait, 2017.

Projection Stills:





Creative Work Continued: Destroying my Own Work—Introducing the Video Component

Despite the projection imagery being a success, I still felt there was an element missing to my project. I let this sit for weeks, staying up at night wondering how I could get across the element of anxiety without being literal or cheesy.

I recalled my frustration during this semester long process to sooth my qualms about self-representation. I wanted this to be apparent in the work, and for the viewers to understand the journey of self-discovery I had been through— the ups *and* downs. I recalled one self-portrait painting that I had gotten frustrated with, and attempted to destroy in embarrassment. This was not the first time I had reveled in destroying something I spent time creating. I thought about this, and the catharsis the destruction has brought me in the past.

This lead to my decision to rip up all physical copies of my portraits and display them in the gallery in front of the projection on a podium as trash.

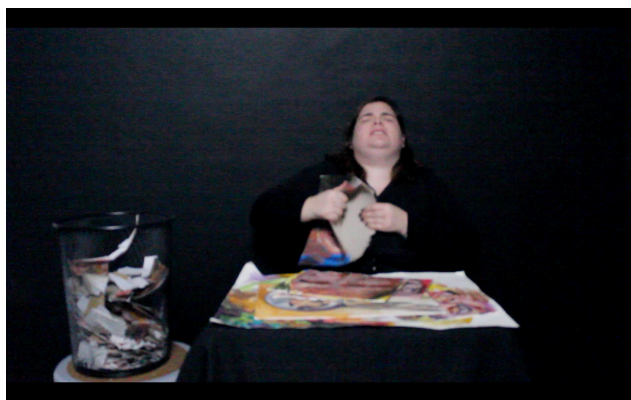


Abigail Zrike, Image of attempt at destruction, 2017.

Here is my blog entry from that day of realization.

“The more and more I think about the space and displaying my paintings ripped up as a sculptural piece next to the projection is warming on to me. I really can envision this and I think it adds another layer to the work. Something I didn’t even think about until this morning is the possibility to film this process of me ripping them up. I don’t think it would be something I would show, but I think it could be really useful and maybe a separate piece that is not in this show. “

As I was laboring over and ripping up my work, everything started to settle in my stomach. Below are stills from the documentation of destroying the work. I experienced a whirlwind of emotions that day that I sat in front of the camera and ripped up all of my self-portraits. It felt so good.



Abigail Zrike, Stills from “Destroy” 2017.

An excerpt from the same interview between David Sylvester and Francis Bacon:

“Sylvester: When you were talking earlier about this head you were doing the other day, you said you tried to take it further and lost it. Is this often the reason for you destroying your paintings? That’s to say, do you tend to destroy paintings early on or do you tend to destroy them precisely when they’ve been and you’re trying to make them better?”

Bacon: I think I tend to destroy the better paintings, or those have been better to a certain extent. I try and take them further and they lose everything. I think that I would say that I tend to destroy all the better paintings”

Sylvester: If people didn’t come and take them away from you, nothing would ever leave the studio: you’d go on until you’d destroyed them all.

Bacon: I think so, yes.”



Conclusion

The work I did this year was physically, artistically, and emotionally liberating. I know I will continue to create self-portraits because I change every single day. If I were to attempt to recreate this project in 20 years, I will arrive at new information, and an entirely different project.

My Art history classes this year were both very influential of this research. “Self in the Self Portrait” taught by Professor Thomas Willette and “Realism in Modern Art” taught by Professor Alexander Potts both opened my mind and pulled me into the world and rich history of self-portraiture. It is a topic I am interested in delving further into, and I am constantly questioning the importance of the identity to the artist when I look at any artwork.

I am interested in continuing to learn about self-portraiture and the relationship between the artist and their artwork. I am also excited to use this work in continuing to research and advocate for mental health resources and to help end the stigma against mental illness. This work aided my desire to be an educator, it helped improve my artistic voice, and it allowed me to become better friends with my anxiety.

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