

INTEGRATIVE PROJECT REFLECTION

JOSIE BURCK

To Preface

I have treated this reflection as a zine-style portrayal of this IP project and all of the stages of research and iterations that have gone into it. This way it stands as a physical artifact that displays all of the hard work and dedication to the project.

First I will talk about the research preceding the creation of the characters. I find that the research is ongoing, as there is still much to learn around issues of gender and identity which are issues I believe my work will always be in conversation with. Next I will talk about the iterative process through a series of images and small explanations. Then I will reflect on my relationship to each character I've created through a combination of the final images and personal narrative writing. I am treating this section as the reflection for this project, as I am more deeply assessing each character and how it relates to me. This writing is also largely made up of revelations I've had as a result of "What If?". Lastly I will reflect on how this project has influenced my plans for the future.



Artist Statement

My name is Josie burck, and "What If?" is my Integrative Project at the University of Michigan School of Art and Design. It is self-portraiture that explores my childhood obsessions with specific celebrities like Uma Thurman in Pulp Fiction, Youtube personalities like Tana Mongeau and Trisha Paytas, and icons like Jennifer Coolidge and Pamela Anderson. They were role models of sorts in terms of their agency and sex appeal, which both seemed to be qualities that were tightly linked.

Like many young women, I was modeling my gender presentation in conversation with these images, and more specifically began imagining myself as them. My childhood was filled with hours and hours of daydreams each day in which I imagined myself to be like these women, living their lives. Perhaps if I looked like them I would find myself leading a completely different life and I would be able to escape the dullness of high school and beyond. As I worked on "What If?" I realized that the behaviors I indulged in throughout my childhood were Maladaptive Daydreams, an under researched psychological disorder that is increasingly talked about from online forums to therapy sessions. Although Maladaptive Daydreaming is not the main topic of this project, it is partly where each of the characters in this project have bloomed from.

In this work I taught myself to use prosthetics and makeup to evoke a completely different character than my own, inspired by the work of artists like Cindy Sherman, Nadia Lee Cohen, Marilyn Minter, and Daniela Rossell. I hoped to not simply critique celebrity culture and my obsessions with glamour and beauty, but to imagine a more complicated relationship that includes critique and also play. I believe that there is an oddness around the femme experience and our interactions with the media, but there is also pleasure in looking and imagining. In this way the characters look both flawed and distorted, but gaze at us full of confidence, refusing to be dismissed as abject.

1

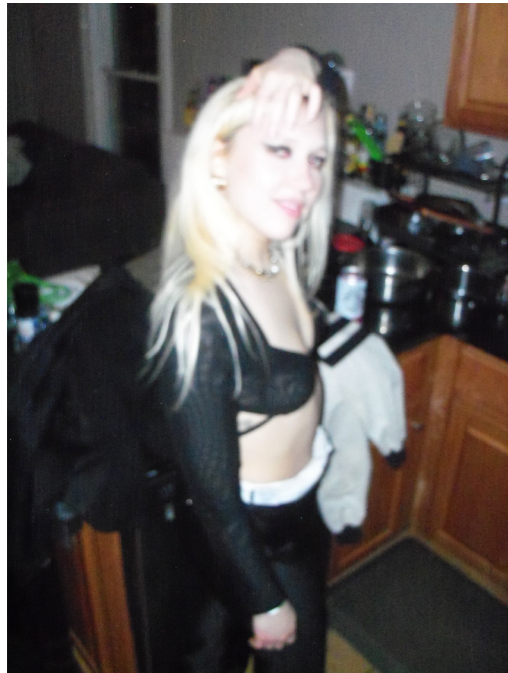
CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCH



"It's almost like my alter ego - my other me. I can never tell. It's like there are two me's. And I can't decipher whether what I think about myself or others is true, or made up in my head." - My journal, Dec. 23, 2017

Me



This project, first and foremost, is a reflection on my childhood and how it felt to be heavily influenced by the media as a young woman. These reflections and experiences throughout my life have presented me with the attitude that I take on this project: both critique and play. While I could go back and judge every daydream I had or celebrity I was obsessed with, instead I choose to play with the consequences through the exploration of gender presentation.

In a way I've been cultivating all of the tools and research I've needed for this project since I was born. Even though the characters in "What If?" have felt performative and uncanny, it still feels similar to the performance that is gender, which is something we enact every day. In this way my artwork is so heavily integrated into my life, and if it wasn't I don't think I would enjoy my art at all.

One large aspect of "What If?" has consisted of assessing artifacts from my childhood, and how growing up in rural Michigan has influenced my view of pop culture. While some of these artifacts can be viewed physically in the form of old photographs, drawings, or journal entries, a lot of them live within my mind as memory artifacts that I've spent hours obsessing over as a means for inspiration.



Nadia Lee Cohen

Nadia Lee Cohen's "Hello My Name Is..." project depicts a series of characters that Cohen has transformed herself into. Each character is a complete transformation, with little of Cohen's actual features recognizable. Each character is photographed in a studio, with a very simple background to keep the focus on each look. Photographed also is a starter pack for each character (such as what you might find in each of their purses or pockets, on them at all times). Cohen transforms herself through prosthetics and makeup, costuming, and props.

This project is of specific interest to me because it shows how character work can be depicted through self portraiture. When I first viewed this it gave me confidence that prosthetics, makeup fashion styling, and props can be forms of artistic expression, especially when talking about beauty standards and social pressures on femme people.





Cindy Sherman, "Untitled #466"

Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman was the first artist who I really began looking at when I started self portraiture. Cindy Sherman's photograph Untitled #93 has encapsulated a lot of the goals for the visuals in my IP project's photo series. The lighting, bright like the sun, hits Sherman's dripping face post-sweat. I loved the cinematic essence that this photograph gave off, and although a pretty simple image set-wise and props-wise, it tells a world of stories. This effectiveness is definitely something I strive for in my photographs.

Cindy Sherman, "Untitled #93"

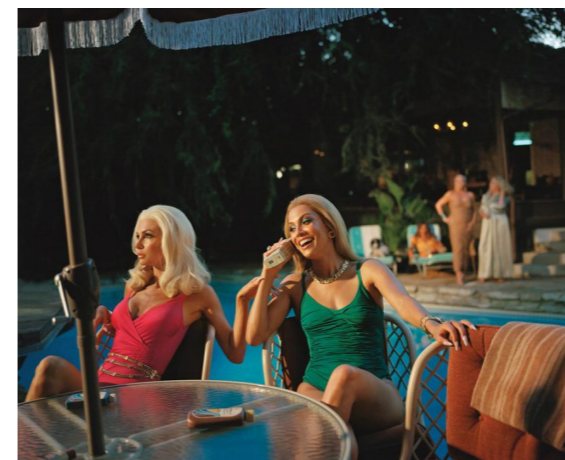
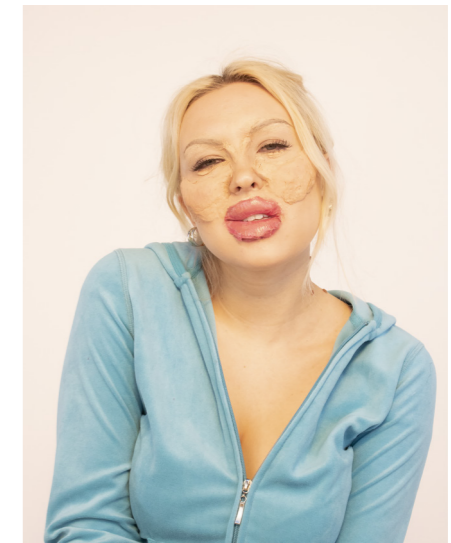


In Comparison

While Nadia Lee Cohen seems to have a good deal of admiration for her characters, Sherman seems to actively critique hers. Through looking at both of these artists I realized I wanted to inhabit the space between the two: both critique as well as admiration. From this sprouted from the message I want to spread through "What If?": that we should realize the oddities of the feminine experience, as well as reclaim femininity and glamour to regain authority over our own bodies as places for self expression and change.



Cindy Sherman, "Untitled #359"



Nadia Lee Cohen, Untitled



"Cosmetic surgery is a performative enactment of the malleability of the body. It girls the flesh, asserting that girlhood is less a state of being than a state of becoming, a way to assert and maintain the plasticity of an image and, by extension, a self."

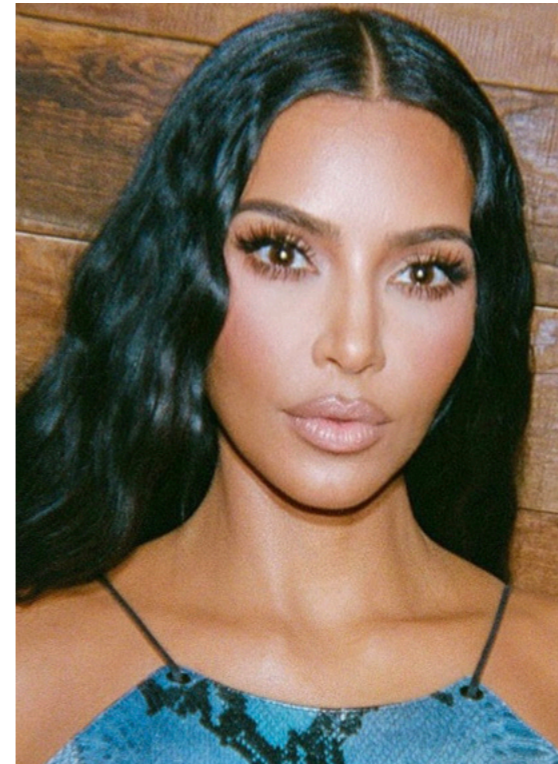
"Girlhood and the Plastic Image" by Heather Warren-Crow

Heather Warren-Crow talks about how young girls are expected to be malleable at their core, always expected to change or be changed. She describes this by quaintly arguing that "Girlishness is thus pursuance of a mobile and forever modifiable body." (p. 12-13). This changeability can be closely compared to a jpeg -- sometimes even our girlhood perseveres through programs like Photoshop and other image-changing programs. These changes are also closely related to plastic surgery, "Cosmetic surgery is a performative enactment of the malleability of the body. It girls the flesh, asserting that girlhood is less a state of being than a state of becoming, a way to assert and maintain the plasticity of an image and, by extension, a self." (Warren-Crow, p. 12). The fantasies from my childhood that I've based my character (and each photoshoot) off of were performances and enactments of the belief that I should change, and that this change would be more beautiful, and more digestible to others.



Celebrity Instagrams

When I began planning the visuals around the characters, I needed to create personalities for each of them. How do they present themselves to the world? Do they use social media? How would they interact with social media? In order to prepare for the creation of each character, I studied celebrity Instagram accounts. I paid close attention to each celebrity's poses, where their posts took place, what they were trying to sell, what they were wearing, eating or drinking, and what their makeup and hair looked like.





Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Consciousness and Cognition

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/concog



"Development and Validation of the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS)"

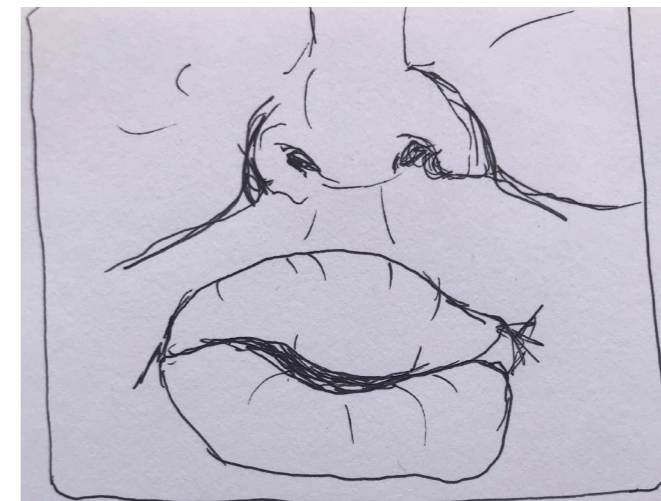
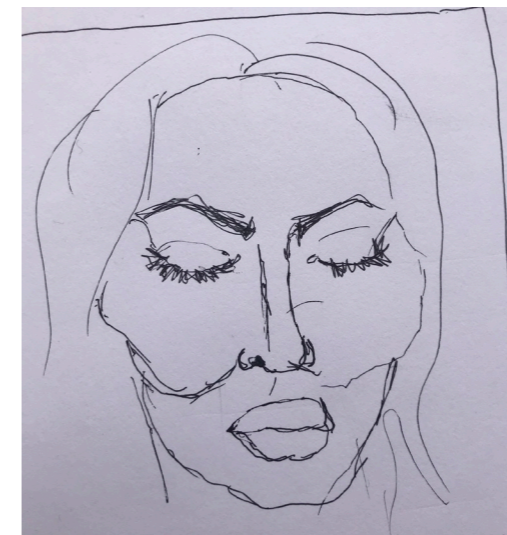
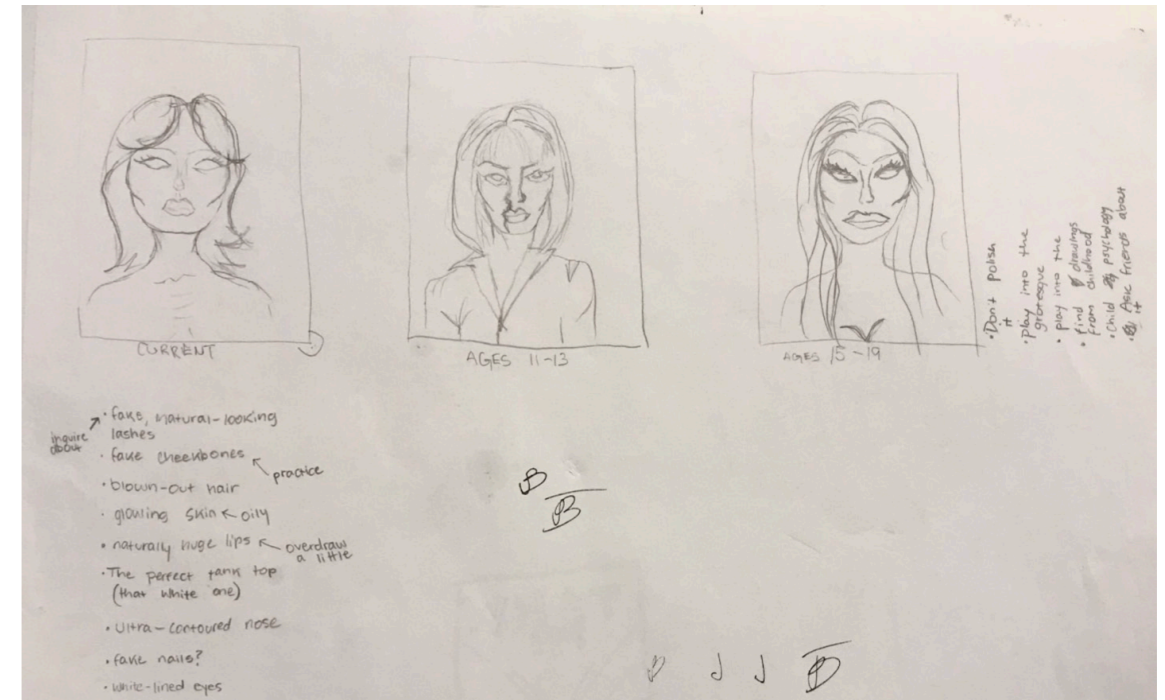
"Development and validation of the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS)" by Eli Somer, Jonathon Lehrfeld, Jayne Bigelson, and Daniela S. Jopp talks about Maladaptive Daydreaming within the larger context of daydreaming as a normal function of everyday life. The study conducted in this paper is developed to test the validity of the MDS and whether the questions and sections within it are up-to-date and correct. The MDS was developed to determine whether someone is a Maladaptive Daydreamer, as there is limited information on the diagnosis of MD. This scale was developed by Eli Somer, a psychologist based in Israel who coined the term Maladaptive Daydreaming in 2002. Subjects for this specific study were found through online forums, flyers, word of mouth, and were all self-diagnosed as MDers. Overall the study suggested that MD is heavily associated with OCD, dissociative behaviors, and attention deficit disorders, and less with psychotic disorders.

Maladaptive Daydreaming, and this paper in particular, informs my work because the obsessions I talk about in my self-portraiture and the creation of the characters for "What If?" were informed by the Maladaptive Daydreams I consistently partook in throughout my childhood. Learning about how MD is associated with obsessive disorders is interesting in comparison to my own experience because I would consider my relationship to celebrity culture and the media an obsession. I plan for my future work to be heavily informed by not only my own experience with MD, but also the experience of other MDers.

ITERATIVE PROCESS

Iterative Sketches

Here are a few sketches that I drew throughout the iterations of this project as a way to plan the looks I would create on the days of each shoot.



Trial and Error

This iteration was my first attempt at creating a character with prosthetics, makeup, and clothing. I used scar wax to build the cheekbones, a waxy material often used to create scars and abnormal shapes in special effects makeup. I chose clothing that evoked the type of extremeness I was aiming for with the creation of the characters. I took the photographs myself in the photo/video studio within Stamps. While these photographs were successful, I was aiming for something more nuanced in the way of posing, costuming, and set pieces. I wanted each of these elements to more precisely evoke the specific character's personalities.



Iteration One: Brenda

This iteration consisted of more planning in order to really build Brenda's personality as well as physical appearance. For this iteration I gave her fake boobs, her signature red acrylic nails, the drawn-on brows, and the curled hair.

These elements ended up in the final iterations of her as well, just in slightly edited ways. Going forward from this first iteration I wanted to age her. I imagined her to be an older woman, having gone through a divorce and now living on her own. This shoot was also when I developed a yellow/peachy tone for the whole project through lighting.



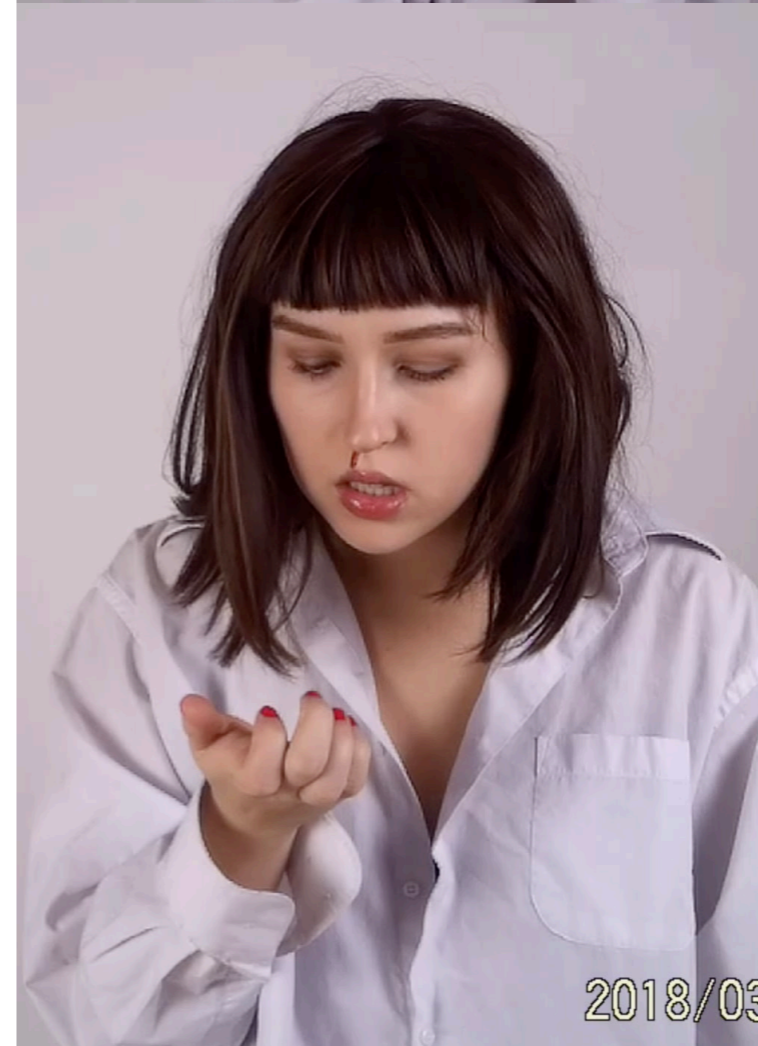
Iteration Two: Brenda

This particular shoot showed progression in the making of the sets. I thought that the dinner table and drink might age her, as well as the slightly out-dated evening dress that matched her high heels almost too well. The posing in this shoot was also much more thought-out, as I wrote about Brenda's personality before and studied how I might embody her through my own body. Still, I wasn't happy with the clunkiness of the table, the bowl, and the drink glass. I believed she needed more refined surroundings. I was still taking the photographs myself, as I had found a way to connect my phone to the camera through wifi. This allowed me to focus the camera as well as take the photograph from tens of feet away.



Iteration one: Mia

This shoot was much different than the others as I was having soul-crushing issues around photographing myself. Images were coming out unfocused and blurry, and the lighting was unsatisfactory. So for this shoot, because I was desperate to get a first iteration of Mia out, I videotaped myself as her and took film stills after. While this option didn't fix the blurriness, it was a good start for Mia as a character overall. This iteration of Mia was almost a direct model after Mia from Pulp Fiction (who this Mia is based on). From the bloody nose, the blunt bob with bangs, the white button-up, to the darkly painted nails. Through this shoot I realized that Mia innately had a darkness about her (and not just because she's brunette). I wanted her to embody that female character who has extreme agency over men, an attitude, a "fuck-it" mentality, a darker side, and who is always subsequently written by a man. While these kinds of female characters are often seen as an opposite to the Pamela Anderson's and blonde sex symbols of the world, they lack much complexity beyond the fact that a man who likes to be bossed around wrote them.



Iteration Two: Mia

I knew from the beginning of this shoot that it wasn't my favorite to say the least. I think it was the unsatisfactory styling process, as I sprayed root cover-up on my whole head in an attempt to avoid wearing a wig. I used three cans of it, and it got all over me. I also felt as if my outfit wasn't really fitting the character. She looked like a mix between a mob boss and a lesbian. Moving forward, I realized that Mia needed to be feminized a bit, and she needed an outfit change. Writing about her also helped -- I realized she was the type of girl to work at a bodega while secretly being a hacker on the side. I looked at actors like Angelina Jolie in 'Hackers' and Megan Fox in 'Jennifer's Body'. I was also inspired by the unnamed main character in Otessa Moshfegh's book 'My Year of Rest and Relaxation' who embodied that heroin chic aesthetic, indulging in drugs and vices, being mean to those around her, and living for herself. Through some processes of writing about Mia and who she might be if existing in real life, I knew that she shouldn't wear slacks and a white button-down. Because I disliked this shoot so much I could only find two photographs from it.



Iteration Three: Mia

I used the same set that I'd used for Amber (cite page here) as I was under the impression I'd use the same set for each character. This was right before spring break, and I wanted to spit out a final iteration of Mia without really trying. While this does not end up being the final iteration of her, I was able to really land down her look for this shoot, which carries over to the final iteration almost exactly. I just felt as though the set around her didn't really fit her character.





Iteration One: Amber

This was the third shoot I did OVERALL, and it was an attempt at working with a photographer and a student makeup artist. So my role in this shoot was to direct everything as well as embody the character in front of the camera. I don't think this shoot was successful (for many reasons) because it looked as if Amber felt bad for herself, which was the opposite of how I wanted to portray each character. I wanted each character's photographs to act as a once-and-a-lifetime spotlight on their lives, giving them ample room to get excited and be truly themselves. Through this shoot I also realized that it made more sense for me to be photographer because these characters inhabit my own mind, and I am acting as the medium between their existence in a daydream and their existence in a physical photograph.



3



CHAPTER THREE
THE CHARACTERS

MIA

Embodying Mia was easy because she really feels like part of me. She almost acts as my alter ego, my confidante. I've found that she is so deeply rooted in me through a style of therapy called Internal Family Systems therapy. This model of therapy believes that "each individual possesses a variety of sub-personalities or 'parts,' and attempts to get to know each of these parts better to achieve healing." (GoodTherapy, 2018). So while I am assessing these "parts" of myself with my therapist, I also take these findings and apply them to my creative life (and ultimately the understanding of Mia).

Mia has many opinions about how I should conduct my life. When I overeat she tells me to restrict, when I have social plans with friends she tells me how much to drink, when I have been spending too much money she tells me to stop buying food, when I am drunk she tells me to light up a cigarette, when I am tired she tells me to nap all day and skip all responsibilities. She often ascribes to the "fuck it" mentality, where all reason can be thrown out the window. During highschool I heavily attribute my bouts of affinity for molly to her, as well as my heavy stages of stealing alcohol, makeup and clothing. When reason goes out the door, it's almost like there's only room for FUN! When I converse with her about my ideal body, instead of suggesting to me that I work out and eat healthily, she suggests that I don't eat and smoke cigarettes. So although her ideas are largely unhealthy, with a wave of her hand she justifies them for their European charm and talks about how romantic my life would be if I only listened to her.

Usually the different parts of ourselves arise when something traumatic or memorable happens, and usually they arise to protect us and help us flourish as we grow up. For Mia, I can trace her back to my early exposure to Rated R movies, specifically Pulp Fiction by Quentin Tarantino. The character she is based on in Pulp Fiction is also named Mia, played by the actress Uma Thurman. Mia from Pulp Fiction is a character who, while seemingly holed away within the rapture of a

marriage that doesn't seem fulfilling, still possesses sexiness and adventure that is admirable and magnetic to those around her (especially to men). To this female character, misery is an accessory. I also see this style of female character and existence in the trendiness of 'Heroin Chic', a 90s style mostly popularized by models. I think we also had a resurgence of this style in Tumblr in the early 2000s, where unhealthy and worrisome skinniness was accessorized and extremely sought-after, bringing forth a surge of eating disorders mainly in young women.

Characters like Mia from Pulp Fiction are hard for young women to pine after because it's difficult to tell whether they actually can exist in real life or if they just live within the minds of the men who write them for the screen. It doesn't help that Quentin Tarantino mistreated Uma Thurman repeatedly, and continued working with Harvey Weinstein (who sexually assaulted Thurman) on the Kill Bill series in which Uma Thurman was abused and used on and off set. As a child who already had an extreme affinity for fantasy and escape from reality, it made sense why I'd decided that becoming like Mia was doable as a 10-year old. It's confusing thinking about these female characters and the differences between the actual existence of women in real life. I've tried to find a clear description for this experience, the viewing of female characters in the media and the wishing and hoping that I was exactly like them. But mostly I just end up flustered and unable to express my feelings around the experience. But I think that's exactly where this project has grown out of.









BRENDA

However much I claim to know why I've created these characters, Brenda continues to be the biggest mystery of them all. I can, however, point towards several celebrities and stereotypes in which she is based on: Pamela Anderson, Jennifer Coolidge, many of the Real Housewives, and female characters from The Sopranos. After some thought on Brenda's conception, the biggest breakthrough I had was that she represents one of the largest curiosities of all throughout my childhood: women my mother disliked.

My parents raised my siblings and I on a small farm in Southwest Michigan, a fairytale delight for a child to grow up surrounded by. I had chickens, dogs, cats, fresh food, and acres and acres of yard and gardens and land to play on. I was a stone's throw away from Lake Michigan and the wonderful festivities that the area provided. Yet, it was as if I was born to be in opposition of all of those things. I seriously can't tell you why I hated all of the beautiful things I was handed back then. When I was 6 or 7 years old I heard 'Family Affair' by Mary J. Blige on my Dad's ipod and thought to myself 'so this is what I've been missing out on?' - the grass truly is always greener on the other side. My parents raised us homeschooled for much of my life, and I didn't have much access to a phone or a computer until I was around 11. I'd barely seen that many images in the media and I already knew where I wanted to be: anywhere but where I grew up. I hated going on hikes (although now I think that was in part due to my asthma), I hated learning about the environment, and I hated being in the middle of nowhere. I felt like I was missing out on everything that a city could provide me with. Many times when we went on vacation we would stay within the wilderness, surrounded by the beautiful outdoors, yet all I wanted to do was shop and lay on the beach. I wanted to sip on a Starbucks drink in a Range Rover by the ocean with a string bikini on, a pair of fake boobs, and a tan. I wanted everything my mother didn't want.

My mother, and honestly many women my mom's age, simply frowned upon these kinds of women. For instance, if a friend's mom looked or acted in this way my mom would've shown disapproval, or questioned me about them. While almost everyone had stigma around plastic surgery - that wasn't really what she disliked. It was that she found them to be trashy. Yet when I saw these kinds of women in public, I wanted to be around them. I wanted to understand why they did what they did, and how they held so much power. I believe that maybe Brenda is one of those women. The act of embodying her was lethargic and extremely familiar in a comforting way.







ANM BEER

Highschool. Oh what highschool can tell us about ourselves. It always took me so long to figure things out socially, especially in public school. I'd transitioned from homeschooling to regular school in 8th grade, and it took me almost two years to realize how to find the right people (even if they weren't always the best people for me). Actually, 'making wrong decisions' would be just the phrase to categorize my high school experience. When I transferred from the first high school to the second my sophomore year (my mother thought it was because the second high school had more art classes, but I did it because I had no good friends at the first) I blasted myself into a group of friends who, for better or for worse, opened up my eyes. Wide. One way in which they did this was by showing me the people they watched on Youtube – truly, it was that simple. But what's so interesting about Youtube personalities is that they usually also have extreme physical attributes to go along with their influential personalities. Tana Mongeau and Korinna Kopf were a couple examples of women Youtubers who I watched around this time. They were examples of how tightly linked physical appearance and fun experiences for women and femme people seemed to be, or at least how they were portrayed in the media.

It always took me so long to figure things out socially in school. This really became abundantly clear when I transitioned from homeschool to public school in eighth grade, and then again when I transferred from my first high school to my second sophomore year. My mother thought I transferred because the second high school had more art classes, but it was really because I had no good friends at the first. The second highschool was called Clay High School, and it was the breeding ground for my determination to be popular and well-liked, which would be a complete turnaround for me. I threw myself into a group of friends who were so, so different from me, but who ultimately helped me grow out of the social and personal rut I'd found myself in ever since entering public school. They opened up my eyes. Wide.

These new friends of mine not only showed me how to drink, party, and flirt with boys, but they also showed me the Youtubers they watched. Two of the most notable were Tana Mongeau and Korinna Kopf, women influencers who dominated areas of social media for a good chunk of the mid-2000s.

Korinna Kopf was a member of the Vlog Squad, a group I deeply regret watching and admiring as a child. Their videos were 4-5 minutes long and jam packed with pranks, extreme stunts, celebrities, and parties. Korinna was one of the few women members of the group, and was basically an object of desire for all of the male members because of her looks (large boobs, big lips, long blonde hair, skinny).

Tana Mongeau began her Youtube career as a story time influencer in which she would sit in front of the camera and tell detailed stories about her wild experiences. Her mannerisms were a big part of her allure, from her laugh that was awe-inspiringly annoying, her raspy voice, and her exaggerated hand movements (always adorned with acrylic nails of some kind).

I straightened my hair everyday, plucked my eyebrows and drew them on, put pounds of foundation on my face, wore athleisure wear, fake nails, and Uggs because of these women. I assimilated. And while I do agree with my mother when she said I had no style during these years of my life, I can also say that these were formative years in the formulation of my ability to recreate and copy others. Or, that's at least what I tell myself.









Looking Forward

“What If?” was the first project in which I realized the combination of all of my interests into one thing. I have realized that my main canvas is meant to be my body, as I’ve always been enraptured by stepping in front of the camera, any camera. My biggest challenge while navigating self portraiture was figuring out that being the focal point of art didn’t actually make me self-obsessed. I’d always felt as though taking selfies or posting pictures of myself portrayed me as egotistical. Really I think I just needed to embrace this and experiment with the possibilities that it could provide. I now know that my future work will consist of some kind of work with my body, specifically self portraiture or acting. Based on the feedback I’ve gotten on this project and after being one of four finalists for The Big Idea Award, I now know that the best I can do is to continue working on my projects, whatever version of my current work that is. I plan to move to a large city, New York City, Chicago, or LA in Fall 2022. I will be applying for grants and awards to fund these projects and hopefully be able to rent out a studio wherever I inevitably move. The goal is to have an exhibition for future work within the next two years. Hopefully I will be able to support myself with a job and also continue with my creative practice.