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The exploration of self construction through art

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Roger Williams University May 2016

Abstract

This thesis investigates the different outlets of starting a conversation with people about our contemporary dilemmas, while exploring influences from historical and modern views. I do this by elaborating on the importance of discourse in making art and how these conversations can impact and widen our lives and understandings. Within these discourses, topics surrounding controversial issues such as gender disparities, social acceptability, race inequality and body images are brought up. My main arguments explore the importance of self-construction and the limitations and influences that the outside world might bring forth, the impact and results of speaking out and how it can help in the progression of our society, the fabrication of oneself and what that includes, and lastly how to effectively challenge mainstream ideas and beliefs. In all, I explain how these different sectors of my life have strengthened the content of my work and what it means to be able to educate people and myself throughout.

Prior to attending Roger Williams, I was not exposed to art or what it meant to make art. Taking an art class at the end of my senior year in High School, I became interested in making art, mainly drawings of celebrities (See example figure 1). Starting undergraduate I was still deciding on a focus of study and did not expect to become a Visual Arts major. Through this major I started to question what constituted good or bad art and what is appropriate to say in my work. A statement made by one of my favorite artists is "You can declare yourself an artist and

then figure out how to be an artist." Although I was not confident and didn't fully understand what it meant to be an artist, I knew that art was something that I cared about. Over time I have gained understanding that as an artist my goal is to start a conversation, a dialogue amongst people. Prioritizing discourse over other aspects of art making, I want these conversations to have an impact and widening on our daily lives and interactions.



Figure 1: Natalie Portman 2012

In trying to understand my position on this earth and my views on several different topics, I turn to art. In an interview Kara Walker states "I don't know myself and they don't know me either." I think it only makes sense to be faced with the challenge of understanding oneself and views on the world in order to move forward as a person in general. I was born in Lagos Nigeria, and moved to New York at the age of nine. My family dynamic is a little different from

¹ YouTube, (2015). Kara Walker at the MAC: 24 Jan - 27 Apr 2014. [online]

² Ibid

the typical American household because I come from a traditional polygamist family. Males and females had their specific roles and if one were to disturb this balance, there was a problem. Starting from a young age, I felt as though I was forced to play the stereotypical woman role just because it has always been done that way. I was exposed to being asked not to interject and state my opinions, to only be seen and not heard, and above all, to believe that no matter where I am in life, I can never stand as high as a man. Growing up with these limitations and expectations, in addition to the unstable dynamic of my family has made me grow to have strong responses to things that I do not take to be acceptable.

My lack of understanding on polygamy, my rebellious outlook on traditional Nigerian gender roles, and my years of not being able to speak my mind has fueled my relationship with art making and exploration. Exploring these aspects of my life through art has and will continue to shed light and expand my knowledge and opinions on things that are going on around me, ultimately leading to a greater understanding of self. Other than exploring who I am as a person and all the things that contribute to that, I also hope to help other people answer some of the questions they might have about the content and ideas behind my work. Art for me cannot only be for the artist, it also has to be for the viewers. It would truly be selfish that art should be only for the artist alone. I know that I am not the only person who has these views or strong feelings towards these topics, therefore, in making art I also hope to form a raw and personal connection with people by exchanging ideas and feedback.

The work that I make explores controversial topics that allow for conversations to be held about many of our contemporary dilemmas while keeping in mind influences from historical and modern views. Dilemmas such as gender disparities, social acceptability, race inequalities, body images, and so on. If I neglect to understand the impact that history has made on our

contemporary culture, then I think I neglect to understand my existence. My race alone stems from generations of intense fight, passion and education. As a contemporary artist and a witness, I aim to do my part by voicing my opinion through the work I make. This is what I hoped to do in most of my work; to contribute to the conversation about contemporary art, societal standing, daily challenges, and continuing progress. In doing this, I also look to understand how we can increase our contemporary voice without fully abandoning historical influences. In contemporary practice, artists are focusing on social issues through original approaches to performance art, landart, and so on. I believe one of my strengths to be the content of my work: the ability to open conversations normally closed in this environment for example the incarceration of African American men. The personal stories and directness strengthen my projects.

As a student who was recently introduced to the possibilities and vastness of what it means to belong to an art community, I immersed myself in understanding and dedicating my time to everything art; from competitions, to gallery openings and art internships. I started to gain confidence in my work and the conversations I was having with students through my work. Like many other artists, one of my biggest obstacles is not falling victim to the pressures of conformity and its distractions. With so many opinions, ideals, and ideologies thrown at us daily, it is hard to stand strong in our own ideas and values, without susceptibility to change that is meaningful. With that said, I am open to change and development as long as it preserves my core values. How I have avoided this as much as I can is by involving myself in as many leadership roles as possible on campus at Roger Williams. Starting with my freshmen year, I found that I gained interest in learning and educating myself on topics related to diversity. In joining the Multicultural Student Union (MSU), an organization on campus, attending several National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) trainings, and becoming a mentor to underrepresented

students on campus through the Diversity Leadership Program, I was introduced to topics such as racism, classism, sexism, and feminism. In having these conversations, I was able to strengthen my ideals and beliefs, forming a stronger sense of self. These conversations overall have helped form the groundwork for the content in my work. They have also guided me in understanding why they are important to me.

Coming to Roger Williams, the lack of diversity on our campus was very apparent and so was the lack of conversation students were having surrounding these topics. The majority of the student population is white, and unaware of differences around them. I took it upon myself to bring awareness to these topics in order to start a dialogue among my peers. For me, trigger words or subjects that I continuously find myself gravitating towards usually surround people, how we occupy space, and our place on this earth. I not only focus on my personal experiences but on the stories I have heard from others and the assumption I make from my own observations. Some of my trigger words are: Race, Gender, Feminism, Power, Sexual Orientation, Oppression, Stereotypes, Downtrodden, Weakness, Norm, Masks, and Identity. I feel I am part of this town where these words are frequently present and because of that, I am sometimes the only one that can talk about them. I have that privilege in a way. I have an emotional investment in these issues and ideas and therefore most of my projects are about them. How I feel about these words allows me to conjure other connotations around them.

By picking up books about Kara Walker, <u>Colour and Symbolism</u>, <u>Black Feminist</u>

<u>Thought</u>, Picasso, <u>Doppelganger: Images of a Human Being</u> and even the <u>Power of Advertising</u>,

I am able to say that I feel moderately self-assured in my ability to research in order to improve on my ideas and work. I understand that in contemporary art, the main goal is to be able to comment on itself, others, and the world. It must be able to compete with what is already out

there in mass media, or with the history of art itself. When I make art I relay messages to people about social issues, controversial problems in the world, identity crises and more. In saying that, I have found myself gravitating towards contemporary and modern/post modern artist that I see talk about these issues in their work. I started to research artists like Kara Walker, Judith Henry, John Stezker, Marc Quinn, John Heartfield, Ellen Gallagher, Vanessa Beecroft, Louise Bourgeois, George Grosz, Marlene Dumas and famous magazine editors like Andrew Gallimore.

One of the main things that I appreciate about Kara Walker's work is her bold way of exploring identity and power relations in the world. In her work, Narrative of a



Figure 2: Narrative of a Negress 2003. Kara Walker

Negress, She takes a social standing

with her silhouettes, forcing us to pay attention to the ongoing battle between white versus black and strong versus weak (See example figure 2). In her silhouette cut outs she removes something from the whole. She provides us with a dialectic point of view: positive and negative. White usually symbolizes purity and cleanliness while black symbolizes evil and mystery. She uses these two colors mainly in her work to understand and question identity and power relations. The most stereotypical but often dismissed way of indicating race is by the usage of solid color, but Walker is brave enough to do so. Although the placement of these colors changes in her work depending on what she is hoping to convey, the more common colors remain black and white. These colors for Kara Walker have stood in place of a void filled with various

³ Le Clair, Charles, Color In Contemporary Painting (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1991)

suggestions of race, power, and victimization. Simple colors such as black and white have entire meanings behind them that we sometimes overlook.

From her cut out silhouettes to her larger than life size sculpture, I am inspired to be as daring and brave as she is. Along with Kara Walker, other artists like Cindy Sherman have impacted the commitment I have put into my work. Cindy Sherman's work focuses on identity, stereotypes and female roles in society. Her multiple personas and disguises that explore the roles of contemporary identities has been highly influential for me because of its controversy.

An artist that uses a highly challenging approach in her work to explore gender and

sexuality with honesty and that I look to for reference and motivation is Louise Bourgeois.

With her painting, Couple (See example figure 3) and other works, she tried to deal with her response to sexuality and understanding it by making art.⁴ Her subject matter is male or female, pink or blue. In simple terms, her paintings and

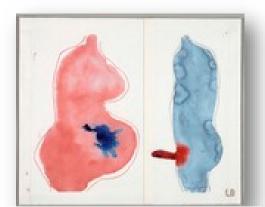


Figure 3: Couple 2009. Louise Bourgeois

work brings attention to the dualism of two people or things coexisting together. In popular culture, we have come to learn about gender through social cues, for example assigned colors.⁵ The gender signifying colors pink and blue have become a way of individualizing the sexes. Louise Bourgeois is aware of this and did just that. In the simplicity and brilliance of her work, she was able to present gender differences through the varying hues of pink and blue. She makes it clear to us the sex of the figures just by color.

⁴ "Louise Bourgeois Biography, Art, And Analysis Of Works". 2016. *The Art Story*.

⁵ Green, K. S. (1995). Blue versus periwinkle: Color identification and gender.

Although I fear conforming to the pressures of the outside, I must admit that I have found myself bending to the ideals of others. In the beginning of my undergraduate study and even sometimes now, I make art that I know people will like, pretty art, Kitsch art. I start to lose focus on my ability to take risks and challenge mainstream ideas and beliefs, resulting in losing myself as an artist. I am sometimes afraid of standing out, and not getting my ideas out in a compelling way. Each time I notice that I am heading down this path, not only do I look to other visual artists for motivation but also musicians and poets. Some of my favorite influences are Lauryn Hill, Jill Scott, Langston Hughes, Staceyann Chin and others. From these influences and my constant attempt to challenge myself and surroundings, I understand that what matters the most, no matter where you are, or what pressing oppositions present themselves, what you are saying in your work and why you are choosing to talk about them is most important. Not the awards or recognitions.

Poetry and music are an important factor in my life and my art. I would consider myself shy and quiet in different aspects of my life. I have always held things back in conversations because I was always afraid of saying the wrong thing. Writing has helped me greatly in expressing my thoughts and feelings in ways that I had not been able to before. Artist Lauryn Hill states in one of her songs that "see fantasy is what people want, but reality is what they need, and I just retired from the fantasy part." When reading her lyrics in addition to other artists, I began to form a connection on the influence music has on our society today and the underlying messages it brings forth. I started to formulate my own thoughts on how I can tie this into my work. If I am holding back in my conversations with people because I am afraid to make mistakes, then why not write them down? My love and admiration for Lauryn Hill comes from

⁶ Hill, Lauryn. 1998. *The Miseducation Of Lauryn Hill*. Sony.

her inspirational approach to empower people to do better and learn. She is constantly rejecting societal notions and provides real life experiences to her audience. She is not afraid to speak her mind and say what she feels.

I have found myself mixing poetry into my artwork, exploring the possibilities and progression I can make from it. In many of my poems, I found that I was addressing the same subjects in my art, but just through a different medium. A poet that I was newly exposed to that has strengthened my ability to shake things up is Staceyann Chin. Not only is she a spoken word poet, she is also a performing artist and a political activist. What I love most about Chin is the energy and bluntness she brings forth through her poetry. She is not afraid to speak her mind and voice her opinions, no matter how provocative or eccentric it might be. One of her poems that I have grown fond of is *If Only Out of Vanity*:

...Most days I don't know what I will be like then but everyday—I know what I want to be now I want to be that voice that makes Guilani so scared he hires two (butch) black bodyguards I want to write the poem that The New York Times cannot print because it might start some kind of black or lesbian or even a white revolution... (50-57)

Dating back as far as the Harlem Renaissance and even further, poetry has always provided deeper levels of conversations to be held. Famous poets like Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Gwendolyn Brooks have used poetry to take a political stance on exploring racial identity, black lives in America, sexism, and so much more. It is important for me to take different approaches in forming my work, switching between mediums and combining others that may seem completely apart.

Art for me is an opening of ethics, beliefs, ideas, perceptions and so much more. It has become a way of understanding an experience, relating a message, and even questioning an

ideal. Considering this, when an artist with clear intention creates deliberately he or she keeps in mind their content, understanding the power and logic behind it. Contemporary art can be defined as art that is able to comment on itself, an audience, or an idea. It allows for others to be present in the painting, as an audience, forming a connection, and or being the subject matter. Contemporary art can also be art that speaks on the process rather than their finished states, having a pungent physicality.

In most of my recent works, I have been playing with the subject of masks. Masks are

cultures, example -from African
culture. African masks have always been a
source of inspiration in art of the past and in
contemporary art. The act of masquerading
and rituality come with the cultural
understanding of masks. They have marked
an expansion of time and stories.

usually referenced as artifacts from different

Nonetheless, in contemporary art, there is a



Figure 4: Tribal African Mask. Unknown

reinvention of masks, displacing them from being only a physical thing, but as a telling of history and society (See example figure 4). Masks for me are a way of tracking traditions, exploring where people come from, understanding of true self, hiding dirty secrets, or even defining who we are. I started with the vague knowledge of Picasso and his relationship to African masks and his inability to acknowledge the influence it had on some of his work, neglecting to appreciate the real source. I wanted to give credit where the credit was due but in my own contemporary way. How the mask was made mattered, where it came from, and the form it takes.

As an artist I believe that I am forced to always please someone in order to succeed. I have to subject myself to the expectations of others, forcing me to adapt and form into a role likable by others. This is another reason as to why I started making and exploring masks. In trying to understand who I am meant to be, who I need to please, or what I am expected to do, I focused on fabricating these different questions through mask making. In starting this conversation I started to think about the dualism of the subject and object. I started to question how much of the self is transferred to the object from the interrogation of the subject. It was about the making of another person, a mask, and how that could be possible. I started by interviewing people, questioning them on who they are, who they are meant to be, who they want to be, how they are seen and so on. The idea for me was very exciting and important but I did not know how to execute it. Do I make a physical mask, draw it out, or paint it directly on top of a face? I concluded that the materiality of the mask relates to the subject matter.

In all the confusion, I turned to researching the art of mask making, what it means to transfer a person into an object, and artist that I thought worked with similar ideas. I recognized where and why making masks was important to me from the start. I acknowledge that it stems from trying to find and understand myself in relation to everyone around me. The hardest part of being an artist is bringing yourself into your artwork, either by commenting on the aspects of



Figure 5: Latex Glove 2014. Judith Henry

who you are or exploring who you are to become. With that said, this is something I have neglected to include in my work, and hope to change. An artist that I look to as a leading example in how to include oneself in artwork is Judith Henry. As an artist, Judith

Henry explores the various roles that people play by setting herself as a protagonist of several strong compositions. Using her own person in her work, she creates staged photography that shows her in a mask (See example figure 5). She explains this to be "a tactic that allows her to investigate the many postures and facades of female identity." In her current work she hides her face with masks. In viewing and reading about her work, I have come to an understanding that in some way, every artist understands the power of masks, contemporary, modern, or postmodern.

While exploring the idea of what it truly means to construct a self, an aspect of this series that I have not presented in the past is the addition of a poetic voice and identifier. In inscribing poems in the masks, my aim is to provide an exploration or background to who the person wearing the mask is. Prior to this exhibition, in my work I was unable to explore and include a

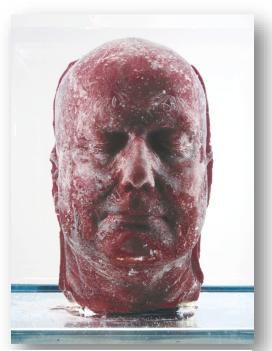


Figure 6: Self 2001. Marc Quinn

distinct identifier, making it hard for people to relate and connect to the images in the way I had hoped. With poetry I believe that I can create a storyline of what these mask represent and the type of people they investigate. I wanted to individualize the images I presented.

In Marc Quinn's work, deliberate and conscious choices allow for viewer understanding. One of his projects that deals with intentionality and meaning, but also self criticism of the artist himself is the series <u>Self.</u> The series thus far

⁷ "Artist Judith Henry". 2016. *Judith Henry*.

contains four casts of the artist head immersed in silicon created from plaster and ten pints of his blood frozen in -18 Celsius temperature (See example figure 6). Recreated every five years, the sculptures not only hold a symbolic function but also a real one. In this work, he comments on dependency and the absence of control through addiction as well as life and the limited aspect of

being and the desire for eternal afterlife. In explaining his reason for such extremity and provocation he comments "It depends on my life to be created – it's made from the substance of me; and so I think of it as the purest form of sculpture - to sculpt your own body, from your own body." Quinn wanted to move away from an average attempt to self-portraits, therefore instead he uses a culturally mediated approach by making use of his blood as a



Figure 7: Masked Baes 2014

medium. In order to allude to something as a self portrait, the artist wanted to make sure it came from the real self and not just an extensive removed representation of self.

Throughout my time as an undergraduate, I have also completed several works and projects that surround my main triggers; subjects that I find myself gravitating towards; For example Masked Baes . With this project, another student and I explored the outlet that social media serves to individuals (See example figure 7). In this collaborative work, we wanted to make clear of the questions about every person becoming one entity contributing to the use of social media. This was done by creating a manufactured story line and playing a part in social media clichés. The inspiration for this work came from a project that a studio mate made where

⁹ Self, Will. 2016. "Bring Me The Head Of Marc Quinn!"

⁸ "Ephemeral Works (On Life Support)". 2016.

he constructed a mask out of cardboard boxes. It was another point of view, a fresh and new perspective on art, and life. Seeing this new conversation about the work he had made, it helped me shed light on another way to approach some of the same ideas.

In my Mixed Media class we had the opportunity to do an installation piece that could possibly include the entire Roger Williams University community, which stirred my interests. At Roger Williams, we rarely have conversations about important issues occurring in the world. It is either we choose to ignore it or do not feel the need to talk about it at all. One of the bigger cases that were constantly talked about in the news, media, and schools was the Eric Garner Case and the incident that had taken place between a police officer and a teenage boy. I wanted to use this controversial issue to start a conversation at RWU; what are opinions pertaining to this case? I intentionally avoided inclusion of details that could lead the viewer to conclude this piece was about race, making sure to leave out words or images only surrounding race. This piece contained three components; the passage of violence, examples of violent crimes such as the Eric

Garner and Mike Brown case, and finally the result of violence (See example figure 8). The Eric Garner Case was the basis to talk about injustice because it was in the recent conversation, except on our campus. This piece is



an example of how I helped in continuing the education.

Other works I have also done while a student here at Roger Williams is the Deconstruction series. In this series, I worked with famous artist such as Miley Cyrus, Erykah Badu, and Lady Gaga. With my first love being drawing, I wanted to complete a series involving influential people circulating in mass media. I am somewhat distant from the social media usage community, but I wanted to explore how I would approach these famous stars and my views on them. For example with Lady Gaga, I explored how far I was able to push a drawing including the personality of the individual being

drawn. Gaga to me is a combination of multiple personalities and identity, which is confusing for many people, especially me.

Therefore I deconstructed her image specifically to confuse the eye (See example figure 9).

Revisiting this idea of
deconstruction, and using the methods
explained in creating masks I explored the
physical act of destroying the perfect image



Figure 9: Deconstruction Lady Gaga 2013

of a human being. An example of someone who is considered perfect in our society today is Kylie Jenner. Her rise in fame and widespread image on social media and in daily conversations made me want to use her image. The extended process of drawing this icon, perfecting every stroke and shade played an important role in the final product. I framed the image in gold and blue to symbolize wealth and power. With all the care and effort put into perfecting her image, having to tear down and destroy what it stands for is the hardest part (See example figure 10).

For me it shows and helps me understand that sometimes you would prefer to leave a beautiful image as it is because of its flawlessness, but is that always what we should care about and look to. I think we sometimes need to tear down these acceptable social standards placed and forced on us by those in power.

`I continued working with the idea of wearing masks and how we chose to wear the masks we put on. I started to question; how much of the true self do we bring forward to others? What messages can be brought across



Figure 10: Deconstruction Kylie Jenner 2016

by what we prevent people from seeing and what we feel comfortable revealing? I believe that a lot of the comforts we have when we present ourselves to the outside comes from masking, concealing, or manipulating the truth in a way. In simple terms, we pick and choose what we want others to see, but what if we didn't have that choice. What if everyone could see through

the various facades and masks that we wear daily? My keys ideas are translucency and concealing, understanding identities through an object, and placing objective history and responsibility on others. As time passed, I focused more on the creation of the masks



Figure 11: Masked Self Portrait 2016

and how they are presented (See example figure 11) Understanding the role masks play in our society and our personal lives I paid attention to how I constructed and developed the images. With the materials I used, it seemed more believable and true to the person wearing the mask if they were able to breathe and see through them. Therefore I used materials that are similar to the elasticity of the skin. With this, the performers were able to breathe and see everything that was happening around them, although their faces were covered (See example figure 12). The expressions on the masks as well as features differed in each one. Combining different features from various people, I created ambiguous faces, which I hoped would exclude specific social identifications such as gender, race, or sexual orientation.

Studying art at Roger Williams has broadened my horizon, and strengthened my ability to think outside the box and challenge people to reflect. The experiences I have gained from joining various clubs, interning, entering competitions have immensely helped in the progression of my work. Aside from the influences I have mentioned thus

far, the professors I have had also played a big part in the

Figure 12: Masked 2016

development of my work. They were posing the hard questions, challenging me to commit to my work and explore it as much as I can. It helped to hear about how they started off as artists, and what it takes to make a complete body of work. In all of my work, from freshmen year to now, I have searched for a common argument and voice. In graduating I hope to expand and continue to formalize the idea of masks and individuality. I look forward to discovering new artists and rich ways and concepts to making my work. Being in the art program at Roger Williams has pushed me far out of my comfort zone leaving me in a place with no limitations.

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