

*a testament to my existence: using art as
documentation for self reflection*

(thesis writings)

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PROPOSAL

There hasn't been a day where I don't question my existence, mental/emotional process, memories or the connections I have with the people and things around me. I've constantly been trying to find the answers through my everyday life, but I've found that to be pretty difficult due to constant overthinking and the anxieties that I carry. In general, locating where we stand in the world and with ourselves is a difficult but fulfilling experience. Our memories help us understand both our existence and how we stand in relation to our present moment. However, what happens if those memories feel like they are displaced or fragmented? How does that affect our understanding of ourselves?

So far, my practice has allowed me to reveal my authentic self, reflect on my process and question who I am in the present moment. It has been a bittersweet experience so far, but I wonder: what role does my self-reflection, emotional process and memory play within my art work? Do my intuition and hyperfocus intertwine when making work to help my emotional processes? Is it possible for me to share all parts of myself through making work? Do the memories that feel displaced or fragmented explain the testament to my existence? These are questions that I want to address in my project.

For my thesis, I will be making a collection of 15 medium-scale oil paintings with oil pastel contour line drawings on printmaking paper. The context of these works will be about both questioning my existence through my displaced memories. I also want to use this project as a way of documenting my personal and artistic growth, along with using it as a way to face certain challenges and achieving goals in my pieces. My final vision for this project will be 15 pieces within a gallery space setting. It will be displayed in chronological order by memory on the walls.

I have begun to look at how my memories, connections with the world and experiences have played a role in my art work. So far, I've gained more knowledge about how to fully express my voice by looking at the art-historical context, insights into intuition and process in art. Additionally, experimenting with oil paint and oil pastel have allowed me to more effectively express myself with my process. In the historical context, some of the artists that have influenced my work include Joan Mitchell, Henri Matisse, Howard Hodgkin and Joan Snyder. All of these artists are from the twentieth century into the twenty-first century, during which time artists began to use abstraction to express their emotions and examine the meanings of their existences. This semester, I've been doing research on how emotional processes have played a role in making work. It has included looking at the history of art therapy, memory and ontology/metaphysics

in relation to the visual arts. Learning all of these concepts has had a significant impact on not only my thesis, but within my general studio practice.

I've been interested in both painting and drawing for most of my life, which is why I want to use both in my thesis. Making intuitive-based work has allowed me to understand the clarity that I want to gain about myself and the world surrounding me (like my relationship with nature and some parts of my everyday life). While painting allows me to lose any sense of time because of my hyperfocus, drawing allows me to return to what I'm thinking about or the things I'm going through in the moment. I've been inspired to make blind-contour line drawings and scribbles since I was a young child; this experience has helped me to process my thoughts and emotions, as well as heal from personal hardships. The importance of blind-contour line drawings allow for both a mind-body meditative and self reflective experience, in which we learn to pay attention to the things around us while drawing. I've been able to pay attention to parts of my life and reflect back into what I'm thinking about in the moment or contemplate about my life when I'm making my blind contour line drawings. When I've made work in the past year that relates to my memories or emotions through abstraction, I've done it by layering my pieces with blind-contour line drawings, shapes and color. Specifically, making blind-contour line drawings on top of my oil paintings this semester has allowed me to process my fragmented and displaced memories.

I've found that making work on paper this past year has allowed me to have a clear authentic voice in my work. There has been a greater emphasis on color, mark-making and composition in my pieces recently - all of which have served as challenges for me in the past. In light of the challenges I have faced in my work before, I want to set 3 new goals to achieve in my thesis proposal to meet for the following semester: 1) Understanding the use of space and composition in my pieces in relation to the context/depiction I have of my displaced memories, 2) The use of color in relation to my memories and associations I have and 3) using this project as a way grow and reflect on my displaced memories, as a way to gain authenticity in my work. I feel that these goals will allow me to not only meet the challenges that have been an issue in my work before, but to answer the questions I have set out in my line of inquiry.

The purpose of this reflection is to examine all parts of myself, to question my existence and to fully embrace who I am through my own perspective. I want to achieve the ability of gaining clarity on my displaced/fragmented memories and learning how to grow with my process through line drawings and paintings. By the end of this project, I hope that it'll stand out to be the testament to my existence.

THESIS ABSTRACT

Through the questioning of my displaced childhood memories and how I grew into the person I am today, I am using abstract drawing and painting as a way to express my grievance towards reflection and clarity on the experiences in my life. This is meant to be a process of gaining acceptance for becoming more authentic and sharing all parts of myself by making intuitive works that display both raw and reflective emotions on the experiences that have happened to me in my lifetime due to my mental health. This is also meant to be a practice of me documenting my time and perspectives with my displaced childhood memories and experiences by using art to do so. My materiality speaks to how I can become more authentic and my areas of inquiry come from wanting to understand the person I've become in the present moment.

ORAL DEFENSE

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I want to give a special thank you to the following people:

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- and lastly, my wonderful mentor Michelle Ross

Additionally - I want to put a content warning for self harm and eating disorders since some of my work does have imagery that addresses my experiences with them. If any one feels uncomfortable at any point, please feel free to leave the video. Thank you.

INTRODUCTION

Today, I am showing you a collection of documentation through art. A type of documentation that was solely made from my own perspective for myself, but I am choosing to share pieces of my displaced memories and things from my everyday life that speak to my authenticity.

This is a collection of documentation of my reflection, discovery, authenticity and process in making work. It is nothing more than me explaining who I am and it's to be seen more as an invitation to the viewer to understand who I am.

I've learned that this invitation is a sacred and rare one, but it's one I've specifically curated and crafted for the viewer to understand who I was in the past and who I am now. This is a series of 23 oil paintings done on printmaking paper, with oil pastel drawings on top of the works.

Every piece in this series is meant to represent a type of self-portrait, kind of like multiple puzzle pieces for people to figure out through a series of works. Additionally, I am using drawing as a personal language to express my authenticity. My inquiry for this project was to discover how memories that feel fragmented relate to my emotional and artistic processes in reflection.

It's also meant to show a way of how I can share all parts of myself (including my past) and how it explains the testament to my existence, which I think I executed through using the idea of art as documentation for self discovery and share my perspectives on my memories.

INTENTION

At the start of this project, my intention was to focus on the reflection of my childhood memories by using an intuitive mindset while drawing.

A part of my intentions were the goals I had made in my proposal:

1. Understanding the use of space and composition in my pieces in relation to the context/depiction I have of my displaced memories
2. The use of color in relation to my memories and associations that I have
3. Using this project as a way to grow and reflect on my displaced memories, as a way to gain authenticity in my work.

I felt at the time that these goals felt like a challenge for my process, which I also intended working on in my pieces. Additionally, I wanted to have my end goal of these pieces to be presented in a gallery space, curated by chronological order of the memory I made.

My main intention of my project now is to show how my reflective process and how I see myself has changed, by using my art as documentation of these experiences. I felt that the goals I set out for myself during this project helps me understand the intentions that I want to serve in my pieces. I also know that my direction with the context changed over time because I've learned that art is meant to change everything, not just the work itself.

I also know that my direction with the context changed over time because I've learned that art is meant to change everything. I also wanted to use my goals as a way to help me with the intentions of my project. I felt that I have achieved my goals and more, which I'll discuss later.

CONCEPTUAL AND AESTHETIC AREAS OF INQUIRY

My areas of inquiry for my thesis were focused on three main areas:

- Art as Documentation
- Memory and Experiences in Art / Understanding Processes
- Semiotics and Language in Drawing

ART AS DOCUMENTATION

Using art as documentation shows a record or proof of information about the world or experiences that the artist or person goes through. Making artwork serves as evidence for the experience that someone is going through or what's happening in the world by documenting their experiences - by making art works through any mediums.

Art as documentation can also be used as a way to understand how artworks can be used as archives for evidence of historical events in one's life or a time period. This also goes into how certain objects or works of art that are seen as impactful parts of history are seen as "evidence" or documentation of the time period that people were in.

I also like to think about history and how we can look at cave paintings - in which cavemen made carvings to document their rituals or hunting-gathering practices during prehistoric times. This not only brings to light how people throughout history have made works of art (paintings, fresco paintings, vases, sculptures, buildings etc.) that capture the certain time periods that they were living in, but also serves to document their existences as individuals. While this has changed with the technology that we have, art has still served as evidence of time and existence through documentation through many art mediums,

including performance, sculpture, painting, drawing and photography. Art can hold information through the use of materials and can serve as a purpose to documentation with how we interpret the information.

Artists like Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler or Tracey Emin are artists who have used their experiences with the world to document their experiences through art. Emin specifically has used performance in the past in her work, but Mitchell and Frankenthaler have painted about their experiences with nature and landscapes that they interact with. Most artists that I know or have inspired my practice this far have documented their experiences with the world and how they interact with it - which can be seen as evidence of their existence and their interpretation of the world at that time. I am attempting to do this through my project by making work about my displaced childhood memories, experiences and interactions with the world that documents my existence.

MEMORY AND EXPERIENCES IN ART / UNDERSTANDING PROCESSES

My second area of inquiry is looking at how memories and experiences shape the way we make art. I know that influences shape who we are as people and it's one of the reasons why we constantly change. Almost everyone I know has had experiences with how they were influenced by their childhood experiences or cultural and social aspects in their early life.

Artists will utilize art as a way to heal and express themselves from certain traumatic events that have happened in their lives or will use it as a way to document and share their experiences with the world. Art as an experience can help the processes of healing for people who are still recovering. It's a whole body process of making and understanding the materials that the artist wants to manipulate for the use of communicating their emotions. This also goes back to my first area of inquiry (art as documentation), but using memory in the context of art, it embodies a personal significance.

Art historical time periods like surrealism or abstract expressionism show how experiences have influenced the contexts of artists' work in the past. One of the main ideas behind surrealism was the role of the conscious and unconscious in the artist's process of making work. Intuitive art-making is also related to the unconscious, in that it is a way for the artist to express their unconscious through art. By using intuitive art-making in this way, artists are able to access their unconscious feelings, memories, and desires.

For my project specifically - I wanted to touch on my own personal experiences and memories with having attention deficit disorder and a concentration deficit disorder. I was diagnosed a year ago with both and the entire process of reflection was an incredibly difficult one - I still struggle with grieving because disorders like ADHD (or any mental health disorder, really) aren't easily recognizable or detectable in POC. Some of the experiences that I dealt with as a child came from struggling with both disorders at a young age, while also living in the heart of Silicon Valley where the pressure to be the next CEO is skyhigh. Having both disorders caused a lot of issues with my interactions with the world and how I learned about things. I struggled (and still do) with communicating and self-advocacy.

In the past two years, I've learned more about myself and what I need. This has also allowed me to learn more about my arts practice and the materials I want to use as well. Through this project, I want to use my experiences with having both disorders and the combordbites I've struggled with (like severe anxiety, mood disorder and eating disorder experiences) to communicate with people who are going through the same thing and for them to know that healing is possible. I felt that I'm at a point in my arts practice where I feel okay enough to share these experiences with other people, which I was scared to before.

I see intuitive art-making as a way for me to tackle these experiences and express them effectively, which is something I struggle with due to their unconscious nature. I will discuss how I used intuitive art-making in my project later on, but one thing that I'll say is that making art in this way has been a very healing experience for me.

SEMIOTICS AND LANGUAGE IN DRAWING

My third area of inquiry is semiotics, in which I'm inquiring about how my abstract drawings are pictorial signs for representing and communicating my displaced childhood memories and who I am in the present moment.

Semiotics is the study of signs and how signs are depicted in the world. In the visual or fine arts, the main inquiry is to analyze the pictorial imagery or signs that represent an image's meaning. In drawing, artists will use their own pictorial and personal systems of signs to communicate what emotions they want to convey in a piece. Drawing is a form of mark-making, the process of forming an idea and the endless form of becoming of knowledge. It's also developing a language for communicating emotions through mark making - how the artist is developing a system of signs or icons for that purpose.

Artists use their own language in whatever medium that they flourish in. I think that using my own language in drawing helps me understand what I'm trying to achieve with authenticity in my work.

As an example of what I'm talking about - Cy Twombly has served as inspiration for my work in the past year - in which he uses his own language of painting and drawing in his work. Twombly also includes text in his work, most of which comes from his poetry and the contexts of his works come from wanting to make work about his experiences. Another artist that uses drawing as a language to express their communication is Dan Miller, who is a contemporary artist from the Bay Area.

He uses drawing and painting as a language to communicate onto paper by using layering of letters and objects that he's interacted with in the world. These are both artists that are using drawing as a personal language to communicate with the world by using signs (like texts) or icons (imagery). Personally, I think that using drawing as a language to communicate helps with understanding one's authenticity.

CONTEXTS AND INQUIRY IN RELATION TO WORK

The significance of all three of these areas of inquiry pretty much relate to my works which I'm using art as documentation to "document" my memories and experiences while using my own drawing language or "signs" as a way to communicate through my work. While doing this, I'm also simultaneously intuitively making this work by allowing myself to fall into a place of reflection, so I can learn how to accept who I was in the past and how I've grown. To be perfectly honest, this process isn't meant to be an easy one for anyone. I'm also exploring the ideas in which drawing can be used as a personal language, by using oil pastels in my work. These oil pastel drawings are blind-contour abstracted drawings that depict my intuition and understandings of these memories.

Each of the pieces have significant objects or things from my childhood that are drawn in using a blind contour style method onto the paper. Some of these are from my childhood house in Palo Alto, my grandparents house in Goa and Bombay, my first few experiences in nature and some of my favorite things from my childhood that have become a part of my early adulthood. Each of them are associated with time-periods in my life too, which includes the dark periods in my life.

I've also learned that contemporary artists or some of the second generation of abstract expressionists have made work about experiences that they've been through by "documenting" it by using art to do so.

Artists like Cy Twombly, Laura Jo Pierce or Noel Fielding have been influences for me, in which most of their work involves them documenting their experiences with the world by drawing or painting about them. Like most of these artists, most of them have also used their own personal drawing language and “signs” in their work to help communicate their experiences. Discovering that there’s artists like me in a similar way who have difficulties with communication has been an inspiring experience for my project. This also allowed me to understand how people can use art as a way to document their communication or experiences by using different materials or developing a personal language of their own. This inspired me to envision doing that for my own project by showing the viewer how I can document my experiences by using my own personal language of drawing to communicate.

I decided early on in this process of making work that I wanted to shine a light on the dark periods in my life that were significant to me due to the fact that I had suffered from an eating disorder, severe depression and anxiety as a child. I really enjoyed the idea of art as documentation for my own work and wanting to “document” my personal memories and experiences by making work that would exemplify seeing art as an “artifact” or evidence of my existence.

Like I said in the beginning, my pieces are still serving as documents of my memories and evidence of my existence. Each of these are meant to be like puzzle pieces and how all of these pieces make me into the person I am today, right now as we speak. And like the title of my project, this work is meant to be a testament to my existence, through which I am documenting my experiences and self reflection through intuition.

EXPERIENCES IN MAKING THE WORK

My experiences in making this work tested everything I had in me. Since my anxiety has always been high, I feel that everything needed to be done perfectly - alas that almost never happens. Majority of these pieces deal with darker personal issues that I feel too afraid to even speak about to anyone else, let alone the public. Even making pieces about my childhood memories feel very surreal and hold a sense of nervousness because most of the memories I have are hazy.

With that being said, I had a difficult time with making pieces about things in my life that were extremely depressive and dark, like the pieces - *being enough (not)*, *an insomniac childhood*, *searching for blue*, *nervosa is dark* and *anxiety is a point blank*.

I found each of these pieces extremely difficult to make due to the fact that I had the emotional intensities of those dark times hidden away in a box in the back of my mind. It was also with the shift of my proposal after midterms to make more pieces on my happier memories and the things I cherished rather than the things that were extremely dark or depressive. I felt that elaborating on having negative experiences while also being able to show light on the positive parts of life were extremely helpful in showing how healing can occur for one. Healing and finding clarity or comfort with yourself is different for everyone.

The majority of the other pieces in this series are happy memories, experiences or people that I cherished or still cherish to this day. Although even through all of those dark times I had in the past, I always found a way to be content or okay through being active outside or experiencing things with my family members. Some of my pieces highlight the childhood experiences of - traveling to India and being with my paternal grandparents (both who have inspired me to make art or be creative since I was a young child), exploring the Palo Alto Baylands and going over the bridge next to the highway near my childhood home, how my siblings and I would play in our family living room for hours on end or me just playing outside in the front or backyard in the grass.

The last text based pieces I have in this series are pieces that are solely based on my phone notes app. My notes from my phone or sketchbook have served as “writings” or a short diary of things that have inspired me or things I’ve thought about for this project intuitively on the go (like between work, school, errands or home on the bus). This serves as a type of documentation and I wanted to reiterate that by making pieces that layer the text I have in my pieces.

I also know that some of my actual pieces have text erased in them or scratched out with oil pastel or china marker. That’s only because I’ve been afraid to share or speak out about the text in the piece or what the text is about - so I “erased” it out but over the semester I became more confident with my work so I started to leave some of text I had in there without “erasing” it out.

The process of titling each piece came prior to making the piece because of how I associate each memory with color (I’ll return to color later) and picking which color to lay down with the oil paint onto the paper. This also seemed like a natural and intuitive process for me as well because of the color choices with the oil paint. I mostly would play around with a few title ideas before I would actually stick with one. It was almost like a choice between similarities in title and most of them kind of just depended on the color and association with memory. Titling my pieces feels like I’m allowing the audience to view a part of the process, which is something I didn’t think about until now.

COLOR, SPACE AND COMPOSITION GOALS

Exploring how to use my intuitive process in my project affected how formal decisions were made in the work. I made several reiterations of a few images based on a singular memory, which wasn't something I wanted to do entirely. I was trying to be the "good student" (due to my perfectionism) by reiterating the composition with colors and different places to space things out but I only discovered that to be the process of me unboxing dark emotions from those memories that I didn't want to have reopened again.

This caused many days of depressive episodes during this time and it contributed to a major burn out by the end of this project. I also learned that the more I was trying to reiterate images, the more I was actually losing energy in my drawings due to the fact that I was somewhat "planning" my drawings and spaces. In a way though, this process can also be seen as a memory and healing tool with how I ended up making work that was helping me process some emotional stuff that I didn't want to find healing in just yet. Maybe that was a good thing, but I'm not sure about it at the moment.

It was after my mid-term review that I made the formal decision to not reiterate any of my pieces for not compositional purposes, but to remind myself that my own mental health was also important because it reminded me of certain traumas I didn't want to relive anymore. My work became much stronger from making the decision to not reiterate pieces anymore and the drawings in my work started to have energies again, something that I had missed seeing in my drawings.

As for color - what I took away most about learning about how color plays a significant role in my work was how I associate different colors with certain memories and learning how to replicate that onto paper. I learned that I really had to take the time to understand the reflective part of this project by examining the memory before I started painting onto the paper. Associating a certain color with a specific memory was a difficult task at first and knowing what color was right was tricky. I finally came around to the realization that I should probably remember the colors of physical objects from the specific memory in mind. For example, I realized that using the color of my living room rug from my childhood was a good starting point.

As I made more pieces in the series after reflecting on the memory for a while and understanding the relationship between my intuition and color - my pieces became stronger in a way where I felt that it was better communicating the memory that I wanted to share, along with the drawings I made. This also

allowed me to understand my process in the early stages of making work, like with the compositional issues and formal decision making.

Looking back on it, I think that I learned a lot about my practice and process through setting the goals I had in mind from my proposal. It taught me how to advocate for myself through my studio practice, which is something I am grateful for. I felt that I did achieve all of the goals that I had in mind, even though I didn't really think about the hurdles that I would have to go through to get to them. It's also kind of the point about setting goals and going through the process - it's to go through a journey of some hardships to achieve or gain success from it).

SHIFTS FROM THE PROPOSAL

I had a lot of shifts from the time of the proposal to now, most of which come from my comfort zone and gaining confidence in my work. Most of the shifts came post midterms but I realized that I needed time for myself and I never quite received it until Spring break hit.

Throughout the majority of this process and making the work, I've been an essential worker in childcare for the past academic year. It didn't occur to me how much of the stress of being there was actually ruining my basic mental health needs and completely traumatized me. I quit my job the week after midterms and left for my current job. I mention this part because it completely shifted how I viewed my project. I gained confidence in my work again and it helped me with the direction that I wanted to go with my project.

The other shifts from my proposal come from my goals and how my process went with each of them (especially for color). I also decided to include pieces that discussed my journey with finding myself in the last two years. I realize that it was probably important for me to share that because the dark period that I had two years ago (2019) with eating disorder recovery and learning how to really heal on my own was how I became to be more authentic with myself and advocate better.

The formal decision to do this was entirely my own and something I don't regret. I feel that now I'm able to gain clarity on even some of the negative memories that I have and it feels like I'm able to see it all, through my own perspective.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS/ AUDIENCES / QUESTIONS

At the moment - my work right now sits here in this gallery space at PNCA and I hope one day when the world is free from the pandemic, it'll sit in other gallery spaces. My general hope for this work is to reach an audience or person that has trouble with communicating out their needs and for them to know and have reassurance that there is a creative outlet here for them. The other part of my purpose is to speak to the community where people don't feel heard enough, especially to POC who present with neurotypical disorders (like ADD) and have a hard time with communicating or need to know that healing is possible. This is also to serve the purpose that art (of any kind) can serve for documentation for existence that derives from experiences in our lives and how one can heal.

Until that is possible, I'm still going to be an active member of my community in the Portland Metro Area as an early childhood educator and as an artist. Outside of my thesis work, I've learned that developing art and expression for our generation is important - so they can learn how to speak to their community by making work that hallmarks their expression and making works that signifies their existence. While I'm teaching young children to be expressive and learning how to communicate their emotions in their art projects - I'm learning that I'm doing the same thing in my thesis work. I'm making works that serve as documents of my existence and how I can communicate with my emotions through art. These are evidence of my existence and I'm grateful for having the opportunity to document this testament through my thesis.

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Christian Berger & Jessica Santone (2016) Documentation as Art Practice in the 1960s, *Visual Resources*, 32:3-4, 201-209, DOI: 10.1080/01973762.2016.1241030

A journal article about the practice of documentation and art in the 1960's, gives a thorough understanding about how artists used this in their work for either social, political or personal purposes.

Thorburn, J. M. "ART AND THE UNCONSCIOUS." *The Monist* 31, no. 4 (1921): 585-600. Accessed March 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27900882>.

A journal article about the relationship between art process and the conscious/unconscious mind (psychoanalysis) in the 1920's.

DAVIES, STEPHEN. "Defining Art and Artworlds." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 4 (2015): 375-84. Accessed May 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44510185>.

A journal article outlining how art has played many roles in changing the interpretation, context and meaning overtime and how art should be characterized by their origins.

Cube, White. n.d. "White Cube - Artists - Tracey Emin." Whitecube.Com.

https://whitecube.com/artists/artist/tracey_emin

Tracey Emin is a British artist who focuses on the context of feminism and emotional/personal struggles by using an array of mediums. I'm interested in looking at her painting works, as she uses abstracted painting and drawing to explain certain experiences in her life.

"Dan Miller: Artwork Survey: 2010s — Art21." n.d. Art21.Org.

<https://art21.org/gallery/dan-miller-artwork-survey-2010s/>.

The works of American neurodivergent artist from Oakland, CA - who focuses on language, layering, line and semiotics through drawing and painting on paper. Miller also focuses on representation and attention to detail in his works. (He doesn't have much on giving artists talks or speaking on his work due to his disability).

"Laura Jo Pierce." n.d. Artspace.Com. <https://www.artspace.com/artist/laura-jo-pierce>

The works of Laura Jo Pierce - an American neurodivergent artist who makes drawings using oil pastel and watercolors on paper to document everyday experiences, as a private diary or daily record.

Instagram.” n.d. Instagram.Com. https://www.instagram.com/noel_fielding/?hl=en.

Noel Fielding is a British Artist who focuses on both abstracted painting and drawings. I follow him on social media, in which he posts his line drawings and paintings. The context/concepts of Fielding’s work focus on surrealism, expressionism and dada in his works.

Kantor, Jordan, and Igor Zabel. 2005. *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*. London, England: Phaidon Press.

A book that features contemporary artists who focus on drawing in their work.