

Bug

This work deals with grief and pain as a tangible, persistent presence. I am exploring what it means to change one's physical appearance as a coping strategy. Changing my appearance is like feeding an addiction; I have wanted to further myself from who I was when I was hurt, as if it is a race to dispel my grief as fast as I can before I am hurt again. I want to look in the mirror and no longer see a husk, but no matter how many times I change—permanent or impermanent—I remain a false version of the Self. So, I change again, hoping to somehow earn my place in this vastness.

I was victim to an abusive relationship...repeatedly violated, gaslit, cheated on, and estranged from my safe spaces. I felt the need to change my appearance and my mannerisms in order to escape my internal prison. I soon realized that if I ever wanted to transcend such grief and self-loathing, I must accept the fact that I was hurt and, in turn, accept myself.

I began to heal.

If you know someone in a physically, mentally, or emotionally abusive relationship, there is always something you can do. Please take action whenever you can, as it is difficult to seek solace and freedom alone. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for my loved ones and mentors. They are the reason why I was able to experience Oxbow in its remarkable entirety and live a vivid, rewarding life.

Maggie J

Essential question- What do we gain when we alter ourselves to dispel grief? Does it work?

Trauma. We eat, we sleep, we drink, we reproduce, we work, we learn, we are traumatized, we change, and then we die. Trauma, loss, and pain are present in all of our lives, one way or another. How do we purge this grief? How do we change our self-image and transform into our “true” selves? Trauma is the effect of life’s cruel causes. It poisons us to the point of no return occasionally, but what happens when you have the ability to suck the poison out?

Is there a “true self”?

Throughout my research and personal experience, I’ve noticed a distinct link between altering the self in order to further ourselves from who we were at the time of our scarring. Though my alterations have all been temporary, many people choose to turn to body modification and surgical transformation to reach a place of more permanent empowerment and comfort. I’ve never had ease in understanding human behavior, but since reading some Jungian/Freudian essays on it I’ve gained a better grasp. In addition, I’ve been reading “The Lives of the Heart”- a collection of poems dealing in the way love, loss, and grief can change the way you operate emotionally and cause drastic changes in the self, by Jane Hirshfield. Jung, when discussing the notion of grief said: “Embrace your grief. From there, your soul will grow.” This quote revealed a question- Changing yourself emotionally and physically is simply a means of pushing the pain away, rather than accepting it. Is gaining closure through “Embracing your grief” a more rewarding route to stability? The banishment of my pain was a result of acceptance rather than change in the end. Perhaps it depends on who you are, and the source of such grief. For example, some people experience body dysmorphia, or in a less severe vein- self-esteem issues, due to emotional abuse and media poisoning. (I had to deal with horrid self-esteem issues as a result of my past. Read on!) They feel inclined to change their appearance often until they are comfortable... usually to the detriment of their wallets. AND YET- self-love is free. Perhaps acceptance is the answer!

Through loss, can we lose “the self”?

I am reminded of the time I spent reading Siddhartha, and how his goal was to lose this sense of self to gain true enlightenment. This is intriguing because most people I talk to are obsessed with finding themselves, rather than losing themselves. Perhaps it’s a material obsession, or perhaps we feel as though we’re obligated to mean something in this vast universe- and to have a purpose. Which is funny, because in Hinduism the goal is to lose your “self” entirely in order to transcend mortal life and reach “Nirvana”. I am guilty of this, and I am definitely not the only one. People are less inclined to dispel the self, and more inclined to dispel grief or guilt.

What is closure?

As it pertains to me, closure is like finishing a complex task or assignment, and feeling as though you can breathe when it's over. During my time at Oxbow, I’ve had a lot of time to think about who I am, and though I’m wrought with inner conflict and anxiety still, I’ve discovered the pieces of myself that had since been taken from me.

Perhaps this project is a form of closure for me. I was inspired to do a project about myself at the beginning. An animated self-portrait and whatnot. I reassessed my decisions and realized that self-portraits are all I've really done. They were all made to further my understanding of myself. It was time to make something others could relate to.

Grief and I

When I was 14, I was a freshman in high school. I was excited to go to an art school, since I thought I'd get to escape the bullies and shaming that comes with public school in greater heaps. I was young, naive and inexperienced socially, so naturally I was sucked into a relationship with a junior boy who was nearly 3 years older than me. Never has a more inconsiderate, putrid, and abusive creature walked upon this earth. We had similar likes and dislikes, he was odd and unorthodox, diabetic, and held a tragic past full of maternal abuse, so he said. And for about two thirds of a year, it all seemed fine. Under the surface was a chain smoking, drug addicted, violent, damaged shell of a person- unable to love healthily or care for someone effectively. Socially inept, rude and cruel.

I was being non-consensually abused by him for more than a year- without identifying it or understanding the magnitude of what I wasn't fighting back against. He hurt me physically twice in fits of rage and constantly cheated on me, deliberately gas lighting me to suit his tattered strength in memory, denying his faults without fail because of it, and leaving me in a well of self-loathing and uncertainty, thinking that it was all my fault, and that I wasn't good enough because I didn't want to have sex with him.

And as if it couldn't've gotten any worse, he got me crossfaded in public at age 15 and nearly raped me behind a tree. I was not in a proper state of mind to say no, but when his attempt was unsuccessful, I finally became coherent and told him to stop. I left that day still a hostage to this prison of a relationship, but still had my virginity. I was too uneducated to understand it was still SEXUAL ASSAULT, regardless of his success- and that everything I was pressured into previously was all the same. I'm not sure I'd be here had he been able to carry out his intention. He got expelled from my school in his senior year, and I stayed in contact with him despite my mother's advice, who broke the relationship off for good. I was angry, but soon realized that he had destroyed my relationship with my family, and I still hadn't realized the magnitude of what he'd actually done to me.

Then it finally hit. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror for the rest of my sophomore year. I wouldn't eat anything substantial, I wouldn't sleep, and I wouldn't speak to my family. I blew through a whirlwind of relationships before realizing that I didn't "need anyone".

I shaved my head,
I dyed what was left of my hair black,
I got horrible grades,
And I made a lot of art.

Eventually, I discovered love in a way I hadn't, and I learned that I am capable of love in actuality. I felt happiness for the first time in two years.

So I cut my hair again,
And I forced myself to be social, despite my anxiety.

I looked in the mirror and I saw a 'version' of me.
Not "Me" but closer. Happier. Freer, but still burdened.
So I came to Oxbow.

Consent is mandatory. Proper, enthusiastic, unpressured consent is mandatory. Let it be known.

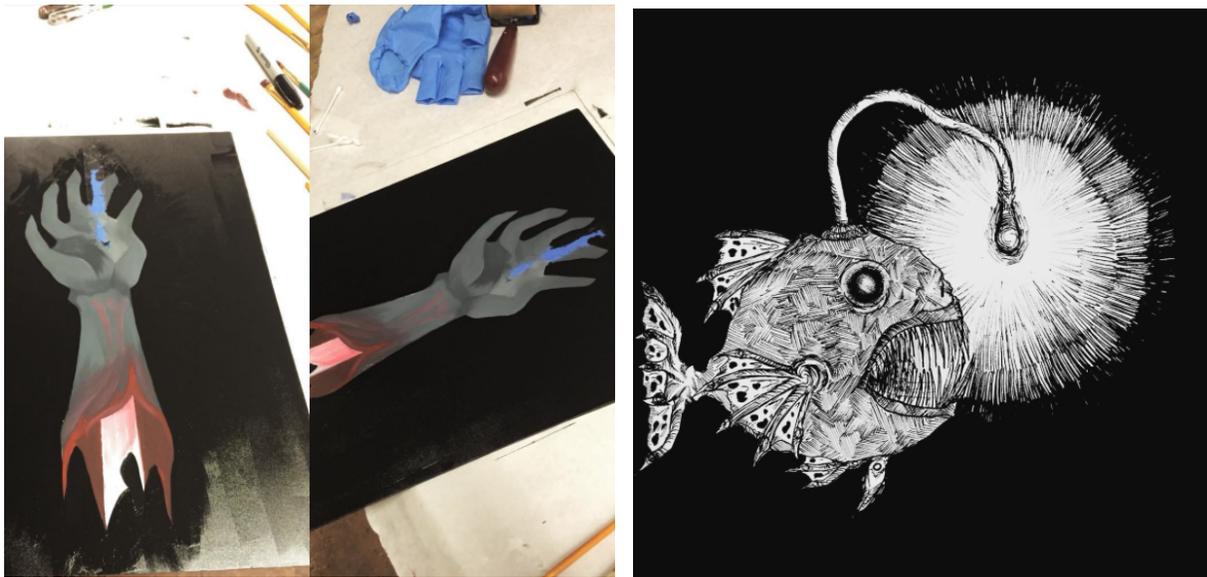
None of this was my fault.

On a lighter note, life is better. I haven't been this happy in years and I am no longer a "version" of myself. I am now a soul. Spring break brought me full circle to the freedom I was seeking this whole time. This project is simply the finished thought. Oxbow has been my gateway to the "Self".

This is why I've chosen such a personal topic. Not only am I fascinated by human behavior, but even more so by the points at which I am cripplingly human.

My transformation was visible artistically

As previously stated, my pain was a clear element in my artwork from that period of my life. Below is a visual timeline from the second my abuser was out of my life physically and visually, to the absence of pain I experience today.



The first images were made at the crux of my grief, my emotional pain was compromising my familial relationships, as well as with my peers. The left hand side shows a monotype matrix with a disembodied forearm being stabbed with it's own bone. The pressure was off on the press, so the print was unsuccessful- which only brought me more displeasure. The righthand image is an illustration of an anglerfish I did entirely in faber castell ink on bristol. The dark was synonymous for how I felt during that point of loss and uncertainty. (Cerca 2015)



The plot thickened as I started experiencing obscure dreams and fell into insomnia. On the left, is concept art for an intaglio etching. Same year.

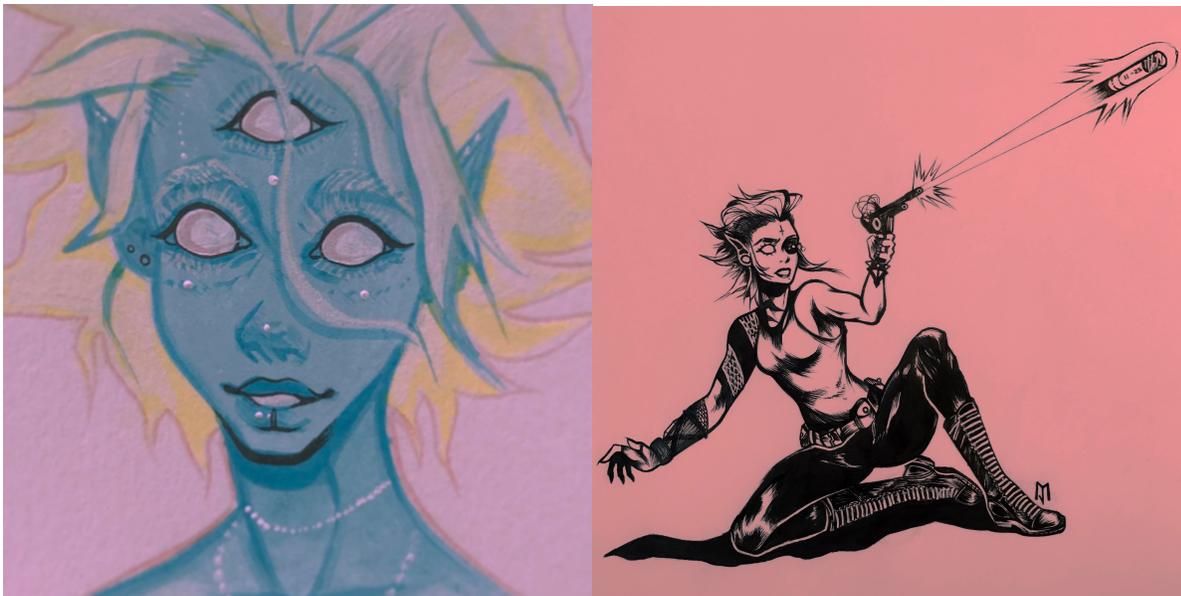
Once Sophomore year ended, I had a burst of happiness over rekindled relationships and a lack of concern for the opinions of others. However, my imagery remained either somber, or aggressively loud. I sought to disturb and there was no inbetween. I wrote often and started spinning my own complex stories and narratives. The image on the left is a depiction of a character I created in the eighth grade. He brought me a new level of repair when I discovered a stack of mediocre drawings beneath my bed. His name is Lazarus, and he is the lead character in a top-down videogame design of mine. The image on the right depicts more characters of mine from a

comic I'm currently writing called "Tongue and Groove" (2016).





The second to last set and more colorful works above were made before I was accepted to Oxbow. At this point I realized that I am capable of love and healing. They are two detail shots of pieces I made with deliberate experimentation in color. (2016)



Finally, The last two pieces I have to share are works I made while enrolled at oxbow, excluding a very colorful self portrait I made during midterm. They show how I've changed not only artistically but emotionally. The left is a gouache painting I did during midterm project, and on the right is a character study.

Is changing yourself fuel for a false goal?

I've thought about whether or not seeking to change yourself as a coping mechanism is more akin to the "need" mentality that goes hand in hand with drug addiction. The result is not abrasive, but there is an emotional release. Your mind feels like a clean slate and you can breathe. At least until it's time to do it again. I often feel the 'need' to change my appearance if something less than satisfactory occurs in my life, rather than out of boredom. That isn't to say

that I don't do things on a whim. It would be absurd, since that is one of my most defining personality traits. However, It's a definite result of my past- If I don't 'feel' like I have the world "By the balls" as it were, then I'll feel inclined to morph once more in order to maintain that white-knuckled grip on myself.

I've always thought of it as "Shedding" or "Rebirth" on some level, as it became my only means of coping until now.

My artistic process

I've referenced many animators and artists over the course of writing this paper. I've drawn from them technically and stylistically in order to better my final product. The Artists who stood out to me the most throughout my research were Emily Partridge and Rebecca Sugar. These women worked on the creative teams responsible for the Cartoon Network series "Adventure Time" and Rebecca has been especially successful in her craft as the first woman to single handedly create a television series. The show in question is titled "Steven Universe" and I recommend both of them from ages -1 to transcended immortal.

Why I've accepted impending arthritis

In his documentary "Monster Road", Bruce Bickford said "Animation is concentrated energy" And since starting my animation, I've recognized that what it looks like pales in comparison to the hours put in. My animation is likely to reach just shy of a minute in duration, and will undoubtedly take the remaining three weeks of my Oxbow semester to complete, give or take. I've worked vehemently for a week or two now, storyboarding and drafting. Alas, animation is an unappeasable mistress with blithe disregard for how much my hand hurts. I've made a conscious effort to hand draw my final project because given my concept, I feel that it is a personal endeavor, and in the end I'll experience an apparent sense of closure and achievement. Not only that, but when my animation is watched, My goal is for the viewer to see the effort it must've taken, and know how invested I was in making something relatable to my audience and myself.

Bibliography:

Art & Artists:

Artist from Hong Kong who does hand drawn stop animation:

<https://www.instagram.com/littlethunder/?hl=en>

Animator/Artist who worked on the creative team for “Adventure Time”:

<https://www.instagram.com/em.partridge/?hl=en>

Animator/Artist who created the show “Steven Universe” and worked on “Adventure Time” too:

<https://www.instagram.com/rebeccasugar/?hl=en>

Film:

“Monster Road” - A documentary about Bruce Bickford and his animations.

Videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1m-JYut7GSQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhheiPTdZCw>

<http://www.adultswim.com/videos/superjail/superbar/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ7JTB2CaN0>

(Via Greg)

Books:

“the Collected Works of C.G. Jung” - “the Ways and Means of the Psyche” -

“the Lives of the heart” - Jane Hirshfield (Poems mostly about loss and grief)

“The Dictionary of Symbols” - Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant and John Buchanan-Brown
(for symbolism in the animation)

Internet:

“Humor and Resiliency: Towards a Process Model of Coping and Growth” - Nicholas A. Kuiper

<http://ejop.psychopen.eu/article/viewFile/464/354>

“Positive Psychology”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_psychology

The “Kübler-Ross Model” // The Five Stages of Grief:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kübler-Ross_model

The General Psychology of relationship abuse and how it can affect the victim:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/enlightened-living/200807/understanding-the-dynamics-abusive-relationships>

Some Evocation background info and history:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocation>

Finally- coping through finding the self in body mods:
<https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/09/22/body-modification-gender-and-self-empowerment/>

<https://laurengodek.wordpress.com/2013/12/12/therapy-in-body-modification-for-sexually-abused-women/>

Personal:

Summoned and spoke to a spirit about their experience with grief

Spoke to my parents and friends about their grief

Long personal reflection

Watched a lot of cartoons. :)