

For my project, I dug into the idea of a “true self”. My research self as an illusion created by the egotistical structure of society. So the answer lies more in how to navigate the self, instead of proving its non existence. My research brought me to understand the true self as a multidimensional ecosystem holding both negative and positive aspects. I wrote poetry as an introspection, observing the different sides of my “true self”. My painting incorporates the different sides of my personality in a manner that points to the illusion of it all.

The oil painting depicts my different sides as five characters, all together at the dinner table. Each one has specific traits that are both good and bad within me. For example, the girl with red skin I would describe as spontaneous, dreamy, aspirational, carefree, unapologetic, likes her small tits, never wears bras, runs into oceans and small lakes & ponds, loves loud music, fashion crazy. While the purple girl under the table I would describe as stuck in a bubble, spacey, aloof, depressed, stays in bed, feels everything and is confused, time for her goes slower, heavy like the bass line of a song. There is no one character less authentic than the others, the different characters represent a whole.

In the painting there is no logic because we as humans are not born with essence, instead we are constantly searching for reason within the existing world to feel secure. None of the characters are painted to be realistic instead they are a manifestation of the contradictions within ourself. The legs and arms are too long for the bodies and the hands are backwards. However there is a sense of unity and belonging because everyone is intertwined in just the right ways. On the wall is a painting within the painting. It is a picture of the exact scene presented in the whole painting. This represents how a true self is ever changing and this depiction of myself is only a snap-shot bound to be changed and twisted as my life continues.

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The True Self

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*This essay expresses the contrast between a discussion
about the illusion of true self, and a
personal exploration of the true self through poetry.*

The True Self

The true self may have no possible definition. The authentic self is a universal experience that challenges the mind because it holds no one truth or method to prove that truth. D. W. Winnicott in his book *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* defines the true self as “little more than the summation of sensori-motor aliveness” that appears “as soon as there is any mental organization of the individual at all”.¹ However, some experimental psychologists such as Bruce Hood argue that “based on brain research... the self is an illusion” and “if they're right no one can truly know their own self because there is no self to know”.² At the crux, is the potential contradiction between our sense of self, and the realization that our experience of the self is only an egotistical social construct.

Personality #1:

*and she thinks she's in a movie
and it gives her permission
the ocean writes her name in green letters that match
her curtain waves up at her and reminds her
and she draws on her face
and it gives her an evil eye that she puts back on whenever needed
and she tries not to think and in the process
is thinking
and the mirror tells her a story of a world where no one wears a bra
and everyone has a mullet
the absurdity giggles back at her
and she listens for a moment to her heartbeat
and then keeps on walking*

From birth, we are plunged into a pre-existing society built for the egotistical expectation of what humanity looks like. We often play many different roles in society. However, some roles feel more authentic or comfortable than others. Erving Goffman theorizes that “we display a series of masks to others in acting roles controlling and staging how we appear” in constant strife to “set ourselves in the best light”.³ However, Goffman did not believe in the “true self”. He argued that there was “no identifiable performer behind the roles. The roles just are the performer”.⁴ Some would protest that certain masks would be inauthentic or fake, but I think every person has inherent diversity within their

¹Donald W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (n.p., 1957-1963).

²Hood, B. (2012) *The Self Illusion*. London: Constable and Robinson.

³Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (n.p.: Doubleday, 1959).

⁴Goffman, *The Presentation*.

own identity. No one is just one adjective. If I were to ask myself right now to complete the sentence, “I am...” with one word, I would find it impossible to pin a word that could summarize my whole being. There is not just one little part that is the “true” side. To understand your own true self one must zoom out, not in. Instead of looking for that one little part, look at the whole as an ecosystem. The true self is made up of many different sides. That does not mean that every part of your personality is authentic. Or that we can exclude sides of ourselves. When people create insincere masks that only serve the purpose of appearing to be a “better” human, they are creating a false ego. The false ego is the “idea and concept we create about ourselves in the course of our lives, which typically excludes any qualities we don’t wish to accept about ourselves” or don’t want others to see.⁵ The true self must include both our good and bad sides. Excluding your more negative sides in your own vision of self, can be extremely harmful to yourself and others. It harms you because without fully accepting yourself, you will hate yourself. It can harm others because your own internal hatred can be deflected onto others, causing unnecessary pain. You cannot hide behind the masks you wear. Instead you must recognize your masks and accept them.

Personality #2:

and the buzz of silence got really fucking loud

like in a test

where everything gets heavier

your jaw locks and hardens

you grip your pencil, a little tighter

and push down a little harder

you can hear silence

And the air becomes a blanket that weighs heavy on your neck

and then you can touch time

and feel it slow

and coil around you finger

and it relaxes onto your palm

and it almost stops

but then you remember that time never stops

and you remember that you know nothing

and the buzz of nothing gets really fucking confusing

⁵H. Boghart, "False Ego," Urban Dictionary, last modified March 13, 2015, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=false%20ego>.

Personality #3:

this constitutes a list

1. argumentative

a trait learned and received from pops

Where the words twist into an afterward embarrassment

And the mouth feels like it has eaten too much cheese

2. lawyer I could be

easily

sometimes i think about if that would get all the arguments out of my gut

clearing out for a more amiable day time me

3. can't listen to anyone

but myself because rationally, I

would always know how to do it better

irrationally

4. ego

5.power

Identity is constructed by each individual. Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre believed that “there is no design for a human being, no way we have to be, no God to create a purpose for us, no human nature that fixes how we should live” because for human beings “existence precedes essence.”⁶ Therefore, each person “creates [themselves] through what [they] do, the choices [they] make in a world without fixed values. Every sincere decision [they] take presents a picture of what [they] believe any human being should be like. In fashioning [themselves, they] fashion humanity.”⁷ Each human fashions themselves according to their own set of values, what they believe is right and wrong. Sartre’s philosophy makes me question how authentic our own morals truly are, as they are often constructed only by external influences. Values are instilled in us often from parenting, teachers, friends, and (in America) what political party one associates with. These value systems can create conflict because, for example, political parties alienate us to the point where we cannot see each other’s humanity. However, is the true self shown only through one’s morals? What about one’s emotions? A study at Harvard showed that the majority of people believe that your true self is not one or the other. The data illustrated that the true self is understood as the part they believe is good or valuable. The study took two groups of Republicans and Democrats and gave them two different scenarios. In one scenario, there was a man who preached the resistance of homosexual feelings but felt inside an attraction to men and in another scenario, there was a man who preached the acceptance and equality of homosexuals but inside felt a deep disgust towards homosexuals. Both scenarios illustrate a conflict between beliefs and emotions. The Republicans and Democrats did not answer in accordance to which one was a belief and which one was an emotion, but instead answered in which idea they thought was morally good or right (the Republicans thought the homophobic sides were the true self, while the

⁶Jean Paul Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism Is a Humanism (n.p.: Les Editions Nagel, 1946.,

⁷Sartre, Existentialism Is a Humanism.

Democrats thought the reverse).⁸ This study illustrates Sartre's point that each human's view of their true self is fashioned by their personal vision of humanity. It also points to the fact that our view of our true self can change, as our morals and beliefs change with life experience and hardship. In fact, our true self could be changing every second of the day with each shift in our mindset and belief system.

Personality #4

*sometimes i am fully water
so full up
a vessel for something
or someone
to take up residence
rocking to the motion
a lullaby that cries louder
and talks quietly
but with the tongue
of an elderly gentlemen*

*sometimes i am fully water
and water floods the veins of my retina
and they turn blue
and i am vessel
so i am full up
and when i spill,
i can't breathe for a moment
one long moment
and i spill onto the floor
and i feel the cold concrete
and the imprints of yesterday's shoes
and a small grain of rice
and i tell myself a story*

⁸"Mind: Personal Identity (The True Self)," video, 04:57, Khan Academy, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/wi-phi/wiphi-metaphysics-epistemology/wiphi-mind/v/the-true-self>.

Personality #5

*when she thinks about driving and
it turns dinner into tuna fish
and she goes fishing*

*when she thinks about roller skating and
it turns wagons onto wheels
and she wants to line dance*

*when she thinks about you and
it turns picnics into lost opportunities
and the future waves a little*

*oh and haven't you heard
when she thinks about herself and
it turns conversations into vhs tapes
and she presses replay*

Even if the self is an illusion, we are living within that illusion. America's capitalist system is built on the idea of personal success. The ideals of ego are pushed onto us from birth. The self is inescapable. Perhaps the solution lies "in understanding the limits of [one's] knowledge" and continuing on with humility because "we are only as wise as our awareness of our ignorance."⁹ The fact that we are able to think independently inherently creates a self.¹⁰ This experience of self is universal and can be the key to peace and empathy. For the self is what we use to connect with others. In Thomas Hobbes's words, "one of the best ways to understand other people [is] to introspect."¹¹ In the end, we are all the same. We are a mass of contradictions and hypocrisy. We are not made of reason, we are constantly searching for reason within the confusing mess that is our world. We are not made of one thing, we are a multitude shaped by our daily experiences. We are all looking for the same thing, ourselves. Sorting through, weighing the importance, and accepting the good and bad of your own self can be the solution for a healthier mental state and world. When you are able to understand and love yourself, you can use that knowledge to create community.

⁹Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, trans. Jowett Benjamin.

¹⁰Decartes: "Cogito Ergo Sum" (I think therefore I am)

¹¹Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (n.p., 1651).

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