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False Perceptions and Reality

Photography and gouache

How do reality and perception intertwine with each other? How do our minds create false perceptions and change reality? How do mental illnesses (anxiety, depression, body dysmorphic disorder, etc.) change one's perception of reality? How does art change the perception of reality? These are all questions that guided my artistic journey through this project. I like to describe this painting as a portal between perception and reality. A combination of photography and painting which reflects how I interpret reality and perception. The photo being partially painted, points to the idea of how one captures reality (photography) versus interpreting it (painting).

I am still on the journey of discovering how I understand my reality and perceptions. I have struggled for years with my own reality and how my life is dictated by it. After having personal experience with anxiety, body dysmorphia, and other things, the process of this project helped me take a big step toward rewriting the false reality I currently reside in.

Reality and False Perception



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OS47

This essay was structured around these essential questions: How do reality and perception intertwine with each other? How do our minds create false perceptions and change reality? How do mental illnesses (anxiety, depression, body dysmorphic disorder, etc.) change one's perception of reality? How does art change the perception of reality? Through the process of research from psychologist, experts, and my self-exploration, I discovered what I believe to be an answer to these questions: Reality doesn't change, but perception does; but if perception doesn't change, then that becomes reality.

Have you ever seen the photo of the dress, the one that is either blue and black or white and gold? What color do you see? The dress is, in reality, blue and black, but what makes people see white and gold? That is perception. Perception is “influenced by expectations, knowledge, or beliefs.” (Lupyan 82), meaning that perception is subjective; it is different for each individual. But how does perception interact with reality? Our minds like to believe that our perception is reality. Once we believe strongly enough in our perceptions, they become facts in our minds. The greatest difference between these two concepts is that reality doesn't change, but perception does; however, if perception doesn't change, then that perception becomes reality.

There is no scientific definition of what reality is. Still, I have been able to pull pieces together to create a definition that I think will be useful: Reality is what we can grasp with our senses. Take, for example, a box. We know that there is a box, and we know the size, weight, dimensions, and color of the box. This is a fact; this is reality. However, perception is what we can infer about the box. The stories and details that our mind creates help guide us toward more information about the box. These perceptions are made from previous knowledge and experiences with boxes and judgments we can make about them. For example, people might grab at the instinct

to open the box and see what's inside, wondering if there is a gift for them or an animal trapped inside. The curiosity that our minds drive from our perception of the box can lead to a whole new version of a reality.

Despite the fact that there is no true scientific definition of reality, many scientists have developed expertise in this topic. For example, Professor Gary Lupyan of the University of Wisconsin claims, "The idea that what we perceive is strongly influenced by what we know." Our previous knowledge is what dictates our perceptions; in other words, we conclude how objects, events, behaviors, and so forth relate to our world. Furthermore, "Objects of perception do constitute the real world," according to philosopher Waldo Jewell-Lapan, which means that everyone has a different "real" world. Said differently, we all live in the same world, but we all perceive it differently. This means that even if one tries to create a definition of reality, it would constantly change and evolve as each new perception of the world creates an altered reality.

Another way to look at this idea is that reality is the relationship between two things, meaning that in order for something to exist truly, we must know it exists. For example, the reality is that when we see a circle, it is a circle because we know what a circle is. However, perception requires an individual viewpoint: if someone stands at a certain angle, they can perceive that circle as an oval. This example connects to many aspects of life, especially in the ways in which we view ourselves; our perception can influence our view of ourselves. The idea is that reality and perception are two different aspects that contribute to the way we see the world. However, they sometimes will overlap when perception is believed so strongly that it becomes reality.

If we run with this idea, we can conclude that because everyone stands at a different angle of reality, meaning we all see things a little differently, then we all have different perceptions of reality. So if everyone has a different version of reality, what is mine? My reality starts the day I

was born in Bridgeport Hospital in Connecticut. I was born at 8am, weighing 8lbs, 14oz, and with a full head of black hair. I was born as the first child and only daughter of Lauren and Eric Kutcher. I then spent the next 15 months as an only child until my younger brother came along. We lived as a family of four on a dead-end street in Milford, Connecticut. I spent my days going to school, playing with my family's chocolate lab, Ruby, and playing with the four kids next door. Eventually, my perception and reality of my childhood start to intertwine. *My brother and I became best friends, inseparable, and spent the next five years just the two of us. Some of my favorite memories of living on this street occurred when it snowed; the plow pushed all the crystal white, sparking snow into a pile. All the kids who lived on the street went sledding and played in the snow together, giggling and laughing, content in our own world. The first five years of my life consisted of the little universe I built on Captain's Walk Street. This reality of mine was peaceful and full of bliss. We were the hallmark perfect American family. A family of four with a dog living in a white house. The kids were full of joy, and we were one happy family. I wouldn't have traded it for anything. Then my whole world came crashing down; at least, that is what my five-year-old brain thought.* In 2011, I got another younger brother and discovered I was moving to California. *My little brain could barely comprehend the new addition to the family, let alone moving across the county to a place I had never been before. But once I moved, I realized how much more my family would grow, along with the smile on my face.*

The summer going into first grade was when my whole family moved to Los Altos Hills, California. I started at a new school, Hausner, where, unlike my last school, everyone was Jewish. This school was a K-8th school that prided itself on community, *and that's exactly what I got from it; a loving family that stuck with me for the eight years I was here.* My grade consisted of 50 kids, and with some kids leaving and some joining as the years passed, my new reality set in for the next

eight years. I have so many memories from this school and time that I could write a book about them, and one, in particular, I would like to share with you. I was in 7th grade, when I had my bat mitzvah [a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony]. *My bat mitzvah was unlike most others in my grade; mine was a bat wedding, as my parents called it. Mine was a destination bat mitzvah in South Carolina, a place that is a second home to my family. I never felt more like a part of a large family than on the day of my bat mitzvah, where almost 200 people came out to celebrate me on one of the most memorable days of my life.* I had chosen an art theme and a color scheme of lilac, purple, and gold. My ceremony was held in front of the plantation house, and everyone gathered in the barn for the party afterward. *I felt so loved and supported when friends and family held me high on a chair, dancing and cheering me on.* This time of my life had its ups and downs, just like when I was up on that chair, but in the end, my time at Hausner and my early 8 years are a part of my reality and a part of me. Hausner taught me so many lessons, and even though I left the school three years ago, *I still feel like I'm a part of the family I built there.*

It was March 2020, *and everyone's reality changed. Covid-19 shut down everyone's world. The things I had been looking forward to since joining the community at Hausner had been taken from me; I lost opportunities like going to Israel, graduating, seeing my friends, and more traditions I had been waiting for since the day I stepped through the front doors of the lower school building.* I now had to change my reality once again to adapt to the new world of Covid. I wasn't yet ready for my reality to change; I thought I had one more year at my beloved school, but life never goes as expected. About two weeks into the Covid lockdown, my family decided to go to South Carolina since it didn't look like reality would be returning to the way it was anytime soon. My new reality consisted of learning through my computer screen. Like many, I fell into a deep depression and never wanted to leave my room. *I felt imprisoned in my house. Every part of my life changed so*

much during those few months. I had lost interest in learning and art (the thing I cherish most), my body had changed, and I was consistently in a spiral of depression and anxiety. This was the darkest part of my life, I would say. Then things started to look up once I moved back home to California at the end of August, and I started high school. I felt like I was beginning to see the light at the end of a very dark tunnel. Freshman year is mostly a blur with online/hybrid learning, getting my mental health on track, and joining a friend group that wasn't the best fit for me. Then, finally, sophomore year came along. This is when my whole life started to look up. I met my best friends, formed a solid friends group, my mental health became healthier, and I was the happiest I had been in a long time. My reality hasn't changed much since then; my friends are the same, I'm happy, and I have rediscovered my love for art and learning. The only major change in my reality since my sophomore year is that I am currently at an art boarding school for a semester in Napa, California. Even with a major change in my reality, it doesn't seem that major. I like to believe that as I have grown up, the shifts in my reality haven't affected me as much as they did when I was little and believed my whole world had come crashing down. I have grown so much as a person since living in Connecticut, and that's what has created my reality today. I have learned that my reality is compiled of all the different perspectives I have on life. I now understand that if I had changed my perspective even once, my reality wouldn't be what it is today.

If there is anything that I want you to take away from my research and story is that reality isn't always what it appears to be. Most of the time, you are standing at an angle that obscures your perception of reality. A personal example of this is my perspective of my body. As I had mentioned before, during Covid, *my body underwent drastic changes*. I don't blame puberty; I gained over 30 pounds, and I started getting stretch marks on my inner thighs. My brain wasn't ready to deal with the *emotional baggage of gaining so much weight*. I wasn't the skinniest kid, and had been

working to lose weight for a long time, but once Covid hit, *all my efforts were thrown out the window*. For a while after that, I gained some *bad habits* that turned into eating disorders and body dysmorphia. I could not see my body as it truly was, and my perception of myself was all negative. I had believed so strongly in my perception that it became my reality. I slowly had to re-educate my brain on what my body actually looked like. I'm still in the process of healing, but if I learned anything from this experience, it's that I had to take a step back and change the angle of my vision so that my perspective was no longer altering my reality.

Finally, as an artist, I understand that art is a beautiful way to understand perspective and reality. *Many artists view their art as an extension of their minds and souls*. Art is a form of expression, and I believe it's the best way to view someone else's reality, which, of course, is based on their perceptions. Everyone's art is different, just as everyone's reality is different. *Observing and analyzing someone's art, you can understand just a small part of their reality*. I tend to draw from my reality in my art. I use inspiration from my past experiences, hopes for the future, and overall emotions to show my views of what my reality is.

Reality does change, it evolves, and our perspectives are the reason for that. Reality and perspective aren't as different as many people might think. We need both reality and perspective to exist because without them both, life as we know it would be different. By simply sharing my version of reality, I came to a stronger understanding of my perspectives and my reality. It was challenging to truly pull apart reality from the perspective because of how intertwined they are. It's important to remember that perceptions are not, in fact, reality. They might be reality, but they might not be reality. If we are not open to the idea that perceptions can change, then they will become facts in our minds and create a false reality. Therefore, we must understand that changing perceptions brings growth and opens our minds.

One last thing I would like to point out. While reading this essay, you probably wondered to yourself why much of the writing is italicized; do you perceive it as strange? They are my way of showing the difference between perspective and reality in my own life. All the sections that are italicized are my perspective of my reality. I invite you to go back and read my essay with this idea in mind and see if it changes your perspective of my reality.

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