

Identity and the Complexity of Knowing and Being Known

An MFA Thesis Statement by Katherine Johnson

My work centers on the question of identity in an attempt to pierce the subjectivity of the self and reveal the true nature of individuality. In “Can Art Fill the Vacuum? Langdon Gilkey states, “Art opens up the truth hidden behind and within the ordinary; it provides a new entrance into reality and pushes us through that entrance...it pierces the opaque subjectivity, the *not* seeing of conventional life, of conventional viewing, and discloses reality.” (Gilkey) It is the goal of my work to disclose the reality of identity and perception and their roles in human relationships. Too often we focus on the exterior—the conventions of daily life—and hide from our internal realities because they are complex, difficult, uncomfortable to define. I want to examine the nature of the individual both from a concrete, physical, external standpoint and from an internal, mental, emotional and spiritual one. By revealing the intricate ways that we construct our own identities and our perceptions of the identities of others, I am dissecting the essence of what it means to be human.

Human beings are extremely complex in that we live an internal life of thought, emotions, and spirituality. Identity is often seen as a collection of personality traits or something that can be defined by our relationships with others and positions in the world. All of these things are a part of identity, and they can certainly have a great impact on who we are and who we will become, but I believe that identity is more than just a series of measurable traits. Each individual human being is a soul, a personal essence that transcends many roles and situations. My purpose in creating this series was to explore identity and individuality in pursuit of the question, “what makes us who we are?”

In my work, identity is closely related to perception and personal psychological state. I believe that a person’s own reality is defined as much by his or her own mental state as it is by

concrete physical surroundings. One of the primary questions in my work is whether or not the basis for identity is found in self-perception. I believe that self-perception, and by extension psychological state, are integral to the way we *perceive* our identity, but I do not believe that they necessarily define identity. Because of watching several loved ones succumb to Alzheimer's disease, and my own personal struggles with anxiety and depression, I have been greatly concerned with questions about the role of mental state in identity.

In some of my paintings, most notably *My Bed in the Depths*, I have begun to explore the loss of identity due to mental and emotional states. Even milder forms of depression, anxiety, and mental illness can rob an individual of self-image. Although these conditions are not things that we generally want to identify ourselves with, they are a reality for many people, and their relationship to identity cannot be ignored. Even a relationship with another person who suffers from mental illness can change the way we perceive ourselves. My question is, if a person's self-perception changes, is it their identity that changes or only their understanding of that identity? I believe that there is an essence of identity within each person that transcends illness and psychological distress, but psychological, spiritual, and emotional balance can greatly affect the way an individual identity develops over time.

For some, the dark corners of the mind are ever pressing inward, blurring the line between nightmare and reality. For others, these secret spaces have a more subtle effect, slowly eroding self-perceptions, placing censors here and there, or causing a slightly irrational fear of spiders or heights. We like to assign these irrationalities to the insane, or at least the atypical, but it is my belief that in one way or another, everyone has perceptions that violate the socially accepted norm of reality. As Susanne Antonetta says in her book *A Mind Apart: Travels in a Neurodiverse World*, "Even those I meet who don't have a syndrome you could find in the DSM-IV, the manual doctors use to assign disorders of the mind, reveal to me inner lives of

honeycomb intricacy, bitterness and sweetness: judges' chambers, elevators inside." (Antonetta 2)

I was first introduced to Gestalt theory in a visual communications class as an undergraduate student. "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts," a simple, yet profound statement. In terms of visual processing, Gestalt theory is the idea that our minds will always try to create visual connections between objects. This is the reason that humans have seen constellations in the night sky for thousands of years, our eyes see scattered points of light and our minds seek connections between them. The connections created by the mind are what give the constellation greater meaning than a random collection of stars.

Gestalt theory goes far beyond visual perception, however. Every living organism can be said to have its own gestalt, or organic balance. In other words, the parts of an organism work together to promote the well being of the whole. When one part is out of balance, all of the parts suffer, and the organism must rebalance its system of functioning or ultimately it will die. This balance between the parts of the individual is the ideal state of the personal Gestalt. In order for the whole to be truly greater than the sum of the parts, those parts must intertwine. It is the interaction between parts that expands the greater meaning of the organism as a whole. In the same way, a person's identity can be understood to have a gestalt quality. One individual may have many facets and fill many roles, all of which are part of the greater whole of that individual's identity.

From a visual standpoint, I want to express this idea of gestalt as a metaphor for the facets of identity and for the way we view the world and experience others. I am interested in the idea of fragmentation as a means for expressing human modes of perception and interaction. We are ruled by gestalt principles in that we rarely perceive wholes, but rather discern an overall view from pieces of experience. We are constantly combining fragments of information in an

attempt to create a cohesive view of reality. By presenting extremely cropped figures, I am showing an incomplete piece that the human mind naturally wants to complete because of gestalt perception. In addition, the architectural imagery layered in the backgrounds of my images is presented as repeating fragments that allude to rather than depict an overall environment. The viewer is forced to mentally construct his own picture of both the figure and the environment, therefore applying gestalt principles of visual perception.

The applied photographic images in my paintings also serve as layers of information, mirroring the way I perceive the self—as complex and multifaceted. They are transparent in some areas and opaque in others, both veiling and revealing information. I have also chosen to apply the paint in very thin layers, building up the color with subtle glazes to evoke the ethereal and mysterious nature of identity. I want the viewer to have enough information to be intrigued by the state of the figure and understand that there is more information underneath the surface without revealing everything on one level. Like the identities that they represent, my paintings are multilayered.

Our minds are in constant flux, changing and growing, constantly adjusting to new information. With every new thought, experience, and emotion, we add to our own personal Gestalt identity, creating a chain reaction that influences the ways that the innumerable parts of our self-interact with one another. It is true that some people seek to deceive and hide behind constructed personality masks, but even a healthy, balanced individual will have to adapt to different roles. This adaptation is necessary for personal safety, both physically and emotionally, and for maintaining social constructs. It would be inappropriate and nonsensical for an individual to behave the same way at a job interview as she did at home with a spouse, or even a close personal friend. Social norms dictate how we must act in public versus private situations, and our interactions with others vary based on the role we play in each relationship. One woman may be

a mother, a sister, and a daughter, and each one of these roles requires a different facet of her identity to take precedence. All of these roles will also be very different from her other roles as a professional, a citizen, and a member of her community. These differences are not indications that she is inconsistent, but rather they reveal the complexity of her identity. It is only by understanding that the entire gestalt of her personality extends beyond these individual roles, that we can begin to understand her as a whole person.

Because of the gestalt nature of the self, it is impossible to know another person completely. With each interaction, a fragmental experience is exchanged, and perceptions are formed. Over time, we come to “know” others by assembling the fragments of their personages into an overall impression of that individual as a whole being. However, no matter how familiar two people are to one another, each still experiences a personal, inner reality of thought and emotion that the other is not privy to. Even the most open, honest person could not be fully known by another human being because even if he desired to share every part of himself, it would be physically impossible. In reality, we are limited in our experiences of one another not only by the physical limitations of the humanness, but also by conscious and subconscious self-censure and veiling of our complete identities. The caution that we apply to interactions with others creates additional barriers to the deep knowing of one another. Not every relationship is meant to operate on an intimate level, but it is my belief that the desire to be known, and even understood by someone outside ourselves is an inextricable part of the human experience.

Although the expression of the personal desire to be known may change with culture, time, and social station, some form of this need can be documented throughout the history of the written word. A profound and revealing example of this concept can be seen in the Hebrew book of Psalms, found in the Christian Old Testament. At the beginning of Psalm 139, David, the author of the Psalm, states, “O LORD, you have searched me [thoroughly] and have known me.”

Then, in verse 23, he presents a plea, “Search me [thoroughly], O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!” (Amplified Bible, Psalm 139:1, 23) This passage serves as an example of the desire to be known, and in fact goes beyond the desire for mere human interaction, but extends to a yearning to be seen and understood completely—by the only one capable of knowing his every thought, the omniscient God. Even in this ancient text, there is an understanding that it is impossible to be known by another human being in such an all-encompassing way.

In sharp contrast to the human desire to be known, however, is the fear of being made vulnerable by what is revealed. There is an interesting dichotomy that forms between the human desire for connection and the desire for protection. The more we are known by others, the more we become vulnerable to them. So, we experience deep, personal interaction as something that we both fear and crave. Even my previous example, Psalm 139, expresses discomfort at being exposed on such a profound level. “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (NIV, Psalm 139:7) *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* further points out this reaction, “139:5-6. David’s initial response to this staggering knowledge was that he was troubled...The thought of such confining knowledge (v.1-6) may have prompted David’s desire to escape, as verses 7-12 suggest.” (Walvoord 891) In Psalm 139, David’s desire to be known ultimately overcame his fear at the vulnerability of such a state as evidenced by his plea to be known at the end of the Psalm. However, the individual’s battle between the need for connection and the instinct of self-preservation continues.

Because we are constantly wavering between the revealed and concealed elements of ourselves, it can become difficult to even connect with our own identities on a personal level, let alone relate intimately with others. In many cases, there is a disconnect between the public and the private self, and this disassociation of the self can lead to true identity being lost

completely—dissolving into the fragmented pieces of the public self. There is a kind of theatricality to the expression of identity on the public level. For this reason, I compose my images within a fairly shallow space. The figures are posed against a relatively flat, although multilayered, background. In some of my paintings, the figure is bold and forward facing, suggesting an intentional sense of self-presentation. In others, the figure is caught in a more private moment, and the shallow, cropped space serves to emphasize the intimate, and sometimes even oppressive, situation.

As time passes, we are continually bombarded with a myriad of choices, and it is in our choosing to make decisions or even avoid them that our gestalt identities are developed. By using architectural imagery involving doors, window, and staircases, I am evoking the constant state of decision that is the human condition. With each turn, another layer is added to the self. These layers hinder us and help us, lending experience, wisdom, and growth or creating personal obstacles that we must overcome. And even indecision becomes a decision in the path of life because it results in not choosing possible alternatives. Good or bad, uplifting or discouraging, this process is at the core of the human experience and cannot be avoided, yet we often are ignorant or avoidant of the effect it has on our lives.

I view each painting as a stage, set with props, scenery, characters and lighting. Looking at Dutch genre painting has influenced my choices in the way I view a scene as well as my tendency toward dramatic lighting. Unlike traditional genre painting, however, the rooms in my work are not physical spaces but psychological ones. My use of figures is also intended to highlight the psychological nature of my images. Genre painters chose to show images of everyday activity, but my work represents the genre of the mind—mental, internal activities rather than physical, external ones. I believe that the human figure offers a greater level of

emotional and psychological expression than almost any other subject, but I also want viewers to relate to my work on a personal level, experiencing a moment as if it were a personal memory.

By choosing parts of the figure that are expressive but difficult to identify as a particular individual, I am creating a form of portrait that is familiar but vague. The individual becomes a metaphor that could represent any number of people. Using a fragmented figure also helps to emphasize the internalization of the spaces in my work. The distortion and incompleteness of the body mirrors the complex, ethereal, and often incomplete nature of thought. Our thoughts are always turning in on themselves. Simple processing of a thought quickly turns to obsession and self-limitation. We are either actively involved in an attempt to emotionally escape from personal demons or complacently surveying our thoughts as if disconnected from them. Many of the figures in my paintings attempt to present a controlled version of themselves, but yet they are unstable. They are anonymous in their veiled personas, and yet made vulnerable by the intimacy of the image and put at risk by the choices they must face in their surroundings.

Surrealism has also had an influence in my painting because of the surrealists' emphasis on the psychological. The surrealist paintings of Rene Magritte, in particular, have influenced the way that I present my images. Magritte's use of common objects and scenes presented in an unusual way has become a catalyst for me in the way I interpret imagery. Although I do not use Magritte's juxtaposition of images, I do use unusual perspective, expressive figures, changing eye level, and emotionally based color to achieve a similar psychological effect. For me, color is one of the strongest factors in creating an emotional response to a painting. By choosing colors that evoke an emotional and psychological state, I am expressing the tension inherent in the position of each figure. In some cases the tension is subtler, emphasizing the quiet struggles that erode the mind, while other images represent intense, emotional battles through the use of more vibrant color.

By presenting the figure in unusual, even slightly disturbing, ways, I am forcing the viewer to raise questions. Through my paintings, the viewer experiences glimpses of others, a metaphor for the way we interact in daily life. In the case some of my images, however, the viewer experiences moments that might not normally be witnessed by another person. I wanted to create images that are familiar and yet somewhat awkward in their familiarity. They are the moments of awkwardness, uncertainty, or self-doubt that are common to the human experience, and yet uncomfortable to witness. Because the figures are made ambiguous through cropping and stylization, viewers can identify with my images on a personal, emotional level—experiencing the partial figures as a reflection of someone they know, or possibly even a reflection of themselves. These are not representations of one individual, but rather reflections of the nature of identity and the common threads that unite us within our individuality.

In the end, my paintings are an exploration of the human mind in all its complexity. I believe that we cannot understand the world around us unless we first understand ourselves, and so my work is an examination of human nature, thought, and emotion. Through the process of creating this series, my work has become a voyage into my own thought processes and the way I view the world. I have begun to view identity less as being and more as becoming, and I hope that this body of work will encourage viewers to further examine the way they view themselves and others.

Bibliography

- Antonetta, Susanne. *A Mind Apart: Travels in a Neurodiverse World*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Comparative Study Bible, Revised Edition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999.
- Gilkey, Langdon. "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?" *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*. Ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.
- Keenan, Julian Paul, Gordon G. Gallup Jr., and Dean Falk. *The Face in The Mirror*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- Latner, Joel. *The Gestalt Therapy Book*. New York: Julian Press, 1973.
- Ross, Stephen David, ed. *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*. 3rd ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Walvoord, John F. and Roy B. Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. USA: SP Publications, Inc., 1985.





































