

# Thesis Statement

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Coping with life is part of our existence as humans. This is an emotional process, affecting each individual differently. In many ways, it can be described as an elaborate act, a play of sorts; in others, a survival tactic that maintains order and control. I believe both instances of these methods of coping can have positive outcomes.

The majority of my creative ideas were influenced through fairytales, fantasy video games, and a variety of fantastical stories. As a student of art on the college level, I took these stories and creatures into my work with influences from Art Nouveau. Fairies, mermaids, and realms were the subjects of several early series of paintings. I have found the work of Connecticut based artist Michael Shapcott to be profoundly influential to my art making over the years. Though my techniques and executions are far different from his, I am drawn to the basis of his work that is grounded in the deeper aspects of human emotion and implied collective narratives from myth and folklore. I find the work of painters such as Bruce Riley Alyssa Monks to be greatly influential especially in my recent body of work. Finding ways to combine both abstraction and a “natural” representation of the human figure are explored in Monks’ paintings. Riley’s use of epoxy resin to create transparent and translucent floating layers in his paintings is what ultimately led me to begin using resin in my own work.

Through the exploration of these motifs, I was led to masks. We all wear “masks” daily for various reasons, and in some ways, it is necessary. The concept of “masking” the true self is something that is well known by nearly every human being. Further investigation of these themes has revealed that “masking” true emotions is a coping mechanism that allows a person to either maintain or perceive control in their life.

The preface to my current body of work was my father’s cancer diagnosis in May of 2011. Recognizing how I managed my own anxiety along with the complexities,

intricacies, and manifestations of that malady influenced my work as well. It was one simple statement that set the gears in my head turning for a completely different series of work. While my father was hospitalized, my siblings and I would sit with him in shifts. While leaving the hospital one day on the way to pick up my brother for his “shift,” my mother said in exasperation, “I’m so tired of putting on the mask.” As vague as that statement sounded, I understood what she meant. Putting up a fearless façade in the face of doctors and others on the outside was becoming a 24-hour act. It became more or less a means of survival in order to go on living daily. However, while I was made acutely aware of the “mask” myself and others in my family were wearing at that specific time, it became clear to me as I watched my father die that I had been preparing myself for his death for nearly a decade. We were his caretakers, and each year brought a new decline in his physical health.

The creative process for me evolved from an escape to a cathartic experience. A piece of literature that became inspiring at that time was *We Wear the Mask* by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, particularly the opening lines “We wear the mask that grins and lies/it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes” (Dunbar). I began to associate pattern with most immediately with fabric which costumes and masks I was using, which brought me to think about pattern and fabric near and clothing. I’ve since moved on from the historically based imagery to continue to remove myself from that specific context and the loaded issues that exist within various cultures to pursue the emotional and psychological aspects of coping.

Following the *Masquarde* series, I decided to focus on the abstract nature of emotion by removing the figure and only using elements of design (shape, color, line, pattern). I used cut paper forms to demonstrate the movement of emotion from high

charged and saturated with color, to static and dull. While I was not limited to the four corners of a traditional picture plane with this series, I found that by removing the figure from the work, particularly the face, I had removed a crucial signifier in understanding my work. I have recently reintroduced the figure in my most recent series of paintings, focusing only upon the face.

The face is a surface: facial traits, lines, wrinkles; long face, square face, triangular face; the face is a map, even when it is applied to and wraps a volume, even when it surrounds and borders cavities that are now no more than holes. The head, even the human head, is not necessarily a face. The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code—when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be overcoded by something we shall call the Face (Deleuze, Guattari).

The portraits I began to use in these pieces were not meant to represent any specific person or people group, rather humanity as a whole. Therefore, the expressions of the faces of these figures are neither threatening nor inviting. They were to be viewed as pensive and introverted; facing the viewer, yet clearly not comprehending him/her for his or her own thoughts. The purpose of both the first set and current set of paintings in this body of work is hidden external, to visually articulate how swallowed fears and anxieties would appear if made into tangible objects. My painting process also follows the idea of covering and layers. I work primarily in watercolor and other water-based media. The delicate layers of the translucent paint and resin create a barrier between the viewer and what lies beneath the surface. Patterning and layering have become important in my work to express that somewhat invisible but opulent barrier in which we hide. The patterning serves as a metaphor of the wall or “veil” that goes up as protection from scrutiny or fear of weakness.

With the inclusion of repeated patterns in the paintings I have strayed from using patterning that is reminiscent of any specific cultural narratives or symbolism and

developed a set of my own. These patterns look may appear to be familiar to a viewer, but only in the way that they simply mimic the human fingerprint or loop/whorl pattern in which human hair grows. In addition to the patterning, I alter the smooth surface of the pieces with resin drips and pouring. When light passes through these drips, the portrait in the layers beneath the resin is interrupted. I begin with washes of watercolor that I build up to increase color saturation. Over this, I use colored pencil to flesh out the figure's skin tone and facial details. The only other part of the body shown in this series is the neck, which I have made uniform in each piece: yellow-green with a hand drawn thumbprint pattern flatly placed on top. Behind the head of the figure is a colored disc. Although in art history, a flat disc behind the head of a figure was regarded as a holy symbol, its *additional* function is to represent a person's aura (my reasoning for including it is the latter definition). Once the portrait is completed, I screenprint a transparent thumbprint pattern directly onto the piece and cover the surface with a coating of clear epoxy resin.

More transparent screen-printed patterns are printed in between layers of the resin, before the piece is completed. All of the pieces contain at least three layers of resin to achieve the correct amount of layering.

Through my exploration of media to create a visually active surface, I have begun giving my paintings an actual tactile surface. In an effort to layer even more pattern and color into the shallow surfaces of these paintings I began to mimic my linear patterns with circles of water and wax based glues. The water based glues reactivate liquid watercolor and actually tone the base color when dried again. Over resin, the water-based glues dry clear, but patterns are visible through the refraction of light passing though the interrupted smooth surface of the resin. The wax based glue, which is glue-gun adhesive, cools and hardens into a semi-translucent finish. Under resin, it is milky and very subtle. However

over resin it is cloudy and has enough surface area to throw shadows over other parts of the piece's surface.

Like the linear screen-printed patterns, the tactile versions represent the active thought processes of the anxious mind. Yet, unlike previous pieces that relied only on the linear patterning, these pieces appear subtler from a distance. My reason for designing this series of work with less complicated compositions was to more accurately represent the nature of anxiety and the metaphorical “masking” to hide it. The portraits in this series of work are more obscured and are uniform in features. This choice was made for two reasons: the face, as explained by Deluze, is heavily coded. As humans we are wired to look for faces in everything, and try to assign it an identity. Individual identity is not important to my work, therefore I felt that it did not make much sense conceptually to create individualized portraits for each piece. I felt that the portraits, though they were created from composite source imagery, drew too much attention to themselves as individualized creatures, so they have been rendered uniformly. The second reason to obscure the visages even more than in the previous series' is to portray the deluge of anxiety, worry, and frustration that can quickly envelope a person.

The purpose of these layered paintings of both pattern and resin on top of the painted and drawn portrait is to make the internal (fears, anxiety, hope, etcetera) visible. According to Erving Goffman, how a person's true or real attitudes, beliefs, and emotions are only ascertained through expressive behavior (intentional or otherwise) (Goffman). This means that the act of ‘stuffing’ emotions down is an expression of behavior leading others to believe the opposite of what is truly felt by the individual. Though there are certainly behaviors that cannot be acted upon in public life for numerous reasons, I find

that couching emotional responses to be intriguing. A piece of literature that best depicts this notion is this scene from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*:

'Now you see,' said the turtle, drifting back into the pond, 'why it is useless to cry. Your tears do not wash away your sorrows. They feed someone else's joy. And that is why you must learn to swallow your own tears' (Tan. 217).

In my own experience as caregiver, this statement could never be truer, both nurturing and somewhat destructive at once. From this standpoint, there is a degree of self-prescribed isolation. Whether or not this isolation is necessary depends entirely upon the situation a person must face. Yet from my own experience as a caregiver the resulting product of denying oneself of emotional responses is often profound isolation and even loneliness. The juxtaposition of helping oneself to move on with life at an expense of self-fulfillment (at times) is the driving force behind these works. From this standpoint, there is a degree of self-prescribed isolation. Whether or not this isolation is necessary depends entirely upon the situation a person must face. Yet from my own experience as a caregiver the resulting product of denying oneself of emotional responses is often profound isolation and even loneliness.

Loneliness is a subjective and negative experience, and the outcome of a cognitive evaluation of the match between the quantity and quality of existing relationships and relationship standards. The opposite of loneliness is belongingness or embeddedness (Dijkstra, 486).

It is for that reason I have chosen to depict my figures as solitary in their environments. Loneliness has negative connotations and lonely people are stigmatized, thus making talking about the subject of isolation embarrassing for fear of displaying a weakness in character (Dijkstra, 487). The fear of revealing the loneliness that comes from

the solitude of couching emotional responses leads to the emotional masking discussed previously.

Outside of “emotional stuffing” or masking, we most often see people handling emotional stress from difficult situations (or the stress of not knowing how to manage one’s emotions) by turning to substance abuse or methods of controlling the body through diet and exercise. On the opposite end of the spectrum, channeling stress into productivity has proven to be not positive, but a successful coping method.

Again, though this is a universal subject, it is possible to experience a level of social interaction that is both stimulating and alienating at the same time: each experience is subjective. Overall, this is a long-standing criticism of both modern and contemporary society due to the advent of technologies. I believe that technology is not entirely to blame for the nagging sense of isolation and melancholy that seems to permeate our culture. Socially isolated persons are not necessarily lonely, and lonely persons are not necessarily socially isolated in an objective sense (Dijkstra, 486).

To be entirely blunt, we *are* solitary creatures by default who *need* interaction, but our contemporary society has become so enamored with increasing ways to interact with others that people are no longer fully able to understand themselves on an emotional level, and thus we have isolation. Eventually prolonged periods of intense stress will give rise to a coping method. It is physically impossible to remain in a constant state of heightened stress or anxiety. Something *must* happen. Whether an individual chooses to fly, freeze, or fight, the stress will in or way or another decrease.

Prolonged periods of intense stress will give rise to a coping method eventually. In this specific area of coping, however, the intense stress of the situation can give rise to positive moments and outcomes. Although fascinating, this aspect of emotional well-being



is not studied as often as negative emotion because they are “assumed lower priority... as a result their association with problems and dangers, negative emotions have captured most research attention” (Fredrickson, 1368). In a study performed at the University of California-San Francisco in 2000, “a significant increase in problem-focused coping by caregivers during the weeks leading up to a partner’s death, a period of profound lack of control” (Folkman, 116). The caregiver, not wanting to feel completely helpless, would be motivated to continue caring for the loved one with even more focus and determination, “this coping mechanism involves creating a positive psychological time-out by infusing ordinary events with positive meaning” (Folkman, 116).

The conclusion of this study found that although there were obvious negative stressors on the caregivers, there were just as many positive events. These moments of sudden and awe inspiring beauty in the midst of chaos is what I am attempting to depict in my work. I can best describe it as “the eye of the storm,” a moment of perfect calm in the midst of a tragically destructive storm. It’s those moments that are most often committed to memory. In fact, in some situations, positive emotions have the power to undo whatever negativity is present. This theory is called the “undo hypothesis” (Fredrickson, 1371). It was discovered in a study performed at the University of Michigan in 2000 that people who experience a positive influence, that case a positive film after viewing one sad and one emotional neutral film, physically had a faster cardiovascular recovery to their normal state than those who had not viewed the positive film. Physical manifestations of emotional stress, while uncomfortable, are not sustainable. This is why it is possible for the “undo hypothesis” to exist.

Resilience was also taken in consideration following the study, the head researcher noting, “positive emotions might help people place the events in their lives in broader

context, lessening the resonance of any particular negative event” (Fredrickson, 1371). In further investigation of the use of positive emotions during crises, research also revealed Strikingly, resilient people not only cultivate positive emotions in themselves to cope, but they are also skilled at eliciting positive emotions in others” (Fredrickson, 1372). The final remarks in the study of positive emotions came to this statement:

“When positive emotions are in short supply, people get stuck. They lose their degrees of behavioral freedom and become painfully predictable. But when positive emotions are in ample supply, people take off. They become generative, creative, resilient, ripe with possibility and beautifully complex” (Fredrickson, 1375).

These experiences in our lives that excite positive and negative emotions can lead to resiliency. Though it’s well known that there are plenty of destructive, unhealthy, and dangerous coping strategies associated with emotional turmoil, I believe to think that there are an equal amount of positive experiences that can be gathered. It is these experiences that give us growth of character, a will to live. These are the experiences I hope to convey in my work.

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