

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

The Performative Portrait

by

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I examine my two years of research culminating towards my thesis exhibition. The paper shows the development of my work within the framework of the portrait. I discuss my artistic production with analysis of concept, process and my relationship with the history of portraiture. Central to my thesis exhibition installation is the concept of performance and engagement in an experience. My work examines the role of the viewer and the function of perception through the visual theme of the 'performative'. My installation pieces are intended to describe the sincerity of my relationship with my model and mediums as well as alter the gallery space into a stage with which the viewer participates. This suggests an encouragement of the viewer to participate in an interpretation and reaction.

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**This thesis is dedicated to my parents for their unconditional love and support.**

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## **Introduction**

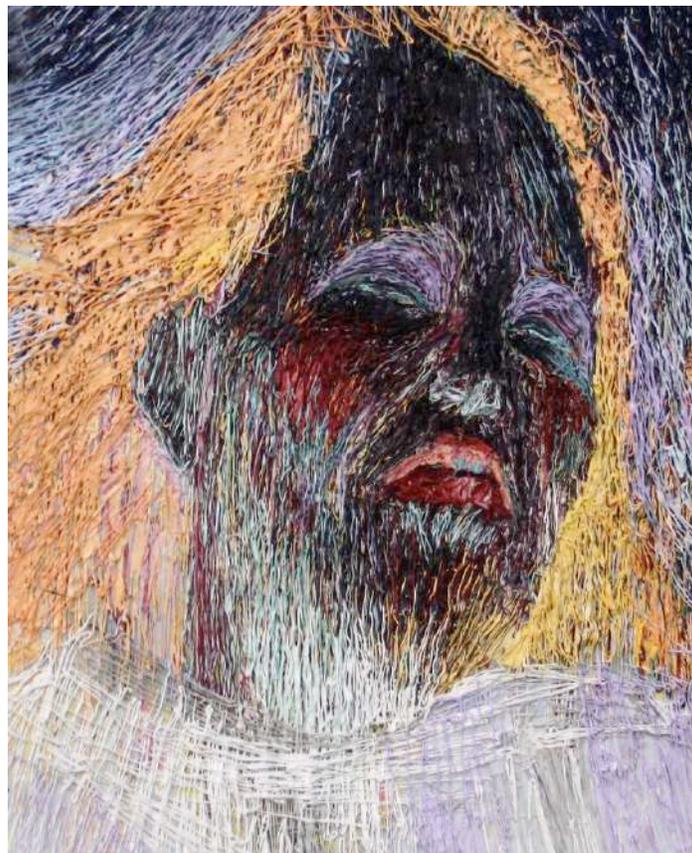
Portraiture has a rich history of artistic devices, modes of representation and technical innovation. Central to my approach is the notion of the performative in portraiture as it pertains to new modes of creating expression and possibilities of interaction with the viewer. In this paper, I will be addressing my thesis work as it relates to performance by describing the relationship with my model, the notion of staging, materials as aids to performance and the role of the audience. By investigating the development of these interactions I will examine the role of the viewer and the function of enactive perception. By enactive perception I mean the engagement-driven process by which the viewer experiences the drawing, painting or installation<sup>1</sup>.

My use of symbolic imagery, ritual and drama signifies personal relationships as well as recognizing the audience as an active character. My work addresses the collective physical space or 'stage' that is occupied by individuals and communities of people, for example a nation, a bus, a home or a theatre: in this instance the gallery space. My work focuses on the importance of these shared spaces and the importance of their shared-ness. Our interactions and engagement with our personal psyche, social surroundings and physical environments are constantly at play with one another, each influencing and informing the other. Through internal and external dialogue there is a cycle of interpretation. This space creates an experience for collective identity that exceeds the sum of all individual viewers. There is a symbolic dialogue that happens within a collective of viewers that takes on an identity all its own. Photographs documenting the time spent with my model inform the artistic re-enactment and performance that include drawing, painting, screen-print and installation based modes of portraiture. The work transports the viewer to an imaginary space in which he or she is obliged to react in a performative manner. The role of

the viewer then becomes the role of the actor.

The context of the performative is also linked to the viewer's exertion of enactive perception, a term used by philosopher Alva Noë. The way of perceiving, constructing meaning, and experiencing my work is achieved through a visual exploration. Through enactive perception, and the process of my work eliciting a response in the audience, the viewer attains a particular vantage point and unique role.

Throughout my two years of research in my MFA program, my studio work has referenced my engagement with model. My earliest work includes *Mona* (2011), *Grams* (2011) and *Scrap* (2011). These paintings reflect upon my routine with my long-term model Donna and



**Figure 1.** *Mona*

my Grandmother against the backdrop of an expressionistic artist studio environment. These paintings were produced through the squeezing of threads of paint through plastic bags. The process involves the penetration of a clear plastic or quasi-invisible border with a needle which leads to the unification of a multitude of energetic and forceful colors. The resulting images appear as sculptural reliefs of the interior of faces. The threads of paint emulate strings of tissue or muscle, although intense and acidic in color. These works recorded the physical performance in my studio, by highlighting the laborious process of squeezing threads of paint into three inches of layers on a canvas.

*Queen* (2012) and *Donna* (2012) are two large-scale charcoal portraits that reference my recurring relationship with Donna and the various theatrical stagings. In both works I use a symbolic crown as a costume prop that signifies status and symbolism. In *Queen*, I reference the exterior outdoor setting. The drawing is from a photo of Donna's reflection in the water puddles on the street. The theme of reflection in water can also be related to the Greek myth Narcissus. Identity can be formed by reflection and is status driven – this echoes the Narcissus myth. The

world is a reflection of our selves, perception of our selves, and our desires. By physically rehashing the charcoal drawing with erasers and sandpaper I present tracings of the inscriptions. With *Donna*, the drawing depicts a harlequin pattern within the crown. The harlequin pattern is a sign that is repeated through a number of my works. It calls attention to the performer, stage and theatre.

*Widow* (2012) is a charcoal drawing inscribed directly onto the surface of my studio wall then cut out and placed in the gallery. The piece addresses the way in which Donna is set up in a theatrical context. Donna was costumed in a widow's veil (another motif that is repeated through many works). The drawing on the actual studio wall documents and is indexical of the

performance of drawing over several sessions. It also records the history of the wall's usage — the re-paintings, the nails and tack holes, and various dents and ruptures. The drawing is re-contextualized by its removal from the studio wall, and placement in a new space. Being in a public space is quite different from the intimate setting of the studio; it suggests that the work and its immediate space can be transformed by its location.

My later thesis work moved into the realm of installation, because I wanted to investigate notions of a shared theatrical space between viewer and installation. By introducing the idea of a 'stage' through installation, I want to include the audience as performer. Alva Noë uses the term enactive perception to describe a form of experience that rejects traditional ideas of perception concerning the re-presentation of the external world internally. Performance and theatre exemplify the fundamental philosophy of enactive perception by accessing visual information through movement, time and space. Previous works reveal my performance as a painter, draughtsman and actor. By moving towards installation, I propose additional ideas about how others can be included in the theatrical context of the performance and how broader, exterior environments can be infused into the gallery and studio. For example, in a site specific work entitled *Eli* (2012), I composed a portrait of soil and snow on the steps and backyard of my family's home. I made the piece by manipulating the snow with my hands and a rake, adding large amounts of garden soil for tonality. Tracings of my performance exist in the hand-thrown dirt on the snow. The setting becomes at the same time an artist's studio and domestic location. In contrast, *Ashes* (2013) transforms the interior gallery space into a theatrical set co-occupied with the audience. The work comprises flour and black paint as both sculptural and drawn portions. A cone-like shape or half-pile of flour connects with the drawn portrait on the wall, depicting Donna as a widow. The time-limited installation mirrors a theatrical production which becomes an event

that shifts slightly over time and which has a finite viewing potential. The widow-themed imagery plays on the notion of *memento mori*. In contrast to the previous piece *Eli* which addressed beginnings, this piece clearly points to endings.

In my thesis exhibition, my interests in enactive perception, installative modes of portraiture and the performative come together in a piece entitled *Pearl Dust*. *Pearl Dust* uses a similar pile of flour as *Ashes*. The re-imagined portrait is of Donna wearing a mask in harlequin face paint. The tears from her eyes connect to the two piles of flour situated on the gallery floor. The conical mounds of flour blend into the harlequin patterning in the portrait and create the illusion that the flat surface of the wall is being opened and connected to the physical space occupied by the viewer. *Pearl Dust* also focuses on themes of social, internal and contextual interaction and engagement. *Pearl Dust* displays an engagement between installation, viewer and gallery context. This situates the audience in a theatrical setting whereby the viewer's become active characters or performers. A trompe l'oeil effect of Pearl Dust has the portrait on the wall oozing through the frame and onto the gallery floor; the tears in the portrait initiate on the wall and materialize as residue (flour) on the floor. The harlequin portrait functions as a theatrical and performance-driven symbol, supported by the references to the hourglass, ornate frame and immense scale.



**Figure 2. *Queen***



**Figure 3. *Donna***



**Figure 4. *Widow***



Figure 5. *Eli*

## Chapter 1: The Genre of Portraiture

Representations of individuals have existed within the context of ritual, performance and social structure from the beginnings of portrait history in western civilization, not to mention other cultural sites and historic locations. Portraiture in Egypt, Rome and later on in the Renaissance was very much linked to the idea of recognition: the recognizable as well as idealization. Portraits of Egyptian royalty were placed on tombs or coffins, and existed as early as the 3rd century A.D. Political figures and wealthy aristocrats used portraiture as a means to establish their places in the social hierarchy. These historical portraits conveyed the performance in life as it related to class, royalty and social distinction. In contrast, artists such as Honore Daumier, Francisco Goya, Diego Velasquez and Vincent Van Gogh introduced ideas of portraiture of the everyday subject and performance of day-to-day life within a contemporary and modern setting. Through the depiction of everyday theatre and roles – birth, performance, matrimony and death – my work references these notions of status, ritual and societal positions. For instance, *Iron* (2012), is a black and white photograph that features Donna in a costume: a tiara and a crinoline shawl. It focuses on the theatre of the everyday, the domestic and routine. This is contrasted by Donna's queen outfit and the performance of ironing in a modern home setting, calling attention to 'roles' of class and society.

In the 19th century there would also be a shift, in portraiture and elsewhere, from an iconic to indexical approach, where the body of the painter was left through applied marks. This would bring attention particularly to the tracings and application of the medium being used rather than just to the representation of the subject.<sup>2</sup>

By the early 20th century, Expressionism altered the portraiture genre and introduced new concepts of painterly intuition, insight and performance. The performance of the artist was

represented through emotive, physical traces of artistic execution. It was the artist who conveyed drama within a studio or social environment. With certain Expressionistic artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Egon Schiele, the studio and model were often the primary subject of the painting, drawing or print. Painters as such were less concerned with conveying an exact likeness of their subject than they were in portraying feelings through physical paint application. Exact representation of a subject was no longer the mark of a completed portrait. The actual appearance of the subject would be a starting point for an exaggerated depiction in every possible way — manipulating the color, proportions and texture. With a departure from creating a realistic three-



**Figure 6. *Iron***

dimensional likeness, in exchange for liberties taken by the artist, Expressionist performances became largely defined as a form of self-portraiture, regardless of the subject being portrayed, and reflected the physical performance of the artist in studio.<sup>3</sup> German Expressionists such as Otto Dix, Oscar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele further sought to explore the world around them, exposing the societal and cultural maladies of a country between the wars.

The performative stage in portraiture would continue particularly in the photographic medium later in the twentieth century. The relationship between artist, stage and subject plays a defining role in the photographs produced by Diane Arbus, situated in New York from the 1950s to the 1970s, and by contemporary artist Joel-Peter Witkin. People with disabilities, mental and physical illness, those in transsexual communities, along with corpses, were among the subjects who evoked trauma and tragedy in Arbus's work. The sense of death, tragedy and horror is embellished in Witkin's work through the use of added props and meticulous stagings of his subjects. Unlike Arbus, who mainly photographed her subjects in their natural habitat and physical state, Witkin uses the studio stage to position his human subjects – usually deceased – in particular poses which arouse elevated levels of discomfort and tension in the viewer.

My connection to expressionistic portraiture is important in order to further articulate the relevance and implications of the modern portrait within a contemporary context. My art practice focuses on different techniques of applying a medium to suggest the performance of making, as well as alternative considerations of how the portrait occupies a particular space. These essential aspects to my work are influenced, informed, inspired and depend on the on-going history of the portrait genre. The psychological and emotional aspects of an individual's psyche are what make people my preferred subject. The appearance of one's flesh and mental state offers infinite possibilities of artistic representation. This demands constant engagement with my subject and

self. I am curious of individual's sense of consciousness and how these feelings - sometimes similar but often vastly different - are communicated to one another. The relationship with my human subject and the creation of the portrait allows for me to investigate this.

## Chapter 2: The Model

The relationship to my model is fundamental in that it affects the outcome of my work. My portraits are of people I know personally, engage with, and of whom I have an understanding. The individual being captured in portraiture, either photographed, drawn or painted, brings about their own temperament and feeling, largely a culmination of their internal dialogue, which in turn affects the relationship with myself. One can view the exchange which occurs between artist and human subject as a form of improvised theatre. I am viewing, interpreting and responding to the subject during photographic sessions, and when using the photos in subsequent works. While the role of the subject could be regarded as the performance, the actions of the artist are an additional performance. The subject's mood and feeling is influenced by the live performance of the artist, which in turn influences the feeling of the artist. It is a circular form of imitation which is dependent on trust and understanding. For this to occur organically without false, preconceived or disguised attitudes – from myself or model – there is essential importance on a trusting relationship, which encourages openness in the moment. This is not unlike the relationship I must have with myself throughout the development of my work and handling of my materials. It is necessary to engage, with uncompromising honesty and trust, in every facet of my work, from the time spent with my model, to my time spent creating the drawing, painting or installation.

In addition to choosing subjects that I have a personal connection and relationship with, I am motivated to photograph individuals with various conditions or ailments that effect their psyche, identity and presence. This allows my work to speak on behalf of a flawed reality. Within my work the model also represents a form of the *'other'*. Many groups continue to be regarded and described as the *'other'* based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, social status and religion. The *'other'* is also tied to the artist, who is often seen as an outsider and different.

The *'other'* counters pre-modern portraiture trends that focused on idealization, beauty and elevated status. Photographers Diane Arbus and Joel-Peter Witkin, particularly through their interest in individuals representing the abnormal and unusual, have influenced the psychological, theatrical, performative and sign related aspects of my own thesis work. My grandmother, Dorothy, would often not even know I was photographing her; she suffered from dementia. Donna has various mental and physical afflictions. She has arthritis and requires weekly nursing assistance. Donna's behavior is also suggestive of someone who experiences post traumatic stress syndrome. Having been abused at a young age, in a foster home without the support of family, Donna's life has been distinctly affected by neglect and abuse. Her presence – physical motions, clothing, facial gestures and the gaze from her eyes – reveals this. This presence of an outsider - someone who is different – symbolizes the infinitely varied forms of identity within our culture and alludes to a pre-occupation with beauty and idealization. It also elicits a response regarding images of comfort and 'perfection'; images which bombard western culture in contemporary television, movies, magazines, internet and advertising. My intention through using non-idealized, unconventional portrait subjects and approaches is to provoke a response, any response, which may touch on issues of ethics, morality, sanity or artistic innovation. With my intention coming from such a departure point, I construct – and draw upon – images and subjects that counter our conditioned sense of western popular ideals.

All of my portrait work starts with photographic documentation, which I revise and alter through painting, drawing, screen-print and installation processes. During the time spent photographing, I employ various artistic devices such as costumes, garments and face paint to portray notions of ritual and theatre. Many of these devices are bought from second-hand stores. I also rent and buy items from a theatre-rental outlet. I continue to relocate to different stages –

indoor studio, gallery, outside setting – and represent the portrait in a performative context. From these photographic roots my work references the theatricality of time spent with my model – a routine of engagement among artist, subject and stage. The tracings, documentation, index and performance of my work is portrayed in the physical application of my materials. Tracings reveal a rhythmic and pulsating application, which reflects the motion of my body and hand. The abundant and tactile nature of my medium – with high-contrast and acidic coloring to convey an intensity within the tactility – is represented as important and central as the resulting image of the actual model. This is necessary in order to show, not disguise, the performative application of the medium as well as bring about a sense of life and pulse within the model. For example, my string-painted portraits, *Mona*, *Grams* and *Scrap*, draw upon immediate expressionistic portraits from the early twentieth century in the mold of Emile Nolde, Egon Schiele, Otto Dix and Oscar Kokoschka. These artists emphasized the physical, abundant and colorful nature of paint in addition to the representation of the subject. The transparency, harsh coloring, vivid brush work and high contrast helped emulate a sense of time and mortality. The individuals painted were unidealized and often harshly described, conveying a sense of torture, sickness, deformity and death. Dix spent time in the German military in World War I, witnessing the horrific war-related atrocities and an aftermath which included an economic downfall and legions of poor, disabled war veterans. War mangled corpses and war veterans lying on the streets dominated much of his paintings. Schiele and Kokoschka also painted their models with no intention of conveying beauty. The color palettes of Schiele and Kokoschka were intense and rich, although the depiction of their model's skin would usually appear sick, worn out and abused. This was achieved with high contrast and cold colors - greens, violets, grays and purples - and a highly physical, aggressive and spontaneous layering of brush work. This would also result in slight to

large characterizations in their model's appearance – the shapes of hands, bodies and facial features would become contorted and exaggerated.

The paintings *Grams*, *Mona* and *Scrap* were created through the squirting of paint. They derived from extensive photograph sessions with Donna and my grandmother. Three or four paints were placed next to each other on plastic, and then punctured with a needle on the opposing side. I then squeezed the paint through the punctured hole, whereby the multiple colors merged into a multi-color string. This process created threads of color thinner than the radius of the punctured hole. I would physically spray the surface through gestural, layered applications of the squirting. These would act as ‘tracings’ to my physical performance. The ultimate perception of the portrait is of sculptural relief which suggests notions of mental and physical space between viewer and painting.

One of the resulting works, *Grams*, is of my grandmother. In the last year of her life I took thousands of photographs of her. Some moments were very staged, for example, with a certain dress, certain shoes and a particular seating arrangement. Other times, as with the photographs used for *Grams*, I would show up at my grandmother's home and photograph her as she was naturally. In the final pictures, due to dementia, she didn't even know I was there. I used varieties of expressionistic coloring to parallel my grandmother's extreme mental and physical condition. Her psychological interiority was conveyed through the weaving together of strands of paint strings. This hinted at her inner mental tissue and its relation to the surface. The coloring was high contrast and focused on the use of skin tones set against more intense and bright complementary colors which represented layers below the surface of the skin.

There is the repeated theme of beginning and ending in my relationships with my models. In some cases it is a recurring relationship that constantly renews itself with new beginnings. In

other instances I have a limited time with a subject and know that the relationship is coming to an end, such as with my grandmother. This reflects my engagements in all parts of my life, where there are constant endings and beginnings. This conveys the act of going in and out of a relationship and the constant need for opening and closing. The relationship with my model mirrors this. Infants, as in the portrait *Eli*, have been a primary subject for the purpose of portraying beginnings and birth. Photographs of Eli happened within a brief three month window, until he was no longer an infant. In the case of *Grams*, my grandmother was 93 years old and her time left was scarce. She passed away a couple months after the final photographs were taken.

Donna has been a distinct modeling presence in my art practice for the past six years. When I visit Edmonton I am able to generate new photographs of her. Every session is like a new beginning with no foreseeable end. My first meeting with Donna occurred about six years ago while I was working as a server at a restaurant. She would come off the streets where she sold newspapers. The manager would provide Donna with free coffee. At moments I would be drinking coffee too and our lives would share a moment. Throughout my two and a half years at the restaurant I began to learn about Donna and her difficult circumstances. Soon after my departure from the restaurant she began modeling for me, and our dialogue continued in a different context. I usually met with her for several weekends consecutively at different times of the year. I pick her up from her apartment, and we would go to various locations or 'stages': the park, playground, streets, metal scrap-yard. These places function as theatrical sets where the photographs would be taken. Some locations are unintended sets, such as the grocery store or restaurant, based on other routines within our day.

With Donna, her own clothing and personal style would often play a primary role in the costume she chose to wear. Donna would be the core interest from my perspective and the

costumes would be used to frame Donna as a focal point and present her as the primary star on an open and elevated stage. The photographic sessions would include positions in various types of lighting and locations. My intention was to capture and document Donna's natural body language – her walking, sitting, talking, smoking or whatever she was doing. My job was to locate her in certain spaces with particular lighting in a particular outfit and capturing the experience—perceptually speaking—from sharing that space and stage at that time with Donna. I used natural and artificial lighting in the method of chiaroscuro and photographed from all angles. I used the camera not with the intention to capture a specific angle or photograph but to capture the physical time spent with the model. I documented the ability to be able to walk up to the model, then walk away, then all around, also situating myself at various heights. In the following artistic explorations I am still deliberating positions and angles, and it is through the consultation with my photographs that I make artistic decisions. The cigarette breaks in the modeling sessions, where Donna would detach from a frozen position and move physically as she pleased, were also photographed.

The choice of my model is predicated on the subject representing the '*other*' and it is essential that myself and model have a personal, trusting and interactive relationship. The final portrait's appearance and distinction is informed by these engagements. The model and I are under scrutiny when in each other's presence – constantly being seen, interpreted and reacted to – and this serves as the source of the created, or expressed, feelings.

### **Chapter 3: The Performative**

While performance describes physical gestures, speech and human interactions, the notion of the performative – referring back to the concept of speech theory by John L. Austin – is rooted in transformative qualities.<sup>4</sup> It suggests that the use of human language and speech actually changes reality, rather than just expressing and describing it. My work implies that our opinions and interpretations of our surroundings influence the feelings of others, and aren't exclusive to our identities. The function of the performative also suggests that our dialogue and physical gestures are central and primary to our identity: not secondary and not a by-product of our personal selves. My representation of gesture is done through my physical gestures of applying the medium. The theoretical basis of my work suggests that we are all performers with a unique identity, individually and as a democratic and societal 'whole'. The visual vocabulary of my work concerns the performance – the portrayal of roles and interaction – as well as suggesting action and change between myself and the audience: the performative. Through the interpretation and experience of my work the audience becomes an active character which, by way of interaction and engagement, transforms their identity through sense of perception. The performative aspect of my work also claims that by way of interaction, we are active performers who reflect and are continually changing aspects concerning personal and collective (societal) identity. Noë asserts that one must achieve their sense of consciousness through an active process of engaged perception.<sup>1</sup> One must apply their skills, knowledge and education in order to experience a visual exploration.

The audience's experience is dependent on a form of relationship. Of course, to access this perception one must be engaged and enact exploration. This describes the way of putting together content that is made available, that which is seen. Perception then becomes a form of exploring

the world. The very act of perceiving is tied to a particular vantage point, which implies everyone having a unique role. Because perceptual experience is not defined by representation it relies on how one contacts or experiences the world; how one enacts perception.

Through my portraits, the inner psyche comes into contact more directly with the subject being portrayed, enacting a sense of performance. This type of theatre also represents a form of reflexivity and helps define the merging between the internal artist — the inner dialoguing, pontificating and concerned nature that the artist has within — and the subject and setting. The inner dialogue enacted within myself is echoed within the relationship of subject and stage.

Within my installation portraits the reference to my materials is overtly recorded. The physicality and artistic movement of my body and hand is recorded through my medium and becomes a trace of its application. My installations involve handfuls of material – soil, snow, charcoal, flour, berries – being thrown with my hands and poured from large containers and bags. I continue to alter and revise the portrait with large scale tools such as a broom, rake, ice/snow chipper and towel.

In the outdoor *Eli* portrait, composed of soil and snow on the steps and backyard of my family's home, the infant is a sign of birth or life. *Eli* also situates the infant in a contemporary and current environment rather than a religious or historical one. The natural elements of soil and snow become the medium, as do the porch steps, garage and tree branches. The domestic setting of a backyard and fence is used to reference the stage and theatrics of the everyday and familiar. The steps at the bottom of the composition reflect those that would lead up to a stage, while the closed off fence hints at a contained theatrical set. The portrayal of winter symbolizes the cycles of life and narrates from an ecological perspective. From day to day the wind would influence the soil/snow drawing. Berries and leaves would randomly fall onto the portrait. Every day over the

course of a snowfall-free day I manipulated the snow to a level of sculptural relief and drew the portrait with large handfuls of garden soil. I also used a rake and ice-chipping tool. Sometimes I would apply the dirt with delicate calculation, while other times I would throw large amounts of dirt in an extremely physical manner. I also applied snow back over top of the soil and sometimes mixed the two together for a middle tone. I used red berries hanging from the surrounding trees and applied them sparingly in the face.

*Honey Pumpkin* (2013), *Revolution* (2013) and *Corrupt* (2013) are all works from photographs of paintings I created on myself and my models' faces and body. Face painting transforms the physical space of the skin on the human body and requires photography to record the temporal status. Temporarily, the body becomes a living sculpture. Using the harlequin patterning on the face I reference ancient traditions of face-painting which symbolize theatre and ritual. The face painting is not an act of scarification, it is a symbolic gesture of performance and story-telling. Since the beginning of humankind elaborate face painting has been used as a part of mating, hunting, and death rituals. Cultural historian, Karl Groning, notes: "The messages conveyed by decorated skin not only distinguish the phases of people's lives, their social and political position and their professional or economic status, they also mark stages in the development of a community."<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 7. (Above) Studio Photo 1**

Ancient tribes used paints, pigments, powders and berries to construct particular colored patterns on their faces and bodies of symbolic meaning. Dating from 3,000 BC, face painting and tattooing was used for mummification procedures in Egypt – a death ritual – but painting the face and body goes back even further to primitive times:

"...primitive humans began to make use of colours and to express their primitive creative impulse by painting their own bodies...in the darkness of the prehistoric period. They used mineral pigments from the earth—manganese and the white of lime. Skeletons laid on red ochre and ochre grave goods are found in burials from as far back as the Palaeolithic period – This burial ritual suggests that body-painting was already a long established practice among the living."<sup>6</sup>

The harlequin refers to a clown or more particularly a comic servant character in the Italian play *Harlequinade* which dates back five hundred and arguably one thousand years. The pattern of diamond shaped boxes has been re-imagined through countless costume designs in the history of the play and the plays that it has influenced. These costumes have been depicted in both painting and theatre history. I create the harlequin-informed painting on the face of myself and model and then take pictures of documentary, which shows an interaction between us. In these artworks the theatrical notion of interaction continues to be investigated through the performance with my materials in various studio contexts. In *Honey Pumpkin* a melted and cloudy layer of wax lies underneath the transparent layer of paint which is used to describe the sharp edges of the harlequin-patterned face. *Masque* uses a similar technique of paint smeared over melted wax and includes a painted mask – in the technique of the threaded string paintings – which lies over top.

With *Corrupt* and *Revolution* I painted over top of one of my photographs of the documentation with additional harlequin patterning. Here I connected or stitched the outside parameters of my face with the frame of the picture. The pattern occupies most of the picture plane with my face somewhat revealed and somewhat camouflaged. Through the screen-print process I separated the colors into four units CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black) which get merged together in the printing process. The conversion to a screen--print with four colors (cyan, magenta, yellow and black) – each applied separately – symbolizes the four steps to create the final image (face painting, painted photograph, photograph, screen-print). This demonstrates the durational, time-based and story-telling aspects regarding the print's production from beginning to end.

The coloring, application and distortion of the harlequin pattern is essential in symbolizing

performance as well as encouraging enactive perception and a viewing context that is performative. Through the distortion and randomness of colors used in the harlequin pattern in *Honey Pumpkin* and *Revolution* – or the tonalities of the pattern in *Corrupt* – it is possible to see various harlequin pattern alterations within the broad pattern of the overall picture plane. Segments of the overall pattern can be visually broken up to create different diamond shapes with unique colors and distortions all their own. In *Corrupt* there is a blinking animation from the first portrait to the third. The transparency of the harlequin pattern hides and then reveals my eyes – a sign of awakening – symbolizing a conscious engagement and visual exploration with the world.



**Figure 8.** *Corrupt*

## Chapter 4: The Viewer

My thesis works – photography, painting and drawing practices – are rooted in the notion that I am documenting a type of real and staged theatre. With the participation of the audience it also becomes an experience of everyday life. My artwork provides this documentation and draws parallels with the aspect of signifying. The signified – that which is symbolized or suggested – has historically belonged to the happenings of everyday life.<sup>7</sup> Modern living alludes to the role of documentation as living. The documentation practice is a signifier of living and the audience or viewer who is interpreting their internal, physical and social surroundings.

Western theatre endorsed a working tradition consisting of a metaphorical mirror. A reflection occurs between the audience or social reality and rehearsed reality on stage. The goal and intention is to entertain and provoke questions of ethics. This occurs by presenting notions of being inside and outside the play, subjective and objective, looking and being looked upon<sup>6</sup>. The installation medium in art provides a portrayal of theatre and represents a continually driven social narration. This occurs through the audience's participation. The experience that the viewer has with the installation includes a social and internal experience which occurs simultaneously, as well as the experiences leading up to and proceeding the viewing of the installation. The narration of the installation represents a moment in time in the broader narration of the viewer's day to day life.

During a play the audience perpetually interprets the actions on stage. The representation of the script by the actors conveys characters who are similarly interpreting. This portrays the distinction between how things are and how they are represented; how things are and how they seem to be. While there is a theatrical performance at the centre of the viewer's experience, the engagement is surrounded and influenced by real life theatre — real life occurrences that are

familiar to the everyday — at various points throughout the play’s execution: the moments of anticipation while dressing up and traveling to the performance, the immediate feelings of the venue upon arrival, the socializing and discussion of the production — mingling, drinking wine, having a cigarette, going to the washroom, which occurs during intermission—as well as the actions which conclude the evening (or matinee) such as going out for dinner or grabbing a coffee.

These social happenings are woven into the proceedings of the play and compound the overall experience. A consciousness of these real life happenings helps define the audience’s feelings and opinions of the performance and dictates the viewer’s sense of importance and relevance of the play. Similarly, the actions on stage signify characters in various circumstances which inform their motivations, feelings and identity. Structure and choreography also unite and liken the relationship between the viewer and action on stage. The ‘unit’ – the distinction and timing of a play’s change in location – also includes the actions of the audience. The audience is expected to arrive at a certain time, no sooner no later. The intermission places the audience’s actions right into the centre of the production. The viewer’s participation here makes them a central character.

Similarly, the installation of an artwork portrays the conclusion of an artist’s rehearsals and allows the audience to participate, registering the viewer as a social signifier of reality. At this point, it is the audience that takes part in their interpretation of the ‘performance’. Theatre, through multiple re-enactments, reveals so many performances that no two are exactly alike. Because of the feelings of the actors and feedback with the audience, plus a *dependency* on the audience, each performance becomes an original fingerprint. My process – my engagement and interaction with my model, art materials and stage — is equally defined by such cumulative

performances.

The modern trend of revealing theatre through artistic means suggests an increased social tendency to enact roles and personas. Modern art and modern living influence one another. In the art community and elsewhere, there is a developed consciousness regarding performance and drama. For example in my photograph, *Iron*, Donna is portrayed wearing a queen's crown dressed in a rented white ballerina garment – used as a shawl - ironing a white shirt. This included an unnatural pose. Her facial expressions remained natural but her body was twisted for a particular effect that brought drama to the photograph. The skylight from above provided the only



**Figure 9. *Honey Pumpkin***



**Figure 10. *Revolution***

lighting as the viewer sees the setting of a modern home as Donna irons while wearing a crown. The kitchen cupboards, dining room table and walls occupy the background. On one of the counters lie Donna's water and pack of cigarettes. This image represents Donna as a domestic symbol within a modern theatrical context. The cigarettes and water serve as props, which bridge the gap between the real and the staged. This describes notions of personal roles within a setting.

According to Robert Cozzolino, we assume roles:

"Each of us negotiates identity every day of our lives whether unconsciously or with delicate calculation ... Through linked social media websites we craft personas, assemble and reassemble circles of friends, and make visible our intellectual and pop culture

tastes, political opinions, and spur-of-the-moment musings on subjects that might seem inconsequential to those outside our circle (and some within) ... we constantly amplify, mutate, and subsume aspects of our identities ... We understand that identity is not fixed. It is malleable, endlessly shaped..."<sup>8</sup>

In my installation portrait *Ashes*, the black veil from the Victorian-era widow costume that Donna wore, and the hourglass composition of the piece, both suggest time and memento mori. The composition shows an hourglass structure, with Donna's portrait (created with flour and charcoal) on the surface of the wall making the top portion, and a pile of flour lying underneath making the bottom portion of the hourglass. A large half-cone shape mound of flour lies up against the gallery wall. The tip of the white pile meets the bottom tip of the flour-drawn portrait and creates a compositional structure of an hour-glass. The portrait is under-lit to create a connection from the face to the flour pile. I used large and narrow brushes as well as my hands to apply the flour. I also used a spray mist bottle to dampen the surface. I would sometimes throw handfuls of flour and charcoal onto it. I painted a vertical black rectangle directly onto the gallery wall for the flour portrait to adhere to. The rectangle is painted from the floor to the ceiling and is not the width of the base of the flour pile. This creates the illusion that the flour is coming out of the frame in addition to coming out of the portrait. With the flour installation I bring the notion of an exterior stage – as described by a large mass of uncontained, exposed flour – into the interior gallery. The flour is re-defined as an art object and functions as the drawn and sculptural portion of the installation. I merge the three-dimensionally described mound of flour with the two-dimensionally described flour-drawn portrait on the gallery wall. The mass of flour acts as the exterior to the contained, flat portrait, black frame and wall. The contrast between enclosure and

openness represents relationships in an environmental and setting or stage context. The flour bleeding from the wall onto the gallery floor re-contextualizes the floor as part of the installation and transforms the gallery into a stage of which the viewer is part. This mimics theatricality, defined by engagement and interaction with an environment and the ensuing interpretations and reactions.



**Figure 11.** *Ashes*

## Chapter 5: Thesis Exhibition

I am the director of the art's production and feel obligated to provide informational and emotional impact. Edits and rewrites along the way involve additions and subtractions in content. The concern of feeling, spirituality and expression is attained through identifying what is driving characters' emotions in a scene. Characters' emotional states and behaviours are constantly being relocated through interactions with one another. This occurs with my model, surroundings and self. It also provides a blueprint of my artistic research.

The image, painting or photograph has value in that it can be a complete fiction, something that reorganizes the order of things. But also it is a valuable connector of history, depicting the evolution of the medium. An image is always multi-dimensional. It can relate that which is said and seen and described. It reveals the before and after, the cause and effect. Although the photograph, painting and installation have literal differences they are constructed from similar starting points, or conceived rather from the mind of the artist. My photographs explore the theatre between myself, another human being and a space, while my paintings, drawings and installations reflect additional interactions I have with myself and my medium.

My thesis exhibition consists of my drawing and sculpture installation entitled *Pearl Dust*. In my installation piece, the harlequin painted model is wearing a sculptural white mask. Using Donna as a model once again, her face is drawn directly onto the gallery wall with paint, charcoal and flour. Her massive portrait is framed by an ornate pattern, also drawn directly onto the wall. Underneath the portrait are two piles of flour which lie beside each other on the floor and against the wall. The eyes in the drawing appear to leak out white tears which fall over the cheeks and connect to the tips of the piles of flour. This gives a sense that the medium of flour and



**Figure 12. *Pearl Dust***

representation of tears are bursting through the surface of the wall and into the gallery. The conical piles of flour run in sequence with the diagonal lines of the harlequin pattern and provide a bridge into the 'other' reality of the two-dimensional drawing on the wall. The installation converts the gallery space into a modern stage with a temporary performance that includes the audience.

The scale of the flour piles and its scent, the large scale of the portrait, as well as the portrait's expression and decorative frame, contribute to the sense of monumentality and transform the gallery space into a stage. The flour appears as models of mountains, thereby suggesting a grander scale than the portrait appears in the gallery. Through the flour piles and viewer's occupancy of the floor, the two components become united and the gallery's permanent physical structure becomes a temporary stage on which the viewer may perform. There is no distinct separation from stage and viewer as one would typically see in a theatre and so the viewer is suggested as an actor. *Pearl Dust's* gaze, scale and scent also encourage performance from the viewer. The face in the ten and a half foot tall portrait looks downward, forcing a viewer to raise one's head to make eye contact. The presence of the installation imposes itself on the viewer even when not being looked upon, as one can smell the scent of flour from about thirty feet away. This scent becomes stronger as one approaches the front of the installation and makes eye contact. With each passing week the scent of flour becomes faded and the viewer is forced to have to pay extra attention in order to detect the scent at all.

The installation's monumentality is amplified further by the ornamentation on the top of the frame. This functions as a crowning device and symbolizes distinction, power and role status. The crown becomes more obvious because the sides of the frame are slightly detached from the top portion. When read as a crown, the sides of the frame may also be interpreted as stakes or poles being planted or plunged into the mountains of flour below. This enhances the installation's narration of a declared performance.

The three-dimensional aspect to the flour encourages the viewer to pace around the installation and give extra notice to the massive portrait. It is meant to be imposing, its physical presence hard to turn away from. This is in contrast to the lack of attention Donna usually

receives in her day to day life. The representation of Donna in a mammoth manner whereby she towers over the viewer is informed by Donna's more permanent status in society as an outsider who is overlooked, ignored and walked past repeatedly as she sits un-imposingly on sidewalks throughout the streets of Edmonton. The large scale of the installation brings a focus and attention to an individual who usually leaves people uncomfortable and looking elsewhere. This also led me to play with her gaze in the portrait, looking intensely downward at the viewer, forcing some sort of reaction.

The title *Pearl Dust* suggests the symbolizing of tears. This is consistent with my portrayal of sorrow, as it exists in my feelings of Donna, and the notion that there are individuals who are unsympathetically ignored or over-looked, since they represent an un-idealized and un-beautified reality. Pearls signify value and thoughtfulness, while 'dust' alludes to the residue of tears. Through the titling of the piece there is also a performance aspect to the materials, with the flour masquerading as *Pearl Dust*. The materials of charcoal and flour contrast tonally—one black and one white—and represent a binary of physical states. Charcoal is created through a burning process, which turns a material into a dark, final cremated state. Conversely, the flour represents a fresh material ripe for a variety of uses. This echoes opposite ends of a life cycle, similar to that which is hinted through the hourglass composition.

The harlequin patterning on the face and white mask amplify the symbolized performance, as does the hint of a halo behind the portrait. The halo's suggestion of divinity, distinction and lone supremacy harmonizes with the crowning portion of the frame. The halo also brings attention to the raining of light that falls from top to bottom over the portrait and installation, illuminating in the literal and symbolic sense. There is also a suggestion of an on-going ritual taking place, with the 'pearl dust' raining over top of the subject from above.

The co-representation of time and performance is established through the index of my body's application of the materials. After painting the wall black, water was sprayed on the wall before throwing quantities of flour over top. The flour would adhere to the wall allowing myself to brush the flour off in varying degrees, in a reductive manner, which created different levels of tonality. Powdered charcoal was brushed over the wall and flour as well. This process produced brush marks which acted as traces of my application or 'performance'. The beginning, middle and end of brush marks reflect the speed, rhythm and motion of my performance. Some portions of the portrait and frame appear smoothed out as a result of my smearing the flour with a 3-foot wide squeegee. Large chunks of flour also remain on the wall, a demonstration of my tossing and throwing of flour against the wall's surface. The creation of the installation took about fifty-five hours with at least forty of those spent on the portrait. *Pearl Dust* was constructed within a contained bracket of time that started and ended on pre-determined dates and times; its exhibition was similarly presented for six weeks before de-installation, whereupon the portrait was washed from the wall, and the flour discarded. Similar to a theatrical run of a play, there is a beginning and finality to the piece's existence, just as there was to its installation. *Pearl Dust* performed in the temporal sense, just as a play, expressing the finite nature of existence and trajectory of the viewer's visual exploration.

## Conclusion

The function of my installations and thesis show is to visually articulate the performative portrait and provide a new environment in which the viewer participates. My installations use imagery based on practices of ritual and performance, acknowledging audience engagement. This brings attention to and closes the gap between social and environmental relationships and our collective roles. *Widow*, *Ashes* and *Eli* present the location and time as elements of the stage production. This is what portrays the active audience as part of a unique story, within temporary visual circumstances much like a staged play or happening. Audience members are immersed in a scene whereby they create meaning through creative free-association and become active participants. The viewers must apply themselves in order to be engaged, through enactive perception.

Abstract expressionism or action painting, in particular the works of Jackson Pollock, demonstrate the influence of painting upon installation art. By painting beyond the canvas and even working inside the painting by standing overtop, Pollock revealed new understandings concerning performance and use of space. Action painting also recorded the relationships between artists and their materials. The paintings were also described as moving from representation into an event.<sup>9</sup> Because installations are often temporary, the act of installing becomes performative and action painting's denial of a frame is thematic within installation art. Through the removal of a framing device the installation becomes a stage in which the viewer assumes a role. They are in the frame and the idea of theatre within theatre is presented. The everyday life of the viewer comes into contact with the staging of the installation art. Ultimately, the theatre of the installation brings into focus the theatre which exists in people's day-to-day lives. This includes the interactions between people and their environments, and the role of

recurrence as it applies to people's interpretations and reactions of their experiences. Theatricality is not purely symbolic either. Installation art is also a social event. The audience or actors, while interpreting the installation, are also inclined to interact with the other actors. Most often the opening receptions serve this purpose, by inviting an audience to appear at a designated time. Social mingling often precedes and follows the experience of the installation as well. This mirrors the way people experience a theatrical production of a play, without the intermission.

The environment, or consciousness of one's setting, represents the sum of circumstances one is surrounded by and establishes the importance and value of a shared space. It also presents an environment of meanings – social, personal, ethical. This is emphasized in my work through the documentation of my performance with materials, my relationship with model and stage, as well as the suggestion of the audience's role through enactive perception and the performative. My installation acts as a staged monument or scene that dissolves the gap between viewer and stage. The installation portrays a happening, and is reliant on a witnessing audience for its installation within society. My performative driven portraits represent myself and the audience as actors with transformative abilities, situated within – and defining – an on-going social narration.

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