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MASTERS PROJECT REALISATION
RESEARCH REFLECTIONS

OMAR MAJEED

WHO AM I?
~~LIVING ARCHIVE~~

Explore personal identity through spontaneous application of an interdisciplinary practice

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This essay is dedicated to my parents, the Oxford Comma and God.

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In this section I will outline my initial thoughts for how to approach my research, and how and why they changed. I had an exhibition in mind for which I would need more energy and resources than were available. I was to catalogue every beer mat I'd ever scribbled on, every self-designed cassette, every painting. This self-imposed audit was to shed light on my practice, which has been eclectic, and driven in different ways by personal circumstance.

I also aimed to cement some form of coherent identity as a creative person. Written into my research from the beginning was the idea that art can be used to create identity, I chose to audit this through archiving. On reflection I adapted my aim to continue with an art practice that reinforces and clarifies my personal identity. I feel we are defined by what we do, and making art both gives me a sense of purpose and supports an idea of myself as of value to society. My multiple hospitalisations for periods of acute psychosis, every world cup year since 2002, leading to me being in receipt of state benefits and dependent on my parents, have contributed to me feeling a little parasitic. While making art is not exactly giving something back, it is at least a role. Saying this, French thinker Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) would have said identifying with one's profession was an act of bad faith: "Let us consider this waiter in the café... He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café" (Sartre 1943).

The Armenian philosopher G.I. Gurdijeff was of the view that we shouldn't identify at all. Identification is subtly different from having an identity but they are contingent. In the long run, this battle for identity may become a battle not to have one.

Eventually it became apparent this idea of the 'museum of me' was untenable as well as potentially overly self-focused. While I have continued to make work that explores self-identity, the autobiographical element in the video work in particular has become more self-aware, ironic, self-effacing. Over time I have taken less seriously the idea that being an artist enhances my identity in any meaningful way.

The archiving was a conceit to make work that was not pinned down by any overarching themes. If ever I had been struck by archive fever, it was a mild case, and my symptoms all but vanished. I didn't realise that the strategies that underpin my work could provide a valuable starting point and all I had to do was identify them. This was a useful realisation and one I wish I had come to sooner. There are other ways of exploring identity than archiving. Even a few simple spider diagrams would have got enough material to work from.

At this juncture, it feels worth revisiting my original project aims:

To create a 'living archive':

- ! By scanning/photographing existing work
- ! By annotating details such as media chosen, date created
- ! By adding biographical details from the time it was made, with reference to existing ongoing biographical documents such as my 'cv' (life story) and other attempts to pin down what happened and why in writing
- ! Creating a near-exhaustive database of work with a view to producing an 'early career retrospective' where juvenilia and more recent work are juxtaposed with biographical text and comment

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My updated project aims are as follows:

- ! Explore identity through an interdisciplinary practice, both in the content of the work and through art practice as identity praxis, the activity itself providing purpose and a more desirable self-image
- ! In particular explore issues around having a mental health diagnosis in terms of self-image, stigma, challenges faced and ways of overcoming them
- ! Continue honing identity as artist through social media – my output on social media is as much part of my practice as my painting and installation work, but seems more peripheral because of its ambience.
- ! Identify and assimilate historical precedents and peers working in related fields, to give context for work.
- ! Engage in meaningful collaboration.
- ! Examine implicit value systems, criteria and beliefs and reflect on practice. e.g. explore and question notion of DIY aesthetic to see if it still serves.
- ! Develop musical practice and synthesise with visual practice through video/performance.
- ! Further explore notions of performance particularly identity as performance. Self-authorship.

I began painting portraits. This began as a technical challenge but I grew to like the sociability of the process. The portraits of people I knew were, it has been observed in a crit, a form of self-portrait. We see ourselves through the eyes of the people who surround us. The act of painting another is a way of making a connection. Also, the idea that someone is prepared to sit for half an hour for you to paint them is evidence to some degree that they take you seriously as an artist. The painting is in keeping with this project of becoming an artist, as it is the archetypal artists' activity. I may start wearing a beret! Obviously the notion of wearing a beret is absurd, but the idea of doing so expresses both a desire to be taken seriously and amusement at the notion of taking on historically defined ideas of what an artist is.

I aimed to develop and hone a style of painting that was characteristic to me but still palatable to an audience. People might be put off by the raw amateurism of the paintings. I don't want to make concessions as but if I can make work with a broader appeal it may be advantageous commercially. I want to paint as part of a portfolio career, and making work has given me a sense of purpose and identity. I will talk about the relevant literature to identity that has informed my research in the next chapter.

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Psychoanalysis and identity

James Hillman's *The Soul's Code* questions the Freudian conception of self as formed by trauma, and discusses pivotal moments where an individual's purpose manifests. Saying that, reading Freud, Jung and Lacan (the latter primarily through Zizek) has been influential. Through Freud, I have understood how sexual development is at the forefront of both who we are and why we do what we do. This is perhaps overemphasised, both by him and his critics, who miss other facets of his writings. Still, I imagine libidinous forces drive a large proportion of our creative output.

Reading Jung, in particular *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, filled in some of the missing territory. I am interested in the concept of the archetypal, the mythological. In Robert McKee's epic book on writing narrative in film "Story", he describes the archetypal nature of cinema such as reducing the plot of Star Wars to the template of a hero's quest, where a quest presents itself and is initially resisted before self-surmounting occurs and the hero takes it on, eventually meeting and thwarting the antagonist. Tropes that exist in culture are often ancient and repeated in various forms throughout time. This gives raw material to play with. When we watch a film, we at least unconsciously recognise certain shots as part of a visual language inherent in culture. A car chase upsetting the watermelon cart is amusing for being familiar. All of these type of things in cinema and all art provide raw material for pastiche.

I am further interested how other archetypes form identity. This relates slightly tangentially to my interest in psychosynthesis, the theory by Italian psychoanalyst Assiglioli (1888-1974) that we are made up of a constellation of subpersonalities that arise at different times while we work towards unification. Lacan talked of the self as structured as a language. This fascinates me and underpins my thinking behind attempting to produce an encyclopaedic document of my life, which I call my CV.

I share my interest in the unconscious with the Surrealists, many of whom used automatism in their work. Art historian, writer and curator Mel Gooding said in "A Book of Surrealist Games", "Solitary and collective automatic techniques and the exploitation of chance are central to many surrealist games. The original surrealists soon came to realise the limitations of "pure automatism". Automatic techniques may be used as a beginning of creative activity to stimulate and encourage spontaneity of utterance or image making." (Brotchie and Gooding, 1995) While the unconscious is by definition unknown to the artist or anyone else, engaging in certain activities can deliberately unearth material from the unconscious. I have even seen artists consciously integrate with the collective unconscious and like a diver bringing back a pearl. Incorporating surrealist strategies is one way that artists engage with "scientific" theories, as stated by Kathrin Busch in *Artistic Research and the Poetics of Knowledge*: "Referencing science was also common in the 20th Century, in, for example, the reference to psychoanalysis in surrealist painting..."

Influences for the painting were seeing the *Abstract Expressionists* show at the RA and following up looking at work by the featured artists. A lot of research was carried out into surrealist automatism, prompted initially by reading about automatic drawing in Piero Ferucci's *What We May Be* which uses it as a diagnostic and self-developmental exercise, but seeing it used in art I realised its creative potential. While a lot of these early 20th century ideas have informed my thinking, there has been a newer psychological model that has played a role, as we shall see.

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How Neuro-Linguistic Programming has helped my art practice

Studying NLP has been invaluable personally, but also has had a degree of influence on my work. *NLP* by Ali Campbell taught me about modalities, and rapport. There is also the concept of the inventory, which like my CV is a mental filing cabinet of experiences, that you can literally rewrite yourself through visualisation. Mostly one would do this by recalling past memories and diminishing unpleasant or negative ones or reinforcing positive ones. This was introduced to me on the Lightning Process in Bristol, and I read more about it and watched many videos on YouTube. It is through this process I was able to invoke the state of mind to evoke the disinhibited, chaotic, and loosely associative drawings I put on the wall for the final show. There is also a nod to “What the hell are you doing: The Essential David Shrigley”; even the mentally unwell have inspiration and I think the drawings I made when acutely ill were in part influenced by Shrigley as well as HCA alumni Daryl Waller who worked under the moniker Mr Disco, and whose zine “Look at All the Beautiful Couples at the Railway Station” was an early influence in 2003. Though Waller can draw classically when he wants to, he has been employing these wobbly line drawings for a long time. There is a whole context for work that is deliberately “bad” or “messy” that could have been an alternative focus for this research. There is a precedent for this in the trajectory of twentieth century art up to a contemporary context.

The 20th Century was a hard act to follow

The Shock of the New gave me a swift overview of the trajectory of 20th century art, concentrating on Cezanne and pausing on Picasso. Reading Frederic Jameson and Lyotard’s books on postmodernism led to few definitive answers. The whole definition of postmodernism is vague, apart from it being a break with modernist metanarratives. These said metanarratives still have an influence but are destabilised by nuance and irony. *But is it Art* by Cynthia Freeland was a populist introduction to tendencies in art over the last hundred years. She suggests that Goya was the start of people making work that wasn’t conventionally beautiful. These stages in art history give context for where we are now, though Jameson claimed that postmodernism had “forgotten how to think of itself historically” while cherry picking styles from the past, it was a historical period. There is a case for saying we are now in post-postmodernist times, the rules of which are even harder to establish but much could be said about the influence of social media platforms on trends in contemporary art. In David Foster Wallace’s favourite joke in his graduation speech “This is Water”!(Wallace, 2014), an older fish asks two younger fish “how’s the water?”, The younger fish reply “what’s water?”. Fish are unaware of the physical substance they are constantly suspended in, just as artists are unaware of the undefined trends and practices that they are immersed in. It would be a good idea to try and define that, if it were not wholly impossible except in retrospect. Key aspects of any definitions of artistic trends would be what stylistic modes were used, or what thematic content predominates. Of course, these are going to be pluralised, but content and themes are also inseparable.

Style, substance and high-level craft

Susan Sontag (1933-2004) was a writer, philosopher, teacher and filmmaker, but primarily is remembered as an essayist. In *On Style* she said “It would be hard to find any reputable literary critic today who would care to be caught defending as an idea the old antithesis of

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style versus content. On this issue a pious consensus prevails. Everyone is quick to avow that style and content are indissoluble, that the strong individual style of each important writer is an organic aspect of his work and never something merely “decorative” (Sontag 1966, page 15). Her points may have been made in relation to writing of the time but seems analogous to art. Yet just as they are inseparable to the points of being facets of the same thing, different disciplines seem to have weighted style and content differently. In painting at this time Andy Warhol’s Pop Art screenprints and Bridget Riley’s Op Art paintings were dazzling viewers with their bright colours and dizzying patterns. The brash boldness seems somewhat redolent of the time as does the apparent superficiality or at least simplicity of content. This simplicity could be seen as a critique of early paintings that often took Biblical narratives for their subject matter.

In another essay, *Against Interpretation*, Sontag states a position that “[she] is not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased... The question is how. What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place?” (1997 p. 12) This question is not rhetorical. She suggests the value of descriptive criticism. She also warns of reductionist analysis: “By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable.” “The flight from interpretation seems particularly a feature of modern painting. Abstract painting is the attempt to have, in the ordinary sense, no content; since there is not content there can be no interpretation. Pop Art works by the opposite means to the same result; using a content so blatant, so “what it is,” it too, ends by being uninterpretable.”

Conceptualism and aesthetics

Further elaboration needs to be made on style and content. Writer Dave Beech, in his essay *On Critique* asserts “while it is true that artists, curators and writers have recently asserted their right to look at Conceptual Art as a bearer of visual qualities, even to extract an aesthetic from it, my experience as an art student in the 1980s was of conceptualism as a block on looking... Conceptual artists were not attempting to make art for the blind but against the ‘eye’ in the elitist sense of the word in aesthetic dogma”. While it is impossible to make work either purely style or purely substance, as one relies on the other, different types of work are weighted differently in where the attention goes. A Persian rug contains symbols, that are largely ignored and unread because of what my friend Johnny Burrage says is “the linguistic overlap of “decorum” and “decoration” (Burrage, 11.27pm, 2017). These often mystical meanings are kept in the background and the decorative element at the front. Meanwhile certain video work, including mine, may appear to prioritise content over any conscious consideration of style, but on examination everything has a style. Mine is marked by expediency; usually shot on landscape format on a handheld iPhone with all the wobbliness that dictates, and background noise from ambient sound recording. This “good enough” DIY aesthetic has been characteristic of my output for all media across a long period of time, but perhaps needs questioning. There is potentially a kind of inverse snobbery to it, an arrogance in the celebration of flaws. “Why should I have to do anything well?” it asks. It is a junk aesthetic I learnt from painter Daryl Waller and noughties antifolk band the Moldy Peaches. I was already developing it when I was designing the school paper age 15 and we photocopied a crisp packet as content. My painting is validated by Primitivism, Fauvism, German Expressionism, but is my own way of doing it. Repeated comparisons have been made to the work of Martin Maloney, the success of whose naïve paintings seems solely the product of hype. This was the view articulated by Julian Stallabrass who said that

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Maloney's painting "can stand as an emblem for the movement. It looks critical but the teeth of its gears have no purchase and spin in the air".

The primary purpose of collaborating with David Eatwell is to overcome this self-imposed limitation and learn a degree of craft. Painting is a discipline like any and there are methodologies which have been proven to work. I set out to study them.

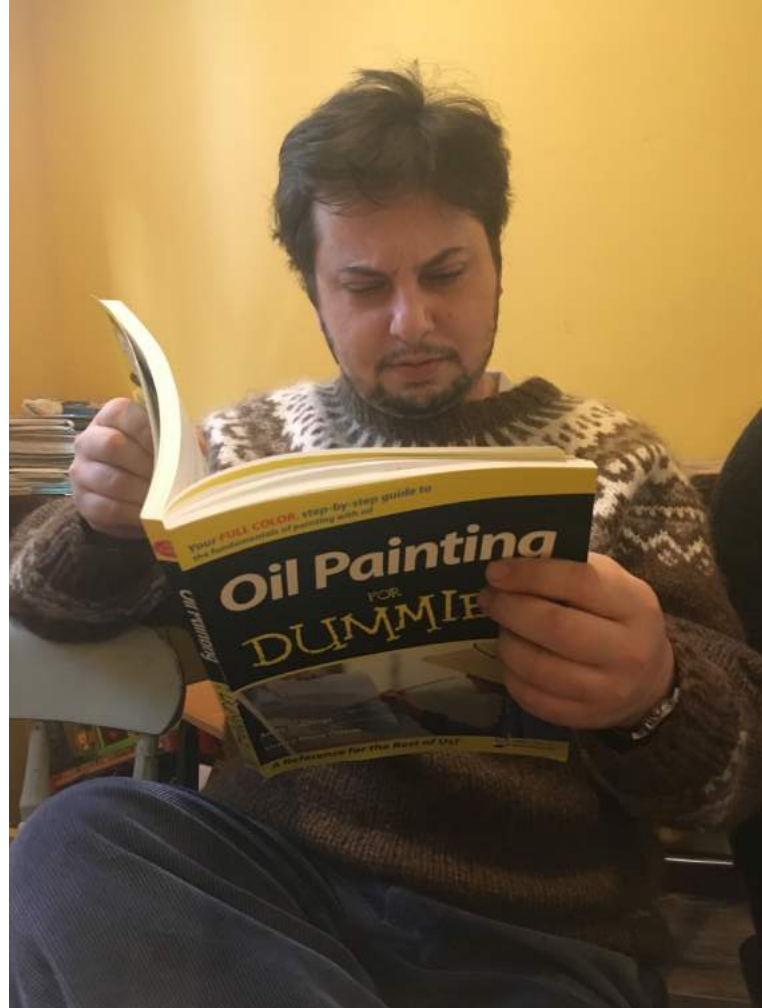


Figure i

A brief footnote on racial identity

Within my comment on identity is a meta-narrative on race. In her essay *Racialized Bodies*, Sara Ahmed describes the process of racialization. "What does it mean to describe bodies as 'racialized'? The term 'racialized bodies' invites us to think of the multiple processes whereby bodies come to be seen as 'having' a racial identity. One's 'racial identity' is not simply determined, for example, by the 'fact' of one's skin colour. Racialization is a process that takes place in time and space: 'race' is an effect of this process, rather than its origin or cause." [Ahmed 2002, in Evans and Lee 2002, p. 46] There will be more about this in the next chapter.

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I have had several outcomes from this module, including paintings (fig vi – xii, appendix D), a tapestry (figure xiii), automatic drawings (appendix E), poems (appendix C), and videos (figure xiv – xvi, appendix F). Working in different media allows me to undertake my research from as many different angles as possible, while propping up the idea that I can turn my hand to anything, albeit shakingly.



Figure ii

I constructed sculptures; one named “Defence Mechanism” (figure i) utilising a retroactively defined process of making based on the connotation of material and form. I conceptualised (or so I thought) a sculpture based on wrapping concrete soaked wool around a balloon. I was interested in the vulnerability of the balloon, and the brittle cocooning nature of the wool, with the connotations of blanketing. It turns out that my girlfriend used to put plaster of Paris and string around balloons and sell them to her friends, which she’d previously told me; so the idea hadn’t really come out of the ether. Still, I interpreted it as a physical representation of how persona masks and protects the true self, but also keeps it buried. The reading of the art as text after the fact led to a conclusion of something I wasn’t consciously aware of, which came as a warning. The sculpture is time-based; the balloon withers over time. Explicitly; the concrete wool is the persona, a barrier for the ego which is vulnerable, represented by the balloon. The warning was that excessive reliance on persona could lead to atrophy of the authentic self. This is only my interpretation, it could be read in other ways. The exoskeleton could be seen as “scaffolding” within which existential building is going on, like a chrysalis, as the butterfly is formed within.

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Ziggurat (figure ii), was a form of material enquiry constructed with my dad, and a paean to the historical artefacts destroyed by Isis. We were interested in how the cast concrete would look against the brushed metal, and the idea of the tiling came about organically in conversation. This collaboration was in part an expedient way to continue producing work when I was depressed, but also reflects my values. I live at home and have a close relationship with my family and like to undertake projects with my dad. As far as I'm concerned, it's a monument to him, and the superhuman levels of support he and my mum have provided me with in this ongoing battle with illness. The structure of a pyramid is as stable as can be. It is a symbol of strength and hierarchy.



Figure iii

I produced a number of portraits and abstract paintings, which had begun to take shape but were limited in terms of their technical competency. I still don't know where I stand with these paintings. Some 'in the know' viewers such as David Eatwell considered certain paintings to "have it" almost entirely by chance, (see Witness (figure iii), Terrain (figure iv) and Eden (figure v)) while other paintings were apparently of little interest. Other people such as Angela at the studio have been fairly uniformly gushing about all the painting, of which I am slightly sceptical. I have always painted with idiosyncrasy and expedience. This is partly because my hands tremor too much to paint delicately. I feel my painting practice could be pushed further.

As a result of the sculptural collaboration, I came up with this collaborative practice titled Majeed & Son, reminiscent of a family plumbing business. We came close to getting a commission through Sydney Nolan trust. Dad came up with the idea of the

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convergence/divergence bench and I sent a speculative email (appendix A). It's both meaningful to me and amusing to collaborate with dad, who isn't an artist really. I have been collaborating obliquely by documenting arrangements of objects he made for non-aesthetic reasons and appropriating them as sculpture, inspired in part by Richard Wentworth's street photography (Appendix B). In part, switching between media is an attempt at demonstrating I am flexible and capable in a number of ways, but more so the different media allow me to explore different facets of myself.



Figure iv

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Figure v – terrain (2017)



Figure vi - Eden (2018)

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I also went through a phase of writing poetry on a typewriter (Appendix C) which at one point was tied in to the fictional identity of Callum Hunter, an alter ego I explored in the External Partners project that I borrowed from previous autobiographical fiction. Eventually I returned to writing poems from my own experience, which were integrated into the installation. My poetic voice is an idealised voice, and the poetry serves to implant meaning on experiences where the meaning is ambiguous or absent.



Figure vii - “Grace, with rose”

Synchretism and painting as identity praxis

Figure vii is one of the more successful portraits. I will elaborate as much as I’m able to about this odd ‘x-factor’. The raw canvas showing through and the spontaneous brushmarks create a vibrancy and immediacy. The hand-stretched canvas has a more authentic look than the cheap Chinese imports one can get in Hobbycraft. I feel my painting practice incorporates a degree of what art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig (1908-1966) called Synchrestism. Synchretistic viewing is global and the scanning happens unconsciously, and reflects how children draw, something lost in academic painting and most people’s drawing after the age of eight when “drawing becomes duller in colour, more anxious in draughtsmanship” (Ehrinzweig 1967, page 6).

Aside from whether it is a “good painting” or not, more importantly perhaps is whether or not the painting of Grace adds anything to my research. I painted this painting in a twenty-minute window before a clay workshop, and the expediency and originality of delivery was, I felt at the time, satisfactory in demonstrating to Grace and the others that I was a painter. Being a painter was to me a desirable identity. The more I have undertaken

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this research, the more frivolous and primitive the whole notion of identity seems. If I were to continue my research I would certainly look further into Gurdijeff, who I have mentioned advocates for non-identified being. More important than identity is presence. Identity is a form of attachment. As long as I am presenting myself as this or that sort of person I am a caricature. Oddly, it has taken this project to realise that.



Figure viii

One of the paintings I saw at the Toulouse-Lautrec museum in Albi pulled off a similar unfinished panache. This was the kind of thing I had in the back of my mind when I left the background showing.

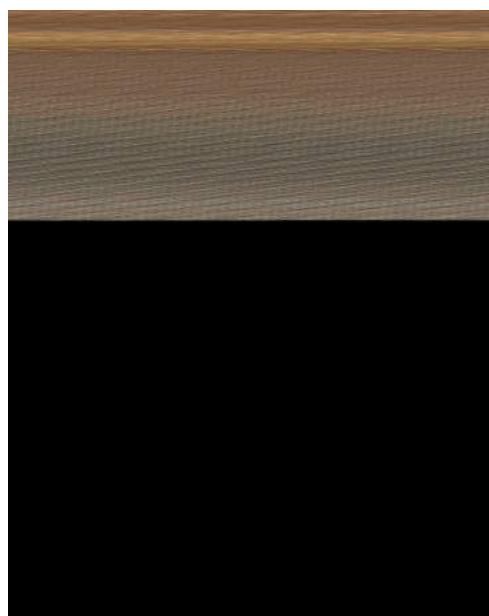


Figure ix

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“Dervish”, is in my opinion, one of the more successful abstracts. An extension of my automatic drawing practice (Appendix D), improvised gestures within a framework of rules: following art theorist Stephen Quiller’s colour theory, primed single colour background setting the “key” for other colours, much like music. The lines don’t touch, which gives a spaciousness and clarity.



Figure x

DeKooning’s epigraph for Sontag’s “On Interpretation” is apt here: “content is the glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It’s very tiny—very tiny, content.” In my abstract paintings I have in one respect tried to avoid content, or at least avoid choosing content consciously. Arabic characters and musical marks appear (as in Figure x). My hand seems to want to form them, the former having been written out repeatedly by rote in childhood and containing mystical resonances. Each surah of the Koran is prefaced with Arabic characters that only God knows the meaning of. I have the letter Yaa (!) tattooed on my right shoulder, the last letter of the Arabic alphabet, which reminds me of my grandmother, but that’s another story...



Figure xi

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Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

To say more on the subjectivity of interpreting paintings, people project what they want on to them. I sold this painting of a sleeping man to a friend. My painting tutor however, couldn't see anything in it. I think he objected to the crudeness, the flatness (although he likes flatness in Gauguin). He admits to not understanding these "postmodern contexts [we] youngsters operate in". David's mind boggles at the popularity of Shrigley and operates in a world of art as "high level craft". I can understand this viewpoint, yet it is not the totality of my stance, which is more accommodating to contemporary mores. Whether these prove to be lasting is another question. I do wonder what art from our time will persist centuries from now, just as time has filtered the best of countless generations.



Figure xii – collapsed series

Painting in ink with harmonious colours selected according to colour theory and using unconsciously chosen symbols, forms, and marks, was the methodology behind these later abstract paintings. These were on show at Hereford craft pub Beer in Hand for the external partners project in conjunction with three other artists, one of whom was a product of my imagination.

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Figure xiii – Celto-arabic prayer tapestry

This tapestry (figure xiii) synthesises Celtic and Islamic patterns to set a Muslim prayer in a Celtic typeface. This is in an attempt to synthesise the two facets of my cultural identity, Scottish and Iraqi/Turkish, which have at times sat awkwardly and manifested more as difference than identity. I feel there is a lot to be celebrated in these identities.

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Veni, vidi, video

Meanwhile I had been producing humorous short videos that addressed the human condition. Somehow the expediency that characterised all my work seemed to diffuse the validity of them in my mind. In a tutorial I was told to value them more. I appreciated this as had hoped there was something to them. I had not had the feedback previously from people and I sometimes doubt what I'm doing. The videos were usually too long for Instagram and went up on my website.

My web activity, which is part of my practice, includes photography, poetry, painting and drawing which gets posted on Facebook, Instagram, soundcloud, WordPress, tumblr, and twitter. Not all art I make goes on social media, and not all of my social media output is art practice, but the overlap of the Venn diagram is pretty wide. While some posts are clearly art that has been posted, others serve a more social function, but the boundaries are blurry. Much of social media is vigilantly curated and even status updates are a form of creative activity to me.

I started posting drawings on social media early on in my late arrival at the drawing club. People were receptive in general. I realised this was potentially useful for my identity. Being an artist is what you'd call an existential project. It is through such projects that the world takes on meaning. The project of social media art practice, is a project of securing and maintaining a captive audience through the generation of material that is at once startlingly authentic and real but also expertly curated.



Figure xiv – Everyone's a Critic (video still)

"Everyone's a Critic" (fig xiv) the title is taken from the patriarch's favourite in joke in *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. The video shows me ineffectually attempting to destroy a painting with an axe and eventually succeeding. The performance is a gesture of impotent rage directed at an inadequate artwork, a manifestation of the futility of this ongoing project transformed into amusing material. In addition to the expediency of most of these videos, they also have in common an element of self-portraiture. I often star in them, partly because I am on hand. They are self-portraits, even if of a distorted or fictionalised self. They often deal with various flavours of alienation. In the instance of *Everyone's a Critic*, it's creative frustration, in other videos there is loneliness, status anxiety, fear of mortality.

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This is also an ironic pre-emption of potential criticism of artwork by viewers and imagined response to what they may perceive as general attention seeking behaviour.



Figure xvi – Reverse Striptease (video still)

“Reverse striptease” (figure xvi) depicts a comically unsexy process of dressing in a photo studio environment. A comment on masculinity and identity, it explores my insecurity in my own body, particularly with regard to my circumcision, a deliberate marking on behalf of my one side of my ethnicity, for which I was called a “roundhead” at school, while my uncircumcised friends were “cavaliers”.

It is a performance in anticipation of an unidentified gaze, and shows me how I am in others company in changing rooms and bedrooms. In her essay *The Masculine Body*, Sally Sheldon describes the “novelty” of dealing with the masculine body. “This focus on masculine specificity is an interesting reversal on the usual state of affairs which is to treat female difference in relation to the unstated male norm... the exploration and problematisation of received understandings of the female body has been far more central to feminist thinking.” (Sheldon, 2002, p.14). Sheldon also cites Stoller on the sex/gender binary as two things “inextricably bound together... not inevitably bound in anything like a one-to-one relationship, but each may go into [sic] quite independent ways” [Stoller, 1968 cited in Millet, 1970, cited in Sheldon, 2002]. This point, that male bodies imply but don’t posit masculinity is essential to what is on display in my video. In “Embodiment and Mindful Body” by Nancy Scheper Hughes and Thomas Csordas they wrote, “Our body is a social and a political construction where a collective and an individual [sic] dimension of experience, languages, symbols and social structures are interlaced.” (Rivistadiscienze sociali.it, 2018)

They see the body as a text that can be read. “Clifford Geertz defined culture as a text and a system of symbols – suggests an analogy between our body’s materiality and a text, between

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the activity of bodily production and textuality as an activity of production that creates the text itself. Our body is a conversational production, a text to read and to interpret.”²⁰⁶
(Rivistadiscienze sociali.it, 2018)



Figure xvii

The MPC External partner project taught me a lot about putting on an exhibition. I was able to explore fictional authorship in regard to work I wanted to remove myself from and create a mythological context for. This was primarily done by putting fictional biographical text into the show itself and advertising the same blurb on the Facebook invite. I learnt the impact that good framing makes to the impression a work gives. In the Master's Talk I once again used NLP to bring myself into a state I could talk about my work with uncharacteristic focus, confidence and clarity. I discussed my practice which was then centred around the archive, and went through different pieces of work historically. I also spoke to the foundation students and I think made an interesting and inspiring presentation. I enjoy the challenge of public speaking and consider talking about my work part of my

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practice, and something in which I am playing with the boundaries of truth and fiction, identity and persona.

In the next chapter I will speak about how I felt about the work I did this year, the change from archival to spontaneous generation of work and the amalgamation of pseudonymous and partly fictionalised biography as well as the uses of persona and the problems therewith, starting with reflections on the production and presentation of my final piece of work “Acute Ward”, a personal and nearly prophetic installation.

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Evaluation

Over the course of the year, I feel I succeeded in producing an abundance of work, but the theoretical backing was somewhat retrospectively considered. I will now go through the aims and say to what extent they were met. My goal to explore identity through interdisciplinary practice was met as I worked on new artworks in a variety of media that initially I felt propped up my identity as an artist but over time just became an enjoyable and meaningful activity. I also aimed to look at mental health, which I talked about in my Masters' Talk and also addressed very directly with "Acute Ward" and related talks. The social media aspect to my work is ongoing and progressing as I regularly post work on Instagram and other forums. I feel my immersion in this praxis and my repeated crises may have been a factor in me never managing to fully identify and assimilate historical precedents for my work around identity; my literature review focused more on psychological and philosophical writing as I did things my own way. It would have been helpful to have more awareness of context of contemporary and historical artists. Collaboration with Dad and David has been a meaningful and valuable pursuit and I have learnt a lot from as well as producing some work that is at times amusing, at others profound, often both. I am in the process of abandoning my "just good enough" aesthetic as I learn painting skills but as they say, old habits die hard. The musical practice, only thinly evidenced in the video soundtracks and the hand in for the last module has been one of the most enjoyable and fulfilling pursuits of my life and I hope to keep improving.

My initial feeling to make an archive of everything I had ever done reflects where I was with my identity at the time. I wanted to present the carcass of my work to date as a holistic work, a grand and futile gesture of trying to scribble my way out of meaninglessness and confusion. Instead I picked over the bones, reflected on themes, produced new work and in the end tackled head on my fear of ongoing mental illness. I could have put together a show of painting, but there were few I was really happy with considering we were at postgraduate level. Neophyte as I am, I didn't want to put together a selection of work that was at best praised for its bloody spontaneity. Using what there was of the archive to identify existing themes proved to be useful. When I was artistically stuck, I found I could revisit the archive and refer to existing themes and make work more deliberately about one theme, while still using an intuitive methodology.

So I looked at past work for inspiration. Some of the better received work was video installation and I decided to return to that. I worked with a local filmmaker to record a video, later to be titled "You Artists Are So Sensitive" which typically combines obliquely disguised biographical elements and performance. I thought I might project the video with the clothes I was wearing draped over a chair. I was responding to a theme of loneliness, one that had recurred throughout the archived work regardless of the company I was keeping.

Then came the site visit. The space I was interested in made an impression on me. There was a cheap Formica kitchen unit and some lockers. The magnolia paint was flaking and took an unearthly tone under the striplights, which provoked a strong feeling of alienation and anxiety, because it was reminiscent of the psychiatric institutions I had spent months in inside over the years. My response to the space clarified an idea for what to do and I discarded my original thoughts.

Over the period of about a week, I worked hard at assembling what was to be my installation "acute ward". I install as I paint, in an improvisatory and involved fashion. I knew the kind of elements that needed to be there. Shoes without laces, the laces in the locker with a box of razors. A bed (a mattress from the charity shop stacked on top of pallets). The sandbags I had ordered to represent weight took on a new connotation (more

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clearly recognisable) of simultaneously blocking something out and keeping someone in, away from the world.

The space evolved into an authentic re-enactment of this kind of space when I started a pseudo-residency. I call it a pseudo-residency because it was short and was basically an install, but while I was installing I was drawing the pictures for the walls and making coffee and living in that space as if it was actually what it was purported to be. I used NLP to bring myself into the psychological state I would be in in such a space in order that the drawings were authentic. If I spilt coffee I left it where it was: the psychotic are too preoccupied to think about tidying up after themselves. I made sure to leave a breadcrumb trail so to speak and didn't stay in the state too long, so I could get out of it again. It was important to me that this space was more than a simulation. I didn't want any Disneyland impression of mental illness, I wanted as close to the real thing as possible for maximum impact.

The drawings were done using bibliomancy with a dictionary. I would open the dictionary at random and allow a word to catch my eye and then free associate from there. The drawings I made would often involve puns and cultural references. Meanwhile I decided to show all of my videos on the small monitor provided, which I felt integrated better than the projector and connoted surveillance, implicitly of the person whose room it was but also tacitly referred to the world outside the unit, the life the person had abandoned temporarily.

Talking about mental health is difficult and requires a mixture of bravery and tact. Unfortunately, despite improvements, it is still taboo to an extent which makes it ripe material for contemporary art to address. People look at issues differently when presented as art. The environment of the gallery makes them more critical in a useful way. They occasionally can even be made to question their prejudices. I aimed to tell my story accurately as a way in to talking about mental illness more generally and question its prevalence in society. Why is it so widespread? What are we doing wrong?

The work communicated to varying degrees. Those unfortunate enough to be familiar with such institutional spaces understood immediately what it was. The wider public varied upon whether they noticed the pill boxes, noose, etc. or if they just thought it was a messy bedroom. Some people sat down in the chairs and engaged with the video, some just glanced in. I heard the name Tracy Emin a couple of times which is obviously a reference but she was looking at a different flavour of despair. Her despair is not coloured by the influence of treatment. The disarray in her room is less florid, more cumulative, a kind of stasis or inertia rather than a thunderstorm. I was also influenced by Mike Nelson's Coral Reef (figure xix) as an installation that packed an emotional punch.



Figure xviii – Tracey Emin – “My Room”

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The institutional single bed with crinkled, starched sheets is a less decadent disarray than the spent condoms and empty liquor bottles in Emin's installation. It is the difference between the home and the institution, one is permanent, one transient.

Figure xix

I also included a painting for a nod to traditional craft, though the painting was quickly painted, and had as one colleague put it a "manic" flavour that made it congruent, it contrasted in terms of medium. It appeared the painting may have been made by the inhabitant of the room, which essentially it had.

Figure xx – floor plan "Acute Ward"

The work was site-specific in the way popularised by Robert Irwin, in so far as the whole concept was inspired by the site and made within it. However, unlike some site-specific work there was no historical precedent referred to with the work; as far as I know anyway, the site has never been used as a sanatorium, nor do I think it matters. I am not

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particularly interested in the history of spaces I am exhibiting in. Site-responsive might be a better term.



Figure xxi



Figure xxii

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In an online essay, *Art/Site/Context*, Gillian McIver said, “Work site-responsively, the artist concerned with the experience of being in those spaces, in the inter-relationship of the past and present, imprints of history and current activity, the physical feel and texture of the space and with bringing those experiences out to the public. The work has the ability to make the audience think about where they are, to reintegrate the lost fragmented forgotten place back into their consciousness.”



Figure xxiii

It is these experiential triggers more than the socio-historical elements in which I am interested. I aim to tell my own story, as I say, and hope it resonates across to other people, from their own experience and that of people they know. According to mental health charity Mind, “Approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year”, and probably everyone has experienced it second hand at least. Therefore, I feel I am justified in sharing my experience, always in the hope of this universal. The research I have been undertaking has been personal and biographical. Although I left behind the archive, I am always archiving, as when I wrote poems about memories to go with the videos which were scattered around the room and coffee stained. I wrote my entire biography in note form and continue to expand it when I remember other events.

On the subject of influence, our idea of what constitutes an artwork crystallises from the total of work seen in a lifetime. Some resonates, and thus has more import influentially. Seeing late Picasso paintings in Malaga had a strong impact on me; pure colour, and for such a sophisticated artist, brute lines and forms packing such a visceral emotional punch. The Van Gogh paintings I saw in the Louvre aged 20 were psychologically dizzying and intrigued me so much I missed a literal boat, and had to find my own way back to the hotel. They spoke to me, and my psychological experience. Having experienced psychosis aged 18 and been hospitalised confirmed to me the feeling I was different to other people. It was comforting to see what I felt was a kindred experience. That kind of visionary intensity had a context in art now. Seeing Peter Fraser’s work aggravated me at the time, but it had a big influence again. Over the years I have been lucky enough to see many galleries in Europe and around the world, but the most powerful experience I had was in the Rothko room in the Tate Modern. It was transcendent. I think these paintings resonate with something, whether it is

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form or colour or what does it I don't know. Jungu Yoon wrote in "Spirituality in Modern Art", "Rothko uses a visual paradox and subtle colour variations to create a range of atmospheres and meditative moods to evoke a numinous feeling... [displaying] the extraordinarily emotive and elemental power which I venture to call the 'energy' or 'urgency' of the numinous... Rothko established colour as a real sense of presence which inspired an overpowering sense of awe..."(Yoon 2010, p.54) I draw these parallels with big name artists because they are the ones that have made an impression on me, partly through the powerful aura the works hold due to the archetypal potency of the artists' reputation.

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Looking at the work I have produced over the past year, I feel I have gone some way towards my aim of undertaking an existential project of developing an art practice that validates my existence, and in the process of doing so, maybe I've learnt that the whole idea of needing an activity that props up your identity is spurious and unnecessary. For a long time really, apart from meeting the needs of the course, which I have done with varying success and am aiming now to do. I am doing this for me, for my own enjoyment and development.

Creativity is part of who I am. It doesn't need to be a contrivance. It always has been part of my life from a young age. And making work in new media has allowed me to explore new ways of approaching personal topics around identity. In my video work, I looked at my physical, social and artistic insecurities in a way that was both therapeutic and I hope amusing and enlightening to the viewer. The personal is so much raw material.

My painting, though behind where I want it to be, has progressed somewhat, and is something I plan to continue beyond the bounds of the MA. I will still have my studio, and I will keep working on the portraits and try and develop the abstracts with the help of David. I hope to have another show before long locally and perhaps sell some more paintings. Practicing mindful painting has led to certain developments of paintings I couldn't have made consciously. On conclusion of this MA, I feel (if it's not too much of a cliché!) that I am just beginning my artistic journey. While I have come across challenges that brought me close to leaving my studies, overall the work I have done has only succeeded in strengthening my sense of who I am although not necessarily in the way I have imagined. I have admittedly further developed an artistic persona, which has proven useful in presentations, talks and suchlike. However, I feel that (if foggily) I have a better idea of who I really am underneath and what I want out of life. The search for meaning and identity has, as in Attar's Conference of the Birds, taken me back towards where I was. The search for 'wholeness' without, being all along a search for something essential, within. I am trying to hang on to the simplicity recommended by Lao Tzu in the "Tao Te Ching" through an awareness of thoughtless presence as advocated by Eckhart Tolle in "The Power of Now". The water never stays clear for long but with daily meditation practice one day I will no longer worry about who I am and just be. The role of artist is for other people's categorisation and something to put on a form. The persona I have developed is just a tool, a game, just as writing can be a game, but one that mirrors a submerged truth beyond articulation.

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Appendix A – emails to Sidney Nolan

Dear Sir/Madam,

I have been aware of the Sidney Nolan trust since my friend Florence Boyd told me about it a couple of years ago. Since then I have heard more from Celia Johnson who I know as a tutor from art college. I am currently undertaking an MA in Fine Art at HCA and have an interdisciplinary practice including a collaborative practice with my dad under the name Majeed and Son. We currently have a sculptural work called “Ziggurat” on display at the front of the college and are exploring touring it.

There is a piece of work we are developing that we are looking for a home for and you were our first port of call. It sits somewhere between functional and conceptual art. We call it the “convergence/divergence seat” and it is in effect a bench made out of a single curved piece of treated oak on three legs. The concept is such that the bench can accommodate both amicable and more distanced relationships whereby the viewers/sitters select which side of the bench they sit on. If they sit on the inside of the curve they will be facing each other with knees pointing together in a convivial convergence. If facing apart on the outside of the curve the sitters will diverge and be able to give each other space for the moment.

The convergence/divergence bench is an exercise in simplicity of design and humorously functional. If you feel you would like this work installed on site we would be glad to arrange a visit to Sidney Nolan Trust to see how best we can deliver. I hope you will forgive the speculative nature of this email, as we wanted to present you with our idea and weren't sure of the correct procedure, but regardless we thought you may be sympathetic.

Thank you for reading, best of luck with your endeavours.

Warm regards,

Omar Majeed



Hi Omar

Thanks very much for your email. I need to speak to my colleague and will get back to you...but I think we might well be interested! It sounds lovely. Then a site visit would be great.

I'll get back to you – but please nag me if you don't hear in the next few days!

V best and thanks again, Amanda

AMANDA FITZWILLIAMS
PR MANAGER, SIDNEY NOLAN TRUST

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Dear Amanda,

How are you? You said I should email you if I hadn't heard from you. What did your colleague think?

Best wishes,
Omar

Hi Omar

I'm SO sorry not to get back to you. We are always so busy - crazy!

I am copying Anthony in to this so please reply to us both. Is the work still looking for a home? If yes, and Anthony is happy with the plan, we must fix a date for you to come up and have a look at possible sites.

Good luck with the MA show. I hope to pop in on the last day - I'm off to Spain for a week now so can't make the PV unfortunately.

v best, Amanda

Dear Amanda,

Thanks for getting back to me.

To clarify, the work, though fully realised conceptually is still in process. We are in talks with a local fabricator who is going to build it to our specifications but we were hoping to gather the necessary funding. He will give us a quote shortly. Like I say, you were our first port of call for offering the work a home, and imagine it would look lovely perhaps at the top of a hill or half way on a walk in your lovely environment. It would be great to meet you and get to look around and see if it could go anywhere. It would also be interesting for me to see the site properly having heard so much about it.

It feels like a delicate matter in a way and I wish it wasn't a consideration, but would you be interested enough to house the work that I could present you with a fee? If you are happy with this I will be back in touch when I have a concrete figure and we can work from there, it shouldn't be anything too outlandish but materials are expensive. Hope you understand.

Best wishes,

Omar

Dear Omar,

Thank you for your email and for your interest in the Sidney Nolan Trust. However potentially exciting your project, I am afraid that at this time the Trust is not in a position to take it any further with you. We do not operate a budget for the creation/installation of artworks and nor do we have the security/facility to care for works appropriately on the farm or the Trust when in situ.

I realise that this may be a disappointment for you but we wish you the very best in siting your work for the future.

With all best wishes,
Anthony.

ANTHONY PLANT, DIRECTOR

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Appendix B – Majeed and son



Composition (2018) – Majeed and son



Split mind (2018) – Majeed and son



Obstruction (2018) – Majeed and son

! **Appendix C – typewritten poem for Acute Ward installation “Hunting Glowworms”**

Hunting glowworms

After band practice
we pitched up the road
with torches, but Elzabeth
and Tom wanted to turn them out
and make the most of the dark and silence
as we paced past a house
that hasn't changed inside since 1945.

An animal or god know what scuttles
in the undergrowth. we stop
but I want to keep moving

leeches, sheep run in a line

Im looking at the ground as usual
one foot in front of the other
and all that
It's going to be a fair walk back.
Its late and I'm tired
and full of cortisol.

I get snagged in a tree.
I fall in a hole.

and then... there's one
But its fading
and I miss it.
maybe a glimmer.

If we don't see one Im going to be too
despondent to walk back, I say
only slightly joking

then in the hedgerow, a glimmer
clear and bright in the dark
a solitary glow worm.
When they find their mate
they stop glowing. Elepeth said.

We look for more, but the rain starts

OM2018

Appendix D - Paintings



Caroline looks severe in this painting and she has a kind of resolve that I think I've captured here. I am not aiming consciously to capture anything than what is in front of me but pick up on things while I'm painting. There is a darkness and melancholy to it that I see in Caroline. Though she seems whimsical and playful, it is apparent to me she has suffered.



Martin and Maddie were meditating in their sittings. This is betrayed by the closed eyes and in Maddie's more formal posture. I think there is an element of serenity in these despite the usual spontaneity. I left Maddie's background plain for emptiness.



Beth in studio

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Fiesta

This one has been painted over now despite having quite a clean finish I felt it was too lacking in recognisable motifs and is becoming a geometric painting with the addition of a grid. What you see below is a work in progress and has been part of informal painting instruction I have been receiving from my friend David. The rest of the rectangles and spaces will be filled in and then the rectangles will be ghosted with overlaid rectangles. It gets worse before it gets better!



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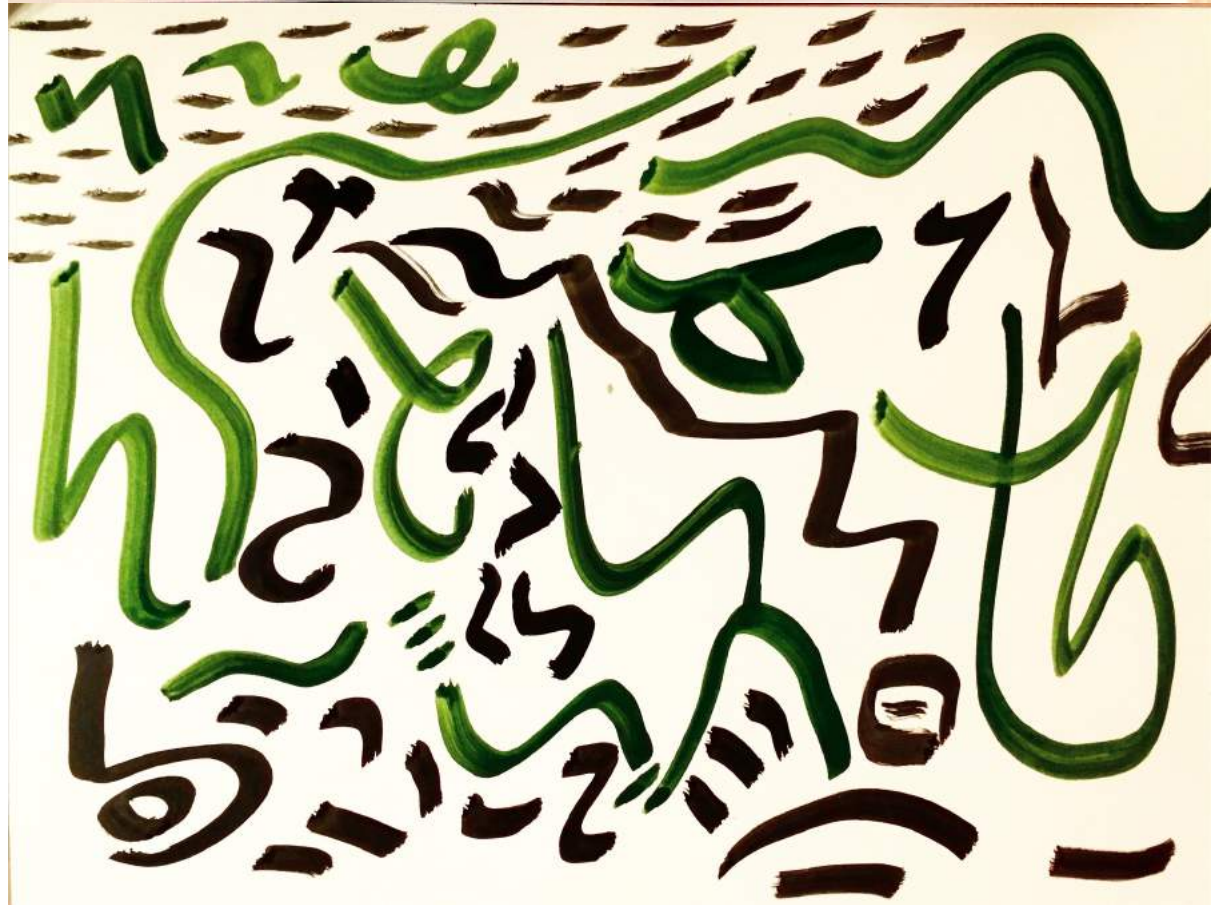
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Appendix D – Automatic Drawings



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Appendix E – Video Stills

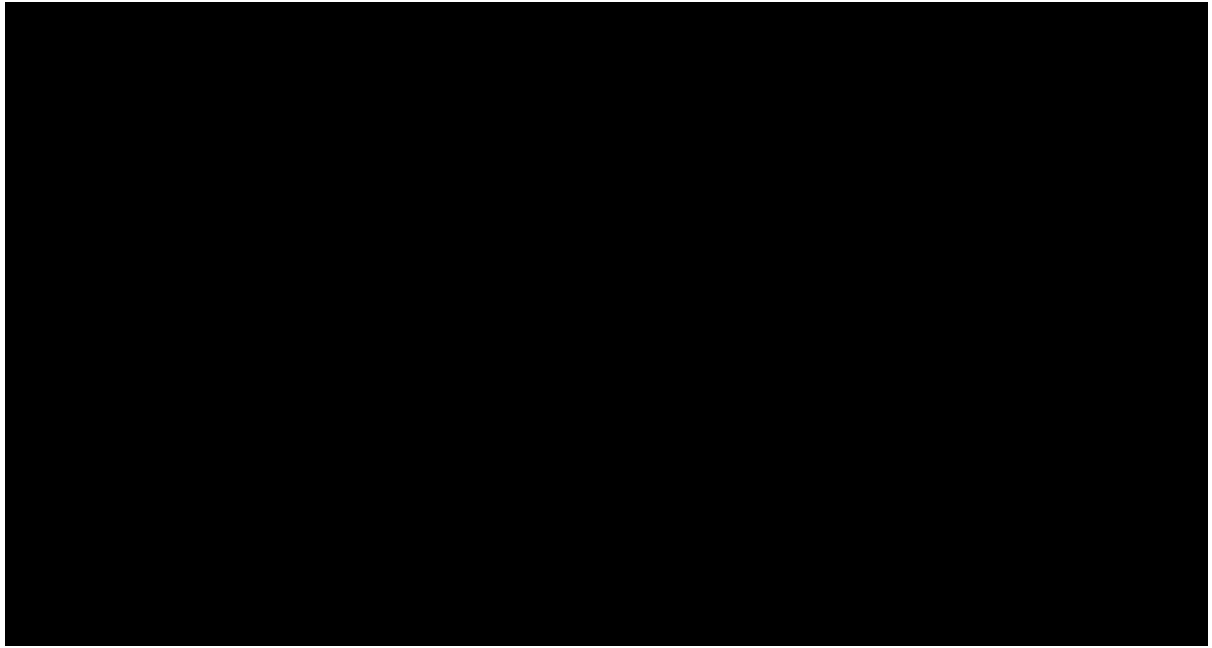
Carwash

“Car wash” playful evocation of loneliness. Two people dancing with headphones to Rose Royce’s disco tune Car Wash outside a lit up carwash.

England

“England” disorientating meditation on class tourism.

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I don't need anyone

"I don't need anyone" Shouting along to JJ72's October Swimmer in shirtsleeves in the car. A humorous insistence on independence in the face of latent need.

You Artists are so Sensitive

"You Artists are so Sensitive" Performance in woods, referring to memory of bad date.

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Figure xx – Requiem (video still)

“Requiem” timelapse of melting plasticine snowman set to Mozart’s requiem. Appendix E shows a newspaper article demonstrating what I knew from an early age, namely that Raymond Briggs’ animation is ostensibly about grief.

Appendix F – article about the Snowman

Raymond Briggs: The Snowman is not really about Christmas, it's about death | The Independent

06/08/2018, 17:29



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Raymond Briggs: The Snowman is not really about Christmas, it's about death

The beloved children's book, and subsequent animation, has been hijacked by festive sentimentality according to its author

Adam Sherwin | @adamsherwin10 | Tuesday 11 December 2012 01:00 | 0 comments

Like

Click to follow:
The Independent Culture

Raymond Briggs: The Snowman is not really about Christmas, it's about death



show all

Christmas wouldn't be the same without another showing for the heart-melting fantasy about a boy whose snowman creation magically comes to life.

But *The Snowman* was actually about death and should never have become a festive favourite, Raymond Briggs has revealed, after complaining that the film adaptation of his story was hijacked by Christmas sentimentality.

The illustrator who wrote *The Snowman* in 1978, has finally consented to produce a sequel to the enchanting animated story, *The Snowman and The Snowdog*, which will be broadcast by

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/raymond-snowman-is-not-really-about-christmas-its-about-death-8388520.html>

Page 1 of 5

Channel 4 on Christmas Eve.

The original Oscar-nominated Snowman, famed for the scene of the boy and his snowman taking flight to the swelling choral ballad

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"Walking In The Air", has been screened every Christmas by Channel 4 since 1982.

Yet Briggs, 78, a self-confessed "miserable git" with a **Grinch-style attitude to Christmas**, said that his story, which depicts the snowman melting in the morning, was designed to introduce children to the concept of mortality and should never have become a heart-warming accompaniment to mince pies and gift-giving.

"The idea was clean, nice and silent. I don't have happy endings," Briggs told the Christmas edition of Radio Times. "I create what seems natural and inevitable. The snowman melts, my parents died, animals die, flowers die. Everything does. There's nothing particularly gloomy about it. It's a fact of life."

The animated version of *!e Snowman*, which appeared four years after the book's publication, inserted "Walking in the Air", a motorcycle ride and a visit to Santa at the North Pole.

Briggs said: "I thought, 'It's a bit corny and twee, dragging in Christmas', as *!e Snowman* had nothing to do with that, but it worked extremely well."

The writer, whose 1973 bestseller *Father Christmas*, presented Santa as an irritable old man, grumbling about delivering presents in the cold, remains indifferent to the festive spirit.

"I'm not a fan of Christmas, although I support the principle of a day of feasting and presents, but the anxiety starts in October: how many are coming? Are they bringing grandchildren? How long will they stay?"

Briggs is however content with the *Snowman* sequel, which resurrects little Billy's melted playmate and introduces a mischievous pup with odd socks for ears.

"It would have been cashing in to do it before," he said. "Now it won't do any harm, and it's not vulgar and American. I've never touched a computer, or anything like that.

"CGI makes everything too perfect, but they're sticking to the old ways. I'm a notorious grumbler, but I found nothing to grumble about."

The 24-minute *Snowman* and *!e Snowdog* costs £2 million, and is made up of 200,000 individual drawings. Many of the artists worked on the original film and have sought to maintain the look of Briggs' drawings. Digital snow and lighting effects have been added, although it's unclear if the producers dared to tell Briggs. The sequel is accompanied by a mobile phone game. "Huge amounts of money have been generated by the *Snowman*," Briggs said. "I'm not interested. I read it's sold three million copies, but publishers bandy about numbers that aren't usually true. I don't spend anything. I don't like going abroad – the Gatwick airport hellhole."

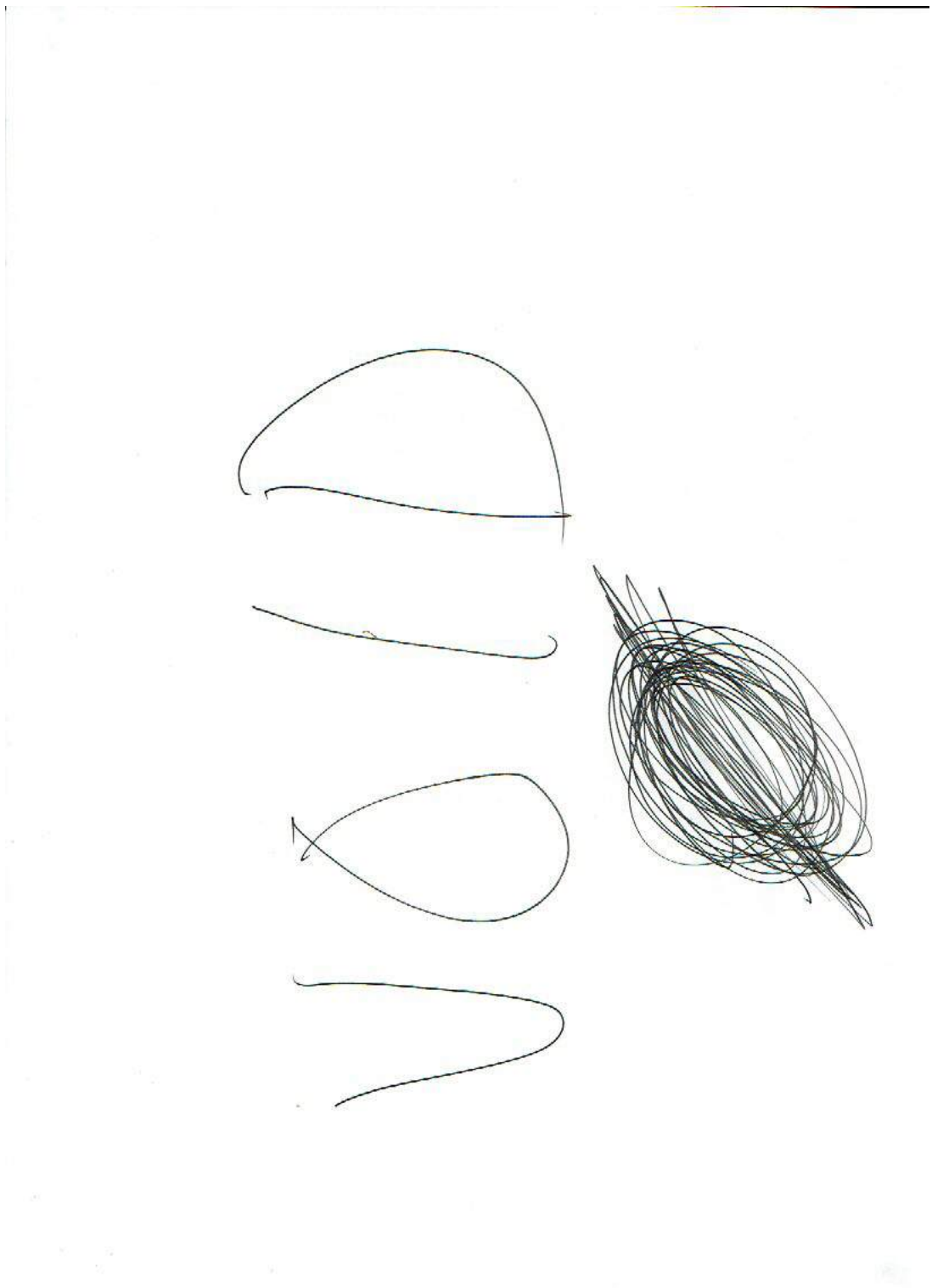
The writer did once find a kindred spirit. "I went once to Roald Dahl's birthday party so I must have read something of his. He was fairly curmudgeonly."

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Appendix G sample of “psychotic drawings” drawings produced over three days for “Acute Ward” installation



I had a moleskine prior to my 2006 hospitalisation with the words ‘avoid’ and ‘void’ written repeatedly in it.

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My 2001 AS art coursework contained several versions of figures disappearing through archways into light.



your eyes
glow thru
darkness

In 2002 I wrote a poem for my Australian exchange student called "For Romy" about not being able to sleep after a party and watching a moth trying to get out the window. I could see her eyes through the darkness.

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This has taken shape well from when I last saw it Omar.
Comments below that relate to the feedback I gave you for your first draft:

- Make more connections with theory and practice-based research throughout – embed and interweave this so that it feels integral and ongoing. You refer to value judgements that aren't explained or expanded on in any way – such as why something worked, didn't work, was liked or disliked, by others or you. Give these more attention and try to tease out reasons and criteria for judgment.

You have done this, and the lit review and outcomes feel more connected. Push your analysis further when you give value judgments – e.g. 'it has something about it' or 'it works' – its tricky, but can you put your finger on what you're getting at here. Your work is distinctively yours, and so this is something particular to your critical faculties and aesthetic sensibilities.

- Address the change of direction of the main heading more. Is this an evolution or a fresh direction? Why did the work and research demand this change?

You do address the change in direction. In a way this text has taken on the role of an archive or mini museum of the year.

- Some formatting issues with images, make sure you include a Figures list – follow the conventions from previous submissions.

See comments in the text about figures and formatting. Please continue to work in this document specifically as I have made quite a few corrections and adjustments that will be lost otherwise.

- Add subheadings where suggested so that chapters feel clearly structured.
- Go through my comments throughout the document, which often prompt more info, expansion, and explanation. Try to make sure that the making and the theory feel mutually informed. Reference to existentialism, psychoanalysis, and postmodernity all make sense in the context of your work. As do references to sources outside of visual art discourses. Take these differences seriously as shaping influences on your methodology and ways of working.

You obviously need to edit some text out to bring it down to the max word count. The text would benefit from more sustained engagement with specific thinkers (who should return in the evaluation as you round things off and tie things together with your aims and lit review etc.), as the net is cast very widely, unless you make a point of this as being intrinsic to your methodology. It is good to read that you feel in a good position to move things forward after the MA – I agree. Can you point to how things might be pushed further in future projects or forthcoming developments? You could also mention the research group and public talk for common room. The brief comparison that you make with Emin feels meaningful as you put your work alongside another artist's and compare them in more concrete terms than done previously. This is useful in the process of evaluation, as comparison can draw out commonalities, distinctiveness and illuminate how value and meaning are formed within different contexts amongst multiple authorial voices.

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