

**Exposing the Layers: An Experience of Discovery**

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My art emphasizes process over product: when I create art, I create experience. Whether my art involves solely myself, as my initial works did, or others along with myself, as my later works did, the physical act of art making always functions as an exploratory act. When I refer to art making as an exploratory act, I find it helpful to visualize the art-making act as similar to the act of excavating. Through artistic excavation, I unearth what I consider to be layers of experience. These layers include the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that construct the unique identity of a particular person or group of people.

Both my initial artwork and my most recent work conceptually and visually communicate the idea that one's self and one's sense of self is comprised of various thoughts, feelings, and life experiences that accumulate into a collective whole. By sense of self, I mean the ways in which one views or defines his or hers self. When I create art, I visually expose these layers in order to contemplate their complexities and the ways in which one's context molds one's experiences. My process functions as a means of extending personal exploration to its relevance within a larger framework; my work explores the social constructions and societal standards that influence how we consider our experiences and ourselves. This theme of exposing layers of the self is the foundation that inspired my range of self-portraits over the course of this past year. Overall, my art considers the significance of individual experiences that comprise the unique individual, and then connects those experiences both to larger, societal frameworks and to the experiences of others. By doing this through utilizing the genre of self-portraits, I show art's powerful potential to challenge misrepresentations of individuals and their experiences, to express the complexities of what makes us who we are, and to empower individuals to assert their voices, their stories, with confidence and authority.

Before I narrowed my artistic focus to self-portraiture, I created works that attempted to tackle broad themes of feminism. In particular, I made art that how a woman's life experiences are influenced by her gendered identity within a particular sociopolitical context. When creating these works, I looked to designated feminist artists for inspiration. One artist I looked at in particular was Hannah Wilke. In her artwork, Hannah Wilke explores female representation and female bodies, notably incorporating vaginal imagery into her work. One of my earliest, exploratory artworks directly references Wilke's vaginal sculpture made from chewing gum and kneaded erasers. The symbolism of Wilke's materials especially engaged me: "eraser" becomes "erase her," and the gum becomes a metaphor for how society treats women, chewing them up and spitting them out when they lose their flavor, when they no longer serve a purpose. I found myself particularly drawn to this gum metaphor, so I started sculpting little gum sculptures of my own. I enjoyed the visceral quality of the process, how I had to chew the gum myself, embedding my saliva into the material, and then form the little pieces with my own hand. For my own gum artwork, I haphazardly plopped four vaginal gum sculptures to an open, empty gum container and titled it *Woman*, again directly referencing Wilke's woman-as-gum metaphor and the deeper message it conveys about women's place as deemed by a patriarchal society.

As I progressed in my exploration of feminist work, I realized that in my own work I was attempting to tackle too many things at once. In trying to convey overall expressions of the female experience, my work lacked specific focus and thus did not communicate any clear, specific meaning. In making these broad artworks, I had ignored the fact that each woman's experience of her female identity is subjective and unable to be defined by the broad generalizations I was making. I knew I needed to reevaluate and specify my goals, my focus,

and my artwork. In order to resolve this issue, I shifted my artwork from its wide scope to a more specific focus on a female experience I knew intimately: my own.

At this point, I turned to the genre of self-portraits as a vehicle to still address feminist issues within my art, but to do so in a way firmly grounded in my own experiences. By using my own experiences as the lens for my exploration of feminist issues, I not only learned more about societal influences on female experience but also about the outside influences that helped shape my sense of self as a woman, a daughter, a bulimic, a student, an artist. In my initial self-portraits, my content focused on my considerations of aspects of my female experience, most of which revolved around my negative feelings towards my physical body and the tension I felt between my interior and exterior self.

During this time, I looked to the work of Austrian painter Maria Lassnig. Lassnig does not create specifically feminist work, but she does create self-portraits that convey her acute sense of body perception and body awareness. She achieves this keen awareness of her own body through her artistic process, in the way in which she physically interacts with the materials while creating her work. Lassnig approaches her work without the desire to paint something specific; rather, she lets the work develop as she creates in a relaxed manner. When painting, Lassnig often lies down on her canvas, or rests it on her lap, a process that intimately connects her physical self with her artwork. Also in her artworks, Lassnig expresses themes of the tension between the interior and exterior self. She achieves this effect through her use of color. Lassnig's oil painting *Language Grid* exemplifies how Lassnig uses Fauve-like color to communicate a particular mood or feeling in her work. The subject of this work is a jolting figure. Bold red flushes the figure and gives it an alarming glow. The stark contrast between the

warm and cool colors in the work creates a visual vibration that signals the tension between the figure's interior and exterior self.

Like Lassnig, in my body of self-portraits, I both approached the works without a concrete image in mind and used color to convey emotion. While I tried not to have a definite image in mind when creating my self-portraits, I did set specific guidelines for myself. I decided that each self-portrait would focus on one particular emotion, experience, thought, or feeling that I had that influenced my sense of self. Since my earlier works tried to achieve too many things at once, I needed to establish this boundary to ensure my works communicated their intended message. I also decided that each work should try to emphasize one particular art element or principle. For example, in self-portraits where I wanted to emphasize line and its expressive quality, I omitted color in order to place emphasis on the dynamic energy of the bold lines coursing across the picture plane. On the other hand, in self-portraits where I wanted to emphasize color, I downplayed my lines so that my saturated, unconventional color choices commanded my viewer's attention. By using formal choices to express certain feelings and emotions, I realized how the negative experiences in my life play a large role in shaping my sense of self.

While primarily positive experiences make up my life, negative experiences are crucial components of my life as well. It is the influence of these negative experiences that most contributes to the complex layers that make me who I am. As I further developed my large body of self-portraits, I became aware of how integral a role my eating disorder played in my perception of self and the way I manifested that in my art. Many of my artworks show disturbing images, ones that are uncomfortable to look at. I specifically created them to be unsettling to view in order to reflect my difficulties experiencing the sense of worthlessness and

shame I associate with my eating disorder. The works in which I juxtaposed photographs others took of me as a child with words others spoke about me are a specific example of self-portraits that communicate the tension that exists between my interior and my exterior and how my interactions with others influences my own sense of self. The self-portrait titled “Fat @ approx 14 mos old” shows a photograph of my baby self sitting in the sand at the beach. I face away from the viewer; my body is twisted, and a round pudge of my baby fat folds over the waistband of my bathing suit. Underneath this photo is a caption, identical to the title of the work. This self-portrait as a whole maintains associations with a page from a documentary scrapbook: a photograph, mounted on plain paper, captioned with simple, handwritten text underneath the photo. By creating this type of self-portrait, I documented two separate, past moments of my life in a constructed moment of my own, expressive of my present feelings. I found it necessary to reflect on my experiences of my past in order to understand the ways in which those past moments manifested themselves in the present and fused with my current situation to shape my sense of self.

My awareness of how my art communicated some of the most intimate aspects of my life experiences led me to research the work of Frida Kahlo. In our artworks, Kahlo and I both utilize images of our physical, female bodies as vehicles that communicate a variety of our life experiences. We both place a focus on the physical body as a vessel, one that contains all of the intimate thoughts, feelings, and life experiences that construct our sense of self. In her artwork, Kahlo exposes intimate aspects of her life and does so in a way that is self-empowering. Looking at Kahlo’s self-portraits, I view them as a tool she utilized to exercise control over her identity and assert a very specific representation of herself. Kahlo’s works blatantly communicate intimate emotion regarding the dynamic of her relationships with her family, her

lovers, and herself, as well specific, painful life events such as the trolley accident that almost killed her. Despite all of the pain and sadness Kahlo manifests in her self-portraits, her works are not pitiable. Instead, these works stand proud and strong, a testimony to Kahlo's resilience. For example, Kahlo's self-portrait *The Broken Column* shows Kahlo, her nude torso exposed and vulnerable, nails piercing her skin, tears streaming down her face. However, Kahlo's stance and gaze convey an attitude of pride and determination. Her pose and expression show resilience and perseverance, despite the many challenges in her life.

I found myself, like Kahlo, creating works that, although they address difficult subject matter, stand bold and proud, unapologetic of their statement. Through creating the expanse of self-portraits I presented at the midyear show, I found myself empowered. Despite the fact that each of the images that made up this comprehensive self-portrait tied directly to the pain and complexity of emotion interwoven with my eating disorder, I felt proud of the work as opposed to ashamed of the taboo content it addresses. The process of visually expressing an abundance of hidden, suppressed emotion proved cathartic. In a very personal way, the act of exposing my vulnerabilities through representations over which I had sole control was therapeutic. This positive experience of the ways in which art functions as a beneficial tool to help us consider ourselves and the factors that influence our sense of self served as a catalyst for my desire to extend this positive art-making experience to others.

I knew I wanted to create collaborative art workshops in which participants and myself discussed themes of female representation, identity, and sense of self, and responded to those discussions through subjective visual responses. To create these workshops, for inspiration, I turned to feminist poems that function as self-portraits. Like feminist visual self-portraits, these poetic self-portraits articulate aspects of female experience and how a gendered, patriarchal

society influences those female experiences. These feminist self-portrait poems each convey a specific female voice speaking about gendered experience and, by asserting a feminine voice, challenge misrepresentations of women and their experiences. I selected three particularly engaging feminist self-portrait poems as the foundation for three workshops in which participants and myself discussed self-portraits and female experience, read the poem together, and then created individual artworks to synthesize our workshop experience and assert our own voices.

In constructing my workshops, I turned to the artwork of Tim Rollins and KOS. I strongly link Rollins and KOS' artistic endeavors to my own in the way that their art is multidisciplinary, involves community, and express facets of layers that make up their sense of self and the context in which they exist. I admired the ways in which Rollins, as an art educator, prioritized reading and writing skills in his collaborative art-making process with KOS. Rollins and KOS' process is a multidisciplinary one, and I view my workshops as multidisciplinary as well because of the ways in which they incorporate reading, writing, and critical discussion.

In addition to that aspect of Rollins and KOS' process, their process parallels and enhances the content of their works. Rollins and KOS deconstruct physical books of canonical literature and then use those deconstructed pages as the foundation for their own artwork that reconstructs the original meaning of the text. As their process of deconstructing and reconstructing texts relates to the context in their works, so does my workshop's emphasis on the collaging process. In the workshops, through discussion, we stripped down the layers of the poems, sifting through the lines and pondering their meaning. When our conversation shifted to a discussion of the significance of those lines relevant to our own personal lives, we reconstructed the layers of text so that they reveal new meanings. Through the physical process



of collaging artworks, participants stripped down found materials into fragments to later be layered into a whole, new image. In their artworks, participants reconstructed those fragments, layering them and making them relevant to their own personal endeavors by infusing them with new meaning. In the ultimate art products, these layers reveal layers of the participants' lives, their thoughts, and their feelings.

Rollins and KOS' work *Red Alice II (after Lewis Carroll)* illustrates how their artwork reveals the layers make up their lives. The artwork is an acrylic painting over top of pages from Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which are mounted on stretched linen to form a horizontal, rectangular picture plane. A bold, exclamatory rectangle of red takes up most of the picture plane; however, the pages of text are visible along the perimeter of the rectangle, allowing the viewer to immediately relate the work to the text that inspired it. This red rectangle demands attention with its color associations with raw emotion and passion and also aggression. Within the red rectangle is a red figure: Alice. The figure almost blends into the background at first but she is there, subtly visible and confined in a scrunched pose within the red rectangle. Within this space, Alice's body folds into itself, a posture that simultaneously intimates defense, with her hands protecting herself, and defiance, with her head turned outward from the space of the image. Alice displays a peculiar facial expression; she gazes out of the frame but does not lock eyes with the viewer. It appears she is actively engaging with thoughts inside her mind, inside the rectangle, and outwardly displaying the mounting tension she feels. About the personal significance embedded in artwork, KOS member Annette Rosado revealed, "the Red Alice means both anger and blood to me... The Red Alice is a girl who is so angry and in pain that she has had it and might jump out of the painting and fight back. The Red Alice is angry because of all the girls who are raped and hurt and killed because they are girls" (Berry 75). This

new meaning reveals that the context of the south Bronx proved smothering to women in many ways. In the artwork, the bold, saturated red almost smothers Alice. However, the narrative image also illustrates Alice's pent up energy and hints at its upcoming release. The process of creating this artwork, for Rosado and other members of KOS, served as an action of release, one of asserting their voice, outraged at the conditions of the violence present in their everyday lives, into the public sphere. Though *Red Alice* is literally a red Alice, this artwork reveals the complex, layered ways in which the members of KOS consider their sense of selves, the context in which they exist, and how they communicate those considerations to others.

The idea of layers manifests in my final artwork as well, but in a more complete way. I created the quilt to function as an artwork that synthesized the artworks produced in the workshops and communicated those works in a cohesive, visual form. In creating this quilt, it was crucial that I hand-sewed every component. I wanted to maintain intimate physical interaction with the materials, much how I did in my earlier works. I started creating the quilt by stitching together pink security blankets. I wanted to take these gendered items, representative how gender and its associations are assigned to individuals immediately at birth, and assign them new meaning. I did this by threading the workshop artworks into this quilt background that I had constructed, overlaying the old meaning with this new, collective meaning informed by the workshop experiences. In my quilt, the thread serves as a metaphor for the thread that connects individuals' life experiences with the experiences of others. The images of the participants' works, printed on fabric and integrated into the quilt, serve as a metaphor for the fabric of the participants' lives. The physical act of stitching the materials together to make up the quilt illustrates how, within the context of the workshops, individual participants' lives and perspectives intersected through dialogue and creative production in order to create meaning that

extends beyond personal significance. As I hand-stitched each workshop image into the quilt, I relived the conversations and ideas manifested in the workshop, recalling each individual who contributed to the experience.

I incorporated multiple elements from the workshops in order to reinforce how meaningful those multiple workshops were in the development of my conceptual ideas, as well as my emphasis on collaborative artwork. Lines from the poems we discussed used as a framework for our discussions in the workshops frame the images in the quilt. The whole concept of the quilt and the act of sewing emphasizes my emphasis on the interconnectedness we can find between individuals' life experiences that influence how they consider themselves and how they engage with, respond to, and define their world. The ways in which this quilt portrays individuals' self-created representations of their experiences and perspectives makes this work the collective self-portrait that it is.

Over the course of the past year, my artwork has progressed from intimate self-portraits to collaborative works, yet throughout its development, the artwork has remained focused on considerations of female sense of self and the factors that influence it. Consistently, through the process of making art, I emphasize how, much like different materials and components make up artworks, different thoughts, feelings, and experiences make up the individual. Though the process of art making unearths both the positive and negative aspects of the self, the act of asserting a representation of one's self through art functions as an empowering act. In addition to acting as empowering expression, art making serves individuals as a tool to help them better understand their sense of self and the factors that influence that, and communicate their perspectives to others.



Maria Lassnig

*Language grid* (1999)

Oil on Canvas

80.75x59 inches

Source:

<http://cloud.hauserwirth.com/documents/N0e2P1uFK52JwmDN17eiM8haR1F1n8K39wdy6VW04M27F49EXa/large/37331.jpg>

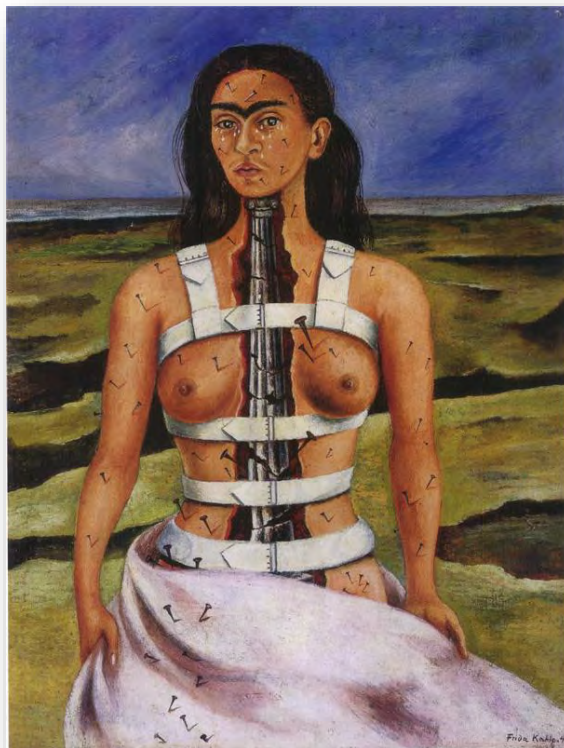


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*Fat @ approx. 14 mos old (2014)*

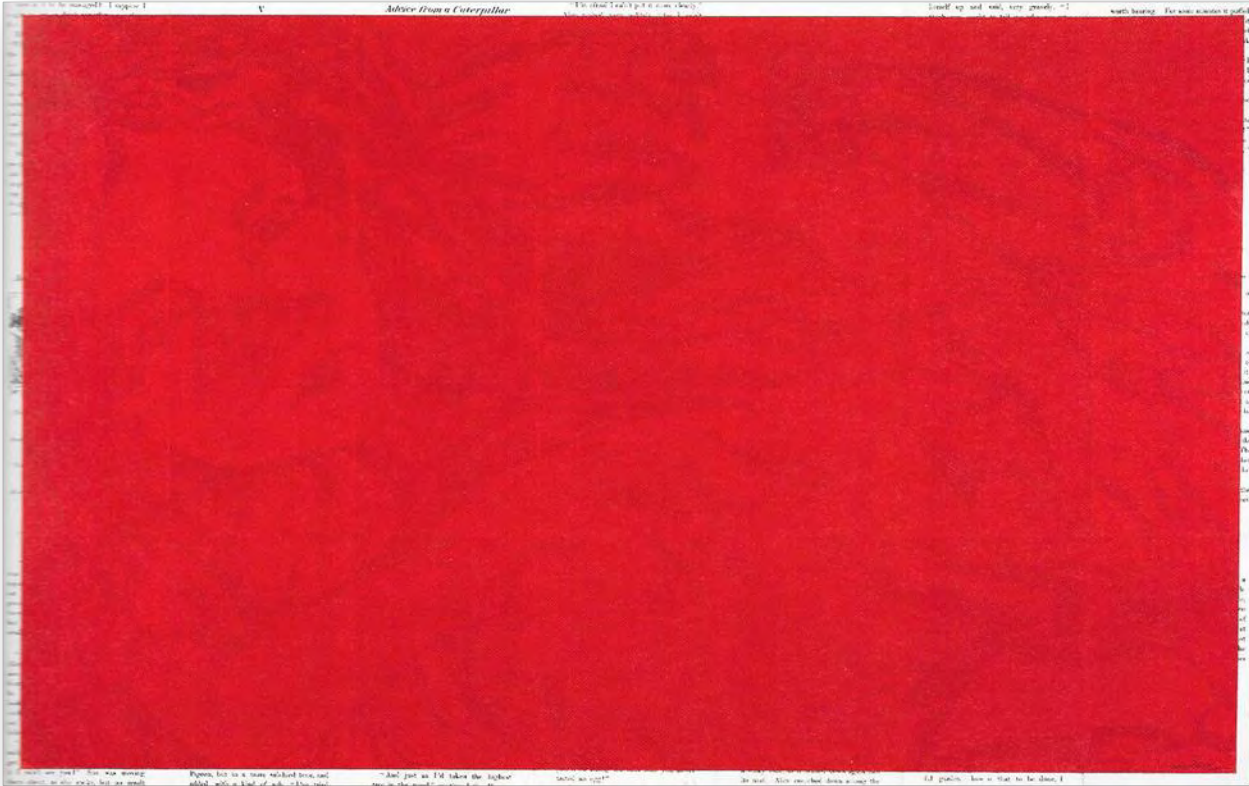
Photo, pen, Bristol board

9x12



Frida Kahlo  
*The Broken Column* (1944)  
Oil on Masonite  
43x33 cm

Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/search/the%20broken%20column#supersized-search-185002>



Tim Rollins and KOS  
Acrylic on book pages mounted on linen  
24 x 36 inches

Source: image scanned from Berry, Ian, ed. *Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: A History*. Saratoga Springs, NY: Frances Young Tang

Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2009. Print.