

Nina Harris

Artist Statement and Research

SMP in Studio Art, 2018

### **Artist Statement**

My entire life has been surrounded by art. My love of art stems from my family's endless support and interest in the subject. Art was always a way for my family to come together and celebrate our family's culture and traditions. I have always been fascinated by Sicilian culture. My Sicilian heritage is something that helped to shape and form my own identity. The culture and traditions I grew up with shaped my view of the world and my place in it. However self-identification is something that I have struggled with my whole life. The society we live in today creates many ideas about what a person should look like, act like, or think like. As the world becomes smaller and more connected many cultures and traditions fade away with these changing times. The merging of cultures and traditions make self-identification much more complex and ambiguous.

Through the subject matter of my work I am exploring my presence within the complexity of Sicilian culture. I am using fashion as a medium to explore these identities and understand the effects that clothing have on person's identity. Using fashion as a form of self-expression is something that we come across everyday in our daily lives. Clothing and fashion play a major role in creating a person or cultures identity. We are able to observe this role everyday within society. For example, on a college campus clothing is one of the best ways to distinguish social

groups in the community. In the image (figure 1), the students each have a unique personality that can be seen through the clothing they wear. One student wears a hijab that covers her hair. Just through this piece of clothing we are able to gather information about the girls religious practices and beliefs. The next girl beside her wears a shirt with a graphic image of Marilyn Monroe and shorts exposing most of her legs. The clothing this girl is wearing speaks to her interests, and personality. The loose fitting t-shirt and short shorts look comfortable and show that she wants the ability to move around freely. The design on the t-shirt refers to pop culture, which can give us an idea of her interests. Like the girls in this image, many cultures and individuals will use clothing as a way to create an image that is unique and symbolic to themselves or their culture. My work uses this aspect of clothing to create an image for myself. My work is compilation of my own identity using cultural symbols, personal images, and historic references that represent my place with in this culture.

Alexander McQueen was one artist who also used clothing and fashion as a way to represent his own identity and emotions in the designs and collections he creates. He uses cultural symbols, historic references, and modern design and imagery to create an identity that speak specifically about his own experiences and emotions. His work not only engages with the idea of aesthetic and function of the art form, but also creates an emotional spectacle that can be felt through the visualization and performance of his work. He combines the functionality of clothing with the expressiveness of art to create work that is in a way living art. One of McQueen's most famous and controversial collections was his (autumn/winter 1995-6)

collection titled "*Highland Rape*". (Figure 3) This collection is an example of how McQueen is able to take his own experience and emotion and represent it in a line of clothing. McQueen uses dirty brown and green colors to create a feeling of roughness and destruction. The clothing is ripped and torn exposing intimate areas of the models bodies. This texturizing and manipulation of the clothing creates the feeling of mutilation and aggression in the piece. Through the different elements of the clothing's design McQueen is able to express his own feelings and emotions about the sexual abuse he encountered as a child and relay it to the audience. This personal and emotional connection is what grabbed the audience's attention and created a profound emotional reaction within the viewer.

Like McQueen, I am using clothing as a medium to explore the beauty and emotion that I find within my own expressive means. I am using his artwork as an inspiration the help me move away from fashion as a simple decorative art form and explore it as a expressive and conceptual form of art. In Figure 2 one can see the how the use of cultural symbolism is mixed with personal intimate elements. The dress is adorned with traditional Sicilian imagery and patterns while being surrounded by personal objects and paintings. This combination helps to create a more personal and intimate atmosphere for the dress. The strong bright colors of red and yellow along with the traditional patterns and symbols creates the feeling of cultural pride and history. The personal items and images that surround the dress create a feeling of family sentimentality.

A culture is influence by many different things; the environment that surrounds it, the religion, the language, the artwork, and many other things. My

work is attempting to explore each aspect of a culture I identify with. I am exploring my place within Sicilian culture through the history of my family as well as the symbols and imagery that have come to represent this culture to me. My fascination with Sicily's diverse history can be connected to my struggles with finding my own identity. Sicily is referred to as a mixing pot of culture and ethnicity. This mixture of cultures is what makes it so unique, but also creates difficulty for the Sicilian people to find a single identity. Sicily's complicated past and central location also makes it very difficult to trace the origin of anyone living in Sicily today. The Sicilian people are a mixture of Spanish, Moorish, Greek, Arab, and some northern European cultures. This mixture creates a population that is able to adapt to many different cultures, but is not able to identify as any specific one. This confusion of identity is what inspires me to create a work that can represent this culture that is struggling to find its own identity.

Frida Kahlo influences my work in many ways. Her paintings are explorations of her cultural, sexual, and emotional identity. The strong sense of cultural and feminine identity that she creates within her paintings is what I strive to achieve within my own work. She was able to use the events in her life, cultural symbols and motifs, as well as traditional clothing to create an identity for herself that has withstood the test of time. "Kahlo was keenly aware of the ability of clothing to communicate information about the tastes, principles, character, and moods of a nation." (Block, Jepp). In the painting *My Dress Hangs There, 1933*, Kahlo's figure is removed from the image entirely. In this painting she depicts a traditional Mexican dress hanging between two classical columns. The columns each have one object on

top that holds the dress in place. This painting is very chaotic and full of detail. All around the dress and columns is the artist depiction of an industrialized and urban United States. Through the contrast of the traditional dress and the industrialized chaos of the background the viewer is able to interpret the artist presence within the painting. Her identity lies within the symbol of the dress.

I am utilizing historical imagery as well as cultural motifs in the design of the clothing to represent specific aspects of the culture that I am able to relate to and identify with. I am also using paintings and photographs from my own personal experiences within the culture. I am combining my personal emotions and feelings about the culture with historical information to find my place within the culture. I am able to represent these feelings and emotions about the culture through videos and audio that capture intimate moments of my own family and experience in Sicily. The personal element of the imagery within the design mixes with the traditional imagery of Sicilian clothing and artwork. This mixer creates a design that is unique to my own experience and identity.



Figure 1, Students, 2018

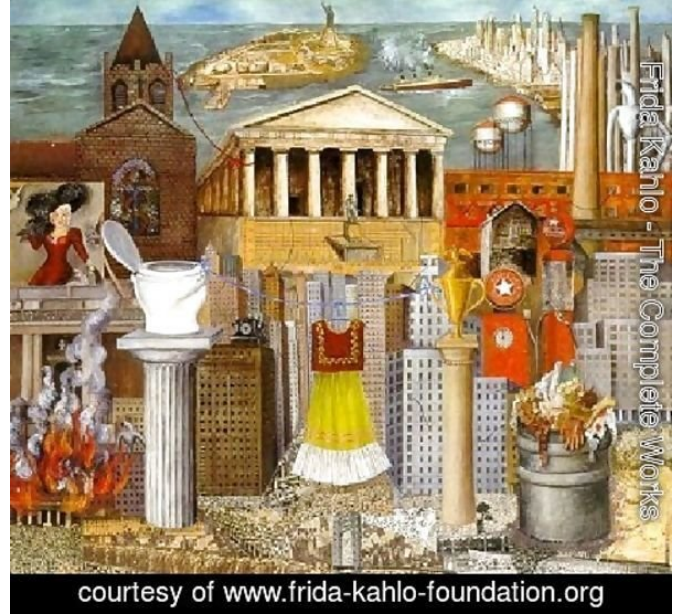


Figure 4, My Dress Hangs There, 1933



Figure 2, Eredità Sicula fotografia 1, 2018, photograph

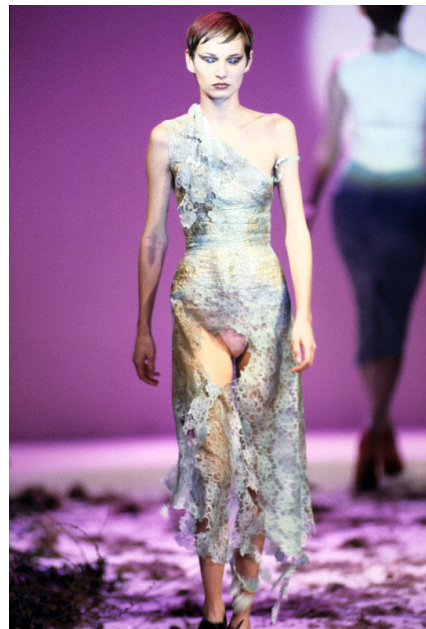


Figure 3, HighLand Rape, 1995,

### **Work Cited**

- Aragon, Alba F. "Uninhabited Dresses: Frida Kahlo, from Icon of Mexico to Fashion Muse." *Fashion Theory* 18.5 (2014): 517-50. Web.
- Block, Rebecca, and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep. "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in "Gringolandia"." *Woman's Art Journal* 19.2 (1998): 8. Web.
- Herrera, Hayden, and Frida Kahlo. 1993. *Frida Kahlo : the paintings*. n.p.: New York : HarperPerennial, 1993, c1991., 1993.
- History.com Staff. "Joan of Arc." History.com. 2009. Accessed January 19, 2018.  
<http://www.history.com/topics/saint-joan-of-arc>.
- Julius, Corinne. "SAVAGE BEAUTY: The Performance Fashion of Alexander McQueen." *Craft Arts International*, no. 94, July 2015, p. 72.
- Kahlo, Frida, and Sarah M. Lowe. *The diary of Frida Kahlo: an intimate self-portrait*. Place of publication not identified: Harry N. Abrams, 2006.
- Kettenmann, Andrea. *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954: pain and passion*. Koln: Taschen, 2016.
- Knox, Kristin. *Alexander McQueen: Genius of a Generation*. A & C Black Publishers Ltd, 2010.
- Wilson, Andrew. *Alexander McQueen: blood beneath the skin*. New York: Scribner, 2016.