

# *La Bella Sicilia*

An exploration of sicilian identity and culture



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## Introduction

My entire life has been surrounded by art. My love of art stems from my family's endless support and interest in the subject. Making ceramics with my cousins and my grandmother was the beginning to my love of art. My cousin Mya was always the one who would stay with me for hours and hours painting our ceramics. We would talk about working together and becoming artist when we grew up. Mya died when she was 9 years old in 2012. She is one of the most important people in my life. She inspired me to love art and she was my biggest supporter. She is constantly on my mind as she continues to inspire everything I do.

I have always been fascinated by Sicilian culture. Growing up in multicultural household in America created a unique experience for me. I have always been amazed at the beauty and complexity of Sicilian culture but I am also aware of the negativity that can be connected with Sicilian culture and the people of Sicily. From a young age I was exposed to prejudice and hatred that is shown towards Sicilian people and anyone who is different. I remember a time when I was so embarrassed by my mother and grandfather's accent that I would refuse to go out in public with them. This period of time ended quickly when I realized that the things I thought of as ugly accents, weird food, strange traditions and family that lived seemingly across the world are all actually what makes my family so special. My artwork seems to be a combination of all these things. The experiences I have had in my life are what shape my work and give it life. I use art as a way to show the beauty that I see in my life.

There are so many artists who inspire me everyday. One in particular whom I relate with more than others is Frida Kahlo. I am able to connect with the ideas and practices of Kahlo on many levels. Frida Kahlo was very interested in the culture and history in Mexico. Her work reflected her strong passion towards Mexican culture. Her piece *Self-portrait on the Border Between*

*Mexico and the United States* is a good representation of how she is about to place her Mexican heritage on a pedestal against other cultures.



“Positioning herself between two distinct worlds, Kahlo highlights her role as intermediary in the sense of one who is knowledgeable of both cultures and seeks to facilitate an apt representation of each.” (Block, Jepp) In this painting she is able to compare the two cultures and explain without words why Mexico is the better of the two. Another reason I am able to connect with Kahlo is because of her use of traditional clothing in her artwork. “Kahlo was keenly aware of the ability of clothing to communicate information about the tastes, principles, character, and moods

of a nation.” (Block, Jepp) My SMP project is focused on this exact idea. I am using clothing to represent a culture, to debunk misrepresentation and to open up a discourse about what true Sicilian culture is. I use Kahlo as inspiration for my project and all of my artwork to come.

Using the inspiration of Frida Kahlo’s work and my family's deep rooted culture and traditions I am able to explore the idea of culture and history in Sicily. I am using clothing as a way to explore this culture and create a new view of the same culture that has been misrepresented for many years.

## **Interview Transcriptions**

Interviewer: Aine White (asking questions)

Interviewee: Nina Harris (answering questions)

1.) What was your first memorable art experience and how is it relevant to what you are doing now?

· “Growing up my grandmother had ceramic pouring and everything in her basement. So with my cousins and brother we would paint ceramics and play with the clay. I had a lot of fun doing that with my cousins and grandma and that inspired me to continue working with art and learn more about art and want to do it today.”

2.) Who is your favorite artist and why?

· “I don’t have one person but for this particular time I am really interested in Frida Karlo because I admire the way she can say so many things in her art; she can talk about her Mexican identity, being feminine, being a woman, birth and having problems with birth like miscarriages and all these things through her art. These are things you do not forget once you learn them about her and this inspires me to work in a way that the theme is unforgettable.”

3.) What inspires you? What are some of the sources both within art and outside of art that you turn to?

· “The most inspiring thing to me is always seeing pictures paintings etc that make me feel different emotions. When artwork can make the viewer feel different emotions it is the ultimate response you want. The photograph of the woman from the great depression holding her kids is one I always think about because that has a lot of emotion in it.”

4.) What draws you to the medium and materials you work in?

· “What draws me to this medium is I can actually create a different person by putting makeup on them and making them look the way I desire – good and bad. Working with makeup and costumes allows me to create something in humans that wasn’t there before.”

5.) What, in your mind makes a work of art successful?

· “Success to me is all about the artist’s intention. If the artist intends for something to look a certain way and they succeed in completing that then it a successful piece of art. And if this artwork also elicits emotion that would be successful in my eyes because seeing emotion is something that is important to me in art.”

6.) What motivates you to make art?

· “It’s something that I have always liked to do and I want to create something new that people haven’t created and/or seen before and to make people feel different things by looking at the works that I produce. I think a big thing is trying to have a voice in the world through art.”

7.) How is your art a response to the world you live in?

- “My art is a response to the world I live in because I like to consider what is going on in the world and what makes me feel different emotions about the world and I like to convey the emotions that I feel by seeing what is going on in the world and working those feelings into my artwork to see what is going on.”

8.) How important is self-expression to your art making? In what way does ‘self’ enter your artwork?

- “I don’t like to do artwork as a busy work. I think of it as this is showing something about me. No matter what it has something to do with me, relating to my memories, something I have seen and relates to who I am as a person.”

9.) Is your work ultimately more about your process or about the final product? Why do you feel that way?

- “It’s about both. It would be hard to say one or the other but I think process is really important in mine because there is no way to go from 0 to final project in the type of work I do. There are so many different steps – rendered sketches, build the costume, do the make up etc. There is always a process involved.”

10.) What about making art intimidates you?

- “The most intimidating thing about art is having people who criticize art – you never know what people are going to say and hearing what other people think can be difficult because they are speaking about the work you do and it can be hard to hear people speak about the work you do.”

1.) What does Sicily mean to you? How did your time in Italy influence your project?

- Sicily is really important to me because that’s where my family comes from and I have travelled to Italy multiple times and I think Sicily is a big influence in my life because the culture and everything has been a big part of growing up. We do a lot of traditions that you would see in Sicily and it’s a big influence in my life and also my time in Italy has definitely made me just appreciate this project more and realize what a beautiful place it is and it’s made me want to make art that represents how beautiful it is.

2.) How does your American heritage tie into the project?

- I think my American Heritage ties into the project by giving me a little bit of an outsider’s view of how Sicily’s looks from an American perspective so it helps me to understand the prejudices and everything from an American view of Sicily which helps me to find a way to represent Sicily in a way that doesn’t what does prejudices

3.) How do you plan to present the work for the final presentation?

- For the final presentation my plan for now is to present it in video form. I would like to videotape my models in the full costume layering it with a voice over of my grandfather and other Sicilians talking about their Heritage and different aspects of Sicilian culture. I am also hoping to have the actual costumes in the gallery to display.

4.) Why did you choose to work with clothing as your art form (as opposed to painting or drawing)?

- I chose to make clothing from fabric as my medium because I am really interested in fashion and how it influences cultures I really would like to work with costumes after college so I am also trying to build up a nice portfolio for grad school or any job that I apply for after college.

5.) Why did you choose the fabrics you are using? i.e. colors, textures, etc.

- I chose the fabrics that I'm using because they all are supposed to represent certain aspects of Sicilian culture. The blue fabric I'm using for the skirt on the main characters will represent the Sea and the way the ocean meets the land on the island. The fabric has to do with representation of certain things on the island in certain aspects of culture.

6.) How did you choose the models you are using?

- I chose the models based on who replied to my email. I didn't really want to use models that were specifically Sicilian however. The reason I chose to use just random models was to help me to implement the idea that there's such a diverse group of people that come from Sicily that there's really no such thing as a Sicilian person. My hope is that my models are very diverse looking and there's just very different large quantities of cultures that I want to be representing with my models.

7.) What message do you hope to portray to your audience about Sicily?

- I really hope to try to take away some of the stigma about Sicilian culture. I want to really remove the idea that Sicily is this Mafia led dirty island. This is a common negative image in America. I really want to provide a new perspective and to show that there's so many different cultures that make up Sicily and that the culture is really beautiful and there's a lot more to it than a lot of people realize.

8.) How do you plan to change or improve your work after hearing the feedback from the critiques?

- I definitely want to incorporate a lot more symbolism in my work. I don't want to represent things as directly through historical costumes and things like that and want to use a lot more symbols of the cultures and ideas to show through the clothing but also just showing up what each culture provided to Sicily.



## Critique log

### Professor Lisa Scheer: Notes

- Incorporate more of a personal aspect in the design of the costume
- Divide the historical aspects of the research from the personal aspects of the interviews
- Work in a more sculptural form
- Move away from designing clothing and look at designing a character.
- Clear idea of what each character will represent
- Likes the idea of an organic and human like tie between characters
- Start working in the materials

### Summery

Things that Professor Scheer liked about my work included the research and images that I have done for my project. She also liked the many sketches I had done for each character. The research and sketches help to show the many aspects of the project. The main idea behind the advice I received in this meeting was to continue to work on defining each character. Professor Scheer would like to see me use more sculptural elements in my costumes. She would also like to see more of a personal representation in my artwork. I am using this advice to define my characters in more precise way that makes it clear that each character has its own traits and representations. I am also working to incorporate the personal and historical research in more concessive way. I do not want to make this project about myself but about something I am very passionate about. I think that my passion for the subject is the personal aspect of my work without having to put a literal translation of myself in the work.

### Professor Leah Mazur: Notes

- Pick out specific elements from the research that you want to incorporate in your characters
- Work on a larger scale so that you can see the details better
- Distinguish the characters from one another
- Use color in your sketches

### Summery

Professor Mazur liked that I used a clear and precise process for my work. She liked that I had research for each character and that I was exploring many different possibilities within the characters. She liked the personal aspect of the project that shows my connection to the work I am doing. In this meeting we talked about the different aspects of the characters and pulling information from my source images. Professor Mazur suggested working larger and pulling specific details from the research to build up each character. I will use this advice to build on my characters and narrow down my research to be more specific to each character. I will also create specific character boards for each character. I will be narrowing down my ideas about each character and begin working on the actual costumes.

### Final Critique- Notes

- Work from a circle skirt

- Use the serger
- Likes the pattern of the bodice
- Create more volume in the skirt by adding material at the bottom and not the top
- Use a nude leotard for the other part of the bodice
  - More natural
  - More sculptural
- How to present things
- Make the sculptural elements more present in the piece.
- Use the dress form as a part of the sculpture and not just a form to hold up the dress

### Summery

During this critique we talked about the technical aspects of the design of the dress and how it should be put together. We talked about what was work as far as construction and what was not. Leah was happy with the way the bodice was cut and sewn together. The skirt was not built in a way that would be beneficial to creating more volume in the bottom of the skirt. She suggested using a circle skirt pattern or adding godet panels to the skirt to add more volume. After trying out several of these suggestions I decided to get rid of the skirt I started with and use a new pattern for my skirt. This skirt creates volume from the many small layers of tulle that are added to the top of the skirt. I decided to go with this idea because it was more important to me to get a lot of volume in the skirt and less important about where that volume began. Leah wanted to make sure that the volume ended up at the end of the skirt instead of the top. I am happy with the way the skirt looks with the volume at the top of the skirt. During this critique the main thing that was presented as a critique of my work was that the dress needed to have a more sculptural feeling and more of a natural feeling that is represented through the material. This critique with Lisa was more about the sculptural aspects of my piece. We talked about how to incorporate the sculptural elements in a way that does not overpower the fabric aspect of the piece.

## Critical Analysis

### Introduction

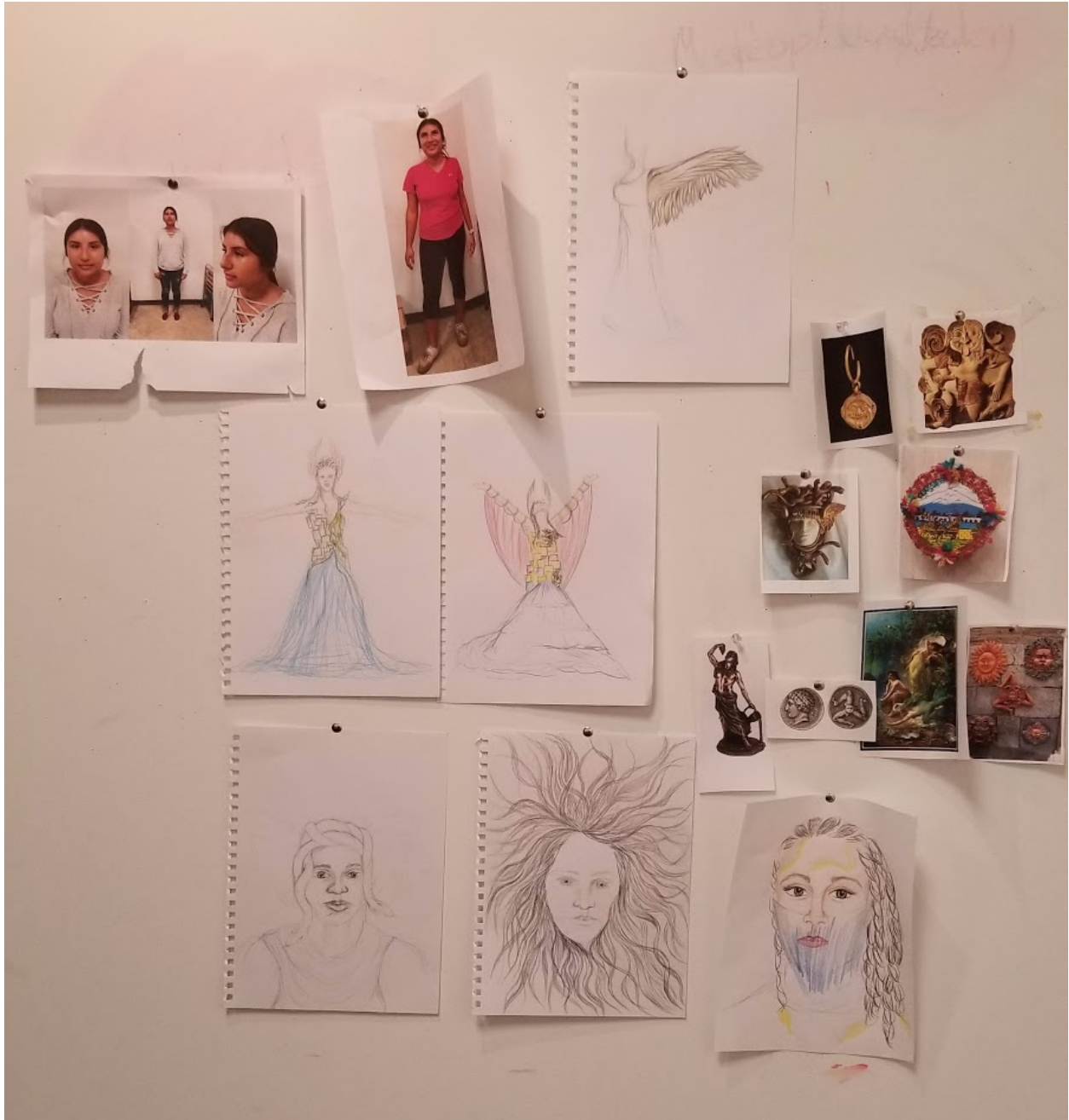
I am using costume design and makeup to represent Sicily as a diverse beautiful place that is made up of people from all over the world. My goal is to open up a conversation about the true identity of the misunderstood island and the people who make up the population. Through the use of 3D design elements I am able to create artwork that represents the life, culture, history, and people of Sicily all in one. My work uses symbolic motifs, specific colors, and textures to represent the island in human form. The sculptural costume and the video recording create a unique representation of culture. All of the elements of my work come together to help explain the identity and history of Sicilian culture.

### Cultural Identity

One artist who is an inspiration for my work is Frida Kahlo. Kahlo's interest in Mexican culture and costume is what first drew me to her artwork. She is able to reference Mexican culture in many ways throughout her art. The most symbolic motif of her Mexican identity is the traditional Mexican dress that is present in many of her paintings. The use of costume to represent a culture is something that has always inspired and fascinated me. In my artwork I am using elements of traditional Sicilian dress to combine with a more abstract and representational idea of Sicily to represent the culture through clothing. Kahlo uses this traditional imagery and cultural motifs in a way that evoke specific emotions about her own feeling towards her homeland. In her painting "On the Border Between the U.S. and Mexico" (figure 1)



her own figure is surrounded by a representation of two cultures. Her figure in the middle is dressed in a traditional Mexican dress and holding a mexican flag. She is able to represent Mexico as a nation through specific imagery including architecture from the cultures history and vegetation that is native to the country. This imagery compared to the cold gray industrial imagery of the United States is what helps portray the two nations through the eyes of kahlo. Through this imagery she is able to present Mexico in a emotional way that represents her personal feelings about the country. In my own Artwork I am using strong powerful imagery to represent Sicily.



I am utilizing imagery of historical architecture and artwork from the diverse cultures history to create a piece that encompasses all aspects of the cultures history. In this imagery I am not only representing the culture but also my feeling towards the culture just as Kahlo has done in her paintings.

## Misperceived Truths

Another artist who is a big influence on my work is Adriana Varejao. An essential part of her work deals with the many different cultures and identities that make up Brazilian Culture. Her work deals with the different civilizations that make up the history of Brazilian culture. She also tackles the idea of the many different civilizations and cultures that bring people of all different backgrounds to Brazil in a big mixing pot of culture. My work relates with Varejao's on many levels. My work deals with the idea that Sicily is a big mixing pot of cultures and identities. I am working to demonstrate the many cultures that are represented in Sicilian culture and artwork. In Varejao's piece "Polvo Portraits I (Seascape Series), 2014" (figure 3)



She is representing the mix of ethnicities in Brazil in a very literal way. She is taking skin tones from many of the diverse range of people who live in Brazil and painting herself in each of those skin tones. Her goal is to show the diversity and mix of culture in Brazil. While my work takes a less literal step I am able to create the same kind of dialog in my work by including things that one would not typically associate with Sicilian culture. For example I am using a large amount of

Muslim and Arabic artwork motifs in my artwork.



The Arab rule of Sicily was one of the most influential time periods in Sicilian history. By pulling from many different cultures that make up sicily I am able to present a view of sicily that is not typically represented today.

### Presentation

Another artist that I draw much of my inspiration for my artwork is Alexander McQueen. McQueen was an important figure in the fashion world. He worked to change the standards of fashion and how fashion can be presented as an art form. (figure 2)



He focused on the performance aspect of fashion and how performance can add to the conceptual idea of the piece. The performance of the piece comes from the way the clothing become more than something that is worn. The piece is enhanced by the movement within the material it is made of as well as the way it is displayed. In McQueen's work the display or wearing of the clothing is as important as the clothing itself. In the image of McQueen's work the



dresses are displayed in a way that creates a large feather like flowing shape out of all of the dresses. The material and design of the dress itself does not carry the complete idea of the airy feather-like shape but by adding the idea of performance to the piece he is able to enhance the meaning. My design is inspired in many ways by McQueen's work.



In my piece you can see that I am using sculptural elements to push my design into a style that goes beyond just clothing. I have posed my model in a way that added the feeling of power and grandness to the piece. I am using different types of material to bring the work together.

There are many artists that inspire my work. My work uses costume and design to show the diversity and history of a culture that is very important to me. I am using my artwork as a way to open a new discussion about the culture and history in Sicily. My source artists are all using their art as a way to open a new conversation about a concept that they are passionate about.

### Works Cited

Aragon, Alba F. "Uninhabited Dresses: Frida Kahlo, from Icon of Mexico to Fashion Muse." *Fashion Theory* 18.5 (2014): 517-50. Web.

- This article talks about the meaning behind the Tehuana ethnic dress that is present in many of Frida Kahlo's works. It also looks at the first exhibit of the artist's wardrobe on view at the Frida Kahlo Museum. The article talks about the influence that Kahlo has on contemporary fashion. This article talks about how history influences fashion despite the innovation of fashion of time.
- This article is relevant to my project because it help to explain why the historical cultural influences in fashion are so important to not only my project but also fashion and design in general. This shows how a culture can be the influence in clothing that continues to prevail through time.

Benjamin, Sandra. *Sicily: Three Thousand Years of Human History*. N.p.: Steerforth, 2006. Print.

- This book focuses on the people who immigrated to Sicily. It talks about many of the different rulers of Sicily and other important civilizations of the time. It also talks about the influences that these different cultures have had on the island's culture and architecture. The book goes into the many different events that help to shape Sicily's history.
- This book is important to my project because is helps me to understand the different cultures that make up Sicily's history and how they influence the art work and culture in Sicily.

Block, Rebecca, and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep. "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in "Gringolandia"." *Woman's Art Journal* 19.2 (1998): 8. Web.

- This article talks about he way Frida Kahlo uses costume as a way to establish a national identity. This article examines the way Frida Kahlo emphasizes her Mexican identity through symbols in her work as well as her dress. Her dress has become a symbol of her identity and is present in many of her paintings.
- This article is important to my project because it helps me understand how a Frida Kahlo was able to create a national identity for herself through her work. It talks about the significance of costume in a culture and how that culture can be understood through the artwork.

Diaz, David M. "Un Planeta Canibal." *Historia Y Memoria* 4 (2012): 141-87. Print.

- This article talks about the artist Adriana Varejao and how here artwork relates to the appropriation and misconception of Brazilian culture. This article talks about how Varejeo uses her art as a way to show culture in as it has been manipulated by society.
- This article is important to my project because it helps to explain the way a culture can represent in a unique and pure way. This gives me a clean perspective to look at the culture I am working with and use these ideas to further my understanding of that culture.

Farrell, Joseph. *Sicily: A Cultural History*. N.p.: Interlink, 2014. Print.

- This book talks about Sicily's history as the center to some of the great civilizations of Europe and North Africa. It goes through the history of Sicily from ancient times, to when Sicily was a purely Islamic country. It also talks about the influences each of the major culture of the time period had on Sicily as a whole. This book also goes into modern Sicilian culture. It talks about the mixture of culture that is present in modern day Sicily.
- This is important to my project because I need to understand the history of the influences on Sicilian culture. It is also important for me to understand how those influence affect modern life and art in Sicily today.

Norwich, John Julius. *Sicily: An Island at the Crossroads of History*. N.p.: Random House, 2015. Print.

- This book talks about Sicily's history in comparison to the history of many major societies in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. It talks about major periods in Sicily's history when it served as a crossroad from many of the major civilizations of the time. These major civilizations all left a large imprint on Sicily's history. This book talks about the specific influences that each of these civilizations had on the art, people, and culture in Sicily.
- This is important to my project because I will be able to understand the major influences on Sicilian culture and history. It will also give me an idea of what was happen in other places of the world during specific important times in Sicily's history.

Julius, Corinne. "SAVAGE BEAUTY: The Performance Fashion of Alexander McQueen." *Craft Arts International*, no. 94, July 2015, p. 72.

- This article is about Alexander McQueen and his important influence on the fashion industry. The article goes into the idea that He was able to break trends and create new and exciting work while still using perfect technique and form in his designs. The article also talks about how he was able to take the art of fashion into a new field by working with fashion in performance. He was able to use performance to elevate his design and further the meaning of the piece.
- This is important to my project because I am able to look at how this artist uses fashion as a form of expression. This article helps me to understand fashion as a performance and in a different context. It helps to understand how ideas can be expressed through design and clothing.

Marguerite Itamar, Harrison. "Envisioning the Body Politic through Dense Layers of Paint: The Art of Adriana Varejão." *Chasqui*, no. 1, 2008, p. 66.

- This article is about the social and political connections that are present in Adriana Varejao's work. The article talks about the social constructs set up in her native home of Brazil and how her work connects and critiques these constructs.

- This is important to my project because I am able to look at how this artist uses her artwork to comment on the social structure of a country and how it affects the people who live there.

## **Artist Statement**

The Sicilian culture and people have been misrepresented and misunderstood for many years. Sicily is typically represented in movies and pop culture as a dirty crime-filled island that is corrupted by the Mafia. This misrepresentation is spread on to the identity of the Sicilian people. Growing up in a Sicilian-American home, I was always aware of this misrepresentation of the culture that helps to define me.

I am using my artwork as a way to redirect the image of Sicily and it's people. I am using costume design and makeup to represent Sicily as a diverse beautiful place that is made up of people from all over the world. My goal is to open up a conversation about the true identity of the misunderstood island.









