Growing up, I was familiar with such terms as "anxiety" and "depression" but they were words that held very little meaning to me. They were always spoken about in hushed voices, and were always a term for other people, never really discussed in my family or small circle of friends. In my young mind, these were words used to describe whining, immature, and worst of all weak people, and I steadfastly refused to let myself be seen as weak. This denial lasted through middle school, high school, and all the way up until about a year ago when I finally entertained the possibility that my panic attacks, crying spells and the constant gray fog in my head stemmed from something other than normal stress. After processing this revelation and finally taking steps to treat it, I was able to view myself in a whole new light, and began wondering how many other peoples lives were also effected by anxiety; if I had been in denial for eight straight years, surely their were others who are going through the same thing? With these thoughts in mind, I decided to make my SMP an exploration of self; a way of dealing with and illustrating the effects of my depression, anxiety and general fear through comics, a medium that I have always been drawn to and that I felt would be a good way to illustrate the obstacles I faced. In it, I illustrate the effects of fear and anxiety, specifically the impact it has on decision making, through an androgynous proxy character.

Since the characters themselves are central to the story, their design was an important part of my project early on. Upon deciding that this would be my thesis, I was immediately faced with a dilemma; I first and foremost wanted this work to be an exploration of my own experiences, but my other goal was for people to be able to relate

with the situations and experiences I would be depicting. For this reason, I decided to remove any depiction of myself from the narrative, creating a fictional world and character through which I could operate. To advance the narrative, I created two main characters that contrast the personalities of the constant worrier and the bold risk taker.

The design of this proxy character, who I named Remy (a very gender neutral name), was something that I heavily revised early on to become as androgynous as possible; she is the antithesis of the traditional comic book heroine. She is plain in design elements but also extremely expressive, her actions and expressions often speaking louder than her words. For example, in the first chapter when she is accused of plagiarism, instead of sticking up for herself, all she can bring herself to do is stare sadly at the floor and try not to cry; her emotion is clear on her face, but she cannot express it through words. This hearkens back to my own early experiences; although almost never talked about, especially in a personal context, symptoms of depression and anxiety often manifests itself in every way except direct speech. By expressing this to the readers of the comic, I wanted to help them realize this and be able to identify it. Stout and boyish, frequently hunched in a submissive, fearful posture, she expresses constant timidity and

Push and Pull, page 5 detail

lack of confidence. Instead of using myself as a model reference, my goal for this character was to be relatable in body and expression to a general audience; I wanted people to be able to look at her face and feel her surprise, her fear, and her confusion.

By contrast, I designed the foil character, Bob, to be Remy's physical opposite. Long and lanky, with confident posture and dynamic, expressive body movement, his personality is large and outgoing. Whereas Remy's questionable decisions are spur of the moment, desperate attempts to prove herself, this character is a purposeful risk taker, and seemingly finds excitement in the fact that his decisions are not the smartest, but things always turn out alright in the end. This character is not a representation of an aspect of depression or anxiety; rather, he is representative of the qualities I longed for growing up. I wanted so badly to go through my life without fear, trusting my own abilities and strengths to guide me. By juxtaposing these two contrasting personalities, I am further exploring my own past and reconciling with confidence issues I still face. They represent two sides of me; one reflecting my actual experiences growing up, and one that was the idea version of myself that I was never able to achieve, and their journey together serves as a reconciliation between the two.

I knew right away that the format for this project would work best in comic form; it is a medium that I have been familiar with since my youth, and often used as an escape from my own thoughts when I was younger; getting lost in someone else's story and imagery was a great comfort. Formally, comics are a very flexible and diverse medium, allowing a great deal of creativity and personal touch. Depiction of moment-to-moment action was important to my narrative as well; I needed to be able to depict thoughts racing through the main characters head faster than she could process them, and the physical

form they took in her body language. For example, on page 39, Remy panics at the idea of

not left on her own to be judged by a group

Push and Pull, page 39 detail

of strangers. The progression of her panicked expression, as well as her body curling

protectively downward and the panel around her fluctuating sickeningly accurately depicts

the time progression of her train of thought.

My process first involved the creation of the story, which is the logical first step; this

is also something that ended up being heavily revised. I was overly ambitious my first

semester, and set unrealistic expectations of the work I wanted to produce. Because of this,

I pared the story down its core elements, allowing me to spend more time focusing on the

quality of the work. The second step of my process was to draft each chapter, deciding how

I wanted the pages to flow, how the panels are formed and tweaking the text to properly fit

the situation at hand. This drafting process was extremely important and time consuming,

as my final hand-drawn medium was permanent black ink, only really revisable through

digital editing. I decided on this as a drawing medium because of its permanence and the

quality of lines pen and ink produce; the variability in thickness and the amount of control I

wielded over the pen or brush allowed me to capture complex emotions in characters faces and bodies.

Before I began the art-making portion of my SMP, I researched other artists for guidance and inspiration, looking particularly for those whose works were similar in theme to mine and, in some cases, had similar formal qualities. When researching source artists, the works of Paula Rego, a Portuguese painter whose works often depict non-idealized women in fearful, aggressive, and often-surreal situations, particularly struck me. Through her work, she explores different aspects of femininity, fear and anger through these female figures in often disturbing situations. The women she depicts in her paintings are strong, and this is especially true in her Dog-Woman series; women crouched, snarling, their bodies fraught with tightly wound energy that stems from anger and fear[1]. I designed my character Remy after her own solid, strong women, looking to her expressive poses and pinched faces when creating different scenes. These depictions are her rebellion against the idea of women as demure and delicate beings, expected to perform for others. Her female figures actively rebel, not as heroes, but as people, clearly full of fear and anxiety, but also rebelling against it[2]. The unwillingness of these women to submit and "roll over" speaks to

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Paula Rego, _Nursery Rhymes: Little Miss Muffet III,_ 1989

[1] McEwen, 145
[2] Rego, 64

me on a personal level; when I look at these snarling, animalistic women I feel a surge of anger myself; although visually Rego's work influenced my female characters design and physique, the intention behind her work spoke to me as an artist.

I have also been looking at the work of Raymond Pettibon, an American artist known for his drawings and illustrations of pop culture and the punk scene. His work deals with the uncomfortable truths of the era he grew up in, and pulls no punches in terms of graphicness; sexual acts and physical violence are common reoccurring themes[3]. What initially drew me to his work were the formal qualities; he uses a comic format in his work, combining image and text in different rations to produce different effects. He primarily uses pen and ink in his works, and I often looked to his line work for guidance, as his hand drawn text and inking was very similar to my inking technique. His work echoes the discontent of an entire generation of youth, who rebelled through their music, clothing and

Raymond Pettibon, *Untitled, 1987*

art.

Push and Pull, page 51 detail

[3] Gordon

Similar to Rego, Pettibon's work expresses disillusionment of a group of people, and their rebellion against their situation. Both of their styles include fantasy themes, sexuality, fear and anger, and I also identify with Pettibon as an artist, specifically his background in the punk scene, hanging out with discontent youth[4]. That is most likely because, growing up, I was one of those discontent youth, unhappy with my situation but express it, and it manifested itself in the clothing I wore and the music I listened to unsure how to.

In the end, this project has helped me understand myself better as a person; all those years of denying the causes of my unhappiness are now easier for me to comprehend and think about rationally. Writing and illustrating this narrative has been therapeutic in a way; formerly, my knee-jerk reaction to negative emotions was to cram them away and not think about them; I am now able to process them rationally and find a solution. I cannot credit that entirely to this project, but it has really helped me change my mindset about depression and anxiety. Through my relatable main character, I hope that others are also able to identify anxiety and depression in themselves and those around them, and realize that it is not something to fear, but to accept about oneself and learn to grow in spite of it.

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