

Push & Pull:

**An Exploration of Anxiety and
the Overcoming of our Deepest
Fears**

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Introduction

Art has always been an important part of my life since a young age, and my pursuit of it has shaped me into the person I am today, even though I did not live in a very artistic household. I grew up locally, on a small, rather isolated farm, and spent a lot of time either outdoors or reading books. Much of the time spent outdoors was around horses; the first creatures I ever remember drawing. For a while, all I could draw accurately were horses, simply because I spent so much time around them. Fairytales and mythology fascinated me; monsters and magical creatures particularly fascinated me because my grandmother constantly gifted me old books filled with what I considered to be scary illustrations. The fear did not deter me, however, and as I grew up I developed an interest in horror books and films that I keep to this day; the thrill I get from that fear inspires a lot of my subject matter and ideas. My main goal with this SMP, aside from the exploration of anxiety and it's influence, is to really pull all of my influence, and create a fully recognized and complete work that I can honestly say represents me as an artist.

Although many artists influence me, I chose to look at the illustrations and installations of Takashi Murakami, and to learn more about his artistic process and style. Murakami is well versed in the traditional Japanese painting technique of Nihonga, which is visible throughout his work. His main influences stem from imagery and history of Japanese culture, which he seeks to make unique by refusing

to hold it to the western standards of “high art” in an attempt to revitalize the contemporary art scene in his country. He “believes that the role of art is to serve as a moderate message that slowly filters these unchangeable realities from our hearts” (Maerkle 139). His exhibitions range from small sculptures to gigantic paintings that take up entire walls, but they all exhibit his trademark “superflat” style consistently, a term he coined based on what he describes as the “pathological state of superflat mentality of the Japanese people” (Koh 400).

He produces a lot of his work digitally, and more recently en masse, even breaking into the fashion world briefly. His work can be seen worldwide in many galleries, and is widely known and respected throughout the art world. His mix of the “low arts” and “high arts” in his work, coupled with the bright color palette and clean line work create a very visually appealing mix, and is enjoyed by both critics and non-critics.

Although we are not entirely similar, both Murakami and I share an interest in culture and mythology, and have an interest in comics and graphic art. I look to his works for inspiration and ideas when I hit a mental block, and pay close attention to certain aspects of his works in order to learn from them, especially his line art. Since he was trained in traditional Japanese inking techniques, much of his early work, though digitized, still exhibits those expressive brushstrokes and thick, heavy lines. He is a very successful and well-known contemporary artist, which I someday also aspire to be, so I believe he sets a good example to be followed, not just by me, but by any aspiring artist.

Motivations and Influences

During this project, the artists most influential to my work are Paula Rego, Raymond Pettibon and Takashi Murakami, because of the similarities between their works and mine, and because I consider them all great examples of artists who have really established themselves and should be learned from. Other influences include folklore and mythology, animated tv shows and movies, and comics from eras ranging from the early 1900's to today. Feminism is also a driving influence in my work, as my SMP follows a strong female lead as the main character of the storyline.

Interview Questions

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

My first memory of making art was sitting at a desk in my living room and drawing a picture of my horse. I tried to color inside the lines and wanted to be exact in my depiction. When I draw, I'm not so much drawing from life but from my whole memory.

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

My art is definitely more about the final product. I spend awhile working on each page, but as more a means to the end. All my work is supposed to flow together, so it's very much about the final product looking just as I want it to.

What about art making intimidates you?

Having an exact image in my head and not being able to properly depict it, or not knowing how to properly translate it onto paper. A blank canvas is one of the scariest things ever.

How does the choice of having shading/no shading and color/no color enhance your work?

When I initially added the shading, I did so with the intent of distinguishing details in the background, but through feedback during the critique, I learned that details would probably benefit from being left in their purely line work state. I chose not to use color for my work because I know that I personally would not be able to color everything in time for the final critique, but if I were to add color, I think I would only add it to emphasize important events and moments.

Why is it important to design the characters the way they are in terms of looks and personality? Why is it important that they contrast from each other?

I designed one of the main characters, Remy, to look androgynous and not conventionally beautiful, because in many space themed stories, female characters are over sexualized and unrealistically portrayed. It is important that they contrast because they influence each other with their differences throughout the narrative, each one convincing the other to do things that they normally would never do.

How is the setting of the narrative important to the overall theme of the work?

Since the overall theme of the work is pushing personal boundaries and facing fears, that is exactly what the course of the storyline will lead the character to do. The narrative purposely pits the main character against some of her worst fears, such as being stranded in a strange place, and being forced to interact with unfamiliar people.

Are the themes of the comic things that you have experienced? Where do you draw your inspiration from?

I am drawing a lot from my own experiences when creating these works, mainly for the character named Remy. I am not inserting myself into the comic through any specific character, but I am relying heavily on my own dealings with fear, depression and anxiety when planning out her actions and reactions. I draw my inspiration from fairytales I read as a child, folklore and mythology, and I also draw inspiration from more contemporary sources, like comic series and TV shows.

What is important about having different panels and text in this particular work?

Different types of panels give the reader clues as to the mood and action of the scene that is taking place; if a panel or text box has jagged, pointed edges, urgency and loudness is immediately implied. Panels also guide the eye through a page spread; by using diagonals and breaks in the panels, movement is created and scenes make more sense. Panels also allow you more control over time; a large, half-page scene depicts an obviously important moment that you are meant to focus on for a while, while smaller, closer together panels cause the eye to travel through them faster.

Why did you choose to make a comic in particular rather than just a series of drawings?

I chose to make a comic because of the way I could split up chapters to center around key points of the story. I have done narrative drawing series in the past, and although you can pack a lot of information into a single image, I decided that I would not properly be able to portray the characters emotions, which are a huge part of the story. A comic allows for moment-to-moment action, where you can follow the characters body movement and facial expression; if I were to create a series of twelve drawings all depicting different key scenes, I may still be able to tell the story, but much of the inner workings of the characters would be lost.

Who is your target audience? What do you hope your audience gains from your work?

The general age range of my target audience would be young teenagers to older adults; while the message should still be understood by older generations, children under twelve may have difficulty comprehending certain themes and ideas of the comic. People of all ages should be able to follow along with the story, whether or not they completely understand all of the underlying themes.

Do you have a mission? What do you consider to be your purpose for creating art?

I wouldn't say I have a mission, but my purpose for creating art is to express myself, and not vent, but more emote through the characters I create. By exploring their personalities

I want to learn more about myself as a person, as each of them carry a little bit of my personality and reasoning within their own.

Midterm Critique

It was very helpful to hear the criticism and advice that everyone had to offer during our midterm critique. Professor Scheer's fresh perspective was especially interesting, as she provided a fresh new perspective, along with Professor Johnson and Professor McDowell. It was really interesting to hear that the comic pages looked better purely in black and white than with grey shading. I definitely agree that after looking at the shaded work, the detail and lines get lost in the background, which I will definitely address in the future. Going forward, I will be keeping shading to a minimum, using primarily pure black and white to denote light and shadow in the scenery and characters.

In terms of text, I will be keeping all the dialogue between characters, but I will be sure to spread them out in appropriately placed speech bubbles and boxes. I will be working hard to ensure that the text does not overpower or cover up important details in the artwork, and instead fits the page in a way that does not disrupt the page flow. I will also be having lots of people proof read and double check my narrative, writing style and grammar to make sure that everything makes sense and can be understood by the general viewer. I will still be using panels to distinguish different moments in the work, but I will make sure that they do not accidentally cut off or take away from the artwork within, and instead aid flow of the narrative.

Although I initially planned to make the final product fairly small in terms of paper size, I have decided after feedback that it would be more beneficial to the viewer to keep the size of the original sketch, in both the first semester critique and in book form. I may scale it slightly down from the original sketch just to smooth out any slight inking imperfections that I cannot clean up by hand, but I want to make sure that everyone can see the important details as they become relevant, and I do not want people to have to strain their eyes to be able to see the text. I will still be editing it on the computer, but for the final critique I will be printing it out onto a stiff, sturdier paper, so that it can properly be mounted and seen on the gallery walls, along with the digital display.

I was very glad to hear that my line work was a good quality, and that my characters were expressive and easy to read. I will make sure to keep the angles and perspective accurate, but also to include new, more dynamic angles and views in certain scenes, so that the viewer stays engaged with what is happening. All in all, I am very happy with the feedback I received; having so many fresh perspectives has really helped me decide which changes would make my project more engaging and successful.

Faculty Feedback

The earliest feedback I received for my SMP came from just before the midterm critique, when I was still completing the first chapter and could not provide a complete viewing experience for them to review. Professor Johnson was the first person I called in, as she has a background in drawing and printing and was

familiar with the techniques I was using. Stylistically, she pointed me in the direction of keeping the shading of the comic minimal, to keep the viewer's eye uncluttered. She also discussed the final display of my SMP for installation at Boyden Gallery, and suggested that I scale things down for the final display, which, at the time, was going to be the complete display of all the comic pages laid out on a wall. She inquired as to what source artists I was looking at for this project, and encouraged me to study their techniques and careers more thoroughly, as it would help point me in the right direction for the comic.

The second faculty member I asked to critique me was Professor McDowell, with whom I had never had a class, and who was a welcome outside opinion. Since my project does have a digital aspect to it, I also thought that she would be a good professor to consult on the matter of formatting my comic. She brought up a lot of good points about the plot of the comic, and really made me think about what exactly mattered the most in the storyline, and what was more filler. Like Professor Johnson, she also told me to look more carefully at my source materials, and to pay attention to early comic tropes and the aesthetic of 50's space-themed comics. Looking at common comic tropes made me reconsider the design of certain characters because, as she pointed out, certain features of my characters could be misconstrued if I was not careful.

My last faculty visit was a revisiting from Professor Johnson, to discuss the work I had completed since the first interview and to talk about moving forward. We discussed my decision to ink the comic by hand, instead of digitally, as I had originally intended, and the effect it had visually on the style of the comic. She also

coached me on my use of text boxes, and gave me tips on where to place them to enhance the flow of the comic. The last thing we talked about was how things would be displayed in the gallery, and what the optimal arrangement of my work was so that people could fully appreciate it. I decided on an arrangement where people could sit down and peruse the comic digitally at their leisure, and to frame a few of the original pages from each chapter to put on the wall.

Critical Analysis

As we near the end of the semester and finish up our works for the in-progress show, it is important to reflect upon all the decisions that we made along the way; what we chose to keep and cut out, influences and inspirations we chose, and stylistic choices. I in particular made many changes to my SMP along the way, for many different reasons. The artists who ended up most influential to me remained unchanged, however; I drew from the works of Raymond Pettibon, Paula Rego and Takashi Murakami during the entire process. Below are the main parallels, and a few differences, in each of our works, and explanations of my artistic choices along the way.

Parallels with Raymond Pettibon

Pettibon's work has a comic quality to it, with the imagery and words combining to create a narrative, although this narrative does not necessarily have a

clear beginning or end, and is widely up to the viewer's interpretation (Buchloh, 23). Visually, both of our works are very similar; we both work with ink on white paper to create dynamic, expressive figures, accompanying them with drawn text to create a narrative. However, his works are more like snapshots of specific events, and rarely have a resolution. My narrative has a clear beginning, middle and end, and is an accumulation of many moments framed by the panel layout. Our recurring characters, however, do share similarities; he appropriates the popular character Gumby and uses him as an exploratory tool, writing him into already existing worlds of fiction and reality (Pettibon, Art21). I too use my main character as an explorer quite literally, her entire journey is an exploration of fear and anxiety and the effect it has on our choices.

In Figure 1, one of Pettibon's works is depicted, and Figure 2 is from a close-up of a page of my SMP. He uses dark, heavy lines and expressive, deliberate brush strokes to define the figures, with only slight crosshatched shading. In my work, I too utilize very deliberate, dark brushstrokes to define the figure as she floats through space. Pettibon is using black ink to define areas of shadow, where-as I am using black mainly to define my figure from the background; I made the decision in my comic to keep the shading to an minimum, so as to clearly define the figures and not make the pages too busy for the eye to follow. Although his works contain a different kind of narrative than the linear one I utilize in my work, stylistically we make a lot of the same choices and work in a similar process.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Parallels with Paula Rego

Paula Rego's paintings and drawings are often based on folklore, fairytales and religious stories, depicting fantastic creatures and, more often than not, female subjects. The women depicted are often in distressing and fearful situations, the figures themselves irreverently and imperfectly depicted. Her scenes often depict "domination, or rebellion and domination; or freedom and repression, suffocation and escape" (Macedo, 171). She depicts narratives without words, allowing the image itself to tell a story, relying on the figure's expression, pose and interaction with objects to set the mood of the piece. One of the initial choices I made for my main character was to make her female, and to make her flawed; she does not have the hourglass body, perfect hair and flawless skin of most traditional comic book heroines; she is androgynous, freckled and has short, unmanageable hair. Neither

does she have the confidence or allure of the classic heroine; she is so fearful and anxious that she cannot even look her peers in the eye. Rego's work puts her female figures in strange, surreal situations, and I do the same in my work; the main character is put in a strange, alien environment, and must navigate it despite her fears. As one critic said, Rego's figures depict "Rough and unglamorous humanity and the face of the dread of everyday existence," which is something that I believe my main character very much embodies in her actions and expressions (Oliviera, 277).

In Figure 3, an illustration of Rego's is depicted, and in Figure 4 a close-up of my main character, Remy, can be found. Rego created this work using black and blue ink, mainly to distinguish the sky and the left figure's dress from the darkness around it. Shading is minimal except where it serves to emphasize texture, such as on the right figure's skin and tails. Her line work is significantly more delicate than Pettibon's, as she creates an impressive amount of detail by using very thin lines. Although shading is minimal on the figures, she uses built up washes of ink to depict water, instead of just blocking things out in black as seen in figure 1. The figures faces are very expressive; on the left, although the girl is most likely dead, she still retains a look of horror and helplessness, while the figure on the right has an expression of grim satisfaction. In Figure 4, my character has just suffered an emotional blow, and is trying hard to hold back tears while her hard work falls from her hands. Although my work does not contain as much fine detail as Rego's, the emotion and expression of the characters plays a huge role in our respective narratives.

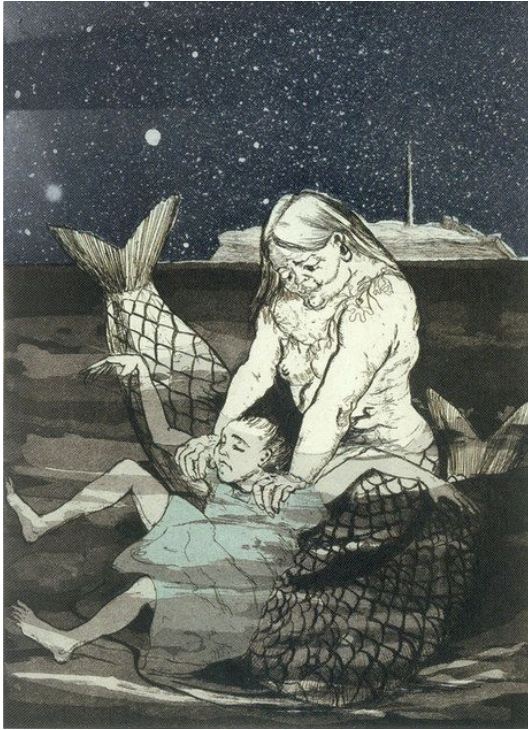


Figure 3



Figure 4

Parallels with Takashi Murakami

Takashi Murakami, unlike Pettibon and Rego, is not a terribly narrative driven artist. He has evolved his work from traditional media into a mostly digital, worldwide brand, employing other people to help create his works. He is as much a businessman as he is an artist, but his influences and ideals are driven by a love of art. He draws a lot from the Edo period, which is widely considered the gold age of Japan (Steinberg, 454). Originally trained in Nihonga, a traditional style of Japanese painting, he later moved on to digital art as a way to make his art more “Superflat” which is his signature style of work. In his work, he combines “Traditional planar

Japanese art forms and contemporary, globally circulating, non-realist, non-humanist, anime-manga chimerical life forms” (Cornyetz, 182). Despite the lack of narrative, in terms of his traditionally inspired line work, our works are similar.

In Figure 5 is an example of Murakami’s work, and in Figure 6 is an example from one of my works. His dark, thick, gestural line work is a hallmark of his style when depicting his figures, and while most of his characters feature a toothy grin or a cartoon smile, this characters distorted, worried expression is clearly defined by the lines on his face. In my example, the character’s pinched face and furrowed brow is defined by the dark line work. I made the decision to make my SMP only in black and white, as this kept things visually simple for the reader, and cut down on the time it would take to create each chapter. My main tie to Murakami definitely lies within the expressive line-work; even though he has moved on from most traditional media, his influences are still there.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Art Movements

Personally, I have trouble fitting my SMP into the context of a specific art movement; I can, however, examine the movements to which my influences belonged. Murakami's work was inspired by the pop art movement, with its repetitive forms and bright colors, something that I cannot relate to very well within my own work, despite him being a definite influence. Paula Rego was a representation artist influenced by surrealism and feminism. My work definitely has some representational aspects; such as the rocket being a representation of hope and dreams, and surrealism is present in the overall design of the second main character, Bob, who is the foil to Remy's realistic body. Feminist messages are also present in my work, mainly in the main characters design and narrative. Raymond Pettibon's work is hard to categorize, despite the aesthetic similarities in our work; he was not classically trained in art, despite having classical influences, and defines his work mainly as political cartoons. Some of his works veer into surreal territory, although he has stated in interviews that he does not like his art being defined by a certain category.

Although it was not really a conscious factor of my work until recently, feminism is definitely a driving force behind my creative vision. Strong female characters that do not conform to the standards set for them by society are my favorite type of heroes to depict, especially when they are not trying to be nonconformist, and are just true to themselves. Rego's feminist artwork depicting strong, solid female characters definitely influenced my character design, and are a source of inspiration for poses and expressions as I complete more pages.

Annotated Bibliography

Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. "Raymond Pettibon: After Laughter." *October*, no. 129, Summer 2009, pp. 13-50.

This article was an excellent source of information on Pettibon, and delves into the meaning behind the imagery and iconography he depicts. It also comments on artists he was influenced by, such as Roy Lichtenstein, and made connections between his work and theirs. I utilized this source when searching for more information on Pettibon as one of my source artists, and helped me discover similarities between my own work and his.

Zwirner, David. "Art21. Raymond Pettibon. Biography. Documentary Film, PBS." *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*, PBS Art 21, Inc., 2010, www.pbs.org/art21/artists/pettibon/.

Although not a book or a written article, the Art21 interview of Pettibon was extremely informative. Since he was not a terribly talkative man, transcribed interviews cannot really capture the essence of him as an artist, and being able to see him in his workspace was very informative. The close up shots of him creating his ink drawings, accompanied by his own, quirky explanations for his subject

matter and imagery, really helped guide my hand through the process of inking my own drawings.

McEwen, John and Paula Rego. *Paula Rego*. London : Phaidon, 1997., 1997.

EBSCOhost, proxy

This book contains a huge amount of information on Rego, and contains lots of great examples of her work. It touches on many topics, such as her artistic background, influences and the reasoning behind her famously unsettling female figures. This was a great starter source for me to use because it contained such a vast amount of information, supplemented by high quality images of her work, and was easy to read and comprehend.

Macedo, Ana Gabriela. "Paula Rego's Sabotage of Tradition: 'Visions' of

Femininity." *Luso-Brazilian Review*, no. 1, 2008, p. 164. EBSCOhost

This article contains a wealth of information on Rego, and delves into her influences and the meaning behind her works. Famous for her feminist art depicting the female figure, this article focuses mainly on fear and its connection to women. Her work is often darkly themed and features women in strange, upsetting situations, and this article offers insight into the message of her work; the fear that women experience living in today's society, and how society today views those women.

Oliveira, Leonor de. "'To Give Fear a Face': Memory and Fear in Paula Rego's Early Work." *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 18, no. 2, July 2017, pp. 274-291.

EBSCOhost

This article gives insight into the events that shaped Rego as an artist, and, like the previous article, discusses the connection between fear and femininity in her work. The light it sheds on her training as an artist and the events that took place throughout her life and career helped shape my opinion of her and solidify her as one of my influences. Since two of her main subjects are the female figure and fear, I decided that this article could really help me apply her knowledge of the subject to my own anxiety-ridden main character, Remy.

Cornyetz, Nina. "Murakami Takashi and the Hell of Others: Sexual (In)Difference, the Eye, and the Gaze in ©Murakami." *Criticism*, no. 2, 2012, p. 181. EBSCOhost

This article discusses Murakami's influences, imagery and recurring themes in his work, and discusses his art making process. It focuses on his ties to popular culture in Japan, especially Otaku culture, and explains how it has remained present in his work throughout the years, especially in his recurring characters. Learning more about how Murakami drew inspiration from current events, folklore and the history of his country helped me shape my own research and hone my own art making process.

Maerkle, Andrew. 2007. "BELLY OF THE BEAST: TAKASHI MURAKAMI."

Artasiapacific no. 55: 134-139. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost
(accessed October 3, 2017).

This article talks about Murakami's more modern influences, as well as the more commercial and capitalist aspects of his work. It features an interview with the artist as well, which helped me gain insight into his creative process and what he found most important about his artworks. I found this source helpful because it helped me understand why Murakami took his artwork in such a capitalist direction, and led to a better understanding of the message behind his works.

Dong-Yeon, Koh. 2010. "Murakami's 'little boy' syndrome: victim or aggressor in contemporary Japanese and American arts?." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3: 393-412. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 3, 2017).

This article delves into the reasoning behind Murakami's theories and practices, specifically his "superflat" concept and how he implemented it in his work. It discusses in depth his recurring characters, such as Mr. DOB, and the how he uses them to make a commentary on pop culture in both Japan and the rest of the world. This source was very useful to me because it taught me the importance of creating

characters with depth; although on the surface they are very bright, cutesy figures, they stand for something much deeper, and sometimes darker as well.

Conclusion / Artist Statement

This body of work explores themes of anxiety, loneliness, isolation and fear of the unknown, and the struggle of one individual to overcome those fears with the help of an unusual, extraterrestrial stranger. Drawing from themes of science fiction, mythology, and the artist's own experiences with fear, this work seeks to explore how we, as humans, cope with new and sometimes terrifying situations and the changes that overcome us as the result. This is not an autobiographical work, as the artist is not writing directly about herself. Instead, the two main characters serve as foils to each other; one confident to the point of self destruction, and one too afraid to venture much farther than her own back yard. This juxtaposition will serve as a personal study into how self-confidence can affect decision making, for better and for worse. By looking at the artistic processes of artists such as Takashi Murakami, Raymond Pettibon and Paula Rego, the comic will be made using a mix of traditional pen and ink and digital inking to create a mostly monochromatic narrative, with a focus on expression and emotion.