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University of Nevada, Reno

**Who Am I?
Self-Portraiture as a Means of Self-Exploration and Expression of Identity**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art and the Honors Program

By

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We recommend that the thesis
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BACHELOR OF ARTS, STUDIO ART

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Abstract

Using visual and written narrative, I relate my own journey of self-discovery while exploring the use of self-portraiture in the arts. Self-portraiture is an important method through which artists express their personalities, beliefs, and ideas. My research begins by examining the history of self-portraiture – how other artists participate in self-portraiture and how their self-portraiture relates to their identity. I then examine my identity as it has formed through my personal history by reflecting on my childhood, adolescence, and college life. I also explore my interest in identity as it has emerged throughout my life and in my artwork. My project concludes with an exhibit of twelve self-portraits that explore facets of my identity.

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Introduction

My thesis will explore identity in relation to self-portraiture. Traditionally, women's stories have been told by men, since the role of the artist has been a dominantly male profession. When men narrate the stories of women, women are often objectified. Self-portraiture has become an outlet for women to redefine their roles within society. It is important for each generation to continue this practice in order to fill in the void that exists with personal narration of female artists, especially those of a younger generation. I will add to this evolving account by narrating the discovery of my identity as a young female artists living in the 21st century.

I will investigate the history of self-portraiture and the concept of individual identity. By reviewing the work of other artists, photographers, and women who participate in self-portraiture, I will gain an understanding of how to narrate my identity through the creation of self-portraiture. I will examine my identity as a result of my past experiences, challenges, emotions, and influences. With the aid of childhood and adolescent journals, I will reflect on my life experiences and will connect these experiences to my current identity. I anticipate gaining a more concrete understanding of my identity and a higher level of self-awareness in order to negotiate my roles in society. One of the greatest resources a person can gain is an understanding of who he or she is. Understanding self-identity enables a better understanding of the world and of the people around him or herself. I believe my written and visual narratives will not only add to the evolving understanding of women's identity, but also encourage other artists to explore their own identities.

Background

The Concept of Individual Identity

Self-consciousness and identity are both relatively new ideas. They emerged during the 15th century. Before this time, the “sense of one’s self as a unique being and of worth as such” was not of widespread understanding (Thompson 31). Scholars and philosophers have speculated and discussed theories relating to self and personal identity since as early as 100-40 B.C. (Martin and Barresi 30). However, the self-concept was not understood by the general population until around the 15th century, when there was a rise in democracy and mobility between social classes, which led to an increase in individual privacy. Privacy was the first key element for a person to establish an identity defined separately from their class or family. Another key element was the increasing availability of mirrors, which allowed the common person to develop a self-image. However, Peter Hunt Thompson believes that the most important element in the development of identity and self-consciousness was “the invention of sincerity” (31). Thompson defines sincerity as “the marriage of what one professes publicly with what one feels privately” (31). He further explains that sincerity is based on the idea that each person has a self that is separate from his or her role in society, to which he or she ought to be true first and foremost. This idea seems common in the 21st century, but according to Thompson, historians place the emergence of the idea of sincerity in the 15th century.

The Commencement of the Self-Portrait

The beginning of self-portraiture also occurs during the 15th century, during the birth of humanism in Western Europe (Thompson 31). Although there are self-portraits

that exist before the 15th century, the practice of self-portraiture was not widespread. The self-portrait is a result of “artists recognizing themselves’ as individuals” (Avgitidou 131). Peter Hunt Thompson defines self-portraiture as the “self-portrayal... of an individual as an individual” (31). Essentially, a self-portrait is a representation of oneself by oneself. Self-representation is not limited to the visual arts; it is executed by orators through personal histories, by authors and poets through autobiographies, and by artists through self-portraiture.

Types of Self-Portraiture

Angeliki Avgitidou, in her article “Performances of the Self,” defines three uses of self-portraiture within the arts – sampling oneself, or becoming “masters of disguise;” promoting oneself; and auto-biography (131). These three categories are not strictly defined, and therefore, some self-portraiture falls under multiple categories. Sampling oneself is the disguising of oneself or the altering of one’s image. The reasons for altering one’s image are varied. One reason is promoting oneself, which is a subcategory of sampling oneself because the artist alters his or her image to present him or herself in a manner that will ultimately elevate their status in the eyes of others. Promoting oneself was used during the Renaissance. Many renaissance artists were viewed as craftspeople instead of artists. In response, they used “carefully constructed” self-portraits to achieve an elevated status in society (Avgitidou 132). The artist would carefully select his or her scenery, clothing, props, and pose. In this case, the self-portrait was used to communicate “the idea of the self that the artist want[ed] us to fall for” (Avgitidou 133).

As early as the 1800s with the first wave of feminism, women began creating self-portraits depicting themselves as artists, equal to the men that dominated the field.

Their self-portraits proclaim that women were valuable as artists rather than simply valuable subject material. Anna Zinkeisen paints a self-portrait in 1944 in which she depicts herself as a strong, independent working artist (Rideal 84-85). Her gaze is firm, her hair pulled back, and her sleeves are rolled up. Her arm in the foreground draws attention to the paintbrushes she holds, indicating her status as an artist. Although modern artists promote themselves, it is not as common to carefully compose a self-portrait to serve that purpose. The advance of digital technology allows artists to promote themselves through websites, blogs, and even paper communication such as postcards. However, the category of sampling self-portraiture, in which the artist masks herself, is still widely used today.

Contemporary artists practice the sampling method, in which they disguise or alter their image. Cindy Sherman, for example, used wigs, costumes, and makeup to transform herself into a number of different characters. Nikki Lee dons makeup and clothing to transform herself into a member of various subcultures. Yasumasa Morimura also disguises himself through costumes and paint to recreate historical works of art. Other artists opt to use digital technology such as Adobe Photoshop to allow the creative construction of self to be limitless.

The final use of self-portraiture is essentially autobiography. Autobiographical self-portraiture can be either self-representation or self-exploration. Artists who record events and facts of their daily lives, or their emotions from day-to-day are participating in self-portraiture that is “diaristic” (Asbury 61). These self-portraits act as a visual journal to aid the artist in exploring and representing him or herself. Artists like Jo Spence, who

creates self-portraits for introspection, are also participating in the autobiographical category by using the camera as a tool to dig into their subconscious.

Avgitidou also discusses self-portrayal as it extends into the online digital world. This world allows us to present ourselves to others under a number of guises. Although presenting oneself under a guise or mask relates to the sampling category, Avgitidou calls this representation self-fashioning, or put simply, the construction of fake or altered identities. On the Internet, blogs (web-logs) and networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace allow the individual to create a textual and visual representation of whom they are or who they want to be. There is no strict requirement or enforcement of a sincere self-portrayal, and individuals are left to be creative in their self-fashioning. Self-fashioning is also prevalent in daily life. Society expects individuals to present their sincere identity. However, this norm cannot be enforced. Presentation of identity is a complex issue. It is difficult for an outsider to affirmatively decide whether or not an individual's presentation—online or in person—is genuine.

Self-Portraiture

A wealth of self-portraiture exists. For this examination, criteria were established as a filter, with emphasis placed on those situations where two or more criteria were met: self-portraiture relating to expression and exploration of identity; self-portraiture created by artists in any field and, more specifically, photographers; and self-portraiture by women.

Self-Portraiture by Women

Self-portraiture has been an important outlet for contemporary female artists to take control of their identities. Traditionally, the role of the professional artist has been “exclusive to male artists” (Meskimmon 15). As a result, throughout history, the representation of women, their roles and identities, have been told by men. The act of construction in these narratives mediates the relationship of women’s roles in the world. Women have been portrayed as beauty, as nature, and as objects (Meskimmon 2). With the first wave of feminism in the 1800s, however, self-portraiture became a channel for women to redefine their gender roles and individual identities and “challenge the objectification of women” (Meskimmon 28). Whitney Chadwick argues that any woman who creates a self-portrait “challenges... the complex relationship that exists between masculine agency and feminine passivity in Western art history” (9). Women’s self-portraiture creates a collective vision that reclassifies the roles of women in society. With each moment in history, women confront society’s construction of femininity with their views on what it means to be both a woman and an artist. Yet, on an individual level, the intent of each female artist’s self-portraiture varies. For example, Cindy Sherman’s self-portraiture documents fictional characters and roles while Jo Spence uses self-portraiture as a therapy tool to aid her in understanding her struggle with cancer and her impending death.

Paula Modersohn-Becker

Paula Modersohn-Becker was a forerunner in woman’s use of self-portraiture. The majority of her work from 1903 to 1907 establishes a connection between woman and nature by joining Modersohn-Becker’s nude form with symbolism. Her paintings

take the narrative of woman and present it through the eyes of a woman. In her nude portraiture, her form is not meant to embody the sexual male gaze but rather a comfortable and organic essence, referencing naturalness with flowers. In one image, she depicts herself in the nude pregnant form. She was not pregnant at the time, but rather this self-portrait was created to express her own “maternal potential” (Lubell 12). Sadly, she died three weeks after giving birth to her only child. Modersohn-Becker’s work set the stage for the women’s self-portraiture that would follow for the next century.

Frida Kahlo

A woman artist who is well-recognized for her painted self-portraiture is Frida Kahlo. Kahlo’s self-portraiture from the 1930’s and 1940’s often relates to the pain and restriction that littered her life after a crippling accident she suffered when she was only 15 years old. She began painting to pass time while she was recovering in a body cast. Her paintings articulate both the life she lived – the pain and anguish that multiple surgeries were unable to heal – and the life she was unable to live, portraying “children she could not bear” (Lubell 12). Frida’s paintings are bursting with symbolism to aid her in her self-representation. Her work also deals with her Mexican identity, which is often depicted through bright colors and additional symbolism.

Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman is a female photographer recognized for her self-portraiture, most notably her *Untitled Film Stills*. Her book, Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills, contains over 60 of her self-portraits. It also includes a detailed account written by Sherman on how she came to create the self-portraits, what she tried to accomplish in her

photographs, her purpose, and how she went about her process. It is rare to have such an in-depth explanation from the artist as to how the work was accomplished both conceptually and technically. Sherman also traces her personal history from college through the completion of the *Untitled Film Stills* project, which provides a glimpse of her identity.

Sherman did not begin self-portraiture with a purpose or intent. Her first interactions with self-portraits, and photography for that matter, began when she was dressing up as different characters for parties. She put a great deal of time and effort into her costume and makeup and thought, “why waste it?” (Sherman 5). During this time she was living in a group studio space with other artists and used a fellow artist’s photography studio to document her characters. Her interaction with self-portraiture continued as she began making narrative tableaux or visual short stories. She would dress as each of the multiple characters, photograph herself, and print each image. Then she would cut out the characters and arrange them in a two-dimensional scene. It was similar to “storyboarding a movie” (Sherman 6). She worked in this manner until she discovered the work of David Salle. David Salle worked as a photographer for a magazine producing photographs primarily in a storyboard format. Sherman was struck by his work. She states, “It was hard to figure out what was going on in any of them, they were totally ambiguous,” and goes on to describe how his imagery was the solution to “trying to imply a story without involving other people” (Sherman 6). From this point, Sherman’s passion for self-portraiture grew. She originally shot only a few untitled film stills, not intending to start a large project. However, character after character, the project grew. She desired for the stories to be somewhat vague, and refrained from titling her

work so as to not spoil the ambiguity. She constructed her characters to be almost expressionless. She wanted the photographs to imply a story, but a vague story that the viewer could relate to.

Sherman's book provides technical insight into the construction of her self-portraiture. Most of the film stills were created in Sherman's loft, which she used as both a living area and a studio. In order to shoot multiple scenes in this space, she transformed it by changing curtains, adding pillows, draping fabric over the bed, and shooting from different angles. She wanted the backgrounds to be mysterious and unidentifiable. Clothing for her characters was usually purchased from thrift stores, and she used wigs to vary her hair. Sherman loved to dress up. As a child she'd put paint on her face in place of makeup. She explains that it wasn't about looking like anyone in particular but rather just looking different. Girls dress up to embody the various roles they will play as an adult. In her film stills, she uses makeup to transform her age and skin color. Sherman's lighting setup is also basic, consisting of a few hot lights or light bulbs on tripods. For her self-portraits, she sometimes uses a tripod with a cable release, utilizing a mannequin head as her stand-in to aid in manually focusing her camera. Other times, Sherman's friends or family take the portrait for her. She would direct them where to stand and how to hold the camera. In my experience, many of my fellow artists believe that to qualify as a self-portrait, the artist must control every aspect of the image. Therefore, if someone else triggers the shutter of a camera, these peer artists don't believe it is a true self-portrait. Nevertheless, Sherman is well recognized for her self-portraiture, and the issue of the validity of her work as self-portraiture has never been challenged. The photographs that were ultimately taken by another individual are still self-portraits

because Sherman, the photographer, came up with the concept and completed the construction of the scene and character. A small act of triggering the shutter should not void the photograph from recognition as a self-portrait.

Artists in Sherman's Shadow

Cindy Sherman has influenced a number of photographers to participate in self-portraiture. Jennifer Dalton, et al., explore the work of artists following in Sherman's shadow, two of which are discussed herein. These artists continue in the tradition of self-portraiture while masking, altering, or sampling their identity.

The first artist is Nikki S. Lee, who strives to become virtually invisible. Lee assimilates into various social groups, first becoming part of the group, then having her snapshot taken with the group. Lee came to the United States in the 1990s for college from South Korea. During her graduate work, she realized that her understanding from Asia that "social identity is defined by the group" helps her to transform her identity into the various subcultures of the United States (Rice 27). Lee assimilates into both mainstream and marginal cultures. Her work argues that subcultures and social groups are fluid; different clothes and makeup have as much to do with the character of a group as attitude. She is successful in her work because she has perfected the ability to pose with both her face and her body, and to imitate those in the group into which she has assimilated. She studies each group for months before infiltrating them. Lee does not compose her self-portraits; rather, she has strangers take a snapshot of her with the group. This method is considered appropriate, since the snapshot documents her performance and shows her ability to transform into part of a particular group (Dalton et al. 49). This snapshot also minimizes the artiness of her work, allowing them to "feel more 'real' to

viewers” (Sterling and Wat 43). Lee’s work is related to Cindy Sherman’s self-portraiture in that she does not create her self-portraits to reveal something about her own identity, but rather to say something about others and their identities. She dons different clothes and makeup in order to transform and mask her identity, showing the fluidity of identity in the subcultures of the United States.

One other artist that Dalton et al. discuss is David Henry Brown, Jr., whose work deals with identity as it pertains to celebrities. Brown crashes celebrity parties by giving a socialite’s name to gain entrance to a party and then asks famous celebrities to take a picture with him. They usually oblige. In essence he is creating a souvenir-quality document. Society has a fascination with celebrities, and having one’s picture taken with a celebrity is like getting one’s picture taken with a famous landmark, such as the Eiffel Tower. A picture becomes proof that you were up close and personal with something or someone worth recognizing. Brown’s method requires that his subjects do not know he is creating art, because that knowledge causes people to act self-consciously. Brown also experiments with creating different characters (such as a nerd), going to a portrait studio, and having the studio photographers pose and photograph him based on his character. Although his work seems very humorous and light-hearted on the surface, Brown is diving into the “complicated issues of class, social self-image, access, and cultural representation” (Dalton et al. 54). Brown takes a stance against mainstream American culture by critiquing our fascination with celebrity and our depiction of stereotypes.

These three artists are “conceptualists who use photography to illustrate their ideas about social identity” (Dalton et al. 56). Like Cindy Sherman, these artists bring an element of performance to their work – each photograph takes research, costume,

makeup, and detailed posing. Their work does not deal with individual identity, but with class and cultural identities. These artists must rely on the cooperation of others to create their art.

Yasumasa Morimura

Another artist whose work is similar in nature to Cindy Sherman is Yasumasa Morimura, who transforms himself into well-recognized pieces of art from history, such as the painting of the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci. His book Daughter of Art History: Photographs is the collection of his art history self-portraits. At a glance, one would be convinced that his work is a collage of digital self-portraiture with original artwork. In actuality, the majority of his work is constructed physically with no digital manipulation. Morimura paints replica pieces of art, constructing them as though they are stages for a play, large enough to insert his own body. He creates the clothing and usually covers it with clay to give it a painterly effect. After the entire scene has been set, he uses stage makeup to transform his face and body into the character of that particular piece of art. His work emphasizes the impact of time and planning on a single self-portrait.

Jo Spence

Jo Spence is another female photographer recognized for self-portraiture. Her book, Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression, combines a wealth of her writings with some of her self-portraits. Jo Spence uses self-portraiture as a therapy tool to aid her in understanding her own battle with cancer, allowing her to “learn to live with [her]self and be ready for [her] eventual death” (135). She also explains her use of photography as a

therapy tool for others. During her life, she held photography sessions for people to act out emotional themes; to come to terms with situations and identities; to show fragments of truth, record a process, and connect with the unconsciousness; and to create narratives. One of the chapters of her book dealing with her personal therapy and understanding of cancer is subtitled “Deciding to become the subject of our own histories rather than the object of somebody else’s” (129). This idea relates to the history of feminism with respect to art. Women use art as one outlet to aid them in redefining their history and identity. Spence uses art to cope with cancer. She is photographing and narrating her history rather than succumbing to the role of the victim.

Francesca Woodman

Francesca Woodman was a photographer during 1970s whose work reflects on the female body in a complicated manner. Woodman’s photography differs from Cindy Sherman, in that her images present a collective view of women’s persona while Sherman’s are glimpses and hints of individual guises. Woodman’s images are constructed in a manner that limits the voyeuristic approach of her audience. She uses her body to dialogue her vision of woman, projecting her hopes, fears, and reflections on her childhood into each image. Her work evokes “a feeling of horror, of sudden emptiness” where the viewer confronts their own cowardice and confusion (Woodman et al. 15). Woodman created most of her self-portraiture in her teens and early twenties before committing suicide at age 22 in 1981 (“Francesca Woodman”). Her work is experimental, matching soft nude forms with glass or hard walls and curving her body into various arching forms. Most of Woodman’s work disguises her face, which allows her work to be read as a narrative of all women, and also as a possible struggle with her

own identity. Her work is complex and intriguing especially for such a young artist, and leaves her audience wondering what her work could have been had she lived a full life. Her work has been widely exhibited and published since her death.

A Multitude of Self-Portraits

There are a number of anthologies that group the self-portraiture of many artists into one book. One such visual source is Self-Portrayal, a collection of 101 self-portraits by photographers and three essays in relation to self-portrayal. The self-portraits are somewhat ambiguous, as the only information provided is the artist's name, the title of the photograph, the location, and the year. Unlike Cindy Sherman's book, this one does not provide any insight into the photographers' ideas and processes, and the viewer is left to discern their meanings and purpose.

The first essay in Self-Portrayal is "Self-Portrayal" by Peter Hunt Thompson. The majority of Thompson's essay discusses the history behind self-portraiture and the idea and nature of self-portraiture. Thompson states that "self-portrayals are a kind of confession... allowing others to be included in an intimacy" (31). The viewer is allowed to see the photographer as the photographer sees him or herself. Self-portraiture can also become a work of fiction because of the difficulty to mirror the real, or perfectly portray one's own life, and because the process of mirroring becomes part of the artist's life.

The second essay, "Photographing the Interior: The Self-Portrait as Introspection" by Dana Asbury picks up where Thompson's essay leaves off. This source builds on the relationship between self-portraiture and identity. Asbury questions if we can really learn anything about "other people through their portrait" (60). August Sander, a photographer from the 1920's through the 1940's documented people of Germany through portraits,

classifying people by their job or role in society. He believed that the camera could “pare away the layers of daily habit to show us who we really are” (60). His photographs were designed as absolute dry fact, to reveal a person’s identity. Richard Avedon, who worked in the United States, also photographed people in a somewhat matter-of-fact manner, composing his portraits straight-on with white backdrops. His work is neither dry absolute truth nor intimate revealing narrative. Both of these artists appear to reveal part of their subject’s identity through the subject’s clothing, pose, and gaze, and yet we cannot be certain we know anything about these individuals. Asbury explains that self-portraiture is an attempt to distinguish between “how we appear and how, on the inside, we really are” (60). This relates back to the idea of sincerity in a moral sense - that one should be true to one’s inner self first and foremost.

Dana Asbury’s personal experience was a continual search for “commonality” with his portrait subjects (61). However, due to photography’s ability to retain the likeness of a person, he was unable to give the viewer much interpretation as to what he was trying to articulate about his subject, and so his intentions were unclear. Asbury realized that he was seeking to reveal something about himself in those he photographed. When he finally created a self-portrait, he was freed from the search and need to portray elements of himself in portraits of others. Asbury stressed that the creation of self-portraiture does not follow a rigid structure. There is a “disparity between appearance and reality” (62). Just as we can mask our identity from our friends and family in life, artists can also mask it from the viewers of their self-portraits. Asbury emphasizes that he considers self-portraits as interpretations of self from a personal reality. He also mentions that self-portraits do not necessarily require the artist to be in

the image. For example, Thomas Barrow, one of the artists featured in Self-Portrayal, creates a self-portrait by photographing his library shelf. He used a conceptual approach to convey something about himself. In this case, he was using his literary interests to define his identity.

Role Models: Feminine Identity in Contemporary American Photography, edited by the National Museum of Women in the Arts is a written and visual anthology that explores the representation of women in photography. Although this source does not deal exclusively with self-portraiture, there is a wealth of self-portraiture contained there-in. The book contains a wide selection of female artists' work created between 1975 and 2005. Sherman's self-portraiture embodies allegories about the "construction of... female identity, by culture" (Soutter 18). Carrie Mae Weems works with images coupled with text to "critique existing representation and propose new roles" for women (18). Her work confronts the complex issues with the identity of African American women in the United States. She originally participated in a labor movement, but transitioned to using her photography as an artistic way to present her political concerns. Nan Goldin's work is an ongoing narrative. She uses her self-portraits and portraits of others to describe and analyze her pain, allowing us to feel the emotion of her experiences through her "difficult, often tragic, scenarios" (Rice 23). Goldin transforms her private life into "public domain," depicting her internal identity for her audience to view and relate to (23).

The anthology Role Models also explores the work of women artists that do not participate in self-portraiture but do explore identity. One such artist is Rineke Dijkstra whose portraits usually depict women at important transitional moments in their lives, for

example, awkward teenage years or the moment right after childbirth. In one series, Dijkstra follows Almerisa, a young refugee, for eleven years. The series relates to Almerisa's changing environment and how she undergoes "cultural assimilation" (Rice 25). This series represents the process by which all humans "construct and project our social identities" (26).

The Need for Additional Narrative

While women are becoming more prevalent in the art world, there is still a need for the female voice to narrate her story. The world is continually changing and with it changes the roles and expectations society places on women. Each generation must confront these expectations and negotiate whether to accept or reject them, defining their generation's identity. I will contribute to the evolving discussion by narrating my identity as a young married woman in 21st century America. I am continuing in the artistic tradition of self-portraiture and contributing to the work of female artists, young artists, and explorative self-portraiture.

As a woman, my self-reflection can serve as a model for other women, and as a young adult, my narrative can guide younger generations. Self-discovery and an understanding of one's identity are a necessary part of maturing, and I hope my work will serve as a guide to those women who are less sure, less confident, and less aware of their self. This work will also be valuable to artists. Self-portraiture is a tradition in the arts. It should be continued in each generation to tell that generation's story. I hope my work will inspire others to venture into their own exploration of self-portraiture.

Who Am I? – My Past

Background

In order to narrate my identity, I must first begin by exploring my life. My identity is a sum of my history – people who influenced me, events I experienced, trials I encountered, and challenges I overcame. Tracing my history reveals how these elements have intertwined themselves throughout my life to become important threads that connect pieces and explain fractions of my identity today.

Childhood

I spent my childhood in Stateline, Nevada, which is essentially Lake Tahoe. My childhood was pleasant. I played soccer in kindergarten. I danced ballet, tap, and jazz. I was a girl scout. My family's house was nestled in the trees, and I spent countless afternoons imagining the neighborhood kids and I were Indians or animals. I loved being outside. I spent the summers swimming at the beach and passed the winters skiing on the mountains. I attended a small elementary school where all the students knew each other and became close friends. With lots of friends, I had play dates, sleepovers, and birthday parties practically every week.

My family was very close during my childhood. We ate dinner as a family at the dinner table every night. Most evenings we would clean up and then take walks together. We went on many vacations – some to visit my grandparents, others to fun destinations, and many backpacking or camping trips.

My fondest memories with my father involve his bedtime stories. Every night before my dad would put my brother and me to bed, he would snuggle us close in his

arms and tell us a bedtime story. He didn't read the stories from books, but made them up as he went along. Some nights they were scary, other nights they were silly, but they were always captivating. After a while, he began recording his stories with the intent to someday publish them into a book. The tapes have been misplaced, but I'm hoping to find them one day so we can finally make that book. As the head of our family, my father had a huge impact on who I am today. I adored him and looked up to him as my hero and guardian.

As a young girl I remember my mother as the baker, cook, teacher, real-estate agent, and loving wife. She was always happy and nurturing. My brother and I would help her make cookies by sitting on the counter and pouring her measured ingredients into the mixer. We would sneak cookie dough when she was not looking, but we knew it was okay because she shared stories about how she used to do the same when she was a kid. I remember wearing my mother's high heels and hats and wanting to be just like her. She was my role model. She was strong and independent, but also loved playing the role of homemaker.

My brother and I were extremely close. Mackenzie is a year and a half younger than I. Our close proximity in age allowed us to play off of each other's imaginations. I remember taking baths together as little kids and playing battleships or laundry. We would pretend to wear washcloths as clothing. When the wash clothes got soap on them we would pretend the soap was dirt and wash it off in the water. We played all sorts of games together. I would play dump trucks with my brother in the backyard and then we would play store with our stuffed animals inside. Occasionally my brother and I would argue, but it usually diffused quickly due to us making silly faces at each other. We had a

close relationship full of fun times and countless adventures. One thing we always looked forward to was visiting our grandparents in San Diego.

San Diego

My mother's parents lived in San Diego, while my dad's parents lived in Colorado. We usually visited my mother's parents because they lived closer. The road-trip to and from my grandparent's house took around 10 hours. As young children, my brother and I passed the time by playing Mad-Libs, I Spy, magnetic board games, and with stuffed animals. As we grew older, we transitioned to playing games on paper, working on homework, or listening to music.

When we arrived at my grandparents it was usually late, around 11 p.m. or midnight. My grandparents always came out to greet us. My grandmother always applied a coat of bright coral lipstick before coming outside and insisted on giving us big kisses on our cheeks. We'd have to scrub her love mark off our cheeks before we could go to bed.

Every visit we went to the beach and the park. The weather was always warm and sunny, the birds always chirped, and the air always smelled sweet of saltwater and fragrant flowers. I adored San Diego. I began telling myself at age 10 that I would someday live in San Diego. San Diego represented everything I desired. The weather and environment were perfect. The attitude of residents was laid back and relaxed. It was the atmosphere of life that I idolized.

Moving and Growing

When I was in fourth grade, my family moved from Lake Tahoe to Gardnerville, Nevada. I was sad to leave my friends and terrified of becoming a valley girl that used 'like' every other word. My parents decided it was best to relocate, since they had been commuting from Tahoe to their jobs in the valley. Changing schools was difficult at first. The social norms were completely different. One distinct memory is from my very first week of class. A girl in my class was upset and I wanted to comfort her so I put my hand on her shoulder and asked if everything was okay. Instead of warmly acknowledging my gesture of comfort, she freaked out, shrugged my hand off her shoulder, and walked away. The kids in the valley were much more reserved than my friends in Tahoe had been. My family was always very affectionate in our communication and suddenly I found this style of behavior unacceptable. Thankfully, one girl reached out to me; her name was Kirsten. After a couple weeks of school, she brought me a gift – a delicate necklace. We instantly became friends. Ironically, we later discovered that her family had tried to purchase, but had fallen out of escrow, on the same property my parents had purchased and upon which were now building a house. Eventually, I adjusted to living in the valley. I made new friends, became pen pals with my Tahoe friends, and continued with my new life.

Depression

In middle school, I went through a critical period of my life. I was sad and cried almost every day. Some days I was so upset that I tacked blankets over my mirrors so I could not see my red puffy face. I was never clinically diagnosed, but I believe it was depression. I was miserable. I fought with my family, especially my dad, every day. I

felt like everyone was out to get me. I felt disconnected from my peers and society. I did not see the purpose to life. It was mundane and painful. A couple of times I thought about suicide, but I never actually attempted ending my life. The thought of dying scared me more than the idea of living. I knew what to expect from life, as lonely and agonizing as it was. I had no clue what to expect after death, and was not ready to find out. I wrote in my journal all the time. Some of my entries read, “Who am I? Who am I? WHO AM I?” At night I would pray to God, if He existed, asking to know why I was here, why I existed. I would ask Him to show me if He was real and to reveal to me what the purpose was to life. I wanted to know why I was alive. Was I really just a result of millions of years of evolution? And was I really just a fleeting moment in history? Or was I designed with a purpose? My depression eventually faded, but the answers to those questions still floated in the back of my mind, and would not be answered for a few more years.

Religion

In high school, I began to have an interest in religion. My parents had raised my brother and me with morals, but we didn't go to church, except on the occasional holiday. My parents explained the religious reasons why many people celebrated Christmas and Easter, but we never talked specifically about God or religion. My parents believed in a liberal “all roads lead to heaven” idea: if a person lives a good life, tries to be a good person, or finds a religion that works for them, God would send them to heaven upon death. I adopted this belief as well. I had good morals, but my parents also raised me with a liberal outlook on life. I believed in sex outside of marriage, abortion, recycling,

and being kind to others, and to nature. I defined for myself how good I needed to be in order to get into heaven and then I followed my model.

In high school, my same childhood friend, Kirsten, had grown into a devout Christian. She and I were best friends and would often engage in heated discussions about her faith. We would argue about abortion, sex outside of marriage, and heaven versus hell. She introduced me to some of her other Christian friends, including Akiya and Jeff, who challenged my views of morality and what I had to do to get into heaven. I realized I did not have anything to back up my arguments other than feelings and what society and my parents taught me to believe. So I decided I wanted to investigate different religions. I was interested in the idea of religion and why people followed different belief systems. I was curious if there was a religion for me. I didn't investigate deeply; my exploration was more of a surface look at basic beliefs. I picked out my parents' old Dartmouth Bible and read small bits of it. I began to pay attention in history class, learning about the fundamental values of religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Kirsten invited me to come to youth group, and since I was 'looking into religion' I agreed to go. I had fun during the social activities, but the remainder was incredibly uncomfortable. The teaching and discussions conflicted with my beliefs about morals and heaven versus hell. Nevertheless, because I enjoyed the social activities so much, I began attending youth group on a regular basis.

Salvation

That summer, before my junior year of high school, the church was having a weeklong retreat for high school students. I thought it might be fun to hang out with friends for a week, so I asked my parents if I could go. My mom thought it was a great

idea. She told me she had gone to church camps when she was a kid and felt it would be a good experience for me. She expressed regret for not raising my brother and me with more religious guidance and was glad I had developed an interest in religion on my own. The camp, called Hume Lake, was completely different than I expected. Kirsten gave me a Bible as a gift on the first day and I began reading it. There were small groups, messages, and quiet times. During these quiet times, my life changed. I started praying similar to how I had prayed during my depression — to God, *if* He existed. I read my new Bible and tried to understand what I read. God opened my eyes to see truth. I had been looking for the best *religion* for me. However, religion itself is a man-made idea. There cannot be multiple religions that are all true because it would mean there is no absolute truth. It is impossible to say there is no absolute truth without declaring that statement as truth and creating a paradox. If there is truth, there can only be one truth. I began to understand sin and realized that I couldn't choose how good I needed to be to get into heaven; rather, there had to be an absolute definition of good and bad. Later that summer, I re-read earlier journals and found the entries from my depression. All my questions had been answered and despite my lack of faith in my prayers during that time, God still answered them.

I began reading a lot of books on Christianity. I discovered that there was significantly more evidence to back up the stories and testimonies in the Bible than those in any other religion. Christianity is backed up by history and science. My worldview began to change, and I started thinking about and approaching life differently. Becoming a Christian changed my life. It forced me to question beliefs my parents and society had instilled in me. Children often grow up idolizing their parents, taking on their beliefs

without questioning them. When I became a Christian and started questioning what I had been taught, I took the first step in defining my identity.

My next couple years were drastically different than the years before. Most of my friends were no longer interested in being friends because I had become a Christian. I was changing. I had different views on life – I understood my purpose, my struggles, and my strength. I desired to use cleaner language, wear more modest clothing, and stop gossiping. My friends did not respect these decisions and gradually we grew apart. I began spending more of my free time with my Christian friends, including Kirsten, Akiya, and Jeff, who would later become my husband.

I was a diligent straight-A student taking honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. My time was split between school, my part-time office job, track practice, and church related activities. What little spare time I had on the weekend I usually spent with family or my close-knit group of friends.

Dating and Engagement

Jeff and I began dating early in 2005. Our first kiss was on New Year's Day. I had gone over to Akiya's house to hang out with Akiya; his fiancé Jessica, and Jeff. We played board games for a while, and then when Akiya and Jessica spent some time alone talking, Jeff and I did the same. Then he kissed me. The next few weeks were rocky. I didn't want to date because I wanted to be focused on school, but I also had feelings I had not experienced before and could not explain. Jeff had graduated high school the summer before. We'd been close friends and spent most of the previous summer and fall going to the beach and park. That winter he moved to Utah with his parents, but spent only one week away before he choose to move back to Carson on his own. He confided

in me later that after one week apart he knew I was the one he wanted to marry. When we started dating, my schedule didn't allow us much spare time, so Jeff would meet me at the high school to eat lunch together. We also saw each other on Thursday nights for Bible study and Sundays for church. We talked on the phone almost every night. Some nights we talked until 4 or 5 in the morning. I am still amazed that I was able to stay awake that late, sleep for one or two hours, and function the next day at school and work.

Jeff and I decided early in our relationship that we weren't going to date recreationally. Culture teaches teenagers to date and break up in a selfish manner. Dating is perceived as seeing how another person can fit your needs and desires. If that person doesn't fit your mold, the relationship will break off and both individuals will seek another boyfriend or girlfriend. Neither party is looking at how they can give to the other person, only what they can get from them. If both individuals view the relationship in this manner the relationship won't work. Two people enter into a marriage with selfish expectations of the other person. When the relationship gets rocky, they divorce, and go back to where they started, looking for someone to fit into their mold. Society's dating model doesn't work because no one is perfect. We all have flaws and can't fit into someone else's mold. When both individuals are looking at the interests of the other person, a relationship can be built and strengthened. Jeff and I agreed that if we were dating, we were dating with the intent to work through our problems, look out for the other person's needs, and consider our relationship as one that could turn into marriage. After six months of dating, we purchased promise rings, committing to stay pure for each other, and intending to get married in the future.

Jeff and I decided to get engaged in March 2006. I was 17 and finishing my final year of high school. My parents, teachers, and acquaintances thought I was crazy. We decided to get married after I graduated high school. When we got engaged we considered our options for the future. First, we could get married the summer after my high school graduation. This option would allow us to go to college as a married couple. Changes in college would be experienced as a couple rather than as individuals. Our other option was to wait and get married until sometime during college or after college graduation. The first option came with the weight of negotiating and growing our marriage during school, but the second option presented possible strain for our relationship. We would be separate from each other since we had chosen to not live together until we were married. We would have less of a support system built between the two of us. There would also be more opportunity to grow apart from each other and more temptation to cross boundaries we had agreed not to cross until we were married. Considering all these issues carefully, we decided to get married after I graduated high school.

During my senior year as I was sending in scholarship applications, studying for finals, and finishing my classes, I was also choosing my bridesmaid dresses, centerpieces, wedding location, designing invitations, and more. Through this demanding process, I matured. Planning a wedding and preparing for a lifelong commitment forced me to take on new responsibilities and change. The last few months of high school were extremely difficult for me. My parents thought my church was encouraging Jeff and me to get married. They thought I was being brainwashed by the church, my Bible, and Christian friends. None of these assumptions was true. I wasn't following society's norms. I was

growing up and maturing faster than they had expected and planned. One of their major concerns with our getting married so young was that approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce. It didn't help that Nevada is the unofficial divorce capital of the world. They thought Jeff and I were getting married just to have fun, live together, and be intimate; they feared it wouldn't last.

Stress in High School

Not surprisingly, my senior year of high school I started getting heart palpitations. Some days my heart would race, other days it would skip beats or beat hard. I'd get dizzy, lose my breath, and have to sit down. My parents took me to the emergency room on a day when my resting heartbeat was double its normal rate. The doctors drew blood, hooked me up to an EKG, and proceeded to tell me that I was fine. We saw a cardiologist, who made me an appointment to wear a heart monitor for a week. Jeff took me to the appointment a month or so later, and they had no record of my appointment or my name. My heart problems lessened and I never followed up with the cardiologist. I was too busy graduating and planning my wedding. I didn't make the connection until a few years later. The stress of juggling schoolwork and high school graduation with planning my wedding presented itself physically through heart palpitations. Thankfully, when I graduated and was able to solely focus on planning the wedding, my level of stress decreased significantly and the heart palpitations stopped.

The End of Childhood

My high school graduation marked the end of my childhood. I had developed into a mature young Christian woman. I learned to negotiate respect for my parents, while challenging the beliefs they had instilled in me. My family struggled to accept my

new faith and maturity. It was difficult to run against the norm, but my persistence fostered the formation of my identity and the strengthening of my faith. My relationship with God was solid, and my relationship with Jeff was growing. I was preparing to enter the next stage of my life as a wife and full time college student.

Who Am I? – Today

The Wedding

My current stage of life began with my marriage to Jeff during the summer of 2006. After graduation from high school, I began focusing all my efforts on planning our wedding. Jeff and I were paying for the majority of the wedding ourselves, so we were careful to choose economical alternatives. We skipped the DJ and instead created playlists of music for our reception, first dance, and father-daughter dance. We wanted to get married on the beach, but found a charming and quaint park in Genoa for a tenth of the price. We bought flowers online and had them shipped to my parent's house, where my bridesmaids and I assembled them into centerpieces and bouquets the night before the wedding. We setup our reception in the morning and our wedding party cleaned up afterwards. I designed, printed, and hand-assembled our invitations and kept track of all RSVPs along with our expenses and wedding details. The night before the wedding I wavered between feelings of security and uncertainty. I trusted in God that His strength would allow my marriage to be firm, but I was uncertain of what new challenges I would face. My parents, although unsure if I was really ready, were supportive, desiring to encourage us to take our commitment seriously. Jeff's parents were also very supportive.

Overall, my feelings were normal compared to what most women I have spoken with experienced before their weddings.

Our wedding was beautiful. It was a warm August afternoon, but much of the guest seating was in the shade. There was a fire on the nearby mountain, which caused some road closures and helicopters flying overhead, but thankfully there was no smoke or evacuations. Our wedding was moderately sized, with friends and family, including my friends from both elementary school in Tahoe and middle and high school in Minden and Gardnerville. Before we walked down the grassy aisle, my father asked me for the last time if I was sure I was ready to get married. I assured him I was and he asked if he needed to remove his sunglasses. He was choking back tears and the glasses were his hope of hiding his emotions. He took them off, recognizing his little girl was growing up, and the wedding began. The procession focused on our faith and how Christ was the foundation and stronghold of our marriage. My dad cried, I cried, and Jeff's mother bawled. We kissed, everyone cheered, and Jeff and I walked back down the aisle as a married couple amidst a delicate stream of bubbles blown by our guests. After many exchanged hugs and congratulations with our wedding party and family we took pictures and walked down the street to the reception.

The reception is somewhat of a blur. We greeted our guests, ate some food, cut the cake and listened to toasts. Our first dance was an absolute disaster. I had been putting the final songs into our playlists and couldn't remember exactly which acoustic guitar song we had chosen. I played the first ten seconds of a few and thought I had found the song we had decided upon. Unfortunately, there were two songs with similar beginnings: one continued with soft and slow melodies, and the other turned into a fast-

paced duel between two guitars. It was only a moment before I realized the wrong song was on the playlist. Jeff and I, rather than stopping, played along and began dancing quickly in circles, all the while trying to signal our wedding party to fade out the song. Realizing our mistake, they were laughing hysterically, and never noticed our signals. After two extremely long minutes someone finally faded out the song; we bowed, somewhat embarrassed. We discovered later that many guests didn't recognize the panic on our faces and thought it was a fun first dance. This is now one of my favorite memories. It has taught me to accept and enjoy the humbling and embarrassing moments in my life. My father-daughter dance went much smoother, giving my dad and me a very special memory. It was the first dance where my dad was no longer the key male figure in my life. Jeff was now my husband and it was now his responsibility to protect and watch out for me. My father was still coping with emotions of giving his daughter away, wondering if I was ready to be a wife and if Jeff would be able to be the protector and leader for me. A few more hugs with guests, pictures, and the reception was over. People started filtering out and Jeff and I stayed for a while, helping our wedding party clean before they sent us home.

The remainder of the evening was mixed with emotions of joy, relief, and anticipation. It was still light out when we arrived at the apartment, and I didn't want the entire complex to know we had just gotten married, so we parked across the street and waited until our neighbors had all gone inside. Then we dashed up into our apartment and flopped down on the couch. And for many minutes we just sat there quietly, enjoying being newlyweds, relaxing in the stillness of the moment, glad to be done with the excitement of the day's events. Our wedding party dropped off our gifts and cards

and then we went to bed. It was our first night together, but it was impossible to sleep. Despite our 3 a.m. alarm that was set for the next morning, we lay awake, excited to start a new phase in our lives.

That next morning our friends picked us up bright and early and chauffeured us to the airport to fly to Cancun for our honeymoon. We were extremely groggy but still excited. When we arrived in Cancun it was hot and muggy. A little Mexican man saw my Orbitz shuttle receipt, grabbed our bags and went running off. We trailed behind him, realizing he was actually helping us get to our shuttle, not stealing our luggage. At the hotel, they greeted us as Mr. and Mrs. Bennington. I had booked our flights and hotels using my maiden name, so the entire stay I felt like they were calling us by my parents name rather than my married name. I had chosen to take on my husband's name, so I was now Mrs. Hilderbrand. I was accustomed to being Miss or Ms. Bennington, but I had never been Mrs. Bennington. It was an awkward situation, choosing to explain the misunderstanding to each and every employee that greeted us, or grin and bear it.

Our trip was unlike anything Jeff or I had ever experienced. The environment was serene. Our room was exotic and beautiful, overlooking the ocean. The water and sand were warm and the sun was always shining. The resort was all-inclusive so we chose from one of many restaurants for our meal, had dessert at a different restaurant, and after playing ping pong and walking on the beach, we ordered more dessert through room service. We spent days on the beach, in the pool, or exploring the flea markets. In the evening we had romantic dinners, watched different performances at the hotel, and walked on the beach. We were in love, and Cancun was a perfect and private get-a-way.

There were plenty of other couples and some families at the resort, but we didn't know them, they didn't know us, and we didn't bother each other. It was like they didn't exist.

As perfect as Cancun was, there were a couple moments during the first days, when we'd be in the middle of an activity, I would begin to cry. I wasn't fully aware of why I was crying. It felt like a mixture of fear and joy at once. I didn't regret getting married, but I was unsure of what to expect next. This was a whole new chapter of our lives, and as wonderful as Cancun was, it felt as though we couldn't actually start our lives until we returned from our honeymoon. Jeff and I hadn't lived together or been intimate with each other before we were married. Then the instant we were married we flew off to Cancun. Being together was new – we were learning to negotiate our relationship on a higher level, but we were doing so in a foreign environment. In retrospect, I believe it would have been easier and more enjoyable if we had taken our first week or two as a married couple and spent it at home in our apartment and then taken our honeymoon. Nonetheless, we enjoyed our honeymoon and wished it could have lasted longer.

Assuming New Roles

When we returned from our honeymoon we had two weeks until I would begin my freshman year of college. Obviously, the first step was moving my things out of my parent's house into Jeff's apartment, which was now our apartment. That same week, I took on a new position at my job. I had been working as an Office Assistant for the previous two years. After my graduation, they needed an Office Manager and offered the job to me, which I gladly accepted. The week after I returned from our honeymoon, I began training to take on my new responsibilities. Life was hectic. There were so many

changes to confront. Beyond the new leadership responsibilities at work, I was now a wife, which brought responsibilities to my husband and my home. I was no longer a daughter helping to keep the house clean, or cooking the occasional dinner. I was a wife; the apartment was now my domain to clean and dinners were my responsibility to plan. I was also preparing to enter college and negotiate a new level of schoolwork. It was as if I'd gone to sleep as an adolescent and woken up as an adult. I underwent a number of changes during our first month of marriage. It was challenging. I had many new roles and responsibilities to negotiate. As a result, my identity morphed and developed.

Pursuing a Degree

I entered my freshman year amid unusual circumstances, especially compared to my peers. While they were excited to live in a dorm and experience life away from parents, I was focused on my new roles and responsibilities while attending college and obtaining a degree.

I declared Mathematics as my major. I was always talented at understanding numbers and equations, so math was the logical route. My parents had encouraged me to go to college to get a prestigious degree that would lead me into a high-paying career. I reckoned math fell under the “scholarly-intellectual” category they had encouraged me to pursue. My first semester, however, I decided to take a light semester and chose not to take math. I had already completed three semesters of college math and decided taking one semester off would be less demanding.

That semester, I realized I enjoyed having a break from taking math classes. I had always done math – this was my first break – and I decided a math degree was not the right path for me. I switched to an undeclared major and spent the next year and a half

searching for a “scholarly-intellectual” degree replacement. I tried accounting, information systems, and even social work. Unfortunately nothing seemed to fit. At the end of my sophomore year, I received a letter instructing me to declare a major or else be destined to meet with a counselor every semester. On a whim, I decided to switch my minor to my major.

I had never previously considered declaring photography as my major. Photography, along with painting, sewing, and ceramics, were just hobbies. Artists didn’t make money, and so I had never considered art as a degree or career possibility. I thought photography would be a fun minor that would allow me to enjoy my hobby at school. However, with no other paths to take, I began to wonder if I should pursue my passion in place of a lofty, intellectual, high-paying career in which I had no interest. I became an art major.

I had a difficult time justifying an art degree. Did I really need to go to college to study art? Was it a waste of time? Couldn’t I just learn art on my own and get some other degree? I imagined my parents’ voices and the voice of society telling me that art was not a scholarly degree. As I imagined their disappointment, I felt as though I wasn’t advancing my education by studying art. But this outlook on art began to change as my education continued. I loved art and I realized my desire to get a prestigious degree was to fulfill the expectations of my parents and society. Jeff and I had been living in a small house for a few years on small wages, and yet we were happy, and happiness was more appealing to me than wealth. As I took photography and art history courses, I began to realize art wasn’t just a craft that allowed people to make pretty objects. Rather, art was a means to communicate ideas, comment on society, and critically approach the world. I

began to view art as a viable and worthy degree. I realized art was much more than I had previously believed. My classes challenged my ideas and my technical skills were cultivated and fine-tuned.

One of the largest changes during these last few years has been my approach towards my education. As my views began to change as to why I was attending the university – not to fulfill the desires of my parents and society, but to pursue one of my passions – I began to recognize a need to take my education seriously. In high school, I had learned how to negotiate tests and assignments in order to get the grade; however, this often did not translate into long-term learning about various subjects. As I began to take my college education seriously, I recognized that I had to approach my classes differently. The assignments my teachers gave to their class were to guide my peers and me in our learning, but that didn't mean I had to do the bare minimum. If I wanted to get the most out of my education, I had to take charge of my own learning, and go beyond the framework of what was needed to get a decent grade. By challenging myself to really understand the material, set high goals, and do more than what was required, I became an active participant in my schooling and stopped cheating myself out of a worthwhile education. In this same manner, I began to recognize that I couldn't be a victim or make excuses. So often when I was not able to meet expectations or fulfill requirements, I would play the role of the victim, making excuses for why I didn't do as well as I could have. With my new outlook on my education, I began making a conscious effort to stop making excuses and rather own up to my mistakes, and attempt to learn from them.

My time at school was limited. I commuted an hour from Carson City everyday for classes. As a result, I did not have time to participate in many clubs or activities on

campus. I made friends in my classes, but our relationships never extended outside the classroom. My purpose was to study, learn, and graduate. I never tried to make my time on campus more than what my classes dictated. I would arrive to campus in time for my first class, and leave as soon as my last class of the day had finished. If there were breaks in between classes I spent them in the library or student union, eating and studying alone. I adjusted to living a very independent life on campus. However, in this final year of college, I strengthened my relationships with many of my peers, especially within the art department. Through these relationships I've grown, learning to better communicate my ideas visually in my art and understand how my ideas relate to art history. I've learned to relate to my peers and mentors as an adult. I look forward to continuing these relationships after I graduate.

Analysis of Today

These past four years have been a difficult path. I fought an internal battle with preconceived ideas of whom I was expected to be and who I desired to be. I balanced married life with schoolwork, a part-time job, and church. However, this balancing act allowed me to grow. My workplace taught me to be a leader, school - a thinker, home - a collaborator, and church - a servant. The challenges I encountered shaped me into a new identity. A confident, intellectual, and creative woman has emerged as a result.

Who Am I? – An Interest in Identity

Appearance and Name

One of the main reasons I have an interest in identity today is because I always felt unique as a child. Two things have always set me apart from others. First is my

appearance. One day as a young girl I held up my Happy Meal toy and exclaimed, “Look mom, Cruella DeVille has hair just like me!” I was born with both blond and brown hair. This birthmark has run in my family for decades; however, it was usually temporary and faded by age 5 or 6. My birthmark, on the other hand, became more distinct as I aged. Today, almost half of my hair is platinum blonde while the other half is dark brown. My hair has always set me apart. As a girl, I became accustomed to being stared at by strangers. Natural hair coloring like mine isn’t common, and most people assume it is dyed. Some strangers had the audacity to approach my mother in the grocery market and condemn on her for dying her daughter’s hair at such a young age, to which my mother would always graciously reply that it was natural. It was also frequently assumed that my mother had artificially styled my hair, but I inherited natural curls from my father.

In elementary school, I wanted to be like everyone else. I wanted all blonde hair, and I wanted it to be straight. I hated my hair. It was unruly and I couldn’t wear it like everyone else did. My hair’s color made me stick out in a crowd. I remember explaining why I hated it to my mother. “Its not fair,” I whined, “If someone else were to rob a bank, the teller could describe the robber to the cop as a person with brown hair or a person with blonde hair, but if I robbed a bank they’d describe a person with both brown and blonde hair and then I’d get caught for sure.” I didn’t want to rob a bank; I just didn’t want to be different. As an adult I have grown accustomed to the looks and stares I receive because of my hair. Now on a college campus, less people are shocked. They assume I’ve dyed my hair to fit within a certain social identity – punk rock or hippie, for example. Whereas others do dye their hair to reflect their identity, my hair appears dyed and, hence, causes assumptions to be made regarding my identity.

My name is the second thing that has always set me apart. My parents named me Harmony after the harmonic convergence of the planets. They used to tell me, when I was young and naïve, “You were just a twinkle in our eye on that night.” The harmonic convergence is the new age term for the planetary alignment of the sun, moon, and the planets in a line in on August 16-17, 1987. It also happens to be the date of my conception, and the basis of my name. My parents decided during pregnancy that if I were a girl they would name me Harmony and if I were a boy they would name me Cosmo. (Thank goodness I’m a girl.) Symbolism or not, this name still makes me stand out. As a child, my name thankfully did not provide my peers with a wealth of material for nicknames or rhymed teasing, but it still bothered me that kids would turn and point at me any time the music teacher discussed the harmony of music notes. I wanted to be an Elizabeth or a Sarah. Those were good, old-fashioned, common American names.

Reflecting on my childhood desire to be like everyone else made me realize how much I’ve changed. As a kid I wanted to be liked and so I wanted to fit in. As a young adult, I still want to fit in, but at the same time I wanted to be recognized. As an adult I’ve learned to love my hair and my name and appreciate that they set me apart from others. These unique characteristics have become a very important part of my identity because of how they affected me throughout my life.

Identity Related Photography Projects

Subconsciously, an interest in identity began to emerge in my photographic work well before I started my self-portraiture. Recurring themes in my artwork are identity, personality, how we present ourselves to others, how others view us, stereotyping, and masking of identity.

In my first photography class in Spring 2007, I completed a project titled What is Beauty? I wanted to explore the differences of natural and masked beauty. I felt that society pushed women to wear makeup and do their hair in fancy styles in order to be seen as feminine and attractive. I believed that a woman's natural beauty was much more beautiful than any amount of makeup. I compared these two views by photographing models first with common makeup and hairstyles, and then after they had washed their hair and face and were completely natural. There were many technical flaws to my project, but the concept was my first step in work relating to identity.

In fall 2008 I completed a series titled The Collaged Stereotype. I viewed stereotyping as a constant struggle in, not only our society, but in all nations around the world. We judge people on appearance, including gender, race, age, dress, makeup, and more. These differences are what make us unique from each other, but are also a constant basis for discrimination. In history, we see that race and gender have been two primary factors for discrimination. Today, while we are moving toward equality in America with respect to gender and race, as individuals, we still struggle with stereotyping people based on other attributes.

The Collaged Stereotype series sought to explore blending stereotypes using photographs of many different individuals and combining them to create new-collaged individuals who represent a mix of a several attributes. An example is shown in Figure 1. These new individuals eliminate many of the stereotypes that existed within each individual before the collage, but at the same time present new differences on which new stereotypes can be applied.

In spring 2009 I completed a series titled the Brown Paper Bag Façade. I was interested in exploring the masking of identity. At this time in my life, I was confronting the multiple roles I played. I was trying to negotiate my understanding of these roles and how they related to my identity as a whole. In the Brown Paper Bag Façade series I used a fictional story about Paperbag Territory and brown paper bags as a metaphor for the masks we use to hide our identities. [See Appendix A for the Paperbag Territory story.] My project sought to comment on the struggle with identity in today's society. Everyone seems to put up a front or wear a mask on some level. This mask is the sum of the dress and personality that is changed in order to communicate who each person is pretending to be. My project explored the roles that masking of identity plays in our society to encourage viewers to assess the level of masking they perform. [See Figure 2 for a sample piece from this project.]

365 Project

In my photography courses, creative freedom is given to students to propose projects of interest rather than being obliged to follow specific themes or guidelines. Allowing students the freedom to explore ideas and areas of photography that intrigue them is a wonderful policy, but, unfortunately, it also allows students to avoid areas of photography they find daunting. I avoided photographing people. I thought I did not understand how to photograph others, and I feared the interaction and authority I needed in order to direct another person as a model. In my earlier projects, I left out people completely. In my stereotyping series I photographed people, although in a manner that required no more than a few seconds of interaction to create a single headshot. My paper bag series was my first attempt to photograph people in a directorial manner, but the

interaction was simplified by my models wearing paper bag masks. I admired my photographer peers who understood the relationship between themselves as photographers and their models. I especially admired the photographers who went a step further and placed themselves in front of the camera. I followed the work of many of these photographers, some I knew personally and some whom I'd never met, on Flickr.com. Flickr is a photography sharing and networking website ("What Is Flickr?"). Groups exist for photographers interested in similar ideas or projects to collaborate or share their work. One such group, that a number of the photographers I followed were taking part in, was called the *365 Project*. The concept is to create one photograph everyday for an entire year, or 365 days. Some photographers chose themes, such as self-portraits. I was extremely intrigued with the art of photographers working on self-portrait 365 projects. I desired to attempt a 365 self-portrait project myself, but feared stepping from behind the camera. However, I wondered if the project could be a way to challenge myself and begin to understand the relationship between photographer and subject by taking on both roles simultaneously. I toyed with the idea for a few weeks before I attempted my first self-portrait. I had never taken a self-portrait before, with the exception of quick snapshots of myself with friends or family.

With the growing belief that if I could photograph myself, then I could photograph others, in mid-April 2009, I secretly started composing self-portraits. Without committing to the full 365 project, I began composing one self-portrait each day. After a week, I decided to commit to the full project. Since then, I've been taking a self-portrait everyday. I have missed a couple days overall, but I've decided to make these days up by adding additional days at the end of the project. My 365 project has

helped me to grow as a photographer. With self-portraiture the photograph must be planned differently than with a model. Pre-visualization is required to set the scene. I learned to use tripods as stand-in focusing aids. I practiced posing my face and body in the mirror. My parents had given me a cordless remote for Christmas in 2008, and it allowed me to easily trigger the shutter.

As I began posting my self-portraits on Flickr, I would include short captions that explained the picture or my day. Many of my self-portraits were created in response to my day, so I felt that my online audience would better understand the image if they understood the background behind it. Friends and family members alike commented that they knew me and understood me better as a result of my 365 project. Online photographers commented that they felt as though they were getting to know me through my 365 project.

I also began to understand my identity more clearly. I was reflecting daily on my life, and began making connections between my past and my present. I began to recognize a growing interest in identity as a result of differences from my peers both as an adult, and also as a child. My daily reflection and introspection forced me down a path of self-discovery.

One thing I discovered with my 365 project was that my biggest struggle with identity was that I felt like I was different people in different roles. I was struggling to reconcile the differences between all the different roles I played. At church I was a mature married Christian woman as I related to other women. At school I played the role of a student and an individual, and I wasn't expected to act as mature. I felt like I was a different person based on the role I was playing in that social interaction. I struggled

with the belief that I couldn't be the same person from one situation to another. I felt jumbled, disconnected, and fragmented. I considered my identity as the person I was in my head, when no one else was around. This inner self seemed completely different than the roles I played. Recently, however, I realized that my inner identity is actually the sum of all these different characters and roles. I understood the relationship between my inner identity and my varied roles and responsibilities as a Christian, a wife, a woman, a student, and an employee. I didn't struggle with the interaction of these different roles. I understood how they related and were interwoven to create a whole identity. Rather than a belief that I was betraying my true inner identity, I realized that different fragments of my identity were emerging in different situations. My identity is like light – in its entirety it is white light, but in different situations only certain wavelengths and colors are reflected. Red may be reflected in one situation and blue in another, but both are critical to the entire sum of white light.

Summary of Interest

My growing interest in identity is due to the differences between myself and my peers that I experienced as a child and as an adult. As I became aware of this interest, I was able to recognize and actively participate in self-discovery and self-exploration. This self-awareness allowed me to translate the struggles with my identity into art, ultimately helping me to work through these struggles.

Thesis Project

Choosing a Thesis Topic

The combination of honors student and art major isn't common. I knew I would eventually be doing an honors thesis and started thinking of ideas at the beginning of my junior year, after the decision to become a photography major. My ideas were slim and undeveloped. At the beginning of my senior year, I was still struggling to come up with a solid proposal for my thesis. I had many ideas, but none of them seemed well enough developed or focused to become the topic of my thesis. I needed a topic that required research as well as related to a photography project. My breakthrough came as a result of an unfortunate event.

On September 13, 2009, I received a phone call from my mother, who was choking back tears. She was in San Diego, visiting my grandparents. My grandmother had been in and out of the hospital for heart and lung problems. She needed surgery to fix a problem with her heart, but her lungs weren't strong enough for doctors to perform the operation. They had tried different medications and treatments, hoping to get her stable enough to undergo surgery. Results were varied. One day the doctors would say she would be able to withstand surgery; the next they said she was too weak. Nothing was concrete and so we kept waiting, hoping, and praying. They finally determined that she would never be strong enough for surgery. A few weeks later her lung condition worsened and they gave her a prognosis of six months to live and began organizing hospice care. My mom drove down to San Diego to assist my grandfather with the

transition. My aunt arrived a few days later. They said my grandmother was in good spirits and my grandfather was dealing with the situation better than could be expected.

When my mother called me, I had been at my computer typing an email to my church requesting prayer for my grandmother and grandfather. But I never got to send the email. My grandmother had peacefully passed away only an hour earlier. Hospice care had been scheduled to begin the following day. My mom believes my grandmother knew her condition was deteriorating and recognized that she wasn't going to live another six months. My grandmother must have known it would be easier for my grandfather to grieve and make bereavement arrangements with his two daughters at his side. She allowed herself to go that afternoon, with her daughters helping her take a bath, and my grandfather playing her favorite songs on the piano.

My grandfather decided to hold a memorial for her the following weekend. I drove to San Diego with my dad and brother like we had so many times before, but on a much more somber note. During the ten-hour drive, I reflected on my childhood in relation to my grandparents. My time with them was precious because they had lived so far away. But my relationship to them wasn't close. The distance prevented me from really getting to know them. I knew them only within their roles as my grandparents. I knew my grandfather liked to play piano and build functioning radio-controlled airplanes. I knew my grandmother loved to knit and sew and was an amazing cook. I knew they loved my brother and me. At my grandparent's 50th wedding anniversary party, when I was 11 or 12, I remember reading a newspaper clipping of their wedding announcement. They were both young, in their 20's, when they got married. When Jeff and I announced our plans to get married, they cautioned us against it as my parents had. They shared that

their young marriage hadn't been easy and that they almost split twice. Something however, kept them together all those years. If my grandmother had lived a few more weeks, my grandparents would have celebrated their 60th anniversary.

The memorial was small but sweet. Family and close friends filled my grandparents' house. My mother and aunt made my grandmother's delicious tortilla casserole. My cousins and I clipped some of my grandmother's award-winning roses for vases around the house. We all shared memories of my grandmother, laughing and crying.

Afterwards, my mother, aunt, and I finished going through my grandmother's belongings. They had already sorted through her clothing, jewelry, and her studio at the request of my grandfather. As they showed me what they set aside for me – some clothes, lots of costume jewelry, plenty of cookbooks, and an array of art materials – I marveled. My grandmother had always been artistic. She was an avid weaver, knitter, and sewer, but I didn't know she had also taken a number of other art courses. She drew and painted and even had a pottery wheel and kiln. My mother and aunt set aside almost all of her art materials to give to me. I realized I knew much less about my grandmother than I had previously believed, and it made me regret not trying to build a closer relationship with her when she was alive.

On the trip home, my mother and I got to spend some driving time with just the two of us. We talked about my grandmother, my mother, and me. We talked about being a woman, a wife, a mother, a student, and an artist. I shared some of my ideas with her for my thesis project. One of my ideas was an extension of my 365 project, looking at self-portraiture and identity. We talked about ideas and reasons for the topic. I was

interested in exploring my role as a wife with my traditional family values and desire to be a mother, and how I balance those with my desire to be a strong and independent woman. The pressures of society to choose between being a career woman or a mother weighed on me heavily, and I felt as though my desire to have children was considered as not trying to achieve much with my life or degree. I was surprised to learn that both my mother and grandmother had similar struggles.

The reason my grandmother took up so many art hobbies was because she was bored with only being a housewife. She had graduated from college and was very smart. She loved her family and enjoyed being a mother and a wife, but she also desired to do more. To fill her time, she took art classes and became talented in many arts before finding her niche in weaving, knitting, and sewing.

My mother also attended college and is a very intelligent and independent woman. She chose to earn her degree in home economics because it combined all of her passions including science, cooking, design, sewing, child development, and nutrition. She worked as a middle school teacher until my brother and I were born, at which point she took time off to be a mother. When we started school she got her real estate license and went back to work.

Both my mother and my grandmother wanted to be recognized as intellectual and independent women, but didn't want to sacrifice being a mother or wife to do so. It is a challenge in today's society to balance these modern and traditional values. Women like myself that desire to hold the traditional family roles of mother, wife, and homemaker, while seeking to also pursue a career or intellectual role in society are forced to cope with

juggling both. This struggle, although I am not yet a mother, has already begun, as I've learned to balance my role as a wife with my role as a student.

During that drive, ideas began to solidify in my head as to a direction I could take my thesis project. I spent the remainder of the drive reflecting on the development of my identity and the journey of self-discovery I'd been travelling for the past many years.

Research Methodology

My research began by focusing on self-portraiture and identity in general. I sought to learn the history of the self-portrait, and was not surprised to discover that it came to fruition around the same time as the idea of individual identity. I built a base of knowledge about self-portraiture by reviewing literature that covers general information about the history of self-portraiture and portraiture across a number of arts. Literature related to specific artists that use self-portraiture has been helpful in gaining insight into how and why other artists have used self-portraiture. In these sources, I looked for the answer to how they create their self-portraiture. What is their process? How do they set up the scene? How do they pose? Most importantly, I hoped these sources would answer why these artists do self-portraiture. What is their concept? What are they trying to say about themselves or the world? What are they sharing and what are they hiding? As I reviewed these sources I related each artist's how and why to my own work.

The second major part of my research is self-explorative. I reflect on my life and try to answer the question, "Who am I?" There are two main parts to my introspection. Most importantly, I am forcing myself to become more aware of myself. Each day as I go about my day, I am constantly analyzing my thoughts and behaviors. With this growing self-awareness, I am beginning to make connections between different times and

events in my life, and how the interaction of those times and events changes aspects of my current identity. To track this introspection I am journaling regularly, in both a paper journal and through verbal stream-of-consciousness recordings.

The second part of my introspection is looking back into my history. I am reading through journals from my childhood through my most recent journal, and also reflecting on childhood memories. I began journaling when I was 10 years old, so a majority of my life was recorded. I chose to use journals to reflect on my past rather than by speaking to my parents or other family members because self-discovery is a very personal act. By relying only on my journals and memories for my past, I am free of outside influences on my reflections. My point of view on past events, although it may not have been accurate, influenced how that event affected me. Reflecting on that event using only my memory and journals allows me to accurately identify how that event may or may not have shaped my identity.

Another reason I chose to use previous journals as a source for my history is due to my experience with journals in the past. As I noted, I have been journaling since I was young. It is difficult to remember all the key points in your life, let alone the less critical but still important moments. From time to time I read through portions of one or more journals and each time, I am inspired by how far I've come since the journal entries. It is important to look back on events and challenges I have come up against. Reviewing former journal entries allows me to track the initial problem through the solution and growth. Reading through my old journals allows me to see the grand picture, to reflect on almost my entire life, rather than bits and pieces. Continuing to journal regularly during this process of self-discovery allows me to not only summarize my identity at this

point in time, but will also give me a point to look back and reflect on in the future. Self-awareness and self-discovery is a continual process because self is always changing.

These journals may serve to complete my thesis, but their relevance to the process will continue for the rest of my life. These journals can also give insight in the future to my family – be it Jeff, my children, or grandchildren – as to how I viewed a situation, relationship, or my identity at different points in my life.

Research in San Diego

Part of my thesis research involved visiting San Diego to reflect on the relationship of San Diego to my identity. My original intent was to visit the schools and hangouts of my parents in order to reflect on how their identity development in San Diego varied from my identity development in Carson City. However, as I began thinking about San Diego, I realized I had more connections the California city than I had previously believed. My family took more vacations to San Diego than all other vacations combined. Every Christmas we traveled to San Diego for a gathering of my mother's entire family. We often visited for Thanksgiving, and almost always during spring break or over summer. Every child looks forward to vacations, and I was no exception. I started planning weeks in advance what I was going to wear, what I would bring to play with in the car, and which side of the car I wanted to sit on. Naturally, San Diego became a place that represented pleasure and escape from daily life.

In March 2010, my husband and I traveled to San Diego so I could complete my research regarding the city's influence on my identity. For three days we visited places I had looked forward to visiting as a child. It had been a few years since I visited and explored San Diego. It was quite different this time. As a child, my family always

stayed with my grandparents during our visit. However, my grandfather was taking his own vacation in March, so Jeff and I stayed in a Mission Beach hotel. One blaring difference was the traffic. I don't remember the traffic being nearly as hectic or stressful as a child, but as I child, I didn't pay attention to the traffic. Many differences that I noticed were due to the change of relating to San Diego as an adult rather than as a child. For example, as a child, I didn't worry about things being stolen out of the car, off the beach, or pick-pocketed out of my purse. As a child, my focus was narrow; I was ignorant to the criminal side of cities.

Childhood locations that Jeff and I chose to visit were Belmont Park, Mission Beach, and the San Diego Zoo. These were locations I always looked forward to visiting as a child. Belmont Park is a small outdoor amusement park. It is home to a rickety roller coaster, an old-fashioned carousel, some small rides that twist and turn, and lots of trinkets and food vendors. As a child, I always rode the rollercoaster. I tried to find someone to ride with me, usually my father because my mother hated scary rides, but I went alone if no one else would go. My brother and I would ride the carousel and the bumper cars and our whole family would share some cotton candy or ice cream. Belmont Park sits right on the boardwalk of Mission Beach so after our visits we always walked down the boardwalk to find the best beach spot and spent the rest of the afternoon soaking in the sun, building sand castles, and gathering seashells out of the surf.

Belmont Park still has the ability to turn me into a giddy little girl. Jeff and I relaxed on Mission Beach until the clouds rolled in. We then enjoyed some frozen yogurt and wandered through the rides and the vendors of Belmont Park. The roller coaster is just as rickety as I remember it 10 years ago. A new generation of children were

dragging their parents from one ride to the next and begging for caramel apples.

Reflecting on the childhood days I spent at Mission Beach in San Diego, I realized my love for the beach, the sun, and warm weather owes its roots to San Diego vacations. If we had grown up visiting my dad's family in Colorado, my love for skiing and climbing would probably outweigh my love for warm weather, swimming, and the beach. This facet of my identity is clearly shaped by the experiences I had as a child visiting San Diego.

The San Diego Zoo was the last childhood location Jeff and I visited. There are animals from all over the world, ranging from polar bears to elephants, and lions to flamingos. As a child, the zoo was fun – lots of animals to see and habitats to explore – but it had a level of surrealism. As an adult, the zoo was completely different. There were still a lot of animals and habitats and it was incredible to see them up close, but there was a different level understanding. As a child, it was “ooh” and “ahh.” As an adult, there was an understanding that these are real living animals, intricate and diverse in design and part of this world, however far removed from our daily lives. However unlike the prior two locations, my visit to this location was influenced by my age. Because of its unique nature, its influence on my identity seems limited.

While Jeff and I were relaxing on the beach, I thought about how great it would be to live in San Diego. My relationship and understanding of the city and beach have changed, but my love for its atmosphere has not. Its essence is freedom – freedom from the daily drone of working, eating, and sleeping. It is that feeling rather than the actual city that currently calls to me. The end of my undergraduate career and the beginning of a new chapter of adult life with my husband looms near. One of my fears is falling into a

life that consists of routine: working, paying bills, eating, and sleeping. In a routine, you risk losing your identity. As my identity has evolved in the past, I want my identity to continue to develop, change, and adjust to new environments and influences.

Exhibit Methodology

Although my research on self-portraiture and the associated introspection were fruitful, I struggled to determine what I wanted to show my audience through my self-portraiture. Identity is so complex that deciding on one characteristic or facet of my identity to present as my thesis exhibit seemed impossible.

In fall 2009, at the beginning of my thesis work, I determined to use my photography project for that semester as precursory work for my thesis project. I was negotiating the relation of my inner self to each of my roles. The focus of the class was learning to use a 4x5 film camera. For this project, I placed the 4x5 camera with a 20-foot cable release in my home-office. I also installed a white backdrop and studio lights. At the moment I felt an emotion or thought that I would normally hide from acquaintances, strangers, or friends, I would step into my setup and create a self-portrait. My hope was to capture the normally hidden piece of my inner self. The studio setup facilitated the transition from identifying a moment to capturing that moment. I merely had to step into my office, flip on the power strip that the studio lights were plugged into, remove the film holder's slide, and trigger the shutter by stepping on the bulb cable release. The time from start to finish was less than ten seconds. I had already set the lights to appropriate levels and set the aperture and shutter on the camera. I had manually focused the camera using a tripod as my stand-in, and marked the plane of focus on the ground with tape. Although I feel this project was a start to capturing another side of

myself, I was not completely successful. My awareness of the camera and knowledge that the image would eventually be shared with an audience caused me to slightly hide or mask that emotion or moment. I also discovered that the emotions or moments I recognized were usually negative. I have no problem sharing my joy or happiness with others. However, I am inclined to hide my anger, fear, jealousy, and sadness. As a result those emotions began to emerge in this series. I chose not to continue that series for my thesis exhibit. First, I do not feel that negative inner moments accurately represent my identity as a whole. Second, emotion alone does not tell enough about me to accurately represent my identity.

I continued brainstorming ideas for possible projects for my thesis exhibit. As I brainstormed I began developing a list of criteria for the project. First, the project had to show some aspect of my identity through self-portraiture. It needed to be conceptually based, aesthetically pleasing, and well composed. It needed to fit naturally with my thesis. I wanted it to be a project that my honors advisor and my photography thesis advisor would approve. I also wanted my audience to be excited about my work. I wanted to decide on a project that would be cohesive as a series. As I brainstormed project ideas, I would compare them to my criteria. None of my ideas fit all the criteria. After weeks of frustration, I realized I had to let go of my criteria list. This project is for me, not for my advisors or my audience, and I realized I needed to approach my self-portraiture exhibit in the same manner, for myself.

As I continued brainstorming, I kept returning to my 365 project. Over the past year, my 365 project has helped me to understand myself as a whole. I realized that if I were to do a series outside of school or my thesis, to represent my identity, I would use

my 365 project. It represents my journey over the last year, from April 2009 through present, ending in April or May 2010. It is both a visual journal of my day-to-day reflection, and also a cohesive summary of my roles, responsibilities, and emotions.

Exhibit Production Process

I chose twelve images for my exhibit from my 365 project. These images are key in my process of self-discovery and either helped me in my introspection or help explain a portion of my identity. I used Adobe Photoshop Creative Suite 4 to make adjustments to the images – including brightness, contrast, levels, color balance, and sharpening – to prepare the images to print. I printed each self-portrait on Epson Enhanced Matte paper on an Epson 4800 printer. Each image required multiple test prints and adjustments before printing a full-sized image. Before framing, I laid out all twelve images to ensure they were properly balanced against each other. Eleven images are 20 inches tall by 13 3/8 inches wide. The twelfth image is 20 inches tall by 10 inches wide.

My Honors Undergraduate Research Award covered the cost to frame my work. I purchased twelve white aluminum frames with Plexiglas, uncut mat board, and foam core. I cut windows in my mats using a beveled mat cutter. I assembled each self-portrait into its own frame.

The gallery in which my exhibit is being displayed has track lighting; however, one wall's track no longer works, and there are only five light canisters on the working track. Since my exhibit is being displayed on both walls of the gallery, I purchased seven clamp lights to light my entire exhibit, which were clamped onto the dead track, and powered by extension cords.

I purchased vinyl lettering for my title from a local sign shop. I printed my artist statement and image titles on the Epson Enhance Matte paper, mounted it onto foam core, and attached it to the wall. I also designed exhibit postcards and ordered them through an online website.

The exhibit was held from April 12 through April 23, 2010 in the McNamara Gallery at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Who Am I, The Exhibit

The exhibit, as a whole, is choppy and complex. However, identity itself is complex, so the presentation fits. The images I chose are key photographs in my process of self-discovery. These images either represent a self-portrait that aided in my self-exploration or express a key facet of my identity. They are presented in the exhibit, as a collective narrative. The first image, *Who Am I?* (Figure 3), is important not only because it is the first self-portrait of my 365 project, but also because of what it has come to represent - a commitment and an inquiry into the search for self-identity. *Femininity* (Figure 4) is part of the narrative of my identity as a woman. In this self-portrait, I explore sensuality, focusing on my delicate and graceful touch as a woman, while avoiding the objectifying gaze. *Breathe* (figure 5) is a triptych to communicate the passage of time and the process of dealing with challenging emotions. In the center image, my gaze communicates vulnerability and the paring away of a mask. *Intimacy* (Figure 6) represents the closeness between my husband and me. Over the last four years our relationship has grown into a deeper intimacy. Intimacy means I am confident in my husband, that I trust his intentions and interactions with me. *Fragmented* (Figure 7) was created as a direct response to feeling overwhelmed, broken, and fragmented. This image

was composed with approximately 30 vertical images over a 30 minute period, while I lay immobilized due to the feeling of being torn in many directions. One strip from each image was then collaged to create a final self-portrait. *Inner Confidence* (Figure 8) embodies the growing self-assurance I have about my identity as a result of my process of introspection. *Expanse* (Figure 9) comments on my relationship to Christ, in which I recognize my temporal and momentary life compared to the expansive wonder of the world that God has created. *Thinking of Children* (Figure 10) communicates through my gaze and expression, my mixed feelings on someday having children. I look forward with joy but also anticipation and nervousness at some day being a mother. *Reaction* (Figure 11) is the only self-portrait in which I am not the main subject of the image, but rather a reflection in my husband's sunglasses. This portrait embodies love and silliness. Often in our marriage Jeff and I are inclined to react in frustration or anger; however, this image is a reminder that I must reflect on his point of view before reacting because things may not be as they appear. This image also communicates our closeness through his silly expression. *Contemplate* (Figure 12) deals with the need to quietly reflect on my past in order to understand my present. Hesitation and calmness are embodied by the pose of my hand and my gaze. *Not Today* (Figure 13) represents my struggle in not only negotiating my roles and responsibilities, but also my difficulty in looking back through my past. *Laugh* (Figure 14) concludes my exhibit by representing my realization that I need to be honest and humble when I face challenging situations and humiliating moments. Many of these self-portraits deal with negotiating my masks and moving beyond them to reveal honest glimpses into my identity.

These self-portraits represent my personal process of exploration and discovery. The titles are meant as hints for the viewer to understand each image's meaning; however, the images are not individually explained. Self-exploration is a very personal process and these images represent this process and its result. I chose not to explain each image within the exhibit so the viewer could question for him or herself, who I am. A person is unable to fully understand an artist's identity by viewing an exhibit of images accompanied by text. Although a general understanding of the struggles, experiences, emotions, and relationships of that artist may be gleaned, a full understanding of the artist's identity is not available until an intimate relationship with the artist is formed. In order to make my identity more accessible to my audience, I chose to produce small versions of my prints with my website and contact information on the reverse. If viewers are interested in gaining a better understanding of my identity, I invite them to get to know me on a more personal level by following my work on Flickr <www.flickr.com/harmonyhilderbrand>, my experiences on my blog <www.harmonyhilderbrand.blogspot.com>, or even contacting me personally. In this manner, I am inviting my audience to build a relationship with me in order to begin to personally understand my identity.

Conclusion

My process of self-examination and self-exploration has allowed me to fully understand the breadth of my identity. Assessing other women and photographer's self-portraiture fostered recognition of the traditional roles that self-portraiture has served. I learned the conceptual groundwork that women have laid, using self-portraiture

to advance their roles as artists and independent women. I formulated how my work would fit into this narrative, by advancing the conversation of my generation. I also obtained technical guidance from the writings of Cindy Sherman, such as how to plan ahead and focus my camera using a stand-in.

Through my visual and written journals, I have been able to record the process of examining myself and asking the question “Who am I?” By reviewing journals from earlier times in my life, I reflected on my past. The exploration of my past allowed me to recognize how different influences intertwined themselves throughout my history to shape various facets of my identity.

My early childhood established my identity within my family – revering my father and looking up to my mother. My appearance and name set me apart from my peers and caused me to have a subconscious interest in identity at a young age. Our move from Lake Tahoe to Gardnerville became the first of many challenges I would encounter. This first challenge caused me to reassess expectations I had of others and social norms others expected me to follow. My first outright questioning of my identity came in middle school during my depression. This depression was a precursor to my exploration of religion and my challenging of the beliefs that society and my parents had instilled. My new faith forced me to question what I had been taught, and I took my first step in defining my own identity. As the differences from my peers increased, I matured. When Jeff and I decided to become engaged, I realized my childhood was coming to an end. I had transitioned from a little girl whose identity laid with her family to an independent, mature, young Christian woman, ready to take on adult responsibilities.

My adult life began the summer after I graduated high school, when Jeff and I said our ‘I do’s. The abundant new roles and responsibilities I had to negotiate created a struggle inside of me to find balance. As college began, I found myself divided. My growing interest in identity owed its fuel to the additional differences that now set me apart from my peers. In my first few semesters, I remained an undeclared major due to my inability to find a degree path that fit my interests and the pressures of my parents to pursue a “scholarly-intellectual” field. When I chose to become an art major, I struggled to reconcile my passion for photography with my feelings that art was an impractical degree. However, my passion was cultivated into technical and conceptual skill and my views about art began to change. As my art began to flourish – two exhibits, multiple publications, and newfound recognition – I began to appreciate the value of an art degree and actively took hold of my education.

As my interest in identity developed, I began to recognize and actively participate in self-exploration. As a result, my struggles with identity were translated into art, which, ultimately, has helped me work through these challenges. The process of evaluating my childhood, adult life, interest in identity, and my artwork caused me to recognize a complex history of interweaving influences that shape who I am. I began to reconcile my roles and inner identity as my self-discovery continued.

Recording my extensive narrative in visual, spoken, and written form allows me to share my self-discovery in an intimate way that most people will never do. Through this process I have become not only aware of my full identity, but also tremendously at ease with my identity. The self-portraiture that I once feared creating and sharing with others, I now gladly display as an artifact of my self-discovery process.

My identity is continually changing and growing based on my environment and relationships. My identity is a collection – consisting of pieces from my family heritage, struggles with my peers, frustrations and emotions with negotiating roles and responsibilities, my continually growing relationship to my husband, and a foundation of faith in God. A project that began as a photographic challenge to advance my understanding of the relationship between photographer and model grew into a deep examination of my soul.

So, who am I? I am a child of God, a wife, a woman, a daughter, a sister, a friend, an artist, a photographer, a student, a leader, a humble servant. I am sensitive, compassionate, emotional, independent, strong-willed, comfortable, committed. I desire to give everything I have, push my limits, encourage others, and grow as an individual. But I am also weak, unsure, nervous, and cowardly. I wear many hats; I possess many emotions; I have many dreams; and there is much for me to still learn. By God's gracious guidance and strength, I am able to persevere through trials and grow in every facet of my life.

My undergraduate career is coming to a close. Appropriately, it ends with this honors thesis. My thesis has provided me an opportunity to look back at my life and recognize influences and experiences that have molded my character. It has been challenging, but no more challenging than living life. My goal of understanding my identity has been successfully accomplished. I've learned more about myself in the last year than I have in my entire life. As I graduate, I will enter a new period of my life. I trust that it will bring many new challenges, experiences, and influences that I will

negotiate. However, I expect it will be quite different from my past. I have a new understanding that will allow me to negotiate my evolving identity in new ways.

We live in a connected world. The experience of predecessors and peers is critical to an individual's journey. My hope is that this narrative will inspire others to delve into the journey of self-exploration and to explore self-portraiture.

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Appendix A – The Brown Paper Bag Façade

Many years ago in another world, parallel to ours, lived two people, Janel and Johnathon Doeghuet. They resided in a town called Pauper-Bagueville. In this town, everyone was open and honest. People were unique and different and accepted each other as they were. One day a man visited from out of town. His name was Mr. Pressure. He scoffed and mocked Janel and Johnathon, for their clothes and the way they acted. At first Mr. Pressure's remarks didn't bother Janel and Johnathon. However, a few days later Mr. Pressure returned with a few of his friends, Mr. Superior and Ms. Influence. The three of them went to work on, not only the Doeghuets but also all their friends, family, and townsmen.

Out of fear of being ridiculed Janel and Johnathon Doeghuet changed their names to Jane and John Doe. However, this only worked for a little while. Mr. Pressure and Ms. Influence had done quite a number on the town and it was now the town that was singling out Jane and John for being different. The Does, out of fear of being made the laughing stock of the town, resorted to wearing brown paper bags over their heads. Surprisingly, this seemed to do the trick. No one recognized the Does, but rather they seemed to blend right in with the rest of the town.

It wasn't but a few months later that everyone in the town was wearing paper bags. Two years later, brown paper bags had become as common as underwear. A person never left their house without their brown paper bag, and often, they didn't even remove it when they were at home. The only time they'd take off the paper bag was when they needed to change it. You see, the brown paper bag had become their identity.

They'd often choose one bag for one group of friends or occasion, and another bag for another group or occasion.

Eventually, the citizens of Paperbag Territory (Mr. Superior had created a monarchy of the town and renamed it.) forgot who they used to be. They'd so succumbed to the identity of their paper bags that their inner honest open self had faded away. Jane and John Doe had completely forgotten their old names, lives, and the events that had happened. Because of their dedication to their brown paper bags and Paperbag Territory, the Does were put in charge of the Department of Outsiders and Outcasts. Their job was to keep watch for people who dared to be open, honest, and unique.

So I warn you, look out and stay away from Paperbag Territory. For if you are caught, you'll be locked up, and it won't take long before you'll succumb as well to the brown paper bag.

Appendix B – Figures

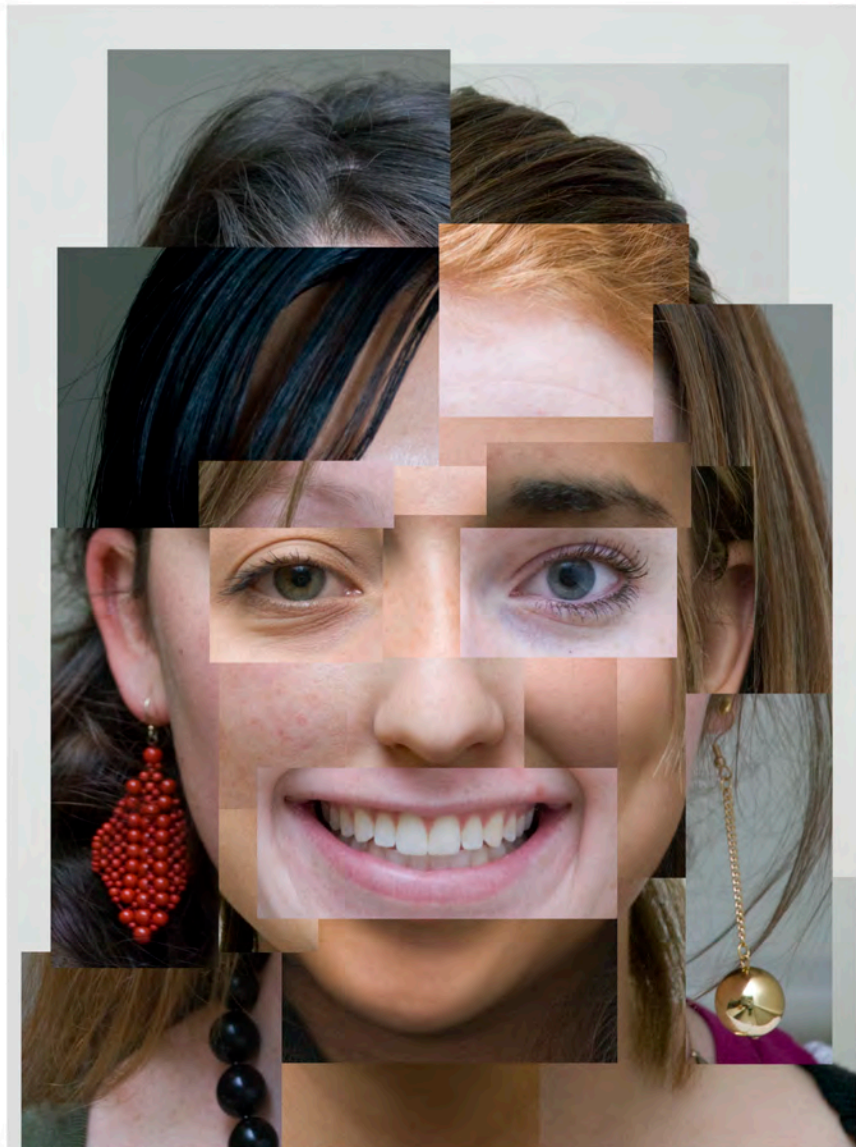


Figure 1 - Julia



Figure 2 - Paperbag Newscast



Figure 3 - Who Am I?



Figure 4 - Femininity



Figure 5 - Breathe



Figure 6 - Intimacy



Figure 7 - Fragmented



Figure 8 - Inner Confidence



Figure 9 - Expanse



Figure 10 - Thinking of Children



Figure 11 - Reaction



Figure 12 - Contemplate



Figure 13 - Not Today



Figure 14 - Laugh