

J. Doe: Placeholders for the Unidentified

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A thesis

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Abstract

J. Doe: Placeholders of the Unidentified

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3D4M

Artist Statement:

“And since you know you cannot see yourself
So well as by reflection, I, your glass,
Will modestly discover to yourself
That of yourself which you yet know not of.”¹
-Shakespeare

How am I reflected in the objects I create?

How do I exam myself through them?

Will I recognize the reflection?

¹ Shakespeare, William, and Alan Durband. *Julius Caesar*. Woodbury, NY: Barron's, 1985. Print.

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Introduction

My practice is focused on questioning identity. I create objects as a means to find our primitive side, our true nature, which reflects notions of finding ownership within ourselves. Identity is constantly in flux; it shifts and depends, unsteadily, on influences within each person's cultural climate. Through encounters with people in our lives, we are externally shaped into who we appear to be. I aim to break the surface and expose what is suppressed, giving our primitive instinct a voice. I am striving to speak a visual language that on a subconscious level taps into collective instinct, disgust, and fear of the unknown. Art can help us seek an understanding of self by exploring our tiny tragedies.

This thesis explores three themes: horror genre, duality, and materials.

Horror

Horror is experienced when the world seems fundamentally shocking or permanently altered. It is directly associated with being shocked or scared. The horror genre has been at the core of my inspiration. Horror films give a controlled environment to contain and understand our fears. Our Halloween customs also achieve this by letting children embrace their fears, safely becoming what scares them. Using horror film and Halloween costume aesthetics, I can make objects that establish control over my own fears. Horror genre costumes are made of latex, fur, hair, found objects and techniques of practical and make-up effects.

Make-up and practical effects in movies create monsters that in the camera frame, seem real. While behind the scenes, one can see how the various parts are connected to create a whole. For example in the movie *American Werewolf in London* the character David Kessler (David Naughton) transforms into a werewolf. The transformation scene expresses as a painful struggle

between two natures. There is an aggressive take over, distorting the body and identity of Kessler. The image in **(Fig.1)** on the left, we see the transformation to the right, we see behind the scenes. The monster is in many parts, with technicians making it come to life. This is a very symbolic to me, many components making up a whole.

Two Natures

The monsters in the horror films I reference, specifically, experience a physical transformation. We question what becomes of the character and where its place is in the world. We become more easily sympathetic and disgusted by the characters.

“In each of us, two natures are at war – the good and the evil. All our lives the fight goes on between them, and one of them must conquer. But in our own hands lies the power to choose – what we want most to be, we are.”²

– Robert Louis Stevenson

The “monsters” that inspire me embody these two natures. When ‘something’ from within takes over, the character struggles to hold on to its self identity, the other nature physically changes the body, and they each become unrecognizable to others and more importantly to themselves. This scenario questions the notions of what “makes up” identity and how it is in constant flux.

² *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Dir. John S. Robertson. By Robert Louis Stevenson. Perf. John Barrymore. Blackhawk Films, 1920. DVD.

DUALITY

Whole/Hole:

“According to Greek mythology, humans were originally created with four arms, four legs and a head with two faces. Fearing their power, Zeus split them into two separate parts, condemning them to spend their lives in search of their other halves.”³

— Plato, *The Symposium*

I find this quote from Plato intriguing when relating it to my experience as an identical twin. What happens to the other half when one becomes withdrawn? This question is at the core of my work and what currently drives me as an artist.

My thesis exhibition at the Henry consists of three fragmented figurative pieces (**Fig. 2**). Fragmentation of the body helps me communicate my thoughts on what is absent in the pieces. These three figures have no arms and stand upon one left leg. Protruding from their left leg is a post that is used in the absence of their right leg, hopefully generating thoughts that address their stability. Each of these three pieces is adorned/ layered in different colors and assorted objects. One is blue, one yellow, and another white. The posts that protrude from their legs become the complementary color of the figure’s body. This reiterates the idea of what is missing is more than a literal body part, reflecting thoughts of what then helps to create the whole.

Surrogates:

I have defined the figurative objects I create as “surrogates”. These surrogates are a substitution of myself, a reflection that I may project onto. Not a reflection of exact physical characteristics,

³ Plato. *The Symposium*. Trans. Christopher Gill. N.p.: Penguin Classics, 2003. Print.

but a reflection of my interior. I question how I perceive myself versus how I am perceived by others. As mentioned in my artist statement, I am examining myself through the making of these surrogates, searching for how I may or may not be reflected in them; furthermore seeking a manifestation I may recognize.

Reflection:

Mirrors are devices used to seek out our physical reflections. How we perceive our own reflection in a mirror can vary on how we are feeling at that moment. What we search for will never physically appear in a mirror, but yet it is a vehicle to examine one's self. In my work "Surface Tension" (**Fig. 3**), three heads are "collaged" together with different materials ranging from duct tape to chopped up pieces of a Halloween mask. These heads, all on separate stands face the wall. The space between the face and the wall vary for each piece. On the wall, directly across from these heads, is a mirror almost the exact size of the head. When the viewer is interacting with these pieces, they must look in the mirror to see most of the objects' face. While looking in the mirror, the viewer catches their own reflection or, even in some cases, someone else's reflection that may be looking at the piece as well. Ultimately, the viewer struggles to find their reflection, sensing that the surrogate reflected could be their own.

MATERIALS

Technical approach:

I choose materials based on their ability to elicit a psychological response in the viewer. These materials include clay, rubber, latex and found objects. Through clay, I create "stand-ins" that project the search for my own true reflection. These clay surrogates become immersed in

lush, alluring color and conglomerations of broken, abandoned objects. I am attempting to find the source of these surrogates, seeking the identical.

The Body:

Fatty, corpulent, billowing folds not only describe the body but also clay. Clay can mimic the body. It is malleable and directly affected by touch, allowing me to manipulate and alter- to capture the look of flesh. This direct manipulation can show us the raw animal nature of existence. By using representations of the body, I create an entry point for the viewer through the commonality of our own human bodies. Our physical bodies give us a similar vehicle for the identification, connection, and individuality we seek in our perceptions of others. This becomes a form of measurement of ourselves.

Latex and rubber have a skin like quality which elicits a visceral response. The clay acts as a body and the latex acts as a skin. Merging these materials helps me to create a surrogate, on which I can project some sort of identity within the moment.

Playful Dismemberment:

The alluring colors and dismembered found objects I use provide a whimsical weirdness to the pieces. Playful materials assist in establishing “humor” which is a device to help with the uneasy visual content. My inspiration for this juxtaposition of silliness and sophistication is in the writings of Shel Silverstein’s children poems. A description found in the New York Times helps explain what I mean.

“Many of the poems reflect a ghoulish taste that children tolerate better than many adults. In the poem "Safe," also in the collection "Falling Up," a child preparing to cross a street carefully

looks to one side and then the other before confidently proceeding oblivious to a steel safe hurtling down from the heavens.”⁴

-William H. Honan NY times

My objects’ surfaces may seem playful but their meaning is grim. Humor becomes a device that allows the viewer to linger and contemplate an uncomfortable object. Humor is a device used pervasively in many horror genre movies as well.

Shadow:

Light can help set the mood for an object; it can give and take away certain information. It gives me the ability to distort how the piece is perceived. Theatrical lighting emphasizes what may or may not be real, giving a sense of uncertainty. Also, by giving the piece a shadow, its footprint in the room becomes greater, surrounding the viewer and demanding space and attention.

In “Severed Sisters” (**Fig.4**), I use the physicality of shadow to create a painted silhouette of my own bust. From there I created a clay head, which then was covered in fur and yarn, then dripped with rubber. This object was placed in front of the silhouette. Questioning if this could be the shadow of this object and suggesting a reflection of state of mind, instead of an exact object with its matching shadow.

⁴ Honan, William H. "Shel Silverstein, Zany Writer and Cartoonist, Dies at 67." *New York Times* 11 May 1999: n. pag. *NYTimes.com*. Web. 12 June 2015.

Conclusion

In conclusion by using horror genre as inspiration I can communicate my obsession with duality through the materials I select to find my answers to identity, the perception placed upon us by others and ourselves.

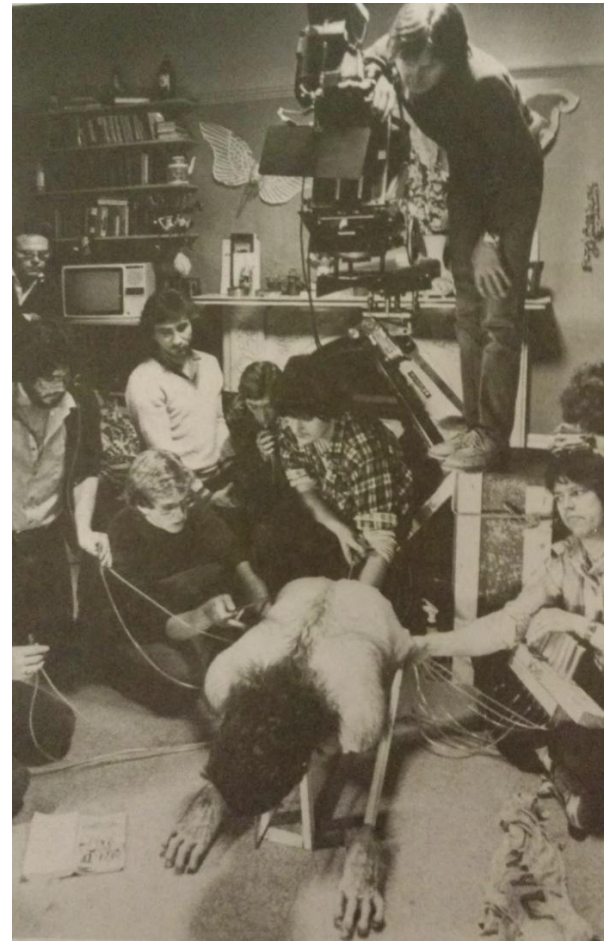
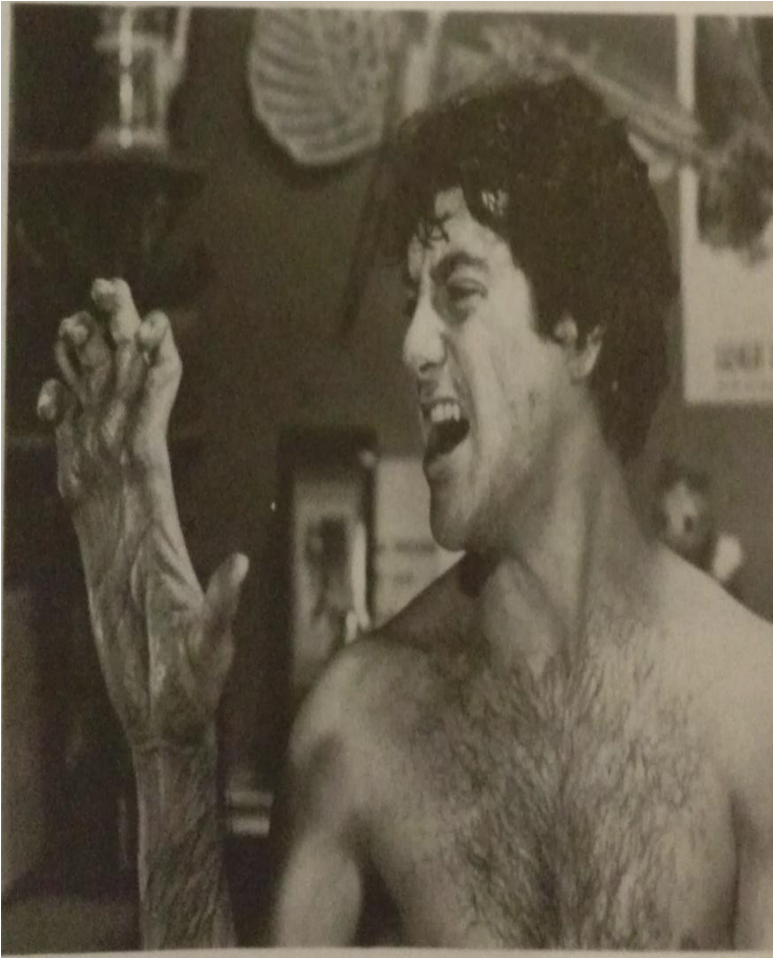


Figure. 1
Photographs scanned from Vincent J-R Kehoe book *Special Make- Up Effects*



Figure 2

Photo by : Mark Woods

(from right to left)

Surrogate 1 : clay, string/yarn, fake hair, feathers, found objects, paint, concrete, hydrocal, and flashlights, 11x 20 x 78” (2015)

Surrogate 2 : clay, string/yarn, fake hair, found objects, paint, concrete, hydrocal, and flashlights, 14x14x75” (2015)

Surrogate 4 : clay, string/yarn, fake hair, fake fur, found objects, paint, concrete, hydrocal, and flashlights ,15x12x79” (2015)

Detail of **Figure 2**

Surrogate 2 : clay, string/yam, fake hair,
found objects, paint, concrete, hydrocal, and
flashlights, 14x14x75" (2015)





Figure. 3

Surface Tension : mirrors, found objects, Styrofoam heads, latex, rubber, fake fur, fake hair, fur, yarn/string, pins, plaster, duct tape. (2015)

Figure 4

Severed Sisters: Clay, fake fur, yarn, rubber, wood, paint . 16x7x23" (2015)



Detail of **figure 4**, Severed Sisters



Works Cited

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Dir. John S. Robertson. By Robert Louis Stevenson. Perf. John Barrymore. Blackhawk Films, 1920. DVD.

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