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## **A Contemporary Exploration of Fairy Tales and Social Identity Through Visual Language**

### **I. Abstract**

This body of work seeks to use a visual format to explore construction of identity through the lens of fairy tales. Study of social constructionist theory as well as theories of identity construction underpins an interest in looking at how narratives like fairy tales play a part in the shaping of identity. The written word, as one artifact of these narratives, plays prominently in the research as well as final execution of each piece. Additionally, the spoken word is utilized in the research of many pieces, as direct dialogue and interviews with the subjects of the works inform the conceptual direction of each one. Each piece is an analysis of a specific influence of a fairytale, whether traditional or modern day, over how someone experiences and constructs their world. Using a variety of media (primarily but not entirely 2D), this series is a collection of voices and identities that have been shaped by the fairytales of western culture. It asks the viewer to question which narratives they play into and which they break free from, and how those decisions shape their world. This summer I plan to complete at least two more pieces in this series in order to have a connective bridge from the already existing pieces to my BFA exhibition, as well as collect interview material, resource photography and do concept work for at least three more to be completed in the fall semester. Additionally, two existing pieces will be prepped for display so as to be viable parts of the larger series.

### **II. Description of Research**

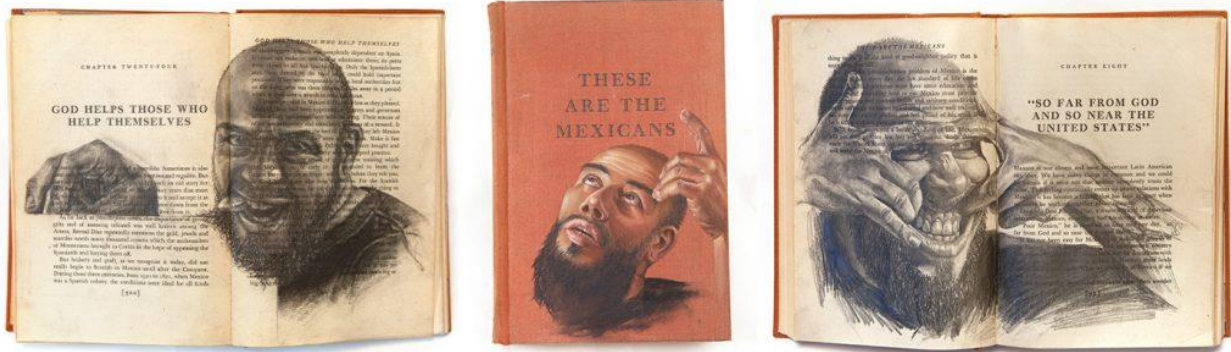
One of the core principles of sociological theory is the concept of social construction of reality. According to social constructionism, “reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always *embodied*, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality” (Berger & Luckmann 1976, p.116). With individuals acting in such a crucial capacity in creating a social definition of reality, the conception of self becomes integral to how reality is constructed and understood. The project of identity construction is multifaceted and extremely complex, and put in concise terms can be seen as the dialectic between internal sense of self and how this sense of self is received by the external environment. A continually evolving understanding, this sense of identity cannot exist solely in a vacuum of self contemplation, but shifts in response to and is shaped by social interaction, new stimuli and physical space (to name but a fraction of influencing factors). As highlighted in Callero’s discussion of the theoretical sociological understanding of self, “self and identity are constructed within, not outside discourse.” (Callero, 2003 p.118) This understanding carries with it the logical extrapolation that the self is never static and never truly individually chosen. Further; this concept extends to not only interpersonal human relationships, but also to interactions with objects and cultural artifacts, “the modern untying of identities has been accompanied by an expansion of object-centered environments which situate and stabilize selves, define individual identity just as much as communities and families used to do” (Cetina as quoted in Callero, 2003 p.126). As such, a great deal more identity-creating power lies in external cultural forces than many people realize.

Narratives, especially those embedded deeply in our society, provide an external cultural structure for understanding identity. The more they are repeated and retold, the more ingrained they become in the fabric of socially defined reality. One set of stories that perfectly embodies this idea is the set of narratives we refer to as classic fairy tales. Many fairy tales that are a part of contemporary American culture have roots reaching hundreds of years back through multiple variations. The commonality of fairy tales in American culture, and especially their association with childhood, contribute to the high degree to which they have been culturally internalized. As described by Ahn, “by helping to mold personality and establish a basis of identification, these stories encourage children to internalize individual values”(Ahn, 2011 p.416). Not only do many people recall fairy tales with fondness from their own childhood, but the codes of morality, worth, and entitlement continue to inform how people as adults interact with and understand the world. “Narrative identity discloses itself in the dialectic of selfhood and sameness. What is more, in the plural world, stories are key to understanding who we are.” (Ahn, 2011 p.416). There is value, then, in not taking these narratives on face value as ‘just’ children’s stories, but in looking at them with more of a critical lens to understand the ways in which their influence does not stop on the pages that contain them.

The aim of this series of work is to take a critical look at fairytales and their connection to contemporary western culture. With a specific emphasis on how fairy tales form identity and thereby influence the creation of reality, this series tries to make the bridge between roles as they are defined in the fairy-tale context and roles as they exist in the everyday context. The series contains both fictionally constructed figures that do not represent any photograph or individual, and figures of people who identify with opposing traditional roles or identities that exist within traditional fairy tales or in contemporary fairy tales we construct. With representational pieces, the concept of the work is the subject of a discussion that engages the person who models for the piece so that they have voice in how they are portrayed. For all pieces, research into cultural artifacts such as literature, media, and scholarly

writings then provide a deeper conceptual foundation. The initial discussion, or the decision to construct a completely nonexistent person, is crucial in staying in integrity with the guiding inquiry, as passive objectification is a prominent fairy tale theme explored, and the act of an artist arranging somebody’s body on a page to say what the artist wants to say can walk dangerously close to that passive objectification of the figure. “Not only do advertisements, books, television, film and art encourage expected behavior, they often contain underlying themes that reflect and enforce how we are structured as a society”(Denys, 2008 p.86) and as such, every step in the artistic process that can be taken to try to provide agency to individuals seeking to avoid reinforcing damaging structures is not only worthwhile, but necessary.





The research being proposed is a bridge from the early ruminations on this concept, and my BFA series that will expand it into a fuller body of work for solo exhibition. This will be approached in three primary ways; final preparation of two existing pieces that will be part of the collection, collection of reference materials for three new pieces, and the execution of two additional pieces for bridging the completed works and future works. The preparation of existing works will take the form of acquiring and assembling protective casings and props for a piece created on a set of antique books, as well as assembling earth magnets for the hanging of the paper component to that piece. It will also involve assembling earth magnets and already existing plexiglass for a separate, larger work. Collection of new reference materials follows a sequence of making initial contacts with community members, conducting interviews and discussions with those who express interest, and then based on those discussions, project mapping and eventually arranging a photoshoot with each to catalogue reference material for future works. The final component is execution of additional pieces based on interviews that already have prepared reference material. One of these works involves the arrangement of multiple layers of sheer fabric with fractured images of a figure painted across them to create a composite portrait of the subject's lack of ability to choose between visible and invisible identity factors as a Jewish female identifying person of color. This piece plays with the fairytale heroic device of a cloak of invisibility, a narrative tool present in much of European literary history when it comes to fairytale, but always used in the context of a white body with the ability to choose it. The other work focuses around a participant who works with the sunrise movement, and the experiences of being a young female identifying person who is not in a social standing of being provided a platform to be heard or taken seriously. This work will be executed on a wood panel and will pull on themes of serpents and apples associated with femininity, sin, and luxury, as well as the use of females as targets for displays of accuracy in activities of masculine risk taking exhibitionism, all in the context of consumption of fossil



fuels. Once completed, these works will connect the finished pieces to the future final exhibition, creating a continuous visual path through the series.

### III. Timeline

**May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020-** Order display components for finished works and materials for 2 new pieces with money from grant

**May 18<sup>th</sup> 2020-** Begin work on first of 2 new pieces, averaging 25 hours a week in the studio (beginning first with the piece painted on multiple sheets of fabric as this will likely take the longest to complete)

**June 1<sup>st</sup> 2020-** Send out initial requests to individuals modeling for future pieces, begin booking interviews

**June 8<sup>th</sup> 2020-** Assemble display cases for completed works \*plexiglass for one of the finished works is currently located in a place that cannot be accessed until covid-19 causes less of a health threat so may be delayed in assembling

**June 28<sup>th</sup> 2020-** Have first reference material photoshoot with 1-2 subjects for fall works \*postponed until close proximity between photographer and model does not put anyone at high risk of covid-19

**June 29<sup>th</sup> 2020-** Complete first mixed media piece to serve as a bridge from current works to BFA series

**June 30<sup>th</sup> 2020-** Begin work on second new piece, averaging 25 hours a week in the studio

**July 13<sup>th</sup> 2020-** Have second reference material photoshoot with remaining 1-2 subjects for fall works \*postponed until close proximity between photographer and model does not put anyone at high risk of covid-19

**July 19<sup>th</sup> 2020-** Organize and clean reference shots, plan out fall semester timeline and works

**July 31<sup>st</sup> 2020-** Complete additional mixed media piece to serve as a bridge from current works to BFA series

**August 12<sup>th</sup> 2020-** complete 10-15 page research paper

### IV. Budget

● Stipend.....	1500
● Cost of 3 display cases.....	436.58
● Cost of 3 book stands .....	110.43
● Cost of earth magnets .....	92.59
● Cost of 21 yards of matte tulle.....	65.78
● Cost of 3 spools brass 10 gauge wire (with tax and shipping).....	69.67
● Oil paints assorted colors.....	140.43
● 36” Circular wooden panel .....	84.15
 Total.....	 2499.63

\*No additional funding is being sought from any external sources.

### V. Resources

- Ahn, J. (2011). Review of Children's Identity Construction via Narratives. *Creative Education*, 02(05), 415–417. doi: 10.4236/ce.2011.25060
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann. (1976). *The Social Construction of Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Callero, P. L. (2003). The sociology of the Self. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 115–133. doi: 10.1146
- Denys, P. (2008). The Use of Words and Images in Our Culture to Create Misrepresentation, Objectification and Denial. *Humanities and Sciences Department of the School of Visual Arts Twenty-Second Annual National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists: Design, the Arts, and the Political*, 86–94.

All images included are photos of original work by Gillian Maurer

## **VI. Publication outlet**

This research will be published in the UNC Asheville Journal as well as presented in the UNCA Undergraduate Research Symposium.

## **VII. Human Subjects**

While humans and their stories are subjects of my work, human subjects are not a means of collecting data in this project. Interviews only ask participants to share their experiences and self perceptions as a means of directing the research that does take place, which examines already existing written text and audio in the public domain. As such, neither the works that will be created, nor those being prepped for display or the reference materials being collected will use human subjects for data collection.