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## Abstraction as a Form of Redaction

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*abstract*

*Abstraction as a Form of Redaction* acts as an explanation of the personal and conceptual basis of my three bodies of work titled *the dimension of intimacy*, *notations of the mind*, and *medical signifiers*. Examining contemporary art through the lens of the self, I have created work that is present in conversations about intimacy, abstraction, self-portraiture, and feminism. Though my work does not directly address contemporary feminism, I am using this work to reclaim my body, my mind, and my space as an act of agency. The work, when looked at as a compilation, functions as an autobiography. All of the pieces in my thesis work are self-portraits. I have removed myself from the work to create a sense of withholding. I am interested in the wall that forms due to this withholding and the ways in which people react to it.

*framework*

In order to create the conceptual framework for my thesis, I read a lot of feminist literature, hoping to better understand my perceived place in a culture that values men over women. Two books that really influenced me are *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolfe and *Men Explain Things to Me* by Rebecca Solnit. Wolfe's *The Beauty Myth* argues that men have created a structure to entrap women, preventing them from gaining too much power. With women gaining more rights in the workplace, there needed to be a way to make their contributions less significant and keep the power in the hands of a male dominated society. Wolfe points out that not only has "the beauty myth" created an economic trap for women, but it has also created a structure that pits women against one another, competing to see who has the best body and who can receive the most male attention. Using extreme tactics, Wolfe is able to pinpoint a possible source for many societal problems surrounding beauty culture in the United States. Solnit's *Men Explain Things to Me* takes Wolfe's arguments a step further by discussing the long term impact of a culture obsessed with female beauty, which has led to an extreme imbalance of power between the sexes — fueling rape culture (Solnit 19-20).

Women all over the world constantly fear for their own safety when walking alone, an act which is treated as normal by American society. Instead of teaching men not to rape, the United States has focused on teaching women to not get raped. All of these issues are tied together by a culture that still refuses to see men and women as equals. This inequality, which is deeply rooted in American society, has impacted my life in ways I had never thought possible. Reading these books has given me a new sense of agency and control. I am now more aware of my perceived place and how I want to fight back against it to reclaim my body and my space as my own.

My work does not offer a solution, but rather an outlet. Using the concept of the self-portrait combined with techniques of abstraction, the different aspects of my work combine to create a layered autobiography that exists between the realms of private and public space. My three collections — *the dimension of intimacy*, *medical signifiers*, and *notations of the mind* — combine layers of my past together to create a complex and purposefully confusing self-portrait. I address the problematic culture that I am a part of by making the personal political and layering my experiences on top of one another to create a new understanding.

### *self-portraiture*

Self-portraits are often wrought with emotion and symbolism, while communicating a very controlled message about the artist. Elisabeth Bronfen remarks that “since the Renaissance, the self-portrait has been considered a privileged genre. . . because it allows the artist to capture her individuality while also determining the way her audience will think of her” (Bronfen 16). With this idea in mind, I create intimate and abstract self-portraits that represent my mind and body while prompting conversations about ideas other than the self. My self-portraits use the personal in a vague and abstracted way in order to become applicable to a more general audience. *the dimension of intimacy* includes sixteen self-portraits. None of these photographs show my face or any defining characteristics of my body — allowing the personal to become universal. Some of the images show the point of view of the photographer, such as *self-portrait 12*, but most are unrecognizable body parts and there is no indication that these are self-portraits except



Alex DeRosa; *self-portrait 12*; 4 x 4 in; 2016

for the wall label, which indicates that the materials of this piece include “sixteen 4 x 4 inch self-portraits.”



Francesca Woodman; *Untitled (Providence, Rhode Island)*; 1975-1978

My work has been influenced by contemporary photographers such as Francesca Woodman. Most of Woodman’s photographs are self-portraits that focus on an emotional state, rather than a physical depiction of the body. Her photographs are about her relationship to her body and her surroundings; many of her pieces attempt to place her body within a space that appears to be

uncomfortable (*Francesca Woodman* 11-12). All of Woodman’s published works were shot with 120 mm film, resulting in a square format which I also use throughout my work. Distorting her body in seemingly violent ways, Woodman is able to lend a physicality to her mind-state. My work also gives tangibility to seemingly intangible emotions, but in a quieter way.

The traditional definition of autobiography is “a history of a person’s life written or told by that person” (dictionary.com). For the purposes of my thesis work, I am redefining the term. My definition of autobiography is an account of a person’s life depicted in separate moments that do not individually tell a story, but when combined these moments function as a non-narrative glimpse into that person’s life. In this way, my self-portraits are autobiographical. Individually the work does not form a narrative, but when looking at all three of my collections — *medical signifiers*, *the dimension of intimacy*, and *mind drawings* — as layers of a whole, one can begin to picture an autobiography based on experiences, without examining the experiences

themselves. My work shows viewers a brief and somewhat vague glimpse into my life without telling an actual story.

All of my work is composed within a small square format and placed either within a small square box, or a small square frame. The square format lends comfort to me as an artist and in turn, I am able to use the square in ways I would not use another shape, such as a rectangle or larger plane. The intimacy of a 4 inch square feels safe to me, a feeling that I want my work to convey. Even though the work may appear unsettling at times, I have maintained an aesthetic beauty throughout the pieces in order to allow viewers to enter the work with ease and comfort. As a whole, this body of work functions as a picture of my life, including my thoughts and feelings about very personal events that may be violent and painful to recall. The work allows me to reclaim my body, my identity, and my space. The withholding of information adds another layer of abstraction to the work, both conceptually and visually. By layering images of myself, I am able to create scenes that awaken a variety of emotions, such as discomfort and grief, within a safe space, and encourage conversations about their origin.

### *abstraction*

Artists use the term “abstract photography” to describe a wide variety of images, lending little meaning to the words and making them nearly impossible to define. I place a lot of my work within the realm of abstract photography, but the work functions as an abstracted self-portrait that is not medium specific. That being said, all of the images I have created for my thesis work are printed on photographic paper to quote the medium of photography. When seen in the context of an 8 by 8-inch frame, my drawings and my text based pieces can function as photographs, adding a layer of removal to the work. I do not want my hand to be present in the

pieces, which is why all of my images have been scanned and reprinted — this removal creates a distance between me and the viewer. This space allows others to enter the work. As the artist, I am intentionally withholding information from the viewer to allow them to have their own interpretation of the piece. Withholding information lends power to me both as an artist and subject, allowing me to control any knowledge the audience has when looking at my work. To some extent, I use this technique as a way to protect myself.

My work is strongly rooted in the medium of photography, but I see it in conversation with non-photographic abstract art that also uses the body as a subject. Amanda Valdez's work



Amanda Valdez; *dream your face off*; 32 x 29 in; embroidery, acrylic, and gouache on canvas; 2015

has been particularly influential to me. Valdez creates mixed media abstractions, using materials that are typically associated with the feminine, such as embroidery and textiles, to create abstractions about bodies and the negative spaces our bodies create (Neely 1). I see a likeness between her work and my own, her brightly colored shapes are similar to my dark, grayscale photographs of the body.

Looking at Valdez's work inspired me to work more outside of my medium and create the

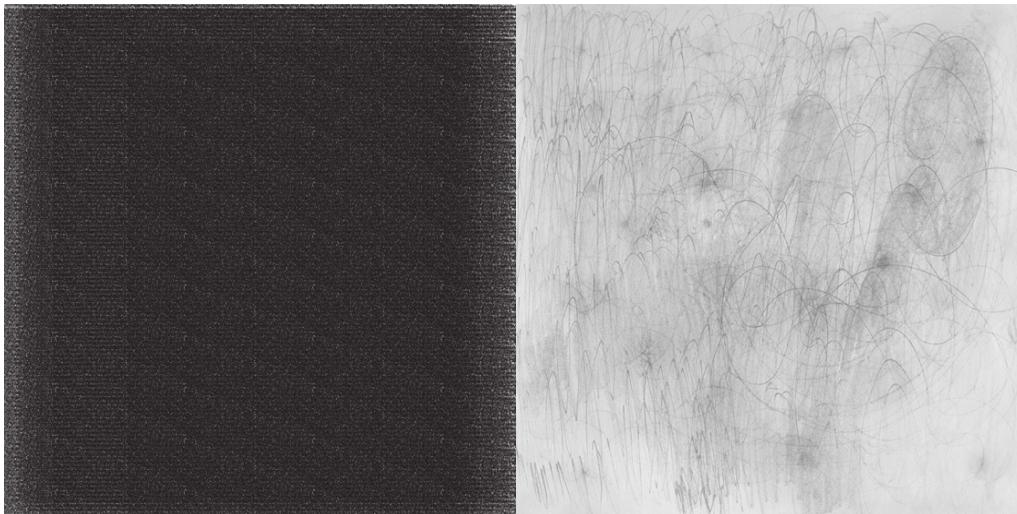
drawings that have become another layer of my thesis project.

Each piece within the *medical signifiers* collection represents a different illness or condition with which I have been diagnosed. The pieces are a visual representation of the condition as well as my feelings towards the diagnosis. Most of the text is illegible, but I have left some words visible to the viewer. In contrast, *mind drawings* are expressionist drawings and



paintings that I have scanned and layered in Photoshop in order to remove the direct touch of the artist. The drawings are an effort to depict an overwhelmed mind. The shapes and tones present within these pieces are sourced from images that I see when I close my eyes. By layering these drawings together, I am creating a new, confused space, which I pair with a text piece from *medical signifiers*.

When discussing the three branches of my thesis work –*medical signifiers*, *notations of the mind*, and *the dimension of intimacy*– it is important to think about the psychological impact of the build-up of layers. Layering is especially prevalent in *medical signifiers* and *notations of the mind*, since each of the pieces is made up of many images. This aspect is increased when I pair one drawing together with one text piece to form a diptych. Although these pieces are separate, when paired I think of them as two layers that have been separated from one another and rejoined rather than two separate pieces. Together, the drawings and text pieces represent different sides of a whole.

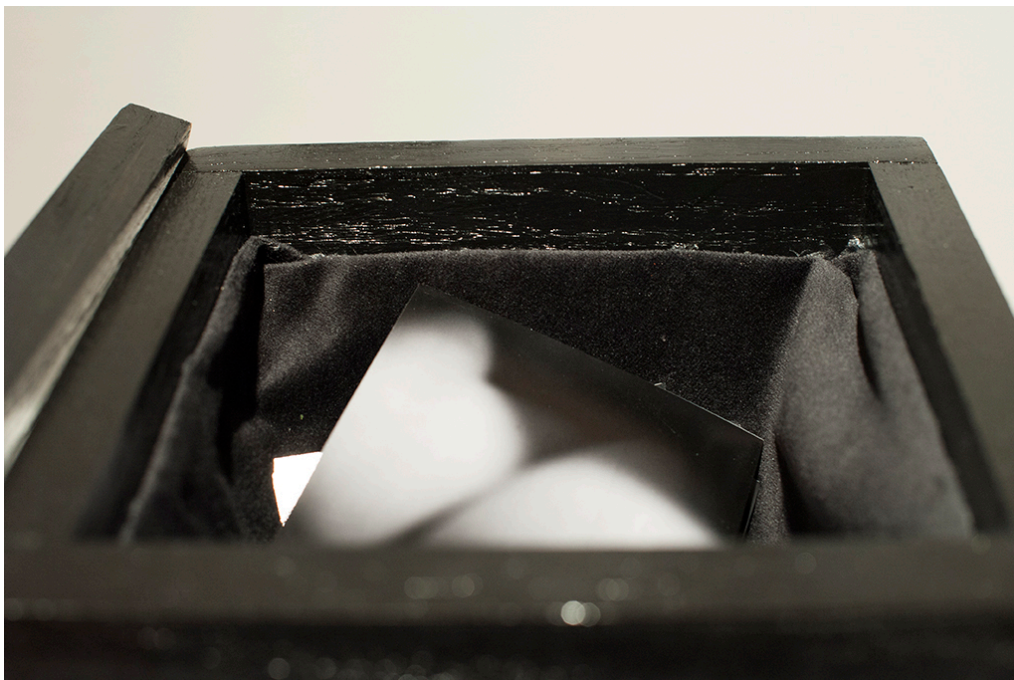


Alex DeRosa; no. 7 (*medical signifiers*); 4 x 4 in; medical definition, photographic print; 2016

Alex DeRosa; no. 2 (*notations of the mind*); 4 x 4 inches; scanned drawings, photographic print; 2016

*intimacy*

All of my work addresses the relationship between public and private space. My piece, *the dimension of intimacy* directly confronts the viewer with a choice — either to open the wooden box, reaching in to touch the photographs held within, or to allow the images to remain private and unseen. Viewers are prompted by a wall label to “feel free to look inside the box.” I have chosen to word the directions in this way because I want the viewer to feel safe and as though they are choosing to view the photographs. I did not want to command anyone to interact with my piece because that can cause some level of discomfort. My purposefully vague directions have an interesting effect on how people interact with *the dimension of intimacy*. I have witnessed a variety of ways in which viewers have looked at my piece; such as opening the box, looking down, and immediately closing the box to spending a lengthy amount of time looking at each of the sixteen photographs.



Alex DeRosa; *the dimension of intimacy*; 8 x 8 x 8 inches; stained wood, black velvet, and sixteen self-portraits; 2016

Boxes, and more specifically small boxes, have a very distinct psychological meaning. As the French philosopher Bachelard notes in *The Poetics of Space*, when one opens a small, private box one is entering a new world:

The outside has no more meaning. And quite paradoxically, even cubic dimensions have no more meaning, for the reason that a new dimension – the dimension of intimacy – has just opened up. (Bachelard 85)

This quote left such an impact on me that I took the name for my piece, *the dimension of intimacy*, from it. The size and subject matter of my work makes it inherently intimate, but presenting it in a box increases the level of privacy. When the individual viewer opens the box and looks through the photographs within, I want them to be transported to the new, more private space that Bachelard is discussing. I want anyone who interacts with the 8 x 8 x 8-inch cube to feel a connection with the images inside, even if it lasts only for a moment. That connection, that intimacy, is what transforms the gallery from a public space to a private one. I am sharing very private photographs and memories with the viewer, but in return I ask that they engage with the work and chose to open the lid to the box. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard says that boxes are “complex pieces that a craftsman creates [and] are very evident witnesses of the need for secrecy, of an intuitive sense of hiding places” (Bachelard 81). I want to challenge this notion with *the dimension of intimacy* by creating a box that is meant to be opened and shared with others, rather than a secret box that should be hidden away.

The installation of my thesis work creates a new place of experience and allows me to share my most intimate moments and feelings with my audience in a protected environment. The installation only takes up 16 x 68 x 14 inches of space and is meant to be observed and interacted

with by one viewer at a time. Since all of the pieces are so small, people must get very close to the work to view it.



Alex DeRosa; Installation View at Des Lee Gallery; 2016

Few artists convert the gallery space to discuss issues of private vs public space in the same way as Jill Downen. Downen explores a realm between private and public space with her exhibition, *As If You Are Here*, at Bruno David Gallery in St. Louis. For this exhibition Downen created many small boxes with tiny openings, that when looked through, led into another world. This created an interesting phenomenon within the gallery space. People were sticking their heads very close to the art, peering in and focusing on Downen's tiny environments. Viewers were forced to bend down or move at different angles in order to access the worlds held within the plain white boxes. By forcing the viewers' interaction with small boxes, Downen effectively

transformed the Bruno David Gallery into a private space, one for quiet contemplation and discussion, similar to the installation of my work at the Des Lee Gallery.



Jill Downen; *We'll never find the house without a map*; 4.5 x 6 x 8 in; thread, dry pigment, wood; 2016

### *conclusion*

It is easy to become lost in the autobiographical nature of my work and forget the social issues that influenced me to make these pieces. As a woman, I am constantly confronted by the threat of a culture that objectifies me. A threat that I have tried to address in my work by using my own body. The work is about me, but it also represents more than just my life it represents feelings of inequality that all women face. My work allows people to place themselves into a new context, and to learn from the disruption of space that my installation creates. I have thought a lot about how shame and vulnerability play into my work, and after watching Brene Brown's TedTalk "Listening to Shame" I have come to realize that these topics affect all of my work. My work fights against a culture of inequality for women, but I was also raised in this culture, and I have to overcome my shame in order to create work that is vulnerable. I am placing myself in a vulnerable situation and in return, I ask that the viewer does the same.

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## Image Sources

Figure 01: Alex DeRosa

Figure 02: Francesca Woodman

*Francesca Woodman*. San Francisco, Calif: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ;  
New York, 2011. Print.

Figure 03: Amanda Valdez

<http://www.dennygallery.com/artists/amanda-valdez/>

Figure 04: Alex DeRosa

Figure 05: Alex DeRosa

Figure 06: Alex DeRosa

Figure 07: Alex DeRosa

Figure 08: Jill Downen

[http://www.brunodavidgallery.com/artistsDetail.cfm?id\\_artist=4&n=Jill+Downen](http://www.brunodavidgallery.com/artistsDetail.cfm?id_artist=4&n=Jill+Downen)