External Influences and Internal Construction of Self

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EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AND INTERNAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
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December 2019

Accepted by:
Professor Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Professor David Detrich
Dr. Andrea Feeser
Throughout our lives, a plethora of influences in some way or another, determine who we are by constructing our identities and the perception of who we are. Understanding this is important as we attempt to discover self, amongst our experiences. My work investigates the way that cultural, familial, environmental, social, and other external factors affect the internal construction of self. The accumulation of imposed influences leaves little room for self which calls to question, “who are we if not for our predisposed circumstances?” Through the collective use of textures, patterns, and colors found in fabric, the sculptures in this work portray the overwhelming influx of influences. My sculpture includes domestic furniture such as chairs, rugs, and wallpaper as a metaphor between one’s mind and the foundational elements of a home. That is to say, the mind is the home of every person. In a response to the sculptures, the paintings depict an awareness and internalization of self which appear as formed spiritual and sacred entities. The titles of this work become very important as they represent two different high and low understanding of self. The sculpture titles are relative to specific dates and places or events, which are influential but not an internalized version of self. These moments are significant as they are chaotic and represent times when understanding of self is being pulled in every direction. The other half of the work, the paintings, are simply titled with single names of people. My intention with this work is to evoke a desire in the viewer to investigate their understanding of self and acknowledge their overwhelming amount of identities and personalities that construct them.
DEDICATION

To my grandfather, Poppy. Without you, I would have had nothing to paint on all these years. Here is to many more canvases and frames made in Pa Beam’s woodshed.
I would like to give my sincerest thanks to my thesis committee and my fellow graduate students who have been with me through this exhilarating and challenging experience.

Todd McDonald, I came into this program thinking I knew so much about painting but saw quickly that I still have so much to learn. Thank you for always offering me your vast understanding of oil painting and color.

David Detrich, the ultimate problem solver. Your vibrant energy and willingness to make almost anything work encourages me to never give up when I feel I have come to a dead end. I am grateful to have had you as an advisor and to consider myself, at least, half “Sculptron”.

Andrea Feeser, your kindness and understanding does more for others than you may ever know. Our meetings always put me at ease and helped manifest so much of the content in my work. I see the influence of you and your fuzzy, warm sweaters in my sculpture and painting.

Finally, the fantastic group of women who entered this program with me, Denise, Allison, Anna, and Sara. The laughter, tears, and coffee that we shared together helped me get through even the worst of days.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Even before we are born, an entire set of conditions begin forming our existence without our approval or understanding. As an infant, still floating in a sack of amniotic fluid, I was already determined to be female presenting, white, and middle class, without even understanding how those elements would shape my existence. As I grew older, other factors would begin to influence me and build my identity. I would play soccer from the ages of five to seventeen. I would have an unconditional love and weakness for animals not only because of all the pets we had, but also because my house sat beside a horrendous cattle farm that still haunts me. I would pursue art because my mother was an artist, and I admired her enthusiasm so much. And now, after almost twenty-five years of being overexposed to constant influences, I realize that exterior influences hardly reflect the internal construction of self. Through the use of sculpture, I portray the overwhelming presence of outside influences and how our experiences construct self. As a response to the sculptures, I created a series of paintings that depict an awareness and internalization of self which appear as formed spiritual and sacred entities. The combined outcome of the work gives a sense of hope that clarity can come from the chaos surrounding self.

In my work, external identities and influences are represented as three-dimensional soft sculptures and installations. These pieces are constructed from fabrics of various patterns and textures to suggest multiple stories and identities that a person possesses. The intermingling of these metaphorical time lines suggests an overwhelming amount of influences that cloud the viewers inclusion of self in the piece. Every person is an amalgamation of countless identities and influences. Some things are taken, others are not,
and over time it becomes difficult to decide what “self” really means without the effects of our predecessors.

As a reaction to the overwhelming volume of the sculptures in the space, I constructed a series of paintings that represent internalized versions of self. The paintings express carefully constructed fragments of influences and identities along with personal development and growth to create visual representations of Self-Concept Clarity. Psychologists vary on their definitions for Self-Concept Clarity (SCC), but I will be referencing the research of Psychologist, Carl Rogers who defines it as “congruency between the ideal self and the real self” or the self that we desire to be and the self that we are. The paintings balance the real and ideal self by referencing some of the fabrics found in the sculpture (Real Self) and some fabrics and objects that are new (Ideal Self). Their inclusion of specific objects, textures, and colors indicates a type of internal construction which alludes to the ethereal and most pure identities of a person rather than the clutter of all experiences. This indicates how clear or unclear a person’s understanding of self is. In my paintings, I convey levels of high SCC. Their inclusion of specific objects, textures, and colors indicates a type of internal construction which alludes to the ethereal and most pure identities of a person rather than the clutter of all experiences. This is to say, “I have achieved SCC” rather than, “This is me overwhelmed as I try to adapt my personality to eight different people at Thanksgiving”. In this case, the sculptures metaphorically mirror the Thanksgiving experience and the paintings are reflections of people and my interpretations of their SCC.

My sculptures are assembled using terms I will call globule and tubular amalgamations. As individual fabrics and patterns, they are harmless and minimal to deal
with, however, once they develop into an amalgamation, they overwhelm their limited spaces. This physical assertion of space mimics the multiple personalities, identities, and experiences that demand attention and cloud the SCC of a person. When the viewer approaches this work, they feel displaced and pushed out of the arrangement.

The choice of fabrics included in the sculptures is dense, as they represent the complexities of experience. Coffee and dirt stained fabrics included in \textit{Mom Martin's Home, Summer 2018} indicate that none of the fabrics are clean or new. They retain a level of wear and tear, which triggers a variety of senses. Unlike freshly bought clothing and fabric, the viewer has a more personal relationship to clothing and fabrics that have been worn and utilized because they can imagine the events that led to their used quality.

The imagery in the paintings is carefully constructed, unlike the sculptures, which include a little bit of everything. I realized through careful research that a person is unable to completely separate self from the identities that they possess. However, when there is awareness of influences and identities, there can be more careful and meaningful construction of self. The representation of certain fabrics and objects from the sculptures in the painting represent careful selection rather than overwhelming randomness. That is to say, not all of the fabrics/influences from the sculptures translate to the paintings. This is because not all influences contribute to the construction of self and lead to high SCC. Jane Bennet theorizes \textit{Thingness} as the nature of our material world and us in it; or, there is energy, or matter, within all things, whether it be people, animals, objects, etc. The paintings depict an attraction and selection process of materials or objects due to their energies or \textit{vibrant matter} (Bennett). Bennet states that she cannot make claims as to what gives something vibrant matter because it varies for each person, but when they see it or feel it they know it,
and it is wise to ponder what gives it that special quality. In my selection process for the paintings, I have extracted visuals from within the sculptures that strongly remind me of the person(s) associated with them. For example, in *Mom Martin's Home, Summer 2018*, I talk about the overwhelming influence of my great-grandmother and my partner and included a large variety of their clothes and other fabrics that have come from them. In reaction to the sculpture, I created two symbolic portraits of these people titled *Jean* and *Russell*. The imagery in these paintings balance “real self” by including fabrics from their respective sculptures and “ideal self” through new fabrics which align to create imagery for SCC. This visual representation of the materials reflects the relationship between the internalizing the self and all influences.

The paintings combine multi-dimensional space and flat space as a way of showing a relationship between things that have little meaning to the self and things that have vibrant matter and are important in the construction of self. This can be seen prominently in the paintings *Brownie/Laura*, *Cleo/Serra*, and *Teddy/Clint* which juxtapose highly developed and dimensional forms with two-dimensional, simplistic patterns.

The result of the paintings being shown with the sculptures offers the viewer a sense of hope that clarity can come from the chaos surrounding self. Without the paintings, one can assume that we would drown in the layers of our outside circumstances and influences, which is why the visual correlation of both mediums is crucial in this work.
CHAPTER TWO
EXTERNAL INFLUENCES VS. INTERNAL CONSTRUCTION

From birth, veils of personality, identity, and experience are hung around us. As infants, we seek connection to others as a way of grounding within an unfamiliar existence. In this stage of life, what we absorb is crucial and sets a foundation for how we will define our relationship to self (McLeod). Before adolescence, the mind does not seek independence from others. It continues absorbing information around it that varies from person to person. Once a child is between the ages of 12 and 18, they begin to look for their personal identity. Although they may believe they are assembling a version of self on their own, a person’s preferences and aversions are influenced by experience long before they approach this point (McLeod). During these ages and onward, the mind is constantly searching for a sense of self. This begins the careful construction of a relationship between the real self and the ideal self\(^1\) (McLeod). When the two selves are harmoniously balanced, a sense of SCC arises. In my work, I create visual representations of both the external influences, which alone are wildly overwhelming, and the formation of an internally constructed self, which amounts to Self-Concept Clarity.

In my work, fabric is used as a symbol for identity. The multitude of fabrics used are sourced from many times, places, cultures, and classes, which results in an inconsistent and jumbled effect. I inherit energy when I am dealing with each piece of fabric for the sculptures. I am made aware of the power it possesses through the sensory evidence of its

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\(^1\) McLeod credits the idea of “real” and “ideal” self to Carl Rogers. Rogers describes the real self as being what a person actually is and the ideal self as being what the person wants to be.
smells and stains, such as the coffee stain on a loved one’s button-down shirt, or the smell of my great-grandmother’s house embedded in a scarf she crocheted. Each sample could act as a piece on its own, but when they combine into their final globule and tubular amalgamations, a heightened sense of power arises from their massiveness as a whole.

*Mom Martin’s Home, Summer 2018* is composed of material and garments from my great-grandmothers house and my partner’s clothing, two crucial influences in my life. After my grandmother, Mom Martin, passed away in the Summer of 2018, I felt overwhelmed by the amount of possessions I inherited. I was also overwhelmed because a large influence in my life had been physically emptied, but her presence felt heavier than it ever had when she was alive. This situation is conveyed through the upper chair element being emptied onto the lower chair. The upper portion of the work is the symbolic representation of a person whose existence has been of great influence. The lower chair is a representation of the person who absorbs that influence and makes it a part of their self. As her memories and legacies tumbled into me like clothes being thrown into a hamper, I experienced new influences from someone who had entered my life. As influences blend together, as they do in the bottom chair, the self becomes stifled and labyrinthine under their weight.

As a reaction to *Mom Martin’s Home, 2018*, I created two paintings, *Jean and Russell*, which are considered to be portraits of the people I reference in the sculpture. The amalgamated imagery in these portraits are partly references of the fabrics and materials found in their paired sculpture. These relate to the experiential relationship between self-concept and influence during an event. The new fabrics and materials included in the amalgamation represent other elements of self that exist apart from single influences like the one described earlier. The result of having some elements from the sculpture repeat in the
respective paintings as well as new sources defends the theory that in order to reach our SCC, our real self, which is based on our external influences and experiences, must be congruent with our ideal self. This harmonious relationship can be seen in the paintings.
CHAPTER 3
THE WAY THINGS OCCUPY SPACE through sculpture

Matter has a tendency to accumulate and become impermeable if left unattended for long enough. Most accumulation will control the majority of the spaces that we exist in and will include material such as clothing and fabrics as well as furniture. In this work I use such materials in sculptures to control as much space as possible. This claim on the area excludes the viewer from entering the space, much like our physical and mental collections of matter excludes us from getting close to the understanding of self.

Jane Bennett examines the artistry of hoarders and their need to collect objects that, she theorizes, have “vibrant matter”. During a lecture, Bennett includes a clip in an episode of the TV show “Hoarders” where a man desperately tries to locate one of his most favorite objects, a television set, in a room of unorganized chaos. After several grueling minutes of the man struggling, he finally locates it under several feet of clothing. The trouble with hoarders is that because they see vibrant matter in so many things that they have no way of valuing everything. The accumulation of fabrics and materials in these sculptures represents the feeling of becoming overwhelmed by our accumulations, both mental, and physical. It is easy to understand physical accumulation because there is a visual element to it; however, mental accumulation (of influences) can be confusing and difficult to describe, even to ourselves. Ultimately, without dissecting influences and experiences the understanding of self is buried at the bottom of the mind under the weight of these ideas.

Visually, my work involves the combining of countless fabric samples and visually results in large, tubular and globulous amalgamations. Each amalgamation is filled with a synthetic, plush material so that they become more bulbous and are able to wrap around
something like they would a body. Theses amalgamations almost always have an interaction with chairs. Tadashi Kawamata and Yayoi Kusama are examples of artists who also use chairs as a symbol within their sculpture and installation work. Themes about the chairs used in their work include rest, focus, and comfort. These themes follow suit in my own installations except the viewer is never able to actually sit or interact with the chairs because of the massive forms that are occupying them. This further, pushes the viewer outside of the installation and does not invite them to feel relaxed within it.

The physical accumulation and attachment to furniture is symbolic of the influences, identities, and personalities that mentally and emotionally accumulate and assert dominance over self. Kusama’s series of work titled *Accumulation* include chairs, couches and other domestic furniture that have been covered in phallic like forms. This visual causes the viewer to feel uneasy and excluded from the sculpture. My sculptures are inspired by these pieces and their invasiveness over space, particularly over domestic objects such as chairs. In the piece *Mamaw's Livingroom, Winter 2008* a globule amalgamation encompasses the only chair found in the arrangement. The globules break through the seat of the chair, pour out onto the floor and even extend up the wall in a way that seems parasitic of the space. This leaves no seat or entry point for the viewer to place their self, even on the floor or walls.

There are other signifiers in the work that allude to the invasion of space. In the sculpture *Animal Trax, Fall 2003*, as well as other sculptures, a rug is included with tassels that have been grossly exaggerated far beyond their normal boundaries. These extensions act as barriers between the amalgamations and the viewer as a way to physically represent the mental and emotional separation from self. This physical barrier would not actually prohibit the viewer from coming closer if they wanted but I do not anticipate the strings being
stepped on. There is a vague understanding of where the pieces begin and end which causes awkward navigation of the work and pushes the viewer back from the sculptures rather than inviting them to come closer. When thinking about maneuvering within this work I was inspired by artist, Anish Kapoor and his pieces included in To Reflect an Intimate Part of the Red and 1000 Names. In these works, Kapoor creates large, heavily pigmented forms that are situated on the floor surrounded by piles of powder that match the vibrant pigments in the forms (Kapoor). This extension of his forms stretches the understanding of his boundaries and blur the line as to where they begin and end. Kapoor describes this as “claiming space” which is what influenced me to use a similar method. My intention for the sculpture is for it to inhabit as much of the space as possible so that the viewer feels pushed or guided away from it. In addition to the extended strands on the rugs claiming floor space there are also extensions on the walls. In Animal Trax, Fall 2003 tubular amalgamations reach out from a more two-dimensional wall piece and pile into a close by chair. The flatter, wall portion of this piece extends through zig-zag lines around two of the gallery walls. The lines are constructed through scraps of fabric that have been pulled to create tension within each sample but also flow rhythmically up, down, and around the space of this installation, claiming a large amount of space. Although there is not full coverage of the walls, the direction and movement of the lines does not make the wall space approachable for any person or matter to claim space.

Kapoor’s influence of extending space can also be seen in Mamaw’s Living Room, Winter 2008. The center of the sculpture, where the chair and middle of the rug exists, there is a dense globule amalgamation. The globules spill out from the chair, gradually leaking off the rug, and finally climb up the wall. This imagery resembles moldy, parasitic imagery while
also acting as a barrier to the paintings that exist behind the sculpture. The barriers and extensions in these pieces become symbolic of the labor involved to reach Self Concept Clarity.

During the creation of the sculptures, there is an involvement with the fabric that becomes an almost visceral experience. Each fabric sample has been excessively touched throughout its lifespan and as I pick them up I smell and feel the condition of them. Peter Stallybrass wrote in his essay “Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things” about a friend who had left him his favorite leather jacket after he passed away. Stallybrass was unable to wear or get rid of the jacket because he described “The magic of cloth, I came to believe, is that it receives us: receives our smells, our sweat, our shape even” (Stallybrass 28). That is to say, this coat was no longer pieces of fabric, it was a tangible memory of his friend which has become useless to most but priceless to the right person. The condition of the fabrics in this work is intended to be alluring to the senses and the inclusion of so many unique pieces contributes to an overbearing feeling experienced by the viewer.

In pieces such as Mom Martin’s Home, Summer 2018 the viewer can image how the fabric in the work might feel or smell due to the appearance of their condition. Flannel that has turned to thin, gauzy material and cotton with a “picked” areas from where the body has rubbed against the material are the fabrics that create this piece. The body and mind remember these sensory elements when exposed to them which causes nostalgia to occur. Using this type of fabric acknowledges an intimate connection between the body and fabric unlike if general, store bought fabric was used. The fabric’s complexity also causes the viewer to become caught up on certain samples rather than look over the fabrics as a completely seamless form. Ultimately, using fabric that has been worn and conditioned
creates a complex and overwhelming relationship between the work and the viewer in both a physical and emotional sense.

I use these sensory, nostalgia inducing, fabrics in paintings as well. Brownie/Laura, Cleo/Serra, and Teddy/Clint are composed of heavily used stuffed animals. In the paintings, I developed certain textures and color relationships that allude to the specificity of material and the overwhelming effect it can have on the senses. Examples of this specificity can be seen in the “picked” fabric texture, scratchy brush strokes over the damaged glass and metal eyes, and in the scruffy, stippling texture on fuzzy features of the of the animals. These details prompt the viewer to consider their connection to objects and fabrics based on how their bodies have interacted with them. The formal figures are juxtaposed by flat, patterned backgrounds.

There are dynamic relationships in this work between the space, the art, and the sensory experience that results in feeling extremely overwhelmed. Careful manipulation of the sculptures makes them seem claustrophobic in the spaces they exist in. In order to amplify the feeling of being overwhelmed by the sculptures, they have been constructed of incredibly specific fabrics that allure to the senses and evoke feelings of nostalgia and the body’s relationship to fabric. Because of the uniqueness found in each piece of fabric the visual experience of the work becomes overstimulating and straining for the viewer to fully absorb. In the next chapter I will discuss how pairing the paintings along with the sculpture results in a feeling of clarity and hope that the chaos of the sculpture and of self can be resolved and understood.
CHAPTER 4
THE REALIZED ETHEREAL SELF through painting

It is important that this work include not only sculpture, but also painting. The paintings act as resolution to an otherwise overwhelming existence of being trapped in the sculpture. As written previously, the sculpture represents a state of chaotic, never ending commotion that is attached to influences and identities. However, the paintings function as a reaction to the sculpture and offer a resolved feeling of clarity. The paintings act as sacred objects and talismans that arise out of confusion and disarray. These could also be considered a physical representation of SCC or understanding of oneself.

From a young age, people begin to embody emotion and feeling into objects and fabrics such as teddy bears and special blankets as a way of transitioning into new phases of life. Psychologists define these items as “Transitional Objects”. Although Transitional Objects represent an essential part of development and lead to a higher understanding of self, they are considered unessential later in life. However, their owners may still feel sentimental about them and resistant to part with them. Transitional objects exist in almost all stages of life but at an early age they act as our first relationship to self-identification. These self-chosen objects also offer constancy, predictability, and comfort when transitioning into new situations. My installation includes a grouping of three paintings, Brownie/Laura, Cleo/Serra, and Teddy/Clint, that represent the emotional attachment and individuality that is embedded in transitional objects. I developed detailed textures and surface qualities in the teddies using dynamic color relationships and values. These developments are used to draw attention to the forms and their unique, complex histories and personalities. These forms juxtapose against not only their flat, individual, patterned
backgrounds, but also hang on a wall that is covered in a heavily patterned wallpaper. These patterns represent the influence of transitional situations that can be overbearing and unfamiliar which can alter the understanding of self and in some cases cause us to develop one or more artificial personalities. It is noticeable that the paintings appear to be closer together than necessary. Their magnetic pull signifies that these objects are seeking comfort in their closeness. Transitional Objects are often labeled as a crutch for children and are not allowed once they enter school; however, psychologists researched their positive impact in developing self-awareness and self-expression. I define these items as being talismans or sacred objects that symbolize further understanding of self during certain periods of life. Contemplation and consideration of these objects and their meaning contributes to constructing and heightening SCC.

Other paintings found in this work share dynamic relationships with respective sculptures. Mamaw’s Living Room, Winter 2008 accompany paintings with titles like Christine, Katie, and Ivy. The sculpture title describes a specific section of time when influence may have been heavy and coming from multiple sources. These moments do not summarize our existence and must be treated carefully as not to define us too closely and result in a low Self-Concept Clarity. The painting titles are simple, first names that relate to the people that inspired situations in the sculpture. The names do not include last names or any other information because that becomes an association to something other than self, which is what the meaning of the paintings is about. The ethereal, luminous, and whimsical quality of the paintings represent the clarity of a mind that exists in harmony with its surroundings and is not corrupted by the overbearing influences of past, present, and future events. While developing the color relationships, I researched the work of Christine Grey. Grey uses pastel
colors and soft edges in her work which are elements I represent in my pieces. Grey also has a way of animating inanimate objects which inspired my own work. The vibrational quality of her forms also supports the ideas of Jane Bennett and “thing power” referenced in an earlier chapter. In the pieces Russell and Jean, I developed soft backgrounds and a luminous glow around objects in the foreground. Although all forms in the pieces are only fabrics and stuffed animals, there is a sense of movement and energy throughout the pieces that read as playful and weightless. This is the feeling I prompt the viewer to feel when viewing the paintings after they have interacted with the overwhelming sculptures so that they are relieved from their overwhelming presence.

The paintings balance the ideas of Ideal Self\(^2\) and Self-Image (Real Self) in relation to the research of psychologist, Carl Rogers. Rogers theorized that in order to achieve Self-Actualization, the ideal image of self must be congruent with the real self, or self-image (McLeod). The paintings are a construction of specific fabrics and objects; some are patterns that repeat in the sculptures and others come from unknown sources. This combination supports Roger’s theory that part of our self results from our influences and experiences and the other part of self arises from personal development and growth.

\(^2\) The Ideal Self is the version of self that you would like to be; if it is incongruent with the real self the person likely does not value self which is needed to be Self-Actualized (McLeod)
CONCLUSION

When I was twenty-four, my grandmother, who I spent a large part of my childhood with, gave me a binder filled with newspaper clippings, drawings done on napkins, photographs of me and my friends, and other papers she had collected because they made her think of me. This collection touched me deeply and made me realize that a part of my existence and my grandmother’s understanding of me lied in this book. While we individually construct our idea of self, others are constructing ideas of us, all based on our influences and experiences. The abundance of information surrounding self is so infinite that people have no way of fully realizing self which is why the idea of my book is helpful. Amongst the countless influences, the closest we can approach to reaching self is to organize fragments of our lives into something sacred like my grandmother did with paper and photographs and like I have done with scraps of fabric and paint. I thought about my binder and my grandmother a lot while I was constructing this body of work.

Construction of self involves countless contributing factors including, but not limited to, environmental, social, familial, and cultural influences. In this body of work, I created a visual relationship between those external factors and the internalization of self. Through sculpture I show, through the use of countless fabric samples, that influences are abundant and difficult to dissect in the journey to understanding self. Additionally, I construct a domestic space, reflective of the mind, that is uncomfortable for the viewer to navigate. This relates to the labor of designating which parts identity and influence we want to internalize and make part of self.
FIGURES

Figure 1: Mom Martin’s House, Summer 2018
Chairs recycled from my great grandmother’s house, clothing and fabric from her house, clothing from myself and partner. 2018
Chair and rug recycled from my great grandmother’s house, clothing and fabric from her house, clothing from myself and close friends. 2019
Figure 3: Mamaw’s Livingroom, Christmas 2008
Chair and rug recycled from my great grandmother’s house, clothing and fabric from her house, clothing from myself and close friends. 2019
Figure 4: Ivy
Oil on Canvas 2018
Figure 5: Christine
Oil on Canvas 2018
Figure 6: Katie
Oil on Canvas 2018
Figure 7: Brownie/Laura, Cleo/Serra, Teddy/Clint
Oil on Canvas, 2019
Figure 8: Russell
Oil on Canvas, 2019
Figure 9: Jean
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Figure 10: Cheryl
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Oil on Canvas
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