

IN LOVING MEMORY

The word “vulnerable” is derived from the Latin word *vulnus*, or “wound.” In struggling to cope with being sexually assaulted, the most significant lesson I have learned over time is this: In order to forgive, love, trust, and heal, one must learn to let go of fear and be vulnerable to others.

This work explores of the role of vulnerability in personal healing and identity. How does portraiture relate to vulnerability and identity? In what way is being vulnerable a strength? This triptych depicts various stages of my healing process. The first panel represents being completely engulfed and rendered powerless by fear and pain. The second panel represents a long, complex stage during which I became hyper-vigilant, while still struggling to cope with anger, grief, and fear. The last panel depicts my present state of forgiveness, acceptance, and empowerment.

I employ several personal symbols, such as lavender, to represent home, family, and self. The wine glass is symbolic of support vessels and coping mechanisms that sustained me. The halos, traditionally used to distinguish an important person in religious paintings, are a tribute to the value of self-love and inner strength.

These photos mourn the childhood which I lost, but allow me to reclaim myself and embrace my history as well as the person I am now.

Kahalla

Portraiture and the Power of Vulnerability

Penny



PREFACE

“I mostly paint self-portraits, and since an interest in the self has always been linked with narcissism, I must redefine the position as the subject of my work. Unlike Narcissus, I do not see the image of myself as an illusion that I may fall in love with. I see myself in the mirror, but the mirror is broken, shattered; each little piece of mirror reflects a different me. I am multiplied, like cells multiply inside the body. I transform myself for each painting. Each of my paintings is a performance that I perform for myself. I offer myself to my own gaze. I see myself through my own eyes.”

~Tino Rodriguez

I have always been fascinated by the idea of metacognition (awareness and understanding of one's own thought process) when it comes to identity and personal growth, and how that translates in an artist's work. The way we choose to represent ourselves and the medium with which we do so all contribute to the version or facets of our identity that we project. In the past few years I have been coming face to face with some of my most painful experiences and exploring the role of vulnerability in forgiving, trusting, and loving, but most specifically, in healing.

*Vulnus**

Eleven years of my life I spent opening my
Eyes and the next five I spent
grieving.

(His fingers raked a sepulchral Chasm in my earth and in
in in in I plummeted) Your
aching flesh like parched valleys; your limbs like
Severed shadows binding my breaths, embroidering interstices, bleeding
Cold stroboscopic episodes.

Idiosyncrasies shuffled into an amalgamation of
Chemicals and at night i hear my thoughts rattle around like a handful of pills,
I am learning quickly now the hieroglyphs in the ceiling fan and I welcome the embrace of a
synthetic entity;

(wrought fields of static in the waking world)

He watches me smile and shrink out of my skin, these sun-bleached bones, a deteriorating
Domicile, splintered dry, antipode of inundated sinuses
within my eyes fractals of a sequined semi-state.

Where in that raw air my impoverished lungs were swollen, and with stars adorning my tender
larynx I could breathe.

I. THE EVOLUTION OF PORTRAITURE

Since the birth of humanity, people have used any material accessible to create drawings, paintings, and sculptures depicting people. Portraiture is an ancient art, and its true origin is unknown. However, portraits can be traced as far back as the wall paintings in ancient Egypt, or the sculpted busts of ancient Greece and Rome (Famous Noble, 2010). During the Renaissance, the portrait genre evolved into a depiction of classes in society, and Italian, Flemish, and Spanish artists dominated the field. The mid-19th century prompted the social-realist movement, where paintings became heavy with political value. Throughout the 19th and early 20th century painters began to dismantle ideas about what portraits and painting in general were or should be. Some of the most prominent movements which followed included observational realism, impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism, cubism, and surrealism. This era gave birth to revolutionary artists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch, Matisse, Schiele, and of course Picasso. During the rest of the 20th century, abstract and conceptual art was incredibly popular and the existentialist and abstract expressionism movements were born of the years following World War II (Miller, 2016). This continued until Warhol and Lichtenstein reintroduced more literal representation with portraits that were intended to be commentary on pop culture and the art world (Heaston, 2013). More recent movements include neo-expressionism and activism in art, as well as hyper realism and performance art.

II. PORTRAITURE AND VULNERABILITY

Francesca Woodman

Francesca Woodman was an American photographer born in 1958. Known for her (usually untitled) black and white photographs, she employs the use of symbolism and often photographed herself as a model to explore the concepts of identity and metacognition. Woodman was very influenced by conceptualism (a movement that emphasized the value of ideas as much as a physical product). She integrated props and surrogates to leave us with a the haunting suggestion of an elusive question while “emphasizing the revelation of self-knowledge” (Townsend, 2006). Woodman’s technique of “dispersing herself throughout the photograph” either symbolically or literally gives the viewer a suggestion of duality of the self; or, as Tino Rodriguez wrote, “I am multiplied, like cells inside the body” (Rodriguez, 2016). Woodman’s use of the nude body engaging in interactions with an environment is representative of the enigma of a conscious being; the paradox of self depiction “which is capable of maintaining within itself its own contradictions” (Townsend, 2006). Through her work she poses questions about identity and self, and uses it as a vessel for self-perception and exploration. However, some argue that her self-portraits seem to be simultaneously driven by a desire to disappear completely due to their dim and ghostly qualities (Williams, 2015).

In the left photo below, Woodman sits above an evaporating silhouette imprinted on the woodboards of the floor. Her nude form seems to lean forward, peering over the disintegrating figure as though she is watching herself disappear. In the right photo below, Woodman’s nude body is limp and bent at an odd angle, as though lifeless or defeated, and surrounded by dried plants and splayed fabric. Many people believe that her photos were a glimpse into her mental and emotional disposition during that time of her life, where she suffered from depression and career-related stress. Later in her life, a week before her suicide, she wrote a letter to a friend expressing her desire to die young and described her life as “very old coffee cup sediment” (Williams, 2015). Her work has a similar impression; still and residual, yet truthful and gritty.



Left: *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.*



Right: *Untitled, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976.*

Marina Abramović

Famous for her extreme and controversial performance pieces, Marina Abramović is an artist who constantly pushes boundaries. Abramović was born in Serbia during in 1946 but is now primarily New-York based. Abramović's work is prolific, but most of it shares consistent themes. She often explores the identity and the self, human nature, physicality, intimate interpersonal relationships, and vulnerability. Abramović believes that performance requires forging total trust in another human being and confronting new territories such as failure, fear, and pain. "We are always in the space in-between... all the spaces where you are not actually at home... this is where our mind is the most open," Abramović says. "We are alert, we are sensitive, and destiny can happen. We do not have any barriers and we are vulnerable. Vulnerability is important. It means we are completely alive and this is an extremely important space. This is for me the space from which my work generates" (Ley, 2013). She is famous for the interactive and personal qualities of her work, which is often physical, involving her body and/or the body of her partner(s). She was beaten by her mother as a child, and speaks often about her willingness to be vulnerable to pain in order to create art as both a performance and as an experience (Pereira, 2015).

During a TED Talk she gave in 2015, she discusses trust, vulnerability, and connection. She states, "Performance is about pushing the boundary between audience and artist in pursuit of heightened consciousness and personal change. It is the mental and physical construction the performer makes in a specific time and space before an audience. An energy dialogue happens, and the audience and performer make the piece together" (Abramović, 2015). One of Abramović's most recent and possibly most remarkable pieces, "The Artist is Present", took place in the Museum of Modern Art in New York during the time span of three months. Every day of every month from the opening to the closing of the museum, she sat in a chair silently and met the eyes of whoever sat in the chair across from her and attempted to communicate with what she calls her "energy dialogue" (Pereira, 2015). People were immensely moved by their experiences with Abramović and reacted in different ways. Some people cried, some people got commemorative tattoos, some people wrote about her, others waited in line every single day for months for the chance to see her again. Many people say that the element which makes

Abramović's work so powerful and transcendent is her ability to connect and be completely vulnerable. She is able to completely trust her audience, and in turn they are able to experience something raw and exquisite which derives from her being.

In the top photo below, Abramović performs "The Story Of Bow and Arrow" with her former lover, the artist known as Ulay. In this piece, Ulay holds the arrow pointed at Abramović's heart while Abramović holds the bow in place. Both artists lean back slowly as far back as they can. In the bottom photo below, Abramović is shown engaging in an "energy dialogue" with a stranger visiting the NYMoMA during the "The Artist is Present" exhibit. She says, "When you have a nonverbal conversation with a total stranger, then he can't cover himself with words, he can't create a wall" (McDaniel, 2013). Abramović explains that these pieces are a representation and display of trust and vulnerability through the "energy dialogue" of the performance (Pereira, 2015).





Bottom, previous page: *The Story of Bow and Arrow (with Ulay)*, 1980.
Top: *The Artist is Present*, 2010.

Janine Antoni

Janine Antoni is an American artist born in the Bahamas known for her pieces which combine both performance and sculpture using her body as the primary tool and instrument. In 1993, Antoni created a self portrait composed of twin busts cast in likeness; one made of chocolate and the other of soap. Antoni explains that her piece is a commentary on self-love and self-image. The sculptures' value lies heavily in Antoni's artistic process. She began by making a mold from her body. She created the two busts by taking turns filling the mold with chocolate and then with soap. Once the busts hardened, she used different processes to sculpt and refine them: licking the chocolate and washing herself with the soap. In describing her process during an interview with PBS, Antoni says, "I wanted to work with the tradition of self-portraiture but also with the classical bust...I had the idea that I would make a replica of myself in chocolate and in soap, and I would feed myself with myself, and wash myself with myself. Both the licking and the bathing are quite gentle and loving acts, but what's interesting is that I'm slowly erasing myself through the process. So for me it's about that conflict, that love/hate relationship we have with our physical appearance, and the problem I have with looking in the mirror and thinking, 'Is that who I am?'" (Art21, 2011). Antoni uses her body in many different ways to address identity and being human. In this piece, she explores the way that self-awareness and metacognition produces almost a duality of self that allows one to interact with or control facets of their being.

This "duality of self" is sometimes a result of derealization disorder (DRD) and depersonalization disorder (DPD). These conditions can be characterized by a feeling of detachment from reality and the self. Episodes of DR/DP are common in sufferers of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and often cause, or are caused by, episodes of existential introspection/panic (Glenmore, 2014). Antoni's sculptures seem to mimic this physical detachment from oneself while still managing to explore self-observation and a reliance

on oneself (Shapiro, 2016). However, Antoni's work has more tender and gentle undertones, suggesting that she is on a path to become more intimate with herself and learn to love herself more. The busts can be interpreted as parts of herself which are vulnerable to her influence and will to change.



Above: *Lick and Lather*, 1993.

Frida Kahlo

Born in 1907, Frida Kahlo was a revolutionary Mexican artist who became most well-known for her poignant surrealist portraits depicting her love, grief, suffering, and identity. The effects of Frida Kahlo's difficult life can be seen in her paintings. She contracted polio at age 6. At age 18 she was involved in a streetcar and bus accident where she was impaled with an iron rail and sustained many serious injuries which left her immobilized for months. Despite a miraculous recovery from the accident, she continued to suffer intense pain and medical issues for the rest of her life.

Kahlo's work is incredibly emotional and visceral, employing symbols of personal value (such as clothing of her heritage, plants and animals from her home, items she received from important people in her life, etc.) and most often depicting a recognizable version of herself in different forms. Critiques and responses to Kahlo's work show a controversial view on her profile as a woman painter. While a few believe that Kahlo is only famous because her work has a prominent message of victim-hood because much of her work expresses so many of the struggles of her life, most admire her work for its striking imagery and powerful emotional value. Diego Rivera, the great love of her life, once said, "Frida began work on a series of masterpieces which has no precedent in the history of art - paintings which exalted the feminine qualities of endurance of truth, reality, cruelty, and suffering. Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time" (Makufka, 2010). In many of Kahlo's paintings there are recurring themes of pain and vulnerability, yet her work cultivates a sense of strength and power as she owns her story. Some believe that the direct and intimate quality of

her portraits is what gives her viewers such an intense experience. We are able to feel as though we are given a glimpse into Kahlo's identity and (most often) her pain because her work opens her up to be vulnerable (Peters, 2002).

The consistent theme of vulnerability manifests in many different ways in Kahlo's paintings, the most common being open wounds or exposed organs, as shown in *Las Dos Fridas*, *La Venadita*, *Sin Esperanza*, and *La Columna Rota*. They tell a tale of her emotional suffering and intense depression as well as her constant physical pain. She believed that being able to express herself through painting is what kept her alive in many instances (Peters, 2002). For Kahlo, painting from her soul was a tool to survive and to heal.



Upper left: *Las dos Fridas (The Two Fridas)*, 1939.

Upper right: *La Venadita (The Little Deer)*, 1946

Lower left: *Sin Esperanza (Without Hope)*, 1945.

Lower right: *La Columna Rota (The Broken Column)*, 1944.

III. VULNERABILITY AS STRENGTH

Francesca Woodman, Marina Abramović, Janine Antoni, and Frida Kahlo are vastly different artists in terms of medium, origin, and intention. However, something they all share is a one of the most essential elements of their fame and uniqueness; their ability to be vulnerable, or having the courage to be raw and whole through their art. It is what draws in the audience, intrigues them, touches them, challenges them, haunts them, or gives them strength. Vulnerability is the key to connection, and connection is what we humans crave.

In a TED Talk from Brené Brown, a successful research professor and author, she compiles the findings of her six years of research to unearth the connection between love, shame, and vulnerability. She begins with stating that connection is what gives purpose to our lives. “Shame,” she states, “is about our fear of being unworthy of connection” (Brown, 2016). Vulnerability is what bridges the gap between loneliness and desire for connection. To be vulnerable is to surpass a fear of shame and unworthiness and allow ourselves to be seen. Brown studied the behaviors and mindsets of people who have healthy, thriving connections and relationships. She found that those who have a very strong sense of love and belonging are the ones who believe most that they are worthy of it. They have the courage to be fully and openly themselves. Because they are compassionate to themselves before others, they have a sense of self-worth and security. They can then apply that respect and support to their interpersonal relationships. Brown believes that connection is a result of that authenticity; to embrace vulnerability and take risks. “Vulnerability is natural and necessary,” says Brown. “It is the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging, and love” (Brown, 2016).

Our immediate reaction to harm of any sort is to flinch away, retract, and hold ourselves tensely closed, which tends to cause our thoughts and feelings to fester until we are full of grief and rage and shame and blame without an outlet for it. As terrifying and painful as it may be to open up, all your negative energy will stay with you forever until you learn to let it go.

This is where vulnerability plays a crucial role. It is time to let go of your fear. Embrace the difficult feelings. It’s okay to hurt. Let it hurt. And one day, slowly, you’ll realize you can say their name aloud without your voice faltering. You can wear that skirt without crying seeing yourself in the mirror. You can go to that place and stand where you once laid and no longer feel pain as acutely and breathtakingly as the day it happened, where you died and were born at the same time.

It won’t stop hurting all at once. The pain comes in waves and waves, but they will gradually become softer and smaller until the water of your pain kisses your legs gently. Some days after lots of small waves there will be a storm, and you will nearly drown, and the water will be more bitter than you ever remembered it, and you will be carelessly tossed back to shore where your aching body may lay for awhile. But lay. Let it hurt.

You are raw. You are whole. Some days you will hurt, but slowly you will let go of fear. You know the beating of those rough waves like the rocks do. You know emptiness like the driftwood camouflaged in sand. You know the heavy breathing of the ocean at night for it longs for all the things it was and cannot be again. You are everything, like the ocean. You reclaim power from particles of the highest mountains and deepest canyons, of things which once lived and people you once loved. Ever-changing, you cannot go back. You hold a universe within yourself. This is how you forgive. This is how you love. This is how you reclaim yourself.

MANIFESTO

I used to be filled with grief and rage and bitterness. That part was easy; to let your skin grow thick from healed scars, to forget to feel. Being tender is the part that will break you, undo you, and teach you how to be human again. It takes bravery and strength to be vulnerable. I'm still learning.

I. When we surrender ourselves and refuse to participate in, or reciprocate, acts of hate, we are reclaiming the power of our humanity. Our vulnerability exposes the rawness of our humanity and requires us to accept all that we are. This is a part of the process of healing.

II. *Two Branches of Vulnerability After Trauma:*

- a. During personal recovery, one subjects the volatile parts of their mental, emotional, and spiritual disposition to a visceral ravaging by the universe.
- b. During forgiveness, there is healing, but equally importantly, there is safety.

III. Only love can defeat hatred, fear, judgement, and pain. Sometimes the most liberating act in recovering from trauma is forgiveness. To love one another, even those who have wronged us or nearly destroyed us, at the base of their humanity, is how we free ourselves from the burdens of our trauma or abuse. Although this is a mode of vulnerability, we can still forgive without subjecting ourselves to the same damage we initially sustained. Our strength simultaneously manifests in this elevation from the original damage.

IV. A note on Self-Love:

"I am your everlasting home. Don't you ever be afraid. I am enough. We are enough".

~ Sue Monk Kidd

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