

As I have explored the value of separation, my research has taken on a life of its own. It began by exploring the term hermit, then into the study of Henry David Thoreau's time at Walden Pond, and finally arrived at renaissance humanism and individualism. Along the way, I looked into hermits and artists who secluded themselves and if they experienced some form of trauma in their lives that could have led to that behavior and influenced their work thereafter. In the following weeks, I revisited earlier notes about the attitude of the renaissance era and the emphasis on the individual. I have armed myself with a variety of sources to answer this: What is the value of separation? To me, separation is the act of discovering what's left after breaking free from expectations and the noise promoted by society at large. I personally feel that society has inhibited me from being myself, the one thing I aspire to be in a world full of expectations. By leaving expectations behind and forging a new path, I can begin to craft myself into the person I want to become, rather than struggling for my entire life to find out who I am. It is my aim to explore what comes from this question through meaningful research and artwork over the remainder of my time here at Oxbow.

Looking back on my life, my identity and finding my place in society is something I have struggled with for as long as I can remember. I grew up in a quiet suburb and spent most of my time playing alone in my room, reading anything I could get my hands on, drawing, or annoying my older brothers who would soon go off to college. To this day, I am often told how interesting my family dynamic is. I have four siblings, and the joke about us is that we're all a decade apart. Now, if you do the math you must be thinking *wow, your parents must be pretty old*, and if we're being honest here, you're not wrong. Growing up I was surrounded by adults and given some of the same "old-school" lectures and discipline my parents and older siblings received. I believe this is where the separation began to occur. I was learning about life through a different lens my peers could not relate to, and as a byproduct, I was perhaps more mature, but overall, just different. As I got older, I slowly began to notice how different I seemed to my peers, and even some adults, but it didn't make any sense. I would often be left out of conversations, taken advantage of for my kindness, or bullied for my differences. I realized my upbringing shaped my interests and the way I socialized. The older I got the more "different" I felt. It's as if all of my peers knew something I didn't and never let me in on how to make friends or be seen as "normal". Until I came out as gay in middle school and found a reason to justify a portion of my loneliness and ostracization, I floated aimlessly through the series of social networks I was presented with, yet never found a comfortable place to fit in. Through my experiences at different schools, friend groups, and clubs, fitting in was never a thing that came naturally and honestly, never arrived. I can remember so many times where I was teased and outcast just for being myself. It was always that my shorts and uniform skirts were always too long, that the button-downs and blazers I loved to wear on out of uniform days were *unnecessary*, and my personal favorite, that my unshaven legs were *disgusting*. I was constantly reminded of these things and every time there was an opportunity, my peers ripped me apart just because I chose not to conform. Almost every day for months, my classmates would tell me to shut up and call me "teacher's pet" just for being an obedient student. Whenever grades would come out at the end of every year, at least one person would shove me around and say all of my stress and complaints over the course of the semester were unnecessary because of how well I did at the end of each year. The worst part is, the vast majority of these incidents took place during my high school years and were never handled by teachers who watched it all unfold. Over the years, I found through therapy, long talks with countless adults, and a lot of crying¹, that fitting in and being "normal" wasn't real, and that there was beauty in nonconformity and the self as a separate entity from society at large. I have begun to discover pieces of myself through reading and art, the things that help me ease the pain of not fitting in. I ease the pain by surrounding myself with positive outlets and safe environments for me to just be. There aren't many of those spaces, but little by little, I find and create more. I have come to realize that fitting in is overrated and that conformity is dangerous. Not only is the individual erased, but there is such a terrible impact on one's well being. My struggle with finding my place in society is far from over and something I deal with almost every day. When presented with Final Project, I took it upon myself to finally face what has tormented me for as long as I can remember, and maybe even figure out how to cope with it. Identity to me is one of those things that is so complex it can be linked to every aspect of my life. This makes it even scarier to confront, especially in an age where being choosing to conform to social expectations is the norm. As painful as it is to be as "different" and

¹ And I mean A LOT

self-aware as I am, the value of separation and self-discovery is something I wish to understand through my artwork.

When thinking about the concept of separation, the first thing that comes to mind is the word hermit. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term means “a person living in solitude as a religious discipline or any person living in solitude or seeking to do so”.² Most hermits, from medieval times and beyond, lived simple lives in solitude to focus on religious studies often involving meditation and prayer.³ Most hermitages were caves or natural dwellings in the desert or the forest. This was so that the hermit could escape from the material world and that there was no room for temptation. I found their living spaces, hermitages, particularly intriguing because departure from society into the natural world is something that feels so natural to me, even though that in this day and age it is increasingly unpopular and overall, viewed as unsettling and backwards. I believe this is because the material world is the default and the act of removing oneself from it is shocking to those who have become so accustomed to it. This connects to the idea of change. On average, it takes more than two months before a behavior becomes automatic- a habit.⁴ Being accustomed to a certain lifestyle and then moving onto something else could prove challenging, which justifies the questioning of removing oneself from the familiar and going into the unknown. By analyzing the lives of hermits, it led me to think about the lives of famous artists and intellectuals that shared similar habits.

I first looked to Basquiat: his early life was turbulent, suffering from abuse and depression. While playing in the street one afternoon, he was struck by a car and spent a considerable amount of time in the hospital. While hospitalized, he was given a copy of *Grey's Anatomy* by his mother. Influences from *Grey's Anatomy* are quite prevalent in some of his greatest works like *Back of The Neck*, a piece that showcases anatomical elements. Soon after his hospitalization, his mother was committed to a mental institution, an event that piled onto the trauma that inadvertently drove him to run away from home; later, Basquiat lived a life of seclusion following dear friend Warhol's death in 1987, leading to his death soon after due to a heroin overdose.⁵ Like Basquiat, writer Emily Dickinson lived a life of seclusion. Similar to Basquiat, she was encouraged by her father to engage in her studies and spent a great deal of her childhood focused on her education. In her adult years, Dickinson wrote many of her now-famous poems, the most notable being *Hope Is a Thing With Feathers*, and lived a quiet life, rarely leaving the house. Her health and wellbeing began to decline after the death of her father, in conjunction with speculated medical issues, and eventually died in 1899. With her, died some of her work, but the rest, like Basquiat's, was put out into the world and lived long after she passed away.⁶ When comparing the experiences of Basquiat and Dickinson, the trauma they

² "Hermit." Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hermit. Accessed 9 Nov. 2019.

³ "Hermit." Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermit. Accessed 6 Nov. 2019.

⁴ Maltz, Maxwell. *Psycho-Cybernetics: Updated and Expanded*. Updated Perigee trade paperback edition. ed., New York, Perigee, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2015.

⁵ Sawyer, Miranda. "The Jean-Michel Basquiat I Knew...." *The Guardian*, 3 Sept. 2017, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/sep/03/jean-michel-basquiat-retrospective-barbican. Accessed 9 Nov. 2019.

⁶ Habegger, Alfred. "Emily Dickinson." *Britannica*, 1 Nov. 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Emily-Dickinson. Accessed 9 Nov. 2019.

experienced in their lives led to their seclusion, yet still proved fruitful through the work produced while removed from society, until their deaths.

I find that choosing not to conform is seen as brave and strong, yet the impact it has on mental health can be detrimental in the early stages. All throughout my childhood, I encountered so many people who tore me down for choosing not to conform to the unspoken rules of our community, yet still, I didn't stop being myself. However, I never built a thick skin or combated their unkindness. I tolerated the bullying to stay afloat and maintain any chance of having friends, no matter how toxic the relationship was. Every negative comment and act of malevolence was internalized until one night I snapped. I like to think it was the night my life fell apart. It was early October, about a year ago, and I was painting at my desk and singing along to one of my favorite songs. All of a sudden I started crying. At that moment, I took a step back and realized how unhappy I had been for so many years and how many emotions I had repressed as a result. I remember my mom coming in and asking what was wrong and how scared she looked, but not much after that. I had always been a happy kid and usually only cried when something was wrong, but this was different. We agreed that I needed to start therapy and get to the root of what was going on. The months that followed blurred together. Each morning I would wake up and lay in bed until my mom or dad dragged me out of bed and encouraged me to get dressed and ready for school. I slowly began unraveling. Early nights turned into late ones as I often stayed up crying and avoiding my responsibilities. It started with missing a few homework assignments and showing up late, to not doing homework at all and missing days of school because I could barely function. On the weekends, I spent almost all of my free time sleeping. It was my one coping mechanism that allowed me to escape from the pain I felt in everyday life. This continued for months on end. Each day that went by I was less and less interested in the superficial aspects of my social interactions and found comfort in isolation. During this time, I found that separation was the easiest way to deal with my problems by simply ignoring them. It was not long until I was diagnosed with depression and carried on in this way until the end of the summer.

This period of time is essential to my driving question. Months later when I began to read *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, I noticed so many similarities within my own behavior and those exhibited in Thoreau's findings. I find comfort in his experiences. Within Thoreau's *Walden*, the dichotomy between the self and society is presented through the rich experiences of Thoreau and his own thoughts on life as a whole. Through all of the trials and tribulations, I realized that separating myself and choosing not to conform forced me to view my differences as strengths. I find his initiative inspiring in the way that his time spent at Walden Pond jump-started my initial curiosity into the separation of self from society. Henry David Thoreau was not a hermit and separated himself from society deliberately in order to find an answer to his own questions on life. When explaining his reasoning to leave behind commitment and the uselessness of worldly possessions, Thoreau says it was to go into nature and "front only the essential facts of life" and see if he could learn from it and find "when [he] came to die, discover that [he] had not lived".⁷ I find his perspective on solitude refreshing and increasingly relevant in today's world. Perpetuating this notion, Thoreau also tells readers to "let [their] affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and [to] keep

⁷ Thoreau, Henry David, et al. *Walden and "Civil Disobedience."* New York, Signet Classics, 2012.

[their] accounts on [their] thumbnail”.⁸ Finding the singular meaning of life is not an easy task; therefore, by simplifying the happenings of everyday life, it allows space for the individual to figure out the important aspects of life. Through simplicity, mental clarity can be obtained, and from there, the individual can open up to a realm of infinite possibility. This is what Thoreau did at Walden Pond. His experiment to simplify his life and confront the essential facts allowed him to experience life in its truest form, for “it is life near the bone where it is sweetest”.⁹ Henry David Thoreau did away with unnecessary elements from his previous experiences and brought himself to a space where he could take control of his life and be free to experience all that life had to offer him. Thoreau was never restrained by the opinions and expectations of others and relied on only himself- all he needed. He had occasional visitors that brought meaningful conversation, a clear mind, and the lessons of the natural world. For this reason alone, Thoreau lived not as a hermit, but as an individual that was free from society and recognized the power of separation to live deliberately.

The best time to be an individual was easily the Renaissance Era. In the 14th century, the focus shifted from the deep depths of the Dark Ages to the revelation of the enlightenment which placed great emphasis was placed on self-discovery and the concept of being a well-rounded individual. Beginning with Petrarch, Latin manuscripts from across Europe were rediscovered and the terms humanism and individualism were coined to begin the age of scholarly habits and virtù. As lost knowledge was redistributed, the standards for education and for the average person were raised. The ideal renaissance man was one who engaged in private intellectual study while broadening their perspectives of human potential along with the arts and humanities. When applying the excitement of renaissance humanism and rebirth, the individual can have the power to create who they are rather than struggle to find themselves out in the world. By acquiring the passion needed to sustain a life filled with knowledge, one can “learn to reawaken and keep [themselves] awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn” and “the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor”.¹⁰ This quote from Henry David Thoreau directly relates to the exhilaration of newfound knowledge in the Renaissance Era and the emphasis that was placed on the individual as a self-sufficient entity. To be self-sufficient in an age of reliance is yet another great skill that adds onto the value and the act of separation in itself.

In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude”, which is what I am working towards when confronting difficult experiences.¹¹ I find that there is great value in separation in order to learn valuable lessons and learn more about yourself and that separation doesn’t always have to be physical. To keep a clear mind amidst all of the noise of everyday life, “what [the individual] must do is all that concerns [them], not what the people think”.¹² The idea of crafting the self through lived experience rather than finding it. This relates back to Existentialism, a

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Thoreau

¹¹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." Self-Reliance, emersoncentral.com/texts/essays-first-series/self-reliance/. Accessed 8 Nov. 2019.

¹²Ibid.

philosophical inquiry that states existence precedes essence.¹³ A thread that runs across my collection of research is knowledge. By being self-aware, human beings are “condemned to be free”. According to Sarte, humans are in a constant state of anguish and suffering from birth, and the only way to let those harsh feelings subside is to make choices or even choose to do nothing at all, which is a choice within itself.¹⁴ Whether it be the affirming words of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Sarte, and his existentialism, knowledge, and self-awareness allow the individual to be free from society, or better yet, rise above the noise and find comfort within themselves. As we move through life, these choices we make every day bring us closer to the essence of what it means to be a human and truly live, an answer many struggle to find which condemns us to be free from it. The feeling of anguish associated with finding and claiming my identity exactly what I wish to capture through my artwork. I want to destroy the notions of finding the self and transform it into the creation of the self. If our existence precedes our essence, the ultimate freedom that separates individuals from society are those who abandon “finding” who they are and seek out knowledge and comfort within themselves to create who they want to be. In closing, the questioning of the role of the individual in society has led me on a fruitful journey of self discovery. Through my own personal experiences, I have discovered the immense value of separation and that it truly is a gift.

¹³"Jean-Paul Sartre and Existential Choice." YouTube, 17 Apr. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpXNRtuo38&feature=youtu.be. Accessed 15 Nov. 2019.

¹⁴ Ibid.