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Warped Perception
Acrylic and oil paint on canvas

Self perception has always been a hard thing for me to wrap my mind around. I think to some degree, all of us have a hard time realizing the difference between who we are to other people and who we really are, and what we don't show people. For most of my teenage years I have struggled with not really knowing who I am or how to approach how others perceive me.

My installation focuses on how the perception of ourselves through others can warp the way we see ourselves, and how hard that can be. Through researching and crafting my artwork I have come to a better understanding of who I am and who I would like to be. I chose the medium of painting because I had a specific vision that I wanted to carry out and I knew how I could do that with painting. I also wanted a chance to improve my skills in oil painting. I used acrylic paint for my first layer, and then went over that with oil paint. I also used dirty mirrors to further illustrate the idea of warped perception. The image in the mirror depicts the way we see ourselves, in a skewed, distorted way.

How Accurate is Our Perception of Ourselves?

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OS46

Writer's note: For my project I studied self perception and how the way other people perceive us impacts the way we perceive ourselves.

My own self perception and the idea that others perceive me has been a hard thing for me to grasp for a long time. I think for most people, before middle school and high school and caring what others think about you, life is a lot easier and more fun. In elementary school I remember genuinely being happy and not ever worrying about if any of my friends secretly hated me. I never wondered what others thought about me and never even considered people talking about me behind my back. I wish I could go back to that state of mind, back to not having a care in the world.

I've found that people who don't struggle with anxiety don't really understand the toll it has on you and how it warps your perception of the world. For me, I wasn't always an anxious person, and I was a relatively happy kid. I had good parents and was born into a position of privilege. My family didn't have to worry about money or getting food on the table. My siblings are both perfectly happy, relatively popular, well balanced people with lots of friends. There's nothing about me that would indicate having a difficult experience in life. A lot of times I get frustrated with myself because I feel like I'm wasting the best years of my life by being anxious all the time and worrying about what others think of me. On the other hand I have to remember that it's not really my fault, as much as my brain tries to convince myself that it is.

When something happens during your formative years that completely warps the vision of yourself you had in your head, it will affect the way that you think about yourself. When I was in middle school, something happened that changed the way I thought about myself completely to the point that I no longer recognized myself. I think I just wasn't prepared to go through the

things that I went through and it messed up how my brain works. I switched from going to a huge, underfunded public school to a very small private school with thirty people in my grade. The transition was really hard and while I thought it would be a great new opportunity to get away from everyone in my grade and start fresh, it wasn't really like that at all. I wasn't prepared for being the new kid. I wasn't prepared for people making fun of me every single day for weeks and weeks on end, and I wasn't prepared for suddenly not having any friends when making friends had never been hard for me in the past. I went from assuming that everyone was kind and inclusive to seeing the world in a much darker way. It warped my perception of myself to the point that I simply didn't believe it when people expressed interest in me. I would convince myself that if people liked me, they were playing a trick on me or they didn't actually like the real me. When I got to high school I had pretty much convinced myself that nobody would ever find me attractive, and when that did happen, my brain couldn't register it. I couldn't believe that another human being actually liked me, and that manifested into me giving off that energy. After this happened, I did a lot of self reflection and realized that the way that I see myself greatly impacts the way that other people see me. Because I was convinced that other people couldn't like me, that affected the way people interacted with me. If I didn't like myself and wasn't convinced that I was likable, then how could I expect others to feel that way about me?

I have done a lot of self reflection and even though I have come a long way in realizing my self worth, I still have a long way to go and a lot more work to do. This topic is so important to me for so many reasons and I have had to realize that people see me in a different way than I see myself. Healthy self image is essential to living a happy life, which is something I am still working on.

Self image is the conscious and unconscious narrative that we create about ourselves. It is formed through social interactions in everyday life. Others' views of us are informed by their beliefs and individual experiences. Also, our perception of how they view us is warped. As much as we may try not to compare ourselves to others, we can't help it. We compare ourselves based on expectations of others and society's expectations of us. Positive self image leads to a positive view of ourselves. Negative self image leads to self doubting, and insecurity. Those with confidence and a firm sense of who they are will not be affected by the comments of others (Collingwood).

Studies show that people who have a lower sense of self worth have a higher probability of experiencing memory loss as they get older. However, scientists believe that this could potentially be reversed with a change of mindset. The self image of adolescents has been declining significantly as of recently, and this is because self worth is linked to education in many young people. This causes them to have an unhealthy relationship with school and how they view themselves (Collingwood).

Life patterns are the result of people's perception and the way they view life, and they are formed during childhood. If your expectations are negative, then ultimately your life patterns will be negative. Perceptions are a filter which affects how you see life. The perception that nothing can ever go wrong can lead to major anxiety when even a minor inconvenience happens. However, the perception that you don't deserve happiness will lead to your brain filtering everything good out and making sure that you aren't satisfied (Jantz).

People observe the actions of others and make judgments on their attitude and personality. Self perception theory is that when people are unsure of their own attitudes, they take cues from their own behavior. Self perception theory suggests that emotions come from

actions. For example, people are happy because they smile, and that action affects their mood. A study conducted shows that cartoons are perceived to be funnier if one is smiling ("Self Perception Theory").

How we respond to everyday life is impacted by our self image. Practicing healthy habits improves our lives. Having a healthy body and a healthy mind directly affect each other, and having a healthy state of mind creates positive self image. In a study of the self image of teenage girls, participants who believed themselves to be unpopular were 69 percent more likely to gain weight than those who thought they were popular (Conger). Self image also impacts the likelyhood of adolescents to participate in protected sex. Body image, choices, attitude and experiences in life all contribute to mental image. Defining ourselves is deeply tied to our strengths and struggles. Body dysmorphia causes people to have a distorted mental image of what they look like, and causes them to obsess over every imperfection in themself. Body dysmorphic disorder affects a small percentage of the population; However, many are dissatisfied with the way their body looks and worry about weight is very common, especially with women. Studies show that 46 percent of young girls worry about their weight, and boys are more concerned with looking muscular. Women are more likely to want to physically change their bodies as they age.. "The messages we receive from media, friends and family all play different roles in shaping our body images. Age-wise, adolescents and teens are the most susceptible to negative body images. Young people who are unhappy with their bodies are more prone to eating disorders and depression as well" (Conger).

Positive body image has positive connotations and consequences. Women with healthier body image tend to be more confident and have higher sexual satisfaction. . Relationships are

another factor in mental image. . Women in abusive relationships tend to have lower self esteem (Conger).

"Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is one of the most common mental disorders with a lifetime prevalence of up to 12% in Western countries. Hallmark characteristics are intense fear and avoidance of being evaluated or criticized resulting in extreme discomfort and self-consciousness in everyday social situations" (Schulze). Abnormal gaze perception and seeing things differently than they are is an important part of social anxiety disorder. People with this type of anxiety have biases and process more ambiguous social cues as negative and even threatening (Schulze). Anxiety causes people to act shy and awkward, and other people can see this as unfriendly, aloof or self absorbed. Other's read people with social anxiety's faces and behavior and evaluate them negatively. Those affected by anxiety may act unfriendly or standoffish even if they aren't really like that, and others will react to your behavior and what you show them, not your actual personality ("Perceptions of Social Anxiety"). Anxiety alters what we're conscious of and the way we experience life and see reality. The visual system is like a spotlight that scans the world around us, and we can only focus on small areas of space at a time. Since we're not focusing on anything else, everything outside our vision is blurry, as taking in everything at once would overwhelm our brain. The visual system is biased toward threats and automatically responds to them. It is actually supposed to be a function to help us survive, but anxiety can cause our system to be oversensitive. Anxious people have a threat bias that filters out positive things and only lets in the negative. The world is a scarier and unhappier place to people who have anxiety (Azarian).

      Self perception and image is an important factor that contributes to the way we live our lives. How we view ourselves impacts the way we view the rest of the world, and our life experiences contribute to that.

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