

Surrender

Melissa Carubia

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Department of Art
College of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

William Paterson University of New Jersey

Thesis Committee

Professor Eileen Foti, Dr. Claudia Goldstein, Professor Steve Rittler

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Abstract

Emotions significantly impact an individual's life, influencing relationships, decision-making, and mental health. Feelings such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust can dramatically alter our actions and inherently keep us from our true desires. My primary focus in my thesis is to illuminate and expose emotions that often remain uncomfortable, unseen, or deemed unacceptable by societal standards. Unpleasant feelings are frequently labeled as “shameful” or “unworthy” and are often ignored. Societal factors such as religion, culture, gender norms, race, and mental health awareness influence how an individual perceives the interior and exterior world around them. The absence of healthy forms of expression creates a disconnect from ourselves, allowing our souls to carry the weight of constant reminders of lower vibrational frequencies such as pain, fear, sadness, and anger. By neglecting our emotional needs, we not only do a disservice to ourselves but also jeopardize our relationships with family, friends, and other vital connections.

My art exhibition will provide viewers with the opportunity to acknowledge and release their emotions in a safe space without judgment. It will be an interactive exhibition where audience members wander through the gallery, viewing nine acrylic paintings. Each painting measures five by four feet and depicts an emotional experience as its own “entity.” If an audience member feels drawn to a painting, they can approach it and reflect on their own emotions and personal experiences while viewing the piece. If they need to release an unresolved emotion, they can write it down on paper provided next to each painting. Each paper is colored and coordinated with its assigned painting. The individual then walks over to the sculpted tree, “transferring” their unwanted or uncomfortable emotion to the tree. After the show concludes, I will collect all the papers and burn them in a fire, surrendering the thoughts and feelings of my viewers to the universe.

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Introduction

The human experience is a multifaceted and intricate journey. From the moment we are born, we navigate a variety of life experiences that shape our identities, personalities, and senses of self. These experiences present both rewards and challenges across all areas of life, including relationships, beliefs, and personal growth. As we encounter these situations, our intertwined emotions add a layer of complexity to our existence. This inherent complexity impacts our daily lives, affecting our emotional well-being and spirit. Ultimately, our emotions govern our lives, often without our conscious awareness.

Humans share similar and unique life lessons with each other. We encounter a series of rewards and challenges that influence our decision-making, relationships, and personal growth, which, in the end, impact our emotions. This adds a layer of complexity to our lives, deeply intertwining us with our emotional bodies. These interactions amplify our emotions, for better or for worse, molding our identities in ways that may obscure our true essence. This can damage our sense of self, our beliefs, and our perceptions of the world around us. This is why acknowledging and embracing these emotions is essential; neglecting them can lead to stagnation and hinder our development.

If our emotional needs are not met due to limiting belief systems, then how are we truly living? If we cannot begin to acknowledge our emotions—no matter how intense or uncomfortable they may feel—then we are doing a disservice to ourselves. This is how the human body is designed, and we, as a society, should no longer neglect our own needs to conform to outside influences. It is important to recognize and validate our emotions regardless of societal pressures and generational behaviors. This neglect is a detriment to our authenticity. If we continue to live with a false sense of self, we will never know what it truly means to be human.

Reflecting on my own life experiences, my emotions were often overlooked and neglected throughout my childhood. My feelings were never validated, and I was trained to push my feelings aside to prioritize other's needs. This suppression of my true emotions led me to feelings of depression, grief, pain, and anger. I was not allowing myself to live authentically. I feel passionate about exploring this topic in my work, as it

can serve not only as a healing experience for myself but also as a platform for viewers to confront and release these uncomfortable emotions in a safe, judgment-free space. Art has the power to evoke emotions, making it a perfect avenue for exploring the complexities of the human experience.

Beginning

In my undergraduate degree at Rowan University, my exploration in my unusual vivid and spiritual dreams was at the forefront. Since I was a child, I had unexplainable spiritual dreams and encounters in my waking life. From messages from passed on loved ones, to synchronicities during the day, it was a daily occurrence, and nothing out of the ordinary. The supernatural was interesting, terrifying, and comforting all at the same time, but it was a part of me, so I began creating them on canvas. When I entered William Paterson's MFA program in fall of 2019, I continued to explore this theme because dreaming was something I was familiar with and could not escape. Painting my dreams on canvas was an easy way to cope with my continuous nightmares, past life regressions, and unexplainable encounters with supernatural beings. It helped me process my feelings, my visions, and my state of mind. Although some dreams were bright and full of love, others were very dark and disturbing, making me become extremely anxious, depressed, and paranoid. I continued to paint my dreams for about the first three years but after a while, I started to pull away from a narrative scene. I wanted to dive deep into the meaning behind the dream to uncover the hidden emotion.

This introspection began after being in therapy for a few years. I gained insight into myself that I didn't think was possible. I learned that my struggles with self-worth stemmed from past emotional abuse which indirectly molded me into a people-pleasing perfectionist, driven to meet unrealistic expectations of others in order to receive their love or acceptance. My emotional needs were often overlooked, often leaving me to feel alone, invisible, and unheard. As therapy progressed, I uncovered patterns of negative self-talk and fear that trapped me in the cycle of doubt. I over-trusted and struggled with setting healthy boundaries, and I was completely unaware of it all. Through breath work, cognitive changes, and journaling, I began addressing these issues and making progress.

As I continued therapy while working on my masters, I learned that my nightmares were often ways that my mind, body, and spirit processed my traumas. I often pushed down my feelings for the sake of others, but I never realized how it was affecting my soul. I was doing a disservice to myself and giving away my power to others for the sake of wanting to feel loved. I recognized that in my dreams, the more disconnected I became from my emotions, the more present demons and shadow figures were. The more I embraced my feelings, the more spirit guides and angels appeared. It became clear to me that how I felt about myself and my outlook on life was the energy that I was emitting into the universe.

This new self-awareness made me analyze my artwork differently. I was no longer looking at my paintings as reflections of my dreams, but as a representation of my emotional state. I questioned how my feelings at the time attracted darker energies and how I could change my frequency to manifest more positive and light energy into my life. This self-awareness was a game changer for me. I was no longer in fear of my dreams, and I wanted to reveal the emotions behind them. My emotions were hidden in my paintings, and I needed to expose them for the sake of my own happiness. This self-recognition of myself led me to explore the complexity of human emotions and understand how others might face similar emotional turmoil.

Development

During the developing stages of my work, I focused on how to manipulate the figure to create different emotional moments and states of mind. Our emotions faded in and out, constantly bringing us back to the past or pushing us far into the future. It is rare to stay in the present moment, and this was something I aimed to showcase in my work. During the 2023 spring semester, I played close attention to the human form, utilizing color interpretation to convey emotion. I originally worked with just one figure, but later, I attempted to overlap images within the same composition. I wanted to capture the illusion of an emotional experience happening simultaneously within the emotional body, so I decided to start exploring this concept with myself first. In order to

gain a deeper understanding of my own emotions, I needed to figure out how they could possibly manifest visually.

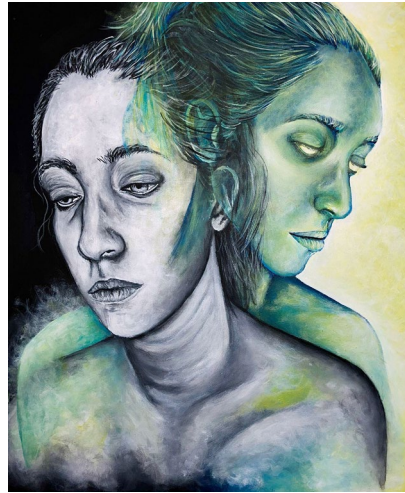


Figure 1, *Self Portrait*, Acrylic on Canvas, 16 x 20, 2023

I took pictures of myself from different angles, brought them into Procreate, and changed the opacity. This was the perfect way to see how the pictures would lay on top of each other within the composition. After I felt confident about the composition, I transferred it to canvas without any plan for a color scheme. For the painting titled, *Self Portrait* (Fig. 1), I intuitively chose vibrant colors against a grayscale image. This exploration became the catalyst for my series regarding the experimentation within the planes. The consistent layering of paint while simultaneously pushing back and pulling forward different levels of the figure and background aided in this visual representation of the figure's state of being.

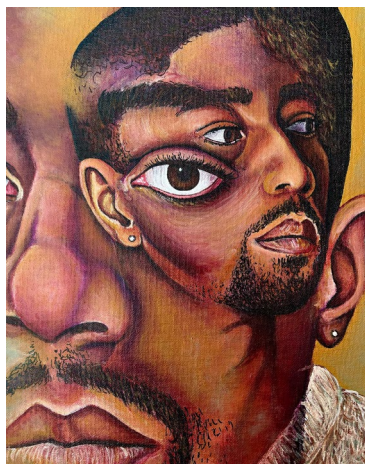


Figure 2, *Darin*, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 11x14, 2023



Figure 3, *Jason*, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 11x14, 2023

I continued to experiment with this visual concept and application of layering. Instead of working large, I decided to work smaller just so I could plan out compositions and paint faster to see what worked. I grabbed some 11x14 inch canvas board and explored two figures, my friend, Darin and my husband, Jason. For the painting titled, *Darin (Fig. 2)*, I painted with normal skin tones with some exaggeration of enhanced color. With the painting *Jason (Fig. 3)*, I decided to paint with more vibrant colors. This time around, I allowed the form of the faces to become more intertwined within itself. I did not want to create too much of a separation otherwise, it would be difficult to see the exchange in emotion. This play led to a lot of new ideas for my future pieces, except in regarding the size. Painting small was very stressful for me. I felt that the figures were too confined in the small square format. There also wasn't much room for the background to correlate with the images. I believed that the size of the canvas was hindering the overall experience. The impact of the emotions felt small and unimportant. This led me to the decision to work much larger, which in the end would become 60 x 48 inches.

In the winter, I began painting my first large scale painting. Just like Jenny Saville, I wanted to explore my theme and techniques in a large format in order to give the viewer a chance to be present within the moment. Before I even got a chance to think about what I wanted to make, my intuition kept creeping in. In my mind's eye, I kept seeing flash images of a profile of an angry man. At first, I ignored it because my mind constantly shows me images. But when I kept seeing this clear silhouette at work or before bed, I knew I needed to draw it. As I began drawing it out on paper, I realized that this man was in pain. His anger was powerful, but deep within, he was lost and wounded. Within my sketch, I began to add another man within the existing profile as a way to showcase what was hidden deep inside. As I finished the sketch, I knew this was going to be my first large painting.

During the artistic process, I applied the same techniques that I used in the smaller paintings alongside new techniques. I began by exploring my sketch digitally and then transferred it to canvas. Originally, the colors I planned on using were much darker and jarring, but as I was painting, I felt drawn to oranges, reds, and teals. I

utilized paint acrylic pens to enhance detail and texture in the face and hair. Every once in a while, I would take a step back to analyze the painting to see if I needed to tweak anything. But, I often found myself concerned about the person trapped inside the painting. Even though I could not identify with the anger, I could relate to the despair the figure on the left was feeling. The internal conflict I felt seemed to influence my brushstrokes, prompting me to reflect more deeply on the painting.

In Eckhart Tolle's "Power of Now," it discusses the importance of living in the present moment as a path to spiritual awakening and inner peace. He believes that human suffering stems from identifying with the mind and the ego, which often dwell on the past or worry about the future. He states, "if you cannot feel your emotions, if you cut off from them, you will eventually experience them on a purely physical level, as a physical problem" or "symptom" (25-26) ¹. This resonated with me in relation to not only my life, but also this painting. This intuitive flash image was a mere representation of that statement. Deep and rooted pain can become a physical manifestation of anger.



Figure 4, *Emotion 1*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2023

You can most likely recall a time or a moment when you spoke with someone who was severely angry. They may have been angry at someone or something in life

¹ Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now*. Hodder Paperback, 2001.

and would create an uncomfortable atmosphere for all those around them. We often think to ourselves, why are they so angry? But what some do not realize is that it is a physical representation of sadness and pain. Their pain was never fully processed, released, and healed, thus resulting in a physical expression. In *Emotion 1*, (Fig. 4), the man on the left lays dormant, covering his naked body in a fetal position. This emotion is disconnected and hidden within the profile of the angry man. The man's appearance creates a sense of anger, but deep within he is suffering. This painting is a mere representation in relation to the constant issue of unhealthy expressions of emotions. This can ultimately be harmful for both the individual experiencing the anger as well as those they interact with in their lives.

As I continued exploring my work, I found myself influenced by my dreams again. One night, I dreamt that I was at work. I was walking with a coworker who became overcome with sadness. Suddenly, he morphed into a small child, and he began to cry. I immediately hugged and gave him the comfort he needed. When I woke up, I knew at that moment, this dream was going to be the focus of my next painting. Childhood wounds are something we all struggle with, and it is common for adults to have recurring memories that impact their development in adolescents. Most of the time, the painful moments are the most detrimental, and sometimes we are not even consciously aware of it. If our childhood wounds are not uncovered or addressed, we are often left dealing with them as adults.



Figure 5, *Emotion 3*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024

American Author, Daniel Goleman's book, "Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ" reiterates his groundbreaking research on the brain and how it relates to behavior, IQ, and emotional intelligence. He argues that emotional intelligence (EQ), which encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, is more crucial than traditional intelligence (IQ). He also examines family dynamics and how certain situations in life impact individuals during their development in adolescence. He claims, "when similar moments are repeated countless times over the course of childhood, they impact some of the most fundamental emotional messages of a lifetime—lessons that can determine a life course" (168)². A child's home life, surrounding area, and community can profoundly impact their life and can cause trauma. In *Emotion 3 (Fig. 5)*, I make this connection between an adult male and his childhood self. The images of both figures blend and shift between each other. The vibrant blues and yellows create a contrast, symbolizing emotional release and separation, yet still conveying a sense of interconnectedness. A human heart is placed in the same location in their chests, creating a shared reflection of a memory. This painting marks a transformative milestone for me, as it signifies the shift toward more narrative-driven artwork, rather than merely illustrating an emotion. Each subsequent piece evolves into a visual narrative that conveys a richer, more immersive experience.

After completing *Emotion 3 (Fig. 5)*, I felt inspired to turn inward. I decided to create another self-portrait inspired by another dream involving vibrating butterflies. In the dream, I was wandering around in an unfamiliar place. It was bright, colorful and surreal. Suddenly, I felt a sensation of vibration around my crown chakra. As I glanced up, I could see bright golden monarch butterflies flying around my head. They moved with such beauty, grace, and importance. The vibration was overpowering and unbelievable to which I thought to myself, *are these butterflies actually real?* Immediately, the butterflies stopped vibrating, fell to the ground, and died. I could feel the weight of the butterflies falling into the grass and it brought me to my knees. Everything went dark, and then I woke up.

² Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Bantam Books, 1995.

As I searched inward for the symbolism behind my dream, I became aware that the butterflies' deaths reflected self-doubt. Since I didn't believe the butterflies were real, they became irrelevant and faded away. This doubt stems from childhood wounds of shame, where constant criticism left me feeling like I was never good enough and always needed improvement. I wanted to encapsulate this experience for my next piece and began right away by taking pictures of myself. As I laid out my composition, I placed two images of myself intertwined at the head. To counteract the energy of high and low vibrations, I chose contrasting colors such as brighter pinks, yellows, golds and then pale blues, purples and gray. Circling around both versions of me are monarch butterflies. As the butterflies fly towards the less vibrant version of me, the butterflies start to fade, losing their glow. This symbolizes the self-doubt and low self-esteem I often feel.



Figure 6, *Emotion 4*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024

In *Emotion 4* (Fig. 6), the lighter version of myself is portrayed looking at the viewer, connecting with them while the darker version is looking down and away from them. In this painting, I am experiencing a sense of uncertainty and distrust in my own authentic self. As butterflies often symbolize change and transformation, the shift in energy causes the self-recognition and change to stop, thus creating a repeated pattern. This mindset keeps us trapped within old cycles, which Eckart Tolle often illuminates in his writings. He states, “an emotion usually represents an amplified and energized thought pattern, and because it is often overpowering energetic charge, it is

not easy initially to stay present enough to watch it. It wants to take you over, and it usually succeeds-unless there is enough presence in you” (27) ³. This use of color, expression of my portraits, and imagery enhances the energetic frequency of our thoughts and emotions and self-awareness. In order to break free, we must recognize this, otherwise we will continue to live in the continuous loop of life.

I began sketching out my next idea. Most of the time, I would allow my intuition to guide me on my next composition. Certain feelings and imagery would pop up, and I would begin to sketch, solely relying on my instincts. For this piece, I kept seeing a scared man, cowering in fear, and trapped inside himself. Almost as if he could recognize his fear, but felt helpless. Once the composition was set, I began painting and choosing colors based on my vision. In *Emotion 5 (Fig. 7)*, a dominant portrait of a man is present. His one eye is open wide while the other is completely blacked out. Within him is himself, trapped within the portrait. The green figure is present, but fearful of the confined space. I wanted to play on this idea of the fear he was experiencing as recognizable, but unwilling to do something to change his mood. Interestingly, as I was painting the green figure in the bottom right corner, I kept saying to myself, “*he looks just like my brother.*”



Figure 6. *Emotion 5*. Acrylic on Canvas. 60x48. 2024

³ Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now*. Hodder Paperback, 2001.

It's fascinating how our unconscious mind seeps into our reality without making itself known. My older brother has severe OCD, Tourette's syndrome, depression, anxiety, and was recently diagnosed with mild autism. My whole childhood revolved around his struggles and why his life wasn't perfect. Although I didn't face the same challenges as my brother, the negative family dynamic surrounding his disability deeply affected me. I wasn't allowed to struggle because *"my life wasn't as difficult as my brother's."* Reflecting on this as an adult, I realize how unhealthy this was for both my brother and me. In my view, my parents created a negative environment focused on tragedy and victimhood for my brother. They struggled to see the bright side, but it's hard to achieve greatness or pursue happiness with that mindset.

Caroline Myss, an American author who writes and speaks on mysticism and wellness, discusses victimhood in great detail. She says, *"The journey of the victim is all about self-esteem. It's all about this journey of moving in perception—moving in empowerment to becoming someone who is not overwhelmed, or terrified, or feeling like you are victimized by forces in the outside world."*⁴ We have the ability to break free from our own darkness, but some choose to stay in it out of fear. Though I don't blame my parents, I understand this negative family cycle began long before my brother and I were born, and my brother's disability amplified it. Ultimately, it comes down to my parents' self-esteem and how they feel about themselves. My intention wasn't to focus on my brother's mental health struggles, but somehow, it happened. This reveals the healing power of art. This painting allowed me to not only connect with my brother and have compassion for his struggles, but also to heal the part of myself that once believed I wasn't important.

I have always found solace and a sense of safety in creating art. Interestingly, my best work seems to emerge when I'm emotionally charged or feeling unbalanced. Whenever I try to force an idea, it doesn't feel authentic, and I often abandon the piece before it's finished. However, when intense emotions take over, the process flows and the act of creating feels natural. For example, just before the holiday break, I learned

⁴ Myss, Caroline. "The Victim: The Power of Archetypes." *Caroline Myss*, 1 Feb. 2023, development.myss.com/the-victim-the-power-of-archetypes. Accessed 12 Nov. 2024.

that I had been denied my masters column movement at work for the next school year. This was because they had changed the paperwork submission process. Although I was unaware of this deadline and missed it only by nineteen days, I was still held accountable for the mistake. I, as many other teachers, are overworked, under-appreciated, disrespected, and exhausted, and the reason that I missed this deadline is due to burn out. I reached out to human resources, explained my situation, and pleaded for an extension, but they denied my request with a superficial response and “*hope you have a great winter break.*” As I am taught and praised for being compassionate and understanding toward my students and their parents, it was deeply disheartening to be met with such a lack of empathy. Their dismissal of my situation, as though it meant nothing, left me feeling invisible and unworthy of understanding. It evoked a profound sense of despair, helplessness, and rage within me, which led to my next painting. Overwhelmed by emotion, I put on my headphones, grabbed my tablet, and began to draw.

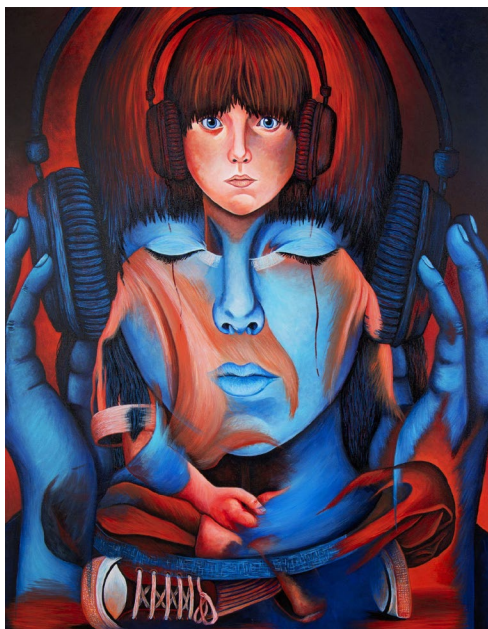


Figure 8, *Emotion 8*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024

The imagery of a girl lost within herself in her music emerged. In *Emotion 8* (Fig. 8), a strong representation of a young girl wearing headphones encapsulates the composition. The polarizing and chaotic contrast of red and blue intensifies the internal struggle of the child, reflecting on one of my emotional triggers of feeling unheard. The rage I felt within my body was a manifestation of my pain, which is depicted as a

suppression through music. Drowning out my feelings was and still is to this day, one of my coping mechanisms. Music allows me to drown out my current reality and imagine another one. Although disassociation through music can be healing for the moment, it is just a band aid; there is a scar underneath that has not healed.

It is important to maintain our mental strength in order for us to be mentally and emotionally balanced and to live a fulfilled life. In Amy Morin's "13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do," she suggests ways of how a person can develop their mind and provides tips and strategies to improve their mental health, regardless of the situation. In chapter 7, she talks about the issues of dwelling on the past and how it can often distract us from the present. She claims, "ruminating on the past won't change it. Instead, waste your time on dwelling on dwelling on what's already happened will only lead to more problems in the future" (135-136).⁵ With being denied a raise at work, I equated this scenario made me feel unheard and unworthy, which is an unhealed wound from my childhood. She also suggests ways to shift in your thinking to condition the brain to focus on the positive.

I decided for my own mental health, to look at this situation from a different perspective. As Sonia Choquette suggests in her book, "Trust Your Vibes," she reinforces the importance of breath to bring awareness to the present and to yourself. She claims, "when we're stressed or fearful, we tend to hold our breath, which traps us in the head and cuts us off from our hearts, our spirits and intuitive vibes" (41)⁶. While I was fearful of not being able to have enough money for my expenses, I tried to breathe and clear my mind. At that moment, I reflected on two phrases I hear often and repeat to myself in times when I am struggling. The phrases are "*man's rejection is God's protection*" and "*everything happens for a reason.*" These two phrases help me remember that there is a plan for me. I might not know the reason why certain things don't go according to my plan, but in the end, it is for another reason. My rejection for a pay increase from work forces me to look elsewhere for money, which can ultimately connect to the right people. This can be beneficial for me and dreams of becoming a full

⁵ Morin, Amy. "13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do." HarperCollins Publishers. 2014

⁶ Choquette, Sonia. *Trust Your Vibes. Revised Edition.* Hay House, INC, 2004

time artist, art teacher and inspiration for others, instead of feeling stuck, underpaid, and unappreciated at my current job. Regardless of the situation, I know that I will pull through and continue to be grateful for these life lessons because ultimately, it is for the sake of my own healing and happiness.

Influences & Context

Since the start of my MFA, I was influenced by various topics that sparked my interest in exploring emotions. Psychology, spiritual practices, science, and the visual arts have served valuable frameworks in my journey. They solidified the importance of healthy emotional expression as crucial to human existence. Emotions facilitate communication, strengthen connections, and serve as survival mechanisms that align with our core values. They influence our thoughts and actions, playing a role in our mental health and overall well-being. Recognizing and understanding our emotions allows us to connect more deeply with others and ourselves to cultivate a more meaningful life. Ultimately, they are vital to navigating our existence and enriching our life here on earth.

If we start with the basics, we can agree that throughout our lives, we experience a wide range of emotions. Feelings such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust often move fluidly throughout our body, depending on the circumstances. We can agree that the idea of a “feeling” seems intangible, which makes us question its existence and purpose in our body. It seems strange how emotions often emerge spontaneously, without our conscious control, leaving us to wonder if they are simply biological responses or if they serve a deeper, more mysterious purpose. This ambiguity of our emotions has intrigued us, thus studied by many around the world.

Carl Jung, a famous psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, was known for his work in analytical psychology. His work focused on the concept of the collective unconscious, a shared layer of the unconscious mind, and use of universal symbols and patterns of behavior. He also elaborated on the process of individuation, where a person searches for different parts of their personality to achieve self-awareness. In Jung’s “Diagnoses the Dictators,” referenced in Princeton University’s Press, Jung claims, “emotions are instinctive, involuntary reactions which upset the rational order of consciousness by

their elemental outbursts. Affects are not “made” or willfully produced; they simply happen. In a state of affect a trait of character sometimes appears which is strange even to the person concerned, or hidden contents may irrupt involuntarily (9)”⁷. Jung’s research supports the idea that emotions are instinctive to both the human body and psyche, often arising without conscious reasoning. We may not fully understand why or how, but nonetheless, they cannot be ignored and should not be suppressed.

Now looking at our emotions as intrinsic and involuntary, if we dive down a bit deeper, we can say that our emotions serve as our intuitive compass while navigating through life. In order to pilot correctly, we must look inward and connect with ourselves in order to improve emotional intelligence. American psychologist, author, and science journalist Daniel Goldman reiterates the importance of emotional intelligence as part of the significance of emotions and how it impacts us in all facets of our lives. He claims, “our emotions, they say, guide us in facing predicaments and taste too important to leave to intellect alone-danger, painful, loss, persisting toward a goal...each emotion offers a distinctive readiness to act; each points us in a direction that has worked well to handle the recurring challenges of human life (4).”⁸ He believes that our emotions are powerful and essential guides through our everyday life, especially during times of change, transition, or healing. However, if we are led off course by unhealthy forms of expression, it can affect our lives not just in our immediate reality, but also energetically, from a religious or metaphysical standpoint.

Many religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and New Age spiritual practices, focus on one’s energy centers (chakras) in the body, which store our habits, feelings, beliefs, thoughts, fears, and desires. Commonly, there are seven chakra points located along the spine, from the base of the spine up to the crown of the head. Each of the seven chakras govern particular physical and emotional functions and serve a purpose in specific qualities such as earthly elements, colors, and aspects of consciousness. In Allegra Learning’s article, “The Power to Heal” it states, “the goal of chakra balancing is a strong, clear energy system, because the more open, clear and balanced the chakras,

⁷ Jung, Carl. “Diagnoses the Dictators” (1939), C. G. *Quotable Jung-Chapter 1*. Princeton University Press, Year of Publication. <https://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/s10550.pdf>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2024.

⁸ Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Bantam Books, 1995.

the more energy that can flow through the body. This energy is essential for vitality, health, and continued spiritual growth” (3).⁹ If one of the seven chakras have blockages, then it is due to an emotional or energetic imbalance within the mind, body, and soul. In order to unblock these negative energies, it takes self-reflection, introspection, and healing which can be achieved through many various forms of mental health practices. These practices can include meditation, therapy, breath work, journaling, music and or art.

While religion, beliefs, and science often don't share common ground, there is evidence to suggest that emotions can be understood as energetic vibrations and frequencies. Famous scientist Albert Einstein once said, “everything is energy and that’s all there is to it. Match the frequency of the reality you want, and you cannot help but get that reality. It can be no other way. This is not philosophy. This is physics.”¹⁰ It is a proven fact that everything is made up of matter, and that matter is made up of energy. Every kind of matter or energy vibrates at a certain frequency. If we were to think of it in basic terms, energy that aligns with a particular frequency or vibration is known as resonance energy. Similar to pushing a table, objects or systems that resonate with certain frequencies can absorb energy easily and vibrate more intensely and transfer it outwardly to another object. When exposed to the right frequency, energy can build up in systems such as atoms, molecules and sound. This evidence supports that if everything is made of energy and that energy of another object can impact another, this means that our own thoughts and feelings are formulated into some kind of energetic frequency.

Similar to our feelings, resonance causes “person 1” to vibrate at the same frequency of “person 2”, forcing the second person to vibrate similarly to the first person. This plays on the idea of an individual's energy being transferred or absorbed by others positively or negatively. Dr. Joe Dispenza touches upon emotions as energetic frequencies in his research. In his book, “Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself,” he

⁹ Allegra Learning. *The Chakra System*. Allegra Learning, 2015, <https://allegralearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/The-Chakra-System.pdf>.

¹⁰ Meindl, Anthony. “We All Have an Inner Einstein: Figure Your Frequency Out First to Find It.” *AnthonyMeindl.com*, 22 Aug. 2023 <https://www.anthonymeindl.com/blog/we-all-have-an-inner-einstein-figure-your-frequency-out-first-to-find-it/>.

suggests to “think of emotions as “energy in motion.” If you share the same emotions, you share the same energy.” And just like two atoms of oxygen that share an invisible field of energy beyond space and time, in order to bond together in a relationship to form air, you are bonded in an invisible field of energy to everything, person, and place in your external life (157) ”.¹¹ This idea that there is an invisible and unexplainable give and take of energy between people is real is crucial to the study of emotions.

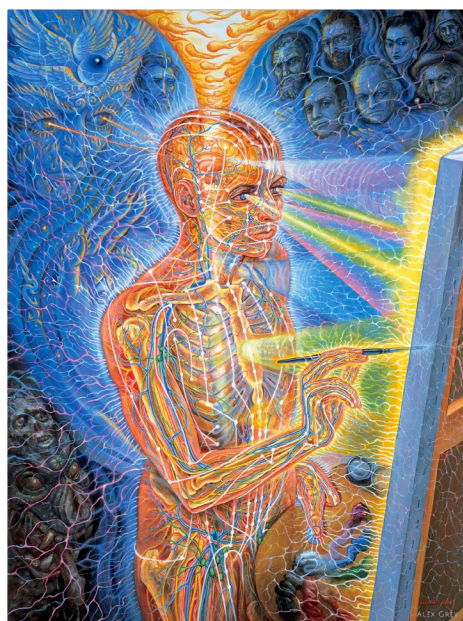


Figure 9, *Painting*, Alex Grey, Oil on linen, 30x40

This can also be used to describe how energy is transferred into an artist's work. Spiritual artist, Alex Grey illustrates this very concept in many of his paintings. In his piece called, *Painting* (Fig. 9), you can see and feel the energetic sensations of an individual who is creating art. Through use of intense bold colors, small energetic brush strokes, and detailed depictions of human anatomy, Grey's painting illuminates an energetic flow through mind, body, and spirit. The golden-orange light at the crown chakra flows through the person's body, radiating outward into the composition. The mysterious blue figure in the top left of the composition pierces the back of the figure, almost suggesting a transfer of spiritual knowledge that the artist is then recreating on the canvas. This visual representation of energy demonstrates the invisible transfer of energy into an artist's work.

¹¹ Dispenza, Joe. *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself: How to Lose Your Mind and Create a New One*. Carlsbad, Hay House, 2012.

Whether they are aware of it or not, artists often create art that involves their mental and emotional state. Those energetic sensations, which are stemmed by a multitude of reasons, are often transferred as energy into their creations. Their energy is then absorbed by their viewers, which can be felt by the viewer. The perception of the viewer plays a crucial role in viewing art. This gives the audience their own experiences in life that can affect the way we view and look at art. Whether positive or negative, the energy in art can be “subjective” and can vary from person to person based on their individual perception and interpretation of the artwork. The energy can be felt by the viewer and can have a profound impact on their emotional and psychological state. No matter the energy perceived, the viewer has a chance to connect with the work in our own way to help us in our own personal journey.

During my exploration of my thesis, I was inspired by a variety of artists who all shared this common ground. On the surface, their work seems vastly different, however, deep within each painting exposed the existential struggle of humanity. Their art was infused with psychological and often spiritual dimensions of emotional distress, bringing forth the uncomfortable. Their use of color, application of paint, lighting, composition, and imagery creates a distorted reality, in which the human figure resides, aiding in the portrayal of the raw and vulnerable aspects of humanity. Their work highlights the complex journey of life, through their own personal journey, in order to bring the internal and external reality to the surface.

The first painter I discovered was Zdzisław Beksiński. I was immediately drawn to his paintings due to his use of dark and disturbing imagery and striking bold colors. While looking at some of his work, it reminded me of my dreams and how vividly uncomfortable they were. After some research, I discovered that his work primarily focuses on surreal and disturbing landscapes of twisted humanoid figures in a dystopian world. Although his work is not a representation of his dreams, he believed that his art was an exploration of his own imagination and the subconscious. This raised the question of the subconscious, unspoken fears or repressed emotions he experienced in his life.

While living in Poland during the Nazi invasion during WWII, he witnessed immense evil, destruction, and chaos. Beksiński also suffered tragedy within his

immediate family, losing his wife to cancer and his son to suicide. As a coping mechanism, he turned to art, but he could not always explain how or why he created these images. He showcased an alternate universe or as I see it, the dark aspects of humanity. Whenever he would be asked about the symbolism or meaning behind his work, Beksiński would reply, “I cannot conceive of a sensible statement on painting,”¹² often avoiding an explanation. I believe his inability to express his pain deeply affected him to a degree he did not feel comfortable sharing with others, which could explain why many of his paintings were “untitled.”



Figure 10, *Untitled*, Zdzisław Beksiński, date & size unknown

His painting, *Untitled* (Fig.10) is a great example of his ability to illuminate an intense internal struggle. The main composition suggests a human head in the center of a desolate landscape. The figure painted in light blues and greens seems smirking and unfazed by the outpour of organic blood-like vine, out of his eye sockets. In the center of the figure's head near the third eye is another human head, expressionless, but present. The emotional experience is illustrated as a release of the internal, which I felt connected to immediately. I often become overwhelmed with thoughts and anxiety, and this piece was a perfect representation of my own struggles.

¹² "DREAMWORKS: Zdzisław Beksiński." *Witness This*, 15 Nov. 2020, <https://www.witness-this.com/art/dreamworks-zdzislaw-beksinski/>.

In my painting titled, *Emotion 2* (Fig. 11), I convey an emotional experience that is familiar to me. In the winter, I typically struggle with feelings of frustration, confinement, and sadness. My senses are often heightened, which intensified a vicious cycle of negative thoughts. My mind ruminates on past scenarios and fears about the future, making it difficult to focus on the present moment. Before therapy, I couldn't understand the shifts in my mood during the later fall and winter seasons, which often left me feeling apathetic about life and plagued by intense creative blocks. In therapy, my therapist helped me realize that I was experiencing seasonal depression, which significantly impacted my mental health.



Figure 11, *Emotion 2*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024

I struggled with continuous cycles of negative thinking until I learned healthy expressions and cognitive behavioral changes in my mind to get the thoughts to stop. In Dr. Joe Dispenza's "Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself," he thoroughly explains how to break repetitive cycles that often bring us grief. He gives detailed step by step instructions on how to focus your mind, recognize the thoughts and/or emotions, and release. He states, "almost all of what we demonstrate starts with a thought. But just because you have a thought doesn't necessarily mean it's true. Most thoughts are just old circuits in your brain that have become hardwired by your repetitive violation (261)."¹³ We are not defined by our genes or hardwired to be a certain way forever, thus

¹³ Dispenza, Joe. *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself: How to Lose Your Mind and Create a New One*. Carlsbad, Hay House, 2012.

allowing us to break from conditioned unhealthy cycles in order for us to take our power back. While I focused on recreating a sense of emotional balance, I created the imagery for this piece. This was an emotional experience that I could not avoid, and in its creation, it helped me gain a sense of grounding. I was able to be present in the artistic process and the negative thoughts began to quiet.

Scott Hutchison is another artist that explores this theme of transformation and introspection through the human form. As a contemporary artist in the DC area, his work highlights themes of identity and introspection of the human form. His paintings consist of overlapping figures merged into a single composition which makes them multifaceted and abstract. This artistic decision suggests that our identity is ever-changing, shaped by time and experience. As Hutchinson exclaims, he states that his figures are “meant to evoke the idea that our identity is in flux. Though we are singular beings, our psyche is not. We are molded in part by time and our life experiences.”¹⁴ Through his work, Hutchison encourages viewers to reflect on the fluid and evolving nature of human identity.

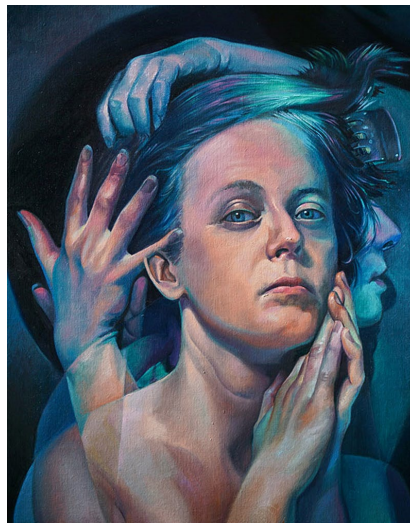


Figure 12, *Her Echo-Her Shadow*, Scott Hutchinson, Oil on linen, 16x20

In Hutchinson's painting, *Her Echo-Her Shadow* (Fig. 12) he plays with this very idea. In the center of the composition is a woman resting on her hands, encompassed

¹⁴ "Paintings by Scott Hutchison." *Artospective*, 8 Aug. 2018, artospective.blogspot.com/2018/08/paintings-by-scott-hutchison.html. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.

by a darker background. Her portrait is surrounded by a series of hands, creating a circular motion that draws the eye toward the background figure—her shadow. All of these moving parts of her but encompassed and intertwined within the figure.

Hutchinson touches upon the figures as displaced, almost like self-aware and timeless layered memories. His manipulation of the figure not only creates a sense of movement within the overall composition, but it illuminates his concept and theme of constant change throughout our journey. He states, “All of my work can be seen as a journal entry, the manifestation of a deep concern for place and purpose in this world.”¹⁵ This idea of overlapping images and playing with the planes in the painting itself is something that not only inspired me, but aided me in similar themes expressed in my work.



Figure 13, *Emotion 7*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024

In my paintings, I play around with this very concept. In my painting *Emotion 7* (Fig. 13) I portray an image of a man who is smiling. At first, you see a genuine and confident smile in the young man, but the more you analyze the painting, he becomes enveloped by another version of himself wearing an uncanny grin. This grin is not only unsettling, but it plays on the idea of the ever-changing experiences which are shaped in time. While the man may seem happy, it is possible that continuous life experiences

¹⁵ "Paintings by Scott Hutchinson." *Artospective*, 8 Aug. 2018, artospective.blogspot.com/2018/08/paintings-by-scott-hutchison.html. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.

are causing him to live a life of lies. By hiding his pain behind a smile, he is not only shifting between emotional states, but also suppressing his true feelings. This very concept of forcing a smile in order to project toxic positivity has been an interesting topic for me because I often feel I need to fake a smile around others, even when I am unhappy.

According to Amy Morin's article, "Smiling Depression: When Things Aren't Quite What They Seem," she discusses the very concept of masking by smiling. She claims that masking our emotions with a smile is not only harmful, but a detriment to our mental and emotional health. She explains that many individuals who smile to hide their emotions often suffer from high levels of depression, a condition known as smiling depression. She claims that "smiling depression occurs when individuals who are experiencing depression mask their symptoms. They hide behind a smile to convince other people that they are happy."¹⁶ Many individuals fear embarrassment or backlash from peers, coworkers, or family members. Those who conceal their true feelings behind smiles often struggle with low self-esteem and unrealistic expectations of themselves, thus this masking behavior is tied to deeper emotional challenges. Overall, both Hutchinson and I share this interwoven journey of people.

The last artist that touches upon similar themes in my work is Jenny Saville. Her work focuses on the human body as classical figuration and modern abstraction. Her large scale oil paintings consist of heavy layers of paint, creating a sense of realism to the physical attributes of the skin. The scale of her pieces is striking, emphasizing on vulnerability, struggle, and the physicality of existence. By painting her work large, she confronts these raw experiences in a visceral and shocking way. Themes of self-image, mortality, and identity are present in her work in order to aid in her exploitation of human emotions. Her representation of her figures reflects the relationship between body, mind and society. This idea of working is very similar to my artistic practice and process.

¹⁶ Morin, Amy. "Smiling Depression: When Things Aren't Quite What They Seem." *Verywell Mind*, 14 Nov. 2023, www.verywellmind.com/what-is-smiling-depression-4775918. Accessed 11 Nov. 2024.



Figure 14, *Fates*, Jenny Saville, 2018, Oil Painting, 94 ½ x 102 ¾

Saville shocks her viewers with large-scale imagery in order to transform emotional experiences into large-scale paintings. These visual entities become unavoidable, allowing the viewer to examine and perceive them in their own way. In her painting, *Red Fates* (Fig. 14), there are three nude women in the same composition. Some of the figures are covering parts of their body while other parts are completely exposed to the viewer. Although the bodies are in different positions, there is a sense of comfort and shared dialogue between all three. The use of deep red feels organic and contrasts with the calming blue background. The red relates to the biological makeup of the human body, such as blood, muscle tissue, and flesh. In Michelle Meagher's article, "Disgust and Desire: The Paradox of the Grotesque and Carnavalesque Female Body," she claims that Saville's work "interrogates assumptions about beauty by depicting bodies that are not at all beautiful in any conventional sense."¹⁷ This play on Realism and Naturalism of the human body, which is often forgotten due to the unrealistic expectations of society. The physical dramatic mark-making and thick brush work evokes the intensity and interconnectedness between the women, aiding in the vulnerable nature of being a woman.

¹⁷ Meagher, Michelle, and Jennifer Saville. "Disgust and Desire: The Paradox of the Grotesque and Carnavalesque Female Body." *Winthrop University*, <https://faculty.winthrop.edu/stockk/WOMen%20in%20art/Meagher%20saville%20disgust.pdf>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2024



Figure 15, *Emotion 6*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024

Similar to Saville's work, I choose to shock the viewer with a large sensitive scene. In my painting, *Emotion 6* (Fig. 15), I play around with this very concept of emotional vulnerability. A woman is shown nude with her back completely exposed to the viewer. She is faced away from the viewer, not wanting to engage with the audience due to her uncontrollable shame. As she sits off the side of her bed, covering up her body, another woman illuminates with bright colors, emerging from the background. She embraces her with comfort, while sewing up the wound on her back. This contrast of dark and light colors plays with the very concept of unbalanced emotions, vulnerability, and self love. This composition came to me after a dream I had in relation to myself as an artist. Overall, I never feel that my artwork is good enough and I am never satisfied with a finished piece. This constant feeling of unworthiness still haunts me. However, my higher self comforts me and reminds me that I am loved. The planes that each figure embodies seem dissociated, but yet still connected. This idea can emphasize that one is never alone because our higher self is always there.

My higher self often reminds me of the constant support and love present for me in the spirit world through dreams, sensations, and unexplainable synchronicities. Although God is invisible to the human eye, I know deep within that I am never alone. This understanding inspired the idea for my purple tree. After dreaming of a large,

glowing, talking tree, surrounded by water, I felt an inner calling to sculpt it. Throughout the process of sculpting my tree, I kept thinking to myself, how am I going to connect this to my paintings? What does a magical tree have to do with emotions? And then it hit me—this tree is the embodiment of God itself. It symbolizes the center of the universe—the origin of all creation. This realization prompted me to reflect more deeply on why I felt compelled to create this tree for my show and the profound impact it might have on the viewer.

When researching the symbolism behind trees, I discovered trees often hold profound symbolic significance in many religions and cultures around the world. In Japanese culture and in Shintōism, a tree is seen as a metaphor for the soul. The wood structure of the tree symbolizes the physical essence of the soul. The sap or resin of the tree represents the inner vitality or emotional depth. The flowers and fruits are seen as our regenerative organs, signifying growth, creativity, and legacy. Lastly, the vitality of the tree, how it grows reflects on our character and the individuality and the soul's unique expression. I have always been drawn to Japanese culture, it really resonated with me. The construction of my tree symbolizes not only the center of creation, but it is also a reflection on my soul. I believe that we as humans are all our own unique tree, connected underneath by roots of God the creator.

In planning my tree installation and conceptualizing my show, I wanted to create an experience that was not solely about me but also a shared, collective journey for my audience. As viewers engage with my work, they will have the opportunity to write down unwanted emotions they wish to release. These written emotions can then be surrendered to the tree, symbolizing the act of letting go and transferring those feelings to an external source for release. In Japanese culture, it is common for Shrines to see “fenced-off areas called *himorogi*, with trees surrounded by paper fortunes. Prayers may also be tied directly onto a tree branch as transporters to the divine realm.”¹⁸ This act of surrendering emotions through written words and offering them to a sculptural tree allows participants to engage the experience that allows connection and a shared

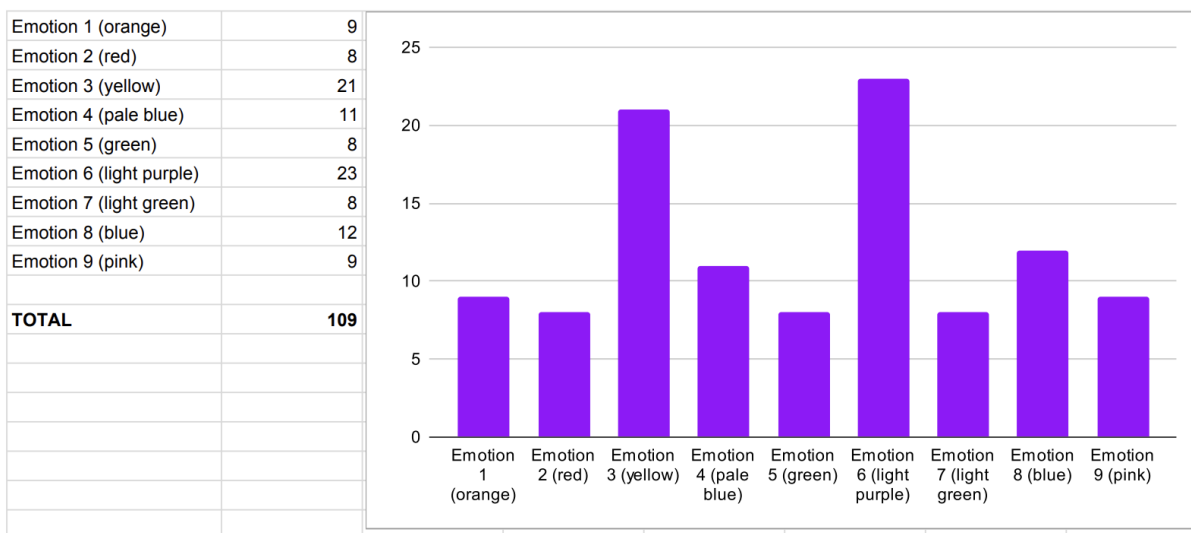
¹⁸ International Environmental Science. "The Phenomenality of Sacred Shinto Trees." *IES.bio*, <https://ies.bio/world/the-phenomenality-of-sacred-shinto-trees/>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2025.

understanding. I am hopeful that this experience will help my audience recognize their emotions and validate them as a fundamental aspect of the human experience.

Conclusion

As my thesis exhibition comes to a close, I've learned a great deal about how my viewers experienced the work. Each painting was paired with a different colored paper to determine which of the nine pieces resonated most with my audience, and which emotions were the most unhealed. As many wandered and moved about the gallery, collectively, people were drawn to certain paintings. Several individuals engaged with multiple paintings, while others chose to reflect on just one. Interestingly, some chose not to write their emotions at all, instead choosing to simply observe and analyze my work in silence. It was interesting to witness the varying degrees of comfort with the experience. After breaking down my exhibition, I sorted through all the written responses and compiled the data into a graph for analysis.

Paper Emotions Data Chart



According to the data, 109 written papers were given to the tree. Out of the nine paintings, the painting that resonated the most was *Emotion 6*, with a count of 23 light purple papers. The second runner up was *Emotion 3*, with a count of 21 yellow papers. I find this very intriguing as both of these paintings were inspired by dreams. This leads

me to believe that my dreams are connected to a higher consciousness, which calls me to explore and deepen my understanding of the spirit world. Through this connection, I feel as if I am a witness to hidden and unspoken turmoil that lies beneath the surface, and through my paintings, I serve as a channel for its expression. Although my vivid dreams were not the central focus of this exhibition, I will continue to interpret them as a guiding force in my work, as they remain the importance of my artistic practice.

Now that my exhibition is over, I intend to burn these papers as a symbolic act of release, removing them from this reality. While my show is mainly centered on a collective experience, each painting holds a deeply personal significance, reflecting struggles I've faced in my own life. In the six years of obtaining my MFA, I created a space for my own healing that I did not know was possible. By confronting my own unhealed emotions and exploring their impact on my emotional well-being, it has given me a profound sense of understanding, compassion, and self-love. Through this process, I've come to realize the power of art is a necessary tool for transformation and connection. I am deeply grateful for this experience and my hope is that this show will inspire my audience to confront their own emotions, embrace healing, and find solace in the shared human experience. Graduating with my MFA from William Paterson University feels like the end of one chapter, but it is truly just the beginning—opening the door to new possibilities, explorations, and achievements through the power of self-expression in art.

List of Illustrations

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4. *Emotion 1, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2023*
5. *Emotion 3, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024*
6. *Emotion 4, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024 (almost completed)****
7. *Emotion 5, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024*
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9. *Painting, Alex Grey, Oil on linen, 30x40*
10. *Untitled, Zdzisław Beksiński, date & size unknown*
11. *Emotion 2, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024*
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14. *Red Fates, Jenny Saville, 2018, Oil Painting, 94 ½ x102 ¾*
15. *Emotion 6, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024*

Endnotes

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Visual Catalog



Emotion 1, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2023



Emotion 2, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024



Emotion 3, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024



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Emotion 7, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2024



Emotion 8, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2025



Emotion 9, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x48, 2025



Surrender, Wood, chicken wire, masking tape, insulation foam, shop towels, glue, plaster, acrylic paint, 7x7x7 ft, 2023-2025