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Fractured: a Self-Portrait

Rebecca Lipps

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May, 2019

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We are submitting a thesis written by Rebecca Lipps entitled *Fractured: A Self-Portrait*
We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts.

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FRACTURED: A SELF-PORTRAIT

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty
Of the
College of Visual and Performing Arts
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the
Requirements for the Degree
Of
Master of Fine Arts
In the
Department of Fine Arts
Winthrop University

May, 2019

By
Rebecca Lipps
ABSTRACT

This statement is on my thesis exhibition Fractured: A Self-Portrait delves into its motivations, influences, content, and form. The video installations are self-portraits that investigate my experiences with anxiety, exhibit the progression of my emotional and physical state during an anxiety attack, and explore emotional triggers. Divided into chapters, this thesis statement includes a discussion of these aspects as well as of processes, mediums, and the final layout in the Gallery. In the Introduction, the main subject of my work, anxiety, is presented to the reader, who is then guided through the content of the following chapters. In Exhibition, each individual work is described and analyzed in its components. In Content: Self-Portraiture and Anxiety, my Self as the subject matter is contextualized within the genre of Self-portraiture. In Mediums and Processes, the focus is on my approach to materials and methods. Essential Questions and Influences presents the questions that were catalysts to my pieces and the artists that influenced them. Finally, in Conclusion I offer a brief reflection on my development as an artist and the key aspects of my art mentioned throughout the Statement.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF IMAGES</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXHIBITION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTENT: SELF-PORTRAITURE AND ANXIETY</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIUMS AND PROCESSES</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS AND INFLUENCES</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGES</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF IMAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image 1</td>
<td>Body</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 1a</td>
<td>Body</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 2</td>
<td>Breathe</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 2a</td>
<td>Breathe</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 3</td>
<td>Transform</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 3a</td>
<td>Transform</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4</td>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4a</td>
<td>Emotion Video</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 5</td>
<td>Application Dating</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 5a</td>
<td>Application Dating Video</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 6</td>
<td>Tainted Video</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 6a</td>
<td>Tainted</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 6b</td>
<td>Tainted Detail</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 7</td>
<td>Ice Experiment</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 7a</td>
<td>Ice Experiment</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 8</td>
<td>Rain 1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 9</td>
<td>Breaking Video</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iv
INTRODUCTION

On a summer day in 2016, I was on a small Boeing airplane on my way to the Netherlands. I was filled with excitement since this was my first time on a big trip with my friends. About half way through the flight, an announcement was made saying the plane was turning around and heading back to the United States. The passengers were asking questions and receiving no answers. The already small plane started to close in around me and I began to lose control over my breath. I was given a paper bag to breathe and regained my composure after twenty minutes. My first panic attack was over, but the frightening experience triggered both fear and a strong curiosity to explore what lay behind the attack. I began a personal investigation into myself to gain a deeper understanding of who I am and created artwork that helped me uncover emotional triggers. I was convinced that if I could create artwork on the subject of my anxiety, then I might undergo a healing process.

This written statement is about my thesis exhibition titled *Fractured: A Self-portrait*, which culminates my Master of Fine Arts experience at Winthrop University. The Department of Fine Arts supported my professional development as an artist by encouraging me to investigate unfamiliar materials. *Fractured: A Self-portrait* is made up of three video installations: the videos project onto a wall and two sculptures. The images projected are self-
portraits, blending various images of myself performing in a state of anxiety.

My personal experience with anxiety is at the core of this work. In this statement, I describe the exhibition, discuss the form and content of the work (self-portraiture and anxiety), and provide information on the mediums and processes used: installation, performance, and video. In addition, I discuss essential questions that stimulated me to create this work and the artistic influences that accompanied my personal journey at Winthrop University.

The title *Fractured* reflects various ruptures and breaks represented in the installation: the disruptions of time I experience during an anxiety episode, the break of the rectangular frame linked to video, the rupture of imagery through editing and projection on broken glass. These ruptures represent the fear anxiety causes and the filter it has now put over my life. The self-portraits in this thesis are embodied in performances that express my experience with anxiety; together, they constitute a self-reflective practice.
The first video installation, *Body* (2019) (Image 1, 1a), includes a sculpture that hangs from the ceiling of the gallery supported by a piece of plywood. I constructed this abstract, prism-like form with FOMULAR insulation sheathing (see Appendix) by cutting triangular shapes and adhering them together. The prism is painted white in order for video to project well onto its surfaces. The sculpture appears to be emitting light, but the light, in fact, strikes its surfaces from a ceiling-mounted projector. I used projection mapping to collage six videos of cropped parts of my body performing repetitive actions: scratching, rubbing my nose, closing my eyes, touching my face, shaking my legs, and swaying my shoulders. These are relieving reactions to the triggers of anxiety. The video images are cropped to fit around the shapes of the prism and are abstracted by slowing down the speed and adding color effects. The viewer looks up at the video installation while walking underneath.

The second work, *Breathe* (2019) (Image 2, 2a), is a video projected eight feet wide onto a wall, displaying myself breathing out smoke through my nose and mouth. I crop the video around my mouth and eyes to bring the viewer close to my emotional state. Breath is the indicator of my increasingly anxious state as its speed and shortness increase to mimic panic during an
anxiety attack. As anxiety increases, communication becomes more difficult, as the moisture of my breath blocks eye contact with the audience. Video clips from the work Body appear as a cutaway, overlapping my heavy breathing. In addition, the video shows images of matches burning out and swells of running water. Both images represent time passing: the first speaks for my sense of the end of time, while the second reassures me that time is ever flowing and the anxiety attack will pass too. Breathe plays recorded sounds associated with my anxiety: crowd noise, fire alarms, airline announcements, gasping for breath, and running water. My facial expressions and the repetitive gestures featured in Body betray my inner state.

The third work, Transform (2019) (Image 3, 3a), projects a video straight down onto a sculptural form made of epoxy resin with embedded broken tempered glass (see Appendix). The shape of this epoxy sculpture replicates a “breath cloud” inspired from my breath in Breathe. The form hangs four feet from the floor and six circular mirrors sit on the floor underneath at forty-five degree angles, reflecting the video onto the opposing wall. The video projects multiple images from Body and Breathe at increasing speeds and the mirrors disperse the video onto the wall, causing a visual effect of evaporation that is reminiscent of breathing. A narrative is created between the projected images and the glass, whose fragile nature symbolizes my vulnerability to anxious emotional states.
As simultaneously artist, videographer, photographer, and model, I produce images of myself that mirror my emotional state at a specific moment. I attempt to achieve reflective growth by making myself the subject. This thesis body of work belongs within the genre of self-portraiture, an art genre that has been changing throughout time. In the 16th century, artists became more interested in the individual and portraits became more valued. Often, artists posed for their own portraits. From then on, self-portraits became gradually more heroic and expressive. Some artists used mirrors to paint their image, and captured a chronological record of themselves throughout their lives.

Rembrandt Van Rijn was a Dutch artist that painted over ninety self-portraits, documenting himself from his twenties until his death. Often he portrayed himself in a specific role as a different persona, apparently to reflect on aspects of his personality. “From an early stage in the history of self-portraiture, artists realized they could project particular ideas about themselves... Artists have used self-portraiture as a means to perpetuate a view of themselves as wealthy, poor, sad, insane...” (West 173).

Another artist with particular meaning for me is post-Impressionist Vincent Van Gogh, who perpetuated a view of himself in a state of acute anxiety. He did it in a direct way by showing himself with a bandage over his
cut ear. He seems to provoke the viewer to connect to his very troubled emotions. I consider my work to refer to these two artists in terms of form and of self-reflective content.

In 1839, Robert Cornelius (1809-1893) invented the camera, which would become affordable and accessible in the 1970’s. Video technology came next. In the 21st century, different kinds of cameras make it possible for people to capture an image far more quickly than before. We can capture both image and video on our cell phone, an object we carry with us everywhere and has defined how we view ourselves. The “selfie” may be considered a 21st century version of the mirror that artists used for centuries, only far more superficial. In some ways, my work can be seen as a commentary on that superficiality as opposed to the seriousness and authenticity of the traditional artist’s self-portrait. Although, I can self-reflect in a similar way by using technology to take my portrait as opposed to an oil painting.

Distancing oneself from one’s own image can paradoxically lead to inner discovery as well as to others’ discovery of one’s inner self. My artwork requires me to confront my self-consciousness, because I must watch my image repeatedly in order to observe myself and reflect on what I see. The core of this body of work is the exploration that has helped me understand and cope with my emotions. In addition, exposing myself to viewers in this
vulnerable way fosters both judgment and empathy from them, which leaves me with a feeling of emotional nakedness; however, in this nakedness I find myself more whole.

I work with cameras to record myself and then I manipulate the imagery on a computer. As a child, I frequently watched videos of my dance performances to critique myself. This repetitive watching was a catalyst to analyzing myself in this way, in this thesis work. Due to the content I wish to express, it is crucial that I am the subject and object, which I appear in the center of it, which adds immediacy to the expression of anxiety. To foster understanding and growth, I need to create artwork that is both authentic and uncomfortable.

Parts of my self-reflection center on examining the causes of my anxiety, some of which are environmental triggers. I recorded sounds while sitting on a plane to capture the setting of my first panic attack and I use them in *Breathe*. The sounds of crowds and a fire alarm were also recorded for the same purpose. Such triggers provoke physical responses in me such as shaking my legs, a movement similar to the restless leg syndrome. “The sensations occur deep in the legs and are usually described with terms that imply movement… an irrepresible urge to move the leg is relieved when the person suffering from RLS voluntarily moves” (Haren). In this work, bodily responses such as shaking legs are relievers of anxiety.
In my first semester at Winthrop University, I created a work I called *Emotion* (2016) (Image 4, 4a). I had received the news that my grandfather and uncle had both had a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. It was shocking to hear this since my view of my family was one of stability, when in reality they were suffering. The contrast between the appearance of stability and the reality of inner turmoil led me to explore the relationship between inner reality and outer appearance; this, in turn, prompted me to explore facial expressions and their correlation to emotion. I focused my attention on seven human emotions: anger, contempt, happiness, fear, sadness, disgust, and surprise. I drew seven self-portraits with pen and ink that expressed these basic emotions and drew detached facial features such as mouths, noses, and eyes. These features were distorted and the paper manipulated to make them seem grotesque. The work involved drawing, performance, and video. I stuck the distorted features on the surface of my self-portraits with temporary adhesive, like masks hiding the true expression of the portraits. The first video performance I created included my interaction with these self-portrait drawings. The distorted features fell to the ground, revealing the portrait underneath, and I filmed myself frantically trying to re-stick them back on as they continued to fall. The need to control my facial expressions caused my behavior to become frenzied, reflecting the futile and constant effort to control my emotions.
During my second year at Winthrop, I felt pressure to find a life partner, which caused its own anxiety. I expressed this through an installation piece about social behaviors related to dating. The installation Application Dating (2017) (Image 5, 5a) was inspired by my use of phone applications such as Tinder, Bumble, OkCupid, and Coffee Meets Bagel, which allow users to meet people by liking or disliking their profiles. I collected screenshots of messages sent to me, as well as pictures of users’ profiles, which is legal to do, as they are public.

I used my installation as a stage that featured what I consider a traditional date setting of a table and two chairs in the corner of a room. Hundreds of printed dating profiles covered the table, chairs, walls, and floor. I gathered questions from the dating applications and filmed myself posing them to the empty chair across the table. The overwhelming collage of application profiles surrounded me as I asked questions such as “What are your intentions on this app?” “Would you like to go out with me?” to the empty chair across from me. The questions were met with silence; there was no real human interaction, no connection with another.

Application Dating was a catalyst for Tainted (2018) (Image 6, 6a, 6b), in which I directed my viewer’s attention to the emotional mark a relationship can leave on someone, here shown physically as a mark on a dress. Tainted is a series of works comprised of performance, edited video, and installation.
In the performance, I stood in the streets of Charlotte, North Carolina wearing a pure white dress and asked strangers to leave a mark on it with blue ink. The blue marks contaminated the white purity of the garment, a metaphor for a negative psychological aftermath of an emotional act on another. As participants placed their mark on the dress, they were encouraged to think about purity and their role in contaminating it.

The color blue developed multiple representations, such as a simple encounter with another or bruising. The street performance was a catalyst for a three-minute video, showing the participants’ role in the dress’s transformation from white to blue stain. In turn, this video inspired an installation, which displayed the same ink-contaminated dress hanging in the air held by fishing line and lures that embedded themselves into the fabric. Plaster mouths with blue stained tongues held the end of each fishing line on the wall. The absence of the human form in the dress permitted viewers to imagine themselves in the piece and connect to the sense of absence in the dating scene.

The creation of Emotion, Application Dating and Tainted desensitized me and decreased my social fear and anxiety, just as it was with Jia Jiang, who attempted to get rid of his fear of rejection by going out and actively seeking it. In his book Rejection Proof he states, “In my case rejection was my curse and was bothering me my whole life. I was running away from it, then I
started embracing it and it turned out to be the biggest gift.” (65) I had a very similar experience.
MEDIUMS AND PROCESSES

My creative process begins from an experience that triggers a conceptual vision of an artwork followed by an urgency to create. Even though the vision is still unclear, the urgency moves me to write down ideas and experiment with possible strategies to execute it. The process includes trial and error and working with various materials to represent my original intention. As my experimentation continues, the vision deepens in meaning, which becomes clearer as the project develops. The clarity resonates when I feel that my experimental stage is over, and the material expresses my vision.

During my academic years at Winthrop University, I chose to focus on the mediums of installation, performance, and video, each of which is equally important to my process. Combining these mediums offers the possibility for many permutations and combinations that allow for endless potential compositions. The purpose of my installations, comprised of hand-built forms and found objects, is to use some of their elements in my videos. In past works, I built installations to create a space to act in, like a prop or the set of a film.

Performance allows me to use my body as medium. In The Performance Art of Marina Abramovic as a Transformational Experience one
reads, “Performance sought to achieve a closer relationship between art and life, in a place that would allow subjects to express themselves and convert their lives into creations, thus making themselves the objects” (Simões 1333). I am producing an autobiography with my body when I film my performances. Yet that story is heavily edited as I revise and replay my performances for the purpose of reflecting on my anxiety, both for therapeutic relief and to encourage an empathetic relationship with others.

My process of working with video begins by sorting through the footage to choose the clips that interest me the most, and then altering the footage by using the computer editing programs Adobe Premiere, iMovie and VPT (Video Projection Tool) (see Appendix). In Adobe Premiere and iMovie, I reorder and overlap video clips, exploring editing strategies that change the saturation, contrast, color hue, exposure, brightness, and size. The repetition and overlapping of images increase a sense of abstraction. Projection mapping with VPT allows me to successfully alter video to various shapes and sizes, and layer multiple videos in one frame in a process similar to collage. These mechanical processes also allow me to manipulate color and sound. I use mostly blue, a versatile color for me as I find it calming and positive, as well as negative, as in the street performance mentioned above. Reordered sounds can be easily manipulated through iMovie and Adobe Premiere, and I select those that hold memories from emotional incidents.
During my artistic practices at Winthrop University, I asked three essential questions that motivated my artwork and built the foundation for *Fractured: A Self-portrait*. The first was, How can I reinvent traditional art practices? I attempted to answer this question in *Ice Experiment* (2016) (Image 7, 7a), which consists of an installation and a video. One day in August, I formulated a way to make a painting without using a paintbrush by freezing acrylic paint in ice cubes and hanging them on a string outside over a blank canvas. The hot sun slowly melted them from cube shapes to organic shapes, to splatters on the canvas creating an abstract painting. I filmed the ice melting and the video became more significant than the abstract “painted” canvas because it documented the process. I decided to change my art practice from traditional oil painting to experimentation with mixed media.

The second question was, How can I manipulate film to resemble a painting? I began filming natural elements such as in the work *Rain 1* (2016) (Image 8), in which I abstracted the footage, simplifying and flattening it by editing the color hues and filters; I also slowed it down to distort the sense of familiarity associated with rain. I created a colorful abstracted image that moved slightly. This work spurred me to look at how video could be utilized to carry ideas and emotions.
The third question I asked was, How can I break video out of its traditional rectangular screen and transform its shape? In order to answer this question, I needed to start with a blank slate. I removed all of the furniture from my studio and turned it into a small clean gallery. I was able to work freely and display my artwork for critique. There I built *Breaking Video* (2016) (Image 9), an installation of three hundred small mirrors that hung from the walls and ceiling. The mirrors reflected a cropped video of a rotating optical illusion onto the walls, floor, and ceiling. This was my first attempt to disrupt the rectangular screen. These three essential questions were the most influential of many I asked during the time I attended Winthrop.

The artists I researched were equally inspiring. I researched modern and contemporary artists that use non-traditional processes and mediums including Bill Viola (1951), Bruce Nauman (1941), Douglas Gordon (1966), Hannah Wilke (1940-1993), Janine Antoni (1964), Mary Reid Kelley (1979), Pipilotti Rist (1962), and Tony Oursler (1957). Overall, their work involves combining materials and technology, performance, and the body; they all influenced the artistic process that led to the creation of *Fractured: A Self-portrait*.

Bill Viola (1951) is an innovative video artist. In *He Weeps for You* (1976), he films a water drop slowing falling out of a faucet. In the drop, there is the image of a human figure being slowly stretched out as it gives in to
gravity. This manipulation of body image by water redefines how we look at portraiture. David Ross writes, “Recognizing a drop of water as both a lens and a metaphoric mirror alters our awareness of our place in the world and our relationship to time and materiality” (116).

Bruce Nauman (1941) is an American artist whose humorous sculptures and conceptual works include the participation of the body. His multidisciplinary practice includes film, photography, sculpture, drawing, neon, and performance. In his early films, he photographed his body contacting the wall and floor as if it were a sculpture. His interest in body function is evident in his film *Poke in the Eye/Nose/Ear 3/8/94 Edit*, in which he films himself poking his eye with his pointer finger and then abstracts the film it by slowing it down. The lengthy Andy Warhol films of the 1960’s that seem to go on continuously inspired him. Just as Warhol inspired Nauman, I am inspired by Nauman’s concept of gesture and time.

The Scottish artist Douglas Gordon (1966) experiments with video installation. Similarly, to Viola and Nauman, Gordon slows down the duration of video with the intention to alter its original format. In *24-Hour Psycho* (1993), he slowed down Alfred Hitchcock’s classic film to two frames a second that take a full day to play from beginning to end. I too slow down the beginning of my video *Breathe* to create a similar element of suspense. In *Pretty much every film and video work* (1992), he stacks multiple televisions next to and on
top of one another playing videos. The way he arranges the television screens next to each other is similar to projection mapping, the technology I use.

Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) is an American feminist artist that combined everyday materials and her body. She challenged the definition of art by sculpting with malleable materials such as gum, erasers, chocolate, cookie dough, and dryer lint, and attaching them to her skin. She photographed her fearless performances with these materials, a form of documentation that became a key part of her work. In the 1970’s, “Feminist Performance Video was usually produced in an intimate setting either in the artist’s home or while the artist was alone in a production facility” (Hall 78). In 1974, photographer Les Wollam snapped a series of images of Hannah Wilke modeling in front of the camera and pressing chewing gum to her face and nude body.

*Starification Object Series* increased awareness of the objectification of female stereotypes by suggesting marks left on her body. She handled the gum as if it were a ceramic material and shaped its form so that it looked like blemishes.

In 1975, Wilke performed her *Starification Object Series* piece live in Paris. Participants chewed three-thousand pieces of gum in the gallery and pinned them to paper on the wall and onto her half-naked body. Her final work, *Intra-Venus* (1987), is a photographic series in which she recorded her nude body in the hospital while undergoing treatment for breast cancer. The core of Wilke’s work is the use of her “body as a social barometer, and for a long time,
what it measured was how comfortable people were with raw female allure” (Princenthal 66). Wilke was testing her viewers’ levels of comfort through self-reflection.

Janine Antoni (1964) creates artwork about her personal journey, showing universal actions that she performs daily. I identify with her statement, “The only thing I know and trust is my own experience” (82). Janine Antoni used her body in *Loving Care* (1992) when she mopped the gallery floor with her hair after lathering it in gallons of hair dye. She used the same brand of dye her mother used, a specific and personal material choice that deepened the meaning of her action. Antoni used her body as a living sculpture and tool, as she swished her long hair back and forth. Dan Cameron writes about Antoni’s work, “the body is articulated as a provisional boundary in which identity flows, inhabited by the forces that make and unmake the self” (71). For Antoni, her body is her medium and she views it as a container of her personality. She embraces the importance of her lineage and recognizes Wilke’s legacy as a female artist. I gained personal insight from Antoni’s work in a similar way.

An American film artist who also influences me is Mary Reid Kelley (1979). Kelley’s work involves making costumes, writing scripts, and performing in front of the camera referencing historic literature in her dialogue. As the solo star in her videos, she elaborates on her thought process, saying,
“We all contain multiple selves and when I create work I may be pleasing one side of myself, but horrifying the other. My alternate selves must be totally embarrassed in order for the work to be any good. It’s become a good source of guidance how embarrassed I am.” (Hughes) As I watch myself in my videos, I too go through stages of embarrassment and awakening.

Pipolotí Rist is best known for creating self-portraits through experimental video and installation art. Her work is infused with honesty about subjects such as gender, sexuality, and the body. In an interview she says, “Making videos, whether experimental or poetic, means doing family therapy; the television is a family member so to speak. If my work is intense, honest and good, then its therapeutic function is also my social relevance.” (Phelan) Rist’s work is inspired by images from her subconscious. My artistic intention is to create sincere artwork like Rist’s. In Digesting Impressions (1993), she placed monitors inside handbags eliminating the large square box of the monitor. The handbags sat on pedestals and the video was viewed by looking inside.

An influential artist that used single facial features and movements to express emotion is Tony Oursler (1957). His innovations involve filming his eye and mouth movements in cropped video shots, then composing the video clips of his features together to form a fabricated facial expression. In Get Away II, he projects a face on a fabric doll wedged under a mattress. Oursler
transforms video projection into three-dimensional sculptures of found objects that seem to emit light. In my thesis work, I do the same. All these artists inspired me in form, mediums, and content.
CONCLUSION

My experiences over the course of Winthrop University’s Master of Fine Arts program led me to the creation of *Fractured: A Self-Portrait*, a work whose significance derives in part from being steeped in my own experience of anxiety. The work is composed of three installations, *Body, Breathe, and Transform*, each a self-portrait including sculpture, performance, and video. Rembrandt Van Rijn and Vincent van Gogh were important influences within the genre of self-portraiture.

*Fractured: A Self-Portrait* revolves around my anxiety. As the creator and the focus of the work, I observe and analyze myself and, in the process, distance myself from my own anxiety while opening myself to the gaze of the other. In the installations, I use a variety of non-traditional mediums such as tempered glass, resin, insulation foam, and innovative video editing and handling. In this, artists such as Bill Viola, Bruce Nauman, Douglas Gordon, Hannah Wilke, Janine Antoni, Mary Reid Kelley, Pipilotti Rist, and Tony Oursler have influenced me. It was at Winthrop that I became familiar with modern and contemporary art and came to know the artists that have influenced me so deeply.

In the foundation of my work lie essential questions that I asked myself
during my attendance of the M.F.A. program; these led to repeated experimentation with materials and content. I believe I am now better able to analyze my artistic decisions, communicate my concepts more clearly, and develop as a future professional artist.
Breathe, 2019

Breathe, 2019
Image 6  
*Tainted Video, 2018*

Image 6a  
*Tainted, 2018*

Image 6b  
*Tainted Detail, 2018*
Image 7  
*Ice Experiment, 2016*

Image 7a  
*Ice Experiment, 2016*
APPENDIX

Description of Materials

FOAMULAR® Insulating Sheathing:

FOAMULAR® extruded polystyrene Insulating Sheathing (IS) can be purchased in various hardware stores and comes in durable panels that are lightweight. They are mostly used for projects that demand site built construction. It can be cut into shapes easily, and its exterior can be applied with a variety of finishes.

Tempered glass:

A safety glass that is processed by controlled thermal and chemical treatments. It is also called toughened glass because the process increases the strength compared to normal glass. The outer surface of the glass is compressed and holds tension on the interior. The glass crumbles into small chunks when broken, preventing injury.

Video Projection Tool (VPT) 7.0:

VPT is a free projection software for Mac and Windows. It is a multipurpose tool for adapting a projection onto a three-dimensional surface. It can be used to project on simple forms, such as a box or more complex forms, such as a building. Up to six recorded video sources can be layered and played simultaneously. There is an input and output screen so you can edit the footage in real-time while your image is being projected. Some features of VPT include layering, mask editing, mesh editing, and source set up.
WORKS CITED


