

Kari, Rebner

Kayla Rebner

My artworks are a two part series that explores themes of self-identity and the understanding of one's self through ancestral history and genealogy. These artworks incorporate metaphysical concepts of identity, through use of visual symbology, and focuses on the idea that self-identity is a product of both our genetics, and external social environment.

I initially chose to work with portraiture as it is a genre I've been drawn to my entire life, as it provides a connection with the audience, particularly through the intimacy of eyes. Portraiture is also complimentary to artworks that explore themes of self-identity. I decided to create an oil painting, as I was inspired by artists such as Ben Quilty and Mark Ryden who use oil paints to create aesthetically pleasing portraits. I have also been inspired by Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo, as they are masters at blending oil paint seamlessly.

This project has enabled me to pursue aspirations of realism in larger-scaled portraiture. Eventually, I would like to master hyper-realism as an artist.

Forms of literature that have informed some of the ideas for my project include "Teaching my Mother how to Give Birth" by Warsan Shire, which was a leading inspiration for my change of ideation. Originally I had wanted to create a series of portraits depicting my parents and I. However, due to separation, I had become uninspired to go forward with that plan. When discovering this poem, I was inspired to change the focus of my parents, into a journey of self-identity. After I decided to focus on this theme, I made the decision to research psychological aspects of identity including cultural identity, self-esteem, self-knowledge, and collective identity.

I am a multicultural Australian. My Father is Aboriginal, his cultural groups being Kaurna and Narungga, located in the Adelaide plains and on the Yorke Peninsula. My Mother is an Australian citizen with a German heritage. When I thought about this project, I wanted to explore the mix of cultures that are the roots of my existence. I had recently learned about my Mother's paternal grandparent's affiliation with Nazi Germany, and when planning this artwork, the theme of genocide became a common thread between my Mother and Father's ancestry.

Being raised with a stronger influence of my Aboriginal ancestry, it was shocking to find out about my German forefather's affiliation with Nazi Germany. To learn the main reason my Mother's paternal family migrated to Australia was due to the repercussions of Nazi Germany made me realise how fragile the possibility of my existence really was, and how our actions can have surprising intergenerational consequences. For me, it seemed ironic how my being was primarily made up of cultures that were both perpetrators and victims of genocide, and this initially was a driving force behind the ideation of my artworks.

As Aboriginal people of today are Australia's survivors of genocide, and Nazi Germany were the perpetrators of genocide, I made the decision to separate both cultures into their own artworks. The two paintings are intended to be a two-part series that are presented together.

By conveying themes of self-identity, cultural-identity and genocide through imagery, I was compelled to incorporate symbolism, such as colour symbology, cultural symbols, photographs, and relevant dates in my family history. I was inspired by artists such as Cristian Blanxer, Vernon Ah Kee and Frida Kahlo who have a sophisticated understanding of composition, juxtaposition, symbology and visual elements to create visual literacies within their artwork that invites a viewer to think more deeply about the meanings of their artwork. Both artworks have a consistent monochromatic grey colour palette, intended to represent ancestry, as photos from earlier eras were taken in greyscale, due to the availability of image reproduction technology at that time.

Each self portrait has an appropriate flag for each nation embedded within one of my eyes, as a way of revealing the roots of my identity to the audience. I ultimately chose to add this into the eye, as eyes symbolise focus, and my overall focus of these artworks is my identity, and cultures. As eyes are one of the first things that I notice when meeting someone for the first time, I wanted my cultures to be something other people identify me with. However, I changed my original idea of incorporating themes of genocide by changing the use of the swastika and replacing it with the German flag, as it was something I didn't want to identify myself with. It didn't seem like a pivotal part of my identity. By having the flags placed in a singular eye, opposite to the other, my aim was to represent each line of ancestry individually (Aboriginal and German) that makes up my entire being, at this point my artworks became more of a celebration of my self-identity formed through culture.

My first Artwork, 'Kari' (Kah-DEE) which translates to 'Emu' in Kurna language, is inspired by my Aboriginal ancestry, and the pride I have for my culture. Though symbolic elements for each painting were selected to mirror each other, the composition, and orientation for each of them is different to enhance different emotions about them. By having this artwork make eye contact with the viewer, I felt as though I could project my feelings of pride onto a larger audience. This pride is also symbolically conveyed through the title of this artwork, as it is named after my traditional dance name. My aim was to use symbolism, composition and colour symbology to make my artwork depict a peaceful acceptance of this part of my identity.

My second artwork 'Rebner' (both mine and my mother's surname) symbolically contrasts greatly against 'Kari', as it conveys the emotional strain of coming to terms with my relatives past affiliation with Nazi Germany. I have intentionally positioned my artwork in a landscape orientation as I am depicted facing away from the audience. By doing this I am giving the impression that I am ashamed and saddened by the history my distant relatives contributed to, which is further symbolised by the tears, created with a gloss glaze. The date in the bottom left corner '13 MAY 1954' symbolises the date in which my family immigrated to Australia, this creates meaning to the landscape that is depicted in my torso.

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