

## *Wail of a Swan*

### **Esther Cheng**

Ideas surrounding identity, such as self-love, culture, hardship, and femininity are important personal topics that have become overwhelmingly relevant to me as I navigate teenagerhood. I was eager to explore self-portraits, both my own and by other artists, to investigate how they can convey internal troubles and aspects regarding self-identity.

I was fascinated by how colour can be employed to convey ideas surrounding identity. I was prompted to work with a variety of colour palettes, and different media such as conté, watercolour, acrylic and photography. My investigation of film artist Wes Anderson's work assisted in refining my use of colour and symmetrical compositions. I was inspired to create eccentric visuals combined with colour symbolism in my self-portrait photograph *Green Is Not Your Colour*. Similarly to Anderson, I decided to focus on a single colour in my composition – green – to challenge ideas of personal development. This ironically conveys the struggle of stagnant growth in one's identity, and the suffocating and unrealistic pressure of society to continuously be 'growing' as a person.

Furthering my experimentation with photography, I was fascinated by American photographic self-portrait artist Cindy Sherman, who explores ideas of female identity through her work. Her work inspired me to create photographic self-portraits in my *Red Series*, like Sherman, exploring my identity as a woman, and the stereotypes and gender norms that engulf our society. I further explored works by Japanese video artist Shunji Iwai, whose dark-themed films explore the struggles of finding self-identity in youth. Iwai's work inspired my *Juvenescence Series*, which, through the use of object symbolism, focuses on how childhood and mental health are important aspects of identity.

As the folio progressed, I realised that my Asian heritage is a crucial part of my identity. I was fascinated by how Asian women and culture are portrayed in art, prompting my exploration of Annette Bezor, whose depiction of Asian women and use of oriental symbols inspired my *Feeling Koi* digital oil painting. *Feeling Koi* explores cultural acceptance, the play on words 'coy' and 'koi' corresponding with the koi fish that are painted on the face – symbols of strength of character, perseverance, and courage. Jiang is a two-headed dragon in Chinese mythology, inspiring my *Jiang* painting, which symbolises hidden aspects of identity, such as insecurities and anxieties. I also looked at the work of Malaysian-Australian artist, Poh Ling Yeow, who uses her artwork to reconnect with her Asian heritage, largely inspiring my *Blue Face* painting. Alike to Yeow, I decided to exaggerate my depiction of Asian features; this piece symbolically representing acceptance of my culture and appearance.

I decided that this topic of acceptance was important within the theme of identity. Therefore, I explored other media and aesthetics to convey this idea. I was inspired by the vintage-inspired aesthetic of the work by Japanese photographer, Hiromix. This encouraged me to employ photography techniques with vintage influences such as high saturation, warmth, and grain in my *Amalgamation Series*, which conveys the idea of different cultures coming together to form my identity. Through this series, I have discovered that I strongly appreciate the vintage film-camera aesthetic.

I was inspired by the impressionistic and tonal techniques used by Marie Mansfield, along with the warmth and use of lighting in Jessica Ashton's *Self-Portrait as a Clown*, 2017. I employed similar impressionistic-inspired techniques in my painting *The Swan*. After analysing animation films by William Kentridge, my understanding of how film can convey various ideas and stories broadened, thus influencing my decision to expand upon *The Swan* by animating my short film *The Wail of a Swan*.

*The Wail of a Swan* is an animation that explores self-acceptance, and a continuous cycle of self-hate and love. In European mythology, swans are symbols of grace, outward and inner beauty, and self-love. Thus, I employed symbolism inspired by swans, reflected in the music and costuming.

The film features *The Carnival of the Animals*, R 125: XIII. *The Swan* by Camille Saint-Saëns. The melody captures the feeling of beauty and longing, its composition mimicking the graceful cry of a swan. I felt the irony of a beautiful swan weeping was metaphorical of those failing to love themselves. The swan is so beautiful, yet is unaware – a tragic irony. I reflected this swan symbolism through my movement and costuming in the portrait, with the subject crying as they slowly turn into 'a swan', symbolic of self-acceptance. This transformation is also an allusion to the ugly duckling turning into a graceful swan.

The feather chest piece strays from the traditional white colour palette of a swan, boasting bright reds and blues, subverting the stereotypical purity of a swan. The bold colours of the chest piece represent awakening the power of self, inner beauty, and strength.

The painting of the swan reverts to the sketch, and the animation repeats itself. This continuous loop is symbolic of the idea that one might never wholly love oneself, retrogressing back to a state of unacceptance. However, eventually, one will feel at peace with themselves, just as through this exploration, I have found peace and self-acceptance.

I believe I have reached a successful outcome for my body of work, *Identity*, as I was able to communicate these different aspects of self to ultimately reach a point of understanding and acceptance of my identity. My personal aesthetic has further developed throughout this project, deepening my understanding of colour and how it can convey ideas. I have come to greatly appreciate vintage influences in photography, and darker, more intense colour palettes and how they convey deeper emotive meanings.

Overall, I have learnt that my identity is comprised of many aspects. As a woman, an Asian 'person of colour', and someone who has struggled with self-love, hardship, and acceptance, I have realised that there is beauty in adversity. The struggles of mental illness, cultural ambiguity, and femininity and cultural stereotypes do not define you, rather facing them helps mould you to become a stronger person. Ultimately, I have found beauty and acceptance in my self-image and identity, accomplishing the aim of this investigation.