Embracing Identity And Narrative In Art For Self-empowerment

Zalika Perkins

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ABSTRACT

This arts-based thesis will explore ethnic identity and narrative in symbolic self-portraiture as themes for a body of work. This paper will discuss how identity and narrative play an important role in the empowerment of the artist and viewer. It will also show how this can be incorporated into an art classroom engaged in multicultural learning and the study of visual culture to empower students and give them opportunities to narrate their life stories.

INDEX WORDS: Art education, Multiculturalism, Identity, Contemporary art
EMBRACING IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE IN ART FOR SELF-EMPOWERMENT

by

ZALIKA PERKINS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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EMBRACING IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE IN ART FOR SELF-EMPOWERMENT

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I would like to first thank my son, Mahari Heru, who upon his birth, inspired me to finally attend graduate school. Secondly, my ancestors who were very hard working and persistent and passed these traits on to me. A huge thank you to my family and friends who are just so awe inspiring and accomplished that I had to keep up. A special thank you goes out to my committee chair, Dr. Melanie Davenport who was always positive and encouraging throughout the entire process. I am because of you: Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Melody Milbrandt, Dr. Kevin Hsieh and all of the wonderful people who contributed to my academic success.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Description of Study

As a writer and artist, I am on this constant journey to narrate my life story, and I feel that my autobiographical portraits fulfill this need. In conveying my story through my artwork, I focus on three very distinct aspects of my identity: as a Black woman who embraces pre-colonial African spiritual traditions, a single mother and female artist.

I believe that my identity as a Black woman in the United States is a unique identity that has historically always centered on empowerment. Historical figures like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth spoke out and rallied against slavery while challenging sexism because they were great orators/freedom seekers in their own right. During the Black Power movement, Angela Davis and Assata Shakur were also important representatives of the Black female voice and they both served jail time as a consequence of their fight for justice (Young, 2007).

Currently, Black women have had to fight against the unfair misrepresentation of Black women in the media i.e. the lack of positive representations of Black females. I believe that I am a part of this legacy and though my artwork, I seek to elevate ethnically distinctive images of Black women as beautiful because they are typically not represented in mainstream media. My representations of women symbolize a concept of attractive traits and female empowerment that is the antithesis of what is typically promoted and widely accepted in our image-centered Western culture. My images stare back at the viewer in defiance, proclaiming their strength that arose from struggle and subsequently, the beauty that arises from these traits.
Moreover, many of my portraits use indigenous symbolism. This addresses my concern that American definitions of beauty are damaging to Black women. For many Black women to feel beautiful, their African identity had to be stripped away. Moreover, many women of all races go through great lengths to alter their image so that they can appear more acceptable in society. Although there is a lot of research to support the topic, for the purpose of this study, I will focus on my identity as a Black woman who embraces pre-colonial African spiritual traditions, and upon my identity as a single mother and female artist.

Part of my preoccupation with my identity as a Black woman stems from my upbringing in an African-centered household. For the purpose of this study, I will define African-centered as an adoption of pre-colonial African culture, language, and spiritual practices as a means of reclaiming an identity that was stripped away from those brought to America as slaves.

My parents came of age during the Black Power movement where people expressed their pride in being Black and embraced an identity that challenged conformity to mainstream society. They shunned the usage of chemicals or heat in their hair that would give them a more acceptable (i.e.: Caucasian) appearance and instead wore the Aafro, a statement hairstyle that conveyed a message of pride in one’s heritage.

They instilled these beliefs in me, enrolling my siblings and me in African-centered schools that promoted the message that Black people should accept and honor their African heritage. We learned African languages and even embraced spiritual systems that were practiced by Africans before the arrival of Christianity, such as the Akan spiritual traditions of Ghana and the Yoruba traditions of Nigeria.

In addition to African-centered teachings, my parents also studied Transcendental meditation and other Hindu-based teachings and this had a profound effect on me as well.
Therefore, having this unusual hodge-podge of teachings, my spiritual identity is another recurring theme in my artwork. My artwork reflects this mix of non-Western identities, as I reference Hindu-derived symbols and African–based cosmologies in my art. Like the mixed-media artist Renee Stout, my need to incorporate African spirituality is my motivation to promote the taboo or the practices that were deemed “evil” and were stripped from my ancestors when they arrived to this country. Also, African spirituality feels very natural to me.

Lastly, my narrative also focuses on my personal travails as a female artist and a single mother and the struggle that arrives with balancing the two. Exploring these themes in my work allows me to heal from the daily issues that I face and those issues that I encountered in the past. I would also like to document and heal from some of the more traumatic aspects of my life, which include family dysfunction and the isolation heightened by my atypical upbringing.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate identity and narrative in artwork as a means to empower myself as a female artist, mother and teacher. For the purpose of this study, I defined symbolic portraiture as portraits of an individual that rely heavily on symbols to represent the subject as opposed to an image. For my thesis project, I created a series of symbolic self-portraits to investigate the following questions:

- How can I communicate more effectively through symbolic portraiture while at the same time avoiding the banality of traditional portraiture?
- How can I use various materials to create multi-layered and textured paintings that are cohesive and clear in their narratives?
• How might teaching symbolic portraiture to my students in a culturally relevant context get them to think more deeply about their lives, their communities and their world view?

Through my exploration of traditional portraiture and “symbolic” portraiture, I hoped to lead students in my classroom to examine themselves, their history, family and communities and how they relate to these contexts. I believe that this is especially important in the age of cultural imperialism where the American media tells us what we should like, who we are, and what we should desire to become. Sadly, this superficiality of American culture appears to be creating a generation that aspires to be nothing more than wealthy. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) discuss the decline of literacy due to the Internet and other media outlets and I have witnessed this firsthand as a teacher in a Washington, DC public school. There is little interest in learning nor an interest in analyzing society but a compulsion to find out the latest Facebook or Instagram update. This only leads to a future generation of students who have no interest in creating change in society but are even more open to manipulation by the media.

The research and thought that will be required of students while they develop their portraits should lead them to a more analytical process of perceiving the world we live in. With alarmingly high dropout rates for African-Americans and Hispanics, I believe that non-White students need to feel more engaged in school and more relevant curriculum could achieve this.

Children from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds deserve to see themselves and their families represented in the curriculum in order to see schooling as a path towards a prosperous future. Many young African-American and Latino students experience failure and frustration in school; they fall behind in basic study skills. Omission from the
curriculum and consistent school failure lead to an erosion of the student’s self-esteem.
(Campbell, 1996, p. 72)

According to Campbell (1996), schools reinforce ideologies and most of these ideologies support the present social structure of America. Since, America is divided by race, gender, and class; most schools do little to challenge these divisions. Through a multicultural curriculum, teachers have the opportunity to reform this current dilemma in the school system therefore better engaging marginalized groups.

Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, and Sessions (2006) also discuss the historical and societal implications for teaching from a more culturally relevant stance. Multicultural Education had its origins in the 1960s as a consequence of the Civil Rights movement. Its goal was to combat racism and help disenfranchised groups gain a voice in different arenas. (p.77)

Thus, incorporating this culturally relevant curriculum should aid in the development of all students so that they develop the self-esteem and self-efficacy that stems from knowing that they are capable of contributing to society. Additionally, having them analyze society will help them function as critical thinkers in this world.

It has been my personal experience that the knowledge of my culture and how it relates to the greater society, has given me a voice and a unique perspective in my artwork. The narrative in art has also been cathartic in my healing from hardships I have experienced in my life. It is my aspiration that my students can continue to tell their stories through their work and find meaning in their lives in the process. Therefore, I approached this studio-based thesis project with the deliberate and clear intention to bring what I learned through my own art making back to the students that I teach.
Timeline and Outcomes

The timeline for this project, including the development of my proposal and preliminary investigation into literature covered a six-month period. At the end of that period, I had completed a body of work that consisted of six to eight mixed-media paintings. I explored my recurring interest in African and Hindu Goddesses as well as the effective narration of my experience as a single mother/artist. I not only created new works, but also worked back into previous paintings to enrich them with newer processes, incorporating more layering, photos, and text. My intention was to create paintings that resembled the layered and textured pages of an artist journal.

An expected result from this study was the creation of more layered and visually interesting work that conveyed my narrative with more clarity. In the past, my paintings were skillfully rendered but very subtle in their messages (see Figure 1) or lacking in depth i.e., e.g., Figure 2. For example, although I think Figure 2 looks very beautiful, there is no obvious narrative behind it. The painting can easily be interpreted as a rendering of a photo taken by a travel photographer. Thus, my intention of this particular study was to begin to create and communicate with more impact. I wanted to use what I discovered in my art creation process to create meaningful lessons in the art classroom.

Throughout the period I worked on this project, I took extensive notes in my journal, used my sketchbook to plan compositions, photographed pieces in progress, and otherwise documented my personal process. In writing this thesis, I have utilized these records to reflect upon my growth, keeping my initial research questions in mind. I have also studied and noted artists whose artwork has had significant impact on my approach. In the following Literature Review I will discuss these artists and their work.
Figure 1. Zalika Perkins, *I Have A Right To Be Angry*, 2003, oil on canvas, 18 by 24.
Figure 2. Zalika Perkins, *Warrior Queen*, 2005, acrylic, beads and fabric on canvas, 18 by 24.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolic portraiture as a means for healing, expression of identity and narrative is a frequent theme seen in the work of the artist, Frida Kahlo. In her 1940 Self-Portrait, Frida portrays herself as a martyr not unlike Christ for she bears a necklace of thorns and a dead hummingbird hangs from her neck. In Aztec mythology, the hummingbird symbolizes reincarnation and in Mexican folklore, dead hummingbirds were used as charms to bring good luck in love (Herrera, 1991). She stares blankly at the viewer almost as if through her silent suffering she is imploring the viewer to find pity for her.

Figure 3. Frida Kahlo, Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940, oil on canvas, 16 x 24.

Kahlo’s artwork has had a profound effect on my growth as an artist. Expressing myself through self-portraiture has always been a compelling practice for me as an artist, however it was often critiqued by others as an extreme form of self-centeredness and/or vanity. Consequently, upon seeing the work of Frida Kahlo, it confirmed to me that self-portraiture was a metaphorical
and effective means of using art as my own personal therapy. By painting the “issue”, I felt as if I had released it and the viewer, by chance, becomes the “therapist”.

The use of self-portraiture is also tied into my spiritual beliefs. Through the creation of some of my work, I believe I am “manifesting” whatever it is that I am depicting. This connects with the spiritual beliefs of many practitioners of various African-centered religions who practice various rituals to create favorable outcomes in their lives. For me, the act of painting is the ritual.

The work of Renee Stout and her unapologetic depiction of African altars, rituals and aesthetics have also had a profound effect on my growth as an artist. She references alternative African spiritual systems as well but also she creates a narrative that draws the viewer into another world, a world of her creation. The viewer has to confront things that they may feel uncomfortable with due to their religious beliefs like ancestral altars, potions, and relics. My desire to synthesize pre-colonial African spiritual systems into my work stems from the same need stated by the artist Renee Stout (2008),

I was inspired because in trying to figure out who you are as a human being, you always need to go back to the source, and I had never been taught in school how rich those cultures were and are. Studying these African belief systems allowed me to understand that there was another way, besides Christianity, of trying to understand and make sense of the universe and our existence, and I’m always open to many points of view about that. (para. 11)
In Stout’s *Thinking Room*, she references the feminine healing powers of women without being overtly “feminist”. It is a subtle reference, as it appears to be a very pretty, drawing room of a woman who might be a healer/medicine woman. But, in the past, a woman with those abilities would, in fact, hold a lot of power in a community because others would either revere her or fear her.

Therefore, like Stout, my *goal-intention* is to portray the feminine power in all of its strength and spirituality and as a Black female who has overcome many obstacles, the spiritual reservoir that I had to draw from to become powerful. Yet I do not consider myself a feminist.

As noted in *Bearing Witness*, Tesfagiorgis (1987) discusses an alternative to feminism that I more readily embrace called Afrofemcentricism that focuses on the Black female consciousness where the Black woman is the subject and the artist, “gives primacy to Black female consciousness assertiveness by centralizing and enlarging intrinsic values…” (Tesfagiorgis, 1987, as cited in Smith, 1996, p.90).

Additionally, “this consciousness focuses on the black woman subject as depicted by the black woman artist…” (Tesfagiorgis, 1987, as cited in Smith, 1996, p.90).
Figure 4. Renee Stout, *The Thinking Room*, 2005, installation.
Figure 5. Renee Stout, The Scream at 42, 2001, acrylic and oil on board, 36 by 36.

Stout’s The Scream at 42 is a great example of a self-portrait that expresses identity and the narrative in art. The title tells you her age at the time of this rendering and this can give you an indication as to why she may be screaming. The timeline on the right side of the painting with the number 42 highlighted also tells you that she might be frustrated with this passage of time and the implications and challenges that come with the aging process. In addition to this, the photos in the background appear to be the artist/subject at different points in her life. Stout makes the viewer interested in the story being narrated by drawing you the viewer in with the screaming face. With its textured background and compelling narrative, this painting represents the style of work that I am developing.

The importance of having a strong sense of cultural identity is a recurring theme of many of the artists who have influenced my work. In Mixed Blessings: New Art In A Multicultural America (1990), Lippard discusses the desire for some Black artists to reference Africa as a movement that has resurfaced and receded since 1914.

One particular artist that I was introduced to in college, John Biggers (1979), spoke on his reasons for exploring identity in his work,

As an American Negro, my lifelong desire had been to bridge the gap between African and American culture… But African art - in fact, African culture generally – remained devoid of significance in our lives. I felt cut off from my heritage, which I suspected was estimable and something to be embraced, not an ignobility to be scorned. I believed that many of my American brothers, in their flight from the stereotyped concepts of our race, had also flown from their real selves and had created a grotesque, unattainable image
based on Caucasian attributes, a development that must surely prove a hindrance in the struggle to achieve dignity and self-respect in contemporary society. (p. 4)

The contemporary artist Wangechi Mutu demonstrates a successful integration of collaged elements to create visually interesting yet cohesive mixed-media portraits. Her portraits that explore race, African identity, and politics are aesthetically strong and meaningfully impactful. They are powerful in that they are complex and simple and this is a balance that I hope to achieve in the creation process of my thesis.

My impetus for incorporating identity, narrative and symbolic portraiture in the classrooms stems from my experiences and the pedagogical influence of *Art for Life* (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). *Art for Life* incorporates DBAE and authentic instruction, and is based upon the premise that human beings naturally seek meaning and that having students construct meaning leads to more profound learning experiences. It is with this in mind, I hope to have my students explore their identities and narratives to construct meaning in their lives and how their lives relate to society on a larger context.

In the following section, I will discuss in more detail how I approached this art-based thesis to try to answer my initial research questions.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Method of Study

In this study, I wanted to explore identity and narrative in my artwork and find healing and empowerment in the process. As a result of this project, I incorporated what I learned into the classroom so as to facilitate more meaningful learning. With research questions that dealt with the art making process and it’s implications in the classroom, it connected very succinctly with Rita Irwin’s concept called A/r/tography (2004). In A/r/tography (2004), research, teaching and art making are intertwined with one process not having precedence over another. Irwin (2004) reflects on the multiple roles/identities art educators hold and celebrates these roles.

In my art-making role, I used art journaling to experiment with layered compositions and text that I translated into larger scale paintings. The central theme of the series of paintings was identity and I focused primarily on the challenges that I encountered as a Black woman/single mother/artist.

In my role as researcher, I looked for symbols to represent certain ideas and other ways to communicate meaning. By printing, painting, and collaging found objects onto canvas, I experimented with ways to bring a dynamic and engaging energy to my work. It was also my intention to impart the feeling that the viewer is reading an art journal.

I completed seven acrylic paintings that varied in sizes by August 2011. Throughout that period of intense creative endeavor, I a) continued reading and researching artists who inspired me, b) journaled and recorded my process, documented through photography and other means to record the evolution of each piece or each concept, and c) reflected upon how my future students might perceive this problem and how I could frame a similar exploration for them as their teacher to engage them in personal growth and investigation of identity.
The experience that I intended on gaining from my research helped me to leave my comfort zone and grow as an artist and teacher. I believed that narrating my story with more honesty and clarity would allow for more opportunities for personal healing and for viewers to better relate to my artwork. In Chapter 4, I will discuss my processes and observations in more detail. The following section is comprised of the terms that I used throughout my study.

**Key Terms**

There are terms that I used throughout the study. The following terms were defined based on my interpretation and how they related to the study.

- **African-centered**: an adoption of pre-colonial African culture, language, and spiritual practices as a means of reclaiming an identity that was stripped away from those brought to America as slaves.
- **Adinkra Symbols**: visual symbols, originally created by the Akan people of Ghana, that represent concepts or aphorisms.
- **Art Journal**: a collection of word and images that are artistically composed into a book.
- **Narrative Art**: art that tells a story.
- **Identity**: a person’s conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations.
- **Ifa Pantheon**: Gods of the Ifa religion who are worshipped for a variety of purposes, each representing a natural element or human emotion. Yemoja, Oshun, Shango, and Elegba are Yoruba gods that are commonly worshipped in the Western hemisphere with Oludumare being the supreme deity.
- **Symbolic Portraiture**: a painting, drawing, engraving or photograph of a person or representation of someone using symbols.
Limitations

I have identified two limitations in this study. The first limitation is that the study can be perceived as archaic since the Black Empowerment is largely now looked upon as a relic of the past and many Blacks that I encounter have no interest in reconnecting with their African heritage. Nevertheless, identity is an issue explored by many renowned artists and they have been able to connect to larger audiences through this topic.

Another limitation is that portraiture is often seen as less creative and conceptual in the art world. For example, as Lippard (1990) stated “Self portraiture has not been a wildly interesting genre in recent decades. In most modern self-portraits one is given objects rather than subjects; faces staring out rather than being stared into-the artist’s face simply replacing that of the absent model (Lippard, 1990, p. 43).” The notion of a portrait is outdated because many artists during modernism and post-modernism art periods rejected portraiture in favor of more abstract and conceptual art. Therefore, my challenge is to create dynamic symbolic portraits that focus more on the narrative and meaning behind the image as opposed to the just the image.

Throughout the art creation process, I will maintain an art journal and reference it for my ideas. I will ask myself the following questions when reflecting on my work: How have I grown aesthetically as an artist? Do I feel like I have grown or healed somewhat from narrating my story with more honesty and clarity? How has my identity shaped me as an artist? Do I feel more empowered as a woman/artist when telling my story? How does allowing my future students to narrate their experiences through art aid them in their growth as artists? Through the experiences that I gain from this research, I ultimately hope to find a stronger voice and aid others in finding theirs.
CHAPTER 4: DEVELOPMENT, INTERPRETATION AND REFLECTION

Creation of Work

The images in my Goddess Series were my initial paintings (Figures 6-9) and they were very much influenced by various African and Hindu cosmologies. As stated in my Methodology, I depicted myself as various goddesses from the Ifa Pantheon that reflected traits that I had or wanted to possess.

Figure 6. Zalika Perkins, Goddess Series: Mama of All Mamas, 2010, acrylic and photographs on wood, 9 by 12.
Figure 7. Zalika Perkins, *Goddess Series: My Honey Brings All The Boys To The Yard*, 2010, acrylic, photographs and beads on wood, 9 by 12.
Figure 8. Zalika Perkins, *Goddess Series: Heru*, 2010, acrylic, text and paper on wood, 9 by 12.
For example, in *Mama of All Mamas* (Figure 6), I portray myself as Yemoja, goddess of the ocean. She is worshipped widely amongst Ifa practitioners in the western hemisphere because of the fact that many of their ancestors survived the crossing of the ocean during the slave trade. She is known as a nurturing and protective Goddess, which is why I have deep affinity towards what she represents. As a first time mother, I desired to have her all-encompassing, maternal energy surround and guide me. Painting, *Mama of All Mamas*, was a therapeutic and symbolic way for me to believe that I also possessed this brilliant, maternal trait of the goddess, Yemoja who, and that I was guided me in making good decisions regarding my son. Although, I did not have the emotional or physical support from my son’s father, I drew support and strength from this spiritual identity.

My painting, *Heru* (Figure 7), depicts my son and the text includes affirming words for him. I created this painting to counter any fears and anxieties regarding my son’s health and safety that I, like most mothers, experience. I included the stylized angels that are often found in Ethiopian religious art as symbols of protection in the background. The painting, symbolically, serves as a visual prayer for my son because some of my many positive hopes for him are included in this piece.

My process for creating the *Goddess Series* began with 9 by 12 pieces of plywood. I typically use canvas for my painting surface however this was not my first time using wood. I primed the surfaces with gesso but wood can be very porous therefore it was still somewhat difficult to paint on despite the primer. I noticed that I had to use several layers of acrylic paint to get a richer finish because the wood still absorbed a lot more paint than canvas. However, a surprising outcome was that despite the primer and layers of paint, the texture of the wood was still very evident in the finished pieces.
Although 3 of the 4 pieces incorporate some of the same elements like collaged images and were all derived from photographs I had taken myself with my camera setup on a tripod, they were all unique in some aspect. For example, I had always wanted to try a particular style of artwork from Nigeria which is a picture entirely composed of beads thus I incorporated this beadwork in *Warrior Mama* (Figure 9). To achieve this, I poured wood glue in the places where I wanted the beads to adhere to and begin applying beads in a pattern while the glue was still wet. I achieved my desire effect, which was to successfully incorporate beads while not taking away from the actual portrait.

The face in Figure 6 was painted with watered down grey tones so the end result had an ethereal watercolor effect. I had initially intended to add color but decided that it looked better in black and white. The black and white gave an impression of an old photograph and this created a nice symbolic statement about my ancestry. The stark pink background and bright blue of the collaged doll image also provided an interesting contrast.

In my painting of my son, *Heru*, I incorporated paper, which is something I’ve done often in older paintings but I felt as if in this image, the paper blended more seamlessly into the painting because of the unified color scheme. The title, *Heru*, is my son’s last name and is also the name of an Egyptian God that represents resurrection.

**Reflection on Process**

After completing my *Goddess Series*, I still felt as if I had not fully explored the intense feelings I was experiencing at the time. I also wanted to make my paintings more personal and more reminiscent of the art journals that I was maintaining for this study. Although my art journals were separate works of art and did not serve as the bases for my subsequent paintings, I
did utilize the gesso techniques, collaging, ink stamping, and text that I gained from my journaling (See Figures 10 and 11).

Figure 10. *Untitled Journal Page*, Zalika Perkins, 2011, paper, acrylic paint on paper, 8 by 11.
For example, I created a stamp, using linoleum, based on the Adinkra symbol for creativity and used it in the background of Figure 11. The stamp along with rubbing into the ink with a paper cloth created a texture that gave the journal page an antique feeling. I applied this same artistic discovery in my later paintings. The text in Figure 11 is based off a book that I read in my adolescence entitled, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. In my painting, I implore the...
fictional man to promise me a lotus garden. The lotus was a symbol that I adopted as a teenager to represent how I defined myself, a person who persevered under any circumstance.

In my subsequent paintings, I addressed the topics of my move back to Washington, D.C. and having to confront my feelings of sadness that stemmed from addictive behaviors exhibited by some of my family members. Like my initial Goddess Series, I worked from photographs of myself, this time taken by my father who is also an artist. However, I used the techniques I had acquired from art journaling.

*Home, Bittersweet, Home* (Figure 12) depicts this isolated feeling as my son and I face our uncertain path. Our backs are to the viewer as we stare into the unknown distance while he leans on me, almost as if he is giving me comfort. I included a map of the region of D.C. where I was raised and the text to depict some of the feelings behind the painting. The title, *Home, Bittersweet, Home* succinctly defines how I felt about my return to my hometown of Washington, D.C. I was eager to have the assistance from my family that I really needed but not ready to face the dysfunction that accompanied them.

Returning home forced me to recall the troubling aspects of my adolescence and teenaged years that I had not quite come to grips with. In my journal, I wrote, “Breaking down feels like an eternity as I recover from all that I have been. Fear has me paralyzed but grace breaks the spell. I have lived and I have not lived depending on varying moments in my life. Now I return; to heal and grow up. These growing pangs are gnawing at my soul but they are necessary for evolution. Now, I set forth to become a woman.”

As a finishing touch to both the paintings (Figures 12, 14, and 13), I carved the Adinkra symbol for strength into linoleum and stamped a border design. I rubbed some of the ink from
the stamps into the border to give the painting an older impression and to impart a feeling of nostalgia upon the viewer.


(Figure 13) portrays the balancing act of single motherhood, working, and practicing my art. I balance symbolic baskets on my head as a reference to my African foremothers who often literally and figuratively also balance heavy loads on their heads and babies on their backs.
In both paintings, the figures’ backs are to the viewer, which is a pose that I have not previously used in my portraits and its intention is for the viewer to form their own conclusions about the emotions in the paintings. However, color does play a key role in both paintings.
For example, the blue background in *Home, Bittersweet, Home*, imparts an air of sadness. In *Brown Girl From Southeast*, the yellow background implies an optimism that defines me as a person. It is an optimism that I maintain regardless of whatever hardships I may face in life. Furthermore, the text that I wrote in *Brown Girl From Southeast* supports this same hopeful feeling: “We don’t easily falter nor do we take punches sitting down. We rise like dust simply because we have to. We fight for our happiness. And though we have too many baskets to bear, we bear them with grace.”

Like, *Home, Bittersweet, Home*, the title of *Brown Girl From Southeast* holds significance. Those familiar with the southeast region of Washington, D.C. where I was raised, know that it is a region that is often characterized by its high poverty and crime rates. I was often told by other residents of the city that I was from the “rough” area of the city, which conflicted with my persona because I was never a product of my environment. Nonetheless, being from Southeast did become an integral part of my identity.

I created, *Never Stop Dreaming, Brown Girl*, to continue this underlying theme of balance and perseverance. I used the basket symbolism again with the basket being the primary subject of the painting. The text in the painting is meant to serve as an affirmation for the viewer and me. It reads, “Fill the basket with your dreams. Let it overflow and never stop dreaming, Brown Girl.” To connect this painting with the other two paintings in the series, I utilized the
maps, patterned paper, and stamped border. I was very pleased with the overall outcome of this piece and how well it compliments the others.

There is a strong, underlying narrative throughout Figures 12 through 14 and 13. I felt like I had successfully accomplished my goal of creating paintings whose narratives are rich with symbolism. I believe that the intensity of emotion is conveyed in the colors and poses of the subjects, which are depictions of my son and me. Additionally, the art/journal feeling that I was hoping for is very evident in the stamped borders, text and textures created by the layered paint, collaged papers and maps. It is a style that I have continued to utilize in subsequent works of art.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLEMENTATION AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Implementation

As a result of exploring my own identity through symbolic portraiture, I have developed several lesson plan ideas around the concepts of identity and narrative. I have included below a brief synopsis of two of these that I consider to be meaningful. It was important to me to enrich my student’s knowledge of culture and spirituality (both aspects of identity) because many have no concept of culture beyond the youth/materialism culture that is heavily promoted in the media. My Survey of World Art class was the perfect vehicle in which to do this.

I used Mandalas as a basis since its very creation process is intended to put the artist into a meditative or relaxed state. This was important to me because many of my students suffer from the stress of dysfunctional home lives and city living. For example, after having casual conversations with my students, I learned that many of them do not live with their parents. They are either being raised by relatives because their parents are unfit, deceased, or in prison and many others are living in group homes due to their own encounters with breaking the law.

They oftentimes arrive to class ill-prepared to function in a classroom setting and are often very defiant to any form of authority. It is no wonder that many of them cannot see beyond their immediate environments. Therefore, I believe that to be able to get my students to think long-term or to conceive of bigger ideas is an incredible feat.

In my introduction of the lesson, I showed them various types of Mandalas that ranged from those only composed of text to the underwear Mandalas by Spanish artist, Pilar Albarracin’s. This was to convey to them that a Mandala in a contemporary context can consist of many things and does not have to be solely spiritual in nature.
I made the lesson relevant to them by making the topic of the Mandala lesson about them. The narrative aspect of the lesson is incorporated into the fact that they have to make the Mandala a visual depiction of their goals and desires in life. I wanted them to have the opportunity to begin to think deeply about their lives and change the story of their lives. This desire stemmed from my observation that many of my students have not been taught to think long-term and do not see much hope for themselves in the future. The mixed media nature of the lesson gave the students an opportunity to collage in images and symbols that fit their themes.

Another noteworthy lesson I created was derived from my desire to engender in my students a desire to know who they are as it relates to this world and how they can effect change in their communities through their art. Taylor et al. (2006) discussed this concept of multiculturalism in art education being used as a platform for societal change and to create thriving communities and this really resonated with me.

I used this idea of art being a vehicle for social change by having students read about the history of fist symbolism in art and how it was often used as a way to mobilize groups of people against oppression. They also were able to connect the lesson to the Occupy Wall Street protests that were going on at the time and which also used the fist symbolism. They then created mixed-media paintings where they used hand symbolism along with other cultural symbols to depict who they were as individuals.

Outcomes

My observation of students’ intense involvement in the Mandala lesson made me feel that it was a very successful lesson. Part of what determines a lesson’s success is the level of relevancy it contains. It seemed deeply relevant to them because it was strictly about what they
wanted to accomplish out of life and who they were as individuals, including their interests and goals. Furthermore, it served as a catalyst for my students to reflect on what they wanted to accomplish in life. I left the project open-ended so that some students did projects solely composed of text. It allowed for students who weren’t that comfortable with drawing to find other ways to express themselves. Other students were using symbols to represent themselves and their desires. Since we previously looked at various artists and studied their use of symbols, they quickly came up with strong symbols that were not too clichéd or arbitrary.

Not only was the lesson very much aligned with my initial desires to bring narrative and identity into the classroom but the Mandalas became symbolic self-portraits. In my key terms, I defined symbolic portraiture as a representation of someone using symbols and all of my student’s Mandalas represented who they were as individuals. It was wonderful to see the level of thought and analyses that my student’s used to create their Mandalas.
The Hand Symbolism lesson was not as successful because many students had a hard time expressing who they were as individuals and even with having the definition of culture, many said that they did not know what their culture was. Upon further reflection, I realized that they would have to look at more artists and have further exposure to other opportunities for them to form deeper understandings about who they were. Another issue I ran into was their inability to render the hands, which led many of them to often quit or not try as hard or quit altogether. A solution to this, was giving them even more practice and study of anatomy. I observed them giving up quickly when doing a symbolic self-portrait lesson as well. This led me to try other alternatives like, allowing some of them to work from photos and to trace them to get more accurate proportions. This gave them more freedom to focus on the symbols that complemented the lessons.

All of the lessons are works in progress and through my constant reassessment of my lessons, I can guide my students into confident artists who can easily express who they are as individuals and what life story they can create for themselves.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Implications

One of the major implications that I have discovered in my research is that the need for a multicultural curriculum that focuses on identity and narrative is more imperative than I originally thought. With alarmingly high dropout rates and high imprisonment rates of many of my young Black and Hispanic students, it is quite obvious that many students are not connecting with what they are learning. It has been moments in my teaching where I have experienced a feeling akin to heartbreak when I witness seemingly thoughtful students drop out of school or get arrested for petty crimes.

From my observations, I believe that part of the issue is that many of my students are disengaged and don’t feel like they can ever be contributing members of society. Therefore, they need to have a multitude of opportunities to learn about themselves and what they are capable of beyond what they are being fed by the media.

Summary

In reflecting upon the process and products undertaken in this thesis project, I must revisit my initial research questions that guided me into this inquiry:

• How can I communicate more effectively through symbolic portraiture while at the same time avoiding the banality of traditional portraiture?
• How can I use various materials to create multi-layered and textured paintings that are cohesive and clear in their narratives?
• How might teaching symbolic portraiture to my students get them to think more deeply about their lives, their communities and their world view?
I believe that I am communicating more effectively through symbolic portraiture because there is an added visual and symbolic depth in my work now that was previously not as visible/apparent. Everything, from my color usage to the concepts behind my paintings are more intentional. As I continue to explore this style of symbolic portraiture and gain inspiration from different artists who incorporate this into their work, I feel more confident in my voice and what I want to convey.

The usage of gesso, paper, ink and other materials have given my work a multi-layered and textured quality that I had always wanted but I found previously difficult to achieve.

I found that through my multi-identity reality of artist/researcher/educator I have been able to find a cyclical balance of all three. For example, the more I create as an artist; the better I am able to challenge my students to hone their creative skills. The outcomes from these lessons, influence my art making process. The observations that I recorded, encouraged me to revise and develop my lessons so as to have a greater transformative effect on my students. Thus the description of the art educator in A/r/tography (2004), has helped me to synthesize my various roles.

Furthermore, teaching from my standpoint of identity has challenged me in a lot of ways as well. I have confirmed as stated in my study’s limitations that African-centered stances or any forms of critical analysis of society are perceived as outdated and unimportant so I have had to find and am still constantly exploring other ways to connect to my student’s modern sensibilities.

Although, I am still developing engaging lessons that help to address the issues that many of my students face, I perceive that my teaching symbolic portraiture, especially from a culturally relevant viewpoint, to my students has had a deep effect on them. By studying symbols and their usage in art and media they are beginning to have a reference from which to
work and their work seems to be taking on additional depth and complexity. They also seem to be attaining a visual language to express themselves with and this is important for their growth as artists and as contributing members of society. *For example, one particular student developed an entire body of work around her identity as an Ethiopian-American. Her images ranged from Ethiopian iconography to portraits of her family members wearing their traditional dress* (See Figures 15 and 16).

![Image of Coptic Cross](Image)

Figure 16. Betelihem Chekole, *Coptic Cross*, linocut print, 2013. 9 by 12.
Implications

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need to have a multitude of opportunities to learn about themselves and what they are capable of beyond what they are being fed by the media.

In conclusion, in my quest for my self and others to find self-empowerment through the subjects of narrative and identity, I realized that my identity is still expanding. In my newly acquired identity as a teacher, I have realized that this role requires so much more than I ever imagined. I am constantly pushing myself to find ways to engage my students and in turn, I have to develop as an artist to do this successfully. I cannot ask of my students what I am not willing to do myself. Thus, in aiding them in finding ways to actualize their greatest potential and to change their thinking, I concluded that I would have to do the same.

Therefore, my newfound identity is that of an empowered mMother, tTeacher, rResearcher and Black fFemale aArtist who is developing a new narrative that speaks of triumph and growth. Hopefully, this narrative can empower my students to do the same.
REFERENCES


