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Adolescent Identity Development in an Art Classroom

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Adolescent Identity Development in an Art Classroom

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Department of Art Education

Honors Research Project

Submitted to

*The Williams Honors College
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Adolescent Identity Development in an Art Classroom

The University of Akron

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Abstract

Identity is an important construct in adolescent development. Adolescence can be a time for students to find the best versions of themselves or to get stuck and confused on who they truly are. This honors project paper explores how art education can be a positive influence in the development of adolescents and their journey to finding their identities. It discusses the psychology behind adolescent development; how identities form, the chances for identity confusion or negative identity formation, and the physical stressors present in an individual that age that may also affect how they develop mentally and emotionally. It also explores how art can help students and what art teachers should and should not do in order to best benefit adolescent identity development.

Adolescent Identity Development in an Art Classroom

Introduction

Art education is most widely known as a specialized form of learning presented in the American education system. Art teaches students to expand their knowledge and offers a variety of quality skills that can be put to use in an array of different job types or expanded upon in further secondary education opportunities. However, what most do not think about is that art education can also be an important resource for students' growth and development. It can be an outlet for self-expression as well as a key player in the positive development of identity for students. Everyone goes through a variety of developmental stages in their life and each stage plays a key role in how one grows and progresses along their own path. Although these different stages are key to one's development, it is the adolescent stage that is seen to be the most crucial, especially when it comes to the development of identity. The adolescent development stage begins at 12 and progresses until an individual reaches the age of 18. This group of individuals begin to see a lot of changes in their life, both physically and mentally. It is during this time, that a student is trying to find who they are and who they want to be. Students may become confused and will try to seek out ways to aid in their identity development.

This paper has explored how art education can help to aid in the positive development of adolescent identity. Subsequently, could art done in an art classroom enable teens to find their identity and express themselves positively? What happens developmentally in the ages 12-18 years that is important for educators to recognize? Why might a student in the given age range experience identity crisis and how can educators help prevent it? What are some art projects/topics that might be better to avoid during this developmental time period? Conversely,

what are some art projects/topic that may be best during his developmental time period? All of these questions have been explored through the next topics presented within this paper.

Literary Review

This paper has examined a variety of different theorists and research regarding adolescent identity formation, adolescent physical and mental developments, and how art can positively influence these developments. As an art educator, it is important to recognize all these different ideas presented below and how the information can be used through student artwork to help them through this tough journey in their lives. The chosen topics below will intertwine with each other to form a whole on the ideas of adolescent identity development and how it can be benefitted within an art classroom.

Developmental Theorists and Adolescent Identity Development

There are many developmental theorists and with most, their theories build off one another to offer a more well-rounded idea about human development. Out of many, three theorists were selected that best represent the ideas of adolescent development in relation to this research.

One of the key individuals of developmental theories is Erik Erikson. Erikson (1968) created a theory called, the Stages of Psychosocial Development. In his theory, Erikson labels eight developmental stages a person goes through beginning from infancy to late adulthood. Each stage offers two “paths” an individual may follow depending on the social experiences they come across throughout their lifetime. During adolescence, Erikson (1968) believed that those ages 12-18, are going through the stage Identity vs. Role Confusion. It is in this stage that youth begin to question who they are. Social relationships are more important than ever in this stage as

well as the ability for self-exploration and encouragement within that self-exploration. Those who are encouraged and reinforced in their journey to finding their identity are more likely to succeed in this stage and will develop fidelity, a type of virtue that helps build better, more genuine relationships. However, those who are left with self-doubt and a lack of reinforcement during their journey, may experience role confusion. Role confusion may also be referred to as identity crisis, and adolescents experiencing this may feel the need to experiment with different lifestyles, both positive and negative. These are also the groups of individuals who struggle to remain grounded in one area and are unsure of themselves. They may feel disappointed and will struggle to build strong relationships with others. As an educator of any kind, it is important to identify the students at risk of role confusion and help them find their path so that they may continue to successfully progress in all areas of their life.

Another major theorist was Jean Piaget (1977), who was renowned for developing his Stages of Cognitive Development theory. Piaget's (1977) theory discussed four stages from birth to adulthood. Each stage shows the progression a person makes through learning and decision making. Adolescents fall under the last stage, Formal operational. It is in this stage that individuals 12 and older begin to gain the ability to think abstractly and logically. These new ways of thinking allow adolescents to do mathematical calculations, associate actions with potential outcomes, use abstract reasoning and begin to think creatively. The ability to start thinking creatively is what makes art such an important tool for self-expression in adolescent students.

Finally, Pamela Hays (2001), another noted theorist, developed the "ADDRESSING" Model. Hay's (2001) model is based around the complexity of individual identities and how there are many different areas of an individual's life that make up their identity. These areas

include: Age, developmental Disability, acquired Disability, Religion, Ethnicity, Sexual orientation, Socioeconomic status, Indigenous group membership, Nationality, and Gender. Each of these areas of Hay's (2001) "ADDRESSING" model may be embraced or rejected on an adolescent's path to finding their identity but all should be made equally important and acknowledged as a student begins to find their own identities. These areas of identity may also be made present in a student's artwork making it important for teachers to be able to recognize and support.

Finally, all three examined theorists offer theories/models that help to acknowledge and understand adolescent identity development. Each theory/model can be further specified to show how art educators can use the given information to benefit their students within their own art classrooms. It is most important to recognize that adolescents are going through a challenging time within this period of their lives and it is important to support and recognize all areas of their developing identity.

Identity development begins to occur around 12 years of age and continues to develop until the approximate age of 18 as noted prior by Erik Erikson (1968) and his theory, the Stages of Psychosocial Development. Erikson's theory talks about how it is crucial to support adolescents during this fragile period in their lives if they are to achieve a psychological state of virtue known as fidelity. If lacking the support or encouragement they need, adolescents may experience role confusion, also known as identity crisis. This can cause negative effects on their later stages in life also defined by Erikson's (1968) theory. If pressured into a specific lifestyle or identity, adolescents can be forced into rebellion, causing them to establish a negative identity. This negative identity could also lead to an overall sense of unhappiness and isolation, affecting later stages of development as well.

James Marcia, another developmental psychologist offered a similar ideology to Erikson but characterized his theory into statuses rather than stages. Marcia (1966) proposed four statuses that could occur while an adolescent is developing their identity. The first status he introduces is Identity Diffusion. This status describes an adolescent's inability to commit to a particular identity making them a "drifter" in other aspects of their life such as career choices or relationships. The second status offered by Marica (1966) is Identity Foreclosure. This status, unlike the last, is defined as committing too soon, possibly without exploration, to a particular identity. This outcome can be caused the same way a negative identity is, with pressure being put on an individual to take on a specific identity. The third status noted is Identity Moratorium. This describes the individual who wants to test all of the waters, good and bad, but is not likely to commit to any of them. It is important to note that while it is good to support identity exploration, it is also good to guide adolescents towards more positive identities rather than risky ones. The last of Marica's (1966) statuses is Identity achievement. Just as it sounds, this is when an adolescent becomes committed to an identity after thorough exploration. This is the status all students should be getting help and support to achieve during their identity exploration.

During identity development, adolescents begin a journey of self-exploration by wandering into new media and gaining a variety of new skills. Adolescents may also begin to distinguish their self-identity from their social-identity. Self-identity is how an individual sees themselves and is their most genuine state of individuality. Social-identity, on the other hand, is how others may view an individual. This other form of identity may be manipulated and does not generally show the true identity of a single individual but rather a whole group.

Finally, there are a variety of dimensions of identity that intersect to form one's sense of self. Similar to Pamala Hay's (2001) "ADDRESSING" model the dimensions to note are:

gender, religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, generation, sexuality, political views, region, profession, culture, and class. The physical dimensions noted are more likely to affect one's identity because they will also affect social interactions.

Physical Developments and Their Effects on Mental Health of Adolescents

It is well understood that an individual in the age range of 13-18 experiences a lot of physical changes as well as mental ones. These changes can have a strong effect on how a student's identity develops both positively or negatively. It is important for any educator to understand these changes in order to best guide students in a more positive direction. An organization called, The Whole Child, offers information on adolescent development about these physical changes.

At the beginning half of adolescent physical development, The Whole Child (2018) discusses how those ages 13-14, begin to see a majority of physical changes appear. For girls, body fat increases, their breasts begin to enlarge, their voices deepen, they experience their first menstrual cycle, body hair begins to grow, they begin to sweat more and their hormones change, potential causing acne. For boys, their muscle mass increases, genitals enlarge, and, just like girls, their voices deepen, body hair growth begins, they begin to sweat more and there are hormonal changes. These initial changes in body development can sway either in a positive or negative way when it comes to a student's mental health. The changes can boost confidence in a student, increasing their drive towards building better relationships, pushing for success in specialized areas of talent, and driving them to work harder to achieve academic success in school. However, these changes can and most often reduce a student's confidence. Students may shrink their groups of close relationships, lose the drive and even quit their specialized talent

areas, and be less motivated to work hard in school. They may feel alone and isolated and are at a greater risk for developing depression and other negative mental health conditions.

In the second half of adolescent physical development, The Whole Child (2018) discusses how in the ages 15-18, girls have typically reached full development while boys begin to see facial hair growth. It is also at this time that girls become the most concerned with their appearance and at least half of high school age girls are on some sort of diet. Once more, these physical changes are going to greatly affect the mental health of an adolescent student and thus, may change how their individual identities develop.

In conclusion, adolescent students' physical developments can have strong impacts on mental health. As an educator, it will be important to teach students to have a positive body image when viewing themselves to help prevent negative thoughts and views. This idea can be represented in a variety of art-based lesson plans that help students to feel confident about themselves, rather than down about these major changes.

Cognitive Development in Adolescents

While students are developing physically in their adolescent years, they are also developing intellectually, socially, and emotionally. These three categories make up the overall idea of cognitive development which is another crucial step in the development of one's identity. The Whole Child, offers information on adolescent development within the 3 categories listed above.

In the first half of adolescent cognitive development, The Whole Child (2018), discusses how those ages 13-14, will begin to intellectually question rules both at home and in school, form concrete thinking styles such as if something is wrong or right, start to believe that bad things will not happen to them, feel like they are the center of attention, making them very self-

conscious, and finally feel like any body imperfection such as a pimple is being seen by the whole world. Socially and emotionally they will: start to spend more time with friends and less with family; begin to make connections between their identity and hobbies, friends, clothes, etc.; become very moody; push limits to assert independence; and spend a lot of time on technology and social media. Although most of the information listed above makes adolescent individuals sound horrible, it is all a common part of the cognitive development process. The overabundance of moods can also be channeled into art, making it easier for students to express themselves.

In the second half of adolescent cognitive development, The Whole Child (2018), discusses how those ages 15-18, will intellectually, become better at problem solving, start making rash decisions, gain better organizational skills, ask frequent questions, challenge rules, and start attempting to answer major questions about their identities. Socially and emotionally they will: feel more assured, resist peer pressure, spend little time with family, build closer friendships, want more control over their lives, have mixed emotions about the future, start to have strong sexual urges as well as find their sexual orientation, and potentially become depressed. It is important to recognize the need for mental health support within this half of cognitive development. Students are beginning to reach the final years of their general education and have some big lifestyle changes coming their way, which can be hard. Making sure to offer real life advice throughout their schooling career, especially in high school, can really benefit students at this time in their life. If students are very interested in the arts, also offering future careers relating to the type of art they enjoy will also help them find their path.

Overall, adolescent cognitive development is an important part of their identity development process. What happens intellectually, socially, and emotionally, all begin to build the basis for a student's identity and it is important for educators to understand. If students are

struggling with mood swings, stress, or depression during this time, it is important to help them find ways to express these emotions through an outlet such as art. Art educators can and should offer a variety of lessons based solely on needing to destress and collect one's thoughts and feelings. Lessons like this should not be complex and students should have a major portion of control in what they create.

Art's Impact on Adolescent Identity Development

The creative outlet is one of the best ways to display self-expression, thoughts and feeling. It can help to ground students during a very tough time in their lives and offers opportunities for control and focus. However, art, especially that taught in a classroom, can alternatively have a negative effect on students. The misguided arts curriculum cannot only potentially destroy student interest in art, but can also affect them mentally. For example, requiring students to do a realistic self-portrait is unwise. If they do not have the necessary development of skills, self-portraits can become distorted, not to mention most adolescents already do not favor their appearance. This type of project not only hurts artistic confidence, but self-confidence as well. It is important for educators to see students on a bell curve; there are those who really enjoy art-making, those who do not feel they can ever gain the skills to enjoy art, and those who are in-between. Teachers should aim to keep those that enjoy art on that side, shift those in the middle over to the enjoyment side, and get those who do not enjoy it to at least the middle section if not all the way to the enjoyment side. To get the greatest number of students to enjoy art making, it is important to create lessons that fit a variety of development needs, are interesting for the age group, connect to each artist, and offer some student control. Adolescent students are very stuck on their self-image, so rather than creating anything that may feel too

realistic or representational, such as a self-portrait, it is better to create projects that feel more abstracted in their relation to a student's self-image.

If taught correctly, art can have a strong effect on identity development. Kenneth Elpus, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, discusses in his paper, *Arts Education and Positive Youth Development* (2013), that students actively interested/participating in any art form, are far more likely to do better in school, avoid suspension or expulsion, and far less likely to drink underage or participate in any form of drug use. When students make art, they gain a sense of self-control and empowerment most other students lack and they follow a more positive path to identity development. The subject matter within student artwork can also give insight into interests and feelings and should be recognized by art educators. Finally, it is important to note that not all students who enjoy art should be pushed towards a career path in art. For some, it can just act as a source of relief or a form of therapy. Pushing a student towards any specific identity, as mentioned previously with Erikson's (1968) theory, can cause rebellion and create a form of negative identity so it is best to avoid this.

Conclusion

As an art educator, it is important to have an in-depth knowledge about the areas of study covered within this paper. This information will allow teachers to decide how they can assist in guiding students on their journey to finding their own identities. It is important to remember not to push a certain identity on students, because the consequences could greatly affect that adolescent's future. It is also important for art educators to be aware of the kinds of art curriculum that will benefit adolescent identity development, and those that will create a negative impact. While not every adolescent may find art as their calling, most can find some enjoyment in it if the subject is introduced to them correctly. Art is a way for students to ground themselves

and express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions while on this journey to find themselves.

While identity development was the main focus within this paper, it is also important to recognize both physical and cognitive development occurring within the same time period and how they can also have an effect on adolescent identity development. Physically, students are going through some very strange and uncomfortable changes that can have a toll on their mental health. Creating projects that advocate for better mental health are important at this time. Finally, cognitively, students are also experiencing a wide variety of changes. One important change is the development of critical thinking skills. It is this new way of thinking that allows students to make connections to their own artwork through style, technique and content and should be used to an art educators advantage.

Units

This section covers 10 lesson plans that this author believes will help benefit positive identity development in an art classroom. There are a variety of different mediums represented to create a more well-rounded grouping of works and to offer other educators' options when it comes to techniques, tools, and materials. Each lesson has a fully developed compact lesson plan with examples available on the authors education website:

<https://msmcgormleysartclassroom.squarespace.com/>. Lessons are organized below by title, grade focus, medium, materials, a lesson overview, and how it will support positive identity development. Although there is a grade focus, each lesson can be simplified or expanded upon to meet the needs of a variety of grade levels.

Lesson Title: Eye Stippling on Wood

Grade Focus: Sophomores and juniors

Medium: Drawing

Materials: Wood planks, pencils, & sharpies

Lesson Overview: Students will be using a mark making technique known as stippling to create a close-up image of their eyes on a piece of wood. An expression of some kind must be represented in the final piece.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: Students will be able to focus their current feelings and expressions into a smaller portion of the human body. Eyes can tell a lot about an individual while also not being too complex to create. Eyes are also typically a part of the body that people feel most confident about when it comes to their own image. The technique being used also offers students a way to mindlessly create a piece, allowing them to destress and hopefully enjoy this art-making process.

See figure 1. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Stitched Outline of a Profile

Grade Focus: Freshman

Medium: Embroidery

Materials: Embroidery thread, embroidery needles, burlap (canvases work best), pencils & scissors

Lesson Overview: Students will be using embroidery thread to create an outline of their own profile. At least 3 additional details will need to be added with the thread and color is student choice.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: Embroidery is a beautiful art medium with a variety of unique techniques. Students will be able to use these techniques as well as their choice of color to best represent themselves within the piece. Also, creating an outline of a profile is simple and is less likely be distorted, allowing students to feel more comfortable about making a piece of art that connects to themselves. Finally, embroidery is a craft that is marketable, offering students an opportunity to continue with the craft and sell their pieces. This can lead students towards opportunities in business and marketing if they pursue it.

See figure 2. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Spirit Animal Mug Paintings

Grade Focus: Sophomores

Medium: Painting

Materials: Ceramic baking paint or paint pens, premade ceramic mugs, & a final protective glaze

Lesson Overview: Students will take an online test to determine their spirit animal. They will then create a painting on a premade mug of that spirit animal. Finally, the student will write a small paragraph on what they have learned about themselves through their assigned spirit animal.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: The student will be able to learn more about themselves through this light-hearted spirit animal activity. The additional writing portion will force them to make connections about their own identity that they may have never considered, helping to ground them in their development journey. This is another type of lesson that can become marketable for students, leading them towards career opportunities in business.

See figure 3. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Unique Portrait Photography

Grade Focus: Middle school and freshman

Medium: Photography

Materials: Camera (cellphone, tablet, digital camera), props, editing software

Lesson Overview: Students will use a camera of some form to create unique and expressive portraits of themselves or someone else. Each student must create 3 different portraits using at least two props.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: Students will get to experiment with digital media while participating in this project. This will allow them to manipulate their portraits to create something they feel comfortable with and with that, they also get the choice of whether or not they want to even be in their own photographs. Photography is also a very popular career type. This project may pique some students interest and help push them towards a career path in photography.

See figure 4. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Self-Propaganda Collages

Grade Focus: Sophomores and juniors

Medium: Mixed media

Materials: Scrap paper (Newspaper, magazines, patterns, etc.), scissors, glue, & paint pens

Lesson Overview: Students will create a collage piece that appears as a propaganda poster expressing their identities. Students must use a wide variety of scrap paper in their final piece and it must consist of some text and a clear focal point.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: Collage is a simple method of art making that can also be one of the most expressive. This project will help students to collect some major ideas about their own identities while also being able to express themselves in a fun and unique way. Mixed media is a popular method of artmaking within the art therapy world as well, due to its ability to be so expressive and mindless.

See figure 5. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Inkblot Drawings

Grade Focus: Juniors and seniors

Medium: Drawing with a little mixed media

Materials: Colored tissue paper, cardstock paper, pencils & drawing pens

Lesson Overview: For this project students will be creating a drawing using the stains from moistened tissue paper. The abstract shapes created from the tissue paper stains will allow students to pull an image from their mind and draw it on top of the color stains.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: This project strongly supports creative thinking skills and offers insight into the process students go through to come up with their final image. Student identities and mental development will aid in the subject matter they pull from the color stains and offer insight to the viewers about the path a student may be taking in their identity development. This project is not meant to support the ideas of inkblot testing methods previously used in psychology however, since such strategies have been proven invalid.

See figure 6. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Doodle Poster

Grade Focus: Freshman and sophomores

Medium: Drawing

Materials: Pens & paper

Lesson Overview: For this very simple lesson, students will be given a poster-sized piece of paper and, with only a pen, will create a large variety of small images to fill the entire paper. Students should not spend too much time planning but rather, should jump right into the project with little thought at all. If a mistake is made, students should problem-solve ways to cover the mistake up.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: This seemingly mindless project idea will help students to destress during this pivotal time of growth and development. Students will be challenged to relax and to not hesitate what they are putting on the paper. Identity will also shine through based on the content represented within the final piece. For example, athletes are more likely to represent sports of some kind in their piece and musicians may have doodles based on their interests. The thought process is that this project will be able to be read like a map and can be used to help guide students in the right direction when finding their identity.

See figure 7. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Contour Futures

Grade Focus: Sophomores and juniors

Medium: Drawing

Materials: Paper & pens

Lesson Overview: For this project, students will be creating a contour line drawing representing their futures. This does not have to be a self-portrait or a specific moment in time, but students should be able to explain how their abstracted piece connects to their future.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: This project gets students to really consider their future and what it holds for them. Because the image is meant to be a contour line drawing it will lack a lot of detail students would normally stress over, making it the perfect project to create. The goal of this project will be to help guide students in the right direction while they form their individualized identities.

See figure 8. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Abstract Splatter Painting

Grade Focus: Middle school

Medium: Painting

Materials: Canvas, paint, paintbrushes, balloons, & straws

Lesson Overview: Using the three given tools to splatter paint, students will create an abstract design based on their personalities. Color choice and splatter method will be up to their own imagination.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: This project allows for a means of self-expressions that creates a closer connection to one's self without worrying what others may think. These types of projects are easy to achieve success and are up to the student to decipher. Students should find the method of making with this project fun and not stressful, allowing them to focus in other areas of their lives.

See figure 9. for a sample image

Lesson Title: Reimagined Self-Portrait Drawing

Grade Focus: Middle school

Medium: Mixed media

Materials: Black and white images of each student, crayons, markers, scrap paper, scissors, & glue

Lesson Overview: For this project, students will be taken a pre-printed black and white photo of themselves and using the materials given, update it to bring out their uniqueness and individuality.

How Positive Identity Development is Supported: This project is going to allow students to bring up their self-esteem by allowing them to alter a photo of themselves to create something that they feel truly represents them. While some may see this project as being the opposite of supporting a student's identity, it is believed that this project will best represent one's inner identity, rather than the physical appearance. It is also believed that there should be no reason to deny the fact that adolescents typically do not like their physical appearance, so getting to change it for a project would be refreshing and exciting to them.

See figure 10. for a sample image

Summary

This paper has covered a wide variety of material relating to the ideas of adolescent identity development and how it can be supported in an art classroom. The research done will be helpful to many art educators who read it and the lessons, a guide to aiding in the positive development of adolescent identity. In the future, it may be beneficial to continue with research by testing out some of the lessons created in a classroom. After testing, students would be interviewed and asked questions based on their experiences with the lessons. These questions may include: Did they grow in confidence? Experience positive thoughts about themselves? Enjoy the process? Like having opportunities to express identity through art? All current and future research can be found on the authors website:

<https://msmcgormleysartclassroom.squarespace.com/>

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Figures



Figure 1. Eye Stippling on Wood

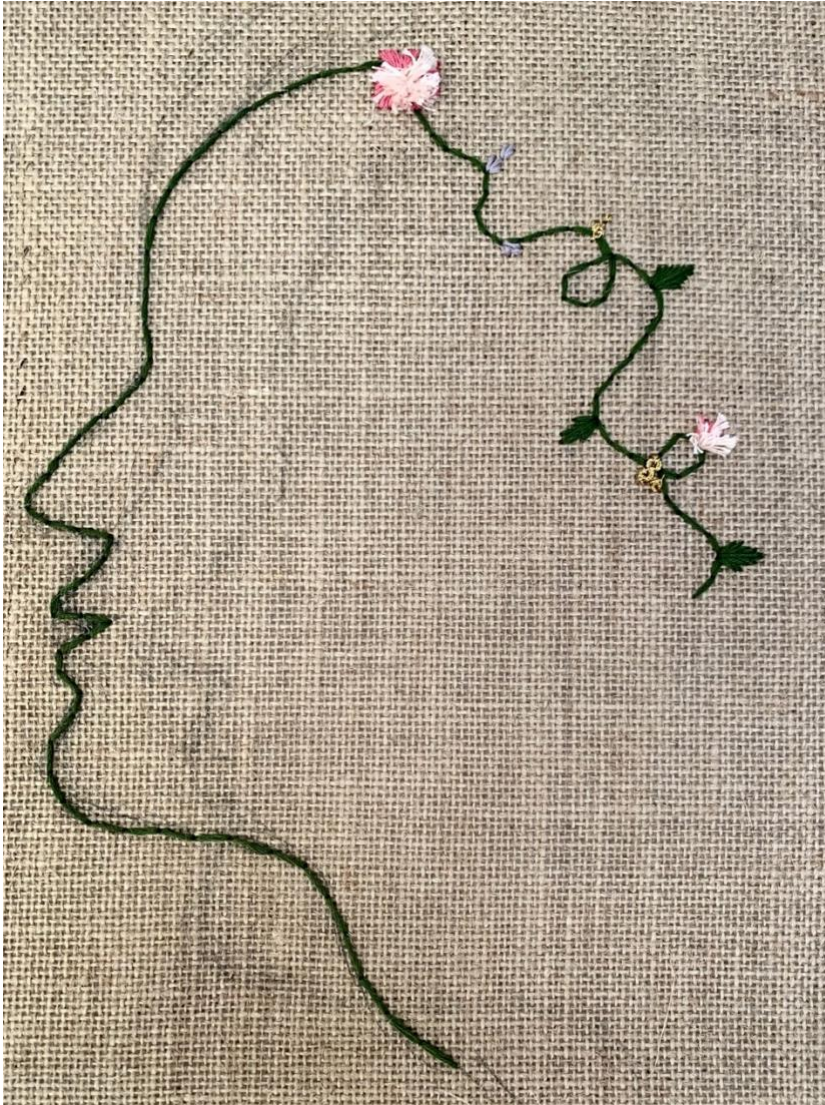


Figure 2. Stitched Outline of a Profile



Figure 3. Spirit Animal Mug Paintings



Figure 4. Unique Portrait Photography



Figure 5. Self-Propaganda Collages



Figure 6. Inkblot Drawings

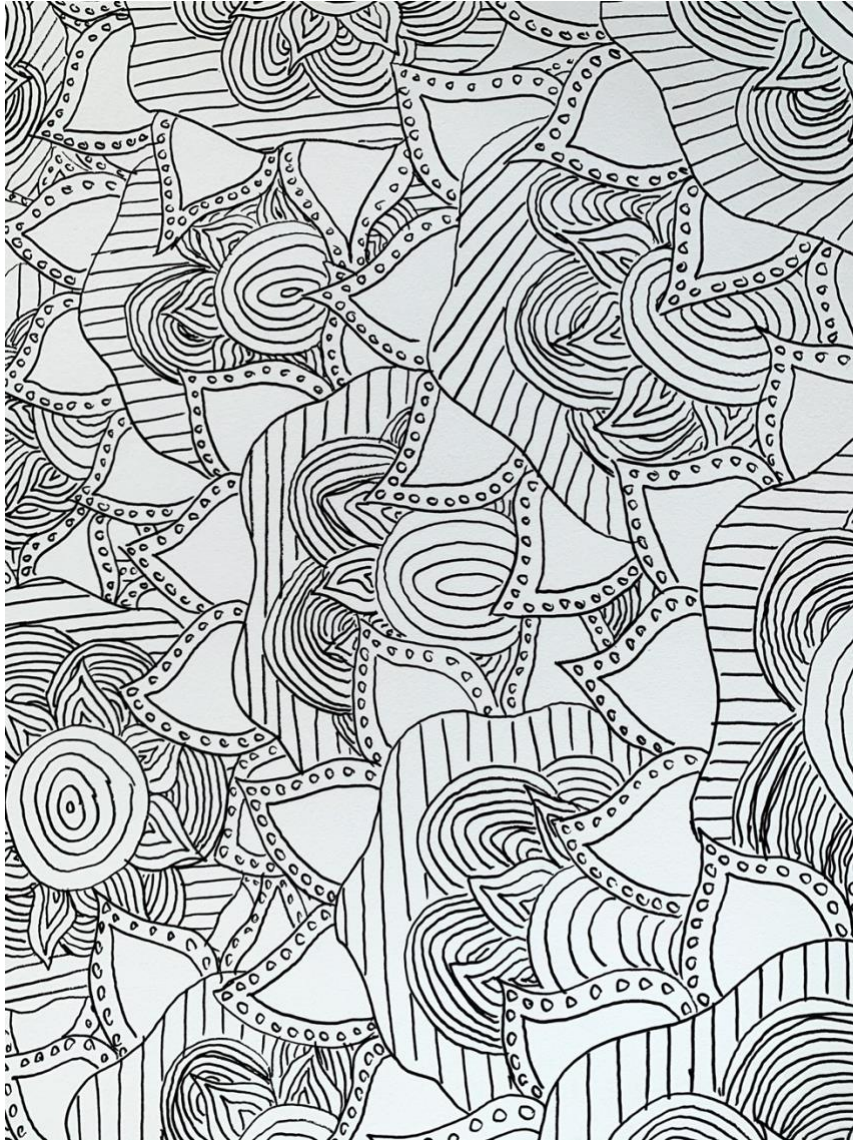


Figure 7. Doodle Poster

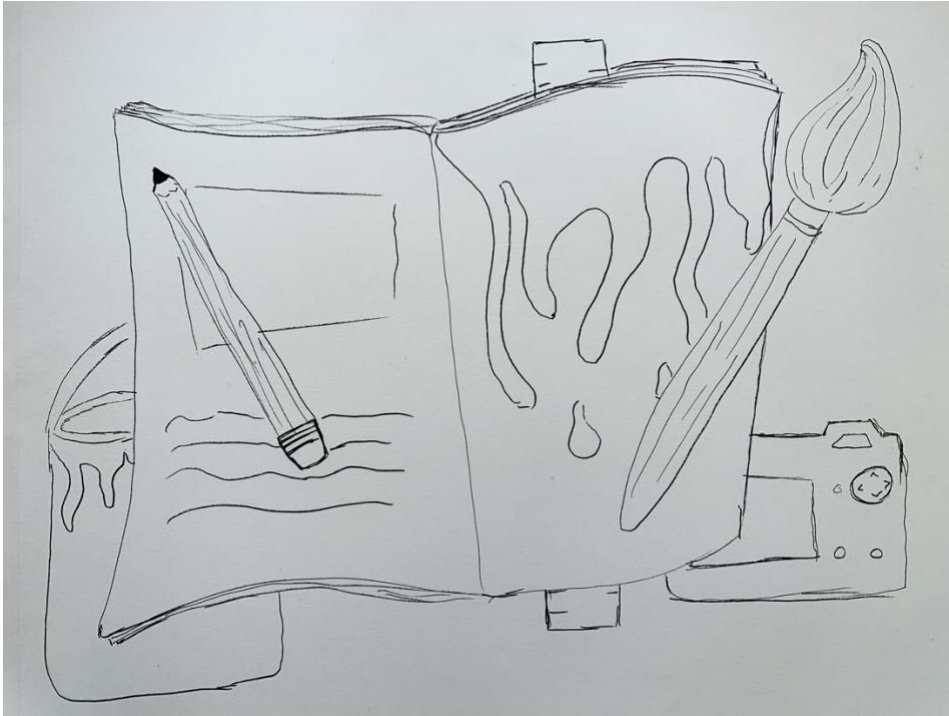


Figure 8. Contour Futures



Figure 9. Abstract Splatter Painting



Figure 10. Reimagined Self-Portrait Drawing