

Student Name: Abbie Thomas

Student Number: 2400502

BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Research in Practice

Lecturers: Alex Duncan and Paul Duerinckx

Isolation, Clinging and Erasure:

Expressing difficult emotion artistically

Word Count: 2315

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Isolation.....	4
Clinging.....	6
Erasure.....	8
Conclusion and research question.....	13
References.....	14

List of Figures

- 1) At Eternity's Gate - 1890
Image Sourced: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/At_Eternity%27s_Gate
- 2) The Two Fridas - 1939
Image Sourced: <https://medium.com/the-collector/what-lies-behind-the-two-fridas-by-frida-kahlo-5e7ce7db7fc4>
- 3) Rob - 2021
Image Sourced: <https://henriettaharris.com/Drawing-1>
- 4) Untitled - 2023
Image Sourced: Author's own image
- 5) The Event Itself - 2021
Image Sourced: <https://henriettaharris.com/Painting-1>

Introduction

In this essay, I will be exploring the fears and feelings I hold on to due to past experiences I have endured throughout my life with people I believed to be important to. These themes are something I face and deal with daily as I fight back thoughts of preceding years that taught me that I may not be as loved and wanted as I wished to be. As such, I will be referencing artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, as his work depicts loneliness and isolation, alongside Frida Kahlo, whose work shows her intense clinging to her husband, Diego Rivera, and finally, I will look at Henrietta Harris, whose artworks show the feeling of erasure within a single identity.

My own experience with each of these themes has been a learning curve for me, yet I believe they have also taught me to be more patient and understanding of others' circumstances. I have touched on these themes lightly in my work as they often open up many things I thought I had dealt with, despite this fear of re-opening wounds, each time I make a piece that I have buried my feelings into, I always feel a weight lifted from me, going forward I would like to make more pieces involving my ever-growing feelings as I believe they will help me face these fears. In this essay, I hope to complete a series of well-researched artworks that relate to my experiences on the themes of isolation, clinging and finally erasure, as to which I will form a question to myself to continue these works further.

Isolation

Isolation and loneliness come hand in hand. For me, it is the act of not feeling recognised within a social group or family setting. While this time I spent feeling shut off and alone was usually the time I spent thinking about things I had been too afraid to face, yet instead of using the time to overcome these thoughts, they almost always ended up making me more anxious. After a while of this, I dreaded being alone and relied on other people to keep me distracted from my own thoughts. It wasn't until I lost these people that I was able to see things differently. Vincent Van Gogh is a well-known artist whose work was deeply underrated and looked down on. He struggled with his mental health famously and took his own life before people began appreciating his work and the effort he put into living a good life.

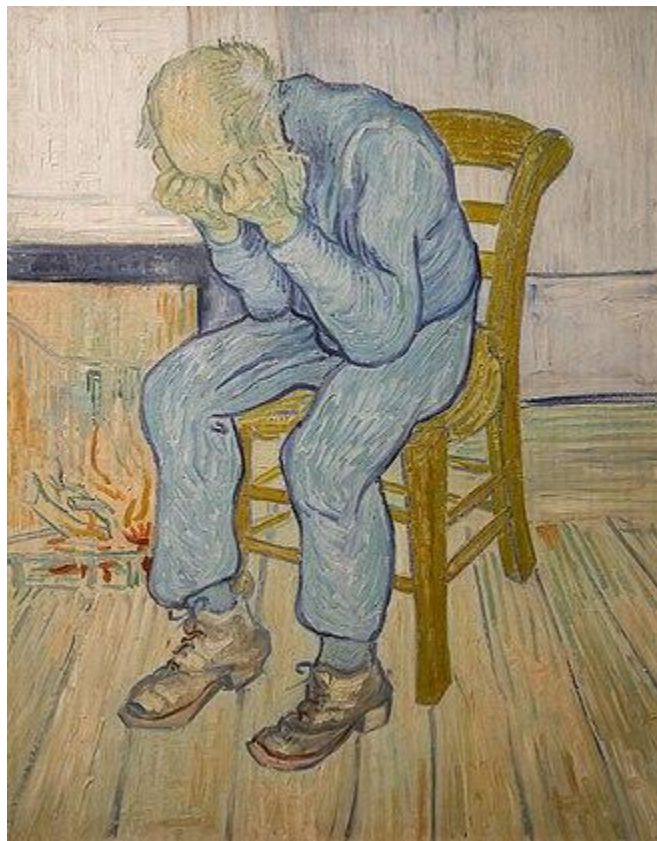


Fig. 1: At Eternity's Gate - Vincent Van Gogh, 1890

This is a painting made by Van Gogh. It shows an old man sitting in a wooden chair, cradling his face in his hands. Immediately, I feel a sorrowful undertone to the painting; the man is dealing

with negative emotions. In 1982, Van Gogh created a series of lithographs, and within them was this print; it is the only print he copied into an oil painting. It was meaningful to him throughout his career as an artist. It is suggested that Van Gogh saw himself in the old man and felt a close relation to how he was feeling as his mental health began to decline. Written in an article by 'Quabble', it says, 'The elderly man depicted in the painting likely represents Van Gogh himself, embodying the anguish and emotional turmoil he experienced.'

Søren Kierkegaard wrote on p.32 of his book 'Journals', 'There is peace and rest and comfort in sorrow.' This leads me to understand that during these moments of my life, I became so familiar with the feeling of isolation, I had not only become used to it, but it was a part of me. In my own work, I tried to portray how I felt, but being hushed before while asking for help, I did not see any reason as to why I would show my emotions on paper either. Van Gogh saw something of himself within this old man and felt a quiet reassurance. Yet, I had nothing to reassure me as everyone in my life pretended they were ok, and hid the part of them that was hurting, just like I did.

Clinging

When I was growing up, my mother used to say I had separation anxiety, because I used to follow her everywhere, like I couldn't leave her side. At the age of 16, I found myself in my first romantic relationship; instead of focusing on my mother, I focused everything on him. I relied on him emotionally, not understanding the impact and strain that it can have on another person; it kept happening. Ultimately, our relationship ended in September 2024, and he had been unfaithful. This result caused me to spiral as I no longer had that cushion of support from another person, and I soon realised how unhealthy our relationship was as I learned how to be there for myself. In 'The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait', there are letters written to her love, Diego Rivera, with whom she was very deeply connected. In one of the letters on

page 53, Kahlo writes, 'Your presence floats for a moment or two as if wrapping my whole being in an anxious wait for the morning. I notice that I'm with you. At that instant, still full of sensations...' The way Kahlo speaks about being apart from her love is how I felt when I was left on my own. How she describes that anxious feeling, the second you wake up, everything comes flooding back, not leaving you a drop of peace. During Kahlo's time with her love, Diego, they ended up getting divorced, and in that time she painted one of her most famous paintings, 'The Two Fridas'.



Fig. 2: 'The Two Fridas' - Frida Kahlo, 1939

In this painting, there are two versions of the painter, Frida Kahlo. These two versions depict the 'Frida' that was chosen by Diego, and the 'Frida' that was not. To the outside viewer, they are identical, as they are meant to be the same person, but to Kahlo, they were not. On the left is the version of her that Diego no longer loved; she is pale, and the heart that appears on both versions is wide open, broken. There is what appears to be a vein connecting the two that has been cut. The left version seems to try to stop the bleeding with a medical instrument, but the blood will not stop and stains her dress. Following the vein to the other side of the painting, it wraps around the version of Frida that Diego loved, her heart full, yet still exposed. In her hand is a portrait of her love, Diego, as confirmed by an article written by 'medium', 'In her left hand, she holds a portrait of Diego as a child.' This shows that she is connected to him in every way.

The story Kahlo tells in this painting feels very close to home, as I struggled to put into words the deceit, pain and heartbreak I felt after my relationship ended, yet I could not quite form an image in my head either. I expressed my pain with music and writing, which I found to be a very healing process, and as soon as I expelled all the confusing thoughts I had, drawing was introduced, not as a way to express my pain through the artwork, but as a way to self-soothe.

Erasure

From my past experiences, I often noticed my own friends and close family ignored me or failed to include me on various occasions. I was always talked over at the dinner table, when all I wanted was to share and be a part of the conversations that were taking place. When I did eventually pull the courage to say something about their constant interruptions, I was told that what I was talking about was not exciting or worth listening to.

In July 2023, I developed sciatica, which became so bad that I could not use my left leg without severe pain and risk of worsening it. I could not participate in any activities my friends

had planned for the summer, and they stopped inviting me after I explained I could not go. From here, they created rumours about me and talked with each other about how I was a bad friend; I felt completely alone, as when I needed them the most, they forgot about me.

With all these experiences, I developed a fear of being forgotten, which led me to be loud and quite irritating. I truly believed that being remembered as the annoying one was better than not being remembered at all; obviously, this was not the case, as I was only brought up in negative ways. All I wanted was a family that listened, and friends that were true. Henrietta Harris is an artist who depicts images of individuals who are in early adulthood, fighting their way through isolation or confusion, and are often painted or drawn with a mist interrupting their peace. Her works directly translate into how I was feeling during this time of my life, and I find great comfort within them.



Fig. 3: Rob, Graphite on Paper - Henrietta Harris, 2021

This artwork, entitled 'Rob', shows a young person sitting in a sorrowful position, their eyes closed, and they seem to be accepting the disruption passing through their head. The material used to create this piece gives us a clue into how this is intended to feel; with no colour added, it creates a gloomy and dejected mood. Confucius wrote, 'Inner conflict is not a flaw of the soul but its signature. The heart that never doubts, never trembles, never wrestles with itself has not awakened - it has merely gone numb.' in Chapter 17 of the book 'Confucius and Social

Harmony'. To me, this means that if I had not battled with my own thoughts and overcome my fears and feelings, I would still find reason to sit in isolation and grow deeper into depression.

This artwork feels very personal to me as I created something similar during the time of my life I previously spoke about.

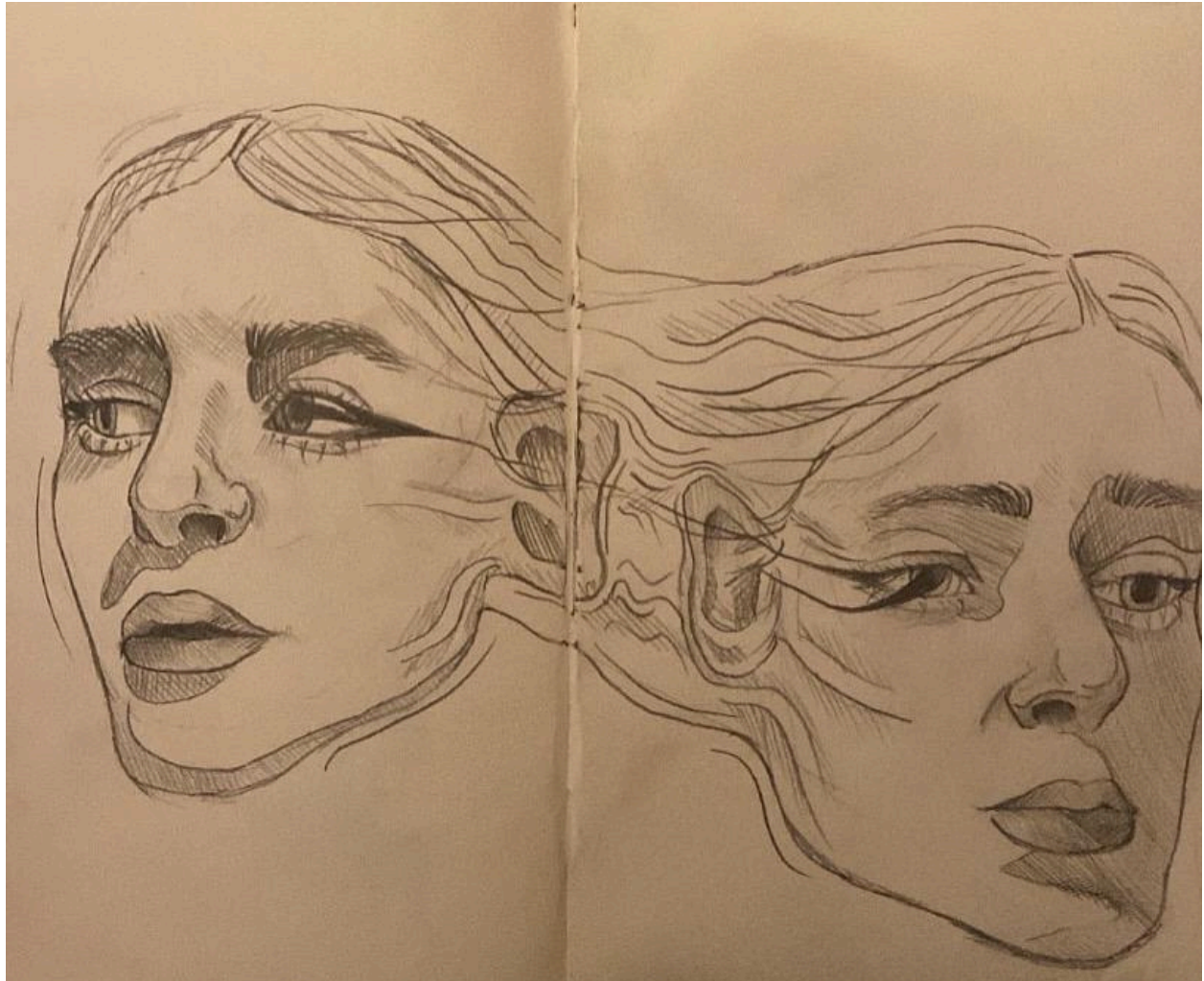


Fig. 4: Untitled - Abbie Thomas, 2023

This is a sketch I drew in 2023 in my personal drawing book. I felt withdrawn from myself and clueless about how to return. Pieces of me are connected, yet I have almost completely disconnected from the person I was before. This also links into Frida Kahlo's 'The Two Fridas', as I have made a double portrait showing two sides of myself that used to be whole. When I

drew this work, I did not know of either artworks, yet since finding them, I feel connected to the artists' struggles and worries as they faced similar problems I had experienced, also.



Fig. 5: The Event Itself, oil on canvas - Henrietta Harris, 2021

This painting, entitled 'The Event Itself', has a very similar feel to the previous drawing, 'Rob', both of which are by Henrietta Harris, yet they are visually different. This painting was created using coloured oil paints, compared to the graphite used before. The girl is looking down, eyes staring at the floor, and to her left, a version of her face appears to be slowly detaching from her, pulling away with a look of shame. This feels like dissociation. This feeling is familiar to me, as I went into a complete shutdown after my relationship ended.

In an article written about Nietzsche on Love and the Affirmation of Life, Simon May writes, 'love easily nurses hate when its hopes are disappointed, or even in anticipation of their disappointment.' In relation to how I treated my relationship, I was always paranoid and fearful of him hurting me emotionally. I would have given everything I had to him, but with these background thoughts, they kept getting louder, and after it ended, my love for him had turned into hatred. I was unbelievably distraught and hurt, yet I was not surprised; I had already anticipated being hurt by this man. Harris' paintings have an intense feeling for me as she can portray the emotions I had during this time.

The fear I had of being forgotten by one of the most important people in my life became a thing of the past as I experienced it, and I navigated grief and loss and survived. Erasure of myself from other people will always be a small part of me, living through that will always remind me of how strong I became after I lost someone whom I heavily relied on. It will continue to inspire me through creating work and being able to express my emotions artistically.

Conclusion

This essay began with an introduction to my life before starting university. Stating events through growing up that affected the way I viewed relationships and fears that began developing as I progressed through young-adult life.

I began with the word 'Isolation', which is one of three keywords I chose, as it remained a consistent struggle. Referencing Vincent Van Gogh, as he faced problems with his own mental

health and self-isolation. I went on to talk about the work 'Clinging', as I faced issues with relying on people to keep me emotionally upright instead of finding my own way to sort through my mental health, which led to a rapid decline when those people inevitably left my life. I chose Frida Kahlo as an artist to reference, as she felt completely lost when she divorced from her husband, Diego. From here, I moved on to my final word, 'Erasure', which I used to explain my fear of being forgotten, using Henrietta Harris as an artist reference, as her work depicts a visual of how it feels.

From here, I pose myself the question, 'How can artists express the difficulty of translating harsh emotions into a visual representation?'

Having read through various philosophers' outlooks on the themes at hand, this question requires research of artists who explore their feelings with a paintbrush and their unique artworks relating to them. In my dissertation, I hope to explore the works of Vincent Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo and Henrietta Harris further.

Reference List

A-Z Quotes. (2026). *400 QUOTES BY SOREN KIERKEGAARD [PAGE - 8] | A-Z Quotes*. [online] Available at: https://www.azquotes.com/author/8000-Soren_Kierkegaard?p=8 [Accessed 7 May 2026].

Costa, J.D. (2023). *What Lies Behind the Two Fridas by Frida Kahlo?* [online] The Collector. Available at: <https://medium.com/the-collector/what-lies-behind-the-two-fridas-by-frida-kahlo-5e7ce7db7fc4>.

Kahlo, F., Fuentes, C., Lowe, S.M. and Freeman, P. (2005). *The diary of Frida Kahlo: an intimate self-portrait*. New York: H.N. Abrams ; México.

May, S. (2015). Nietzsche on Love and the Affirmation of Life. *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* / עיון: רבעון פילוסופי, [online] 64, pp.264–276.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/24523469>.

Medium.com. (2025). *Welcome To Zscaler Directory Authentication*. [online] Available at:
<https://medium.com/@krigerbruce/confucius-and-social-harmony-between-ritual-and-rebellion-cf3ca34c6923>.

Sheikh, F. (2024). *Vincent Van Gogh's 'At Eternity's Gate': Art, Mental Health, and Digital Well-being - Quabble*. [online] Quabble.app. Available at:
<https://quabble.app/stories/van-gogh-at-eternitys-gate-art-mental-health-digital-wellbeing>.