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The Perception Of Identity

This exhibition showcases a variety of perspectives and expressions on the identity through unique mediums, from 1940 until now. The notion of an identity has existed for centuries but there are still many differing theories regarding what it means and how it is formed. In this exhibition the focus is on individual representations that showcase differing perspectives. The perspectives included touch upon the ideas of identity in relation to death, life, love, work, and the self-curated to be put online by the general public.



Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, *Final Project*
(death rituals and return to nature series), 1991-92

Before we can understand the work of Jo Spence we must first understand the context behind it and the purpose for which it was created. In 1990 Spence was diagnosed with leukaemia, an illness which ultimately killed her in 1992 (Vasey,

1992). *The Final Project* was created through her response to the illness and her perception of her impending death. "What upset Jo most about death and non-being was that she would no longer be able to see what was going on in society" (Dennett, 1992). Understandably frightening, the concept of death and no longer existing bothered Spence, as shown in her work. Her personal view of identity and what it means is something she has discussed, "I am what I do. I am also what I don't do", (Spence, 1988) illustrating how she likely felt regarding death. To be dead is to no longer be alive, no longer interacting with, impacting, or affecting that of which is around you. In short, in death you lose your identity and instead become a memory, no longer evolving but decaying.

This particular piece, a photographic self portrait of Jo Spence, appears to be merged with lichen and could be interpreted in a number of ways. Upon first viewing this image she appears to melt away into nothing, merging into a distorted darkness. However, it could also be interpreted as depicting her future return to nature, her physical form decomposing and becoming a new breeding ground for alternate life. This imagery cleverly depicts the way in which Jo Spence's former identity is being removed from this Earth through death.



Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940

This painting was created in 1940 by Frida Kahlo, soon after her divorce from her unfaithful husband. Kahlo often created self-portraits, focusing on her strong features such as her thick eyebrows and her traditional dresses and skirts. However, much like Jo Spence, Kahlo used her depictions of herself to express her change in identity. In this instance, she was attempting to distance herself from her husband's image of her.

This self-portrait depicts Frida Kahlo with a cropped, boy-ish haircut and wearing a man's suit, a stark contrast to her feminine "Tehuana costumes that gave

such pleasure to Rivera” (Herrera, 1993). Above this image is a quote from a Mexican song, “Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don’t love you anymore” providing context to her new look and establishing a link between her hair and her divorce. Her choice in depicting herself central to the mess of hair, still holding the scissors and sat calmly implies a sense of pride in her destruction of her femininity. Where Spence had shown a sadness in her loss of identity, Kahlo shows a satisfaction and dignity in her change in character.



Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998

My Bed was first created in 1998 following the several days Tracey Emin spent in her bed during a highly sexual and depressing period of her life. This piece garnered a large amount of criticism, many people denying its status as art. In defence of her creation against critics, who were claiming anyone could exhibit a bed, *Emin*, (2013) stated "Well, they didn't, did they? No one had ever done that before". This controversial piece has been displayed in various unique ways; it was

once put on show with a noose hanging above it, but this was removed when later displayed. Emin claims that the mess has been preserved as it was when she finally left it after spending a length of time in the bed.

An argument can be made that this is one of the most accurate self-portraits that has been exhibited. Unlike Jo Spence and Frida Kahlo's works, this piece was not created with the intention of portraying her identity but rather, it was stumbled upon through Emin's life. *My Bed* was "above all, confessional" (Emin, Merck, and Townsend, 2002). Free from a self-conscious bias, *My Bed* doesn't hide the negatives that can be seen of Emin but instead highlights them, in stark contrast to typical portraits.

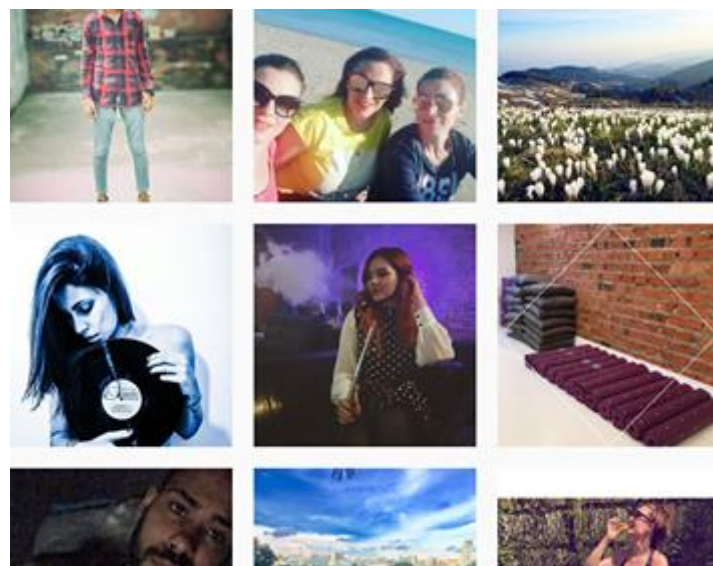


Emily Jo Gibbs, *The Value of Making*, 2018

Emily Jo Gibbs is a textile artist, often using stitch to create portraits of people, categorising them on her website as either "Portrait Projects" or "Commissions". These projects appear to centre around her children, either a focus on how their lives compare to her own or simply taking a moment of time in their

lives and trying to immortalise it in fabric. Gibbs' work has a unique perspective upon portraiture, typically showcasing the lighter side of life with her pieces, unlike the dark self-portrait by Spence previously explored.

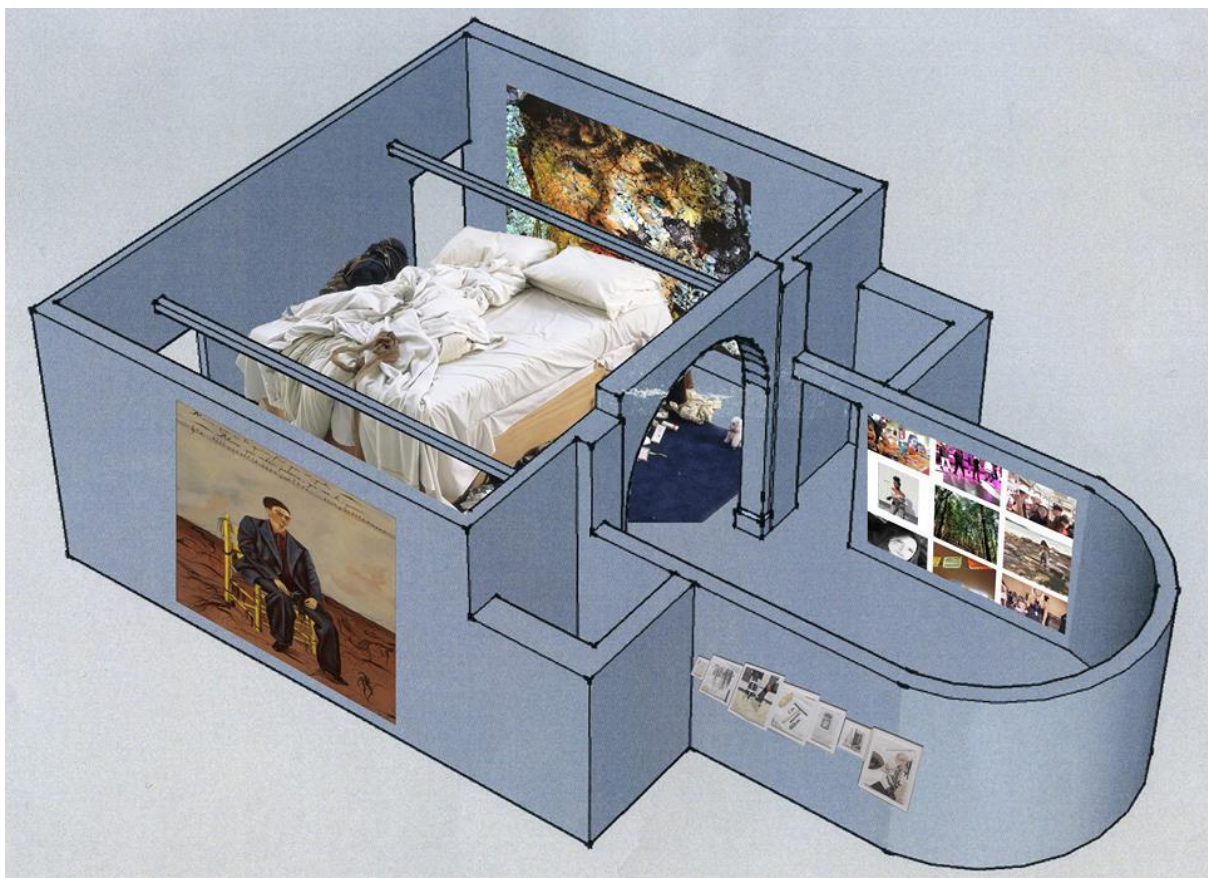
Gibbs (2018) created *The Value of Making* to showcase her pride for being “a member of this creative community and to celebrate the skill, dexterity and the creative problem solving of people who make things.” This body of work represents various people by depicting tools from their professions, intended to showcase the physical skills that come with making-centred disciplines. These pieces, however, have an unintentional connotation, depicting how working members of society are sometimes viewed as tools. Relating to Karl Marx's Law of Value (1847), Gibbs has shown us the value of these people by the effort and tools they put into their work and marks this as their most important asset. Whilst Jo Spence reflects upon the meaning of her character in relation to death, Emily Jo Gibbs reflects upon the meaning of identity in relation to work.



Instagram, #Me, 30-Second Refresh

Included in the exhibition is a rolling feed, refreshing at 30 second intervals, of the

hashtag “me” on Instagram to juxtapose with the works included in this. This provides a contemporary view of how, in the technological age, individual view and present their own identities, which is important in encouraging viewers to make their own comparisons and understandings of the works exhibited. As noted by *David Gauntlet* (2008), “axes of identity include class, age, disability and sexuality”, and through the use of this hashtag members of various categories and forms of identity can be viewed in their choice of representation.



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Additional Reading

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