

Dissertation

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Video Link (Youtube) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGkS0ht9BkA>



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Introduction

In this video essay, I will be exploring a question that sits at the heart of contemporary photography and visual storytelling: why do so many artists create fictional characters as vessels for emotion, identity, and narrative, instead of placing themselves directly in front of the lens?

To investigate this, I will look closely at the work of Cindy Sherman, Juno Calypso, Francesca Woodman and Tim Walker. Each of these artists constructs characters, personas or imagined worlds that act as emotional stand-ins. Their creations become extensions of the self that reveal personal truths while maintaining a sense of distance, disguise or fantasy. Through their work, we see how fiction can express reality, how a character can embody a feeling, and how the boundary between creator and performer becomes blurred.

As I examine their approaches, visual languages and intentions, I will reflect on what I have learned and draw comparisons to my own work. I will explore how I have also used fictional constructs, symbols and imagined beings to communicate internal experiences, emotions and states of mind. By connecting their practices to my own creative process, I hope to uncover why we build these fictional selves and what they allow us to communicate that might otherwise remain hidden.

I will then bring everything together with a concluding reflection on the thoughts, feelings and insights gained throughout this exploration.

So sit back, put your feet up, have a brew and enjoy.

Chapter 1: What do photographers and artists say about my question

“I am trying to erase myself.” Apollo Magazine, 2019. I always find this quote sad yet fascinating. Allow me to explain, Sherman is well known for her creative imagination

and expansive mind to create these characters and still stay original it is true talent. Although, on the other hand I do find it sad that she is trying to as she says, “erase herself.” As it is said she is dissatisfied with her own self, which again is sad as fact of the matter she is one of the greats in this department. This quote is further backed up with the following. “I guess technically they’re pictures of me, but not, because I’m doing all these weird things to my face so it doesn’t look anything like me.” Apollo Magazine, 2019. This is further evidence that her mind and I mean this respectfully works on another level. Which of course is not a bad thing, as it leads to producing original work and inspiring people to follow her in her own footsteps.



Fig 1

This in my opinion is one of the most if not the most iconic work of Sherman and breaking it down into small steps analysing the image of its creation, perhaps we can understand why she hides behind false faces.

She's posed like a classic studio portrait – shoulders turned slightly, smiling directly at the camera. The smile is wide but a bit stiff, almost *too* perfect, which can make it feel slightly artificial or forced. The hair doesn't quite sit like natural hair; it reads as a wig, and the cowboy hat is stereotypical. That combination suggests the subject is playing a role rather than just being herself. The smile is bright but slightly over-held. That micro-tension can imply: Trying hard to appear happy / approachable, emotional labour: "I must look pleasant", a mask over whatever's going on underneath?

I believe she's portraying a happy figure as it gives the image the expression she is going for, but I also believe that in her case and in the sense of my question she just finds it easier to talk like that rather than coming forth and showing yourself it is easier just to display a fake front.

Juno Calypso is a contemporary photographer known for creating fictional alter-egos most famously Joyce to explore emotions surrounding femininity, self-image, isolation, and the pressures of "performing" womanhood. Much like Cindy Sherman, Calypso constructs staged self-portraits, but with a more surreal, pastel, hyper-feminine aesthetic that hides darker emotional truths beneath its glossy surface. "I couldn't make the work I wanted using my real self. Joyce became a way of saying things I couldn't say as me." Studio International, 2020. This quote hits the nail slap bang on the head, that's 2 artists who have stated they simply cannot present the emotion or the scenario they want to portray through their own person. They need and thrive on jumping into a new form, where you are carefree no responsibility in that body. For example, Joyce, one of Calypso's greatest inventions and portrayals gives her this free roam ability to become more and break the mould this is further backed up with the following. "Beauty rituals can feel absurd, obsessive, and lonely. I amplify that until it becomes almost grotesque." The Guardian, 2021. If ever a truer word was spoken, but

then very interesting, as look at this photo of her character Joyce.



Fig 2

We clearly see a heavy use of eyeliner and fake lashes that almost resemble tarantulas, this obviously and counterbalance to her previous quote. But in my opinion kind of obvious why she has done this in this image and many others. It's intentionally miss leading. Basically, she says its "...absurd, obsessive, and lonely..." and does it anyway to cause this sense of controversy and questionable stances.

We now continue our dive into the psychology of this question with our third instalment of artist, Francesca Woodman. Woodman died in 1981, so she did not give many public interviews, and most of what we know comes from letters, journals, and commentary in museum catalogues. She is known for her haunting, surreal self-portraits that explore vulnerability, identity, transformation, and disappearance. Working mostly between 1975 and 1980, she used slow shutter speeds, blurred movement, mirrors, decaying interiors, and body fragmentation to create images that feel both intimate and ghostlike. Her photographs often stage her body merging with walls, peeling wallpaper, dust, and abandoned spaces, suggesting themes of erasure, dissolution, and the instability of self.

Although her work is frequently interpreted through the lens of trauma and emotional turmoil, Woodman approached photography as a performative and conceptual act. She used fictionalised versions of herself masks, poses, gestures, half-visible or dissolving bodies to explore what she once called "a relationship between my body and the world."

Rather than traditional self-portraiture, her images construct characters that embody psychological states: restlessness, fragility, metamorphosis, and the desire to escape visibility.

One of the rare quotes she gave was the following and to be honest I find it rather haunting. "Sometimes I am invisible but I am always there." The Roman Years, 2014. If you don't have goosebumps, I would advise you to seek medical help as you may not be alive. But seriously what a quote. Moving, sad and yet inspirational. Again, not much can be said on meanings behind these quotes, but we are free to imagine. My honest we can take it 2 ways. She feels invisible because she is in character and lost in this world she has created, or we can take it in another way. Woodman was a disturbed and deeply saddened individual. Nevertheless, she is in my eyes and so many others, one of the greats.

Our final quest artist in this video is Time Walker. Walker uses fictional characters, costumes, and sets not as marketing tools but as symbolic and emotional language to express moods, dreams, fantasies, perhaps even subconscious states. His photos are not portraits of real individuals but constructed realities. That construction is itself meaningful: it shows how identity, beauty, fantasy can be shaped, performed, and re-imagined.

Let us begin with a quote.

"I know the world that I am painting is not a reality. It is a whim, an entertainment to provoke something in people, whether as escapism or relief." Photofocus, 2017.

Damn I am giddy, so good. Not just because it speak to me personally to a stage where I too create image to provoke a reaction for a sense of curiosity and intrigue but more on that in the next chapter. In relation to my essay question. This quote is exceptionally relevant. Walker directly states that fantasy can provoke emotional responses in ways reality cannot. His fictional worlds allow him to communicate feelings such as wonder, longing, joy, or mystery. In other words, the unreal becomes a more effective language for expressing internal experience. His characters act as emotional surrogates, illustrating how constructed identities in photography can evoke psychological states with greater intensity and flexibility than literal representation.

Now let's analyse on of his pieces of work.



Fig 3

My god, what a magnificent hat. I'm very jealous. Let's break this image down into a couple of categories Visual, Gender and Identity. Visually we see a very busy image, we have destroyed Greek style marble statues with a painted white sitting figure (with a magnificent hat) looking very dominant over the destruction and wreck of presumably her own doing. Gender, without offending anyone I truly have no clue, but it could be

argued that that is the idea where not meant to be looking at a person but the representation as suggested in his quotes. Finally, we have Identity, who is our mystery star? What is their purpose? Too answer that here is the quote of what the image represents. "I don't want to over-explain an image. The story belongs to the viewer." Time walker, 2019. This is such a typical thing from Walker, it is beyond the word rare to give a reason or answer as to what his work represents. Could be nothing, could be something, we will never know. Which in my opinion is genius. Why tell us? Why ruin the suspense and the drama of unravelling our present of his work.

Chapter 2: My work and how it has been affected by my question and these artists

On to my favourite topic...me. I have been a keen photographer for 5 years and an artist for 6 years but a creator for longer that both combined, I've been told and I believe I am gifted to be able to create something out of nothing. Even though it could be classed as weird yet wonderful. On this topic of my own work, we will be discussing my latest yet oldest body of work. The Forgotten Lands. Allow me to elaborate, this technically is my latest subject matter as I have begun creating work based of this topic, but what is that topic? It's me oldest topic, my mental health's reality. Let's rewind the clocks back to September of 2013. My first day in comprehensive school. I will try not to go on too long as we have other things to discuss, so to cut 12-year long story short. I was badly bullied, to the point where my mental health and overall health was plummeting at a rapid pace.

It started with depression, but eventually led to something more, voices and hallucinations. The literal stuff of nightmares at first that led to me seeing a reoccurring pattern in them. I wasn't just seeing random nightmarish things; I was an observer to a story far beyond most minds can comprehend. These characters as I can to refer to them as would interact with each other and half the time they wouldn't even know I was there. A fly on the wall in a way, and it truly terrified me. But now 12 years later. Still observing this world a spectator, I have learnt to use it for benefits. The characters shown were a metaphorical gold mine for an artist and photography stance. The blueprints were there I just had to build it, so I began researching a series of artist/photographers who use mental health, and reality as a base for their work. I stumbled on many as you can imagine but the ones that I really related too, where the classic Victorian style of photography. Spirit photography. Multiple exposure to create ghosts and figures as seen in the following.



Fig 4

Using this as a base I have created images to show reality and things that don't look like they should be there, same as what I have seen for so long. You can see this in the

following few images.



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7

Ok, hold the applause. So, let's break it down, what are we looking at? Using a slow shutter speed/long exposure I have created ghostly figures that I am calling the Spectre. He is meant to represent an omen of death; under my hallucinogenic state I would often

see this ghostly character. A figure of a man standing close but always somehow out of reach and far enough not to make out details like his face and clothing details. This variant of that thing I see is my way of representing/expressing the ominous ticking clock of our numbered days. A silent watcher observing us until it is time to go, as morbid as it I think I have displayed this very well. True, it could be argued how is the audience meant to get the omen representation? But my real goal with all these Spectre images is to create a sense of a faulty reality. A character who is there that should not be, hence why he is transparent and faceless, a glitch of sorts.

Chapter 3: More about my style/spirit photography

Spirit photography is a photographic practice that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, created to depict the presence of ghosts or unseen forces within an image. Early photographers worked with glass plates, long exposures and multiple negatives to produce faint, translucent figures that appeared to drift into the frame. Although many of these images were staged or manipulated, the genre became closely associated with spiritualism and the idea that photography could reveal what the human eye could not.

In contemporary art, spirit photography is no longer tied to séances or attempts to prove the supernatural. Instead, it has become a method for exploring the psychological, the traumatic and the invisible. Artists use the language of ghost imagery to express ideas about memory, absence, fear and the haunting nature of internal experiences. The ghost becomes a metaphor rather than a literal figure, standing in for emotions that feel intangible or overwhelming.

Infrared photography introduces a new layer to this practice. By capturing light beyond the visible spectrum, IR alters the way skin, shadows and textures are rendered. Skin can appear pale and luminous, eyes can turn black, vegetation becomes white and spectral, and light sources bloom with an unnatural glow. These changes give the world an uncanny quality, as though the camera is witnessing something just outside normal human perception. When applied to figures or environments associated with anxiety or hallucination, IR deepens the sense of otherworldliness and disorientation.

Modern spirit photography often includes long-exposure movement, layered images, distressed surfaces, scratched emulsions or digital composites that mimic the unpredictability of early photographic experiments. The intention is not to create a convincing ghost but to visualise an emotional truth. The familiar becomes disrupted, and the subject appears caught between presence and absence, solidity and dissolution.

For a project focused on mental health hallucinations, this approach resonates strongly. The camera becomes a tool for externalising internal fears, giving shape to the spectres that linger in the mind. Rather than hunting for spirits, the work reveals the

feeling of being haunted by one's own thoughts. The IR aesthetic, with its washed-out skin, deep shadows and glowing highlights, reinforces this idea by presenting the world as subtly altered, as though something beneath the surface has finally become visible.

Chapter 4: My take on my question/conclusion

Thinking of my question and my own bodies of work, it now feels appropriate to articulate my personal position on why artists and photographers create fictional characters to express emotion. As previously mentioned, I consider myself a creative person, someone who can take the simplest object, moment, or visual cue and instinctively transform it into a story or a character. This tendency is not something I consciously force; rather, it is an intuitive and almost automatic part of how I process the world around me. I do not often express my emotions through my own face or self-image. Instead, I generate characters who can embody, perform, or reveal the emotional states that I struggle to communicate directly.

For me, these characters act as extensions of my internal landscape, symbolic vessels that can carry emotions more effectively than literal self-portraiture. I often find that when I am overwhelmed, sad, frustrated, or confused, my first instinct is not to take a photograph of myself, but to place one of my fictional creations into a scene that mirrors how I feel. Through this method, emotions become visualised through metaphor, narrative and performance. My characters are not simply illustrations; they are emotional proxies.

A clear example is my most infamous creation, The Robber. He frequently becomes the figure through which I explore anger, fear, conflict, or moral tension. When I am experiencing these emotions personally, The Robber often appears in a scenario that parallels my mental state, a dark corridor, a moment of confrontation, or a decision filled with uncertainty. In these visual narratives, he expresses emotions I cannot outwardly show or articulate. By placing him under emotional pressure, I externalise my own feelings without exposing myself directly. The fictional character absorbs the psychological weight that I cannot. In this way, creating characters becomes not only a storytelling device but also a coping mechanism.

A quote that often resonates with me when thinking about emotional expression is Shannon L. Alder's statement: "Feelings are something you have; not something you are." Although undated, this quotation profoundly influences how I consider my own practice. It suggests that emotions are temporary, shifting states, not fixed identities. This idea makes my brain tick because it connects so strongly to why I create characters in the first place. If emotions are things we have rather than things we are, then

assigning them to a fictional persona allows them to exist outside myself. The character becomes a container, a representation, a temporary embodiment of something transient yet powerful.

Yet, in an interesting twist, my work also complicates Alder's assertion. She argues that emotions are not who we are, but in my creative process, my characters feel like extensions of myself. They are not something I make, but something I am. They represent parts of my identity, my fears, my imagination and my emotional history. By giving form to fictional figures, I ultimately reveal aspects of myself more honestly than I ever could through straightforward representation. Fiction becomes truth; the character becomes the mirror.

In this way, my practice aligns with many other artists who use fictional personas, not as masks to hide behind, but as tools to reveal emotional realities that are otherwise difficult to express.

Apollo Magazine, 2019, available at [‘I’m trying to erase myself’ – an interview with Cindy Sherman - Apollo Magazine](#), date accessed 10/12/2025

Apollo Magazine, 2019, available at [This Cindy Sherman exhibition is good – but have we seen it all before? - Apollo Magazine](#) date accessed 10/12/2025

Shannon L Alder, no date, available at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/906515-feelings-are-something-you-have-not-something-you-are> date accessed 11/12/2025

Studio International, 2020, available at [Juno Calypso: 'Male critics don't think women are funny, they don't think women are capable of irony. They just think that women are silly and self-destructive'](#) date accessed 10/12/2025

The Guardian, 2021, available at [Unmasking the Uncanny: A Conversation with Juno Calypso -The Guardian](#) dates accessed 10/12/2025

The Roman Years, 2014, available at [The Roman years: between flesh and film - Photographs by Francesca Woodman | LensCulture](#) dates accessed 11/12/2025

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