Homo humanus: An installation investigating the omnipresence of self-documentation

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HOMO HUMANUS: AN INSTALLATION INVESTIGATING

THE OMNIPRESENCE OF SELF-DOCUMENTATION

A Thesis Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

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Historically, human beings have always been interested in documenting themselves and the world around them. Early humans left hand prints on cave walls, marking their presence for the future; royalty throughout history have commissioned portraits of themselves to leave their immortal mark on the world; Polaroid pictures and letters kept in parents’ closets record the earlier days of their lives. Today, humans document their daily lives digitally through social media platforms like Snapchat and Facebook. Images posted to these sites pervade our lives: they are constant, everywhere, and range from photographs of meals to quick snapshot self-portraits – “selfies” – and serve to feed the human need to record and document themselves.

As both an artist and biologist, my artwork has always attempted to combine both art and science, examining the natural world in a way that creates meaningful connections with the viewer. *Homo humanus* began as a single edition of prints in fall of 2015, created from one of my own Snapchat selfies. Nicknamed the “Selfie Project,” it was my first attempt to mesh portraiture and microbiology. Over the following semesters, I continued to create editions of selfie prints, and it soon became clear that these pieces were actually part of a much larger work, one that was finally combining both of my worlds in a meaningful way. The desire to grow this collection and bring both science and art together was the impetus behind completion of *Homo humanus*.

*Homo humanus* is an installation of screen-printed self-portraits that aims to draw a parallel between the ever-present, easily accessible selfie and nature’s most ubiquitous of creatures: bacteria. The name “*Homo humanus*” is a play on binomial nomenclature used in taxonomy to categorize organisms. The piece takes the form of
an installation, comprised of individual prints that come together to make one large piece and is hung in a way that echoes the shape of bacterial colonies growing in a petri dish. The ultimate goal of *Homo humanus* is to overwhelm the viewer in terms of size and number, while also creating a body of work that is both visually pleasing and thought provoking and remains personally relevant to myself as an artist and scientist.

**Source Review**

While creating *Homo humanus*, it was necessary to draw on many different artists and artworks to inform, inspire, and grow the project. Working with portraiture as a main subject, artists who addressed portraiture heavily influenced *Homo humanus*. Portraiture is one of the very basic sects of artwork. It is a means of documentation of the human form. Elizabeth Peyton creates portraits of famous actors and musicians, historical figures, and her friends and family. All the subjects are painted using visible brush strokes and transparent paint, and the portraits exude a type of intimacy and emotionality (Figures 1

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**Fig. 1:** Elizabeth Peyton, *Craig*, 1997, http://artattler.com/archiveelizabethpeyton.html.

**Fig. 2:** Elizabeth Peyton, *Piotr on Couch*, 1996, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/elizabeth-peyton/.
and 2; Craig and Piotr on Couch). Through her style, Peyton “manages to provide her public personalities with the appearance of private persons, and to create [an] intimate, sensitive atmosphere.”

1 Artist Thomas Ruff’s use of portraiture also inspired me as I worked.

Fig. 3: Thomas Ruff, Young German Artists 2, 1997, https://799c61237bd6e732e57e-5fa18836a2ae6b5e7c49abcc89b20237.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/9134811_today-in-toronto-thomas-ruff-art-gems_689313e_m.jpg?bg=C6C4C2

His series “Young German Artists 2” (Figure 3) is a series of framed photographed portraits, where the subject stare directly into the camera, like one would do for a passport photo or a driver’s license.² I was intrigued by the use of such a common type of portraiture, one that occupies a place in everyday life.

Self-portraiture, however, turns that documentation in on oneself, and grants the subject control on the outcome of the image.³ Today, self-portraiture crowds the Internet. It is a means of communication on platforms like Snapchat. Every single day humans photograph themselves and post those images to the web, adding more and more to the vast quantities of easily-accessible self-documenting images to the digital world. One very important artist employing self-portraiture, one that has been inspirational to me as an artist over the years and for Homo humanus, is Egon Schiele. Gemma Blackshaw states that Schiele used self-portraiture as “a means of articulating

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Schiele’s self-portraits are grotesque and thin, as shown by *Self Portrait With Arm Twisting Above Head* and *Self Portrait 3* (Figures 4 and 5 above). Schiele’s work shows an investigation into the artist himself and “reflect a highly intuitive kind of self-interpretaion.” These portrait artists informed the project because of their subject matter; *Homo humanus* is about portraits, and because these artists employed human portraiture as subject matter, they were key in helping me develop the relationship between subject and artist as I progressed through the work.

While portraiture was an important tenant of *Homo humanus*, the most important part and one of the most unique aspects of printmaking, one that draws me to the medium specifically, is that many printmakers’ work takes the form of complete editions- collections of multiple copies of the same or similar images. The most important artists influencing my work as I created *Homo humanus* are Richard Prince and Laura Berman, and share between them a use of collection and multiplicity. Prince’s use of multiplicity in his works, *New Portraits* and *Live Free or Die (Gang)* (Figures 6 and 7) specifically, inspired *Homo humanus* in a variety of ways. *Live Free or
Die (Gang) is a single piece composed of several photographs of people posing. New Portraits, on the other hand, related to my work more directly. New Portraits is an exhibition featuring large canvas prints of screenshots of Instagram posts. For this piece, Prince was inspired by Tumblr photo-sets; they reminded him of his Gangs and he was fascinated by the fact that he could press two buttons on his phone and save a photo. Prince’s New Portraits is a shining example of the omnipresence of human self-documentation and how those public posted photos can be used to create something else. Prince’s use of portraiture, grouping of similar things, and his methods of obtaining material for his work all relate heavily to the way I created and built Homo humanus.

Fig. 6: Richard Prince, *Live Free or Die (Gang)*, 1986, http://www.richardprince.com/photographs/gangs/

Fig. 7: Richard Prince, *New Portraits*, 2015, http://www.richardprince.com/exhibitions/new-portraits_1/#/detail/12/
Laura Berman is another printmaker who uses groupings of objects. Berman’s *All She Ever Wanted Was Everything* (Figure 8) is an installation of prints of her rock collection. This installation consists of around 1200 individual prints, all which come together in a four-by-nine-foot space to encompass the viewer. In addition to this idea of collections, the sheer size of Berman’s installation is a key component in my own work.

Berman’s *Rise: All the Colors of the World* (Figure 9) is an installation that occupies about a 20-foot by 3-foot space and is composed of around 1600 different color decals from pallets she has mixed over twenty years of printing.

Collections, like Prince’s *Gangs* and *New Portraits*, and the veritable size of Berman’s installations informed the structural portion of my work. *Homo humanus*
takes the form of an installation that occupies a space and is composed of many
different editions of selfie screen prints. Works by other artists, like Zachary Copfer,
Eschel Ben-Jacob and Vin Kitayama, related to my work on a much different level.
Copfer and Ben-Jacob use bacteria as a medium in their work, a much more literal
connection to the parallel I was hoping to draw while creating Homo humanus. Dr.
Eshel Ben-Jacob creates images of bacterial colonies awash with vibrant colors. The
patterns that the colonies form are “adaptive responses to laboratory-imposed stresses
that mimic hostile environments faced in nature.”9 The colors are added after images
have been taken of the colonies (Figure 10 and 11).10

Zachary Copfer combines portraiture and bacteria in the most literal of ways: he
uses bacteria to create his portraits, a process he calls “Bacteriography.” According to
Copfer, his process consists of “shoot radiation through a negative to a petri dish
covered with bacteria. The end product is a plate of bacteria that grown to form a
photographic image.” 11 Copfer’s “Bacteriography” combines a process very similar to

Fig. 10: Eshel Ben-Jacob, Microbial Art 1, http://www.microbialart.com/galleries/ben-jacob/
Fig. 11: Eshel Ben-Jacob, Microbial Art 2, http://www.microbialart.com/galleries/ben-jacob/
darkroom photography and his *Portraits* (Figure 12) collection employs this technique to literally combine science and art.\textsuperscript{12}

Vin Kitayama’s is another artist that informed my own, as he combines science and printmaking to create artificial objects that emulate real life. Kitayama, like Copfer, was fascinated by science from a young age, and he dreamed of becoming a new type of artist.\textsuperscript{13} Using a microscope and microphotography, Kitayama employs screen-printing to create delightful images of the microscopic world, exemplified in his *Microlandscape: Lake 1* (Figure 13). For Kitayama, the microscope allows him to “[attempt] to expand the dimensions of this reality [the microworld]- this world this world we cannot normally see- and represent it as landscapes.”\textsuperscript{14} Combining both of my areas of interest, Kitayama is an important influence in guiding my thinking of the microworld and the digital space occupied by my selfies.

**Creative Process: Selecting Selfies**
In order to create a final, cohesive piece, it was necessary to develop a method to use in the creation of each individual selfie edition, so they would all be similar enough to form together at the end. Each of the selfies was taken from either my own personal phone (screenshots, photos taken on my phone, or images sent to me) or from my friends’ Facebooks. Once I had chosen an image, I would crop the image into a circular shape and print it out in black and white. That black and white image would then be used to create three individual, hand-rendered ink drawings, as well as a solid shaped background layer that served as a base (Fig. 14). Once I had my four positives, they would be scanned back into the computer and printed back out as film positives (Fig. 15).

Figures 14 (left) and 15 (right): Hand rendered positives and computer-generated positives

Creative Process: Screenprinting
Homo humanus was created using a method of printmaking called screen-printing. Screen-printing is a method of printing where a squeegee is used to push ink through the fibers of a silkscreen stencil and onto paper. Positives, the objects or images used to create the stencil in the screen, are either hand-rendered by drawing (see Figures 14 and 15), created digitally and printed on a film, or cut from paper or physical objects to block light. For my positives, I hand-rendered four different layers from a single photograph: a solid background shape, the “shadow” layer, the “highlight” layer, and a final key layer. These positives were then scanned back into the computer, put into Photoshop and applied with a filter to bold the black lines and clean up any random spots or mistakes, and placed into a final file and resized if necessary. The positives were then printed out onto a film.

Once the positives were created, I coated a screen with a photosensitive chemical, allowed the chemical to dry, and placed both the positives and the screen on a UV light box. The positives block the light and those areas washed out, creating a stencil. When ink was pulled across the screen, a very flat image was left on the paper, a look that is unique to screen-printing.

After creating the screen, I used them to create an edition of each selfie, consisting of a total of eight to ten prints each. Each print was created using four ink layers, a modified version of a four-color process similar to CMYK printing. CMYK is an important method used in both the fine art and commercial art printing worlds and involves separating a full-color photograph into four different layers: a cyan (blue) layer, a magenta layer, a yellow layer, and final key (usually black) layer. I did not use CMYK
specifically; instead, I used four different colors, a background color, a shadow color, a highlight color, and a key color. This process is the same one used by printer to print color images. Finally, after each edition was run, the selfies were cut out and the final individual prints were installed to create the final piece.

**Final Result**

*Homo humanus* in its final form was displayed as an installation in a display case and photographed (Figure 16 on the following page). These photographs will be stored digitally. Although *Homo humanus* has been installed and presented, the piece has the potential to grow and occupy larger spaces, and it is my plan to continue growing this project. Photographs will continue to be taken and stored digitally as the piece grows and moves from place to place.
Figure 16: *Homo humanus* installed in Kamerick Art Building, April, 2017.
Reflection

As a student of both art and biology, it has always been a fascination of mine to combine both of my worlds. In creating *Homo humanus*, this was the driving force through which I worked. The self-portraiture direction emerged as a way for me to direct the idea of “art and science” at a particular subject matter, one that is prevalent in today’s society. By building the final collection that coalesced into *Homo humanus*, I was able to effectively fuse art and science, while also giving the viewer a direct look into my life as a young person who communicates via social media and self-portraiture, as the images that compose *Homo humanus* are my friends and family.

In the end, the most important aspect of the project was the degree to which it reflected me as both an artist and a scientist. I chose to create work that echoed the natural world in terms of shape and final composition, while deliberately using the human form as a subject because I am fascinated with portraiture and working with the human form. *Homo humanus* inspired me to create an artistic project that spanned more than a year worth of work, creating a series of high personal and meaningful work. *Homo humanus* is the largest part of my creative experiences as an undergrad, and, in many ways, has become the driving force behind the creation of future works and myself as an artist.
Endnotes

1 Burkhard Reimschneider, and Uta Grosenick, eds., Art Now (Köln: Taschen GMBH, 2001), 128.

2 Ibid. 146.


10 Ibid.


12 Ibid.


14 Ibid. 94.
Bibliography


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has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors

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