2015

The lens of empathy

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The lens of empathy

by

Earle Rock

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Christopher Martin, Co-Major Professor
Joseph Muench, Co-Major Professor
April Eisman
Paul Shao

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2015

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DEDICATION

For those who have weathered storms and call me family or friend, who have given their patience, grace and understanding, I am eternally grateful.

Special thanks go out to my committee members: Co-major Professor Chris Martin for his grounded humor that never fails to keep me humble, willingness to mentor and his ability, despite my disparate creative ideas, to corral my energies into one singularity, Co-major Professor Joe Muench for his dedication to craft, passion for making and eye for hitting targets, Dr. April Eisman for her enthusiasm for my work, insights into the connectivity of time and creativity and for her ability to show me the validity of what it was I was doing, even when I failed to see it, and Sifu Paul Shao for his love of the human form, passion for compelling visual design and his faith in my abilities. The four of you are my perfect storm.

I wish to also express thanks to my colleagues in the IVA program at Iowa State University for their endless willingness to offer perspective and for their dedication and enthusiasm for creativity and art making.

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ABSTRACT

This document accompanies the exhibit *The Lens of Empathy*. Portrait busts, audio interviews and a video installation explore effects of the status of “Other” on the individual. This thesis and exhibit also delve into and highlight the character and strength of those who find themselves on the outside of a set of hegemonic considerations in their daily efforts. Finally, together they examine how the subjects of such public scrutiny become more than the sum of their circumstances through embracing the struggles set before them.

Major influences on this body of work are identified and analyzed, including my personal experiences with Buddhist thinking as a means of reconciliation and betterment, the work of other artists who address the human story and condition, and narrative sources addressing the adaptations of fellow persons who have been marginalized. The overarching themes and processes used to create this body of work for *The Lens of Empathy* are described in the following pages. Portrait bust making, a process usually reserved for the immortalizing of the socially significant, is the technique chosen to highlight some of the people in my circle who have been affected by circumstances and often marginalized by the status of “Other”. The audio interviews that accompany an individual’s bust are a chance for the subject to tell the story of their situation and a chance for the audience to hear what otherwise might not be offered. The video installation *My Walk* is the lynchpin that brings the viewer and subjects together.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I work to rid me of them, and them of me.

While creative expression was one of my earliest endeavors, it wasn’t something that I took seriously until I was in my mid- to late 20’s. Prior to that time, chaos surrounded everything I did. Clarity of thought was a foreign concept. At nearly 30 years of age, the context of an early traumatic life still served as the framework for a daily paradigm. In 1996 a friend of mine, Sue Schmoyer, commissioned me to do a painting of her garden as a gift for her husband for Christmas that year. While working on that piece, I began to make sense of my life. Self-expression was cathartic and served as the conduit for the beginning of personal peace. This was the day of purpose for me and mine was creativity. My demons were simply the children of my past and my creative mind wishing for a life of their own. Once they were out in the public arena, in the form of a painting or a three-dimensional piece, I was free to move on and they were free to live free of me.

Through this experience, I also found a degree of liberation from my isolation. This is how countless others, both past and present, have made sense of the strange trip we all find ourselves on. It was then that I realized we all develop mechanisms that help us reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable.
It is this uniquely human, unending search for whatever it takes to adapt that is what this thesis is based upon. *The Lens of Empathy* exhibit is an exploration of how adversity of circumstance can bring the protagonist to a deeper understanding of the nature of what it means to be human. Adversity met head-on can reveal itself through tenacity, resilience and adaptability. The Hungarian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke in his poem, *Sonnets to Orpheus II* writes:

```
Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower
and you the bell. As you ring,

What batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.
```

Likewise, the Chinese have a proverb about hardship that I have taken to heart: “One disease, long life. No disease, short life.” The implication is that if an affliction is not life threatening, the lessons learned in adapting to its new requirements aid you in adapting to aging.

Both of these sentiments speak to the power of ownership. Both statements, one mystical, one practical, deal with how some degree of control can be had during times and situations when
control is the last thing that feels attainable. Power and control can be had, not in refusing that anything can touch you or your family, but in choosing how you will respond when something alters your path and demands you pay attention. It is in this naked boldness that one can find a deeper measure of character.

The Lens of Empathy

The Lens of Empathy stems from the notion that once someone survives a challenging, life altering circumstance, that person gains empathy for others in similar conditions. This exhibit is about sharing with the world the amazing character and spirit of the socially marginalized. This exhibit is an in-depth look at the lives of five people I know who have dug deep and fought with true grit for something that most people in the developed world take for granted: a sense of daily functionality. This is what direction my work has taken. This is what being an artist and a story teller means for me.

At a point in my recent past, the empathy that came to me for other afflicted people began to overshadow my own concerns. It was here when took stock of my motivations for what and why I was creating. It began to dawn on me that if making art was a compulsion, then what I was making had better have a broader audience. Otherwise, it was all endless wound licking and public masturbation, neither of which are good ideas.

Around the time I began to create again, music started to take on a heightened significance for me. I paid close attention to the artists and songs that caught not only my attention but the
public’s as well. There was, in the early 1990s, a broad mixture of singer songwriters who were putting out an enormous amount of music for public consumption. The early 1990s saw a rebirth of the genre, and the songs and artists being most consumed all had two common traits. First, they created and performed with great passion. Second, they all put forth work with the theme easily understood, something so common as to be truly universal to all people regardless of time or location—that suffering is part of the human condition. It might be implied by an uplifting melody amidst lyrics of tribulation or it might be more overt, but they found a way to distill their suffering so as to speak a message clearly understood by many, regardless of language or cultural barriers. The great songs gave hope for ascendance.

This then was the model for me to follow. I would be a story teller! It made the most sense and when working from this edict, brought the most peace. So my work began to take on the form of morality tales and parables. The lessons of my experiences and mistakes were distilled to an essence, a metaphor appropriate to assist in the story telling process was employed, context for circumstance was selected and paint was laid to canvas. Over and over this took place until it became my paradigm, my unquestioned modus operandi. It was the best therapy I could have sought in those days and it was had for the cost of store bought canvases, brushes, paints and countless evenings of otherwise free time. And was I productive! Twelve years passed with barely anything longer than two weeks between works.

It was around 2012, the time that I entered graduate school at Iowa State University that I began to run low on motivation and inspiration for those canvases. Had I lost my edge?!! Or
had I exercised those child demons that howled loudest? The truth was something definitely more challenging, something infinitely more assuring.

The nature of what I was beginning to realize was that the telling of my circumstances bored me. I had grown weary of the sound of my own voice. As a story teller, I needed a broader pool from which to draw.

While in graduate school, I employed a skill that was passed on to me during my undergraduate years at Drake University, the three-dimensional portrait bust. I have always had a real passion for the human face and this gave my hands the opportunity to work on that form in the round. It is immensely satisfying work. While working on a bust, my focus is on representing what that subject’s essence means to me. The objective is to imbue the bust with the spirit of that person. My first bust in over 4 years was a success. I had grown artistically and found inspiration in telling someone else’s story. Sympathy for self became empathy for others when the focal point of the Lens was turned outward. Suddenly there was a way for me to tell the story of someone else, through the three-dimensional portrait bust. I was a story teller again! Now, one question remained—whose stories would I tell?

The Other in Others

As luck would have it, that question was about to be answered for me. It was during the same semester as the aforementioned bust that a seminal conversation among Iowa State University Professors Chris Martin and Jennifer Drinkwater and me took place. Within that conversation lay the seeds for what would become this thesis. The conditions of my early years were always something that were apparent to anyone close to me but rarely a topic of
comfortable conversation. Instead, those unspeakables were my private source of inspiration for the work that poured from me. The conversation between these two instructors and me brought out that what separated me from a healthy, well-adjusted childhood and marked me as “Other” should be the topic of my thesis. The Other is the concept that whenever there is a culturally set of dominant values, anyone on the outside of this tacit social contract is Other than. Within the social sciences, it is recognized that the Other is often reduced to a fetish by the hegemonic group.

Scholars such as Michel Foucault, the Frankfurt School and other postmodernists have argued that the process of Othering has everything to do with knowledge, and power acting through knowledge, to achieve a particular political agenda in its goal of domination. The twentieth century literary theorist Edward Said stated “…what is the truth of language but...a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.” Said, Edward W. Orientalism. 25th Anniversary Edition. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. 202. Print.

This was the fall term of 2013. At the same time, I was enrolled in Dr. April Eisman’s graduate art theory course. One of the many topics in that course was the issue of the Other. I had intuitively known that such a condition existed for many people; hell, I lived it. But I never knew it had a name, let alone a dubiously codified place in society and literature. This was a seminal period that drew out of me more than I thought possible. There was validity in the prospect of using my early life as a springboard for my thesis; however, being so forward as to
make my thesis be about “me and my circumstances” seemed gratuitous. I spent a lot of time contemplating what direction to take this suggestion.

It was a few months after this initial conversation with Professors Martin and Drinkwater when, after sharing the image of the final product of the aforementioned bust on a social networking site, a high school classmate contacted me. Her oldest daughter Brooke was sliding into her last year of life. She wanted to know how she could get one of these of her daughter. Brooke is only 23 and has always been considered a “non-functioning individual” by most. As it was told to me by her mother Lynnette, Brooke was, until recently, able to support herself in an upright, seated position and she was, until the need for a constant supply of oxygen, able to say the word “Mom”. These were, by all outward accounts, her two great life accomplishments. A recorded interview with Lynnette helped me to understand the life that these people had together. It was after conducting the interview that I realized what giving voice to their story meant to this family.

Here was the opportunity, the challenge, the responsibility, and the trust, all and more in one project. This person had the faith that I would speak for the one they loved that couldn’t speak for themselves. You really step up when this kind of game changing opportunity presents itself. And there were more. After this encounter, I took a quick look around and realized that within the circle of people in my life, there was quite a variety that, in some degree or another, were considered “Other”. Phone calls were made, subjects selected, plans solidified, interviews and measurements taken. With all the foundations laid, the only thing left was to get to work.
The Four Challenges

For the purpose of validating my claim to broad empathy that this thesis makes, I make a rare exception and lay out for consideration a brief account of my history. My earliest impressions of life were dominated by my being overwhelmed and dumbstruck by the sheer beauty of the physical world. My earliest memories were filled with deep happiness. The simplest things captivated my attention and fed my imagination. Early on, I remember being carried out to the car by my father, bundled up warm and tight against the winter wind with the golden embers of the setting sun blinding me. But I couldn’t look away. Color and light were the characters of my most furtive dreams. The carefree contentedness and happiness carried over into the rest of my life. My big sister was my best playmate and my parents, although poor, were young and caring.

As I began to move under my own power, the carefree looks on the young faces of my parents began to be replaced by looks of concern. To me, their fears seemed ill founded. I moved the way that came naturally for me and life was still an amazing adventure with new things, places and people to explore daily. Also, I had discovered Saturday morning “Looney Tunes”.

There were many trips in the car in those early days. A lot of our time on the road was spent visiting various doctors and specialists. Then, when I was three and a half, came the prolonged visit to the University of Iowa Children’s Hospital in Iowa City. It was there that the extent of the state of my condition sank in. With my parents in the room to reassure me, the doctors explained that they needed to fix my legs so that I would be able to walk. Some doctors
doubted that even surgery could make walking possible. It turns out that I was born with cerebral palsy.

But even that was an adventure. Sure, there was the pain of recovery and a boy in the hospital that long misses his mommy. However, there was always some new fascinating machine to look at and being in a children’s ward there were always new friends to make.

It was not until I entered preschool that the world began to lose its luster. Still being in physical therapy for a reparative surgery that was less than six months old, I came to Mount Saint Clare’s preschool in 1972 wearing leg braces and in a wheel chair. The phrase: “children can be cruel” is a gross understatement.

Preschool was nothing in comparison to what lay ahead when I got to the prime time of kindergarten and then grade school. Although by first grade I had ditched my ride in favor of crutches, the braces and a serious gait remained. I was still the same. How had life changed so drastically in a year and half?!? That is when the clouds really rolled in.

As if Cerebral palsy were not enough to adapt to, there were three more challenges that lay ahead for me. The next one came around the time that I entered preschool. My parents had decided to become foster parents. Their hearts were in the right place but their experience and judgment were seriously lacking. My sister and I were not kept safe.

In the succeeding 37 years, my parents fostered over 330 children. This is not a fabrication. Nor is it exaggeration. Some children stayed for mere hours as is the case when a babysitting grandparent has a medical emergency and the parents are at work. Most, however
were longer term and quite a few were permanently made part of the fold. To my sister and me this early way of life can by no measure be considered normal. It brought with it lifelong effects.

The second challenge that lay waiting for me came shortly after entering first grade. It was then it was discovered that my mind does not always interpret the words and numbers that my eyes see in the same order. It turned out that there was a “special” program, sequestered away from the rest of our classmates, for people like me. GREAT! Looking back on it, I am reminded of the Simpson’s episode where the family is relocated to a new state. When Bart’s new teachers discover that he has yet to be introduced to cursive handwriting, he is put into a catch-all class of children with disorders that run the gamut from pyromania to English as a second language. His sarcastic and pithy remark to the teacher is: “Let me get this straight. We are going to catch up to our classmates by going SLOWER than them?!?” Touché Bart, touché.

The final challenge and the one I have systematically avoided discussing throughout my life is that of my sexuality. While I have dated women throughout my life, I have been far more attracted to men for as long as I can remember. I have avoided this topic most staunchly because it is the only one that I was ever made to feel was my fault. This is one of the great and terrifying benefits of most organized religions. WONDERFUL!!! EVEN MORE LABELS!!!

The timing of this issue was as awkward as it presumably is for everyone. Teenage years are riddled with self-discovery and what a time to discover self-shames.

The Turning of the Lens

I remember the first time that empathy for another overtook me. It was not a graceful moment. Nor was it a weak one. By the time I had become a senior in high school, there were a
set of twin brothers who were underclassmen. They were blond, beautiful and one was afflicted with cerebral palsy. The other was effeminate, more than likely a young gay adolescent. As high school kids are prone to do, four or five of my friends and I were hanging out in front of our lockers before this particular day’s classes began. Being in a foul mood, I was taking a decidedly detached approach to the beginning of that day. I looked up from my increasingly common cup of morning melancholia to see the two brothers heading up the hall. They were followed by a small gaggle of bullies. The lead bully had his sights set on the brother with CP. As he went in for the cliché gag of trip the cripple, my target became him. Before his foot could reach its target, I had him pinned to the adjacent locker with his feet dangling off the ground. Some improbable threat came spewing from my mouth about picking on either brother and the results that would come about if he did. There was real vengeance in my eyes. I remember the hallway getting very quiet. I let the bully down from my grip and studied him as he stumbled away. I gathered my books and silently headed off to class. I guess I have never truly understood how a trait that, while not common to the majority of people, could be considered reason for persecution. This “weeding out” mentality has always infuriated me. It is the worst of human characteristics. That day was seminal as it was the first time that my attentions changed from feeling sorry for myself to empathy for someone else.

It was during college that I made a promise to myself. I would never again allow my circumstances to define who I am. For the cerebral palsy, I chose the most physically challenging activity I could imagine: Chinese Martial Arts, Kung Fu (pronounced Gung Fu). With its circular motions, animal-derived styles and complicated combinations of hand and foot techniques, it was initially the source of great frustration. But I tenaciously stuck with it and have been a
practitioner since the fall of 1991. I have achieved a high rank in a very traditional system and am on the track to mastery of Tiger and Dragon styles, the latter being a complicated fighting style replete with twisting and interlocking movements. Not an easy animal but definitely worth the years of effort.

For the dyslexia, that was something that required a lot of practice and until now remains a daily effort. Like the CP and coming to grips with my sexuality, dyslexia also required outside help. After several years I was finally able to accept that these were not conditions I brought upon myself. I could only move forward and grow.

Looking back on the road behind me, what stands out is that my circumstances left me with little choice but to bounce back and find ways of adapting, ways to define what functional meant to me. In making that promise to myself, every time I thought of giving up, my resolve kicked in and I took hold of the ideal I had set in front of me with renewed vigor. I kept moving forward. The lessons I learned are profound. Now, the most common remark is “I would never have guessed.” I think that means my work has paid off. But if the majority of the work has been done, what do I do with my energy? What do I do with my habit of perpetual motion? You cannot really turn off the life habit of herculean effort once it becomes part of you.

You put your efforts into your work. Tor Bieker, who is my Sifu (Chinese for instructor) for the internal side of my martial arts studies, recently instructed me to direct my meditations outwards. He wanted me to meditate on the IDEA of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is a being who is on the verge of attaining enlightenment, but turns back for the purpose of the betterment of all sentient beings.
Sifu Bieker wisely recognized the state of my situation, the buildup of intense focus that had occurred had in fact become an obsession with “working on myself.” With achieving a level of functionality across all issues that is high enough to be misread as unafflicted, the navel gazing was quickly turning toxic. So he instructed me to direct my focus outwards. He wanted me to think of others with the love and compassion I had for myself. Simply put, treat everyone the way I would want to be treated, with compassion. It then makes perfect sense and is a simple transition to turn the Lens outward and tell the stories of those around me.

Stories of commonality

My father, whom I love dearly, never taught me how to hang drywall. Nor did he teach me anything about electrical wiring or house plumbing. What he did was to teach me life lessons in sound bites. An example is: one day when I was a teenager, I was particularly frustrated at the flip-flopping nature of politicians and how they never seemed to stay true to their words. My father stopped what he was doing, looked me in the eye and said: “Earle J., the pendulum always swings both ways.” Then he went back to what he was doing, and in that moment, the subtleties of the situation shotgunned themselves into my consciousness. As society changes, so do politicians. Society has been changing rapidly as of late, but inequity still exists.

Well, the pendulum is swinging back from what some think to be a highlight of western culture, the mid 1950s. The era that brought us the power of Madison Avenue also gave us race riots and public lynchings of blacks in the South. Any established idea, when a threat is perceived, will fight for its survival. And as the counter culture made its presence known, the establishment fought back.
Times may be better for the current generation of teenagers who discover that they do not fit the expected sexual practices of their grandparents. But it was my generation that saw Mathew Sheppard beat to death for his sexuality. And Russia is having its own problems with the subject. They more closely resemble how the Deep South struggled with the issue of liberating blacks after the Civil War. This is not what we have come to expect in an era of liberation and human rights. Poverty has only gotten more widespread and by many accounts the middle class is worse off today than when the Berlin Wall came crashing down. This does not hold a comparison to blatant disregard for life we see in the Middle East. There are still people who do not have a voice.

I cannot solve the problems that exist between Muslims and Jews. I cannot wipe out poverty. I can do what I can do. And I can make a damn fine portrait bust. And I can be a storyteller and a voice for the marginalized I come in contact with. By taking a process that has historically been reserved for immortalizing persons of social significance and employing it to represent people of extraordinary character who are commonly overlooked, I am asking the viewer to reevaluate what is significant, what is worth remembering. When the busts are coupled with the interviews, the viewer is taken to the next level and further explores preconceived notions of Otherness. My goal for this body of work is to shed more light on the power play of labels and the destructive nature of marginalization. I aim to demonstrate through my work how our stories are more similar than dissimilar, that we can all identify with the Other-than status and how those who have been afflicted with a condition can find a deeper sense of resiliency and adaptability through finding their necessary pathways.
CHAPTER TWO

INFLUENCES

A wide and varied combination of personal, philosophical, innate and artistic influences helped to shape this body of work. My primary influence has been my personal experience of being born with cerebral palsy in a family where my parents fostered so hundreds of children, being dyslexic and not being straight. Just as I refused the label of “cripple” and its implied limitations when I was younger, I have also rejected the label of “gay” and its implied limitations. This thesis is about the effects of labels and it would be a contradiction to apply such a label to myself. My experiences of finding out the bottomless nature of human resiliency have been the most significant guide through the graduate school process. I always knew what I was capable of and I always kept the vision of my future self as the goal to work towards.

Among the other personal influences that have provided insights for this body of work is Krista Tippett and her interviews with social figures during her weekly National Public Radio program entitled “On Being”. The artists who have most influenced this body of work for some very personal reasons—Michelangelo, Rodin and Gustav Vigeland—are some very traditional sculptors. Finally, there is the impact that Buddhism has had on nearly everything that I do. Buddhism’s daily implications are simultaneously ethereal in its metaphysics and perpetually grounded in daily practicality.
Personal Influences

The circumstances of my childhood were less than ideal if one is seeking to raise a child with a healthy, well-adjusted perspective. Strangely enough, they were ideal for raising an empathetic, ambitious, resilient and highly creative individual. From the moment it became clear to me that people were judged by their physicality, I made it my goal to rise above it. I would outgrow my circumstances. I would become more than the sum of my broken parts. There was, from that time on, a future me that lived a life of beautiful creativity, unafflicted by hindrances and free to love freely without hesitation or self-conscious pangs of potential rejection. That future self was always there, inspiring me to work harder, dig deeper, love more intensely and live more intently. It was my motivation during the darkness.

As I age, I have found that there is never a place of rest. There are times to regain a breath but the stride forward continues. This characteristic has served me well in my art making. I have always sought to do more and be better at doing it. It has served me well in particular, for the work for this thesis. In this day and age of continually increasing cleverness and conceptual art in the public arena, one question that I hear with great regularity is: “What is it that makes what you are doing contemporary?” This is usually accompanied by an absurd statement about the notion that the “figure is dead.” When we know something so clearly that its ringing resonates in our bones, we are often challenged by others to articulate what we know until our convictions extinguish all self-doubt and convert the sceptics. These questions have clarified my articulations. This is the nature of my experience with the figure and more precisely, the portrait bust. I love the figure as subject. It is the one thing that unites us all. We all have physicality!
How can that ever not be relevant?!? And what of this process of portrait busts? How can this say anything relevant to today? In order to answer my challengers, I had to dig deep or be blown off course. So I did what I do and I dug deep. Looking back on my personal history I distilled my story to relatables, found others whose stories were brilliant lights in relative obscurity and am employing the portrait bust along with the recorded interview to be a surrogate voice for them. This is part of the vision that I had of future Earle, which would be free to advocate for others through this work.

When it came to interviewing the subjects for my thesis, I knew I needed a model from which to draw inspiration. Fortunately for me, my alarm clock is set to Iowa Public Radio and every Sunday morning during the 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. time slot is a National Public Radio program called “On Being” that is hosted by Krista Tippett. According to “On Being’s” website:

““On Being” opens up the animating questions at the center of human life: What does it mean to be human, and how do we want to live? We explore these questions in their richness and complexity in 21st-century lives and endeavors. We pursue wisdom and moral imagination as much as knowledge; we esteem nuance and poetry as much as fact… “On Being” is the home of the Civil Conversations Project, an emergent approach to new conversation and relationship(s) across the differences of our age. “On Being’s” listeners, readers, and online communities cross boundaries that separate them in the culture at large: generational, socioeconomic, political, and religious. They report that “On
Being” equips them to relate in fresh, new ways to different others, and empowers them to engage in new kinds of service.

Ms. Tippett interviews people from all walks of life, the well-known and those less well-known. During an interview broadcast on September 25th of this year she interviewed His Holiness the XIV Dali Lama along with three other prominent spiritual leaders; one from an Islamic tradition, one from the Jewish faith and a Catholic Bishop. The subject of this interview was centered on the subject of happiness.

She recently concluded a four part series entitled “The Fabric of Our Identity”. During that series, she explored issues having to do with the psyche of American culture such as the long-term effects of September 11th 2001, how we precipitate change in racial equality, the roll of “minority programming” on how we are shaping our new “American consciousness” and the wisdom of the communal connectivity of the millennium generation. She has interviewed artists like Dario Robleto on the meaning of his work and how “objects can become meditations on love, war, and healing.” She has interviewed poets and politician scientists and Zen abbots. She has had conversations with such notable people as Phil Donahue on his amazing career as a talk show pioneer. The great American poet Maya Angelou gave one of her last interviews to Ms. Tippett. “On Being” has explored elephants’ love and the significance of whale’s songs, and what it means to inhabit the human body after surviving cancer. Through it all she manages to extract from her subjects the essence of the human story that is theirs to tell.

From Ms. Tippett, I immediately employed a deep respect for my subjects. I learned to ask difficult questions in a sympathetic way while being profoundly considerate of what each
person brought to the ongoing, interconnected conversation of our commonality. Ms. Tippett taught me to prepare for each interview with an idea and a direction for the conversation to take but ultimately how to be spontaneous and respond organically when some great nugget of storytelling presents itself. She taught me to be profoundly respectful of those I interview and listen more than talk. She helped to teach me how to listen in those circumstances. She taught me that to listen was to be compassionate.

Artistic Influences

The first artist that has played a role on the work for this thesis is Michelangelo Buonarroti. I am aware of the danger of cliché in this instance but my reasoning is sound and the decision to list him as an influence was not lightly weighed.

When I first became aware of the rich history the west has with the figure in sculpture, my attentions were predictably captivated by Michelangelo Buonarroti and in particular his sculptures *David* (see figure 1 in appendix), *Pieta* (see figure 2 in appendix), and *Slaves* (see figure 3 in appendix). After many years of loving his work from this side of the Atlantic, in 2001 I had the profound honor of being in Italy to see these and many more of his pieces in an all too brief trip. I was fortunate enough to afford two full days sitting in front of the *David* doing sketches and drawings. These drawings remain some of my most prized possessions. Even then, I saw something that few others around me saw. Most I talked to were overwhelmed by a 19 foot tall young man brazenly presenting his nakedness for the world to see. Very few saw the story that was being told through the determined look on the face of this nude adolescent. His expression is caught the first time he locks eyes with his foe. I was stunned by how the steel in
his eyes married with the bare body of a boy, so exquisitely told the story of the moment of his transition from boy to man. Through this one act, David would either die or become the future king of Israel. And through this one sculpture, Michelangelo is deservedly recognized as a master.

As one steps into the hall where the David is housed, Michelangelo’ Prisoners (see figure 2 in appendix) or Slaves (see figure 3 in appendix) lined the entrance of the Academia Gallery. All told, there are eight of these figures, four on each side of the hall. They are in various stages of emerging from the stone from which they are carved. Many scholars disagree as to whether or not these sculptures are finished. To me they represent an artist who is searching for new forms of expression of his craft late in his career. I saw their states of relative emergence from the stone as the metaphor for the condition of man. I saw them as definite and finished. For me, Michelangelo was creating pure, expressive form, free from religious attachment. He was telling the universal story that we have, as a species, yet to fully awake or emerge into our true, unfettered form. They are sublime.

The transcendent nature of the Pieta (see figure 4 in appendix) is beyond the power of my words to adequately describe. I was aware however, when I saw it even behind the thick glass and far away in that poorly lit corner of the Vatican, that the power of this piece lay not in the Christ but in the serenity and surrender of Mary. Michelangelo has captured a very private moment here where Mary, the mother, is holding the body of her dead son. It is incidental, for that moment that her dead son happens to be the Christian Savior. Yes, she is a woman divinely touched, but she is a mother first. This fact was not lost on me when I saw it in that dark
shadowy recess on that warm June day in 2001. And its impact has been long lasting. It was during that trip that I knew I wanted to use the human figure to create works that moved others the way these had moved me. I knew I wanted to be a sculptural story teller.

Another sculptor who has had a most profound influence on this thesis was Auguste Rodin. Rodin is considered the father of modern sculpture. Although he was traditionally schooled, he was never accepted into Paris’ most prestigious academy. Controversy surrounded his first major sculpture, *The Age of Bronze* (see figure 5 in appendix). Such was Rodin’s craftsman’s approach that the artistic community accused him of simply making a mold of his model. While he sought recognition from the artistic establishment, this was not the attention he was after. He refused to change his style in the face of public pressure. The Parisian public had distinct ideas about what constituted sculpture and Rodin’s work was not it. While he occasionally made pieces that had a theme or used allegory, his more original sculptures celebrated the character of his subjects and were more about the physicality of the human form.

More than all these reasons, for me, he speaks clearly of the joy and sorrow, triumph and tribulation of our shared human condition. He has always been the ambassador of the human figure as the ultimate tool for artistic story-telling. In his *Burghers of Calais* (see figure 6 in appendix), Rodin revived the theme of patriotic martyrdom in a time when France was dealing with results of its somewhat failed revolution and thus was able to hit a public nerve. Unlike the *Burghers of Calais*, his *Call to Arms* (see figure 7 in appendix), in which a winged, bare breasted Victory figure is simultaneously supporting the wounded and dying figure of a revolutionary and rallying the remaining freedom fighters, did not enjoy the same critical success. It was viewed as
an insensitive insult to the failed revolution. Even the piece that gained Rodin notoriety was mired in controversy. His *Age of Bronze* was so perfectly proportioned and beautifully rendered that many claimed he simply took a mold of his model.

Regardless of the immediate public response of certain pieces of Rodin’s total body of work, it is clear that he was able to use the human form in sculpture and speak to countless people around the world. Despite being classically trained, he famously refused early challenges to change his style to represent more traditional aesthetics. Instead, when he knew he had struck his own stylistic gold, he stayed his course until the critics came round. In doing so, he pioneered a new and more contemporary form of sculpture for the Modern era. This is the hallmark of a great and creative mind of a true and singular vision. These two men, Michelangelo and Rodin, are two of my inspiring heroes for these very personal reasons.

Gustav Vigeland is a sculptor of a different kind. It is commonly known that he actually studied with Rodin as an apprentice in France. After completing his apprenticeship, he returned to his homeland of Norway and cleverly negotiated a deal wherein he would create a massive sculpture park for the city of Oslo. The *Vigeland Park* (see figure 8 in appendix) is a massive Modernist outdoor sculpture park with more than 200 sculptures. Among the myriad of individual sculptures in the *Vigeland Park*, there are such crowd favorites as the *Angry Boy* (see figure 9 in appendix) and *Man Running* (see figure 10 in appendix). At its center is a 57 foot *Monolith* (see figure 11 in appendix) that is comprised of 121 intertwined figures. Vigeland would spend the remainder of his days designing and building this complex. If the city would provide him with a salary, materials and tools, land and workers to complete his vision, they
would receive in exchange a world class sculpture park at their city center. After all, talent is wasted on those lacking vision. He is widely considered one of the most prolific public artists of his generation. The complex in Oslo is massive. It is a testament not only to his ingenuity as an artist but also his subject matter around which the entire complex has been created: the family unit from the cradle to old age. Not only did Vigeland understand politicians, he understood the public. He was able to accomplish what he did because he knew how to create work that filled both the public’s desires and the government’s needs. Some might argue against the approach that he took and question its pure artistic validity. I, however, do not. It simply pushed a different part of culture forward. And it is a beautiful park adored with multiple hundreds of figures. The 14 meter monolith that is the center of the park is comprised of 121 writhing figures. Vigeland was forward thinking as well. All of the works in the outdoor section of the sculpture park are either carved from granite or cast in bronze.

All three of these extraordinary men had a vision for their work. All three knew what they needed to do to win other people over to their favor, be they popes, politicians or the public at large. None was about to stop until he saw his vision realized. It is this level of tenacity that I revere in my heroes. It is this kind of resolve that I value in the people I portray in busts. This is the kind of man that I aspire to train myself to be. It was through appreciating these artists’ work that I first found my own voice and first discovered how to use the figure to communicate.

Buddhist Thought

Although my martial arts career began in central Pennsylvania at the Harrisburg Kung-Fu Center, it was not until shortly after my return to Iowa in 2002, that I met the man who would
become my next Sifu and my training would take on the spiritual significance it bears today. It was during this time that Buddhist thought entered my consciousness in earnest. Chinese martial arts can essentially be divided into styles that are passed down through family lineages and those that are learned in temple settings. While both family and temple styles share many of the same components, what differentiates them the most is that the temples offer a codified and somewhat standardized set of Taoist and Buddhist teachings that every disciple must follow. The style that I had initially studied in Pennsylvania was the prior. When I returned to Iowa, I was fortunate enough to meet a man who would train me in a temple style. Although my studies do not take place in the surroundings of a temple, our system has ordained Buddhist priests who are the spiritual directors for the order and thus, those under them. While my Des Moines-based instructor of the external side of my training is a master of two different temple styles, it is Sifu Tor Bieker of Portland, Oregon, one of the aforementioned ordained priests, who is my guide and mentor on my foray into the internal side of the martial arts as well as Buddhism.

I grew up in a Christian home. My roots, however, have never served to provide me with a healthy perspective on life. They did not help me understand my own state and condition. In reality my Christian roots made it more difficult to understand. It seemed I was always waging an unwinnable war against an all-powerful faceless being somewhere out in the nebulous ether who was either listening to my prayers, or not--it was always speculative and open to interpretation. Anxiety, fear and self-loathing were some of the more potent byproducts of that ill fit. It was not until I began to paint, and with seriousness began my Buddhist studies that the light from my earliest years began to return. Spiritually speaking, through painting and then Buddhism the world and my place in it began to make sense. There was logic to the workings of
the universe. There was cause and effect. There were direct correlations between action and reaction. More importantly, spiritually, my life began to make sense. It was strangely comforting to know that randomness of events was part of the natural order. It meant that none of this was personal, sometimes shit just happens! People can be mean to others who are different and some people are born gay. No drama, it is just the way it is. That is a wonderful thing to get your head around.

The Four Noble Truths taught me about the nature of the human condition. I learned that I and I alone am responsible for my relative state of liberation from suffering. The Eightfold Path showed me how to live a virtuous life and how to eliminate my own suffering. It also taught me compassion for all living things. It drew me out of my inward spiral and showed me a world mired in suffering and pain. If the circumstances of my life were not personal then that meant that there were people who were far more afflicted than I was. Compassion for living things became bigger than the pain from my earlier life.

It is through the daily application of the Eightfold Path and in particular, Right Livelihood, which the focus of this thesis came into perspective. If I was to be a story teller, then I would tell other people’s stories. If what I learned from being an outsider was empathy and compassion then I would be a voice for those who could not speak for themselves. If I was to be an artist who values above all else the human form, then I would use my talents as a bust maker to utilize this very traditional process usually reserved for immortalizing the socially significant and immortalize the people in my life who were Other than.
It was around the time that I had selected the subjects for the busts I would do, taken all the measurements for those busts and conducted the accompanying interviews that I had another Dharma talk with Sifu Tor Bieker. I needed to align my thesis with what I knew about Buddhism but I knew I also needed to have that alignment verified by an independent source. So, on November 14th, 2014, I called Sifu Bieker to talk with him about the principles of Buddhism and my thesis of *The Lens of Empathy*. According to Sifu Bieker,

There are two kinds of love: romantic love and the non-romantic love. Romantic love is love where you expect something in return… It is a Bundle of Attachments… It has the expectation of outcome… The non-romantic love is made up of two components: Loving Kindness and Compassion… Loving Kindness is the expression of love that creates joy… Compassion is the expression of love that relieves suffering in others…

When I explained my concept to Sifu Bieker he became enthusiastic about my choice. He explained that “This is what Right Livelihood (part of the Eightfold Path) is about… using your talents and skills to help others.” I asked him specifically about being a voice for those who either cannot or do not speak for themselves and he replied that

This is an example of both Loving Kindness and Compassion. The busts bring joy to the ones who they are of, for it is a way for the mother to have an actual three dimensional likeness of her daughter once she is no longer alive… It also relieves suffering by highlighting in a piece of art what is beautiful about their circumstance. Representing the beauty of the Other is love and an act of love…
At that point the conversation turned towards a general topic of Buddhism and empathy. According to Sifu Bieker,

You help others through self transformation. You forge yourself into the person who provides benefits for those around you. You see that your suffering is no different than anyone else’s. In the ways that matter, we are all part of the same system. Your suffering is no different and your existence becomes more loving… There is no Other. We are all the Other…This is the heart of empathy. Suffering is caused by delusion. The Other suffers by the delusion of its label. To make the Other beautiful spreads both Compassion and Kindness. It relieves suffering and creates joy.

There are three unexpected benefits from engaging in the making of this body of work. The first is I had no idea how much gratification could be had from engaging in the making of these pieces. The fulfillment is amongst the deepest I have ever felt during any activity in my life. The second is a peace that comes from working on the story lines of people I empathize with. I have no words for this. The third is the difference this project has made in my perspective on mortality. Being a man of my years means I have parents who are in their early seventies. I am aware that every day together is a gift, but I hope for a little more time. Prior to this period, anxiety over the end my time and or those I hold dear was growing in intensity. Strangely, the act of creating these busts has alleviated a great degree of that anxiety. According to Sifu Bieker, “Suffering is caused by delusion.” The delusion in this case is that the energy that is us ceases to exist. Although ever changing, energy does not cease to exist when the mortal connection no
longer serves its purpose. Crafting these busts and conducting these interviews has showed me that there is real power in art. By interpreting the beauty and essence of the subject in three dimensional form and maintaining these interviews, the spirit of these people is captured for others to experience from here on. I am convinced this was an intent of all those before who had the foresight to commission such a piece of themselves or better yet, their loved ones. The difference here is that those represented in this thesis would never think of themselves as significant. They are more than likely unaware that their daily struggle to obtain and maintain a base level of functionality is precisely what makes them significant. They are likely unaware of the influence their struggle has in inspiring those who quietly and respectfully watch. They may not have held office or written a treatise on the ideal society but their tenacity, resiliency and adaptability have contributed greatly to the overall human story.
CHAPTER THREE

THE WORK

The majority of my undergraduate work revolved around the figure. This work was much less defined and my reasons for insisting on this path were not clear. I have a particular affinity for idealization in the human form and spent a great deal of effort and time pursuing this. In my second semester at Iowa State, I had the opportunity to work with Professor Paul Shao in his three dimensional design course. I knew that his was the only class on campus to work with the human figure in three dimensions. I took the class as a graduate student and spent the entire semester working with the figure. It was essentially a figure drawing class where the medium was oil-based clay as opposed to graphite or charcoal.

I earned my BFA from Drake University in drawing and had experienced a large degree of satisfaction in rendering the human form two dimensionally but it was in Professor Shao’s class, working on rendering the figure in clay, that the difference and reasoning came into focus. Since I was so critical about my physicality, I took immense joy and satisfaction from seeing and rendering the human form the way I knew it could be, beautiful, sublime, and undistorted.

While pursuing my graduate degree, I was challenged in this tendency by a number of faculty on a number of different occasions. I was not ready to articulate my reasoning then because I knew there was no way to talk about this issue and not have the conversation come uncomfortably close to issues I was unwilling to discuss. I never wanted my thesis work to revolve around my cerebral palsy. After all, how could I rise above my circumstances if I would spend my time and efforts talking about how I was different?
This is when I determined the focus had to be directed elsewhere and when the opportunity to do the bust of Brooke presented itself, I knew that I had found the direction for my thesis. It may have required refinement and polishing, finessing and tweaking but all ideas need a maturation process before their gestation period is complete. I needed to come at the topic of Otherness from a different direction. When I found the angle of the story teller, the advocating voice for the voiceless, I knew I had found the necessary path of application. This was an amazingly important shift in my thinking about my art, and I am grateful for it.

The process would be surprisingly simple. Select a subject who fulfilled the criteria of Other in some form, do a bust of that person, imbuing it with the character of the person so as to most aptly tell his or her story visually, and conduct an interview wherein the appropriate questions are asked so as to open the broadest channel possible for his or her voice to be heard.

The show is comprised of three main elements: a portrait bust of four different individuals: Brooke (see figure 12 in appendix), Nathan (see figure 13 in appendix), Sebastian (see figure 14 in appendix), and Patricia (see figure 15 in appendix), all of whom are Other in their own right, an audio interview with each person where their story is told firsthand, and the video installation of My Walk (see figure 16 in appendix) wherein a two-point perspective video of me, one from my vantage point, one from that of a follower, walking outside in the dramatic spring evening. These three elements constitute the visual components of my show. The first component discussed will be that of the portrait busts. This is arguably the lynchpin of the show as it is the point at which tradition parts with history, the portrayal of the marginalized as opposed to the privileged.
The Busts

Each bust starts with me meeting with the subject. I start with the same techniques that I learned in my BFA, only now I add the crucial component of the recorded interview. The process starts with using a pair of calipers and a ruler; I take a set of nineteen measurements of the subject’s face, neck and shoulders. Starting with the hollow of the ears as a base line, I measure such dimensions as: the hollow of the ear to the hollow of the ear, hollow of the ear to the chin, chin to hair-line, the width of the outside of the eyes, and distance from the chin to the center of the lips just to name a few. Once the measurements are obtained, I take a set of photographs that show the subject’s face and head straight on, three-quarters front from each side, profile, and the back, top and bottom of the subject’s head. It is during this time that I conduct and record the interviews that will accompany the bust in the final thesis exhibit.

At the conclusion of this process, I return to my studio with the measurements and the photographs. I start each bust by using an armature upon which I apply the clay. The armature consists of a wood base approximately twelve inches by twelve inches, to which I attach four two-by-two-by-one pieces of wood stacked on top of each other and glued in place at the center of the base. On top of that I mount a plumbing flange, a three inch section of steel pipe, and a gooseneck fitting. This gives me a base armature upon which I can then start reproducing the subject’s measurements.

Once the armature is ready to accept clay, I use my calipers and ruler to reproduce each subject’s unique set of measurements. This part of the process constitutes the majority of the work. When we see someone we know from a distance, what we recognize as that person
is not the color of their eyes or the shape of their nose. It is the unique set of proportions that constitute the structure of their face. It is for this reason that trusting the math of the process is vital.

It is when the proportions are reproduced that the art of the process begins. It is at this stage when scrutinizing the photographs for how the skin lays over the structure of the face that transforms the piece into an accurate likeness of the person. These busts are not perfect representations of their subject counterparts. They are likenesses and interpretations. As such, I have chosen to accentuate the aspects of the subject’s character that I feel best assist in visually telling their story.

Each bust is then molded. The mold making process starts with a rubber mold applied over top of the original. This rubber mold is applied in three layers to ensure uniform coverage. Once this rubber mold is properly cured, a plaster “mother mold” is applied over top. This mother mold is divided into three sections: the face, the left-rear two-thirds, and the right-rear two-thirds. This mother mold serves as an exoskeleton for the rubber mold. After the mother mold dries, it is then removed and an incision is made in the rubber mold from the base up to the crown of the head along one of the shoulder lines. The rubber mold is then peeled off the original and the clay and armature are recycled for the next piece.

I then make sure that the rubber mold is clean and contaminant free. Next I reassemble the rubber mold and mother mold. With the structure turned upside down, I then pour a soupy plaster mixture into the opening of the rubber mold. I leave the structure in this position for several hours to ensure that the plaster is dry and cool and ready to be removed from the mold.
When I originally learned the process of mold-making and casting, plaster was the default casting material. I learned to appreciate its luminescence when finished to a high degree. When it came to applying this material to my thesis work, I took a second look at plaster. As long as the finished cast plaster piece is not abused or treated carelessly, it is a very stable material and a single can last for centuries if not longer. If treated indelicately and or abused it is easily damaged and broken. It possesses a nature that is both timeless and fragile. I felt this was the best material to reflect what I want to say about the human condition. Plaster was also the material my early casts were made of. They were put in place to immobilize my motions so the corrective surgeries would have the opportunity to take. There is something immensely satisfying about the process of taking a material that, early on, I associated it with the pain of recovery and modeling it into a beautiful form that emulates the vitality of life.

Cleaning up the casting is a matter of removing the mold line from the bust, filling in any air pockets with filler, and some mild sanding-out of imperfections. Each bust is then mounted on its marble base and made ready for the thesis exhibit. The stone that I chose for the base for each bust is selected to also reflect and echo the traits I highlight as a story teller.

The Interviews

Accompanying each bust is an audio interview. These interviews were conducted with each of the subjects as a means of putting into words concepts only able to be hinted at in the portrait bust’s format. Through the interview, the subjects get to say things about their lives that only the closest of family or friends might know. They have the chance to “get things off their chest” in a rare opportunity, as if they were speaking to the viewer.
When I was building the framework for this thesis, it was clear that the portrait busts would be well served by some form of accompanying documentation. An obvious thought was to use the audio interview format as that accompanying documentation. That was the easy part. A great degree of discussion and deliberation took place before any recording equipment was rented. Quite a bit of that deliberation was over the interview process and what questions would be asked of each subject.

As mentioned before, inspiration was drawn from the N.P.R. program “On Being” and its host Krista Tippett. However, whereas her subjects vary week to week in what their specialty is with regards to the overarching scope of the theme of her program, my subjects were all coming to me with a relative kinship of experiences. I decided that roughly the same set of questions would be asked of each person. Although all recorded in different locations, they would be set up in the same fashion and recorded with the same equipment. This would give the resulting edited interviews a continuity that would assist in communicating the story that each bust was to tell.

Brooke

I introduced Brooke earlier in the process of this thesis but it is reasonable to mention her again. Brooke is non-verbal so it stands that her mother is her voice and advocate. Rather than spending time talking about what makes Brooke Other, I will focus on how she affected her family, especially her mother Lynnette.

Your life cannot help but change when a special needs child is born into your family. Under the best of circumstances and the most comfortable of financial situations, the challenges
can rip a family apart. Brooke’s family has not enjoyed the comfort of financial security and has had to make many sacrifices of untold severity for one who required so much.

I cannot fathom what it would take to restructure an entire life around someone who requires 24/7 care. The feeding, bathing, changing—all these tasks and more—would necessarily become your entire life if you were not wealthy enough to afford hired care. Any thought of a career or a social life would have to take a back seat to any and all needs of that one child. What of your other children? How do you raise them not to feel resentful of their sibling’s needs?

The reality of society’s lack of concern in these matters is pretty harsh. Certainly there is some form of a social safety net to help out the most destitute but even then, the results of this and of need are often unhealthy degrees of social exile. Good luck finding a job or a boss who would understand a lifetime of absenteeism due to medical emergencies. More than likely your pool of friends and family as support would quickly dry up. Things are better than they used to be for those unfortunate enough to find this challenge lay at their doorstep, but they are far from great.

While rendering Brooke, the choice to emphasize her innocence was obvious. Doing so required very little alteration. Her smile is infectious and eyes, which point in different directions, tell the story best. She does not engage with the viewer to represent her status as “non-functioning”. I chose to let her story stand, almost unaltered. She is pure, and hence, the stone her bust is mounted on is pure Carrera white marble.
Lynnette and Brooke’s Interview

Lynnette King, Brooke’s mother, was the first interview I conducted. As I stated earlier, Brooke is non-verbal. Her mother Lynnette is her voice and thus the one interviewed for this portion of the thesis. Early on in the fall semester of 2014, I went to Clinton, Iowa, to meet Brooke and Lynn. I had not seen Lynn since we were in high school. Despite the fact that she contacted me about doing a bust of her daughter, she was obviously nervous about the meeting. We met at the hospital where Brooke was admitted. Brooke was ill with another in a long line of complications and Lynn was spending all of her time with her daughter.

As I was introduced to Brooke and began to talk to her, telling her why I was there and what her mom and I were going to be doing, it became apparent that she was conscious of what was happening. At one point, I told Brooke that I was going to take a certain measurement and as if on cue, she pushed her chin forward to allow me access to the area I needed to measure. This was a person who medical professionals had labeled as “non-functioning.” It was clear to me that although she might have obvious deficiencies, even with tubes and hoses attached to her in more areas than I care to relate, she was still participating in what was going on around her.

The more I talked to Brooke, explaining my process, the more I could see Lynn start to relax and trust me with the situation. This was fortunate for what was about to come. After the measurements were taken, Lynn and I found a family waiting room and I set up for the interview. I asked Lynn a set of questions about her daughter and the effects, obvious and not, that having a child so afflicted had brought to her family. She kept reiterating how Brooke was the light in her life and how much she loved her.
She was at a point in her life where she saw Brooke’s life as one of the greatest gifts she had ever received. Her responses were not rehearsed.

She talked openly and honestly, telling me of the rest of her children and how they grew up and what her perception of their feelings towards their sister was. It amazed me how close and united this group of people seemed to be. They were not divided by this adversity. They had built the bond of their relationship around Brooke and had become more committed to each other because of it. This supported the thesis I was building.

Near the end of the interview, Lynn thanked me for telling her story. She stated that no one outside of the immediate family had ever showed concern or cared enough to take the time to talk to them and hear their story. Lynn then told me something that truly disturbed me. She told me that most of the medical doctors who treated Brooke never talked to her directly and never asked permission before they put their poking and prodding hands on her. In Lynn’s telling, most people treated Brooke worse than they would treat an animal. After all, an agitated animal might bite.

Lynn is, in this case, almost as much an Other as her daughter is. And since Brooke cannot speak for herself and tell the story of her life, it falls on her mother to speak for her. What I did not find surprising is that Lynn had suppressed her own desires in an effort to afford for her daughter’s never-ending needs. The bust may be of the daughter but the interview is definitely the mother’s story.
Nathan Carder and I attended Drake University as undergraduates together. Although I am older than he is, he was one year ahead of me in the program. He was one of the people I kept my eye on and paid attention to when figuring out how to navigate the system of a B.F.A. program. We have remained in touch ever since and our friendship and mutual respect has grown as we have come into our own as artists. In between his second-to-last year and his last year, he fell sick with ulcerative colitis. His work changed to address the challenges of his condition. He graduated from Drake and went on to get a fellowship at Virginia Commonwealth University to pursue his M.F.A. He was still sick.

During his time at V.C.U. his condition worsened. Almost immediately after graduation he had to have major surgery that was drastic and quite frankly, smacked of desperation. When Nathan told me of what had to happen to keep his ulcerative colitis under control, it was clear to me that the best of doctors did not fully understand the nature of the beast he and they were wrestling with. Their hack and slash approach reminded me of the tactics generals use when dealing with an entrenched guerilla force: destroy and clear everything and hope we get all the offending agents. It rarely works and the results are often worse than a life learning to live with managing the symptoms.

Nathan is an obvious choice for this body of work because he is the rare example among this group of coming to a life-altering condition after all concepts of self and health are established. Every other person here had to come to grips with their circumstances as they were identifying who they were as people. Nathan was healthy and grew up only to find that all
change in the span of a few months. He now deals daily with the knowledge of a shortened life expectancy and diminished quality of life. His first wife even divorced him because she did not want to “be around someone who was always sick.”

For the bust of Nathan, I decided early on to use gauntness to communicate his sickness. He is a young, tall, and virile young man and you see that in the bust of him. You also see his sickness through his sunken cheeks, and the exposed muscles in his long, lean neck. His gaze is one of near shock and is turned away from the viewer and directed into the upper left distance. This decision was made to suggest the uneasiness with a sudden and heightened sense of mortality. The stone I chose for his bust to be mounted on is a black stone with sharp white contrasts to echo the short and drastic nature of his transformation.

Nathan’s Interview

Nathan Carder was the next person I interviewed. I was aware of most of the fundamentals of his story but it was the first time that he had told me the whole sequence of events from beginning to end. The effects of hearing him tell his story without interruption was markedly more dramatic and gut wrenching than I expected.

I know that he, like most people when faced with uncomfortable and threatening news, did not know exactly how to adjust. And he, like so many, spent a great deal of time and energy dealing with the results and conditions of the illness but rarely did he deal with how he felt.

Although I was sensitive to his situation and respectful when I asked the questions that I felt needed to be ask, it was clear that Nathan was very uncomfortable. At the end of the
interview he even made a point of telling me that the interview had made him face his illness in a way that he does not on a day-to-day basis.

What I found fascinating is that, because he found himself afflicted with this disease relatively recently, he had not developed the level of acceptance that some of the others had. Nathan’s experience was new enough that, while he was dealing with his illness on a daily basis, it was clear that there was still some psychology to be worked through. This is not judgment. It is simply observation.

Sebastian

Sebastian may be the poster child for this exhibit. He is the most fundamentally different person I have ever had the privilege of meeting. Quite frankly he is an extraordinary individual. I met him during Thanksgiving 2011. It was a chance meeting and we simply hit it off. When he realized he could trust me, I became his confidant and consoler when a relationship went sour. He has the most beautiful face I have ever seen. It is a filled with pathos and is the perfect balance between hard and soft, feminine and masculine, sorrow and joy.

When he and I started talking on the phone, something seemed peculiar to me. During one conversation, he would be markedly assertive with a deep voice, and then a few days later, the complete opposite. It is not unusual to find young gay men who are still unsure as to how their sexuality will play out but there was something more to this. I had my suspicions that this was a case of something more than just uncertainty. But in life, as in poker, you never show your hand unless you are absolutely certain. Plus, all that mattered to me was who he was.
Fast forward two years and it was during a late night phone call when he revealed the nature of his long-held secret. He was not a he. Nor was he a she. Sebastian was born with both sex organs, a genuine hermaphrodite. My response to him was that I already knew, but did not care. This was what I suspected from almost day one. But it still did not change my affections for him. He had had to make the choice to be a he. Actually, in all honesty, it probably deepened my affections for him. It explained so much. I had no frame of reference for what it would have been like to grow up not conforming to one of the first identifying label, of society, male or female. In Sebastian’s case, the answer has always been neither and both.

Even before I started on the bust of Sebastian I knew what I wanted this piece to do and say. Sebastian has been made to feel uncomfortable in his own skin his whole life. He has been confronted by society. He has also been repeatedly sexualized as a forbidden fetish. I chose to have the bust of Sebastian confront the viewer with a penetrating gaze, almost as if he is the one who now sits in judgment of those who once judged him. To reflect the fetishistic nature of his status, I picked a black marble with strong, deep red veins in it as the base for his bust.

Sebastian’s Interview

Having known Sebastian for a few years at the time of the interview, one truth stood above all others when dealing with him. Out of all the people interviewed for this thesis, he is the person most victimized by his condition. To be accurate and fair to him, it is more apt to say that he is the person who is most victimized by a society that harshly judges his condition. Brooke has been shielded by the protective love of her mother her whole life and has, arguably, never had to face the bitterness of an intolerant culture alone.
Sebastian is unfortunate enough to not be able to make such a claim. His own mother turned him away to live with his grandmother. To be honest, I never expected that he would consent to my request to include him in this thesis. I was more than a little surprised when he so quickly agreed. Even up to the point when I arrived in his driveway, I expected him to back out and tell me that he could not follow through with the plan.

But he never canceled and we completed the measurements and the interview. The setting was quite spectacular. We sat in his room, darkly lit by a couple of black lights, me asking questions and him answering me in between exaggeratedly large puffs from his hookah. He was shy with his voice and the depth of his responses. I would have liked for him to be more forthright and detailed in the telling of his story but at least he was participating. Sebastian has told me more of his story than I am at liberty to convey in this document. I commend him for participating at all, let alone being willing to talk so openly.

Patricia

Patricia Rock is my mother. And as my mother, she is an example of an atypical vision of early 1950s America. The peculiar part of the process of my becoming aware of the existence of other people who were Other, was that I noticed the trait in my mother before I noticed it in the greater world at large. We all grow up to think that what we experience and what our parents represent as typical of the rest of society. I, however, was aware that there was something amiss close to home.

My mother carried sickness with her from her childhood. It was forever a shadow over her. Not only did she survive childhood polio, but she also contracted rheumatic fever. By the
time she was ten, she had spent the better part of two years in quarantine for one illness or another. In those days, anything medically not understood resulted in quarantine. If it were not for her childhood best friend Patti Heiler, who visited her nearly every day after school, albeit from the other side of a partition, she might have grown up to be far more scarred.

There were some years when she was young and our family was young that she enjoyed her peak physical health, but those times were rare. As I entered my high school years, I saw the shadow of sickness creep back in and by the time I was a senior, the big C (cancer) spread its gloom. This was in the 1980s when the survival rate was much lower than it is today. In reality, her next sickness was only a matter of time. My mother never drank, smoked or abused herself in any obviously cancer-associated way.

After she survived cancer, the next big issue was a rare scarring disease of the lungs. Mind you, she never smoked. The most recent development as of 2014 and the cherry on top is ulcerative colitis, like Nathan. So a state of chronic poor health has been a condition for her and yet she fights. She has always been a fighter. This was the most difficult bust to render. It was long after my initial draft of the bust was complete that I realized the nature of how I needed to represent Patricia. She is an enthusiastic people-person so she is looking at the viewer with an eager smile. It is an awkward smile though as her eyes reflect a deep pain. I chose to mount her bust on a grey marble that has subtle hues of blues, lavenders, and reds. It is reminiscent of bruised flesh and thus reflects the sickness that has shadowed her whole life.
Patricia’s Interview

This was the last interview I conducted. The story of Patti Rock is one that I am very familiar with. She is my mother after all. This fact, however, did not in any obvious way influence my decision to include her as one of the subjects for this thesis. Actually, I avoided making the choice for quite some time out of a desire to avoid the obvious charge of nepotism.

What I could not escape, however, was that she was the person whom I knew of early on in my awareness, who also suffered from childhood traumas that caused her stress in adjusting to find a, functional at best, way of living. In my teens, I began to hear stories of how she grew up and the stories were not pretty.

When it came time to interview her, I had prepared myself for a potentially unpleasant time, or so I thought. With the telling of her story, as discrete as she was, there were many things that I was aware of that were not being addressed or were being lightly glazed over. It was maybe the most uncomfortable interview that I had conducted. Writing about the experience is no less uncomfortable.

Her early life was hard. She was afflicted by two very dire illnesses early on but was also the survivor of an abusive home life. Through these experiences, she learned how to adapt and survive. This is a skill she is still employing even as she turning 70 years of age. Through the interview it became clear that she learned, early on, how to face adversity and not allow it to define her self-image.
My Walk, a Video Installation

In the very early spring of 2014 a friend of mine, Brent Garland, and I shot a collaborative video piece. Brent is the front man for the up and coming Des Moines-based band, The Holy White Hounds. Brent is himself an artist. Collaborating with him on a piece was a natural fit and I let him have rein over his side of the piece. The concept was simple. Since my I.S.U. residence is near the edge of the boundary between the city of Ames and the surrounding county, Brent and I would go for a walk that would start roughly one hour before dark and head into the country until we ran out of light. On a mid-March evening we set out—me with a small camera discretely strapped to my chest to capture my perspective, and him following me with a camera trained on my back the whole time. He would obtain a counterpoint perspective. The two cameras would never see each other. The final film consists of two frames of identical size projected next to each other. The intent was to be my view of the world and how the world sees me, laid up side by side in a video format.

The result was fairly dramatic. Being Iowa in March, it was not surprising that the day was windy. What played into the piece so excellently was the severity of the wind. It became a character of the film. I struggled against it and it tossed me, my jacket and scarf around as if provoking me into a fight.

The concept for this piece came out of a conversation I had with Brent about the difference between how I saw myself in the world and how I thought the world saw me. Alongside of struggling with cerebral palsy my whole life, I have also wrestled against people’s
perceptions of me. This video addresses the assumptions we make about people based on outwardly observable signifiers and how that contrasts with the way they see themselves.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Summary and Analysis

The work displayed in this exhibition represents the culmination of my experiences both in academia as well as the personal journey to turn my hindrances into assets. It is the natural and cathartic step along a continuum that is the exploration of how labels affect people and what is possible when the labels are refused. My starting point for this work was the framework of my own past, the brilliance and the not so brilliant. I came to this body of work with a well-established sense of empathy for others. However, through the acts of creating busts and conducting and editing the interviews, I have found that empathy stretched and redefined until it became transformative. These pieces exemplify the concept of the beauty of the Other. By marrying the traditional process of bust making with the informed interview; it adds a contemporary context to the subject of the “Other.” The two components merge together to transform the passive viewing experience of the busts into a private exploration of the effects of Otherness and hegemonic labels and standards on real world individuals.

The pieces are the result of my love for the human figure, a need to be a story teller and a history that gave me a solid rooting for an exploration into Buddhism. The work of other artists has shown me that while the figure may require contemporary contextualization from time to time, it never lacks relevancy. The work of other empathetic listeners guided me on the portion of this journey that required documenting the stories of those I would be capturing. Buddhist thought provided the foundation for turning a tumultuous past into a mind and heart that desires
to make works that bring joy and relieve suffering. Many aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path are on display in this thesis, such as Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Meditation, Right View and Right Intent. Following this path has provided me with the opportunity to forge a life’s work that helps to eliminate suffering and brings joy. Not just mine but for those whom my work is of, for, and about.

These influences have helped me to develop a body of work that explores both old and new concepts of normality and what is truly significant about the human condition. Throughout the time I have spent at Iowa State University I have become aware of my compulsion to work with the human form as well as my need to continue on the path of the storyteller. It was in the initial phases of setting out to construct this body of work that I became aware that the stories should be those of other people who know what it means to live with the stigma of Other. It became clear that my work needed to be a voice for those who felt otherwise unheard. By allowing this transformation to take place, The Lens of Empathy brought meaning, release and joy. It never ceases to amaze me how much we grow when reach out through our love, work and actions to help another. It is an equally amazing thing when the shedding of labels takes place, and people cease to define themselves by what conditions they are afflicted with and learn instead to put live according to what they know they are capable of doing.
The Walk Forward

Since the spring of 2007 I have been working with a life coach. This is still a new enough field that most people consider the profession to be some form of “hokum”, with its practitioners being charlatans at best. This could not be further from the truth and P.T. Barnum’s claim about suckers and their birth rate has no stake here. A life coach is a person you are perhaps able to be most honest with. Much like a therapist, a life coach can, perhaps because they have no place in the rest of your private life, keep you more centered than even the closest of friends. They are equal parts strategist, therapist, priest, confidant, advisor, and pep-squad. They help you to define your goals, assess the steps necessary to reach them, and help you decipher the reasons why you stumble along the way. The end result is that once you have reached critical mass with regards to progress towards your goals for the future, they help you stay focused and committed to the plan while simultaneously refining what you thought you wanted and why. In short, they are a tremendous asset, the proverbial ace up one’s sleeve.

I say all this to say that I have a fairly well defined post-graduation plan, thanks to my work with my life coach, Marty Baddeloo. That plan has three major components to it. The first part of the plan is to establish myself as a portrait bust maker. I used to live in central Pennsylvania and I plan on relocating back to that area once I complete my master’s degree studies. Within six hours in any direction of Harrisburg you have roughly 50 million people. Every business model has its primary income stream that allows the rest of the operation to function: for McDonald’s, their base is the “burger, fries, soft-drink” meal; for my art, it will be the commissioned portrait bust. With a steady flow of customers who provide me
with a base level upon which I can build a life, I would be able to continue to explore the pure art topic of the “Other” through the bust. These non-commissioned pieces would allow me to express myself through my work without the restraints of being a plastic surgeon for the vain and wealthy.

Despite the fact that I have had the skill of bust making for some time, I only recently found its artistic potential in the framework of contemporary art. Utilizing this as a means of continued exploration is tantalizing to say the least. I have only scratched the surface of its potential importance in my work. A recent preliminary thought about another possible direction is to use the homeless as subjects for a series of busts. Utilizing the interview as a means of a narrative to accompany these pieces would be a natural extension of the body of work I am currently building. The two processes, for the purposes of telling the story of individuals or peoples within groups, are an amazing fit. The bust serves as a visual representation of a moment in the subject’s life while the interview is an opportunity for them to tell the story of how they got there.

The second part of the plan involves seeking suitable venues for the growing number of concepts I have for public sculptures. This growing body of work is geared toward the part of my self-expression that has a taste for the more grand, theatrical and ambitious of scale. The potential public sculptures include but are not limited to: The Flow of Deep Time (a piece that addresses man’s place in the scheme of cosmic time), The Necessity of Resistance (a sculpture that talks about the growth that can come from embracing one’s suffering), The Arrow of Time (a sculpture that promotes a public dialog about the nature of entropy and its human implications), The Infinite and the Direct (a public work that talks about the balance of the intention within the
scope of a natural world), and *Poseidon’s Riddle* (a work that is void of intentional conversation but provocative none the less due to its complex yet simple nature).

The third portion of the plan involves a number of performance art pieces. One such art piece revolves around the concept of taking about six months to drive the circumference of the Continental United States in my 1972 Alfa Romeo 2000 GTV. The goal is to obtain sponsorship from various parties that would benefit from six months of nearly daily publicity and set out in a freshly mechanically refurbished car. The goals for this trip are:

- To explore the state of neoliberal politics in America
- To experience our digital age through the Lens of a forty-three year old analog car
- To make new connections with fellow car lovers and artists
- To locate venues for future public art pieces and to gain strategic gallery representation for busts
- To explore America’s contemporary car culture amidst a period of great change
- To explore the America that is often written about but seldom experienced
- To offer this perspective to the myriad of social media followers

During the trip, one of the main objectives will be to connect with fellow artists. I will also make it a priority to procure representation from two or three key galleries around the country that can help market and sell my busts. Along the way I will be looking for possible future locations for my public art concepts in the cities and areas I visit. This trip, *The Little Alfa That Could*, will essentially be networking my way, literally around the whole country.

Upon completion of *The Little Alfa That Could*, I will return to my home in central Pennsylvania and settle down into utilizing the connections I make for commissioned portrait busts as well as potential public sculpture venues. As virtually the whole trip will be
documented, either by video or camera stills, there will be an enormous amount of material which will be fodder for future personal works. I started out a painter and cannot see that going away. It is expected that my public and private work will be affected by this epic journey but only time can reveal exactly how. Who knows, maybe there will be a documentary or a book that would come out of this meeting of the ideal and pragmatic.
CITATIONS


Bieker, Tor 2014, personal communication on Buddhist philosophy.
#1. Michelangelo Buonarroti’s David

#2. Michelangelo Buonarroti’s Slaves

#3. Michelangelo Buonarroti’s Prisoners

#4. Michelangelo Buonarroti’s Pieta
WORKS CITED

#5. Aguste Rodin’s The Age of Bronze

#6. Aguste Rodin’s The Burghers of Calais

#7. Aguste Rodin’s Call to Arms

#8. The Vigeland Park in Oslo
# WORKS CITED

#9. Gustav Vigeland’s The Angry Boy

#10. Gustav Vigeland’s Man Running

#11. Gustav Vigeland’s Monolith

#12. Brooke
WORKS CITED

#13. Nathan

#14. Sebastian

#15. Patricia

#16. My Walk, A video Installation