

Living in limbo

By

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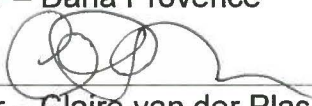
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I. Introduction

Everyone I grew up with was given the same advice from their parents and teachers; “Do your best. Study hard. Go to college. You can be anything you want to be. Follow your passion.” This advice was repeated over and over from elementary through high school. It was hard wired into our brains, the American dream was within reach if you just put in the work.

The reality however, is that this advice was complete bullshit. We all studied hard, we all went to college to pursue our passions, yet most of us fell short of the promise land. Instead of corner offices and pension plans, we ended up working in pizza parlors and coffee huts. As it turns out, this is not such a bad thing. Working service level jobs gave us the time and freedom to be inventive, to try new things, to create.

We started bands, launched Kickstarter projects, and quickly realized that success is not determined by the number of zeros in a paycheck but through the self-realization that comes with blazing your own path. In ten years time we will still be paying off our student loans and those dreams that we were promised as children will still go unfilled, but it doesn't mean we didn't succeed.

Don't compare me to the experience my parents went through. They were already married with their second kid on the way when they were my age today. College was paid off and they had a secure career path. Reality is much different for me and my generation now.

"So now that I'm older, than my mother and father, when they had their daughter, now what does that say about me?" - "Montezuma" by Fleet Foxes, Helplessness Blues, 2011, Reciprocal Recording-

I have spent the last year investigating and exploring notions of identity and purpose, to try and answer that question posed by the Fleet Foxes. I know that I am not the only young adult that has felt apprehension about the future, but it has become clear the expectations of our affluent American society are no longer applicable to my, and future, generations. The old blueprint handed down to us from other generations no longer describes the reality of modern life, leaving an entire generation without a useful guide to adulthood.

In this body of work I explore the feeling of limbo through portraiture. It's a feeling that I have felt throughout my adult life. Limbo, in relation to this series, is defined as a period of confusion, indulgence, and crisis for people between the ages of 18-34. It is a stage somewhere between adolescence and adulthood. Psychologists and Sociologists refer to this age range as the quarter life. Many historical, sociological and economical factors that are specific to affluent western nations have lead to the development of this new stage of life (Atwood, Joan, Schultz 233).

II. Historical Background: The American Young Adults

American culture changed after WWII. There was an economic boom in United States as it became a superpower on the world stage. People were able to define their dreams and future. This gave birth to a culture of privilege, individualism and choice.

The new generation of young adults, as a result of the previous generations achievements, now have more freedom and different problems than those faced by their parents or grandparents. This is why those who struggle in the stages between adolescence and adulthood are now experiencing what is referred to as the quarter life crisis (Atwood, Joan, Schultz 234).

Today's generation of 18-34 year olds differ from those of their parents largely due to the amount of choice they have. They also carry the largest financial debt of any other generation. Globalization has integrated economies making jobs more difficult to get than they once were. Technology has given them information that is available at any time and has also increased a need for specialized training and extended education. Gender roles and the norms of relationships have also changed since the time of their parents. In addition, this generation is more isolated than any other group of people aside from the elderly in retirement homes. "This means that many young people explore their identity transitions alone and without companionship of peers or family" (Atwood 235-238).

All of these factors contribute to a period of confusion, indulgence, uncertainty and privilege. The most influential of these aspects that inform the artwork is the increase in isolation amongst young people. A main difference is that many of this generation choose to be alone because over 50% of their parent's

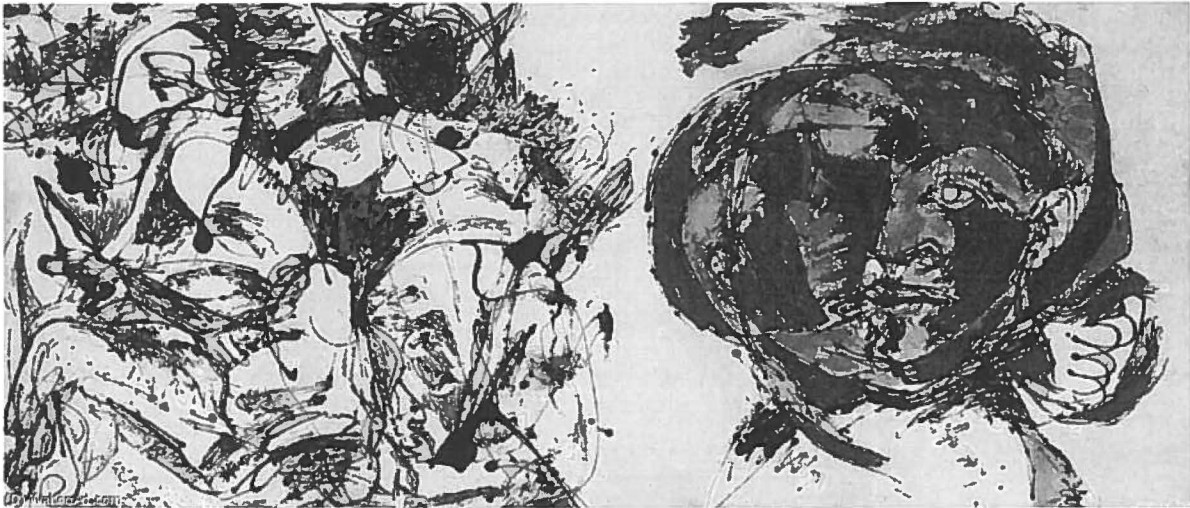
marriages ended in divorce (Atwood 240). Many young people want to achieve an independent financial status before they consider choosing a life partner. Adding to this, because of technology and mass media, young persons ages-19-29 spend more time alone than any other group except the elderly, and they spend more of the time in productive activity like work and school alone than any other age group under 40 (Larson 155-157).

The markers of adulthood that have been the standard for so long are no longer applicable to today's young adults. Today, they are constantly changing and reinventing themselves. They are anxious, intelligent and uncertain about what they want to do. The young people of today need to re-write the blueprint to adulthood for future generations.

Historical Background: Abstract Expressionism

As the culture of affluence grew and changed in America after WWII, so did the art. In painting, there was a shift from representation to abstraction. The shift was labeled Abstract Expressionism. Many factors contributed to the change in art style. The historical and sociological reasons listed above and the development of new technology. Specifically it was the camera and its ability to take portraits and document life in a realistic and representational way. The camera's ability to document life so efficiently in a sense gave permission to artists to focus more on the emotional and expressive values of art.

The canvases of the Abstract Expressionists were large scale and their marks were gestural. Many of the artists from this movement are influential to me in my work.



1) "Portrait and a Dream" Jackson Pollock, Oil and Enamel on Canvas, 1953

Jackson Pollock was the pioneer of abstract expressionism. He once said, "painting is a self discovery, every good painter paints what he is." ("Jackson Pollock: Paintings Have a Life of Their Own." SFMOMA, n.d. Web.) This approach to painting serves as a good model for the basis of my own work. Like Pollock I believe in this approach to painting. In my artist family tree he is at the root.

Jackson Pollock's technique revolutionized the painting world. He used no preparatory drawings and painted directly on the floor. He used a stick or brush and poured paint straight out of the can. His main goal was to "express his feelings rather than illustrate them." ("Jackson Pollock: Paintings Have a Life of Their Own." SFMOMA, n.d. Web.)

Abstract Expressionism was the first truly American art movement. It influenced Minimalism and Pop Art movements for decades after it first hit the art scene. In keeping with some of the traditions and techniques used by Abstract Expressionists, I feel it is an appropriate technique in utilizing while painting portraits of Americans today.

IV. Artistic Influences

As a painter of the human form I have many other artistic influences that, like Pollock, stem from an expressionist and symbolist background. The most influential of these are the artists that use the language of abstract expressionism to describe human forms.

The main influences in my current practice are Edvard Munch, Willem De Kooning, Frank Auerbach, and Alice Neel. I admire the work of these artists because of their reflections of modern life. Within their work they all represent personal attitudes and emotions through using a direct painterly approach. There is little to no separation of themselves from their subjects and like Pollock they express feeling through the language of Expressionism.



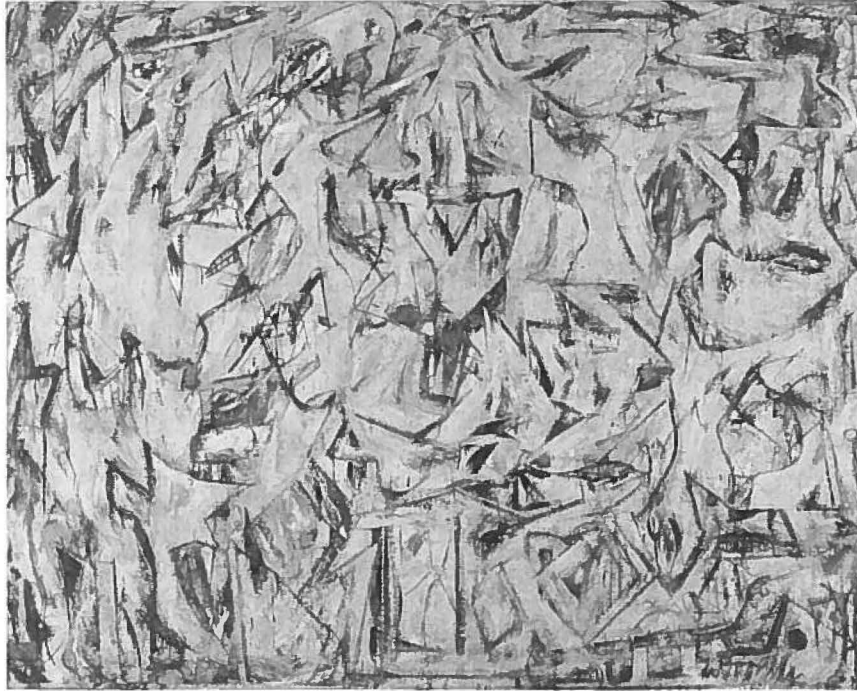
2) Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, Oil on canvas, 1910

One of my first experiences with art was seeing Edvard Munch's *The Scream* in an art heritage lesson in 3rd grade. I have never forgotten the image since first seeing it. I thought it was strikingly raw, very energetic and mysterious. It got me asking questions about art for the first time. Munch's work has always stuck with me throughout my life.

Munch has a unique ability to create a psychological space on a canvas through the use of the human form. *The Scream* is the most obvious example. The gesture of the man and the yellow color of his skin combined with the blood red skyline in the background creates a powerful and raw portrayal of man.

Munch often portrayed the life of bohemians in his work. His subjects were poor, they could not afford proper health care and they are always in a constant state of suffering. He depicted this class of people almost exclusively in his work. The idea of the struggling and emotional individual as a seed of germination for his work is informative to my own.

While much has changed since the time of Munch there are still many issues that mirror my world to Munch's. One could say I depict the attitude of a contemporary bohemian class of people in my paintings. Evidence of this is that nearly all of my subjects live beneath the poverty threshold. I get most of my models from my own circle of friends. These are people I identify with on many levels. The personal connection is an important aspect of my work. Like Munch, the people I am surrounded by serve as seeds of germination for paintings.



3) Willem De Kooning, *Excavation*, Oil and Enamel on Canvas, 1950

Willem De Kooning is another important influence. As an expressionist, I have always admired the confidence of deliberate brushwork and juicy thickness to the paint. De Kooning's marks reveal a keen insight into his psyche. He is willing to change and alter a painting in order to preserve the life of each painting.

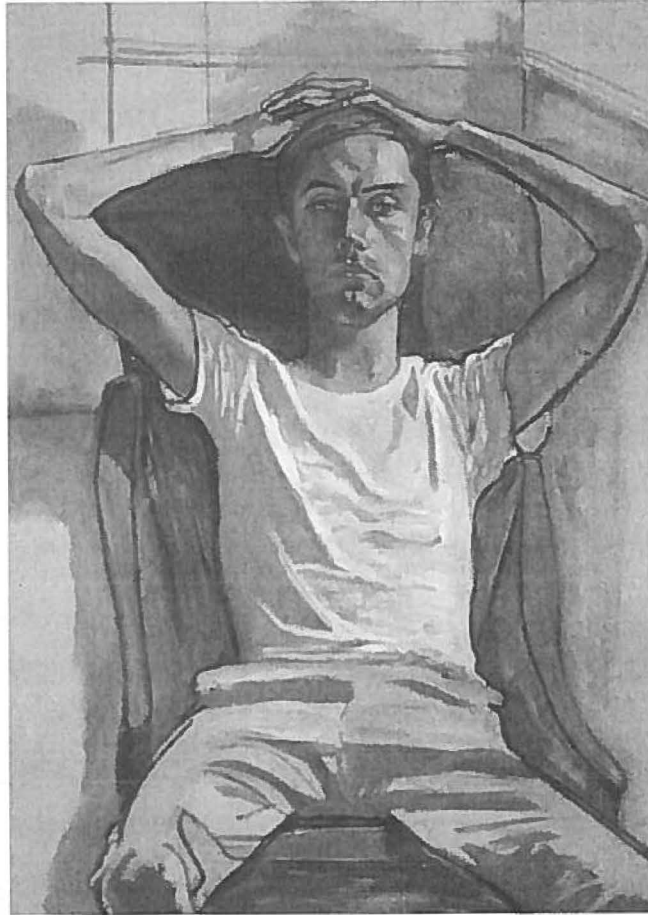
In his earlier works such as *Excavation* there is a black and white canvas painted with enamel and house paints. This paint was probably used because he was dirt poor at the time he painted it and because he had a paint at all costs mentality. I also reflect this attitude in my work in the way I use any type of paint or material that I can get my hands on.

The images of this early work are fragmented and reassembled. They are influenced from the subconscious and from the way cubism can break up the picture

plane. His paintings are full of energy and layering. The work gives the viewer a sense of history when reading the mark making. The history is important because it reveals the artist's process and demonstrates his decision-making ability.

The characteristics of De Kooning's marks are influential on my own canvases. I use a similar approach and bold decision-making in my portrait painting because when you trust your instincts while painting you can convey more pure emotional qualities in the work. It's an all or nothing mentality to mark making that can be very rewarding to the artist.

One of the most interesting portrait artists that have influenced me is Alice Neel. Her work represents a sociological cross section of people from her immediate surroundings. Her portraits, as a group, are revealing of a whole generation of people living in New York during the 60's and 70's. She made portraits of everybody from the poor to the elite members of society. Some of her most impactful work was that of the people who were closest to her.



4) Alice Neel, "Hartley," 1966, Oil on canvas

In her portrait of her son, *Hartley*, Neel is able to capture a confident yet vulnerable feeling. The pose is a confident gesture but, the gaze of Hartley is focused somewhere off in the distance. The background is left unfinished, yet the figure is fully resolved. The unfinished quality is a common theme in much of Neel's work. It can help create a psychological aspect to the work. It has become a useful technique in my own portraiture as well to represent an uncertainty or apprehension of the unknown future.



5) Self Portrait , Frank Auerbach, Charcoal on torn Paper 1958,

Frank Auerbach is another important influence on my portraiture. He uses thick layers of paint to create tension and emotion within his subjects. Auerbach's process is that of construction, deconstruction and rebuilding. His interpretation of the portrait carries a thick tension and mark making approach to paint handling.

Unlike Neel, who painted a large variety of people, Auerbach's subjects are a group of the same people that he has been painting over and over for decades. They are the people he has best known and best loved throughout his life.

I can relate to this approach because I paint many of the same subjects, repeatedly, throughout the year. I use mainly the people that I know and love as my

subjects. Like Auerbach, I agree with his statement that, “you can never exhaust a subject. The subjects that I paint are relatable to me. In their struggles and victories in life and they are the spark that ignites the ideas for my paintings. “

III. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This body of work focuses on a specific group of people that are between the age of 18-34. Through research I have found that this is the age where a quarter life crisis could occur. As the work developed over the past two years, I began to realize that I am interested in representing my personal feelings about my life through people that I know are in a similar life situation. The paintings are a reflection of my friend cohort and our modern life, combined with a response to our life situation.

This collection reflects my experience as a quarter lifer.

The main concept that emerged through painting this series is the idea that many people I identify with are in between places. They seem to be caught in limbo, waiting for new opportunities to emerge. In the mean time the subjects are reinventing new ways to better their lives. I intend to reflect and express, through the process of painting portraits, some emotions felt while in this demographic.

I begin a painting by thumbing through stacks of photographs that I have compiled. I use social media and my own photography for my references. The photos are pictures of my friends or people from their friend groups. The reason I use them as models for my paintings is because they evoke a strong emotional reaction within myself. When I look at them and think of their situation in relation to my own, my subjects play an inspiring role in my painting process.

One example of how I can be inspired from my subjects is through sharing a common experience. Good or bad experiences both shape my work. I have lived in three states for an extended amount of time. I have painted subjects from all of these places and all of them share a commonality of living in limbo. My painting subjects Joey, Mahto, and Isa all share some similarities...

- A) They have all completed a four year college degree.
- B) They are all looking for opportunities to succeed.
- C) They share the same generation.
- D) They have all started their own non-profits, businesses or independent project.
- E) They have all defined their own future.



6) Mahto, 20X30, Oil on Canvas



7) Isa, 40X60, Oil and Charcoal on Canvas



8) Joey, 24X24, O/C

The photos then are translated into drawings. I draw and paint directly on the canvas. I will create a composition and begin to overlap shapes and play and experiment with the composition.

Through the use of charcoal and oil paint I can create expressive marks. These two materials are often regarded as two things that shouldn't go together because of the tendency of charcoal to contaminate colors. I have found that sometimes combining the two materials can create interesting effects that help convey a feeling or emotion that satisfies my artistic intent. I use a Kamar Varnish to preserve the marks after I have made them. This keeps in tact the raw quality that I prefer in my work. It also conveys a sense of history on how the painting was constructed.

The figures in my paintings are representative of different emotional states of being. Some are being erased and then reconstructed. Some are decomposing and reinventing themselves. I change the appearance of the figures in my work often depending on my mood. This constant changing and rebuilding reflects how we live in the modern cultural situation. It reflects my own mentality while painting.

My piece "The Waiting room" (fig 9) is one example of my approach to painting. There are two seated figures that appear to be the same person. One is being deconstructed while the other is becoming more defined. It is difficult to know where one person begins and where the other begins. They are in a state of deconstruction and reinvention.



9) "The Waiting Room" Michael Goe, Oil and Charcoal on Canvas, 46"x46"

V. Technical Processes

Each painting is on a hand stretched canvas built on brick molding. They are all wired in the back for hanging. They will be unframed because the artist has to take into consideration shipping to Alamosa Colorado from Detroit Michigan. It is also in the tradition of Abstract expressionism to leave the work with no beginning and no end. The work is a life project. The frame implies a resolution.

I have made large format group portraits and more personal single portrait paintings throughout this series. The work is a large format so that it introduces the concept of limbo. The large group paintings express the feeling that there is an entire group of people sharing a similar mood. In the individual portraits, I get a chance to get close with a subject chosen from the group and tell a more personal story. The paintings all have an expressive quality and physicality in the mark making because the larger format lends to a more active and gestural painter. The smaller portraits are gestural in a more specific way.

The viewer is confronted by a variety of formats. In the larger group portraits they have to interpret many individuals within a setting. There are many personalities to consider. Some feel optimistic and some feel very pessimistic in nature. The viewer has to consider their own feelings in relation to the group setting just as if they were at a party filled with strangers. The viewer has to consider their own identity in some way because they need to have a plan of interaction.

In the more intimate portraits from the work, the viewer considers the same confrontations, but in a more personal space. The subjects are so vulnerable in their honesty that the viewer is forced to decide to either listen and empathize or walk away.

VI. Description and Analysis of Creative work

My final series of work for the thesis exhibition is split into three parts; individual painted portraits, group painted portraits, and group drawing portraits. Each of these works express a feeling of limbo that I see and feel in myself and in my

subjects. The work reflects three main characteristics of the quarter life which are; the reinvention of identity, a feeling of immobility in society, and a reflection of the emotional state of subjects and myself.

For example, in my portraits of Justin and Ashley, the concept of limbo is portrayed in an expressionist and symbolic approach. Both the subjects are painted in a window space that is surrounded by raw canvas. The raw canvas space is filled with graffiti and doodles that are made from a combination of spray paint, charcoal and oil paint. These scribbles and thoughts represent the internal world of the subjects.

The painting gives some clues to the viewer that the subjects have goals and dreams that are materializing or deteriorating around them. For example, on Justin's portrait, there is a drawing of a house that could evoke a viewer to think about home, family or home ownership. On Ashley's piece, there is a diamond ring amongst all the scribbles and doodles. These images are intended to let the viewer create a narrative about the subject's world and empathize with their story. These symbols are personal symbol, but are also common goals for many other quarter lifers.

These goals that are depicted in the paintings represent the standard blueprint for development as upheld by the generations before mine. However, these goals are much more difficult to achieve for quarter-lifers now than they were before. That is why they are painted on a raw canvas.

The images painted on the raw canvas make them non-archival. Over time, the paint will break down the canvas matrix while the portraits of Justin and Ashley

will remain on archival gesso. The intent of this approach is to express the fact that these milestones of development are becoming increasingly difficult for the quarter life generation to achieve. They express an emotion of being trapped by a model they didn't create or choose.



10) Ashley, 56"X56", Oil and Charcoal on Canvas



11) Justin, 56"X56", Oil, charcoal and Spray paint on Canvas

The second category of paintings in my show are the group portraits and grey face portraits. The subjects in these paintings are shown together in different states of limbo. They are buried by graffiti, which is a recurring theme in the work. The group portraits are my way of representing a feeling of immobility in society. The subjects are trapped by the surrounding culture.

The graffiti is used in an expressive way with many different marks and gestures. In my painting called "Tony, Garrett and Jasmine" (fig 12), I use a mix of oil and spray paint and charcoal to create a web of letters and images woven throughout the portraits. The letters and writing are a way to depict how difficult it is to navigate through the quarter life. The writing is hard to read and sometimes it is nonsense words that don't exist. It is written with urgency.

Inspiration for the graffiti comes from my everyday world. It is written everywhere in Detroit and I have even found it on the trees in the mountains of Colorado. To me the writing represents voices that want to be heard which is a recurring theme in the politics of life in America. It is a representation of the culture of the quarter life.

Young adults face an incredible amount of choices that no previous generation has. They can do anything as long as they get an education. College students today are incredibly privileged to be able to have an education, but it comes at a cost of extraordinary debt for most. The national average college debt is \$25,000. In addition, the cost of housing has skyrocketed in recent years and unemployment is rising according to the National Labor Department.

Quarter lifers face an uphill battle where they have to constantly reinvent themselves to succeed in America. This can cause severe anxiety in individuals making them feel terribly stressed and anxious. In fact, quarter life aged young adults report feeling anxiety more than any other age demographic (Larson 155-157). In these group portraits I reflect anxiety through mark making.

The mark making in these paintings serves as a metaphor of being buried by and endless cycle of trying and getting nowhere. In my work "Tate and M" (fig 13) I depict another group portrait trapped in a web of graffiti. The focal point of the work is a solid grey portrait of a girl wearing a longing gaze. She represents a person coming to terms with their reality of the quarter life. In the background there are two portraits of a man that are fading away into the writing. The painting hints at wanting for things that are out of reach.



12) Tony, Garrett and Jasmine, 40"X50", Oil and Spray on Canvas



13) Tate and M, 56X56", Oil and Spray on Canvas

The third category of my thesis work are the drawings. My piece titled “North American Scum” is inspired by the feeling of isolation that many young adults live with today due to the many factors of a privileged society listed above. This work explores issues of feeling lost, confused and the search for identity. Each of the twenty-eight subjects has their own portrait drawn in charcoal on paper and are hung in a group stacked on top of one another.

By drawing each person individually I can relate to the subject while in the artistic process and create a personal experience for the viewer. The decision to hang them in a grid takes the idea of an expressionist portrait and elevates it into a larger group portrait of the quarter life in general. It better captures a feeling of limbo that I see in my subjects and makes the message of limbo become more clear to a viewer.

Through the use of Charcoal I am quickly able to draw a portrait with an intense emotional feeling. The Charcoal eliminates having to make color choices, color mixing, and painting prep that comes with creating a work on canvas. The grey scale of charcoal on paper expresses the feeling being stuck in a state of mind. The resulting works make me feel like I am closer to the pure feeling of limbo that I observe and feel in my work.



14) Ike (North American Scum), Charcoal on paper, 18X24"



15) John(North American Scum), Charcoal on paper, 18X24"



16) North American Scum detail, 18X24" each, Charcoal on Paper

VII. Conclusion

This series of work is the result of my personal life experience and observations of my cohort. It is reflective of my culture and our emotive state and it has reassured me as I reflect on my current situation as a quarter lifer in America. I have been affirmed in my opinion that the American dream needs to be re-defined and my generation will be the ones to do that.

My intent with this body of work is simply to explore and express my feeling of limbo through portraiture in order to find the source of my personal angst. In order to do that I had to face many of my insecurities and question my own privileged upbringing. Through the process of art making, I discovered that there are many aspects of my personality that normally remain hidden under the surface that I was forced to confront. It wasn't easy for me to make art this way,

but the resulting works are honest expressions of my internal and external world.

Through research I found that I am not alone in my emotive state. My eyes have been opened further to my place in the world and where I stand on a global and local scale. Although I do still feel a certain state of limbo and staleness, I know now that it is a temporary state where as before I was less optimistic.

This work is relevant and relatable to many viewers. I am certain of it. Others may dismiss it as whiney or naive. It doesn't matter to me how critics view it. What matters to me is that I will take the knowledge learned from the creation of this series and use it to inform my art making in the future.

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