8-2019

Monsters from Within: A Sympathetic Outlook on the Human Condition

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MONSTERS FROM WITHIN: A SYMPATHETIC
OUTLOOK ON THE HUMAN CONDITION

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

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August 2019
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My MFA Thesis exhibition, *Monsters from Within: A Narrative of the Human Condition*, will explore humanity’s everyday societal struggles and display its relationship to the battles that we face psychologically, biologically, and spiritually. Through character development and reoccurring story lines, my drawings will bridge a gap between the subconscious “monsters,” the battles we face internally, and the influence they have, not just in our waking life, but also in society as a whole.

Exploration into the cerebral world and its relationship to how we respond to everyday life has made strides yet remains largely elusive. The focus on connecting mental disorders and learning disabilities is continually being investigated. My work will be displayed on large rolls of primed, crude, and slightly crinkled canvas, referencing the immediacy and importance of the artist’s sketchbook. Through my work, I hope to make society aware of not only its social demons within the world, but the importance of visual language in uncluttering and healing the battles that occur within our own minds.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Through my artwork, it is my goal to challenge society’s negative perception of people who suffer from certain psychological disorders, and who we sometimes refer to as “crazy” or “weirdos”. *Monsters from Within: A Sympathetic Outlook on the Human Condition* seeks to establish levels of formulated empathy towards these disabled individuals that might be described as unworthy or morally inept, especially those that we sometimes call “monsters.”

Through my personal experience with the condition known as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), I aim to explore how society portrays certain psychological traits among those who suffer from this and similar disorders and to challenge these characterizations. The struggles associated with many of ADHD’s characteristics, including a lack of ability to regulate one's emotions properly, can prove extremely discouraging, frustrating and potentially cyclically futile. Those who are afflicted with ADHD are essentially watching themselves exhibit emotions on the outside whilst unable to control what they are watching. My thesis exhibition, comprising large and small scale black and white drawings, seeks to express the internal struggles arising from living with this condition alongside the negative attitudes projected by society.

Diagnosis of ADHD is expanding rapidly. Dr. Susanna Visser, on behalf of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of Public Health and General Preventive Medicine, conducted a study in 2013 showing that 17.3 percent of children living in the state of Kentucky, for example, were diagnosed with ADHD (Visser). Additionally, Health Central reported in the same year that 11 percent of youth in the United States were diagnosed with this learning disability.
Twenty percent of male youths in the United States are diagnosed with ADHD. 41.5 percent of those diagnosed in grade school will continue on into adulthood suffering from ADHD. Many of these cases, especially in adults, go widely undetected (Visser).

ADHD is a perfect example of society being affected by a large body of individuals, many flying under the radar, who unknowingly struggle to maintain normalcy within the otherwise chaotic structure of their everyday life. The afflictions brought about by those diagnosed with ADHD are frustrating for both the diagnosed and for the outside observer, who mistakenly perceives afflicted individuals as perfectly capable and “normal”. It becomes easy to mistakenly question the work ethic and overall motivation of those affected by ADHD. Often, people with ADHD are characterized with negative attributes such as laziness and procrastination.

The struggles rooted in mental illness can, in many ways, produce a broader effect on society that goes beyond the individual. In the case of ADHD, learning about the afflictions which plague those diagnosed with this disability may reveal an overarching list of deficiencies and hardships that society faces as a whole (Green). We must allow for empathy and reason to triumph over the dogmatic, judgmental attitudes sometimes directed toward those who are different, rather than viewing them as inferior or morally inept. This must be the goal if we are to make strides towards ending the stigmatization and labeling of those who are divergent from us – those who sometimes become labeled as social monsters.

ADHD heavily relates to the body of work I make both stylistically and throughout my artistic process. Many of the traits that are associated with this learning ability show up in both the imagery I create as well as my choice of medium and execution. The exploration of many famous artists before me have considered the process of artmaking to be just as important as
the final product. The raising of awareness towards afflictions in ADHD and other mental afflictions is my goal, both by bringing both clarity to the specifics of the disorders as well as through helping society further understand the concepts of ADHD. Through my art I strive to provide a documentation and explanation with both narrative and visual connection, bringing viewers directly into the mind of someone suffering with the learning disability of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder.
CHAPTER II
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Historically, a number of groundbreaking artists have exhibited signs of mental illness, anxiety, and conflict between their personality and their aspirations to make art. Similar to the artwork in which I search to create, the main influences of my thesis exhibition derive from artists that are tormented by a heavy degree of internal conflict. This conflict shows up in not only their lifestyles, but also in their visual imagery.

Philip Guston: Truth in Crudeness

Philip Guston’s work contains what could be considered by some as crude, unskillful, raunchy, and juvenile approaches to painting that culminate in a large series of works that contain an obsession with the imagery of multiple objects from his everyday life. A variety of clocks, cigarettes, fingers, hands, portraits, shoes, easels, and eyeballs were present in his late work and show Guston’s compulsion to paint from his everyday life. Dore Ashton in her biography on Guston describes this phenomenon when she states:

The range of mood is wide—from comic, affectionate, and tender to downright surly. There he is developing his cast of characters for the grotesque mummary he now "sees" in terms of a long series of episodes. He is telling stories, but he is also refining a vocabulary of forms (the shoes, clocks, and window shades) that he has known intimately all his painting life. (Ashton 1)

Guston uses simple imagery as a means of conveying a direct message which contains a very despairing truth. Two examples of these truths are his use of comical little triangle characters and cartoon shoes. Upon further inspection, however these images are
representations of the evil injustices and corruption occurring within the Ku Klux Klan, as well as the piles of shoes that accumulated at the concentration camps during the abominable crimes committed during the Holocaust. Guston’s large scale portrayals of chaos and order, which provide commentary on the fleeting nature of our everyday existence, have had a significant impact on my work. Moreover, Guston also was haunted by the compulsion of immediacy which fueled his use of such grotesque mark-making and cartoon-esque stylization, a similar motivation behind my work. Art critic Sean O’Hagan touches on Guston’s art practice in his article “The Everyday Genius” where he writes, “They (Bob Dylan and Philip Guston) shared what might be considered a Jewish-American intellectual energy, an outsider’s point of view and a relentlessly, frequently angry, sense of creative impatience.” He goes on to state that Guston “understood that he had to make a new kind of art that was about flesh as meat and meat as flesh. I can't think of any other artist who is so cerebral and so cartoonish” (Hagan, 2019). The comedic aspect of Guston’s work has also influenced my decision to use comedy and whimsical aspects of my art making to soften the blow of many controversial and otherwise potentially overbearingly uncomfortable topics that continually show up throughout the imagery in my work.

This constant demand to face future possibilities as well as the courage to confront the happenings of what is going on within the world around us both personally and socially, is why I relate to Guston on a conceptual level. On a stylistic and formal level, the crude mixing of hue and the abandonment of traditional juxtapositions of color, loose application of paint, and his limited color palette, also highly influences my decision making. My constant limiting of color has slowly degraded to the use of only monochromatic greys and has now made its way down
to painting purely with black and white line. This return to a simpler form of painting, one viewed by some to be more akin to a drawing than that of a traditional painting, is also very similar to the style Guston had when he first began making small drawings and cartoons, long before he decided to take the leap to canvas and paint.

Jean Michel Basquiat: Expression and Intuition

The immediacy and crude nature of artist Jean Michel Basquiat’s paintings are something that is similarly inspiring. The extremely primitive and hieroglyphic process with which Basquiat approaches image making is inspiring for multiple reasons, the first being that the sense of urgency in which Basquiat paints lends itself to an array of uncensored and honest mark-making. His marks capture emotions contained within his mental struggles and emotional instability, as well as his thoughts on our social demons and future manifestations. My work is greatly influenced by what some may perceive as the drawings of a crazed lunatic, but instead are now viewed as enlightened and even prophetic. The way that Guston paints clocks and envisions his ultimate demise, Basquiat similarly paints with the words “man dies” repeated over and over in his later paintings. I view their prophecy as evidence that these artists were in tune with not only the world around them but also their foreseeable future. This form of intuitive and expressionistic choice of art making inspires my creative process. Immediate, uncensored, and recognizable imagery, particularly done in large scale, is the foundation of the work in Monsters from Within: A Sympathetic Outlook on the Human Condition. The experimental nature in which Basquiat goes about switching back and forth between painting and drawing has influenced the way I now approach each new work of art. As shown in both my smaller drawings and larger paintings, I utilize line and drawing with a more painterly way of
thinking. These drawings are done in a manner that emphasizes an expressionistic, experimental, and loose way of drawing, and appositionally, I have established a method to control the application of paint in a way, that when necessary, reflects a more controlled and linear approach to image making. This has made its way into a more graphic and bold body of work that at times resembles some of my more cartoon-based and grungy, low brow, politically and socially influenced artists, such as Robert Crumb, Van Dutch, and Ralph Steadman. Consequently, they have left a belief and realization that approaching art in a more “cartoony” manner is not necessarily a lower form of making modern art, and when appropriate should be considered just as serious and revered as any other artform.

George Condo: “Drawing-Paintings”

Another painter that blurs the line between painting and drawing is artist George Condo. In addition to Condo tackling many of the same issues such as schizophrenia, deeply rooted human caricatures of humanity’s psyche, and socially unacceptable forms of interaction, he also utilizes an immediate form of painting that borders the stigma attached to painting, which he calls “drawing-paintings”. In the documentary The Way I Think, Condo is quoted as saying, “With drawing you could shut the notebook, put it in your desk drawer, and nobody would see it. It was much more of a private sort of thing. Whereas painting required sitting out, letting it dry, and anyone could come by and see what you are doing. I like to work quickly. Some art has a very slow tempo and some art has a very upbeat tempo, but it’s not that easy to figure out...” (Condo, 2017). Condo’s philosophy of getting quickly made marks onto a surface, feeling the “tempo” of the drawing, and providing an immediate, cleaner, and more private
alleyway for creating artwork, is a technique that utilizes and attempts to channel making “drawing-paintings.”

*The Chaos of Bosch*

Hieronymus Bosch’s drawings and paintings, along with their highly charged imagery and controversial use of religious narratives, have also influenced the way I think formally when it comes to allowing a highly chaotic image of work, to flow in a way in which provides a visual journey and clarity for the viewer. Bosch’s interconnection between characters is inspiring in that he intertwines both the believable and unbelievable in such a way that also allows for the blurring of just how seriously we take the validity of the interaction of characters. In my paintings there are similar hints of whimsical interactions as well as potentially confusing moments combining everyday objects and juxtaposing them with fantastical imagery. Similarly, when closely inspected, much of my work contains a darker side that is elusive upon first glance due to the whimsical and ambiguous nature of the way I approach image making. The interaction of the characters is torn between a multitude of story lines and conflicts, all commenting on the darker side of human nature just as frequently as they do the more comedic element, disguising many disturbingly contemplated thoughts that go unconsidered in society’s everyday personal discussions.
ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

ADHD as a Diagnosed Phenomenon

For the unafflicted, knowing that ADHD has become a medically accepted learning disability with a distinct characterization of symptoms does not necessarily lead to a true understanding of the day-to-day experience of the diagnosed. ADHD seems to be the best example of a mental ailment where internal struggles experienced by all humans are amplified at sometimes debilitating levels for the afflicted. This opinion is also expressed by Gina Pera, an adult ADHD expert and author, who states, "At any rate, from my perspective, ADHD is essentially "Extreme Human Syndrome." In other words, ADHD symptoms are all typical human traits. It is their number and severity, combined with impairment in life, that creates the diagnosis. Pera states:

Neurodevelopment is a term referring to the brain's development of neurological pathways that influence performance or functioning (e.g., intellectual functioning, reading ability, social skills, memory, attention or focus skills). When you learn to do just about anything, you are improving neurodevelopment. When you learn to ride a bike, play a musical instrument, improve your game of basketball, etc., your neurodevelopment can improve. As you improve, the structure of your brain changes and you usually get to keep the gains that you have made, especially if you stay at it long enough. (13)
Fundamental to the condition is the inability for the brain to concentrate on situations that it deems as uninteresting, even if in most cases, it is otherwise very important, while viewing them as mundane and insignificant in the current moment.

ADHD is caused by consistently low dopamine levels in the prefrontal cortex of the brain (Diamond). There is also a constant struggle for the brain to self-regulate the amount of dopamine for those with ADHD, which translates to extremes in terms of the ability to maintain focus on a particular idea or task. Another side effect of ADHD is the inability for the brain to switch from one task to another (Diamond). This difficulty becomes significantly greater when the task that the individual is switching to becomes less stimulating than the first. This often leads to a perception of affected individuals as flaky, stupid, irresponsible, lazy, bad students, spacy, prone to procrastination, unmotivated, or morally corrupt.

ADHD is diagnosed in several different ways, with pediatricians being the physicians most likely to recognize the condition. The first diagnosis to describe the condition was in 1902 (Collingwood, 2017). ADHD mainly occurs in males, although it is sometimes dismissed as "boys being boys.” (Collingwood). It is much more than just a “bad boy” situation, however. Dr. Thomas E. Brown, an ADHD expert, states that:

Technically, from 1902-1980 it was all about little boys who couldn't sit still and wouldn't shut up, it was all about behavioral problems. We now know that it is not a problem in behavior, but one within the executive functions of the brain...It’s similar in a way to the problem you have with a cell phone where you’re in an area where you don't have good reception, you can get part of it and then message keeps fading in and out (1).
For a century this diagnosis was traditionally viewed as simply a problem getting your child to sit still and behave (Brown 4). Those who did not behave risked punishment in the form of physical or mental abuse, and these were perfectly normal repercussions for “bad kids”. This was the case for children who could not act appropriately in school settings or any other arenas that rejected socially intolerable acts of movement or interruption. Young males were the most commonly diagnosed group (Brown 6). Children who had problems sitting still in their desk, blurting out answers, talking to their classmates, or just having too much disruptive energy were dealt with through shaming, detention, or physical discomfort. These early diagnoses were once called ADD, and such cases were seen as a problem-child ultimately infused with a behavioral issue.

Dr. Brown goes on to explain that as a society, we are now learning that the behavioral part is less prominent and the ability to concentrate and focus is what is most damaging and the main concerned (Brown 2). Those affected with such distractions pass in and out of focus and are challenged when listening to lectures or instructions, or perhaps something even as minor as not being able to finish a paragraph in a book without losing complete touch with what was attempting to be read or comprehended. This characteristic is something that occurs almost all of the time, except in rare instances, manifested usually in the form of situations or subjects that are of extreme interest, in which case a rare hyper-focus is achieved (Brown 15). There is some evidence that this is a disorder that focuses on hierarchy with relation to perceived importance and rejects concepts subconsciously thought of as having little or no value (Brown 15).
Because the symptoms of ADHD are widely viewed as normal things that most people would say affect everyone, it is often looked at as a less special class of disability (Green 1). Those affected by the condition therefore receive little sympathy, and true awareness of the experience of ADHD is rare. A lack of attention-span can, for example, be viewed simply as an everyday problem, but the severity of the condition is much greater for those diagnosed with ADHD. As founder of *Totally ADD* Rick Green states:

So, yes, more people are multitasking, under the gun, have too much to think about and remember, and stressed, struggling, rushing around, falling behind... so sometimes they get glimpses of what it’s like to have ADHD. Sometimes they have to live this craziness for months on end. Until they are able to escape to a vacation, lay on the beach, sip Pina Coladas, and ‘cure’ their overwhelm. Those of us who actually have ADHD cannot ‘escape’. The 4 % of adults who are struggling with a lifetime of restlessness, uneven attention, and impulsivity, to the point that it’s sabotaging us, perhaps fatally, envy those who only experience it for a few months. (1)

There are also correlations with other debilitating conditions. Consider depression, for example. Most people in the world will have a bad day or become bummed out once in a while but those with depression have a chronic and crippling form of sadness and unhappiness almost all the time. This experience is the same with those who suffer from severe ADHD. It is excruciatingly more difficult for those with this disorder to concentrate on things that are of no interest or that are simply not compelling to them (Brown 2). However, there is no way for them to control whether or not that is the case, even if it is something of extreme importance to the functioning of their life. This is where they differ from the general population, most
people without ADHD are not able to force themselves to pay attention. ADHD requires extraordinary external pressure in order to find the concentration necessary to complete a necessary task.

This inability to concentrate hinders those affected from being able to complete everyday tasks necessary for functioning in the world, such as chores, paying bills, listening to lectures or instructions, filing taxes, and so on. On the other hand, things that are very important to those with ADHD induce a heightened ability to focus and concentrate on organization, time management, and priorities (Brown, 10). This sometimes leads to lack of sleep and subsequent tardiness or even sleeping through things that are very important or vital to one’s livelihood.

People with ADHD tend to be able to work very fast when stimulated; they can accomplish something when under pressure exceedingly accurately and efficiently in a very short amount of time. When given long tasks that take time to complete, they often are unable to force themselves to work on something for a lengthy period of time or even see it through to the end of completion (Hallowell and Ratey 6).

Given my experiences, I create my art with a very sprinter-like approach in the form of very large and intuitive drawings that are a "sprint" to the finish line. My work is necessarily fast and spontaneous, straight to the point, free flowing, expressionistic in mark-making, and rarely planned. This allows for the direct unhindered imagery to flow directly from the subconscious and to manifest itself as two-dimensional imagery in a very unadulterated and honest fashion. It also allows for the "sprinter" in me to feel fully free when making art as opposed to working in a suffocating and extended process of planning, sticking with the plan, and seeing it to
completion. Rome wasn't built in a day does not apply to those with ADHD. They would rather not build Rome, just draw a sketch of it.

*Other Issues Associated with ADHD*

Nearly everyone with ADHD suffers from some form or level of Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) (Matteson). This is an extreme emotional pain triggered by the perception, but not necessarily the reality, that a person has been rejected, teased, or criticized by important people in their life. RSD may also be triggered by a sense of failure or falling short of expectations.

The problem with RSD is that it can very easily diminish a person's self-esteem. This dysphoria often brings about internal sadness and depression in the individual, and external expressions of anger, frustration, and lashing out.

ADHD and RSD are similar in that they both induce an inability to focus on specific thoughts or ideas, and, more broadly, an inability to see the “grand scheme.” People afflicted by these conditions often become focused on a singular issue or concept as definitive of their entire self-worth (Matteson, 2019). RSD is usually only triggered through the perceived relationship with those who are important or loved in their lives. Consequently, those with ADHD have an extremely difficult time concentrating on anything else but the ideas and thoughts that they care about. Therefore, it makes sense that those with RSD would only focus on the approval of those important in their lives and easily neglect the possibility that they have self-worth in a variety of other ways and to a variety of other people. Focusing one's entire self-worth on just a few people's perceived approval is what leads to depression for many struggling with ADHD and RSD (Matteson).
People with ADHD and allied RSD struggle with everyday simple tasks to the extent that something as simple as running a cash register can encompass one’s entire feeling of self-worth, meaning, and even validity of existence. This pattern of losing touch with reality does not stop at RSD, as psychologist Donald Klein first diagnosed RSD as hysteroid dysphoria, and curiously enough found a significant correlation between this dysphoria and borderline personality disorder (Bondu). Such personality conflicts provide the underlying structure for many of the internal battles faced by those with RSD.

*Technology’s Contribution Toward ADHD*

The most powerful means of combating the negative effects of ADHD is ensuring that those affected by the condition maintain constant communication with other people. Multiple studies have shown that simple gestures such as hugs, waves, or even smiles can alter a person’s mood, behaviors, and psychological torments or depressions (Hallowell 175). Something as inconsequential as a handshake has been proved to strengthen dopamine and related to ancient theological acts such as laying hands on those in prayer.

With the recent spike in the popularity of electronic devices and social media’s popularity as a means of communication in culture, there are clear indications that mental health and ADHD can be helped or treated through the reduction of interaction with electronic devices (Hallowell 184). There is also evidence linking kinetic and physical contact with learning amongst those affected by ADHD. Dr. Christakis explains this relationship in more detail during his lecture on Media and Children when he states that:

When the content itself was studied, traditional educational programming was found to have no negative impact on attention, whereas fast-paced entertainment programs
(such as Powerpuff Girls) negatively affected children's attention spans. The most significant detriment to attention came from watching violent programming, which is often more rapidly paced than standard entertainment (1).

Many would find this observation to be self-evident considering electronic social interaction requires little or no physical or spatial contact or interaction. The correlation between ADHD and social media is becoming clear. The Kaiser Family Foundation performed a study in January 2010 that determined that children between the ages of eight and eighteen generally spend around eight hours each day engaged with entertainment media (Christakis 1). This was a nearly 20 percent increase over time spent with electronics five years earlier (Christakis 1).

Furthermore, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that 7 percent of children from the ages 3 to 17 have now been diagnosed with ADHD, which rounds out to about 4.5 million children (Visser). Diagnosis of ADHD has been on the rise for more than a decade, increasing by 3 percent a year from 1997 to 2006, giving a direct congruence between the amount of technology consumed and the rising degree of ADHD diagnosed kids increasing early (Visser). A possible means of treating ADHD is the removal of electronics to promote higher emotional stimuli with interactions in humans, as well as the removal of highly charged, fast paced motion and change in imagery.

The imagery in my artwork conveys these negative aspects of technology through the portrayal of violent and highly energized chaos, depicted in the form of interaction between robots, machinery, computers, and technology in constant warfare, violence, and struggle. These unnatural elements are balanced by organic and biological imagery.
characterized by morphed characters, anatomical shapes, and figurative imagery of cartoon creatures and monsters. This back and forth battle reflects the cluttered, struggling, back and forth mind of the person affected by ADHD. The many emotions that are exerted in each character’s facial expressions, ranging from fear, frustration, aggression, anger, and empathy, are all common sensations and emotions that are very common ADHD experiences. The wide-open eyes of the characters represent the lack of sleep associated with ADHD. Those with ADHD find stimulating activities such as fast-paced movements and highly invigorating chemicals and recreational activities to be highly appealing.

Hands and feet are also a recurrent visual element in work, along with eyes and internal organs. They serve as representations of the connection between the nervous system and the brain, and of the grounding and calming nature of human contact the interpersonal human contact being shown through the relationships of hands and feet, and the interactions of the figure, are repeatedly seen in a narrative of trying - sometimes helplessly, sometimes harmlessly, sometimes with great malice - to interact and connect with the other monsters or figurative creatures. These images present a very vivid picture of the chaotic and tormenting nature that exists within the unorganized and rapidly moving mind of a person suffering heavily from ADHD. The viewer is provided with a cluttered field of vivid and vibrant narratives, full of life and movement, that upon first glance is visually overwhelming, cluttered, and somewhat suffocating, but upon closer examination unleashes a world of interest that captivates and intrigues, showing the heavily detailed and hyper focused mind that can also exist in the mind of those who battle ADHD. The viewer, like the afflicted, is caught in a constant conflict of where to place their attention. Dr. Hallowell states:
Many people in the United States today, including those who have ADHD and those who do not, suffer from what I call disconnectedness. They do not have the close, sustaining relationships that they need. While we are elaborately connected electronically in modern life, we are poorly connected interpersonally. Studies have shown that such disconnectedness leads not only to anxiety, depression, and underachievement but also to substance abuse and disruptive behavior. (11)

Noticeably, many of ADHD’s negative attributes can be directly correlated with the improper balance and lack of positive communication with those who are in their social group as well as the toxic indoctrination of electronics and cell phones used as a substitute for human conversation (Ratey 15). ADHD mirrors humanity’s inability to cope with an in-between stage of neuro evolution - one in which we are now caught between an intermediate phase of both harboring emotional characteristics and learning to develop a faster, more methodical and efficient way of thinking. I believe that this fast-paced lifestyle of electronic imagery where we are drawn in by the speed, competency, and efficiency of electronics, is partially responsible for the depression and anxiety felt in contemporary society. This strips humanity of the positive and necessary emotional fuel needed, such as love and encouragement, and replaces it instead with an unattainable ideal of perfection that cannot be achieved. This essentially is a classic case of being unhappy and discouraged due to the comparative nature of our species with regards to the search for intrinsic joy and self-worth.

Positive human contact and emotion is imperative in helping people diagnosed with ADHD succeed, and further compounds the shared opinion among psychologists that this particular learning disability stems from an overarching problem that is inherent within the
human condition as a whole. This is why positive human contact tends to not only benefit society as a whole but works especially well in helping those with ADHD function with more consistency on a daily basis (Brown, 2016). Dr. Thomas Brown touches on this idea of sensitivity in one’s emotional stimuli when he states:

Sometimes the working memory impairments of ADHD allow a momentary emotion to become too strong; the person is flooded with one emotion and unable to attend to other emotions, facts, and memories relevant to that immediate situation. At other times, the working memory impairments of ADHD leave the person with insufficient sensitivity to the importance of a particular emotion because he or she hasn't kept other relevant information sufficiently in mind or factored it into his or her assessment of the situation. There are two primary ways in which emotions play a critical role in the chronic difficulties of people with ADHD. Both are related to working memory impairments—the person's limited capacity to keep in mind and use multiple bits of emotion-laden information at the same time (5).

A third way to treat ADHD is the replacing of these outside stimuli with a feeling of intrinsic worth. Special effects infested movies, television, and cell phones all create unrealistic expectations and the perception of supernatural abilities. Once the device is taken from the individual, these perceived abilities instantly disappear, leaving one with only their mind to tread through life, which now in comparison, is terribly disappointing. This not only has taken the self-worth from the individual, but also had depleted his or her emotional tank, starving the individual of basic human necessities such as empathy and love, and replacing them with a dependency on the stimulation of electronics.
Along with these main two prognostics for treating those with ADHD, a healthy diet, exercise, and proper sleep, have all proven to be viable ways of helping to treat the problem (Hallowell and Ratey, 15). Again, this further seems to indicate an existing relationship between the narrow diagnosis of ADHD and the struggles faced, to a lesser degree, by most of humanity.

**Historical and Philosophical Background on Mental Illness**

After exploring the attempts to understand and remediate the suffering of those with the learning disability of ADHD, it is also an important to explore how both ADHD and the area of mental illness share similarities: they are both mentally debilitating obstacles that require understanding the distinction between morality and neurological sickness. This is vital in our ability to find empathy with those discussed as “moral monsters.” Such a step towards understanding the human condition can inevitably be drawn between our understanding of all such mental handicaps, as well as the relationship they hold with previously held ideology on the ethics and philosophy of things such as morality, free will, and the nature of a theological “good and evil” rooted in our souls. This dichotomy of saintly people and monstrous individuals as opposed to only unlucky, and mentally biologically victimized individuals, is a vital distinction if progress is to be made in the pursuit of ridding our harsh and unempathetic social stigmas towards different behaviors. Dr. John Ratey characterizes the problem as follows:

For most of human history, problems with learning, emotion, or behavior have been viewed through the lens of morality, often colored by theology. If you were suffering what we would now call depression in say, the year 1400, your diagnosis might have been that you were a weak and slothful person, or even that you were possessed by the
devil or some other demon. Your “treatment” could have been anything from exhortations to work harder at cheering up to an exorcism, or even being burned at the stake. If you heard voices and couldn’t control your behavior—if you had what we might now call schizophrenia—you’d have been diagnosed as a raving lunatic who was cursed by Satan, and put into shackles, there to live out the remainder of your days, if you were lucky. (xv)

The search for what we can control and what we cannot can understandably become difficult to define. The concept of free will and morality based on the correlation between nature versus nurture, specifically with regards to what we are ultimately responsible for and what we are incapable of controlling, as well as the origin of these choices, whether biological or spiritual, is rooted not just in theological examples such as “The tree of knowledge of good and evil”, a biblical Judeo Christian account on the beginning of mankind’s first capability to choose between right and wrong, This notion of nature versus nurture and free will is also found within newly developed, present day scientific discoveries. In today’s modern age, this can now also be understood within newly ascertained biological and psychological understandings of how the brain works. How we evaluate an individual’s character or moral responsibility becomes an important distinction. In the same way that we would not question the ethics or value of someone who has become physically inept as a byproduct of weeks of chemotherapy for leukemia or lymphoma, we must also be careful that we do not scrutinize unfairly those suffering from a debilitatingly powerful mental illness.

This leads us to consider an ancient controversy concerning the soul. The concept of a soul is something that neither mind nor matter has the ability to adequately measure.
Throughout time, many philosophers, theologians, and psychologists have tried to describe just how deep one must go in the human condition to reach what we perceive to be the most internal moral compass of an individual or a society. We see the search for higher morality embedded throughout the history of humanity. Finding patterns in the failures and successes of past civilizations and cultures can be beneficial to future harmony and can contribute to the elimination of previously harmful ideas and concepts rooted within the human psyche that have led to the mental and physical abuse of those whom we perceive to be as different than us.

Dr. John J. Ratey touches on this concept of mental illness in his book *Delivered from Distraction* saying, “If you have a friend who is in the hospital recovering from gallbladder surgery, you might send her a get-well card, but you never send a friend who recently attempted suicide for treatment of depression a get-well card. When we use the adjective sick with regard to a mental condition, we do not use it with sympathy. ‘He’s sick’ is said with contempt, as in, ‘He’s a real sicko’” (XVI).

On the other end of this spectrum, there is an expectation of accountability for one’s actions, and a claim that we have a moral obligation when it comes to our ability to exercise self-control. However, the concept of self-control, as society is increasingly learning, can be broken down into mental stability or lack thereof. Someone who has committed an act of murder, a by-product of becoming lost in a moment of heat and passion, will be charged with much more empathy and leniency than that of a premeditated murder committed by that a serial killing sociopath, to use an extreme example.
This argument also has immense ramifications when it comes to how we consider our justice system for future rulings. Elaine Sharpe, a defense attorney who had witnessed hundreds of murder cases, stated that, “You see, I truly believe that murderers are mentally ill,” she explains. "Their brains don't work like the rest of ours do. To deliberately kill someone requires crossing a profound boundary. Most of us couldn't do it. We couldn't even think about it. But they can. They do. Why? Because they're mentally ill. And fundamentally, as a society, I believe it is barbaric to kill people who are ill.” (Wallace 1) She goes on to discuss her belief regarding her view on choice when she states, “Most of us make the mistake, when we hear about a murderer, of projecting that they're like us and simply choosing to do this heinous crime. And so, imagining ourselves doing something so terrible, we feel they should be severely punished for that choice. "But," Sharp argues, "they're not like us. That's why they can do it” (Wallace 1).

This is the crux of this heavily debated argument that mental conditions are an actual disease as opposed to being merely a byproduct of free will. Whereas in the past the only evidence for someone pleading insanity had to be taken at the discretion of psychologists, past actions, medical records, and mostly anecdotal and evidence subjective to interpretation, now we have numerous examples of tangible and biological examples of instances where the choices someone has made were heavily affected by more than just chemical makeup, but by physical forms of terminal and life threatening disease such was found in the Arizona Family Murder case in June of 2012. In this example, the murderer, who committed suicide shortly after, was found to have had a large tumor pushing on his front temporal lobe, the part of the brain that regulates decision making. ABC News ran an article on the event that was reported as
saying, “Friends of an Arizona family that perished in a fiery murder-suicide said the father’s brain tumor may have led him to kill his family, something completely out of character for a man who was remembered as ‘one of the nicest guys’...by his friends who also were quoted saying that, ‘The whole thing is illness. I know it’s not God’ (Newcomb). Professor of Law from the University of Pennsylvania Anita Allen-Castellitto, states:

..because such a high percentage of the adult, white, literate population (26%) (not including those who are already hospitalized, minority groups or the homeless) can be classified as mentally ill (illness here including mood-, conduct- and personality disorders), the failure to take the particular moral agency of this significant group of people into account is problematic and needs to be addressed. It cannot be assumed...that the mentally ill are capable of the same kind of moral agency as are the non-mentally ill. This distinction... needs to be taken into consideration when assessing moral blameworthiness and, in cases of infringements of the law on the part of people who could be classified as mentally incapacitated, when assessing appropriate punishment...Instead of thinking that the mentally ill have the same responsibilities as have the non-mentally ill, scholars thinking about moral responsibility should rather assume that they have only partial responsibility? (1)

According to the World Health Organization, it has been shown that one out of every four people worldwide are affected by some sort of neurological disorder, further underscoring the need to address this major problem (Castellitto 1). ADHD is not an isolated condition, and there are many potential associated physical vulnerabilities and health risks such as asthma, sleep deprivation, irregular circadian rhythm, difficulties with glucose metabolism, among other
conditions. (Castellito 1). Hopefully we will learn more about epigenetics and can prevent some of the more troubling aspects of some individuals' experience of ADHD.

On the whole our culture has not yet formed a proper perspective when investigating the moral responsibilities and social obligations of those impaired with mental illness. The general mindset held when dealing with mental illness regarding morality is that many of the choices made are functions of character and not a byproduct of genetic makeup or neurological disorders. It is imperative that we not ignore this problem within our social system and that we find urgency in addressing issues of mental illness, learning disabilities and other chemical imbalances in the brain with awareness, understanding, and empathy for the afflicted. Dr. Hallowell touches on this urgency when he states that, “The more we can work to help understand these various conditions, especially ADHD, the closer we will get to tapping into these people’s extraordinary strengths, rather than relegating them to the slag heap so many of them find themselves cast upon” (Hallowell).

The choices that we make, and the internal dialogue that determines these choices, is driven by mechanisms that have been underwhelmingly investigated by psychologists. These mechanisms, however, deserve further consideration in order to enhance our understanding and awareness of specifically categorized learning disabilities, mental illnesses, and other neurological disorders.

The questioning of morality and its effect on the human psyche has proven to be just as detrimental to our wellbeing as the maintenance of biological health. King's College in London recently conducted a study where a significant correlation was found between mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and depression, as well as bipolar disorder, and their relation to
cardiovascular disease. Data was taken from 3.2 million people living with severe mental illness and it was discovered that in fact they were at a 53% higher risk of having cardiovascular disease than those who did not have mental illness (Kcl.ac.uk.). Their risk of it potentially being fatal was an astounding 85% higher than those of the same age range in the same area (Kcl.ac.uk.).

This lack of control or chaos invites a conversation about the nature of free will. Dr. Allen-Castellitto explores this concept in her lectures. The predicament with free will, according to Allen-Castellitto, is rooted in the basic idea of disabled choice when she states that mentally ill individuals, “...belong to the same moral discourse as non-mentally ill...the mentally ill experience feelings of guilt, regret and shame. The problem is that they often cannot “healthily” discriminate between different choices” (Castellitto).

The inability to “choose” what one truly wants, or even what is in the best interest of a particular individual, is a concept that moves farther away from what we would consider to be free will. Chemical and biological mutations, substances, viruses, disease, etc. all play a part in what we as an individual can and cannot control, further complicating notions of where “free will” exists. (Harris 5)

Neurologist Sam Harris touches on the concept of free will when he states:

The sense that we have of being the conscious authors of our thoughts and actions we know is false. Now, it's not false in the Freudian sense of the id and the superego and the ego at war and it’s all being driven behind by this intelligence that's consciously editing what we can consciously know, but most of what's going on in the brain is unconscious, and that explains a lot of the change that you get with psychedelics,
because if you change the biochemistry enough you are playing with the margin of what's conscious and what's potentially conscious and we are potentially conscious of a lot of things we don't tend to be conscious of and that completely transforms our experience. (Harris 5)

This sort of thinking can be seen as an idea that predates modern science. In a way it very similar to the cry from Jesus Christ in the book of John, when he is claimed to have shouted in pain saying, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do!"

This symptom of inwardly feeling one way but having the inability to outwardly change one's appearance or actions is what relates to one's ability to control one's own morality. The notion that there are “bad people” begs this question: What exactly is the relationship between what they "wish" they could control and what they can actually control? This is not only a relationship on the debate of free will, but is also a very important discussion on bridging that imaginary line between controlled morality and being a victim of mental illness.

A similar structural debate exists within our justice system. The current way the law seems to handle this situation is by allowing someone to “plead insanity.” This is a very crude attempt, however, to resolve what is ultimately not a simple issue. Ultimately, we need to find different ways of understanding the mental or physical diversions, mutations, or other psychological issues that are different from the norm and that hinders one’s ability to express or function with "normal" people. It is fair to note that many of the historical innovators in society have been, in their own time, perceived as odd, crazy, or as social outcasts.
Art as a Way of Coping with ADHD

Throughout history many artists face misunderstanding in their own time. Many are plagued with mental illness and misunderstood approaches to social interactions, and some may have even been plagued with unknown diagnosis at the time such as ADHD. For many, Vincent van Gogh has become the prime example of our inability to embrace different, yet valuable, ways of seeing the world. Van Gogh coped with many of his internal demons through prolific creation of art. The idea of art as a coping mechanism can be beneficial for those struggling with ADHD as well as other symptoms embodied the human condition. The helpful nature shown in mental hospitals shows that drawing can be used as a way of coping with many different forms of mental health issues and can even increase functions such as creativity as well as happiness. (Carrie).

M.D. Barron Carrie touches on this in her research how visual uncluttering can specifically help those with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. (Carrie). Drawing being essentially a physical manifestation of transferring the ideas that cloud a chaotic and cluttered mind has science just now putting this age-old idea into physical evidence. This has helped to unpack the clutter inside peoples minds with exercises such as making lists to help organize ones own day. The idea of fast paced artmaking helps to get the essence of one's ideas out and placed into an organized fashion. This idea has been proven to help clear and increase the health of mental stability. (Carrie).
CHAPTER IV

EXHIBITION ANALYSIS

The main goal of *Monsters from Within: A Sympathetic Outlook on the Human Condition* is to take the viewer inside the mind of someone who struggles with mental conflict, specifically ADHD. *Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria*, a large, crudely cut canvas covering the entire back wall of the museum enables the teleportation of the viewer from their own thoughts and into the mind of someone struggling with RSD and ADHD. Because of the compulsive nature of my creative process, both by design and by personal necessity, it is important that the medium reflect this form of art making. This is done in order to provide the most authentic presentation rooted within the disorder, and also to allow the immediate flow of subconscious imagery to be delivered without filter or restriction from too much overthinking or conscious decisions, problems that also occur frequently to those suffering from ADHD and RSD. The nonchalant feel of the way the canvas is exhibited resembles that of a ripped piece of paper torn directly from a sketchbook. This strategy helps to show the personability that comes with the image on the canvas. The scale of this large painting embodies the struggles of Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD), projected through conflicting facial expressions of anxiety and joy, awkward linear tensions, and narratives in which characters clearly exhibit fearful moments of future uncertainty. These images were further complimented by both walls next to the main piece remaining completely empty, giving the viewer a visually quite space on both sides, enabling them to fully and completely involve themselves in the image being viewed.

Five smaller works are displayed along the back portion of the gallery and these works are professionally framed. This choice in framing contrasts the two different possible
approaches to viewing the work. These drawings differ in their approach to line and mark making in order to fit the criteria of each form of mental disorder they are visually portraying. The first of the five paintings, *Hyperactive Anxiety*, utilizes a heavily compressed and highly chaotic experience that is achieved through movement of line as well as the tight cramming together of images, leaving little room for negative space in an image full of movement and activity. This over emphasis of what it’s like inside the minds of those struggling with a hyperactive imagination and ADHD, presents the viewer with the potential anxiety and overwhelming sensation that typically comes with such experience. In opposition to this, *Hyper Focus of Gender*, is equal in size and is placed directly next to *Hyperactive Anxiety* by design. This work is about only one specific and controlled image and exhibits mainly negative space. The negative space allows for the viewer to see what it’s like inside the mind of someone with ADHD when they are finally able to drown out all the excess noise that comes from being in a state of mind such as the one shown in *Hyperactive Anxiety*, and allows a momentary sense of exhale and focus achieved when those with ADHD find a rare moment of concentration and are able to hyper focus in on a subject of interest.

The next work is located to the right side of the entrance and is titled *Tensions*. This title reflects the specific narrative of the tension between two figures. The first exists between a smaller entity and is unaware of how to interact with another larger, more amorphous one. This pairing shows the confusion that many people with ADHD face with their family, friends, and peers, strictly due to the lack of communication and inability to fully express or explain their situation. Tension with those close to them frequently arises in many of their personal
lives and this battle between seeking understanding and exhibiting caution is shown through the interaction of these two characters.

The image on the opposite side of Tensions is titled Pareidolia. Pareidolia is described as a type of apophenia and is the description given to someone who is always associating inanimate objects and everyday images with faces. This image utilizes a more experimental form of drawing that is not as clean and precise as the first three works, the function of this being to blur the lines between clarity and imagination. This technique allows for ambiguity to take place after momentary glimpses of clarity. Pareidolia for this same reason is a landscape containing free flowing nature, hills, organic imagery, and the changing of concise to messy mark making. This approach takes the viewer in and out of familiar imagery, creating the battle between the recognition of natural images and into the realm of ambiguous faces and creatures of similar form.

The last image is displayed on the final wall and is titled Imaginacion Hiperactiva. Imaginacion Hiperactiva is purposefully placed by itself, titled in Spanish, and is the only fully figured drawing closest to resembling that of the entire human form. This self-portrait is scattered with Hispanic references to the Mexican holiday Dia de los Muertos, Mexican being my maternal background, shows a personal side to the image while also celebrating the potential joy and excitement that can come from having an overly active imagination. This is achieved through the intertwining of imagery and shapes that are shown erupting from the figure’s mind and into his line of vision, bringing him escape from his thoughts in a playful and positive manner. This is to show that not all symptoms of ADHD are forms of suffering.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The ability to make sound cognitive decisions, especially those that shape our everyday life, in part determines our reality, but also on a larger scale, determines the structure of society. In making these decisions, the individual is confronted with difficult choices. As we come to a better understanding of learning disabilities such as ADHD and associated mental illnesses, it will increasingly become society’s responsibility to approach individuals affected by these conditions with compassion and understanding. Humans have always faced difficulties in assessing the correct moral stance on a wide variety of issues and must now face new trials.

The poet Walt Whitman paints a picture of a better way of life, one filled with acceptance attained from simply being human, free from the ailment of self-consciousness, concepts of perfection and morality. He describes himself as jealous of the ignorance of animals, which hold no judgement or concern for those with neurological deficiencies, or self-worth, content to be themselves, each one in the moment that they are, perfectly created, paying no attention to the dark voices, whom are heard whispering lies of worthlessness, all resonating deep in the subconscious mind, spoken softly from the monsters within.

I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained
I stand and look at them long and long;
They do not sweat and whine about their condition.
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins.
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth. (Whitman 54)
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