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Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, New York

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
Fine Arts Studio Department  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

***ARTFULLY CONCEALED***

By

Athesia V. Benjamin

2007



## Thesis Proposal

In this work, I attempted to create a series of self-portraits in which I am not recognized or identified. I am intrigued with the idea of using my form and likeness as the groundwork for the painting, yet gradually distancing myself as the subject until I am absent from the final work. In this, I have redefined my function as subject matter and painter, and redefined the meaning of self-portraiture for myself. In my absence, I have created characters behind which I can hide as I take on new identities. My purpose in these paintings is the same as 'x' in a math equation. Even in my attempt to be anonymous, these paintings have become amazingly autobiographical. In the paintings in which I am dressed as a surgeon (which I consider my most successful in terms of my being unidentified), I unintentionally take on issues about hospitals, sickness, and death, which have been recurring themes in my life this year. The earliest of this thesis series are clearly traditional self-portraits and were created before I came to my final thesis proposal. They serve as the foundation for the work that was to come.

## **Thesis Approval**

Chief Advisor: **Alan Singer**

Signature:

Date:

Associate Advisor: **Tina Lent, Ph.D**

Signature:

Date:

Associate Advisor: **Robert N. Heischman**

Signature:

Date:

Department Chairperson: **Donald Arday**

Signature:

Date:

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## ABSTRACT

BENJAMIN, ATHESIA V. (MFA., Painting)

Artfully Concealed, March, 2007

Abstract of the MFA document completed at Rochester Institute of Technology  
Thesis Exhibition supervised by Professor Alan Singer

No. of pages in text: 36

The following document is a summary of the development of my work during two years in the MFA painting program at Rochester Institute of Technology. The process intrinsic to thesis development eventually brought me to my final concept of obscuring my identity as a way to develop a body of figurative paintings. Along with the eleven pieces created during this two-year period, I have thoroughly studied this specific topic within the context of contemporary and historical art and identified artists with like concepts and images.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Afa, Cathy, Eric, Kenneth and Velvia. Thank you for each of your individual contributions towards helping me complete this degree. You all have created an amazing web of support for me, one that I never want to take for granted.

March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge my thesis committee; Tina Lent, Bob Heischman, and Alan Singer, for your encouragement, patience and guidance throughout the years that I have known each of you. I am grateful for mentors such as you.

March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007

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**Plate 1**

Alesia Benjamin

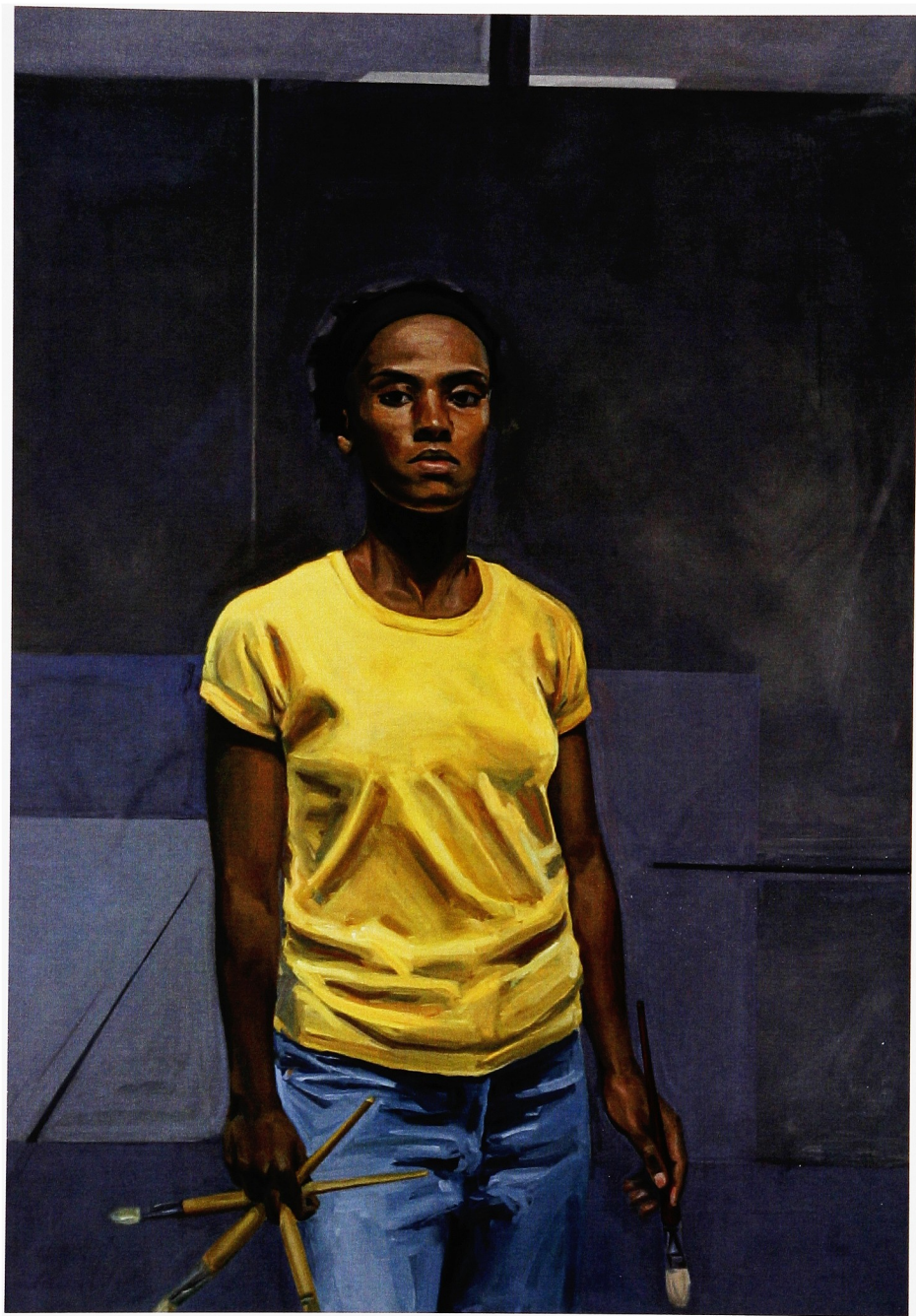
*Givers of Good Things*

2003

Oil on Canvas

60 x 60 inches





**Plate 2**

Athesia Benjamin

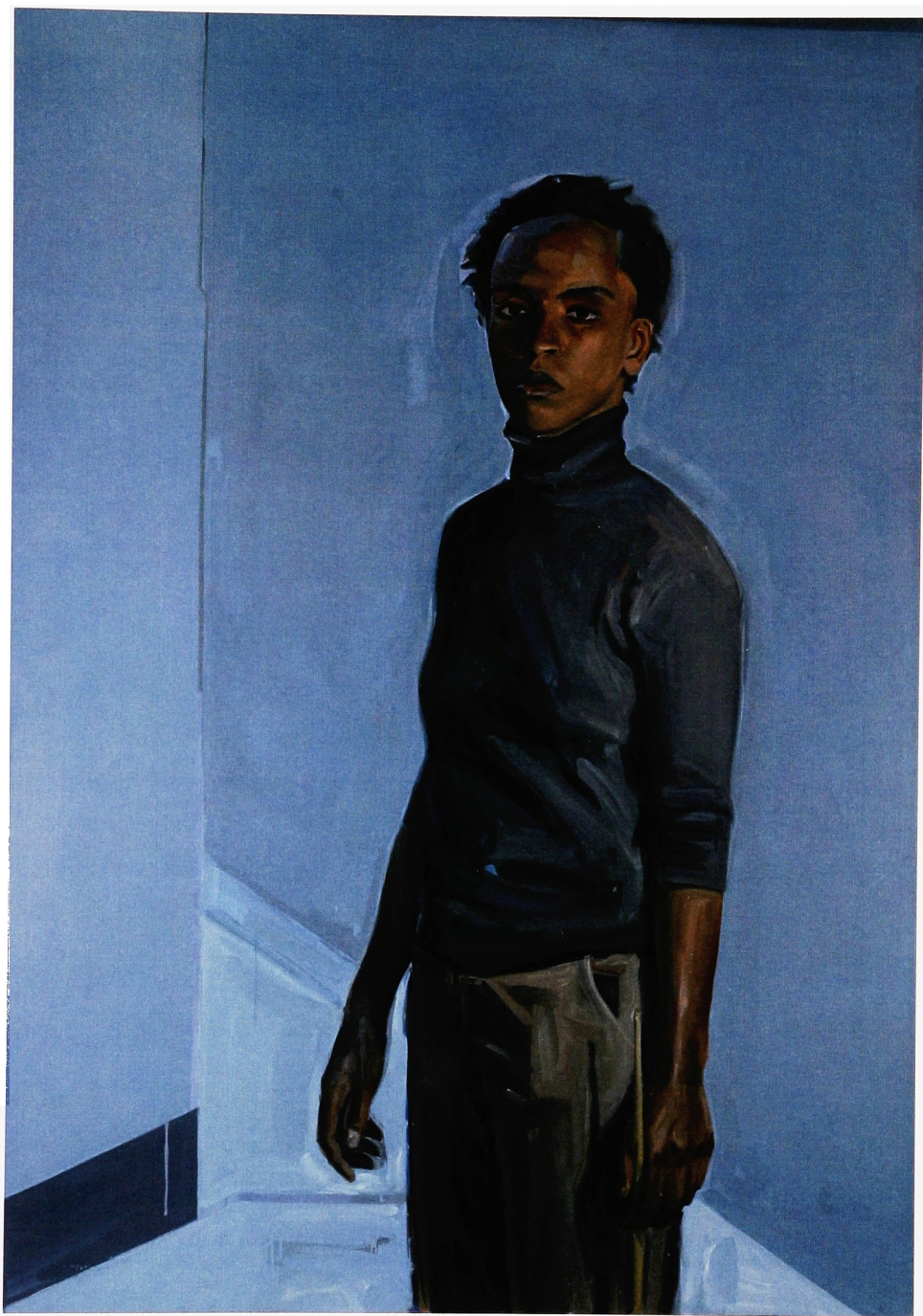
*Self-portrait in Yellow Shirt*

2003

Oil on Canvas

72 x 48





**Plate 3**

Athesia Benjamin

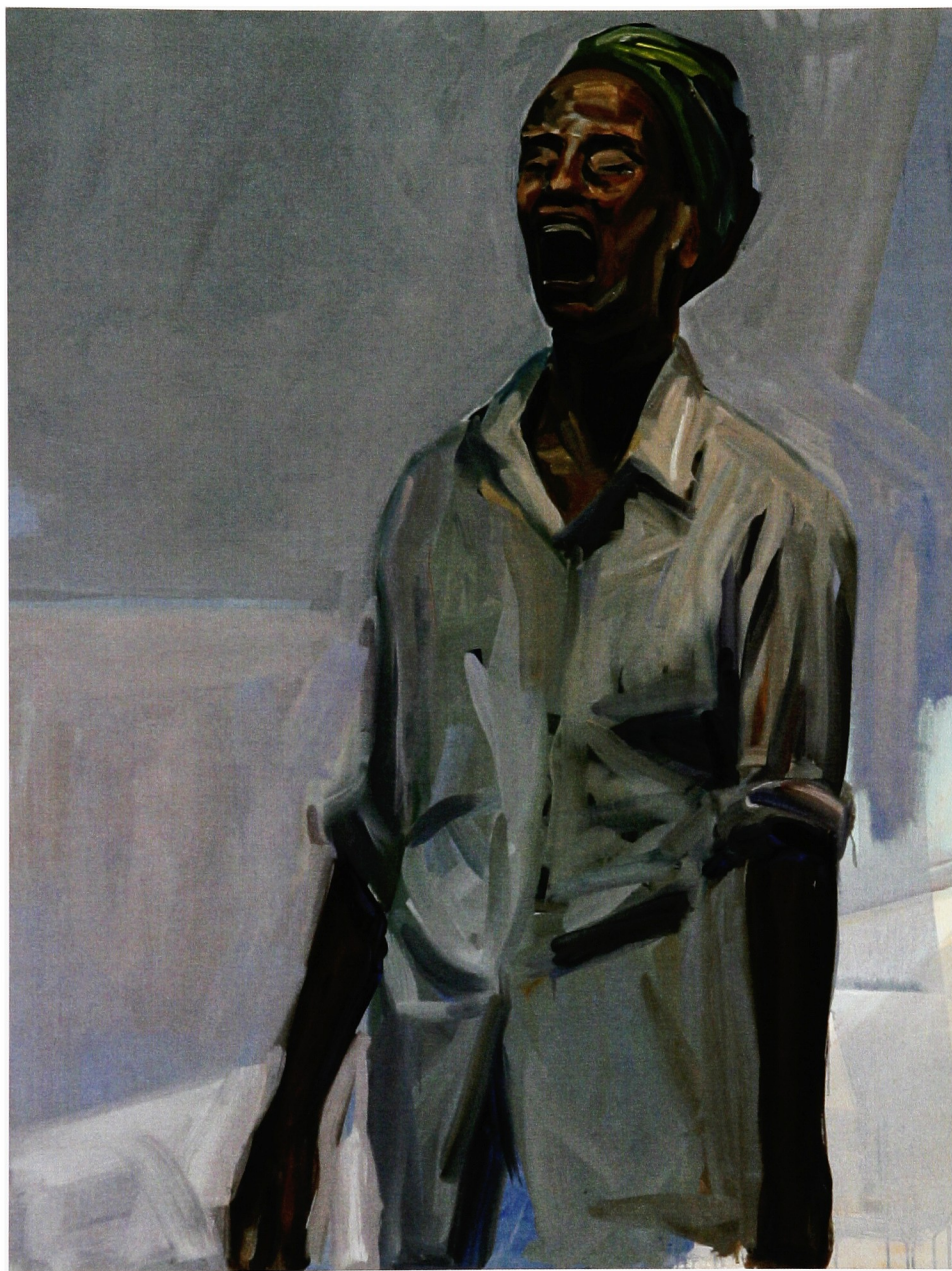
*Response in Blue*

2003

Oil on Canvas

72 x 48 inches





**Plate 4**

Athesia Benjamin

*Crying*

2003

Oil on Canvas

48 x 36 inches



**Plate 5**

Athesia Benjamin

*You Can't See Me*

2003

Oil on Canvas

48 x 36 inches





**Plate 6**

Athesia Benjamin

*Tradition*

2003

Oil on Wood Panel

50 x 50 inches



**Plate 7**

Athesia Benjamin

*Trabaja*

2004

Oil on Wood Panel

48 x 30 inches





**Plate 8**

Athesia Benjamin

*War*

2004

Oil on Wood Panel

57 x 30 inches



**Plate 9**

Athesia Benjamin

*Arrow*

2004

Oil on Wood Panel

6 x 6 inches





**Plate 10**

Athesia Benjamin

*Stat*

2004

Oil on Canvas

78 x 60 inches



**Plate 11**

Athesia Benjamin

*Aja's Self-portrait*

2004

Oil on Wood Panel

78 x 60 inches





**Plate 12**

Thesis Exhibition: Left side view  
Bevier Gallery



**Plate 13**

Thesis Exhibition: Center view  
Bevier Gallery





**Plate 14**

Thesis Exhibition: Right side view  
Bevier Gallery



**Plate 15**

Thesis Exhibition: Far-right side view  
Bevier Gallery

## **Introduction**

The self-portrait, an image of a visual artist by that artist, offers a density of meaning beyond aesthetic value. Its complexity rests within a mixture of the artist with the art, the public with the private, the subject with the object, the historical with the psychological, and the truth with the lie. -Susanna Coffey (Maxwell 26)

Embarking on the path of self-portraiture from the beginning of my graduate career allowed me the opportunity to work in that specific genre almost exclusively and to study the historical antecedents with the intentions of attempting to contribute to the tradition. The early paintings of the thesis series adhere to the tenets of traditional self-portraiture. Those visual attributes that could characterize self-portraits throughout history include a centrally-placed figure within the picture plane, more often an emotionless or serious expression, and a background that could be described as atmospheric and non-descript. The difference between my early works and the final few pieces of the thesis series, however, differ because I began to intentionally disguise my likeness until my identity was obscured in the final painting. In this, I recreated my function as subject matter and painter simultaneously, and redefined the meaning of self-portraiture for myself and the viewer. In place of my likeness, I created characters whose identities I could explore. My presence in these paintings could be analogous to "x" in a math equation, where "x" is the unknown, but could be many things.

With a body of work so personal, I was concerned that the viewer might misunderstand the work as being narcissistic and trivial, and that concern prompted me to question the notion of narcissism and ego, especially as it pertains to the artist. I began to accept its potential as an area of psychological investigation and as a natural, but sometimes shameful, human trait. I now concur with Ashton Harris in that, "One cannot



speak of narcissistic disturbance without its most crucial variable: Redemptive narcissism, or self-love as a form of resistance from the tyranny of mediocrity and as a site of solace.” (Maxwell 46) The resolution that I arrived at for my thesis deliberately reflects our human narcissism, while paradoxically being the antithesis of the same, in that I am not easily identified. My culminating work explores the artists' life-long relationship with her own gaze, but at the same time, subscribes to a certain psychological subject matter within figurative art, specifically within contemporary self portraiture: and that is the act of assuming a character role. In the paintings that reflect my thesis topic, I was able to exchange my identity for another and become somewhat anonymous.

### **The Work**

The feeling of having finally arrived at a concept that could be the catalyst for provocative work was incredible, especially when compared to the lack of direction and frustration I experienced my first year. During that first year, I experimented with non-figurative subjects, alternative painting formats, and new painting mediums, but at the end of Spring Quarter, I didn't feel any closer to a definite topic. I felt somewhat unproductive in terms of producing finished, show pieces, but that time proved to be valuable in the development of my work.

One thing I was sure of was my desire to work with the figure, and during winter quarter of that first year, I painted *Givers of Good Things* (Plate 1), a double portrait of my parents. My ambition to work large is evident in this piece, but what is also evident, and frustrating, is that I wasn't yet adept at working with such large forms. The figures are larger than life, but the torsos come to an abrupt and awkward end at the bottom of the

picture plane. As a result of that frustration, I went to New York City at the start of Spring Quarter for the sole purpose of viewing art and seeking out inspiration. As a result, *Givers of Good Things* was the last painting in which the placement of the figures was so unresolved.

A single painting in Forum Gallery (NYC) ultimately inspired the first two pieces of my thesis series. The painting was a larger-than-life, three-quarter length self-portrait by William Beckman (Figure 1). What struck me the most about Beckman's painting was how he cropped the life-size figures just below the knees, without sacrificing the impact and strength of the piece. On that Spring day, I left the Forum Gallery encouraged to attempt another large figure, large format painting.



**Figure 1**  
William Beckman  
*American Modern (Overcoats)*  
1999  
Oil on Panel  
[http://forumgallery.com/current\\_fff1.php?id=105](http://forumgallery.com/current_fff1.php?id=105)

I came back to the studio with a new motivation and confidence. I stretched a 72” x 48” canvas and began *Self-portrait in Yellow Shirt* (Plate 2). This six-week long endeavor was a direct and immediate visual response to my recent discovery in New York City. Upon completing that, I challenged myself to paint another self-portrait, *Response in Blue*, (Plate 3) with the same dimensions, to be completed within the restriction of one week. By the end of that Spring quarter, I had completed five self-portraits in all.

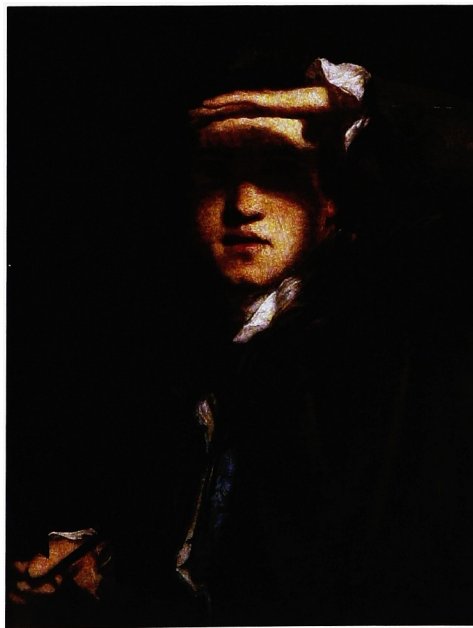
I consider *Self-portrait in Yellow Shirt* and *Response in Blue* to be the centerpieces of my thesis work, because they were catalysts for the resulting paintings, and they also visually anchored the other eight paintings in my thesis show exhibition (Plates 12-15). The first piece that I painted during the Fall of my final year was *Crying* (Plate 4). In this piece, I began working with a significantly different color palette compared to my previous paintings. The colors are unsaturated, due to the inclusion of black in my palette. On the advice of one my professors years before, I never used black in any painting, but during this time, I began to experiment with ivory black when mixing colors for the inanimate elements in these pieces, such as clothing, props or background space.

Looking back, I can clearly see how nearly every painting was somehow influenced by the painting that preceded it. That was definitely the case with *Crying* and the subsequent piece, *You Can't See Me* (Plate 5). For example, the large geometric expanses in *Crying* could be seen as maquettes for the more built-up, architectural space in *You Can't See Me*. Also, the two pieces were painted from the same pools of paint, so the palettes are almost identical. The marked difference in *You Can't See Me* is that the figure is now engaged in an action, as opposed to being static and frozen as my previous figures were. I went into this piece with the same intentions for the figure that I had



always had, which was to paint my likeness in a very direct and traditional manner. After some difficulty and frustration in painting the facial features, particularly the eyes, I attempted to solve my problem by simply covering my eyes with my hand. I meant this to be merely a last-ditch solution to what was becoming a disproportioned face, but found that this simple gesture added a sense of mystery and interest to the painting.

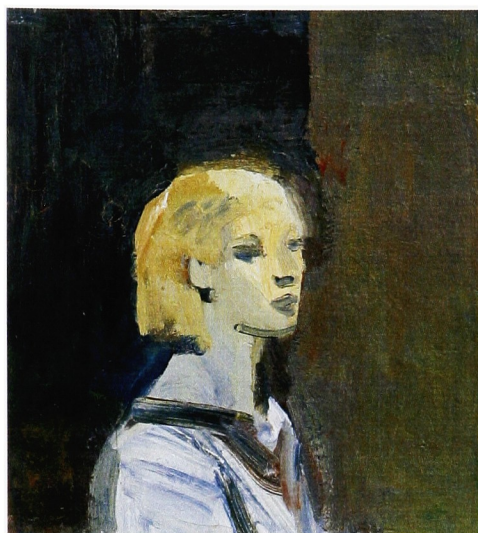
Before I began the sixth painting of this series, I did some research on artists' use of gestures in self-portraiture. I learned that a precedent had been set for gestures similar to mine, most notably by 18<sup>th</sup> century English artist Joshua Reynolds (Figure 2). In this painting, Reynolds holds his hand up to his eyes, but instead of completely covering them as I did in *You Can't See Me*, he is actually shielding them, in what seems to be an effort to better see the viewer. His action suggests that somewhere beyond the picture plane is some source of intense light or illumination, and that is confirmed by the strong cast shadow of his hand falling across his face.



**Figure 2**  
Joshua Reynolds  
*Self-portrait*  
Oil on Canvas  
London, National Portrait Gallery  
Calabrese 169

I was so intrigued by Reynolds' painting and gesture that I wanted to pay deference to self-portraitists who had also become aware of the power and symbolism in gestures. In direct response to my discovery, the sixth piece in this series, *Tradition* (Plate 6), depicts the figure shielding her eyes. As I mentioned earlier, Reynolds' gesture is a universal symbol that represents protecting one's eyes from the sun. In my painting, I attempted to account for this suggestion of intense light by having the two main elements, being the figure and the ground, on opposite ends of the value scale.

The next piece in this series is titled *Trabaja* (Plate 7), which means *work*, in Spanish. This painting is directly influenced by the work of Elmer Bischoff (Figure 3). Bischoff began his career as an abstract expressionist painter in California during the 1950's. He is as much known for his large, colorful abstracts as he is for his sudden mid-career shift to painting the figure and other objective subject matter. The painting that I created was a direct result of having researched and studied Bischoff's work. The positioning of the figure in space and the indication of the interior are not unlike one of Bischoff's later works. Also, I attempted to capture the sense of urgency that is evident in his brushwork, which could be seen as a vestige of his earlier abstractions. In an effort to create consistency between these paintings, I again make use of the harsh contrast between a saturated primary color (in this case, the bright red of the shirt), and the dark gray-blue of the ground.



**Figure 3**  
Elmer Bischoff  
*Girl with Blue Blouse*  
Oil on Canvas  
Private Collection  
Landauer 96

*War* (Plate 8) could be viewed as the first painting that conformed to my declared thesis topic of disguised self-portraits. In this piece, the figure is dressed in a surgeon's uniform, holding a shovel over one shoulder, with the other arm in a sling. This is the first of two pieces in which I displayed the figure dressed as a doctor or surgeon. The impetus for this painting was actually the shovel that the figure is holding. Due to the exceptionally icy winter that year, I was using this shovel to break up large chunks of ice in my driveway. One evening, I noticed this shovel, not as representing the manual labor that I associated with it, but as an object that had symbolic and aesthetic potential. I further challenged myself with this prop by the way I chose to display it –over my shoulder with a foreshortened view of the handle.

Another artist who depicted himself as a medical professional is German artist Max Beckmann. *Self-portrait as a Medical Orderly* (Figure 4) was created in response to Beckmann's experiences as a medic in the German army during WWI. In what seems to be an effort to purge his being of the death and trauma he witnessed, here he depicts himself, one last time, in the role of a Red Cross worker. The only noticeable color in

this painting is the Red Cross emblem on his collar –an ironically vivid symbol that, in this case, represent of the saddest, darkest aspects of war (Selz 21). Born February 12, 1884, in Leipzig, Saxony, the heart of Germany, Max Beckmann was a proponent of objective and figurative painting (Selz 5). I became acquainted with his work as a student at the School of Visual Arts where I had the chance to view his large, allegorical triptychs. It wasn't until some years later that I learned of the scores of self-portraits Beckmann created throughout his career –some very traditional, while others are purely fanciful and theatrical.



**Figure 4**  
Max Beckmann  
*Self-portrait as a Medical Orderly*  
Oil on canvas  
London, National Portrait Gallery  
<http://www.humboldt.edu/rwj1/301G/084.html>

The smallest painting of my thesis series is a 6 x 6" oil on wood portrait of my daughter, Afa (Plate 9). I originally intended for this piece to simply serve as a respite from my more serious thesis work, hence the small dimensions and monochromatic blue palette. Although this painting is clearly not a self-portrait, images of my daughter, as



well as my parents, are autobiographical and certainly have a place amidst such a personal body of paintings. My parents embody the values and ideas that have helped to shape me, and images of my daughter represent a variation of those non-physical characteristics.

The largest painting of this thesis work, titled *Stat* (Plate 10), is a convergence of all the separate elements that make up my concept of disguised self-portraits. The figure is completely disguised, the piece is large format, and I had to rely on the subject/image creating techniques, (a combination of observation, photographic referencing, and memory painting) that I developed throughout this thesis process. The idea for this painting came about after I learned that my daughter had seen some inappropriate images on television while at daycare. In anger, I impulsively threw our small-screen T.V. onto the asphalt behind our apartment. Before placing the broken television on the curb, I became curious about the contents behind the screen and proceeded to take it apart. Stimulated by the circuitry and colors I found inside, I brought the television into the studio the next day. It seemed natural that I use the same surgeon's costume that I wore for the previous painting, since I had, in a sense, 'dissected' the television. I also felt like I broke some new ground in terms of the expressiveness of the figure. Up until this point, my exploration of expression in these paintings was limited to the emotional face of the figure in *Crying*. For the most part, the figures in these paintings served as an expressionless iconic form, or subject, within which I could explore color relationships, the act of painting, and composition. In this piece, though, the figure steps out of that capacity and is now "alive," and in action. As mentioned before, I touched on facial expression in a previous painting. Now, I was exploring the implications of physical expression. In *Stat*, the figure is working on the machine, in what may appear to be an

effort to fix it, or save it. I like to think of this figure as not unlike Dr. Frankenstein, in the process of disabling the monster, which is a benefit to society.

The final painting of this body of work is “Afa’s Self-portrait,” and it as an image of my daughter painting her own self-portrait as I look on. This painting is roughly based on a photomontage created from reference photos that I took while Afa was painting in my studio. Looking beyond the obvious visual content of this piece, this painting aptly represents an important part of my creative process that developed since having my daughter, and that is constantly, (*and subconsciously*), maintaining an attitude of openness, with the understanding that inspiration for my paintings can come at anytime, at anyplace. Once I became a parent, it is understandable that my approach and process would have to undergo some necessary adaptation. I was no longer able to work on a piece for hours at a time, or pour over books that would inform my ideas. This necessary adaptation took its form in a greater reliance on the spontaneous and everyday *film-stills* of life. Early on, as an undergraduate art student and new mom, I subconsciously learned to look for ideas and inspiration in my everyday life with my daughter. Those things that would be categorized as mundane had now become creative fodder for my work. I realized early on that the documentary-style method that I always used in approaching my art had become stronger and more evident because of motherhood. This piece has come to represent that modification that occurred in my process, and that can clearly be seen in the content. In the painting (Plate 11), Afa is represented twice, in the studio space and in the reflection of the mirror. I am also in the mirrors’ reflection, and I am simply watching my child paint, as I had done so many times. This was not the first time I had observed her and then been suddenly inspired to create. Once I realized the potential of this scene I was watching, I began to take reference images. Although I

intended to build this piece up in full-color, my thesis committee encouraged me to consider leaving it in its under-painting stage. I had created a precedent for my use of monochromatic blue in another portrait of Afa, and I enjoyed the clarity of content when color was not a factor, so I agreed with leaving this piece in its “unfinished” state.

One common thread that runs through the major pieces in this series is my use of simple abstract elements in the spaces not occupied by the figure. I have always sought to have my work represent the observable and factual, but I have also always had admiration for artists with an opposite preference, such as color-field painters Mark Rothko and Richard Diebenkorn, and minimalist artists like Anne Truitt. With the level of visual studying that my work entails, I’ve found that I appreciate that rest for the eyes that is afforded when observing expanses of color without much interference by shape and form. I began to use the background and “empty” spaces of my paintings to work out my abstract inclinations, especially concerning geometry within minimalist painting, and areas of pure color.

### **First Thesis Topic Submitted**

Although I had hit a wave of productivity by painting my own likeness, I had trouble viewing self-portraiture as a valid thesis topic. I was afraid that the viewer would dismiss the work as self-centeredness on display. Succumbing to this self-doubt resulted in my momentary dismissal of exploring self-portraiture. As an alternative topic, I submitted a proposal that would visually explore the Italian painting term *tenebroso*, or extreme and dramatic light and dark. In this, I was further encouraged to research the film genre of *film noir*. Although I never began creating work within this topic, the time spent thinking

about this alternative idea only helped me to further recognize what elements were vital to whatever topic I finally settled on. Interestingly, the major components of the *film noir* thesis idea, i.e., light and dark, scene development and theater, were fundamental to my final topic of disguised self-portraits.

It is important to note that select paintings created during that first year were included in my show, although they were unrelated in many ways to the core body of work. I felt that the inclusion of these pieces was essential, as it made evident the sequencing of my sometimes struggled process.

### **Real-life Situations that Influenced work**

Many artists have had the experience of creating a piece, or a body of work, to later discover that the art has made a subliminal visual commentary about their real-life, personal events. I experienced that in the creation of some of the pieces in this body of work.

During the summer after my first graduate year, a close family friend became very sick, suffered through the summer months, and then died in August of that year. I was a first-hand witness to this woman's three-month decline. I drove her to Strong Memorial hospital the night she fell ill, wrote her obituary when she died, and mine was the only car in the procession to her burial. As can be imagined, I spent many hours that summer just observing, thinking, and discussing issues of sickness and health, and hospital procedures.



Up until that time, I had never experienced illness and death in such personal and up-close way, and to make it even more poignant, she was my mother's friend and contemporary.

It was long after I had finished the paintings *War* and *Stat* that I realized there had been a strong, psychological, but subconscious transference of the events over that summer into my work. I was made most aware of this when I later reflected on the medical doctor costumes and accessories I chose to wear. In *Stat*, the figure is performing an operation on the television, donning a surgical mask, latex gloves and hospital scrubs. Also, the facial expression is intense, and even distressed, making it appear to be one of the dramatic life-or-death situations that take place in hospitals, but that we otherwise only see on television. In the painting *War*, the figure is wearing the same hospital scrubs, holding a shovel in one hand, with the other arm in a sling. After some reflection, I was shocked by the undeniable connection between the events of that summer and the medical and hospital references that I included in my paintings.

The first painting I created when I came back to my studio that September, *Crying*, was my only conscious attempt to comment on this very emotional and also to make the experience relevant to the task at hand –creating a body of work. I wanted this painting to communicate my sadness about the experience, and by attempting that, I came to recognize an important aspect of self-portraiture, and that is that a face functions as a major communicator, strong -and sometimes even silent. Painting an image of myself in intense emotion moved me beyond the traditional dead-pan face that I had always painted, and that self-portraiture demanded.

## **Influential antecedents and contemporary references in self-portraiture**

Under the best of circumstances, revelations about oneself are a very tricky business. We all have aspects of ourselves that we feel should remain hidden and under cover, for fear of how others will react if the dreaded truths become disclosed. For the artists, it stands to reason that the process of creating self-portraits which disclose conscious or unconscious aspects of the self would take place in the safe and solitary confines of the studio. There, one might use a mirror to create a reflection of self-representations, parts or fragments of the self –self-esteem, narcissistic aspects, yearnings, needs, wants, traumas, physical or psychological idiosyncrasies, etc.– to make public and private disclosures in the self-portrait. (Maxwell 5)

It seems as though the preceding statement would likely apply to the most contemporary self-portraits in history. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the purpose of self-portraits was similar to that of early portraiture, in which the final painting served as documentation or proof of the artists' life and existence. In the case of master painter Rembrandt van Rijn, he created countless self-portraits, not only to chart the physical changes of his life, but also to mark significant (often tragic) life events.

First, more than any other artist before or since, Rembrandt turned his gaze on himself. He painted, etched, and sketched almost a hundred self-portraits in his sixty-three years. Taken as a whole, they amount to an intimate autobiography, intended or otherwise, that began in his youth and ended only in his death. (Housden 12)

The contemporary artist who I most relate to within the context of my thesis topic is photographer Cindy Sherman. I've been acquainted with Sherman's work for quite a few years, but it wasn't until the final few months of my graduate experience that I realized the connection between her work and mine. Born in New Jersey and raised on Long Island, Cindy Sherman is one of the best examples of an artist who has

reconfigured the notion of self-portraiture. Sherman, who initially studied painting (and painted self-portraits), eventually moved on to find her niche as a photographer, but not before failing her introductory photography course at the State University College at Buffalo, New York (Cruz Smith, and Jones 1). Her “Untitled Film Stills” series, for which she is probably best known, all feature her as the main character in what appears to be movie stills, but yet, she claims her work is not about her at all.



**Figure 5**  
Cindy Sherman  
*Untitled Film Still #7*  
1978  
Gelatin Silver print  
Morris 39

She takes pictures in which she appears as a model...She makes up stories without beginnings or endings, leaving the narrative to the imagination of the viewer. Sherman doles out just enough information to imply something by setting up the “action,” then hands the ball off to the viewer. (Morris 12)

What Cindy Sherman has done with her photography is what most artists aspire to: to create intriguing, interesting art with the resources most available, while allowing the viewer the role of active participant in the work. The final stage of exhibiting the

finished work is critical to Sherman's process, in that she wants to then "seduce us into contemplating our own emotions –not hers." (Morris 63) In the late 80's, Sherman produced another notable body of work inspired by famous paintings from art history, titled the History Portraits. In these, Sherman poses as the main figures in her interpretation of historical works. I consider these to be her most dramatic pieces in that she makes full use of make-up, prostheses, costumes and props to recreate these figurative artworks. Even as a young child, Sherman displayed a propensity for the theatrical. For fun, she would dress up as an old lady and walk around her neighborhood, completely fooling her neighbors. I can relate to the refreshing anonymity that that activity would afford.

After studying the life and work of Cindy Sherman and other artists with a similar aesthetic, I am left with the conclusion that most of us aspire to two extremes: to be known and recognized, but also, at times, to be unrecognized and anonymous.



**Figure 6**  
Cindy Sherman  
*Untitled Film Still #225*  
Cibachrome  
1978  
Morris 92



## **Technical Issues**

As I worked on these paintings, I found myself spending more time preparing and mixing the colors on my palette. I had always been aware of the direct relationship between the palette and the painting, but working on such a large scale simply brought those issues to the forefront. I spent a great deal of time mixing and altering the colors that I wanted to work with, often creating hue and value variations of a main color for use during a single painting session. I realized that I was spending just as much time preparing my palette as I was actually applying those colors to the canvas, and, as a result, my use of color in these paintings seemed more mature than in any previous work.

I had made the decision early on that I would attempt to paint larger than I ever had, so it goes without saying that my tools –brushes, palette, palette knives- would also have to be larger than I was used to working with. Some of the brushes that I used to create these pieces (especially for the large expanses of color in the backgrounds) were comparable to the size of house painting brushes. In order to utilize these larger tools, I was forced to become aware of the role that physical energy and exertion played when working on such a large scale. The term “Sunday Painter” probably wouldn’t denote a relaxing activity if the canvasses were larger than four feet. In working so large, my painting preparation would begin long before I arrived at the studio. I would attempt to preserve my energy earlier in the day to assure a lengthy painting session later on. My new realization of the relationship between canvas size and energy expended made me reconsider the Action painting style of the 50’s.

Also called Abstract Expressionism, this style “often emphasized the physical act of painting itself as an essential aspect of the finished work.” (Jones 17)

I was interested in this way of approaching the painting surface, which is why I was drawn to the aforementioned figurative work of Elmer Bischoff and the other Bay Area Abstract Expressionists of the 50's.

The three Bay Area artists "returned" to the figure paradoxically to save what was salvageable in abstraction. They strove to preserve not only the technical achievements of "action painting," with its sensuously loaded brush and sumptuous color, but its idealistic aims and convictions as well. (Jones 36)

After having read through the graduate handbook, I was very conscious (and a bit anxious) about the requirement to create "groundbreaking work." Although I was encouraged by the early direction and development of my self-portraiture, I felt that aspiring to create groundbreaking work was probably too lofty an ambition for any graduate student and probably outside of my reach, given the rich tradition of the genre. However, when I finally settled on my topic and began to work through my ideas, I realized that I might have inadvertently stumbled upon an area of focus that could be deemed groundbreaking within contemporary painting. That place that I ultimately arrived at, nearly halfway into my final year, was a direct result of some technical, practical, and subjective conditions, some of which I placed on myself and some which were a matter of coincidence. The major condition was that the work would be realistic, but loose in application, and figurative.

I knew from early on that I would not be working with a model. I wasn't sure how I could resolve this, seeing as how I wanted to work with the figure, but I didn't want the success of my thesis to be dependent on a model's whims and availability.

Also, I found it difficult to incorporate into the paintings the likeness of someone who wasn't significant to my work or my life somehow. Sculptor Alan Rath describes a similar sentiment concerning his own work:

When I first started putting faces in my sculptures, I used my own face for the same reason I had used my own hand or nose in other sculptures: the model was easily available and cooperative. It was unintentional that the sculptures would portray me and my own feelings. I had assumed that the depicted situations are commonplace and I was merely standing in for the "every man." (Maxwell 68)

Another condition inadvertently helped to shape and mold the foundation of the thesis work. I initially viewed the lack of natural light in the painting studios as a definite handicap, but in the end, that actually proved to have been a benefit to the work; both in my understanding of what informs my particular aesthetic as well as heavily contributing to the mood of the entire body of work. I first became aware of the role and importance of light in my work as an undergraduate, and as an MFA candidate I felt limited in what I could do with just the fluorescent lights available in my studio. The summer following my first graduate year, I gained permission to access the drawing and painting studios on the third floor just to have available the option of a natural light source. I also removed the fluorescent bulbs in my studio space and brought in flood lamps in order to have even more control over the light in the paintings. Out of frustration with the limits and weakness of the flood lamps, I eventually bought a work lamp that emitted a type of ultraviolet light. This accessory would prove to be as important to my work as my paints and brushes. As I mentioned, I always sought to tightly control the light in my paintings, and I did not expect this lamp to produce the different, cooler light that it did. In mixing and preparing colors to paint, I surprisingly found myself working with an alternative, colder color palette for the areas of intense illumination. The differences in light from

these two different light sources is apparent when looking at certain paintings. The contrast that I achieved between the figure's shirt against the deep cool blue-violet of the background in *Self-portrait in Yellow Shirt* is intense, due to the warm nature of the bulb illuminating the yellow shirt.

If anyone were to walk into my studio after I declared this thesis topic, it would have appeared that I might possibly be working on some strange theater production. The box-like shape of the studio space, the darkness cut by a sole light, even the objects, or "props" lying around, all came together to produce the feeling of witnessing a performance on an intimate stage. Looking back on my process and the culminating work, I realized how my involvement with theater during my high school years was now informing my painting aesthetic. During my teen years, my acting experience consisted mainly of monologues, and looking back to the space that I created for these paintings, I believe I subconsciously reconnected to my many experiences of being alone on stage.

During that final graduate year, I was much more aware of my studio space as an entity and presence in the work. In the ambiguous scenes that I ultimately created, the geometry created by things in my studio, and the atmosphere created by a sole light in the dark space, both became supporting characters.

Not only did I find myself referencing theater lighting in these paintings, but also the scene changes that occur throughout a theatrical production. As a cast member in plays, I remember being so impressed by the elaborate sets created for some productions. I believe that this influence found its way to the forefront of my mind as I developed these paintings. As I worked, I loosely referenced the walls, ceiling, and corners of my studio for the backgrounds of the self-portraits.



Over time, I found myself deliberately moving my studio furniture around and re-arranging my space from painting to painting for fresh inspiration.

One particular issue of necessity was honed as I worked through these paintings, and due to it, I developed a skill that eventually proved to be crucial to my chosen topic. Prior to developing my thesis, my work had always been dependent upon an actual representation of my subject matter, whether it was painting from life or working from a photo reference. The only elements in my paintings that were not directly observed were the geo-abstract elements that I often included to indicate space. In order to fully realize my vision of becoming a different character, I had to be able to paint myself *in action*, and not as a static and stoic figure, which seems to be the tradition common to many self-portraits. While working on *Stat*, it is evident that I am very conscious of this new way of working. I was developing for myself a way to observe more efficiently, commit that observation to my short-term memory, and then create from that impression. I would assume a particular pose, quickly scan the area of observation and make mental notes of the shape, light, and color in that area. Then I would break from my pose in order to mix my color and paint based on the fresh memory of what I had just observed. I first became aware of this while attempting to paint *Crying*. I urgently wanted to paint myself with a convincing expression of despair, without having to objectively study a photograph. I would make the expression and then quickly scan my face, neck and shoulders (every area affected by this intense expression). I now had a method in which to further reveal the fundamental characteristics of whatever I was observing, and that is my continual aspiration as a representational artist.

This new way of processing visual information afforded me the benefit of knowing that what was going on to the canvas was the direct and unmediated version of what I was observing.

### **The Future of the Idea**

Since the 70's, I've been using self-portraits as a vehicle to convey different situations and conditions. For me, using a self-portrait is much like an actor who plays a role or character on stage –it enables me to empathize with the victim I portray.” -Luis Cruz Azaceta ( Maxwell 16)

My thesis exhibit consisted of the paintings done under my thesis topic, but also of work created throughout the entire process. I feel as though I could have benefited from one more year to complete this thesis work -in order to then try to exhaust this new idea. I consider only two of the final three paintings to have been executed under my title of disguised self-portraits. With the time and opportunity to create more work under this topic, I would push the idea even further by, for example, deliberately staging scenes to paint. I would move between very direct images and extremely ambiguous images. One of the next phases of this work would be investigating what my personal symbol system is – and work at incorporating that symbol set into the images.

Working in the genre of self-portraiture is, to me, the visual equivalent of maintaining a written journal or diary. I can't think of a more interesting way to document events throughout one's life, while utilizing the same vehicle to purge one's subconscious mind. Were this work of disguised self-portraiture to continue, it would become more deliberately autobiographical in every way (i.e. environment, supporting props and objects) while moving even farther away from myself and my likeness. I

believe I would eventually begin using a “stand-in” for myself that may not even represent my race and gender. These steps would further challenge the notion of what makes a self-portrait.

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## VITA

Athesia Benjamin was born in Albany, New York on March 28, 1979 to Velvia Rose Benjamin and Kenneth Benjamin of Jamaica, West Indies. She was raised in Rochester, New York, and as a child, began taking art classes at the Memorial Art Gallery. She earned her high school diploma from the School of the Arts and attended the School of Visual Arts in New York City, New York for two years. After transferring to Rochester Institute of Technology, she earned a Bachelor in Fine Arts degree in 2000. She entered the Art Education program at RIT and obtained New York State k-12 art certification in May of 2001.

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