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## In Light of Self Reflection: Personal Identity and Art

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# In Light of Self Reflection: Personal Identity and Art

by

**Anna Elizabeth Beam**

An Honors Capstone

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Honors Diploma

to

The Honors College

of

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Honors Capstone Director: Senior Lecturer of Art, Drawing & Design Roxie Veasey



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4/25/2022

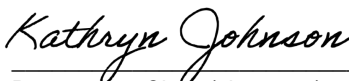
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### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this project to my partner Jaime, who has offered incredible support and insight throughout the entire process. There is no way I would have been able to complete everything I have without you by my side.

I would like to thank each of the amazing instructors I have had the pleasure of learning from here in the UAH Department of Art, Art History, and Design. I give particular thanks to those whose classes I struggled in - the concepts I have a hard time grasping initially seem to have the greatest impact on my later work. And finally, I give thanks to all the family and friends that have encouraged me during my years here. I could not be where I am today without all of your wonderful help.

## **Abstract**

As an artist, I have always been interested in exploring new materials and methods of creating work. During my time here as an undergraduate student, I have begun specifically looking into the use of ultraviolet light (“UV” or “blacklight”) and mirrors in my art. I find that these materials offer unique opportunities to explore concepts relating to self reflection, hidden meanings, and viewer interaction. With these strengths in mind, I chose to use personal identity as my subject matter. I used this series of art as a way to explore how I relate to sexuality, gender, and body image. There is no better close to my time as an Honors Studio Art student than completing a series of work rooted in experimentation and exploration of unconventional materials and ideas.

In this paper I explain the initial concept of the work, the creation of specific pieces, and the meaning behind this art series. Images of my preliminary studies and artwork can be seen on a website created for the project.

### **Link to Images**

<https://inlightofselfreflection.carrd.co/> - A small site for hosting images of the work created for this project.

Select pieces are also pictured in this text in the “Creating Works” section.

## **Introduction and Initial Concepts**

I stumbled into the idea of using UV light in my art almost by accident - I found an invisible ink pen that I was given as a Christmas gift as a small child, and I happened to bring it back to the studio with me. The ink was dry at that point, but it had a small blacklight on the end. Its batteries were nearly dead, but they had just enough power left for me and a few friends to play around with shining it on our work. A pen drawing I had recently completed was one of the pieces grabbed, and to our surprise it glowed under the weak light. I made a mental note, and the next semester, I decided to pursue blacklight art more intentionally.

While toying with this new idea of using UV light in my art, I began to think more about the other ways external light could be used in art. The idea of using reflective materials to redirect light came up, and then the idea of specifically using mirrors. I remembered learning about the tradition of painting on glass, and wondered how different it would be if the glass were mirrored. It took some time before I decided to try incorporating the UV light into the mirror work, however. I experimented with painting small mirrors with oil, and drawing with UV reactive materials in my sketchbook.

Several of my initial sketchbook drawings were of abstracted landscapes, seen through the windows of buildings on campus. I let my eyes wander across the scene in front of me, my hand trailing behind, flicking from detail to detail. Many of the sketches were done around sunset, as I was trying to capture the orange glow of the sky. As it got darker outside, I could see my reflection in the window in front of me, and I began incorporating it into my drawings. This idea of drawing my reflection wrapped back around to my earlier use of mirrors, and I decided to plan pieces using both elements. This ranged from adding small mirror tiles to drawings on paper to creating sculptural installations with mirror and canvas to drawing directly on mirrors.

## Researching Materials

Once I decided to pursue UV light and mirrors as significant aspects of my work, I realized that there were many important details to sort out. Several main areas of concern were: how pigments in paint, ink, and other materials reacted to UV light; how well said pigments and materials adhered to the glass surface of a mirror; and how to display works involving UV light so viewers could experience both “versions” of the work.

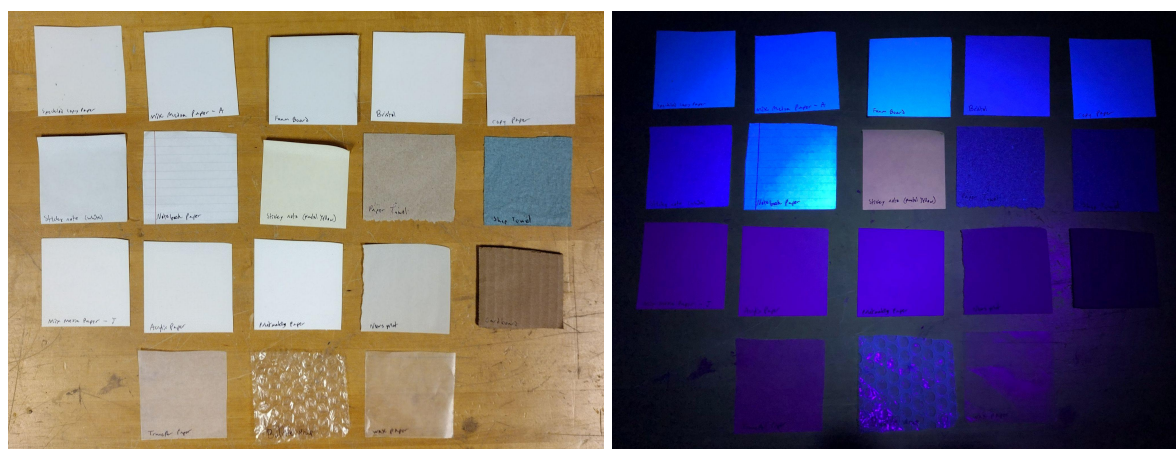
I ordered a pair of small LED UV flashlights online, and began testing out all the pens, highlighters, markers, and paint I already had in the studio. I found that the Pilot G2 Neon series reacted strongly to UV light, and all but the blue and purple pens in the Pastel series reacted at least weakly. Most highlighters across all brands reacted to UV light as well, with the notable exception of blue - not a single blue highlighter reacted to UV in the slightest. I found that specifically marketed acrylic paints reacted to UV light, and I was unable to obtain any UV reactive oil paints. By testing materials with the small flashlight everywhere I went, I was able to build up a list of items to work with that included nail polish, embroidery thread, and india inks.

I also had to take the reaction of paper and canvas into account. Different types of paper react very differently to UV light, with some glowing a bright blue and others fading to a dull purple. Highly reactive paper makes UV media used on it seem relatively dull, while the less reactive paper gives the media a chance to shine. The Canson XL Mixed Media sketchbook I was initially working in had a highly reactive blue glow, but I found that the Rough Mixed Media paper of the same brand was not very reactive. Printmaking-specific paper, such as Rives BFK, proved to have very little reaction. I noticed that heavier weight papers, with the exception of the Canson XL Mixed Media, tended to have less reaction. Cheaper, thinner papers such as copy paper glowed brightly. Some recycled papers had an interesting mottled effect under the blacklight.

Working directly on mirrors limited the materials I could use. Pens such as Pilot G2s or Gelly Roll Moonlights did not write on the slick surface, since there was not enough traction for

the roller ball to move and deposit ink. Highlighters tended to work well, although some did not fluoresce as brightly as they would on paper. Water based markers would bead up as they dried, leaving a patchy appearance instead of a clean line. Oil based markers such as Sharpies worked well, and so did paint pens. India ink was visible but thin, and had a tendency to run. Acrylic paint worked best when built up in layers. Nail polish worked surprisingly well, although it was hard to apply accurately at times.

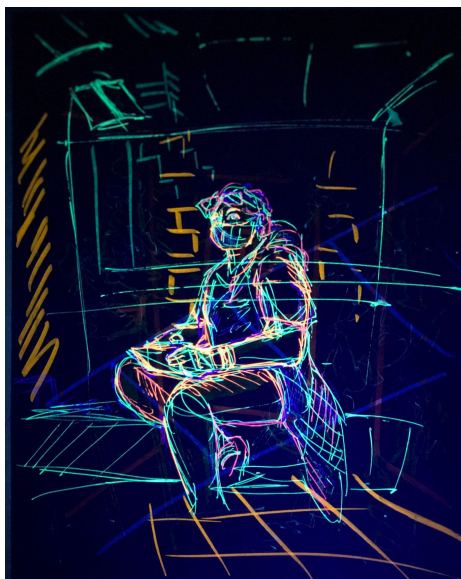
Displaying the work was a difficult question to answer. The work was meant to be viewed under both regular white lighting, and in the dark with UV lighting. Even the type of UV lighting had variables - wavelength of light, type of bulb, and the size of the light. I started out with two small, 12 bulb LED flashlights marketed with a 395nm wavelength. I moved up to a 128 bulb LED flashlight later, with a wavelength between 385 and 395nm. I also bought a 24" 395-400nm LED bar light. The shorter wavelengths bring out more of the fluorescence in the work, while the longer wavelengths are closer to the visible spectrum and seem more purple. I tried a 24" fluorescent tube light as well. It appeared much less purple than the LED lights, but its wavelength was not listed. My works and materials reacted to it, but it did not cast light far enough to be of much use.



**Image 1:** Paper swatches under regular light (left) and UV light (right).

## Creating Works

The process of creating this series started with a number of test pieces. I made a number of swatches to test and rank the UV reaction of my materials, then began using them in sketches. As previously mentioned, I started by drawing abstract landscapes. The sky also played a large part in my initial sketches, with the orange glow of sunset serving as a strong source of inspiration in my work. I began to incorporate figure drawing into these pieces, and the act of drawing my reflection linked them conceptually with the mirrors I was experimenting with in other projects. *Quietly Loud* is one example from this era of sketching, and it served as both a materials test and an exploration into self portraiture.



**Image 2:** Quietly Loud *under regular light (left) and UV light (right).*

I was also experimenting with artistic methods during this time, leading to works such as *Experience* and *Convergence*. *Experience* is a monoprint I initially created as a means of testing an ink transfer method, but grew fond of as I worked. I continued to use it as an experimental sheet, testing out ideas of embroidering paper and new gel highlighters. Though highly abstracted, it came to represent a specific memory of one night I spent with my partner. The small dark smudges in the lower left corner represent us, and the branching, scumbled lines became the trees we stood under at twilight. The lines of embroidery to the lower right indicate the pond we sat in front of, and the knots of thread scattered across the top of the page are the



stars above us, connected by the thin white threads of constellations - only visible under the UV light. *Convergence*, on the other hand, did not hold nearly as much meaning to me, and was simply a chance to experiment with combining mirror and canvas into a three dimensional form.



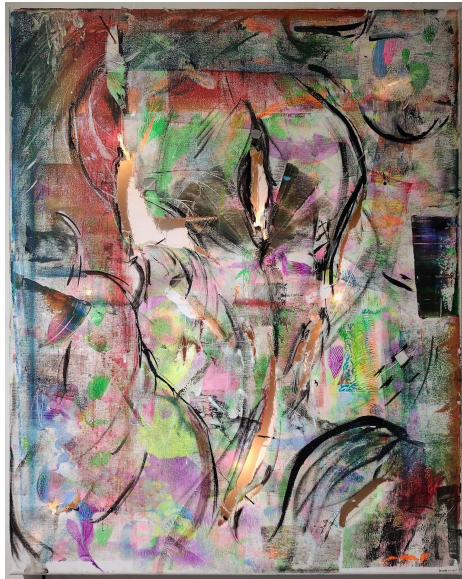
**Image 3:** Experience under regular light (left) and UV light (right).

With these first experiments under my belt, I moved on to creating more intentional pieces. *Appreciation* and *Sensation* are sister works, created at the same time as part of the same project. *Embrace* was meant to round out the trio, although it was not completed until a few months later. *Sensation* is an abstract canvas piece, with splashes of acrylic paint and streaks of printmaking ink accented by vague parts of figures drawn in marker and nail polish. The canvas is wildly ripped and torn, with shreds of itself pierced by toothpicks that hold it in place. Throughout it are a few small mirror tiles, delicately placed and easy to miss until caught in the light. Behind the canvas is a string of decorative white lights, coiling around to illuminate the work from within. As the name suggests, it is a piece about feeling - both emotional and physical. It is the sensation of holding your partner close and knowing they feel the same for you. It is bright and chaotic and messy and *glowing*, glowing both inside and out with love.

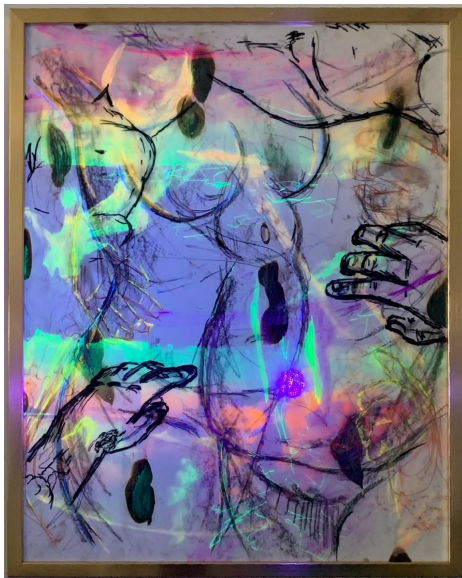
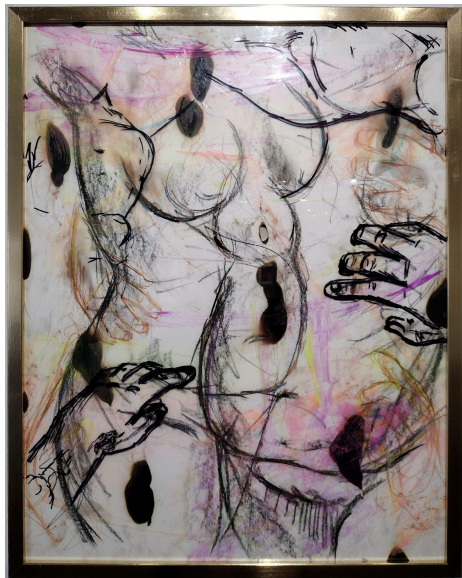
*Appreciation* deals with similar concepts to *Sensation*, but differs in a few key ways. Its composition is less chaotic, with well defined figures taking center stage. Around them are smaller figure sketches, and gesture drawings of hands reaching out to touch and hold the



bodies. This is a piece focused on admiration of the human form, specifically that of a romantic partner. It is a piece filled with desire; the bodies call to each other, make each other whole. There is an acceptance of perceived flaws - the figures are not the conventional standard of beauty and the paper has been burned through in places, but these “flaws” strengthen the composition and create visual interest. This work was a means of facing my issues with body image head on.



**Image 4:** Sensation  
under regular light  
(left) and UV light  
(right).



**Image 5:**  
Appreciation under  
regular light (left)  
and UV light (right).

*Embrace* was the final piece of the trio, and my first attempt at drawing and painting on a large scale mirror. It has several layers of imagery: the first to be added consists of scattered highlighter figure drawings, vague gestures, and scumbled lines calling back to *Experience*. On top of them is the second layer, a portrait of myself and my partner holding each other close, eyes locked and foreheads touching. It is also done in highlighter, but has added layers of paint pen and nail polish to distinguish it from the background. Orange halos circle our heads - this love is something spiritual, something holy. A final layer on top is black marker and white correction fluid, a stark difference from the swirling color underneath. In this black and white layer my partner and I share a kiss, trees branching overhead. The darkness of the marker makes this layer stand out in regular lighting, drawing attention away from the background layers. However, under the UV light, the embracing figures pop out, shining brightly as the black and white all but fades away. While working on this piece I had to be very careful, since the mirror was so easy to smudge. Windex and q-tips were used as erasers of a sort, although they still left a noticeable smudge at the edge of the clean areas. In order to make sure the highlighter, paint, nail polish, and marker would layer correctly, I worked on a few small scale test pieces. 3"x3" square mirror tiles made excellent test canvases - *Little Moments* was one such test piece that turned out particularly well.



**Image 6:** *Embrace* under regular light (left) and UV light (right).



After finishing *Embrace*, I turned back to the ideas of my initial sketchbook work.

*Reflections* is a scaled up version of the early sketchbook drawings, with a shifting landscape created by the same process of automatic drawing. It also features figure drawings pulled from the reflections seen in the windows, this time darkened with india ink. Small mirror tiles rest in the upper left corner, and embroidery thread accents the bottom right corner. *The Third Story*, a woodblock print, does not physically incorporate mirrors, but is based on the same idea of seeing a reflection in the window superimposed over a view of the outside world. After printing, I lined the figures with invisible ink, sketched with a UV reactive pen around the streetlights and clouds, and stitched UV reactive thread around the sun and moon. *Light My Way Home* is a small canvas that also falls into this idea, and it served as a test piece for experimenting with how non UV reactive acrylic paint interacts with reactive paint. These pieces play with ideas about self perception and how we project ourselves.



**Image 7:** Reflections  
under regular light (left)  
and UV light (right).

The final piece included in this project is *Act of Worship*, another mirror drawing. It consists of a large mirror with an ornate gold colored frame, with two figures lying together. The first is my partner, resting on their back as I lay above them, kissing their stomach. Orange and blue halos circle our heads, a callback to *Embrace*. However, the halos are much more pronounced in *Act of Worship*, and the title confirms its spiritual themes. I was raised as a

Christian, but left the church for a number of personal reasons. One of the final deciding factors in my leaving was the lack of acceptance for the LGBT community. I am aware that not all Christians hold the same views, but the church I grew up in was not welcoming to diverse sexualities and genders. With *Act of Worship*, I wanted to rebuke those views. I wanted to show clearly, explicitly, that our love is something holy. The piece is also about body acceptance. My partner's body does not conform to conventional standards of beauty. They are not a thin woman with large breasts and a small waist - quite the opposite. And I love every last part of them. Their appearance and their weight are not flaws to be fixed or ignored. Their body is worthy of being embraced, cherished, and loved exactly as it is. The entire mirror drawing is a declaration of love. In the background, particularly visible in the glow of the UV light, are the words "I love, I love, I love, all of you." Loving my partner has helped me to see that some of the "flaws" I pick at about my own appearance are not worth worrying over. I know that I am also loved just as I am.



**Image 8:** *Act of Worship* under regular light (left) and UV light (right).

## **Display and Reception**

The pieces in this series were displayed as part of my BFA senior show, alongside other pieces of my work. Almost all of the work included in the show contained UV reactive elements, although not all of them dealt with mirrors or other reflective surfaces. Several handheld UV flashlights were placed around the gallery space for guests to use. Visitors were encouraged to pick up a flashlight and move through the work at their own pace, viewing the pieces under both regular lighting and under UV. The gallery director and I considered using mounted UV lamps at one point, but ultimately agreed that the flashlight option offered the most personal and intimate viewer interaction with the work. This appeared to be a success, with guests enthusiastically engaging with the work during the opening reception. I could not have asked for a better response from my audience.

One issue with involving UV light and mirrors into artwork is the difficulty it presents for photo documentation. It was hard to find a camera with settings that truly captured the glow of the UV elements without washing out darker areas of the work, and the mirrors posed the challenge of reflecting the photographer. Even without the lighting and reflection issues however, I feel my work - like most physical art - is best experienced in person.

## **Significance of the Work**

I poured myself into this series of work, and it is very important to me. This series allowed me to confront parts of myself that I was not fully comfortable with and celebrate them alongside the aspects I already embraced. I have not always been comfortable with my body, particularly the way I carry weight. But by pairing that imagery with imagery of my partner, it allows me to remember that I am loved as I am. Through loving my partner's body, I can come to love my own.

My partner and I have sexualities, genders, and body types that are underrepresented in most media and seen as inferior or abnormal. By incorporating mirrors into my self portraits, my work forces viewers to literally see themselves in the image. For some audiences, this means a chance to see aspects of themselves celebrated instead of shunned. Members of the LGBT community, particularly women who love women and people who do not identify within the gender binary, can see a love like theirs celebrated. People with plus sized bodies can see themselves represented and loved. For other audiences, it forces them to put themselves in the place of someone whose identities they do not relate to. People who are uncomfortable with the themes presented are confronted with them face to face. Their own visage is reflected in the mirror, with an unashamed declaration of pride superimposed over it. Viewers are asked to look inward: even if they do not personally identify with the same labels, they are encouraged to find a sense of empathy and recognition of similarities between themselves and the subjects.

The use of UV light also holds significance in relation to my subject matter. The magic of UV light is that it allows certain details to hide in plain sight, only to shine under the right circumstances. As such, it is a powerful tool for creating work with themes of intimate identities. Marginalized genders and sexualities are often kept private in certain situations, while celebrated in others. I have personal experience with staying quiet about my identity around family, while proudly embracing it around friends. At this point I am comfortable with showing my true self around everyone, but I still acknowledge the uses secrecy has. In this series of art,

both the regular light and UV versions of my work show my pride in my nonbinary lesbian identity. However, the UV versions still sing with extra color and detail, just to drive home the feeling of embracing oneself and reveling in the feeling of love.

## **Conclusion**

The work in this series offered a great learning experience, and I feel that I've grown immensely as an artist. The project taught me much about creating a coherent body of work and refining my ideas so they come across clearly in my work. I am very happy with the progress I've made. I want to continue to explore the use of UV light and mirrors in my work as I move forward, and experiment with them in different artistic disciplines. I feel that I am just beginning to scratch the surface of the possibilities these materials hold. In particular, I would like to come back to the idea of adding sculptural elements to my work. Using thread to embroider paper and canvas was an interesting experience, and I would like to look into more textile elements as well. Overall, the work I completed during this project has laid an excellent foundation for future series, and I fully intend to see where the themes of UV light, mirrors, and personal identity lead my art next.