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Complexity of Perfection

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Complexity of Perfection

A Capstone Submitted to the University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree With Honors

Department Of

Management

By

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DeKalb, Illinois

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Abstract

Many of the first art galleries and museums existed in places where elite individuals were allowed. The constant pursuit of achieving perfection in many circumstances may stem from a white supremacist narrative that often stagnates creativity from achieving its full potential. This sends a series of alarming messages to artists as they tend to lose the initial interest they have for their medium by attempting to achieve a level of perfection that is unattainable. As a result, this notion can shed light on the social impact art can have in society and the relationship with the type of artwork displayed. This research will focus on how perfection is represented in the art industry as it is rooted from white supremacist ideas and notions. To analyze these ideas, this research will uncover some of the messages 'perfectionism' sends, the history of art spaces in regard to perfect artwork displayed, and the impact this can have on creative individuals and the socio-political impact art has on society.

Introduction

In this research paper, I wanted to focus on how perfection is seen in the art industry and the role it plays in artists' creative process. In addition to the research of this project, I also wanted to apply my research in a practical business setting and curate an art exhibition show in a Chicago-based gallery. In doing so, this would allow DeKalb-based artists to showcase their artwork on a large platform.

Methods

Methods taken to complete this research involved curating an art exhibition show at Addington Gallery in Chicago where artists would create original body's of work that showcased this idea.

Information about the opportunity was communicated through a Call for Entry flier that detailed a description of the show, questions to use when creating work, a detailed timeline of all project materials, and also media artists can choose from. In addition to the exhibition, artists were given the option to conduct recorded virtual interviews where they were asked a series of questions about their artistry, experience with the art industry communicating ideas of perfection, and how this impacted their creative process. For the exhibition itself, I selected artwork, completed the installation, and marketed the show with assistance from the University Honors Program and gallery owner, Dan Addington.

Results

Completion of this study is reflected below with analysis on the messages perfectionism sends, psychological impact striving towards perfectionism has on creatives, and the historical implications of perfectionism.

Section 1: Messages ‘perfectionism’ sends and their impact

A. Failure

Much of what perfectionists hope to achieve is a life that does not have failure. This constant strive towards achieving perfection can be rooted in a multitude of things and oftentimes is not realized and understood until much later in life. Personal goals that are often set by perfectionists are incredibly unrealistic and unknowingly, those individuals have all or nothing thinking patterns. According to Asher R. Pacht’s dissertation, he notes how author D.E. Hamacheck defines normal perfectionists as, “. . . are those who derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labors of a painstaking effort and who feel free to be less precise as the situation permits (Pacht 1).” He also includes the difference between a neurotic perfectionist as someone who, “never seem good enough, at least in their own eyes. . . . They are unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling, (p. 27) (Pacht 1).” The distinction between the two is extremely apparent and demonstrates how one can be viewed as more healthy than another while neuroticism is a debilitating personality trait that can often lead to stagnation and resort to mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, poor self-consciousness and esteem. Typically, for neurotic perfectionists, their unreachable goals toward achieving their idea of success and achievement is often uncelebrated and poorly recognized. No matter if the work or task is completed in a more than efficient manner, there is still an element of unsatisfactory feelings that can become inescapable for those with perfectionistic tendencies.

There are many motivations that are derived for achieving these unrealistic goals. Paul L. Hewitt [*Brockville Psychiatric Hospital*, Brockville Ontario Canada] and Gordo L. Flett [*York University*, North York, Ontario, Canada] describes self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism as, “. . . behaviors such as setting exacting standards for oneself and stringently evaluating and censuring one's own behavior . . . self-oriented perfectionism also includes a salient motivational component. This motivation is reflected primarily by striving to attain perfection in one's endeavors as well as striving to avoid failures (Hewitt, Flett 457)” and, “. . . entails people's belief or perception that significant others have unrealistic standards for them, evaluate them stringently, and exert pressure on them to be perfect (Hewitt, Flett 457)”, respectively. While pressures from outside stimuli are unwavering and cannot be maintained at the expense of the person who is to achieve these standards, this is commonly felt among many artists.

During my interviews with the artists included in the *Complexity of Perfection* exhibition show, many of the commentary surrounding the idea was that it is a part of their creative process, but they do not allow this pursuit to be the detriment of their artwork. They also described how important it is to have perfection act as a driver to challenge to create your best work, but to not allow it to become the factor that limits your authenticity as an artist. Notably, in my interview with Raevenne Zackery, the question was for her share her thoughts on perfection being the enemy of good. She describes how, “It can benefit you in a lot of ways and get you into spaces and places,” and how, “There will be good coming out of this [situation] but you will put your mind through the ringer [in the process].” Her words really stuck with me as I am more on the neurotic perfectionist spectrum. When we look at how this affects the brain and how this can

become something that does essentially “put your mind through the ringer”, it can often result in feelings of brain fog and feeling utterly exhausted by how much energy is exerted into this pursuit. In a study conducted by the Harvard Business Review, they analyzed the relationship between employees' effectiveness in completing their job and their perfectionistic tendencies for more than 25,000 employees beginning in the 1980's. They found that employees who were perfectionists, “*are* more motivated on the job, work longer hours, and can be more engaged at work (Swider,Harari,Breidenthal,Steed 1).” As mentioned before, those who exhibited these behaviors often depicted a higher likelihood of suffering from anxiety, depression, and overextending themselves to the point of working too much. The interesting part here found in this study was the fact that though perfectionists worked harder and longer than their non perfectionist subordinates, researchers found that performance and perfection were unrelated to one another. Though, “... employees high in excellence-seeking perfectionism were not better performers. . . [they] could not identify a specific reason for the absence of the relationship. It is possible that perfectionists spend too much time perfecting certain work or projects while neglecting other tasks or projects. Alternatively, perhaps any advantages gained by employees' perfectionistic tendencies are washed away by the consequences of those same tendencies (Swider,Harari,Breidenthal,Steed 1).” Though in this case it is mainly a work environment, in the creative space this can take on an entirely new level when trying to produce artwork. During my interview with Maeve Wallace, she also described her thoughts on the same question. She describes how, “It's good to have standards for yourself, but I've noticed that those were blocks in my creative process in making stuff. It really stopped me from what I would actually like to be making. In that way, I think it did get in the way of making good work. I feel like its still blocking me right now. I do still plan out every little detail. But also, I am figuring out if this is

just how I have to learn in order to make stuff. Do I need to have it completely written out? Do I have to have it all written out like a science experiment? It helps to some extent, but [I also think] in quite a few ways it can make things worse.” Among many artists in this show, they’ve described a similar case as allowing the strive towards perfection to motivate you but to not allow it to reach an unhealthy point. It is very contradictory to the very nature of artistry as there should not be a certain standard that artists at large should strive for outside of making the best work they can do. Challenging yourself is key in this field though it often becomes an unhealthy metric that you often do not allow yourself to step away from. During my interview with Raevenne, she also shared with me how she does not talk about art when she is spending time with her artists friends; since many of them are full time artists on top of balancing their everyday lives and careers, this a very holistic approach to finding balance to both the thing you deeply enjoy yet also can deliver a lot stress. Zackery further advised to “be perfect in your confidence.” In a study done by professor Alejandro Lleras from the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, analyzed the positive influence that breaks can have on the ability to focus. In his research, his goal was to overrule the idea that attention is a limited resource when completing a task and how poor performance was linked to lack of attention dedicated towards a task. In his research he found, “that a similar phenomenon occurs in sensory perception: The brain gradually stops registering a sight, sound or feeling if that stimulus remains constant over time. For example, most people are not aware of the sensation of clothing touching their skin. The body becomes "habituated" to the feeling and the stimulus no longer registers in any meaningful way in the brain (Ariga, Lleras 1).” Though it is often not considered, breaks are necessary as a creative since it can inhibit you to have this idea that can often tie your overall self worth as your sense of self.

In a study done by Howard K. Hall and Andrew P. Hill, they conducted a study on the implications perfectionism can have in sports and performing arts. When analyzing the psychological impact that perfectionism can have on artists and athletes, they discovered that, “For most individuals engaged in sport, chronic disaffection will be sufficient to lead to attrition. For perfectionists, however, the fact that identity and self-worth are inextricably tied to achievement precludes any option of dropping out, no matter how aversive the sporting environment. These individuals feel obliged to carry on striving in order to maintain identity, and it is the debilitating cognitive, affective and behavioural consequences of this process which will precipitate burnout for athletes and performing artists [Hill et al. 2008, Hall et al. 2012, Hall in press] (Hall, Hill 221).” In the very definition of an artist and an athlete, you are defined by what you are able to produce or your ability to perform. When patterns of burnout start to become evident, it often results in the individual losing a sense of passion and love for the craft. That even though it is the thing that can bring you the greatest joy, it can also be the thing that becomes your detriment. These ideals has its roots in a capitalistic society where your worth is defined by how much output you are able to provide for yourself or for someone else. This next section will address where these ideals originated from and how that has diluted itself in creative spaces.

B. Roots in white supremacy

“Capitalism is often thought of as an economic system in which private actors own and control property in accord with their interests, and demand and supply freely set prices in markets in

away that can serve the best interests of society.”¹ Productivity is the ultimate root in a capitalistic society with your worth only tied to what you can produce and how well you can do it. Many of the drivers of a capitalists society originated from the first onlookers of artwork in art gallery spaces. “The capitalist class first exercised its cultural power as a class when it defined, designed, and promoted a group of artists that articulated its ideological needs as an emerging hegemonic class following World War II. These soon-to-be-inside artists became known as the Abstract Expressionists. Using numerous capitalists back galleries and museums – primarily MOMA NYC which was created by the Rockefeller family – and the CIA (secretly directing the full range of art activities in western Europe as well as intellectual journals for 17 years), capitalists, during the postwar era, made it imperative that all artists pushed to the inside had to make work that was totally abstract, that is, “politically silent,” and free from any European influences.”² Many officials in these groups created what we see today are in positions of power in many of the institutions that drive a capitalistic society. Many of the pillars insinuate the notion that every man for himself and promotes an individualistic natured society. This is completely contradictory to the environment that exists in the art environment at the academic level. In my interview with an artist included in the Complexity of Perfection exhibition show, Laura Nienhueser, described how this was something she appreciated most as a multimedia artist since there is a strong sense of community that lives in the Art Department. A capitalistic society negates everything that the art world is founded on as much of it is from learning from your peers on various techniques and styles. This ideas are seen reflected in our educational institutions with such immeasurable high expectations set for Black women and girls

¹ Fresia, Jerry. “Three Ways Capitalism Impacts the Insider Art World.” *Kdoutsiderart*, 11 Dec. 2019, <https://kdoutsiderart.com/2019/12/11/three-ways-capitalism-impacts-the-insider-art-world/>.

² “Judicial System Netherlands.” *Judicial System Netherlands | Dutch Judiciary*, <https://www.rechtspraak.nl/English>.

The pursuit of excellence in higher education is largely based on its capitalist structure that values financial gain and relies on quantifiable measures of student success (e.g., rankings, GPA, graduation rates) to bolster institutional reputation (Hotckins & Dancy, 2015). According to Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007), “High-achieving [Black students] have been described as ‘the best and the brightest’ and are predicted to achieve the highest levels of academic and professional success” (p. 509). Yet in their interviews, the researchers identified several challenges that high-achieving Black students experience: being the only Black student in the classroom; seeing very few Black faculty; feeling pressure to behave in “non-Black” ways and “serve as positive example” for Black students to combat stereotypes; and being forced to prove their intelligence to counteract affirmative action claims from their white peers (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 514).”³ With these barriers at the forefront, this only makes it that much more difficult for Black artists to enter into a white-male dominated industry. This idea that there is only one way for something to be done and does not allow anything apart from that be defined as acceptable. Ever since the dawn of colonization, the very first thing that was enforced was forced assimilation and the stripping away of one’s identity. A white supremacist culture is not celebratory of the differences that are celebrated in the art industry; hence the often contradictory nature of the two. In this next section, it will discuss how this has been reflected throughout history by only allowing certain groups to view artwork and types that are permitted to display.

Section 2: History of permissible artwork displayed

A. Background:

³ Raymundo, J. (2021). The Burden of Excellence: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Perfectionism in Black Students. *The Vermont Connection*, 42(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol42/iss1/12>

Art galleries, museums, and art spaces as a whole were originally designated for the elite white male gaze. Over the course of history, there has been a ruminating of opportunities for people of color to populate in these spaces and create a name for themselves that they would have never been able to achieve before. This next section will uncover the history behind art spaces and how the display of artwork has drastically changed overtime while also addressing many ideals that exist today in the industry.

It is important to identify how much of the first representations of art spaces originated in the church with images of ethereal and angelic-like figures. The very first art gallery opened is what is now the Kunstmuseum Basel (1671) museum in Switzerland.⁴ It was originally the Amerbach-Cabinet, the city of Base but was bought in 1661 and had no office publicly opened until a decade later. Since the first origin of art space originated in a dominantly European culture, the threshold for what is considered beautiful and acceptable into these elite spaces was especially narrow. In David Carrier's journal, he describes Thomas Crows, *Painters and Public Life*, how Parisian art in the eighteenth century had a designated criteria of display and the creation of art was recognized as gifts from the above.

“In early times, the nature of public art was ‘openly determined and administered from above’ in this period we find ‘a collective space that was markedly different from those in which painting and sculpture had served a public function in the past. The salon brought people together of all classes:

⁴ Zephir.ch. “History.” *Kunstmuseum Basel – Kunstmuseum Basel*, <https://kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/collection/history>.

‘ . . . wherever one looks, countless young clerks, merchants, and shop assistants in whom unchanging, tedious daily labor has inevitability extinguished all feeling for beauty . . . are the men whom every artist has endeavored to please’

Crow poses two fundamental questions: did the nature of the audience for painting change at this time? How was this change reflected in novel modes of writing about art? As long as the dominant form had been history painting, the rules of taste were fixed by an elite of connoisseurs; it was possible to claim that these rules were universal and that in practice only the privileged had the sensitivity needed to judge artworks.”⁵ Crow in fact does pose an interesting approach when it comes to the narratives that are meant to surround art and who has the say to the metrics of an acceptable piece. Soon enough, however, by the end of the 18th century the public display of art became more available and was overlooked by less of the elite and more aimed towards laymen. This is no surprise as this was largely a result of the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. During this time, neoclassical art became the newly embraced style the French artists adopted. The common art style prior to the revolution mimicked that of status and class through dramatical style artform, rococo.⁶ The Rococo style of art was the final fruition of the considerations that derived from the Baroque era.⁷ With styles that were equally

⁵ Carrier, David. “The Display of Art: An Historical Perspective.” *Leonardo*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1987, pp. 83–86. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1578216>. Accessed 4 May 2023.

⁶ Rococo art, sometimes called a "feminized" version of the Baroque style, is associated with the aristocracy. Typically the paintings depict aristocrats or aristocratic leisure-time activities -- like courtship rituals, picnics in a harmonious natural environment, excursions to romantic places. Sullivan, Mary Ann. “Rococo Art.” *Rococo Art*, Bluffton College, 1997, <https://www.bluffton.edu/courses/humanities/art/18c/rococo/>.

⁷ “This highly embellished style was coined Baroque and became marked by its innovative techniques and details, delivering a lush new visual language into what had been a relatively toned down period for art (Seiferle, Nichols 1).”

"Baroque Art and Architecture Movement Overview and Analysis". [Internet]. 2023. TheArtStory.org Content compiled and written by Rebecca Seiferle

Edited and revised, with Summary and Accomplishments added by Kimberly Nichols

ethereal and elegant yet also served as a reflection of the type of art displayed in Protestant Catholic churches. The Baroque period began in the early 1600's all the way to the mid 1700's following the Renaissance era in Italy. Baroque art and style was mainly doctrine on a romanticized view of the world and bodies. Many ideals that often went against the principles that the Protestant Catholic Church was founded on. In this next session, it will describe various examples of various women who revolutionized their role in society and did not adhere to the expectations of societal norms but instead paved a path for themselves seen as radical at the time.

Section 4: Art evoking socio-political impact

The constant erasure faced by women who are artists adjacent to their male counterparts is alarming. Due to the overwhelming impact of an ovation of patriarchal society dating back as far as one can remember, the art industry has not been exempt from the barrier many women artists have faced when entering this space. In Marsha Meskimmon's journal, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*, she describes the various cases of women being overlooked in the art industry by their male counterparts in various time periods. While her novel does address a variety of cases, she does disclaim several times throughout that she does not purposefully eliminate various intersecting identities that are not included in the book. When describing women's art in the Holocaust, she describes women's art in the Holocaust as, ". . . offer[ing] a unique praxis through which to consider the connections between the embodiment and articulation, beyond the legacy of universal representation and monolithic history. It is not a separate or oppositional 'women's history', but a nuanced intervention into those singular

narratives which so easily permits us to forget (Meskimmon 21).” This is often a common misconception when it comes to learning about the history of creative spaces and any historical background that is not of the straight male perspective is often this othering that commonly happens. While the history of women in art is important, Meskimmon elaborates on this notion that it should not be labeled as particularly women’s art, and exemplifies that it can just be art that was created by a woman. She further elaborates on other artists who have identified the unequal disparities faced by women and man artists by Emily Mary Osborn.⁸

“For some, the problem with Osborn’s painting is that the woman is presented as too passive, too willingly accepting of rejection, too much of a martyr to male prejudices and male desires. Rather than breaking down the gender divide, then, the painting instead seems to perpetuate it. As valid as this argument is, as an early or proto-feminist painting *Nameless and Friendless* offers one of the most forceful examples of a women artist making a clearly articulated stand on one of the central social issues of the day. The painting is an image of its time, one that expresses the contradictions within Victorian society as well as its appetite for the mawkish (Pollitt 1).”

Osborn’s daring subjectivity throughout her artwork was extremely controversial during her period. During this time women were often the pinnacle muse to use to paint at this time.

⁸ Emily Osborne was a very successful female artist during the Victorian Era who communicated messages throughout her artwork the inequalities men and women faced in the art industry. One of her most well-recognized pieces was *Nameless and Friendless* as it depicted the fact that women are always being watched by men. She was not properly taught in the classroom as other male artists during the time, but she had the opportunity to be taught private lessons by an instructor which then enabled her to continue studying and practicing her craft in her instructors gallery. “As a woman she was never granted membership of the Academy and could not study in the Royal Academy schools (women were admitted in small numbers after 1860). More generally, though, Osborn, like many of her contemporaries, was deeply concerned with the issue of educational and employment opportunities for women (Pollitt 1).”

However, the controversy that surrounded this piece and much more of her artwork was the fact that women during the time had this constant barrier to be able to sell their artwork. In the piece, there is a woman who is seen in a print shop, hoping to sell her artwork. However, the woman is seen wearing a black-hooded dress but without her mourning ring⁹. She appears to be with someone who looks like her son holding a portfolio. From the pose of the woman at the counter, she appears to be veering away from the gaze of the print clerk. She does look a bit anxious and is seen nervously fidgeting with a piece of string which can lead the viewer to believe the piece the clerk is holding is her own. The underlying message here is the woman appearing to be a son in the window who looks as if they are leaving the printing-shop, foreshadowing the events that are soon to take place with the woman at the counter. This demonstrates this idea that her artwork is soon to be denied the opportunity to sell which are seen from the, “orthogonal lines in the painting would seem to support this view, pointing conspicuously to the door (Pollitt 1).” Further reflecting the notion that women will not have access to achieve the desired professional success to that of their male counterparts.

Osborn is not the only success story of women artists during the Victorian era, what sets her apart from the other successful women artists is the fact that she did not receive academic training in her field like that of Evelyn De Morgan, Elanor Fortescue-Brickdale, R.W.S, or Georgiana Burne-Jones. One thing these women each had in common was the fact they revolutionized against the expectation set for them as women and also as artists who were women. While many of these women received secondary education in art, they communicated

⁹ “During the early Victorian era the requirements weren’t as strict as they would become later (after Prince Albert died of typhoid fever, 14 Dec 1861). . . For widows the first year was the most restrictive, with black clothing and isolation. The materials used for mourning attire were dull, crêpe being silk but not shiny, and black piping would edge shirt cuffs and collars, along with black buttons (Fleming 1).” Fleming, R. S. “Mourning Dress During the Early Victorian Era.” *Kate Tattersall Adventures*, 30 Dec. 2020, <http://www.katetattersall.com/mourning-dress-victorian/>.

ideas throughout their artwork that went against the common ideas celebrated among men. It did not help their case that many women were not allowed to learn in the classroom let alone alongside men. Particularly for Evelyn De Morgan, she enrolled in the Slader School of Art circa 1873 after studying several months at the South Kensington National Art Training School. She was one of the first women to enroll at Slader after discovering, “ her aspirations were clearly at odds with the school’s traditional emphasis on the more feminine idea of artisanship and ‘accomplishment’ (De Morgan Foundation 1).”

During her time at Slader, she took a four hour long course where she would have to draw a naked woman draped by a cloth. Her being enrolled in the classroom at all was revolutionary let alone being able to draw a naked woman. As a result, women were banned from drawing another woman after 5pm. Nonetheless, she continued to draw everyday even after graduating from the institution where she continued to focus on drawing nude bodies that were draped over. During her time at Slader, she continued to excel in creating artwork that aligned with the aesthetic and Renaissance style at the time. She developed a critically acclaimed skill for creating images that glorified the human body through her careful composition and realistic figures. Later in her career, she shifted her artwork from less of a human body glorification but tying that into her themes of social reform. Between the 1890 and the early 1900’s, her artwork was greatly affected by the first World War occurring. Her artwork focused on depicting women being represented as heroic figures conquering the devilish celebrations in favor of war. Notably, in her piece, “. . . *The Gilded Cage* (1905-10), she highlighted the domestic and social restrictions placed on women. Similarly, in *The Hourglass* (1905) she commented on the unattainable ideals of youth and beauty promoted by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Duncan 1).” In the *Gilded Cage*, it

reflects an interior scene of an older man and a young woman in a lavish home. There have been many interpretations of their roles with this piece as the man has often been recognized as either the woman's tutor or even her husband. Husband, since he is seen with a wedding band on his finger; tutor, since he is seen sitting at the desk and appears to try to gain the attention of the young woman to refer back to her lessons. The young girl is seen gesturing toward the window where she is a bird flying in the distance.

The symbolism displayed throughout this piece pays homage to the beliefs that were normalized at the time with women subject to the demands of domestic life. While it was never noted that the woman in the painting was meant to be autobiographical, the narrative reflected does demonstrate a very similar picture of De Morgan's upbringing. From the expectation of her to complete her education to later become married, having anything outside that was frowned upon. The bird in this image depicts this longing that De Morgan among many other women at the time wished to find but were unfortunately caged to have a life they wanted. Reflecting the title of the piece as women were caged birds. Regardless of the responses that she had from the content of her artwork and the messages depicted throughout, she was one of many who revolutionized how women should be portrayed in art. She challenges the idea that women should be used as a muse in artwork and enforced the understanding they can also serve as creators too.

Conclusion

Findings of this research essay reflect the negative notions that can be calculated for one who is striving to achieve this unattainable sense of self. While it can be used as a positive motivator to achieve new heights of success and challenge one to reach their full potential, the negative

effects it can have on your sense of being are not worth the turmoil it takes. While many of these concepts are reflective in societal norms and the founding ideologies of the United States, these outdated and eventually detrimental effects should not continue to be the drivers to a well-functioning society. The goal of this research is to bring awareness to this negative pattern exhibited among artists and negate the unhealthy patterns in an industry that is without barriers.

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