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Masters of the Mask

An exhibition report presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Masters
in
Māori Visual Arts

at Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand.

Jordan Dean Quinnell

2021

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Abstract

In Aotearoa, there are exponential pressures and stigma associated with being male. Males are expected to be strong, not show emotions or worse hide themselves behind a mask. These traits have affected men's mental health and wellbeing, resulting in the highest suicide rates for young Māori males (15-24 years old) in Aotearoa.

I make use of the literature review to examine artists who specialise in using text and self-portraiture within their work, providing a pivotal reference for the development of my art making and research. In conjunction with this I explore my own practice and the development that occurred from the initial exhibition *Te Matatau* (Te Manawa, 2020) culminating in the creation of my thesis exhibition, *Masters of the Mask* (Lysaght Watt, 2021).

Along with the development of my mahi toi and research, I make use of the qualitative research method known as Autoethnography, which allowed me to explore my own personal narrative as a starting point which I had hoped would progress to analysing other rangatahi Māori and their own unique experiences with mental illness.

Acknowledgements

This project has been a while in the making and comes at the culmination of my University study (at least for now). Along the way I have been fortunate enough to have had a tremendous amount of help and support from my lecturers, friends, family and even complete strangers. While I sometimes struggle with the words, it felt right to truly acknowledge those who have contributed towards making this project happen…

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Hopefully this is just the beginning…

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Introduction

This exhibition report explores my research process in the lead up to my very first solo show/thesis exhibition *Masters of the Mask* that was held at the Lysaght Watt Gallery in Hawera, Taranaki from the 6th-24th December 2021.

Chapter One focusses on the literature review, which explores various artists, both national and international who have been a crucial part of my research. This chapter is divided into three parts; the first examines artists who have employed text in their work. The second examines artists who have overcome the struggles of working with self-portraiture to create powerful pieces whilst the third section looks at the *Let's Talk Campaign*, which uses an amalgamation of both text and portraiture to portray numerous individuals' personal experiences with mental illness.

Chapter Two tracks the development of my research and artistic process. Commencing with work from my graduate show at Te Manawa in 2020, I explore various techniques and decisions that I made following the creation of the *Am I Safe?* series early on in 2021. The methods I used to create the artworks are examined before I discuss the qualitative research method known as Auto Ethnography.

Chapter Three is centred on my thesis exhibition, *Masters of the Mask.* While the gallery space located at Lysaght Watt is discussed, much of this chapter focuses on reflecting on some of the early research and decisions that underpinned the creation of this exhibition. The research method known as autoethnography is also discussed as a pivotal framework that supported my decision to examine my own personal journey and experiences with mental illness. Following this, in Chapter Four each individual piece is showcased and briefly discussed. The Lysaght Watt floor plan as well as the exhibition invitation are included in the appendices.

Chapter 1 : Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

Due to the multi-faceted nature of my final series, I felt it prudent to explore artwork focusing on text as well as portraiture both nationally and internationally. In the first part of this chapter, work by artists Glenn Ligon, Brandan Odums and Ralph Hotere are examined. While each piece is uniquely different, they all use and showcase the power of text as an artistic medium, further emphasising and portraying their chosen kaupapa to the viewer. The second part of this chapter delves into portraiture and examines works by Abdul Abdallah, Christian Thompson and Kelcy Taratoa. All three are heavily influenced by their culture providing a unique and much needed perspective to my research.

To conclude, I explore the *Let's Talk Campaign*, a collaborative project by photographer Charlie Clift and lettering artist Kate Forrester that combines the use of text as well as portraiture. By scribing people's most difficult thoughts on their faces, they aim to bring awareness and spark conversation about mental health.

Through examining these different artists and their work I hope to provide an insight into my research process while also providing a starting point to showcase and examine my own work within a broader art context.

1.2 Text Artists

Glenn Ligon is an American artist who is well known for his text-based paintings which he has created since the late 1980s. Known for exploring race, identity, sexuality and language in his work, Ligon frequently draws on different resources for inspiration. These include everything from photographs to 20th century literature, speeches of numerous cultural figures such as Jean Genet and Richard Pryor, and his own lived experiences growing up as a gay black man in America.

Figure 1: Prisoner of Love #1

Prisoner of Love #1 is one such work that draws inspiration from literature. As one part of a three print series of work, they collectively examine Jean Genet's autobiography *Prisoner of Love*, written in 1986 about the status of African Americans in American Society. Clearly written across the page in a stencil-like typography are the words "We are the ink that gives the white page a meaning" which continue to repeat as your eyes travel down the page, gradually becoming more smudged and unreadable. Subtlety Ligon has changed part of the original quote – switching the word 'they' with 'we' – "thus imbuing the original text with his own personal experience and culturally relevant meaning. The repetition, accumulation and transformation of the passage also speak to Ligon's concern with language and identity as forms". (Ligon, 2001, pg.1)

Showcasing more of the power that text has as an artistic medium is Ligon's piece *Condition Report* which was created in a collaboration between the artist and a painting conservator. Originally Ligon created *Untitled (I Am a Man)* which was based on the signs carried by protesting sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee in 1986. Ten years after its creation, he had a condition report made which can be seen in the image below. The "I Am a Man" slogan is duplicated and placed side by side, which allows the viewer to view both the original and the copy while making their own analysis of all the differences and changes that have occurred over time. The painting conservator has highlighted and made note of these in handwritten text on the copy, offering a unique and personal touch to the piece, while also providing an interesting contrast to the clean and simple typeface. Ligon states that it was "about detailing not only the physical aging of the painting over time – all the cracks and paint loss and all of that – but also changing ideas about masculinity, changing ideas about the relationship we have to the Civil Rights Movement". (Drogin, 2010, pg.3)

Figure 2: Condition Report

The “I Am a Man” phrase was first used in 1986 during the Memphis, Tennessee sanitation worker strikes where African American workers protested for equal rights and regulations after the deaths of two of their colleagues. The slogan itself was used by the workers during their strike as a way of calling attention to their issue while also referencing how their bosses and the wider majority white community did not consider them as human beings or men but as boys that did not know any better and therefore could not think for themselves and needed protecting. It has since become a famous slogan, normally associated with the Civil rights movement and used as inspiration by many different artists such as Ligon mentioned previously as well as Brandan Odums in his series *I Am Untitled (1-4)*.

Most often working with Spray Paint, Brandan Odums is an African American artist known for experimenting with bright colours to create large scale murals which normally depict portraits of everyone, from well-known historic figures such as Harriet Tubman to contemporary creatives and even everyday people.

Figure 3: Detail of Studio Be - Odums public gallery space

His four piece series *I Am Untitled (1-4)* is a powerful piece that comments on racism and injustice towards African Americans. Created by Odums as a way to change the narrative, he states that he "wanted to recreate images of these men in ways that were more beneficial to me, I was tired of seeing these images of men and woman dead in the street or being subdued etc…There is this idea that pervades when people look at the work, that this was not right, I do not care how you try to spin the circumstances or demonise the victims, their humanity and the injustice always comes through". (Lamb & Odums, 2017, pg.1)

Each figure shown in this series were subjected to racial brutality and unfortunately did not survive, depicted from left to right, is 17 year old Trayvon Martin[1], 22 year old Oscar Grant[2], 44 year old Eric Garner[3] and 18 year old Michael Brown[4].

Figure 4: I am Untitled (1-4)

Visually this piece catches your eye, as each male figure is depicted in monochromatic colours against a different pastel coloured background, adding emphasis and drawing your eye to each

[1] Shot and killed by a neighbourhood watch officer in 2012
[2] Shot and killed by a police officer in 2009
[3] Placed in a chokehold and killed by police in 2014
[4] Shot and killed by police officer in 2014

man while also adding some softness to each piece. Depicted in similar poses, facing the viewer, it is hard not to feel a personal connection as you read the placards each one is holding which features the slogan “I am a man”. Intentionally paired with the golden halo around each head they affirm to the viewer their humanity. Originally created in 2016, these pieces are still extremely relevant in 2021, especially considering the recent events of the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others as well as the Black Lives Matter Protests that took place around the world in 2020.

In contrast, Ralph Hotere’s piece *Drawing (KO WAI KOE?)* utilises the use of text as a means of questioning the viewer. As seen in Figure 5, Hotere has painted a dark rectangle shape in ink which he has added pencil and lacquer to, providing an interesting sheen of movement, almost unseen against the background.

Figure 5: Drawing (KO WAI KOE?)

“Text has been a prominent element in Hotere’s work since the early 60’s and a poem by Hotere’s father, Tangirau is effectively incorporated in the border of *Drawing (KO WAI KOE?).* Drawn in pencil, the stencilled Māori text ‘KO WAI KOE' melds with the abstract composition posing the question to the viewer - WHO ARE YOU? Cultural and self-identity are central issues in much of Hotere's art and the inclusion of Māori text both within the composition and bordering the top right corner provides a context for the drawing”. (Vangioni, 2007, pg.1)

The handwritten text that runs around part of the border is the poem written by Hotere’s father Tangirau. Providing an interesting contrast to the stencilled text of KO WAI KOE, it adds a personal touch to his father’s writing. The poem reads as “Tenei taku manu te rere atu nei - he karere - no Te whitinga mai o te ra. Pataia mai - i ahu mai Koe i hea? KO WAI KOE? (This is my bird that flies to you - a messenger from where the sun rises - It asks from where have you come? WHO ARE YOU?)”.

1.2.1 Context

As a whole, all of these pieces actively use text as a means of engaging with the viewer. While in some instances it may only be a simple phrase, to these artists the use of text and the specific words and font selected, impact the overall piece and the messages that they want to portray to the audience – whether targeting racism, or identity, these works show that text and the use of language has power.

1.3 Portrait Artists

Abdul Abdullah is an Australian artist whose work explores the complex issues of religion, identity and politics. As a Malay and Muslim artist, Abdullah is no stranger to the prejudice and alienation that Muslim’s face in western society. In fact he uses his experience of growing up Muslim in the suburbs of Perth and coming of age in a post September 11 world to expose the prejudices and stereotypes which have demonised and marginalised Muslim youth today.

An example of this can be seen in his photographic series titled *Siege* which depicts various figures staged in theatrical poses similar to those you might see during a riot or protest. According to Abdullah, “*Siege* refers to ‘siege mentality’ a state of mind where an individual feels constantly under attack; an affliction the artist feels is suffered by many minorities and marginalised groups, particularly young Muslims, who live in traditional Western societies –

the images in *Siege* seek to engage and reflect the anxiety and frustration felt by young people of Abdullah's generation". (Abdullah, 2014, pg.1)

As seen in Figures 6, 7 and 8, the facial features of the subjects in each piece are stripped away by the use of an Ape mask. While human qualities are evident, the loss of the face which is such an instantly recognisable symbol of "humanism" combined with the dark lighting against the studio backdrop portrays this intense otherworldly feeling which can be felt by the viewer. The use of smoke and the posing, for example the closed fists and intense gaze (Figure 6) only add to this uneasiness.

Figure 6: You see monsters

Figure 7: The disaffected by-product of the colonies

Figure 8: Someone else's king and someone else's country

These examples are just three of the larger series of ten but were the main pieces I was drawn to during my research into portraiture and symbolism. The two portrait images in particular stood out to me. Although they were not placed next to each other in the series overall, the juxtaposition between the traditional and modern intrigued me – As depicted in Figure 6, the subject is garbed in what I assume is traditional Muslim attire whereas in Figure 7, the subject is shown wearing a commercialised Nike hoodie, perhaps a reference to the changes that the newer generation is influencing…

Abdullah frequently uses himself as the model in his photographic projects as portrayed in Figures 6, 7 and 8, as well as in his work *Sons of Sycorax*. A self-portrait photograph which uses similar techniques such as the dark lighting with intense shadows and contrast. When asked about why he includes himself in his own work, Abdullah stated that "At first it was about being at the frontline of my work. I did not want to feel like I was exploiting my subjects and thought they should not shoulder the burden of the stuff I was trying to communicate…" (Abdullah, 2014, pg.1)

In the beginning stages of my research, I had explored the possibility of featuring other rangatahi who had suffered from mental illness. While I liked the idea and everything that could be created around this subject, ultimately it did not come to fruition. Reaching a similar conclusion as Abdullah (mentioned above), I found that it would be wise to examine my own journey with mental illness before reaching out to others. This decision proved to be beneficial as it helped kickstart the journey towards the work that would later feature in my solo exhibition.

Figure 9: Sons of Sycorax

In this self-portrait piece, Abdullah has posed himself mid-labour as he attempts to carry a net full of black balloons, which is a direct reference to the 2014 ‘stop the Mosque’ protests in Bendigo, Australia where black balloons were tied around the letterboxes of Muslim families and their supporters.

Lighting plays an important factor in this piece, highlighting each balloon while leaving Abdullah heavily shadowed in an almost intimidating way. While this draws the viewers eye to the balloons and their important symbolism, it also creates room for discussion. Personally I see a connection between the artist and the balloons and how he has depicted himself physically lifting them almost as if the balloons have weight…

Christian Thompson is an Australian artist of Bidjara descent, probably best known for using native flora and objects from nature in his large scale photographic prints, which can be seen in this particular group of works titled *Black Gum 1,2 and 3.*

Figure 10: Black Gum 1,2 and 3

As stated by the title, this group of works is comprised of three separate photographic prints all depicting a different angle and perspective of a figure wearing a black hoodie with native flora spilling out from the opening where the face is typically seen. “The black hoodie is a powerful symbol of black youth culture, the raised hood of disengagement and hopelessness. In contrast the escaping red and gold gum blossoms are unexpected and beautiful. Native to Australia, they suggest the bounty of Aboriginal cultures often overlooked” (Goldfeder, 2017, pg.1). The feeling of not seeing any familiar human characteristics besides the rough form paired with the native flora evoke some interesting ideas around whakapapa and how we are intrinsically linked back to our Atua.

In contrast, Kelcy Taratoa who is a well-recognised New Zealand artist of Ngai Te Rangi and Ngati Raukawa iwi is well known for creating graphic, almost comic book like paintings full of symbolism and familiar iconography. Heavily influenced by Identity, this was and still is a theme that Taratoa explores in his paintings. Particularly in his early work, he explored how your past experiences can impact the process of constructing identity - The *Who Am I? episodes* are an example of this. They are a series of acrylic paintings Taratoa created in the early 2000’s that directly merge significant symbols and contemporary urban scenes from his childhood/upbringing. Each numbered as an episode, they help portray to the viewer what

many Māori youth would have experienced growing up in an urban environment without their traditional cultural influences. (2005[5])

Figure 11: Episode 008

Episode 008 is one such painting that incorporates multiple imagery together in that intense graphic, comic-book like style. As shown above, there is everything from a self-portrait of Taratoa to an image of the hulk mid fight to even the very classic "kiwiana" Tip Top dairy.

[5] SCOOP Culture. (2005, January 19). *So If You're The Silver Surfer, Who Am I?* Retrieved August 13, 2021, from https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/CU0501/S00082.html

1.3.1 Context

Portraiture and Self-portraiture can be a difficult medium to work in for artists, due to the vulnerability and personal analysis of one self, that you have to overcome and ultimately use to create a fully realised piece. A portrait can tell so much just by the expression and body language that the artist has placed them in. While each of the artists mentioned above have ingeniously used this alongside their kaupapa, such as Abdul Abdullah who has used the form of the body in motion to convey weight to balloons in *Sons of Sycorax* (Figure 9), each artist has embraced their own cultural background and experiences to further elevate their work and connect with their intended audience - much like I hope to achieve in my own work.

1.4 Let's Talk Campaign

Two people helping to bring awareness to the important issue of mental illness are photographer Charlie Clift and lettering artist Kate Forrester. The masterminds behind the *Let's Talk Campaign*, a collaborative project that explores and showcases everyday people and their experiences with mental illness.

Figure 12: The Let's Talk Campaign's outdoor debut exhibition

The aim of the campaign is to spark millions of conversations about mental health by literally drawing peoples most difficult thoughts on their faces. Depicting seventeen individuals and standing at two metres tall, each image is captivating in its own right, pair that with the fact that they were exhibited in public spaces around central London for everyone to view as they were going about their day, the impact and engagement with this campaign is immense.

Figure 13: Detail showing viewers interaction

After launching a successful social media campaign asking for volunteers, Clift who himself has suffered with depression, went ahead and started having discussions with each person. Personally interviewing them and getting to know their own journey and experiences, his aim was firstly, to make everyone feel at ease with the whole process and secondly, to have everyone in their own words express how it feels inside their head.

Following this process, Clift and Forrester went through the recorded material and picked out different words and phrases which were then hand painted onto each person's face at the beginning of the photo shoot. The resulting photographs capture the strengths and vulnerabilities of each volunteer while also showcasing a different, far more complex and I believe modern depiction of mental illness and of the people who suffer from it. Each expression portrays to the viewer a little snapshot into that person's lives, broadening our

understanding and showcasing that mental illness is not confined to any specifics, it can affect anyone.

Figure 14: Detail showing text applied to face

The power of text is an important aspect of the overall design of this project. Through the use of Forrester's innate skills and expertise, we have this fully realised piece that reads exceptionally across the uneven surface of the human facial structure. Throughout each piece, every word and sentence is chosen and placed in its opportune place. The different sizes of font add emphasis to specific words and draws your eye. Although you could have covered the whole face with text to portray more of each person's story, the spaces of free skin adds much needed space and breathing room which I personally feel also allows each individuals humanity to shine through.

As you can see in Figure 15, the subject is posed staring straight at the viewer. To me this adds emphasis to the overall piece because it increases the personal connection that the audience can experience. When viewing these pieces, it is a natural inclination to move closer to each work and read the text that is each individuals account of their own journey, told in their own words. Paired with an emotion or in this piece direct eye contact, the chances for the audience to connect with this campaign is immense. That feeling of connection was an important factor that influenced Clift when he was originally planning this series, "If you type mental illness into an image search you mainly see photographs showing people staring sadly at the floor.

These are one-dimensional images that do not show the person as a living breathing human with loves, friends, passions and desires. I was determined that my images would be different to that. I wanted to capture powerful portraits showing each person's personality." (Shovava & Colorsheets, 2019, pg.2)

Figure 15: Detailed Close up

That connection was also something that I wanted to achieve in my own work. Like Clift, when I first began looking into mental illness I wanted to try and find examples of what had been done before – both by artists and in general media. When it came to a quick google search, most of the images I found involved text, silhouettes of the head, random facts and people looking sad while staring down at the ground. It was only when I broadened my search and started investigating other artists who had created work around the topic of mental illness, for instance the *Let's Talk Campaign*, that my research started to develop and grow.

Chapter 2 : Materials and Methods

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores my own artistic practice and the processes/methodologies that I explored to arrive at the body of work which was showcased in my thesis exhibition. This started with my first-year masters show at Te Manawa in 2020. The research process is further showcased and shows my thought process in the important initial stages. Following this, an examination of the *Am I Safe?* series is highlighted, which was created for the exhibition *#Make/Believe* at the Percy Thomson Gallery, located in Stratford 2021.

The qualitative research method known as autoethnography is also discussed as an important framework that supports my decision to explore my own personal narrative as a starting point for analysing other rangatahi Māori and their experiences with mental illness.

2.2 Te Matatau - Joint BMVA graduate and First Year MMVA Exhibition

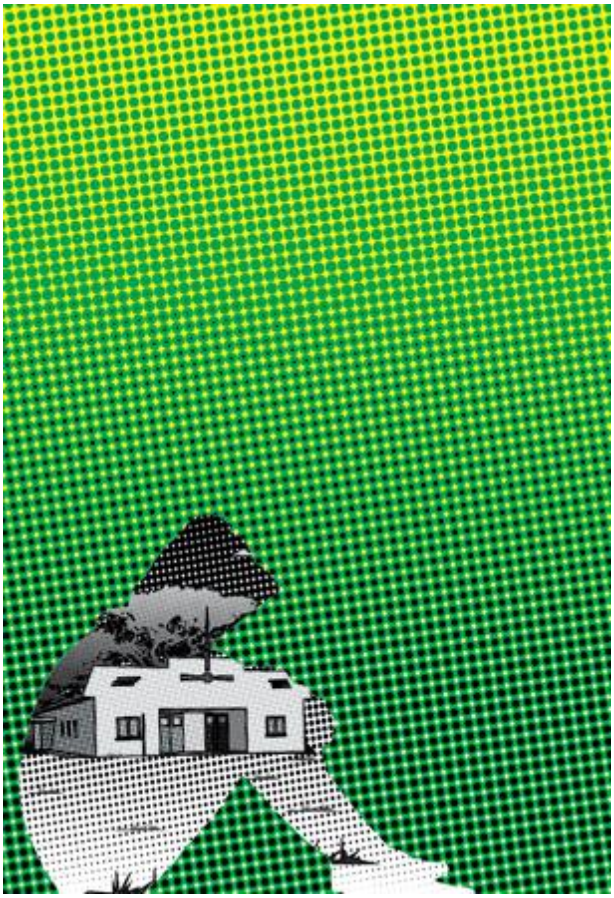
During my first year enrolled in the MMVA degree (Masters of Māori Visual Arts), I created a series of three digital prints for the graduate show *Te Matatau* at Te Manawa Art Gallery in Palmerston North (2020). Designed on Adobe Illustrator and printed onto 280gsm cold press paper at A1 size (594x841mm), these works were the catalyst for the beginning of my research into mental illness with rangatahi Māori - specifically male.

In the early stages, I was somewhat all over the place in terms of what I wanted to create, but knew that I wanted to explore a combination of identity and mental illness within rangatahi Māori. In previous years, I had some success with silhouette pieces that featured another image inside of it. However, I originally created these pieces from an idea that stemmed from creating a double exposure technique in a digital medium, rather than the typical photographic process. Interestingly, when it came to creating these preliminary works, it felt like there was some kind of disconnect. For example, as depicted in Figure 16 this piece incorporates imagery of my wharenui, a hooded silhouette and some experimentation of the use of ben-day dots, which are commonly used in comic books. While I did not mind what I had created, in

terms of the kaupapa, I knew that these works were not the best representation that I could create. I also felt that there was no way to continue or develop them further, which ultimately led to me leaving them behind and moving forward with a different focus.

Overall, this decision ended up being good because it forced me to analyse my research process and look at what was not working. From the beginning I had struggled with the broadness of my kaupapa and allowed the weight and pressure associated with a Master's Degree to affect my mental wellbeing and stymie my creative process. After altering my kaupapa and allowing myself the chance to experiment and create, my research quickly developed into a series that I am proud to have exhibited as my very first solo show.

Figure 16: Original Concept



Throughout the research process and experimentation with the different ideas, I slowly came to the realisation that I needed to address the topic of stigmatisation surrounding mental illness. In conjunction with this, I felt that it would be prudent to examine myself and my own

journey with it before I did anything else. I had already been experimenting with portraiture and using text in my work, but I believed that the best way to examine my own journey would be to create some self-portraits, which before this series, I very much disliked due to the level of vulnerability that it introduced to my perception of 'self'.

Following on from this I gradually became more accepting and excited about becoming involved in creating a series of self-portraits. Hence, I started to experiment and test out every idea I had and just have fun with it. The concepts I created in this period explored everything from full-body shots, to close-ups of my face, as well as text with one or two sentences, or sometimes full pages. While not every idea was successful, these attempts allowed me to develop and expand my work until I arrived at a fully realised body of work.

Figure 17: There's no light without shadow

Figure 18: I AM fine concept

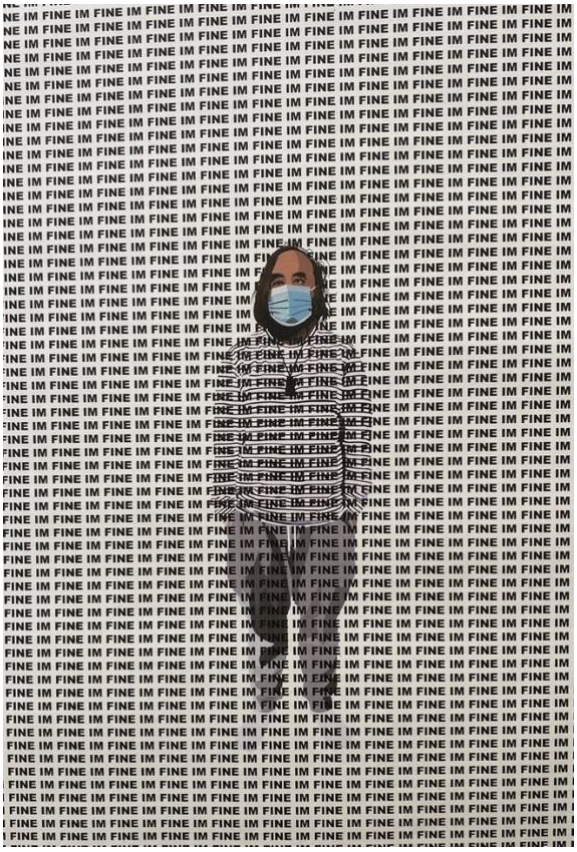
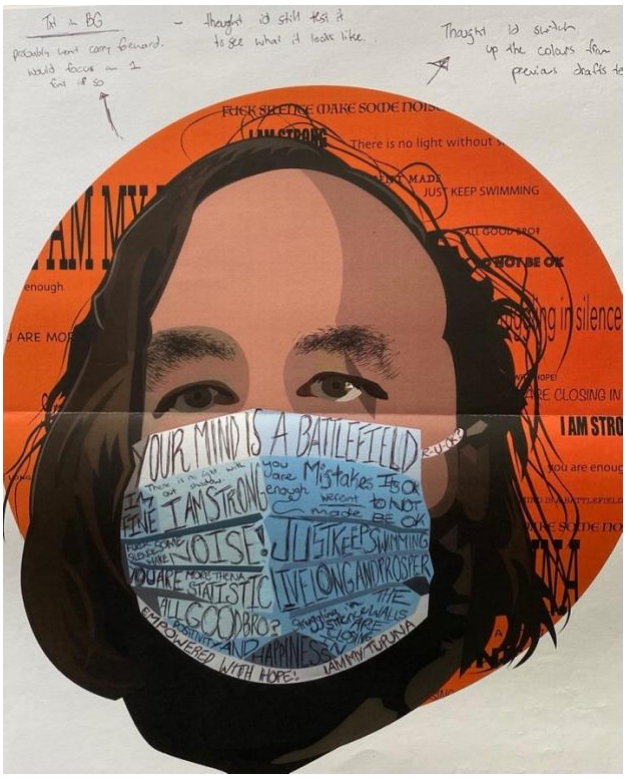


Figure 19: Masked Up early concept



From quite early on in my research, the symbolism of the mask kept reappearing. At this point in time, it was mostly in reference to the psychological mask that people put on to hide their feelings and insecurities in their everyday lives. But around this time, was also the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic where we were encouraged to wear and use the disposable blue facemasks for protection which aligned somewhat with my kaupapa and encouraged me to use the relevance of the covid mask to add another element of relatability and personal experience to my work. The overall title I gave this series and my resulting masters show reflects this – *Masters of the Mask.*

As mentioned previously all three prints in this series are self-portraits and feature a vectorised image of myself alongside text, that directly faces the viewer. All three versions of myself are also depicted wearing blue disposable surgical masks which have quite recently become a recognisable symbol and tool as a means of safety and protection due to the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 20: All good bro?

Figure 21: I AM Fine

In terms of other references the hoodie featured in Figure 20 is a nod to youth, the crossed out text showcases the feeling of indecision and potentially denial whereas the use of the colour green is in reference to mental illness.

The process to create this final series as well as the previous concepts involved taking individual photos of myself in different outfits which I then digitally vectorised on Adobe Illustrator. The process of vectoring an image is sometimes difficult to describe to someone, personally I see it as similar to tracing, where you take an image or design and create a digital copy of it in Adobe Illustrator. Once that digital copy has been made, the vector can be increased or decreased to any size with no visible blurriness or pixilation. After this process I began to experiment with different phrases and sayings that I thought would work with the kaupapa as well as cohesively with each other.

Figure 22: Masked Up

Strategically placed in the centre (between Figures 20 and 21), the piece *Masked Up* showcases many of those phrases in a rough sketchy style that I created by personally writing out those phrases onto paper, taking a photograph and then digitally editing them on the computer until they gave off this graphic, almost ink-like feeling. Because I wanted to highlight these phrases and show more of the face I decided to leave the middle piece as a close up. Framing each side we have two full body vectorised self-portraits which I placed against a repetitive wall of text that subtly asks and answers a question while repeating their respective titles; *All good bro? I AM fine.*

2.3 Am I Safe? Series - #Make/Believe Exhibition

Figure 23: Under the sea

Figure 24: From the unexpected

This series was conceptualised as somewhat of a continuation of my previous mahi, but with a larger emphasis on the symbolism of the mask and the hoodie. Because of this I felt it would be better if I went in closer rather than show them as full body vectors. I was approached by the Percy Thomson Gallery in Stratford, Taranaki and invited to participate in an upcoming group exhibition focusing on young, up and coming Taranaki artists titled *#Make/Believe,*

In retrospect I originally did not have an idea for this specific exhibition but I had been experimenting and exploring certain parts of my mahi more in-depth. Because of this I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to create some new works that I could use as a part of my masters research, as a way to experiment and improve my growing style and as a way that I could include some work in a public group exhibition. In total there are six digital prints, all self-portraits of myself wearing a blue surgical mask. This time with each image I am also depicted in a different coloured hoodie alongside different coloured text all repeating the same phrase; Am I Safe?

Figure 25: In the woods

Figure 26: From natures wrath

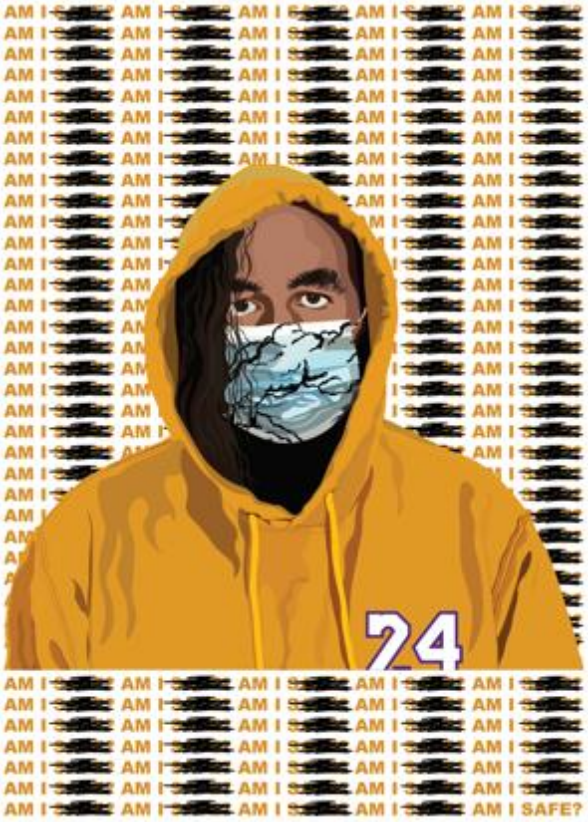
Because I had experimented with text previously I felt that continuing that would help portray my message across while being able to keep simpler imagery in the foreground. I began to experiment with different short sentences around safety such as “we are safe” and “we are protected”. “Am I Safe?” ultimately became the phrase I used because I liked how it interacted with the audience by asking them to examine themselves and their own vulnerability. “Am I Safe?” is the overall title of the entire series - but when finalising them I personally liked the idea of naming each piece individually and having them interact and answer the question when posed together. For example, Am i Safe?... From the unexpected (Figure 24 – focusing on Covid) Considering these works were created after the events of 2020 such as Covid, the Black Lives Matter movement and numerous environmental disasters I felt these phrases best personified what I wanted to achieve with these works.

With that being said I wanted to add a little bit extra to them and I achieved this by collecting different reference images around these different events and using them to create different sketches. I then took photos of each of them and digitally edited them on the computer using Adobe Illustrator. As shown in the images, I tried to pair each sketch to a hoodie to further

strengthen each piece, i.e. a red hoodie and text with a sketch of forest fires (Figure 26). Two of the masks I decided to leave blank as I felt they were strong enough by themselves to correctly reference Covid-19 as well as the Black Lives Matter movement - so there was no confusion, I did include a digital print that I had done earlier in the year on the black lives matter hoodie.

Figure 27: Among us

Figure 28: When we breathe

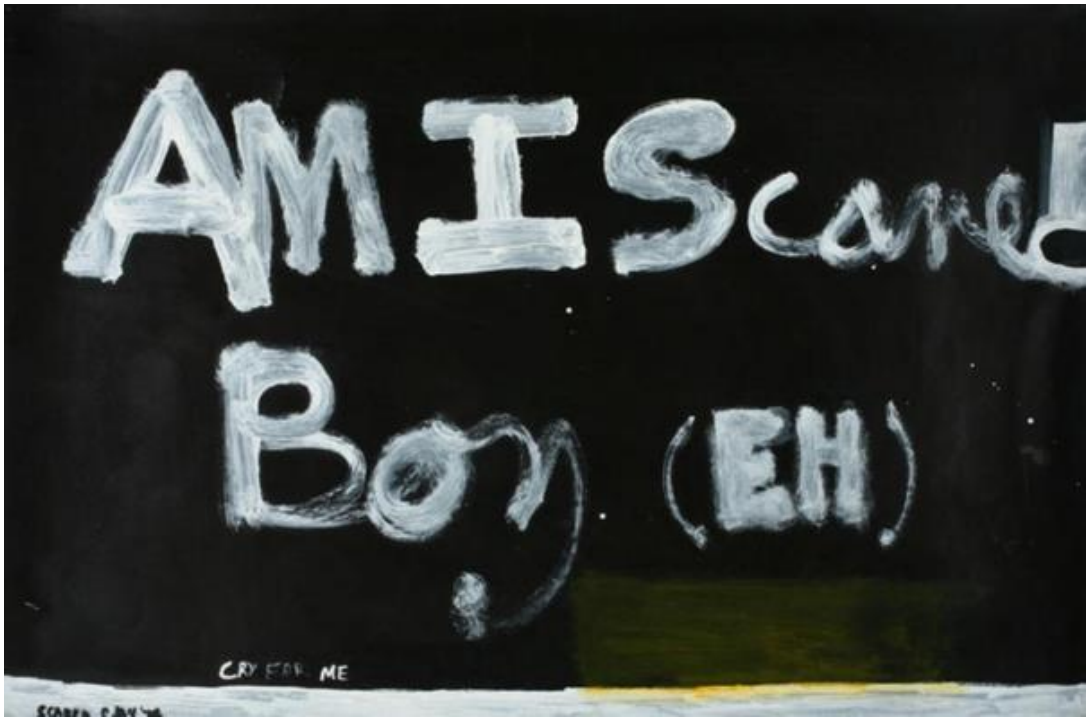


The “AM I” was a play on the “I AM” phrase which has been used by numerous artists such as Robert Jahnke and Colin McCahon in their work. It was not until I was examining McCahon’s work that I came across his piece “Am I Scared” which cemented my decision to use the reversed version because of the fact that the original imagery references feelings of alienation and doubt which I felt would work well juxtaposed with the focus on the events of 2020;

“Deceptively simple in appearance, it was painted in response to a photograph that McCahon saw of two young Māori men apprehensively entering the unfamiliar environment of an art gallery. In light of this fact, the text “Am I Scared Boy (EH)” can be read as a comment about the alienation of young urban Māori in the 1970s, and the difficulties faced by a generation largely dislocated from their own cultural heritage, yet also marginalised by Pākehā culture. Reversing the assertive “I Am” of McCahon’s famous 1970 painting Victory over Death 2 with the tremulous “Am I?”, Am I Scared expresses the doubt which is the dark twin of faith. Emerging from the intense blackness of the painting’s background, the white letters become

fainter, less certain, as the words scroll across the surface. The darkness appears to be overwhelming them, and is only punctuated by the bravado of the final emphatic "EH".[6]

Figure 29: Am i scared boy (EH)



As a young fair-skinned contemporary Māori artist I personally felt a connection to McCahon's piece especially as I am currently beginning to navigate the art world and exhibit in the public forum. So far the feedback has been amazing, with these "masked" pieces in particular being well received by viewers, even two years later these pieces are still very relevant and continue to surprise me.

2.4 Method

The process to create a lot of my artwork featured throughout this report involved similar steps. Since 2018, I have enjoyed digital mediums, namely creating digital prints and vector illustrations on Adobe Illustrator.

[6] *Am I scared: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery: Len Lye Centre*. Govett. (n.d.). Retrieved January 21, 2022, from https://govettbrewster.com/collection/77-3

Before beginning the vector process, I take individual reference photos of myself in different outfits, sometimes full body and sometimes closer half shots which I then digitally vectorise.

Figure 30: BTS shot of Gas mask reference photo

The process of vectoring an image is sometimes difficult to describe to someone, personally I see it as similar to tracing, where you take an image or design and create a digital copy of it in Adobe Illustrator. Once that digital copy has been made, the vector can be increased or decreased to any size with no visible blurriness or pixilation.

After this process I began to experiment with different phrases and sayings that I thought would work with the kaupapa as well as cohesively with each other. Since the creation of the original *Masters of the Mask* series (exhibited at Te Manawa,2020) I have been utilising a list (Appendix 3) I had created of different sayings associated with mental illness. Encouraged by my supervisor to have roughly one hundred, this list has proven to be very beneficial and has helped me with most of the pieces that have been created over the last three years.

2.5 Autoethnography

While I have discussed it previously, in the beginning stages of my research when delving into the subject of mental illness within rangatahi I made the decision to focus on my own personal journey instead. Firstly, this was a strategic move as we were in lockdown and unable to conduct kanohi ki te kanohi or face to face interviews which would have allowed me to collect valuable information that could have been used to explore and ultimately depict other rangatahi's experiences with mental illness. Secondly, I felt that if I was not going to examine and portray my own experiences within a public forum, how could I ask others to do the same? This led me to investigate the qualitative research method known as Autoethnography.

Described by Ellis and Bochner (2000), "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience". Furthermore it can be a difficult and complex research method to understand, let alone use for those new to conducting research as it involves examining your perception of self and your experiences intimately which is then open to analysis from the reader(s). While I am still new to the concept of conducting research, the struggles I found when trying to fully understand this research method were familiar. Familiar in the sense, that I had already been experiencing difficulties when choosing the kaupapa of mental illness as well as choosing to focus on self-portraiture – all three requiring me to look inwards and examine my own journey as a rangatahi Māori dealing with mental illness and bare that visually to the public. Even though it did take a significant amount of time, I ultimately made the decision to overcome my apprehension as I knew that the work I could create from this introspective analysis would be beneficial, not only for myself, but for others who were experiencing similar struggles.

In terms of my Masters exhibition, the show itself I believe reflects this Autoethnographic approach. From the beginning each piece interacts with one another and showcases a progression of itself which helps uplift the overall show – keeping it light and positive while still highlighting the important kaupapa of mental illness. From the outset I wanted each portrait to be natural in the way they were posed and dressed. I believed that the casual ambience would make it easier for the audience to interact with each piece and perhaps imagine themselves in similar situations. I also wanted to create images that people had not

seen before. The casual clothing, in conjunction with the simplicity of the mask reinforced the idea of protection and safety.

When I created my original series (Figures 20, 21 and 22) as well as finalised the introductory text in my master show (Figure 34), I knew that through the use of colour I could connect each piece in addition to what I had already produced. Through my research, I came across the UK mental health foundation's website where they state that a green ribbon is internationally recognised as the symbol for mental health awareness.[7]

While these choices were only the beginning of my journey into fully incorporating and understanding the qualitative research method known as Autoethnography, following this I do delve somewhat deeper into the decisions that I made regarding the creation of my masters show.

[7] *Green Ribbon for Mental Health Awareness*. Mental Health Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved August 25, 2020, from https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/green-ribbon-campaign

Chapter 3 : Masters of the Mask

3.1 Introduction

From the outset of this chapter I explore some of the early research and decision making that went into creating the body of work for my thesis exhibition, *Masters of the Mask*. Alongside this the Lysaght Watt Gallery space is briefly discussed before each individual piece featured in the thesis exhibition is showcased and discussed.

3.2 Research and Development

When it came to creating a body of work for my Masters show, I knew that I wanted to continue on from the previous work I had created, namely *Masters of the Mask* as well as the *Am I Safe?* series.

I felt there was room to develop and expand on the works I had previously created as well as the opportunity to explore the kaupapa and my own journey with mental illness in more depth. Therefore, I began experimenting and revisiting some of the ideas I had previously overlooked. Alongside this I also started researching other artists who had used text, portraiture or looked into the topic of mental illness. A few I have already mentioned such as Abdul Abdullah and Christian Thompson.

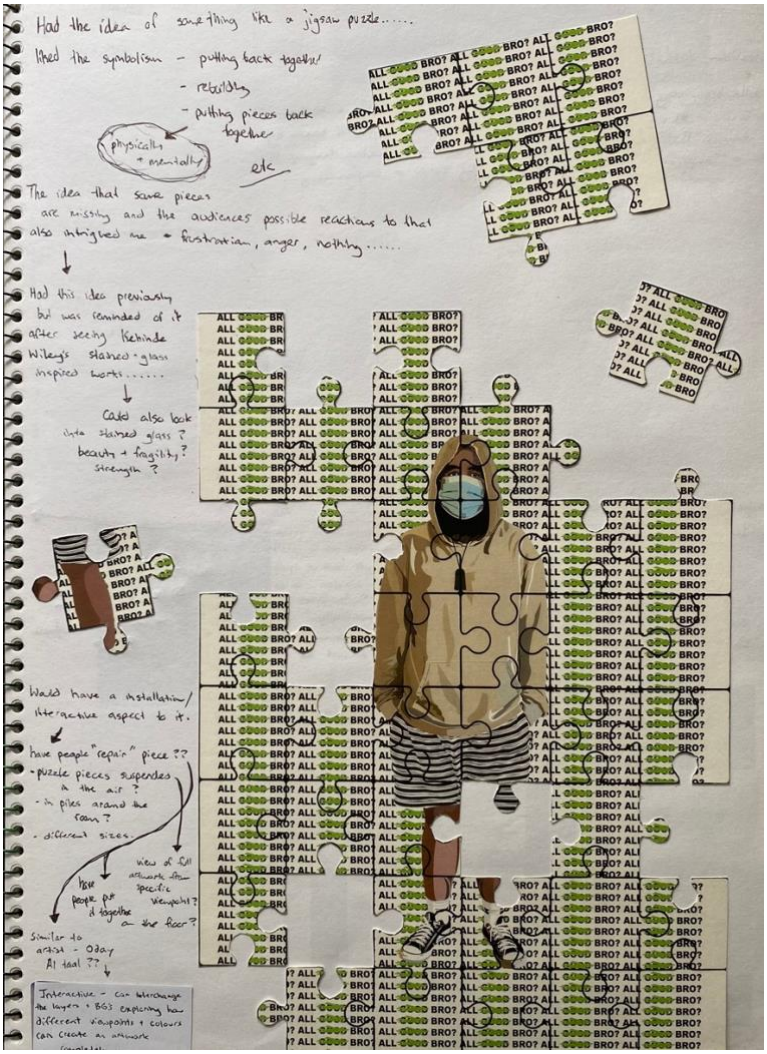
Since the beginning of my research, the mask has been an important symbol in my work. Due to the feelings of protection, safety and anonymity that masks can portray, I have been able to use that and suggest to the viewer that they have a crucial symbolic connection to mental illness and those suffering from it as well as providing a direct reference to Covid-19 within my work. For instance, The *Am I Safe?* series, which I created at the beginning of the year, is an early example of this new direction. Branching out and referencing alternative kaupapa such as climate change, alongside my original ideas, I predominantly explored techniques that I thought would work well with this mahi. This is further illustrated by the overall composition as it changes from using a full body image to a half body, as well as focusing solely on the face and the drawings depicted on the mask referencing different environmental disasters.

While it was a shift away from the topic of mental illness, the *Am I Safe?* series encouraged me to look deeper into the symbolism surrounding the hoodie as well as the mask. It also invigorated me to approach this in a light-hearted way so I could continue to enjoy and have fun with the art making process. Moving forward I began to look into other types of masks and their uses. Also, because of the references to Covid-19, this led me to examine masks that protected the subject, namely gas masks and the bird-like contraptions worn by plague doctors.

It has to be said that for the purposes of my art making process (and particularly for my own piece of mind), most if not all possible avenues were explored, including the possibility of removing the mask or incorporating text. For some reason I still struggled with the idea of removing the mask completely, while it seemed like the natural route to progress, I could not fully convince myself to do it, in particular as it moved away from the important symbolism that the mask provided and reaffirmed. Experimenting with text saw me looking for inspiration in particular at my piece *Masked Up* (Figure 22) which I had created in 2020. This piece featured hand written text which had been digitalised and placed onto the mask, while I had liked the original idea I felt inspired to look at other variations. This led me to develop a mask composed entirely of white text, providing a new fusion of text and portraiture that seemed natural and showed more of the face while still keeping the mask imagery. In addition it also references one of my main artist models; the *Let's Talk Campaign.*

During the art creation process, one particular image kept recurring, which involved the use of puzzle pieces alongside the figure to showcase that something important was missing. Personally, I liked the symbolism that this piece would have portrayed to the viewer, especially as a physical sculpture. Physically, it seemed interesting to move away from my preferred medium (digital illustration towards sculpture), as this would allow the audience to also interact with the piece – whether that be in terms of just the display being three-dimensional, or actually taking it further and having the audience be able to interact and rebuild it like a functioning jigsaw puzzle.

Figure 31: Workbook page showing Jigsaw concept



Conceptually the idea of the pieces and intentionally leaving some out also intrigued me because of the emotions, namely frustration, anger and possibly sadness that I could make the audience feel; subtly imitating a small portion of what people who suffer from mental illness experience in their day-to-day lives.

Even though this concept is yet to be fabricated, it drew attention to the importance of scale. With this unique concept, it would need to be of a scale to be interactive for the audience as well as a large enough size to accurately convey the significance of the kaupapa. In conjunction with this, it seemed foreseeable that my research would naturally progress in this direction, meaning that I would have to step outside my comfort zone and test larger scaled works. This revelation encouraged me to play around with space and through the art making process my work slowly became more focused on the portraiture and the messages it could

portray to the audience without the addition of the text – allowing the audience to create their own opinion about each piece.

3.3 Lysaght Watt Gallery

When initially planning for the exhibition, it seemed prudent to try and secure a Gallery space within either Taranaki, (because I whakapapa as well as grew up there) or Palmerston North (where I have been studying at University for the last seven years). I began contacting various Galleries in both rohe's. Fortunately I was successful with the Lysaght Watt Gallery, located in Hawera who had their full Gallery space available for December 2021. Personally it seemed significant that I had secured this space, while I have never lived in Hawera, I have numerous family members who have. In addition, my marae Waiokura is only twenty minutes away and my hometown of Opunake is around thirty minutes further up the coast.

Figure 32: Exhibition Window Vinyl

Spread across two rooms, my work visually shifted and developed as your eye followed the works around the room. Because of the seriousness and weight that is normally associated with mental illness, I had always wanted to convey a sense of lightness and calm within the pieces that I hoped to exhibit. Personally, I believe I achieved that through the colours that I chose to use as well as the overall placement of the artwork in the Gallery space.

Figure 33: Exhibition Opening

Printed at A0 size (841x1188mm) each piece was exhibited unframed with stainless steel clips and showcases a significant development in scale compared to the original prints that were shown (at A2 size, 420x594mm) for the exhibition *Te Matatau* at Te Manawa, Palmerston North. As you walk around the space, your eye follows the development of this particular body of work.

Chapter 4 : Exhibition Catalogue

4.1 Introduction

Confined to the first space are Figures 34, 35, 36 and 37, which showcase the unique combination of text and portraiture as they slowly change in miniscule ways. Named after the text that accompanies them, each sentence is reaffirmed and portrayed to the viewer.

Figure 34: I AM Afraid

Figure 35: Your mind is a battlefield

Figure 36: At war with myself

Figure 37: Break the cycle

Figure 38: A visitor inside my own brain

Figure 39: Well-being…?

Figure 40: Safety…?

Figure 41: Protection…?

Figure 42: Let's Talk…

4.2 Summary

Connecting to the second space via Figure 38, we see that the use of text is dwindling as the focus shifts from the full-body imagery to closer inspection of the face and therefore the masks. With these particular masked pieces, I wanted to further reaffirm the feelings of

protection and safety – which I achieved by also posing each title as a question to the audience, one that would make them analyse each piece and determine for themselves if they are what they appear to be. For example, is the subject in Figure 39 shown depicted in the birdlike mask, (which was historically worn by plague doctors) actually concerned with the wellbeing of its patients and therefore the audience…?

In addition to this, the final piece Figure 42, I titled *Let's talk…* which is a nod to one of my main artist's models the *Let's Talk Campaign.* As can be seen, the title of this piece does not feature a question mark like the other close ups, this was intentional because I wanted the title to almost feel like someone is encouraging the viewer that it is okay if you wanted to discuss anything while also indicating that there is the possibility of more to come following this series.

Conclusion

I have engaged with the creation of this work as part of my Postgraduate Diploma. As such, it creates a point of reference for the Masters exhibition, where I observed my engagement with earlier ideas and techniques and took them to another level – text, scale, mask selection, apparel etc. I reference particular artists due to the way that they engage with self-portraiture, not only of themselves but by how they use other people's portraits to transmit their individual responses to mental illness. My exhibition is organised in such a way that it presents the viewers with a sequential engagement with text and scale, culminating in the image being placed on a white background, with text relegated to the labels where questions are inevitably discarded (e.g. Figure 42).

In brief, Chapter One begins with an examination of the literature review, detailing particular artists that I have studied who on one hand either engage with the art of self-portraiture or with text. Split into three parts, I examine artists such as Glenn Ligon, Ralph Hotere, Kelcy Taratoa and more who have been pivotal references in the overall development of my research and art making. Following the analyse of these artists, I examine the *Let's Talk Campaign,* which uses an amalgamation of both text and portraiture to portray numerous individuals' personal experiences with mental illness – much like what I hoped to achieve with my own mahi.

Chapter Two explores some of my own artistic practice and the developments that myself as well as my art making undertook to arrive at the body of work which I showcased in my thesis exhibition. In particular, work from my first year masters show at Te Manawa in 2020 as well as the *Am I Safe?* series (from the #Make/Believe exhibition,2021) are analysed as they feature similar imagery and showcase some of my early decision making in the important initial stages that ultimately led to the creation of prints that are contained within my thesis exhibition. I describe to the viewer my process when creating these digital works before briefly touching on autoethnography – a research method which allowed and encouraged me to lean on my own personal experiences to further showcase the kaupapa of mental illness.

Following this, Chapter Three equally describes in detail some of my early research and decision making, but with a particular focus on my more recent experimentations that culminated in the creation of my thesis exhibition, *Masters of the Mask.* Alongside this the

Lysaght Watt Gallery space is likewise discussed before each individual piece featured in the exhibition is showcased within Chapter Four.

Glossary

Aotearoa - New Zealand

Atua - Ancestor with continuing influence, God, Deity

Iwi - Extended kinship group, Tribe

Kanohi ki te Kanohi - Face to face, In person

Kaupapa - Topic, Theme

Mahi - Work, Occupation

Mahi Toi - Art

Marae - Open area in front of the wharenui

Rangatahi - Younger generation, Youth

Rohe - Region, Territory

Whakapapa - Genealogy

Wharenui - Meeting House

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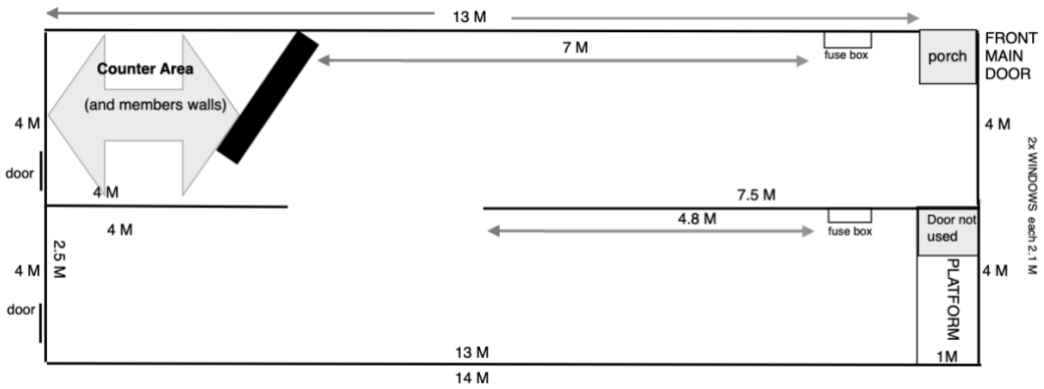
Appendices

Appendix 1: Lysaght Watt Gallery Floor Plan



Appendix 2: Promotional Poster for Masters of the Mask

Appendix 3: List of Sayings around Mental Illness

100 phrases to describe mental illness? the struggle of dealing with mental illness?? describe your own experiences with mental illness? what you say to people dealing with mental illness??

1) Your Mind is a battlefield
2) Struggling in Silence / Suffering in Silence
3) You are enough
4) Just keep swimming
5) Are you ok? - R U OK?
6) The walls are closing in
7) At war with myself
8) At war with my thoughts
9) little tied up rn
10) Fuck silence, make some noise
11) I matter
12) Live long and prosper
13) All good bro?
14) you're not alone
15) positivity and happiness
16) your fucking awesome
17) One every forty seconds (suicide stats)
18) Im proud of me
19) Impenetrable
20) What mask do you use?
21) What persona do you hide behind?
22) Silence isn't strength
23) don't let it define you
24) I give myself permission to feel
25) Keep fighting
26) its not weak to speak
27) You matter
28) Everyones fighting
29) take that small step
30) Im afraid
31) Constant battle
32) nothing changes if nothing changes
33) into the light
34) hiding behind the mask
35) im fine
36) Smile full of emptiness
37) destroyed by me
38) Masters of the Mask
39) Lets grow together
40) off days
41) Facing Nightmares
42) Alone
43) Into the light
44) the struggle is real
45) its not forever
46) Voiceless yet free
47) the struggles you face today are just the stepping stones for the success you will have tomorrow
48) if shadows could talk
49) breathe
50) the mental game
51) we are warriors
52) there is no light without shadow
53) Mistakes weren't made
54) be true to you
55) Stand as one