

## Assignment 1: Part 2, Creative Self Portrait

### CREATIVE EVALUATION:

I titled this piece as PAINFUL INSECURITIES, because in some way or another, I believe everyone can relate to pain, whether it is physical, psychological or emotional. But what we can also relate to, is how quickly we try to hide it from others. With HS, I have to dress my own wounds daily with bandages, or take myself to walk in centres if it's too deep or painful to self-manage. But waking up each day, applying makeup and wearing expressive hairstyles gave me confidence to still engage with society and feel safe in knowing I wasn't drawing attention to my painful insecurities.

In this self portrait, I'm showing myself perfecting a part of skin that I know everyone else will see, by 'caking my face'. But in a more hidden part of my body, I used one of my real wound dressings to show that I am literally trying to cover the pain I feel.



I chose to write the word 'PAIN' in red, because it's reflective of the actual blood stains that would begin to seep through usually within a few moments of it being applied. I regularly wore long sleeves and kept medical supplies close by, because I was not always able to visit a nurse to redress my skin, and still attend to my daily duties. The creative problems I encountered when producing the self portrait was trying to figure out how to capture pain in an abstract way, but I still resulted in being as literal as possible.

The technical issues I faced revolved around the editing of the image. In the unedited photo you would notice that by the time I captured this shot, my bandage was peeling and becoming stained, making it difficult to read. I overcame this by cloning the bandage from one of the first images I shot with Adobe Photoshop.

### WHY I CHOSE TO FOCUS ON HIDRADENITIS SUPPURATIVA:

Hidradenitis Suppurativa (HS) is a chronic autoimmune disease that affects the skin covering areas where lymph nodes are prominent. I was diagnosed on my 20th birthday, after quietly suffering 8 years of symptoms, and told that as far as medical specialists are concerned, HS has no cure, and no clear cause, and I would be on antibiotics or have general and plastic surgical treatment for the rest of my life, or if I'm lucky, until I begin menopause. This was also a year after being diagnosed with Rheumatoid Arthritis as a symptom of Lupus.

This affected my mental health on a great level, because it was bad enough knowing that my joints could just stop working at any random moment, but when my skin flared up with HS, it became so painful that making even the smallest movements were also impossible. There were days I could not walk, dress myself or even get in and out of a shower without support from my friends at university, or from my mum back at home. Because I am fearlessly independent, always prided myself on being helpful for others, and rarely asking for help for myself, it was hard for me to recognise my own needs or consider myself vulnerable. So I constantly attempted to suppress the pains I felt and hide it from others on a daily basis, even if it meant I had to make some extreme choices such as bingeing on alcohol during social interactions to numb any feelings of discomfort.

In 2014, my first assignment as a second year student in uni was to produce a creative self portrait, in which we needed to take a portrait capturing ourselves, or in other words, exposing the photographer. The one who somewhat 'hides' behind the lens... I had no idea what my identity was, nor could I think of a concept about myself that was worth capturing; all I did know was that I felt as though my personal identity was still under-developed and blindly insecure because my medical problems were so restricting of the things I truly wanted to explore in life.

On the plus side, this was the first time I realised how therapeutic photography can be as a practice for anyone suffering any form of mental health. It's a chance to capture things that reflect your thoughts, emotions, raw reality and become aware of what has had an influence on you, whether it was positive, or negative. This creative self portrait made me aware that I was suffering from high-functioning anxiety and depression. I drowned myself into a million jobs and tasks to distract myself from constantly worrying about the judgement of others. I overworked and stretched myself thin socially just to prove to myself that I could still do it all, despite my medical issues.

It was easy enough to pretend I was fine, as I had to cover my wounds daily I took comfort in knowing, nobody could see how bloody, gory and gross my wounds were, and I never revealed any visuals, convincing myself that HS wasn't 'normal' or 'common enough' for people I would speak to, not to have ignorant sounding responses or ask questions that I didn't even have the answers to. However, one of my best friends suggested I expose this very topic as part of my identity. He knew it would be challenging, humiliating and make me feel extremely vulnerable. But the physical pain I carried, was just a visual of the mental pain it triggered, and even more importantly, my truth.

When you're told your health condition is lifelong, it becomes a part of who you are, how you think, and what you believe you are capable or incapable of doing. I on the other hand refuse to accept this condition as part of me, but rather part of my journey. Therefore, I need to know how to manage it, and how to manage to inform others so they can understand a little easier what differs in mine and many other HS warriors' worlds from theirs. It has driven me to become more self-motivated to push through the daily pain and discomfort I feel, and own the disturbing/embarrassing symptoms. After completing and exhibiting this piece to other students,

it brought me out of hiding and encouraged me to be more vocal about my experiences for others to recognise and try to understand.

**Painful Insecurities by Laurelle-Maria Sterling**