MESSY

A Photographic Self Portrait by Hannah Moon

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Although I use photography as a means of self-expression, always being drawn to emotionally striking photographs that establish a specific mood or feeling, this depicted self-expression never actually pictured myself. I have always loved photographing portraits and revealing so much about a person, an idea, a mood, or otherwise from a simple glance by the subject and tone of the atmosphere.

As a rather introverted and self-conscious person, the term 'self-portrait' has never been in my vocabulary. Given the opportunity to assume such a task, much like I often do with other portraits, I approached it with the intention of displaying the deep, often hidden aspects of my character. In addition to visually depicting these introspective interior roles, I aimed to showcase external traits that define my character – whether these internal or external qualities exist as long-term definers or are instead a reflection of my current stage in life.

With a considerable amount of personal apprehension, I attempted to translate my anxieties and despondent mindsets with the serious expression and dramatically contrasted light and shadows. My more external character encompasses my love for art, where I am seen holding a paintbrush and a stick of charcoal. By combining the internal and external characteristics of myself, my serious composure also reflects much of my approach to art and my tendency to express my mood or inner feelings through it and photography. Furthermore, the charcoal smeared on my face and all over my hand, as well as the artfully painted cast of light and shadow, portray myself as messy and partly in the darkness to symbolize both my expressively artistic and occasionally morose person.

REVIEW:

When we consider the history of self-portraits, it's clear that a certain degree of narcissism or enhancement has often formed the basis for representing the self. As Susan Sontag states in her book On Photography, "the traditional function of portrait painting [was] to embellish or idealize the subject" (Sontag, 1973, p. 81). However, as expressed directly by thephoto's title "Messy," Hannah Moon's self-portrait strays far from idealization.

The way Moon sees it, portraits, as well as art and photography in general, are an opportunity to display raw and vividly honest self-expression. Her ultimate goal is to reveal as much about a person, idea, mood or otherwise from a simple glance at her photographs. Moon's portrait attempts to do just that, displaying both her exterior role as an artist, with the paintbrush and charcoal in hand, as well as the dark inner workings of her mind. The black smears of charcoal on her face and hand can easily couple with the paintbrush to merely represent the externally messy and sometimes dramatic nature of an artist. However, to settle upon this consensus would be to

overlook the image entirely. The aesthetics of abounding smudges, while an exemplification of artistry, also effectively reveal the messiness of her mind and self.

Understandably, Moon explains that she experienced "a considerable amount of personal apprehension" in her attempt to display her "anxieties and despondent mindsets" in a portrait. As she explains, "Overcoming the personal discomfort that I always feel in sharing and talking about myself was key for creating a self-portrait that I could look at and believe truly represented myself, at least at that point in my life" (Moon, 2018). Despite her trepidation, the dark and dramatically contrasted light and shadows effectively portray the dark inner workings of the human mind that she experiences. Whether or not the viewer relates to these same visually represented thoughts and feelings, one can't help but be struck by the highlighted parts of her charcoal-painted face and hand along with the palpable depth seen and felt by the contrasting darkness surrounding her.

The fact that no more than half of Moon's face is visible also speaks volumes to the intangible feelings that are still present and plague her but yet cannot be outwardly seen on an obvious surface-level. Additionally, with these dark shadows, one can also perceive a sense of her personal apprehension for displaying herself in such (ironically) revealing light – or doing so at all.

Considering the plethora of representational meaning behind many details of her portrait, as described in her artist statement, some of the profoundly mindful symbols of her inner and outer character may be lost to those who do not study the photo close or long enough, or perhaps to those who are strangers to Moon and these anxiety-ridden feelings. This dilemma is the price of nearly every artwork, especially portraits and those that are so personally connected to a person, feeling, concept, or the artists, themselves. Moon's translation of many of her intentions is subtle, like the symbolically represented darkness and messiness that parallels her mind.

However, this subtleness seems fitting to the conceptualized feelings, themselves, and if unclear at first, deserve an attempt at understanding such personalized examples of art.

Citations

Sontag, S. (1973). *On Photography.* New York, NY: RosettaBooks, LLC.

Moon, H. E. (2018). *Messy* [Photographic Print]. Stephen C. Hall Building, Georgia Institute of Technology [display], Hannah Moon, Atlanta.