Post-Truth Imagery Makes the Quest for Truth a Subversive Political Act

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Declaration of Authenticity

I, the undersigned, Marie Claire Farrugia declare that this dissertation is my original work, gathered and utilised especially to fulfil the purpose and objectives of this study, and has not been previously submitted to any other university. I also declare that the publications and archival material cited in this work have been personally consulted.

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Preface

This project entitled 'Post-truth Imagery Makes the Quest for Truth a Subversive Political Act', attempts at understanding the constantly evolving relationship with the truth, lies and emotions, through imagery, particularly imagery present online, especially social media. This research attempts at understanding how this disregard towards the truth and reality, has led to post-truth imagery. The presence of lies, particularly those online are now expected. This results in a public that is complacent. Which in itself is considered to be a post-truth reaction. With the final work the artist hopes that these themes will be brought forward and thus allow for discussion regarding the relationship the public has with lies and how this relationship impacts the public's behaviour and perception.

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Plates

List of Appendixes

Introduction

This project seeks to understand as well as deal with truth and reality in relation to images, particularly images available online, especially social media. It seeks to understand if these images are in fact a form of post-truth in their complete disregard towards truth and reality, due to the behaviour these images elicit. Imagery which has been edited or altered and which is being placed online is consumed by the public and in turn this is being converted into made-up forms of reality. This project attempts to understand this behaviour in relation to the truth.

This work and essay do not seek to explain, defend, or debate if post-truth is a newly emerged phenomenon or if it is really just a new word for lies. In this essay the term post-truth is being utilised to assess and attempt at understanding the current relationship individuals have with truth. This does not mean to say that this relationship is nowadays novel, however when taking it into context of the present environment, that where the internet has become so important in the way one experiences the world, the environment for this relationship has turned into a highly charged one and therefore this relationship has been impacted in some way or another.

Chapter 1 starts off trying to understand what appears to be the immediate and obvious signs and symptoms of this post-truth phenomenon, through Brexit, Donald Trump, reality television and social media. These examples serve as a means to start understanding post-truth. This chapter then further delves into assessing factors which the public might not be aware of that trigger these signs and symptoms. Such as Colin Burrow's algo-lie [1], lies and the relationship between emotion and truth. Finally, this chapter then discusses the causes of these symptoms, the driving force behind these behaviours. It assesses, the publics modes of perceptions and how this impacts truth and reality as well as the establishment that has the authority and power to allow these symptoms to propagate.

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[1] Colin Burrow, 'Fiction and the Age of Lies', *London Review of Books*, vlii, 4 (2020), 8. Retrieved on 02 November 2020 from: https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n04/colin-burrow/fiction-and-the-age-of-lies.

The next two chapters document the process of how the final work evolved, in relation to the theoretical aspects discussed in Chapter 1 and the imagery available online, particularly social media. These chapters discuss the various works created using different techniques related to the way one interacts with truth and lies. In Chapter 2 self-portraits and selfies are the main focal point, whereas in Chapter 3 the subject of the Judgement of Paris is introduced as well as experimentation with Pantone® swatch standards.

Finally, Chapter 4 describes the final layout, work and technical aspects of the work that was presented. The initial part of this chapter delves into the layout for the installation and the paintings. It then goes into detail for the individual fractions of the final work. The painting depicting the Judgment of Paris, how it was created, what is seeks to represent and its execution are discussed. The second part of this chapter then delves into the set-up of the panopticon room through which one views the Judgement of Paris, and how this mode of viewing it is important to how information is consumed.

Research pertaining to the self-image, truth, and the impact the internet has on one's experiences, is hardly a novel topic. However, a gap is present for research dealing with the impact of one's apathetic relationship with truth and lies, particularly on how one presents oneself online. This modern relationship served as the foundation for this research as well as the basis for this artistic practice.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Rise of Post-Truth

Post-truth did not emerge with the inauguration of Donald Trump as the new American president in the 2016 election. Nor was it ushered in by Kellyanne Conway's famous interview, where she claimed that the Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, gave 'alternative facts' when defending the number of people at that same inauguration. [2] According to Matthew D'Ancona, in that interview, Conway gave a colloquial form to Nietzsche's famous dictum 'there are no facts, only interpretations'. [3] However, this would mean if there are no facts, there can be no alternative facts either. Post-truth was also not established when the Oxford Dictionaries named 'Post-Truth' the word of the year in 2016 and defined it as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. [4] However, one should not assume that emotions are of any less value than facts, or that appealing to emotions is in fact taking us further from the truth. The relationship between emotions and truth will be further discussed in Section 1.5.

The term 'post-truth' was first used in 1992 in an article in the *Nation* by the Serbian-American writer Steve Tesich. In his article Tesich argued that the number of scandals that were uncovered, such as Watergate and President Clinton's affair, left the public traumatised and thus caused them to turn away from the truth. [5]

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[2] Kellyanne Conway (2017) Interviewed by Chuck Todd . *Meet the Press, NBC News*. 22 January 2017. Retrieved on 02 November 2020 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSrEEDQgFc8.

[3] Matthew D'Ancona, *Post-Truth. The new war on truth and how to fight back*, London, Ebury Press, 2017, 14.

[4] Oxford Languages, Word of the Year, 2016. Accessed on 25 January 2020 from https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/.

[5] D'Ancona, 9.

In *The Death of Truth*, Michiko Kakutani states that the popularity of relativism has been increasing in the culture wars since the 1960s. Initially it was the New Left and academics, pushing a post-modernist idea, that encouraged this shift away from a universal truth and into promoting smaller personal truths. These arguments have now been taken up by the populist Right. With this shift, perceptions therefore start being shaped by cultural and social forces thus leading to further segregation, as people with similar ideologies find people with like-minded ideals to support one another. This shift towards relativism is characterised by several transitions, such as the switch from religion to spirituality. Religions usually sustain a more rigid structure whereas spirituality allows for flexibility. It promotes a philosophy associated with "self-fulfillment'', "live in the present'' and instant gratification. [6] The rise of narcissism and subjectivity is epitomized by the 'Me Decade' as well as the rise in popularity of selfies. [7] This obsession and importance given to the self is further discussed in Chapter 2, where several experiments were done to assess, challenge and question the rise in selfies present in contemporary culture i.e. the glorification of the self-image.

1.2 Brexit and Donald Trump as post-truth?

Brexit and Trump are almost always immediately classified to be a result of post-truth, albeit by parties that were in favour of the opposite outcome. In his book *Post-Truth. The new war on truth and how to fight back,* Matthew D'Ancona contends that the campaign in favour of Brexit, which made use of post-truth tactics, sought for a simple campaign that resonated with the public for its simple narrative on something that was both technical and abstract. Whilst the 'Remain' campaign bombarded voters with facts and statistics, thus lacking that emotional connection which was so successful in Trump's 2016 electoral campaign, 'Make America Great Again'. [8] Silvio Berlusconi, before Trump, was already using emotionally charged slogans such as 'Forza Italia' and populist politics however, interestingly enough,

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[6] Carlos De Angelis, 'The rise of post-truth and how to build customized gods', Uno, 27 (2017), 38.
[7] Michiko Kakutani, The Death of Truth, London, William Collins, 2019, 18
[8] D'Ancona, 17.

despite similarities between him and Trump, the post-truth label is never really associated with Berlusconi.

Sir Roger Scruton argues that 'post-truth' is used to explain the Brexit result to those that were not pleased with the outcome. Scruton explains that Brexit was about identity and the public refused to listen to the experts who were using a language that was no longer relatable.

When it comes to President Trump, Scruton admits that this ''post-truth' accusation does appear to stick'. For Trump, there is no distinction between the truth and falsehood. Anything contrary to what he says, he would label it as 'fake news' through Twitter so that readers can read it and move on. [9] However, Scruton still believes that everyone, excluding Donald Trump and deluded academics, have a form of truth within our consciousness, which will willingly be corrected should sufficient data be presented showing otherwise.

In Chapter 2 the reality of our appearances is further discussed to assess the extent of truth in one's consciousness when determining when someone's appearance is real or not. Humans have always sought to alter their appearance, be it to look better or to conform to trends through the use of make-up and clothes. Thanks to social media, the use of filters on a number of applications has made enhancing appearances the norm. Considering the amount of time, the majority of people spend online, can filters be equated to make-up or a form of plastic surgery for our online selves?

When applying a filter, one knowingly does so, unless it is the automatically installed 'Beautify' feature integrated into most phones, which one must go through the settings to eliminate. Generally, a filter is used to enhance one's features, however the public may or may not pick up on that. However, what is interesting is that even though the public might know that a filter is being used, filters are still used unabashedly.

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[9] Roger Scruton, 'Post Truth? It's pure nonsense'', *The Spectator* (2017). Retrieved on 16 February 2020 from: https://www.spectator.co.uk/2017/06/post-truth-its-pure-nonsense/.

1.3 Reality TV and Social Media

According to D'Ancona, one of the defining characteristics of the post-truth era is that reality and entertainment now have the same boundaries. One no longer uses rationality to identify the truth but now one gets to select one's reality and one's falsehoods. [10] A funeral was organised for a gamer who died of COVID-19 complications and the online community organised a virtual procession where hundreds of people all over the world attended. The procession started at midnight where the players organised a procession that lasted half an hour and all who attended were dressed in black attire. [11] Is a virtual funeral any less than the real thing? Marshall McLuhan discussed the new form tribalisation, that is being promoted via media, and he claims this in turn strips us of individualism. [12] If one is selecting a form of reality one cannot choose something that is not real. Nowadays, one selects one option over another based on what they want or what appeals to them, and not on facts. This way of selecting has now become acceptable.

Reality and entertainment nowadays seem to be consumed in similar ways by the public, as demonstrated by Trump himself. A clear example of this is the first debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden for the 2020 presidential election. Where the debate was proved to be entertaining to watch, yet useless to everyone watching.

The ironically named popular genre of Reality TV gives viewers the much craved for narrative by 'documenting' a group of people going about their everyday lives in a scripted way. [13] When discussing his mockumentary film *I'm Still Here,* on the David Letterman Show in 2010*,* Joaquin Phoenix discusses how reality shows are believed by the viewers

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[10] D'Ancona, 56.

[11] Josh K. Elliott, ''Final Fantasy' gamers hold online funeral for player who died of COVID-19', *Global News* (17 April 2017). Retrieved on 02 November 2020 from https://globalnews.ca/news/6832247/coronavirus-video-game-funeral/.

[12] Michael MacDonald, 'Empire and Communication: the Media Wars of Marshall McLuhan.' *Media, Culture & Society*, xxviii, 4 (2006), 515.

[13] D'Ancona, 55.

because they are built to be real and people use their real names, even though entire scenes are staged and disclaimers are made. [14]

In the 1935 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin claims that the camera penetrates reality, like a surgeon penetrating tissue. The painter, on the other hand, like a magician, maintains a distance from the subject. [15] This was also echoed by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) when discussing the Louds family. 'The camera lens, like a laser, comes to pierce lived reality to put it to death'. However, when assessing the cameras impact on social media, as well as reality shows, Benjamin's comparison of the camera to a surgeon's knife seems to be almost too flattering to these forms of entertainment. The public, as well as the mainstream entertainment industry seem to have replaced Benjamin's surgeon's knife with a rubber one. Unlike the Louds on television, where their reality was attacked, users of social media and reality television stars behave in a certain way that conforms to a way that will increase views. Reality is nowadays being shaped by television and social media. Social media accounts, and mobile phones now alter our behaviour and change our reality. Baudrillard claims that with reality TV the TV becomes a manipulator of truth, and according to Baudrillard this is also the end of the panopticon. [16]

In the original Panopticon, as intended by Jeremy Bentham, the prisoners are being watched, however they cannot see when they are being watched. As a result, the prisoners monitor their own behaviour thus behave better. [17] With reality TV and social media the public has now become the prisoner as one modifies one's own behaviour to match that of reality TV or social media and the media serves as the judge. However, Baudrillard believes that the panopticon is no longer. "There is no longer a submission to the model, or to the gaze

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[14] Joaquin Phoenix (2010) Interviewed by David Letterman. *David Letterman Show*. 22 September. Retrieved on 17 February 2020 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97pPMzESi6s.

[15] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London, New York, Toronto, Penguin Books, 2008, 25.

[16] Jean Baudrillard, 'The end of the Panopticon', *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

[17] Jeremy Bentham, 'Letter I: Idea of the Inspection Principle', *Panopticon: or, The inspection-house. Containing the idea of a new principle of construction applicable to any sort of establishment, in which persons of any description are to be kept under inspection,* Thomas Byrne (ed.), Dublin, 1791, 1-3.

"YOU are the model!" "You are the majority!". The public has become their own models according to Baudrillard. The focal point has been abolished as media has infiltrated into the real. Thus, the public has become all Louds now. Baudrillard asks us to think of the media as if in orbit, a genetic code that directs the mutation of the real into the hyperreal. [18] However, the question here is what, or who, is controlling the media? What is the overarching power? Is this all up to chance, same as the genetic code? Some form of manipulation of the media still has to be present and thus is the panopticon really as over as Baudrillard claims it to be?

In his essay, Benjamin also analyses the relationship between play actors, film actors and the audience. During a play the actor is present in person, whereas for an audience seeing a film the actor is not present. However, the actor is being presented to the audience through a piece of equipment. The equipment is not required to respect the performance and present it to the audience in its entirety, as it is guided by the operator. Unlike a play actor, the screen actor cannot form a relationship with the audience. A play actor has the potential to alter his performance depending on the audience, however the screen actor is deprived of this. The audience is no longer empathising with the actor but instead it is empathising with the camera's depiction of the actor. [19] Benjamin discusses Pirandello statement regarding the actors' alienation in front of the film camera to a person's feeling of surprise and displeasure when confronted with their mirror-image. However, in film the reflection is separated and is now placed in front of an audience. [20]

Pirandello claims that in film alienation between the actor and the audience is due to having the camera's depiction of the actor filtering his/her performance. [21] [22] When assessing particularly selfies in video format, where the user is doing a monologue intended to either motivate, sell, self-promote etc, the camera or operator's depiction is being eliminated from

[18] Jean Baudrillard, 'The end of the Panopticon', *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, 1994.
[19] Benjamin, 18.
[20] Benjamin, 21.
[21] Benjamin, 21.
[22] Irving Singer, *Reality Transformed: Film and Meaning and Technique,* Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1998, 145.

this equation as the user self-curates him/herself and now the interaction is directly between the user and the public. Could one possibly attempt to equate social media with theatre? One would expect Pirandello's alienation to be absent on social media, however this is probably hardly the case. One might argue that the user and the film actor cannot be equated, that the user seeks to attempt at being 'real' whereas the actor knows that s/he is presenting a fiction. Maybe it's the user's naivety that still allows for alienation to be present. As one expects a genuine connection but is still left craving.

1.4 Post-Truth, Lying and Fictions

D'Ancona emphasises for a number of times throughout his book that post-truth is not the same as lying. Burrow, unlike D'Ancona, is hesitant to claim that this is a post-truth world. However, both Burrow and D'Ancona agree that post-truth is a result of the altered way people experience and think about the truth and evidence, with indifference and then complicity. [23]

On the other hand, the way one thinks about and responds to lies has not changed as much as how we respond to the truth. [24] Lying has always been present in politics. However, nowadays it is not the lies that are new, but the public's response to them. Looking at the current political atmosphere D'Ancona and Burrow's claim easily holds. Kakutani insists that should portions of the public have not been completely indifferent towards the truth and not influenced by partisan terms, a candidate that was exposed during the electoral campaign for his lies and fraudulent business deals, would not have such popular support. [25] Democracy is being threatened because of this lack of distinction between fact and fiction and true and false. It is this indifference that makes people the ideal subject of a totalitarian rule, not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist. [26]

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[23] D'Ancona, 26.
[24] Colin Burrow, 8.
[25] Kakutani, 16.
[26] Kakutani, 11.

In his article, Burrow states that an age of post-truth would imply that there was an age of truth to begin with or an age where the truth was known. [27] In T. J. Clark's *Picasso and Truth*, Clark debates how Picasso's cubist paintings and the painting *Young Girls Dancing* encapsulates the shift from the 'ascetic ideal' to when the will to truth is questioned as discussed by Nietzsche. The 1911 cubist works were the final push in truth-telling. Appearances were pushed to the side in exchange for structures and ideals. The maenad dancing in *Young Girls Dancing* is the 'lie personified', as Picasso looks back at his cubist works and tries to eradicate this. [28]

However, when it comes to the term 'post-truth' the Oxford dictionary editors emphasise that the term ''exemplifies an expansion in the meaning of the prefix *post-* that has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Rather than simply referring to the time after a specified situation or event – as in *post-war* or *post-match* – the prefix in *post-truth* has a meaning more like 'belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant'. This nuance seems to have originated in the mid-twentieth century, in formations such as *post-national* (1945) and *post-racial* (1971).'' [29]

Burrow delves into two key features that tend to be neglected when discussing what constitutes lying. The first being that lying is dependent on the predatory relationship between the liar and the person being lied to. This is because the liar knows just what to say to get the person being lied to to believe the lie. Secondly, the liar usually believes he knows the impact the lie will have. However, this is seldom the case as a lie generates an unpredictable emotional response which gives rise to more lies. [30]

The distinction between lies and fictions is also explored by Burrow. A lie is spoken by someone that knows that what s/he is saying is false and is doing so with the intention to deceive the person listening to that content. Fiction on the other hand is not true, however it

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[27] Burrow, 6.

[28] T.J. Clark. *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica*, New Jersey, Oxfordshire, Princeton University Press, 2013, 128 – 132.

[29] Oxford Languages, Word of the Year, 2016. Accessed on 25 January 2020 from https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/.

[30] Burrow, 2.

does not have the intention to deceive. [31] In Schembri Bonaci's recommendation of Malcom Bull's *Inventing Falsehood, Making Truth*, Bull discusses how Gianbattista Vico accepts that fables are lies. However, Vico argues that fables and myths serve as a true narration. Vico echos Bellori's views on the roles of poets and artists in relation to truth. Poets and artists, like history all have an equal drive in pursuing the truth. History focuses on particular facts, whereas poets and artists focus on the ideal truth i.e., the universal ideal by using natural beauty and in doing so become superior to nature itself. [32]

Pablo Picasso's famous quote 'art is a lie that makes us realize truth,' [33] further affirms Burrow and Vico's claim. However it would be interesting to challenge this theory with photography. It might be possible to claim that photographs are in fact lies that show us a truth, but what about when a photograph has been edited? Edited with the purpose to show a better version of reality, like Brian Walski's photograph of a British soldier, where he combined two images taken a few seconds apart to create another image? [34] What about self-portraits with enhanced features, such as selfies. Can this be considered on the same lines as Walski's case? Throughout the course of this research and as discussed later on in Chapter 2, this relationship between truth, lies and their impact on the audience, if at all, was pivotal.

Figure 1: The top two photos were combined to make the third photograph

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[31] Burrow, 2.

[32] Malcom Bull, *Inventing Falsehoods, Making Truth: Vico and Neapolitan Painting*, Princeton, Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2013, 40-41.

[33] Pablo Picasso, Statement, in *Theories of Modern Art: A Sourcebook by Artists and Critics*. Herschel B. Chipp (ed.), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1968, 264.

[34] Duncan Campbell, 'US war photographer sacked for altering image of British soldier', *The Guardian* (3 Apr 2003). Retrieved on 03 November 2020 from https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/apr/03/pressandpublishing.Iraqandthemedia.

1.5 Emotion and Truth

Narrative fictions that successfully trigger emotions, similar to the ones that would be evoked should one have been present in the event itself, are a useful tactic in presenting something to look like the truth. [35] This is something most politicians are currently using, a defining characteristic in what is now being called post-truth world. [36]

D'Ancona discusses how truth is giving way to the rise of emotional narrative. Since the enlightenment and scientific revolution, rationality, and priority of truth, which served as the basis of social organisation, pushed narratives to the side. [37] Additionally, postmodernism led to the questioning of the very notion of objective truth, through its encouragement for deconstruction. As a result, institutions were viewed as a social construct and therefore one has to question 'what is false?'. [38] What the postmodernists did was to present a new kind of relativism, one without meta-narratives. [39]

On the other hand, in his essay Burrow assesses the point when the person being lied to is made aware of the lie. This gives rise to emotional chaos and betrayal of trust. When one realises they have been lied to one's perceptual vulnerability is exposed. [40] Therefore emotion is still a vital factor in how one experiences and deals with truth. It is through emotion that one experiences both reality and truth even though this is at times used to occlude the path to truth.

When discussing and analysing lies, it is usually always the liar's intentions that are given precedence. Lying is a social act that is dependent on the beliefs of the person being lied to. As the victims' prejudices play a vital role in the success of a lie. [41]

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[35] Burrow, 3.
[36] D'Ancona, 31.
[37] D'Ancona, 31.
[38] D'Ancona, 92.
[39] D'Ancona, 94.
[40] Burrow, 3.
[41] Burrow, 3.

1.6 Algorithms

History of lying has led one to believe that lies are always associated with a liar. Fiction ought to teach readers to question themselves for their willingness to accept lies. Nowadays the algo-lie has been introduced. The algo-lie, as defined by Burrow, is a lie that is 'algorithmically created to elicit a response from a microtargeted audience by feeding the audience drips of misinformation'. So now the liar has been removed and the lies are only based on prejudices. [42]

Burrow emphasises that even though the algo-lie is something new, it still consists of features present in other forms of lying. Firstly, the algo-lie is generated by feedback between the person being lied to and the liar, and secondly the algo-lie also elicits emotions which the lie would not have predicted. With the algo-lie the person to blame for the lie is lost. In turn this leads to collective gullibility or anger towards those that do not realise they have been played. [43]

1.7 Counteracting post-truth and the algo-lie

Burrow claims that fiction writers need to find a way to deal with this algo-lie. The increase in algo-lies coincides with the rise in auto-fiction narratives, such as *My Struggle* by Karl Ove Knausgaard. So far authors that have tried, have only produced works which were angry and targeted an audience that had the same beliefs as them. This is not addressing the issue that people are split algorithmically into target groups and therefore this cannot be the solution. If fiction targets only the perspectives of a particular type of audience, it is not doing its job as it would sound like lies to those that do not want to believe it. [44] This was in fact the case with Joseph Farrugia's '*The Goldfinch*' which over glorified the late journalist

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[42] Burrow, 7.
[43] Burrow, 8.
[44] Colin Burrow, 'Fiction and the Age of Lies', *London Review of Books*, vlii, 4 (2020). Retrieved on 02 November 2020 from: https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n04/colin-burrow/fiction-and-the-age-of-lies.

Daphne Caruana Galizia with his literal works and left anyone disagreeing with Farrugia's views anything but swayed. [45]
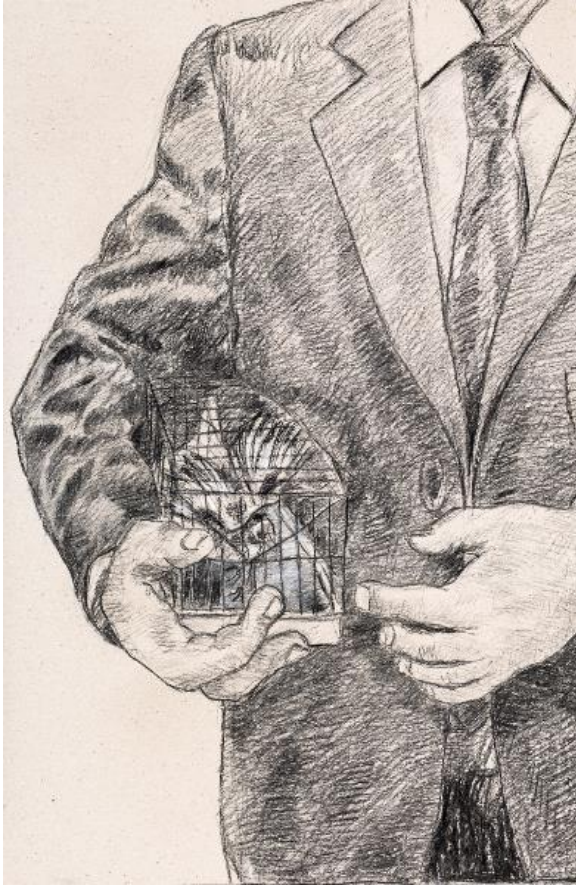
Figure 2: Joseph Farrugia, *Big Brother*, 2020.   Figure 3: Joseph Farrugia, *Libel*, 2020

Burrow ends his essay by calling out for a novel that channels the anger of a person being lied to. It needs to get into the heads of people that believe lies without ridiculing them whilst having the risk of making those lies almost possess the compelling authority of truths. It is exactly this that was trying to be achieved with the Pantone® swatches which are discussed in Chapter 3 of this essay. By taking a universal standard and turning it into a lie, those viewing it would not be attacked but it would hopefully provide the audience with a space where the relationship with the truth and lies can be assessed.

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[45] Joanna Demarco, EXHIBITION: The cage and the bird that did not stop singing, *The* Shift, 2020. Retrieved on 24 July 2020 from https://theshiftnews.com/2020/10/09/exhibition-the-cage-and-the-bird-that-did-not-stop-singing/

In his last chapter D'Ancona encourages the public to revert back to the enlightenment categories which were attacked in the early twentieth century. D'Ancona believes that this can be achieved by fact-checking. In order to deal with post-truth, D'Ancona emphasises that one must be selective and critical of everything one reads, and this skill should be taught from a young age. [46] Large companies such as Google and Facebook should recognise the responsibility they have in information distribution and therefore should implement systems that fact-check. [47] On the other hand Burrow argues such an argument for fact-checking is usually put forward by people that cannot fully comprehend the strength of the algo-lie. [48] When it comes to painting, during the initial phases of this research painting realistic human figures was being considered with the aim that the viewer can compare and contrast a real body with that on social media by presenting truth and giving it importance.

Since, according to D'Ancona, post-truth is an 'emotional phenomenon', lies cannot be counteracted through facts only. D'Ancona argues that one must therefore be intelligent in counteracting post-truth. [49] Simply presenting facts and a well-organised argument, as is being done with *Bellingcat*, might not be enough. Facts need to be presented in a way that is both emotional and rational. [50]

D'Ancona also calls for counter-narratives, such as Harvey Milk's 'Hope Speech' on the 10 March 1978 on celebrating differences and Danny Boyle's 2012 Olympics opening ceremony. It is imperative that these counter-narratives allow for honesty and discussion whilst acknowledging the public's anxieties. [51] Something which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez successfully seems to be doing with her approachable and relatable image. Ocasio-Cortez manages to present current affairs, as well as a number of policies, through a number of platforms, in an easy and well-informed manner.

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[46] D'Ancona, 113.
[47] D'Ancona, 117.
[48] Burrow, 9.
[49] D'Ancona, 126.
[50] D'Anconca, 127.
[51] D'Ancona, 132.

Ridicule is another strong method to mock lies. An example of this is Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* where Hitler is reduced to a ridiculous figure, as well as Alec Baldwin's Trump impersonation [52] However, as discussed earlier, this must be done cautiously and intelligently. Taika Waititi's representation of Hitler in his film *Jojo Rabbit* misses the mark with his satirization of Hitler as nowadays this is too easy and pointless, as this poses no threat.

Despite the multitude of advertisements and influencers showing how easy it is to look a certain way, the public are still left feeling lacking. The public is constantly fed to want more and buy more. D'Ancona and Carlos De Angelis claim that consumption allows for the passivity that is vital for post-truth to proliferate. [53] This occurs when what one buys is given more of a priority than things one can do in their neighbourhoods; when one talks more to 'online friends' rather than real ones and when the notion of 'public space' has been reduced to the screen in our hands. All this takes away from the strength of the local community and the public's civic spirit. [54]

President Trump has replaced the standards of public life with the criteria of success in show business. [55] Are influencers and most social media users replacing the standards of life with celebrity criteria? D'Ancona believes that the gap created between the grandiose unattainable promises made and reality, will result in disappointment and mistrust. As a result the cycle will start over again. [56]

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[52] D'Ancona, 136.
[53] Carlos De Angelis, 38.
[54] D'Ancona, 141.
[55] D'Ancona, 138.
[56] D'Ancona, 148.

1.8 Reproductions

In his 1935 essay, Benjamin strives to analyse how technology and the modern ease of reproductions has and will influence and alter our relationship with art, as well as arts function within modern times. He starts by stating that art has always been reproducible, from bronzes and terracottas to all forms of printing leading up to photography. [57] The introduction of photography dismissed the hand's duty of pictorial reproductions. [58]

Virtual art, or digital art, which is not printed but only viewed through a screen and therefore easily accessible to a number of people, does not occupy a definite presence in time and space. Therefore, it must never have an aura. According to Benjamin, reproduction by technological means reduces the aura of a work and it is this fading aura that is resulting in our change in perception. [59] A digital artwork is not any more genuine on one website than another. Does a digital work have to be printed in limited quantities to maintain an aura? Or does the original Photoshop file have more of an aura than a print? Or is anything confined to a screen stripped of the possibility of having an aura?

It was art's ability to be reproduced by technological means that allowed for art to be created for arts sake by shedding away its initial purpose pertaining to rituals and religion. [60] Works of art are received and appreciated based on two points, the emphasis on the cultic value and the emphasis on the display value. Initially it started out with cultic value being the most important. The presence of artistic productions that serve a cultic purpose is more important than the fact that they are seen. As artistic production becomes cut off from the religious context, opportunities for displaying increase. Technological methods allow for greater displayability and therefore the cultic value decreases. Thus, the work of art is becoming an image with new functions, namely artistic function which can be considered to be incidental. [61]

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[57] Benjamin, 3.
[58] Benjamin, 4.
[59] Benjamin, 9.
[60] Benjamin, 11.
[61] Benjamin, 12.

1.9 Reality and Modes of Perception

In the article 'Real Fictions' by Hal Foster, Foster seeks to delve into understanding how the relationship with reality has evolved from the nineteenth century to today. Foster starts off with modernism, and how reality was considered to be something that had to be unearthed. He explains how for Marx truth can be attained by looking at accounts from all classes, not just the accounts of the stronger ones, as is usually the case. For Freud, dreams and slip-ups must be analysed to get past the subjectivity of life and its psychic conflict. As for Nietzsche, it is the will to power that is the driving force that propels any system. The Frankfurt school tackled these three approaches and led to the identification of the relationship between humans and the factory. The honest view of reality has been lost behind the numerous representations individuals are surrounded with. Bertolt Brecht believed that exposing the reality behind these representations can only be achieved via an image, text, or both. An example of this would be Barbra Kruger's work. Incorporating text into the works will be further assessed in Chapter 3 and 4 of this essay. [62]

Schembri Bonaci discusses the relationship between reality and modes of perception and the impact of this in his introduction to the essay '*Shostakovich, Britten, Stravinsky, and the painters in between: 1936*'. Perceiving reality is dependent on a number of individual variables, such as individual experiences, knowledge, belief and political or class allegiances. To sustain this claim Schembri Bonaci refers to Michael Baxandall's thesis. Baxandall deals with the idea that the way in which an object is perceived is dependent on our visual behaviour. In turn our visual behaviour is determined biologically, culturally and also by our different individual experiences. Changes in our visual behaviour impact not only how one sees, but how one thinks and therefore how one behaves. Thus, altering our understanding of reality. [63]

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[62] Hal Foster, 'Real Fictions', *Artforum International*, lv, 8 (2017), 1.

[63] Schembri Bonaci, *Shostakovich, Britten, Stravinsky, and the painters in between: 1936*, Horizons, 2014, 28.

Modes of perception are determined by established structures of thought, politics and power which in turn reflect, as Theodore Adorno stated, the hegemonic power relationship. Is this apathy towards what is true and what is false resulting in a shift in our modes of perception? Are the current authorities promoting this shift? Authorities now supply the public with various narratives that confirm certain biases. According to TJ Clark, authorities have the potential to control thought and, by disrupting the established visual behaviour, art has the capacity to stimulate critical thinking. Subversive art exists within the tension between seeing, behaviour and thought. Gustav Courbet's *The Burial of Ornans* is one such example. It challenged the bourgeoisies world view and in turn their place within it. [64] Picasso's *Guernica* and *Demoiselles D'Avignon* also challenge the viewers mode of perception by disrupting the public's structures of thought. [65] By stimulating critical thinking, not only does art become a political act but so does the act of seeing. [66]

Foster then delves into modern myths which 'present specific beliefs as general truth'. [67] For many artists, Roland Barthes *Mythologies* (1957) showed them how certain accepted beliefs should be thought of critically. This led to the tearing apart of the structures that held the real together and it is at this point of the argument that Foster links this to the rise of image appropriation.

It is image appropriation, as well as sign and symbols that lead to Foster's claim that the narrative does not copy the real but in 'copying a (depicted) copy of the real'. [68] This is why realism cannot be considered to copy but is in fact a '*pasticheur*'. This Foster claims to have led to the emergence of the postmodernist artist. It would be interesting to apply the notion of '*pastiche*' to the twenty-first century idealised face that is made up of a 'tan skin tone, a South Asian influence with the brows and eye shape, an African-American influence

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[64] Schembri Bonaci, 30.
[65] Schembri Bonaci, 25-26.
[66] Schembri Bonaci, 16.
[67] Foster, 2.
[68] Foster, 2.

with the lips, a Caucasian influence with the nose, a cheek structure that is predominantly Native American and Middle Eastern.' [69]

Before discussing postmodernism, Foster delves into Barthes traumatophilie - where accidental repetition of a past trauma is triggered when viewing a work and thus surprises the viewer. In this framing it is not 'the critic that exposes the real' but 'the real exposes the subject'. [70] The subject and the real is no longer framed using codes, but in this case the subject is a witness to a traumatic reality. During this research this was touched upon by highlighting common everyday imperfections, such as pimples, acne scars, cellulite etc, imperfections which the first instinct is to cover up or filter out. In creating these depictions would a traumatophilie reaction be triggered? Thus, bringing in the viewers reality onto the work?

With regards to the relationship between art and reality in the twentieth century, Schembri Bonaci claims that reality was displaced by art and this introduced a new facet to this relationship. This view attacks the idea of visual behaviour and noting the object's character. Leading to the question of: what is one seeing when looking at art as life? If the artwork one is viewing is life, will it trigger perception? This closes the gap between art and life, [71] a clear example of this is Damien Hirst's *Pharmacy*. [72] In his *Post Scriptum*, Schembri Bonaci concludes on this by arguing that taking mystification out of art sterilises it, and strips art from its subversive power. 'Art' thus becomes nothing more than an advert. If art is indistinguishable from our environment, then one cannot help but ask 'where is the art?' [73]

Postmodernism has now freed the signifier from the signified. In his article, Foster discusses how Jameson linked this to the present capitalist system which thrives on this. Simulacra is an example of this form of reality, where copies are produced for the only purpose of being mass-produced. The questioning of authority brought about by

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[69] Jia Tolentino, 'The Age of Instagram Face', *The New Yorker* (12 December 2019). Retrieved on 26 December 2019 from https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face.
[70] Foster, 2.
[71] Schembri Bonaci, 46.
[72] Schembri Bonaci, 146.
[73] Schembri Bonaci, 146-147.

postmodernism led to the inability of claiming truth present in any reality at all, thus giving rise to nihilism, where everything is only a construction. [74]

Foster refers to Latour when discussing reality as something that is fragile and should be handled with care. This is something currently very evident in recent documentary practice. Nowadays art focuses on constructing rather than deconstructing. Foster delves into the importance of reconstruction of events in order to provide the public with the whole picture of a subject. In view of the increased control on data of governments and corporations i.e., satellite imaging and information mining, these authorities have the power to select the information presented to the public. Eyal Weizman's 'forensic architecture' seeks to challenge this. [75] Another example would be the film *Bellingcat* (2018) and Lawrence Abu Hamdan's exhibition 'The Voice before the Law' (2019). [76] [77] It would also be interesting to delve into the question of influence and the extent authorities have always had on the information available to us and how far back this goes.

1.10   The Establishment

Growing propaganda as a result of technological reproductions is a change Benjamin noticed in his essay 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions', and it was and still is the means used to construct myths, especially when culture is in the hands of the powerful. The environment nowadays has become oversaturated with images and videos competing for our attention with the aim to manipulate public opinion or profit economically. [78] The internet and social media are massive contributors to this. As a result of the constant bombardment of stimuli people are left feeling disassociated and distracted. In Andy Warhol's 'Death and Disaster works, by repeating a truth over and over again Warhol reduced these photographs shock impact and in doing so devalued their truth.

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[74] Foster, 2.
[75] Foster, 3.
[76] *Bellingcat* [film], Submarine Production, Netherlands, 2018.
[77] Lawrence Abu Hamdan: The Voice Before the Law, Nationalgalerie Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (2019). Retrieved on 22 December 2019 from https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/nationalgalerie/exhibitions/detail/lawrence-abu-hamdan.html.
[78] Carolina Pina, 'True Friends: Legal Limits of Fake News', *Uno*, 27 (2017), 41.

Capitalism manages to successfully suppress any critical thinking via its blitz of globalised mass-media and infinite supply of mentally numbing sources of entertainment, be it reality shows, [79] series, YouTube videos, Instagram posts and stories. A number of people no longer sit down and read entire articles, think and challenge. They read headlines and empty articles and move on to the next piece of news or trivia because of the influx of data constantly being fired. François Cusset comments that 'attention has become the central object of the capitalist economy' in the twenty-first century. [80] In Chapter 2, works dealing with the way social media is experienced, comment on this constant blur of images one is surrounded with. This constant appetite, pulling for attention was further assessed in this research by assessing the use of repetition of content.

Gramsci's cultural hegemony discusses how a capitalist society maintains power ideologically, more so than violence and politics. It deals with how the avant-garde, unlike the bohemians, sided with power. Nowadays the avant-garde is the establishment. Revolutionary works such as Malevich's the *Black Square* were taken in by the art market and exploited, thus stripping it from its impact. Works which initially troubled us and were subversive have now 'transformed into the Establishment world view.' [81] As Adorno stated, the culture industry promoted by the authorities, removes all form of subversion from art, and in doing so silences critical thinking. [82] Schembri Bonaci claims that it is vital to maintain a revolutionary perception so as to oppose the dominant view. One can attempt to apply this to the current political atmosphere. If currently authorities are promoting a post-truth way of thinking, then this must be challenged.

Authorities always sought to safeguard their power by integrating and absorbing rebels and revolutionary thoughts. A clear example of this, is the establishment's relationship with drag. Drag was at its most powerful when it mocked, questioned and challenged power,

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[79] Schembri Bonaci, 23.
[80] François Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right; Fifty Years of Counterrevolutions*, Paris, Semiotext(e), 2018, 77.
[81] Schembri Bonaci, 48.
[82] Schembri Bonaci, 17.

as seen in *Paris is Burning*. Shows like RuPaul's Drag Race have turned the subversive art that was drag mainstream to fuel consumption. Drag has turned into a capitalist machine. [83]

1.11   Reality and truth nowadays

On truth, Schembri Bonaci argues that the will to truth has ended and in doing so there is no longer a will to anything, thus leading to nothingness. The relationship between art and truth can be expressed in the following ways: Art is functional as it is a subject of reality. For the Constructivists, art becomes secondary to craft and utility. However, this was soon negated when an object's function was removed and thus considered to be art, such as Duchamp's *Fountain*. Furthermore, that art and reality are harmonious and finally, that there is no relationship whatsoever between art and reality. When art and reality become disassociated, art creates its own reality as exemplified in Malevich's *Black Square*, [84] James Joyce's *Ulysses,* [85] and John Cage's *4'33''* and all of which stimulate the discussion between art and reality. [86]

Nowadays it is all about making the real, real again and reconstructing it as Tom McCarthy does in his novel *Remainder* (2005) and Omar Fast in the film version. Maria Lassing's body awareness paintings which were exhibited in *Ways of Being* (2019) at the Stedelijk museum are also worth mentioning. In these works, Lassing reconstructs the sensations felt by her own body onto the canvas, therefore she is reconstructing her reality for the viewer. [87]

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[83] Zeena Feldman, Jamie Hakim, 'RuPaul's Drag Race: how social media made drag's subversive art form into a capitalist money maker', *The Conversation,* 2020. Retrieved on 1 November 2020 from https://theconversation.com/rupauls-drag-race-how-social-media-made-drags-subversive-art-form-into-a-capitalist-money-maker-144967.

[84] Schembri Bonaci, 34.

[85] Schembri Bonaci, 40.

[86] Schembri Bonaci, 41.

[87] Maria Lassing: Ways of Being, Stedelijk (2019) Retrieved on 26 December 2019 from https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/maria-lassnig.

Foster also discussed the impact of repetition on reality as Ben Lerners does in his novel *10:04*. Repetition has also taken a new form. It is no longer about simulation, but rather it allows for a space to allow a different reality to be viewed. [88]

Foster concludes with two interesting questions: Is the latest framing of the real caused by the drive for alternate futures as a response to a reality of a capitalist world? Secondly what relationship exists between the framings of the realities discussed in his article and 'alternate facts'? Can real fictions be used to challenge these 'alternate facts' without reducing it to a positivistic view of the real? [89] One cannot help but think, given that 'alternate facts' are becoming a common occurrence, particularly in the political scene, wouldn't that make 'alternative facts' a part of reality in themselves? Thus, even though real fictions are representing 'alternative facts' they are still representing reality.

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[88] Foster, 4.
[89] Foster, 5.

Chapter 2: Selfies and truth

The following chapter details the process of how the concept for the final works evolved during this research, through the imagery present within the current post-truth environment. In this chapter both the actual evolution of the works through the various experiments carried out, and how these works impacted the theoretical aspect of this research, and vice versa will be discussed and evaluated.

2.1 Representing truth in a post-truth world

In *The Unreality of Realism*, Schembri Bonaci discusses how Edward Caruana Dingli uses a "realist idiom" when idealising rural Malta. Yet Giorgio Preca's *Malta Scenes* are more successful in depicting the reality of rural Malta, despite being considered to be caricatures. [90] During the initial stages of this research the first thoughts and ideas were centred around trying to place the truth, by utilising the human body as a subject, at centre stage, by depicting, anatomically correct, realistic representations of the human body. Doing so with the hope that this mode of action would be the most obvious and direct way to deal with and counteract the influx of edited media that surrounds us. This approach quadrates to what was discussed in Chapter 1 of this essay, where D'Ancona calls for the public to fact-check as one of the ways to counteract post-truth and in doing so, in counteracting this new way of thinking, which is being encouraged by the authorities, the work would be subversive. [91]

At the outset it was thought that this could be achieved through the representation or emphasis of what society defined as flaws. The term flaw is here being defined as something natural which deviates from the idealised modern beauty societal standards such as cellulite, scars, stretch marks and acne, which makes the human body 'less attractive or valuable'. [92]

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[90] Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, *The Unreality of Realism*, Valletta, Horizons, 2019, 25-32.
[91] D'Ancona, 113.
[92] Oxford Dictionary, Definition of flaw. Retrieved on 26 July 2020 from
https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/flaw.

Artists such as Jenny Saville, Lucian Freud and Emma Hopkins were referenced at this stage of the research. These artists are indisputable in their success of depicting the realness, honesty and crudeness of the human body using painting, all whilst making use of completely different techniques. Saville's strokes being looser and more visceral, Freud's bold brush work and impasto captures the skin's texture whilst Hopkins' sharp, crisp strokes achieve hyper-realistic works. Despite having the human body as a common subject and using different techniques these three artists are still successful in their attempt at representing the truth and reality of the human body.

Figure 4: Jenny Saville, '*Branded'*, 1992, Private collection

Figure 5: Emma Hopkins, '*Robert and Martha'*, Private collection

Figure 6: Lucian Freud, '*Head Of A Girl'*, 1976, Private collection

This led to one of the many research questions that arose throughout this process; would representation of flaws and imperfections make a painting more truthful? A number of the artist's sketches (Refer to Figure 7: Sketches dealing with flaws), emphasize these 'flaws'. This was done by assessing and analysing negative spaces and highlighting these 'flaws'. However, these 'flaws' start to become the subject of the work rather than the human body.

Figure 7: Sketches dealing with flaws

For the next step of this research the medium of photography was used as the springboard for the next set of experiments. The importance and impact photographs have is undisputed, due to the oversaturation of images in our everyday lives. Up until a few years ago photographs used to be considered to be uncontested as they seem to show a clear version of reality albeit this is not always so. The numerous 'scandals' of photoshopped celebrity and model images started highlighting this issue. However, this was not only limited to the entertainment industry. Brian Walski's case as discussed in Chapter 1 was such an instance,

but this time the edited image was classified as a news item. Walski's image had been edited to show a better version of reality. [93]

With the rise of social media and the numerous editing tools freely available for everyone, enhancing realities is now more widespread than ever, and no longer just limited to the special effects departments in films. Nowadays this has even seeped into videos. Excluding the age-old trick used by numerous television stations where video excerpts are taken out of context, the rise of TikTok as well as a number of video editing tools has led to an increase in the number of impressively modified videos.

Following the initial set of experiments done by painting 'flaws', the next set centred around painting 'flaws' onto the photograph. This was done in an attempt at making a photograph more real by painting reality onto a lie. Unlike Walski's work, the final result here is not showing us a better version of reality, but it is in fact attempting to show a more honest and real version of the image. The examples seen here are far cruder. The works here do not allow for discussion, they only strive at highlighting the falseness of social media which is not the scope of this research.

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[93] Duncan Campbell, 'US war photographer sacked for altering image of British soldier', *The Guardian* (3 Apr 2003). Retrieved on 03 November 2020 from
https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/apr/03/pressandpublishing.Iraqandthemedia.

Figure 8: Painting flaws onto photographs

2.2 Social media layout

Initially Instagram's interface was considered to be included or referenced in the final works. Doing this would aid in creating a strong and obvious link with social media and influencers. However, this idea was no longer pursued in view of the ever changing and constant updates being performed by the application. Additionally, trends are constantly changing, as well as which applications are the most popular and in use. This would risk having a work already being out-dated before the actual submission of the final work. Post-truth is a phenomenon that is still very present and so using outdated material might allude to the idea that it too is something that has changed and can be now dismissed.

During a workshop organised by the Department of Art and Art History, numerous experiments were performed on various social media posts. In doing this the element of physical interaction with an intangible content was brought into play. This novel way of physically interacting with social media posts contrasts to how users usually interact with the same posts. Most users interact with the digital version and therefore their experience is only limited to visual as well as a sterile touch. Users directly interact with these images when our fingers land onto the screen. Viewers double tap to like something or just slide their finger

over the image to go onto the next one. The sensation of touch is considered to be an intimate one. Despite using this sense to interact through their phone with other users, the intimacy of this sensation is still lost. It is not direct and so it still feels cold and sterile.

Colour was also introduced. As well as returning back to the painting of flaws onto the 'perfect' picture, in an attempt to infuse a sense of truth and reality into these sterile images.

Figure 9: Décollage experimentation

Experimentation with décollage was also performed during this workshop by painting onto the photographs, occasionally adding an adhesive, and then placing a paper on top of the wet media. After a few seconds the papers were separated to achieve the above effect (Refer to Figure 9: Décollage experimentation). This technique aids in the analysis of the layering present in both the works and as well as the images on social media.

Décollage was a technique pioneered by a group of French artists, within the movement of *Nouveau Réalisme*, who sought to use reality as a primary medium through deconstruction. Violence was used to destroy traditional attitudes in an attempt at aggressively defining new ones. Through *Nouveau Réalisme* artists challenged the way art

idealised a subject. [94] These experiments, like the *Nouveau Réalisme* artists, deal with the idealisation of the person on social media and attempts at infusing back realism into these images.

2.3 Relationship between real appearances and appearances on social media

The following set of works further strive to assess the dissonance between real appearances and appearances on social media. Real appearances in this research are being defined as the natural appearance of a person offline i.e., in the physical world, at a certain point in time. In this set of experiments, before and after images were superimposed onto one another and the differences and changes were highlighted. When looked at individually, differences between the images are not noticeable. However, when superimposed the difference become evident.
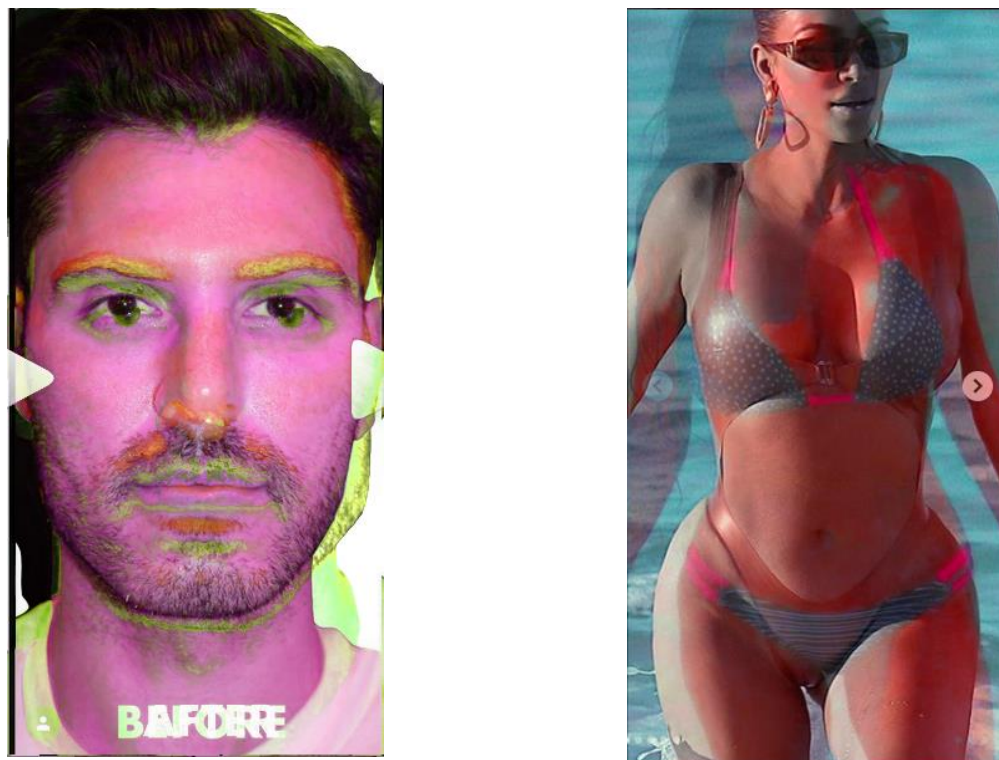

Figure 10: Digital superimposition with saturated colours

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[94] The Art Story, Nouveau Réalisme. Retrieved on 31 January 2021 from https://www.theartstory.org/movement/nouveau-realisme/.

2.3.1 Selfies and social media

Social media has provided the public with a platform for expressing one's personality and uniqueness through a series of images and text. Yet, despite this pool of infinite possibilities, people still agglomerate to certain niches and stereotypes. Social media also allows for the curation of profiles which one can edit to express one's thoughts, beliefs, and personality. Social media also allows for users to interact with one another. This interaction was discussed in Chapter 1 when discussing alienation in film and in contrast the relationship present between the actor and audience in theatre.

One cannot discuss social media without delving into selfies, as selfies constitute a major portion of what makes up social media. The introduction of front-facing cameras in mobile phones has been pivotal in the surge of 'selfies' being posted daily. [95] A selfie is defined as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam" and usually, however not necessary, shared via social media. [96] Selfies have become a global phenomenon as they have become an archetype for contemporary culture. This rise in selfies can be most likely safely concluded to be a consequence to the Me Decade as discussed by Michiko Kakutani in *Death of Truth* when referring to the article in the *New York* magazine by Tom Wolfe. [97] This is also evident with the increasing number of photo-taking, photo-sharing, as well as photo-editing mobile applications available that allow for easy editing of several elements, such as contrast, brightness, saturation, softness, as well as smoothing out skin and enhancing face shape. Selfie-posting behaviour consists of selecting and presenting one's own image in a socially desirable self-view. Thus, giving the user the power to manage impressions and therefore self-curate. [98] This behaviour is not just limited to selfies, but also surroundings. By posting surroundings the user is curating their

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[95] Tae Rang Choi, Yongjun Sung, Jung-Ah Lee, Sejung Marina Choi, 'Get behind my selfies: The Big Five traits and social networking behaviors through selfies', *Personality and Individual Difference*, cix (2017), 98-101.

[96] Oxford Dictionary, Definition of selfie. Retrieved on 26 July 2020 from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/selfie.

[97] Kakutani, 18.

[98] Yongjun Sung, Jung-Ah Lee, Eunice Kim, Sejung Marina Choi. 'Why we post selfies: Understanding motivations for posting pictures of oneself', *Personality and Individual Differences*, xcvii (2016), 260-265.

environment to fit within a specific trend that might be trending at the time. Be it from colour palettes to positioning of the items as well as framing.

Ironically, in this age of connection, when communicating with one another, one is in fact most likely to be looking at his/her own image instead. Social media is littered with perfectly posed and self-curated images of users. Most images are with a half-glazed look as the person taking the image is not looking at the camera but is in fact looking at one's own image as s/he is taking the picture. The same holds for video calls. During a video call most of the time is spent looking at one's own image rather than looking at the person at the other end of the call. This is because video calling provides users with the opportunity to look and observe oneself in comparison to others. Seeing oneself talk in real-time is a novelty. [99] Since nowadays one can observe oneself immediately one has the tendency to self-check, ensuring that one is behaving in the correct way just as Jeremy Bentham's prisoners in his Panopticon. [100] One can argue that authorities nowadays successfully manipulate us into behaving into a certain manner, even in the most intimate parts of one's life.

In this next set of works several edited selfies, taken in the same sitting, with different filters were superimposed. This was done with the aim to identify common elements within the numerous faces of the same individual; this might help bring one a step closer towards identifying the real appearance of a person. The result for these experiments led to a completely washed-out face, with only the general idea of where the eyes, nose and mouth should be. Other than that, all remaining features were completely eliminated, and the sitter's identity was almost completely eliminated.

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[99] Aarron Toal, 'Why do we stare at ourselves on video calls?', Durham University, 2020. Retrieved on 31 January 2021 from https://www.dur.ac.uk/research/news/item/?itemno=42053.
[100] Bentham, 1-3.

Figure 11: Digital superimposition of selfies

Appearances can now be edited easily to look one way on one day and another on another day. There is no one real, fixed appearance at a certain point in time on social media and the internet. Social media provides the right conditions in which this ephemeral relationship with the truth festers. Does this volatility of appearances, impact the relationship with truth on other levels, such as politics and our day-to-day life? People, such as Trump who occupied the highest offices, claim one thing one day and deny it the next day disputing that they ever said such a thing. Nowadays news outlets and politicians throw about the terms 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', and in doing so cast a shadow of doubt on everything, and so they have successfully devalued the strive for truth.

2.3.2   Social media and reality

A study carried out by Yongjun Sung & Jung-Ah Lee (2016) found that there are four major motivations for posting selfies on social media: attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment. Social media serves as a platform through which individuals can emphasise certain features of themselves by presenting an optimised image of themselves with the aim of gathering admiration from others through the feedback they leave, such as

likes, comments and shares. This feedback serves as a means for validation. Additionally, this feedback also allows for communication between different users. [101]

Social media provides users with the opportunity to view curated and edited realities. On one hand this provides users with the opportunity to interact with like-minded individuals, be inspired, learn, as well as possibly serve for motivation. It also serves as a comfort for people hiding from reality and it also serves as a platform for people to sound their voices and be seen on a global level.

Social media allows us to carve out our desired version of reality whilst also helping us to identify individuals whose reality is similar to ours and thus creating the chain reaction of affirmations which takes us further away from the truth.

2.4 Painting our edited reality

The next set of experiments dealt with the painting of images edited using the available tools on popular social media. The selfie was still maintained as the main subject for this set of works as to allow for further experimentation and strive towards understanding the self-constructed desired realities we create on social media.

Up until recently images and videos were considered to be indisputable. Both were evidence of our reality. Social media is saturated with images and videos as posts with visuals are far more popular and more shareable than text only posts. This is central in the spread of misinformation as it has nowadays become almost impossible to discern credible images as was also discussed with Brian Walski's LA Times photograph in Chapter 1. [102] Whenever a viewer is scrolling through someone's profile, to that viewer, that user's reality is what that user wants the public to think. Thus, that user is creating his online reality and presenting it to everyone so that they in turn think that what they are seeing is in fact that person's reality,

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[101] Yongjun Sung, 260-265.
[102] Emily Saltz, 'How Do People Decide Whether to Trust a Photo on Social Media?', *NYT Open*, 22 Jan. Retrieved on 26 July 2020 from https://open.nytimes.com/how-do-people-decide-whether-to-trust-a-photo-on-social-media-e0016b6080ae.

making this real. Photographs and videos are therefore being used as evidence of our desired reality. Consequently, social media starts making the unreal real. By editing something as simple as a selfie this impacts how we see ourselves and also how others see us. It would be interesting to delve into how the selfie has altered one's own image of oneself.
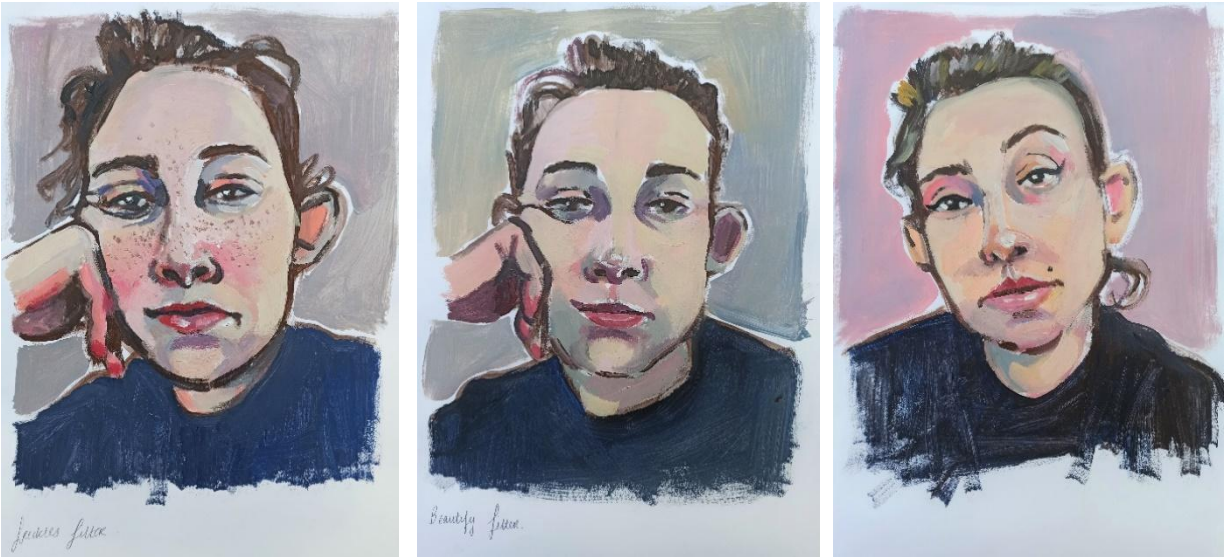
Figure 12: Filtered self-portraits

How does Picasso's, Vico's and Burrow's argument, that art and fables are lies without the intention of deceit but on the contrary show truth, hold with paintings of edited photographs? Would these paintings (Refer to Figure 12: Filtered self-portraits) be a lie of a lie? Would these paintings take us further from the truth or closer to it by showing us the truth of the lie? Would painting an image which has been edited, elevate the lie and in turn devalue the truth?

2.5 Incorporating the interaction between the viewer and online images

The internet has become a vortex of constant stimuli. As mentioned in Chapter 1, François Cusset highlights how capitalism has successfully managed to capitalise on attention. [103]

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[103] Cusset, 77.

When active on social media, viewers scroll endlessly through a never-ending feed of images and videos all competing to attract attention for long enough to get their message across.

With the next couple of experiments, the blur and movement through which the internet and social media is experienced was attempted to be captured. This was undertaken by first painting edited self-portraits using acrylic or oil paint onto cardboard with a layer of gesso. Before the paint is dry, a palette knife was used to smudge and scrap the paint in a vertical motion from the bottom of the support to the top, in an attempt to mimic the scrolling movement. This allowed for the creation of works that successfully capture a vague and general feel of what the image is but all sense of detail is lost. In doing so creating a work that reflects the modern viewers' interaction online.

These works successfully capture the foggy and whirling way through which most users consume images. The vagueness of the viewer's truth; how an obscure general idea of the truth is consumed. However, when one attempts to fully look into and understand what they are seeing or reading one is still left with unanswered questions.
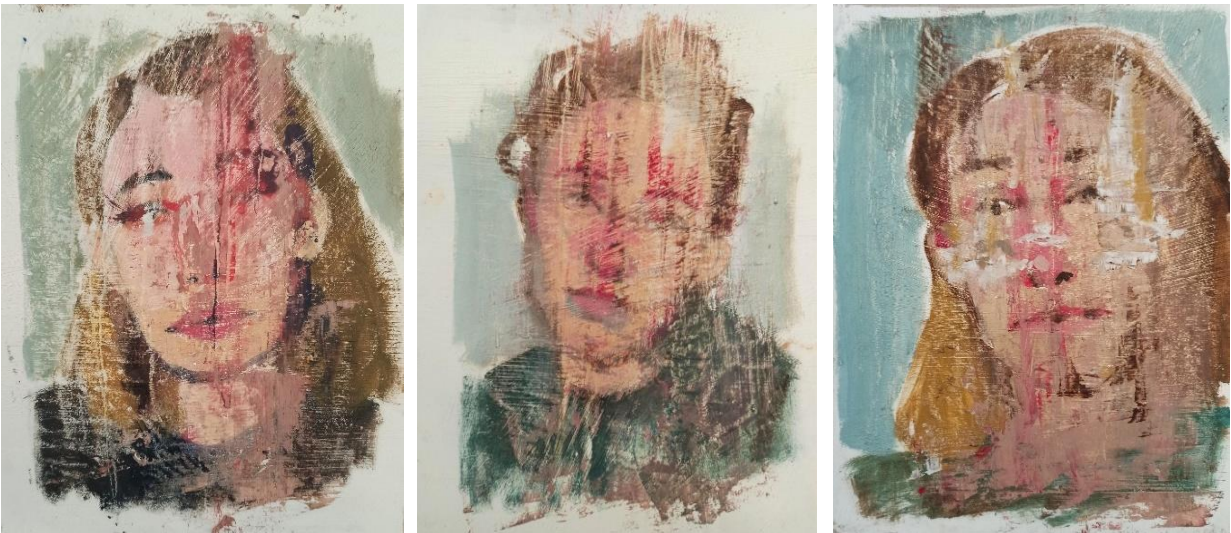

Figure 13: Scrolling portraits

2.6 Manipulating the painting in the same way that truth is manipulated

The next set of experiments reverted back to the décollage technique. The starting point was again self-portraits. An initial sketch was done using acrylic paint. This was then followed by a transfer technique from magazines onto the background and then applying masking tape. Photographs of self-portraits were then added and using acrylics the photograph was then blended into the first self-portrait painted as the first layer. Next, using a palette knife the painting was scratched and parts of the masking tape were peeled off. This whole process was then repeated as needed.

This technique attempted at reflecting and commenting on the current relationship with the truth. As discussed previously in this essay, and it has in fact served throughout this research as a way to recentre, Schembri Bonaci's claim that nowadays the truth has no value. The truth is now even more malleable and ever changing, without questioning. With these paintings a portrait was sketched using acrylics. This sketch was then covered with photographs and articles. This in turn was peeled, ripped, glued, and repainted as to treat it in the same way the truth is nowadays being handled. Truth is no longer given value, but it is now moulded and angled shamelessly. This forceful action was in turn applied to the works. These works are still a form of reality. In displaying how we are treating truth and reality they are still a form of truth. So are these works, which are manipulating a selfie, which in itself is already manipulated, a route via which one may arrive at the truth?
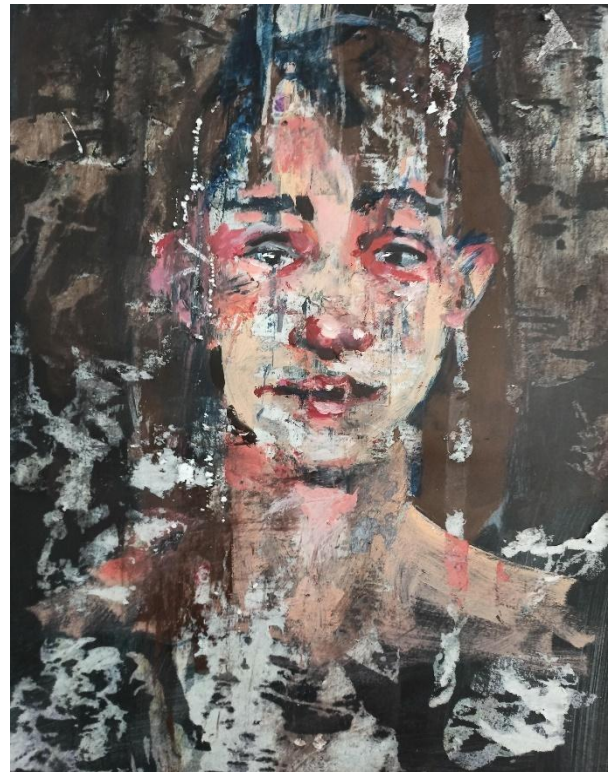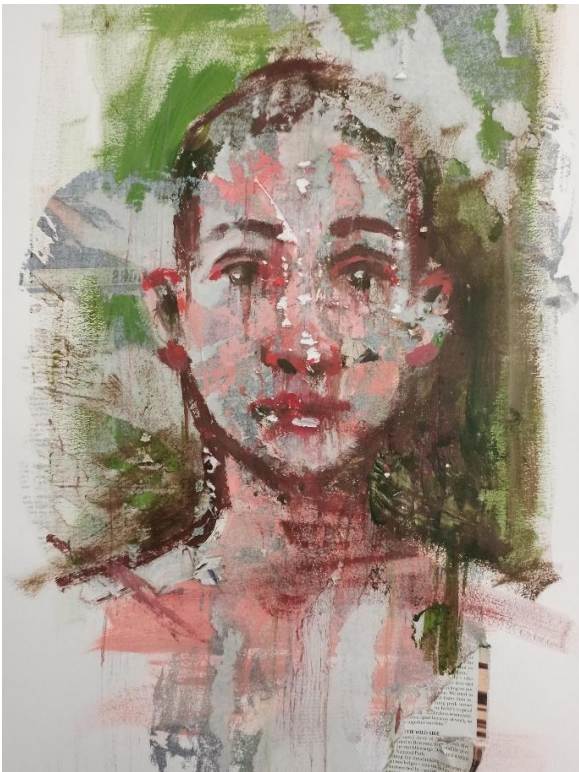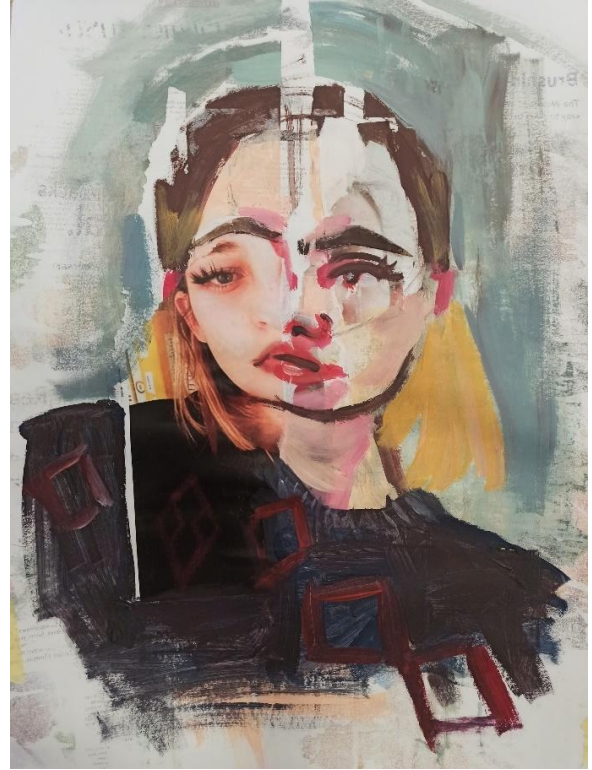
Figure 14: Décollage portraits

2.7 Self-portraits of selfies

From the initiation of this project, selfies of the artist were always used rather than using the numerous selfies available online. Selfies of the artist were used as the main subject for the paintings. Other than the ethical implications involved in using other people's images, the main reason for this was that self-portraits are both personal and public and the artist can in no way be presumptuous as to project her thoughts onto other people by interacting with their image and projecting her own thoughts and accusations of the works. Although these accusations are well founded it is up to the viewer to take this on board. Should another person's selfies had been used it would seem as if there is a direct attack onto that person, and that is far from the scope or the impact desired. By using the artist's appearance that sense of attack is lost, and a neutral playing field is hopefully set.

Chapter 3: The Judgement of Paris and Colour Swatches

3.1 The Judgement of Paris

After the portrait series, the myth of the Judgement of Paris was considered as a subject at this point of the research. The idea to introduce mythology came during a few lectures attended at the University of Malta dealing with Greek Mythology, organised by the Malta Classics Association. During one of these lectures this myth was mentioned and discussed. It was at this point of the research that the myth was returned to as it dealt with two major themes that overlap with this research.

Eris, the goddess of discord was not invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and as a reaction to her being omitted from the festivities she threw an apple amongst the goddesses which was to be claimed by the fairest one. Aphrodite, Hera and Athena laid claim to the title and so Zeus told Hermes to take all the three goddesses to Paris, who was considered to be the most just of men. Each of the three goddesses promised Paris something in return for the title. Hera would make him king of all men, Athena offered him victory for his wars and Aphrodite promised him the hand of the most beautiful woman, who was Helen of Troy. Paris chose Aphrodite and it was this decision that led to the nine yearlong Trojan War which led to the fall of the city. Both Athena and Hera who were left spited supported the Achaean forces. [104]

One of the two themes being dealt with is the theme of beauty. The goddesses Hera, Aphrodite and Athena all wanted to be awarded the golden apple that was to be claimed by the fairest of them. All three goddesses sought the approval of Paris. Despite calling for tolerance and acceptance for everyone, competition, particularly on social media, a platform

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[104] Coluthus, *The Rape of Helen: From the Greek of Coluthus, with Miscellaneous Notes*, London, T. and J. Egerton, 1786, 1-31.

that should be connecting people, is rampant. Although this is not just limited to appearance, this factor is still very heavily present. Social media provides a breeding ground that allows for cutthroat competition, with users competing for likes, shares and comments, and if one is successful enough, one can manage to monetize one's popularity which is based on content and appearance.

The themes discussed can easily be linked to people's presence on social media. Social media has provided people with a platform on which one can display oneself and one's worth is determined on the basis of likes, shares and follows. Paris has turned into the public, or as Burrow would argue, Paris is nowadays is the algorithm. [105] The public now competes for the algorithm's approval. In doing so successfully, one is bestowed with more likes and followers. Various users, if they have enough followers, now use social media as a platform through which they can monetize their filtered and self-curated looks. Capitalism has now no longer solely monetised models appearances but has successfully made people willingly do it for free with the hopes of being monetised for their efforts.

Finally, the last theme from this myth that was desired to be introduced into the works was that of corruption. Paris was selected by Zeus to judge the contest since he was considered to be a just man. However, as soon as Paris's decision stopped being about the beauty of the three goddesses, which was the intended aim, and became about what either goddess bribed him with if selected, Paris lost his title as the most just man.

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[105] Colin Burrow, 9.

Figure 15: Judgment of Paris I

Figure 16: Judgment of Paris II

For Figures 15 and 16, the décollage technique described previously was also employed. At this point of the research, focusing solely on the Judgment of Paris, made the visual link to the post-truth imagery weaker. Thus, possibly creating a link between the subject of selfies as well as the myth might possibly aid in tackling post-truth imagery. This may allow for a

conversation between the social commentary being provided by the subject of the Judgement of Paris, that of the competition environment that is so prevalent on social media as well as the individuals view and participation through selfies. Like the goddesses, social media users subject themselves to the mercy of an algorithm that determines their value.

3.2 New media

Since post-truth is a recent phenomenon, new media was reconsidered again at this stage of the research. This was done with the expectation that this would allow for new ways to experiment with the themes being dealt with in this research. Digital collages were considered (Refer to Figure 17: Judgement of Paris Digital Manipulation I), as well as image manipulation and superimpositions.

Figure 17: Judgement of Paris Digital Manipulation I

Experimentation with a short video showing images of a group of people before and after having minor interventions done was carried out. The video has a quick transition between one image and the next and this is then repeated. This was done with the intention that the viewer would identify that the person they are seeing is the same one, however the change is not sufficient enough for them to identify what has been done. As a result, it

becomes impossible to identify which was the before and after and which definite points of the faces were altered and thus the viewers quest in identifying the truth in the video is only made tougher.

Figure 18: Video stills

3.3 Repetitions

Repetition is very much present on the internet, particularly social media. Repetitions of edited images makes identifying the real image even more of a struggle as repetition dilutes and therefore distracts from the truth. The internet started off with being a spectacular platform that allowed for all levels of creativity and different content but has now been capitalized to the point where thousands of users produce similar content, to satisfy the algorithm and therefore monetise what they do.

Figure 19: Sketches of various selfies taken at a point in time

Repetition has long been a marketing tool, used by companies and nowadays authorities to make their advertisements more effective. [106] However, this is not only limited to marketing, but it has seeped into social media as well. Other than people or companies repeating their posts, different users post similar images or content with a similar aesthetic. By seeing something similar to something one has already seen before, this increases the chances that seeing it the second time will have a greater impact on the viewer which would lead to some form of interaction, being a like, follow or share.

Furthermore, this general shift towards repeated content is also further aided and accelerated through the algorithm. The algorithm takes into account the content one spends the most time on, including the amount of time spent pausing looking at something on screen, and gives the user more of that, as to keep one engaged for longer.

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[106] Olivier Corneille, et al. 'Repetition Increases Both the Perceived Truth and Fakeness of Information: An Ecological Account.' *Cognition*, ccv, 2020.

Figure 20: Instagram post by @insta_repeat

The same holds for our appearances. Despite everyone having their own unique appearance society strives to a particular levelled ideal set at the time, be it certain proportions, features, skin tones, eyebrow shape, lip size and body shape. Society creates this template and everyone is made to feel the need to work towards that and every few years that template is changed or altered. However, it is interesting as on one hand we are given the opportunity to change our realities, to look anyway we desire, yet the majority of users edit their appearances to fit within the norm. The constant claim is that we are living in a world of individuals, yet given the infinite possibilities, people still agglomerate to a certain look, stereotype, or ideology. We select the realities that appeal to us and our circles.

Online one cannot directly compare the different selfies being posted and thus being able to identify which selfie is real and which is not, or trying to arrive at the real appearance of someone by cross examining selfies is next to impossible. Juxtaposing the different

paintings of different selfies, would allow the viewer to compare and contrast. Pick out differences and assess these. What is making this different from the next? Although individually one might think they are looking at the same person when compared directly the varying appearances would be evident.

Furthermore, in another set of selfies, Ruben's *'Judgement of Paris'* was incorporated into the work by collage. By replacing one of the goddesses and placing the selfie instead this led to the interesting conversation between the myth and the modern-day selfie as well as allowing for modernisation of the myth.

Figure 21: Selfies and Rubens' '*Judgement of Paris*'

On reviewing the material created so far, the link with post-truth was still absent. Thus, the next stage was to negate all that was done so far and try to approach this research in a new way.

3.4 Colour Swatches as standards

During this part of the research the artist had the opportunity to meet Professor Vince Briffa at his exhibition in Gozo *'Out of Time'*. During this conversation, this research's topic came up and Briffa recommended a conference that took place between the 10th and 11th November in 2019 entitled 'Understanding the Post-truth Society: From Fake News, Datafication & Mass Surveillance to the Death of Trust'. [107]

During the panel discussion in which Briffa himself participated, Briffa discussed a few of his works that deal with our relationship with reality and truth. One of the works Briffa discussed that had links to my research was the work *'Heterotopia'*. For this work, the narrative was that the gallerist was not allowed to text during work and so she goes to the bathroom and she starts texting from there. On entering the exhibition space, the viewer was invited to interact with the gallerist through texts. As the viewer walks through the space s/he can see monitors showing recorded and live CCTV videos on the screens and as well as see the gallerist texting from the bathroom. The CCTV footage of the bathroom is pre-recorded whereas that of the gallery is live. As the person moves through the gallery space they receive messages and questions from the gallerist, who is actually a chatbot, and the viewers could reply back. So, at the end of the experience people leave the exhibition with a chat with someone that wasn't there. During the panel discussion Briffa mentioned that the visitors did not even care whether the experience was real or recorded. It is this lack of caring that is really fascinating. People's realities are being impacted by this fake scenario being created and yet they are indifferent about it. This obviously highlights the growing trend towards the dismissal of truth and facts.

Another work discussed by Briffa, which triggered the next idea was *'Nar-Nir'*. The work consisted of two coloured squares, on the red square the text 'NAR' was embossed and on the blue square the text 'NIR' was embossed. Each square then had a live CCTV camera

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[107] Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning, 'Visuality & Visibility: Exploring Visual Truths & Untruths Panel' [Video], *Understanding the Post-truth Society Conference*, Valletta, October 2019, Retrieved on 20 February 2021 from https://connectedlearning.edu.mt/aiovg_videos/visuality-visibility-exploring-visual-truths-untruths-panel/.

directed at it. In turn these cameras were feeding into two monitors that displayed the subject in greyscale. In this work, the text is describing the colours they are embossed on. It is only through this text that the viewer can know the what the colours are, when looking solely at the monitors. Even though the screen stripped the squares of their colour, the text still provides the viewer with the correct information. Although this work sought to comment on the local political atmosphere it was Briffa's use of simple coloured squares with the corresponding text that led to the challenge of trying to see how to experiment with post-truth.
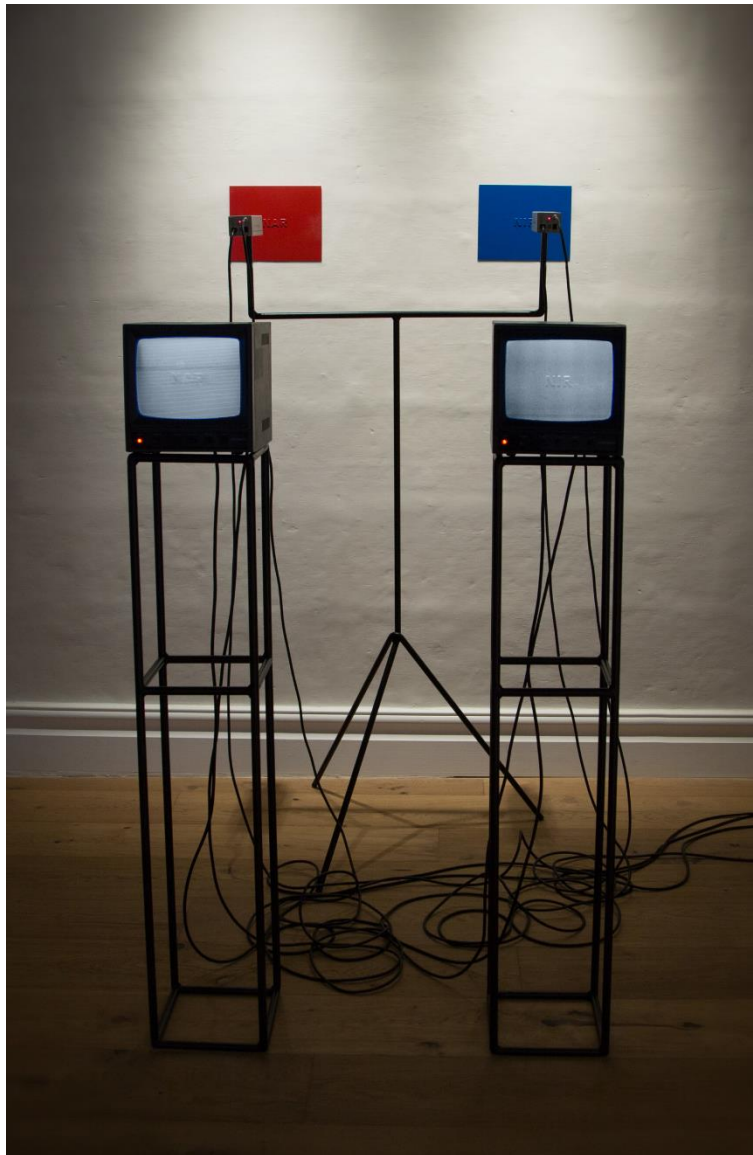

Figure 22: Vince Briffa, '*NAR-NIR*', Human Matter exhibition, MSA galleries, Valletta, 2017

3.4.1 Colour swatches and truth

This work by Briffa allowed for a fresh perspective when dealing with this essay's question in challenging the truth of images. In his work, Briffa's text is the only way we can know what the colour actually is when looking at the squares through the CCTV footage. It was Briffa's use of simple colour squares that led to the idea of using colour swatches to strive to that post-truth element the research had so far been missing. This was achieved by taking something as simple as colours, something so well-known and understood, something which can easily be so objective, but using such a popular and well-known standard, and playing with the truth it represents. Contrary to what Briffa did, the text in the below work is not describing or indicating the colour it should be intended to do.

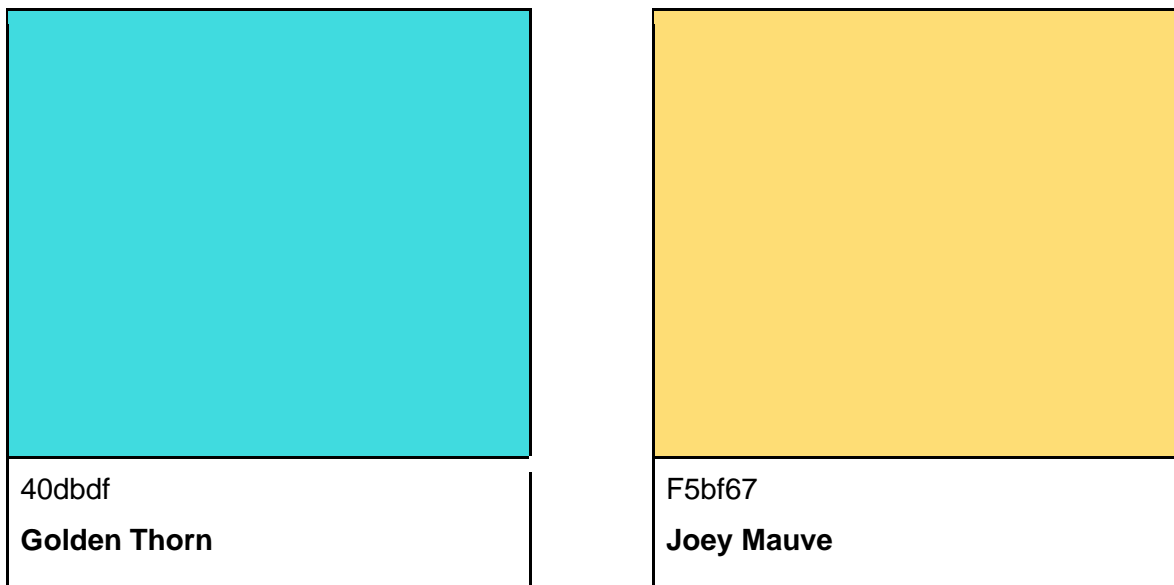| 40dbdf | F5bf67 |
| **Golden Thorn** | **Joey Mauve** |

Figure 23: Post-truth swatches

Pantone® have successfully created an objective numeric language for colours, an objective truth, used by millions of designers and producers in various sectors, such as graphic design, textiles, architecture, pharmaceutics, beauty and apparel, to aid in defining, communicating and controlling colour. This ensures that colours are consistent in any part of

the world. With its PANTONE MATCHING SYSTEM®, consistent and accurate colour is ensured. [108]

With colour swatches there can be no post-truth or alternative facts, as this would lead to chaos in numerous industries. By creating colour chips, in the same format as the Pantone® chips, which has become iconic to the brand, but the code and name have no relation to the actual colour they should be describing, this universal coding system is being handled in the same way facts and appearances are treated, particularly online. Colour swatches, something which has become a standard, a truth, is no longer left as such. In Chapter 4 further discussions as to how these swatches will be incorporated into the final work, as well as how they will be included in the final exhibition will be discussed.

3.4.2   Pantone® swatches and Selfies

In an attempt at combining the work done so far, which dealt with selfies as well as the recent concept dealing with the swatches, the next phase of this research consisted of trying to identify ways through which the research carried out so far could be combined.

Initially it was being considered that the edited selfie paintings created throughout this research (Refer to Sections 2.4 and 3.3) would be exhibited and the colour swatches from each painting would accompany them (Refer Figure 24: Selfies and swatches). The colour swatches would serve as the building blocks of the painting next to it, only what is being presented as a foundation to the painting is a lie. This foundation for the painting would be made to look deceptively like the truth, and in turn, the painting itself would also be a lie as it is representing an edited image.

The colour name, for the colour swatch, is the only queue the viewer has that the colour does not correspond with the code, unless the colour code is checked. The work does not provide the viewer with any answer. There is no way they can know the exact colour

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[108] Pantone®. 'About Pantone®', Pantone®. Retrieved on 03 December 2020 from https://www.pantone.com/about-pantone.

code of the swatch unless a Pantone® swatch is held up and matched to the swatch. One can argue that this reflects the way we consume information.

Additionally, by cutting out one of the goddesses, the work allows for a conversation between the edited selfie and the myth. By introducing this myth into the work, the subject is being grounded and placed within a context by using a universal myth. The selfie, like the goddesses, is competing for attention of the algorithm with the hopes of achieving approval and like the goddesses in the myth to be claimed to be the most beautiful. However, unlike the myth, the appearance here is edited. The goddesses' appearances were always considered to be untainted and natural, however as discussed, appearances online are rarely the case. Social media provides everyone with a platform where appearances can be altered, and if altered in the right way to get the algorithm's approval one might earn the title of the 'fairest one'.

Figure 24: Selfies and swatches
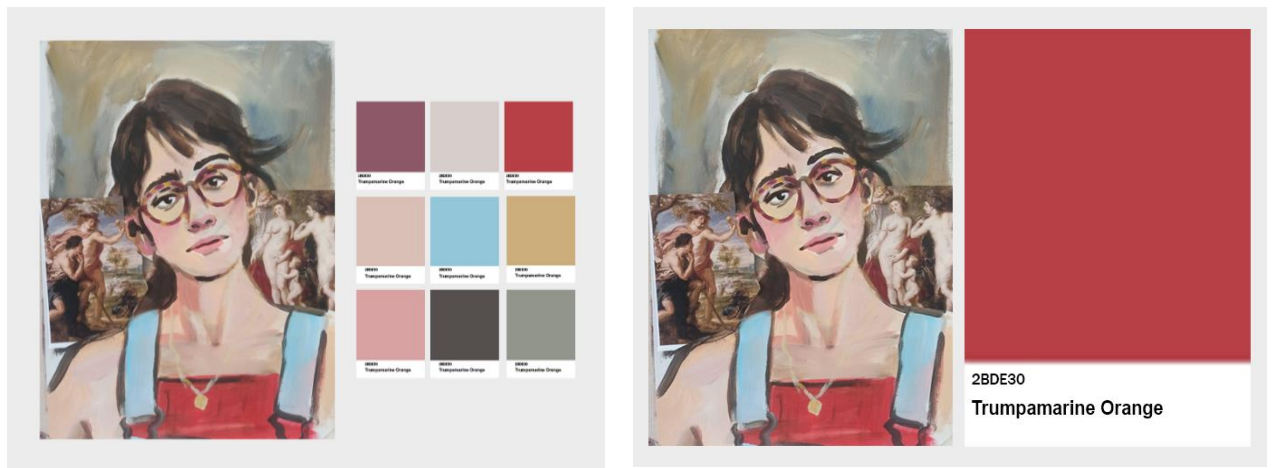
3.5 Truth in Pop art

Pop art was referenced at this stage of the research as to assess how artists dealt with capitalism, mass media as well as truth. Andy Warhol and Gerald Laing are referenced as to further strengthen the subversion aspect for this research. Andy Warhol took an event that had occurred from the media and mass produced it. In his 'Death and Disaster' series Warhol

commercialized, or rather, inflated these tragedies and as a result reduced their shock value by desensitizing the viewer. The power these images had in the media was stripped away through Warhol's works. He successfully managed to de-value the truth. Warhol's works are still works of truth however it is the reaction they elicit that results in the devaluation of truth. Laing's War paintings are similar to Warhol's series. Laing took the well-known Abu Ghraib prison scandal and aestheticized it. [109]

The next set of experiments (Refer to Figure 25: Washed-out selfie) attempted at washing out and simplifying selfies. This would mimic what filters do with images, where any defects are blurred out, as discussed in Section 2.3.1 previously. As a result, the final product is an airbrushed face looking pristine, polished and lacking any form of character and identity which is similar to the results achieved in previous experiments (Refer to Figure 11: Digital superimposition of selfies).

In the next work the skin colour was matched to the background. This was achieved by utilising various tones of the same colours and then black was used to define certain areas. In doing so the first layer of skin is stripped away, and thus allowing the work to comment on race as well as gender. Once that layer is taken off so is any form of identity. Figure 26 also comments on the constant attempts at trying to fit in within the new trends to attempt at fitting in. Furthermore, this too makes us lose our individuality.

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[109] Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, 'Gerald Laing: Pop Politics', *Sunday Thoughts on art*, Horizons, 2013, 50.

Figure 25: Washed-out selfie   Figure 26: Pop-selfie

Nowadays the public no longer needs Andy Warhol to be desensitized, as the internet, particularly social media does this on a daily basis, be it from mass shooting videos to suicide videos to the multitude genres of freely available porn. All done with the intention to grab our attention for a few minutes and monetize on this. Re-creating something like Andy Warhol would have no effect today.

So far throughout this research truth was always sought to be dismissed, however these next set of works try to oppose what Andy Warhol did by attempting at re-integrating some form of the truth. Warhol used repetitions to lose and desensitize the viewer. We live in a world of constant repetition, with advertisements and repeated content so therefore by eliminating this repetition one allows space for the truth.

The next works were created with the element of layering taking centre stage. This technique comments on the filtering imagery we use online. Various sketches and trials were performed to incorporate the selfies back into the myth. In the next example the goddess's faces were replaced by washed out self-portraits with a Pantone® frame which were pasted onto the image in an attempt at representing the way we simply filter out or reality to create this facade.

Figure 27: Judgement of Paris and Pantone® selfies

3.6 Audience and exhibition

Throughout the progress of this research, ways to interact with the audience, as the ideas developed, were constantly considered. One of the ideas considered was that of having the exhibition solely on Instagram as an online exhibition and in doing so keeping within the theme of social media. However, on further analysis it was decided this would not be the selected approach. One is so used to consuming digital images so quickly that an online exhibition would risk compromising it. Launching an exhibition online provides people with the build-up of accessing the exhibition online, however once it is online that excitement and intrigue is lost. With traditional exhibitions one either stumbles upon an exhibition or has to set time to go and make an event out of it. With a physical exhibition the viewer is given a space, a moment in time when the viewer can slow down and just focus on the works. We are oversaturated with images on the digital platforms and therefore there is no distinction if the viewer is one minute scrolling on Instagram and next scrolling through an exhibition. The chances are one will consume the exhibition in the same way one might consume Instagram.

With COVID-19 the number of online exhibitions increased. The most successful, with respect to showcasing art online, were fashion shows where videos/films were created to showcase new collections. In May, Gucci pulled out of Milan Fashion Week and instead started its own way of showcasing the new line through a series of short movies. In these films the focus is never lost from the clothes. In the first short film the sound of the fabric moving is intense, almost ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response). [110]

With regards to paintings, presently, exhibitions are still being held minus the opening night and by controlling the number of people present at one go. In a way this can be considered to be beneficial for still media as it allows the focus to fall back onto the art. Following these reasons, a traditional exhibition was considered to still be the best approach for this research.

When working with the paintings of the edited selfies (Refer to Sections 2.4, 3.3 and 3.4.2) creating a panopticon where the works are the 'all-seeing', and the observer and the audience are the ones being watched, was considered. This setup is contrary to the usual exhibition set up where usually on entering the space the viewer can quickly skim through the works at one go and then individually zoom in on them. The idea was to create an octagonal structure, or something similar which will be placed in the middle of a room. The selfie paintings with the corresponding Pantone® swatches (which were discussed in Section 3.4) will be affixed to the outside plane. This would therefore create a structure displaying the works individually, unlike the usual format where the viewer steps into one room and can start taking in a number of images simultaneously.

This way of viewing the paintings would reflect how the public consumes images on social media, particularly through mobile phones. We only see one image at a time. Initially, when considering to display the selfie paintings (Refer to Figure 27: Judgement of Paris and Pantone® selfies) it was being planned that these selfies would be exhibited next to each

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[110] Alexander Fury, 'With Guccifest, Gucci swaps shows for short films', *Financial Times,* 19 November 2020. Retrieved on 22 November 2020 from https://www.ft.com/content/4c8cac09-9197-40d2-9d5c-b7c175004a3e.

other as this would allow the viewer to identify discrepancies between the various self-portraits and in doing so hopefully bring about a discussion on alternative realities and truths. By using this panopticon structure the viewer will no longer be able to directly compare and contrast the image as this is no longer easy to do. In a way this is again reflective of the way we interact with social media. We see a number of selfies of the same person online however we are rarely given the opportunity to compare each one and see how the angles, colour, contrast etc changes. We just see a different version of the person and take it to be reality for that point in time.
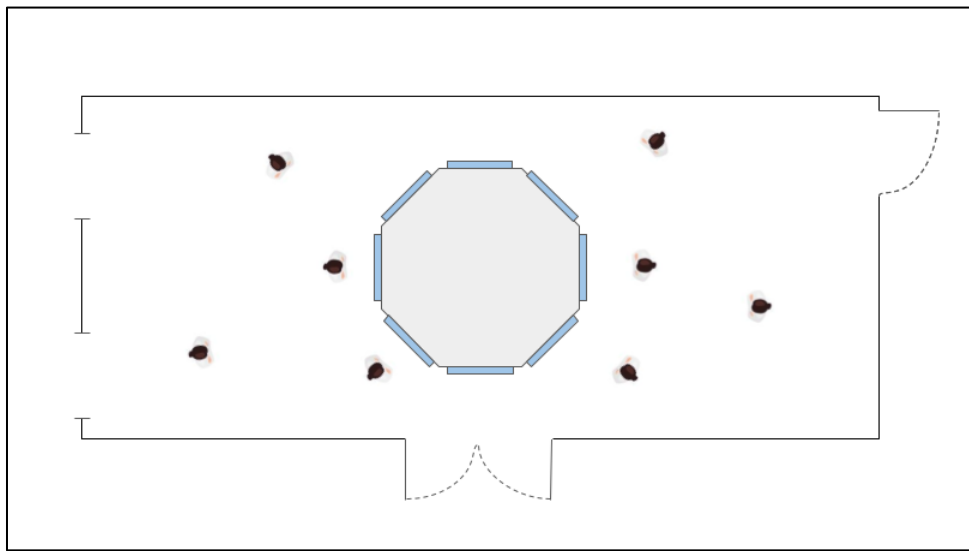

Figure 28: Panopticon exhibition layout

This octagonal structure would also touch upon Baudrillard's anti-panopticon, where the viewer is becoming the model. The viewer is information. The viewer is the event. The focal point has been lost and in turn the viewer is now being watched. However, as discussed in Section 1.3, contrary to what Baudriallard argued, the public is still being watched and the panopticon is still relevant. The public no longer watches electronic devices but the public is in fact being watched by them. [111] Chapter 4 will further delve into how the idea for the panopticon evolved and was incorporated into the final work.

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[111] Jean Baudrillard, 'The end of the Panopticon', *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Chapter 4: Project Description

The final works presented during the viva as well as the exhibition are an accumulation of the imagery created in Chapters 2 and 3, which were in turn heavily impacted by the readings carried out and discussed in Chapter 1, under the supervision of Schembri Bonaci. In this chapter the final idea, as well as the execution and set-up will be delved into.

4.1 The idea

The presence of images has only kept on rising exponentially in recent years, where now entire news statements are spread through the use of memes or even gifs (Graphics Interchange format). As discussed in Chapter 1, the veracity of these images has nowadays become even more disputable. Imagery remains a political act in this post-truth environment and in turn the truth remains even more so. Authorities promote an era of misinformation, despite having so much information freely available to everyone. Yet they still manage to successfully promote false agendas to keep them in power. It is because of this, to be politically relevant, that works which attempted at dismissing the truth will not be the only subjects for this research. It was initially desired that the final work would not contain any trace of truth, however in doing that, the work would be stripped from its subversiveness. Elements of post-truth will obviously be present and interweaved within the final works as this post-truth way of experiencing the world has become integrated into our modes of perceiving it. The final work will comprise of paintings as well as an installation and it is through the installation itself that the viewer will be able to experience and perceive some of the paintings.

4.2 Location and layout

The final exhibition seeks to consolidate the works and discussions delved into in Chapter 2 and 3 of this essay. The exhibition was set up in one of the main rooms at the Società Dante Alighieri. The large work, depicting the Judgment of Paris (A) (Refer to Figure 30 and Plates

3 and 4) was displayed on the large wall opposite the entrance into the room and a smaller room (B) was built into that room. This means that on entering the room the viewer enters the smaller in-built room and s/he views the larger work hung outside the triangular room through the room itself. In order to allow the viewer to do so the walls of the smaller room were constructed of rope. This created partitions that would partially, albeit not total, restrict the view into the larger room. Additionally, periscopes were built into the wall of the small room to allow the viewer to focus on different points of the Judgement of Paris (Refer to Figure 30 and Plates 3 to 6) The next part of the essay will break down each aspect of the final project.
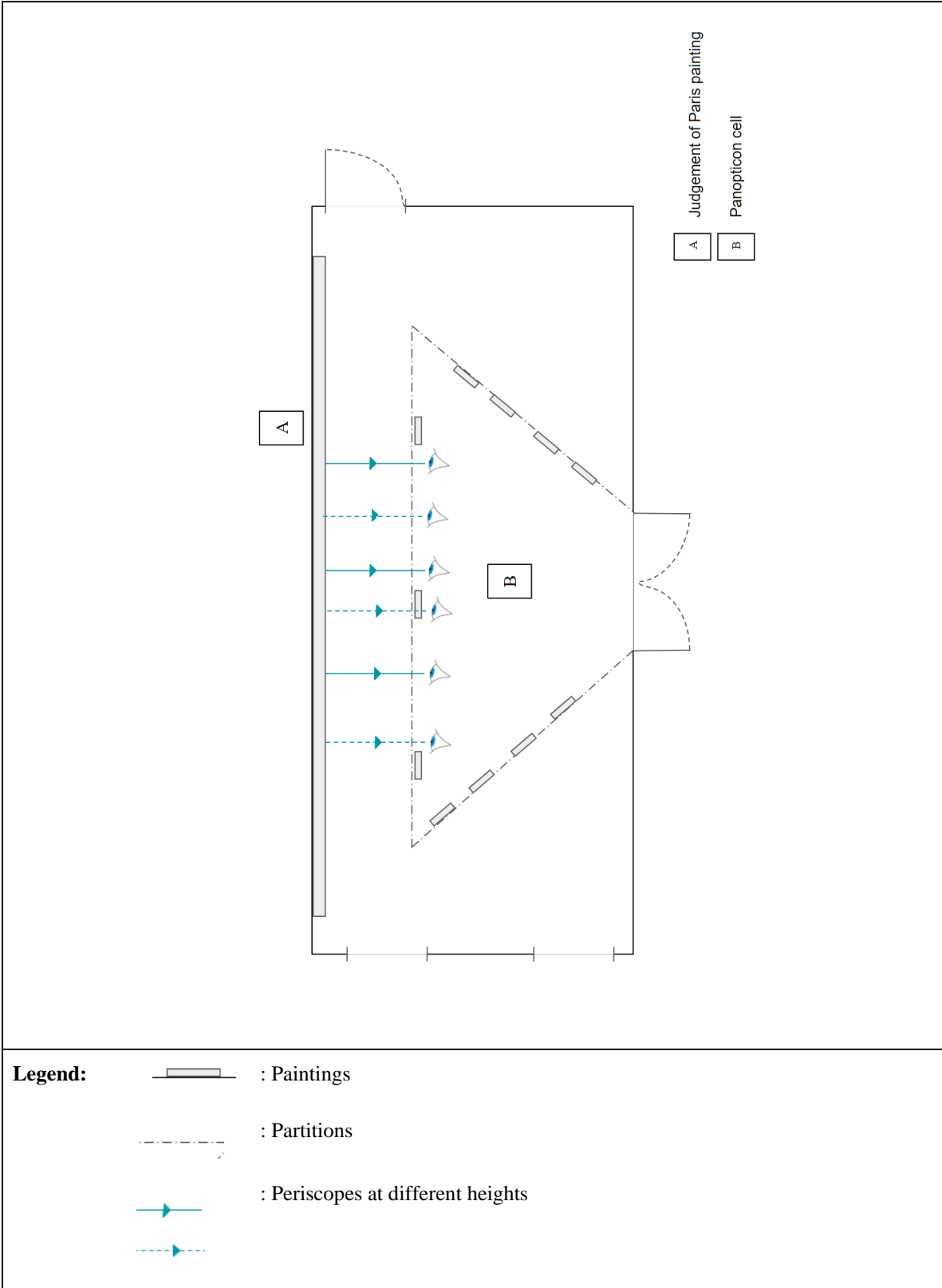
Legend:

▱ : Paintings

⋯ : Partitions

➤ : Periscopes at different heights

➤ :

Figure 29: Floor plan for the exhibition space at Società Dante Alighieri

4.2.1   Judgement of Paris

The work depicting the Judgement of Paris (denoted by an 'A' on Figure 29) comprises of twenty-four canvases which together form one image to depict the Judgment of Paris. Each individual canvas has a Pantone® swatch layout, meaning that the top part of the canvas is the image, whereas the bottom part will contain the text detailing the code and name of that canvas.

Figure 30: Judgment of Paris, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 270cm by 980cm

The myth for the Judgment of Paris serves as a clear reflection of the current online environment in relation to how the public consumes information, the presence of the algorithm, the constant seeking to please and conform as well as monetise and capture attention as well as the element of corruption. Additionally, the use of smaller canvases to make the larger work is to comment on the way information is fragmented and consumed as such. The use of the Pantone® standard layout is also a nod to the way lies which are presented as facts are consumed without being questioned or challenged. Lies are unabashedly stated as if truths and are consumed without a care that they are so.

4.2.1.1 Establishing Canvas sizes and layout for the Judgement of Paris

When considering various sizes for the work depicting the Judgement of Paris, the initial thought of creating one large work was considered. However, this would have created a number of obvious issues related to transportation, location issues as well as finding such a large surface available or constructing it. On further thinking, the idea evolved into creating one large mural using a number of canvases of the same size.

This would make the logistics much easier to manage as well as creating a wonderful and fun link to both the Pantone® swatches and social media visuals, both elements that the artist wanted to incorporate into the final work. This would mean that the individual canvases would be split at an approximate ratio of 1 is to 3, with the smallest being designated for the text.

When selecting the canvas sizes, reference was made to the Pantone® chips format. The required calculations were made, and it was concluded that the white band at the bottom of each swatch is at a ratio of 1:3. Once this ratio was established, next was identifying the exact canvas dimensions. Two options would have been suitable, 60cm by 90cm and 50cm by 70cm. Two to-scale drawings were made to consider both canvas dimensions (Refer to Appendix 2). It was then decided that as to make the most of the location and to have the desired impact the best dimension would be the 60cm by 90cm size. Thus, the final work consists of a total of 24 canvases, which will be placed in a 3 (vertical) by 8 (horizontal) layout to create the mural (Refer to Figure 30).

Figure 31: Detail from Judgment of Paris

4.2.1.2 Composition

The next steps consisted of laying out the composition. Reference was made to a number of works depicting the Judgment of Paris, particularly those by Peter Paul Rubens, Hans von Aachen, Henri-Pierre Picou, Willem Isaacsz van Swanenburg and Eduard Lebiedzki.

Figure 32: Peter Paul Rubens, *'The Judgment of Paris'*, c.1638, Museo del Prado, Madrid

Figure 33: Hans von Aachen, *Pallas Athena, Venus and Juno*, 1593, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 34: Willem Isaacsz van Swanenburg, *'The Judgment of Paris'*, c. 1609, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Figure 35: Eduard Lebiedzki, 'Urteil des Paris', 1906, Private collection

Although in most of the works, excluding Hans von Aachen, most artists depicted three full figures for the goddesses, for this work the conscious decision was made not to represent the complete figure, as to reflect the majority of imagery the public is currently being subject to. Additionally, doing this allows for the goddesses' size to be even larger as well as to saturate the works as much as possible with different parts of the human body. Thus, also allowing for comment on the obsession with the self rather than surroundings.

A number of small sketches were done initially to select the optimum composition for the myth (Refer to Appendix 1 and 3). Throughout this planning stage, having each canvas be a standalone work, was kept in mind. Thus, the figures were placed with this consideration as well as ensuring balance for the overall final work.
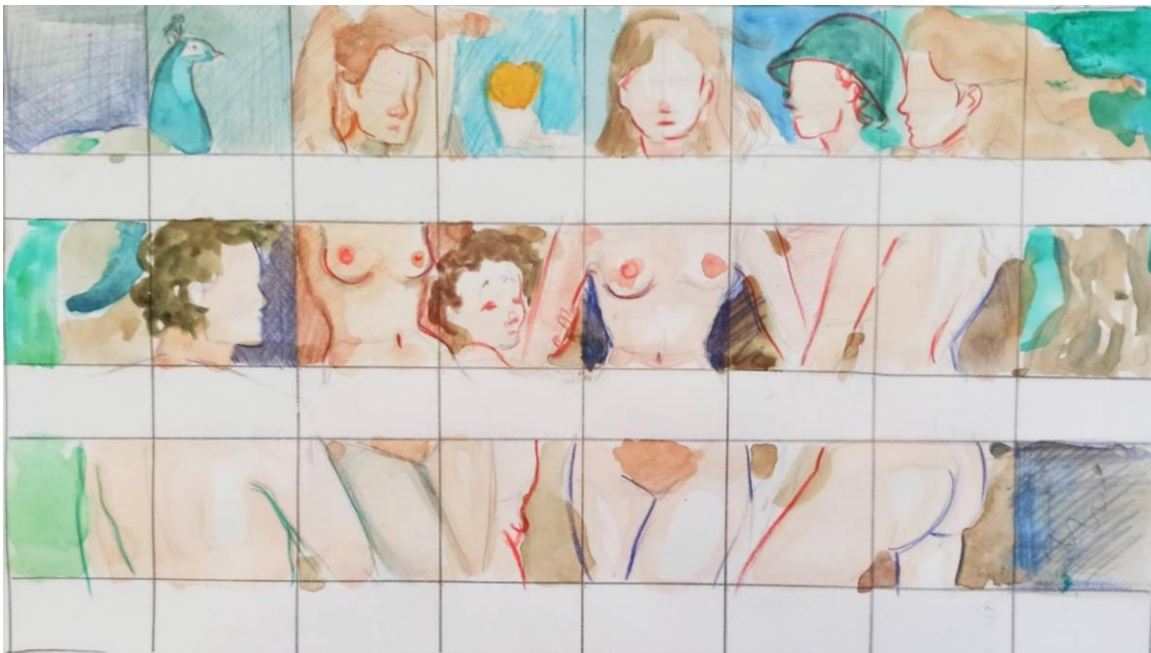

Figure 36: Composition studies I

Figure 37: Composition studies II

A number of elements were also included to aid in the identification of the goddesses and therefore help in the identification of the myth. The peacock for Hera, Cupid for Aphrodite and the olive tree for Athena. Hermes is depicted to be a step behind the three goddesses presenting the golden apple and Paris is depicted with his back to the viewer as if

observing the goddesses. This allows for the viewer to identify with Paris. The viewer is also judging the goddesses or others based on appearances, and the viewer, like Paris, can easily be swayed, due to the viewers human nature, upon whom we bestow our attention. Like Paris, the viewer is corruptible.

Figure 38: Details from the Judgement of Paris

The apple is depicted towards the centre of the work. The three goddesses fought for Paris' attention to earn the title of the 'fairest one'. Similarly, the same in happening online when a number of users turn to social media for validation, as discussed in Chapter 3. [112] By building and optimising their reality, social media users are creating alternate realities, or optimised realities. As discussed in Chapter 1, alternate realities and truths are not just limited to social media but also politics.

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[112] Yongjun Sung, 260-265.

4.2.1.3 Captions for the individual canvases

Each canvas has a text accompanying it in a font similar to the one used by Pantone® for their swatches. The first line has the text 'Pantone®' on each canvas. On the second line, which is usually reserved for the colour code, is a random code, and finally, on the third line, which usually contains the colour name for easy reference and identification, contains a title for the subject of that canvas. The title will not be a correct representation of the subject of that canvas, but instead it will be something unrelated or incorrect. For example, the symbol for Hera is actually the peacock and not the olive branch, whilst Cupid usually serves as the symbol for Aphrodite, not Athena. Additionally, the muscles refenced are also not correctly representing the body section being depicted on that canvas. Therefore, the Pantone® swatch layout, which is considered to be a standard and an objective fact, is in turn referencing a lie. A lie is being represented as a truth. One might argue that the same effect could have possibly been achieved if a caption was placed next to the canvas, as is traditionally done. However, by incorporating the caption into the painting itself the painting and the caption have to be considered as one work.

This is linked to the experimentation discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.4, however unlike the colour swatches discussed the work here is not just dealing with the colours but also the subject of the work. By having the canvas represent one object, but then the caption claiming another this will attempt at highlighting the influx of misinformation available as well as attempt at commenting on the fact that both true and false statements are treated equally.

4.2.1.4 Execution

Next step was to work on the actual planned final size. In order to do this tracing paper was attached to a wall to make up the final dimensions of 270cm by 480cm. Once the tracing paper was attached the canvas dimensions were mapped out. Using the sketches discussed in Section 4.2.1.2 as a reference the final sketch was then done directly onto the tracing paper.

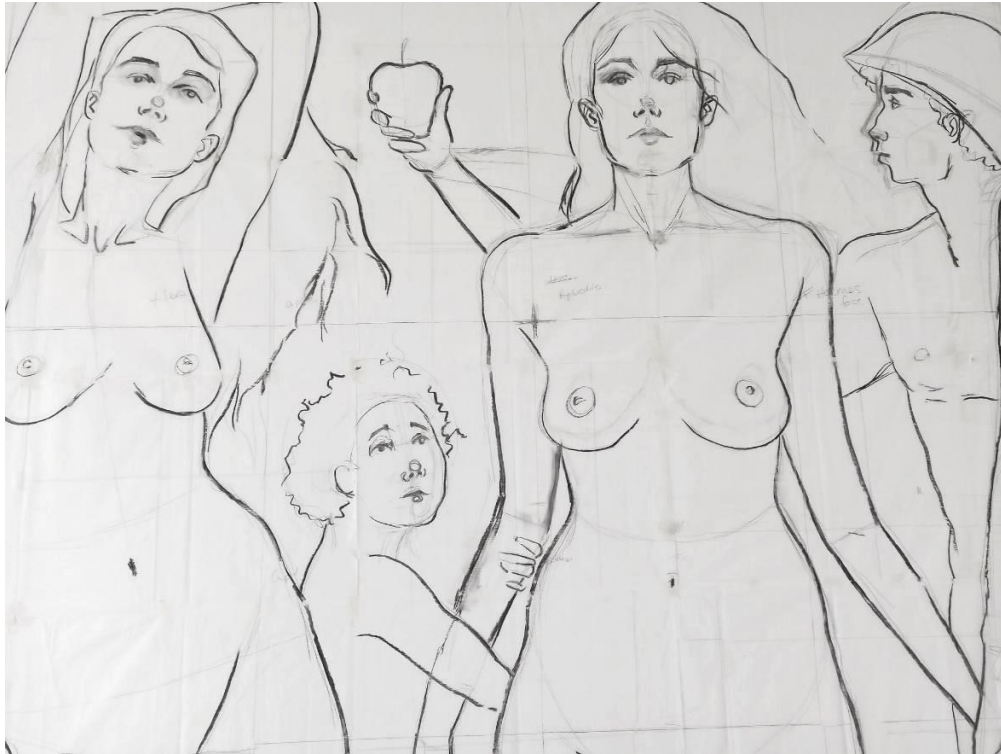Figure 39: Large-scale sketch

Figure 40: Detail of large-scale sketch

Following the finalisation of the sketch the next step was to start transferring the sketch from the tracing paper onto the individual canvases. The blank part of the canvas was masked out and the painting was initiated.

Between one canvas and the next there is continuation of the subject, i.e. the figure will be continuous however the colours will vary. This was done consciously as a means to fragment the work, make each canvas an individual, as well as play around with the Pantone® swatch colour idea.

4.2.2   The Panopticon

As discussed in the introduction of this section a small room was built into the exhibition room (denoted by a 'B' on Figure 29). The trapezium layout was selected as a nod to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. In Bentham's panopticon the building is circular, and the cells are around the circumference. The guard's room is in the centre and so this allows the guards to view into each cell at any moment. Thus, the people occupying the cells do not know when they are being watched. This, according to Bentham, causes the prisoners to auto correct their behaviour. [113] Each cell would therefore be close to an isosceles trapezium in shape (Refer to Appendix 4).

Thus, the viewer is being placed within a panopticon cell in which s/he is being observed. Similarly, to what technology is nowadays doing with its algorithms, categorising users and extracting information. Additionally, technology has become the guard we let into our everyday life and consequently alter our behaviour even when one is alone.

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[113] Jeremy Bentham, 'Letter II: Plan for a Penitentiary Inspection House', *Panopticon: or, The inspection-house. Containing the idea of a new principle of construction applicable to any sort of establishment, in which persons of any description are to be kept under inspection,* Thomas Byrne (ed.), Dublin, 1791, 5-6.

4.2.2.1 Partitions

The partitions for the small room were created by threading individual pieces of approximately 5.5m string through a PVC pipe at 2cm intervals. These pieces of string were in turn knotted to create loops. Each loop was then threaded through a metal cable and the cable was in turn attached to the walls at around a height of 3.5m. This resulted in partitions that limit some visibility into the larger room, whilst still allowing a feeling of space. These partitions will give the feeling of space and light, yet the viewer will still be contained to experience the exhibition through the small room. Just as one experiences the world through their limited perceptions and restricted view.

With regards to lighting, a wash effect was achieved using eight LED pars onto the Judgement of Paris. The light was set up just behind the periscopes. In doing so the mural is bathed in light and then reflected light lights up the rest of the room. Thus the areas behind the left and right partition remain the darkest and thus creating a contrast with the string partitions (Refer to Plate 4). Two additional LED pars were added onto the left and the right side of the panopticon cell sides.

4.2.2.2 Periscopes

Integrated within the partitions were six periscopes that allowed the viewer into seeing the outside of the small room they are restricted to, whilst also allowing the viewer to focus on certain portions of the Judgment of Paris work. The periscopes were mostly directed onto the erogenous zones, thus enticing the viewer to look through and in doing so directing the viewer's gaze. The numerous viewpoints allow one to think they have options, yet each option was in fact been pre-determined by the artist.

Online, as discussed in Chapter 2, algorithms provide material that will keep the user engaged. These algorithms serve as a vehicle through which lies can spread due to the confirmation bias which one is naturally susceptible to. The artist here is playing the role of the algorithm, the artist assumes what the viewer might want to see and the viewer's view was directed accordingly.

4.2   Selfies series

The works created throughout this research process which were discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this essay were included in this exhibition. These works were displayed on the partitions of the inside room (denoted by an 'B' on Figure 29). The works displayed in the small room can easily be viewed by the viewer, as well as juxtaposed with the periscopes.

The works that will be presented here will provide a summation of the thought process for this research, the various ways we interact with truth, the different value we attribute to truths and falsehoods and how this reflects and impacts the way we interact particularly on social media.

Conclusion

The presence of post-truth imagery in everyday life, particularly social media, has in no way made the search for truth any easier. Despite all the information made available, this age of truth and information which was promised with the introduction of the internet never materialised. The internet now serves as a breeding ground that allows for lies to proliferate.

Despite the call to be oneself, niches are still prevalent more than ever, as humans still tend to agglomerate to people with similar beliefs. It is precisely this agglomeration that is so dangerous to truth. These bubbles of likeminded individuals create these *cul-de-sacs* in which other perceptions and ideas different to one's own ideologies go unheard or ignored. Algorithms sieve the internet and its users in order to supply those same users with material that will engage them in order to distract and keep them engaged for longer, thus monetising their attention.

One must not be misled into thinking that post-truth is now over now that Trump is no longer the President of the United States of America. Post-truth was present before Trump and will most likely remain for some time. However, one might dare argue that despite all his negativity, having Trump as president served as a wake-up call. Trump as president highlighted how fast information was consumed without it being questioned and challenged, particularly by the public.

Post-truth is more than just alternative facts and fake news. It does not imply that there once was an age of truth, and we are now in an age of lies. What is new now, and what merits being called post-truth, is this laxness and apathy towards truth. Lying was always present, in all facets of life not just politics or appearances. But it is the change in reaction that is elicited once the lie is made apparent that is novel. The reaction is no longer anger. That anger and emotional chaos has now been tamed into acceptance and apathy. [114] What is truth and what is a lie is no longer attributed any particular significance when observing the emotion it elicits.

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[114] Burrow, 2.

As discussed in the introduction of this research, research pertaining to this newly emerged apathy was lacking. Through painting and this installation, this research sought analyse the impact post-truth imagery has on how one presents oneself on social media, and vice versa. This exhibition sought to create a space, in which no viewer is attacked, but provided with the space think about this change in relationship with lies and truth, particularly on social media.

This research did delve slightly into the element of multiple realities and the ever-growing trend of the public now being able to easily select realities that are appealing. It would be interesting to further delve assess the surge in multiple narratives being given prominence, particularly by mass media nowadays. Emotional narratives trigger the public into sympathising with these narratives and in doing so challenge the classic narratives the public was once accustomed to. Particularly the monster narrative. Monsters were previously always depicted as bad or evil characters, however we are nowadays veering more towards sympathising with these same monsters and villains.

As one can gather from these chapters the final idea did in no way materialise easily. The entire process consisted of various experiments, frustrations, back tracking, self-doubt and more frustration. The final idea being presented here is the result of an accumulation of readings, sketches and discussions.

The artist asks that the reader understands that some generalisations with the public's view were taken and this project is skewed through the perspective of the artist as well as her personal relationship with social media and the truth, which is still, and will continue to be an ever-changing relationship. However, the artist hopes that the public might still be able to relate with this work or draw their own conclusions. This study would be considered to be a success if this research manages to elicit some form of discussion surrounding our imagery, social media and truth.

Finally, this work aims to highlight three major points; the way in which imagery is immediately consumed and its veracity not even questioned, the relationship between appearances in the physical world, how one edits their appearance online and finally the role and impact the authorities play on perceptions.

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Plates

Plate 1: Stairway leading to the installation

Plate 2: Pantone self-portraits before entering the installation
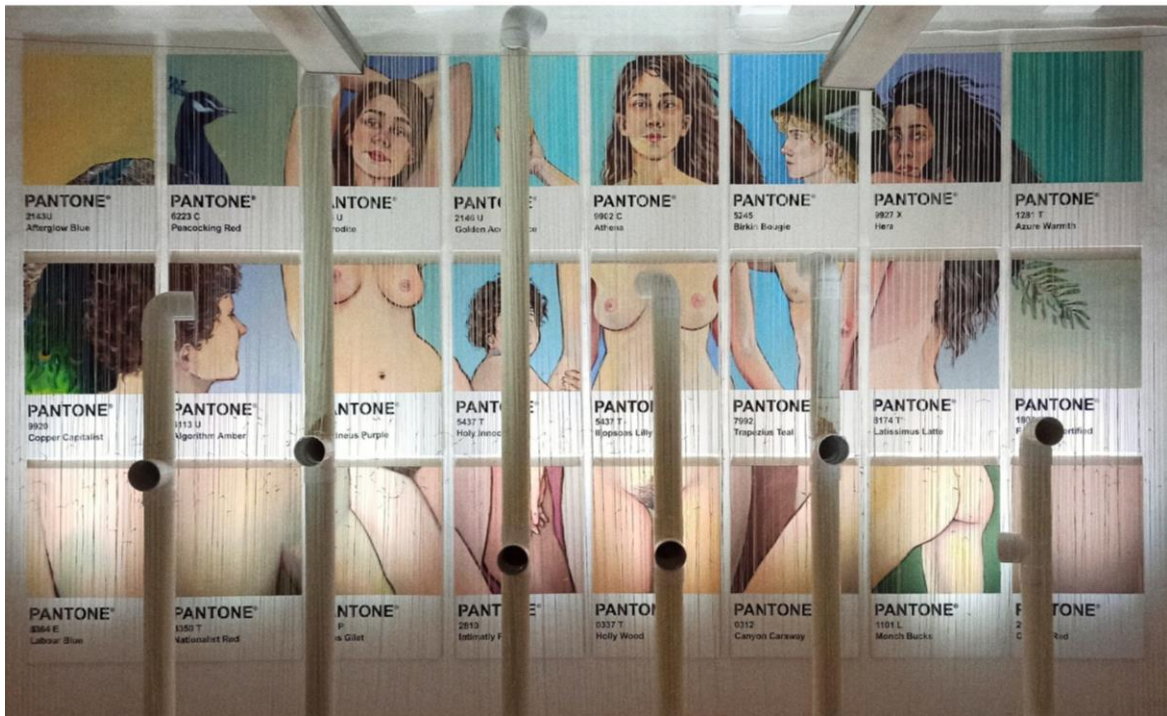
Plate 3: Judgement of Paris installation
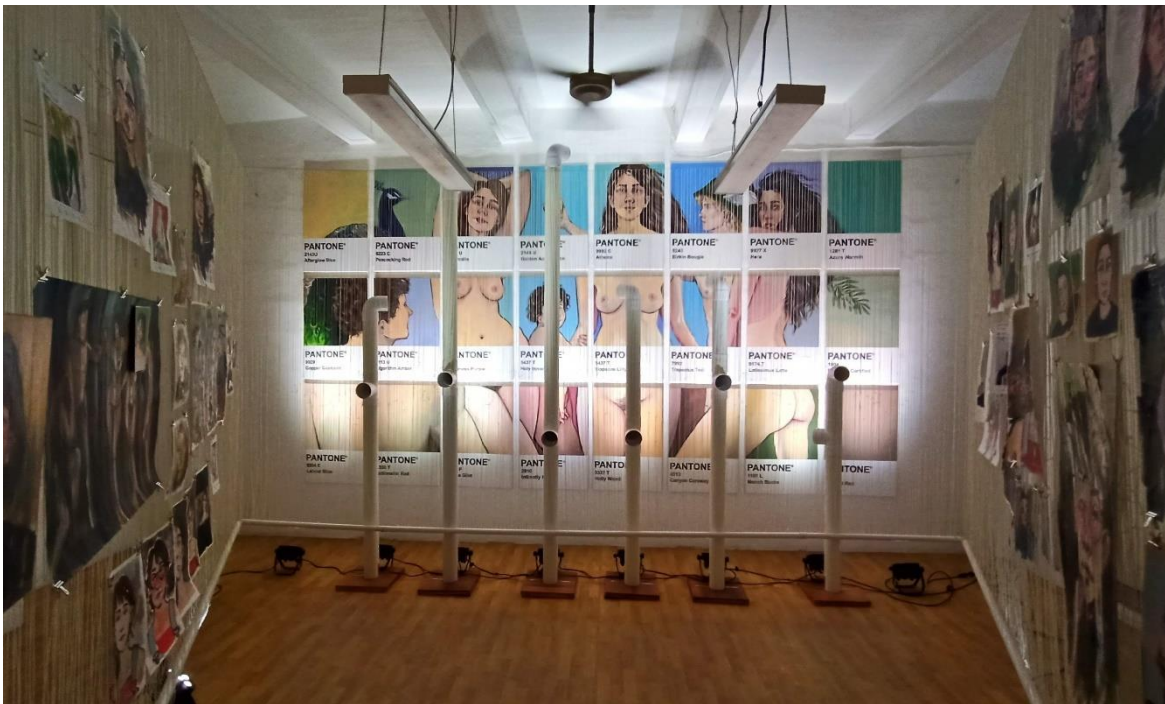
Plate 4: Zoomed out view of the installation

Plate 5: Periscope detail

Plate 6: Periscope detail
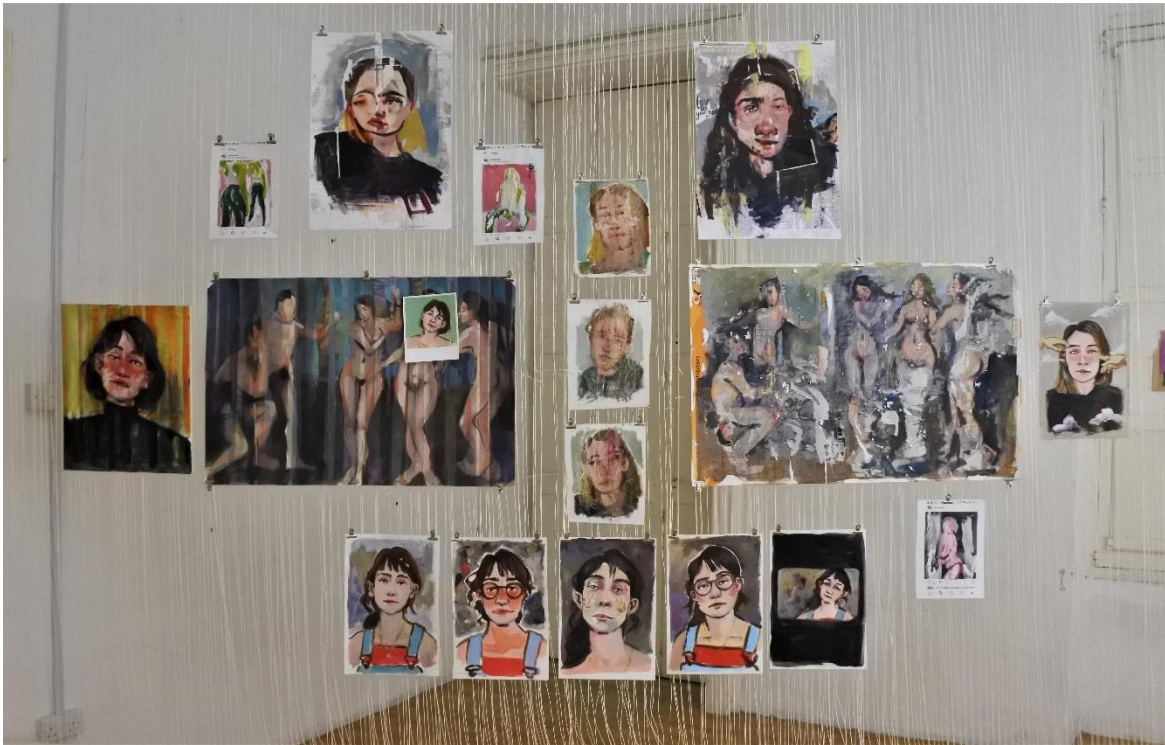
Plate 7: Left side of installation on entering

Plate 8: Left side of installation

Plate 9: Right side of installation on entering
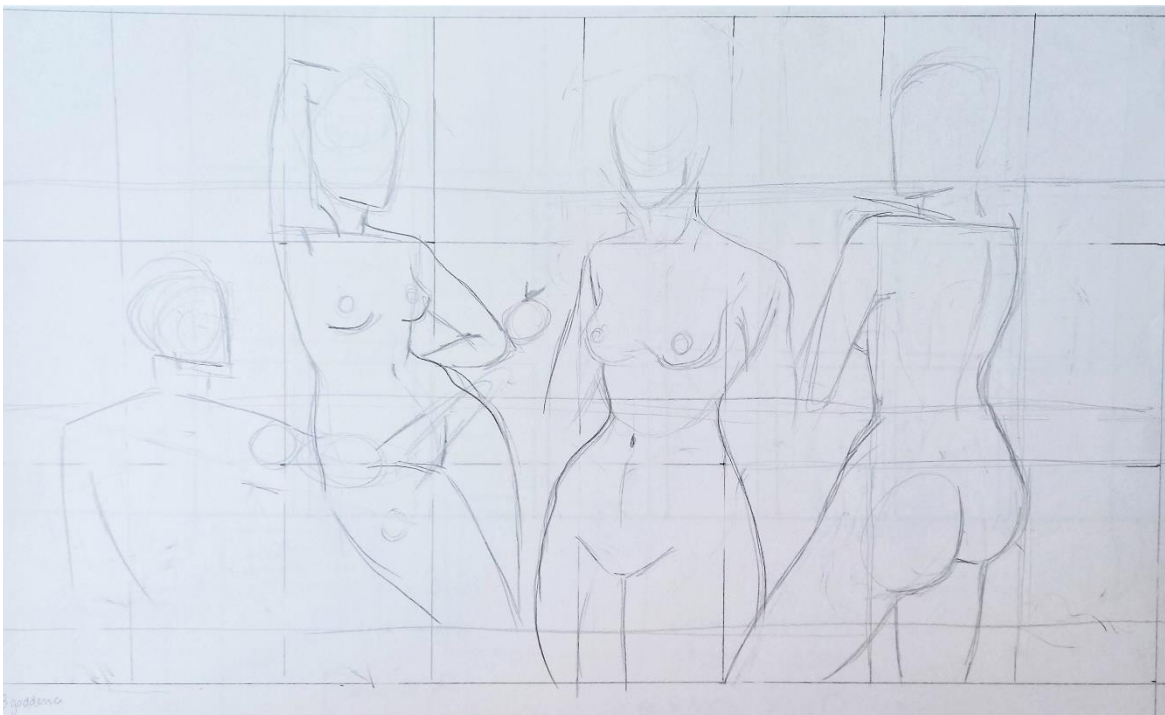
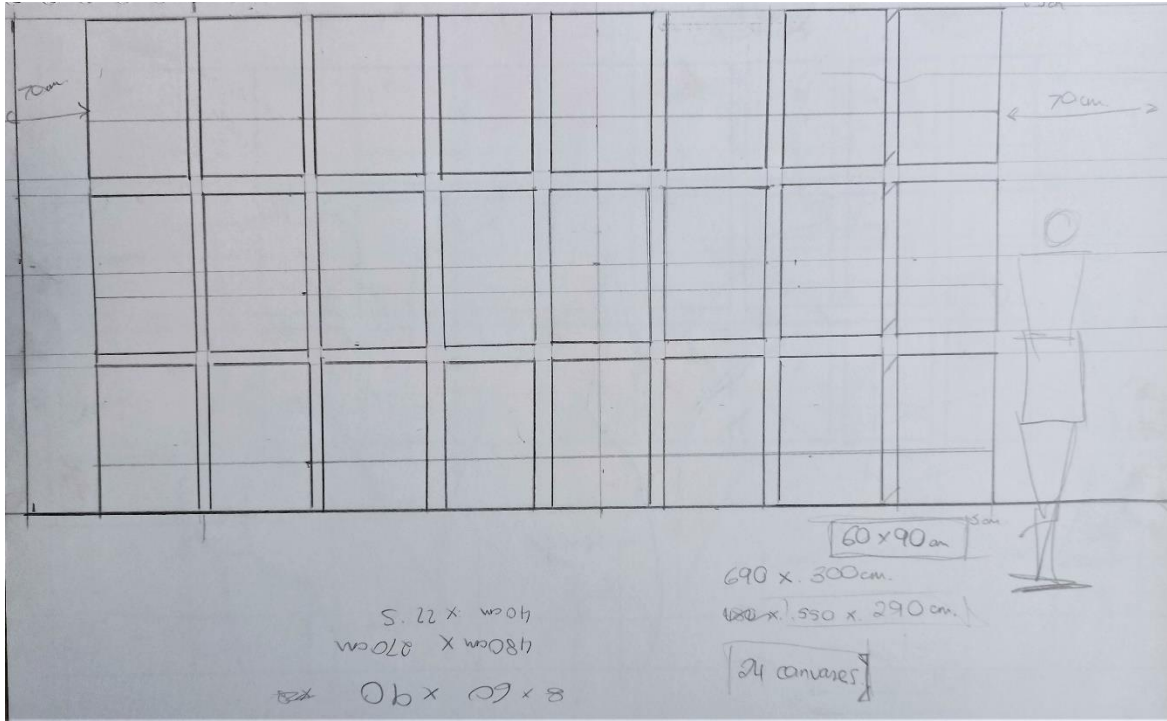Plate 10: Right side of installation

Plate 11: Right side of installation
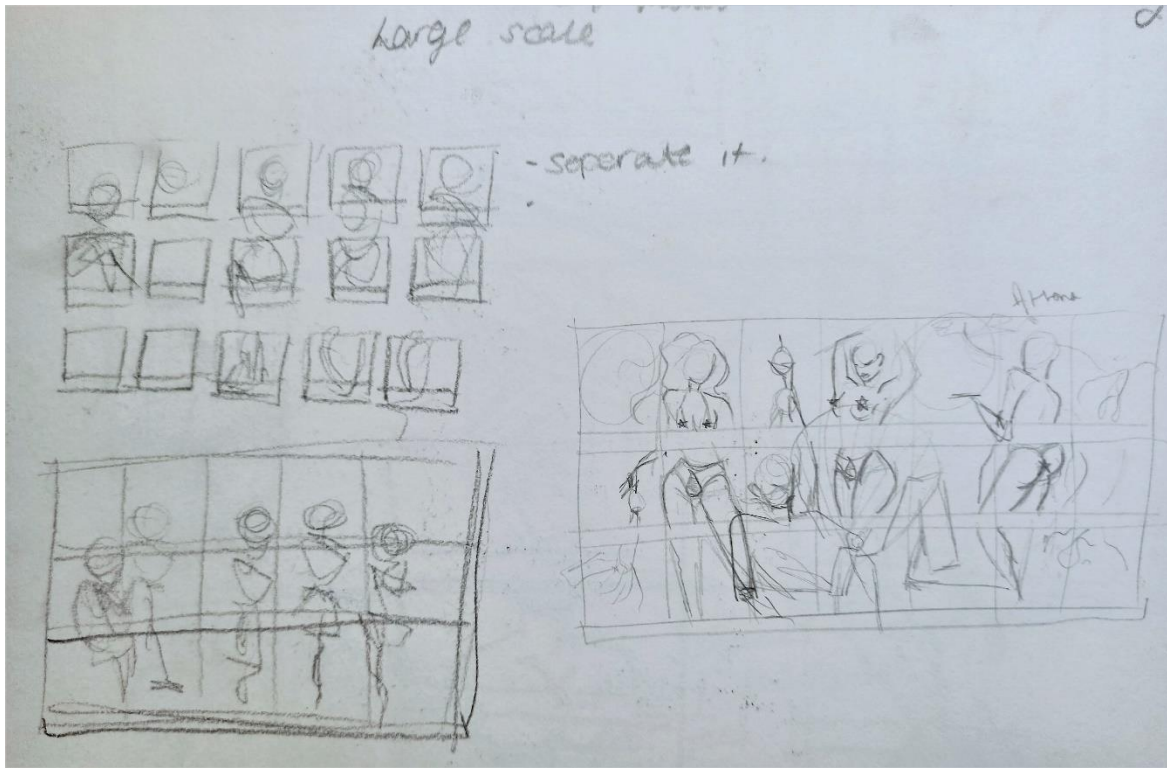
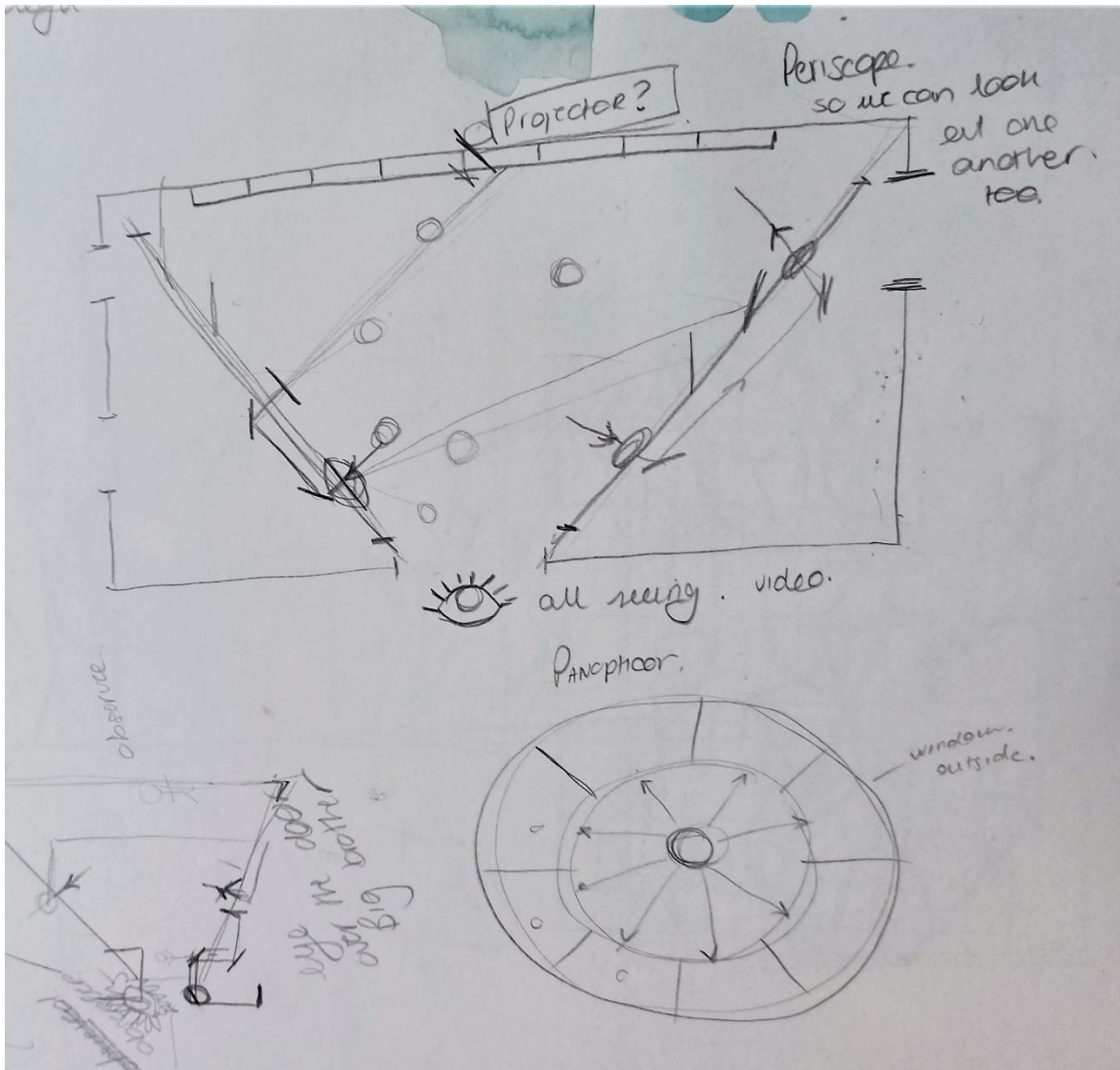Plate 12: Visitors in the installation

Appendix

Appendix 1: Compositional study for the Judgement of Paris

Appendix 2: To-scale drawings

Appendix 3: Compositional studies for the Judgement of Paris

Appendix 4: Sketches for the installation layout