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# As I Am Changing: A Conversation

Sheri Park

*Union College - Schenectady, NY*

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As I Am, Changing is a series of videos and paintings that explores growth, and how it is attained. The longing to change can degenerate into an anxiety-driven obsession, manifested in the body turning against itself. Perception is filtered by obsession, which distorts true understanding of the self and others. Lasting transformation is often caused by indirect forces; a random discovery may outweigh a multitude of deliberate attempts. Some change, like the seasons, can only happen in its own time.

I am exploring this universal experience through the means of self-portraiture. While a typical self-portrait focuses on the face, my self-portraits focus on my whole person, the self as regarded by the ancient Psalmists as a person's thoughts, feelings, will, body, and social relations, all held together by the soul.

The integration of various forms of expression —poetry, performance and painting—reflects this multilayered understanding of the self. The making of these works involved obscuring and exposing layers of image and text. This process of covering and unveiling mimics the changing of the seasons.

As I Am, Changing depicts the struggle to change in the soul, as manifested in the body and articulated in poetry.

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*As I Am, Changing:*

A Conversation

by  
Sheri Lisa Park  
with Scott Poulter

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of Visual Arts

UNION COLLEGE

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*Let's start by talking about finding the focus of your thesis. Were there ideas you wanted to articulate from the beginning or was it a gradual process of discovering what you wanted to say?*

Figuring out the focus of my thesis was a long and confusing journey (my family and close friends can attest to that!) It's strange for me to look back, because I topically ended up back where I started from—but with a matured approach.

My first thesis idea was to do family portraits at the microscopic level. I wanted to take samples of my and my family's hair, saliva, whatever, look at them under the microscope, and paint. I actually did

painting of my mouth cell and a close up of a hair—this is how I discovered my process of Photoshopped image to painting, actually—but the results weren't quite what I wanted.

I had been playing around with ideas of text—words whose letters were made out of words whose letters were made out of words— I ripped off this concept from Hofstadter's Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid. But there wasn't enough image at this point, it was so conceptual and it wasn't me—I'm all about colors, and I was imagining these pieces mostly just pencil on white paper. Plus, I had spent a term focusing on blind contours and figure drawing, so that was sitting around in my head, waiting to come out.

Early on, I made a list of ideas for my thesis, and it is amazing how many of those I have managed to touch upon. Really, this process was about finding the connections between all the ideas I had, and the different mediums I want to use—similar to the definition of soul as that which encompasses and connects the different parts of you. With each new project idea I had, I was thinking about self portraiture, and perception. It's still hard for me to articulate what the perception is about—you could say disguise, mystery, obscured, layered, hidden—that's what my microscopic portraits and words in words were about, too. These last couple years, various relationships and experiences have forced me to dramatically shift the way I see myself and others. I've been dismayed, I've been in awe—it was, and continues to be, a humbling experience, finding out again and again that I don't see the whole picture! I wanted the viewer to experience some of that same wonder of looking—and then looking again, and finding out that there was more there than what first meets the eye.

So, to answer your question: yes there were ideas from the beginning, and yes it was a gradual process, both technically and conceptually! So much of this I feel I've been given. I tried to force it, and I was angry that I didn't know exactly what I was doing until I began making art. I had to simply trust, and wait, and work in the midst of confusion—and, I guess it got figured out!





*You talked about self-portraits in terms of levels of perception and layering, particularly with words. What choices about medium did you make to convey those ideas? Did certain media seem more suited to a particular aspect of self-portraiture?*

I might as well talk about my process, and I'll get to the meaning within each media!

I start by choreographing and filming the video—I always call it video, Fernando, my advisor, has convinced me its performance—I suppose its some mix of the two! This medium very new for me. I've danced, and acted almost all my life, but I've never used those skills for visual art. When I began to do performance art and videos, I was immediately taken in by opportunities it opened up. Primarily I saw this direct way to the figure, to use my body—to use my body in motion. I could react to my environment. A lot of the video I only roughly planned and I just felt it out on the spot. Video let me speak in an unfiltered way. Instead of making a motion with my body which makes a mark on the canvas, I make a motion, and that motion is the mark.

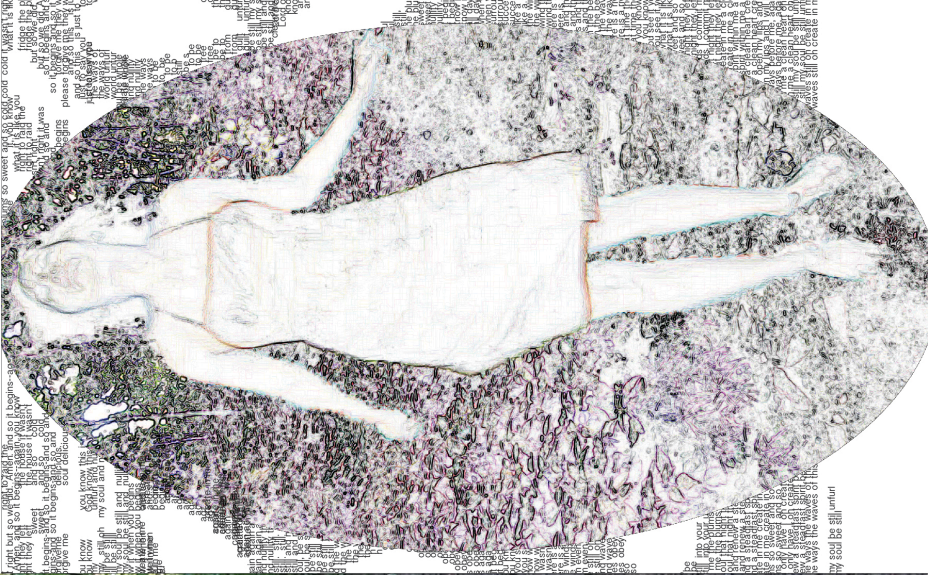
And editing software opens up a whole new meaning to repetition for me! Up to that point, I'd had very little interest in exploring repetition in my work. But of course in dance, in music, in time based media, that's often an intrinsic component. And now that I could do it so easily, I realized it was a perfect way to communicate obsession and anxiety. Of course, I could have done some obsessive, detailed painting, but with video, the viewer is more engaged in the experience. It's a bit painful. That was something I needed to get across, this mental/emotional state.

After editing the video, I take a still and edit it a bit in Photoshop. I use a filter and adjust the contrast a bit. I suppose, I essentially just used Photoshop as a drawing machine—a very complex drawing machine!

Next I take the image into Illustrator and add in the text. Now I articulate the meaning in words. At first I just arranged the words as you normally would, but as I got familiar with the program, I arranged the words to wrap around the image, or emanate from it, as in *Returning*. Most of the text is my original poetry, which is very personal, and mainly about important relationships in my life. So I could draw up a lot of past experiences, some from the beginning of college or even before, and those into this project.

A huge question in making self portraits is how much of myself I'm willing to expose—that comes up in the videos quite literally when I keep on adjusting my dress!—and with my poems, I decided to draw a boundary by arranging the text so that it was very hard to read. If you really want to read it, and you have some time, you probably can make out a good bit of it.

I print out this digital image twice, on oil painting paper and on mylar. This process of figuring out where to paint, where to leave the digital drawing, which parts of the mylar or paper to cut out was pretty difficult, and I still don't feel like I quite have a handle on it. Perhaps I shouldn't have ventured into mylar...regardless, this process of covering over and uncovering reflected some of the ideas I wanted to communicate about will power, and work. When I want to achieve a goal, I can push myself to an unhealthy extreme. I want to work, and see results, but I've learned the hard way that the amount of effort I put in doesn't directly correlate to what is produced. This happened in my process—I'd paint something, and end up covering over it entirely, not just by layers of paint, but with the paper or the mylar. You can see the layers as covering over, or peeling back—what is revealed, what isn't.



*There's a vulnerable quality to your work in that you're exposing deeply personal struggles and emotions. Instead of a polished surface, you've sought the roots, the soul. Can you describe the aspect of spirituality in your thesis? What connections have you made between spiritual awareness and self perception?*

The definition I have for the self is very much a spiritual one; it comes from Dallas Willard's understanding of the Hebrew terminology in the Old Testament. Dallas Willard is an amazing Christian philosopher—he recently died, sadly. He's known for writing on spiritual transformation, and I was reading one of his books The Great Omission the summer I was brainstorming for this.

I've always been curious about what composes the self—you hear so many words tossed around about different parts of ourselves—the mind, the heart, soul, spirit, and so on—but it is hard to understand what those words actually mean—mainly, how they relate to each other. The definition of the self offered in The Great Omission was the most succinct and comprehensive one I've heard, and its given me a chance to explore and express a fuller picture of myself.

Sometimes it feels silly saying that my thesis is a series of self portraits! But, I believe that understanding myself and how I relate to God and others is one of the most valuable things I can do with my time. Christianity is not about regulations. It is about inner life and relationship. One of the big things I've been thinking about in regards to my faith has been being honest with God and myself about what I am thinking and feeling.

David, who wrote the Psalms, was called a man after God's own heart. And the Psalms are really intense! Yes there is praise, and wonder, and love expressed, but there is also doubt, and fear, and anger and incredible anguish. Reading the Psalms has driven me to find those feelings inside of me which I



often try to bury. It's not particularly fun to feel and acknowledge fear. But left under the surface, it rots other things inside of me, it comes out in ugly, unexpected ways. I need to deal with it—writing often helps me expose it—and my faith teaches me that I need to bring it to God, and ask for help. Holding on to Bible verses, or other words that call out to God, has been a huge help for me. You can see that in the middle painting in *Ascension*, the words on the side are no longer my own poetry, but a Rilke poem, and a piece from the common prayer. That is when I've "found it", as one my friends put it.

I remember when you were looking through my images from earlier in college, and some from high school, you said that many of my self portraits are not very flattering! Which is true, though I never would have put it that way myself. I find Christian doctrine about how we look at ourselves very tricky. On one hand, we are made in the image of God. On the other hand, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, making us deserving of death. And yet, because of Jesus, God now looks at us as His sons and daughters. I was just reading in *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis that it is, in a way, a divine pretense. In Paul's letters to various churches, he often argues like this: Because of what God has done, you are holy, blameless, a royal priesthood. This is who you are. Because of that, stop sinning! So this is incredibly different from how I typically think about identity.

I'm half Korean but because it is several generations back, I don't know much about Korean culture. I've always felt vaguely undeserving of being half Korean. But I distinctly remember when I realized that I don't have to like kim chee to be half Korean. It's in my blood. I don't have to earn it.

It's similar with being a child of God. I want to believe that yes, I am a friend of Jesus, I am know fully and loved by the God of the universe. But it is a struggle, because I see so often how I do not act like this is my identity—and how I even don't want to admit that! Here is a beautiful quote from Dallas Willard which sums up everything: "Sin always splits the self in some degree. Because you know that you have harmed yourself and others but you probably are not going to come to terms with that, because you're carrying

on a charade of righteousness even if you don't believe it [...] This is a major part of repentance. Looking at them, and seeing things for what they are. But we have to be willing to do that. We have to believe that it is safe for us to do that." That is what I was thinking about with *Caged*, where my body is split in the middle screen—the figure splits off, comes back together. That's when I realized that much of my thesis is confession, admitting how I place my identity falsely, how I overwork... When I have not repented and acknowledged reality, this affects how I see others, how I see God, how I look at larger world issues.

And the title comes into this too. *As I Am, Changing* comes from this verse in 1 John: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." Isn't that so beautiful? I long for that day!





*You brought up your video Caged and the concept of the multi-faceted, sometimes divided, self-portrait. In that piece you've managed to convey many of the ideas we've talked about earlier through your movements. The physical stance of your body, for example, seems to mimic a seed through the seasons, going through various stages of growth, closure, openness, engagement, and solitude. How have you learned to use your body as a tool for communicating ideas? Can you explain in more detail the composition of Caged, specifically the actions and transitions that occur?*

I can see in the progression of my videos how I've learned to use my body more expressively and intentionally—I should mention my past experience with dance, that's a big part of this.

I began Irish dancing when I was about 11, and continued almost all the way through high school. I use an Irish dancing move in one of the sections of *Ascension*, which I filmed early on. You get the gist of Irish dancing from that—lots of jumping, and you don't move your arms! It's a wonderful form of dance, and I love it, but recently I've tried to loosen up from that formalized, rigid way of moving my body. Praise dance, and taking some modern dance helped with that. Also acting! I took an acting class this year and many of our exercises were about reacting with your body, incarnating ideas and emotions. So that is some background in how I've gotten to the where I am now in how I use my body.

You can see that expression in *Caged*, one of my best videos I think, because it had so many drafts! It started with the spinning motion, which came directly from a poem I wrote, this line: "She is a cage/or is she in a cage?". I turned this into a question about myself. This was a question I was primarily directing at my own emotional life, commenting on the extreme moments when I feel on top of the world, and when I feel drained of hope. Was I in control, or were external forces driving me? Or both?

Similar to *Bridge/Carried*, I was interested in using the body to make a structure. So when I filmed the summer section, I used my arms to make a cage for my body. This upright, strong structure then slowly collapses, and then rebuilds again, collapses...

I was thinking a lot about pride too, not just being boastful, but pride as in any form of self centeredness; insecurity as a form of pride, because it still about self obsession.

That's why I have the slow movement from one state to another; originally I had two videos, with one figure that was always upright, one figure that was always dangling. But I wanted to show how both of these states were coming from the same place. The first plan was to have four videos, but they didn't fit—which was good, because that is what led me to discover the middle, split image. I mentioned before that the split self can be a result of sin—I've also heard that language used in psychology to describe how people deal with trauma.

There are these moments when I look at myself, or when I look towards myself but don't actually acknowledge the other presence, or when I look at the camera. This awareness of performing adds this possibility of deceit—I am presenting myself to the camera, I want to look a certain way, I must keep going, keep working.

Adding in another person with the fall section adds onto this effect. Sometimes he just watches her turn. Then there are these moments of stillness when they are embracing, a temporary rest, and then back to turning.

In the winter portion, there is much more stillness. The middle frame is essentially still the whole time, curled up. I'm glad you brought up the seed imagery; part way through my thesis I realized that many of

my videos were directly related to some paintings I did in high school of human figures growing underground. One of them was even called *Seed*! These videos aren't quite as obvious, but the concept is similar.

Since I ended up filming the winter section in the dirt, I could be out filming for a longer period of time, which was really nice! This section I was thinking about mourning, loss, covering and curling in response to a season that exposes the skeletons of the trees. Covering my face is about that, and this ashamed thing (losing face, literally!). And ever since watching the dance film *Pina* I had been thinking about what it is like to perform with my eyes closed versus open, so it was great to experience that, and it makes the final frame stand out more.

I started with a similar perspective on my face in the spring videos. I remember seeing the test clip and just loving it because it looked so weird! There isn't much of a resolution in the spring section—I wasn't trying for much of a resolution with my videos—but I hope I captured a sense of waiting, and a step towards peace, and receiving.

























