Breaking the Stigma around Autism: an Interactive Art Exhibition

by
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DEDICATION

This creative project is dedicated to the autistic people who are diagnosed late in life. Those who grew up masking heavily. Those who face daily discrimination and abuse. Those who feared they would not be allowed equal and fair medical treatment during the Coronavirus pandemic due to unlawful DNRs or local legislation. Those who are undoing stereotypes and trauma resulting from the public's preconceived notion of their abilities.

More broadly, this is dedicated to every disabled person and their daily struggle to be recognized as an individual outside of their limitations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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My therapist for helping me unpack how being autistic has affected me and for showing an interest and excitement in my research.

Everyone who interacted with my work for being open to experiencing and learning about autism.

ABSTRACT

Neurodivergence affects an ever-growing percentage of the population. For years, the definition of autism was based solely on the experience of nerdy white boys. Modern-day research on autism is finally beginning to include people of other ages, genders, and races. Thus, more people are being diagnosed today than ever before. However, the stigma surrounding autism has not adjusted accordingly. Inaccurate representations in the media, preexisting stereotypes, and the taboo surrounding mental health discussions has prevented an accurate understanding of autism by neurotypical people. This project is my attempt to destigmatize autism through an education-based approach. I created an interactive art exhibition that allows the viewer to experience aspects of autism themselves to better learn how the disability affects autistic people. This, in turn, opened the door for discussions about basic human differences and mental health, a conversation that benefits everyone, neurotypical or neurodivergent.

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INTRODUCTION

> "The stigma of mental illness is when your psychological state defines your identity; when people see you as flawed and incompetent; when you are invisible to others; or when people see your suffering but blame you for it. It is the unwanted shadow of a person, produced when a society casts a certain light on human differences." (Grinker, Introduction)

Neurodiversity refers to a variation in the human experience caused by the effect of genetic and environmental factors on the brain (DCEG staff). Though it is estimated that 15-20% of the world's population is neurodivergent, it remains a heavily stigmatized and shameful condition (DCEG staff). Dr. Devon Price even defines the term neurodiverse as "the wide spectrum of individuals whose thoughts, emotions, or behaviors have been stigmatized as unhealthy, abnormal, or dangerous" (Price 30). From a young age, neurodivergent people are ostracized for being too weird, rude, hyper, immature, or unlovable (Price 4-5). This sense of otherness causes many of us to mask, or hide, ourselves and our symptoms under a false façade.

Michael Oliver coined the phrase "the social model of disability" in the 1980s. This model is a tool for understanding the interaction between disability and society. Oliver's model begins with the argument that capitalism created the image of disability that exists today. As industrial society developed, so too did the idea that one had to be productive and work to be of value. Disabled people who were not able to operate machinery or complete tasks at the same rate as those who were not disabled were considered a liability to the government, family, and society as a whole (Oliver and Barnes, Ch. 1). Because of this, Oliver argues, disability is seen as the problem of the individual rather than society. By studying disabled activists and organizations, Oliver noted disabled people's disadvantage came from "the organization of society rather than their ascribed limitations or differences … society had failed to recognize or accommodate the reality of human diversity and impairment" (Oliver and Barnes, Ch. 1).

Autism is both a neurodivergence and a disability. In recent years, as the definition of autism has expanded and the diagnosis procedures have become less biased, more people have been diagnosed, and public awareness about autism has increased (Price 40). However, representation of autistic people in the media has not improved in response. Almost all autistic people in shows, movies, and books are quirky side characters, white men "with a monotone voice, rude demeanor, and a penchant for science" who are almost always played by neurotypical, or not neurodivergent, actors (Price 37). Oliver notes the harm misrepresentation can cause, stating "images of impairment and disability in the media influence the formation of what is widely regarded as a traditional, dependent 'disabled' identity" (Oliver and Barnes, Introduction). These harmful stereotypes about what autistic people look like and how they act further excludes people of color, other gender identities, and other minorities (Price 37). They seem like outliers, their disability weird rather than quirky. My thesis aims to combat these harmful stereotypes in the media by visually representing autistic people authentically, encouraging healthy discussion and understanding of the disability.

I am choosing to study neurodiversity for my thesis as a continuation of current themes in my artwork. Over the past several years, I have been creating art about the broad topic of invisible disability and neurodivergence. This was a reaction to finally getting diagnosed with ADHD and autism in my early twenties. This project has given me the opportunity to focus my research on the more stigmatized of the two diagnoses: autism. As someone who received a late diagnosis, I had the experience of dealing with harmful stereotypes, being ashamed and in denial about my disability, and feeling alone and lost. When I was in the diagnosis process, I was rarely believed when I described my symptoms and how hard they made life for me because my outward masking made it seem as if I was not struggling. As I worked to educate others and start discussions about what I was going through using my art, I was met with a greater understanding from others and from myself. As Dr. Devon Price writes, studies show “that for a variety of people with mental illnesses, coming out proudly about one's disability and presenting it as a valuable part of one's identity helped reduce self-stigma's impact” and “social psychological research shows that contact with marginalized groups does help reduce public prejudice toward those groups” (Price 145, 239). With this project, I aimed to do just that, help create discussion that decreases the stigma around autism.

BODY OF WORKS

MASKING

Masking was the first piece I worked on for this project. The term “masking” refers to a defense mechanism by which autistic people create many masks, or façades, to hide their autistic traits to outwardly appear more palatable, socially acceptable, or neurotypical. This experience can vary greatly in severity and duration per person. Many people who are diagnosed in adulthood have been masking for the majority of their life, often without realizing it. Studies show constant masking is detrimental to people’s health and contributes to “physical exhaustion, psychological burnout, depression, anxiety, and even suicide ideation,” whether or not someone is aware that they are masking (Price 11). Though clearly damaging, many autistic people do not have a choice when it comes to masking. Filmmaker Jackson Tucker-Meyer explores this duality in his mockumentary “Satan Cured my Autism.” Throughout the film, two versions of himself are coming into direct conflict with one another: the autistic self and the masking self. The masking persona says “I wish I didn’t have to try so hard to be normal, but it’s worth it in the end. I get to go to a good school, get a good job, live independently, and sometimes I don’t even feel like I am faking it.” This is a harsh reality for many autistic people; they have to choose between respect at the cost of their mental and physical health or living truthfully and facing society’s rejection.

When I began brainstorming how to visually represent conceptual aspects of autism, one idea was inescapable to me: a person behind layers and layers of clear masks at all angles. This concept required a lot of experimentation in media I had never worked with before. I began this piece by making a silicone mold of a mannequin face. I chose a male mannequin because, though it had traditionally masculine features, when reduced to just the front of a face, it was ambiguous in both expression and gender. I then cast several versions of the face in plaster until I made one I deemed successful. I carved out any details that needed to be more accentuated and punctured holes to mark hanging points. Then, I repeated the mold making process using this plaster face to create a closed mold for resin.

Figure 1: Mannequin prepped for mold making

Figure 2: Silicone mold of mannequin face

Figure 3: Plaster casts of the mannequin face

Figure 4: Successful plaster cast and closed mold

Figure 5: Failed resin experiments next to the plaster cast

Figure 6: Failed resin close up

Resin work was where I ran into the most issues. I experimented with many different methods of application, including painting it on, using uv resin, coating the actual plaster face, and pouring while continuously rotating the mold. The problem I consistently ran into is the resin would not cure, or solidify, fast enough to keep a thin shape. It would all pool in the nose area due to gravity. The results were extremely messy, sticky, and tacky. As I had not ever worked with resin, I did lots of research first and consulted multiple people who use resin before beginning the process. However, there seemed to be no way to successfully execute my idea using resin. This is where I changed my execution of the process. I purchased a machine that uses vacuum suction to shape plastic. This process worked exactly as I had hoped, and the pieces turned out consistent and clear.

Not only did the plastic pieces turn out how I envisioned, but they also added more layers to my discussion of masking. The vacuum forming process consisted of me placing one plastic sheet into the machine, waiting for it to heat, pushing it down onto the plaster face I made, letting it cool, cutting it out, and punching holes for hanging. I repeated this process for all 140 faces I created. This mass production added a distance from human touch, subsequently removing the masks from emotion, personality, and uniqueness. Not only did the final product resemble masks, but the process I took to create them reflected the sterility and repetition of masking. Using plastic also references topics in biodegradability, recycling, sustainability, and the lack thereof. I found this to be an intriguing unintended benefit of the media. Much like how plastic is a permanent part of the environment, masks are a lasting part of autistic people's lives. They either remain forever out of necessity or leave lasting trauma. Though not intentional, I found this parallel reinforced my themes in an interesting way.

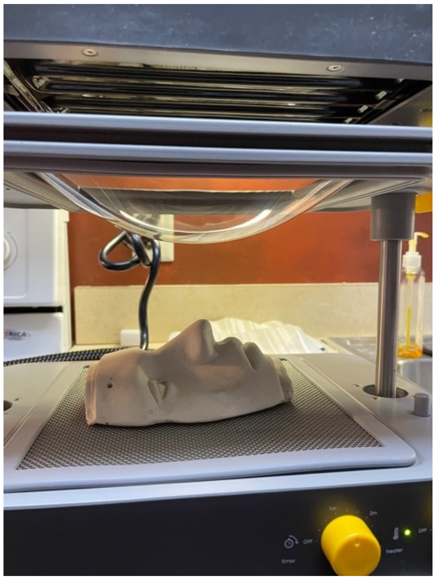


Figure 7: Vacuum form machine melting plastic

Figure 8: Plastic sheet cooling on plaster mask

Figure 9: Vacuum formed plastic sheet next to plaster face

Figure 10: Vacuum formed plastic mask before cutting

Figure 11: Masks after cutting and hole punching

I chose 120 of the 140 masks that were identical and hung them at varying heights with clear fishing line in the center of the gallery. Despite the setback related to materials and experimentation, I enjoyed the outcome of this work significantly. The clearness of the masks was essential to the purpose. I wanted to represent the idea that layers and layers of masking can lead to a lack of identity in autistic people. People were able to walk through these masks, losing the ability to see other people clearly. When viewed through the layers, the masks can distort the individual behind them beyond recognition. Each mask on its own may seem insignificant, but all together they make the person on the other side unreachable, unidentifiable, and a shadow of themselves.

AUTISTIC BURNOUT

Initially, this piece was going to be an oil painting exploring the distance between the body and mind that results from autism. When I was studying the topic, however, I found there is not much modern research on this. It is written about in many articles I consulted, but never beyond brief definitions and examples. I did a lot of internal reflection to see if I could still pursue this topic from more of a personal lens. I do experience a conflict when it comes to my body and mind communicating, specifically introception (misunderstanding of the body's basic signals) and alexithymia (the inability to recognize and distinguish emotions) (Price 124-126). The very nature of those two makes it almost impossible to comprehend from a personal standpoint, let alone as a separate entity from my chronic pain. When I began this piece, I was facing personally unprecedented levels of autistic burnout and decided to shift my topic to address that issue instead. Burnout looks very different in autistic people than it does in people without autism. When I tell others I am burnt out, they can often relate to the feeling of helplessness and lack of energy, but they are confused when I say I lose the ability to plan, make eye contact, and sometimes even speak.

As autistic burnout in adults lacks much formal study as well, I consulted testimonials of autistic people. I was able to discern four main points that were different from regular burnout and cross referenced this with developmental regression common in young children with autism. I found a striking number of similarities between the two despite the age difference. Since there ended up being four traits that make autistic burnout different, I decided to create a small series of illustrations that explored each. I have been studying modern digital illustration out of personal interest, and I noticed that many social media illustrators are currently using illustration as a medium to talk about mental health issues. I wanted to experiment with illustration's power as an inherently relatable and narrative media to discuss the topic of autistic burnout. Though this burnout series is not interactive, illustration's easily interpretive nature does connect to the viewer in a different way than painting, like I was initially considering, does.

I began by drafting a series of thumbnails, or loose sketches, to explore concept, imagery, and compositions. The final design for each piece evolved as I worked on them, often combining aspects from different thumbnails. I ended up using circular compositions to keep viewer's eyes moving around the work while remaining trapped within the frame. This was meant to simulate being trapped in the cycle of autistic burnout as "autistic traits can amplify the conditions that lead to burnout, and burnout can cause these traits to worsen" (Winegarner). I also used a complimentary color palette to increase tension and contrast, something I repeated throughout my exhibition. Each illustration was then printed and mounted on foam core.

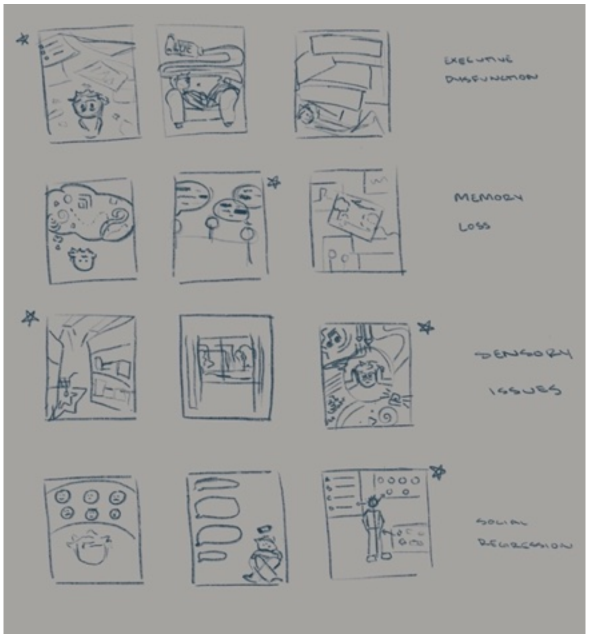


Figure 12: Thumbnails for burnout illustrations

Executive Dysfunction

Executive functioning refers to the ability to plan, sequence, break down large tasks into manageable steps, and self-motivate to complete those tasks (Price 77-78). When autistic people are suffering from burnout, their ability to do those things disappears, which makes their burnout inescapable. This continuous loop is represented by the swirling papers. The papers are planning tools that should be able to help make the burnout more bearable. However, they are spiraling out of control and reach. I chose a foreshortened perspective from a high angle to increase the feeling of helplessness at the sheer scale of the burnout.

Figure 13: Thumbnail and Sketch for Executive Dysfunction

Figure 14: Progress picture Executive Dysfunction

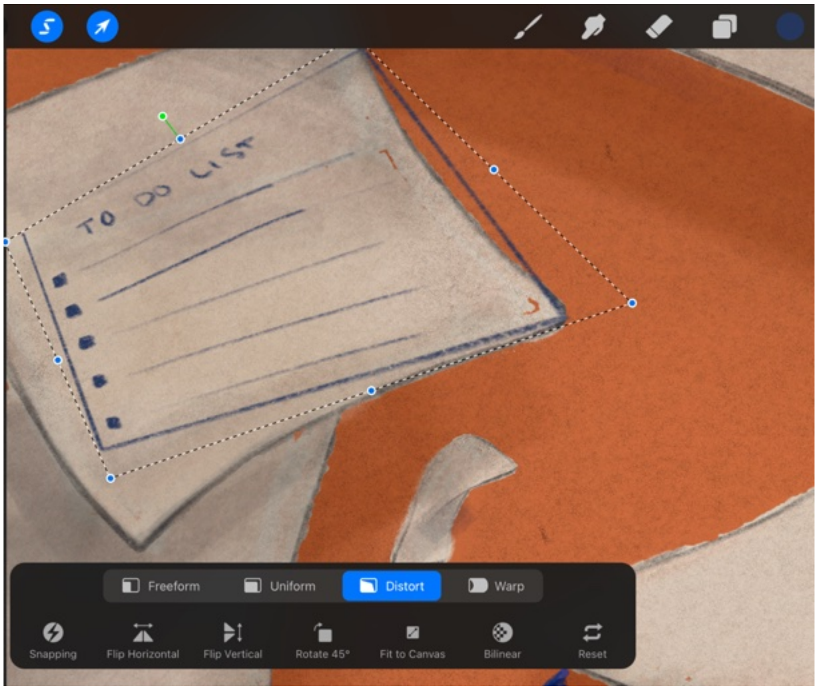


Figure 15: Warping of papers A

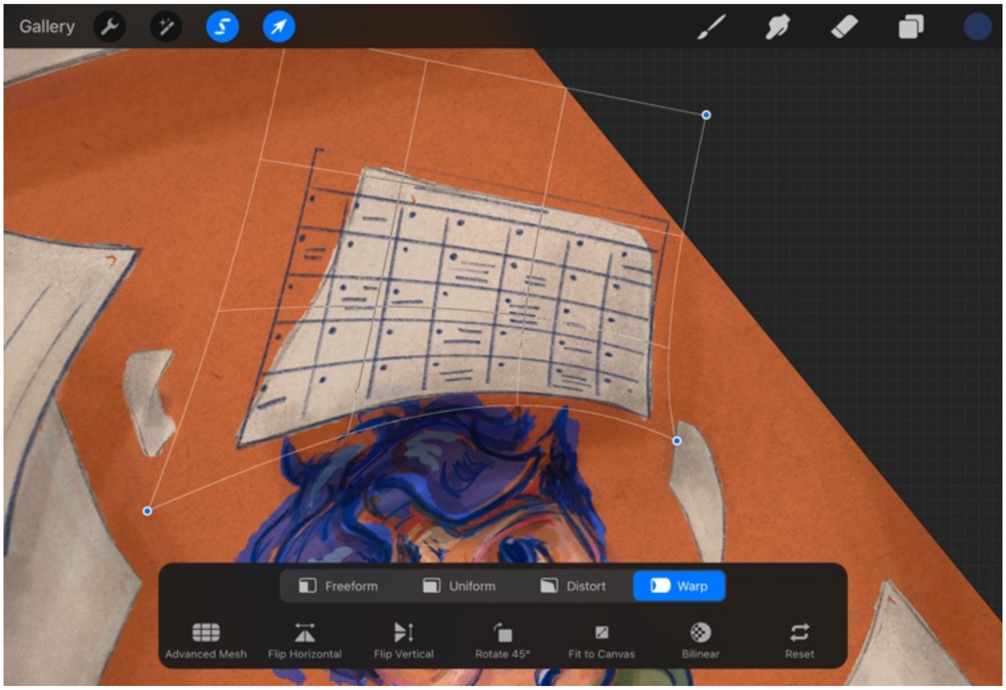


Figure 16: Warping of papers B

Figure 17: Executive Dysfunction final illustration

Sensory Issues

When struggling with autistic burnout, sensory issues become more overwhelming and more likely to cause a meltdown (Roberson). As I am doing a different piece on sensory overload in my exhibition, this illustration focused on visual language rather than experience. Sensory issues in public places can be completely overwhelming and disorienting. I chose a warped perspective for this piece to reference tunnel vision. The viewer gets the exact same exact experience as the person pushing the cart in the store. Though I am not visible in this piece, it is a self-portrait like the rest of this series. I included the wrist braces I sometimes wear as an identifier that this illustration was made from my point of view. I made the sensory triggers visual by adding action lines around the lights and hands to represent overwhelming textures and disorienting florescent lights. The text quotes things often heard in grocery stores, especially in loud self-checkout lines. Distorted products and labels line the shelves to represent how distracting these colors and shapes can be when scanning for one specific item I need.

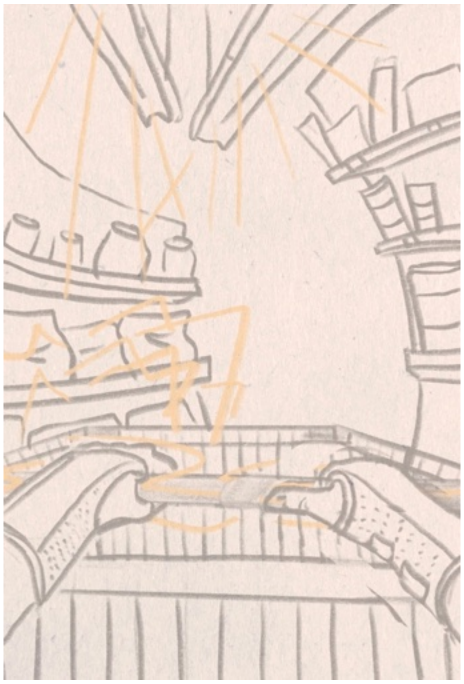


Figure 18: Sketch for Sensory Issues

Figure 19: In progress for Sensory Issues

Figure 20: Sensory Issues final illustration

Memory Loss

I suffer often from memory loss, and it gets significantly worse when struggling with burnout. Sometimes memories are inaccessible to me or lack important information like the setting or who I was talking to. I especially struggle with conversations, both paying attention during the actual conversation and recalling it later. I took inspiration from redacted government papers to make some of the information completely inaccessible to the viewer. Some of the memories floating around me have text that aids in interpretation. Others have a subtle eeriness to them; they are too simple and uncanny to make a full memory on their own.

Figure 21: Sketch for Memory Loss

Figure 22: In progress for Memory Loss

Figure 23: Memory Loss final illustration

Social Regression

This piece changed the most as I was working on it. I believed the best way to represent different aspects of socializing was a symbol-based approach. This was not blending well with the style of the other illustrations, so I ended up redoing it several times. Socializing is hard for many autistic people, even when they are not burnt out. When they are, it can seem completely impossible, painful, and excruciating. I chose specific symbols to represent this. The faces at the top represent always having to adjust my facial expressions to appear polite, attentive, and engaging rather than rude. The speech bubbles represent communication, in person or over the phone, that is overwhelming to answer. The thought bubble is empty and huge to show that internal responses and chatter can be significant, but due to becoming nonverbal, sometimes all I can say is a small "..uhh…." as seen in the bubble by my head. The crowd and eyes represent how small talk can feel like having a crowd of judging onlookers making painful eye contact. I chose each symbol purposefully but not with the intent everyone would interpret them exactly how I did. Rather, I used them to create a tense and overwhelming mood.

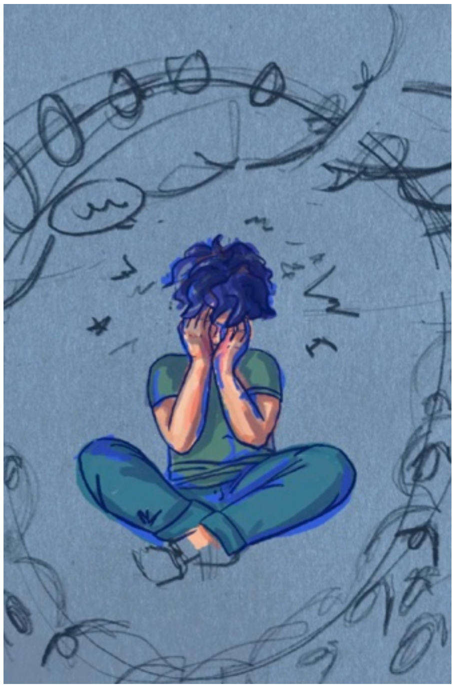


Figure 24: Sketch for Social Regression

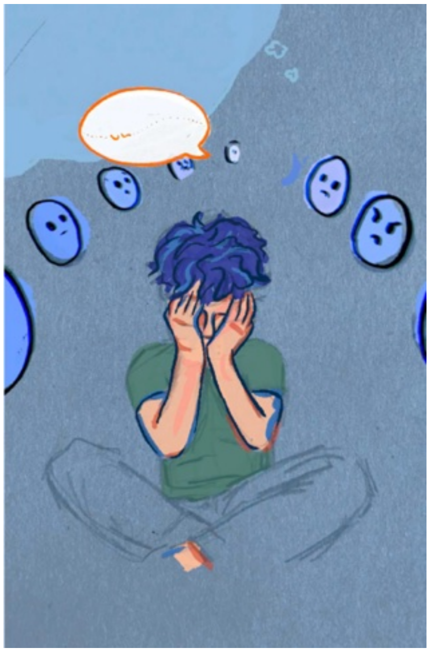


Figure 25: In progress for Social Regression

Figure 26: Social Regression final illustration

SENSORY OVERLOAD

For autistic people, sensory input can lead to meltdowns, overstimulation, anxiety, and even physical pain (Price 114-115). Sensory overload makes rational thinking, tasks, and emotions very difficult to manage. Though neurotypical people cannot fully experience sensory overload as autistic people do, I wanted to simulate this feeling at a minor level using touch. I knew interaction would be critical to tackling this topic. Thus, I began creating my “sensory tiles.”

I made a list of texture extremes: very pleasant textures and very unpleasant textures based on my opinions. I then went to a local thrift store and dollar store to buy as many of the textures as I could, deviating from the list as needed based on availability. Though the process was scientific, I did use personal bias in my choice of textures. Sensory preferences vary from person to person, and it is impossible to create a piece about which everyone has the same opinion on how specific textures makes them feel. Therefore, I chose textures that usually elicit strong reactions, but I categorized them using my opinion of good and bad.

When purchasing the textures, I bought as many as possible in the colors blue and orange to continue the color palette used in my illustrations. Anything I could not find in those two colors I bought in a neutral and color corrected accordingly. I used a variety of materials for the color correction process, including fabric dye, watercolor, sharpie, marker, and acrylic. Such a variety of media was necessary so I could choose the medium that was least likely to change the preexisting texture of each material. The color correcting was an essential part of the process; it allowed me to use found materials for the textures without visually distracting from the most important part of the piece: the sensory experience. I made sure the colors did not correlate with solely good or bad textures to reduce any predictability.

Figure 27: Textures I purchased

Figure 28: Textures I needed to color correct

Figure 29: Color correcting using fabric dye

Figure 30: Results from the blue dye bath

Figure 31: Results from the orange dye bath

After the color correction process, I began arranging the textures across three pieces of plywood. This part took a lot of planning. I wanted each sensory tile to have a different experience. The first tile consisted of mostly good textures, the second tile was mostly bad, and the third was an even split. I was curious to see how people would react to each one; if they agreed with my opinions, or if they had opposite experiences than me. This is why I chose the three-tile approach. As I was working on compositions for the boards, I had to cut materials to fit, arrange them so there was no exposed board, and decide the best approach for gluing them. At the same time, I had to ensure the colors and textures were evenly dispersed. I wanted to enhance the confusion of the participant by placing good textures against bad, again without creating a predictable pattern. This process was extremely tedious and lengthy, which was quite taxing on my sensory issues, despite my use of gloves. The creation on my part was very uncomfortable, and I hoped it would be equally uncomfortable for viewers who had no idea what textures they were touching.

Figure 32: Arranging textures A

Figure 33: Arranging textures B

Figure 34: Composition of board 1 before gluing

Figure 35: Composition of board 2 before gluing

The final steps for my tiles included gluing each small square of texture on individually and working on touch ups. Touch ups consisted of filling in any small gaps, more color correcting, and distressing textures as needed. I then added sign standoff screws to hold custom plexiglass I ordered. The plexiglass was frosted so the colors beneath remained visible, but the textures were blurred beyond recognition. The participant must reach behind the frosted plexiglass to touch the textures. Based on the colors, what the viewer sees is enticing; however, being unable to tell what material they are feeling adds an element of surprise, disorientation, and discomfort. As they try and peer behind the plexiglass, it becomes almost opaque, restricting access even further. The textures on the edges become more visible, but the viewer still cannot see the entire picture.

Figure 36: Final steps of Sensory Overload

LABEL AVOIDANCE

For my final piece, I wanted to discuss label avoidance, which is where autistic people either choose not to pursue a diagnosis or not to tell others they are autistic. This is unfortunately very common due to mental health stigma and the harmful stereotypes surrounding autism (Price 15). Being able to tell people you are autistic should be a good thing, leading to better understanding, accommodations, and freedom from masking. Unfortunately, with the current stigma around autism, the results of being out as autistic can often do more harm than good. All my works before this were meant to educate people on autism, to have an open and honest conversation about what autism is. This final piece serves as a call to action. It reflects the purpose of my entire thesis: there are a great number of issues surrounding how society understands disability and mental illness, and these need to be solved.

For this piece, I wanted to deal with heavier topics than I discussed in the rest of my works. I utilized “Hello my name is” stickers as a literal take on labels. These stickers are used for introduction and are thus a gateway to getting to know a person and their identity. Instead of writing names on the cards, I wrote a combination of words and phrases that are used to describe autistic people. Some of the words are outright offensive like “outcast” and “retarded” while others are merely adjectives on their own such as “sensitive” and “emotional.”

Figure 37: All the words and phrases I wrote

The labels “Do not resuscitate,” “expendable,” “vulnerable,” and “waste of space” are a reference to ableism that was occurring in 2020 during the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Disabled people are often victims of discrimination in the medical world. The severity of this discrimination became apparent during this global health crisis. Inclusion London came out with an interim report in June of 2020 called *Abandoned, Forgotten, and Ignored* that published some astounding findings about Britain’s treatment of disabled people during the pandemic. The report detailed many ways that disabled people were denied resources, communication, and help during the coronavirus outbreak. The most shocking information to me was that doctors were placing DNR orders on disabled people’s records, illegally and without the person’s consent (Inclusion London). Between April and June of 2020, 22 unlawful DNRs were reported by the organization Turning Point UK, and Learning Disability England reported

20% of their organizations represented individuals subject to the same offense (Alexiou). These instances were all targeting people specifically with learning disabilities, not at all considering if the individuals were high or low risk or consulting them or their families. These ableist laws were not exclusive to Britain. Tennessee was one of several states in the US that "issued protocols deprioritizing the treatment of disabled people in the event of scarce medical resources" (Alexiou). This research was what inspired this piece in general and pushed me to use harsher and more offensive language.

I came up with seventy words and phrases and wrote each on 3 to 4 stickers. I ended up creating around 240 labels that I then stuck onto posterboard. I arranged them so they were as evenly dispersed as possible. After creating this physically, I photographed it and edited it digitally, adding some minor distorting elements and making the contrast more extreme. Then, I created several cropped compositions I felt were compelling, so I had options to choose from on installation day. This gave me the freedom to explore how each image fit within the gallery space. The digital file I chose was then projected into a corner of the gallery. People could walk through it or look at it. Either way, they had to face their silhouette within the harmful labels.

I would like to note here that this piece is not about person-first language, an example of which is calling someone a "person with autism" rather than an "autistic person." This preference varies among autistic people. Rather, this piece is about the root of the problem, that there is such a stigma around mental health issues and specifically the word "autism" that being out can be dangerous. Being autistic can easily become one's only identifier. Removing good or bad connotations from the word autistic is essential. It is a neutral term that just describes a condition. The issue I wanted to discuss in this piece is deeper than referring to someone as a “person with autism” will fix. Having to remind someone that they are a person before they are autistic would not be an issue at all if the term autistic was not associated with a lack of personhood.

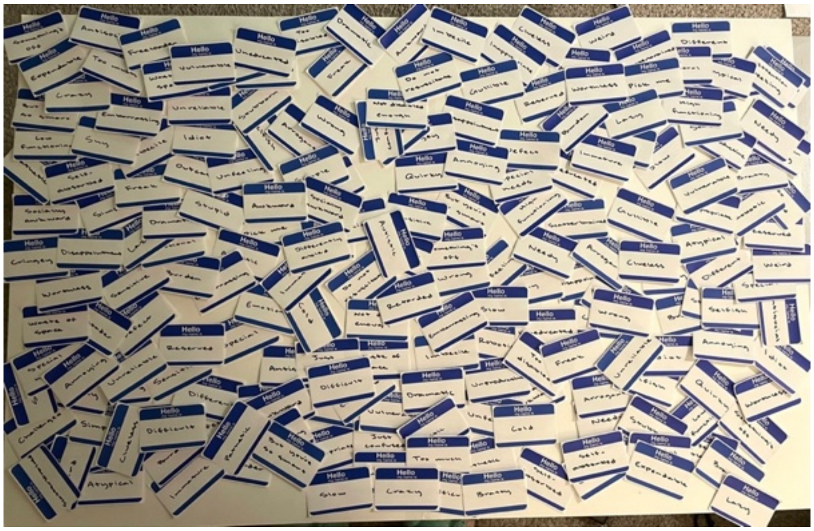


Figure 38: Arranging labels on posterboard

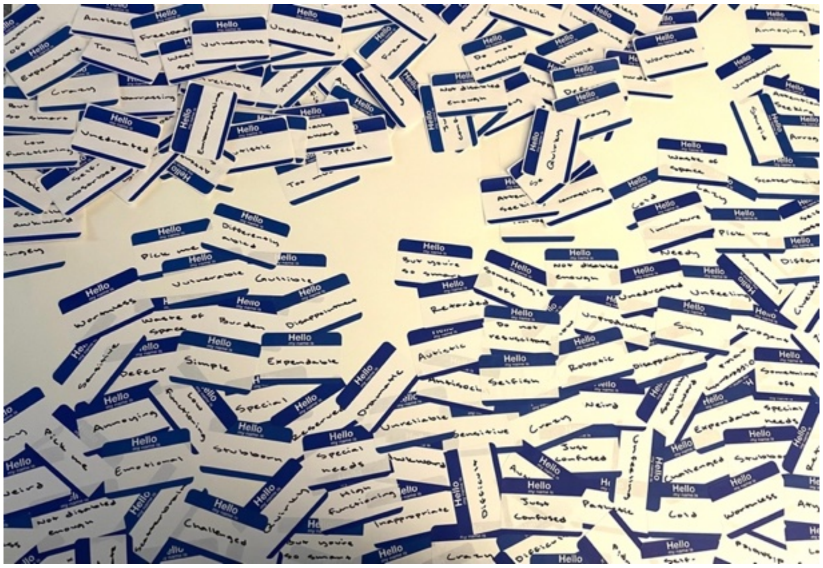


Figure 39: In progress for Label Avoidance

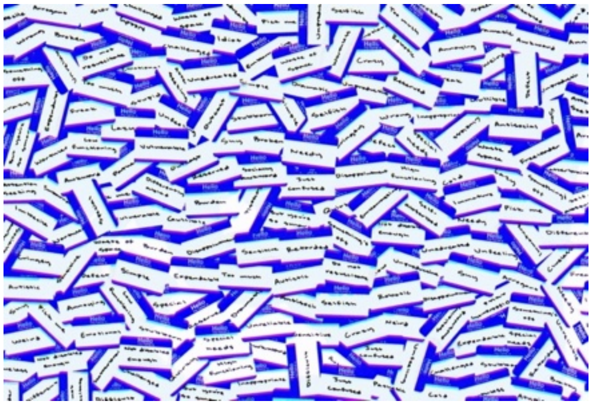


Figure 40: Complete composition for Label Avoidance edited digitally

Figure 41: Label Avoidance composition A

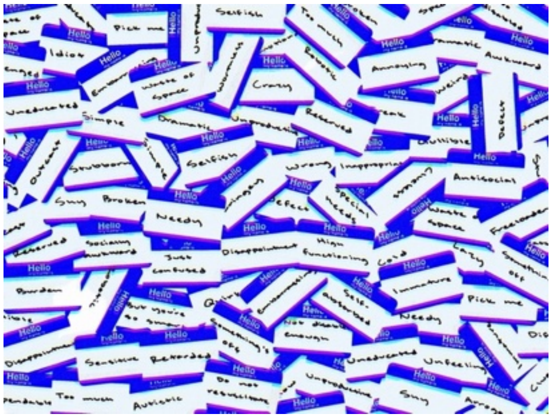


Figure 42: Label Avoidance composition B

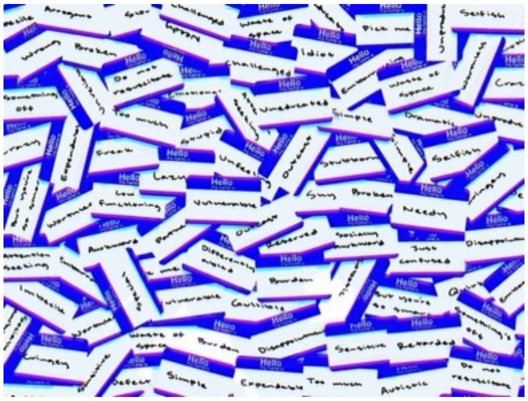


Figure 43: Label Avoidance composition C

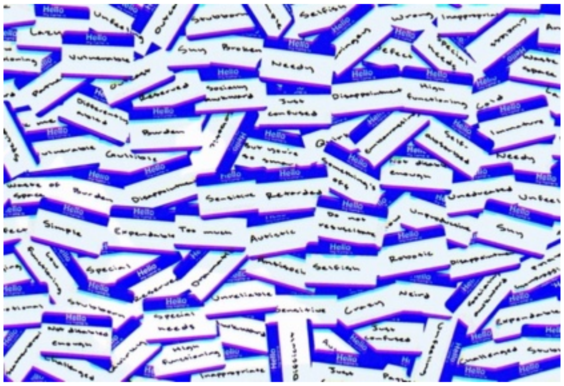


Figure 44: Label Avoidance composition D

Figure 45: Label Avoidance composition E

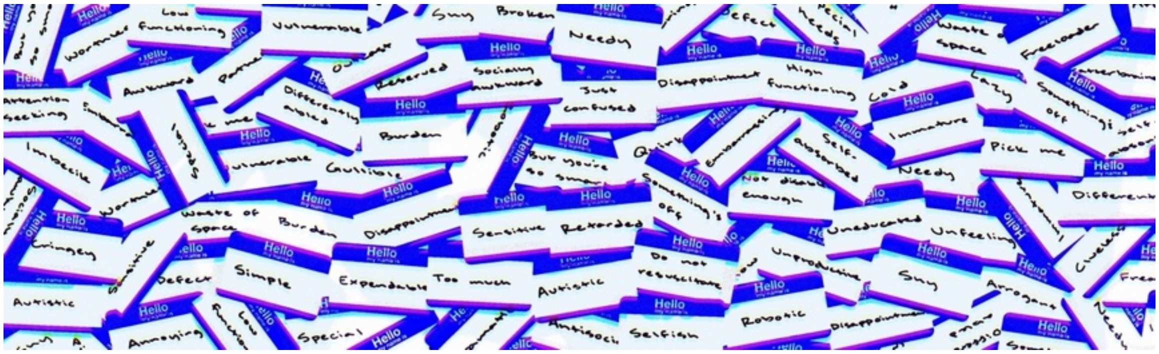


Figure 46: Label Avoidance composition F

Figure 47: Label Avoidance composition G

ARTIST RESEARCH

My works were heavily influenced by personal experience as well as my research, as I have shown so far. However, I would be remiss not to include the artists from whom I drew inspiration. I looked at the work of Rachel Ungerer and Jennifer White-Johnson for visual representations of invisible disability, both as a celebration of differences and the struggles linked to them. For *Masking*, I referenced Jackson Tucker-Meyer's satirical short film "Satan Cured my Autism," Gilbert and George's living sculptures about individuality and humanity, and Sophie Calle's objective and scientific documentation of emotions. Megan Rhiannon's illustrations of everyday autistic life greatly inspired my symbol-based approach for my burnout series. For *Sensory Overload*, I went to the Frist Art Museum to see Jeffrey Gibson's exhibition. I studied his color and geometric interlocking shapes for this piece. I took notes on how his exhibition displayed both 2D and 3D work cohesively. James Luna's works on being a minority heavily influenced *Label Avoidance*. My repetition of hard-hitting writing is reminiscent of his spoken confession pieces. I found his artistic process extremely moving and returned to a quote of his very frequently when trying to consider my own approach:

> "I give people choices – I don't tell them how to think … Sometimes I hit people over the head with information they may not understand at first glance. It's different than hitting them over the head with an appeal for them to think my way." (Weintraub et. al 102)

Finally, and most importantly, I watched “In My Language” by Mel Baggs. Baggs was a nonverbal activist, artist, and writer. Their short film consists of a video of them communicating and interacting with their surroundings. As they are nonverbal, this “language” consists of singing, humming, touching, and other sensory experiences they are performing. The second half of the video is overlaid with a computer-generated voice that reads Baggs’s writings about human diversity, discrimination, and their experiences with both. The piece is the most honest and beautiful representation of autism I have ever seen. I used several quotes from the video in my exhibition. I strived for Baggs’s level of authenticity, bravery, and honesty across my exhibition.

INSTALLATION

My work was displayed in Todd 210, the student gallery space, from October 7th to 18th. I chose this space because it was large enough for my project, but still a small, quiet, and intimate room. This allowed the viewer to experience my exhibition as a whole world, separate from the rest of the building. I planned out where I wanted each piece ahead of time using the gallery's dimensions and altered as needed on the day of installation. I prioritized flow and movement when planning the placement of my works. This was to ensure people interacted with each piece rather than viewing from afar.

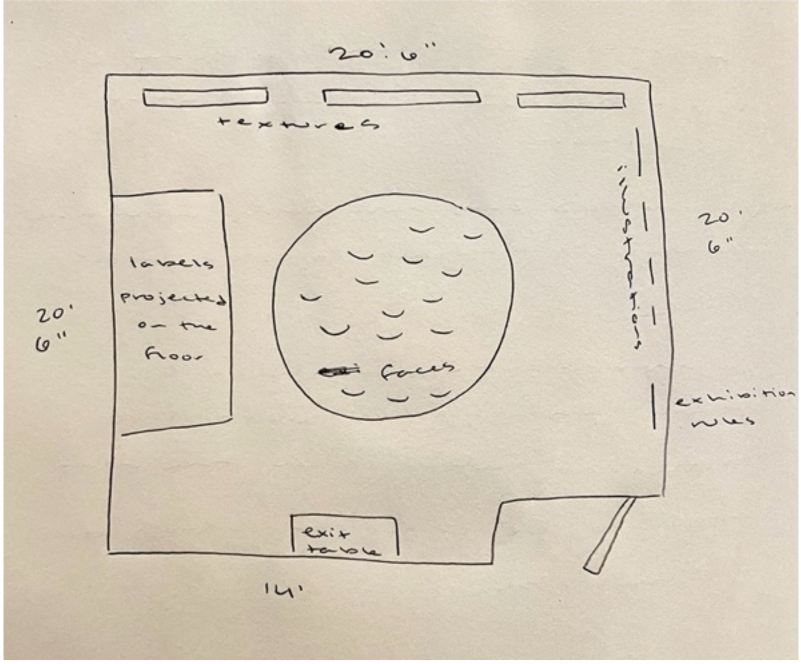


Figure 48: Gallery plan pre-installation

My installation was completed in a 12-hour time period on October 6th. I received help from the gallery preparator and assistant for necessary tools, projector installation, and hanging brackets for *Sensory Overload*. I also had a couple friends help me tie fishing line onto the masks and take measurements. I was very prepared for the installation, so the hanging of the illustrations and sensory tiles was quick and easy. The projection of *Label Avoidance* turned out slightly difficult as it required experimentation on position and hanging of the projector for the intended effect. Hanging the masks was the most tedious. It took around 9 hours of knot tying to get all 120 hung from the ceiling beams. There was not any alternative that could have made the process faster. I could not tie the fishing line to the masks ahead of time as the line got tangled so easily it would have taken just as long, if not longer, to detangle while installing. I had a specific vision on how I wanted them hung, so I hung each one myself. I had to consistently get down and check the height of the faces and the density of the grouping. This process paid off in the end but gave me quite a few joint issues the next day.

Figure 49: View of exhibition from the gallery door

Figure 50: View of exhibition A

Figure 51: View of exhibition B

EXHIBITION RULES:

Come in with an open mind and willing to learn.

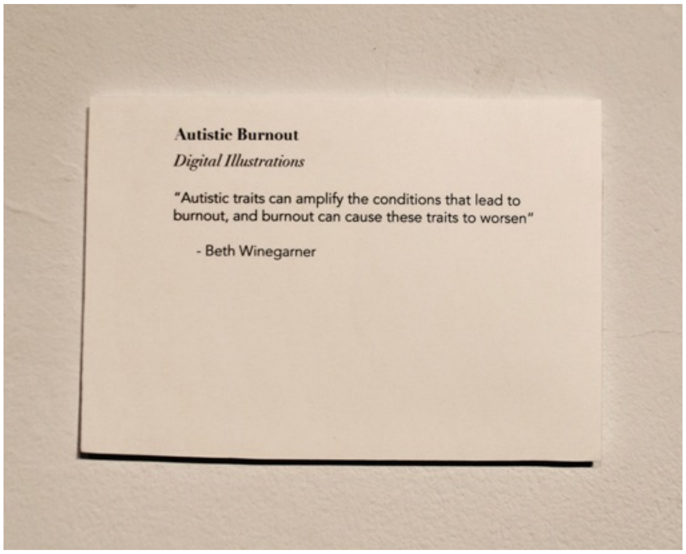
Interaction is key to the work. Walking around and engaging with each piece is essential for the experience. Stand around them or within them, and fully immerse yourself.

Entire exhibition is touch and photograph friendly.

Please consider leaving a note on your way out about how the experience was for you. This is essential to my project and thesis.

Thank you and enjoy!

Figure 52: Exhibition rules plaque



Autistic Burnout

Digital Illustrations

"Autistic traits can amplify the conditions that lead to burnout, and burnout can cause these traits to worsen"

- Beth Winegarner

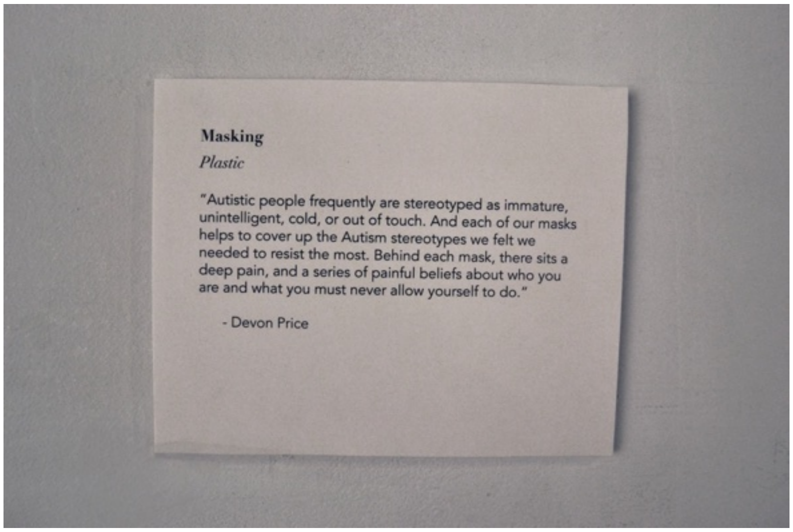
Figure 53: Autistic Burnout plaque

Figure 54: Executive Dysfunction installed

Figure 55: Sensory Issues installed

Figure 56: Memory Loss installed

Figure 57: Social Regression installed



Masking

Plastic

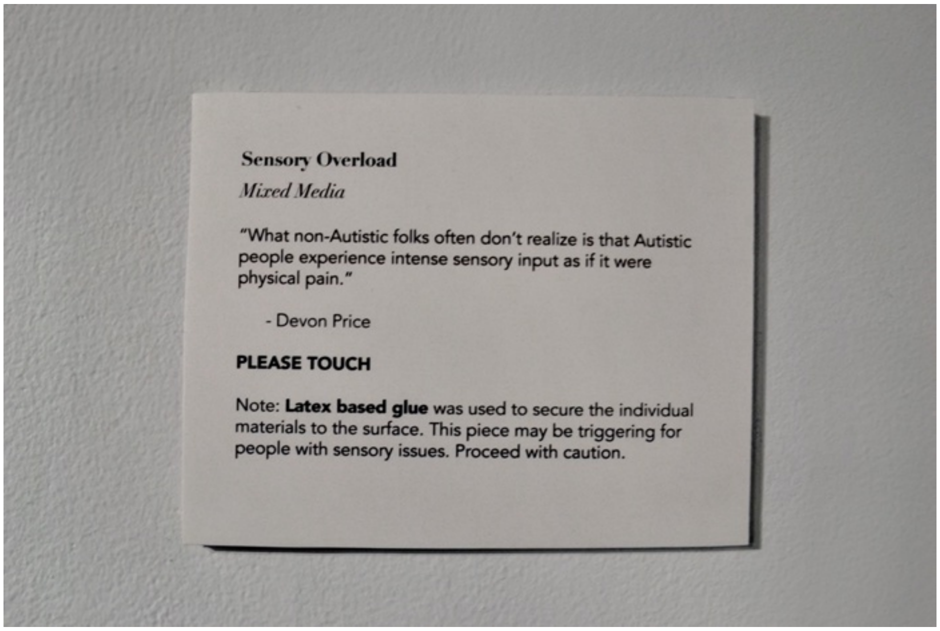
"Autistic people frequently are stereotyped as immature, unintelligent, cold, or out of touch. And each of our masks helps to cover up the Autism stereotypes we felt we needed to resist the most. Behind each mask, there sits a deep pain, and a series of painful beliefs about who you are and what you must never allow yourself to do."

- Devon Price

Figure 58: Masking plaque

Figure 59: Masking installed

Figure 60: Close up of Masking installed



Sensory Overload

Mixed Media

"What non-Autistic folks often don't realize is that Autistic people experience intense sensory input as if it were physical pain."

- Devon Price

PLEASE TOUCH

Note: **Latex based glue** was used to secure the individual materials to the surface. This piece may be triggering for people with sensory issues. Proceed with caution.

Figure 61: Sensory Overload plaque

Figure 62: Sensory Overload installed A

Figure 63: Sensory Overload installed B

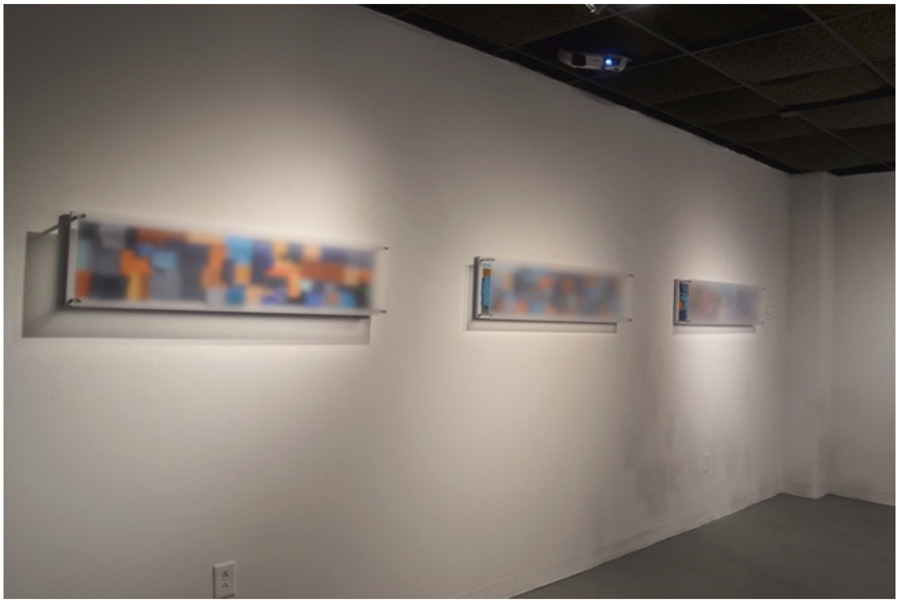
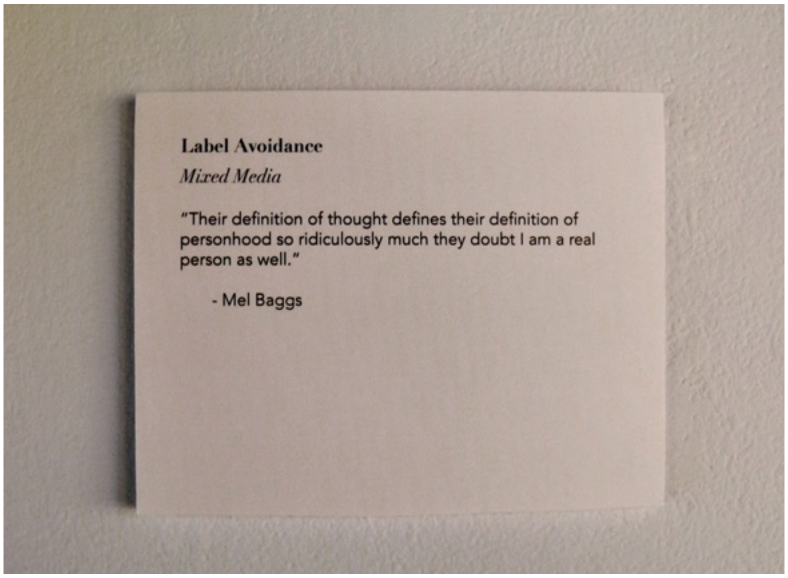


Figure 64: Sensory Overload installed C

Figure 65: Sensory Overload installed closeup



Label Avoidance

Mixed Media

"Their definition of thought defines their definition of personhood so ridiculously much they doubt I am a real person as well."

- Mel Baggs

Figure 66: Label Avoidance plaque

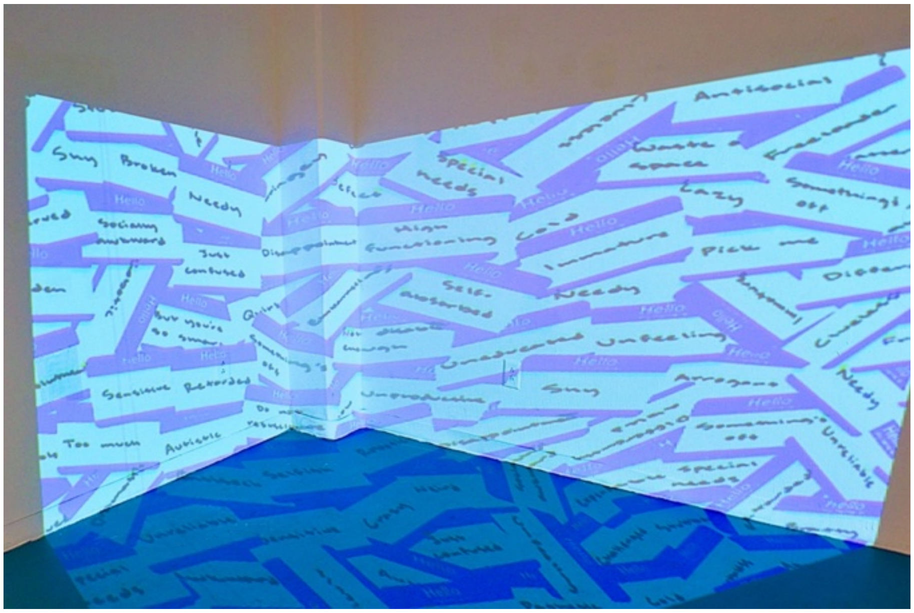
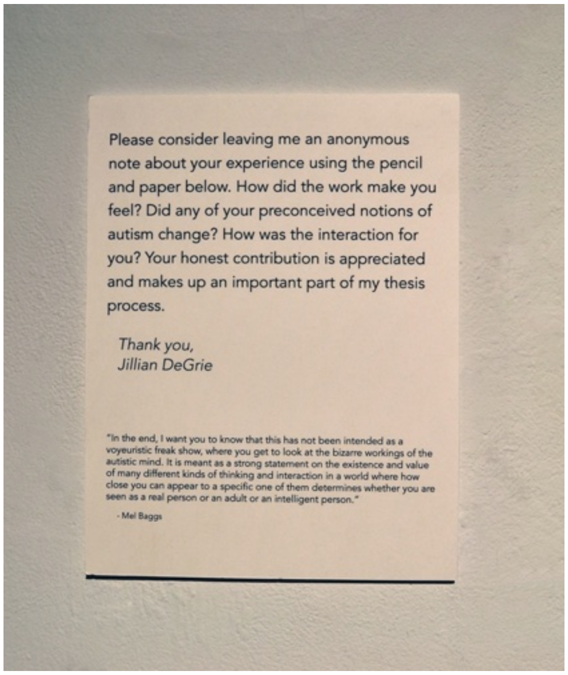


Figure 67: Label Avoidance installed

Figure 68: Artist in Masking A

Figure 69: Artist in Masking B

Figure 70: Artist in Label Avoidance



Please consider leaving me an anonymous note about your experience using the pencil and paper below. How did the work make you feel? Did any of your preconceived notions of autism change? How was the interaction for you? Your honest contribution is appreciated and makes up an important part of my thesis process.

Thank you,
Jillian DeGrie

"In the end, I want you to know that this has not been intended as a voyeuristic freak show, where you get to look at the bizarre workings of the autistic mind. It is meant as a strong statement on the existence and value of many different kinds of thinking and interaction in a world where how close you can appear to a specific one of them determines whether you are seen as a real person or an adult or an intelligent person."

- Mel Baggs

Figure 71: Exit note plaque

Figure 72: Exit note station

OPENING AND INTERACTION

I hosted a casual opening for my exhibition on October 7th from 1-3 p.m. This opening was essential to my project as its purpose was to encourage interaction, personal reflection, and discussion. Though the exhibition consisted solely of my work, I wanted to distance myself from the experience to ensure more authentic reception. I did this in several ways. I stood outside my exhibition and welcomed people. I did not say anything besides that, nor did I enter the exhibition while people were inside. I glanced in periodically to see if people were interacting and how. Inside the exhibition, the first thing on the wall was a list of rules explaining how to participate. Each individual work had a quote by someone other than myself next to it on a plaque. I felt it was important to include quotations from other people to better reflect the autistic experience as a whole and to make sure my opinion was not overly dominant in the exhibition. These quotes offered a slight context to each piece without explaining how to interpret it. Each plaque also had a title that directly said the topic the respective piece was addressing. That way, people could easily see what each piece was about and look it up later if they were interested. The last thing I did to ensure I was not influencing people's experience was leaving a station at the end of my exhibition for notes. I asked people to write anonymously about how the experience was for them on a piece of paper and leave it in a box. This encouraged honesty and authenticity through anonymity and the fact people did not have to give me opinions face to face. I hope this gave people the ability to speak freely without fear of offending me. As people left the exhibition, I thanked them for participating.

YOU ARE INVITED
TO THE OPENING OF

BREAKING THE STIGMA AROUND AUTISM:
AN INTERACTIVE ART EXHIBITION

OCTOBER 7th
1:00 - 3:00pm
TODD 210

A solo art show and
honors thesis by
JILLIAN DEGRIE

JOIN US TO EXPERIENCE & INTERACT WITH THE WORK

*Exhibition will remain up through October 18th

Figure 73: Advertising material

Figure 74: Family member interacting with Sensory Overload A

Figure 75: Family member interacting with Sensory Overload B

On the way out, many people took my thank you as an invitation to start a discussion with me. The result of this was more than I had hoped. I wanted my exhibition to create dialogue and was so grateful that almost everyone who came was comfortable enough to approach me after viewing the work to give an opinion or ask a question. This led to some beautiful interactions. Two stuck out to me the most. The first was with a fellow autistic person who graduated from MTSU. They were extremely interested in the exhibition and felt accurately represented and seen. I was very appreciative that they came to the opening and stayed for the entire time talking to me and to others. I learned nuances they experienced in my work that had been subconscious on my part, such as aspects of androgyny and ambiguity. Though I made the work as an autistic person and consulted much research in literature, art, and science, I was unaware how my work would resonate with other autistic people. It was an exhibition intended for neurotypical people by design. I wanted to use my work to educate people on experiences other than their own. This made me examine autism at a base level, in a way people uneducated on neurodiversity could understand. Though designed for neurotypical people, the project was dedicated to autistic people. I was very grateful the person was able to share their personal life experiences and how they felt my works represented them.

Another interaction will stay with me forever. I said thank you for coming to a lady on her way out, and she turned to me with tears in her eyes. She was clearly struggling for words but managed “thank you… the label piece was beautiful… seeing your own silhouette surrounded… thank you.” When she left, I stepped away for a minute to wipe my eyes. I was overcome with emotion. The heaviness of that piece did not hit me while I was working on it. Writing all of the harmful labels had a numbing effect on me. It was almost empowering to be able to write them all out and project them on others rather than having them used against me. I recognized the heavy weight of the work in theme and execution, but the emotions did not catch up with me until that moment. My work has always been intended to elicit emotion. This was the first time I had witnessed such a pure reaction to my art. I felt grateful, honored, and like I truly achieved my goal with this project.

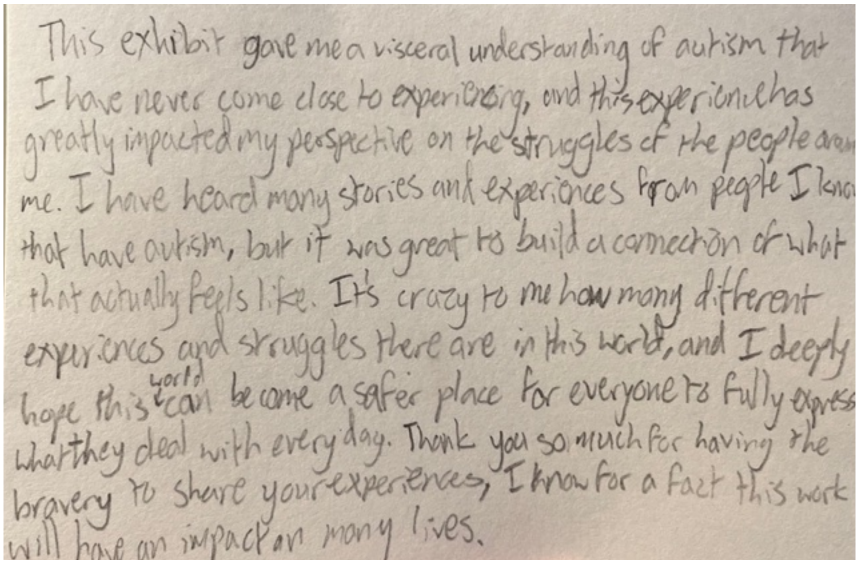
Exit notes

I assumed that quite a few people would leave notes, and I was correct. I received 42 notes from people who attended, and even more saw my exhibition. These notes were extremely helpful for me to reference, both in my research and for personal reasons. As an artist, I need to know how my work is received. As an autistic person, I wanted to see if my work changed people's minds, made autism less taboo, and if it helped people better understand the autistic experience.

According to the notes, I was successful in that regard. I received a wide variety of feedback, from the overall experience and relatability to technical aspects like visuals and craftsmanship. Several notes agreed the exhibition was emotional for them. I was surprised by this. I expected neurodivergent people to be emotional as it is very rare to find accurate representation of our experience, and thus it is very rewarding and overwhelming when we do get to see parts of our life in the world. However, about half of the people who found my work emotional were neurotypical. I was equally surprised to see that I was thanked for my exhibition in the same way. Many of the notes thanked me for sharing my experience with them, regardless of if they were neurodivergent. This left me feeling very fulfilled and honored; I was so grateful people were able to connect to my exhibition so much they wanted to thank me for it. I was hoping it would help open neurotypical people's minds, but I did not expect it to resonate with them to the degree that they wanted to express gratitude.

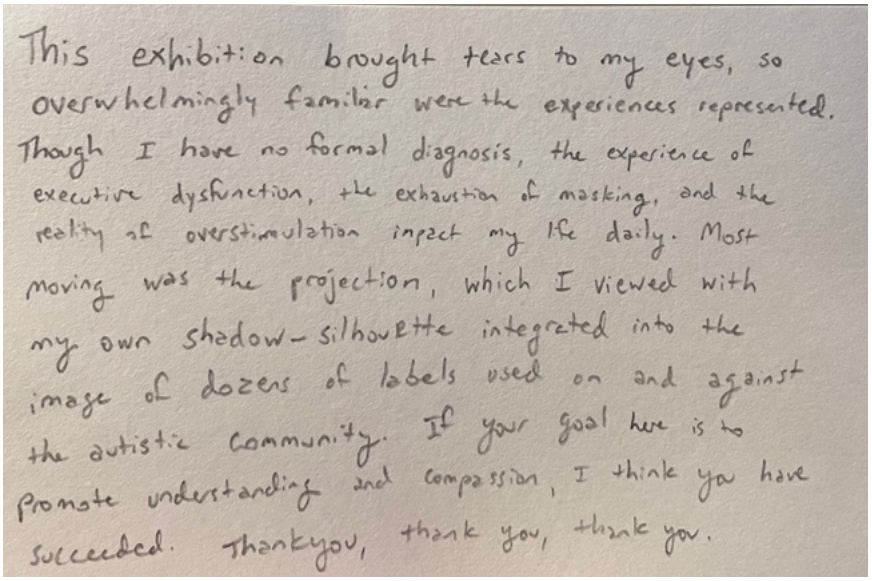
I found one note difficult to interpret. It said "MTSU isn't for people who think different." I have debated if this is meant to be more of a critique on MTSU's accessibility or a statement that neurodivergent people do not belong at MTSU. Without context, I am unable to determine the intent behind this note. After some discussion with peers and professors, I believe it to be a commentary on the university itself. Despite being unsure of the intent, this note brought to my attention an important subtext within my work that I had not considered. Creating and displaying my work on a college campus creates a greater conversation about accessibility at the institutional level, especially within organizations that predate modern neurodivergent definitions.

I am very used to receiving feedback for my work in class, but I have never completed such a large and personal project that reached so many people. Because of this, I keep returning to reread the notes. Every note I received, even the singular ambiguous note, has shaped my perception of my own work. I gave the viewer and participant vulnerability and experience with my exhibition. I asked for an open mind and honest feedback in return, knowing that the viewer would only get as much out of my work as they put in. Though my work was vulnerable in nature, I view each note objectively, as a way to measure the successes, failures, and points that could be improved upon in my exhibition. It meant so much to me that my exhibition was received so well. I wish I could include all 42 notes below, but instead, I have included several that mean the most to me.



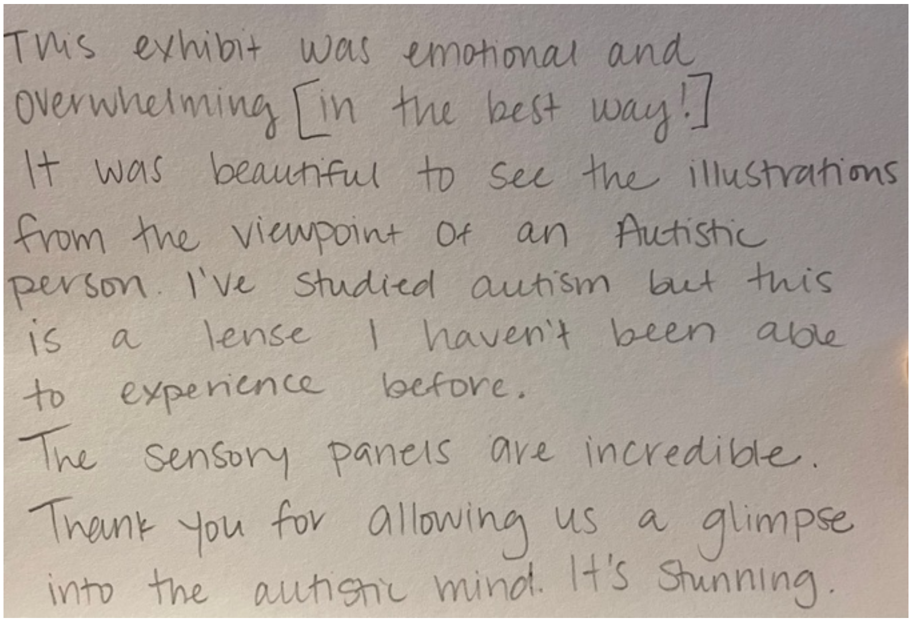
This exhibit gave me a visceral understanding of autism that I have never come close to experiencing, and this experience has greatly impacted my perspective on the struggles of the people aro me. I have heard many stories and experiences from people I kno that have autism, but it was great to build a connection of what that actually feels like. It's crazy to me how many different experiences and struggles there are in this world, and I deeply hope this world can become a safer place for everyone to fully express what they deal with every day. Thank you so much for having the bravery to share your experiences, I know for a fact this work will have an impact on many lives.

Figure 76: Exit note A



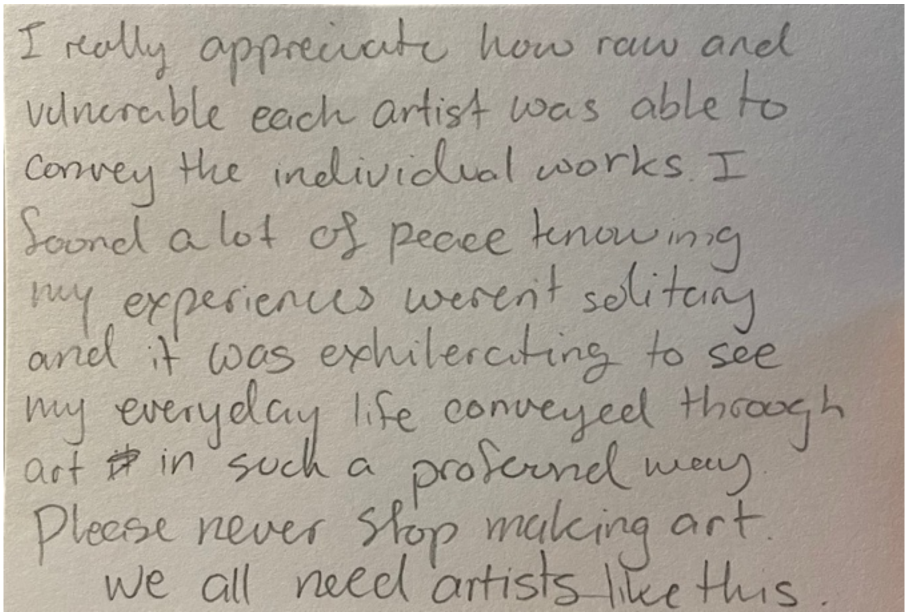
This exhibition brought tears to my eyes, so overwhelmingly familiar were the experiences represented. Though I have no formal diagnosis, the experience of executive dysfunction, the exhaustion of masking, and the reality of overstimulation impact my life daily. Most moving was the projection, which I viewed with my own shadow-silhouette integrated into the image of dozens of labels used on and against the autistic community. If your goal here is to promote understanding and compassion, I think you have succeeded. Thankyou, thank you, thank you.

Figure 77: Exit note B



This exhibit was emotional and
overwhelming [in the best way!]
It was beautiful to see the illustrations
from the viewpoint of an Autistic
person. I've studied autism but this
is a lense I haven't been able
to experience before.
The sensory panels are incredible.
Thank you for allowing us a glimpse
into the autistic mind. It's Stunning.

Figure 78: Exit note C



I really appreciate how raw and
vulnerable each artist was able to
convey the individual works. I
found a lot of peace knowing
my experiences weren't solitary
and it was exhilerating to see
my everyday life conveyed through
art in such a profound way.
Please never stop making art.
we all need artists like this.

Figure 79: Exit note D

CONCLUSION

I began this project to come to terms with my recent autism diagnosis. I was interested in understanding myself and other autistic people better. As my research deepened, I realized how necessary a conversation of this nature is, for both autistic people and neurotypical people. Destigmatizing mental health issues and disabilities is long overdue.

I created this exhibition by focusing on how I wanted the participant to feel and what media would best achieve that feeling. I intended to simulate an experience through individual interaction with each piece and then the exhibition as a whole. I wanted the audience to leave educated and with a glimpse into how my life is affected by my autism. This project ended up being a truly transformative experience for me. I have never created a large cohesive body of work before or exhibited my work in an environment I control. I pushed myself to work with new mediums, parameters, scale, content, and more research than I have ever completed for a creative project. The project was extremely challenging for due to personal issues, sensitive subject matter, and general ambitiousness. However, I am very grateful that it came together the way it did. I grew so much as an artist and researcher. It was healing to see representation and education I desperately needed at a young age but did not get due to the stigma surrounding neurodivergence in society and the medical field. I am beyond proud of what I was able to achieve with this project, within myself, within others, and within the completed whole. Now that I understand how far I can push myself when it comes to research-based art, I feel capable of further pursuing it in the future and look forward to the continued growth that will create in me as an artist and a person.

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