Hidden Connections

Yazmin Goulet
HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

By
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ABSTRACT

Yazie Goulet: Hidden Connections
(Under the direction of Virginia Chavis)

As a graphic designer pursuing degrees in both Art, from the College of Liberal Arts, and Integrated Marketing Communications, from the School of Journalism, the goal of the art that I create is for it to be seen by many and connect viewers to the messages that I am trying to get across through my work. Art is a form of visual communication, and as an artist, I am always looking at the world around me and seeing how art of all forms connects art to people.

Much how like art itself is used to connect people, for this thesis I wanted to focus on utilizing art and artistic elements to showcase the connection between art and how people view the world. Specifically, I wanted to focus on the human connection and use art to show how people are all connected to one another in multiple ways. Along with expressing human connection through digital art, I wanted my work to also connect the viewer to the art itself through the finished overall composition of all the portraits individually and collectively.

Each portrait is printed larger than life so that the viewer can examine all the details, and so that the piece as a whole holds a greater impact. For this project, size matters, as I wanted the viewer to feel surrounded by the individuals and enveloped in the Zoom call layout as if they were part of the conversation. Making it feel as if the viewer is a part of the piece helps amplify the idea that we are all connected to one another. I want the viewer to realize their own
connection in relation to the people in the portraits even if they do not personally know the subjects.

I chose to showcase my work in a Zoom layout to bring attention to the worldwide event, the COVID-19 pandemic, that has both separated and united everyone. We were all isolated from one another and had an absence of social human interaction due to everyone being at home, but at the same time, we found ways to communicate and stay connected with one another. Zoom was one of the main tools used during lockdown to keep people in touch with each other.
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ARTIST STATEMENT

The concept and design behind this series began in high school when I created my first digital portrait. The piece was of my brother, and the goal was to show, through the colors used to create him, the connection he has to the rest of my family (Figure 1). His favorite color, orange, is represented in his skin color. His twin’s favorite color, purple, is used as the background color, because it is the second largest space besides his figure, and she is his “other half.” My favorite color is blue, which is the color of his hair. My other sister’s favorite color is pink, which is the color of his shirt. My other brother’s favorite color is red, which is shown in his older brother’s jacket, and my parents are represented by his glasses. Every color in my brother’s digital portrait has a deeper meaning and a hidden connection to the rest of my family.

As a final for one of my art classes that I took at the University of Mississippi, I expanded on the idea of the digital portrait of my brother from high school and created digital portraits of the rest of my siblings with the same connecting factors (Figures 2-4). This time, however, I found deeper meanings (p8-10) for the choice of colors that I used, and that is how the one image of my brother, to the continuation of the process in creating my other siblings, became the idea for an entire body of work. In creating more portraits, the idea surpassed the familial connection between people and began to reveal how all people, blood related or not, are connected to one another on a deeper level.

To show these connections in my work, I utilized color, shape, and the shared experience of COVID-19 that has been going on for almost the past two years, along with the personal
connection between myself and the subjects used in this project of being on the same Winterguard team. Through interviewing members of my Winterguard team and then creating a digital portrait of each person, I was able to learn more about them and found factors that intertwined everyone together. This project has opened my eyes and allowed me to view people in a new light. We all share commonalities more than we realize, even if no person is the same. I feel like I have a deeper tie to people; even people that I do not know well. We are all connected to one another in more ways than one, and knowing that makes the connection so much stronger.

This project also showed me that while we are all similar and connected, we are also different and one of a kind at the same time. I found that the best way to illustrate this concept was to create a distinct and different background for each person, utilizing shapes that represent the personality of that person. Another way to show how each person is different on the inside was to make the color of their skin correlate to their favorite color, while keeping their eyes true to their actual eye color. The aforementioned are just a few ways in which I integrated these elements to visually show the individuality of each person that I interviewed and created a digital portrait of.
Figure 1:  
*Head of the Family*  
The colors used in the portrait of my brother exemplify the connectedness of the portrait subject with our family.

Figure 2:  
*Digital Portrait of Gabie*  
The colors used in the portrait of my sister exemplify the connectedness of the portrait subject with our family.
Figure 3:  
*Digital Portrait of Tozie*

The colors used in the portrait of my sister exemplify the connectedness of the portrait subject with our family.

Figure 4:  
*Digital Portrait of Gilad*

The colors used in the portrait of my brother exemplify the connectedness of the portrait subject with our family.
CONCEPT

‘Hidden Connections’ is a series of digital portraits that portrays multiple individuals who all participate in a sport known as color guard. The portraits show how people are connected and similar to one another in many ways, but also shows how unique and different everyone is at the same time. The colors, shapes, and overall layout/composition represent either the similarities that link each person, the differences that make them unique and one of a kind, or a mix of both. Though these individuals are connected by the activity that they do and share, which is a major underlying theme that ties them together, this piece focuses on the deeper universal connection that each person has with one another; the human connection. It also focuses on the differences that being a human entails. As human individuals, no one is alike, yet we all have many things in common and share experiences that further enhance our connection to one another.

**Human Connections**

Coming from a family of seven who are all super close, my relationship with human connections has always been strong. One thing that being the oldest of five children has taught me is that while my siblings and I are all related by blood and share many outward similarities, we are also very different in our own ways, as is shown through our personalities. To show the human connection that we all share, and to exemplify that, at the core, we are all the same, in my portraits I chose to make everyones’ outward characteristics, their hair and clothes, with shades of the same colors. On the other hand, to show how unique and different everyone is on the
inside, I chose to make everyone’s skin color stand out by utilizing that person’s favorite color to represent them. I also chose to focus on one major human anatomical feature that most everyone has and yet is special and one of a kind. This feature is the human eyes.

The eyes tell so much about a person and are usually the first thing that people look at when greeting someone. So much can be understood, even if unsaid, just by looking at someone’s eyes. Especially now, during COVID-19, when everyone wears masks, the eyes are the most prominent facial feature visible and therefore hold a lot of meaning. Because of this, I decided to make the eyes of each person more realistic by making the color the actual color of that person’s eyes. All the colors and shapes used to create the face and background of an individual are unnatural and artificial, while the eyes are more realistic as another way to showcase the uniqueness of that person. That important feature is specific to each individual.

Although one cannot tell just by looking at all the individuals depicted in the project, they are further connected by their shared hobby. All these people participate in an activity known as color guard. Color guard is a sport of the arts where flags, wooden rifles, metal sabres, and other objects/equipment are thrown in the air, in a choreographed fashion, in time with music. A color guard team often spends hours working together and has to be united so that every toss and movement is timed perfectly in order to be in unison. This type of dedication bonds not only the team together, but also bonds each individual to one another. At the University of Mississippi, the color guard is an integral part of the Pride of the South marching band, performing with the band before and during football games. The color guard, like art, is a visual factor that ties the band to the audience and allows people to experience game day at a higher level.
Color guard is an activity that is done all year round. In the winter, this activity is called Winterguard. The University does not have a Winterguard team on campus, but there is a competitive group called Colibri Independent Winterguard that I have been a member of for five years now. Last year was a difficult year for this group, as color guard is a physical activity and we all had to wear masks while we performed. My team members were the only human interaction I had after being in my house for half a year due to COVID-19. Because I saw them often and they were the only people I had access to at the time, they became the subjects for my project. The fact that everyone was on a team together further demonstrates that each individual depicted in my project is connected in more ways than one, even if this particular tie is more personal to myself than it is to my audience.

External shared experiences, whether good or bad, are additional factors that connect humans on a deeper level. Being on the same color guard team and sharing a strange season together is one experience that these individuals share. Another example of a major event that has caused everyone to share experiences together in some way or another is the ongoing current COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has separated humans physically but has connected them emotionally, as we are all going through many of the same hardships that have risen as a result of COVID-19. To try and convey this separation and connection at the same time, I decided to place the digital portraits in a Zoom call layout.
DESIGN

Finding a way to visually show the connection between individuals who may look nothing alike (different race, gender, ethnicity, etc.) was a difficult challenge. I decided to start with the obvious; everyone has hair (and if bald they usually still have eyebrows) and everyone wears clothes. To show how these factors connect the people photographed, shades of specific colors were used for each person throughout the pieces.

When talking to subjects before taking their photo, I realized that each individual spoke and interacted with me differently. I noticed that the conversation highlighted each person’s unique personality. Personality is a major part of who someone is, and I decided that I really wanted to somehow try to convey the person’s personality in their digital portrait. The background, therefore, is meant to be a representation of the person’s personality. For example, if the person has a bubbly up-beat personality, the background in their portrait may have bubbles/circles and be a bright happy color to represent their light hearted energy. If someone seems dark and mysterious, their background may contain dark spikes to showcase that enigmatic feeling they give off. Another feature that highlights the differences between humans is the color of each person’s skin, which is different and special to that individual.

Meaning of Colors

Along with using similar colors in each piece to represent a connection, and different shapes and colors for the background and skin tone to represent people’s differences, my choice
of colors was not random, but rather, was with much forethought. As Osvaldo da Pos and Paul Green-Armytage’s journal on color states, “a fundamental role of colours is to give the viewer information about the nature of objects” (Da Pos, Osvaldo, and Green-Armytage, Paul, 2007). The use of color in the portraits fulfills this major role, as the colors used in every aspect help show how the individuals in the pieces are connected to each other, yet still their own person.

In the portraits, I use the colors blue and red for every person to indicate that they are all the same on the outside, as is represented by hair and clothing which are both aspects of exterior appearances. Each individual depicted contains shades of blue in their hair. The color blue often signifies wisdom, imagination, and intelligence, which are all qualities that come from one’s head/mind and positively affect the body (Amsteus, Martin, et al., 2015; Super Color Digital, 2020). Blue is also used as a symbol for water, which all humans need in order to live and survive. Hair often flows or cascades down from the head to the rest of the body, much how like water flows. These characteristics, and the basic human need for water, connects humans and is therefore represented in each portrait through blue hair.

Each individual portrayed also contains shades of red in their clothing. The color red often represents life, anger, and love, which are all strong attributes/emotions that originate from the heart (Super Color Digital, 2020; Morton, Jill). Red is also the color of blood and often represents the bloodline that all humans share. Therefore, the clothes of every person in the portraits are red to represent the bloodline and heart of humans, which connects humans on the deepest of levels.

What makes people different and distinguishable from one another is what is on the inside and their personalities. To depict this, every individual’s skin color is different and
symbolizes that person’s favorite color. The background of every portrait is tailored to the individual and utilizes the person’s second favorite color, along with different shapes, to convey the personality of the person depicted. The color black is used for each individual’s mask so that the focus is not taken away from the importance of the color of everyone’s face and surrounding background. Black is also a relevant color to use for the masks because the it is often associated with being sad, powerful, feared, mysterious, and deadly (Amsteus, Martin, et al., 2015), which are all adjectives to describe how COVID-19 may seem to many.

**Composition**

Each individual is printed larger than life to amplify the meaning behind the piece and to allow the viewer to look closer at every detail. This larger than life presentation of each individual is to create a greater impact on the viewer as they focus on every aspect and detail of the portrait. While each piece can be viewed independently, a more comprehensive picture forms when the viewer steps back to look at the collection of portraits as a whole. The composition, or layout, of the portraits is very important and pertinent to the continued concept of being connected to one another while still being unique in their own way.

The portraits, while large enough to be stand alone pieces, are arranged in a grid like format to indicate that each portrait is part of a bigger picture. This format is meant to replicate being on a Zoom call. The decision to place the portraits in a Zoom call layout was to showcase the pandemic of COVID-19 and show how much it connected, and still connects us, both emotionally/mentally and also digitally. While everyone was forced to isolate, quarantine, and stay at home for an extended period of time, people adapted and learned how to use video calling
software, such as Zoom, to stay in touch. Even though the people are brought together in a Zoom call, where masks are not required since everyone is physically distanced, I decided that it was still important to create the faces being covered by masks. Masks have been an integral part of our daily life since the pandemic started, and I thought that incorporating them into the piece was necessary. This inclusion of masks also places the focus of the faces on the uniqueness of each person’s eyes, which are the only realistic element.

In addition to the compositional Zoom-like layout, the choice to have the individuals printed on glossy paper and to paint the background with a glossy finish also adds to the computer screen look. I could have presented this digital medium via projection or showcased on a screen, but there is something about having and seeing a physical copy of something that many humans enjoy. Often times people are able to feel more connected to a work of art if they are able to see and touch it for themselves. Digital displays are interesting and can last forever, while a physical copy is delicate and ephemeral, just like humans.
PROCESS

It has always been difficult for me to create something from my own imagination. The thesis journey to create art that is made entirely by me, from start to finish, has been a challenge. On the other hand, it has also been rewarding seeing my work come together and successfully convey the message and concept behind my ideas. Every piece in this series is completely my own. I interviewed each individual about their favorite color and got to know their personality.

After interviewing the person, I then took a photo of them using portrait mode on my iPhone camera. Subsequently, I uploaded their photo into Adobe Illustrator and used it as a template to change the photographic portrait into a digital portrait (Figure 5). The main tool that I used in Illustrator was the pen tool. Because humans are imperfect, I decided not to make the individuals’ faces exactly identical to their actual face. Instead of creating all the curves and soft edges that can be found in the human face, I used the pen tool to make sharp lines and give everyone a more geometric appearance. I also used unnatural colors for the skin and hair. These colors have different significances (p 8-10) and hold a particular meaning to that individual. The only colors that are accurately represented in each piece are the colors of the eyes, which were created by using the eyedropper tool.

After creating each digital portrait, I printed all of them on 11x17in paper. I test printed multiple times to see at what brightness was best to keep my colors vibrant (Figure 6). Colors look different printed vs on a screen where I create my pieces, and I did not want the colors to be too dark or too dull. To reflect that the portraits are meant to showcase people on a computer
screen, as is evident by the overall Zoom layout as mentioned earlier, each portrait is printed on glossy paper to portray that screen like sheen. Once printed, I trimmed the excess paper and then mounted the final portrait to 4x8ft wood panels boards.

In order to mimic a large scale computer screen, I bought two 4x8ft wood panel boards, black and white high gloss paint, and painters tape (Figures 7 & 8). The boards served as the background and mount for the portraits. Each board was painted with high gloss black paint, and then a 3x5 grid with 11x17in boxes was measured out and taped off (Figures 9 & 10). I then mixed the black high gloss paint with some white high gloss paint to make a shade of gray which served as a border to each Zoom box. A layer of gray paint was coated on the grid I created using the painters tape. Once dry, I removed the tape and my Zoom layout look was complete (Figure 11). The final step was my using two sided adhesive tape to adhere the portraits to the board inside the gray Zoom box that was created. I also printed out the Zoom icons that are showcased at the bottom of the screen during a Zoom call and attached them at the bottom of the board.

For the physical piece, I decided not to add the names of each individual to the finished product, as it took away from the faces and all the minute details within each portrait (Figure 12). I did not want to add a name to the face, because I wanted each portrait represent that person without giving away who exactly they are. In the final digital Zoom layout, however, I did decide to add the names of each individual because in that image they were showcased all on the same screen/Zoom call and not on two separate screens such as is the case with the physical design (Figure 13). Without the names, the digital design looked empty, as if it were missing an element. I do not think that the addition of the names in the digital design takes away from the individual portraits, and vice versa with the physical design.
Figure 5: Photo of Subject

Digital Portrait of Subject

Figure 6: Print at 85% Brightness

Print at 100% Brightness
Figure 7:
*4x8ft Wood Panel Boards*
Used as background and mount for digital portraits

Figure 8:
*Black and White High Gloss Paint*
Used to paint boards to create Zoom call look
Figure 9: Painting Boards Black

Figure 10: Grid Using Painters Tape

Figure 11: Final Zoom Call Layout
Figure 12: Final Physical Printed Zoom Call

Figure 13: Final Digital Zoom Call
Inspiration

When creating my art, I usually get inspiration from other artists and artworks to help spark my own imagination. For this project, however, I did not necessarily find inspiration from any one artist or art piece. Because this piece is a continuation and expansion of my earlier works, the inspiration to create more digital portraits of people, and show their connections to one another, came entirely from myself and the evolution of my thought process from four years ago to today. I did not research other digital artists to get inspiration from their digital portraits. Rather, I noticed what popular digital portraits looked like and focused on elements that were missing from those pieces.

When looking at other digital portraits, I noticed that many artists decided to exclude the facial features. Most of the portraits contained a simple outline of the person with more details present in the clothing and hair. The face was usually left blank and held no hints as to who the person may be if one did not know them personally. I have created work similar to this style in the past (Figures 14 & 15), conversely my digital portraits for this project are almost the opposite of this. Though still important, I focus less on the hair and clothing and have a great amount of detail in the face. I really wanted to focus on the face and all the facial elements and characteristics in order for viewers to feel strongly connected to the individual, even if they have never seen that person before.
Figure 14: *Self-Portrait*  
Example of Digital Portrait Without Facial Features

Figure 15: *Self-Portrait Action Shot*  
Example of Digital Portrait Without Facial Features
THE CHALLENGE

In addition to the challenge of getting past my own self doubt, and finding a way to convey the concept behind my work in a relatively simple and clear way, the biggest challenge of all may have been COVID-19 itself. Due to the lockdowns, I was not able to reach people for the longest time in order to photograph them myself. My final product is a reflection of how the virus has affected everyone, driving us physically apart, while at the same time creating this shared experience that we all have in common and will affect us for the rest of our lives.

COVID-19

In addition to portraying the bond that people have visually through color and shape, this piece also shows how we are all connected today by what is going on in the world. Over the past year and a half, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many people to stay home and communicate with others through Zoom (As shown through the composition of the portraits which is mentioned on p10-11). Though people were separated physically and were unable to interact with one another like most are accustomed to, Zoom brought people together and gave them a way to stay connected even if they were miles apart.

Another result of the pandemic that the majority has had to endure, and still endures, are wearing masks. Many find masks to be annoying and get in the way when trying to speak with others. Masks make having a conversation more difficult than normal and are often seen as a nuisance, but even this face covering is another factor that serves to connect people. Internally,
most people share the same dislike for having to wear masks, and externally, wearing masks causes everyone to look similar because two-thirds of the face is covered or obstructed.

To show how much the pandemic and masks have affected people, I decided to keep that element when creating the digital portraits. For this reason, wearing masks in the Zoom call was intentional. The masks, and placing the portraits in a giant Zoom call, show that even though people are not in the same space and are not ‘connected’ physically, they are still linked to one another in some way. This pandemic has brought people together and connected them in a way like never before, and everyone will always share this experience that has forever altered both our individual lives and our lives together.
CONCLUSION

As a creative person, I am always looking at the small details in every day life and seeing how the world around us is linked in multiple ways. I notice how art connects viewers to the art itself, to one another, and to the artists’ deeper meaning behind the pieces. In the art created for this thesis project, I strove to show the bond that humans share with one another by being human and through similar experiences. Colors, shapes, and the overall compositional layout, were factors used to showcase and highlight these connections, connections that may go unnoticed or may initially appear hidden.

It is important to note that, for me, this project holds a deeper meaning and has more associations between the people whose digital portraits I created and myself than it may have to outside viewers. My relation to the people portrayed, and to the activity of color guard that is an important connecting factor between everyone used for this project, is personal and stronger than the connection between the work and viewer may be. The goal of this project, however, was to showcase the hidden connections that are there between each of us; whether we are part of a particular group or know one another or not. Despite the fact that an outside viewer may know nothing about these people, I wanted the viewer to look at the piece and find parallels between each work. The same colors used for the hair and clothing are an obvious visual tie between each individual, but upon looking closer one can find other hidden connections between each piece that further enhance my project’s theme.
I want viewer’s to notice how the background of each portrait affects how the individual in the portrait may be portrayed. While I personally know each individual’s personality and therefore know what each background represents about that person, I want viewer’s to be able to look at the shapes and colors and still recognize/identify when someone may have a happy, go lucky personality or a darker, more somber one.

Even after completing each digital portrait and putting all the parts together in the final product, I myself keep finding hidden connections throughout the work that were done subconsciously and only became visible once I stood back and viewed everything as a whole. For example, I unintentionally placed the portraits in a pattern based on the background color. This made the overall composition more appealing to the eye as the piece was balanced visually. I also placed individuals who were facing/looking to the left or right on the outside of the grid so that they would be looking into the piece. This helps to move viewer’s eyes inside the piece and keep them within the Zoom call. These additional elements were not purposeful and could only be noticed once everything was completed, adding to the hidden connections within the project.

This project was challenging because I did not start with a concrete idea. I knew that I wanted to expand upon the digital portrait that I created of my brother in high school, but I did not understand where it would lead me until after I finished the project. This journey in completing these digital portraits and finding the connecting factors within and between each one, both visual and non-visual, has led me to realize that I want to continue to further develop this art style. I want to continue to create digital portraits of people and use factors that show how each of us are linked.
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The following images are the digital format of my thesis exhibition held in room 208 of the Honors College at the University of Mississippi.

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