

## Something to Live By.

Bridget Murray

Early on in our disability studies class, I did a close reading of a photograph of a man that was meant to highlight his **visible** disability; this assignment led me to much rumination on representation: how we represent ourselves, how we tell the story of a stranger, how the artist's agenda melds with, is scrambled by, or walks over the subject's personhood. When we represent someone—whether through a piece of visual art or a biography, an exhibition or a video—we are taking on a **duty** and a **responsibility**.

To create a portrait is to embrace the nuances of portraiture and the dynamic complexity of the self. Rather than simply **replicating** the contours of a face or the records of a life, representation is an art. It is, at best, a means of communication and storytelling: artist, subject, viewer. These three bodies are closely connected, though; as a result, an artist's acceptance of the task of communicating and storytelling means accepting **accountability** for a fragile triangle of relationships.

With Riva Lehrer, the artist who taught and advised us throughout the semester, we learned how to make a portrait tell a story. But later on in the semester, we took a trip to the Mütter Museum, where we saw the exact opposite—portraits without narrative, without connection, there for staring and pity and the self-gratification of / **n o r m a l** / patrons who shuffled in, wandered around, and left to resume their / **n o r m a l** / lives. The Mütter is billed as a museum of medical oddities, putting so-called **abnormal** human bodies on display. The exhibits, as we saw, rarely give any background; they tell no story except the **fantastical** one framed by the museum's introductory fairytale-themed display. As an anatomist, Riva, who acted as our guide, filled in the **gaps**. She told us what the museum wouldn't: this person lived in pain, those explicitly requested to *not* be examined and have been stolen and disrespected in their deaths.

One particular exhibit stands out to me. On the far wall of the main floor, there is a wall of human skulls. Lined up in neat rows and columns, dozens stare down with only a small card next to them to give an age or sex or religion or cause of death. Discussing the display afterwards, Riva called to mind for us the word "collection." And that was what they were: tokens of lives here, there, an impressive spread. They were pieces put together for the effect of the many, with was no semblance of the individual. Those people—because yes, they were actual human beings—were stripped of their lives, reduced to bone and cause of death and maybe a medical malady. And this was the theme for the museum: each display was a portrait not of a person but of a body, of the abnormal.



We walked in a crowded space, teeming with unacknowledged **stories** stuck behind glass OR in jars of formaldehyde, *objectified in the name of science*. And this is a **failure** of a portrait, the antithesis of **ethical representation**.

To represent is to adopt a story, and, as a painter, as a curator, as a photographer, as a writer, we have a responsibility to be true to our subject. Whether or not we actually want to **tell** that story (which is certainly, for me, one of the most *beautiful* parts of creating a representation), we at least owe it to both our subject and our audience to show respect. It's simply something to live by. Ethics.  
Humanity.

## For the Love of Listening

by Abby Rose

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For as long as I can remember, I've been a listener.

As the youngest child in a family of five -- my closest sibling is seven years my senior -- I've never really been a part of the conversation. Now don't get me wrong, my parents and brothers have always given me the time of day, but I spent more of my childhood deciphering their grown-up conversations and concerns than speaking my own mind.

Because of this, I've had a knack for picking up on the little things and reading in between the lines.

As helpful as that skill has been in acquainting myself with strangers, delving into the personal problems of others, and seeking out truth amid all the noise, it has also primed me to draw my own conclusions based on what I hear.

I was never fully aware of how many expectations I harbored about others while I was listening to them until I was introduced to Monsoon and Benaifer's methodology. I realized that while listening to others, I was simultaneously writing my own story about their lives and not truly hearing what they had to say.

Once I was taught how to create a space for another person to speak into, the stories I heard began to change... as I **deepened** and **b r o a d e n e d** my listening, the narratives themselves became **deeper** and **b r o a d e r** as well.

My friends, family, and near strangers actually started to share parts of themselves that I had never seen before. Perhaps it was due to the fact that I was hearing more of what they were saying; maybe they genuinely began to say more about their thoughts. I think it was a little of both.

By entering a conversation without an agenda,

by not pressuring myself to react or respond to what I heard,

by purely listening to the person in front of me without judgement, my experience as a listener has changed completely

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## THROW OUT THE STORIES YOU'VE WRITTEN ABOUT OTHERS

The character you see in front of you is not a part of your life's play. They have their own script, you just can't read it.

## DROP YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Anybody can surprise you, but only if you allow them to. No you do *not* know how their narrative will end, as much as you'd like to think you do.

## LET SOMEONE ELSE DO THE TALKING

Every one of us has a story to tell. All we need is the right audience, the right place, and the right time. Do not treat every conversation you're a part of as the prelude to your own opinion.

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