

The Beholder

Danika Rasmussen

2022, Acrylic on canvas, 20"x24"

Image Description:

This painting depicts a person in a dark gray shirt with collarbone-length blonde hair and bangs, using both hands to hold under their chin, facing the three-quarters direction to the right. Behind their shoulder and to the left is a gray, black, and white lynx (a type of wild cat) emerging from the background, whose right paw is reaching forward over the figure's shoulder, claws outstretched. Neither of the figures have defined eyes (irises or pupils). The background of the image is uniformly dark, with multicolored drips (russet, blue, and green) framing the central figures from the top of the canvas, and abstract color markings in the same colors spread out from underneath the lynx's paw. More drips come from the tips of the claws.

Inspired by Riva Lehrer's self-portraiture and other disability portraiture work, I've attempted to translate my own experience with disability into a portrait. Motivated primarily by her Mirror Shards series, as well as any of her works which feature an animal or creature component, I wanted to find a way to do my own reclamation of the 'beast' motif as someone with an invisible disability. In Portraits of Disability and Difference my freshman year, I wrote a paper regarding how Riva's work actively reclaims the beast narrative for disabled people, by stripping it of its dehumanizing power and using it to enfranchise her models. Riva has similarly done some self portrait work which interacts with animal motifs related to her disability as well, and these really spoke to me as a form of artistic expression which is often policed or subdued. I wanted to explore this narrative for myself, and what the 'beast' motif and its reclamation meant to me.

My biggest challenge was really deciding how I would visually encapsulate a lived experience which is not visible. How do you show invisible disability as a part of yourself in a portrait, without playing into negative stereotypes or caricatures? In the end, I ultimately decided that there was no way that I could properly plan out how to paint that and have it be authentic, I would simply need to feel it out as I went along. There were a few things I

did plan before, one being the position I would be posing in. As my disability is a mental one, my upper body seemed like the most crucial element to include in the portrait. I opted for the position of holding my chin as it captured my sense of feeling self-restrained by my disability. I also knew that I wanted to include an animal motif, and I decided on the specifics of this motif in a very personal way. The lynx is my favorite animal, and therefore I've aligned with it in a particular way with respect to my personal character, values, and specifically here with my disability. The lynx is not only generally considered a 'strange' wild cat, but is also generally misunderstood for its differences from other similar species. My attraction to it has felt fairly comparable to my evolving relationship with disability, personally and externally, in ways that are hard to qualify, but certainly are clear to me. I also recognized that I wanted the position of the lynx to be forthcoming, and even in the action of clawing or 'revealing.' This was because I firmly believe that invisible disabilities are only truly invisible when ignored or suppressed- and it's quite difficult to ignore something as striking as a large cat moving towards you from the darkness. I also liked the addition of the clawing motion, because I was at one point considering a layered effect to the piece, where the clawing would reveal the painting behind the layer on top. I forewent this idea as I painted, but maintained the sentiment in the lynx's positioning. Other artistic choices were made as the piece came together, and will remain up to personal interpretation.