



A Self Portrait

An abstract Approach to Portrait making.

Holly Johns

A SELF PORTRAIT

Throughout this project I have created a series of self portraits that are formed on the basis of connection with the material. With the removal of visual identity I want to challenge the conventions of a portrait and offer an alternative perspective to portrait making. Each portrait is formed from the body and the surface pattern is also taken from the body. I will take you on a journey throughout my visual investigation all the through to the making process and the concluded portraits.

"You do not have a
Soul.
You are a Soul.
You have a body."

You do not have a soul, you are a soul you have a body.

This much believed quotation is at the heart of my portrait making. It's referencing that your soul make you who you are and you have your body, like a possession, and does not define you. Therefore it is suggesting that your body is a vessel for carrying your soul.

This is what led me to produce a series of portraits in the forms of vessels. Referencing our body as a vessel and translating this through connection with the material through an intimate process.

By abstracting and removing my visual appearance creates an abstract aesthetic to these vessels, I want this connection to be almost like a secret, and to produce portraits that are not instantly recognized as a portrait. This is so that the viewer may not necessarily realise that the vessel is a portrait but that connection resides within the vessel and myself.

The portrait is a visual representation of myself where the portrait does not reveal my visual appearance but through connection, and surface pattern it is a direct result of myself. Thus creating a portrait, my body as a vessel.

LIFE DRAWING

To analyse the body I attended life drawing classes that used a variety of different techniques to draw the body. I then applied these techniques to drawing my own body.



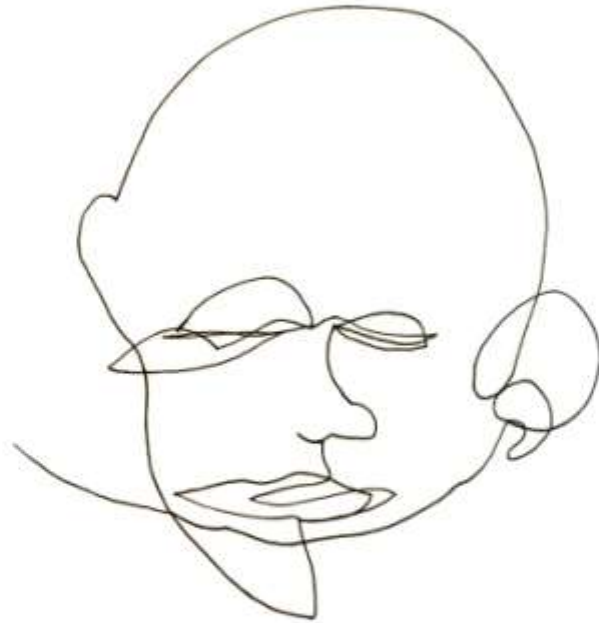




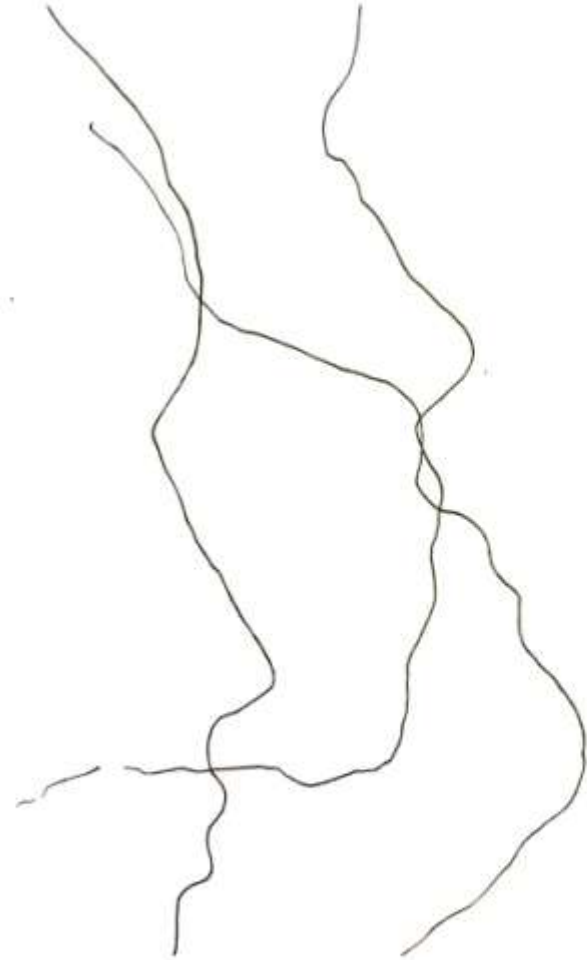
PHOTOGRAPHY & LINE

Here are some examples of line drawings taken from multiple exposure photographs on 35 mm film and layered digital images. Some of these drawings were also produced free hand. These drawings are created using a continuous line which gives these portraits an abstract feel where the whole portrait does not need to be drawn. The effect it produces gives a really interesting illustrative aesthetic however these drawings may be too literal on their own.





These are continuous line drawings that I have produced using different techniques. On the left is a continuous line 'blind and touch' drawing and the one to the right is traced around the outside of the profile of my face





35mm film, multiple flash exposure
Images layers on top of one another to create a layered
line drawing.

The effect it produces interesting as the identity and facial
features have been removed, however it is still too figurative.

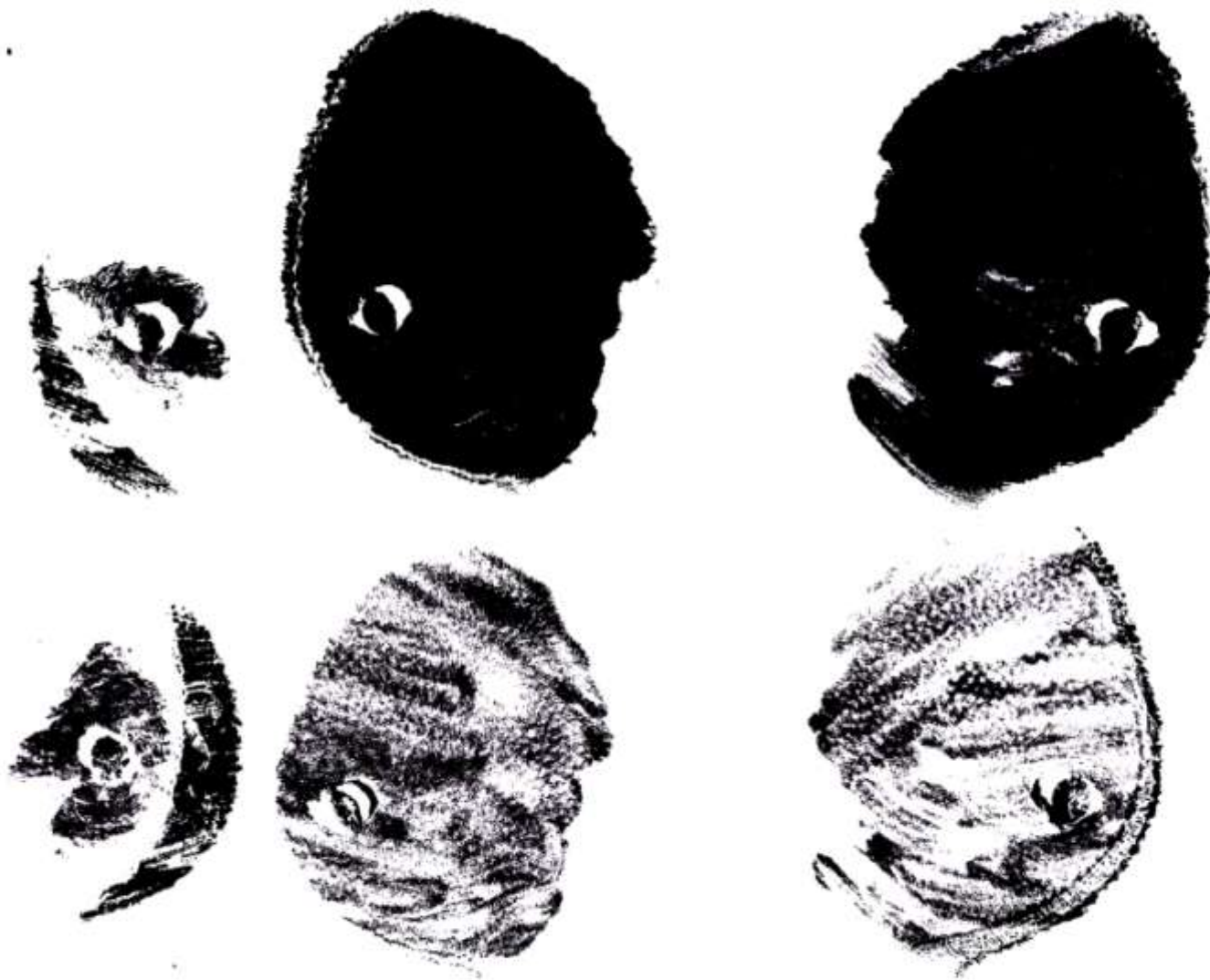
BODY PRINTS

Covering my body in black paint, and pressing against paper creates a direct print of myself.

This process is very intimate, by being nude and putting paint against your skin is an exposing and unusual experience. However once the print is produced, the print left behind has visual identity of my appearance on it. Therefore a process that is so intimate and exposing for myself, my visual identity is lost, which means that the viewer loses the intimate and exposing attachment to the print, but still resides with myself.

Coming direct from the my body, it's a physical mark left by myself, capturing an intimate, essence and image of my body. Therefore creating an intimate portrait.

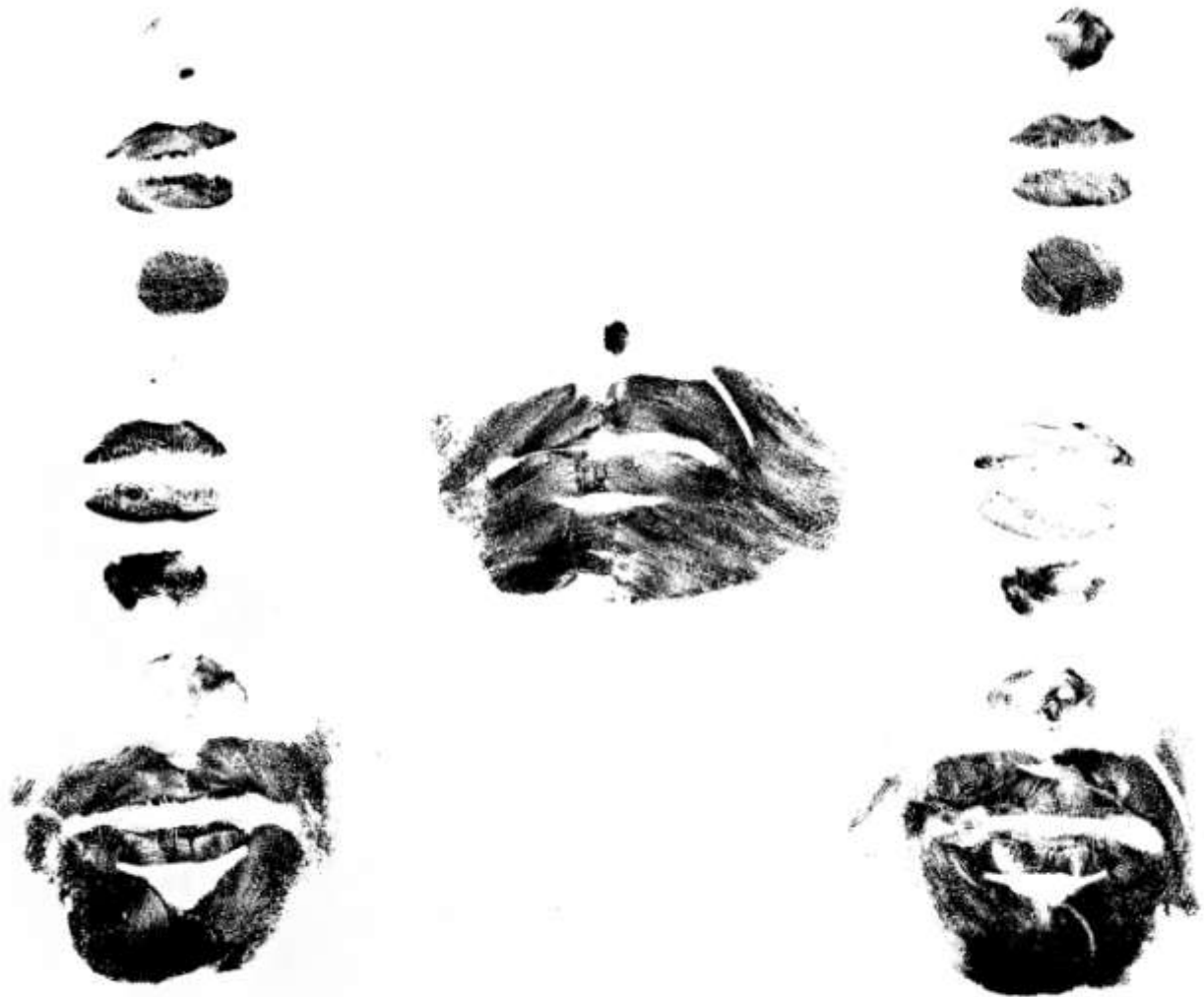




Breasts



Face



Mouth and Lips

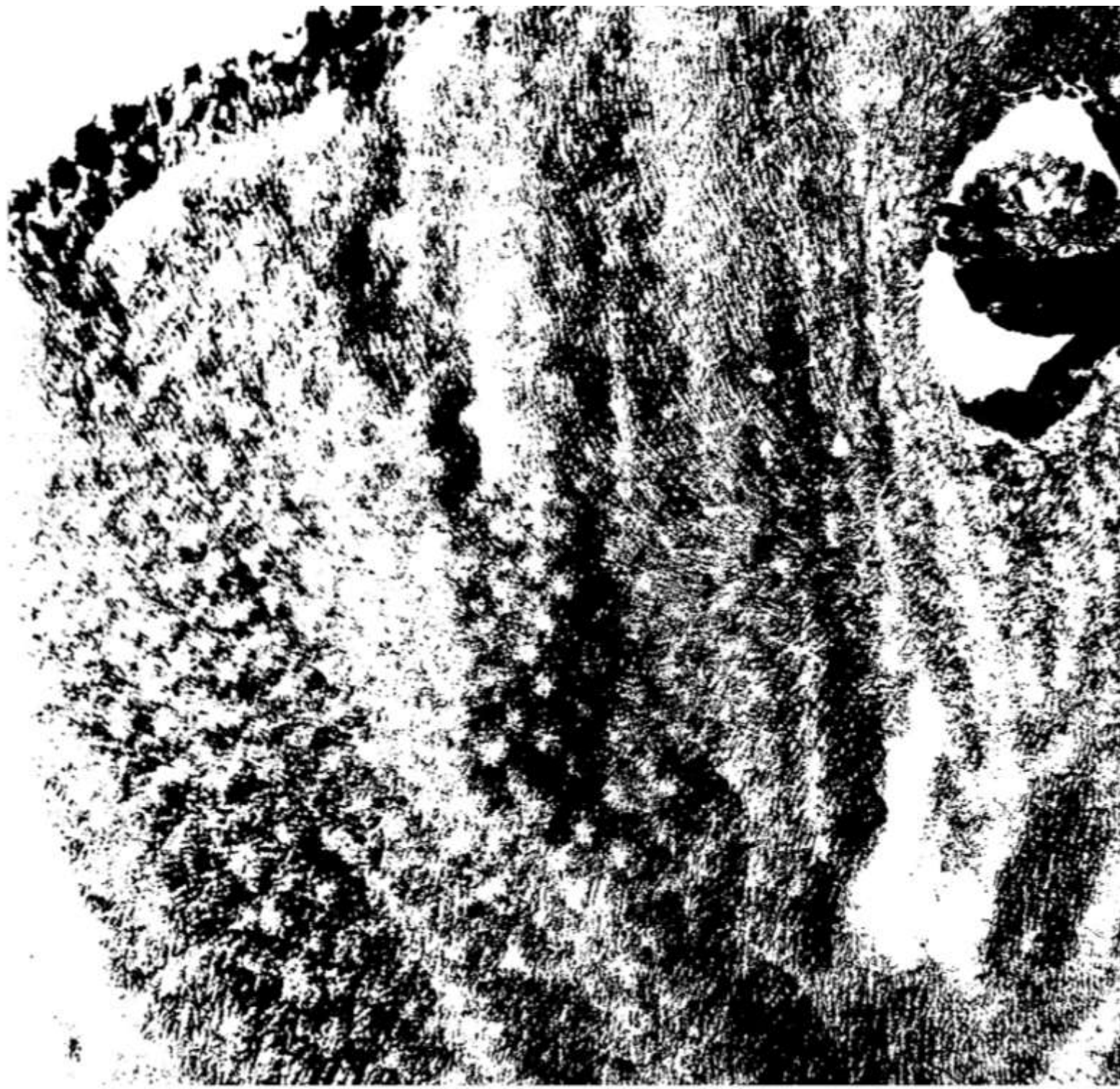


Torso and Face

ABSTRACTING PRINT

I have abstract body prints by enlarging the print so that their origin become unapparent, in some cases a print may not even look like that it originally came from the body.

This is the beginning the the removal of visual identity within the portrait. By taking a body print and enlarging it to become ambiguous provides a disconnection between the print and the viewer, From an intimate process of connection with a print to creating something that appears to have no connection and therefore removes it of identity which begins the abstraction of the portrait.

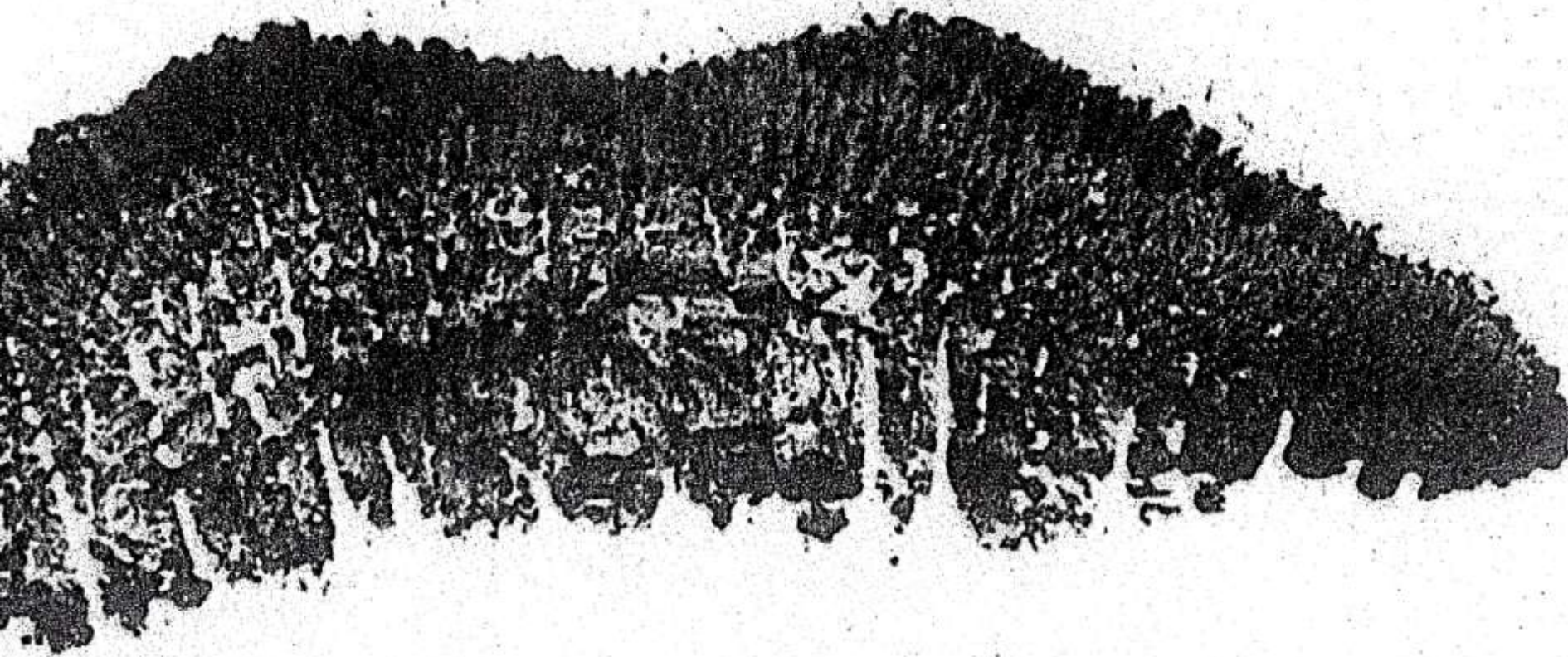




Thumb



Mouth





CYANOTYPE & SUNLIGHT PAPER

Using light sensitive paper I have captured the form of my body, these may have been stretched or changed due to shadows, but by my body blocking out the light from the sun it has left a negative of my body against the paper, creating images of me but without any visual appearance of my identity, just the form and profile of my body.







THROWING & EXPERIMENTATION

Making marks through the process of throwing by capturing my movement and connection with the clay. I wanted to convey the idea of the connection through the making; however after a lot of experimentation and trying to throw large scale I came to the conclusion that hand building would provide a more interesting result as well as the scale I wanted to achieve.

The thrown form created a refined finish, whereas the process and the finish of handbuilding created a finish that conveyed the idea of connection and process with the clay, and provided less of a restriction in size, which is more suitable for the context of my self portraits.



Thrown test pieces
experimenting with
slip decoration,
naked and glazed
surfaces, preserving
print and abstracting
form through
manipulation of
material.





Tracing movements

These vessels were thrown with stain on my hands, which created the movement of the process and my hands on the surface of the clay.

The idea behind capturing the movement is interesting, however I don't think the aesthetic is interesting in the final product.



Capturing movement

This thrown piece is decorated by capturing the movement of the hand around the vessel after bisque firing. I really like the finish of these pieces, however I feel like this a commercial outlet for my thrown pieces. This is a commercial outlet I may pursue at a later date. I do not think this aesthetic is right for this portrait.



TEST PIECES & EXPERIMENTATION

Investigating different methods and processes in order to achieve the best and most effective result. Experimentation takes place in form, surface and material used. These test pieces and experiments determine the concluded finish.





High Fired Keuper Red

Whilst trying out different surface decorative techniques on the keuper red the main experiment was getting the right temperature to achieve a draw brown colour in the clay. Starting at 1250 to 1215, to 1200. discovered that 1200 degrees achieved the dark brown colour without over firing the clay.



High Firing Keuper Red

In this test piece you can see the difference in colour from a high firing to a lower temperature you can see the clay going from dark brown (highest temp) to a lighter brown. This shows the colour I want to achieve in the Keuper red.





Cut out texture



Wax Resist

Paper Porcelain
Trying out different techniques to get translucency in the porcelain. The Wax resist finish is really sharp but the cut out texture goes deep enough to create the translucency. Try to combine both of the techniques.



Paper Porcelain

Wax resist in paper porcelain. The pattern created after wiping back the clay is really interesting with the sharp line created by the wax gives a contrast between the uneven flowing form to the crisp lines produced by the wax. I wanted to get some translucency but the walls are too thick to let any light through.



Grogged porcelain and Wax Resist

High firing the grogged porcelain creates a nice matt finish with a slight texture from the white grog. After using the wax and wiping away the surface of the clay, whilst using a tool to get a deeper cut, created a smooth finish, compared to the paper porcelain. I was able to get the porcelain thin enough to become translucent, and holds itself well as a finished piece. Therefore I will use the grogged porcelain as the grog provides strength for building as well as a good smooth finish.





Grogged Porcelain

Sgraffito and underglaze test pieces on grogged porcelain.

The clay body when fired to stoneware as naked clay has a stone matte but soft tone to it's base. The underglaze provides a contrasts of a shiny surface against the matte.





Black Clay

Different black clay tests using, decorating slip, glaze, needle tools and experimenting with pattern and putting it on the clay.



Raku

Experimenting with different firing techniques I then went on to produce a few experiments with Raku. This is not a 'Naked Clay' process as you use glaze in order to achieve colour but it is an experimental technique.

Due to the size of my final pieces I am unable to use raku as a process, this is due to the dangerous firing of raku. The size of my pieces would prove to be problematic when trying to 'shock' the pottery.



Saggur

Sawdust firing is unpredictable as you never quite know what you're going to get. Saggur firing takes place in a ceramic base and your piece is surrounded by saw dust. You fire to a low temperature (Less than 1000 Degrees) the sawdust then smokes the pottery in the firing process. These were paper porcelain and the effect created by the sawdust is really interesting as it is a soft matt smoke around the rims and the base of the vessels.





Surrounding the piece in sawdust and ensuring that it is sealed with clay and a few breathing holes, then it's time to fire. With the desired result at the end.

CYANOTYPE & PYROFOTO

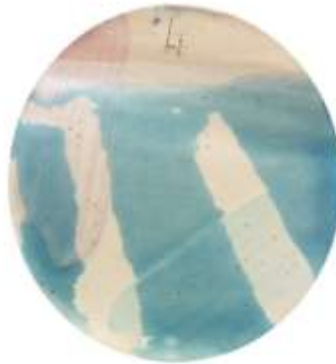
Experimental photography has been a process that I have been interested in for quite some time now. Portraiture nowadays is predominantly seen in photography, therefore I wanted to try and integrate this within my Self Portrait.

Cyanotype is an image that is created using natural light, and was one of the first forms of photography. However the traditional process of a cyanotype is fairly toxic, thus I found Pyrofoto that provided a safer option to produce a cyanotype on clay.





14% Azure Blue, E/W + Pyrofoto



2% Cobalt E/W + Pyrofoto



Earthenware glaze tests to find a cyanotype blue.



Lilac tests in S/W proved to produce the closest cyanotype blue.

Pyrofoto tests

The colour produced after using the pyrofoto doesn't have the rich cyan colour that the pure glaze did before hand. Therefore I will need to figure out the stain percentage to create a rich cyan. However the Pyrofoto reacted well and created an interesting shape of my hands around the vessel. Image two shows two layers of pyrofoto, however this is looking unfinished.



Final Test

The colours used in this test have been the most successful the blue on the right produces the right cyan colour for the Cyanotype Portrait.

This was 14% Azure Blue with 4% Lilac.



COLOUR

Throughout my experiments I have opted for a simple colour scheme, of black, white, brown and with the exception of blue. I have opted for a simple colour scheme as my surface patterns are quite complex and in my previous experiments it ended up over complicating the design.

Therefore the colours I have chosen are simple but provide a good contrast. They also reference the colours of traditional photography, from black and white photographs, to sepia brown and one of the first photography techniques of the cyanotype, which is a process I am wanting to achieve in one of my self portraits.

Chosen colour and decorative surfaces I think the gestural surfaces work well with the intricate line pattern from the prints, whilst a variety of textures creates different levels of texture.



PROCESS

To create the Self Portraits I have to undertake the same process for each. Building up from press moulds using using coils to gain height. Each vessel will be made in the same way, however the different clay bodies each of the clays will act differently to the handbuilding process.

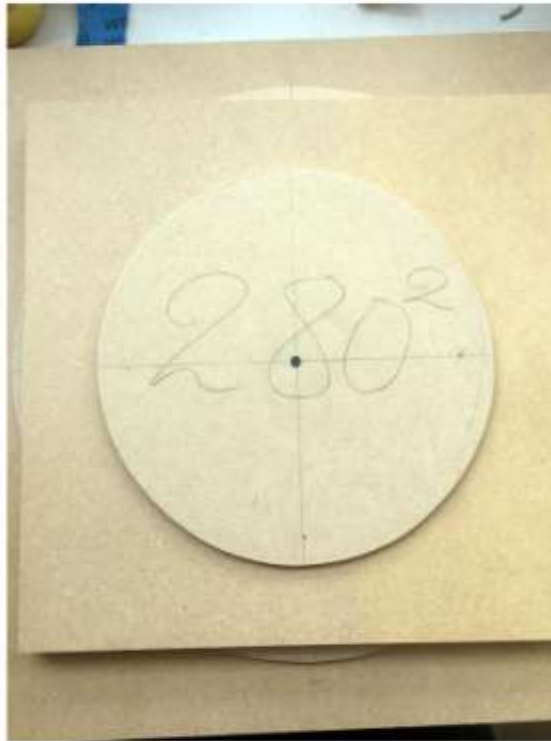


MAKING MOULDS

Each vessel is built up from a mould. As these Vessels are all self portrait it is important that they all have the same base and form to each other to recognise the one individual. Each are made to the diameter of my arms in a wide embrace and into a tight embrace. Larger one measures at 46cm and the smaller one measures at 28cm. As the form of these portrait are conducted by an embrace is it crucial that these measurements are kept to in order for my arms to reach around the vessel.

Using a profile

Initially you decide what shape you would like your base to be, you then draw out a simple line drawing according to your measurements (half of the diameter), you then draw this profile onto a piece of wood saw along the line and this becomes your profile, making sure you sand one side down to allow for movement of the clay. You then make a base that you pull the profile around that you cover in clay to get the base you want.





Once you have formed the profile of your base you smooth out the clay base to get a smooth mould. Since taking this photo I have changed the design, instead of having a footring with a logo in the base it now has a smooth curved base, which provides a nicer finish. After you then build clay walls around your piece and prepare it for plaster, covering the clay mould in plaster you are now casting your base. you can add Hessian fabric to strengthen the mould and to keep it light weight rather than adding more plaster.



Finished moulds

Once set and sanded, the moulds are ready to use.

These form the base of the vessels, where they will be built up from the base of the mould.

On hindsight, the smaller mould could have been made using a whirler, however I have still achieved the result I desired.

MAKING PORTRAITS

This will demonstrate a step by step process of how each portrait is made, visually as well as technically.





Making a Vessel

Using a press mould you have to roll out a large piece of clay first, making sure it is not thin, then you press it into shape this forms the base. Due to the large size of my moulds it is quite difficult to roll out a big enough piece of clay, but you can always attach pieces at the base. I then start building on top with coils, I did try slabbing but I found this made the structure weaker.



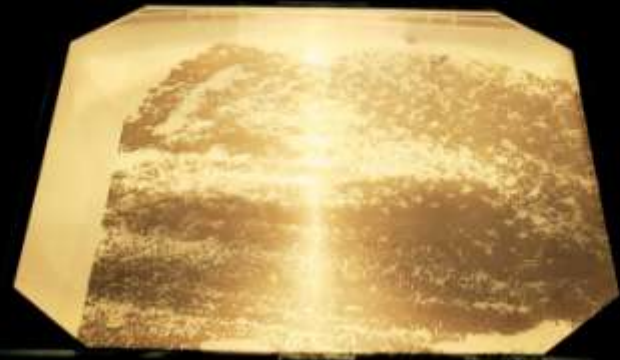
After a couple of days, taking the clay out of the mould is difficult due to the weight of the clay, this is when the base sags a little. The join is another weak point but using slurry, using kidney tools you can smooth it out to a strong join. I took this one out of the mould too early and as you can see I did not use any supports this made the base sag more.

Then an embrace to create the form.

PROJECTION & SURFACE DECORATION

This section will look at each process I undertake in order to create the surface pattern to complete the portrait. These processes take time, and patience, they are not achieved quickly and they need a lot of attention to the small details.

The concept behind the surface decoration is to produce a pattern that come direct from my body, and then abstract that image. This creates the connection between myself and the vessel that puts my own unique print on the surface, that may not be obvious to a viewer but will reside between myself and the portrait.



Surface pattern

Projection of print onto the surface of the porcelain vessel. Every outline of the thumbprint is traced using an embossing tool, this creates a wider and smoother line. The line is then filled with black iron oxide, and then the excess on the surface is then wiped away using a sponge

This process can look quite messy with the grey hue left but this burn off throughout the firing process. Thus leaving the thumb print outlined in black with a porcelain background.





**Wax Resist
Grogged Porcelain**

Using projection once again to create a surface pattern of my thumb print. However this time instead of producing a flat surface pattern I am going to create a texture surface, almost like an etched surface. This is done by applying wax and then rubbing back the clay.



I began by melting my own wax and then painting it on. this proved to be a time consuming process, then I was informed about liquid wax resist, which sped up the process and was very easy to use. however the wax was not as strong but it was strong enough. I wanted this piece to become translucent, however due to the nature of building these vessels I am unable to build them thin, so therefore before rubbish down the clay with a wet sponge I took out some of the pattern with tools in order to make it deeper. this worked well but was also very time consuming. This was when i decided to fade out the pattern from the top to the bottom of the vessel.





Slip Decoration

To achieve the gestural body prints on my vessels I cover my torso in white decorating slip and embrace the vessel whilst its on a throwing wheel and let the wheel slowly move over my body. This creates the movement in the piece, illustrates and marks my body against the vessel, thus creating the connection forming the portrait.



Black slip decoration

This piece was the height of my hip to the top of my head, then I printed my body onto the surface creating the slip print on the finished piece.



Large Textured Black Clay

This is the largest portrait in the series, once again the thumb print is being projected onto the clay and I am outlining the pattern, this pattern is going to stay as a textured surface.





Cyanotype

First of all you make a really thick paste of your chosen colour glaze - if you have no colour no print will appear. You then apply this on to the surface and dry between each layer once this is done I needed to create a barrier between my body and the vessel as it is slightly corrosive I used cling film wrapped around my arms and the whole vessel. Holding the vessel outside with direct sunlight for about 6 minutes enabled the reaction between the chemical and the glazed surface to fuse together. After the exposure you then wipe away gently using a sponge and water then your image will appear.



A SELF PORTRAIT

Concluded and finished portraits.

I am really happy with the body of work I have produced and my final Portrait Vessels have been successful, I believe that I have achieved what I wanted to achieve through my work and created portraits that stand alone as well as sitting together to form one.

I believe that this is still a project I can further and push into new directions as well as finishing a concluded project.

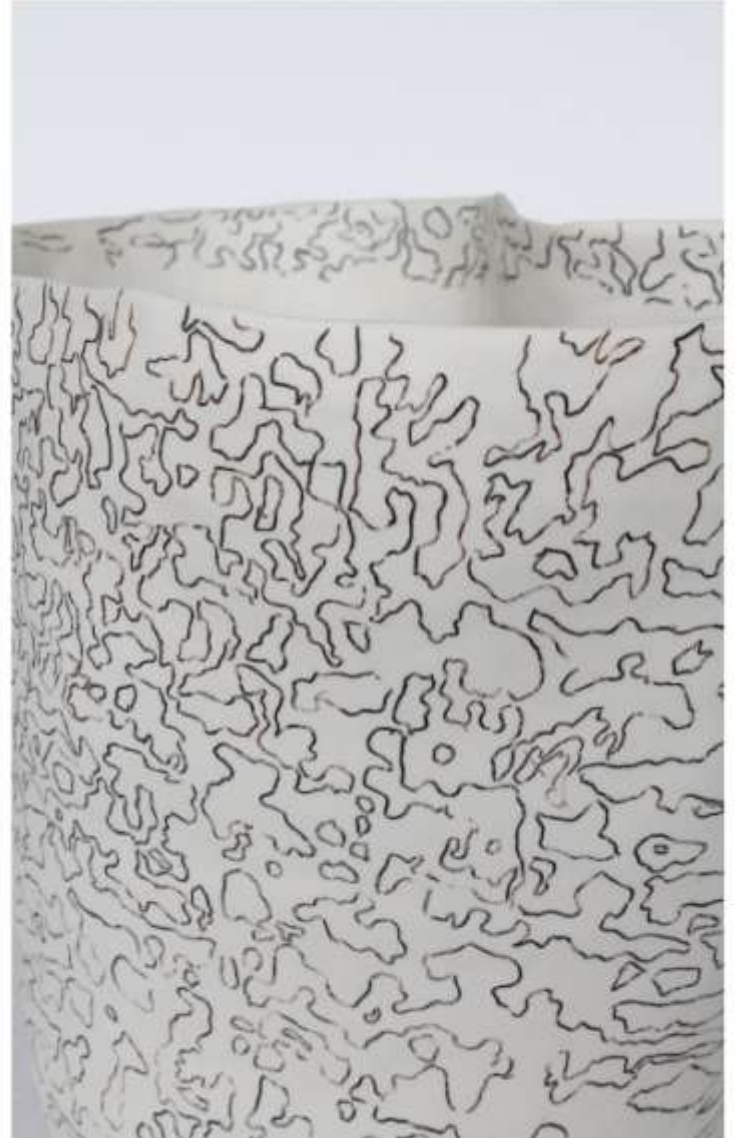
One thing I would like to improve on are the bases, when I made the bases I thought that the foot ring would finish of the piece, however on hindsight it doesn't really matter and a flat base would have been suitable as well as aesthetically better.



Grogged Porcelain with Sgraffito, 35cm x 34cm x 23cm



Grogged Porcelain with Sgraffito, 35cm x 34cm x 23cm





Grogged Porcelain with Wax Resist 41 cm x 33cm x 25cm



Grogged Porcelain with Wax Resist 41 cm x 33 cm x 25 cm





Keuper Red with Slip Decoration 36cm x 41cm x 30cm



Keuper Red with Slip Decoration 36cm x 41cm x 30cm



Black Textured with Slip Decoration 55cm x 30cm x 18cm



Black Textured with Slip Decoration 55cm x 30cm x 18cm



Black Textured with Line Decoration 60cm x 46cm x 32cm



Black Textured with Line Decoration 60cm x 46cm x 32cm



Modelling Clay with Semi Matte Glaze and Pyrofoto 270mm x 340mm x 380mm



Modelling Clay with Semi Matte Glaze and Pyrofoto 270mm x 340mm x 380mm

