

Breaking Binaries: An Exploration Through Interactive Art

Diya Karthik

Personal Background

My independent project draws its inspiration from my AP 2D portfolio, which follows the theme of bringing awareness to underrecognized societal issues through art. I tackled a variety of



societal issues, one of which was how Title 42—a policy enacted by Trump that denied migrants the right to seek asylum when crossing the border—affects the complicated relationship between border patrol and migrants. In my drawing (shown below), I include strips of black and white to show how people tend to view immigration issues through a polarized, “black and white” lens when in reality, it is a complicated and nuanced issue influenced by a range of factors including political opinions, cultural identity, and humanitarian rights. The use of rigid lines and shapes

reflects how Title 42 creates divisions in society that pit border patrol agents and migrants against each other; border patrol are framed as the “good” enforcers of the law, and migrants are framed as the “bad” threats to security. To challenge this narrative, I placed the migrants in the foreground to portray their overlooked feelings of hopelessness and pain that reflect their personal experiences: the man on his knees because he had to leave the only life he has ever known; the boy searching for answers as to why he must leave his family; and the mom who has

been stripped of her life belongings by border patrol and can't care for her own baby. Because these stories often get lost in the oversimplified narratives of immigration, I was inspired to not just raise awareness about these overlooked issues, but also delve into the root of the issue: binary thinking. According to Clay Drinko, an American author and educator, "Binary thinking, by definition, is thinking there are two sides and that you can only pick one . . . being stuck in categorical thought doesn't actually involve much thinking at all, you just assume that new experiences will fit into your old boxes, buckets, labels, generalizations, and stereotypes." As the article states, the problem with binary thinking is ironically the lack of thinking applied; rather than viewing gray areas as deserving more complex, in-depth thinking, binary thinking causes us to mindlessly oversimplify things just for the sake of lumping them into a category. This is problematic because in our world we are faced with difficult decisions and complicated feelings all the time, so if we keep making inaccurate categorizations, we are ultimately just running from the root of our problems. In order to avoid this loophole, people need to dissolve binary thinking and practice thinking about things on a full spectrum by investigating nuance and exploring the gray areas of issues. Through my interpretative and interactive art pieces that guide viewers to dissolve common binaries, I hope to encourage more introspective and nuanced thinking about social and cultural issues and create a more evolved way of looking at issues in our world.

Method and Rigor

Research has informed my choices in many ways, especially in shaping my childhood book where I explore and challenge the traditional hero-versus-villain binary. According to the

academic journal, *Philosophy and Pedagogy of Early Childhood*, by philosophers Farquhar and White, pedagogy should be a “relational experience that locates emotionally as a co-requisite to learning.” The source’s emphasis on a balanced relationship where teachers are facilitators of children’s learning but still value children’s emotions and autonomy relates to my approach to the children’s book. In my childhood book, I aim to emphasize these emotional and relational aspects of learning rather than learning based on order and certainty, which educational structures tend to prioritize. I want to create a balance between children-teacher relationships where children can take autonomy over their learning by first interpreting the book on their own through the book’s visuals and creating their own endings. Then, they can have a collaborative discussion with an adult (the teacher) who reads the philosophical poetry of the book, during which the parent can expand the child’s views.

I’ve developed this idea through feedback I have received and expansive research ranging from character design and color choice to children’s pedagogy and philosophy. Specifically, I’ve delved into children’s philosophy to make educated hypotheses of how the children will perceive the book and why. Moral philosophy books such as Jean Piaget’s book, *The Moral Judgement of the Child*, have introduced me to the two types of moral reasoning: heteronomous morality, the idea that rules are unchanged and imposed by authority figures (such as parents), and autonomous morality, the idea that rules created by peers can be negotiated.¹ This distinction inspired my idea of child-peer discussions, as these interactions foster a unique sense of shared dialogue and mutual understanding that differs from the dynamic of parent-to-child relationships.

¹ Susan Isaacs, *Mind* 43, no. 169 (1934): 85–99, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2250175>.

However, recognizing that adults play an equally important role in a child's life, I adjusted the plan to include constructive parent discussions.

Finally, to maintain the exhibition's reflective nature, I decided discussions should take place after the event. This ensures children can engage fully with the exhibition's themes and develop their opinions across multiple exhibition pieces. Additionally, I plan to have a reflection wall at the end of the exhibit to provide a space for children to process their experiences independently through drawings, words, or other forms of expression, reinforcing the introspective purpose of the exhibition. This distinction inspired my idea of child-peer discussions, as these interactions foster a unique sense of shared dialogue and mutual understanding that differs from the dynamic of parent-to-child relationships. However, recognizing that adults play an equally important role in a child's life, I adjusted the plan to include constructive parent discussions. To address concerns about parents acting as an "authority" figure by dominating the child-to-parent discussions, I researched adult-child dynamics to prepare parents with a brief talk and written guidelines on how they can foster open-ended, curiosity-driven conversations (which I will present during my presentation). I can't control what happens outside of the exhibition, but what I can control is educating the parent in hopes they will make the right decision for the learning of their child. Additionally, to avoid parents overstepping when talking to their children, I decided that children would have their own photocopies of the book. This allows them to explore the story on their own terms without sharing a page with an adult, preserving their sense of ownership and creativity. These copies also empower children to create unique endings based solely on their interpretations of the visuals. Finally, to maintain the exhibition's reflective

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Artwork + Interpretations

The project will be presented in two stages. The first stage will involve a presentation along with



a video, detailing the ideation and research behind my pieces. The second stage will involve the creation of the exhibition in the second semester, focusing on the execution and design of the pieces. My first exhibition piece is the children's book that challenges the



hero-versus-villain binary. With interactive, high-contrast visuals intended for young readers and poetic text that engages older audiences, the story follows a confident and self-assured hero who gradually becomes manipulative and morally ambiguous. Meanwhile, a sorceress, initially depicted as evil, is revealed to be

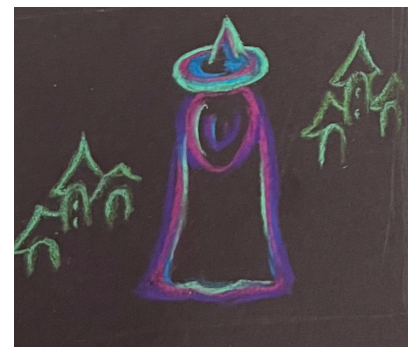


misunderstood, using her magic to defend her home from the hero's

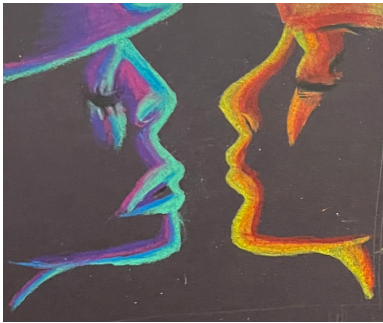


invasion. I visually depict these shifts by having the hero transition from a front-facing stance that conveys confidence to a back-facing stance that reflects a darker, more arrogant side of himself. In contrast, the sorceress transitions from being back-facing and emotionally detached to someone emotionally vulnerable through the front-facing view, revealing her humanity. The narrative for this story is informed by Jean Piaget's stages of moral development and Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning.² Piaget's theories suggest that younger children initially view rules as fixed and absolute, which aligns with the hero's early portrayal as a definitive figure of good. However, as they mature, children begin to understand that rules and morals are flexible and influenced by the situation, a shift reflected in the book's narrative as the hero's seemingly moral actions become morally questionable. Kohlberg's stages strengthen the progression from viewing morality as obedience to authority toward a more nuanced understanding of universal ethics principles (justice, equality, and respect for others' rights), reflected in the moral dilemmas faced by both characters. This concept of moral growth is further reinforced by the hero breaking the Hero's Journey arc of victoriously returning home after completing his duty by choosing to talk to the sorceress first to reflect on how his decisions were immoral and unjust.

My iterative process and feedback have not only deepened my research but also artistically shaped my final piece. A piece of feedback I received was about how my children's book would stand out visually and what would draw children in. This made me realize that while I have an engaging storyline and changed the



positioning of the characters, the visuals alone didn't have a distinctive quality that would make the book appealing. In response, I recognized the need to embody the creativity I aim to inspire in children, so I adjusted the visuals to maintain the same narrative while making them more unique. By switching to a black background, I emphasize the significance of color in my



childhood book. For example, for the villain, I use green and purple; purple connotes malice and power, while green symbolizes renewal and growth. Hence by transitioning from purple to

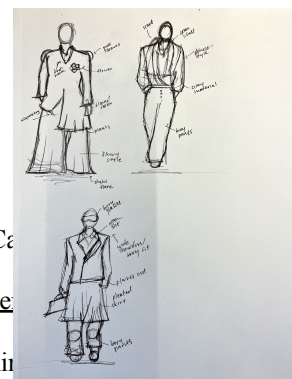


green, I reflect the villain's transition from a more malicious figure to one that is more humane. I also simplified the composition, focusing only on key visuals, such as the hero's hand and foot positioning, to effectively convey the image of a stereotypical hero rather than including unnecessary details. Lastly, I altered the front page visual to create a more evocative connection, with the characters facing each other, representing them as dynamic, human figures rather than static, distant objects. Through these changes, I have strengthened the visual impact of the book to better convey its message.

For my second exhibition piece, I am creating a statue installation featuring gender-neutral clothing. The audience will dress the statues, using these pieces to challenge traditional gender norms and disrupt the masculine versus feminine binary in fashion. My research focuses on selecting silhouettes, color palettes, fabrics, etc that innovatively portray gender fluidity.



Through this interactive process, I aim to encourage diverse and individual expressions of identity beyond societal labels. For the December deliverable, I will present detailed sketches of outfits I have designed (which I will physically create in the final exhibition). While the designs are still in progress, the image above serves as inspiration for my direction.² As illustrated in the sketch, the artist emphasizes the materials, styles, and various ways the outfit can be worn, showcasing how the presentation of the outfit changes based on design choices. Similarly, through my sketches, I aim to bring them to life with mixed media elements, creating a dynamic and engaging visual experience that highlights the potential of fashion design. This project is also inspired by Sadé Mica's *Gracie in the Garms* from the 2023 *Genders: Shaping and Breaking the Binary* exhibit at Science Gallery London.³ Mica reimagined binders—compression garments—as pieces of outerwear to celebrate trans identities and reject the need to conceal them under clothing to appease societal expectations. Similarly, I want to create intentional yet stylish designs that can empower individuals to feel confident in their identity. Finally, I have drawn inspiration from the fashion of non-binary icon Abhinav Anguria, also known as Alok. Alok is a gender-nonconforming writer, performance artist, and fashion figure who challenges gender binaries through fashion. Alok has shared how trans women and transfeminine people are often told to “tone it down,” avoid “drawing too much attention,” and wear “appropriate” clothing that undermines their masculinity in order to



² Özlem KAYA and Laura Sînziana, "Some Aspects of Texture Element in Art: The Case of Fashion Design," *ResearchGate*, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352226579_Some_Aspects_Of_Texture_Element_In_Art_The_Case_Of_Fashion_Design.

³ Sadé Mica, *Grace In The Garms*, 2023, Fashion design, Science Gallery London, Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. <https://melbourne.sciencegallery.com/break-the-binaries-exhibits/grace-in-the-garms>

be considered “legitimately feminine.” This led Alok to realize that the issue was not with their body but with the gender binary itself. Just as Mica created fashion that celebrated trans identity, Alok’s fashion choices challenge cisgender norms by blending masculine and



feminine styles. Alok combines elements like floral prints and ruffles with broad shoulders and an open chest, expressing their femininity without compromising their masculinity.

Alok’s clothing designs have inspired some of my recent sketches. As seen in my drawing, I blend traditionally “feminine” and “masculine” designs to represent the possibilities of fashion; pairing a pleated skirt with a blazer, a silky blouse with fitted pants, etc. In my final presentation, I will explain the intentions behind my design choices in detail and how they reinforce the breaking of the masculine vs feminine binary. For my last exhibition piece, I initially planned to do lenticular art, which is a form of art that uses lenticular lenses to produce images that change based on whether you look at them from the right or left. I planned for the lenticular art to show two different images; the first being a masked person devoid of emotion in black and white, and the second being a scene within the masked person’s eye of that person isolated in a room, crying. However, after receiving feedback on how to more effectively convey the idea of “what’s behind the mask,” I decided to switch to creating a physical mask. This change to a 3d piece of art offers a more immersive and interactive experience, allowing viewers to walk around and observe the piece from different angles, which



reinforces the idea of viewing cancel culture from a dynamic, rather than fixed, perspective. The physical mask also more directly embodies the concept of hiding one's true emotions or identity by revealing the stark contrast between the lifeless face on the front of the mask (as seen in the image) and the girl clouded with emotion behind the mask (which I will show during the presentation). I want the idea of looking behind the mask to reveal the inner turmoil often hidden beneath the surface of public judgment, serving as a critique of cancel culture's tendency to reinforce binary distinctions between "good" and "bad" people. While it is important to call out people for their mistakes and hold them accountable, oftentimes our society handles people's mistakes by labeling people as good or bad, the former leading to cancellation. By being cut from support, this system can ultimately lead to shame, mental health struggles, and create a culture of social ostracism that prevents growth and development.⁴ By calling out cancel culture's unjust simplification of human behavior through my art piece, I hope to foster a more progressive society that prioritizes progress and empathy.

Through the interactive element of each of my pieces, I want to show how people's interaction with my art provokes introspective thinking. So, for my December benchmark, before I talk about the pieces I have made, I will play a video in which a few people will interact with my art and share how it made them feel or what it made them think about. This way, I can showcase the interactive element of my project and also complexify the explanations of my pieces by

⁴ Eloisa Bermas, Mae Salac Bermas, and Emmanuel Paciano Mabulay, "Cancel Culture: How Social Influence Affects the Judgment of Individuals on Social Media Issues," *ResearchGate*, December 17, 2023. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376586590_Cancel_Culture_How_Social_Influence_Affects_the_Judgment_of_Individuals_on_Social_Media_issues_A_Journal_Analysis_presented_as_a_final_requirement_for_Social_Psychology_SOCP311.

demonstrating how my project was able to diversify thinking. For the explanation of my pieces, I plan to talk about multiple things: my inspiration for the pieces, my process, the significance of materials used, how I envisioned viewer interaction vs the actual interaction, context of the pieces (why I chose to present these 3 pieces), and what this piece means to me.

Reflection

Through this project, I have gained considerable insight. I have learned that art is an ongoing process of revision and that each step of the process should be completed with intention, from research to artistic decisions to presentation. Children's books are often regarded as straightforward, and yet, while the illustrations of my book are simple, each visual choice conveys a deeper meaning. Additionally, changing the learning of rigid educational systems remains a challenge, which is why I aim for this exhibition to provide a learning space that contrasts traditional methods by prioritizing the emotional and relational aspects of learning. On a personal level, this project has encouraged me to step beyond my comfort zone in multiple ways. Growing up, the art classes I attended focused on taking existing photos/paintings and replicating them to the best of my ability. However, in the same way that strict educational systems prioritize order over curiosity, art academies tend to prioritize technicality over creativity. While I discontinued art classes a few years ago, it's taken a conscious effort to rebuild my artistic practice in a way that fosters creativity. This project is a huge step towards this goal as it is centered around creativity – it is up to my own imagination to design characters that can disrupt binary thinking. Finally, through this project, I have come to appreciate the value of presenting art in an interactive, exhibition format, as it merges my passion for art with

leadership. Just as I found inspiration for my AP 2D portfolio for my IP project, I have no doubt that I'll take inspiration from this project for my college art portfolio. Ultimately, this experience has proven to me not only what I am capable of creating independently but also the profound potential of art to inspire change and make a meaningful impact.

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