

6-2018

Selfie-Portrait

John Shield
johnnyshieldartist@gmail.com

John Shield
California State University - San Bernardino

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shield, John and Shield, John, "Selfie-Portrait" (2018). *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*. 743.
<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/743>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Graduate Studies at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

JOHNNY SHIELD

757 710 2117 \ johnnyshieldartist@gmail.com

Artist Statement

I inherited a legacy of journey and discovery, both internal and external. My grandfather made an adventure across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States during World War II, my mother went on a journey backpacking through Europe in the 1970s, and now I embark on my pilgrimage into the depths of art to search for the same thing as those before me. Channeling the traditional American pioneering spirit, I aim to conquer ideas that appear unconquerable to myself, such as what does it mean and how much power do we have to occupy a body in this political world. I physically use and sometimes alter my body, gender labels, and the literal art gallery to express concepts relating to what it means to be an artist and a consumer of art, such as what is the value of art, and where does the current artist desire to take their work. In *The Nomadic Gallery*, I use the act of carrying the physical and metaphorical weight of the institution of Art to the top of the mountain, allowing some to experience art in a way that no one has before.

I grew up in the much-desired, mostly undeveloped coastal wetlands of Virginia. While it was not a challenge to escape into nature as a child and even into young adulthood, I never had anything in view as sublime and seductive as the sculpted San Gabriel Mountains. When I moved from my childhood home, an area with a maximum elevation of 50' to an area with a base elevation of 1,000' in view of 10,000' mountains, it drastically affected my work. That type of size comparison is overwhelming when experienced in person. Within weeks of moving to San Bernardino I had summited my first peak: Mount Baden-Powell (9,406'). This was an

exhausting, cold, painful, but ultimately empowering ten-mile hike. Baden-Powell is the site where I would later begin *The Nomadic Gallery: Mountaintop Gallery*, in an attempt to draw other breathers to the inspiration that grabbed me, just as it has attracted artists like Thomas Cole and Ansel Adams and even further to the beginning of art. These are historic American artists who used their bodies to venture out into an American world that was new to them. The mountains of our obsession tower over in a way that teaches someone their own tiny size while standing at the base, and their personal immense power while standing on the top.

My undergraduate work consisted primarily of metalwork, with the occasional conceptual piece. I focused on fine metals and wearable jewelry, particularly the chain. A literal and symbolic version of strength and continuance, the chain can also be symbolic of bondage and servitude. The politically charged nature of these objects was not missed on myself. After graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Old Dominion University in Virginia, I went into a graduate diploma program for the Conservation of Metals in the United Kingdom and subsequently completed independent study courses in glass and art history at my alma mater. I spent the next two years as a demonstrating glass artist honing my craft at the Chrysler Museum of Art Glass Studio. I began the Master of Fine Arts program at California State University in San Bernardino working in conceptual glass, but by the end of the first quarter I was consumed by the performative nature inherent in almost all art. This exploration manifested in a recent series of work focusing on the physical human body and the effect of altering its appearance. Through the removal of gender labels, covering of bodies, and literal inscription on flesh, I am engaging the viewer in what it means to be an artist, as well as a human body, in a constant state of change, observation and judgment. One of these performances, took two gendered bodied and systematically removed the gendered labels such as hair and clothing, so as

to highlight not our differences, but our similarities. Yet another took on the aspect of the viewing eye by allowing the audience the authority in tattooing my flesh over social media.

I am driven by concepts in the art I view and study, more so than materiality. I believe this to be in response to feeling pigeonholed in a material shortly after completing my craft based undergraduate degree. My aversion to objects further developed into my mantra during my studies in the field of metals conservation in the United Kingdom. I would spend months analyzing and defending objects made by craftsmen who had long since passed. These artists were mostly forgotten as their work was unsigned. The illusion of immortality through the life of your art object, which was perpetuated by my father, fell apart during this period of my life. As I was living in a foreign country I was already learning to live minimally and further converted into minimalism of objects. This manifested in my art as an affinity for performance, a much more difficult to commoditize medium. My true inspiration today comes from the Avant Guard and Anti Artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Chris Burden. These powerful figures inspire me not only with their willingness to use any material to achieve their concepts, but also in the way each of them used humor and cynicism so effectively. Performance art has had a tenuous relationship with the gallery since its creation because there is not typically a commodity being produced. A performance artist typically relies on photographic or video documentation; however, some artists choose to handle this differently. Tino Seghal does this to great effect by making his almost fluxus pieces he calls “constructed situations” which are essentially non-commodifiable group performances. I believe that in our fast-paced commodity-driven world, everyone wants to consume and move on, not allowing for a significant connection with the work. I strive to have my work live more similarly to spoken cultural history - I desire for the viewer/audience to have a very individual and intimate experience with my work by only having

those in attendance experience the piece in its entirety. My performances are based in spectacle which in today's time means the viewers photograph the work and share it for the artist - I try not to actively document my work. Instead I rely on viewer documentation on social media as I believe these images can be more authentic and focus on aspects of the performance that I as the artist could possibly ignore. But of course, in the instance of my tattoo projects, I carry the physical documentation always.

The other topic which has consumed my consciousness since it was awakened, is my own gender construction. My performance of gender has confused me since long before it was made aware to me. I have attempted to perform exclusively the male gender, through encouragement, even though it has never felt genuine. As I have to become educated in the spectrum of gender, I am desperately trying to find my own positioning in this spectrum. Reading Judith Butler's work about Phenomenology has changed the way I can accept my body, and learn to grow under the reality of the gender standard.

The body of work I am presently showing is taking the form of two separate but supplemental series, one relating to the performative act of art making, specifically tattooing, and the second showing other artists' work through the act of carrying the literal weight of the art institution, as an art gallery that fits on my back. The first series uses self-tattooing as a performative act of expression, with my body both the art venue and work of art. Tattooing and body ornamentation have been a part of my life since my teenage years but body adornment finds its roots in ancient cultures. I continue to consume the work of other tattoo artists such as Servadio and the Brutal Black Project. These artists greatly change the standard of what it means to be a contemporary artist and tattooer. I find the ability to inscribe my own flesh with a nearly permanent mark highly empowering and doing this in front of the art audience highlights this

empowerment. The second relates to a physicality in carrying not only your own weight, but objects needed for survival. By carrying and showing art and my gallery on my back, I prioritize those objects as necessary for survival. As in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, I am placing the subject of art in the same level as food, water, and shelter.

In my current practice, I am glass blowing weekly in addition to also hiking locally 2-4 times a week, unplugged from society at large, thus allowing me some of the best brainstorming time I have experienced. The hiking is also immersing me in the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), a 2,700-mile trail from Mexico to Canada that passes within 20 miles of campus. I am planning my MFA exhibition to be a two-month performance of *The Nomadic Gallery* on the PCT. I am proposing to hike from the Mexican border to campus (350 miles) while showing, and give a museum show of the viewer documentation of not only this show but the seven I have had during my tenure at California State University in San Bernardino.

My path has taken me full circle by focusing on my own body while I travel through this world. Even though my journey is ever expanding in scope including a summer abroad in South Korea, my work is becoming ever smaller, by working with my own body instead of the precious art object of tradition. As a maker and an academic, I am mindfully ready for wherever my artistic journey takes me. However, where does one find a home as someone who feels damaged by their past and cursed in their future. The artist is described as a lofty dreamer fighting against a system older than the generations, yet will we be swallowed up into that very commodity-based system. I will fight to keep my distance from the standards of not only gender, but also standards of success as usually defined fiscally. I will make my journey interacting with a shifting audience to speak of an ever-changing landscape of labels and disappointment.



Selfie-Portrait, 2016-2018. Blown and inside sculpted glass, cold rolled steel, corrosive bath,
Installation.