

Harbingers: The Fragmentation of Self

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INTRODUCTION

The authentic self is a paradox—it exists not as a fixed truth, but as a threshold, a liminal space between what we were and what we are becoming. *Harbingers: The Fragmentation of Self*, explores how identity is always in flux, how masks shape our perception, and how we navigate the tension between concealment and revelation. As the boundaries between self and spectacle are blurred, *Harbingers* investigates the psychological and emotional impact of masks- whether to hide vulnerabilities or to project an idealized self. Driven by personal experience, *Harbingers* seeks to understand the transitory implications of identity and its construction. How does our inner world reflect our presentation to the outer world; how does the outer world affect our inner?

This work unravels the mask's true nature- a veil that both distorts and reveals, shaping the fluid contours of identity. Physical masks have historically served as vehicles for self-transformation, allowing individuals to take on alternate personas. In contrast, modern masks such as makeup and digital filters blur the line between reality and artifice, amplifying the pressures of perfection and self-curation in today's society. By placing these two forms in conversation *Harbingers* reveals their interplay and contradictions, questioning the performative nature of identity.

Throughout history, mankind has always seemed to yearn to alter personhood. Traditional masks have been used in rituals and performances to veil and metamorphose the self. In the contemporary landscape, makeup and digital manipulation have become masks of their own. By drawing parallels of these modes of disguise, we can unravel the enduring human impulse to reshape identity- whether for transformation, protection, or deception. This continuum between ancient and modern curation of persona reveals how self presentation is not just an aesthetic impulse, but a deeply psychological urge.

THE WORK

This photograph, *DEMON TEETH FULL* (Fig.1), captures a moment that resonates with Carl Jung's concept of the persona as "that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is." The subject, dressed in a childlike pink gown and adorned with a toy tiara, holds a wand and a stuffed animal, embodying an exaggerated, almost grotesque version of innocence. The darkened teeth disrupt the viewer's expectations of purity and charm, evoking a sense of the uncanny—Freud's concept of the familiar made strange.



Figure 1.0, *DEMON TEETH FULL*, 2024, Photograph

The juxtaposition of playful props with unsettling facial features challenges the viewer's perception of identity, authenticity, and the masks we wear to project ourselves to the world. The tiara, wand, and stuffed animal serve as physical masks, projecting an idealized version of innocence and nostalgia. Yet, the unsettling expression and dissonant elements reveal the

fragility and performativity of this facade. This visual dissonance mirrors the tension between how individuals present themselves outwardly and the concealed truths of their inner worlds.

The composition evokes a sense of unease that forces the viewer to confront the contradictions of self-presentation. The stark lighting and deliberate placement of the framed artwork in the background reinforce the interplay of narrative and identity, suggesting that even the settings in which we place ourselves contribute to the masks we wear. The skew of the framed artwork speaks to a devolution of the framework of identity and that something is off kilter. The performance of childlike innocence becomes both a critique of and a surrender to the expectations placed on individuals to conform to idealized versions of themselves. It raises questions about the psychological effects of these expectations: How do they distort self-perception? How do they fragment the self into the seen and the unseen, the projected and the concealed? This work visually embodies the tension between concealment and projection, amplifying the psychological effects of masking in both its physical and metaphorical forms.



Figure 2.0, *DEMON TEETH CLOSE*, 2024, Photograph

This photograph, *DEMON TEETH CLOSE* (Figure 2.0), confronts the viewer with an extreme close-up of a grotesque and distorted mouth, its sharp, animalistic teeth sharply contrasted with the pale, mask-like skin surrounding it. The visceral nature of the image elicits an instinctive reaction of fear and discomfort, aligning with Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny, where the familiar is rendered horrifying through subtle distortions. Here, the mouth—a symbol of communication and expression—is transformed into a site of menace, embodying the tension between concealment and projection.

The outward facade—white skin that could signify purity or blankness—is violently disrupted by the jagged, monstrous teeth within. The image suggests that beneath the constructed persona lies something raw, untamed, and perhaps repressed. This duality reflects the central theme of my thesis: the ways in which masks allow us to project curated versions of ourselves while hiding parts we fear to reveal. The grotesque teeth challenge traditional notions of beauty and perfection. This visual disruption emphasizes the gap between outward appearances and inner realities, drawing attention to the artificiality of modern self-presentation.

This image embraces discomfort as a means of exploring identity. The close-up framing isolates the subject, stripping away context and forcing the viewer to confront the transformation of a human feature into something alien. In this context, the photograph becomes a meditation on the psychological impact of masking and identity manipulation. It evokes questions about the cost of maintaining a persona: What parts of ourselves do we hide, and what monstrous truths emerge when the mask slips? The rawness of the teeth suggests a primal authenticity that contradicts the cultivated blankness of the skin. *DEMON TEETH CLOSE* (Figure 2.0) destabilizes the boundary between reality and artifice, revealing the fragility of identity in an age of relentless self-curation. It forces viewers to confront their own masks, asking them to grapple with the tension between the desire for authenticity and the pressures of societal expectations.

In this way, the photograph serves as both a mirror and a mask, reflecting the fragmented nature of contemporary identity.



Left- Figure 3.0, *TRANSFERENCE ONE*, 2025, Alcohol transfer on fabric
Right- Figure 4.0, *TRANSFERENCE TWO*, 2025, Alcohol transfer on fabric

What happens when your own face becomes unrecognizable? When the self you've curated, performed, and projected begins to dissolve- smudged, distorted, slipping beyond your control? *TRANSFERENCE ONE* (Figure 3.0) and *TRANSFERENCE TWO* (Figure 4.0) are me and not me at the same time. This artwork originates from images in my modeling portfolio—photographs once meant to capture a polished, idealized version of myself. Through manipulation, distortion, and degradation, I disrupt the curated identity that was imposed upon me. What remains is a fractured imprint, a ghost of the persona I once performed. They are masks, echos, and whispers of a version of myself that exist somewhere between presence and disappearance.

TRANSFERENCE ONE (Figure 3.0) and *TRANSFERENCE TWO* (Figure 4.0) reveal and erase my identity at once, a fragmented self caught in the tension between who I am and how I am seen. The ghostly impression of my face communicates a loss of clarity and control, mirroring how identity is mediated and fragmented through perception. The Impermanence and mutability of the self is reflected in the unstable quality of the transferred images. Once pristine, the now eroded and disfigured visages of myself mirror identity and its everlasting fluctuation. The warping and misalignment of facial features challenges the viewer's ability to "read" the subject as a coherent individual, reinforcing the facade as a corruptible, failing construct.



Figure 5.0, *BUTTER CHURN*, 2024, Photograph

This photograph, *BUTTERCHURN* (Figure 5.0), depicts an ornate mask that delicately covers a human face, shimmering with intricate embellishments and glittering details. The mask's beauty is juxtaposed with the exposed human tongue, adding a layer of humanity and intimacy to an otherwise impersonal facade. This interplay between the concealed and the revealed speaks directly to Carl Jung's concept of the persona, which he described as the version of ourselves we project outward—an interface between our inner selves and the expectations of the external world. The mask, with its carefully crafted surface, functions as a literal representation of the persona. Its design exudes refinement and elegance, suggesting an idealized projection of identity. However, the slight protrusion of the tongue disrupts this polished facade. This intrusion of something raw and unfiltered beneath the mask hints at the tensions between the cultivated facade and the messy, authentic truths that lie beneath.

From a Freudian perspective, the image brushes against the uncanny—the mask's ornate artificiality, paired with the exposed lips, creates a dissonance that feels both alluring and unsettling. The mask depersonalizes the subject, transforming them into a crafted object of intrigue, while the lips ground the viewer in their humanity.

Historically, masks have been used in rituals and performances to both obscure and transform identity. Here, the photograph contextualizes this tradition within contemporary concerns about self-presentation. The glittering mask mirrors the idealized personas often cultivated on social media, where filters and editing tools allow individuals to project curated versions of themselves. Yet, the visible lips remind us of the imperfect, human realities that these facades often seek to obscure. The partial concealment of the face invites viewers to question what lies beyond the mask: What does the subject wish to hide? What parts of themselves are too vulnerable or imperfect to be revealed?



Figure 6.0, *DAVID*, 2024, Photograph

This photograph, *DAVID* (Figure 6.0), presents a figure standing barefoot in a wooded landscape, draped in soft pastel fabric and wearing a mask resembling the classical bust of a bearded man. The figure's attire, mask, and placement by a birdbath suggest a surreal, dreamlike atmosphere that blends the human, the historical, and the artificial. The stark contrast between the constructed persona and the natural environment amplifies the tension between concealment and projection—central to Carl Jung's theory of the persona as a curated image we present to the world, distinct from our true inner self.

The classical mask evokes a sense of timelessness, conjuring images of Greek and Roman statues, figures that represent idealized human forms. However, its use here—worn by a contemporary figure in a mundane setting—creates a visual dissonance. The mask serves as a literal and metaphorical shield, obscuring the wearer's identity while projecting an air of authority, wisdom, or divinity associated with classical imagery. This duality aligns with Jung's idea that the persona allows individuals to navigate societal roles by adopting masks that conform to external expectations.

At the same time, the fragmented atmosphere speaks to Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny. The lifeless, frozen expression of the mask contrasts with the living body it conceals, unsettling the viewer and challenging assumptions about identity and humanity. The figure's stillness and the muted color palette further enhance the sense of unease, suggesting a liminal space where the boundaries between the natural, the artificial, and the human blur. The setting—a dense, shadowy forest—adds another layer to the narrative. Nature, often associated with authenticity and the unfiltered self, becomes a backdrop for the figure's constructed identity. The birdbath, a symbol of renewal or reflection, might imply a yearning for purity or transformation. Yet, the juxtaposition of this serene setting with the rigidity of the mask highlights the tension between the natural and the artificial, the inner self and the outward projection.

DAVID (Figure 6.0) amplifies the fragility of identity in an age of artifice. The mask's association with historical ideals contrasts sharply with the vulnerable, barefoot figure beneath

it, suggesting the dissonance many experience between societal expectations and their true selves. The figure, caught between the timeless and the contemporary, the natural and the artificial, serves as a poignant metaphor for the fragmented nature of identity in a world that demands both conformity and individuality.

BACKGROUND

Starting in the modeling industry at 16, I entered a world where my identity was never entirely my own. It was exhilarating and terrifying, a mix of glamour, smoke and mirrors. I became the canvas for someone else's vision, constantly shifting to meet the expectations of photographers, designers, and brands. My body, my face—they weren't entirely mine; they were tools for projection, crafted to tell stories that weren't my own. I learned quickly how to wear the mask, both literally and figuratively. Makeup became armor, and every pose was a performance. The industry taught me the art of concealing flaws and projecting perfection. But behind the facade, there was always a sense of disconnection—a gnawing tension between who I was and who I was expected to be.

Over the years, I became fluent in the language of masking. I could transform effortlessly, adopting whatever persona was required—a sultry femme fatale, an innocent ingénue, a blank slate of beauty. But the more I shifted, the more fragmented I felt. It was as though pieces of myself were scattered across every set, every runway, every lookbook. I began to wonder: What was left of me beneath all the layers? There were moments of profound discomfort—standing in front of the mirror, heavily made up, looking at someone who felt familiar but not quite real. It was uncanny, in the Freudian sense. The face staring back at me was mine, but it had been molded, manipulated, and perfected to the point of estrangement. I began to see how easily identity could be distorted, how the mask could slip and reveal something raw and unsettling beneath.

Leaving modeling recently has been like peeling off a second skin. It's liberating and terrifying in equal measure. I'm rediscovering the parts of myself that were hidden, obscured by

years of carefully curated personas. This journey has deeply influenced my thesis. The themes of concealment and projection aren't just theoretical—they're personal. My work is an attempt to reconcile those years of wearing masks, to explore what it means to navigate the world as both the masked and the unmasked self. In my photographs, I see echoes of my time in the industry. *DEMON TEETH FULL* (Figure 1.0) feels like a reflection of the duality I lived—the childlike dress and tiara juxtaposed with the grotesque teeth, a metaphor for the innocence I had to project and the darker realities underneath. *BUTTER CHURN* (Figure 5.0) feels like a love letter to the masks I wore—beautiful, intricate, and glittering—but also a reminder of the humanity that always peeked through.

This work is influenced by the work of artists like Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Francesca Woodman, whose unsettling imagery delves into themes of identity and isolation. I aim to evoke a similar sense of discomfort in my audience. Meatyard's use of masks in his photography to disrupt the conventional portrait aligns with my interest in the ways masks distort self-perception. Woodman's exploration of the fragmented self, particularly through her often blurred and ambiguous depictions of the human body, echoes the psychological fragmentation I seek to capture in my work.

CONCLUSION

This project isn't just about masks in a conceptual sense; it's about the masks I've worn, the identities I've tried on, and the ways they've shaped me. It's about questioning what's real and what's constructed, what's hidden and what's revealed. And ultimately, it's about finding a way back to myself, and questioning what is at the center of self.

This project isn't just an exploration of masks as a concept— it's a reflection of the identities I've inhabited and the ways they have shaped me. It is an inquiry into what is hidden and what lingers beneath; an attempt to peel back layers of projection, performance, and perception to confront the ever-elusive question at what lies at the core of identity. The self is

not a fixed point but a shifting terrain. I have come to understand authenticity not as a static truth but as a liminal space—a threshold between what was and what is becoming. Liminality, derived from the Latin *limen* ('threshold'), describes a state of transition, a moment of suspension where identity is neither fully formed nor entirely undone. In anthropology, it marks the disorientation of a rite of passage, when one is no longer what they were but not yet what they will become. In digital culture, liminal spaces are depicted as eerie, in-between landscapes—empty, surreal, and undefined. Much like these spaces, the authentic self is something we pass through rather than arrive at, existing always in the tension of transformation. To be liminal is to exist in the in-between—between places, times, states, and ideas. It is a condition of transition, often evoking unease, even eeriness, as the familiar dissolves into the uncertain.

The authentic self, if such a thing exists, is perhaps the purest form of liminality. It cannot be fully grasped, only experienced in fleeting moments of transition. We are never static; we are always becoming. The trajectory of our lives shifts with each breath, each encounter, each seemingly small choice that alters everything. Within this perpetual state of change, we remain unknowable—even to ourselves. To claim absolute self-knowledge is to confine oneself to an illusion, to construct a fixed identity that negates the fluidity of being. We are echoes of our own making, shaped by forces both internal and external, caught in the reverberation of who we were, who we are, and who we might yet become.

We are forevermore walking the tightrope between what no longer is and what has yet to be, whether or not we acknowledge the inevitability of transition. Within this constant flux, the authentic self is not a fixed essence but a dynamic, fluid space—an existence suspended between past, present, and possibility. This challenges the notion of authenticity as a singular truth, suggesting instead that it resides not in a definitive state of being, but in the act of becoming. The self is continuously rewritten, shaped by experience, introspection, and external influence. It is neither a relic of the past nor a projection of the future but an ongoing, unfiltered

emergence. It is this liminality that allows us to hold contradictions within ourselves—to exist between concealment and revelation, individuality and conformity, stability and change. This psychological tension is not a flaw but an intrinsic aspect of human identity, revealing that authenticity is not an endpoint, but a process of perpetual transformation.

The liminal nature of the authentic self liberates us from a fixed narrative, granting the freedom to shape how the world perceives us—to craft and recraft the mask we present. Here, experimentation and transformation are not mere possibilities but inevitabilities. To exist is to dwell in the space between No Longer and Not Yet. In this framework, authenticity is neither about returning to some essential self nor striving toward a final form, but about inhabiting the in-between. It is an embrace of uncertainty, an engagement with ambiguity, a willingness to exist in oscillation. Even if the truth of the self is transient, it is no less real. Even if the mask shifts, it does not negate its momentary sincerity. Identity will always be suspended—waiting for the other shoe to drop, or searching for the shoe in the first place. The self is continuously questioned, shaped by both external distortion and internal conflict. The so-called ‘authentic’ hovers at the intersection of performance and perception, a flickering presence caught between what is expected and what is felt.

The authentic self is not a fixed state but a threshold—a space of initiation where one confronts fears, desires, and potential. It is within this tension that transformation takes root. Authenticity is not a destination but a process, an ongoing negotiation with the unknown. To be authentic is not to arrive, but to move forward—to stand at the edge of becoming and step willingly into the space between.