

A BROKEN PALACE

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ABSTRACT

Promising a life of luxury, the fashion influencer lures victims into her palace. Glamorous and shiny, it grasps onlookers in all their insecurities and questions about identity – their place in the world. The palace is the American Dream promised through countless ads and marketing campaigns. The palace is a hyper-capitalist world that takes labor from the underprivileged and the naive. Yet, the palace is broken, weak and only able to persist through the attention viewers provide and the self-esteem it consumes. This thesis is part of an MFA research-creation project that examines the impact of influencer culture on a larger scale, critiquing its impact on fashion cycles and the rise of overconsumption. Asking the big question: what role do social media influencers play in fashion and consumer culture? Examined through understanding social identity and consumer habits, the role of a fashion influencer becomes predominantly clear. Through phenomenology and grounded theory methodology, the fragile nature of the palace is unveiled.

A Broken Palace, exhibited at OCAD University's Ignite Gallery, presents a series of six large oil paintings installed within a collection of objects, antiques, and detritus that allude to ruins of old wealth. The older antiques convey the contrast between that old luxury and the contemporary idea of wealth in a hyper-capitalist world. The paintings combine eighteenth-century Rococo paintings by mainly women artists of a soon-to-be-deposed aristocracy with the images of online personalities in the social media landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

The Building Blocks

Building a palace, brick by brick, I wanted to be the princess I grew up playing with. My favorite books growing up had been *A Little Princess* and *Heidi*. The life portrayed in these stories was one of struggle and of richness- one that promised a material luxury and the other that spoke of an escape from the highly populated capitalistic city. I grew up spending a lot of time buried in books, creating an escape.

I remember reading *A Little Princess* written by Francis Hodgson Burnett as a preteen, and *Heidi* written by Johanna Spyri when I was a mere age of 10. The ideologies enforced in these books have allowed me to evaluate and reevaluate the world around me constantly. As I grew older, while the classical stories written by these authors remained the same, it was my view of the world that had continued to be shaped by external factors. The life of a younger socialist in the making was filled with the same ideologies and concepts that I am opposed to today.

The glorification of the American dream sold through Barbie dolls and princess movies creates an idea of a life that is seamless in the manner it unfolds. While my role models growing up had been nonfiction- with maturity came a different set of ideals that shaped my adolescence and teenage years. As a natural progression, these ideals transformed the moment I entered high school and social media platforms like Instagram and Pinterest gained popularity. Upon downloading these apps, I was immediately faced with a massive array of early influencers. While there's a fair critique to be said of both the old and new, the content at an early age was more authentic in the manner it was filmed and portrayed. While editing software existed, they were seldom used.

I will admit before I begin discussing things further that seeing the rise of influencers online affected my self-image and impacted my body image growing up. Like an ad on a billboard, these content creators had the tendency to spark insecurities. By showcasing a mountain of wealth, or material possessions, an average teenager was made to feel as though they were never enough.

Seeing a group of individuals online showcasing a lifestyle to be yearned for – a faraway dream. In order to keep up with the trends, I began taking inspiration from the early content creators and began a habit of shopping consistently, and so the recovering shopaholic was created.

Glitz and Glimmer (or lack thereof)

My own personal contribution to the hyper consumer-capitalist lifestyle that I had become accustomed to appeared when I started a painting that focused on the climate crisis. Without even knowing, I had fallen deep into the very trap I had begun researching. This is when my curiosity about the fashion industry grew, I was concerned about the dark side and the effects of what my material desires could be encouraging. As I dug deeper into this research, I learnt the importance of marketing and advertising in the fashion industry and the overall emphasis in terms of monetization of weaknesses linked to human nature. The hard truth is that insecurities are artificially generated by specialists and experts in order to sell products, exploiting human desires. In addition, I learnt about the cycle of fast fashion – how clothes are made, exported and then discarded. This opened my eyes to a whole new world of systematic issues underlying beneath the glitz and glamour that is associated with fashion and couture. The colonial history linked to the production of fast fashion, and capitalism among others began to surface to the

forefront of larger systemic injustices that play a role.

At this point, haul culture and influencer culture had become prominent parts of the digital world. Online persona has changed how individuals are seen beyond the screen. It was very noticeable that the identity portrayed online, and reality showcased vastly distinct personas. While life looked perfect online, the struggles and the mundane-ness of the everyday stayed hidden. The perfect moments found their way onto the never-ending feed and profiles. Luxury items were worn, travels and trips – the highlight reel became a reality online. Before I continue any further, I think it's crucial that I introduce the questions my research is based on:

What role do fashion influencers play in fashion and consumer culture?

What are the benefits and downsides of their activities?

How can artists address the cultural prominence of fashion influencers?

With the mundaneness of life suddenly being presented online as a perfect reality, a sense of FOMO (fear of missing out) can be and is often created within those struggling to liberate themselves from the harsh truths of their existence. However, western culture is highly driven by trend cycles – as is human nature – and so, many individuals look to items promoted online or that are trendy to 'fit in' or 'follow the crowd'. Consequently, viral marketing has become a norm and a source of motivation for brands and content creators alike.

When items are shown on their feed, often by a popular figure, viewers feel the urge to purchase said item. This means that if a public figure is popular enough to create a massive impact, the product is often sold out in days. This product is later marketed and reviewed by more creators as a viral product- creating a massive influx to an already growing consumer

market. The repercussions of this in the real world are immense as it allows space for hyper consumption to occur and creates havoc in stores associated with these viral products.

Modern Mystique

Clothing and fashion hold a complex history in the modern world. While clothing was originally created as a form of functionality in its early days, it has become a status symbol and something to accumulate to showcase wealth and luxury. Earlier forms of clothing were designed to cater to regional weather conditions, considering culture and traditions as well as some sort of class symbols. Only the truly wealthy, the bourgeoisie, and nobility were privileged enough to house multiple outfits and accessories in their wardrobes. While the peasants and lower classes often wore secondhand clothes, and only had a few items to their name. This widely contrasts with the lifestyle that exists today.

In contrast to the lifestyle actively pursued today, the idea of only the bourgeoisie and wealthy having many items to their names has been lost. In a world governed by a capitalist system, low-cost labor and poor material quality have normalized mass production- deeming this the age of fast fashion (Brooks, Preface). This has allowed the average citizen the freedom to explore styles and brands at a fraction of what it would cost. On the contrary, the upper class in the contemporary world prides itself on building wardrobes of massive dimensions, hoarding impressive proportions of clothing and accessories- ones that would make a Tudor royalty envious.

This is all due to the political shift brought on by colonialism, capitalism and industrialization that has altered the political and economic geography of the world. While clothing in the past was designed and handmade locally at a certain point in history, with the

advancement of society, these jobs and skills began to be outsourced to the eastern world - namely China, Bangladesh and India. In fact, textile factories played a role in the construction of the industrial revolution and in turn the progression of capitalism (Brooks, 7)

While there are many pitfalls and benefits to this new lifestyle that we've curated in this era, two that I'd like to highlight are hyper-consumption, and self-esteem issues that are linked to and fueled by the image created by public figures. In a largely superficial and materialistic world, appearances and social performances tend to take the stage to create a platform for the most influential of figures. While this may seem a cynical approach, being a part of the digital age has degraded society from one that honors academia, knowledge and critical thinking to one that dilutes worldly truths to gaining capital through any means necessary.

It is said that humans wear masks until they feel safe enough to take them off, revealing their true persona and identity. This mask also holds an individual's true intentions. "The expressiveness of individuals conveys one of two things: the expression he gives and the expression that he gives off." (Erving, 2). Erving explains that while giving an expression involves verbal symbols and substitute for these symbols that others know to attach to this- the traditional form of communication. The expression given off implies actions being taken by the individual, an action being performed beyond the traditional form of information that was given. This can further be elaborated further by understanding that while it is a traditional form of communication, the other is an action performed that can be re/reread by the spectator. While social performances and appearances are complex and require an immense understanding of social psychology, the masks that hold an individual's true intentions remain.

Titles hold importance in this 'topsy turvy world' (Zizek, 1). Holding a title is significant and shows the level of power an individual has. Like a rank, a title distinguishes the wealthy and

those in poverty, in power and ownership of a property or idea that sets the titled individual apart from an average citizen. While historically the idea of power was only given to those who had earned the right to be addressed as such. However, this has changed to allowing most individuals to be endorsed by the public as a celebrity, influencer or public figure. At this point, there are also self-proclaimed influential figures, often hidden in the public eye yet drastically important in their own vision -often with grandiose views of themselves.

THEORY

Time in the Salon

Fashion is one of the world's largest industrial sectors (Brooks, preface) From waking up excited to pick out an outfit, to accessorizing, and then styling one's hair, the early hours of your morning are transformed into an event. Feeling the fabrics, creating a color palette and creating a theme is an act of poetry that helps transform one's mood of a mundane morning. However, while an average individual only has a small wardrobe compared to the wealthy today, the amount of clothing owned is still a far greater amount than any other upper-class individual before our time. Yet, a common phrase that still lingers today is I have nothing to wear. This phrase can be rephrased to I have too much to wear and still nothing changes.

With the advancement in technology, the idea of presenting the self has altered and shifted quite dramatically. The idea of self-portraying in the real world in comparison to the image projected online usually portrays two vastly different sets of individuals. This is a new phenomenon in the contemporary world that allows an individual to play with the concept of identity and social identity in the sphere of digital media. Social theory and social identity theory define the self as being able to instinctively take itself as an object and can categorize or classify

itself in relation to other social categories. (Stets and Burke, 224) This concept is referred to as self-categorization or identification. The self is often morphed and created through the categorization of a role in which one can play a part through the expectations and purposes associated with that role (Stets and Burke, 225). The idea of self and identity are very complex in the grand scheme of the social sphere. “The identity machine comprises a contingent convergence of processes, structure, discourses and rationalities. It is inevitably diverse, fragmentary, and internally contradictory; both its architecture and its utterances are always in flux” (Leve, 518). With a self, an identity being in flux and responding to the changes around it—political, social and environmental, the idea of self-perception is warped. A never-ending change in the personality comes with a lost sense of worth, one that holds weight in external validation and a strong social identity.

In the current time period, when social groups and external influences saturate the social realm, finding and creating the self becomes a challenging task. The idea of authenticity becomes a grey area as the lines of reality become blurred. This is when one must ask, what is authenticity? And how can that be created and carried into other areas of one's life without sacrificing the being that already exists? Optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer 1991, as cited in Smaldino, 2019) suggests that individuals adapt and change their self-concept to balance the need to blend in and find uniqueness within a larger social system. (Smaldino, 452).

However, the current reality demands a social identity that extends to the digital world. Trends and niche subcultures become the center of an individual's existence and persona online. While the individual may garner completely different characteristics in the corporeal world, the digital world allows freedom to create a new persona and identity. In an age of influencers, (Duffy, 1) new identities can be created based on the specific niche catered to the character

designed for that specific page. Often, these niches cater to gender normative ideas that cater to the stereotypical and traditional roles, presented in a new cultural context (Bishop 2017, as cited in Duffy 2019) A recent example of this phenomena is Nara Pellman, also known as Nara Smith. Aside from being a model, and mother of two children, Nara recently gained spotlight as an online personality or influencer. She rose to fame as her recipes published online rose to fame and the hashtag #tradwife gained popularity due to her predominantly traditional way of life. The internet aesthetic associated with her – #tradwife promotes gender roles linked to the 1950's (Dickson, 2024). This is an example of the “labor of devotion” provided by women in the online world (Campbell 2011, as cited in Duffy 2019).



Figure 1. Nara Smith, online personality and traditional wife

An individual, however, can be a member of several social categories over the course of their lifetime (Stets, Burke, 225). In a complex society, the social identity is heterogenous and multidimensional, and is used as a compass to find other communities that cater to a world open to more experiences (Smaldino, 457). It is the very self-concept and role identity in a group identity that allows create space for “facilitate assortment for successful coordination” (Smaldino, 461). ““We” - that which people everywhere in the world instinctively think of as “our-selves”- are merely the composite products of an increasing flow of physical and mental sensations and events” (Leve, 515). It is the very intrapersonal notion of the human persona that allows the individual to pervade multiple group identities through the personal identity (Stets and Burke, 229).

Fashion influencers are one of the many large social groups in the digital world. Social media influencers can be defined as individuals with a significantly large following, a distinct online presence and relationships with large, commercialized companies (Duffy, 1). With the enforcement of massive corporations, the individual becomes more credible in the eyes of the consumer. Through paid influencer marketing, usually in the form of sponsorship, pre-roll advertising or testimonial messaging, the individual can gain credibility from the brands and earn the trust of their massive audience (Sudha and Sheena, 16). Direct marketing is ineffective today and so with branded content strategy, influencers play a role in promoting a product through their channels (Sudha and Sheena, 17).

With social media playing a massive role in the contemporary world, being influenced by reality online seems effortless to grasp. Aesthetics and subcultures play a tremendous role in allowing the individual to create a space that caters to the demographic only interested in that specific way of life. Some of the main aesthetics floating around the digital media space are

academia, cottage core, VSCO girl, that girl, clean girl, mob wife among many others. The rise of aesthetics forces the individual to change their lifestyle and alter their persona to one that fits their chosen aesthetic. “This act of self-defining seems to be the major task of modern aesthetic” (Scruton 2024 as cited in Shansphere 2022) However when self-defining boils down to choosing a particular aesthetic to tie oneself to, not providing space for exploration and self-expression, the idea of the self is lost amidst the chaos of finding the one aesthetic for that current trend cycle.

One example of this phenomena is the recent rise of the mob wife aesthetic as opposed to the that girl and clean girl aesthetics that were trending last year. This is followed by the rebranding of the individual- or the rebranding of the persona portrayed online. These subcultures, or lifestyle changes behave as forms of escapism (Selous “What's up with our obsession with "aesthetics"?). The picture-perfect persona created by influencers and stars online is one that an average person would try to mimic, without the knowledge of the imperfections and many takes that were taken behind the scenes. McLuhan states “this visual – and character of commercially sponsored glamour is perhaps what gives it a narcissistic quality” (McLuhan 25). Being completely obsessed with visual characteristics and physical appearance leaves one feeling self-conscious to the world around it, hypersensitive to the discourse surrounding the idea of an ideal beauty: “And the smartly turned-out girl walks and behaves like a being who sees herself as a slick object rather than is aware of herself as a person.” (McLuhan, 25)

When a naive, young person is exposed to content that looks picture perfect, they try to shape themselves to look like their role model. In an alternate world, when technology was sparse or non-existent, children and young adults looked up to celebrities and academics as role models. Being mostly positive influences, little to no exposure was given that would create

confusion or the constructing of a messy personality. In a world as uncertain as ours, with a declining quality of life where many people are burned out, struggling to make ends meet and fatigued (Perna Penny for your thoughts: Why quality thinking is declining worldwide), many are forced to confront their immediate challenges and are stuck in practical/survival thinking (Perna Penny for your thoughts), the youth of today lack the ability of critical thinking and often waver to the media they are exposed to online. The recent phenomenon that showcases this is the emergence of the ten-year-old Sephora kids and the loss of tweens. ““Sephora kids” refers to the children and tweens who shop at the beauty retailer, sometimes posting videos of their hauls and skin-care routines online, much like the influencers they may follow.” (Stechyson, CBC News). While not all children are exposed or given the permission to purchase items at stores directed towards an adult audience, this doesn't stop the few that are given the freedom and budget to purchase items at these stores that boast high prices for extravagant items:

There’s a proliferation of social media marketing aimed at young consumers. That includes witnessing a growing number of tweens, often “skinfluencers”, demonstrating how to use such products for their followers. This is happening at a time when tweens have been spending increased amounts of time on social media since being cooped up during the pandemic. (Taylor 'Sephora Kids')

A young mind is perceptive to the changing world around them and more likely to internalize the subtle (or not so subtle) messages they receive from an older audience on social media platforms. In a report published by Circana, a global analytics firm, sales revenue in the beauty market in Canada grew by 18 percent in the September of 2023, a dramatic rise from the previous year. (Chojnacki, Beauty industry sales). An identity is formed from internal views created from the self-categorization into a group (Stets, Burke, 226).

When individuals, adults and children alike find themselves participating in a community that perhaps enhances their lifestyle, they want to adopt ideologies and items associated with it. This plays along with the concept of the loss of subcultures, with the replacement of aesthetics. The ever-changing aesthetics in replacement of subcultures has increased the number of trends and micro trends that exist within the digital world, transforming the face of the fashion world.

Micro trends can be defined as trends that rise in popularity rapidly and fall just as quickly. While some may say that micro-trends last three to five months, the more accurate number would be three to five weeks (Suriarachchi, Micro-trends and overconsumption). With new trends on the rise every few weeks, some individuals find the need to alter their entire personality to cater to the aesthetic that is trending. This leaves the individual losing themselves in the trend cycle, unable to find not only their personal style but also the ability to think and develop a persona that best reflects them.

In addition to losing their ability to grasp a strong sense of self, the influence of online personalities is also associated with the manufactured aesthetics that cater to a certain lifestyle sold with that aesthetic. Although the lifestyle may be promoting healthier habits, what's sold instead are the material items potentially associated with that lifestyle. The subcultures become another form of consumer group in buying, using and commodifying items, like any other market niche (Edwards, 113). Edwards cites Polhemus's "supermarket of style", stating that fashion becomes something that is chosen, used and later discarded. (Edwards, 113) With the constantly changing aesthetics, the self-concept is lost with the constant branding and rebranding of the self. The authenticity that exists within the individual is lost when the perception of the self is viewed through a screen. In a study conducted regarding the role of social media in the development of young people's social identities (Wilska et al., 2023), a boy (aged 15) said stated about luxury

items: “so that the others would get a better picture of you, as a person, just because of your clothes” (Tomas, 15). What lies beneath the surface is lost in pleasing the eye, turned into a mere commodity of sort. The soul exists in a vacuum of lost identities that once were. When the entire persona is associated with the validation of external factors, the strong sense of self is lost amidst the confusion.

Fashion influencers and online personalities alike have the power and tendency to create strong parasocial relationships with their audience. This leads to many of their followers- consisting of some impressionable teenagers and young adults- to follow in their footsteps. Influencers become a source of inspiration for young minds, the clothes they adorn, make up looks they try and the mindset and lifestyle they live all become a source of aspiration: Items worn by fashion influencers sell out in days, if not seconds. With the advantage of social media, followers of these influencers can emulate trends they see on their favorite model, actress, artist, or social media personality in a matter of hours. (Suriarachchi, Micro-trends and overconsumption)

The digital realm acts as an extension of the runway. Social media platforms have become an extension of runway shows that allow ordinary people to get a sense of fame and spotlight through the validation of a double tap rather than an applause at the end of a runway show, creating a false sense of identity or fame that exists somewhat metaphysically.

While it is easy to get lost in the mess of life, and some difficulties as a result of being merely absent in your own existence, choices can be made to alter the direction of one’s life. The ‘topsy turvy’ situations thrown your way can become the bane of your existence or the reason you find yourself. Among many other things that social media is capable of, one of them is the confusion of the self, of the human mind. In a mind that is still developing, this can lead to an

identity crisis. As terrifying as it sounds, the experience may be a lot worse as you begin seeing yourself in the third person, travelling through the eyes of lost souls, desperate to grasp control of your own reality. Living vicariously through the lives of wealthy influencers, an average individual pursues the task of creating a similar lifestyle using the resources they have on hand.

As a young child, I had wanted to become like the individuals that had influenced my childhood and adolescence. Barbie being one of my early influences, I aimed to beautify my life the way she did, pushing an ideal of a woman who was ambition and beautiful. However, it wasn't until I hit my teenage years that I began to have doubts about my place in the world, I became conscious of my physical appearance. Concerns about gaining weight, dressing a certain way and fitting into a certain category began to surface. At this point, I had begun watching hauls and styling videos on YouTube and Instagram regularly. Early Youtubers like Bethany Mota and Meredith Foster had become a constant on my feed in my late teenage years. In addition, I was trying to fit into a mold created by my own eastern culture and eastern traditions. This later led to an identity crisis in my early twenties. I had lost a part of myself trying to fit into the many molds created for me. I had been pushed and pulled by my western upbringing and western influences in addition to fitting into the eastern mold expected of me. This identity crisis took place for a large part of my early twenties and only ended when I began to turn inwards to my deeper values and morals. Rather than trying to fit into all the roles predestined for me, I took my life into my own hands and instead began to niche down and focus on the western and eastern ideals that aligned more with the life I wanted to create for myself.

Being born in the west while having an eastern identity left me confused of my place in the world. Constantly being shown a western ideal of a person had me questioning my position. Was there a mold I had to fit into? Was I more eastern or western? Can I carve a category of my

own that translates my two identities?

Spilled Tea

The extravagant lifestyle sought by the wealthy and aspiring fashionistas of today is inspired by the court life of King Louis XIV of France who was known as the consumer king (Kawamura, 90). Kristen Lee states that “while fashion has been used for centuries to display markers of identity or ideology, it became a particularly powerful form of identification during years surrounding the French Revolution” (Lee, 1). The modern-day model of consumption originates from the lifestyle of the French aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeoisie who, rather than using wealth to flaunt often used this advantage as political power. The ruling class defined what would be in-style and were the tastemakers of the time.

Fashion influencers and fashion bloggers are a modern phenomenon born out of entrepreneurial ambitions of (mostly) women in a male-dominated society. Entrepreneurialism has become an ideal career path for those venturing towards a creative path or in digital media. This in turn encourages those who aspire towards being an online personality to begin practices regarding self-branding. Aspiring influencers and online personalities invest time, energy and capital to create the life they imagine towards a ‘venture labor’ (Hund, 2). While not taken as a serious career path in its early days, the title of a fashion influencer or fashion blogger has increasingly gained respect from one pursued by hobbyists to one that required entrepreneurial skills with business plans and revenue streams (Hund, 2).

Like many other creative ventures that are seen as simply hobbies due to the lack of formality or strict structures linked to them, fashion influencing had humble beginnings before rising to the prominence of being considered a solid career path. Unlike companies and

enterprises that base their branding on company values, the fashion influencer is tasked with centering her entire existence around her work. An article featured in WIRED (UK) regarding fashion blogger states: “Rarely are fashion bloggers just hobbyists these days—increasingly they are entrepreneurs with business plans and revenue” (Epstein, 2015, italics added, as cited in Duffy and Hund 2015).

This individual is tasked with finding a niche- one that sets her apart from the other fashion influencers and bloggers and makes her unique and special. Joanne Entwistle states that Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984,1994 as cited in Entwistle 3) argues that the “battle for distinction is a battle for power – economic, social and symbolic – since to acquire distinction potentially raises one’s stakes” (Entwistle, 3) While this may seem simple in hindsight, it requires the individuals to rely upon emotional labor in order to portray the glamorous life portrayed online: “Managing the self in conditions of radical uncertainty” (p. 249, italics original). This technologically mediated worker must constantly perform the labor of the self as her “entire existence is built around work” (Gill, 2010, as cited in Duffy and Hund 2015).

As opposed to traditional forms of labor, the self-governance associated with this work shifts the burden of management onto the individual, creating discussion of commercialism into all areas of the individual's life (Duffy and Hund, 3) This is the emotional labor often linked to underpaid and undervalued work linked to women’s work (Duffy and Hund, 3). Although women tied to fashion influencing and fashion blogging hold the power to generate capital from production and driving their audience to consumption, this often goes unnoticed due to the unique nature of their work.

Racing to fulfill the American dream, women who aim to work towards being fashion influencers are tied to the superwoman ideal (Devos, 173). The superwoman ideal was born of

the American dream that emphasizes the notion that anyone can attain success if they work hard enough (Devos, 175). Women able to make an income and career are able to live glamorous life, falling into the category of narrative fashion experts (Sudha and Sheena, 19). This level of influence means these online personalities can live a life of glamour, comparable to celebrities. “The word glamour is ubiquitous in the mass media, where it alludes to a potent combination of sex appeal, luxury, celebrity, and wealth.” (Steele, 38) The American ideal is focused on individualism, one that promotes a woman building a stable career before beginning to address other societal expectations. However, there are two variations of the superwoman ideal, one that focuses on personal development and the other that focuses on career growth (Devos, 175).

Steele states that historically, the idea of glamour was associated with the aristocracy. (Steele, 39) Working towards the superwoman ideal and creating a life of glamour, fashion bloggers and influencers have found their way into the new elite, a social status that allowed personalities to be photographed and talked about in the press (Steele, 39).

Although this is more predominant in the west, due to the fast-paced translation of social media culture, colonialism and capitalism, this ideology has also spread to the East due to the influences of colonialism and capitalism. Women across the globe cater to the ideology that fits the ideal of the superwoman in that region, although this doesn't exclude them from playing multiple roles. This means that in addition to harnessing the emotional labor tied to their work, women fashion influencers also have to 'have it all'. According to the principles of framing theory, influencers strategically combine visual and textual elements to fit into multiple roles (Devos, 173):

Well-known bloggers utilize a series of interrelated tropes—predestined passionate work, staging the glam life, and carefully curated social sharing— to depict an updated version of the post-feminist ideal of “having it all.” (Duffy and Hund, 2)

The influencer often finds their audience by authentically framing their online presence based on their cultural beliefs and values (Devos, 173). Certain aspects of their lifestyle are emphasized and framed into the niche they aim to portray online. This can be as niche as sustainable fashion to luxury and couture. Social performance theory suggests that individuals use their ongoing lifestyle as a tactic for social media recognition with some involvement on the collective impact of their actions (Lu, 3). Lifestyle movements such as those created and marketed by influencers expand into the larger culture, creating new cultural norms or normalizing aspects of their lifestyle to the larger public. Creative authorship is created wherein the self is curated and shown in a manner that showcases their textual and visual elements of their online identity (Hund, 4). While the primary focus of fashion and beauty influencers tends to be external beauty, there is often more nuance to this as most online personalities. As with many other roles related to women’s work, the idea of beauty and sexiness play a predominant role while focusing on appearance and non-appearance related work (Devos, 175).

Regardless of the content these online personalities create, the focus of the audience and media is their physical appearance, tied into the halo affect and the idea that beauty is good. “Fashion may have been capitalism's favorite child, but the commercialization of sex and the sexualization of consumer desire made women, as well as dresses, into commodities.” (Steele, 40). In addition to working with companies and brand deals, women become an object of

consumption. Capitalism begins to use the women's body to promote items. This may create self-esteem and body image issues in a young impressionable audience that aims to create a body similar to the ones seen online.

Although the figures of women may sometime be edited or exaggerated, these details can go unnoticed to an untrained eye: "Fashion and dress are the tools for this calculation, but various health projects, such as diet, fitness exercises and cosmetic surgery all contribute to the appearance of the body as well." (Entwistle, 2)

As Entwistle states, Foucault refers to this as technologies of the self, as we change ourselves to be a particular form of human being (Entwistle, 2). This phenomenon has led to more plastic surgeries, especially in privileged younger individuals that have the financial means to do so. Creating unrealistic expectations, though the use of filters and edited photographs, social media platforms present idealized versions of beauty that may not be attainable: "The transformation that occurs after facial or body surgery, even some injections, it's far longer than what you would see on an Instagram reel," said DeLuca-Pytell (Peterson, Navigating Social Media's influence).

The content on social media impacts the psychological state of a person. Never being satisfied in their own skin, always wanting more, always craving external validation and change. Many go through extreme alterations in order to create the ideal identity and persona they view online. Affecting their mental health and view of life, the effects can be permanent or life changing, creating subtle and subconscious waves of doubt throughout one's life.

More, More, More

Thousands of objects are poured into the enclave of luxury, thousands of goods and commodities made incarnate by industrialized means, by artisanal efforts, by labors of love. (Randolph, 17).

With a superficial connection, one that breeds a parasocial relationship, and often benefits one party more than the other, fashion influencers are public figures that are relatable to the average audience as opposed to the celebrities that take up most of the spotlight in the luxury fashion world. Playing a large role in the lives of many young adults, the aesthetics and lifestyles promoted come packaged with products and outfits that help to complete the look. Rather than the products being sold, a lifestyle is sold that encourages the audience to indulge in items to embody the influencer they admire. Often following the crowd, items are purchased that are trendy at the time. Trends are ever-changing and only linger for a short period before they end, leaving you longing for the next rush of dopamine. With the change of pace in the contemporary fashion cycle and the constant change in the trend cycle, the vulnerable and easily influenced audience make their way to the mall to fit into the mold artificially designed to keep them on the harness of the capitalistic machine:

The style-conscious or fashionable person is often seen in rather ambiguous terms – sometimes as admirable and worthy of emulation but at others regarded with suspicion, accused of narcissism, idleness or wastefulness. (Edwards, 104)

It is often women who are stereotyped for pursuing a life of extravagance, seeking ways to waste time and money for the sake of vanity – clothing and beauty. Due to the reigns of patriarchy, women have not had much power over anything else. Feeding off their insecurities, fast fashion brands and fashion influencers portray products as must-haves and trendy pieces to

create a sense of want in the individual to curate their social identity. Craving a want of all things luxurious and expensive, the consumer aims to curate a wardrobe that fits the aesthetic and lifestyle they hope to live. Purchasing items endorsed by fashion bloggers and online personalities allows them to trust not only the person marketing the product but also the quality of the item. “McCracken's (1989), through his study observed that a celebrity endorser is an individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement.” (Sudha and Sheena, 21)

However, this is a larger conversation centered around the excessive consumerism endorsed by these public figures. At the turn of the century, the industrial revolution brought with it possibilities of mass production which led to mass consumption:

During the nineteenth century there was a quantitative rise in material culture – the extension of the world of goods, of consumption, shopping and symbolic display – all of which offered new possibilities for individuals to recognize themselves as consumers "who have come to determine their own development in this world of goods" (Miller 1987) (Entwistle 4).

The nineteenth century brought with it industrial capitalism and urbanization. This means that many people moved from a rural to an urban place, taking away the separation between the intimate setting of a home and the larger society. This was a major shift as individuals were suddenly surrounded by unfamiliar and new faces, this led to fashion being and dress being a “technique of survival” (Wilson 2007 as cited in Entwistle 2015). The consumer revolution of this time created space for fashion to be democratized. This means that items were available to a larger audience regardless of class and region. Fashion, being the epitome of luxury at the time, became an accessibility to the larger public. With a wider range of choices available, the

consumers were more selective in their tastes and choices. New techniques were constantly being developed and new fashion was constantly being released to the wider public, and those with resources grasped new items upon their release. For the first time, due to mass production of items, it became undistinguishable to know new wealth from generational wealth (Kawamura, 92).

While the new era of fashion and fashion influencers rely heavily on digital marketing on social media to buy and sell items, the earlier days of consumer culture began when barter and trade were the only means of accumulating items. This later transitioned to markets being the prominent spot to secure goods. However, a major transition occurred in the nineteenth century as mass production became a norm. With the introduction of department stores, a place was created to purchase all the trendy items in one space, but also evoke feelings of material desires (Kawamura, 92). Playing a major role in the changing tastes and preferences of the larger public, the department store brought the material expression of the bourgeoisie to life. Rather than simply buying products, purchasing products became a method to extend ourselves, or as Cumming states, a purchase now makes “us” (Cummings, 131). Material goods were associated with cultural meaning. This caused a massive shift in the larger system; material items were framed in a manner to encourage a want rather than a need. This new change is reflected in the modern consumer culture focused on collecting material goods as a badge of honor, a display for public consumption (Kawamura, 94).

While fast fashion is already responsible for targeting the self-esteem of younger people, the targeted ads on social media have further accelerated this. With the excessive use of social media, fast fashion has become ultra-fast, with a new tier of micro trends being introduced. “These new shopping technologies, particularly potent in the era of digital networks, are looking

to extend our relationship with things outside of a physical and temporal grid, and into a limitless space characterized by indebtedness, loyalty and service” (Cummings, 137).

As opposed to trends that have been a tendency to repeat over the course of every 20 years, being inspired by the old and run for the course of a few months to a few years, the new concept of micro trends means that some items are deemed popular on an online space, often popularized by an influencer. “While shopping, customers are already well-versed in these stories; unlike the narratives of the museum, they and the systems of taxonomy and classification that support them, are inculcated from childhood onwards via the incessant white noise of broadcast media, images and information.” (Cummings, 139)

The item is often swept off the shelves instantly and is the talk for the next few weeks before it lands itself in the depths of one’s closet, aching to be worn and used again, though that is seldom the case. Fast fashion promotes a throwaway culture, contributing to emissions and pollution (Brooks, Preface). People in the West, in the global North have grown accustomed to the changing supply of clothing styles and accessibility to clothing. The fast faced cycle is known as fast fashion. “‘Fast fashion’ is a term coined by retailers to encapsulate how trends move rapidly from the catwalk to the store” (Brooks, 11). While celebrities and influencers often have access to items off the runway and luxury goods, fast fashion allows the average citizen to gain access to these items at a fraction of the price.

While the figure of influence may have accumulated a mountain of wealth through their effort of earning brand deals and endorsements as well as the overwhelming support of their followers, it is seldom that the lifestyle portrayed is humble and showcases their beginnings or appreciation for the people who helped them reach their peak. With the constant addition of UI/UX features added to social media platforms, a new feature allows for tagging and

sponsorships in images. This feature allows for transparency between the influencers and their audience. Sponsored posts are usually paid and monetized by the influencers while tagging is usually done to share favorite items and the stores where they were purchased for the curious minded individuals: “The practice of “tagging,” or linking to a branded product in one’s blog or Instagram feed, stands as public recognition of a commercial gift.” (Duffy and Hund, 6)

The digital media space is one that an individual may browse to find specific products and place and impulsively other objects of desire (Sudha and Sheena, 14). The impact and influence of fashion influencers creates a never-ending chase for the consumer as they try to embody the lifestyle of the big personalities online. Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is alive today as individuals try to copy those of a higher status they're competing with (Kawamura, 97). Conspicuous consumption can be defined as “people acquire goods to compete with others. Fashion and clothing are used as symbols of social positions and status. His theory explains the functions of fashion which are clearly different from the functions of clothing – modest and protection.” (Kawamura, 97) When followers purchase products from the links provided by influencers, be it affiliated links or a sponsored post on their social media platform, the influencer is paid by the company or the followers as they purchase the item. “Social influencers therefore have a great deal of influence on consumers purchasing decisions and can influence what becomes a trend and a “must have” fashion as consumers tend to copy their style and believe that they are the experts within the product category.” (Sudha and Sheena, 18) Regardless of the method, the influencer is rewarded with an extravagant amount of money as a form of influencer marketing.

In a hyper-capitalist society, heavily focused on the class system, the influencer works their way up to being upper-middle class and/or upper class. The underprivileged and wealthy create an often-unhealthy relationship of give and take. “For if he is rich, he needs their services; if he is poor, he needs their aid; and even a position in between does not enable him to do without them” (Rousseau, 66). The lower and upper classes live on a model of inequality, one class holds the upper hand and surpasses the amount of wealth and goods the lower classes would only dream of gaining. The capitalist system is based on benefitting the wealthy rather than creating a balance or an equality of wealth between all classes. This is physically seen in the luxury items and services owned and used by those in power. Alternatively, the lower classes, often naive to the system and tricks of the wealthy, donate and purchase to their own disadvantage.

Inspired by the closets and lifestyles of the ultra-elite, it is now possible to accumulate a massive wardrobe and indulge in a lifestyle far more luxurious than that of a royal in previous centuries. An image of wealth and status fed by the human need for constant attention and validation is born. Participating in and creating new trends for their followers creates a need for their loyal fanbase to later purchase as a low-cost option at fast fashion brands. Often, fashion influencers and online personalities alike are invited to fashion and couture shows that showcase items on extravagant runways, surrounded by celebrity personalities, this is a luxury not affordable to ordinary people and so they live vicariously through the lives of those they look up to.

Escaping through Time

Playing the role of cultural critics in the larger span of society, artists and makers hold the power to alter and change the cultural discourse in society. They're able to hold a mirror, showcasing weaknesses that exist within the larger system. While social media can bring out the illusory effect of the best in people, it is the artists and creatives that hold the power to uphold the realistic frame of the world. Through appropriation, pop art and readymade objects- postmodernist and contemporary culture are magnified in the eyes of the public. Postmodernist and contemporary culture have rebelled against traditional and conservative forms of being and continue to do so using a lens that challenges conventional ways.

Artists and creatives, through extensive research in the sciences and liberal arts, can encompass knowledge based on the overall state of the world. Knowledge gained by playing a role in politics and the social landscape allows them to view life from an outsider's perspective and that of an average individual in the larger social sphere. While artists in the past used painting to convey the often-extravagant lifestyle and reality of those they looked up to and those in power, and although that remains true today, post modernism brought with it a change in perspective where the power has the ability to shift from those in political and social power to those that are able to gain strength through numbers and inconsistencies that remain in the system.

By analyzing what is often overlooked by the upper-class, details or shifts in the middle and lower classes are felt and captured by the creatives who can camouflage in all caste and classes. Artists have always been able to capture the cultural shifts through their work. Through a thorough critique of the real conditions of the fashion industry, artists can track and keep an archive of the reality this glamorized industry promotes. In addition to seeing the results of the unfair practices, the artist can capture the unescapable reality faced by the working class. By

considering reality and creating a mirror for the rest of the world, the artist foreshadows and creates a narrative surrounding the struggles faced by the working and lower classes. By addressing and capturing the reality of the cultural provenance of fashion and fashion influencers, the artist is able to properly articulate and understand the dire change that needs to occur in order to spark a change in the well-being of those involved.

METHODOLOGY

Laying the bricks.

Being a project that revolves around the parameters of the digital world, my research began in its place of origin. Being an avid user of Tumblr, Pinterest, and Instagram, it was crucial to scour these sites and find fashion influencers and bloggers that would be relevant to the purpose of my research questions. While the comparison between these forms of social media is vast, the common thread between each is visual language. Each social media platform is home to millions of images that showcase a certain lifestyle to its users. The first step in understanding the role that fashion influences play in consumer culture was to direct my attention to figures that have played a role in influencing my lifestyle. Once I began creating a list of public figures that influenced my choices, the list grew longer and longer. This was later narrowed down to under ten people who showed up on my feed and ones I found myself interacting with more.

The original list was as follows:

Mina Le
Best Dressed (Ashley)
ZoeUnlimited
Hodan Yusuf
Maha Gondal (moxeb)
Liz Kapran (Lizzi.jpg)
Zahra Omarji
Lissy Roddy
Jihoon Kim (jihoon) Koe Yeet
Threads Obsessed Sarah Dunk
Danielle Spencer (daniellejuliesp)
Rebeca Oksana (rebecaoksana)
Anais Van Oekel (anais.closet)
Jenny Mustard
Anaa Saber

It is important to note that these are influencers that have played a role in shaping areas of my life, however, the list may vary for each individual based on their preferences and style.

While the common thread with each of these influencers is that they are women, women of color, and fashion influencers, they differ in the methods that they portray their love for fashion and their role in the fashion world. While some are new emerging fashion forces, others play a role in being endorsed by major fashion and couture brands- giving them a higher role up the metaphorical ladder. In addition, some play multiple roles as influencers – being YouTube content creators. Although a greater part of these figures endorses fast fashion and luxury goods, a small chunk of this group plays a somewhat positive role in the dark world of fashion. Despite the fact that secondhand clothing has connotations linked to the lower class, and vintage being

linked to the upper class, despite their similarities in provenance- a few of these influencers have an expertise in the art of thrifting and collecting secondhand goods. Beyond styling items not sold in big box stores and fast fashion brands, these figures teach their audience the importance of secondhand clothing and sustainable fashion, destigmatizing the notion of the lower class and the needy being the only individuals investing in secondhand items. Although the influencers that specialize in secondhand items and thrifting are middle to upper class, they play an essential role in encouraging a circular economy and slow fashion in a fast-paced world.

The next step was to narrow this massive list down to a few in order to create and curate a series of paintings that reflected the themes surrounding fashion, bourgeoisie and consumer culture. While all these influencers encompassed these qualities through their online presence, only a few have the luxury and the privilege to travel and capture moments and destinations truly associated with the bourgeoisie. This list was later narrowed down to: Zoe Unlimited, Lissy Roddy, Maha Gondal, Liz Kapran, Hodan Yousuf, and Mina Le. These individuals were chosen because they cater to different audiences but follow a similar method of presenting fashion and style on their platform. Rather than styling outfits that simply contain the attention factors, the outfits are also realistic and wearable for the average audience. Their styles are focused highly on self-expression and cater to their morals as individuals. While Hodan Yousuf and Maha Gondal create the basis of their brand on modesty, their interpretations of modesty are very different and that is reflected in their styles. While Hodan wears a hijab, Maha does not- regardless their outfits follow a similar method. On the other hand, Mina Le has a wardrobe that caters to a wide range of eras and subcategories. Her style is edgy, Avant Garde and fits her expressive, extroverted personality. She is also a commentary Youtuber, covering cultural theory and pop culture.

While scouring social media platforms played a key role in investigating the topic surrounding fashion influencers and consumer culture, it was complimented with online research on the phenomenon surrounding these public figures. Platforms like Google Scholar and Jstor were used to find articles and studies surrounding topics of consumer culture, critiques of fashion influencers, fashion, identity, and 18th century fashion. Traditional methods of research were also used in the process- books.

In addition to taking inspiration from digital platforms and online personalities, substantial information was also gathered from site visits to architecture sites and museums that mimic the original bourgeoisie's lifestyle – the outfits they wore, the houses they lived in, books read, the events they attended and other individuals they associated with. This led to a visit to the Samuel European Galleries located on the third floor of the Royal Ontario Museum. This allowed me to capture the essence of the space and setting associated with luxury and wealth in a European context. Furthermore, the ROM, the Campbell House Museum was another site visited to guide the notion of grandiose and wealth from the 19th century in the city.

Theoretical Influences

My theoretical influences come from a range of disciplines. My thinking has been informed in part by Marshall McLuhan, an influential media theorist who articulated how new forms of media and technology create an extension of our senses and nerves (McLuhan 151). Critiques on the inequalities in our modern society as discussed by Jean Jacques Rousseau have driven me to recognize the universal desire and human nature to gain not only political power but also the material possessions acquired (Rousseau 80-81). The division created through wealth and class analyzed by cultural theorist Jeanne Randolph has further compelled me to question our innate

desire to fulfill materialistic desires and the larger role of capitalism enveloped in material luxury (Randolph, 17). How much is too much? Is there ever enough luxury in our lifetime or does greed win the game of capitalism?

Artistic Influences

My artistic influences were inspired by a few voices that challenged the system, such as Richard Prince, a controversial appropriation artist and photographer responsible for his series of work show in 2015 consisting of screenshot photographs from Instagram. His use of screenshots and the social media landscape informed the early development of the paintings. The loosely placed brushstrokes with soft layers of colors in the paintings of Doran Langberg resemble unfinished works, where the background is visible. Featuring portraits and landscapes, Langberg's work informed the way and inspired the translucency of some areas to be visible. The feeling of nostalgia was inspired by the works of Luc Tuymman, whose works use a neutral palette with some soft shades of pastels. The haziness and loose, yet non-existent facial features in some works were brought to life using some techniques of Marlene Dumas. Her layering and mixing of colors give some agency to the paint and gave me the courage to let go of some control while painting the figures in the works.

OUTCOMES

Taking inspiration from salons of the eighteenth century, A Broken Palace brings back the life that existed prior to the industrial revolution and late-stage capitalism. The rebirth of a place that housed and welcomed intellectual thought and revolutionary ideas. Although this is a Western ideology, the East harbors similar methods of knowledge building through storytelling and oral communication.

In order to create and bring The Broken Palace to life, Instagram and Pinterest were the two main platforms used to conduct research and curate a series of works that illustrates the intersection of the contemporary and the 18th century. The paintings were created using inspiration from the images of fashion influencers available online and the works of eighteenth-century painters. In the research, common elements were analyzed that catered to a similar class and status in the larger context of society. One of the key elements present in eighteenth-century paintings and the images of influential figures today was the incorporation of old architectural elements, extravagant gardens and a curated life of luxury. A library of reference images was created that would later be used to create reference images of the paintings. The paintings combine elements of eighteenth-century work with the inclusion of some elements from the image posted on the profile of online personalities. The backgrounds of the paintings are taken from paintings created by mostly women painters of the eighteenth century, where the original subject of the painting has been removed and replaced with the individuals that define and redefine luxury today. A few artists referred to while creating reference pictures were Lady Hamilton by Elisabeth Vigee Le Brun, two paintings by Margurite Gerard as well as a Portrait de femme en buste tenant une corbeille de fleurs by Anna Vallayer-Coaster.

My paintings create a strong contrast between the aristocratic figures and lifestyle of the past and the wealthy figures that exist today. The figures depicted in the paintings are purposely

left empty and seem to blend in with the background. The identity of the individual, or in this case the influencer, is concealed to create anonymity. The anonymity of the figure emphasizes that in this era, anybody with access to social media can gain the stature associated with wealth and luxury as opposed to the past when this was only given to the royal and nobility that existed in that age. To create a further contrasting statement between the past and the present, images of influencers wearing contemporary or modern clothing were chosen. The paintings play on color and proportions in order to show the disembodied and distorted versions of identity that is created through the use of social media. This is done to emphasize the real issues surrounding body image and self-esteem discussed earlier.

In order to create a further emphasis on the imperfections that lie within social media and the decline of fame, the ruin associated with The Broken Palace, the works are intentionally left unfinished. The lifestyle portrayed on social media is defined by the image of perfection, however reality is incomplete, a constant work in progress and imperfect. Having perfectionist tendencies, leaving a painting unfinished was a personal struggle that I dealt with while creating. This is a struggle dealt with artists over the centuries, and one dealt with the greatest artists of our time, including Leonardo Da Vinci, Edgar Degas and Alice Neel. The act of leaving a painting unfinished is called non-finito (Mentley). While not all work that has been left unfinished over time was intended to, it has been brought on curiosity by art historians and the public alike.

As opposed to these artists who often abandoned their work due to external circumstances, sometimes as intense as war or death, I decided to leave my paintings looking unfinished in order to emphasize on the fading ideas of luxury associated with the past, with the background being simply color blocking on some paintings while the figure is filled in a bit

more. The figure carries more definition in order to show the new ideas surrounding luxury created by the emerging faces of luxury in this era.

However, this leads to larger questions such as when is the artwork really finished? Does it need to be finished to be complete and meaningful? (Ricci). Unfinished work holds power that pulls the viewer further in, revealing secrets behind the process work of the artist. The series of work created for The Broken Palace are at a massive scale, with loose brushwork, messy underpaintings and exaggerated colors. This is done intentionally to convey and foreshadow the completed work, finished in its unfinished state. The ruin that comes with social media culture and influence align with the idea of cancel culture, where the credibility of the individual is destroyed and tainted.

The idea of the unfinished piece is often tied to modern ways of creating, a sort of rebellion, however although unintentionally these dates to the early days of creation when death plagued a large part of the European continent leaving the works of the masters in the state of disarray. The intentional unfinishedness of a work allows us to contemplate “a human endeavor that, like any other undertaking, is subject to chance and determined by psychology or even fate.” (Reifert, MOMA). The unfinished work is unexpected and unresolved in a series of works that takes inspiration from a time period and figures that aim to create an image of perfection. The seven paintings replicate the massive size of painting created by the masters, ranging from thirty-six by forty-eight inches to forty-eight by sixty inches. The large sizes were chosen to intentionally create space and show the evolved nature of influential figures over time.

The paintings are not the only pieces created as part of this show. Around the gallery, hidden in plain sight are approximately ten paintings of UI/UX features, often seen on social media websites. This subtle symbolism of the digital age tied in with the unresolved works

creates a strong contrast between the larger paintings inspired by a time period when painting and styling were created intentionally, a slow life lived. However, the contrast and hidden features of UI/UX elements shows the extent of technological advancement of society, one that moves at a faster pace and values attention and validation extensively through the features created and provided on these social media platforms. The few features painted on these small pieces ranging from six by six to eight by eight are the heart, comment, share and save buttons. The smaller works are meant to add a playful element to the show, a treasure hunt of sorts. This is meant to convey some lightheartedness in a topic that is dark and portrays a very real image of society at large.

Time Travelling

In addition to paintings, the show houses antique items reminiscent of a time when digital media did not exist. Upon entering the gallery space, a yellow-gold birdcage sits in the entrance. This birdcage is empty. The dimly lit space houses the diptych on the left wall. The first work titled Valentino features a woman standing on a balcony of an older structure – perhaps a palace or an older form of architecture. This painting is 36 x 48 inches. Her face and hair are hazy and disappear into the clouds. Her face is turned away from the viewer and faces the landscape behind her. The next painting is titled Chanel, 36 x 48 inches. This painting features a figure standing in the center of the painting, wearing a blue outfit. The paint is applied thick and loosely. A few shades of blue are visible throughout the dress. She seems to be surrounded by shrubs and trees, but they are left unfinished. A few different shades of greens and yellows are visible, creating loose shapes of leaves, bushes and plants. A few clouds can be seen in the background. She seems to be standing on soil, but the surface is unfinished, with her shadow

being cast on some parts of the ground. Some sort of green landscape seems to be visible in the background, hazy. It disappears into the clouds.

The massive wall in the center houses three large works, all 48 x 48 inches. Placed a few inches apart, women are seen dressed in extravagant outfits, in seemingly remote locations. On the wall, across the wall with the smaller paintings, is a 48 x 60-inch work. On the small wall, facing away from the entrance sits another 48x 48 painting. Different from the rest, this is painted using pink and gold, with SURPLUS ENJOYMENT written on it. A painting is seen underneath but seems to be hidden with the oil paint. Objects reminiscent of the past are slightly hinted at and covered up by the intense shades of color and large strokes of spray paint. Also, in the center of the gallery, on a plinth and scattered across the floor, are old antique items. A tea set sits on a soft burgundy piece of organza. The teacups are positioned askew. A kettle is nowhere to be seen. The saucers sit with the teacups. A dried-up flower lays near the plinth, next to a broken white dish. An old wooden clock sits in a corner, frozen in time. The lights are dim, and only a few are turned on and unevenly distributed. In the hopelessness and ruin that lies within the paintings, the antique items lay on the floor. The floor is mostly, except for the few installations that lie on the right side of the gallery. Near the plinth sits a broken mirror, shattered at its core. Near the far corner of the gallery, an old clock sits surrounded by small ten small canvasses depicting buttons associated with social media platforms, surrounded by more pieces of shattered mirrors. A soft melodic, instrumental soundtrack plays in the background.

Beethoven and Bach are the soundtrack of this palace; however, some beeps and error-like sounds create a disruption – bringing the visitor back to the 21st century. Rather than romanticizing the 18th century, this exhibition is meant to show the contrast that has occurred due to the advancement and incorporation of technology in the 21st century- one that affects our

self- concept and change in consumerist values over time.

The visitors are invited to explore the ruins of a palace that once was. Similarly to the paintings, the audio plays with the sounds that depicted the past, classical music while the glitches caused by contemporary sounds (notifications, alarms, vibrations) and other sounds associated with modern technology bring light to where the individual spends a lot of their time in this attention economy. These aspects are all related to the painting in discussing evolving ideas of luxury and the contemporary factors that shape identity in this era.

The viewer is intended to walk around the exhibit and take elements from the installation as clues to the show's larger meaning. While the plinth in the center discusses ideas of luxury and wealth, the broken mirror shows the distorted identity of the individual. Following that, the installation in the corner featuring a clock and 10 mini paintings depicts the time that is lost in the digital realm, as we lose a sense of self and time in a virtual world. These clues depict the multiple elements incorporated into our contemporary lifestyle that shape our way of life and in turn the larger system that governs our way of being.



Figure 2. Show title on vinyl at gallery entrance.

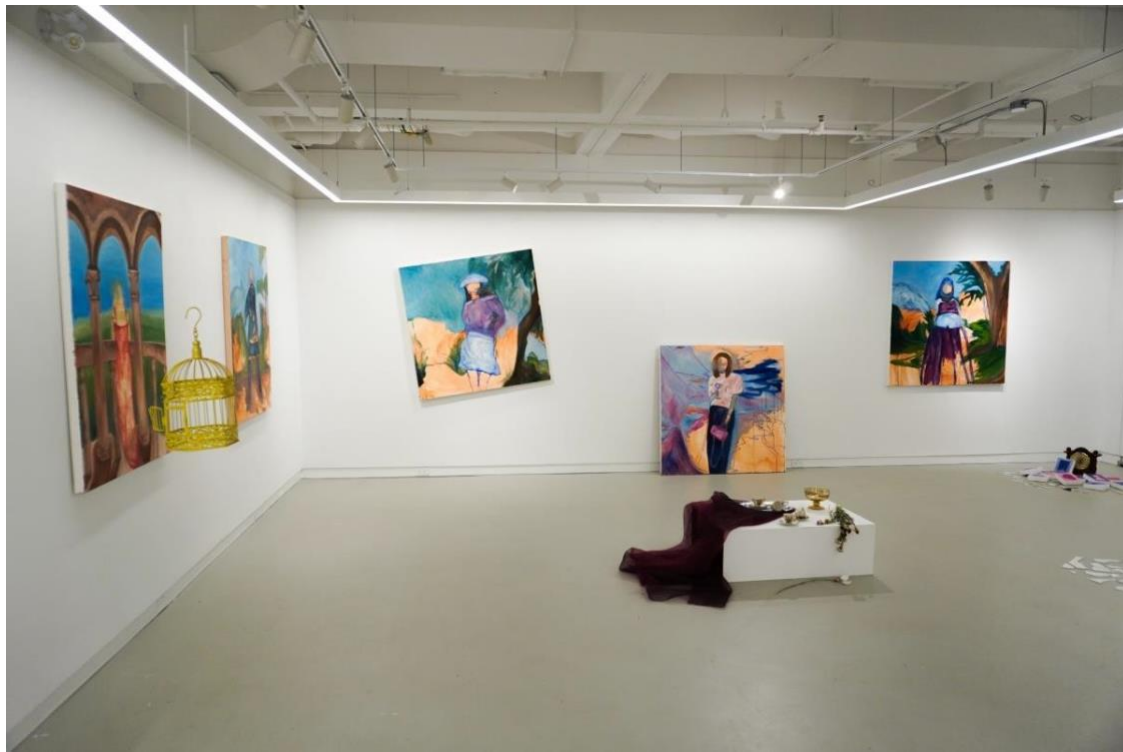


Figure 3. Front view of gallery space showing 5 pieces.



Figure 4. Rear view of gallery



Figure 5. Mid wall of gallery with installation and 3 paintings on wall.



Figure 6. Plinth placed in center with collected objects.



Figure 7. Installation with 10 mini paintings



Figure 8. Organza with tea set on plinth



Figure 9. Gallery view as seen through a yellow-gold cage.

CONCLUSION

A Broken Palace confronts the downsides of the digital age. It addresses the increased performativity and inauthenticity tied to social media and online personalities and the hyper-consumerist values linked to the excessive use of social media platforms. While encouraging entrepreneurship, it holds the value of a post-capitalist society. Being a massive force for the birth of micro trends and ultra-fast fashion, a throwaway culture is promoted. This leads to a negative impact on countries where the items are discarded, and the cycle continues in the global North. The youth of today continue to be impacted by the actions of an older generation, on their way to earning an income through their presence online. A Broken Palace blurs the figures of aristocrats and social media influencers by presenting their mutual ruin after the collapse of fame and wealth.

Through this project, I was able to let go. Coming from a background of perfectionism that has shaped how I view life and my world, this show displayed paintings in an installation that addressed the imperfections that exist within an individual molded by external sources. The paintings were an exercise in letting go as I had to hold back from finishing and just leave the color blocking. Breaking mirrors and letting the flowers wither with the show was an exercise in acceptance of ongoing change.

I came to understand the many layers that carve out an individual's personality, adding to my knowledge of the idea of the being and the ever-evolving concept of the self. Moving forward, I aim to have my work continue to challenge the ideas surrounding identity and be able to guide individuals struggling with their own identity. By exposing some of the external factors that stand in the way of self-realization, my work seeks to uncover a way through the chaos of consumerism, influencers and social media.

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