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For Art's Sake: An Exploration of the Persistence of Imposter Syndrome and Low
Self-Confidence in Creative Fields

by

Mckinsey Carroll

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Fine Arts

in

University Honors

and

Graphic Design

Thesis Adviser

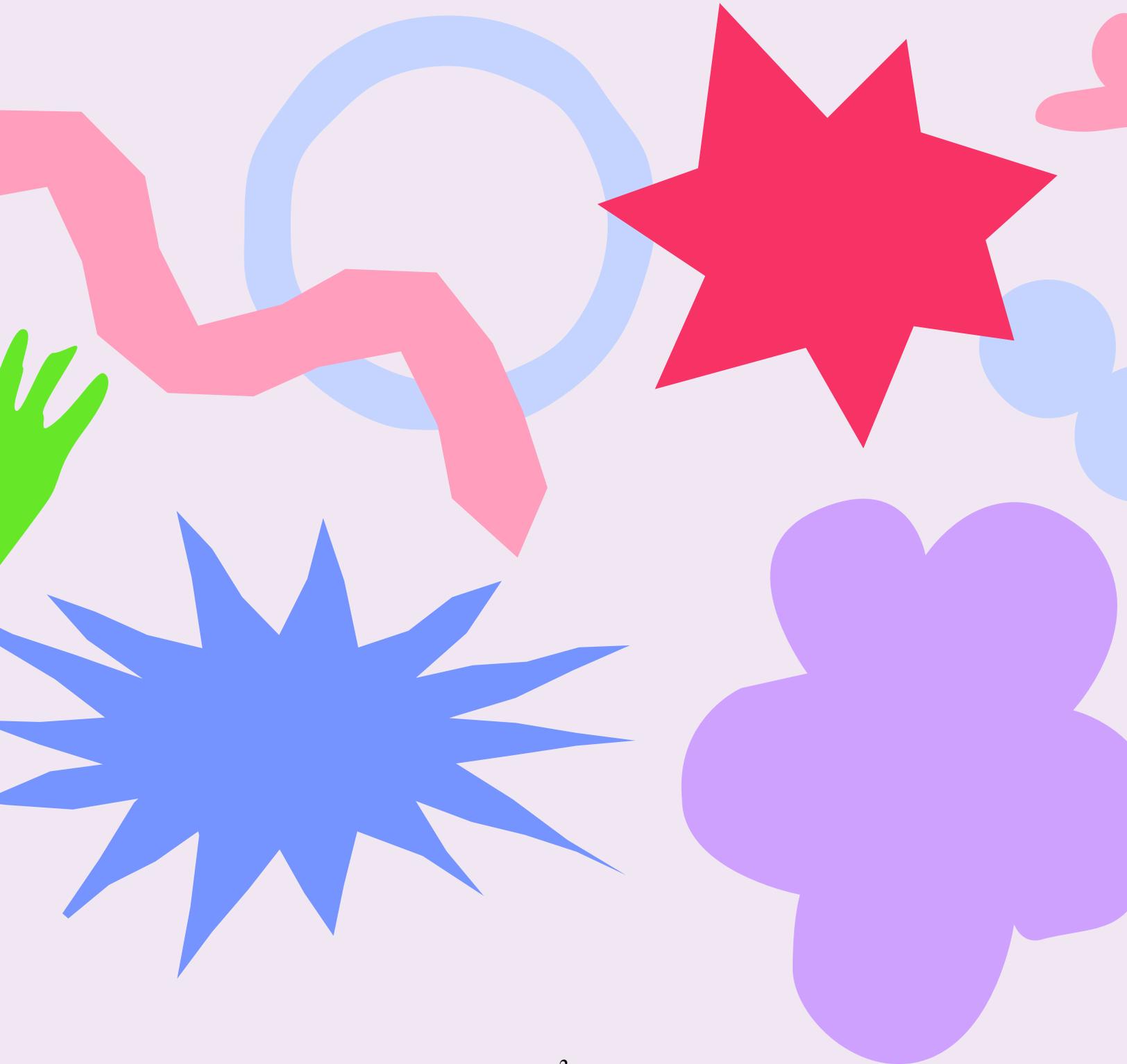
Meredith James

Portland State University

2022

FOR ART'S SAKE:

an Exploration and Reflection on the Persistence of Imposter Syndrome and Low-Self Confidence in Creatives



Overview

Inspired by personal experiences and those of my peers, this project discusses the prevalence of insecurity, imposter syndrome, and similar mental health struggles of those in a creative field. As the American Psychological Association explains, imposter syndrome is a form of intellectual self doubt. Those who experience it tend to be high-achievers: “Even if they experience outward signs of success — getting into a selective graduate program, say, or acing test after test — they have trouble believing that they’re worthy. Instead, they may chalk their success up to good luck” (Weir, 2013). Though imposter syndrome, or even just struggling to feel confident in one’s work, is not at all something that only exists in the world of art and design, I think people in these fields are uniquely affected in ways in which I will outline in the following pages.

Over the course of my academic career, in the in-between moments and casual conversations with my peers, I’ve seen just how many creative people can be bogged down by their own (internal or even sometimes external) self-deprecation. They think they’re not as good as everyone else, that they won’t be as successful, or that they’ve “faked” their way to where they are now. Some people have told me how they hate their work, how they’re so deeply unmotivated, and how they’re just not confident in themselves as artists or designers, and that they want to know they’re not alone in feeling this way. I also believe that self-confidence has been my personal biggest stumbling block in my academic and professional graphic design career. Through research, I have a foundation that has allowed me to create something that helps designers address the feelings of insecurity that inhibits our creativity, makes us competitive, and negatively impact our livelihood.

Research

There are a number of considerations that I’ve found in my research relevant to the experiences of graphic designers, and sometimes more specifically, graphic design students. General factors include graphic design’s existence at the intersection of creativity and capitalism and the rapid rate of change in regard to keeping up with technology and the internet. Also, as a design student, one main concern is the inevitable gap where one’s “taste” outpaces one’s skill. I’ll begin outlining my research by emphasizing the prevalence of these issues within creative spheres, and then continue through these other aforementioned main findings.

A. THE PREVALENCE OF THESE FEELINGS

To gain more insight on the prevalence of these issues in my community, I conducted an online survey in which I asked my artist and designer peers questions of their experiences with confidence and imposter syndrome in creative spaces. This primary research aimed to discover how other designers or design students feel about ideas of confidence and imposter syndrome, and if it’s something they struggle with. I wanted to discover what tools people wish were available to them, what their usual antidotes are for feeling this way, and to find out what aspects of graphic design as a field might foster an environment where people often feel they aren’t good enough or struggle with their mental health. The survey began with multiple choice questions, based on a 1-5 scale of severity. 80% of the responses reported struggling often (levels 4 and 5) with feeling confident in their art/design work. 80% also gave a response of 4 and 5 when asked if they experience imposter syndrome. Most respondents also reported their low confidence inhibiting their design work and mental health in some way. The rest of the questions were short answers where respondents gave their personal experiences

and antidotes to issues of self-confidence. When asked how low confidence or imposter syndrome inhibits their design work, one person said, “Not feeling confident in my work makes me feel embarrassed and ashamed to show anyone my art/designs. I feel my work is an extension of myself and when I don’t feel proud of my work, it takes a toll on my self esteem as an individual. If my work isn’t worthy=I’m not worthy.” Another respondent said, “It almost always holds me back in actually working on a project. I will procrastinate when I am afraid I’m going to fail and lose time I could have been breathing into a project.” Other responses included, “I never feel proud of my work and I see genuine compliments as lies.” “It makes me judge my work based on others and think I’m not good enough.” “When I feel low confidence while making work, it inhibits me by slowing the process, limiting my options, self sabotaging.” The survey supplements all of the anecdotal and conversational “research” I’ve been collecting over the past 4 years, giving valuable examples of specific individuals’ vulnerable perspectives on their own experiences with their mental health and their creative work.

B. RAPID RATE OF CHANGE / INTERNET

The field of graphic design is uniquely affected by the internet and rapidly moving trend cycles, making it crucial for graphic designers to stay up to date on the zeitgeist by consuming tons of media every single day. Additionally, social media, which can be a great place to get inspired, network, be creative, and foster community, can also get competitive, toxic, and exhausting as you compare yourself to others. UXMatters, a web based UX design magazine with a large online presence (100k+ followers on twitter) notes that “rate of change has been dizzying” for UX designers in reference to the internet and advanced technologies (Ivanov, 2016). They see keeping up with the internet as a design problem.

C. CREATIVITY + CAPITALISM

The intersection of creativity and capitalism within the field of graphic design creates an environment perfect for breeding stifled self expression, an increased link between self worth and productivity/inspiration, and a competitive atmosphere. Indeed, one source acknowledges that unlike fine art, graphic design is tied closely to “the commercial sphere” (Dhillon, 2012). When discussing this idea with a local art therapist, we agreed that this could be one of the reasons why graphic designers might face increased levels of mental stress. They’re more often devoting their creative energy to capitalism and less often creating art for art’s sake, for their own enjoyment.

D. MINDFULNESS + ART MAKING FOR ART’S SAKE

Interviewee A is an Art Therapist in Portland, who has important contributions to our understanding of creativity and identity. In an hour long interview, we talked about self-expression through art making, and the importance of spending time practicing art for art’s sake. “Using art as a way to hear myself supports an esteem- I’m giving all parts of me space” (Interviewee A, personal interview, 2021). The tools they value most in combating negative esteem are “consistent art making through the lens of mindfulness” and self compassion (Interviewee A, 2021). They emphasized that there won’t be one single solution for people’s negative feelings around their work, and how valuable it would be to get to the root about what each individual person really feels. Do they not have any motivation? Is it late stage capitalism? Is it burnout? Frustration with oneself, or lack of self care? Daily practices like the ones we discussed prove to be useful for this very personal topic, where one size does not fit all. One particular blog post from DesignerUp, a popular online hub with resources and a community for “mindful product designers,” outlines the basics of mindfulness, the origins of the idea of mindfulness, its role in creativity, and how it can lead to self-awareness and

empathy. They say, “Mindfulness is what happens when we combine the act of attention with the quality of intention.” (Alli, 2021) They explain how practicing mindfulness can teach us about design, and that creativity and mindfulness can be similar processes. They say they are both “innate inner resources that we can tap into at any time.” (Alli, 2021)

E. THE NEED FOR CONVERSATION

A 2014 paper outlined an experiment where doctoral students went through a process of “self study” where they journaled and reflected on how their daily experience and practices influenced their identities. The paper includes a whole section about “self-inefficacy”, which included the concept of imposter syndrome. In the students’

reflections, they noted that imposter syndrome stemmed from internal rather than external forces, may be more closely associated with underrepresented groups of students in higher education, and they recognized a relationship to procrastination (Foot, 2014). Their solutions to this “self-inefficacy” included making connections with other students, agency (doing something you really enjoy), and undertaking self reflection (Foot, 2014). One student said, “I even reflect on the need for some group like this one to be implemented early in the doctoral program” (Foot, 2014). Interestingly, a few survey responses I received from my personal survey reflected something similar: a need to have these conversations within their educational experience.

A spread from my book which features the quotes + responses to my survey from my peers

paint random things. doodle on my iPad. read, write, and scrapbook <3 doodling, coloring books, singing. make moodboards and doodle. going on Pinterest is probably the one I do most frequently. draw, read, write. draw, meditate is a big one. or watching sitcoms. sing, collage, write, draw/paint with a child I care for. play piano/uke, take a walk outside. I like drawing with pencil and paper on my sketchbook to relieve my mind of many stressful things. listen to music, (sad music, the sadder the better) calm relaxing happy video games while listening to music. (sad instrumental music), take a nap. usually anything outside of my computer! magazine collage, knitting, embroidery, painting, baking, etc. use my hands to make something that's not intended to be shared. I sing a lot. lol self-karaoke is the best. dance, journal, color.

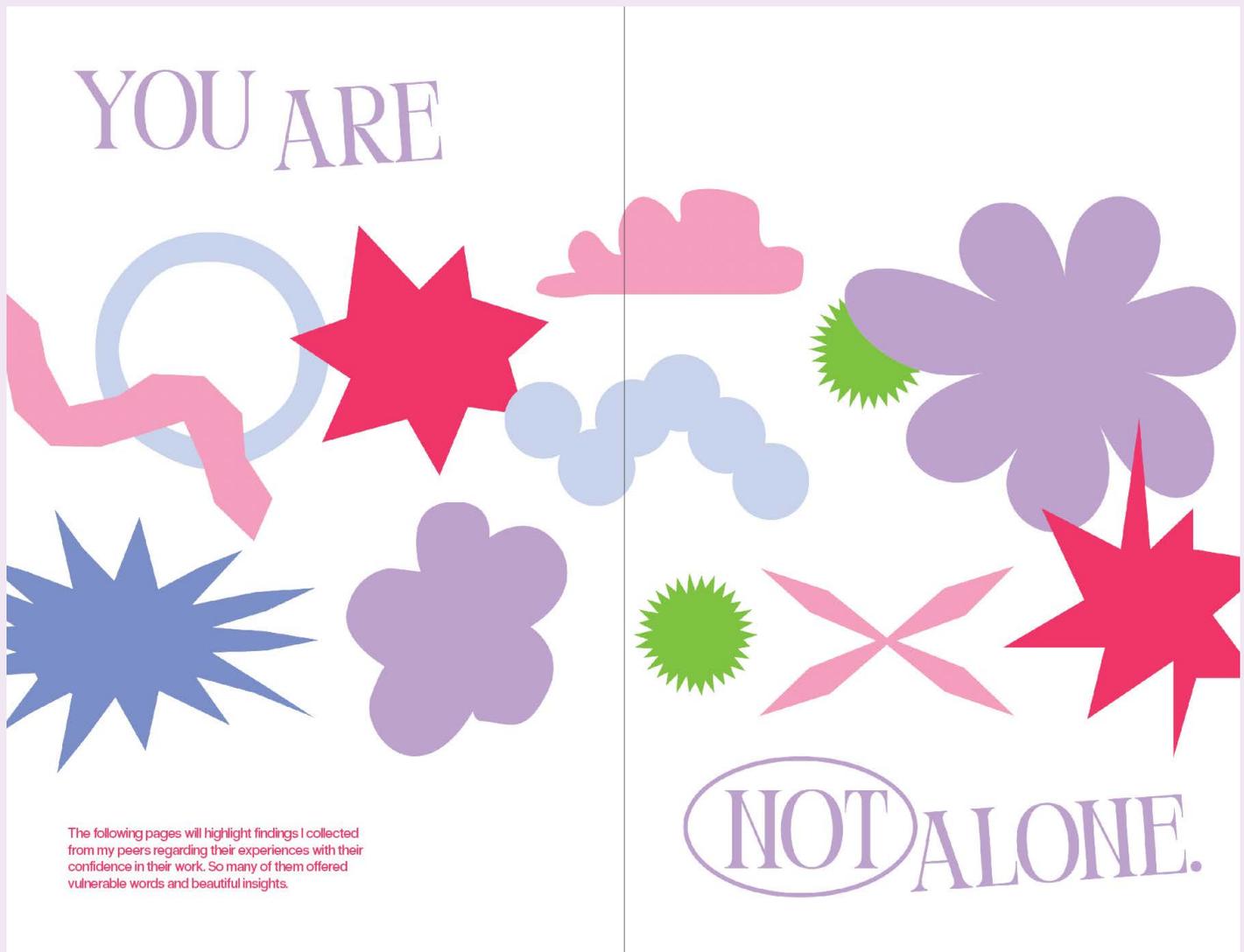


what creative things do you do to de-stress?



[Q: If you experience low confidence or imposter syndrome, how do you think it affects your mental health?]

“It depresses me and makes me question the purpose of me being in a creative field. It makes me anxious when I want my ideas to be original or subversive. It also makes me anxious to apply for work.”



Intro spread for the feature article 'You are Not Alone'

There also exists a time period that art/design students have to go through where one's "taste" outpaces one's skill. For example, maybe someone is born with a natural eye for design and tons of creative strength, but haven't mastered the technical skills or abilities to produce work that's as good as the work they admire. One article, "How to create designs you know to be good" put it this way: "Most all creative people go through years of this gap where taste is more developed than skill. Unfortunately many quit before they reach the point where skills catch up to taste" (Bradley, 2011). The existence of this "gap" can last much longer than a student is in school, which I believe to be a big stumbling block.

When I asked my survey respondents how important or necessary they feel it is to have

conversations about imposter syndrome or self confidence in design education, everyone either reported 4 or 5, with the majority answering 5. The results were more mixed when asked if those said conversations have been a part of their education, with 5 people giving a score of 2, 4 people for 4, 3 people for 3, 2 people for 1 (Not at all), and 1 for 5 (all the time). One person said, "I reach out to my fellow designer friends who can relate and it tends to give me a boost knowing other people feel the same. Having a support system can go a long way in feeling good about one's work." Another said "More communication about it [would help]. The more I see that most artists deal with this, the more I understand it's more a product of our culture rather than an actual fact and I can breathe and keep trying." Another student voiced,

“It seems less intimidating when you realize almost everyone is also dealing with the same issue” Another wished they “had more opportunity to discuss this with other creatives and have this topic included in my artistic education.” Yet another respondent explained, “I just want to know I'm not alone and that others think the same could be a big help.”

My research reflects a need for conversation, particularly in spaces of education. My goal is to add something positive to the community: something that makes people feel welcome, understood, and valuable. My work aims to target young creatives, specifically those who may be struggling with their confidence in creative spaces.

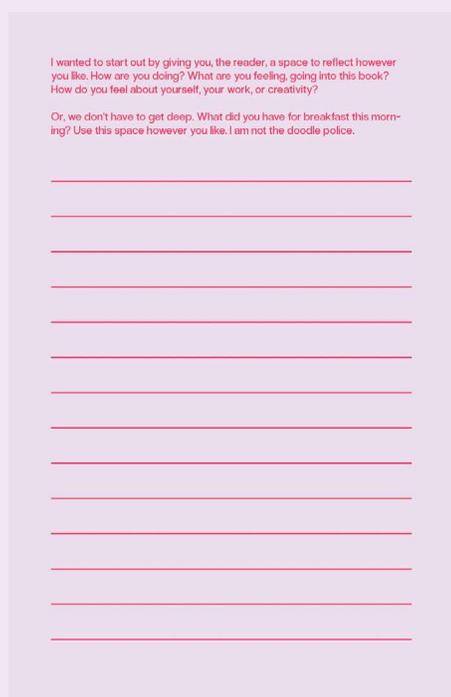
Project

As I worked through these concepts, received feedback, and began with creative ideation, my output began to take shape as For Art's Sake- a short publication. After much deliberation on the format of the work, I determined the most suitable option would be an interactive workbook

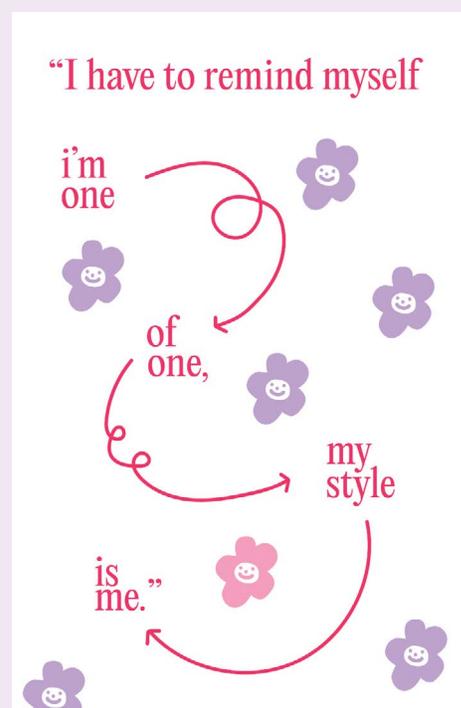
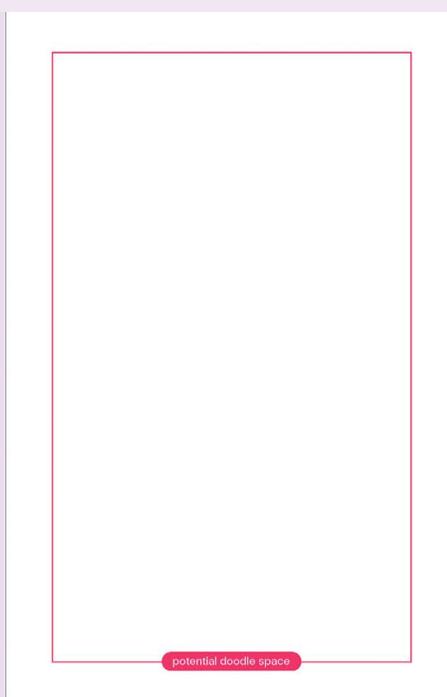
with a small online component. I was inspired by self-help books, “wreck-this-journal”s, and other quirky, self-referencing and unpretentious books, journals, or planners. I often find these to be accessible and un-intimidating ways of self-reflecting and absorbing information.

Since the nature of this topic has proven to incite vulnerability and subsequently a lack of conversation, I wanted to make sure the tone was friendly and empathetic. Emphasizing the notion that I, the author, personally don't have all the answers to the questions being asked, I wanted this book to be personal while feeling relatable; offering my personal experience, thoughts from a professional, anecdotes from my peers, and spaces for readers to reflect.

My conversation with the local art therapist reminded me that I wouldn't be able to structure a project around a one-size-fits all approach, since the root of people's issues of self-confidence or imposter syndrome can be so unique. This research informed my project to be partially a place for loosely prompted reflection, with multiple pages of space for writing and drawing. Offering this space in my book helps frame the project as less



Spread which shows space for reader to reflect



A featured quote from one of my peers

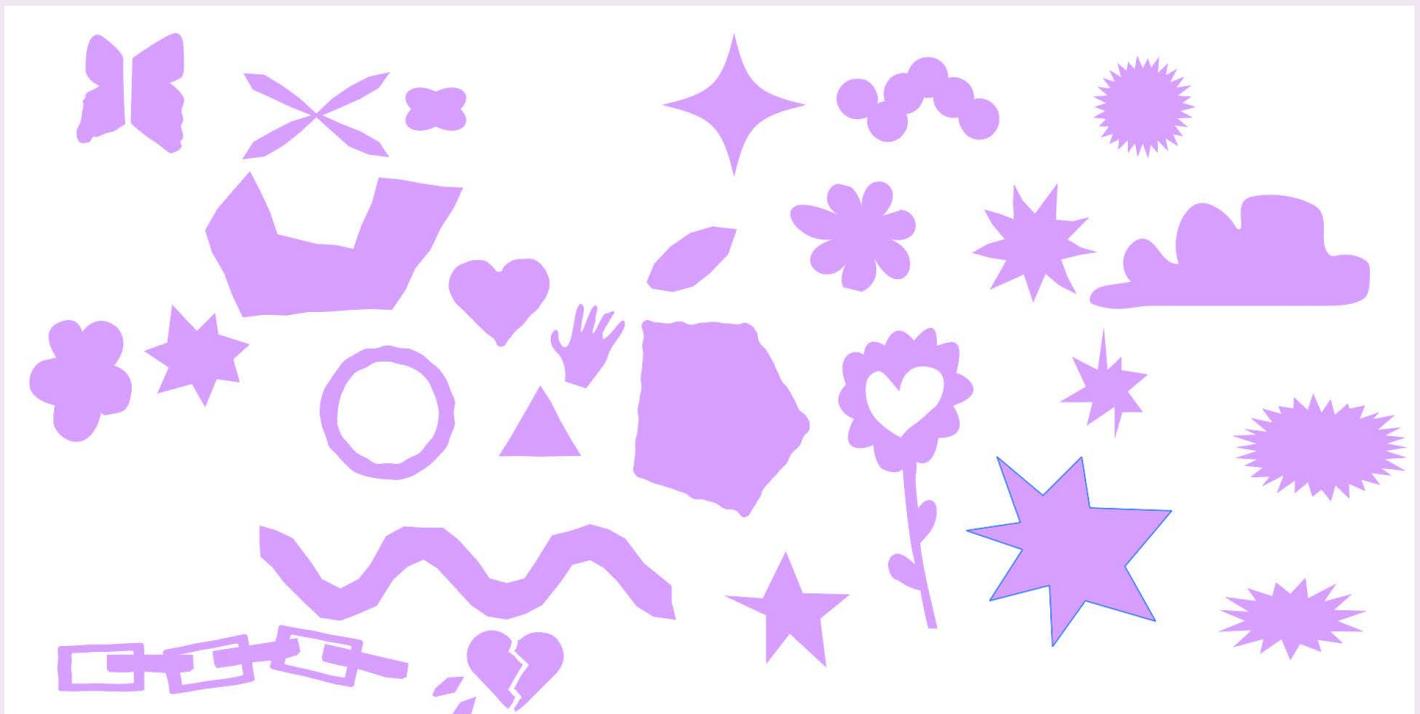


of an “author-to-reader” guide, instruction manual, or how-to, to more of an opportunity to think about these issues together and help each other, from one person who has experienced this to another. For Art’s Sake is just as much for me as it is for the reader.

A main goal of this work was to inspire others to bring these conversations into creative spaces, perhaps specifically into creative edu-

cational spaces, where we’ve seen big need yet low execution. The main, featured section of the book, titled, “You Are Not Alone” hopes to encourage this sentiment of transparency, as I highlight the data from the survey I conducted. This section includes infographics containing quantitative data surrounding creative people’s experiences with their mental health, imposter syndrome, and confidence in their work. Also showcased are a

Paper-cut shape story





Intro spread to 'Advice' section

plethora of vulnerable, powerful quotes from my peers that truly make this section successful in its effort to help a reader feel seen, understood, and perhaps more equipped to share their own experiences. In one of the last sections of the book, I address questions people have asked and give advice, which I candidly explain I'm "unqualified" for. My goal for these pages was to have a sort of back-and-forth, interactive feel, while also getting to establish my personal voice and my two cents on how I might personally deal with certain situations. On these pages, I also refer people to an Instagram page where they can submit their questions and experiences, encouraging further conversation and interaction.

For the aesthetic of the book, I wanted to break some design rules I normally don't break for an an-

ti-design inspired aesthetic. This visual direction is a response to the notion of art or design needing to follow certain rules. While I believe rules can be helpful and even necessary at times, I think they can also tend to infringe upon our creativity and expression. I simply wanted to have fun with this, and design a little bit more "intuitively" than I normally might. I chose not to include photography in this project because I wanted the book to feel like a blank canvas: something anyone could relate to without the associations that might come with any non-abstracted imagery. Instead, the visuals are based around a shape story that I created which I made to look crudely cut out of paper by hand. Design decisions like having skewed layout, quirky typography, a hand done, crafty feel, work together to reflect the general sentiments of the book. I

want those who read it to feel empowered to create how they want to create, and let loose sometimes. This book itself was an exercise for me in that way, which was a personal goal I had in mind for the project. To me, creating art for art's sake means creating intuitively, without the intention of showing it to anyone or using it for anything other than your own expression. Though I can't say this book was made without the intention of sharing it with others, I do think its visual aesthetic is hugely important in the presentation and representation of what I wanted to say with this project.

Conclusion

In this project, I studied the prevalence of low confidence and imposter syndrome in creative people and the ways in which these experiences or tendencies can inhibit us and stifle our creativity. This work was inspired by what I experienced and observed in others over the course of my time as a graphic design student at Portland State. Through my research, I learned that there are many ways in which graphic design as a field is uniquely affected by these issues, and that there exists a glaring need for conversation, particularly in academic spaces. This prompted the development of my personal interactive workbook titled "For Art's Sake" in which I addressed these topics, gave voice to students' perspectives, and offered a space for the reader to reflect on their own experiences. The creative execution of this book allowed me to practice designing in a less limited way, as well as hopefully accomplish my goal of promoting conversations about creative's mental health struggles that so many more of us experience than we think.

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