

“IT ISN'T MAGIC, BUT IT REALLY DOES SEEM MAGICAL”

INTERVIEW WITH BRYAN SAUNDERS

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About Bryan Saunders

In 1995, Bryan Saunders was still a student in the East Tennessee State University when he decided to paint a self-portrait everyday, until he dies. When he started painting his daily self-portraits, his intention was not to have an autobiography or use it as a kind of journal. In a conversation with students in the University of Mississippi, Saunders said that the self-portraits are his way to organize his own life.

Brian Saunders had a difficult childhood and teenagerhood. He was arrested when he was 15 years old and sent to the youth detention and then to a military school where he suffered physical and emotional abuses. At the age of 21, he was arrested and sent to the penitentiary where he had contact with more violence. As part of his prison sentence, Saunders had to finish his studies in the program General Educational Development (GED), that became not only a way to university but an artistic journey to a life change. In his interview, he explains how his art helps him deal with himself and the world around us. In addition, he reveals how he uses his own body to produce art.

The interview with Bryan Saunders

Tânia Ardito: You've made a decision of painting your one self-portrait a day from 1995 until your death. Do you compare your different phases on your portraits? If yes, what do you discover about yourself in your own art? If not, why don't you do this exercise?

Bryan Saunders: First off, I discovered that there is no “self”, there's no such thing, there is only my personal identification, evaluation and judgment of experiences and sensory stimulations, and those IEJs are subject to incessant change and that change relies heavily on the strength of my feeling of knowing something which can often be wrong. Through the act of doing them daily and allowing for new ways of transmitting differences between sensations and experiences, I've discovered that drawing has the potential to communicate a whole lot more information than we realize. Each daily-self-portrait can contain all of the elements of experience. They can record and transmit my focus, valence,

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arousal, and stress, as well as all of the components that make up those elements and that's why no two daily-self-portraits are ever the same. That's also why I call my journal "Just Noticeable Difference".

My phases are often durational sensory experiments; 30 days totally blind, the deaf month, 100 days upside down vision, human temperature control, 60 days outside, sexual arousal... People have often said that it's self-harm or self-destructive of me to deprive my senses like this, but they're totally wrong because every time I deprive or deny one of my senses, for a certain length of time, my other senses become amplified. It's an incredibly beautiful and empowering thing to experience. I'm not injuring or weakening my eyes, I'm making my sense of smell stronger, or making my sense of touch more intense. Or strengthening my balance even. The power to grow becomes endless.

T.A.: We can notice that you have a very particular methodology to produce your art. Can you describe the pre-production stage? Do you look yourself in the mirror when drawing or painting?



Fig. 1 Bryan Saunders, *Look good = feels good* (2011)

B.S.: When starting out I either listen to my body, my brain, or my environment. Something during the day or night from either of those three places will catch my attention more than everything else. That notification, or noticeable difference, that I attend to will be where I start the drawing. For example, if I lean forward getting out of my chair and notice a sudden pressure in the front of my skull, I may start there by drawing that pressure. Or, if there are a lot of drug addicts in my parking lot and a potential for violence outside, I may start there. Or I may think about myself being violent and then that notification or sudden onset of attention to anger will trigger me to deal with that and then I can either illustrate what I see to challenge my fears or I can change the image of myself to what I would rather feel instead of anger or danger. Because I'm focusing on my

experiences and sensory stimulations, the creative options are inherently infinite. Sometimes I use a mirror, sometimes I use a photograph, sometimes I use my physical somatosensory feelings, sometimes I use my imagination or even my memory. What I experience is always changing as my experiences in life are always changing. I may change what I attend to in the middle of making the drawing too. It's a very synchronized way of attaching my attention to my experience and senses which allow my brain to drive and steer my moments in life along with the images. It really makes drawing a very natural and fluid way to interact with life.

T.A.: Talking about more practical stuff, we know that a great part of your work is kept by you. How do you catalog your work? Is there anything you do to prevent it from damage?

B.S.: I have them all in books and on bookshelves and in plastic zip lock freezer bags so no bugs or rodents can get into them. I also have them all scanned and stored on multiple hard drives located in different places. I have them stored digitally by book number, and by year as well as by experiment and feeling type. I have slideshow videos of them too that I watch and use to change my brain chemistry very quickly.

T.A.: You submit your body to extreme high-risk experiences to produce your art. You have already been exposed to torture, use of high drugs, high temperatures and etc. Do you think that your way to see pain and suffering changed after you decided to use material of art? How do you deal with pain and suffering in your ordinary life?

B.S.: Yes, definitely! Before art, I would allow my pain and stress to consume me and I would obsess on it until I became a violent criminal. With the outlet of art, I can now draw violence instead of doing real violence. BUT! I can also draw breathing exercises, and draw relaxing activities like taking bubble baths or exercising, thus freeing myself of any unwanted aggression. I can translate all of my physical and emotional problems into 2 dimensional inanimate objects. It isn't magic but it really does seem magical. I deal with pain and suffering in my daily life by preventing it, or removing it and transforming it into something more removed and away from my body and brain. I can also mutate traumatic memories so that they aren't traumatic to me anymore.

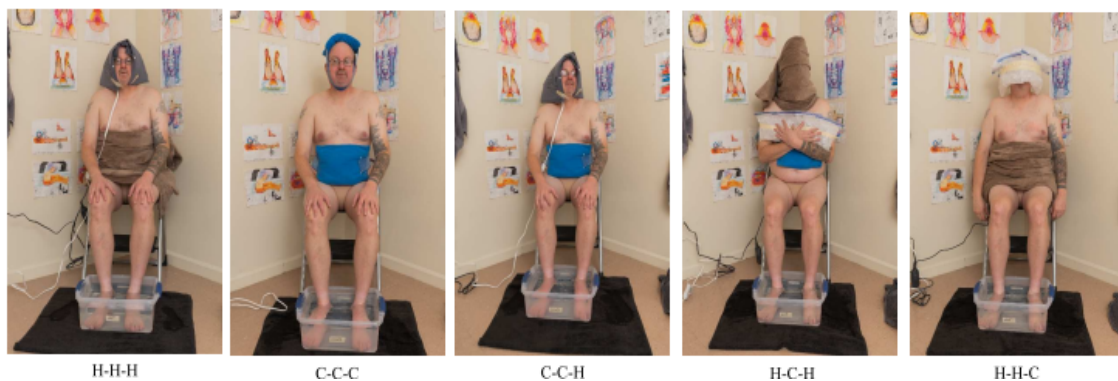


Fig. 2 Billie Wheeler, *Temperature Permutations* (2019)

T.A.: From all your experiences of portraying yourself under the use of drugs is known as your most popular experiment. Do you think it is responsible for making you well-known not only in the U. S. but in Europe too?

B.S.: Definitely. That one experiment has captivated the minds of every generation of kids since I created it. Every few years it goes viral again. The creation of every new app allows the next generation of kids to rediscover it and I think it's perpetually viral among each generation because young people will always respond to the danger, and novelty and risk taking that went into it. That's what kids do. It is primarily a work for the youth. I'm known in every country in the world because of it. The movies, the documentaries and videos, about that project have also exposed viewers to even more projects of mine and that's helped my popularity tremendously along with the podcasts and interviews too.

T.A.: When we exchanged e-mails, you were about to finish "The 100 days upside down vision" in which you had an upside-down vision and decided to paint traumatic events of

your life. You also described it as “empowering”. Please, describe this experience and tell us what its real impact in your life.

B.S.: I discovered that I’m able to rewrite my brain. Literally. My traumatic memories appear in my brain as a trauma GIF loop. Pieces of scenes, fragments of an event. These internally generated GIF loops have a direct negative effect on my body when I am remembering them. When I draw them, I change them from a moving image to a still image. I change them from an internally generated image into an externally generated one. The process is slow too, so as I am drawing the event the experience is slowing down and repeating over and over again dulling the physical impact the memory has on me. Also, I do not draw a freeze frame still of my trauma GIF. Instead, I change the observational perspective too so that I the artist and original memory container can step back into a 3rd person role and see the events play out away from me at as much of a distance as I want. Changing the observational perspective also gives me a lot of time to play with the elements of design, like What color should I use? What shape should I make? What materials should I use? etc. And that is incredibly important, all of that is a positive distraction and those positive chemical changes in my brain that occur while remembering a traumatic event I believe drastically weaken the power those memories have over me. Oh, and another thing, by turning them into drawings and photographing them and putting them in a special iPhone photo album of all of the traumatic events of my life makes the memories look even more smaller and cheaper and weaker. Seeing the worst times in my life as colorful tiny thumbnails grouped together robs them of their power so much. And after all of that, because I’m drawing them and familiarizing myself with the new images, I’m rewriting my brain, or writing over my brain, so when in real life I’m confronted with something in my environment that triggers a terrible memory, my memory tends to go to the newest and freshest version of the event and those drawings have no negative physical effect on me at all. Now if I was to try and replicate my trauma and make a real motion picture loop of exactly what I see in my traumatic memory that would be harmful to me. I would only be perpetuating the trauma. Refreshing the wound so to speak. It might make for a more intense imagery but I don’t care about that. I only want to grow forward better in life.



Fig. 3 Bryan Saunders, *Marijuana* (2000)

T.A.: What can we expect from you in the near future? What projects do you have in mind?

B.S.: Next I hope to do a series like “30 Days Meditation”, or maybe “30 Days Breathing Month” and experiment with breathing. Maybe a “Weightlifting Month”? I don’t know yet. The number of profound possibilities is great. I would also like to illustrate the opposite of my traumatic events and draw all of the times in my life when I was radiant, and exalted and self-fulfilled, but that is extremely hard to do right now because of my different neighbors’ psychosis and drug abuse and stress and mental problems. I may make a few pictures for money too. I also garden each year and cook and preserve my own food, so I usually do my bigger art experiments in the late fall and winter.

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