Why I Illustrate

Life is odd when you're not very good at anything. Whether it's math, science, or sports, by most measures of society, I find that I can't help but fall short. I didn't even start speaking until I was 4 and then I had to take speech therapy because I had a lisp that prevented me from making 'ch' and 'sh' sounds. I had an odd vernacular because I avoided words that would highlight my lisps but then I ended up avoiding words altogether. Y'know how most people get hung up about always coming in second? I was glad to get a ribbon for participation.

Without a voice and without relatability, I lived a lot of life behind a window. The early disposition was actually a coping mechanism, allowing me to accept my place in the world. I genuinely thought to myself 'If everyone on earth has a purpose, maybe my role is the guy who's bad at everything and I should just go with it.' This is why I love art so much, because it's all about interpretation and the process of making rather than just the outcome. From then on, drawing totally consumed my whole identity; it was my anchor, my assurance that, for the first time in my life, I had some kind of use.

Until one day, when I was about 6, I told my mom about how I wanted to be an artist. Understandably, she had to break the news to me that most artists didn't make enough money to earn a living. Immediately fear was instilled in me, fear named financial instability. I was so frustrated that the one thing I liked might not even be a viable option for a career. It drove me to practice like crazy. In spite of the terrible wages I craved a creative future of some sort. I was following my passions blindly, and, suprisingly, none of this came as a shock to my mom. In fact, she was and is one of the most understanding people in my life about this.

My mom is very odd in this regard, she is my complete opposite, she lives untethered in the daylight beyond my glass barrier. She lives in the moment; rarely does she ever worry or fret. Once she sets her mind to something, nothing can deter her, even bad people are like falling autumn leaves she can simply brush off her shoulder. One thing you have to know about my mom is that she was born at the decline of the Khmer Rouge, a radical Communist movement who are responsible for a genocide in Cambodia that killed roughly 25% of the population. Ever since she was young, this 'in the moment' mindset was cemented in her, she wasn't allowed the luxury to know if she'll have a tomorrow. She described to me how after her childhood nothing could ever seem as serious, which is why it's so important I strive to be happy in this life because we only get the one. As a matter of fact, my mom disregards her own future a lot of the time, opting to only focus on my siblings and me. In a strange turn of events, it seems I really have to convince my mom that I will pursue my creative passions instead of worrying about the financial stability of the family.

In order to show my mom my real and genuine desperation for the arts and my willingness to sacrifice for it, I had to get really good, which proved to be very difficult. I didn't take any formal art classes until high school and so all of my learning was self-taught. Being self-taught is a bit like assembling furniture from IKEA with no instruction manual; you have to drag yourself when trying to catch up all the time.

That is, until sophomore year of high school, when I took AP 2D Art and Design, a whole other beast that I was not prepared for. When I say this class burned me out, I really mean it—I hated art after this class. When picking up a pencil to draw I felt like Sisyphus realigning himself with the boulder before he began pushing it back up the mountain just knowing that it'll tumble down to the other side once again. This experience left me unable to draw. Without art acting as my emotional outlet, I was at a loss about where to redirect my mental and emotional fatigue. Do you ever remember that awkward phase in your life? Now do you remember transitioning in and out of it? I can't really describe how apparent it was to me that I was in a transitional period of my life. Like, through each obstacle and each celebration, I just couldn't settle down because I had somewhere else to be, someone else to be. Just to get back to , I had to push myself to reflect not only on why I first enjoyed drawing but what could inspire me to continue. Inspiration is such an odd and difficult thing to capture, for most of my life I've only found it by stumbling onto it by mistake.

Like one day when I pestered my sister to play with me, she instead put a movie on for me with the big box tv in my bedroom that I shared with my brother. *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1988) is an animated film by Studio Ghibli and it is one of my favorite pieces of animation ever. As a 8-year-old I don't think I had the cognitive ability to understand the depth of the studio's movies, but, as I rewatched it I found that their stories reflected my own so clearly. Hayao Miyazaki, the director of the studio, is a perfectionist when it comes to storytelling. He understands the deeper roots of childhood and expressing the feelings of characters through animation correctly. These movies appealed so well to me because they captured life so accurately. In so many children's movies morals are often painted in a superficial manner, and don't offer different perspectives to teens once they've grown up. The feeling I got from watching these movies is kind of indescribable, like finally getting onto an equal playing field where everyone sees eye to eye, a connection. It was like being given the words to describe emotions that you didn't even know you had. As a kid I was so starved for a say that I didn't even question where this voice came from—I just took it and ran. So when I got the wind knocked out of me in AP art, I lost not only my art, but also my connections with people. So, in the pursuit of getting my will to draw back, the question became 'how do I reconnect with people?' And as I walked into Freestyle for the first time junior year of high school I knew I had finished molting. First, it was the way I walked. Each step got lighter and every stride was longer and before I knew it I had a pep in my

step. Then it was something in my chest, this creative will that sprang about in my mind. Finally, I knew I got my spark back when I had this burning conviction, this complete and utter abandon in pursuit of art. Being given this opportunity to step into the daylight and to connect with all these amazing students is such a life-changing event. I firmly believe that if I hadn't attended Freestyle Academy I'd have had a much rougher time trying to communicate and open up again.

This is why I believe it's so imperative that people draw as opposed to utilizing AI. I've always viewed art as an opportunity to express yourself so when you make it instantaneous it really only shows a surface level thought. Art demands that you convey your own perspective and asks that you interpret it on your own level. When we allow ourselves to express our thoughts and emotions naturally, we allow for communication to happen more freely. By blocking off this process I worry that it will funnel more kids who lack a voice for themselves into the same position I fell into, but this time they'll see no value in making art for themselves. By nature we are sociable creatures whether we like it or not. I think that people like myself crave communication and connection, and one way or another they are gonna find out how to do it. So through all the weird, possibly apocalyptic versions of the future, I think they'll figure something out

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Reflection

In the planning phase of my writing process I was heavily influenced by Octavia Butler's 'Positive Obsession' and the way many of her values were shaped out of hardship. Though I doubt I've faced nearly as many as her, I guess I focused mainly on how I responded to these obstacles in my life. I resonated very deeply with Octavia Butler and her depiction of shyness—and how it has this really kind of

disgusting way to shape your actions around your intrusive thoughts. I think, like quite a few people who make art, we are inclined to living life behind glass because of our natural obstruction to speaking. It feels nearly impossible to make it past that first hurdle of communication. I focused a lot on this subject in my essay because it’s very dear to me.

I think the first pre-revision reflection helped me re-read my essay with a clean pair of eyes. When writing I always get hung up about having an ugly baby—y’know how people say things like ‘only a face a mother could love’ I worry occasionally that I'm a mother(a writer) and that I have an ugly baby(my writing) and people are too nice to tell me that I have an ugly baby. So basically, I planned on making a ton of major revisions to my piece because I worried that it’d fall flat. Additionally, I got many compliments on my original draft but I don’t think it really conveyed who I was to who I am. It was weirdly angsty and read a bit like a reddit post…To better communicate who I am with my audience I decided to write it a bit like how I write my diary. Just talking directly to the audience, like a voice memo that you send a far off friend.

When I look back at my version of history I always feel kind of odd. I write best knowing I’m alone but I always write thinking of an audience. The larger parts I revised were with the audience in mind actually, I thought ‘of all the freestyle students why would somebody read this one?’ and ‘what would I want to read if I were looking for an interesting personal essay’. Being the kind of dismissive and passive person I am, I thought about what being given an audience means to me in this context. Ultimately I considered this piece an opportunity to have a one on one conversation with somebody I’d never met before. In this essay I talk in a very informal manner because as a shy person I never really get the chance to act this way with new people. I’d really like to form some kind of connection with the audience, I want you to hear me narrating through the screen. With all of the hiccups and pauses and coughs and imperfections included. I really love observing life, and as a result I’ve become very tethered to details and the beauty in the unremarkable. And I want this to be a conduit from which I can share my perspective in a sort of unremarkably beautiful way.

On the rubric I’d like to imagine that this essay is a 3 because I feel that I've met all of the standards listed in the rubric. Though, I always fall short in the analysis part but it’s not for lack of trying I just sometimes get carried away with my exposition.