

Identity

Dania Rehan

My artwork remains unnamed and is a mixed-media piece on watercolour paper. Like other Pakistani women, I was also known for having 'greasy' hair as a result of my culture's use of hair oils to maintain our long and shiny hair. I've also been asked about the "shit" (henna) on my hands. I've also been stared up and down when I'm in my traditional clothes. Overtime, I shaped myself to fit into the western beauty standards to please others, whilst feeling ashamed of my own culture, because that's the only way I could fit in and be accepted. I took influence from artists such as Hanifa Abdul Hameed, ZenTee and Sravya Attaluri who combine merge their South Asian and American identity with activism and arts to convey powerful messages exposing feminism, sexism, colourism, racism and discrimination.

Now, I am more accepting of who I am and am proud of my cultural identity, but unrealistic and toxic beauty standards are still a prevalent socio-cultural issue, and a part of the influence still remains in me. I painted this practical in response to the influence of western beauty standards on my cultural identity as a Pakistani living in Australia since 2010. I used a split-face portrait to more clearly and intimately represent the difference between my Pakistani identity, on the left side, and my identity influenced by western beauty standards, on the right side. The subject used in the practical is me, as to show my personal experience with this issue, although this is relatable to South Asian women who may feel the same. I painted the right side using a dull, greyscale colour palette to depict the insecurity that is felt when you have to be someone you're not, and how hurtful it is to be confined to unrealistic beauty standards. However, my left side is painted with bright, cold and warm colours. Green not only represents healing, similar to healing from hurtful, racist remarks, but the colour of my country's flag. Green is also reflected in the earring, and on the right side, a green coloured tear is dropping from the subject's eyes to depict a loss of identity and culture that once remained. Yellow represents the joy I feel when embracing that part of my identity. Red represents the courage that individuals hold when they are faced with such issues to love themselves truly. Orange is the amalgamation of all colours and represents an overall message of positivity. The right side also has rough, dark scribbles as a form of shading to represent the irritation, confusion and longingness that comes with being ashamed of your cultural identity, which is also shown through the tongue-inside-cheek expression expressed predominantly by the right side. The left side is more calm and "at peace", shown through linear, organised cross-hatching. The left side is shown embracing their culture, with their hair down, big, beautiful earrings and a dupatta draped around them. As it transitions from left to right, you can see the colours getting greyer, and the embroidery of the dupatta falling off, representing a loss of cultural identity.

I decided to create this practical in mixed-media form, so I have more creative expression. I chose watercolour tubes as my medium so the split-face portrait flows smoothly between each side, and so it can act as an underdrawing for the dark scribbles and posca pen 'embroidery'. I used a ball-point pen to create the scribbles as it's very smooth running and goes back and forth easily. I created the embroidery, a symbol of South Asian culture, with a white posca pen liner to capture attention. I also used it to add highlights to the hair for a "silky, shiny hair" effect and earrings. I created the earring with coloured pencil to create smooth blends that gemstones have.