Ariel Wilson (Faculty Mentor: Alexandra Opie)

‘Historical and Contemporary Portraits: Classifications and depictions of mental illness’

As a studio art major, psychology minor, with a background in photography, I am interested in conducting research this summer in ‘alternative processes’ photography and historical and contemporary portraiture. I have explored the medium of photography here at Willamette as well as independently in freelance settings. My project was initially inspired by the work of Susan Seubert, a contemporary photographer from Oregon, who works in tintype photography and who has, through her work, discussed social issues such as domestic violence and mental health. Tintype is a historical photographic process used in the 1850’s for portraiture which, through a chemical process, prints an image directly upon a sheet of iron.

With an eye towards exploring alternative photographic processes and social issues and constructs, my LARC project will focus on early modes of portraiture and depictions and labels of mental illness. Suebert produced a series entitled Neurasthenia in which she discussed a psychological condition of young gentlemen of the late eighteen hundreds. I will explore how American society has developed categorization of mental illness since the mid 1800’s, specifically focusing on photographic portraits and depictions of the mentally ill. I will analyze historical depictions of those labeled mentally ill and examine these societal definitions, questioning the possible underlying messages present. Cultural values and cross-cultural analyses may become of interest in my explorations as both portraiture and mental health are tightly connected to culture.

Through the mode of photography as a form of inquiry, and with the support of my LARC co-participants as well as the guidance of Professor Opie, I hope to gain a better understanding of both past and present portraiture. Collaboration with Professor Opie will involve joint-research in historical portraiture through online collections and books, development of studio of setup, lighting technique, costuming, and exploration of alternative developing processes such as tintype. Professor Opie and I will share varying angles on similar research in historical portraiture. Once thorough research has been conducted I will work to create my own body of work connected to my discoveries, through alternative processes such as tintype. Through a series of contemporary portraits with historical reference, I hope to raise questions about the way society in the United States views mental health and mental illness.

Beyond my Willamette experience I aspire to pursue a Masters in Fine Art as well as possibly join the Peace Corps. The opportunity to participate in guided yet flexible research in the fine arts is one of extreme value and importance to me. I intend to learn firsthand the process of research, discovery, and creation of a personal project within photography as well as the values and processes of collaboration with areas of study beyond the art community. This experience will be invaluable to my future as an art student/artist, as a socially and culturally informed and aware individual, and will aid preparing me for my senior thesis project here at Willamette.
Susan Seubert, Neurasthenia #1, Tintype, 2001

Susan Seubert, Neurasthenia #2, Tintype, 2001

Susan Seubert, Neurasthenia #3, Tintype, 2001