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DO YOU LIKE MY FACE

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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University Honors

University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

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ABSTRACT

Do You Like My Face is a short film centered around the experience of a young artist named Dina. As a Black/ Nigerian American woman, Dina finds herself in an art class focused on accentuating Eurocentric beauty standards, excluding anyone who looks different. This, of course, rubs Dina the wrong way, and she sets out to confront her professor regarding the matter of representation in the class. After being shot down numerous times, Dina decides to take matters into her own hands and becomes her own model in order to feel beautiful. As the film progresses, we see that the drawing instructor, who had previously been so oppositional to the idea of diversity, had been another version of Dina all along. She was a version of Dina that had let the world affect how she viewed her identity and allowed it to limit her art. Within the film, two important things are being addressed: the first is a commentary on beauty standards in the film, TV, and media industry; the second is about identity, self-love, standing up for yourself, and freeing yourself to be able to express who you are, create, and inspire.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Introduction:

Ever since I was 5, I have struggled with my self-image. Growing up in the predominantly white neighborhood of Martinez, California, the way I looked had always made me stand out. I would keep comparing myself to lighter kids, and whenever I did find black kids to be around, they would always comment on the darkness of my shade as if there was some competition to be won if your skin was lighter. These incidents, coupled with what I saw on TV, did a number on my self-esteem. Even when looking back on my favorite movies and shows, I've realized that very few of them showcased Black or African women front and center in a positive light. Even now, although there have been more roles for black women, a good number of films get a bad rap with DEI associating black women with extreme wokeness, poorly written characters, a monolithic view of what blackness is, and misandry. The internet doesn't make anything better with how many men call out the N-word whenever they see our faces, and there hasn't been a comment section on Instagram where I didn't see at least one person talking about how black women are the least desirable women when it comes to race.

For my Capstone, I created a screenplay, soon to be adapted into a film, revolving around the experience of a Nigerian-American artist named Dina. In *Do You Like My Face*, we see how digital media is replicated within the oldest form of media we have: drawings. Art is a big part of who I am, and in previous versions of this story, I had an idea to combine animation and live-action film to incorporate my artistic side into the project. However, since the script ended up taking so long to finalize, and I made a plethora of drafts, the time it would have taken to learn animation or find an animator for the film would have been too long. I mainly wanted the animation as a means to showcase the rich inner world of Dina, who at the time was named

Anika. The choice to go with figure drawing instead of something like social media or a TV was another change that was made. Originally, I had the story revolving around a TV, but coupling that with my animation idea ended up making the story confusing and convoluted. It wasn't clear what I was trying to say or how I was trying to say it, and I hadn't yet gotten to the root of the story. The idea of figure drawing came to me when I was thinking about a discussion I had had with my mentor regarding how animation connects both to Anika and TV; the common denominator being versions of pictures. Film and Video are just moving pictures, and so is animation. At the heart of both of these art forms is the original first-ever picture: a drawing. I just also happened to have taken a figure drawing class before, and the way this art style focuses so much on the human body made it the perfect illustration for the message I wanted to send with this film.

Characters:

Dina - Spirited young woman in her early 20s with a carefree spirit and a love for creating and art. She is the main protagonist in the play and has a strong sense of self, refusing to let other people confine her to a box.

Drawing Instructor - Represented at first as a young man jaded by the art world, but later depicted as Dina herself. This character is to be the exact opposite of Dina when it comes to responding to the influence of others in terms of what artistry should look like and whose face gets to be at the forefront.

Artists 1 and 2 - Although these characters don't have speaking lines, in the beginning, they are used as a foil to Dina, representing those who quietly move with the program, either too scared to speak up and make a change for themselves, or have the same mindset as the Instructor, where they have been brainwashed to believe that the industry knows best. In addition to this,

they also represent the perfect student, or the perfect audience for the industry, who stays quiet and accepts everything they are told. However, in the end, we do get to see them have their light to shine, as it is revealed that each of these artists has had a Dina moment in their lives at some point and that they are coming to terms with how much they matter.

Models - They represent the world's idea of beauty and what gets reflected by the media, which in this film is represented by drawing on paper.

Reflection:

During the most recent rewrite of the script, something I wanted to focus on was the importance of Dina being the one to prove to herself that she is beautiful. In earlier drafts, I had it so she had a lover who would tell her that she is beautiful, but it didn't feel right to me for Dina to have her self-worth come from a man. Reflecting on my own life, it didn't matter how many men told me I was beautiful. Compliments like that would wash over me, in one ear and out the next. As long as I believed that I was ugly, that I was worthless, that I was unwanted, nothing anyone else said could truly make me feel otherwise. Dina needed to be the one to tell herself that she is beautiful, just like I had to be the one to tell myself that I was beautiful. It's for this reason that the character of the drawing instructor is played by two people. The first version has the instructor representing the men in charge of putting the beauty standards we have in motion, but the second version of the instructor is Dina. Paired with the first version of the instructor, this 2nd version of Dina is buying into the ideas that were planted into her mind of what human perfection looks like. It changes the way we see the first version of the Instructor because now that we know that the first version is technically Dina, it's revealed that the first version is how Dina sees herself, or at least who she needs to be to be considered perfect. As if she is wearing a mask to hide her true self, which she feels ashamed. When it comes to showing

herself a painting of herself, Dina is confronting that part of her that rejects herself and wishes she looked like someone else. She is forcing herself to step out of the mask, to remember what she looks like, and to accept that this is who she is. And I feel with this last draft, I was able to execute this well.

Themes and Purpose:

The purpose of this story is to encourage young Black women who struggle to love their skin to find beauty within themselves. In addition to that, I want everyone, not just black women, to be able to look at themselves in the mirror and feel comfortable in their own skin. It is so important to me that there is diversity in the type of stories told on the big screen; the world needs to be exposed to different experiences and acknowledge that people shouldn't be stereotyped or placed in boxes. And to all the people who believe representation or lack thereof doesn't matter, I hope this film opens their eyes to understanding.

Going Forward:

My next steps after this are to release this screenplay as a film and submit it to film festivals. The original plan for my capstone project was to release a short film, but because writing the script took so long, I didn't have time to do so before the deadline. That being said, as of right now, I am excited to say that my team and I have been working on preproduction for the film and will soon be moving into the production phase of the filming process. Currently, we have our shot lists, cast, locations, and crew. Now all that's left is finalizing costumes, props, and finding a good schedule that works with everyone. Our first filming day is estimated to be around the week of May 17th. This will officially be the first time I am ever working as a producer, actor, and writer for a short film, and it has been a fun but also tough experience, with trying to make sure everything is organized and moving swiftly. It's a dream to work with so

many passionate people, but it's also hard too when complications arise, like problems with locations, or finding time to make room for these within everyone's busy circles. Part of me wishes that the screenplay could have been done earlier, but also I know that the ideas that are now here in this current draft would have been thought up if I hadn't spent so much time editing the story over and over until it felt right. All in all, I'm so thankful for those who have come alongside me on this project and intend to work with them in more projects for the future.

Do you like my face

By

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INT. ART STUDIO - DAY

DINA (22), Black/Nigerian American, face lit up with excitement. She taps the desk in front of her with a finger.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR (V.O)

You've got 30 minutes. Pencils up.

MONTAGE OF EACH DAY

...Dina grabs her pencil and sketches. ARTIST 1 and 2 sketch as well. At the center of the room, MODEL 1 sits on a stool, posed.

...MODEL 2 comes in and poses differently on the stool. Dina notices Model 2 looks similar to Model 1.

...MODEL 3 on the stool. Dina looks down at her current sketch and compares them to her previous sketches; they all have a similar quality. She purses her lips and looks up at the Drawing Instructor(Early to late 20s). He crosses the room to examine Artist 2's work.

...MODEL 4 on the stool. Dina lays her pencil down on her paper.

...MODEL 1 on a stool. Dina sighs, elbows on the table, head resting in her hands.

END OF MONTAGE

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dina sits on her couch with her drawings from class placed in a semi-circle on the ground. She stares at them, holding a pillow to herself. She then looks up at a mirror placed across from her. Dina buries her head in the pillow, screaming.

INT. ART STUDIO - DAY

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR (V.O)

Pencils down.

Artists 1 and 2 are packing up to leave. Dina takes a breath and makes her way over to the Drawing Instructor's desk. He doesn't look up. Dina clears her throat.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)

(w/o looking up)

Do you need something?

DINA

Hi -uh, first off...how are you?

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

(looks up)

Dina. What do you need?

DINA

(hesitantly)

Yeah. I was just wondering if different models would be coming in.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

What?

DINA

Different models...figure drawing models...

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

We draw different models each week. Are you expecting someone specific?

DINA

No, I mean- I don't know how to explain it, um..

(breathe)

I feel like I only ever see one type of person coming in, and as a result, there's only ever one kind of person on the page.

Dina shows the Drawing Instructor the sketches from the course. He analyzes it.

DINA (CONT'D)

...Art is an expression of ourselves, right? I think there's power in how we depict things, especially people. But I look at everything I've drawn so far, and I can't help but feel erased from the picture.

The Drawing Instructor is silent for a moment, considering Dina's concern.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

Art is a funny thing. We express ourselves through it, but you don't get paid for expression alone. I'll say it; it sucks.

(MORE)

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)

The world shows partiality to some faces over others, but it's not personal, and I'm sorry if you take it to be that way. You want to make it as an artist, right? Don't focus on the face. Focus on what sells.

INT. ART STUDIO - DAY

Dina stares at Model 3, tapping the blank paper before her. She glances at a mirror to the left of the model and contemplates her reflection. She touches her hair and her face, then glances back to Model 3. Model 3 makes eye contact with Dina. Dina quickly retreats her eyes to the page in embarrassment. Dina taps the paper with the pencil. Her eyes glance at her reflection again. The lead of her pencil breaks. Dina takes a breath and starts to draw herself.

INT. ART STUDIO - MOMENTS LATER

Dina glances up from the page. The Instructor isn't sitting at his desk. She looks around and sees him hovering over Artist 1's work. Dina looks back at her page and continues to draw. She looks up once more, and he's gone again. Her eyes wander around looking for him.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

(whisper)

What are you doing?

DINA

Oh- I'm- uh-

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

This isn't what I assigned. Start over. There's 10 minutes remaining.

DINA

(indignant)

Wait-

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

It's not up for discussion, Dina.

DINA

But-

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

You sure you want to be here? I'm starting to feel like I made a mistake when choosing you for this class.

Artist 1 and 2 stop drawing and turn to look at Dina. Dina looks back at them. She's cornered.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)

10 minutes.

The drawing instructor takes her paper, and Dina watches him walk to his desk. Dina throws her head back with a groan.

INT. ART STUDIO - LATER

Dina's arms are folded over the desk with her face buried in them.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR (V.O)

Pencils down.

Artists 1 and 2 are in a line giving the Drawing Instructor their work. Dina reluctantly gets up and walks to his desk. Dina gives the Drawing Instructor her work. He takes it and doesn't look up at her. She stands there for a minute longer than she needs to.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)

We have nothing more to discuss. I understand how you feel, but I'm training you for greater disappointments down the line. You've been dismissed. Have a good day.

EXT. ART STUDIO - CONTINUOUS

Dina walks out of the studio and pauses for a moment. She brushes her fingers up and down the strap of her bag and screams under her breath. Dina re-enters the studio.

INT. ART STUDIO - NIGHT

The studio is dark and vacant. Dina looks behind her and sees darkness outside. She's standing in the doorway. Visibly confused. Dina steps back outside and it's daytime once more. She walks in, and it's dark. Dina moves inside, letting the door close behind her. Dina sits in her seat, and places her sketchbook on the desk. Before her is the mirror from earlier. A slight smile creeps onto her face, and she starts drawing.

INT. ART STUDIO - MORNING

Dina is sleeping, her head against the paper. Her face and hands are covered with pencil smears. The door to the studio opens, and footsteps approach Dina. Her eyes gradually open and travel up to see the Drawing Instructor peering down at her. He doesn't say anything. The Drawing Instructor walks around Dina to see what she created.

DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

May I?

He outstretches his hand. Dina hesitates for a moment before handing over her sketch. The Drawing Instructor examines the page. At this point, it's no longer the Drawing Instructor standing beside Dina, but a duplicate of herself in the instructor's clothing, examining the sketch. Dina waits expectantly.

INSTRUCTOR DINA

I thought we talked about this.

DINA

I know.

INSTRUCTOR DINA

And--

DINA

And I can't. I don't feel connected to what I'm creating, but I can't just give up on this profession. I can't see myself anywhere else; it's who I am. But how can I call myself an artist when the only pictures allowed to live in my mind are drawings of someone else? We deserve to be drawn too, don't we? Are we not beautiful?

Instructor Dina stands against the wall and slides down to the ground with the drawing in her hand.

INSTRUCTOR DINA

It's not about whether or not we--

DINA

Do you believe you are beautiful?

Instructor Dina doesn't respond.

DINA (CONT'D)

Don't do that...Don't let them decide who you are.

Instructor Dina holds out the drawing.

INSTRUCTOR DINA

This isn't what they want to see.

DINA

Who cares what they want to see? Our faces belong too. And if you aren't willing to accept that, how do you expect everyone else to? I'm tired of sitting around, waiting for someone to tell me I'm worthy. Aren't you?

A pause. Instructor Dina lets out a breath.

INSTRUCTOR DINA

Okay.

Instructor Dina looks to the center of the room. MODEL DINA poses on a stool. Instructor Dina takes a breath and walks towards her desk.

INT. ART STUDIO - DAY

INSTRUCTOR DINA

Today, we are going to try something different.

In the center of the room is Model Dina. Dina has the biggest smile on her face, tapping her desk in anticipation. Besides her are the artists 1 and 2 sketching the Model Dina. Then, in the center

is a model version of Artist 1. Artist 1 is now the person smiling where Dina originally was, with 2 other artists besides them. Then the same happens with Artist 2 and a model version of them. Multiple people get to be in the center both as an artist and as a model. Then we see Dina again.

INSTRUCTOR DINA (CONT'D)

You have 30 minutes. Pencils up.

REFERENCES

No sources were used for this screenplay, as everything was thought up by me.