

On Desks

I often think about the way I am perceived and for that reason, I guess, this very easily could turn into an essay on vanity. But it's difficult to write about perception, let alone admiration, when the self is unknown to the very body it resides in. I try to call out to it, or coax it from its spot behind ribs and cages with things that I remember once relating my identity to. But still, the self stays hidden. So I forgo the internal exploration and look toward the external. Recently, I've taken up the habit of taking pictures of my spaces. My college dorm room, my desk, my bed back home. My camera roll is filled with what seems to be the same couple of photos over and over again. It's not a habit I'm completely confused by, I've always been the type of person to take a picture at the first hint of wonder or beauty in a scene: the way the light trickles in through a window or my friends hanging Christmas lights. Somewhere deep in the depths of my phone, there is a picture of water in a glass cup, solely because something about the way the ice looked in the water was enough to make me want to cry. All this to say, I am always looking for truth in the things laid out in front of me.

I look at these photos of my spaces and I think they work to tell me something about myself. Maybe if you place all these photos side by side you could notice my habits. I could draw a line connecting each version to one another and stick a thumbtack into each one, noting *this is me*. But for all these photos, I love the ones on my desk the most. A few nights ago, some friends came over to my dorm, which I share with three other girls. All of us share a common space where our desks each took up a portion of the small room. One friend began to walk around the room, taking guesses as to whose desk was whose. On the first try he was able to match the desk to the person. This terrified and excited me at the same time. I wanted to ask him *how can you tell*. I already felt that the objects taking up residence on the plank of wood revealed something to me about myself, but in this moment I was reminded that others also witness and believe something to be true based on what they see in my corner of the universe.

There is a specific science to what one places on top of their desk. Possible objects include a lamp, pencils, and a calendar; but then there are the private matters of the heart and mind which get revealed. I read the spines of the books that line the edge where the desk meets the wall: *Breast and Eggs*, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Nox*, *Crush*. In the desk's corner that meets the wall's corner, another pile guarded underneath a small ceramic cat that I never got around to painting, despite the paintbrushes sitting idly with color pencils in an organizer across the vastness of this tiny little ecosystem. *Norwegian Wood*, *Homesick for Another World*, *Play as it Lays*, *A Tale for the Time Being*. Amongst both groups are other hidden artifacts. The ceramic cat also guards two comic books, a magazine, *Beginner's guide to digital painting in Procreate*, and my planner. Meanwhile, the barrier of books is also made up of a scrapbook and a photography book.

I take this all in and imagine that I'm seeing it from the eyes of a stranger, and by that I mean anyone who is not me. I can imagine how easy it is to assume certain things about me from the contents of my desk. I look at the books and think *oh, she must really like to read*, or I gaze over the art tools and posters of paintings hanging on the wall in front of me and think *this girl must be an artist*. But the lens fades and suddenly I'm back to looking at things with my own eyes; seeing these objects and knowing the truth behind them. The books that I keep buying and not reading, all because I'm trying to chase that feeling from when I was young and all I needed in order to find comfort and hope was a book. If you look closely you can tell which ones I have and haven't read by the condition of the pages and if dust lines their borders. The paintbrushes, give the appearance of constant use but in reality their hair fibers have grown hard and stuck together after months of neglect. And yet, despite the facade that I seem to have perfected, I still manage to look at my desk and search for the truth about myself within it. I look at the books, even the ones I haven't read, and think it says something about me that I chose these specific stories and these specific authors. The magazine which I

also haven't read in ages but I bought it because I wanted to be like the teens that created it: artistic, revolutionary, strategic. Even the paintbrushes hold layers of history because even though they are brittle now, back home they usually live in a cup full of water where they are constantly being put in a cycle of use and cleaning. Looking closely now, I can see remnants of dry paint on their handles.

I had been staring at the poster of paintings over my desk when I first recognized myself in the contents. The poster itself is small, roughly the length and height of six postcards lined up vertically. In the first panel the title "NON-BRAND" and the artist's name Caiguo-Qiang, and then in the remaining five panels, five of his works. At that moment I was fascinated by the second painting, of a woman with a made-up face applying lipstick. Her right hand is over her chest, clutching what seems to be a white cloth as her body turns to look off in the distance, almost as if she was looking towards the remaining three paintings in the length of the poster. I had stared at the work plenty of times, but in a moment of misperception I thought the lipstick she was holding was a cigarette, and for a second I recognized her as a reflection of someone I love and as a result, of me. At that moment, the lipstick wasn't a lipstick and she looked caught in a moment of stillness as she took in the imagined smoke. In her face and body, I see the shift in emotion as she feels the relief that comes with that inhale. Suddenly I'm back in that empty parking lot from a few years prior where my brother smokes in front of me for the first time and I saw his face tense in anticipation and then fall into a relaxed state. I stare at the made up girl in the same way I imagined I looked at him then, in some form of wonder and in fear. I felt that in a fleeting moment and even though I know that her hand holds lipstick all I can see is a cigarette. The desk walks the border between public and private, and though the poster is entity public, visible to anyone who enters the room, the truth of what that painting means is only relevant to me, because it is a truth that I made up. It doesn't make it any less real. Any less notable when I map the things that I find myself in.

I say the desk is both a private and public matter because while there are the things left exposed there are the things kept in drawers. Generally, the desk is more private than most public things. They are usually in one's personal space, and only available to be seen when the owner invites someone in. But here, where the personal space is shared with others, I've gotten comfortable in making my most private, public matters, like the things that reside on my desk, fully public. Or maybe it's that private has taken up a new meaning. Its new definition is found in the way random objects are found on my desk at given moments: a bra, an eyeliner, a bag of jalapeno chips. All things that continuously tell something about the owner of the desk in which they are found, but are only ever seen by those constantly in the space. My roommates will witness these moments of revealed self and add to their perception of me, and I've grown accustomed to it. But that's But the desk's inherent privacy comes again when guests are arriving and things are put back in their place. All that's left are the books, the paintbrushes, and the poster.

So what happens when the desk returns to its common state of calamity? When things are all out of place and a private life is all up to show. When I am working at my desk, like I am right now, and pull my eyes away from a screen or textbook, I see that a host of new objects have made their way to the desk like planets being pulled in by a gravitational force. That's what I think my desk is, something important enough to draw things in. Myself, of course, is one of those things, but there are others. Today that force brought my headphones in their case, my wallet, jolly rancher wrappers, a water bottle, and a napkin. Things that seem unimportant. But I feel like the same way one can have trouble looking at a person and understanding how their external self relates to their inner self, I look at my desk and am blinded by the idea these things are here not of their own volition. That the force that brought them here is me, and by virtue of the fact, they speak to my wants and needs. My obsession with drinking water and my newfound love for jolly ranchers. The headphones are still in

their case because I forgot to put them in when I first started working and now part of me is scared I will get distracted if I release them from the confines.

While to me, these things seem crucial in the understanding of my identity, I understand that in a way they still do not form the full picture of who I am. Because they end up on my desk freely, albeit never in a planned way, it makes me think there are parts of me, the parts I have mentioned I don't fully know or understand, that are not easily affected by the gravitational force. I think of my desk as a body, and the posters and books are like tattoos; constants in the desk's existence, maybe not fully realized in the eyes of others, but dripping with identity to its host. The wrappers, water bottles, etc, are like clothing. Things that dress the desk for an instant, and perhaps provide information about my taste and habits. But still, I feel as though none of these things unlock the self still hidden by ribs. Maybe for that, I need to look deeply into the drawers.

My drawers are organized, or at least they try to be. Little plastic containers hold and distinguish objects from one another. *This one is for my computer cord, and this one is for whiteout.* But I can't stop the way things sometimes overlap and infiltrate the other's assigned place. This is a screaming reminder to me that despite how I wish to go through the world, organized and prepared, I am always breaking at the seams a little. Letting one memory or thought to affect another. Through the screaming, I can't help but think *now we're getting somewhere.* But even as I think that I am getting the sneaking suspicion that if I really wanted to explore the most hidden parts, I would need to venture into the third drawer, and pull out my sketchbook. Which is a sketchbook in name only. Inside the pages are lined with scribbled words, pressed foliage, pieces of paper that hold notes or letters, and fine, some drawings and paintings. But there is a reason that it stays in the third drawer. Fear of it being seen and read is the main one. But also because in a way I am scared of it. Scared that the things I wrote in it then don't feel like words I would say now. Or that my drawings are bad

and so is my prose. What does it say about me then, that the thing that could probably provide the most answers, is the one I keep hidden in a drawer? Maybe it says that I'm scared of my own creations, and what they will tell me about myself, or worse, that they don't tell me anything. I guess in a way this too, provides more context to who I am, without ever having to open up its pages.

I said in the beginning that *All this to say, I am always looking for truth in the things laid out in front of me*. And I think that I have gotten that, some forms of truth from my desk. But maybe telling the truth doesn't always equate to telling the whole story. Maybe no matter how many instances of truth are revealed to me by the desk's surface, none of it could equate to the truth living inside me. Maybe I should have written this about my sketchbook if really all of this was just an exploration of the self. Maybe the fact that I didn't, though, helps me pry back another rib.