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Hello everyone! Thanks for coming and I'm excited to show you the work I've been doing. My name is Soren, I'm an illustration major born and raised in Portland Oregon and an artist entering the comic book industry. This thesis project is a way I can showcase my own potential as a storyteller, Illustrator, letterer, and designer. It has been a long but surprisingly short year making this project, which means I can show you all the process from beginning to end!

At the Table to your left you can see my comic and a few others I made previously printed out. You're free to grab and read them while I'm presenting. There are some free art cards and bookmarks on the table. If you would like to purchase a copy of Dejection, I'll be selling copies after the presentation.

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Content Warning before we begin, this story goes into detail about mental health issues, trauma, and suicide. Please be warned.

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I started this project in the Fall semester with one goal: make a complete comic by the end of the year, and every decision that followed was based on that outline. So a lot of what you will find initially in my thesis Journal is essentially word vomiting out ideas and scrambling them into some form of a useful concept. At the time I wanted to make a graphic novel which showcased the skills I had been practicing during my time at PNCA and would represent the best of my work. I also wanted this to test my skills at a professional level and see what would happen.

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Luckily this isn't my first foray into comics. As I have done two previously. They are somewhat rudimentary, but have given me a lot of experience in terms of sequential storytelling and reinforcing a professional work ethic. So moving forward with this project, I have a good foundation to work from

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With this project, a lot of the ideas I had had to do with dissolution, dissatisfaction and isolation, as those were themes screaming in my head at the time. So I ran with it, and in conjunction with the Research for Creative practice class encouraged me to research mental health from many different perspectives. My first question that I wanted to explore in a narrative format was how age changed your relationship with traumatic events. Can growing older ease the burden of hard moments, or keep them simmering in your mind.

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A recurring theme you'll hear during this presentation is time, everything had to fit in certain windows because given the scope of the project, if one part fell behind, everything else did. My ideation and writing followed this mindset. I would write as much as I could and discard what didn't work. I found that I'd write ideas that were good on paper, but were either way too long, way too complicated, or something that was obviously done before. It is quite easy to stumble your way into writing something you saw on TV.

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Eventually I settled on the idea for Dejection, focusing on a therapist finding his way out of a lifelong struggle with depression, at the same time a strange teenager comes crashing into his life. This idea felt simple enough for me to work with, but complex in its meanings and subtext. So I went running trying to figure out what the set pieces were and how the story would play out with these two characters. This is where the design work came into play.

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When designing their characters I first focused on what their primary emotions would be and tried to work off of that, and keep outfits in mind when thinking of a realistic setting. I chose to have New York as the location because it represented a key aspect of this story, passive avoidance and the bystander effect. The story of this comic focuses on how the avoidance of issues can only make them grow stronger, so having a hectic and chaotic city be the setting felt appropriate. People will likely pass you by without noticing, and since there are so many people, and so many crazy things happening on a daily basis, it all becomes something to avoid.

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Our protagonist Michael represents this avoidance, pouring his whole life into his job, and only focusing on the good memories from his past. Outside of that limited view, he doesn't have much. And due to time, and the degree of separation he has from life, the last remaining shred of his happiness comes from a baseball his friend had.

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This longing carries into his design, unkempt hair and beard with baggy eyes showing a lifetime of self-neglect, and an outfit a therapist usually wears, something unreflective of his true identity, which has been lost a long time ago. Creating this character means he is naturally passive, and antithetical to a typical action protagonist, meaning he needs someone to kick him into gear. Which is where Josh comes in.

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A teenager with a vicious drive and a desire to wreck his way through life. Josh is someone you would find starting a fight with someone just to feel anything, as his connection with purpose and self fulfillment is non-existent. I found his character particularly challenging because of time. Both characters had to share the screen together, but one would have to take priority over the other, meaning Josh is a secondary character fueling Michael's development.

For his development Josh is more lost and scared than Michael, in recovering from his own experiences he is seeking any form of distraction and attention he can get.

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This of course leads him to theft and counts of jail time. But he has been released without any form of care given to him. As of the point in this story, Josh is in a state of panic and needs someone to help him out of it, unfortunately the only person capable of that is Michael. Josh, on his own escapade, crashes into Michael's office and steals the memorial Baseball, leading to Michael losing it and chasing him across the city. This is where the bulk of the story takes place and is the centerpiece behind the action, as we see Michael struggle to reconcile with his past, and Josh's spiral into self destruction.

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Here I once again dealt with balancing the dialogue, pacing, and how much is told over the course of the story. Outlining and thumbnailing the process made it much easier to go over the project and check how everything flowed together. The challenge with this was creating something from nothing, and it was especially difficult given the scale of the project.

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What made it easier for me was to use google street view and try to map out the route they would take in the comic and think of fun ways to add challenges. I used this because 1): I needed a TON of references for NYC buildings because they're all very unique, and 2): it was great for environment shots with multiple angles present, as that would keep shots looking consistent.

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From that point on it would be a bunch of trial and error getting the page flow to look right before I moved on to the next. I do wish I would've spent more time on this part of the project, as building the foundation for the comic is the most important aspect of it, so more time will never hurt, and likely lead to a smoother production towards the final stages.

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Going out of the project for a moment, I was in late October when I reached this stage, I was moving between classes, writing, part time job, thumbnails, and more classes. It was very exciting but also quite overwhelming as working at this stage it is much harder to imagine a finished product. This was the other part of the thesis I was counting on, work life balance and my skills in managing a professional life where this project is standard. I want to work as a comic book illustrator, which means I should be expected to work well under pressure.

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So I was keeping check of my emotions and trying to make sure I stepped away when I was feeling overwhelmed. What helped and hindered me during this point was keeping the story in my mind all the time, thinking about the characters passively during class and what would make sense for them to be going through. This allowed me to research with a thesis in the back

of my mind, and use shower thoughts or random notes as inspiration. But it did mean I had a harder time separating work from life. A key skill I will be using NEXT TIME.

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Once I finished the thumbnails I went into layouts and started building references and assets for the comic while creating the proposal. And at the time I worked on getting the visual style of the comic ready to show off, additionally these early choices would allow me to have pivot points over winter break if I found myself needing to change a part of the story. This process was the remainder of my Fall semester, pitching my project, continuing to build assets, and beginning work on final pages. By the end of Fall I had completed 5 pages, and had planned to make 8 more pages over Winter break. I did do that. However, I did what no one else could. I burnt out before the semester even started!

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Turns out it's way easier said than done to follow a good work life balance, and unfortunately the weight of "falling behind" made me never stop working. I made 2 pages a week over the course of the 4 week break. I was on schedule, probably ahead of schedule. But I did lose a week after that just because I didn't budget my health into account. I brought myself to a scary point in my thesis where I had to stop and take a break.

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Once again, please take regular breaks and engage in physical activity to break up the monotony of sitting at a desk for 8 hours a day in shrimp pose. I certainly felt like I always had to be working, but the most important lesson of the thesis was managing my own life with daily grind of art. The most important part of this whole year was making sure I could have a healthy work ethic, and for that I needed to re-evaluate what I was doing.

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So, I changed my schedule to 1-2 pages a week, and maybe a 3rd if I had a lot of extra free time. And including mandatory stretches, burpees, and runs so that my body could use energy on something other than drawing. I was still following my schedule, and making sure I wasn't burning out... as much. That was the ugly truth I had to reckon with during this final semester. I was too deep to see where I came from, and too far from the end to see the exit gates. It was going to be a slog no matter what. So I tried to make the slog as fun as possible.

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I continued at the pace I did for the next couple of weeks, turning those thumbnails and roughs into final interiors. I jumped between mindlessly illustrating and correcting errors in proportions and page flow. It was fun, but not glamorous work. This process continued for the next... I would say, 2-3 months. I believe I finished the final illustration by the beginning of March. And wow, it felt strange to see all of the pages go from concepts to finalized pieces. So... I'll take you through a couple of the pieces to make sure all that time was worth it.

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If you remember from my proposal, here was the outline I had for the entire 40 page graphic novel. Pretty big and pretty loose thumbnails, but I saw the whole picture. But during the fall break, I wanted to cut the story down to the bare essentials, as I felt that I wouldn't be able to complete 40 pages in such a short time, or at least, not without consequences. With a lot of editing and restructuring of the story, I cut it down to 27 pages. This didn't erase the previous illustrations I made, it just made sure every scene packed a punch.

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For instance, the beginning scene with Michael in his office was 8 pages originally and focused more on the dialogue between him and the patient, but it felt unnecessary given the important of other scenes and character development, so I cut it down to 6 pages and prioritized Michael's thoughts, as then it strengthens the starting point before Josh arrives. I approached every scene with this mindset, making sure it only strengthened the narrative and helped keep viewers engaged.

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While I was balancing the narrative aspect of the comic, I was working to keep a consistent visual style throughout the book. I used brushes to mimic the style and pencil and ink work, including the use of hatching and cross hatching to add more texture to the figures. I always love hatching, but it usually means my hand hurts afterwards. I wanted to make sure everything was clear and readable, so that came down to balancing visual intensity with 3 parts, detail hierarchy, page flow, and efficient values.

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Like I mentioned I love detail but too much takes away from the illustration, so I kept the most important aspects like characters, props, and key areas in minimal detail, and if that wasn't possible, I would use value to make things fade into the background or pop to the front. During this time I would make sure that everything was working well in the transitions between panels, and how things looked in spreads.

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This was the plan I went through for the majority of February but was tabled for the midterm review. Where I was brought to Helioscope Studios to talk with additional working artists about my work as a whole.

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It was truly fascinating to be brought into a studio and seeing not only the practice, but attitudes of comic artists making a living. Even without the feedback, I learned so much about clarity, communication, and delivery. The central point of the feedback I got was to work on refining my page flow, values, and designs.

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Details that were in the back of my mind but got stuffed down due to the time crunch. I now had more confirmation that foundational research, asset development, and preplanning are the most important aspects of the craft, as they help you in dividends later. I gained so much useful feedback from this visit and it gave me a great view of what matters when communicating a story. This would be crucial when moving into the final stages of the visual development of Dejection.

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These final stages involved finishing the final 10 pages, and beginning the lettering process. Which all being said, is technically easier than illustrations, but a new challenge nonetheless. For these final illustrations I saved the first and last pages for the end of the semester, as that was when my style was at its most consistent and any rewrites I did were already accounted for.

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A special part of my process is rewriting dialogue within the story after the illustrations are complete. A process I will never follow in a work-for-hire position, but one suited for a self published product. After I drew a scene I would have the dialogue ringing through my mind and repeatedly check if it made sense given the facial expressions I drew. If it didn't I would alter the dialogue to make the scene even more powerful.

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Finally I moved onto the lettering placements and prep work before beginning the final stage of the project. I made sure all the captions and dialogue were fitting into the pages and contributed to the page flow. It was like putting together a puzzle piece I built from scratch. Then I moved onto the lettering, which I created in Adobe Illustrator and placed in InDesign, separated into three layers. The process felt simple but it is easy for uneven bubbles or a wrong font to screw up the entire feel of the dialogue. I made sure to keep a lettering book right next to me during the entire process, as I was flying by the seat of my pants. All being said, I think I did a good job on the lettering, I made sure the gaps between the text and the bubbles were appropriate and worked around the illustrations with the tails.

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An important thing to note about lettering is that the text you've written in your script may not always look good when placed in a bubble, so proper construction and placement is crucial for tone and intensity. Like this page for example. If all the dialogue were to be condensed into a single bubble, it would feel more flat. Spacing it out allows for pauses in conversations, or opportunities for someone else to cut in and interrupt. Like I mentioned before, small changes result in huge differences when lettering.

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My favorite process during this step was printing the comic and comparing it to other graphic novels. I was following rules, but also looking at other works to see what felt better. A lot of this checking was me asking myself: "Should the font be bigger, does it matter if I italicize this word?" Would it be stronger if I did _____".

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This whole process felt like the opposite of "death by a thousand papercuts" As if every small step I was doing made the comic come together. And without them, the project would collapse. I also can't stress enough how euphoric I felt, I finally got to see my work printed and ready to submit. This was one of the longest projects I've worked on and to see all the blood sweat and tears I put into it is undescrivable. But it's kind of like drinking cold water after running a marathon in 90 degree heat. What helped me the most was reading other comics and posing in unfathomable ways for reference.

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But as always, the work was not done yet, even after finishing the lettering process, I had to make the comic print ready, because I wanted to send this off to Comic Impressions, a professional printing company. I had done numerous prints here at PNCA, but since I'll be leaving in... oh god 27 days... I will have to find another means of printing my stuff. This was another opportunity to test my formatting skills and value work. As most of the illustrations I made came out muddy on the first and second pass.

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So after a lot of trial and error I sent off the project and got it printed. The majority of the work I have done since has been focused on marketing and prep work for this presentation. I have been consistently posting updates on this project on instagram since January, practicing what I hope to do once I graduate. I made bookmarks, art cards, posters so that this project can exist in more ways than one, and I made sure to publish this comic and behind the scenes work to my website for publishers and editors to see. I want to work as an illustrator and visual storyteller, so communicating my process is vital to my own identity and work ethic when a company is seeking employment.

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Looking back on this project from the other side of the thesis it has changed a lot even since the proposal, most of the ideas I presented have been clarified, and what didn't work has been removed. But at the heart of it is a story I couldn't get out of my head for the last 2 years. Ever since the pandemic it has felt to me like the world is growing more and more cold. Neighbors talk less, everyone looks down while walking, and businesses no longer support us the way we support them. We have forgotten what it means to be a community and that comes with the cost of guttural loneliness.

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This loneliness and apathy can lead even the best of us to shut down. To step away from the natural hardships of being a human. It's not a loud declaration, but a small passive force eating away at everyone across a long stretch of time. It can be a number of things ranging from generational trauma, systemic dissolution, corrupt people in power. But it is affecting us.

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For Michael and Josh, this force is unrelenting and has impacted them in the cruelest of ways. Michael has grown up shouldering the responsibility of a loss no one should have to bear, and cannot lose another to the same fate, but he loses himself in the process. Josh faces the pressure of intense shame and apathy, and without the support of friends or family he falls to vices as his last line of defense, desperately seeking any form of help.

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Sometimes when we are at our lowest it can feel like the world is cruel, unforgiving, and indifferent to us, and it most likely is. That is unlikely to change in the coming future and no system or institution is coming to save us. We are the ones who can help and support each other, even if that means sitting in silence with a friend, or sending that one insignificant text message. We can try our best to make up for who or what failed us. It's not a perfect solution, it might not even be the right one, but it is the best I can envision at the moment while the world burns around us.

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Making this project was hard, I couldn't stop thinking about these concepts, yet it is not easy to solve them. You're tempted to wrap a bow on the story and hope things figure themselves out, but nothing really ends. I'll graduate, make another project, get another job, meet new people, repeat the cycle. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing. Existing in this cycle is nothing new and we have figured out our own ways of getting by and making the best out of these situations.

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I wanted to write this story because it felt so important to have a piece of evidence out there of people scraping by, and coming out on the other side, at least a little better. Because that might just be the experience I have for the rest of my life, day by day, little by little, getting better.

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Reflecting on the last year, I am satisfied with what I accomplished. I managed to complete a graphic novel within an academic year. And I would like to continue that process. Luckily that can mean a lot of different things, I could do work-for-hire gigs and illustrate covers and interior pages for writers independently. Or work for bigger companies like Dark Horse, Oni Press, Marvel, DC, etc. But I likely have a long way to go before those opportunities come knocking. In the meantime, I will continue to practice my skills with self publishing and tabling to meet more artists and hopefully grow a community of my own.

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I do need to make money, so the process of this will be time consuming and contain hundreds of cold emails and job applications. But my priority through all of this will be on my physical and mental health. At the beginning I mentioned my goals when working on this thesis, don't die. That is still going to apply to my life. I will not kill myself working behind a desk, there is a healthy way to make art for a living and I will make sure to always work towards that goal. I am still a very young artist, and that comes with the freedom to stumble my way into jobs and come out the other end with knowledge. Because it seems like that is the way you succeed, by failing upwards.

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I am so incredibly grateful to have completed this project, and am so thankful to everyone who has helped me through this process. To my friends, family, and mentors, whom I certainly couldn't have done this project without. From the bottom of my heart. Thank you!