

Spiritual Symbolism & Unmasked Identity: The Healing Art of Sarah Renzi Sanders

By Jasmine Kwok

Surrealism has no limits-- it tests the boundaries of the human imagination and spirit. Whether it's a reflection of a nostalgic memory or a foreshadowing into the future, abstractness holds a beauty that taps into the unconscious. Without realizing it, viewers may look inwardly as they reminisce about the past or question parts of their identity. Sometimes, artists are unaware of the burdens they hold within-- paintings can release that inner tension through colorful palettes. Somehow, even through the abstractness and mystery of it all, surrealism provides an intimate glimpse into an artist's life that perhaps others could see themselves in. Specifically, Sarah Renzi Sanders, an artist based in Washington D.C., uses her art to explore different identity roles and spread awareness about mental health. Through an interview, Sanders has shared details about her artistic journey.



Art has become her refuge. Especially as a mother of three, her life is constantly bustling and moving. As long as she could remember, she was somehow creating or teaching art, until her craft came to a halt after her third child was born. Newborns take up every ounce of time-- many nights go unslept and days are hectic with juggling work and kids.

“I felt like I needed something of my own outside of being a mother,” Sanders mentioned. “So I started to create.” Painting again became her form of self expression and reflection. During naps and school days, she would squeeze in that time for herself to tune back into her creative passion. Paired with meditation, her artwork displays her fascination with imagination and symbolism-- there appears to be this tranquil, mystical ambience to her art that brings us into a calmer state of mind.

Underneath the whimsical, vibrant color palette and healing nature of her art, Sanders addresses heavy topics- the societal expectations of being a woman, anxiety, depression, and other states of mind in our modern world- while intertwining those universal subjects with her own childhood and present life. Her bright color arrangement, made out of her favorite shades, somewhat masks the darker aura behind her pieces. Vibrant hues of blues, pinks, greens, and oranges, and yellows are consistent throughout her work. Upon first glance, her pieces all seem to radiate with sunshine and joy.

“I found that when I stuck to this color palette, it was much easier to create a cohesive body of work,” Sanders stated. “I also use these bright pastels to make the subject matter more digestible. I think



confronting these difficult topics while using this bright color palette allows the work to reach more people.”

Surrealism gently introduces sensitive issues-- her art does not directly illustrate the stigmatization behind mental health but rather uses symbolism to encourage viewers to pause and really observe the art, thus enabling them to think deeply about her intended message.

Sanders observed, “I believe as women, we are expected to be so many things for so many people, which often causes anxiety and depression. I use surrealism to express this because visually, it’s the only way I know how.”

Mental health and gender norms often go hand in hand. Throughout their lives, many women are trapped under this impossible expectation of perfection and domesticity-- even with modern day movements and progressions, women still battle sexism and discrimination. This preconceived idea that women are passive and moldable can trigger a spiral into anxiety and depression, as they feel that they have to follow these expectations no matter the cost.

“I wanted to express this pressure for perfection that women in all stages of life feel in our modern society,” Sanders said.

Struggling with the notion of perfectionism herself, Sanders once devoted her art to simply please people:

“I was creating art I thought others would like.”



For years, she buried her traumatic experiences to paint what she thought the world wanted. Eventually, however, Sanders began using art as a pathway to heal her soul and confront the past she has concealed for so long. She now tells stories from the heart-- nostalgia, facades, and revealed identity are all acknowledged in her symbols. From masks to a third eye, the artist truly conveys her long road towards self-expression and embraced identity.

In the vibrant environment of Washington D.C., Sanders has surrounded herself with supportive and talented artists. She began to go outside of her own bubble and exhibit her work in public spaces, such as Femme Fatale, a local pop-up shop uplifting female creatives. From then, she has also immersed herself in opportunities that connect art and the spirit, like the gallery and meditation community Latela Curatorial, founded by Marta Staudinger.

“It was here [D.C.] where I learned to really create from my soul and share my authentic self in my art. I am so grateful to the women in the

DC art community that have encouraged and inspired me in my journey,” Sanders reflected.



Especially when tackling topics such as mental health, viewers connect most strongly with authenticity. Knowing that the artist, who was able to produce something magical out of darkness, went through similar struggles, there is a greater sense of connectivity and optimism. It takes courage to share such a vulnerable moment in our lives. Yet, starting a conversation shines light on the commonness of mental health struggles and encourages others to speak up.

“We have to talk about depression, addiction, and anxiety to remove the stigma. I hope I am doing my part by telling my audience that it is ok to not be ok,” Sanders declared. “We all have trauma and it is necessary to talk about it in order to heal ourselves.”

The genuinity behind her art is applicable to all aspiring artists who wish to expand horizons with their craft.

As Sanders encouraged, “Find your own unique form of magic and share it with the world. The right people will be attracted to you when you share your authentic self.”