For my 2019 summer FURSCA research project, I developed a series of oil paintings titled “Normative Discontent of the Modern Woman”. I chose this title for my project because my paintings were created so my audience and myself can explore narratives and content dealing with women’s never-ending daily pressures to conform to societal beauty expectations and how those behaviors negatively impact women of all ages. The main goal of this project was to create open communication to a wider audience about the content of my work so we may try to raise awareness about the serious issues involved, such as eating disorders in middle school, higher rates of female body dysmorphia, and how a social media wave is creating exponentially more insecure women and girls.

My original plan to deliver these messages was to create images that had a satirical take on the way women alter their bodies. I chose satire because I thought it would be relatable to my audience, I felt it was a unique way to deliver such messages and I believed it would help illustrate the ridiculousness of some lengths women go to attain beauty. An example is the image I developed of me almost completely nude with the exception of large, purple, balloons in place of my breasts. I thought this was an appropriate simultaneous representation of the massive increase of women receiving breast augmentations in recent history as well as the visualization of what it feels like to have pressured desire for larger breasts in order to be beautiful.

Now I really liked this idea. I worked through several versions of my draft before I felt the idea of a satire element was the way to go. So I started the FURSCA program fully intent on creating this original series of satirical representations. I used my supply funds to order everything I would need for this project. Since I was creating my own canvases, I ordered 20 yards of canvas, 40 individual stretcher bars and a gallon of gesso. I also needed to buy 8 tubes of paints, a dozen new brushes, a quart of paint thinner and a bottle of liquin medium. I ended up ordering at least a dozen books as well to research my topics on women and body image.

When my supplies came, I created all of my canvases, I drew out all of my image ideas and I began to layer on the paint. But, the further I got with this project the more I felt like there was something I wasn’t doing right. No matter how much I liked the idea in theory, the real execution wasn’t as enjoyable. And my advising professor helped point that out to me. He showed me some technical errors I made, but more importantly, he showed me the disconnection between me and my work. In the original images I created, there was little evidence of why I wanted to tackle such serious female issues; what did I have to do with any of this?

So thanks to the advice of my teacher, I decided to take this project on a detour. Halfway through FURSCA, I began developing different imagery about my own personal experiences with body image, such as my rollercoaster feelings of body dysmorphia and my childhood struggle with an eating disorder, just to name a couple. When I did this, I found it actually harder to develop images and compositions I felt good about. But when I did, I felt far more satisfied with the result. It was so cathartic to put more of my own personal experiences out on the canvas for the world to view and I think the audience connections are a lot more special because of that as well.

In the next year, I plan on exhibiting this work in gallery shows both at Albion College for the Senior Exhibition as well as other national shows I’m accepted to. I also anticipate showing my work at the 2020 Elkin Isaac Research Symposium. This project has prepared me for not only my senior year at Albion but it’s also prepared me for after college. After school, I’ll have a body of work to show and I’ll have the experience to keep building this body and more all on my own. I know more lessons about what it takes to be an artist. I’ve learned what it’s like to create a cohesive series of paintings; I was in the studio by myself all day for days at a time; I struggled with the frustration of not knowing what solution is the right one since there’s not always one answer. And after learning all of that, I just know even more now that that is how I want to spend my life and my career. I can thank the FURSCA committee and the generous donors for making that possible.