

Ligorano/Reese



These Artists Turned Fitbit Data into a Connected Canvas

By Chris, Dec. 12, 2014



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The artistic duo LigoranoReese have been collaborating as a team on amazing projects since the mid 1980s. But Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese's latest exhibit is a phenomenal, interactive self-portrait derived from Fitbit and psychological data.

To say we were intrigued by the exhibit is an understatement—so we caught up the artists to learn exactly how the idea came about and all the intricate work that went into each portrait. Read on for the full interview.

And if you're local to the San Francisco Bay area, you can see **I•AM•I** in person at the Catharine Clark Gallery until January 3, 2015. [Here's how to find out more](#) about the exhibit.

How did the original idea to visualize Fitbit data come about?

A couple of years ago, we began to think about painting a portrait using someone's data and personal metrics. This idea grew from technology we designed of painting data using woven fiber optic thread connected to LEDs as a kind of canvas. We call these pieces "fiber optic tapestries" and we see them as part of the tapestry tradition connected to the history of textiles in human culture.

The first piece "50 Different Minds" (2010-12) was inspired by the Bauhaus artists Josef and Anni Albers. This piece uses public information from Twitter feeds and airflight data in real time to make patterns and colors on the fiber optic threads.

The Quantified Self phenomenon really inspired **I•AM•I**. We were intrigued with how society and people's image of themselves are changing with the ability to self-measure with apps and devices like Fitbit. We felt it was meaningful to use this process as a way to make a portrait of someone.

Do you remember what you were doing when the idea came to you?

We were visiting Chicago and went to the Art Institute when we saw Lucas Cranach's Adam and Eve paintings – something just clicked. We had started experimenting with internet surveys like Moodscope and Track Your Happiness and we got the idea we could use these type of surveys to input one's data, and they could be a way to interact with an artwork.

This was also about the time that Fitbit became popular. And we asked ourselves how could we combine both types of data: the psychological and the physical to compose a dynamic full body portrait.

This didn't come out of left field – we'd already been interested in portraiture and finding ways to expand it for a number of years. Earlier works were video portraits in

the shape of clocks – these sculptures have video screens in place of clock faces and are in the shape of bar clocks and alarm clocks to explore various aspects of time and how people embody it.

Have you been a Fitbit user for a while?

We've been using Fitbit for a couple of years. Nora got the first one (the One) and we used her data to experiment with. I got mine (the Flex) 8 months ago, along with the Aria scale.

How did you choose what Fitbit data to ultimately integrate?

One of the great things about Fitbit is its open API and the ability to interface and interpret one's data in a number of ways. We thought Fitbit was a fantastic data recording device with its ease for interaction in the way of uploading information to one's account.

We are making a portrait using very personal activities that differentiate someone clearly and are not burdensome to input. We chose Steps, Distance, Activity scores, and Weight Gain and Weight Loss as the parameters of making our portraits.

So if you are viewing I•AM•I for the first time, how would you explain how to interpret it?

The subjects of I•AM•I become familiar with and easily learn to read and recognize the patterns and colors of their activity and emotional stats over a short period of time. It's a type of literacy.

We realized right off the bat that we needed a way to frame the data as a timescape, we looked at color systems that depict time – in Thailand days of the week have a specific color. So we decided to use them. This allows a person to see their data and know the day of the week it was collected from.

We also needed a starting point for colorizing feelings and emotions and discovered that Robert Plutchik, a psychologist, had developed a color chart for emotions. These became the basis for the emotional patterns we use. It's kind of like making a portrait using procedures and instructions like the artist Sol Lewitt.

Or as they often say, RFTM. (Read the F***ing Manual.)

How long did it take to create? The design looks incredibly intricate.

It took about 18 months to make. The fiber optic threads are woven on a hand loom. And we also work with very talented weavers. Nobody is weaving fiber optics on both the warp and weft like we are. We also work very closely with a team for the software and hardware design. Besides the programming of the data and creating patterns in light from it, we're pulling data from Fitbit to our server several times a day and contacting the subjects via SMS or email to report on and input their emotions. So it's a complicated system. Our subjects interact with their portrait remotely, we designed the piece to be controlled through a user account through a frontend web interface.