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Elusive Boundaries

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I sat and stared incredulously at the television screen as a commercial flashed by. I saw my grinning face, ten years younger, peeking out of a fur hood, bopping along to the inane jingle of the advertisement. My mother, for one sentimental reason or another, had pulled out a tape of the commercials I had acted in as a child. Intrigued, I leafed through a scrapbook that documented my short acting career, gingerly turning each page and wondering how much I had directly contributed to reinforcing cultural stereotypes. I had been cast as everything from an Eskimo to a Siamese princess, but, as always, a model Asian.

I do not define myself by such narrow, stilted stereotypes, but questions of my present definition of identity arose through reflecting on my past. "Chinese American" - what does that phrase mean? Should it be hyphenated? Or should it be "ABC (American Born Chinese)"? How Chinese am I? Am I too Americanized? I decided to explore these questions through a series of paintings and drawings for my studio art thesis. Through this process I was also trying to find my identity as an artist. My thesis transformed into something that I could not have even imagined seven or eight months ago. Process cannot be emphasized enough, and I came to satisfying solutions only by struggling with and working through a number of problems. Through the accumulation of small revelations, I realized that identities do not necessarily have concrete boundaries; rather, they are constantly shifting in a continuum as I attempt to define them through art making.

When I started in September, I had a concrete idea of the direction that I wanted to take, to incorporate elements from Chinese and European folklore as a metaphor for the struggle that I was having in defining my identity. As I began to sketch and do research, I quickly discovered that this route was not going to work. Creating

paintings from folktales seemed too clichéd (Fig. 1) and it did not convey any sense of emotion. However, I became more and more fascinated with one particular character in Chinese folklore, the Monkey King. My mother had read stories about him to me as a child, and seeing the books again brought back so many memories that I hadn't thought about in years: visits to my grandparents' apartment, trips to Chinatown, rituals my family used to do for Chinese New Year's, White Rabbit candies, and going to Chinese school on Saturdays. It brought back many of the experiences that made me who I am now. This was the direction that I needed to take, to use the Monkey King as a key for the part of me that I had forgotten out of neglect.

I used the storybooks as a basis for a series of sketches of the Monkey King in different poses. I began with pencil, but I found that the fluid lines of the poses were the most intriguing element, so I switched to a thick, chisel-tipped marker. As I became more confident, I was able to pare the drawings down to 2 or 3 lines. I wanted to incorporate these loose lines into my painting. I then thought about observing real monkeys, because the drawings did not seem accurate enough. The only way that I could capture fluid lines was to see the monkeys in action. I made a few trips to the zoo with my sketchbook and a marker and some charcoal (Fig. 5, Fig. 19). Different species presented unique challenges; some were extremely active, others hid in the foliage, and some were lethargic. The active ones allowed me to focus on drawing movement, and I felt my lines loosening up. The monkeys provided a means for observation from life, something that I had been missing since beginning the thesis. I have always felt that drawing from life is one of my strengths, and before this I was unsure of how to incorporate this skill when I was dealing with concepts that called for more abstract interpretations.

The more I worked with the monkeys, I realized that I needed to incorporate more personal elements into the paintings, to connect it to my own emotions. The monkeys alone did not signify anything to the viewer. By juxtaposing the monkeys with personal imagery, I could convey yet another level of meaning. I collected recent photos of my family to use as source material. This led me to look through old family albums, where I found newspaper articles about me and my sisters, both in Chinese and English. They were about events and moments in my life that I had completely forgotten. For example, I had won a contest when I was four years old for the "Healthiest Child" in Chinatown, and my photo was printed in the local Chinese paper. Ironically, I was sick that day with a fever, and furthermore did not live in Chinatown. Other articles appeared in the local town paper, including a story that pictured us as the model Chinese family celebrating Chinese New Year's. I used these images in my paintings because they reflect the struggle of defining the self within a conflicting cultural context. Combining the monkey with the images and text of these experiences acted as a bridge between the Chinese and American identities because the concept of the monkey transcends the barriers of language and culture.

An essential duality exists within my work, which revolves around the struggle of defining the boundaries of my Chinese and American identities. Abstract and representational images, full-spectrum and monochromatic palettes, the English and Chinese languages. In much of the work that I produced in the fall semester, these elements were in constant conflict, and overall they were not visually resolved. For example, I did a painting using fragments of images - my face, a monkey, an eye (Fig. 4). I painted these fragments in rectangles that were taped

off from the rest of the canvas. I then proceeded to paint colorful, gestural strokes around the rectangles, and placed text around the edges to form a border. I was hoping that the gestural strokes, taken from sketches done at the zoo, would unify the composition. If anything, the composition seemed crowded and unfocused. The bright colors did not seem to mesh or have a point, other than the fact that I was attracted to bright colors. This painting was indicative of my mindset at the time. I was unsure of who I was, where one part of me ended and another began. Somehow I knew that if I found a way to settle some of these issues, I would find a visual solution as well.

The pull between the abstract and representational modes of painting has acted as a source of both inspiration and frustration. At this point I still have not found a completely satisfactory solution for integrating the two modes within one composition, but this process has brought me closer to finding it. The idea of the monkeys, inspired by Chinese folklore, led me in the direction of abstraction early on in the fall semester. As I transferred the drawings onto canvas, I noticed that I enjoyed working with the paint in such a loose manner. I was no longer concerned with a representation of reality, but rather the actual physical properties of the paint became more important. I wanted to incorporate abstraction into my work because it challenged me to convey a message without relying on representation. However, I still felt that I needed to use a more representational mode because I was more comfortable with it, since it came to me much more naturally. This presented a problem: with little practice in abstraction, how was I going to paint at the same level that I had achieved with representational painting to create convincing work? Obviously the first few attempts were less than successful. I simply placed fragments of images on the canvas and painted gesturally around

them in the hopes that it would come together, but instead it turned into a confused, jumbled mess (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). A relationship did not exist between the brush stroke and the image, they were isolated from each other even though they were on the same canvas.

I discovered that relationship in the form of Chinese ink paintings, and ironically, it took more than a semester for me to look at them. It had not even occurred to me until I had a conversation with Qing-Min Meng, the Chinese painting professor, who asked me to consider who my audience would be; simply Americans, or also Chinese? How would someone coming from a non-Western background interpret the work? I realized that I had been ignoring a visual tradition within one of the cultures that I am a part of. Perhaps it is indicative of my previous attitude toward the Chinese part of me: willful ignorance. Both of my parents grew up immersed within the Chinese culture but did not choose to raise me and my sisters in that manner. My mother moved from Hong Kong to Arkansas when she was twelve, and my father was born in New York and grew up in Chinatown. They decided to settle in the suburbs of New Jersey, where I have spent most of my life. I was raised with an unconscious "American is better" attitude, and, as a child, this attitude led me to reject the Chinese culture. I understand spoken Cantonese to some extent, but I cannot speak or write it. I have finally become conscious of this attitude, and I have been trying to become more aware of Chinese culture rather than let it dictate the boundaries of who I am.

I feel strongly that the written word is very much connected to the perception of identity, especially within the media. Many cultural stereotypes are disseminated and reinforced in newspapers, magazines, and books; the accuracy of these

sources is never questioned because of the patina of authority that surrounds them ("I read it in the newspaper, therefore it must be true.") I had toyed with the idea of combining text with images in an attempt to question the "truth" behind these texts, to redefine the identity that was presented. I found the perfect opportunity in newspaper articles about myself and family members that I had found in a scrapbook. The text treated my family in an extremely superficial manner, by making many assumptions about who and what my family was, and presented us as the model of a cultural stereotype. By combining this text with carefully chosen images, I questioned the validity of the statement that the text made and pointed out its underlying condescending tone.

I experimented with a number of methods for applying text to canvas to achieve the maximum contrast between the text and the image (Fig. 3, Fig.4). I first applied vinyl lettering to the canvas and then painted over it, then peeled the lettering off, thus exposing the unpainted surface underneath. These letters were not large enough for the scale that I was working on, so I bought stencils, which gave me more control over the colors and clarity of the letters. I explored other avenues, such as photocopy transfers using acrylic matte medium and printing on canvas, but they were not nearly as effective.

As I worked with the text, my viewpoint towards its use took on new angles. Again, with the realization of my ignorance towards Chinese art and culture, I explored language as a symbol of culture and how I could use the two systems of writing at the same time. After criticizing and tearing down the existing boundaries as dictated by the media, I needed to reconstruct my identity from the bottom up. The content shifted as the text's usage changed; rather than using text from the

newspaper articles, I decided to use text that I had written about personal experiences. I chose the same method, thinned oil paint with a brush, to apply both Chinese and English to the canvas. I was seeking unity between the image and the word, as I was trying to bring the disparate worlds of Chinese and American culture together.

During Wintersession I took advantage of the resources available in the Art Library by looking at the work of other artists. I wanted to become more in tune with the tradition of oil paint as well as with contemporary work. The research led me to explore Chinese painting, and I was attracted to works created by masters of the Southern Sung school, such as Ma Yuan; they harbored a beautiful tension between the abstract and representational. The brushstrokes were so flowing, confident and bold, yet the entire composition conveyed such space and a sense of place. I was also greatly intrigued by the use of negative space to create a composition that moved the eye across the entire expanse of silk or paper. The monochromatic, inky palettes of many of the paintings also aided in unifying the composition. These discoveries presented themselves as possible solutions for the problems that I had been struggling with during the fall semester.

After looking at the Chinese ink paintings, I made a series of sketches, both on paper and stretched canvas (Fig. 7, Fig. 11)). I chose a monochromatic palette that echoed the inky browns, blues and greens of those works as opposed to the multicolored palette that I had been utilizing previously with little success. This shifted the viewer's attention away from the garish colors to the image that I was trying to create. The choice also fit within the context of the work; there was a reason for a monochromatic palette rather than colors selected at random.

These sketches provided a basis for much of the work that I have done since Wintersession (Fig. 8, Fig. 9). In these sketches, I was attempting to explore the use of the gestural brushstroke that was reminiscent of landscape imagery. I also wanted to play with composition, moving away from the crowded jumbles that I had created in the fall, to using large areas of space that would convey a sense of depth. I began to incorporate other elements into these landscapes. Again I inserted fragmented images drawn from scrapbooks and photos as well as from life, but rather than isolating them from the abstract brushwork, I made them appear as if they were emerging from the "landscape". I also inserted text taken from journal entries that I had written about conflicting feelings about my identity instead of the newspaper articles. All of these elements gave a greater sense of personal connection with the work.

The process through which I approached the large "landscape" paintings (Fig. 12, Fig. 13) was very different from my usual route. Rather than planning the composition precisely, I held a general idea about the placement of the elements and let them evolve as I painted. I did not envision a concrete image of the final product. As I put down the first layer of gestural brushstrokes, I felt my way through building thicker layers of paint and glazes. I was no longer dictating what was happening, but instead was following my intuition. In a sense this has been liberating because there was nothing "real" that I needed to stay true to. I could more easily convey emotions and a state of mind through these abstract marks. By giving up control, I harbored the fear that I would destroy something that was working by adding too much paint. This fear was paralyzing at times, and made me indecisive about what step to take next. After working on the first two

paintings of the triptych with this new approach, I decided that the third would include a return to this control.

As I developed ideas for the third painting (Fig. 14) and talked to Bunny Harvey, my advisor, it occurred to me that much of the work I had been doing was some form of self-portraiture. Although I did not necessarily use a representation of my face, I used other elements (my name, my family, the monkeys) to stand for the self. I reasoned that if I wanted to return to the sense of control that I normally had while painting, why not do a self portrait for the third part of the triptych? As the central painting, the realist style and wider palette would provide a needed contrast to the "landscapes". I was interested in conveying a sense of depth, but this time in a representational context. I decided to put myself in the studio, wearing everyday clothing, which is yet another aspect of how I actually see myself. I was back in my comfort zone and I enjoyed doing this painting. I tried to work the gestural feeling of the landscapes into areas of the shirt, but the abstract marks did not completely disappear. They began to creep in at the corners, but still worked with the realist nature of the painting to create a sense of depth. In this case, I did not feel that the inclusion of the third character of my name was necessary as I had originally planned. I felt that the portrait itself stood for my name, whether in English or Chinese.

The name is the most visible signal of identity; it is an indication of where you are coming from, partially how you define yourself and how others view you. For example, my parents decided to give me an English name as my first name and a Chinese name for my middle name. This speaks volumes about their attitude towards integrating the two cultures in which they existed and how they could best

raise their children within this context. They felt it was important for me to have an English name, so that I would be “accepted” in school, but it was important to them to give me a Chinese name as well. Other parents feel differently; some only name their child in their native language and allow them to have an English nickname and others prohibit even that. The usage of the name becomes a reflection of how one navigates between cultures.

I explored this theme in a number of ways after I realized that I had forgotten how to write my name in Chinese. I remember lying in bed one morning during Wintersession and being unable to recall how to do it; in fact, a mental picture of what it looked like did not even exist. This fact, a part of who I am - one of the most prominent signifiers of one’s identity - had been forgotten. I could not believe that something so simple and basic to one’s identity could slip away so easily. I also saw this as part of a larger loss of knowing my heritage. I found the written characters, and I began to fill up pages and pages of writing my name over and over again, with pens, pencils, ink and brush, paint, everything I could think of. Only through repetition and practice could I remember my name.

After the cathartic process of writing the characters out repetitively, I came upon using them within the paintings. This partly comes from the influence of contemporary Chinese artists such as Gu Wenda and Xu Bing, who both play with text and language. I decided to link the format of a series of paintings to my name. Each painting, in a series of three, would contain one part of my name. The first part, (Lee), is the familial name. (Mon), the second, is the generational name which I share with my sisters. Lastly, (Ting) is my personal name. Originally, I planned to hang the large, horizontal paintings as a

triptych, which referred to the long tradition of Chinese scroll painting and landscapes. I have since decided that the paintings are more visually effective when hung individually, so they will be displayed on two separate walls.

The possibilities of my Chinese name in other forms presented themselves. For example, I rediscovered a chop, or stamp, of my name that had been carved in Singapore, a gift from my mother. I found that the printed image was too small, perhaps a half inch square, so I reproduced the carving on a piece of linoleum. Without much printing experience, I made a series of prints on paper using various techniques. I wanted to use the image of the chop on the series of "landscape" paintings. I thought that the sharp edges would provide a pleasing visual contrast to the loose, less defined brushstrokes. However, I had a difficult time transferring the image onto the textured canvas, so the edges are blurred. Although I was not initially thrilled with the results, I began to see the prints as more integrated into the painting because of the imperfect transfer. I also realized that it could be seen as a lack of confidence in concretely defining my identity. After a conversation with Bunny, I tried burnishing the linoleum, which gave a much better print. I see this part of the project as continuing on its own through paper, and I am experimenting with printing the chop on large sheets of rice paper.

The concept of making rubbings of family gravestones was inspired by some charcoal rubbings (Fig. 18) I had done of the linoleum block. I had been thinking about my grandfather often because my family traditionally visits his grave a week before Easter. I have not been able to participate in the visit since starting college away from home. I felt like I was missing out, not only on an important familial ritual but something cultural as well. By making a trip to the cemetery to do the

rubbings, I was in a way performing the ritual again. I also saw it as a way of directly involving my family in the process. I was able to talk about a number of issues that I have been working on with my thesis, and it opened a path for me to discuss issues of identity with them, something that I was never able to do before. I did not understand any of the rubbings because they were in Chinese, but my mother translated them for me. They stated which province and town where my grandfather had been born as well as the date. They were beautiful - the crisp, sharp lines of the characters contrasted with the dark charcoal marks that surrounded the characters. I loved the textural feeling that the rubbings conveyed, echoing the thick layers of paint I was applying to the canvas.

The idea for the fourth painting (Fig. 15, Fig. 16) developed through a conversation I had with Carlos Dorrien, the sculpture professor, about the use of names. With the "landscape" paintings, he felt that the red characters called for a great scale as compared with the other elements. With this advice, I pushed the size of the character to fill the canvas on a monolithic scale. The actual style of the character was derived from the rubbings of my grandfather's headstone, thus providing a solid, sculptural quality that was lacking in the "landscape" paintings. Again I wanted to play with the juxtaposition of English and Chinese, so I superimposed some writings I had done about a recent experience that I had had which questioned the boundaries of my Chinese identity. The writing also acts as a texture on the character, giving it a rougher appearance and playing with the edges (boundaries) of the character. I also improved the technique of printing the chop onto canvas, and incorporating the rectangular form into the painting seemed like a way to unify the disparate elements of Chinese characters, writing, self-portrait and monkey. The strict linear repetition of the chop lent a stronger composition to the

canvas, and made a reference to the traditional use of the chop as a mark of identification for both the owner and creator of Chinese paintings.

Throughout the year I have been using the Art Library as a resource for inspiration by looking at a number of artists' works. Many of the artists and styles may not have impacted the actual visual output of my work, but rather have influenced the thought process behind the creation of many of the paintings and drawings. These artists were often recommended through conversations with professors about specific issues, whether formalistic or content-wise, that needed resolution.

Dialogues with other students and an art history class, 20th Century Contemporary Chinese Art, also acted as catalysts. Early on I was looking at Egon Schiele's self-portraits, for the honest and direct way in which he was able to convey his personality. Cy Twombly became a source for more formal qualities in his use of lines and how to create such lines on canvas. I drew a number of parallels and felt a definite connection to Mark Tansey's work, and I especially drew from his later paintings; he often utilized a monochromatic palette in a hyperrealistic style. I was very much drawn to his palette after struggling with color for much of the fall and decided to start as simply as possible, and I was impressed by the technical skill needed to achieve such a high degree of realism. However, Tansey's most striking works combine layers of silkscreened text with realistic elements such as a landscape and figures; the abstract and representational intersect and cross over in these works. I had a wealth of artists and designers to draw ideas about the combination of image and text. Tibor Kalman and Barbara Kruger are two of the many artists that I looked at who successfully create a dialogue between the meaning of the text and what the image represents, and I tried to transform some of those concepts to serve specific purposes within my own paintings.

I am continuing to explore other means of self portraiture. In a conversation with Bunny, we discussed the concept of using objects to depict the self. I possessed one item in particular that seemed appropriate: a large soup spoon. This object is significant in a number of ways, because it originally came from a restaurant that my grandfather owned in Harlem in the 1960s. My family continues to use these spoons in our everyday cooking. Many connections exist between this object and my family, so I felt that the spoon could act as a symbol for the self. I used it in a number of sketches on paper, mostly using oil bars (Fig. 10). Again, I used text as a contrasting two dimensional element to the faithfully rendered drawing/painting. I was not thrilled by the results, but I found enough pieces within the compositions that I want to continue pushing this concept in future projects.

The past two semesters of working on my thesis have been the most challenging to date, and I have realized that it is simply the beginning of a constantly evolving process that will continue for the rest of my life. I have actually developed a few projects that I would like to pursue in the future as inspired by my thesis, which include a photography project in which I will spend a week with my grandmother following her around Chinatown and interviewing both her and the people that she interacts with every day. She exists in a completely different world than I do, and our paths only meet on the rare occasions on which my family ventures into Chinatown for a visit. What is that world like? Does she buy fruit every day? Or ride the bus? Does the fish vendor on the corner of her street greet her as she walks by?

Throughout this year, I have become more aware of my habits as an artist and developed more mature approaches to the artistic process. For the first time I felt like I was creating work that was truly connected to me, in the sense that it was no longer an assignment for a class, but work that was produced under my own motivation and direction. Content and context are vital issues within contemporary art, and I began to handle these issues in a serious manner through these paintings and drawings. Most importantly, I learned how to effectively convey a message in my work; I created actual content rather than solved a technical exercise. I have become more open to processes drawn from other mediums, such as utilizing printmaking methods on canvas. I also became more attuned to my working habits, in which I will not work much for a period of time, but then I suddenly become inspired and work in short, intense bursts. Inspiration and motivation came from a number of sources, from thoughts that came to me while lying in bed to long conversations with my studio mates. I have also developed a wider visual vocabulary in painting through my exploration of abstraction (Fig. 20).

I still do not feel as if I have clearly defined those boundaries between "Chinese" and "American", but instead I have begun to understand and found a way in which to approach them. The project has confronted many of the attitudes that I have unconsciously held, to perhaps change them for the better in becoming more aware of my cultural heritage in both its visual and written forms. Not only has this affected my personal views, but allowed me to open up communication with my family about these issues. I hope that the audience will be able to make connections with the subject matter, to question their own perceptions of where one identity begins and another ends. I will continue to seek those boundaries,

whether it is through the act of painting huge canvases in a studio or conversing with my grandmother over a bowl of soup in her apartment in Chinatown.