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Contemplations of Otherness and Beauty

Xia Zhang

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Contemplations of Otherness and Beauty

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Thesis submitted
to the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts in
Ceramics

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Abstract

Contemplations of Otherness & beauty

Xia Zhang

This written thesis is created in conjunction to a thesis exhibition shown in the Paul Mesaros Gallery at West Virginia University (displayed March 16th to April 3rd). The work presented in the gallery consists of installation, photography, performance, sculpture, and video. I create work based on my personal past influenced by my everyday life in search of my individual identity within my external environment. Being a Chinese female living in predominantly White areas, my interactions often are laden with preconceptions of who I ought to be. My daily life is affected by a global past. I intend to discourse my research on the representation of Asian women alongside my own ruminations of beauty.

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Introduction

I create work to catalog the ephemeral and ever changing memories of my past. To fully understand situations and experiences that define me, I manipulate and cognitively dissect through a physical process with the objects and materials that are symbolic to me. By working with my hands in repetitive actions, my mind drifts off into the subconscious. I embody external mythologies to incorporate into my own personal mythology, using my self as the protagonist to set narratives around a central idea. My work is an assemblage of different mediums including ceramics, sculpture, photography, video, and installation to convey my thoughts. I gain inspiration from diminishing memories of childhood to my present day endeavors and failures. Early childhood is a time marked with developmental skills that aid our perceptions of our environment, and vice versa. We continue to build up these fantastic notions until we inevitably learn through action and consequences of life's difficulties. For me, since childhood, mythology has acted as a buffer to these difficulties, telling and reinforcing stories of universal needs and desires.

I attempt to fix misgivings and mistakes that weigh heavily on my mind through process. My obsessive tendencies are carried out through the motions of my hands. As I work in a repetitive manner, my hands quickly become automatic and allow my mind to wander into the depths of my subconscious. I fixate on an object that reminds me of someone, or a material that evokes a feeling upon touch. In a way, my practice has turned into a ritualistic practice that I engage in, hoping to find a personal nirvana.

The Realization of Otherness

As I work in the creation of repetitive objects, I often recount the mundane conversations that I engage in, replacing the words in my head with the words I wish I had said. I attribute this lag to my dual-cultural upbringing where true words were often kept to oneself. I lived the first six years of my life in a rural farming town in southern China, only to be transplanted to suburban Maryland. I was raised very differently from my peers, but like any other teenager, I strove for acceptance. That required paying close attention to what the norm was. I quickly realized that I could never achieve the physical standards for acceptance because I would never be able to wear powder blue eye shadow or create bouncing curls with my thick, pin straight hair. In college, I found myself in western Pennsylvania where I fully became aware of my Otherness.¹

The term Otherness can be applicable for anyone who is the minority in their present environment, but specifically, I address an Otherness that is perpetuated through stereotypes and perceptions placed on Asian women. Otherness derives from Orientalism, which is the representation of Oriental thought, culture, and people through the lens of Western imperialism. Writer Edward Said, who researched and wrote a study on Orientalism, theorized that:

The Western imperial discourse is able to bolster its own position not simply because it can requisition the intellectual's wherewithal in affirming the other's inferiority, but that it can at times and places vacillatingly equate the other as self, depict the other in a positive light, sustain a fantasy of attraction and exoticism for the other, while

¹ *Alterities in Asia: Reflections on Identity and Regionalism*, ed. Leong Yew (Routledge, 2011), 46-65.

² Yew, 16.

³ *Teaching With Documents: Using Primary Sources From the National Archives*.

still inherently retaining a separate but co-functioning vision of the other as threatening, repulsive and licentious.²

Understanding the impact Asian immigration has had on the United States is also fundamental to understanding the racial and sexist problems that have emerged since the nineteenth century. These issues stem from laws that excluded the Chinese from citizenship beginning with The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and then the National Origins Act of 1929 where Asian immigration was altogether prohibited. It was then repealed by the Magnuson Act of 1943 when China was an ally during World War II against the Japanese. However, the repeal limited only 105 Chinese immigrants per year, thus reinforcing prejudice. It wasn't until the Immigration Act of 1965 that eliminated previous policies.³ The effects of this systematic exclusion exist today in the American subconscious in daily interactions.

As an Asian American woman, it is impossible to not recognize and acknowledge the culturally constructed stereotypes and perceptions strangers view me through. Historically, Asian women have been seen as overtly sexual and exotic objects since Western colonization. "During the US involvement with the Philippines wars, Japan and China in World War II, and more recently, the Korean and Vietnamese Wars, Asian women were perceived by American soldiers as prostitutes and sexual objects who provided rest and recuperation from the war zones."⁴

² Yew, 16.

³ *Teaching With Documents: Using Primary Sources From the National Archives*. [Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1989.] pp. 82-85.)

⁴ Connie Chan, "Asian American women: The psychological responses to sexual exploitation and cultural stereotypes." in *The Politics of Race and Gender in Therapy*, ed. Lenora Fulani (New York: Haworth Press, 1988), 31-38.

Even prior to Western involvement in Asia, Chinese women have been depicted by and for men since the beginning of Confucian influence some 2000 years ago.⁵ Male dominance was the core of the didacticism, strictly binding women in all aspects of living to obeying the man at the top of the familial order.

From the very beginning of Chinese pictorial art, the female was represented of as a real person but as a product of male construction, depending on the gender ideology of the time, but rooted in the patriarchal ethos of the Confucian age. Moving from the ideational representation of the exemplary woman to the palace lady to the deserted woman and culminating, in the final stage, as an anonymous visual metaphor, the female image has remained a signification of masculine power and superiority in Chinese society.⁶

These perceptions of Chinese women have long been embedded in our American cultural society, with Europeans transmitting the ideology westward to our contemporary time. Stereotypes have been reinforced through film media since the 1950s, usually objectifying Asian women into one of two roles: a China Doll, who is submissive, exotic, overly sexual, and mysterious, or a Dragon Lady, who is cold, stealthy, and dangerous. These roles have been prevalently produced in Hollywood films such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005).

Film and television influence the way we see the world and ourselves. It is a powerful tool in our contemporary global society, as it represents gender, race, class, and social collective norms. However, American television usually only represents the consumer demographic, that is the white, middle class families. Research has concluded that children learn societal customs and expectations

⁵ Mary H. Fong, "Images of Women in Traditional Chinese Painting." In *Woman's Art Journal*

⁶ Fong, 26.

through what they see on their television screens.⁷ Growing up only seeing images of Asian women portrayed in a derogatory way has affected my perceptions of self. There were no positive representational role models that I could identify with, thus creating an immense sense of being an outsider. It is only recently that I have understood this impact because it has not been a widely discussed issue.

1994 was a monumental year, with the premier of *All-American Girl*, the first sitcom about an Asian American family starring Margaret Cho as the lead role. The show was canceled after 19 episodes because of low ratings and negative criticism from the Asian American community that the show reinforced stereotypes, rather than alter them.⁸ Jeff Yang, the television critic for *The Village Voice* wrote: “The situation is humdrum – 20-something slack-queen clashes symbols with her loving but (hopeless) family. The writing is awful, larded with stereotypes and dusty gags from ‘Full House’ ‘s cutting-room floor.”⁹ It took two decades for another Asian American family to star on primetime television. February 4, 2015, ABC premiered its new sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*, based on Eddie Huang’s memoir of his childhood is about him and his Taiwanese immigrant family in Florida vying for success.¹⁰ The show is bold, with the pilot episode addressing the slur *chink* in a middle school cafeteria setting. Not only is *Fresh Off the Boat* redefining what it means to be an

⁷ Carolyn A. Stromam and Kenneth E. Jones, “The analysis of television content.” in *Research Paradigms, Television, and Social Behavior*, eds. Joy Keiko Asamen and Gordon L. Berry (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 271-285.

⁸ Yew, 890.

⁹ Jon Caramanica, “A Bloom in TV’s Asian-American Desert,” *The New York Times*, 29 January 2015.

¹⁰ Caramanica.

Asian American; it addresses cultural differences and negative perceptions. Yet simultaneously it is Huang's experience as an individual that shines through.

This notion of individual Asian American voices in popular culture is still new, but with each generation, the filter of difference becomes more transparent. However, Asian American women are still very much misrepresented or underrepresented in mass media. My work for my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition derives from this realization of Otherness. I created five pieces, two that ruminate on ideas of culturally created Otherness, two based on my own ideas of beauty, and one piece that embody both concepts simultaneously.

Self-Sacrificial Butterflies

My piece titled *M. Butterfly* (2015, see fig.1), is based on the late 19th century story *Madama Butterfly* written by Giacomo Puccini, who exemplifies classic Asian exoticism in popular culture. The story is ultimately about Cio Cio San, otherwise known as Butterfly, who commits suicide after waiting for her American naval Lieutenant, Pinkerton to return, only to find out he had married an American woman, and she was but a mere sexual convenience abroad. The character lacks individual thought and intelligence, her sole purpose is to be a sexual object, to live and die by her white lover. These fictitious portrayals of Asian women continue to this day to be depicted in American mass media and then naturally influence the way society as a whole thinks about real, individual people.

I created *M. Butterfly* (2015) to shed light on this underlying issue that only those affected realize. The piece is a photograph displayed inside a large fabric covered light box (figure 2). The image shows a female figure wearing a black dress in front of a red background. On her head, she wears a headpiece that lies between transparent and opaque, giving the wearer ambiguity, but the general features are still apparent. The headpiece is created with hundreds of variously sized butterflies made out of silicone caulk. The process involves daily attention of extracting and injecting the silicone into molds to accumulate enough for the purpose of abstraction through quantity. The background of the image is a red sheet. Red represents a myriad of intense emotions from love to danger, and it is heavily associated with China's Communist Party. I choose to use the powerful color with a

sheet, because of its implications of a sexual space. By creating and wearing this object, I am attempting to comment on the objectification of a large number of individuals who are viewed in a damaging perspective based on their physical appearance. As writer Larissa Pham puts it, "... we can't extricate race from sex, and we can't extricate sex from race. To be an Asian woman means to deal with the full scope of personas and fantasies imposed upon you. To be an Asian woman means to see the effects of this long history, and to see these images recycled over and over and over again."¹¹ The musical *Miss Saigon*, which follows a very similar narrative of the self-sacrificing Asian woman first introduced with *Madama Butterfly* (1903), reportedly sold \$4.4 million dollars in ticket sales the first day of its revival in London 2014.¹² This is evidence that the story is still very popular and profitable.

With the art world becoming more globalized, there is danger that "artists of the periphery would increasingly become tools of that very market and of the industrialized West's desire to consume the newly fashionable, or to assert the radical "otherness" of the so-called non-Western world".¹³ In the 1980s, the term *postfeminism*¹⁴ stimulated Asian women artists to organize themselves to be heard as a collective voice on issues of displacement, imperialism, economic colonization, sexuality, and identity. Suk Nam Yun, a South Korean artist lead the organization, and alongside three other women in 1985, she organized the group's first public

¹¹ Larissa Pham, "The Madama Butterfly Effect," *Yale Daily News* (October 19, 2012).

¹² Mark Brown, "Miss Saigon breaks West End box office sales record for London revival," *The Guardian*, 9 September 2013.

¹³ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 5th ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 427.

¹⁴ A reactionary movement against the contradictions of second-wave feminism, that is more inclusive to non-white feminists.

exhibition titled *Group Exhibition* at the Kwanhoon Gallery in Seoul. She is still a prominent voice in Asian feminism, as well as the editor for the Korean feminist magazine *IF* (for identity).¹⁵

Yun's work is dedicated to transforming gender, social, and cultural practices, specifically, she is advocating for redefining Korean women as self-sacrificial beings who lose their identity while serving the needs of others. In her installation, *Pink Room* (1997, see fig. 3), Yun confronts the domestic female space with layers of hidden meaning, incorporating chairs, beads, and spikes. There is a visceral energy of aggression and hysteria in the seemingly 'pretty' silk-covered furniture, but upon further inspection, the surfaces of the chairs are covered with sharp iron spikes, prohibiting function. "The spikes mean that no one cannot take the roles of women for granted like an empty seat on which anyone could easily sit. By upholstering chairs and sofas with a pink fabric and fitting them with steel legs, she turns them into personified women."¹⁶

In my thesis work, I concentrate on a physical feature that Asian women are heavily fetishized for: hair. To fetishize something or someone is to become obsessive with a specific trait or traits that disconnects from the individual herself. With the development of the Internet and its ability to connect people worldwide based on a common interest, individuals have become more brazen and extreme with united, anonymous obsession. Individuals, such as the originator of

¹⁵ Chadwick, 447.

¹⁶ H.Y. Caruso & J. Caruso, "The art of Suk Nam Yun: A feminist expression of Korean women" in *Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education* [online], http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/2003fall/art_reviews.html, 2015 March 20.

asianwhite.org¹⁷ attempt to justify any misunderstandings regarding his obsession, “The Asian features, black hair, slender builds, golden skin and Asian eyes are extremely appealing to me. I don’t know why I have always liked the way Asian women look. Does any man know why he finds certain looks attractive? ... When an Asian woman looks at me with attraction it fills me with a great sense of being a handsome man.”¹⁸

I created the video installation *To Be “attractive in a delicate way”* (2015, see fig. 4) as an objection to this nonsensical ideal of Asian women. The piece is layered with materials and mediums, with a video of myself in a red sweater braiding my hair in front of my face projecting through two steel stands. The first stand has a piece of lace stretched and attached to the steel with red thread. The second stand hangs strands of interconnected porcelain disks of varying sizes from half an inch to four inches in diameter, all created in a thin pinching manner. The disks are clustered centrally, so the projected figure falls directly onto the objects. The final display of the video shows the resulting layers of distortion through lace and disks, with the figure nearly covered and unrecognizable.

First and foremost, the piece is about discomfort with identity, and second, the need to address social cultural perceptions that aid toward that personal identity crisis many underrepresented Asian females undergo. I have had personal experiences of strange men asking to touch my hair, and it always befuddles me that they consider this request to be as normal as asking to pet a dog in a park. My video

¹⁷ an online forum.

¹⁸ Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), 149.

is a looped sequence of myself braiding hair in front of my face repeatedly. By doing so, I'm bringing this physical trait to a frontal view to emphasize the absurdity of perceiving someone based on physical appearance. The video is projected onto stretched lace that is European in style. There is evidence that the core of this fetishization originates from Western colonialization. I alter and abstract the moving image in many layers in attempts to eradicate this issue into sheer nothingness. However that hope is in the very distant future.

Mwangi Hutter is a collaborative artistic duo who utilizes hair to comment on broader social issues of identity, gender, and race. The duo consists of Ingrid Mwangi, born in Kenya 1975, and Robert Hutter, born in Germany 1964. Mwangi is the daughter of a Kenyan father and a German mother, who has faced identity conflicts from a young age. The installation, *Neger Don't Call Me* (2000, see fig. 5) consists of a video of an African woman with varying hairstyles, most covering her face. Placed in front of the projection screen are four chairs equidistant from each other, with holes drilled into the seats that emit an audio track of agitated roars and yells. The title originates from her recollection as a child, with the German translation of negro: *neger*. The word often is associated with discrimination and pain is yelled repeatedly throughout her video. Whilst living in Germany, she became aware of personal "appearance, stereotype, (and) the eyes of the other".¹⁹ Mwangi began using video with an interrogation of self by pointing the camera back at her in attempts to discover what it was that represented that difference the "other" saw. The solution she came up with was to use the parts of herself that were

¹⁹ Mwangi Hutter, interviewed by Studio International: Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, studiointernational.com, accessed September 26, 2014.

important identifiers: hair and skin. The results became very intuitive and linked to the pain and trauma of being seen, a postmodern idea of the body not as a whole, but an assemblage of fragments.²⁰ Her dreadlocked hair acts as a signifier to one physical aspect of her identity, with the camera showing her face being covered and uncovered by “masks” of her own hair.

The importance of acknowledging these cultural influences is how they may help “shape personality, behaviors, communication style, interpersonal relationships, sexuality, and gender role expectations.”²¹ Since childhood, I’ve been pressed to constantly remember the significance of hair, with impressionable comments regarding my appearance. In *These Years* (2015, see fig. 6), I contemplate that significance by placing said trait in a different context than it is usually in. Suspended from long strands of red thread, are 25 small bundles of my hair, 25 for my age. They hang from the ceiling, always drifting and swaying with the air around them.

Hair acts as a measure of beauty, a physical attribute that has come to define my self-confidence. I remember haircuts being exorbitantly emotional as a child, resulting in scenes of me crying and screaming for hours because it was too short to tolerate. I remember important moments based on the length of my hair because it has been an ongoing cycle where I get it cut at the cusp of a new life altering experience. As an adult, I view this ritual as an attempt to purge myself of previous

²⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity, and the Ideal Figure* (London: Routledge: 1995), 25.

²¹ Connie Chan, “Psychological issues of Asian Americans.” in *Teaching gender and multicultural awareness: Resources for the psychology classroom*, eds. Phyllis Bronstein and Kathryn Quina (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), 179-193.

experiences, mistakes, and heartaches to start anew. But that is simply an attempt. It is not physically feasible because hair is a regenerative material. I use it in my work to suggest a recurring level of discomfort and self-deprecation with my identity and ideals of femininity, in conjunction to traditional methods such as sewing, weaving, and pinching clay that are perceived to be “women’s craft”.

The Beauty of Lived Experience

Whilst the representation of Asian women has a long tradition of being primarily left in the hands of the Western male from written word to the moving image, it is slowly, but surely changing. Trailblazers such as Connie Chung, Margaret Cho, and Sandra Oh are paving the way towards Asian American women controlling their own representation. An increased diversity of voices and narratives is critical for positive social and cultural change.

With my work, I hope to bring my own voice into the conversation, and not only discuss the issues of being an Asian woman in our society, but speak of personal, defining experiences and what I find to be beautiful. I explore the complex ideas of beauty in *Remnants of Breath* (2015, see fig. 7) through ceramic shells of origami balloons. There are hundreds of these fragile slip dipped paper burn outs placed on top of each other on a eight-foot wide stained board that sits into a steel frame. These objects that are symbolic of my childhood have been persistent in a few past pieces. I first began using the objects in *Waiting* (2012, see fig. 8) where I had slip casted hundreds of the full, blown up origami forms, and arranged them abstractedly.

Again, in *Anchored* (2013, see fig. 9), I incorporated the paper balloons into a performance installation piece. I created a workstation of sorts by using an antique school desk, and attaching a curved metal rod, with a ceramic basket hanging off the end. It is a performance piece where I sit in the desk and fold origami balloons repeatedly. The task is reminiscent of my childhood where I remember folding and

ripping and folding on my grandparents concrete floors that chilled me as I sat for hours at a time just folding and folding until my mother came home from work. In my memory of my thoughts at that age, it was my own labor of love in exchange for her labor to provide and support me. After moving to America, it became my responsibility to lessen the language barrier between mother and the complexity of this society. It is a necessary burden that forced me to grow up faster. I choose to perform the task of folding these objects at a schoolhouse desk to reference childhood. The basket in this scenario implies the fragility of this built up burden between my mother and me.

In my most recent rendition of paper balloons in *Remnants of Breath* (2015), I attempt to create a permanent catalog of experience based on a fundamental trait of existence: breathing. By firing these objects, I am creating a shell of something that once was. However, they are still fragile objects post-firing because they are thin and delicate, easily broken. I use the color white a lot in my work to suggest this pureness that comes with out personal memories. There is no real way to tell how truthful they are because the more we ruminate on a memory, the more distorted and broken they become. However to us, they are the pure truths of our past because they were first hand experiences we lived through.

I find much beauty through my personal experiences that has given me invaluable lessons in humanity. It is the ordinary subtleties that accumulate into a fragile strength. In an interview with Louise Bourgeois, the artist remarked that beauty is only a mystified expression of our own emotion; it is a series of experiences that they project onto an object. Beauty is an intangible concept that

shows “learning, understanding, solving problems, and a reward of effort”²² that goes beyond the senses, and penetrates the soul. It is difficult to analyze ephemeral moments of fleeting time, but we can at least consider the remnants of those experiences in conjunction to our present selves. I believe that all previous successes and failures from our experiences dictate our present decision-making. It is the seemingly unimportant objects, sounds, smells, or feelings that stay with us. With the scent of honeysuckle wax, I can recall the smell of hot asphalt and accumulation of salty moisture during summer days that I spent daydreaming under the dappling sunlight of an oak tree. “The spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being want them to remain so.”²³

I’m highly influenced by other artists who approach the concept of art making in a similar thought process. One of them is Ann Hamilton, who believes that knowledge is beyond facts and information; it is accumulated through experiences filtered through body and mind. . “You have to trust the things you can’t name... you feel through your body, you take in the world through your skin.”²⁴ The installation *tropos* (1993-1994, see fig. 4), references the natural inclination towards stimuli, as plants bow towards the sun. This innate act stems from our subconscious that formulates our words and actions. In the center of the installation, in a sea of horsehair, seats a woman at a desk burning out lines in a book. As the viewer enters the room, they are permeated with the scent of burning paper and smoke. With

²² Louise Bourgeois, “Sunday Afternoons: A Conversation and a Remark on Beauty” in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 1998), 332.

²³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 10.

²⁴ Lynne Cooke, review of *Ann Hamilton: tropos*, Dia Art Foundation (1993 – 1994).

tropos (1993 – 1994), Hamilton's "concern wasn't the particular book but the activity. The performer singed the page so that the printed word became smoke, which was reabsorbed by the hair, because hair absorbs smells. The word was transformed into matter."²⁵ The act of labor is overwhelmingly apparent from the hand gathered horsehair and seated figure absorbed in her task. The objects in her installations play an important role, as they are the physical embodiment of a life from birth to decay.

I consider labor to be a core concept in my trajectory. The process of creating hundreds of small, repetitive objects take physical time and labor to create, as well as the installation process of assembling all the parts. My family is a huge influence to myself as an individual and artist. For as long as we can remember, my ancestors have been farmers, tending to the same crops in a repetitive fashion, working the same land in the same rural village. With China rapidly shifting from an agrarian culture to an industrial culture, this way of living is dissipating, and the last farmer in our familial line will be my grandfather (fig. 11).

Most individuals from my generation are moving into the big cities to work a monotonous factory job mass-producing commercial objects for the rest of the world. This is another form of working in repetition, only it is soul wrenching. Xu Lizhi, a 24 year-old immigrant worker in Shenzhen, China jumped out of a window of a dormitory owned by his employer Foxconn²⁶. His case is considered common, and just another small sacrifice to China's economic boom. The story is personally

²⁵ Lisa Dent, "Ann Hamilton: In the Studio", *Art in America* (12 December 2012): 172-177.

²⁶ The largest electronics manufacturing company that makes the majority of the world's Apple iPhones.

jarring because each one of my cousins who are 17 and older had previously worked in such factories before immigrating to the United States in 2014. Many young Chinese people end up on an assembly line facing alienation for survival. Xu was a poet, and often wrote of his pent up frustrations with his surroundings:

We ran along the railway,
arriving in some place called 'the City'
where we trade in our youth, only a cough
and a skeleton nobody cared about.
'Sleepless'

Midnight. Everyone is a sleeping soundly,
We keep our pair of young wound open.
These black eyes, can you really lead us to the light?
'Night Shift'²⁷

I often consider my alternative future had certain situations not transgressed as they did. The labor that I participate in my studio practice is very different and almost trivial compared to those Chinese workers such as Xu, but I do believe I am a product of cultural inheritance that contributes to my decision-making in working with repetition.²⁸

I go through a process of creating and recreating various forms, trying out new techniques before I get to a point of satisfaction. Clay has a seductive, tactile quality that is both frustrating and rewarding. I often find the process of creating more fulfilling than the finished object. I am drawn to the ephemeral state of being, where objects are vulnerable and susceptible to everything (fig. 12). They often only

²⁷ Xu Lizhi, "Untitled", translated by the Nao project, 29 October 2014, <https://libcom.org/blog/xulizhi-foxconn-suicide-poetry>.

²⁸ Ehud Lamm, "Inheritance Systems", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/inheritance-systems/#Con>.

exist in photo documentation when it is in progress. I find myself pulled toward photography and video to convey personal experiences.

I work with the concept of true memory, which Pierre Nora defines as “gestures and habits, unspoken craft traditions, intimate physical knowledge, ingrained reminiscences and spontaneous reflexes, and memory transformed by its passage through history.”²⁹ I attempt to discover true memory through my repetitive handiwork. It is the combined extremes of stimulation and relaxation when my body eases into a well-versed choreography between my hands and material until my muscles ache with monotony. There is much joy in personal discovery through physical actions that result in an aesthetically beautiful object or image.

In *The Thoroughness of Your Seediness* (2015, see fig. 13), I integrate video documentation of an act of labor into an installation comprising hundreds of slip casted ceramic pomegranates. I created a 30-minute video in which I am slicing a pomegranate laterally, and then I endeavor to stitch it back together with a needle and thread. The video is projected onto the surface of an antique sewing table, with a curtain of slip casted white pomegranates cascading down onto it. The piece is my attempt to eradicate a deeply intimate personal relationship. Pomegranates have a long history as a symbol of fertility and abundance because of their plentiful seeds. In the Greek mythology of Hades, the God of the Underworld and Persephone, the pomegranate plays an important role. The story is of love and deceit, where he

²⁹ Pierre Nora, “Realms of Memory” in *Memory: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Ian Farr (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2012), 62.

tricks her into eating a pomegranate that forces her back to him annually.³⁰ The fruit is a metaphor to a relationship that will neither be here nor there because of all the deception layered in between, but nevertheless, I try to suture the wound back to whole again. No matter my attempts, it will always be this terribly gruesome object that once was beautiful and held potential.

The sheer number of ceramic pomegranates hanging from red thread represents individual moments within a relationship with a person. In Chinese folklore, when children are born, they are connected by red thread to their fated one. Over time, the thread becomes less tangled and the pair find each other despite all odds. The concept of a destined other is a universal one and can be found in most cultures through other vehicles of symbolism. I understand the idea, but I don't fully agree with it. Instead, I use red thread in my work to represent a variety of close relationships of all forms in my life. It seems naive to consider one person who fully understands your entire essence because people are complex creatures. I embody external mythologies to incorporate into my own personal mythology.

I choose to represent my personal mythologies and rituals through a myriad of mediums such as ceramics, sculpture, photography, and video. Since the late 1960s and '70s, video art quickly became the ideal medium to work from because of its self-sufficient nature to capture the psychological conditions that prove difficult on a two or three-dimensional plane. The artist is afforded the opportunity to subject the viewers to their own point of view with controlled perspectives. A large reason video art became popular with female artists such as Martha Rosler and

³⁰ Helen Morales, *Classical Mythology: A Brief Insight* (New York: Sterling, 2010).

Pipilotti Rist is the lack of patriarchal history and usage. Traditional art mediums such as painting and sculpture have a long male-dominated history. In 1965, Sony marketed the Portapak that offered artists a brand new alternative tool to create with. This launched a monumental new era of art making. There were no restrictions on how to explore the new medium. "Once the emphasis in art had begun to shift from the end product to the process of its making, an acknowledgement of the bodily presence of the artist as a crucial factor in that process became all but unavoidable."³¹ In 1962, Media theorist Marshall McLuhan offered a new way to perceive how new technologies could revitalize society. He envisioned the medium as an extension of the human senses, "rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media."³² Women used film to address modern art issues that propagated postmodernism, whilst explored gendered perspectives.

In the 1980s, the term "postfeminism" became a critical topic of discussion as the new transnational term to describe current feminist discourse that was inclusive to various cultural experiences. Postfeminism came about as a challenge to second-wave feminism due to its negligence of discussing women of color, class, and identity different from the white middle-class woman. There was a fundamental

³¹ Michael Archer, *Art Since 1960* (London: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2002), 100.

³² Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 984.

change in the movement from equality to difference. "Postfeminism facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the demands of marginalized and colonized cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post colonial feminisms."³³ This broader perspective allows for an all-inclusive conceptual structure that seeks an individualistic agenda rather than a collective political one. The history of the last few decades of Western feminism have been abundantly documented and readily available, however the analysis of "other" feminism is still presently developing. Art critic Flaudette Datuin states that by telling their stories of experiences, they are presenting "revelatory testimonies of their struggle, thus presenting an/Other history – one that is not anchored on a catalogue of styles or forms, nor on a linear narrative of masterpieces and masters."³⁴ Asian women artists are still currently pushing for a reinstatement of their voice in representation of self.

³³ Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, cultural theory and cultural forms* (London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

³⁴ Phyllus Hwee Leng Teo, "Alternative Agency in Representation by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists," *Asian Culture and History* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, my research has led me toward a better understanding of self in relation to my environment. I work in the realm of repetition because it allows me constant contemplation until I reach a point of personal discovery. One of the most important realizations is how affected I am by outside perceptions. Perhaps subconsciously I was already aware of this, but long hours spent working and researching has led me to fully grasp the significance of it. In a sense, my work is a visual documentation of discovering my personal identity. Growing up without seeing positive representations of Asian women in mass culture has been detrimental to my psyche, and unknowingly influenced all aspects of my being, from the way I handle close relationships to the ways I think about my own appearance. While there is a lack of sources that describe the Asian American experience, I found solace in the contemporary articles written by women close to my age. It was a relief in discovering a validation of suppressed emotions through solidarity of difference. While we have similar experiences of racism and sexism, we are all individuals desiring to speak on behalf of ourselves, to change the Asian female representation that was propelled during the colonialist era and maintained by current mass media.

As an artist, I want to create visual representations of how I perceive the world around me, the things that I find incredible and worth noting. The things that have shaped and defined me: the people who I've disappointed or loved, and those moments I savor. While making work offers me mental alleviation and an outlet for my personal narrative, I primarily want to be able to connect with other individuals who also feel a sense of uncomfortable Otherness.

Figure List

Figure 1:

M. Butterfly
Digital print
Dimensions vary
2015

Figure 2:

M. Butterfly
Digital print, wood, plexi glass, fabric.
49" x 37" x 8"
2015

Figure 3:

Sun Nam Yun
Pink Room
Mixed media
1997

Figure 4:

To Be "attractive in a delicate way"

Video projection, ceramic, lace, steel, red thread

10' x 9' x 9'

2015

Figure 5:

Mwangi Hutter
Neger Don't Call Me
Video projection, 4 chairs with loudspeakers,
11:34 minutes
2000

Figure 6:

These Years
Artist' hair, red thread, steel
8' x 14" x 1"
2015

Figure 7:

Remnants of Breath
Ceramic, wood, steel
2' x 8' x 1'
2015

Figure 8:

Waiting
72" x 120" x 18"
Ceramics, wood, red thread
2012

Figure 9:

Anchored

Ceramic, steel, red thread, paper, found object

90" x 25" x 48"

2013

Figure 10:

Ann Hamilton
tropos

Translucent industrial glass windows, gravel topped with concrete, horsehair, table, chair, electric burner, books, recorded voice, audiotape, audiotape player, speakers
1993 – 1994

Figure 11:

My Grandfather and His Bok Choy

Digital print

Dimensions vary

2012

Figure 12:

A Work in Progress
2013

Figure 13:

The Thoroughness of Your Seediness

Video projection, ceramic, nail polish, red thread, steel, found object.

90" x 36" x 30"

2015

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EDUCATION

West Virginia University	August 2012- May 2015
Master of Fine Arts	

West Virginia University	Fall Semester 2012
Ceramics in China Program	
The Pottery Workshop	
Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China	

Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania	September 2007- May 2012
Bachelor of Arts	

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Record	2013 - Present
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West Virginia University	
- 240 Introduction to Ceramics: Handbuilding	
- Drawing 1	
- Drawing 2	
- 3D Foundations	

Graduate Assistant	2013 - Present
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West Virginia University	
- Upkeep and maintenance kilns	
- Management of studio materials and studio spaces	
- Held bi-weekly lab hours at the WVU Production Studio	
- Assist Foundations coordinator in organizational tasks and upkeep	

<i>Furtherance: Friday Night Lecture Series</i> , Guest Lecturer	2012
The Pottery Workshop, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China	

<i>The Green Show</i> , Sustainability Festival, Curator	2009
Americorps, Slippery Rock, PA	

AWARDS

School of Art and Design Graduate Assistantship	2013- Present
West Virginia University	

Best in Show, <i>Juried Student Exhibition</i>	2014
West Virginia University	

Best in Show, <i>Decomposition</i>	2014
Allen Priebe Gallery, Oshkosh, WI	

Valerie Canady Scholarship 2013- 2014
West Virginia University

Global Positioning Studies Travel Grant 2012
West Virginia University

Americorp Scholarship 2009

Slippery Rock University Merit Scholarship 2007-2009

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Contemplations of Otherness & Beauty 2015
Paul Mesaros Gallery, Morgantown, WV

Thoroughness
Miller Gallery, Indiana, PA

Belongingness 2011
Associated Artists of Butler County, Butler, PA

JURIED EXHIBITIONS

Annual Juried Student Exhibition 2014
Awarded Best in Show
Douglas O. Blaney Lobby, Morgantown, WV

4th Annual Workhouse Clay National
Juried by Richard Notkin
Workhouse Arts Center, Lorton, VA

Reclaimed: Installation, Performance, and Sit Specific Works
Juried by Art Axis Board of Directors
One Wall Gallery, www.one-wall-gallery.com

BUMFACK Co.
NCECA Project Space: Material World, Milwaukee, WI

Decomposition
Juried by Laura Davis; Awarded Best in Show
Allen Priebe Gallery, Oshkosh, WI

INVITATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

BUMFACK Co. Does Minneapolis 2015 (upcoming)
Northern Spark Festival, partnered with Northern Clay Center
Minneapolis, MN

Encountering the Anthropocene: Landscapes of a New Epoch
group exhibition with Tautology Collective
JD Brooks Gallery, Fairmont, WV

Confluence

Artists Image Resource Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA

Bottom Feeders and The Distant Self

Slusser Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI

2014

Confluence

Artists Image Resource Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA

Interface

Laura Mesaros Gallery, Morgantown, WV

2013

A Series of Small Acts

Black Bear, Morgantown, WV

Confluence

Artists Image Resource Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA

98 Days In China

C2 Gallery, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China

2012

Artist's Banner Display

Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, PA

2011

Metalsmithing and Painting

Martha Gault Gallery, Slippery Rock, PA

Kaleidoscope Arts Festival

Miller Auditorium, Slippery Rock, PA

PUBLICATIONS*Reclaimed: Installation, Performance, and Site Specific Works*

Exhibition Catalog

2014

Featured Artist

<http://365artists365days.com/2014/01/31/xia-zhang-morgantown-wv/>

January 2014

Featured Art Student

<http://www.sru.edu/academics/colleges/chfpa/art/Pages/XZhang-Gallery.aspx>

Spring 2012

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Member

West Virginia University Clay Club

2013- Present

National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts

2011- Present

- Tampa, FL
- Houston, TX
- Milwaukee, WI
- Providence, RI

Gu Mei Qun Yixing Teapot Workshop
The Pottery Workshop, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China

2012

Treasurer
Slippery Rock University Potters Guild

September 2010- May 2012