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家

by
Jia Wang

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology

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May, 2016

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Abstract

家

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This body of work 家 explores the domestic violence that is prevalent in the typical Chinese family and the complex family relationship that are a result of this trauma. 家 is a multimedia site-specific installation comprises of video, sculpture, collage and photographic images. Traumatic memories, the beautifully unbearable experiences, have inspired this artwork from both a personal and cultural perspective. In this work I am examining, and displaying for the audience, the effects of abuse and the trauma that is a result, how it is manifested, and how it transforms an individual and a family's identity.

Extended Artist Statement

By Jia Wang

I started this body of work, composed of photographs, video and installation, to better understand and cope with my family dynamics, and investigate how it shapes me as a person. In this work “家,” I’m exploring the complexity of family relationships, abuse, and forgiveness. In Chinese, “家” means family and home, and “家” has the same spelling and pronunciation with my given name. As an artist I am utilizing multiple media to translate my personal perspective of complicated family relationships. This contained space speaks to a visual and emotional intimacy, creating a complicated experience that translates my emotions to my audience.

The values instilled through my family have shaped my identity and understanding of the world. However, as I got older and moved away from my family, I realized that the beliefs I had adhered to throughout my life no longer always held true. For me, family is the most intimate relationship, but also the most confusing. In my family, love and hostility can be difficult to separate. Those who make me feel safe and dependent are also the origin of my fear and insecurity.

Sociology professor Blitsten defines the Chinese corporate family in *The World of the Family*, in which “a typical Chinese family, the eldest member is granted the authority to control the whole family.”¹ Family practices, such as interactions between family members and disciplinary actions, are passed down from one generation to another. Such traditions may also be the cause of conflict and disagreement within the family.

The hierarchy of the Chinese family, as well as the difficulty of dealing with the intensity of memory, is further examined through my work “*Innocence #1*.” The images feature the backs of two of the elders who hold the power in my family, concealing their identity and emotions. In making these images, I had the power to decide the exact moment I wanted to capture them.

¹ Dorothy R. Blitsten, *The World of the Family; a Comparative Study of Family Organizations in Their Social and Cultural Settings*. 3rd ed. New York: Random House, 1963. 83.

In *Innocence #1*, I used available window light and removed everything from the background to bring out a soft and gentle quality of light on the skin. I did not want my camera to disturb them either physically or emotionally. I asked them to take off their clothes in order to keep the focus on the body but allowed them to choose their own pose. Photographing the backs allowed for an emotional distance to be maintained between myself and my family members. However, every time I look and work with these images, I feel the pain of past memories. Thus, I decided to emphasize the cold tone of these images in order to articulate both the physical and emotional distance among my family members.

Although each of the images and series in this body of work were created at different times, the work is best understood as a complete installation. In “家”, the life-sized back portraits first catch the attention of the audience. The twelve back portraits are hanging in midair, and interconnected with a piece of red string through their hearts. *Innocence I* is hung in front of the red string installation, titled *Entanglement*, and *Empathy* and *Innocence II*, which forces the audience to walk around this piece in order to view the other works. The anonymity of the backs serves as a bridge between my private space and the audience, enabling them to better relate to my work while reflecting on their own experiences. Through “家” I transformed the unspoken traumatic memories and complicated family relationship into a visible experience for the viewer.

“*Innocence #2*” depicts a young child photographed after an act of violent abuse has happened to him. His skin is still red. In capturing the pain of this moment, I uncover the traumatic current and tension among family members. The trauma here not only reflects the violent reality in this child’s life, but also, with the child’s look back, the aftermath that will have an impact throughout his life. This reality, in the context of the other works, also metaphorically speaks of my own experience.

In the installation, the isolation of the two portraits is meant to directly show how the problem of abuse effects the youngest generation. The portrait on the left directly stares at the back portraits, among who are the perpetrators. It’s making a visual and real connection. In addition, the red strings connect the two portraits to the rest of the work. The space engages the audience as they walk through the installation. The audience’s visual narratives will change depending on the path they choose.

Every time I spoke with my family about cruel love, even though I could see fear in their eyes, they spoke with a self-glorified nostalgia about those cruel experiences. This “cruel love” is what they believe to be the foundation of their success, a form of “righteous” discipline that has paved the way for them to grow into persons with integrity.

Confucius is an important ancient Chinese philosopher. He built and developed the philosophy known as Confucianism. His main principles emphasize the importance of family and social harmony. Confucianism states that human beings are fundamentally good, and teachable, improvable and perfectible through personal and communal endeavor especially self-cultivation and self-creation. In *The Ethics of Confucius*, in the chapter IV “The Family”, as Confucius said, “Our bodies, to every hair and shred of skin, are received from our parents. We must not presume to injure or to wound them.”² Neither men nor women were to cut their hair, letting it grown for their entire lifetime.

The installation *Empathy* consists of four boxes that contain my hair, family portraits, photographs of scars, and one video, respectively. Each box is the same size and has the same dimensions as a box I had as a child to keep and hide important objects. The content of box cannot be easily seen from the outside. The boxes are mounted on the wall, red string is webbed from floor to ceiling and blocks access to the boxes. These four boxes are an entrance point to the “secrets” in my personal life and also within my family.

The sequences from right to left for these four boxes are based on my perspective of being a part of my family and other part of a witness who saw the whole family. It is about the past, the present and the future. The first box functions as an entrance point for audience to raise their curiosity about personal secrets. When the audience moves to the second box, they encounter the portraits of my family arranged by hierarchy and start to feel the problem of a

² Miles Menander Dawson, *The ethics of Confucius*, New York: Cosimo 2005. 165.

strange family relationship. The third box contains photographs of scars; everyone in a family is both bearing hurt from others and are hurting each other at the same time. The left corner image in this box features a hand of a young person touching an elder person, a healing gesture. However, this hopeful gesture is destroyed by the fourth box, in which an elderly man gets visibly angry, still keeping the same hostile attitude towards his family. As a result, the hope becomes a miserable wish.

As pointed out by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around it- self, constituting what is present to us as we are.”³ The way we see things is based on what we know or what we believe. Thus, in the piece “Empathy,” the objects I have selected are not merely things that are tangible; they embody the intangible, such as emotions and memories.

For me, a family starts with a single point. This point extends into a bloodline which connects each generation like the string. According to an old Chinese legend, a man and woman who are predestined to meet have been tied by an invisible red string since the time they were born. As more and more family members appear, the connection of the bloodline grows more and more complex.

One source of inspiration for me is Chiharu Shiota, a Japanese performance and installation artist known for making monumental but delicate environments. This installation “Dialogue from DNA” contains hundreds of different shoes, all collected from Japan⁴. Shiota uses red yarn wrapped around each one, and the yarn is stretched back to meet at a single point on the back wall. A handwritten note attached to each shoe describes its original owner or a related memory. This overwhelming space, filled with everyday objects, becomes somewhat anonymous.

In traditional Chinese culture, the family is the basic unit of family and many aspects of Chinese life can be tied to honoring one’s parents or ancestors. In a typical Chinese family, many

³ John Peter Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 1972. 9.

⁴ Chiharu Shiota, “Dialogue from DNA,” Chiharu Shiota, 2004, accessed May 2014, <http://www.chiharu-shiota.com/en/works/?y=2004>

generations of a family live under the same roof, which sometimes exposes difficult and complex problems that arise between older generations and the younger ones.

Some memories of family are too painful to talk about publicly; they are my deepest and darkest secrets. When I talk about these memories outside of my family, I feel ashamed, and often blame myself as well as my loved ones. The intention of the red string is to fill the space with a sense of tension that is commensurate with the complexity of family relationships. The act of installing the work is truly liberating for me as an individual and artist. As Édouard Claparède Swiss says, “It is impossible to feel emotion as past... One cannot be a spectator of one’s own feeling; one feels them, or no one does not feel them; one cannot imagine them without stripping them of their affective essence.”⁵

Similar to the delicate entanglement created by the red strings, it is difficult to remember the details about specific emotional entanglements felt during difficult times. The intertwined strings reflect my complicated feelings about love and family. Red strings throughout the entire space are used to represent the familial bloodlines, and are orchestrated such that the audience is kept a certain distance away from the work mounted on the back wall. In addition, the Red strings are constructed into a tunnel that allow only one person to walk through at a time, which controls their viewing experience. The audience investigates the objects in the four boxes privately, providing an individual experience.

The path leads the viewer to *Empathy* on the right and the twelve back portraits, Innocence I, on the left. As the material, the red strings tangle together. They maintain a veil of secrecy and contribute to the tension in the atmosphere thereby enabling an intense scrutiny of relationship problems, and metaphorically call attention to the experience and intensity of these complex family relationships.

⁵ Edouard Claparede, 1911. “La Question de la ‘Mémoire’ Affective.” In *Archives de psychologie* 10. 361-377. Cited in: Leys, Ruth. 1996. “Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet and the Question of Memory.” In *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, 113-114. New York: Routledge.

Past memories and encounters still hold significance because they have shaped me into the person I am today. Paradoxically the pain that I had to endure was inflicted by people very close to my heart. Through this work, I find the courage to confront the issue of domestic violence while reflecting on the past of the perpetrator's actions. Still, it is an ongoing process that I have undertaken to heal past wounds and grant forgiveness to my family and my past. Using visual tools to speak about ideas, power, control, memories, and identity through the notion of time and space.

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