5-2018

Young Cash Karen

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Recommended Citation
Young Cash Karen

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography & Related Media

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Rochester, New York
May 2018
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Collaboration with Eh Moo Ku, 2018, from the series Young Cash Karen
www.jadethiraswas.com
Abstract

Young Cash Karen

BFA Photography & Art History, Memphis College of Art, 2015
MFA Photography & Related Media, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2018

Young Cash Karen is an ongoing body of work about a community of young men refugees from Burma (or Myanmar) who have recently resettled in Western New York State. They are members of the Karen, a Burmese ethnic minority that has fought a decades-long civil war against the Burmese government over the native lands of their people and for their very right to exist. The Karen people have been the victims of ethnic-cleansing policies by the oppressive Burmese military regime. For most or all of their lives, the young men of Young Cash Karen lived in refugee camps across the Burmese border in Thailand, until taking the leap to resettle in the United States.

Young Cash Karen is comprised of portraiture, in both still and moving images, of these young men and their current lives in the United States. The work has developed into a multi-layered and nuanced exploration of the intersections of culture, ethnicity, and identity. It portrays a tribe of young men who are experiencing the difficult process of displacement and cultural adaptation. Yet despite their hardships they retain a sense of unapologetic pride of their identity and history. They fearlessly announce their outsider status to the Western world, while such simple acts of freedom and self-expression would be forbidden from their people in Burma. The core intent of Young Cash Karen is to create a poetic resistance to oppression.

The title, Young Cash Karen, comes from the same name the young men have chosen to represent and mythologize themselves. They proudly use the name to express a sense of belonging and solidarity. This works portrayal of young adulthood and refugeeism crosses and blends boundaries and cultures. Both the subtle and apparent effects of colonialism, assimilation to American society, and the preservation of parts of their endangered Southeast Asian culture create a compelling mixture of fashion, music, language, and lifestyle.
Bee and Eh, 2017, from the series Young Cash Karen

www.jadethiraswas.com
Featuring in no order of importance:

Eh Day
Eh Moo Ku
Bk Sin
Maul Nu
Eh Sun
Mae Saw
Sae Sae
Lazy
Moe Eh
Jade Thiraswas
Bee Hsay

Video still, 2018, from the series Young Cash Karen
www.jadethiraswas.com
Eh Sun, 2018, from the series Young Cash Karen
www.jadethiraswas.com
Eh Moo Ku’s Tattoos, 2017, from the series Young Cash Karen
www.jadethiraswas.com
Right Before Winter Hit Rochester, 2018, from the series Young Cash Karen
www.jadethiraswas.com
Driven by my desire to give visibility to underrepresented people and celebrate their existence, my thesis focuses on a community of young male refugees in western New York. Members of the Karen, an ethnic minority originating from Burma (Myanmar), they have fled oppression, persecution, and horrific atrocities against their people by the Burmese regime during a decades-long and ongoing civil war over their tribe’s ancestral jungle lands (Karen State) and for their very right to exist. The Karen people have been forced off the map through a systematic policy of murder, rape, forced labor, and the destruction of thousands of villages, resulting in the loss of communities and a rapid recline of traditional cultures. For most of their lives, the young men in Young Cash Karen lived in remote and overcrowded refugee camps across the Burmese border in Thailand, until they took the leap to resettle in the United States. Some came with their families and some came alone. Their community in Rochester, New York is large and strong, with connections to many other such communities throughout the state of New York.

My thesis project, Young Cash Karen, is comprised of photographic portraiture, video, and collaboration about these young men and my relationship to them. It has developed into a multi-layered and nuanced exploration of the intersections of culture, ethnicity, and identity.

The country of Burma has a tumultuous history filled with political upheaval and conflict. Having gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948, a brutal military regime (junta) gained power in 1962. This unelected military dictatorship changed the name of Burma to Myanmar in 1989. Certain parties who do not accept the authority of the regime still call it Burma. This includes minority ethnic groups, the United States, and the United Kingdom, while the United Nations, France, and Japan recognize it as Myanmar.¹ It is ironic that the oppressive regime chose this name, as it translates to “Wonderland.” The country of Burma has a highly diverse population, with 8 main ethnic groups and 130 distinct sub-groups.² There is no single national identity of Burma. From 1824 to 1948 under British

colonial rule, the British favored the Karen and other ethnic minorities. During World War II, the Karen and Burmese fought against each other, with the Karen supporting British forces and the Burmese supporting the Japanese. After independence in 1948, the Karen felt abandoned by the British and persecution by the Burmese began, commencing the ongoing civil war. An estimated 85,000 Karen people are currently internally displaced in Karen State, hiding deep in the jungle while on the run from the Burmese junta. And further, there are roughly 150,000 Karen refugees that have fled Karen State and are displaced in camps in Thailand where many have lived for generations with nowhere else to go. In recent years, about 50,000 Karen refugees have been resettled in the United States, Canada, Australia, and some European countries. The decision for refugees to make the journey to the United States is not an easy one, having to forcibly go through another process of displacement and to be in a completely unknown culture and location with the hope of a better life.

Young Cash Karen depicts a close-knit community, a brotherhood, with whom I have formed a deep personal connection. These young men each have complicated and tenuous experiences as refugees. They lived a fragile existence in a place of limbo in refugee camps in Thailand, where many of their friends and relatives still live, restricted from leaving the boundaries of the camps. Many of these young men have never actually seen their homeland of Burma. They were born and raised inside the barbed wire fences of the refugee camp. It was the only reality they knew before their recent resettlement process to the United States. They have shared stories with me about their struggles during this challenging process, and how racism, xenophobia, and discrimination are major factors in their experience. Despite this, they retain a deep sense of gratitude for the better quality of life they have found here. They stick together and take care of each other. I admire their resilience and how they have managed to preserve their community and culture while displaced and disconnected from the origin.

This work is very personal to me, in part because of my own journey. My childhood was filled with cultural and geographical shifts, and experiences of displacement and adaptation. The earliest

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years of my life were spent living in an isolated settlement in the deep jungles of Papua, Indonesia near a copper and gold mine where my father, a Thai immigrant to the United States, worked. Due to these circumstances, I had little opportunity to interact with other children which taught me how to befriend and appreciate human beings of all kinds. My friends were often adults, and people who had highly different backgrounds from me. My first memories are from the walks my Indonesian nanny, Samini, would take me on every day around our small village and through the jungle where aboriginal tribes lived. Wrapped securely around her back with a blanket, she’d bring me with her on little journeys in which I’d observe with curiosity from behind her shoulders. The aboriginals became my neighbors and friends, often taking me into their arms and treating me as one of their own. I am grateful to have had these experiences as a child which taught me to see the world, and the people in it, without judgement or fear.

In my life, I have experienced two significant moments of displacement thus far. The first when my parents decided to leave Indonesia and re-settle in Louisiana, where my mother of Cajun-French descent is from and where my parents had met. Although we had made occasional visits to see family—both my mother’s in the United States and my father’s in Thailand— it was an entirely different experience to be permanently transplanted. Going through this jarring change as an adolescent proved itself difficult for me, and it took me a long time to work through the insecurities and confusion that came with this cultural adaptation. My mixed ethnicity, as well as my lack of understanding of and immersion in American life and culture made me stand out during a vulnerable period in one’s life in which you want more than anything to simply fit in. I became a shy, quiet, and unconfident young girl who experienced a fair amount of bullying, judgment, and mockery from my schoolmates. I tried many saddening attempts to change myself and my history. I did not want anyone to know where I came from— that I had lived in foreign places and was not a born-and-raised American. I was ashamed of who I was.

The second significant experience of displacement came after Hurricane Katrina, when I had to leave New Orleans and attend school in Georgia while my house and the city of New Orleans was rebuilt. These experiences play an influential role in who I am as a person and artist today. I felt like an outsider for most of my life. It was a position that initially felt hindering and confusing, but I have learned
that social hardships do not exist in isolation. Oppression, displacement, and migration are always present in the world—as is the desire to form a distinct identity in the context of changing cultures. Elevating the stories of those with whom I work with, as well as my own experience as an Asian-American woman, not only gives us a voice, but speaks to others in similar situations around the world. The act of artmaking is empowering to me, particularly when I use it to make visible the existence of those who are underrepresented, and by asserting my perspective which differs from that of the dominant culture.

Making work about a community of refugees feels especially urgent and important under the current Trump administration’s attempts to harden immigration policies and enforce borders, coupled with the rise of xenophobic and racist attitudes amongst large populations of the United States. The language of President Trump has had a profound influence, and toxic effect, on the rise and spread of these hateful attitudes by his very own fruition. From the very beginning of his 2016 presidential running, he proudly flaunted a political rhetoric built upon discriminatory views and appealed to the hidden masses that came out in passionate support for his campaign. Since then, spews of insensitivity about delicate issues, news of inappropriate behavior towards women, and the upholding of a patriarchal, white supremacist society by Trump has regularly dominated the news.4

The refugee crisis is a global human rights issue, a humanitarian catastrophe, and one that I believe does not get the proper level of attention or representation in the mainstream media at large, despite the issue growing in severity. Global indifference surrounds the death of these people. I myself was guilty of knowing little to nothing about these atrocities in Burma, until I was drawn to and befriended survivors and listened to the stories of their peoples’ oppression and perseverance. I am so ashamed of my ignorance, especially as a person with ancestral ties to both Thailand and Burma. How heartbreaking it is that so many are struggling for basic survival due to forces outside of their control, while the rest of the world lives in ignorance. The country of Burma being of especially particular turmoil with the regime’s deadly persecution of not only the Karen, but also against other ethnic groups like the

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Rohingya Muslims which has momentarily caught the attention of western media in recent events. Trinh T. Minh-ha is a Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, and literary theorist who has written extensively about cultural politics. In her book *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*, she writes:

“The myopic view that the refugee problem is *Their* problem and one on which *Our* taxpayers’ money should not be wasted is no longer tenable. The tragedy of tidal waves of people driven from their homes by forces beyond their control keeps on repeating itself as victims of power realignments, cross-border hostilities and orgies of so-called ‘ethnic cleansing’ continue to grow to alarming proportions and detention camps proliferate on the world map without drawing more than fitful sporadic attention from the international community.”

I am passionate about exploring what it means to be a young, immigrant of color in the United States at this particular time in history. Regardless of who you are, it is a challenge to be a young adult navigating our contemporary culture, trying to find one’s place and purpose with the world at your fingertips on the internet and social media. The power of this tool can cause simultaneous feelings of connection and isolation, but it can also offer the opportunity to self-identity and self-represent. The title of my thesis, *Young Cash Karen*, comes from the name the boys have chosen to mythologize their group, their tribe of young men, and which they proudly use in reality and on social media to express a sense of belonging and solidarity. While intending to portray the refugee experience, I also wound up portraying timeless notions of youth culture—rebellion, partying, music, sexuality and identity-searching, as well as aspects that are unique to the moment such as the use of technology and social media. What makes the work’s portrayal of young adulthood unique is that it crosses and blends boundaries and cultures. The both subtle and obvious effects of colonialism, assimilation to American society, and the preservation of parts of their Southeast Asian culture create a compelling mixture of fashion, culture, language, and lifestyle. For example, their clothing choices come from the global influence of hip-hop and street style, in combination with traditional Karen tribal clothing that has a distinct use of colorfully woven patterns. Pieces of the camouflage uniforms of the Karen National Liberation Army’s “freedom fighter” soldiers, (the volunteer and ill-equipped army formed to fight against the Burmese regime for the

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rights of the Karen)\(^6\), are also often incorporated into their outfits. A popular clothing combination I have observed on the boys is a pair of name-brand sneakers, baggy KNLA camouflage army pants, a U.S. sports team jersey, with a traditional Karen tribal tunic layered on top. At first look, an outsider to this community would not know the layers of meaning these young men wear on their bodies.

Tattoo culture also plays a prominent role in the work, and in the claiming and preservation of their Southeast Asian cultural heritage. The young men tattoo each other as an act of brotherly manhood and as a practice of a tribal tradition. They permanently and proudly mark their skin with culturally symbolic imagery and line work. Many of them have the entire surface of their back covered with intricate designs. In the warmer seasons they flaunt these markings shirtless, further obtaining a distinct identity. To most outsiders, it is apparent these young men are not American. They have made the choice not to seamlessly assimilate, not to whitewash their bodies—despite the social repercussions this comes with. It is an act of celebration as well as rebellion. They unapologetically announce their outsider status to the Western world; a simple act that the Burmese regime forbid them to do and for which they now have the freedom.

In making this work, my creative process evolved as my relationship with this community became stronger. Spending large amounts of time with them is important to my process and something I do with or without the promise of producing work from it. They are my friends before they are my photographic subjects. Investing time and patience also builds trust which later allows for intimate and vulnerable moments that go beyond a performance for the camera, although I find meaning in both types of portraits. I met them at a park during the summer, when I approached them after I noticed their unique taste of fashion and overheard them speaking the Thai language. Because I primarily shoot with natural light with an attention to rich color, the season of summer and its warm light produced a great deal of work for the project. We spent most of our time outdoors at parks, in backyards, and at the beach. When the cold arrived, we migrated indoors, hanging out in their furniture-bare apartments, sitting on the floor eating, drinking, singing, and laughing. Unlike a typical American home, these

refugees choose to own very little furniture or material possessions. And why would they? Most of their lives were spent on the run, displaced, and without a permanent home of which to fill with possessions and objects, and this way of life becomes habitual. You only keep what you can carry.

The gallery installation of Young Cash Karen consists of multiple components. What started off as a traditional photographic project has expanded to include video and collaborative elements. On one wall of the gallery is a selection of framed portraits of various sizes hung with the intent of building meaning between each photograph. A large, mural-sized print of an image of a pair of the boys swimming in Lake Ontario is on the adjacent wall. Opposite to the wall of framed pieces is a screen looping a video piece, allowing for the video's audio to spill into the viewing area of the work and create an atmospheric experience.

I chose to print mural-sized the image of the pair of boys swimming during sunset to build an encompassing and immersive viewing experience. Its large scale makes it likely the first thing that people notice in the gallery installation, I wanted to choose an image from the body of work that speaks to the work as a whole, while also being capable of holding power as an individual statement. A body of water is symbolic of the refugee and migration experience. It is a signifier of a barrier between land, something that one must cross while departing from a place and journeying to a new one. The vast open sky represents freedom; a wide-open future.

An additional important element of the gallery installation is the inclusion of a framed collaborative drawing piece. Drawn by Bk Sin, one of the many creative young men in Young Cash Karen, the fantasy-like imagery depicts what he dreams his future will look like. My decision to include the drawing in the installation is because I felt it to be a more honest depiction of their lives than anything I alone could make. I see the drawings as another facet or tool for self-representation. They are collaborative in that the paper is handmade by me out of scraps of blue-denim jeans. The denim is symbolic of their fashion tastes. To the side of the framed drawing on the gallery wall I added a brief artist statement to give important context about the subjects of Young Cash Karen.

I believe taking someone’s portrait recognizes their importance in the world by celebrating their existence and recording the beauty that I see in them. I am fascinated by how, although portraiture may
seem simple, its power seems to lie in its complexities and mysteries. All portraits fail in a certain respect, in that they can never fully represent a person’s complexities and contradictions, their history and fullness. The images that result from a portrait session depict the subject, but is also filtered through the experiences and biases of the photographer, and records an often-fleeting interaction. In this sense, a portrait of another person will always fail on an objective level, but the best one can do is to have it succeed on a subjective level, in that the artist personally finds something interesting, beautiful, and worth documenting in her subject. The artist’s responsibility is to honor her vision, to capture what she finds compelling about her subject. Thus, my personal approach to portraiture is one of subjective truth, which means I take an intuitive authority over my artistic vision. I do not claim to fully understand or portray the truth of my subjects because that would be a futile endeavor. I see something special in the subject and I strive to translate that which I see into a photographic image—a portrait of someone that is inevitably weighted with my own artistic and aesthetic decisions.

The photographer Dawoud Bey uses his work as a platform to challenge stereotypical images of African Americans and other historically marginalized groups. Bey has completed several collaborative projects, working with young people, museums, and cultural institutions to broaden the participation of communities whose voices have been widely absent from these spaces. Bey is aware of and sensitive about the role of a photographer, having stated “There is an implicit power relationship acted out in the process of photographing people, particularly those on the margins of society.”

My identity as a young woman making work about a group of young men creates its own set of complications. I hold a position of privilege as a photographer who has been given access, and the power, to portray them. I have a responsibility which comes with the imaging of a vulnerable community and in being their advocate, but I am also an artist with a creative vision. I also believe my identity as a Thai-American woman helped me quickly gain access and acceptance into their community. I have witnessed their distrust towards many outsiders, while with me they were eagerly welcoming, and quickly grew trusting and comfortable with my presence. I am both an insider and outsider of this

community in several ways: I am Southeast Asian but I am also white; I have experienced displacement but I am now well-adapted; I hang out with the boys but I am most often the only girl in the room. I am with them but I can never truly be one of them. I also face the challenge of dealing with the gender dynamic, and the inevitable tension that occurs when I am with them. It is because of this complicated and undeniable reality, that Young Cash Karen evolved into an exploration of the construct of masculinity. I am a young woman who feels both a repulsion to and a fascination with maleness and masculinity, and I find myself photographing masculinity, exploring it, in an attempt to understand it.

When I began this project, the gender dynamic was not of major significance to me, maybe because I did not want it to be and so I ignored that truth. I enjoyed that I was being treated as one of them, as one of the boys or as a sisterly figure. But eventually the differences became apparent to me—when the flattering of my looks and messages of adoration became frequent, or when my presence seemed to escalate performances of masculinity. I have grown used to the discomfort of having my female body sexualized and objectified by society, and when making this work, it feels scary, yet also empowering, to subvert the role of who is traditionally gazed upon. I embrace a role as the taker, not just the giver.

Collier Schorr is a photographer who eloquently addresses this idea in her work:

“I suppose I learned to objectify men from other men in literature and art, but it was troubling to feel my view was being attributed to a male one because my female authorship was being erased by the way in which my images were being consumed. I always feel that the connection between myself and the boy or man when I’m shooting is very clear: he is aware that I’m a woman and he’s clearly posing for a woman. It’s a very different kind of picture. I don’t think men can take the kinds of pictures I take of men because men pose differently for women.”

My use of video is an extension of my portraiture practice. It allows for an even more layered building of meaning through the use of moving images, sound, and edit. The sound is especially important in the video piece as it becomes a part of the atmospheric viewing experience in the gallery installation. The footage in the video edit varies from quiet tender moments to rowdy, inebriated parties with freestyle rapping—something the boys love to do when they get together. My own presence is a

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part of the video through my hand in filming and editing, as well as physically being in some footage, showing my simultaneous belonging and otherness with this community.

Self-representation is another important element in *Young Cash Karen*. I am an advocate for art that is made from a personal connection to community and place. My own identity and body is foregrounded and present within the work itself. I assert my voice and vision into the world, in opposition to the dominant history of documentary practice as a pursuit of the white male photographer who enters cultures outside his own, often driven by a sense of curiosity, entitlement, and exploitation. I acknowledge and learn from this history, and I hope to be a force of change in the future of it. In LaToya Ruby Frazier’s book, *The Notion of Family*, Frazier “reimagines the tradition of social documentary by approaching a community not as a curious or concerned outsider but as a vulnerable insider.”⁹ Her work represents the negative effects of deindustrialization on her family and the African-American community of her rustbelt hometown of Braddock, PA. She uses self-portraiture and portraits of her mother and grandmother in the work to tell the story from a personal place. I am inspired by her unapologetic ownership of the authority she possesses to portray her, and her community’s story to the world, which vastly differs from what mainstream media chooses to show. She took the responsibility as an artist and photographer into her hands to expose the truth about corruption and the unfair treatment on her community.

Over the past year, I have become closely connected with the young men in *Young Cash Karen*. Without their generosity and openness, this work would not have been possible, and I am immensely grateful for their openness and trust in me. It is important to me to cultivate a real relationship with my subjects, to build trust over time, and not simply use my subjects as raw visual material. As an artist, I push beyond the didactic boundaries of photojournalism towards a complex and nuanced form of documentary practice. I consider myself an artist and advocate, working to increase the visibility of an underrepresented community and to celebrate their resilience. The core intent of *Young Cash Karen* is to create a poetic resistance to oppression.

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Lake Ontario, 2018, from the series Young Cash Karen
www.jadethiraswas.com
Collaboration with Bk Sin, 2018, from the series Young Cash Karen
www.jadethiraswas.com

Group Picture on Eh Day’s Birthday, 2017, from the series Young Cash Karen
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Bibliography


