Origins

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Origins

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Metals and Jewelry Design
Department of Metals and Jewelry Design
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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ABSTRACT

Origins are beginnings. Everyone has an origin, a point from which their path brought them to the person that they are today. Some origins are from birth and lead in winding lines to a person’s present. Some origins come after birth and may take the form of an event, person or place that touched a life and drastically affected their path, pushing or pulling them to become an entirely different person than would have otherwise come about.

My own origin was the moment I was given into the arms of my adoptive parents. I was wrapped in layers of clothes, bundled up tightly as my own thread of life veered drastically. In my grown up life I have no memories of my origin and few pictures by which to remember it. But as I turned twenty-two my mother showed me the very clothes that I wore the day she and my father received me. These clothes, a variety of baby articles in shades of pink and red, mostly handmade, and slightly worn, have come to symbolize my own origin.

I believe that the passage of time and the memory by which we mark it within ourselves, is not linear. It warps and fades allowing moments of joy and sadness to stand out while other less emotional times slip away and fade into a haze. Within memory there can be longing, mourning and even anger for what has occurred, but also joy and hope for what was and can become.

For my thesis investigations I delved into my own origin story in hopes of representing a universally understood story of origin. I utilized the imagery of my baby clothes as a visual subject that is easily recognizable to many people. I also incorporated the themes of The Red Thread of Fate and cloth and textile arts as a particularly gendered subjects representative of my own adoption story.
Gender in Adoption and Textiles

In 1978, in post Mao China, local government started to encourage citizens to have only one child in order to curb population growth. In 1979 the Family Planning Policy was introduced to China as a whole. In 1980 September 18th the central government met and decided that the ideal population in the next few years would be about 700 million people. The government then decided to implement the One Child Policy in order to meet this goal. In 1992 China began to allow foreigners to adopt children out of the country.

This policy was enforced at the provincial level throughout China. The desperate enforcement of the policy resulted in various and sometimes extreme methods. These included fines, such as a “social child raising fee” or “family planning fee”, female contraception, sometimes forced, such as IUD and sterilization (tubal ligation), sex selective abortion, infanticide, abandonment, and adoption.

Facing the choice of only one child, many Chinese families valued having male children to carry on their family lineage. This cultural gender preference resulted in what is called the “missing girls”. The generation of “missing girls” refers to the high number of female children aborted, killed after birth or sent to orphanages, many of whom were adopted out of the country. Another term, the “black child” is the occurrence of a family keeping and hiding an illegal child. That child would not be able to get a Hukou, which would have provided official government

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2 “Capsule Overview of Adoption Issues in China.”
3 “Capsule Overview of Adoption Issues in China.”
4 “Capsule Overview of Adoption Issues in China.”
birth records for school, immunizations and legal status. It is estimated that anywhere near 100 million to 150 million girls were sent to orphanages or adopted during these 36 years. A darker side to the trend of adoption occurred at the provincial levels, based in Guangdong provinces, where abducted babies were trafficked and sold internationally.

December 27th 2015 the abolition of the Family Planning Act was passed. The decision took effect January 1st 2016. This change can be seen to largely affect the landscape of international adoption world wide. When spoken about as a single number it is difficult to picture the numbers of people whose lives were affected. My work tries to represent my story of adoption and not to define it as an innately good or bad act. My own adoption story is a balance between a good life, a loving family and the essential questions of identity that everyone faces.

The imbalance of females given up for adoption in China began my story, but as I develop into an artist and maker, this exploration has developed into a broader exploration of the skewed history of females in the art world. “Throughout the history of art, women have often been represented as a subject rather than the creative force behind the artwork (St. Clair. “Embarrassment of Obscurities”). Although it is widely acknowledged that women in the arts have had a back seat role, in the area of weaving, sewing and the textile crafts, that history is a little different. Textiles have been the domain of women in many cultures. This fact is highlighted by the female deities of spinning and weaving in many cultures including, “Neith in pre-Dynastic Egypt; Grecian Athena; the Norse Goddess Frigg and the Chinese Silkworm

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Goddess (St. Clair. “Embarrassment of Obscurities”). This particular skill was considered across the board a women’s work which in turn gave her value. It is also theorized that the importance of the textile art, while understood as valuable in most cultures is, compared to other longer lasting materials such as bronze and iron, minimized because of the natural archaeological bias of material decay\(^{11}\). This points to the fact that the ancient history of textiles is much harder for us to know about simply because these items less commonly survived.

In my own work I utilize the sewn line and a variety of premade fabrics partly for my love of material, but also for the gendered history of women’s hands creating value with these materials. Specifically I use thread as a top layer of line to draw details on top of images of the clothing items I was adopted in. The clothes were mostly made by the women in the orphanage that cared for me. I use the sewn line in red to show deference to those women whose hands held me before my parents. I also use the lines to reference the gendered story of Chinese adoption that made my story one of many thousands.

**The Color Red and The Red Thread of Fate**

In Chinese Culture the color red symbolizes luck and joy. It is the national color on their flag, is a color used in every holiday celebration and can be found in almost every ancient architectural construction. Even today red can be seen everywhere in China, but in my work I associate it most closely with the story of the Red Thread of Fate. This story is also found in Chinese, Japanese and Korean culture. The basic belief is that there is a red thread connected to

one’s little finger that runs from them to their destined partner. The thread will tangle and wind, but never break or tear.

My interpretation of this story is more widely angled. I do not believe that this thread connects only two fated people, but rather it connects oneself to other people around them, representing the many and varied relationships that we create in life. Some of these do disappear over time, but those that are most meaningful and formative remain, at least in value if not in constant presence. In my piece Supplication (Fig. 6) the threads are symbolic of the many connections to others that give us strength and purpose. The many red threads knotted and crossed in Wall Piece (Fig. 2) and Lost Poem (Fig. 3, 4) are the mass of overlapping and tangling paths that we each create as we connect and form relationships with people throughout our lives.

The color red also has non-cultural and more emotionally specific meanings attached to its many shades and temperatures. In my larger Baby Clothes installation (Fig. 1) I started to utilize various shades of red to insinuate the many emotions associated with my adoption story; happiness, love, anger, aggression, fate, loss and longing. In creating this piece I did come to realize that red, like most things in our visual world is a matter of perception. When the many values of the color are placed next to each other some appear pink, while others look purple. This is a fine illustration of the many experiences and stories of adoption, each as unique as both the individuals who have been adopted as well as the wider circle of those closely affected by the act of adoption.
The main installation piece for my thesis show is *Origins*. (Fig. 1.) *Origins* utilizes photographs of the clothes I wore as a baby when I was adopted. The day I was handed to my parents I was bundled in several layers of clothes. I was just a face poking out of cloth, large dark eyes looking at my new family. My parents saved these items of clothing and when I was older showed them to me. I felt an immediate connection to them. So small and fragile. A pink hand knitted sweater, two layers of red pants with holes in them, a playing card patterned black, red and white button up shirt, a deep dark long sleeved red sweater knitted from wool the color of dried blood and lastly bright and cheerful, little red and yellow star shoes. These items were so small and colorful, not at all how I dress as an adult. At the time I took pictures of them and the other small objects that my parents saved from that trip when they got me. I was incredibly touched to see the worn clothes that hands I never met made for me and which my parents saved in memory of the day that I came into their lives.

Later I realized that through silk screen printing I could directly utilize the imagery of these baby items to tell my story. The clothes are instantly recognizable shapes to viewers and they supported the story of a shared experience of loss, gain and change of destiny that I wanted to discuss. After many versions of these clothing prints, some small and embroidered, others in many multiples, I decided to scale up the imagery so that it could more easily address the viewer. I then decided on the form of the installation, which consisted of many individual, but repetitive prints coming together to form a space through which the viewer would walk. The experience of walking through space and time would happen actually at the exhibition, but
would also function metaphorically as the viewer examined each print, moving through many images that start to show the numbers of children adopted. Each print is part of the same story, but is unique in its execution, as every person’s story is their own.

Just as each story of Chinese adoption is not the same each print is uniquely individual, using slightly different values of red and allowing edges to remain sharper or become blurred during the printing process. In this way I want to create a whole field of red, but not a single red, a field of images that are the same, but not exactly the same. And when hung in space they become a collage in which each individual identity may appear to be lost while in actuality remaining unique.

Ideally the installation will be enhanced with the lighting, showing off the sheerness of the fabric that is printed on so that images can be seen through one another in a layering effect through space. At the show this came to life, creating a strong sense of depth and space. In the Yards Gallery, space limited by the pre-existing architecture of the building, this forced me to respond to the space while installing the show. For example there was a large red brown pole that ended up being incorporated into the hanging pieces. I thought this would be bad, but it turned out that the coloring of the pole was similar enough to the reds and brown undertones of the images that the pole disappeared into the arrangement in the end.

Another adjustment to the space was the formation of the hangings. In the initial plan they were to be hung with a low point in the middle arching up into two higher ends. In the space the piece came into being as planned, but due to the size of the gallery the back side, farthest from the door, this made it feel sort of closed into the back corner of the room thus creating a sort of triangular gap where the arch of open space ran into the corner. I decided after viewing
this empty space to fill in the corner and negate the arching up effect that was previously planned. This allowed the viewer to see the show as they entered the room as a large mass starting high up and then spreading low and all the way back into the far corner of the room. Creating a dense, but not entirely evenly spaced grouping of hanging images which they could then walk clockwise around and view different angels of the hangings, without large empty gaps appearing as they circulate the installation. It was also possible to carefully walk through the hanging fabrics, which only a few people did after asking for permission. They relayed that the experience was very nice, it felt intimate like they were really entering the artwork.

*Wall Piece Unnamed* (Fig. 2.) is a work that first forced me to push scale. At first the piece started as a few sheets of paper, about the size of a small table. Slowly it grew as I figured out that I want the viewer to be visually overwhelmed by the black loosely gridded circles. I kept adding sheets of paper until it made me feel small and daunted when I stood and addressed it. I wanted to create this feeling because that is what the world is, it is large and unsafe, but even so as we go out and live in it we create connections and bonds with people that anchor us in the vastness.

Each circle represents an individual. Even though they are in a gridded formation, they are loosely drawn, some larger, thicker and darker than others and forming columns that seem to lean in many places to the right or the left. The splashes of red ink mixed with blood show the places of overlap or “fate” (important connections) which are then connected by sewn red threads. Just as our relationships with family, friends and other people we come into daily contact with are complex and sometimes difficult, these threads are messy, knotted and overlapping. The mess of threads and knots show strives to show that connections are maintained
with many individuals, not only with those physically close to us. All of this takes place on a surface of rice paper sheets glued together by rice glue, which as it dried formed on a small scale, mountainous ripples and waves at the edges of each single surface.

*Lost poem* (Fig. 3,4) is a sculpture piece made up of many small bundles of tulle heat formed and tied with red thread. Inside a handful of the bundles is a torn up poem that was written in ink. The content of the poem is rendered illegible to the viewer. The small bundles are how I envision people, who as individuals arrange ourselves in space, grouping together and forming networks of relationships in life. The red threads are left to trail over each other, like afterimages of movement through space, or linked connections that tie us to each other. When I came upon tulle as a material I wanted to use it to create dimensional forms that talk about interior space. In many ways *Lost poem* is another iteration of *Wall Piece Unnamed*, just in another dimension.

I spent a long time trying different installation arrangements on this piece. When I first presented *Lost Poem* in class a few months prior to my show, I received feedback that the individual pieces became difficult to differentiate from each other. This was due to the fact that the smallest bundles and the largest bundles did not vary so much in size. Therefore when placed all together on a flat surface (Fig.4) the larger ones did not stand out very much and people felt there should be a greater variation in size if not in color. Keeping this critique in mind I tried three different installation arrangements involving varying heights and sizes of pedestals. I hoped that this varying landscape would draw more attention to the various sizes of the individual bundles. Then the problem was making a large enough surface with pedestals to display the majority of the bundles, since they exist in relation to each other and need to be presented in
Finally I settled on an arrangement similar to steps, with pedestals laid on their sides creating large rectangles of surface to display on.

*Supplication* (Fig. 5) is a small piece that was made during the summer, while I was processing and exploring the subtleties of drawing in thread. It is a relatively flat piece, with the thread poked through small pin holes in the paper to form the image of hands. These cupped hands are my own, appearing to either give or receive multitudes of small threads at their fingertips. I imagine these are the invisible lines connecting myself to each person that is important to me. They are not my destiny, but the ties that form my community and help me shape my future. In person the drawing is a flat sheet of paper, but the threads cast a small shadow where they lie on the paper adding an unexpected depth. While at the bottom of my fingers the threads trail off into space creating a soft feeling and entering the dimension of the viewer.

Finally, *Struggle I* (Fig. 6) is a sculptural form made from loose red wool. This piece was created after all the others. It was a last endeavour to try and realize the same conceptual pursuit of showing human connection in a more three dimensional form. I struggled to create this piece, trying out metal and paper and finally coming upon wool in order to create the full dimensional shape, while also preserving a loose and flowing quality in the form. Wool is animal hair, giving the form a human feel even though it is not strictly representative of a recognizable figure or object. The piece was created in layers, condensing the wool to make a stable form while also trying to preserve the innate loose and airy feeling of the material.

In the making process I started forming small shapes from handfuls of wool which grew into larger amounts of wool as I searched for the form and mass that would more deeply express
my concept of struggle. While installing my show I decided to put out the larger red piece
*Struggle I* (Fig. 6) and the smaller forms in yellow *Struggle II* (Fig. 7). I felt that the smaller yellow pieces added a visual break in all of the red and white in the show in a complimentary way. Together they show my struggle to create, the struggle for freeness and structure and the struggle to form connections and keep them while you grow.

**Artist Influences**

In addition to historical and cultural research I am influenced by the works of many other artist. Foremost among them is Chihara Shiota. Shiota is a Japanese woman born in Osaka Japan who has lived and worked in Berlin since 1996\(^\text{12}\). She is best known for creating large gallery size installations with found objects and thread (often red). Her work is poetic and captivating. Her best known installation is a collection of large boats surrounded by hundreds of keys hanging from red threads from the ceiling, so numerous as to create a sea of tangled red sky.\(^\text{13}\) Shiota’s use of red thread represents, “... the bodily, the social, the human.”\(^\text{14}\) Her use of line in space and minimal color are able to create an entire narrative in all of her works; from the first moment of seeing her art I was touched by a sense of wonder and peace. In my own work I have tried to grasp some of her sense of wonder that she observes in the human world.

Do Hu Suh is another artist whom I look to for inspiration. He is best known for his large nylon architectural installations. Do Hu Suh is a Korean born artist who examines the meaning of “home” by creating nylon structures based off of buildings he has lived in or with which he has a


\(^{13}\) Acret, Susan. “The Primacy of Matter.”

strong connection. Some of his works are on the floor for people to walk into, while others hang in the hair like surreal dreams of floating houses\textsuperscript{15}. These structures are sewn together from nylon fabrics using a traditional Korean technique and then installed in gallery spaces\textsuperscript{16}. His architectural works literally create another space for the viewer to enter. Additionally, the use of sheer colored fabrics gives his works a hollow almost ghostly feeling, like a childhood home left and forgotten or an old building that was torn down and only remains in one’s memory.

Working in a different medium from both Chihara Shiota and Do Hu Suh, Tomoko Shioyasu is a Japanese female artist who is able to capture the same feelings of awe, longing and peace that the two previous artist I have referenced are so well known for. Tomoko Shioyasu is a Japanese artist living in Japan who is known for working with only one medium, paper\textsuperscript{17}. Using utility knives and soldering irons she makes immense cut paper works which hang in space\textsuperscript{18}. Although her media is limited she has found a balance of small detail and huge scale, that in combination with judicious lighting, creates pieces which evoke many emotions. Her extreme minimal use of materials is in itself poetic to me. It speaks to the purity of form and shape, how to use little and still convey strong and meaningful concepts. In my own work I often feel that I should try to incorporate more materials, but find that there is peace and balance in less, things that become lost when complexity is added. that I lose when I add more.

\textsuperscript{16} Kim, sarah. “Do Ho Suh Stitches Time, Identity and Memory in The Perfect Home II at the Brooklyn Museum.”
\textsuperscript{18} Jobson, Christopher. “Immense Paper Cut Tapestries by Tomoko Shioyasu.”
Conclusion

My exploration originated from my own story of adoption. Through conversations with others and research of Eastern mythology, Shinto culture and other working artists I tried to tell my own story in hopes that others could see their story in the work as well. In the end I simply put my own experiences into representative forms. Nearly all of my pieces started on a small scale, and continued to grow in number and size as I was encouraged to address the uncertainty and pain that I was confronted with when sharing my own story. But I was encouraged to consider that to share one’s own very personal issues with viewers actually enables them to delve into their own stories too. As the subject matter for nearly all of my graduate school time was in a similar vein creating a cohesive show was simply a matter of choosing what works visually fit together in the space.

I was my first time installing an entire show, which pushed me to utilize and respond to the distinct gallery space. In retrospect I would have liked to be in a more controlled environment, or “white gallery space” where I had originally imaged my works inhabiting. In spite of this I am proud of the installation and sense of cohesion within the exhibit in spite of many unknowns and quirks of the Yards Gallery.

Working towards my thesis has been vital for my personal growth. In this time through this work I have been able to address questions of identity and culture that I had previously kept in a closeted part of my myself. Hearing other peoples’ stories, especially those of foreigners living in America for long periods of time I have come to an understanding that for myself, as I am now, it is alright to feel cross or multicultural. And that although I may find resonance with
other people and places it does not make me belong less to where I come from and by whom I was raised; it can simply become another layer of self that I absorb and make my own.
Photos of The Thesis Show

Figure 1. *Baby Clothes 2019*. Zoey M. Perse. Synthetic fabric blend, ink, thread and wooden dowels. Photo Credit: Elizabeth Lamark
Figure 2a. *Wall Piece Untitled 2018*. Zoey M. Perse. Rice paper, black ink, red ink, blood and thread. Photo Credit: Elizabeth Lamark
Figure 2b. Wall Piece Untitled 2018. Zoey M. Perse. Rice paper, black ink, red ink, blood
and thread. Photo Credit: Elizabeth Lamark
Figure 3. *Lost Poem 2018*. Zoey M. Perse. Tulle, paper, ink and thread. Installation.

Photo Credit: Elizabeth Lamark.
Figure 4. Lost Poem 2018. Zoey M. Perse. Tulle, paper, ink and thread. Installation.

Photo Credit: Zoey Perse.
Figure 5. *Supplication*. 2018. Zoey M. Perse. Paper and thread. 7”x8” Photo Credit:

Elizabeth Lamark.
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