Leave Prejudice Behind

Pei-Chen Chien

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LEAVE PREJUDICE BEHIND
By Pei-Chen Chien
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I strive to expose societal rules and regulations that constrict and restrict our social interactions in a way that promotes prejudice and xenophobia. Through interacting with the series of sculptures, viewers are given the opportunity to question these societal norms and start a process of self-reflection to truly understand the freedom that comes without prejudice. Interaction is the main element that ties the series of works together, to form a seamless journey of self-discovery.

The following artists are discussed in relation to this series of work: Niki de Saint Phalle and Björk Guðmundsdóttir. Their art works share the same spirit of liberation and social revolution.
INTRODUCTION

Love, is a word that has been so misused that it has lost any deeper meaning than a verbal declaration of affection.

Tolle writes, “To love is to recognize yourself in another” (A New Earth, p.105). His definition of love is based on empathy, something much bigger than ourselves. But our world is so full of egoism that pure love, true friendship and trust are rare. We forget that humans were meant to cohabit in a beautiful community.

Prejudice is the outcome of this, and preconceived judgment about a person based upon race, social class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, political beliefs, religion, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics is widespread. I believe that the only solution for terminating prejudice is to encourage love.

In my art, I put special emphasis on maintaining the simple purity of love. The figure, color, and expression of my thoughts are through the materials I selected. Figurative forms and color are the main visual components that represent my personality directly.
I take inspiration from the way children create figures for art because children’s art invokes a style that is untainted by the world. The color white appears frequently in my art because it is the purest of colors, while smooth arched lines speak of unabashed freedom and love.

My art reminds people that there is more to life and the world than what they currently see and know. Life should not be lived only for the individual, but for others. I want to challenge beliefs, and remind people of the beauty in uniqueness, a quality that separates and joins everyone.
I create art not to make a finite statement, but to start a conversation. A good piece of art is akin to a good bottle of wine - the value comes from the conversation evoked.

Twenty-seven years ago, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) amongst children was not widely understood, and was commonly mistaken for a child’s lack of discipline. Partly because of an extremely conservative education system, Asian teachers believed that these “problem children” had to be disciplined until they behaved like other normal students. Being branded as a “problem child” made me a target in school, and an outcast.

Everyone has decisive moments in their lives that set the course for the rest of their life. Mine was a punishment dealt by a teacher when I was ten. She had asked the whole class to write down their favorite and least favorite classmates.

The champions of both categories were posted on the notice board in the classroom, and I had topped the least favourite category.
That evening, she called my mother on the phone and told her that I was unable to be educated. My mother handed me a box of colored pencils after she had spoken to my teacher, and said, “Put your creativity into these colors, one day, people will understand you.” Art became my outlet for escape.

At the same time, my father who has a strong military background, used violent punishment to discipline me.

During this painful period, drawing made me feel peaceful and happy because I could stay in my internal world without any others.

These experiences ignited my existential search, which led me to study human behavior. I found that many victims of domestic abuse and chaos have given up on finding a way to solve their problems. Dissatisfaction stems from the conflicts in their internal spiritual lives as opposed to their material lives. The main barrier that keeps most people from living a healthy spiritual life is the discord between what they instinctively believe to be true, and what society dictates as truth.
Making art is a way for me to vent my emotions and to understand myself. Each art piece I create is reflective of my current relationships, emotions and personal experiences. I used to prefer strong colors and grotesque figures to reflect my negative feelings towards human nature. I was frustrated with the constant conflict and hurt surrounding me, and that distinctive lack of hope was reflected in the murky, violent, dark and heavy art pieces of my past.

In 2007, I moved to America to further my studies. The new environment changed the way I look at the world. I was like a newborn kid, trying to understand this foreign, brand-new environment. I was given this opportunity to discard the old egos and start a new life.

The transition in my artwork was clear. Soft, bright lights started making appearances in my works. It was a good start.

It made me curious about the reasons behind the change, and what factors made people stagnate. Making art became a journey to open this discussion with people through my works. Many of my pieces became a mirror that exposes people’s inner selves,
invoking them to think and question what they see. I also wanted to invite people to participate and create art pieces together, planting the seeds for a brighter future together.
ABOUT ART AND ARTIST
What is art? Some people think that art has aesthetic value like sculpture, painting, architecture, or craft, while some others think that art is an infection. Niki de Saint Phalle and Bjork are two artists who refined what art meant to me.
Niki de Saint Phalle
Artist Niki de Saint Phalle’s Nanas convey a child-like art that attracted me. Art is a language and a visual communication tool for Niki. She had a miserable childhood, and created these beautiful art pieces that were therapeutic to her soul. Studying her artwork helped me understand more about the value of art. Her art doesn’t hide the secrets of her emotions but exposes her thoughts and experiences. She overcomes her negative experiences by changing the energy into art. Niki’s shooting paintings, Nanas and Tarot Garden are clear examples of that transition in her life.

Artist Niki de Saint Phalle’s Nanas, represent a child-like way of creating art that attracted me. Art is a language and a visual communication tool for Niki. She had a miserable childhood, and created these beautiful art pieces that were therapeutic to her soul. Studying her artwork helped me understand more about the value of art. Her art doesn’t hide the secrets of her emotions but exposes her thoughts and experiences. She overcomes her negative experiences by changing the energy into art. Niki’s shooting paintings, Nanas and Tarot Garden are clear examples of that transition of her life.
She turned her anger into art and broke traditional forms. She used a rifle instead of a brush. She said, “Danger was present from the first moment. I would learn to love DANGER, RISK, ACTION.” and “I realized how lucky I had been to find a peaceful way to express the violence within me.” Regardless of what people think of her, she just does whatever she wants, in efforts to find out who she truly is. She also questions, “Why do people who love God make war in religion’s name? Why do nuns wear black? Didn’t God like colors? Why were they against sex? Against life? Was that really God’s message?” (Niki de Saint Phalle, p.184)

Nanas is a great departure from Niki’s shooting painting. They are dancing and integrated into an environment without any constraint, void of both anger and frustration. They are symbols of freedom and liberty that have charged the world. The harmonious curves of Nanas’ fatty figures create joyous movements. Although many people think that the Nanas are ugly, they are the most beautiful things for Niki.
Tarot Garden, which is also named The Wonder of the World, is her most important work of her life. Niki has always stood up for women, encouraging them to strive for their freedoms and dreams. The Tarot Garden is a dream world that is open for any one to join.

Flat sculptures surrounded with nature, space, light and air are built up with mosaics. Fragments of mirrors, which possess an introspective meaning, are stuck together in many areas of her sculptures. They reflect the natural environment and the viewer. Glaring surfaces present joyful, vivid and dream-like lives to visitors.
Björk Guðmundsdóttir
Björk is better known as a singer, but she is also a great artist. What really set Björk apart from other artists is her flexible definition of music. Björk creates her music using both traditional and non-traditional elements. The piano, violin, drum, bass, guitar, guzheng and human voice along with the sounds made by electronic chaos, the human body, trains, loom machines, factories, and nature are unified into beautiful music. She turns what most people consider just noise into something beautiful. This is the spirit of an artist breaking the traditional rules and creating a new form.

Björk isn’t afraid. She has strong personal views of the world, and her performances and music are created from that vision. She isn’t afraid of the controversy she believes this might cause.

Björk’s lyrics in “Human Behaviour” and “Homogenic”, address the issue of racial discrimination. Both songs capture Björk’s struggle and imagination to explore this problem:

There’s definitely, definitely, definitely, no logic to human behaviour

... 

There’s no map
And a compass
Wouldn’t help at all

(From “Human Behaviour”, 1993)
I want to go, on a mountain top!
With a radio and good batteries
And play a joyous tune
And free human race
from suffering

(From “Homogenic”, 1977)

In 2008, the Chinese government took an aggressive action and issued an order to kill people who supported Tibet’s fight for independence. The Chinese government blocked out all the information related to this military action. The action wasn’t stopped until information was leaked through social media and got international attention. To support the Tibetans, Björk gave a shout out for Tibetan independence in her “Declare Independence” performance in Shanghai, which caused major controversy. Once again, she puts her beliefs into her music and performance to encourage people to make a positive change.
Declare independence
Don’t let them do that to you
...
Make your own flag
Start your own currency
Make your own stamp
Protect your language And raise your flag

(From “Declare Independence”, 2007)

Art is an intrinsic part of our lives, and is a way to express and to share our thoughts. It has the power to affect and change the world. I believe that the most valuable characteristic of an artist is to be fearless. Become fearless enough to tell people what we think our world lacks, and help create ways to make it better.
THE BODY OF WORK
LEAVE PREJUDICE BEHIND
SECTION I

The Mirror
THE COCOON
The original concept behind The Cocoon is weariness from the pressures of societal expectations. Society dictates that we act according to specific learned behaviors in order to pander to societal values and become “successful.” Humans sometimes try so hard to play God, and they become overwhelmed with the desire to control everything. This lifestyle is boring and meaningless because the motions are mundane and we become lost from our true selves. The Cocoon is a physical manifestation of humanity’s need for simple freedom and love – whose weightlessness can be fully supported by our spirit.
Prejudice is the barrier that blocks freedom and love from our lives. Human behavior is strongly controlled by religious and societal laws. Books are written by human hands, and many books have been translated multiple times from ancient languages. A book, after many translations loses much of its original meaning. Words and languages cannot fully convey a standard meaning and feeling to readers because words are interpreted through our personal biases.

Often wars and conflicts stem from religious and cultural conflicts. Many people do not realize that they are bound by their thoughts (limited and prejudiced) so they do not realize the true intent and consequence of their actions. They believe that they are right, and that there is only one truth.

Does God, Buddha or law order wars? “Can you feel there is something in you that would rather be right than at peace?” (A New Earth p.77) For me, the Holy Bible is not God, the great Sutra is not Buddha and the US Constitution is not universal law. While I believe that the fundamental purpose of religion and law is to instruct humankind to be kind and loving, there are many different factions that believe in
Christ or Buddha and some of them are currently in conflict with each other. It is meaningless to dispute each perceived truth. I do not believe that Jesus, the Virgin Mary or Buddha would agree with the conflicts.

The Cocoon is made with plaster, wire, cement, glass, glue, transparent paint spray, and pages of the Bible, Sutra, and Constitution. These three books – the Bible, Sutra, and US Constitution – are very influential books that control human behaviors. I picked the Bible because Christianity is the most widely practiced religion in the world. The Sutra was chosen because Buddhism is the main religion in Asia, where I was born and grew up. Finally, I chose the Unites States Constitution because the United States is the current world leader. The influences of these three books are phenomenal.
The Cocoon is larger than human-size to convey the weight of life that the figure carries. The figure kneels on the floor, with outstretched hands while waiting to receive something from others. The gesture represents people who treat religion as a crutch because they do not trust themselves and they require constant support and validation from God.
The Cocoon - 3
Pages from the Bible, Sutra, and US Constitution are sprayed with plaster, which glues them together, creating a collage of the form itself. The books are then ripped into various shapes and mixed together to create the surface of the body, representing the beliefs that cover us like a cocoon. The pages are sanded in order to blur the meaning of their words since they have been translated many times. They simultaneously protect us and bind our freedom.
The large human-shaped figure is without gender or race because freedom and love should be distributed equally to every gender and race. I love to use the colour white in my work because it is without prejudice and symbolizes purity. We are struggling to get out of the heavy weight of the cocoon. We can only be free if we eliminate our prejudices and bring more love, peace and freedom into our lives.
This was my first time creating something of such large scale and shape. When I started working on this piece, I used many kinds of materials to build up the form. Wooden sticks and chicken wire were used to create the framework and plaster provided a body to the frame itself. Initially there was a high risk that the sculpture would collapse because of extreme angles and heavy plaster weight. With that in mind, I put more filler inside the wire and sprayed on a few layers of cement to give it stronger support. Despite the initial fear that it might collapse, I truly enjoyed investigating the potential of materials needed to create this work.
INVISIBLE CAGE
Our behavior changes when we know we are being watched. *Invisible Cage* represents people living under the shadow of others, and how our social values become a cage that ensnares us.

When the viewer walks into the art space, a three-way, triangular relationship will form between the viewer, the figure in the birdcage and other members of the audience.
Invisible Cage - 2
The metal cage symbolizes the invisible restrictions that society enforces on us. A figure with a glassy expression lives in the cage, reflecting the consequences we suffer when our happiness is restricted, locked in because of these values we unconsciously impose on ourselves in order to please others. Our body may be limited by physical function, but our soul should be free. Only when we rid ourselves of the need to please others and fear of being judged, can we open the door of the cage. That will lead us to greater freedom to reach our dreams and pursue happiness.
When I was working on this piece, I had a lot of trouble making the metal cage. I did not have any welding experience, and my first attempt did not fit my vision. So, I sought assistance from School of American Crafts (metals) teaching assistant, Lee Crowley. Together we worked on measuring the size of cage and the density of each tube. He taught me how to heat copper to create patinas. I deeply appreciated Lee’s skills and knowledge. Finally, the result was successful.
SECTION II
TREE OF TOLERANCE
Trees symbolize the cycle of life.

The roots bring nutrients to the body of the tree that then feed the leaves, flowers and fruit. When the leaves on trees die, they fall to the ground and become nutrients that are absorbed back into the tree via the roots.

The leaves, flowers and fruit are unique in every way, and they all play important roles in the life cycle of the tree. No one component is more important than another. Similarly, each individual hair cutting on my tree belongs to a person of a different race or gender, and each possesses a unique DNA. Despite these fundamental differences, no clump of hair is more important than another. Each cutting of hair symbolically receives nutrients from the same roots, and when it dies, it returns to repeat the same cycle. They will all be absorbed back into the Earth.
"LEAVE"

"PRETTY"

"FEI - CHEN CHEED"
This piece was divided into three distinct events during the creation of my performance work. The first project was collecting human hair. I printed posters and flyers to convey the idea to people. I set up tables where I asked them to donate their hair. This process was a great way to explore my exhibit intentions, interacting with people and learning what they thought of my concept.
Collecting hair was a very important part of this art piece. Contributing hair strongly symbolized trust and support. Hair contains each person’s DNA, so by developing trust, people were willing to give a part of them-self to another. The action of cutting one’s hair may destroy their hairstyle, so it was a strong symbol of support. During this collection time, I documented people’s reactions and the collection process with a video camera. The moment people took the scissors to cut off a tuft of their hair to support others affected me significantly. It seemed like we were cooperating to create a peaceful world.
Collecting hair continues as an extended long-term assignment. After I gathered some hair, I started to build up the form that I had envisioned. I found a tree that had been cut off from the bottom of its trunk. I wanted to give the tree a new life. I created the new roots that would help the tree reach the nutrients from the environment. The trunk was covered with gold leaf; and people helped it grow plenty of leaves with their hair and love (nutrients). That made the tree become very dazzling, vivid, vigorous and alive.
Tree of Tolerance - 3
Eckhart Tolle said, “To love is to recognize yourself in another” (A New Earth, p. 105). We can clearly see the differences between each tuft of hair growing from the tree, but if we look deeper, we can see that each strand of hair is contributing to giving life to the tree. To love is to be able to see past the differences and straight to the similarities that tie us together.

The third phase of the Tree Of Tolerance happened during the thesis exhibition’s opening reception, held in the Bevier Gallery where I shaved my hair.
In Buddhism, the act of shaving one’s hair is a symbol of putting oneself into a neutral position and discarding all personal biases (ego). It’s an act of getting rid of the old to make space for the new. The performance attracted many people who stayed and watched. Many viewers were surprised and curious about a woman who would shave her long hair for art. Their inquisitiveness motivated them to find out about the symbolic meaning connected with the tree.
After my hair was cut, I deeply appreciated that John Remo joined the performance to shave his hair in support.

2011 MFA Thesis Exhibition
Opening reception performance
Bevier Gallery, RIT
After the performance, the tree received much nourishment from the audience. Many people cut their hair for this tree to support the idea of human equality. This tree can never grow and be reborn through my personal strength, but can only thrive through the love of others.
LIFELINE
The rainbow flag is a multi-cultural symbol of diversity and inclusivity, expressing hope and yearning. It represents the basic human desire for inclusiveness, similar to being part of a family.

The *Lifeline* project used snippets of clothing from numerous people to create a rainbow flag. Everyone’s contribution symbolized the act of working together, skills necessary for all families to survive.
The progress of the Lifeline is similar to the Tree Of Tolerance. Collecting pieces of cloth and video taping the process were the most important part of this artwork.

“... thoughts of me and mine ... this is identification with objects, which means investing things ... with a sense of self ” (A New Earth, p.29.) Tolle explains, that when an object is given ownership, it takes on a distinctly changed meaning. A piece of clothing becomes my clothing. The addition of the designations “my” and “mine” instantly makes the object part of a personal identity.

Clothing plays a major part in our sense of identity - people spend lots of money on clothes in order to be perceived as beautiful. When volunteers cut out pieces of their clothing, they were essentially sacrificing parts of their identity.
Maasa, a 1st year Fine Art Studio graduate student, cuts a purple star from her shirt as part of a Life-line performance for the opening reception at Bevier Gallery, RIT.

Maasa Nishmura, Apr. 22, 2011

Zerbe Sodervick Apr. 22, 2011
Our lives are strongly connected together. “the pain-body, however, is not just individual in nature. It also partakes of pain suffered by countless humans throughout the history of humanity, which is a history of continuous tribal warfare, of enslavement, pillage, rape, torture, and other forms of violence.” (A New Earth, p.142.) The way we wash the dirt off our clothes is similar to the way we should wash old thoughts, conditioned by the past, away from us. Then, we hang our clothes to dry in the fresh air, where wind and sunlight bring new energy into our lives.
CONCLUSION
Rules are created to give form and order that will make a better World. Those rules may give us some direction for improving our behavior, but they are often inflexible and can’t adapt to fit all people and life’s circumstances.

Many laws – both religious and legal – are created out of selfish and prejudiced intent. Those laws have ripped society apart, and have killed millions of people because they aren’t based on love. Those laws are one society forcing a point of view on another. If we are arguing or fighting for whose viewpoint is the only truth, our minds are becoming prejudiced. Then, we lose our values and the original purpose for creating rules.

I do art because I believe that art expresses my feelings more deeply than words. People seeing art come together through emotional responses and realize that it is a special, personal experience. This kind of communication can deeply affect us and create a profound and lasting set of impressions.

When I make art, I re-organize my internal self. My works reflect all my feelings. Many times I do not know why I want to initially create a piece of art. But through the process of making art, I feel like I am standing in front of a mirror. I absorb, express, and extract and dig something out of the world and myself from this miraculous mirror.
During the 2011 thesis show, I felt that my artwork brought many together through their curiosity to see my work. *The Cocoon, Invisible Cage* and *Tree of Tolerance* were all created bigger than life size; with natural, primitive shapes and colors to suggest their power and strength. *The Tree of Tolerance* is the most outstanding piece of the performance that invited people to become involved. People enjoyed creating an art experience together. They were happy to see their support and their viewpoints merging together. Everybody was a part of the tree and that was also part of the spirit of this artwork.

The most precious thing in this world is that no two people are alike. Respecting and accepting differences between each other is the most important thing we need to learn. Differences make our world colourful, beautiful and amusing. By respecting and accepting differences, love comes to our lives.

We are like seeds; without love and nourishment, we are trapped in dull brown husks. When we leave our prejudice behind and learn to love we then grow, becoming individual, unique and beautiful.
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