No Words

Maasa Nishimura

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in Fine Arts Studio

NO WORDS

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will try to explore and put into perspective how my life experiences have made me the person I am now. The topic of my thesis is “No Words.”

I focused on painting human emotions that transcend standard cultural barriers of race, culture and languages. Being a foreigner in a foreign land and surrounded with foreign words I have more often than not, had to rely on reading people’s emotions to gather substance of a conversation. Very often feelings of gratitude and happiness were easier to express as well as interpret using facial gestures as opposed to words.

I have attempted to capture and express positive human emotions in a manner that is truly global. The human faces and features that I have portrayed in my oil paintings are snapshots of such emotions.

My thesis project represents my exposure to a truly multicultural environment and how I used reading peoples faces as a source of the meaning and depth behind people’s words.
ARTIST STATEMENT

There are certain emotions that we feel, that are close to impossible to express in words. Emotions that we can clearly feel but are hard to describe. My aim is to capture these emotions and use my art as a medium to share it with everyone.

All of us, no matter what language we speak, or how different our cultural roots are, the emotions we use to express our inner thoughts and feelings are the same.

Eyes reflect the desires and aspirations in a person’s heart. Eyes in their inherent delicate nature have this amazing capacity to express feelings and thoughts that are too complex and subtle for words.

Another thing that works in parallel with the eyes is a person’s smile. A smile is universal. People from across the world may smile for different reasons, but the inner feelings that bring about a smile are the same. A smile is so pure and innocent that a person would rarely feel the need for hiding it. It has a very calming soothing effect and this is what makes it so endearing. I have attempted to capture positive emotions in the eyes and smiles of people I have met in my life.

I am sharing my thoughts and beliefs on a canvas and use it as a medium to connect with people, without the constraints of language, culture or different backgrounds.

Maasa Nishimura
GOALS & OBJECTIVE

My mission is to use my art as a medium to communicate my thoughts with others.

As a person whose primary language is not English, I find it difficult at times to communicate with people who do not speak Japanese. This thesis covers my attempt at bridging the language and cultural barriers between people of vastly different backgrounds.

A smile is one of the most unique and instantly recognizable gestures. I have attempted to convey this gesture, a smile, through the eyes, using my canvas as a medium.

My goal is to express emotions that touch one’s heart through using my art. I believe in being myself and showing my voice on a canvas and this is the most personal way of connecting with people and showing them a glimpse of my life, without the limiting constraints of language and culture.
ARTIST'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I was born in Chiba, Japan, 1987. It's quite a big city with an equally big population to match. I am an only child; I do not have any brothers or sisters. When I was little, my parents were busy with their jobs all the time; they often came home late at night. My parents’ friends used to look after me until they returned. They were really nice to me, but I was shy and was not good at communicating with people. I always felt nervous when I went to someone’s house and was quiet most of the time. Being an introvert, I became an observer of everything happening around me. I avoided uncomfortable situations, preferring to walk away and avoid conflicts, even up to the point of ignoring other people’s wrongdoings. Only when I saw people smiling, laughing or looking happy did I felt at ease. I grew up in an environment where I was more of an observer than a participant. At that time my hobby was to draw. I remember I said when I was 5 years old that my dream was to be a painter. Time passed...

In the summer of 2005, I was 18 years old. I had mainly studied math and physics in high school. In my senior year, I had to decide what I wanted to study in college before taking college entrance exams. I had no idea what I wanted to be in the future, and I also worried about entering a good college and getting work at a good company to earn money—the usual things that are expected for a person of my age in Japan. That was too much pressure for me. I just wanted to escape from that situation. My life up until
that point had been highly scripted, and I already knew what was expected of me. Everyday was just the same: highly regimented and predetermined.

In the end, I decided to study abroad in the U.S. I envisioned it as way to restart my life and to redefine who I was and who I wanted to be.

In the summer of 2006, I came to the U.S. The environment here was different, and everything was a brand new experience for me. America, being the melting pot it is, offered different cultures, races and languages. I realized how unique this environment was, how totally different from where I came from. It was both refreshingly exhilarating and scary at the same time. This place where people were from different backgrounds and cultures offered me the opportunity to blend in with this heterogeneous mix, but also presented me with the dilemma about how to interact in the first place.

The first wall I hit was language. I could not understand what people were saying, I did not know what to do and I could not even say what I wanted to say. I was scared and felt totally lost in a new place, like a newborn baby who can’t express himself.

My second year in college, I took an art class for the first time in my life. I felt at ease mainly because I did not really have to speak. My work could do the talking, and I did not need to hear any explanation from others about their work. I could read their work just like they could read mine—just by looking and observing. Not needing words to communicate, I felt much
more at ease.

I loved painting, but everything I did as an undergrad was all assignments and exercises. I never had to think what I wanted to paint or what I wanted to express. However, I thought that was not enough for me, and I wanted to have new experiences and something unexpected. At this point I knew how to paint; I had learned the technique of painting, but I realized I was a long way off from learning the art of painting.

My junior year in college, my painting teacher, Jim Quinn, suggested that I go to graduate school, and the school he suggested was Rochester Institute of Technology. His guidance was essential in helping me realize what I did not know. For a person to grow, knowing what he or she doesn't know is the most essential step forward.

Before applying to RIT, I made an appointment to see what the school looked like and to make sure I wanted to study there. Jim and I visited RIT during summer vacation, and we met Tom Lightfoot. He showed us around building 7. Inside the building was like a maze. I had never seen such a big art facility. I was nervous and excited.

Tom spent time to discuss my portfolio with me. I told him that I did not have my style yet and worried whether I was ready to apply to grad school. Tom said, “Teachers are here to help students to find their style,” and he gave me a lot of advice. I totally fell in love with RIT: it was love at first sight.
Here I am; I became an RIT student!
EVOLUTION OF THIS THESIS

Since I started studying art, especially the past two years in the Masters Program at the Rochester Institute of Technology, I started from what I truly wanted to paint and why. The first year, I tried to paint human expressions that came from my experiences here in the U.S. However, I was struggling with how to express and paint people’s hearts through their facial expressions.

To find what I wanted, I started painting and drawing from human figures. This evolved in trying to record what makes a gesture. The culmination of this effort was my four faces painting. I used four people with different racial and cultural backgrounds to form a single “smiling” face. This process was quite powerful for me as an artist. It brought to the forefront what I had always known: that people, when expressing their emotions, no matter where they come from, they subconsciously render the same facial gestures. As I created my artwork, I realized that I could very easily express things through my art that were difficult for me to do in words.

After this I wanted to study in more depth the facial gestures that break traditional barriers of communication. I picked eyes as my test subject. I tried to portray the quintessential everyday smile, through a person’s eyes.

My theme “human expressions” hence evolved from “human
expressions” to “No Words” to highlight my aim of expressing human emotions through my art.

Creating artwork that touches people’s hearts was a big challenge for me. I may at times succeed or fail in touching people’s hearts, but I do know it will be my challenge now and forever.
ARTIST'S INSPIRATION

Jim Quinn is the artist who brought me to the art world. He was the person who saw that artist in me, and more importantly showed me that artist that was until then hidden. He specializes in classical observational paintings and drawings. His early work was influenced by classical training and is realistic. His work includes portraiture, landscape and figurative paintings. His current work is religious art based on Judeo-Christian scriptures and philosophy and is more abstract; yet it is still derived from figurative realism.

Jim Quinn, “Oona, the Artist’s Daughter, bat Ya’achov,” 2012, oil on canvas, 52”x52”

Jim Quinn, “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (I Will Be That, Who, Which, Where I Will Be)” 2008, oil on canvas, 24”x20”

While Jim helped me find the artist within me, and lead me on to learning techniques that I have been refining ever since, it was the painter Chuck Close who inspired me to develop and appreciate the physical aspect
of my art. Close once famously said, “If you paint a face big enough, it's hard to ignore.” This made a huge impact on me, and made me feel a lot more at ease in producing art on a big scale. I feel the bigger the artwork, the more details I can add, providing greater depth for the viewer to explore when observing my art.

While the work of Close provided me inspiration and confidence for the scale of my artwork, I felt there still was something missing. I wasn't able to connect with my art at a deep enough level; it still felt I was missing depth in my art.

It was Robert Heischman who first introduced me to Alyssa Monks.
She makes what I have learned to believe is called figurative realism oil painting. Her artwork, when I first saw it, left me speechless. The depth of emotions in her painting left me in a state of dizziness, an unrelenting flood of emotions overwhelmed me. I came to realize this is the kind and level of impact I want people to experience when they see my art. Monks filled a void in me that I could feel but could not even begin to describe.

Also, under Alan Singer’s guidance I have been exposed to different types of artists and art styles, which has been a source of inspiration. He helped me immensely with the evolution of my thesis from conceptualization with his insightful critique.

Learning art is like learning a language for me. A language that I
define and control. A language that I had the responsibility of creating and nursing from conception to reality. One that is constantly evolving and redefining itself, but at the same time lends itself to conceptualization and understanding even by people who witness and experience it for the first time. Jim Quinn, Chuck Close and Alyssa Monks have shown me, inspired me, and help me realize my art. From helping me to find the artist within me, to giving me confidence to give scale to my art, to helping me focus on the impact of my art, I am grateful to have met these people both in person and through their art.
THE BODY OF WORK

The theme of my thesis is “No Words.” My experiences over the years have shaped my subconscious. My art is a form of communication to express my feelings, a medium that I use to share my thoughts and ideas. My artwork has a story behind it, and I focus on capturing the essence of human emotions.

Painting

Below is a painting of mine titled “The One.” This painting consists of four separate pieces. It is a composite construction, with four independent faces contributing towards the final rendering. The four sections are each derived from four complete and independent images each capturing the same emotion: a smile.

Maasa Nishimura,
“The One,” 2010, oil on canvas, 28”x28”
The idea for this painting came from my experiences in America. It reflects my interactions with people from different backgrounds, cultures and languages.

My goal was to show how we all, as humans, share a common bond: how we react to situations in the same way no matter where we come from. A smile is the basis of all emotive expressions, and this was my attempt at capturing it.

Maasa Nishimura, “Kansha,” 2011, oil on canvas, 36”x24”

I named this painting “Kansha,” which means gratitude in
Japanese.

This is my crying face. It is showing how much I appreciate my parents, friends and other people in my life. I have been able to have strong feelings and not give up on my dream of becoming an artist, because they have always supported me, and they have always believed in me. This painting holds my most important and strongest feeling which I can never forget.

This was my first attempt at capturing a tear. It was something I hadn't done before, and I wasn't sure about the technical aspect. Working on my paintings I have always made new discoveries and found new ways of solving problems. I applied this new technique in my later paintings, which I discuss later in this paper.

My second year, I focused on painting eyes. Eyes reflect a person's emotions. By capturing eyes, I wanted to express people's inner hearts. I was at a crossroads as to what subject and in which direction I should be heading. Luvon Sheppard suggested I first try something. It wasn't necessary for me to get it right the first time. He quite rightly suggested I experiment first, and not worry about results. Reason will follow later.
I started with a single eye, with the aim of capturing the emotion of a smile. My first attempts were on a 9x12 canvas. The smaller scale allowed me to prototype and experiment rather quickly to show me a glimpse of how to get the effect and impact I wanted to convey.

Maasa Nishimura,
“No Words (Tarun),” 2011,
_oil on canvas, 9”x12”_
Maasa Nishimura,
“No Words (Sarah),” 2012,
oil on canvas, 9”x12”

Maasa Nishimura, “No Words,” 2012,
oil on canvas, 30”x40”
I wanted to create a powerful and delicate artwork that could stand on its own.

In the painting “No Words” I used the tear effect that I had developed in “Kansha” and further refined and enhanced it to get the required level of delicateness and simplicity. In “No Words (Miya),” I applied a very subtle tear effect to impart an organic feel to the eye, and applied a polished lighting effect to capture the sharp liveliness that I sensed in the original eye. My paintings are realistic but not at the level of photo-realism. I try to implant my emotional impressions in my artwork, so certain emotions that I feel are more enhanced than others.

Since I had started painting eyes, I was planning on showing only eye paintings in my thesis exhibition. I could not see the relationship
between my past artwork and my eye paintings. However, in many critiques and committee meetings, I started getting ideas. I learned it was also important to show how my artwork had evolved. That way people would be able to get better idea about what I was working on in my two years at RIT. I also thought it would be good to go back to where I started.

This painting is called “Brothers.” The inspiration behind this piece was accidental. I came across two brothers, who had remarkably different facial features but having spent some time with them, I started to notice some similarities in the way they behaved, and the way they expressed their emotions. One of the most endearing moments was watching them smile at silly things. I couldn't help but feel the need to capture this smile of theirs in

Maasa Nishimura, “Brothers,” 2012, oil on canvas, 30”x40”
a single moment, a single snapshot that would show the bond between the brothers.

**Process**

I believe everything I do on a canvas is an impression of my feelings and thoughts at that moment. Each stroke of my brush captures a snapshot of my mood; my impression of my subject; from the color to the softness of my brush stroke, it is unique.

I prefer making my own colors. There is a level of predictability in all of the off-the-shelf colors. They lack a certain organic feel. Mixing colors is an adventure in itself, and then there is also the possibility of encountering something totally unexpected and new.

Black is too strong a color to use, so I usually mix burnt umber and Prussian blue to make similar but softer colors. Also, I use these colors to create all the other colors and tones that I need. These are enough for my purposes because every single color is different. To achieve subtle differences in shades and tones, manufactured colors were not enough to help me create my paintings. Creating my own colors is more natural and feels important to me and it helps me to be more involved in my art.
The characteristics of my painting to start with: a background of black gesso and I use a grid to guide my outline to get the right forms and proportions. By starting with a black background, the color stands out more, rich colors glow and it gives the painting more depth. I choose grids to guide my drawing to create realistic paintings with warm colors.

Next, I use oil paints starting with a rough first layer, choosing a background color, and then painting with two or three different tones of skin colors of a model using a big brush.

After this, I switch to smaller brushes, adding details on a layer-by-layer basis. At the end, I put on highlight color to achieve greater contrast.

Using a projector would make more sense if my goal was to create photorealistic works of art. I tried a projector once because I thought it would be easier and faster. While using the projector, I could see all the lines and colors clearly, exactly like tracing a photo on my canvas. However, this felt like coloring in a picture. My painting looked like a manufactured boring artwork, and lacked an organic feel.
I do not want people to look at my paintings as realistic artwork. It will be a lie if I say technique is not important. However, a more important aspect for me is that my artwork communicates a story, as though from a moment in time that was the inspiration of the artwork itself. Techniques will amaze people, but may not reach people’s hearts. I believe when the time that my artwork speaks for itself comes, it will touch people’s hearts.
THESIS EXHIBITION

Exhibition Space Plan

This thesis exhibition was on a scale that I had never experienced before. In the beginning I was at a loss as to where and how I should go about it. I first created a layout prototype to get a feel of the space, and how each artwork was interacting with the space around it. With additional input from my advisory committee, and a bit of trial and error, I finally found an optimal layout that presented each artwork in a way such that they all complemented each other. It was important that the artworks were presented to the viewers in a smooth and aesthetically pleasing flow.

Besides me, Edmond Caputo, Fatma Al Azmi and Francesca Lalanne Jeune exhibited in the show. With four artists simultaneously exhibiting their individual artworks, it was important for each to have their own space. It was important that the artworks were presented in a harmonious fashion as a collective but at the same time able to retain their individuality and uniqueness as conceptualized by their respective creators. We decided to make our artist statement boards and put them together in the middle open space, so that viewers could from one location in the gallery
get an overall view of the entire exhibition.

We also put an advertisement in the local city newspaper in order to publicize the show and get more visitors to the gallery. Working with other artists and having a group exhibition was a very emotional and unforgettable experience.

**Invitation Card Design**

Front

Back
Installation

On the day of installation, I created my space like I did in the demo. However, on observation I noted that the layout was not going to involve the viewer as much as I had hoped. I decided to change the square box layout by moving the corner piece from its vertical orientation to one that was angled at forty-five degrees.

![Diagram showing before and after layout](image-url)
Opening Reception
THE FUTURE

Coming to RIT my goal was to find my style. I found out over my years at RIT that style is something very dynamic in nature, something that evolves over time. My theme is based on capturing emotions that have a positive effect on a person’s heart. To faithfully record and convey the emotions of happiness and gratitude through my art is my ultimate goal.

For me, a style is a path that I take to reach this ultimate goal. For the future, I plan to explore different styles within the realm of realism, and reach a greater audience. As an artist I want my artwork to go places and be viewed by people all over the world.

I am very grateful for my experiences in life and the people I have met that have shaped me into the person I am.

Thank you to my parents who have always supported me and believed in me.

Thank you to all my professors who made me grow bigger as an artist and gave me support in helping me find my foothold in the art world.

Thank you to my MFA friends with whom I have faced and overcome challenges and have spent valuable time.

Thank you to my advisory committee, Alan Singer, Luvon Sheppard and Robert Heischman, who have given me massive support and courage.

I am still an artist in the making. Through my art and the art of others I have met amazing people who have and will be inspiring me to go forward and take on bigger challenges.
An especially big thank you to everyone’s smiles!
Reference

Quinn, Jim; “Oona, the Artist's Daughter, bat Ya'achov.” 2012. Oil on Canvas. Webshots. Jim Quinn Fine Art:


http://alyssamonks.com/#333_AlyssaMonks_Smirk.jpg#portthumbs, Web. 08 May 2014

Monks Alyssa; “Kiss.” 2011. Oil on Linen. Webshots. Alyssa Monks | Paintings:
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