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Expression Identity/Culture

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

Expression Identity/Culture

By

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Thesis Approval

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Abstract.....	5
Thesis Proposal.....	6
Section I: Context	
Personal History.....	8
Influenced Works.....	10
Section II: Evolution.....	15
Section III: Body of Work....	15
Conclusion.....	21
Bibliography.....	22

Abstract

The following thesis contains the background and inspiration for my thesis paintings. I will be explaining how my works reflect my identity and culture and the background of my artistic history, which include Korean calligraphy. I also go into how the paintings of Jackson Pollock, Hans Hofmann and Sam Gilliam have influenced my own paintings. I will explain the artistic and technical process of my paintings in detail and show how each processes affected my work.

Thesis Proposal “Expression Identity/ Culture”

Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “What can be shown cannot be said”. For my thesis, I am concerned about the wordless moments I have had in my life emerging through my art-making process. I am examining the visualization of my mindscape, toward direction for future output.

My goal is to bridge the two worlds of Eastern and Western world experience through the use of action painting in relationship to body gesture, memory, touch and timing. In this sense, my painting can be viewed as a mindscape filled with my personal expressions and with my physical presence and absence at the same time.

The purpose of my thesis is to achieve an understanding of how painting can be an expression of my identity and culture, while remaining relevant to principles of painting. I am stimulated by visual references such as aerial views of the landscape, especially of the Rocky Mountains, Eastern art such as Korean calligraphy, and the paintings of Jackson Pollock, Hans Hofmann and Sam Gilliam.

My paintings will involve time, process, and material experimentation along with personal observation. Methods of experimentation will include varying densities of mixed media such as gesso/paint to be dripped and poured to achieve a variety of mark making.

Color combinations will differ from layer to layer and changes in surface will result from this process at which time I can decide which ones are furthering my idea and which will be eliminated. Like many action painters I want to close in on a manner of working that incorporates the experimental and that which is under control. Time is a key element in the

process. As materials are poured onto the canvas, (which is on the floor), I wait a couple of days or longer to see how the elements merge and then wipe, scrape, or add, revealing and covering layers.

Section I: Context

Personal History

Long before I got into oil painting, I had first started the expression in the artistic sense with Korean calligraphy. I had started learning how to write in calligraphy by my mother's urgings when I was in first grade (Fig 1). At the time I was really reluctant and annoyed to learn it because I was just a child, and calligraphy seemed to be a hobby for old men. However, I fell in love with the deep ink and the appearance of the mighty and serious letters with just a swift flick of my wrist. I continued the Korean calligraphy until I was in junior high, when I immigrated to the United States.



Figure 1. Korean calligraphy work (1990). Hye Keun Park.

I fell back in love to creating wonderful things with just my two hands in high school when in an art class I earned the gold key award. Enthusiastic compliments and suggestions from my art teacher pushed me pursue art and ultimately led me to study art as a student here at RIT.

With a background in Korean calligraphy and an education in Western artistic values, my work transpired to be an accumulation of my identity and culture. All of the struggles that I had with immigration to the U.S. and the continuing exploration of my identity through those struggles reflect back into my artwork. My paintings became a mirror in which I can find both my Korean, eastern roots, and my art education and western ideals. My work has been influenced with eastern artistic values and of western arts, specifically with works by Jackson Pollock, Hans Hofmann, Larry Poons and Anselm Keifer.

Influenced Works

The pour over technique found in my paintings was hugely influenced by the works of Jackson Pollock, specifically *Blue Poles* (1952).



Figure 2. Jackson Pollock, Number 11, also known as Blue Poles (1952). Australian National Gallery, Canberra

Before Pollock, I believed art to just be realistic. After encountering Pollock, I was introduced to a whole new world of art and was captivated by the works that utilized the pour over technique and I began to find merit in the flux, rhythm, energy, and so forth of this technique.

I hoped to use the same flux, rhythm, and energy in my own works and my painting. Untitled 1 (Fig 3) is representative of my efforts in that direction.



Figure 3. Untitled 1 (2006). Hyekeun Park

Hans Hofmann and the use of textures in his work were also important to me in many of my paintings. Hofmann's work, "Above Deep Waters" (Fig 4) and its encrusted surfaces became his sculptural record of his super human expressive force- energy transformed into matter. Similarly, I hoped to show the energy that I was able to bring forth as I was creating my own works in that way, and Hofmann's use of texture and composition reflects in my works, specifically, Untitled 2 (Fig 5).



Figure 4. Above Deep Waters (1959) Hans Hofmann



Figure 5. Untitled 2, 3, 4 (2006). Hyekeun Park.

Sam Gilliam's *Dark as I Am* (1968-74)(Fig. 6) was a piece that was a direct response to the tempestuous debates surrounding African American cultural identity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While this work does not contain actual clues to the artist's race, the title *Dark as I Am* forces recognition of the autobiographical content and the artist's pretensions to manifest blackness in the work. I learned through Gilliam to find my own identity and attempted to project this aspect into my own works. I actually had the pleasure of meeting Sam Gilliam when he came to lecture at RIT in spring of 2006, pictured below. He advised me on technical skills for my work as well as abstract, artistic aspects. This experience made me go on to experiment with directing emotions tied to identity into my works.



Figure 6. Sam Gilliam, *Composed* (formerly *Dark As I Am*), 1968-74



Figure 7. Sam Gilliam and I, RIT studio on March 31, 2006. Photo by Sue Weisler.

Section II: Evolution

As mentioned above, before I was exposed to such artists such as Jackson Pollock, Hans Hofmann, and Sam Gilliam, I believed art to be strictly realistic and paintings that mimicked real life were how art should be. This is why before, I stuck to strictly realistic ways of painting and many of my early works reflect that. My early works were realistic paintings and drawings of nature, landscapes, and still life. It was not until I was exposed to the art of Pollock, Hofmann, and Gilliam that I started to branch out and experiment with more abstract works. I learned that through abstract works, I was able to convey the confusing, and unique aspect of my Korean American identity and that came about through action painting in relationship of body gesture, memory, touch and timing. Abstract art opened my artistic sense in that I was now free to express the meanings on my mind and bridge the two worlds of my identity onto paint and canvas.

Section III: Body of Work

My paintings reveal my personal and cultural identity through the composition of the forms and colors and the wonderful accidental ways that came to work together.

I used experimentation in my work through different colors, different density paint, different ways of dripping- syringe, squeeze bottoms, surface manipulation- glossy, matte, flat, strong, edges, soft edges in of color and surface separation.

In my acrylic paintings I used golden mixtures- applied with brush, palette knife and then drip, and stain, and repeated sanding. This gave the effect of watercolor and soft blending and I attributed this mixing of bright colors to the shock that I had when I first came to the United

States of different people of different races interacting together. This also reflected in my own blending of identity from strictly Korean to Korean American.

In my oil paintings I used Winsor and Newton paints and used a cold wax medium. The paintings were stained with thin colors, and I applied paint again thick, thin, brushed, poured, palette knifed and waxed. Different feelings were created by using different media such as Linseed Oil, Stand Oil, Damar Varnish which dry slowly, and shiny oils that are very flexible like Gallkyd, and cold wax which is quick to dry and over time would yellow. I also used the traditional medium of oils with thick Stand Oil, and thin unseeded oils for drips.

Using the different oils and methods for painting created significant contrast and texture which reflected the multiple aspects of my identity that transpired through my immigration, my place in my family, and my place as an adult in the social world, and my place as an art student and artist.

Untitled 5 (Fig. 8) is one of my early works and I attempted to convey the interconnectedness of the different points in my life. Moving back and forth from Korea to America, and even within America, I tried to show the overwhelming moments that passed by in blurs as it remained still in my memory. This piece (“Untitled #5”) is made of different sizes and can be viewed from different directions. It cannot be reduced down to a one plane painting and this reflects the complexities of my identity and my mind, and this shows that I cannot and will not be seen by others as something simple as a complete, two dimensional painting (Fig. 9). It shows the continuing exploration of my identity in two cultures.



Figure 8. Untitled 5 (2006) Hyekeun Park.



Figure 9. Untitled 5, spread out. Hyekeun Park.

For my final work, I attempted to incorporate color into my paintings for the very first time. The paintings go in order of reds and pinks, to yellow, and at last to green and blue (Fig. 10). The first painting is reminiscent of my earlier works where I was hesitant to utilize color. In the next transition I use yellow that shows the neutralized state of my mind as I begin to express and come to terms with my different identities. At last, the final piece shows lifting with green and peaceful blue which represents the peace of mind that I was able to achieve through my art processes here at RIT. Through my art, I was able to sort through the turbulent and unclear boundaries of my identity in the different environments and accept them as they were and I hope this final piece represents that. (Fig. 10)



Figure 10. Untitled 6 (2007). Thesis Exhibition. Hyekeun Park.



Figure 11. Untitled 6 (2007). Thesis exhibition. Hyekeun Park.

Conclusion

It was unfortunate that the layer of gesso that I used in majority of my works was too expensive and I think using another medium in the future will let me explore deeper concepts and branch those ideas into a bigger, more comprehensive body of art.

The colors that I used prior to my final thesis exhibition were too natural and colorless, and now I regret not being able to explore through the transition in my body of work of colors and I realize now how I can utilize colors and meanings of colors in my future works.

Even though the body of work is mostly colorless, the different textures and contrast of oils conveyed the inner workings through the thought process of my identity in two different worlds. As I found power in Korean Calligraphy as a young child living in Korea, I found power and relief in my body of work presented here today as thesis work.

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Figure 2. Jackson Pollock, “Number 11” also known as “Blue Poles” (1952). Australian National Gallery, Canberra

Figure 4. Hans Hofmann, “Above Deep Waters” (1959). University of California, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive.

Figure 6. Sam Gilliam, “Composed” formerly “Dark As I Am” (1968-74). Collection of the artist’s daughters.