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A Hybrid mosaic and vice versa

Jinhwan Choi

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A Hybrid Mosaic and Vice Versa

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

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All of my models in my thesis project,
and
My family
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Introduction

Culture in general represents a vague, “complex whole.” It includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other products of human thought. There have also been attempts to define culture more precisely, but culture is still used as a broad and all-inclusive concept. Another crucial aspect of culture is that for the past century the study of culture has been appropriated by the Westerners’ view and concern about discovery and collecting. It is no wonder if we consider European imperialism and the great expansion of globalization of Western commerce. Globalization does not mean simply a global culture, distributed by mass media, but it results in other cultures and nations experiencing Western ideology. However, today it seems clear that Western ideology should no longer be extended to all the world’s peoples nor should their cultural identities be evaluated only by Western standards. All cultures have the right to evaluate and represent themselves by their standards. It is within this new condition that cultural studies has become a central field within the arts, the humanities, and other social sciences. This contemporary term, cultural studies, does not directly mean the study of culture nor a certain discipline. Rather it is a collective term and concept which addresses a number of theoretical and political issues such as race, gender, place, difference, migration, slavery, and responses to the problems posed by the conventional cultural discourses, especially imperial/colonial-ism. Although specific subjects such as post-colonialism are being distinctly discussed, these cultural matters are all relevant and interact in a profound way.

Although I intend to raise a number of questions about this field, my major aim is to examine how my artwork relates to culture and society since I find that making art in

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1 From The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
Western society is deeply problematic for non-Westerners. Thus I will emphasize how art functions and is relevant within the society since the concept of culture has been extended to all social activities including the arts.\(^2\) For instance, photography, within the imperial mode, was used to survey and to make scientific observations of remote lands.\(^3\)

From my multifarious stance, I merge a variety of ideas, issues, and concerns into a work, both to express my multifarious stance and to avoid a limited cultural perspective. Of course, there is an underlying coherence, which is based on post-colonial theory, to support my ideas. But I refuse to place my artwork in a single category, neither in the de-colonialist position nor against globalization. In short, I attempt to portray cultural identities through my firsthand experience as a perceptual filter, not through the outsiders’ gaze. Hence it is not my concern to cover every ground systematically, rather through an investigation of the association between my art practice and cultural experience, I am working to find the value of my doing photography.

The vehicle I have adopted to link my artwork and cultural subjects is the concept of duality, an extension of my dichotomous view. I have been trying to grasp how binary logic exists and works in everyday lives. The notion of duality discussed in both Western and Eastern philosophy is exemplified by notions such as body/soul or yin/yang. Post-colonialism and deconstruction, in that they are trying to overcome the limit of the given reality of the dualistic system, are engaged in the tension and relation of duality.

\(^2\) Clifford, James. "On Collection Art and Culture," *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988. According to Clifford, since culture became a general category, modern culture ideas and art ideas functioned together in an art-culture system. He also shows that in the twentieth century people started to erase the distinction between high and low culture, whose idea eventually made equal the quality of aesthetic and moral value between primitive art and Western masterpieces.

\(^3\) "Photography grew up in the days of Empire and became an important adjunct of imperialism, for it returned to the Western spectator images of native peoples which frequently confirmed prevailing views of them as primitive, bizarre, barbaric or simply picturesque." Wells, Liz. *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 58.
Convinced by those studies, I decided to explore the alternative feature of the in-between or undecidable, rather than the seemingly ideal realm of balancing in equilibrium between cultures. Indeed, my message is not a simple request for equality, but an emphasis on first calling attention to today’s reality and then re-thinking any possible mutual development among cultures. Thereafter hybrid culture and multi-identity became the major theme of the thesis.

Culture is not a static system, but rather an ongoing, evolving process. It is alive and therefore always changing. While working on the thesis project, the September 11 tragedy happened. The secure “home” is attacked, and numerous political issues/events are arising everywhere. Globalization is being resisted, and the notion of cultural homogeneity and multiculturalism are now high on the agenda. By exploring this dramatic moment of cultural transition, I also propose questions concerning what culture actually means and how we understand, judge, or value today’s cultural dilemmas, from whose viewpoint and for whose sake.
A Dichotomous View toward the World, 1991-96

It is a phenomenon of the twentieth century that a developing or colonized country suffers not only from the destruction of its physical environment but also from the disorder and damage of psychological disequilibrium. Unfortunately my country, Korea, is the perfect example of this miserable history. The political division into two nations resulting from the multiple colonial intervention of the Korean War (1950-53) has become deeply implanted in every Korean mind. The partition of Korea is also an ideological division, marked by the opposition of liberalism and communism. Simultaneously, the huge cultural flux from the West, now referred to as globalization, accelerated Korea’s political polarization. The Korean incomprehension of Western thinking and the difficulty of aligning it with traditional cultures have produced a number of cultural side effects and dissonances between the cultures.

My generation grew out of the unstable cultural climate Korea experienced after partition. We inevitably received a dichotomous view of the world that counterpoised contradictions of good and evil, wealth and poverty, East and West, North and South Korea, all or nothing. Although this process was insidious and largely unconscious, its dual nature, thematically and stylistically, became a strong characteristic of my work from my earliest projects through the current phases of my development.

In the majority of my work made in Korea, the use of high contrast and grainy films manifested a duality of elements which are often discontinuous or not logically connected. A dichotomous style with a great concern for a pictorial aesthetic became evident in all aspects of my work (figure 1).

Since polarity or division governed my thinking in everyday life as well as philosophy, art, and culture, I had difficulty comprehending a new culture and art in a broader view. This awareness of polarity, however, gave me an opportunity to actually
think of an association between my psyche and photography that eventually developed my style and concept as acknowledgement of the duality from a different perspective. In addition, my political concerns since arriving in America in 1997 has shifted my traditional approach of pure aesthetic consideration toward a more conceptually based practice.
When I came to America in 1997, the sudden loss of a familiar environment made me feel strange and alienated while at the same time I was trying to understand my identity in relation to the new environment. My initial response was to consider myself a newborn, learning how to adapt to this new world. By placing a baby doll into scenes of my everyday life, I created the simulation of the reality from the perspective of an observer and observed (figure 2).

As time passed, however, I became aware of a sense of self which was not incommensurate with the world around me. Lacan’s psychological analysis of the child seeing, for the first time, its own reflection in the mirror describes my progress of self-recognition.

At first, the child who is together with an adult in front of a mirror confuses its own reflection with that of its adult companion. In the second phase the child acquires the notion of the image and understands that the reflection is not a real being. Finally, in the third stage, it realizes not only that the reflection is an image, but that the image is its own and is different from the image of the Other.4

In a sense, the overall situation was similar to my stages. Like the child’s confusion in the first stage of knowing, I first felt confused and strange in the new environment, and immediately tried to assimilate into the dominant culture. It was my assumption that people, whatever their background, could be united by a common purpose. However, I became aware of cultural distinctness, and people do not abandon their own backgrounds. In short, there is no simplistic assimilation. Finally, I realized that those uncertain

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feelings were triggered by a society which is more diverse and is based on different structures than those of my country. Since race, class, and gender are socially constructed, I found my new social identity in the group of minorities known as the Other.5

Frantz Fanon, a black man in a white-dominated society, attempts to show how racism affects and constructs the black man’s psychology.6 But in my work I chose not to directly address any cultural discrimination or racism. Rather I am more interested in the psychological aspect of cultural difference and “mimicry.” According to the theory of Lacan, “The effect of mimicry is camouflage. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled.”7 Indeed, in the image (figure 2), a baby’s “imitation” and “mimicry” did not resolve the problem of new reality, but generated the tension of conflict. Especially, the crushed baby image (figure 3) underlined the sense of alienation, loneliness, and sadness caused by the ambivalent moment of cultural conflict. Overall, the baby series turned out not to express a harmony of difference, but a dissonance of resemblance. Although it was my initial moment of art/culture practice, I was able to further investigate the idea of mimicry and cultural studies.

5 “The Other: This term is used within psychoanalysis and identity theory, and within post-colonial theory, to signify ways in which members of dominant groups derive a sense of self-location partly through defining other groups as different or Other. For example, in racist ideologies, whiteness is taken for granted, therefore blackness is seen as Other.” Wells, p. 294.

6 Fanon’s observation on racism recounts the psychological relationship between the colonizer/colonized. For further information, see Black Skin, White Masks. New York: Grove Press, 1968, by Frantz Fanon.

Contemporaneous with the baby project, I embarked on social documentary of the Korean community in Chicago, the third largest city of Korean population after Los Angeles and New York City, in hopes of grasping their inner cultural condition.

Rejecting the conventional idea of documentary as the transparent reflection of reality, my work evolved in reaction to my dichotomous view of both style and subject. In the beauty salon image (figure 5), some comparable objects were carefully captured in the male mannequin and woman, and the Asian and English magazines. In some cases, I manipulated the situation of the event to obtain a more dramatic or “decisive” moment. However, this work purported to record immigrant life as well as to understand the mechanism of culture by which I tried to balance my personal observation and cultural reality.

For six months or so, I surveyed the landscape of Koreatown and its people, especially their working places such as the Korean video rental shop, market, barber shop, car mechanic, and elementary school places where I could physically sense the interactions of Korean immigrants with others of their own ethnicity. At a quick glance, however, I sensed the intense confrontation between cultures, especially at the Korean elementary school. In school, they were teaching the Korean language, history, and traditional activities of Korea. It showed that immigrants do not abandon their own culture in a foreign country. Although I knew that it was inappropriate and incomplete to measure them by looking at one aspect of the phenomenon, my documentary had a strong

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8 Due to its scientific accuracy, photography was considered as an objective tool for describing the real world. However, it became clear that the image-maker whether intentionally or accidentally manipulates the look and feel of the image. Photography is no longer considered a pure delivery of the events of the world; rather it has come to be seen as the expression of the photographer’s subjective experience of the event.
basis in factual observation of the immigrants in this community. The unique formation of an ethnic community was important for me to understand how one (minor) culture coexists within other (Western) societies.

To further understand community formation and ethnic consolidation, we can consider four basic characteristics of ethnic consciousness.

*Assimilation*: Minorities are absorbed into the dominant culture and identity.

*Separatist consciousness*: Minorities feel that they are permanently excluded from the mainstream culture and identity. *Diasporic consciousness*: Immigrant minorities identify mainly with their ancestral homeland and with people of the same ethnic origin, both in the homeland and in other countries. *Transcultural consciousness*: Minorities interact with specific groups in the population of the receiving country, and together develop new forms of culture and identity.9

However, it is extremely complicated and problematic to measure each ethnic formation of culture. Besides, those principles are strongly interrelated and may co-exist in any country at the same time.

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After moving to Rochester in 2000, I was determined to pursue more abstract and experimental work in contrast to my prior documentary style. In this stage, I made a fundamental shift toward an internal and psychological approach in order to analyze my cultural experience. Meanwhile, I primarily focused on the matter of duality\textsuperscript{10} in various aspects because of its important position in philosophical and cultural context. In my artist statement, I wrote:

Deconstruction:

I am looking at the world in which everything is defined through binary systems, and come to see myself in one of them, but as an inessential being and the Other from one. In this binary world, I once attempted to be one, but seemed to have failed to get in. I feebly insisted on the harmony of the dual world, but it is too overwhelming to me. I need a very cunning and insidious strategy. Then I decide to play with this duality in order to disturb and disarrange this dual world by showing the beauty of difference, variety, and possibility that people might overlook or neglect, dreaming of the collapse of this giant dual-empire. (November, 2000)

According to Derrida's deconstruction, all systems or structures consist of binary pairs or oppositions. Within this system, one part of that binary pair is always more significant than the other. For example, in the binary pair of good/evil, good is always valued over evil. Derrida argues that such metaphysical logic pervades Western thought,

\textsuperscript{10} Duality or dualism, which was originally coined by Thomas Hyde, states that nature is made up of two elemental components which are incommensurable. For Western philosophers, the interaction between body and soul is one the most significant matters while for Easterner thinkers, the relation between yin and yang are most prominent.
and we should break down the limitation it generates. Although all of his paradoxical concepts do not convince me yet, I have come to agree with his great concern for the metaphysical binary because its binary limitation is ultimately the bias of understanding for our lives and the world. After further examination, I also found that most cultural practices are highly involved in the matter of duality due to the unequal and uneven reality of the relation between colonizer/colonized, West/East, whiteness/blackness and so forth.

From the point of duality, the cube was created to encompass a diverse cultural and philosophical concept: the Other, difference, de-centering, and hybridity. Although each term/idea has its own theoretical and historical concept, I had to bring them all together in a way that examined the immense diversity of cultural studies in relation to duality.

I constructed four cubes with different sub-titles to embrace and examine these various ideas. Basically, each cube had three images revealing both the differences and similarities of culture through symmetrical composition. The images on the cube were juxtaposed and floated in every direction, and each connection made sense within the context. A light bulb inside the cubes made the black and white images colored, abstract, and even surrealistic (figures 6, 7).

One of the main concepts was the idea of the “complex connectivity” of culture. As the metaphor for the cultural dimension of globalization, the cubes contained various images from highly symbolic to ordinary cultural icons in order to present a global “closeness” where our lives, goods, knowledge, and beliefs readily flow across national boundaries.11 By focusing on the fluidity of cultures, I attempted to reveal the interstitial space among nations, beliefs, and our minds. In short, the cube signifies the contradictory

and ambivalent condition of culture; then it proposes the question of our understanding in a divided, shrinking world.

However, during the review it was expressed to me that there are many loosely connected themes among the cubes that the images on the cube were too abstract and symbolic to convey particular meanings of culture. Although I failed to express my major concerns of its specific meanings because of a general lack of recognition of the importance of the cultural issues, culture itself emerged as the most urgent issue of my art practice as well as my life.
Environmental Portrait, 2001

My next project, completed in February 2001, was focused on an even more personal and cultural subject matter. I photographed two Asian people in their home, and then replaced them with dolls positioned at the same spot. Through four different but interactive images, I tried to address numerous issues relating to cultural identity (figure 8).

Artist Statement:

Hoping to find out any clue about what I am doing in this new environment, I turned to others like me. What I saw through them was the tension between self and the world, body and language, race, and sexuality. I once attempted to define my identity in a place drawing, a line between them, but now I might consider the third space, culture, and world without an either/or, but a both/and or at least neither. However, this hybrid world I exposed in my images creates endless questions—alienation, assimilation, voicelessness, tonguelessness, hidden, forbidden, colonized, colonizer, East, West. (February, 2000)

I also played with size of the image to affect the audience’s view of the details of the rooms and bodies. Each image was 30 by 40 inches and was displayed with focused lighting to accelerate the idea of the double shadows of the models. By showing multiple tensions of the dualistic polarity between images, I forced people to become aware of the binary limitation in our daily lives. However, the images of a semi-naked male and sex toy were too literal, and a single pack of four images was not enough to make it a tangible story line. To continue my exploration of cultural identity, I settled on environmental portraits as my thesis project and began photographing international students within their “home.”
Thesis Project: A Hybrid Mosaic and Vice Versa, 2001-2

The thesis project is an extension of my 1998 social documentary of the Korean community. Again I used the documentary approach to explore cultural context. However, there are major differences.

In the brief survey of the Korean community, I had difficulty accessing the immigrant’s physical life due to my different social position as a student, whereas the majority of models in the thesis project are international students coming from the Asian countries of China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Thailand. As a Korean international student, I am more capable of expressing their culture and history because of my first-hand experience.

More significantly, the Korean community project was much based on traditional documentary principles concerned with representing the nature of work and the lives of working-class people with black and white photographs. Although I was working with the full understanding of the photographic transparency, I did not much consider my involvement with the subject. I needed a more active and articulate way of communication to express and merge all my personal experiences and concepts into the work. For those reasons, I reinvented a sort of pseudo-social documentary in a realistic way so that I could reflect, reveal, and convey a number of hidden tensions of individuals as well as today’s inner conditions in general. In spite of the doubt in today’s photographic truth, I believe that the idea of realism in various senses is still adequate to deal with the social and political matters, most especially in the miserable realities. In this way, modern photo artists such as Jeff Wall play with the idea of fiction and fact, real and unreal, and simulation and reality in order to recreate, reconsider, and support a particular history.
For the thesis project, I did manipulate every situation, not to erase or elude documentary truthfulness, but in order to express my message in the work. All of the elements in the images were constructed, as were the models’ body language, costume, and the objects displayed within their rooms. Also, convinced by semiotic theory, I actively worked on particular meanings to portray their unstable, temporal, and insecure conditions in society. I transformed the traditional portrait to achieve my political agenda. Furthermore, the 32 by 40 inches color prints with details of the bodies and rooms captured by a large camera and elaborate lighting, allow viewers to read a variety of messages in the signifying system of the work. This is my early statement of the thesis project:

Hovering In-between Time, Space, and Culture:

You see the color, the hue unlike you. You see the naked toe on the red carpet.

You see the flag fluttering on their chest. You see the room unlike yours. They come here forward in time, and fly to their countries backward in time, over and over again until their journey ends. They are asked, ‘Who are you,’ here and there. It is 9:00 am. It is 11:00pm. They are bilingual or more, but forbidden their mother tongue. No uttering the worlds. Hovering between two times, two homes, two selves, questioning themselves, which is the real one, but always remaining as the Other.

I mark under their naked toe, and it tightly holds their two legs. I dig out their closet and stir up all their stuff in the room. No moving, no blinking, hold the breath. Stillness. They revive after my count one, two, three.

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12 “Semiologists analyze photography as texts in order to investigate the components of sign system through which meaning is structured and encoded within a work. The point of concern was not whether the work adequately revealed or reflected a pre-existing reality but the way particular signifying systems imposed order and created particular sets of meaning.” Wells, p. 95.
Your authority lights them. You have the light right to make them shadows. They are in-between shadows, in-between space and time, in-between culture. Limbo. They wear the underwear to wear the clothes. They get on the stage dressed in Western clothes. Strange and beautiful clothes. I do identify each one, but you only see the color, you see the body. You enter the very private space, with no memory, no history. It is not like the room you live in. Everything is there, but everything is ready to leave. They are willing to show their memoryless stuff and their hybrid world to you, because it is not “home.” (May, 2001)

As the title Hovering In-between Time, Space, and Culture suggests, I was so interested in their dual identity that I purposely made two visible shadows of the figures, sometimes using the reflection of the mirror, as the metaphor of the dual identity. But I found the image (idea) of the shadow was too artificial and distracting from the other elements. Ultimately I gave up the idea of the shadow.

Instead, I became more concerned about the figures’ body language and facial expressions, which were depicted with a dominant mood of bleak and gloomy sadness, instead of the positive nuance of academic international students as pure knowledge or cultural harmony. Not only their “nothingness” expressions on the face and awkward gestures stared plaintively at the viewers but also the empty or messy environment lacking in memory and warmth, created an odd and negative mood.

In the early images (figures 9, 10), most of my models were standing at the center of the scene or at the corner of the room. The entire body was in sight, and the private and personal space was dominated by viewer’s voyeuristic gaze. By constructing this psychological instability, insecurity, and dissonant relation between the body and environment, I showed, on one level, their demoted personal and social lives in a foreign country. However, I did not fully intend to constitute the figures as “poor” or “alien,” nor did I celebrate the hybrid identity. The harsh view of international students came from the
fact that they exist within a number of latent tensions and complex relations to other societies, cultures, and people.

The body, place and education are the major tensions of international students. First of all the visible body (skin color, hair, and voice) as cultural signifier, directly and immediately, tells of one’s cultural and social condition in a pre-existing society. As Fanon mentions in his book *Black Skin, White Mask*, the color of black itself is the visible sign of the inferiority of African-Americans since the body is an inescapable fact of “blackness.” But my position was somewhat different from Fanon’s concern for his “blackness” because of the different historical background of the Orient. The notion (term) of the Orient has been described as the polar opposite of the Occident, serving to define one and the Other.13

In this point, I considered two aspects of constructing the models’ performances. One was about the old stereotypical view of the fundamental absence from the West such as movement, reason, order or meaning. The “empty” expressions and passive stances are examples of the signs of such absence. Another approach was the process of describing the body. I did describe, measure, and define the ordinary international students as a certain social type, underling the sense of alienation and loneliness. Both approaches were to evoke the colonial gaze in which photography, aligned with the imperial modes, measured, defined, and categorized bodies for the needs of anthropologists and ethnographers as well as tourist souvenirs.14

13 “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences . . . In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.” Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978, pp. 1-2. Broadly speaking, all non-Western cultures are considered as the Other of the West.

Another key tension is “place.” Place here does not simply mean physical space or landscape but can be defined as a cultural and political identity.

Place in postcolonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. It is characterized firstly by a sense of displacement in those who have moved to colonies, or the more widespread sense of displacement from the imported language, of a gap between the experienced environment and descriptions the language provides, and secondly, by a sense of the immense investment of culture in the construction of place.15

Migration means that immigrants leave their home and build a new home in another country, and such a displaced adulthood is, more or less, at the base in the lives of international students: the desire to return to the homeland and the reality of building a temporary shelter.

Related to “place,” the idea of hybridity has been centrally discussed in the postcolonial discourse. One may, on the surface, sense hybridity and cultural mixing by looking at the items in the rooms I photographed. A national flag and calligraphy on the white painted-wall, a bunch of tea and a rice cooker in the modern kitchen, and an empty jar of Kimchi on the red carpet are some of the cultural icons. I utilized to express hybridity.

The basic idea of hybridity is that of simple mixing—intermingling, combination, fusion, and melange. The term is “derived from notions of breeding in plants and animals and is carried over to the cultural sphere via negatively charged notions of racial mixing.”16 In the context of culture, it suggests the mingling of cultures from different backgrounds. However, the application of hybridity as simple mixing is not as simple as it seems in postcolonial practice. According to Bhabha’s view, postcolonial cultures find

16 Tomlinson, p. 142-3.
their new identities in the space between the colonizer and the colonized, rather than by simply assimilating. This new space is “hybridity,” and it is not a third or alternative notion that resolves the tension between cultures.

Hybridity is the sign of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority).\textsuperscript{17}

Beyond its closer examination, we see another picture of fragmentation of multiculturalism. As was already examined through my social documentary, we can no longer call America a melting pot, in which people of diverse origins are assimilated and Americanized. The ideal notion of integration might be suitable for a certain group of the same historical or cultural background. Instead, global migrants and ethnic diversity creates a form of “mosaic” with parts that never mingle with each other but rather create a new culture.

In such unexpected productions both the hybrid and mosaic cultures tend to resist ideas of a pure (superior) culture, considering themselves strengths rather than weaknesses. In practice, the colonized are able to re-appropriate their newly formed culture, and eventually come to disrupt and re-articulate the identity of the colonial authority. In addition, post-colonialists further assert the aspect of mutuality of this ongoing process, and do not consider it as a simple by-product of cultural mixing or disappearance of cultural tradition.

My thesis title, \textit{A Hybrid Mosaic and Vice Versa}, was created to convey these issues. First it reveals today’s cultural phenomena as disruption resulting from globalization. More specifically, globalization merges our language, knowledge, beliefs,
customs, and other human activities into a unity, and yet they do not disappear or lose their individual character. With the idea of "fusion" and "division," I created the phrase a hybrid mosaic. The phrase and vice versa does not denote the idea of equality, but emphasizes the continual and mutual cultural exchange and change. Although non-Western countries have derived a great deal of advanced economic and cultural benefit from the West, I believe any kind of cultural transformation can't be undertaken one way exclusively; rather cultural elements should be understood to circulate and interchange with a good of mutual understanding.

Despite a shared experience of colonialism/globalism, each culture and group has different concerns and problems with cultural realities. In the case of international students, education must be emphasized, not only because the labels "international" and "students" indicate a direct relation to academia, but also because education is perhaps the most insidious and powerful technology of social control.

Education is the foundation of colonialist power and consolidates this power through legal and administrative apparatuses . . . Education thus remains one of the most powerful discourses within the complex of colonialism and neo-colonialism.18

The primary purpose of imperial education, with its "civilizing" and indoctrinating motives, is to impose its superior ideology onto the colonized. Today, all (international) students are required to learn English fluently as well as Western history and general academic studies. Whether directly or indirectly, knowledge is produced and used in political circumstances. Here I do not claim a simple humanistic concern distinguishing between pure and political knowledge, nor do I devalue the political aspect of knowledge in that academia seems not to be involved in a direct political order. There are, of course,

lots of positive aspects of an academic education, but my concern is with the negative results of the exclusive educational process since those international students are not yet able adequately to analyze this political power of social control, but are only consuming and becoming accustomed to Western ideology.

Throughout my examination of international students, I realized that the existence of the in-between identity, of double lives, and of multi-tensions makes it extremely difficult to classify and place students into an existing social type or group, including immigrants or other minorities. Understanding the intrinsic presence of the Third Space by postcolonialists and the paradoxical idea of indeterminism by Derrida, I put them into an indeterminate zone, which is neither one nor the Other, not only because of the aspect of the multi-shift identity, but also because of my resistance to the fixed binary system. The new perspective of the undecidable made me, in turn, shift my concept and style.

In response to my effort to escape from binary limitations, I removed the artificial elements such as the shadows and unnatural acting to recreate the seemingly mundane image. By doing so, the models (figures 13-18) became neutral and involved with their daily lives in contrast to the early images in which I had not integrated people with their natural surroundings at all. The individual subjectivity was alive, and at the same time their intense tension was dispersed and submerged under the surface, retaining the ambiguous aura of subtle hints and shades of feeling. The images became somewhat of a “reference” with my memory and emotions.19

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19 According to Roland Barthes, "photography is reference rather than Art, or communication" (Wells, p. 44), because of the time-based characteristic of photography. He also gives more weight to the photographic contingency and the need for active looking. My dual stances on both fine-art/documentary, Eastern mind/ Westernized way of looking, and multi-shift identity produced this documentary work that embodies cultural codes and personal emotions.
I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American. They give you an American Pass port. The United States of America . . . You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away . . . They ask you identity.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

I have portrayed a select international group of students from the viewpoint of my personal, artistic, and political views. My goal is, of course, to understand and grasp my self-identity through portraying them. However, what I have done through my practice is merely cast unanswerable questions and looks at some comparable examples of others rather than criticize our pre-given reality in a penetrating way. My stance on art and culture was not strong enough to emerge in a practical application.

Nevertheless, this project helped me to find a way out of binary limitations and freed my consciousness to think about and look at the world more fluidly. In addition, I emphatically agree with the way of finding our identities as “in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.”21 Right now my social status is changing again. I am not sure what it will be come, but I would rather not downplay my given situation. I intend to take advantage of my presence, which means, possibly and I

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20 Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Dictee*, Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1995, p. 56. I was greatly influenced by Cha, a Korean-American immigrant (1951-82), who addressed many cultural matters in depth. Often comparing myself to her, I was able to share her sense of urgency regarding cultural identity.

21 Bhabha, p. 1.
hope, being able to further re-examine all situations here I explored as well as my presence in the moment of passage.
Works Cited


Figure 9
List of Plates

Figure 1. *Two hands*, gelatin silver print, 1992

Figure 2. *A Newborn 01*, C-print, 1997

Figure 3. *A Newborn 02*, gelatin silver print, 1997

Figure 4. *A Newborn 03*, gelatin silver print, 1998

Figure 5. *A Korean Beauty Salon in Chicago*, gelatin silver print, 11” x 14”, 1998

Figure 6. *Cube 01*, gelatin silver prints wrapped on the wooden frame, 12” x 24” x 2.5”, 2000

Figure 7. *Cube 02*, gelatin silver prints wrapped on the wooden frame, 12” x 24” x 2.5”, 2000

Figure 8. *Untitled*, C-print, each print is 32” x 40”, 2001

Figure 9. *Sukwon Kim*, digital print, 32”x40”, March 30, 2001

Figure 10. *Sungeun Kim*, digital print, 32”x40”, April 6, 2001

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