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I and another I
I and another I

Graduate thesis
Master of Fine Arts
(Photography Concentration)
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

By
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Fall, 2000

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Fall, 2000

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Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance:
Professors Angela Kelly, Ken White and Dennis Defibaugh; and my friends
Ik-Dong Yu, Tae-Youl Ryu, Younglim Chung, Jung-Hun Hyun, Hyungwon Ryoo and
Jaehoon Chung. I thank to my wife, my son and my parents for their support,
and I give thanks to God for His and many blessings.

In Memory of My Grandmother
Kim Bok-sun
1911-1998
I and another I

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back on his perch and cling
When he beats his bars and would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core.

I know why the caged bird sings!

from “Sympathy”, by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

Always, I and another I are coexisting.

My agony, suffering, conflict, distress, obsession are continuing now and into the future. I am veiling enmity between seeming serenity in the outward “I” and unruly struggle in the hidden “I”. I am longing to be free from my suffering, the insistent pressure of obeying the existing customs and fixed ideas: Confucian principles, my well-trained conscience, the culture gap, restraining responsibilities...like a caged bird, I am trapped by following in someone else’s footsteps as all social animals do.

Even though I never wanted to be a fool, I demonstrate these fixed ideas which suffocate my soul. “I” still belies my free soul with tranquility, while “another I” writhes harshly in desperate agony.

“I” can’t free myself, but I can be free in “another I”. “I” keeps reminding me each day: You aren’t really free. But “another I” insists, coaxingly, that I be free like a hummingbird in the unlimited blue sky.
Artist Statement

Humans, by nature, think that problems and a sense of confusion come from others or from their surroundings but not from themselves. I feel people in general, including myself, think that is a foolish idea, but if I am honest with myself, I admit that I think like that, too.

In some way, all sources of our problems are a part of ourselves, but too often our pride gets in the way and we ignore this simple truth! How can we lower our pride and be one with ourselves? To illustrate, we go to church and repent for our sins. That is the same as being one with ourselves. If we open our minds and our hearts, like going to church, there would be fewer problems and confusions to deal with in our lives.

Being closed-minded and blaming others for our problems leads to a lack of communication with others. This lack of communication can breed hatred, frustration, greed, and other misunderstandings. The only way to get past all this is to have an open mind and to communicate with sincerity, showing people the true essence of yourself.

If you start off with yourself, you have to open your mind, let people look through your eyes, the door to the soul. There are always helpers: teachers, parents, friends, siblings, etc, who will always stand by your side, if first you deal with yourself.
Let's try to open our minds and hearts and let the help that we need for our problems and confusions get in and help. The sense of honesty is given to us by our creator.

It is our human privilege and our duty to open our minds, and our hearts to each other.

Jae-gu Lee

November, 1998
I. Introduction

Photographers and their work reflect and create the culture in their own way in modern art. Therefore, artistic works are a kind of aesthetic reflection of the culture. Art originally meant “to join or fit together” and “culture” comes from cultivation and growth. I believe the purpose of art is not to simplify the world and our place in it but to honor and increase its complexity. From this perspective, photographers’ functions have changed from time to time and age to age.

During my spiritual journey toward defining myself, my body work explored the emotions, defenses and charades we all play in order to fit into our respective familial communities. My body work and installation evoke spiritual and emotion realms of experience. In the show and installation, I wish to challenge viewers to recognize something about themselves and their culture.

My body works represent my concepts and my surroundings since 1996. I am interested in the ways I am rooted in my Korean Confucian society. I want to create “myself,” images of who I am, what I want to do, and who I want to be.

By choosing my body as my theme, I am dealing with the same concerns and issues which focus on my identity as a Korean in the United States. I am true to my Korean background in my experimentation with concepts and images.
The works are divided into four different parts that could be described by words like “revealing, puzzling, confusion, conflicts, writhing and gradual modification.” I expressed my painful feelings that are inside; I am always tied up in existing customs and fixed ideas. I have to act as a faithful son, father and husband who is expected to do this by others. I am under a lot of stress because I stand up between my false self as an ideal model in my society and my true self as an innocent in my dream world.

The final pieces mark a departure in medium, form and feeling from the previous three works. In my series of work, I attempted to open my mind and let viewers look through my soul. I start off with myself. I now believe that in expressing myself openly in the work, the work becomes more accessible to others.
In this chapter, I wish to discuss the inspiration, influence and development of the work with respect to my premises. I would also like to review the work of the image of the body. In this paper I try to show that the self-portrait can be a written language to express internal self. In this process, I reflect upon my studies at R.I.T.

II. Inspiration

A. Perfect Vehicle for Self-definition and Self-reclamation

Photographers are working to establish an understanding of the wider network of social, economical and political factors. Photographers and their work reflect and create the culture in their own way in modernist art. I believe that photographers represent factors in the most critical problems when showing the minority to majority viewers. They set up the stereotypes and overcome them and vise-versa because some photographers show self-representation as members of minority groups: African, Asian, Latin and Native Americans’ subcultures, or lesbian and gay subcultures.

Photographers accept and participate in the social, racial, and sexual diversity of our culture. Minority images and subculture images were real challenges to my work. By reflecting on myself in the work of others, I raised serious questions about myself in this mixed culture. As photographers used their own images as a perfect vehicle to represent their differences or to claim full recognition for their participation in the American culture, I became conscious of myself as a yellow-faced Asian who is rooted firmly in the
confusion but struggled to fit in liberal culture. I desperately needed self-definition and self-reclamation to know who I am.

Through studying multifaceted American culture in the photographs, I had a new understanding about what the criteria of beauty is in the art world. I also found my own racial identification by reflecting on African American or Asian American identities in the pictures.

As poet Paul Laurence Dumber wrote, everybody wears his or her own “mask” in society. So-called, “social animals” we are not free to express our own identification within social custom beyond racial or political matters. Thus we need art to show our identification in different ways.

**B. The Image of the Body**

When the body is mentioned in the context of photography, the ideal nude is the most popular image in the Western tradition. Classical notions of beauty are founded upon the ideals of symmetry and calibrated proportions in the woman’s nude. However, for most of the nineteenth century, many contemporary artists viewed the body from a different perspective.

Accordingly, changing the standards of beauty and ugliness addressed complex phenomena. The real, suffering body may be understood as a conspicuous collection of the image, while the ideal body may be posited as invisibly blended unity, a fixed and eternal construction.
The image of body fully participated in the domain of written language, so the images could convey the invisible characteristics and emotions beyond the physical appearance. The images of body could represent not only external figure but also express an internal conflicts in inhumanly ugly but classically beautiful images. Indeed, several aesthetic issues are raised due to this dichotomization of the standards of beauty and ugliness.

The image of the body seemingly ugly and monstrous body, weather decayed, displeasing, or deformed, exists beyond and outside the normative and perfect appearance of the ideal. Historically, these unfavorable images included those distorting body marks and embarrassing stigma, stemming from aging, disease-flaws which indicated a vulnerability of human life existence, resulting from the environment and the assaults of time. Thus, the forms used to produce the images vary from the realistic to the wittily distorted.

Furthermore, images of the body as inherent portraits of the external physical self, then, may also allude to the internal topography of the person as well. (Edward Munch, Symbols and Images, P 27) Images of the body often function as visualizations of the invisible. Character, temperament, and emotions constitute an inner psychological realm that the artist displays through representations of the outer physical self.

For this, artists may portray intangible subjectivity through gestures, facial features, or psychological expressions, and may also draw upon the environment in which the body is placed. In addition, the characteristic way in which the artist manipulates tone, color and lighting may itself make manifest the inner condition of the person.
In this respect, portraits can present an aspect of a person’s internal self to the viewer by means of external body language. For me the images of my body work serve as both internal and external languages. At first I attempted to communicate both vulnerability and accessibility to my inner self. Then I also tried to communicate with viewers by using my another language. Through the body images, I wish to visualize my mixed, and suppressed emotions that invite viewers to take a look at my revealed inner self. Through my elaborate body language of displaying and withholding, a private and normally invisible aspect of the inner self is made public and visible to the external observer.
I wish to evaluate the progress which my work has made during my graduate studies based on the standard set for myself in the beginning: being true to my cultural background, responding my new cultural environment and making the best possible use of R.I.T. Furthermore I would like to show the importance of my graduate work in the development of my professional career.

III. Progress Evaluation

A. My cultural background

By using my body as a subject, I wish to be true to my Korean background in my expression with concepts and images. What I want to make the image is my self-portrait. In the development of my graduate work, I concentrated on defining the concept of the work. By choosing my body as my theme, I am dealing with the same concerns and issues which focus on my identity as a Korean in the United States. I am true to my Korean background in my experimentation with concepts and images.

The most obvious way in which I respond to my situation is in productivity. I look back at my life and myself carefully while I stay here for several years.
B. Responding to my new cultural environment

At the moment, two years after completing my thesis work, I must say that the impact of the American culture went deeper than I expected. It went further than what can be recognized in the work. When I came here I had an image of America as Ollman described it in his documentary photographs, “Points of Entry: A Nation of Strangers” that tells us how immigration and labor are linked throughout America’s history. I hoped to find out the meaning of the “American Dream” or so-called “land of opportunity” for the newest arrivals with a realistic view. I wanted to seek different images of America, and I wanted to see American life inside-out, upside-down.

My expectation was to be an observer, not be assimilated into the new culture. However, I became a newcomer myself and absorbed the freedom and opportunity in an apparently limitless big land. As a result, I was starting to observe myself as the subject of my own work.

At first, I was afraid that I would lose my style and strength that were rooted deeply in my philosophy, confusion. I was concerned that American culture would influence on my beliefs and my strength of the expression too much. For this reason, I was a bit timid to try out new techniques and even to make myself the subject of my work.

In critically evaluating my success in incorporating new concepts and ideas into my work, I find that I was not as dynamic as I wanted in doing so. However, my response to the new cultural environment became active in incorporating it in a way which was strongly recognizable in my work.
C. Making the best use of R.I.T

During my first year of RIT, I avoided making the work too personal because I believed that if it were, it would lose its validity and strength and could not be entered by others. While creating my thesis work during my second year, I started expressing my beliefs, philosophy, and even my agony in a more personal way. Rather, I found that my teachers and fellow students were very interested in my work. I now believe that in expressing myself openly in my work, the work becomes more accessible to others. This change is, in part, a reflection of the differences between my Korean perspectives and my new perspectives being developed in the United States.

In addition, I am thankful for the opportunities to study “History and Art of Photography”. It was a demanding course that covered a great diversity of artistic approaches. Even though I had difficulties in digesting ideological functions and effects, it really opened my eyes to see the art and the artistic work as a kind of aesthetic reflection of the culture. Consequently, it answered the questions what the role of art is, and what the role of the artist in a highly commercial and technological society is. I realized that we artists can redefine them in this tremendous culture.
In this chapter I reflect upon other artists’ influences and innovation upon my work within aesthetic appeal and personal expressions. I will explain how I captured the images and how I applied special effects in four different series of body work.

IV. The Work

A. Statement of Intent

This thesis “I and another I” is a series of my body work intended to portray feelings and thoughts relating to my cultural background and my new life in the United States. I attempted to capture and evoke feelings surrounding acceptance-familial interaction, societal boundaries and social status. This intent here is to validate the emotions that I must confront in my search for who I want to be.

B. General Description

Through my intangible, invisible fights to define myself, I explore emotions, defenses and falsification. As I go forward to grab my hidden images and listen to my inner voice, I feel like my external “I” springs backward to fit into my respective familial communities. When my suffering and endless spiritual journey were revealed upon the visible images, I could feel relieved as if I endured the labor of birth. It was a time that
my inner self was born. It also was a time that a bud of my artist life sprouted vigorously to confront myself and my environment.

The figurative character of body work is my response to what I perceive as major concerns in my body work. I stem from Korean Confucian society and am the first son in my conservative family. After coming in USA, I became aware of my roots and surroundings so that my work gradually began to focus on self portraits searching for identity: the images of who I am and where I live in my own world.

Each piece is highly symbolic and purposefully cryptic. I will explain the concept of a series of pictures for viewers to build up better understanding of my intention and hidden emotions.

My body works divided into four parts for different purposes, I use various means to distinguish photographs.

Part 1
In the first series of images, I attempt to embrace my body as a part of mother nature. In order to create the whole image, mother nature, I combine six pictures (30x40 inches) to make two sets of images. Through these pieces I wish to demonstrate myself resembling the nature; in other words, I endeavored to make equivalent images to nature.

At first I observed my body and my existence within a magnificent landscape of the nature that God created in harmony. To enhance the landscape images in my body pictures, I took close-up shots of my particular body that seemed to unveil a similar curve to nature’s. Moreover, it showed that this subject of the picture, the close-up shots of body hair and pores, tells the viewers that the subject breaths like other creatures. To make these images, I observed my single breath and followed my breath to understand my inhalation and exhalation functions.

Through these images, I brought John Caplan’s inspiration to my big, close-up shots that seemed to be audacious and even displeasing. John Coplan is a man whose many achievements outnumber and influence the emerging of my body work. In short, his career is a summary of the history of Western contemporary art over the past forty years. In his large scale works, aggressively ugly and classically beautiful images of body coexist.

As he chose his own aging body as his restricted subject matter, I chose my own body in order to concentrate on issues of abstraction and seriality with the photographic medium. My photographs are also big close-up shots as many of Caplan images are so large to show totality within the gallery spaces.
Part 2

Intentionally, I made a comparison between the first part and the second part. First, I set up the tangible installation to connote the human being as a material thing and commodity in capitalism. Second, I want to express artificial and unnatural environment in building up a tall, metal sculpture like a symbolic figure of a technological society. For this reason, I would use metal pieces rather than use the
wooden materials from nature. To signify the unnatural figure against nature, I preferred metal pieces to make the body representing a monstrous figure.

The cold, metal sculpture also represents myself and my life as an artificial person or a machinelike existence in this modern society. This represents to the viewers the Post-Modern construction of the body or techno-engineered body in the twenty-first century.

For the face and its hidden emotions, I attached duratrans on the metal sculpture from the top to the bottom: the duratrans divulged my belied feelings underneath the armed figure. I utilized special effects such as multiple exposure, light-painting and using color filters to enrich the images of suffering, agony and complicated emotions representing my face. In detail, I made an effort to exaggerate distorted face and despair.

I put eight different duratrans to abstract my painful feelings that are inside; I want to be free to live in nature, but to exist against nature. Additionally, I took some of pictures in water by using a water-resistant camera to maximize the grotesque images.

As the viewers approach to see the sculpture, the duratrans turned on and off randomly as if it were alive to sense people’s movement. For immediate response to the viewers, I attached the motion sensor on the metal sculpture. In doing so, I want to show the mental processes that illustrate my emotions and feelings gradually move from one to another stage.

For the installation, the great artists Nam June Paik and Bill Viola gave me such an incentive and vision respectively that I researched Nam June Paik and Bill Viola’s work.
Nam June Paik's impact on the art of video and television has been profound. Nam June Paik and his Korean Aesthetics remind me of the boundless genius of the human spirit and the desire to realize how science, technology and invention can expand and transform how we make and see art. Paik is called an innovator of contemporary multimedia art. Paik’s video sculpture installations, and performances had taught us that technology had the capacity to enrich and enhance our lives in unexpected ways. I believe he anticipated much of the dramatic technological change in recent years through his eighteen year work. As I research his major video pieces, I realize what a total vision he had of video as an art practice. As Hanhardt John G. describes “Paik is a utopia artist, looking to achieve impossible to realize a better word for art, is undeniable.” (Hanhardt John G., The World of Nam June Paik, p 231) Most of all, Paik’s live global satellite broadcasts were held together by the live link between peoples and cultures. This link was fueled by Paik’s playfulness and desire to share cultural values and experiences.

In short, Paik’s video art gave me extraordinary visual experiences to look back my art practice. I realized that the artist’s expressions would be open and free to everyone.

Another incentive of my imaginative pieces came from Bill Viola’s lucid images. I experienced his dream and hallucination and repressed memory while standing in front of his spatial settings. He is called one of the pioneering, forward-looking artists along with his multimedia and poetic work. For his aesthetic pieces, critics often said that one does not merely see Viola’s work; one experiences them thorough one’s body.
Viola's work forced me to look back where we have come from, if only to surmise where we may be going. His exhibition evoked my spiritual journey: doubt, hope, and anguish. As Viola intended, I realized that emotional charge of materials, our personal relationship to experience and the desire to address alienating cultural separations were challenges. As a result, I could see the deep oppositions between the self and the world at large, between hidden obsessions and our daily passage with one another. I remember how I wondered about the self and an art while standing in front of his video projections or passing through each room. My senses were so stimulated and my perceptions so acute that time seemed suspended. Certainly, Viola integrated the sound and image in order to establish the video as a tangibly physical body.

Part 3
In the third part, my inner voice was becoming louder and began screaming uncontrollably. Seemingly my conflicts and confusion were about to burst out so that “I” and “another I” confronted each other. Although my inner self was trapped in my external self, another I searched for freedom and tried to escape the cage of my own body.

To express vigorously arising conflicts, I applied special effects; for example, spot lighting, light paintings and alternating color filters. To increase the special effects, I painted my body and shook the camera while I was moving around. Previously, I had the camera set to slow shutter. The vivid photographs were arranged by the order of the color: yellow, red and yellow in a gallery. They were also big prints (30x40 inches) to intensify visual shocks for the viewers.

At this point, I should mention my inspiration, Lucas Samaras’ intensive self-exploration, something seductive and something psychological, that is so extreme as to seem supernatural to ordinary people. As always with him, there is a sense of recognizable psychological experiences that reflect upon his shamanistic photographs. I like the way Lucas explored his emotional tones arising from a frank confrontation of his aging.

In my work, the similar emotional stages appealed, especially, the stressful situation and antagonism; I stand up between my false self as an ideal model in my society and my true self as an innocent in my dream world.

In this series, I show that I constantly writhe to escape from stress, and conflict. Thus the pictures convey the body language that I scream to be free while standing in the middle of a trap.
"I have to be a responsible oldest son in my family. I’m under lots of stress because I stand up between my false self as an ideal model in my society and my true self as an innocent in my dream world. I want to escape from stress, and conflict, which comes from my uncontrolled situation. I search for freedom but I find myself in a trap. I have limitless desire to fly but not flying yet"

Part 4

In the forth part, three pictures are combined under one theme that implies a recovery from the cultural shock, conflicts and uncontrolled desire to be free from the existing customs and fixed ideas. Associated with the search for identity, “I” and “another I” deliberately find the way to go together in the forth part. These three pieces of image allude to a more inert stage than the third part. It insinuates the gradual change throughout the long suffering of spiritual journey.

I utilized several skills to produce strong contrast pictures. To dramatize the contrast of the highlight and shadow on my body, I applied the tungsten light. Moreover, I adopt the cross-processing when developing the films. In addition, to heighten the color of the tungsten, I used the orange filter.
"I think
my problems and sense of confusion come from myself
but not from others or from our surroundings. I attempt to open my mind and let viewers look through
my soul. I start off with myself. I now believe that in expressing myself openly in the work, the work
becomes
more accessible to others."
V. Conclusion

I wish to create my body works to depict my true essence of myself for better understandings. Since I decided to choose body work and my concept defining myself through the images, I have continued to develop a series of body works while I arrange them in progress. Through my work, I rediscovered identity as expression of a hidden and virtual image in my mind. In addition, I produced and recreated existing work into a unified concept during my studies at R.I.T.

My exhibition focused not only on outward appearances but also on the ways in which outward appearances correspond to and express inward activity: thoughts, emotions, and dreams. Viewing my images, I wanted to prove that surfaces could visualize the invisible. The body, the mind, and the self are a mixture of homogeneity and heterogeneity, sameness and difference. Alternatively, I attempted to visualize the transformation from part to whole and back again, suggesting the mental processes of my mind in contemplation of my unique surroundings. Additionally, the interests of installation and special effects come together especially in the category of three dimensional images.
I believe that the more we explore ourselves, stemming from the physical environment and the culture, the more we are fully aware of who we are and where we live. In turn, we are able to experience redefinition of ourselves and our relations to the world.

My graduate studies had a profound impact on my growth as an artist and I am still cultivating the aestheticism through my endless journey. Enthusiastically, I wish to discuss my project in an open minded manner in order to have communication with sincerity.
VI. Bibliography


