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My Identity

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My Identity

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

My identity is the dominate theme in my works. As a Korean American, I am influenced by life experiences in both countries. These two vastly different cultures and experiences define me as an individual. I use references and symbolism from both cultures as elements in my painting, mixed media, and crafts. I have spent half of my life in Korea, my mother country, and the other half in America, my new homeland. Living as an American, my artworks keep me connected to my Korean roots. Creating artwork is my way to relay who I really am as a Korean American.

My Identity

Introduction: A Story about Me

I am a Korean American. I was born and raised in Korea and immigrated to the United States three days before I turned sixteen. I went through a difficult time adjusting to a new environment. I learned not only the language but the culture as well. I went to schools in both countries and learned different etiquettes, manners, and social skills as well as the academic school subjects. My identity is a combination of Korean and American culture, and my artworks reflect my identity.

The immigrants who were born in their country, stayed there until their teens, then came to America are grouped under the designation *1.5 Generation Immigrants* by demographers and social scientists. I developed a mixed identity living in the United States as this type of immigrant. By the time I changed my major in college, from biology to art, I started to question whether I was Korean or American. As I started to express my feelings freely through creating artworks, I began to see who I was in my paintings. I was blending Eastern and Western aesthetic elements in my work. From then, creating artwork became not only the method of interacting with the world around me but also a method to explore my own identity.

I always had a passion for art, since I was little. This passion led me to become an art educator. As I focused on teaching art, I put my development as an artist on hold until I found the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University. The MIS-IAR Program helped me expand my artistic skills with various media and allowed me to express my identity in a variety of different forms.

Subject Matter

My subject matter is my identity, and my imagery reflects my personal history which includes my experiences, family, and memories. I use mixed media to express my mixed identity as a Korean American. I began as a painter but mixed media gave me freedom to express myself beyond the confines of painting. I work in painting, alternative photography, jewelry making, bookmaking, printmaking, and sometimes in a combination of media. My study in college, and the MIS-IAR Program, of Western artists formed how I approach painting and creating artworks. My imagery is often Korean in origin and my approach is Western. Together, they are indicative of my new identity, a Korean American.

To express my identity, I took Korean traditional landscape paintings, folk paintings, the Korean flag, and *Hwatu* images as references. The imagery in my paintings is primarily derived from Korean playing cards called, *Hwatu*. Korean families play *Hwatu* at holiday gatherings, and their vivid colors and oriental designs remind me of my life in Korea. I focused on different pictures and elements of *Hwatu* cards, such as plants, animals, figures, and manmade objects. This range of imagery represents the months from January to December. These elements that represent each month not only depict an object or an animal but are also Korean cultural symbols. *Hwatu* cards remind me of what I learned about history at school. They also remind me of school, teachers, and friends. The cards also remind me of my family playing the card game and having a good time together at holidays. They act like a memory chest that prompts wonderful memories from my childhood in Korea.

In addition to the playing cards, I also use my photographs that were taken in both countries as inspiration for collage-like paintings. The photographs that were taken in Korea are pictures from my youth and of my parents. The photographs taken in America are pictures of

places that I have visited, my paintings, and the house I live in, which looks different than the Korean houses my family and I used to live in.

To express the American influences in my work, I adopted the Western tradition of image presentation and techniques. For instance, traditional Korean paintings are characterized by water-based techniques and emphasis on negative space. In contrast, I made my paintings with thick paint to create a rough, textural surface and I layered images in collage-like compositions. My prints are also developed in layers of ink built on top of each other to create a sense of depth.

Influences

By the time I started to see my identity in my paintings, I saw the movie *Frida* (2002). The movie is a biography of artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). I started to study her artworks and the story behind each piece. She valued her culture and expressed her personal history and feelings on canvas. I recognized a strong and special connection between her and her artworks. Kahlo's work became an inspiration for me to start seeking, in depth, for my own identity. I began by looking back to where I was born.

I learned about traditional Korean paintings and painters at school. I also learned how to write calligraphy. The slow process of grinding ink sticks with water was a meditative exercise. We were taught to be calm and ready to write letters with a brush. Since traditional Korean calligraphy or paintings value negative space in the background, I had to be meticulous about applying each brush stroke on the paper. Learning calligraphy helped me to appreciate the Korean alphabet, or *Hangul*, and Chinese characters, which are still used in Korea. Making mistakes in the process of writing Korean calligraphy is unforgivable, once you make a mistake with your brush stroke, you need to start over. I used to think a lot in preparation for a stroke and

tried to imagine how my next paint mark would change how the painting would look. When I took my first oil painting class in college, I learned the concept of forgiveness in oil painting and it changed my approach to painting. I learned that if I made a mistake or did not like the way I painted, I could simply fix it or change it instead of starting over. The Western approach to oil painting encouraged me to be free from the fear of making mistakes and to try different things on my canvas. I also opened my mind and my eyes and incorporated expressive calligraphic characters into my works.

Besides calligraphy, I was attracted to folk paintings, or *Minhwa*, of the Joseon Dynasty. Yun-Bok Shin (born 1758) was a Joseon Dynasty painter who depicted daily life. Shin is famous for his use of bright colors and delicate brush strokes which made his works unique compared to other painters at his time who mostly used soft, earthy colors. *Hwatu* and Shin inspired me to use bright colors.

I fell in love with creating texture when I started using oil paints. I learned the characteristics of oil paints and expanded my painting style from precise realism to a more painterly and abstracted form. While moving in this direction, I became interested in the textured and patterned oil paintings of Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890). The water in Van Gogh's *Starry Night Over the Rhone* (1888) appears to be vibrating with textured brush strokes. His hair in his self-portraits looks as if it could move with breeze or a wind that passes by. Van Gogh's expressive brush strokes, vibrant colors, self-portraits, and attention to his environs affected how I paint.

Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) is another artist who influenced my work. He also used painterly, expressive brush strokes. In his painting, *Portrait of Chocquet* (1875), he used rough brush marks in creating interesting textures and a dynamic surface to grab the viewers' attention.

I also try to create different types of smooth and rough textures on my paintings.

Paintings

I create collage-like paintings by combining elements of *Hwatu* card images with images derived from personal photographs. The original *Hwatu* card images are simple and graphic and I add textures and more colors to make the images more dynamic. *Memory I* (Appendix, 1) is a combined image of eight different *Hwatu* cards. Each card illustrates a combination of Korean cultural symbols representing a calendar month. The crane and the black pine cones on the January card symbolize good luck and health. The peony on the card of June is one of the popular flowers in traditional Korean paintings and it symbolizes wealth and honor. Each element of the painting has its meaning and what it symbolizes reminds me of Korea. *Hwatu* cards not only remind me of my family and relatives but the elements of each card also remind me of my old schools, teachers, friends, and what I learned at school about Korean history.

Memory II (Appendix, 2) is a triptych and the panels represent February, November, and September, from left to right. I kept the original design of each card but I changed the images by creating texture, changing and adding colors, building up some parts of painting (with board added to the canvas), and adding my photographs. The resulting painting is made and presented in a collage-like construction.

Jo Kyung-Jin (Appendix, 3) is also a triptych. Each panel has a letter of my Korean name, Jo Kyung-Jin. ‘Jo’ is my family name, even though it is spelled ‘Cho’ in America, its pronunciation is close to ‘Jo’. The family name comes before the first name in Korea. ‘Kyung-Jin’ used to be my first name in Korea. When I got my US citizenship, Kyung-Jin became my middle name and my first name became Kris. In the painting, ‘Kyung’ is written on the middle

panel and 'Jin' is written on the panel to the right. I started this painting with writing my name in Korean in cursive. I made the lines of the letters thick and cropped them at the edge of each canvas. I filled the interior of each letter with elements and colors from six different *Hwatu* cards. In this piece, I wanted to turn letters into an artwork design. The design first appears graphic but is developed with textured paint, visible brush marks, and a varied surface quality.

Mixed Media and Crafts

The MIS-IAR Program provided an opportunity for me to delve into different media, such as alternative photography, Precious Metal Clay (PMC), and printmaking. I came to America in 1998 and the alternative photography work, *Before 1998* (Appendix, 4), is about Korea. I started the piece by collecting photographs of the Korean flag, the Korean map, and my personal photographs. All the scanned photographs were manipulated in a computer program. Then, the manipulated images were printed on a laser printer. Next, they were transferred onto a thick sheet of paper by using a xylene transfer process. The colored part of the work was transferred first then the black and white one was transferred on top of the colored one. The xylene transfer process makes the colors soft, diluted, and also look somewhat aged. After the transferring steps, I went back into the artwork with colored pencils and heightened some of the colors.

After 1998 (Appendix, 5) depicts my life after I came to America, my new homeland. This artwork was made in a similar process as *Before 1998*. However, in this piece I used some of my childhood pictures that were taken in Korea along with the pictures taken in America. I came to America and lived in a different environment but my background as a Korean always stayed in my mind. I wanted to show my life in America as a Korean American in this piece, instead of a composition of general American symbols.

When I was planning to create my next piece, an alternative photography work about Korea, there were two things that came to mind that represented Korea to me. These were the Korean Pledge of Allegiance and the Korean national anthem. In *My Roots* (Appendix, 6), I transferred and overlapped a part of the Korean flag on top of my face. Both pictures were digitally cropped and manipulated then transferred with the xylene process. Using two different types of pens, I wrote the Pledge of Allegiance on the top left-hand corner and the Korean national anthem around the piece. I wanted to make this artwork appear aged so I tore up the edges of the paper and added light colors around the picture with colored pencils. I planned on overlapping pictures on this piece by using xylene transfer but I couldn't predict exactly how the pictures were going to be transferred. The process of image transfer has a factor of uncertainty and unpredictability which has influenced my style by freeing me from being precise or perfect.

The next media I explored was PMC. I found it very interesting how this pliable clay-like material turns into metal after firing. I found that I could express things easily with PMC. *My Identity* (Appendix, 7) is a silver PMC bracelet and it has ten round beads that each represents me. The whole bracelet, except for the wire that connects the beads, is made with PMC. I started each bead by rolling a small PMC ball and then poked a wooden rod through it. I worked on each bead while it was on the wooden rod. When the clay was half dried, I pulled out the rod and added an end piece. The end pieces were small bands on both ends of each bead. Then, I made spacers to go in between each bead. Each bead and spacer was dipped in warm water and Liver of Sulfur (a patina for jewelry) to oxidize, or blacken, it after being fired and polished.

The beads represent my parents, my birthday and religion, American and Korean symbols, and my name in two languages. One bead is dedicated to my love of color as an artist and another one pays tribute to my teaching career.

After working with PMC, I ventured into printmaking processes. In printmaking, I could overlap many layers of ink to create a sense of depth. Landscape painting was a part of Korean folk art and I wanted to create my own version in ink. *Landscape I* (Appendix, 8) is a brayer ink landscape painting influenced by traditional Korean painting. I started with a light colored background. Then, with an inked brayer, I built layers of mountains, blackened corners, and created small details. *Landscape II* (Appendix, 9) is also a landscape but it is more abstract and it has more colors. For this piece, I used different sized brayers as my paint applicators. The brayers left many sharp-angled, rectangular marks which make my landscapes unique. Also, the rectangular marks help some viewers to see the piece differently, so the interpretation of the imagery is left open. I made more prints from the original plate, called ‘ghost prints’. I layered these ghost prints on *Landscape II* which created the complex perception of depth in the piece.

Tae Guk Gi (Appendix, 10) has symbols printed on top of a brayer painted ground. The center circle and the black lines around it represent the Korean flag. The bird on top of the circle is a crane and it symbolizes good luck and health. I made a template of this crane flying up into the sky with both wings spread out in the traditional oriental form. Just like the crane flying to reach the sky, I am now one step closer to being a better artist and a teacher.

Conclusion

The MIS-IAR Program has given me the opportunity to explore different media and use new skills to express myself in depth. The growth of my artistic skills and understanding of art was not just limited to my artwork. As a teacher, I adopted what I learned from the MIS-IAR Program to enrich my lessons. I want my students to not only master skills but also develop the meanings of the artwork they create. I encourage students to express themselves freely in art and

personalize their artwork. As I explore myself through creating artworks, I want my students to see that artworks reflect themselves. I am still exploring and seeking myself through creating artworks. With what I learned from the MIS-IAR Program, I will continue challenging myself to grow into a better artist and a better teacher.

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Figure 1. *Memory I*, acrylic on canvas, 30"x 24", 2009.



Figure 2. *Memory II*, mixed media painting on three canvases, 10"x24", 2010.



Figure 3. *Jo Kyung-Jin*, acrylic on three canvases, 12"x36", 2010.



Figure 4. *Before 1998*, alternative photography, 14"x11", 2008.



Figure 5. *After 1998*, alternative photography, 11"x14", 2008.

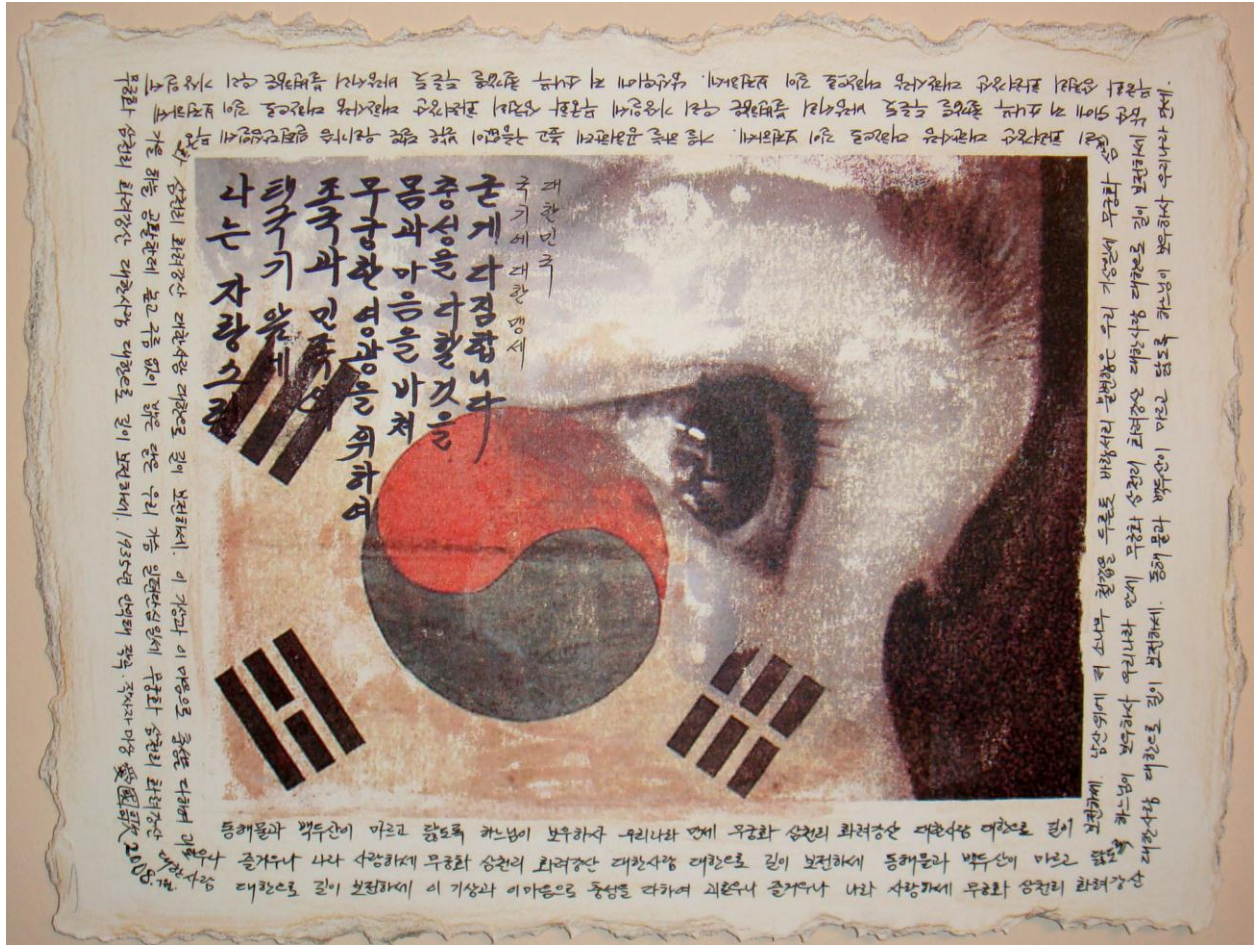


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Figure 7. *My Identity*, precious metal clay, 2½”x2½”x½”, 2010.



Figure 8. *Landscape I*, ink on paper, 12 ½"x19", 2011.



Figure 9. *Landscape II*, ink on paper, 17 ¼"x12", 2011.



Figure 10. *Tae Guk Gi*, ink on paper, 14"x11", 2011

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