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Chiasma: Plural Selves on Ink and Paper

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Sapira Cheuk
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The earliest memory I have is laying down in my living room floor in Hong Kong drawing. Leaving my brother and I with our babysitter, I remember trying desperately and failing to draw the individual pearls of her necklace on top of her stick figure triangle dress before she left. As I drew I would assign the figure an imaginary occupation (this particular one was Knight Princess) and developed a complex narrative (or at least as complex as a 3yr old could get) about her adventures through life. I recollect this fond memory with a feeling of freedom, and a sense of individuality. Drawing allows me to create a universe that was solely my own, with a narrative that escapes the realities around me. Reflecting on this memory now made me realize that my practice did not divert very far from that particular first memory.

The first time I saw a Van Gogh was at the Getty in Los Angeles after our family immigrated to America. We walked through room and room of art, until I spotted a small group of people gathered around a painting. I walked away from my family and pushed my ten years old body through the crowd, looked up and found Van Gogh's *Iris*. At first I felt breathless, as if the shades of blues in the painting pushed the air out of my lungs, then my eyes started to water and I couldn't look or bear to be around that painting anymore. It was the first and most intense viewing experience I've ever had. I still wonder why my body reacted the way it did that day, I didn't care for the painting much prior to seeing it, and the subject was not particularly profound. I've theorized I could be have been in awe to be in the presence of an old master, and the aura of the painting put a spell on me, or the stress of immigration and adapting to a foreign place had found an outlet in the that painting. Whatever the reason, that encounter made a lasting impression on me that still influences me to this day. I know painting can do something only a painting can do, and I've been trying to make work that moves others the same way *Iris* moved me.

We would travel back to Hong Kong every summer since my father did not immigrate with us. I developed thyroid cancer when I was twelve; surgery took place in the summer of '96 in Hong Kong, because my mother did not have full time employment and so we did not have insurance in America. Twelve is an awkward age to have surgery,

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since I had to be housed in the adult ward, instead of the children's. At the time I felt deformed, and incomplete.

During my recovery period, and subsequent radiation treatments and every summer after, my parent would send me to learn Chinese brush painting with Master Gern a moderately successful artist in his late 70s, and a Chinese expat. painter who also studied woodblock printing in Japan prior to WWII. His 500 square ft. home was covered with scrolls of paintings, awards and accolades, yet he was living near poverty if not for the earnings from teaching art to students to help with their extra curricular activities in their college applications. Master Gern was the first professional artist I'd met, and I couldn't imagine a life of being an artist producing skillful and cherished works but at the same time being near destitute.

During high school in Honolulu HI., I watched my mother struggle against my very traditional and somewhat controlling father since he solely dictated our finances. He didn't allow her to complete her GED (she did so anyways and now she is in her late 60s and still continuing her education), doing so in his mind would mean she's telling the world he was not able to provide for the family. I realized the most important thing for a woman to be is to gain financial security, so naturally, I chose to be an accountant when I started college at the University of California, Riverside. I've also come to the conclusion that a woman may appear to be submissive, but that doesn't mean she is powerless. In the case of my mother, she fought against my father's will for her education and at the same time show me that while she did comply on other things a women (the submissive) does have the power to draw a metaphorical line on what is acceptable to her even if her society and spouse disagree.

After two years of struggling as a business major I knew I couldn't stay away from art. Luckily I met Brad Spence, a visiting lecture, whom ultimately became my mentor. During the time I studied with Spence, I developed my undergraduate thesis; deformed, sensual nudes painting in a surreal landscapes with watercolor, soy sauce and sugar. Their bodies decorated with traditional Chinese headdress and jewelry, incorporating aesthetics I learned from Master Gern. At this point in my practice, I was still not able to

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articulate why I was making what I was making, I only knew I loved the pleasure and a sense of freedom when I painted and I knew what the images I wanted to create that would give me pleasure.

I found my way into graduate school at California State University, San Bernardino where I was finally able to compile and understand why I make what I make. Stylistically influenced by traditional Chinese brush paintings, with abstractionistic marks paired with surrealistic images my work attempts to recapture the awe I felt when I first saw *Irises*. To recapture and at the same time express the unspeakable feelings only an image could evoke and only a body could represent. I've come to understand the inarticulable feeling as something similar to the sensation of sexual pleasures mixed with the cleanliness of a truly religious experience. From my experience as cancer patient during puberty, I've come to unconsciously equate sex and desires with a deformed, incomplete body, but not as a negative. I want to advocate that a broken, deformed body could embody beauty sex and desire. At the same time, I want to represent a female that could be submissive yet the same time not. My work has thus far primarily revolved around issues of the female body and its sexual experiences, particularly the duality of the sensual and repulsive quality of the female body and complex role of the submissive in a BDSM sub/dom relationship. My work takes conflicting and opposing ideas and organizes them in a way that creates a singular entity that embodies contradictory forces. I am interested in the tensions caused by opposing ideas, the balance of these tensions between self-contradictory forces and the hybrid products of opposing themes; therefore, I strive to create works that transcend the identity of the original and the documentation of the dialectic between these opposing forces within a body.

In my abstract works, I choose to embody my concepts in the process of making. In *Muscles and Hair*, instead of focusing on illustrating a figure's features and thereby imposing a single narrative of female body or sexual experience, I use abstracted forms to draw the viewer into the erotic intensity and the implication of bodies through gestures of watery mass and detail mark making. The process of forming a body by dropping Indian ink in pools of water on paper may seem to be chaotic and difficult to control, as if the artist gave up artistic direction and allowed the ink to produce the body,

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yet the reality of the process is very much dictated by artist. The water applied to the paper acts as the boundary of where the ink can spread, much like the boundaries set by the submissive for the dominate in a respectful sub/dom relationship. At the levels of depiction and process of its creation the paintings reenact the sub/dom relationship in order to revel the submissive as paradoxically the more powerful role in the sub/dom binary.

For reasons I have yet to articulate clearly to myself, I felt compelled to incorporate realistic body parts in my work. In the series such as *Bounded and Unbinding* and *The River*, the presences of recognizable figures add elements of surrealism to the abstracted images. The feminine disembodied hands are simultaneously tying the untying themselves from bonds, implying the capacity to both set and free itself from bonds. The nature of this abstract capacity is hinted at by the pools of ink, which not only suggest vaginal forms, but also refer to the recurrent image of the female body in my other works.

Currently, I'm interested in investigating the possibility of how the body occupying a space may transform into a landscape; or rather reconfigure the body as the landscape by incorporating Chinese Sumi ink painting techniques and aesthetics and geometric elements to portray the body and it's experience. Blending multiple practices and aesthetics, I attempt to build an alternative narrative of sex and bodily desires from a deformed female perspective.