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Re-exploring my identity as a Japanese woman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia
Commonwealth University.

by

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BFA, Aichi University of Education, 2008

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Thank you mom, dad and my sister Tomomi for your big love and support. I wouldn't make it without your continuous support.

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Abstract

RE-EXPLORING MY IDENTITY AS A JAPANESE WOMAN

By Fumi Amano, M.F.A

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

Major Director: Jack Wax Professor, Craft/Material Studies

This document contains reflections on motivations behind selected works leading up to and including my thesis exhibition "Voice". The following text shares the connection between my life and art-making. My personal issue about relationship with others spilled over from my mind and turned to art. I express the continuously unsuccessful attempts we make at developing true bonds between peoples.

Introduction

I have been lonely since I came to Richmond for graduate school. It had been two years since I had moved to the United States. English is not my first language. Even though I had been here for two years, my communication skills had not improved as dramatically I had hoped, before coming here. Repeated misunderstandings made me sad. The appearance of my ignorance made me frustrated. The eyes of all, on me, intimidated me. I felt like the more I stayed here, the more I shrunk. I lost myself. Loneliness made me eager for deep communication with someone else. I felt as if I had to rely on someone else to keep my own existence. I love Devin. He is my boyfriend. Without him, I felt I couldn't keep myself. During my first semesters studying, I did performance pieces to express the intense way that being loved by someone helped me survive. Through the performance work, I become a sculpture and communicated directly with the viewers. I feel I could finally talk with others, beyond language.

Intimacy

Because of my deep loneliness, I had been thinking about Devin too much. Only when I was communicating with him did I feel satisfaction with myself. I created some performance pieces about my intense love for him. I had wanted to share that feeling with others as felt as if I had forgotten how to communicate with others people in an understandable way.

“Look at me”



fig. 1

I like to bite and lick my lover's body to show my passion. Similarly, he accepts my action without complaint to show his love for me.

Glass is a subtle material. I can see people behind a clear sheet glass. People can see me as well, but we cannot touch each other directly. To me, it is like an invisible filter between people, or it is like a skin to protect ourselves from our surroundings. During the performance, I licked a frosted sheet of glass to reveal myself to the person opposite me. Licking is an intense way of showing my desire to break through the barrier, the frosted glass, and to attempt to communicate. I might lick my lover so that he might reveal more of himself to me.

“Reconstitution”

I became interested in the act of ‘licking’ due to the many different reactions I received from the previous performance piece “Look at me”. Many who viewed it were both surprised and disgusted at the sight of me licking the sheet glass. I knew that my lover was the only person who would accept this action without being disgusted. I think this sort of behavior is normal for couples who love each other. Through this, I have felt closer to him. I once had a dream that I ate his entire body. Rather than just eating him, I wanted to create something with him. I used food to represent my boyfriend’s body. Through biting and spitting out pieces of his body (which was made of red bean paste - a kind of Japanese sweet) onto a “canvas”, my saliva and his body fused together to create a new body.

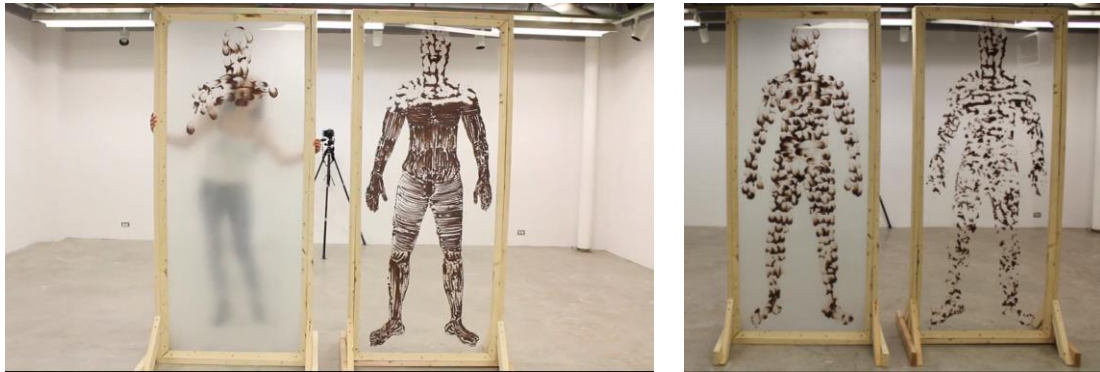


fig. 2

“One night”

I was thinking about how I could show the piece “Reconstitution” as a performance piece at my candidacy show. How could I invite the audience to view my performance work (be present in my imaginary world)? I reconstructed an exact copy of my room in the gallery space, and invited the audience to view my actions from a gap in the window shades, and the open door. I wanted to perform more privately and sacredly. When the viewers saw the private activity, of me biting and spitting a human shape of jelly on her bed, they hesitated to watch for a long time. Perhaps it was because of the normally private nature of the action taking place in the gallery. I still don’t know why I wanted to show the piece in public, I wanted to show how much I feel for my love, and the feeling I cannot express in words to him. After the performance he said it was “disgusting”, all the while smiling.

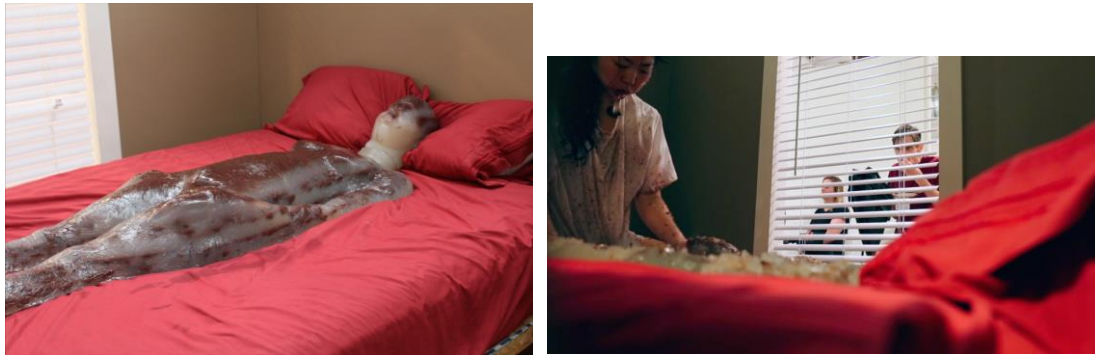


fig. 3

Feminism

I just turned thirty years old. As I get older I feel more and more pressure from those around me to conceive a child. Most of my friends (from childhood) are married, and are moving on to their next stage of life. But here I am, still single, with no marriage plans in sight. I also get the feeling that my parents want to see grandchildren soon. My parents have never directly mentioned the subject, but I can sense it. Despite the sense of urgency I feel to settle down and have children, a marriage, and bear children, it is still a ways off for me. Because of my age, however, I feel as if I need to start preparing to bear children, even though I'm nowhere near ready. I still have so many things that I want to do and accomplish before having a child, but external pressure makes me feel as if I need to put those things aside, hurry up and become a mother.



fig. 4



fig. 5

A concept of Japanese women in Japan

I was born in Japan; there we have developed our economy dramatically in the past sixty years. Women work outside of the home as well as men. There is however still a conservative way of thinking about women. We are supposed to get married by around thirty years old and have children. Women do more house work, such as cleaning up, cooking, and raising the children than men do. Even though the system makes it almost impossible to take a break from working Japanese companies. Because Japan is a small island nation, our relationship with our family is (perhaps) closer than other countries. Parents are worried about their daughters if they haven't married by the time they turn to thirty. I thought (we've always thought) that this is normal. As I grew up, I realized that this is not the only possible life for women.

“Worries of a thirty year old single woman –Baby-”



fig. 6

Even if I do decide that without a shadow of a doubt I want to have a child, I'm not even sure if I'll be able to. Before bringing a child into this world I've been taught that there are certain conditions that must be met in order to give that child a fair shot in life. My finances must be straight, my health must be sound, and the couple in question must have a "healthy relationship". In the event that I do decide that I want to have children, I still feel that these three conditions must be met. Looking at my life today, I'm not one hundred percent sure that I will ever meet these conditions. These are worries of a 30-year-old single (Japanese raised) woman.

At this point in my life I feel as if I'm walking alone in a pitch-black room. I'm trying to make it to the next room safely before the door is sealed shut. I can't see what's ahead of me, but I can hear the voices of my friends and family trying to guide me along the 'right' path. As time is running out I begin to get more and more anxious. As I get closer to the goal, the voices of the people around me have begun to get louder, this increases the pressure that I am feeling. The pressure to have a baby is becoming so intense that it's beginning to make me thoroughly miserable.

This performance piece was a rather direct representation of my feelings being childless at 30 years old. Running around without a clue through my life trying to satisfy everyone's needs, while also trying to satisfy my own. On the surface level it might appear to be humorous to see me flailing around trying to figure out what to do and where to go next, but underneath that there is a layer of sadness and anxiety that I am attempting to hide from public view. Please help me find my way, please help me find my child.

For the performance of "Worries of a 30 year Old Single Woman", I asked an audience member to hide a glass baby that I made, somewhere in the room (the glass baby was my potential future child, the one that I have yet to conceive) . I (then) asked the audience to tell me where to go to find "my baby", as I was not able see it with my own eyes, due to my vision being intentionally impaired by a helmet that I was wearing. The audience's voices were the various societal pressures that I feel are constantly trying to penetrate my brain.

"Worries of a thirty year old single woman -Hysteria-"

When I turned thirty, I felt as if I came to a different stage of my relationship with my boyfriend. I began feeling a distance from him. He is six years younger than I am. He doesn't (seem to) think about getting married to me. I'm getting impatient with him, and with the people who surround us, those who keep asking me about our relationship. I was getting sick of being woman. Even my body's natural processes, such as my period, made me feel frustrated. Taking birth control pills made me quite sad, because I have to take the pills (as an exercise put into action - intentionally) to avoiding getting pregnant. I am running on a treadmill sometimes for exercise, and I realized I was just exhausted, and I was not getting anywhere. This would be my life. I would not be able to create any new life. I would just consume (energy) until I die. I would not produce. Before I die, I want to bitch to everyone about all of the feelings I've had during this time, as a proof that I have lived. I wanted the viewers to feel the deep exhaustion that fills my soul. I know no one is listening to me on the street because they are busy. That is my life.

“Worries of a thirty year old single woman –Uterus-”

I made a video about the relationship between me and my uterus. Since I was sick of being a woman, I wanted to show what I am doing and how I am thinking about my uterus everyday. I was a girl until my first period came. As I am getting older, I am losing my “cuteness and my purity”. Dripping fake blood on a tampon cake that I fabricated, attempts to show the transition from cuteness (& purity) to the grossness which I now felt I have in my life. Inserting tampons (as I do) is one of the most uncomfortable things for me to do. In the performance, the repeated knocking of a bamboo seesaw, shows my obsession and exhaustion with this monthly insertion. Every night I take my birth control pill. I have to swear (every night) “I don’t need a baby.” These really are some of the most painful words for me to say. In the video, I am repeating this phrase (“I don’t need a baby”) and recording the action of taking the pill, this all indicates my sadness.

Humor and me

When it is funny, people laugh. When it is sad, people cry. The issues I am concerned with in my projects are not funny. The loneliness which a middle aged (30-year-old) Japanese woman has is rather sad. The personal issues and the feelings I have are difficult to understand, for people who are not in exactly the same situation as me. I wonder if there were a common sense of “humor” in my art-work, perhaps it might be helpful for “others” to gain a bit more of a universal understanding of my feeling? Since I struggle to communicate with others in English, I would like to communicate with people through my artwork. If people smiled when they saw my performances, it would give me great pleasure.

Glass house

I have been making work about the relationship between myself and my lover, (though I am still filled with loneliness). My desire to express these feelings gradually has brought me to attempt to engage with the larger world. How can I reveal my inner world to others? What makes this “revelation” so difficult? I remember the feelings that I had when I stood in front of the sheet of glass (in an earlier performance), and was closely facing another person. That (I feel) is similar the filter that we all have between us. It is clear but it exists, we see but are in one sense untouchable. It divides space and people. How can we overcome this filter to gain a better understanding of each other? In an attempt to address this issue; I created a house made out of old glass window frames. (Glass is a fragile material that I felt showed my feelings). The glass house divided my private space and from others but we were both still visible to each other.

“Message”



fig. 7

I was thinking about how to communicate with others. In my mind two distinct and separate languages exist, English and Japanese. Every time I need to speak in English I need to erase all of my Japanese thoughts, and replace them with English ones. When I need to speak in Japanese I need to do the exact opposite. I have to organize my thoughts each time. (This makes me tired). In this performance I employed the action of wiping the sandblasted sheet glass clean. This revealed English messages, and embodied my slow internal translation process. I hoped as well that it addressed the invisible (language) barriers between us.

Since moving to the United States I've often irritated others, as well as myself, with my inability to communicate smoothly. “Why are you always tapping your foot when I speak? How can I tell you how much I love you? Oh, that's not what I wanted to say...”, are thoughts that constantly run through my mind when talking to “native English speakers”. It seems as if the more I try to communicate, the more that I fail.

The house I constructed was made out of old recycled glass windows. It is a stand in for my brain. I always am struggling to keep up with English speakers' conversations, but in this instance they'll have to catch up with me, as I slowly work to reveal messages that they may understand.

“Message from the Ancients”



fig. 8

I was wondering to myself why I was struggling to communicate with others just using the means of verbal communication. How did ancient people communicate without language? According to researchers, when the ancient Japanese people lived in pit-houses, they didn't have a developed language. I wonder how they were able to survive in the world. The ancients teach us that we can communicate with each other without words. In this performance I wrote an old Japanese proverb about communication on the surface of the sandblasted glass. So I am working to embody a world without language onto a glass house I inhabit.

If language disappeared, would we be able to communicate with each other like the legends of the ancients? In this piece, we get to find out, when we witness the language disappearing. (a cloud of steam rises with-in the structure obscuring the words with moisture). Understanding is all about sharing the same feelings at the same moment, with others. Perhaps in sharing this moment, in which language disappears, we will get to share the same feelings of amazement, confusion, and shock, without ever saying a single word.

“Voice”

I have an interest in using a glass house as a device that is the embodiment of a voice.

For my thesis exhibition, I have been thinking about what "house" means to me. I think it is a private space, as well as a symbol of women. I've focused my attention on the realities of Japanese women's place in Japan, and come to realize many things. "We" have always done all of the housework, kept the house clean and the family healthy. Why is this "unpaid" job still limited almost exclusively to women? Women are not treated as well as men. Since the election in the United States (November 2016) it has been revealed (to some of us) that women are discriminated against, here as well. What I can say about feminism as a Japanese woman living in the United States? Since moving to the United States three years ago I have faced many problems due to people's preconceptions about Japanese women. The worst of these misconceptions generally come from American men, who believe that Japanese women are "easy", submissive, innately passive, and quiet.

As a response to these generalizations, I created a complex glass house to perform inside. Shape of house and windows are constructed in a distorted manner to reflect the misunderstanding between people. I will perform inside as a house wife and sometimes draw and write messages to the viewers who are directly front of me. Through this performance, I am expressing my feelings of loneliness, irritation, and my struggle to survive. Through my fleeting "messages" I create for the viewer, I hope to connect more intimately with people in hopes overcoming invisible barriers and go beyond our differences.





fig. 9
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Vita

[Education]

- 2017 MFA Candidate, Craft and Material Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, VA
- 2011 Research student at Aichi University of Education Aichi Prefecture, Japan
- 2010 Toyama City Institute of Glass Art Toyama City, Japan
- 2008 BFA Aichi University of Education Aichi Prefecture , Japan

[Employment]

- 2016-2017 Adjunct Professor, Introduction to Glass Fabrication, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 2015-2017 Artist Assistant for Bohyun Yoon
- 2014 Artist Assistant for Jack L Wax
- 2011-2013 General Art Teacher, Junior high school and High school in Aichi,

[Exhibition]

[Solo]

- 2017 **Solo Exhibition** Cohen gallery, PA
- 2013 **Solo Exhibition** Gallery APA Aichi Prefecture, Japan
- 2012 **Solo Exhibition** Gallery APA Aichi Prefecture, Japan

[Group]

- 2017 **"2017 Biennial Juried Exhibition"** Olin and Smoyer Gallery VA
- 2016 **"Glass National 2016"** Workhouse Arts center VA
- 2016 **"Auction Preview exhibition"** Pilchuck glass school gallery WA
- 2016 **"Please touch"** at Target Gallery Washington DC, United States
- 2016 **"GoggleWorks 10th annual juried exhibition"** at Goggleworks Art Center Reading PA
- 2016 **"Practice"** Candidacy show Plant Richmond VA
- 2016 **"Touch"** at Arrowmont gallery in Tennessee, United States

[Awards]

- 2016 **Honorable mention** at Glass National 2016 Workhouse Arts center VA
- 2016 **Grand Prize** at Goggleworks 10th annual juried exhibition, Reading, PA
- 2015 Best Student Award, Pilchuck Glass Art School, Stanwood, WA

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- 2017 Work Study scholarship from Penland school of Crafts, NC
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- 2015 Travel grant from Virginia Commonwealth University, VA

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- 2017 **The Anderson Center** , MN
- 2017 **Torpedo Factory Art Center** Washington D.C

