The Formless Self

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

by

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The Formless Self

Introduction

In the years preceding the exhibition “The Formless Self” (Kent State University, 2016), I had the freedom to explore individuality. As such I didn't have to remind myself only of societal harmony; instead I explored personal happiness. I separated myself from the life presented by my traditional Japanese name 美和. I was born in Tokyo, Japan and named 美和 Miwa, which means “beautiful” (美) “peace/harmony” (和). Reflecting on my youth, everything seemed organized, harmonious and followed tradition. The order I remember from my childhood is expressed with the character 和, pronounced as wa, which is also used in words that describe old and traditional Japan, like “Yamato” (大和), both lost meaning in a modern society, one characterized as superficial and empty. Although my adolescent years were shaped by Japanese, the conventions wa and yamato, my adult life is informed by more individualistic values with Western imported culture as well as my location in the United States. I became more conscious and aware of my simultaneously existing traditional and modern selves. Through courage I found myself, and started seeing beauty in both individuality and freedom, especially in regard to traditional art and free expression. Different customs and individualities were intimidating at first but I started realizing that human connections in Japan, for example, are not all that different from the United States, or almost anywhere else.

My practice in art is directly informed by childhood values of harmony, as well as the freedom I granted myself as an adult. This is a process of understanding different perspectives residing in my own heart and mind. In the studio, I visualize those perspectives from the mind of Miwa, and from the mind of 美和. The childhood self struggles to keep the peace and harmony but at the same time, the new self keeps exploring the new connections between contrasting individualities reacting to experiences and environment.
“The Formless Self” shows merging and transition from my lived experiences in Japan and the U.S. It traces what happens in-between cultures, an interstitial space where I reside, and as such my art is adapting and becoming formless: an “elsewhere, within here” paraphrasing Trinh T. Minh-ha. By formless I mean a state of mind that allows my work to grow out of the mismatched cultural identifications like “the gray area” which Minh-ha describes as “a phase of (r) evolution, between form and formlessness, when old forms are disappearing while new ones coming into view are not yet distinguishable.”

Statement

Establishing Identity

Developing a concrete idea about identity was both obstacle and inspiration. With an established history and culture in Japan, I felt I was compelled to identify tradition and culture as a representation of my identity. The traditional Japanese concept of building *Uchi* 内 “inner” and *Soto* 外 “outer” personality as a way to keep the harmony of a collective society always confused my sense of which personality to be the true self. Western culture, in particular, the United States, encouraged me to freely express myself, something that was foreign in Japan. I was inspired to define my idea of identity of which I had it grown unclear and blurred in Japanese society.

I preferred clay prior to graduate school because I enjoyed working with material directly, intuitively and without planning; but when my pieces were fired they became too formal and traditional, not allowing me any way to re-enter them. My prior practice was mostly making biomorphic vessels with organic colors and shapes. I was influenced by the general images of scientific and biomorphic shapes found in sea creatures and microscopic cells. I was seeking images and forms that do not belong to any specific culture, in an effort to avoid the stereotypical image of Japanese art such as traditional pottery. Techniques and aesthetics in Japan were the established frames that limited me and I could not go beyond
them using clay by itself. In time, I explore non-traditional materials and methods thereby creating the appearance of formless objects and installations freed of historic convention that I associated with my childhood. This exploration with new materials was exciting and opened possibilities for new methods of working and paralleled my thinking process regarding my Japanese heritage and the merging of it with what I associated as more liberal western perspectives.

Method

Hybridization

_Cuddle_ [Fig.1] is a piece I made with the feeling of isolation: an emotion I routinely felt living in the United States, foreign place. I experimented with the idea of the face as a façade, a foil which hides true identity. In this piece, the face was featureless and became only the suggestion of a mask – it could not see or hear because the face depicted was submerging into the mass and becoming lost. _Cuddle_ was inspired when I visited my home after two years of living in the U.S. My mind and body felt separated. Feeling isolated, I sculpted _Cuddle_ by putting a mask on the amorphous shape built with wire-mesh, clay and plaster. _Cuddle_ became the expression of a dissolving-being that is crumbling, yet holding together to exist without keeping any distinctive identity.

_Cuddle_’s successful representation of the mindset of Miwa and 美和 led me to bring more images of the body. I started to depicting gestures that make the work more approachable such as _Bubble Gum Eyes_ [Fig. 2] which visualizes the consciousness of awakening. The hint of a figure: suggests the conscious is not completely awake or asleep. The piece has multiple shapes of opened and closed eyes representing two ends of cognition: consciousness and unconsciousness. I molded each eye with different details in order to represent the levels of cognitive dissonance, which I felt from trying to absorb and digest the experience of living with the second language.
Figure 1
*Cuddle*
2015
Plaster, clay, cloth, sumi-ink, MDF, metal
38”x20”x15”
Figure 2

Bubble Gum Eye

2015

Clay, wire-mesh, wood, ink, acrylic

22”x18”x8”
My practice of working two dimensional, collage and drawings [Fig.3] also helped me to project my thoughts regarding the superficial yet also at the same time, allowed me to express the real and imposing gap of cultural differences I was routinely negotiating. Layering faces, and then excising them onto other abstract drawings was another way that I explored and developed my ideas for the sculptural work in my thesis. The result was a multivalent portrait, not necessarily a self-representation, that pictured two persons connected by a shared mental chamber.

![Figure 3](image)

Figure 3, (2015) Paper, acrylic.

Concurrently, I incorporated random Japanese and Chinese characters and played with the idea of “oriental” as a historically superficial and socially-constructed cultural signifier in the Western world. I was attempting to alienate this stereotypical Asian image from my cultural background by deforming and ignoring the meaning of characters. I was inspired by art made by Jiha Moon [Fig.4] and Takashi Murakami [Fig.5] and similarly. I mixed cultural signifiers and unauthentic images seen every day in contemporary society. Moon’s and Murikami’s hybridized representations of East and West, pop and traditional, inspired me to look for the artistic strategies that resolve the gap of multi-cultural identity, which led me to reimagining my sculpture practice again.
I constructed *Pink Hole* [Figure.6] by covering the hand shaped wire-mesh with plaster-dipped cloth, leaving a void that I then painted with gaudy pink paint. The process made a rough texture on the surface. I was inspired by Moon and Murakami to paint them with synthetic color and traditional black *sumi* (ink) to play with the idea of both artificial (i.e., synthetic colors) and natural, or traditional Japanese ink, as a way to address cultural intersections at the center of “The Formless Self.” Making abstract sculpture with an empty hole or void in the piece evokes the philosophical idea of “nothingness”, depicted with the Japanese character “無”, of which Japanese philosopher Hisamatsu explains as a living, that possesses mind and self-consciousness and sees the heart itself. I believe this exists both in Eastern and Western perspectives. In the art history seminar *Nations and Borders*, I re-encountered an old Japanese
poem influenced by Buddhism and Shinto philosophy published in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Elsewhere, Within here, immigration, refugeeism, and the boundary event* (2010). In the poem I once felt disconnected from Fujiwara Sadaie’s words because of the ancient Japanese formal tradition he uses stylistically. However, by reading the English translation I re-discovered and appreciated “nothingness” as articulated by Hisamatsu in *The Formless Self* (1999).

見渡せば、花も紅葉もなかりけり

浦の苫屋の秋の秋の夕暮れ

All around, no flowers in bloom are seen,

Nor blazing maple leaves I see,

Only a solitary fisherman’s hut I see,

On the sea beach, in the twilight of this autumn eve.

The Japanese aesthetic concept of *Wabi Sabi* has always deeply influenced the lifestyle of Japanese culture. However, the artistic expression of such concepts are old and traditional, I only started to understand the real concept through reading Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Elsewhere, Within here*. Encouraged by Sadaie’s creative expression in this Japanese poem no translated into English, I started to feel more comfortable to think that I did not have to force myself to think or imitate Western contemporary approaches or Japanese traditional styles.

*Wabi Sabi* is, according to Boye Lafayette De Mente, one of the foremost Western commentators on Japan in English, ‘a secret Japanese thing’, an aesthetic quality that is “sensual and spiritual” that imparts a sense of peace and tranquility that is also sexually stimulating – perhaps because it is impermanent and fragile, like pleasure”. De Mente defines *wabi* as “quiet or tranquil, with a strong connotation of refined simplicity.” *Sabi* according to De Mente is best expressed by the phrase of “appreciate in the rest of age” or “a special kind of beauty that results from aging” and a “look of simplicity and naturalness”. *Sabi* is just a that word means ‘rust’. So *wabi sabi* is a complicated traditional
Japanese aesthetic concept that conveys a sentiment of harmonious tranquility that arises from a respect for things that have aged in a natural state. Sadaie’s gave me permission to weave this Japanese concept with my own self-expression that merges both Japanese and Western stylistic approaches, aesthetics, and influences. For instance, Shinto, the traditional religion of Japan influenced my process; it is defined by Dr. Ono Sokyo that “It is an amalgam of attitudes, ideas and ways of doing things that through more than two millennia have become an integral part of the way of the Japanese people. Thus, Shinto is both a personal faith in the kami and a communal way of life according to the mind of the kami, which emerged in the course of the centuries as various ethnic and cultural influences, both indigenous and foreign, were fused, and the country attained unity under the Imperial Family.” Evidence of Shinto philosophy resides in the faces, or disembodied features of faces that I incorporated in my sculptures including Cuddle and Pink Hole. In each, whether the eyes are open or closed, the formless face gives an animate and inanimate quality depending on what psychological state and or emotion I was trying to express.
Figure 6

*Pink Hole*

2015

Plaster, clay, wire-mesh, acrylic, sumi-ink, MDF, metal

34”x21”x21”
In the post war era, I found a psychological connection to many abstract Expressionists such as Arshile Gorky and Alexander Calder as well as Nouveau Realiste Niki de Saint Phalle. With their background and studio practice, I realized my art is also an expression of transition. Myself—the self—is looking for the new and challenging the old. In *The Anxious Object* (1964) Harold Rosenberg opined artists’ struggling as “The anxiety of art” that is “an objective reflection of the indefiniteness of the function of art in present-day society and the possibility of the displacement of art by newer forms of expression, emotional stimulation and communication” through artists’ struggle with their heritage and tradition. He asserts this inner conflict was influential to the development of art that challenged tradition and to the Greenberg’s Modernist movement. In contrast, most Japanese histories of art are related to religious or Chinese calligraphy and its subsequent, influence on painting and craft. Inquiries regarding Post War era and histories of Japanese art motivated me to figure out how to incorporate both of these distinctly different paradigms into my work.

The sculpture *Gray Bubble* [Fig.7] is an exploration of juxtaposing the logical consciousness and the irrational nature of dreams through merging sculptural and two-dimensional practices. I painted geometric shapes to represent logical structure and linear thinking, a technique I used again on the piece *Plum Blue* [Fig.8].

These contrasting elements, logical and illogical, are repeated on the surface of the masks—formless figures that hint or allude to a face representing how the English and Japanese languages are continuously shifting as I change back and forth from speaking, thinking, writing and reading. The welded metal became an important component for the sculpture, both as support and as drawing compositional element. My drawing first started to emerge as “automatic” drawings, but as I paid attention to my gestural marks, I started connecting the lines to the writing of Japanese characters. The result is an integration of painterly strokes side by side with traditional characters, all enveloping my formless figures. This inspired me to incorporate more Japanese and Chinese characters, especially symbols effectively capable of conveying honest emotions such as 迷,”lost”, 独,”alone”, 知,”knowledge”,
and 助,”help”; an example of this is evident in the wood component of The Grey Bubble which expressed my anxiety and fear. By visualizing anxiety through words, I was reminded that Japanese characters were also invented to symbolize, through conceptual means, the emotions they express. The Gray Bubble functioned as an artistic borderland of sorts; the sculpture was a site to symbolically depict emotions including fear and want by incorporating the characters with gestural and painterly marks, another reference to post-war U.S. art, I made the Japanese characters visual rather than literal, even though the majority of my English-only speaking audience could not read them. My intent was to abstract the traditional Japanese language and use their cultural associations to symbolic ends. This represents the moment where the mind of Miwa and the mind of 美和 coexist through appropriate and abstraction.
Figure 7

*Gray Bubble* detail

2016

MDF, clay, acrylic, metal, wire-mesh, ink

32”x23”x25”
Figure 8

*Plum Blue*

2015

Clay, wire-mesh, acrylic, wood

8”x18”x18”
Outcome

Collective Identity; Installation as a Whole

On the entire wall I used spray and acrylic painting which was improvisational and direct. It was not pre-planned and was influenced by my state of mind over the two weeks in which I had to prepare the MFA sculpture gallery. I filled the walls with abstracted Japanese writings, circles and geometric shapes that are familiar to my drawing and painting practice. Spray paint requires drawing lines a lot faster than painting with a brush, this process brought gesture and energy into the space and made a reference to street art and graffiti. Painting with acrylic was applied more self-consciously in both line work and painterly brush strokes. On the corner wall [Fig. 9] I first wrote the character "dream", my idea of “the Formless Self” which I thought of a dream-like space that enables me to mix both subconscious and consciousness, synthesizing them. For the 2 weeks I worked painting from left to right in the gallery, creating a chronologically ordered installation. Ultimately, when the viewer walked around the room clockwise the piece builds, fades, and grows much the way a story is written. The idea of creating a loose narrative, albeit rather abstract, inspired me to paint more and more of the wall space, layering the imagery and meaning of the formlessness. Once the walls were painted, I arranged and re-arranged the sculptures until I found a sense of harmony and integration. [Fig.9,10,11]

With only a few days before “The formless Self” opened to the public, I stopped rejecting Japanese culture, thus allowing me to re-discover and integrate the elements of my identity in both the linguistic world and visual world. As Joan Stambaugh concludes, "Overcoming and abandoning its anxious sense of itself as an encapsulated separate “I,” the self gains the wondrous freedom and openness to emerge in joyous compassion from the shackles of its self-imposed boundaries" (1999) The process of making this exhibition allowed me to bring back the essential emotion and feeling of –myself-- into my work: the beauty, peace, and harmony of 美和 that I, Miwa, embody through lived experience.
Japanese sentences I drew on walls in the exhibition and its translation:

何もわかっちゃいないんだ
Nothing is understood,
一つの世界を全てと思い
Thinking one world as everything
見えるものしか見ていない
Only looking at visible things
知らない言葉
unknown words
見えない影と
invisible shadow
平気で遊んで
playing indifferently
夢と唱う
chant a dream
Figure 9

*The Formless Self*

Installation view
Figure 10

*The Formless Self*

Installation view
Figure 11

*The Formless Self*

Installation view
Reference


http://m.halsey.cofc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/08.-Traveler-48in-x50.5in.jpg


