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A Journey into My Mind

Shen Chen Hsieh

Missouri State University, Hsieh4057@live.missouristate.edu

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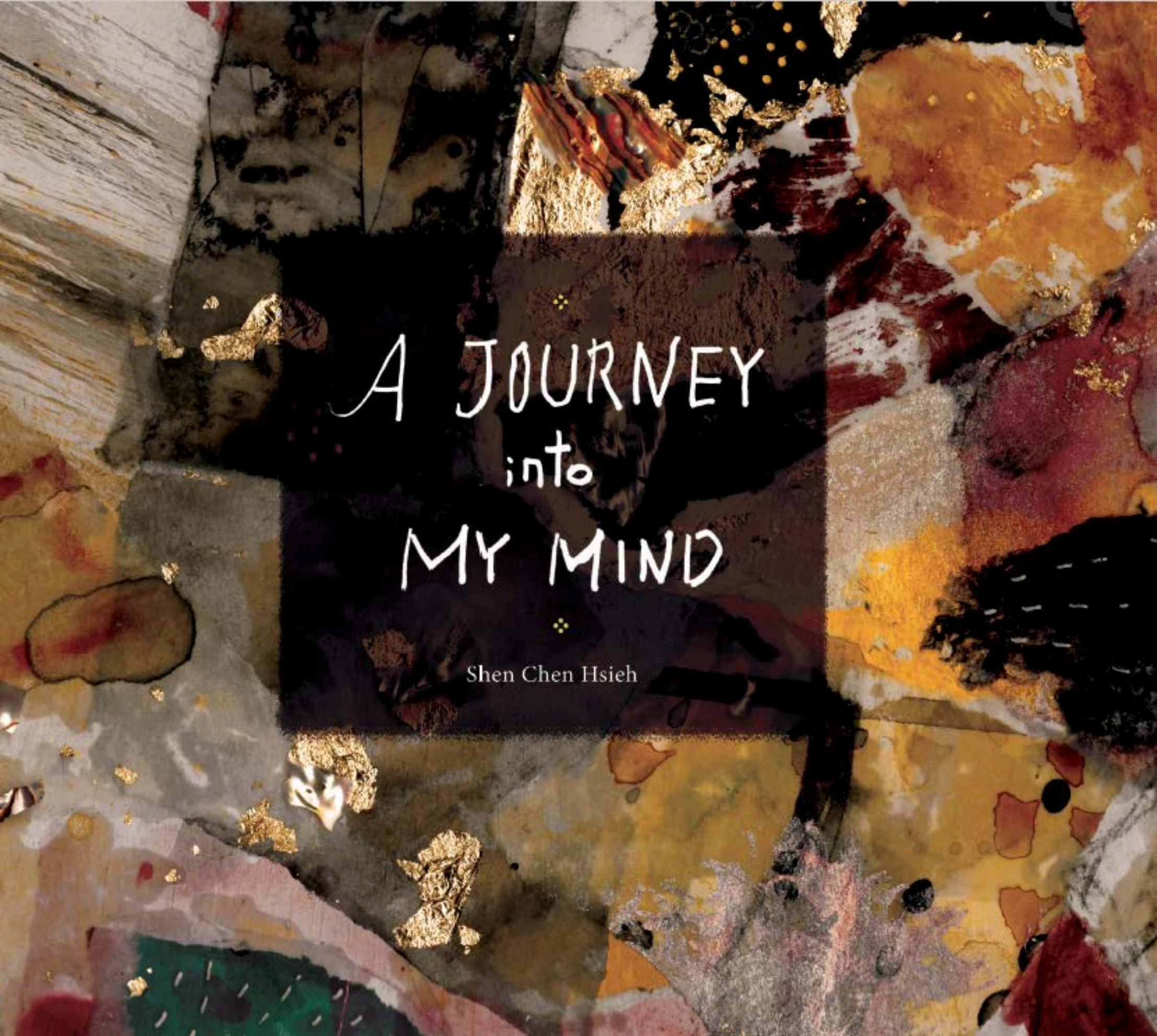
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A JOURNEY
into
MY MIND

Shen Chen Hsieh

A JOURNEY INTO MY MIND



A JOURNEY INTO MY MIND

SHEN CHEN HSIEH

Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri
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Missouri State University
Art & Design Department
901 South National Avenue
Springfield, Missouri 65897
artanddesign@missouristate.edu
art.missouristate.edu

publications
Design & Image: Shen Chen Hsieh
Photographs: Neal Polallis
<http://www.shenchenhsieh.com>

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A JOURNEY INTO MY MIND

Art and Design Department

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Fine Arts

Shen Chen Hsieh

abstract : During my time as a student in the MFA in Visual Study Program, I have been interested in creating imagery that expresses my inner world that is based on my emotional experience. I believe my identity is influenced by my multi-cultural background, relationships, daily moments and my own introverted personality. I continue to experiment with various mediums and visual styles to communicate these feelings. Drawing, silk-screen printing, mixed media, and three-dimensional sculpture are the main mediums in my artwork. Exploring diverse mediums provides me opportunities to develop my self exploration in my images. I seek to express and understand the conscious and subconscious of myself through my creations and ultimately communicate this with others.

KEYWORDS: Self-portrait, face, masks, expression, collage, mixed media, illustration, identity, multi-cultural.

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Sharon Harper, MFA.
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

A JOURNEY INTO MY MIND

By

Shen Chen Hsieh

A Master's Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Studies

May 2019


The written thesis will serve to document the work within the thesis exhibition and to provide a narrative description of the work's development and theoretical framework, including influences, and its significance within the discipline(s). This document should include substantial visual documentation appropriate to the media.

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DEDICATION

Thanks to Chih Yuan Hsieh Sun for all your support
and to Sharon Harper for all your helpful advice.

The image features a dark, textured background with a vertical dashed line running through the center. A cluster of small, light-colored flowers with dark centers is positioned on the left side. The word "INTRODUCTION" is centered horizontally and vertically, with a small yellow diamond-shaped icon above and below it.

INTRODUCTION

❖ As I began the MFA in Visual Studies program, my mind was full of complicated feelings about going forward on this new artistic path in my life. When I was a kid, I had a habit of doodling daily to pull out my feelings. I based my idea of creation on this childhood memory. I put all of these complicated feelings into my images to develop a visual language that can describe my thoughts, while observing my evolution of self-identity in my creation. The goal from my visual study is not only researching my self-identity, but also experimenting with various materials and seeking to understand how they affect my visual narrative. I use my illustration on papers, explore collage work, silk-screen printing, daily sketches, and develop three-dimensional sculpture to exam how art can speak about myself. Each medium is inspired by different artists and offers me a new way to express my complicated feelings through images. The mask/face/head, female character, pose, facial expressions and hair are the main characteristics of my personal iconography in my current creation. These icons demonstrate my inner thoughts, such as fear, confusion, anxiety, depression, disappointment, judgment, guilt, desire, hardship, obsession, and struggle that I carried in my daily life. Through my graduate school journey, I continue to develop the art that helps me to observe my conscious thoughts and subconscious mind, and learn how to accept myself as I am. Now, creating artwork has become a mirror to reflect my inner character. It is a guidebook to identify myself and share my feelings to the world through my own visual language to communicate with people. This body of work reveals the influence of my personal background, cultural and visual inspirations, as well as my personality.



Childhood Memory, 2016. Pen and Ink. 18"x24".

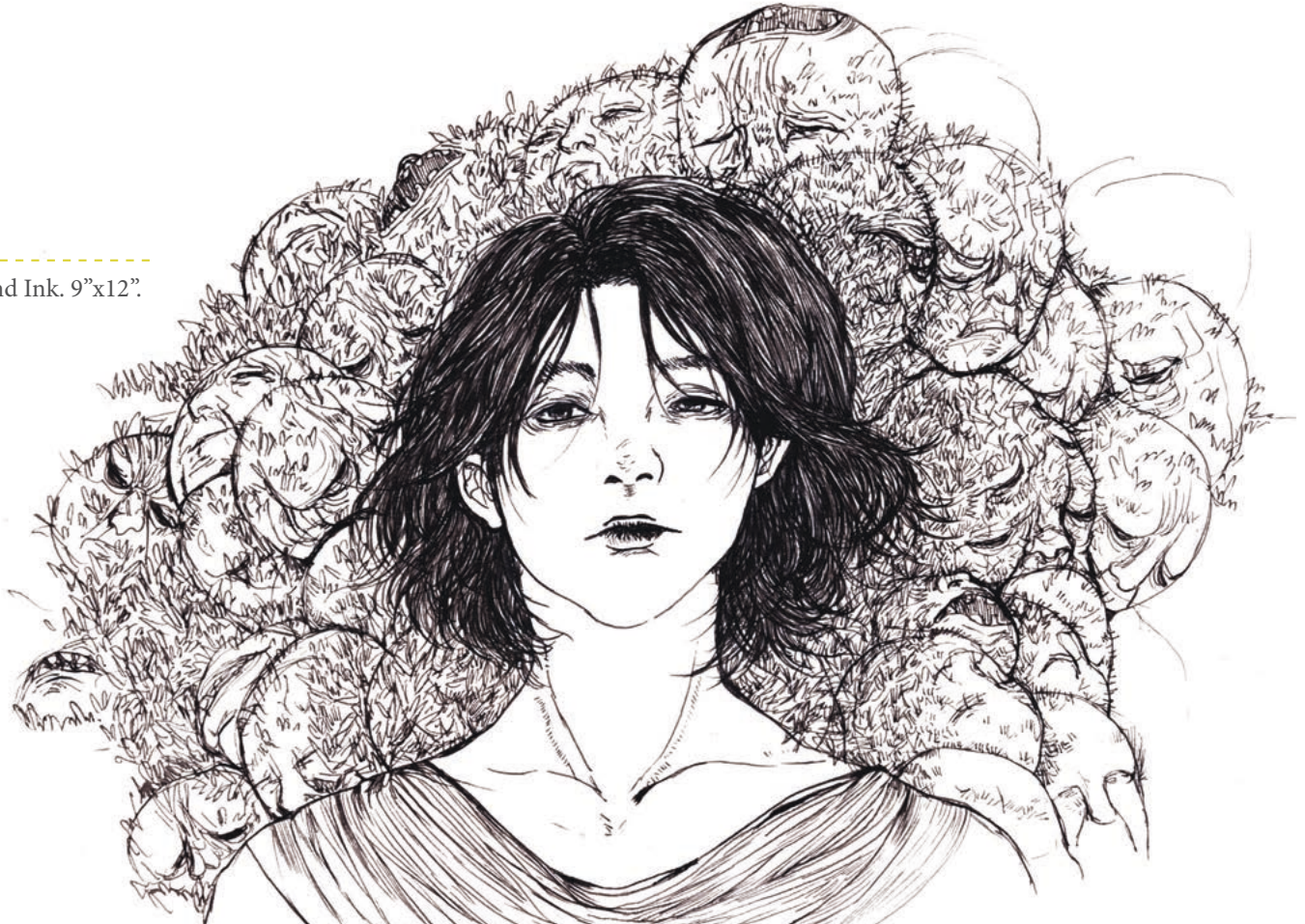




CULTURAL INFLUENCE

- ❖ My confusion with self-identity and struggle in self-determination has been influenced by the different cultures I am a part of. I was born as a Chinese immigrant living in South Korea, and have Korean, Chinese and Japanese blood relationship in my family. My mother was born to a Chinese and Korean family, and my dad was born to a Chinese and Japanese family. Both my parents were born in South Korea as a Huáqiáo (華僑). In Asian countries, Huáqiáo is a label which describe Chinese people who live in other countries. I am a third generation of this Huáqiáo immigrant family born in South Korea

Untitled, 2017. Pen and Ink. 9"x12".





Left *Feeling Heavy*, 2016. Screenprint. 19"x27".

Right: *Early Anxiety*, 2016. Lithograph. 9"x12".

and I was required to go to an overseas Chinese school, which is managed by the Taiwan government since I was a kid.

When I was a teenager, I continued to feel like I was not connected to China, even though I was taught it was my true home country. We, as Chinese students, were required to stand outside of the school every morning, sing a patriotic song that praised the Republic of China's president, and watch the flag raise up to the top of the school. It was my very first ironic and confusing moment about my identity because I could not feel any patriotic connection to that flag.

This complicated multicultural background has continuously lead me to question my self-identity and where I belong or don't belong. I cannot get the sense of homogeneity with either South Korea, China or Taiwan. Presently, I still struggle with my sense of nationality in the U.S., which is the second place that I have lived for an extended time. When people ask me where I am from, I still feel it is difficult to explain. I always feel like a wanderer and an outsider from everywhere.

There is always a gap that separates me and others, a cultural boundary that makes me feel isolated from the community and society. I desire to belong to the community, but at the same time I feel more comfortable being alone. Self-portraits that I create in my conscious thought reflect conflicts between my real feelings. I want to make myself acceptable to the society but also feel exhausted and stressed have relationships where I feel I don't fit in. These personal experiences that cause my internal conflicts are the main content in my artwork. My cultural experiences are not as dominant in my current subject matter, but the complex feelings such as hardship, struggle, isolation, self-judgement, self-contradiction, self-objectification and confusion in my mind strongly influence my artwork.



Burden, 2016. Pen and Ink. 9"x12".





Untitled, 2016. Pen and Ink. 16.25"x23".





Babel, 2017. Mixed Media. 16"x20".





Father, 2016. Pen and Ink. 22"x28".





EARLY VISUAL INFLUENCE

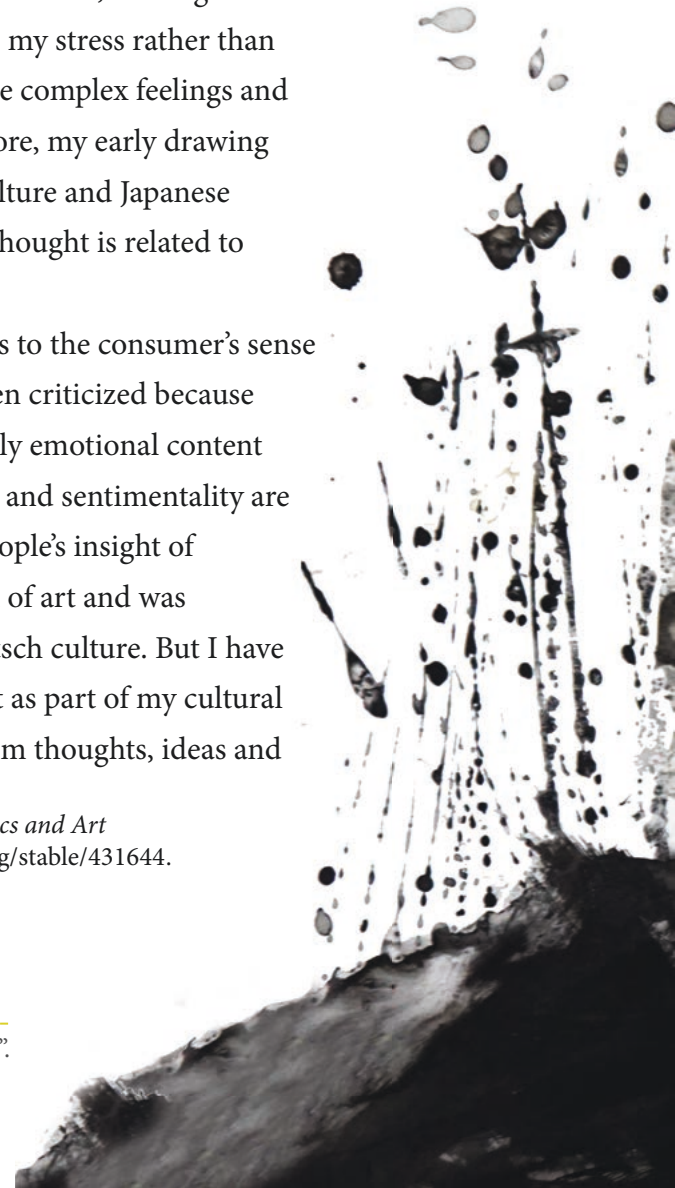
❖ I grew up with Japanese manga (comic) books in my hand and was interested in drawing my favorite characters. I also liked to draw my own imagined world rather than learn my home country history, language, or make friendships with others. To me, reading and drawing manga, or doodling cute characters was a way to release my stress rather than express what I think to the others. It was a way to escape from the complex feelings and confusion I felt in between both culture and relationship. Therefore, my early drawing style and emotional content connected to the Korean popular culture and Japanese manga culture that invoke the viewer's sweet emotions, which I thought is related to kitsch style.

In Western culture, the mass-produced content, which appeals to the consumer's sense of nostalgia or sentimentality is defined as kitsch.¹ Kitsch has been criticized because mass-produced products “appear cheap and tend to deal with only emotional content rather than aesthetics and ethics.” according to Solomon.² Kitsch and sentimentality are considered by most to be false or phony emotion that distorts people's insight of rational thought.³ Initially, I considered kitsch to be a lower form of art and was concerned that my style was too related to Japanese manga or kitsch culture. But I have found my early connection to this art is important and I accept it as part of my cultural identity. I started to sketch and doodle about my daily life, random thoughts, ideas and

1. Solomon, Robert C. “On Kitsch and Sentimentality.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 1 (1991): 4. Accessed February, 18, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/431644>.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 11.







The Struggle On The Inside, 2016. Pen and Ink. 9”x12”.

experiments in my studio to release my stress. This studio practice helped me re-examine my personal experiences and inner thoughts. I have been investigating how my style relates to other contemporary artists who use their visual kitsch culture and make it their own. Such artists include Takashi Murakami and Mark Ryden.

Takashi Murakami is a Japanese contemporary artist who is associated with the Japanese Pop art movement. Japanese comic—manga—culture has been defined as low art in Japanese culture. Murakami blended this lowbrow art with Japanese traditional fine art to create his own characteristic art style.⁴ Murakami’s work inspired me to research how I can blend my early

4. Darling, Michael. “Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness.” *Art Journal* 60, no. 3 (2001): 77. Accessed March, 2, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778139>.

manga drawing style with collage to develop the visual characteristics in my creation.

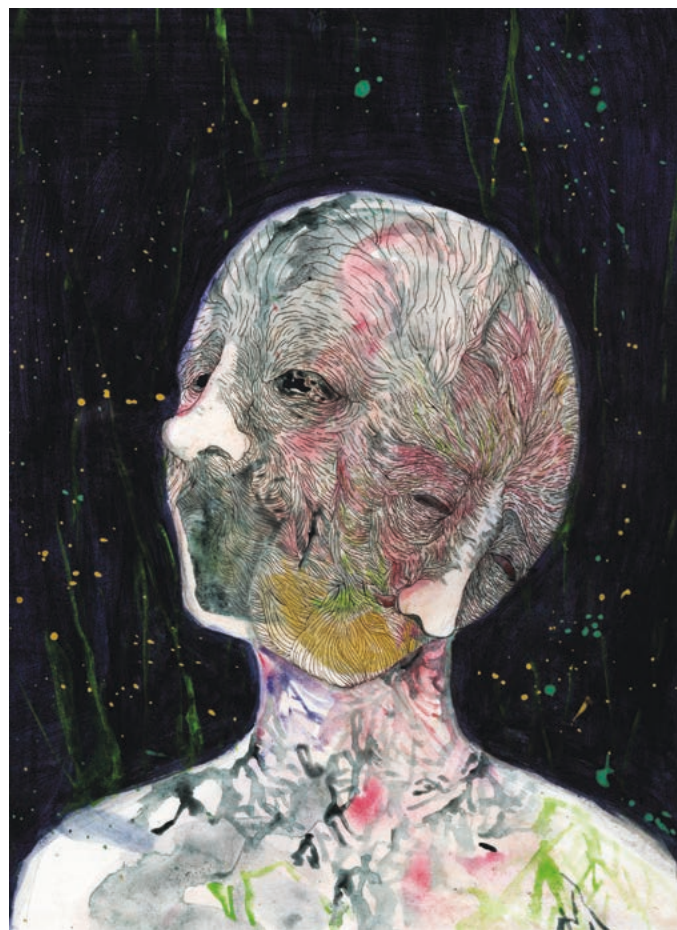
Mark Ryden is a contemporary artist who I was also inspired by. He combines low brow art with traditional master paintings to create a style which has been labelled Pop Surrealism.⁵ Most of his paintings illustrate female characters with strange themes. His mysterious figures and surreal painting style motivated me to create images that can tell the story of my narrative theme which revolves around struggles and confusion in self-identity.

My imaginative drawing consistently exhibit a female character with a giant head and small body in uncomfortable poses, sitting alone in an unknown environment. I made these personal iconographies to illustrate how I feel about myself. All these girl characters are avatars that illustrate my inner character. The body is small and childish while the mouth is little and closed, making it look like she is not able to speak. This unusual look in my characters is about the mental struggle that causes me to feel heaviness, confusion, loss, worry and alienation. Sometimes the character has a perfect bob hair cut style that reminds me of my junior high school years, but I also drew long hair that covers the face. My obsession in the contour line drawing of hair illustrates a sense of weight that I always carry as a female. The environment around the character represents the complex feelings of both isolation and the safety of being alone. Often my characters have multiple pupils, or the pupils are facing different directions. That symbolizes the self-conflict and contradictions I feel in my everyday life.

5. Pricco, Evan, and Mark Ryden. "Mark Ryden." *Juxtapoz Magazine*, no. 161 (2014): 50.



Futility, 2017. Mixed Media. 16"x20"



Self Conflicts, 2017. Mixed Media. 16"x20"



Camouflage, 2017. Mixed Media. 16"x20".



Untitled, 2018. Mixed Media. 16"x13". • 23 •





Untitled, 2018. Mixed Media. 23"x29.5".



Exhausted, 2018. Screenprint and Collage. 23.25”x23.25”.



DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION
IN MIXED MEDIA WORK

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Among to the Rubble, 2018. Mixed Media. 12"x12".

❖ To indicate the feelings of isolation and being lost in a complex inner world, I illustrate my girl using pattern, dots, and linear drawing that flow around her within the intricate collaged environment. The idea of this image came from Yayoi Kusama, who is a Japanese artist that creates numerous polka dots that applied to environments and figures. This illustrates Kusama's own hallucinatory illusion that causes her extreme anxiousness.⁶ This approach is also a metaphor for expressing an infinite universe, timelessness, and provides a way for her to lose her identity.⁷ Kusama's *Self Obliteration* inspired me to explore this collage drawing method in my illustration series that expresses my intense emotion.

I collected the works that I disliked, deconstructed them and recomposed them into a new image. These collective old works became a singular background—like atmosphere with various colors and textures. It makes me feel like I reassembled my fragile thoughts, taking the weakest part of me into one image and reconstructing myself. Monochromatic color on my figure emerges and blends together with this complicated background, so both chaotic textured layers blend together to illustrate the internal-conflicts I feel.

This mixed media approach also evolved in my work with multiple layers of resin which is a transparent medium. I create several layers with paper textures, resin, marks and patterns. The multiple layers and figure's transparency successfully blend

6. Turner, Grady, and Yayoi Kusama. "Yayoi Kusama." *BOMB*, no. 66 (1999): 65. Accessed February, 10, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40425916>.

7. *Ibid.*, 66.

with the environment and help to deliver the feeling of being lost in self-identity. Also, the suspension of each layer with textures, drawing and patterns around the girl figure illustrates feeling stuck, helpless, abandoned, and exhausted trying to overcome these feelings. For example, the multiple layers of resin with different textures, patterns, dots, and line drawing flow around the figure to show she is stuck in her feelings.



Untitled, 2018. Mixed Media. 28"x28.5".

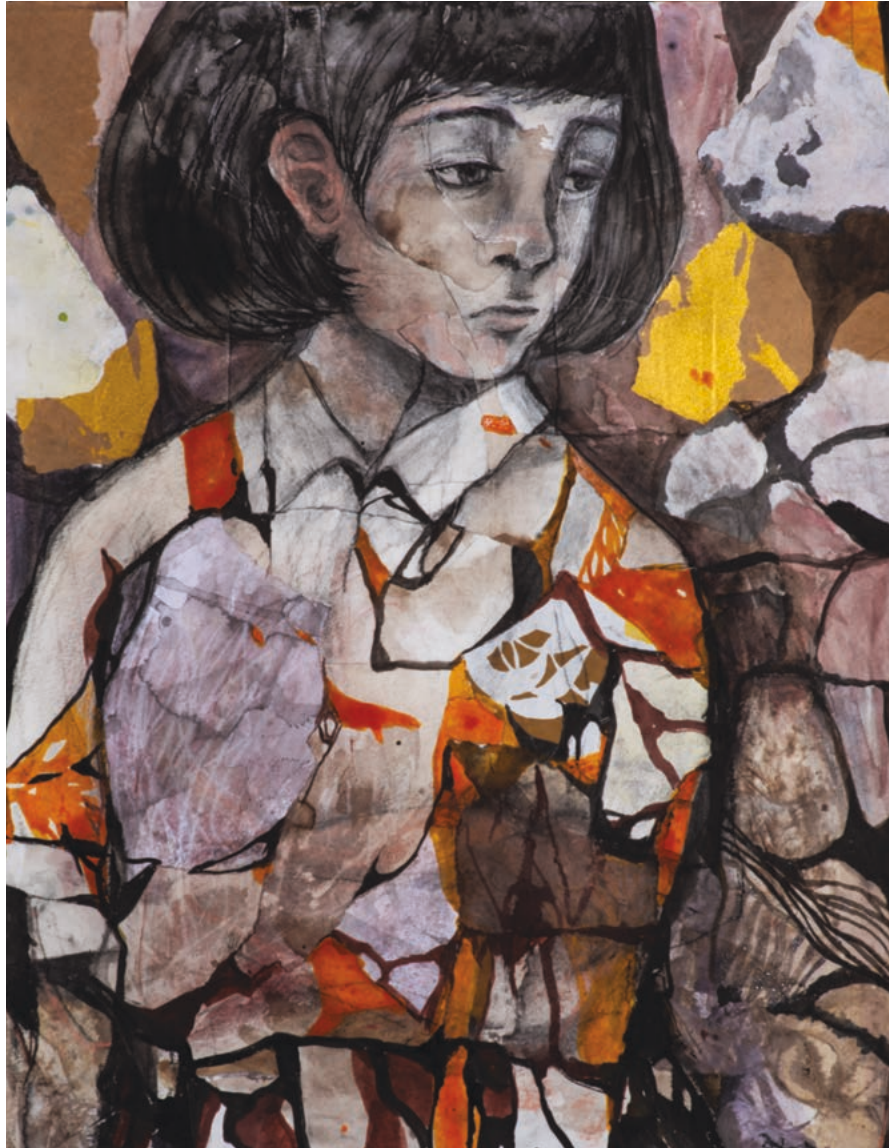


Untitled, 2018. Mixed Media. 13.5"x13.75".



Untitled, 2018. Mixed Media. 22"x22".





High School Memory, 2018. Mixed Media. 16.75"x22".



Walking on Eggshells, 2018. Mixed Media. 21.75"x18".



Melancholy, 2018. Mixed Media. 14.5"x16.75".



Being a Good Girl, 2019. Mixed Media. 47.25" x 48".



Walking on Eggshells, 2019. Mixed Media. 47."x46.5".



Thought & Emotion, 2019. Mixed Media. 28.75"x28.75".



Being a Good Girl, 2019. Mixed Media. 27.5"x25.5".



Abyss, 2019. Mixed Media. 11.25"x11.25".



Among to the Rubble, 2019. Mixed Media. 12.25" x 13.25".



Deep Into My Mind, 2018. Mixed Media. 17.25" x 12.75".



Being a Good Girl, 2019. Mixed Media. 20.5"x20.5".



MASKS/HEADS/FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

My early facial expression mask drawings began with the inspiration of Japanese and Chinese theatre masks. I was interested in how the masks and certain ornamentation played a role in representing individual personality. I wanted to see how my mother countries have similarities or differences in their cultures. Generally and historically, masks are used to conceal people's real identity and they are used in ceremonies or performances in global culture. In China, Japan, and Korea, traditional masks have different ornaments and colors to express the personality of the specific character or gender. For example, opera masks in Beijing, China are made with color to portray a role. Red represents loyalty and bravery, while black symbolizes uprightness. Similarly, James McCormick's "Japan: The Mask and the Mask-Like Face." demonstrates how Japanese Kabuki masks also use colors and facial expression to exhibit the specific role of the character.⁸ McCormick introduces three types of traditional mask play and puppets in Japan: noh, bunraku, and kabuki.⁹ The Japanese culture and social system developed the 'face' as an art object and uses different elements of the face mask to express their inner statement or spirituality.¹⁰

My masks/face color and texture are about expression and communication because my intention with masks/faces is not to conceal the identity but to confess my real feelings. Rather than Asian cultural iconic colors such as red, black, white and ornaments, I use sumi-ink and charcoal to give me a chance to express my struggles and confusion

8. McCormick, James P. "Japan: The Mask and the Mask-Like Face." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 2 (1956): 200. Accessed March, 5, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/427875>.

9. Ibid., 200.

10. Ibid., 204.



Top: *Self-Reflective Mask/Face series*, 2016. Charcoal, Pen and Ink. 24"x36".

Bottom: *Self-Reflective Mask/Face series*, 2017. Charcoal, Pen and Ink. 22"x30".



Self-Reflective Mask/Face series, 2017. Charcoal, Pen and Ink. 22”x30”.

through every stroke, gestural mark, texture, and facial expression to show my personality in art.

While I explore various materials in the creation process, my images have become more abstract and colorful with the use of texture. Instead of making representative facial expressions in this practice, I let mediums and serendipity speak in this process. Using the ink medium and reassembling torn papers gave me a new opportunity to see how each collaged piece starkly juxtaposes colors and texture, and how each individual element can assert itself in a distinct way. I also rearranged them with line marks and drawing components to describe my desire for a sense of belonging. This self-reflective series continues my self-identity research, and my experimentation with materials helps my ideas come to fruition.



Self-Reflective Mask/Face series, 2018. Mixed Media. 19"x19".



Self-Reflective Mask/Face series, 2018. Mixed Media. 19"x19".





Mask/Face series, 2018. Wool and Foam. 20"x20"x20".

My head sculptures are a continuation of my mask series. I used the massive head and exaggerated facial expression to symbolize my confused feelings that are not able to be explained by a single word or vocabulary in Western culture. I decided to use my own visual language to describe my feelings through my sculpture of giant a head. The idea of the giant head and exaggerated facial expressions are influenced by the artist Paolo Del Toro. Del Toro is an artist who uses wool and felting materials to make his gigantic masks. These massive mask characters are mainly developed from his own dream imagination.¹¹

Unlike Del Toro, my giant heads are not characters that come from dream imagination. All masks are representing my inner character. I rely on my imagination of myself, mixed

11. Ohanesian, Liz. "Paolo Del Toro." *Hi-Fructose The New Contemporary Art Magazine* 44 (2017): 30.

with the manga illustrative style, to create facial expressions. I like how the scale of the mask and facial expression can communicate with the viewers, rather than my real face which cannot explain the internal uneasiness I feel. I started to develop my own facial expression masks that can become an emotional icon to represent myself to the viewers. I intentionally emphasized my negative feelings in my mask's facial expressions, such as exhaustion and anxiousness. These are contradictory thoughts that have been hidden inside of my mind.



Left: *Mask/Face series*, 2018. Wool and Foam. 31”x22”x26”.

Right: *Camouflage*, 2019. Wool and Foam. 17”x16”x6”.



The image features a dark, textured background with a vertical dashed line running down the center. The background has a mottled appearance with various shades of brown and black, and is scattered with numerous small, light-colored specks and spots. The word "CONCLUSION" is centered horizontally and vertically, flanked by two small, decorative icons consisting of a grid of dots.

CONCLUSION

- ❖ As I have explored various mediums and the expressions of my thought through art, I have realized that I am interested in creating artworks about myself. I began pursuing this field to create illustration that influence people. But through the creative process, I have unexpectedly altered my research to focus on self-reflection and I have learned to communicate with myself through the image. I do not clearly know the meaning in my life, or who I really am, but I work to find my identity. However, there is always a sense of vanity or futility in another part of my mind. I am continuing to connect to my core through my art practice which helps me define the meaning in my life. Creating artworks has become a way to represent myself to the world. Although my work is derived from my personal background, I believe everyone has their own struggles that include struggles, anxiety, hardship, and self-judgment that can draw on to my art. The objective of my work is not only to express my own imagination of identity and mental condition, but also invite viewers to reflect on themselves and visualize their inner world.

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