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Painting as a Vehicle for Identity Formation and Survival

by

Chunbum Park

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Fine Arts Studio

School of Art
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Thesis Approval

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Abstract

Through the thesis, I produce a highly rigorous body of works and explore the theoretical and philosophical reasons behind my paintings. I explore why I repeatedly paint myself as a woman and why the symbols of tigers, frogs, Frankenstein, and other aspects of Northeast Asian and Korean culture and heritage appear in my paintings.

I find that painting is a process by which I can reflect on my own identity as a Korean who alternates between masculine and feminine identities. Painting allows me to react against the problems threatening my identity such as the worldwide trend of the racialization of beauty and racism which I encountered in my youth in the US. It is also a coping mechanism to survive my “mental illness” (which is in quotation marks because I do not believe that I have it), which would otherwise destroy me due to the pain and anger that it causes.

I explore texts by various authors such as Judith Butler (on gender fluidity and performativity), Shirley Anne Tate (on racialization of beauty, anti-racist aesthetics, performativity of beauty, and hybrid beauty), Sigmund Freud (on the theory of sexuality and the concept of sublimation), and Hans Prinzhorn (on the art of the mentally ill).

The result of the thesis is a comprehensive account of my art that explains where it is ideologically positioned in terms of the political, social, cultural, and personal. It is also an assessment and a self-reflection of how and why I arrived at where I am in today. Through the thesis, I also wish to make the case that my art and I are of good nature, and to ask for reconciliation with and forgiveness from the friends from the past who left me.

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Vita

My name is Chunbum Park, also known as Chun. I was born in 1991 in Seoul, South Korea, and I spent most of my childhood in Mokpo before I came to live and study in the United States with my mother in 2000.

I struggled against racism and bullying in high school, which severely debilitated me in my youth and caused social isolation, depression, and anger problems. I faced constant ridicule and ostracization by my classmates, who were mostly white. For example, on one of the school trips, a black chef at a restaurant could see that I was distraught and called me a “brother” to commiserate with my sufferings. To cope with the trauma of being hated and ridiculed, I would make extreme and violent threats against my classmates and the society at large inside my head and type them out onto Google search.

Eventually, I was diagnosed with a “mental condition” that would require lifelong treatment by my doctors. In addition, I would lose my best friend from Rhode Island School of Design (where I majored in Painting), who would suddenly stop communicating with me. I would also find that several other friends would ghost me.

These are the troubles and pains that I had to endure at the University of Rochester in 2010 and RISD in 2011. However, despite paranoia, anger, and sadness, I obtained my BFA from the School of Visual Arts in 2020. After that, I began pursuing my MFA at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

I decided to become an artist when I was at U of R because I felt at the time that I was mediocre in everything except drawing and painting. I took beginner and advanced painting classes with Collette Watts and Heather Layton, respectively, and I made some of the best works during that time. To me, painting seemed to communicate something beautiful and profound

about our human experience and perception, and I wanted to partake in the tradition and dialogue. Furthermore, I wanted to leave something behind that is worthy and significant, to communicate with the future generations, just like Vincent van Gogh. Figuration was simultaneously the most challenging yet rewarding for me because I loved people and friends (although this sense of excitement and appreciation was not always reciprocated). Capturing their essence required not only the analytical mind toward the anatomy but also the intuition with form, color, abstraction, and expression.

I have been told that when I was conceived and when I was born, my father dreamed of me appearing as a Korean tiger. In the first dream, my father was set to eat a lofty dinner in his Seoul apartment when he suddenly realized that a tiger was sitting next to him. My father grabbed the tiger's shoulders to wrestle with it, but the tiger shook him off instantly and bit his hand, causing it to bleed. Then as my father watched in awe, the tiger proceeded to eat all the meal, which included a fish (I am also a Pisces in the Greek Zodiac). In the second dream, my father was hiking on a mountain trail and saw a large, beautiful rock dividing the trail. A boy with a tiger's head jumped out from behind the large rock and smiled, revealing its human teeth. The tiger-headed boy and my father spent the rest of their encounter running around joyfully and playing in the mountains.

Between episodes of anger and frustration, I have moments of clarity and sensations of beauty, in which I capture the beautiful female bodies that I desire to become in my paintings. I am certain that these are dual opposite sides of my being – the powerful tiger and the shy but beautiful sheep (as I was born in the year of the sheep).

In retrospect, pursuing art allows me to survive because my otherwise violent and self-destructive energies of my “mental illness” are consumed by creative and peaceful outlets of

expression.

Nevertheless, this transformation would not be possible without the gift of love that my parents availed me. My mother sacrificed her career as a doctor in South Korea to become a stay-at-home mother (to ensure that my brother and I did not play video games all day). She gave us the best education and the chance to pursue the American Dream (working hard to earn financial success and happiness). My father has also had difficulties being separated from his family for many years. Nevertheless, he has led an exemplary life as a lawyer (although he is no longer practicing law now).

I want to thank my Chief Thesis Advisor, Professor Luvon Sheppard, who has been the most nurturing and wise shepherd to me (as I am a sheep in the Chinese zodiac). Professor Luvon has encouraged me to be concerned with the spiritual because our existence is more profound than we realize. I sincerely thank my Thesis Advisor and Professor Emily Glass for her sharp insights into my painting and her clear guidance concerning the overall direction of my work and the logistics of writing a thesis. I am also very thankful to the Thesis Advisor and Professor Clarence Sheffield for supporting me in times of doubt and inspiring me with his intellectual side and depth of knowledge.

Lastly, I want to thank the Universe and God, Allah, or Buddha for giving me a second chance and a second life, despite my numerous failures. When doors closed, a door opened.

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Introduction

The thesis consists of some of the best paintings that I have ever produced up to this point in my life and an earnest scholarly exploration of the ideas that drive my paintings. I believe that I am trying to see and depict myself as a woman through the act of painting, in which faces resembling my own manifest themselves in the female figures. I believe that, through painting, I am trying to discover an idealized version of myself as a Northeast Asian beauty in defiance of the racialization of beauty that presents white beauty as iconic (Tate 60-66). (I focus on Northeast Asian beauty specifically rather than East Asian or South Asian beauty because the people and cultures are so dramatically different between the various regions of Asia, which is the largest continent. Northeast Asia, which includes China, Korea, and Japan, has a shared history due to cultural and historical exchanges and interactions and the movement of people. The common ancestor of Han Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans dated 3000 – 3600 years ago (Xu).)

Ever since I was young, I secretly desired to assume a female identity at times, although the highly patriarchal and traditional nature of South Korea and the American South prohibited me from learning that this dual persona could be a possibility for me. Outward, I projected an image of a tough boy who did not have an interest in girls or femininity, although inward all of that was a lie. I recollect the times when I was a little boy and drew a Japanese female anime character whom I felt attracted to and whom I wanted to become, only to rip it apart and throw it away in the trash can for fear of being found out.

I was uncomfortable with the appearance of the male sexual apparatus, but I was enchanted by the beauty of a female body. I was astounded by the immense beauty of the Greek

statue of the Aphrodite. I pretended to be content being a boy and striving for a masculine image, but I was deceiving myself.

In my young adulthood, upon deciding to become an artist, I found myself repeatedly painting women. At first, they were mostly white women (– most likely because my taste in beauty was “racialized” towards whiteness – the term ‘racialization’ will be explained below). But eventually there came a time when the women began to look more Asian and resemble me in terms of the facial feature.

It was only through an honest personal investigation that I found out that the reason why I repeatedly painted women was not because I was exercising the male gaze, but because I had a desire to become a woman myself. (As discussed by Laura Mulvey, the male gaze is the process of looking at females by the spectator through the masculine, heterosexual viewpoint. It often “objectifies” women or sees them as objects (Mackenzie 533).) I desired to become or see myself as a woman because I found femininity beautiful, and beauty was something inherently good and important to me. In this sense, my work is similar to the works of Yasumasa Morimura. The Japanese artist subverts the male gaze through his depiction of women throughout the canon of Western art in his performative photographs (“Yasumasa Morimura”). (Moreover, beauty is a sign to me that the universe is an aesthetically concerned place and that it and our existence in it matter. Beauty soothes the beast from its proclivities for domination, power, and violence. It reminds us that the world should be more nuanced and equal.) In retrospect, perhaps I am not desiring to literally become a trans woman by undergoing surgery (I am afraid of big surgeries), but I become content with performing the feminine role by occasionally wearing women’s clothes and makeup, as well as depicting myself as a woman through painting.

Painting is a very demanding but also highly rewarding medium of art that allows me to express myself to my fullest potential. Through my art, I play with color, form, and content to investigate my own identity. By providing a peaceful and creative outlet, painting helps me survive despite the anger and frustrations stemming from my “mental illness.” Painting also allows me to communicate with the viewer through the shared experience of seeing the painting. And, through the thesis, I hope to communicate with past friends who ghosted me that I am of inherently good nature and I deserve reconciliation and forgiveness.

Body of Document - Section I: Context – Judith Butler

Judith Butler's theory on gender fluidity and performativity are essential pillars to my artistic practice. Butler argues that sex and gender are both "cooked" (meaning "culturally constructed") and the same (Butler 9-10).

Although Butler argues that gender does not rely on a core of identity and free will but rather is a "relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (Butler 14), I believe that gender is in fact a negotiation of those two forces (which are the core of identity, and the cultural and historical relations). This is because I perceive within myself a natural inclination or proclivity to desire to see myself as a woman (because I desire to become beautiful, and I perceive women as beautiful) that is separate from my experiences and upbringing as a Korean boy that should have solidified my identity as a heterosexual male (but ultimately failed to do so).

According to Butler, gender "proves to be performative" because it is neither a noun (woman) nor adjectives (feminine) but rather doing by a subject that does not exist prior to the act of doing (Butler 34). Butler argues that gender is neither a noun nor an adjective because the production of gender is "fictive" (- meaning that a man can be feminine and a woman can be masculine) and "resist assimilation into the ready-made framework of primary nouns and subordinate adjectives" (Butler 33).

But going back to my own perception and observation that gender is negotiated between the core of identity and the cultural and historical relations (rather than being purely the latter and excluding the former), I argue against Butler, that gender simultaneously comprises a

subject, adjective(s), verb(s), and object(s) (like a sentence structure). There is the doing but there is also a subject that is prior to the doing, even though the subject is in constant flux – being changed by the doing as much as it changes the doing. The subject exists. It chooses the doing (even though the choice is the result of a compromise between free will and the deterministic forces of the universe; both forces exist simultaneously in the world in different dimensions or levels). Without the subject, there cannot be choice made that leads to the doing. And the evidence for the subject is my own consciousness or soul, which validates to myself that I exist, and I desire to see myself as a woman. The subject precipitates the rest of the performance or the sentence. The subject leads to the adjectives, verbs, and objects. [EG1]

Studying Butler's ideas allows me to perform the role of femininity within the realm of painting by repeatedly depicting myself as a female, yet I formulate my own idea about gender and performance – that the social forces can influence my desire to see myself as a woman, but my intrinsic desire can also shape how the social forces impact me and how I shape the social forces myself through art and/or activism.

The realization that gender is a sentence structure where both the subject and the doing are equally important defends the idea of free will and core of identity, which are important to me because I feel, perceive, and observe their substance and existence in reality. Without a free will and core of identity, we are susceptible to dehumanization because we are reduced to mechanical roles of a deterministic physics. I believe that the nature of the universe and human consciousness are mysterious, spiritual, and divine. The fundamental nature of the universe is quantum, and it cannot be explained by classical physics or deterministic logic.

Body of Document - Section I: Context – Shirley Anne Tate

Shirley Anne Tate's ideas on racialization of beauty, anti-racist aesthetics, and hybrid beauty are based on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which is applied to the context of beauty. Racialization of beauty, driven by racism and white supremacy in a Eurocentric world (that was brought into place by slavery, colonialism, and post-colonialism by the Western powers), turns the issue of beauty into an issue of race, where being white is a prerequisite to becoming beautiful and pressures non-white people into pursuing a whiter form of beauty (Tate 19, 60-66, Chen 1-11).

The problems that result in society include excessive reliance on skin lightening and plastic surgery to obtain a whiter look such as narrower and taller nose and double eyelids among Northeast Asians (Baer, Stone, Youn).

It is true that anti-racist aesthetics initially dealt with the black experience and was a form of resistance (Taylor 19, Tate 39). However, I believe that non-whites can utilize anti-racist aesthetics in the Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color (BIPOC) contexts and experiences to resist the dominance of the racist aesthetics and white beauty standards.

In Japanese anime, Northeast Asian characters exhibit phenomes that are closer to white. Anime, which is short for "animation" and originates from Japan with manga as its printed comic book equivalent, began in the 1960s with the production of animated works based on modern manga (manga has a tradition that goes back centuries and looked entirely different from the modern style in its inception) by Osamu Tezuka (Encyclopedia Britannica). Although some people argue that Japanese anime characters do not look white but, rather, we assume that they

look white because of our own inherent bias, I would argue otherwise. The litmus tests can be found in various anime and manga series, such as *Hating the Korean Wave*, which show the “inferior” Korean characters as looking more Asian and “superior” Japanese characters as looking whiter. The only conclusion is that the appearance of anime characters is not an “abstraction” towards a non-specific idealization but a specific stylization towards whiteness, in which being white is the ideal.

By applying performativity to beauty and arguing beauty is performative like gender, Tate comes up with the idea of a hybrid beauty, in which people borrow from outside their culture and engage in repeated performance of various stylization and beauty practices to form a hybrid identity (Tate 6, 129-130). According to Tate, there is no such a thing as original beauty prior to racialization, as anti-racist aesthetics seeks to find – because people constantly borrow from one another, and the “original” is in fact a copy of a copy (Tate 129-130). To arrive at this view, Tate looks at the practices and concepts such as *Browning*, which describes light-skinned women of African or mixed descent, and which originated from Jamaica (Tate 118-119), and white women’s use of tanning and cane rows, both of which originated or were inspired by the black beauty aesthetics and stylizations (Tate 5).

I feel that the idea of hybrid beauty should primarily be applied to the people of mixed races who can claim ties to both western and non-western identities. If applied too broadly, the concept of the hybrid beauty may allow non-white people to abandon their traditional stylizations and aesthetics in favor of whiteness or a western identity. There is also the danger that white people may steal the unique characteristics and practices of non-white people and naturalize them as their own through a distorted interpretation of the term.

As a Korean, the concept of the original beauty (prior to racialization) is more important and agreeable to me because the struggles by Northeast Asians and the oppression (or the denial of equal opportunity and/or evaluation) by the western culture and its ideals are still ever-present.

Body of Document - Section I: Context – Cho Kyo

To search for the original Northeast Asian beauty, I turn to the writings of Cho Kyo, a Japanese scholar who searched the ancient texts from China and Japan.

The Chinese phrases “mingmou hao qi” (lucent irises, lustrous teeth), “emei” (moth-feeler eyebrows), and “liuyao” (willow waist) describe beauty with clear eyes, well-aligned white teeth, thin eyebrows with gentle arc, and slender waist (Chō Kyō 21). In ancient China and Japan, slim eyes were regarded as beautiful because “From the viewpoint of eroticism, half-closed eyes may be more attractive in a bedroom than glaring... [or large] eyes” (Chō Kyō 24). Pale skin was highly treasured, and women used white rice and lead makeup on their bodies, including the parts covered by clothing (Chō Kyō 31). Chinese beauties in ancient times were also shown as lacking breasts in paintings, and there was rarely the mentioning of ample breasts as a beauty feature in the historical texts throughout the millennia (Chō Kyō 28). In both China and Japan, the preference for moderately tall noses appeared before their contact with western people and culture (Chō Kyō 27).

We can also look back in history to find the original Korean beauty. For example, Shin Yun-bok (1758–1813 CE), also known as "Hyewon," painted the "Portrait of Beauty" (also known as "Miindo"), and Lee Quede (1913-1965 CE) painted the Korean people after liberation from the Japanese occupation in the 20th century.

Again, I am cautious in fully embracing the original definition of the Northeast Asian beauty because I don't want pale skin to become an important criteria. Yet I also feel highly

attracted to large breasts and desire them for myself (which may be seen as sexist and problematic).

An important thing to note is the struggle between the desire or the preference arising from an inner core (of my identity) and the social or cultural pressure of what is correct of the time that we are living in. I desire ample breasts in my depictions of female form because I desire female partners with such features, and also I desire those features for myself in my female form that I illustrate in my paintings or that I were to assume if I were to undergo surgery. This desire, of course, comes under attack from the social conventions which label such desire or preference as sexist and objectifying. Sometimes, however, people just prefer different things, such as big breasts, small breasts, lighter skin, or darker skin - no matter the social convention or what is socially acceptable or politically correct.

Upon finding the definition of the “original” Northeast Asian beauty, I am discontent and must find my own definition of my ideal beauty based in a fantasy, sexual desire, and aesthetic instinct. The inner core of my identity defines what is beautiful to me and what attracts me. I refuse to blindly follow an original or popular model of beauty but rather seek to define a formula of beauty that is both personal and universal in nature.

In retrospect, this personally defined ideal beauty highly resembles the definition of the hybrid beauty as I merge Northeast Asian faces on top of bodies influenced by westernized taste/racialization of beauty. In fact, I return to the model of the hybrid beauty in my paintings, even as I initially rejected the concept. In my state of my aesthetic taste and desire already racialized, this is a compromise that moves towards achieving the goals of the anti-racist aesthetics that aims to counter the racialization of beauty.

Body of Document - Section I: Context – Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud in his “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” published in 1905, studies human sexuality by exploring “psychopathology” (meaning ‘the scientific study of mental disorders’) because it “shows us in a magnified way the tendencies and problematics that we all have to deal with.” (Freud ix – x) Freud argued that perversion, which is “any form of sexual behavior which deviates from the norm of heterosexual genital intercourse” (No Subject – “Perversion”), is the inverse/opposite of neurosis, which is “mental disorder that causes a sense of distress and deficit in functioning...and... [is] characterized by anxiety, depression, or other feelings of unhappiness or distress that are out of proportion to the circumstances of a person’s life” (Britannica – “Neurosis”). Freud examines infantile sexuality, which he describes as “autoerotic” (meaning that it is without an external object and involving the self), in order to disprove the commonly held misconception that sexuality was absent in childhood and was purely designed for reproduction (“No Subject – “Auto-eroticism”).^[EG2]

According to Sigmund Freud, sexual desire and drive are the core building block of identity and behavior, and they have their origins in childhood, when the baby has sexual experiences from the beginning of its life when it suckles on the mother’s breast (Freud 42-45). Freud’s predecessors who examined human sexuality took the Darwinian position that sex was purely for reproductive purposes; other means or aims of sexuality were deemed abnormal (Freud xvi – xix). Freud, however, argued that the sexual drive was mostly a pursuit of pleasure, and it could be converted into creativity and artistic expression through a process called sublimation (Freud 39).

Freud's theory of the sexual drive is of strong importance to my work because my paintings often depict nude bodies and are sexual in nature. Furthermore, the concept of sublimation perfectly fits my situation with my art because I express my frustrations and dissatisfaction as a virgin at the American age of 31 in my art, which may contain a mixture of "efficiency, perversion, and neurosis" (Freud 87) (in my self-diagnosis, I may exhibit all three traits). According to Freud, suppression by reaction information, which means "[the psychological process by the individual to]... protect... [oneself] against threatening impulses by overemphasizing the opposite of one's actual thoughts and actions" (No Subject – "Reaction Formation"), is "a sub-species of sublimation" (Freud 87); this was true in my life when I pretended to dislike girls or have no interest in them as a young boy.

Is my desire to become a woman merely a symptom of perversion and neurosis (in which I enjoy dressing up in women's clothes yet feel unhappy more than I should be), or do I genuinely want to become a woman? This is a difficult question that needs careful consideration, but I have observed that I feel this "special" feeling or sensation of beauty and meaning whenever I depict myself or dress as a woman. I therefore conclude that I may have little bits of perversion and neurosis, but they coincide with my transgender or genderfluid desires.

Body of Document - Section I: Context – Hans Prinzhorn

Based on Gestalt psychology, which originated in Austria and Germany and emphasizes that “the whole of anything is greater than its parts... - that is, the attributes of the whole are not deducible from analysis of the parts in isolation” (“Gestalt Psychology”). Hans Prinzhorn discusses the art of the mentally ill with a focus on the concept of the “configuration,” which means “an arrangement of elements or components in a particular pattern or figure” (“Configuration”). A good configuration has “the quality of a shape or form that has high levels of simplicity, regularity, symmetry, or continuity” (“Goodness of Configuration”). According to Gestalt psychology, the principles of perception argue that humans tend to “perceive and interpret certain configurations at the level of the whole rather than in terms of their component features” (“Gestalt Principles of Organization”). By using the “‘normal’ configurative process” as a basis for evaluation and comparison, Prinzhorn hopes “to show strange traits within the confines of a configurative tendency... [and] show that psychological function as such is disturbed” (Prinzhorn 12).

According to Prinzhorn, “all expressive gestures [in art]... are subordinated to one purpose: to actualize the psyche and thereby to build a bridge from the self to others” (Prinzhorn 13). Each artist has an “expressive urge” to “escape into the expanse of common life from the restrictions of the individual and to objectify itself in concert with other people” (Prinzhorn 13). But the expressive urge has no means of being resolved because it is like an involuntary compulsion, and it has no purpose, unlike the other directed urges that are purposeful, like the need “to play or to imitate, or the sex drive” (Prinzhorn 14).

Because I am diagnosed with a mental illness, although I do not believe that I have it, my art could possibly be considered “mad art” or “pathologic art.” Both “stereotypy,” which is the repetition of the same motif several times, or “contamination,” which is the juxtaposition of a human body with an animal head and vice versa, have occurred in my art in the past. But upon closer examination, my art is mostly quite unlike the mad art that Hans Prinzhorn notes as being close to the works of children, primitives, and Cubist/Expressionist artists (Prinzhorn 4, 273). My work is more illustrational and concerned with ideal beauty. My art is more controlled and has much greater symmetry in the forms of the figures than the samples of the mad art exhibiting raw energy and emotions, as shown in Prinzhorn’s writing.

However, I still suffer from mental anguish and an occasional sense of hopelessness that the conspiratorial elements that I perceive as being the main cause of my suffering in my daily life will never be resolved. Perhaps the theme of the beauty and the beast (of a tiger or a bear) represents the two sides of my psyche, in which I seek to be liberated from the oppressive forces to pursue happiness on my own terms (this aspect would be the beauty) and threatens to use violent force against the antagonist if the oppression continues (this aspect would be the beast).

One mentally ill artist whom Prinzhorn discusses is Case 237, who makes an allegorical drawing with pencil, as illustrated in the book as Fig. 69 (Prinzhorn 89). I couldn’t help but find similarities between the artist’s idealized style and composition, and my own. There is something beautiful and controlled yet free about the figures, shapes, and the line quality on which the drawing style heavily relies on. It has a bit of Matisse-like quality, as well as the iconography of mythological and fantastical beasts and sceneries typical of the ancient art of Crete or Sumer in present-day Iraq.

Another mentally ill artist is Karl Brendel (Case 17), who is diagnosed with schizophrenia and admits to hearing voices and seeing hidden ghost, as well as making megalomaniac claims such as “I am Jesus Christ himself, I work for emperor and empire...” (Prinzhorn 97, 103). Although being stylistically very different from me and closer to Primitivism of Picasso’s African Period from 1907 to 1909, Brendel is engaged with imagery of two kinds of sexual objects – first are passive objects of young girls, children, and animals, and second is the “independent woman, appearing with a will of her own” (“African Period,” “Picasso's African-Influenced Period - 1907 to 1909,” Prinzhorn 116). Because Brendel believes that the woman gains power in her relationship with her male partner, which he disagrees with, he also comes up with a “hermaphroditic concept,” which combines femininity and masculinity into a single creature and liberates people from the power struggle that is found in sexual relationships (Prinzhorn 117).

There is a strong similarity between my dual identity as the tiger and the Northeast Asian beauty and the “hermaphroditic concept” of Brendel, which also contains both feminine and masculine aspects. As Prinzhorn hypothesizes, the mental condition of the person may affect the creativity and the artistic output of the person. In Prinzhorn’s own words: “will a thorough psychological analysis prove these conditions – the artistic, inspirational, creative process on the one hand, and the outlook of the insane on the other – to be somehow related (Prinzhorn 6)?” I believe yes. While not all mentally ill people may be artists, all artists must be engaged with the human struggles that are especially amplified for the mentally ill by their pathological symptoms.

Body of Document - Section II: Evolution

I created the initial, prototype works that would set the tone and the overall direction of the thesis in 2021, with the *Onnagata* series. Chief Thesis Advisor Luvon Sheppard asked me to study the Onnagata, who are the male performers of femininity in Japanese kabuki theatre, to contextualize my gender identity and fluidity within the historical and cultural traditions. In *Onnagata II*, I depict an *onnagata* who experiences an earthquake while performing in this painting. The Japanese icons of the Fuji Mountain and the Godzilla can be seen in the background. It is contradictory for me, a South Korean by nationality, to engage with the Japanese iconography and heritage. However, I also see it as a gift and a reconciliation process.



Image #1: *Onnagata II*, 2021

Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 30 x 0.85 in.

I continued the Onnagata series with the painting titled, *The Onnagata and the Tiger*, in which I depict myself as a Japanese onnagata, infusing Korean and Japanese themes and iconography into the image. The bloody relationship between Korea and Japan is referenced by a hint of the formation of the *mimizuka* (in bottom right corner), which was a mound of noses and

ears. It is also symbolized by the trail left behind as a river of blood during the 16th-century war. The tiger, which used to roam the Korean peninsula, became extinct during the Japanese occupation of Korea in the 20th century. However, as the ancient Korean saying goes, the tiger re-asserts itself to its glorious image of the former times when it used to smoke a pipe.



Image #2: *The Onnagata and the Tiger*, 2021

Acrylic on canvas, 74 x 74 x 0.1 in.

In these two paintings, I attempt to achieve both the aspects of gender fluidity/performativity and the racialization of beauty/anti-racist aesthetics by depicting my self as a Japanese onnagata.

While I recognize the inherent conflict in a Korean depicting themselves as a Japanese female - in many of their paintings - and I am fully aware of the historical and political issues between Korea and Japan, I embrace the role of the onnagata because the androgynous Japanese male performers have mastered the art of performing femininity through mimesis and emulation (mimesis means “emulation”). I also find the traditional hair style and practices of Japanese

women very iconic and alluring; it is only through the investigation of the other that I can see myself in the mirror.

Body of Document - Section III: The Body of Work

The relative success of the *Onnagata* paintings sets the stage for the main body of work in the thesis.

In the next painting titled, *Tiger Express*, which is the first major painting of the thesis, I dissolve the Japoneseque nature of the woman by turning her into a Latino or Chicano hiding in a modern dress, to put the tiger onto the center stage. In *Tiger Express*, I am simultaneously the tiger and the girl in the red dress and hat in the picture. As the girl, I strip away the tiger's stripes, which emasculates the tiger, initiates his transformation into womanhood, and turns him into her. They are on the top of the caldera of Mount Baekdu in North Korea, which is the highest peak in the entirety of the Korean peninsula. Tigers used to roam Korea's mountains and pine forests in ancient times. I see a particular relevance of the tiger as a symbol in my own life. My parents dreamed of me appearing as a tiger when I was conceived and the night before my birth. Furthermore, the school mascot for RIT is the tiger.



Image #3: *Tiger Express*, 2021

Acrylic on canvas, 53.5 x 72 x 1.5 in.

In *Hug Attack*, the second major painting of the thesis, I depict myself as an Asian bride to a big and powerful golden bear. As a woman, who is also weaker and submissive per my traditional ideals of femininity (which contradicts the conventional aims of feminism), I also hold power over the teddy bear, thereby re-asserting power over the golden bear. Power relations are reversible, and the weak and submissive Asian woman has the chance to resist the dominant power structure of the identity that merges masculine and white traits, as the golden bear represents.

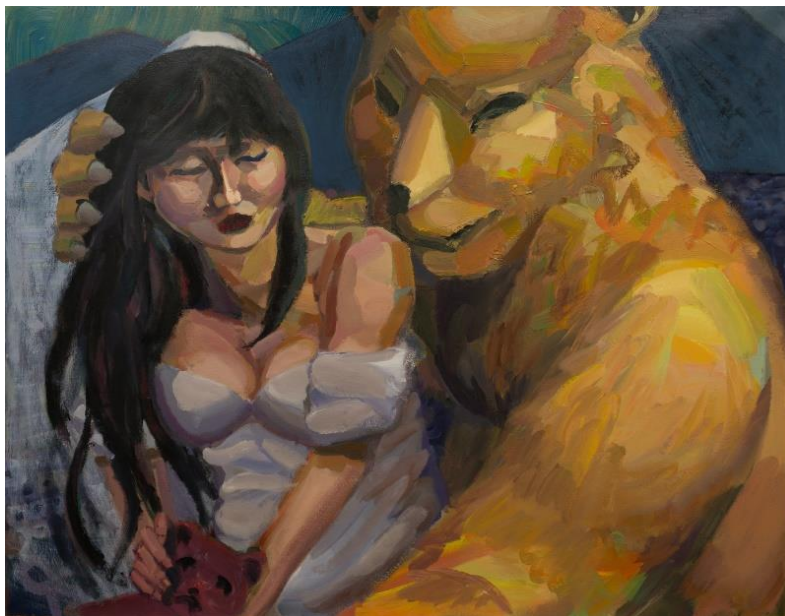


Image #4: *Hug Attack*, 2021

Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 71 x 1.5 in.

In *Phantasmagoria*, I am the submissive Asian woman whose hair is being pulled by the white dominatrix into safety as a Boeing 747 airplane crashes down on the circus, which is not evident at first glance. The tiger tries to leap away from the danger by jumping through the fire ring. The circus master also shields his face from the impact of the crash. Pizza slices which represent the artificial and superfluous experience of capitalism and consumerism, are scattered,

and abandoned everywhere. The circus, which is the phantasmagoria or the illusion of the city, disintegrates with the crash's impact, and the revolution comes near (in which the proletariats rise against the capitalist system).



Image #5: *Phantasmagoria*, 2021

Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 78 x 1.5 in.

In the *Queen of Goguryeo II*, which is a resurrection of an older and larger painting that was destroyed in a recent flood in NJ, I am the Queen of Goguryeo, a powerful Korean kingdom in present-day Manchuria and North Korea. The queen holds the baby tiger, representing truth because the tiger has a sharp eye that can discern the truth from falsehood. The tiger can see miles afar from the mountain's peak and smells the enemy before the enemy can detect its presence. I devise this aphorism regarding truth in the post-truth era and politics of Donald Trump: "Protect truth; truth will protect you." It follows the model of the Latin aphorism,

“Magna est veritas et praevalabit,” which means “Truth is great and will prevail.” Goddess is when truth and beauty coincide. Both are extremely important to the tiger.

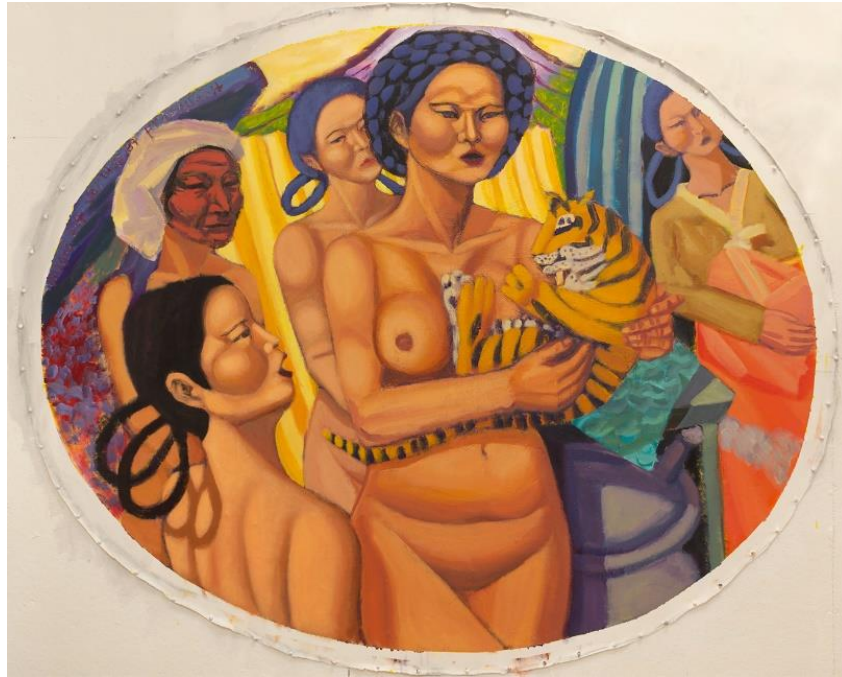


Image #6: *The Queen of Goguryeo II*, 2021

Acrylic on canvas, 62.5 x 77 x 0.1 in.

"Northeast Asian Security Architecture" depicts a Korean woman or goddess dressed in a colorful, hybrid Hanbok fused with western and modern influences. Despite Eleanor Franklin (who would later marry Franklin Roosevelt to become Eleanor Roosevelt) 's claim that Korean women are the ugliest in the world, this central figure is gorgeous ("Hanbok: A New Lexicon of World Fashion - Women's Hanbok"). She has ample forms in the manner of her round cheeks and full breasts. The forms exaggerate and idealize the roundness of the facial features among Northeast Asians, and they oppose the angularity of a westerner's face. The breasts' sizes are

certainly on the rarer spectrum among Northeast Asians but still quite possible. She symbolizes the thriving economy of South Korea and the metropolis of Seoul, which is only several kilometers away from the DMZ with North Korea. It is a mind-blowing spectacle of a tiger economy rising from the ashes of the Korean War, put in place by the might of the US with its military, foreign policy, and nuclear umbrella. Tiger and black-billed magpie feature prominently on the lady's umbrella. The two creatures used to be frequent Korean paintings as the messengers of the mountain spirit and the village spirit, respectively. Morning glories are the national flower of Korea, as Joseon Dynasty used to be called the "Land of the Morning Calm." Frogs, which feature in a Korean children's tale as characters that refuse to listen to their parents, symbolize the fraudulent people and con artists that frequently populate the South Korean landscape in my paintings. The painting simultaneously celebrates South Korea's success and condemns the Koreans' wrongful and deceitful character, many of whom avoid paying taxes.



Image #7: *Northeast Asian Security Architecture*, 2021

Digital painting, 47.9 x 27 in.

In *The Anime Girl And The Creepy Dracula*, the anime girl is a half-racialized beauty with certain whitewashed features. The “Creepy Dracula” is seducing her, a character of my invention, to whitewash her appearance even more via racialization. She is tormented by the seductive qualities of whiteness as seen through a racist lens. The only ideology that can save her is the anti-racist aesthetics and the route to hybrid beauty, which borrows from other beauty stylizations and practices without necessarily trying to become whiter.

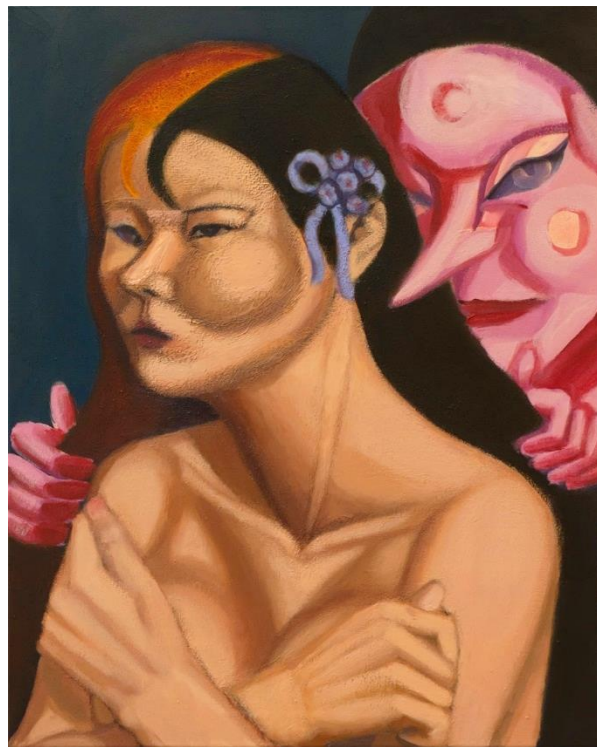


Image #8: *The Anime Girl And The Creepy Dracula*, 2021

Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 x 0.85 in.

In January of 2022, I made a breakthrough work that would depict a hypersexualized, nude Korean woman with cats sitting on top of her, utilizing drips and transparent glazes that I learned from watercolor class. In *Korean Interior I*, the cats signify the little boys fighting for the

mother's love and nurture. The interior of the painting is specifically Korean, occupied by Korean vases that are made transparent to show more of the architecture. The woman and the cat on her breast are the main protagonists, as I identify with both, alternating between masculine and feminine personae.

As the criticism may follow against the potentially objectifying nature of the paintings, I must point out that I was always attracted to sexual and hypersexualized images of women that I saw as beautiful and vulnerable – the traits I wanted to experience and identify with. The vulnerability of human sexuality and its amplified beauty go hand in hand, and I wanted the most beautiful and imaginative figurative expression of sexuality based on fantasy to be vulnerable, revealing, and potentially objectifying. The images may appear dehumanizing and objectifying on the surface. However, the judgment of the work ultimately depends on the context and my intent as the artist. In the struggle against the racialization of beauty, which renders white bodies as sexy and beautiful and non-white bodies as ugly and (sexually) undesirable, this imagery is the only logical response and counterweight which depicts Northeast Asian bodies as sexy and beautiful. In the worst-case scenario, I objectify and dehumanize myself as the face of the female forms, whom I identify with and perform through the act of painting. However, in the best-case scenario, my art serves as a counterweight to the accusation and belief tied up to the images of racialized beauty, that non-white beauties are rare or do not exist, and that Northeast Asians are sexually irrelevant. The main evil here is not the potential sexism of the work but rather the actual racism that renders Northeast Asian bodies sexually uninteresting and aesthetically unpleasing.

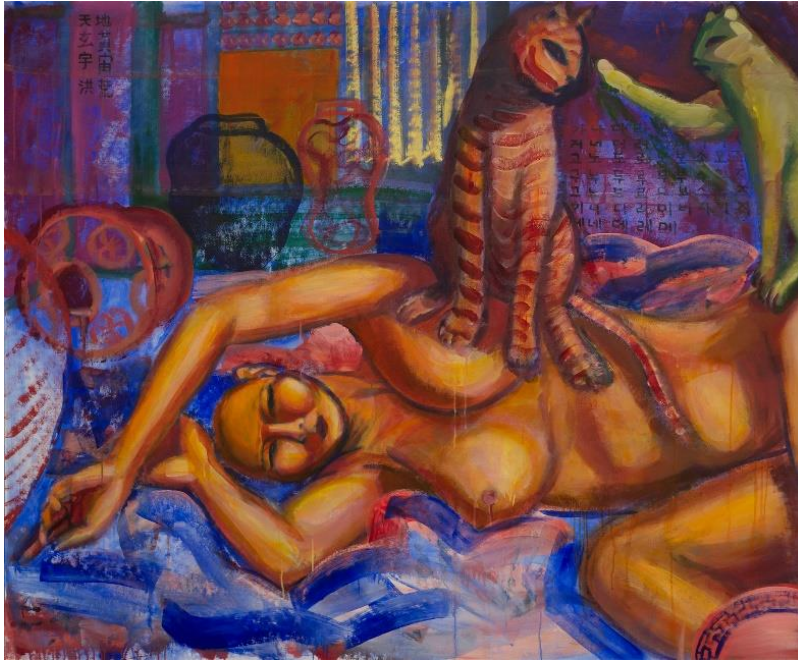


Image #9: *Korean Interior I*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas, 67.5 x 77 x 1.5 in.

In the *Chrysanthemum and Sword of the Techno Utopian Anime Vision*, the woman has a pointy nose and a split face with two opposite characteristics. Thesis Advisor Clarence Sheffield suggested that I investigate the Greek concept of the Janus to explore further this duality of the “original” Eastern self and the racialized appearance in Japanese anime. Janus was the two-headed Roman God of doorways and archways, and he was represented by ceremonial gateways called *jani*. The superstition held that there were lucky and unlucky ways for the Roman army to depart through the *jani* (Encyclopædia Britannica).



Image #10: *Chrysanthemum and Sword of Techno Utopian Anime Vision*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas, 69 x 78.38 x 1.5 in.

In this painting, titled *You Are Ordained To Stop The Violence*, I identify with the young lady dressed lavishly in Korean Hanbok and the Frankenstein, who appears poor and distressed. The Frankenstein works for the Korean lady as her servant; their employer-employee relationship suggests the immense disparity in economic and social power between the large corporations/chaebols and the everyday people in South Korea. Frankenstein is ordained to stop the violence between the two tigers in the palace, but he cannot do so without risking his own life.



Image #11: *You Are Ordained To Stop The Violence*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 x 1.5 in.

Stylistically speaking, my paintings throughout the evolution and the main body are reminiscent of illustrations or highly detailed cartoons. Tadeusz Deregowski, a British-born painter living in Brazil, had commented that I was not a traditional western painter concerned with light, form, and depth but rather I was like a Japanese manga artist with the efficient use of lines and bold colors. I mostly agree with his assessment, and it is this cartoon-like illustrational style that allows me to idealize the figure and pursue the beauty that I desire. I chose this style partly because I grew up watching Japanese anime but mainly because I am concerned with the ideal caricature rather than the down-to-earth realism.

Additional influence for these paintings includes John Currin, who exercises the male gaze to illustrate his sexual fantasies in a highly sensual and erotic manner, primarily white women. Another is Jenny Saville, who depicts immensely voluptuous bodies with big breasts

and hips, depicting womanhood and motherhood. Moreover, I see similarities between my work and Hanneline Røgeberg's earlier figurative works that depict voluptuous white bodies making love with one another ("Images-All"). Last but not least, I realize a strong connection between my work and the artist Iona ROZEAL Brown's work involving the Kabuki theatre and Japanese culture recontextualized to tell our unique stories. I really appreciate Brown's attempt to reverse the power relations of beauty in relation to race, putting brown makeup on Japanese women who were obsessed with obtaining white skin ("Iona Rozeal Brown").

Furthermore, I was looking at Judith Linhares, who paints scenes of (feminist) paradise populated with people, plants, and animals. Her blocky forms of bodies and plants made of fragments of colors and brushwork impacted my approach to Hug Attack and Phantasmagoria. In terms of subject matter, the paintings contained influences from Lisa Yuskavage, who paints highly sexualized scenes of attractive men and women in an anime or cartoon-like fantasy style. Tunji Adeyini-Jones' generously lush and erotic style of a modern Matisse and the Social Realist style of Diego Rivera merged to give birth to The Queen of Goguryeo II. Diego Rivera (and Social Realism and Mexican Muralism) influenced Lee Quede, the Korean artist who was discussed previously (Jin).

Body of Document - Section IV: Philosophy - The Requirements of Painting

For me a successful painting exhibits great depth and rigor of style and approach of conception and visualization. The joy and personal satisfaction in painting for me comes from the penetration of the invisible barrier that is the limits of my own abilities and the resulting possibilities or outcomes allowed by the physical laws of the universe (including the nature of space, time and perception, light, and color). A strong painting sits at the limits of what is possible, like trying to see the reds that are allowed to exist in limited quantities in the green leaf or the blues, in the tan skin. All the colors must be connected to one another to form a single, continuous, and believable world of illusion. The visual style must be consistent, with the internal language of abstraction or representation establishing a dominance as a kind of framework over the entire painting.

It can be said that, in a successful painting, the sum is greater than the parts. This hypothesis is consistent with Professor Clifford Wun's emphasis on the need for the entire painting to work together and the lessons of Gestalt psychology, which argues that only a holistic understanding or perception of the entire object can capture its qualities or characteristics accurately rather than the examination of the parts of the object.

The critical problems of painting can be divided into two main parts – formal aspects and content. Content means the message or the story of the painting, and the formal aspects can be sub-divided into color (hue, saturation, value, temperature, etc.) and form (value, contrast, shapes, and composition). But the real critical problem is whether the painting has depth and meaning that makes it deserve the attention which it is seeking. Another problem is whether the painting says what I want to say or what I claim the painting is saying. It is the consistency

between the dialogue or the interpretation surrounding the painting and the painting itself in terms of the formal aspects and content that is highly important and often broken by mediocre people who are lacking in the painter's eye.

Body of Document - Section IV: Philosophy - The Tormented Artist

From my numerous failures, struggles, and various campaigns with the canvas over the past 12 years, I have learned that genius is truly God's gift, but this gift can be taken away by the powerful forces and/or circumstances that dominate and conspire in this world. I say this because I had an innate gift that was highly exceptional in terms of color and form in my early years (2010-2011) before I began to take medication to treat my "mental illness." All my gift and talent with regards to painting completely diminished to nothing, and I made works of inconsistent output and quality for nearly a decade. It is only after 2 years of graduate school at RIT that I am finally making breakthroughs. Either you have the gift and the painter's eye, and you can see the relationships and the possibilities on the canvas, or you cannot. Either you know what you know, or you don't know what you don't know. (This difference should disqualify at least 95~ 99% of the people who think that they are painters.) This is truly a gift that cannot be attained through efforts alone.

After 12 years of immense struggle with paint on the canvas, I have the right to say that mediocrity has absolutely no place in art. Art that is mediocre is not art at all, and any sign of mediocrity should make anyone unhappy, dissatisfied, and even disgusted or angry. It makes me extremely unhappy to see someone present a pile of laziness lacking in inspiration on the canvas as art.

And this brings me to another point – a successful painting must reflect a kind of dedication, sincerity, and devotion from the artist. The artist must be willing to sacrifice their entire life, whether that is their lifestyle or the pursuit of a stable income source or romantic relationships or marriage, to create a body of art objects and/or ideas that are highly rigorous and

dedicated. This quality can be reflected in the labor put in by the artist or the years it took for the artist to learn and master the craft that they took interest in. Jeff Koons hiring a bunch of assistants to paint under his instruction should not be considered legitimate at the highest levels, especially since painting by the assistants requires significant amount of personal interpretation of Jeff Koon's instructions. The kind of paintings that I feel inspired by includes the works by Judith Linhares, Willem de Kooning, Lisa Yuskavage, Cecily Brown, and Frank Auerbach. I am awestruck by the devotion and the level of academic expertise that Mary Beth McKenzie, my former instructor at the Art Students League of NY, exhibits in her work, even if I am not an academic painter. These people are the real deal because they are naturally devoted to their craft.

Anxiety for me as an artist is the risk of failure and mediocrity. The biggest source of anxiety comes from the disruptions of my attempts at painting and the diminishments of my painting abilities, both of which originate from an external source. I have no time; I don't want to be interrupted; I don't want to be restrained in terms of my abilities. I am in the boxing arena, competing with Vincent van Gogh, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo. The tiger does not have time to respond to the dragon's gestures and challenges. Where was a Korean Leonardo da Vinci or Picasso?

Anxiety comes because I must be the most critical of my own work, and, if not, I am deceiving myself. I must know my own failures and weaknesses, as much as I aspire to be the Korean Picasso. The artist is eternally tormented because of failure and mediocrity that they perceive in their own works, and the process of art and life itself are both difficult and challenging beyond the normal. Only a tormented artist is a true artist.

Body of Document - Section IV: Philosophy – Instinct and Process

As of now, I work very much intuitively in that I do not plan my compositions much or make preliminary drawings. The main reason for this is that the preliminary drawings usually end up becoming extremely time-consuming undertakings and evolve into separate works of art; I would much rather be painting than drawing because drawing tends to be too labor intensive and detail-oriented. The lack of preliminary preparations for my paintings is not a sign of laziness on my part because when I plan, nothing goes according to my intentions, and I usually ruin the initial composition with something else that is either overworked or doesn't work at all. I am a different kind of artist from those who are idea-driven (they bring ideas from preliminary steps to the intermediate preparations to their destination); I make the art first by utilizing spontaneous energy of expression and composition, subconscious dialogue of my interests and the unknowns (or what I don't know), and the sense of overall direction from my recent and previous works. Once I complete the artwork, I interpret my own work and come up with the meanings and the title for the work. This may make no sense to a logics-oriented person who believes in a deterministic universe and believes that all events, actions, and decisions in the universe must follow concrete steps from A to B to C, and so on. However, they do not realize that the logical part of the brain is only like a small fraction of the overall brain, which includes the subconscious and the unconscious. It should also be pointed out that the direction of time is reversible in physics, so from a different perspective or dimension of space-time, I came up with the idea first, then made the work, and then unraveled it. The belief remains that I was born because I was meant to be an artist, and everything that I say, do, think, and make are aimed towards this destiny.

Fantasy and projection are highly integral to my process of visualizing, constructing, and rendering the female figures. I fantasize that I am the woman in the painting; I project myself onto the female figures, as if I were playing with dolls and pretending that I am the doll or that the doll becomes a woman who is me. Another analogy would be a mirror, in which I see myself in the reflection of the female forms. A third metaphor would be plastic surgery, in which I constantly alter and change the shapes and forms of the female face and body using my aesthetical instincts.

A painting becomes complete when it reaches the threshold or limit of very high risks of the painting becoming ruined outweighing any possibilities that the painting will be significantly improved upon. A complete painting sits at the edge of perfection, limitation, and clarity of the vision, materials, and techniques.

Body of Document - Section IV: Philosophy - Impact of Cubism and Expressionism

While I argued that my work was distant from both Cubism and Expressionism in the earlier part of the writing, I do retain certain lessons of Modernism in my paintings. My characters appear to share aspects of Cubism and Primitivism in the facial structure and color choice (like Gauguin or Picasso, in the case of “Korean Interior I”); my paintings also share certain Expressionist characteristics in their use of color, abstract brushwork, and drips of paint (seen primarily in the background). I heavily admire by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner for his earnest investigation of human nature, sexuality, and beauty; I also respect Franz Marc for his bold use of lush colors that carry a spiritual value; lastly I worship Vincent van Gogh for his genius and original use of color. Van Gogh had a willingness to experiment with color in ways that no other people had done before him. He fragmented colors and forms and merged them together simultaneously and conveyed a sense of light, materiality, emotional significance, and spiritual presence, all of which amplified each other through interaction of color and form. Van Gogh’s abstracted and fragmented use of color was highly experimental and almost divinely inspired, in my humble opinion. While the works in my thesis do not resemble van Gogh’s paintings, they had a tremendous impact on my earlier works from 2010 to 2011.



Image #12: *The Restaurant*, 2010

Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 x 1.5 in.

Body of Document - Section IV: Philosophy - Color^[EG4] and Painting Techniques

In general, my color choices are based on my own aesthetical taste and instincts that drive my decisions in the moment of painting, but they can also be logically described like cooking with ingredients (which are the colors), in mathematical terms.

Color can be quite contradictory; for example, (pure) red advances forward in space, yet it is also relatively a dark color, so it also becomes a very good accenting color or a color that demarcates a boundary or edge of an object towards the shadow. In depicting an object with highlight, mid-tone, and shadow, using color becomes a contradictory endeavor of many compromises as the highlight of flesh in a typical setting should be indicated by a lightened yellow (yellow + white) in theory (as yellow is the brightest of all colors that retains most chroma when lightened towards white), yet the highlight can also be a lightened red (red + white) because it advances forward in space. A good compromise is a lightened orange (red + yellow + white) which is darker than yellow, yet it advances forward in space more than yellow.

The mid-tone of the flesh would then (relatively to the orange highlight) go closer to yellow that is mixed with neutral tones, as this arrangement would allow the more reddish highlight of lightened orange to come forward in space relative to the mid tone with less red. As for the shadow, a return towards a desaturated and darker orange or red may be the most effective, as these colors are naturally darker than yellow, and they should be supplemented with little bit of glazing of cool and dark blue's to create a harmony of warm and cool colors.

Green in its light form in the additive system is the third brightest color of the primary, secondary, and tertiary colors, with a brightness of 88 (pure yellow has 98 and pure cyan has 91,

according to Photoshop data; other colors include red with a brightness of 54; magenta, 60; and blue, 30). It is a slightly cool color, and it can be made with yellow (such as hansa yellow) and greenish blue (such as a pthalo blue) in the subtractive system with paint/pigments but it is a primary color in the additive system with light, which cannot be made by mixing other colors. All the colors in terms of opposite pairs in the additive system add up to white, while all the opposite colors in the subtractive system “subtract” in terms of saturation and value towards black.

Color is also contradictory in the sense that not all warm colors come forward in space and not all cool colors recede backward in space. It is possible to change the hue, saturation, or value (HSV) of a color to weaken or strengthen the degree of the color’s spatial presence. I hypothesize that how much a color comes forward or goes back in space has to do with its overall energy, which would be a numerical sum of the different aspects of the color, such as hue, saturation, and value, and native luminosity and color intensity, both of which vary with each hue. Therefore, a pure cyan (teal in terms of pigment or paint color) will come forward in space more so than a lightened and desaturated red.

As mentioned previously, if one adds white, grey, or black to a color, it is the equivalent of mixing it with the opposite color in the color wheel, moving the color closer to the opposite color. This understanding means that one can use a color without literally using the color as defined by the hue. The mere act of shifting the saturation and value introduces other colors as well. For example, turning a red pink by adding white to it introduces green into the red (in other words, pink has both red and green in it). What this ultimately means is that the artist can connect different colors together by association through this process of shifting not only the hue

but also saturation and value. The connection of different colors creates a sense of cohesion and believability of the visual space within the painting.

On a side note, it must be determined whether additive or subtractive color systems are the real basis of all color mixing and relationships because I suspect that only one of the two systems is the true system while the other is a distorted translation of the original, due to the way light refracts off of a surface of pigments and how the human vision has evolved to see more greens; I suspect that the way pigments mix outside of human vision has not changed in theory, while the additive system with light has changed in terms of how it is perceived within the human brain, which in turn affects how we perceive the subtractive system as well.

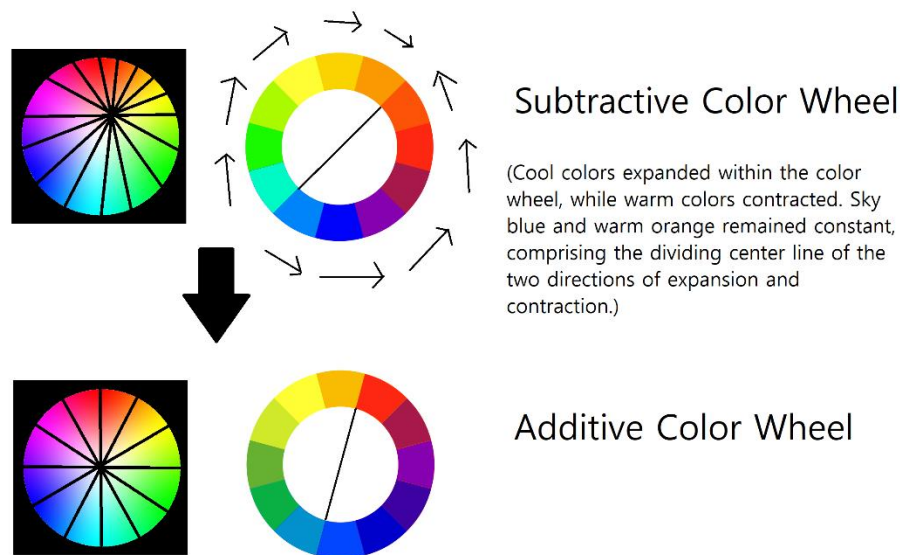


Image #13: A Comparison of Color Systems (original research)

If we start by comparing the differences between the additive and subtractive color mixing systems, we notice that the pairs of opposite colors in both systems are different from one another. By lining up the opposite pairs in the color wheels, we see that cool colors expanded in

the additive color system from the original interaction found in the subtractive system, while warm colors contracted. The only pair of opposite colors that remain constant are warm orange and sky blue (between cyan and blue).

It can be confusing for me who works with both additive and subtractive systems, as I use both traditional and digital mediums, such as acrylic paint and Photoshop on the computer. I prefer these two mediums (although I do not have many digital paintings – I enjoy the physicality of the paint) because they are quick, easy to layer, and very forgiving in terms of making corrections.

Furthermore, acrylic paint is really useful to apply thin washes and drips like watercolor. These techniques are becoming very important in my recent paintings during the Continuation of Thesis (refer to the section after ‘Conclusion’). With acrylic glazing medium, I can apply opaque colors as glazes and slowly build up the colors and layers with the lesson that I learned in Professor Luvon Sheppard’s watercolor class. The advantage of glazing is not only that the colors can be slowly built up and changed, but also the colors come out more vibrantly because the colors are not being mixed but layered transparently. (When colors are mixed, and farther apart the colors are on the color wheel, the more the colors “dip” in the color wheel and lose their energy in terms of saturation and value.)

When applying the glazes, I must calculate which areas are the highlights and which are the mid-tones and shadows, and work in inverse; rather than applying more white’s to the highlights, I leave the highlight as lightly colored transparent layers showing the white canvas underneath, while mostly adding colors to the mid-tones and shadows, which get darker and

thicker relatively to the highlight. This is achieved by using a paper towel or cloth to smudge out the additions to the highlights after a uniform wash over the entire area that is being painted.

Glazing allows my paintings to express the full vibrancy of different combinations of colors because the colors that are glazed do not desaturate or “dip” in the color wheel, but they move in the color space in full curves and in full spectrum. In areas where I do not want this vibrancy, I simply glaze or wash over the area with a darker, muted, or opposite color.

Perhaps, it is a fair assessment that learning watercolor was the single most important development for me as an artist because with glazing and washes, I can apply colors in subtler and finer ways and with greater expression (with less control) or control (with less expression).

Body of Document - Section IV: Philosophy –Influences of Music and Literature

When I paint, I often listen to music, and music is a very important influence for me, as it often impacts my emotional state and thoughts while I paint and reflect on my life. My music taste reflects a divergence of the psyche and the duality of the masculine and the feminine; for example, my favorite song includes “God Yu Tekem Laef Blong Mi,” which is from the original soundtrack of the movie, *The Thin Red Line*, and which my ex-best friend from RISD used to play on his computer. It is a highly spiritual and divine song, filled with sadness and the immense power of divinity and the cosmos. I also listen to “Ghost” by Justin Bieber, thinking of all the friends who have left me. White Lies is also a band whom I admire, and they are a British alternative rock band exhibiting a wide range of feelings in their songs, including the sentimental, defiant, and sad. I find music such as “Hoppipolla” by Sigur Ros, an Icelandic experimental band, and “Cosmic Love” by Florence + The Machine, very inspiring. By contrast, my other favorite songs include “Just a Dream” by Delerium, “Stay Gold” by Utada Hikaru, and “Marionette” by Stellar, and these songs are very sexy and spicy.

I must admit that I do not read much fiction or novels nowadays, but whatever lingering knowledge or memory that I have of literature comes from my schooling. Back in high school, I was exposed to books such as “Lord of the Flies” by William Golding, “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, and “Romeo and Juliet” by Shakespeare. A similar story to “Romeo and Juliet” is “Tristan and Iseult,” which was one of the few stories that moved me to tears when I read it in 2019 at the School of Visual Arts.

I also remember my education about Korean history and culture when I was a little boy. I remember my father telling me stories about Admiral Yi Sunsin who bravely defeated a Japanese

armada of 133 ships with just a dozen ships during the 16th century war between Korea and Japan.

All these stories should contribute to the wealth of content in my paintings, directly or indirectly. Many of them appear to me to reflect on the human struggle between good and evil.

Conclusion

A pattern emerges in my art, in which the tiger is a messianic figure who would defend the truth and save humanity, and the female figures nurture the tiger. I believe that I am simultaneously the beauty and the beast, which is permitted by Judith Butler's theory of gender fluidity and performativity, although I also assert that my gender identity is a negotiation between the doer and the doing. To pursue the philosophy of anti-racist aesthetics, I find the definition of the original Northeast Asian beauty, only to partially reject it for its celebration of pale skin that I disagree with and the absence of ample breasts that I desire for myself. I discover that I must find my own version of the Northeast Asian beauty, although this vision may already be influenced by the racialization of beauty (because I grew up in a western/westernized society). The tiger and the lady are also an expression of my sexual frustration of being a virgin, but, as Sigmund Freud hypothesizes in his theory of sublimation, I let out my sexual energy and frustration through the act of painting and creative expression. The motif also represents the carrot and stick of my psychological expression, revealing my possible situation with mental illness, in which I offer an olive branch of femininity and the sword and shield of masculinity simultaneously to my oppressors – whether imagined or real. The hybrid nature of my gender is also conceptually reminiscent of the art of Brendel, a schizophrenic artist who also exhibits megalomaniac and grandiose personality (which is partially reflected in myself and my art).

Specifically concerning the racialization of beauty and the philosophy of anti-racist aesthetics, how have I approached the concept of anti-racist aesthetics? Artists like Susan MB Chen make realistic, down-to-earth, and humanistic depictions of Asian Americans. However, I feel that that route is not for me because I am concerned with the ideal physical beauty that is

distant from reality. My painting is, in fact, a counter-reaction to the racialized beauty at the level of the ideal and fantasy. My paintings do not depict ordinary people (although the female figures' faces are based on my self-portraits); they depict Northeast Asian goddesses that counter the western goddesses and racialized goddesses masquerading as Northeast Asians within the realm of fantasy.

I am fully aware that my talk of the ideal, fantasy, and goddesses will stir accusations of the male gaze (although I do not see myself as a straight male person), objectification, and hypocrisy from certain people. Nevertheless, I refuse to make paintings to satisfy other people. My paintings must fulfill my wishes and desires first. My inclinations align with certain aspects of anti-racist aesthetics and gender fluidity/performativity while also being influenced by the racialization of beauty. My paintings strive for equality of Northeast Asian beauty with western beauty at the fantasy and ideal level.

This obsession with fantasy and ideals may appear problematic and unequal to some. Those critics often take on anti-beauty stances because they think that beauty is a concept or mechanism that oppresses women and is contrary to the aims of feminism. Nevertheless, beauty continues to matter to most people, and it matters to me a lot. To illustrate the Northeast Asian beauty in my image at the level of fantasy is not only liberating and fulfilling but also self-empowering to me.

What is a goddess to me? What is beauty? In goddesses, beauty, truth, and justice coincide. It is not only the physical beauty that matters but also that a person is a good person. According to Cho Kyo, the cultural conventions hold that a woman is beautiful when she is also

a good and a just person (as opposed to an evil person); conversely, an evil character is considered “ugly” (Chō Kyō 17). Beauty then is related to justice and the issue of good and evil.

The tiger is inherently good and just. It wants to fight for justice and equality like everyone else in the democratic world. The messages and allegories in my paintings are guided by these principles and intentions. Had I not been concerned with justice and beauty and what is inherently good, my paintings would have been filled with dark, distorted, and evil messages, which they are not.

As I previously discussed in my Vita, I secretly made the violent threats against the racist bullies from high school and the American society at large when I was a student at the University of Rochester in 2009 – because I believed that both the bullies and the society itself could not be at peace when Asian people like me were being constantly ostracized and ridiculed. Even though these actions were dark, and I feel sorry about them in retrospect, they were driven by a sense of justice and a willingness to fight against oppression. But instead of placating the tiger’s anger and guiding the tiger towards a better, peaceful path, the dragon conspired against, sanctioned, and isolated the tiger. The dragon, which represents state power, stuck the label of “mental illness” onto the tiger and drugged the tiger, depriving it of its abilities for many years. This, in my eyes, is not justice but a mockery of justice, and the dragon will have a heavy price to pay for its actions which were of criminal nature.

By reflecting on the thesis, I realize that painting is primarily a means of survival for me. Had the tiger not been given a paint brush, it would have immediately engaged in a deadly fight with the dragon to restore justice and fight oppression.

In 2020, I returned to Rochester to pursue my graduate studies and to make a stand that I am not the person to be ridiculed, excluded, or treated as a criminal (which is what I perceive in my daily life, as I have been diagnosed with a mental illness); that I could strive for excellence; and that I could carve out my own path as an artist.

Through the completion of the thesis, I hope everyone can see that I am such a person, that I am inherently good and just, and that I am a tiger. I hope that my ex-best friend whom I met in Providence, Rhode Island, would finally forgive me and meet me again, as we had promised when we hugged the last time we parted.

I believe that in the distant future, when I reach an old age and even if I could attain all the material things that I desire now, I would abandon these things and go to a Buddhist temple. I wrote the following on Facebook:

“Maybe one day, I will leave everything and join a Buddhist monastery

I will leave my big dreams for fame and success

And I will meet a friend there just like... [my ex-best friend from RISD]

who is compassionate and sincere

and I will say to... [him], ‘My brother, my dearest friend

where have you been? You have left me, but as we promised to meet again, here we meet again.’

And we will hug each other just as we did the last time we parted

And my story will come to an end.”



Image #14: *A Friend*, 2019

Acrylic on canvas, 75 x 75 x 1.5 in.

Works During Continuation of Thesis (Summer 2022)

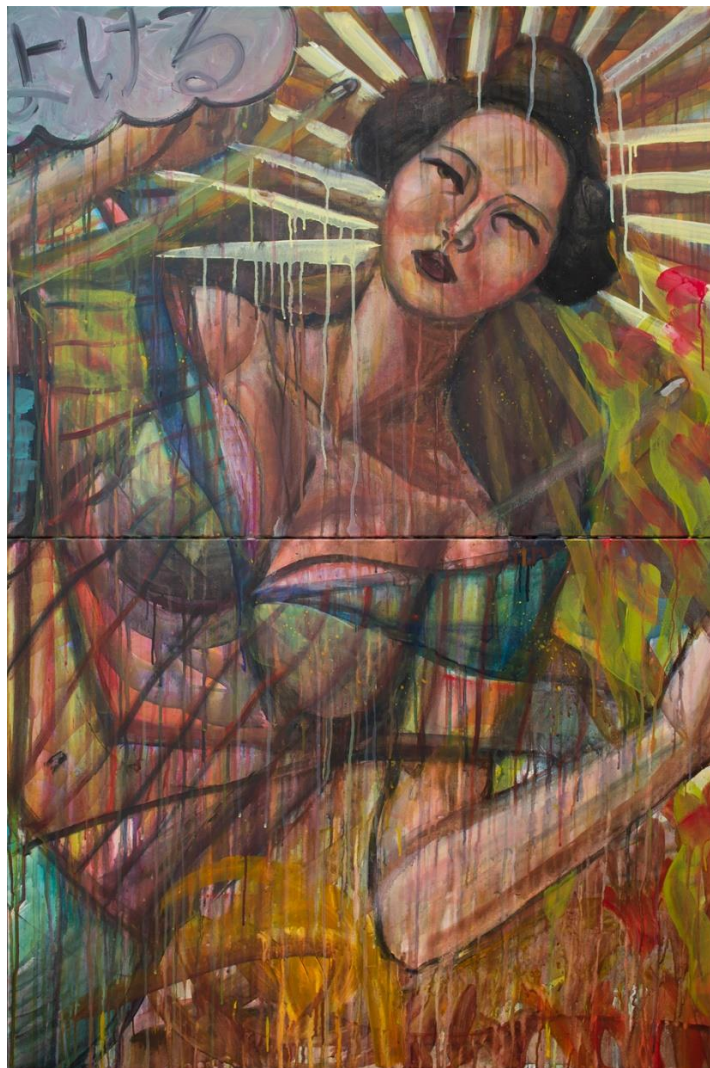


Image #15: *Sakura Dodges Bullets I*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 x 1.5 in. (2-panel)

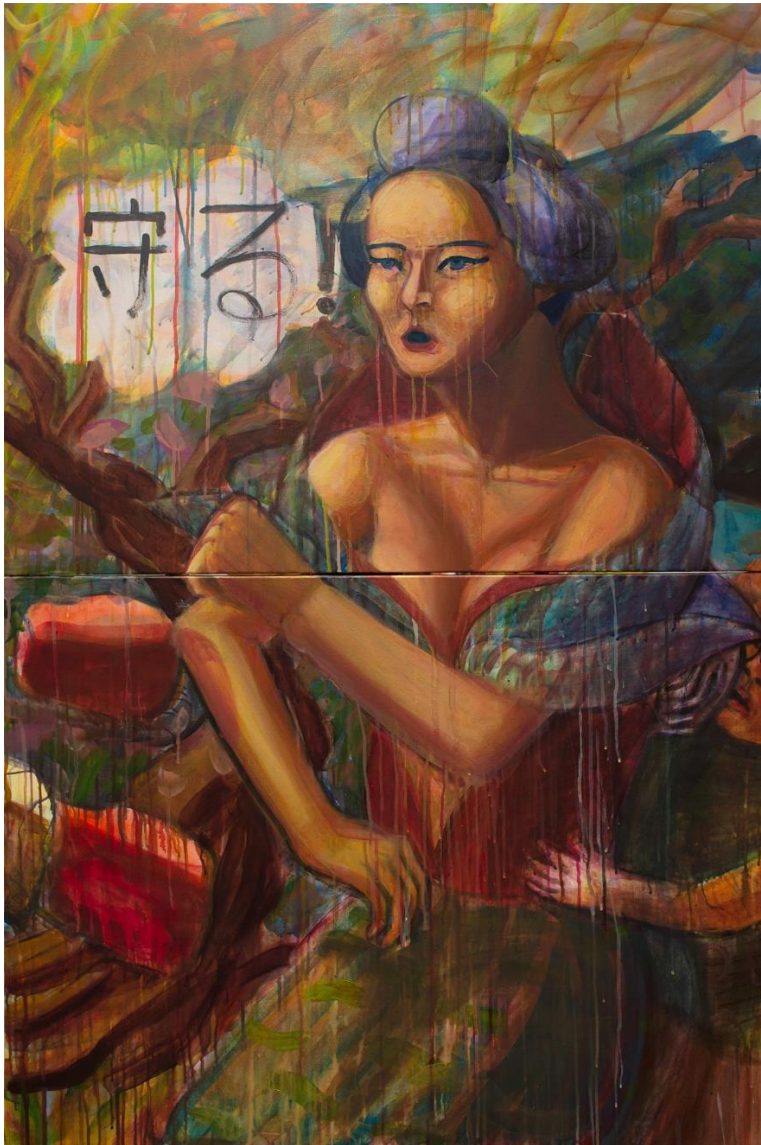


Image #16: *Sakura Defends Mischievous Boy I*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 x 1.5 in. (2-panel)

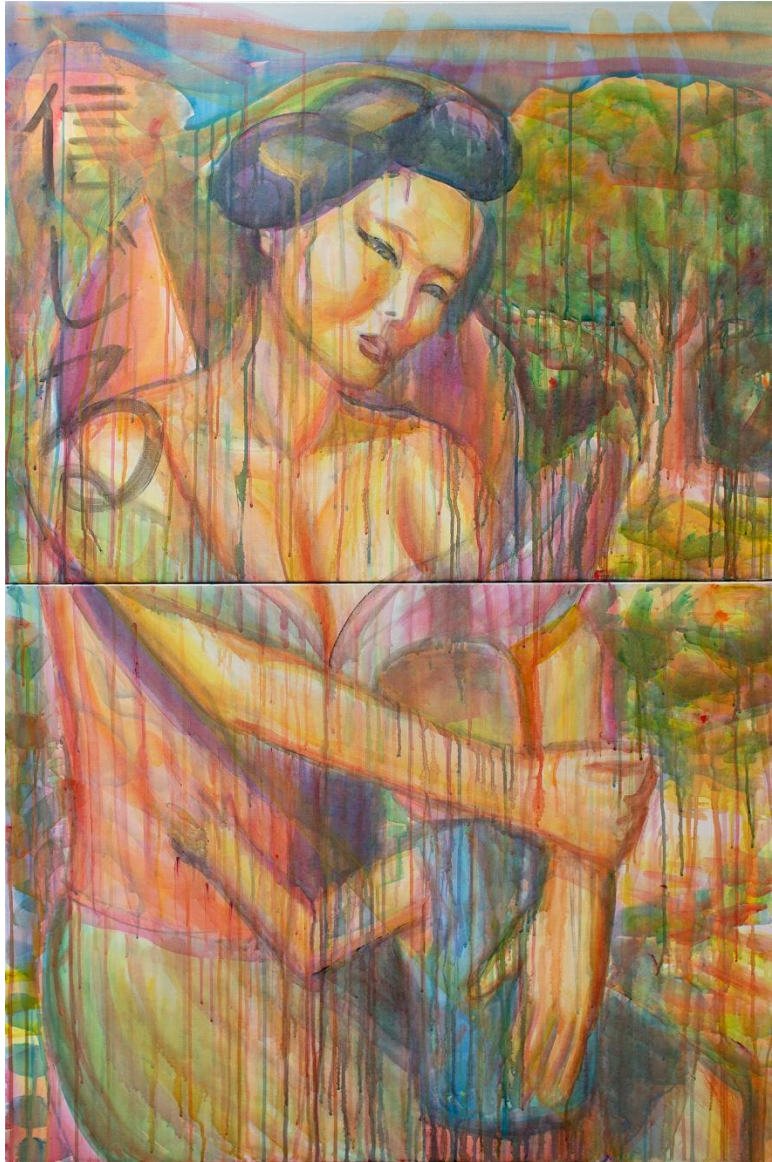


Image #17: *Sakura Believes I*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 x 1.5 in. (2-panel)



Image #18: *The Radicalization of Madonna*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 60 x 1.5 in.



Image #19: *The Land of Morning Calm*, 2022

Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 60 x 1.5 in.

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