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THE LABYRINTHINE PATH

by

Shur-tzy Hou

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER IN FINE ARTS

MFA IMAGING ARTS
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
DECEMBER, 1993

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I. PRELUDE

The angels came to my house in the summer of 1990. I witnessed their falling. I saw how their wings withered. The wings were not able to bear their weight anymore. They smiled at me painfully. All of a sudden I realized my fate- I can not avoid falling as I can not avoid being born. There is no way out of the labyrinth.

II. INTRODUCTION

This thesis work focused on exploring the existential concerns expressed in the theme of birth and death, love and desire as well as in the dramatic conflict of light and darkness. As a woman from a different culture, I attempted to explore the relationship between men and women out of my own experience, imagination and hope.

III. THE SUBJECT MATTER

In the past three years, I tried to rediscover the world within myself. Finding ways to liberate myself from the past has been a significant part of my life. The ambiguity of the past, the insecurity of the present, the fear and anticipation toward the future all have motivated me to create art. Art has helped me to understand myself.

III-1. The Labyrinthine Path

In Chinese, the word "destiny" is composed of two characters, 命 (ming) or "(pre)-determined life" and 運 (yun) or "chance". Traditionally, when a child is born, his or her parents will ask a fortune teller about the child's "ming". "Ming" is determined only in part of the acts of the child's ancestors. It is also determined by the year, month, day, minute, and to some extent, the place where he was born. Other actions, such as the choice of a name or creation of an environment can also influence a person's destiny. So, the tension between destiny and chance enters a child's world from the first moment of life.

Children grow to become men and women, moving through their lives so close to events, they can not see the maze they are in, nor determine where destiny is pushing them, nor see where chance or self-determination enter. This is the state of being human, moving through the labyrinth of life without knowing if there is a way out, without accepting or resisting the path we travelled.

The tension between destiny and chance is especially poignant regarding matters of love and desire- the relationship between men and women. I envision the interaction of love and desire as a labyrinth, an imprisoning passageway that from which people are unable to escape. and without a final exit from the labyrinth that would bring one to absolute truth. But people are

seldom free from being trapped in this maze. Like the smart rats, some people search for a way out or try to find the certain secrets at the center of the maze. After entering the labyrinth, one will be put face to face with one's death. But without entering it, one will not be able to gain a new life.

For me, entering into a relationship with a lover, meant entering another maze- in which I alone was lost. But while falling into the abyss of despair, I encountered angels. To my surprise, the angels too had fallen from clarity into confusion and despair. Moving through the maze with their companions and talking with these other sufferers, I regained strength and hope from the inspiring message they brought me. I attempted to transcend all the worldly boundaries to achieve the gratitude of freedom. I realized that it would be a challenge for me as an artist to express this idea. From this idea I completed two installations and a series of photographs.

III-2. Love and Desire

In Herbert Marcuse's book Eros and civilization, he states :

"According to Freud, the history of man is the history of his repression..... Civilization begins when the primary objective- namely, integral satisfaction of needs-is effectively renounced."¹

This concept became a subject I investigated in this installation.

There were several questions I have always asked regarding the relationship between love and desire. Can love be achieved without desire? Is desire for love itself a pure form of love? Can desire be equivalent to love? The realization and fulfillment of love often challenges the cultural and social standards. When desire overpowers love, possession of the subject or objectification of the subject of desire can happen.

¹ Herbert Marcus, Eros and Civilization, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955,p.11.

IV. THE PROCESS OF CREATING THE WORK

In my first year at R.I.T., I experimented with photo-collage, hand colored Polaroid and non-silver processes with a desire to manipulate and alter photographic images. Most of these images were two-dimensional. Impressed by early Greek sculpture² I saw during a trip to Europe, the broken pieces of a torso remained in my dreams for a long period of time. I began to work with three-dimension media. The first figures I made were a clay woman and a clay man . I then sculpted two male and two female angels. The figures I made were headless to avoid issues of gender, age, race, and class. To bring the figures into reality, or to create a real fiction of their existence, I chose to build a physical environment for them instead of constructing pedestals for the figures which looked more sculptural.

The idea of creating universal images of human beings and the angel as a messenger between human being and God has intrigued me. I immediately found that the new medium gave me a much wider scope of expression, but presented a number of technical problems to master. I tried to learn some basic woodworking, hand-built ceramic sculpture techniques by myself but it's like a child who tries to ride a wild horse. The situation frustrated me. In searching for these images, my daydreams and nightmares were woven together that I had to separate the everyday reality from the chaotic emotional world.

It bothered me that I had so much to say in one piece of work and that I was always seeking symbols and meanings to speak for me. It was also hard for me to decide on whether to make the work clear or ambiguous. I believe that one has to reach a certain stage of inner development before one can apply the appropriate techniques to support and further one's ideas. While

²John Boardman, Greek Art, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, revised edition, 1981.

the interest in Art grew, the "right" approach and understanding still remained an enigma to me.

While looking for a spiritual home where the warmth of love existed and where my soul was at ease, I was lucky to learn from the printmaking Professor Judd Williams, and got support from some of the students in the printmaking program. In the non-competitive environment, I was able to absorb new knowledge and a positive attitude toward art-making. I also intended to find the relationships between different media and to break down the boundaries between them.

For a long time, I did not think of myself as a photographer but a mixed-media artist. It seems to be more appropriate to explore the idea first, then to find a "right" media to convey the idea. Since 1960, quite a few artists have explored photography in an effort to expand the technical and aesthetic boundaries of traditional photography. I knew that at a certain point I would find a way to link my ideas to the medium.

The process of my thesis can be divided into two stages: from the spring quarter of 1990 to the fall quarter of 1991 I created a series of photographs of the figures I had created; from the winter quarter to the spring quarter of 1991, I completed two large installations and two small installations.

The big step I took in the first stage was to place all the figures on the floor of my studio and to create an environment for them rooted in my dreams, memories, and unconscious. The photographs I took of this installation allowed me to convey the abstract meaning hidden behind what was immediately apparent. The two parts, the photographs and the installation, were related, and could be seen as a transformation from one form into another.

My studio was a "breathing room" for me. With very simple tools, and material, I worked like a nun doing her daily practice. I felt relieved when I

had decent communication with my work. I realized that instead of acting as if one can dispose of parts of oneself, one should learn the art of transformation. I learned to transform my anger and my sadness into something more constructive. Out of my suffering, I came to learn sympathy. With the same attitude, the work sometimes transformed itself. And I finally found a way to deal with depression, anxiety, fear, and sadness. When the apples in one installation, for instance, began to rot, I incorporated them into my work and didn't discriminate against them.

The process of continual exploration and transformation was, to me, more valuable than any end-product. Through spontaneous gesture and continuous exploration, I gradually reduced each idea to its barest essentials. Anxiety, pain, and other subconscious desire motivated me to be bold and adventurous, to render the invisible visible.

In making art based on one's life, there is a danger of revealing aspects of one's mental life to the public gaze. On the other hand, there is the difficulty of not transforming the personal into art which stands on its own. To admit the pain and pleasure of life is not an easy task. To look at oneself as if under microscope is even more difficult. I nevertheless did use my own memories and experience as the material for my work. The dilemma was to defend myself but end up losing the battle. But I am heartened by the possibility of getting relief from art. I came to see the work as an unity between reality and fiction.

V. EXPLANATION OF INDIVIDUAL WORK

V-1. The Photographs (Untitled)

These photographs, which dealt in poetic images, embodied an imaginary world of my mind. This series consisted of 22 images which basically questioned the level of freedom within a relationship, the enigma of the destiny of human beings, the fatal attraction of evil, and the struggle of the falling angels.

In the early spring of 1991, I started to use the apple as an object in my art. The meaning of this symbol in the Western culture is public, whereas my interpretation is private. The ambivalence of the apple as the fruit of evil and the fruit of wisdom intrigued me. While making reference to desire the apple also suggested the elements of danger, pleasure, and pain. People could always perceive the apples as both a symbol of desire and just apples. I built a garden for the figures to inhabit. It was directly built on the floor which enabled the angels to truly descend to the earth. It was the paradise as well as the hell and constructed of branches and black spray paint. The dramatic change of the summer light through the window rendered a rich atmosphere for making the photographs. When I took pictures of the scene, I lowered myself slowly and gradually to the floor till I finally attained a position enabling me to see and feel the things of the earth. The angels had spoken to me, manifesting themselves to me in many ways. They did not compel me to believe anything, but what happened to me was that I finally could be true to myself by talking to them. I had witnessed the failure of the fulfillment of a dream of love. I thought of all this as I lingered by the Garden. I looked at the angels and time paused in its flow, nothing existed but the instant lying behind the wall of phenomena. I felt that I was part of the scene and at the same time being a spectator of it. I was the dreamer at the center of the dream. I always dreamed of myself standing in front of the labyrinth but

could not decide to enter or not. I knew I could probably not find a way back to the entrance but I always decided to enter and went through the tunnel.

It is fairly difficult to attempt to describe the photographs verbally. I tried to condense the sequence to manifest and intensify its meaning. The images can be read in any order and be regarded as 22 individual pieces. But since I had arranged them to provide a narrative reading of the images, I will give a few lines of description of them. The images can be sorted out into several categories: angels, human beings (male and female), the devil (Death), the God, and myself.

The prelude to these images started from my encounter with the angel(fig.1). I endeavored to catch and hold the moment when it occurred. In the second picture, a clay foot stepping on the floor represented the foot of God(fig.2). It's a moment of God's silence, and someone who intended to interpret God's intention, even God hardly reveals himself in the world. In the third image, a woman was left alone to enter the arena of intricacy(fig.3). Within the confines of passion, she couldn't avoid confronting the "life size" apple. Whether she would surrender herself to the inevitable temptation was not predictable. Whether she was good or bad, innocent or mean was beyond imagination. However, a man entered the following picture and was placed next to the woman(fig.4,5). It's unknown whether they chose to do so by their own will. The light falling on the bodies enlightened their being human being.

The picture which follows reflects a vision of chaos and destruction(fig.6). Angels watched and guarded the traumatized woman while the man ceased to do anything. The woman must be sacrificed and reborn. The same image from a different angle with the man confronting the big apple spoke of this recurring issue(fig.7). The hand of God was pointing in a direction which implied His will to dictate and regulate(fig.9). Why both the male and female angels fell into the trap of love and the abyss of despair can not be

explained(fig.8,10). Ignoring good and evil, their naiveté led them to the involvement with human beings. When the hand again pointed at the bound couple, it raised the question of how a woman and a man could become an unity(fig.11). In searching for the ideal, a devil came to play with them. It was arbitrary whether the devil was absolutely bad(fig.12,13,14,17). His look was no doubt ugly and thanatoid. He earned sympathy and trust with a certain disguise. During the night, he obscured the truth which only emphasized the constantly changing phenomena of the world.

Three more images of the falling angels were not only a study of the gesture of fallen but also an inquiry into the limitation of being an angel(fig.15,16,18). In the last picture, the angel was waiting to fly again, to keep out the pain, despair and chaos(fig.19). This carries longing for a beautiful life, and my attempts to make sense out of the world.

The other three images of a larger size,16"x16", were meant to bring the viewers a different impact(fig.20,21,22).

From the very beginning of my search until the end, I lived in a world of dreams. There was a conflict between my old existence and the life I was creating. These experiments were based on a desire to free myself from the "external" world.

V-2. The Labyrinthine Path I

The Labyrinthine Path I consisted of 5 objects on the floor(fig.23).

a. The apple box

As described before, the apple became a crucial element of my work. While I spent lots of time arranging the apples in composed patterns on a pedestal, the shape of the composition puzzled me. I struggled to give the apples the right position in the world, but their stubborn existence was like the indestructible energy hidden in desire. The physical presence of natural objects in decay revealed the ephemeral aspect of life. When the apples

decayed, their texture had the same quality of the skin and flesh of a human being. They hinted at the evanescence of life. Once I realized this, I gave up trying find an arrangement for the apples, but instead only collected and kept some of them in a box I bought from a flea market for 5 dollars. It was more valid for me to dispose of the border or to be shapeless. Eventually I put some rocks into the box as something opposite to the existence of the apples which decayed over the period of the project. The seemingly unchangeable and lifeless rocks attracted me for their calm features. They are the objects of my meditation.

The apple box(fig.24) featured the contrast between permanence and impermanence.

b. Untitled

This piece of work(fig.25) started with two 3'x3' woodpanels. Two pieces of black fabric covered the surface of each panel. On the fabric was painted a pattern of 4"x4" squares. A twined rope sat in the middle of the right panel, one end extended towards the left panel. On the lower right panel, a small twig stood alone at the corner. On the left piece, seven twigs of various shapes and length were arranged in a row. Dust and straw scattered around the work was meant to divide the work from the floor. They also functioned as a bridge between two different universes. Since all the three-dimensional works were placed on the floor without any other support, the floor affected the work in a very direct way . Certainly the height of the work lifted them to a different level.

My intention of the work was to visualize the relation between freedom and bondage. I was influenced by Antoni Tapies's work³ during the process.

³Babara Catoir, Conversation with Antoni Tapies, Munich: Prestel-Verlag,1991.

c. A Pair of Halved Apples

Two halves of apple(fig.26) were laid on accumulated layers of cheese cloth. The softness of the material suggested the tenderness of the skin, but the tinted part cast a shadowy memory. The idea of pairing became ironic when people found out the two pieces were not from the same apple and that one could not match them together to make an unity. I inquired into how a man and a woman found their partner- the other half. There are too many mismatched couples in the world. I also suspected that monogamy is an universally good system to follow.

d. Untitled

A random heap of loosely coiled strands of ropes reminded people of a maze. With randomly arranged apples, it portrayed the chaotic state of mind when encountering the moment of decision(fig.27).

e. Untitled

The juxtaposition of a clay male figure and a clay female figure revealed the center of the maze. Both of them were the victims of love affairs. The woman, who is connected with one end of a heap of ropes, was the victim of temptation(fig.28). Women are often depicted as evil because of the original sin of the first woman, Eve. As a woman, I deeply hope every woman can be treated as an individual and be judged on her own merits. The Garden of Eden is regretfully lost, but the Paradise can be regained by heightened awareness of the weakness and the strength of human beings.

The labyrinth path is the path of the experience of transformation. Whoever reached the end of the path would have the chance to unravel the knot of the secret. *The Labyrinth Path I* was a work that touched me

unexpectedly. The accumulation of time was directly related to the density of the work. I experienced a process of changing the relationship of objects and space. The construct-reconstruct- deconstruct process was a way to work with an idea. I moved around the objects like a dancing explorer. The audience was expected to have the same interaction with the object when they observed the work. The complexity of the meaning hidden in the work could be unfolded by following the path.

I have focused my attention on the importance of uncovering the implicit relationship between myths, symbols, and rituals. It became apparent that the labyrinth described by my imagination suggested a whole universe composed of many worlds, an undefinable and unlimited complex constituted of the interlocking and meshing of all men and women.

I was sometimes unable to control all the processes within the framework of the creation of these work, since I often indulged myself in the endless free-thinking. In development of this piece of work, I observed the internal transformation of substance, the transition of the material from one state to another, and the links between the elements and the way they interacted. Installations are appropriate ways to present ideas and to break down the distance between the works and the audience. I tried to exhibit the presentable part to the viewers even though I could not bring the whole process to them. In this installation I expected to build a complete environment, but unfortunately I did not get into working with all of the space at the photography gallery of R.I.T. The floor was a major problem. I did rearrange the work during the exhibition period. In the first two days of the exhibition the work was located vertically to the hallway. Because the distance between the two was very limited, the photographs and the installation interfered each other. The lighting had been adjusted to suit both, but the two different sets of demands could not compromised each

other in every way. When one of my board member Judy Levy pointed out these defects, I was encouraged by her to make some adjustments that turned out to be great improvements. I felt much more comfortable working with the space after two days of display. I divided the space into three parts by hanging black curtain-like cloth from the ceiling(fig.37,38,39,40,23). The viewers thus would first encounter the photographs . They were then invited to pass the *Labyrinthine Path I* . They would also see the fallen angels' presence at the corner. Finally they would get into the *Labyrinthine Path II* to end the journey. The rearrangement evidently improved the effect of the exhibition but the floor remained a problem. To add any material such as wood strips or small charcoal cubes was too big a task to accomplish for this exhibition.

V-3. The Labyrinthine Path II

The Labyrinthine Path II (fig.29,30,31,32,33) is an installation piece carrying out the idea of four stages of transformation between birth and death, love and desire. It was developed during a year of experiments on different material. The prototype of *The Labyrinthine Path II* was printed on several pieces of painted canvas and stitched together. The stiffness of the material somehow didn't quite well illustrate my idea of the nature flow of life. By printing on a much softer material-chiffon, I attempted to compensate the disadvantage. The 14 yards of fabric were dyed in four sections that varied from yellow to green, to red, to purple gradually. The letters printed on the top of the fabric have been arranged with four Chinese characters: birth, love, desire and death. Each character was combined with two other characters. The translation of the text would be: birth, love born, desire born; love, the birth of love, the death of love; desire, the birth of desire, the death of desire;

death, love die, desire die. Each of the letters was printed with the color of following section but mixed with slightly varied color. The letters could be read from both sides since they were transferred from the wood block randomly backwards and upside-down. Two large pieces canvas were placed underneath the fabric to enhance the overall quality of the work. Ropes and apples were placed on the top without specific arrangement. A bound clay couple was also presented as an essential part of the installation(fig.34). I wish this work could speak of the flow of life extended endlessly.

V-4. The Angels

The physical presence of the falling angels meant to bring the audience into a complete trap. The work(fig.35,36) was constructed from two large pieces of fabric painted with black and muddy colors hanging from the ceiling. There were heavy ropes coiled on the ground which extended through the fabric. The setting was a simplified version of the one I had in my studio. The existence of the angels was not merely an illumination of the mundane but also a manifestation of hope even they all fell in the trap at one point.

VI. CONCLUSION

The collective process of the thesis work mainly focused on exploring the interrelationship between media and material through inner understanding projected onto the phenomenal world. The questions that have been raised during the conceptualization and fabrication process did not all find solution, but it would be profound to regard the process as a prelude to a further development.

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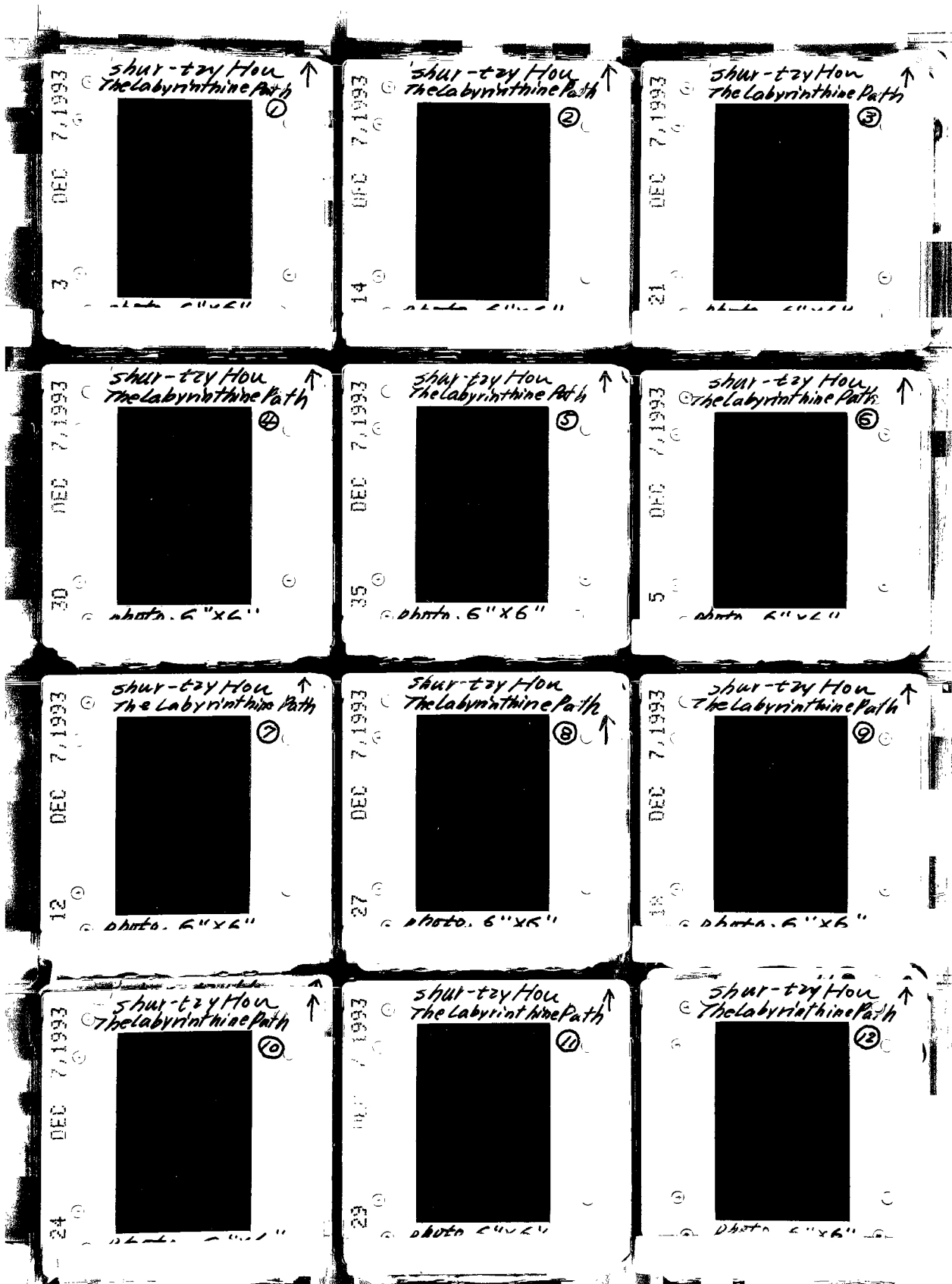
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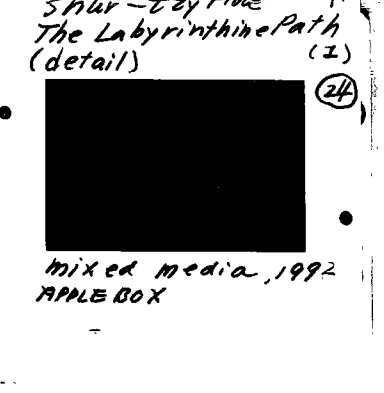
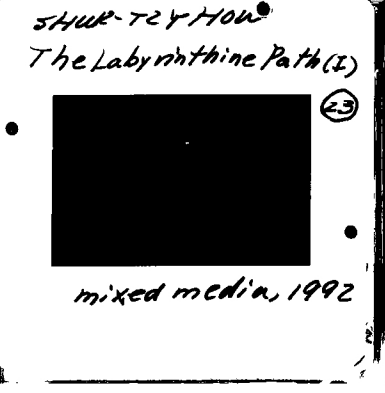
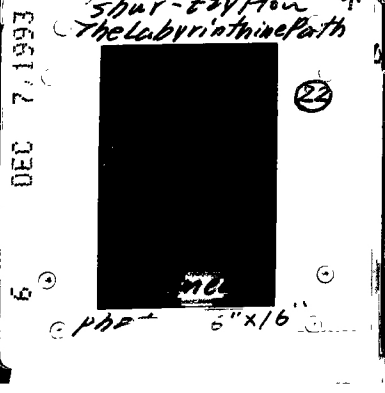
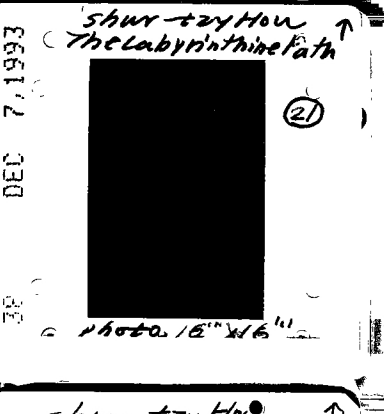
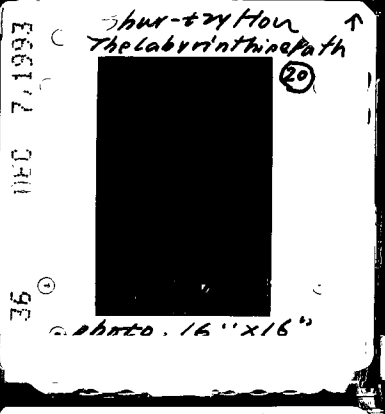
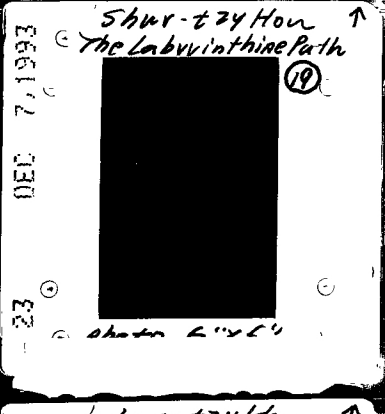
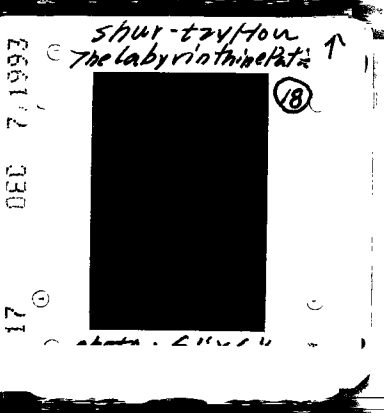
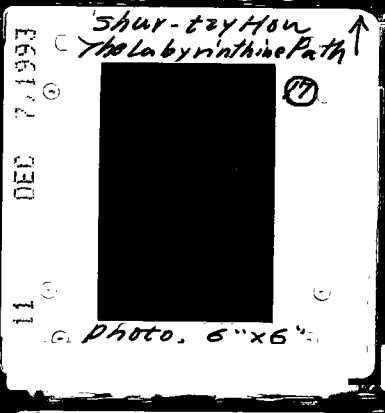
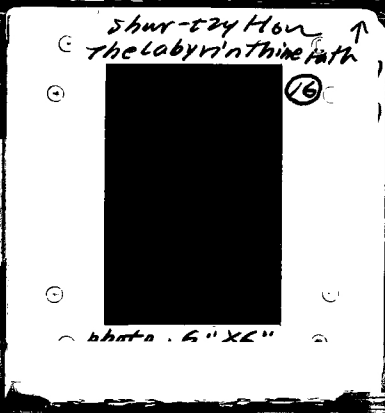
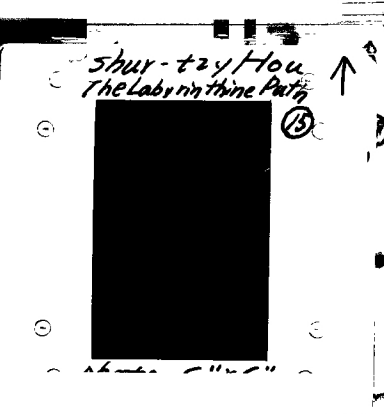
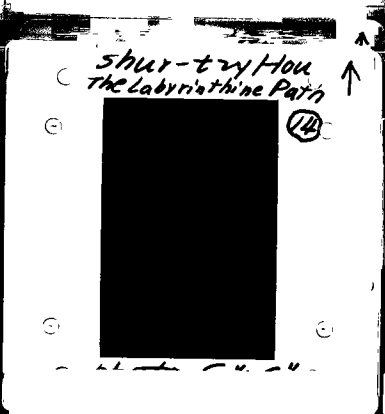
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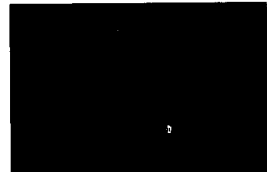


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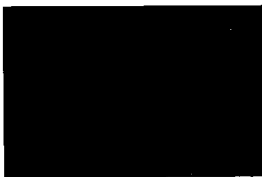


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