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**Making, Remembering, Remaking:
Personal Meanings in Symbolization**

Linda Lok

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art Education

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art Education at
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ABSTRACT

Making, Remembering, Remaking: Personal Meanings in Symbolization
Linda Lok

*My silent voice spirals out of me
with your stories
I remember
they have fused, intertwined and woven themselves
into my story*

My primary goal in the following research is to examine my own sense of ethnic identity, and in the process better understand my own cultural experience through the process of telling my story. This will be done through incorporating two distinct voices, a documentary voice (academic) which is interlaced and interwoven with a personal poetic voice (phenomenological).

This thesis will explore the phenomena of my experience as an artist, student, researcher and individual of Chinese descent living and teaching within a Canadian context. This will involve a process of journeying through my own sense of ethnicity to discern and distinguish within and without my cultural repertoire: an understanding of who I am as reflected in the cultural history of the Chinese in Canada, and from within my family and my upbringing.

Acknowledgments

Thesis

I would like to express my gratitude to the people behind the scenes for their continual support and help.

I am particularly grateful to Cathy Mullen (my thesis advisor), and Lorrie Blair and Paul Langdon (members of my thesis committee) for their continual encouragement, feedback, insightful comments and suggestions. When I found myself immersed within (post)structural paradigms, their encouragement to use my phenomenological voice and incorporate it into my work (art and thesis) has been invaluable.

Exhibition: "Red (my)story"

In the photographic work, "Red (my)story". I would also like to express my gratitude to Pak Tam for his contribution as a photographer, and for his expertise and assistance with computer graphics.

A special thanks to Johanna Bohbot for her work as the makeup artist and stylist.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to my husband, Daniel Rakusha, for his silent support and encouragement throughout the process of writing this thesis.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father, for without his(story), or his encouragement into exploring the cultural dichotomies within and without my own lived experiences. I would not have the rich Chinese cultural history from which to place my(story).

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The title “*Making, Remembering, Remaking: Personal Meanings in Symbolization*” refers to the process of examining who I am within the context of my family, and the greater social context within which I live, teach and make art. It is only through the process of remembering and making that I can re/construct who I am, and identify in my creative process the common links or dominant symbols which prevail throughout my art work.

Through the process of mapping, naming, and telling—integrating my documentary and phenomenological voices, I will examine my perception of my ethnic identity and how I symbolize my worlds (the dominant culture within which I live and teach and my Chinese one, in which I was born and raised). The questions I address or ask in this inquiry include: How have I internalized, utilized and manipulated symbols within my artistic and creative process? What role did art education at the university level play in the development and shaping of my perceptions of ethnicity? In the following chapters, this inquiry is presented through an academic voice intertwined and woven with a phenomenological and poetic voice that tells *my story*—personal memories and perceptions of what it means to be Chinese. My personal thoughts and ideas—remembering—as expressed by my silent poetic voice will be presented in *italic*. Also a part of this inquiry is a photographic installation entitled *RED: (my)story*. This installation represents a body of work developed throughout the process of writing this thesis. These self portraits express my making and remaking my sense of identity and remembering from within a *hyper real Chinese* persona.¹ This particular body of work was exhibited in a solo

¹ *Hyper real* is a term used in describing artificially or synthetically generated environments. A term that is most often used when discussing the exaggerated confines of cyberspace or real space simulations such as Ocean City in Japan. In these recreated and enclosed environments, everything from colour, texture, sound, etc.... are embellished and made to look more than real, hence beyond reality. This is a term that I have borrowed, as in my images, I remake myself to look more oriental than I am through the use of makeup, dress and lighting.

exhibition from June 2, 1997 to June 14, 1997 at Espace 524, 372 Ste. Catherine Ouest in Montreal.

Small photographs and excerpts from the installation are also integrated into the following chapters.

The motivation behind this research is based on my own role as a student, researcher and artist working within a culturally diverse milieu, and reflects my own interest in examining how they are reflected in my “art learning” experience and art-making. From this position (borrowing from my sociological and anthropological background), I will look at the interaction of images and symbols within my art work, and map it against Isajiw’s definition of ethnicity.

From a more personal viewpoint, another important goal is to investigate my own understanding of the cultural paradigms at play in my own life, and thereby explore my own sense of ethnicity and cultural identification, and explore the meanings behind the presence (or absence) of symbols used in my own artistic and creative processes.

METHOD AND PROCEDURES

My inquiry is reflective and phenomenological in its methods of inquiry—I follow Banks’ (1992) contention that one cannot be an effective teacher within a culturally diverse milieu, unless one can first reflect upon one’s own lived experiences and understand one’s own sense of ethnicity and cultural history. The following discussion views my creative and ethnic identification processes from my “multiples realities” (Cohen, 1980:32) as artist, teacher, student, and individual of Chinese ethnic descent. Borrowing from the phenomenological paradigms by Husserl and Schutz, two features will be accounted for. First from the standpoint of transcendental phenomenology of Husserl, my inquiry process investigates and questions the “taken-for granted” assumptions of everyday life” (Cohen, 1980:31). This involves a process of “finding out how things appear directly to us rather than through the media of cultural and symbolic structures” (Cohen, 1980:31), and thereby, “look(s) beyond the details of everyday life to the essences underlying them” (Cohen, 1980:31). By putting the world in “brackets”, or, when we “free ourselves from the ways of perceiving the world” (Cohen, 1980:31), what is left in the “reduction” process is a consciousness from which three elements are extorted—the “I” who thinks, the mental acts of this thinking subject, and the intentional objects of these mental acts” (Cohen, 1980:31). The end goal of

this process is the deconstruction of objective understanding that leads to looking beyond the “preconceptions” of the world. (Cohen, 1980:31). Second, (following Schutz, who was concerned with relating Husserl’s phenomenal viewpoints to the sociological and social behavioral sciences) my inquiry uses reflexivity as a process of understanding that brings meaning to the otherwise meaningless, the “unbroken stream of lived experiences”. Meaning can only be imputed retrospectively, “by the process of turning back on oneself and looking at what has been going on” (Cohen, 1980:32). This is dependent upon the individual identifying reflexivity (or meaning-making) as her purpose or goal. (Cohen, 1980:31) How one understands or makes sense of his or her world is also dependent upon a “process of typification”, that is, mapping or measuring experiences against concepts or “ideal types”. (Cohen, 1980:31) Derived from one’s experience of daily life, these concepts function to help one make sense of and organize one’s social context or world views.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Working Definition of Ethnicity

There is always the danger that any definition may be either too narrow, and therefore inapplicable to the ethnic groups under study, or else too general and hence devoid of substantive meaning. (Isajiw, 1985:5)

In arriving at a working definition for ethnicity, in the Canadian context, subjective and objective approaches are incorporated in “subjective ethnic identification”. This is identified as a phenomenon based on real ancestral links between a person and a group with which there is a shared culture.

Therefore, ethnicity is involuntary by nature, with boundaries that are not flexible, such as the fact of being born into a religious group, and/or racial group, and/or social class. Ethnicity can be articulated by an individual through “feelings of sympathy and loyalty towards members of the same ethnic group” (Isajiw, 1985:19), or by symbolic “items” within a socio-cultural repertoire or phenomenon which have significance for an individual. As noted by Isajiw,

there seems to be a process of selection of items from the cultural past and rather than accepting the entire baggage of ethnic tradition persons from consecutive ethnic generations show a degree of freedom in choosing such items from the cultural past of their ancestors which correspond to their needs created perhaps by the specific character of relations in society as a whole. (Isajiw, 1985:15)

Thus, the individual does have some choice in what or how they articulate their involuntary ethnic identification.

In Canada, the multicultural fabric of society means that “many ethnic groups interact and compete with one another” (Isajiw, 1985:15). One factor in this social dynamic is that “the existence of ethnic boundaries from within inevitably produce ethnic boundaries from without,” or that identification is assigned by others even though no symbolic links can be made with ancestral culture. (Isajiw, 1985:15)

Seen as a process of ethnic rediscovery (Isajiw, 1985:15), persons from any consecutive ethnic generation who have been socialized into the dominant culture may develop or maintain a relationship with their culture of ethnic descent. From the standpoint of understanding my own sense of ethnicity and in the process making sense of my worlds (the dominant culture in which I live and the Chinese one in which I was born into), Isajiw’s definition of ethnicity assists me in putting my dual worlds into perspective. Application of Isajiw’s definition explains that exploration into my ethnicity at this point in my life is linked to a process of ethnic rediscovery (Isajiw, 1985:15). Other research into identity development suggests a generic concept of ethnic identity development rather than a cultural one (Cross’ Model of Psychological Nigrescence as discussed by Smith, 1991), and others still express a developmental viewpoint. (Banks, 1988) Thus, using Isajiw’s definition allows for the incorporation of a cultural link to one’s culture of ethnic descent while looking at the symbolic relationship established between the dominant culture and culture of ethnic descent. Here, “folk art, music, can become symbols of ethnic identity” (Isajiw, 1985:15).

Art Education Research on Ethnicity

Stories focusing on the immigrant experience, ethnic identity and diversity very often mirror the angst shared within a family, reflecting the gap between two generations. One such story entitled, “The Other Family” by Himani Bannerji does just that from an art and education viewpoint. It tells the story of an

East Indian girl who brings home from school a drawing she made of her family, a picture of which she was very proud. However, her mother was appalled at the content, which she felt did not reflect her own family, but a European one. Her response to her daughter was, "This is not your family. I don't have a blond wig hidden in my closet, my eyes are black, not blue, and your father's beard is black." (Hutcheon, 1991:142)

Several questions arise from my reading of this story: Is the teacher at fault for not being sensitive to her students' portrayal of her family and for not making the little girl aware of her ethnic roots? Does this little girl, brought up within two cultures (the one in which she was born, and the greater one in which she is socialized and educated), not see herself as different? What research in art education explores these issues?

Within art education, one study in Leicestershire, England focused on members of the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Afro-Caribbean community. The goal of the study was "to generate a set of curriculum guidelines for a multicultural approach to art and design education" (Toye, 1987). Participants were presented with a display of different items from each of the above mentioned cultural groups. A questionnaire asked parents to provide personal data, the art object they would prefer their children to learn about, the object which they would not like their child to study, opinion on curriculum content, and judgment about length of time for teaching about a culture. (Toye, 1987) Findings in this study showed that parents felt that it was important to teach their children something about their own ethnic culture. Moreover, they were willing to do so at the expense of taking away time in learning about western European cultures. Interestingly, parents were only interested in their own cultural group, and not interested in having their children learn about other ethnic groups.

Other writings and studies in art education look to providing a model of teaching art within a multicultural framework, and although there has been a strong advocacy and voice for a multicultural art curriculum within schools, few authors really explore the complexities that confront art students of ethnic origins. None have really explored the interplay between dominant and non-dominant cultures.

At a conference of the Canadian Society for Education through Art (CSEA, 1992), Dr. Nick Webb addressed the issue of art educators “jumping on the multicultural ban wagon”. In his lecture on “The Race to Be Plural: The Politics, Philosophy and Pedagogy of Multiculturalism”, four types of multicultural curriculum were addressed. Webb defined “pot protectors” as fighters of bigotry and racism through the promotion and celebration of different cultures. The “WIMPS” work from the contention that an understanding of ethnicity is best elaborated through a construction of appropriate paradigms. The “travel agent” looks at art or other cultures from an anthropological viewpoint. Art objects in this context are viewed as exotic artifacts. Finally, a “T.V. guide” presents ethnic diversity from the standpoint of media interest. Although Webb’s typology is somewhat generalized and simplistic, it does reflect how some art educators categorize issues of ethnic diversity.

In the United States, a study by Tomhave identified six different approaches for teaching within a multicultural framework. Somewhat similar to Webb’s typology, Tomhave’s categories arise out of the different issues and ideologies within multiculturalism: acculturation/assimilation, bi-cultural education/cross-cultural research, cultural separatism, multicultural education theory, social reconstruction and cultural understanding. Acculturation/assimilation works from the standpoint of enculturation or assimilation into dominant society (Tomhave, 1992). Bi-cultural education/cross-cultural research, on the other hand promotes minority rights in mainstream education (Tomhave, 1992). Cultural separatism adheres to the establishment of a separate school system: an example would be the Greek and Jewish schools in Montreal. Multicultural education theory espouses curriculum with the purpose of cultural understanding. Social reconstruction takes this one step further and is concerned with developing critical thinking about dominant values in society. Pedagogical goals involve changing preconceived notions of eurocentrism, sexism, racism and class consciousness. Social reconstructionist theories and cultural understanding attempt to promote tolerance of different ethnic groups. (Tomhave, 1992) Social reconstruction and cultural understanding are two approaches that attempt to examine the relationship between different minority groups and the dominant one. In examining this relationship multicultural pedagogy attempts to raise consciousness and to sensitize students to understand the

multifaceted nature of their environment. Multiculturalism has thus become a term and an issue that is often addressed in art education. However, within this multicultural framework, how are the complexities of living within “multiples realities” explored, understood, and supported? None of the existing studies attempt to explore or understand the complexities that confront an individual of ethnic descent.

RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY TO ART EDUCATION

This thesis attempts to examine the relationships between my role as an artist of ethnic descent and my cultural milieu. My intention is to provide a holistic representation of myself as an ethnic minority artist: my sense of ethnicity and my creative process. From an Art Education standpoint, my inquiry will follow Banks’ contention that to be an effective teacher within a multicultural environment, one must first understand one’s own sense of ethnicity and cultural history. The structure by which I measure and understand my own sense of ethnicity and ethnic identification process is through Isajiw’s definition of ethnicity. Finally, phenomenological methodology will help describe my experience. This study will not attempt to prescribe methods in the teaching of art to a culturally diverse student body, nor will it advocate the teaching of a multicultural based art curriculum. Instead it will explore some of my art making experiences, and their relationship to ethnic identity and cultural context, as well as some experience’s as an art student, and thereby share some insights and connections that can benefit art teachers in their teaching practice.

Chapter Two

MAPPING

With the constant (re)shifting of ethnic boundaries within a multicultural framework, and confusing as the ride may be, there is the fear that one may find oneself in (UN)known territories. (UN)charted territories. Where do I place myself? Thus, looking for familiar landmarks, familiar experiences, a map of some sort, provides a guide by which to identify, examine and understand firstly the trail as blazed by my ancestors, and secondly, to understand the political and social dynamics at play during their life here in Canada.

my/My story begins with the arrival of the first wave of Chinese in Canada. It is their story...my great grandfather...my grandfather...a story that has been told, (re)told, (UN)told (embellished, (re)embellished) a number of times by my father...shifting myths...(re)shifting realities...

What is true?

What is real?

They have all fused, intertwined and (re)shifted into my story...

...although I am third generation, I am the first to be born here.

"How is that possible?" one may ask.

THE CHINESE IN CANADA

Great Grandfather came to the golden mountain...in search of a new life...new possibilities...he came as a labourer during the early part of this century, he saved his money so that his son and later his grandson could come to Canada and share in his legacy of the golden mountain...

Father told me that Great Grandfather had a pioneering spirit. He was a man who did not let the overt racism

around him deter him from making a niche for himself in Vancouver. Coming to Canada first as a labourer, to eventually setting up his own fish stall at the local market he endured much racism. I remember my Father telling me how white hooligans use to overturn his stall. With his savings, Great Grandfather eventually opened a restaurant in Chinatown. Here he was able to service other Chinese without having to deal with the racism that was running rampant towards the Chinese. Enclosing himself within an exclusively Chinese environment provided him with a community and a sense of security. In China, Great Grandfather was a respected elder. He lived a long life.

A grave stone in Vancouver is the only concrete testimonial that reminds us of his labour here in Canada. All documentation have been discarded, as my father did not see the value in keeping or preserving them. (When he recognized their historical and personal significance, he regretted throwing out Great Grandfathers' personal papers.) I do not even have a photo of him.

All that I possess is his story, as retold by my father, and although I have never met him, Great Grandfather continues to live in my life through the stories I will tell.

My Grandfather was not so fortunate.

He came to Canada during the time of head tax law. He worked for his father, but he eventually returned to China. My Great

Grandfather sent him back because he had tuberculosis. He died shortly after he arrived in China.

My father has repeatedly told us how unfortunate it was that he did not stay in Canada. They found a cure for tuberculosis shortly after Grandfather left.

Had he stayed in Canada, he would have been cured.

To map my own story against the larger history of the Chinese in Canada, I looked to outside sources. Baureiss' work, "Discrimination and Response: The Chinese in Canada" is one. I was specifically interested in his post-Marxist viewpoint. He contends that immigration legislation in Canada mirrors ongoing economic concerns of the government, and since my own story begins with my Great Grandfather coming to Canada for economic reasons, I used Baureiss's work to parallel my own story. His conceptual framework stems from the viewpoint that Canada, being an advanced capitalist society, is organized within the confines of an "asymmetrical relation of wage labour and capital in the development of productive forces" (Baureiss, 1991:240). Thus the state produces market-protective legislation in order to protect the system from self-destructive side effects. In this process of assuming partial control of the market, it passes laws and regulations to legitimize production. This in turn produces a "legitimation crisis" (Habermas as quoted in Baureiss, 1985:241). This is when the state finds that its action (the introduction or omission of policies) results in the failure to satisfy specific interest groups in positions of power. When government policies respond to interest groups, and thereby maintains a semblance of legitimation, new problems and conflict are often generated among other, opposing interest groups, thereby creating a new legitimation crisis. (Baureiss, 1991:241)

Throughout Canada's history, immigration policies have continuously reflected the state's responses to legitimation crises, and also reflects the need to provide for wage labour. Allowing for an influx of immigrant and foreign labourers to meet the demand for production and expansion has historically been Canada's answer to this problem. However, it has also meant the emergence of ethnic stratification, that

is, groups of “similar ethnic-cultural backgrounds, ethnics of different, ‘less desirable’, backgrounds are permitted entry” but then denied access to social, economic and political power. (Baureiss, 1991:242)

This stratification exists along side the emergence of ethnocentrism (“refers to the tendency to judge other cultural or groups by the standards of one’s own group” (Baureiss, 191:242)), ethnic discrimination, and racism. This is the conceptual framework into which Baureiss places the Chinese in Canada.

Great Grandmother, Grandmother were left at home. Chinese women were not allowed entry into Canada. Due in part to the fear by the Canadian government that men with families will not return to China upon completion of their contract work.

The men sent money home on a regular basis. My Father told me that they had a big house in China, built with the money that came from the Golden Mountain. They were considered fortunate, lucky, and economically well off. Things changed during the Japanese occupation of China. Father was only a child. He, his mother, his brother and one sister escaped to Hong Kong. Another sister was left behind. My father has recounted many times the story of how a Japanese soldier shot him in the leg while he was running in the streets during this turbulent time. I think he was only a young teenager. I don’t recall ever asking my Father how old he was, but I remember my Father rolling up his pant leg to show us his scar. But this story was never confirmed by my Grandmother. So sometimes I wonder if my Father’s story is true or simply the result of a vivid imagination during stressful times, or if my Grandmother blocked out certain experiences, but then, Grandmother never talked much.

In the early part of the century, from as early as the 1850’s and the Canadian gold rush era, the first wave of Chinese immigrants settled in Canada (Baureiss, 1991:241). Traveling from California up to Victoria, B.C. and into the interior, they came in search of gold and prosperity. With the exhaustion of the gold mines by the late 1860s, some returned to China, while others stayed behind in British Columbia. They worked as labourers building bridges and roads, and in mining and the lumber industry. (Baureiss, 1991) As a source of cheap labour, the Chinese worked in occupations that were not of interest to Euro-

Canadians. The first wave of anti-Chinese sentiments arose with organized labour activities. Resentment surfaced over Chinese monopoly of salmon-cannery jobs and the low wages paid to the non-union Chinese work force (Yee as quoted in Baureiss 1991:241).

By the 1880s, with the promise of return fare to China, Chinese males were being shipped to Canada as contract labourers. These workers helped lay the tracks of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) (Chan 1982:65, Berton 1971:201 as quoted by Baureiss 1991:243). Upon completion of their contract, many Chinese males stayed in Canada because their return fares did not materialize. (Baureiss, 1991:243)

With the surplus of labour in a limited market, Chinese males came into competition with Euro-Canadians for jobs. (Baureiss, 1991:242-3)

Mounting pressure from organized labour and from the Province of British Columbia led to the appointment of a Royal Commission by the federal government, the outcome of which was the implementation 1885 of a “head tax”, that is, a fifty dollar tax that every Chinese immigrant had to pay upon entering Canada (Baureiss, 1991:244). It rose to one hundred dollars in 1901. By 1904, the levy was raised to five hundred dollars - equivalent to a year’s wage (Baureiss, 1991:244).

Father came over via the head tax. Not his own. For a specific fee, my Great Grandfather apparently bought a head tax document from a distance cousin. It didn't matter that it had another name—Lee. Father came to the Golden Mountain with these papers. Five hundred dollars was a lot of money those days. It was common practice to buy papers illegally in the underground Chinese community. (“All chinks look alike”.) This was never openly discussed when I was growing up. I remember with much clouded hazy clarity an incident in my early childhood when the family all went to an official government building. When we left the place, our surname was no longer Lee, but Lok. I recall asking my Father, “Why did our name change?”, and I remember Father responding, “Lok is your family name.” The reason for the change was never clearly explained to us. But my own research into the history of the Chinese in Canada has pieced together all the missing pieces. It was only years later, when the National Chinese Council attempted to get reimbursement for the head tax

that I recall my father saying, "I should have kept Great Grandfathers' papers." I remember being very confused by this incident. One day I was a Lee, and the next I was a Lok.

Great Grandfather went through all the challenges of obtaining papers for my Father so that he could have the opportunity Great Grandfather never had—a better life. My Father's goal was to continue with his studies. Much value and emphasis was placed on attaining a good education.

Throughout the next twenty years, Chinese male labourers continued to enter Canada and by 1911, despite the head tax, they inhabited every province. By 1923, the Chinese Immigration Act was passed prohibiting Chinese labourers to enter into the country. This was not repealed until 1947. This was also the year that all Chinese residents were given the right to vote.

My father told me that in the days of my Great Grandfather, signs like "Chinaman (little yellow-belly) keep off the grass." marked manicured lawns throughout Vancouver.

During much of the early history of the Chinese in Canada, racism against the Chinese was rampant and largely legitimized by the institutions of power through their legislation and through individuals in positions of power. For example, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald (1880), "subscribed to the theory that they (the Chinese) were sojourners who might be rented, as one might rent a machine..." (Roy, 1981:152 as quoted in Baureiss, 1991:244)

In a more positive vein, a manager in a British Columbia cannery referred to "...this class (the Chinese)—as a most valuable instrument in the development of the country" (Yee, 1979:9 as quoted in Baureiss 1991:244).

In 1967 an Order in Council amendment of the 1952 Immigration Act help change the nature of Chinese immigration into a much more "heterogeneous population composed of males and females" (Baureiss, 1991:246) of different ages and occupational status. Based primarily on a point system, potential candidates who wished to immigrate to Canada were selected via their economic contribution to Canada. (Tan, 1985:16) While the early Chinese came mostly from Canton, China, "the new system allowed many Chinese families from South America, the Caribbean, southern Africa and Southeast Asia to adopt

Canada as their home (Tan, 1985:16). Between 1972 and 78, about 77 % of Chinese immigrants came from Hong Kong...18 % from the People's Republic (of China), and the remaining five percent from elsewhere" (Tan, 1985:16).

The socio-economic profiles of immigrants after 1962 are very different from the early immigrants.

While the early immigrants from the south of China came in search of work, and were largely farmers or illiterate peasants, immigrants after 1962 saw Canada as a "particularly desirable place to live, work, and raise families because of its' political stability, high standard of living, relative lack of racial tension, and the openness of it's educational system" (Tan, 1985:18). Many were urban professionals, occupying white collar occupations in their country of origin. Others were entrepreneurs and businessmen/women. (Tan, 1985:18).

But have attitudes changed towards us?

I remember a group of teenagers peddling by. They spat at my father and called him "Chink". I remember retaliating with profanities. More clearly, I remember my father gently shaking my arms and saying, "When you stoop to their level, you are not better than they." I recall responding with flaring anger at my father, "You're going to let them get away with it!" "There is nothing you can do to change their minds", replied my father

In his quiet tone, my father had advocated that I/we silently endure the insensitivity and aggressive acts of others towards us— individuals of another race and colour. Since that day, I have learnt to avoid racial conflict through silence, and meander within the dominant "Canadian" milieu with a sense of docility and submissiveness on the one hand, while fuming with silent anger at my own sense of being Chinese. I have also silently learnt to accept the insensitive and overt prejudice projected at me and at others around me, and inadvertently build a wall so to speak by putting a distance between me and the possibility of having to confront racial conflicts. Thus any links to my "Chineseness" was through my family, Chinese friends, or my regular jaunts into Chinatown. My dualistic social realities have remained exclusive.

Rootless, rooted...I push towards the other, only to be pushed back, oscillating between one extreme and another...only to find myself in the center.

I am a neither, nor...a banana (yellow on the outside), but my yellow skin also makes me the other.

Chapter Three

NAMING

within/without

inner/outer

me/them

i/you

Viewed from without, much of my phenomenological voice is structured through Isajiw's definition of ethnicity:

Ethnicity is a matter of a double boundary, a boundary from within, maintained by the socialization process, and a boundary from without established by the process of intergroup relations (Isajiw 1991:15).

With this definition, I explore the use of cultural symbols and their influences in my own artistic and creative processes, the end goal of which is to arrive at an understanding of how these cultural symbols help me organize and make sense of my ethnic identity within and without the greater milieu in which I teach and make art.

The more I defy the use of specific Chinese cultural symbols, the more I find them surfacing in my work:

Concubines' Reverie

the moon and stars

behind an indigo haze

fragrances of cherry blossoms fill the night air

silence is her only companion

as she walks alone in the quiet courtyard

gazing beyond lotuses

floating in cool water

dreaming of a boat along the river's edge

*it will await for her at dawn
but she must first slip pass cast iron gates
and make her way down sloping rice fields
into the forest
to the waters' edge*

*and she will sail
to a land far beyond
free to roam and explore
but a tear runs down her cheek
awakening her from her dreamy reverie*

RED

Rather than choosing the entire gamut of my cultural baggage, there is a process of selecting specific symbolic items from within my socio-cultural repertoire or phenomenon, and according to Isajiw, there is a degree of freedom in choosing items from within my culture/s which in turn corresponds to my need/s. The need factor is in turn created by the nature of the relationship/s with my society as a whole. (Isajiw, 1985:15)

My symbolic identification with Chinese culture is sustained and reinforced by customs and practices from within my family and my Chinese ancestry. These I choose to adhere to and observe out of respect and honour for what my mother and father has shared with me through the years. For example, I celebrate Chinese cultural festivities, folkloric customs and taboos from the south of China even though I may not understand the inherent meanings behind them. The act of observing these cultural practices is a link to my Chinese heritage. The observance on my part of rituals associated with Chinese New Year is an example. I do not wash my hair on New Years Eve, nor do I clean my home, but do so before. Cleaning on New Year's Eve is tabooed, and is symbolic of washing or sweeping away good fortune. All cleaning is done before the New Year, preferably the day before.

In my artistic process, there are specific symbols which I continuously use and manipulate. The colour *Red* is one. Since Chinese antiquity, red is a symbol associated with luck and prosperity:

Red is the colour associated with fu and xi, happiness...In Chinese belief, because red is the colour of blood, it is the colour of life, and hence associated also with yang, the positive, male, life-giving force of the yin-yang polarity. All yan elements protect against evil and so reinforce life. (Berliner, 1986:33)

Red was a colour that dominated my scene-scape as I was growing up. I remember seeing the colour red everywhere. I remember my mother decorating our home with red papercuts during Chinese New Years. Red was also a predominate colour scheme within the Chinese community. Vermilion backdrops and golden dragons dominated Chinese restaurants. Red envelops filled with *lucky money*.

RED (my)story

(Artist Statement)

1997

“*Red (my)story*” refers to the process of examining who I am within the context of my family, and the greater social context within which I live and make art. Phenomenological in nature, this particular body of work, explores my perception of my ethnic identity and how I symbolize my worlds (the dominant culture within which I live and my Chinese one).

By (re)making myself into a *hyper real Chinese* persona, and through the process of remembering and (re)telling my story, I (re)construct who I am.



Red
is
the colour of my passion
and
love for you
it is also the colour of my
hurt
anger
and
pain



Red

is a

Chinese Wedding colour.

Worn by the bride

to symbolize

luck, good fortune,

prosperity, long life,

health, and fertility.

I've always hated the colour red with a passion.



I remember wearing red on my wedding day. I was advised by my Mother to wear red—it was the tradition. I wanted to wear a white gown—pure and flowing. A traditional form fitting red Chinese dress made me look too oriental, and I didn't want to be Chinese. I didn't want to be Chinese. I wanted to be a princess in white.

Chapter Four

TELLING

Trying to understand or to place myself within the cross-cultural context as a female of Chinese descent, is confusing. For although I live and interact within an environment in which cultural pluralism is first and foremost an integral part of my social-cultural and political reality, there are many occasions in which I feel that I am shifting in and out of many different personas or 'mythos'. I feel as if I am polarized by I/i, us and them, you and me. I feel isolated.

Legitimization comes in telling my story, and in the process of telling, I am forever changed. I have shifted from the domain of the private, from the silence of self talk where thoughts whirl in a constant state of cultural dichotomic polarity, of mental turbulence and constant ethnic insecurity that has led me to regard everything as a philosophical problem, into the public.

As I reflect back in an attempt to identify when I first became interested in the issue of my sense of ethnicity, I came to the realization that in order for the topic to have first captivated my attention, it was an interest that has been stirring for quite sometime.

My own sense of curiosity, and my need to validate that what I was feeling can be justified within concrete terms, led me to explore other cultures from within the confines of academia, most notably within the discipline of anthropology and through the different theoretical paradigms utilized in this particular field of study. It opened up for me many new insights into the eurocentric nature of the discipline on the one hand, as well as an awareness of the other-women and other individuals from the outside (the cross-cultural), whose voices have in the past been excluded and who are now being heard. It laid the groundwork, so to speak, for my own voice to surface and develop. More importantly, when I entered into the graduate program in Art Education, much of this curiosity—or more specifically my interest or leanings towards the social-cultural and ever-so-silent voice from within the cross-cultural context—started to evolve.



BLOOD

when my sister first started to bleed,

Mother sent her to me so that I could show her what to do.

I remember

carefully explaining the changes

her body

was

going through...





...her body was going through.

I wanted it to be a positive experience.

I did not

want her to experience

the pain and shame

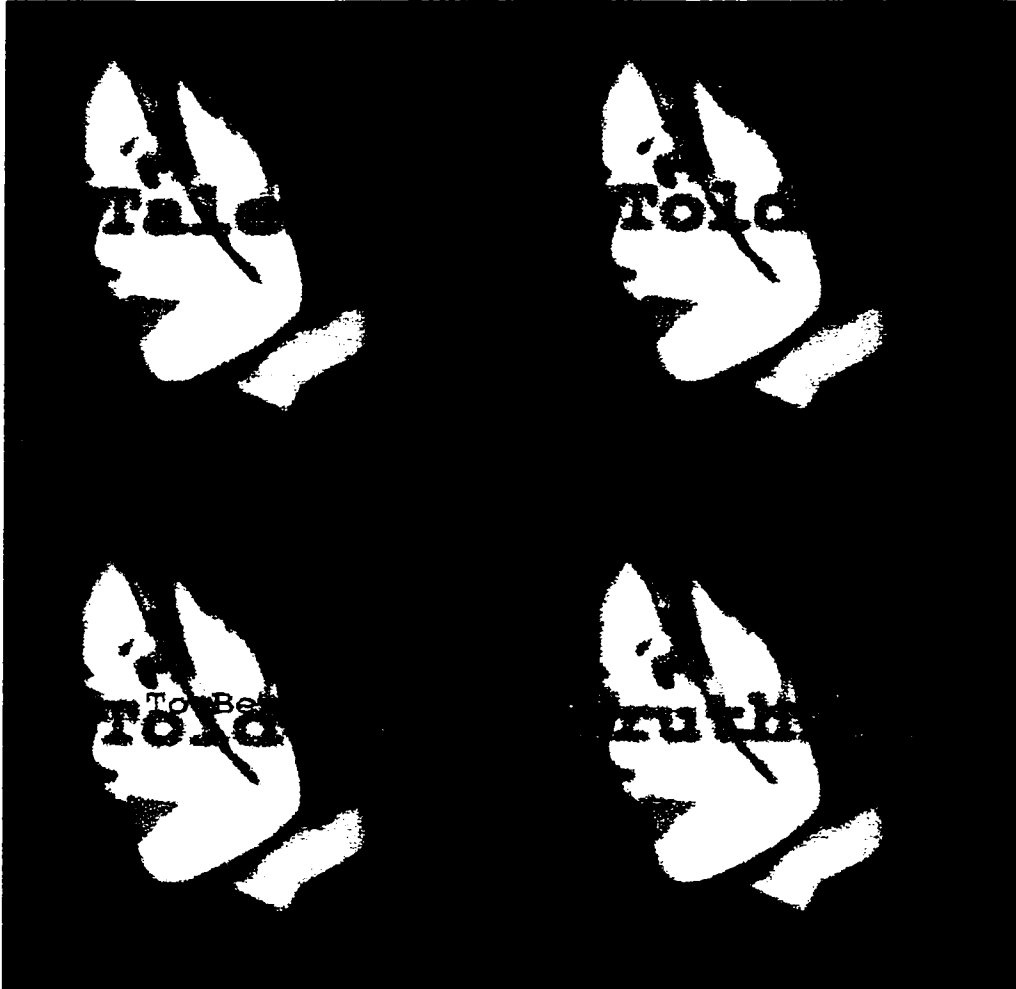
I

had

felt.

(his)story

"Tale, told, to be told...Are you truthful?" (Minh-ha, 1990:327)





my silent voice

spirals out of me

with your stories

they have intertwined and fused with (my)story



All through my childhood, I can recall numerous times in which my father imparted to us (his) story. I don't think I really took any of these stories seriously and can remember feeling embarrassed when he would insist on telling them to friends of mine who dropped by the house. I didn't mind so much when relatives or family friends were over, for all they did was recount stories of the past. What truths were interwoven into these stories were much too "old" and "ancient" for me to understand. I thought they were far fetched tales—myths. I remember asking my father, "is what you are telling me true?" How I must have hurt him with those thoughtless little gibbers. They did not however deter him from telling me more stories. Today, I yearn to hear my father retell those stories of the past. I remember hearing stories as a young girl and feeling shame that my forefathers arrived in Canada as labourers. Now I rejoice in their courage. I am proud of their toils amidst the "Golden Mountain", and their Canadiana roots. My

research into the Chinese in Canada helped me place (my)story in context to the social, political and cultural development of Canada. My fore-fathers build this country with perseverance, sweat, and human power.

(my)story

Viewed from within, one of the issues that arises within my story are my own misconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes on being Chinese within a culturally diverse milieu.

As long as the blood continues to flow in my body

I/i am me

I/i will not be angry



she came from a very enclosed community

dependent

I/i remember my grandmother turning to my mother and telling her, “you didn’t bring your daughters up properly, a young woman should not be so free with her expressions or gestures.” ...my mother nodded in silence....ashamed...



I/i too was silent—pretending I did not understand her Toishanese. i/we spoke predominately Toishanese using English when I could not find the appropriate word, but then there are times when I cannot find the word or phrase in English either.

English polite whispers soft

Toishanese loud layer upon layer of loud voices



resonating hard and deep from the throat

it got louder as we each tried to communicate, share, or tell our story

a noisy din to others who were not familiar with the way we communicated

Chapter Five

(RE)TELLING

Through the process of telling one's story, there is also a developing self awareness and understanding.

One can move beyond the tears towards laughter. Where through the very process of (re)telling, one journeys towards a sense of closure, toward a new beginning—a new paradigm shift.

I did not grow up in a cultural vacuum. Instead I inherited two worlds, dualistic in nature, the world of my ethnic descent, and the larger world of the dominant culture in which I also live. (Re)shifting voices from within and without, an (in)doctrination of Chinese mysticism, social values, norms and customs on the one hand, and the Evangelical Protestant belief and ideological systems which mom and dad also professed to. Two conflictive and polarizing world views.

It was often very confusing trying to distinguish between the two polarities that existed in my life. There were many examples of this, one of the most vivid is the time my grandmother told my mother that an ancestral spirit stood outside our home. I remember laughing at the very notion. The next day, my mother made a special trip to the local soothsayer, who performed a ritual of burning paper money to send this spirit off into the ephemeral heavenly realm. I remember telling my mother that this was a very un-Christian act. "Mother, we are Christians, and this is sacrilegious in nature", I had interjected. Angry, she turned to me and retorted that I did not understand.

I remember seeking answers for her illogical act, only to realize that "to be understood, they must be seen as part of a larger tradition—a religion and belief system. The complex belief system of rural Chinese society encompasses Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and includes a fantastic spirit world where immortals and mortals eventually reside side by side. There is a constant communication between earth and heaven, between the carnal and the ethereal. Spirits and their earthly counterparts frequently assist each other." (Berliner, 1986:27) Ironically, my answers came from non-Chinese sources.

Art Making Experience

“What do I recall of my art making experience?”

It is difficult to separate the many layers of experience that have been built over time, and examine them without questioning: What is truth? What is real? There is a very thin line between what I remember about what is “real”, and my own myth making. Language is the only tool I have which can function as a bridge between memory and a vertigo clouded by feelings and emotions. Can my story be told and discussed without a certain amount of displacement? In telling, language falls prey to the limitation of binary opposition: *I/object; internal/external; private/public; nature/culture.*

A reiteration of the subject/object where the “I” becomes “it”, and “We” becomes “They” (Minh-ha, 1990:327). (my)story becomes an intimate philosophical discourse, about the “semantic distance between oneself and the work; oneself (the maker) and the receiver; oneself the other.” (Minh-ha, 1990:327)

To claim that I speak the truth denotes a position of knowing, of mastery, of which I really know not. I speak only from the stories relayed to me by my father and mother, and from fragmented memories. Their stories speak through me, but in doing so, I transcend the boundaries of the *I/i* polarity, and in the process question: What is true? Subjective in nature, what is real is simply my perception. Thus inevitably, in synthesizing memory into language, the former has been transformed into words, and each utterance can only be defined in terms of other words:

each word uttered only makes complete sense when the sentence is finished; and it is perhaps only the last word uttered which retrospectively established the full sense of each word that came before...any sentence can be added to. No sentence is ever completely saturated...There is no link between the signifier and signified...In the course of a life time the individual builds up many chains of signification, always substituting new terms for old and always increasing the distance between the signifier that is accessible and visible and all those that are unconscious. (Lacan as summarized by Sarup 1989:13)

There is also an element of romanticizing or nostalgia that is evoked during the process of reflection and remembering. (Jameson, 1988: 15-19) Much of what I remember as a child of my ethnicity and childhood art making experiences were very much related to my father. From a psychological viewpoint, it can be surmised that these memories were special ones which I cherished not because I spent a lot of

time with my father, but rather the inverse, that I spend so little time with him. Moreover, these activities were memorable, because they reign outside the mundane of daily routines. Thus, in the process of reflecting and writing about my ethnicity and art making experience, it is difficult to separate what is the signifier and what is signified - it has surfaced to some degree, into my 'mythos'.

More significantly, memories are evoked and utilized as "ammunition" towards highlighting or presenting a specific stance, or argument. To echo Lyotard,

In a discussion between two friends the interlocutors use any available ammunition...questions, request, assertions, and narratives are launched pell-mell into battle. The war is not without rules, but the rules allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance. (Lyotard, 1984:17)

Throughout my youth, Chinese aesthetics was expounded and nurtured within the family nucleus. I recalled my parents' effort to share with my siblings and me many components of their culture. One of my earliest art making experiences involved using Chinese art mediums: rice paper, brush, inks and watercolours.

As a five-year-old, holding the brush properly and writing my Chinese name was one of the first things I learnt to do. Many long hours were also spent on learning to control the delicate balance between the brush and the amount of ink and water, where slightly different pressure on the brush can create the most fragile or bold line. Many hours were also spent on painting the goldfish—a Chinese symbol for luck and prosperity—"Fish, yu, a homonym with the word for plenty or abundance, is also frequently employed in decoration to bring such luck as an abundant harvest (Berliner, 1986:36)"

When I first started to draw abstract figures during my first year of fine arts study in university, my father would sit beside me while I worked on my drawings. "Cockroach drawings," he would respond. He would draw an outline of a fish, and in the process tell me that this is how an image should look.

When we were children, Father encouraged us to make our own toys, to use paper, found material, empty cans in a creative and ingenious way. I remember my younger brother and I experimenting with sound using recycled objects. In playing "Get Smart" ('agent 99' and 'Maxwell Smart') two tin cans with a long string attached to either end became our "walkie talkie".

I remember drawing outlines of Chinese women in long flowing gowns. The drawings had an element of fantasy to them. These drawings were probably inspired from viewing kung fu films when I was a child. I would draw many of these pictures and then staple them together. This became my colouring book. Money was scarce. Father and mother felt it was a waste of money to buy toys. Fathers' focus was on the more important necessities of life. What we lacked in terms of material things we gained in another aspect. We spend every Sunday doing something special. Father and mother delighted in taking us to the Royal Ontario Museum to view the Chinese collection, attending Chinese Operas, viewing contemporary Chinese films in Chinatown, touring the Ontario Science Center, or viewing Canadian art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Father's favorite artists were the Group of Seven, and his favorite kind of art was representational.

One of my fondest memories is a particular outing with the family to the department store one Christmas. It is an occasion that my siblings and I still recall with warmth and tenderness. During this particular Christmas, Father asked each of us to choose a toy. I remember being so timid in my selection, that I finally chose a doll. I also recall my father and mother frantically searching the toy department for my youngest sister. They finally found her standing next to a walking doll that was twice her size. She still has this doll.

From as early as I can recall, I was always making art and researching a particular topic of interest (and often from an anthropological viewpoint) at the same time. Throughout grade six, my teacher, Mr. Down, gave me the freedom to work on many different topics. One of my most memorable projects was researching with another classmate (he was Chinese, and spoke very little English) the social and religious life of the Aztec Indians. I remember making elaborate drawings of their religious ceremonies, their temples, and scenes from what I imagined to be their daily lives. With

these drawings and the incorporation of text from our research, we made a film strip, which we presented to the class.

I also recall the time I wanted to research the life and times of Queen Elizabeth I of England, and being the type of student who loved to examine all the books at the school and local public library (father was on the public library committee, so I was always there) on the topic and feeling that it was somehow lacking, I remember writing Queen Elizabeth II for some more information (primary source). I remember Mr. Down giving me a big package along with a letter written by one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, and I remember the big grin he had on his face (I don't know if it was because he was laughing at me because I had written to the Queen asking for primary and a more personal in-depth source of information, or if he was surprised I actually got a response). This was the starting point of my own development as the researcher-artist, so to speak. It is interesting to realise that my own art projects incorporate personal and intimate discourse, image (photographs and computer enhanced imagery) and text, and that my plans for future projects incorporates all these elements within a video context—have I come a full circle?

Art and Research

The processes of art and research are very similar. Both begin with a question or issue, and both seek to arrive at a conclusive answer. Like paint to a white canvas, layer upon layer of (con)text(ual)isation—black ink upon the page—becomes a visual collage of meaning in the form of signs and symbols. In shifting through the layers one finds many different voices or stories. Nothing remains the same.

Art and research have always been didactic polarities for me. The two have always been exclusive and often times confusing, as each functions, and utilizes and develops different sides of my brain. This was probably due to the fact that when I was growing up, the focus on education and academics were re-enforced by my parents through our early childhood play and through our weekly excursions. An education which would lead to a promising and lucrative career was particularly encouraged and valued within my family and within the Chinese milieu in which I grew up. My parents'

conversations with uncles, aunts, family members and friends always reverted back to how well their children were doing at school, or how hard they studied (I recall my father having me recite the multiplication tables before I could go and watch television). Talent in art and music was viewed as an extra-curricular activity or hobby rather than a career choice. I remember my brother had the talent to teach himself to play different musical instruments effortlessly. (We all played an instrument when we were young, and often performed for our Church congregation Sunday mornings—the ‘Van Trapp Family’ revisited—I use to muse.) He wanted to study music in university, but my father had deterred him from doing so, insisting he study something more career oriented. When I first went to university, I too chose the academic route. I chose to study anthropology and sociology more out of a curiosity for other cultures, and more out of a need to look at cultural dynamics other than my own. Perhaps I chose this discipline out of the need to mirror, or perhaps validate, my own experience as real and meaningful. But art was not forgotten, and I spent my weekend and evenings pursuing the art of Chinese watercolour. Taught by Sophie Ho, a master in the art of Chinese watercolour, the approach to painting through the control of brush, water, and ink recalled the way I was taught art as a teenager. I had a special tutor at the time, my art teacher. This was in grade 12. At the time, I was going through a personal transformation of sorts—a crisis—from a greasy haired Chinese student who was obedient, good and studious, to the hip hop Chinese student who wanted to be in with the “in crowd”. I remember going into art class one day drunk (after I had been out during lunch drinking at the local tavern), and lying on one of the drawing tables, I told my art teacher to get lost. I think I surprised him. Actually, all my teachers that year were very understanding of what I was going through, and although they didn't condone my rebellious attitude, they were there for me when I needed a listening ear. My art teacher, Mr. McLean took me aside later that day, and offered to give me art lessons after class twice a week. Perhaps it was his way of keeping me constructively busy and out of trouble, or perhaps he was helping me develop a skill or talent, or perhaps it was his way of helping me develop my own sense of self esteem and individuality, I don't remember, but what I do recall is many hours of exploring line, texture, shade as I copied and examined old master drawings. This approach was

very much the methodology used by my watercolour master, Sophie Ho. Ironically, during my first year as a graduate student in Art Education, I ran into Sophie, now an undergraduate student in Fine Arts. She decided to do a program in studio art to develop a more Western approach to painting and drawing. Here she was, this renowned Chinese Watercolour Artist within the Chinese community both here and in Asia, whose father was also a well renowned Chinese watercolourist, poet, and calligrapher, and she decides to go back to university to learn Western art. Needless to say, I was a little shocked, and asked why she did not just experiment with the medium. But after some thought, I realised that her decision to return to school and learn Western art was very much a product of her own training and educational process, and reflective of learning through a mentor or master (teacher/master and student).

My decision to study Chinese watercolour was motivated by my own need to find a grounding in my studio work from a technical standpoint, especially in painting during the first year of my undergraduate degree in Fine Arts. It offered a sense of security, and mirrored the way I had been taught to paint and draw as a teenager with Mr. McLean. I had just finished my Bachelor degree in Anthropology and Sociology, and although I had kept up with my own work (painting and drawing) and had participated in group shows, I was awashed with this unexplainable sense of low self esteem, and kept asking myself all kinds of questions: Do I have the talent? Is this the route I should be taking in my artist development? Am I an artist, or am I just fooling myself? What is an Artist? How can I express myself as an artist? What do I want to say visually?

After four years of being indoctrinated with social and cultural models, functionalism, structuralism and post Marxist theoretical paradigms, I sought to find what I believed in. I started to explore through reading, a theoretical model that suited my own thinking process. I found that I had to make a slight mental shift within Fine Arts, and to my comfort, discovered that although the terms and jargons differed from one discipline to another, and although names may be different, theories were the same. I approached art making as I would a research paper. This helped ground my own artistic development. In the beginning, I looked at my work, and it somehow recorded the angst and

confusion I felt, that first year in fine arts. I had felt so lost. My own artistic work was as fragmented as I felt within. A jumble mess! Through the process of finding out what my own thinking process was, and what I believed in, helped to structure my work that first year. I experimented with different painting techniques and different media to discover my own areas of interest and talent. Although I was able to express my work from an articulate standpoint, I could not necessarily express it visually. Thus, for the first three years of my undergraduate process in Fine Arts I found myself questioning the very nature of art through a process of unmaking, deconstructing and remaking all I knew about the figure (body) and nature through drawing and painting that I had learnt with Mr. McLean, and then ironically, Sophie Ho.

Ironically, understanding who I was from a creative and artistic standpoint became a process of drawing from my own reservoir of knowledge, lived experience, and learning on my own about a particular medium or subject. It was only through this process that I could make sense of my own work, by unmaking all that I knew, and rebuilding or remaking it.

But what did I want to say?

After I finished all studio requirements, I felt I had not really accomplished anything in my own creative process. Moreover, I was so dissatisfied with the way studio had been taught. There was no real theory or technique being taught. In each studio program, one was subjected to the subjective and often times biased viewpoints of the instructor. With this somewhat negative experience behind me, and with the belief that I can perhaps be a better teacher, and modeling myself after the sensitivity, insightfulness and tactility of Mr. McLean and Sophie Ho, I decided to apply for the Art Education program at Concordia University.

During the first year of my graduate program in Art Education, and probably as a result of a developing boldness in my approach there is a new boldness in my artistic development. I began to take risks which I would not have done as an undergraduate student. I began to explore my own body with the use of Polaroids.

I was particularly fascinated by the body—woman’s body. Observation and studies of the female body in life drawing classes, and understanding the line, mass, contours, and plane, was my way of understanding my own body. This led to an exploration into how the body could express sensuous emotions such as pleasure, passion, or anger and pain through the slightest twist and turn of the figure. This was perhaps my way of understanding my own body, as it was a tabooed subject within my family. Tabooed in the sense that when we were growing up, my parents never discussed with us the developmental or sexual aspects of the body (sex in general). When I first started to menstruate, I remember not understanding what my body was going through. I remember being afraid to tell my mother lest she thought I did something wrong, and when I did show her what was happening to me, she just showed me what to do—no explanations. It was only during health class in grade 7 (when I was 13 years old) that I discovered my body was going through a natural developmental process. I forgave my mother, understanding that she could only teach me what she herself was taught via her own mother. Thus, exploring sex and sexuality within a complicated and multilayered social, cultural and psychological (personal) paradigm became a major theme throughout my work (writing and art).

*(...Excerpts from a body of work entitled, **What’s in a Name?**)*

I don’t know my body, I’m scared of my body!

I know it’s the way I was brought up—nudity or the human body—to look at your body was a form of shame... it was very tabooed.

Constructing and Deconstructing the Foundations

At the first day of the Canadian Society for Education Through Art (CSEA) Conference in Toronto (November 1991), I remember listening with great enthusiasm to the keynote address by Dr. Glenn Lowry as he discussed the need for museum and art educators to adhere to the social and cultural diversities of our society: “Art without people makes no sense” (CSEA, 1991). *I recalled leaning over and whispering to Professor Leah Sherman, and telling her that I understood and can relate to what Dr. Glenn Lowry was saying. I remember she took my pen and wrote the following in my notebook: “You can validate your*

own experience and ideas - because they are real to others". *This little comment by Professor Sherman is the catalyst which drove me through my graduate work in Art Education, leading to an exploration into my own sense of ethnicity by examining first, the meaning of art within a diverse cultural milieu, the role of art education, and then exploring my own roots or sense of ethnicity as a student and artist/researcher.*

Through a process of incorporating personal discourse and structuring it within a post-structuralist paradigm, and often times inserting quotes into the work from research in Anthropology and Sociology, my work moved toward a more profound insight into who I am.

(Excerpts from Narrative, 1991²)

pretty, beautiful

My name is Linda

jade flower

My name is Yian Lian

oppositions

When I was a young child, I remember telling my mother

I thought father was a much better cook.

My mother left the table and wept.

I had not realised that what I had said had hurt her.

As a teenager I pretended that I did not know nor understand

Chinese. I denied my heritage

On my use of the colour black, red, and white: Milk and semen are white. Blood is red. feces are brown. Blood and feces both turn black with age" (Leach, 1976:57).

On understanding my Chinese culture: (in China) "the bride was dressed in bright reds and greens, the widow in unbleached hemp and an ordinary working class wife in blue black indigo" (Leach, 1976:58).

² *Mapping my silent voice is part of my studio process. I record the minuscule inception of ideas, musings, sketches, poetics, to the thinking, intellectualization, analysis and final materialization of a project. I always incorporate some of this material in the form of a book (or booklet). Narrative, 1991 is a hand-made bond book, and a part of a body of work entitled, Responses—a series of large scale figurative drawings, which explores the theme of violence, pain and death*

On my use of the rectangle: (in the west) “The rectangle is shaped by the opposition of vertical and horizontal lines...straightness connotes regularity, conformity...taking their meaning from our bodies, straight lines show a rising emphasis of human control, upward orientation, and centerness exhibited in our erectness” (Bronner, 1986:16-17).

(...continued...excerpt from Narrative, 1991)

My work is part of my ongoing exploration of my dual cultural identity which comprises elements within my dual cultural repertoire - the dichotomy between east and west, between Chinese and non Chinese. There is also a preoccupation on the use of the rectangle. I have appropriated this form to symbolise that thin veneer we call civilization. The rectangle is a personal symbol. Utilised much the same way the structuralist (C. Levi-Strauss) contends it to be: “the grid is not a story, it is a structure, and one, moreover, that allows a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism to maintain themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed” (as quoted in Krauss, 1987:13).

The rectangle is then, that thin veneer I know as civilization - it represses and structures my world views. However, as recent events have shown - Yugoslavia, Indonesia (referring to top news stories in 1991), the killing of 14 women at the University of Montreal, etc. - this veneer is easily torn - revealing our malaise.

The colour and shapes I use are loaded with personal meanings from within my Chinese cultural heritage, and from within the larger context of western epistemology. They have been appropriated to express my concerns with compartmentalization and confinement.

Making and Unmaking

To break the rules, one must first understand implicitly what the rules mean, otherwise one may find oneself swimming within an ocean, lost, flowing to and fro. If one were to find oneself upon a small island surrounded with nothing except a body of water, one at least has the island as a starting point from

which to explore, examine, and eventually build a foundation upon which can rest the plans of building a boat, a home, or a bridge.

This process of learning art through seeing, listening, repetition, and copying took me a while to unmake when I first entered the fine arts program at Concordia University. I recall the frustration of trying to abstract, deconstruct and break the classical approach I used when drawing the figure. I remember asking myself one day: "Why am I trying so hard to unmake something that I've been taught?" Why am I unmaking something that is so reflective of my own Chinese culture? Why not pull out specific elements which I like, or are more reflective and representative of myself, and why not develop them? Why not unmake, remake, embellish, reshift these elements within my cultural repertoires and play with them, manipulate them? Why not?

Artist Teacher

From the standpoint of art education, and teaching in general, I contend that before one can be an effective teacher within a multicultural framework, it is important for the teacher to examine their own sense of ethnic identity, and in the process better understand their own cultural experience. This thesis has in effect been a journey as such, exploring the different aspects of who I am within a dualistic cultural milieu, my Chinese one, and the greater Canadian one in which I live. Moreover, by examining different memories, these fragments create the greater sum of which is understanding who I am as reflected within the many diverse social contexts I find myself. In my case, it is within the different roles of daughter, student and artist. As a teacher, I believe that through this process of exploring my ethnic identity through my phenomenological or silent voice, I can empathize more with my students' needs. As many of my students come from a diverse cultural milieu, being able to place myself within a social context, and being able to identify where I've come from culturally, has been a very important aspect in my ability to communicate with students within my classroom setting. In my teaching experience, most of my students come from many different cultural backgrounds, and many of them do not speak English. I use art activities as a means to bridge this barrier, as well as a means to let the child express him/herself. Working in groups, the banter of the other children helps

the child learn communication and social skills. Working on individual projects gives the child the opportunity to have some personal space, as well as provide me, the teacher, an opportunity to examine and evaluate where the child is at developmentally. When I see a child has a particular interest in a specific area, like painting, or cutting and gluing, I create an environment in which the child can further develop his or her area of interest. Much like Mr. Down my grade six teacher, or Mr. McLean my high school art teacher, if I see a particular child has a specific need, I work with this child individually, or encourage them to work with another on a topic of their choice.

Art: so much of it is simply a need for me to express the turmoil and unresolved issues within: my way of putting into coherent texts or signs the hurt and pain that I could barely express or articulate by speaking out. And now, to sit here and let these feelings unfold into text, into some form of meaning, is a difficult process, for are there words tangible enough to explain the immateriality of thoughts, desires, feelings and all the little nuances that go hand-in-hand with emotions? No. Who am I as reflected by my works? Who am I as reflected in the eyes of you? Who am I as I stare at the mirror image of me? I know my personal history. Yes, I am a Chinese born Canadian. Born in 1959 in Toronto. The first of my family to be born here. I have been enriched by two cultures, and although the two are mutually exclusive, I have learnt to meander between the two, taking what is best from both worlds, and incorporating it into my own lived reality. Confusion arises only when they conflict with one another. Then I must sift through and question why specific issues of conflict and confusion arise, and work through them. Hence art is also a means for me to work out questions, issues that may be resonant in my mind. Working on a specific topic or issue helps me answer and resolve whatever question, conflict or confusion I may be experiencing. From an ethnic identity standpoint, I know who I am, and how I came to be; however, I am no closer in discovering who I really am. Who am I? Who I am is constantly in flux, changing, shifting, and responding to the world around me. I respond to the nuances of lived experience, and am hopefully sensitive enough to pick up on all the rich nuances around me.

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COLOUR PRINTS

RED: (my)story



is the colour
passion and



i remember wearing red on my wedding day

i wanted to wear a white gown
pure and flowing

own-fitting
ok too of

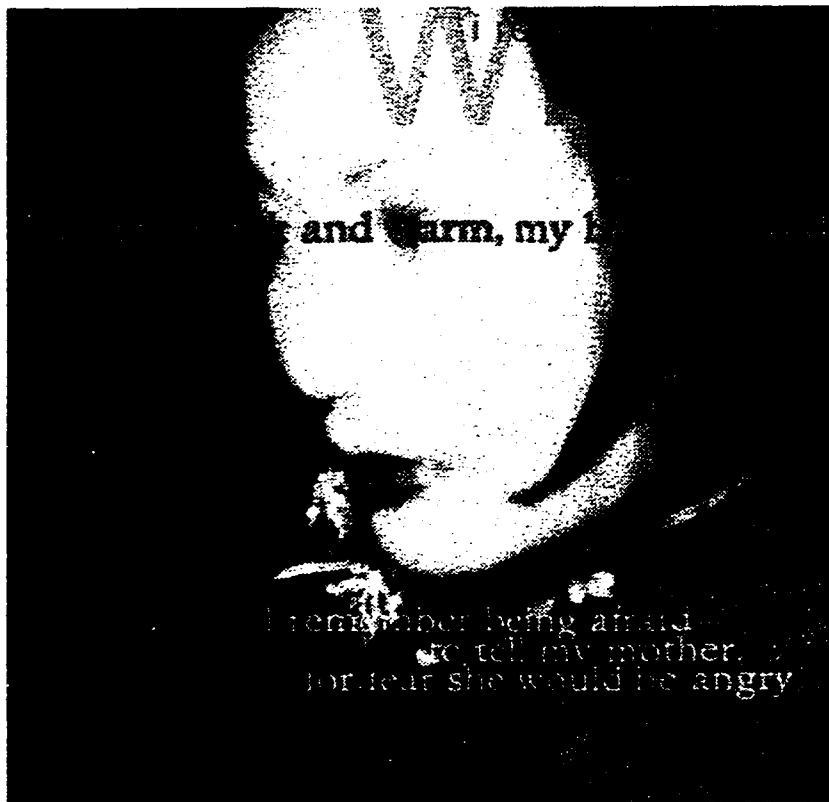
i wanted to be a princess in white





when my sister
first started to bleed
show her what to do
mother send her
to me

remember

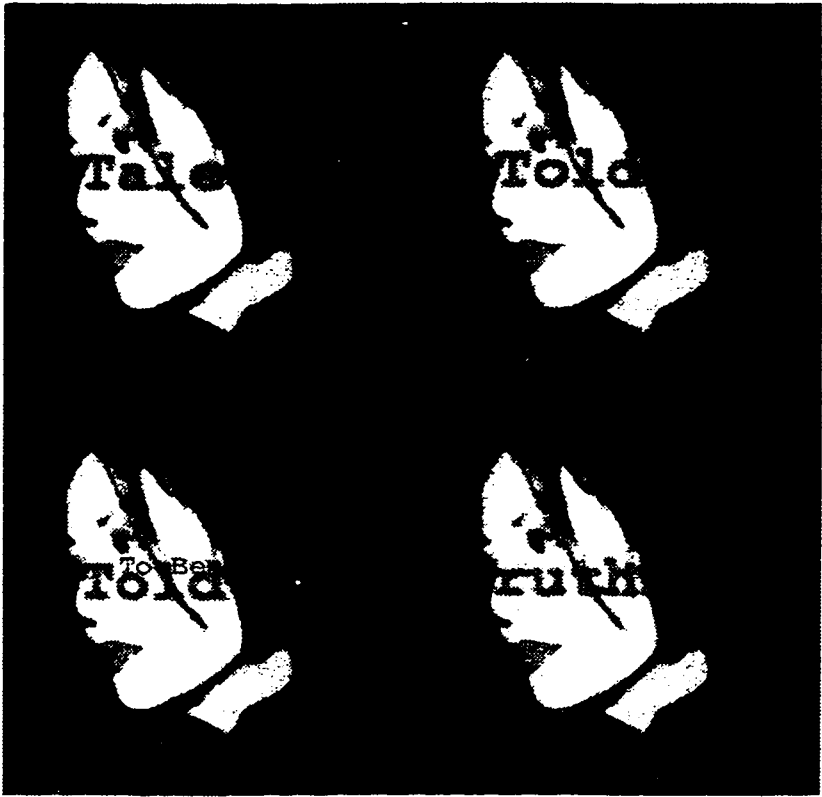


and harm, my b

I remember being afraid
to tell my mother.
for fear she would be angry



Her Body
was going through
I wanted it to be a
positive experience



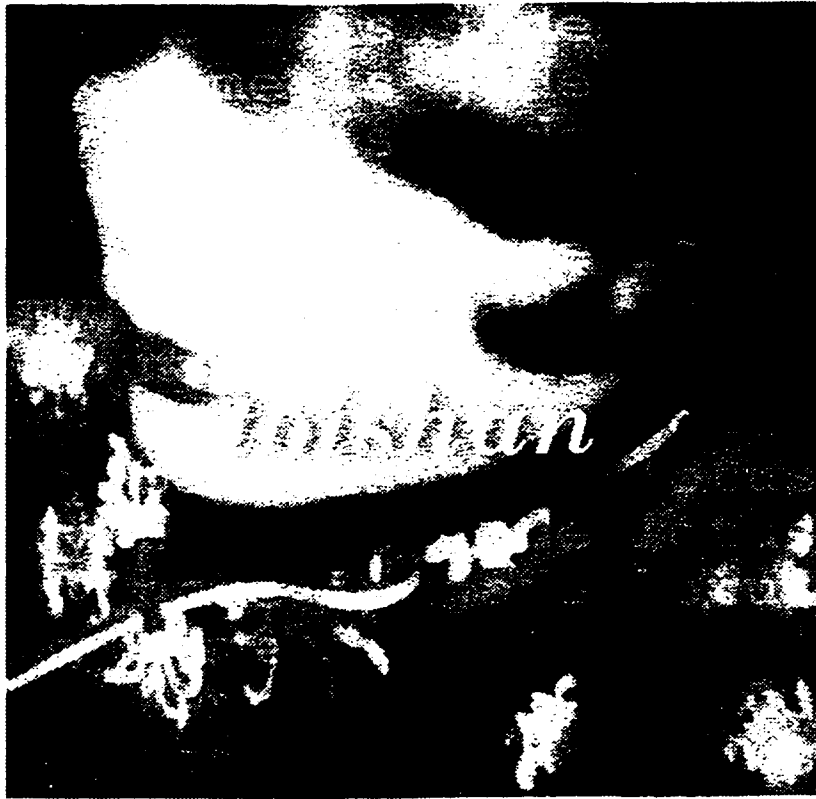






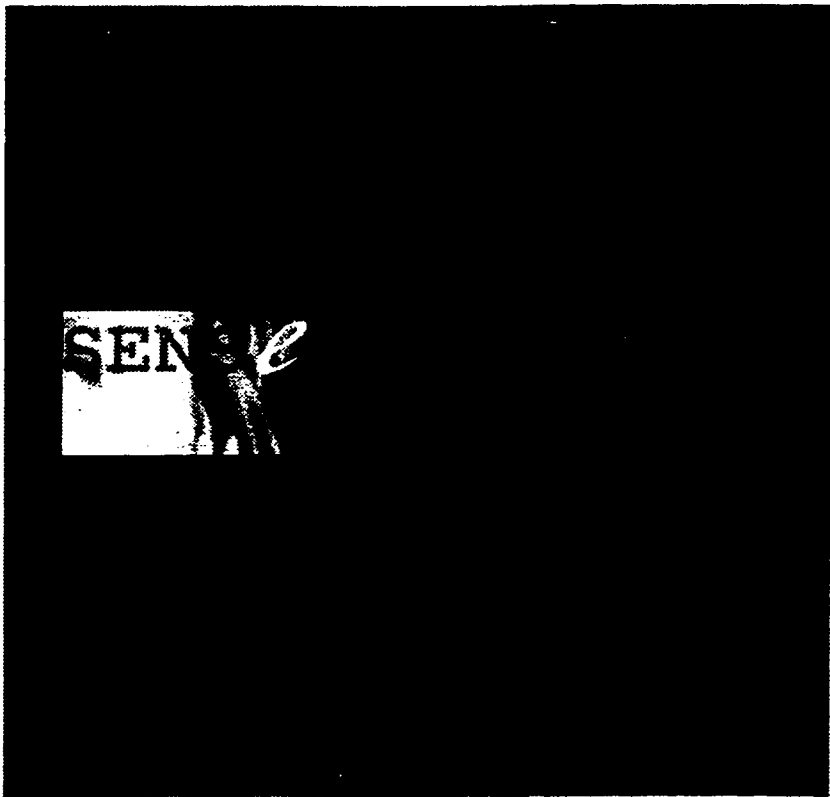










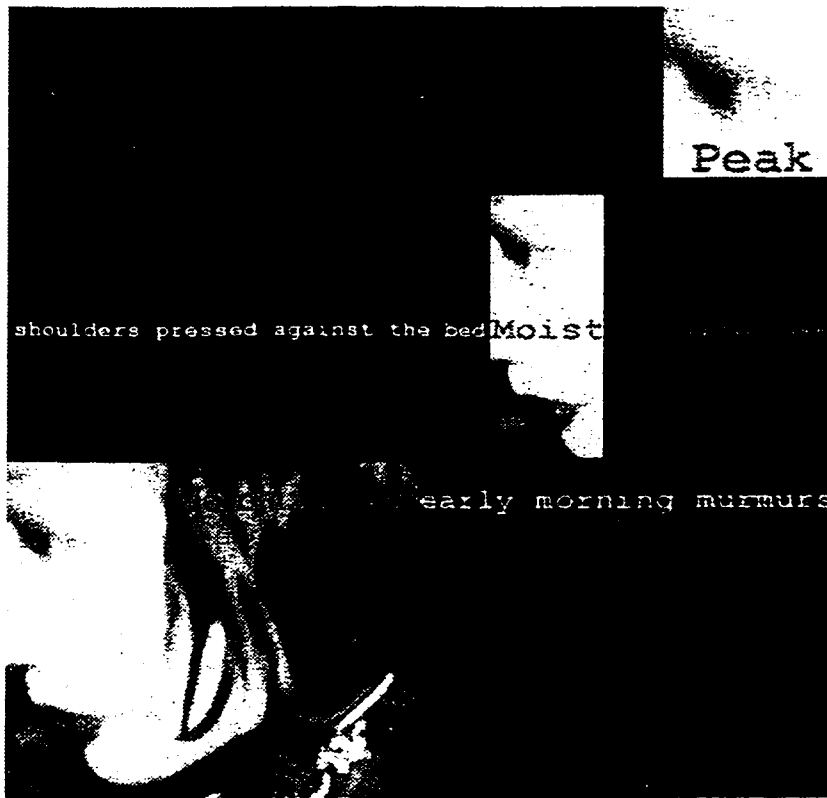




Softly

I put out the candle

To spring's moonlight



Peak

shoulders pressed against the bed Moist

early morning murmurs