

MFA Thesis: After...

Pamela Lin

After... is a 10-piece serial mix-media collage of drawings and photographic cutouts exploring my Taiwanese and Asian American identity. The reason for naming it *After...* is because each piece is a re-envision of famous American, Chinese and Taiwanese artists' works, which include "The Saturday Evening Post" illustration covers, Chinese landscapes, and figurative paintings in order to represent different cultural themes. Cultural integration is shown through self-portrait photographic cutouts interacting with Chinese-style drawings which also contain many cultural symbols. Through the reconstruction of food and clothing by way of drawings and photo cutouts, *After...* visually reflects the cross of both Asian and American cultures. My goal of this project is to break the fixity of cultures and re-envision a third space with more fluidity, nuances, and hybridity.

My identity crisis started at a young age. I grew up in a Taiwanese household speaking Mandarin and listening to Chinese folklore from my grandparents. At international school, I had to switch to English and learn US history, geography etc. Growing up with both Taiwanese culture and American influence, I found myself struggling to fit into both cultures or even defining myself as either Taiwanese or Asian American. I'm not Taiwanese enough. I naturally intermix English words when I'm speaking Mandarin. I don't have the popular thick straight bangs that Taiwanese love to cover their foreheads with for a youthful look. I even have trouble understanding Taiwanese slang such as "Q" which is derived from English word "cute". Yet, I'm also not as American as other kids. A popular early 2000s Disney show "Lizzie McGuire" is oblivious to me. I had trouble understanding American dry humor. In addition to that, I didn't get my first taste of turkey until seventh grade. These social and cultural gaps made me feel unbalanced in my identity.

However, being raised in Taiwan, I still couldn't fully fit into Taiwanese culture. That was the most frustrating part. The reason why Taiwanese culture is hard to define is because it is so interconnected to Chinese, Japanese, and American culture. Most Taiwanese ancestors came from China as early as the seventeenth-century, bringing Chinese cuisines, Mandarin and Hokkien dialect, and Chinese culture to this little island.¹ Since 1895, Taiwan was governed by Japan for half a century after the defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, fusing new immigrants and characteristics into Taiwanese culture.² Ruled under Japanese government, the Taiwanese were given Japanese names, dressed in kimono, and spoke their language. American culture became widespread after World War II, when American troops arrived in Taiwan to help strengthen the military tie to combat the spread of communism. Disco dances were wildly popular over Taiwan, American singers such as Elvis and the Carpenter were well-known. Taiwan, having rich cultural influences from other countries, still can't cut loose from the once metropole, China. In this sense, complicated questions started to appear: whether the learnt language, art, and food I ate growing up with are culturally Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, or American? These questions are not yet answered. However, the intertwining, overlapping cultural concept between East and West eventually progressed into what I am tackling in this project: the newness of hybridity.

Discovering my identity is confusing to begin with. It is questioning the most fundamental essence of yourself. Who are you? Simple question, yet extremely difficult to answer. Growing up in Taiwan with constant American educational influences from international school— an American-based curriculum private school in Taipei— from an early age, I became attentive to my “in-between” identity. The intensity of searching and defining who I was grew

¹ “History of Taiwan” Accessed March 5, 2019. https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content_3.php

² Ibid.

stronger when I came to study in the States, which prompted this self-discovery journey. In the States, I've seen vastly diverse cultures and ethnicities living harmoniously. People growing up with various cultural backgrounds, claiming onto multiple identities. That's when I realized the possibility of owning and recognizing both Taiwanese and American identities in me.

Even though my work stems from personal experiences, I believe everyone experiences cultural differences one way or another. A good example is the food culture in the States. Barbeque for certain parts of the South means "smoked, long cooked", whereas in a more general term, it means "from oven to the grill" according to Clair Saffitz, a senior associate food editor from the magazine *Bon Appetit*.³ *After...* aims to bring cross-cultural experiences to more audience as multiculturalism is what makes America unique compared to other monolithic countries. Diversity is the characteristic of America. However, we should also remember, as author Victor Davis Hanson from *National Review* reminded, that despite how multicultural and multiethnic America is, unity is our strength.⁴

Visual Elements

After... is a serial mix-media collage consisting of drawings and photographic cutouts. In order to visually express the interweaving of two cultures, numerous cultural symbols were used. Cultural food along with traditional clothing and objects are the most noticeable elements. For example, American food such as hamburgers, hotdogs, pizza and barbecue appeared throughout the work. To enhance the Asian influence, buns, roasted duck, Asian carbonated drinks and

³ "Claire Makes Best-Ever Barbecued Ribs | From the Test Kitchen | Bon Appétit" YouTube video, 9:22. Accessed Jan 31, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mjz2aZ350vg>

⁴ Victor Davis Hanson, "America: History's Exception" *National Review*. Accessed Apr 28, 2019. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/06/america-melting-pot-immigrant-culture-made-country-great/>

Asian condiments are depicted. Another Chinese influence is the blue-color drawing style, which is inspired by Chinese paintings, Chinese blue and white porcelains, and Dutch Delftware. Drawings and photo cutouts are presented on round wooden panels as circular frames suggest “unity” and “fulfill” in Chinese culture. Filled with Eastern and Western cultural symbols, *After...* visually expresses the interweaving of two cultures.

When living in a foreign country, one will first experience a discomfort of fitting in due to cultural differences and values. To visualize the struggle of adapting, I collage photographic self-portrait cutouts onto the drawings. On a visual level, the flatness and line work of the drawing in contrast with the realism of the photograph shows a visual inconsistency, thus creating a gap in reading the work. This gap is the visualization of the unfitting of myself (the photograph) and the environment (the drawing). The figure is present yet not fully adapted to both the identity and the new encounter of different culture.

Another technique to imply displacement is the use of drawing. I intentionally chose a meticulous and realistic Chinese painting style to emphasize the details of the drawings. However, if looked closely, one will realize the drawings are done by using watercolor paint on watercolor papers. The drawings are technically Chinese but ironically done with watercolor. Advanced watercolor painting could be traced back to the Renaissance.⁵ Here is the inconsistency of drawing; by integrating Chinese painting and watercolor, I am embracing both Eastern and Western cultures in a technical form. Different from the Chinese tradition, I intentionally switched out the signature black and white color and replaced it with ultramarine blue. By using this color, I am evoking two ways of viewing the work. Upon first glance, one

⁵ Laura Monroe, “From Cave Painting to Modernists: A History of Watercolor Painting” *ARTmine*. Accessed Apr 20, 2019. <https://www.art-mine.com/for-sale/paintings-submedium-watercolor/history-of-watercolor-painting>

with more Eastern or Western background will either grasp onto the idea of Chinese blue and white porcelain or the Dutch Delftware. Delftware is a cross between the East and West. It is in fact influenced by Chinese porcelain during the seventeenth-century.⁶ I want to turn the table and redirect history to the original source, which is the blue and white Chinese porcelain.

The use of photographic imagery is crucial in this series. The self-portrait cutouts are not only a way of self-analyzing my identity, but also a way of having more Asian representation in the American art world. “Concept of race and ethnicity have historically been inseparable from a discourse of display and the logic of vision,” wrote artist Coco Fusco.⁷ Photography is a trace of reality, a footprint of the real.⁸ Whatever subjects represented in front of the camera were once present. As Roland Barthes wrote, “the Photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents.”⁹ Because of the indexicality of photographs, the visual images are easily linked and associated with race, gender, and ethnicity, resulting in exploitation in viewing and visually describing otherness.

Indeed, “the camera changed not only what we see, but how we see it.”¹⁰ Yet, photography can also subvert the way of seeing otherness. Otherness is an extremely problematic exclusion. The concept highlights the differences among race but overlooks the commonalities. African Americans, for example, have been struggling in terms of their negative visual representations since the Civil War. In 1850, Swiss-American scientist and biologist Louis Agassiz took fifteen daguerreotypes of African-born slaves from the South. All of them were

⁶ “From Tulips to Delftware: How Asian Imports Transformed Dutch Life.” *Gardiner Museum*, Apr. 23, 2018. <https://www.gardinermuseum.on.ca/tulips-delftware-asian-imports-transformed-dutch-life/>

⁷ Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, *Only Skin Deep*, 380.

⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 154.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 85.

¹⁰ John Berger, “Ways of Seeing” filmed 1972, YouTube video, 30:04. Accessed Mar 5, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=190&v=0pDE4VX_9Kk

photographed stiffly and naked to show the oppositions and inferiority from Caucasians.¹¹ The power relation between the photographer and the subjects is discernable. Photographers have the control and power to produce any narrative to fit their purpose. However, photographers see the potential of turning the table by utilizing the power of the documentarian. The technique they use to overturn the power relation is through self-portraiture.

Self-portraiture offers photographers a mechanism to control their image and how they would like to be seen. Photographers such as Omar Victor Diop and Pipo Nguyen-duy have been utilizing self-portraiture to regain their power and rewrite how Africans and Asians were once seen. In my series, photographic self-portrait cutouts are collaged in each piece. My portraits engage with the drawings in different ways- leaning towards the table on a chair or hanging Christmas ornaments on a bonsai tree. The figures aren't unemotional, stiff, or passively being photographed like Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes. I am lively, interacting and active, attempting to figure out my identity.

In *After...*, another important element is the illustration covers from "The Saturday Evening Post". These illustrations created by Stevan Dohanos were published on November 13th, 1948, January 8th, 1949, and March 3rd, 1956. Norman Rockwell and Stevan Dohanos are known for their drawings on "The Saturday Evening Post" depicting everyday American life. Their illustrations are the representation of Americana. It is where you can find the stereotypical (White, middle class) American life that we Asians or outsiders imagine. Newcomers often learn new cultures from the environment, mass media, books and music. "The Saturday Evening Post"

¹¹ Boyce Rensberger, "Earliest Pictures Of Slaves Found in Harvard Attic" *The New York Times*, May 31, 1977. Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/05/31/archives/earliest-pictures-of-slaves-found-in-harvard-attic.html>

covers are where I found the inspiration for this work, which is the American life I once wished I had growing up.

Besides illustration covers, Chinese landscape and figurative paintings are also referenced in my drawings. They represent the culture that I'm most familiar with but is now distant due to the lack of cultural exposure studying abroad. In my drawings, I keep the Chinese architecture style from the landscape paintings, with the focus of adding Western modern items. Familiar objects such as a barbeque grill, board games, and bonfires make the drawings more relatable. Having Americana illustrations to work with and on the other hand using Chinese paintings, I am able to bring both of my "Asian-American" and "American-Asian" perspectives into the project.

To further play with the notion of clashing cultures, translating is a crucial step. In a bilingual's mind, toggling back and forth between two languages happens frequently. Through translation, one is able to learn the nuances of different languages and thus be more open minded. As Emperor Charlemagne said, "To have another language is to possess a second soul." Similar process could also apply to my worldview growing up with two cultures. For example, food can also have cultural counterparts. In *After Norman Rockwell: Thanksgiving Dinner*, my rendition of Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want*, American food is swapped out and replaced with Taiwanese food (see appendix). Turkey is translated into roasted duck. Glasses of water are substituted with Taiwanese carbonated drinks. Another piece referencing *Grocery Line* by Stevan Dohanos, *After Stevan Dohanos: Market* (see appendix), also illustrate Asian snacks in replacement of American ones. The nuances, similar items from different cultures, strengthen my view on commonalities. We are indeed different in many ways, yet by noticing common grounds, it brings everyone and everything closer.

The unity and harmony of cultures are represented through the circle frames. In Chinese culture, a circle stands for “together”, “fulfilled”, “harmony”, and “oneness”. It is also the process of coming to full circle. For instance, family would gather around and celebrate together during the Moon Festival (or Mid-Autumn Festival) when the moon is at its fullest. Round shaped foods such as pomelos and mooncakes, sweet and savory round Chinese pastries filled with red bean paste or lotus seed paste, are essential and symbolic foods of the Moon Festival. Also, when having family gatherings at a restaurant, family members would sit around the big, round table to indicate union and perfection. Roundness is seen everywhere in Chinese heritage, making it the most iconic and important shape with profound meaning in Chinese culture.

By intermixing Eastern and Western cultural elements together, *After...* is constructing a third space freeing me from being enclosed in two rigid identities. The third space, according to philosopher and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, provides “a special politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.”¹² After a long journey of self-exploration, my Taiwanese and American identity has finally become one.

Artists Influences

The technical aspect of *After...* is influenced by Japanese artist Masami Teraoka (Fig. 1), Norman Rockwell and Stevan Dohanos (Fig. 2 and 3). Teraoka is famous for his Japanese style watercolor panels that explores contemporary social issues such as fast food and AIDS invasion in Japan. Western icons—burgers, fries, blond women in bikinis—are portrayed in his works, in the form of Japanese painting. In order to find his cultural roots, he utilizes *ukiyo-e*, a traditional

¹² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.

Japanese art form, to represent the “pictorial format of my national identity.”¹³ Linnekin argues that “tradition is a conscious model of past lifeways that people use in the construction of their identity.”¹⁴ I am intrigued by Teraoka’s Japanese inspired works and his idea behind using traditional medium to reconnect to his root. Chinese painting style not only allows me to show the Asian side of me but also enables me to trace the history and connect to broader communities sharing the same culture.

Rockwell and Dohanos’ works, as mentioned earlier in the statement, have been inspiring my work to look closely at domesticity, American culture, and shared experience. Their illustrations are extremely detailed, loaded with cultural codes. Not only did they portray vividly the daily life of Americans, they also focused on telling stories that happened in the mundane domestic spaces. With the combination of meticulous details and lively stories, Rockwell and Dohanos successfully represents the dream of Americana. Curious as to what their stories would look like under the Asian American lens, *After...* series pay homage to Rockwell and Dohanos’ works.

If Rockwell and Dohanos are storytellers of American life, then Carrie Mae Weems is narrating her African American side of the story. In *Kitchen Table Series* (Fig. 4), her carefully staged photographs, Carrie Mae Weems pictured the ordinary daily scenes taken place at the kitchen table. The kitchen table for her is not just about food, but about the relationship and the intimacy shared with the people around her. Weems’ work is different from other stereotypical representation of African Americans. People photographed in her works are not seen as inferior, others, or unintelligent. She goes under the surface, *reveal* the *hidden* side of her life. The

¹³ David Bell, “Locating and Relocating Cultural Engagements in a Transnational Age.” *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities* 5, no.1 (2018): 84.

¹⁴ Jocelyn S. Linnekin, *Defining Tradition: Variations on the Hawaiian Identity*, 241.

vulnerable, the joy, the whispers are all captured around a kitchen table, the center point of the family life. Although her images are calm and quiet, *The Kitchen Table Series* successfully crushes the stereotypical representation of African Americans. Weems tells a life of tranquility and intimacy beyond racial and ethnic differences.

What can domestic spaces reveal and how can they shape human beings' perspective of the world? I think that is the question Rockwell, Dohanos and Weems are exploring through their works. Domesticity such as home is extremely important for human beings. Home, as architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz explained, "The House, therefore, remains the central place of human existence, the place where the child leaves to understand his being in the world, and the place from which man departs and to which he returns."¹⁵ Because our behaviors, characteristics and personalities are reflected in the domestic space, the space thus "differ[s] from person to person and from culture to culture."¹⁶ Home provides human beings shelter, safety, intimacy and privacy. Home is a "point of departure" to venture out and connect with the outside world. It is a place that one returns to for safety and belonging. For newcomers especially, home has another special meaning and purpose. Home (or homelike places) is a place to preserve culture and language as well. For many second or third generation kids, they learn their languages and heritage through their parents or grandparents. They have authentic cultural food in their kitchens at home. Outside of home, they speak English and adapt into the American lifestyle. Domestic space, filled with familiarity of home, not only creates a sense of place, but also holds important cultural preservation and connectedness for different racial communities.

Yasumasa Morimura also collapses the duality between East and West through his photographic series, *Daughter of Art History* series (Fig. 5). Not only did he deconstruct

¹⁵ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space, and Architecture*, 31.

¹⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective*, 389.

geographical and cultural differences between the Orient and the Occident, but also blur the line between male and female, creating a hybrid body that speaks volumes in the contemporary art world. Morimura dresses up as protagonists in famous canonical western art pieces, reversing the gaze as an Asian artist. He successfully challenges the canon of Western art history through his Asian-ness and drag performativity. Morimura's identity performance is subversive and challenging because it provides a "space of possibility structuring and confounding culture"¹⁷. Morimura's work influences me tremendously. Through his work, he shows me the importance of photographing myself. By doing so, my Asian-ness becomes apparent. Dressed up as the protagonists in my drawings, my figures and the hybrid spaces created within the drawings are merging into one.

The artists that influenced me are all interpreting their identities in their own way. They recognize the cultures they came from and transform it in a way that connects new cultures with the ideas they have encountered. Jacques Derrida describes this concept as *heir*. He pointed out that to *heir* is "not simply accepting this heritage but relaunching it otherwise and keeping it alive."¹⁸ Destroying the cultural boundaries is also a crucial step in order to construct a new identity. As Derrida puts it, "to select, to filter, to interpret, and therefore to transform; not to leave intact or unharmed, not to leave *safe* the very thing one claims to respect before all else."¹⁹ A similar concept is also addressed in Eric Liu's *Notes to a Native Speaker*. He quoted G. K. Chesterton: "conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave a thing alone, you leave it to a torrent of change." However, the torrent of change is the entrance to something new. "In every assimilation, there is a mutiny against history—but there is also a destiny, which is to redefine

¹⁷ Marjorie Garber, *Vester Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, 17.

¹⁸ Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

history.” By blurring the lines between cultures, it is not to say we are disapproving one’s culture or value one over another, but in fact, it is an act of reaffirming the heritage of the cultures we are from. This inheritance can only be achieved by “transforming it as radically as will be necessary.”²⁰ Thus, without dismissing it, I took a closer examination into my Taiwanese upbringing and integrated Chinese painting and photography into my work.

Reflecting on Contemporary Issues

Taiwanese identity is hard to define, whether in history or in the current political climate. Taiwanese identity, as well as nationality, has been and continues to be oppressed by the power of China. Historically, Taiwan was governed by the Japanese, then later by the Chinese government. Torn between two distinct cultures and traditions, Taiwanese citizens are constantly confused in terms of cultural and self-identification. In recent years, the pressure from China has been more prominent, which continues to push me to explore my Taiwanese heritage even more. Even though Taiwan inherited Chinese culture, the claiming of its cultural tradition does not necessarily imply the conformation of Chinese identity.

Conclusion

The world, after the age of discovery in the fifteenth-century and colonialization during the sixteenth to nineteenth-centuries, has become more diverse. This is especially true for the United States. The motto of the United States, *e pluribus unum*, which means “out of many, one” in Latin, perfectly captures the multicultural, multiracial and unity of the nation. Without united and inclusion of all people, the United States would not have its unique characteristic that no

²⁰ Derrida, *Spectators of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International*, 67.

other countries have. On a personal scale, the motto has taught me to concentrate on the commonalities that various cultures shared instead of focusing on the differences, which would often cause conflicts. In order to embrace the intricate and complex cultures, it is crucial to have more racial representations as well as acknowledge cross-cultural identities. And that is the vision of my work: to establish third space for my cultural identities, and most importantly, to show the viewers the benefits of having multiple cultures harmoniously interacting together. Just like the national motto of the United States describes, “many united into one.”

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Appendix



(Fig. 1)

Masami Teraoka, *McDonald's Hamburgers Invading Japan / Geisha and tattooed Woman*, 1975. Watercolor on paper, 14.25 x 21.5 in.



(Fig. 2)

Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 45.75 x 35.5 in.



(Fig. 3)

Stevan Dohanos, *After Dinner Dishes*, 1949



(Fig. 4)

Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and Daughter with Makeup)* From Kitchen Table Series, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 28 ¼ x 28 ¼ in.



(Fig. 5)

Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Twins)*, 1988. Chromogenic print with acrylic paint and gel medium, 82 3/4 x 118 in.



After Stevan Dohanos: Dishes
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Stevan Dohanos, *After Dinner Dishes*, "The Saturday Evening Post" cover on January 8th, 1949
<https://www.art.com/products/p10985181797-sa-i6111532/stevan-dohanos-after-dinner-dishes-saturday-evening-post-cover-january-8-1949.htm>



After Norman Rockwell: Thanksgiving Dinner
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 45.75 x 35.5 in.
<https://www.nrm.org/2016/11/freedom-want-1943/>



After Wang Hongli: Barbecue
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Wang Hongli, *Untitled*, from his book “古代風俗百圖”
<http://www.duku.cn/product-2347.html>



After Stevan Dohanos: Market
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Stevan Dohanos, *Grocery Line*, "The Saturday Evening Post" cover on November 13th, 1948

https://www.1stdibs.com/art/paintings/figurative-paintings/stevan-dohanos-grocery-line-saturday-evening-post-cover/id-a_1652803/



After Stevan Dohanos: Art Museum
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Stevan Dohanos, *Tired Museum Feet*, “The Saturday Evening Post” cover on March 3rd, 1956
<https://www.fulltable.com/vts/a/amna/menu.htm>



After The Eighteen Scholars by Anonymous Ming Artist: Game Night
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Anonymous Ming Artist, *The Eighteen Scholars- Go*, Ming Dynasty

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Eighteen_Scholars_by_an_anonymous_Ming_artist_4.jpg#/media/File:The_Eighteen_Scholars_by_an_anonymous_Ming_artist_2.jpg



After Norman Rockwell: Christmas Ornaments
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Norman Rockwell, *Trimming the Tree*, 1973, ink, pencil and gouache on paper, 10 x 9.8 in.
<http://www.artnet.com/artists/norman-rockwell/trimming-the-tree-90LbCcHDjHLL8k2z5a9Aw2>



After Chen Jin: Bedroom
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Chen Jin, *Leisure*, 1935, Japanese painting, 63 x 53 in.
<http://vr.theatre.ntu.edu.tw/fineart/painter-tw/chenchin/chenchin.htm>



After Wang Hongli: Bon Fire
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Wang Hongli, *Untitled*, from his book “古代風俗百圖”
<http://www.duku.cn/product-2347.html>



After Xiang Weiren: Season Change
collage of watercolor drawing and photo cutouts on paper, 20 x 20 in.



Xiang Weiren, *Bu Zhi He Chu Zhao Ren Yuan* (不知何處照人圓), 2010

<http://www.xiangweiren.com/product/class/index.php?page=7&catid=115&myord=uptime&myshownums=&showtj=&author=&key=>