Liminality of Culture in Studio Art: A Biographical Investigation of a Second Generation Filipino American Experience

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LIMINALITY OF CULTURE IN STUDIO ART: 
A BIOGRAPHICAL INVESTIGATION OF 
A SECOND GENERATION FILIPINO AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

by

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B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements 
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts 
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ABSTRACT

Danielle Culibao Powell manifests the disconnectedness of a second-generation immigrants’ cultural disorientation into colorful collage paintings, reconciling cultural history with contemporary identity while building a connection between herself and her parents’ homeland the Philippines. The evolution of Powell’s studio art practice follows entering a transcultural marriage and researching the art created by the Filipino women artists before her. This thesis documents that evolution both visually and conceptually. It elaborates the history of both the canons of Western Art and lesser-known Filipina art and expressed in art rooted in cultural plurality.
This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Ronaldo and Norma Culibao, to whom I owe everything.

There is no truer way to state it. I have everything I have, and I am everything I am because of them. This thesis is also dedicated to my husband, Haley Powell. Nearly every painting I make—
even the work that is critical—is an outpouring of my affection for him. The life we built together is worthy of being painted because of the teamwork, wonder, and love that define it.
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Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Ilenia Colón Mendoza, whose expertise and understanding of my motivations provided me with a starting point for my research. I am indebted to her because of her generosity and the perspective she brought to the conversation about my work.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up in a Filipino household nestled in the suburbs of Kissimmee, Florida provided me with what feels like almost two, clearly distinguishable sets of experiences.

The first set of experiences lies in the memories formed within my Filipino family and household. I remember my childhood fondly and recall the stability I associated with my home even then. My parents spoke Tagalog, the official language spoken in the Philippines, with one another and with our Filipino family friends whose children my sister and I were raised alongside of. We ate Filipino food for every meal which consisted of flavorful meats, stews, and the most delicious jasmine rice that I can identify by scent alone. The Christmas season in particular affords me my most vivid memories. I remember the anticipation I felt whenever I helped my mother cook the entire day for our Noche Buena\(^1\) dinner. There was an overwhelming feeling of joy associated with the festive potlucks that were accompanied by late-night karaoke sessions and basketball games among Filipino friends and friends of friends. I remember referring to every adult as tito\(^2\) and tita\(^3\), which I still do to this day because if you are Filipino, you are family. If you are a friend of a friend, you are family. This sense of belonging permeated my childhood experience in my home and within our extensive Filipino community.

The second set of experiences were less blissful. These memories are not bad or traumatizing by any means, but are definitely disconcerting. Both of my parents worked full time jobs and when I was old enough to go to school, it was hard for me to connect with the other children in the way that I wanted to. The private school I attended for my elementary education was culturally diverse but I felt extremely different despite that. That is because the number of

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\(^1\) **Noche Buena** is a Christmas Eve feast that is common tradition amongst Filipino families.

\(^2\) Tito is Tagalog for “aunt”.

\(^3\) Tita is Tagalog for “uncle”.
Filipino children at the school was so small that I was always aware of my minority status. This experience left me with the strange sensation of being both overly conspicuous and terrifically invisible at the same time. I made friends easily enough but when lunchtime came and everyone wanted to trade different types of sandwiches and prepackaged snacks, no one wanted to try my “stinky” leftovers. Nobody could pronounce the names of the food that rolled off of my tongue. Nobody ate with a spoon and a fork. Everybody opened their presents on Christmas morning instead of on Christmas Eve, and no one had heard of Noche Buena. It was unsettling that I could not find a single person that could speak my parents’ language at school. It was then that I realized, to my horror, that I could not speak my parents’ language either. I could understand it perfectly but my tongue refused to form the words. I could only speak English while my parents could slip between Tagalog and English with ease. It had finally dawned on me that my parents had made the decision to speak Tagalog with one another but not with me.

This is the point where I understood that I was different from the children at school and I was somehow different from my parents at home. I did not yet have the language to describe this sensation but my awareness of being “in-between”— being neither fully the one nor fully the other— hit me at full force.

This impression of cultural liminality has followed me into adulthood and has manifested itself in my studio practice. As I’ve built my body of work, I have fought to connect myself to the culture of my parents. It is a culture I love, but one I have always felt I have fallen short of and one I have hesitated to claim as my own. Now more than ever, so much of who I am seems to be more American than Filipino.

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4 Liminality is defined by Merriam-Webster as “of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase or condition: In-between, transitional.” (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liminal)
This liminal space is where I am operating from as I continue to make paintings that speak to the experience of second generation immigrants. In this paper, I will discuss how my work has evolved as I have studied different artists working with similar concepts, the ways in which both Eastern and Western influences have shaped my practice, and how my experiences have translated into my pursuit of creating art rooted in cultural plurality.
CHRONOLOGY OF WORK AND PROCESSES

PART 1: Early Works

My early work is inescapably academic. My undergraduate training was primarily founded upon the process of Drawing with an emphasis on a structural rather than photographic understanding of my subjects. At this point in my practice, I was preoccupied with mastering my craft and any of the concepts tied to my work were secondary concerns. I was obsessed with rendering the figure with better and better skill. I used self-portraiture and my family members as references for these drawings in the hopes of giving myself content to work with. In 2016, I completed a series about mortality and self-reflection though it was chiefly an experiment in formal decision-making (Figure 1 - Facets). At this point, I was chasing formal and pictorial proficiency.

Figure 1: Danielle Culibao Powell, selected works from the Facets series, 2016, charcoal, watercolor, and acrylic on BFK Rives, each piece is 11” x 15”
Several series of work then followed, and looking back, these seemed to be different iterations of the first one. The concepts remained fairly similar. I have always been interested in making work about intimacy between relatives, introspection and self-exploration, and mortality. I continued to use my relatives, my partner, and self-portraiture as references for these next series of drawings and paintings (Figure 2 - Reflect and Figure 3 - The Weight of Tenderness). Even then, my family-orientedness was evident, which I attribute largely to my culture. But the fact that I am still fixated on portraying the family unit supports the idea that this virtue is inextricable to my personal identity and not just a characteristic of my family’s culture.

Figure 2: Danielle Culibao Powell, selected works from the Reflect Series, 2017, charcoal, watercolor, and acrylic on BFK, 22” x 30”
By the time I reached graduate school, creating straightforward portraits could no longer hold my interest. I needed a new goal. For so long, I had fought the push to resolve the space surrounding the figures in my work because I was more interested in maintaining a psychological space in lieu of a literal space. I was just starting to understanding how much I was limiting myself by holding to that mindset. During my first semester of graduate school I resolved to create spaces for my figures to inhabit that would carry the conceptual weight I so wished my work could hold.
PART 2: Breaking Ground (Doors and Windows)

The first painting I made called *Pieces Of Me, Pieces Of You* was the largest piece I have ever created, and it needed to be so that the resulting work would be an interior that the viewer could enter into (Figure 4 - Pieces of Me, Pieces of You). This is also supported by the shifting perspective used throughout the piece. Here in this painting is the first time introduced elements that referenced my Filipino culture and where I began to develop my own iconography. I included references to my present and perpetual struggle with my Filipino identity. These symbols allude to how I am always questioning how authentically Filipino I feel or am capable of being. This is demonstrated through the imagined Filipino garden in the window and the patterned rugs that are vaguely reminiscent of Filipino textiles—both of which are devices I utilized frequently from that point forward.

Figure 4: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Pieces Of Me, Pieces Of You*, 2018, charcoal, watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper, 9’ x 12’
The great shift in my formal approach to the work has everything to do with the fact that I married my caucasian, American husband during the completion of this painting. The space the figures inhabited suddenly became very important because I was building my own family and creating a space of my own for the first time.

I was the first in my family to be born outside of the Philippines and the first in my family to marry a non-Filipino. I have always felt different from the people I love the most and knew that my marriage would set me apart from them completely. I am hyperaware of the fact that my nuclear family will be very different from the family units I’ve descended from and a domestic space seemed to be the best metaphor to visualize the inner struggles and inner negotiations that accompanied this lineage-changing union. This painting is the work that sparked my obsession with depicting interiors and all of the formal and conceptual possibilities a painted interior could offer me.

After that painting, I worked on a series of small pieces about banality, domesticity, and routine which I called the Lived In Series (Figure 5 - Lived In). The alienness of my new life at the time is evident in these works where there seems to be much uncertainty with no foreseeable exit. I did not intend for the figures portrayed to be trapped, it just so happened that way because I was so fixated on the inner workings of my home at the time. Strangely enough, this series in particular mirrors similar sentiments that would arise because of the forthcoming COVID-19 pandemic. This idea reveals that the work—while concerned primarily with domestic and familial issues—is also about isolation, introspection, and limitation in regards to intimacy with
a loved one. Nevertheless, it was because of this series that the symbol of the Doorway became important to my work.

The Doorway became a symbol of liminality because it sits between two distinct spaces. In a literal sense, it serves as the entryway or exit into a different room or building. In a conceptual sense, it serves as the entryway or exit into a different way of life, a different way of thinking, or a different culture entirely.

The Doorway also signifies opportunity, possibility, and the unknown. Whether the contents in the space beyond should be embraced or feared, passing through a doorway means entering into something completely new. In fact, it signifies walking away from something as
much as it signifies walking into something else. Thus, the Doorway is also a symbol of Transformation.

Examples of the Doorway in the work following my *Lived In Series* can be found in Figure 6 through Figure 9. In these paintings, I addressed the degrees of separation within my transcultural household to better understand how to bridge the gaps between my husband and myself. In doing so, I hoped to better understand how we, as a couple, could build a culture for our family that would reflect both of us as individuals.

Figure 6 (left): Danielle Culibao Powell, *Untitled #1 (Lived In Series)*, 2019, watercolors and acrylic on paper, 13” x 9”

Figure 7 (right): Danielle Culibao Powell, *Ritual*, 2019, watercolors, acrylic, and collage on paper, 10.5” x 7.5”
These paintings do not contain the transcultural symbols that I began to utilize in *Pieces of You, Pieces of Me* (Figure 4 - Pieces of Me, Pieces of You). Instead, these works appear to be an examination of the union between a man and a woman and what the merging of two lives entails. In my experience, there is much sacrifice and compromise involved with marriage. I’ve found that despite the desire to wholly connect, our individual identities remain. This is liberating and empowering; frustrating and discouraging; exciting and wonderful. Coupled with our vastly different upbringings and backgrounds, it seems to me that there is much to learn about how the lives of men and women come together and that painting symbolic interiors is a worthy vehicle for artistic exploration on the subject.
Eventually, the Window began to appear in my work, though less frequently than the Doorway. Despite its similarities to the original symbol of interest, it came to represent something more restricting than the possibilities offered by the symbol of a door. The Window seemed more indicative of isolation and pointed to the separation of oneself from the outside world. However, along with the sense of isolation came the feeling of insulation. There, in the Window, is a layer of protection allowing for limited access to the outside world—should the blinds remain open. Should the blinds be shut creates a number of other implications to be explored in the future (Figure 10 - Paper House).

Figure 10: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Paper House*, 2019, watercolors, acrylic, and collage on paper, 54” x 44.5”
Here is another painting I made containing a window and a door that is all about the relationship between the figures (Figure 11 - Fools Rush In). The woman stands in the doorway, and the viewer is not sure whether she is coming or going. Included is this collection of strange objects hinting at the history of the figures and their relationship. The objects point to their backgrounds, their concerns, and their states of mind. In the very back of the piece you can just make out a window revealing smoke and a fire in the distance. Is the threat too far away to be taken seriously? Is it inevitable or can it be avoided? Does it affect these figures at all?

Figure 11: Danielle Culibao Powell, Fools Rush In, 2019, watercolors, acrylic, and collage on paper, 54” x 44.5”
The introduction of these two symbols to my practice gave me a path forward artistically which felt very much like breaking new ground. Armed with expanded conceptual interests and new methods of formal exploration involving patterning and symbolic color, my practice blossomed further as I studied the work of the following artists. By connecting my paintings to the practice of several artists before me, I have allowed my work to become more accessible and more easily understood by a larger audience. Studying the work of artists dealing with similar concepts and subject matter has propelled my practice in the direction of my current research.
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES AND THE RESULTING

PART 1: Njideka Akunyili Crosby

Up until the creation of *Pieces Of Me, Pieces Of You* (Figure 4 - Pieces of Me, Pieces of You), I had studied the figures of Lucian Freud (b. 1922) and Cristina Troufa (b. 1974) as I worked on my early drawings and paintings (Figure 12 - Freud, Reflection and Figure 13 - Troufa, Pedestal). I found that I could understand those two painters from a formal perspective and adopted a similar approach to figuration based on mark-making and a structural understanding of the human form.

Figure 12 (left): Lucian Freud, *Reflection (Self Portrait)*, 1985, oil on canvas, 55.9 cm x 53.3 cm
https://www.wikiart.org/en/lucian-freud

Figure 13 (right): Cristina Troufa, *Pedestal*, acrylic on canvas, 59.1” x 39.4”
https://www.saatchiart.com/art/Painting-Pedestal/7743/1503091/view
However, it took some time for me to find contemporary painters that I could connect with beyond a formal technique or style. It was in the work of Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b. 1983) that I found a kindred spirit, one whose artwork dealt with both subject matter and themes that I was already driven by (Figure 14 - Crosby, Mother and Child). Her work further fueled the motivation I had to construct symbolic interior spaces for the figures in my paintings. Furthermore, her paintings demonstrated the power of re-contextualizing and combining imagery, symbols, and objects from different cultures. As another woman whose life and work is founded upon the merging of disparate cultures, I can understand Crosby’s paintings almost instinctively.

I was enchanted by her large-scale collages and how she managed to create interiors that were complicated in some areas and so flat and clearly stated in others. Looking at the work, I was struck by the precision and effectiveness in her communication. Nothing felt over-stated or heavy-handed. The work always felt “just-right” because every object she included served a purpose and all of the collage elements she included tied seamlessly into the paintings.

Though Crosby’s larger-scale, more highly rendered works are what initially caught my attention, the painting in Figure 15 is a favorite of mine for many reasons. The series of work I created after my introduction to Crosby’s practice is inspired by her approach to making this particular piece. This work is titled *Janded* and it demonstrates one way the artist was able to combine references to both Nigerian tradition and American culture in one painting (Figure 15 - Crosby, *Janded*). The first association an informed viewer would make is that this painting to alludes to “Girl with the Pearl Earring” by Johannes Vermeer (b. 1632), a celebrated master in the lineage of Western painting (Figure 16 - Vermeer, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*).

Figure 15 (left): Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Janded*, 2012, acrylic, oil, and collage on canvas, 2’ x 1.67’
Figure 16 (right): Johannes Vermeer, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, 1665, oil on canvas, 17.5” x 15”
In contrast to this art historical reference, the hairstyle of the figure is modeled after famous contemporary model, Tyra Banks. The artist also includes a tribal mark on the figure’s cheek, which refers to a practice that was common in Crosby’s grandparent’s generation. It was used to identify a person’s home tribe. The title itself, *Jand*, is Nigerian slang that means “oversees,” “abroad,” and “Americana.”° She creates a union between disparate elements in this work which is symbolic of the two cultures she considers her own and the two countries she considers to her home. From this artist, I learned about the power of re-contextualizing symbols and marrying disparate imagery that is significant to different cultures. Through the appropriation of this famous artwork, Crosby opens up a conversation about visibility. Through the contrasting light and shadow, and through the averted gaze compared with the confident eye contact, the artist addresses what it is like to be put on a pedestal and what it is like to be hidden away.

I approached my next two paintings the way Crosby approached the creation of *Janded*. I used two compositions belonging to Lucian Freud, the master of my choosing, and inserted my own figures and imposed my own meaning onto the work (Figure 17 - Freud, Reflection With Two Children and Figure 18 - Hotel Bedroom). *After Lucian #1* includes a wallpaper patterned with the National Flower of the Philippines called *sampaguita* (Figure 19 - After Lucian #1). In the painting titled *After Lucian #2*, I have placed my husband and myself as the figures in the scene (Figure 20 - After Lucian #2). By doing this, I was able to continue the conversation about domesticity and intimacy that I started in my early work. Here is also where I began to collage different papers into my paintings more frequently. The physicality of the process of collaging

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6 *Sampaguita* is Tagalog for “Arabian Jasmine”.

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lends itself to the sense of construction—whether it be the construction of a home, a life, an identity, or a new status quo.

Figure 17 (left): Lucian Freud, *Reflection With Two Children (Self Portrait)*, 1965, oil on canvas, 91.5 cm x 91.5 cm

Figure 18 (right): Lucian Freud, *Hotel Bedroom*, 1954, oil on canvas, 91.1 cm x 61 cm

Figure 19: Danielle Culibao Powell, *After Lucian #1*, 2019, acrylic and collage on wood, 16” x 12”

Figure 20: Danielle Culibao Powell, *After Lucian #2*, 2019, acrylic and collage on wood, 16” x 12”
The paintings that followed contain a mixture of the same types of transcultural symbols I utilized in *After Lucian #1* and *After Lucian #2*. In this case, the symbols are transgeographical plants. In my paintings titled *Zip* and *Portrait With Lola*⁷, the walls are once again patterned with plants that can be found in both the Philippines and the United States (Figure 21 - Zip and Figure 22 - Portrait With Lola).

Figure 21 (left): Danielle Culibao Powell, *Zip*, 2019, acrylic, oil, and collage on wood, 16” x 12”
Figure 22 (right): Danielle Culibao Powell, *Portrait With Lola*, 2019, acrylic, oil, and collage on wood, 16” x 12”

⁷ *Lola* is Tagalog for “grandmother”.

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My painting called *Lolo*\(^8\) and *Lola* contains a framed image of the same flower included in *Zip* (Figure 23 - Lolo and Lola). This flower is called *Dama De Noche*\(^9\) and its distinctive, fragrant scent is one that I associate with visits to the garden with my grandmother both here and in her homeland.

Figure 23: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Lolo and Lola*, 2019, acrylic on wood, 16” x 12”

Completing the paintings inspired by Freud’s work provided me with the momentum I needed to build a body of work about transcultural issues with my own original compositions. This body of work would also be about memory, compromise, hope for the future, and the strength of both marital and intergenerational relationships. These are values that go beyond my

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\(^8\) *Lolo* is Tagalog for “grandfather”.

\(^9\) *Dama De Noche* is Tagalog for “Night-Blooming Jasmine”.
specific circumstances and speak to any number of people that have deep ties to their respective families.

The Western symbols I included in these pieces are no less important and point to the events surrounding the completion of these works. The zipping up of the Western-style wedding dress in Zip signifies the expansion of a family and a family identity but also communicates the joy and the sorrow that comes from the giving away of a daughter (Figure 21 - Zip). I framed the figures to show that the scene depicts a tender moment that has already passed. In the foreground confronting the viewer is the dog my husband and I adopted after our wedding. This is the first painting the dog appears in and I included him to bring the viewer into my present situation and to exemplify the creation of my new family.

*Portrait With Lola* contains textured paper that I collaged onto the clothing of the figures (Figure 22 - Portrait With Lola). The texture and color of the paper is reminiscent of the Barong, which is an embroidered formal shirt that serves as the national dress of the Philippines. The paper alluding to the Barong is pre-made and commercial, which I purchased at a local craft store. The anonymity of the material’s origin, along with the casual shape of the garment, demonstrates the strange notion I am always wrestling with; of being vaguely instead of wholly Filipino.
The last work I created using this formula is my painting called *Lolo and Lola* (Figure 23 - Lolo and Lola). It is a portrait of my Filipino immigrant grandparents placed in a composition that is slightly reminiscent of *American Gothic* by Grant Wood (b. 1891) (Figure 24 — Wood, American Gothic).

![Lolo and Lola](image1.jpg)

![American Gothic](image2.jpg)

This decision was made to Americanize two immigrants who may still be considered foreigners for the remainder of their lives in the United States. It was also meant to honor my paternal grandparents as icons in their own right; icons that represent bravery, faithful diligence, and assimilation; icons that embody the familiar gamble of leaving behind a beloved home country in the hopes of finding a better life elsewhere.

Studying Crosby’s work helped me understand how I could re-contextualize iconic Western compositions to draw attention to the liminal experiences I make artwork about. Rather
than attempting to subvert my experience living in the West, I find myself striving to expand upon my lived experiences by offering context to the viewer by referencing the country my family came from.
PART 2: Paula Rego

As I continued to build my arsenal of symbols and personal iconography, I found in the paintings of Paula Rego a level of sophistication and complexity that my work seemed to lack. The inclusion of culturally significant symbols did not properly convey the intricacies of navigating life as a person whose identity is not easily categorized. I also understood that symbolism paired with figuration could only bring me so far; there is much I would like to communicate and the simplicity of the formula I was repurposing did not do enough to carry my work forward.

I was familiar enough with Paula Rego’s work to know that she is a master from both a formal and conceptual perspective. Anyone looking at her body of work would recognize that she is not to be pigeonholed. While self-portraiture and figuration are formal consistencies in her oeuvre, the subject matter is vast. Her subject matter included commentary about life under a Portuguese dictatorship, her advocacy for social equality, the clash of her fears and her desires, and more.10 The sinister nature of her work lends itself to a multitude of implications that cannot be quickly or easily explained. Rego’s ability to convey such complicated ideas while remaining ambiguous enough to invite new interpretations served as the pinnacle of painting in my mind.

How could I create imagery that was precise in communicating my own ideas without becoming utterly didactic?

The two paintings created by Rego that I drew the most inspiration from are two of her most famous works, titled *The Family* and *The Dance* (Figure 25 - Rego, The Family and Figure 26 - The Dance).

Figure 25: Paula Rego, *The Family*, 1988, acrylic on canvas-backed paper, 213.4 cm x 213.4 cm

Figure 26: Paula Rego, *The Dance*, 1988, acrylic on canvas-backed paper, 83.87” x 107.9”
I found these works particularly compelling because their compositions appear to be natural and effortless despite Rego’s meticulousness in orchestrating them. The figures in these paintings are also intriguing. They go beyond mere portraiture because the relationships between the figures are charged and suggestive. These paintings taught me I did not need to choose between incorporating dynamic compositions and emphasizing the figure. In fact, coupling the two could make the work much richer in meaning and appearance.

For this next painting, I once again used the compositions of a master (in this case, Paula Rego) to create imagery of my own. I transplanted the figures found in *The Dance* onto the background of painting titled *After Rego #1*, which can be found in Figure 27.

Figure 27: Danielle Culibao Powell, *After Rego #1*, 2020, acrylic and oil on canvas, 24” x 24”
Instead of allowing the figures to remain symbols of impending doom or eventual death, I chose to portray these figures in a way that celebrates life. I used them to address the other side of the coin. Rego’s dancing figures provided a visual contrast to the quiet couple dining in the foreground, which points to the nuances of domestic life. Some days are magical and filled with wonder; other days are heavy, weighed down by repetition and routine. These experiences coexist within a household and Rego’s The Dance does many things, offering a commentary on the cycle of life being of one of them. Adding the other elements completed the picture in my mind.

Furthermore, the painting was inspired by the reorganization of my life in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Once the nationwide quarantine commenced, my home became the focal point of my work life, my artistic research, my recreational activities, and my personal life. After Rego #1 reflects the way my small, 2-bedroom apartment contained every part of my daily life once I no longer had habitual access to the outside world. Therefore, it is about domesticity as much as it is about confinement.

Figure 28 is an image of my painting Mother-In-Law’s Tongue which has a more populated and dynamic composition than previous works. The composition in this painting was inspired by the composition of Rego’s painting, The Family (Figure 25 - Rego, The Family). The elements incorporated in the work include a patterned rug that is, once again, reminiscent of traditional Filipino textiles; my all-seeing dog that continues to appear in my paintings; and a wall of eyes that provides a multitude of positive and negative connotations. Another fact that is worth noting is that Mother-In-Law’s Tongue was the first painting since Pieces of Me, Pieces of You in which I rejected pure linear perspective (Figure 4 - Pieces of Me, Pieces of You). It is the first time I warped the interior space in a painting to this extent, which gave me another variable to tweak according to my conceptual intentions.
Figure 28: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Mother-In-Law's Tongue*, 2019, acrylic and collage on paper, 35.5” x 24’
PART 3: Romare Bearden

While Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s paintings were the first to inspire my experimentation with combining flat space and illusory pictorial space, it is Romare Bearden that struck me as the master of flat, graphic space and color. I discovered in the collages of Romare Bearden an artist who was fluent in that part of visual language.

Romare Bearden was the first Western-based artist that I studied closely who was known for rejecting the careful crafting of linear perspective in exchange for more improvisational compositions. The improvisational nature and fluid structure of Bearden’s artwork is due to his close ties to jazz music as a composer, a musician, and a consumer of jazz during the peak of the genre’s popularity in the United States.11

I attribute many of the formal lessons I have learned about color, perspective, figurative anonymity, and collage to the careful study of this artist’s many bodies of work. However, the *Odysseus Series* is the body of work that I connected with conceptually because it is a reinterpretation of the Greek epic he used as a vehicle to examine the history of Black America.12 In other words, he connected a Western canonical text to the tragic history of African Americans, therefore making it even more accessible to outsiders and even more significant to the collective history of mankind. Researching Bearden’s motivations and his thought process in making the work, I realized that I had been doing the same thing but on a smaller scale and with a more shallow level of understanding. In order to explain how the formal decisions in his work influenced my own research, I will begin by examining a few of Bearden’s artworks from the

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*Odysseus Series.* The first being his collage titled *Battle With Cicones*, which can be observed in Figure 29.


*Figure 29: Romare Bearden, *Battle With Cicones*, 1977.*

Collage of various papers with graphite on fiberboard, 32” x 44”


Although the composition of *Mother-In-Law’s Tongue* was inspired by Paula Rego’s painting, *The Family*, it was Bearden’s *Battle With Cicones* that influenced the warped structure of the room and the flatness of the floor in my painting (Figure 28 - Mother-In-Law’s Tongue and Figure 25 - Rego, The Family). This collage proved to me that depth of space could still be communicated with flat planes of color through the emphasis of scale relationships.
In *Battle With Cicones*, I am looking specifically at the boats that appear to be in the distance compared to the figures that are captured mid-battle in the foreground. While there are none of the typical details articulating depth of space in this work, there is no mistaking what is happening in the artist’s arrangement of this battle scene. What is so fascinating to me about Bearden’s imagery is that it appears to be both effortless and complicated at the same time. The simplicity of his busy compositions is what makes him a master of his medium and his collages led to the realization that linear perspective had its own limitations. As a painter, there was nothing stopping me from working outside of that tradition whenever I deemed it necessary to the work.

Another insight I gained from Bearden’s practice was the understanding that traditional Western figuration had limitations as well. In considering all the artists I had researched, Bearden was the only artist whose figures did not require a likeness or a level of recognizability. This is demonstrated in *Battle With Cicones* and in *Siren’s Song* (Figure 30 - Bearden, Siren’s Song). Because each figure is anonymous, the collective identity of the figures is what becomes most important to the work. The viewer will ask, “What links this group of people?” rather than “Who is this individual?” Likewise, the viewer is more likely to question, “What is this group doing?” or “What is being done to them?” instead of pondering the identity of each individual. Here, it is solely the arrangement of the elements in this composition that carries the meaning of the work.
In this piece, Bearden portrays a soldier tied to the mast of his ship to endure the temptations caused by the sirens’ singing. But the image can also be interpreted as a slave ship slipping off into the sea, men in tow, being separated from their families. Though my subject matter is not nearly as heavy, I used this strategy in the following three paintings.

My initial approach to introducing more anonymity to my figures involved turning the figures’ faces away in order to obscure their identities. I still used the mode of self portraiture in these instances but I allowed for more ambiguity by concealing the likeness of the woman. More ambiguity, I have learned, gives the viewer more room to bring their own perspective to the works in question.

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Figure 31 features an untitled piece that feels more intimate than previous paintings. Conceptually, the piece speaks about fear of loss and rejection. It touches on the anxiety I experience whenever I think about the possibility of being left alone, waiting for someone to come back or waiting for something that will not happen. Because the figure has its back to the viewer and her identity is not defined, there is space for the viewer to place themself into the work. The way I have invited the viewer to look over the woman’s shoulder adds to the intimacy and vulnerability of the painting. This is because I have made the onlooker a part of the scene.

Figure 31: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Untitled (Dinner Table)*, 2019, acrylic, oil, and collage on wood, 16” x 12”

The other way I incorporated anonymous figures into my work was by stylizing the figures entirely. In my paintings titled *Where We Find Ourselves* and *From There To Here*, I’ve combined references to my family history with figures that have no specific identity and or desired likeness (Figure 32 - Where We Find Ourselves and Figure 33 - From There To Here).
This type of figuration more closely resembles Bearden’s approach and is more open to interpretation in comparison to the rest of my visual research. The resulting paintings manage to remain highly personal but imprecise enough to elude the trap of being over explanatory.

Another commonality between these three paintings— and a formal strategy that I find to be very effective— is the use of figures that are either exiting or standing just outside of the picture plane. The positioning of these figures creates an awareness in the viewer that the image they are looking at is a scene in action. It makes the passing of time another piece of the formula that I can manipulate depending upon my intentions. Conceptually, these figures caught mid-exit do two things. The first being that their presence points to a world beyond the picture plane.

Figure 32 (left): Danielle Culibao Powell, *Where We Find Ourselves*, 2019, acrylic and collage on wood, 16” x 12”
Figure 33 (right): Danielle Culibao Powell, *From There To Here*, 2019, acrylic and collage on wood, 16” x 12”
In my previous work, the world of the painting was restricted to what was visible inside of the picture plane. The exiting figures and the suggested figure in these last three works indicate a connection to a world on the other side of what is visibly portrayed, which creates potential for connection and meaning outside of the intimate interiors I’ve constructed.

The second thing that the exiting figures contribute to my work is an established line of connection between my paintings. Thus far, my paintings appear like isolated works. By introducing mobility and access to a space outside of the interior depicted, a connection between individual pieces is not as difficult to imagine. In fact, it can be surmised that my figures are operating within the same world.

Though I have since returned to a more traditional or observational method of self portraiture and figuration, I know that the study of Romare Bearden’s work has expanded my understanding of what is formally and conceptually possible. My research into his practice has left me with a new perspective on my own creative process, which has become more intuitive and more concerned with the pursuit of new ideas.
FILIPINA ARTISTS AND POINTS OF CONTACT

It was after painting this series of small works that I began researching the history of artists from my family’s country of origin. I had not seriously sought out other Filipino visual artists because I was absorbed in my studies of Western contemporary art and the work in the canon of Western art history. I had not heard of any painters from the Philippines. This does not surprise me because the Philippines is an impoverished country and impoverished countries do not normally have the luxury of investing in the arts to the degree that first world countries do. While there are many parts of the Filipino culture that are distinct and celebrated, visual art is not one of them. Rather, the arts that are definitive of the country’s culture and history are performative. I feared that discovering a lack of distinctly Filipino painting meant there would be more about myself that clashed with Filipino culture than I was already aware of.

Although the history of Filipino painting is far from prolific, through my research I found several women artists who created artwork that had an affinity with my own. Discovering their bodies of work brought my practice full circle. I felt I had a degree of an innate understanding of the lens through which these Filipina artists viewed the world. Beyond informing my paintings, researching their work provided me with a stronger sense of connection to my family’s culture and allowed me to feel more ownership over that facet of my identity. I will now discuss how studying the works of Norma Belleza, Brenda Fajardo, and Pacita Abad enriched my art-making.
PART 1: Norma Belleza

Norma Belleza is one of the earliest Filipina painters I found when I first began my research and is the first Filipina artist that I felt an immediate connection with. Like me, she grew up in a family of artists. Belleza was born in 1939 and was married to Angelito Antonio, another Filipino artist. She and her husband had children who later became well-known artists themselves, including Marcel Antonio and Fatima Baquiran. Her family was filled with billboard designers and sign makers; my father’s side of the family is filled with draftsman and he himself works as an architect, so both Belleza and I had artistic influences since an early age.¹⁴

Belleza is known for her vivid, iconographic oil paintings of laborers, women, and families. Her paintings are rooted in the genre of folk painting with an emphasis on the figure. The backgrounds she paints are almost surreal at times but her work always appears to be rooted in reality, like a glimpse into her daily life. Though the work is just as abstracted as it is representational, Belleza transforms day to day, banal routines into inviting and intimate experiences. The vulnerability and transparency that is so characteristic of her work is demonstrated in her painting called *Fruit Vendor* (Figure 34 - Belleza, Fruit Vendor).

I found in Belleza’s work a tenderness between her figures that contrasted the cool, almost clinical figures of the artists I habitually studied.

To Lucian Freud, figures were objects to be analyzed, pinned down, and mastered. Paula Rego’s figures are archetypes that were carefully arranged to poke and prod, provoke and confront. Even Romare Bearden’s figures were more like figurines than humans; each one a part of the collective instead of acting as an individual. But to Belleza, her painted figures do not serve a greater purpose than appearing as she knows them to be in her mind, in her imagination, and in her memories. There is something heartbreakingly human in her work that I wanted for my own—should the work demand it.
The untitled painting in Figure 35 is the first painting I’ve made in a long time that focused on the intimacy between my husband and myself. I have shied away from this sort of tender imagery because I feared that my work would appear too sentimental. I feared that the sentimentality of the figures’ poses would distract from the nuanced familial and cultural issues I am exploring. One thing Norma Belleza’s work proved is that vulnerability has a place in conversation. While building a body of work about cultural plurality and experiences within a transcultural family, I’ve found it easier to view the disjointed parts of my marriage as a source for compelling and relatable subject matter.

Figure 35: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic, oil, and collage on wood, 35.5” x 23”
I placed a couple at the center of clashing realities in this untitled work. The bottom half of the image situates the figures in a bed that is too small to properly hold them. The upper half of the images opens up to a canopy of trees, set against a black and white, makeshift building. The inclusion of all these disparate elements provokes more questions than it provides answers, which was my goal in creating the piece. Here, memory meets actuality and both the past and the present are active in the conversation. When I think about this painting, I ask myself, “Is this about reality or fantasy? Is this about contentment in the present or hope for the future? Is this about freedom or confinement?” This painting speaks to a sensation that is common among many second generation immigrants: a feeling of being out of place in a space that should be your own.
PART 2: Brenda Fajardo

The next Filipina painter I would like to discuss is Brenda Fajardo. Fajardo was born in 1940 to a family living in Manila, the capital city of the Philippines. Manila happens to be the city where my parents were born, raised, and met one another, so I share a connection to that city as well. Fajardo is best known for her Tarot Card series in which she appropriated and then reimagined tarot imagery into indigenous Philippine icons. Her approach is not dissimilar to that of Romare Bearden’s. The Tarot Card series is a commentary on the country’s struggle with socio-political issues, colonial history, and ongoing poverty.15

While the Tarot Card series contains her most famous works, she created paintings outside of her social interests like the one featured in Figure 36. This painting is titled Paghigugma sa tagsa-tagsa, pagpalangga sa familya (To Love Sometimes and to Care For Family) and depicts a family inside their home while tarot-inspired imagery appears on the side perimeters of the work. This painting struck me as particularly vulnerable. Though I cannot attest to whether or not Fajardo used her own family as a subject for this painting, I can say that the figures are rendered with a level of sensitivity that indicates a familiarity to this setting. This painting was made from the perspective of an insider. It is an honest and authentic family portrait, one that brings to mind the nakedness and openness of Francisco Goya’s Charles IV of Spain and His Family (Figure 37 - Goya, Charles IV of Spain and His Family).

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Figure 36: Brenda Fajardo, *Paghigugma sa tagsa-tagsa, pagpalangga sa pamilya [To Love Sometimes and to Care For Family]*. 1997, ink on paper, 72 cm x 87 cm. 

Figure 37: Francisco Goya, *Charles IV of Spain and His Family*. 1800-1801, oil on canvas, 110” x 132 
https://library.artstor.org/asset/LESSING_ART_1039490333
The figures in Fajardo’s painting reveal a lot about the inner workings of the family portrayed through their arrangement and the subtlety of their poses, much like Goya’s painting here. Rather than the typical, idealized royal portrait, the posing of these figures is vulnerable instead of pompous. I find that Fajardo’s painting leaves her figures just as exposed as Goya does, and as an artist who is constantly dissecting my own family unit, the unguardedness of the two works is what I strive to emulate in my own paintings.

Figure 38 is a painting I created that was directly inspired by Fajardo’s family portrait. The image of this cluster of figures suits how I view my own family. Like Fajardo’s family and Charles IV of Spain’s family, we form something strong and seemingly impenetrable. We have chosen to remain united despite our private difficulties and disagreements. Though the family depicted in my untitled painting is a memory from my childhood, the strength of our bond persists even now.
In the foreground of the painting is a self-portrait. The picture of a couple’s wedding shoes set high above the figure represents how highly Filipino people—myself included—regard marriage and see it as the foundation of our culture. It also expresses my fear of falling short as a spouse and how far out of reach I fear the ideal marriage seems to be. The crooked Filipino flag testifies to my insecurity surrounding my cultural identity and the yellow dog references a painting created by Kerry James Marshall, another contemporary artist that I have studied at length. Like Marshall’s yellow dog in the untitled work found in Figure 39, my yellow
dog also acts as a silent and all-seeing observer, watching the scene unfold before him. He is both an insider and an outsider, more of a witness than a participant.

Figure 39: Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014, acrylic, 211.6 cm x 302.9 cm
PART 3: Pacita Abad

While Belleza’s and Fajardo’s paintings appeal to my interests in domesticity and family, I find that I can connect with Pacita Abad’s work because of the variety of materials she incorporated into her paintings and because of the specificity of her subject matter.

Pacita Abad was a Filipina artist whose painting career took off when she moved to the United States to complete her graduate studies at Lone Mountain College (now the University of San Francisco). During that time, she earned a living as a typist and seamstress. Both of these practices translated directly into her work through the frequent appearance of text and fabric in her collaged paintings. She created several bodies of work over her lifetime, many of which consisted of nonrepresentational abstractions, but it is her figurative work that interests me the most.16

Figure 40 features Abad’s piece entitled How Mali Lost Her Accent. While I could not find any information about the subject of the painting (Mali), I believe that the title and the symbols used by Abad give enough context for the viewer to understand the piece. Mali, a young girl or woman who I presume to be Filipina, sits at the center of the composition surrounded by buildings with labels like “Harvard,” “Yale,” and “Berkeley.” Based on the title and the limited visual information available, I can surmise that this painting is about a woman moving to the United States to attend a prestigious university where she then (figuratively or literally) loses her accent. The loss of an accent implies a higher level of assimilation and also obscures a person’s country of origin when they are conversing with another person. In a way, losing an accent can be considered a type of loss in and of itself. Thus, the painting is about something more complicated than a change in speech. The painting is about leaving home and adopting as your

own something that was once foreign. In this case, a way of speaking can be related to cultural and ethnic identity. This work is about a change in identity and in culture that occurred because of a change of location. Therefore, Mali is a liminal character operating in a space that used to be foreign to her.

![Image](https://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_43753243)

Figure 40: Pacita Abad, *How Mali Lost Her Accent* (1991), acrylic, oil, on stitched and padded canvas, 238.8 cm x 172.7 cm

While much of my interpretation of this painting is conjecture, the experience it portrays is a familiar one. I see my mother in this painting because she was the first one in our family to immigrate to America, and through her, the rest of my family was able to immigrate as well.
Because I was the first of my family to be born in the United States, my understanding of their struggle to assimilate is limited; I am aware that my relatives share experiences and hardships that I will never be privy to.

That said, I’ve experienced my own feelings of displacement that many of my relatives cannot relate to because I have lived my life as the product of two cultures instead of crossing over from one into the other. Abad is the first Filipina artist I found that has created work that addresses transcultural experiences in a way that relates to my own. In her work titled *Mixed Marriage: Mike and Jeeva*, a mixed race, intercultural couple is depicted on what is presumably their wedding day (Figure 41 - Mike and Jeeva). I felt instantly connected to the collage when I saw it for the first time. Outside of the work of Njideka Akunyili Crosby, I’ve not seen many paintings that directly address the marriage of people from two different cultures. Along with the subject matter, I’ve found a kinship with Abad because of the patterning, the jewel-like colors, and the collage elements of this work.
As I have stated before, the culture of the Philippines is one I have always hesitated to claim as my own. After studying the lives of these Filipina artists and their work, I found that we share a lot in common despite the difference in our upbringings, lifestyles, and surroundings. Figure 42 features a painting I completed after I began my research into Filipina art, which
demonstrates the confidence my research has given me as I learn to reconcile my contemporary American identity with my Filipino heritage.

Figure 42: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Untitled (Parols)*, 2020, acrylic, oil, and collage on wood, 35.5” x 23”

In this one artwork, I am able to reflect on my childhood and what it was like growing up in a Filipino family in suburban America. My family is gathered together for a family dinner, as we did every night while I was growing up. I am able to address how my interracial marriage has changed the trajectory of my family line and how my husband has become a part of our
traditions. I gave myself permission to seek a connection between myself and the country of my family’s origin, and I can express the childlike wonder that accompanies any new discovery I make. I can position myself in the middle of all of these things to indicate where my mind is on a daily basis. I shed some light on the inner negotiations and the balancing act I feel I am performing when it comes to my identity, in relationship to where I came from, who I am now, and who I would like to become moving forward.
CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to review my more recent work to demonstrate where my practice is currently taking me.

*Birthday Wish* portrays intersecting realities in which the figures are coming and going (Figure 43 - Birthday Wish). The child, the balloon, and the objects on the table are the only stagnant elements in the work. This painting, once again, combines elements from the past, the present, and the future to show how everything that I am doing circles back to my childhood. I am now dealing with my upbringing with more specificity, and I started introducing symbols that represent impermanence.

Figure 43: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Birthday Wish*, 2020, acrylic, oil, and collage on wood, 24” x 24”
The next painting is called *Give It Time* and it deals with the multitude of possibilities that stretch into the future (Figure 44 - Give It Time). With its completion came something new to my body of work. This is the first time that an open window appears in one of my paintings and it is the first time that an exterior is just as significant to the work as the interior. This struck me as a way out of the realm I have lived in and gives me a new sliver of the world to take on. Although the conceptual implications of this open window are not yet fully realized, I can already tell that this is the seed of something forthcoming and important to my work.

![Figure 44: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Give It Time*, 2020, acrylic, oil, and collage on wood, 35.5” x 23”](image-url)
The last painting I will discuss has revealed another way forward for me artistically (Figure 45 - Tinikling). Of all the different ways I have documented my home life and of all the portraits of my family that I have created, this is the first time I’ve depicted myself at work in a painting. It is the first time I have positioned myself as the Artist in Studio and the first time I placed myself within the lineage of artists that have painted themselves working in this way. Because of that decision alone, this is closer to reality than my previous work. It is as much of a self portrait as it is a family portrait and it still addresses the cultural issues at the core of my practice. It also demonstrates how my practice has become interwoven with my home life. It conveys how reality feeds my work and how my work feeds my reality.

Figure 45: Danielle Culibao Powell, *Tinikling*, 2020, acrylic, oil, and collage on wood, 24” x 24”
My current body of work leaves me with more questions than answers but my research has proven that the conversation about transcultural experiences is far from over. As the consequences of globalization continue to unfold upon the world and as immigrants continue to build lives for themselves outside of their home countries, the number of people caught between multiple cultures is growing. The people whose lives have been shaped by transculturality are becoming more vocal and are gaining more representation in popular culture, in the media, and in the contemporary art world. Although this subject is not new to artistic exploration, it is important to note that visual art is particularly suited to expressing the nuances of living within a plurality of cultures. Visual art provides a way for individuals to describe the complexities of transcultural identity that transcends space, time, and language. Through my art, I am able to speak to the inner conflicts that the children of American immigrants experience when confronted with the portions of their family’s cultural history they will not or cannot carry on.

Researching Western artists and Filipina artists has allowed me to claim ownership of my contemporary identity and of my heritage in a way that I could not before. Since studying these artists and their work, the trajectory of my practice has shifted. I believe that my work is richer in meaning because I am more informed about the lineage of both Western painting and Filipina painting that my work is situated in. This is something solid that I can lean my weight against when I am battling feelings of being a fraud in my own skin.

The process of assimilation, cultural adaptation or compromise, and even feelings of detachment or disconnection are common subjects when making work about such experiences. Again, this is not a subject that is new to the art world, but visual artists that are actively researching this subject indicate that this topic is only gaining momentum and recognition for its role in the contemporary discourse. The strangeness that imbues the second—and third, and
fourth—generation immigrant experience can be a catalyst for important conversations and meaningful art making for generations to come.
APPENDIX:
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<td><strong>Details of use</strong></td>
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<td>13 March 2021</td>
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<td><strong>Expiration date</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Additional details</strong></td>
<td>Personal prints, cards and gifts, or reference for artists. Non-commercial use only, not for resale.</td>
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**Paid**  
**Subtotal:** $  
**Sales tax @ 0%:** $ 0.00  
**Total:** $
To whom it may concern,

My name is Danielle Culibao Powell and I am a candidate for an MFA Degree in Studio Art and Design from the University of Central Florida. I am reaching out to you today because I am submitting my Thesis paper for publication soon and would like to know how I can get copyright permissions to use the following image in my published paper:

![Image](https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/brenda-fajardo/)

This image is very important to my Thesis and I cannot seem to find it anywhere else online. Fanny Verdier from AWARE instructed me to reach out to your gallery about this matter.

This is a time-sensitive matter so please let me know if you would give me copyright permission to publish this image. It will not be a commercial publication, rather, it would be for educational and research purposes through my university.

Thank you so much!

Best,

Danielle Culibao Powell
Hello Cristina.

My name is Danielle Culhao Powell and I am a graduate student at the University of Central Florida. I am about to graduate with a MFA Degree in Studio Art and Design and I am reaching out today to ask for permission to use the following image in my Thesis paper:

[Image of sculpture]

The paper will be published online but will not be for commercial use. It will simply be for educational and research purposes. Please let me know if this would work for you as soon as you are able.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration!

---

cristinatrofula <christinatrofula@saop.pt>
Thu 3/7/2013 5:57 PM
To: Danielle Culhao, cristinatrofula@saop.pt

Hello Danielle,

Yes you have permission to use this image in your Thesis.

I wish you a huge success.

All the best,
Cristina Troufa
LIST OF REFERENCES

   https://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_43753243.
   https://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_43753263.
   https://11.berlinbiennale.de/participants/brenda-v-fajardo.


Vermeer, Johannes. c.1665. Girl with a Pearl Earring. Place: Mauritshuis.
