Way of the Butterfly: A Journey towards Transformation through Self-portraits In-Between

2015

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WAY OF THE BUTTERFLY: A JOURNEY TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION THROUGH
SELF-PORTRAITS
IN-BETWEEN

by

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ABSTRACT

It has not been easy for me to talk about myself or describe my feelings or thoughts. Coming from Japan, a collective society, we typically are not raised to do so. Throughout the MFA program at UCF, I have shared my feelings and thoughts through my work. It is important to discuss and inform others of our cultural similarities and differences so that we may gain a better understanding of each other. This process has helped me grow not only on an artistic level, but also on a personal level. My journey towards integration has led me to a meaningful studio practice, which has allowed my work to bridge the gap between Western and Eastern artistic sensibilities.

At the beginning of the MFA program, my mother sent many boxes of origami from Japan. As I started incorporating my mother’s origami into my work, I found myself identifying with the origami butterfly. My realization is that the person I am now is not the person I was when I began this journey. My wish for you, the reader, is to go along with me as I tell you the story of my transformation.
This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother. She was a Japanese orphan who was left behind after World War II. After the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Japanese people who were within Chinese territory had to leave quickly. While many Japanese were killed, my great-grandmother, grandmother, and her little brother were the only survivors within her family and were saved by a Chinese family that found them homeless on the street. A few months later my great-grandmother decided to offer her daughter as a bride, a gesture of appreciation for saving their lives. My grandmother was 17 years old at the time.
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Last but not least I am grateful to my mother who has worked endless hours creating thousands of origami. You are such an amazing mom and your support helped me finish this project.
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INTRODUCTION

“Young people are merely the passive recipients or vulnerable victims of global change.”¹ Because of rapid social changes, a person’s identity and his/her sense of place in the world may be lost. The countries of the world are becoming increasingly dependent upon one another both economically and politically. More and more people are faced with conflicts based on race, religion, culture and personal identity, and it has become increasingly necessary for people to understand the cultures and customs of those from other countries.

Despite the challenges of social displacement, social anxiety, and societal expectations, I have found a strong sense of purpose since moving to America in 2004. My goal has been to depict the feeling of being in between through the usage of seemingly contradictory subject matter such as East vs. West, traditional vs. modern, and reality vs. dream. My work combines different types of media such as painting, sculpture, video, performance, and installation.

Within the following chapters, some of the topics discussed will include Japan’s male dominated society, China’s one child policy, and mail-order-brides. Various art forms such as Abstract Expressionism, Performance Art, Gutai Art, Feminism, Japanese Neo Dada, and Butoh are discussed as my influences. My artists references include Kimsooja, Yoko Ono, Coco Fusco, Yuken Teruya, Arahmaiani, Chuck Close, Yves Klein, and Ushio Shinohara to list a few.

Experimenting with different mediums, drawing inspirations from diverse influences, and collaborating with talented individuals has broadened the horizons of my artistic expression. As I reflect upon my humble beginnings and the fact that technically I shouldn’t be alive due to China’s one child policy, it is with deep gratitude and appreciation that I present this work.
CHAPTER 1: “HELLO,” SELF-PORTRAIT WITH BURNING KIMONO

The first video I made during the MFA program, Self-portrait with Burning Kimono, shows my transition from painter to video artist. My goal was to create a still video that imitates a painting. This video marks the beginning of my journey towards finding myself as an artist as well as introducing my multicultural background as Chinese/Japanese. My goal was to intrigue the viewer so that she/he may question the relationship between the subjects, the figure and the burning kimono.

Figure 1: Self-portrait with Burning Kimono with Poem: Flash back 1 (English Subtitle), photo by Author, video/performance/poem, 3 minutes, 2012-2015
In this five-minute video, a nude female is standing in front of a burning painting in the shape of a kimono made of wood (Figure 1). The wooden kimono is painted abstractly and includes the application of red lipstick, black calligraphy, and a repetitive shirt pattern (Figure 2). Japanese words cover the entire back (Figure 2). The only thing that is obviously moving within the frame is fire, but of course because it is recording a specific span of time in a specific place other things are moving too, although minutely. Filming ends when the burning kimono falls down.

Figure 2: *Little Kimono* (front & back view), photo by Author, mixed media, 4’ x 4’, 2012
The juxtaposition between the naked figure and the burning kimono is intended to symbolize a release from oppressive male dominated society while at the same time it is showing my pride in my Japanese cultural heritage in subtle, symbolic ways. The kimono is a traditional costume from Japan, mostly worn by women at special occasions. The kimono represents Japanese feminine personality traits such as innocence, gracefulness, calmness, politeness, humbleness, etc. The repetitive patterns of shirts with ties and tubes of lipstick within the painting symbolizes Japanese gender roles (Figure 3). On the back of the kimono, I wrote a letter in Japanese that spoke of my struggles and goals as a female. The ritual of burning a letter comes from the Chinese tradition of sending messages to ancestors.

Figure 3: Little Kimono (detail), photo by Author, 2012
The Healing Process

The content of the poem is about a young female’s tragic love life, dealing with anger and revenge, yet she is still trying to heal and forgive (Figure 4). During the time the video was made, I was suffering from the trauma of being physically abused by the biological father of my son. After the performance, I covered the burnt kimono with origami my mother made for me, symbolically healing the pain (Figure 5). Elinor Massogkia in her article, *A Flight of A Thousand Cranes* explains, “Japanese tradition holds that an ailing person who folds a thousand cranes will regain their health.” Origami became popular after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

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People made origami by the thousands as a gift to heal illness and the soul. By incorporating my mother’s origami into my work, I came to understand the true meaning of the use of it. The gesture of burning the wooden kimono painting during the performance therefore indicated that I was releasing the past, opening myself to the new, and finding my personal identity.

Figure 5: Little Kimono Aftermath with Origami (back view), photo by Author, 2012
Inspiration

The contemporary performance artist, Soo-ja Kim, known as Kimsooja in her *A Needle Woman* series (1999-2001), depicts a woman standing, never moving, and facing away from the viewer: only her surrounding environment is in motion (Figure 6). Eight video installations took place in Tokyo (Japan), Shanghai (China), New York (USA), New Delhi (India), Mexico City (Mexico), Cairo (Egypt), Lagos (Nigeria), and London (England). Each video lasts about six minutes. The question of “What is reality?” is the artist’s vision in the video. In the dissertation, *Korean Border-Crossing Artists in the New York Artworld* by Esther Kho describes her work as “‘examining the boundaries between art and life’”3 The author continues, “People all over the world live in different cultures and societies from their own. Yet, Kimsooja's work represents more than just physical displacement.”4

When I saw her video series at Mom Museum in Miami, at first I noticed her standing still, but my attention turned more towards the reactions of people in the video. After a while, she disappeared (fading from attention because she was not moving). The two subjects, Kimsooja and her surroundings become equally important and visually dominant. Conceptually, the term “physical displacement” refers to the displacement of personal, cultural and traditional identity as the subject becomes lost in the crowd. In my video, *Self-portrait with Burning Kimono*, the attention turns at first towards the naked figure and then to the relationship between the naked figure and the burning kimono. As the video goes on, the focus may shift to the movement of the

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fire which may provoke certain feelings of isolation and nostalgia. My goal was to blur the boundaries associated with nationality, culture and gender roles while expressing my personal yet universal experience as a displaced person in a global society.

Figure 6: Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman*, video stills, Shibuya, Tokyo. 1999

Source: Kimsooja’s Official Website
http://www.kimsooja.com/
CHAPTER 2: “THIS IS...,” SELF-PORTRAIT WITH FACE IN ROCK

While dealing with my personal experience as the subject matter in my work, I had to develop a certain relationship with myself and become completely vulnerable. In Chapter 1, I introduced my cultural identity while Chapter 2 focuses on my personal identity. Self-portrait with Face in Rock deals with my struggle as a female born in China and as a single mother in the U.S. Through a Japanese cultural ritual, I was seeking inner acceptance as a person by kneeling before a shrine dedicated to myself.

A naked figure is kneeling in a Japanese posture in front of a shrine on a piece of tatami floor (Figure 7). I created a clay mold of my face, poured plaster into it and attached it to a sculpture that mimics a rock. The rock is inside of a black box which represents Butsudan, a shrine used to honor the ancestors, commonly found within temples and almost every household in Japan. One of my intensions was to bring a Japanese spiritual practice into a Western backdrop. I remained still for 10 minutes in the video (the actual length of the shoot was 20 minutes and my legs were asleep for 10 to 15 minutes afterwards). The movement of the wind-blown curtain is the only visible action in this video.
Performing Still (Silence of Action)

Some people may wonder why I am still in the video series. What is the significance of a meditating woman? Indeed, there is not much movement except the wind blowing the white curtain. The video is silent and meditative. According to Taoism, inaction produces an effect, which means being silent is also an important action. Elizabeth Reninger in her article, *Wu Wei: The Action of Non-Action*, explains, “One of Taoism’s most important concepts is wu wei, which is sometimes translated as ‘non-doing’ or ‘non-action.’ A better way to think of it, however, is as a paradoxical “Action of non-action.” Although the meditating woman is naked and vulnerable,

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sitting very still is also an act of protection. A frightened bird becomes motionless and blends with the landscape, in a successful pretense that it is a plant or a stone in order to survive.

**Time and Place**

The still figure and the movement of the curtain creates an illusion between reality and imagination. At first glance this video may appear to be a photograph, but the gentle movement of the curtain breaks the illusion. The authors in *Themes of Contemporary Art*, indicate, “The implication is that there is value in time spent making something essentially useless that exists only for a short time, simply for the joy of seeing an idea come to life.” The time captured in this video is based on the time it took to burn an incense stick that was on the shrine, which helped me focus. This dedication to stillness contradicts how many people in modern society value time. By placing a Japanese shrine and a piece of tatami floor into a Western environment, this video provides a subtheme about personal identity and the connection between where the subject is from and where she finds herself now.

Contemporary artist, Yoko Ono addresses destruction through conceptual performance. Ono’s performance work, *Cut Piece*, invites the audience to cut away pieces of her clothing (Figure 8). Whitney Frank, in her article, *Instructions for Destruction Yoko Ono’s Performance Art*, analyzes, “By repositioning violence in performance work, Ono’s art promotes creative thinking, ultimately drawing out the reality of destruction that remains hidden within the physical and social body.” Ono’s posture and gestures are submissive. This allows the audience to look

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upon the artist as if she were an object. As the protective layers of clothing are stripped away piece by piece, Ono is placed in a position of complete vulnerability. The trust between Ono and her audience is apparent throughout her performance. This sort of trust is also found within my work, *Self-portrait with Face in Rock* as I kneel naked and expose my back to the audience.

![Yoko Ono, Cut Piece, Performance, Carnegie Recital Hall, 1965.](http://imaginepeace.com/archives/2680)

Figure 8: Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, Performance, Carnegie Recital Hall, 1965. Photo by Minoru Niizuma. Lenono Photo Archive

Source: Imagine Peace

http://imaginepeace.com/archives/2680
Daruma Doll (Symbol of Patience)

The inspiration for the Self-portrait with Face in Rock came from the traditional Japanese daruma doll. It is seen as a symbol of perseverance and good luck. Peggy Thomas explains, “In Japan, when children want to set a goal for themselves, such as doing well on a test or learning a new sport, they use a pudgy paper mache Daruma doll to help them.” 8 Certainly, this traditional Japanese object inspired me to create the video, which reflects my ambition as an artist and my desire to excel in school. Also, a female version of daruma dolls makes a welcome gift for newborn daughters of a family. By using the idea of celebrating the birth of a daughter, I am making an ironic comment about the traditional gender role of females and China’s One Child Policy.

China’s One Child Policy

The One-child Policy introduced in 1978 is involves many issues including forced abortion, female infanticide, and gender imbalance due to the preference of a male child over a female. 9 In male dominated society, it is more prestigious to have boys over girls. The authors explain, “Son preference is the cultural background; gender selection, such as gender-selective abortion, is a tool through which a desired gender can be pursued; and the decrease in fertility induced by the one-child policy leads to increasing sex ratios.” 10 It is an imposed rule. I was raised in a Chinese family as the second daughter. My mother once told me that the only reason

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she kept me was because she thought I was a boy when I was still in her womb. I would not have been allowed to have a life otherwise. Placing the naked figure in front of a shrine dedicated to oneself is my ironic comment on China’s policies towards globalization and gender shifting.

Poem (Flashback Two: Little Girl)

The second poem, *Flashback Two (Little Girl)*, is about my personal struggle as a second daughter in a Chinese family and shows the juxtaposition between reality and a dreamlike sequence (Figure 9). A little girl and a mother play important roles in the poem. The little girl represents myself as a child, and the mother represents myself in such a role. Because we are caught up in our busy lives, we tend to ignore what is beneath the surface, our inner child. Searching for true self by praying to myself, once revealed, will set me free.
Figure 9: *Flash Back 2: Little Girl*, by Author, poem, 2013
CHAPTER 3: “WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF IN-BETWEEN”

By using cultural and personal experiences in my work, Meditating Woman series, I created a boundary between my work and audience. My work was perceived as mysterious and confusing. The inspiration was indeed personal, dealing with the tragic events of my life. In this chapter, I am communicating my feelings of being in between, torn between two homelands: Japan and the U.S. The landscape painting of mountains and the ocean is a metaphor that depicts the duality of isolation and hope. The “relationship” between male and female, painter and multi-media artist, and cultural vs. personal identity is emphasized to discuss two subjects that are different but equally important in order to achieve a sense of balance and self-realization.

Within “Self-portrait in Between the Mountain and Ocean,” I am sitting in front of a painting that combines two different landscapes: the mountains represent Japan and the beach represents Florida (Figure 10). The video depicts me in the ocean with my back facing the viewer, perfectly still. The horizon line of the landscape painting matches aligns with the actual horizon of the ocean. The only aspects of the video that change are those associated with nature such as the ocean waves and the changing light of the sunrise. The actual video recording was about 12 minutes long. At the end of the recording, I was knocked over by a wave, but the painting remained standing.
The struggle of being in between two homelands provided the motivation necessary to achieve self-realization through my meditative art practice. In the video, I am sitting motionless seeking an understanding of my own personal habits, patterns and tendencies that directly come from my various cultural influences. J.P Singh, a professor of Global Affairs and Cultural Studies at George Mason University, explains, “Creative expressions are the most visible
symbols in understanding human identities.”  

11 Within our multi-faceted global society it is our cultural rituals and artistry that provides the foundation to examine one’s “self.”

Poem: Flashback 3 (The Mountain)

The mountains and the ocean are not only metaphors for geographical division but are also symbolic of the masculine and feminine. Within the teachings of Toaism, mountains and oceans are often used to describe the relationship between men and women:

Water does not flow upward to the mountains separating but downward to the sea’s joining. Man and woman are the downward course of each other. Flow with each other and move together ever downward toward the sea’s joining. Be moved, be carried, be taken willingly by the primal urge. It is infallible. From the very beginning it has been practicing for now.  

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In the poem, Flashback 3 (The Mountain), my feelings toward my parents’ relationship are expressed in a poetic fashion (Figure 11). Being a single mother who has struggled to provide both a mother and father figure to my son has led me to analyze the relationship between my parents who divorced in 2000. The feeling of love and respect for both of my parents and deeper understanding of what they went through as parents has given me the foundation necessary to raise my son.

I am sinking
I am sinking into the ocean
Waiting to hit the bottom
I am sinking
I remember the eyes, the sad eyes

Flash back 3 (mountain)

Father
Father, why do your eyes look so sad?
You would pour some coffee in your cup as usual
You read the newspaper like you normally do
But
Father
Why do your eyes look so sad?
Behind the glasses

The water is boiling on the stove
He hears it yet ignores it
It sounds like it is crying

For the anger to release, peace to spoil, and the irony to speak
For the hope and change

10:52:56, 57, 58, 59...

Time stretches in between
The consequence of silence
The eyes...
A little tree is climbing up my leg,
The floor changes into soil,
The kitchen turns into a forest
I am like a small animal trapped in the mountain
With a feeling of comfort, warmth, and sadness
I can't look behind
I can't love it

I'm in between
Between the mountain and ocean

The fire from the ground
Steam from the water
The blowing wind

Look out!

My father said
He pulled me away from the boiling water
And opened the window

Father, why are your eyes so sad?
You are like the high mountain staring at the ocean

Figure 11: Flash Back 3 (Mountain), by Author, poem, 2013
A Painter in Multi-media

The relationship between the painting and myself in Self-portrait in Between the Mountain and Ocean shows my progression from a painter to a multimedia artist. The dynamics and expressions of painting alone have limitations. By using various media and techniques in my work, I am able to convey my artistic vision in a broader scope. Coco Fusco, a New York–based interdisciplinary artist and writer, in her recent video/installation, And the Sea Will Talk to You invites the audience into the physical and emotional experience of journeying from Cuba to America by sea (Figure 12). Before entering the darkened theater, participants are instructed to leave their worldly possessions behind such as handbags, money, phones, watches, etc. Instead of using traditional seating, inner tubes serve as sea crafts for Cuban rafters.13 Fusco’s signature style involves combining electronic media and performance in a variety of formats. Her multimedia performances often incorporate large-scale projections, live performances and chat interactions. Olibia Thornburg in her article indicates, “This is what Fusco’s work is about—subverting the performance norm by creating visual spaces that physically symbolize and reinforce the political messages conveyed by the performance itself.”14 My goal is to engage the viewer through multi-media and performance so that they may see what I imagine. My wish is to have my vision come to life.

14 Thornburg, “Let the waves roar.”
Suffering for My Art

Sacrificing my own comfort for the purpose of creating video/performance art has been a necessary evil. Female artists such as Marina Abramovic, Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke, Jessica Lagunas, and Kimsooja have created works that contain overlapping themes of the body, suffering and identity, crossing the boundaries between personal belief and societal norms. These artists transcend traditional points of view by questioning sex, gender, and cultural beautification.
rituals through performance art. In the video, *Self-portrait in Between the Mountain and Ocean*, I am performing the “Mediating Woman”. During the performance at the beach, I was bitten by mosquitos, gnats and sand fleas. My entire body was covered in red whelps (Figure 13). By performing naked, I am conveying the disconnection between the mind and physical appearance. It is a gesture of portraying a feeling of ambiguity towards the world.

Figure 13: The aftermath of *Self-portrait in Between the Mountain and Ocean*, photo by Author, 2013
No Self

My work is deeply associated with finding myself. By questioning my identity throughout the Meditating Woman series, I found there is no self. The authors, Robertson and McDaniel in The Themes of Contemporary Art After 1980, explain that identity is constructed and deconstructed over time and is formed mainly through social interactions and shared history. Indeed, many events reshaped the concept of identity in our contemporary period. Artists with new vision and international awareness brought forth new understanding of what it means to be human. The heroic generation of abstract expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko expressed their personal identity, their own radical individuality, emphasizing philosophical concepts, finding and questioning “what is the true nature of the self?” Everything is in a constant state of change. All identity is continuously reforming and reshaping. The only true identity is that which is found within art.

Art as Identity Itself

Art has an identity of its own. The artist, Yuken Teruya, was born and raised in Okinawa and currently resides in New York. He is known for his use of everyday objects such as toilet rolls and paper bags (Figure 14). Teruya’s work embodies political art, dealing with themes such as consumerism and globalism. His work often speaks of cultural tradition and modern society. I personally interpret Teruya’s work to be more about appreciating the beauty of nature and bringing life to a piece. The philosophical idea of “bringing life to a piece” may refer to Ikebana.

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16 Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, Themes of Contemporary Art, 37.
Mary Averill in her book, *Japanese Flower Arrangement, Ikebana (living flower)*, traditional Japanese art of flower arrangement came from China and was inspired by Buddhist philosophy. Averill continues, “The Buddhist desire to preserve life lies at the root of the whole subject and has created most of the rules of flower arrangement, controlling also the shapes of the flower vases, which are so formed as to help to prolong the life of the flowers.”[^17] Ikebana is a creative expression and discipline about humans and nature. It is through the artist’s intention that the flower arrangement receives its life and meaning (Figure 15).

![Figure 14](http://www.yukenteruyastudio.com/projects-1/notice-forest)

**Figure 14:** Yuken Teruya, *Notice – Forest Series*, paper, glue, 2005

Source: Yuken Teruya Studio

At the end of the video, *Self-portrait in Between the Mountain and Ocean*, I was pushed over by the waves while the painting on the easel remained standing. This is an example of how even though everything is in a constant state of change, the identity of art (ideas, thoughts and moments) remains fixed. Not only does the painting of the mountain and ocean depict my thoughts and feelings at the moment of its creation, but also the video itself captures a moment in time. In essence, the identity of the painting was captured within the identity of the video. Consider this quote from Pablo Picasso, “Painting is just another way of keeping a diary.” Thoughts, feelings and experiences of the artist once presented through art, become a form of journal, chronicling the artist’s life and times.
CHAPTER 4: “I LOVE YOU,” MARRY ME

Within each chapter of “Way of the Butterfly”, the focus is the progression of a typical relationship. Chapter 1 starts with “Hello,” then each following chapter moves towards the point where the relationship becomes more intimate. Since I started the master’s program at UCF in 2012, I have diversified my artistic approach and studio practice. My interest in different cultures has led me to emphasize the importance of the relationships we have, whether those relationships are cross cultural or personal. The goal is to develop a deeper connection and understanding of myself in order to acquire a deeper understanding of others.

My video series, Meditating Woman, embodies the three main cultures I have been most influenced by. Self-portrait with Burning Kimono was inspired by a traditional Chinese ritual of burning letters written to deceased family members and ancestors as mentioned in Chapter 1. Self-portrait with Face in Rock from Chapter 2 alludes to a Japanese cultural ritual (knelling in front of a shrine), and Self-portrait in Between Mountain and Ocean takes place on a beach in Florida where I reside now. (Figure 16). Culture and tradition are the dominant forces that influence decision making in our daily lives. Being a product of cultural hybridity and dealing with the struggle of social displacement has personally inspired me to bridge the gap between different personal belief systems (cultural and traditional) through my video/performance work.
This video/performance piece emphasizes how modern society has blended our once diverse collection of cultures into a more homogenized version of a global society. As the countries of the world become interrelated to and interdependent upon each other politically and economically, the understanding of international issues becomes a necessity. By blending the three cultures I most closely identify with into the character of the Homeless Bride, the video, *Marry Me*, focuses on my personal struggle with intimate relationships as an international student and woman living in America.

In the video, *Marry Me*, I created a character of a Homeless Bride holding a sign that says “Marry Me” in three different languages. I combined different cultural elements from the United States, Japan, and the China in the form of (a white wedding dress from America, geisha make-up from Japan, and a red wedding veil from China) (Figure 17). The Homeless Bride appears in various locations such as a street median, bus stop, train station, forest, court house and airport (Figure 18). I meditated for 30-45 minutes at each location and captured the events...
that occurred during the video recording. This organic approach led to many “happy accidents” such as a sky-writer writing “I Love you,” a large group of Australian male tourists surrounding me at the bus stop, and multiple interactions with strangers at the airport.

Figure 17: “Homeless Bride” from Marry Me, photo by Author, 2014
Figure 18: Marry Me, photo by Author, video/performance, 6 minutes 48 seconds, camera operated by Dominic DiPaolo and Wayne Martin, edited by Author, Rashaad Rosalle, music by Kung Fu Piano: Cello Ascends by ThePianoGuys, Flute accompaniment by Wayne Martin, special credits: Orlando International Airport, 2014
The Need to Be Accepted

The sign that was used in *Marry Me* is also symbolic of the desire to be fully accepted and embraced by the United States. Having three different cultural experiences and being an international student in this country have created a dilemma. On the surface, the video may direct the gaze of the viewer towards a common stereotype. Is she trying to marry whoever she can because she wants to obtain a Green Card? Many women dream of the day when they will get married. Having a wedding ceremony was one of the most anticipated events of my life. Being an international student living in the U.S. has led me to realize how many conflicts may arise while attempting to have an intimate relationship. Not being a citizen of the U.S. automatically creates a barrier, thus true trust is difficult to build during a relationship.

The scene in *Marry Me* where I appear with the American flag at the airport creates the illusion that I am staring at myself (Figure 19). This moment also shows that the gaze of the Homeless Bride has been fixed on the flag. This brings forth the question, is the Homeless Bride hoping for a man to marry her or is she longing for the acceptance of the country she is in?
Inter-racial Marriages and Its Risk

“We are living in the Dark Age for relationships. Intimacy is on trial.”\textsuperscript{18} Robert Sachs, in \textit{The Passionate Buddha}, points out that love is being tested due to social media and multicultural diversity.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, some societal concerns such as divorce rate and single parents are increasing especially in East Asia due to the impact of globalization. One of the reasons that interracial couples have difficulty agreeing is due to conflicts based on their cultural differences. According to United States marriage statistics, interracial marriages are more likely to end in

\textsuperscript{19} Robert Sachs, \textit{The Passionate Buddha}, 25.
divorce compared to same-race marriages. Roy Chan from University of California, Irvine, in her essay states, “…that Asian and White relationships were one of the most complex ethnic groups to study because of how the two groups must abide two sets of cultural rules that were completely different from one another.” These interracial couples encounter conflicts caused by issues concerning Asian self-identity and individuality in American society which creates the feeling of not fitting in. However, the rate has been improving since 1990. In 2000, interracial divorce rates were about 6% while same-race divorces were 4%. This trend towards acceptance of cultural differences may create a societal shift that will yield a higher likelihood of success among interracial relationships.

History of The Mail-Order-Bride and Stereotypes

Because of the well-known phenomenon of women from developing countries seeking citizenship through marriage, a stereotype has been created that alludes to the idea that any foreign female interested in an American male must be seeking a green card. The term, mail-order-bride refers to International Marriage Agencies which are businesses that introduce men and women from different countries. For example, “the advertisements and catalogs are part of an expanding multi-million dollar industry that markets women from developing countries as

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potential brides to men in Western industrialized nations.” (Figure 20). 23 On the contrary, many mail-order-brides from Japan who wished to have a financially secure life for themselves and their families ended up working in fields as farm laborers and were put in Japanese internment camps during World War II. 24 Fortunately, due to the efforts of political officials, the modern approach to mail-order-brides has become much safer. Be that as it may, forced marriages and marrying for financial reasons still exists today.

Figure 20: Japanese Picture Brides at Angel Island in 1919

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picture_bride

“Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride”

M.O.B., the Filipina American performance and video-art group, responded to the popular-cultural stereotypes of Filipina and portrayed the mail-order-bride in humorous, positive and kitschy appropriations of the term. Short vignettes highlighting same-sex weddings and also weddings for immigration purposes were compiled into a successful video. The video also includes still images of the M.O.B. (Mail Order Brides) and voiceover “testimonials” from “satisfied customers”. “The Mail Order Brides’ use of the infomercial genre, and the testimonial form in particular, highlights the commodification of affective labor within the institution of marriage.” This objectification of Asian women was most certainly a strong influence for the visual of my Homeless Bride (Figure 21).

Figure 21: “They put the maid into bridesmaid!”

26 Gina Velasco, “Performing the Filipina “mail-order bride,” 351.
My Grandmother’s History and Japanese Orphans in China

The video, Marry Me, was inspired by my Grandmother. She was a Japanese orphan who was left behind in China. At the end of World War II, roughly 4,000 Japanese children were left behind mostly in Manchuria, China, a vast territory referred to today as Northeast China. In 1932, Manchuria was reorganized into a client state called Manchukuo after being conquered by Japan in 1931. Li Narangoa, a professor from Australian National University, continues, “Most of those who failed to be classified as orphans were older than thirteen at the end of the war; many of them were women whose parents had given or sold them to Chinese farmers as wives or servants after the war.”

My grandmother’s family was sent to China in 1938 and had to quickly leave after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. She was 17 years old at the time. While many Japanese were killed by the Chinese, my great grandmother, grandmother, and her little brother were the only survivors within her family. They were saved by a Chinese man (my Grandfather) that found them homeless on the street. In 1947, as a gesture of gratitude for saving their lives, my great grandmother decided to offer her daughter (my Grandmother) as a bride to the man who saved them. In 1972, the Japanese Orphans were allowed to return to their country. After 32 years of living in China, my Grandmother decided to separate from my Grandfather and return home to Japan for financial reasons. Later on she successfully brought the rest of her family to Japan as well.

28 Narangoa Li, “Japanese Orphans from China,” 142.
My Grandfather’s Sacrifice and Compassion

The day my Grandfather found my Grandmother’s family on the street, he was working for a bicycle taxi service. As he rode by, he looked over his shoulder and his eyes connected with my Great Grandmother’s. He saw deep sadness and felt as though she really needed help. Over the next three months, my Grandfather spent all of his savings taking care of my Grandmother’s family. This money was supposed to pay for his wedding, but the wedding never happened. He lost his fiancé as result of this gesture. My Great Grandmother decided to offer her daughter (my Grandmother) as a gesture of appreciation for saving their lives. My Grandfather refused and said this gesture was unnecessary. However, one morning my Grandmother awoke to find she had been left behind, and her brother and her mother had returned to Japan.

Eventually, my Grandfather and Grandmother had five children, living mostly a life of poverty. One of the reasons was the loss of his leg during a train accident. My mother was seven years old at the time. They ate plants and leaves to survive when they had to. When the children were all grown and independent, my Grandmother made her choice to return to Japan. My Grandfather started filling the empty house with birds in cages and flowers. He became well-known in town as “the bird man.” He sang to his birds and they copied his song. The last years of his life were quite lonely, but during his 80th year, a large family wedding brought together his children and Grandchildren. This final gathering gave him much joy. The morning after the wedding ceremony, my Grandfather was found cold in his bed as he had passed away during the night.

My feelings about the story are bitter sweet. His life was one of sacrifice and ultimately loneliness, but in his final hours, he found happiness. The image (Figure 22) is dedicated to the
story of my Grandparents. Although most would agree that the story of my Grandparents is filled
with unfortunate and unfair circumstances, I retell it with a sense of gratitude. Without their
sacrifice, I would not be here telling the story.

Figure 22: “Homeless Bride” Image by Author, photo
by Dominic DiPaolo, 2014
“Why aren’t you painting?”

During the semester I created *Marry Me*, this was the first time in my MFA experience that I did not include painting. While some people may have thought I was neglecting to paint, I was actually focusing more on multimedia techniques in order to achieve my vision and convey the message. There are two different ways to see the imagery of the Homeless Bride and her surroundings. I refer to this as the “visual/conceptual gestalt”. By placing the focal figure against a busy environment such as a street or the airport, the gaze of the audience initially falls upon the Homeless Bride. The focus then swings towards the passage of time and the activity surrounding her, resulting in the loss of her identity as she fades into the crowd. Remaining still creates the feeling that she is completely isolated from the world that surrounds her. The relationship between the Homeless Bride and her surroundings are equally important, which depicts my struggle with not belonging to one particular culture.

We live in the era of multiculturalism, and because of over exposure to entertainment media, social media and popular culture on a global scale, people may be losing their sense of cultural identity. The challenge will be to find a balance between global connectivity and personal/cultural identity. The last poem, *Flashback 4: Love and Fear* refers to the love of my cultural heritage and the fear of losing or not being accepted by any of them (Figure 23).
For 24 years, I've been staring at the lion
If I blink, he will tear out my throat
My grandpa used to say
Darkness does not exist
Even in the deepest places on earth
Small insects find a way
And plants sprout in mud
Flash Back 4 (Love and Fear)
The flag watches over me
The nation watches over me
I gaze out
I gaze out and wait
The place I come from
The place I came from
I gaze out and wait

In the darkness
I crossed the land
I slept so long
I've come so far
To find an answer
To fall in love with you
I was five
Counting flags on a small bathroom wall
Each had to be defined
Each had to be perfect
One rectangle to another
And the relationship between
I gaze out
I gaze out and wait
I gaze out and wait
The place I come from
The place I came from

Something is broken inside
I must find
Define
Still, still not, fear, fear not, love...
At 4:21
He arrived
It was winter
Or I thought it was
Cherry blossoms drifted down
Wait!!!
Hearing the sounds of flute near by
It's good to be alive

Figure 23: Flash Back 4 (Love and Fear), by Author, poem, 2014
The Story We Tell

Form is not good enough. Many contemporary artists deal with society’s concerns and their work has become more conceptualized in order to convey important messages. An Indonesia artist, Arahmaiani, who was active during the “second-wave feminism”, brought a significant shift to art history and changed the foundation in art practice. Arahmaiani was one of the few Indonesian artists that openly articulated about sex/violence and challenged opinions.29 She also moved away from painting and used a variety of found objects and diverse media including photography, video, collage, assemblages, and music (Figure 24). Datuin notes that “Her approach also springs from her wish to balance the East and the West, the spiritual and the material in her life.”30 Her performance and installation work, Nation for Sale, shows Arahmaini’s themes including “the displacement of whole social sectors by technology and global capital and the homogenization of cultures mesmerized by the culture industry.”31 Living in a society based on capitalism, people try to sell everything, including their country.

The oppression of women is still a reality. The Meditating Woman series alludes to women’s repression in traditional and familial roles. I am seeking balance and harmony through the use of the naked figure and the Homeless Bride, both of which wish to be free from the feeling of being trapped in a traditional discipline. Datuin emphasizes, “Arahmaiani is saying that although women are continually burned by the fires of oppression, it is through such

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experiences that women can gain strength and finally break free and move on.”32 My struggle with coming from a male dominated society, being a single mother and becoming a multi-media artist has coalesced into a form of expression. He continues, “Women across the globe face certain varying limitations of artistic expression, as well as fears of censorship, imprisonment, and exile.”33 The language of multiculturalism is transformed by a cross-cultural dialog, yet our expressions as humans and our common experiences connect us, despite geographical barriers.

Figure 24: (left) Arahmaiani, Lingga-Yoni, 1994. (right) Arahmaiani, Nation for Sale, 1996

Source: Manit Sriwanichpoom. Courtesy: Pruss & Ochs Gallery Berlin
http://universes-in-universe.org

CHAPTER 5: “GOOD-BYE,” SELF-PORTRAIT AS BUTTERFLY

Although my focus within my studio practice has moved away from painting, I still practice my intuitive, free form and improvisational work using traditional materials and media such as pencil, acrylic paint, ink, wood and plaster. I first began creating my Boxes Series in the fall of 2012. Through the use of cultural symbolism and metaphor, my goal was to strike a balance between traditional and contemporary, realism and fantasy, and Eastern and Western artistic sensibilities.

Black Boxes series

Just before I began the MFA program, my mother started sending boxes of origami to me, which she made in Japan. I incorporated her origami into mixed media projects. The Black Boxes, a total of six, combined both realistic and abstract expressions (Figure 25). The dreamlike quality found within the interior of each box offered a peek into different parts of my mind showing the overlap between thoughts and feelings. The results of this work at that time, revealed my depressive state of being, isolation, violence, confusion, and longing for home.

Figure 25: Black Boxes, photo by Author, mixed media, 8” x 13” x 8” each, Fall 2012
Little Kimonos

The Little Kimonos, were all fabricated from the same piece of wood (Figure 26). Calligraphy symbolizing the words “Woman” and “Mother” were painted on the wood before it was divided into four parts. My mother’s origami was placed within the recesses of each piece. A “low-brow” technique was used to imply a hominess that could be interpreted as kitsch by some viewers, to depict Japanese artistic/cultural sensibilities such as humility and simplicity. The kimono is an iconic costume from Japan, mostly worn by women for special occasions. The traditional representation of the kimono is different in these works, which suggests a more optimistic and liberal response, turning the kimono into a sensation of the life of the “self” rather than a traditional object.

Figure 26: Little Kimonos (w/ my mother’s origami), photo by Author, mixed media, 12” x 12” x 3” each, Fall 2012
Butterfly and Figure Studies

The series, *Butterfly and Figure Studies* emphasizes transformation (Figure 27). Each drawing illustrates the evolutionary phases of a caterpillar as it goes through its transition from chrysalis to butterfly. The pencil drawings of each naked figure are covered with silk cloth and a butterfly painting or an actually cocoon are placed upon it. The gesture of the naked figure exposing her back, symbolizes “vulnerability” and “trust” as is my understanding within Eastern philosophy. The *Butterfly and Figure* series depicts my personal struggle as a female, my hope for the future, and the universal desire for freedom.

Figure 27: Masami Koshikawa, *Butterfly and Figure Studies*, mixed media, 12”x12”x2”, Spring 2013.
Boxes of Memories (Mountain and Ocean)

This series came from the poem, Flash Back 3: Mountain and Ocean. Each box has three different layers. In all three boxes, the shapes of the Plexiglas in the two foreground and middle ground layers represent mountains, while background layer depicts the ocean. The images within the box relate to key phrases found within the poem. For example, Box 1 (Figure 28):

(Layer 1)
Father, why do your eyes look so sad?
You would pour some coffee in your cup as usual
You read the newspaper like you normally do
But Father
Why do your eyes look so sad?
Behind the glasses

(Layer 2)
A little tree is climbing up my leg,
The floor changes into soil,
The kitchen turns into a forest

Figure 28: Boxes of Memories (Box 1), by Author, mixed media, 12” x 12” x 2”, Fall 2013
The imagery within Box 2 (Figure 29) refers to the moment when the father opens the window. The butterfly origami attached to the middle ground layer symbolizes my mother and her need to be free:

(Layer 1)
Look out!
My father said
He pulled me away from the boiling water
And opened the window

Figure 29: Boxes of Memories (Box 2), photo by Author, mixed media, 12” x 12” x 2”, Fall 2013

Within Box 3, the cooling tea pot within the first layer 1 depicts the aftermath of the entire event of my childhood memory in Japan. The choice of the red and white strips behind the blue tea pot represents my geographical location (America) at the time the poem was written (Figure 30).
Box 3:

Father, why are your eyes so sad?
You are like the high mountain staring at the ocean

Figure 30: Boxes of Memories (Box 3), photo by Author, mixed media, 12” x 12” x 2”, Fall 2013

Butterfly World Flags

At the end of my second year during the MFA program, I appropriated a piece called Butterfly World Flags. The order of the world flags was inspired by artist, Yuken Teruya’s work, Color the World (Figure 31). Flags from 196 nations and regions of the world were placed near one another in the same order they appear geographically. The flags were also made to be the same size to evoke a sense of equality amongst nations.
The *Butterfly World Flags* is also a collaborative effort between my mother and myself. I printed out a world flag image and cut it into pieces. Each flag image I produced was 3”x 3”. They were then sent to my mother in Japan where she made them into origami butterflies. Once completed, they were sent back to me in Orlando. Each origami butterfly was pinned on a wall (Figure 32). By lining them up in a uniform fashion, the uniqueness of the each flag is emphasized up close, yet at the same time, from a distance, the differences are less apparent, creating a sense of unity. In our modern age, the concept of separatism and nationalism has become less important due to the shift towards globalization. Normally flags are associated with governments, military, and nationalism. By turning the flags into a symbol of the butterfly, the emphasis is then shifted towards nature and humanity. Having all the flags folded into identically shaped figures, alludes to the commonality of all. Butterfly also represents transformation. This
symbolizes the rapid transformation of society as we the people develop a heightened sense of
global connection.

Figure 32: Butterfly World Flag, photo by Author, paper and pins, Fall 2014

Is This Art Therapy?

The boxes series reflected my state of mind at the moment the work was created. As a result, some people might refer to this approach as Art Therapy. At the beginning of the MFA program, the color of the boxes was black and gradually changed to variations of white. By the end of spring semester 2014, the Butterfly World Flags became the turning point when I chose not to use the enclosed structure of a frame at all. Reflecting back on my choices of frames for my boxes series, I have come to realize that perhaps on a subconscious level, the black boxes represented my darker times (homesickness and an abusive relationship). Helene Burt, the author
of *Art Therapy and Postmodernism: Creative Healing Through a Prism*, states, “Artworks, indisputably, produce effects. The cause of these effects, however, is rarely clear and precise.” The author continues, “This elusiveness indicates that art is traversed by unconscious effect.”

As I became happier towards the end of my experience in the graduate program, I did transition to using lighter/whiter tones.

My approach to my studio practice mostly depends on my intuition, drawing from my sub-conscious, which not only helped me to gain a deeper understanding of myself, but also allowed my work to have a clear concept and meaning. The authors of *Art Therapy in Asia*, indicate that art making is an individual’s expression of emotion. It also reflects the person’s interpersonal relationships and group identity. I often create a series of work in which the content of the piece is enclosed within the same colored box. This repetition and grouping reflects the cultural aspect of Japan’s tendency towards group effort as opposed to individual freedom of expression. According to *Art Therapy in Asia*, the patients who were dealing with boxes in art making, created a personal safe space. The box provided a soft three-dimensional space for art materials to suggest a tactile feeling of safety and grounding. “In fact, Japanese people possess cultural values, social customs, and communicative styles which are different from Western norms.”

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so in a way that felt safer and more secure, but that choice may reflect my group cultural identity as much as my individual identity.

Although the art world may reject the legitimacy of Art Therapy as fine art and think of it as more of a healing process than a creative process, the methods of making art reconciles emotional conflicts and trauma, which may reflect some of the techniques and motivations found within the contemporary art world. Burt writes:

By using and choosing from a variety of art media, the individual gives expression to repressed thoughts and feelings related to conflicts, traumatic experiences, fantasies, dreams, self-image, patterns of relationships with others, his defensive operations, his impulse controls, and his reactions progressively unfold as projected images and provide a global matrix for stimuli for free association.38

Although my intention was not to create artwork for the sake of “Art Therapy”, evoking realistic emotions and feelings connected to actual events and conflicts within my life at the moment has led to the work I created during my MFA experience. Like many contemporary artists living and working today our processes may have a great deal in common with art therapy because we are dealing with cultural and interpersonal issues in our art and we all grapple with similar issues in our lives.

The Guilty Mother: Butterfly Portrait of Andy

This work was inspired by the guilty feeling of not being able to provide a normal set of circumstances for my son, Andrew. Some of the issues involved with this feeling include my immigration status, language deficiency, missing my family in Japan, and the lack of influence

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of their cultural/family traditions. The intention of *Butterfly Portrait of Andy* is to portray my four-year-old son using my mother’s origami as medium (Figure 33). The choice of canvas is an entry gate. Black, gray and white origami butterflies are used to create the contrast and contours of Andy’s face. Red and blue origami butterflies are attached to the back of the gate to add warm and cool shadows to the portrait. Fishing line was woven throughout the gate so that a higher concentration of origami could be attached. Fences are seen every day, usually around houses, buildings and properties. By applying an organic form and texture to the industrial material of the gate, my goal was to create a balance between geometric and organic shapes, soft and hard textures and sensation of warmth and coolness. The juxtaposition of contemporary vs. traditional and reality vs. imaginary are also implied within this work.
Figure 33: Butterfly Portrait of Andy, photo by Author, origami on fence age, 5’ x 3’, March 5, 2014
In Japan, a gate represents protection and purification. For example, Torii gates are mostly found at the entrance of Japanese temples called *Jinja* (Figure 34). The author of *Dimensions of Sacred Space in Japanese Popular Culture Intercultural Communication Studies*, Randall Nadeau explains that “Torii gates are symbolic markers indicating the boundary between two kinds of space: profane space and sacred space.”\(^3\) The profane space is indicative of trouble, filth, chaos, illness, and falsehoods while sacred space represents peace, spontaneity, health, nature, and simplicity.\(^4\) Nadeau also states, “…they create a tunnel-like effect. Passing through these gates, there is a magical sense of deepening spirituality: a cleansing of outer pollution and a growing awareness of inner purity.”\(^5\) By placing this gate in a gallery space, the wall beyond the gate becomes a portal that transcends the boundaries of nature, nation and family. My desire to secure and heal my child is found within the folds of each butterfly.


\(^5\) Randall Nadeau, *Dimensions of Sacred Space*, 110.
During my second year of the MFA program, I created *Hair Portrait of Andy*, using my own hair as the medium (Figure 35). Symbolically, women’s hair represents “life” in Japanese culture. By drawing with my own hair, the *Portrait of Andy* emphasizes that the subject, my son, is my life. My close bond with the subject, my son, provided my inspiration. By using my hair, the work not only indicates my physical connection with the subject, but also provides a new way of seeing traditional family portraits. Similarly, in *Butterfly Portrait of Andy*, by using my mother’s origami as the medium, the piece becomes about the relationship between my son, my mother and I. In this piece therefore, the “butterflies” are a symbol of “happiness”.

Figure 34: Kamakura Tori 1870s.

Kamakura_Tori_1870s.jpg

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Chuck Close’s portrait of his wife, \textit{Leslie} 1986, inspired me to research my own project, \textit{Hair Portrait of Andy} further. The entire portrait of his wife is comprised of nothing but his fingerprints. The unusual use of medium and its abstract surface draw in and intrigue the viewer, creating more meaning than the subject itself. By using his own fingerprints, it is a statement of unique individual expression, emphasizing his bond between himself and his subject. In \textit{Hair Portrait of Andy}, the hair used to create the likeness of my son is genetically connected to him.
This not only symbolically makes the statement that my son is my life, but also shows the physical connection to the subject (Figure 36).

Figure 36: *Hair Portrait of Andy* (process), photo by Author.
Why butterflies?

Butterflies are commonly used in art and throughout art history. They are not only beautiful insects but are significant and symbolic to many cultures. For example, Egyptians believed that butterflies were a symbol of rebirth. Dawn Haynes in her article writes, “They believed that this world and this life were part of the continuum of existence which transformed from one plane of existence to another at the time of death.” Haynes also states, “This meant that everything that exists in this life can be transported to the next.” Similar examples can be found in Mesoamerican cultures. Many tribes within Teotihuacan worshipped the butterfly as god, reborn ancestor and survival of the soul of dead warriors.

In Japan, butterflies are also symbolic of the human soul. According to "Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things" by Lafcadio Hearn, “A butterfly was seen in Japan as the personification of a person's soul; whether they be living, dying, or already dead. One Japanese superstition says that if a butterfly enters your guestroom and perches behind the bamboo screen, the person whom you most love is coming to see you.”

In China, butterflies represent the human soul. "Butterfly Lovers," one of the four Chinese folk legends, appeared in the Jin Dynasty and spread widely in China for over 1600 years. According to the story about Zhu Yingta and Liang Shanbo from Butterfly Lovers, Zhu disguised herself as a man in order to pursue her studies. She fell in love with her school fellow,

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Liang Shanbo after three years together. After Liang realized Zhu’s intentions, he headed to the Zhu family to propose marriage. Unfortunately, Zhu had been promised to another man by her father. Liang was so struck by grief he passed away. Zhu headed to Liang’s tomb to offer a sacrifice to him on the day she got married. After a while, the tomb opened up, and Zhu sprang into it. Later on, the lovers emerged from the tomb as butterflies and flew into a rainbow sky.46

*Butterfly Woman*

*Butterfly Woman* is the last video I created during the MFA program. The video is about transformation and depicts the transition from one state of being to another. The video captures my metamorphosis from painter to multimedia artist, young female to a mother, and a Japanese woman who integrated into the United States. In Figure 37, I am wearing a crocheted butterfly body suit. Behind me is a *kuroko* (black person), a Japanese stagehand often seen in Kabuki Theater in Japan. His presence within the performance is meant to offer assistance while his every gesture says to the audience, “I am not here”. The conflicting personality trait such as “humble” and “provocative” is combined; therefore, *kuroko* is my counterpart, the opposite half of myself.

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Figure 37: *Butterfly Woman* image, by Author, photo by Dominic DiPaolo, Fall 2014
In the video, *Butterfly Woman*, a tall cocoon is set up on a low table covered with a black cloth against black seamless background paper. I am inside the cocoon, wearing a white crocheted butterfly body suit. I spent about six months creating the body suit for this one performance. After slowly coming out of the cocoon sculpture, the butterfly falls to the ground. The next scene is called *Wondering Butterfly* where I am performing an interpretive dance, portraying a butterfly that is adjusting to its new physical state of being. In the third scene, the butterfly bathes in white paint in a silver pool (flower) and throws herself onto black seamless paper. As I make trips back and forth to the pool to gather more paint (pollen), the *Kuroko* (Japanese stage hand) pushes and pulls the walking path forwards and backwards so that I can avoid dripping the wet paint on the paper. After finishing the body painting (pollinating), I walk over to the side to interact with a bowl filled with red paint. In the end of the video I dip my lips and then my face into the red paint forcefully stamping my face onto the edge of the paper to make my signature (Figure 38).
Figure 38: Butterfly Woman, by Author & Collaborators (Wayne Martin, Dominic DiPaolo, Rashaad Rosalle, Darragh Sinnott, Anne Hennessy, and Matt Brown), video/performance, 10 minutes, Fall 2014, music: Japanese Taiko Drums - Amazing Grace - Pro Series (2/9) by Ondekoza (鬼太鼓座)
My Struggles as a Painter

One of the struggles I experienced as an artist was the realization that the canvas has limits, which led me to the exploration of video art to further expand my artistic ideas and concepts. I began painting in 2006 at Miami Dade Community College where I received my Associates Degree. Later, I graduated from UCF’s BFA program in painting in 2011. At the end of my BFA experience, I created my first video/performance piece called, *Birth from Dumpling*, video/performance, 2011 (Figure 39). In the video, I emerged out of the dumpling sculpture in contemporary informal Western clothing to make sumi ink drawings on a large piece of paper of Mt. Fuji, ocean waves, a Buddha figure, the sun, and a Japanese calligraphy. The sound of Japanese drums were playing during the video-performance. *Birth from Dumpling* was based on the concept of associating the dumpling with where I came from (China), and the drawing was symbolic of where I grew up (Japan). Even though I grew up in Japan, some Chinese rituals strongly remain within my personal identity.

Figure 39: *Birth from Dumpling*, photo by Author, video/performance, 2 minutes 52 seconds, 2011
The body painting I created on the black paper in the final video, *Butterfly Woman*, was inspired by two Japanese characters. In Figure 40, the left image means woman, and the right image means mother. The combination of these *kanji* together symbolize my transition from young woman to mother. During the process of this mark-making, my butterfly body suit became very heavy. This extra weight was symbolic of the challenges of motherhood and the sacrifices mothers make for their children. The sacrifice was also represented through the crocheted body suit. It took six months to create the butterfly suit which could only be used once for this performance before it was destroyed (Figure 41). The beauty of destruction refers to a woman giving birth to a child and the loss of her youth and freedom.
Figure 41: Croched Body Suit, photo by Author
Art of Calligraphy

The choice of style, subject matter, and the use of my body as a paint brush was inspired by a form of Japanese traditional art, Shodo. Traditionally, Shodo is monochromatic. The design of the characters and their meaning are often poetic and artistic. They originate from ancient pictographs and have been simplified over time. The article, The Art of the Brush in China and Japan Educator Guide by Indianapolis Museum of Art states that the goal of Shodo is not only to discover the meaning but also to understand and recognize the beauty of these written languages.47 Calligraphy or mark-making is a discipline that often reflects the maturity of the person: “even landscape paintings which at first glance seem to be idyllic or pastoral can have hidden symbolism referring to people, places and events that reflect an artist’s allegiance or disagreement with an important historical figure, policy or societal issue.”48 My work, Butterfly Woman, shows the awakening derived through discipline and the maturity that comes through struggle and difficult situations. Another characteristic of Shodo is the red stamp of my face, which serves as a signature or a seal of the artist. It also denotes various owners, collectors, and dealers.49 As the “first” owner-creator of this drawing, the stamped impression of my face becomes the red seal of my signature. At the end of my video, I press my face onto the corner of the painting, placing my red seal as a signature.

Some Modernist painters such as Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline pushed the limits of what paint could do through Abstract Expressionism. Their use of mark-making, fields of color, and abstract forms with gestural expressions set moods, emotions, and universal themes. Abstract Expressionism was shaped by Surrealism, a movement that transmuted into a new style that fit the post-war mood of anxiety and trauma. In my video, *Butterfly Woman*, my goal is to push beyond the limits of Abstract Expressionism to create a unique form of expression by using my body as a brush.

Yves Klein, a French artist, who was also an important figure in post-war European art, is also known as a pioneer of Performance art. Some of his work showcased female body imprints using cobalt blue pigment. Marina Abramovic, who is known as the grandmother of Performance art, stated in an interview, *Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic*, that “Yves Klein was one of her influences” and mentioned his quote, “Paintings are just the ashes of his art, the process is what is the most important.” Just as a fire can be a metaphor for passion, the ashes from the fire are a metaphor for the result of passion. In *Butterfly Woman*, the performance is the “fire” and the resulting video and painting are the “ashes.” The process becomes art, and the product is what remains.

**Introduction of Gutai Art**

During my graduate studies, I was introduced to Gutai Art. Gutai art was led by the Gutai Group (*Gutai Manifesto*) in Japan after World War II. *Gutai* means embodiment. *Gu* means tool.

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and tai means body. Gutai art flourished during the post war movement roughly between 1950 and 1970. Natural materials such as paper, rock, and wood are used to represent pain and destruction, which celebrates a way of revealing the inner “life” of the objects. The article, *Gutai Chain: The Collective Spirit of Individualism* by Ming Tiamo, Associate Professor of Art History at Carleton University, Ottawa states, “In the postwar period, when artists around the world seeking to make sense of the inhumanity of the previous war looked either to the individual as a site of existential resistance or to the collective as a source of revolutionary power, the Gutai group’s articulation of a creative relationship between individual and community represented an unusual and prescient perspective.” The Gutai group aimed to lift the veil that obscures the truth of corruption at the highest levels and challenged the audience to question authority and also question traditional points of view.

**Japanese Neo-Dada**

Gutai art, which rejected Internationalism, was a direct contrast to Japanese Neo-Dada which was introduced after the Gutai movement and embraced Euro-American art. The Japanese artist who organized the Neo-Dada movement was Ushio Shinohara, who is known for his action painting and junk art. Shinohara created paintings called “boxing paintings” in which the artist dipped boxing gloves in sumi ink or paint and punched paper or canvas in order to splatter it with pigment (Figure 42). “He embraced the philosophy of what he termed ‘Imitation Art’: Rather than straining to create something original that would end up looking like a Rauschenberg, or Oldenburg, or Warhol, why not imitate them outright? This was his sixties version of

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appropriation art.”\textsuperscript{54} Neo-Dadaism and Gutai attitudes defined the two extremes of the vanguard relationship to “imitation” in 1960s Japan.

Figure 42: Ushio Shinohara, *Red and Black on White*, 2012 Acrylic on Canvas-18” x 72”

Source: Ushio Shinohara Official Website
http://www.ushioshinohara.com/?page_id=87

My Struggle as Japanese

One of the intentions in the Butterfly Woman video was to express my feeling of displacement as a Japanese woman. I grew up in Japan most of my life, yet never felt fully Japanese because my family immigrated to Japan from China when I was a six years old. Furthermore, when I came to the U.S. in 2004, I realized that my cultural identity as Japanese was strong. Ironically, as my sense of cultural identity has deepened, my homeland has shifted to a more Westernized way of life. Through the art practice, research, and inter-cultural study, I have gained a deeper understanding of Japanese history and traditional art. At the same time, my work also reflects how I was influenced by Western society. This new understanding of my culture along with my integration to the West has allowed me to find a balance between both ways of life. This balance is represented in my most recent work, Butterfly Woman, where the approach is Western and influenced by Abstract Expressionism and Performance art, yet the aesthetic is Eastern.

Japanese Modern Dance, Butoh

The intuitive dance in the video, Butterfly Woman, was inspired by Butoh, a Japanese modern dance which came into existence after World War II. Butoh dance was developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is known as the “Dance of the Dead”, which is based on the struggle caused by traumatic experience as a result of war. The dancers are usually painted white and contort their faces and bodies to show the torment of the damned. Paula Marie Orlando in her article, Cutting the Surface of the Water: Butoh as Traumatic Awakening, Social Semiotics states, “…it was announced as a rebellion against the traditional Japanese conservatism and the
rapidly intruding westernized cultural value.”55 Orlando also states that Butoh was a part of the avant-garde movement in Japan that criticized the artificiality of artistic expression.” Although Butoh has been rejected by Japanese conservatism, they held firm to their conviction. Mark Holborn’s article, in *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul*, “Tatsumi Hijikata And the Origins of Butoh” states:

> The growth of Butoh involved a search for a form true to the Japanese experience. Inevitably it entailed the rejection of elements of imitative culture, the result of the Japanese assimilation of Western style. Yet at the extreme point at which it took root, on the outer edge of Japanese culture, Butoh found common ground with shaman and seer.56

The Japanese performance group, Sankai Juku (山海塾), is an internationally known Butoh dance troupe (Figure 43). In spite of modern art movements, they are staying true to the authenticity of Japanese art. Ushio Amagatsu’s quote from *program for Kinkan Shonen, The Cumquat Seed* reads:

> Butoh belongs both to life and death. It is a realization of the distance between a human being and the unknown. It also represents man’s struggle to overcome the distance between himself and the material world. Butoh dancers’ bodies are like a cup filled to overflowing, one which cannot take one more drop of liquid—the body enters a state of perfect balance.57

The video, *Butterfly Woman*, was made in the spirit of Butoh. The dance lacks formal choreography. The intuitive movements exhibited throughout the performance were drawn from the sub-conscious in order to let the body speak for itself.

57 Mark Holborn, Tatsumi Hijikata, and Yukio Mishima, BUTOH: Dance of The Dark Soul, 121.
The most recent research about a butterfly’s transformation has completely changed the way in which this metamorphosis is understood. NPR (National Public Radio) reported that biologist Bernd Heinrich’s research points out that a caterpillar turns completely into goo and only a few “imaginary cells” remain to become a butterfly, and they are actually two different animals. Lincoln Brower, a research professor of Biology at Sweet Briar College states, “What

Figure 43: Sankai Juku (山海塾), *HIBIKI-Resonance from Far Away*, 1998

Source: Sankai Juku Official Website
http://www.sankaijuku.com/w_hibiki_e.htm

The Science of Butterfly

The most recent research about a butterfly’s transformation has completely changed the way in which this metamorphosis is understood. NPR (National Public Radio) reported that biologist Bernd Heinrich’s research points out that a caterpillar turns completely into goo and only a few “imaginary cells” remain to become a butterfly, and they are actually two different animals. Lincoln Brower, a research professor of Biology at Sweet Briar College states, “What

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is happening is a biological miracle going on inside that caterpillar. Enzymes are being released that digest all the caterpillar tissue, so that the caterpillar is being converted into a rich culture medium.” What happens within the chrysalis is similar to what happens within the womb. The “imaginal disks” are really like little groups of embryonic cells. Basically, all parts of the butterfly have a corresponding imaginal disk responsible for the development of each body part. The most intriguing aspect of this process is the discovery of memories transferring from the former life as a caterpillar to the new life of the butterfly.

The butterfly metaphor in the video, *Butterfly Woman*, is closely related to the scientific findings of what a butterfly actually is, a completely different creature. The performance is a self-portrait concerning transformation, self-realization, and inner rebirth. The results address my experiences with identity crisis and being torn “in between”. Within the video, the focus is on self-realization and acceptance of a new way of life; new life represents America, motherhood, and my growing artistic development. In conclusion, the science of the butterfly has given me a new perspective on my life. It is not about transformation as much as it is about being born anew through pain and struggle. Through multicultural experiences and multiple societal norms, I have developed a global perspective concerning the universality of humankind, at the same time, I have also developed a deeper understanding of my own uniqueness, and how I may be flexible and adjust to different situations and challenges while holding firm to the memories of my past.

/2012/08/01/157718428/are-butterflies-two-different-animals-in-one-the-death-and-resurrection-theory.

The Art of Human Interaction

Although my work is highly conceptual and based on personal and cultural references, I do not expect the viewer or audience to fully understand the meaning of the performance. I would rather that they question the meaning of my work. It is through the ambiguity of the piece that the audience must first perceive, and then eventually find their own interpretation. The work intentionally also invites them to examine their own inner self. The same ambiguity applies to the traditional form of fine art, but performance art by definition happens anytime, anywhere, and with anyone. Without the viewer/audience, performance art would not exist. The resulting video piece is the resulting record; the actual performance process is the art. The focus is the interaction between the performer and the audience. In *Butterfly Woman*, I chose not to over edit or over produce the video in order to avoid losing the pure interaction between the performer and the cameras. My goal is not to produce work that is merely formally correct or aesthetically pleasing on the surface, but rather to create work that is intriguing and memorable.
CONCLUSION

Compared to my undergraduate studies, I have made significant changes in my graduate studies. Using various forms of artistic media has afforded me the opportunity to become a more flexible artist and to convey my concepts, thoughts, and feelings in a way that is unique to my experience. The origami butterfly as a symbolic theme has provided me with not only a deeper understanding of my cultural heritage, but also a deeper appreciation for my mother. Through inter-cultural studies, my art resonates with Eastern artistic sensibilities but often takes place in Western settings. By combining elements such as reality versus fantasy, cultural rituals, and my role as a mother within my work, the goal is to find balance between the various facets of the self while also trying to gain a sense of where I belong within our complex global society. My art expresses a spiritual understanding of our physical existence without the need to simply be decorative or design oriented. The connection with concepts concerning relationships and identity issues has resulted in what has become my main body of work.

Live Performance at the Thesis Show 2015

Figure 44: Butterfly’s Secret, photo by Author, live performance at UCF Art Gallery, March 5, 2015
My live performance at the Thesis Show 2015 is called *Butterfly’s Secret* (Figure 44). In order to view the performance, the audience must peek through a hole in a Japanese *shoji* door (Figure 45). Within the room, I made a drawing of my son using crocheted gloves as a brush (Figure 46). Through my performance, it appeared that I was involved in a private ritual. The audience could see me, but I acted as though they were not there. This created an interaction between the performer and the audience. By poking the shoji door, the audience became part of the performance.

![Image: Butterfly’s Secret, photo by Author, live Performance at UCF Art Gallery, March 5, 2015]
In the beginning, I emerged from the black shrine. My choice to use my gloved hand as a tool for painting was symbolic of female butterflies that taste with their feet. The live performance lasted only 45 minutes. The duration of my performance was symbolic of the short but beautiful life of the butterfly. At the end of the live performance, the black shrine became my casket. During the following days of the thesis show, there was a sculpture on display inside the shrine. The sculpture, “face in rock” implied that I had transformed into a cocoon.

Figure 46: Butterfly’s Secret, photo by Author, live Performance at UCF Art Gallery, March 5, 2015
My Private Butterfly

A piece of art will be hung on a wall inside the room in which I will be performing. The work is called, *My Private Butterfly* (Figure 47). What seems to be overlapping images of butterflies are actually imprints of my private body parts applied using *sumi* ink on paper. Creating butterfly images with my vagina is a symbolic representation of my transformation. This work alludes to the fact that I finally embrace my femininity and my role as a mother. Being born the second daughter of a family ruled by China’s one child policy has made me question traditional gender mind sets and the bias against females and the poor.

Figure 47: *My Private Butterfly*, photo by Author, ink on paper, 3’ x 2’, Spring 2013
**Japanese Fable, “Crane Wife”**

Although I have lived in the United States for over ten years, certain cultural characteristics still remain as part of my daily existence. The “Crane Wife” is a Japanese fable that I strongly identify with and have used repeatedly within my studio practice. In my live performance at the Thesis Show, I will be asking the audience to poke a hole through a *shoji* door so that they may see inside. This concept comes from “Crane Wife” where the husband was asked not to peek while his wife was making a kimono using her feathers. However, he broke the promise and peeked through the *shoji* door and then found out his wife was a crane. The content of the story refers to sacrifice, duty, dedication, betrayal, and freedom. Figure 48 is a painting that I made at the end of my BFA program. The imagery was inspired by the story of the loyal crane wife who flew up to the sky after the betrayal of her husband. My struggle in adapting to a new environment and culture is suggested along with the feeling of homesickness, isolation, and the need to belong.
Figure 48: *Crane Wife and My Mother’s Origami*, photo by Author, mixed media, 4’x 4’, 2011
Butterfly Sphere

The choice of using butterflies as a metaphor instead of using cranes was a decision based on the universality of the butterfly as a symbol of transformation. Cranes are a common Eastern symbol of long-life and good luck in Japan. A thousand origami cranes are culturally significant as I mentioned in Chapter 1. The Butterfly Sphere, was created during the third year of my graduate studies. Approximately eight thousand origami butterflies are attached to a large size inflatable globe/beach ball (Figure 49). Butterflies attached to the earth symbolize, human kind’s connection to nature and ceaseless change. Thousands of origami are also associated with “healing.” By applying thousands of origami butterflies to the “earth”, I am offering a gesture of hope and healing to the world.

Figure 49: Butterfly Sphere (before and after images), photo by Author, mixed media sculpture, 72”, 2014-2015
Even though my work is personal, the meaning is not absolute. It is a gestural abstraction that potentially contains multiple meanings. *The Critique Handbook* by Kendall Buster and Paula Crawford states:

> Meaning can never be completely contained in any work of art or in any one of its parts. Although we immediately think of meaning as something that resides comfortably in a work’s narrative imagery, it is really a slippery, shifting thing, informed also by a multitude of formal choices made by the artist—when and where a work exists, what it is made of, how it came into being, who made it, and what is carried to it by the viewer. Meanings can change as a work ages, as a political controversy swirls around it, or as information emerged about the artist’s not to say that a work of art is beyond interpretation, but simply that meaning can never be finite or stable.60

Because of the ambiguous nature of my piece, many different interpretations may arise. The work, *Butterfly Sphere* (Figure 50), for example is conceptual. The meaning that I interpret is a direct reflection of myself. That being said, the interpretation of others is merely a reflection of themselves. Whether they be Eastern or Western, an international dialogue is the result.

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Figure 50: Butterfly Sphere, photo by Author, mixed media, UCF Art Gallery, March 5, 2015
Among various themes in the art world, “identity” appears to be one of the most challenging. As a young artist, I create installations and performances that cross the boundaries of race, gender, and culture. Although my work contains elements that may appear to be Eastern, my main objective is to portray the commonality of human kind. Through live performance, the interaction between the performer and the audience creates a connection that unifies and strips away boundaries. During my journey towards finding a new way to connect and interact through performance/installation, it occurred to me that nature is what connects us all.

As the title, *Way of the Butterfly: A Journey towards Transformation through Self-portrait In Between* indicates, this story is about my life and the struggle to find balance. It has been important to make the effort to change and adapt to new environments and circumstances in order to maintain better relationships. By learning new languages, embracing different cultures, and expressing myself through art, I have grown stronger and have become a better person, mother, and artist. As my life unfolds, my chapters continue. It’s not about saying “Good-bye”, rather it is about saying “Hello again”.
You may use the image

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