

THINGS ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

By

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Abstract

My thesis investigates the themes of identity, nationality, and place. My work draws on the theories of spiritism and animism, and on the history of Laotian traditions and culture through the incorporation of found objects and family photographs of my heritage. To visualize my own rediscovery of my family's diverse past and present, I use a broad selection of media including paintings, photographs, cyanotypes, and sculptural installations. Through my synthesis of diverse materials, I create new worlds where I belong. Reuniting and harmonizing the content in my work is a form of remembrance. I have come to realize my own ancestral history is closer and more connected to me than I expected.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My thesis investigates the personal battle I have fought to establish my identity. My paternal ancestors are Laotian. On one hand, I have a sense of pride that I am a part of a mysterious culture from the deep jungles of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, I can never belong fully to this culture because I feel torn between the Asian roots and the heavy American present. For me, making art is about exploring this identity and values; the creative process is a discovery about myself and my family's past. My work is made of mostly hanging framed works that are collaged together on the wall of the gallery. Some are pinned, some use magnets, many break the frame by extending fabric and other objects beyond the space of the rectangular boundary of the image. Also in my thesis show were spiritual and multi-sensory aspects such as offerings and incense to give the space a temple-like atmosphere. I want viewers to feel as if they are stepping away from the outside world, and into a sacred, private space.

My thesis works use a variety of family photographs, images of myself, and physical objects that hold memories for either my father or me. The goal of these pieces is to show the connection between my family and myself, which goes beyond just sharing genetic material. My use of layers and symbolism can connect to audiences even if they do not share in my heritage or personal memories because we all have complex family histories that require work to understand and represent. One kind of material I use continually is the *sinh*, a traditional fabric worn by the women of Laotian culture during special events, including weddings, visits to the temple, and funerals. These fabrics are typically

made of silk with silver or gold embroidery. Women take years to make these fabrics for their granddaughters, passing on the tradition of heritage and culture through textile production.

Now that I have reached adulthood, I feel acutely estranged from my paternal family and my Asian heritage because my paternal grandmother passed away and my father moved far away from where I was living. Despite having other mixed-heritage cousins, I was never invited to birthday parties, get togethers, or family vacations. I was an outsider to this side of my family, which is something that I have had a hard time forgiving. However, when my father was sick with COVID in 2021, I spent more time with him and began to inquire about his journey as an immigrant. These stories highlighted connections between his childhood life and my own. Such connections are the love and comfort he felt for his home country of Laos aligned with the comfort and protection of my *mae tu* (grandmother) that I felt growing up. At the same time, I faced my own awareness of not belonging to a foreign country, even if it was a home to my father. This thesis work is about my journey of coming to terms with the complicated relationship with my family and heritage.

Some of the stories that my work engages with include the history of the Laos Secret War, which occurred in tandem with the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and caused many Laotians to flee their homeland, including my father. Though he was only six years old when his family fled Laos, he still recalls vividly running and hiding in the jungle, laying in kayaks as his family members treaded along the Mekong River, and living in refugee camps in the Philippines. I can only know these memories through his words, through the images fashioned in my mind. I

have learned from my family's stories how Laos became embroiled in the geopolitical conflict of the Vietnam War—how it was a country in the crossfire between the US Army and Vietnamese Communists. During this conflict, Laos took more bombs per square mile than any country in the history of global warfare, receiving a total of 2.1 million tons of bomb material.¹ To this day, people are still finding bombs from the war. My work explores the tragedy of the Vietnam War from both a personal perspective of my family's experience, as well as that of the Laotian people as victims of a war they did not ask for or deserve.

In Asian cultures, the scroll is a central format of art and communication. I use this format often in my work as a reference to my Asian heritage. Scrolls unfold across time and space. One experiences a scroll by unrolling it, viewing it intimately at one's own pace, and then moving onto a new section. Expressing the notion of a journey, I use the scroll format to discover my own history one part at a time. Not only do I use fabric pieces in my work that point to the scroll format, but I also hung a large, long "scrap scroll" from the ceiling in my thesis exhibition. Each section of fabric stands for a memory shared with me by my family members, a story that helps me learn who I am and who I can be. Traditional Asian scrolls normally feature animals, human figures, landscapes, and calligraphic text.² My scroll forms and pieces instead explore the themes of layering and collage. They incorporate layers of digital prints, cyanotypes of

¹For more on the Laos Secret War, see Alfred W. McCoy's article, "America's Secret War in Laos, 1955-1975" in Robert Buzzanco and Marilyn Young's, *A Companion to the Vietnam War* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006). 282-312.

² On Chinese hand scrolls, see Richard Barnhart, et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022.) 8-10.

family photos, image transfers, and found objects. In this, my work draws on the work of Asian contemporary artist Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Her installation *Kotodama Converse* (2012-2020) interests me because it intertwines different sections of a "scroll" into a web that appears infinitely dense.³ Scrolls like those of Sugawara-Beda represent how life or existence is a cycle, one that seems to repeat itself from generation to generation until someone decides to change the outcome. I feel myself and my art are a part of this cycle, both continuing traditions and breaking with them too, in order to create something new for myself and my family. Also like Sugawara-Beda, I use abstraction in my work. She employs sumi ink to create unique forms on wood panels and rice paper to tell stories of her Japanese heritage. My multi-cultural heritage is not clear or obvious, but distant, layered, and complex; therefore, abstraction fits my narrative best. My process reflects the ways I have had to search out and unpeel the layers of my ancestry, and it mirrors the complex sense of belonging and reconnection that I have found with my family heritage—I feel like I am literally “fabricating” my identity through making this thesis. In Buddhist traditions, like those practiced by my family, cyclicity is central, and reincarnation occurs until one achieves enlightenment.⁴ There is no beginning or end, just a continuous stream of life. But life and existence are dynamic, changing, rather than static and linear. My thesis art and its installation explore these themes.

³ On Beda’s work, see the artist’s website: nishikibeda.com

⁴ For more on Theravada Buddhism, see Benjamin Schonthal, "The Tolerations of Theravada Buddhism," in Vicki A. Spencer, et al., *Tolerance in Comparative Perspective* (Landam, MD, Lexington Books, 2017), 179-96.

My use of collage has two separate but interconnected meanings. The printed images in the collages represent my father's point of view, because they are transfers, instead of "mediated images" or not direct memories or objects from myself. In contrast, collaging actual, unedited photographs represents my own point of view. The unedited photographs are taken by me, created as a response to memories or thoughts that I have personally experienced. In contrast, images transferred onto the canvas reflect the mediation of my father's memories shared with me but not experienced directly. The physical objects I use in these collages, such as the traditional fabrics or crocheted animals, become symbols of different memories—either my own or my family's. Likewise, the colors I use, especially for the painted abstract backgrounds of the hung objects, also have symbolic significance. For example, in *Mae Tu* (Figure 4.12.), the hunter green of the background was a color that signals my grandmother in my mind, but it is also a color of fertility and the jungle of Laos. The blush pink color field on that canvas was the color of her wedding dress. In a small work, *Faces Everywhere* (Figure 4.6.), the textured background of orange and red express the color of fire and burning, referencing burning homes that my family had to escape from in Laos during wartime. Another major color in my work is blue—which enters especially through my cyanotype images. This color represents a sense of calm to the densely chaotic pieces, but also adds a layer of ghostliness and otherworldliness to my work.

In traditional Laotian lore, supernatural beings or ghosts often rule the lives of the living. For example, living relatives of deceased family members are devoted to honoring departed relatives. They not only pray *for* them, but also *to*

them. “Giving merit” is a prime example of the benefits for both the living and the dead.⁵ By offering the departed food, money, clothes, and more, the living family members receive protection and good karma that adds to their spiritual merit, benefiting them in this life and those after. By receiving these items, the dead are “happy,” and can take more time to protect their living relatives, while they enjoy a merrier existence in the afterlife, instead of becoming “hungry,” bringing harm and haunting others. These hungry ghosts often appear in my work illustrated through distorted imagery. This also shows the audience how I see spirits in general, including the way I physically “see” spirits, which is a hereditary gift from my father’s family. In my work, hungry ghosts are heavily manipulated bodily features versus happy ghosts, which have zero manipulation.

Another aspect of the supernatural in Laotian culture, like the ghost lore, includes the concept of the *khawn*, which refers to the soul of a person, animal, plant, or object.⁶ Living humans are required to keep the *phi* or spirits at peace, or they will interfere with the living family member’s *khawn*, which leads to sickness. To allow the ancestral spirits to feel more at peace, a “spirit house” is built where the *phi* can reside within the home of the living.⁷ These spirit houses allow living relatives to have a place to pray and give offerings to ancestral spirits. My work incorporates small to medium-sized canvases, large frames, and other objects arranged in installations, all of which act as spirit houses, containers for

⁵ For more on funeral culture, see Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁶ For more on ancestral worship, see Chang, Ya-Liang. “The Body, Merit-Making and Ancestor Worship: Mask Festivals in Thailand and Laos.” *Thammasat Review* 21, no. 2 (Dec. 2018): 212-233.

⁷ Michael Pearce, “Accommodating the discarnate: Thai spirit houses and the phenomenology of place,” *Material Religion* 7, no. 3 (2011): 344-372.

memories and ghosts. Moreover, my installations are not permanently secured together, allowing the memories (spirits) to be freed from my mind and *khawn*.

Finally, photo documentation of my installations will become the permanent art piece. In doing so, I capture the spirits in a new spirit house. The balance in my work between short-lived installations versus longer-lasting photographic pieces mirrors the push/pull of my own struggles with family identity and forgiveness. Though some works in this thesis project will be destroyed in the process of their presentation when I deconstruct the installations, the pain of that destruction will be short lived. The pain from being temporarily forgotten by my Laotian family does not last as we build new memories together. These photographs and the works on canvas endure, showing that my own existence within my family is not destroyed.

CHAPTER TWO: INFLUENCES

Collage as a practice was invented by Cubist artists in the early twentieth century.⁸ Pablo Picasso used found objects, including newspapers, chair caning, and wallpaper in his works, alongside more traditional artmaking materials, such as charcoal or paint. During this time, materials that were worthless or mass-produced were often used in what became a radical new art method. Collage removed the purpose of art as a direct reflection of or mirror onto nature; instead, it fractured and fragmented the subject. Collage essentially removes a single focus: the discrete, single visual aspect. My work uses collage for these very reasons to show how my relationship with my identity is not easy, direct, or simple, but rather fractures into fragments and layers. Artists following Picasso, including Robert Rauschenberg, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, and Gary Burnley, have similarly embraced the collage method for its ability to communicate the layers of life and identity, both past and present.

In particular, Smith's work explores many of the themes I bring into my art: especially identity, gender, culture, and storytelling. Smith's process is also very similar to my own; she is a mixed-media artist using oil paint and collage, both digital and physical, in her installations. In *Trade (Gifts for Trading Land with White People)* from 1992 (fig. 2.1), Smith collages historical photographs, illustrations, and clippings

⁸ On cubism's development and use of collage, see especially Charles Harrison, et al., "Realism and Ideology: An Introduction to Semiotics and Cubism," in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 87–95.

from newspapers. But she also adds the actual objects of things like of sports mascots, cheap toys, and faux Native American crafts to critique the stereotyping of her people in popular culture projects.⁹ For her, this statement is not only political but also highly personal. She is exploring these issues from the perspective of an insider, and I am trying to do the same. Although I cannot be an insider to Laotian culture directly, I am an insider in my own hybrid family and its complexity. My statements are less political than Smith's, but they are still centered on identity and its complex negotiations. Smith finds her collage aesthetic as the best way to reveal the layers and complications in her life as a Native American woman. I use collage for similar ends to show how a direct mirroring of my identity would be impossible because I cannot see it all clearly myself; it does not exist from one simple perspective, but can only be revealed and shared in layers, fragments. Like Smith, I find the balance between pictorial elements and literal objects to be another way to signal the challenge of exploring and representing identity.

⁹ Laura Phipps *Jaune Quick-To-See Smith: Memory Map* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023.) 28-29.



Fig. 2.1. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Trade (Gifts for Trading Land with White People)*, 1992, oil and mixed media on canvas

Also like me, Smith struggled to learn things about a culture she felt distant from and had to rely on stories from her own father and from published books.² She was raised by a single father and had to rely on him to shape her familial identity. She struggled with moving around a lot and not having a clear and solid connection to a “home” or a people. She would even beg her father to speak to her in “Indian” and he would refuse because he wanted his daughter to be “American” so that she could live an easier life as a person of color.¹⁰ This biographical narrative that Smith explores in her art connects to how I am exploring my own biography and family history. I remember how my own mother would not allow my father to give me a Laotian name or allow me to learn the Lao

¹⁰ Phipps, *Jaune Quick-To-See Smith: Memory Map*: 22-23.

language. Like Smith, I was expected to be an “American,” yet always felt that there was some aspect of my identity missing or lost. Drawing on Smith’s approach to her art, which includes both biographical references as well as historical and cultural references, I aim to show that the layers of identity of being “American” include a combination of many kinds of heritage; my work questions the notion that identity is simple and singular, and easy to access or define. Like in Smith’s work above, she hangs pop culture references of Native Americans; I too hang objects in my work such as fishing lures to correspond to my connection to my family, or incense sticks that connect to the traditions of Laos culture. The hanging of these objects offers another connection to my family and myself.

One of the artists who influenced Smith in her collage aesthetic and her use of Pop Culture references was Robert Rauschenberg. Although he is best known for his early pieces that layer imagery from fine art, popular news stories, taxidermized animals, and more, Rauschenberg later began exploring aspects of Asian art. And it is his Asian-inspired works that I have found most relevant to my thesis. For example, in the 1980s, Rauschenberg journeyed to Xuan paper mill in China.¹¹ Following this trip, he created *Individual (7 characters)* from 1982 (fig. 2.2) that uses rice paper so thin that it is almost transparent. He layered this rice paper showing how it is both strong and delicate, allowing us to view imagery that he placed between the layers then sealed with gold. What I am most inspired by in this work by Rauschenberg is his ability to explore a new art

¹¹ Mary Lynn Kotz *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990.)

tradition and to make it his own. Even though he was a Texas-born artist, that did not stop him from traveling to a new place and investigating new ways to create meaningful collage-based imagery. My thesis takes a similarly experimental approach to collage art with a basis in Asian traditions—something I must study from the outside rather than having been raised in these traditions. One approach I took was breaking outside the frame, much like Rauschenberg's piece below. Putting fabrics and objects outside the frame represents for me the way I am trying to break boundaries of containment of traditions keeping and secret keeping outside of my knowledge.



Fig. 2.2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Individual (7 characters)*, 1982, silk, ribbon, paper, paper-pulp relief, ink, and gold leaf on handmade Xuan paper, with mirror.

A third artist whose collage aesthetic and exploration of identity has deeply inspired me is Gary Burnley. In Spring 2022, Burnley visited our campus and gave talks and demonstrations on his method of collage art. Burnley, like Smith and Rauschenberg, built up his collages in layers. And like Smith, Burnley explores his own identity as a Black American through the subject matter of his works.⁴ But what most struck me about Burnley's approach was his use of color. Some of his subjects in his collages are very dark and difficult, such as lynching of Black people in the American South. And yet, he employs colors that contrast the dark meanings he brings to light. I similarly use color to represent symbolic meanings in my work. For instance, by toning the distorted cyanotype images with black or green tea, I get darker colors that for me add hints of the presence of ancestral ghosts, especially the hungry, unsatisfied ones. In other pieces, Burnley parallels famous paintings of white figures with found images of Black figures, meshing them into a single, if still disjointed, image (fig. 2.3). From Burnley, I learned new ways to mix two cultures in my work, Laotian and American for instance, or Asian and German as in my mixed heritage. Burnley's work centers around photography, photo manipulation, and collage. He chooses images that align with each other and layers them in a way where two people become one. Though I am not physically putting two people together, I am altering one person to become two, the human and the spirit. Burnley also calls his works "physical collages" because he is not doing these collages digitally but cutting each individual piece to put back together. As I layer each element in my works, I am also not digitally making a collage but a physical one.



Fig. 2.3. Gary Burnley, *Pair*, 2019, physical collage

One final artist whose approach has inspired my own is Louise Nevelson, who was arguably the first artist to arrange her works as “installations.” Starting in the 1930s, Nevelson began creating pieces that formed an entire environment—from found wooden sculptures of circus figures arranged inside a tent with sawdust on the floor, to her 1958 *Moon Garden + One* installation of wood sculptures painted black that filled a gallery space and included theater lighting.¹² My thesis show was similarly arranged not just as singular objects hung on walls, but rather filling the gallery space as an installation. This aspect can be seen both in the way my objects break the frames that hang on the wall,

¹² Diana MacKown and Louise Nevelson. *Dawns + Dusk*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976.

but also in how I created a hanging scrap-scroll that forms a kind of archway at the entrance of the show and how the bench became a kind of altar for offering. Nevelson's "environments," as she called them, aimed to achieve a bodily and psychological response in her audience, and not just a visual response. My work, too, is made to be experienced not just visually but bodily by my audience, and to inspire them to journey into my history mentally and physically with me.

Nevelson's work, *Mrs. N. Palace* from 1964-77 (fig. 2.4), helped me envision my work as a spiritual "house" that encapsulates my history and beliefs in a physical space that one can enter. Nevelson's "palace" incorporates her memories and experiences in a form of both a memorial and a tomb. She used to find scraps of wood from the streets of New York, her lifelong home, and gives them new personal and spiritual meaning. Nevelson used found wood that she felt was "resurrected" and given new spiritual meaning by its arrangement in her sculptures. She believed in transcendent realities and extra-sensory perception, and her works communicate her beliefs. Likewise, I am trying to create objects that communicate spiritual meaning and ghost-like histories that I am trying to grasp but they are elusive. Like Nevelson, I use found objects and images that trigger personal memories—like the fishing lures, line, and bobbers that reference my father's love of fishing—but also inspire connections to spiritual memories and ghosts.



Fig. 2.4. Louise Nevelson, *Mrs. N's Palace*, 1964-77, Painted wood and mirror

Nevelson struggled with a hybrid identity, not unlike me, and she explored this in her sculptural work. She immigrated to the U.S. as a child from war-torn Ukraine; she had believed that the streets would be paved with gold in her new home, and instead she found bigotry and hatred because she was different. She was Jewish living in a Christian-dominant town, for instance. Even as an adult, she told people she was “Russian” because it was easier than explaining she was from Ukraine. Most of her art dealt with the complications of gender and identity, and her feeling of being out of place in her own life. She explored themes of outer space, like her “Moon Gardens,” and she did a series of white wooden works that explore the theme of “Weddings,” but from the perspective of how strange and surreal they are, rather than the ideal dream for a woman.

In my work, I am inspired by Nevelson to create “environments” that show the difficulty of creating clear identities within the reality of hybridity. Also, like Nevelson, I embrace the supernatural in my life and my art. I practice Theravada

Buddhism and I have a clear “sixth sense,” and I have started having sessions with a medium, Amy Utsman, some of which have directly inspired my thesis.⁶ For example, the title of my thesis, “Things Are Closer Than They Appear,” emerged in a session where my deceased sister communicated with my medium that she was seeing me through a rearview mirror bearing this phrase: “things are closer than they appear.” Though this phrase is simply a warning label on car mirrors, it signified to me that spirits are closer than we think. In other sessions, my deceased Oma (maternal grandmother) stated her understanding of my struggle to fit into my own family. Such validation for my struggles and my artistic responses have been a central foundation for my thesis. The lines between dreams and memories, life and death, humans and spirits are thin, at least in my world, and my thesis explores this.

CHAPTER THREE: PROCESS

Intuition, memory, and storytelling are a large part of my process for this body of work. I start with a story from my father's childhood. For example, *Faces Everywhere* (Figure 4.6) a smaller canvas piece, stems from his memories at a refugee camp in the Philippines where the walls of his building were covered in newspaper. I chose the three refugee pictures of my grandmother, father, and uncle reminiscent of that wall. I then use both digital and physical processes to alter these images, applying with two different types of transfers: cyanotype and acrylic transfer. Once I apply these image transfers through matte medium or hand stitching, I then choose fabrics and found objects to apply for the final layer. I chose to use these elements in two different ways: one on canvas and the other in large installations. Each piece tells a blend of stories and memories.



Fig. 3.1. Details of *Faces Everywhere*

In Adobe Photoshop, I turn these images to black and white to print them for the photo transfers for the cyanotype pieces that are the main focus for the canvas works. My images are often distorted to create the “ghost” images for the photo transfers and cyanotypes. For this distortion, I use the smudge tool to lengthen and widen key characteristics such as the eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and hands. This results in a “scarier” or more distorted image that signifies “ghost” for me.

After the transfers, I decide what color and textures are painted on the ground of the piece. In the case of *Faces Everywhere*, I decided on a bright orange as the base color to represent fire and the chemical Agent Orange—things that reveal trauma experienced by my ancestors. As an accent color, I used a poppy red to represent the poppy/opium industry and resulting drug problems in Asia, including Laos. When it comes to the larger framed works, I use the same method. In *Mekong* (fig. 4.NUM), I used a variety of blues, greens, and iridescent colors to represent water—both the Mekong River my father had to travel to leave to country, but also the fishing trips my father and I took together. My application varies in technique determinant by the content of each piece.

While I wait for the paint to dry, I cut out my loose canvas pieces that will hold the cyanotypes. For *Faces Everywhere*, I chose to do long, rectangular pieces of canvas—again these draw on my theme of scrolls that I discussed in my introduction. I also chose to make this piece very dense by placing six cyanotypes on it to create a condensed collage. Cyanotype, a photo transfer process, is quite simple. I use this process to obtain another element to the ghost theme.

Cyanotypes typically look aged and archival, and like something from the past rather than the present. As we can see in Figure 3.1, the faded color of the blues and greens read as both watery settings and ghostlike images of the past. To achieve the aspect that I am telling a story from long ago, I wanted to use this transfer process.



Fig. 3.2. Detail of *River Dance*

I used both the unaltered and distorted images for this process. For all the unaltered and some of the distorted images, I washed out the chemicals after exposure to reveal the blue coloration that is typical with cyanotype. For most of the deformed images, I washed the chemicals out and place them in different toner baths for up to eight hours that causes the color to change. For *Faces*

Everywhere, I used instant coffee toner bath for 8 hours to create deep brown images. In other pieces, I used green tea to create sage green or altered blue images (fig. 3.2-3). Because this process is so abrasive, I decided to hand-stitch for a cleaner edge. I wanted to use hand-stitching from a traditional standpoint. The older women, such as grandmothers in my Laotian culture, would hand-stitch and embroider the fabrics, *sinh*, I use in my works. To incorporate that, I stitched the edges of damaged canvases.



Fig. 3.3. Details of *The Family Ghosts*

Once the cyanotype pieces are finished, I move onto choosing the fabrics and objects that are assembled for the piece. For *Faces Everywhere*, I chose a pink *sinh* for the flames and black *sinh* to represent burning logs. For the collaged objects in this piece, I decided to go simpler and used dried flowers, dyed rice, and incense. Other objects in different pieces vary from fishing lures, dried

flowers, coin purses, and/or crocheted plushies. I chose fabrics and objects that best symbolize the story or feelings. For example, I used crocheted animals to symbolize innocent childhood.

Finally, I bring all the factors together to create the final piece in the gallery. I put together the spirit houses in this sacred space. This step typically takes me longer than getting each part finished because I am constantly thinking about the story behind the piece. I usually thumbtack the parts onto the canvas for placement studies until I am satisfied with each placement of fabric and object. I will finish multiple pieces and decide to rearrange pieces. The rearrangement decisions come strictly from my intuition. I will look at two pieces next to each other and decide to swap objects or fabrics. Once they are in the right place, I hand stitch them in as if I am sewing my identity back together; figuring out what about myself goes where. There are times where I see an object on one piece that I will cut off to put on a different piece. I would even say the spirits of my ancestors are letting me know when the piece is finished.

The small canvases in my thesis exhibit a subtle combination of color, photography, and found objects. The images are of my grandmother when she was a young adult in Laos. In *Grandma's Home I* (fig. 4.5.) the image is unaltered cyanotype combined with the orange-brown background to showcase my connection of her presence with the feeling of home. The challenge in this piece was how to make it feel like you are in someone's arms being comforted. I solved this problem by folding the fabric in such a way that looks like arms folding across someone. I also included a crocheted animal as a symbol for myself and

here the toy is behind the fabric being comforted. Most of the smaller canvases have these crotched animals to symbolize myself to show the combination of memories. After I finished the works on canvas, I moved onto the large, framed installations.

For these pieces, I chose to use large frames mounted directly to the wall. In the frames, I create an assemblage of small loose canvas, *sinh* fabrics, and objects. Intuition and story continue to drive my process. First, I choose the background color that is painted on the wall and the accent color for the texture. The background color is applied with a roller and the textures are applied with a large paint brush. I choose the color for the loose canvas in relation to the ground. For the large work, *Mekong* (fig. 4.10.), I chose different blues for the background representing water and a Citron Green to symbolize ghosts. I then went on to use a photo transfer method with matte medium to apply the images to the painted canvas (fig. 3.4.). In other areas, I would do the same but instead pasted the image onto the canvas. Before the image was fully dry, I would rip the paper off to keep some of the paper image on there and then sealed it with more matte medium (fig. 3.5). Once the images were dried, I chose the fabrics and objects. On *Mekong*, I chose a blue *sinh* that I used also as a pouch to hold rice and incense – a previously-made piece I did that represented the same story of the river, and a small pig bell charm, as well as different fishing lures to symbolize my father and our time on the river fishing. For these larger pieces, I chose to use magnets as the hanging mechanism of the loose canvases to allow them to flow versus being stuck to the wall. I want to use magnets because they

are not a permanent fixture. They can be taken off and on and there is an attraction that must exist in order for them to stick together. This attraction is much like the twisting, colliding stories I put together. Some of these stories attract each other, while others oppose.



Fig. 3.4. and 3.5. Details of *Mekong*

By using two different approaches— the canvas and large framed installations—I blend stories of my father and myself together. Through this process, I am able to show the traditions of my family, the memories I share with my family, and the struggle I have had accepting my complicated identity. This process has brought me closer to knowing myself—my past, present, and future.

CHAPTER FOUR: WORKS



Figure 4.1. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *River Dance*,
mixed media assemblage on canvas, 20 x 24 in.

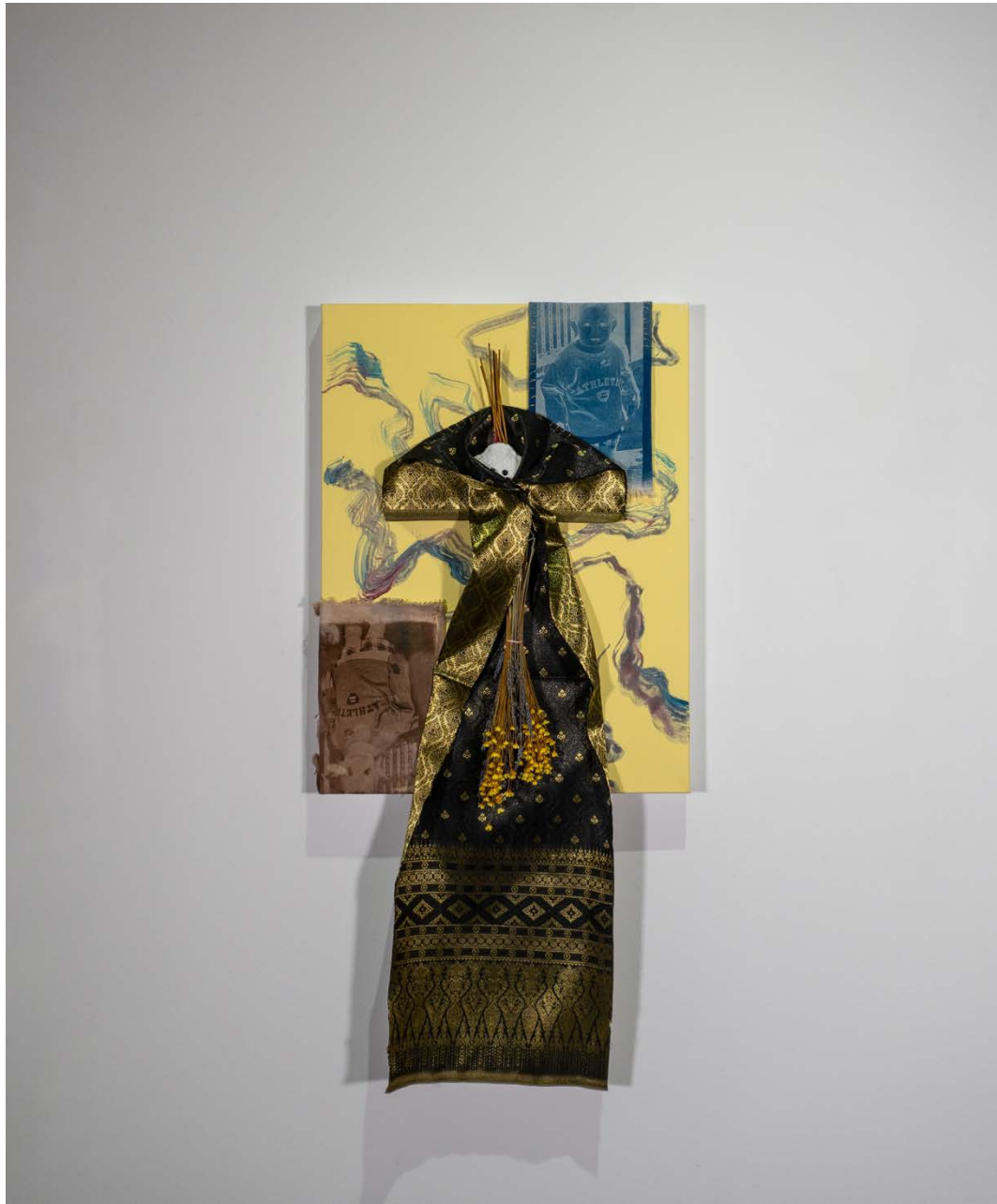


Figure 4.2. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Innocence*,
mixed media assemblage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.

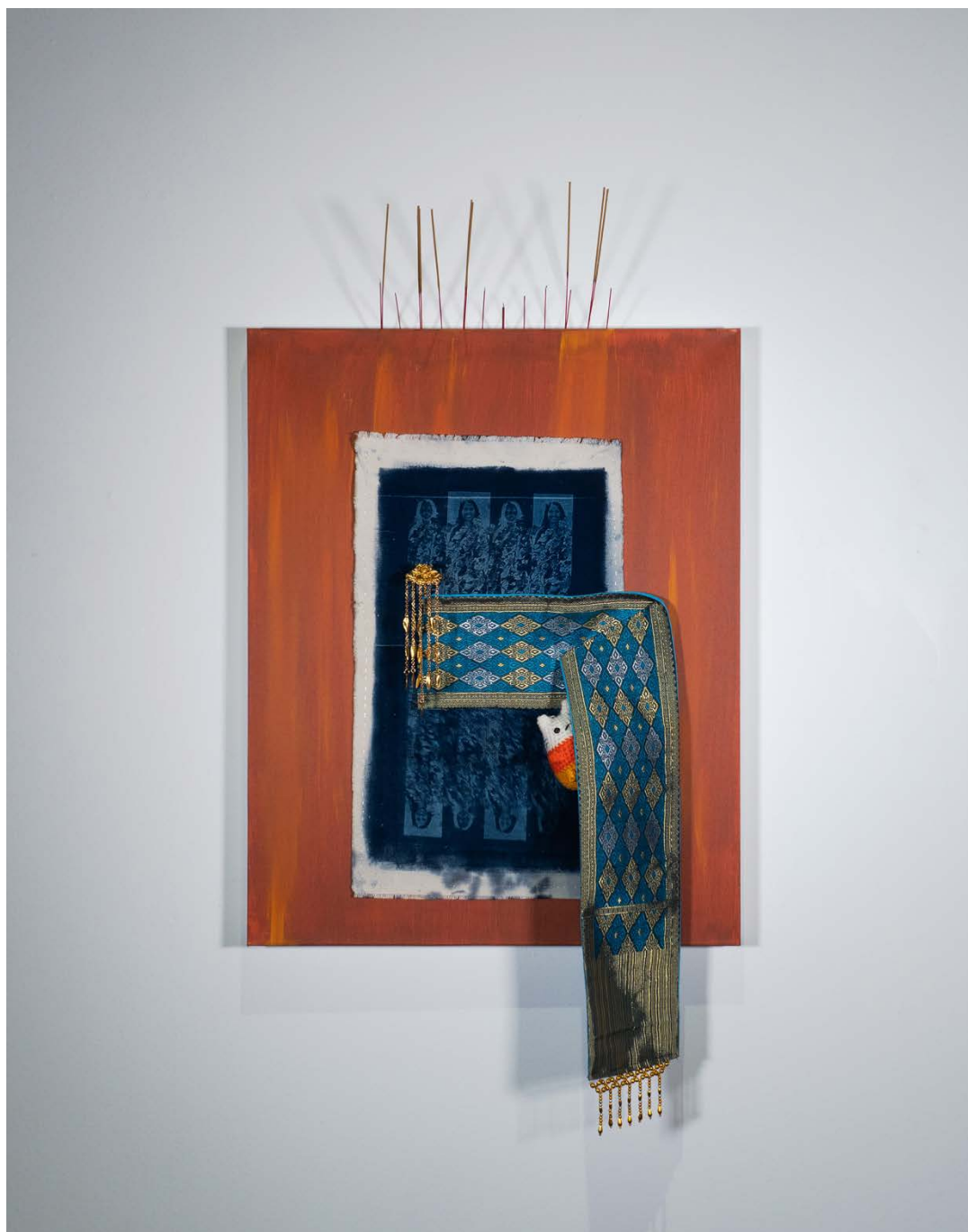


Figure 4.3. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Grandma's Home I*,
mixed media assemblage on canvas, 24 x 30 in



Figure 4.4. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Daddy's Soul*,
mixed media assemblage on canvas, 30 x 40 in.



Figure 4.5. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Grandma's Home II*,
mixed media assemblage on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Figure 4.6. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Faces Everywhere*,
mixed media assemblage on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Figure 4.7. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Baby Girl*,
mixed media assemblage on canvas, 20 x 24 in.

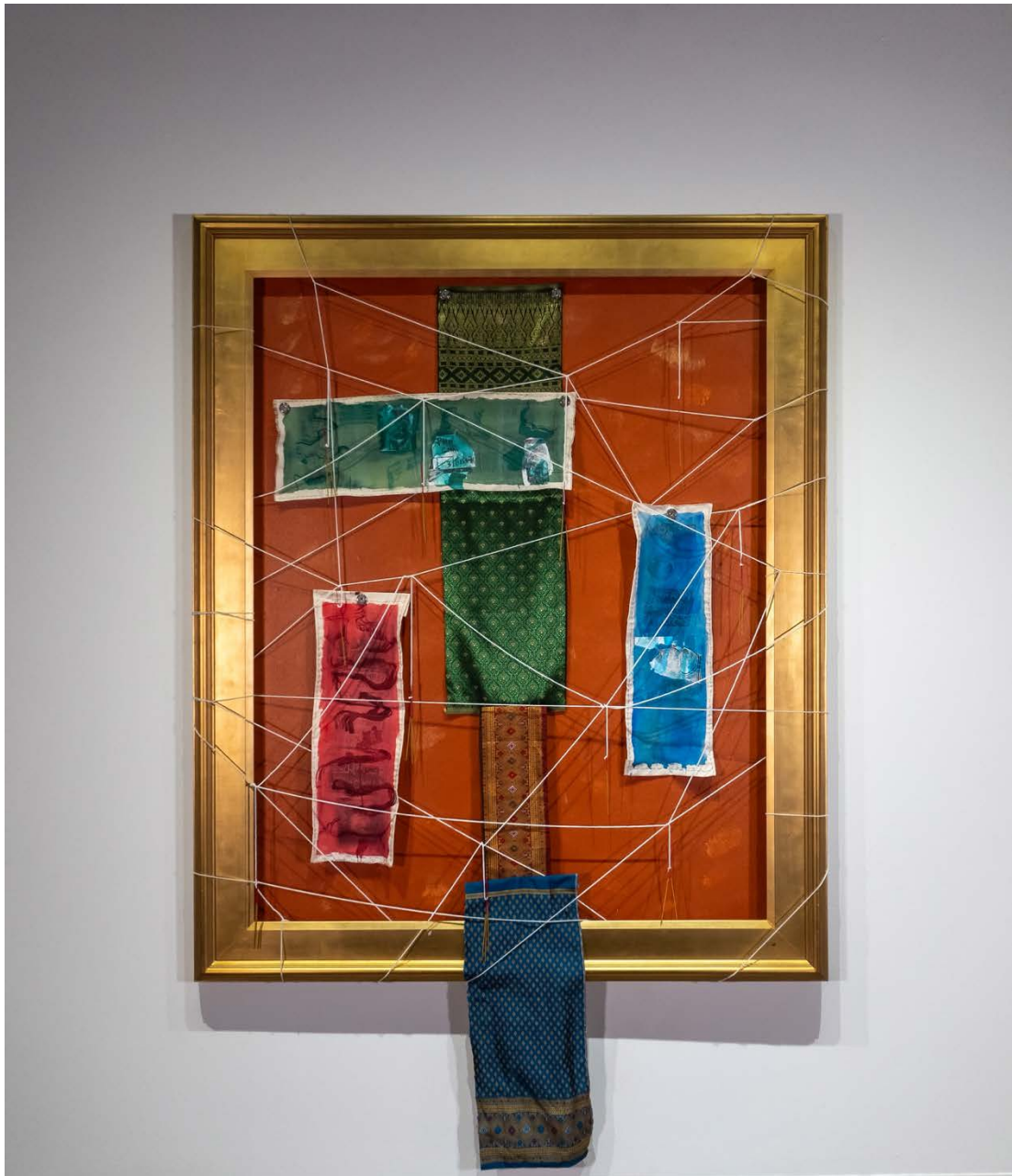


Figure 4.8. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Refuge*, mixed media assemblage,
57 x 69 in.



Figure 4.9. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *The Family Ghosts*,
mixed media assemblage, 45 x 57 in.

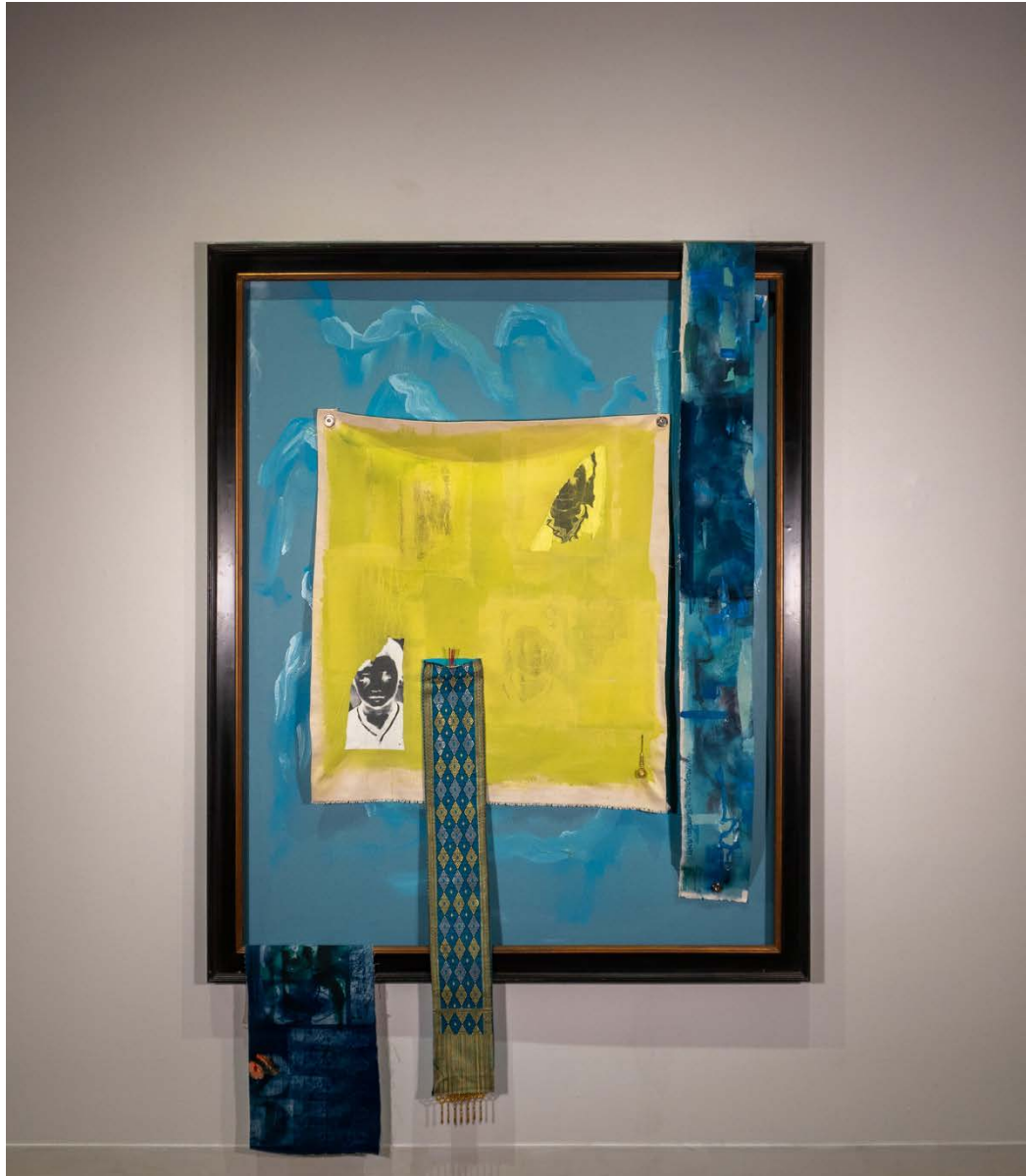


Figure 4.10. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Mekong*,
mixed media assemblage, 54 x 69 in.



Figure 4.11. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *It's a Beautiful Baby Girl*,
mixed media assemblage, 48 x 56 in.



Figure 4.12. Chasely Kade Matmanivong, *Mae Tu*,
mixed media assemblage, 57 x 68 in.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

My thesis acts as a vehicle for an in-depth analysis of memory and identity. It offers a personal history and an experimental journey based in installations that break out of traditional art styles of “painting” or “sculpture.” I sought to capture—even trap it in the spirit houses I have made—my identity as an Asian American. I tried to create a new story through the mixture of media and the layers of materials that represent memories, ancestral ghosts, and my own hybrid identities. My installations draw on aspects of the past—both my own and my family’s—and aim to bring them to material and physical form through abstraction and collage. The work presented the emotions I hoped to activate. I wanted viewers to feel both disturbed and at peace, uneasy but also comforted. This goal was especially achieved when there were limited people in the gallery. Being alone, surrounded by history, the dim lights, and lit incense gives an ambiance that allows the mixture of comfort and fear, where the presence of ghostlike figures can be felt—both the happy and the hungry ghosts, contained in their spirit houses but having a strong presence in the space.

Mae Tu (fig. 4.12) is the first mixed-media assemblage completed for my thesis. When I first started making these pieces, I thought the larger works would be easier to create due to the fact that this piece was finished in a matter of days. This piece came easiest to be intuition-wise. I knew her favorite color was a hunter’s green, which became the background color, while the color field on canvas was a blush pink, the same color as her wedding dress. Once I had all the “pieces of the puzzle”, I entered a state of automatism, where the act of painting,

stitching, and placing objects was guided by my subconscious of memories from the images of my grandmother, the theme of a matriarch and its objects like the gold crown and veil, the incense sticks, and flooded emotions from our shared memories. This assemblage gave me the final push to no longer be afraid of creating what I wanted to create. It gave me the strength to trust my intuition, to let go of the harsh feelings of the past, and to just let myself go and trust the process I had begun. I used a paint roller to paint the walls of the gallery the hunter's green along with touches of a pale yellow to texturize the wall and to incorporate my own favorite color to her own; bringing us together as grandmother and granddaughter, much like most of my memories of her were. I placed the gold crown and veil together in the top center to create a Madonna effect to show the viewer that she was a matriarch to the family. Much like most of the pieces in this collection, I used butterfly clips as a "random" object, but the meaning behind butterflies is not so random. In my family, we believe butterflies are our family members who have died coming to us. They are signs from the afterlife, another layer to the theme of ghosts in the thesis. I chose to use a long, vertical strip of red *sinh* in the center of the piece to give the work another layer that the viewer had to look through as well as bringing tradition into the piece. I decided to use this *sinh* because it was one of the two my grandmother made specifically for me. I titled this work, *Mae Tu*, grandmother in Laos, because I wanted the work to be as authentic, cultural, and personal as possible.

The assemblage, *Mae Tu*, led to further explorations of large, scaled works and the use of different techniques and media. This resulted in a series of five

works that included cyanotype, photo transfer, acrylic paint, and assemblage. Each of these pieces tied together through material yet evoke their own emotions through the content related to the stories and/or people pulled from memories that are both my own and from my father that have started to mix into my mind where my dreams started becoming memories, I believed were my own. The titles of these works provide clues about their stories, content, and context where they provide the viewer with an experience they also may have had or recall their families' stories of immigration, loss, and/or abandonment (figs. 4.8-4.12).

When I became stuck with how to go about some of the other large-scaled assemblages, I moved on to smaller canvas pieces that were initially studies for their grander counterparts. This led to a series of seven mixed-media canvas works (figs. 4.1-4.7). Though smaller, each piece contains an emotional journey of memories, stories, and thoughts that impacts the viewers just the same as the larger works and represents the notion of finding themselves. In my opinion, these works are more effective in evoking emotion because they are containing the same amount of memories in a smaller space. *Grandma's Home I* (fig. 4.3), for instance, symbolizes my grandmother and how she made me feel safe when others in the family wanted to shun me away. This piece is one of the more minimal works in the collection but impacts the viewer as if it were densely assembled. The orange, brown background feeling like a warm fire one can sit next to for warmth, like a hug from a loved one. The cyanotype of my grandmother smiling upon you as you look at her face, a smile that shows she is happy to see you. The blue *sinh*, stitched in a way that looks like arms wrapped

around your shoulders embracing you into a tight hug. Finally, the crocheted animal hiding behind the fabric representing my childhood and how I hid behind her for protection from those that wanted to banish me. This minimal piece showcases those feelings of love, a relieving breath from some of the denser pieces.

The densest smaller works, *River Dance* (fig. 4.1) and *Faces Everywhere* (fig. 4.6) give a more in your face approach to the feelings meant to be felt by the viewer. These works almost overpower viewers with the memories and stories told; they give a darker ambiance to the space. These works are from my father's grimmer experiences when fleeing Laos. *River Dance* exemplifies the memories of traveling down the Mekong River avoiding the danger from both shorelines. The incorporation of monochromatic hues of blue expresses a calming emotion as one floats through water, much like peaceful thoughts floating through the subconscious is juxtaposed by the altered, horrifying images in cyanotype of family attached to the canvas in red string as well as the waves of a strip of canvas displaying darker blues also attached by red string to illuminate the death surrounding the dangers of the river. I titled this piece *River Dance* as just that, a dance families were forced to perform in order to survive the trek to safety. I also used this title because of the dance in my subconscious of dividing the memories and dreams of this piece through process of what is real or imaginative.

Faces Everywhere (fig. 4.6) is another densely, overpowering small work that is driven by separation of reality and imagination. This piece relates to my

father's memories of the refugee camp he had to stay in the Philippines where the walls were covered in newspaper clippings where there were many faces, he felt were staring at him and would come out of the walls to grab him and my own dreams of being in his position feeling those same fears. The colors of fire and overlapping of cyanotypes in this piece give an overbearing sense of being watched by the spirits of the past. This piece distills fear in the viewer, it activates the "freeze response" where one is frozen in place, unable to flee or fight. These two pieces, the densest of the seven small works, come from the hardest memories and dreams that I had to decipher of which are my own or not.

My work is a compilation of memories, dreams, intuition, and spirituality represented through mixed-media that was inspired by works from Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, Robert Rauschenberg, Gary Burley, and Louise Nevelson combined with automatic painting and assemblage. I visualize my work to stimulate emotions, memories, and experiences from others as they decipher reality from their subconscious. With each piece, I wanted an equal balance of feelings. This collection of objects and images creates a visual narrative where a viewer can experience memories they may have locked away. In this way, my works allow us to realize that things, people, memories, and even spirits are closer than they appear.

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