WHERE I AM FROM

FINDING MY IDENTITY THROUGH VISUALISING MEMORIES

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This article discusses about the author’s identity related to the experience of being in the United States for one third of his life, and away from his native country, Japan. He uses photographic images as a tool for finding his identity. Those images are combined and painted with paraffin wax as finished pieces. The extra layer of wax on the photographic surface is treated as a metaphor for the fuzziness of memories and dreams, as well as a boundary, which lies between author’s two familiar spaces, the United States and Japan. His visual influences are shown to include photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, painter Giorgio de Chirico, and sculptor Alberto Giacometti.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Before becoming a graduate student I had various experiences as a visual artist. After receiving a Bachelor’s Degree in photography, I worked as a professional photojournalist. The job did not require me to use the creative skills that I learned in school. I had to take pictures that the newspaper wanted – not what I wanted.

Acquiring the freedom of choosing my subject matter in graduate school, I started documenting flamenco dancers in Texas. These people travel around the United States or internationally to perform. During this project, my experience of being remote from my home country for a long time, included a concentration on the lifestyles of flamenco people.

While I was exploring this subject of flamenco dancers, I found myself being bound to the self-imposed rules of documentary photography. Some of the rules were: the subject in the picture has to be in sharp focus, pictures have to be perfectly composed without cropping, and the images should contain good sources of light and color. Through the study of flamenco dancers, I was using photography as a way to document people and subject.

I am native Japanese and have spent the last 10 years in the United States. The more you stay away from the place where you were born, the more you see it and yourself better. During these 10 years, I have been questioning what the meaning of my existence is and what my roots are.
I wanted to use photography as a medium of self-expression to explore my identity. The new photographic works were about elucidating my identity through studying memory via the act of taking photographs. I tried to carry my camera with me as much as possible and take pictures spontaneously.

Choosing images from hundreds of negatives to show to viewers is equivalent to choosing words to communicate to others. During the editing process, I recalled my memories: where I was, why I was there, why I chose the subject to be photographed and how I used light.

I chose photographs taken in Japan and combined them with images taken in the United States to make my works. By documenting things I saw, they automatically became the “past.” By combining multiple images of two different times, or two different places, my own existence began to appear. I believed looking back into my past made it possible to see myself anew. The wax that would be applied over combined images would not only control visibility, but also help unify those multiple images.

Through the process of printing the images, my experiences and memories would be elucidated, and sublimed; in other words, the images would become the reflection of whom I am.
Statement of Problem

I wanted to share my experience of exploring my identity and realizing what the process of remembrance and memory was about. Also, I wanted to share the feeling of each individual’s sense of time and nostalgia by using the photographic works as a visual language. In applying wax, I created or broke the boundary between the viewers and me – public and private. By scraping and manipulating the surface of the wax, some parts of my photographs would be clear and some would be obscured, thus allowing me to control the part of the image I wanted to show. Carefully chosen lines, light, and colors to compose the images and manipulation by wax became the aesthetic factors of my works. These methods and media were the tools I used to search for my identity, existence and lost memory.

I will address the following questions:

1. What elements will determine my decision to choose and print an image from the existing pool of images?

2. How can the method of applying paraffin wax over the images possibly convey the sense of memory?

3. How does the combination of images function as a single image? Do the single images have to be combined into diptychs or triptychs to convey the meaning I desire?
Methodology

In order to answer these questions, I studied the photographs taken in Japan. At the same time, I kept taking pictures, like a diary, of what I saw in my everyday life and then I studied the contact sheets. The most interesting images were recorded with ideas for final output and data in a journal. Then, they were categorized by place and time to be edited. Images were printed on chromogenic paper, and their size and format varied. The chosen photographs were mounted on wood boards, and then paraffin wax was applied over them. After the wax hardened, I scraped some areas of the images. After finishing the piece, I exhibited them in the Cora Stafford Gallery, University of North Texas from April 16 to 20, 2001.
CHAPTER TWO

DISCUSSION OF WORKS

Sometime ago I decided to create a pool of images based on photos that I have taken while at home in Japan. I decided to use those images as material for a body of work. Those images were intimate to me, because they revealed my personal life. I used a small camera so that I could carry it with me all the time, which enabled me to capture images of private scenes. Therefore, I wanted to build a boundary between the images and viewers to protect the sense of intimacy. I started with choosing images from the pool of negatives by using formal factors, such as color, composition, and interesting elements. However, the meaning in my private life was the dominant factor for the editing process used to create imagery for this project. They are the relationships with my girlfriend, my parents, my grandmother, my grandfather who had just passed away, and friends from my high school. When I explained about those relationships, I would tell it to others, but not a whole story. Printing those images and telling stories through the images included that kind of nuance.

The very first piece of my series, “Where I am from”, was a “Self Portrait with Trees” (Fig. 1). The image was printed from one negative onto eight pieces of torn chromogenic paper. First, I scratched the surface of the image with various grades of sandpaper. The result was not satisfactory because of the quality of the surface. An one-inch-by-one-inch window was masked to show a clear area. I was going to paint the final surface with a thin layer of paint, but I did not want it completely covered with paint.
The area was intended to be obscured, but not completely hidden. So, I chose to paint the image with wax.

I was satisfied with the effect that the wax created. It created a half-transparent layer between the surface and the photographic print which caused an effect almost like looking at a print in a tray of water during the washing step of a printing processing. As a result, an ambivalent atmosphere contrasting the reality of photographs with the unreality of a dream was created. One’s dreams often occur as ambivalent incidents. Using a paintbrush to apply wax on the photographic surface causes varying degrees of visibility in the wax layer. Occasionally, a dream from the night before may be remembered only partially. At the same time, some part of the dream was deeply etched in my mind. From these effects, the characteristics created by combining wax and photographs allowed the viewer to experience the images as metaphors for memory.

My early wax works were about myself, and the images used were self-portraits. So, I stepped back to take a look at myself and my roots. Then, I started seeing a better picture of myself, such as a high school student living with my parents and commuting on a bicycle to the next town. Or as a young college student who had many hopes, but did not know what his future would be in the United States. And I began to see myself as I am now. As a result, I decided to present my photographic images in the form of diptychs. This enabled me to combine two points or places in one piece, such as one from the United States and another from Japan.
The triptych entitled “I remember that there was nowhere to run.” (Fig.2) employed two scenes from Japan on the sides. The photograph on the left was my father cutting a salmon. I chose this image, because the Japanese proverb “a carp on a cutting board” was in my mind. The meaning of the proverb is “there is no escape”. The image on the right is of my high school in Japan. This prestigious high school had a difficult entrance exam. During the new student orientation for the high school, the principal gave a speech and said, “Now, you are part of the elite group working as the axle of society and economy.” That speech was the turning point of my decision making for the future and made me decide to do whatever I wanted to do to make my living. The straight portrait of myself was placed in the center of this diptych to show who I am and was juxtaposed with the other two images to create a metaphor of my experiences. The image of the fish is the metaphor of myself with no escape from the blood or the lineage. The image of the high school building is a symbol of hierarchy and the system of Japanese society. The portrait of myself wearing a formal suit represents how my parents wanted to see me, and symbolizes how I am expected to fit into the Japanese society. I was centered as if being on a stage with curtains (side images), either opening or closing. Also, it represents myself as unable to move because of the pressure of the family line (father’s hand) and the system (high school).

The idea of making the piece titled “14” (Fig. 3) came from my desire to present the “gap” between the place where I currently live and the place that I am from. The time difference between the Untied States and Japan is fourteen hours. Through the diptychs,
I tried to fill the "gap" between several factors, including time, place and nationality; in this piece what is represented is the "gap" between these two worlds.

On the glass plate in the picture frame, photographs of the town where I grew up and a strip of copy from my passport were combined. The text “TOCHIGI” in the copy of my passport is the name of the town. Two contact prints are included, one is an American flag and, one is an empty chair, which represent existence and absence. Because I had spent most of my recent time in the United States, I felt like I was absent from where I was supposed to be: Japan. By presenting these two images as metaphors, I represented the existence of myself. The boarding pass of an airplane ticket refers to travel. There is the black and white photographic print mounted on the wall behind the picture frame. The size of the print is exactly same as the frame, and the image of the print is my self-portrait: just my face. By inserting one more layer of this self-portrait, “I” started to appear as a steadfast image. Because the self-portrait is half transparent or obscured by the wax on the glass plate, viewers would be required to make an effort to view the image by gazing through the first layer, or moving to the side to peek into the second layer. And this is made possible with the help of light, like in the definition the word photography: “drawing by light”. The prints mounted on the glass plate were printed with light, and wax was applied. There is a space between the frame and the second image, which emphasizes the fuzziness of itself in combination with the wax surface. There is a simile that describes using light as time, and it says, “light and shadow are like flying arrows.” It is the same as “time flies like an arrow” in English.
And enormous distance is measured by light or light years. What fills and makes up the space between “14” is the space between it and viewers: light and time.

A related piece is “I.D.” (Fig. 4). As I stayed in the United States, my current passport became the third one, and several identification cards were made for each move from state to state. On the other hand, the Japanese identification cards were not being used, and the numbers of them also increased during my stay in the United States. As I took pictures of those papers before turning them into the authorities, I became interested in using them in a work to show my identity.

During this project, “Where I Am From”, which had the theme of searching my identity and presenting it, I started seeing my position gradually. If there were two choices for me to choose from – if I am Japanese or American – my choice would be Japanese. I still feel comfortable communicating in Japanese, I prefer Japanese food, and I live a Japanese life-style.

After copying those various IDs into negatives, I enlarged them and included head shots of myself. I intentionally printed the American IDs inverted or out of focus. And I used the copies of eight IDs to surround the image of a road sign that I took in California. The sign was a metaphor for choosing a direction to take in life, and the one taped up was the metaphor for an irresistible force; a choice which was there, but deleted by someone else. Wax was painted on the surface of the piece to unify the nine images. Combining the images of my IDs represented the accumulation of time that I have been in the United States. Not just one image of an ID, but multiple IDs could represent an extended amount of time. The numbers and texts also helped to create a feeling of time.
Lastly, I would like to discuss the three diptychs. In the first diptych (Fig.5), the image on the right is my father who was opposing my profession. People like my father who are from poor farming families, and now own a small corporation, cannot imagine making a living by taking pictures. He wanted me to take an elite course; go to a good high school and college, and then find a job with a stable salary. The image of a ladder and a ladder that resembles a fence was the metaphor of his idea of “climbing up”. And when I painted the wax over this diptych, I felt like I was performing the act of sealing the image, which is a memory of the time I spent with my father, in a ritual to depart from his ideas.

When I saw the gloves hanging upside down in my father’s office, I could not take my eyes off of them. I took pictures of them, a few shots, and later combined them with a snapshot of my friend’s house (Fig. 6). The thought-provoking finger pointing to a vacant space and the vacant gloves are working as a diptych. And after finishing this piece, I realized that the image was similar to a painting done by the painter who influenced my image making. That was Giorgio de Chirico, and the title of his painting was “Le chant d'amour – The Song of Love” (Fig. 7). I remembered that I had seen that picture before; it was on the bookstand right by my desk. Because the image of the painting was burned in my mind, I noticed the unusualness of the scene at my father’s office unconsciously.

De Chirico influenced me while making images when I was studying painting. His “Metaphysical” paintings during the 1910s were the most influential ones for me.
The twisted and deep space would give an unpleasant feeling to viewers, but de Chirico’s “Gare Montparnasse” (Fig. 8) is:

Striking in the majestic geometrical simplicity of its structure, which however does nothing to alleviate an overall sense of anxiety, provoking in the viewer a powerful emotional disorientation by way of a multiplicity of vanishing points which, in addition to being the most sophisticated perspectival system heretofore attempted by the artist, also serves as a harbinger of new developments with precise theoretical implications. (1: 194)

Two people with long shadows, a steam locomotive, and the light of a late afternoon are the objects in de Chirico’s paintings recall my childhood memories. To me, his favorite objects, trains and train stations exist as a metaphor for going back home. Those elements create a nostalgic feeling. “Nostalgia” is the Greek combination of nostos, a return home, and algos, a painful condition. This emotion was one of the factors that I employed in choosing images from my pool of images.

The last diptych (Fig. 9) was the most complicated work from this series that I have done, both in form and meaning. At the same time, it shows my experience as a modernist photographer. Each of the two individual images was from the accumulation of my daily snapshots. I was taking pictures using this technique of street photography before acquiring my bachelor’s degree in photography. My major influence of this technique of snapshots came from the works of Henri Cartier-Bresson or William Klein. Even though I was influenced by those photographers, I always had the image of the sculpture by Alberto Giacometti titled “City Square” (Fig. 10) in my mind. This was the sculpture of the five thin figures walking toward each other in a different direction. The
balance and tension of the space between each figure, were the elements that I was looking for when I photographed on busy streets.

In this diptych, two figures are pictured as going in the same direction, and another figure enlarged in front, in looking at one of the two figures. The only gazes, which were fictional and fabricated, were from the advertising posters. The two harmonized figures help to unify the two different images and locations in the diptych. The vectors of figures and the perspective lines of space, the colors of red and green, and the gesture of the running figure juxtaposed to another figure in a flamenco dancing costume, were woven into one piece like a tapestry. The formal elements of the images represent the character of the complexity of my memories.

Based on my study of painting and drawing, I tried to recreate the “space” that Giacometti created. Therefore, pencil lines and paint layers were repeated on canvas and paper in my works. While I was painting hot wax over the photographic images, I realized what I was trying to do was the same technique I was using after studying Giacometti’s works. “Repeated overlapping lines build up density in the main form, while multiple, discontinuous contours mediate between that core and the surrounding space” (2: 29). When I took these photographs, I was looking for space. Then I created new space by combining those prints. By adding layers of wax, some areas became flattened, and other areas became deeper space than they were originally. The space made by these methods, and the space between the surface and photographic images, helps viewers to recall memories.
CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

After finishing this project, I realized that these images were the accumulation of my image making. The techniques that I learned through the numerous documentary projects I have done were utilized to build up the pool of images. The experience of painting and drawing were helpful to create pieces by combining images, and using wax as an alternative medium. That experience and the research of non-photographic artists brought me the idea of relationship between imagery and memory.

Although I have done various kinds of projects before starting to apply wax on prints, I have problems in terms of expressing myself through images. If "there is a fundamental dichotomy in contemporary photography between those who think of photography as a means of self-expression and those who think of it as a method of exploration" (3: 11), my ideas of these images from "Where I am from" would fit in both categories. Szarkowski also uses the words "window" and "mirror" as a metaphor for these two categories of photography. If I borrow his words and put the series "Where I am from" into both categories; both words will function to describe my concept. It is the "mirror that can be seen through the window".

As time passes, I will change. As I change, the images I shoot will change as well as my methods of presentation. My past will continue to accumulate, and it will be used as a foundation for my future work. I plan to continue taking pictures of daily life as a method of self-exploration. But the methods of presenting my images in the future (diptychs or wax) will possibly change. I will search for more possibilities of expressing
space through combining multiple images, and refer those images to a broader definition of identities.
Fig. 9
BIBLIOGRAPHY

