

In Between Insider and Outsider

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I used to think I needed to create a special narrative or subject in my art work that others could easily recognize and relate to. Because I had trouble finding many art works depicting Korean immigrant culture and didn't see a lot of Asian artists represented in the art world, I assumed that works about myself would not be significant enough on their own. In the course of two semesters, I challenged myself to face this fear by making my art into an autobiographical journal. I would carry my sketchbook with me wherever I went and draw on the bus, at the cafe, and the Korean church my family goes to, simply being an observer of different aspects in my life. Then I would bring those sketches into my studio and experiment with the images in painting and printmaking. When I presented them in my classes, I was surprised to see people getting curious and finding a way to connect to the work despite having a different cultural background. To me, the body of works I've created through my senior project feels like a series of self portraits, the places and people recorded like a journal, reflecting my past and present.

Liminal Space

When I'm in a liminal space, I'm in between what was and what will be. It's like when I worked for an acupuncturist and I would see people in the waiting room. When I feel anxiety and uncertainty about not knowing what's to come, I become disoriented. I remember when I first started going to school in America, I dreaded going on the bus. I knew once the school bus arrived at the school, I would have to be that an Asian kid

who could not speak English. I didn't like that label but it was how others seemed to see me. However I could not tell my parents that I didn't want to go to school because I didn't want to disappoint them when they came to this country to provide a better education for me and my sisters. So every time I got on the school bus, I always wished that the bus ride would never end. I knew I'd arrive sooner or later so, I was anxious during the whole ride. The mixed feelings of wanting to stop being anxious by getting to destination but also wanting to stay on the bus felt like a torture. Being on the school bus is only one of many times I experienced the anxiety of being in between spaces. As time passed, the anxiety faded away, however whenever I'm on the bus to commute to school, it takes me back to that time when I struggled to find my place.

As I started making sketches on the commute, I realized I'd never looked at people and the interior of the bus so closely before. My preconceived notions of the bus and the people I see everyday, kept me from seeing what was right in front of me. As I began looking, I noticed people around me those who take bus to the grocery store, to work, and to school. After looking for a while, my focus shifted from people to visual elements of the commute. I started noticing interesting shapes and lines in the bus's structure, in the clothing people were wearing, and in the light and shadows. I quickly put down what I was seeing in my sketchbook.



Passengers, colored pencils on brown paper, 11'x14', 2019



Untitled, Colored pencils on paper, 8.5"x11",2019.

Untitled, Colored pencils on paper,

Because people constantly got on and off and the view out the window changed as the bus moved, I tried to capture as much as I could in short amount of time. This sense of urgency pushed me to work faster and follow my intuition which felt like I was doing a writing exercise in a stream of consciousness style.

The figures in many of my sketches are often transparent, layered one top of another, showing what's underneath. For example, in *Green Bus*, the hospital sign sits on the same layer as the female figure with glasses—the fare box shows through the figure in the very front. In this chaotic environment, the figures float around like ghosts. Along with the transparency, the colors play with spatial depth. In *Green Bus*, anything that's drawn in color close to green in background recedes back in space and colors such as red and blue come forward. Because I didn't use the colors to match the depth in reality, the figures and the bus interior shift back and forth creating an undulating motion.

During a critique I had with the artist Derek Fordjour, he pointed out the signs I include in my drawings. They were mostly signs that prohibited an activity or offered a warning: do not enter, caution, or watch the gap. I didn't notice this until he pointed it out. He said he painted horses because he grew up on a farm and he wondered what environments I grew up in which made me draw signs that prohibit something. Even when I took photos on public transportation, I focused on warning signs.



As I reflected on Fordjour's observation, I realized I was very sensitive to public order and societal rules. Growing up in Korea where the collective is valued more than individuality, there is a strict hierarchical structure in every community. In school, questioning a teacher or expressing your own thoughts could be considered

disrespectful and result in punishment. As a result, my education in Korea taught me what not to do and I carried the lesson into my art work.

Because I spend majority of my time working in my sketchbook, I really enjoy working with drawing materials and the textures they make on paper. Then while taking monotype class, I came across a watercolor monotype technique using silk screen. This method combined painting, drawing, and printmaking all together which allowed me to explore new ways of layering my imagery and a lot of different textures. I found this process both frustrating and rewarding because there was always an element of



Left: painted on the screen with water soluble mediums **Right:** finished print

surprise that came with making monotypes in this way. As in many other monotype techniques, you cannot reproduce the image once you run it through the press. You have to embrace whatever mistakes happened in the print. While the lines I drew were very clean and sharp at first, because the background I painted with watercolor was not completely dried, the lines started blurring creating hazy atmosphere. Depending



Green Bus, Watercolor monotype with silkscreen, 12'x16', 2019



on the pressure I applied, some parts would transfer and some wouldn't which left white dots and lines.

After making prints, I wanted to see how a particular image could be recreated on a canvas with paints. However, I was struggling to start with a blank canvas until I saw the work of Doron Langberg, a painter who uses dried up pieces of paint mixed with fresh paint to create moss-like textures.

(Samet) His work inspired me to experiment with modeling paste to create textures on the canvas. I would put some down and scrape it, carve into the paste with the tip of the brush handle and draw gestural lines before it dried.

Shara Hughes is another artist I was looking at the time. She works with many different mediums such as spray paint, enamel, marker and so on. In the interview "Changing the Way We See", Hughes talks about how combining a variety of materials gives her a lot of freedom in building her own world with layers of marks. This encouraged me to explore acrylics, oil paints, and oil sticks all in a single work.



Fleeting Time, Mixed media(oil paints, acrylics, oil stick, modeling paste) on canvas, 18'x24', 2019

In making *Fleeting Time*, I didn't plan ahead. With each layer, I would respond to the previous marks or color. In comparison with my prints, being able to build layers of paints and using wide range of value allowed me to create sense of depth and add weight to the painting. The world I created in this painting is disorienting and psychedelic which reflects my anxiety about not being able to be grounded to one place. Hughes points out that she uses bright colors because she wants to attract her viewers but when people get close, it is scary to be in her world. There is a push and pull of elements which I can see in my painting as well.

Church/Choir

I have gone to church ever since I can remember. I was baptized when I was born and I spent most of my Sundays at church listening to sermons and doing church activities. When my family came to America, I learned that church plays important role in Korean immigrant society. It is the first place you go when you land in America for most Korean Immigrants. My family was no exception. I remember when my family landed at JFK airport. The person from church whom my mom knew through her friend came out to pick us up and showed us where we could buy Korean groceries and a rice cooker. Besides helping new immigrants to settle down, the church is where people get help with their status issues and also the place where people find community and a sense of belonging. Once they step outside of the church, they become foreigners again.

Despite having the Korean church community, sometime I felt lonelier in church. As much as I wanted to belong somewhere in this big country, I struggled to find my place even in church. While everyone had the same ethnicity, the community was divided into different groups depending on how Americanized you were. People who were born in the states struggled to mingle with people who just came to the country because of cultural differences. People who immigrated when they were teenagers like me could relate to both those who were born here and those who came later. We're referred to as the 1.5 generation, because we could never fully belong to either group. Because the church plays such a big part of my life, it seemed natural to start making drawings of my experiences within this community. I began observing the church more closely, the state of being both an insider and outsider allowed me to see it in different lights.



Untitled, Colored pencils on paper, 10"x7", 2020

The first thing that caught my attention was how technology changed the way the service was structured. Many modern churches especially those that have large chapels have big screens in the front for people who are sitting in the back to see. The

pastor and the choir are enlarged on screen creating a rhythm of repeat forms.



In the drawing, *The Hand*, the pastor is preaching and as he gets emotional in his speech, he raises his hand and starts making gestures which is then shown on the screen above him. In trying to deliver the message to the congregation, the hand gesture is another language that helps to express the urgency of trying to reach out to people.

Last semester, I decided to visit other Korean churches in the New York City. I wanted to explore more about Korean church besides the one I've been to in terms of overall

The Hand, graphite on paper, 8'x11.5', 2019

church architecture as well as how service is structured. Taking this journey also allowed me to think about my own belief and gave me an opportunity to choose my own church instead of following my parent's decision.

In the course of semester, I visited one church I was introduced to by my older sister's friend. The church had a fairly small chapel and about thirty people were sitting close in proximity touching each other's shoulder. It felt strange at first because the church I used to go had large congregation and the building was big enough to hold more than two thousand people so, there was always space between people. With everyone being top of one another, it seemed impossible to hide one's feelings. Towards the end of the service, the long prayer began. It went on for more than ten minutes with piano playing in the background. Then at one moment, one woman who looked like she was in her mid 40s, suddenly knelt down on the floor and started crying. Not long after, the pastor came down and sat next to her, praying with her. It was a poignant moment where two figures merged physically and spiritually.



Untitled, Graphite on paper,
7"x10", 2020

When I brought the sketch back to my studio, I struggled with coming up with new composition and as well as utilizing negative space and shapes. Then I came across Cindy Jihye Kim, Korean American artist who makes large, gray scale paintings, mainly working with sinister imageries yet depicted in cartoon style.(Benson) Because of simplified yet exaggerated forms, the subject matters becomes more digestible for me and makes me curious. *Interpretation* is the first painting I came across in person and I was mainly drawn to how it feels intimate and distant at the same time. The two figures in the back are depicted in silhouette and I could only see the body of the figure in the front. Even though this anonymity creates emotional distance with viewers, the symbolic objects included in the scene such as the book with pages being flipped and the transparent curtain pull viewers back into mysterious scene.



Interpretation, 9"x12", 2019 by Cindy Jihye Kim



Intruder, Ink, gouache, graphite on paper, 28'x36', 2020

Inspired by Kim's works, I created drawing in a limited palette. In creating *Intruder*, I focused on depicting the emotional experience I had at the church. Witnessing a stranger breaking down in tears up close felt like I was seeing something

that I wasn't supposed to see. It triggered intense feeling of sadness and anxiety which made me emotionally distance myself from the scene. I portrayed myself as a brown, ghostly figure which looks like disappearing into the background.

Being at the service and listening to sermon, there are themes that occur repeatedly such as suffering, sins, and love. I especially think that those words resonate with immigrant experience. As cliché as it sounds, many immigrants suffer. When someone looks down on you because you are an Asian immigrant, you feel like a sinner who deserved to be treated lowly. To get through these hardships day by day, you really need love and support from one another and the church fills this essential purpose. It is a place of worship but also place where people can reflect on their lives and express emotions by praying, singing, and listening to encouraging words to remind themselves that tomorrow will be better.

In Asian culture, expressing emotion whether in words or body language is not common. People are often very rigid and prone to suppress their feelings, therefore praying and singing are alternative ways to express yourself without being direct about your feelings.

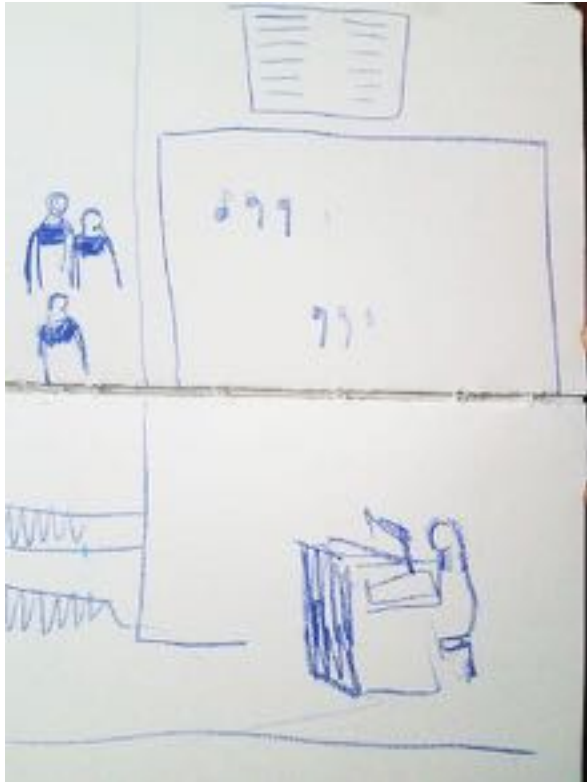
The church choir reminds me of my childhood, which gives me an emotional connection to it as a subject in my work. Around the time I entered elementary school, my family had to live apart from each other due to our financial struggles. While my parents were trying to make a living, my two sisters and I moved into my grandparent's



The Choir, Watercolor monotype with silkscreen, 20"x36", 2019

small apartment. During that time, I remember spending most of my time practicing singing at the church nearby. Thinking back, the times I sang and prayed filled the void I had due to absence of my parents

When I first started making art about the choir, I was drawn to each singer's face during the performance. Then I started looking at the piano player and how the screen interacts with the church.



Untitled, Colored pencils on paper, 7"x10", 2019 Becoming, Gouache on paper, 12"x16",

When the choir sings, the music notes and lyrics are projected onto the screen. As I painted the choir beside the screen, the singers standing beside the screen started resembling the shapes of the music notes. It almost looked like the choir was becoming music themselves, reflecting the spiritual experience they were having at the moment. Singing gospel is like praying in musical form.

I painted this on paper with acrylics and gouache once I got back to my studio. The brush marks in the background creates atmospheric environment and the blue wash evokes the idea of a baptism for me. It is as though the choir is being reborn through the act of singing. The saturated color and the element of abstraction

accentuate the resemblance between the figures and the music notes. The bottom row of notes begins to resemble pregnant women, which further suggests the birth of new life. The violet color I used in the piano and the floor reminded me of wine—the blood of Christ.

In the beginning of my senior project, I was concerned with creating a meaningful narrative in my work. However, as I let go of that notion, I was able to leave room for a new narrative to emerge. During the lecture Judy Glantzman gave recently at Purchase College, she said she does not focus on the narrative in her work and instead lets the subject be part of the mystery. There are many factors other than narrative, such as color, texture, and line which can become subjects on their own. With that in mind, I was able to let my intuition be in charge of my artistic practice.

I carried my sketchbook with me everywhere I went during these past two semesters and began observing what is around me. Like a journalist who would record an event with a pen and a notebook, I drew what I saw in my sketchbook with colored pencils. Through this experience, I was able to see things I had overlooked before such as people's facial expression, the objects they carried on the bus, and the interaction between the church and the choir. Surprisingly, the whole process became introspective. Making close observations of people and places I encountered in my daily life led me to reflect on my past experiences: the bus reminded me of the time when I struggled to figure out where I belonged as an Asian immigrant and the church choir reminded me of my childhood when music filled void in my life.

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