

EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Identity is both the self-image and the social construct that guides our behavior. We see ourselves through the concepts others have of us and the groups we belong to, and perform identities under the impact of the surrounding conditions. Identity, therefore, becomes a duplicated phenomenon – I am both myself and a project I make of myself. In my thesis, I investigated the ambiguous anxiety to be in the liminal state between the alienation from my country of origin and the displacement at the current settlement. ∴

Sartre once said that the fundamental doctrine of existentialism is “existence precedes essence.” We are thrown into this world without a preconceived meaning or true essence in life, and human “first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterward.” Looking at the absurdity of the human condition, I chose painting to fulfill my desire to look for existential meaning, as I feel that reality only exists when I paint and look at a painting. I examine, deconstruct, and remodel myself by making works with different focuses to investigate my identities and roles in both personal and public space, as I transcribe perceptions, memories, and imaginations through the medium of paint.

Capturing the natural likeness of things has always been important to me, however, achieving merely formal resemblance is never enough, as Zehou Li talked about the aesthetic criterion of traditional Chinese painting in the Path of Beauty, formal resemblance without the inner spirit, quality and charm of the subject would

never become a true representation. ¹ The whole and true representation of things has been fundamental in the creation and production of my works, and I try to achieve that by understanding the relationship between my paintings and my drawings. Lopez Garcia once commented on the difference between painting and drawing “: a painting gives you all the details, while a drawing does not; one brings you closer to the motif, largely thanks to color, but the other, at its limits, takes you into a more psychological terrain. To some extent, something similar happens to us with film. When we see a movie in black and white, we have an unreal, dreamlike sensation. However, if the movie is in color, everything comes closer.” ² I found my drawings to be rawer, more subjective, and emotional with the light of the ground and the transparency of the materials. Regarding my paintings, I attempt to make them resemble drawings more by incorporating a limited color palette, lines, and thin washes to achieve a more ghostly, dreamlike quality so that they could affect the viewership more on the psychological level.

Moreover, preliminary drawing has been an important part of my work process. Zehou Li explained how Chinese traditional painters worked on their concepts “: Artists are not always fully aware of how they are thinking and feeling when they are doing a piece of creative work. Rather, it is in the very process of objectively depicting something... that their thoughts and feelings as well as the principal theme,

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Li. (1994). *The path of beauty : a study of Chinese aesthetics*. Oxford University Press.

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López-García, & Calvo Serraller, F. (2010). *Antonio López García : drawings*. D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers.

eventually become clear.”³The subject matter hasn’t always been clear from the beginning, but the process of making smaller studies, researching, and depicting allows it to evolve. Besides concepts, preliminary studies are also important for figuring out formal issues like composition and color. I usually make the studies with watercolor, charcoal, and digital platform as those mediums are more direct and easier to make changes.

The idea of my thesis began when I compulsively stared at an image: a round table with a white tablecloth in a room lit by an incandescent light; a woman holding a silver spoon sits at the edge, her face dislocated; a little girl sits opposite and stares at the viewers. They are having dinner, but it almost looks like a quiet ritual. The eeriness in *the Dinner* painted by Antonio Lopez Garcia is so striking that I found it ineffably, absurdly touching. Whether in the religious, genre or still life paintings, images of food and dining have been prevalent. Although I have never seen *the Dinner* in person, I wanted to respond to it along with the many other dining scenes in the tradition of Western painting.

By comparing and analyzing three artists: Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn and William Hogarth, Annette Cozzi argued in her article that those paintings of food reflect, express, and even help construct national identity.⁴ I began to take interest in how the events around food are associated with the construction of my identity and searched my earliest childhood memory of family

³ Li. (1994). *The path of beauty : a study of Chinese aesthetics*. Oxford University Press.

⁴ Annette Cozzi (2013) *Composed Consumption, Food, Culture & Society*, 16:4, 569-588, DOI: 10.2752/175174413X13758634982128

dining, when I have been taught many rules and customs that define what is appropriate and what is not around the table. For example, you can't stab your chopsticks in the rice as this resembles the burning incense sticks in the funeral, which would attract hungry ghosts. Also, to show respect to the senior, everyone else should wait for them to eat first. If you are the youngest family member, you should be the last one to start eating. Countless other table manners are ingrained with the Chinese tradition, some sound so inviolable that I once thought they were universal, but later found out only specific to where I lived.

As we use our body as the site of identity performance to convey who we are, we alter our actions, appearance, and speeches according to the environment. My thesis examines the experience of food consumption as part of the identity performance which reflect dislocation and alienation. Eating is quintessential to human identity as we start to realize who we are and with whom we are at the dining table. The events surrounding the table are more interesting than the food itself to me since those interactions reflect the lifestyle, states of mind, and power dynamics within a group. They both give us a sense of community and at the same time confer the status and identity with which we distinguish ourselves from others. I chose "Eat Drink Man Woman" as the title of my thesis because, firstly, I want to acknowledge the influence of cinema on my creative practice, as "Eat Drink Man Woman" is also the name of Ang Lee's film, which narrates the maintenance and destruction of the family structure around food. Furthermore, "Eat Drink Man Woman"(饮食男女) is a direct quote from one of the Confucian classics, the *Book of Rites*, which says "The

things which men greatly desire are comprehended in meat and drink and sexual pleasure”. (饮食男女，人之大欲存焉) Confucian addresses that it's the human nature to have both material and sexual desire, although those desires are deemed immoral and heavily suppressed throughout the Chinese history. The second painting of my thesis would focus more on the desire and the suppression of them.

The final product of the thesis involves two paintings and drawings of the same format and composition. I completed the drawing prior to each painting to solve the compositional and proportional issues, and each of them represents different aspects of my anxiety. In the first painting, people gather around a long table talking to each other. On the left, a man opens the door and invites somebody to come in. The central figure sits among them but remains disconnected from the conversation. The domestic space looks believable but minimal so that it feels slightly out of place. The space is concrete, but not real enough to live in, it is almost like a stage. In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois introduced the idea of double consciousness. The term identifies the impact of the socio-historical conditions on the consciousness of African Americans. He wrote “: It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁵ Similarly, the experience of being

⁵ Pittman, John P., "Double Consciousness", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

peripheral and stuck between the disconnection from the West and disintegration from my homeland build two conflicting consciousness: an Asian “American”, and a Chinese. The painting examines how I live in the double-consciousness as I adapted to the new customs after I moved to Seattle. I look at myself through the eyes of others and put on an act to try to belong. While I belong to a group, I also have the heterogeneity of a foreigner. The academy offers the stage setting, everything looks real, vivid, and perpetual although I know they are only a façade. After the curtain fall of the play, everything would be back to where they truly belong to.

The second painting portrays a chaotic Chinese wedding banquet. In China, red symbolizes joy, luck, and love. It is also the traditional color of the wedding. On the other hand, red is also associated with violence, danger, and anger. At the focal point of the painting, people are playing games to offer cigarettes, which is an important part of the wedding tradition. Everyone is socializing and enjoying the feast around the table and food. This painting was inspired by Ang Lee’s movie “the Wedding Banquet” and the wedding photos from the Beijing Silvermine project; from different perspectives, both of my inspirations represented the Chinese wedding as an epitome of the repression and instant release of individuality and desire in Chinese culture. Ang Lee commented in the movie that the chaos of the Chinese wedding is a consequence of “five thousand years of sexual repression.” To me, the chaos is an entry point to scrutinize the deprivation of agency I have experienced under the normalization and repression of individuality implemented by my culture of origin. The chaos also symbolizes the refusal to the identity performance and the norms

that decide our subjectivity. As Judith Butler argued that gender identity is a performative construct, we could reinterpret the categories into which we are born to rearticulate the discourse around them. “Norms cannot be embodied without an action of a specific kind, and they cannot continue to enforce themselves without a continual action. It is in the thinking through of this action that change can happen, since we are acting all the time in the ways that we enact, repeat, appropriate and refuse the norms that decide our social ontology.”⁶

In the current semiotic system, I could not find an appropriate signifier to summarize my experience, and the paintings and drawings examine this duality of my dislocation. I seemingly identify more with the liberal tradition under the western education system, although I would never be truly integrated into it; as a result, my situation is more like a performance; whereas It’s also not liberating to follow the tradition of the Chinese culture as I refused the norms that I was assigned to. Through the focal point of the dining tables, my works examine the fluidity of our self-images, and relate to the broader human experience of the uncertainty and ambiguousness of identity.

⁶ Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity , 2004, No. 62, African Feminisms Volume 2,1: Sexuality in Africa (2004), pp. 115-123

Image List



Eat Drink Man Woman: The Apartment

2022

79" by 109"

Oil on Canvas





Eat Drink Man Woman: The Wedding

2022

79" by 109"

Oil on Canvas



Eat Drink Man Woman: The Apartment

2022

68" by 94"

Charcoal on Paper





Details



Eat Drink Man Woman: The Wedding

2022

75" by 102"

Charcoal on Paper



Details

Book Reference

1. Li. (1994). *The path of beauty : a study of Chinese aesthetics*. Oxford University Press.
2. López-García, & Calvo Serraller, F. (2010). *Antonio López García : drawings*. D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers.
3. Annette Cozzi (2013) *Composed Consumption*, *Food, Culture & Society*, 16:4, 569-588, DOI: 10.2752/175174413X13758634982128
4. Pittman, John P., "Double Consciousness", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
5. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* , 2004, No. 62, *African Feminisms Volume 2,1: Sexuality in Africa* (2004), pp. 115-123