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HEARTMTNDEMON: Mourning Ritual

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
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Thesis Sponsor:

December 21, 2018
Date

Lisa Corinne Davis
Signature

December 21, 2018
Date

Alexandro Segade
Signature of Second Reader

*I dedicate this work to my mother Grace, my aunt Lillian, and to my grandparents
Miyo and Yasu Kizu.*

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HEARTMTNDEMON: *Mourning Ritual*

Over the past few years I have shifted from a binary practice of painting and performance to an integrated composite of performance, video, sculpture, and installation. I have chosen to pursue this shift to materially reflect in my work the themes of hybridity and the merging of discontinuities within oneself; multiple self-identifications require multiple modes of depiction within the same work. As an American from a mixed-race heritage of Japanese and Scottish origin, my work refers to Japanese aesthetics and utilizes tropes of orientalism to simultaneously announce my complicity in perpetuating these images and to emphasize the fallibility of the stereotypes. Similarly, I work with caricatures of Caucasian types to address the overdetermination of whiteness in American culture.

Growing up in a predominately white suburban town, I believed that in order to fit in I had to smooth over my unique cultural heritage. In my public persona, I focused on the Caucasian half of my ancestry, filling in the bubble labeled “White” on standardized tests as a young child, rather than “Asian” (at the time, in the early 1990s, we were only allowed to pick **one** race with which we most closely identified). The shame that I carry from the years in which I publicly disregarded my Japanese heritage motivates me to focus my recent work on my heritage. As my relatives are aging, I feel an increasing urgency to learn stories from my family history and bring them to life in my work. When once I might have chosen to focus less on my Asian ancestry in an effort to pass as white, now I make the conscious choice to spotlight it and make it visible and prominent in my work, despite all of the contradictions and controversy that choice may generate.

I am considered *Yonsei* (fourth generation) in the Japanese American diaspora, as my maternal grandmother was born in the United States but then raised in Japan. I never met my Japanese grandparents and have never visited Japan, so the way in which I relate to Japanese culture is most closely tied to my upbringing by my Japanese mother. She cooked Japanese food almost every day for dinner, and sent me to school with a Thermos full of bite-sized tofu topped with bonito flakes, along with a shoyu (soy sauce) packet (much to my embarrassment, when most kids brought turkey sandwiches). Our house was filled with Japanese prints, textiles and ceramics. At a young age I learned to dye fabric from my mother, who collaborated with my grandmother to form a batik and tie-dye enterprise in Los Angeles in the 1960's. My performances are a conduit through which I am beginning to research my family histories (especially their internment during World War II), and to explore the choice and agency involved in self-identification, as opposed to the classifications and judgments of society.

Language is my preferred form for directly communicating with my audience. I have realized that straightforward spoken statements are a powerful method to convey ideas, especially ones about politics and contemporary culture. For many years I attempted to make paintings that represented my feminist agenda, but I was dissatisfied with the results. They undermined my ideas of voice, embodiment, and subversion, for they could not speak. I began performing four years ago to create an outlet for myself that was explicit and direct. I build my performances on a foundation of language, beginning with a text that I develop through continual editing, memorization, and

recitation. The texts follow a (rather imprecise) couplet rhyme scheme, and are first-person narratives that portray the inner monologue of the character whom I will embody. Parallel to the text, I develop an audio track that sets the mood for the piece; I draw on my musical background to make it with electric guitar, percussion, and samples from existing music. It contains portions of spoken text that act both as a voice-over of the characters' innermost thoughts, and as a reminder of the social boundaries that bar people from saying certain words aloud.

The texts that I write and perform follow a sing-song couplet rhyme scheme, which mimics children's nursery rhymes. However, the questions and concerns that I raise within them are laden with profanity, controversy, and dark humor. When juxtaposed with an audio track that evokes doom metal or noise music, the playful quality of the rhymes takes on an aspect of foreboding. By speaking these words into a microphone during the performance, I am literally amplifying myself and subverting the expectation of voicelessness that comes with being an Asian woman.

In past performances I have examined and humorously dismantled common conceptions of well-known Western female figures such as the Virgin Mary, the biblical Eve, the Roman goddess Diana, and Joan of Arc. More recently I have turned the critique onto Western stereotypes of Eastern women, focusing specifically on the geisha. By reproducing a stereotype of a Japanese woman, I perpetuate an orientalist notion that the geisha is a static icon that is simple to portray and not subject to change. However, my performances work to disrupt the essentialized archetype by perverting the audience's expectations of well-known characters using language, manner, and

attitude. I might begin with parading around a stereotype, to seduce the viewer into believing that they know to whom I am referring, but then turn the audience's understanding on its head when my character becomes more specific, strange, and corrupted.

In order to work towards a more specific critique, I am excavating my family's history in the United States, focusing on their internment during WWII. Using interviews that I conducted with my aunt, who was a small child when our family was sent from Los Angeles to live for four years in a concentration camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, as well as research into Executive Order 9066, and details of the camps in general, I have constructed a performance that investigates my personal relationship to this traumatic family history and its effects on me today. In past performances, even as I personified historical figures or spoke about ancient customs, I always injected contemporary subject matter and observations from my daily life; by playing with archetypes of women from the past as well as reopening historical wounds, I draw parallels to our current political and cultural climate. In HEARTMTNDEMON: *Mourning Ritual*, the intersection of personal, everyday horrors with those of the past is made more conspicuous than ever.

Costume and masquerade are of particular importance for me in the process of subverting commonly held notions of female beauty. I use exaggerated makeup and wardrobe that edge on the pornographic and grotesque to reveal how obscene some ideals of feminine beauty really are. Mary Kelly says about masquerade, "...the masquerade impinges on the cultural order as a mode of conscious acting out; a

performance of identity which is bounded, as Emily Apter has suggested, by the tyranny and pleasure of the stereotype... The masquerade effectively maneuvers between the compression of the signified and the endless deferral of the signifier, by articulating the body as a language by making it visible, sometimes subversively so”¹. When I began making performative videos, I was influenced by Youtube makeup tutorials, fascinated by the extreme transformations, as well as the capital (both cultural and monetary), surrounding the teenage women making the videos. My enthrallment with metamorphosis through makeup and costume, along with my longtime relationship to the DIY aesthetic of punk musicians such as the Slits and Destroy All Monsters, are the building blocks on which I develop my wardrobe and attitude for a performance. I employ rudimentary transformation techniques during live performances, using wigs, makeup, and lighting to shift from one character to the next; as a viewer it thrills me to see transformation happen in real time with makeshift elements, precipitating a suspension of disbelief. Most recently I experienced this in the work of RRLEW, during her performance in July of 2018 entitled *TR-79*. In her hour-long live solo performance, RRLEW shifted between five different characters, each one inhabiting a new set, lighting, and soundscape. The shifting of characters through simple costume changes can also be seen in the plays of Reza Abdoh, who uses the grotesque to formulate an uncomfortable depiction of stereotypes that rewards and punishes viewers at the same time.

¹ Mary Kelly, “Miming the Master: Boy-Things, Bad Girls, and Femmes Vitales” in *Imaging Desire*, pg. 204.

In Joan Jonas' early video *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, she creates a parody of a female character by donning a glamorous doll mask, feather headdress, and belly-dancing costume. I would argue that she is engaging in a form of female drag; a woman dressed in burlesque as a woman in order to portray what society expects her to be, what she desires to be, what she could never be. In Japan, ohaguro, or the practice of dyeing one's teeth black, was seen as a mark of beauty and aristocracy; it was prevalent in Japan until the end of the Meiji period around the beginning of the 20th century. However, if I blackened my teeth for a performance and then went to work as a bartender in New York the next night, I might inspire dismay, horror, or fear in my customers. The different standards of beauty in the West and East Asia, and how they have changed historically, are of great interest to me and I use that in my work.

The set design of my performances has most recently been based on paintings and Ukiyo-e prints from the 18th and 19th centuries. I am particularly interested in Kitagawa Utamaro's works depicting geishas and sex-workers in their boudoirs, as well as his images of Yōkai, or Japanese supernatural monsters, demons, and ghosts. Recreating Utamaro's tableaux in three-dimensions motivates me both visually and thematically. I am transforming something flat, still and two-dimensional into a work that is living, breathing, and in a completely different context than the original. Ceramic sculpture plays a large part in creating a world that my characters inhabit; the sculptures are hand-built, oversized facsimiles of everyday objects which assume fantastical roles in my performance. They are heavy, mottled, and crude versions of recognizable

objects that aid in transporting the audience to another world (albeit a world that is only a short distance away). A giant tofu container holding ceramic tofu blocks becomes the prop that parallels part of the script in my thesis performance:

“Does everyone want me to be just like tofu? Cut into pieces to soak up the flavor, submerged in shoyu? Be mutable, changeable, a plain empty framework, to be flavored and penetrated, impregnated and macerated. I refuse to be like tofu! I’ll crush you like a bug with my shoe! And fuck you too!”²

Creating a three-dimensional world for my performance persona to dwell in is crucial in my effort to render what was once flat into a work that is fluctuating and scabrous.

Being a petite Asian woman working in the service industry in New York City, people expect me to be polite, polished, and obedient. I seek to subvert these expectations, both my own misguided, ingrained notions and ones that come from others, in order to take ownership of how I exist in this place and time.

Doubling figures into my work as a metaphor for my own cultural hybridity, often in the form of projected video. A video of myself performing as another character, projected behind or in opposition to the live performance, is a way to extend the text and character away from a singular point of view and demonstrate that there exists no originary identity, even if the video apparitions are all figments of my character’s imagination. Doubling through audio, in which the voice-over imbricates the live vocals of the performance, further disorients the viewer. Through live action, video, and audio, I play with the concept of simultaneity in an attempt to complicate the viewer’s perception of what is occurring at any given moment, and where their attention should

² Excerpt from HEARTMTNDEMON: *Mourning Ritual* script

rest, if it can rest at all. This creates a work that revolves around misdirection, in which I place my body in the center of the audience, elevated on a stage but obstructed from the audience at many angles by screens and dividers, and then additionally play a video that draws their attention away from the live action. This misdirection and splitting of attention parallels the fracturing of identification that occurs throughout the text of the performance.

My thesis project explores how a woman's hungover, self-loathing morning routine becomes increasingly disrupted by the horrors of the current political and cultural climate as well as the horrors of her family's past (which mirrors events of today), to the point that she may no longer ignore these violations. The "morning ritual", an age-old concept that has been co-opted in recent years by our neoliberal economy with the aim of boosting empowerment, motivation, and productivity, becomes instead a rumination on what happened last night as well as what happened seventy-seven years ago to Japanese Americans during World War II. Throughout the piece, the morning ritual distorts into a mourning ritual, as a ghost from the past visits her kin to speak about inherited wounds, regret, and revenge. Using tropes from various traditional Japanese theater forms, including Kabuki, Noh, and the movement concept of Jo-ha-kyū, (which roughly translates to "beginning, break, rapid"), as well as from Kaidan (Edo period Japanese ghost stories), and classic 1950s and 60s ghost films from Japan such as *Kuroneko* and *Ugetsu*, I create a pastiche of a ghost story set in modern day New York City, concerning one hungover nightlife casualty. By mixing sundry Japanese imagery and sound with other Western references in this

performance, I hope to elucidate how distant and fraught my relationship is to my Japanese lineage, but also how important that history is for me on the road to a greater understanding of how I might inhabit the present state in which I live.

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Image List

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Figure II *Installation view, HEARTMTNDEMON: Mourning Ritual, mixed media*

Figure III *Detail (Props)*

Figure IV *Performance Documentation*

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Figure VI *Performance Documentation*



Figure 1 Installation view, HEARTMTNDEMON: Mourning Ritual, mixed media



Figure II *Installation view, HEARTMTNDEMON: Mourning Ritual, mixed media*



Figure III *Detail (Props)*



Figure IV *Performance Documentation*



Figure V Performance Documentation



Figure VI *Performance Documentation*