

Artist Statement

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Introduction

My work is an investigation of cultural identity in our current era of globalization, which is characterized by the rise of electronic technologies. These technologies affect the ways that people around the world communicate, creating a quicker and more fluid exchange of information among individuals, societies and cultures. The scope of our knowledge is affected by this process that is occurring.

Globalization by definition compresses cultural space and time, exposing a greater number of people to a greater number of historical and contemporary cultures. Traditions, behaviors, identities and histories may be thrown into relief when contrasted against that which seems foreign. Navigating these intersections can be tricky, and questions of preservation—what deserves to be preserved and who gets to decide—arise. Conversely, as cultures fuse into one another, demonstrating the shifting nature of cultural boundaries, issues of appropriation and ownership surface. It is my belief that evolving cultural practices is a form of preservation; cultures wane when they are stagnant. Therefore, my body of work consciously participates in appropriation and contemporization in order to preserve different cultural traditions.

It is not my intent to convince the viewer of which identities in particular deserve to be dissolved or sustained, elevated or diminished, I simply want to encourage an examination of the reactions to globalization's effects on cultures and so cultural identity. These reactions indicate that globalization is both negative and positive. Or, rather, globalization *is*, the suffix “-ization” itself indicating a process that is in existence. Any process that exists then has consequences. Responses to those consequences are subjective, depending on how one feels they may or may not have benefited. Common thought among

researchers asserts that “since globalization contains the key poles in the conflict, it cannot represent one position in the conflict.”¹ Therefore, my work is not advocating a “pole,” or imposing a normative value regarding globalization.

What I am suggesting is that perspectives on culture and globalization occur within, and further generate, a complex network of intersections where individuals and groups meet and try to navigate around each other. Some feel threatened, their opportunities and expressions of identity hindered. Some desire supremacy, ascribing a greater worth to their identity. Others welcome the fusion that allows a chance for fluidity of identity. What is the smartest way to traverse these various junctures together? My work is intended to present questions like these for debate and contemplation.

Process

By participating in the globalization process, I am therefore representing it as well. I point to historical artistic formats from around the world, but adorn my pieces with images that speak to contemporary life, which is defined by the expanding networks resulting from increased usage of electronic technologies. Since my work speaks for a larger population than just myself, it needs to avoid appearing as though my opinions are formed merely from my relatively inconsequential microcosm of life and from one singular progression of technical skill. Establishing a framework through research allows me to comment on global concerns in a relevant way, while a diversity of techniques provides a multi-lingual way for me to speak to and for a diverse population.

¹ Ritzer, 198.

Since there is a broad range of traditions I can draw inspiration from, I focus at the start of my process by collecting reference material that I feel will carry my work in the conceptual direction I want to go. This may include gathering images to inspire how I choose to construct my surfaces, from textiles to ceramics. I will also pick an appropriate assortment of images to paint on these surfaces and the best technique with which to paint them. My color choices then become important for the practical purpose of keeping my mixture of images and styles from becoming overwhelming in their variety. I enjoy more muted tones for this reason, but also because of the similarity to the palettes of traditional folk art styles.

The handmade, constructed quality that results from my process can be interpreted as reactionary to a certain kind of process and a certain set of materials that are taken for granted in the description of what “painting” is. I don’t assert a claim that such assumptions are negative or positive, but I acknowledge them in order to subsequently reject them. To find new and different possibilities for what painting can and could be, I routinely expose myself to visual traditions from around the world. Often, this includes functional objects that are esteemed as visual accomplishments and not “art for art’s sake.”

The task to reproduce images from and of various cultures becomes harder because of popular interpretations that suggest this results in objectification and exploitation when “painting” is put through a Western filter, with its corresponding hierarchy of media, subjects, and display formats. I consider this as I develop my work, and therefore aim to create work that partakes in these traditions as it represents them. The question of whether the maker is an “insider” or “outsider” should be present so the viewer may reflect on how this affects the interpretation of the work.

Materials

My process forces consideration of my materials so allows them to become integral and carry significance as much as the painted images. Even the paint itself can function on a conceptual level as a reference to human evolution. Experts like Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, argue that narrative building is a basic biological need. Historically, the manifestations of this result in an intrinsic relationship between the oral and the visual. We have been dependent as a species on stories being sustained through time by visual records. This is more than just translation of words on a page, or a simple representation of life through an illustration. Our stories are built and continued by the interpretations we derive from every element of the visual creation, from the meaning of the images, to the materials that were used, to the method of dissemination. And the longest history we have of this is in “painting.”

As more archaeological study is completed, more evidence is uncovered that lends credence to the assertion that the evolution of human ancestors and the evolution of painting fed each other. Recent dating of cave paintings show that painting is not necessarily the result of humans who developed to a point at which they enjoyed visual mark-making. Earlier relatives engaged in the act, which, coupled with other conditions and factors, can be seen as evidence that it spurred further physiological growth into the Anatomically Modern Humans we are today.² If recent science is to be seriously considered, one would be supported in the claim that humans didn’t just create painting, but painting helped to create humans.

² Joyce. National Public Radio.

It is this backtracking of human history, discovering more about the parallel evolutions of biology and aesthetics that has taught me about how to navigate the intricacies of globalization today. I am questioning the norms of what I have been taught to assume, not because I think I have been taught wrong, but because I seek to understand further and better. So, even though I recognize that the current era of globalization is defined by the rise of efficient electronic technologies, I also acknowledge that the cultures that are confronting, fusing, colliding, displacing, drifting, shifting and evanescent have been doing so since “culture” itself began to bloom. The boundaries that we draw are not stable and never have been, despite historical attempts to make them so. I want my materials to reflect this, and so I make reference to a wide array of practices and traditions.

Globalization often forces people to confront their own histories, and so informs their present-day culture. Choices are made of what aspects of culture to keep and shed, and how to communicate that evolution; modern-day technology plays a significant part in this process. Being globally connected means we are not just broadcasting to our own cultural participants, but to a wider world ready to interface, negotiate, and shape a future. I use methods such as sewing to reinforce the importance of network connections. I also use conspicuous stitches to reference traditions in sewing, quilting, embroidery, and weaving. I have dyed my fabric surfaces in shades of different skin tones (another marker of cultural identity), which are physically and conceptually connected by threads. By layering fabric, textures, and paint, I allude to the build-up of culture over time. Some of these pieces include hair as a texture, which, coupled with the “skin” of the fabric, give an animalistic impression. Perhaps if we can conceive of ourselves as an animal species with common roots, our cultural differences may not seem so insurmountable. If we can

contemplate the building blocks of our own identity, we can contemplate that of others' and so maybe understand and accept our differences.

In representing traditions of visual storytelling and history-telling throughout the world, it is important that my work is adaptable to a multitude of spaces, which reinforces attention to material. My installations, therefore, consist of component pieces that can be reconfigured and edited and easily installed in open space. This reflects historical objects that were portable and expandable, used to disseminate stories and consequently germinate cultures into existence. I am both expanding the reach of those traditions and using them to comment on the building blocks of cultural identity. The materials I use and my choices of how I install and display them establish the conceptual significance of my materials beyond that of functional framework or surface.

Symbolism

I choose many of my symbols based on the feeling that my artwork can serve to aid in their preservation. The process of globalization has had both positive and negative consequences for indigenous and traditional artforms and imagery. Current technology and media can extend the reach of such traditions; innovation, often with the help of new media, can keep them alive and relevant. But it is also much easier to disseminate traditions or traditional items in a global manner when they have been stripped of much of their distinctiveness. In terms used by academics, “gLOCALization” is at an economic disadvantage to “GRObalization.”³ Hand-crafted turns into mass-manufactured, and nuances that reflect local demand are disregarded in favor of a generic quality that

³ Ritzer, 197.

increases the odds of wider appeal. Globalization is not inherently negative, as it is a process that can encourage more efficient ways of delivering much-needed items to various parts of the world. Nevertheless, preserving cultural identity is not a primary concern, which could prove disastrous in the long term if profits are put before people.

“Glocal” acknowledges that there are very few cultures or regions that have not been touched or affected in some way by the process of globalization, thus no place is strictly “local.” However, glocalization is a process that allows for mutation of cultures and traditions in contemporary life while retaining an integrity of individuality and a unique community. This is often threatened by globalization, and the nations who have the economic resources to manipulate the process enjoy a security against cultural vulnerability by displacing others, to the extensive detriment of those displaced.

Pursuing a course of action to eliminate the existence of globalization is neither realistic nor practical. At any given point in time, global relations can be characterized by which place they occupy along the spectrum between the glocal and global poles; globalization is a fact of global relations, not simply a potential outcome. In order to counter the trajectory of globalization, individuals and communities must put forth the effort to promote glocalization, if that is what they value. Therefore, I act to sustain and preserve the glocal, rather than work to discredit and discharge the globalization process.

This philosophy makes itself visible in many of my symbols and references. I use handicraft, like sewing and natural fabric dyeing, and display my work like wall hangings, flags, or stretched leather. I not only follow in the footsteps of traditions that extend long into history, but embrace practices that have been rejected as “high art.” Their rejection, potentially more widespread if globalization is dominated by Westernization, threatens

their existence as artforms that inform and build the identity of individual members of many cultures. The images I paint, as well, have been collected from various traditions. I use folk-style technique to portray examples of that which is associated with the foundation of modern first-world life: technologies such as circuit boards and satellites, high-traffic freeways and skylines of sprawling urban centers. This is a fusion that mirrors the development of cultures in our recent past; folk art doesn't have to be "stuck" in a particular time in history. It does not destroy tradition to allow it to reflect contemporary life, rather, it allows the tradition to stay relevant to those whose identities it helps to inform.

Similar to, but not drawn from, folk-style techniques, are my images of networking painted in a graphic manner. A relatively new visual language has emerged to help organize large quantities of data into recognizable or readable patterns, which allow viewers to see connections or discern narratives within the data. My inclusion of network visualizations are a way to demonstrate how cultures and identities do not exist in isolation, but link and communicate to other individuals and groups. Again, I am using modern imagery to comment on processes that have been occurring since cultures first emerged.

In addition to my more graphic imagery, I also use representational techniques to depict additional historical images that continue to stay relevant to many cultures and inform their identities. I am often drawn to adornment—masks, clothing, tattooing, scarification—because of the strong symbolism the act of adorning holds for identity, both of the individual and the collective, throughout the history of human evolution.

Place also affects individual and collective identity, which I represent through map-like imagery. By painting such images on sheer panels that may overlay my other panels to varying degrees based on the viewer's spatial relation to the work, I'm asking my audience to consider cultural identity *through* the lens of place. This idea is expanded in the banner-like ratio of my panels, which suggest flags or similar markers of place-associated identity. There is a reason people ask one another, "Where are you from?" when attempting to understand one's identity. Regions take on local character and become identifiable "locations," which tell us something about the people that reside there. But as groups of people become more mobile and expand their networks, thus expanding cultural possibilities, the identity associated with an area can evolve.

Another way I symbolize the non-linear history of artistic traditions and cultural development is in the way I often choose to orient the painted imagery. Many of my compositions resemble storytelling formats that are similar across cultures. From Persian miniature illustrations, to comics and graphic novels, to Mayan codices, Asian scrolls and Egyptian wall paintings, there is a structure to the visual representations that is often characterized by an organized system of panels, a framework that indicates how the images relate to each other and acts as a visual explanation of a greater subject or theme. Within my panels themselves, however, each image I paint is rotated. There is not one consistent viewpoint across my framework, just as there is not one viewpoint in looking at the process of globalization and the history art, or for that matter, looking at the world in general.

Further symbolism can be derived from the relationships of the component pieces of my installations; there is significance in these different arrangements. Cultural

communication is a key theme of my work, and my artifacts, by virtue of their painted imagery, materials, or constructed style, come to represent different cultures. By organizing these objects in a thoughtful composition, they “communicate” with one another and symbolize the communication that occurs in the real world.

The intent of my arrangement of images and artifacts is to make clear to the viewer the way in which disparate pieces come together and coalesce to create a whole, greater than the sum of its parts. Stories and narratives are built this way, cultures are built this way, and identities are built this way. The world exists this way, multifaceted, but not separate; we are bound by threads of social and political relations. The world is often thought of as overlapping networks, defining who we are and how we function. The individual symbols amalgamating in my work act as a greater symbol simply in the way they *combine*, thus reflecting our current era of globalization. Each has a meaning in its own right, but their symbolism elevates when they are put together. This reflects the fusion that is occurring among cultures of the globe as we speak. In other words, it shows how globalization *is*.

Conclusion

As someone who is multiracial and multicultural, questions of identity have always seemed to follow me around. Since I was young, I’ve embraced identity as an investigation. As a teenager, I was intrigued by anthropology and linguistics. I enjoyed documentaries like *The Linguists* in which (what else?) two linguists traveled to remote regions of the world documenting endangered languages. After making the documentary, one of the protagonists wrote a book titled *The Last Speakers*, providing a solid argument

for why there is an imperative to preserve endangered languages. Because of the fact that I consider visual art to be a kind of language, where audiences have varying levels of “fluency,” I draw many parallels to his thesis in support of my own activity that seeks to preserve and extend the life of visual traditions.

The responsibility appealed for in *The Last Speakers* continues to be a source of guidance, reinforcing the way I perceive the anthropological implications of our actions, images, and representations. It is not my goal to convince the viewer that these implications are positive or negative. I would like to proffer my content in a way that allows the audience to contemplate their own perspective. My work could function as a reinforcement of a particular view, or a questioning, depending on the viewer; in my pushing of boundaries, it may reinforce yours, or present a new view on your own identity. The facts I am presenting are realities of universal practices that manifest in a variety of ways, generating culture into existence. Though I try to convey a celebratory tone, how the viewer chooses to react is his or her decision. I hope to promote tolerance and respect with my work, but not because I detail solutions to today’s cultural confrontations. To counter apathy, ignorance, and the blind acceptance of our daily norms and parameters, I encourage education, contemplation, and questioning, which leads individuals to figure out solutions for themselves.

Ultimately, through images, materials, and techniques, I have created objects that both represent and contribute to the process of globalization. In viewing my work as a representation of the globalization process, the viewer is welcome to interpret these pieces through the lens of personal experience, whether that is positive, negative, or neutral. In contemplating my work as a contribution to the transformative effects of globalization, the

viewer should understand that I work for the preservation and understanding of cultural identities and the way we form them.

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