Searching for the Middle Path

MFA Thesis Statement

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Identity, whether it is individual or cultural, has become a common topic of discussion in recent decades. These discussions are byproducts of the change in environment as advancements in technology promote globalization, communication, and travel, and these identities that shift through time impact the world in both positive and negative ways. This body of work puts emphasis on anthropological ideas revolving around culture including cultural preservation, environmental conflicts, and individual identity within the contemporary societies. Through the juxtaposition of symbols that create multi-layered narratives that are reminiscent of Surrealist and Magic Realist paintings, these works attempt to analyze, criticize, and question how community, whether local or global, impacts the perception of the world as a culture and as a biosphere while searching for an ideal balance. This ideal is to find the "middle path," an equilibrium between oppositions, with emphasis on the interrelations of traditional lifestyle and the more contemporary, based on careful consideration of the boundaries of cultural and historical knowledge, both positive and negative, to be used as guidelines.

The conceptual foundation of these paintings rests in the comparisons of perceptions and lifestyles of developed versus developing nations, with references to cultures I have experienced in Japan, Samoa, and the United States. Japan represents a developed nation with centuries of recorded history with minimal influence of foreign cultures until the late 19th century; Samoa denotes developing nations, specifically Pacific island nations. The United States provides unique information as a developed nation that arose out of the concept of the melting pot. The compositions of the paintings use cultural symbols to create multi-layered narratives and a juxtaposition of objects that represent interpretations of modern-day societies influenced by computer technology, and its effect

on environments and/or human behavior. The use of allegorical images is to call forth questions to the viewer regarding various sociological ideas to allow for critical assessment.

Contrasting the Polynesian nation of Samoa with the more urbanized and developed nations of Japan and United States provides evidence of the ambiguity of norms. A seemingly objective norm of a "house" being enclosed by walls must be discarded when entering a traditional Samoan housing structure, fale, where wooden posts are all that support the roof. Not only are houses without walls, but also another norm of Samoan life is that they will climb twenty yards high up a tree with a bush knife to cut down coconuts, and a line of students swinging bush knives that they brought to school from home are one of the methods of lawn care at a public intermediate school. The significance of context cannot be understated in order to deconstruct notions of value and cultural/environmental influences.

Close reading of cultural lifestyles will reveal illimitable values in traditions. Although advancements in technology have driven humankind forward in terms of scientific research and material conveniences, there is a necessity to be conscious of the past and practice moderation, rather than complete reliance on contemporary technology that endorses object-centered cultures and neglects the value of the traditional culture and ideas. Thus, the search for balance begins between the oppositions in a futile attempt to create an ideal *third space* between traditional and contemporary, where the lifestyle of culture without an objectified value of time are assessed and contemplated against a lifestyle where time is equated to monetary value and materialism flourishes under the idea of convenience.

As Homi Bhabha notes in *The Location of Culture*, the notion of third space requires that the interdependence of time and space must be acknowledged, creating complex differences in identity, past and present, and any and all oppositions (Bhabha 1). He argues that different forms of colonization result in hybridity that leads to cultural interchanges and collisions (Bhabha). Despite the nations being analyzed, Japan, Samoa, and United States are not those often associated with the notion of post-colonialism, the influence that environment and culture has on human behavior relates to the third space theory and my search for a balanced, ideal fusion of the different identities in today's postmodern world of hybridity. As I explore the idea of third space, these paintings question the ideal balance of the influences of the divergent cultures in the construction of the hybrid culture. Yet, when searching for the middle path where the third space is composed of a coherent mixture of the opposites of traditional and contemporary cultures, the significance of the two creates a struggle due to the trajectory of contemporary lifestyles' compliance to technological advancements, overpowering the value inherent in traditional ideals.

The use of various icons, taken from different cultures and time periods, serves to provide context in which to interpret the juxtaposed magical narratives. In *Envisioning the Dragon* (fig. 1), a koi fish is used to refer to Japanese cultural context along with the mythology and symbolism associated with the fish. Additionally, Japanese windsocks, koinobori, used during Children's Day in hopes of good health of the children, are juxtaposed with a nuclear power plant depicted in the background, hidden by a cultural symbolic volcano, Mt. Fuji, allowing for contemplation between its cultural/political

benefits and its destructive potentials, as the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster on March 11th, 2011 demonstrated merely twenty-five years after the Chernobyl Disaster.

Some of these icons are inevitably esoteric due to its distinct historical and cultural origins, yet a sense of wonder and curiosity is still proposed by juxtaposed images, often achieved through various framing devices. After all, the "unknown" beyond the cultural boundaries has inspired curiosities through history, since the emergence of *wunderkammer* during the sixteenth century. My ultimate objective is to capture the viewer's interest in hopes that they will expand their understanding of the unfamiliar cultural symbols, which is made possible by modern technology that provides accessible intercontinental communications—one of the positive attributes of contemporary society.

Despite my propensity to appropriate cultural elements within the paintings, I purposely depict these elements using western aesthetics, using perspective and chiaroscuro instead of non-western aesthetics of emphasized flat colors and parallel lines that create an implied space. The representational manner within the whimsical composition is to maintain an aspect of reality that would aid in guiding the viewer to issues, which exist in reality much like the Magic Realism movement has done in the past. It also refers to the historical shift of Japanese art as an outcome of globalization, such as the introduction of linear perspective as a result of the arrival of the Black Ship that opened up Japan from its isolation caused by the political xenophobia in the late nineteenth century.

With the emphasis on the idea of the *middle*, the compositions are created in pairs to stress the notion of the dualities—excluding the central piece that has a bilateral symmetrical balance—as discussed earlier regarding the third space theory. The pairing of

composition allows for works to be exhibited in a symmetrical manner, expanding from the central focal point, as seen in *Searching for the Middle Path* (fig. 2). Furthermore, many of the paintings in this body of work incorporate additional panels/assemblages, often irregular in shape. Although the additional layers are constructed over the main rectangular substrate, the objective is not to convey the notion of structure, but rather to enhance the content. It is not added to emphasize the physical depth, but instead used to augment the illusion of depth. This illusion can be observed in *Bushido* (fig. 3). This painting consists of two total depths, the surface of the cradled panel, and attached panels that protrude approximately a quarter of an inch. One of the key elements of visual art that is embraced in these works is the idea of depth as illusion, the portrayal of a three-dimensional image on a two-dimensional surface. The additional panels that extend beyond the rectangular picture plane allow for exaggerated overlapping and foreshortening that is crucial in the depiction of visual space. This trompe-l'oeil effect also allows the viewer not only to *enter* the visual space, but also for the subject within the painting to *enter* the "real" space. As an outcome, not only are the paintings creating a horizontal bilateral symmetry to enhance the search for the "middle" but also they create a secondary opposition of inside/outside, or here/there, which the viewer can use as reference to interpret the idea of the middle path.

Aside from the pairing, each of the individual sets uses a variety of composition, sizes, and framing devices. Recurring iconographies are used to maintain a level of coherence, including, torii, origami, assorted Japanese toys, and the landscape. Torii is a gate originating from Shintoism that separates the divine, pure world from the rest of the world (Mori), and are used in the compositions to indicate the entrance to the sublime and

the ideal, in a very broad sense. Origami, the art of paper folding, allows for portrayal of various subjects within the context of Japanese culture, representing the involvement of culture in numerous aspects of society and the lifestyle.

One example of the origami used in the compositions is the crane. In Japanese culture, cranes, along with turtles, are seen as symbols of longevity due to their longer lifespan compared to many other animals. The idea of cranes as symbol of longevity and well-being created a legend that states that a wish will be granted to a person who folds one thousand paper cranes. Eleanor Coerr popularized this tale in her book, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, which is a story about a girl who suffered from the aftermath of the atomic bomb and tried to fold a thousand paper cranes in hopes of being healed (Coerr). I explore this symbolism in different ways, sometimes through unusual placement within the composition, sometimes through the depiction of origami made of high-profile materials like currency, and others through depiction of the origami crane in destruction.

Another common motif is landscapes, which symbolizes a more traditional lifestyle and its relationship to nature. The landscapes are placed in the compositions in reference to Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime, like the romantic landscape artist and the Hudson River school, signifying the overwhelming presence that speaks to the viewer on a spiritual level (Avery). Yet, is not an attempt of glorification of the traditional lifestyle and rejection of the contemporary, as the title, *Searching for the Middle Path* implies. Since our predecessors began to use rocks and spears as tools, humankind has relied on advancements in technology for conveniences and efficiency for a more prosperous lifestyle. Technology is a significant part of the lifestyles in the contemporary world, with the majority of the people having access to cell phones and computers that allow for

academic researches, global communications, etc., it is also an irrefutable reality that technology also distracts the users through social networking sites, or its use as gaming consoles. The questions proposed with the search for the middle path is not whether one is good or bad, but where the line should be drawn between convenience and laziness, beneficial and detrimental, progress and regression, etc. The world—at least for the developed nations—is at a point in human evolution where the perspectives of both lifestyles, traditional and contemporary, is still accessible that allows us to envision life without contemporary technology, and life with complete reliance on these technology. It is only when these oppositions are available that the middle path, much like the third space, can be contemplated.

In my work, *Searching for the Middle Path* (fig. 2), the motifs origami, torii, and landscape are used. The graven image on the left, a statue of Ninomiya Sontoku (commonly referred to as Kinjiro), and the figure on the right represent the extremities that humankind has experienced in the recent decades. The statue of Ninomiya Kinjiro is commonly seen in Japanese elementary schools to symbolize hard work and a strong desire to learn. He was born as the oldest son to a family of farmers, but he lost his parents at a young age due to a disaster and his siblings were split up to live with relatives. He studied hard while he worked, and at the age of twenty, he began to buy back his father's land and reunited his family at the age of twenty-three. Throughout his life, he contributed to rural rehabilitation and economy, and was acknowledged by the feudal lords during the Edo period for his success (報徳博物館). The statue portrays Kinjiro walking as he carries firewood, still reading and studying to show his dedication to education. The figure painted on the right side represents the generation of children growing up today with contemporary

devices that can be utilized in many ways, both beneficial and unproductive, depending on the decision of the user.

To find the middle path that exists between cultures and lifestyles, it is mandatory to understand the fragments that make up the opposing ends, and even attempt to encompass what is beyond to further raise questions and break down the norms that are constructed by the given environment. The idea of questioning norms is crucial to objectively deconstruct oppositions without subjective interpretation. With critical analysis of norms as one of the key steps to understanding identity, this body of work shares similar aesthetic choices to that of the Surrealists. As the founder of Surrealism, André Breton, stated in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, "Surrealism attempted to provoke, from the intellectual and moral point of view, an attack of conscience, of the most general and serious kind" (123). Although paintings from *Searching for the Middle Path* do not reference the subconscious, dreams, or Freudian ideas, the element of juxtaposition and manipulation of space that allowed Surrealists to break down the boundaries are still utilized and appropriated for its pragmatic purpose. René Magritte's works provide a good example of juxtaposed images, often through the use of framing devices. His work, *Time Transfixed* (fig. 4) utilizes juxtaposition where the mind is caught off guard with the unexpected placement of a locomotive pushing through the frame of a fireplace. This juxtaposition of expectations forces viewers to question the work's meaning. Moreover, Salvador Dalí, one of the most famous Surrealists, has stated, "Surrealism is destructive, but it destroys only what is considered to be shackles limiting our vision" (qtd. in Sandoval). This willingness to break through norms—often created culturally—is utilized

in my works to acknowledge the myriad of possibilities of the opposing norms that allow for assessment of the qualities that meld within the third space.

Despite the intimate relationship between paintings from *Searching for the Middle Path* and the aesthetics of Surrealism, the philosophical and visual foundations correspond more with *Magic Realism*. Although the visual imageries of Magic Realism and Surrealism have similarities, the context in which the images are created differs among them. The term Magic Realism was coined by German art critic Franz Roh (1890-1965) during the 1920s, where he introduced the term in reference to a new form of post-expressionist paintings. It was used to define paintings that differed from its predecessors, the Expressionists, in a way that emphasized attention to detail, a smooth painting surface, and representation of the mystical non-material aspect of reality.

Surrealism had been influenced by exploration of the human mind by Freud and Jung, dealing with the influence of the subconscious and unconscious mind on actions, thoughts and dreams. Magic Realism, as Roh preferred, would take the psychoanalytical influences similar to Surrealism and combine them with the effort to represent objects with a sense of wonder, through the depiction of the material world (Bowers 12). Roh had listed twenty-two characteristics, which he considered essential to Magic Realist art in his 1925 book on Post-Expressionists. However, in 1969, a different art critic, Wieland Schmied, summarized Roh's definition of Magic Realism in a descriptive list, which includes qualities like sobriety and sharp focus, unsentimental and unemotional vision, vision directed toward everyday subjects, static, tightly unified structure, eradication of the traces of the painting process, and new spiritual relationship with the world of things (Bowers 116).

While there are differences, Magic Realism is often confused with Surrealism. Bowers states, "Surrealism is most distinct from Magical Realism since the aspects that it explores are associated not with material reality but with the imagination and the mind, and in particular it attempts to express the 'inner life' and psychology of humans through art." She continues to discuss the rarity of the use of dream or a psychological experience in Magic Realism to present its ideas, since doing so will distance the viewer from the recognizable material reality. She concludes by stating, "the ordinariness of Magic Realism's magic relies on its accepted and unquestioned position in tangible and material reality" (24). This connection with the material world made Magic Realism popular for artists like George Groz, George Tooker, and Frida Kahlo, to discuss various social issues including post-colonial identities, McCarthyism, etc. *The Subway* (fig. 5) shows the sense of *magic* that still refers to and exists in the material world, unlike some of the Surrealist works. Much like these Magic Realists, paintings from *Searching for the Middle Path* incorporate indigenous cultures and a contemporary mindset—in both acceptance and rejection—through multifaceted compositions, building the images that fuse the related Surrealism and Magic Realism based on the analysis of three different cultures.

Through investigation of other theoreticians and philosophers, like Guy Debord with *Society of the Spectacle* noting the dominance of consumerism and its effects on consumers, and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* dealing with lack of reality and references without referents, it is apparent that the post-industrial environment changed societies, impacting its inhabitants. As globalization continues to promote the lifestyles associated with the so-called "developed" nations, more of the younger generations are not exposed to opposing lifestyles that contrast the post-industrial digital

era, where they are bombarded with visual information daily, whether it be advertisement, television show, posters, or social networking sites such as Facebook. What is important for the current and up-and-coming generation is to go beyond the relative ethical and intellectual boundaries of their time and environment to acknowledge the opposing ideals and lifestyles in order to deconstruct the beliefs of current issues, which will allow for a comparative analysis that leads to a better solution comprised of balanced ideal of different oppositions.

The search for an ideal balance between oppositions, especially between traditional and contemporary lifestyles, cannot be achieved without careful critical analysis of the differences amongst them. Through examination of environmental and historical influences on human behaviors of Japan, Samoa, and the United States, this body of work raises questions regarding ideal balances between cultures, and the creation of hybridity through selective incorporation of often-contradictory values. Utilizing the aesthetic features of Magic Realism, which provide a sense of wonder through juxtaposition of normal objects, though sometimes esoteric, these paintings represent abstract questions of harmonious cohabitation of ideals in today's globalizing world. With the addition of an extended panel that enhances the trompe-l'oeil effect, these paintings serve as pathways to break the façade between the abstract ideas and the material world. The motivation to understand the contributing factors of the third space is the driving force for these paintings; they serve as visual representations of an intellectual struggle to find the balance between indulgence and asceticism, in order to resolve the overpowering conflicts of different cultural identities and ideals. These works represent a continuing investigation of the search for the middle path.

Appendix

Figure 1.
Tatsuki Hakoyama.
Envisioning the Dragon. 2013.
Oil on panel. 67 x 55 in.

Figure 2.
Tatsuki Hakoyama.
Searching for the Middle Path. 2013.
Oil on Panel. 88 x 80 in.

Figure 3.
Tatsuki Hakoyama.
Bushido. 2014.
Oil on panel. 60 x 36.5 in.

Figure 4.
René Magritte.
Time Transfixed. 1938.
Oil on canvas.
57 7/8 x 38 7/8 in.

Figure 5.
George Tooker.
The Subway. 1950.
Egg tempera on board.
18 1/8 x 36 1/8 in.

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