Junmo An

State University of New York at New Paltz
Masters of Fine Arts Thesis
Painting and Drawing
May 2014
Junmo An

Asiaticoside
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition

Opening Reception:
Friday, May 9, 2014
5–7pm

Exhibition Dates:
May 9–13, 2014
11–5pm

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
Alice and Horace Chandler & North Galleries
State University of New York at New Paltz
1 Hawk Drive (75 S.Manheim Boulevard for GPS)
New Paltz, NY 12561
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www.newpaltz.edu/museum
Statement

I create two sides of works. The drawings resemble a diary of mundane life, records of routine and floating, unstable emotions. Creating them resembles bleeding from wounds. They naturally ooze from the act, pushing me being restrained. To trap myself in a state of repression and frustration, I paint realistically. Making these elaborate, detailed works is like cutting myself, which makes me bleed. But I bleed drawings. In these monochromatic drawings on paper, I work with splashed stains that I create unconsciously, embracing the accidental. Figures emerge from smudginess; they have no clear semblance, much like a ghost. Some of them become the basis of future oil paintings. I am wandering around the things that intrigue me, the beginning of maturation, the remains of life—such as ashes and bones, the objects that link our lives with our deaths. I walk on, like a column of ants. I feel something draws me, but I do not know what and where it is. I just follow the crumbs of ideas; life, death, and love.
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Asiaticoside

Escape, I wanted to escape. Even though I own and control my body, it has not always moved according to my will, nor has it functioned in the way have I wanted it to. With art making I channeled my obsessive focus into a complex play of restraint and release. Thus through paint I explore issues of corporality, mortality, life and death.

When human beings commit suicide or parasuicide (a suicide attempt or gesture and self-destructive behavior that does not result in death), they desperately want to escape reality. Psychologically there are three main causes: to evade thinking negative thoughts caused by trauma; to get momentary relief from the stress of maintaining an image of the self; to pursue transcendence in the very act of shedding the self (Baumeister 21). This desire for escape leads to self-destructive behavior, deliberate self-harm and suicide. However, unlike people who commit suicide, self-destructive behavior is different. Self-injurers do not want to give up living, but hope to live a less miserable life. Their self-

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1 Asiaticoside derived from the plant *Centella asiatica* is known to possess good wound healing activity. Enhanced healing activity has been attributed to increased collagen formation and angiogenesis. Since antioxidants have been reported to play a significant role in the wound healing process we studied the effect of asiaticoside on the levels of certain antioxidants in the wound so as to explore the possible involvement of such a mechanism in the asiaticoside induced wound healing.
destructive acts are only ways to soothe their anxiety. To put it differently, the ultimate purpose of self-destructive behavior is \textit{escape} from feeling pain (Baumeister 44).

Over the past several years my work has been bound with issues of self-destructiveness. The title of my undergraduate thesis was \textit{Policresulin}, a topical haemostatic and antiseptic medicine that cures by chemically burning through ulcers while causing a great deal of pain and discomfort. The artwork I produced reenacted this concept by using two different processes, creating two drastically different styles of artwork, both of which symbolically replaced acts of self-harm.

\textbf{Paintings}

I paint photo-realistic still life based on photographs I take. Although these paintings share similarities with \textit{vanitas} still-life paintings\footnote{vanitas, ( Latin , "vanity") in art, a genre of still-life painting that flourished in the Netherlands in the early 17th century. A \textit{vanitas} painting contains collections of objects symbolic of the inevitability of death and the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures(Encyclopædia Britannica)}, with emphasis on the frailty of human life, the depicted objects are not employed towards the same ends. The hyperrealism I embrace, and the time-consuming and concentrated effort I make to create these works on canvas with oil paint, generates in me stress similar to the stress that caused me to cut myself. This kind of behavior is punishing, limiting and imprisoning. Painting and subject matter issues are not always my primary concern; my focus is the act of creating.
Drawings

The second art-making process I use to “wound” myself takes place on paper, where I am able to blend stress with pain, letting it ooze through me. I let ink bleed onto paper and I search the inky darkness for forms that remind me of faces, pools of blood, sagging frail flesh, and decay. For me the process of making these works on paper embodies release, freedom, pleasure.

I also base some of my compositions on drawings that do not necessarily have a common narrative but share common threads. When I draw I use two different methods to begin working. One begins with an image straight from my imagination, the other starts with staining paper. The latter is extemporaneous. The random stains or smudges on a sheet of paper come from diverse materials such as Sumi ink, India ink, acrylic, oil, water colors and synthetic paints. My brain automatically detects shapes in them like in the pattern of a Rorschach test,\(^3\) which I then draw. The marks work as clues and lead me to places where I have not visited, but nevertheless feel familiar. The results of the drawing processes are closely related to the way I perceive and experience the world. For the most part both approaches have to go through uncontrolled and controlled stages before they are fully embodied. The drawings commonly contain macabre figures that have served as metaphorical replacements for my emotional states and feelings.

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\(^3\) The test was first published in 1921 by Hermann Rorschach, a Swiss psychiatrist, as an instrument for the diagnosis of personality.(Munroe 2)
Sigmund Freud found the death instinct behind the phenomenon of masochism. According to Freud, “[H]itherto regarded as secondary to sadism...and suggested that there could be a primary masochism, a self-injuring tendency which would be an indication of the death instinct”. In Freud’s theory of the drives, there are two terms: Eros and Thanatos, the life drive and the death drive. Since the death drive is “tinged with eroticism,” pleasure may be felt in destruction, and desire aroused by death (Foster 13).

My works are unified by the color black. I am fascinated by black. As the color of night and darkness, it has always given me comfort and peace of mind. I am aware that black has negative associations for others, and I explore these contradictions in my imagery. The ancient Egyptians worshiped death and painted the figures and objects related to what they considered divine death, black. Unlike them, the Bible treats black as a negative symbol: Satan, sin and death, are all depicted as black. The Greeks and the Romans similarly conceived of death as being embodied by darkness (Pastoureau 30).

After my wife gave birth to my son, the perspectives that had driven my work for so long changed in small but significant ways: my method of healing myself moved from Policresul in to Asiaticoside. Unlike before where my concern was mainly about the dark side of human behaviors and the end of life, I now also have an interest in the beginning of human life, development patterns, and the life force. I now care about the aspects surrounding death, as well as birth, growth, consumption and the process of becoming a human being. Babies are vulnerable and not able to properly control their own bodies. The very young, like the very old, are completely reliant on others. They have limited strength,
eyesight, hearing and other senses. The course of human life resembles decalcomania (Rorschach tests), and as I see it, plays out an endless conflict between Eros and Thanatos.

I have begun to combine these two divided worlds in my current work. I now embrace the fact that for me the dichotomy between restriction and freedom is looser than before. In my thesis work I create images that mediate between my previous and current beliefs. To put it differently, I now reinterpret from my present point of view the concepts of corporality and mortality, *vanitas*, masochism, Eros and Thanatos, the uncanny, and the macabre.

I saw the life force, Eros, form teeth, specifically the lower central incisors comes from my observations of my son’s growth. The lower central incisors mostly grow in first which allows the baby to bite. Biting is the thing that enables a creature previously only able to imbibe liquids to be able to eat parts of other living things. My *Fresh Flesh* paintings are painted as portraits composed with the flesh of chicken breasts and cellophane. I use the shape of chicken breasts instead of human or other flesh because they most resemble shapes like tongues or internal organs covered by mucus. The ironic idea of fresh flesh, a fresh cut of meat taken from a body already dead, seemed like a good way to talk about Eros and Thanatos. In the works *Freshness*, the images of digital sculptures, the concept about life and death is more directly shown as a fresh dead body part in a coffin. It can be seen as an embryo which is a form of beginning life or a peace of flesh.

As I translate these ideas in various techniques, I actively try to eliminate the border between genres in my work. My realistic paintings when seen from a distance look
like photographs. Only when seen up close, do the qualities of paintings become perceptible. However one of the three photo-realistic paintings is actually a digital print (except for the background which I hand painted). In this way I play with the viewer’s perception. This fooling of the viewer’s eyes also occurs in the installation of drawings, where digitally printed photographs of drawings are intermingled with actual handmade drawings. The series titled *Freshness* are captured images of digital sculptures. Flattening boundaries between genres and media adds an extra layer of conceptual complexity to my work. I also feel that my diverse art productions are now more interconnected - that my ideas can now exist as a physical and tactile object, as digital data, or both at the same time.

In developing my thesis body of works, I have moved from obsessive-compulsive and self-destructive tendencies to a broader embrace of both Eros and Thanatos. What has remained consistent in this progression are use of the color black, which remains a unifying element in all my works, as well as humor as a means to relieve my anxiety and pain. I want to keep walking the path connected with my past because my work mirrors my life. I expect the evolution of my work to continue.
Bibliography


