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BARANGAY: MY COMMUNITY, MY FAMILY

by

MARAIAH WENN COLLIER

Under the Direction of Mark Burleson and Michael Murrell

ABSTRACT

Our lives (hopes, ideologies, ambitions) are shaped by what we remember. Personal change stirs our memories and enforces our belief systems and our behaviors. Therefore, our memory can predict who will we become in the future. As an artist, I am constantly observing the world around me. However, with my own transition into adulthood, I became more aware of the changes occurring within myself. In preparation for my own family, I am overwhelmed with wonderful memories of the two communities that support me: my mother's Filipino family and my Southern one.

Even though the two communities are on two different coasts, both carry a strong sense of community that encompasses much more than blood relatives. As these memories surfaced, I found that the strongest similarities between the two lie within the individuals and how my memory selectively produced an image of each person in a unique way.

INDEX WORDS: Ceramics, Community, Memory, Filipino, Southern, Georgia State University

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MARAIAH WENN COLLIER

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MARAIAH WENN COLLIER

Major Professor: Mark Burleson
Committee: Michael Murrell
Junco Sato Pollack

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Dedicated to the memory of Bob Owens and David McEwan. I am blessed to have shared a moment in the shadow of these two great men. Many thanks to my family and friends for their unending inspiration, support, and love. Ito ay ala-ala ko para sa inyo.

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INTRODUCTION

Our lives are shaped by what we remember. Personal change stirs our memories and enforces our belief systems and our behaviors. Therefore, our memory can predict who we will become in the future. As an artist, I am constantly observing the world around me. However, with my own transition into adulthood, I became more aware of the changes occurring within myself, especially after marriage. My husband and I began to discuss children and family, which evoked memories of my own childhood and the rich communities that I grew up in. These memories are helping me define who I am as a person and the life that I want to live as an artist and as a Filipino woman.

My new period of life is known as the Saturn Return or the "Age 30 Transition" (Levinson). According to the ancient traditions of Astrology (the study of the stars that parented the more scientifically based Astronomy and Chemistry), the ages of 28 to 30 represent a life-transition period called the Saturn Return. During this three to five year period, a person experiences life changes that moves them out of youth and into maturity (Reynolds). In Psychological terms, Daniel J. Levinson defines this time as the "Age 30 Transition" when an individual further develops personal identity. This transition allows an individual to "…explore new possibilities out of which the next structure can be formed. It is a time of moderate to severe developmental difficulty for most women and men." It is also during this time that a new life structure can be formed that includes changes in personality or relationships as one enters into the thirties (Levinson 26-27).

I knew that my return to school was just part of that personal change but one that became crucial in fusing my different interests in ceramics and other media styles. In a discussion with Seattle-based ceramicist, Akio Takamori, he had me reassessing why I was now working figuratively:

> Lately, I have become acutely aware of the march of time and its effects on my life, as both a man and an artist. As I experience inevitable natural changes to my physicality, I am also aware of subtle shifts in interpersonal dynamics. The people who once tended and influenced me have moved forward in life's progression. I, in turn, have taken their former place…since memory acts as a place where the sense of time expands and contracts, this work catapults me into larger discussion about group identity (Takamori).

Considering this statement, I began to assess my role and place in the two communities that support me: my mother's Filipino family and my Southern one. Even though the two communities are on two different coasts, both carry a strong sense of community that encompasses much more than blood relatives. As memories of these two families surfaced, I found that the strongest similarities between the two lie within the individuals and how my memory selectively produced an image of each person in a unique way.

This realization led to the focus of my thesis topic: *barangay*. Barangay is a Tagalog[1] word for town or district, yet refers to an enlarged sense of "family" including neighbors, close and distant relatives, and friends. For the first time, I feel a psychological bond with the pieces I make because they are based on the memories of those close to me. Through my work, I hope to emphasize the similarities between the two cultures I come from but also the similarities between

[1] Tagalog is a dialect of the Philippines.

the viewer and myself. In this memory-based dialogue, I hope to help develop a sense of global community where we seek out our similarities instead of our differences.

FINDING MY VOICE

Graduate school coincided with a period of personal change for me. The collision, at times, challenged me emotionally and spiritually, but, most of all, artistically. School had me working odd hours and long days, which isolated me from friends and family. I began to sculpt the human form almost instinctively in order to find solace. As I began to allow myself to work more intuitively, my figures began to change, ultimately resulting in candid portraits of my family and friends. Initially, I was uncomfortable with the sudden shift in my work. As I researched more about how the human form is depicted in clay, I discovered the depth of importance that my marriage and my community hold in me. This discovery has allowed aspects of my life and my art to grow together. I am finally finding my own voice.

Historically, the earliest ceramic or stone figures evoked ideas of survival, fertility and procreation. Today, the figure in art possesses so many other functions from politics, sex, to personal expression (Blandino 9-23). According to Betty Blandino in *The Figure in Fired Clay*, "Even in the past when tied to a functional purpose, the human head and figure have borne sentiments of dignity, of humor, of pathos, of joie de vivre, of satire, of sexual celebrations, of horror and tragedy" (103). Having worked as an illustrator in the past, my drawings and cartoons were always stimulated by characters within my community as well as other intimate communities that I visited in my travels. My work in ceramics quickly evolved from figures

sculpted from live models to portraits of my loved ones. However, the portraits I created were candid and were noted as being reminiscent of West Coast Funk ceramics from the 1960s[2]. Growing up in Georgia, I saw a connection between Funk and the folk art ceramics of the South, but I was curious about this accidental occurrence.

I had little knowledge of the West Coast Funk artists before I attended graduate school. I began corresponding with Clayton Bailey, a Funk artist in northern California, who, more or less, redirected my concern by telling me that folk, Funk, and outsider art is just "…personal expression in your natural voice" (Bailey). There was something liberating from this statement as well as one I received from another ceramic figure artist, Patti Warashina:

> The human form has…given me a reference point to my own existence, as a marker of time and civilization in which I live…I often use the figure in voyeuristic situations in which irony, humor, and absurdities portray erratic behavior, as a way of finding relief from society's pressure and frustrations on mankind (Warashina).

Since my studio lacked photographs or windows, and I had little access to my husband and family in person, I began to work from memory. The more I worked from memory, the more people I began to remember who were a strong part of my community and upbringing. Akio Takamori worked from memory on a series of figures depicting scenes of his childhood in Japan during World War II. He noted that "…memories are not static or fixed, but subject to perspective, both personal and historical. They may appear to be etched into stone only to be easily erased or reframed by the passing of time" (Takamori). In order to capture that fleeting

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[2] The term "Funk" was first coined by Peter Selz, professor emeritus of modern art at University of California, Berkeley and founding director of the Berkeley Art Museum, University of California (Lauria 190).

moment of selective memory, I worked quickly, only sculpting what I could see clearly in my mind.

Models allow you more information but the product becomes more about realism or duplication. When I abandoned using drawings or models, my portraits ended up distorted. However, the feeling was enhanced in a way that did not exist before because the portraits became very emotional and personal. An example of this transition is with the piece entitled "Cousin Elaine" (Figure 1). My grandmother lived in an apartment behind Elaine's house. She is the only only-child on my mother's side of the family, and she was very spoiled. I could only play with her toys when she was not at home. When she was home, she would cry and have a tantrum if I attempted to play with her broken or disfigured Barbie dolls. The piece is truly emotional because I cannot remember the details of her face, but I remember the longing of wanting to play with her extensive Barbie collection (that I coveted) including the pink Barbie corvette, which I depict her clutching tightly.

Figure 1. "Cousin Elaine"

One of my favorite writers, Thomas Moore, wrote:

> The key to seeing the world's soul, and in the process wakening one's own, is to get over the confusion by which we think that fact is real and imagination an illusion. It is the other way around. Fact is an illusion, because every fact is part of a story and is riddled with imagination. Imagination is real because every perception of the world around us is absolutely colored by the narrative or image-filled lens through which we perceive (Moore 100).

By embracing the memories of my family and community, I found a source of comfort and inspiration during the personal changes that I experienced while attending graduate school. The sculptural figures I created evolved rapidly as I allowed selective memory to dictate the overall imagery. The physical images may be skewed, but the emotion is real, therefore, creating a narrative about human emotion and memory. My acceptance of my roles as wife, daughter, sister, friend, artist have allowed me to see that these are not many roles but parts of one entity within a larger community. With this realization, I began to see the separate facets of my art making in a similar way and allowed them to have unity as well. Having found my identity within my community, I found my voice that I had looked for within my ceramic work and my artwork as a whole.

THE EXHIBIT

Without referencing photographs, as well as working in isolation, I allowed selective memory to dictate the portraits of thirty individuals that are part of my community and family. In this way, specific memories have been highlighted, and sometimes skewed, in a very emotional and personal way. In order to create a psychological bond with the viewer, I knew I needed to create small, intimate figures that would draw the viewer in to investigate. This is a method that one of my favorite artists, Ron Mueck utilizes in his work. Mueck also works intuitively, "far from a servile copyist of nature, [he] reveals the need of making selective adjustments to maximize the physical and emotional aura of his figures" (Tanguy 30). Some of his most powerful work involves making the figures smaller than life-size, which, in many ways, concentrates and intensifies their presence. In addition to working on a small scale, I chose to show the body of work at Piedmont College, a small community school located near my Southern family.

I created twenty small busts depicting community members from the waist up. These figures are approximately six inches tall. I hand built and carved each figure from a commercially produced, white earthernware clay body. For the surface, I used commercial underglazes in bright colors that I layered in washes and fired multiple times. Over the underglazes, I applied a wash of black mason stain and gerstley borate, which I mostly wiped away so that it would accentuate surface texture. The pieces were fired a final time to set any remaining wash.

The twenty small figures fell, approximately, into two categories: my mother's Filipino family and family I "acquired" since I moved to the South. I also created ten larger busts, approximately sixteen inches in height. Originally, the larger figures were only going to depict deceased grandparents and great grandparents who serve as spiritual guardians. This group expanded when I added larger portraits of my immediate family, my husband, and a self-portrait that I also created from memory. The "elders" I selected to depict were all blood-relatives who I felt spiritually connected with.

All thirty figures were arranged in a circular fashion within the art gallery of Piedmont College. Viewers could move in either direction because I grouped the portraits in an associative manner. The larger busts served as visual breaks but also introduced a group that held some similarity or connection. From the left, my parents, including my self-portrait and my husband's bust, sat upon freestanding pedestals. On the left wall adjacent to the larger busts, three small busts sat on small, wall-mounted boxes that served as shelves. These three figures (*Uncle Curtis, MamaBean, PapaDon*) represented family adopted by my husband and myself. The next three figures (also small, wall-mounted figures) were "mother" figures: My mother-in-law, my mother, and my aunt, Lettie (who raised me as her own). In my mother's culture, siblings raise each other's children as their own. Since my Aunt Lettie and my mother are very close in age, I was considered her honorary third child and spent much of my childhood in her home along side her own children (Figure 2).

Figure 2. “Auntie Lettie”

The “mother” series are adjacent to two large figures of my maternal grandmother and grandfather, followed by five small maternal uncles. The last three figures mounted on this back wall are related to the last of the five small uncles. The first is the aforementioned *Cousin Elaine,* followed by *Lola Loring*, and the *Dragon Lady*.

The *Dragon Lady* is an anomaly in the installation (Figure 3). She popped up in my memory when I began working on figures associated with my Uncle Pete’s house. The Dragon Lady was a woman who frequented my uncle’s house to play cards, but I was fearful as a child that she was a blood relative because she scared me. The Dragon Lady was an Ilokano rice paddy worker, but what made her so frightening to me was that she smoked cigarettes backwards. I can remember seeing the glow of the lit cigarette resonating from inside her mouth. The fear made me remember so much about how she looked even though I only encountered her once or twice in my childhood: Chinese style shirts in bright colors, her greasy hair pulled tightly into a bun, a fat wad of cash tucked into the left cup of her bra. I referred to her as the Dragon Lady because I thought she was breathing fire.

Figure 3. “Dragon Lady”

At the end of the right wall, a large bust of my little sister sat on a pedestal. Her comical, frowning expression allowed for the piece to stand alone and not in a grouping of other large busts. The following five wall-mounted figures represent adopted siblings, who are all close, personal friends. The last figure, and sixth in the group, was a small figure of my great aunt, Grace, entitled *Wild Aunt Grace* (Figure 4). She is another anomaly in that she does not bear the formal title of “Grandmother.” In the Philippine culture, titles are based on age or respect, not by blood relation or lack thereof. Because of her age, Grace should have the title “lola” or grandmother, but she did not have children of her own, and, is therefore, referred to as “Aunt.” She is one of only a few blood relatives that I know from the South.

Figure 4. “Wild Aunt Grace”

The following three large busts are my paternal great-grandmothers and my paternal grandfather. My great Grandmother, Alice, I remembered in the most detail of the three because I sat with her for hours as a child and listened to her stories. As for both of my grandfathers, I remembered their clothing, glasses, and hats more than I did personal features. As for Lola (Filipina grandmother) and my great grandmother, Ethel, I remembered their hair and the type of dresses they wore.

Each portrait had a short narrative that was placed to the right of the figure. In bold type was written the title in English. Next to the title in italicized type was the title of the individual in Tagalog, a dialect of the Philippines. Single Tagalog words can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on their context or the subtlety of phonetic change. Slight changes in spelling helped the viewer distinguish the level of honor a person held within the family even if the individual was not obviously Filipino. I knew that the individual stories were an essential component to the show and to the individual pieces. The figures alone could draw the viewer in,

but the narratives allowed the viewer to associate themselves to the figure and my personal experience.

CONCLUSION

In the selection of the title, Barangay, for my thesis exhibit, my mother's Filipina "sisters" discussed an appropriate word for the show. There is a "…magical value attached to texts [in Philippine culture], and Filipino visual artists are no exception in holding this belief" (Labrador 49-51). Instinctively, I knew that I could not select the title on my own and needed the support of my elders within my mother's community, a task that they undertook with zest. Such a simple gesture is just one example of how my community, my family, supports the efforts of one individual to enrich the whole community. Each figure, or part, of my thesis exhibit had its own short story, or text, with a similar, magical purpose: Creating an associative memory.

According to Ashish Ranpura, a scientist and science journalist,

> Our memories are rich because they are formed through associations. When we experience an event, our brains tie the sights, smells, sounds, and our own impressions together into a relationship. That relationship itself is the memory of the event…a human memory (Ranpura).

Having returned to my Southern community, I have noticed how it is becoming more diverse as new people and cultures move in. As an artist and a member of this community, I feel that I can help create an environment of sharing and humanity verses one of differences and separation. Underneath our physical diversity, there are many structural and cultural similarities, one of which I have discovered is how we remember individuals in our families: Images that are skewed and highlighted by our selective memories. Evoking a childlike innocence, these stories allow us to laugh, to cry, and to share these stories with each other, thus binding us together.

My exhibit, Barangay, depicted how I perceived the unique individuals from my Filipino community and my Southern community. This environment stimulated the viewers to not only share my own personal experience but to share theirs as well. In many ways, the positive aspects of community were nourished and enforced, part of the role that artists have within the Filipino community. Symbols, traditions, and stories mold us to preserve and continue families, clans, or communities (Kantor 285). In my mother's culture, the preservation and binding of individuals within the community is known as *asal.*

> Asal…refers to sets of dominant and commonly shared values and norms, which Filipinos use as points of reference…in regulating interpersonal and intergroup relations…These standards and norms are internalized in the process of growing up. As such they are intrinsic in Filipino personalities (Jocano 52).

As a Filipina, instilled with the belief that community comes before the individual. The individual's responsibility lies in personal improvement of self in order to give back and bring honor to the community. In many ways, my Southern community also has these same ideals. According to Lucy Lippard, "Demographics alone demand that a society change as its cultural makeup changes. But the contemporary art world, a somewhat rebellious satellite of the dominant culture [white, middle-class], is better equipped to swallow cross cultural influences than to savor them" (5). However, the dominant culture of the United States is no longer the white, middle-class. The United States is rapidly becoming more culturally diverse, with the middle-class being equally represented by all cultures. Unfortunately, just as Lippard notes, the art world still lags behind this societal change.

As an artist who comes from a mixed cultural background, it is my challenge to provide symbols to help educate and bind my changing community. I also know that it is my role to challenge the contemporary art world to celebrate and uphold the diversity within our changing landscape. I have started this challenge, and I am starting at the front steps of my own community, my own family: My *Barangay*.

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