Parts

Helenayu Biying Su

University of Colorado Boulder, Helenayu.Su@Colorado.EDU

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Parts
Relationship between Identity, Persona, Veracity, Fashion, Surrealism through Self-portrait

Helenayu Biying Su
Art and Art History
University of Colorado Boulder

Honor Thesis
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Honors Committee
Albert Chong, Photography, IMAP
Françoise Duressé-Stimilli, Drawing and Painting
Frances Charteris, Writing and Rhetoric
Abstract

I construct digital images to represent my identity as an American-Chinese artist. My work interprets the practice of fashion and present day environmental concerns in China. My current project, *My Identity* (2014), is a discourse on everyday outfits with the focus on what the individuals wear and how they can change the observing viewer’s perception. I use clothing and makeup to blur the lines between various invented personas and myself.

*My Identity* (2014), deals with identity by manipulating and combining various unique personas. This project communicates to viewers that unique personas do not change one’s true identity, but demonstrates how appearances can change while personality remains the same. The artist who influenced my work’s direction is Nikki S. Lee, whose *Project* series (1997-2001) also deals with identity in a similar way. Lee transforms her appearance to gain access to specific American sub-cultures without changing her ethnicity. I also transform myself with different personas but base my transformation on my own perception of beauty.

My research project for the honors thesis, *Parts* (2015), is inspired by Annie Leibovitz’s *Disney* series (2007-2014). Leibovitz’s *Disney* series creates fantasy style photographs using a mix of photographs and a digital painting background. In this body of work, I will investigate the idea of how each image becomes its own separate story and how each story is a part of me. Each image is a fragment of my fairytale persona. The new developments in my concept will elevate my art practice to another level. While my previous work
dealt with unchanging identity in the midst of an ever-changing persona, my honors thesis uses photo manipulation to create an interaction between my different ‘selves.’ The backgrounds in each composition consist of painterly digital fantasy and surreal imagery. The fantasy style imagery in the background of my photos will also document my personal story. The dimensions in Parts 2015 are 27 ½ inches x 39 ¼ inches; they will create an optical effect for the viewer as they become closer to the images. My new series of work includes two large photographs. There will be over ten to twenty of my personas in each work.
Introduction

I deeply treasure this collection of art that I created. It shows the different stages of my development whilst growing up in China and America. As a child in China, my first experience with art was in kindergarten. I loved to draw and read Japanese manga books and watch cartoons such as *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*, (1992) by Naoko Takeuchi (Fig1.1).

1.1 Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon 1992, Naoko Takeuchi, Manga series cover

1.2 Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon 1992, Naoko Takeuchi, Video
This cartoon portrays Japanese schoolgirls who have big eyes, light-colored hair and the power to transform themselves (Fig 1.2-1.3) into pretty guardian sailors to save the world. When I was drawing my self-portraits, I changed myself into a pretty guardian sailor. It was a way for me to transform myself into different personas through my imagination. At that time of my life, art was simple, fun and beautiful, and primarily decorative. I didn’t realize that my drawings had any deeper significant meanings until I studied art in America.

Like most Asian parents, my parents forced me to go to school to learn literature, mathematics, and science instead of art. I still sketched manga characters when I had time. However, art was not my main focus until I started to admire Japanese pop singer, Ayumi Hamasaki, who appeared during that time. She is unique in her appearances on her CD album artwork. On her CD
covers, she styles herself according to the prevailing fashion. Her influence made me think of art in a new way. I started incorporating fantasy into my new style of art. After I moved to America, I had more opportunities to study and develop my art practice. There were more art classes offered and material for me to use as a drawing and painting student. My painting *Rainbow*, (2009) (Fig 2.1) was influenced by Hamasaki’s album *Rainbow*, (2002) (Fig 2.2). Since her album was named *Rainbow*, I was wondering why on her album cover she depicted herself covered in ice instead of a colorful rainbow. In my painting, I substituted her with a mannequin, and instead of ice, I put colorful fabric surrounding the mannequin to comment on her album. My second painting *Quiet Night*, (2010) (Fig 2.4) was also influenced by Hamasaki’s album *Ayu-Mi-x*, (2002) (Fig 2.3). On the cover for her music album, she was playing with the concept of a traditional Japanese style combined with contemporary redesigned kimono and on which she also placed the cherry blossom (symbol of Japan) as a background, then a seal (signature) of her name in both hiragana and kanji. This time, I also played with the concept of the Chinese tradition instead of the Japanese. In my painting, I used many symbols such as the red Chinese costume and temple in the painting. Occasionally, I put the Chinese poem *Quiet Night* by Li Bai in the form of stars that appear in the sky. I got the idea from traditional Chinese paintings in which poetry always appears.
During my time as an art student at the University of Colorado at Boulder, I shifted my emphasis from painting to photography. As a photographer, I come to realize that I am able to create fantastical images. A
photograph can be a powerful instrument to make the viewer believe in the veracity of the image. Cherise Smith mentions, “The camera is a mechanical apparatus that records what is put in front of it and photography is a chemical process, they were deemed to fabricate products that were truthful, realistic, and objective” (213). For that reason, I have started to make realistic images out of manipulated photographs and thus have started to transform fantasy into reality. For example, in my series, *Mirror* (2012) (Fig 3.2), which was influenced by Ayumi Hamasaki’s *A Ballads* (2002) (Fig 3.1), I portrayed the image of twins by using the same concept of an image reflected in the mirror. The significance of this series is that for those who saw images of mirror portraits, they might assume my twin models are only a single person being reflected in a mirror. This creates an ambiguity and provides interaction for the viewers.
In *Polluted World* (2014) (Fig 4.3) from my other series (influenced by Albert Chong’s style of work in photography (Fig 4.2) and the pollution in Beijing) (Fig 4.1), I placed myself into the dreadfully polluted Chinese environment by using black and white photography, thereby making the viewer aware of the serious environmental issues that are impacting our planet.

4.1
*Untitled, 2014 (Beijing)*
Comparison between polluted and clear day
Guan Yu
Photograph from Website

4.2
*Self-Portrait with Baboon Skull* 1995
Albert Chong
Gelatin silver print with sepia toning and copper mat

4.3
*Polluted World* 2014
Helenayu B. Su
Archival Inkjet Print
While I was researching artists, I found Nikki S. Lee. I like the way she transforms herself into different people. There is similarity between her concepts and mine, which relates to my idea of transformation. Later I decided to pay more attention to her work and developed the idea to create my personal persona in photography.

With this creation, I am not only showing my various personas in photographs, I also attempt to create a perception of the inherent power of clothes and style, a power that the individual has not really acknowledged in daily life.

Clothes and style also create a first impression in an individual’s mind. When they first meet a person, they recognize their hairstyle and clothes rather than the details of their face. This could also create an interaction between the viewer and me in my new series of work. By looking at multiple me’s from a distance, those outfits create the illusion that they are seeing different people. However, as the viewer starts to look closer, they will begin to recognize that all these people in different outfits represent the same person, me.
Nikki S. Lee extended her individual identity by immersing herself in various ethnic and social groups. Her work does not focus on creating beautiful
pictures. Rather it is more about documenting and investigating different identities through vernacular photography. She achieves this by capturing images of herself posed among everyday people from different ethnic groups. By imbedding herself in each culture, she styles herself in a way that reflects the culture that she is depicting. It seems that Lee’s purpose is to break down stereotypes and class barriers. Her accepted presence in these groups suggests that supposedly fixed boundaries are in fact permeable and fluid: if you change your clothes and style, you can become a part of any group. In my work, I also suggest that if I change my clothes and style, I too can be absorbed into different cultural situations and appear to belong. I respond to the external pressures on my identity and conform by transforming myself outwardly in order to assimilate. I am more interested in the fluid nature of identity based on outward appearances. *In Projects*, (1997–2001) (FIG.5.2-5.4), by documenting various cultural personas through her photography and film, she is depicting how various cultural groups impact individual personas. “We all have many different personas and I want people to think about the range that they occupy. There is a persona you present to teachers or to your parents or to a new boyfriend. Each is affected by the context and each shows a gap between inside and outside. Each is a personal performance” (Goldberg 1). According to cultural expectations, Lee defines how these external cultural pressures have impacted the appearance of individuals. External pressure is present in different forms through culture, society and politics. These pressures force people to assimilate themselves in order to fit into the majority. The dominant group dictates people’s behavior and the way in which they present themselves. To avoid discrimination, the individual must conform to the dominant group’s
expectations, “Individuals must possess the desire to be part of a larger whole society.” (Smith 435)

Lee also claimed that “Both Nikkis are not me, and both Nikkis are also part of me, so it is all mixed up…” (Goldberg 1). There is no barrier between identities. It is very fluid and ambiguous: one can transform based on the situation. Depending on different situations, identity becomes very flexible. Lee believes that people’s identities are changed by relationships. These many different “Nikkis” are influenced by her interactions with others. In order to fit into the majority, she must surrender to the pressures of the dominant group. That means she has to conceal her true identity to become the pretend Nikkis.

In my work *My Identity* (2014) (Fig 5.1), I transform myself into different personas. They appear to be different from me, but they also represent aspects of who I am. They seem to be not a part of me, because my appearance changed and it’s as if I adopted myself. However, all of my characteristics and my identity remains the same, unaltered; they have not been changed by the outfits that I wear. My work was created with this concept in mind, and the way that I portray the persona could influence the different me.
Cui Xiuwen

*One day* (2004) (Fig.6.2 and Fig 8.1) was the most significant of Cui Xiuwen’s Work. She duplicates many images of the same iconic girl and then creates a group picture (Fig 6.2). My past work created a group picture that included the combination of all my personas, which seems similar to what Cui Xiuwen has done. Without showing the facial expression, I focus more on the use of clothing. Each outfit is based on different experiences that I have been through, and therefore each outfit tells a story about me. In my previous work, *My Identity* (2014), the concept behind this project was to pay more attention and to notice that the individual is the same person as the others. If I am not paying attention, I will think those are different people. In my new work I was combining both ideas of the group picture of Cui and the dolls stages from Hinamatsuri Girl’s Festival in Japan, then manipulating one from my different personas. Cui’s idea in my project showed the various *me’s* from my identity and the Hinamatsuri Girl’s Festival doll stages (Fig 7.1) represent the stages of my life.
“Every minute, every second, people are in different spaces doing the same thing, or different things. Some of the things they do excite my interest, because within a certain relative period of time they can alter the function of the space” (Grosenick 73).

-Cui Xiuwen
Even though this quote is not entirely representative of my work, there is some degree of similarity between our beliefs. Every phase of my life was marked by personas that were influenced by my surrounding environments. I was responding to the space by dressing up to fit into the environment.

Most of Cui’s work was inspired by her childhood memory. In One day (2004) (Fig 8.1), she was using a teenage actress with a similar face and wearing a young pioneer’s red scarf and a white dress. The girl looks innocent, pure and ambitious. “This girl either have multiplied and transformed into maze like virtual landscape or dwarfed by towering red walls of Forbidden City. She is helplessly alone confused and scared” (Grosenick 78). It creates the interaction between the girl and the background. Cui’s work reflects personal stories through her life. The “confused, scared and helpless” (Grosenick 78) facial expressions show Cui’s life was not going well. Without showing the facial expression as Cui does, I am exploring hairstyle and outfits that could reflect the individual’s identity and personal stories.
Kelli Connell

This morning
Double Life, 2008-2010
Kelli Connell

Kelli Connell explores the female identity through *Double Life* (2002-2015). (Fig 9.1, 9.4). “First impressions while glancing at a picture in Double Life lead you to believe that you are looking at two people. On closer inspection, however, you see that it is one. One that has been doubled” (Bright 4). It solidifies the idea that I have been trying to express through my persona project. On first impression of *My identity* (2014) (Fig 9.2-9.4) one will believe that the personas are similar, based both on the outfit and hair style. However, when the individual looks closer, they will recognize both characters are the same. I was trying to use photography to create an illusion to trick the majority through my personas.
As Bright mentioned “Twining, doubling, reflection, and coupling are photogenic. (Bright 7).” For those mirroring objects, they seem to be atypical in life. They will be very easy to create “an instant hook for attention and curiosity (Bright 7)” from the viewers. Also “Biological or photographic
doubling renders identity ambiguous (Bright 8).” Multiple personas of one individual can trick people and create ambiguity through photography; you will either consider them as one or more. However, the idea that I am playing with is that even though two people look alike, their difference in clothing and hairstyle will make them seem not to be twins. “Composition and graphics aside, it can also resonate on a more philosophical or symbolic register to suggest the complexity of people and the different sides to their character” (Bright 5), “the work often trips the viewers making us question our roles in relationships and how we shift and change ourselves to fit around those we love” (Bright 7). The way that I am showing myself in multiple personas pushes Connell’s concept to the next level by making multiple personas and combining them together. The strangeness of this concept garners more curiosity from the viewers. Both Connell and my work also suggest the individuals can have several different characters. Due to the external pressure inferred in the work of Nikki S. Lee, the individual will create his or her own persona or identity based on the surrounding environment. For instance, the influential personas in My Identity (2014) represent my different life experiences.
Combination of Annie Leibovitz and Chiho Aoshima

There is similarity between Annie Leibovitz and Chiho Aoshima’s work. In *Disney* (2007-2014) (Fig 10.1-10.2), Leibovitz, made photographs of the Disney fairytale characters. She dressed them up and manipulated them into a fantasy world. Chiho Aoshima also creates fantasy scenes by making graphic style paintings. She also combines photography with digital painting in each image. Both of these photographers play important roles in the digital painting for my thesis project *Part 2*, (2015) (Fig 18.2).

Leibovitz’s *Disney* (2007-2014) dream series is comparable to my new body of work, *Part* (2015). I am using a method similar to Leibovitz’s by manipulating the fantastical background and placing my self-portraits in front of the background. The difference is that I am placing multiple self-portraits in the scene.
The settings that I choose were all related to me. For instance the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall (Fig 11.1) in my native city of Guangzhou represents my origin and the symbol of Guangzhou. The western castle (Fig 11.2) is represented in both the history of the U.S and Japanese *Lolita fashion style. They are both derived from the European style. In my Part 2 (Fig 18.2), I also combined the mountain ranges in Guilin, China (most traditional Chinese paintings use this location) and the flatiron in Boulder, U.S (Fig.11.3).
Chiho Aoshima generally includes women in her work. The spirit and style of her images is always cute but creepy. There are many images in her series that are digitally painted and illustrated. She focuses less on photography. Her works Gomi (2003) (Fig 12.1), Sadako (1999) (Fig 12.2), and Karin (2003) (Fig 12.3), have influenced me the most. The way that she combines the real photo with graphic style of painting is similar to what I am doing for my project. This process gave me ideas about how my work and my characters could be done through both digital painting and photography, instead of those cute, supernatural creatures shown in her images. I was using myself to play different roles in the same scene to represent each of my personas.
Technical Aspect: David B. Mattingly

By reading David B. Mattingly’s *Digital Matte Painting Handbook*, his tutorial taught me how I can achieve my goal for my thesis work (Fig 13.1). As a contemporary digital artist, it is always advantageous to be able to learn on my own. Mattingly claims, “Matte painting is all about storytelling. Every good movie tells the audience something relatable – something they already know, but in a way that is new and different” (25). The storytelling element in my thesis project is very important because these are the personal stories from my life. By placing the personas in the setting of the story, the whole scene will seem more complete and harmonious.
Conclusion

After engaging with different artists’ style according to the history of contemporary art, my work continues to explore the tension between persona and identity, which is similar to my pervious project, My Identity (2014). Photography is an art tool that helps me to gain a greater understanding of who I truly am and why those personas exist.

Lee’s persona concepts, and Hamasaki and Connell interaction selves ideas are important to my fundamental concept. I document my self-portraits through different personas as a group by combining both Cui’s group images and Japanese Hinamatsuri (girl festival) stages. Later use Mattingly as a guide to utilizing photo manipulation to realize my digital painting works. Stories of
my life show my multiple selves that have been affected by the situations that I have experience. My new work *Part 1* (2015) (Fig 18.1) shows that I am a duplicate of myself in different personas. For example the one that wears traditional Chinese outfit (Fig 14.2) showing my origin. I used to dress like a boy (Fig 15.2) in China, because of the unequal gender treatment (Fig 15.1).

14.1
Chinese Traditional Outfine in different dynasty

14.2
*Part 1* detail, 2015

15.1
Unequal treatment between boy and girl

15.2
*Part 1* detail, 2015
Helenayu B. Su
Archival Inkjet Print
However, when I moved to America my persona changed to resemble a style similar to Japanese anime through popular fashions such as Lolita* (Fig 16.1), Gyaru* (Fig 16.2), and Cosplay* (Fig 16.3), because I felt more freedom to express myself as those exaggerated personas.

Each persona represents phases of my life that changed as I moved from China to America. In one work from my Part 1(2015) (Fig.18.1) series, what I am doing is not only showing the variation that exists within an individual, but also revealing how styles transformed could also make people think differently. With the other work Part 2(2015) (Fig.18.2) in the same series, I was also duplicating myself with a different persona. However, I choose to create stories through digital matte painting and constructing a scene by myself. The cosplaying character Serah Farron (Fig 17.2) in both works is from a video game Final Fantasy 13 (Fig 17.1) that means she is an unreal character. By
using her to be the first person to enter my *fantasy Helenayu’s world* (Fig 17.3), I am creating the curiosity about why she is the one to look at others.

17.1
*Final Fantasy 13*
Video Game

17.2
*Part 2* detail, 2015
Helenayu B. Su
Archival Inkjet Print

17.3
*Part 2* detail, 2015
Helenayu B. Su
Archival Inkjet Print
In my new work *Part 2* (2015) (Fig 18.2), the everyday me is falling asleep (Fig 17.4) which also may create questions by the viewer. Because my idea of the casual everyday outfit is so different from others’ outfits ideas, my piece questions the viewers. By putting the everyday me to sleep, it shows the other persona come to play their own role in my life.

After I finished my Undergraduate degree at school, I will countinue to develop my persona idea through both life and carreer. Art comes from life, when I have gained a better understanding of myself, my works will improve at the same time. As a Chinese artist, I wanted to break out of those traditional Chinese rule which had rooted for many years in my Chinese psyche and ultimately in invent my new style to gain access to the contemporary art world.
Thesis Project

18.1
Part 1, 2015
Helenayu B. Su
Archival Inkjet Print
18.2
Part 2, 2015
Helenayu B. Su
Archival Inkjet Print
Notes:

Lolita: Japanese street fashion inspired primarily by the clothing and general aesthetics of the Rococo and Victorian periods.

Gyaru: a girly-glam style, breaking away from traditional standards of beauty. Dwelling on the man-made (wigs, fake eyelashes, fake nails, etc). Gyaru fashion does not fit with traditional, and media portrayed ideals of Japanese women. It is often identified as a sign of rebellious youth.

Cosplay: the practice of dressing up as a character from a movie, book, or video game, especially one from the Japanese genres of manga and anime.
Bibliography


