

integrateassimilate

*A material arts show exploring identity and cultural reconciliation
by children of immigrants*

An accompanying essay to the new gallery group exhibition by:
Monica Bodirsky, Margaret Lim and Annie Tung
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“What a culture can’t assimilate, it destroys.”

- Charles Durning in Brian dePalma’s ‘the Fury’, 1978.

“If you don’t know your roots and traditions, you won’t know who you are or where you’re going.”

- First Nations elder in conversation with Monica Bodirsky at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, elders’ conference, 1993.

As a child of immigrants growing up in a Toronto suburb, I was, along with countless others, not considered ‘Canadian’, and often told to leave the country and ‘go home’. I was born in Canada. How can I not be Canadian? What path do we ultimately choose to alleviate this often painful dual identity? Assimilation or integration? Our desire to be accepted leads us to follow our peers, often blindly. Many discard or are unaware of their own ‘roots’ in an attempt to become one with the majority. Often we are made to feel that our ancestral traditions are archaic, embarrassing and Nationalistic. Sometimes we join the majority happily, other times it is insisted upon. Forced or voluntary, assimilation resulted in many of us growing up with a sense of rootlessness, and a longing for people and places never experienced. Exploring this blood memory was the impetus for creating the new gallery exhibit, *integrateassimilate*. Unlike assimilation which implies abandonment of the language and customs of the country of origin for the language and customs of the dominant society, integration implies the ability to retain a separate identity within a diverse population. Integration

within a pluralistic society allows freedom of cultural expression without the stigma of being 'foreign' or disloyal to your host country.

Sarah E Simons, whose paper "Social Assimilation. IV" written in 1901 contains ideas which might now be considered intolerant, points out that foreign-born immigrants who occupy large cities and 'huddle' together are creating a barrier to their own absorption in to society (Simons 388).

This thinking has created a legacy of systemic racism that upholds the belief that when people emigrate, they must completely reject their previous traditions and are obliged to blend effortlessly into the language and customs of the host country. Contemporary sociologist Min Zhou feels that, native languages, cultures, and ethnic social enclaves are perceived by traditional assimilationists as "disadvantageous to assimilation" (977).

Zhou also states that the foundation of these beliefs resides in the idea that immigrants may not fully *succeed* socially unless they forget their past, at least, "immigrants must free themselves from their old cultures in order to begin rising up from marginal positions" (977).

This belief puts the children of immigrants in a very precarious position. The implication of assimilation is that 'foreign' ways are inferior and even, barbaric. Children of immigrants are often torn between rejecting or ignoring the languages and customs of their parents and ancestors, in effect rejecting part of their own identity, or adhering to their parent's traditional ways and rejecting their host country and becoming marginalized

In his paper "The Ethnic Ethics of Assimilation: A Slovenian View," Giles Gobetz writes about Slovenian intellectuals who joined forces to create an 'ethical' solution to the dilemma of assimilation. The Slovenes refer to assimilation as 'denationalization' and 'foreignization,' something that had been imposed on them for thousands of years in Europe by the majority of invaders who forced their ways stubbornly on them. This is true of many people who emigrate. After struggling to retain an individual identity for so long, is it amoral to give up this identity because of immigration? The answer, it seems is a compromise of "...retention and acceptance, thus alleviating the extremes of denationalization and nationalization" (Gobetz 270).

As emerging artists, we noticed recurring themes in our works which included: loss, ancestral memories and identity. As a result, Margaret Lim, Annie Tung and I, explore how being children of immigrants affects our perception of Canadian identity. We explore our urge to resolve the duality of being Canadian and non-Canadian simultaneously. We believe that our collective desire to explore our roots is a result of blood memory, a type of genetic pre-disposition which pulls us back to our roots.

Margaret Lim creates exquisitely detailed metalwork which echoes the design elements frequently used in Asian culture. She understands the need to look into one's past to appreciate a current state of being, and adds images of family members such as her grandfather to create precious, miniature shrines which illustrate pride in her roots."

Jewelry and mixed-media artist Annie Tung's work is less apparent in its use of culturally recognizable imagery, but conceptually expresses the deep sense of mourning and loss often experienced by the children of immigrants who grow up "invisible." Tung states that "to others I look Asian but fail to identify with Asian culture". "I am recapturing a past, a memory unknown." Tung's work is poignant and disturbing. Her mixed-media piece "Mourning" in which she has drilled a knife and fork and inserted human hair, expresses loss eloquently and shows us the complex process of grieving.

"Where are you really from?" was a question I was asked frequently as a child. I had no answer to this other than a few place names I knew nothing about, yet was identified as being from. Although already working with the theme of houses and identity, a recent trip to the Czech Republic, inspired me to create a body of 5" x 7" dyed silk and digital imagery collages. These pieces contain many translucent silk organza images of family photos and recent photos I've taken which, when layered, form a single integrated image. These pieces represent balance and reconciliation of past/present, foreign/Canadian, and integration/assimilation.

As material artists, we are literally piecing together our own realities and identities, whether soldered, stitched or riveted, we are all taking divergent aspects of ourselves and creating a new convergent reality.

Bibliography

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