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ABSTRACT

The personal is political. Using humor and my individual narrative, I illustrate the main three factors that drive my work and relate them to corresponding theoretical frameworks: 1) My OCD tendencies and labor as art concept 2) Assimilation and the appeal of the White Cube 3) Reclamation of identity and Abject art. Through textual and visual research, I provide scholarly backing and precedents set by other artists to situate these personal narratives as part of a larger structural system of oppression, while being transparent of my culpability and participation in these structures. I posit that my work provides a nuanced viewpoint on identity and the experience inhabiting an othered body.
I. “WE CAN’T ALL BE NEUROTYPICAL, KAREN!”¹
A Frank Discussion of the Allure of Monotonous Processes

“A lot of people will think that social understanding or something like that is going to lead us to the truth, but it isn’t. It is understanding of yourself. And for that, to make a beginning on that, you have to look in your mind and see what you are thinking about. Because the truth is, you are unconscious of your own thoughts until you catch yourself.” – Agnes Martin

I’m sitting in my bathtub crying. In between the sobs, I’m talking to myself out loud: “Okay, why am I feeling out of control. So, my partner felt too tired to come over. He is tired. I can’t hold him to my own schedule. Why do I feel out of control. I’m graduating. I don’t know where I’m going. I don’t feel like my art is good enough. Why do I feel out of control. I’m good. I have control. I have control. I’m good. I’m good.” Then I get out of the bathtub.²

My mind is constantly running, a tangled nest of thoughts and ideas. In order to make sense of cyclical, fixated thoughts, I deliberately and regularly walk myself through Cognitive Behavior Therapy, the practice of correcting ones thought distortions and maladaptive behaviors.

I think. I feel. When the cycle becomes overwhelming, I act. I walk myself through what exactly I am thinking, parsing out the absurdities behind my thoughts. I explain to myself out loud why the illogical parts of my thinking are in fact illogical. “She didn’t smile at me because she didn’t see me not because I did something wrong and now she hates me.” I break down my negative feelings and find a practical approach to tackle those feelings in the moment. “Next time, I’ll smile and wave so she can actually see me, and I can prove she doesn’t hate me.” Then I do it again.

The cyclical process of sewing a stitch over and over again slows down my OCD tendencies. I focus on the immediate movements: the stiffening of my fingers, the piercing of the needle. Within these processes, my mind wanders, and I’m released from my reoccurring, fixated thoughts. I feel free.

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¹ Karen is the person who keeps a planner. She bakes cupcakes and gets to her appointments on time.
² This was an actual event that happened a week ago. My partner came after all and found me standing in the bathroom with a towel. I started crying again. We were both confused about what was happening.
Inherent in the hand labor is the human experience, the absence of perfection. The psychological, physical, and mental value of labor in art indicate a level of commitment and endurance, implicating the body. Many artists operate this way.

Agnes Martin’s process of painting was painstaking, involving a taut string and a steady hand, as she would draw the grid in her paintings with intense concentration. When she would use a ruler, she would only ever use one that was twelve inches long. This artist, despite her solitude and her meticulous process, preached a view on life that was positive and free from constraint, a life of achieved freedom by looking inward. Her idea of looking inward, reaching a state of mindfulness through the action of the hand, always required methodical labor. Jill O’Bryan works similarly with her various Breaths drawings where she correlates each graphite mark with a single breath. Her

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3 The tonal differences in the stitching are from the grease of my hands, the threads of my blankets, pieces of my hair, and a bit of blood when I pricked my finger twice.
connection to the body and the mediation of each mark is documented through her visceral process. Through her hand, she archives the intangible.

However, framing the concept of labor as an art idea removes labor as a means of survival. The idea of labor as a recreational process, an act as a tool of mindfulness or furthered concept, is a privilege and should be analyzed for its classist roots. I talk about this and more as I discussed my artistic process with Agnes Martin and Jill O’Bryan below.⁴

AM: To be an artist, you look, you perceive, you recognize what is going through your mind. And it is not ideas.

KY: Then what is it?

AM: It’s everything you feel and everything you see and everything that your whole life goes through your mind, you know. But you have to recognize it and go with it and really feel it.

KY: The way I recognize “it”, and here I’m meaning “it” being a solace and a further understanding, is by doing my sewing, my notating, any monotonous process that heavily involves the stamina of my body.

JO: While I was writing my dissertation, I would copy the passages from the texts that I was reading. The physical quality helped me understand the complex ideas that I was taking in. I see your work and your process as a way to absorb these ideas you’re trying to tackle.

KY: Me?

JO: Ya. [Laughter] Your process seems to be a calming exercise, a meditation like my process is for me. It seems like your goal is not to necessarily “make art” and your work or at least your process comes from an honest place.

⁴ These are real quotes taken from other interviews.
KY: I appreciate that. Also, I completely understand the copying thing. Sometimes you need to absorb someone else’s words in your own handwriting in order to really grasp it.  

JO: Exactly.

AM: To neglect your own mind, that’s like to neglect your consciousness. That’s like to give up all hope of joy and happiness, really.

JO: No, writing down the words of others isn’t neglecting our own consciousnesses. It’s expanding it. What’s behind the absorption– just like what’s behind accessing your consciousness– is the labor. The seriality of the process. It’s using the hand diligently without any time restraints.

KY: But what I’ve been struggling with lately is this idea that all of our processes revolve around. This idea of labor, repetitive labor you know? We have the luxury to take our sweet time to do this self-examination and self-exploration through our self-governed laborious processes. Isn’t that a bit classist? That we are able to do this labor in our studios taking as much time as we need, choosing when and where we can partake in OUR process while others have the details of their labor defined by their superiors and the labor must be done in predetermined time confinements in order to for them to receive their livelihood. Our labor isn’t directly tied to our financial survival. We determine our rules of the labor. We design the system, and we are the machine. Others aren’t so lucky. It’s a privilege to be able to torture yourself. I’m not sure if we realize the extent to which we are privileged.

AM: The artist doesn’t need to feel any responsibility for the progress or uplift of anybody…

KY: But Aggy, come on. We don’t live in a vacuum.

AM: I believe in living above the line. Above the line is happiness and love, you know. Below the line is all sadness and destruction and unhappiness. And I don’t go down below the line for anything.

KY: Fine.

In my installation piece *Soak*, my handwriting and the handwriting of others played an important role in sharing the loves, beliefs, commitments, and knowledge of people. I consider it a failed piece, but I keep some of my screenprinted handwriting on a wall in my studio because it reminds me of the beautiful words people sent me and how honored I felt to be copying them (see fig. 5).

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II. But, I’m a Hypocrite.  
The White Cube and Assimilation

“I had to contend with the pain of wanting a beautiful white body, not out of some misguided vanity, but because I saw over and over how whiteness conferred an instant legitimacy… As a teenager, I blamed my parents for failing to secure me admission into whiteness, which I was certain was a prerequisite to being loved. I was mad at them, not at the cruelty of the American dream or the ways in which white supremacy had warped each of us. My privileged upbringing and education and linguistic fluency gave me such proximity to whiteness that it stung all the more to still find myself outside of it.” - Jenny Zhang

The white walls of the gallery signify a space separate from the external. White, clean, and artificial, the implied purity of the gallery space separates an art work from time, social, and material life, announcing it separate from the outside filth. The gallery becomes the context, able to transform. The work in the gallery now exists in a limbo, removed from the external context, completely aestheticized and rendered separate from any functional life of the object other than commodity. The art object is stripped of its humanness and fetishized as commodity in service of its “purity”.

This is Brian O’Doherty’s White Cube. As one of the first to investigate the formalist gallery space, Brian O’ Doherty’s investigation into the ideology of the gallery proved seminal in understanding the dictatorial influence of Western formalism on ideas of contemporary art. The White Cube is a space built by bourgeois, for the bourgeois. Those able to intellectualize rather than spectate are welcomed in; therefore, only those with the education and the intellect and the wealth have power to access these spaces to begin with, perpetuating the caste of the gallery. What does it mean that I, a Korean-American woman, accept the aesthetic of the White Cube, a symbol of inaccessibility and the endurance of capitalism– a system that inherently enforces a power hierarchy– and go further to embody it?

Figure 6. Installation view of work in progress. 2017.
Although I can criticize the politics and the hierarchical structure of these spaces of privilege, ultimately, I want to fit into these spaces and have tried. I am complicit in legitimizing whiteness. From dying my hair blonde to having mostly white friends, this pull to want to be accepted into the white space—now referring to the cultural white space—has been an overarching trend as I’ve searched for full assimilation into white culture.

Figure 7. Chasu 자수. 2017. Handmade paper, hair, wood. 11 ft x 5 in. Detail.

Figure 8. Chasu 자수. 2017. Installation View.

I cannot speak or write Korean, and neither can my mother—at least not well. With Chasu 자수, I copied the words she wrote on my bandage multiples times by sewing my natural hair into paper I made with my bleached blonde hair. Because I cannot read or write Korean, I copy her words blindly, only assuming they mean what she told me. This was an exercise in archiving her words in my memory through the repetitive act of embroidery while also

6 My mom Ann I. Park was born in California. She was the first born to two Korean immigrants and definitely at least at one point wished she was white too.
7 In Korean, “chasu” translates to embroidery. Korean embroidery was considered a way of expressing people’s concept of beauty in the every day. “Chasu” can also mean confession, according to google translate.
8 The words are supposed to say “Gee-eun I love you! Mom!” Gee-eun is my Korean name. I found out later from a friend who can read Korean that my mom spelled something wrong. I still haven’t her about typo.
acting as an apology for wanting to occupy a white body.

Identity assimilation can be defined as the modification of the self in order to be compatible with and incorporated into the societal mainstream. The modification of the self includes a type of erasure, a rejection or abandonment of aspects of the self that are othered by the culture one wants to assimilate into. I rejected my Korean culture. I abandoned the Korean language.\(^9\) No matter the extent I attempt to fully assimilate into white culture, either through proximity, privilege, education, or language, my body continues to other me.

Figure 9. Photo of author. 2017.

\(^9\) The verbs “rejected” and “abandoned” can infer a “choice” to do so. I think there is something to be said of the problematic aspects of saying “choice” because of the pressures put on people of other cultures to assimilate. I want to clarify, I do not believe it can be considered a choice, where it is the complete fault of the marginalized identity, rather a response to xenophobia and racism and a natural desire to not want to be seen as “different.”
III. Ew!
The Abject and The Subtle Disgust of the Other

“There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.” – Julia Kristeva, from *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*

The philosopher, critic, and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva theorized the abject as that which made one face what they considered as separate from the self. For example, Kristeva uses the image of the rotting corpse. The puss, the smell from the rotting corpse forces the unsuspecting onlooker to confront the most sickening potential of their own body. It is not the idea of death that elicits the disgust; It is the realization of how repulsive the self can be despite what society deems acceptable. Therefore, the abject disturbs order, societal norms, and identity. The work included in the seminal 1993 *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* exhibition at the Whitney was the first to address the abject. As Kristeva’s definition of the abject suggests, abject art tackled the taboo by featuring non-socially acceptable presentations of the human body, whether defecating, decaying, or fragmented.

![Figure 10. Robert Gober. Untitled Leg. 1990. Beeswax, cotton, wood, leather shoe, human hair. 11.375 x 7.75 x 20 in.](image)

The non-socially acceptable presentations of the body are analogous to the experience of marginalized identities, those deemed outside the norm. Abject art sought to challenge the audience on what they considered moral, decent, and clean and, therefore, challenging what is thought of to be an acceptable identity.

My work adopts elements of the abject. By considering my body as a drawing tool, I insert my othered body into the gallery space, engaging the viewer with the grotesque. However, with my work the audience is never faced with a representation of the body, rather the literal product from the body. I turn the otherwise abject into an aesthetically beautiful and literal white cube.
The monochromatic white foundation lends itself to convey a calm and provides an accessible surface from which the audience can better understand the work. At first, the audience easily engages the work from an aesthetic standpoint. Then, upon closer examination of the materials and the image itself, my sweat, my dirt, my skin, and my blood become more apparent, disrupting the purity and of the White Cube with my body and organic, impermanent material.

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10 Just in case you were wondering, I severed my Achilles tendon. There were plenty of bandages to work with.
With *flake, shed, chew*, I experimented with material that would degrade more rapidly. By embedding fresh lotus root in plaster, the vegetable began to oxidize and rot in the span of two hours. As the lotus root rot, the translucent film overlaying the lotus root—handmade paper embedded with skin—grew more discolored and warped from process.

Although my work is not overtly violent, the laborious processes and material gathering implies a violence. The physicality of the process—piercing the material over and over again or the scraping of skin—personifies the materials much like the work of Kwon Young-woo. Kwon Young-woo scratches the surface of Korean paper with his fingernails to create his Dansaekwa drawings.\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Dansaekwa or “monochrome painting” became a large movement in the Korean contemporary art in the 1960s. Aesthetically, the Dansaekwa drawings appear to be an acceptance or assimilation towards Western modernism at that time. Although there was Western influence, Dansaekwa became completely separate from Western abstraction by returning to traditional Korean materials.
The labor also shows a commitment to the material, a commitment to my body. Involving the abject communicates a subtle disgust to the audience. This disgust, however, is also personal. The subtle disgust illustrates the everyday feelings of occupying a nonwhite body in America, a disgust I continue to feel. By using my body in my work, I have to embrace it. I have to deal with my otherness and my internalized feelings of abjection.
“My body is an entire __________________ wrangled into a jar…

[body of water]

I swear I would spill everywhere.
My body is a history of __________________ wrangled into a/the __________________…

[verb of struggle] [body of water]

On the days that I lose track of my body,
when I find it too often in the mouths of kaleidoscope-eyed strangers,
I press my ear to the ground, and hear my __________________ heart whisper:

[four-legged beast]

‘_____________________________’ x3” – Franny Choi, from “Mad Libs I”

[something you want to say to yourself]
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Image Sources

Figure 1. *Passing the Time in Monologue (11, 891 notations)*. *Passing the Time in Monologue* (4,382 notations). Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 2. *Passing the Time in Monologue (11, 891 notations)*. Detail. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 3. Agnes Martin. *White Flower*. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/2803>.


Figure 5. *Soak*. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 6. Installation view of work in progress. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 7. *Chasu 자수*. Detail. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 8. *Chasu 자수*. Installation View. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 9. Photo of author. Photo by Jun Lee.


Figure 11. *I Belong Deeply to Myself*. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 12. *flake, shed, chew*. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 13. *flake, shed, chew*. Side view. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 14. *flake, shed, chew*. View of second day. Photo by Katie Yun.


Figure 17. *Passing the Time in Monologue* (*4,382 notations*). Detail. Photo by Katie Yun.

Figure 18. *Chasu 자수*. Detail. Photo by Katie Yun.