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Virtual Yearning

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VIRTUAL YEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Do you feel who you are? The answer to the question is pursued but not captured.

The pursuit consists of a rowdy but skilled team of investigatory video works. The videos possess

research, evidence, beauty, wit, and a healthy dose of humor.

The research is made up of books, films, and archives. The evidence is pilfered from the internet.

The beauty is much the same. The wit is something you are born with. The humor is hiding

something: sincerity.

Where does one find comfort, even constancy.
To find it in an idea or in the flesh.
We do incorporate ideas, after all.
Lynne Tillman, "Living with Contradictions"

Barbies never interested me much. I had a couple American Barbies I would mutilate from time to time like the good tomboy I was. But on the top shelf of my closet was a Barbie I never touched; never to play with and never to mutilate. It was the 1998 Philippine Centennial Barbie, wearing a traditional Maria Clara dress, standing inside a box depicting a Filipino interior setting. While I never touched the Philippine Centennial Barbie, I did reverently admire it from afar, always looking up to it, never bringing it into my own hands.

My art practice is driven by a search for comfort and constancy. It appears in different forms, like looking for love or looking for acceptance. Recently, my thesis work has been exploring my varying levels of acceptance of my half white, half filipina identity. I want to be respectful with every subject I choose to explore in my work. Rather than speak on a subject I have no experience with, I choose subjects from my own life. I then look for other sources that at least tangentially, if not directly, address my subject. I do this step of research to assure myself that elements of my subject resonate beyond my own thoughts.

Recently, I asked my mother why I had the Barbie. She told me that she asked her parents in the Philippines to buy it for me so I could have "a special Barbie." Having a white father and Filipina mother growing up, I would attest that the Filipino aspects of my life were "special." The white aspects of my life went unquestioned and unremarked; the white aspects were the norm. I revered the "special" moments when my Filipino heritage was acknowledged, but the moments were

few and far between. The moments were like a fleeting and unattainable other that I've always been striving for but was always just out of my reach.

My inability to internally feel balanced between both of my races is a struggle experienced by more and more people as the biracial population of the world is steadily on the rise.[1] When I was growing up in a small town in Ohio, I was unaware of this growing population. The first time the US Census counted biracial statistics was 2000[2], when I was looking at my Philippine Centennial Barbie without realizing what she represented to me.

Left: the author's 1998 Philippine Centennial Barbie.
Right: the author's kindergarten photo, 2003.

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[1] Huh, "Racial Speculations: (Bio)technology, *Battlestar Galactica*, and a Mixed-Race Imagining," 104.
[2] Chong, "Racial Identity, Family, and Psychological Adjustment in Asian-White Biracial Young Adults," 1.

From   *grew*   *up*

From   *From*   *age,*   *grew*   *grew*   *up* *up*

From   *From*   *age,* *age,*   *grew*   *grew* *up*   *up*

From   *a* *a*   *age,*   *grew*   *up*   *up*

From   *a*   *a* *young* *I* *grew*   *in*   *up*

From   *a*   *young*   *I*   *I*   *in*   *in*   *up*

From   *a*   *young*   *I*   *I*   *in*   *in*

From   *a*   *very*   *I*   *in*   *in*

      a *fractured*   *visual*   *world,*   *in*

   fractured   *fractured*   *visual*   *world,*   *in*

 fractured   *fractured*   *visual*   *the internet;*

  highly   *fractured*   *the internet;* *the internet;*

highly *influenced* *by* *fractured*   *the internet;* *my video work*

highly   *influenced* *by*   *and* *fractured*   *my video work*

highly   *influenced* *by* *computers* *fractured* *my video work*   *reflects*

   this   *by*   *fractured*   *reflects* *reflects*

  this *this* *by*   *fractured*   *reflects*   *reflects*

  this   *by*   *fractured* *reflects*   *reflects*

 this   *by*   *fractured* *reflects*

   sensibility   *fractured*   *sensibility*

 sensibility   *sensibility* *fractured*   *sensibility* *sensibility*

    sensibility *fractured*   *sensibility*

From a very young age, I grew up in a *fractured* visual world, highly influenced by computers and the internet; my video work reflects this sensibility. My earliest computer memory is the computer screen when I won a game of solitaire.

This fractured visual sensibility and my childhood converged in my video piece *batang bata ka pa* (2020). I used the technique of data moshing to disrupt clips of myself as a baby interacting with my mother in my VHS home videos. In order to achieve the data moshing effect, I had to paste single video frames over other frames hundreds of times to corrupt the file and produce a moving glitch effect. The glitch effect predates video technology. Kathryn Ramey discusses how in earlier years when experimental filmmakers could only work with analog, some of them were "experimenting with memory and impermanence in celluloid and glitch artists are doing something similar in games/video/sound/digital—repeated copying (compression) makes the image/sound

become abstract, indecipherable, new."[3] Old techniques are reappropriated, digitally encompassing past and present while retaining and perhaps adding new layers. By taking old footage, new glitch interventions upon the footage can make once clear footage become "abstract, indecipherable, new," just as I made my home videos reflect a disjointed confusion not visible in their original form. While my own memory can be biased and manipulated, the video files on my computer remain exactly the same unless I manipulate them. Byung-chul Han theorizes "In memory, what has been is constantly changing. It is a progressive, living, narrative process. In this, it differs from data storage. Technological data storage strips all life from what has been. It is *without time*."[4] Video has the ability to retain

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[3] Ramey, *Experimental Filmmaking: Break the Machine*, 365.
[4] Han, *The Agony of Eros*, 15.

things I cannot. The fogged up processes and memories of my mind are made clearer when I translate them to video. The detachment capabilities of video draw me to use it as a medium to collect thoughts and curate them into a piece of art.


At first, I didn't care about belonging to the white group and Filipino group because I didn't realize they were groups. Slowly, the groups and my lack of a membership in either became evident to me. In kindergarten, my teacher said we could go to the playground when she called out our hair color. She called black and I stayed seated. The other kids in my class told me to go outside, but I knew my hair was brown and couldn't understand why they would categorize me as having black hair. My hair was darker than the white kids' brown hair, but it definitely wasn't black. The biggest reason I knew I had brown hair was that my hair was lighter than my mother's hair and that her hair was black. In high school, a boy, who had been going to school with me for over three years, came up to me and asked "What are you? Mexican?" Chong found in her study that if an Asian-White person's

"appearance is different from his or her last name or racial identity, he or she may feel self-conscious or frustrated, especially during adolescence."[5] I would consider myself as white-passing and I have a non-Filipino last name, both of which complicate my own relationship with my identity. The boy's question of "What are you? Mexican?" actually touches on another aspect of my Asian-White identity: "Filipinos are sometimes perceived as Asian, and sometimes they are not. Filipinos are sometimes mistaken as Latinos, and other times they are not."[6] My grandfather explained the racial make-up of our family's Filipino identity is also mixed: Filipino, Spanish, and Chinese. This is another facet of racial ambiguity to add my biracial identity.

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[5] Chong, 10.
[6] Ocampo, "The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race," 205.

The ambiguity that has come before me, lives with me now, and will continue in the future can be a difficult notion to convey in one art piece; but video makes this possible. Gene Youngblood said "Digital cinema offers formal solutions to 'tense' limitations of mechanical cinema. Past, present and future can be spoken in the same frame at once."[7] The past, present, and future of my Asian-White biracial identity can be audio-visually grappled with in video in an immediate manner. These different states of time can be communicated visually through the specific medium of the video as well. A VHS video or a video conversion of a 16mm film convey the past, present, and future through their medial ontology. A digital intervention into these past mediums can blend time, medium, and visuality in a powerful way without having to directly spell out their intentions. It can be inferred by the viewer through the experience itself of watching the video.
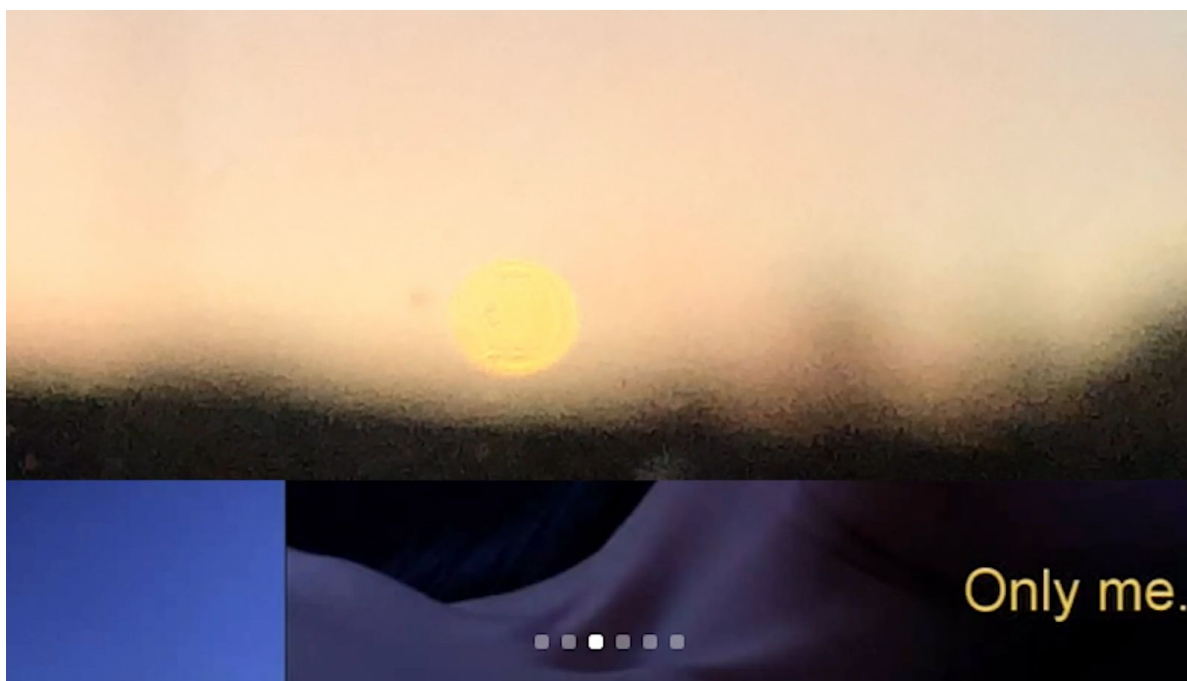
Still from *once a flaky bitch, always a flaky bitch* (2020)

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[7] Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, 217.

Still from *Diva* (Beineix, 1981)

My piece, *once a flaky bitch, always a flaky bitch* (2020) exemplifies the simultaneity of past, present, and future in video form. I tie together letters written in 1805 with my own iPhone footage from 2019-2020 with screen recording of memes from 2020 with stills from films at the turn of the twenty-first century, all combined to communicate a perpetual longing for love. The video is scored with a Schubert piece from the nineteenth century. This combination of high and low culture finds its roots in Post-Modernist French cinema. For example, *Diva* (Beineix, 1981) combined the low, popular genre of cop-chase films with a high, classic operatic score by Alfredo Catalani.

The connotations of the internet situate it more in low culture than in high culture, especially considering the mainstream internet we consume everyday on social media. While social media can feel like a guilty timesuck, it is still a place where people can express their thoughts and feelings. Perhaps counterintuitively to some, I found ways to cope with real life through online expression; notably through humor. When I found myself stuck in a working rut trying to make more high brow work, I took a break to make something I would enjoy. During that break, I produced *once a flaky bitch, always a flaky bitch.* It wasn't a break as much as a redirection. I was able to have fun making videos again, still addressing subjects I was interested in and retaining my editing and aesthetic sensibilities. Both my editing and aesthetic sensibilities are influenced by the fractured, disjointed, pixelated visual world I grew up in online. One can think of "the computer user as a 'decentralized self' who, cycling between different windows, has a fractured but multiple identity."[8] This applies directly to my editing, aesthetics, and also, my subject matter: my biracial identity.

It's all that's left for me to do.
There is something I don't understand, and I want to understand.
I'm not really talking about myself but about them.
Susan Sontag, "Where the Stress Falls"

The writer digs into the depths,
believing he will rescue something buried,
but that something may be himself.
Byung-chul Han, *Good Entertainment*

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[8] Friedberg, 235.

I want to be physically accepted by both groups, Filipino and white, but I stand somewhere in the middle. Incidentally, this mixed race appearance has entered the mainstream beauty ideal. Jia Tolentino writes about this new ideal face as "Instagram Face," identifying that "There is something strange...about the racial aspect of Instagram Face—it was as if the algorithmic tendency to flatten everything into a composite of greatest hits had resulted in a beauty ideal that favored white women capable of manufacturing a look of rootless exoticism."[9] This "rootless exoticism," or perhaps racial ambiguity, has the possibility of encompassing more than one group, which is also something that appeals to brands for marketing.[10] On one hand, this rise of racial ambiguity reassures me of my looks and their acceptance from a beauty standpoint. On the other hand, this doesn't change my acceptance by either my white group or my Filipino group and still leaves me out in these newly chartered waters. I do feel accepted by other biracial Asian-White people, some of whom approach me and don't say "What are you?" but say "What's your mix?", making me feel validated and seen. But this doesn't make me feel entirely at peace, I'm still yearning for acceptance by my white group and Filipino group beyond the acceptance of my peers.

Brud, *Lil Miquela*, ongoing

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[9] Tolentino, "The Age of Instagram Face."
[10] Phillips, "Exploring Mixed Race Identity in CGI Influencers."

It's hard enough to love yourself even if you fit into a group, but it can be even harder when you are straddled between multiple groups.

My thesis video series is structured in three chapters: Chapter I - I'm white-passing; Chapter II - I don't speak the language; Chapter III - I haven't been to the Philippines (forthcoming chapter). Each chapter is divided into two parts: Part I - stories and explanation; Part II - an exercise in futility. The stories and explanation rely on my established mixing aesthetic of high and low culture, found footage, and internet content to lay out the scene. The exercise in futility for Chapter I - I'm white-passing, is footage of me using a digital facial filter I made for my iPhone camera to make me look "more white" or "more Filipino." Visual manipulations to one's own racial appearance relates to Adrian Piper's work on being white-passing, specifically her drawing of her face with exaggerated features.

Adrian Piper, *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features*, 1981

In Chapter I, I didn't use conventional 2D tools to draw my features more exaggerated, as Piper did. Instead, I used Spark AR software to digitally exaggerate my features virtually through augmented reality. I made the alterations in the software on my laptop and then connected the filter to my phone to use the filter on my own face. The changes don't appear convincing one way or the other as they are exercises in futility.
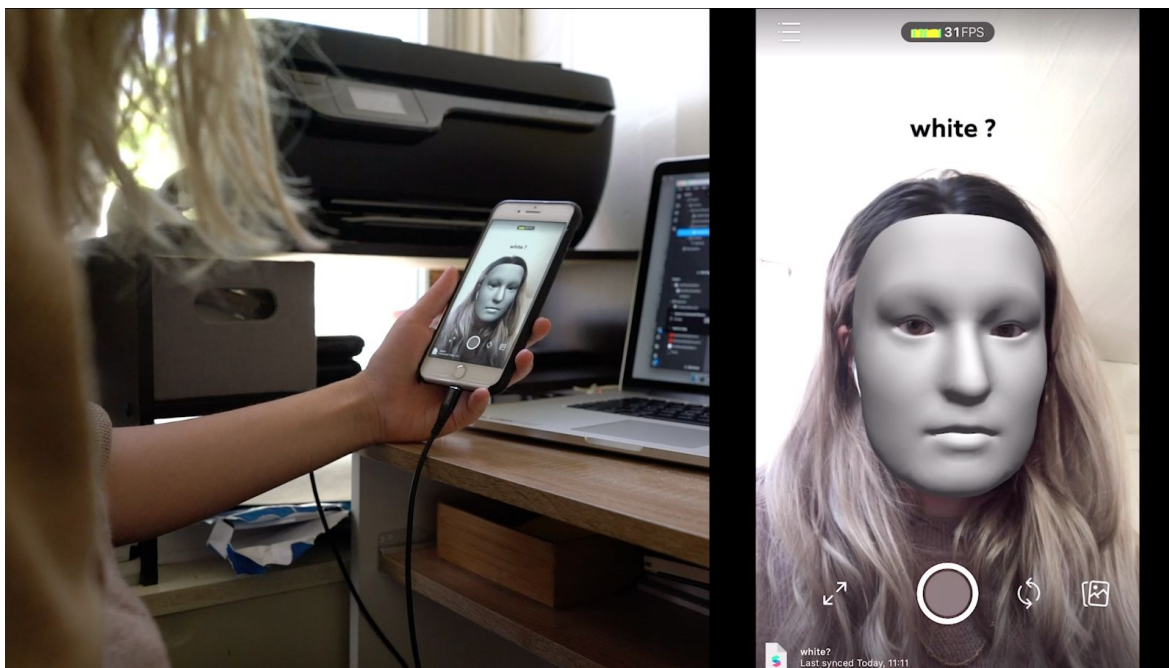
Still from *Chapter I* (2020)

Filters on Instagram are often built to enhance the beauty of the user to achieve more of the Instagram Face discussed earlier. Biracial anxieties and ambiguities aside, beauty is already a prominent anxiety in society, especially in people of my age. The conviction and validation that appearance can bring is what drives the use of the filter. The filter is only digital and only temporary though, it is futile because it is not real. More drastically, with plastic surgery, the transformation could become "real," but a plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills said "I can't, if you're Asian, give you a Caucasian face, or I could, but it wouldn't be right—it wouldn't look right."[11]

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[11] Tolentino.

Currently, digitally produced racially ambiguous faces exist prominently on the internet, like Lil Miquela (image on page 10). While the Lil Miquela project has achieved success on Instagram, in trying to achieve acceptance with one's own biracial identity, can turning to digital means make you as flawless as a CGI version of a biracial person? The answer is no, but it's important to show an attempt and engage with the current avenues of identity acceptance. After all, behind the screen and behind the software is a person who is as flawed as the next person. Autumn Whitefield-Madrano writes that "In turning to our computers' eyes to see ourselves, we may be trying to escape from the more severe scrutiny that we subject oversell to through our phones: that of other humans."[12] Even though I dressed up as Lil Miquela for Halloween this year, I cannot achieve her flawless acceptance of her own identity. The person who created the filter is me, the person who can't achieve full acceptance of her own identity.

Other than my appearance, a language barrier holds me back from being accepted by my Filipino group. English and Tagalog are the official languages of the Philippines. The only words I know in Tagalog are reaction words, judgemental descriptors of people, and bodily functions.

David and Mikio Brooks write that "Without the linguistic competence to successfully navigate himself or herself through linguistically different worlds...AmerAsian individuals...are further placed into a position where they are unable to fit into either of their linguistic heritage groups or into the larger societies."[13]

No, love surely isn't a feeling,
it's an obsessive line of thought

[12] Whitefield-Madrano, "In the Eye of the Coder."
[13] Brooks, "The Significance of Language to Multiracial Individuals and to Their Identities, Part III," 75.

about the mystery of how we learn.
Patrizia Cavalli, *my poems won't change the world*

The exercise in futility for Chapter II - I don't speak the language, is a study of if I can learn Tagalog in my sleep. For several nights, I set up an 8-hour learn while you sleep Tagalog video on my laptop by the side of my bed and a hunting camera behind my head. Any time I moved in the night, the hunting camera detected the motion and took three night-vision pictures with the Tagalog video in the frame. Language is more easily acquired when young and gets harder as you age. This specific moment of time marks the complete transition from childhood to adulthood, as I enter the world on my own. My time to learn Tagalog under my mother's instruction is gone and I am left with myself, my computer, and an internet connection. As mentioned previously, I document this futile exercise using a hunting camera. By using this, I am able to observe the futility of my attempt to learn a new language. Beyond the function of surveilling a process, the hunting camera is a nod to my identity. Growing up in small town Ohio, our school district never had classes on the first day of deer hunting season, but I have never hunted in my life. In the case of this part of the video, I am not only layering visually, but I am also layering meaning.

When I find a video clip or meme that fits with the piece I'm making, I don't feel fraudulent using it.

Its existence online is validation that my work speaks to a larger audience than just myself.

yes   yes   yes   yes
         yes   yes   yes

     yes   yes   yes   yes
 yes   yes   yes   yes
     yes   yes   yes   yes

it's ur lucky day! you won a new ipad and a trip to sandals beaches for two!
yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
 yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
 yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes

Still from *A Pattern Language* (2019)

Trisha Baga, *Mollusca & The Pelvic Floor* (2018)

Chapter III is forthcoming. I have always envisioned it as being incomplete until I am able to travel to the Philippines and film there. Previously, in the second part of my video project *A Pattern Language* (2019), I explored my emotions tied to a geographic location through using and manipulating found 16mm footage that reminded me of my town growing up. I have memories and emotions deeply tied to the white town I grew up in and my white grandparents houses. But I have never been to my Filipino grandparents home where my mother grew up, I

have never been to my Filipino family compound in Manila, or even to the Philippines. I want to finish this project by making memories in the Philippines, capturing footage, and then figuring out its emotional impact on my identity. In Trisha Baga's *Mollusca & The Pelvic Floor* (2018), she uses footage of her family in the Philippines along with internet content, mainstream movie footage, and other elements to create a disjointed but emotional experience. This curation of an excess of different content is similar to the tactics I use in my own practice.

The disjointed, mixed nature of my work doesn't only stem from the disjointed, mixed nature of my identity. My generation has grown up in the onslaught of a fractured visual world, especially since the rise of social media we began encountering early in our lives which has evolved unceasingly since. This visual language has accompanied me growing up, helping to lead me beyond my circumstances and surroundings, into the level ground of the internet, which has raised me with another way of coping with serious subjects: humor. The internet content and memes in my work are part of the disjointed visual internet language that raised my generation and helped us get through the hardest of times we've lived through.

This time will be no exception.

Embracing the cacophonous world we are set to enter with levity is the only way I know how.

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there…No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?
Elizabeth Bishop, "Questions of Travel"

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