

TEXT for video: Self Reflection Through Art and Nature

This project is a continuation of my BFA show for the art department, which began with thinking about the ways in which COVID has changed our society and me personally. I created three self portraits in watercolor that represented to me the beginning, middle, and end of COVID. I referenced Alphonse Mucha, who was a Czech artist during the period of Art Nouveau and known for his distinctive stylized images of the female figure in nature. I was drawn to his combination of organic forms and patterns, as well as the parallels between art Nouveau and the current time period. Art Nouveau was essentially a rebellion against previous art movements and a return to nature in a time of industrial revolution. During Covid, I found myself returning to nature and going outside more often to cope with the changes and social isolation. Art Nouveau was actually inspired by nature and artist used biological and botanical illustrations as direct references for their work. Similarly, I find myself inspired by natural forms, and the lessons that can be learned from animals and plants, and decided to create a self reflective narrative drawing from my experiences as an Asian American artist.

I have always loved paper. Smooth paper, lined paper, tiny ripped up pieces, notes passed in classes, paper airplanes flown in backyards. Many important moments in life are stored on paper. My whole life actually started with a piece of paper—maybe that is why I became an artist. This paper was actually a handwritten letter, stamped and sent from Laramie, WY to Ozamiz City, Philippines, the alternating red and blue pattern on the air mail envelope twisting like a string, pulling two strangers from across the world closer and closer together. My parents were pen pals for three years, sending letters back and forth as often as they could, their minds coloring in each other's world with each line. When my dad flew over to me meet my mom in the Philippines, I imagine he was riding a paper airplane, crisp white edges pointed towards the islands, paper wings aloft with hope. They got married two weeks after he landed, the red-blue air mail paper turning into a certificate of marriage, and later three birth certificates for me, my sister, and brother. I wish I could thank whatever tree that first letter was made from, giving up its wood fibers to make a soft pulp to turn into sheets of paper that became a letter that became my family tree.

I love the idea of family trees, names upon names branching and splitting and growing until your own name appears, the newest green leaf at the edge of a branch. The names of my Filipino side are beautiful and strange to me, Primitiva Archia, Chrisostomo Oberes, Geminiano Generale, the syllabus curling like exotic, vibrant flowers at the end of the tree. My dad's side of the tree has quaint English and Polish names like William and Ruth, Lawrence and Kaminski and Kibble, neatly trimmed, practical hedges.

I wonder what kind of tree my family tree would be....maybe an aspen tree, all those darkened eyes watching over me, the same roots tunneling miles and miles underground to another grove. The largest organism on earth is actually the aspen tree because all the trees grow from the same roots, and though you might never guess, aspen groves miles and miles apart are one and the same.

Or maybe my family tree is like the mangrove tree, roots winding and intertwining on the edges of oceans. Mangrove seeds grow right off the parent root, and sometimes fall into the water and get swept away. Luckily, the seeds are designed for the journey, as mangrove seeds are unlike other plants and actually germinate while still on the parent tree. This adaptation allows them to grow rapidly upon falling to the soil. They are designed to grow on new lands. My mom, a seedling, broke off and was swept away to a distant shore, planting her roots far from any ocean, finding her ground in Wyoming.

Tree rings are fascinating. The years dutifully recorded, ring after ring in thin lines that speak of years of drought or times of rain. Memories of all the years of growing, season after season. The dark heartwood in the center solid and sure. I don't have tree rings—but I do have tan lines that remember the fierceness of summers spent camping in the mountains or laying on the sand. I have freckles on my face and arms documenting memories of trips to the Philippines with my family. When I feel buried in school and ice and snow, I look at the freckles on my arms and tan lines on my feet and it reminds me of where I have been. My mom and dad have tree rings of their own too, wrinkles of laughter by their eyes, age spots on their skin, and worry lines on their forehead that tell stories about all the years raising three kids.

The Tarsier is a tiny monkey endemic to the Philippines. Measuring around 5 inches, these shy little creatures are rarely seen, mostly being active at night, their luminous green-brown eyes drinking in the rainforests. The second time I visited the Philippines, I had the chance to go to a Tarsier conservatory and see them in person. I remember when my family and I walked in, there were packages of dried bugs like crickets on the counter. "Oh we get to feed the little monkeys!" The Filipino staff looked at us and laughed, shaking their heads, "No those are snacks for people, they are for you to eat." We looked at the crispy bugs, appalled at the strange snack. Walking around, we spied the tiny creatures clinging to a tree branch, their fuzzy heads tucked under an arm, sound asleep. Occasionally one would stir and open their startlingly large eyes, blinking with wonder and seeming to absorb our presence in a single glance. In this country that felt at the same time so strange and yet so familiar to me, the Tarsier seemed to understand everything I was feeling, its gentle, empathetic eyes seemed to see right into mine.

Sometimes I feel like am a Tarsier, empathetic and gentle, my eyes always open and drinking in all the details of people and places. I have been told I have a really 'good eye' especially when it comes to art, instinctively seeing the washes of color and angles and lines to create a realistic painting. When I was little, I was always gazing at some small thing with my quiet dark eyes, fascinated by a slimy banana slug, drawn to the twinkle of light reflected in peoples eyes, the subtle Alpenglow in the sky at dusk, the tiny footprints of a mouse in the snow. I understood that there are quiet stories everywhere if you know how to look.

The sunset Kingfisher is a diminutive bird that lives in the Philippines, one of several species. With its stubby body and tall feathers and a awkwardly large beak and eyes, the bird has all the looks of a baby bird even when full grown. What the Kingfisher lacks in size, it makes up for with skill and beauty. I like to think the same about myself. People have always called me short, or told me that I have a baby face. Sometimes it bothers me, even just last week someone asked me if I was in high school. No I sighed, I am senior graduating from college actually. I wish I looked older. More in charge. Wish people would take me seriously. But then I remember the tiny Kingfisher with all of its tiny boldness, its brilliant pink and orange plumage, capturing the ambiance of the rosy sky at sunset. The sunset Kingfisher is aptly named, as it is indeed an excellent fisher. But Instead of scooping up fish from the water with its claws like most other birds, the Kingfisher takes a dive, arrowing its tiny body, head first straight into the water, spearing the fish with its beak, and emerging in a stunning shower of sparkling droplets that roll off its wings with each stroke, sunset colors splashing joyously like an expressive painting, clutching the fish triumphantly. I have always admired the ambitious beauty of Kingfishers, their careful precision and bold dives, never faltering before plunging into the depths. Such power in a tiny body. When I wish that I looked was taller, or that I looked older, when I am afraid that I am too young, or too little, the sunset Kingfisher reminds me that I can be small and I can be bold. To splash paint and color and see what happens. To dive in and go after the things I want without pause. To take risks in art and in life.

'Fake it till you make it!' This is a phrase I have taken to heart, so much so that it seems to be my default setting and I wonder which parts are really me and which parts are a disguise. I often feel like I am pretending to be someone else in order to be liked, to fit in. I am a peace keeper by nature, and I have learned how to say all the right things. Like the blue ringed octopus, I can easily slip into disguise, become charming or flirtatious, laugh loudly and then giggle quietly, be professional and scholarly, or warm and welcoming, understanding and sweet, quiet and solemn, then fun and spontaneous, and agreeable above all else. The blue ringed octopus, like all octopi, can blend seamlessly to fit their environment, change the color and even texture of their skin, becoming a rosy branch of coral, a dull chunk of rock, a pile of creamy shells in a blink of an eye. Like an artist who expertly mixes their palette, the blue ringed octopus is a master of blending in and mixing all the right colors. However, when the blue ringed octopus is threatened and a shark gets too close and uncovers their careful disguise, they will flash yellow with brilliant blue spots, warning the shark of their toxins, for the blue ringed octopus's carries enough venom to kill more than 20 adult humans.

Sometimes I think I forget to flash my warning signs to myself, too busy trying to please everyone, I lose myself to my surroundings, endlessly camouflaged until I don't even recognize myself.

Growing up, I was a pretty quiet kid. I think others respected me the same way you respect a mountain lion. Quietly powerful, dangerously smart. Someone to admire, but from a distance. 'Shyness is intimidating!' I have been told. Like the mountain lion or the elusive lynx, I felt both powerful and kind of invisible. People knew I was there, but I was like an elusive cat, this mysterious person no one really knew a whole lot about, who came and went to school, and that was it. I loved school though, I thrived in spelling tests and made my way through the entire back wall of the fiction section in the library. I got straight A's every single year. Later, I learned that people just assumed I would, because I look Asian. I was *supposed* to enjoy reading and do good on math and spelling tests. I was *supposed* to be the quiet smart kid everyone went to for homework help. Of course, there are many Asian stereotypes that have circulated in society, and sometimes these stereotypes even become internalized so that Asians feel like they have to follow these societal expectations. Asian people are considered to be the 'model minority' because of how well Asian people seem to assimilate into society. Asians are always supposed to be successful, hard working, and smart. I was all those things. And whether I was aware of it or not, I worked so hard to become that stereotype. Like the lynx, I know now that there *is* power in being 'quiet' being a good listener, considering what to say before I say it, but also that I don't have to be 'shy'. I can be purposeful with my words and actions, precise like the quick pounce of a lynx, unafraid to speak up and be seen.

I am a very busy person, often because I choose to be. I am a perfectionist and I enjoy diving into projects headfirst. Sometimes I think it is to prove something to myself. Sometimes I think it is because I genuinely enjoy work and I lose myself in it. Sometimes it is just because I feel like I have to keep moving and keep busy to keep myself alive. Like the manta ray who has to constantly keep swimming to pass oxygen over their gills to breathe, I feel like I have to be planning or doing or thinking about what to do next, always gotta keep moving. It gives me purpose, this busyness. But it is also so exhausting. I wonder if the manta rays ever wish they could settle, cursed to forever roam the ocean. College felt like that class to class, apartment to apartment, friend to friend, day to day. Event to event, my planner is always chock full of things to be doing and seeing. I didn't know there was a word for it until college, this feeling of having to do everything all at once: FOMO. Fear Of Missing Out. Apparently it's a pretty common thing, especially for us college students.

We are all manta rays someday, constantly moving and seeing and doing just to feel like we are alive, endlessly roaming.

If you have ever seen a river otter, you will instantly fall in love with their playful personalities, their sleek bodies swooping like cursive letters, curling around and around in the water. I have seen families of otters fishing and playing in the snake river, their curious heads would pop out of the water and duck under again, only to reappear way down river, their sharp chirps echoing off the canyon walls as they call to their family. Otters would sometimes find lost items from white water rafters...soggy hats or sunglasses, a tattered shoe or a shiny beer can, and play with them, nudging their treasure back and forth, diving under with it and tossing it around. Otters know the importance of play, something we forget as we get older. Otters remind me of little kids, who haven't forgotten how to play either, always laughing and running around, turning rocks into dragons and tree leaves into fairies, furiously coloring with crayons or splashing paint on paper. Kids are fearless when it comes to art. They have no qualms about jumping and seeing what happens. They don't worry about if their art is good enough or if they stayed in between the lines. There are no mistakes in their eyes, just joy Picasso once said, "every child is born an artist.....the problem is learning how to stay one once you grow up. Otters seem to understand how to stay a kid at heart, how to be fearlessly playful and creative. Studying art has taught me the importance of play, of experimentation, how to take risks and how to have fun.

A blank page sits before me, a sharpened pencil laying neatly next to it. I stare blankly. Oh *no*. A million things to draw and I can't think of a single one you could do that wouldn't mess it up. Because the paper is actually perfect already, like an untouched field of fresh snow. Perfectly untouched, clean, white, and daunting. *Anything can happen! No guidelines no limits no nothin'*. The paper dares me to make the first mark. My art professors call this predicament 'sacred paper,' when you get so worried about making sure you make the perfect piece that it seems impossible to get started. When I get stuck at this blankness, I remember the elk. Elk who fearlessly step into deep fields of snow and push forward into the gray horizon as they migrate for miles and miles in uncharted land. I love elk, the way their dark legs march through banks of snow, charcoal sticks on a canvas, their billowing breath crystallizing in the cold air, their haunting whimsical bugle making my hair stand on end. Herds of elk sometimes walk right through my neighborhood, the deep criss crossing tracks a tell tale sign in my backyard, step after step. The first step is always the hardest, taking that jump, making a line, but soon you realize that the cautious little line is blossoming into shape and shadows and then the sacred paper is gone and you are on your way to a finished piece. Sometimes you just have to go ahead and see what happens, forging your way like a line of elk in a snowstorm, step by step, you make your own path. *No guidelines, no limits, no problem.*

I am also like a owl. I think many artists are. Owls who can turn their heads nearly 360 degrees, taking in a panoramic view of the world like an artist trying to find the right composition. Flying high and low in the night sky, owls know all about perspective and vanishing points. Owls with their wide amber eyes, perpetually awed and startled looking, perpetually on the brink of inspiration. Owls with their swift and silent flights, feathers carving the air like a confident hand holds a brush, a sweep of color and they are gone. As an artist, I am a classic night owl, staying up night after night working tirelessly on projects, consumed with finishing the latest painting. I find that my best ideas bloom in the AMs, my mind free to wander, sweeping through ideas and images in my mind like the pass of a great feathered wing under the moon. My siblings and I are all night owls, three pairs of wide eyes brightening the night.

Another thing that my siblings and I all have in common is that we suffer from the Imposter Syndrome. Many people do actually. If you haven't heard of it, it is basically a condition where a person feels like they could be exposed as a fraud at any moment, where you doubt your abilities and often overwork to make up for this feeling, and yet find it difficult

to accept your accomplishments and success as real. Many well known artists have also experienced this syndrome of self doubt.

“Oh what are you studying?”

Art I would say, I’m an artist, cringing inwardly for my dishonestly.

I am not a *real* artist, I think. I don’t really know what I am doing, and I don’t have my business or anything. Then I wonder what makes a real artist. They say you are a professional when you make money. So is it when I can make a living doing art? When I get my own gallery? When I have a reputation? When my artwork is desired and understood? What is good enough? When I am good enough? This thought keeps me up many nights.

What does it mean to be an artist? I think I have found the answer. I am a true artist when I can appreciate and love my own art.

What does it mean to be a Filipino-American? Am I *really* Filipino when I am so disconnected from the culture? Am I *really* American when people have to ask me “where are you from?” When am I good enough? When I am popular and known by many? When I fit in? When I stand out? When I am desired and understood by others? What does it mean to be half and half? When I am good enough? I am still looking for the answer, but maybe it is the same as being a real artist. Maybe I am good enough when I appreciate and love myself.

As Emily Dickenson once wrote, “I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.” Sometimes I find myself in the strangest of places. In the bottom of the ocean as an octopus, tucked into the pages of a story, tangled in the roots of an aspen tree, blended into a watercolor painting, deep inside the amber eyes of an owl.

Most recently, I see myself in the papery shell of a cicada and the shiny green of a newly emerged one. With graduation a week away, I look back and see the person I was and the person I am now, and how much I have changed and grown in the past four years. It is fitting because 2021 is a big cicada year, with Brood X finally emerging after 17 years. There will be waves of cicadas coming out into the light all along the east coast. I find it metaphoric of the past year, with the pandemic and all of the issues brought to light in society. I hope there will also be waves of change, awareness, and support in the coming years for women, for Asian Americans, for the African American community, for indigenous people and minorities, for the LGBTQ community, for health care, for education, and for our society as a whole as we re evaluate what is important and how we can grow as a country. My hope is that we will all emerge on the other side of COVID-19 with a brand new perspective.