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Resistance

A Thesis presented by

Ha Na Lee

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Stony Brook University

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The subject of my work aspires to represent the meaning of individual experiences of psychological and physical trauma. My work often appears as sequential images in an unconventional narrative form, and seeks to consider the intimate interactions and interrelationships between the female body and various objects such as fruit, oysters, pearls, or conversely, needles and ants as well as other symbols that serve to symbolize or objectify the female experience and female sexuality in western culture. The objects themselves are intentionally evocative and symbolically loaded in the tradition of *vanitas* paintings exploring themes related to repression, resistance, submission, resignation, and the meaning of power, melancholy, death, pain, and violence in the contemporary world.

This thesis will explore these ideas and themes in relation to three recent projects from a two part series entitled *Contraindications Part I: Oysters & Pomegranates* and *Contraindications Part II: Red Wines* and *Abrasion*. The rendering of these works - their process and interpretation, and the artistic strategies and iconographic subjects that appear in the recent video will be examined with consideration for the art historical influences on my work. In conclusion, I will explain my future direction and intentions as an artist in the context of contemporary art.

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I. Introduction

Art represents a barter activity that cannot be regulated by any currency, or any “common substance”. It is the division of meaning in the wild state—an exchange whose form is defined by that of the object itself, before being so defined by definitions foreign to it. The artist’s practice, and his behavior as producer, determines the relationship that will be struck up with his work. In other words, what he produces, first and foremost, are relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects.¹

My principle motivation for making art is to give voice to a constant discontent with the relationship between the world and myself. Though I cannot overcome this tension, I still attempt to transfer and embed this voice in my work through its conceptualization and visualization. During the past three years in the graduate program at Stony Brook University I have attempted to find ways of representing in a visual and visceral form the often obscure and yet personal nature of traumatic experience and its many contexts.

Since my childhood in Seoul, South Korea, I have always been interested in paintings because their surfaces act like a window. The illusionary sense was fantastical and rather surreal. The contents within the frames showed a different world from where I was living. I enjoyed projecting into that space by moving close to the painting and standing in the illusion, and I envisioned many possible and imaginary narratives. With each one, I attempted to figure out the artist’s intention in choosing that particular frozen moment. Later, I also searched for hints about its hidden meanings and estimated the artist’s use of metaphors and iconographies. This formative experience later made it possible to conceive my own narratives in art form and to pursue an undergraduate degree in painting.

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: les presses du réel, 2006), 52.

However, while pursuing this degree, I began to find the physical existence of the canvas an obstacle to my process of exploring pictorial imagery. I became increasingly frustrated by its immobile image. I realized that I regarded each canvas as a frame in which figures in the paintings appeared in frozen gestures. The movements of color and light were needed in order to convey the feeling of an atmospheric scene. Painting naturally communicates the psychological and compositional movements, and they reflect aspects of history, politics, religion, mythology, and other human values. But I desired to capture the temporality and ephemerality of human experience that I found lacking for myself in this art form.

Hence, I began to shift toward video art, sculptural installation, and digital photography. The search for the right medium for a story became more crucial than individual object making. Likewise, I became less preoccupied with one medium to express my imagination and intuitions. Adopting different media for making art made me recognize that the subjects of the work always emerge through experimentation with materials and observation of everyday objects. This process naturally lends to engagement with a vast number of different media, and it creates the conditions for a dynamic and multifaceted practice.

The subject of my work aspires to represent the varied meaning of individual experiences of psychological and physical trauma. The work often appears as sequential images in an unconventional narrative form. These narratives consist of intimate interactions and interrelationships between the female body and various symbolic objects such as fruit, oysters, pearls, or conversely needles and ants as well as other symbols that serve to represent or objectify the female experience and female sexuality in western culture. The

objects, though often common themselves, are intentionally evocative and symbolically loaded in the tradition *vanitas* paintings. The visual compositions communicate a sense of melancholy and a way to explore themes related to repression, submission, resistance, resignation, and the meaning of power, consumption and an ephemeral experience. Through this imagery, I attempt to address power relationships in the contemporary world through visual allusions to forms of pain, violence, and repression of female sexuality and experience. Through the coordination of the sequence of imagery, I attempt to create for the viewer an experience of visual attraction and repulsion that drives the viewer's psychological response and lingers in his or her memory. These images do not reduce to a single univocal meaning, but instead, they create a complex and diverse set of meanings that act on the viewer's own experience and associations. In essence, as an art experience, my work is best intuited rather than interpreted.

This thesis will closely explore these ideas in three of my past projects:

Contraindications part I: Oysters & Pomegranates, Abrasion and *Contraindications part II: Red Wine*. Each work represents important instances in my artistic development during my education in the MFA program at Stony Brook University and each was a part of my MFA thesis solo and/or group exhibition. I will also describe my inspirations, influences, and thought process of art making as well as the iconography I have adopted and adapted in my work.

II. Influences and Iconographies

The Seventeenth Century Dutch Art: *Gaze*

There is no sadness and no cruelty in the gaze; it is a gaze without adjectives, it is only, completely, a gaze that neither judges you nor appeals to you; it posits you, implicates you; makes you exist. But this creative gesture is endless; you keep on being born, you are sustained, carried to the end of a movement that is one of infinite origin, source, and that appears in an eternal state of suspension. God and the emperor had the power of the land; man has the gaze. All history reaches the grandeur of its own mystery in an endless look.²

I have long been fascinated by 17th century Dutch Art because Dutch pictorial production contains such subtle and alluring presences. I find these works compelling for the way they connect artists and viewers to their society by, as Barthes suggests, *a gaze*. Dutch still life and *genre* paintings depicted an ordinary scene of Dutch people's lives and their material possessions, and in so doing, they enacted a visual morality by raising questions of desire and possession. I am most interested in these aspects of an anthropological reading on Dutch art, and it has been a significant inspiration for my own artistic development and practice.

Norman Bryson stated that Dutch still life and *genre* painting came from the “collision between the traditional *vanitas* and community-based ethic, revolving around shared wealth and poverty, and the private ethic of the individual owner of prosperity.”³ His essay further addresses the evolution of the culturally accepted ideas of the time around

² Roland Barthes, “The World As Object,” in Norman Bryson, ed. *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 113

³ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-Life painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 100.

growing surplus wealth (a form of power) and what he terms “abundance.” Namely, that it reflected a redirection of the attention of Dutch society and viewers to the aesthetics of possession and affluence (power), rather than the morality or ethics of surplus wealth.⁴

The role of depicting ordinary scenes of paintings was either to instruct or reflect moral issues, such as commodity consumption, the ephemeral nature of prosperity, and the proper roles for men and women. *Genre paintings*, in particular, featured architectural interiors as feminine spaces that were marked by the clear distinction between domestic and worldly space in the paintings. Indeed, Dutch still life created a dialogue between the newly affluent society and its material possessions, including women, that involved the reflection of wealth back to its viewers. In many respects, this practice endures in aspects of contemporary art. By way of example, I draw attention to Dutch flower painting that is also associated with my work.

The value of Dutch flower painting was different from Medieval, Renaissance and Spanish still life because it was non-pastoral, or cut off from nature. It involved and embodied larger social arrangements and processes, and presented objects that are removed from the immediacy of rural life. These still life examples originate from different places in the world and have different growing seasons. The compositions that featured them were thus synthetic and wholly imaginary in their character.⁵ When presented as divorced from their seasonal and geographic origins, these floral elements also signified a sense of fragility.

Likewise, such flowers were frequently of great economic value. Gardening was at the time a very complicated, labor-intensive and, therefore, expensive undertaking. The laborious tasks involved in raising exotic flowers in hothouses made them very rare and

⁴ Ibid.,97

⁵ Ibid.,99

sought after objects symbolic of wealth and social prestige. The flowers were important aspects of *vanitas* painting. Representations of flowers, frequently wilting or being eaten by insects, were seen as emblems of ephemeral nature of human existence or experience communicating a sense of fleeting beauty and worldliness. On the one hand, the highly detailed still life paintings and their easily recognizable iconography pleased the viewer's *gazes*. On the other hand, however, the moral issues subconsciously lingered in the viewer's mind. The symbolic use of objects and the deliberate sense of ambivalence are central to my recent video work.

Julia Kristeva: *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*

Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* has also been for me a very influential work of writing. I believe this is because the book organizes not only discussions of psychoanalytic theory, but also gives examples in literature and art. Art plays a central role in her account of mourning and melancholy, and making or creating allows the artist to cope. She acknowledges in the following passage:

Nevertheless, art seems to point to a few devices that bypass complacency and, without simply turning mourning into mania, secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimatory hold over the lost Thing.⁶

She later refers to Freud's famous essay "Mourning and Melancholia." In his essay, he states the clear difference between mourning and melancholia. For Freud, mourning is the

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 98.

conscious reaction to the physical loss of a loved one as well as the loss of an abstraction or ideal: “mother”, “liberty”, “truth” and so on. But mourning entails the possibility of adopting a new love object in one’s consciousness – or an evolution of hope.⁷ The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a static state of grief that develops in a person that suffers painful unhappiness. It entails a withdrawal from interests, activities and the outside world in general, and in essence is an unconscious loss of the love-object.

Kristeva’s *lost Thing* appears to relate to the maternal object, the idea of a state of oneness or identity with the mother that characterizes an infantile experience. She sees that the artists are not simply mourning over the loss of a maternal object, but sublimating that loss by making art. Although I am not entirely sure that this is my motivation, I accept her assertion that “Sublimation alone withstands death.” She writes,

Depression recognizes this and agrees to live within and for that object, but such adoption of the sublime is no longer libidinal. It is already detached, dissociated; it has already integrated the traces of death, which is signified as lack of concern, absentmindedness, carelessness. Beauty is an artifice; it is imaginary.⁸

My reading of her account is deeply connected to the Dutch still life and *genre painting* artists. The nature of melancholia and the experience of human impermanence is unconsciously delivered through the symbols of the objects and sublimated into the art experienced by both the beholder and the spectator. These objects represent attempts to come to terms with the nature of suffering and the reality of death. They also represent an attempt to overcome the loss and inner isolation that comes with melancholia by making

⁷ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 164.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 100.

symbols that embody and, most importantly, communicate the presence of the lost Thing. This process and these ideas shape the practice of my art making and appears in the history of art as well.

Influential artists: *Rebecca Horn and Jean Cocteau*

I have been influenced by many contemporary artists that have orientations and experiences with art making that are similar to mine. In particular, I am deeply attracted to other artists who work with performance, installation and filmmaking. Rebecca Horn (Germany, b. 1944) is an installation and performance artist whose earlier work was based on kinetic sculpture and performance that later became the basis for her early films in 1970. Her performances often employ bodily extensions and kinetic elements that evoke historical, mythological and literary associations. These often both address abstractions and deliver historical and political meanings. I am especially drawn to her early works such as *Unicorn* (1970), *Finger Gloves* (1972) and *Feather Fingers* (1972). Her earlier work involved a poetic deployment of mechanical constructions that associated contradictory senses between physicality of body and a technical apparatus. She described this contradiction: “my sense of touch becomes so disrupted that the different behavior of each hand triggers contradictory sensations.”⁹

The physicality of her body in relation to objects and the space around her is deeply inspiring to me and her idea of contradictory senses is similar to my series of installations, *contraindications*. She is also a poet as well as a filmmaker, and as such her work doesn't tend to focus on conventional narrative drama. Rather, her work communicates through

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebecca_Horn

metaphors of objects and her performing body: “A balance between figure and objects” and “*the paradox of looking out and looking back*” in her films.¹⁰ This is related to my own way of approaching my video making.

I am also interested in Dada and Surrealist filmmaking. Dada filmmaking was primarily driven by experiment and play with imagery in making films, and it pioneered an approach to imagery that became an important feature of Surrealist films later on. My videos and films are engaged more with Surrealist filmmakers because of the way they structure narratives. In particular, Surrealist filmmaker Jean Cocteau has been a very influential artist for me in that respect.

The Blood of a Poet (1930) was the first film to be written and directed by the French Surrealist filmmaker Jean Cocteau (1889-1963). Like other Surrealist films, the film has no clear narrative, but just a series of seemingly unconnected bizarre sequences or montage, and the story is constructed based upon metaphors of spaces and objects that the artist-protagonist encounters. The film explores temporality in a manner that transcends the ordinary clock time, and it attempts to capture the impression of an artist’s inner space by carefully constructing optical illusions and the *mise-en scène*; in effect, he uses sets and objects as metaphor.

Throughout the film, the restriction of physicality for the artist is transcended, and he emphasizes the artist’s mental ability to think beyond the restrictions of the physical reality that surrounds him. Although the narrative seems illogical, the story focuses the possibilities in the artist’s inner experiences by using objects as metaphors. Cocteau uses the interesting metaphors of a drawing, a mirror and a statue to transcend time from the real world to the artist’s imaginary world (subconscious). The sequence of images in the film does not present

¹⁰ Ibid.

a clear narrative structure of cause and effect. The use of cuts and concatenation of images do not mesh with classical film conventions; rather the images are drawn from inner experiences and speak via metaphors and he seems to focus on recreating the artist's subconscious. I was deeply inspired by this approach in making my first film. It offered ways of telling a story or of describing a situation without relying on the accepted conventions of film

III. *Contraindications Part I: Oysters & Pomegranate*

Contraindications: An indication or symptom, which makes against the treatment called for by the main symptoms.¹¹

In medicine, a contraindication is a condition or factor that increases the risks involved in using a particular drug, carrying out a medical procedure, or engaging in a particular activity.¹²

Contraindications Part I: Oysters & Pomegranates tells the story of a woman who encounters a still life scene in which the objects symbolize female sexuality and bodily experience through the traditional symbols of *vanitas* painting. In a beautiful but bizarre domestic surrounding, she appears to be trapped as she curiously interacts with her physical surroundings. The prohibited foods of oysters and pomegranates sit before her on an elaborate table setting. Though not fatal in reality, the oysters and pomegranates are highly loaded with female sexual imagery. As the visual representation evolves, the imagery eventually traps her, and ultimately she finds herself suffocated by it.



Fig. 1 *Contraindication Part I*: Video Still

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50048757?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=contraindication&first=1&max_to_show=10

¹² Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contraindication>



Fig. 2 *Contraindication Part I*: Documentation of installation overview

This video and sound installation was installed at the Melville Library Gallery in April of 2007. I performed the visual image in the video, and the musician, Felix Paster composed the sound. The exhibition was originally planned and installed to appear as a room constructed for a video set that the viewer could inhabit both visually and physically. This involved dividing the gallery space by use of a 10 ft. x 16 ft. fabric screen placed at a 30-degree angle that simultaneously served as both a wall and fabric projection screen. The other walls were constructed with twenty-eight individual 2 ft. x 4 ft. wood panels that were covered with interior stucco and ripped black floral wallpaper. These materials gave the space a sense of an aged and decaying building that had been abandoned. The gallery floor was covered with 8 in. by 8 in. green and white ceramic tiles that were arranged in a checkerboard pattern as in Dutch *genre painting*. The film was projected onto the framed screen from the rear, so that viewers encountered the video portion of the installation as though it were seen through a window or a transparent wall. The projected image appeared larger than life size, and represented the same physical surrounds that had been recreated using the actual objects in the video in the installation itself.

The space communicated a very constrained and claustrophobic feeling through this cramped domestic setting. Perhaps this sense derived from the opposition of physical

tightness of the space and overwhelming scale of the projection. In light of this, the space seemed strange because the screen was installed at such an angle that spectators were unsettled by the room's expressive interior. Across from this screen, there was a table with a still life, an old chair, and a framed reproduction of Rembrandt's *Abduction of Proserpine* that also appeared in the video. The still life objects included an old scale, a long pearl necklace, pomegranates, oysters and shells on a silver plate, and a lit candle with candle stand.



Fig.3 *Contraindication Part I*: Documentation of installation Detail I



Fig.4 *Contraindication Part I*: Documentation of installation Detail II

In order to complete this project, I had to resolve some conflicts that existed in my mind. I needed to consider why I was so preoccupied with 17th century Dutch art. What was my relationship to these paintings? During the period of preproduction, I had several discussions about my new concepts and plans for *Contraindications* with other MFA students

and faculty members. There were a lot of questions regarding my use of images taken from 17th century Western art history, particularly considering my Korean ethnicity.

As mentioned earlier, I grew up looking at paintings in museum catalogs and reproductions. Though I did not have any logical idea of what that meant, I liked to engage in imaginary explorations based on these paintings. As I became more familiar with Western art history, I began to find them strange and somewhat alienating. Indeed, I could raise the question of postcolonialization, especially in light of my education in Western over traditional Korean painting. However, this piece addressed more my feelings and standings about this tradition of European paintings. I will expand on this idea in my conclusion.

When I came to the United States, I began to regard this history as a participant, but still realizing that I will always be foreign to the dominant features of Western contemporary art. Although I am aware that the art world is no longer centered and concentrated in one place because of the impact of globalization, the main activities of the art world are still most actively established in the large Western cities. In a way, this piece represents an attempt to address female sexuality and experience through a tradition that I feel both separated from and immersed in. By inserting myself into a setting primarily associated with the art of the Baroque period, I was engaged in a timid revolt against the huge tradition of Western art history. In particular, Dutch *genre painting* appealed to me through its use of “everyday life” to address moral issues in a symbolic manner that is different from traditional religious iconography. I especially related to their concerns of ephemeral life, *vanitas*, and decay.

Through this art historical iconography, a narrative sequence unfolded for me and was captured in the woman’s inner trauma as recounted in the structure of the video. Pearls, scales, oysters, insects, candles, and pomegranates symbolize aspects of female sexuality and

experience in Dutch *genre paintings*. I incorporated several symbols from different master paintings in order to lead the story. For example, in the center of Jan Steen's genre painting, *The Life of Man* from 1665, there is a young woman who seems to ignore an old man who is propositioning her with an oyster. Here the painter symbolizes the young woman's sexuality through the aphrodisiac. Also, Rembrandt's *Abduction of Proserpine* depicts a great subject for the Northern Baroque period. It represents a scene from a Greek myth of Persephone, who was trapped in the underworld by Hades. He gave a pomegranate to her, and she ate a number of the pomegranate seeds that determined the number of months she would have to spend in Hades each year. With this myth in mind, they become ambivalent symbols of youth and femininity that also suggest danger and potential imprisonment.

The stylistic adaptation of the Baroque period was also a big challenge for me. I adopted several methods for translating the aesthetic of Dutch painting into the film, particularly through the theatrical performance, the dramatic use of lighting and texture, and the distinctive color palette. I wanted to create an atmosphere as close as possible to that in the paintings by Johannes Vermeer or William Kalf in which the vibrant and saturated colors stand out very intensely.

In *Contraindications part I: Oysters & Pomegranates*, though the installation was well received, I did not feel satisfied in my intention of making an experimental film on a large scale. One of the reasons is that the narrative was too abstract to follow, though there is a quality of theatricality. Likewise, the whole installation view and the video did not come together, although in many respects it did put the viewer in the position of the woman in the video. The responses after the show were interesting because the physicality of the installation made the viewers feel as cramped as the woman in the video. The physical and

psychological aspects were crucial to be transformed in the video, yet I wasn't fully satisfied with it. I did not expect that a narrative video piece would come together within an installation environment, but the separation between the two was more striking than I had anticipated. Many people made this point during critiques, which prompted me to think about making video a separate enterprise. With this in mind, I wrote my first scenario for a short film, and this endeavor helped me realize some of the themes I had previously attempted to communicate to viewers and to focus on the narrative itself.

IV. *Abrasion*

Abrasion chronicles a series of tumultuous, fantastic events in the life a young woman named Jin-Kyung. She is the unhappy lover of a local butcher who relentlessly pursues her, even as she recoils from his advances. In a series of events that are both real and imagined, this unbearable situation manifests itself physically to Jin-Kyung in the form of an open wound in her back. In response, she tries to escape into the countryside, and this escape attempt culminates in a traumatic confrontation.

Skin(the Korean original title), was produced in Summer 2007 in suburban areas of South Korea. Its dialogue is in Korean with English subtitles. A crew of about twenty-three people were on location for the shooting, and a total crew of thirty-five participated in post-production as a whole.



Fig.5 *Abrasion*: Documentation of installation overview I

The short film was made to exhibit in either a gallery or a theater, and premiered in my thesis solo show at the Melville Library Gallery in December of 2007. The film was screened in a HD video format on a scale of approximately 10 ft. x 21ft. During the show, the film ran for twelve minutes and ten seconds, and was scheduled to play at fifteen minutes intervals. The show also included three 42 in. x 28 in. large-scale archival digital print

format film stills. The three stills were selected because they present the relationship between the female character, Jin-Kyung, and a pig. They also show her desire to escape reality by sewing the pig carcass.



Fig.6 *Abrasion*: Documentation of installation overview II

During my stay in South Korea, I became increasingly aware of the plight of immigrant women. Like the War Brides in Western countries, women from developing countries in South and East Asia are married to suburban or rural Korean men in South Korea due to the economic situation in their home countries. The immigration issue became a matter of some debate among Korean politicians, as this situation created the conditions for domestic violence and abuse. Stories related to these issues frequently appeared throughout the Korean media during the preproduction of the film.

Surely the Korean government could establish a good policy to aid abused imported immigrant brides. These women were trapped and disempowered, and they couldn't even fight for their rights due to their lack of knowledge of Korean institutions and differences in Korean language. I was drawn to this issue because, in a way, it seemed similar to experiences of miscommunication and incomprehension during my time in the United States. Thus, I wanted to address the issue through the film and, more importantly, to emphasize

how the system never seems to change. Minorities seem to be destined to only dream of changing their lives. I attempt to develop a narrative and language of fantasy as a way of transcending these terrible experiences in the ordinary world.

After *Contraindications Part I: Oysters & Pomegranates*, I still felt very dissatisfied about the conjunction of sculptural installation and narrative video in the same space.

Needless to say, installation involves all the senses, and this sense of immersion creates the immediate relation and sensory encounter between my work and viewers - an experience I aspire and strive to create in my art. I attempted to challenge myself to make a stand-alone video that would possibly communicate a sense of smell and tactile experience, even a change of temperature, through the sequence of images. The screening of a video or a film seems to be linear or one dimensional, but I believe that there is always a sense of a larger reality that is conveyed through the video's communication with the viewers.

The story in this case is also more complicated than my previous videos focusing on the complexity of the narrative as a significant challenge. Therefore, on that account, a film would be the best medium for this story despite the fact that I had never collaborated with film crews before. Searching for the right crew or artists wasn't easy, particularly because I needed to find people who could relate to the both the form and subject matter of my work. Working on a project such as mine was a new experience for them as well, and I had not previously had to talk explicitly about my ideas and communicate to others the exact nature of my project as a precondition for such a big production. Needless to say, I learned a lot in this process.

In psychoanalysis, fantasy is a kind of *empty dream* where the fictive content is both conscious and subconscious. For this reason, fantasy becomes a screen for our

unacknowledged impulses and desires. It takes on the status of a bridge between the physical and psychological world, and in my stories, I focus on minute interactions of an individual in the context of his or her world. Although fantasy often takes the individual out of reality, its images and sensory substance are drawn from the actual world. I would like to address the following question: how does an individual escape a harsh reality by making it into fantasy? Creating a story begins in one's secret mind and aspects of reality. *Abrasion* seeks to address this question and the larger issues I discussed earlier.

The theme of the film addresses a woman's inner experience in the context of her adverse and troubling situation. In her reality, Jin Kyung (the protagonist) is a powerless character whose life was not in her control, but determined by a stern lover. When she encounters violence, pain, and emotional suffocation in the relationship with her lover, she seeks a way to escape through fantasy because it comforts her at least temporarily. Yet during the course of the film, this relationship between reality and fantasy becomes increasingly unstable. Her fantastic experiences seem to deliver her from her real world, though she doesn't seem to be aware of what she creates in her imagined reality in the psychology of her mind. Her dreams of escaping cannot change the realities of her physical world. Therefore, the end of the story implies a circling back towards an earlier moment in the film because he comes back to her though she thought she killed or wounded him in her imaginative world. This was my main concern; I wanted to present her resistance through fantasy.



Fig.7 *Abrasion*: Film sequential images (From left to bottom)

Preconceptualizing *Abrasion* began differently from my other short video/performance works. I often began with a specific image that developed an entire scene. However, *Abrasion* started with the content of the narrative. Also, the writing became important because of the need to communicate with film crews. In this way, I had to open up and consider other possibilities for the narrative. In other words, I constructed and deconstructed the narratives so that viewers could comprehend the story on their own terms. For this reason, I attempted to play with the meaning of the symbolic objects so they would confound the viewer's preconceptions about their meaning and significance.

For example, the mundane objects featured in the film such as the needle and the pig encompass both historical and cultural meaning. In many cultures, including my own, the pig often represents masculinity and greed. Some German expressionist painters and political cartoonists represented politicians as pigs for this reason. While writing the scenario I insisted that the pig represent the stern lover who traps the woman. However, after visiting

a real pig farm and seeing thousands of pigs, I realized that they have a shape and skin color similar to that of a woman's body. Moreover, they are domesticated and trapped in a cage. Because of this experience, I re-envisioned my previous formula by making the pig an ambivalent symbol of both the husband's masculinity and occupation as a butcher, as well as a symbol for the female protagonist's own experiences with him.

The needle developed in a similar manner. At the moment in which Jin-Kyung's suffocation becomes overwhelming, she immediately starts fantasizing that there is a needle lodged in her back. In her reality she sews dolls, but in her fantasy she imagines a needle projecting through the flesh of her own back. She feels physical pain when she tries to pull it out of her back. The needle seems to protect her from him, but at the same time, it remains a physical and mental wound. The title of the film originated from this idea of an abrasion, or a wound that develops and becomes more severe through repeated movements and rubbing.



Fig.8 *Abrasion*: Film Stills, 42in. x 28in. each

My own critique of the work is that although I think the narratives based on object symbolism have an abstract and confrontational appeal to viewers, some of the scenes did not seem to explain enough for viewers to comprehend my intentions. It was interesting to hear that both Westerners and Koreans did not understand the same scene. In response, I wasn't completely satisfied with a few scenes that are complex and that tended to be difficult or ambiguous.

For example, when Jin-Kyung decided to leave her lover in her fantasy, she carries her dolls to be buried under the tree because I wanted to suggest that her past memories would be buried with the doll. However, that point did not seem to successfully translate. The doll was a very abstract shape and did not appear recognizable enough for viewers to accept this meaning as self-evident. Also, after the screenings, some people expressed difficulty following the story both in terms of the uncomfortable visualization of violence and what appeared to be a misinterpretation of the symbolism. In conceptualizing this piece, I was concerned about these issues and, in a sense; I am still dissatisfied by my handling of an experimental narrative. Also, the use of film as medium made me realize that I could consciously plan and control the ways that the narrative could be read or misread. Thus, this piece seems to raise the question of structuring a narrative; however, one thing I tried to insist on in my film was different between my own work and conventional forms of narrative. As a consequence, some may not consider *Abrasion* a narrative short film; I like to experiment as much as possible within the general framework of a narrative. This project allowed me to experience how to collaborate with other artists, to become more aware of my direct intentions, and to better verbalize my work.

V. *Contraindications Part II: Red Wine*

It was a great opportunity for me to install all three of my most important recent works that were made between 2007 and 2008 in one place for the group 2008 MFA Thesis exhibition. I realized these works are bonded both visually and conceptually, although they involved different performers, narratives and choices of mediums. *Contraindications Part I*, for example, was more theatrical. *Contraindications Part II* involved a mixed-medium installation with sculpture, video and sound. *Abrasion* took the form of a short film. However, conceptually, the three pieces are deeply connected and all address *being trapped* in a peculiar domestic setting or undergoing a traumatic inner experience. They also explore aspects of human suffering, violent expression, power, repression, and attempts at resistance. Likewise, the visual representations are interestingly related through the dominant use of red and the visceral presentation of the symbolic objects and women's bodies.



Fig.9 *MFA Thesis Show 2008*: Documentation of installation overview I

Contraindications Part I was set up with its wall panels on the left side of the gallery with the large windows. The green and white checkerboard floor tiles were placed in

the corner of the space and the front big wall that served as a projection surface for the video component.

On the opposite wall, I included two large-scale digital prints as a part of the new thesis work, *Contraindications Part II: Red Wine*. Next to the series of the digital photographs, two columns of twelve shelves were installed and each shelf contained sixteen bottles of red liquid lit from below so they glowed a bright cherry red color. In front of the columns of the shelves, I suspended a tangled mass of medical silicone tubing from the ceiling above and an artificial white fur rug below. On the rug, I projected a minute-long sequence of video that plays continuously on a loop of a girl who is coaxed to drink a mysterious liquid. Further into the gallery space, I placed a 26 inch flat screen HD TV that played *Abrasion* with the soundtrack to the film available through a number of headphones.



Fig.10 *MFA Thesis Show 2008: Documentation of installation overview II*

The thesis show work, *Contraindications Part II: Red Wines*, develops certain aspects of *Contraindications Part I*, my first solo show, and the main theme of the work is similar. In particular, it develops the idea of being subject to taboos that make one feel sick, sinful,

and stigmatized. A young girl seems to be “trapped “ in the derelict basement of an old house where she encounters the bottles of a red fruit wine.

In the beginning, she is timid of experiencing something she has never tried. However, the taste of the liquor makes her hallucinate, and she is quickly thrown into a fantasy world. She imagines another version of herself that acts, in her fantasy, in a more free and experienced manner. The experienced persona encourages her by whispering to her to drink the liquor. The naive persona becomes frustrated and makes the decision to drink. She finally drinks and the liquid falls all over her face. She hates the bitter taste of the liquor – her first, and an experience that is somewhat forced. Despite her effort, the naïve individual’s experience is never quite like that of the seasoned one. The unstable mind and jealousy of striving to be like “the experienced one” makes “the naïve one” keep on trying. By juxtaposing these two different personas, I wanted to address the tension between “knowing” and “not knowing.”

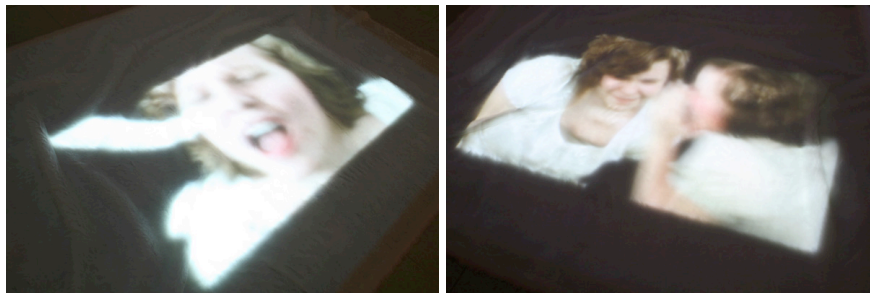


Fig. 11 *Contraindications Part II: Video projection Documentations*

The key inspiration for this piece was a series of animations featured in *The Red Haired Anne* (taken from *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery) that I remembered from my childhood. In one scene that made a strong impression on me, Anne, the main character, and her best friend Diane play together in the empty house. Ann wanted

to drink strawberry juice and she took the jar and served it to Diane. They both drank the bittersweet juice and, without knowing that it was a fruit wine, became drunk. Diane became so sick on the fruit wine that they were overheard and discovered by adults. As a punishment they were separated as the act was regarded as sinful. Anne's story is not quite the same as mine, but I wanted to emphasize how a young girl might experience something unknown that becomes violent and traumatic. They both felt guilty for trying something that they were not supposed to, and in the end, it seemed sinful and shameful.

In my original plan for this work, I wanted it to be a performance piece in which two performers would drink the liquid (wine) through silicone tubes. The set of red liquid bottles looks somewhat like medical cabinets because of the shape of the plastic bottles and caps and the medical silicon tubes. The metaphors of the red liquid could be a medicine, a fermented fruit wine, or blood. I played with these symbols to make it seem both viscerally attractive and potentially toxic at the same time in order to signify the young character's distorted mind. This piece was also collaborative in that sound was created for it by the composer Travis Ellrott. The sounds consisted of the young character's distorted whispering sounds, giggling, and the sound of transferring liquid.



Fig.12 *Contraindications Part II*: Sculptural Installation in detail



Fig.13 *Contraindications Part II*: Digital photos, 40 in x40 in each

The original proposal was not accepted by the gallery director because the gallery has a strict policy that prohibits art involving liquid that might leak and damage the floor of the gallery. Because of this restriction, research and the execution of the piece was challenging and I had to alter the idea to make it work. I also opted to alter the piece by using digital photography to convey the piece more effectively (rather than to make a completely new piece for the thesis show) because *Red Wines* has a strong relationship to *Contraindications Part I*. *Contraindications Part I and II* both have edible objects that symbolize female sexuality, and they also both present a paradoxical and depressive situation where the women are suffocated and trapped.

I had to use a green screen technique to compose the video in order to double the characters. I attempted to portray the site of the story's location with the use of digital images. I looked for really old architecture locally on Long Island and found the Mills Pond House, which is the office of The Smithtown Art Council. I went to the gallery basement, still preserved in its original 18th century form, and formerly the house's slave quarters. The sense of cracking walls and history attracted me, and I installed the partial sculpture in the site to take the photographs. In the photographs, I wanted to demonstrate the possible places

for the double characters, and specifically, in the photographs, I wanted to present a kind of visual hallucination.

The technical aspects of lighting and a green screen was effectively completed, however, the piece seemed to need more work to be resolved. As I mentioned, alteration of the original plan involved substituting digital photography and video projection for a live performance. Yet, this did not seem to resolve my dilemma because the elements in the different mediums do not seem to make the piece a cohesive story. I had very mixed feelings about this piece. During the production of this project, I felt that art making again became an individual experience for me. I had much fun experimenting, and it became an interesting switch from the filmmaking. However, the intentions did not quite come through as well as in *Abrasion*.

I was curious to see how the installation would deliver the story because the film I felt somewhat more successful than other work I have done as a way of telling a story. It raised for me the question of whether I want to become a filmmaker or an artist. After making this work, I realize what I have always been interested in. I like to play with new materials, experiment with visual presentations and figure out possible ways of relating my story through visceral images and elements. I really value a lot of the processes I experienced in making art, and I very much enjoyed making this particular project though it does not seem to effectively deliver my all of my artistic intentions. Therefore, as the last piece for my MFA, it posed challenges for my future art making.

VI. Conclusion

During the past three years in MFA program at Stony Brook University I have employed a number of different methods for art making. The first solo-show, *Contraindications Part I: Oysters & Pomegranates*, was by far the most challenging video, sound and sculptural installation for me. I brought together references of 17th century *genre painting* and the symbolism of *vanitas* still life in relation to female sexuality and death. I specifically refer to the theatricality, color and light of the paintings that I wanted to master in confronting contemporary media and performance art. The question of framing myself in Western art history is indeed to let myself perceive how I feel alienated from the context of western art history. I cannot attach myself fully to either Korean or western culture, and I feel anxiously trapped in between. A form of postcolonial limbo has become an ongoing conflict for me after living in the U.S for a decade.

Abrasion was my first short film in which I worked in collaboration with different professionals and artists. Also, I realized that I am very accustomed to seeing my video looped within a video installation, so I did not acknowledge that a film only plays once for the viewer. Because of the strict sequential time of film, the narrative needs to be more deliberately constructed. Collaborating with production and postproduction crews was extremely complicated because it is all based on verbal and written communication, and I was constantly having to make decisions that I was not prepared to make. I had to be very clear to guide my crew to produce the piece according to my vision. Since this experience, I have been repeatedly weighing making art versus making film. Once again, I feel very much trapped between the two; however, I hope to continue to make both.

Contraindications Part II: Red Wines combined multi media elements, including digital photos, sculpture, and video projections, to present aspects of a young girl's thinking. After making this work, I realized why art making is significant to me. I have often valued particular influences by historical or contemporary artwork, exploring number of different ways of representing stories, experimenting with materials, and challenging myself to use different media to express one idea.

In my future projects, I intend to look at Korean culture from both my position of being an insider and an outsider to transform my own experiences into art making. Although I feel trapped in between cultures, this provides me with a vantage point that allows me to observe my local culture as an artist.

I believe that post-colonial studies needs always to remember that its referent in the real world is a form of political, economic, and discursive oppression whose name, first and last, is *colonialism*. The forms of colonialist power differ radically across cultural locations, and its intersections with other orders of oppression are always was complex and multivalent. But, wherever a globalized theory of the colonial might lead us, we need to remember that resistances to colonialist power always find material presence at the level of the local, and so the research and training we carry out in the field of power-colonialism.¹³

With my perspectives and experiences, I would like to continue to make stories about resistances of various kinds within traumatic and difficult psychological situations. I am particularly interested in the repression of female sexuality in my own culture, but am also interested in stories about the lives of immigrants and powerless individuals, and my young highly globalized generation that exists between cultures in a manner different than my experience, but also strangely similar due to the Internet, music, and film. Art making is, for

¹³ Stephen Slemon, 'The Scramble for Post-colonialism' in Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, eds. *De-Scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and Textuality* (London: Routledge, 1994), 52

me, a great tool to communicate and relate to people and aspects of the contemporary global landscape. In light of this, film is a particularly accessible art form for reaching many people and getting them to feel and think more deeply about important public issues. After experiencing both contemporary art and experimental film making, I have been more conscious about the subjects of my art and the appropriate techniques for presenting them. Regarding myself as a minority and having to deal with issues of resistance in my real life, I will continue to search for and create stories that reflect issues and politics I understand and seek to understand better through the act of creating.

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