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Final Year Project Report

Cultural Detachment expressed through Contemporary Art
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DECLARATION

I, Kayla Rae Javier Santos, declare that this research report, ‘Cultural Detachment expressed through Contemporary Art’ represents my own work under the supervision of Professor Laurence James Wood and it has not been previously submitted for examination to any tertiary institution.

Signature:

Date: April 17th, 2023

ABSTRACT

This capstone project is an exploration of cultural detachment and homogeneity through the medium of contemporary art. In modern times, the phenomenon of globalisation has affected all aspects of our lives. Specifically, in the art market, the rise of global trade and cultural exports from different parts of the world has changed our perception and expression of cultural identity. The thin line between Exoticism and homogenisation has taken root in our tastes and ways of living, while art is no exception, my own relationship with culture is, too, affected. Looking at the ways in which contemporary artists and media imply detachment from their ethnic heritage or background, this project will look at how those techniques can assist me in expressing themes of cultural detachment, and how culture is gentrified for commercial gain. The outcome of the conceived artworks is a public, curated exhibition, where I aim to form discussion and share knowledge surrounding cultural identity in a globalised society, and how heritage plays a role in today’s art market.

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Project Rationale

1.1 Background

In today's world, the idea of culture and heritage is skewed by the evident interconnectedness we have among various societies. In Hong Kong specifically, such is seen in our schools and areas we populate. People of different or mixed ethnicities coexist and speak various languages.

From my own experience, I feel a sense of “cultural detachment” living in a place not representative of my ethnic background. These feelings are catalysed by a lack of exposure to my culture and perhaps the melting pot of traditions and cultural practices I experience growing up in a largely Chinese community. However, even then such experiences unique to Hong Kong culture are diluted further through my upbringing in an international school. As the demographic of such schools are children of expatriate families, and local Chinese with uprooted, globalised lifestyles, we live in bubbles that isolate us from the rest of Hong Kong people. Considering the excessive claims of promoting global citizenship, one would at least expect that international schools would have more interest in engaging with local communities on a more than shallow level (Cheung, 2022). The steady increase in enrolments from local and non-local populations in international schools highlights the desire for a globalised society. This is hence at the expense of a thorough understanding and authentic experience of one's own culture. I recall having to produce an art project based on culture. Of what culture I could accurately represent, I had no idea. Creating something about my Filipino heritage would ultimately be proved shallow and inauthentic, stemming from experiences that were never my own. Otherwise, I did not know Hong Kong culture either. We never learned anything about local news and politics, and our interaction with the culture is limited to knowing how to say “chow fan” at the cha chaan teng and “yau lok” to get off of the minibus.

Globalisation is mirrored in our current art market. Art critic, JJ Charlesworth (2014) points out that immense globalisation in the art world specifically has led to visual and ideological conventions of homogeneity. More adaptable, consumer-friendly art presented at international fairs and galleries manifests at the expense of an authentic expression of culture. He persists that before the 1990s, the art

scenes were more closely tied to a national context. This is not to say that artists' work was particularly nationalistic. More so that the institutions at the time operated on a national level and with the intent of exchange of national and domestic cultural agendas rather than international circulation. The issue many artists face today is in choosing how to address the tension between local and global audiences and in learning that however different their interests and identities are, they are subject to the same global forces that diminish this difference. Although we see this globalised art market as one that is cooperative and democratic, it is manifesting as more top-down, defined by hierarchical power over the commodification of culture (Charlesworth, 2014). A similar notion is expressed in a paper discussing the relationship between art and globalisation. "There are no static communities, no fixed identities and no "authentic" cultures" (Dimova & Gillen, 2017).

Takashi Murakami is an artist known for pioneering the Superflat art movement. Superflat represents the physical and societal flatness of Japanese culture, themes of the Japanese "kawaii" aesthetic and the distinction between high and low culture (The Art Story, n.d.-a). Murakami's art is heavily influenced by the capitalist ideologies of western Pop art which are contextualised in Japanese culture. His works blend Japanese art traditions with the country's murky cultural identity as the epicentre of Asian low culture with characters inspired by anime and cartoon merchandising (Takashi Murakami, 2009). He ultimately benefits from cultural homogeneity, configuring his art for mass consumption. Despite receiving acclaim for his practices, he also has received native and international criticism for the exploitation of popular culture (Davies, 2010). One could argue that Murakami's work is also a commentary on cultural homogeneity, however, there is a lot of room for more dialogue to be carried around the homogenisation of Asian arts and culture.

1.2 Objective

My project aims to express cultural detachment through an Asian lens by means of contemporary art. My work should be able to create a dialogue surrounding what it means to have a cultural identity and

the extent to which it applies to a growing globalised population. It will also highlight the implications of cultural homogeneity in the art market and how cultural detachment is evident.

1.3 Research Questions

- How do artists express their cultural detachment in a culturally homogenous global market?
- How can artists form a commentary on cultural homogeneity?

1.4 Significance of Study

Assessing the current state of the art market and its reflection on society's globalisation, the mystification of culture becomes more apparent. Not necessarily is it a negative occurrence; however, studying the individual effects this has on cultural identity would be interesting to explore. Although some contemporary artists' work does ponder cultural identity and the effects of multiple cultural influences, I find that explicit dialogue regarding the effects of cultural homogeneity and globalisation in the arts is quite limited. Through informed study, I will use art to convey my personal feelings and highlight the underlying absurdity of gentrification caused by these global phenomena.

1.5 Term Definition

Cultural homogeneity is about the diffusion of cultural identity. Subsequent to the effects of globalisation, exchanges of cultural values, philosophies, architecture, languages and other factors of our ways of being become interchangeable. Jennings (2011) claims that this occurrence is hegemonised by those cultures that have more wealth and power; as we have all seen, a tendency towards eurocentrism and northern ideals is seen across the globe. This is not to say that all cultures have adopted a single way of living, but more so that globalisation has allowed people to come into contact with "widely shared ideas and make them their own". In the art world, heightened homogeneity leads to a consciousness of difference. This perspective shift has perhaps subconsciously made artists aware of their much more

global audience. Charlesworth (2014) notes that homogeneity has led to a trend focusing on diversified cultural influences and making hybridity and migration the subject of many works.

As aforementioned, **globalisation** is the occurrence of diaspora across all localities as a result of trade, migration and cultural exchange. The worry of this situation is how it can create uniformity and erase cultural identities. Dimova & Gillen (2017) state, however, that globalisation catalyses the counter-demand for authenticity in the market. This means that nations strategically focus on their traditional cultural identities for better soft power and trade. In the world of art and culture, entanglement with global markets has bred flaws – “profiteering from local specificities, exoticising local communities, and creating new global elites” are some of many (Dimova & Gillen 2017). The dichotomy of globalisation is in that we can welcome inclusion and celebration of diversity. But, we are now succumbing to more explicit hegemonies and inequalities; and the cultural detachment of many individuals.

Literature Review

In this section I will elaborate and analyse cultural phenomena and Asian artworks that exemplify cultural homogeneity. In different ways, these cases are a reflection of cultural adaptation and detachment and highlight how one may respond to globalisation and cultural exchange. My analysis will expand on how I could adapt these techniques in my art to build on a more self-aware commentary on cultural detachment and homogeneity. For a visual overview of these case studies, the chart below shows what areas are gentrified.

| | Technique | Concept | Visual perception | Grey = ethnic background White = Influence of other cultures |
|--------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Yang Qi | Chinese Painting | German Expressionism | Chinese | |
| Yoshitomo Nara | German Expressionism and Contemporary western influence | Cultural detachment/Isolation | Japanese Superflat | |
| Phenomenon of mukokuseki | Japanese Media Culture | The Western gaze of Japanese locality | Ambiguous cultural identity | |

2.1 Cultural detachment through superficial representation

Based in Germany, the diasporic Chinese artist, Yang Qi is known for his unique artistic concept “Zen with German expressionism”. Yang has a PhD in Art philosophy from the University of Heidelberg. From Germany, he dedicated his studies and teaching extensively to ancient Chinese idiograms. His ink paintings and ceramics feature minimal brush strokes and colours evoking the emotive techniques of expressionism and the humanistic reflections representative of either influence (Ong, 2018).



[Figure 1: *Blue Star*, (2017) by Yang Qi]

In the work *Blue Star* (2017), Yang uses diluted ceramic painting washes to draw on a circular plate. Circles in zen Buddhism are regarded as a symbol of perfection. The characteristic dark black lines are also similar to that of Chinese calligraphy and the expressive strokes of Zen painting. Such formal dynamism also highlights German expressionist influence. The two lines are in fact phallic, lines etched in either one to indicate a penile shape. In between are the washed-out silhouette of a person, the mise-en-scene altogether almost resembles female genitalia. The contrast between the deep black and pale blue elicits an atmosphere of contemplation and pressure, objective sexuality and the subjective mind.

Cultural detachment may be embodied through Yang's superficial likeness and gentrification of Zen. The stark contrast between the explicit sexuality that is standard in Western traditions paired with the minimalist purity of Zen ideologies creates an interesting juxtaposition. This is because Zen Buddhists believe sensuality is a hindrance to enlightenment (Stevens, 1990). On the other hand, the contemplative humanistic perspectives both Zen and expressionism share are encapsulated in his work. The superficial resemblance Yang's work bares is an alluring nod to his cultural past and academic practices in the Chinese tradition. More of this fusion of cultural influences can be found in *Lady Gaga* (2004) where, as the name suggests, he uses Chinese painting to present the female pop icon who is known to be a

flamboyant cultural figure. Viewers are called to contemplate the limits of a culturally significant art form and the extent to which we may adapt its heritage to the globalised subject matter, not in line with tradition.

Alisan Fine Arts describes Yang's work as intertwining "the artistic traditions of his cultural Chinese past with the modernist Western style he encountered in Europe" (n.d.). I deeply admire the boundless technical skill and knowledge of Chinese painting traditions Yang emanates throughout his work. In my work, I similarly want to dramatise how Yang uses the visual familiarity of Zen and Chinese painting as a tool to portray more globalised and contemporary ideologies.

2.2 Cultural detachment through ambiguity

Parallel to contemporary art is visual media and modern cinema. Japan's transnational cinema operates under a globalised audience through "mukokuseki" or the racially, ethnically and culturally unembedded imagery in anime that is often whitewashed to suit Western audiences. In an article regarding the internationalisation of Japanese anime, it is recounted that through the deprivation of Oriental signifiers, anime carves a unique path to global markets. Such acculturation is perpetuated by fantastical aesthetics that indicate no real ethnic identity – think of the famous Pokemon and Sailor moon (Lu, 2008). Toshio Okada argues that paradoxically, in the same way, that western Otakus yearn for the Japanese lifestyle embodied in the mu-kokuseki, Japanese people such as himself have yearned for America and American pop culture (Crane, Kawashima, Kawasaki, 2002).

In Japanese anime, cultural detachment is weaponised as a tool for mass appeal. The cultural ambiguity and transcendence of identity in Anime characters could be applied through my art. This would be a way for me to exaggerate and visualise my cultural ambiguity.

2.3 Cultural detachment through technique

More implicitly, Yoshitomo Nara's oeuvre borrows inspiration from his endeavours in Germany and his home of Japan. A member of the Superflat movement, Nara looked to comic books and pets in his early, lonely childhood. After gaining a Master's degree from Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music, he went to Germany to be an apprentice to a Neo-Expressionist painter (Phillips Auctioneers LLC, 2020). The language barrier brought him more isolation and back to his youth.

As briefly aforementioned, Superflat focuses heavily on the re-adaption of Japanese aesthetics to fit a commercial and international audience. Through graphic art, pop culture and animated characters, the movement was started based on Japan's obsession with escapism and consumer culture (Drohojowska-Philp, 2001). Nara's contribution to the movement could perhaps be perceived as a more personal commentary on his roots. Being the only one of Murakami and other major contributors to live abroad in Germany and the United States for a significant period of his life, his work probes for a "Western depth" (Frazier, 2013). Conceptually, his work exhibits his own childlike loneliness and isolation.



[Figure 2: *Midnight Surprise*, (2017) by Yoshitomo Nara]

In Nara's recent work *Midnight Surprise* (2017), he reconfigures his iconic "Ramona" character in a style that distances itself from his prior Ukiyo-e-esque conventions into one that resembles Western

techniques. The dream-like mood Nara creates through thin layers of paint is inspired by his famous tutor at the Kunstacademie, Peter Doig (Phillip Auctioneers, 2017). Welcome too are comparisons with Mark Rothko's techniques, both artists focusing on themes of spirituality and philosophy (The Art Story, n.d.-b).

Children in Nara's work are symbols of his subconscious mind. The utopian purity of children masks the pain of his past through mischievous defiance and likeness to Otafuku theatre masks. Philosopher, Azuma Hiroki remarks on the depiction of children in Superflat adapting the work of psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. Children in art create an air of magic and play. According to Azuma, this is owed to a lack of awareness of gaze or relativity to perspective. In Murakami's work, his "kawaii" characters have irises upon irises in their eyes implying a sense of hyperfocused desire towards an image. Nara's children are oxymoronic; suspended on a blank surface, "Ramona" is neither a child fixated on their surroundings, nor an adult in Azuma's formulation, aware of the viewer and their interaction. Instead, there is an absence of any interaction, the recurrent motif of smouldering eyes in Nara's work is always blank and uninviting (Ivy, 2010).



[Figure 3: *New Day: Kaikai and Kiki, Faces All-Over*, (2011) by Takashi Murakami]

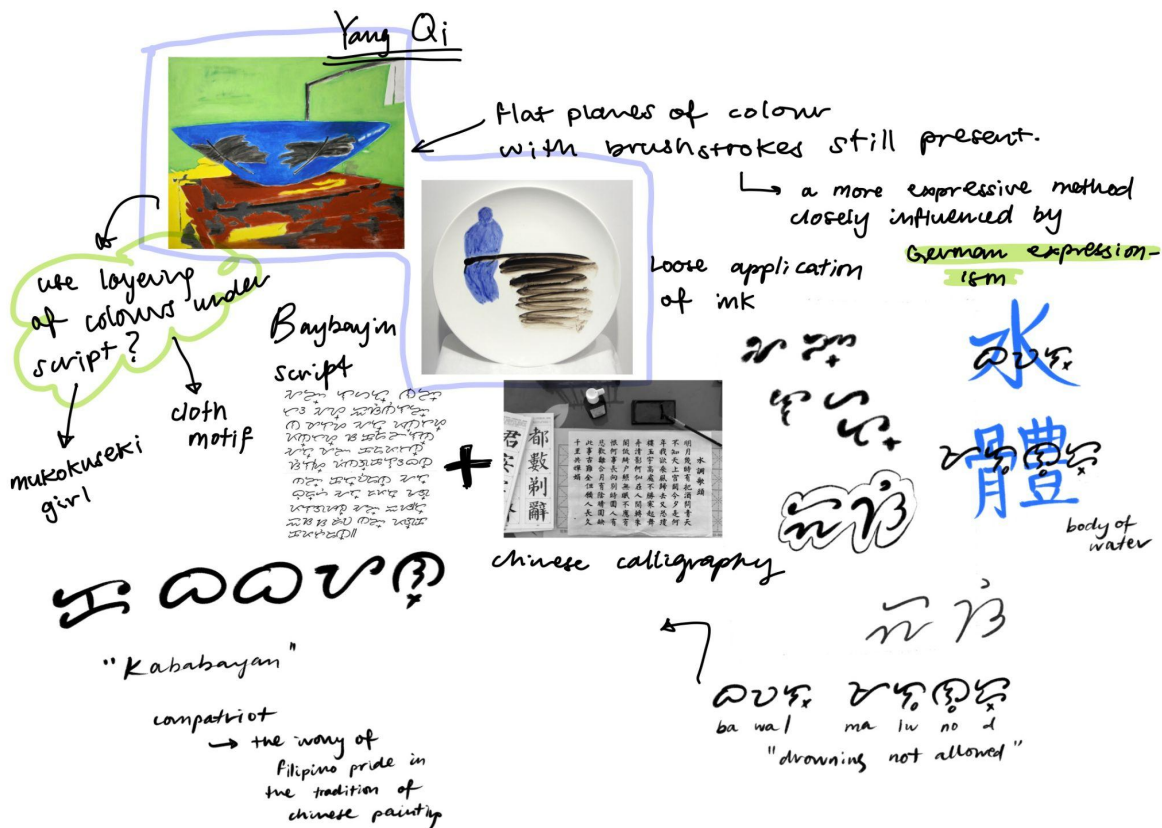
The use of minimalism reminiscent of the stillness depicted in the sensibilities of Japanese Zen Buddhism, and ethereal child-like characters that reference popular culture hence give his work a visually Japanese appearance. Despite this, Nara works with Western technicality and concepts relating to his experience of isolation and fragmentation – the child coming to terms with their statelessness.

2.4 Conclusion

As previously discussed, much of my work will be a satirisation of how we homogenise culture in art. These pieces of multimedia work will discuss concepts such as cultural ambiguity, beautifying tradition, and superficial representation. In terms of medium, I primarily will use painting as a means of expression. I would also like to experiment with mixed media and video to further realise my ideas.

2.4.1 Concept 1

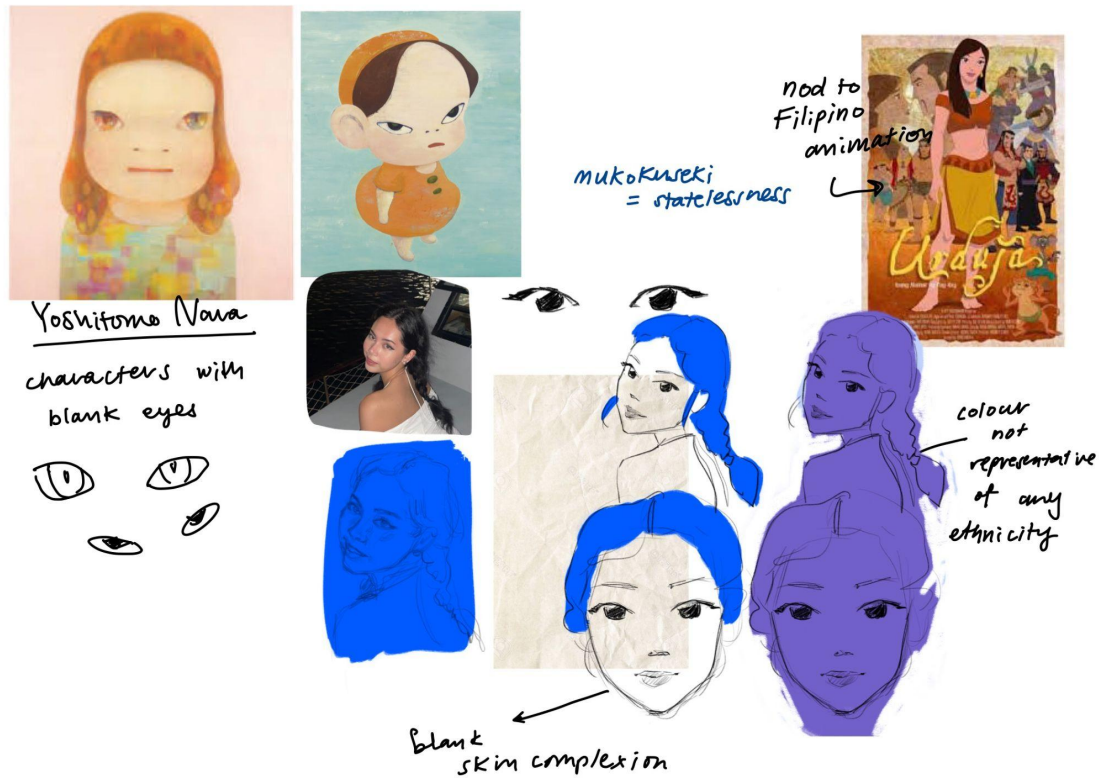
Mirroring what can be perceived as a superficial rendering of Zen painting in Yang Qi's work, it would be interesting to highlight my own misrepresentation of the cultures I identify with. As a Filipino, what comes to mind may be the instrumentation of Baybayin to exoticise the appearance of an otherwise eurocentric work of art. To further ambiguate cultural heritage, Chinese painting may also be adopted as a reflection of my environment. The final work would be a distorted amalgamation of cultures fused into one, perhaps disorienting viewers trying to understand its origin. Baybayin is a Filipino script used prior to the Spanish colonisation in the 18th century when it was replaced with the Latin alphabet. Although not used in daily life, a bill was passed to introduce it as an official national writing system to be incorporated in signages around the Philippines in 2018 (Press and Public Affairs Bureau, 2018). Signalling the process of decolonisation, my use of the script accompanied by visual elements of other cultures creates a dichotomy between national pride and global influence.



[Figure 4: Concept 1 Brainstorm]

2.4.2 Concept 2

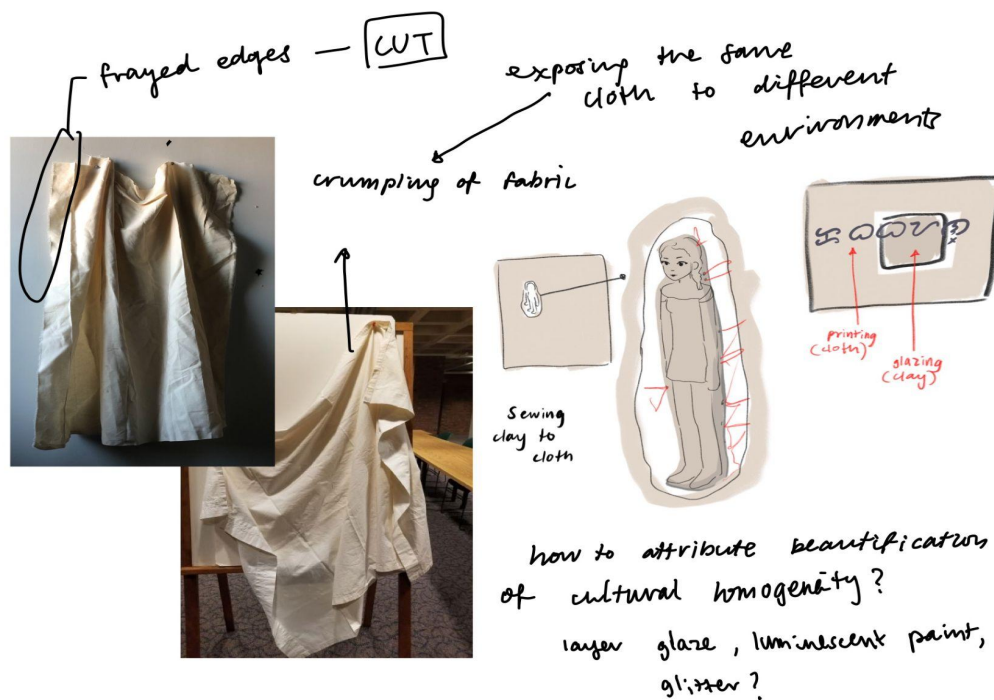
The ambiguity of cultural identity can be explored in a multitude of ways. Expanding from the cultural mystification found in Japanese visual media, I could attempt this in the form of portraiture. Adapting techniques used in mukokuseki, I will create a self-portrait with features that can't tie me to any one race, dramatising or completely obstructing archetypal features by using unnatural colours and cartoonish shapes.



[Figure 5: Concept 2 Brainstorm]

2.4.3 Concept 3

While Nara utilises the technical symbolism of extra-cultural influences, I would like to explore the physical symbolism of cloth to elaborate on cultural detachment. The phrase “cut from the same cloth” is one that describes people who despite being separated from each other bear the same identity or have an unalterable connection to one another. Cloth is a perfect symbol of cultural detachment and homogeneity, in that it is perhaps one of the only manmade creations that have such close resemblance to organic abstraction. It flows and can be cut but it will always be the same material. Compositionally, I am inspired by the fragmented appearance of Nara’s characters and the overall mood of detachment it emanates.



[Figure 6: Concept 3 Brainstorm]

2.4.4 Concept 4

Expanding on the concept of mukokuseki, the beautification of cultural paraphernalia in my work could and how artists may centre the Western gaze as important in their artwork can be explored. As previously expressed, Murakami and Japanese media do this through bright artificial colours and mixing in different cultural references.

Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Target outcomes of artworks

- To create art that discusses globalisation's effects on the homogenisation of visual culture and cultural detachment
- The project's aim is to illuminate the feelings associated with cultural detachment felt by the student as well as the implications of cultural globalisation through the means of contemporary artworks. The research will observe whether or not those themes were represented in the student's work in the participants' own opinion.

3.2 Research Method

In order to accurately assess the effectiveness of my artworks in conveying my ideas, I will host a physical and online exhibition for peoples viewing. Through a digital questionnaire, I will alongside asking participants for their opinions, also ask for their general background in the field of arts as well as cultural experiences. These factors can also help me assess the success of my art as I would hope that regardless of education or upbringing, my work can highlight how dialogue around cultural homogeneity and detachment is important.

3.2.1 Questionnaire sample

1. I declare that I am 17 years of age or older.
2. What is your ethnicity?
 - a. Asian
 - b. Caucasian / White
 - c. African / Black
 - d. Hispanic
 - e. Multiple Ethnicity or other (please specify)
3. What is your highest level of education?
 - a. High school diploma/GED
 - b. Associate degree
 - c. Bachelor's degree
 - d. Master's degree or higher education
 - e. Other (Please fill in)

- f. Prefer not to say
4. Where do you currently reside?
- a. North America
 - b. Europe
 - c. Africa
 - d. South America
 - e. Asia
 - f. Australia
 - g. Caribbean Islands
 - h. Pacific Islands
 - i. Other
 - j. Prefer not to say
5. Please rate your engagement with arts and culture on a scale of 1 - 10.
(1 = I never engage in arts activities, 10 = I engage with and educate myself about art as much as possible)
6. I was raised in a different culture to my parents
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. agree
 - e. Strongly agree
7. I currently live in a city where my ethnic background is shared by the majority of the population
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. agree
 - e. Strongly agree
8. I identify as a third-culture kid
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. agree
 - e. Strongly agree
9. Cultural detachment and disorientation is expressed through these artworks
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. agree
 - e. Strongly agree
10. These artworks give me more insight into the implications of globalisation in art and culture
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree

11. Please briefly explain your answers to questions 9 and 10 and share any thoughts for improvement

12. Would you like to participate in the lucky draw to win a free commissioned portrait?

- a. Yes
- b. No

3.3 Research Schedule

| Month | Action |
|----------|--|
| December | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collect materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 3 canvases ○ Roll of canvas fabric ○ Buy Chinese scroll/Chinese paper ○ Clay ○ Pandan fan, wood plates etc. Filipino heritage paraphernalia |
| January | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Complete artwork adopting concept 4 ● Complete self-portrait with concept 2 ● Complete Chinese painting with concept 1 ● Refine ideas for clay & fabric sculpting ● Start sculpting |
| February | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Finish and start bisque firing ● Glaze and glaze fire ● Start to assemble artwork for concept 3 ● Produce additional works expanding on previous concepts |
| March | 10th: Start social media promotion on Art Root Top Gallery Instagram and email marketing 14th Presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Complete and assemble for concept 3 |
| April | 1st: Exhibition opening (Art Roof Top and Website) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Continuous social media promotion of digital exhibition ● Monitoring exhibition day-to-day, answering questions and requesting for more research participants 10th: Exhibition closing (Questionnaire will stop taking responses) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Compiling and analysing results 18th: Final Deadline |

Application

This section will explain the ideation behind the artworks developed for the exhibition. All of the artworks created were inspired by the artists and general concepts mentioned in the literature review. I will also expand on how those concepts, reinterpreted in my art, work to reflect cultural homogeneity and detachment. I will also explain how the initial concepts developed in my final work. The purpose of this method of research was to gain insight into how artists express identity through their art. I tried to adopt the techniques from relevant contemporary artists and creative professionals from throughout art history and media to visually communicate these themes. The following sections will divide the artworks created into categories parallel to those expanded on in my Literature review.

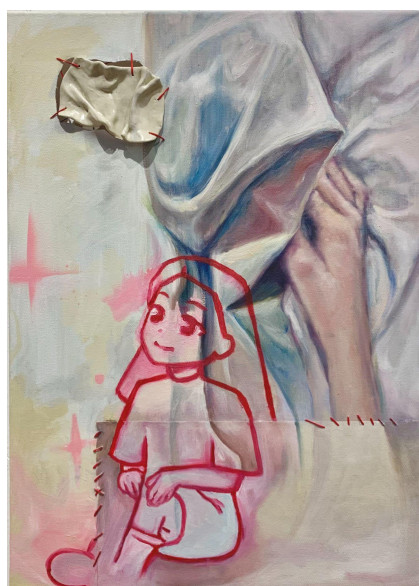
Also, through the practice of organising an exhibition, and curating it for public viewing, I sought out the opinions of other people of various backgrounds. By interacting with viewers and giving them a questionnaire, I would understand how successful my work was in portraying these ideas and what interpretations and ideas would spur out of others.

4.1 Ambiguity of Culture



[Figure 7: *medium amalgamation*, 2023]

The ambiguous perception of culture is presented abstractly in *medium amalgamation*. As the title suggests, various mediums, materials and cultural signifiers cover the canvas in a disorderly composition. Using the Japanese idea of mukokuseki – as previously mentioned in *concept 2* of my proposal and conventions of cartoon media, I developed a character that bore no ethnic leaning. Line art and artificial colours further detach the character from a sense of reality. The idea of blank staring eyes was adopted from Nara's Ramona character, in my case, it eludes to an emptiness and playfulness reminiscent of old "rubber hose" surrealist art styles. Perpetuated by the dream-like assortment of colour and line, the sense of displacement is illustrated in the arrangement of the line drawn girl and me, as a child. They face away from each other but are connected by a red string that stitches the assortment of mediums together to highlight my connection to the character.



[Figure 8: *cut from the same cloth*, (2023) 50 x 70 cm][Figure 9: *cut from the same cloth*, (2023) 65 x 100 cm]

This character is seen again in Figure 8, again demonstrating naivete and contentment with ambiguity. The use of stitching together and layering of materials was further conceptualised in the *cut from the same cloth* series. Looking at how cloth can be used to represent unalterable connection and sameness, I decided to explore the boundary of when a cloth is no longer the same cloth by painting,

ceramic stoneware and stitching un-stretched canvas together. The hand and the kite-like portrait of me as a child in either painting, demonstrate a sense of longing for identity.

4.2 Superficial Representations of Culture

In the work of Yang Qi, his use of Chinese painting techniques with their minimal black ink strokes calls spectators to look deeper into the context of the artwork to discover its true influence. Having studied Art philosophy in Germany, German expressionism is said to be the central concept of his work. In my work, I tried to demonstrate this superficial representation of my identity as a third-culture artist while also leaning into the cultural influences I have as someone raised in a largely Chinese setting.



[Figure 10: *Vacation Photos*, (2023) 33 x 33 cm each]

The oil paintings series on rice paper depict photos I've taken in the past year of Mong Kok, Philippines, and Wanchai. Appealing to my interests is an inherent and authentic way of expressing my personal identity and culture. By depicting these scenes, spectators see the places I frequent through my eyes, the gaze of a Hong Kong-born Filipino. "A New Sense of Identity," a 2022 group exhibition at Tang Contemporary in Hong Kong curated the work of various artists that looked at how artistic creation embodies identity. The exhibition brief explains the renaissance of individuality in contemporary art,

stating that “the collective dimension is recounted in a new way, filtered by the artist’s experiential heritage as a unique individual” and lives (Sena, 2022).

In my initial *Concept 1* brainstorm, I wanted to use Chinese painting like Yang Qi. However, I realised that a more relevant technical representation of my culture would be oil painting. Although conventionally Western, its ever-presence in Filipino art history reflects the Philippines’ colonial history, having been influenced by the art of the European Renaissance onwards (Taylor, 2001). Furthermore, contemporary cultural homogeneity has adopted oil painting as the universal standard. In the Chinese art market, the segments “Oil Painting and contemporary artworks” in comparison to “Chinese painting and calligraphy” justifiably attract global market participants (Wang, 2023). Extracultural influences in *Vacation Photos* are reflected in the choice of rice paper, the circular composition and the technique recalling Chinese aesthetics.



[Figure 11: *cheongsam*, (2023)]

The *cheongsam* series is a conceptual interpretation of superficial representations of culture. By creating a Chinese cheongsam out of canvas, I subtracted the weight of heritage from the traditional dress. The use of canvas across the exhibition was ideated in *concept 3*. In its bareness and abstract organic nature, it symbolises cultural homogeneity. This is not to say that the material itself is what makes a cheongsam a symbol of cultural value, but more so it is my act of creating a costume with no knowledge

or connection to its craft or legacy. The dress has no lining, has visible markings and is sewn together with thick thread. The fabric's illfitting quality alludes to its performative nature and suggests that its wearer is someone intrinsically acculturated. The *cheongsam* is displayed in the exhibition folded neatly, drawing the viewers' attention to the identifying factors of the work. It is also similar to how clothes are folded for sale.

My goal with this part of the exhibition is to appropriate contemporary trends of commercial expression by using fashion and editorial media techniques to reflect how culture has become a superficial market tool. Fashion is among the first forms of expression to be commodified for industrialised societies and so this connection illustrates how contemporary art veers down that same dampening.

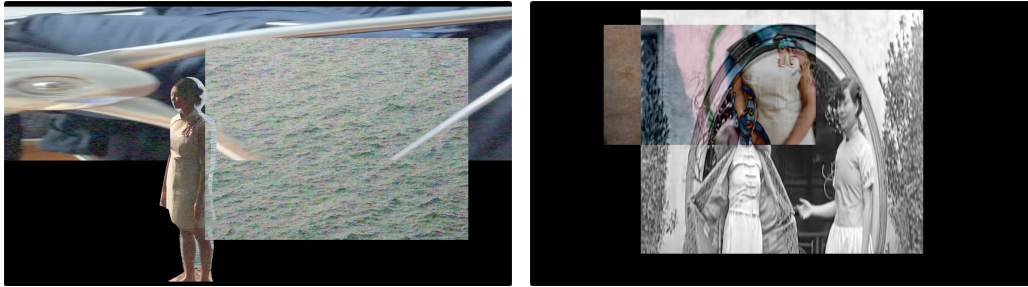
[Figure 12: *lookbook*, (2023)]



The photo collection *lookbook* adopts conventions of editorial fashion photography. While the model personifies the identity of a culturally detached Chinese woman her poses are performative and emphasise the ideas presented in the dress.

Girl in costume acts as a bridge between real life and the conceptual ideas in the *cheongsam* series. I pieced together videos from the photoshoot, videos of people sifting through everyday clothes and an archival video of a Chinese dress infomercial from 1929. I wanted to illustrate through the editing, the fragmentation of identity and clothing as a performance of that. I also drew comparisons between the

clothing people own and the endless ocean accentuating that clothing and the symbolic cloth that ties us together is ambiguated and an illusion.



[Figure 13: *girl in costume*, 2023 - screencaps]

4.3 Technique



[Figure 14: *girl explores*, (2023) 50 x 70 cm] [Figure 15: *girl explores*, the first layer of spray paint]

Yoshitomo Nara uses techniques in painting that reflect his cultural detachment. In *girl explores*, techniques were used to portray flatness on a dimensional collage of Filipino craft wares. I found that the act of spray painting these to be symbolic of that flattening and suppression in the phenomenon of cultural gentrification for mass appeal [see Fig. 15]. The choice of the colour pink references various phenomena in modern-day capitalism. ‘Pink capitalism,’ is the profit-driven business practice of appealing to niche

markets they have once suppressed (Verma, 2021). Calling to contemporary cultural trends, we are reminded of the hegemony of ‘millennial pink’ in products, political campaigns and general media in recent times, the colour’s power employed to generate ‘Instagram-ability’ (Hyland, 2022).



[Figure 16: *connected*, (2023) 25 x 25 x 15 cm]

Connected is a work where I wanted to create a three-dimensional version of the character from *cut from the same cloth*, *medium amalgamation*, and *girl explores*. The result was ceramic stoneware dolls left unglazed. The same red thread that is present in most of the pieces of the exhibition is used again to wrap and connect the dolls. They are placed on a draped ‘malong’, a garment worn by people from my family’s province of Mindanao, Philippines. The continuous motif of cloth and thread throughout the exhibition is perpetuated and contextualised through this piece as it connotes themes of heritage and detachment from one’s family. The dolls are visually spray painted with pink to symbolise the commodification and removal of cultural identity.

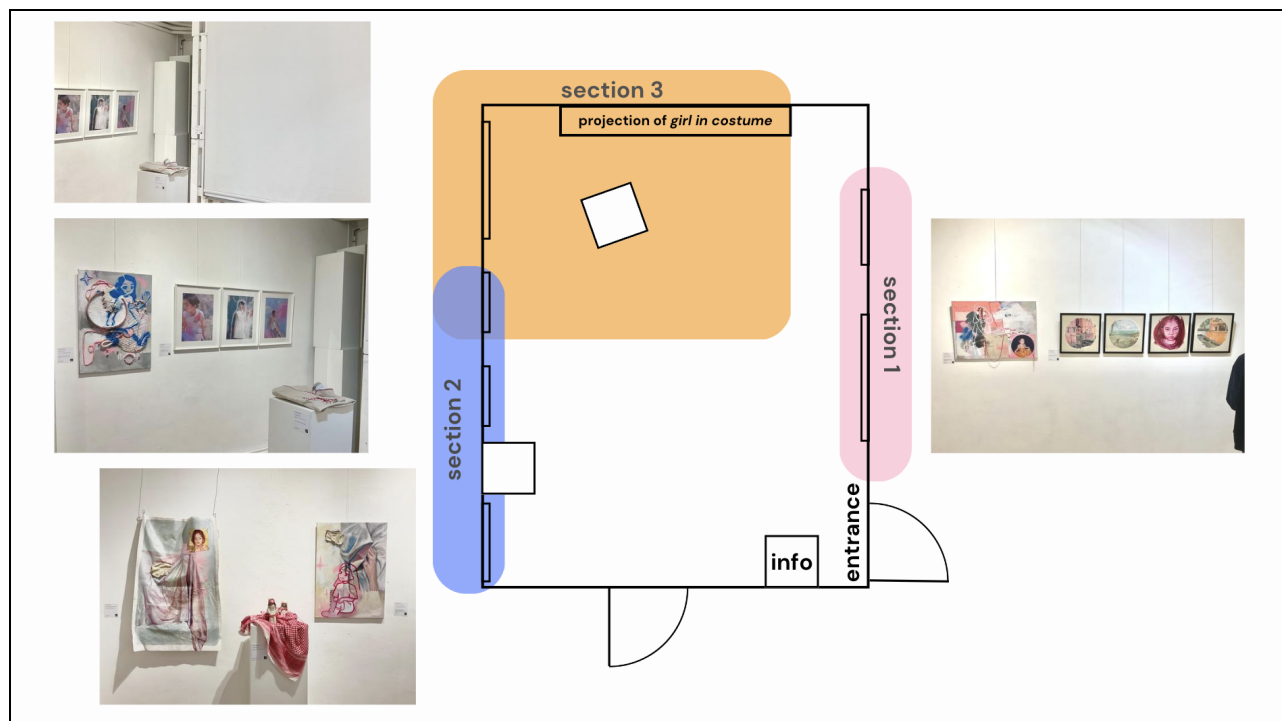
Live and Online Exhibition

The exhibition was displayed at Art Roof Top Gallery from April 1st to 22nd, 2023. During this timeframe, I invited friends and family to attend the exhibition opening where I was able to tour multiple people at a time and gain their insight on the works. People were also free to visit without my assistance. My online questionnaire was also available for visitors for the first 10 days of the exhibition opening. This section will expand upon my promotional efforts, the layout, the texts written, and the research results.

5.1 Exhibition Curation and Promotion

The title of the final exhibition promoted was “pure heritage.” I feel that this encompassed the ironic undertone of all the works, for example, the appropriation of cheongsam and fashion and the ever-presence of the naive young character I developed. The word “pure” has a double meaning and can be interpreted as suggesting an unadulterated form. On the other hand, it can describe something being wiped clear, in this case, of any cultural heritage.

Below is the layout of all the pieces in the exhibition space. As you can see, the works are divided into three separate sections. Section 1 establishes to spectators how I have used physical representation to demonstrate cultural detachment. These works also focus more on my relationship with cultural detachment and thus ground the exhibition in my personal experience. Section 2 then connects that with identity as a general concept through the cloth motif and ambiguous characters. *Girl explores* – more explicitly – investigates the idea of covering culture, and so it lead seamlessly into the *cheongsam* series.



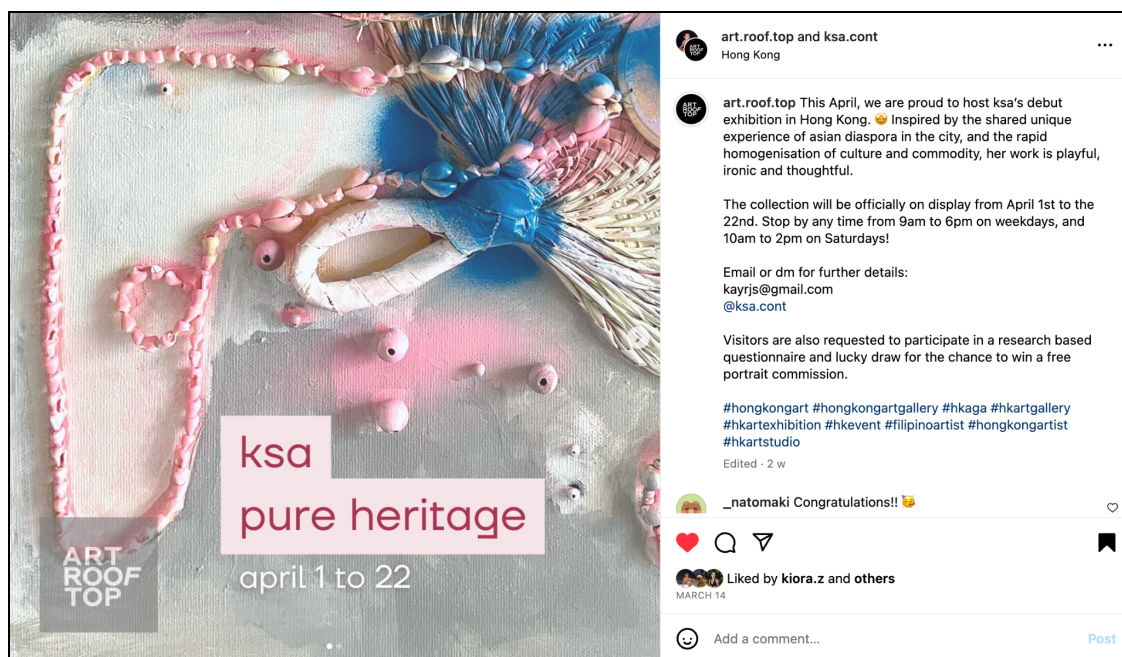
[Figure 17: Floor plan of exhibition space paired with photos of each section]

pure heritage explores the bounds of cultural identity in contemporary society through conceptual motifs. As we shift into a globalised market, culture is used as an exoticizing trait or bound and repackaged as something palatable. In this series, the artist expresses their personal disconnection from her heritage alongside the commodification and erasure of culture through medium and metaphor.



This exhibition is part of an artistic research project conducted for CCA EdUHK. To help out please scan the QR code to participate. Survey participants are also able to compete in a Lucky Draw to win a commissioned portrait. (collecting responses until April 10th)

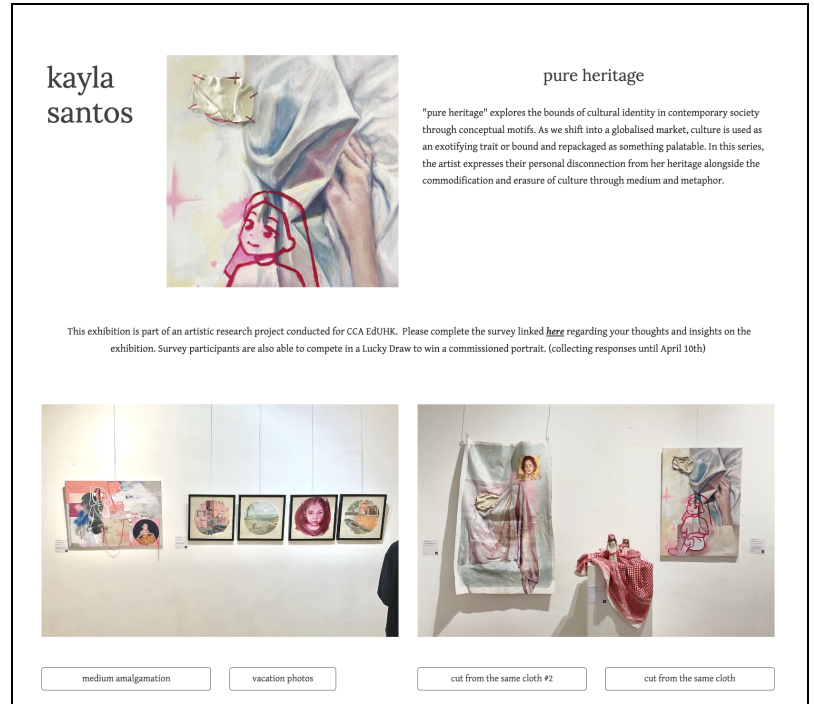
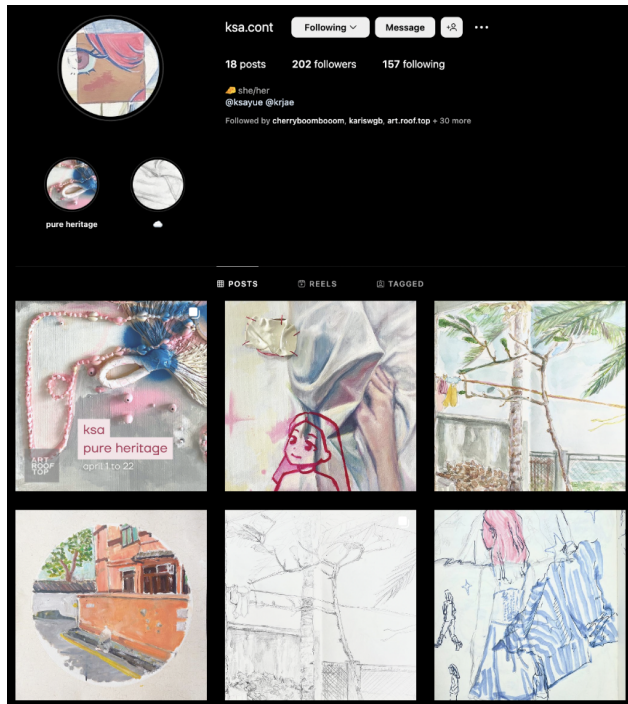
[Figure 18: Exhibition brief information poster]



[Figure 19: Instagram announcement post by the gallery account]

Before spectators were invited to look around, I wanted to ensure that they have a general idea of the key themes explored without precise explanation. This is exemplified in my posts for the opening of the exhibition on the gallery's social media, and the official exhibition brief that is placed in the entrance of the room [see fig. 18 & 19].

To increase the exhibition's reach and more opportunities for diverse research participants, I created an Instagram account amassing 200+ followers. Here, I documented the process of my artwork and idea development and the final exhibition for those who could not attend in person. Upon the exhibition's opening, I made the questionnaire accessible to the public and a website for online viewing.



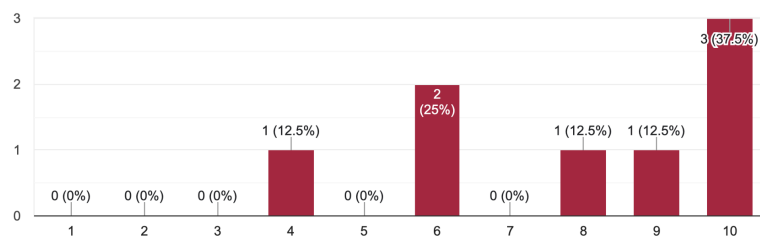
[Figure 20: screencap of my art Instagram account] [Figure 21: screencap of exhibition site with a link to questionnaire]

(Exhibition website link: <https://sites.google.com/s.eduhk.hk/ksa>)

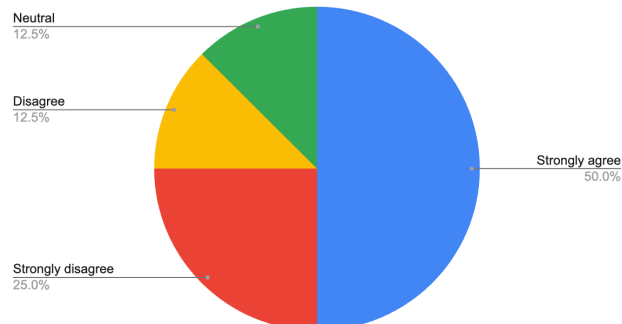
5.2 Audience Feedback

I was able to get eight written responses to the questionnaire. Written according to my research questions, its intent was to see the effectiveness of developing a commentary around cultural detachment and homogeneity. The demographic of respondents was, unfortunately, not as ideally varied. All were between 18-25 years old and were undergraduate students. However, there were racial and cultural variances, and that within the levels of arts and culture engagement. These factors are important as they provide me with a fair assessment of my exhibition's effectiveness among people of different backgrounds.

Please rate your engagement with arts and culture on a scale of 1 - 10.
8 responses



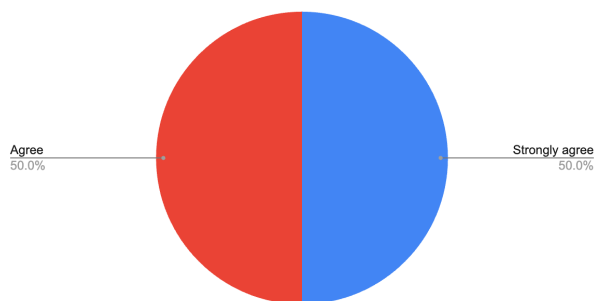
Count of [I identify as a "third-culture kid"]



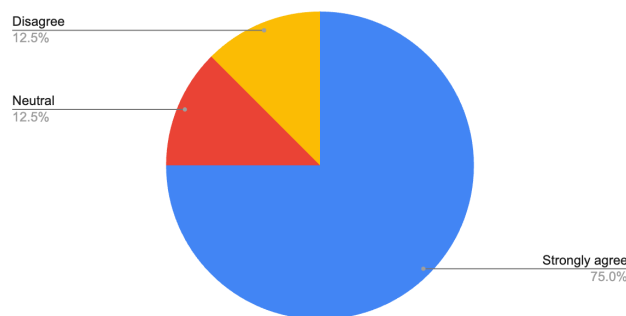
[Figure 22: graphs of demographic indicator responses from questionnaire]

I asked two questions about how strongly my work expressed the themes in my research questions. As illustrated, all participants agreed that cultural detachment was expressed. Whereas, two participants disagreed or were neutral concerning the expression of the implications of globalisation in art and culture. Upon my review, the participant who selected 'neutral' was the only participant who viewed online. The participant who disagreed attended the exhibition opening but did not listen to my tour, unlike the majority of the other 75 per cent. In hindsight, I could have made this element more explicit. Especially since the *cheongsam* series and *girl explores* are the only pieces that I intended on making solely about this theme, I could have used perhaps more effective symbolism and exaggerated elements of cultural ambiguity and technique.

Count of [**Cultural detachment and disorientation is expressed through the artworks of this exhibition]



Count of [**These artworks give me insight into the implications of globalisation in art and culture]



[Figure 23: graphs of participants' opinions on the effectiveness of theme expression]

Finally, I asked respondents to share any comments that they had. Most notably, three of the participants mentioned the *cheongsam* series and the use of cloth as seemingly the most powerful. One said that “The cheongsam and girl in costume do give an insight towards the globalization in art and culture because, from the video, I see culture is being used as fashion.” Another participant, to whom I did not explain the artworks, mentioned that the different sources of cloth “seemed like a metaphor for cultural disassociation and marginalisation.” Two other participants noted the representation of “third-culture” identity, one stating that they admired the “use of mixed media to represent a third culture kid experience.” The other participant who answered that they identify strongly as a third culture kid said: “From the artworks, I was able to relate to the joy and happiness of having an individualistic identity yet lacking a shared collective relationship with others.”

During the exhibition, I spoke with some visitors about their experiences with my art. Two viewers mentioned the dream-like yet chaotic quality of *medium amalgamation*. Another recalled the small portrait’s similarity to the girl in ‘Las Meninas’ by Diego Velazquez. Although unintended, the association perpetuates the painting’s sense of disorientation and performativity, hence, connecting back to the *cheongsam* series. I also found that a lot of people’s interpretations of specific elements in my art were coincidentally in line with my ideas. For example, with *cut from the same cloth #2*, someone said that the square portrait connected to the rest of the painting with a loose thread looked kite-like. While I simply wanted to paint a portrait for coherence, the comparison suggests elements of longing or floating away from the cloth or cultural identity. The Filipino materials in *girl explores* and *connected* were also mistaken for that of other cultures as they bore a likeness to Chinese craft wares and a Persian keffiyeh. The ambiguity of the background of these objects perhaps ties into the bigger idea of culture. One can continue to ponder to what extent can someone’s inherited culture be attached to their own identity.

Conclusion

After assessing the various phenomena across contemporary art and culture, I have found that detachment can be expressed in multiple ways. Art expression is something that is nuanced and therefore the tactics used to convey such themes are difficult to categorise.

My commentary on cultural homogeneity looked largely at the superficiality in cultural representation and how formal elements are used to simply exoticise a work of art. I also expressed the gentrification of cultural elements through the act of spray painting or covering, and the repackaging of cultural dress through commercially inspired photography. Overall, I expressed cultural detachment by simply painting according to my experiences and tastes which is inherently detached from any one culture. The cultural ambiguity in my portraits, objects used and more concept-driven works also preserved that idea.

Should I have the opportunity to do this project again, I would allocate more time to adjusting and creating more artwork to ensure the final products are visually engaging. I would also want to have more time to discuss with prospective spectators and professionals in art curation so that, especially in regard to my critique on cultural homogeneity in the art market, I would have a more clear understanding and henceforth artistic outcome. As mentioned previously, two of the questionnaire participants were unsure of the relationship between my artwork and cultural homogeneity. This theme could have been built upon through more striking visual communication. In my literature review, I could have also referenced artists who had more satirical techniques, which I could've utilised to develop more dialogue and controversy. In terms of assessing the social effect of my artworks, I could have also asked more people to interpret the artworks on their own. This would have given me more accurate research statistics.

From this experience, I learned that as a contemporary artist, I am empowered to express my ideas without there being a correct way. Audience perception was quite positive and I incline that greatly to the shared experience many people in Hong Kong have, coming from a mixture of cultural experiences and being exposed to trends in globalisation.

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