Political Figures
An Exploration in Paint

Yeh Jin (Christine) Oh

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Studio Art

May 2013

© 2013 Christine Yeh Jin Oh
Table of Contents

I. Introduction.........................................................................................................................2
   i. Wellesley Manifest in the Female Figure
   ii. North Korea Revisited
   iii. Resolving Formal Issues

II. Wellesley Girl/Woman Series..........................................................................................10
   i. Grasping the Language of Paint

III. Conclusion.......................................................................................................................14

IV. Acknowledgements........................................................................................................15
I. Introduction

My Wellesley career culminates in my realizing the passions that act as my motivating forces, of which North Korean human rights advocacy stands at the forefront. During my collegiate endeavors to explore diverse fields through which I could approach this issue, I dreamt of addressing the North Korean human rights crisis through painting to confront Kim Jong Il’s dictatorship. His regime was and remains as a master example of the repercussions of totalitarian control mixed with utter disregard for its citizens. For those who pay attention, stories about refugees being executed for attempting to escape North Korea and other reports in this vein surface frequently on the Internet. Concurrently, before Kim Jong Il’s death, popular media would showcase the Great Leader’s quirks including his expensive taste for alcohol—his annual expenditure on cognac was about 777 times that of the average North Korean’s yearly salary. I wanted to shed light on the repercussions of such systemic tyranny by paving a unique path through painting, and use my passion and gifting in painting to help alleviate some aspects of the resulting human rights crisis that permeates North Korea and is spilling over into surrounding countries.

Upon deeper thought, however, my strengths in painting did not seem to align with the skills I saw as necessary to achieving a powerful dialogue around this theme. I enjoy the freedom to work viscerally with materials, namely with paint. My natural talent lies in translating a space and subject into an entirely different environment on a 2D surface, thereby transforming the perception of that space to the audience and putting myself forth as a medium through which a viewer ‘sees’ anew. I did not have a North Korean defector or a Kim leader at my disposal to sit for me as I painted them, and
lacking the element of a live model posed another challenge in pursuing North Korea for my thesis as studying and mastering the human figure is an integral part of my passion for painting. Thus I buried those ideas for the time being and drew instead from the resources I did have, which were an abundance of female friends at Wellesley.

i. Wellesley Manifest in the Female Figure

Consequently, my thesis began as an effort to reflect upon and commemorate my Wellesley experience by painting my friends nude. Many hurdles have marked our journeys year after year in college, and today we are defined by our victories and accomplishments. Still, more often than not I felt that I was crowned with undeserving praises and expectations toward greater achievements. The jarring contradictions between this thrust-upon ‘Wellesley identity’ and my fragile, uncertain sense of self pushed me to examine these incongruities by stripping down the facades of those with whom I shared this unique experience. By investigating, and celebrating, the four years’ journey we undertook in tandem, I hoped to find some kind of solution to combating the self-imposed fears that came hand-in-hand with a looming uncertainty for who and where I would be at the end of this path. Confronting my fears has much to do with choosing the lens through which I view myself, and I saw painting my friends nude as an introspective endeavor to be made worthwhile by the answers I would find in the process. In conjunction with these ideas, I aspired to express a distinct aspect of our shared experience:

…Each of us arrived at Wellesley completely malleable and responsive to change, bearing clean hands as some embarked on a mission to reinvent herself apart from
the self that existed prior to Wellesley. However, I have come to understand that these missions still could not silence the endurance of our vulnerabilities and weaknesses, the aspects of ourselves that we have always shamed the most... As I attempt to record a specific time in the history of Wellesley, my aim, in conjunction with painting female figures, is to address contemporary measures of beauty within the realm of this community and capture the ways in which we respond to these standards. By exploring the female figure, I will paint a series of Wellesley women, resplendent in their imperfections, while drawing attention to their most hidden features. Each painting will hold some of the small conundrums we face at present—having become mature but not old, naïve but less innocent, and grounded in our experiences, yet willing to take leaps of faith into the unknown.

- From my essay for the Pamela Daniels Fellowship

Thus my thesis started as an exploration of the female figure and an endeavor to debunk many of the standards we had naively held ourselves to, and in so doing, make known the shared burden of the female experience at Wellesley College.

ii. North Korea Revisited

I was taken aback by the large chasm that developed over the first few months between my thesis project and my other civil and intellectual pursuits at Wellesley, the most prominent being leading the campus organization for North Korean human rights advocacy. Feeling much like a fetus being expelled from her mother’s womb, I recoiled from the indignity and injustice of the ‘real world’ as it encroached upon my life with
stories of human rights violations that were too heavy to digest in a matter of days. There grew an overwhelming sense of anger and guilt when I saw the opportunities before me juxtaposed with those that North Koreans face at a similar life stage. These issues were positioned at the polar end of the spectrum with the quest I had committed to at the beginning of the year. I saw one end as being intensely political, and the other as deeply personal. I felt egotistical, even selfish, for looking inward while being inundated by problems of the world that demanded greater attention. Thus my studio work became disjointed from my daily life as intrinsic motivation driving me to paint decreased. That the political and the personal are borne of each another, and that one must develop to serve its interests in the realm of the other, is a truth that I am still processing.

Amidst my bewilderment and frustration, my fall semester thesis advisor, Professor Rivera, encouraged me to incorporate North Korean human rights issues into my studio work as an effort to re-engage myself in painting. I eagerly took on this challenge. Painting primarily from pictures and memory, I arranged a grid of heads containing six figures representing my personal connection to North Korean human rights (Figure 1). I first decided to paint my North Korean maternal grandfather, who crossed over to the South during the Korean War and has been divided from his family members since. He represents the fading generation of family members who parted during the war, unaware that a couple weeks would become sixty painful years. The second figure I chose is Song Byeok, a North Korean defector and former propaganda artist for the state. I am inspired by Song’s story of betrayal, loss, and restitution of life through art. His short period of popularity in the United States represents the crossing of physical, cultural and psychological boundaries through painting, and highlights the possibilities through
which art can make a tangible difference in developing awareness for social injustice.

Shin Dong Hyuk, the third figure I painted, is a refugee with a unique story even among the North Korean defector community. He is the only known person who was born, raised in, and escaped from one of the North’s political prison camps and lives to tell his story. Shin unknowingly became a puppet of the system during his life in the gulag; his naïve loyalty to his camp prison guards led to his mother and brother’s executions when he reported their plans to escape. To me, these three North Koreans—my grandfather, Song Byeok, and Shin Dong Hyuk—represent the life testimonies of North Korean victims of the Korean War and real ramifications of the North’s dictatorship.

The remaining three figures are at the center of the human rights crises that we are dealing with today. Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong II, and Kim Jong Un are three generations of what has become a successfully destructive dictatorship whose rules have generated a grave crisis for its citizens and surrounding international community. Each of them possesses a god-like status in North Korea, and they are respectively known as the Dear Leader, the Great Leader, and the Supreme Leader. The first black-and-white color scheme stresses the commonalities among the six men that in turn accentuate differences among them. It is titled *Who is a Father? Who is a Leader? Who is a Hero?* to ask viewers to think about the significance of the words “father,” “leader,” and “hero” and what heavy responsibilities come with these titles. The second grid with the “victims” painted in color is an illustration of my personal and physical experience with each figure, and thus I titled it *These People Are Real To Me* (Figure 2). I met my grandfather multiple times and therefore am able to describe him as if he is present in the flesh. Last fall I attended a lecture by Shin Dong Hyuk in Boston, so I also painted him with a
substantial amount of fleshliness. We were close to bringing Song Byeok to Wellesley College to lecture and show his work; although we were unsuccessful in inviting him, I worked closely with his manager and thus his existence is ‘real’ to me, and this is expressed by the color in his face.

Figure 1: *Who is a Father? Who is a Leader? Who is a Hero? Grid No. 1, 46’x51’, Fall 2013*
From left: Shin Dong Hyuk, Kim Il Sung, Song Byeok, Kim Jong Il, the artist’s grandfather Cha Gil Won, and Kim Jong Un

Figure 2: *These People Are Real To Me, Grid No. 2, 46.5’x51’, Fall 2013*

These grids visualize my personal investment and intrigue with North Korea as well as compare and contrast the figures as they alternate, left to right, from victim to perpetrator. The grids in isolation do not reach the kind of depth I desired to convey in painting about North Korea. However, they allow for creation of a meaningful space within other works. The presence of these flat drawings in any other paintings that I did would add an element of North Korea and transform, or in the very least add to, the
significance of the work. At this point I had yet to understand the significance of the grids as a connection between my two interests, but I decided to utilize the grid as a setting for another work. However, before moving forward I needed to resolve other issues I had while painting the female figure.

iii. Resolving Formal Issues

Around the same time I conceptualized these grids, I was working halfheartedly on a nude painting of my friend. It was a losing battle for the reasons mentioned previously, but it was also formally weak. The overworked surface of her body floated in front of an undefined background, an unclear transition fragmenting the figure from its environment. In many ways, this work revealed my weaknesses and recalls previous issues that I have encountered as a painter. My disregard for the space around the subject resulted in an awkward movement from figure to space. Additionally, I could not answer simple questions such as: “What is this painting about?” and “What were you intending to say with it?” The fall semester faculty critique led me to confront these weaknesses when some professors pointed out that the work did not reflect the ideas in my original thesis proposal as a portrait of a Wellesley woman. I realized that even to me, the painting was meaningless outside of a vigorous investigation of the female figure. Moreover, my quest to perfect the figure as an isolated event rather than approach the image as a whole was a clear problem. I needed to learn how the surrounding space could inform the figure.

As a response to both the formal as well as conceptual issues I encountered, I erased the undefined blue background and replaced it with a stark black. I then made an
impulsive decision to cover the face of my friend with a black and white reinterpretation of Kim Jong Il’s face. His face over hers creates a mask-like effect, and this brought the painting together conceptually and aesthetically. Now, Kim Jong Il’s dead portrait is juxtaposed against the living body of my friend (Figure 3). Her young, still smooth and clearly female body offsets his starkly male face, gaunt with an authoritarian shadow and redolent of fifty years of totalitarian rule. With its new face the painting evokes deeper questions that have arrived with the mask: first, it reflects the paradoxical phenomenon in which a male-dominated regime is relying heavily on female labor and ingenuity. North Korean women are becoming breadwinners of the family through their business in black markets because the government is unable to provide consistent wages for men, rendering the traditional head of the families useless. Kim led his ideological family into famine and starvation, so why is he called the ‘Great Leader’? In a similar vein, the black background represents North Korea both symbolically and literally; it is reminiscent of satellite imagery of the underdeveloped country at night.

All of these factors informed its title, *Its Body is a Battleground*, hearkening back to a famous work of the feminist artist Barbara Kruger. The title implicates both of the themes I was approaching in my thesis of the female experience and North Korean human rights violations. It is a work of satire, dry humor, and harsh questioning and it inspired me to think of these two subjects as being able to not only coexist, but also draw from and play off of each other. Not only that, but this was the first successful instance of connecting these two ‘worlds’ without losing the purpose in the process, which was to master these concepts in the language of paint.
II. Wellesley Girl/Woman Series

Following this breakthrough, the two topics I had been struggling to merge began to naturally form dialogues with each other. In *Wellesley Girl/Woman No. 2, Jee-Hyun Song*, my friend is standing next to a wall on which *Grid No. 1* is hanging (Figure 4). In *Wellesley Girl/Woman No. 3, Kelsey Ro*, the figures of *Grid No. 2* tower over a sleeping female figure (Figure 5). There are a plethora of juxtapositions within this image, but my intention is not to make judgments on them. Instead, I am asking the viewer and myself how our being aware of these human rights violations will affect and inform our future choices. For me, part of answering this question is acknowledging that my response will be revealed in the next stage of my life as I experience the decision-making process of vetting opportunities and future career paths. Especially as Wellesley graduates who are
Oh 11

striving to become ‘women who will,’ will issues like these ground the rest of the decisions we make?

Figure 4: Wellesley Girl/Woman No. 3, Jee-Hyun Song, 39'x51', Spring 2013
Figure 5: Wellesley Girl/Woman No. 5, Kelsey Ro, 48'x60', Spring 2013

Another observation from the faculty critique was that there were no women as a part of this grid. Why did I leave out half of the population in portraying my fascination with North Korea? A large portion of the problems surrounding the country today are deeply intertwined with issues specific to women—sex trafficking being the most problematic, as well as the selling of North Korean women as wives for men in China. My subconscious decision in painting only men reveals my own unconscious complicity in a sexist culture. In a world where women are mistreated, underrepresented and socially oppressed, I made an unconscious mistake in excluding female defectors who had stories
as harrowing as Song Byeok or Shin Dong Huk’s testimonies. This exemplifies one way that painting has revealed and altered my psyche.

i. Grasping the Language of Paint

It was doubly challenging to express these ideas because I was simultaneously attempting to master another language. Painting is comprised of endless possibilities and choices that can paralyze an artist when she realizes the magnitude of options before her. The surface to which paint is being applied, the colors being used, the thickness of the paint, various application techniques, light, composition, and last but not least, the intended meaning of the work are all factors one needs to consider when creating a painting. In struggling with multiple pieces at once, I was pushed to try different color schemes and diverse techniques to make each painting different from the other. Because I found it so easy to use the same palette of colors in painting my friends, I decided to challenge myself beyond what I knew I could do and began to use color that is not strictly true to reality. Furthermore, I learned that restricting my freedom in color choices could lead to a deeper understanding of the colors’ behaviors so that I can create and use them exactly as I intend. This epiphany led me to paint Self Portrait VIII with a relatively limited palette (Figure 6). For a long time I had paid more attention to using a variety of colors than using pure light and shadow as a means to paint realistic forms. Returning to focus on the different shades of one color was simultaneously refreshing and empowering because it forced me to depict what I see with a limited language. A novelist might feel the same way writing a poem: she must use fewer words to convey more meaning.
In restricting my palette I saw that using a myriad of colors does not equate to a more successful work. Alternating between painting in the studio and examining work of artists whom I admire has helped me see that for painters of nude figures, the beauty of the work lies in how well the artist has captured incremental shifts in light between each surface of a fraction of skin. I would pile bright color on top of another with the naïve hope that such cacophony would translate into a greater harmony, but the canvas would turn into a thick, gloppy and stubborn surface that no more defined the subject than a five-year-old would using crayons. Using many colors is not necessarily detrimental for a work, but it is the frequency and strategy with which one applies them that changes the rhythm of the painting. I gleaned this from looking at Jenny Saville’s mono-color palettes in Continuum and other paintings with the same subject. What struck me was that she
was able to achieve the same amount of definition and expression with red, white, a bit of raw umber, black, and a hint of blue. I learned to harness the versatility of the colors I was already using by mixing many shades of each color on the palette.

III. Conclusion

Apart from the political implications of my body of work, painting has helped me grow tremendously in examining myself and the fears and uncertainties I still hold on to. My paintings are both a reflection and expression of what is within me, and the difficulty I experienced in overcoming my fear of failure as well as being intentional with decision-making has provoked much thought and introspection. Addressing the political has forced me to look deep within my personal psyche to explain why the political is crucial to what I do in the future. The attempt to converge what seemed like two separate worlds through my thesis project (the female figure and North Korean human rights) has uncloaked more of myself than I could have anticipated. The struggles and breakthroughs in this process are documented beyond my paintings; they will continue to inform the choices I make as an emerging young adult.
III. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisors, Professors Bunny Harvey and Daniela Rivera, for their continued guidance, inspiration, and support not only throughout my thesis but also in the past three years I have been their student. I have been spurred to continue challenging myself by their belief in me as an artist and student.

A heartfelt thanks to Professor Katharine Moon for her presence at my orals defense as well as her role as faculty advisor to Advocates for North Korean Human Rights (ANKHR). Without Professor Moon’s mentorship of ANKHR leaders, I would not have had the opportunity to develop my passion for North Korean human rights advocacy.

I thank Professor Betsy Seder, whose feedback in critiques and on paper helped tremendously in clarifying my thoughts and intentions throughout this process.

I acknowledge the Pamela Daniels Fellowship Committee for their generous financial support for my project. I attribute all of the freedom with which I experimented with paint to the fellowship’s grant. I am most indebted to Ms. Pamela Daniels for her mentorship, insight, and affirmation throughout my thesis process.

Lastly, my body of works would not exist without the time given by each of my friends and models. I applaud them for their courage to be immortalized in their vulnerability. Their generosity and support inspired me daily as I painted.