

I'm just a tourist here

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Project Board:

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Pledge:

Artist's Statement

My photographs followed tourists who visited Columbus Park in Chinatown, Manhattan over two days. The area of the park that I photographed is occupied every day largely by elderly Chinese people chatting, playing music, playing games, and practicing Tai Chi. In this body of work, I subjected the tourists at the park to a level of examination that they, perhaps unwittingly, subjected the local residents to. In conjunction with text elements, this somewhat hypocritical process as a photographer scrutinizing other photographers, is used to reflect on race, as well my own identity as an Asian-American. In focusing on these tense interactions between tourists and Chinese locals, this work has been an attempt by me to comprehend the role of race in my life.

My body of work for my senior project is intended to reflect on issues regarding race and ethnic identity through photography and text. The project consists of black type and eight digital black and white photographs printed on a white 10 ½' x 17" sheet of printer paper. The photographs depict White tourists photographing everyday visitors, who are Chinese, at a park in Chinatown in Manhattan. The photographs are unconventionally cropped into geometric/quadrilateral shapes, and have sentences of text aligned around each one. The text conveys my thoughts as an Asian American photographer on the subjects, the photographed scenes, and myself.

My aim for this work is to engage viewers in concepts of racial identity and issues through my photographs, as well as through my own genuine perspective on the matter. My personal intention for the work was to examine my identity as an Asian American through the subjects of White tourists and Chinese immigrants. The concepts of identity in my project, stem largely from the dominant cultural perspectives of Asian in the U.S.. The scenes in the photographs reflect on the objectification of people through the process of photography. More specifically, they evoke a long history of Asians, and many non-Whites, being treated as exotic beings by Whites. The title of my series, *There Are So Many Photos Here!*, is taken from one of the speech bubbles, which was also a comment said to me by one of the tourists at the location of the photographs. However, since the photographs do not communicate this historical context directly, the text establishes my work definitively within a racial discourse. The text also further exposes me as another photographer complicit in the issues that I discuss (hence the text, "I feel like I'm betraying my race").

In my research I studied the works of the artists Chris Johanson, Chris Ware, and Duane Michals. I also read the works of Edward W. Said and W.E.B. Du Bois to inform the ideas about

ethnicity on which I based my work. Among the many aspects of the works by Johanson, Ware, and Michals that I admire, I was influenced the most by these artists' narrative use of text and imagery. These influential figures largely impacted the outcome of my work.

I found that I became aware gradually of the effects of my influences on my work as I progressed through the semestre. It is appropriate, then, that the aspects of their work that I appreciate seem to reflect the process and the stages of my project in hindsight. For example, I appreciated the sense of doubt and ambivalence in these artists' work more especially during the beginning of the semester. Furthermore, my use of text, one of the most apparent aspects of these artists' work that I adopted, was decided in part to make my concepts more clear. An additional similarity that I found between these artists' work and mine, is the use of narrative devices to enhance concept.

Chris Johanson

Among street artists and artists associated with street culture, Chris Johanson is unique for his personal approach to art. He contributes a sense of internal struggle and personal conflict to the typically blunt tone of the art of his peers. In his artwork, disparate (and at times oppositional) ideas and aesthetic elements are used effectively to challenge aspects of contemporary life. The juxtaposition of geometric forms with manufactured self-help products in his 2003 painting, *Harmony Incorporated* (Figure 1), exemplifies his interest in bringing together disparate elements to develop a commentary. The diversity of elements in his works though conveys the idea that his works are ambivalent contemplations on certain topics as much as they are direct commentaries.

Most prominent in Johanson's work is his use of simple forms and text. His line work and polychromatic style have a quality that straddles childishness and refinement. His portraits are flatly painted in a way that questions conceptions of superficiality and portraiture. On the other hand, in his geometric abstract work, he brings a human (i.e. imperfect) touch to a genre that is typically evocative of ideals and purity. He accomplishes this through his process of hand painting the geometric forms, painting them on untreated plywood found on the street, and/or juxtaposing them with text or human figures ("visiting artists and scholars lecture series"). Text, the most direct of his tools, appears in the form of captions, speech bubbles, and labels. They are often skeptical, ambivalent, and/or despairing in tone. Johanson's distillation of different genres and elements through his relatively simple style, further adds to an effect of immediacy, as well as resonance.

In hindsight, the tone and dynamic elements in Johanson's work fits the artist's upbringing in the Mission District, an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse area in San Francisco (Rose 40). It is home to an array of artists, such as Barry McGee, Margaret Kilgallen, and the late Jo Jackson, who came to be known as the Mission School in the late 1990's. Though they are fairly independent, the most common motif amongst the Mission School artists is their resourceful use of materials and their street aesthetic. A few of them, Barry McGee for example, entered the art world through graffiti. Another one of their motifs is the unconventional arrangement of works in which individual compositions are at times densely arranged like spaced-out mosaic pieces. Johanson's association with the Mission artists could be considered more apparent in his earlier works, like in his 1998 installation at the "SWP" exhibit in Alleged in New York (Figure 2). In it, paintings of city scenes on wood panels are positioned vertically

along the floor to mimic apartment buildings. There is a distressed tone in this installation that is somewhat typical of work embedded in urban culture. There is a sense that in his work, the artist is eagerly searching for relevance and the connection in the broadness of contemporary life.

Johanson personalizes his discussion on broad topics by incorporating his varied experiences. This approach is expressed aesthetically in *I Am The Sun* (Figure 3) by filling a panoramic landscape with various interactions between people. In the painting, he projects his voice onto the numerous urban pedestrians, who stereotypically walk with slouched and hurried stances, through the use of speech bubbles. The diverse buildings and people, add a sense of character to the area that is reminiscent of his hometown. The sense of urgency it seems that the artist had as he made this painting suggests that he attributes a similar feeling to life in a large city.

In addition to the more interpersonal view of life, the painting points to grand, existential ideas through its depiction of the cosmos above the city and the earth below it. These three spaces divide the compositional space into layers in a way that is reminiscent of a cross-sectional view of earth. In the lower half of the composition, lines, like roots, traverse the thick soil in order to connect the lower edge of the frame with the numerous figures in the cityscape. The planets in the outer space layer have vague, enigmatic text written on each (e.g. “I AM THE SUN”, “The Grey Area”, “WASTE MATTER”, “REFRESHING STREAM FREE OF POISON”, “PERFECT (OR FAKE)”)—echoing the themes in his geometric abstract works.

In this work and others, Johanson expresses his interest in parodying art. For example, the speech bubbles in *I Am The Sun* offer an added dimension to the flatly painted figures, but much of what they say, pokes fun at the way they are portrayed and at portraiture in general (e.g.

“I might be drawn shitty but that doesn’t mean that I don’t have full emotional range”, “I’m not entirely sure about what is going on”, “Quit staring at me. You’ll never enter my mind”).

However, at the same time a more optimistic, somewhat spiritual, view is suggested by the lines that he draws between physically distant bodies (both planetary and human) in this one painting.

In this way, Johanson’s use of dynamic elements prevents his work from being entirely cynical or didactic by having ideas challenge one another. For example, the aforementioned parodic comments on portraiture in his work seem more personal if they are read as comments disparaging the vices of inappropriate judgment and the misrepresentation of one’s character.

Johanson’s integration of dynamic aspects brings a sense of sincerity and ethos to his work. He maintains an emphasis on the diverse interactions and connections between people even in his most political work. By having these dynamic elements in his work, it seems as if he acknowledges the complexity of the issues that he discusses. Therefore, rather than oversimplifying the issues and people that he portrays, he relates to the viewer by incorporating these oppositional elements along with his personal experiences.

My first experimentations with speech bubbles in my work drew directly from Johanson’s artwork. The speech bubbles projecting from the tourists in my prints (i.e. “One of those ladies threatened to take my camera from me!” and “There are so many photos here!”) are inspired by his paintings. The two speech bubbles were taken from actual comments that I heard at the site where the photographs were taken. Also, I found that Johanson’s themes of portraiture, connectivity, and isolation lent them naturally to my work. His parody of portraiture, for example, relates to my critical view of photography that I posit. Additionally, his approach to discussing issues through narrative elements and dynamic ideas influenced my efforts to

facilitate the comprehensibility of my work by providing further context to the photographs through text and speech bubbles.

Duane Michals

The striking sincerity, with which Duane Michals conveys his ideas, deeply resonates with me. He is known for his photo-series and his sentimental text that at times accompanies his photographs. Through his personal narrations he establishes an intimacy between his work and its viewer that feels almost universally effective. His photo-series titled *How Nice To Watch You Take a Bath* (Figure 4) depicts a nude man, not taking a bath, but drying himself with a towel. The facetious quality of the title seems though to be a warm testament to the artist's intimate relationship with this man, rather than a mere ironic juxtaposition of text and imagery.

The power of the suggestive elements in Michals' work inspired me to remove some of the aspects in my earlier drafts of the work, including my drawings. I find that the most interesting aspects of Michals' works are not typically found visually within his photographs, but they are apparent in the implications and in the interpretations that texts bring into the work. *How Nice to Watch You Take a Bath* is a simple scene, yet it has raw evocations for human sexuality and voyeurism. Appropriately, Marco Livingstone in the book *The Essential Duane Michals* described the artist's work in a related manner, "The radical assessment made by Michals, and on which his highly original work has been built, is that one could conceive of the event to be photographed not as some existing external scene or thing but as the visualization of aspects of oneself" (7). Therefore, rather than solely using my photographs to convince people through documentary evidence that the objectification of people occurs, and that racism exists--

as was my original conception of the work--I find aspects that are not visually evident, such as my perception of Asian American identity, to also be valid and communicable points.

Chris Ware

Chris Ware's graphic novels most directly influenced the use of text in my work as it appears in its final state. His empathetic treatment of characters motivated my use of the tools of the graphic novel medium to convey a structurally straightforward narrative within a scene.

Scenes in comic books wherein narrative text underlies an image inspire the usage of text that I have been experimenting with. This use of text is often intended as a thought or to provide exposition. The text may function as a voice-over does in a movie (suggesting that the narrator is not present at the scene), or as a thought that occurs within the moment of the scene. Chris Ware's work, which often intimately follows the lives of individual characters, makes great use of integrating text and imagery to affect how his work is read. His careful arrangement of text and images is unique in that he links the "whole medium of [graphic novels] to the act of remembering" (Bartual 47). His approach to the medium is especially apparent on pages where the frames seem to be spread out according to an image placed in the center. In an excerpt from his book *Building Stories* (Figure 5), for example, a large image of an infant arranged in the center of the page is surrounded by different scenes related to familial care throughout the main character's life. In that excerpt, the text that is not framed by speech bubbles represents her thoughts and descriptions of the surrounding events. This web-chart-like arrangement of graphic components aesthetically emulates the images and thoughts of a wandering mind; the images and text flow according to the narrator's frame of mind.

My experiments with text, as in Ware's work, are primarily intended to engage the viewer through the retelling of an event from a single perspective. I also intended for certain details, such as the arrangement of text and images in my work, to be as natural as the act of remembering. I tried to phrase the sentences to be somewhat blunt, yet reflective (e.g. "It looks like they're being treated like zoo animals", "At least I flipped off that tourist while he took pictures of me"). The text is placed in different arrangements around each photograph so that the two elements, as in one's mind, may be more easily viewed in correspondence. I find that when text is arranged in repetitive patterns (such as in a line), a viewer will first read all of the text, and will then view the images through a second glance.

Similar to my work, Ware comments on contemporary issues while retaining a focus on individuals in his graphic novels. For example, his book *Building Stories* touches on issues such as the housing crisis and the poisonous nature of digital communication; these issues however, are incorporated mostly as obstacles in the relationships between the main characters, rather than as a didactic commentary. The housing crisis, for example, places stress on the marriage between the book's unnamed main character and her husband who is an architect. Furthermore, several scenes depicting cellular text message conversations emphasize the lack of intimacy with which these digital messages are sent between people. At the 2013 Edinburgh International Book Festival cartoonist Joe Sacco described the cultural significance of Chris Ware's work during a talk with the artist:

If you wanted to get a picture of how middle class people lived in America at a certain point in time, I can't think of a better place to go than *Building Stories* frankly. How people lived. What they did. You get the whole impression

how they interacted with technology at their fingertips. (Sacco, Joe, and Chris Ware)

Sacco further suggests that in intimately portraying the lives of specific characters, Ware tries to “get at some human essential elements or truths”, through which his characters become relatable, and even generalizable to a specific demographic (Sacco, Joe, and Chris Ware). I see my work as a microcosmic scene compared to the grand scope of Ware’s *Building Stories*. Nevertheless, within my microcosmic scene, I have still attempted to relate an authentic human experience to the viewer. I also hope then that some of what I express also rings true to viewers of my work, particularly minorities.

W.E.B. Du Bois and Edward W. Said

The historical perceptions of Asians that I referred to earlier in this essay, was informed largely by Edward W. Said's book *Orientalism*. His book discusses the Orient as a view constructed by Westerners to differentiate themselves from the people, regions, and cultures in Asia. According to Said, Orientalism was disseminated by a canon of literature written primarily by Americans, British, and French authors that romanticized the East. Since the book was written in 1978, it should be noted that Orientalism today is seen in many more forms of media. His main qualm though was that Orientalism was driven by a political means that sought to profit from the sense of Western superiority over the East. In the book Said uses texts from Western writers and historical events as supporting evidence for his thesis. Said succinctly summarizes the heart of his issue in this passage from his book:

My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient, because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness . . . As a cultural apparatus, Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge. (204)

Said further described contemporary Orientalist perceptions in his 1980 essay "Islam through Western Eyes":

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have, instead, is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world, presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression. (Said)

The fact that the Chinese people in my photographs--who are simply going about their daily lives--garners the attraction of so many tourists wishing to take pictures of them, sharply evokes ideas of Orientalism. I intended to convey further the ideas of Said's theory in my work by cropping the photographs in a way that echoes the field of view of the tourists' cameras. With the resulting shape and severe edges, I attempt to emphasize the treatment of the Chinese people by the tourists as exotic, aesthetic objects (Figure. 6). However, compared to Said who discusses the Orient in a very concrete manner, the text in my work reflects on ethnic identity in a much more introspective, ambivalent tone. Although there is arguably a didactic voice and message in

my work, I perceive the narrative as coming from a place of vulnerability and discomfort within the scene of my photograph.

My discussion of Asian-American identity in my work relates to the idea of “double consciousness”, a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the conflicting identities within African-Americans. He wrote in his collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts; two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 9). The pieces of text in my work such as, “I feel like I’m betraying my race” and “Even though I’m Chinese, people think that I’m just another tourist here” similarly reflects on the concept of Asian-American identity as existing between the two distinct labels of Asian and American.

By earnestly sharing the thoughts and narrative about race in my work, I hope to encourage the viewers of my work to discuss these issues as well. I find that the artists and writers I researched helped me to clarify my means of communication in my senior project. I found that the works of Edward W. Said, and W.E.B. Du Bois significantly informed the fundamental concepts about racial identity in my body of work. Studying the works of Chris Johanson, Chris Ware, and Duane Michals influenced my use of text and imagery, and also encouraged me to personalize the visual content of the photographs. My photographs of tourists in Chinatown signify ongoing cultural tensions that many fail to notice. I intend to relate to viewers personally, even if they have difficulty relating to the work, by inserting my internal voice into the scene.

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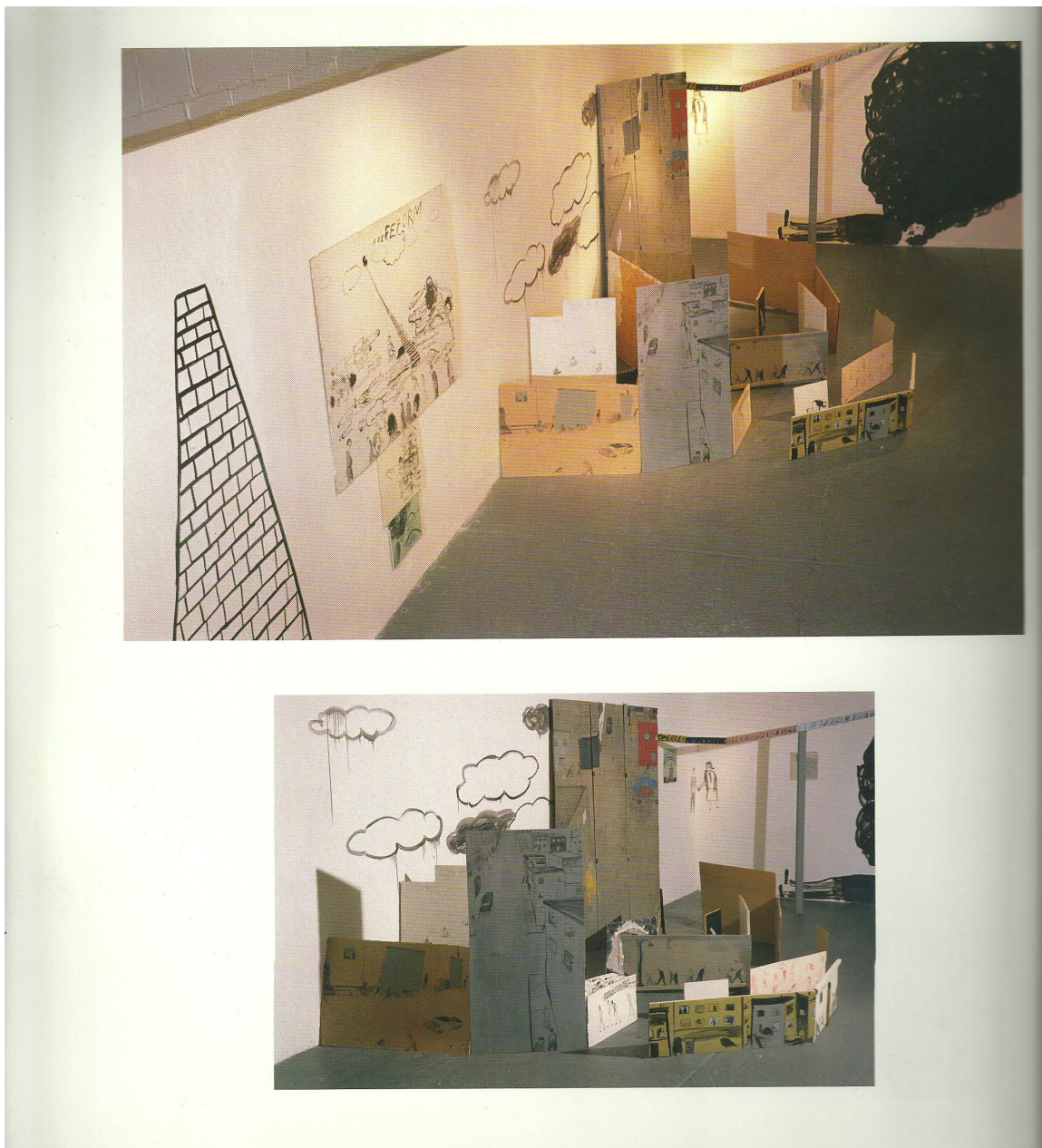


Figure 2

Johanson, Chris. "SWP", Alleged, New York, 1998. Installation views. *Please Listen I Have Something to Tell You About What Is*. By Chris Johanson. Bologna: Alleged Press/Damiani Editore. 54. Print.



Figure 3

Johanson, Chris. *I Am The Sun* (detail). 2002. Acrylic on Wood. 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 37 in *Please Listen I Have Something to Tell You About What Is*. By Chris Johanson. Bologna: Alleged Press/Damiani Editore. 81. Print.



Figure 4.

Michals, Duane. *How Nice to Watch you Take a Bath*. 1986. Silver Print, Gelatin silver prints.

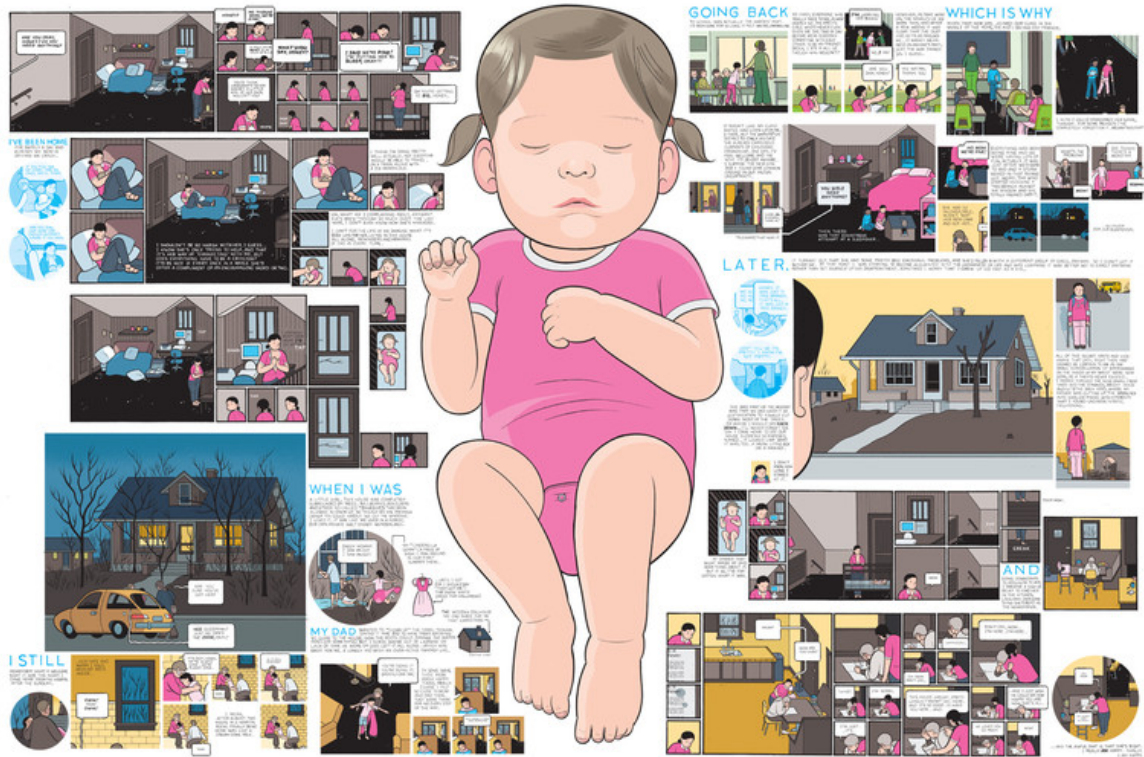


Figure 5

Ware, Chris. Excerpt from *Building Stories*. New York: Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc, 2012.



Figure 6.

Lee, Cliff. From *I'm just a tourist here*. 2013. Digital Print.