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Lucille Kim, 1973-1979

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Lucille Kim's practice travels between drawing, video, performance, sound and photography. She uses these mediums to learn and uncover the history of Cambodia, her parents' birthplace. Her work fuses different mediums to explore memory. For instance, in *Moving from Refugee Camps to Homes* (2013), a piece that can be conventionally considered as drawing, Kim connects with her family's history. This piece juxtaposes the housing conditions in which her parents lived in refugee camps in Thailand and the various homes that they have inhabited in Canada. For Kim, the act of drawing echoes the tediousness of the repetitive labour that her parents have performed throughout their lives. In Kim's stop-motion animation / video-performance *1973-1979* (2015), a coin functions as the drawing medium, with the body as its canvas. This technique not only expands the definition of drawing as a practice, but also critically examines our relationship as artists with the subjects we study and portray through drawing. In this work, rather than making a drawing of a subject, the artist draws *on* the subject, her father, as someone who shares kinship and reciprocates care and healing.

Slowly going from upper to lower body in an orderly fashion - the neck, the spine, arms, back, shoulder blades, thighs, calves, and feet - Kim thoughtfully and patiently performs

coin therapy on her father. This healing technique was taught to the artist at the age of ten by her parents; it originated as *gua sha* in China and has been adopted and translated by many Asian cultures to relieve a variety of aches and pains, fevers and colds. While the practitioner may control the level of pressure, this method, when applied to its most effective, is inherently painful. In the video, the viewer witnesses each mark and its intensity evolve frame by frame as toxicity releases from the body - a body healing through pain. With each scrape, Kim's father's body tells a fragment of its recorded story. As Diane Roberts theorizes in the Personal Legacy¹ work that she developed in collaboration with Heather Hermant and Lopa Sircar, the body remembers; the body stores and recalls. Thus, the marks inflicted by coin therapy explicitly display the pain this body went through between 1973 and 1979.

While the slow motion of marking sets the ambiance of the video, the specificities of its narrative are told through the added soundtrack. The audio symbolizes the memory of three days between 1973 and 1979 that Kim's father's spent working in rice fields during Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime. On day one, the audience hears an axe cutting trees and sounds of physical exhaustion. On day two, more layers of sound are introduced as he began to experience increased pain from being overworked, and feelings of illness and dehydration. At that time, he was so thirsty that he dropped his shovel and drank water from a near by creek. On day three, he caught malaria. The shivers, cold sweats and muscle aches are represented with more abstract and distorted sounds at an increased volume, intended to

¹ The Personal Legacy work is an embodied, "physical/dramaturgical process based on a combination of West/Central African dance, ritual, and story traditions exploring Ancestry." It aims to "bring the actor into alignment with their authentic cultural-historic body as a grounding tool for subsequent character development work." See "Recovering Memory - A Personal Legacy" in *¡VIVA!: Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas*. SUNY Press, 2011.

reflect his state of mind. As Kim writes, “the same sounds of boiling water, spoon hitting the bowl, eating, and mumbling words of [her] father appear at lunch and evening time as flies buzzed around him².” The artist retells a story that she once heard through imagined soundscape - a movie made with field recordings and recreated sounds. As the artist explains: “I want the viewer to feel how I feel, watching [and] guessing.”³

The impossibility of accuracy speaks to our desire for it. In conversation with Kim, we chatted about what it means for us, as immigrant children, to involve our parents within our art practice, especially when our parents don’t really ‘get’ it. Her father keeps a collection of photos that he took of the refugee camp. Kim reflects, “[my father] wants to tell the stories. He wants people [in Canada] to know the history and culture of Cambodia.”⁴ One can see such collaboration as an intergenerational practice that brings untold stories to light. However, I suspect that this process affects Kim more personally and intimately than simply wanting to share stories on behalf of her father as it influences her identity formation. This vulnerable state, common to practitioners from diasporic communities poses the following question: what are the ways through which one can connect to their cultural heritage, especially when this history involves the parents’ traumatic experiences of migration that cannot be shared with ease? Perhaps art is a tool allowing histories of violence to resurface, granting space for intergenerational translation bridging ancestral stories with our existence and positionality as artists in the contemporary world.

² “Artist Statement I,” the artist’s website. <http://www.lucillekim.com/statement.html>

³ Conversation with artist, 29 November, 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

The marks surfacing on Kim's father's skin seems like a *déjà vu* of a past dictatorial regime; the pain of the unspeakable trauma released bit by bit, through the repetitive labour of a caring child and the alleviating pain that comes with each scrape.

1973-1979 is a performance of knowing and documents the artist's multi-faceted attempt to connect with her heritage. Kim learns from her father's storytelling - through words, the literal; then she takes the information to viscerally explore these feelings that she imagines her father might have experienced. In the video, Kim's repetitive hand movement is paced deliberately, a kind of spiritual act in which she tries to feel the pain that is not only in the present but accumulated from the past. At the end of the video, we see red lines of bruises forming a skeleton on Kim's father's body. "He was skinny back then, I am sure,"⁵ said Kim in a speculating tone that comes from uncertainty. While attempting to know every aspect and detail of the story, each frame represents only a fragment of their memory. Migration-related trauma makes us forget what happens in between and how we got here. We only remember who we were and where we are now.

Intergenerational pain is directly related to how we heal. As the artist draws with what is part of her cultural heritage, we learn that healing and pain prove not to be a dichotomy, but rather co-existing entities. We understand that, one cannot heal without being in deep pain.

- Alvis Choi

⁵ Conversation with artist, 29 November, 2016.