



**Window
Space**



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Cat Lamora,

The Aberrant

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Throughout the last fifteen years, every time that I have asked my parents why we immigrated to Canada they deflected with: “Why, you want to go back?” Most Asian millennials will be familiar with this type of response. No sappy background stories, just unspoken appreciation and subtle affection. We can’t force our parents to share their experience of diaspora and displacement, despite how much we long for this connection. Therefore, what we can do is share our own stories and create space for others to do the same. This is what Cat Lamora accomplishes with her work, *The Aberrant*. Through a surreal and curious installation, she contemplates her experience with alienation and cultural severance. Through the fragility of papercraft and morphing placements, she visually recreates the fragmented identity of the gypo - a term for Koreans living overseas. Employed in different context,, this term is often used negatively to describe those who are deemed to be no longer ‘culturally Korean’, but still identify as being of Korean descent.

Lamora created a visual language which translates this contemplation in a multi-layered way. Large, brightly coloured paper eyeballs stare forward, standing out amongst the surrounding flora. Attached to what resembles a cactus, these eyes both unsettle and captivate. Shrouded in the colourful leaves, this strange organism resists engulfment. It is clear that the organism does not originate from the same family as its surrounding environment.

The connection to the Korean diaspora flourishes, despite the struggle between assimilation and cultural maintenance. Assimilation is a survival tool of the migrant with consequences; a traumatic but necessary social procedure that produces strange creatures like Lamora's quizzical cactus.

Much research has been conducted to study the cultural identity maintenance of Korean immigrants. Results show that loss of cultural identity is linked with anxiety, depression, social alienation, and self-estrangement.¹ In host societies, support for Korean cultural maintenance is actively discouraged in schools and workplaces. This conflict between Korean and Western values pressures Koreans to renounce their roots, practices, and history in order to successfully function in society. Even when community support exists, it does so in the form of religious institutions, with much less significance placed on secular Korean cultural spaces in favor of religious iconography.² However, even the efforts of Korean Christian community are often not enough to maintain strong roots, especially for Korean adolescents.

Of course, gyopos do not need official studies to tell them about the subtle and overt hostility from host societies. They learned first-hand that kimchi should not be brought to school and names should be made easier to pronounce. Gyopos gradually learn how to westernize themselves, carrying with them the trauma and shame from the absence of acceptance and belonging. This is the price of surrendering our culture the price of survival.

Identities are constructed from the clues of the Past, and personal narrative is contextualized from lived experiences. So what happens when we lose the things we relate to? In this way, rootlessness lingers in every Korean-Canadian. For both *The*

¹Hovey, Joseph D., Sheena E. Kim, and Laura D. Seligman. "The Influences of Cultural Values, Ethnic Identity, and Language Use on the Mental Health of Korean American College Students." *The Journal of Psychology* 140, no. 5 (2006): 499-511.

² Park, Seong Man, and Mela Sarkar. "Parents' Attitudes Toward Heritage Language Maintenance for Their Children and Their Efforts to Help Their Children Maintain the Heritage Language: A Case Study of Korean-Canadian Immigrants." *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 20, no. 3 (2007): 223-35.

Aberrant and *gyopos*, however, solace is discovered in the possibility of reconciling this socio-cultural trauma. Here, fragility works both ways. Fragility in the maintenance of Korean identity, but also fragility in the permanence of trauma. In the void of their cultural identity *gyopos* find room for healing. Eyes gather together, collectively absorbing nourishments from the communal cactus. These eyes' multiple perspectives all stem from the same displacement, the same loss and through it, a new kind of richness. Richness of new communities and connections; shared comfort in the unstable nebula. "Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration - how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?"³ Just like the staring cactus, *gyopos* have discovered how to not only survive, but also thrive in a new habitat. They have cultivated their identities in ways that speak to both the present and the past, no matter how little water or how strange the soil. *Gyopos* create their own communities, construct their own hybrid identities, and heal the wounds of their diaspora together.

Singular perspective is just another form of Western dominance.⁴ Of singular linear historiography, this standard helps establish the concept of marking people as 'other' just as much as Korean immigrants are marked as 'other' under the term *gyopo*. Hence, celebrating the multi-eyed focal points of the bright paper eyes stands in direct opposition to this Western dominance as well as the existing connotations of the *gyopo*. If varied, multiple visualities are signs of a new representational freedom⁵, then so too are the web of our fragmented experience: a new socio-cultural freedom. Under the guise of stability and acceptance, *gyopos* fall into the traps of erasure. But like the cactus, they stand resilient despite the opposition.

³ Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books. (2017).

⁴ Steyerl, Hito. "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective." *E-flux*. (April 2011). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The Aberrant is not just reconciliation: it is a celebration of the migrant identity. Our stories lay dormant, itching to crawl out of the soil. Layer by layer, Lamora pieces together our intergenerational narrative. This is her contribution to our collective healing process: we witness her sprout, just as it witnesses us back.

- Seo Eun Kim