

In My Own Little Box
Senior Integrative Project
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ARTDES 499

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Introduction

My entire life, being raised in the American education system, there has always been one thing that I feared as an Asian American: group projects. It's the perfect opportunity for group members to bring up the fact that I'm Asian and probably better at math and science and achieving a higher grade if I were to take over the entire assignment. It scares me and makes me question my abilities in school. It's become the norm to classify Asians as "smarter" and thought to be a compliment. As an Asian American, I cannot emphasize the amount of wrong within the idea of model minority. We are put under unrealistic pressure and that hurts those that don't fit that bill. We are put into this devalued box as a sad excuse for diversity in America.

For my Integrative Project, I will be creating a packaging and product design that holds customized buttons that will actively challenge the societal construction of the "model minority" in the Asian American community. It'll be a kit of buttons that engages my audience in educating themselves and others on the topic. This project will spark dialogue to a larger solution that will break down the unrealistic mold that this grouping is expected to meet. My piece will allow people to reflect on the shaping of their identity, not based on labels, but in the value of thinking outside that "box." My hope is that my kit will force people to confront the issue in a way that's personal and reflective. It only takes the action of one person to make a statement.

Contextual Background

The summer of 2015 was a very pivotal moment for me as a minority. I was put into situations where I was a victim of stereotypes

now more than ever. Friends have always told me of stories where somebody commented on their perfect academic scores and what a "surprise" it was or when my female Asian friends would have guys make comments like, "Wow, I love Asian girls." I knew they were there but it didn't register in my head that it could happen to me. And suddenly it did, and it just seemed to happen consistently through the summer and into the school year. I was becoming more and more exposed to how prevalent stereotypes are and how much they can affect a person's sense of character and worth. Because I certainly felt like an idiot when the guy behind me commented on how "pretty Asian girls are." I'm rendered speechless and in awe of the fact that my appearance will never go unnoticed and it's becoming easier nowadays for others to poke fun at it.

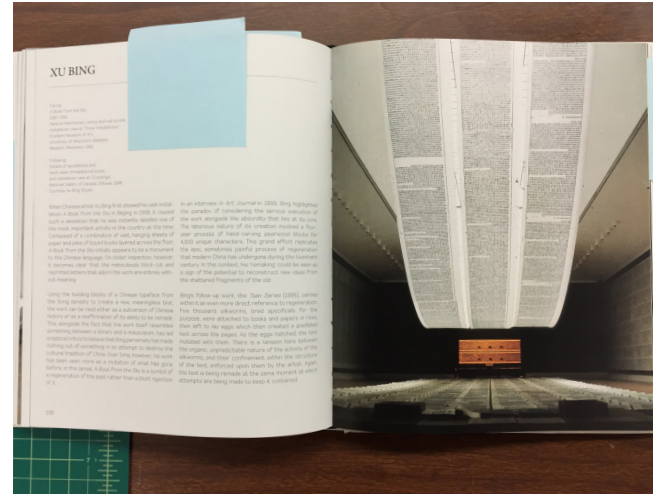
It was that same summer when I had the opportunity to see a special viewing of this documentary called "Vietnamerica." Following the different lives of the boat people during the Fall of Saigon, this was a pivotal event in history for a lot of Vietnamese families. It showed the difficult journey it took for a lot of these families to escape. It's the same one my parents took to get to America. And they all came for one reason: opportunity. Watching these lives unfold put into perspective the sacrifices my parents made in order for my sisters and I to have a better life. I can't imagine leaving my family behind at the young age of 19 like my father did. Teaches us that we can't take anything for granted because we have it a lot easier than the ones who raised us. It's definitely pushed us to work harder and do our best to live the lives that our parents only ever dreamed about. And that mentality speaks highly to how the model minority is a setback in society.

We can't even try hard at something without feeling incompetent because people think it's so easy already being Asian American.

Then there's this model minority idea of Asians being the best at everything academics, possessing quality talents, and earning more money. Due to certain characteristics, there's this pre-conceived notion that Asians are successful at most things in life. This is an outdated and problematic issue for so many reasons. It's setting standards to an unattainable degree that often leads to depression and even suicide in some households. It also reduces other minority groups as being not as intelligent and not as successful in life. There's a clear ignorance to the other qualities of Asians and can only paint them in the lists of their accomplishments. Through my experiences growing up in the educational system, I've been presented in this situation more than anything else. When I was younger, it didn't occur to me that the students chose me to be their partner because it was a guaranteed 'A' in the assignment. As I'm becoming more involved in the Asian American community growing up, it's now something that I notice every single day. They're little statements that get thrown around and many of the times, the voice behind it won't think twice about its effect on a person. That doesn't mean it should be ignored or addressed. It's the big elephant in the room and nobody wants to face the consequences head on.

I found the work of Xu Bing, who specializes in printmaking and narrative work, inspiring. I was especially intrigued by his installation titled, "Book from the Sky." Filled with 40 "false" Chinese characters, he fills scrolls and books intended to comment on the subjectivity of language and meaning.² He

changed how language is affected by changing the space you're standing in with the installation. Taking the simple use of a fabric and presenting it in an interesting form in the space was what fascinated me the most. His work was also very well known for integrating parts of his Chinese heritage and embracing his identity. This

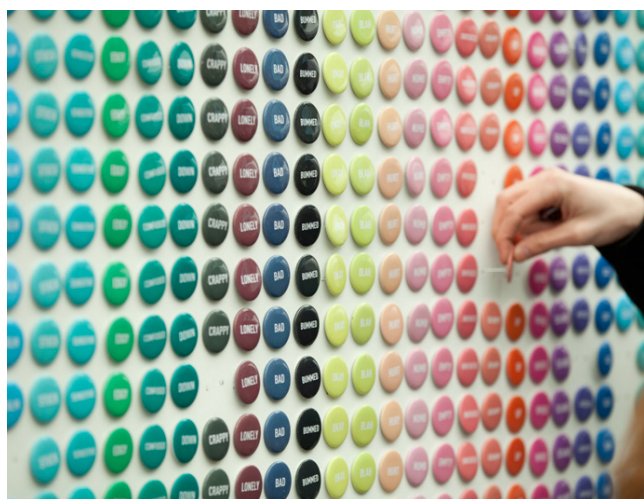


An excerpt from the book "Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections."

informed my work in dealing with the connection between language and identity. He seamlessly merges meaning and words to effectively convey a deeper concept beyond the physical manifestations of letters.

Blok Design is a brand studio specializing in brand identity and installation design based in Toronto, Canada. Their work seeks out the normal and makes it exciting and thrilling for their audience in a visual experience. The piece that I was drawn to the most was their button installation titled "Not Myself Today." In the hopes of improving a mental health campaign, they constructed a wall of mood pins in the corner of a bustling intersection.⁴ It provoked dialogue between strangers and sparked a stream of stories that were shared. The nature of the installation combined with the bold colors and

minimal language encouraged engagement and interaction. The simple act of pulling off a pin allowed the spectator to become a part of the work and own the phrase that they selected based on their current mood. The discovery of this project came at a perfect for me because I was struggling with the form of my piece. Initially I wanted to do a fabric installation fill with stories but progressively it became sadder and less enjoyable for me as an artist to make. I went back



Blok Design's "Not Myself Today" installation that promotes mental health awareness.

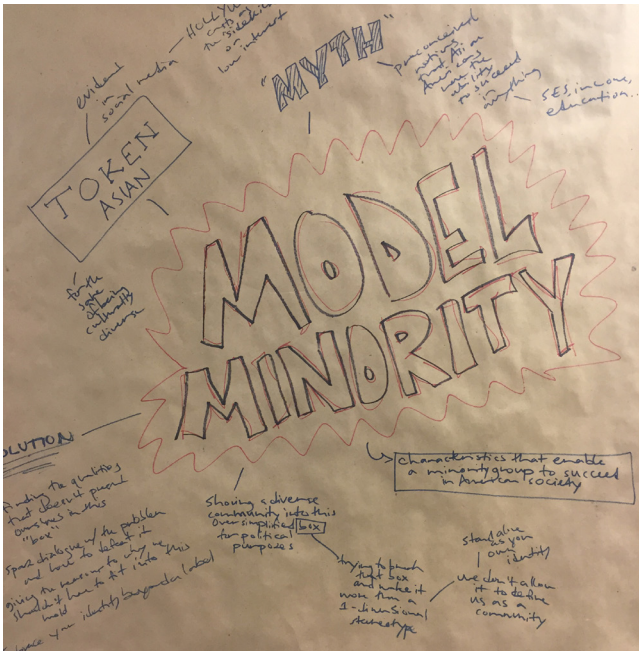
to what I really am passionate and that is graphic design. I discovered that my piece about Asian American identity could be fun if I altered the language and start designing. That's what influenced me to make my own customized buttons and let it be interactive for people. Suddenly, my project is in full swing and I'm happier with this path I'm taking. I'm finally making and designing things with typography and color and using my hands. All of these things are combining the skills I get the most satisfaction of. It's the most comfortable for me and it's getting easier to see where this project is headed.

Barbara Kruger was an artist that was brought up during my December review. The

panel agreed that this was a person I needed to get familiar with because of her work with language and pithy texts on social constructs and reality. Her work is most famous for overlaying aggressive words over found photography to control the way the imagery speaks. Viewers do a double take and it forces them to question the ideas of feminism, consumerism, classicism, and many other society driven topics. A lot of her artwork speaks truth to power and challenges the pop culture.¹ The work that I'm doing with phrases passed around Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans deals a lot with hard language. I want my audience to stop and think when they see my installation, just like Kruger. She demands attention and does it so vividly with her voice selection and choice of words. Her short but powerful phrases are influential in my work because it's forcing me to face the experiences that I've gone through when somebody said something to me that made me stop and think. In the same way I reacted, I want my audience to feel that same discontent. She's particular about her language, and with that mindset, she effectively engages her audience in confrontation.

Methodology

The first thing that I did was mindmap and word associations. This is an important process that guided me towards choosing my central theme for IP. I started writing out words that mattered to me and issues that I cared about enough to make a project about. The center of the map started with Asian Americans and it began to sprout into branches that eventually led me to trends and issues within the A/PIA community. Topics such as the twitter movement #NotYour-AsianSidekick and the model minority myth



My first step in my creative process: mind mapping the idea of what the model minority is and the subcategories of it.

sparked a lot of dialogue and both became a trend that fought for social change.³ The “dragon lady” and “china doll” are terms in the movie industry that portrayed Asian American women as highly sexualized figures and diminished the talents of actors that are of Asian descent. Physically writing out my ideas that I resonated with allowed me to come face to face with issues that mattered to me. It honed in on one topic and it presented the many ways that I can conceptualize a central theme into a piece worth exhibiting. I ended up with several ideas but it took a while before I chose to go forth with the model minority concept.

The next step in my creative process involved some explorations in various mediums and forms. This is especially crucial because although the content is the center of it all, the form is really what aids in how audience will engage in my work. Going into IP, I initially wanted to explore the different forms I can take in book arts. After taking a course on bookbinding,

I became interested in the process and how I can apply that more meaningfully to my topic. I started with a drum leaf style book that was scaled to double what life size would be. My intention behind the scale and bookbinding style was to push the way my audience would interact with the text. Not only are you reading it, but you’re engaged and confronted with it. After trying that technique and also an accordion-style book installation, I found that this form wasn’t effective in driving my theme. I imitated that cascading style (much like Xu Bing did) from the ceiling to act as “pages” of a book. It’s not your ordinary style of books and I wanted to challenge myself in how to create narrative work through two panels acting as pages of a floating book. After a few failed attempts on writing the actual written content, I’ve decided to scrap the idea of creating a story about Asian Americans and instead inform the public about a problematic issue.

It’s from there that I began to reconsider how to make my work relevant to my concentration, which is graphic design. Using design as my tool, I researched different installations where it was effective in informing



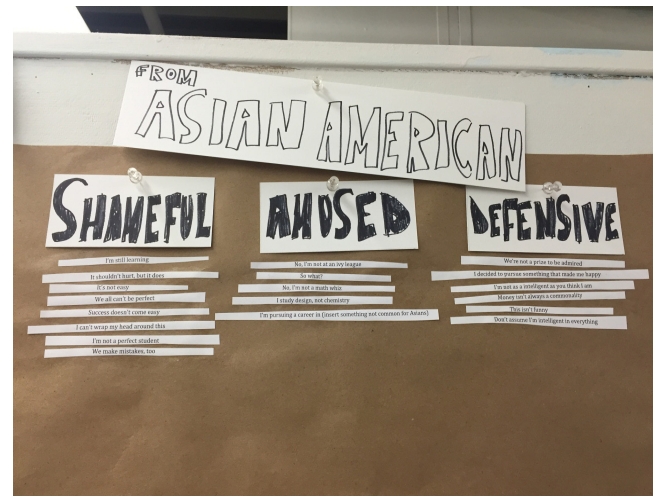
Taking on a new form for my piece centered around the model minority theme.

the public while bringing in elements of graphic design. At this point of my creative process, I was set on the model minority concept and knew I wanted my IP to inform and bring awareness to how problematic this issue is. So thinking about that purpose, I found the “Not Myself Today” installation I mentioned earlier. Not only was it interactive for the audience but it also sparked dialogue through visual communication.⁴ Through the use of color, typography, and layout interaction, I found the many avenues I can take with buttons. It’s such an amusing form to tackle that has a lot of potential to become a potent proclamation for Asian American voices everywhere. After some trial and error and several mockups, I decided that this would be my end product. Along with these buttons, I’m experimenting the ways that I can exhibit this as a kit or a product. There’s something cheeky about buttons so I want to take it a step further and use it in a “how to” format for my audience to quietly have a conversation with. Now all I need is the content to start constructing.

The transition from interactive installation to product design required many failed experiments, but presented surprising revelations. As I explored the form and the use of language in these mockups and models, the form of a button started to take shape. When I think about the use of a button, it becomes apparent that this is a product designed to become a personalized piece of artifact. Whether it’s utilized through imagery or text, a button is worn because the wearer believes in its message and content. We wear these cheeky products on ourselves because we want to make a statement about ourselves. It’s one piece to our character, which materializes it for our surroundings to become aware of who we

are. We have ownership of the statement.

It was important that the content I gathered reflected the real life experiences of Asian Americans and not some made up phrases or statements. Because I want to preserve the authenticity of these moments, I sought out stories from family, friends, and peers. This gave me the opportunity to engage in real dialogues and doing it face to face also relieved any tension. I understand how difficult of a conversation it could be to talk about a time when you felt small and inadequate. It’s scary and that’s why I went out of my comfort zone to approach people about this topic. I wanted to reassure my interviewees that this is something that doesn’t require eloquent language or a super emotionally driven



A documentation of the various stories and sayings that I received from the A/PIA community.

moment. I just wanted something that’ll surprise my audience and me. Luckily for me, I’m heavily involved in the A/PIA community so I had various platforms to present my project in as well. Things like workshops, advocacy events, and even social media has helped me gain a lot of support and interests from my fellow peers. It’s when I started to publicly share it and go out with a plan to record conversations when this process

started to come into fruition for my content.

However, the biggest difficulty in gathering that content was the language. I knew going into the form of a button that my words needed to be poignant and jaw dropping. My goal was that it would surprise my viewers, but force them to reflect on the deeper meaning of each phrase. Collecting the many responses from my peers presented a challenge of which sentences was the most effective in conveying the model minority problem. There were times when I created phrases that conflicted with one another contextually. There were other times when it became forceful and too angry. What I needed was one voice, one strong voice to narrate this conversation. Playing around with the tone of voice and what type of words they would use required me to imagine I'm in the shoes of the other end of the conversation. It allowed me to put myself in the position of being in a genuinely uncomfortable situation. Paying attention to the wearer and the public's reactions and tone of voice were key components of how I finalized the nine buttons.

Creative Work

Getting to the final product involved a lot of trial and error and even more failures. It required serious reflections on my part as the artist to realize what I wanted my final piece to do. Every time I got the question of, "Well what does the audience get out of it?" I felt perplexed a few times. And that was a problem I often ran into because even I didn't know exactly what I wanted my project to say. The issues within an Asian American community is so vast, but limited at the same time. On one hand, the model minority myth presents the opportunity to make



The final packaging and product design.

a statement and give Asian Americans a voice. But then on the other hand, it really only caters to that audience and non-Asian Americans won't be able to relate to it. I was forced to seriously consider the form and how I can contextualize it to a broader audience without losing the heart of the theme.

After much frustration through my experiments and critiques, I decided to just be upfront in a way that'll surprise my viewers. I deviated from the idea of an installation and am working around the idea of a kit or a "how to not let it get to you" guide to ignoring stereotypes. Something along the lines of it being a cheeky product design crossed with packaging design. I want to present this in a way that informs and invites my audience to be aware of the model minority. While at the same time, be a shareable

tool for them to start conversations with other people who are dealing with stereotypes.

I've come up with several elements that will do just that. There's the box that holds the nine different buttons as if it was an actual kit that you can take away as a collection. And then on the other hand, there's the individual packaging



The finalized stickers and individual button ready for the exhibition opening.

cards. Each has been letterpressed with the name "In My Own Little Box." This way, I'm letting my audience take one that they resonate with. One that'll make them want to spread the word. It'll change the way people view the topic when others share it. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to bring awareness in my project.

My ultimate goal is to tap into the minds of people that wouldn't otherwise pick up my product. Using this kit will not only provide a deeper understanding for this one that's holding it, but it gives them a reason to tell others when it's so conveniently presented in a 1.75 inch button. This is effective because it's doing more than inform. It's forcing people to become more aware and reflect on how stereotypes affect their lives. And they also get a glimpse into how others have reacted to the same situations. It's bringing to light an issue that has always been quiet in the public. Nobody wants to confront it and I want to tell people that it's ok to voice your own thoughts and opinions. That's why I created a personal platform that informs you of the problem, gives you space to reflect on it, and is encouraged to be shared among your friends and peers. It's a kit that's made for everybody, from the confrontational ones to the angry ones to the timid ones who can't find a comfortable place to let their emotions out.

This eight month integrative project gave me the opportunity to reflect on my creative process and a lot of the decisions I had to make along the way. Although this is a piece that was devoted to a specific community that's significant in my life, it has opened a lot of doors for anybody that's dealt with conflicts in their identity to confront it. No issue is ever too small to be seen as important in our society. It may take

a slight push and maybe even 500 buttons to get the dialogue started, but it's through those emotional triggers that keep the words constant. The disjunction between wearer and viewer is what makes this experience so effective. It's made people want to listen, and then through that desire, they want to be the next conversation starter. You need to present your viewer with an experience they can't refuse, no matter how uncomfortable it makes them. And especially when I put my own audience in the shoes of an Asian American, it's almost as if they stepped into the internal battles of what it's like to feel "different" in a sea of faces.

Conclusion

The experience of exhibiting my work for the first time was surreal. It showed me that the amount of work and dedication and failures that went into this project was worth it. The reception I received from my audience was positive and uplifting to hear. Even coming from strangers that this is a topic that needed to be heard made all my doubts about it vanish. Initially going into this theme, I was worried that this wouldn't resonate with people who weren't Asian American. That wasn't the case during the reception. I saw people I didn't know proudly wearing my buttons. And I'm glad to say that my wall was almost empty by the end of the night.

It's been a constant battle in speaking about my identity. And it's an even more difficult task when it's about advocating for an issue that hinders that self-discovery. Letting go of In My Own Little Box is one extra step to bringing awareness to the model minority. It's a stepping-stone to what has the potential to make an even bigger difference. And although I'm not

in control of the space it's currently residing in, the impact it creates through others is why I'm not worried. It's now spread across this campus for others to see and for others to think about. My buttons are doing what I intended it to do: give a voice to the quiet and spread the issue to a larger context.



Opening reception of "In My Own Little Box."

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