

Introduction

Picture this – you’re standing in the courtyard in front of a building you’ve never seen before. You know that this building is special, but you don’t exactly know why. You’re in a foreign country, so none of the signs make sense and you don’t speak the native language so you can’t ask questions. You’re with your parents, but there’s a dozen other people standing around you. Nobody is talking, but they’re all looking directly at you. Then all of a sudden, the circle of people closes in on you, arms out, and as they near closer you hear someone mutter “welcome home”. This was my exact experience when I visited my orphanage in Vietnam for the first time since being adopted from there twenty-one years ago.

I was born in Tuy Hòa, Vietnam in 1996. Although I don’t remember anything from my time there, you could say that my life started out pretty rough. Before I was even born, my birth mother had arranged for me to be put up for adoption. There were no plans for her to ever stay in touch with me or meet the family that planned to adopt me. In fact, it’s speculated that her information on my birth records are false, making it impossible to ever find her again. Moments after I was born, I was taken to the hospital’s partnering orphanage. I was only 4 pounds and 8 ounces, and I was terribly sick. Nobody knows if my size and health was due to a premature birth or an unhealthy development in utero. Either way, it’s safe to assume that if my adoptive parents hadn’t been alerted of my situation and arranged for a caretaker to take me out of the orphanage, I wouldn’t be alive.

All of my life I've struggled with finding myself and defining who I am. I've always felt slightly out of place in my life because I look different than my family. On top of this, there has also been the persistent sense of guilt but thankfulness because I was so close to living a completely different life in Vietnam. I spent the first three months of my life in Vietnam. I have no memories of being there. When my adoptive family finally took me home to Maryland, it was the start of my life as I know it. I was raised with a White Jewish family. I went to Hebrew school, learned American history, and spoke English at home. I was never taught Vietnamese or about Vietnamese religion or culture. I have no emotional or spiritual connection to Vietnam and the only thing that relates me to the country is the fact that I was born there. So when my family and I visited Vietnam for two weeks in the hopes that I would have a major cultural experience, you can imagine how I felt returning home, having had no such experience. The trip was, in fact, emotional. But not for the reasons that I thought it would be.

My thesis uses photography and graphic design to explore my mixed feelings about returning to Vietnam as a Vietnamese trans-racial and trans-national adoptee. My goal is to educate viewers about what it's like to live in such a gray area where my identity is greatly defined by my adoptive family and very little by my biology and the internal struggles associated with this.

Contextual Discussion

Mental issues, especially those relating to identity, are very common amongst adopted children. Psychologists and researchers who study the minds of adopted children have observed that mental disorders like depression are more prevalent due to underlying feelings of abandonment and unknown identity or family members (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10926755.2010.481039>). Specifically, transracial adoptees, like me, have an innate dissociative feeling towards their adoptive family due to physical differences.

Brooke Thiele, is a Korean transracial adoptee from Wisconsin who focuses on film. Her work focuses on her Korean roots and American identity. In the piece “A Fall to a Sea Called Home” (2017), Thiele explores her identity and heritage through a mixture of animation, installation, and performance. An element of the piece is the use of a traditional Korean storytelling method called “pansori”. This multi-sensory and musical performance is presented with various projections on Thiele’s personal version of a hanbok, which is a traditional hand-painted Korean dress. Thiele’s version features materials that referenced denim jeans from her childhood and drawings from family photos. The dress is then transformed with projections of a zoetrope animation. Simultaneously, a recording of Thiele recounting different personal stories can be heard intermittently between drums and music.

Another adopted artist named Jenny Butcher uses her art to focus on her identity and the general process of adoption. In her collaborative piece, “The Ties That Bind” (2016), Butcher explores the idea that children experience trauma as a result of being separated from their

mothers and put up for adoption. She uses a puzzle as a metaphor for the missing pieces of her identity. Scattered on the wall are large puzzle pieces with fragments of words from a letter written by a mother who gave up her child for adoption. Butcher writes that throughout her adolescence and childhood, a lot of questions began to arise about her identity and family history. Her work asks viewers to seriously consider the emotional and physical ties that bind a child to their birth mother and how they are broken when the child is put up for adoption.

<https://www.jennybutcher.co.uk/the-ties-that-bind>

My work fits into the world of other adopted artists using visual methods to communicate their personal opinions and experiences as adoptees.

Methodology

Because my project focuses on documentation and the recording of my personal experiences, it was important that I used a combination of imagery and writing to communicate my experience in Vietnam. Additionally, the form of a book best suited my project because it allowed me to format my documentation in a way that could be easily read from start to finish in chronological order. Since I knew that I wanted to present my project in a book form I began exploring different types of book binding methods. I wanted the book to be functional and I didn't want the presentation to distract from the content. However, since the content of the book was very personal to me, I wanted to hand bind it in order to emphasize the intimate nature of it.

The first method I tried was Japanese Stab Stitching. This method was a versatile and fairly simple way of binding a book. Different iterations of my experiments included various string colors, punch holes, and patterns. After assessing the results, I came to the conclusion that the stab stitching method did not match the aesthetic of my book design. The aesthetic complexity of the overlapping strings weaving in and out of the pages clashed with the simple and geometric design of my book pages. So the

Other experiments included testing different types of photographic paper. After settling on high contrast black and white photo edits, I knew that the best paper option would be the one that gave me the most contrast, least amount of glare, and the most sophisticated appearance.

Glossy and luster paper are often used for color photography to increase saturation and vibrancy. Whereas matte paper has little to no glare and gives photographs a very raw appearance. The type of matte paper I chose was a textured matte because it did the best job at mimicking book pages. Matte paper also did the best job at inviting viewers to interact with my work because it didn't look like a traditional glossy print made for display only.

Creative Work



The final book is an 8" x 8", 38-page accordion book. The pages are single sided, alternating between text only and image only pages, but the binding style allows readers to view facing pages.



Stylistic choices to the text and images were chosen based on their contribution to aesthetic and viewer experience. The aesthetic that I was aiming for was sophistication and simplicity with subtle hierarchal differences and an overall consistency. I chose this aesthetic because I wanted the main focus to be on the images and text without distracting design elements like decorations, patterns, or colors.



The material and texture of the book were critical to my project because it greatly determined the quality of my photographs and how they were interpreted. As mentioned in methodology, the textured matte paper was the best option for my black and white photographs. It emphasized texture in each image and gave the images a classic and timeless aesthetic, which was further emphasized by the black border around each image.

In addition to the book, the exhibition features three framed large scale 25" x 25" photographs on the wall behind the book display. The size and placement of the photographs allowed viewers to be fully immersed in the photographs. As they approach the book, their view will be taken up by the large photos, allowing them to be fully immersed in the experience. By engaging viewers this way, I am able to create an air of intimacy around the narrative that I've

created. It should also be noted that the reasons behind the square shape of each photograph is so that it mirrored the square book.

As stated in my project proposal, the goal of my book was to document the mixed and often lost feelings that I experienced during my trip back to Vietnam. Using storytelling, I am able to give insight into the issues surrounding personal identity amongst transracial and transnational adoptees like me.

Conclusion

The goals of my project were to tell a story from my transracial and international adoptee point of view that expressed my mixed feelings about returning back to my birth country for the first time. My photography book and creative writings are just one way in which I could have told my story. Moving forward, I could add more context to my project such as background information on my family or my childhood. Right now, I think that my project paints the picture that my biggest anxieties in life have always been related to issues surrounding my adoption. However, I would like to normalize my life a little more and somehow be more relatable.