



Reinterpreting the *Paj Ntaub* (story cloth): A Retrospectrum from a Hmong American

Ethnic Minority Representation | Using Art to Heal from Intergenerational Trauma | Invisibility in America

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Integrative Project Section 003

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Introduction:

The Hmong are an ethnic minority group indigenous to areas of Southern China, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma. Our origins began in 1600 B.C. China, though the Hmong have been persecuted and forced to migrate into neighboring countries within Southeast Asia. In the late 1900s, a Secret War took place during the Vietnam War, involving the American CIA's recruitment of 30,000 Hmong men to fight alongside the U.S. as allies. With the overrule of communism and the withdrawal of American troops, the Hmong underwent persecution and genocide under a communist regime. Many Hmong were displaced into refugee camps and were left to fend for themselves for 30 years. However, because of our involvement with the American CIA, thousands of Hmong people were allowed to reside in the U.S. through the *Refugee Act of 1980*, starting our history as Hmong Americans.

Assimilation into America was vast and challenging. Disproportionately, the Hmong are among one of the poorest Asian ethnic groups with lower percentages of high school diplomas and postgraduate degrees. According to the *Pew Research Center* (Fig 1), about 56% of all Hmong Americans are low-income and less than 17% have received collegiate degrees. Since the Hmong have recently immigrated to America only 47 years ago, there has been less accumulated generational wealth for our current generations. With the demographics of Hmong Americans; many grow up in rural and urban inner-city settings, undergoing economic insecurity, unstable housing, and many health disparities. To bring awareness to the Hmong community and the invisibility of their contributions during the Secret War, I seek to highlight the experiences of ethnic minority representation through this project.

Educational attainment of Hmong population in the U.S., 2019

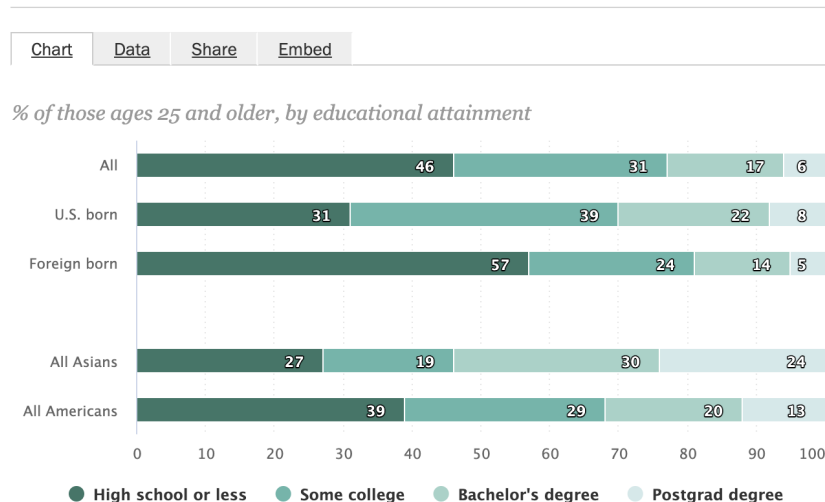


Fig 1. Bar graph of educational statistics for Hmong Americans

Problem Statement:

I will create a narrated timelapse video that displays one large-scale image made up of nine individual oil paintings on stretched canvas. My project will explore the Hmong American diaspora, using our traditional way of storytelling—*Paj Ntaub*, or story cloths. *Paj Ntaub* are typically embroidered quilts that pass down our history of persecution, war, and genocide. However, our story is still being defined today as many new generations of Hmong communities undergo adversity with socio-economic insecurity. My objective will be to transcend a new reinterpretation of our story cloths, using oil paint instead to discuss the identity and issues of current day Hmong Americans. I will include both my personal experiences, my parent's journey, along with historical references in hopes to provide positive amplification to my community and spark larger conversations about the differentialities beyond race, political control, assimilation, intergenerational trauma, and cultural preservation.



Fig 2. Taiv Shoua, my Great Aunt's hand sewn Paj Ntaub

Contextualization:

Over the course of my time at the University of Michigan, I have enrolled in courses studying Sociocultural Anthropology as my minor. My interest began in Anthropology as a way to feel connected to my indigenous and ethnic minority roots on campus. As these classes were one of the only spaces within the University where I could do academic research about the Hmong. Within my studies, I found that there were many overlaps between the two disciplines of Art & Anthropology. A shared commonality I found through “Visual Ethnography,” a methodology used within the study of Sociocultural Anthropology.

I took this approach to begin my research. Specifically looking at *Visual Ethnography and Its Application in Ethnographic Painting* by Yakup Mohd Rafee (Fig 3). From the scholarly article, Visual Ethnography uses theory and practice of visual approaches to learning about the world by communicating these perspectives to others. It emphasizes exploring and analyzing visual forms of art, as a way to record the daily lives of societies and communities. In doing so, this practice gathers data by creating or recording works of video, audio, photography, drawings, and paintings. All of which, I’ve used these visual forms throughout my creative process. By keeping in mind the applications of Visual Ethnography, it has greatly informed my own working thesis for the past four years. How would I use the right visuals to ultimately tell a historically complex story by using paint as my primary tool? How would painting record the daily lives of the Hmong before and after war, genocide, and refugee migration? How could I encapsulate the very emotions and traumas that the Hmong community have shared collectively?



Fig 3. Example of Visual Ethnography in a museum setting

While working through the research process, I had heard from a family member about a Professor of American Culture at the University of Michigan by the name of Melissa Borja. Borja’s research focused specifically on Hmong migration, where she is currently in the process of writing a book about Hmong refugee resettlement under Harvard University Press. I had reached out to her through email, where we later arranged a time to meet in her office. Upon the day of meeting her, she talked to me with the warmest regards, welcoming me with much wonder and surprise. Her office was filled with Hmong art and textiles hung up on her walls. I started to look back at my four years here, wishing I had met her earlier or at least taken one of her classes. Borja had asked me, “*What city are you from?*” and I responded with “*Saginaw,*

MI.” When she heard those words come out of my mouth, she fell straight from her chair in great shock and astonishment. She continued to tell me she was also born in Saginaw, MI. Sharing with me her favorite beanie embroidered with a historical building named “BEANS” in our hometown. We both were completely amazed that we had the same names, yet, were born in the same city and continued to talk about our own research.

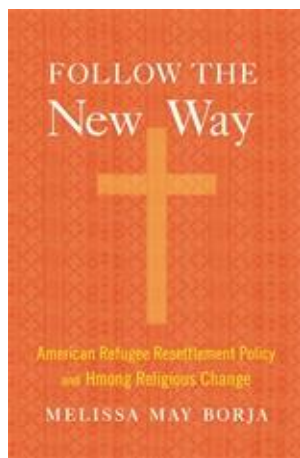


Fig 4. Cover page for Melissa Borja’s book

Borja explained to me that she had just finished the last portion of her book *Follow the New Way: Hmong Refugee Resettlement and the Practice of American Religious Pluralism* (Fig 4), which discusses how specific refugee policies (created under religious organizations) made it difficult for Hmong communities to practice their own traditional rituals less in the United States. Her argument discusses how religious implications have complicated old practices of the Hmong and how governance plays a role in regulating new religious identities. Retrospectively thinking, her research spoke many realities to me in a time where I was doing research about the reasoning behind the Hmong’s invisibility in America, as well as navigating my own traumas. Those words of “invisibility” and “underrepresentation” encapsulate how I have always felt as a Hmong American and speaking to Melissa Borja in person, I gained such a surreal perspective on the policies behind why I felt the way I did about my identity.

To gain further knowledge of other Hmong individuals outside of myself, I continued to look into another source of stories from other Hmong Americans. *How Do I Begin? A Hmong American Literary Anthology* (Fig 5), is a collection of stories exploring the experiences, thoughts, and voices of seventeen coming-of-age Hmong writers. The topics discussed in this book focus on telling narratives about being Hmong in America and serves as a creative outlet for Hmong creators to tell their stories. The poems and short stories included are vivid, powerful and vulnerable forms of written art. The book is one of the first accounts of Hmong American writings, in which the writings of Hmong people have not been documented much throughout history, as it has always been recorded from the oral word. This book overall encapsulates the general feeling of my project best, because it focuses on documenting human experiences revolving around Hmong identities through a creative lens. I gained many insightful perspectives of Hmong experiences that inform my work, where we discuss the similarities of missing parts of our original identities while navigating a new lifestyle.

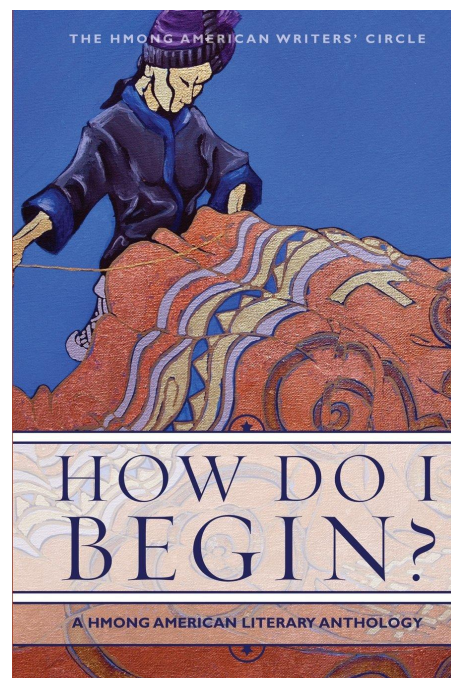
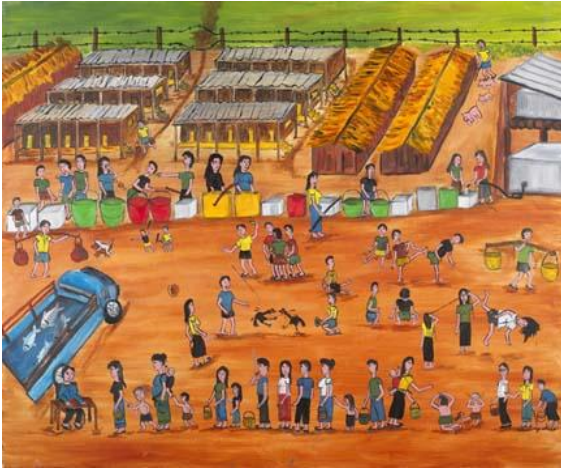


Fig 5. Cover Page for How Do I Begin?



In my artistic research, I looked into the works of Cy Thao—a Hmong painter from St. Paul, MN. Thao had created a series of 50 oil paintings (Fig 6-10), all depicting the Hmong migration, where he has made illustrated books, along with exhibiting his work in multiple museums. Cy Thao also served as a House of Representative in Minnesota from 2003-2011. His work portrays a similar style to mine, portraying the Hmong and masses of people on their journey to America. These paintings helped inform me of compositions, color and overall storytelling through art.

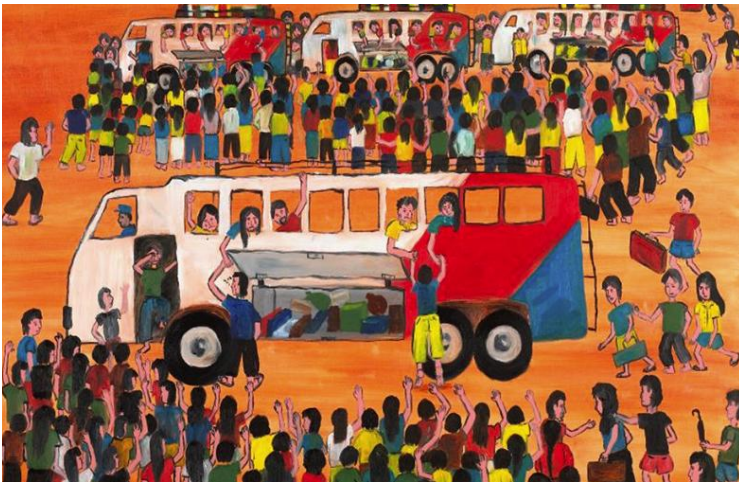


Fig 6-10. Cy Thao's 50 painting series

Creative Process:

Initially, I started with creating rough sketches of what I pictured the final painting to look like. I originally formatted the paintings to be 12 individual canvases, however, condensed it into 9 paintings, as shown in the later sketches (Fig 11-12). My first step was to create an archive by sorting through many pictures from documentaries, films, and family albums as references to figure out which visuals would convey the best meaning to my work. In addition, I've written many iterations of 9 separate transcripts to go alongside each of the sketches, as it was important for me to include a narrated video. I spent the majority of my time thinking repeatedly about what I wanted to say in my transcripts. My mind raced with the inner feelings and thoughts about how to put the Hmong people's history in the right words, along with telling stories about my family's trauma without over exploiting or over-romanticizing it. I dealt with many trivials throughout the process of working through my own traumas. Realizing my experiences were all associated with the topics that I had been researching. I reflected on ways I could overcome and harness this kind of work by focusing on what was truly important to me—to commemorate the Hmong community, whose experiences are rarely ever represented and use art as a means to cope with these traumas.

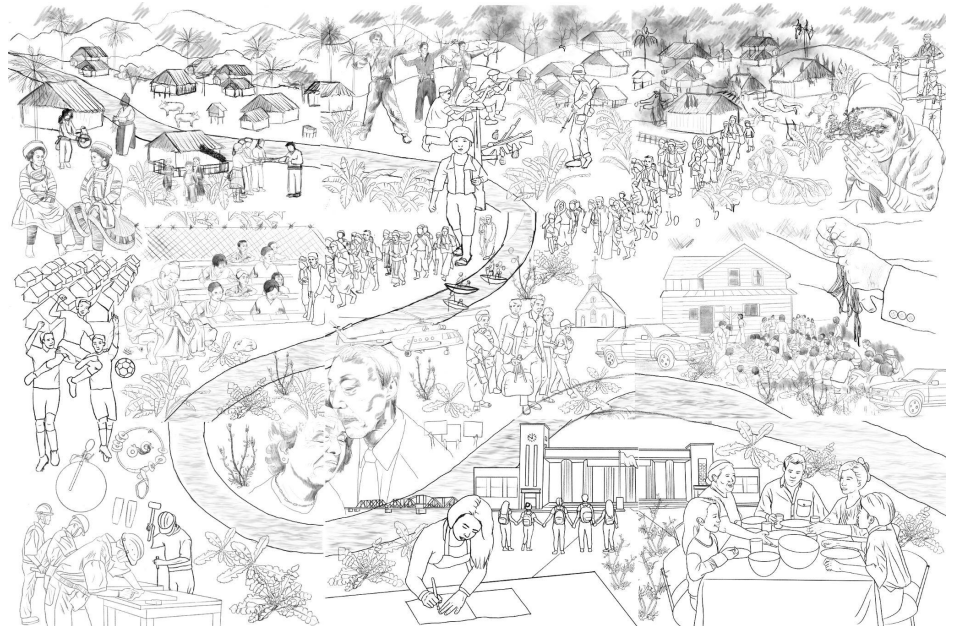


Fig 11-12. Hand drawn and digital sketches

The final sketch (Fig 12 above), comprises the 9 sketches, all composed into one image that will be later transferred onto canvas. I proceeded by then using a projector (Fig 13) to layout the images proportionately. The imagery included in these sketches directly correlates with the words in my transcript, so viewers of the video can engage by tracing my narration with the images in my paintings. Using turpentine and oil paint, I created an outline for when I lay down other oil paints (Fig 14-15).

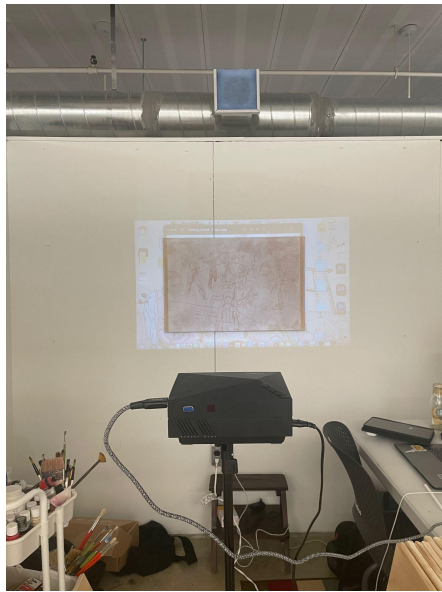


Fig 13-15. Projected images onto canvas, final layouts of all nine paintings

In the video portion, my final methodology in filming the individual painting clips was to use a webcam with the capacity of 1440 pixels (Fig 16). The webcam was then stabilized onto a shelf drill into the wall. Though I had many iterations previously of using a DSLR camera with a table top mount (Fig 17), the webcam method was much more lightweight to travel with. I pieced the many painting clips that I filmed, using enough footage to compose a 25 min video. For the audio, I recorded around 20-30 voice recordings making sure that I could portray my voice in the right tone or setting for my project. Another aspect of the video, which was of great importance to me, is to include subtitles along with captions of the painting panels.



Fig 16-17. Webcam and DSLR filming process

Exhibition Material Documentation:

Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pkagnsCH0w&t=1214s>





Fig 18. Progress photo & studio documentation

Paintings 1, 2, 3:



Fig 19-21. Individual painting panels

Paintings 4, 5, 6:



Fig 22-24. Individual painting panels

Paintings 7, 8, 9:



Fig 25-27. Individual painting panels



Fig 28. Close up shot



Fig 29. Angled shot

Conclusion:

In my future endeavors, the research I began studying when I entered the University of Michigan as a freshman will continue to be an on-going process of my working thesis. The topics of cultural preservation, refugee migration, invisibility, and underrepresentation for the Hmong is a lifetime of working iterations. Where this project is only one iteration and will serve as my starting point to begin that journey.



Fig 30. Final painting



Fig 31. Final Exhibition

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