

Drawn In: Drawing Practice in a Cross-cultural Context in Australia

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Art has always been about reflecting and interpreting the world. In the twenty-first century, the dynamic movement of people between nations needs more empathic tolerance and appreciation of diverse cultures to build stronger, and sustainable, communities. Australia is one of those nations in which different cultures meet, live and shape the diversity of Australian culture.

Also it is apparent that in much of today's society, the trend is towards the highly individual. So artists respond to this phenomenon by demanding a more personal engagement with their art. Drawing, therefore, has become the perfect platform to accommodate artists' personal, intimate and direct experiences of belonging within different environments, as to serve their needs of publicly expressing sensitive and strong responses to the social, political and cultural changes in their lives. It is no longer just a tool that artists use as preparation for other art forms, such as painting, sculpture, etc. Drawing is now an autonomous art form in the contemporary art world, sharing a position of equal importance with all other forms of individual expression.

Each act of mark-making is a form of drawing, which demonstrates the nature of drawing; but it also demonstrates who the artist is and how the artist sees and lives in the world. Acts of drawing occur all the time, when we doodle while on the phone, or sketch someone a map on a piece of paper. We are all mark-makers, whether this is a personal and intimate mode of expression, a way of exploration or research in art and life, or a public statement. We, as viewers, can see how artists portray themselves vividly and truthfully through their marks.

This paper intends to discuss how drawing, has been executed by certain Australian artists who have positioned their art practice in a cross-cultural context. The aim is to make the connection between the act of contemporary drawing and the personal and intimate interpretation of life in Australia. Some of the Australian drawings are evidence of the engagement with cross-cultural changes, which have become increasingly complex. These drawings convey ideas from observation and personal experiences and explore how the individual artist has been affected by this cultural context. Some Australian artists have used drawing to make a strong comment on their experiences of dealing with trans-cultural displacement and belonging.

Therefore, this paper will discuss how art-making has contributed to a cross-cultural study in which making drawing is evidence of individual responses to different situations. The discussion begins with an examination of my own art practice to explain how living in cross-cultural context actually affects practice. This will be followed by an introduction to a recent exhibition, *Remarking | Remaking – Contemporary Australian Drawing Connections*, which included 10 artists from diverse backgrounds whose work suggests exciting possibilities for the themes of belonging and displacement in Australia. Finally, drawing projects by a collaborative art group, *3PPOD*, in which the act of drawing was related closely to the act of living with negotiation and confrontation in cross-cultural life situation, will be examined

Hide and Seek

I see my life as a special journey, where I constantly move from one point to another, both physically and mentally. Consequently, in the past decade I have continued to explore the dual influences of my Chinese heritage and Australian culture, between my homeland and my current home. My appreciation of the benefit of learning from both cultures has led to a genuine exploration of personal perception and expression. Choosing to make art through drawing mediums is a declaration of my ongoing search for a personal interpretation of tradition in relation to the contemporary in various contexts. In my work, space and the marks of objects are essential in representing my inner world, anchoring the physical surroundings that form my understanding and perception, and transcending my thoughts and emotions.

My art has been reflection on my life in Australia. As with any other immigrant, the physical and emotional responses to the changes in life between two cultures inevitably transformed my view of self and the world tremendously. This has been expressed in my art practice. Of all the changes in my practice, this paper will examine only the aspect of subject matter.

While studying in China in the 90s, I used to draw and paint the human body as my principal subject matter, particularly self-portraits, and images of my family and friends. I had always been aware of the presence of myself in relation to the world. When I started my studies in Australia, this style continued: my paintings were still of my friends and me, to convey my emotions of being alone in a foreign country. It was not until I started to focus on drawing as a major art form that images of the human figure disappeared from my work.

During my time in Australia, the need to find myself has been constant, no matter where I am, either in China or Australia. My emotional connections with both nations altered subtly and gradually, which caused me to conclude that I belonged to both countries, but at the same time I belonged to neither. This process of changing and becoming has therefore affected my artworks and ultimately led to the disappearance of human figures from my drawings. Indeed, my subjects have shifted to things around me so that my presence is implied without my actual appearance.

The things that appear in my drawings are mainly from my everyday life. They may be chosen from my home, the art studio, or from my travels to different places. They are sometimes the things I touch and use often, with a sense of affection, such as a chair in my studio, or objects that I am interested in and eager to draw, such as trees and birds. The choice of objects is general and personal. It is important to emphasize this connection, as it is crucial to convey myself and life in my drawings. As an example, a bird that appears many times in my drawings is called the Indian Myna, which can be found everywhere in urban and suburban Sydney. In Australia, the Indian Myna is an invasive pest.¹ It is a hollow-nesting species; that is, it nests and breeds in protected hollows found naturally in trees or artificially on buildings. However, compared with native hollow-nesting species, the Indian Myna is extremely aggressive. This aggressiveness has enabled the Indian Myna to displace many breeding pairs of native hollow-nesters, thereby reducing their reproductive success.

AMERICAN BIRD CONSERVANCY. *Threats to Birds – Common India Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*)* [Online]. Available: <http://www.abcbirds.org/conservationissues/threats/invasives/mynas.html>, [Accessed 24th, April 2013].

The Indian Myna's striking habits have drawn my attention as a reflection of one aspect of an immigrant's survival in Australia.

The marks executed to demonstrate the bird's nature are simplified into two distinct forms: a thinly monochromatic wash for the body and detailed drawn feathers. The thinly coated, washy colour represents its local colour, which implies its vulnerability as a migrant species, being new to the continent and seeking to survive in competition with local species. On the other hand, its aggressive nature has caused national environmental problems that cannot be neglected. I therefore chose to draw the feathers stretching out of its body so that its anger, ambition and aggressiveness could be depicted as I imagine it. To win fights with other creatures, the Indian Myna needs to stimulate all its energy to fight against what it perceives to be threats. There is also humour here, in the bizarre appearance of this bird with just a few feathers stretching on some parts of its body. These feathers are drawn in black, which introduces some darker and stronger features, communicating its local colour and spirit. A sharp ballpoint pen is used to depict each hair on its feathers to convey the bird's purposeful attitude. In some other cases, I draw the bird in pure flat black to express my understanding of its sad struggle, and its shadow in red with expressive marks to represent its unstoppable fighting intentions. There are also aggressive Mynas, vulnerable Mynas, newborns, and those that are in harmony in nature.

It is not my intention in these drawings to use the figure of the Indian Myna to replace self-portraits or represent my life status in Australia. It is the inspiration of mark-making that has spurred me to search for more interpretations of the things in my works. I draw the India Myna, along with many other things, to convey my awareness of different situations, emotions, and processes. It is like a game of hide and seek. The viewers can often feel my presence without seeing me in the work. They find me or lose me, and they find themselves and may lose themselves too. It is a journey through visual language to communicate with each other, to find who I am/who we are and where I am/where we are.

Drawings are so honest that they reflect my dual identity, part Chinese, part Australian. I have been searching for a way to interpret the influences from both cultures in my art and life. My being Chinese and exploring drawing in a western contemporary context stimulated this initiative because I realized that I could not isolate myself from my Chinese heritage and cultural background. Some people argue that diasporic artists can often apply a hybridised visual mixing of cultural elements in their art practice.² This is true to some extent, as there are many examples in which two or more cultural elements have been juxtaposed or hybridised by artists. However, I have positioned my art to make it clear that I have been aware of and rejected the use of mere appropriated cultural symbols or elements in a simple hybridisation. The Myna is an interesting subject that has been painted by Chinese traditional painters, such as Bada Shanren. I have explored drawing Indian Mynas with my understanding of contemporary cultural contexts. I searched for the proper interpretation of things with profound understanding of the cultural contexts in my work. This process of research has provided the means to build a bridge between Chinese and Western aesthetics notions of depictions of the appearance and essence of an object. Both the outcomes of and the feedback on my research and drawings have been positive.

MCFARLANE, K. 2004. Diaspora, Cultural Practice and Syncretic Visuality. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 25, 175-184.

Remarking | Remaking

The exhibition *Remarking | Remaking – Contemporary Australian Drawing Connections*, supported by the Blacktown Arts Centre in Sydney, was a collaborative curatorial project that I worked on in 2012, together with Pakistani artist Abdullah Syed. In this project, we shifted our focus from individual interpretations of being in a cross-cultural environment to the interpretations of a group. *Remarking | Remaking* showcases the talents of artists who address Australia's cultural diaspora. It was not the intention that the small number of participating artists selected should represent all aspects of current Australian drawing, but rather to investigate how artists of very different backgrounds and viewpoints have diversely explored a theme such as this. The exhibition presented the public with a selection of artworks by artists who either embraced drawing as the primary medium in their art practice or employed it as a finished, autonomous and self-generative discipline. The focus was on artists who not only look at and expand their art practice through mark-making but also infuse it with their distinctive cultural tales, legends and myths, and conceptualise it within global history and narrative.

In this exhibition, the viewers saw 10 artists who genuinely celebrate their acts of making and marking in many different ways to express their experiences of diaspora in Australia. Among the 10 artists some, such as Bosnian-born artist Muamer Cajic, who experienced his country's civil war in the 90s, allowed the viewers to perceive their personal experiences of cultural changes or exchanges through very subtle, intimate and sensitive marks on paper. His drawings of a collection of shoes placed in a grid quietly invite us into the artist's very private world. Cajic's drawings often deal with memory and imagination, since memory produces a rhythm in which past confusion and present feelings engage in a cohesive form, that of a shoe. Each shoe represents a person who once had lived, loved and unceremoniously died.³

While some more 'violent' act may be better representation in the act of drawing to convey the concept of belonging and displacement as that of Anie Nheu's. Born in Taiwan, Anie moved through four different countries with her family before they finally settled in Australia. Nheu carries out her exploration of two-dimensional and three-dimensional worlds for which her drawing tools range from pencil and charcoal to cutting paper with a knife or scissors, in order to skilfully express her personal experiences of displacement, belonging, and identity. In her statement, she explains that 'Image making has become a process in finding or revealing forms which have remained elusive. Form has become a metaphor of identity; form in space, a metaphor for a sense of place. The experience of cultural identity was not a given. It takes the form of a continual process of defining, crossing-overs and redefining'.⁴

Interpreting one's own cultural tradition creates links between the artists' current positions and their heritage, as in Nusra Latif Qureshi's work. Pakistani-born artist Qureshi exhibits her drawing using the three-dimensional space of the gallery to carry forward her ongoing interest in the potential of traditional devices and historic images as vehicles to articulate contemporary issues, in which her art practice is formed by

CAJIC, M. 2012. Sydney: Blacktown Arts Centre.
NHEU, A. 2012. Sydney: Blacktown Arts Centre.

the changed experiences of a new society and culture. She is interested in the names of birds, plants, people and land. She hopes to investigate the notion of identity, place and belonging and use drawing as formed by the experiences of migration and taking roots in a new society and culture.⁵

In a country like Australia, artists do not just hold tightly to their own heritage. The advantage of having multiple-cultural communication has enriched the understanding of our life. Some artists search for a way that is not simply hybridised, but integrated in harmony. Polish-born artist Ana Pollack's work has been influenced by the rhythm, energy and movement of Chinese calligraphy to guide her gestural marks in drawing. Her particular interest lies in her passion for understanding the relationship between nature and humans, which she has absorbed into the Eastern philosophy of *being* in nature, so pronounced in her drawings. She has also learned calligraphy in order to understand the use of lines and the energy involved in the mark-making process so she can deliver her intention of interpreting her understanding of the relationship between her beliefs, her life and her art practice.⁶

Remarking | *Remaking* suggests some exciting possibilities for the themes of diaspora in Australia. The drawings became a platform to accommodate the artists' personal, intimate and direct experiences, to serve their needs to publicly express sensitive and strong responses to the social, political and cultural changes in their lives by developing diverse conceptual and technical explorations. The exhibition has provided a catalyst for discussion, as audiences were encouraged to share their thoughts and responses by drawing on their own personal experiences.

3PPOD: Deconstruct and Reconstruct Self-value in Community

The final part of this paper discusses how the act of drawing can be related to cultural/social acts in a cross-cultural context. For the collaborative art group 3PPOD, it is not only what content the artists choose to represent the concept, but more importantly, it is the psychological process the artists have been through that strongly demonstrates what happens when interaction occurs between individuals.

3PPOD was conceived at a point when Anie Nheu, Yiwon Park and I were passionate about enhancing our identity-seeking art in Australia through the drawing act. Our individual art uses similar concepts, based on our awareness of how cultural identity is reconstructed by a new culture. Although this issue is not a new realm for artists to explore, 3PPOD set out to create different approaches to it to demonstrate and investigate how the mark-making act in art can represent our value-making act in life. The group has undertaken several projects representing the relationship between reality and the drawing process, including Adding and Erasing, Concealing and Revealing, Rubric and Puzzles. Each of these projects addresses different problems and solutions that would have been encountered in life. In this paper, two projects – 'Adding' and 'Erasing' – will be discussed to show how the drawing process is similar to the process of life when individual values are confronted in a different culture.

Every individual experiencing conflicts, compromises, or other cross-cultural

QURESHI, N. L. 2012. Sydney: Blacktown Arts Centre.
POLLAK, A. 2012. Sydney: Blacktown Arts Centre.

dilemmas would share a similar process of justifying the differences between cultures. The research group for the paper 'Perceiving cultural importance and actual self-importance of values in cultural identification' suggests an interaction between the cultural self and its shared reality with the collective. The paper argues that people will behave in accordance with the direction of a collective cultural representation. When they find certain knowledge and values meaningful in this culture, they will then appropriate the knowledge and values to construct their cultural self.⁷ It is a personal process of processing different cultural/social values in the act of deconstruction and reconstruction. Each person creates a personal value system, which relates to the person's own integrated system of interrelated values. Individuals in a culture interact with each other at different levels, from one-on-one communication to collective-meaning negotiation.⁸ When we communicate with the others, it is our choice to decide how we conduct any conversation when our behaviours, values and beliefs are confronted and challenged. There are compromises, but our previously held identity is also enriched. We, as individuals, have been shaped to be a part of this new environment. Therefore, the aim of these two projects was to represent life challenges such as this through the art making process.

It was the intention of both projects to investigate how much we can remain who we are in this new country. Therefore, we designed the rules. As these were collaborative works, in both projects, each artist began a drawing. The drawing was circulated to the next person. The third person finalized the drawing. There were two main rules: we could add, cut, tear, stick in the first series, 'Adding', and must erase each other's images as we wished in the second series, 'Erasing'. However, how we decided to work on each other's existing marks was determined by our individual definitions of what is meant by adding and erasing. We considered it reflected our life situation where we always face decisions about how much we keep and hide or give away, who we are and what we have.

At the same time, and also in order to capture our thoughts for evaluation later, we used text to record our thoughts while we were completing the projects. According to the texts, it was very evident that the marks were no longer just drawing marks as in those of our own artworks. The marks started to influence our emotions and moral values at a socially interactive level.

In the 'Adding' project, we encountered some entirely new art experiences.⁹ For example, Nheu was challenged when she was distracted and disoriented by the narratives and recognizable forms and shapes in the drawings, because it is not the usual way she works. She normally seeks relationships by mapping and rendering the negative space to capture inter-relationships between the subjects. She lost her mark-making identity when given an unfamiliar context in which to work.

My own experience was also a process of changing my attitude to the values of my marks and those of the others in the project. I had problems in determining how strongly my own style should be represented in the drawings without damaging the

WAN, C., CHIU, C.-Y., TAM, K.-P., LEE, S.-L., LAU, I. Y.-M. & PENG, S. 2007. Perceived cultural importance and actual self-importance of values in cultural identification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 337-354, *ibid.*
ibid. p.338

LI, W., NHEU, A. & PARK, Y. 2012. Yarns Between Bubble. 3PPOD in conjunction with The University of Sydney, *ibid.*, *ibid.*

others' work. When I first started, I couldn't stop changing the drawing into my preferred style, which caused some difficulties for the other artists and myself. Over the period, I learned to adapt more from the others' marks, temperaments and styles. This change has helped me perceive who I am and how I can be who I am when facing such circumstances in life.

Park, on the contrary, took this project as an opportunity to experiment with developing relationships by being absorbed into others' drawn worlds, searching for various ways to participate in conversations through our visual languages. She avoided dialogue with others and preferred monologues or broken narratives. Overall, the project 'Adding' was the less confronting of the two, because the process could be viewed as complimentary to the existing marks, although from time to time it was difficult to make decisions about how much to add and how much to change the others' work.

Unexpectedly, 'Erasing' caused more troubles than we expected, as putting a value on the 'self' and the 'others', and the individual versus the collective, became emotionally and morally sensitive. In 'Erasing', each of us had to remove 70% of the existing mark, and could add up to 30% if we wished. This exercise allowed us to explore the parameters of and meaning in the act of erasing – its surprising consequences, and the unexpected ways of removing marks and interpreting the act of removing a mark.

I was the most difficult participant, as I started to mix these art actions with moral actions. My normal mark-making process is to give value to each mark and space; but by brutally erasing them, just for the sake of erasing, I felt I was taking away the values of marks and space without equal compensation or convincing reasons. It reached a point where morally, I found it difficult to erase the others' marks, because I started to feel that I was erasing their voices that suggested their identities.

As the elimination of the others' marks through my actions caused tremendous problems, some alternatives were sought – ways of erasing without leaving my marks, such as using sun and bleach to remove the acrylic. To some extent, it was also hard to see my marks covered by Park, because I felt that my history and the evidence of my presence were erased. For these reasons, it became very emotional and confronting for me to continue this project.

Things were not so difficult for the other two artists. Park felt excited at the beginning about the unexpected outcomes of this process. She began the project with the notion of erasing as a way of transforming an image without considering composition or taking likes and dislikes into account. However, her awareness of the presence of the other two became evident later, when she noticed she worked differently once she began considering the others' images as the target to erase. She then started to value the images presented, by maintaining her intention of not occupying the space without thinking about the others' contributions.

Nheu approached the project differently. When she first encountered Park's three drawings, with strong statements on the back, such as '*How can you erase me, if I haven't drawn any image?*'; '*How can you erase me, if I erase it first?*'; and '*Ok, now you can erase me,*' she responded to the texts by subverting the intention of the

instructions to control by questioning the act of erasing. Nheu 'erased' by copying Park's image and adding it to the existing drawing, thereby simultaneously changing the image without leaving her own mark and taking away Park's ownership of her image. However, the image had been changed and was no longer Park's. To Nheu, this process represented the process of assimilating into a dominant culture; adopting a culture that is not yours, and through the process, creating a hybrid culture. New identities are formed with no sense of belonging to either of the cultures that have formed you, and no ownership of either culture; the source of the creation of our hybrid culture.

The drawings produced out of the project 'Erasing' were not as successful as we had hoped, but in the end, the process subjugated the main intention and became the investigation itself.

Living in a new country where new language, ideas, values, and social behaviours meet every day, every immigrant faces often the dilemma of how much one culture should be maintained and how to respond to different culture(s). However, the parallel is that there are always battles, big or small, in one's individual life, which, over time, define its complexity and complications.

It is the process of forming communications like this that interested the artists discussed in this paper, who expressed their shared similarities. The act of drawing has indeed challenged our perceptions of how we see ourselves in relation to the others, the individual value we have found in collectiveness and how we define who we are in art and life. Drawing, and the act of making drawing, through its genuinely intimate, direct and personal nature, effectively serves as an appropriate means to express ideas related to migrants' lives in multiple cultures. The intention of using the act of drawing as a tool to study our everyday behavior as a immigrants was successfully represented in the drawings, and will continue to be explored.

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