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# Grotesque Depictions and Seduction: Exotification of Asian/American Women

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**GROTESQUE DEPICTIONS AND SEDUCTION:  
EXOTIFICATION OF ASIAN/AMERICAN WOMEN**

By  
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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PROFESSOR HUYNH**

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## Introduction

My senior art project is an exploration of contemporary representations of women of Asian descent in the United States, specifically looking at issues of body image, sexuality, and exoticification. I will examine the lack of representation of Asian women in America in media and art, specifically painting and mixed media. Ultimately, I will elucidate on why I chose this topic and used certain techniques and materials to explore the contemporary features and symbolic representations of Asian women in America.

While I use various phrases, like ‘women of Asian-descent in America’ and ‘Asian/American women’ interchangeably throughout this paper for simplicity’s sake, I would like to fully acknowledge that they are not always congruent, as there are Asian women who do not identify as ‘Asian/American’, although they do reside in America. The importance of the slash between Asian and American is symbolic in itself, in order to “question how Asian American people persistently occupy questionable status in the United States as Asian or American.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Shimizu, Celine Parren. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 14.



## Chapter 1: A Short History Lesson on White Imperialism, Orientalism, and Exoticism

Although we could go back far back in history to explore issues of colonialism, imperialism, racism, and the controlling of Asian bodies, I will attempt to concentrate more on modern explorations about white imperialism, exoticism, and “Otherness.”

A central part of Orientalism and what it looks like in contemporary American culture is how Asian/American women are exoticized in current mass media and cultural trends that include media and art. There are countless works looking at the historical phenomenon of what Orientalism came to be and how it can be examined today. In its simplest terms, the idea of Orientalism can be traced back to European colonialism and the desire to occupy the “Orient.” In his revolutionary book criticizing Orientalism, Edward Said describes how “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, and remarkable experiences.”<sup>2</sup> In its conquest, this concept of the exotic “Other” was created “as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>3</sup> The preoccupation and control of the Orient moved around in the hands of white imperialist nations, including the United States. For instance, “from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II, America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain did.”<sup>4</sup>

In *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle*, Bongie defines *exoticism* as a “nineteenth-century literary and existential practice that posited another space, the

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2. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1.

3. *Ibid.*, 3.

4. *Ibid.*, 4

space of an Other, outside or beyond the confines of a ‘civilization.’”<sup>5</sup> All remnants of contemporary standards of beauty with regard to the “perfect” Asian woman can be traced back to the history of oppression, white imperialism, and exotification of the “Orient”. For instance, Professor Darrell Hamamoto of UC Davis points out that “the historical legacy of U.S. imperial conquest, neocolonial occupation, dislocation, exclusion, relocation, and the depredation of global capitalism as the underlying factor for shaping the multiform sexuality of Asian American men and women.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the objectification of sexualized Asian women is maintained by and for white privilege and the “male gaze”.

The phrase “male gaze” frequently refers to “objects of visual art so that the viewer is situated in a ‘masculine’ position of appreciation.”<sup>7</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, one of the leading French existentialist philosophers and writers in the early 1900’s, produced many works about the “male gaze.”<sup>8</sup> She claimed that women were defined as “others” and “not male”, and she argued that a woman’s “identity is socially constructed. ‘Woman’ has been constructed by men, by a society which maintains ideological systems prescribing her subordination, and by womens’ own participation in those systems.”<sup>9</sup> The “male gaze” is an especially prominent issue within the art world, as “analyses of the gaze converge in their conclusion that much of the art produced

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5. Bongie, Chris. *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Find de Siecle* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991).

6. "Asian American Sexual Politics in the International Arena." *Fascinasiens*. August 8, 2012. Accessed November 11, 2014.

7. Korsmeyer, Carolyn. "Feminist Aesthetics." *Stanford University*. May 7, 2004. Accessed November 11, 2014.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Scholz, Sally. "The Second Sex." *Philosophy Now*. January 1, 2008. Accessed November 11, 2014.

in the Euro-American traditions situate the ideal appreciator in a masculine subject-position,”<sup>10</sup> such as the female nude. Just as a painting can be purchased, a person can also own and distort the image of an object based on their own positionality. However, it is important to acknowledge that this definition of the “male gaze” is oversimplified and must account for other aspects of identity besides gender, such as “sexuality, race, and nationality.”<sup>11</sup> For instance, the prototype for the male gaze is the heterosexual white male and a sense of entitlement to view and exploit bodies.<sup>12</sup> The male gaze brings to attention that looking is never a neutral process, especially when it comes to visual art.<sup>13</sup>

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10. Korsmeyer, Carolyn. "Feminist Aesthetics." Stanford University. May 7, 2004. Accessed November 11, 2014.

11. hooks, bell. (1992). "The Oppositional Gaze," Black Looks, Boston: South End Press, 1992.

12. Lueptow, Kelsey. "4 Ways To Challenge The Male Gaze." Everyday Feminism. May 27, 2013. Accessed November 11, 2014.

13. Korsmeyer, Carolyn. "Feminist Aesthetics." Stanford University. May 7, 2004. Accessed November 11, 2014.

## Chapter 2: Postcolonial Desires and the Modern Fetishization and Exotification of Asian Women

### Women

There are many contradictory images of Asian women throughout history, and the depiction of these images is not stable or fluid. Modern archetypes of Asian women have blended with historical, outdated racist images, including the hypersexualized, submissive Geisha Girl, China Doll, Lotus Blossom, the powerful, untrustworthy cold Dragon Lady, and the Dominatrix.<sup>14</sup> These stereotypes are continuously portrayed in current society, especially in media and Halloween costumes of geisha girls and China dolls.<sup>15</sup>



Image 1: Is Your Halloween Costume Racist?

Asian women are simultaneously portrayed as sexualized and infantilized, for they are seen as both “sexy” and “cute” at the same time. In *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing*

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14. Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009.

15. Williams, Patricia. "China Doll, Geisha Girl, and the Asian American Woman." *Hardboiled: The Asian Pacific American Issues News Magazine at UC Berkeley*. Accessed October 26, 2014.

*Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, Shimizu defines powerfully argues that a crucial part of race politics is talking about the “pleasure and fantasy from the sexualization of race”<sup>16</sup>, not just for Asian/American women but all women of color. Ultimately, sexualized contemporary portrayal of Asian/American women is not a true representation of who Asian women really are. As Shimizu puts it, “it is a violent homogenization of Asian American women who are lumped together in representation where cultural and other specificities are lumped together in representation where cultural and other specificities are obscured and eclipsed by hypersexuality.”<sup>17</sup> In this section, I will explore how modern day technology has played a significant role in bringing to light this cultural phenomenon and obsession with the exotification of Asian women in the United States.

With the help of online data and the globalization of technology use in the last couple of decades, there is evidence that there is a strong racial preference for Asian women in online dating sites and Internet pornography. Recent statistics from AYI.com, a leading online dating site, analyzed “over 2.54 million interactions among its current user base in the United States to find that... Asian women are the most preferred by all men, except Asian men.”<sup>18</sup> Another study by Cardiff University in 2012 on facial attractiveness also found that Asian women’s faces were seen as significantly more attractive than other races, including white or black faces.<sup>19</sup> Statistics

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16. Ibid., 13-14.

17. Ibid., 13-14.

18. "Dating Preferences: A Guide to Online Dating By Ethnicity." *AYIcom Blog*. November 25, 2014. Accessed October 4, 2014. <http://www.ayi.com/dating-blog/online-dating-ethnicity-racial-preference-interracial-dating-ayi/>.

19. "Research Suggests Facial Attractiveness Explains Patterns in Mixed-race Marriage." *Cardiff University News Centre*. February 9, 2012. Accessed October 4, 2014. <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/mediacentre/mediareleases/y2012/8150.html>.

on the “most searched terms” in Internet pornography show that the search term “asian” is one of the top ten most searched terms in the United States,<sup>20</sup> with it being number one in California.<sup>21</sup>

Contemporary stereotypical views of Asian women are depicted through a strange phenomenon called “yellow fever”, which includes calling them “mail-order brides.”<sup>22</sup> The term “yellow fever” refers to the phenomenon of fetishizing Asian culture, especially Asian women.<sup>23</sup> For example, the “Yellow Fever” YouTube video by Wong Fu Productions that went viral in 2008 portrays a comical exploration of how the characters always see couples of Asian women with white men but rarely see Asian men with white women as couples. At the same time, Asian women are exotified through the process of infantilization. In an interview with actor John Cho, he said:

...there’s this belief that Asian babies are really cute, and it got me thinking that our whole race is infantilized to some degree, and it manifests itself in different ways. You infantilize a woman, and she becomes eroticized. You infantilize a man, and he becomes emasculated. You infantilize a baby [*laughs*] -- and it's possible, it appears that you can infantilize a baby even more. [*laughs*] The babies need to be cuter than white babies. And it's just a weird thing that I felt like said something about mainstream America's relationship to Asians in general. So that's where it came from.<sup>24</sup>

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20. "Global Top Searches." *Global Internet Porn Habits Infographic*. Accessed October 4, 2014.

21. Chan, Casey. "The Most Searched Terms in Porn by Country and State." *Gizmodo*. March 12, 2014. Accessed October 4, 2014.

22. Bahadur, Nina. "These 9 Images Will Make You Think Differently About 'Yellow Fever'" *The Huffington Post*. December 16, 2013. Accessed October 5, 2014.

23. Lu, Chin. "Why Yellow Fever Is Different than "Having a Type"" *The Bold Italic*. June 3, 2013. Accessed November 12, 2014.

24. Wang, Oliver. "The Game-Changer: An Interview with John Cho (part 2)." *UCLA International Institute*. July 3, 2009. Accessed October 13, 2014.

However, this recent trend-setting critical stereotyping of Asian women as better lovers and passive, sexualized beings has had push-back in recent years as more Asian women are speaking out against the racist, sexist depiction of Asian women as passive, sexualized beings.<sup>25</sup> Cultural activists often use the Internet platform to takedown this offensive generalization and stereotyping of Asian women. For instance, YouTuber Anna Akana eloquently says in her video, “I don't understand why, why you should romanticize an entire race as being submissive or weak or docile...When the only prerequisite for me to become your potential partner is the color of my skin? That's cheap. That's offensive. You're an asshole. Go away.”<sup>26</sup> As the article points out, “Akana gets to the root of the real problem with yellow fever: It doesn't see women as fully-formed individuals, but as the living embodiment of offensive stereotypes.”<sup>27</sup> There has even been a documentary film called “Seeking Asian Female”, by filmmaker Debbie Lum, that follows a 60 year old white man’s search for a potential Chinese bride through online matchmaking sites focuses on white men’s infatuation with Asian women. More importantly, the film “looks at Caucasian men’s infatuation with Asian women and explores stereotypes that paint Asian women as sexual and submissive creatures.”<sup>28</sup>

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25. Ren, Yuan. "'Yellow Fever' Fetish: Why Do so Many White Men Want to Date a Chinese Woman?" *The Telegraph*. July 1, 2014. Accessed October 4, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10935508/Yellow-fever-fetish-Why-do-so-many-white-men-want-to-date-a-Chinese-woman.html>.

26. Anna Akana, *Why Guys like Asian Girls*, YouTube Video, 2:54, July 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWFQ1uiD8LA>.

27. Matthews, Cate. "Here's What 'Yellow Fever' Really Means." *The Huffington Post*. July 29, 2014. Accessed October 5, 2014.

28. Borresen, Kelsey. "Mail-Order Bride Documentary 'Seeking Asian Female' Looks At White Man's Obsession With Asian Women (VIDEO)." *The Huffington Post*. May 7, 2013. Accessed October 5, 2014.

### Chapter 3: Orientalist Representation of Asian/American Women in Media and Pornography

Modern media is a powerful medium for people to consume and understand the world around them, including the representation of groups of people. The hypersexuality of Asian/American women in American culture is impossible to ignore in today's media, whether it is mainstream movies like *Charlies Angels* (2000) or exoticized pornographic images and videos of Asian women. Blockbuster movies like *The Wolverine* (2013) portray Asian women as not particularly hypersexualized but as the "Other", passive characters who need to be saved. These stereotypical media portrayals of Asian women make it impossible for Asian women to ignore these hypersexualized, racist, stereotypical images of themselves.

*Charlies Angels* (2000) perpetuates the hypersexualized images and stereotypical tropes of Asian/American women through one of its secret agent "Angels" Alex Munday (played by Lucy Liu). Although all the female lead characters are donned as equally hypersexualized, Lucy Liu's whitewashed character wears racially stereotypical costumes, such as a "kimono dress" and a "sexy masseuse,"<sup>29</sup> essentially reinforcing these racist tropes of being a fetish. Although her other fellow agents wear the same costumes, Liu's character Alex Munday attempts to be portrayed as a strong, Asian woman is destroyed because her depiction as a sexy masseuse reinforces a historically constructed hypersexualized representation of Asian/American women.<sup>30</sup> This movie is only part of a larger culture of the hypersexualized depiction of Asian women, and

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29. Celine Parren Shimizu. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 86.

30. "Lucy Liu: Breaking Down Asian Stereotypes or Enforcing Them?" *Defeating the Dragon*. March 14, 2013. Accessed November 11, 2014.



in order to “understand her identity and her possibilities”, Asian/American women in American culture are forced “engage hypersexuality in representation,”<sup>31</sup> especially in film and television.

More recently, *The Wolverine* (2013), a huge blockbuster hit, turned out to be another “typical Orientalist love story,” where a “girl’s life is endangered by the backwards misogyny of Asia (in this case personified by a literal giant samurai robot)”,<sup>32</sup> and a manly, white, male protagonist sweeps in to save the day. Although the comic storyline was already based off of “Orientalist source material,”<sup>33</sup> it is hard to ignore the film’s uncritical eye for its racist and stereotypical depictions of the “exotic east”, and especially Asian women. The Asian female love interest, Mariko, is depicted as “a petite woman in a geisha costume”<sup>34</sup> who is portrayed as a one-dimensional character; “We can readily forget that she’s supposed to be a human being with her own agency; we can happily accept that she is just a prize for Wolverine to rescue and win, and then safely discard so that he can go back about his life.”<sup>35</sup> Mariko’s character lost all sense of agency because of her place within the primarily white-male dominated narrative. Instead, she is an sexualized object for the leading protagonist to win over while residing in the paradigm that she is a quiet, passive, and obedient Asian female character - all racial and sexist stereotypes of Asian women. Yukio, the other Asian female character, cannot be forgotten in this narrative of Asian stereotypes. She is the “dragon lady to Mariko’s lotus blossom, dressed in fetishistic

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31. Shimizu, Celine Parren. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 16.

32. "The Wolverine: Memories of Miss Saigon." *The Nerds of Color*. August 20, 2013. Accessed November 11, 2014.

33. Ibid.

34. Rimer, Matt. "The Wolverine Is A Racist Buzzkill: A Review." *Four Pins*. July 29, 2013. Accessed November 11, 2014.

35. Ibid.

schoolgirl garb and shock of red hair against Mariko's traditional kimono and obi, yet desexualized to allow for Logan's sexual conquest of Mariko center-stage."<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, Mariko and Yukio's characters are simply depictions of reigning stereotypes of Asian women, where they are constructed as sexual objects that lack of power and are also willing to sacrifice themselves to save, in this case, the white male savior protagonist.

Another crucial aspect of media that racially objectifies women of color is online pornography. Pornography "simultaneously erotized... racial stereotypes (i.e. the image of the dangerous and wild sexuality of the black woman or the meekness and passivity of the Asian woman)" and "women's subordination... while the exploitation of the racial Other has long been a pornographic trope before the advent of the Internet, online pornography has capitalized on commodifying racial difference."<sup>37</sup> The way pornography distorts representation and employs racial stereotypes for "ethnic pornography" is an even more serious topic because how easily accessible and dominant it is on the worldwide web. For Asian media representation, many pornographic videos depicting Asian women assume that they are "exotic and hold limitless sexual knowledge, yet docile and eager to please", and the "presence of Asian bodies' is in part responsible for the 'phenomenal success of the online adult industry.'"<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, Asian women are exotified and sexualized in many aspects of media, whether it is in mainstream movies or online pornography. These modes of entertainment highlight the importance of critically analyzing problematic representations of Asian women that have lasted over time.

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36. "The Wolverine: Memories of Miss Saigon." *The Nerds of Color*. August 20, 2013. Accessed November 11, 2014.

37. "The Internet, Pornography, Race and Representation." *Violence Against Women on the Internet*. Accessed November 10, 2014.

38. Ono, Kent A., and Vincent N. Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009.

## Chapter 4: Contemporary Asian-Identifying Women Artists

The art world has always been a difficult space for women-identifying artists to enter and thrive in, particularly for women of color. Asian-identifying women continue to fight for recognition in their works in the art world and this struggle has resulted in the creation of spaces like the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA) to give Asian women avenues for recognition for their work. In their mission statement, the AAWAA strives to “educate the general public and elevate awareness about the narratives of Asian Pacific American women. Driven by a focus on art, empowerment, and social justice for women, AAWAA’s programs advocate for public recognition, inclusion of Asian Pacific American women’s voices in media and arts institutions as well as educational curricula in American art history.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, I feel that it is crucial to present Asian and Asian/American women artists who explore complicated issues of identity, the female nude body, mental illness, sexuality, and their process of their journeys through different cultures and spaces in this paper.

One of the most underrated Asian women artists is Pan Yuliang (1895-1977), a Chinese-born artist, who was a “female pioneer painter of western painting.”<sup>40</sup> She grew up during the early modernization of China, and therefore, her art depicts the “flux of transformations where conflicting dichotomies of East and West, tradition and modernity, male chauvinism and emerging feminism co-existed.”<sup>41</sup> Although Pan Yuliang grew up with many hardships, including the passing of her parents and her maternal uncle later selling her to a brothel, she later

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39. "About Us: Mission." *Asian American Women Artists Association*. Accessed October 12, 2014.

40. "Pan Yuliang." *New Geographies of Feminist Art: China, Asia, and the World*. Accessed October 27, 2014.

41. Teo, Phyllis. "Modernism and orientalism: The ambiguous nudes of Chinese artist Pan Yuliang." *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2010): 65-80. Accessed October 26, 2014.

became one of the first female students at the Shanghai Art Academy and later “became the first woman artist in the Chinese Republic to win an official scholarship to study in France.”<sup>42</sup> Many challenged her with her nontraditional methods, and Pan Yuliang had to “wrestle endlessly with obstacles owing to persisting traditional morals against women’s liberation, even in the advent of the modern age.”<sup>43</sup> She is known for her “individualized artistic vision of early Chinese modernism [through] her distinct representations of the nude... as an avenue of self-expression.” Many of her paintings “transmit an allegory of modern women’s desire for autonomy and access to a public sphere.”<sup>44</sup> She also chose to favor non-white female bodies in her paintings, “challenging the conventional representation of the nude and what it means to be racially different in a white society. Given the dominant artistic traditions and notions of femininity in European culture at the time, Pan’s alternative images of the female body clearly created contradictions and challenged conventional notions of beauty.”<sup>45</sup> She also went “against the secured segregation of Orientalist works by male European masters, Pan’s representations signal an intervention from a non-Western artist to reappraise the Orientalist subject.”<sup>46</sup> Pan Yuliang’s revolutionary work in the art world opened up the avenue for Asian women artists to work within a Western context, and yet not conform to the conventions of ideal white, imperialist bodies of work.

Another revolutionary artist in Minimalist, Pop Art, and Feminist Art movements, internationally renowned Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama who is arguably one of the most famous

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42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

Asian woman artists in the world today, winning numerous awards during her lengthy career. In 2008, one of her “infinity net” paintings was auctioned and sold at “USD 5.1 m, a record sum for a living female artist.”<sup>47</sup> She has spoken about her work as “obsessive” and full of phallic symbols, and she talks about wanting to get lost in her work. She moved from Japan to New York because she said that the conservative art world in Japan ostracized her because of her mental illness. In a recent article, she reflects back on her life:

As a child I suffered from hallucinations, and making art helped ease the shock. Painting saved my life: when I wanted to commit suicide, my doctor encouraged me to paint more. I fight pain, anxiety and fear every day, and art is the only method I have found to relieve my illness. My greatest achievement has been establishing Kusama art, and I am blessed that so many people have found a connection to my work.<sup>48</sup>

Kusama’s rich and diverse body of work, including performance art, collage, sculpture, and painting, is well-known to include radical social commentary on issues of race, gender, anti-capitalism, and anti-war, essentially any kind of social or political oppression. For instance, Kusama’s confrontation on feminist issues “goes beyond essentialist feminism into sexuality itself... In the 1990s, Kusama’s ferocious use of the phallus as a symbol of feminist anger against male domination has been justly celebrated for its brio, but she is also to be admired for her unflinching use of overtly sexual imagery and themes that began with the *Accumulations* and continued through her so-called ‘orgy’ performances, as well as her novels and poetry.”<sup>49</sup> Her famous phalluses:

...joyfully overrun such symbols of feminine domesticity as irons, baking pans, kitchen

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47. "Four Influential Women on the Asian Art Scene." *Art Radar*. June 21, 2013. Accessed October 26, 2014.

48. Kusama, Yayoi. "Yayoi Kusama: When I Wanted to Commit Suicide, My Doctor Encouraged Me to Paint More." *The Telegraph*. October 23, 2014. Accessed October 26, 2014.

49. Hoptman, Laura, Akira Tatehata, and Udo Kultermann. *Yayoi Kusama* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 55.

tables and ladles, or peak coyly from the inside of shoes and shoulder-bags, also offer a none too subtle commentary on a world absurdly if suffocatingly dominated by the male gender. Playful, they are also angry, suffused with what were no doubt Kusama's personal frustrations as a struggling female artist and foreigner in a chauvinistic and tightly circumscribed art community.<sup>50</sup>



Image 2: The artist with Macaroni Girl and Infinity painting, studio, New York, c. 1964.  
Photograph by Eikoh Horose.

Although the international art world is still dominated by white, male artists, Kusama's revolutionary work as an Asian woman artist has helped bring attention to non-white, non-western artists in the international art world.<sup>51</sup> In fact, she was known to have influenced contemporary artists, like Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg, because her artwork is so original

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50. *Ibid.*, 49.

51. Deimling, Kate. "Yayoi Kusama Writes of Hunger, Grudges, and Necking With Joseph Cornell in Her Odd Autobiography." *Blouin Artinfo*. March 16, 2012. Accessed October 24, 2014

and daring.<sup>52</sup> At 83 years old, Kusama continues to be an inspiring artist with upcoming exhibitions in London, Mexico City, group shows in Taiwan, and many other places.<sup>53</sup>

Another internationally known Asian woman artist is Zhang Chun Hong, who combines her “traditional skills with contemporary ideas.”<sup>54</sup> As part of her artist statement, Zhang describes how “according to Eastern culture, a young woman’s long hair is associated with life force, sexual energy, growth, and beauty. Like a portrait, the image of hair can express personal feelings and emotions.”<sup>55</sup> She combines her knowledge of Chinese and American education and art skills to create beautiful, “larger-than-life scrolls”<sup>56</sup> with charcoal drawings of her long, straight, black hair. The artworks are a reference to her identity, and the “exaggerated scale of the scrolls transforms this very personal exploration into a universal theme.”<sup>57</sup>

Other Asian women artists have used figurative paintings and drawings to depict their own artistic statements related to their own cultures and lives. For instance, Yu Hong is a contemporary Chinese woman artist who focuses much of her work around the people in her everyday life, including herself and her family.<sup>58</sup> What is most striking about her work is how the majority of her subjects are women, compared to how:

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52. "Yayoi Kusama." *John Berggruen Gallery*. Accessed November 11, 2014.

53. Ibid.

54. "Zhang Chun Hong." *National Portrait Gallery*. Accessed October 27, 2014.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. "Yu Hong: A Woman's Life." *The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art*. Accessed October 27, 2014.

...Only rarely in the entire history of Chinese art has the female point of view been depicted in such an understanding and understated manner. In general, earlier depictions of women engaged in everyday activities were created by men, who overlay that subject with endless symbolic ramifications: they were not interested in depicting women per se, nor did they care about the female point of view.<sup>59</sup>

In her works, she “explores the complex experience of contemporary Chinese women in her lush, expressive paintings.”<sup>60</sup> Although many contemporary Chinese women artists use heavy symbolism and abstraction in their depiction of women, Yu Hong’s works are beautifully rendered as heavily realistic figures because she wants to “focus on the value of the individual in scenes of everyday life.”<sup>61</sup> Her realistic paintings of her loved ones are “extremely sensitive to both facial expression and body posture”, as she hopes to honor the “individual in all phases of life, from childhood to maturity.”<sup>62</sup>

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59. Ibid.

60. "Yu Hong." Artsy. Accessed October 27, 2014.

61. “Yu Hong: A Woman's Life." *The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art*. Accessed October 27, 2014.

62. Ibid.





Image 3: *My Life Strands*, Zhang Chun Hong, Charcoal on paper scroll, 2009, Collection of the  
artist

## Chapter 5: Influential Artists - Jenny Saville and Egon Schiele

Two artists who heavily influenced my approach and style to this project are figurative artists, Jenny Saville (1970) and Egon Schiele (1890-1918). Schiele and Saville's works are often compared and spoken about together, as "Schiele's self-portraits, usually small-format works, the pose, the accentuated view from below, and gestural style give the images a visual impact equal to the forceful punch of Saville's giant formats."<sup>63</sup> Both artists' works bring an interesting dialogue and presentation on figurative painting, especially for their "expressive, personal, and often extreme depictions of the human form."<sup>64</sup>

Schiele, a major Austrian Expressionist artist,<sup>65</sup> created many "figurative works, self-portraits, and portraits that express a deeply personal and radical aesthetic,"<sup>66</sup> and he was known for his intense, "erotic, pornographic, and disturbing [paintings], focusing on sex, death, and discovery."<sup>67</sup> His explicit renderings of nude, twisted bodies caused him much trouble during his life and even landed him in prison. However, he insisted on using the erotic in his art, and today, some argue that "the brilliance of Schiele is precisely to collide traditional aesthetics, a central interest in the beauty and horror of the human body, with the crass functional intentions of the pornographer. And it is in this collision that he is a radical modernist."<sup>68</sup> I was inspired by

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63. "Egon Schiele - Jenny Saville." *Hatje Cantz*. Accessed November 11, 2014.

64. Mahony, Lauren. "Egon Schiele - Jenny Saville." *Gagosian Gallery*. October 14, 2014. Accessed November 11, 2014.

65. "Egon Schiele." *Artnet*. Accessed November 11, 2014.

66. *Ibid.*

67. "Egon Schiele." *Egon Schiele - The Complete Works*. Accessed November 10, 2014.

68. Jones, Jonathon. "The Come-on." *The Guardian*. April 19, 2003. Accessed November 11, 2014.

Schiele's honest and grotesque depiction of figures, including his line work and choice of colors. Because of my desire to depict hypersexualization of Asian bodies and its distorted representation, I pursued to create a similar landscape of erotic, twisted bodies through specific line work and composition. This current work may also cause controversial conversation with regards to the pornographic portrayal of Asian women.

Another artist who also does not shy away from large, explicit figurative-landscapes is contemporary painter Jenny Saville. Her works render "pale, corpulent women looking languidly at viewers with narcotic, detached expressions. Her virtuosic handling of paint is as extravagant as the epic-scale bodies she renders, close-up and monumental."<sup>69</sup> Her large bodies of work with brave painting gestures and grotesque depictions of bodies refuse to be ignored. More importantly, she creates "seductive images of women who are generally considered undesirable, and entices viewers to look at types of women who 'ought' to be ashamed of themselves and hide."<sup>70</sup> I hope to create a similar impact on my viewer with my large pieces of work and incorporate forms of brush and paintwork. These two powerful and influential figurative artists helped guide my process in the current project and inspired my way of painting and representation of nude figures.

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69. Valdez, Sarah. "Naked Truths." *ARTnews*. March 1, 2003. Accessed November 10, 2014.

70. Ibid.

## Chapter 6: Project Execution

In my senior art project, I explore contemporary, hypersexualized representations of nude Asian/American women by manipulating color, paint, and mixed media to create grotesque blind contours of these hypersexualized women. Because the female nude has historically been created and produced by male artists, I believe it is crucial for women to explore representation of female nudes through our own lenses and experiences and to understand our own identity and desires.<sup>71</sup> I hope to seduce and mesmerize the viewer into the work, and yet create a concurrent sense of discomfort for gazing at these women. I seek to create a sense of invitation through the metallic and bold colors and beautiful line work, and simultaneously feeling of embarrassed gazing for looking at the figures. All project material and subjects were chosen with careful deliberation, from the colors on the canvas, the blind contoured figures, to the material of the stretched faux silk.

I specifically used the technique of blind contour to play with the concept of a distorted perception and representation of Asian/American women in American society, specifically in the United States. There is a sense of voyeurism - the audience has the option of looking at the distorted woman from different perspectives without the fear of being 'caught'. The viewer does not have to hide their gaze, and this is an important aspect of how uncomfortable and eerie the works might make some of the audience feel. At the same time, the audience may be seduced by the eye-catching bright red paint and lipstick, gold, line work, and pervasive sexual imagery in the works. The use of the gold in the works (and specifically the Asian bodies) is symbolic for many reasons. Asian/American sexuality is deemed different, more exotic, and yet lesser compared to the white norm of beauty. The gold color is more accurate to the natural skin color

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71. Ibid.

of South and South-East Asian women (darker, richer, tints of yellow, gold, and brown), a nod towards the recent trend of skin bleaching in order to create a lighter skin color, which is synonymous with beauty and class.<sup>72</sup> It alludes to the history of colonialism and the search for gold and exotic places, while also tokenizing and exoticizing the body of Asian women. Furthermore, I specifically used painting as a tactile and gestural act, because I have full control of the brush to recreate these Asian bodies. Manipulating the paint is an intimate act as it parallels how these bodies are altered and perverted. This manipulation is significant within my critique of the misrepresentation of Asian female bodies stems from the idea that create these images the way they want to be displayed. Because I have control of how these bodies are represented, it parallels how Asian bodies are distorted in a way that society wants them to be seen. Exotification is complex topic, and we cannot go past objectifying Asian bodies and the bodies of women of color without confronting and analyzing how exotification can manifest itself. These are all ways the viewer is seduced into the works, and yet there is a sense of uneasiness to them.

Finally, the goal of this project is to not simply present a critique against the exotification of Asian bodies but to begin an uncomfortable conversation about race, gender, and the commodification of Asian bodies. I intentionally based the blind contoured figures off of online pornographic images of Asian women, many of them not looking at the viewer and in the midst of sexual activity, a nod towards voyeurism. As a first-generation Asian/American female artist who has grown up in the United States understanding myself in the context of being objectified, I have also internalized the commodifying and fetishizing of Asian women. There is a push and

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72. Fuller, Thomas. "Glamour at a Price in Asia - Health & Science - International Herald Tribune." *The New York Times*. May 1, 2006. Accessed November 10, 2014.

pull with my anger and internalization of what an “Asian beauty” should look like and desire to deconstruct these issues of exoticization and power. Through my works, I hope to depict the violent reality that all Asian/American women must confront “hypersexuality as a vibrant combination of fantasy and reality”<sup>73</sup> in order to understand their place in American society.

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73. Shimizu, Celine Parren. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.



Figure 1: *Nude 1*, Mabelle Bong, 2014, Mixed media on stretched canvas.



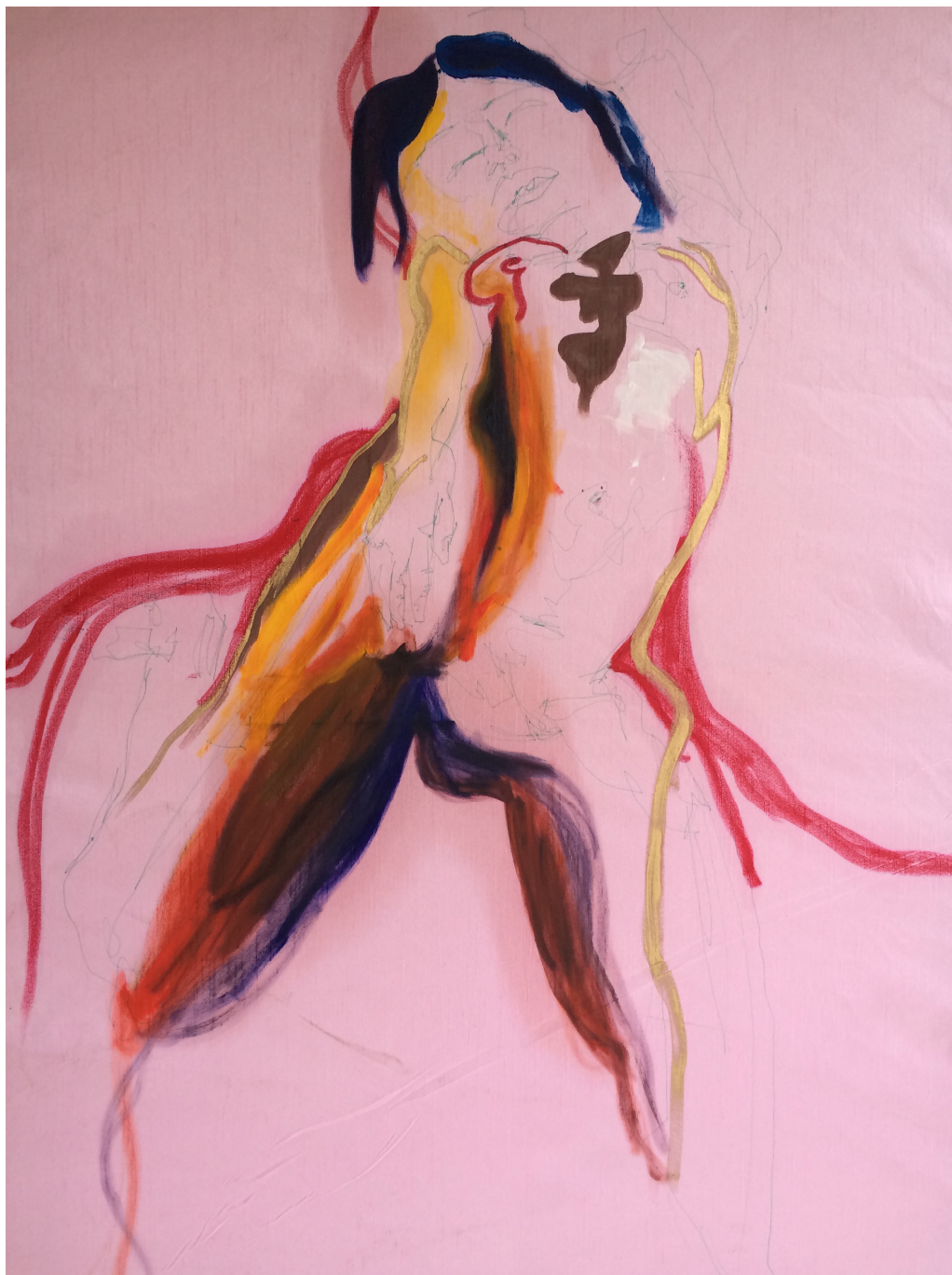


Figure 2: *Nude 2*, Mabelle Bong, 2014, Mixed media on stretched faux silk.





Figure 3: *Nude 3*, Mabelle Bong, 2014, Mixed media on panel.



Figure 4: *Nude 4*, Mabelle Bong, 2014, Mixed media on stretched canvas.

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