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Hybrid Cultures: Solutions for Cultural Appropriation in Art

by

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Thesis Adviser

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Background

Cultural appropriation has been rampant in the art world for a long time, and though not one culture is to blame specifically, western (ie. white) countries thrive on the use of cultural aspects that they are not directly connected to and in fact, tend to marginalize. Yet, though it is mainly prominent in western countries, cultural appropriation is a world-wide phenomenon.

Appropriation in itself has been part of modern and contemporary art discussions, as it plays a large role in some of the popular movements that rose from that era. Typical examples often referenced in art history courses are artists like Barbara Kruger, whom is well known for her appropriation of photographs and texts [Fig. 1], and who's style has been heavily appropriated (if not blatantly copied) by the brand Supreme. There is also the popular, yet controversial Picasso, who, though highly celebrated has received less leniency than Kruger for his *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* [Fig. 2], a symbol of a more direct appropriation—that of African culture (specifically African masks).

Why has Picasso's appropriation been seen as more negative than Kruger's though? Simply put, Picasso's appropriation stems from a biased and negative view of African women as objects that was part of the culture during his time,¹ whilst Kruger's work is meant to raise questions on capitalism, consumerism, and the unequal treatment of women. Kruger is a woman in a capitalist America, Picasso is a male Spaniard—who then, is better connected to the background of their work? That should be the main point in the discussion in any form of appropriation.

¹ Picasso & appropriation, p. 483

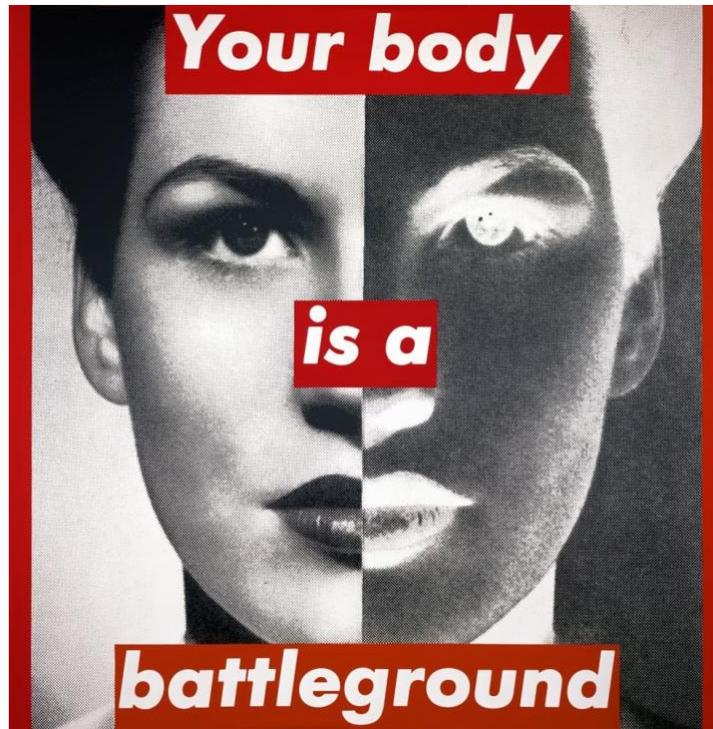


Fig. 1: Barbara Krueger, *Untitled (Your Body is a Battle Ground)*, 1989



Fig.2: Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, 1907

Cultural appropriation is often damaging to the cultures it seeks to represent, and thus seen as a more negative concept. Though contemporary movements have brought this issue forward, however, there is not a lot of academic literature on the subject, nor specific examples in art practice that target the issue, at least not by minority artists and scholars themselves. Artists of different backgrounds, of course, make art in protest to discrimination, but it continues a narrative that it is either or, and can never be both. Artists of colour are presented with the dilemma of what art they get to make in order to be successful, as well as which academic discourses to pursue for equal success to their non-POC (people of colour) peers.

Due to tokenization, said artists tend to flourish more when they create art within their cultural understandings. Yet, doing so sets the artists apart from the mainstream art world.² Cultural subjects can swing from cheerful to uncomfortably confrontational, and thus, portraying a message can be difficult if one wants to maintain relevancy *and* truth to their values. If we were to open up the conversation on appropriation and discrimination within the art world, the playing ground can begin to even up, removing the need to claim a specific form of art. The need for artists of colour to hang tight to cultural imagery would be lessened, as their opportunities would not be dependent in their ability to directly connect to said culture.

As such, it is important to cover more in terms of race and discrimination within the academic setting. There are specialized courses that can be taken by BA and BFA students, but they rarely tend to be required for graduation. I believe that the conversation should infiltrate the entirety of the curriculum within the BA and BFA degrees, in order to even out the discrepancies that cause marginalization. These topics are difficult to get into and discuss, specially while

² Agnello. p 56

trying to maintain respect and honour for the culture that is being studied, but we have to start somewhere, rather than continue ignoring the subject altogether. By doing so, the conversation's load can be equally divided inter-culturally.

Artist Statement

During the Winter quarter of my Junior year, I took a contemporary art course where we were required to do a presentation on a research topic of our choice. During these presentations, a fellow classmate presented on his anger of being unable to create Native American art due to him being a white American. He spoke of his frustrations of being restricted to an art form due to push back from the art community, whom saw his work as appropriation. To his belief, however, having lived in a reservation for 3 months, and having Native American friends gave him the right to create and sell such work. He knew the subject, and cared for the community, so why could he not be part of it?

This presentation sparked a change in the approach of my Undergraduate thesis, which I had been working on and planning for since my Sophomore year of college. I had known that I wanted to combine my majors in my research but knew that I would potentially need to stick to one field for my thesis presentation. That winter term discussion however, signalled me towards the importance of the co-opting of fields, specially when dealing with difficult and serious topics.

As both an Art Historian and an artist, I have gotten the ability to learn from both fields in a way that has exposed me to issues within he art community that fall through the cracks due to the constant separation of these fields into the study of and the practice of art. Art history informs the majority of the academic background of art, with art practice majors (BFA) being required to take at least one course of art history for their undergraduate degree, though the subject remains a choice for the student.³

³ Information taken from the 2019-2020 academic degree requirements for a BFA at Portland State University.

Throughout my studies as a hybrid major within both fields (BA in Art History with an Art Practice focus), I have come to see the discrepancies in learning about each field within the other. There seems to be a form of rivalry that plays a large role in the miscommunications and misunderstandings that continue to be part of the art world, such as that described by my fellow classmate during his contemporary art presentation.

Having also often been the only student of colour in a majority of my courses, both historical and in practice, I can understand why. The majority of professors within the art department are not people of colour, and even if they are, are not often equipped with the tools to hold constructive conversations about race and discrimination. With Portland striving to be as inclusive a city as it can be, having conversations and approaching these subjects without the correct guidance can be destructive and divisive.

Thus, as both an art historian and an artist, I set on a journey to create a bridge within the fields that would address this issue. As an art historian, I understand the importance of research, and as an artist, I understand the importance of artistic expression. Art history is generally static, whilst art practice tends to be more fluid and willing to take risks. Additionally, these fields are hardly combined or work together, which adds to the division between historians and artists. Often, I have found myself addressing and answering questions of one field when within the other. In those instances, however, I have found the conversations expanding and sparking interest in subjects not readily available for one field or the other.

Thus, my work for this collection has revolved around hybridity: the combination of two or more subjects to create a new one. I have done this through the combination of research and practice, as well as using my cultural background to break into the often avoided conversation on discrimination.

Academic research on appropriation and discrimination within the art world has become quite expansive during the contemporary period. During my research, though I found very little on the efforts to address appropriation within the academic setting, specially in a constructive manner. I have slowly become aware of other artists working on this issue, but there is still a lot of work to be done to create a constructive and inclusive narrative that strays away from controversy.

Thus, my focus has been spent in providing not just research, but an example on how to approach the creation of art with cultural influence without performing appropriation or discrimination. As a third culture Mexican American, I have a vast background in both cultures, though there is still a lot I need to learn. With a focus on Contemporary Korean art in my art history career, I have also come to learn a lot about the Korean culture and language. I have come to appreciate said culture and its fantastic art but understand that there are subjects I cannot cover in my own art, however much I know about them. Having this experience has allowed me to also understand the frustrations my white peers have encountered when creating culturally inspired work. As a person of colour, I've found myself in a unique standing, as I don't generally receive as aggressive backlash as some of my white peers might and hold the ability and background to start conversations that tend to be sensitive in nature.

As such, since my sophomore year, I have been researching and learning practical backgrounds in art from Mexico, Korea, and the United States: three regions with which I hold an ancestral or emotional connection with. I have worked on learning how to express the inspiration of each of these cultures in a respectful manner that did not take away the stage from peers more directly connected to each. To do this, I have taken intensive and specialised courses in each of the subjects covered in each collection within the setting of their perspective countries.

While doing so, I have also kept in mind language and the importance of finding a connection between each and all cultures that could be successfully hybridized without appropriation. This landed in the usage of the anatomical heart imagery in most of my work created during my research and for my final collection.

For America, it was not difficult to find art historical research on its original culture (or lack of) and methods common within art created during modern and contemporary periods. I was highly influenced by the use of bronze sculpture and the Pop Art movement, both of which I got to study in depth during my undergraduate career. My initial work piece *Bloom* [Fig. 3], was made during my sophomore year, influenced by the resurgence of bronze sculpture during the modern and contemporary periods. This was the first piece that solidified the heart imagery for the remainder of my pieces.



Fig. 3: *Bloom*, 2018, Cast Bronze and baby's breath flowers.

For the creation of my final piece for this project, I took inspiration from the American Pop-Art movement, which to this day remains a staple of the art history world. Pop-Art was one of the first movements where American artists found their own style, whilst in the past said style migrated from other parts of the world—primarily Europe. Having resurfaced from a tragic war, artists of this time took to criticizing the world of art by creating capitalist-influenced works, something their predecessors had heavily criticized in their own work. The sense of nationalism and pride set apart these artists, whose work became to be seen as very “American”. Bright, primary colours often comprised the palettes of the works of this period, but most significantly, red, white, and blue were the most often used. With this in mind, I decided to use the American flag’s colours to create the American piece, signalling to that national pride summoned by the Pop-Art movement blended with the importance of the American flag in the USA.

For Mexico, I travelled to Guanajuato City, Guanajuato, Mexico, where I participated in a study abroad program in printmaking and traditional mask-making. There, I did studies in the colours [Fig. 4] and the imagery popular in Mexico. I came across the heart imagery through various visits to museums. Such examples included *El Sagrado Corazon de Jesus* [Fig. 5] which is a popular image in the entire country that holds catholic beliefs and traditions stemming from the Spanish colonization. I combined that with the image of the “El Corazon” card [Fig. 6] in a popular Mexican game I used to play when I was little: “Loteria”, similar in rules to American Bingo. With my previous bronze piece in mind, I created a series of prints with the heart motif by combining mono-printing and etching techniques. [Fig. 7-8]



Fig. 4: *Untitled (Monoprint Color Study)*, 2018, ink, cardstock, and printmaking paper.

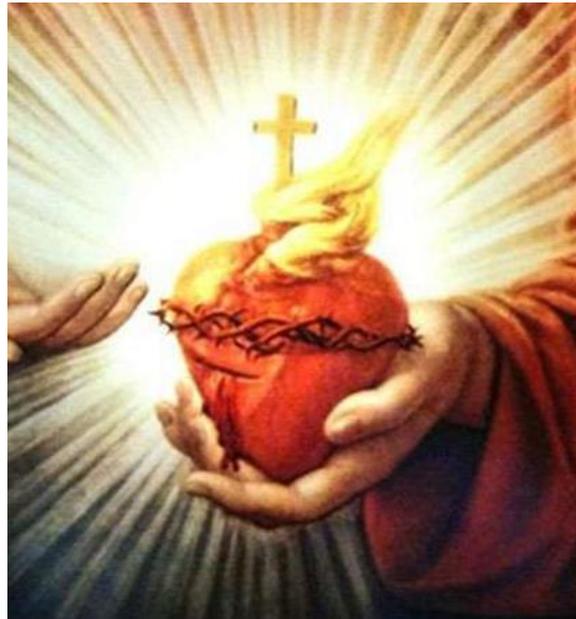


Fig. 5: *Sagrado Corazon de Jesus*, Google Image

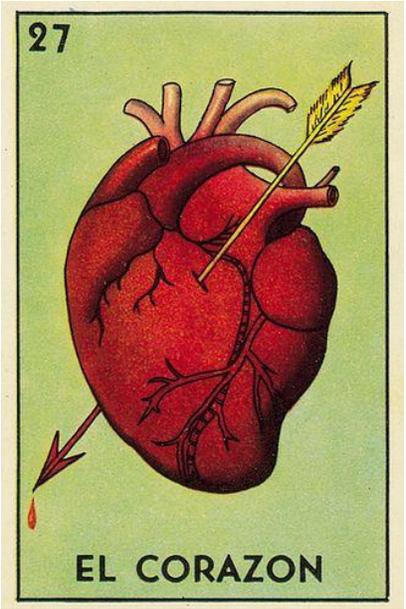


Fig. 6: Loteria “El Corazon” Card, Google Image

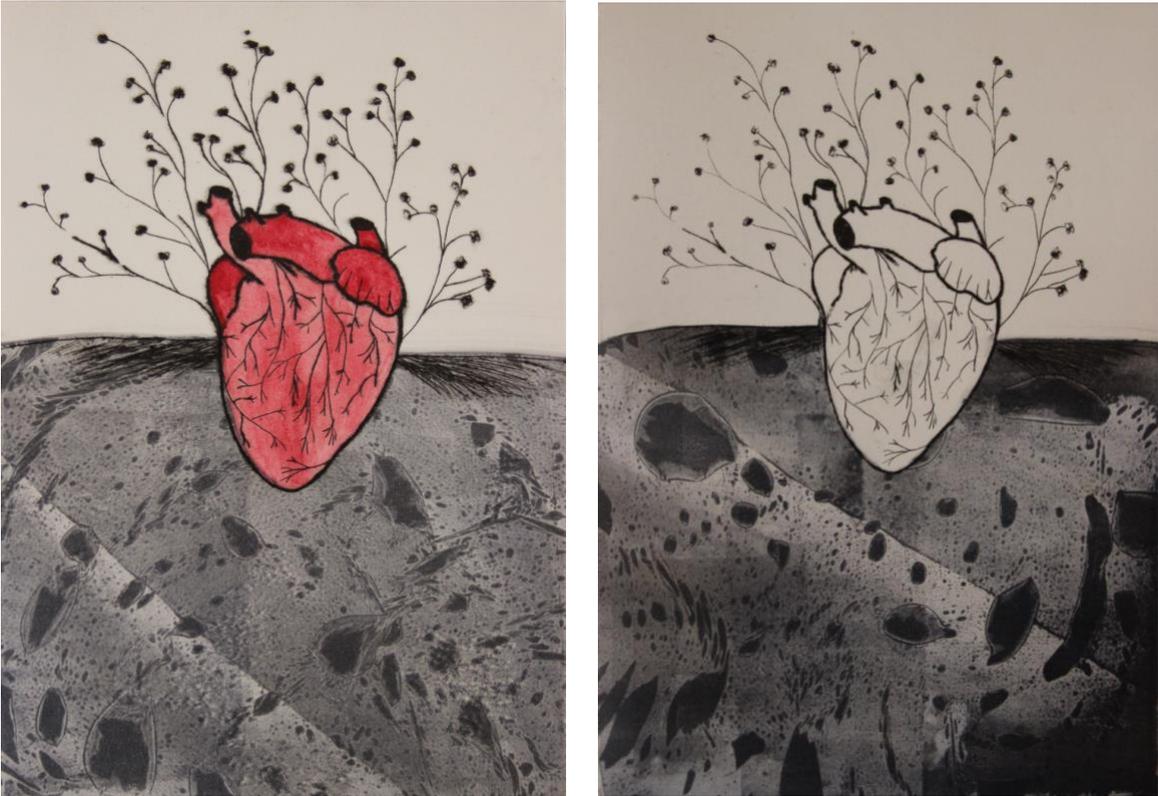


Fig. 7 &8: *Untitled*, 2018, Monoprint and etching on paper, ink, and acrylic paint.

Colour plays a significant role in Mexican culture, as I further learned during my time in Guanajuato. That in combination with the popular Day of the Dead celebrations, became my main inspiration for the final piece for this country. Life and death are balanced in the country, with both being celebrated with equal fervour and pizzazz. This connected well to the imagery of the heart in many ways, but I took my colour inspirations from the celebrations of death that I experienced during my time there. This was done by a palette curated from the colours of the city and celebrations, in combination with traditional textiles purchased from a local vendor.

Thirdly, for South Korea, I travelled to Seoul, South Korea, where I lived for three months, and took courses in traditional paper making (한지/hanji) and ceramics. During my time there, I also participated in an internship at a local art gallery, where I learned more about the contemporary art culture in the country.

I created various pieces through my paper-making class, where I got background information on the history and culture behind the making of mulberry pulp, which is used to make the paper. I also learned how to make the paper and studied contemporary artists that use hanji in their work. Notably, hanji is a popular souvenir sold anywhere in Korea. Through this, I created my last research piece [Fig. 9] through a method referred to as ‘relievo’ embossing, where a piece of foam is carved out and mulberry pulp is delicately layered in the crevices to create an embossed sculpture with the fibres.

The final piece for this country was influenced by the tones of white, pink, blue, and green, which were curated from images captured of the city and nature surrounding it during my stay there. These were combined with hanji paper made during my course, as well as some

purchased from a local vendor, with whom I was able to strike a professional relationship, and now provides my materials for other art projects, including mulberry pulp.



Fig. 9: *Untitled*, 2019, Mulberry pulp, acrylic paint and glitter.

For my final collection, I conducted additional research and took what I have learned thus far to create three soft sculptures of anatomical hearts, which combine the processes learned through a blending of imagery, colour, and language. The heart motif continues as the centre of my imagery, as love is universal, no matter the culture or language. The idea of love is something that can be understood by all of the cultures I covered, as well as what can connect us. This is why I used said imagery. I wanted to speak in a language that could be understood by all, using that which connects us despite our differences in order to start a conversation on that which disconnect us.

The final collection includes three pieces, all with the same dimensions, but with mostly different materials that represent each culture or country as previously detailed. The collaged sculptures bring together the three cultures through the imagery that connects them, whilst using materials and methods specific to each culture. The purpose for this, again is to contribute to the conversation of the usage of cultural material and influence in one's work. As a Mexican American, I was able to use imagery from both countries, as I can claim it through my heritage. For Korea, however, I only used methods and colour palettes, rather than direct imagery, as I hold no direct connection to the culture rather than just an educational one. As such, it was my goal to present a way and exemplify how artists can work with cultural influence without appropriating.

We continue to be in a stage where discrimination and racism are still rampant within the art world. Thus, it is still important to respect cultural ownership and values for those who are under-represented. By introducing opportunities in the classroom for students to learn the background and methods of different cultures, the world can slowly start to pivot from one of ownership to one of collaboration. Learning the backgrounds and traditional elements that are

portrayed each culture, can allow 'outsiders' to enter the conversation with more understanding. As this conversation grows, artists will no longer need to be confined to one specific art form to maintain relevance or have to depend on specific imagery to speak their voice. If we equal the playing grounds by expanding the education on cultural and racial backgrounds in higher education, the need to maintain ownership will slowly start to die off.

In all, my work stands to provide a way to enter into the academic world and conversations of culture and art. It provides an example on how cultures can influence and be valued without being exploited. This is the first step in turning the conversation constructive, by providing a way for people's art to present the influence on the cultures they admire, rather than shutting them down completely. Then, we can slowly move into an academic setting where all cultures, not just the west, are presented equally, enabling for all artists to engage equally in the different methods and influences. This next step lies in the restructuring of the educational system and the amending of current curriculums, as well as giving the opportunity to more minorities to be part of the conversation and education process without being tokenized.

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