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My First Embrace of the Sea & the Fish Swimming in My Head: A Collection of Poems, Photographs, and Cultural Artifacts Inspired by My Father and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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My first embrace of the sea & the fish swimming in my head: a collection of poems,
photographs, and cultural artifacts inspired by my father and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're*
Briefly Gorgeous
(in tandem with my BFA project)

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Contents

Introduction	Page 2
Process	Page 3
Works	Page 9
1. <i>fish in my head. 8, 125 miles across the ocean.</i>	Page 9
2. <i>Untitled</i>	Page 10
3. <i>Home Soon</i>	Page 11
4. <i>Swimming</i>	Page 12
5. <i>quiet gentle love</i>	Page 15
6. <i>Dear daddy,</i>	Page 16
7. <i>January 16th, 2022.</i>	Page 17
8. <i>April 11th, 2022.</i>	Page 18
9. <i>daddy and ayu</i>	Page 19
10. <i>Mom pregnant with Ayu</i>	Page 20
Artistic Research Practice	Page 21
Artistic Influences	Page 21

Introduction

It started with a memory. Of falling rain and my dad's lullaby. The sound of water all around me. And all around me, my dad's embrace.

I wrote a poem about that memory. And I built a whole BFA project around it. Around that warmth and song. Around the quiet, gentle love that held me on the porch, singing softly and patting my back as I fell asleep in the middle of a rainstorm.

My dad was born in Lombok, Indonesia and immigrated to the U.S. in the '90s. Growing up, I only caught glimpses of his culture and life in Indonesia, like how to pray and feed our ancestors. I read an article recently about migration and identity. It talked about the hybridity of culture that is created when someone physically crosses a border and occupies new space. It made me think of my dad and the ways my family participates in Indonesian and Balinese traditions. It made me think about what our family's hybrid culture looks like.

The main source of inspiration for this project, other than my father, is the novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong. Vuong's novel is a work of autofiction, which marries art and memoir. It's a letter to his mom and it's as beautiful as it is painful.

My BFA project is one big letter to my dad. It's a letter he'll never read, a space to release all the fish that swim inside me: all the feelings and questions and thoughts about our identities and memories and lives.

Last summer, I learned about the importance of water in ceremonial rituals in Balinese culture. It made me think about my own relationship and history with water and its significance in my life, as well as in my parents'.

My whole life I have lived close to the ocean. Living in Portland, I am the farthest I've ever been from it. Being far from the sea, I feel so isolated. Sometimes I crave the sea and the salty water so badly it feels like I'm suffocating. I think this example can be applied to the feelings I harbor around my Indonesian identity. Acknowledging certain parts of me while

ignoring the others feels like some parts are breathing while other parts are gasping for air. I grew up in a lot of whiteness and in environments that didn't celebrate or acknowledge the non-white parts of me. It was damaging to live in a learned mindset that didn't allow me to hold my own duality. I have only recently been able to equally hold these identities and feel balance within me.

Process

[May, 2021]

Since the beginning of this project, I have compared my dad to the ocean. Like the ocean, he carries so much inside him. There are thousands of stories and secrets in him just like there are thousands of species and ecosystems in the ocean.

One night, in May of last year, I was in my room, having a really hard time juggling school and my mental health. So I started to write a poem. It was about an ink painting of a diver and a dolphin that hung in our house growing up. I always thought the diver was my dad. He knew the water and the reefs so well that he was a diver in Indonesia and would take tourists around. My mom used to tell me how different my dad moved in the water. *When he's diving, he looks just like a fish. In the water, he moves as if that's his home.*

Memories of that painting and visuals of my dad in the sea swam through my mind. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that I describe my excessive and boundless thoughts as fish swimming around in my head. Water has always been a part of my dad, it seems.

When I wrote that poem, it felt like water was rushing through me. It was endless. There was no beginning or end point, it was all one.

[Fall term, 2021]

I painted on a bedsheet. It was the culmination of my artistic research and an introduction of the poetry I had begun writing.

It began with a feeling.

I was interested in finding poets on Spotify, and came across the artist Twilight Prince. His albums and singles are like spoken-word poetry over instrumental music. His work, specifically his 2020 album, *Welcome to My Creed*, were exactly what I was looking for. Listening to Twilight Prince led me to find Ana Roxanne, who plays with soundscapes and spoken-word. From there I compiled songs that in some way (content, sound, or title) connected to my project and this feeling that I had. After creating a comprehensive playlist, I looked at all the writings I had done that term about my father. They were full of sadness and longing.

Reading through those pieces, listening to the playlist, and feeling the things that were coming up for me, I wanted to make something solemn. I thought about material and looked around my house. I pulled a queen-size bed sheet from the closet. I laid this massive bedsheet out in my roommate's studio.

I pulled out all of my poetry and picked the lines I wanted to write out. I picked black colored house paint called Silent Sea from the paint she had lying around. I changed my clothes and left my shoes off. I pressed play on the playlist I had made, and I sat in the middle of the sheet with my legs crossed and my bucket of paint in front of me. I sat there and prayed. And meditated. And grounded myself. I took a deep breath, opened my eyes, and dipped my hands in the bucket of paint.

I moved very slowly. And very intuitively. I brushed the paint onto the sheet with my hands, my feet, my whole body. I wrote down key words and parts of poems with vine charcoal. It mattered to me how it felt, the process and the piece. I wanted it to look like how I felt: lonely, intimate, alone, depressed, a sense of longing, lost at sea.

[December 2021 - January 2022]

After that term ended, I planned on starting my video project while visiting my dad, step mom, and siblings at Christmas. It was the first time seeing my dad in two years. While there, I learned more about my dad and our culture. There was a moment when I was in the backyard with him and my older sister. My dad was telling us about his life now and his life in Lombok. He told us stories I had never heard before. One of the things my dad taught me while I was there was how to tie a sarong properly. He'd never taught me this before. I was nervous and excited. We prayed to our ancestors and had a mugibang on our last night. Spending time with him and the family, I didn't take video clips for the video letter. I didn't want to. It felt wrong to me - like I was exploiting these moments for an assignment.

I learned recently how identity in the US has historically been based on physical traits. In countries with more homogenized populations, their identity doesn't fall so heavily on their looks. Their identity comes more from their cultural practices and traditions. I don't look like my mom and I don't look like my dad. My dad didn't share much of his culture with us when we were younger. Growing up, the cultural things I learned from him, I learned by watching. Like how to pray with incense and how to feed our ancestors. I've been learning how to cultivate this sense of identity in my daily life.

[Winter term, 2022]

Winter term was the hardest to create work. I reflected on the work I made in the fall and felt so unconnected to it. Nothing felt authentic. Nothing felt worthy of commitment. So during this term I committed to nothing. My creative drive hit a wall. I didn't know what to do. It felt awful. I couldn't make anything good and I didn't want to. I didn't have the capacity to sit down with anything long enough to finish it. I didn't even have the energy to draw. It felt really scary and felt really sad. The only things I could do at the time was read and write. So that's what I did.

Throughout working on this project, I have always been able to write. Reading *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, sorting through old photographs, and entering old memories... writing has been a way of time traveling. Shifting between realities, surfing emotions and memories.

I wrote another poem and it became yet another catalyst for this project. My dad taught me how to tie a sarong properly when I saw him. It is so small and insignificant, but it meant so much to me. I wrote about it and decided that I would make my own sarong.

The traditional Indonesian way of making sarongs is called batik. Batik is the process of using hot wax to create patterns or pictures with different dyes. There's a special tool used in batik called a tjanting tool.

This process is incredibly difficult if you're going to make something that actually looks nice. The artists who create sarongs with batik are truly talented. This is an art. And it is an art form that I am not skilled in. I tried on many pieces of fabric to create sarongs through different dye methods and wax patterning. I used a tjanting tool, cut out my own stamps from foam, experimented with different dyes and dyeing methods. None of these had the effect I'd like them to have. In my failed attempts, I realized how skilled the artists in this craft are. I gained a new respect for this process and a new appreciation for the culture and craft.

[March - April, 2022]

I bought a wooden blockprint fish stamp from Charancreations on etsy and 2 ½ yards of light blue cotton at the fabric store. I started experimenting with what I wanted to show.

I felt so overwhelmed. I felt so much pressure to make something that looked incredible. Something that looked like I had spent all term on it. I got in my head so much that I couldn't even start. That's when I realized that I should just create what was in my head. So I stamped fish all over the fabric. By using different amounts of ink and different pressure when stamping, I was able to create a sense of depth. By having some fish faded in the background, and other fish more clearly stamped on top, I created what looked like an actual school of fish. When I was

done, I looked at my sister. She asked me why it looked the way it did and I told her, “this is what the inside of my head looks like.”

On either end of the sarong is a pattern. Usually, sarongs have a kind of border, whether that’s just an all black border or some kind of repeating pattern. I knew I wanted to have something like that in mine, however I didn’t want to completely border the piece. It felt wrong to have the fish swimming in a space that is enclosed.

I titled this piece, *fish in my head. 8,125 miles across the ocean.* because that’s what it is. It is a visual representation of the fish I have in my head. From my current location to Lombok, there is a distance of 8,125 miles. I included this in the title because it felt important to acknowledge this distance. While I am here in the present, this project has required me to travel through memories, through time, and across oceans.

The poem, *Swimming*, pairs with this sarong. I sent a voice recording of the poem to my sister when I finished writing it. She said that it might make my dad cry if he read it. She painted imagery in my head, and said I captured this sense of nostalgia. She said “there’s this parallel narrative where I just imagine young daddy in the water and you speaking this poem at the same time, like existing at the same time...I feel like it would bring up his old life that he probably doesn’t think about too often, and I think it’d make him emotional.” I wrote a journal entry about that day.

This poem is another form of time travel. I used to have all these thoughts and feelings about my parents. I wanted so desperately to know them before they had kids. I’m 22 years old and I really wish I could meet them when they were my age. Do they feel the same things I do? Do we ever think the same things? At the same time?

I got this poem published in a magazine. My dad read it and told me it was beautiful, and that he cried. He texted my sister about it and said it was true. It was true to how he felt. I cried when it was published, cried when he read it, and then cried again hearing how he felt about it.

[April - May, 2022]

Something that has made working on this project incredibly difficult was my mental health. This work required so much emotional investigation, so many memories and blank spaces. To sit with these things for so long, to write about them and to share those with people has been exhausting. I've written poems and reflections and journal entries that break me. Like my heart was a walnut that someone just smashed and cracked open. Tears would flood out. Like a dam breaking.

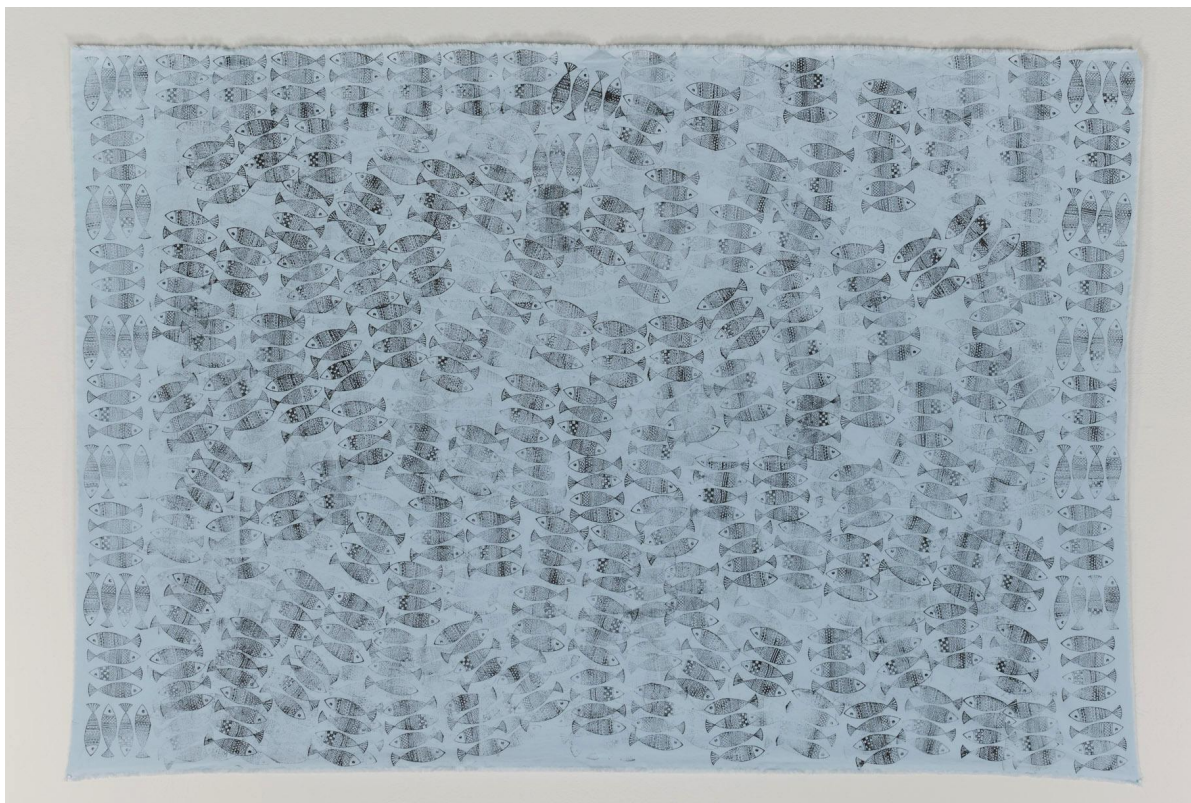
My dad is coming to my graduation. Which means he'll be here for my BFA show. I'm really scared. I don't think I ever told him that my whole project is about him. I don't show him my art. When he asked to read *Swimming*, I sat on the porch and cried. It's a weird feeling, having your muse review your work. *What do they think of it? Can they see themselves in it? Do they hate it? Is it weird for them to see your perception of them?*

Am I exploiting him? And his story? Am I exploiting our identities? I had these thoughts during my time working on this project. It feels strange to pin up my heart on the walls of a museum. I've been told that it changes your art's context. So I've been very aware of what I'm sharing to the public and what I keep a secret. Some stories are meant to be heard by few. I told my sister about these fears and she told me that I was thinking too much about it. "You're just asking questions. About where you came from. You just want to understand, that's all it is." Inquiry after inquiry. Questions with no straightforward answer. Answers as stories and memories and foods and smells. Understanding what this hybrid culture grew from.

I often wonder about my parents when they were my age and if we've ever had the same thoughts at the same time. My dad was practically my age when my sister was born. Seeing the pictures from that time, when everyone looks young and happy, it all feels so soft to me. Their golden memories frozen on film so that even I can see them this many years later. The past two years have made me realize how precious our time is together. Through many moments of introspection, I am learning to weave my family's threads to my own.

Works

fish in my head. 8, 125 miles across the ocean.. 2022. 66.5" wide x 46" tall. sarong (ink on cotton). fish stamp by Charancreations.



Untitled. 2022. Woven tapestry. 21" tall x 27" wide.



Home Soon. 2021, risograph print. 14" tall x 8.5" wide.



Swimming
May 16th, 2021-April 10th, 2022

I used to never be afraid of the ocean. Only how rough it could get.
But then I learned that sharks feed at sunset
And I never liked going to the beach at that time.

Suddenly,
I was always scared of the water.
Not the water-
but of being surrounded by something I couldn't see into.

Underneath me and all around me: unknowns.

I never went to the beach all that much when I lived in Florida.
When I moved to Washington, I remember washing my hands after I got home from school and
thinking how grateful I was for hot water.
I had never needed it until then so I never thought of it as something to be grateful for.

There used to be a framed painting in our bathroom.
It had ink lines
of a diver and a dolphin.
I always thought it was a picture of my dad.

My mom would say he looked more comfortable in the sea than he did on land.
She said *he moves differently underwater, not like I've ever seen before. He's really a fish.*

He could see underwater.
He wasn't afraid.
It was his home.

The water feels different on the West coast than I'm used to. It doesn't feel as free.
It feels like something that has lost its name.
It moves like a body that can't remember who they are. or who they were.

A body who feels like they are a shadow
but can't remember of who.
A shadow who belongs to nobody. Who belongs to everybody.

What does the water feel like where you grew up, daddy?
Who taught you how to swim?
Was it the waves? the fish?

You're as unknown to me as the sea.
I look at you
and I know the surface.

But I can't see underneath it.

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?
Do you know?
Can you remember?
I don't remember who taught me how to swim.
But it feels like I've been swimming for my entire life.

daddy, did you know I was born with fish in my head?
They aren't always there. And they didn't look like this before.
But they are still here.
They swim around in my head and dirty the water until I can't think straight or see anything.
Can you drown with fish in your head?

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?
Can you remember?
Was it your mother?
Your uncles?
Does it feel like you're still swimming?
Do you ever feel like you are drowning
Under the crushing weight of your existence

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?
I told Ayu that you are the most adaptable person I know.
She said that's because you learned how to survive out of necessity.
You had no choice but to adapt.

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?

You are like the ocean to me.

An entity,

so large it contains thousands of ecosystems and thousands of species.

Thousands of secrets and thousands of stories.

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?

Was it the sea herself?

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?

Do you ever yearn and ache for the sea

To be a part of it

To feel like water.

once again.

like water.

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?

Was it the fish in your head?

Did I get them from you?

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?

Did you adapt

And learn

Out of necessity?

Who taught you how to swim, daddy?

I love you.

And I wish I knew.

daddy,

can you teach me how to swim?

quiet gentle love
2022

I am sitting here, age 22,
wondering
 if we've ever actually spoken to
 each other.
I want to know so many things
about you. I'm always scared to end
my sentences in question marks.
It's almost like asking you about
your life, your dreams, your heartaches
will push you further away. |||||
|||||. Sometimes it feels like there
Is an ocean between us. and perhaps
there is. Maybe there is a part of you
that you left in Indonesia.
Maybe there is That you that I
will never know. Maybe we will
always be searching for the right
English word. Maybe there isn't one.
Maybe there is an ocean between us.
but maybe you crossed that ocean
for us.
Maybe you didn't know what to
do. what to say. And so you
stayed. on this side of the ocean.
because you couldn't leave us

again.
Maybe there's an ocean in you.
that only shines when it wants
to be seen.
Maybe you loved us this whole
time. with a love so vast it
crossed borders and survived
undercurrents. It swims with
sharks and fears nothing.
Your quiet, gentle love.
It holds me, on the porch during a
rainstorm and hums me a lullaby
only your children know.
How fitting it was that your father
named you Joko. It's the name
only your family calls you. ~~It's~~
~~the You that I see. and the You~~
~~that you hide.~~

daddy,
you have passed down to
all of us,
 your gentle love

Dear daddy,
2022

Dear daddy,

In my art history class I read about migration and identity. I learned about the hybridity of culture that is created when someone physically crosses a border and occupies new space. It made me think about you and the ways in which we participate in Indonesian and Balinese traditions. It made me think about what our hybrid culture looks like, smells like, tastes like.

This project has taken a shift. Reading Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* has been such a companion during this exploration. As he dives into the past, the storms, the feelings, the moments, the love, the experiences, the hurt. To write so much, so beautifully raw and poetic. I wanted to do that with a video letter to you. A beautiful, heartfelt, sentiment. Perhaps one day <3. In reality, I could not continue standing if I went down that emotionally tumultuous route of diving (like you once did) into the night's sea. There is too much pain there. And I'm scared. I'm tired of sinking in a silent sea. I want to focus on the warmth your gentle love emits. I want to focus, instead, on our connections in the sun, not in our connected depressions.

You taught me how to properly tie a sarong at 22. My inexperienced hands hold tight to that memory. I made you show me how to tie it on you, so that I could follow along on me. You showed me how girls wear it, you showed me how boys wear them. You showed me how you'd wear it for special occasions. My eyes widened with joy as I recognized that folding pattern from old pictures of your life in Lombok. To watch you fold in such a way- to watch your hands slowly awaken the muscle memory- to watch them remember.

I'm doing this to feel closer to that. To feel closer to you. To create a material you fold by memory. To be a part of that memory- our new memories, our hybridity, our culture.

Journal entry:
January 16th, 2022

Sun. January 16 [finished Part 1]

Everytime I open this book water
flows through me. I am 4 again.

I am 16. I am 22. Every age at
once. ~~I am~~

I underline the points of impact
and wonder, what right do I
have to find points of relatability
in this story? Do I really get to pick
and choose which parts I cry to
because they ~~rem~~ make me think
of you? For how many people am
I mourning?

Journal entry:
April 11th, 2022

Ayu just heard my swimming poem about you. She said you might cry if you read it. She painted imagery in my head, said I capture this sense of nostalgie. Said “there’s this parallel narrative where I just imagine young daddy in the water and you speaking the poem at the same time

like existing at the same time”
“I feel like it would bring up his old life that he probably doesn’t think about too often, and I think it’d make him emotional”

Home Soon by Vagabon was playing. I looked in the mirror. Saw my hair and skin and eyes and started to cry.

The last time we talked about your old life I saw you remembering. Putting into ~~words~~ English words your memories from lifetimes ago. Lifetimes that have shaped you.

There are things you couldn’t describe to us. You didn’t know how to in English. And I don’t know how to understand you in Balinese or Indonesian. I don’t know how frustrating that is for you. But I hope one day I can fill in the space. Create a bridge we can both walk on, and walk on in either direction. No more dams or trickling water. The space between us, filled.

daddy and ayu
1994. 4" tall x 6" wide.



Mom pregnant with Ayu
1994. 6" tall 4" wide.



Artistic Research Practice

My thoughts on artistic research are very much like my other daily thoughts. I often get stuck in my own definitions of things, forgetting that I have the agency to step out of the lines I drew around myself. When I am working on pieces, I will think about my past, myself, my feelings, my experiences, and feel really stuck. In those moments, I like researching the creative processes of other artists. Learning about the parts of life that others pull inspiration from, how they conceptualize their meanings, the differences in practices - whether their work falls under fine arts or more social practice - is fascinating and aids me in stretching the limits of my creativity. To me, researching is looking for resources, spending time with specific media, and experiencing art - taking it in, thinking about it. Reading poetry and lyrics, I often wonder how someone must be thinking in order to write about life that way. Employing my imagination and figuring out how to see in new perspectives are integral parts of my artistic practice.

Artistic Influences: art, artists, and novels informing my work: (in order of influence)

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. Penguin Books, 2019.

This novel is about surviving trauma and the narrator navigating and understanding his relationship with his mother. This novel is structured as a letter to the narrator's mom and, although his mother is illiterate, the point is not direct communication. Instead, it is the ability to use words to recall memories and stories, and to heal relationships. This novel is a work of auto-fiction, which fuses autobiography and art. My work for this project operates under the same term. This novel is so poetic, not only in its expression but in the way it is structured. It creates stillness in the reader, and makes them reflect on their own experiences and history with their parents. The world that Ocean Vuong creates warps time away from linear thinking and allows events in time to happen simultaneously. This devastating and beautiful novel relates to my work because it explores similar topics, including the relationship between a child and their

immigrant Asian parent. Vuong's writing style in this is very similar to how my brain thinks, so it's really interesting to read someone's else's world and feel so connected to it.

Afterlife, Luna Ikuta
lunaikuta.com/about

Luna Ikuta explores a wide variety of media to create pieces that belong to a world of her own making. I'm really interested in her utilization of aquascaping and scientific methods to create a ghostly garden that evokes such a strong emotional response and stillness in her show *Afterlife*. This show lures me in mostly because of the stillness it exhibits and its use of water. Stillness has always been something that is important to me and is something I try to emulate in my work. Gentleness has a lot of meaning in my BFA project and it is something that I see a lot in her work.

Twilight Prince's album, WELCOME TO MY CREED
[Album on Spotify](#)

One of my findings that has been incredibly influential in my creative process has been the musical artist and poet, Twilight Prince and their album WELCOME TO MY CREED, which includes nine spoken word poems. Their poems speak about their life, the people in their life, their identity, and how they move in the world. Their delivery commands attention, while music plays in the background so harmoniously. As someone who has a hard time with words, I am in awe and envy about how Twilight Prince is able to turn their thoughts into such elegiac and evocative sentences. In this album, every poem carries such meaning, beauty, and impact. They are so open and I really admire their vulnerability. I wish to reflect that in my own art.

家人 (Jia Ren), Rebbly Yuer Foster
<https://www.shaking-the-tree.com/23478-20154-jia-ren.html>

家人 (Jia Ren) is a self portrait film made by Rebbly Yuer Foster. This film, which honors their Chinese ancestry, speaks on being Chinese in America and being Chinese-American. I haven't found many films like this yet but Rebbly's piece is a great representation of a self-portrait that uses video as its medium. This was a helpful example for the kind of film I was thinking of making. Their film includes interviews with their mother and friends who are Chinese-American.

I don't find films about the Asian identity in the US easily. Rebby's work merges very personal moments of theirs with shared family culture while also leaving space for others to share their own experiences and feelings with their identities. While all the people interviewed are Chinese-American, they all share different identities as people, which I think is really important because it reinforces the idea that Asian Americans cannot be boxed into one thing. This reminder is a really good one to any Asian American and is one that I carry in me and my own work.

Christine Mari

<https://christinemari.com/>

Christine Mari's comics center her experience as half Japanese and the complexities that come with having a bicultural identity. The honesty and vulnerability in her work is very admirable and inspiring. Her comics usually depict small moments in her life that some may deem unimportant. However, she is able to deconstruct what feelings were coming up for her in those situations and why. Reflecting on past experiences and understanding them through a variety of societal oppressions is something I do in my own life and hope to bring into more of my work.

Ana Roxanne's album, ~~~

[Album on Spotify](#)

Ana Roxanne's album, ~~~, combines spoken poetry with ambient sounds that echo feelings I want my work to express, such as stillness. Listening to this album, I am able to recall the feelings of being in water and the emotional and cultural meaning I have to it.

Christine Ay Tjoe

<https://www.artsy.net/artist/christine-ay-tjoe>

Much of Christine Ay Tjoe's work reflects the layered experience of being human. Her intense and condensed linework feels very familiar and is something I emulate in my own work. While the style I chose for my painting doesn't reflect her style, I hoped to evoke similar feelings about the human experience. She is one of the only Indonesian artists I've been able to find in my research whose work relates to my own.

Melati Suryodarmo

<https://ocula.com/artists/melati-suryodarmo/>

Melati Suryodarmo is an Indonesian artist living in Germany. Her performance *Exergie-Butter Dance* speaks the loudest to me out of all her work because of how she uses her body to translate the concepts in her work. This performance about her experience as an Indonesian immigrant in Germany evokes thoughts about my own family history of immigration. This piece inspired me to make my own kind of performance art, which I incorporated into the bedsheet piece I created in the fall.

Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*. Abrams ComicArts, 2018.

This is a graphic novel by Vietnamese-American artist, Thi Bui. It tells the story of her parents, their individual upbringings, their lives as they had children, migration, and their experiences living through war. Thi Bui's novel also warps time, allowing past and present to exist simultaneously, and thus bridging the gap between her and her parents. While my family history is different from hers, I am interested in learning about my parent's lives before they had children and their experiences and stories that have led to their current lives. Recalling memories, storytelling, and closing the distance between us is something that I plan on integrating into my own project. I'm also interested in Thi Bui's approach for doing this - how she is telling these stories and how she is connecting and weaving these threads together.