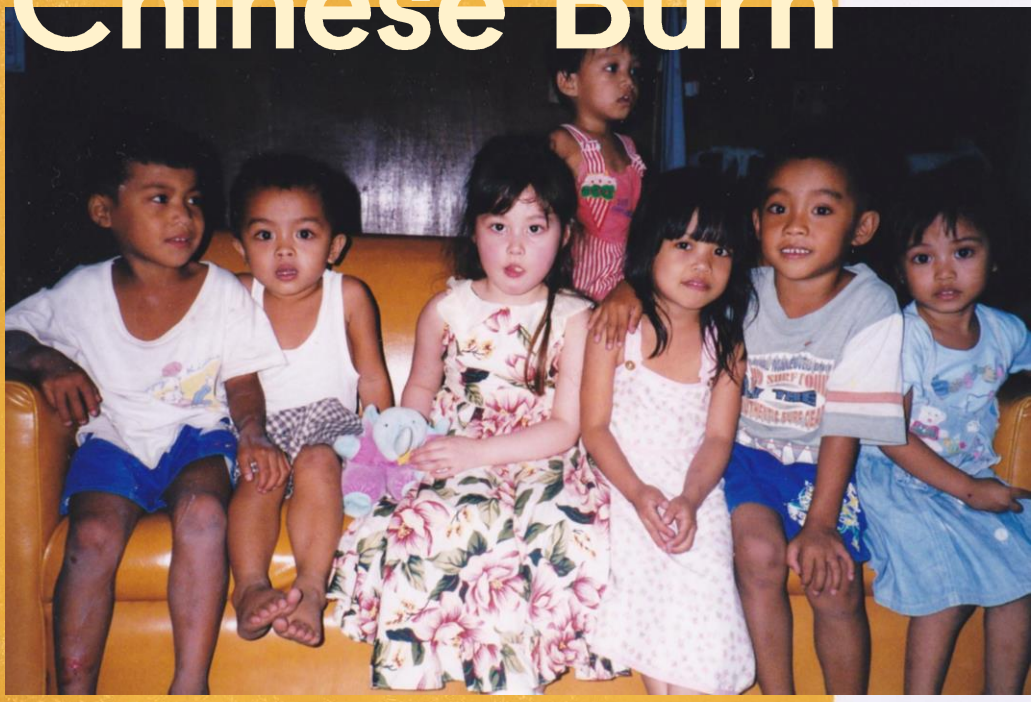
Chinese Burn



Sarah Byrne

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Re-purposing imagery from my Mother's photo albums depicting childhood trips to the Philippines, I reflect on experiences growing up in England being British with an Asian mother. This establishes a process of recalling associations which have contributed to a separation between my two national identities.

The material exploration of these photographs, taken over 20 years ago, allow me to view myself as the subject of an image, as well as a representation of my past. Many of the snapshots show a jarring contrast between the focus and the surroundings, and while exploring the self and considering the erasure of identity and memory, I am led to challenge what I remember versus what I *think* I remember, revealing a degree of overwriting and corruption within memories.

The work progresses to test the extent to which visibility may act as a metaphor for cultural trends relating to 'Whiteness', particularly the proclivity of Western idealisation within South-East Asia. I relate this to my own muddled young memories of feeling tokenised by both sides.

The faded visuals, made with my Mother's imagery, denies any singular narrative. Flickering between voices and forming relationships among mother-daughter, artist-viewer and mother-viewer, all at once.

Acknowledgements

There's no way I could have organised two years' worth of thinking into anything that made sense without the advice and support of my brilliant supervisor, Jane Webb. Thank you, Jane, for sitting with me for hours in my freezing studio, and for giving me the confidence to own my thoughts and share them proudly.

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A note to the examiner

"The ambition was to make a painting that the professor of fine art could have a conversation with my mum about, and neither of them condescending to each other." (Tate, 2011, 02:24)

Created to conclude two years of study on a Masters by Research in Art and Design, this document is formed to take the reader through the thought processes and exchanges that have taken place whilst meandering around the themes of nationality, identity and belonging.

Written in a format more similar to a memoir than to an academic text, this book aims to mirror an ethos which has been present throughout the making and enquiry of this project – which is to appeal and feel accessible to anybody with an interest in these topics, regardless of formal art education.

Recognising the universality of the key themes in this research, the aim is for the following material to be read like a story might be, without the need for highlighters and notetaking that a research paper can require in order to unpack. The book aims to unpack itself as the reader progresses through it. This is a book which might be more at home on a bedside table, than on a desk surrounded by notes. The hope is that this has been successful in balancing just the right amount of academic and non-academic language and storytelling, to establish itself as a piece of enjoyable research – which is how it felt to develop it.

Happy reading.

P r e f a c e *\| ~ V a g u e l y A s i a n ~*

"I can't be British, can I, if people keep asking me where I'm from?"
(Hirch, 2018, p. 33)

Do you remember Chinese Burns? When a kid would take your forearm in both of their hands and twist in opposite directions, causing a burning stretchy friction pain (the 1990s were comedy gold). When I was in primary school, I remember a kid coming up with a racially themed joke where I was the punch line. Making the deduction that my last name is Byrne (Irish: pronounced like Burn), and that I look ~vaguely Asian~ the following interaction would be popularised:

Kid 1: *Hey have you met Sarah's brother?*

Kid 2: *Sarah doesn't have a brother.*

Kid 1: *But he's right HEEERE (proceeds to inflict i n t e n s e Chinese Burn).*
This would spread around various social groups until kids learned to just leg it far away after the opening line. I still don't know who it was who came up with this, but it was admittedly good wordplay.

Me in v cool 90s sunglasses

Growing up, the people around me seemed fascinated by where I'm from. I grew up in the UK, in a town called Aylesbury, after being born in Watford. So, when people would ask me where I was from (one of the first things they'd ask, btw) I would hesitate.

*Do you mean where I was from, or where I'm **from**?* I would wonder.

They always meant where was I *from*. Translation: *Why do you look different?* So, growing up, being constantly asked this question served as a perpetual reminder that I was different. A little prompt that I had to explain myself, most days, in fact more often than not, multiple times a day.

And what does it mean to look different? What are the specifications? What is the prescribed description for 'different'? In my case, it was that I had 'lovely olive skin' and 'beautiful eyes'. I think it was mainly the eyes thing. People really love to fetishise Asian eyes, right? Despite the whole history of… well, I digress, that could be a separate thesis. Basically, my eyes would always get brought up, and to be honest in these cases it was quite often a compliment and not intentionally laced with malice. People recognised my features as different, and most were innocently curious. But that's enough for a child to realise that there is something physically setting them apart from their peers.

These curious White people would expect other White people to wonder the same thing as them, so a description of me almost became a disclaimer when they'd introduce me.

"This is Sarah - she's Filipino" they'd say with a smile and only a slight pause between the two statements. Not dissimilar to the way someone might show off their new accessory and the shop they bought it from.

Before meeting me, the kids at school often hadn't heard of the Philippines, or they didn't know where it was. But they did know that my eyes looked different, and that my skin had a slightly darker, more yellow undertone to theirs. They hadn't heard of the Philippines, but they had heard of China, and Chinese people have distinctive eyes, as I did. That made us similar enough for kids to include me in their stereotypical knowledge of China.

The kid in the year below me in primary school is a particularly strong memory of mine. His face lit up whenever he'd bump into me on the playground because his friends found it hilarious when he'd jump and slide around me, looking me dead in the eyes while he made little *'HIIIIIYA'* noises and impersonated karate chops with his hands. The first time he did it, I had no idea how to respond. It took me a few seconds to realise that he was making a connection to my vaguely Asian features and reducing it to an Asian stereotype. A very good joke, apparently. I was so taken aback that I didn't know how to react, so with it being a passing interaction, I settled for a small glare back in his direction as I walked away. This then became my one and only reaction every time this interaction repeated itself during my primary school career. Note: it was a lot. Sometimes multiple times a day. Another note: Nobody else around me said anything about this or even acknowledged it was happening.

My family and I would travel to the Philippines a fair amount when I was young. I remember it being as regular as every other year or so when I was between the ages of around 3 – 11. We often went during the school holidays, but with it being such a long trip to South-East Asia, it was a big travel commitment, and my parents would like us to be there for at least 3 weeks for all the accompanying exhaustion to feel 'worth it'. This meant that we would

occasionally get permission from my school for us to extend the normal school holiday allowance (schools weren't as strict about this back then). When I was young, this gave me a mixture of excitement at having extra time off school, and discomfort, because through this special treatment I risked inviting more attention from the Curious-White-People.

These trips confirmed for me that I felt like the eternal outsider. In Aylesbury, I am the Asian girl. The Filipino girl. The different girl. I worried about the attention being different got me, and I tried as much as I could to blend in. As a teen, with my first computer with internet access, and my developing identity, I'd look at endless pictures of my favourite celebrities online. The ones I'd seen represented in the TV shows and films I'd watch. I'd compare them to myself and wonder how I could adapt to look more like them. Should I dye my dark hair lighter? It probably wouldn't suit me in the same way it compliments their porcelain skin.

Google search: *what are hooded eyelids*

Google search: *how to make eyelids appear rounder with eyeliner*

Google search: *using white eye liner to make eyes appear larger*

In the Philippines I am the white girl, who speaks with a British accent, cannot speak Tagalog, and has access to privilege and opportunity most people could not imagine. To them my skin is beautiful porcelain, and my family worries for me when I begin to bronze in the sunlight. To them, I am someone to look and stare at, someone to point at in the market. I am someone who *"should be Little Miss Philippines!"*, my Dad is someone to approach with a rusty knife behind your back while you're begging for money.

Back in the UK my mum had lots of Filipino friends as I was growing up, and they would excitedly talk in Tagalog to each other. Occasionally dropping in my name just enough times to make me very paranoid of what she was telling them.

When we were out and my mum spotted a person she could identify as maybe Filipino, she'd stride straight up to them with a huge smile. They could have been in the underwear section of Marks and Spencer's, fists full of bras and comfortable pants, and she'd almost skip over in the most socially confident and profoundly un-British (read: awkward) way. "*Salamat!"* she'd exclaim in greeting, before being met with an equally large grin from somebody proud to be recognised as part of a Filipino community. They'd talk about where they were from in the Philippines, establish if there were any cross-overs, if they had mutual friends or friends of uncles twice removed. They'd exchange numbers, and then suddenly they'd be round our house, cooking food with my mum and planning a karaoke party together.

Pretending I know how to play chess, in my Spice Girls trainers

This project serves as a mindful, meditative process for me to acknowledge and accept the feelings and thoughts I have had as a young girl growing up and feeling a conflict of culture and identity. In a world where *"categories make the world feel understandable and safe"* (Scales-Trent, 1989, p. 305), it's easy for a child to feel the need to disregard one 'category' to avoid the discomfort associated with flitting between two.

I began a meandering reflection around my reluctance to engage with my Filipino 'half' of myself, an unwillingness that lasted for much of my childhood. Really, I was acknowledging (or admitting) this for the first time, and in doing so, I wanted to consider *why*. What were the things that made me feel like this? Why did I come home from school one day to my mum speaking Tagalog, and ask her to speak English instead? Why did I start to feel angry and dig my heels in when my parents would book flight tickets for our next trip to the Philippines? Why did I want to remind people so strongly that actually I am half Irish too?

As British people, ours are socially awkward, emotionally stunted identities, that have played themselves out in a nation where these things are not talked about openly. When I first started thinking about identity, it was something private. It wasn't the kind of thing you could talk about at school, or even know the language with which to raise it at home. It's something I am still finding the language for now, and it began here, with this project.

1 **|** *The Photo Album*

"Unlike the social historian, the owner of an album does not look for the 'truth' of the past … a family album is a treasured possession, nervously approached for its ambiguities, scrutinised for its secrets … it interweaves the trivial and the intense, the moment and the momentous, as it challenges any simple concept of memory."

(Spence and Holland, 1991, p. 2)

Recently a friend and colleague of mine worked with a group of school children who had never seen or heard of an overhead projector before.

Yep.

In 2019, we've reached that point.

As a child of the 90s however, overhead projectors were an essential part of our school lives. Each day one lucky kid would have the honour of sitting at the front of the assembly with it, carefully sliding down the acetate in time to display the lyrics to the hymns for that morning, while our head teacher strummed his guitar.

Even white boards were fairly new technology, with most of our classrooms still transitioning from their squeaky, chalky counterparts.

My favourite artefact of that era though: the printed photographs from film cameras, and the resulting albums that they were curated into.

My mum was and still is an avid photo taker. She likes to document everything. Every visit to a place, every meeting with a person, every meal to be eaten. Today, with her smart phone and tablet, she is ruthless. Nothing can go uncaptured. Multiple times. Different angles. Different poses. Different arrangements of people. Height order. No, you move over there. Try it like this. Try it again. That one's blurry. Now on the tablet.

"You know you can just send it to--" I try to explain before I'm cut off, but with no explanation as to why it's important to take the same picture on multiple devices.

The beauty of film: the limitation. You can make only a finite number of snaps before you must remove the little cannister and take it to a professional to print the results. No sneak peaks – just a little view finder at the time of capture to ensure you're aiming at the right space. You can't waste shots re-taking the same photo either, those things are valuable. And then there's the anticipation and nervous excitement around opening the envelope to see if all the memories you were so excited to re-live were wasted on bad lighting, no focus, or a thumb over the lens.

When I was growing up, my mum religiously kept photo albums to organise these snippets of memory into. They're still in her house now. Big, chunky leather-bound things, still in the plastic shop packaging from when they were

bought (a Filipino thing – an unexplained reluctance for an item to lose it's 'newness' or labelling). The albums are numbered on the sides, and the photos arranged in chronological order. Some with little hand-written captions underneath saying things like "*Sarah and Benji Dec 1994*". Benji was our dog, and hung out with me a lot when I was a baby.

I've always been a little fascinated by these albums. It's something that became a lost art as technology developed and we lost the need to manually archive our visual capturings. Our phones do that for us now, and so do our Facebook timelines. Something I love about Instagram is that it has sort of become a way of publishing a curated photo album. With our tech now, all we do is scroll down to the relevant date in the 'gallery' and we're immediately rewarded with all the snaps from that time, as well as a reminder of how many people have 'liked' the image. That public engagement is something those private leather-bound albums don't have when they're on my parent's bookshelf in the living room. What they have is something far more intimate.

Me and Benji

2 | *R e m e m b e r i n g*

"As Proust writes: 'We find a little of everything in our memory; it is a sort of pharmacy'"

(Mavor, 2007, p.40)

Keen to get started with making, I reflected on my previous artistic endeavours. For me, the process usually took a format such as this:

Step 1: thinking

Step 2: planning

Step 3: hesitation

Step 4: pausing

Step 5: repeat

Note the distinct lack of 'making' in my making process. But this time felt different. For the first time for me, I was beginning a project with not just an idea but a material, and I wanted that to lead me. As long as I was being led by

this material, it could distract me from thinking too hard. I needed to stop thinking and let the doing think for me.

Letting this new ethos guide me, I began with actions which were driven by ease and speed, shortening the lines of thought between my head and my hands as much as possible so as to reduce the possibility of steps 3 and 4 kicking in. I sat in my dad's home office with a stack of the photo albums, flicking through images and digitally scanning the ones I felt drawn to. My purpose was practical. I simply needed to create copies of the photographs I wanted to work with in order to have the freedom with them that I needed. The originals were way too valuable for my mum to be reassured by any sort of insistence they'd be safe.

At the time, I didn't think too hard about the images I was choosing to scan, however on reflection I realise that they were all photographs from various trips to the Philippines when I was between the ages of about 3 – 5 years old. There were lots of photos I recognised, and lots of memories coming back to me as I worked on this. However, as I reminisced around these images, I realised that I was becoming confused about how many of my memories were genuine.

I remembered that as well as the photographs, my mum kept video tapes of recordings she'd made on her camcorder. I remember laying on my belly across my parent's bed in the home I grew up in, watching the grainy videos on a boxy grey CRT TV while my mum spritzed perfume on herself sat at her dressing table. I realised that this memory of laying on the bed was coming back to me just as much as the memories of the Philippines were. Then I wondered how many of my memories of the Philippines were actually my raw memories of the Philippines. What if I was really remembering the images from that grey TV?

What if I was remembering the stories that my mum and other family members had retold over the years, and creating my own visuals to accompany them with the scraps of imagery I had in my brain? Like a movie trailer that plays all the best bits along to an almost-storyline. What if I was entirely misremembering certain details or feelings because they were being impacted by other memories around the topic? '*HIIIYAAAAA*' I remembered, visualising the annoying boy on the playground. Could I completely trust my own narrative? Years of watching TV shows and reading books have taught me that the narrator is never 100% reliable (I'm looking at you, Ted Moseby). Why would I be different?

By looking at these images from when I was that age, I was inadvertently examining this period of childhood amnesia (Fivush and Hamond, 1990), where developing young children are dependent on adults and other external factors for cues relating to their autobiographical memory. It's a fragile period of a child's development, and memories of that time are frequently fractured and confused, which was exactly what I was experiencing in my attempts to remember these situations. As I acted out the repetitive motion of flicking through albums, examining the photos, removing the photos, scanning the photos and replacing the photos, I felt more and more as if I was attempting to access folders of memory that were incorrectly labelled in my brain, or stored in incoherent places. If my brain could have made that '*be-bong'* noise that Windows uses when a command is unable to run, it would have.

Perner and Ruffman (1995) suggested that children cannot "*encode*" events experienced before the age of about 4 or 5 years old. Children younger than this have trouble understanding the concept of experience, meaning they don't take the time to reflect on the origin of their knowledge. This period of development

can be used to argue why adults have an inability to remember experienced events from around the ages of 3 to 6 years old.

New Year's Eve celebrations. The fireworks caught on the thatched roof. Luckily, we had help.

As I read around this explanation as to why my childhood memories were seemingly faulty, I became fascinated by the parallels being drawn between human and computer memory - mostly in the way that the language could be used to describe either thing. And I realised that I had subconsciously been making the same association too. I was talking about human memory (an incredibly complex field of expertise), in ways that I could understand. As a child of the 90s, technology has been a huge part of my life, and I am far more easily able to talk about a computer glitching, malfunctioning and overwriting

than I am my own mind. However, the way I was beginning to see it – that's exactly what my mind was doing too.

This thought process led my work to take on an aesthetic of unpredictability in terms of its framing, and I began to explore the tension between what Richard Chalfen (1987) calls a *"Home Mode"* snapshot, and a formal photographic practice à la Victor Burgin.

The home mode snapshot has such a visual awkwardness that I love. Whether a glitch, a mismatch of subject, or a focus on something unusual, I brought that discomfort through into my collages, prints, and my own thoughts as a reoccurring motif. Repetition and recurrence being another motif, the constant way that I have examined the same photos over the last two years has allowed me to approach these snapshots academically, in a way which is not inherent in the spontaneous, personal making of the image itself. Reminiscent of the way an anthropologist may research and examine evidence and traces of history (Lévi-Strauss, Jacobson and Schoepf, 1963), my reflections around these photographs are a very intentional unpicking, jumbling and re-working, which allows me to interpret my own thoughts and relations.

During this process, I consider the rituals and authorship behind photo albums themselves. An artefact of their time, a photo album's upkeep takes considerable intension and commitment to arrange, especially in my mum's chronological method, with captions and decoration. Albums are curated, edited, compiled and displayed. In this culture of looking through the family album, my mum's authorship is amplified.

3 **|** *Cutting and Cropping*

"Family collections are never just memories. Their disconnected points offer glimpses of many possible pasts, and yet, in our longing for narratives, for a way of telling the past that will make sense in the present we know, we strive to organise these traces, to fill the gaps. Each viewer makes their own tracks through the album. Each new generation brings new perspectives, new understandings and new forgettings."

(Spence and Holland, 1991, p.1)

I began this newfound process of wanting to let my material guide me by practicing a somewhat mindless studio activity. In 2019 there is a lot of hype around mind*ful* action. Mindful meditation, mindful yoga, mindful cooking, mindful colouring books etc. are all the rage on Pinterest and Instagram. I want to celebrate the mind*less* things, though. One of my favourite Chefs, Jack Monroe (2019) writes in the method for her Self Love Stew, that:

> "*stirring is key. It is soothing. It is mindless, not mindful. Sod mindful. My mind is full enough. It is a minefield. Sometimes I want to stir some stuff and stare at my hands or into nothing".*

I think Jack is spot on.

Collaging in progress

Firstly, I think there is a great relationship between cooking and artmaking. But also, it really outlined for me why thinking really wasn't what I wanted to do. In allowing the material to guide me, I was giving the productive responsibility to my hands, where my head couldn't get in the way. Just do the thing, with an empty mind and a calm disposition. It's meditative in its own way. Its own mindless way. Screw you, Pinterest.

While at work, I used the office printer to print off some of the images that I'd scanned into my laptop at my parent's house. Suddenly my childhood visuals and memories were existing in a place outside of the photo album and outside of my parents' house – they were at work with me, sitting next to adult(ish), developed me. A purely functional decision, these images were simply printed on the A4 printer paper available to me. Functionality was helping me to be mindless. I didn't have to make decisions and think too much if I was only using what I had to hand.

I took the wodge of paper prints with me to my studio, where I had a cutting mat and a craft knife. Then, leaning into the mindless activity, I allowed my hands to begin to slice out images from other images. Removing objects and people from their contexts, seeing them in new ones, joining situations together. Each image filled an A4 page, dwarfing the 6x4 film prints in my mum's photo albums. Small details were enlarged. Overlooked expressions and objects were brought into focus.

I spent a long time in the cutting step of this activity. It was calming, and as my first physical step into doing something to address my relationship with my past self, it felt oddly freeing.

***Collage (steady)**, 2017, A3 paper*

As I began to play with the puzzle pieces that I was left with and think about how they could be arranged or used now, I thought that there could be something happening here that is metaphorical for how our memories work. The people and objects I had cut out of their contexts were the things I had on some level been drawn to. Things that I had stronger memories of, for example, or the things that I felt in some way attached to.

The playful act of then combining these elements together in collage was punching holes through history and time. I was using real, actual historical artefacts of my childhood, and doing a good job now of messing it all up.

The people and objects combined in invented scenarios and situations brought an element of fiction to the photographs which were previously documentary. My mother's authorship started to blur with my own, and I began to tell a different story, an untrue story. The process was casual, immediate and spontaneous – much like the way the original film photographs may have been taken. In his exhibition at Hayward Gallery, Andreas Gursky suggests that *"what arouses our desire is not the object alone, but the way it is framed"* (*Andreas Gursky*, 2018). Collaging and printmaking offered me the opportunity to play with this framing.

***Collage (yellow socks and jelly shoes)**, 2017, A3 paper*

***Remembering remembering**, 2017, A3 risograph print*

4 **|** *P r i n t m a k i n g*

"like hummingbirds in a glass box… we are frosted in by the daguerreotype of nostalgia"

(Mavor, 2007, p. 39)

The Risograph printer (affectionately called the Riso printer) is one that I've always felt attracted to but had no real experience of using. During a conversation where I was prompted to consider the development of my impulsive collages, it was mentioned how collage tends to lend itself very nicely to a riso print due to the way the printer flattens all the layers in the image it reads, seeing cut and stick collage as one cohesive image. I was intrigued and, knowing that I already appreciated the unique aesthetic of a riso print, was keen to pursue the idea.

Risography was a very popular printing method in the 80s. It's cheap to print from, meaning mass production is very easy, and it is very accessible and easy to work with since many designs are born from simple cut and stick collage. This process lends itself well to self-publishing in the form of posters and zines.

The printer itself is temperamental, which gives it much of its charm. Disguising itself as an unimportant bulky printer of the kind you may find in an office building, the printer contains a digital scanning bed on the top which it uses to read the artwork. The printer then creates a 'Master' based on the tones that it reads from the imagery, which it will print in one solid block of colour, similar to that of a screen print. The same print can then be printed over multiple times in different block colours, and since the ink on the page stays wet for some time after printing, this allows for printed colours on the design to overlap and create shadows and new shades.

I began to play with the riso printer as a way of visualising how my collages may be able to be lifted beyond their simplicity, and I found the technique offered a really interesting quality to the imagery. An unexpected appeal of the print was that they are full of imperfections. So much so that the first 5-10 prints, I'm told by our print technician, are usually discarded in the same way you would discard the first pancake. The printer needs to warm up to the Master you scanned in, and it takes a few goes to really break into it properly. The initial results are faded, unsure, toe dips in a cold pool. These prints are never done on the 'good paper' – they're much too disposable for that. This stuck with me.

There's a lot of obvious metaphor between fading, and the way we consider memories. But you know what, sometimes metaphors are obvious because they're *effective*. Our memories *are* hazy. Our memories *are* inaccurate. When I look through my mum's photo albums and try to recall the places and the people, my mind is looking for that 'Master', it's figuring out where the edges are in the image I'm visualising, it's figuring out how well it's able to replicate

the tones within it. It gives it a good few tries, but it might be slightly off until it warms up a bit. It might be slightly unreliable.

The so-called ‘poor’ visual became important to me. The idea that there was something there that could almost be seen, but where the details were difficult to make out. For me, it was a visual analogy for the way I felt looking through these photographs and seeing myself in a time and place that I couldn’t quite place. In hindsight, it is also a visual analogy for my feelings around my identity as I was growing up. Something I was on the cusp of but couldn’t quite reach or understand. Something that wasn’t quite clear enough for other people to view without context.

***Tracking**, 2018, A3 risograph print*

Within printmaking, one of the first decisions I found myself making was the colours I wanted to use on the riso. Choosing between mostly primary colours in the first instance, I found myself drawn to yellow tones. Reflecting on this later, I realised that I find myself associating the colour yellow with the Filipino environment frequently.

My mum and me, in very appropriate outfits

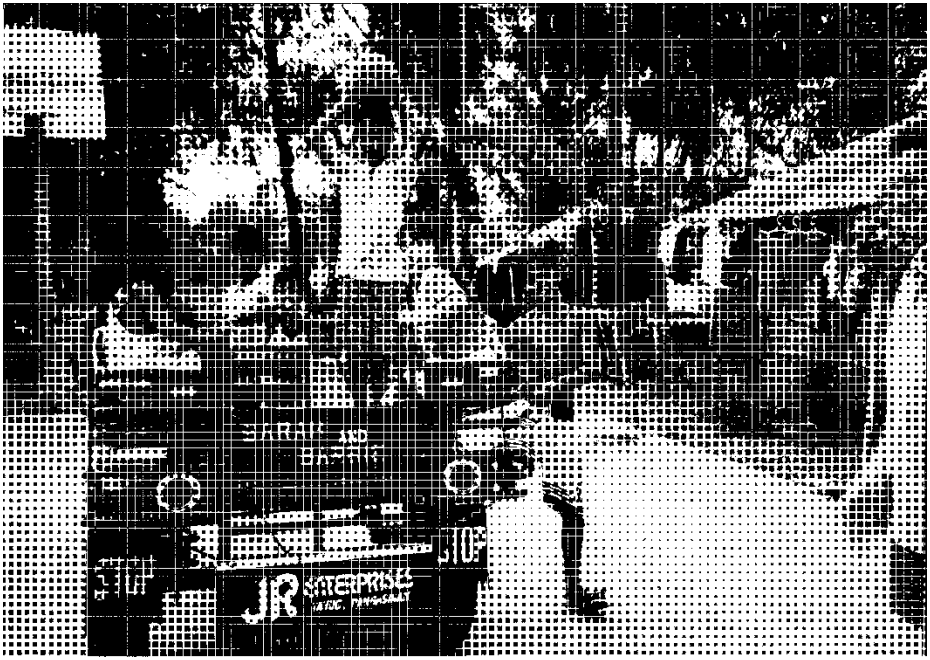
The Filipino landscape has a lot of yellow. Most of the roads around the time of these images were covered in sandy pebbles. When the river flooded, the sand carried through into the waters, creating a murky yellow hue in the streets. The San Francisco plant leaves caught the bright sun and popped out of the bushy green overgrowth. Hay is stacked up against tall trees in the gardens, seemingly yellow, but will certainly cover you in an offensively black dust should you jump into it (trust me).

Then there's the broader consideration of the colour yellow in reference to Asian countries. It became quickly established in the world that there were black people and there were white people. More recently brown, too, has come into play. But where did Asian people belong in these categories? Most commonly thrown into a box called 'Other', the broad umbrella of East-Asians identifying with the description *yellow,* transformed the term from being originally a derogatory term to one of ownership. Race is more than black and white, literally and figuratively, and taking possession of yellow gives us a "*little flag to fly*" (Chok, 2016; Shukla, 2016, p.37).

"'They are the real asians. The orientals are not really asian.
They're just chinese'
- from 'Why do British people think Indians are Asian?',
Yahoo Answers" (Chok, 2016, p.34)

So, the colour yellow emerged as another motif, along with the repetition, the poor visuals, and the mindlessness. What I came to appreciate is that these motifs were being born organically, through this mindlessness, forming their own powerful messages while I discovered and shaped them.

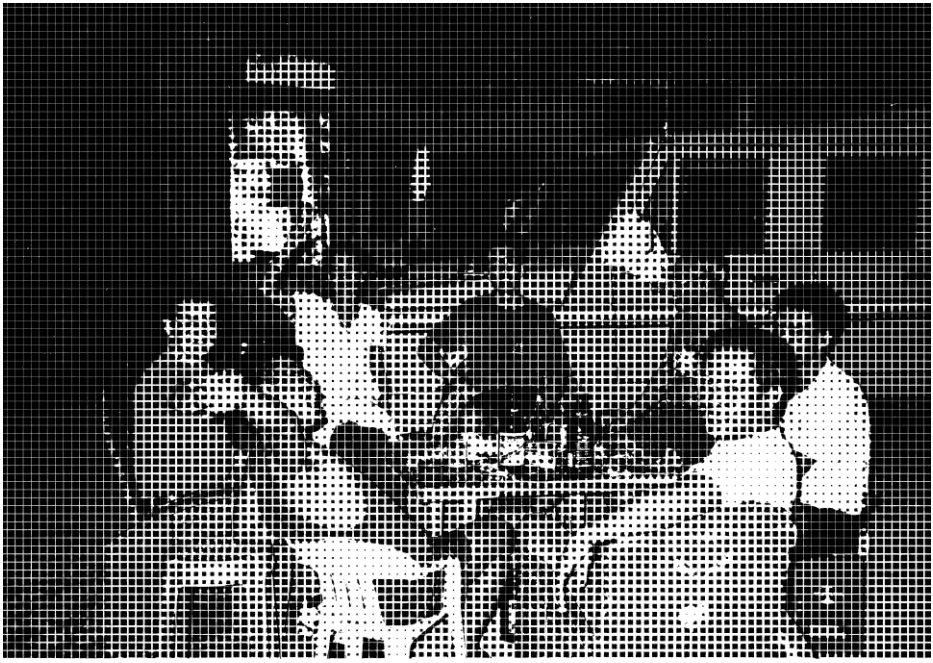
In thinking about printmaking, I also dipped a toe into screen printing. The process of screen printing allowed me to visualise my images in a different way. They go from full, colour photographs to reduced versions of themselves.

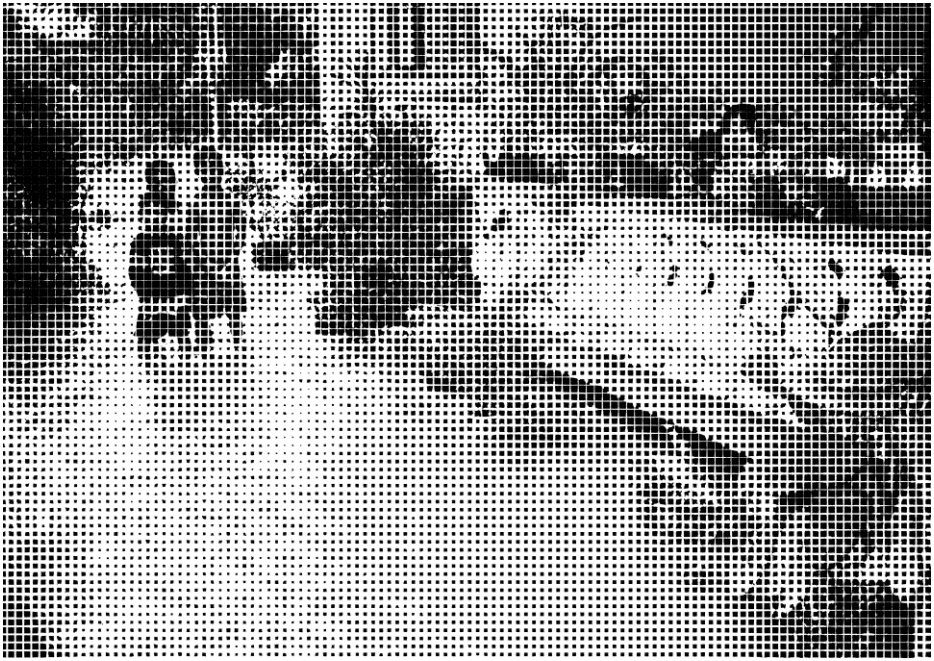


Part of the process of screen printing requires a black and white image to be printed onto acetate to become the key line, similar to the master that a riso creates. However, where the riso reads coloured images tonally in producing a master, a key line requires an image to be strictly black and white with no grey area. This means that there are certain visual methods for mimicking shade and tone within the image, similar to how an artist may use cross-hatching to shade when drawing with a pen.

I saw an interesting parallel here between this practice and the idea of Asians seeking to find their language identity between the words black and white. The artist must be creative in creating the grey (or brown, or yellow) areas in a key line.

In creating my yellow areas, a visual I became very interested in using was a square, grid aesthetic. They work in a similar way to the dots in a classic Roy Lichtenstein screen print, but the grid pattern I was using reminded me of something more digitally produced. As I continued a comparison between digital and human memory, the rigid square structures gave the impression of something computerised, ordered, binary. The lack of detail within the image was also something I was drawn to. Harping back to my poor-visuals motif, the image gives the viewer *just enough* detail to paint a scene, particularly from a distance. However, if the viewer wants to look closer, they'll find barriers within the visuals and be unable to focus or move any closer to the scenario.



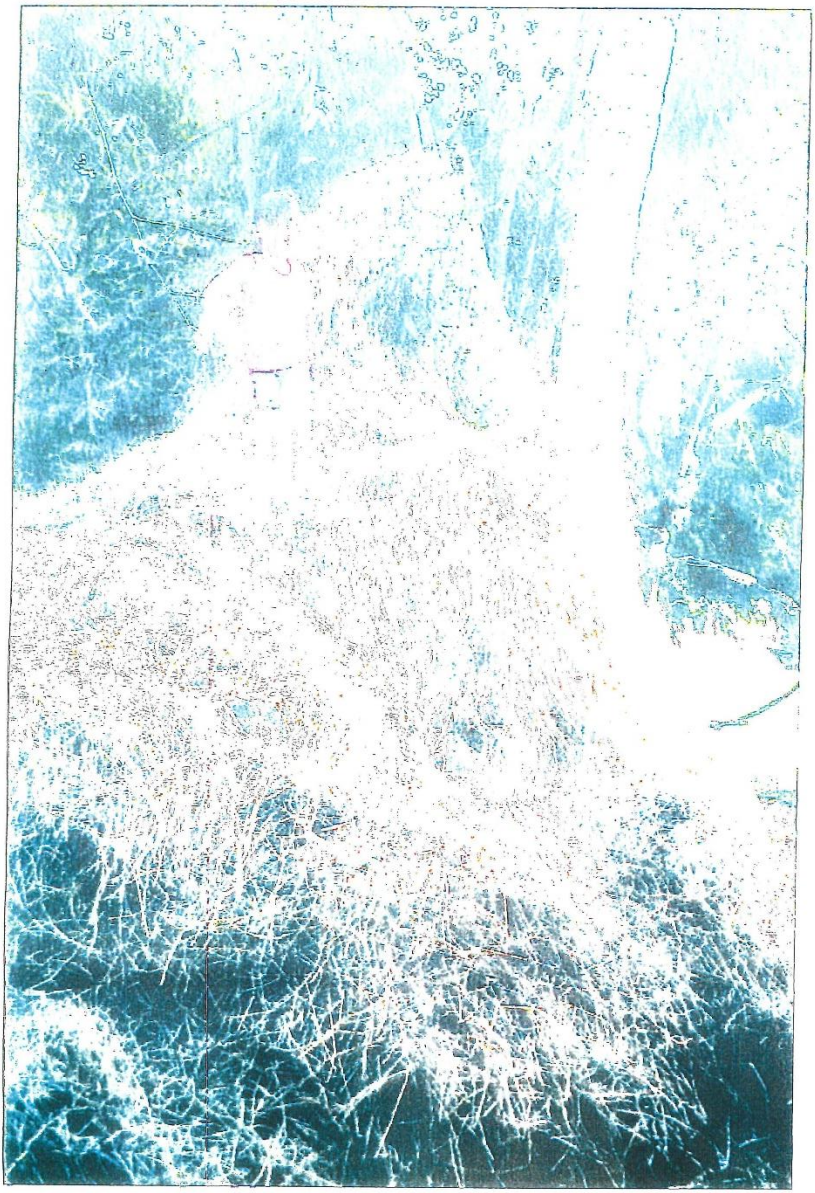


5 | *C o p y i n g*

"the paper…is fragile, discoloured, eaten by time"
(Mavor, 2007, p. 83)

Embracing the imperfections that the riso was gifting me, I wanted to explore the metaphors around fading and memories further. In doing this, I wanted to once again give responsibility for the fading image to a printer and remove my own intervention from the process. Again, I turned to functionality and approached my trusty office printer whilst at work. I thought about how a photocopied image, when re-printed, will have slightly fewer pixels per inch than the original. Then considered how if this process were to be repeated (referencing the motif), how long would it take for the image to disintegrate altogether?

I began a process of photocopying an image and photocopying the photocopy, and photocopying that photocopy, surrendering decisions to the printer, I observed how the printer slowly started to create its own version of the image, as if the printer was painting and participating in its own authorship.



The registration of the evolving prints would often start to move off centre, mimicking the imperfections of my riso prints and emphasising my lack of control over their development. Of the images that I photocopied; my favourites of the series always fell towards those in the middle of the disintegrating stack. I realised these were mostly the ones I would show people when explaining the series.

Despite their creation being the result of a methodical computerised process and relatively technological, the qualities in the prints resonate with those recognised in the Japanese aesthetic philosophy *wabi sabi*. These eroded, faint print surfaces had become:

> "*rich with visual nuance…[their] rusticity and artlessness were extraordinarily expressive and resonated with the imperfections and impermanence of life*" (Juniper, 2003, p.vii)

I was attracted to the way that the viewer would lose sight of the original image, however with knowledge of the context they may just about be able to make out the imprints of certain figures or features and imagine what the visual might be.

Repeating the repetitive motif, I then considered how I could create more steps for the image to journey through, complicating the web of motifs and entanglement of narratives further. This would lead me on to the addition of the glitch motif, which had also been reoccurring.

***Recording**, 2018, A3 risograph print*

Largely a playful experiment, this image accidentally became pivotal in where I was to take my visuals.

In February 2018 we were in the depths of the 'Beast from the East' snowstorm, and on one of the coldest nights I think I've ever experienced (my phone gave me a 'feels like' temperature of minus 15 degrees, if you were wondering), I attended a riso printing workshop in Digbeth, Birmingham, at Ropepress - a printing and publishing artist-run space. There, I met Reece (co-owner of Ropepress) and as he welcomed me in, he apologised profusely for the lack of central heating and the provision of only one space heater within the (quite vast) studio. I kept my coat on. And scarf. And gloves.

Fuelled by biscuits and chatter, the evening was incredibly fun despite the lack of feeling in our extremities. In the face of the weather forecast, the workshop received 100% attendance, which I think speaks volumes for both the reputation of Reece and Ropepress, and the community spirit and dedication to the arts in Digbeth.

The workshop was to create a two colour riso print, with the option to take away a series of limited editions with us by the end. I started the workshop by falling straight into my mindless routine, this time in the company of fellow workshoppers. The table was a cacophony of imagery. Some people choosing to take inspiration from the stacks of books and magazines Reece had provided for us to dismantle at will, and some (like me), with their own imagery brought from home. The mindless activity made space for socialising, and I imagined that this might be what a knit and natter might feel like, if we weren't in a strange warehouse in temperatures far below freezing. The socialising and the cold helped me to be more mindless; The socialising since my mind was forced to

focus on the conversation rather than thinking too hard about my actions, and the cold because I had to keep moving my fingers for fear of them freezing into one position.

Progress at Ropepress

During this period of making, I chose to play with the curation of my images in a slightly different way to the previous collages. Rather than building the image with spliced people and objects, this time I kept the images mostly whole. I use the word ‘mostly’, as I wanted to test the extent to which the riso would read texture, by using some of my older and more ‘travelled’ paper images, which had accumulated some creases and tears. Because of this re-focus, the emphasis of the finished curation is much more of an overlap of scenery and place. Fitting the ‘whole’ images onto a bigger page also mirrors how they were originally

documented in their photo albums – except this was an ‘almost’ version. The glitches are there, and the sequencing is fragmented. The ability to focus on just one of the many things happening in the frame is difficult. The original images harmonise with textures and lines that I’d added; my alterations bled into the organic. There’s a lot to absorb, and the more the viewer tries to focus on the individual subjects, the less it makes sense. As a whole, however, the sense of narrative and place is there.

And so, I realised that my ‘damaged’ paper, the leftovers, the bits that had travelled with me up until this point becoming more and more bedraggled, might have their place too.

Detail of textures from Ropepress

***Offcut (bridge over pool)**, 2018, A4 prints*

Collage in progress

Collage in progress

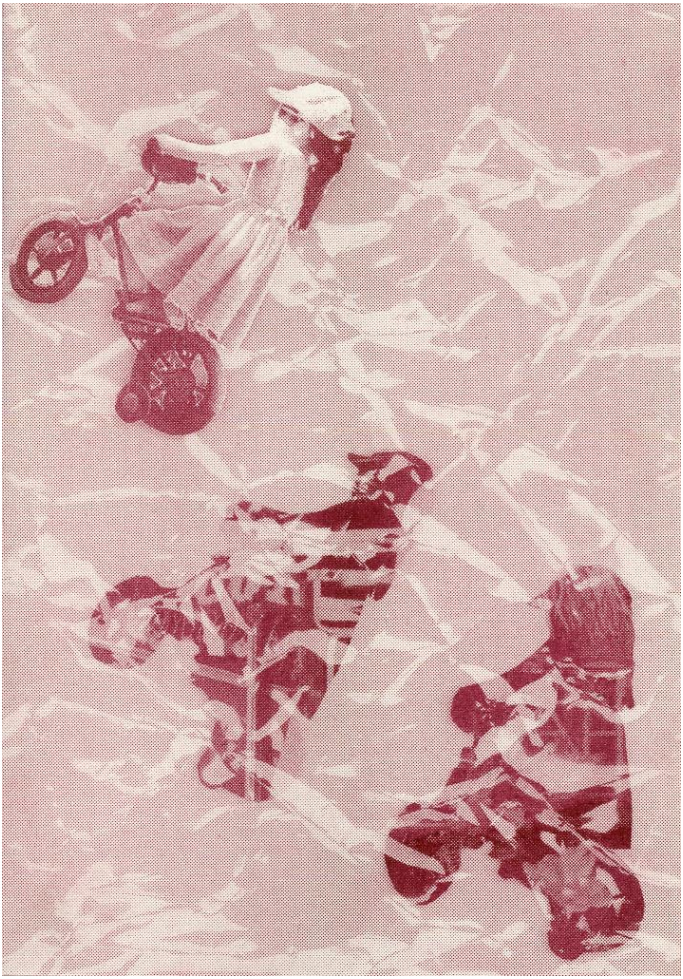
6 | *Bookmaking and Narrative*

"[the] photo-book features overexposures and underexposures of landscapes and family members and other images that are completely unreadable, in a range of deep black-browns, deep reddish-browns, with dreamy light patterns. The photographs are both poorly printed and have deteriorated over time – and that is their charm."

(Mavor, 2007, p. 83)

I visited Ropepress for one more workshop a bit later on. This time a zine making workshop. I was drawn to zine making as a way of storytelling. What was becoming clear to me through conversations with others, was that I really placed a lot of value on just that – the conversations. When I would participate in open studios and visitors would speak to me in my space, we'd spend more time discussing the background, the stories and sharing anecdotes than discussing the images. When I would participate in a group crit, or have the opportunity to present my work, I would mostly plan around how much of the story I would have time to fit within my time limit as my priority. A self-published zine offered me a way to connect with the legacy of the riso printer, as well as putting my thoughts together into a visual narrative. I could offer a

hypothetical structure to my images, allow them to be read and invite viewers into the story without my presence being necessary to facilitate their interpretation.



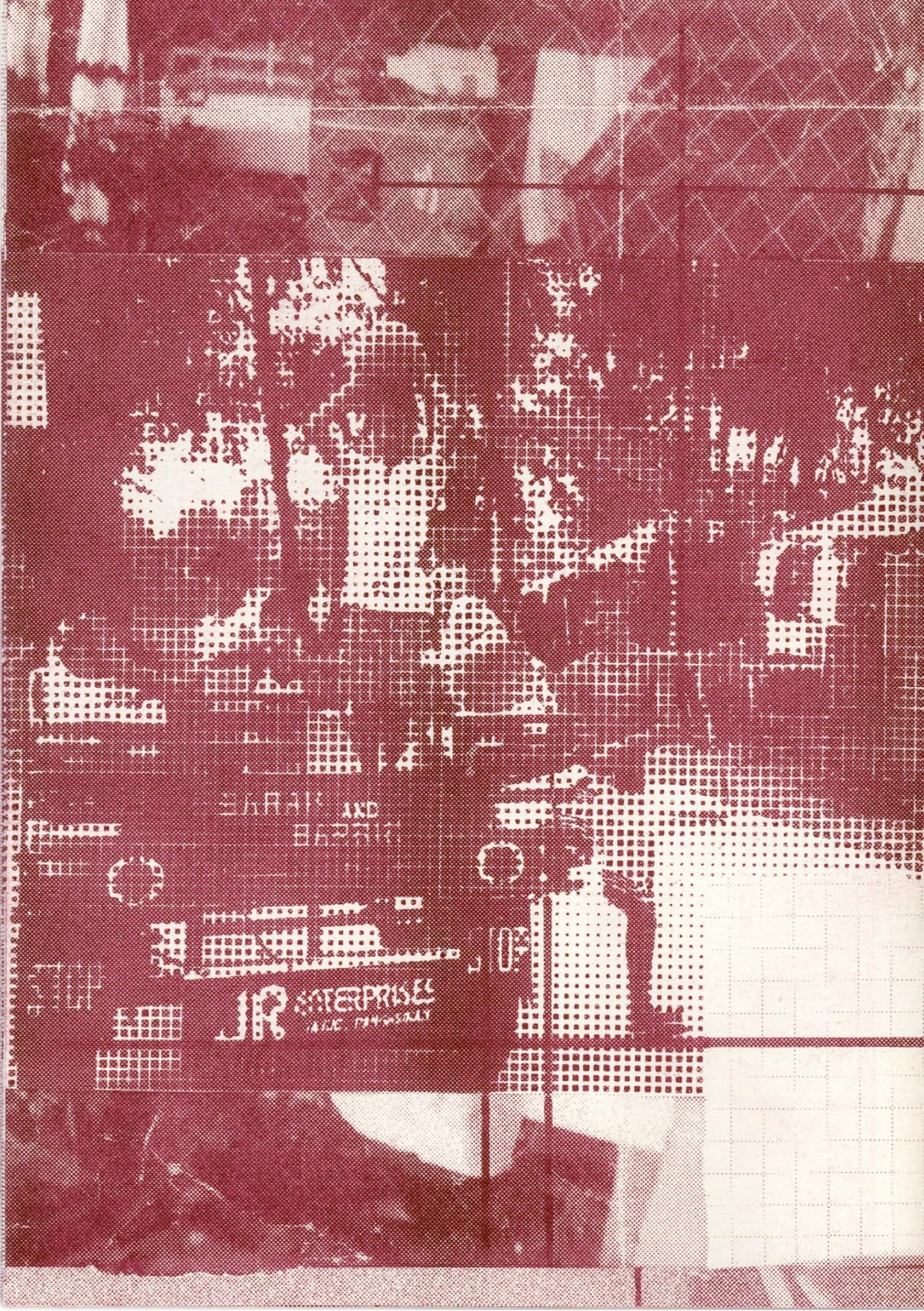
Storage | Issue 1 *(front cover), 2018, A5 risograph printed zine*

The 15-page zine also offered me the opportunity to pull together a lot of the visual motifs that I had been using within one extended piece of work. The continuation of visuals in a series of page by page imagery, allowed me to explore the chaotic overload that I wanted the viewer to experience, while still allowing each page to flow into the next in an intentional and considered way.

Considered.

I had considered.

I had begun *thinking*. Thinking in a way which wasn't deterring from the making. Thinking in a way which fed the making. Which helped me to inform decisions and progression. My mindless process was filling up.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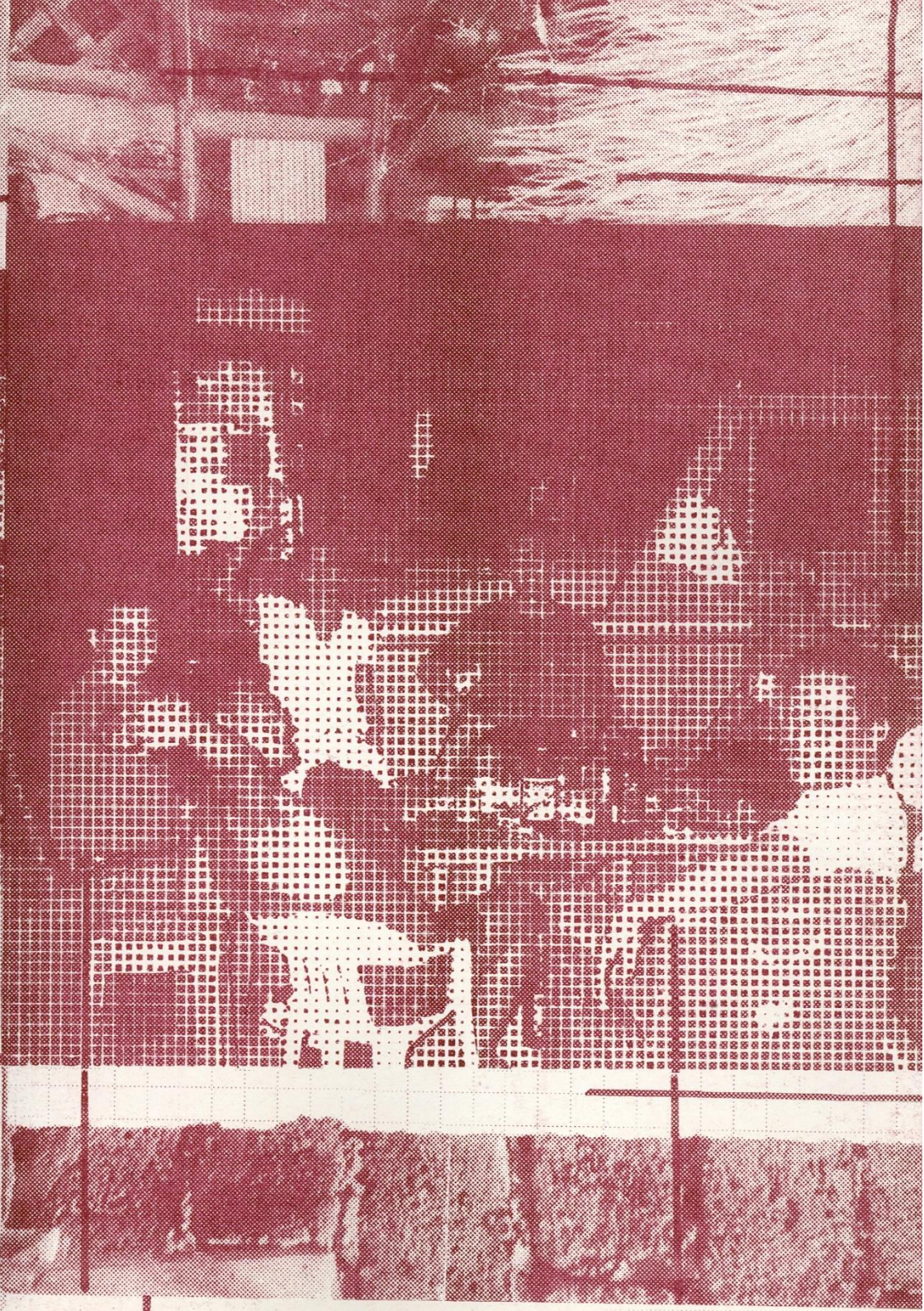
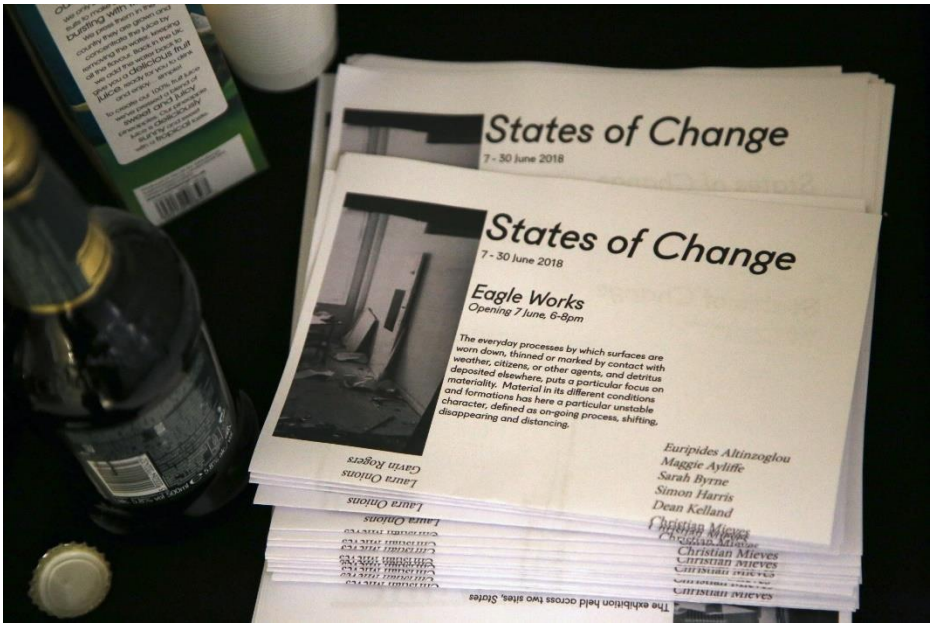


My mind then considered Hurvin Anderson's paintings, and what he calls the "*other place*" (2016). I thought about how I could also be using features of the landscape to create barriers and "*disrupt easy entrance to the work*" (Spawls, 2016, p.62). I used the existing texture and objects in the photographic images as a device. Textures in the folds and creases from carrying the prints around with me, and textures from the foliage and chicken wire fencing in the scenery, all reflect the less organic and more digitalised grids that I added in. This integration of found objects clashes with the organic visuals in an interesting, splintered way. So, I leant into this by curating the collages in order to connect all the disjointed elements. Lines between images join negative spaces, and shape and texture mirror across different fragments, allowing the pages to be viewed holistically as part of a continuous thought.

Zine in progress (detail)

In June 2018, I had the opportunity to present some of my work at an exhibition at Eagle Works Gallery, Wolverhampton.



Flyers at States of Change Private View

States of Change was a group show exploring themes around process and instability. I was very much relating to the idea of process, a fundamental part of my working, and how this may be present in the display of the work. And since I had also begun to actively think about what I was achieving, this exhibition was a great opportunity to test how my thinking could be translated well to an audience.

As I thought about the element of storytelling present in my zine, I then began to consider the authorship of the story. I hadn't yet made a consideration for who the narrator was in the scenario being created. I was in a situation where I

was using my mum's photographs, from her photo albums, but in relation to my thoughts, my process, and considering my memories. So, whose work was this?

I liked the idea that this would possibly never become clear. The authorship is ambiguous, and that lends more charm and universality to the image and story. Maybe everyone who looks at the work also shares a bit of that authorship.

I remembered how I felt towards the beginning of my project, during open studio events. My studio would be visited by lots of curious people over a weekend, eager to see inside our studio building and see what everyone is up to when they potter about in there. I remembered during conversations, when people would pick up my printed photographs, the audible *aww* or *sigh* they'd make when they were hit with their own gush of memory and nostalgia. I enjoyed how this was the general reaction regardless of the fact that these were images of people they'd never met; from a place they'd never been. Here, the immediate association and reaction to the material was so much more powerful than the image itself, and that instant response was all they needed to begin to project their own narratives into the scene.

Project.

Projection.

There is something so cinematic about a projection, whether that's a moving or a still image. The glow of a light in a dark room, and the observation of a highlighted focal point makes the viewer want to sit and be present for a little while in the space it creates. I remembered the work I'd seen by Ellen Gallagher and Edgar Cleijne in the 2017 Diaspora Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Sat on a wooden bench in a very Venetian, grand building taken over by artists, I sat

within the film installation and allowed myself to be swallowed by the dark and the quiet, listening to the occasional *shift-click* from the slide projector that threw Gallagher and Cleijne's painted abstract markings onto the wall.

While re-living this experience, I had the visual pop back into my head of the smug kid at the school assembly, sitting on the plastic throne next to the glorious overhead projector, taking the job of acetate-mover very seriously. And I thought about how if my images were on similar transparencies, they would be able to be layered and moved and shifted and played with on an OHP in a similar way to how my collages were created. Except on a projector, there's much more of an emphasis on its display. A projector invites an audience and invites play.

***Autosave** (detail), 2018, Overhead projector, acetate, found materials*

Which is exactly what happened. On the night of the private view, I showed *Autosave* (a title which plays on the similarities between computer and human memory).

A constantly changing visual, *Autosave* took the form of an OHP alongside a collection of transparencies and other found materials, including yellow acetate and textures to disrupt the clarity of the images. On the OHP, the images have the ability to merge and layer over one another in an infinite number of possibilities.

I made the decision to include a collection of transparencies and materials along with the display of the work as I had set it up, inviting viewers to play and lay out their own combination of visuals. This process allowed me to give up an element of my authorship and added the voice of the viewer's. The narrator behind this experience and the muddled memories grew more ambiguous and shared.

There were layers to how this experience could be appreciated. Visually, I could now see the work on both a horizontal and vertical plane, with both the projection on the wall, and the backlit surface of the OHP providing filmic stimulus. Then, I could also enjoy standing back and watching the way that others would play with the materials and create their own visuals and narratives.

***Autosave** (detail), 2018, Overhead projector, acetate, found materials*

***Autosave** (installation view), 2018, Overhead projector, acetate, found materials*

After the States of Change exhibition, I was reflecting on my zine, and found myself back at my office printer to create more series of fading photocopy images. However, this time using the mathematic grid paper which was present throughout my zine.

Fade to White (basketball bike) *(detail), 2018, A4 publication*

The result was that while the printer fought to erase the colour and visual of the original photograph, the subtle blue grid lines slowly took over, creating competition between the soft hazy edges of the figurative image, and the stubborn lines the paper created. When I considered the metaphors between

digital and human memory, I felt as though this visual competition was an effective analogy for the comparison.

Something that I took away with me from both this process and from *Autosave,* was that I was removing myself from much of the decision making and allowing either the viewer or the printer respectively to react and change the image on my behalf.

I considered the narrative and cohesiveness that I wanted these printed images to have. With this series I wanted to visualise how each page might come together, and I began to again picture them as a book. Imagining something along the lines of a photobook or flip book, I hand stitched the pages together in a rough 'make do' fashion (functionality motif showing up here again), and was able to get a feel for how the photos felt as a bundled collection, to be read in sequence, in a parody of the original photo albums.

After doing this, something that struck me more than normal was how the viewer was able to neatly follow the image's fade into nothing. The order was dictated, and the instruction was to read the book front to back. And the conclusion, I realised, was that it ended in something that was mostly white.

At this point, I had spent quite a long time playing with visuals, texture, cohesion and narrative, and how all of that linked to the idea of a jumbled childhood memory. The concept of nationality and race identity had slipped further back in my mind. But this exercise brought it back for me. As I sat and flicked my new flip book from front to back, beginning to end, and watched my colour-filled images fade away over and over again, I was hit by the colour

connotation and metaphor. The white space that the series finished with spoke of blankness and loss of memory, but it also spoke of skin colour.

Fade to White (yellow) *(detail), 2018, A4 publication*

7 | *Fade to White*

"different but not too different… the women's darker skin soon fades in the cool British climate" (Klein, 1991; Spence and Holland, 1991, p.149)

1979 saw the growth of the marriage bureau business in most European countries, and South-East Asian women became something to be marketed and sold. Displayed in numbered leaflets and catalogues, woman after woman is listed "*as if they are an endless resource*" (Klein, 1991, p. 147), and are even used to seduce Westerners in travel and holiday campaigns such as Philippine Airlines' 'The Beauty of the Philippines' (Philippine Airlines, 1986).

However, as much as Filipino women were sexualised for seeming oriental and other (Said, 1991), the marriage bureau would feed out the reassurances in the same breath that these women are Christian, English-speaking, and as mentioned in this chapter's opening quote, will become whiter as they adapt to Britain and its climate.

A strong memory I hold from my trips to the Philippines are the overbearing presence of skin whitening treatments. Whenever I mention it to my friends back in the UK, they are shocked, not realising anything like this existed – but it's an incredibly popular practice in South-East Asian countries, much like

tanning and bronzing creams are in the west. I remember on one trip to the Philippines, after using up all the sun protection cream we'd brought with us from home, my dad and I were searching for more in the local Boots Pharmacy equivalent. I remember picking up and examining each of the bottles and being unable to find a product that wasn't selling itself on its whitening or bleaching properties. Similarly, I remember getting back home from a trip to the Philippines, and while unpacking my bag, realising that the roll on deodorant I'd been using throughout the trip was labelled 'whitening'.

Driving down the motorways in the Philippines, the billboards show beautiful women, seducing the public into buying into their products and idealisms. The women almost look Filipino, in that they almost share the distinctive features I recognise in my relatives. But when you examine them closer, they really look nothing like my relatives, or the people that I see in the Philippines in general, their look is specifically 'Filipino celebrity'. Their skin is paler, their hair is lighter. Their noses, while perhaps flatter and wider than a typical English nose, is far more pronounced than the typical trademark Filipino nose. I realise that many of these billboards are not selling products at all, but plastic surgery. The Western aesthetic is something to aim for, something for the higher classes, something more attractive, something to look up to.

There's something to note in that many of the whitening properties lay in *women's* cleaning products. I don't notice the same sort of marketing in the men's variety of soaps and deodorants. I thought then about the cleaning products themselves, and their purpose. C*leaning*. *Whitening.* Like the intention is to wash your skin colour away. The same language wouldn't seem out of place on a bottle of Cillit Bang. *Clean yourself to whiteness. Scrub away your*

Snap of typical beauty products on the shelves of Filipino pharmacies

identity. This thought stayed with me as I considered the disintegration and fade motif in my work – there was a definite parallel here which was becoming clear. The rough and ready flipbook became the first piece of work that I titled more suggestively (*Fade to White)*, bringing a subversive undertone to the work which was previously playful and experimental. This felt important for the project's development, but also for *me*. It was exciting, and felt as if I was finally catching up with myself and what my subconscious really wanted to be exploring since the beginning.

In January 2019, I attended an open crit hosted by Q Art at Mall Galleries in London.

Q Art are an events and publication organisation who aim to break barriers to art education and the contemporary art world (Rowles, 2013). They host open crits in public galleries across different levels of education and experience, and use clever questioning and conversational prompts to promote spaces for development and feedback.

I saw the advertisement for the open crit during a time where I felt my work had been stagnant for a little while, and I was feeling the post-Christmas new-year slump. I thought it would be a unique opportunity to present my work to a group of strangers, who hadn't seen the journey my work had taken and would be seeing both myself and the current work 'cold'.

In hindsight I don't know why I didn't expect this part, but being in London, the only other people in attendance were from… London. Masters students and graduates from the Royal College of Arts, from Central Saint Martins, from Goldsmiths, all the top London institutions, oozing with London Pride and

London Confidence. They asked where I studied, and I replied saying the University of Wolverhampton.

"*Wolverhampton? What's Wolverhampton?*" They'd ask.

I guess we don't quite have the same gravitas.

The chance to discuss my work filled me with anxiety, but I was excited. I didn't have to see any of these people again, and whether good feedback or bad, this would be something to put ripples back into my thoughts and making.

The reason I mention this experience as part of this chapter, is because of the unexpected feedback I received from one man who was in attendance.

You know how I was saying that when I was growing up, the first thing anybody wanted to know about me was where I was from? And feeling the consistent reminder that others were acknowledging me as different?

I guess I'm still adjusting to the fact that as I have grown up, much like the marriage bureau suggested, my features have faded and softened into a less 'Asian look', if we assume for a second that that's a thing. My skin is white. My eyes are average. I've gained weight, grown in size, and no longer resemble the stereotypical submissive dainty girl that became so popularised.

It has all shifted now, to the degree that when it comes up in conversation that my mother's side of the family is Filipino, others are surprised. It's become something that I choose to share, rather than something that I am demanded to explain.

So, when I stood in front of a room full of London artists, academics and students and introduced my project as exploring my dual nationality and my Asian heritage, I was met with some confused faces.

People don't realise I'm Asian anymore. I thought to myself.

Then the man I mentioned raised his hand to make a comment.

Ever since that interaction, I've been trying to remember exactly what the words were that came out of his mouth… Have you ever been so taken aback by something that you remember the feelings and maybe how you responded, but the word for word memory of the thing is difficult to place exactly? That's how I felt anyway. '*HIIIIYAA'.* I remembered the boy on the playground. And the similar feeling of being so caught off guard I'm unsure how to react immediately.

Essentially, the comment the white gallery man had made, lead to me having to explain to him what I used to look like for the things I talk about to be regarded as significant.

There were so many things to consider about this, and while I was on the spot in front of an audience, that I felt flustered and frankly confused at what he was asking me. I found myself kind of suggesting to him that, you know, there are certain typical facial features that are associated with people from South East Asian countries. That there are stereotypes.

But why was I explaining this to him? Why was it necessary? Why was it important that I had to fit a certain 'look' in order to truly experience the things that I have done, and for those things to be noteworthy?

Then there's the consideration of the fact that he was implying that for a person to be from a certain country, it was important that they fit a physical mould. Like without fitting certain visual requirements, I wasn't qualified to talk about the things I wanted to.

> "*None of them realize that a playful system of assessing racial identity from physical features shares a family resemblance with much more sinister measurements. Phrenologists of only a century ago had elaborate charts to diagnose character by feeling bumps on the head. The Nazis had pictorial tables that relied on facial appearance to sort out European stocks. A famous magazine article of the World War II era informed Americans 'how to tell our friends [the Chinese] from the Japs'. Among the hints were some about face and body; others about dress and behaviour: 'some aristocratic Japanese have thin, aquiline noses, narrow faces and, except for their eyes, look like Caucasians', 'most Chinese avoid horn-rimmed spectacles', and the Japanese are 'positive, dogmatic, arrogant', while the Chinese are more 'placid, friendly, open'.*" (Wu, 2002, p.83)

I found the whole interaction with this man so fascinating, in terms of how people may now perceive me and my relationship to my nationality. I'd started this project by acknowledging how much I would have to answer the question of where I was from while I was growing up. Now, being grown up, I'm instead having to insist my heritage to strangers in bizarre contexts. It's a strange identity crisis to have followed me into adulthood.

8 **|** *Delicious*

"we set aside our judgements and our longing for perfection and focus, instead, on the beauty of things as they are, at this very moment" (Lawrence, 2004, p.10)

Before I began speaking at the crit, those in the audience were invited up to take a closer look at the materials I'd laid out on a table. On a projector, I was displaying images of the *Autosave* installation, my *Storage* zine, and *Recording* print, however I had also brought along examples of the materials I was working with, to provide context to the works.

After the conversation with the man from the previous chapter, another man raised his hand and introduced himself. He was an academic from one of the London Universities (I forget which one, and I forget his name, which is a shame because I'd really like to thank him). His question was about the paper prints I had out on the table. He wanted to know the story behind those, and their relevance to the works I had projected.

On the table included some of my collages (pre-riso printing), and some of the images from the beginning of the project which were printed on my A4 office printer paper; it was these he was referring to. These prints were the ones which

had made it this far with me, but that so far hadn't been completely destroyed. I may have used sections of them, maybe sliced off an edge to use for a texture elsewhere. I'd definitely carried them with me for a long time. I'd shoved them into my rucksack, taken them along with me as I went about my day, taken them out again at intervals to think about them, consider them in different compositions, fold them up, unfold them, and replace them back in my bag. This process repeated itself for some months, with the paper eventually resembling something more like a cotton rag than a printer sheet. And they had travelled with me to London that day too, so I included it on the table of artefacts.

When I explained this to him, he then asked if I would consider showing those prints in themselves. He went on to comment that his initial curiosity about them was because when he approached the table and saw them, he picked them up and thought,

"*This is really shitty paper… Why has she used this?*"

His comment made me laugh, and the honesty really stuck with me. Then he went on to say that there was something "*delicious*" about the journey I had taken with them, and that hearing me explain that these papers had been touched and hesitated over, again and again for so long, gave him "*frisson*".

I totally agreed with him. I'd become attached to these 'discarded' pieces of paper after spending so long with them. And while they were hastily printed with no thought spared for paper quality etc., the time they had spent with me had added to their value in other ways.

My mum and me, with Winky

This made me think about Winky. Winky was my toy elephant who wore a suit and a bowtie. He was *the* toy. The one that a child decides very early on that they cannot possibly go anywhere without. The one which has a developed backstory, several storylines and a parent that does the voices.

Winky was made of velvet, and as he went most places with me, held under my arm as if he were another of my limbs, over the years the material would wear away and he'd suffer holes and ladders like a pair of tights might. My mum was always very skilled in emergency surgery, and saw to the majority of Winky's ailments, but when we were in the Philippines, the biggest treat would be for Winky to get his surgery done by the Master Surgeon. My Nanang (Tagalog for Grandma) would stitch him back together with a touch so delicate and respectful that what would previously be a gaping hole leaking stuffing (toy-blood) everywhere, would be transformed to a mark as small as a slight crease in the material once she'd worked her magic.

Winky on the washing line, following a successful surgery and clean up from Nanang

The folds in my raggedy paper prints became something I was really absorbed by. Almost like physical doodles, traces of my thinking and hesitation, and a metaphor for the time I'd spent with them, thinking about them.

The folds were mindless too. Some likely to be something I'd done out of practicality, to fit the paper into a pocket and take it with me somewhere. Others made whilst fiddling, playing, creating those doodle lines.

I continued to carry these prints around with me, my acknowledgement of the time they'd spent with me feeding a fondness I was growing for them.

9 | *B l e a c h i n g*

"The light comes from above in a literal sense, but its superior position also carries geographical and ontological connotations, both ethnically suggestive"

(Dyer, 1997, p.117)

In May 2019, I took the prints with me in my hand luggage on a trip to Xi'an, China with my partner.

In the drug stores there, I was met with plenty more skin whitening products for women.

What I didn't expect to find though, was that in the aisles which would display products such as fake nails and eyelashes as we'd find in England, another very popular product in China would be double eyelid glue and stickers. These are products created to give women the appearance of an extra fold in their eyelid, to make eyes appear more Western and hide the natural monolid, which is a common feature for Chinese women. I noticed that even the illustrations on the packets of these products would show women with light skin, and often with light hair and light eyes. All features not typical of South-East Asia.

Snaps of typical beauty products on the shelves of Chinese pharmacies

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★使用后更易形成自然眼线。
●左右双眼皮不对称者；
●原本单双眼皮混合者；
●眼皮脂肪较少者。

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As I sat in the hotel room we'd been put up in for the trip, I looked out of the 26-storey window out onto the landscape, and felt the sun beat down onto me as if its heat was magnified. Being up this high meant there were no obstructions between us and the sun, and the air conditioning was struggling to fight it.

I took out my raggedy handbag prints again, unfolded them, laid them out on the windowsill and watched them bake in the sunlight. This gave me the idea that there would be types of ink that would tend to react to strong sunlight like this and, remembering how my purple wallpaper in my childhood bedroom slowly faded to a dusty blue around the windowsill, I wondered if a sun-bleached print could result in some similar fading, mimicking the effect of the *Fade to White* series.

Upon returning home, I scanned my raggedy prints into a computer so that I could re-print a digital copy on the thermal lithographic printer. This printer can print onto thermal paper, which is an inkless, heat activated method of printing. Essentially a larger version of receipt paper.

Like for the key lines previously, this is a printing method which only recognises black and white, no grey (or brown, or yellow) areas. So, once my raggedy images were scanned in, I was able to translate them into a black & white threshold.

The printer translated my images into it's pure black and white form, and this meant that the lines and textures created from the creases and folds in the image were picked up and highlighted beautifully.

My raggedy prints, reduced to black and white digitally

Resisting the urge to stick googly eyes on the thermal printer as it develops my images

I became lost in these images for a long time, completely enamoured. To see my small raggedy images scaled up to a size which had each print at about 3 feet wide, meant I was able to notice and appreciate many more details than I'd been able to previously. And all the subtleties in colour and shade reduced to black or white meant that my physical doodles were highlighted as an incredible feature of the image in a much more considered, purposeful way.

Have you ever left an old receipt on the back seat of a car on a hot day and come back to it later, to find it faded with a yellow/brown tinge to the paper? My car's a dumping ground, so for me that's a familiar sight during the summer. I started to plan how I may be able to encourage this process intentionally with my thermal prints.

Wondering how I would be able to replicate the sunny windowsill we had in China while back in England, I turned to a traditional method of climate control: the greenhouse.

Unfortunately, I don't have my own greenhouse at home, so I began to search for greenhouses I could appropriate in the nearby area. The first and most convenient space was right at home in the Wolverhampton School of Art. The 7th floor studio spaces where first year students live during term time is affectionately named The Greenhouse. With large windows and skylights, this side of the top floor was originally built as a greenhouse when the building first opened in 1969. It's famously known now for being a freezing but bright working studio for most of the year, ending term with a few scorching summer days.

At this point in the year, the first year students had finished their final semester, and the degree show was finished, meaning there was room for me in the greenhouse studios to lay claim to a space and pray that the sun would come out at least a handful of times over the summer for the effect I was hoping for to come to life.

Thermal paper has a very delicate, fragile texture. This is usually quite infuriating, as it's incredibly difficult to keep anything on that paper type 'clean' and crease free. However, as I'd been embracing those marks up until now anyway, I thought I may as well continue in this way.

I printed off the same four images, three times. Three sets for three different locations, treated in different ways.

This first set, housed in the School of Art, moving from left to right in the following image, the treatments were as follows:

1. Crumpled carelessly into a ball, and then straightened out again for hanging
2. Folded carefully into a rectangular shape as if storing it in a bag, mimicking the grid-like fold marks from the original image
3. Allowed to crease naturally and without consideration as the paper was moved around and hung
4. Folds formed to mirror the lines in the image, adding to the lines

This exercise made me realise very quickly that there was a large difference between crumpling a piece of paper up and folding a piece of paper up. There's value added in the process of folding. To fold is usually to keep safe, to store. To crumple is usually to disregard.

Saying this, I did like how in hindsight, the crumpled sheet of paper also mimicked the texture of the trees in the original image.

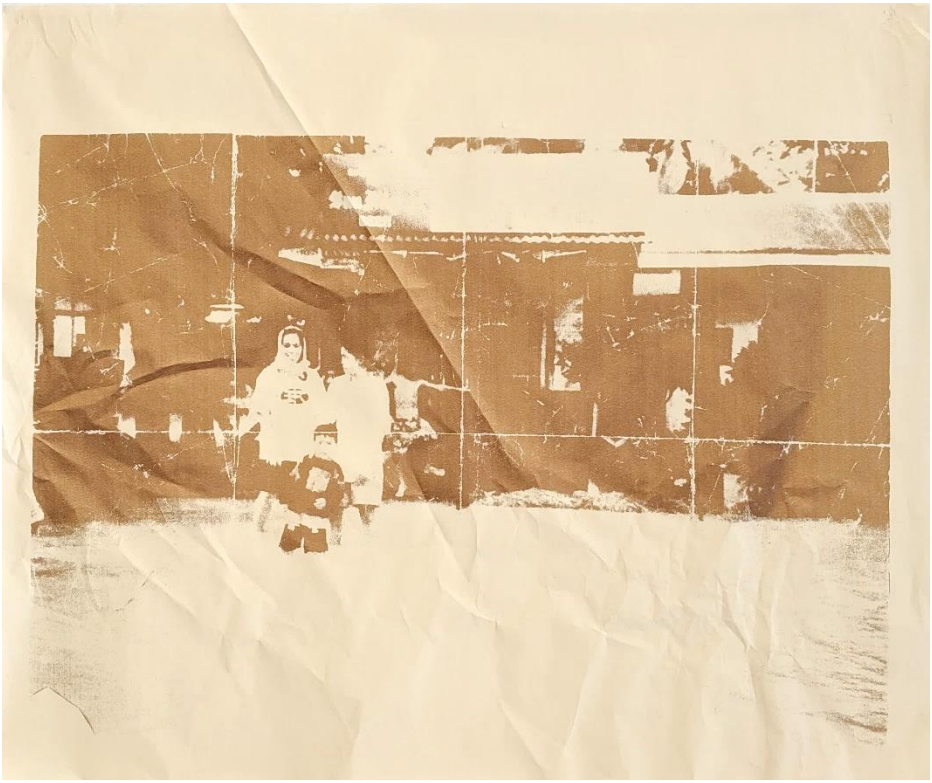
My thermal paper prints in the Wolverhampton School of Art 7th floor greenhouse

In the weeks that these prints hung, I continued to monitor their changes, and watched them slowly transform from an intense black on white paper, to a soft tobacco brown, on hazy orange paper.

An interesting side effect of the creases and folds that I'd put into the prints before hanging them in the sun, was that these ended up encouraging shadows in the faded print that wouldn't otherwise have been there. And in fact, after weeks of hanging up vertically in a warm environment, much of the severe creases had fallen out of the paper, however the shadow that they'd cast over the print has left a trace of them being there, and the illusion that they still are.

Thermal prints during their transition at the School of Art Greenhouse

Thermal prints after a few months of hanging in the School of Art Greenhouse



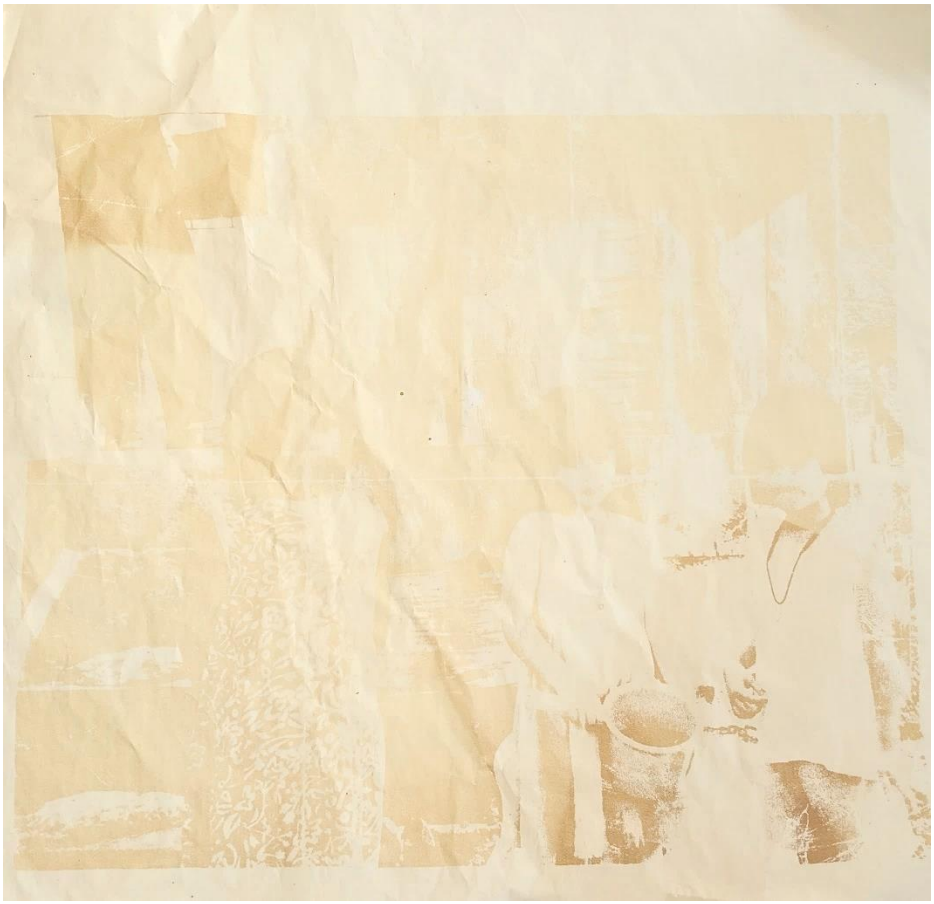
My second set of prints were housed with my generous friend Holly's even more generous parents, in their greenhouse at home.

In return for some home baked lemon cake and my undying gratitude, they offered me the use of their greenhouse during our warmest months of the year, and so would have been met with this impromptu art exhibition in their garden whenever heading out to enjoy the sun. I am so very grateful.

During the time that my prints were hung in this greenhouse, the UK experienced a couple of different heatwaves a few weeks apart. The way our summers tend to work now is that we're mild for most of the year with sudden and intense spikes of unbearably hot weather which force the country into shutdown. My prints got to cook throughout some of these times, and so when I collected them a couple of months later, the result was that *most* of the image, aside from where some shadows were continually cast, was faded away, in the most satisfying way.

My thermal prints in my friend's parent's Greenhouse

My thermal prints in transition at my friend's parent's Greenhouse



The third set of prints were carried over to Winterbourne House and Garden's in Birmingham, where the head gardener, Daniel Cartwright, was so generous in lending me the use of one of his working greenhouses for 6 weeks to support this project.

Of all the prints, these are the 'cleanest' of the lot. While still gaining a subtle rumple in the paper (inevitable with such a thin, fragile material), these were hung cleanly with emphasis on keeping them straight and tidy.

This meant that once all the prints were finished transforming, I would have collections of prints with varying qualities to them, to give the work curatorial freedom when it came to decision making and display.

I realised after this greenhouse series, that I am most satisfied with my work when I have very little control over what happens to it. There's a thrill from handing over an element of decision making and visual responsibility to nature or machine.

The crunchy, worn, sun-bleached prints that I was able to collect from all three greenhouses formed a series of work that while simple in execution, managed to mirror the complex themes I'd been thinking about.

Colour, fade, identity, deterioration, time.

10 | *The Playground*

The final work is to be displayed as part of the MA show at the prestigious New Art Gallery Walsall, and I have spent a lot of time considering how best to display these prints.

With my works being on a wrinkled paper, I was keen to balance the need to add value, consideration and significance to them, whilst still retaining the very lo-fi nature of my practice and process.

The instinctive plan was to pin or clip the prints to a wall, delicately and simply, allowing the graphic nature of the work to do most of the talking. I felt satisfied with this plan for a while, however the more I thought about it, the more I felt slightly underwhelmed.

On reflection, I think the reason I felt underwhelmed was because displaying it pinned on a clean gallery wall like that gives it finality. It concludes the whole project and thought process. But this project is much bigger than my Masters degree – it is an introspective consideration of my identity and my relationship to my heritage. That's not something that ends conveniently with a project

deadline, or something that ever ends at all. Perhaps something which would suit the work better, would be a display which alludes to a deferral of that ‘end’, and a continuation of the process.

In the Philippines, particularly in the more rural areas like where my family are from, families don’t buy a house generally, instead they buy a piece of land. Living in extended families, each family group then builds their own house in an established area of that land, surrounding a communal outdoor kitchen area, and an area which I used to call The Playground.

The Playground is a large flat area of concrete, and its functional purpose is a rice dryer. My family are a farming family, and when they harvest their rice, it is laid out flat on the concrete dryer to bathe in the sun – not dissimilar to how I’ve been treating my prints. I used to call it The Playground, since that was the closest thing I could associate it with. England doesn’t have rice dryers, but my school had a large concrete playground.

I wondered if the way I displayed my prints could mirror The Playground. It speaks of my childhood, the cultural differences, and of drying (and fading) in the sunlight.

I started to picture my prints on the horizontal plane, rather than up on a wall, and immediately it felt right. For the majority of the project, I had been working on a horizontal plane, and it seemed truthful to reflect that in the display. There is something immediately more bookish about looking down at a horizontal image; it becomes something you can read and figuratively step into.

In order to give the paper prints the value that I was concerned about, I thought about introducing a very shallow platform to place them onto. About 5 inches

in height, and only just wider than the width of the prints themselves, the shallow plinths would create a sculptural element for the prints to become part of, giving the paper substantiality.

The plinths, I then thought, didn't have to remain the standard white. With my prints already monotone, the plinth would be an opportunity to introduce colour and emphasise the metaphor that I'd been considering throughout the project. A plinth painted a dusty yellow, like the colour of this page, became what I settled on.

Below is an image that my very patient and technologically talented partner rendered for me, when I started to describe what I imagined the prints on the plinths to look like.

*A 3D rendering of what **Chinese Burn** may look like*

Then came the consideration for deferring the end and displaying the process. After talking these thoughts through with the lovely curatorial team at the gallery, we found a perfect window that my work would be able to be positioned near to, with the intention being that the light will continue to hit the prints as they lay on their mini playgrounds/rice dryers. It is currently the plan that it will be placed there, for the process, the reflection and the thinking to continue.

I don't think I will ever come to an 'answer' with this whole process, and I'm not even sure what the question has been exactly, however the conversations that I've had with people over the last two years while I've been working on this project have helped me to recognise that my thoughts are not unusual. Through this project I have been able to speak with many others who have felt similar tensions within their identities, and it's been an incredibly freeing subject to speak openly about. The experience has given me a confidence and a language to talk about what I was uncomfortable even acknowledging previously, and this is a strength that I can take with me from here.

I still don't know how to answer people when they ask where I'm from. More often than not these days, others are genuinely asking where I live within the local area, and I have been caught out more than a few times when I launch into a discussion about my family geography, when the answer could have been as easy as saying "Stafford". It still generates some interesting conversation though!

The end of my Masters by Research will be marked by this exhibition at the New Art Gallery Walsall between 2nd October – 3rd November 2019. My work, titled *Chinese Burn,* is what I plan to show there.

This book will be submitted before the exhibition is to take place, however when the time comes, I will document the final works on my website:

www.sarah-byrne.com

I will also be documenting the progress on my Instagram page (where you'll also find personal stories, humour and animals (mostly my pet rats):

@sarahqueenofrat

Throughout October and November, I am also pleased to share that I will be displaying work as part of the New Art West Midlands x Coventry Biennial for Contemporary Art. Selected by the International Curator's Forum (the curatorial group behind the highly acclaimed and influential Diaspora Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017), I am being given the opportunity to display in the show titled *The Twin,* which reflects upon a wide range of social issues.

More information can be found at:

www.coventrybiennial.com

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