Mending What’s Invisible

Chahee Yoon
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MENDING WHAT’S INVISIBLE

A Thesis Presented

By

Chahee Yoon

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2021

Department of Art
MENDING WHAT’S INVISIBLE

A Thesis Presented

By

Chaehee Yoon

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ABSTRACT

MENDING WHAT’S INVISIBLE

MAY 2021

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A written thesis to accompany the M.F.A. Exhibition Mending What’s Invisible, in which the artist’s personal experiences and memories explore the cultural identities and femininity in Korea and the US. These identities are explored by using traditional Korean motifs, embroidery patterns, and the visual images of the artist's childhood photographs in the projects of “Reconnecting of Nostalgia” and “Mutating”. Also the visual clips of the artist's hometown is demonstrated in the video project “Things I hated” that discusses criticalities of Korean cultures and a sense of nostalgia for childhood in Korea. The project comes out of a personal need to connect the artists' different identities but also wants to create an awareness of the conflict between different cultural understandings of Korea and the US.
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INTRODUCTION

When I was living in Korea, I thought that the US had more opportunities than Korea. I thought that the US had more possibilities than Korea. I thought that the US had more freedom than Korea. I thought that I would never want to come back to Korea once I lived in the US. However, this perception of the United States has gradually changed.

The United States was a place where I wanted to settle in for the future because I used to hate some parts of Korean culture. For example, all students aged fourteen through nineteen in Korea are obliged to go to school in uniform. I was used to going to school in uniform, and studied until midnight at school. My high school had regulations that students should cut their hair no longer than the clavicle. I have always been educated to keep things organized, but the place where I actually lived was filled with visually complex and unorganized things. The seafood that most Koreans enjoy to eat was something I wanted to erase from my memory. I experienced many of these rules and customs as oppressive, and started to think about leaving for overseas. As time went on, I fell in love with American culture and was ready to make this culture my own. After I moved to the United States however, I slowly realized that my position in this culture was equally complicated. In the United States I was given more defined names than I expected: Asian, Woman, Foreigner, International Student, Minority and Invisible Being. My awareness of this new categorization and in particular my experiences of invisibility sparked my interest to explore the theme of identity and memory in my artistic practice.

For the last seven years, I have investigated my complicated position of standing in between the culture that raised me and the culture that I have adopted as my new home. In my artistic practice, I explore my identity as Asian woman who has a desire to assimilate to American culture and contemplate an idealized image of the United States while simultaneously
holding on to feelings of nostalgia for Korea. My thesis reflects on this search of my cultural identity as Asian woman as I negotiate different notions of femininity in both cultures. My work explores my coming to terms with the varying degrees to which I have attempted to assimilate myself to the stereotypes assigned to Asian women in American culture.
IDENTITY AND MEMORIES

The term identity (ego), redefined by Sigmant Freud in 1923, occupies an important place in the development of history in psychoanalytic theory. Identity is self and me, and it means ‘I see myself’ and ‘I am thinking of myself.’ and is the personality component made up of unconscious psychic energy (Kendra). Based on Freud’s concept on identity, I explore two parts of identity in this paper: unconscious identity formed in Korea that are my childhood memories, and conscious identity formed in the U.S that redefined my cultural identity anew.

In the fall of 2014, I came to the US and spent my mid twenties in Duluth, Minnesota for my undergraduate degree. In 2018, I moved to Amherst, Massachusetts to attend graduate school. At the beginning of my time in the US, I consciously avoided meeting Koreans because I wanted to develop my English skill and be exposed to American culture. But after one or two years of living in the US, I started to miss my language, my food, and the culture of my childhood. The people I met in Minnesota were very nice. However, there were many situations that made me feel uncomfortable. The situations were subtle more than direct, and at first I didn't identify them as racism. I thought that people are looking at me differently because I looked different, because my pronunciation wasn't correct, because my grammar mistakes made them laugh in a good way, or because I ate different foods from them. The first time I realized that my experiences of feeling uncomfortable were rooted in racism was during my sophomore year. I took a class called Intercommunication. Due to the nature of the subject, there were many class activities that involved group conversations. I still can't forget the Caucasian girl who was sitting next to me. During one class activity, each student took turns sharing their opinions on the subject, and I was the last person who had a chance to speak. I was a passionate student and wanted to speak about various solutions and alternatives in discussion. When I had my turn, as I
was learning English, I looked at the dictionary for words and slowly spoke out sentences one by one. After our class was over, I was about to leave the classroom, when I saw that the student who sat next to me was pretending to be me, directly mimicking my pronunciation. I couldn't say anything to her. I just wanted to get out of the classroom quickly. Since then, any time one of my classes is gathered in a group to have a conversation, my heart is pounding and I have a hard time speaking with people in English. It became a trauma. My personality, which has always enjoyed discussions, became completely passive. This story is just a fraction of the racism I experienced in the US, but it has become something that still affects my personality to this day.

During my time in the US, I realized that the only thing that brings me comfort is sharing my experiences with people who had the same. I met many international students through the university community both in Massachusetts and Minnesota. Spending more time with Koreans in the U.S helped my understanding of this new culture. I recognize how my identity fits into new labels: Asian, Woman, Foreigner, International Student, Minority and Invisible being. Freud’s definition of identity is formed not only through how we see ourselves, but also through how others see us. Therefore, when new labels were applied to me, they automatically became part of my identity, whether I agree with them or not. I am aware of the quote ‘I see myself’, which I interpret as I see the reality of racism. All of these experiences have shaped my understanding of US culture and how racism plays out in United States politics.
INVISIBILITY VS HYPER-VISIBILITY

“Invisibility” denies the existence of racial concerns by consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or non-deliberately downplaying, ignoring, or oversimplifying them. It manifests itself as color blindness, claims of reverse discrimination, the belief in a model minority, and exaggerated/negative/purposeful racial displays by those of the mainstream (Wei).

To understand the larger patterns of migration experiences, displacement and identity across cultures, it is important to focus on hidden problems such as the invisibility and hypervisibility of Asians, that are deeply rooted in America’s society under these structures. Asians become invisible figures, marginalized from mainstream structures (Chun). As an Asian woman, I have been rendered racially invisible, at the same time I have been rendered racially hypervisible. While I am trying to consciously assimilate into dominant culture in order not to become invisible myself, I am also becoming hypervisible because my race is different from the mainstream. As I find myself navigating between two cultures, I am continuously changing roles depending on the situation, sometimes being visible and then becoming invisible when it's needed. Regardless of which mode I am performing, my agency for self-determination is taken away and I am always measuring myself against how others perceive me. I have witnessed many friends of Asian descent and international students around the university as they choose to socialize only with people who are from their own countries rather than assimilate into American culture. I also know many fellow Asians, who are aware of racism, choose to situate themselves in between two cultures. In this regard, my position in American culture has always been measured against the perspective of the dominant culture, and continuously rubs against how the dominant culture perceives Asian identity.
In the “Projects” series (1997-2001), Korean artist Nikki S. Lee explores the subject of identity through photography. For the series, she studies the dress code, habits and cultural iconography of different social and ethnic groups and then assimilates into them. She transformed herself to be a Drag Queen, Hispanic, Lesbian, or Dancer, etc. It is interesting to me that in preparation for her projects, Lee only spent about one month in the culture, because she felt like she was becoming that person and her real life experiences became too ambiguous (Nikki). To be specific, while Lee was performing the self-transformation of her identities, she still came home at night and watched a K-drama. She acted out or performed assimilation, without really wanting to change her identity. Consciously or unconsciously, watching K-drama allowed her to transform back into her own identity. In my understanding, Lee was not actually trying to assimilate into the new culture because her identity had already been formed by her Korean roots. Instead she proved to herself that she can alter her cultural appearance without changing the unconscious identity she formed in childhood. I don’t think Lee’s work dissolved the boundary between cultures but she showed us that cultural differences are often only visual clues or behavior that can easily be overcome through different dress codes and make-up. Her process of cultural assimilation gave her agency and allowed her to dictate in what situation she would be considered an insider or outsider. However, the more she assimilated into any of the particular cultures she noticed that her own identity as a Korean woman became obscured. I can relate to Lee’s work because as an Asian woman in the US I feel like I have to perform the role of the model minority on a daily basis, except it is not always for the camera. In this performance, I found similar passive action that Lee and I make for an assimilation.

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1 Lee spent around 3 to 4 months on her project, but she spent 2-3 months preparing for her project, mostly losing weight, gaining weight, purchasing clothes etc.
Furthermore, I want to focus on my collaborative work with Xuan Pham called Hy-Bi to discuss the notion of invisibility and visibility of Asian women. We started working together because we both wanted to speak about our shared experience of invisibility and visibility in our community. Xuan Pham, who is of Vietnamese descent and I were the only Asian female graduate students in the Department of Art at the University of Massachusetts Amherst at the time. The “hy” refers to hybrid and the “bi” refers to binary. The name is also a gesture of greeting one another. Hy-Bi came out of a need for representation to be seen as separate individuals and a need for action based practice. One of the main projects that Hy-Bi performed was the project called *Invisible made Visible*. The project is an action based practice that contains a handmade rug in the latch hooking, component of an art performance, and an interaction with the community. The rug measures 120” x 120” x 1” inches and depicts a whole body portrait of myself and Xuan Pham all done in the medium of yarn on a one to one ratio. During the process, we facilitated workshops where we invite people to participate in latch hooking. At this stage, the rugs function as a process of making in the community action. Even though the work is labor intensive, the latch hooking regards as a craft and people can easily learn the process of it. Wide range of ages of people participated in the rug making project. But the interesting part about the rug making is that the audience only does latch hooking the background, not the artist’s bodies of myself and Xuan Pham. Hy-Bi explains that our body carries our personal experiences which is mentally and physically vulnerable. Our intention was that the body in the latch hooking process is a way to heal and understand our lived body and grief while working and communicating with the participants. When the rugs display in public, the rugs physically create the boundaries but transcend its functions. The artist lay in the rugs in silence, eyes closed as the soft sounds of their conversation done in a podcast style emit from the rug. In order to hear our conversation, the
viewer had to come close, bend down near the rugs. By doing this act, both the viewer and the artists break the normality or familiarity of how one typically interacts with the rug. The rugs are being used as a vehicle to address the complexities of identity politics, cultural identities, stereotypical notion of race by examining the themes of invisibility, visibility, and hyper-visibility. This project criticizes the notion of invisibility of Asian race both in direct and indirect ways in which ties back to the idea of physical(bodily) experiences.
Figure 1. Working progress of *Invisible made Visible* by Hy-Bi. Photography by Hy-Bi, 2019
Aside from our art practice we also wrote an essay in which we focus on the issues of invisibility and visibility of Asian and Asian American women. One of our main references for the essay is *Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American woman, This Bridge Called My Back* by Misuye Ymada. In *Invisibility*, Ymada emphasizes the importance of Asian and Asian American women's invisibility within a visible minority while critiquing the stereotypical image of the Asian woman:

> I have been an Asian American woman working among non-Asians in an educational institution where most of the decision-makers were men...Even when what I considered a veiled racist remark that was made in a casual social setting, I would "let it go" because it was pointless to argue with people who didn't even know her remark was racist. (Ymada 55).

The work of Hy-Bi and my own artistic practice aims to turn the passive resistance of “letting it go” that Ymada describes into an active one through the uses of materials and artistic actions. In my art, passive resistance and active resistance coexist. Active resistance is a physical action that I perform mending the pieces with repetitive uses of materials. And passive resistance is its own way of “letting it go" that indicates no one knows that my physical action is a way of expressing the notion of Asian stereotypes and invisibility. In the process of making this work, many other narratives unfold, such as my memories and experiences in the US and my childhood memories and subsequent nostalgia for Korea.
CULTURAL ASPECTS OF FEMININITY

Growing up in Korea, I never questioned my femininity because it was an important attribute that women aspire to in Korean culture. The femininity I refer to here is what women should do, what women should wear and how they should look. In my community, women were encouraged to visually emphasize their feminine aspects. My mom used to teach me things like eating slowly, talking quietly, and not asking too many questions. I also went to academic school to learn the piano, ballet, and violin. In my environment, these traits were considered natural attributes for all women in Korea. Although I have started to question many aspects of my upbringing, I am still deeply influenced by it. My favorite color is still pink, I like to embroider, I like to wear earrings that are decorated with flowers, and I love to put on pink lipstick. In Korean modern culture, beauty is emphasized, and plastic surgery is no longer seen as a luxurious or excessive pursuit, but an essential part of women’s lives.

When I moved to the US in 2014 I was introduced to feminism, which seemed radical to me then, considering my experiences of what femininity meant growing up in Korea. I felt empowered by some of the feminist ideas, such as speaking up in public, not putting on make-up or not focusing on household chores, but other ideas such as challenging the patriarchy proved more difficult for me to adapt. Though I was interested in the idea, I was not comfortable to participate fully. At this point, how I felt about myself as a woman is clearly divided between the expectations on my role as a girl in Korea and those of a college student in the US, always balancing on a tightrope between two cultures.
Figure 2. *I don’t remember*, Photograph by the artist mother, 1994
In my work, I am always trying to bridge the gap between the two cultures, but the conflict remains. I love US culture but I find the racism I experienced in the US unbearable. My interest in feminist ideas in the US conflicts with my traditional Korean upbringing. I have a sense of nostalgia for my childhood in Korea while also feeling critical of Korean traditions, specifically patriarchy.
BOJAGI AND MINHWA

For my thesis exhibition, I am presenting the issues discussed above in three separate art works that go together but can also work individually. The first work “Reconnecting of nostalgia” is a recreation of the Bojagi form. I use toner transfers of images of me as a young girl on hanji paper, which I then paint with traditional Korean motifs and images. The transfers are photographs of myself as a young girl and I layered them onto the different sizes of Hanji paper and stitched them together. The work measures 98” x 45” inches and the images of myself are a collection of my youth photographs mostly which I have no memories with. The photo images are visually blurred on Hanji but it still can be seen through the materials. The farther back to view the pieces, the whole Bojagi image can read. The images become a part of the Bojagi form, and the traditional Korean motifs become visible. “Reconnecting of Nostalgia” is not a piece made up of a whole image of traditional Korean motifs, but the pieces are painted by individual motifs, and sometimes individual fragmented images are connected together.

Bojagi is a traditional wrapping cloth used in Korea to cover, store or carry everything from precious ceremonial objects to everyday clothes and common household belongings. Bojagi is usually a square cloth of various sizes made out of silk, cotton, and ramie. It was originally made by anonymous women throughout the Choson dynasty (1392~1910) in Korea where the ideology of Confucianism was dominant (Kyong). During that period, women had no art education but they created Bojagi with artistic beauty and unique styles. They applied various techniques such as embroidery, painting, dyeing, and quilting and decorated the cloth with different motifs, patterns and colors. To make the cloth, the women made use of small pieces of leftover cloth, sewing them together to create this utilitarian object. The elaborate embroidery on

2 Wrapping cloths and the life of women in the late period of Joseon dynasty on patchwork were common attributes in Korea.
the Bojagi shows the amount of labor that went into its construction, and it functions in my work as a political metaphor of a hidden history. Bojagi has accumulated memories, experiences, heritage and cultures in Korean history. The Bojagi, similar to that of our life, which is ecologically circulating, creates an invisible line that connects endless relationships through the act of giving and receiving. As people come and go, objects also come and go. I am not interested in making a traditional Bojagi, but I am borrowing the idea of transforming basic leftover materials into a new whole. I use the Bojagi as a symbolic container to wrap my memories and experiences, but my fractured identity is also worked into the object itself through the process of stitching and mending. The process of patching the individual pieces together requires stitching and quilting, a process that is common to both Korean and American ideas of women’s work which has been adapted by feminist practices in both cultures. American feminist artist Orly Corgan for example, uses hand-made embroidery methods in her work. Her materials work as a conduit to translate and draw attention to the long history of female labor that has gone unnoticed for so long. As Orly was interested in the history of female labor, I have been interested in stories and motifs that are culturally rooted in Korea, and I found the most interesting subjects from Korean traditional paintings and objects. Like K-drama for Nikki. S Lee, researching traditional Korean art has allowed me to reconnect with my Korean identity. The materials in my thesis project also offers a feminist viewpoint that draws connections between cultures and history.

Another traditional Korean art form I use in “Reconnecting of Nostalgia” is Minhwa painting. The term Minhwa literally means painting for the people. Minhwa flourished from the late 19th century to the early 20th century during the Joseon Dynasty. In that period, Minhwa

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3 Corgan’s work deals with the differences between the struggles of contemporary women and earlier generations, and her work indicates the perception of feminine ideas.
were called “sokhwa”, and “sokhwa” refers to a low-class painting that did not reach the level of high class art.⁴ The basis of this is a sense of discrimination that despises low class people. Therefore, one notable concept of Minhwa is anonymity. Most of the Minhwa artists did not reveal their names (Jung). The reason why I use Minhwa in my works is that the anonymity juxtaposes with the concept of invisibility. I use the iconography from Minhwa, from the 19th century, especially the motif of Morando, Yeonhwado and Hwajodo and paint them over the xerox transfers of my childhood photograph. Morandos and Yeonhwados are paintings of peony and lotus. Hwajodo are paintings of birds and flowers. Though Minhwa painting was generally used as decoration, the paintings are also believed to have a magical dimension. Putting up a Minhwa was believed to bring protection, happiness and wealth to a household. Minhwa could also signify a freedom and represent the innermost thoughts and dreams of their owner.⁵

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⁴ In Lee Ufan’s Minwha of the Lee Dynasty, he explains that sokwha is considered a vulgar art in Korean history.
⁵ Minwha illustrates the common people's freedom and their expression.
Figure 3. Process section of *Recreation of Bojagi*, Minhwa flower motif on Hanji by Chaehee Yoon. 2021
Figure 4. Process section of *Recreation of Bojagi*, Minwha birds motif on Hanji by Chaehee Yoon. 2021
Therefore, I place my childhood photographs on Hanji and layering different motifs such as flowers and birds to superimpose various images of memories and experiences. The paintings can be enjoyed individually but they are also stitched together to form a whole that resembles the function of a Bojagi. Like the Bojagi was made by putting individual fabrics together, I also re-connect my paintings to make my scattered memories whole again. Another material I use in Bojagi's work is a red thread. The reason why I use red thread is to emphasize visibility. The visibility that I indicate in this structure implies a variety of meanings; visibility of labor, visibility of identity, visibility of vivid memories and experiences. By painting traditional motifs on my childhood photographs to turn into a new form of beautiful images, I am looking for new immaterial spaces to settle my lost identities. These series of processes are like the passage myself that opens up a new crossroads of new life.
Figure 5. Process photo of *Reconnecting of Nostalgia*, Minwha motifs and photo transferred on Hanji by Chaehee Yoon, 2021
Figure 6. Installation photo of *Reconnecting of Nostalgia*, Minwha motifs and photo transferred on Hanji by Chahee Yoon, 2021
Figure 7. Installation photo of *Reconnecting of Nostalgia*, Minwha motifs and photo transferred on Hanji by Chaehee Yoon, 2021
In addition to the Korean folk painting, embroidery is another important process that I include in my work. Like in “Reconnecting of Nostalgia”, I started again with xerox transferring a photograph of myself as a girl on hanji paper for the series of “mutating.” I then embroider flower motives onto the paper. The embroidery at times surrounds the repetitive portraits of myself and other times covers my face and body completely. The images work together as a whole, but also function as individual pieces.

I use Western Embroidery technique that is called French Embroidery in Korea. This particular embroidery style is a popular hobby for Korean women. Western embroidery is more common and accessible than Korean traditional embroidery because Korean embroidery is considered too difficult and outdated for the aesthetics of the younger generation. This is an important aspect in my work, because the embroidery, though beautiful and delicate, is also invasive, often taking over and perhaps even censoring the underlying image of myself as a child. Perhaps the ubiquity of Western embroidery in Korean culture and the control it has on my image in “Mutating” is a symbol for my experience in the US. Western stereotypes of my Asian identity were forced on me. On the other hand, it is important to me that through mastering Western Embroidery myself, I too gain control, and recognize myself that passive and active resistances are ingrained in the work. The history and cultural significance of the materials I use, therefore become a vehicle for me to critique the realities of Asian and Asian American women both in passive and active ways.

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6 In fact, it was originally Western embroidery, but it seems to be called French embroidery in Korean culture because the dmc embroidery thread factory (one of the biggest embroidery thread companies) is located in France.
Another material that I use in both “Reconnecting of Nostalgia” and “Mutating” is a specific paper made from mulberry bark called Hanji.\(^7\) The paper is transparent and looks fragile but it is very durable and hard to tear. **In addition to lasting a long time, Hanji keeps heat and sound in but allows air to flow through it easily.** For me, the characteristics of Hanji are symbolic of qualities I see in myself. The paper’s fragility captures the ideas about stereotypical aspects of Asian women in US culture, where they are viewed as fragile and invisible. But, just like Hanji we are strong and do not easily tear. I am interested in the ambivalence of Hanji's characteristics. Due to the soft but also strong materials used in the work, the struggles of cultural feminine identities appear to be a delicate aspect of my expression, that I have unconsciously built strength in the process.

\(^7\) Hanji has been used for almost 1500 years, and lasts for more than 1000 years as well.
Figure 8. Mutating, Western embroidery flower on photo transferred Hanji (forsythia) by Chaehee Yoon, 2021
In “Mutating”, there is a visible repetition I create with the images of my childhood photograph. I use this specific photo to visually represent the feminine parts of my identity. My mom used to put me in dresses like the one I am wearing in the photograph I am using for “Mutating” whether I wanted to wear them or not. The white dress signifies my innocence of childhood memories and the red vivid color roses right next to my face juxtaposes the concept of hyper-visibility of Asian women in the US. The appearance in this photo resembles femininity in Korea while also critiquing the stereotypical depiction of Asian females in US culture. The background behind me is the place where I used to live. While the photograph is the same throughout the series, the embroidered flowers keep turning into different shapes and changing their appearance. The flowers I am holding in the photograph are visually connected to the flowers embroidered over the image transfer, and sometimes they seem to be completely separated. I chose to work with the same photograph in this series because I am less interested in depicting a particular moment of my childhood, but rather draw attention to the idea of how identity is formed during childhood. Working on and reworking this identity through the labor intensive embroidery process is my attempt to take control over that identity. Through the visual repetition of the flower in the photograph and the repetition of the stitching in the embroidery, I am visualizing the persistence and variability of my complicated identities.

The embroidery motifs I use in “Mutating” are based on real flowers and each flower has its own symbolic meaning. The language of flowers is symbolic – suggesting a deeper meaning hidden under the surface. Flowers have a wide range of meanings – its stories, histories, and symbols categorized by colors, origins, and cultures. Flowers are also often used as names for women and the images of some flowers are used in art to symbolically for women’s sexual images. For example, Georgia O’Keeffe’s best known paintings of magnified flowers are a
broader reading of the life of a new kind of woman (Olivia). Similarly, I use flowers to talk about a new kind of identity in “Mutating”. I use Blue hydrangea, Calendula, Cotton plant, Japanese Quince, Korean forsythia, Lavender, Pick hydrangea, Roses, Trumpet creeper, and Trollius. The Blue hydrangea has a meaning of frigidity and a sense of apology. The Trollius has a meaning of gratitude, a woman full of dreams. As I mentioned, each flower has its own unique flower language, and I embroider them on my body image by reminding of their names and language as if I sense lost identities and language. The embroidered flowers on my face mirror my struggles of visibility and invisibility discussed above. Visually the flowers can act as a censoring of the image, but the embroidery is also potentially protecting me from the gaze of others. What I try to appeal to in the embroidered print is not only visually compelling but also contains lots of meanings that can be seen as a whole or parts, or even as different subjects than what it is. More specifically, I examine space with a different sense of time through old photographs and suggest an idea of seeing the future. I actively place the flowers on my body as both to remember and erase unconscious memories of mine to reshape my invisible identity that were shaped under the structure of the U.S society. Both active and passive actions weave through a sense of time, space, and memory to seek the lost identity. In a similar vein, artist Hu Xiaoyuan, one of her project A Keepsake I cannot Give Away (2005), uses her own hair to create embroidery images on the white fabric. The images are a depiction of traditional Chinese symbols: mandarin ducks and koi which can be read as personal, but it is her conflicting identities and emotions. By using traditional images as vehicles, Xiaoyuan examines multiple facets of identities to address the issues of identity politics for Asian women.9

8 In Oliva’s article, they indicate that “the flowers excited her with their chambers and contours, their frills and fleshy folds, their potential for abstract form.”
9 A Keepsake I Cannot Give Away (2005) is a mixed-media installation consisting of embroidery on white silk and hair. “The work is grouped into pairs: one piece of embroidery depicts a part of
Embroidery work and the Minwha explore the multiple facets of racial identity through gender, cultural assimilation, and identity. I examine how racialized femininity is embedded in the construction of gender identity of Asian women. I use the stereotypical depiction of Asian females as obedient, soft, and hyper-feminine as a device to critique these stereotypes. By embroidering my face to mutate into hyper feminine flowers, I am on a journey to define who I am. I make complex visual language through the mark making in both of my embroidery and painting pieces.

Through the materials I also critique cultural expectations of stereotypical Asian women’s identity, while I contemplate my desire to assimilate. Embroidered flowers are used as metaphor both to emphasize the desires for assimilation into new culture and the stereotypical aspects of Asian women. In this context, my identity becomes malleable as I fit into these notions. I become too malleable, too soft, too delicate, and I become a chameleon.

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the artist’s body, such as her finger, breast, and genitalia, and the other features flowers and animals” (M+Collections).
Figure 9. *Mutating*, Western embroidery flower on photo transferred Hanji (Pink hydrangea) by Chaehee Yoon, 2021
Figure 10. *Mutating*, Western embroidery flower on photo transferred Hanji (Trumpet creeper) by Chaehee Yoon, 2021
Figure 11. *Mutating*, Western embroidery flower on photo transferred Hanji (Blue hydrangea) by Chaehee Yoon, 2021
NOSTALGIA AND THINGS I HATED

In the Spring of 2019, I took Young Min Moon’s Visual Cultures class. He introduced us to many profound films in the course. We watched many films that resonate with my soul but one film changed my understanding of past memories and how they affect one’s future. *The Pearl Button* is a film by Patricio Guzman that explores culture, history, society, and the universe through the political history of Chile, to look for the past, to find out how one small element can be threaded into a larger pattern of life (Patricio). The Pearl button used as a symbolic object he chooses to be in the film that the small takes us on a large journey through history. Water is used in the film as a concept that lets us travel between earth and space. I think the water is used as a symbolic element, like it is a metaphor as for seeing the past and future. I feel a similar sensitivity about seeing the past through objects.

In my video “Things I Hated”, I am introducing the places/spaces I hated when I was a child. The video is divided into three chapters each of which deals with a different subject matter. The first chapter includes scenes of mailboxes, seafoods, and street views around my mother’s house in Korea. In chapter 2, I am inviting the viewer to walk along a familiar street with me. In this segment I introduce the gradual changes of my perspectives of seeing Korea. In the last chapter, I explain why I hated the things I show in the first chapter, while repeating the familiar clips. I edited the video using a split screen. The two frames allow me to use both text and video images. The texts appear and disappear at times creating a rhythmic flow with the video clips. The texts and images are sometimes combined, then separated, creating a choreography that flows as though memories of mine are flowing with them. The video is suggesting a way of seeing my lost identities from macro to micro and micro to macro perspectives while inviting the
viewer to ask questions about my lost identities. Furthermore, I try to establish a new self that crosses past and present through this journey of revisiting the spaces I used to hate once again.
Figure 12. Detail video still of *Things I hated*, Video by Chaehee Yoon, 2021
Figure 13. Details video still of *Things I hated*, Video by Chaehee Yoon, 2021
Through this visual journey, I recall what memories of my hometown were. Old streets, familiar alleys, randomly torn and demolished wallpaper, and antiques that have been neglected on the streets...things so familiar to me from my childhood. I used to have negative associations with these places, but at some point during my absence, my feelings towards my culture have become a mixture of emotions and nostalgia. When I think about my hometown and my childhood, there are certain words that randomly appear in my head. Noise, seafoods, stink, hardware, broken concrete, crowded buildings, neon signs, unorganized mailboxes, and traditional flea markets. The words are floating around as though they’re becoming parts of my positive memories. As I am seeing these places again only this time through the eye of my camera, I begin to find new meanings for them as like I find a new identity again.
SUMMATION

My work has always been associated with thread. Thread I refer to here is not only the physical form of material, but the tool as a metaphor that connects invisible content and makes it visible. *Mending What’s Invisible* defines the processes of re-connecting memories and experiences and discusses a variety of accumulative lost identities and my cultural nostalgia. Use of childhood photographs and the scenes from my hometown are pathways to cross spaces and time. I am looking forward to focusing on my past because the past is a way of looking for the future to me. In a particularly memorable scene in *Pearl Button*, indigenous tribes living on waterways try to recall their ancient language by attempting to speak the words. I think it's a powerful gesture that they are trying to remember their past through the process of recalling their own language. I try to recall my past which involves my own language and my own culture through the process of mending memories and experiences whether it’s positive or negative, or passive or active. I hope that my work can be a starting point to create my physical body to be seen which talks about the notion of invisible and visible boundaries. In this realm of mending, I ultimately reveal my body, reveal my thoughts, reveal my process, reveal my memories, reveal my experiences, reveal my own identity until I finish mending what’s invisible.

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10 In *Pearl Button*, what Guzman thinks about the past is the way of looking for the future.
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