

COME HOME, HEROINE

by

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COME HOME, HEROINE

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This paper is dedicated to my family who have risked their lives for me and my generation to continue.

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THE BEGINNING

Come Home, Heroine chronicles my journey away from my earthbound home. Along this journey, I have found a mysterious, boundless space, and once I acknowledge this fact, I can overcome familial trauma and other negative cycles. I take the role of the heroine and use the terms heroine and artist when describing myself. The exhibition includes three installations: home, traveling, and fantasy. The three settings also work to construct a chronological narrative for the viewer to witness. I use the framework of a hero's journey and conform it to my personal experience as a child of Cambodian immigrants. In my paper, I walk through the work with the viewer and explain my method of making and the influences that inform this body of work. *Come Home, Heroine* questions how one obtains the power to overcome trauma and break cycles.

HOME

Before entering the gallery, the visitor must take off their shoes. In my home and many other homes of Asian Americans, taking off your shoes not only is comfortable, but maintains cleanliness and is a sign of respect for the household. The visitor will place their shoes outside of the gallery and enter the first installation, "home". The Cambodian mats protect the visitor's feet from the concrete floor as they enter the gallery. The woven straw mats heighten the senses. I hope the warmth of the mats increase the viewer's comfort in the gallery and mimics a familiar space or in someone's home. With these sensations, I am echoing the trope of a relatable hero who shares the same world as the viewers. In most of the cartoons, anime, and manga I experienced in my youth, the hero or heroine lives in the same reality as us but is granted superpowers or can access a world outside of our own. With this, the Cambodian mats are laid out in only a portion of the gallery, acting as if the viewer is in my childhood home. This is where my journey begins.

Visitors first encounter a drawing of two characters. This drawing, entitled *Family* (Figure 1), depicts a mother and daughter as their feet sink into the ground. The characters are a reimagined form of the apsara¹. The apsara are female spirits found in Cambodian art and some of the only female forms I have seen depicted in my culture. My decision to simplify the features of the mother and daughter designates them as apsara figures that are spiritual and do not have arms, legs, or faces. As I reshape the apsara form, I highlight the figures' crown, earlobes, and body to create a new, almost genderless form. Most Buddha forms are gender-ambiguous in contrast to the apsara statues that retain feminine breasts and skirts. This statement defies traditionally depicted female bodies, but still retains femininity in nature. Gender is a social construct. Women and other fem-identifying people have the agency to define their own definitions of femininity. In this work, I create a new form of femininity, one that acknowledges my unique definition of it. My reinterpretation of the apsara form is not a recreation, but the mark of new ownership of my heritage.

¹ A female spirit found in Hindu or Buddhist culture. In Cambodia, the Apsara can be found in the stone carvings of Angkor Wat. These stone carvings inspired the Royal Ballet of Cambodia to create dances to act out myths and other religious stories



Figure 1: *Family*, Graphite on Canvas

This canvas drawing refers to a photo of my mom, grandmother, and uncle as refugees, with numbers floating over their bodies. My mother’s photo was taken in the late 70s after they took refuge in Thailand after fleeing from the Khmer Rouge.² The history of The Khmer Rouge and the effect it had on my parent’s past will be flushed out in the “traveling” section of the paper. I intentionally removed my uncle from my drawing to better highlight the relationship between mother and daughter. As most families hang photos around their homes to fondly remember the past, *Family* sets the tone that you are entering a lived space experiencing the life of my family. The drawing foreshadows the events that happen for the mother and daughter before leaving Cambodia. I will journey on with the viewer to discover the past of my family.

² The Communist Regime that ruled Cambodia from 1975-1979

Texas Tofu (Figure 2) blocks the viewer from getting closer to *Family*. The position of both these works alludes to my disconnection with my family's past while protecting their stories. Units and units are unceremoniously stacked to crowd the drawing. Building blocks act as a force field. Around special holidays, my family place an altar for my ancestors who have passed on. In accordance with this Buddhist tradition, we place their favorite foods on the altar to recognize their passing and ask for blessings for their guidance in the living world. I did not want to mimic the exact arrangement of these altars but chose to haphazardly arrange the tofu boxes to explore further the feeling of protection from someone who has passed on. My arrangement of the tofu boxes activates the spiritual. For example, Buddhist altars seek to interact with ancestors, and my decision to refer to this tradition in *Texas Tofu* also seeks to connect with heritage. To make this work, I created a plaster mold of tofu containers, and then used porcelain slip to create the actual forms. I found the original tofu container while shopping at Central Market and I became interested in the Texas insignia on the back of the container. Growing up, my family cooked tofu as it was a common item found in the Asian supermarkets. The fact that I can find tofu in other places outside of the Asian supermarkets indicates globalization is happening here in the US. I do not always feel at home here in Texas, because I am a child of immigrants. I needed to create *Texas Tofu* to personify myself through this object. Tofu is a product imported from Asia, and now through globalization can be produced locally.



Figure 2: *Texas Tofu*, porcelain slip

Under *Texas Tofu*, I placed a poem. Before creating the exhibition, I wrote this poem to convey the themes of the show. The poem reads as follows:

“Come Home, Heroine.

Home is where you learn how to speak.

What Traditions are...

What my habits are...

Where cycles continue to go...

Home is where you can learn new things.

Expand your world view.

Break this endless cycle.

Break.

Reform.

Become a New.

You have always been home, Heroine.”

The poem helps inform the viewer of what the heroine must do on her journey. I do not consider this poem to be a part of *Texas Tofu*, but the words are linked to a spiritual presence that watches over the heroine.

As viewers traverse past *Texas Tofu*, a potato with a stick in the form of a crescent moon appears on the mats. A wire holds the stick up to complete the waning form; as the potato aged, its roots sprout, which indicates it is old. When potatoes start to sprout, they act like seeds to help grow more potatoes. Another potato appears approximately six feet away from the first potato as the viewers move towards the window. The stick growing upwards out of the potato almost touches the window. *Potato Sticks* (Figure 3 and 4) act as stand-ins for house plants in the context of the space. The work symbolizes the potential of growth. My grandmother’s dedication to her housekeeping inspired this work. She was always gardening and experimenting in the kitchen. Since her passing, I have not figured out why she stabbed potatoes with a stick. As a young girl, I remember finding her stabbing sticks into potatoes and now I think she may have been propagating new ones. In honor of how she raised the family, I want to exaggerate her gesture of stabbing a potato. The theme of growth appears physically as the potatoes sprout, which echoes the housekeeping and care that grows the family.



Figure 3: *Potato Stick, One*, Potato, Stick, Wire



Figure 4: *Potato Stick, Two*, Potato, Stick, Wire

The work *Heirlooms* appears between the two potatoes. *Heirlooms* (Figure 6) is made of a large wooden box embellished with drawings and foil tape. Placed on top of the box are five objects: three ceramic figurines, one ceramic tofu box, and one *Yu-Gi-Oh!*³ card. As a part of my studio practice, I collect objects that I am aesthetically drawn to or that connect to my interests in gaming or anime. I dedicated shelves in my studio to arrange these objects. My favorite *Yu-Gi-Oh!* Card is next to a ceramic apsara to connect my interests and my work. In the context of *Heirlooms*, I am collecting and making an array of objects to convey the journey of the heroine. For example, the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card is *Dark Magician Girl the Dragon Knight* (Figure 5), and I use the imagery of the card as a model for the concept of a strong, powerful heroine. The title, *Heirlooms*, alludes to the way objects are passed down through generations of family. The space resembles a home, where family values set expectations. People follow traditions. I make objects that function as heirlooms for the heroine. The two apsara act as figures that have been passed down to her. The figures are objects of her reimagined culture and carry a new idea of femininity. The third ceramic piece is a mound-like shape with a jutting-out arm with a crescent-like form on top. It is colored in oil pastels and graphite. This work foreshadows *Her Chose Mound* (Figure 13) that will be found in the section “fantasy”.

³ A manga series by Kazuki Takahashi about a boy name Yugi Mutou who solves the Millennium Puzzle and releases an alter ego named Yami who is obsessed with gambling. The plot revolves around Yugi and Yami solving conflict by playing various games. The manga series later spawned into a card game of the same name.



Figure 5: *Dark Magician Girl the Dragon Knight, Yu-Gi-Oh!*



Figure 6: *Heirlooms*, oil pastels, ceramics, porcelain slip, crayon, graphite, stickers, foil tape, wood

Home is a space where I want the viewer to experience a sense of my multigenerational upbringing. As quoted by bell hooks, “Capitalism and patriarchy together, as the structures of domination, have worked overtime to undermine and destroy this larger unit of extended kin. Replacing the family community with a more privatized small autocratic unit helped increase alienation and made abuses of power more possible.”⁴ Breaking cycles is a major theme of *Come Home, Heroine*. Hooks speaks upon the importance of community to foster a family and of defying the traditional nuclear family structure. My family lived in a multi-generational home. I was raised by grandmothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, and teachers. When my family immigrated, we did not fully conform to western customs.

The installation defies the norms of the gallery by asking the viewer to take off their shoes and walk bare foot on Cambodian mats creeping onto the sides of the gallery wall. The objects that reside in the first realm are odd and barely resemble things belonging to a home. My goal for “home” is to create an installation that invades the white cube. The viewer witnesses the disruption of the gallery through the habits and customs of my Cambodian upbringing.

⁴ Bell Hooks, *All About Love*, New York: William Morrow and Company (2000), 130.



Figure 7: Install shot of “home”

TRAVELING

As the viewer and I journey away from home, a portal opens to another world. My feet transition from warm mats to cold concrete. As I travel, I see visions of the past. Not my past, but the past of my parents. Flashbacks typically occur in hero’s stories and give insight on how the heroes accomplish their goal through the memories of their past mentors. The imagery of the drawing the viewer encounters is based on the memories and stories of my families’ trauma of the Khmer Rouge.

Khmer Rouge was a genocidal communist reign led by Pol Pot from 1975-1979 in Cambodia. Pol Pot targeted doctors, artists, musicians, writers, and other academics and professionals to be eliminated. My parents lived through this genocide. Pol Pot sent Khmer people who hid their professional identities and the working class to concentration camps known as the Killing Fields.⁵ People starved. Families were

⁵ Several sites where Khmer people were murdered and buried by the Khmer Rouge from 1975-1979.

separated. The death count reached to over two million people.⁶ Many Americans do not know this history, as America's failures in the Vietnam War overshadowed the genocide of my people.

We will not die on this hill (Figure 8) is a large drawing installed on two large moveable walls. Starting from the furthest right, the viewers see two hills drawn with yellow crayon and circle marks on top. Following that, a continuous line drags downward to a large clay mass. Surrounded by the gray mass, a young male figure huddles. The young boy is my father, and this drawing recreates the memories of his life in a concentration camp. He is unable to move freely or move within the clay mass, but he is still alive. He and his father were relocated to an infamous camp called Tuol Sleng⁷. In Khmer, *Tuol* means hill and *Sleng* means poisonous fruit. The gray clay mass traps the male figure in the same way that the poisonous fruit represent all the trauma experienced; this trauma that carries on after survival. Translating my father's Khmer words to drawings helps process the story of his lived experiences.

The drawing continues in the middle of the picture plane, a purple potato appears floating between the male figure and a girl. A stick stabbed into the potato is the same as the physical potatoes found in "home." The girl is orientated in the middle of the composition beside a taller figure farthest to the left surrounded by a wash of coffee. These two figures are the same mother and daughter pair in *Family*. Two ambiguous floating red forms hover next to the two figures. The drawing depicts the history of genocide that my parents survived, and the red forms become murdered bodies. Each figure in the drawing is surrounded by something (a mass, a color, a material) that represents the traumas they carry. The heroine travels towards a fantasy place where she can find power, but she needs the flashbacks to motivate her journey. In the gallery, the placement of the drawing on moveable walls keeps it aimlessly floating in space, just as memories do in time.

⁶ "Khmer Rouge" History, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/the-khmer-rouge>.

⁷ In 1975, Preah Ponhea Yat High School was converted to Tuol Svay Prey prison. Known as S-21, the prison served as the central hub of a vast prison system throughout the country and was used throughout the period as a secret facility for the detention, interrogation, torture, and extermination of those deemed "political enemies" of the regime.

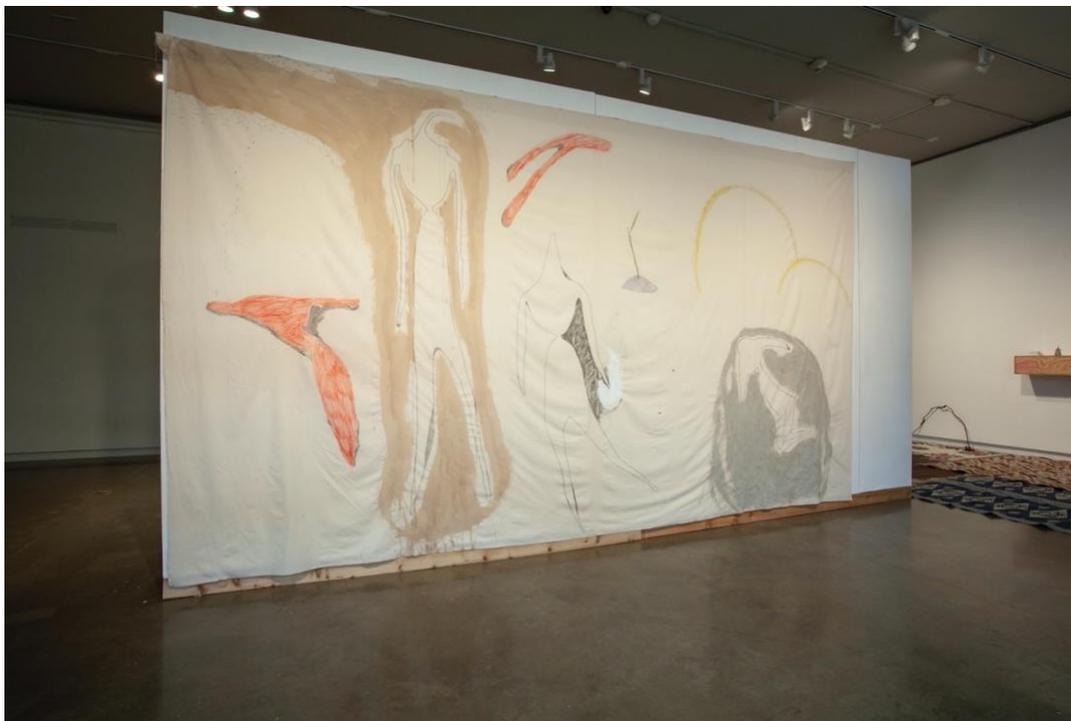


Figure 8: *We will not die on this hill*, graphite, lumber crayon, thread, clay, coffee, markers, wood on muslin

As the viewer and I walk away from the past, a row of ceramic wands appears. I arranged them together as a collective. I first built them with clay, then fired them to bisque, and finally colored and marked them with oil pastels and pencil. *Wands* appear on the windowsills of the gallery where they sit at a height where the viewer could see them up close. *Wands* reveal themselves as the viewer transitions to the final realm. Influenced by magical girl anime⁸, such as *Cardcaptor Sakura*,⁹ (Figure 9) the wands become a source of power for the individual that can harness magic. *Wands* prompt the question of who the power of the wands belongs to. Wands, in the context of magical girl anime serve as extensions of oneself as a source of power. For example, in the story *Cardcaptor Sakura*, Kero¹⁰ observed that Sakura

⁸ A genre in anime usually targeted to young girls, the premise of most of these animes focus on a heroine who harnesses magical powers and is destined to save the world while balancing her everyday life as a teenager.

⁹ A manga series created by Clamp about a ten-year-old girl named Sakura Kinomoto, who accidentally release the power of the Clow Cards. She possesses the power to capture card to save her town from magical terror while balancing her school life.

¹⁰ Known Cerberus, the guardian of the Clow Cards

possesses the power to release the Clow Cards, so she can bring the cards back. The Clow Cards are magical cards created by a sorcerer named Clow Reed. The Clow Cards were sealed away in a book before Clow Reed died. The book can only be opened by someone he has chosen. Kero granted Sakura a wand made for her as she is the only one that can take on this mission. When the cards manifest and attack Sakura, the battles are resolved through empathic conversations and problem solving rather than physical fighting. Sakura's power lies within herself through her wit, her love for her friends, and her empathic nature to return the cards to the book. I made *Wands* with unique colors and marks to convey different personalities who can potentially partner with them. *Wands* symbolize inner power rather than magic itself.



Figure 9: *Cardcaptor Sakura*, Clamp



Figure 10: *Wands*, In progress shot

FANTASY

The last realm is “fantasy.” The viewer and I approach a solitary ceramic figure. *She was the First Goddess* (Figure 12) is a ceramic sculpture glazed in a white, reddish glaze with bursts of fired Korean chili flakes, coffee, and rice on the base and shoulders of the figure. The young apsara previously seen in *Family* and *We will not die on this hill* now appears in a three-dimensional form. The same character of *We Will Not Die on This Hill*, who is in the middle of the drawing, is the same as the character depicted in the clay form. The title refers to the form as a ruin of the past. *She was the First Goddess* is a monument to my mother. She survived the genocide. She raised me and gave me a better life than she had. She also overcame her own struggles. *Family* depicts my mother as a child with her mom, both feet sinking into the ground after escaping from the Khmer Rouge. This sinking action foretells an ongoing journey to get over the traumas of war and to face new obstacles in America. In a typical hero’s journey, the hero has an older mentor to guide them through their young adulthood. My mother is my mentor, showing me how to break the cycle. For example, she is the breadwinner of my family and defied

the societal norms and behaviors of her own childhood. Nothing is perfect. I now must identify my own cycles and break them.



Figure 11: Photograph by Ján Cifra from *The Temples of Angkor: Monuments to a Vanished Empire*



Figure 12: *She was the First Goddess*, Ceramic, Coffee, Korean Chili, Flakes, Rice

Her Chosen Mound (Figure 13) was influenced by Cy Twombly, *Thermopylae, Gaeta 1991* (Figure 14). *Thermopylae, Gaeta 1991* is assembled by using found materials, such as plaster, flowers, and wooden sticks. Twombly also drew over his sculptures with graphite. *Thermopylae* is named after a battle between the Spartans and the Persians that was fought in 480 BC.¹¹ The materials are also painted white to create a sense of cohesiveness. Twombly described his painted sculpture as marble, drawing parallels to classical sculpture which used marble as the primary material. The work subverts the material of marble and the concept of perfect craftsmanship.¹² The same strategies are applied to *Her Chosen Mound* as I confront the craft of ceramics by also introducing a foreign material, oil pastels. Traditionally ceramics as a practice involves technical skills to make functional objects like cups and pots. In my studio practice, I use clay as my medium to create what I call imaginative forms. I make these three-dimensional

¹¹ "Cy Twombly: The Sculpture", National Gallery of Art, 2022, https://www.nga.gov/features/slideshows/cy-twombly.html#slide_19.

¹² "Cy Twombly: Sculpture", Press Release, Gagosian Gallery, 2019, 1-2.

forms using coil and hand-built methods resulting in ambiguous shapes. My imaginative forms disrupt traditional notions of craftsmanship and are somewhat playful to activate a sense of comfort. Through the act of applying oil pastels to the surface of clay alludes to a play nature, the conceptual attention placed on *Her Chosen Mound* calls into question the seriousness of both the symbolism and the act.

Her Chosen Mound is a large-scale ceramic sculpture with a large opening and prongs jutting outwards. The mound form is glazed and overlaid with pastels. Just as Twombly suggested a narrative in *Thermopylae, Gaeta 1991*, I was thinking about the Legend of King Arthur and his ascent to power. I often wonder what would happen if a heroine pulled out the sword. Would it even be a sword? *Her Chosen Mound* exists parallel to *She was the First Goddess* as they sit alone in the last realm. King Arthur was destined to become the King of England when he pulled Excalibur from the stone. Similarly, *Her Chosen Mound* is an object destined for my mother to obtain. When King Arthur obtained Excalibur, he received the power to be king. *Her Chosen Mound* shows that power is internal. The opening in the mound suggests that my mother already obtained the power she needed to overcome her traumas, not through the object implicitly released from *Her Chosen Mound*, but from within herself. The power is generated in the self, not given.



Figure 13: *Her Chosen Mound*, Ceramic, Oil Pastel, Graphite



Figure 14: *Thermopylae*, Gaeta 1991, Cy Twombly

THE END

Self-love can be the most radical gesture you can do for yourself. From *All About Love* by bell hooks, “Self-love is the foundation of our loving practice. Without it our other efforts to love fail. Giving ourselves love we provide our inner being with the opportunity to have the unconditional love we may have always longed to receive from someone else.”¹³ The core of my artistic practice has been self-acceptance. The work I make is an investigation of myself. Like many other immigrant children born in the U.S., I feel like I do not belong in America or my motherland. These works create a space to feel comfortable, safe, and free to exist in the in-between. Every impression I pinch out of clay or every mark I make with a pencil helps me define what space could look like. Confronting the great trauma of my parents has never been easy for me to face. The Khmer Rouge tried to eliminate my heritage, and my existence is the outcome of survival. The heroine of the exhibition is me, the artist.

¹³ hooks, 67.



Figure 15: Install shot of “fantasy”

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VITA

Adrianna Nou Touch was born on December 23, 1994, in Carrollton, TX. She is the daughter of Phirum Leng and Phirun Touch. Touch received her Bachelor of Fine Arts with an emphasis in Drawing/Painting from the University of North Texas in 2017.

In 2019, Touch was awarded a Graduate Assistantship from Texas Christian University in Studio Art with a concentration in Sculpture. In her time there, Touch has worked with Art Galleries of TCU from 2019-2020, as a Teaching Assistant in Beginning Ceramics from 2020-2021, and as an Instructor of Record of Beginning Ceramics from 2021-2022.

Touch has exhibited throughout Texas since 2016. She has exhibited at Cliff Gallery in Dallas College, Goldmark Cultural Center, Rockport Center for the Arts, Fort Worth Contemporary Arts, 500X gallery, and collaborated with artist Corrie Thompson on a two person show at Moncrief Cancer Institute.

ABSTRACT

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by

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Come Home, Heroine is comprised of three installations that act as realms. The realms are home, traveling, and fantasy. Using the framework of the hero's journey, (informed by interests like anime and manga) the exhibition's three realms navigate the viewer through the narrative of the heroine journey. From her earthbound home to a boundless space, she seeks power to overcome familial trauma. Ceramic sculptures, drawings, and other three-dimensional forms bring shape to the narrative.