There’s More Beneath the Surface

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in Art,
Visual Arts

By

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Dedication

For my friends.

To Paula DiMarco, Jim Kelley and Mario Ontiveros.

To all who have offered me generous supports.

Thank you.
ABSTRACT

There’s More Beneath the Surface

By

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Asian-Americans are expected to have high achievement and success because of their ethnicity, a phenomenon which has been coined the Model Minority Stereotype. Mass media contributes to the generalization and perceptions, relating to Asian-Americans; categorizing this very large group of people originating from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, the Ryukyu Islands, and more; indiscriminately labeling them “foreigners,” “illegals,” “nerds,” and/or “poor communicators.” There’s More Beneath the Surface acknowledges some of these stereotypes by confronting viewers
with graphics, photographs, and text. My approach to these images attempts to raise awareness. The various graphics of text and layered portraits of Asian-American women obscure the faces and portray the negative-commentary and prejudices, without really seeing the true self of these individuals. This archetype, a model of success, intelligence and wealth, sets a standard sometimes impossible to reach.
Introduction

As an Asian student from China, I have been surprised to hear stereotypical judgments applied to me: rich, passive or quiet. At first I thought these stereotypes were just because of my international student status, but this is not the reason. Even a friend of mine, a second generation Asian-American young woman, admits to being placed into these stereotypical categories because of her eye shape and skin color.

As a non-Asian-American, this issue of a Model Minority Stereotype is particularly interesting to me. There have been incidents presented in the US media in which Asian-American students were targeted based on these stereotypes. In July 2014, a 24-year-old USC graduate student, Xinran Ji, was robbed and murdered by four teenagers only a few hundred feet off-campus at night when he was walking home from a late-night study session. According to Paul Shearholdt from the Los Angeles Police Department, the suspects testified that they picked Xinran “because he was Chinese he must have money.” This attack is just one example of how stereotypical ideals can become deadly.
THERE’S MORE BENEATH THE SURFACE

“The purpose of visualization is insight, not pictures.”

—Ben Shneiderman (1999)

Background

At the beginning of my research, I contacted Dr. Gina Masequesmay, chair of the Asian American Studies Department at California State University, Northridge. With her assistance, I obtained statistical information, critical essays, and narrative commentaries that examined the history and real life consequences of the Model Minority Stereotype. For example, Asian-Americans are more academically, economically, and socially successful than any other racial minority group. It also indicates the high rates of suicide, depression, and addiction when these standards have not been reached. The most poignant consequence of the model minority label is its failure to acknowledge socioeconomic and educational disparities among the diverse range of communities categorized as Asian-American. Not all ethnic communities under the Asian-American umbrella are advantaged. Southeast Asian-Americans drop out of high school at an alarming rate; nearly 40 percent of Hmong-Americans, 38 percent of Laotian-Americans, and 35 percent of Cambodian-Americans do not finish high school. These Asian-American subgroups, along with Vietnamese-Americans, earn below the national average. Sweeping generalizations of Asian-Americans as the “privileged” and “successful” minority cannot replace unnerving disaggregated data that bring truth to the inequalities that many Asian-Americans face daily. (Lim, 2015)
Upon meeting Dr. Masequesmay, I also toured the study lab within the Asian American Studies Department, located on the east side of campus, separate from the department. I realized how little resources these students had in this study/tutoring space. There were only three outdated PC computers and tables and chairs which appeared to be old and mismatched. Dr. Masequesmay explained that they’re requested funding from the university and college to upgrade the space for years, but the administrators told her to find funding on their own since they were the “Model Minority.” Many administrators think that that money should come from Alumni, since they are most likely successful and have the means to donate. (Masequesmay, 2015) I was surprised to discover the Asian American Studies department’s struggle for resources.
Artistic Approach

i. Sketches

I began conceptualizing and building ideas based on the Model Minority Stereotype. In my sketches and brainstorming I found the issue was, in essence, covering the truth. There is very little acknowledgement of the individual struggles and many people are ignorant to even seeing this as a problem or an obstacle. As I continued to sketch out some visual advertising style layouts, I came up with the idea to use the stereotype words: smart, wealthy, hard-working, self-reliant, living "the American dream", docile, submissive, obedient uncomplaining, and spiritually enlightened. I hand drew these words on the face of a young woman who appears to be of Asian descent (fig.1). I employed various approaches to cover up the Asian face or reveal a part of the Asian face through hand-lettered or digital typographic words. In addition, I used the phrase “You are model minority. You don’t need my help,” which originated from the lack of funding for the Asian American Studies Department’s need for upgraded resources.

Fig. 1.

Minting Li, *There’s More Beneath the Surface*, sketch, 2015
ii. Photography

One of the models in the photographs I used for this project is my best friend, an Asian-American female student who has been impacted and experienced stereotypical comments and pressures by American society. I chose to use her because of her personal connection to the issue, thus bringing deeper meaning to the issue. I chose the color black as the background of the photos because I wanted the subject’s face to be the main focus of the poster.

Fig. 2.
Minting Li, *There’s More Beneath the Surface*, photography, 2015

iii. Tagline

At first, the tagline for my posters was, “Can you see the truth under the surface?” I chose this to emphasize that people should rethink their judgments and not assume people are a certain way because of ethnicity. After many discussions with my committee
members and other graphic designers in my field, I decided to expand the issue to all
types of stereotypes describing Asian Americans. Thus, the new tagline has become,  
“There’s more beneath the surface.”

Fig. 3.

Minting Li, *There’s More Beneath the Surface*, poster, 2015
iv. Hand-drawing letters

As I started to sketch, I experimented with different typographic techniques as a means to convey my concept. Through hand-drawing letters I found a more effective way of communicating voice and action, thus giving the words more power. According to Stefan Sagmeister, “We go with handwriting when the content is personal, emotional, and deeply human, but we might also go against that and express personal content in deliberately cold typography.” (Strizver, 2016) (fig.4) The action of hand lettering these stereotypical words provides a more personal connection to the oppressive words. By utilizing an open typographic approach combined with the clear message, many viewers have an easier time relating it to their own experiences. (Quito, 2003)

Fig. 4.
Minting Li, *There’s More Beneath the Surface*, in process
v. Color choice

I chose the color red for some of the graphics and words because of its effectiveness as a symbol of power and passion. In addition, red will visually attract the viewer and enhance the experience of oppression in the video projection on one of the pieces in the gallery. Red is also recognized as a symbol for the Chinese “China Red” and the Japanese flag. My idea of having the type obscuring the face visually connects with the masks worn in the Chinese opera, which are used to conceal the actors’ real identities. In the Chinese opera, a red-colored mask indicates a positive character, in addition to signifying bravery. A black mask represents neutrality and integrity. The black background of the poster contrasted against the red type covering the face not only offers a striking visual effect, but also holds a deeper connection rooted in my Chinese culture.

Fig. 5.

*Chinese Opera Mask, Unknown*
vi. Book

All the images created for this thesis are seen in the context of a book, a “book-art” piece that visually communicates of Asian stereotypes on page 9 (fig.6). For this particular project, a designed book is essential in expressing validity. The size of the book, 11 inches by 8.5 inches, sends a message of importance and impact of issue-based graphic design. In order to persuade the viewer to interact with the graphic design images, I chose the format of the book to bring a personal space.

I created a two-page combination for each poster I designed in order to further demonstrate the main concept of the thesis, *There’s mMore Beneath the Surface*. For the first posters, I chose to use transparent vellum paper to print the stereotype words of Asian-American students and placed it over a poster that describes their real situation. At this point, the viewer will see the idea of the type poster on the wall (fig.6), and can interact with the piece themselves. Through this placement, my key intention is to show that looking at people with a stereotypical view will prevent you from seeing and hearing the true reality of their experiences. The second poster in the book, page 17 (fig.7), shows hand-drawn type with Asian-American stereotype terms printed on transparency vellum paper, which is placed in front of the Asian portrait. The message behind this poster is similar to the first poster. The reality is that all Asian-Americans are unique individuals just like the Asian female on this page, but if you are unable to look beyond the stereotypes, you will never be able to see them for who they really are.
Fig. 6

Fig. 7
Influences

“Design in art, is a recognition of the relation between various things, various elements in the creative flux. You can't invent a design. You recognize it, in the fourth dimension.

That is, with your blood and your bones, as well as with your eyes. “

—D. H. Lawrence

I am constantly looking at advertising as a means to find meaning in design and consumer society. I have observed how many advertising campaigns play into American stereotypes. However, there are artists, magazines, and commercial brands working to breakdown and create commentary that mocks, reflects, or exposes these objectifications of cultural viewpoints. Fig. 6 is an example of multi cultural advertisement by Charles Schwab (featured in Newsweek and Business Week) that contextualizes these emerging themes of globalization, professionalism through the incorporation of Asian/American models. (Kim, Chung, 2005) The ad displays three people sitting on a bench; the left (Caucasian) female is reading the book “Keep Ahead from the Sharks”; the middle (Asian/Asian-American) female is holding the book “How to get rich overnight”; and the (Caucasian) male is reading “Boy Am I Happy” with a smile on his face. The Asian woman looks jealous of the Caucasian man. The concept of the advertisement is that if you use the services from Charles Schwab, you will be happy and rich. But what is really being portrayed is a reinforced stereotype that the Asian/Asian-American strives for money and will find a means to make it happen through study.
Another example of an advertisement with misrepresentation of Asian/Asian Americans is in Figure 7. The Asian women in the ad is holding a paper, which says, “Can he take care of me and all my bills?” and the Asian man on the left is reading the question and laughing. This advert reinforces the stereotype that an Asian/Asian American man would be wealthy enough to support a future family, but also that an Asian woman prefers a successful wealthy man.
Multicultural advertisement by TOTO

As a graphic designer, it is my mission to counter these stereotypical symbols and visual imagery, and work to change the stereotypes for women and ethnic groups. As I created various portraits for my thesis, I realized I was influenced by a series of public service campaigns by Ogilvy & Mather, a globally renowned advertising agency. One of the campaigns was for UN WOMEN, and was called *The Autocomplete Truth*. (fig. 8) These series of ads, developed as a creative idea for UN Women by Memac Ogilvy & Mather Dubai, uses genuine Google searches to reveal the widespread prevalence of sexism and discrimination against women. Based on searches dated, March 9, 2013, the adverts expose negative sentiments ranging from stereotyping as well as outright denial of women’s rights. Christopher Hunt, Art Director of the creative team, stated, “When we came across these searches, we were shocked by how negative they were and decided we had to do something with them.” (UN Women, 2013) Portrayed in the ad, the viewer sees the Google searches layer over the mouth of several women portraits to symbolize silencing their voices.

Fig. 8

There are graphic designers who make visual statements through posters, such as Stefan Sagmeister and James Victore, and these designers in particular have had a great influence on me. These designers are graphic artists, poster designers and book designers, who make statements and comments about society. For example, Sagmeister’s work for Levi’s Hong Kong, “We are all workers,” (fig. 9) has a strong visual impact over laying typography through projection. The concept of this ad is not only promoting Levi’s worker Jeans/series, but is also telling the viewer that all workers and people are equal. The words are connected on wheels that rotate to display the phrase “We Are All Workers”.

Fig. 9

*We Are All Workers*, billboard, 2011

Artists like Jenny Holzer, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Nuno Barbosa have also inspired me to refine and conceptualize my message through installation and projection works of art. Jenny Holzer’s project, “Truisms,” displayed in large scale projections was
an ongoing series of Truisms that cogently pared down European and American enlightened thought, co-opted the tone and concision of authority, and disseminated through an endless supply of cultural channels—from baseball hats to billboards. (Smith, 2012) Although my thesis work does not require large-scale projection, the idea behind her message influenced me to create an interior space in the gallery that symbolizes my message. Typography, as a graphic design element, transformed, is a powerful weapon to make people think, and Holzer’s approach does just that, making the viewer think. (fig.10)

Fig.10
Jenny Hozler, Xenon for Berlin, 2001

Krzysztof Wodiczko’s art is another example of how projection and social messages can generate an impact and help change the way the viewer thinks about an issue. Wodiczko, The Tijuana Projection, 2001 (fig. 11) used a progressive approach to technology; giving voice and visibility to the women who work in the “maquiladora” industry in Tijuana. The artists had a headset designed that integrated a camera and a microphone allowing the wearer to move while keeping the transmitted image in focus. The headset was connected to two projectors and loudspeakers that transmitted the
testimonies live. The women’s testimonies focused on a variety of issues including work related abuse, sexual abuse, family disintegration, alcoholism, and domestic violence. Woodiczko stated, “During the projection, you could sense the kind of electricity and pain among those who came to witness it. The position of the image was very special. Standing in front of the building, we saw the face over our heads speaking to us.” (Wodiczko, 2001) His work, is experimental but is effective at challenging the public to question the type of interaction within the work.

Fig. 11


Emmy Curl, a singer, created a musical song and collaborated with filmmaker, Nuno Barbosa, on a work called “Come Closer.” After learning about Barbosa and Curl’s work, I was inspired by the dynamic projection mapped and overlaid visuals on Curl’s face. (fig.12) The meaning of the work was to pull the viewer into Barbosa’s on-body/on-face projection mapping experience, as with his work called “Omote.” (fig. 13). Curl, as the model in the video “Come Closer” (fig.12), moves her head around and the projection mapping shifts in and out of alignment, creating a ghostly and bizarre but beautiful effect.
Although in my work, *There’s More Beneath the Surface*, does not use projection, Barbosa’s effects and how the individual model was hidden behind the imagery inspired me. What is different and unique is the used of this technique with oppressive words to hide the real person.

Fig. 12


Fig. 13


Originally, my goal was to have a room where the viewer would be able to see a projection of type over an Asian/Asian American face (fig.14), similar to some of the
artists I have previously mentioned. However, the projection was not working the way I wanted. Due to limited space in the gallery, I was offered a 5 foot by 7 foot narrow storage space. Because the space was so small and in the back of the gallery, through experiments, I determined it would be hard to create the effective viewing for my concept. The space could only fit one or two people at one time and that intimacy was not what the work speaks about. The work needs to be shown and displayed to educate and make people aware in a larger scale and the small room was not working for that message. In addition, technical and installation difficulties further diminished the message. The projector would need to be installed on top of the door, which would create an angle, thus loosing the effect of seeing a person’s face. I also needed to construct a system for the projection and the portrait to be visible simultaneously; which I determined did not work effectively.

Fig. 14
Minting Li, There’s More Beneath the Surface, multi media, 2016
Conclusion

I consider myself to be an excellent visual designer with strength in concept design. It is my belief that I should use my voice to create a discourse on social stereotypes. For this thesis, I hope that the model minority stereotype can eventually be eliminated. However, I want my work to reform and reveal the truth about myself and other Asian-Americans.

I strongly believe that prejudice is implicitly developing in the political, social, and cultural environment among us. Lin Tianmiao, a Chinese artist, comments that Chinese artists "cannot reach a certain level of art without reaching a certain level of self-discovery or self-confidence…We need to better discover ourselves rather than allow ourselves to be marginalized.” (Pollack, 2012) I hope my work can present the reality of what it means to be a human being, without looking at Asian-Americans through rose-colored spectacles. Negative or positive, stereotypes cause harm because they rob people of their individuality, their complexity, and their voice. There’s more beneath the surface; it’s only when you look beneath the surface that you will be able to see the truth.
References


Appendix
THEY'RE DOING JUST FINE.

WE NEED YOUR HELP

Model Minority Stereotype of Asian-American Students