

EMBRACING THE THIRD SELF



Mirela Kulović, *Mystic Land*, 2018. Oil on canvas
24x36in. Photo courtesy of the writer.

“Who am I?” can be a thorny but fundamental query that follows us throughout our lives. For those of us living between or among two or more cultures, defining a singular identity can be daunting, and definitions are bound to change over the course of a lifetime. Relocating to a new country presents various challenges—not the least of which are feelings of disconnection and isolation from familiar surroundings, people, and language. Where immigration and identity intersect can be a lonely and confusing dimension, but it can also be a fertile ground for creativity and exploration.

I had always experienced an internal drive to clarify who I am and found that how I saw myself culturally also influenced how I personally identify. I arrived in the United States with my parents after my father won a diversity lottery visa. Growing up, I had the privilege of returning to Poland for entire summers every few years, which allowed me to cultivate a duality that was created from the moment I moved to this country. I longed to be home in Poland, seeing it as not only my birthplace but my “true home,” while I thrived in my life in the United States, eventually becoming a naturalized citizen. In the United States, I am Polish-American. In Poland, I am American-Polish—subsequently making the question “Where are you from?” incredibly frustrating to answer with personal satisfaction.

I also had the opportunity to grow up with a number of friends—immigrants or first-generation Americans from Latvia, India, the Philippines, and Portugal, among other places—who were experiencing this fissure, so I had the comfort of knowing I was not unique in this sense. Over the years, as I continued to wrangle questions of cultural belonging and identity, I wanted to unite them through my creative practice as a writer and curator. In the spring of 2018, I had the opportunity to do this through a group show I curated in one of the Fort Point Arts Community galleries. Through “(Inter) National: Dual Identities,” I became acquainted with the work of Shadia Heenan Nilforoush, Petra Lee, and Mirela Kulović, three artists diving into their own interlaced cultural identities. Each artist examines latent and overt effects of migration, and I found a certain kinship in their evolving exploration of these themes.

In the last few years, I have started to use the idea of a third self to explain the “neither here nor there” feeling that dominates my cultural identity. Drawing inspiration from Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of Third Space, the third self can result

from a strong internalized tension—it is a hybrid version of the self defined by migration, where multiplicities can coexist. In other words, the third self is a hybrid version of the self defined by migration. This phenomenon can be observed in almost all immigrant communities, but the work of Lee, Kulović, and Heenan Nilforoush embodies this multifaceted idea in incredibly compelling and relatable ways on the individual scale.

Each artist, in her own way, constructs an identity that draws from her past and lineages. All three of their perspectives are uniquely their own, yet are united by the sense that they belong to something outside traditional boundaries of a singular culture—namely, they embody their own version of a third self. They ground themselves in the places they have lived and the people they call family, yet reach beyond them to construct their personal narratives.

Memory plays an important role in this narrative construction. All three artists share an interest in piecing together childhood and adolescent memories into visuals that reflect their journeys. The pursuit of some sort of cohesion in the face of feelings of fragmentation and alienation speaks to both the strength of the unnerving, underlying tension created by migration and our own equally forceful tendencies to create compelling narratives about ourselves.

Assemblage and layering are useful techniques for processing the tangible and conceptual components of personal narratives. Lee’s work, such as her recent series “FRGMNTS,” is an example of a work created to honor and explore the loss of certain memories and notions of displacement. Each drawing in the series features a memory that is represented through both photorealistic and abstracted visuals. The drawings trace the artist’s hand as she attempts to reconstruct a particular moment from her past. Lee is a collector of memories, places, people, and experiences. She creates her own visual language through which she recounts her formative years spent in her native Singapore, her time living in Vietnam, and her current life in the United States.

Lee’s expressive collage work merges her external and internal worlds into visuals that connote both contemplation and urgency; in *Deconstruct*, a four-by-six-foot canvas contains what looks like a postcard placed near a fervently painted line and a splash of paint, and a closer examination of brushstrokes reveals a different rhythm in each section of pigment. The work appears as though it could have been assembled in one sitting, and yet it would

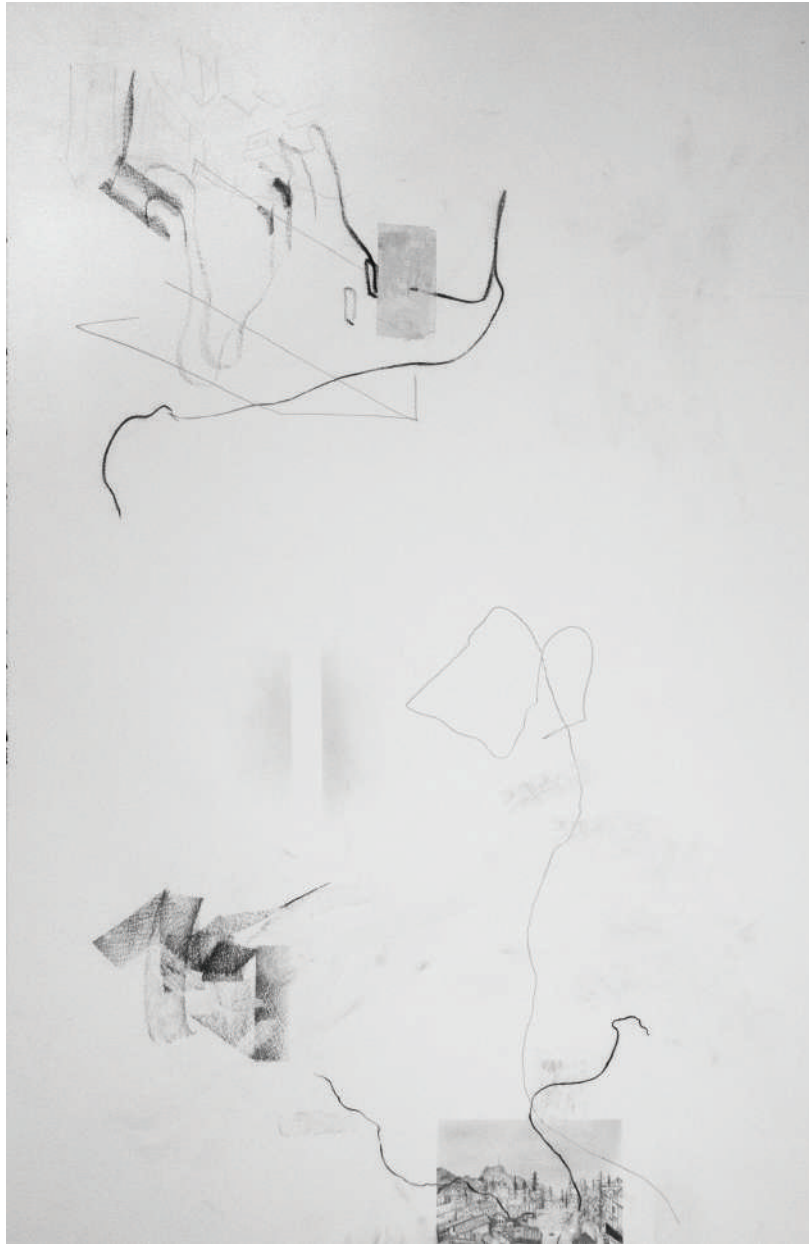
Four Journeys Exploring Immigration and Identity

Words by
Karolina Hac

have been impossible to create without the depth of personal experience and artifacts the artist collects.

Lee collects items that not only catch her eye but represent meaningful moments. She uses the word "intersect" to describe the body of work that emerges from this practice—in bringing together these artifacts from various parts of her life, Lee creates a philosophy of what she considers her "fragmented identity as a result of a multi-cultural upbringing and physical and emotional displacement." Collage is an incredibly potent medium for portraying these feelings. The abstraction of her depictions renders her collages a Rorschach test, through which viewers are encouraged to ponder the "significance of the paths they tread, the roots from which they began, as well as engage in the intersection of time and place in a single moment." Despite her collage work emerging from a personal place, Lee offers her audience an observer's perspective. In a sense, migrating from home to home renders the artist detached from a singular point of origin, allowing her to embody the role of benevolent outsider or a modern-day flâneur.

Like Lee, Kulović also sees her occupation of the third self as an opportunity to expand her point of view. Kulović is a Bosnian artist splitting her time between her homeland and Boston. Formally trained as an industrial engineer in Split, Croatia, Kulović left engineering to pursue her passion for creative expression. She finds that occupying space in multiple cultures offers her a "bigger picture of the world, but also an understanding that people are the same.... All people need food, protection, safety, and love. Those needs are translated into art and cultures in many different ways, and that is the beauty of [different cultures]." For Kulović, life within her third self offers her the chance to observe



(above) Petra Lee, *FRGMNTS (Sapa)*, 2018.
Graphite, charcoal and tape on paper, 26.5" x 40".
Photo courtesy of the artist.



(right) Petra Lee, *Deconstruct*, 2017.
Paint and photo collage on canvas, 4' x 6'.
Photo courtesy of the artist.



and appreciate commonalities and draw from a wealth of potentially inspiring material.

Kulović's painting practice is intuitive and incredibly introspective—her work often looks like it is a scene plucked from her own internal world. Memories are carefully embedded within each layer of paint and pastel, creating a dreamscape that the viewer is invited to enter. In *Mystic Land* we see a bridge in a haunting, abstracted landscape, emerging from a space that appears to glow from a mysterious light source. Kulović's skillful placement of pigment illuminates the bridge and draws us in, playing with the idiom "the light at the end of the tunnel." Yet upon closer inspection, the bridge loses its shape, disintegrating and fraying at the edges.

The inspiration for these bridges and arches comes from Kulović's childhood in Bosnia. In her painted world, they become monuments to her memories of the land and the people of Bosnia. She clarifies that she is naturally drawn to ruins and ancient architecture because the effects of time can be easily seen. In *Memory of One Land*, Kulović explores ruins from another vantage, bringing us closer into the hollow space beneath arches as she superimposes an abstracted view reminiscent of an aerial through the middle.

We also see Heenan Nilforoush draw from memories of her ancestral homeland, recontextualizing them as she delves into her third self. The multidisciplinary artist currently resides in Connecticut, but was born in Denver and raised in Houston. She identifies as Caucasian and Iranian but was raised in a Pakistani home.

In her photography series, *Makhloot*, Heenan Nilforoush explores how her multiple identities interact. She chooses a *roosari*, an Iranian headscarf, as a site for a symbolic meeting between her American and Iranian roots, using fabrics representative of each culture. *Makhloot*—which takes its title from a Farsi word that means "blending or to blend"—puts forth the notion that there is no universal answer to what it is like to occupy multiple cultural identities. Rather, it emphasizes that this fluid blending of selves results in a third self.

Heenan Nilforoush defines her third self in her writing about the series, noting, "The attempt is to reconcile multiple identities, experiencing them as an outsider, never fitting into the mold. The result of occupying space within multiple cultures is a loss, as it is impossible to know where one version of the self ends and the other begins."

Instead of presenting faces the viewer can relate to, the series shows the back of the sitter's head. While this serves to highlight the intertwining

of these distinct fabrics, the overall effect is mysterious, leaving us with only the visual indicator of the fabric to make judgments about the sitter's identity.

Makhloot also draws attention to the complicated relationship clothing plays in identity. We use garments as a way to either align ourselves with a particular culture or to set us apart. When offered the ability to dress as we choose, our garments articulate cultural identities in a way that our words sometimes cannot. Heenan Nilforoush has recently begun to probe this idea in her video work. In *Moving Under the Current of Silent Waves*, the artist moves slowly from a seated position, layering and obscuring her body with vibrant scarves. She explains that these layered fabrics are like overlapping layers of identity, connoting the "evolution of a new being, creature, race." This work, like the artist's previous photographic series, presents the birth of a third self as a unique and potentially liberating space to occupy.

There is something comforting in knowing nearly all of us, in this land of immigrants, will confront these sorts of ideas about ourselves at some point. All of us have experienced some form of fragmentation, especially as we grow older and shed prior selves. There is, however, an opportunity to create one's own definition. These three artists acknowledge in their practices that there is no final answer. Through their exploration, they elicit open-ended questions and prompts for both themselves and their audiences. For those actively traversing this strange, internal land, it is equally reassuring to know that others are already putting in the work. Perhaps more importantly, though we emerge from different backgrounds, we share similar feelings of isolation and dissolution, and there is strength in leaning into these feelings to define a presence of one's own.

Karolina Hac is a Somerville-based writer and marketing professional. She earned a master's degree in art history from SUNY Purchase, where she was the 2016 Neuberger Fellow, and completed her bachelor's in both English and art history at the University of Connecticut. Hac's recent research interests include the history of photography and contemporary art in conversation with technology.

(previous spread) Shadia Heenan Nilforoush, *Makhloot*, 2017. Archival Pigment Print, 27' x 36".

Petra Lee, *FRGMNTS (Da Nang)*, 2018. Graphite and charcoal on paper, 22" x 30".

