

PARADOX

Identity and Belonging

by Heidi McKenzie

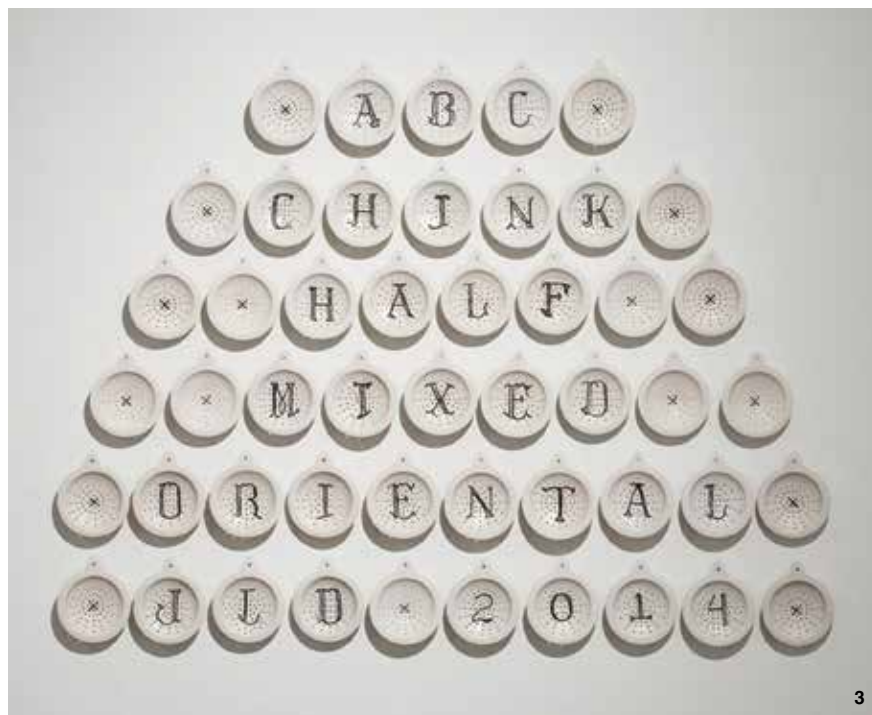


I was in the room when Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates delivered his keynote speech at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2014. Among many things, he spoke about his sense of isolation working as a black artist in an otherwise white-dominated creative milieu. He asked people in the audience who self-identified as African American to stand up. When fewer than 40 people in a room of 4000-plus stood up, I was shaken. I recognized that this was a physical expression of a deeply rooted sense of disenfranchisement, on both collective and personal levels. Gates put the discomfort of race on the table. It was a call to action.

I organized a panel of mixed-race ceramic sculpture artists whose work speaks to issues of race and identity titled “Paradox: Identity & Belonging” for NCECA’s 50th anniversary conference in Kansas City, Missouri, last spring. Fellow Canadian, Brendan Tang, as well as Americans Jennifer Datchuk and Nathan Murray joined me on stage. Their words cut deeply into the personal journeys of many in the audience who stayed and shared with us for over an hour after the panel discussion, a conversation that moved onto a gathering of more than 20 at a local eatery. The synergies, revelations, and resonances were powerful, walls came tumbling down, and for a moment in time there was a collective sense of empowerment, a feeling that we’re all in this together, sifting through the paradox of mixed race.

An In Between Space

My father was of South Asian descent and grew up in Trinidad. He came to Canada in 1954 at the age of 24 and met my mother whose family is of Irish/Scottish heritage. I grew up in a small town in the Maritimes in the 1970s and 1980s where almost everyone else, including my mother, was white. My father checked his cultural baggage at the border, and I grew up BRASP (Brown Anglo Saxon Protestant). For decades I have been living and breathing as an artist and cultural consumer in the predominantly Eurocentric circles in which I was raised. I define myself as a Canadian artist of mixed Indo-Trinidadian and Irish-American heritage. Much of my work is abstract self-



1 Brendan L.S. Tang’s *Manga Ormolu ver. 4.0-n*, 24½ in. (62 cm) in height, 2012. 2 Brendan L.S. Tang’s *Manga Ormolu 4.0-p*, 27 in. (69 cm) in height, 2013. 1, 2 Ceramics, mixed media. 3 Jennifer Datchuk’s *Sampler of an American Born Chinese*, 3 ft. 4 in. (1 m) in height, slip-cast Laguna cone 5–6 porcelain shower drains, oxidation fired, collected hair, 2014. 4 Jennifer Datchuk’s *Half*, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, Jingdezhen cone 10 porcelain, blue/white pattern transfer, reduction fired, human hair, 2012. 3, 4 Photos: Mark Menjivar.

portraiture, and employs agateware as symbolic of both racial and cultural diversity. I am developing a functional line of marbled colored porcelains that echo a celebration of pluralism. I strive to challenge viewers to reconsider the intersubjectivity of mixed-race

identity's ambiguity, and to set aside the obvious assumptions of visual identity that is merely skin deep.

Within the context of the panel, the paradox refers to the "in-between" space in which mixed-race people find themselves, neither here nor there. Our faces occupy visual markers in society. On-lookers file faces into categories in unconscious, routine assessment. In that instant they assign identities to people that can usher in a whole set of assumptions. Yet the way someone looks—at face value—isn't necessarily who they may be. "Paradoxical space" was first coined by feminist geologist Gillian Rose nearly a quarter of a century ago. Today, in both Canada and the US, the first wave of self-identified mixed-race adults has come of age and with it, artists seeking to find a foothold. The hope for tomorrow is that this generation's children will navigate ethnically mixed milieus effortlessly, and migrate the discourse to new horizons.

I first stumbled upon Jennifer Datchuk's work at NCECA in Providence, Rhode Island. Her conceptual work centered around her mixed Russian-American/Irish-American, Chinese-American heritage. Her imagery screamed paradox, and as we worked together to prepare for the panel, I began to glimpse how her complicated familial relationships continue to be a perpetual source of inspiration.

Datchuk has always been aware of being the "other." Admittedly, she learned to live with the constant question of, "What are you?" In her words, "It's a question that I love to hate and hate to love . . . how I determine to answer this question depends on my hair, make up, clothes, what I am doing, where I am at or what I am eating. What I do know is that people are rarely satisfied with my answer." Datchuk understands the potential pitfalls of face value: "It's only natural to want to fit into a box. We have been putting

people into their respective boxes for years. It's also very American to be ethnically and culturally fragmented, which makes this decision difficult when you want to be both honest and accurate as to what box you put yourself in." Datchuk embraces the angst she feels around her sense of self as "imposter"—neither fully Chinese nor white—through the medium of porcelain. Porcelain aptly nods to her Chinese heritage, while at the same time underlines the purity of white—a quality she finds herself seeking in both cultures. The duality of porcelain captures both fragility and resilience. She often incorporates human hair, her own coarse, straight hair—that can be dyed, curled, and manipulated into a multiplicity of camouflage.

Nathan Murray identifies as black and white. He sees art as "an act of self-exploration" fashioning life-size and heroic, larger than life-size busts as well as half-scale full figures of individuals whose symbolism reach allegorical proportion. Murray's father is Jamaican and he was raised by his mother who grew up in a farming community near Oakland, Nebraska. Murray tackles a range of issues: from passing—where being as pale as possible was desirable for social status, to what he terms "the post-racial world"—where the impetus is for mixed African-Americans to appear as dark as possible to avoid not being "black enough." As a corollary, the concept of being "color blind" is a recurring theme in Murray's work. By positioning his subjects from varying points of view, he asks his audience to consider issues of systemic racism, perceived moral superiority, white supremacy, and racial stereotyping. His personal experiences invariably inform the points of view he chooses to forefront. As a black man, at face value, Murray stands over six feet. He can't count the number of times he's been asked if he can rap or play pro sports, reinforcing the deeply ingrained notion that black men exist

5 Nathan Murray's *Where do I fit into this?* 20 in. (51 cm) in height, earthenware, underglaze, acrylic wash, 2016. 6 Nathan Murray's *The Crossroads*, earthenware, underglaze, gold luster, acrylic wash, oils, 2016.



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7 Heidi McKenzie's *self reflection*, 3 ft. 6 in. (1 m) in length, thrown and altered black-and-white stoneware, 2012. 8 Heidi McKenzie's three pint glasses, 6½ in. (17 cm) in height (each), slip-cast marbled porcelain, 2016.

to embody some form of entertainment. He's quick to point out that he's never been asked if he can sculpt. Murray rails against Western society's propensity to commodify blackness. He points to history to find his way forward, "The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow Laws, and segregation are a negative part of history in the US that continue to have lingering ramifications today. The realities of racial stratification have provided the impetus for working toward social justice in my art practice . . ." Through clay, Murray is literally carving out his role in facilitating progressive discourse with respect to race and racism.

Brendan Lee Satish Tang was born in Dublin, Ireland to Trinidadian parents of Chinese and Indian descent. His family moved to Burlington, Ontario when he was five. Like me, Tang grew up one of a handful of "others" in a sea of white faces. Also like me, his parents hail from a diaspora several generations removed from the homelands. As an ethnically-mixed Asian Canadian, Tang is intrigued by cultural appropriation and hybridity. His artistic practice embodies the influences, tensions, and contradictions that define the postmodern world and boldly embrace the paradoxical tendencies to be irreverent, frivolous, even playful, yet at the same time critically engaged. His signature works, the *Manga Ormulu* series, pair Chinese Ming dynasty vessels with 18th-century French Rococo, Japanese comic-book characters, and/or contemporary toys. He explains, "It is perhaps due to my sense of belonging in the remix generation that I tend to borrow and reconfigure ideas and influences to create works that I find both visually and intellectually compelling. I liken aspects of my artistic practice to channel surfing, where I absorb, interpret,



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and bank a great deal of visual information to inform my personal aesthetic." Tang's practice is diverse and prolific. He's branching out, collaborating, working with 3D-printed culturally specific tiles that can be tattooed onto the human body—leaving transient impressions that reveal or reflect histories of migration. Tang sums up his vision, "Integrating and sometimes literally mashing together differing cultural traditions and visual signifiers allows me to continue to be a part of the ongoing conversation about what makes us who we are in this global community."

Learn more about the artists: Jennifer Datchuk maintains a ceramic practice and teaches in San Antonio, Texas (jenniferlingdatchuk.com); Nathan Murray sculpts clay and minds at the Lux Centre for the Arts in Lincoln, Nebraska (www.nathanamurray.com); Brendan Tang lives and works in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he continues to explore the interface between culture and material (www.brendantang.com).

Note: All the quotes by the artists are from the *NCECA Journal*/Volume 37, NCECA Kansas City Makers Mentors & Milestones 50th Annual Conference, "Panel: Paradox: Identity and Belonging."

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