

There, there.

By

©2014

Anna Youngyeun

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Visual Art and the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

---

Chairperson Mary Anne Jordan

---

David Brackett

---

Yoonmi Nam

Date Defended: March 13, 2014

The Thesis Committee for Anna Youngyeun  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

There, there.

---

Chairperson Mary Anne Jordan

Date approved: April 21, 2014

## **Abstract**

*There, there.* references personal stories and examines affective dualisms through a theoretical lens of intersectionality. The work creates a space for dialogue concerning cultural and bodily awkwardness, as well as a means to find humor in hardship and empathy in embarrassment. My MFA thesis exhibition is a manifestation of these reflections and an attempt to prompt earnest consideration for the confusion that occurs in a search for comfort and place in the midst of converging identities.



Figure 1 Anna Youngyeun. *Buttman's 20 Minute Workout*. Gouache on watercolor paper. 2014.

*I grew up in a Thai-Chinese household in Missouri and became a product of two spaces where I never quite fit-- an American society that both exoticized and mocked my racial identity and a Thai-Chinese heritage that I felt estranged from. My chubby body size further alienated me from both spaces. In retrospect, I can essentialize these childhood issues into a singular experience: The first time I saw porn.*

*My eight-year-old self searched for exercise tapes after a classmate attributed my size to "eating too many egg rolls." I settled on a promising cassette entitled Buttman's 20 Minute Workout. An anal sex scene filled the television. Having never seen sexual acts in person, in print, or on TV, I was horrified and intrigued. I watched the entire thing.*

This encounter began as a quest to quell bodily and racial shame and ended with an embarrassed-yet-curious: "I feel funny, but I like it." That sentiment continues to influence my artistic practice and personal search for comfort and belonging.

This search often results in perplexing emotional and sensorial experiences. In order to examine this perplexity, my MFA thesis exhibition *There, there.* explores affective dualisms such as comfort/awkwardness, empathy/disgust, and intimacy/alienation through a theoretical

lens of intersectionality. For the purposes of this analysis, I use the term ‘affective dualisms’ to describe contrary emotional and sensorial states that are typically contrasted opposite one another, but may be experienced in succession or in tandem to one another.

There was a time when paranoia over cameltoes made me nearly miss the bus every morning. There was a time when I decided to shun my Thai identity and proudly proclaim that I was American. By the time I wanted to feel Thai again, I had already lost the language. And at some point, “practicing” kissing with my hand simply became “kissing my hand” because it felt nice. My displaced sense of self has resulted in numerous embarrassing situations that are difficult to admit to. *There, there.* references these experiences in order to create a space for dialogue concerning cultural and bodily awkwardness, as well as a means to find humor in hardship and empathy in embarrassment. My MFA thesis exhibition is a manifestation of these reflections and an attempt to prompt earnest consideration for the confusion that occurs in a search for comfort and belonging in the midst of converging identities.

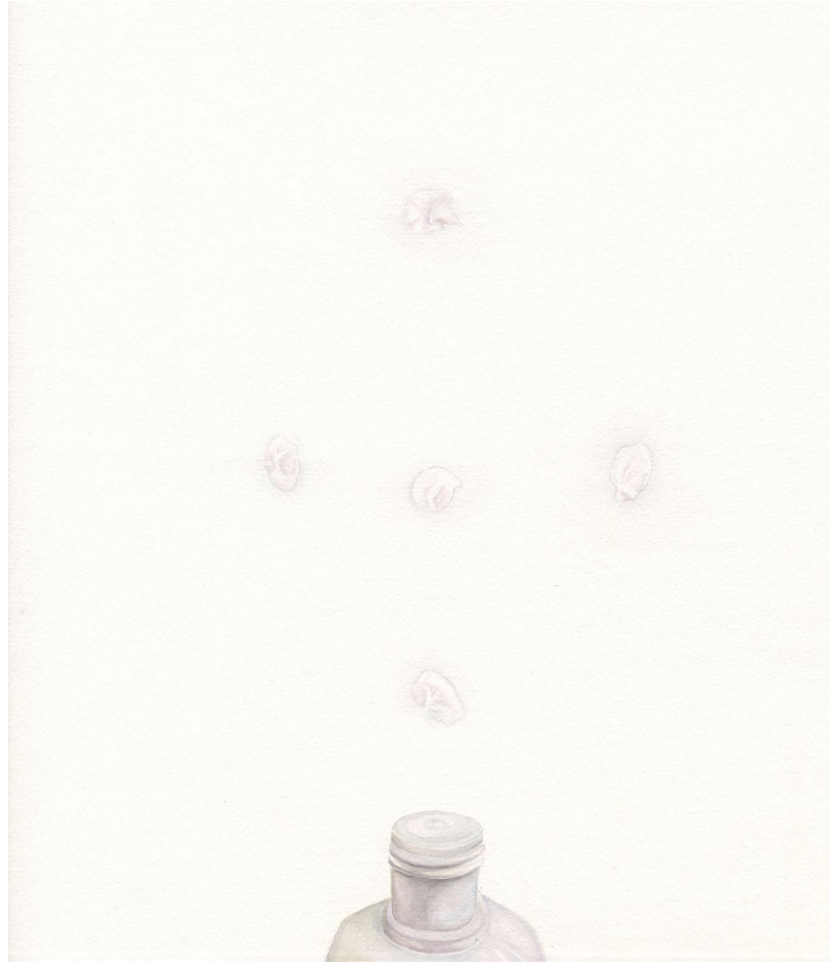


Figure 2 Anna Youngyeun. *Okay, olay.* Gouache on watercolor paper. 2014.

*Strategically placed dots to practice frugality and maximize product effectiveness.  
Her face had an even sheen right before bed.*

### **Description of the work and space**

*There, there.* has a dual identity. The gallery space is bifurcated, comprised of seven framed gouache drawings and a tactile soft sculpture installation (Figure 3). The division of the space highlights my theoretical focus on affective dualisms. The drawings present viewers with intimate, small-scale compositions in a conventional gallery format of framed works on walls. The sculptural installation is an immersive space in which viewers are allowed to touch plush

objects that surround them. As viewers move through the space, they are faced with contrasting gallery experiences. Although initially, the two spaces may seem disconnected, they conceptually inform one another and draw from each other aesthetically in terms of composition and color.



Figure 3 Anna Youngyeun. *There, there*. Full installation view. 2014.

### Works on paper

The works on paper reference intimate and awkward sensory memories from my childhood (Figures 1, 2, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14). This personal imagery is approachable and playful with a sense of unease and subtle revulsion. Realistic rendering in gouache floating in white space suggests a psychological space instead of a narrative or representational space. The exaggerated and diminutive scales of each figure and object highlight each piece as an

opportunity for indulging in confusion and questioning emotional, sensorial, and physical realities.

### Sculptural installation

The installation serves as a tactile manifestation of contrasting emotional and sensorial states in which viewers may insert themselves. Three roughly stitched, larger-than-lifesized rag doll figures play the protagonists in the ambiguous narrative. Cellulitic blobs overtake and surround the figures. A “curtain” of dangling finger and phallic shapes hangs from udder-like pods attached to ceiling rafters, and intangible shadows cast from the dangling pieces complete the composition (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Anna Youngyeun. *There, there*. Installation view. 2014.

The installation reflects a similar play with scale and compositional sparsity found in the works on paper. The large figures dwarf viewers while the dangling objects are suggestive of



life-size fingers, phalluses, testicles, and other body parts. The plush, flesh-colored blobs are an ambiguous medium—at once corporeal and alien due to their color, texture, and form.

These components form a system of nourishment and parasitism. Cellulitic blobs appear to be born from udder-like pods (Figure 5) and surround and cover the figures (Figure 6). Each figure is truncated in some way—decapitated or void of hands and feet (Figure 7). Their lack of fingers and toes seems cruel in light of the abundance of such digits hanging just above them. Stripped of their agency, each figure is rendered vulnerable to the horde of blobs. The installation presents viewers with a tenuous narrative, which they may read as benevolent or malicious. Each element may be read as simultaneously pitiable, endearing, and off-putting.



Figure 5 Anna Youngyeun. *There, there*. Installation view. 2014.



Figure 6 Anna Youngyeun. *There, there.* Installation view. 2014.



Figure 7 Anna Youngyeun. *There, there.* Installation view. 2014.





Figure 8 Anna Youngyeun. *Savory and Sweet*. Gouache on watercolor paper. 2013.

*Always try to have a system. Left and right, bed, floor, chair. It doesn't last, and they'll always need a sniff. A few specimens warrant pause for various "reasons."*

## Influential works

My research and artistic practice is grounded in observing the works of individuals who are mindful of affectivity and tactility in relation to identity and experience. Although an abundance of art, literature, and research has influenced my thesis exhibition, I will discuss three primary sources that most heavily impacted *There, there*.

### Andrew Solomon

In The Moth Radio Hour story "The Refugees," author and lecturer specializing in psychology, the arts, and politics Andrew Solomon chronicles the experiences of Phaly Nuon, a Cambodian woman who survived Pol Pot's regime and created a treatment program for depressed refugee women. She developed a three-step program, which included teaching the

women (first) how to forget the horrible things they had experienced and witnessed during the oppressive Khmer Rouge, (second) how to work to take care of themselves and their own children, and (third) how to perform manicures and pedicures.

Although the third step seems disparate, in the wake of facing such physical and emotional atrocities, these depressed women needed to relearn how to trust others and to become comfortable with touch. Performing manicures and pedicures on one another created a context that was both technical and intimate in a safe way: “They would touch each other’s fingers, they would touch each other’s toes... and then they began to laugh together.” Phaly Nuon discovered a subtle and jovial way to use humor and touch to bring these survivors out of truly dark places (Solomon, 2001). This story has served as a central piece of inspiration for my studio practice because of its example of tactility and humor in the face of dehumanizing cultural displacement.

### Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”

In her canonical feminist essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Donna Haraway explains that the Western colonialist purview cannot provide an adequate frame of reference for understanding social issues. Binaries of black/white, male/female, and nature/machine all serve to divide, exclude, and oppress. Examinations of culture grounded within those hegemonic binaries carry too much historical weight to allow for true empathy. In order to build a purview based on egalitarianism, Haraway offers the political-mythical model of the cyborg to provide a clean slate to think about existence in new ways.

Because Haraway’s cyborg is ground in both imagination and reality, it can serve as an outlet for examining global culture without being tethered to concrete realities or histories. As a product of science fiction and political myth, the cyborg is already of tainted origins so there is

no need to keep it pristine, whole and perfect. Part human and part machine, it provides a vehicle for ulterior understanding of human relationships with nature, machine, and one another (Haraway, 1991). In relation to my studio practice, the cyborg serves as not only a conceptual model to explore affective dualisms, but also an aesthetic and tactile example due to its dual materiality of metal and organic components.

Science fiction deeply influences my worldview and artistic practice. My exhibition's biomorphic imagery constructs new questions and understandings of reality. The doll-like figures in *There, there.* serve a similar function to Haraway's cyborg by offering viewers more neutral figures for consideration. The cyborg serves as a fantastical model to explore human affect and behavior on a global scale. Because *There, there.* is generated from personal origins, it arouses similar questions but in a more intimate manner.

#### Mika Rottenberg: "Mary's Cherries"

Mika Rottenberg is a New York-based contemporary video artist whose work utilizes the human body in systematic productions. Her 2004 work *Mary's Cherries* involves a series of

rickety wooden devices and several buxom, middle-aged women who work

in a multi-story production line to transform bright red fingernail clippings into maraschino cherries (Figure 9). Rottenberg's piece is disturbingly humorous and creates a bizarre site for viewers to question bodily purpose and systematic dysfunctionality (Figure 10). Rottenberg's



Figure 9 Mika Rottenberg. Video still from *Mary's Cherries*. 2004.

awkward use of detritus to create a mundane spectacle heavily influences the systematic nourishment and use of the figure rendered in *There, there*.

The following excerpt from a 2010 interview for *BOMB* magazine has been a strong influence in my studio practice:

**Judith Hudson (New York based painter):** To me, imagination is the most private and revealing aspect of a person. It's what attracts me to your work. You submerge people in your imagination. I feel as if you seduce the viewer with unconscious sympathies, like fetishism or caged energies.

**Mika Rottenberg:** Right, things that tap into everyone's subconscious memory. We're pretty similar in our cores, more or less. I have to tap deeper into this psychological vein, so then I can drag people with me. It's not just visual; it's energetic. It's about trying to locate feeling that has no shape. The whole thing is meant to fail on some level because you can't give shape to abstract emotions, sensations, memories, and smells (Hudson, 2010).

From my personal purview, Hudson's term "unconscious sympathies" engenders shameful indulgences that people hide but can often relate to. This excerpt highlights Rottenberg's playfulness and thoughtful experimentation in the strange systems she creates. Her



Figure 10 Mika Rottenberg. Video still from *Mary's Cherries*. 2005.

description of tapping into "everyone's subconscious memory" is at once invasive yet inviting—a quality I value in viewing and creating artwork.

## Theoretical analyses



Figure 11 Anna Youngyeun. *Luck Meat*. Gouache on watercolor paper. 2013.

*Ma has always been superstitious of an old Chinese kind. Every new year, P'or quells her quest for luck with ham hocks and black eyed peas— a gesture of good fortune straight from the American South. I've stopped eating pork. What of my serendipity?*

### Intersectionality/Duality

Intersectionality is a key concept in queer and feminist theory examining converging disenfranchised identities that fall outside of heteronormative standards. Intersectionality provides a critical lens to view multiple systems of oppression acting against an individual at once. Junctures of race, sexuality, gender, class, size, education, ability/disability, and age create unique experiences and worldviews specific to each individual (McCall, 2005). These understandings are continually in flux because people change, social climates change, and relationships change. Each person's intersectional identity and experiences are unique and attempting to understand an individual through singular lenses has proven to be damaging and



dehumanizing. Haraway's examination of Chela Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness provides readers with a way of "examining systems of power resulting from conditions of multiple oppression" (Haraway, 1991). For example, non-white feminists cannot evaluate their situations based on singular understandings of just patriarchy or just racism. Their experiences are multi-faceted, but the options available to them only address one thing at a time.

This relates to Rita Chaudhry Sethi's description of the Asian-American *Onus* in her article "Smells like Racism." Sethi describes the expectation of racial and ethnic minorities to understand both dominant culture and their personal heritages. In order to assimilate, minorities must emphasize the dominant culture while selectively showcasing acceptable elements of their own cultures (Sethi, 2007). This tenuous existence contributes to a simultaneous sense of belonging and alienation. These concepts are paramount in my personal relationship with *There, there*.

A lens of intersectionality is also essential in considering the making and viewing of art. Hans Maes argues that a work of art will appeal to various audiences on a number of different levels—what Maes refers to as "multiple occasions of reception." Maes recognizes that any type of media may be read differently not only by separate people, but also by the same person on separate occasions. In other words, a person may form an opinion about a work and could potentially form a different opinion upon revisiting it—either based on viewing it more than once or as a result of changed perspectives from personal growth and life experiences (Maes, 2011). Analyzing any type of media requires a dissection of the lenses and boundaries that construct both the work and the reactionary dialogue concerning the work.

Conscious efforts to understand a person and an artwork with consideration of intersectionality bring artists and viewers closer to empathy and self-awareness. For this reason,

my work does not solely focus on references to my race, size, or sexuality, but rather more universal and human experiences of shame, embarrassment, humor, and touch. *There, there.* openly displays my own intersectional experiences as a chubby, Buddhist, overtly sexual, Thai-Chinese Asian-American feminist. Each scenario is somewhat unsettling, somewhat endearing, and purposefully confusing in order to create an uncomfortable space where viewers may consider their own intersectionality—perhaps not directly in terms of race, weight, age, etc., but with a more subtle approach to questioning belonging and a sense of self: *Why does this make me feel strange? What about me makes me relate to this? What about me makes this seem like nonsense? Why do I hesitate to touch this while that person feels comfortable enough to touch it?*



Figure 12 Anna Youngyeun. *Classic flavor*. Gouache on watercolor paper. 2014.

*Reliably, he always had some in his pocket. He spread a layer on his lips, and extended his hand to offer me a swipe. I puckered up and he went for it. The static from his corduroy jacket must have been to blame. The Chapstick shocked my lip with a loud crack. We never shared again.*

### Tactility/Intimacy

Tactility starts with the body and ends with propriety. Children discover that putting pressure on their genitals is pleasant and comforting and then are shamed for doing it. Back rubbing is a gesture of care until it turns into fear over a lawsuit. And forget about back scratches. While I have no interest in being didactic in describing those situations, I am aware that such circumstances make tactility and closeness shameful indulgences. A physical and

metaphorical sense of tactility—an opportunity for closeness—is paramount in my thesis work because it is both intimate and compromising.

Art and academe have historically practiced sensorial hierarchy in which the visual equates to the intellectual and the tactile equates to the primal. In her book *Art Museums & Touch* Fiona Candlin notes that “Although modern public galleries are places for looking, they are also places for not-touching...[Traditional purviews denounce] participatory art, [situating] touch as an immediate, intellectually undemanding and communal activity.” Candlin cites H. Wofflin and E. Panofsky as demonizing touch as “primitive, childlike, non-rational and pre-modern” while “vision [is] aligned with perceptual sophistication, modernity, and rationality.” This system too closely echoes familiar Western hierarchies of male/female, white/black, rich/poor, and east/west (Candlin, 2010). These binaries parallel the notion that touch intimately connects a person with another person and, in doing so, compromises the whole, individual self. Therefore, intimacy is dangerous to the Western colonialist male self so traditionally characterized as private, individual, dry, clean, closed, rational and intellectual.

I argue that the importance in Candlin’s observations lies not within debating whether or not touch is a viable means of critically engaging with an artwork (*I am clearly of the opinion that it is*), but rather in questioning why immediacy and primitivism are so readily excluded from intellectual pursuits. Just as experiences are informed by both the tactile and the visual, identities are also informed by both “childlike” or guttural impulses and intellectual engagement. Therefore, some degrees of observing both the visual and the tactile are useful in experiencing an artwork. That is not to say that all artworks should be touched, but rather tactility should be considered in its flexible scope of definitions—including the dismissive definitions of primal, immediate, and childlike. With its dual nature, *There, there*, highlights such affective dualisms

and invites viewers to engage both senses to some degree as essential parts of a search for comfort and belonging.



Figure 13 Anna Youngyeun. *Protocol*. Gouache on watercolor paper.

*It was standard protocol. A vigorous and thorough toe-flossing to keep me from tracking lint or sand into the house. It tickled viciously. I wiggled on the doorstep and laughed to tears, but it was tortured laughter. I dreaded each of the eight.*

### Humor

The above-mentioned theoretical research is fundamentally important to my understanding of my personal sense of identity, belonging, and place as well as my artistic practice. Admittedly, however, much of it leaves me feeling heavy-hearted. These realities are difficult to cope with, confusing, and mentally and emotionally taxing. I am not at all alone in using humor as a coping mechanism and a means to relate to other people. Humor taps into the unconscious sympathies Hudson describes in her interview, and it makes embarrassment, shame, guilt, and displacement more tolerable. I am interested in subtle humor as a device to ease into more serious issues—similar to Phaly Nuon’s manicure and pedicure approach in her three-step

depression program. In my studio practice, humor is both a comfort and a form of confrontation. It serves not only as a gateway to acknowledging and embracing more melancholy realities and realizations, but also as an indulgence in lightheartedness.



Figure 14 Anna Youngyeun. *To Collect the Cream*. Gouache on watercolor paper. 2014.

*Ma used the bucket to wash my rear. I used it in the bath to skim milky soap residue from the bathwater. I collected the cream to feed to my imaginary impoverished children who were so starving that they needed to drink bath cream.*

## Conclusion

My work is not only a reflection of my intersectional identity, but also my identity as a product of my parents: a caring but pessimistic mother and a jovial yet distant father. As their

child, I am an embodiment of affective dualisms: a juncture of debilitating pessimism and liberating joviality. It is important for me to note here that conversations surrounding contrasting affectivity often focus on balance. I am baffled by people's obsession with balance and moderation. I have learned that balance is fine, but being overwhelmed in either direction is what creates understanding, self-reflection, and empathy. For that reason, *There, there.* teeters between jovial and disturbing and the viewer's purview decides which becomes paramount. Through exposing intimate components of myself in my work, I create a platform for viewers to intimately explore and question themselves and their surroundings.



...

*Homemaker. In which she does all things Pretty, Righteous, and Good. Perhaps I am inclined toward the opposite. Homewrecker. In which I sleep with your husbands and wives.*

## Works Cited

- Candlin, F. (2010). *Art museums and touch*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1991). A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. (pp. 149-181). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hudson, J. (2010). Mika Rottenberg. *BOMB Magazine*. Retrieved December 2013 from <http://bombmagazine.org/article/3617/mika-rottenberg>
- Maes, H. (2011). Art or porn: Clear division or false dilemma? *Philosophy and literature*. 35(1), 51-64. Retrieved from Project MUSE.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs*. 30(3), 1771-1800. Retrieved from JSTOR.
- Rottenberg, M. (2004). *Mary's Cherries*. [video]
- Sethi, R.C. (2007). Smells like racism. In P.S. Rothenberg (Ed.), *Race, class, and gender in the United States* (pp. 143-152). New York: Worth Publishers. (Reprinted from *The State of Asian America*, 1994)
- Solomon, A. (2001, June 5). The refugees. *The Moth Radio Hour*. Retrieved from The Moth Web Site: <http://themoth.org/posts/stories/the-refugees>.