All Animals Will Get Along in Heaven

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All Animals Will Get Along in Heaven

Camila Nagata

A selected project submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Brian Christensen, Chair
Bryon Draper
Fidalis Buetler

Department of Visual Arts
Brigham Young University
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My final thesis exhibition is directed towards children and parents. My goal is to create a connection between parent and child, and their past, present, and future through memory. Such a connection is accomplished through the implementation of these three different ideas in the artwork: 1) creating different layers of understanding, 2) producing everlasting memories, 3) connecting adult viewers to their past. In addition, I use principles as the foundation for each piece, such as the principles of kindness and learning. These principles are presented to the viewer through parables of current social and political issues, illustrated through my own cultural and artistic backgrounds.

I am interested in planting good principles in the memories of the children and incentivizing parents to think about the impact the world around us has on their children.
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I am also grateful for trials that shape us into a better version of ourselves.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural History</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Inspirations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition Background</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Ideas</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Different Layers of Understanding</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Memorable Art</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Childhood Influence</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Animals Will Get Along In Heaven</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sky is the Limit</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuckooorio</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae (Mother)</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pai (Father)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson in Aerodynamics</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cultural History

Before I talk about my art I’d like to talk a little about my heritage and cultural influences, since they play an important part on how I work as an artist. I’m a Sansei, second generation born outside of Japan. My grandparents, all four of them, were born in Japan and immigrated to Brazil in the beginning of last century, before World War II. Japan was a destitute country, so my grandparents left in pursuit of a better life. They lived in a Japanese colony, so they kept their traditions, spoke their language, and married another Japanese. My parents were born out of the colony, but their first language was Japanese; they only learned Portuguese when they started attending school. Even though they were born in Brazil, they were brought up the Japanese way, in a strict and honor-driven environment, but were exposed to the Brazilian culture through their classmates and friends. Consequently, my siblings and I grew up in between these cultures as well, one being more reserved and emotionally removed, and the other the polar opposite, open and somewhat emotional and melodramatic.

We grew up in a cultural melting pot. The menu of our Christmas dinners consisted of turkey, sushi, and beans and rice. In my grandmother’s house by one wall sat a Shinto shrine, and on the opposite wall hung a picture of the Pope. But my influences were not only Brazilian and Japanese, 90% of the cartoons and movies I watched were from the US, 9% from Japan, and 1% from Mexico, 0% from Brazil. I grew up with the 80’s and 90’s American pop culture being part of my daily life, and manga being one of my passions.
My family moved to the US in September of 1998. After almost 20 years of American media consumption I thought I knew exactly how it was going to be. My assumptions were wrong; my life was nothing like the high school movies I watched. I didn’t know the language or the culture, it was a hellish nightmare, but time and experiences turned everything into one of the most enriching periods of my life. I learned English, made new friends, worked custodial, served a full-time mission in California with the Hispanic community, I was diagnosed with clinical depression, and graduated with a BA in Graphic Design. Through the bad and good experiences, I’ve learned that independent of gender, religion, political preference, race, geography, age, we are all the same when we step onto higher ground where principles steer our lives, not differences—principles of kindness, honesty, humility, and happiness. I’m not saying we should all be a bunch of lemmings, a perfect replica of each other, but that if we apply these principles to our differences, we can live harmoniously with each other.

My final show addresses my cultural influences, childhood memories, and principles that bring us together as humans.

**Artistic Inspirations**

Becoming an artist was never a decision for me, but a process. As a child I was offered opportunities to explore my creativity through after-class art courses, experimentations on my bedroom walls, and I was lucky to have a father who provided me with as many art supplies as I could name. When time came for me to choose a major it was just a matter of deciding which creative outlet would be ideal for me. As I
mentioned before, I had a passion for *manga*, Japanese-style cartoons. My grandmother even made me Japanese dolls that look like the characters from *anime* and *manga*, like Hello Kitty. The clean lines and flat extended fields of bright colors attracted me. For this reason when I first saw Keith Haring’s work, I was 15 years old, I became an instant admirer and started exploring the pop movement, coming across Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein whose works have greatly inspired me. So, combining my attraction to bold clean lines and colors, pop art, and my financial insecurities of not being able to make money with a studio art degree, I chose Graphic Design.

As a graphic designer my tools became Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, and Flash, and my canvas the computer screen. I was taught how to think conceptually, and how to make aesthetically pleasing choices. But once I graduated and started working with real clients I realized one of the most important elements for me in the art making process was missing: freedom.

In the Fall 2010 I started my Master in Fine Arts degree in Sculpture.

**Exhibition Background**

As a graphic designer, a product, a client, and a computer were always there restricting me, but as an artist I was free to create whatever I wanted. Freedom was the reason why I decided to go back to school, it was also the reason I became paralyzed; the possibilities were endless, so my imagination was everywhere and nowhere. For a while I ended up going from concept to concept without feeling a true commitment to any idea in particular. I explored ideas of identity, body image, and culture, then in frustration started
becoming cynical and used my art to make moral and artistic criticisms. That’s when I had a severe allergic reaction caused by a resin I used in my art. I was confined to my bed for a few weeks. I don’t remember ever suffering as much physically, and if that wasn’t enough I had many other trials come my way during that same month. It’s funny how suffering helps us see life in a different perspective. I decided to abandon all the negative art I was making and search for a worthwhile and uplifting concept.

Not knowing where to go, I turned to the one aspect of my art that had remained constant throughout my explorations: my aesthetics. I started asking questions, such as, “Why is it so controlled? Why does it look Japanese? Why is it minimalistic? Why is it colorful? Why am I always trying to make it cute?” My father summed up the answer for my question in one of my phone calls home: “Sua arte parece infantil, para crianças.” (trans. “Your art seems infantile, for children.”) At first I was a little offended; I thought he was putting my art down and not taking it seriously, but I changed my mind when I took a picture book class, and the teacher said the most meaningful books ever written are picture books, because those books are the ones that will stay with people for the rest of their lives; they become dear to us. So my brain started clicking. I figured three things out: 1) Some of the most remarkable picture books have different layers, the literal message children will understand, and a deeper message only adults will understand, as in The Giving Tree, by Shel Silverstein; 2) Some events from our childhood will stay in our memories, but we will only understand them years later, like when I was in first grade and a friend of mine told me a dirty joke, but I only found out why it was dirty in 6th
grade; 3) For the most part, our childhood molds who we are as adults: our passions, fears, and traumas.

Thus, to effectively incorporate these three ideas into my art I began researching contemporary artists with the same aesthetics and conceptual points of view, and was pleasantly surprised to find the similarities between my art and some of my favorite artists.

Influences

When talking about childhood memories as part of the concept for my art, I have to mention my main influence Joseph Cornell (see figure 1). ¹Cornell accessed his childhood memories and used them as subject matter in his artwork, and not only that, but “Cornell tried to see the world as children do (…) Cornell loved children, loved their innocence.”² In one of his last major exhibitions he arranged everything especially for children: the artwork was at kids’ height and he served soft drinks and cake.³ My final MFA show will be especially for children and parents, and I’ll serve cotton candy, popcorn, and lemonade.

¹ http://www.salon.com/march97/cornell970331.html
² All things Considered. NPR. Nov 26, 2003
³ http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/may/20/1
Another artist that uses childhood memories as driving force in his work is Richard Serra (see figure 2). In his art statement he recounts that on his 4th birthday in the fall of 1943 his father took him to the shipyard to watch the launching of a ship to the sea. Serra describes the scaffolding, the huge propeller, the crowd’s anxiety, the logs rolling, the moment the ship hit the water, and he concludes by saying, “My awe and wonder of that moment remain. All the raw material that I needed is contained in the reserve of this memory.”4 Amen, Richard.

4 The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts
http://water.pulitzerarts.org/artist-statements/serra/
Another artist drawing inspiration from his infancy is Yoshitomo Nara. He addresses his loneliness and the neglect he felt growing up because of his working parents: “The paintings, drawings and sculptures of seemingly innocent, wide-eyed children and dogs that have become his trademark are an attempt to capture this childhood sense of boredom and frustration and recapture the fierce independence natural to children”5 (see figure 3.) Like Nara, the past has great hold of what I make, including my aesthetic choices. I grew up watching Japanese cartoons in Portuguese, and my grandma made us felt *manga* dolls.

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5 [http://sites.asiasociety.org/yoshitomonara/artist/](http://sites.asiasociety.org/yoshitomonara/artist/)
Cuteness is appealing to me so I often use clean lines, flat colorful fields, and baby proportions in my art. These are all characteristics of the Japanese Kawaii and Super Flat art movements, of which Nara is part. But one cannot talk about Super Flat and not mention Murakami (see figure 4), who was also greatly influenced by Japanese pop culture.⁶ Even though Murakami’s cynicism is the backbone of his art, he also uses childish and cute art to convey a much more serious message, even a political message. I have the same goal, minus the cynicism and sex.

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Kara Walker and Tom Otterness also use child-related aesthetics to convey a much more serious message, such as racial and political issues. Walker goes back a century into children’s illustration and uses the same style to tell horrific stories about slavery (see figure 5). Otterness makes his political statement on NYC’s corruption through little, round, bronze sculptures that look like escapees from an early 20th century black-and-white Disney cartoon, but are actually inspired by Gilded Age political

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cartoons (see figure 6). It is difficult to say these artists have only influenced me visually, because like them, I also use eye candy art to discuss complex topics. This is a technique used by picture book authors when writing about a difficult topic. Rick Walton, who has published more than 90 picture books, suggests the use of “distance in time and space,” animals, or humor, (and I would add cuteness) to make the message less abrasive.

Figure 5. Kara Walker, Sillouettes

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8 http://hyperallergic.com/23776/tom-otterness-subway-art/

The Three Ideas

Drawing inspiration from other artists’ art and my triple eureka moment have helped me find my new focus; it led me to the art I’m making today. I’m applying these three ideas by making art that: 1) has different layers of understanding, 2) is memorable and, 3) shows the influence our childhood has on us. Here are the reasons behind each idea:

1. Different Layers of Understanding

Parables are effective teaching tools because they have different layers of understanding and the audience is able to comprehend those layers at the depth of their capacity to understand. I am using the same method in my art. By using parables my
objective is to reach two main groups: children and parents. My main target audience is children ages 5-11; they are in the Concrete Operational stage, which is when “their thinking is limited to what they can personally see, hear, touch, and experience.” They understand the world in literal terms, so the story of the three pigs is simply the story of three pigs and their hay, wood, and brick houses. My secondary target audience is the parents and older children, 12 years through adulthood, who are in the Formal Operational stage. “Adolescents and adults think about abstraction and hypothetical concepts and reason analytically.” For this group, the three little pigs story goes beyond the pigs and the wolf; it is also about preparedness and hard work.

2. Memorable Art

Because children only understand the literal layer of my art when they see it, it is important that the art will stay in their memories until they can understand its secondary layers. If the three little pig story remains in the child’s memory until the Formal Operational stage and they reassess this memory, they will be able to draw the moral of the story. So, how am I going to make my art memorable? 1) By making it interactive, giving the children an opportunity to participate. We remember more when we perform a motor activity and use our senses, than when just being a passive viewer. 2) By


making it visually appealing, eye candy. 3) And by combining the experience with the presence of the father and/or the mother, because the most important memories we carry from childhood are related to our parents.\textsuperscript{13}

3. Childhood Influence

Our childhood have great influence on who we are as adults. Dr. Berger explains the fundamentals of psychotherapy: “Inner drives and motives, many of them irrational, originating in childhood, and unconscious (hidden from awareness), are crucial concepts in psychoanalytic theory. The basic underlying forces are thought to influence every aspect of thinking and behavior, from the smallest details of daily life to the crucial choices of a lifetime.”\textsuperscript{14} And as children we are affected by the environment we grow up in which consists of different systems. Developmental researcher Urie Bronfengrenner said “each person is significantly affected by interactions among a number of overlapping systems which provide the context of development.”\textsuperscript{14} This context is shown in the Ecological Model, represented in Figure 6. So by resorting to my own memories and influences growing up in the 80’s and 90’s I would like to trigger parents’ memories of what they were exposed to when they were children and make them aware of what kinds of things their children are experiencing from them, their peers, the media, and the culture. Hopefully this realization will encourage us to create worthwhile memories for our children.


Figure 6. The Ecological Model. Urie Bronfenbrenner.
Exhibition - Part I

The foundation of each of my pieces in this part of the show is the principle of kindness, and the structure on top comes from parables I draw from my own experience and from current political and social issues. The reason I chose the principle of kindness is because in the midst of so much information, different opinions, and conflict, I feel sometimes we forget we all have something in common: we are all humans. So even though the work makes reference to current issues, I don’t take sides, but focus on the underlying principle, and I utilize the aforementioned three ideas to help the viewer internalize and remember the principle.

The viewer will be able to interact with the piece by pushing the sound button and listening to the text. By making the story audible instead of placing the words on the wall, children that can’t read will still have access to it. Also, when more senses are used to interact with the piece it’s more likely a memory will be formed. For this reason the art is also visually appealing through controlled shapes and lines, and bold colors.

Little hints of the 70’s, 80’s, and early 90’s will be spread throughout this session, to connect the parents and adults back to their own childhood.
All Animals Will Get Along in Heaven

This piece consists of two porcelain animals: a donkey and an elephant. They are free-standing on a cloud pedestal made out of wood and plastic laminate, and under the cloud there are 18 black plaster pigs (see figure 7). The donkey has a bow in its tail referencing Eeyore (see figure 9), from *Winnie the Pooh*, and the elephant has a necklace with the symbol of Lotsa Heart, from *Carebears* (see figure 8). The pigs are round and cartoony resembling piggy banks (see figure 10-11). The sound device says “All animals will get along in heaven.”

The words reference the scripture that says the lion and the lamb will be able to live together peacefully. Also, I refer to the battleground my Facebook page became during the election, where I saw many of my friends fight and argue with each other due to divergent views and party preferences. A difference of opinion is not evil, it’s a gift brought by agency, but it can become something terrible if we let go of charity. The elephant and the donkey got to heaven, not the piggy banks. Children will understand the artwork literally; animals will all get along in heaven.

The *Winnie the Pooh* and *Carebear* references are to take the adult viewers back to their own childhood and invite them to see the art as children.
Figure 7. All Animals Will Get Along in Heaven
The Sky is the Limit

The yellow and green characters are ceramic pieces spray-painted with neon colors. The yellow characters have white stars (see figure 12, 15, 16). Right above them within the box there is a black light giving the figurines a luminous glow and makes the stars black. The box is made out of wood covered with plastic laminate. The sound box will say, “an alien was born, and there was no more room.”

The colors of this piece are the Brazilian flag colors. The yellow characters represent a mother and a father, and the green a baby; the blue box and the stars represent sky and the land of Brazil, and each star signifies a state. This artwork is about immigration and the disconnect that exists within the family when the parents are born in the native country, and their children in the new country. Cultural and socioeconomic differences create this gap between generations, and things can get even more difficult when societies have a “there is no room here” attitude. In Brazil, my grandparents were introduced to Christianity and some of them became Catholic. So, this piece can also be viewed as a nativity set.

Looking for a better life in Brazil, my grandparents were full of hope and the sky was the limit. Then you see in this piece, the sky is a confining box for these glowing, yellow, alien-looking figures. The stars placed on the figures turn black under the black light. It represents the limits imposed by the new country on the immigrant’s dreams, either because of discrimination, laws, or unrealistic expectations. Japanese immigrants
were called the “yellow hazard.”\textsuperscript{15} (see figure 13 and 14). The neon colors also reference the 80’s.

Figure 15
Blue

“You’re Blue” consists of three ceramic characters painted blue. The first is a chick with a bronze beak, the second is a bigger figure of a cat-chicken hybrid with a bronze beak and bronze whiskers, the third is a kitten with bronze whiskers (see figure 17-20). They sit side-by-side with the chick and the kitten facing the cat-chicken. The sound box will say, “Am I a chicken or a cat?”, “You’re blue!” An adult will ask the question, and two children will answer it in unison.

I’m Japanese Brazilian. In Brazil I’m Japanese, and in Japan I’m Brazilian. When I was a child I didn’t pay too much attention to that, but as I grew and moved to the US, people started asking me where I was from. When I said Brazil I could immediately see people’s confusion in their eyebrows. Also, after talking to people for a while they would do the same eyebrow movement and say “I thought you were Asian, but you have a Spanish accent” (I knew they meant Portuguese). At first I found it all a little offensive, because I was trying so hard to fit in, and every time people pointed out that I was different, I felt like an outsider, but I got over it and now I take pride in my heritage. I celebrate cultural, ethical, racial, gender, and age differences; they make this life enriching and interesting. But the moment these differences make people think they are better than the other, it creates conflict and hate.

Most children don’t see so many differences; their literal and innocent way of seeing the world brings everyone to the same place.
Figure 17. Blue
“Cuckooooo” consists of a wooden structure covered with plastic laminate, with six slots/shelves; each holds a little bronze weapon from the game Clue (a candlestick, rope, knife, pipe wrench, and pipe), except the last slot, which remains empty. On the top part, in a little platform, a blue porcelain cuckoo chick sits.

Gun control is a very controversial topic right now, and I don’t have a clear vision of what would solve the problem, but that is not what this piece is about. The missing weapon from the game is a gun; there are still 5 weapons left (See figure 21-28,) so the game can go on because there can still be a murder. And there is a depressed blue chick cuckoo bird on top (blue is the favorite color of the mentally ill\textsuperscript{16}) waiting to make his choice. My objective with this piece is to call attention to the cuckoo bird (see figure 22), serving as a symbol of mental instability. It’s still a chick and it’s depressed. When researching mass murderers and their relation to mental illnesses, I came across an article by James Garbarino called “How a Boy Becomes A Killer.” Dr. Garbarino’s research suggests that mass murderers commonly suffer from mental illnesses triggered by isolation and bullying, which leads to depression. He also mentions the influence of mass media and video games in violent behavior.\textsuperscript{17}

Again, I’m not promoting a specific solution to this problem, but just opening the way for some thought of how we can help. For example, parents can try to be more aware


of what their kids are seeing or playing, and children can be taught to be kinder with their siblings, neighbors, and classmates. Every major problem has a root, a principle that is not being followed, and trying to heal the symptom will not solve the problem.
Figure 21. Cuckoo
Figure 27
Exhibition - Part II

Part II relates to the saying “you are what you eat.” Consumption doesn’t only happen when we eat food. We have other ways of consuming, including: seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling. My parents fed me from the moment I was born, their likes and dislikes, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, biases, these things have become part of who I am. What I am passing on to future generations is result of what I was fed.

Mae (Mother)

“Mae” is an installation of 272 transparent plastic plates hanging from a wall and partially laying on the ground, with key words that tell my mother’s life story up to the point she had all her children (see figure 29 and 30.) My mother fed me in the literal sense of the word, but she also gave me herself—her past, her identity, her worldview. The plates are fastened together as a big quilt, holding two symbolic elements of motherhood. First, my mother was the one that pasted the words on the plates and chain linked each plate, mimicking the process of making a quilt. Second, the words are my mother’s life story represented by verbs, nouns, and numbers. The viewer can either read word by word in sequence, or pick at random what he/she will read. Today my mother is the consequence of events and decisions she made in her life. Because she is my nurturer, in part I, have become who she is. A quarter of the plates rest on the ground, and the rest are suspended by fishing line on the wall, as if ascending. My mother was an active part of my childhood and teenage years, but as an adult I see everything she’s done for me in a different perspective. Once the blanket and the plates were functional, now they area a relic in my memory.
**Pai (Father)**

Right next to the plates there is a “Pai” table with an image made out of 702 transparent plastic cups filled with colored water, acting as pixels they will form the image of my father’s face (See Figure 31). I pulled the image from the family picture we took two weeks before we set up the piece. My father has also been a great influence in my life through the priesthood power he holds. The water and the light symbolizes this power. A quality I learned to admire in my father is his capacity to accomplish anything to which he sets his mind; he is persistent and diligent. The process of making the colored mosaic was repetitive and arduous, and he was there with me the entire time in a collaborative performance in honor of his legacy. I attribute who he is and what he has accomplished to these qualities. The image becomes easier to perceive if the viewer is willing to climb the stairs to higher ground. Now, as an adult, I can see the bigger picture.

As I began to understand my parents, and see the bigger picture, I realized the impermanence and shortness of life. My parents won’t be around forever. So the water in the mosaic evaporated throughout the exhibition (see Figure 32), and the plates once taken down, will go to the trash; they are disposable, like our bodies. But my mother’s story and my father’s face went on in the minds of the people that visited the exhibition.
Figure 31. Pai
Exhibition - Part III

Lesson in Aerodynamics

The artwork took place in the opening reception. Each guest was given a piece of construction paper and was instructed to build a paper airplane. At 7:45pm everyone was be invited to go to the 5th floor and fly their airplanes all at the same time.

Through play generations can connect and build memories together. I’m exploring the idea of what creates memory. According to Dr. Angela Chen, when we engage all our senses, we are more likely to remember things. So by building airplanes, and looking at them flying in the air at the same time while surrounded by many people will engage senses and create memories. Another way our brains select what goes into our long-term memories is through the intensity of the emotion we feel in a determined situation. So, in “Lesson in Aerodynamics,” I tried to create a situation where the event would be permanently engraven in the minds of the participants. The memory is the artwork.

The opening reception took place on a Friday evening, and I invited children and parents to come and enjoy each other’s company. Popcorn and cotton candy were served. My goal was to create a fun and happy atmosphere. This was the “art,” the guests became part of the art as they enjoyed themselves. The objective of the art was creating memories, sharing good principles, and promoting family interaction.
Conclusion

As an artist I was falling into the trap of cynicism. I was saved by a trial that made me question what was really important in my life, and it made me realize the world is filled with negativism and pessimism, but it also is filled with goodness, kindness, and honor. Consequently, I decided to promote the positive, and to point the viewer in the same direction by producing art with different levels of understanding like parables, making it memorable through use of shape and color, and triggering the viewer’s childhood memories. My main focus was on children because they are pure and teachable, and more importantly, they are the future of our families, communities, nations, and religions.
My first goal was to create works of art with different levels of understanding. I created artwork the same way parables were created. Parables use metaphors to teach principles. In the process of finding these metaphors I researched different topics and issues, such as gun control, immigration, human development, human rights, and others. Although these issues might seem disconnected and somewhat random, I discovered they connect and work as metaphors; every one of these topics teaches us, in its own particular way, the principle of love. When dealing with any element of the creation, animal, plant, or human the absence of love causes grief, pain, and destruction, while the presence of love brings light and hope. I concluded the main cause of problems, big or small, is lack of charity caused by pride.

The second objective was to make memorable art, so the parables would still be remembered by the children when they matured enough to understand it. Going back to my own childhood, I was able to revisit some memories and question why I still remembered them among so many others. Also, researching studies done by psychologists about memory, I was able learn that the more senses we engage in a certain situation, the more likely we are to store it in our long-term memory. So, when strong emotions are felt, and we hear, see, taste, smell, and touch, our brains are more likely to store what is happening. Based on this discovery, I designed my art show to become a sensory experience to the viewer, and created an environment where families and friends could come together to have fun, and feel of each other’s love and companionship.

Even though I’m not a child anymore, sometimes I feel like one, because of my memories that once in a while take me back in time. I especially think about my
childhood when I remember how easy and carefree life was, and when I long to be as
kind and patient as I was. So, the third objective of the show was to help parents and
adults remember who they were as children, and realize what contributed to them
becoming who they are today. Parents have an enormous influence on their children, like
their parents did on them. By creating “Pai” and “Mae,” I was able to think about the
influence my parents had and still have on me, and realize what I want to pass on to
future generations.

When I first started sculpting the ceramic pieces, and cutting the wood for the
boxes for my final show, my objective was to use current issues to share important
principles to children and adults, which I did. Through my research I came to understand
that everything in the universe is guided by principles. My art show played a key role in
opening my mind to the philosophical, scientific, and artistic world of principles, not only
when applied to the problems we face today in the world, but to the whole universe, even
before the earth came to be. It is fascinating to me to think about harmony and chaos, and
the principles involved in the creation. The more I learn, the more I know there is a God,
and that His power and dominion go beyond my finite understanding. I plan to continue
exploring these ideas and translate them into art that inspires and uplifts children and
adults.
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