Spliced Journeys: Interconnected Digital Memories
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Introduction

Inspired by life experiences in Asia together with a collection of found objects and personal environmental images from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Brunei Darussalam, Kong Ho has recently created a series of digital artworks based on his memories of these iconic places. This series of work is based on literally deconstructed photographs comprised of vintage patterns and parts of objects. Ho manipulates and reformats these items into swirling designs of color and form associated with contemporary digital images of fractals. Like the ever-repeating edge of a fractal shape, Ho's chosen objects form isolated images of themselves that emerge and radiate outward in spiraling patterns. The natural objects and artefacts that appear in his work include shells, flowers, leaves, rocks, ceramic shards, symbolic artefacts, monumental sculptures and historical architecture.

In this paper, Ho intends to use his complex spiral digital art to trace the evolving and revolving memories that frequently materialize in his work. Specific identities pertaining to the objects and images found in these three Asian countries can be seen to reverberate Ho's cultural identity through his utilization of transformed visual language. Each step of Ho's working methodology, from finding objects and buildings that seem familiar to him while journeying from location to location to creating his digital works of art and exhibiting them will be addressed in this paper.

Sensory Experience of Transition

As a teaching artist, Ho tries to be sensitive and aware of his living environment. Ho remembers the moment when he first truly began to internalize the special sense of place that is Brunei Darussalam. It happened on a hot summer evening of middle of July 2011, as he was leaving the hotel apartments in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, the starting point of his new journey in life, and a place somewhat half the Earth distance away from his hometown, Bradford, Pennsylvania. Ho noticed that while watching the golden-yellow sunset that he was encountering a moment of timeless being that came from feeling that he was a person of the world and a part of nature. He shares this influence from nature for creating a work of art with those of Jacquelynn Baas (2005), who notes in the introduction in her book *Smile of the Buddha*:

> Human beings are social animals, creatures of their culture as well as of their own histories. Works of art are complex products of complex minds, and this makes the search for the sources of inspiration that lie behind them cumulative and endless. (p. 9)

This is the kind of transcendental experience that comes from feeling lost in the enormity of nature. According to Baas (2005), "Buddhism challenges thinking as a path to knowing. And what both the creation and the perception of art share with Buddhist mediation practice is that they allow us to forget ourselves and thus realize ourselves. They are parallel practices." (p. 11) This sort of experience has led Ho to
try and capture the sublime and over-whelming nature of the sensory experience that make up the vintage patterns of a memory that more about the essence and mood of a time and place instead of a clear set or frozen remembered place. Even though Ho has relocated to many places during the past 20 years: from humid Hong Kong to dry Texas; hot Texas to cold Pennsylvania; and from snowy Pennsylvania to sunny Brunei, the way the sky looks when the sun sets with its peaceful sunbeams, is the one thing that feels the same and familiar to him.

The golden-yellow clouds against the ultramarine blue backdrop of the sky on that particular evening might have been familiar; but there were also some aspects about them that were unique. Ho took several photographs of that unique moment. After that, he started taking photographs of other natural wonders, such as seashells, shards, flowers, leaves, insects, sea and sky. These items and phenomena are commonly found on beaches and rainforests in Brunei Darussalam. After viewing his "gallery" of environmental images, Ho selects those, which he feels most attracted to, and instead of printing "straight" he begins the process of manipulating and transforming them. For his transformations, Ho uses imaging software, Adobe Photoshop. With this software, Ho manipulates and transforms some of the digital photographs into spiraling patterns of colour and texture, which resemble the digital images of fractals. In a further effort to fold and unfold his old personal memories of "self" into his new identity in Brunei, Ho also deconstructed the photographs of vintage patterns and sections of objects that were common household articles, such as tea cups, spoons and bowls, found in his childhood in Hong Kong. Other types of digital images for his recent series of digital art, Spliced Journeys, include the colonial era architecture found in Taiwan. These images were collected during Ho's last practice-based research in Taiwan in 2013. Looking back on the work that he produced for his last group exhibition, Mural•list•mania: Multimedia Art Exhibition, at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre in Hong Kong in March 2014 along with works that he did not show, Ho can see that these digital art pieces carry a common thread, a growing nostalgia for the past and a romantic attitude toward his bicultural identity as an American-Chinese working in Brunei Darussalam.

**Stretching out the Transient Experience**

When measured against the visual quality of Ho's complex digital art series based on spiraling forms, the nostalgic quality of his vintage photographs resembles the poetic and time-shifting feeling of Claude Monet's Water Lilies, an Impressionist masterwork depicting his water garden in Oregon in 1914, as described by Baas (2005):

> The painting seems to contain a moment or—better—a totality of moments in deep summer, when the greens go dark and the water reflects a bottomless sky. The sensation of a moment I wasn't even aware of losing is suddenly mine again. Or maybe what the painting embodies is change itself, and the awareness is an awareness of time and the losses that time brings. (p. 19)

The process by which digital art images are created along with the medium used in the works is a very important part of the final statement or content of Ho's work. For example, in his digital art pieces that rely on the fractal art effect, Ho articulates a meditative state of mind through the process of creating a field of never ending spiral images. Through the use of manipulated and often common subjects like seashells,
plants and daily articles, Ho begins to enhance that object’s most outstanding feature. This coupled with his recollection of having found the object on a particular day adds to his desire to transform his subject into an image that can engage others into seeing the fabulous transient world around us. The square picture plane may end up resembling a memory with no beginning or end, or it may be more like the interweaving of time and space. *Yellow Heliconia*, one of his digital art images, shown in Figure 1, reveals the transfiguration of the memory of a simple tropical yellow Heliconia, found on the campus of University of Brunei Darussalam.

![Figure 1: Kong Ho. *Yellow Heliconia*. 2012. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W](image)

The visually attractive golden yellow-orange spiral Heliconia image resembles the picturesque style of a carefully orchestrated albeit casual composition. The colourful and sweet appearance of this golden yellow-orange spiral Heliconia against its complementary blue Heliconia image is not the content of Ho's digital art but instead it embodies the transitory nature of life revealed as an expression of nature.

**Memory as Evolving Fragment of Experience**

According to Hogenboom (2013), a science reporter of BBC News, our memories are unreliable. Whenever we recall our memories, we reconstruct parts of images stored in collections of memory forming cells. Dr. Xu Liu of the RIKEN-MIT Center for Neural Circuit Genetics told BBC News, "The differing combination of cells could partly explain why memories are not static like a photograph, but constantly evolving" (as cited in *BBC News*, 2013). As a sensitive visual artist, Ho has tried to capture moments of his memories through his art. However, it is hard for anyone to have an explicit and complete picture of one's specific memory. It is similar to our memory of colours, which is always shifting and uncertain. It is not because we run out of specific names for colours in our art vocabulary, but the incapability of recalling the
specific colour in our memory cells, gives rise to interpretations.

"Every time we think we remember something, we could also be making changes to that memory – sometimes we realize sometimes we don't," suggested Dr. Liu. It is similar to the art making experience of Ho's deconstructive fractal-look digital art. The process by which his digital artworks are created along with the media used in the works is a very important part of the final statement or content of the work. For example, in his recent digital art piece, shown in Figure 2, which relies on the fractal effect, Ho articulates a remembered state of mind through the process of creating the image. Briggs (1992) has described fractal as the tracks and marks left by the process of dynamical change:

Fractals describe the roughness of the world, its energy, its dynamical changes and transformations. Fractals are images of the way things fold and unfold, feeding back into each other and themselves. The study of fractals has confirmed many of the chaologists' insights into chaos, and has uncovered some unexpected secrets of nature's dynamical movements as well" (p. 23).

Digital imaging can alter layers, colors, textures, dimensions, repetitions, rotations and transformations in a photo to form differing combinations and changes, which are different from hand-drawn compositions. Ho cannot visualize the final outcome of his images, but the process always reminds him of his free-floating fractured memory with no defined space or time. Also, each magnification of his digital fractal image reveals more details of the chosen pattern, which is difficult to present in a traditional hand-painted image.

Figure 2: Kong Ho. Reinvented Sensations. 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W

The composition of his recent body of work is created to form a transcendentental kind of space, which may turn out to include spiral, rotational, transforming, dissolving, or
overlapping visual effects. *White Costumed Shells*, one of his digital art pieces, shown in Figure 3, reveals the transformation of a simple yellow white ark shell, collected on Muara Beach in Brunei Darussalam, into a more beautiful or spiritual state.

![Figure 3: Kong Ho. White Costumed Shells. 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W](image)

Ho never has a preconceived notion of how his digital images will turn out. He was not sure how to depict his nostalgic feeling or perceptual memories for the tiny white ark shell, which now serves as a reminder for remembering a particular day or the beach but after using his well-trained eye and instincts to settled upon a final version of the manipulated image, he is satisfied. This is how Ho repeatedly transfigures moments and memories into digital images. Digital art, like painting, allows Ho to explore colours and the use his intuition to direct his image to a completion that finally feels "right" and matches his memories. In a way, the digital medium allows him the luxury of working in a manner that is not only original but also bold in its outcome. His latest work with a focus on evolving memory, follows the principles put forth in the writings of French art historian Hippolyte Taine in his essay titled "Le Bouddhisme" published in 1865:

> Nature is … an infinite chain of causes from effects and effects from causes, an infinite progeny into the past and the future of decompositions and recompositions with no beginning and no end. Such is the view of the whole to which [Buddhists] are led, on the one hand, by their main theme of nothingness and, on the other, by the spectacle of things incessantly changing. Having suppressed fixed causes, there remains only the series of changing effects. Thereupon, the imagination comes alives. (Taine, 1886 [1865], p. 291)

**Reconnection to the Past and Asian Culture**

The creative impetus or intent behind Ho's recent spiral fractal digital art is to
reconnect to his past bicultural experience in Hong Kong. Psychologically, the motivation behind his transfigurations of a natural object or common image found in Hong Kong, Brunei and Taiwan is to hold onto the essence of the evolving memory of his past Asian culture, which forms the basis of his self-identity. In Ho's recent digital art piece, *Whirling Chinese Cranes*, shown in Figure 4, he suggests the nostalgic feeling of his childhood life with his now deceased parents in Hong Kong. The whirling composition reveals the synthesis of various ceramic shards of a typical Chinese teacup with a blue crane pattern from the 1960s. The fragment of this traditional common Chinese blue and white teacup with a regionally generic blue crane pattern, not only recalls his childhood memory of having a pleasant Chinese tea breakfast with his parents in Hong Kong, but also provides a new dimension or meaning to his current living environment in Borneo. Ho searched for this old teacup pattern in Hong Kong for several years but only found two well-preserved blue crane teacups during his visit to Kuching in Sarawak, Malaysia, in March 2013. It may seem contradictory to try to rematerialize that is already gone, but a part of the large historical list behind humankind's reasons for making art seems to have gone into this endeavour. While it is true to say that the passing of time may help to ease the wistful longing for the old days, the full sense of the loss remains and the nostalgia is always there.

Figure 4: Kong Ho. *Whirling Chinese Cranes*. 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W

According to Searleman and Herrmann (1994), "Research suggests that our memory for the physical environment is more like a sketch than a photograph. In other words, our memory for the environment typically contains gaps of information from the original scene much like a hastily made sketch would" (p. 199). Searleman and Herrmann (1994) also stated, "Memory for the environment will usually involve a combination of perceptual memories for objects or events seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched and the meaning that we attribute to these perceptions" (p. 199). Human
life is full of contradictions and so is art. Artists like Ho try to capture those timeless memories in our lives through artefacts or mementos, such as ceramic shards, which are used to establish a link or connection with our past experience. It is not clear that whether the past affects the present or the present is just an illusion of the past. Similarly, we cannot be sure whether we can live without our past experience or perceptual memories. The only certainty is that our world and personal experience is in a state of flux. The connection to our past experience gives us a reason for understanding ourselves and sustaining our identities. It stops us from creating a world where humanity and cultural memory are devalued.

**Colonial Cultural Memory and Personal Cultural Identity**

In Ho's recent cross-cultural artistic research, he documented architectural sites in Taiwan that had colonial and cultural significance and then he put them into a new context. The resulting fragmented images hold a new identity embossed with a new significance that he presents as a digital photographic memoir of Taiwan's history as seen through His bicultural identity as an American-Chinese working in Brunei Darussalam. Specific identities pertaining to the colonial era architecture in Taiwan and can be seen to reverberate in Ho's cultural identity through the utilization of altered visual language. Analyzing the concepts behind Ho's recent series of digital art, titled *29 Days in Formosa*, helps to bring new insights to his nostalgic work, which is about new sensory experiences in Taiwan mingled with memories of familiar old ones of colonial Hong Kong before 1997.

Born and raised in Hong Kong from 1960s to 1990s, Ho has witnessed the changes of this region from a tiny colonial seaport into the Special Administrative Region of China—one of the world's leading international financial centres. In Ho's memories, there are not too many colonial era buildings that have survived after decades of rapid urbanization in Hong Kong. The most memorable one for Ho is the red brick and granite Clock Tower of the old Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) terminus, built in 1915, in Tsimshatsui, Hong Kong. Ho still remembers his father taking him with his brother and sisters there for taking the railway to visit the New Territories in Hong Kong during the holiday season. His father told them repeatedly how he and Ho's mother arrived in Hong Kong through this terminus as Chinese immigrants in 1949 after the Communist Party of China took over Mainland China and founded the People's Republic of China (PRC). Undoubtedly, this Clock Tower has witnessed millions of Chinese immigrants from Mainland China passed through the railway terminus to begin new lives in Hong Kong. Nowadays, this old Clock Tower has become a memorable Western landmark of British Colonial Revival or pre-Victorian architecture in Tsimshatsui, Kowloon, in front of Victoria Harbour, Hong Kong.

Ho’s journey of selecting Taiwanese architecture with significant colonial and cultural value to photograph, deconstruct, manipulate, print, exhibit, and reflect on, is all part of his artistic research, and as such it is also included as material critical to the understanding of his identity as a bicultural artist and how he has come to understand certain cultural aspects of his youth as a person of Chinese heritage growing up in the colonial city of Hong Kong. Ho's personal journey includes immigrating to the U.S. in early 1990 and his present choice of living in Brunei Darussalam, which is located on the northwest coast of Borneo island in South East Asia.
Ho's first recollection of exposure to the colonial Clock Tower in Hong Kong might be his first experience of memories passing between generations. According to the findings of a Nature Neuroscience study reported by Gallagher (2013), a health and science reporter of BBC News, behavior can be affected by experiences in previous generations, which have been passed on through a form of 'collective memory' (Billig, 1990) to the descendants. Actually, "memory images" or "mental images", as referred by Gregg (1975) in his Human Memory, passed between generations not only happen in a verbal context or collective memory, but also in a memory for the environment. Our visual experience of particular historical site reminds us our cultural memory. According to Searleman and Herrmann (1994), "The existence of this body of knowledge (sometimes referred to as a collective memory) imposes a task on the active members of a culture—they need to be aware of this information and to pass it on to the next generation" (p. 223).

When Ho starts out to make an image of a particular architecture site in Taiwan he knows that he is only creating an illusory memory of that site. Through the use of manipulated digital photos taken from the particular architectural site, he begins to enhance that architectures most outstanding feature. This coupled with his recollection of having experienced the colours, patterns, and textures of the interior and exterior of that particular building on that specific day adds to his desire to work his subject into an image that can engage others into seeing the compelling illusory world around us. Ximen Read House, one of his digital art pieces, shown in Figure 5, reveals the transfiguration of a colonial architecture. A series of photos of this colonial building was taken in Taipei's Ximen. This digital art piece uses the Red House, built in 1908 during the Japanese occupation. The Red House expresses Ho's passion with the red-brick octagonal architecture and the Fibonacci Sequence and his delight with seeing this Western-style colonial building turned into a revival hall for visual and performing art in Taipei. In some circumstances, historical buildings are not just perceived as antique architecture but a compelling illusory memory.
The Red House has undergone a series of transformations since 2007. It went from a public market to a multi-purpose cultural arts hub for the creative industries in Taipei. It houses diverse visual and performing art organisations and provides exhibition and performance space and boutique space for young artists and designers. Ho transfigured his experiences and subsequent memories of the interior and exterior space of this colonial building and coupled with his personal feelings towards the displays and settings inside the Red House. He selected three major digital photos of the Red House for the transfiguration of a digital art piece, including an outside front view of the building, a white linear architectural drawing of the building on red background, and an inside view of a display case in the main lobby. He applied the actions effect of Adobe Photoshop to transform the cutout images of the Red House based on his formulated imaging effects, such as resizing, rotating, moving, changing colour, adding blury effect, duplicating, grouping, rearranging and merging layers. Then he organized different groups of transformed images according to the formalistic visual relationship of individual groups of images and background images.

Ho's first encounter with the colonial architecture of Hong Kong was a memorable one. The red brick and gray granite colours of the Clock Tower mixed with crowded travelers in the platform of KCR terminus turned out to be one of the highlights of Ho's childhood life. The loud train sound mingled with the coal smoke smell of the steam engine train helped him to experience the feeling associated with adventure and new destinations. Furthermore, this first memory of colonial architecture has somehow become what seems to be the driving force for Ho to continue developing his art around almost forgotten themes. No matter if it is explored in his complex fractal digital art, memoiristic digital photographs, dissolving videos or transcendental paintings, personal memory is always his favourite motif.
Conclusion: Transpersonal Experience

The visual styles of Ho's spiral fractal-inspired digital art series based on spiraling forms, and the nostalgic quality of his evolving memories of his bicultural background have their starting point in the real world, but the same representational starting point that grounds the digital art images in the center of compelling, make-believe colours also transforms them before the viewers eyes into pure visual patterns, colors and relationships. If 'remembering is a constructive act' (Radley, 1990) or process of making memories, then Ho's nostalgic digital art transforms personal experience to the interest or memories of people concerned.

In his 29 Days in Formosa series of digital art, Ho uses his spiral fractal-looking digital art to trace the inspirational forms that frequently materialize in his work. Just as with everything else in life, the images in Ho's digital art appear to have fluid meanings and even to take on different physical characteristics when one looks carefully at the structure of the work and contemplates the image as a whole. Confucius Temple, shown in Figure 6, reveals the synthesis of a single view of the main hall of Confucius Temple in Taipei. The view of this temple with an orange-yellow roof and mint green doors, not only recalls Ho's memory of the Sik Sik Yuen Wong Tai Sin Temple, a home to Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, in Hong Kong, but also provides a new imaginative dimension of Confucianism. On another level, his digital art can be considered to be visual interpretations of the Confucian philosophical and ethical teachings because his art reflects humanism – the core of Confucian philosophy. This belief states that human beings are teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal endeavour, especially self-cultivation and self-creation.

Figure 6: Kong Ho. Confucius Temple, 2013. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W
After completing his research, Ho posted his research findings, digital photos and digital art pieces on his online research blog, Photographic Memoir of Taiwan, at http://photographicmemoirtaiwan.blogspot.com. Ho uses this site to share his practice-based research with other interested researchers. Twelve pieces of his recent digital art pieces, all embedded with cultural references and personal memorable experiences were displayed in the recent group exhibition, Mural•list•mania: Multimedia Art Exhibition, in Hong Kong in March 2014. All of these twelve digital art pieces have textured cultural segments of Chinese cultural background revealing the tendency of reconstruction of personal experiences and remembrance.

In addition, digital art was also practical for this exhibition because it is so transportable and locally printable. This new medium of expression has come to affect almost every aspect of Ho’a art and life. The visually attractive Whirling Chinese Cranes, shown in Figure 7, resembles the "picturesque" style of the late eighteenth century's Romanticism, because of its carefully orchestrated casualness of composition. The colourful and attractive appearance of this spiral blue and white ceramic shard is not the content of Ho's art but instead the Chinese crane teacup embodies the transitory nature of life and evolving memories revealed as an expression of nature and transpersonal experience. Ho believes that before he can make art, whether it is digital art or a painting, that certain elements must be present, including a bitter-sweet mix of emotions. Looking back on the work that he has produced for his recent group exhibition, Mural•list•mania: Multimedia Art Exhibition, Ho can see that his digital art pieces carry a common thread—a growing nostalgia for the past and a romantic attitude towards cultural identity.
Figure 7: Kong Ho. *Whirling Chinese Cranes*. 2014. Digital print, 12"H x 12"W x 1.5"D, displayed at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, Hong Kong.
References


