

THAI TIME: I'm dreaming for you too

About the work:

These images represent part of my ongoing exploration of immigrant familial memory, echoes of legacy and expectation, and how unknown and unspoken generational traumas shape our present sense of Self.

I'm making an attempt at moving forward in my life, through a studied consideration of past and present. It's one uncomfortable and necessary survey out of many, looking to see where you exist in that place between ancestral histories and present day. Perhaps we find more of our substantial truths in the basic questioning; Who? What? Where? Why? When? And How?

For some first-generation families, numerous intercultural inequities arise from active pursuit of "The American Dream." As the sole American-born member of my immediate family, I couldn't always recognize how different from my peers my upbringing was, or how my interpersonal communication skills evolved into a cultural code-switching. The distances between "accepted American" and "Other," rapidly shifted back-and-forth like an erratic tide. This dissonance fluttered chaotically while I concurrently held multiple, and sometimes opposing ideologies as truths, at the intersection of two dominant worlds.

As a child, being happy and comfortable (predominantly making others feel happy and comfortable) did overshadow some inexplicable cultural expectations. These moments of dissonance, became a distorted and confusingly normalized state of being. Not Thai enough to be Thai, not American enough to be American. When your self-realizations and emotional growth is held steadfast within the void of familial context and lack of mother tongue, where family secrets and those things left unsaid define a skeletal outline of a collective unspoken history, you find yourself hurtling forward into the world without the proper tools. We are shaped by selective edits.

My parents too had to find their own way through, finding friends, allies they could trust in a place where everything was vaguely familiar and altogether alien. Though our lives were not entirely without a certain wonderful harmony, the navigation was often fractured for all of us. We got used to being vocal and silent in certain ways.

With no formal Thai language or cultural ritual instruction taught (or explained fully by my parents) I had to reclaim those aspects of heritage, identity, and ancestral heirlooms mostly my own. It's taken decades to feel more whole, and yet by what measure? If you only have expectations of being an ideal American, and to whatever metrics a successful version of that even is, what do we lose in the attempts for acceptance?

The realities of attempting to successfully "realize" this dream, creates such a weight of expectation, and suffocatingly so. What and whom do we sacrifice in this pursuit? Eventually I met them in that place where you discover that your parents are also people, imbued with the same sense of uncertainty and vulnerabilities. And in the face of yearslong frustration, anger, and disappointment, how can one help but lean headlong into and expand wider our empathy, understanding, and dreams?

At an early age I began to collect long lists of questions about family and identity, and now find myself in middle-age shaped by these unanswered questions. Maybe there's a comfort in the not knowing, over the potential extension of heartbreak through concrete answers. Maybe, and maybe not.

"THAI TIME: *I'm dreaming for you too,*" aims to delve into those liminal spaces of ourselves, where we glimpse the trajectory of how we end up in these profound feelings. I'm seeking to accept more why I am the way I am, to evolve past limitations of having to choose to be American or Thai, to reclaim and redefine a sense of identity by embracing the blur between the two. Whether we have lived our lives fully intact or involuntarily fractured, the truth is we are valid, whole, and loved.

The Installation:

I began with the photographic images, which were all taken with an out-of-production Polaroid model NPC195 and many years out-of-date black-and-white instant FP-3000b Fujifilm. This particular combination of tools and materials illustrate the ghostly and fleeting nature of my memories. The past evokes an atmosphere akin to its optical lens flares and grainy texture, while the haze of detail mirrors the unplanned burn of expired chemistry.

Alongside these prints, I've surrounded them with various images from family albums and some select personal artifacts. Many of the images of the past are glimpses at a life lived; little snippets of family life, shared adventures, languid moments, and all of the in between gatherings that signify that not only did we make it, we made it through together.

The artifacts are arranged simply, to illustrate how in adulthood we can sometimes see how much time has passed between then and now. We can feel the full weight of the decisions we've made, the stories we've told, and how much we still don't know about ourselves, our family, or our histories. There is so much of our Self which is informed by missing familial folklore, mysteries, and what has remained silent.

Captions of thoughts and observation adorn the spread of images to show the beauty of the past, the heartbreak of regrets, and the echoes of those questions which drive us forward headlong into the present moment and shape who we are. I'm asking the past for help, for information, for answers. I'm asking the present for a forgiveness of behaviors born out of not knowing, for a permission to be more whole, more myself, more understanding, and more patient with not knowing it all.

The patterned geometry of white string signifies good luck, protection, blessings, and mark perimeters where evil spirits may not cross. The lengths of red signifies a healing tether from memory to memory, and embodies the power to dispel negative energies. This use is an interpretation of Theravada Thai-Buddhist "Sai Sin" sacred threads, and an expression on my part of what I don't know. It is a lost-in-translation attempt to pay homage and respect to my Thai-ness.

Through the use of all elements, I hope to rediscover connections of what was, what might have been, what is, and how it all could be.

C. Bay Milin

bay@cbaymilin.com

