

Title: **I KNOW I AM NOT SAFE IN THIS WORLD**

Artist: **Tara Cariaso**

Materials: Brown paper bags, marker, newspaper, glue, wig, acrylics, newspaper NYTimes from July 16th, 2019

Tara Cariaso is a second generation Filipina American, which means though she was born in the US, she has a closer experience to first generation immigrants than to native born white citizens. In this piece, Cariaso, the owner of Waxing Moon Masks Company in Baltimore, Maryland, uses the tools that are most known to her to change the face and the narrative of a Fear mask.

Her process in making this piece included a dialogue with the materials used as she attempted to make the mask's face more like her own face. Her observations on the effect of each critical change on the mask and how they mirror her own experience bring the viewer into the experience of someone whose need to decolonize and reclaim her own heritage creates friction, conflict and isolation. She discovers that the process of claiming her Filipino-ness in the face of a white cultural norm includes both adding and subtracting material from her life.

PROCESS NOTES

1. Initial Planning: I plan the piece to center on others. I plan to interview other Filipina immigrants, first and second generation, all of whom are US citizens, and have them tell me what thoughts fill them. I plan to put these in the mask via paper mache.
2. Adding Something: Waiting for interviews, I decide to add brown paper bag material to the mask without words on it, augmenting the existing sculpture, in an attempt to "add" just my physical identity to the piece a bit more. This is unsuccessful. In the end I realize that ***I cannot simply add to make this piece look and feel like myself.***
3. Changing plans: I have a week away from the mask, and come back to it with a refocus on the necessity of articulating my own identity. The Trump administration has been scheduling ICE raids in Baltimore and I have been organizing an information/education gathering to let folks know what to do if ICE tries to take away someone they know. I start to see the importance of a process of uncovering my own identity through this sculpture. People won't know that it matters if I don't give them a face, if I don't say that these people and myself, count. I cancel the scheduled interviews, and focus on writing out my own truths.
4. I make a list of sentences that help me claim my identity as an adult who is Filipina American, but I keep a picture of myself at age 8 next to me to remind me that I am many things... ***I am my present, but I am also my past.*** This process feels very much like the old adage of 'putting away childish things.' I lost some naiveté when I looked at what I had written.

5. I have realized that “Additions” to my persona, the material I added to the mask face in the beginning of my process were unsuccessful because they were not the whole truth. I must *also* remove material for the face to be like my own.
6. Removing Material: ***So what are the ways that I must remove what was given to me in my life in order to reclaim my heritage?*** I may remove friends who support hateful policies against migrants, because migrants are innocent people who have come to our country legally, who are looking for a new home out of desperation... and those migrants look exactly like me. I may remove resistances in my own acceptance of myself by self-accepting my body shape rather than trying to make it match the thin white bodies I grew up idolizing. So I begin Removing, and it is a lot of material to remove- nose, some more nose, the brow... I’m carving now, not sculpting. Like in my life, I’m saying no, rejecting things not like me, things harmful to me, and using the mirror a lot, accepting what I see as truth rather than unfinished or unworthy. I hold the mask up and look at the profile next to my own in the mirror. Finally, we have the same nose.
7. ***A question occurs to me: what would have happened if I had never added on to myself,*** if I had simply tried to remove things that were inauthentic to me without having the padding of the previous layers of those older ‘editions’ of Tara? My added materials, such as choosing to pursue my passion for song, learning ferocious leadership, joining struggles against injustice, those old versions of myself held me so that when it was time in my own life to cut away the inauthentic, I had, as the mask had, the strength to stay held together.
8. Another question: ***What are the choices that still give me support even though I've taken the heart and soul of what was previously there out?*** I have old friends that don’t acknowledge I am different than them, “I’ve never thought of you as brown,” they have said, and meant nothing unkind in doing so. Their love held me then, and yet it hurts me now so much. But didn’t their love make me who I am? These are the questions that plague me as I plunge my Exacto knife into sometimes extremely thick layers, sometimes absent holes from paper mache. ***I am not Filipina or American. I am both. It’s hard to be both.***
9. It’s interesting how I have learned, through *removing* material, about my own face. This fear mask is so much more material than what my own face is. In different places, my face is more curvy, or I am more delicate, or I am more strong. There is no consistent change that must be made... every inch has a different story to tell and requires a very different negotiation. Humanity, I heard today on a podcast, is exactly the same. There is zero proof of biological “race”- biologically, we are different balances of everything in every aspect of our physical construction. We are, however, 99.9 percent genetically the same. ***Seems that if we’re definitely so much more ALIKE than we are different, we could get past a differently shaped nose when it comes to job interviews.***
10. Now I’m adding my own personal connective tissue, my truths and my affirmations which I had written down on a piece of brown paper bag. I treat each of them as I would a different organ, each is sacred and contributes to the function of the whole so distinctly. I repeat the paper mache process with each thought on paper. ***I see myself in my writing. I accept myself as I have written about myself. I add every piece of paper, each reality, each personal truth and decision...*** These choices make up a life.

11. Predetermination as a byproduct of colonial and racist ideology? For me, regardless of the strengths of my artistic choices, the end picture of a face in fear was predetermined at the beginning. This mask, like this body, was what I was given. I could change the features to not be fearful, but there's only so much time and resource available to me. I have to get to my children from my mother's house very soon, my five-year-old boy and my 10 year old girl, and as a result of that limitation, I'm only going to get maybe two hours today in my studio. It reminds me of the time my best friend said to me, " Hey! Why don't we just start going to the gym everyday and get ourselves really really skinny and thin and beautiful?" Without missing a beat, he answered his own question, "...but who has time for all that?" Like the mask, I haven't got time to change myself completely. ***I am what I was given, as well as what I choose.*** Changing the base line of fear for people who were born immigrant at this time in this country poses the same challenge. Some of us can change the "base of fear" into something else, because we have the resources to do it... But not all of us have the energy or resources...
12. Painting: I start using a mask maker's most powerful tools, the highlight and the shadow paint. But in this mask, highlight and shadow take on new purpose. Rather than trying to create deep shadow in facial creases to give a character age, I realize I need to strongly articulate the edges of the new paper mache because the edges show the work done... The piece looks now more Frankenstein-like, showing the roughness, ***the intentional construction, the naked otherness of the new skin.***
13. More Painting: Now the shadows are bringing forward the changed spaces on this landscape of human features, and I can clearly see ***the attempt to reclaim my nose, the attempt to reclaim the shape of my eyes.*** I can also see that my construction of them is far more simple and less refined than the beautifully smooth negative mold constructed mask I was given. The new features are rough looking, but they are genuinely made with my own thoughts and feelings and existence and circumstances. These Worlds Do Not Match. I decide to use acrylic paints to amplify these two very different facial landscapes. Not painting over my nose or eyes completely, but trying to tie the two very different worlds together through a color scheme.
14. One face means one perspective: It's strange how all of this difference is trying to articulate a single face with a single perspective. I am reminded of how 'at odds' I feel with myself, regularly as a Filipina American. How I can't help but empathize with opposing structures and rules about how to behave. I have a white mom; I am Filipina but I can't leave my mom behind because she made me who I am. Why can't we just abandon the myth of a single point of view? **Filipinas have been in the US since the 1700's... so why are Filipinas still considered 'other' in the US?** For more than 300 years, people who look similar to me have been dying as patriots in US wars serving this country. My dad was in the army. His dad was in the Batan Death marches. And Central Americans! They have been here so much, much longer. Why are Central Americans being held like criminals for trying to be where their ancestors have been for a thousand years? The contradictions inherent to the Trump-inspired anti-immigrant bias are so absurd. **I have swam in the waters of US structural racism for 44 years, but some white guy in a red baseball hat still thinks I don't know what being an American is about.**

15. Finishing touches: I find hair that is somewhat like mine in the form of an old wig. I attached the hair, but ***I'm careful not to cover the words written across the mask's forehead, "I know I am not safe in this world," because being brown is a political statement.***
16. Newspaper: When I first envisioned this piece, I imagined it reconstructed almost completely with newspaper stories. I fell in love with the duality of the two styles of paper I was using: printed newspaper, so thin and covered in stories, and brown paper bags, pragmatic, and durable. But it's the end of my process and I haven't found what purpose this newspaper material has as a part of this mask. I commit to buying a paper, and immediately there are 5 articles that speak to me of this world in which I know I am not safe. I know I can't leave it out. The newspaper represents the stories that we consume daily, the stories that are constantly telling us our place in this world that come from media, advertising, government and religious communities. ***It's one thing to be made up of your own stories; it's another to be made up of the stories from your community.*** Immigration policies under the Trump administration are suffocating the life and humanity from our culture. I regularly read my Facebook feed and within minutes I notice that I am already holding my breath. The fear that is being generated feels purposeful. Fear makes us suppliant. Fear makes us abandon our ideals. Fear makes us lie about ourselves and who or what we love. Fear changes us from living breathing beasts to statues with only a hint of heat. I apply the newsprint to cover all of the mask's open spaces: the eyes, the nostrils, the gaping mouth. I choke the breath out of this mask with stories of brown people whose lives are in jeopardy, stories of immigrants and second generation immigrants like myself who are sent to detention centers and separated from their children by ICE because there is no longer any priority to the immigrant detention process. They collect even citizens now, and they pretend they don't know because they want to tie organizers up in red tape and suffering. ***I glue in stories of a government that does not respect the lives of people who look like me, and I realize that the mask is done.***
17. ***I am not done:*** My mask is not me. My mask is a shield. My mask is my costume. My mask is my username. My mask is my Avatar. But my mask is not me. I will continue to breathe. I will continue to speak. I will continue to see through my own eyes.