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Fall 2009

# Binary tales

Bounnak M. Thammavong  
*University of Iowa*

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BINARY TALES

by

Bounnak M. Thammavong

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of  
Fine Arts degree in Art  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

December 2009

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Kee-Ho Yuen

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Bounnak M. Thammavong

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the  
thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Among many other arguments in the field of Academic Fine Arts, the arguments of art for art's sake only, fine art vs. craft, and the relevance of art are in themselves irrelevant. Current world culture contains so much visual and political stimuli that it's paradoxically both extremely easy, and extremely difficult, for those working in the fine arts to engage the world the way that Picasso did just forty years ago.

Consider that anyone can get their work into the world via online galleries, make sales on eBay, or get published in an online arts publication. The digital era of art also allows faster produced artwork through digital art processing; that's also just as quickly transmitted to its audience. These are the advantages of making art in the current world arena.

A disadvantage of this world culture is an audience with a diminished attention span due to an abundance of new media; such as: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and so on....What this means is that people don't focus on fine art as they did even in Andy Warhol's best days.

An even more significant disadvantage for artists of this world culture is that the venues for artistic outlets expanded. At first this seems agreeable, until the quality of the venues and artists are examined. As more and more venues are created, more and more artists begin to fill the ranks. As this saturated market fills, the state of the artworks as a cultural commodity stagnates and suffers. It stagnates because the concepts that become recognized as successful are "paraphrased", mimicked, or outright copied until all the

cultural mass is fairly homogenized. More galleries asking for more of the same, produces more artists making more of the same.

I've been told that the best solution to this stagnation problem is to invent something completely new; in hopes to become a Picasso of sort. I argue that nothing new is ever created; it simply changes into something unrecognizable. I call it the Law of Conservation of Human Thought. Just as there are only a limited number of elements on this planet to create "new" materials with; the human mind is a limited system that's slow to evolve to think in "new" ways. What we really do is combine elements in varying combinations to produce various unrecognizable physical properties. In that way, new ideas are really just combinations of old idea.

Picasso stole the visual compositional ideas of indigenous Africans and combined it with well established European painting techniques. Picasso did not "create" a painting technique. He combined already established visual ideas in a way that his audience did not recognize and thus, valued. This is the solution to cultural stagnation.

I've found that intriguing and thoughtful artworks share the traits of deep philosophically driven concepts that manifest themselves in visually compelling ways; and in turn, achieve unique and relevant expression. This is regardless of media or audience. These deep philosophies may be stolen, as they were in Picasso's case, or inherently culturally based as in my case. The more personally connected to the artist the philosophy is, the more unique the expression. The main stipulation is that the manifestations must be derived through skillful manipulation of media and technique to be visually compelling.

Binary Tales the Exhibition was my philosophical concept that manifested in a visually compelling way; and in turn, achieved a unique and relevant expression.

### Contemporary Relevance of Binary Tales

#### Obama Presidency

What lent a great deal of relevancy to Binary Tales the Exhibition was the Obama Presidency. As an immigrant, it's the first time I've felt the true breadth of the American dream within my grasp. Before President Barack Obama's election victory, I thought of my future children with sadness. I realized that, even though they would be born on American soil, their rights were tempered by the unspoken doubts of others. These doubts questioned the ability of a person because their background is not of an ideal, shaped by a blonde-haired blue-eyed doll; such as Ken or Barbie. I never believed I could honestly tell my children, "Yes, if you work hard, you can be anything...even president someday". Yet, this nation again offers hope to me, by electing the first biracial president; whose parent was an immigrant. Barack Obama is a child of two heritages. He is a personified amalgamation of the best qualities of two very different cultural backgrounds, come to full fruition. The story of Barack Obama is often told from the vantage points of successes alone; in honor of the president. In compliment, Binary Tales the Exhibition highlighted a similar dual cultured story, while examining immigration in a spectrum that highlights both the favorable and unfavorable results of immigration.

## Minorities in American Society and Politics

The Election of President Obama also brought to light the changing demographic of American Society and Politics. There was no doubt that race played a role in the election in many ways. Republicans and Democrats alike were watching the voting habits of a growing Latino political influence. President Obama himself was a symbol of hope for helping to healing old civil rights wounds for much of the Nation's African American community. And during this political change in tone, a significant Muslim American community sincerely asked for understanding and tolerance during a time of war and fear highlighted with terrorism.

At this poignant time in history, I paused to see that this was a mile marker that indicates our nation was ever more diverse. The ideal America of "Leave it to Beaver" and 1950 was finally being accepted as the façade that it always was. As an internet culture, America is finally able to see more, and be more accepting of, its melting pot metaphor in a truly genuine manner. We're able to positively move toward considerations of diversity and equality as a normal way of operating; because recent technology allows for quick distribution of information and simultaneous dissemination of multiple vantage points.

## Immigrant Issues in the Forefront

The American Society of today is reminiscent in diversity to the early days of Ellis Island, in that immigration and cultural identity are present and significant in every aspect of life for all citizens in one form or another. People are more acutely aware of

their cultural backgrounds for many reasons.

For some the Iraq War, Al-Qaida, and terrorism gave cause to be on the xenophobic and paranoid side; fearfully turning in neighbors and friends for unfounded suspicions. For those on the other side of the fence, they take defensively fearful stances to simply justifying a way of life; some may even sever themselves from their cultural roots just to keep from being lynched.

As a first generation immigrant who came to this country because of a war, I have a unique understanding and deep empathy for both sides. Immigration isn't a neat and tidy process even when chosen during piece time and of free will. Segregating oneself from your original culture to be a part of another requires a great deal of work and sacrifice that the culture one wants to join will never acknowledge.

These are the issues of Diversity and Immigration that are the darker side of a melting pot that must be acknowledged and addressed, in order to keep our forward momentum progressing toward equality. All that is required is to see, acknowledge, and understand things from more than one point of view.

## CHAPTER II

### INTENT OF BINARY TALES EXHIBITION

Allowing the audience to see, acknowledge, and understand another point of view is the intent of Binary Tales the Exhibition. I've found that a simple metaphor allows for quick acknowledgement and understanding. For example, consider the metaphor of two dining tables. There are forks at one family's table, and there are chopsticks on another family's table. Each family wonders how the others could eat with such strange instruments. But both families are still alive and well; so they must be both capable of bringing the food they enjoy to their mouths. They just simply do it in slightly different ways. But the basic activity of eating is the same; and in that similarity they can relate.

Like this explanation of the two dining tables, Binary Tales the Exhibition uses the metaphors of corn and rice to highlight the binding relations of two separate societies. Both the cultures of Laos and Iowa are tied to the land and its ability to produce the staples of life. Their cultures can identify and relate to one another through the agrarian way of life.

#### Immigrant Perspective: Provocation of Thought

It was often the case during my assimilation into an Iowan culture that people focused on what they saw as vast differences, rather than seeing the multitude of similarities in how my family and Laotian cultural practices achieved the basics of life. My father was often able to bridge this gap in understanding by relating fables from the Laotian farm. Often times a Laotian agrarian fable had an Iowan counterpart; relating

the similarities often produced friendly conversations.

Diversity and Immigration often provide grounds to tear a society apart because the indigenous culture often feels that long set and celebrated traditions are lost to unknown and often strange customs. Its fortunate that fear of the unknown is often easily subdued by simply experiencing, and acknowledging, that these strange customs are just another way of doing the things that all humans basically do.

I acknowledge that the human condition only allows a person to see the world from one point of view; their own. What's truly wonderful about the arts is its main purpose: to share that point of view with others in the culture; and engage in a conversation that will promote understanding and collaboration in constructive ways.

“Binary Tales”, my MFA exhibition offers an alternative point of view of diversity and immigration to provoke thought in the audience. I'm gifted with the ability to express myself through the visual arts in the medium of metal. I also have the experiences to carry a message of hope and exploration through the tale of my immigration and assimilation in the great American culture. Using my abilities and experience, I seized the opportunity of excitement and hope generated by the President's leadership to further breakdown cultural barriers. “Binary Tales” guided the viewer in a vicarious journey through my life story as an immigrant trying to fit into American society and provide chances to understand and consider issues of culture; with particular attention to the effects of war and immigration. Perhaps the audience can then take that understanding and apply it to current issues of war and immigration.

### CHAPTER III

#### INTENT OF BINARY TALES THESIS

This thesis paper is intended to supplement Binary Tales the Exhibition in two ways. First, by way of Chapter I and II, this thesis shall serve as a conceptual guide and contextual supplement to the artworks in the exhibition. Second, the rest of this thesis will supplement the exhibition by further detailing the philosophy that produced the work from the philosophy's development, to its current definition, and to its application.

## CHAPTER IV

### BINARY ART PHILOSOPHY DEVELOPMENT

According to general human perception, this universe is composed of inherent pairings. When ever the human mind has tried to grasp a natural concept it's been historically done in a binary way. Key examples include our perceptions of space, usually described in paired descriptors: up and down, left and right, forward and reverse, longitude and latitude. Another example is our concept of morality: good and bad, right and wrong, truth and lie. Even our human condition is reduced to paired descriptors: Man and woman, awake and asleep, alive and dead.

Being human, I am also no different in my binary thought tendencies. I'm a born observer with highly pragmatic deductive reasoning skills. I learned and implemented a binary pattern of problem solving from a very young age. Although I take in many variables if any given problem, I've found that the quickest and most productive way to solve a problem is to consider the two most possible results; what is likely to go wrong and what is desired to succeed. From that point, I can predict the methods or events that will produce either result.

Of course I acknowledge that there are an infinite number of results beyond the likely binary pair. It's not that life, nature, and the universe are not infinitely more complex than this binary pairing. It's simply that the quickest and easiest way the human mind understands concepts is polar comparisons. We understand something on a cursory level through a singular description alone. But by comparison to its near opposite compliment, we understand the concept with greater depth.

### Binary Art Philosophy Origin: My Immigrant Heritage

The reason behind my fascination, and loyalty, to this comparative binary pairing process of thought is that it was how life was consistently presented to me during my most impressionable years. My family immigrated to the United States in 1983. At three years old I went from knowing, and experiencing, one single world in an agrarian village in Laos, to Iowa.

In general, where you are is really your world; especially when you are a kid. But being the keen observer, I never let go of the few memories of Laos I had. Nor did I fail to notice the differences between my house hold's constitution and my neighbor's versions of home. I couldn't wipe out my former concept of the world and couldn't ignore this new one. Thus, Iowa became the other half of my binary world; and the Binary Philosophy was born.

### Binary Art Philosophy Youth: Basics of Assimilation

Life in this binary world was very simple, at first. I simply set two different behavioral modes for myself. One mode was Lao the other was Iowa. At home I spoke Lao, ate rice with chopsticks, listened to fables and fairytales of life in the rice fields, and burned incense for our ancestors in front of Buddha. At school I learned my ABCs, picked at spaghetti with a fork, wrestled with the universal concepts of mathematics, and pledged allegiance to the flag with liberty and justice for all. When ever I walked in or out the front door, it was time to engage life with another version of me. These were the solutions to the problem of existing in a binary world with two halves.

Soon my habitual shape shifting eventually distilled the two halves of my world to the point where they appeared as two separate worlds; rather than the halves to a single globe I'd initially known. My binary worlds separated further from one another because my interactions in either were rudimentary and unrelated. It was a convenient and simple separation that highlighted an increasingly profound difference between the two. I was always very aware of the times when I had to choose between chopsticks or a fork.

### Binary Art Philosophy Adolescence: Higher Concepts

After a while I'd accepted the separation of the two worlds; consigned to a dual existence. In hindsight, I was foolish to think that the states of my binary worlds wouldn't change. I stepped beyond the bounds of rudimentary interactions and began to consider things that all young adults do.

On the professional end of things I was considering a job or college. Culturally a young Laotian man was obligated to simply earn enough of a living in a day to day job to support him and the nuclear family. I was to stay with the family until a suitable wife was chosen for me. My future wife and I would then remain in the household and take over as caretakers of the family as we raised our own children.

As a young Iowan man I was compelled to leave the family and blaze a career path to success; highlighted by a devoted wife, Mercedes in the driveway, a mortgage on the house, and 2.3 children in the family room.

I felt as if my two worlds had conspired together to make me believe they were separate and simple; all the while producing the most profound binary equation of my young life. The conflicting elements of the equation of where I will work and who my

wife will be were deeply rooted in respectively separate parts my life.

Choosing the devoted responsibility of the family care taker would uphold my bonds with my father's culture at the cost of true self fulfillment; as promised by the American dream that brought our family here in the first place. Choosing the career path of the Iowan man would compensate me with a lifestyle I've grown to accept as my own; while eroding the foundations of the heritage that brought me into being. Somehow the intersection of cultures produced a binary equation a kin to the black hole I so long admired.

On an even more epic venture, I was also considering religion. Through out my early childhood, I'd been a Buddhist in the likeness of my parents, my grandparents, and their parents before them. One day when I was eight we went to a Presbyterian church. It was this church that sponsored to have us brought to the United States. I believe my father felt an obligation to thank the church for our lives through patronage; and we attended faithfully.

One day I asked the simple theological question of my bible school teacher. She had stated many times over that, "You must accept Christ into your heart to go to heaven." Logically my eight year old mind deduced the binary compliment to the statement, "Those who do not accept Christ into their heart go to hell." I asked her to confirm this with respect to my relatives and ancestors in Laos. She did not confirm that they were going to hell right away, but was clear in repeating that, "You must accept Christ into your heart to go to heaven." As I thought more about it, I was increasingly disturbed by the conclusion that my relatives and ancestors were going to be confined to hell because of the ignorance of the method to reach it. I indicated this frustration to my

father. He acknowledged the question and encouraged me to simply explore and understand the question for myself; rather than take the word of one person. He also allowed me to stay home from church when they went from that point on.

Although I was posed with the question of Christianity or Buddhism often, I've never really been able to choose one over the other. I also never stopped exploring the concepts of life after death among different cultures. The conditions of Life and Death are the greatest binary equation to consider.

In my quest to find out what to do with my life, and how to deal with what follows after death, I honed my ability to make binary comparisons into a coherent and systematic method. I've used this method in all endeavors to distill each problem I face into the easiest to understand elements and see the relationship between those elements. Through the examination of these relationships, I find at least a partial understanding of complex higher concepts.

## CHAPTER V

## BINARY ART PHILOSOPHY

Binary: bi-na-ry adj. consisting of two.

Art: art (art) n. the use of the imagination to make things of aesthetic significance; the technique involved.

Nothing in life exists as a singularity in itself. Everything is a direct part of a greater system in some manner. The simplest system is a pairing. Often, things also exist in slightly more complex clusters or groups. The most complex systems are still simply an amalgam of smaller systems.

There are a significant percentage of objects and concepts that inherently exist in pairs. Furthermore, a significant percentage of these pairings produce uniquely intriguing relationships that exceed the expectations of the individual elements.

A beautiful example is the symbiotic relationship between anemone and clown fish. Anemones are immobile marine invertebrates that resemble colorful flowers blooming on the ocean floor. Despite a meek and vulnerable appearance, their natural defenses make anemones nearly impervious to predation. These defenses include multiple tendrils covered with stinging cells that inflict a great deal of pain on contact. Clown fish, on the other hand have no major natural defenses. Although they are highly mobile little fish, their small size makes them vulnerable to predation. Their relationships with anemones are what really save the little fish. Clown fish live in the anemones' clusters of tendrils. They keep the tendrils clean and the tendrils keep the fish safe; a mutually beneficial binary relationship.

Other types of pairings exist that aren't always mutually beneficial. Destructively disparate pairs can be significantly more impressive than symbiotic pairs. A system where a black hole feeds off its neighboring sun is an awe inspiring poetically parasitic relationship.

It's difficult to understand either (symbiotic or parasitic) type of complex systems as a whole. Trying to consider the effects of gravity, mass, and energy at the scale of a black hole system, as one concise conceptual model is impossible for the human mind. In the case of the black hole; we can only truly understand small portions at a given time. This illustrates that complex systems are best understood by the human mind when reduced as closely to a polar comparison as possible. This reduction to a polar comparison is the basis for the Binary Art Philosophy.

The Binary Art Philosophy's goal is to first observe and record the properties of significant binary relationships inherent the subject matter, concept, medium, technique, and presentation of artwork; in order to distill these observations into meaningful elements that can be combined in significant ways to highlight a philosophical concept.

The Second goal is to convey that philosophical concept in a visually compelling, unique, and relevant expression.

### Concepts and Research

In the case of the thesis exhibition, my intent was the provocation of thought with regard to diversity and immigration issues in current society; with recent world events considered.

The two binary systems most evident in my goal were: Christian and Muslim relations, and Current American Culture with the Culture of Immigrants. I further reduced these systems down to the essential elemental concepts in order to relate to them on a personal level.

One resulting concept is of two religions that refuse to see the similarities in either side; but willing to destroy one another over the differences. The wars in the Middle East are a culmination of ages of anger built up over simple theological arguments with no real answer evident until death. This argument was then co-opted by both sides using fear, money, and the promise of revenge to perpetuate an atmosphere sufficient to produce power and wealth for a select few.

The other concept is that two cultures conflict while yearning to simply provide a way of life. Current American Culture feels entitled to the opportunities of the society it was born into. They are threatened by the tenacity of the influx of immigrants willing to seize those opportunities with more effort. The Immigrant Culture of recent years yearns for the opportunities just as the forefathers of Americans did during the days of Ellis Island. Both simply want a way to provide for their families.

The next part of the process was to relate these elements to myself so that the work produced would be more personal; and thus genuinely guide the audience through my perspective of the current issues. A verbal conversation is more compelling if stated in your own words rather than regurgitating what you heard on the news. It's even more important for a visual conversation that the work be filtered through the artist's lens and stated in their own unique visual creations.

My relation to the religious conflict that led to two wars was very evident and easy to make. The effects of the wars of either era were both direct and collateral. The Vietnam War produced wounded veterans during and after the war. It also produced intolerance toward Asians in the U.S. during the years of, and shortly following, the fighting. I'd a direct relationship to one war based on conflicting ideals of how to live life that eventually led me to consider my religion. The Vietnam War tore my family from its origin and left two countries scarred thirty years later. It was the fear of invasion and communism that led the United States into the Vietnam War. In the same manner fear of terrorism and Muslims led the United States into the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

By producing my visual view point of the Vietnam War, I led the audience to consider the current wars in a different light than they considered by the similarities between both eras of conflict.

As for my relation to the cultural conflict between Current American Culture and Immigrant Culture, it's a far more immediate and present relationship. I reach the conclusion of using agrarian life as a symbol to link all the concepts.

In the national scope there has been much strife about immigrants taking work from Americans. It's hard to believe that unskilled migrant workers are taking all the skilled labor jobs out there. It should also be noted that if there was no demand for type of worker, would there be a supply? The reality is that, there has been building xenophobia in general. The climate of fear of terrorism propagated much of this xenophobia. This irrational hysteria has made the nation waste valuable resource putting up literal walls along southwest borders that have nothing to do with the actual threats. Immigrants are the scapegoats of this hysteria simply because they are different. The fear

of the unknown culture sits beside the fear of terrorism for many, eventually becoming irrationally inseparable. Immigrants are simply seizing an opportunity that many Americans feel is beneath them; yet illogically don't want to allow any others to take. What gets overlooked in these cases is that the immigrants simply want to provide a way of life; just as all Americans do. This idea of providing life is the essence of this binary equation. It is also why the agrarian life, coupled with the concept of immigration, is such a potent symbol.

Farming occurs both in Laos and Iowa, and the agrarian culture that surrounds both have the same basic goals; to sustain life by working in tandem with the land. Although the crops of corn and rice are different, the reasons, cultural byproducts, and resulting life styles are equivalent. By providing a viewpoint based on the similarities to an American way of life, and an Immigrant way of life, through an agrarian scope, social boundaries begin to recede for the audience.

After considering these binary concepts of religion and culture, the format of the work was then considered. In keeping with the binary philosophy, the diptych was an obvious choice. Each piece consists of two distinct parts; either physically and/or in concept. Each work also contains symbols of either side, which significantly intersect in a visual or conceptual manner.

In selecting symbolic imagery, I started with the duality of my heritage as a Laotian and my upbringing as an Iowan; selecting symbols of each in pairs: rice for Laos, corn for Iowa, elephant for Laos, pig for Iowa, and so on... These symbols were then drafted into the diptych format and distilled down to the essence of the relationships between symbols.

In summary, the philosophy of Binary Art is comprised of physical and/or conceptual pairings that compliment the qualities of two individual parts, expresses the relationship between them, and expresses the synergic result of their combination. I use this philosophy to display a poetic visual language derived from my Asian-American perspective.

### Media, Process, and Tools

Once the format was decided, I addressed the need for a medium by choosing the pairing steel and printed canvas as well as pairing cracked corn and rice grains.

Steel's application in the white collar pursuit of academic fine arts is infantile compared to bronze, gold, or other fine art metals. Steel is a material that dwells mostly in blue collar professions. I've often provided for myself financially in blue collar ways; such as construction and welding as a skilled laborer. During my time in those trades I noted a remarkable difference between the cultures of the two worlds of a nine-to-five job and an academic career. Yet steel fit in both arenas just fine. This is why I have an affinity for steel as an art medium. I fit in both arenas just as well as steel does.

Steel also allows for the inference of time through the treatment of surface; allowing my work to reference the binary concepts of past and present. By allowing some objects to rust I indicate the past. Conversely by polishing or sanding an object I indicate the present.

Finally Steel provides a fast and highly malleable platform to integrate flat imagery with dimensionality. In accordance with the binary art philosophy, it was important that the two dimensional plane and the three dimensional objects in my

exhibition found a point of intersection. This is because I started out as an oil painter who eventually made sculptures in varying scale. This duality in two-dimensional and three-dimensional art medium was highlighted best in these shallow wall reliefs.

To further enhance the idea of integrating the two-dimensional planes and three-dimensional planes the Steel was paired with printed canvas. Printed canvas allowed for an expressive translation of the concept, through my illustrative oil painting technique directly to metal. This allowed for more versatile shaping of border for certain works that lent further support to the concepts. Because not all images had to be confined to a square frame, the line between two-dimensional planes and three-dimensional planes blurred further in positive ways.

The other binary media used were rice and corn. Rice was used to represent Laos and corn was used to represent Iowa; in all their symbolic forms through out many of the pieces.

Physically the medium of rice and corn are compositionally useful to fill a space in a unified but non-uniform manner, draw attention to a physical plane (such as the floor), or produce a form. Patterns on the floor produced by thoughtful placement of grains allow the filling of a space. Thoughtful placement of patterns in an interrupted manner can indicate a transition of movement that highlights separate planes; a spilled pile of rice on the floor beneath an encrusted shape on the wall for example.

Physically their colors compliment each other in a very natural way; while conceptually referencing time. The softness of the white color of rice lends itself to metaphors of memory, while the harsh yellow of corn is useful as a very immediate and bold reference to the present.

Further conceptual uses of rice and corn, stem from the fact that they are both grains, produced in fields, harvested in similar ways, and stored in similar ways. They are also consumed for the same reasons. In this way they both represent the yearning and ability to sustain life through a cooperative relationship with nature.

The method that must be maintained to produce the two crops also creates similar cultural byproducts. Farmer in the corn field is just as attuned to the state of the weather as a farmer in the rice field. The family structure of an Iowan household on a farm is the same as that of a Laotian household on farm; they are generally large and extended and the children participate in the agricultural practices. In this way rice and corn conceptually represent agrarian culture in general.

The next consideration beyond the media was the process and tools by which the artworks were created. I considered the binary philosophy of art when using printed canvas by thinking about the process of creating the image to print on it. Often times the use of a digital media produces a generic looking image because the artist selects an image and applies one or two automatic processes. I hand sketched a drawing and then digitized it to create a binary image making process. By hand sketching the idea, I worked through the image concepts in more directly. By the time of digitization, the composition was solidly constructed; providing an already unique and expressive scaffold for digital embellishing. In this way, the imagery produced is unique to me and far more expressive of my concepts.

Another binary aspect of the process of using printed canvas is that it required a computer to manipulate the image. Computer or digital language is Binary. Inside a computer the circuits, processors, and drives all do essentially the same thing. They

either turn on or off, or they make ones or zeros. Ones and zeros produce the language by which the information is recorded or displayed. This information is in turn directing or affected by the hardware which is turned on and off by circuits that simply turn on and off. It's a complicated system that is based on turning electricity on and off; a Binary System.

The digitalization of processes was an even more integral part of the art making process during the fabrication phase. Cutting the steel required the use of a CNC plasma cutting system. This system accurately slices through metal with an extremely hot electrically produced flame of plasma. The acronym stands for Computer Numeric Controlled. The computer controls the operations of the electronics; while the numbers (Numeric) provided by the user tell the computer how to control the electronics. In this case the numeric system is in G-Code; which is based on the Cartesian coordinate plane. In this Cartesian coordinate plane the position of the flame is guided by the position of X and Y; x5, y5 means five inches right and 5 inches up. This is another example of a binary system which lent itself well to my art making process.

In summary through out the selection of media and the processing of that media I observed and maintained a significant amount of binary relationships in order to produce compelling works that expanded average media and average formats.

CHAPTER VI  
BINARY ART PHILOSOPHY APPLICATION

The Artwork of Binary Tales the Exhibition

The following section will summarize, and provide details to, the concepts for the most significant works in the exhibition with regard to the issues of diversity and immigration in today society.

Invasion and Salvation

“Invasion” and “Salvation” are two parts of a diptych that convey the results of the Vietnam War.

The left side of the diptych is an image of a soybean field being plowed; overlaid on the outline of a soybean pod. This imagery is suspended above the image of a Vietnam veteran sitting in a wheel chair; he is missing one leg. His image is imposed on a pattern of soybeans.

The right side of the diptych is an image of a rice field years after the bombings of the war; overlaid on the outline of a soybean pod. Soybeans are also prevalent in Laos. This imagery is suspended above the image of a Laotian farmer with only one arm; he lost his arm simply plowing his field 30 years after the war. Overlaid on his chest is the symbol for Lao UXO; a group dedicated to clearing unexploded munitions from the fields of Laos. The farmer’s image is imposed on a pattern made of cluster bombs collected from the fields.

Often time the citizens of a nation at war only see the side their governments let them. Ever more often the wars are forgotten quickly after they happen. By expressing the results of war in this visual way with, the two forms side by side, a new perspective is formed for someone who only saw one side.

My personal connection with this imagery is that this particular war was the one that uprooted by family from their native country; forcing them to immigrate to the United States. Thus, this is the beginning of my binary journey.

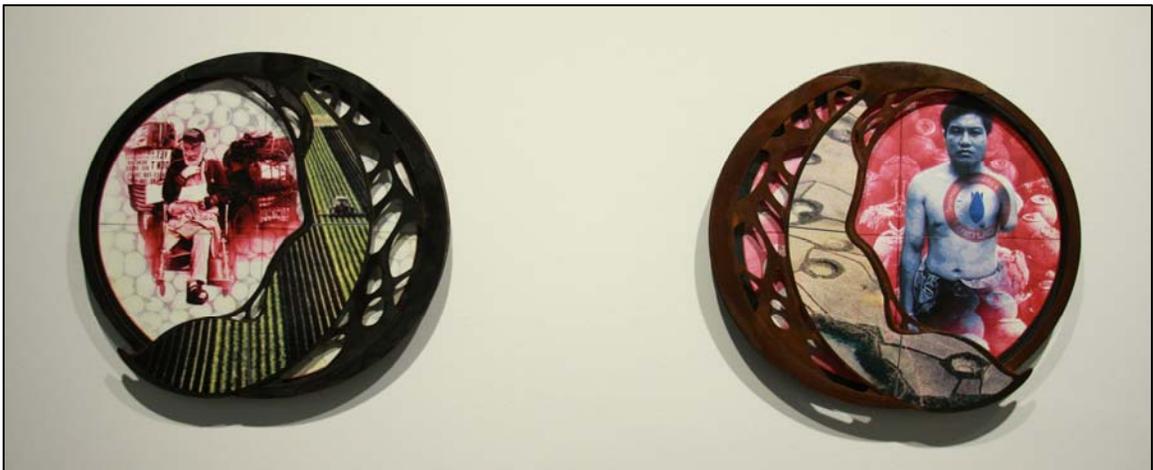


Figure 1: Invasion and Salvation

### Heavy with Luck

“Heavy with Luck” depicts my birth and my first binary struggle; the struggle with life and death. I was born with breath with a stopped heart. My parents were lucky

to revive me; hence the meaning of my name, Heavy with Luck. I used the blue skinned baby to reference death's eager hand. The red blanket with white elephant indicates the color of luck and the sacred symbol of Laos. All this imagery is embedded into the immature seed pod of a lotus blossom. In this way, the form represents a life being threaten as well as the possibility of life.



Figure 2: Heavy With Luck

## Two Tides

“Two Tides” illustrates the story of my family’s immigration I was told as a child. As my father colorfully relayed, he and my mother carried me from my mosquito net covered crib, past the broken cages of our silkworms and into the night shielded jungle. I cried and they were fearful that the raging red monkeys of the Viet Cong would keep us from meeting the American eagles. We reached the river and silently rowed to safety across the Mekong to the shores of Thailand.

The reality of our immigration was far more terrifying, but this metaphor of a midnight boat ride down two shores, imposed on rusty moth wings elegantly states the case from a child’s perspective.



Figure 3: Two Tides

## Flock of One

“Flock of One” illustrates my struggle with the religion of Buddhism and Christianity. The landscapes of the image extend into shallow reliefs on either side that form the mountains of Laos on one side and the cultivated hills of Iowa on the other side. In the middle of this landscape I stand, as a child, in an elephant costume gluing cotton balls to my body. There are a couple of elephants watching from the Laotian side and a flock of sheep watching from the Iowa side.

Essentially, as a child, I was trying to figure out the best way to fit into both world; but was always caught in the middle.



Figure 4: Flock of One

## Choosing Sides

“Choosing Sides” is formatted in the most blatant religious format. It is essentially a crucifix using myself as the crucified. I mediate this heavy handed metaphor by using more banal subject matter associated with agrarian life. The essence of religion is to guide a person’s way of life so that their afterlife can be fulfilled. Agriculture fulfills the needs of the living and represents a way of life that is harmonious with nature and the universe when done in cooperation with the land. The combination of this worldly need of agriculture and the spiritual need to know the outcome of the after life is what makes this piece achingly poignant.

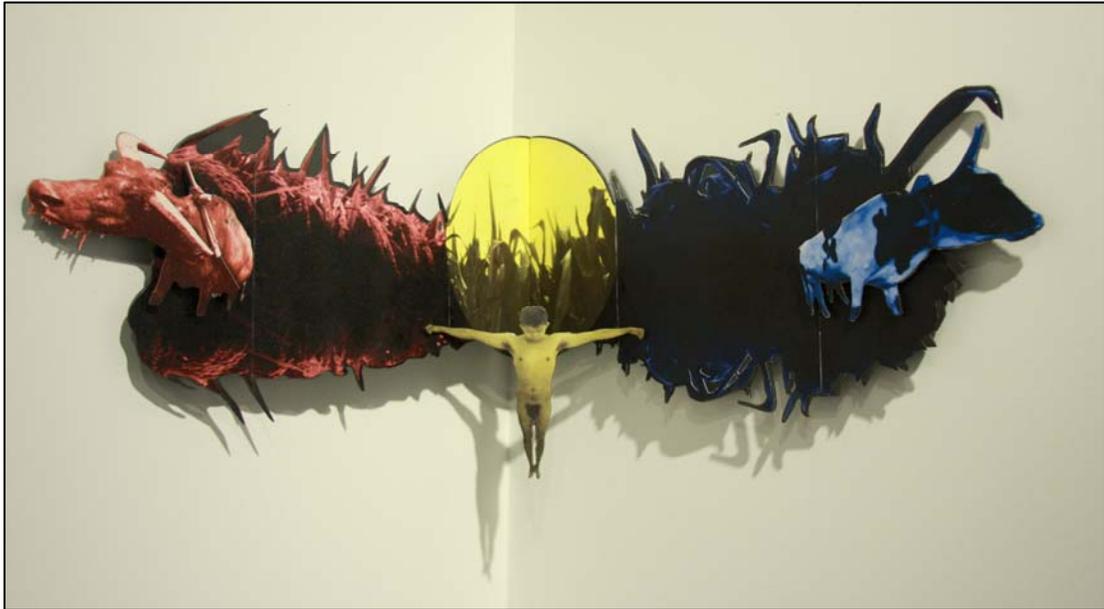


Figure 5: Choosing Sides

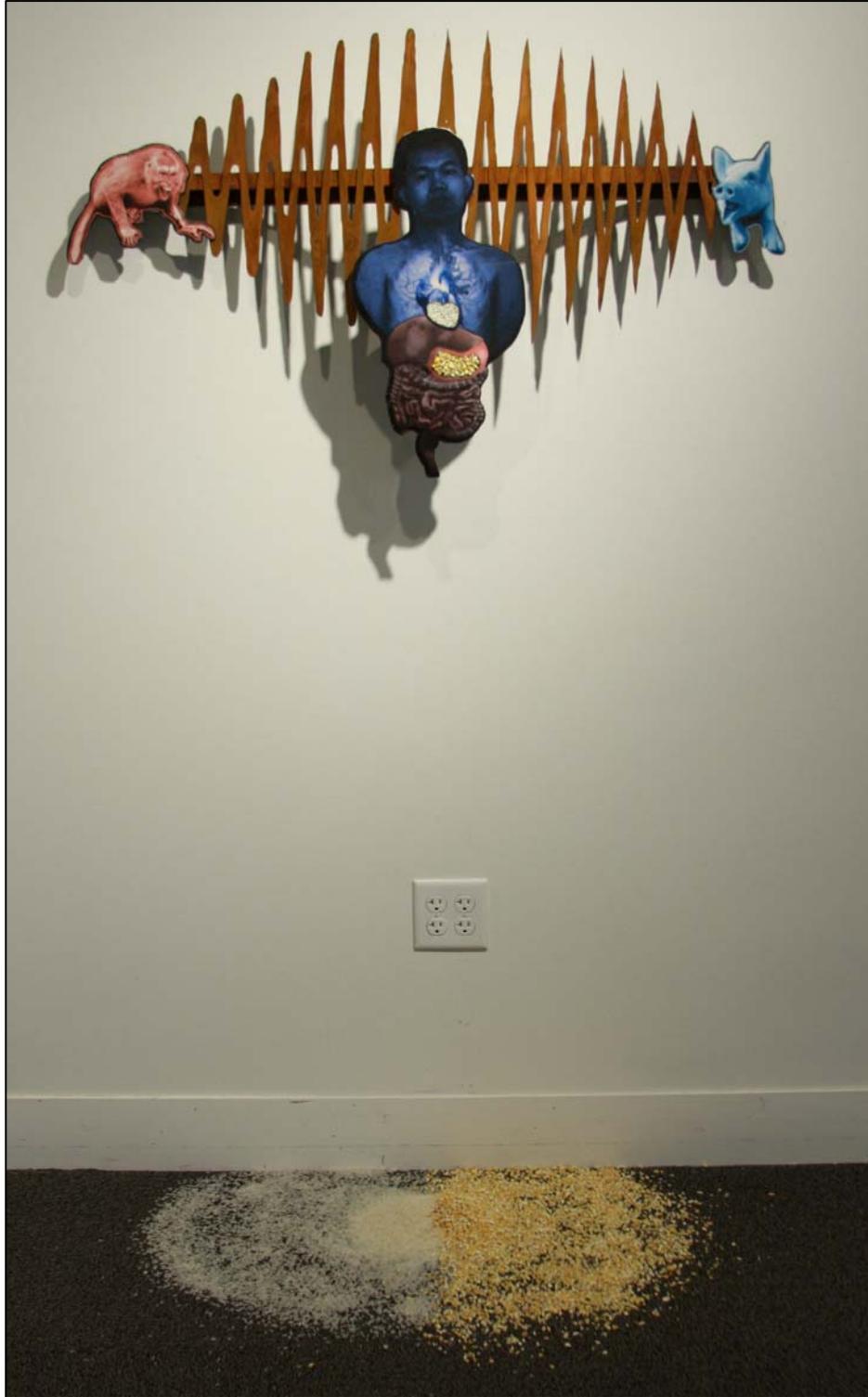


Figure 6: I Hear Them All

## I Hear Them All

“I Hear Them All” is a synopsis of what my current relationship with the two cultures is like. The monkey shouting in my right ear is Laos. The pig shouting in my left ear is Iowa. Both make it into my being; manifested in this work as rice in my heart and corn in my stomach (Laos and Iowa respectively).

The rice is in my heart because Laos is my origin and will always be in my memories. Iowa is in my stomach because it is where I currently operate to sustain my life.

The piles of rice and corn below the wall portion of the work simply indicate that the outcome of the influences is always a portion of both.

## Polywiggle and Strands

“Polywiggle” and Strands are abstract geometric representations of Laos and Iowa derived from agricultural architecture and implements such as silos and weaved baskets. They are embellished spatially by complimentary patterns of corn and rice on the floor that reference the fields of Iowa and Laos.

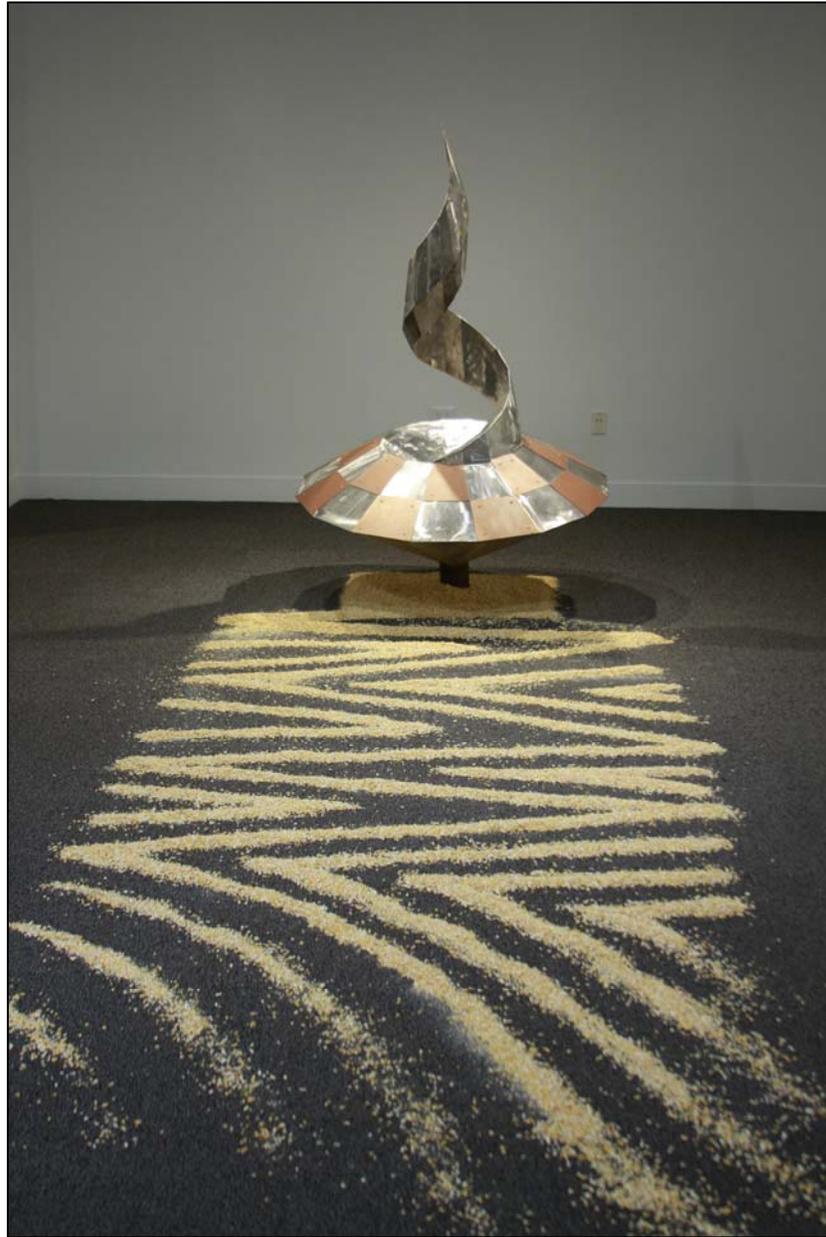


Figure 7: Polywiggle



Figure 8: Strands

## CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSION

Binary Philosophy as a Universal Comparative Reasoning Tool

Binary Tales the Thesis Exhibition stands as evidence to the Binary philosophy as a successful art making tool. This philosophy does not need to be limited to just art, however. My own experiences have proven that it easily applies to religion and social concerns as well.

For the simple problems the Binary philosophy will provide a quick assessment of the polar possibilities; in turn allowing the user of the philosophy to create a course of action for either scenario. It's a guide that reveals the signs along the road that you may not have noticed because you were too busy staring at the scenery as a whole.

The Binary Philosophy does not provide the answers to small problems or even large problems; because it does not indicate which road to take. It simply makes the problems more manageable on a human scale, so that a person can examine for themselves the most prevalent possible polar outcomes. In turn, by comparison of the two possibilities, a person should then be able to produce a desired outcome through thoughtful reasoning.