

“Halmoni” and “Paternal Grandmother”

Monica Heilman

Artist Statement

In this set of portraits, I depict my grandmothers, both living, one residing in South Korea, the other in small town USA. During the pandemic, my mind is frequently on elder family members. These portraits honor and memorialize, while capturing our current reality, when one’s likeness is most likely obscured by a mask.

Yet the mask is contentious. I am confident that my *halmoni* must wear one, and almost as confident that my conservative white grandmother does not. In recreating the image of a woman who does not want to see me, I contend with the tensions of a multiracial Asian American identity for which long-standing racism is inseparable from ancestry.

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Halmoni

Deciding on your portrait is easy. Rough pencil strokes that act as pathways for careful ink lines are external expressions of longing. I reference photos I've taken of us, but these are already four years old. So I lean on a more recent photo of you and the daughter you're having difficulty remembering now—my mother—taking note of how the nursing home has dressed you in something akin to a hospital gown.

I know that now you must also wear a mask, because you live in a country that acknowledges that public health takes communal effort. I take comfort in that fact, drawing in the shadows of your wrinkles as I wonder if I'll get to see you again.



Paternal Grandmother

As soon as I decided to do your portrait, I questioned whether I could pull it off. We haven't seen each other in twenty years and, currently quarantined away from my childhood home, I have no photos of you. You hate photos anyway.

While Halmoni's portrait leaves warmth, drawing yours highlights an emptiness. I pull on faded memories of your likeness and do a Google image search for "older woman"—no need to specify "white"—for references. I question whether you would even wear a mask, and though I have doubts, draw one across your face, like a benevolent voodoo wish for your safety.

Yet I can't help but wonder, given our estrangement and my not-quite-white skin, if you saw me today, features obscured by a mask, would you recognize me or be afraid?