

Art

# Maya de Forest

I love here now

Interview by Myungsook Lee

Your project *I love here now* was exhibited in 2007 at the Access Gallery in Vancouver. This project is very strong and shows a part of Canadian identity with the figure of mother and the Canadian landscape through still images. I read an article that your mother has been in hospital. Since this project, are there any changes in your life related to your mother or family?

My mother suffered from a stroke last year so I have been temporarily living back in Winnipeg. She has made a huge recovery, but her English and also her walking have really taken a hit. She is able to still live in her home though. We are all really happy about that. My mom was looking after my father who has Alzheimer's, so we ended up having to move him to a nursing home.

In your work, *I love here now*, your mother, originally from Japan, is corresponding with many other aging women. Yet, she represents not only those women but migrated or

marginalized people who may have similar circumstances or experience. As a displaced person moving from her native country to new country, Canada is not only her story. Nevertheless, choosing the title *I love here now* is very interesting. It can be interpreted as a positive transition such as being reconciled or adjusted. Yet for me it seems more like making a compromise. What does this title imply?

*I love here now* came from my mother's response to my question "how do you feel about Winnipeg?" I thought it worked as a title because it uncovers a lot. Her broken English and her use of "now" after forty years living in Canada really embodies her withholding or reluctance, whether conscious or not, to completely assimilate. I was actually taken aback by how heartfelt her answer was. I wasn't really expecting that. But, I think at this stage in her life, she has had to finally reconcile with truly living between these two cultures.

PHOTOS ABOVE & NEXT PAGE Part of *I love here now* which is a photo project on her mother. ©Maya de Forest

Could you tell me how your childhood memory of your mother affects this work? As a child of intermarriage (western and eastern) how has your parent's heritage affected your daily life? Were there any challenges, difficulties or confusion in your early days?

The work definitely comes out of a love and admiration for her and my perceived notions around her struggles and challenges as a visible minority and immigrant. I think I was always incredibly sensitive around my mother being obviously different, being Japanese. I grew up in a very white community and I just felt this vulnerability for her. I don't know if she necessarily felt that way, but I took it on and felt very protective of her. Being a child of an intermarried couple with no peers to relate to aside from siblings had its isolating moments. I generally had a happy childhood,







but I know there were subliminal messages and self-questioning happening.

In looking at the setting for *I love here now*, shooting at night and/or in snow plays a significant role in your work which tells viewers to notice the mother's emotional isolation from her environment. Was this part of your intention?

That was part of the tone I was attempting to create in the book, but I also think those images represent my own feelings around her mortality.

As a temperate - weather Vancouverite, I feel a distance from harsher Winnipeg weather. This may be interpreted not only as physical "distance" but also a cultural distance between Winnipeg and Vancouver. Why did you move from your home town of Winnipeg to Vancouver? How are they different culturally and also in the natural surrounds?

I left Winnipeg when I was 18 and have moved around a lot. I was actually working in Toronto before making the move to Vancouver. The main motivating factors being the ocean, the Asian population and wanting to get out of Toronto. After ten years in Vancouver, I still find it hard to pin the city down culturally because it is changing constantly and so many of us living here are from other places. Winnipeg on the other hand, is a city where people either never leave, or leave but always end up coming back to, so there is a very strong sense of culture that is uniquely its own. Historically it is also very culturally diverse. It is strange to say, but I do feel more connected to nature in Winnipeg than in Vancouver because of all the old trees and the two rivers running through it. In Vancouver, nature feels more like a backdrop to me.

Distance also can be seen in the relationship between you and your mother due to your

position behind the camera. In my experience, working with my mother brought out very complicated emotions as being in the role of observer. Through the viewfinder, I saw a woman who has half of my genes yet, also was a stranger separate from me. How was your experience working with your mother?

My mother and I are very close, so it wasn't a huge stretch to start photographing her, although she put up a fight at the beginning. I think the distance between us really is just not being able to share her language, which is a huge part of who she is. My Japanese is equivalent to a four year old. As she has aged, her English has deteriorated to the point where I really struggle to understand her. Now after her stroke she can barely put a sentence together. She has also, over the past ten years become more immersed in all things Japanese: friends, reading, the computer, so that outside of her family she doesn't need to think or speak in English.



So, that shift was a huge motivating factor for making this work.

You started university majoring in Music Performance at McGill and switched to Visual Art, particularly photography, at Emily Carr. How did you make this decision?

I always had a camera as a kid and by the time I was in high school I wanted to go into fine arts. But the path to music was kind of laid out for me early in my life. I went to art school about 10 years after finishing my music degree and playing professionally. On top of being underpaid I found the classical music environment stifling, so I was happy to go back to school and start studying something new.

Your other works are also closely related to Canadian identity. *Mix Meetings* book project, shows mixed race. What would you express through this project and how did you select the people in your work?

I did *Mix Meetings* during an exchange term at CCAC in Oakland, California. I chose the school based on the Bay Area's prominent mixed race population. I was at that time seeking more clarity in my own identity as a person of mixed heritage. For me the project was really about investigating whether a collective identity exists between mixed people. I basically approached, photographed and surveyed bi and multi-racial strangers on the street based on an unsolicited access and naïve affinity I felt because of a shared mixed physicality. The portraits act as a record of these meetings, while bits of text taken from the surveys explore the very individual ways in which mixed-race people embrace or reject identity. I learned a lot from that project.

When you photographed your models in *Mix Meetings*, you positioned them with a neutral background, which reminds us of a passport photo. Were there any reasons for using a neutral background?

Because I was meeting people on the street, I would usually shoot them wherever we met, so often I would just find the closest neutral background. The intention was for the focus to be on the features of the face



more than anything. Being mixed isn't always that obvious to people that aren't mixed themselves.

In the same work, a few models are the exception: having a shadow on their faces, or positioned in front of a tree. Was this your intention?

It was more about the randomness of location.

Your work uses very simple visual presentation yet contains many layers. In particular, landscape and portrait are important aspects to illustrate your theme. In Canada we

**PHOTOS ABOVE & NEXT PAGE** Part of *Mix Meetings* book project which shows mixed race. ©Maya de Forest

have great nature and diverse people. How does Canada play a role in your work?

I never thought of Canada really playing a role in my work, but I can see how working with cultural identity themes would be seen as Canadian or North American. I remember showing *I love here now* in Germany and realizing how differently they look at the work, not having the same immigrant history as we do here. It is still a new concept





there, whereas aside from the indigenous population, all other Canadians can relate to the immigrant story somewhere in their family lineage.

In your other project *Nippon* showing Japanese landscapes and portraits, your approach to is very similar to *I love here now*, which is about Canada. In some ways, your tone is dark, calm and still whether it is in Canada or Japan. How does having a heritage in two different nations affect you and your work?

I'm not sure if I'm really conscious of it. My father is also an immigrant from Switzerland.

He moved to Canada with his family when he was 18 and went to school here, so he is much more "Canadian" than my mother. He taught Architecture and his mother was an artist so there was always openness to creative thought and expression which I think is very European. But my mother ran the household, so the Japanese side was much more predominant in my upbringing. I think my attraction to simplicity and layers of meaning that you mention definitely comes out of that.

As an artist working on Canadian identity, what has been the biggest challenge in pro-

ducing and presenting your work?

I wouldn't say that I'm working on Canadian identity per se, but the biggest challenge for me right now is finding the right venue for this kind of work. I'm not certain that many galleries would be interested outside of artist run centres because of its personal nature. At this point I'm just happy to have some good book shops in the States and Europe taking on my book.

You completed book projects three times. Do you prefer the form of books more than gallery presentations and festivals? Are there challenges from mainstream gallery culture due to your subject matter?

Honestly I've never really had the goal of showing in galleries. When I discovered the book medium it felt right to me and the kind of work I like to make. I like the smallness and intimacy of it. I also like how books give photography another dimension where you can play with sequencing and space to create greater form and meaning.

Do you feel Canadian society is very supportive of cultural issues?

I think a lot of it depends on the city, its history and the government that supports it.

What does photography mean to you now and what are your goals?

My goals for making art now are not necessarily photography driven. I love photography but I do feel a bit limited by it. I would like to continue making books but I'm also looking forward to working with more mixed media for my next project.

What is your next project?

It's about my father's brain and how his Alzheimer's is changing him and his creative output. He cartoons and collages every day and is a force to be reckoned with! 🍁

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**Maya de Forest** born in Winnipeg, MB. B.Mus Performance at McGill University, Montreal, PQ (1992), B.F.A. Photography at Emily Carr University of Art & Design (2004), Vancouver, BC, The first solo exhibition at Access Gallery, Vancouver with *I love here now* (2007).