

# CHANG SHEN TAN

MICRO NATION







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**SVA MFA Fine Arts, Class of 2017**

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## CONTENTS

4 Introduction

### **Inspirations**

7 Judd & Duchamp

### **Projects**

8 Objects

16 Paintings

23 Flags

### **Thesis Project**

25 Micro Nation

33 Conclusion

## **INTRODUCTION**

Design has the ability to resolve any existing issues. By using the concept of design, I have been able to explore abstract ideas such as identity and culture. As a foreigner in the U.S. my experience changes toward America, from the time I first arrived, to my recent application to become a U.S. citizen. I have done this by investigating the idea of a national flag and exploring the self through design and symbols. The flag is also an example of how essential design is in the context of Fine Arts.





Flag of Chang Shen, 2017  
Original Flag Design





## Donald Judd & Marcel Duchamp

Donald Judd's essay, *Specific Objects*, supports the idea that "actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface. Obviously, anything in three-dimensions can be any shape, regular or irregular, and can have any relation to the wall, floor, ceiling, room, rooms or exterior or none at all. Any material can be used, as is or painted."<sup>1</sup> His emphasis on the relationship between space and object also supports his argument that the audience plays a role in activating the work. My sculptures also require the viewer's interactions and participation to activate the work. My viewers become a part of my work when they move around and duck under the work.

Judd also suggested that new material is not as accessible as oil on canvas or sculptures made from one material, and thus not as obvious.

He uses Oldenburg's soft objects as an example of a new material and how they can be sewn, stuffed, hung, and draped. Such features found in Oldenburg's soft objects or even Judd's cold industrial materials paved the way for many contemporary artists today.<sup>2</sup>

Marcel Duchamp and his readymade objects also play a big role in my art practice. I have embraced his influences through my found object sculpture and furniture series. Such influences can be seen in my *Office Chair Part* and *Office Table Legs*. Besides reconfiguring and repurposing found objects, I have also combined them with construction material and tools in a non-conventional way. This is most evident in *Found Bench*, *Wood*, and *Ratchet Straps*. I support the belief that art should not be constrained to the traditional but should be a continuous problem-solving enigma.

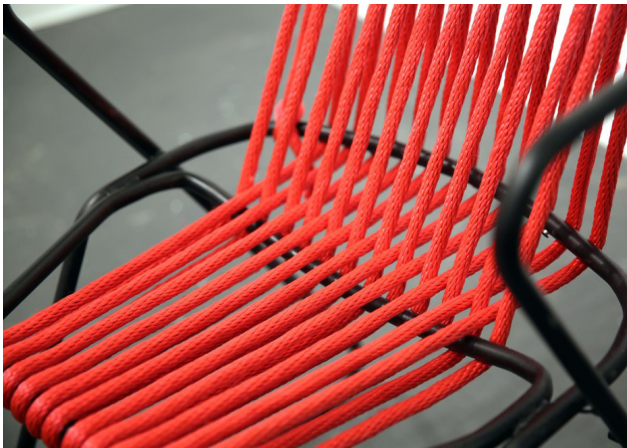


Table Chair, 2015

Found Chair, Cutting Table, and Red Rope

28 x 23.5 x 28 inches

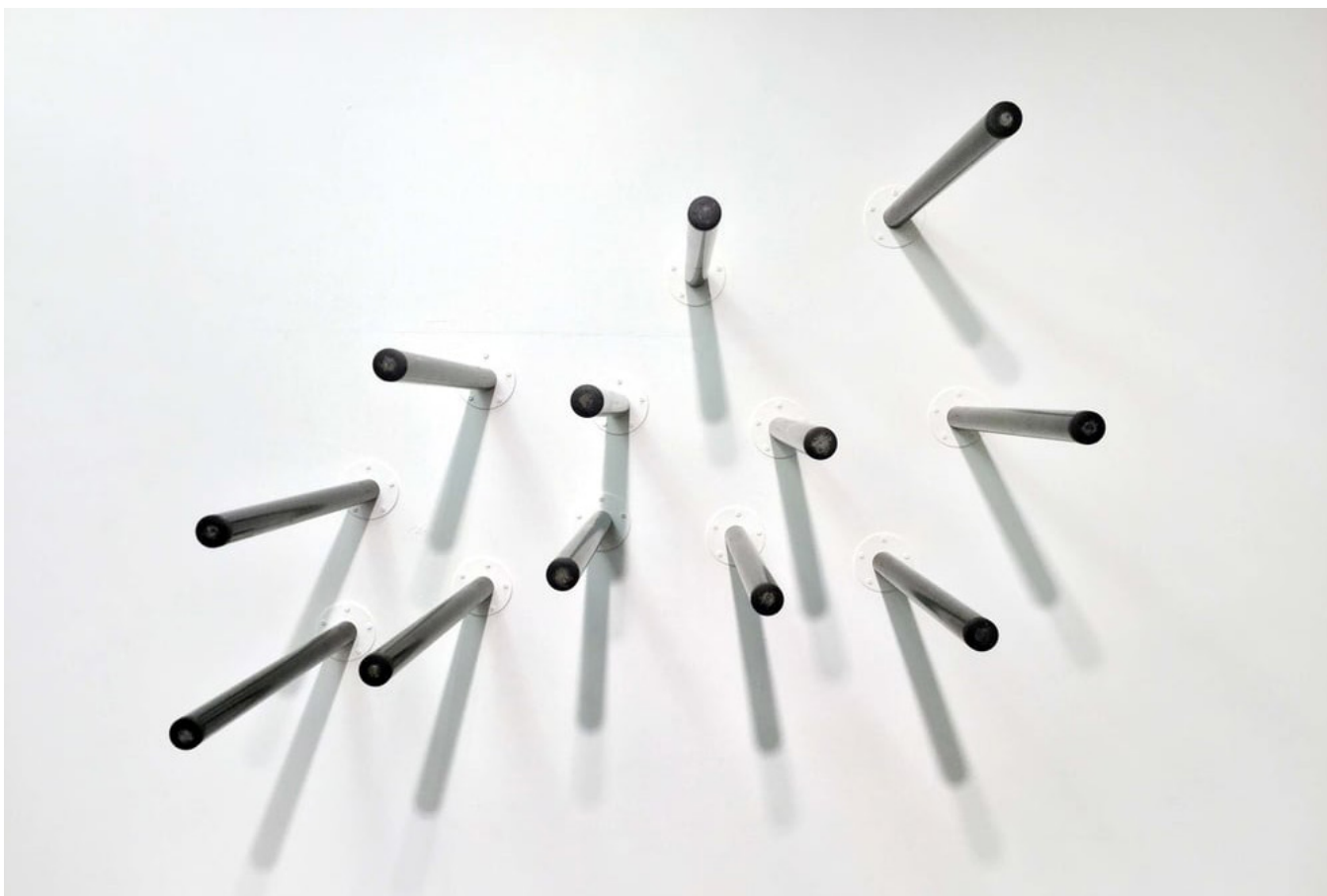


## Objects

During my first year living in New York my work had been about glorifying found objects, giving them a second chance as either a sculpture or furniture within the context of Fine Arts. The discovering of a strong design object on the street and then physically retrieving it without hesitation or assistance is part of the art making. The objects that I've chosen are often presented unaltered and purposefully. Although my audiences will most likely see my artwork as a minimalist sculpture, because of its simplicity, the most artistic part of the artwork is the chance of discovery combined with intuitive planning and problem-solving. When I find objects like Ikea table legs, my mind tells me they ought to be protruding from the wall. This is natural to me because being a designer requires keen observation and multiple perspectives on a problem, even when it means confronting my viewers with the bottom of furniture that was picked up from the streets. In my case, the problem is the fate of an object and the solution would be alteration and/or the way it will be presented. The results of my actions and the future of the object determines its context.

I am in favor of Judd's argument that the space around the artwork, including the viewers, plays a role in activating the work. My found object to sculpture and furniture series was a response to Judd's furniture series and also an attempt to reintroduce functional objects into the art conversation. Such an attempt would put all objects that exist in the space on an even plain, regardless of its medium or context.

I value craft and working with my hands because it involves the mastery of a skill. Due to human limitations my work is "imperfect", which in turn exemplifies dignity and demands respect for both the maker and the process. Mechanical art however, lacks dignity because it has little to do with physical skills and craftsmanship. With that said, Zen Buddhism greatly influenced me during my years of art practice. Zen Buddhism is essentially about self-discipline, without obsessing over the outcome. I believe and support this mentality because my practice is about the balance between honoring process as a value, and the aesthetics and craft of the final product as another value. My finished products as the evidence of my craft or design and thought processes.



Office Table Legs, 2015

Twelve Office Table Legs

28 x 45 x 30 inches





Cart's Underside with Clothes Hangers, 2016

Found Cart and Two Hangers

18 x 41 x 17 inches





Chair, Office Chair Part, and Black Rope, 2016

Found Chairs and Black Rope

20 x 21 x 48 inches



Office Chair Parts, 2016

Found Chairs

20 x 23 x 24 inches (Individual)



Found Bench, Wood, and Ratchet Straps, 2016

Found Bench, Wood, and Ratchet Straps

28 x 45 x 20 inches





Office Chair Part, 2015

Office Chair

13 x 24 x 12 inches



## Paintings

My first series of paintings dealt with the elements of design such as shapes, color, and textures. I've developed a unique mixture of paint and painting techniques by playing with the acrylic paint and concrete patch, generating a color palette that was not considered in my previous work. I dipped a 3-foot chain in paint then attached it to the top of a wood panel so that it could swing like a pendulum. I would hold the panel from behind and swing the chain back and forth, allowing the weight and the shape of the chain to paint the panel. This resulted in an interesting solution to a problem I had not been able to answer with just the object. This new process was in a way an attempt to bridge traditional practices of painting and sculpting with unconventional practice such as painting with a chain. As I find more unconventional ways to make art, the more I am convinced many conventional artists are missing out by working too closely within their medium or subgenre. As I find more unconventional ways to make art, I hope to see other traditional artists push the boundaries of their own work. Art does not have boundaries and artists should be encouraged to diversify their mediums, materials, and tools which they work with.



Untitled (Putty Knife), 2016

Putty Knife, Satin Interior Paint, Concrete Floor Patch on Wood

19 x 27.5 inches





Untitled (Chain #1), 2016

Chain, Acrylic, Concrete Floor Patch on Wood

39 x 36 inches





Untitled (Wheels #1), 2016

Wheels On Trucks, Satin Interior Paint, Concrete Floor Patch on Wood

30 x 30 inches





Untitled (Chain #2), 2016

Chain, Acrylic, Concrete Floor Patch on Wood

38 x 48 inches





## Flags

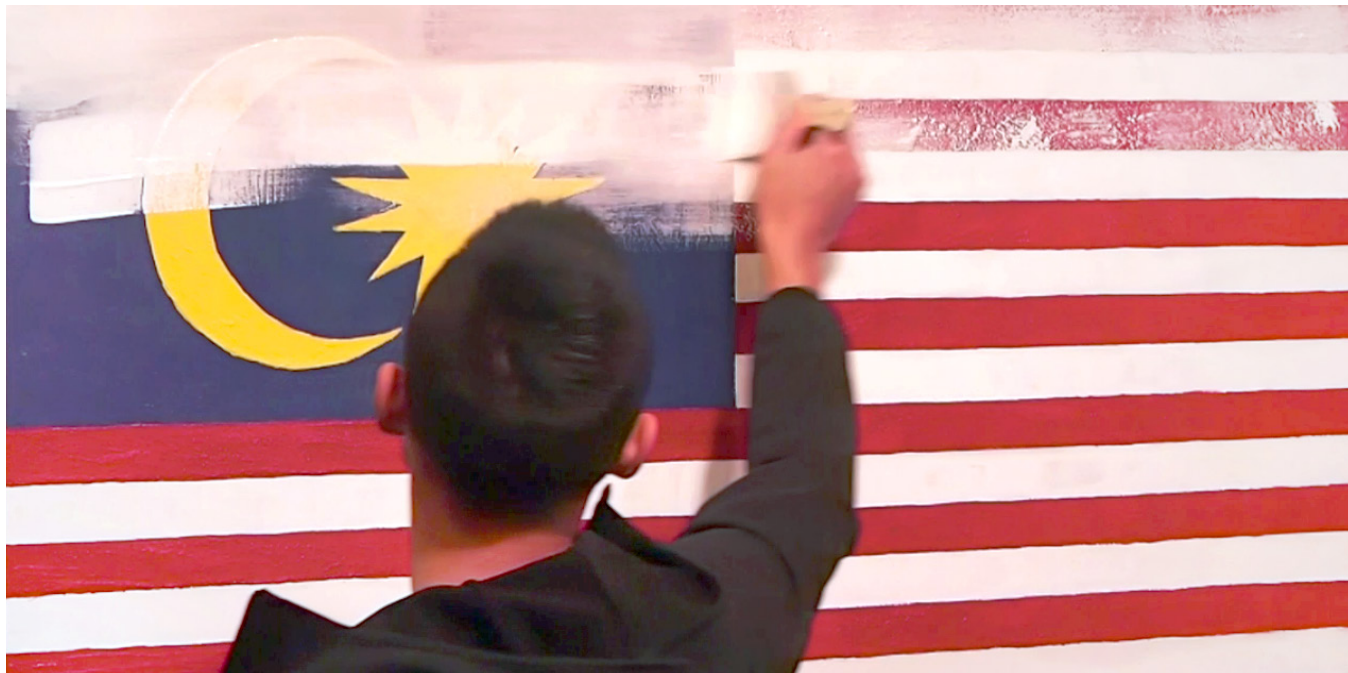
There has been many modern to contemporary artists that had tackled the imagery of national flags or flags that represented new identity or messages. Flags could represent a person or a large population. Some people tend to view their national flag as sacred and a symbol they can be proud of. Some people would defile or misrepresent a flag to illustrate their opposition and defiance. We have artists such as David Hammons who designed the African American Flag, to Dread Scott who placed the American flag on the floor to question the proper way of displaying a flag. Flags and the way they are presented connote different meaning and have different effects on people subjectively.

At a young age, I have dreamed of living the American dream and becoming an American. As an infant, I immigrated from Malaysia to Singapore and Singapore to Hong Kong as a missionary kid. The change of environment led me to disassociated myself from calling a country my own. Although I have a Chinese

heritage, I had never felt patriotic towards China. This may be due to the historical moments such as the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the single party rulers of the Chinese Communist Party. I felt disgraced and ashamed by the actions of my people. With bitterness in my heart against my own ethnicity, I had looked to what was fed to me by American television as a young teen. I took on the American culture through television programs such as Sesame Street, Home Improvement, etc. in order to replace my Chinese culture. It is only after having moved to the United States and learning the imperfection of a highly regarded nation that I realized my bitterness towards my own race was naive. I deliberately immersed myself in a different language and culture in order become someone I was not. So as I am getting closer to becoming an American I am becoming more conscious of my past and the bitterness has lifted. This manifested itself in this thesis project and the original painting that led up to it.



With the use of design, I have learned a great deal about how I have unknowingly been inhibiting myself from expressing my personal stories due to my concern over the formalistic qualities of art. This realization led to my Malaysian to American flag self-portrait painting. I first painted the Malaysian flag onto a 2 x 3 feet wood panel with acrylic paint and texture on certain parts of the flag. I then painted a white layer of paint over the entire flag, leaving no hints of the previous flag except its texture. I then painted the American flag over the white layer, with the emphasis added on the stars by adding texture to them. The symbolism lies not only in the design and texture, but its encryption in the process and the transition between each layer. The Malaysian flag represented my origin, the white represented the becoming of an American, and the American flag represents the reality of achieving my goal of becoming an American in the coming years.



Malaysian to American, 2017

Still from process



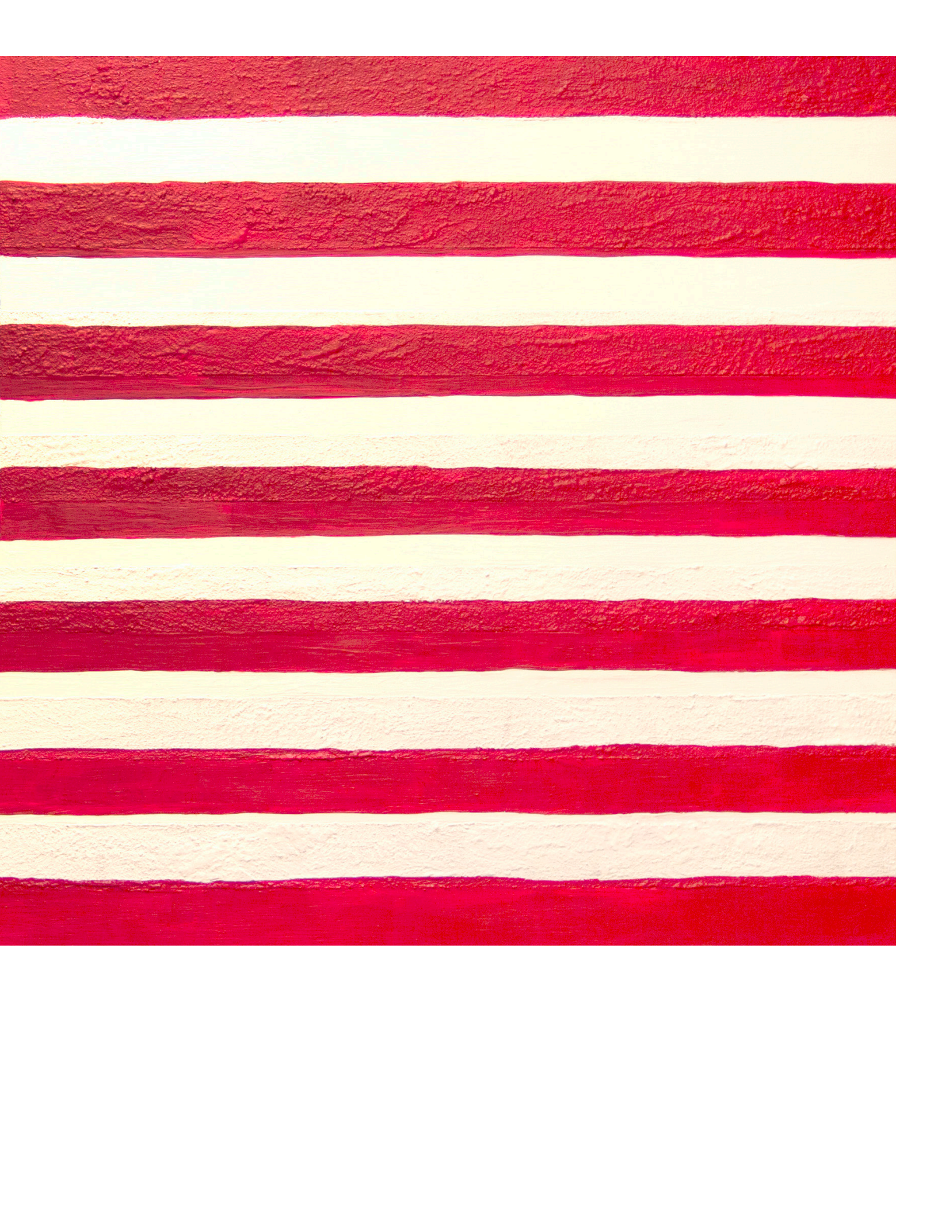


Malaysian to American, 2017

Acrylic Paint

24 x 48 inches

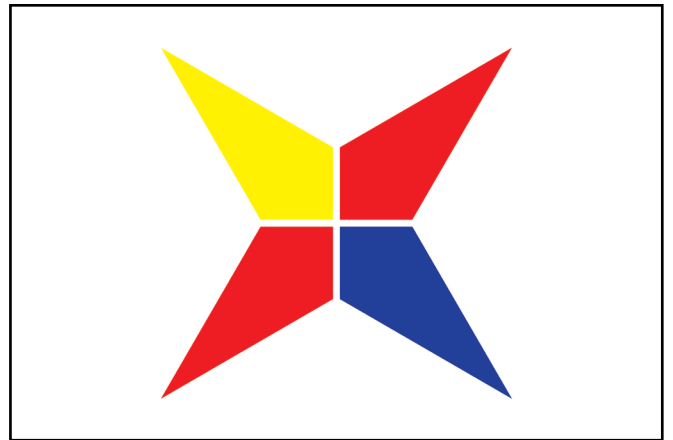
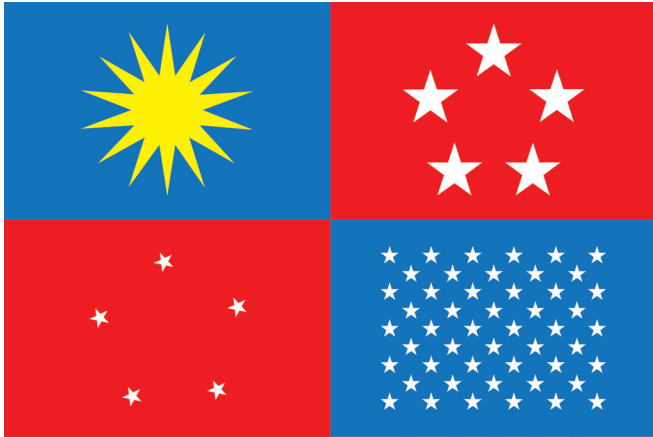




## **Mircro Nation**

My thesis project is an extension of my Malaysian to American flag painting. In this project, I created a new, hybrid flag based on the designs of existing flags (specifically as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the United States) that I have direct connections to. More importantly, the flag explores the ideas of how design elements can build or change the world subjectively and/or objectively. In this case, the flag enabled me to find pride in my blend of nationalities.





Original Concept Flags Designs

The flag design was initially sketched out on paper before it was finalized in InDesign. The design file was then transferred onto a 4 x 6 foot flag, a standard scale for a flag pole on a building. I then held a ceremonial performance which allowed friends and family to witness my declaration of independence. The ceremony entailed traditional Malaysian attire to honor my birth country, prayer to the divine and the unknown, lite aromatic incense as a tribute to my ancestors, and lastly, pouring tea onto the ground as an act of reverence to the earth. These rituals are inspired by existing rituals I associated with, much like how I had implemented designs from national flags I have connections to.

After a month of flying the flag on a flag-pole where I had resided, I then framed it like an artifact. The design existed in the form of iron on patches, which could be applied to personal items such as jackets or backpacks. Using the flag as a self-portrait furthers the notion that design is a universal tool and serves all aspects of the arts, such as drawing and painting.







This project also provided me the opportunity to research the meaning of flags and particularly the symbolism behind the flags of Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and the United States. This project has also given me the inspiration to continue making art with the mindset of a designer regardless of the end goal. The next step is to offer flag design service to people who are also experiencing similar struggles with identity. Besides making different flag designs, I could also see them in the form of embroidered patches, printed on mugs, or as an actual flag that people can hang up.

Design encompasses more than the visual and physically experience. Humans have always lived by invented social construct, traditions, religions, and laws. I have found a solution to my struggle with my nationality by inventing a new identity through a flag, then corroborated a micro-nation by having friends and family witness my declaration of independence. The flag now exists as an artifact to remind me not only of my independence but the

steps it took to get to where I am today. In reality, I am native to nowhere. My identity and my future are not determined by where I call home or where I reside. Instead, I am an unrestrained, evolving, independent being.

Even though the flag was a temporary representation of my hybrid identity, it felt real. With this flag I feel more connected to the countries I've never considered home. The project had also given me the opportunity to revisit my past and find a way to slowly mend the years of personal bitterness I had felt towards the actions of my people. As my status change over time, I will also expect the design of this flag change. I also see globalization and the exponential growth of the population having a huge impact the future of the world. We share the responsibility of designing our future with innovative ideas by developing from what we have and learning from our predecessors. Sometimes in order to move forward we must be willing to look back.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Judd, Donald. Specific Objects. New York: Arts Yearbook 8, 1965. Print. p. 4
- 2 Judd, 1965, p. 5



