

THE SHAPE OF HOME

by

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DEDICATION

For my family, near and far.

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ABSTRACT

Society often frames the concept of home as singular. Despite this, I examine the intersections of home with place, identity and memory. Being raised by Japanese and Irish immigrant parents, in North Dakota, I am intrigued by what defines a sense of home. In this thesis paper, I investigate my own experience of growing up in a multicultural context and the shared experiences of children growing up in a multicultural context. I especially focus my research on Third Culture Kids and those with Half-Japanese or Half-Asian identities. Through the mediums of acrylic and watercolor painting, I create my own representation of home. I include that which brings a sense of belonging; objects, places and symbols from my own heritage, including Japanese patterns, Kamon (crests), and Celtic Knots. Through my work, I aim to bring awareness to how layered and complex belonging can be, especially for those who, like me, struggle to consolidate many parts of themselves.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

What creates a sense of home?

I've been asking myself this same question repeatedly for years. Three years ago, I moved away for the first time from my hometown of Fargo, North Dakota. I left my support systems: my family, my community of friends, and the spaces I had grown used to. I had never been far enough from Fargo to know what it was I needed to make a place for myself to belong.

As I settled in and grew to love my new life in Bozeman, I began to deeply question home; a word that can be both hyper-specific and broad sweeping. This questioning was further complicated by my own multicultural background. I was raised by a Japanese immigrant mother and an Irish immigrant father, inheriting many of the cultural ties they have to their native countries.

Through the process of research, reflection, and creation, I've slowly unpacked many of the complexities that make up home. The paintings in my thesis body of work, *The Shape of Home*, use my connection to the medium of paint to explore the pull of belonging I feel between personal experiences, values, and family history.

CHAPTER TWO

ROOTS

My mother, Yoshiko Kuroda (畔田芳子) was born in Tokyo, Japan; 5,757 miles away from Fargo, North Dakota. Yoshiko was the oldest of three girls born to Kenichi (畔田健一) and Masako (畔田昌子) Kuroda. The Kuroda family proudly owned and ran a fish and sushi shop called Sushi-eh, (すし栄) named after my great-grandfather. Because of the business's success, they lived well and invested in the happiness and success of their children. So, when my mother was presented with the opportunity to study abroad in high school, my grandparents supported her.

In the fall of 1983, Yoshiko traveled from Tokyo, Japan to New Rockford, North Dakota. Of the many places her exchange agency could have placed her, they chose a small town in North Dakota, famous only for bitter cold winters. She spent a year living with the Hovey Family, attending New Rockford-Sheyenne High School, learning English, and growing a connection to North Dakota.

Upon returning to Japan, my mother enrolled in university, studying Education and English. Around 1990, she returned to the United States and got a job at Boston Higashi School, a Japanese school for children with autism, which sponsored her green card.



Yuki Coyle, Cities Service (New Rockford, ND), 2023, Acrylic on Wood.

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My father, Franz Joseph Coyle was born in Tradeston, Scotland, 3,777 miles from Fargo, North Dakota. His mother Angela Coyle, whom I am named after, was a nurse who traveled from her home in Ireland to Scotland. She had fallen in love with my grandfather, a Spanish sailor, but she learned he planned to leave Scotland. She wasn't ready to leave everything she had known and depart for an unknown land with her only child and a man she was no longer sure about. Aiming for a fresh start, she returned to Ireland with Franz.

Years later, Angela met a kind policeman, Hugh McGloin, and they were married. At this time in Ireland, it was considered taboo to start a new marriage with a child from a previous relationship. So, my father, at the age of three went to live with my great-grandparents, William and Elizabeth Coyle. I am not writing these facts to incite judgment or pity, but to lay the important foundation for the story that eventually becomes my own.

My father was adopted by William and Elizabeth and grew up on Iona Road, in Letterkenny, Ireland. My great-grandparents, both devout Catholics, raised Franz with kindness. He grew up playing soccer, causing trouble with the neighborhood boys, and in his teens, practicing karate. In 1988, Franz won a green card in the Donnelly visa lottery (aka NP-5), a program that historically benefited the Irish immigrant population (Law 2002, 15).

Franz moved to Boston, where he met my mother. The details of this story are never told in depth, but the short story is that my parents met through friends at a bar, hit it off, and dated until my mom got pregnant. Afterwards, they made the decision to get married.

After having 2 kids together (my older sisters), in search of a slower pace of life away from the traffic of Boston, my parents moved to Fargo, ND. Fargo is the largest town in North Dakota, a compromise between the smallness of New Rockford and the largeness of Boston. There, they bought a house, had two more children (my brother and I), and embraced the chaos we created.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT ARE YOU?

In Fargo, I was one of the few non-white students at my elementary school. It was a common occurrence to get kids that came up to me and did “Chinese eyes” or “Japanese eyes,” stretching out their eyelids either up or down with their fingers. I laughed it off, saying I didn’t really look like that. Both kids and adults would come up to me and ask the typical “what are you?” question. I came to realize they wanted to know what kind of “Asian” I am, not that I was born and raised in North Dakota. It was small things like this that reminded me that there was a difference between someone white and someone Asian.

At home, I found ways to be very proud of my cultural ties. I found these ties in the form of my love for my mom’s Japanese cooking, learning Irish folk songs from my dad, receiving yearly boxes full of Japanese craft/art supplies, and learning to Irish dance. These all helped me develop a positive foundation regarding being mixed race and filled my siblings and I’s lives with cultural richness.

Trips to Ireland or Japan were infrequent when I was a young child. But in my teens, I was lucky enough to visit both countries multiple times. I saw family and played football (soccer), mummy (blind tag), or rounders (kickball) with my cousins. The food I was able to eat there was the “real deal” version of the meals my family tried so hard to recreate in the United States. The more I visited these places and cultures, the more I realized that, however connected I feel to these cultures, I was different. I was never afforded the opportunity to grow up in these places and learn their languages, mannerisms, and history firsthand. No matter how welcoming everyone was, I was reminded that I was different and began to long for the comforts of the US,

recognizing that I was American too. I love a greasy burger, a stroll by the river in Fargo, a summer road trip, stopping at all the various “world’s largest” statues, and a small-town café with many flavors of pie at an unbelievably low price. I am as American as I am Japanese and Irish.

CHAPTER FOUR

JAPAN AND LANGUAGE

“Bicultural children may never become fluent in the original language of at least one parent. When they go to a family reunion held for that parent’s family, they realize they cannot have extended conversation (or any) with their grandparents or other relatives.” (Bell-Villada et al. 2011, 41)

Every time my mother would visit Japan, she would take one of her four children with her. In my teens, I was lucky enough to go with her twice on this adventure. We would spend most of our time visiting family, and she would share her favorite parts of the places where she grew up. These trips were some of the biggest highlights of my teenage years. They filled many of the gaps between what I had spent so long hearing about or experiencing through packages from family once a year. There was so much joy in sharing jellies, melon-pan, gorgeous cakes, and tea with my family, connecting their personalities with snippets of them I’d only known through phone calls, stories, or photos. I was happy to see the room my mother grew up in filled with things she had owned when she was my age. We would retrace the steps she took, visiting the onsen town she visited every summer with her grandmother, and eat ice cream together at the same zoo she used to visit. I felt a deeper sense of connection and understanding with my family and lineage in these moments, which I will forever carry with me.

The most immediate disconnect I felt in Japan was in language. I remember my mom would send me off to the register by myself when we went shopping. Already a quiet youngest child, afraid of judgment, I would clam up and try to nod my way through each transaction, feeling helpless. After I spent two weeks there, I realized I mostly only spoke to my mom and

Aunt, who both also spoke English. I remember being frustrated with myself because I couldn't say anything to my grandparents and relatives when we went to see them in their houses or in the hospital. I felt their love through each gesture and smile from them, and the photos of my family they had pinned up. I wanted very badly to be more connected with them and return their love through their native language. I wanted to ask them about their lives, share jokes with them, and send them letters full of my thoughts when I returned to the US.

I was also surprised by how pressured I felt by the expectation that I should speak Japanese. My mom never shamed us for not having fluency in Japanese, and nobody in my family ever expressed any frustration with us kids not knowing the language, but I found that certain Japanese people, or even the Americans I encountered, were baffled that I didn't automatically speak the language. To them, it was just a requirement of being mixed, and my lack of fluency in Japanese was a sign that I didn't care. The older I get, the more I begin to realize how unfair it is to disqualify a child from their own culture because they don't have the privilege of learning the language.

To combat these feelings, I began taking Japanese language classes during graduate school. This was the first opportunity I had to take a class, as my undergraduate institution had cut Japanese the first semester I could register for it. As I began to study the language, I noticed the subtle ways that Japanese, whether intentionally or not, expressed a feeling of separation towards anything foreign. In the Japanese language, there are three alphabet systems: Kanji (Chinese characters), Hiragana (Japanese characters), and Katakana (for foreign loan words). By default, all foreign names, even if they sound identical to a Japanese name, are written in Katakana. I remember seeing my name multiple times when interacting with various Japanese

individuals, typically written as コキ・コイル. The way it was written was in a default foreigner style, with all the characters written in katakana, first name, last name, illustrating my “foreigner” status. It wasn’t the way I was taught to write it.

I had never considered that I would be seen as a foreigner to most Japanese people. When I asked my mom about this, she adamantly reassured me that I can and should use my name in a Japanese style, コイル 雪(ゆき). When choosing her children's names, she had made sure that even my siblings' more Western names could be written in a Japanese style. This version uses a last name (foreign loaned katakana for me), first name (Kanji that more clearly indicates the meaning of my Japanese name or hiragana) format. I feel more attached to this way of writing my name, since it is the way I was taught it from childhood, and it is an interesting combination of Japanese and Foreign characters, slightly resembling myself.

Divisions like this between half-Japanese and Japanese individuals have been highlighted in contemporary research. The term hafu (coming from the English word half) has often been used in Japan since the 1970s to indicate mixed-race Japanese who have one Japanese parent and one non-Japanese parent. In the 1990s, there was some pushback on this term, suggesting it as being derogatory, hafu subtly indicating that half-Japanese individuals are half a person. Many people suggested alternatives, offering new terms like mixed or daburu (double).

Mixed race Japanese “are rarely considered (Japanese) or may have been deemed to be in the same category as foreigners” (Oshima 2014, 23). It may not specifically be meant as derogatory, but the unique makeup of Japan being 95 percent full Japanese race in population (Oshima 2014, 1), makes even subtle cultural differences much more apparent. It can be

surprising for people to grow up thinking they can be included with those who share their culture, just to be perceived as an outsider.

CHAPTER FIVE

IRELAND

One of my earliest connections to Ireland was in song and dance. From around the age of six, I would attend Irish dance lessons. They were lots of fun for me, and I would look forward to getting dressed up for our performances in traditional dresses covered on every surface with Celtic knots. We would also sit with my dad in the car on road trips and belt out Irish songs by the Wolfe Tones and Christy Moore. He would tell us stories about Irish history, and described much of the joy and conflict that surrounded the land he grew up in.

Now, when I return to Ireland, even though I no longer dance or sing much, I feel connected to this tradition. I remember attending a traditional music session/performance my aunt was performing in a few years ago. I remember sitting and listening to the music that connected me back to my own memories of Irish music and dance, but sitting there alone without my family near, I couldn't help but feel a gap between me and everyone else sitting in the room.

There was a point in my teens where my father almost bought a home in Ireland. He had an offer accepted for a home to remodel, but the deed fell through in the end. I remember vividly being very excited about finally living near my cousins and living in a place I have heard about all my life. Sitting in that room, listening to the music, I sat there and mourned a life I could have had in Ireland. I wasn't sad about the way my life had turned out, but sometimes the strings pull on me. It helps me realize that though I am disconnected, I am lucky to have so many people I love around me that I sometimes must choose between them.

CHAPTER SIX

THIRD CULTURE KID

My experiences between cultures place me in the category of the Third Culture Kid. A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is defined as, “a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK builds relationships with all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any” (Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock 2017, 15-16).

This third culture is described as a “culture created at the interstices of societies, by people who mediate. It is a bridging culture which obviously reflects the participants’ cultures. It transcends those cultures; it is not a blended culture” (Bell-Villada et al. 2011, 61). I relate to this description as not blended, because I think my sense of identity isn’t fully integrated; it is fragmented, overlapping, and constantly changing. A Third Culture Kid must become a kind of “cultural chameleon” and as a child learns to blend into any environment (Cockburn 2002, 481). This ended up being true for me, especially when I was younger. I would try my best to adapt to any environment and would act more American/Japanese/Irish in any given context, never fully blended. There was always an underlying anxiety that I wasn’t good enough at being any of those, and only half good at being American, half good at being Japanese, and half good at being Irish.

This fragmentation isn’t always negative. My cultural interests change in phases; I am sometimes deep diving into Irish history, but other times I am learning as much Japanese as

possible. The latter is my current phase. As a result, much of the work in this feels more Japanese than Irish.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEFINING MYSELF FOR MYSELF

It is important to me to acknowledge why I feel the need to address these things at this point in my life. Not only has moving away from North Dakota muddled my sense of home, but I haven't taken the time I needed to understand the tensions I felt between the many aspects of my identity. I didn't grow up having conversations with anyone about what my culture looked like. My parents always referred to Ireland and Japan as their homes, retaining their citizenship in both countries. I don't think my parents said this to be confusing, but it did not help the tension. I ended up assuming the closest answer I would ever get to the question of "what is home?" was Fargo, North Dakota.

In high school, I began seeing more art, as I spent most of my time in the art rooms taking ceramics and drawing classes. I remember being introduced to the artwork of Ayumi Horie and being immediately drawn in by the fact that she was also Japanese American and her work's style and content often reflected that (Pots in Action 2019). I felt that my experience was given a voice and some level of importance. Early on in my undergrad, I was also greatly moved when I saw James Jean's paintings online. Jean specifically explored the "dual nature of his identity" through his works and emphasized the sense of limbo he felt floating somewhere between China and the West (Lotte Museum of Art, n.d.). It was eye-opening for me to see that other people had strong feelings about their identity, and that it was important enough to express them through art.

I let these ideas bounce around in my head during my undergraduate experience but didn't feel like I had anything to say about my own experience yet or simply hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about it. The main tipping point where I felt I must address my own mixed feelings was when I moved to Bozeman. There were some real personal lows in my first few months here, leaving everything that had once brought me a feeling of comfort and home. I no longer had my parents and siblings around, my art community was back home, and I didn't know anyone in Bozeman. There wasn't even a good international grocery store. I felt I was in over my head.

This presented a unique opportunity for me to curate my life. I had taken only what had fit in my car to Montana and carefully selected what to put into my life. I quickly returned to making art and hiking. I met people who shared my interests and grew friendships. I also began to study Aikido, a Japanese martial art. After a while, I found myself missing home but began to realize that there were moments here that I felt as strongly for as the places that I missed. When I thought of home, I battled between wanting to keep aspects of my life here in Bozeman and my old life in Fargo. In addition to this, I still wanted to be wherever my relatives and friends lived. This made me really question how far I could stretch the idea of home, or a place or feeling to belong to. I began to think of home as a collection of moments that make me feel purpose and community.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WORK

My work explores what home can be, especially for those who struggle to find home. I decided that I could let every small moment of disconnect weigh me down and isolate me or I could use them to create a new sense of belonging. I needed to fully embrace my feelings, no matter how disjointed they may have felt initially. The paintings display some of the lightness and freedom that has found me in the moments I am making, hanging it, or writing about it.

I want my work to reflect the Third Culture Kid trait of the “cultural chameleon,” taking aspects of my own identity and displaying them in whatever way they may arrange themselves. I want to emphasize that the overlap, fragmentation, and moments of color inversion all serve to emphasize the fact that this is not a perfect balance I have found, but for a moment, within all the random complexities, it works.

I think that my forward-looking perspective on painting is important to emphasize. Each painting reflects not only my own sentimentality, but also how I see myself existing in the world and how I want myself to exist in the future. This is an attempt at understanding where I come from and how I can use it to my advantage instead of allowing it to hold me back. I am choosing to paint each piece in light, bright colors to emphasize this positive attitude.

I hope that I also open discussion for those struggling to find a way to visualize their own sense of home. “Learning about the term “TCK [Third Culture Kid]” brings great comfort and self-understanding as it normalizes this identity” (Bell-Villada et al. 2011, 67). That is really

what I felt in finding multicultural artists like Ayumi Horie and James Jean. I would feel successful if I could be that representation for even just one person in my place.

I will now introduce some of the main categories of visuals I use, and how they relate to my own search for identity. I may select subjects due to their personal connection to home, whether it is a specific memory, a design I feel a connection to in my lineage, or a representation of a value.

Craft

I grew up around craft. My father is a carpenter-turned construction business owner who specializes in painting. When my mom has time, she takes up sewing, quilting, and knitting. I grew up walking through job sites, and as soon as I turned fourteen, I was ready to go and earn a whopping (to me at the time) seven dollars and twenty-five cents per hour going to humid dorms in the summer painting white walls white. By this time, I was painting artistically and the values I learned in commercial painting carried over into my artistic practice.

When painting commercially, one of the most important things to aim for is a smooth, consistent finish. This requires much preparation: laying down tape, patching, and sanding imperfections. Then, you can brush and roll a consistent coat in enough time that it all lays flat. I can't walk into a single building without questioning the paint and construction quality of the building and will point out issues to anyone whether they are interested or not. I took pride in a job done right and wanted to put my skills to use. Slowly, in my practice, I began to carry over this pride in detail. I wanted every proportion to be spot on, surface to be smooth, and paint to lay evenly. This body of work feels like it is leaning into these urges more than any I have made before.

I chose to use watercolor and Golden SoFlat acrylic paint because of their ability to lay very flat with control. I usually don't choose acrylic paint because it tends to have a plasticky texture and sheen on the surface. The matte-ness of the SoFlat helps eliminate my dislike for acrylics. The key combination that happens for me is when this paint is applied on unfinished wood. Instead of simply sitting on top of a primed surface, it begins to soak in, furthering the flat and matte look I love so much. I have spent a lot of time looking at Japanese Ukiyo-e prints, illustrations, and watercolor paintings, and I also love the flatness of them. They can stay neat and flat, while still creating a rich surface full of interest, movement, and dimension. I hope to be able to use paint the same way, leaning into my love for perfectly flat paint, while remaining rich in all other aspects.

I have also gravitated towards the use of cutouts in my work. They can pull me in as a viewer and cut right to the essence of the objects I am choosing. The works begin to exit the confines of the usual rectangular painting and interact with the 3D space surrounding them. There is also a technical challenge to this cutout process that I enjoy. The larger pieces I make in plywood begin to require patience for detail and woodworking. It takes a steady hand and a strong understanding of how to frame each piece and assemble them, so they appear to float off the wall (see fig. 3). I have found that there is a thin line I must walk with the cutouts, allowing them to still feel flat and simple, without feeling like they are falling into the complexity of something like set pieces.



Figure 1. Yuki Coyle, *The Shape of Home* (Installed View), 2026, Helen E. Copeland Gallery, Bozeman MT

The Outdoors

I love being outside, in the woods, up a mountain, and swimming in a lake. One of the places where I feel the most relaxed is in nature. It embraces each person the same way, without judgment. Most of my childhood weekends were spent with my family, out in nature, trying to catch lots of fish to fry up for dinner or exploring a new area. But, as I've learned by catching an awful cold camping in freezing temps, enduring North Dakota blizzards, and getting caught in summer thunderstorms, nature can be brutal. I love a man-made refuge, deep in nature, but safe from some of the harshest parts of the natural world. And that's why I love an outhouse, a

campground bathroom (bonus points if it has heat), or a cabin. A campground bathroom has seen me through midnight tornado warnings, a much-needed shower, or just a place to plug in my phone. A pit toilet, though less luxurious, is usually a sure sign that you are close to a trailhead, and you can soon stretch out and take off your boots. They are little pieces of home in the larger comfort zone I find in nature.



Figure 2. Yuki Coyle, *Far Out*, 2025, Watercolor on Paper

This watercolor painting, titled *Far Out* (fig. 4), explores the specific forest service outhouses that are everywhere in Montana. They quickly became a symbol of Montana weekends for me, as they are at the trailheads of most trails I've embarked on. I can confirm I have seen this one at the M trail, in Hyalite, Pine Creek Lake, Lava Lake, and other places. It is brightened up from the usual brown to a cheery pink, adding some of the lightness that I

associate with it. It balances alongside a Celtic plaid and a wrapper for a Japanese rice cracker (with complementary meanings that I dive into in pattern and packaging sections).

The Backyard

My backyard became another sort of wonderland growing up. It had a similar connection to the outdoors, being a small slice of nature. But it also became my favorite place to socialize. Growing up, we had a pool, so we spent many three-month summers swimming with our neighbors. In my teens, I also loved to host bonfires. My sisters and I pooled our money together and bought a fire pit. We invited our friends and would sit on lawn chairs together and toast marshmallows, put on a playlist, and have the best conversations together over the fire.



Figure 3. Yuki Coyle, *Summer Nights*, 2026, Acrylic on Wood

The painting *Summer Nights* (fig. 5) reflects on that backyard comfort of a lawn chair. The pattern of the chair itself complements the pop of the Japanese Yagasuri (矢絰) pattern. It is also balanced with a raffle ticket. The mass-produced cheesiness of the cheap raffle ticket, usually used by community gatherings brings me back to values I will outline in the next section.

The backyard, along with the outdoors, are newer categories of home I am just beginning to explore. I hope that as I continue to make work beyond this show, I can investigate more of the possibilities of this imagery.

Small Business

The Fargo-Moorhead area has a population of around three hundred thousand, so it is not necessarily a small town. But, for me, growing up, it had a distinct small-town feeling. I remember going around to many of the businesses my dad painted, visiting the suppliers he worked with, and engaging in lots of small talk about what was new with their families and around town. I loved the feeling that came with knowing there was a general interconnectedness and interest people had in each other's lives and well-being that came through in each business.

There was a year when I was a middle schooler and my classes didn't start as early as my siblings'. My dad and I would get up at seven am, go to a morning mass and have breakfast at the diner near our house. I loved the quirks of that diner that remained a time capsule. The owner was notably tight with money, so there were lots of random half upgrades; like little pictures of random places on the sides of each booth, painted in colors that didn't match the outdated squeaky booths. The food was just the right level of comfort for me to get my day started. These days left me feeling spoiled and in hindsight, grateful for the experience of being welcomed into a space that someone had poured their life into, to share with you. I want to capture some of the

sweet charm of these parts of our hometowns: the drive-in burger stops, the auto shop that hasn't changed its décor since the eighties, and the ice cream shop that gets a line around the block on opening day each spring.



Figure 4. Yuki Coyle, *Mootel*, 2025, Watercolor on Paper

Another watercolor painting I created, *Mootel* (fig.6), uses the motel sign to represent a connection to the unique culture that small businesses add to a community. The motel sign is from the City Center Motel, in Butte Montana. It is not particularly sentimental to me, but I find that wherever I go, I can find small businesses, even if they may be past their prime. These places can offer a reminder of the specific charm and community they fostered for me. The piece also features the (notably funny-faced) statue of Paul Bunyan's blue ox from Bemidji, MN, offering a connection to the belonging I feel on the road in the Midwest, finding random roadside attractions. Even if roadside stops aren't specifically small businesses, they similarly become

pillars of their community. I intertwined this with different plaids and the Sakura (桜) Kamon (see Kamon section), symbolizing not only Japan, but a more positive, blossoming feeling.

Packaging

“We sit here in silence, eating our lunch. But I know we are all here for the same reason. We’re all searching for a piece of home, or a piece of ourselves.”

— Michelle Zauner, *Crying in H Mart* (Zauner 2021)

Wherever I go, I love to visit grocery stores. Growing up, my mother took us to our local Asian/international market weekly. It was the closest grocery store to our house and had a wide variety of products from around the world. The shelves were filled with some of the same foods that reminded me of the boxes of food we received from Japan, and the candies we rationed from Ireland. Many of the cultural associations I made were to that of food. Packaging featuring kanji characters and their cute cartoon mascots became associated with the comforts of home and a connection to my own culture.

I recently read *Crying in H-Mart*, a book written by the musician Michelle Zauner, as a memoir for her mother. Zauner repeatedly stated that many of her associations with being half-Korean felt weak. She hadn’t spent much time in Korea, she wasn’t a great cook, and her Korean language skills were mediocre. But the one thing she had was the love she had for eating Korean food, and the reminders they brought her of her time with her mother, and her family. Returning to H-Mart, a popular Korean grocery store, made her feel a sense of belonging. She also felt a resonating sense of a community of individuals who were all searching for this connection to a place far away, and people they love, far away (Zauner 2021). I feel that I am a part of this collective longing and sometimes feel that international food is the most tangible cultural

connection I grew up with. Even in Japan and Ireland, some of the things I feel are most familiar, I find in a grocery store.

I incorporate wrappers, mascot characters, and shopping bags from small businesses because they bring me a sense of belonging through a cultural connection to food or products. Most of these are connected to the international ties I described, but some are more local. Some of the ties I have for plastic bags can also overlap with the values I referred to surrounding small businesses, as these are the more generic bags sold in bulk.



Figure 5. Yuki Coyle, *Sweet Butter*, 2025, Acrylic on Wood

I painted the piece *Sweet Butter* (fig. 7) about butter packaging in Montana. When I moved here, most of the food stayed similar, but the biggest difference I found was in the butter packaging, which became comically short. I learned that once you end up west of the Dakotas, the butter tends to be shorter, simply due to differing packaging systems (Summers 2022). Every

time I opened the fridge and grabbed butter, I was subtly reminded I was in a new place, thus short butter became a symbol of the belonging I found in my home out west. As one of the earlier pieces in this series, it is a bit simpler, incorporating Japanese uroko (鱗) and ichimatsu (市松) patterns.

Kamon

Kamon (家紋) are Japanese clan crests, which connect back to one's own lineage, dating as far back as 800 years. Most of their designs derive from natural elements such as leaves, trees, mountains and animals. Each design is very specific to a family line, and was traditionally used on armor, kimonos, flooring and many other details of a family's personal home. I am drawn towards Kamon's simplified flat aesthetic designs, and the connections they draw to nature.

I went through the process of trying to determine my own family's Kamon years ago. I started off by searching for my family name Kuroda (黒田) and distinctly remember being dissatisfied by the complicated design that appeared in the images. Only when I returned to Japan last summer, did I notice on my family's grave site, and the name plate on our family home, that the Kamon (see fig.8) was not the same as the one I had found. I asked my mom about it, and she explained that each crest must be traced through one's family's clan lineage. It is not always associated with a surname, the way that an Irish coat of arms is. The knowledge can easily be lost to generations. My family's design, known as "Mokkomon" (木瓜紋, translates to cucumber, though it doesn't resemble one) I found some importance in the pride and tradition that has kept my family passing down the knowledge of the crest through many generations. I

hope to not only keep using this Kamon, but also continue researching others, and the various natural and historical meanings they could add to my work.



Figure 6. Kamon detail image from my family grave, May 22, 2025. Photograph by Yuki Coyle



Figure 7. Yuki Coyle, *Valley View*, 2025, Watercolor on Paper

Valley View (fig.9) incorporates the family Kamon I found. This piece, along with the others I completed during my recent residency in Japan, dive deeper into both my past and present with Japan. My time in Japan allowed me the unique opportunity to see how I belonged in a place I regard as home, without my family around me.

The Kamon displays the connection I feel with my family and lineage in Japan. The window designs were taken from the windows of the Takeo Onsen Romon Gate, in the town where I completed my residency. This pulled me forward into the present, where I was empowered by opening new doors and connections, without my family helping me with everything. These moments exist alongside my home in the US. The sign is taken from the Valley View RV Park in Island Park, Idaho, a (small business style) sign I had passed a few times on road trips from Bozeman. The patterns I added are the Japanese Uroko pattern and an unnamed cross-stitch pattern I found on the internet. All of this illustrates my headspace at that point, embracing a unique feeling of belonging, surrounded by my family's past, recent past in the US, and my newfound independence in Japan.

Pattern

An integral part of my work that I have not yet touched on is the pattern. I have always been fascinated by bins of quilting fabric, Japanese origami paper, and Celtic knots and designs. I find patterns fascinating because they produce a visual sense of movement, and they carry potential energy.

The universal sense of design in patterns is intriguing to me. Though most of the patterns I pick have some hallmark of a specific region, they tend to use the same formulas. Cultures from opposite sides of the planet developed some of the same patterns and symbols. It seems to

be likely that most of the patterns stem from societies identifying and replicating patterns in nature and the development of mathematics (Washburn and Crowe 2004). I find that really comforting, as I draw so many differences between cultures, many core things remain very similar.

My relationship with spirituality in my personal life adds context for the thoughts that inform my work. I am Catholic, so much of my own religious life informs my spirituality. But, since starting grad school, I've also devoted much time to studying Aikido (合気道). Aikido is known as the martial art of peace or harmony, originating from Japan in the 1920s. The first Kanji character in it, Ai (合) means harmony. It focuses a lot of study on ways that we can work on being in harmony with ourselves and others, blurring the lines of attack and defense into a movement of energy. The founder of Aikido explained some of the philosophy of the martial art, stating, "The divine is not something high above us. It is in heaven, it is in earth, it is inside us" (Ueshiba 2002).

I am comforted by the ways that this statement, as an Eastern philosophy, relates almost exactly to my own observations as a Catholic. That is something I remember my mom always pointing out to me, stating that she wouldn't have been as accepting of Catholicism if it didn't already support many of the Shinto and Buddhist traditions she was raised with.

I believe there is a unifying energy like this in all things, constantly rebalancing. The energy part has already been proven through physics, but it may not be described spiritually. So even if it is just for me, the patterns in my work are a reminder of the unity of all things. I am not only Irish, or Japanese, or American, but also human, and figuring things out along with

everyone else on this planet. I have found freedom in embracing all these pieces of home and observing the ways they attempt to balance each other out.

CHAPTER NINE

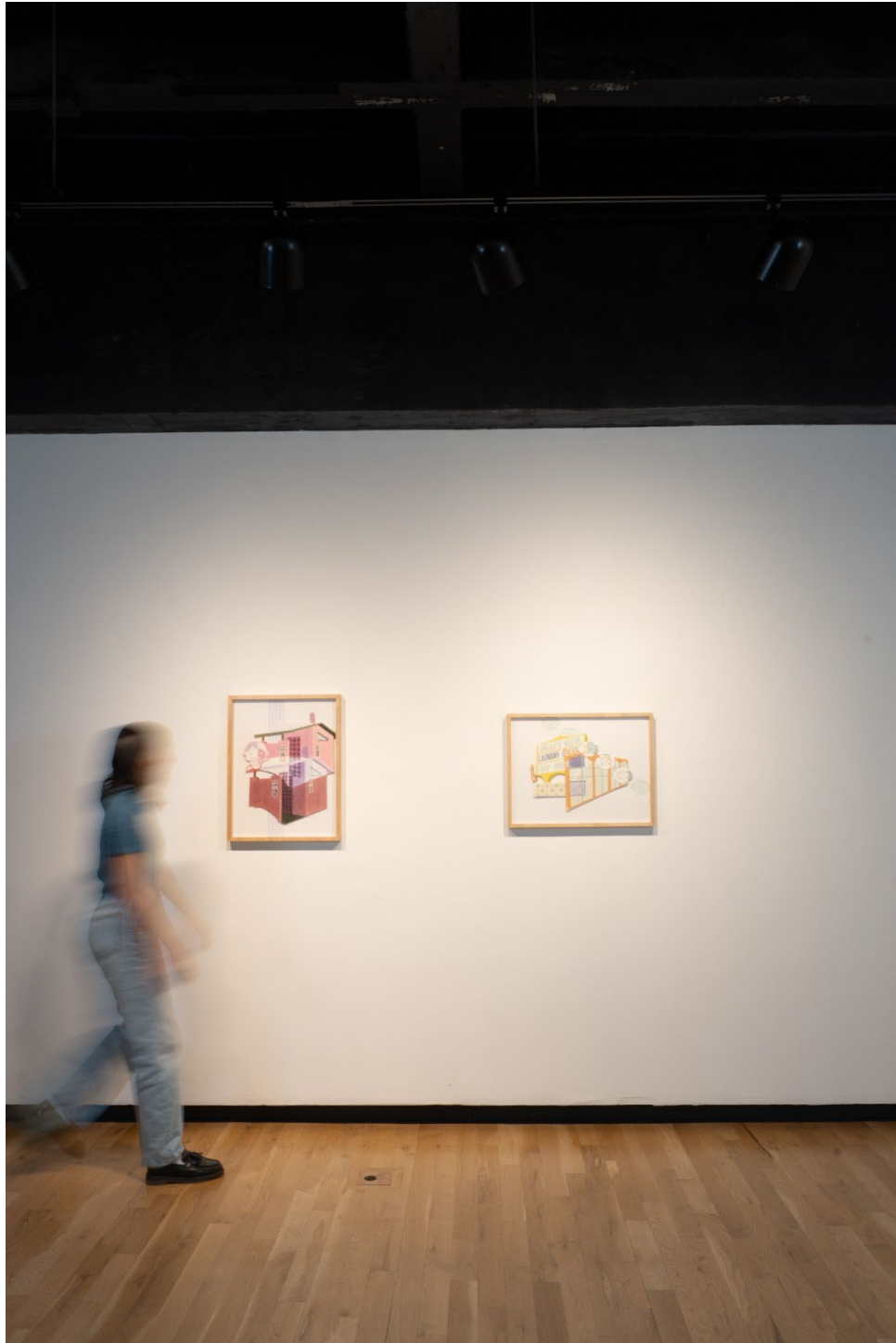
REFLECTION AND FUTURE PLANS

Creating this body of work and attending graduate school has felt like the beginning of a long and fruitful journey of discovery as an artist. The process of installing my work in the Helen E. Copeland Gallery was extremely satisfying. I found that the space offered many opportunities to play with the depth and interaction of each piece as pieces of a larger puzzle. Painting on the walls in detail using stencils was new for me, and I would love to continue to push it further. In future installations, I would like to consider using more of the space, bringing the walls and floors into play.

I plan to also continue my research work more deeply. Since I have focused so much on Japan these past years. I would love to spend more time with my family in Ireland. Researching different Celtic Knots, the Book of Kells, and the Gaelic Language would continue to inform my work. Alongside this, I want to continue to deepen my connections to the outdoors, finding more imagery to express these feelings. Overall, I want to continue traveling, researching, making, and discovering more about myself in the process. I don't know where I will end up in the future, but I know I will make it home.



Yuki Coyle, *The Shape of Home* (Installed View 2), 2026, Helen E. Copeland Gallery, Bozeman MT



Yuki Coyle, *The Shape of Home* (Installed View 3), 2026, Helen E. Copeland Gallery, Bozeman MT



Yuki Coyle, *The Shape of Home* (Installed View 4), 2026, Helen E. Copeland Gallery, Bozeman MT

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