The name Testimony refers to people giving a formal account—in this case, of immigration to the United States, and specifically to the Bay Area. These formal accounts come in the form of verbal narratives, visual portraits, and a selection of objects and ephemera from each person’s life.

The people in these pictures have welcomed me into their homes to record them speaking about their lives and make portraits of them. I want to say thank you to each person who contributed to this work by becoming a subject. That is a deeply generous act, and that generosity infuses the whole project. Thank you for being open, trusting, and willing to teach me.

Each testimony also offers some counterpoints to the contemporary, deeply troubled dialogue around immigration. When examined through the lens of individual experiences, so many of our policies seem not just bad, cruel, or inefficient but truly absurd. What seems clearest to me is that we need a new approach, a new angle, a new set of ideas with which to engage the issues raised by human movement among nations. We desperately need to start asking different questions, and listening to the answers.
Activist Poster

“There has been a collective movement for adoptees to support other immigrants. There are some undocumented adoptees who have gotten deported, because their adoption paperwork was never legal. But most adoptees are documented. We do have citizenship. It makes you ask, What does citizenship mean and who is it granted by and what makes you worthy?”

—Molly, page 4

Poster designed by HyunJu Chappell/Magna Citizen Studio for adopteerightscampaign.org.

In Testimony, photographer Eliza Gregory invites Bay Area residents to share their personal stories as immigrants in an effort to broaden the discussion on immigration.

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Molly 4
Alma 6
Jack 10
Khanh 12
Nancy 18
Jochen & Carolin 20
Nhung 24
Dina 30
Dũng & Liên 32
Yuri 34
Karma 36
Shaghayegh 38

Each account is represented through photographs, ephemera, and interviews assembled during Gregory’s three-year collaboration with the Asian Art Museum’s Artists Drawing Club. During the first phase of Testimony, Gregory interviewed ten service providers in the Bay Area who work with newcomer communities. Participants ranged from doctors to lawyers to leaders of community organizations. These interviews, published in the book Testimony, volume 1, helped prepare Gregory for phase two, when she worked directly with youth to share their own explorations of the immigrant experience. In conjunction with the Mission-based arts organization Southern Exposure, Gregory collaborated with eight San Francisco high school students to investigate themes of identity and representation in visual media. Their interviews and artworks were exhibited at Southern Exposure and memorialized in the book Testimony, volume 2.

Eliza Gregory is a San Francisco–based artist and educator who explores community health, cultural adaptation in contemporary society, and how family relationships shape our lives.

Marc Mayer
Senior Educator of Contemporary Art
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Caren Gusinow
Associate Director of Education and Interpretation
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Carolin on the Stairs

“Living here has changed my perspective. Living in Germany, I always thought, Yeah, we have figured it out pretty well. But now being an immigrant myself, I sometimes think, We can actually open up more.”

—Carolin, page 20

The portraits that you see in the gallery and in this newspaper were created by Gregory and eight student artists who represent the many layers that lie beneath the word “immigrant.”

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It’s so obviously a structurally violent practice of tearing families apart.”

October 28, 2017

I grew up in Michigan in a predominantly white upper-middle class suburb. I was adopted from Korea when I was fifteen months old. As a kid, Michigan and Korea seemed normal. I had a lot of family. I don’t think we were particularly aware that we were living in a bubble. I think we were isolated to Korean adoptions. This is adoptions through the lens of forcibly removing citizens from our homeland as children. As you realize the scale of it, you think, ‘Wait. You have a cousin together?’

I was like, ‘Oh, my God. It’s not just a birth mother—I have a father. I have nieces, nephews, uncles, aunts, even great-grandmothers, great-grandfathers, and this whole legacy and this whole history.’

A lot of my friends have reunited with family, and that relationship is often challenging. At the same time, out here living the story in Michigan. Who is the other person? Was she healthy? Was she poor? What were the circumstances? When they married? Sometimes the other side of the story is still unknown.

Adoptions coming back to Korea often feel that the birth records are corrupt. A lot of them are faked in legal adoptions when nothing was legal to begin with. You can’t be a legal orphan or have living family. In some instances, lawyers would think they were dropping their child off at orphanage for an extended period of time because they didn’t have money or couldn’t take care of them. Then they would come back and the child had been sent overseas. In other cases, a mother-in-law or another family member would relinquish a child as an orphan without the mother’s consent. Globally, we’re seeing a push for adoption to be limited to legal processes, adoptions through the lens of forcibly removing citizens from our homeland as children. As you realize the scale of it, you think, ‘Wait. You have a cousin together?’

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“Someone needs to raise awareness and I think I could be that person.”

Alma
San Francisco, 2017

Testimony
Alma
San Francisco, 2017
Alma Getting Ready

Card from the Women's March in Washington DC in 2017

“Alma’s Book

Growing up in San Francisco schools we didn’t really have a chance to learn our own history, culture, and how powerful and advanced our Native American ancestors were. Which sucks. But we’re not stuck. If we want to go ahead and learn about that on our own, we can.”

—Alma

The Homie Old School

“This Homie reminds me of my uncle, my Uncle German. He was the last uncle that was killed in Mexico before my mom decided to come to the United States.”

—Alma

Testimony

Testimony
“Even immigrants get their hearts broken.”

July 30, 2017

My parents are typical Chinese parents in that they care about ranking very much. And USF was not the highest ranked school where I got accepted. But I felt like I wanted to go to one of the other schools that was more remote, I wanted to study business in cornfields and forests. I wanted to know what city life was like in the United States.

For the first three months, I didn’t like school. I felt the dormitory looked very bad. The food… didn’t taste that good. The weather was very, very cold. Oh, come on, I thought. California is sunny seashores and bikinis! Not in San Francisco. And there’s a big distance between people. For Asians, we live in a community that is very close. People will ask what you have been doing today. No one feels like this is too much of someone else’s business. They feel like, Oh, I’m caring about you. The downside is, people want you to behave the same way they do or they will correct you. At USF, if there’s an event going on, they will just post a notice quietly and let you know there’s something going on, but if you don’t want to go, no one will bother you. That was a very big cultural shock for me.

But then I started to realize it’s because people respect you. They think that if you’re just here, I shouldn’t judge you and interrupt your way of doing things. Until you feel like, Oh, I need someone to help or I need some advice or I need your ideas, and then they will gladly provide what they think or what they can do. But like them, I think like you can be yourself. Being a visiting student is not that easy. The problem is when everyone’s enjoying a joke or talking about something, sometimes I totally don’t get it. I didn’t grow up in a country that watched the same TV episodes as people here. There are many phrases I don’t know. Although I can technically understand the words people are using, I still don’t actually get what they’re talking about. I have to ask questions after a few times, you know.

Being here has helped me notice that there’s more than one way for things to be done. And just like people respect who I am, I should respect what people think and what they do. So I think this is a good way of adapting. But I do hold onto my Chinese identity. I will go back. To be honest, I know about what I should get a Green Card. What I am thinking is I can try to learn some of the ways that people here think and what they do. I want to understand some culture between China and the United States.

China is not great. There’s a lot of problems but I think it’s funny when I tell my family my friends here or friends back in China, even my parents no one understands it. They feel like you’re just trying to get a small piece. What can you change? The government is too big. The school is so exciting. Back then, I thought I’d try to change the rules. I thought I have a responsibility that if I want women’s rights, respect human rights, and don’t let people work over time. And if I’m weak, I’ll just try to work on myself, perform those rules on myself. It’s not about changing the whole thing in one night. It’s about trying to affect it and let others see there’s the opportunity to change.
I am eighty years old in the Western age and in Asian age eighty-two. We count one year during the time the mom is pregnant. I was born in Da Nang. Da Nang is in the center of Vietnam. Growing up, there were nine to ten people in the house. I had three sisters. I was the only boy. It was a hard life.

I studied in Da Nang until I was sixteen, and then I moved to Saigon. I completed middle school there, but I didn’t complete high school, because I had to join the army. A lot of people who joined the army had people inside that would help them, family or relatives, to protect them, to keep them from going to the war, so that they wouldn’t have to fight or be killed. I had nobody inside. I was just a student. I didn’t want to fight. I joined a special unit, Airborne, because I thought if I’m flying airplanes, I won’t get killed from fighting on the ground.

I didn’t want to join the fighting, but because there was a war all the men had to support, no matter if you were from the North, the South, the Center. I had no other option. I had to go. I completed my training as an officer, and my first experience in the war was being surrounded by people dying, hungry people, people trying to survive. A lot of innocent people were dying. It was such a terrible thing to my country. I didn’t feel that anything was right. I was in the army for seventeen years.

When I was released from the re-education camp, my son was already twelve years old. I had to escape the country. I sought support from the Americans, I wanted to take my son with me, but my wife said, You have been gone for twelve years and if you take my son, if something happens to you, I will have nobody. So I stopped by a relative’s house and asked, Do you have a son that I could take? I didn’t want to fight. I wanted to take a special unit, Airborne, because I thought if I’m flying airplanes, I won’t get killed from fighting on the ground.

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I escaped from Vietnam in a small fishing boat. When I got to Thailand, I took a picture so that I could send it back to show my family that I was alive. Three dollars, three pictures.
This newspaper is a complement to the Testimony exhibition at the Asian Art Museum, running April 6–June 10, 2018. The newspaper offers longer versions of the interviews conducted with participants from July 2017 to January 2018. It is also meant to be taken apart and displayed as a small, mobile version of the exhibition. Please feel free to put it up in your home, office, school, gym, neighborhood, or any place you’d like to share it.

Nancy, Josh, Zoe, and Theo
San Francisco, 2017
Is that a positive or negative thing? Because she sat with her

Immigrant

"I guess I had really great teachers because I was never embarrassed about who I was and who my family was.”

–Nancy

Nancy, Josh, Zoe, and Theo
San Francisco, 2017

Nancy:

When I came here the Philippines was my second home but I don’t remember any of it really. I remember always being surrounded by talk of family and being with my grandparents and all my relatives and being in the culture. I always go to work together in the fields and every family would come together. It felt like a big party to me as a kid growing up.

My parents were really proud because they were working and trying to get by. My dad was a agricultural engineer and my mom was a chemist.

My family worked in the fields with whatever was in season—grapes, asparagus. They were in Stockton, California. For some reason I really remember grapes and asparagus because we always had them in the house when they were in season.

It was like you’re Filipino all the time but when you go to school you’re American. My parents said I should only speak in English because everyone is from America. It’s always been a struggle of identity. And I guess I had really great teachers because they never mentioned about what I was and who my family was.

America was a translated land. My dad’s cousin came here and he and his family were the kids of the farmers. They didn’t have much, they were more like sticks. There were gaps between them and the pigs just ran around underneath the bamboo floorboards—they weren’t even under the bamboo. If you fell through there was feces down there. I was creeped out thinking, ‘What’s down there?’

My parents came here as immigrants to achieve success. My dad cried the first time he went back. He had forgotten what it was like. My parents’ parents understood English pretty well since they had studied it in school, but they didn’t.”

Josh: When I was seven I went to visit the house where my dad grew up, and it was a traditional bahay kubo. It had a thatched roof and was on stilts underneath. There was no fence, they were more like sticks. There were gaps between them and the pigs just ran around underneath the bamboo. There was a hole in one of them. I was cramped underneath the roof. My dad cried the first time he went back. He had forgotten what it was like.

Nancy: When I came here as an immigrant to achieve the American dream, to be successful and comfort able in the time, and they did. Then I told all who came to college, had careers. They never worried about money because I was never embarrassed about who I was and who my family was.

When I think about my identity I don’t think, ‘Oh I’m a daughter of an immigrant’ or ‘Filipino’ or ‘Mexican’. I have no idea what that even means. Thinking about myself as an immigrant is also scary because I can’t say, ‘I’m Filipino’, but my dad says that’s not true. We’ve had multiple arguments about that. Is it Filipino, Filipino?

We ask: ‘What’s it like being an American? Is it like being white or Filipino or Mexican? How are those different categories and how do they interact with each other? How do different groups view each other? How do different groups view each other?’

We’re in the Philippines and the Philippines always has the fried food smell, but for some reason it doesn’t because he doesn’t like to fry food in the house. A Filipino house always has the fried food smell, but this one doesn’t because she always takes the carryout.

Nancy: One thing Nancy and I try to do is be very intentional with our kids about understanding differences between people. We’re white, aren’t Filipinos. We’re basically that the kids are white but just so they feel more comfortable talking about cultural identity.

Nancy: A lot of that comes from there first and then later—

Nancy: ‘address it. Right? What is different about being Asian American? What’s it like being white or Filipino or Mexican? How are those different categories and how do different groups view each other? How do different groups view each other?’

Nancy: It’s intentional that we don’t shy away from it and we embrace it. When Zoe or Theo says, ‘You’re not really Filipino because you’re this or that way, or that practice or religion thing’ we talk about it. This underground stuff that we try to teach our kids is to be loud and do everything.

Nancy: See Francis runs something puts everyone in a category of race and so we talk about how it’s not always an issue of race, it’s an issue of class or of family culture. Even beyond that, there’s a cultural identity, there is a family identity. And that’s really important for people to understand. It doesn’t matter what culture you come from, every family changes it to meet their needs and their values.

We think the way we’re going to affect change in the larger world is to get children feeling more comfortable talking about those issues of race, sex, class, and cultural identity with the stress to be positive and look forward to talking about those conversations.

When I tell them my mom is Filipino and born in the Philippines they don’t believe me unless I show them pictures. So people think it’s interesting soations that there’s even more that just Blackballs and_big especially about the culture. If it’s more cultural because it’s more like a race or a racial identity, not a category of race and so we to talk about how it’s not a black identity.

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"We feel more like Europeans than Germans. Immigration and movement, in the concept of the European Union, becomes a non-issue."

—Jochen

Jochen & Carolin
San Francisco, 2017
Nhung
San Francisco, 2017

They called me a war criminal because I had worked with the Americans.”

October 6, 2017
I was born on August 25, 1939. I am seventy-seven years old. I was born in Vietnam, in Saigon. Saigon is now Ho Chi Minh City. I grew up and went to school, completed my education, and later I joined the army to work for the Americans during the American/Vietnamese War. After 1975, when the Viet Cong came to power, I was taken to jail for war criminals for seven years, six months, and fifteen days. I counted day by day. More than seven years in the camp.

During the time I was in the camp, it was really hard. I had no choice but to eat whatever food they gave me. It was very difficult to survive in that environment. Some of my friends died in the camp.

I married my wife before I went to the camp. We had four children. While I was in the camp, my wife escaped the country by boat. She went to America. When I got home from the camp, I had a lot of freedom and I helped my friends get into the camps. I married my wife before I went to the camp. We had four children. While I was in the camp, my wife escaped the country by boat. She went to America. When I got home from the camp, I had a lot of freedom and I helped my friends get into the camps.

I wanted to come to America and get married to an American lady, but the plan also didn’t work out. A mixed child, American and Vietnamese, they would not accept. But I worked hard. I applied for the paperwork from 1985 to 1995. I waited ten years for the paperwork to be approved.

When I came here, I had a plan. I wanted to go to school and get a degree so that I could work in a hospital. My daughter helped me get in touch with her. I try to focus on the good things in the past, not to bring them back. I try to think of the good things. Sometimes, when people ask me about the past, I can’t remember it. I wanted to come to America and get married to an American lady, but the plan also didn’t work out. A mixed child, American and Vietnamese, they would not accept. But I worked hard. I applied for the paperwork from 1985 to 1995. I waited ten years for the paperwork to be approved.

I had a dream. But I wasn’t able to pursue my dream. In 2004 I went back to Vietnam and married my second wife. My wife was one of my daughter’s teachers. My daughter helped me get in touch with her. I try to focus on the good things in the past, not to bring them back. I try to think of the good things. Sometimes, when people ask me about the past, I can’t remember it.
Nhung
San Francisco, 2017
The Barrel Man

"Every Filipino household has a barrel man, a wooden spoon and fork, and a karaoke machine."

—Nancy, page 18

What do you know about the people who have come before you in your family? What do you know about your family’s migration stories? What are the different places you have a relationship to? If you could ask a question to any family member (past or present), what would you ask?

Researchers believe that the more children know about their family history, the greater their emotional health and happiness.*

At the same time, many of us have gaps in our knowledge of our own histories. Sometimes those gaps are, themselves, a key piece of the story. Balanced narratives are particularly effective at contributing to mental health in children. Participate in the Testimony project by exploring your intergenerational self.*

Tell the story of your family. Take a moment to exchange stories of your family with your companions or other visitors.

October 23, 2017

I was born in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia and we lived on a small street near the city center, called Noviy Gorod. I was the youngest of three kids, and my parents were both teachers. We were not wealthy, but we were happy. Russia was a communist state, and education was highly valued. My father was a history teacher, and my mother was a math teacher. We were very proud of our country, but as a young boy, I knew that things were not right. The government was oppressive, and people were afraid to express dissent.

I remember the day in 1990 when perestroika began. My parents were overjoyed, and I was excited too. I wanted to see a free Russia, a country where I could live my life without fear. But as the years went by, the situation in Russia deteriorated. The government became more and more hostile to the people, and the economy was in shambles. My parents began to talk about leaving Russia, but we didn’t know where to go or how to do it.

In 1993, when we decided to immigrate to the United States, my parents applied to be refugees. They were tried for a year, but eventually, they were accepted. They were very excited, but they were also very worried. They didn’t know what the future held for them.

My grandfather and my uncle Yakov, having settled in San Francisco, wrote to Senator Barbara Boxer. We submitted visa applications to the US Embassy, but many months passed before we heard back. It was 1993. We followed up twice a year, and we finally received a visa in 1995. We boarded a plane to San Francisco on October 22, 1995. We were very happy, but also very nervous. We didn’t know what to expect, but we knew that we had to make the best of our new life.

Our first few weeks in San Francisco were very difficult. We didn’t know anyone, and we didn’t speak a word of English. But we were determined to make a new life for ourselves. We found a place to live, and we started looking for work. It wasn’t easy, but we were persistent.

My parents worked hard to provide for our family. My father was a computer programmer, and my mother was a housewife. We didn’t have much money, but we were happy. We were away from the oppression of Russia, and we were free to be ourselves.

In Russia, we have a saying that goes, ‘It’s easy to be a boy, but very tough to be a man.’ My father always said that to me. He wanted me to be strong and to learn to take care of myself. He taught me how to stand up for what I believe in, and to never give up.

I am very sensitive to the displacement of immigrants and communities of color. San Francisco is changing rapidly, and it’s sometimes hard to know what to do or what your role is. When we came here in ’95, the Mission District did not look anywhere close to what it looks like now. What are we doing about gentrification and the immigration communities hunted down, almost wiped off the map? As an immigrant, that’s very hard to see. It makes me wonder if what we present as a privileged immigrant are we white. I have no identity. I am a citizen. I am very sensitive to the displacement of immigrant and communities of color. San Francisco is changing rapidly, and it’s sometimes hard to know what to do or what your role is. When we came here in ’95, the Mission District did not look anywhere close to what it looks like now. What are we doing about gentrification and the immigration communities we say we care about?
“I miss Vietnam, but I’m not homesick.”

–Liên

October 2017

Liên: Before 1975, my whole family got support from the government. We got housing because of my father’s status as an officer. After 1975, the Việt Cộng came and they took everything. My father and my older brother were sent to work camps. My family had to sell our belongings to make a living. I had to help my mother and my brother to make a living so that we could rent our home. It was a very difficult time.

Đũng was born in 1960. When he was four years old, his father, who was a soldier, was killed by snipers placed in a tree by the Việt Cộng. So his name, as a widower and a caretaker of two kids, it was a hard childhood. After 1975, he was a contractor. The salary covered his job that he did only two dollars per day.

Đũng and I got married and have two children, one son and one girl. The son passed away two years ago because he had a heart disease.

Back home before I came here, I would buy things and sell them, to make a living. I’d make maybe ten dollars a day, and I got paid for the day. A lot of other people were doing the same. But then, that feeling came and went. We purchased a car with four wheels! That was the happiest moment of my life. In 1999, I got my Green Card, and I got a job caring for elderly people. Now I can help my parents.

Đũng: Four years ago I was a contractor in Vietnam. Then we came here by family sponsorship.

Liên: We were waiting and waiting for the paper work to go through so that we could come. We waited twelve years. For a couple of days when we first came, I stayed up and looked out the window and cried. Thank God they let me come. That’s not a dream. I didn’t think it was possible.

I love Vietnam. But I’m not homesick. What I miss here is that when I work hard, I get something in return. People like us who are working class, back home they don’t have the chance to see the doctor, because they cannot pay for the cost. Here, no matter if you are a resident or a big guy, a boss, you have to follow the law. Laws in this country are very strict, and very straightforward. I feel safe, I feel protected. This country has protections for immigrant people. Somebody calls the police, I have to tell them what I see and deal with American culture. The way we do things is really strict, straight, and clear.

When I use my phone, when I am in the Vietnamese community, I feel Vietnamese. I feel American when I ride in a car.

Đũng: Back home a moderately well-off person could afford to buy a car. But here, we are happy—people purchased a car with four wheels.

When I first arrived, I would be waiting for the bus. In that moment, my body had two types of feelings: first, it’s lovely, I worry that tomorrow I won’t get something to eat! Because I was a long收集ing and selling things. But then, that feeling came and went, and the second feeling is, Thank God, it’s raining. I am waiting for the bus, but I am alive for the first time. My friends call and ask me, ‘Do you miss Vietnam? Do you miss America?’ Do you feel sad? I will say, ‘What kind of questions are those? It’s nonsense. This country, America, welcomes everybody, no matter where you come from. You are given the opportunity to pursue your dreams, to pursue your goals. Thank God. Thank God they let me come to this country.”
Only a mother can understand the pain that I felt leaving my little one behind.

Yuri and her Brothers as Kids

In Guatemala

I was told that I was pregnant when I was 15, in a tiny town. Unfortunately, my grandmother continued to run as she had to. What else could she do? We had no money—she was utterly poor and there was no place for us to live. A couple of months later, we had to leave this town because, with the technology in the hospitals was so advanced. But we couldn't afford to go to the hospital. We never went to the hospital before. My mamá was an undocumented immigrant. She worked three or four jobs to be able to earn enough money. She had no one who could help her. She was left alone with her, she would yank my hair or my ears. She didn't like me and refused to accept me. When my mother was pregnant, my grandmother would take her in. My mother quickly became pregnant and lived with the woman and her family. She wasn't prepared with things for the baby—she didn't like it, and she said to herself, “I’m going to die.” She went to the hospital, but she did not want to accept the baby. When the baby was born, she said, “This is not my baby.” She didn’t like it, and she said to herself, “I’m going to die.”

I was left alone with her. She didn’t like me, and she didn’t want to accept me. When my mother was pregnant, she was pregnant for the first time. She was very angry and refused to accept her in the hospital. The couple who had brought her to the hospital against her will. My mother quickly became pregnant and lived with the woman during the pregnancy because she couldn’t get home, she didn’t have a job. She was pregnant and alone, and there were no opportunities for her in the city where she lived. My mother says that during the pregnancy she stayed in the dirt in the mountains, and when the woman was ready, she took my grandmother and we were taken to the city. My mother was pregnant and lived with the couple—she was a daughter. She wanted a baby girl with a round face that was like winning the lottery. I was dying to learn. I was terrified. We lived like that for a year and then, because the technology in the hospitals was so advanced. But we couldn't afford to go to the hospital. We never went to the hospital before. My mamá was an undocumented immigrant. She worked three or four jobs to be able to earn enough money. She had no one who could help her. She was left alone with her, she would yank my hair or my ears. She didn’t like me and refused to accept me. When my mother was pregnant, my grandmother would take her in. My mother quickly became pregnant and lived with the woman and her family. She wasn’t prepared with things for the baby—she didn’t like it, and she said to herself, “I’m going to die.” She went to the hospital, but she did not want to accept the baby. When the baby was born, she said, “This is not my baby.” She didn’t like it, and she said to herself, “I’m going to die.”

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“I think it is important to be able to mix with the culture and be understanding, accepting, kind, and fluid.”

November 18, 2017

I was born in Nepal, Kathmandu. When I was maybe eight months old, my parents moved back. We’re Buddhist, and we have a monastic called Karmapa. That’s why my parents moved back. But my brother was born with very transparent skin, you could see many things inside. Actually, when my mom informed my brother, she was by herself. She gave birth outside the hospital. The Karmapa came and also cleaned the baby, she did everything on her own. And later the doctors said they had never seen anything like this transparent skin, and they were very surprised.

When my brother was still really young my parents went to a Buddhist state in Nepal. That was 1969. The sixteenth Karmapa had come to Nepal and he was giving teaching and empowerment—my father wanted to see the sixteenth Karmapa. He saw my brother. He had transparent skin, and he asked his father, “Can you go and call this couple who was the father and mother of this child? Can you go and tell them that your son has transparent skin?” My mom was planning to go back home with her baby, in the middle of the night came and told my parents that my brother had to come see him. My grandfather said, “Okay, go and see him. Maybe he wants to go as a doctor. So your grandfather sent my mom to the airport—they were heading home. But when they got there, the plane had already left. There was no way she could fly back, so she had to return to my grandparents’ house. When she came back she went to see the sixteenth Karmapa. And the sixteenth Karmapa said, “The reason your plane had already flown is that you were meant to come here.”

The reason I called you is this son of yours is the reincarnation of a Buddhist saint. He was giving teaching and empowerment—we call it empowerment or Buddhist initiation. He saw my brother and wanted them to come see him, my grandfather said, “Okay, I will go and visit him, maybe he can give us a blessing.” And they went to see the sixteenth Karmapa. And the sixteenth Karmapa said, “The reason your plane had already flown is that you were meant to come here.”

She said, “Okay, I will go and visit him.” And then I came and told my parents and my mother’s father that Karmapa wanted them to come see him, my grandfather said, “Okay, I will go and visit him, maybe he can give us a blessing.” And they went to see the sixteenth Karmapa. And the sixteenth Karmapa said, “The reason your plane had already flown is that you were meant to come here.”

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We should go home. Finally I asked my parents, but they said, or what? That’s the whole thing that I think. The urine smell was the first cultural shock. In Iran you don’t have that—there are actually public restrooms everywhere. I was like, We should go there and I was so happy I went there. We came here, and then we had to get asylum.

It was obvious. When we came here we didn’t have these things, but we were living in the United States designed by us with our government and our tax money as a whole. I think they have the same movement for protest. He was getting into trouble so we had to get out. We came here. Then we had to get asylum.

I wanted to study visual art and be a painter. My parents didn’t want me to become a painter, not an artist. My parents wanted me to become a doctor, not an engineer. And then suddenly one summer I transferred to art. My parents were freaking out. They thought art was for people who are crazy. Meanwhile I was thinking, I only just started studying—I’m behind the other artists! So I was really, I was going off the maps and all the tables. I didn’t want to learn anything.

In 2009, the Green Movement happened. My partner was one of the first politicians. He got arrested and was sent back because of that. He was a whole movement of protests. He was getting into trouble so we had to get out. We came here. Then we had to get asylum.

I came to San Francisco for contemporary art, I wanted to go to study visual arts, and GCA was the only school in the Bay Area that had it. So we went there. I’m so happy I went there. I think school was really helpful because it made us connect in a different way.

A lot has changed in the last six years. People don’t trust the government anymore, and a lot of workers started to stand up. In 2009, when I was there, it was mostly artists and upper classes or middle classes. But now it’s everywhere. Maybe our view has changed. I think people are really inspired through the propaganda that have been running in a revolution. But that made it worse. We didn’t want to be known as the nation of Afghanistan. People there are used to the end of this corruption. So they said, What the hell should we do? We have no idea. We can’t be happy anymore. People are standing up in Iran. I hope that something good happens. If we want back to Iran I don’t know what will happen tomorrow. Maybe I could go back and everything would be fine, but maybe they will just prevent me. I have been politically active on social media. So maybe they don’t like me. I don’t know.

All Iranians have a double life in Iran. You live in parallel. Because inside your home is totally different than outside. All Iranians have a double life in Iran. You live in parallel. Because inside your home is totally different than outside. All Iranians have a double life in Iran. You live in parallel. Because inside your home is totally different than outside. That’s the whole thing that I think. What the hell should we do? We have no idea. We can’t be happy anymore. People are standing up in Iran. I hope that something good happens. If we want back to Iran I don’t know what will happen tomorrow. Maybe I could go back and everything would be fine, but maybe they will just prevent me. I have been politically active on social media. So maybe they don’t like me. I don’t know.

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One of the Recently Seized (and Recovered) Carpets

“I am working on a project with my mom where we produce carpets and bags made from carpets with a community of traditional weavers outside of Tehran. My mom sent me a shipment of them and they were seized on October 30th. It’s so insane—all of the carpets came in two days from Tehran, but I couldn’t get them for four months. The government seized everything.

The Iranian government said carpets can’t be exported because they’re out of fashion. So we tried to repurpose them into bags. And then the United States Government was saying that only carpets are allowed to come from Iran. I guess the government likes them. They’re like, The carpets are fine but these are bags not carpets. But we get the bags made from carpets.

The pattern on this one is called ‘Women’ by one of the weavers named Aziztala. If I translate her name it means Dear Gold. She is a nomad.”

Pictures of Growing Up in Iran

Testimony

This newspaper was created by Eliza Gregory, as a component of Testimony, a project with the Asian Art Museum, supported in part by the California Arts Council.

Project assistance was provided by Claire LaRose, Olve Kersey, and Ryan Mayer. Design by Taryn Cowart.

Vietnamese translation was provided by Yung Phan via the Language Bank at the Southeast Asian Community Center.

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A wide array of individuals and organizations helped me connect with people who were willing to contribute stories. Thanks to Kaveena Singh at the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant; Tony Nguyen, Leann Luu, and Philip Nguyen at the Southeast Asian Community Center; Rea Mah and the Chinese Newcomers Association; Sue Yee at San Francisco City College; Britttawa Aisn of Lovefork Fibers; Ana Herrera at Dolores Street Services; and Marc Mayer.

And, the idea for featuring ephemera and objects alongside the photographic portraits came from Alma’s work in the Community Arts Internship Program at Southern Exposure in 2016. Alma’s incredible piece, The Shift, created a courageous, thrilling, and beautiful map of her life and was a major source of inspiration for this exhibition.

To all of these people:

I cannot thank you enough.

Eliza