Visualizing Cultural Impermanence Through Entropic Design

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Submitted to the faculty of the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Master of Fine Arts in Design/Visual Communications.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>PROBLEM STATEMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>PROCESS AND EXPERIMENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Meena Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On Admitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vcucorat Think Decompose Create</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trash Collages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From Iran To America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My Grandfather and The Ravine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Glossary of Entropic Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>EVALUATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Entropy is a process of gradual decline as a system loses the strength to maintain itself. It begins with disorder and results in complete transformation.

As a multi-cultural American, it has been my experience that the maintenance of my Iranian heritage parallels this concept. A method of visual communication that incorporates entropy is able to express notions of impermanence, disorder and transformation.

This project is focused on employing entropy in the process of design and image making by using the transformation of my cultural identity as primary content.
The Oxford English Dictionary defines entropy in regard to both physics and information theory. In physics, entropy is considered a quantitative representation of a system’s lack of energy to maintain itself. This is linked to chaos theory, or “the degree of disorder or randomness in a system.” Information theorists use entropy to measure the efficiency of information obtained from a message; entropy increases as communication becomes less distinguishable.

As the daughter of an Iranian and an American, I see myself made of two distinctly separate nations, each of which harbors suspicions of the other. Living in a Western culture, I have experienced the slow dissolution of my Middle Eastern heritage. I see entropy as a metaphor for this dissolution. I have struggled to maintain my Iranian roots and find I am losing my grip on the threads of a culture passed down from generations.

In April of 2009, National Public Radio began airing a series of interviews titled Immigrants’ Children: A Foot in Two Worlds. One interview in particular struck me. Indian-American author, Samina Ali spoke of her American-born son and his view of the Indian culture. As I listened to her speak, I found myself identifying to the point of helplessness. She told a revealing story of her nine-year-old mistaking a visit to a family’s home in Minneapolis for a visit to India. She remarked, “I can already see it and it makes me sad because he hasn’t been to India yet. He doesn’t speak Urdu… and I can see how everything is starting to lose its substance, its strength and it’s sort of being weaned out.”

Ali’s interview was a powerful confirmation that I am just one in a sea of multi-cultural Americans who feel this transformation occurring. As a visual communicator, I am inclined to express this transformation in a way that can be understood universally.

Dadaist Jean Arp demonstrated formal aspects of entropy through his paper collages as a way to eliminate what he called, “the burden of personal experience.” Arp was previously well known for his more meticulous compositions, which he later labeled “impersonal, severe structures.” He wrote of his acceptance of dissolution in his paper collages: “The light fades the colors. Sun and heat make blisters, disintegrate the paper, crack the paint... The work falls apart, dies... I had made my pact with its passing, with its death, and now it was part of the picture for me.”

The sculptural work of Andy Goldsworthy also communicates this notion of falling into chaos. He uses the force of nature to give life and death to his natural structures. His work conveys a sense of time as it allows each small action to inform the next. He has said of some of his sculptures, “I haven’t simply made the piece to be destroyed by the sea... The sea has taken the work and made more of it than I could have ever hoped for. I can see in that, ways of understanding those things that happen to us in life that change our lives.”

I am interested in designing with the force of entropy in order to visually communicate a feeling of transformation. Just as the art of Andy Goldsworthy becomes a metaphor for life changing events, design methods that involve entropic processes have the ability to provide more transparent communication of the human experience. The natural force of entropy reminds us that life constantly pushes us to adapt and confront our surroundings. As I confront the personal issues that come with striving to maintain my cultural identity, I appreciate the metaphorical power of entropy as a means to create work expressing this issue.
Must all work seek permanence?
Can degradation be used as a method of creation?
Design methods inspired by entropy have the ability to apply a mark that is an honest expression of life.

In graphic design, the relationship between form and content is mutually beneficial as they work together to promote one another. In the experiments that make up this creative project, the development of form is driven by content. It is my position that content expressing disorder is effectively communicated through forms reflecting a similar struggle with maintenance. Forms that are affected by the disorder inherent to entropy express such a struggle.

This project reconsiders the communication expressed by forms that are the result of disorder and degradation.

The word 'entropy' is derived from the prefix en-, meaning 'inside' and the Greek word trope, meaning 'to change.' Entropy literally means a transformation of content and as the second law of thermodynamics, it reminds us that change is inevitable and aspirations of permanence are unattainable.

To delay this physical law, artists throughout history have sought to slow down the natural decay of their work. Today, words like 'archival' provide insurance that a hundred years from now, a printed work will retain its original pigment and show little signs of age. There is no argument here against such prudence, but must all work seek permanence? It is my argument that degradation can be used as a method of creation.

To delay this physical law, artists throughout history have sought to slow down the natural decay of their work. Today, words like ‘archival’ provide insurance that a hundred years from now, a printed work will retain its original pigment and show little signs of age. There is no argument here against such prudence, but must all work seek permanence? It is my argument that degradation can be used as a method of creation.

Entropic methods of visual communication have been used by some of the most historic movements in graphic design over the past century. The illogical and incoherent work of Dada was an expression of rejection to artistic and social conventions. With work like the poem *Karawane*, Dadaist Hugo Ball suggested it is not always necessary that a message be clearly understood for it to make its intended impact on an audience. The Fluxus movement (so-named to suggest a state of continuous change) explored the concept of indeterminacy with work that was open to accidents and unintended effects.

Today, the shift towards environmental conservation and ‘going green’ is expressed in the Slow Design movement, which values natural time cycles and impermanence as integral parts of the design process and addresses issues of environmental and cultural sustainability.

Entropy is the gradual decline of a system as it becomes less distinguishable. A method of design incorporating this fluctuation retains a sequential quality. It has the ability to communicate transformation from a state of clarity to one of incoherence. Possibilities exist within this communicative quality for allegory between form and content. These visual experiments attempt to capture a record of the human experience by addressing the use of entropy to create forms that serve as a metaphor for the transformation of a cultural identity.

As I age, I find myself grasping at the fraying edges of a heritage passed down to me by my father. Visual communication that incorporates entropic design is able to express these notions of impermanence. In my experiments, I look to methods and processes that embrace and elicit a loss of control to discover how forms expressing disorder have the ability to convey a message of cultural transformation.
Over the course of my research, my focus shifted from one particular project to an overall process through which different methods of entropic design could be explored. In observance of the natural process of entropy, these explorations required an interim loss of control toward their outcome. However, with each experiment it became necessary to begin refinement of the respective project. The purpose of this work is to visually communicate the experience of cultural loss through graphic design. It was essential to strike a careful balance between a loss of control and the employment of aesthetic refinement.

With this research has come an increased appreciation of the entropic process inherent to many printmaking methods, specifically metal etching, lithography and monotype. In the process of metal etching, acid is used as a tool to bite away and erode the surface of a metal plate in order to create deep crevices for holding ink. Similarly in lithography, layers of limestone are ground away by hand in order to create the maximum surface for the next illustration. Unlike the previous two processes, monotype is unique in that it can only create a single impression. Metal etching and lithography allow for hundreds of impressions to be created from a single plate or stone, but as the prefix mono- insinuates, only one impression can be obtained from a monotype. The ink fades with each subsequent pressing and creates what is only then called a ghostprint. Ghostprints are the weakened structure of a monotype.

Designing with entropy at the forefront produces a heightened sense of awareness for possibilities of degradation. Entropy is a force of the natural environment, but I also found the capacity for this degradation in telephone lines, a scanner bed, and even my local coffee baristas.
The process of entropic design is a challenge of faith and tenacity. It requires openness to losing control and the patience to allow nature to become a partner in the creative process.
When I tell someone my name is Meena, what he or she likely hears is Nina, Dina, or Tina. Miscommunication is a part of life, and misheard names are a common annoyance. For me, no matter how clearly I speak, it is an everyday occurrence. After researching John Cage and ruminating on his questions about sound, specifically what we hear and how we hear it, I decided to make an entropic experiment out of my name.

Every morning and afternoon for two weeks, I went to a local Starbucks®. They asked me for my drink order and when I gave it to them, they asked me for my name. When I told them my name, they wrote it on my cup. I compiled data in the form of thirty cups each bearing some semblance of my name.

I scanned the handwriting, took the translations of my name to a recording studio and had them read by a friend who was unaware of the project. I then created typographic representations of her audio translations. Finally, I recorded my computer as it read those typographic representations. When joined together, the two sounds formed a random cadence of data that all stemmed from one name. I coupled this sound with the images of scanned handwriting and digital typographic representations to create an audio and visual experience of this entropic experiment. Lastly, I created a codex that could be employed by a single user to manually create the same randomized effect as the audiovisual experience.
This simple interaction of introducing myself became a chaotic mess. It was my first entropic experiment in this series and I found the inability to control a final outcome intensely freeing. I provided a catalyst for chaos (my name) and I watched the change unfold. My everyday obstacle manifested visually in the data I collected. My name transformed into abominations like ‘MMEEINUH,’ which albeit comical, was hard to swallow.

As individuals, our names are an important reflection of who we are. In this experiment, I was able to outwardly express the inner chaos and conflict caused by responding daily to names like Nina, Dina and Tina.
Stemming from a graduate workshop with Rob Carter, *On Admitting* is a series of typographic explorations focused on experimenting with medium and message. This series addresses personal memories and feelings of cultural transformation. For example, *It’s True* is a juxtaposition of sentences on how I pretended to be a princess from Iran as a child and, later on in life, shamefully lied about my ethnicity after September 11th, 2001. *On Admitting* was conceived out of my hope for redemption. Here I began expressing content about cultural transformation through processes that explored notions of degradation and impermanence.

I’d never before worked with materials in the way that I did during these fifteen weeks of experimentation, both digitally and physically. It was with this project that I began to make connections between entropic processes of image making and visual communication.
at the age of three I cut off my pigtails

everyone was afraid

Digital
Printing ink, tea, plexiglass, digital

sip your tea through the sugar

Tea

1.
2.
3.

Commune

every

was

lafia
Prompted in part by the series of explorations in On Admitting, I proposed to instruct a workshop with VCUQatar students in Doha, Qatar for a week in October of 2009. I conducted this workshop as an independent study with Law Alsobrook at VCUQatar. Both sections of the Design Methods and Processes course took part in the workshop, which was conducted over three class sessions and based around the following set of actions: Think, Decompose, Create.

The students were required to think of a self-defining memory – an important memory that has informed who they have become. They were to decompose their memory by mapping it out into elements. They thought of things like sound, color, time and place. Finally, they were asked to take any combination of these elements and use them to create a response to the memory using typographic collage and monotype.

I instructed the students on the printmaking technique of monotyping, which employs a method of removing ink from a surface to create a negative image, which is pressed onto paper. Monotyping requires the artist to give up a lot of control over the outcome of the final image. Furthermore, no two prints can ever be the same.
The choice was made to incorporate memory and monotype as integral parts of this workshop for a couple of reasons. The process and outcomes of monotyping retain specific characteristics that cannot be reproduced. Each stroke is unforgivably permanent and shows through to the resulting print. In fact, much like a memory, any flaw well-manifested in the printing process, even if the artist has attempted to cover it. Moreover, with each subsequent pressing the ink fades — a fleeting characteristic shared with memories. This degenerative process of making subsequent prints from a single monotype is called ghostprinting. As a method of visual communication, ghost-printing is easily connected to the qualities of memory.

There was a gripping spirit of investigation and curiosity as the students took to the assignment with enthusiasm. Their experimentation with the medium closely followed. They began to combine the monotype process with digital methods. Students scanned and manipulated their work on the computer. They explored the method of photocopy transfer, which required the students to photocopy images and transfer them onto existing monotypes by using a solvent. The explorations resulted in painterly hybrids of the monotype and photocopy transfer methods.

The impactive yet fleeting properties of memory proved excellent context for this experimentation. Yes, without memory as content, the monotype process is entropic on its own. However, it truly was the marriage of entropic content and form that made the students’ images so powerful.

This was my first visit to the Middle East. I had hoped to find some feeling of connection to the region. A connection that might strengthen my Iranian roots, but I found no such thing. Qatar is currently struggling to maintain its own cultural identity amid an onslaught of high-rises, a Western traffic system and constant Arabic and English dualities in signage and language. In this fascinating turn, I found the ever-changing landscape of Doha reflected my own inner battle with cultural preservation.
I was the mark that separated my childhood and adolescence. It was the only one, slowly falling into the void.

July 10th 4th
The light fades the colors. Sun and heat make blisters, disintegrate the paper, crack the paint… The work falls apart, dies… I had made my pact with its passing, with its death, and now it was part of the picture for me. [Jean Arp]
Interested in the natural weathering of objects, I began to collect the most interesting bits of trash I could find in Richmond, Virginia and Doha, Qatar. I used these pieces of trash to create a series of collages. These torn pieces of paper and assorted junk retain references to culture, travel, consumerism and music. I wondered if working with a language I could not read would impact my compositions. I found it did, and the compositions using Arabic were ultimately less rigid and more organic than those employing the Latin alphabet. Before this experiment, I thought of entropy as a totally destructive process. It was during this experiment that I began to think about entropy in a whole new light, as a catalyst for transformation.
The most famous story my father tells—or doesn’t tell—is the story about how he came from Iran to America. Just as I have pieced together what I believe may have happened on that journey, this book is pieced together by found and weathered ephemera and words in both English and Persian. The top and bottom rows of the book reflect the varying moods of his journey and use lines from the First Folio of Shakespeare, which are broken down into Persian by my father. I experimented with the duality of Latin typography and Persian calligraphy. When read left to right, as is custom in America, this story brings you to America. When read right to left, as is custom in Iran, it leads you to Iran.
Who's there?
Friends to this ground.
What I know of my Persian heritage exists in the stories told to me by my father. It has been said that as we tell and retell stories, the stories themselves change. The tales my father recounts alter slightly with each telling, just as they will for me when I tell my children. With this transformation in mind, I conducted experiments to produce a similar aural and visual shift.

Considering how an analogue telephone line could act as a corrosive agent, I called my father and asked him to tell me a story. He obliged and told me a short story about my grandfather, Mohammad, a man I never met. After our conversation, I filtered his story through the telephone line fifteen consecutive times and the sound of my father’s voice eroded considerably. New sound emerged and evolved from each previously generated sound. My father’s story became completely incoherent and after the fifteenth iteration, it was recognizable only as a kind of symphony of acoustic oscillation.
There was a ravine going through this land, way down. It was really deep and he built a house on this property. He made a bath out of the ravine that goes through the house. From his bedroom he would come out, two steps out, every morning at five-thirty. He used to come get out of bed. He would go down the stairs – sixty of them every morning – where the water was average temperature, I would say, probably about seventy, seventy-five degrees all year long. He would take his bath over there. He didn’t believe in public baths so that was his personal bath. Every morning that was his thing. Five-thirty. By six-thirty he was ready to go to work. So, that was basically his exercise. I always wondered, why? Then, I realized. Every year in the fall he would get a kind of cold and it would settle – some kind of pneumonia in his system. Eventually, he passed away from pneumonia because he didn’t believe in drying his hair or anything in the winter time. There was no hair dryer or anything. But, that’s the way he was. The old man was raised to do the hard work and that was his exercise and his whole life being. I can not ever remember him not going down there to take his bath in the morning. Whether sick or healthy, he did that every waking day.
The final experiment in response to this story was based on the form of the Persian chador. A chador is the head and body covering worn by Iranian women. I printed the written story upon a twenty-two square foot white cloth with ink that was not colorfast. This type of ink is most vulnerable and susceptible to weathering. Upon wearing the cloth out into the rain, the letters forming the story began to dissolve on the fabric. The black ink began to run, resulting in a sort of erosion of type. In the places where the chador folded over upon itself, text transferred onto text, which fragmented the type and produced a slow breaking down of the story. In the places where rain hit the heaviest, the type almost began to fade. Watching the story erode, transfer, fade and transform was entirely cathartic and fully realized my feelings of cultural loss and personal transformation.
Original print before exposure to rain.

Exposure to rain, days one through three.

opposite

Final exposure to rain.

1. Exposure to rain, days one through three.
2. Exposure to rain, days one through three.
3. Exposure to rain, days one through three.
4. Exposure to rain, days one through three.
**DECLINE**

to become smaller, fewer or less.
Diminished in strength or quality.

The decline of a mark as black chalk is drawn across a surface.

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**DETERIORATE**

progressive decline of a structure, dependent upon time. Natural deterioration by weathering elements such as wind, sun and water.

The deterioration of paper after exposure to natural elements for seven days.

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**DISSIPATE**

irregular dispersion or scattering of a system or structure ultimately resulting in its disappearance.

Dissipation of black printing ink as it is transferred from glass to handmade paper (as in the monoprinting process).

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I have documented the methods that were used in my experiments and named them decline, deteriorate, dissipate, dissolve, erode, fragment, generation, scatter, transform, and translation. I consider these elements to be visual cues connected to the process of entropy. I see this list as a work in-progress, to be continued in my research for some time. Here they serve as a visual glossary of entropic elements.
entropic elements

Erode

Gradual destruction or diminution of a structure by corrosive agents, caused by mechanical action as in acid as it dissolves in intensity upon a copper plate (as in the etching process). Printed letterforms dissolve upon a cotton sheet which is the result of exposure to natural rain.

Dissolve

Slowly subside uncontrollably into. To gradually change as in liquid to melt, disappear.

Fragment

To break or fall apart into smaller pieces or a part of a structure by erosion, such as in the fragmentation of pigment on sun-print paper after over-exposure.

Generative/Generation

Reproduction. Transformation of a structure where one generated form is repeatedly derived from the previous generated form.

Transforming placed type on a scanner bed which has been repeatedly opened and closed.
SCATTER
complete disorder and confusion so unpredictable as to appear random, chaotic. Owing great sensitivity to small changes in conditions.

unintelligible form generated by random casting of cut-out letters upon a scanner bed
I believe the success of this thesis and its experiments lie in three areas.

First, in the physical creation of these entropic forms which have the power to convey a personal experience. There exists a wide breadth of possibilities for future employment of these methods. While I have explored entropic design to convey the personal feelings associated with multicultural identity, these design methods can provide a visual language for a litany of topics. Today, we are witness to the trend towards environmentalism and ‘going green’. As large companies and manufacturers are pushed to explore the possibilities of biodegradability and conservation, design that uses entropic elements can be a strong and viable approach.
Recently, the manufacturer of the snack, SunChips®, introduced a completely compostable bag for their chips in order to promote less waste in the environment. Their television advertisements for this new environmentally friendly packaging are centered on a time-lapse animation of the decomposition of an empty chip bag over the course of 14 weeks. In this context, the notion of entropic design is employed to convey the fragility of the bag, reminding consumers that the bag will not sustain itself against the environment.

The Slow Design movement, which combines nature, time and sustainability into the design process, is making strides by addressing issues that can undoubtedly benefit from entropic design. Slow Design promotes thought about “the history, meaning and life cycle of products and built environments” and encourages designers to think through the consequences of their creations. The issue of eco-tourism is another further direction that could benefit from a visual language employing entropic design. Eco-tourism is concerned with an awareness of natural conservation and places heavy consideration on the fragility of the environment. Current environmental dilemmas like climate change and soil erosion are prime examples of topics that can benefit from the forms of entropic design that express transformation.

Second, in the pedagogical work I’ve done with undergraduate design students at VCU and VCUQ. My workshops and presentations have urged students to explore the possibilities of imperfection by working with their hands and other materials, and to embrace the frustrations that come with these processes. I have found that in this time when perfection rules so much of our lives, processes that lend themselves to disorder are a change of pace to a design student. Students should have the capability to convey messages with processes that vary in their degree of precision. This may seem to be an obvious course of instruction, but it is not always the case. Not only can this lack of predictability free the artist’s hand, it can free the mind. I know these methods have helped to broaden the consciousness of design and visual thinking for many of the students with whom I’ve worked.

Finally, in the personal understanding that loss begets transformation, which begets new form. This new form can be beautiful and speak with more transparency than one that is scrupulously preserved. This discovery brought new clarity to my research. Originally, I designed these experiments with the desire to express only the loss I associated with my cultural identity. I have found, however that a structure goes through a series of transformations as its’ strength fluctuates. I came to understand how the loss that I have felt has resulted in an honest transformation of my identity. Consequently, the decision to change my maiden name to my married name resonated deeply with me. It is now a reflection of my transformation and is an honest expression of who I have become.

**Endnotes**

This book begins as a personal plunge into his own history inspired by looking at images of his mother after her passing. It is a deeply moving testimony about the significance of images and the signs within them.


Bourgeois, Louise. The Secret of the Cells. New York: Prestel Publishing, 2008. Bourgeois is an American sculptor, painter and printmaker of French birth whose state proofs provide a visual documentation of entropy as they mark the deliberate and permanent changes in her printmaking process. Much of her work is inspired by the content of her childhood, which is clearly reflected in her pieces.

Cage, John. A Year from Monday. New York: Pantheon, 2005. Cage’s embrace of randomness and exploration of the clarity of communication is highly influential. His composition “4’33” and its orchestration of sounds that are not sounds created a stir and continues to influence new forms of music and art.


Hara, Kenya. Designing Design: Japan. Lars Müller Publishers, 2007. Design enlightenment and an introduction to the word “haptic.” (Kenya Hara) is a color escape artist because he knows that by avoiding color tactility can speak up.


Reza Abedini

A professor of Graphic Design and Visual Culture at Tehran University in Iran, Abedini’s eloquent use of illustration and Persian calligraphy in his work are a constant inspiration. His unique approach to design communicates undercurrents of collapse, despair and disintegration. Ronchshaler, Edward. Life with Letters as They Turned Photogenic. New York: Hastings House, Publishers and Photo-Lettering Inc., 1981. Ronchshaler explains a language of words as they sound, not as they are spelled or written.


Sattapi, Marjane. Chicken with Plums. Pantheon Books, 2006. Simple line quality couples with her candid writing to tell emotional stories that are honest reflections of her life and the lies of those she has loved. Chicken with Plums reflects upon the life of her Uncle Nasser Ali who decided to relinquish his soul and die, after his wife destroyed his tar, the musical instrument from where he her Uncle Nasser Ali who decided to relinquish his soul and die, after his wife destroyed his tar, the musical instrument from where he

Sloan, Mark and Brad Thomas. Force of Nature: Site Installations by Ten Japanese Artists. Charleston: Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, 2007. Among all of the amazing work in this book is that of Japanese artist, Yumiko Yamazaki. There is a stimulating sense of entropy in what she produced for her series, The Remembrance of Time. In this series, she buried copper plates into the ground and allowed the earth’s natural elements to degrate them. She then unearthed the plates and made prints from them. Her philosophy is to allow nature to do what it does, she does not seek to control it.

SLOW. 17 Feb 2009. <http://slowdesign.org>. Based in the UK and created by Alastair Foulad F. Lake, this website is described as “an on-going dialogue, an open-ended project” centered on ideas that combine nature, time and sustanability into the design process.

Rhythm and Blues From Robert Johnson to Sam Cooke. The blues are honest. They are an expression of the beauty that can be found within our personal struggles. Rhythm is our metronome reminding us that time will always keep marching on.


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