

Megan Rye, *Foundling: 100 Days*

Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Curated by Megan Rye and Diane Mullin

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Foundling: 100 Days is comprised of 100 portraits, based on my own and my fellow adoptee's adoption file photographs. These images of waiting children bear witness to who we were as foundlings; before we were given names, before we were claimed by families, before we left the countries of our birth and traveled around the world to our new homes.

—Megan Rye, 2020

Based on one hundred referral photographs, the first and sometimes only photographs of available children that prospective adopters receive, *Foundling: 100 Days*, engaged timely questions of identity, kinship, and race through the unique lens of transnational adoption. After the birth of her second daughter, artist Megan Rye gained new insight into photographs from her own infancy. An adoptee from South Korea, Rye realized that the small, black and white referral photographs were likely the only ones that existed of her from her birth country. In stark contrast with her own daughter, whose hours-long life was already thoroughly documented, Rye's few photographs taken between her

birth and her adoption seemed to represent the loss of so much information about her birth nation and her birth family.

In the show, which was seen in its second venue at the Weisman Art Museum (the first occurred at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas), each of the 100 paintings was displayed next to a copy of its source photograph. Painted against the utterly quotidian surface of paper shopping bags from Target, each of the children gazed upon, sometimes past, viewers as they entered the gallery. The kraft paper and red ink support of the bags, printed with a variety of versions of the store's iconic red bullseye logo and slogan "expect more, pay less," showed through

sparse applications of white and black oil paint. The paintings were arranged in a grid around the single room, recalling the orderly formation of bassinets containing newborns that would be placed around the floor of a hospital nursery. The source photographs took up the role of identification card, labelling the children only through image rather than text.

On the wall to the right of the gallery entrance was a television screen playing a slideshow with excerpts of the adoptees' testimonials, occasionally alongside those of their adoptive parents. At the Spencer Museum, which hosted the exhibition pre-pandemic, these stories were presented in their entireties, enclosed in a binder that visitors could page through as they walked among the portraits. Of course, public health guidelines restricted this practice during the exhibition's run at the Weisman. However, at the Weisman, the television felt more integrated, occupying the same plane and visual space as the paintings themselves. On the screen, the adoptee's name, birth name, birth year, arrival year, and country of origin appeared as a header, along with an enlarged version of their referral photograph and, shrunk to smaller scale, the attendant painting. Each story described where the now-grown adoptee was vis-à-vis education,

career, and family-building. Some stories reflected on adoptees' returns to their nations of origin, sometimes accompanied by their adoptive parents, and their reunions with their pre-adoption foster parents or caretakers. Some, like Meghann McLouth's, reflected poignantly on their ambivalence towards adoption; these stories shared the joys of having a loving family, of having found professional and academic fulfillment, and of having friends, but also the sorrows of being immediately marked as racially "other." Meghann, for instance, revealed her childhood encounters with racial slurs, levied easily on the playground by White classmates, and her feelings of not belonging as either a "real American" or a "real Korean."

Meghann's feelings, so thoughtfully shared with Rye and displayed among these many portraits, reflected common ones shared by adoptees. This uncertainty came to bear on the work itself. In part, the exhibition celebrated the practice of transnational adoption, in keeping with the dominant narrative of it as a positive means of family building. South Korea, the most heavily represented source country in the exhibition, has sent some 200,000 children abroad, with at least 120,000 landing in the United States (including Rye). Most have been heavily concentrated in

Minnesota. Certainly, the association with Target, arguably Minnesota's most recognizable business enterprise, was obvious given the paintings' surfaces. The stories told around these paintings, too, reflected a culture of gratitude and joy in finding adoptees' "forever homes." Much of the written text surrounding the exhibition, from its introductory panel to the exhibition's page on the museum's website, reinscribed this narrative. For example, the website described "images of waiting children ... before given names, claimed by families, and traveling around the world to what the adoption community calls 'forever homes.'" ¹ Rye's artist talk, given on April 27, 2022, was steeped in similar language, which painted adoptable children as pitiable and in need of rescue, and adopted children as lucky, blessed, chosen. This messaging, though, elided the trauma of pre-adoption rupture. Adoptee advocates and activists online often call attention to the fact that all adoption starts with loss—of family, of origins, of nation. It is not that these children don't have names or families or homes, but rather that they are in transition between their first names, families, and homes, and their adoptive ones.

Like Rye, I myself am an adoptee from Korea. I found this framing changed my interaction with the portraits themselves. Described in

the gallery and on the website as "returning the viewer's gaze with a direct, unflinching stare," the painted faces seemed to me haunted by the uncertainty of their social position within the world. ² Such direct gazes from children ranging from newborns to toddlers seemed less defiant when you accounted for what they had already lost and only hoped to gain. Instead, they seemed haunted, afraid, and even traumatized. Painted over the bullseye of the Target bags, their tiny hearts are thus framed as something aimed at, as a goal to reach. Undergirding the search for adoptive families, in which the referral photograph plays such an integral role, was the uncomfortable reality of adoption as a marketplace and the adoptee as a commodity. Though Rye did not intend such a connection, adoption scholars Dr. Kim Park Nelson and Dr. Elizabeth Raleigh both drew attention to it during a March 2 roundtable hosted by the Weisman in conjunction with the exhibition. On, rather than in, the shopping bags, the adoptees became items to be brought home, to the so-called "forever home." After all, the photographs are presented to prospective adopters to show them what their future child *might* look like, should they agree with the adoption workers that the photographed child is their match. Even the refrain "expect more, pay less," which peeked

out from several of the portraits, drew attention to the market forces of transnational adoption; many adoptive parents, my own included, are told that adopting internationally is less costly but just as rewarding as adopting domestically.

These were hard, tricky conversations that Rye and the Weisman staff facilitated in the exhibition itself and its related programming. While the term “forever home” may be a fraught one for some adoptees who challenge it for its erasure and elision of birth families and for its practical failures given the all-too-common practice of rehoming adoptees, it was an appropriate one here: The Weisman has acquired the entirety of *Foundling: 100 Days* for its permanent collection, a gift facilitated by three adoptive families who are also Friends of the Weisman. I look forward to the ways in which the museum and Rye’s important work will continue to facilitate conversations around identity, family, and race, as they come to bear in the practice of transnational adoption.

¹ “*Foundling: 100 Days*,” Weisman Museum of Art, accessed June 14, 2022, <https://wam.umn.edu/calendar/foundling-100-days/>.

² “*Foundling: 100 Days*.”