

QUỖNH

Katelyn Tran
Graphic Design
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Instructor & Mentor:
Kristin Rogers Brown

THESIS ABSTRACT

KATELYN TRAN // THESIS DEFENSE // PNCA FALL 2025

QUỲNH is a 3D-printed blind-box toy series that explores my experiences as a second-generation Vietnamese American person. The series includes 7 unique figures, each resembling various foods that I ate growing up. Each figure has its own unique story and visuals relating back to my experience culturally, as a designer/illustrator, and as a collector. They are also paired with a collectable card that has an illustration and short description of the figures' connection to my experience. This project overall is a representation of my combined skills, wide exploration and thoughtful production process.

I was inspired to create this project as a way to reconnect with my Vietnamese identity and navigate my struggles with belonging. Throughout the whole process, I would ask myself the same question: "Who am I?" I wanted to create a body of work that other second-generation Vietnamese Americans who are struggling with their cultural identity can see themselves in, as well as encourage them to reflect on their own experiences and share them with others. This is reflected in the ambiguous names for each figure, allowing each person to connect their own reason to the figures.

This blind-box series not only allowed me to explore my experiences as a second-generation Vietnamese-American, it also allowed me to form new relationships, strengthen existing ones, and become a little bit more comfortable with just being myself.

ARTIST STATEMENT

KATELYN TRAN // THESIS DEFENSE // PNCA FALL 2025

I have been told that my three greatest strengths as a designer are how I am detail-oriented, open-minded, and communicative, which I feel ties into why I enjoy design in the first place.

The first thing I love about design is the production process because that is where I get to be off my computer and work hands-on. I love cutting out dielines, assembling boxes, or feeling different paper types. I also love how versatile design is. There are so many ways to approach a creative brief, and I love seeing how different designers interpret a prompt. What surprised me about design is how effectively it communicates with people, like how a designer is able to take a few lines of copy and create a poster that is not only easy to understand, but is also visually appealing.

I have always been extremely creative ever since I was a kid. I lived up to my “quiet art kid” reputation in school. However, I was also an academically advanced kid. Everyone thought I would go into a STEM-related field – I mean, who could blame them? I excelled in my classes and enjoyed the subjects we were learning. Thanks to my school district building a new school in my zone every few years, I went to a total of 5 different schools, 3 of which were STEM schools that...didn't have any art classes compared to the “normal” schools in my district. I seemed like I was destined to go into STEM, but I still held onto my creative passions, learning how to crochet, knit, sew, etc. all on my own. When it came to college applications, I had to really think about what I wanted to do with my life.

I knew in my heart that I did not want to do something STEM-related. Sure, I was good at it, but imagining myself doing that for the next 4 years, maybe the rest of my life? That did not sound fun. However, I also knew going into an art-related field was rocky territory as well – especially being from a strict Asian household and the first in my family to go to college. I decided to take the risk but chose graphic design because it felt like the most “respected art path that my family would be okay with. Thankfully, I came to love design. It is more than just corporate branding, but something you can use to communicate with others. It provides a strong foundation to elevate whatever you need it to.

Although most of my hobbies involve some kind of visual art (ex. crocheting, knitting, 3D modeling, etc.), I also love to take unnecessarily long walks (and naps), watch the same five shows over and over again, or obsess over one topic for the next month. You do not want to be in the same room with me while I'm doing a deep-dive unless you want to be there for hours...

THESIS PROPOSAL

KATELYN TRAN // THESIS DEFENSE // PNCA SPRING 2025

I have always felt lost when beginning to describe myself as an artist. Especially growing up as more of an illustrator, and now being referred to more as a designer. Sometimes it feels like I have two identities, where I am unable to gush about new art supplies I bought with my strictly-digital designer friends, or being teased by my illustrator friends for dissecting a horribly-designed restaurant menu. Although it sounds trivial and nonsensical, I feel like this split in my artistic identity is a reflection of a much larger part of my creative journey.

Growing up as a second-generation Vietnamese-American in a small, conservative, predominately-white town has impacted so much of my journey as an artist and as a person. Being one of the only Asian kids in every grade school I attended (at least five I think), I felt like I had to hide my identity and my culture. I wanted to conform with my white peers. I wanted them to like me. I spent years being ashamed of my background, wishing I was born a different person. At the same time, however, I had also felt like I couldn't fit in with my Asian peers – the small Vietnamese community who I still, to this day, do not know who I am and who I am not related to. I lost the ability to speak Vietnamese, and I knew little about my culture. I felt stuck between two identities: too Asian, but too white. I felt like I had no one to talk to about my struggles. Even my own parents would tell me, “You're not Vietnamese, you're American.”

Although my path towards a STEM-based career was bright, I took the “bold choice,” according to my high-school English teacher, to attend an art school thousands of miles away in a city where I knew no one, and no one knew me. It was here where I began to explore my experience through my art. My first-year projects centered around Vietnamese culture with a focus on connection through food. I drew from my own personal experiences of creating memories in the kitchen, sharing stories around a dinner table, and sharing snacks with someone who doesn't speak the same language as you. Food was the connection.

As I dove further into client-based graphic design work at PNCA, I craved to express my identity and experiences through my art, which leads us to this thesis project. Being in a school full of people who never felt like they really fit in, I finally have been given the space and the opportunity to explore my struggles with my culture and identity in any form I choose. As a kid, I was obsessed with collecting anything and everything. Whether it was rocks, stuffed animals, or enamel pins, I wanted it all. Even now, I love collecting little trinkets. Although most of my work done for school is mainly digital, my personal artistic passions fall towards hands-on projects. Being able to hold my art in my hands, and being able to share my art with the people in my life is what has motivated me to keep creating. Combining all of this background together, a blind-box series felt the most fitting form for my project to take on.

With a blind box mini figure toy series, I will navigate my experience as a second-generation Vietnamese American through food symbolism. The series will have a total of four figures: each with a unique story and visuals relating back to my experience culturally, as a designer/illustrator, and as a collector. Expanding on my skills of 3D modeling and packaging design, this project will explore themes of identity, culture, shame, loneliness, nostalgia, and joy.

Each figure in the blind box series will be associated with a particular moment in my experience as a Vietnamese-American. That experience will be symbolized through a food item that is also significant to my experience. For example, my struggles with not feeling “Asian enough” can be represented through a bowl of phở. As phở has gained massive popularity amongst a non-Vietnamese crowd, I felt a mix of delight, confusion, and self-doubt. “How do these people know about phở?” “Why do they seem to know more about phở than me?” “Why can they use chopsticks better than me?” The other foods I will include in this series include apples, banh bao, and cha gio (egg rolls). Apples symbolizes my connection with my parents and the broader concept of cut fruit; expressing love through action. Banh bao symbolizes my connection with my grandparents; how love surpasses language. Lastly, Cha gio symbolizes my family sharing Vietnamese culture with the non-Vietnamese people in our life. Along with the toy figurines, a small card will be included in the box in order to provide the story behind each figure. Further context will allow the audience to connect deeper with the project.

The overall tone of this project is meant to be nostalgic and comforting to my primary audience: other second-generation Vietnamese Americans who are struggling with their cultural identity. The visual language will be playful and colorful. The project is meant to be lighthearted and fun at a first glance, but as you dive deeper into the symbolism and meaning of each figure, a heavier tone will be revealed. My struggles will be brought to the forefront, and the viewers will be forced to sit with them. Each toy will be a physical representation of my experience with hiding my struggles. They will act as a way of expressing myself, as well as encouraging others to do the same.

I will be creating four figurines and their packaging. I will also include small infographic cards describing each character and what they represent. The packaging design will be the same for each figurine to keep the surprise in this blind-box set. The packaging and cards will be designed in Illustrator and printed using the PNCA production printers. They will then be cut and assembled by hand. The size of the figurines will be approximately 2” by 3.5”, similar to other blind box figurines currently on the market, such as SKULLPANDA, Nyota, and Smiski. They will be designed digitally using Nomad Sculpt and Blender, two commonly used 3D-modeling programs. The figures will be printed using the 3D-printers at PNCA, and then painted by hand.

The 4 figurines will be presented in a gallery space behind glass cases. Symbolically, putting the toys behind glass protects my personal experiences from the audience. This will force the audience to engage in an intimate space with the figures to view them. Forcing the audience to become physically close to my work represents how I had to make myself smaller and hide my struggles. My attempts to speak out about my experiences were shut down or dismissed, and putting them behind glass protects them. With this project, my experiences will be on display, but it is up to the viewer to engage with them.

For the overall timeline, I will have a draft of the character designs drawn by the end of Spring semester. This will include how they look, but also notes about how they connect back to a moment in my personal experience through a food item. Over the summer, I will work on 3D modelling each character and designing the packaging. If time allows, I will also work on prototyping each figure, familiarizing myself with the 3D printers, and potentially start on the production process. This will leave me all of Fall semester to work on physically producing the toys and finalizing all parts of my project.

I take some inspiration and influence from every area of my life. For the form of my project, I was inspired by the Nyota blind box series sold through POPMART. Nyota is described as a “gentle-spirited little girl [who] finds joy in embracing life’s simple pleasures and cherishes the tender moments that touch her soul.” I thought the way the artist was able to capture childhood wonder and joy into small figurines was really captivating, as I want to do something similar with my own experiences. Another influence that relates to capturing memories is Heada, also known as @whwd_heada on social media. She is a fiber artist and painter, who excellently combines her skills in fine art and fiber art to create captivating pieces that embrace imperfection and explore how we recall memories. Although her work is stylistically different from my overall creative vision, I appreciate how she plays with textures, colors, and shapes to tell a story.

For the concept of my thesis project, I was actually inspired by previous PNCA students’ thesis works; specifically, Katherine Fakashcuck and Meng Phoumyvong. Both projects were rooted in culture and how their heritage is reflected in food. The way Fakashcuck used this project to preserve her family’s recipes and stories made me want to do something similar. Phoumyvong’s work was so comforting and nostalgic. The way they captured kitchens full of familiar ingredients and imagery encouraged me to want to represent my own culture in my project as well. It was really cool to see how both artists embraced their cultures through completely different mediums.

My current work is split between graphic design and illustration. Most of my graphic design work stems from class assignments that have a focus on brand systems and packaging. However, I also enjoy working with poster layouts and editorial work. My style ranges depending on the project brief, but I gravitate towards playful and friendly design. My illustration work emphasizes color, shapes, and joy. I mainly illustrate cute, minimalistic characters, that I then bring to life through crochet, knitting, or sewing. Balancing my skills as a designer and illustrator connects back to the overall theme of my thesis project.

In conclusion, this blind-box series will allow me to explore and showcase my struggles as a second-generation Vietnamese American. My hope is that others in my situation will feel represented and comforted by the figurines I create. Even if no one ends up caring about this project once finalized, this project is deeply personal to me in order to process my experiences. I will come out of it having gained new skills and a stronger connection to my identity and culture.

ORAL PRESENTATION

KATELYN TRAN // THESIS DEFENSE // PNCA FALL 2025

EXPOSITION

Hi! For those of you who don't know me (and for those of you who do), my name is Katelyn, and I am a graphic design major here at PNCA. Thank you all for coming today :)

I have always felt lost when beginning to describe myself as an artist. Especially growing up as more of an illustrator, and now being referred to more as a designer. Sometimes it feels like I have two identities, where I am unable to gush about new art supplies I bought with my strictly-digital designer friends, or being teased by my illustrator friends for dissecting a horribly-designed restaurant menu. Although it sounds trivial and nonsensical, I feel like this split in my artistic identity is a reflection of a much larger part of my creative journey. Even throughout this thesis project, I have struggled with the same question: Who am I really?

Especially now, since I am graduating this fall, I am constantly being asked: What are your plans after graduation? What do you want to do with design? Have you started applying to jobs yet? The thing is...there is so much about design that I love, from challenging creative briefs to discovering a hidden feature in Illustrator. But those are also the very things that make me never want to design again. Is this what I am defined as now? A graphic designer?

Growing up as a second-generation Vietnamese-American in a small, conservative, predominately-white town has impacted so much of my journey as an artist and as a person. Being one of the only Asian kids in every grade school I attended (at least five I think), I felt like I had to hide my identity and my culture. I wanted to conform with my white peers, and I wanted them to like me. I spent years being ashamed of my background, wishing I was born a different person.

At the same time, however, I also felt like I couldn't fit in with my Asian peers - the small Vietnamese community who I still, to this day, do not know who I am and who I am not related to. I lost the ability to speak Vietnamese, and I knew little about my culture. I felt stuck between two identities: too Asian, but too white. I felt like I had no one to talk to about my struggles. Even my own parents would tell me, "You're not Vietnamese, you're American."

Although my path towards a STEM-based career was bright, I took the "bold choice," according to my high-school English teacher, to attend an art school hundreds of miles away in a city where I knew no one, and no one knew me. It was here where I began to explore my experience through my art. My first-year projects centered around Vietnamese culture with a focus on connection through food. I drew from my own personal experiences with my family, creating memories in the kitchen and sharing stories around a dinner table. Food was the connection.

As I dove further into client-based graphic design work at PNCA, I craved to express my identity and experiences through my art, which leads us to this thesis project. Being in a school full of people who never felt like they really fit in, I finally have been given the space and the opportunity to explore my struggles with my culture and identity without feeling ashamed to do so.

One of my favorite things about creating is being able to hold my art in my hands. Especially since most of the work I do now is primarily digital, I cherish the projects where I have to be hands-on (except for this semester because every single one of my projects is hands-on and it's a little too much lol). I love being able to share my art with the people around me and bring them small moments of joy, even if that means I will never see that piece again. It is funny because that was the very thing I did during my midterm review, where I gave my panel the only fully painted prototypes I had even before photographing them. But it seemed to make them happy, so I was happy :D

I chose to make this project in the form of a blind-box because I love collecting little figures and trinkets. Ever since I was a kid, I would collect stuffed animals, enamel pins, you name it. I also wanted to incorporate something with 3D modeling, since at the time of my proposal, it was something I was just starting to teach myself. A blind-box set felt like a sweet combination of 3D modeling, graphic design, illustration, and hands-on production work.

Now that the exposition is out of the way, let's get into the details of this project!

PROJECT DETAILS

My blind-box series, titled, "QUỲNH," shortened from my Vietnamese name, Nhú Quỳnh, contains 7 unique figures, each resembling various foods that represent a particular experience I have had as a Vietnamese-American. The box also contains a small card that provides some context behind the figures' stories. They are purposefully kept somewhat vague in order for the viewer to form their own connections to the toys.

The overall tone of this project is meant to be nostalgic and comforting to my primary audience: other second-generation Vietnamese Americans who are struggling with their cultural identity. I wanted to make something that little-me could see herself in. Secondary audiences include anyone who feels split between two cultures, identities, worlds, etc. Anyone who feels like they never fit in with their communities might find solace through the figures in this series.

The project is meant to be lighthearted and fun at a first glance, but as you dive deeper into the symbolism and meaning of each figure, a heavier tone will be revealed. My experiences and struggles are brought to the forefront, and the viewers are forced to sit with them. Each toy acts as a way of expressing myself, as well as encouraging others to do the same.

INFLUENCES

The inspiration to make this project is never ending because I take some inspiration and influence from every area of my life. For the form of my project, I was inspired by the Nyota blind box series sold through POPMART. Nyota is described as a "gentle-spirited little girl [who] finds joy in embracing life's simple pleasures and cherishes the tender moments that touch her soul." I thought the way the artist was able to capture childhood wonder and joy into small figurines was really captivating, as I want to do something similar with my own experiences.

Another influence that relates to capturing memories is Heada, also known as @whwd_heada on social media. She is a fiber artist and painter, who excellently combines her skills in fine art and fiber art to create captivating pieces that embrace imperfection and explore how we recall memories. Although her

work is stylistically different from my overall creative vision, I appreciate how she plays with textures, colors, and shapes to tell a story.

For the concept of my thesis project, I was actually inspired by previous PNCA students' thesis works; specifically, Katherine Fakashcuck and Meng Phoumyvong. Both projects were rooted in culture and how their heritage is reflected in food. The way Fakashcuck used this project to preserve her family's recipes and stories made me want to do something similar.

Phoumyvong's work was so comforting and nostalgic. The way they captured kitchens full of familiar ingredients and imagery encouraged me to want to represent my own culture in my project as well. It was really cool to see how both artists embraced their cultures through completely different mediums.

TOY DESCRIPTIONS

The foods that are included in this series include apples, banh bao (steamed pork buns), banh bo (steamed rice cakes), cha gio (egg rolls), pho (noodle soup), peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and shrimp chips. All of these foods were things that I loved to eat growing up (and now), and they felt most fitting to represent the stories I wanted to tell.

The apple figurine, named "I Love You," symbolizes the silent but heartfelt action of cutting fruit for someone. The character is surrounded by sliced apples, representing the love she has around her even if she does not know it. This was one of the more difficult figures to sand and paint because there were so many small crevices that I had to get to. The apples on the plate were definitely a challenge, but worth it in the end.

The banh bao figurine, named "Cam on Ong Ba Noi" (meaning thank you grandma and grandpa) symbolizes my connection with my grandparents, and how love surpasses language. Although I am unable to express it to them, I hope Ong Ba Noi knows how much I appreciate having them in my life.

The banh bo figurine, named "Before it Goes Bad," stems from the anxiety I feel towards losing the people closest to me. In my experience, Bánh bo really only tastes good within the first few days. You can refrigerate them, but they are never the same chewy texture. I can never finish them all in a day, so I try to extend their life as long as I can by reheating them in the microwave, even though I don't like them *that* much. In Vietnamese culture, family is everything – even if that means sacrificing your own well-being to "keep the peace." I share this story, and the story of banh bo because it oddly connects to how I am constantly afraid of running out of time, holding onto relationships even if they hurt me, in order to experience the small moments of joy before it is too late.

The cha gio figurine, named "Caring is sharing" symbolizes my family sharing Vietnamese culture with the non-Vietnamese people in our life. I started off just peeling the eggroll wrappers for my mom when we made them in bulk for the holidays, but I eventually moved up to rolling them with her. Making them alongside her made me realize how much thought and care goes into such a small, delicious roll.

The pho figurine, named "You're not Vietnamese," was the very first figure that came out of this project. It symbolizes my struggles with not feeling "Asian enough." As pho has gained massive popularity amongst a non-vietnamese crowd, I felt a mix of delight, confusion, and self-doubt. "How do these

people know about pho? Why can they use chopsticks better than me? Am I really Vietnamese if I don't like sriracha, but they do?"

The peanut butter and jelly figurine, named "What are you eating?" symbolizes the shift in what I brought in my packed school lunches. Even now, sometimes I become a little self-conscious when I pack something that is not as visually appealing as other more "accepted" foods.

Lastly, the shrimp chips figure, named "You know this?" acts as a playful nod to one of my favorite snacks growing up as a kid. Being the secret figurine in this series, it symbolizes a small act of resistance when it comes to sharing Vietnamese food. I am going to savor these chips until they become the newest food trend online.

PROPOSAL + PRINTING

Since my proposal, this project has evolved in many ways. Originally, I proposed to have 4 figures in the set. After talking with my panel, they had suggested 12 to make it feel like a full set, which...was a little bit TOO much. I decided that 9 would be realistic. However, after sketching each character out, my mentor and I landed on 7, since some of the figures overlapped in story/meaning.

I also wanted them to be displayed on podiums behind glass display cases to represent how I often had to make myself smaller and hide my struggles with my identity. My attempts to speak out about my experiences were shut down or dismissed, and putting them behind glass would protect them. My experiences would be on display, but it would be up to the viewer to engage with them. However, due to the school's limited resources, I shifted my plan to have them displayed on individual shelves instead. Doing so still gave them their own individual space to live, but also united them in a way – being displayed on the wall. Although they are not protected behind glass, the intimate space still forces the audience to engage closely with them.

My plan over the summer was to finish 3D modeling each figure, so that they would be ready to print once the semester began in the fall. I also wanted to have the stories for each figure written out. However, as many proposed timelines go, I did not stick to the schedule. I underestimated how demanding taking summer classes and having a job would be. Breaking down 30 palettes of shipment each week for a retail store is not super favorable in the middle of thesis >-<

I ended up only having two figures modeled, and all the stories in my head by the time Fall semester came. I was pretty worried that I would not be able to finish everything in time, but Kristin, my mentor, and I spent over an hour mapping out my entire schedule for the rest of the year in order to get some idea of where I had to be each week. This was pretty helpful, but I ended up getting off track as we got closer to focus week.

Once fall semester began, I worked with Megan, who runs the Creative Tech Lab here at PNCA. She was very helpful in teaching me how to use the 3D printers, run the printing software, and worked through any issues that came up along the process. While I was printing the figures I already had designed, I was also working on modeling the rest of them. It was a lot of back and forth, designing while waiting for the prints to finish.

One of the biggest issues I ran into was my print lifting off of the plate. It was especially bad with the smaller items like the chopsticks for my pho figure. Because they were so thin, there was not a lot of surface area to stick to the plate. I redesigned them into a frame, similar to how gunpla kits are modeled, and that ended up working out perfectly.

Other issues I ran into were classic file errors and my prints randomly stopping halfway through, which we never found the reason for. When this happened, I would have to completely restart the job. Because I printed multiple figures at the same time, the printing job would last between 4-9 hours depending on the models. Sorry to anyone trying to print at the same time...I definitely hogged both of the printers for a couple of weeks.

I used Nomad Sculpt, which is a modeling/sculpting program on the iPad, to model all of my figures. I had taught myself how to use Blender over winter break last year, but I immediately forgot everything after taking a break for a week. I thought about relearning, but that felt like a project all on its own. Womp3D was another program I considered for this project - it was actually the program I used to learn how to 3D model, but it felt unreliable because it relied on internet connection, and was not as easily portable. I landed on Nomad Sculpt after looking into other programs that I could use on my iPad. It was easy to learn and it had all the tools I would need for this project.

SANDING + PRIMING

While I was about halfway through printing, I began sanding. This was definitely the most difficult part of this project - I feel like almost everyone in this room has heard me complain about it. Because the figures were so small and complex, they would take forever to sand. I would use a combination of plastic wood filler, sand paper, and my mom's old nail drill to smooth out the layer lines. This part took almost 2 months to complete, and would not have been possible without my friends - Devon, Menuxee, Max, and Anthony - who volunteered to help me.

After we got everything sanded, I moved onto priming them to paint. This was the part that I was worried would take too long, but ended up being the fastest. I opted to use a brush on primer because I want to avoid using aerosols in my practice. After two days, they were primed and ready to be painted!

PAINTING

At this point in the process, there was about two weeks until focus week - which was incredibly scary. I had to figure out a way to paint 28 figures before my presentation, but also account for other classes and work, as well as leave time to print the boxes and cards, package the figures, set up the space, and practice my presentation. I was lucky enough to recruit a few more friends - Menuxee, Nadia, and Ellie - to help me paint. I may or may not have been painting up until yesterday...but we got it done!

I was working with cheap acrylic paints that are probably more than 8 years old at this point, so it took sooo many layers to get an even coat. I considered buying better quality paints, but by the time I made that conclusion, it was already Saturday night. If I were to do this again, that would definitely be something I would do differently.

Once everything was painted, I sealed them off with a clear coat fixative spray. I originally planned to coat them in a thick gloss glaze as well, but due to time I was not able to.

PACKAGING / PRINTING / CUTTING

After painting, the figures were ready to be put into their boxes. The packaging design process was fairly simple, since I had sketched out the design months prior. It was primarily designed in Procreate, and then formatted in Illustrator and Photoshop. I wanted to incorporate more illustrations and handmade type into the design in order to emphasize a personal, handmade feeling. I combined a few different box dielines from other blind boxes I have to create the dieline for this project. I am also pretty familiar with this process, so I didn't run into any issues, thankfully.

I printed them on a thicker cardstock paper in order to provide more structure, as well as give a more high-quality feeling to the boxes. I was debating between using 100 lb or 120 lb paper, but the 120 lb would not run through the 406 printer here at school, so the choice was made for me. But now I am super familiar with fixing printer jams.

I also printed the card inserts on the same paper. These cards were made to provide more context to the figures, as well as mimic the collectible cards you would get in other blind boxes. They include an illustration of the figure, as well as a couple of sentences describing their story. I wrote these in a letter format, as if the figure, Quynh (aka me) was writing them. I purposefully kept the sentences somewhat vague, almost poetic, in order to leave room for the reader to come to their own conclusions and connections about the figures. I also wanted to protect myself and keep some things private, especially because this project is already so personal.

I originally wanted to cut the boxes and cards out by hand since I really enjoy the production process in design. However, due to time and consistency, I decided to cut them out on the laser cutter here at school. It was a good excuse to learn and use the laser cutter before I graduated, but it also saved a lot of time. The learning process was incredibly easy - I just needed the dielines in an illustrator file that would be sent to the laser cutter. The most difficult part was alignment, since you would have to set the starting position of the laser yourself. I decided not to become too obsessed with making everything cut perfectly, and I still ended up with boxes and cards that I was happy with, so it worked out!

Packaging the figures into the boxes was a little stressful since it was so close to the deadline, but I also enjoyed assembling them. Big thank you again to my roommate, Ellie, for folding all the boxes while I finished sealing the figures. I also decided to wrap each figure in tissue paper in order to add onto the surprise factor of the blind box. Interestingly, the process of wrapping the figures was very reminiscent of wrapping egg rolls, so it was fun to make that connection.

PRESENTATION SPACE

The last part of this project was setting up the space we are all in today. Luckily, I was able to get some help from my friend Amber, to put up all the shelves. They also helped me attach the vinyl that is displayed at the entrance. I chose the Commons Gallery because I liked the open spacing and large white walls. It felt like a nice home for my figures to live in.

COMPARATIVE MEDIA / MARKETPLACE APPLICATION

Beyond the structure of my thesis project, QUYNH is intended to work as both a portfolio piece as I'm launching my design career and a stepping stone to grow a larger brand. This blind box series

showcases how my various skills work together to create a thoughtful, large-scale project. It also leaves room for me to expand on QUỲNH as its own brand/product that I can sell independently or through a manufacturer.

Compared to other blind boxes on the market, QUỲNH stands out as a personal exploration and reflection on culture and identity. For example, THE MONSTERS series is inspired by Nordic mythology, but does not expand on this further other than the character design. On top of being a cute collectable toy, my audience is able to connect with the stories and symbolism behind each design. Audiences are also able to appreciate the craftsmanship put into every piece of the project. QUỲNH provides representation for other second-gen Vietnamese Americans who felt like they never really had a place in their communities.

CONCLUSION

As I wrap up my presentation, I think about the questions that I've struggled with throughout the entire project: What do I want to do with design? What am I defined as now that I'm graduating? Who am I supposed to be?

I don't think I will ever find the answers to those questions. But now having finished this project, I feel like the biggest revelation I had was that what is most important is how I view myself, not based on anyone else's thoughts but my own — as cliché as that is.

I'm reminded of a conversation I had with one of my managers months ago after telling her my concept for my project. She said things along the lines of, "Why does it matter? Why do you have to choose? Can't you just...be?" Looking back at that conversation now, it makes me laugh because yeah...why do I have to choose? I am Vietnamese *and* American. I am a designer *and* an illustrator *and* a crafter *and* a maker *and* simply an artist. I can exist as whatever I choose to be in this moment rather than worrying about what I should be.

This blind-box series not only allowed me to explore my experiences as a second-generation Vietnamese-American, it also allowed me to form new relationships, strengthen existing ones, and become a little bit more comfortable with just being myself. I hope that you - the audience - are able to find a part of yourself throughout this blind box series or in my journey creating it. To my fellow second-gen kids, I hope you feel represented and comforted in these figurines. I hope they inspire you to share your own experiences and not feel ashamed to embrace the various cultures that make you, you.

To end off my presentation, I want to thank you all for coming and engaging with this project. Thank you to Gordon and Yoshi, for not only being part of my panel, but also being wonderful professors who pushed my limits as an artist. Thank you to Megan and Flo, who had to deal with so many of my printing issues. Thank you to all my friends who graciously volunteered their time to help me sand, paint, and package all of my figures, listen to my every single complaint about this project, or stayed at school with me in the late hours of the day to work together. And thank you to all of the professors, mentors, and peers who have shaped who I am today.

I want to give a big thank you to my mentor, Kristin Rogers Brown, because without her, this project would not have been possible. Thank you for spending almost every single Tuesday this year with me and providing your skills and insight.

Lastly, con cảm ơn Bố Mẹ for always supporting me and my artistic endeavors. Con biết bố mẹ thương con nhiều, and con biết bố mẹ làm nhiều cho con ve anh minh and anh huy to succeed. Cảm ơn nhiều. I hope we make you proud.

Thank you again to everyone for being here today. Enjoy some eggrolls made by my mom if you haven't already, and also if ur interested in buying a figure pls let me know I will gladly take ur money >:D

THESIS CREATIVE BRIEF

KATELYN TRAN // MIDTERM REVIEW // PNCA FALL 2025

PROJECT VISION

- With a blind box toy series, QUỲNH, I will navigate my experience as a second-generation Vietnamese American through food symbolism. The series will have a total of seven figures: each with a unique story and visuals relating back to my experience culturally, as a designer/illustrator, and as a collector. Expanding on my skills of 3D modeling and packaging design, this project will explore themes of identity, culture, shame, connection, nostalgia, and joy.
- The brand of the blind box, Con Khỉ (Dear Monkey), is a personal brand I have been developing for a larger project highlighting rich Vietnamese heritage in objects used every day. I created it as a way to reconnect with my Vietnamese identity, so it is a good umbrella brand for my blind box series as well. The name, QUỲNH, is shortened from my Vietnamese name, Nhú Quỳnh. The figures are representative of little-me in various scenarios connecting back to my experiences of being Vietnamese-American.

AUDIENCE

- My primary audience will be other second-generation Vietnamese Americans who are struggling with their cultural identity. My goal is to provide nostalgia and comfort to others, while also encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences and share them, whether they are positive or negative. This is reflected in the ambiguous names for each character, allowing each person to connect their own reason to the figures.
- Secondary audiences include anyone who feels split between two cultures, identities, worlds, etc. Anyone who feels like they never fit in with their communities might find solace through the figures in this series.

METHODS & MATERIALS

- I am designing the figures in Nomad Sculpt and printing them using the 3D printers at PNCA. The packaging and cards will be designed in Illustrator and Procreate, also printed at PNCA. Everything will be assembled and painted by hand.
- The seven figures will be displayed on white podiums behind glass display cases. There will be an additional table off to the side that will act as a small pop-up shop for audience members to purchase the blind boxes.
- Symbolically, putting the toys behind glass protects my personal experiences from the audience. This will force them to engage in an intimate space with the figures. Forcing the audience to become physically close to my work represents how I often had to make myself smaller and hide my struggles with my identity. My attempts to speak out about my experiences were shut down or dismissed, and putting them behind glass protects them. With this project, my experiences will be on display, but it is up to the viewer to engage with them.

COMPARATIVE MEDIA

- POPMART is a well-known company that works with artists to produce designer toys like blind box figurines. Some of their IP includes SKULLPANDA, HIRONO, THE MONSTERS, and NYOTA.
- Compared to other blind boxes on the market, QUỲNH stands out as a personal exploration and reflection on culture and identity. For example, THE MONSTERS series is inspired by Nordic mythology, but does not expand on this further other than the character design. On top of being a cute collectable toy, my audience is able to connect with the stories and symbolism behind each design. Audiences are also able to appreciate the craftsmanship put into every piece of the project. QUỲNH provides representation for other second-generation Vietnamese Americans who felt like they never really had a place in their communities.

MARKETPLACE APPLICATION

- Beyond the structure of my thesis project, QUỲNH is intended to work as both a portfolio piece as I'm launching my design career and a stepping stone to grow a larger brand. This blind box series showcases how my various skills work together to create a thoughtful, large-scale project. It also leaves room for me to expand on QUỲNH as its own brand/product that I can sell independently or through a manufacturer.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

KATELYN TRAN // THESIS DEFENSE // PNCA FALL 2025

Ahnsim Factory_Jee Sun. "Modeling and 3D Printing with Nomad Sculpt on iPad." YouTube. August 18, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9k8NS5tdEg>,

This was the video that first introduced me to Nomad Sculpt, the modeling program that I ended up using for my project. There are insightful tips and instructions on how to use different features in the app.

Chu, Lan T. "From Reaction to Action: Re-Conceptualizing the Vietnamese American Diasporic Experience." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016): 37–42. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26377908>.

This article acts like an overview for two other articles within this journal, though I still found it helpful in framing my perspective. It discusses how the Vietnamese American experience is so deeply tied with the Vietnam War, but that the experience also goes beyond solely being "a byproduct of war" (Chu, 38). Chu describes that there is not a singular definition for the Vietnamese American experience, as well as the different perspectives on Vietnam between older and younger generations.

Dusselier, Jane. "Understandings of Food as Culture." *Environmental Studies* 14, no. 2 (2009): 331–338. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40608476>.

This article describes how food is much more than just a biological necessity; it is a form of communication. Dusselier explores how food acts as a way of memory and identity formation, impacting how individuals see themselves within their cultural heritage.

Emily Boe. "How to Smooth and Prep a PLA 3D-Printed Helmet for Painting." YouTube. October 11, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smOM_6A3gM8.

This creator showed the process of sanding down a print to prepare for painting. They gave the helpful tip of using wood filler mixed with acetone to help fill layer lines and make sanding easier.

Michelle Zauner. *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021.

"But you're not Korean," she said. "You're American." (Zauner, 90).

I have been wanting to read this book for a while, and I am glad that I finally got around to it. Zauner's way of storytelling was captivating. I felt myself relating a lot to her experience with juggling her American side with her Korean side, as well as her anxieties and fears regarding her family/life in general.

Nguyen-Akbar, Mytoan. "Finding the American Dream Abroad? Narratives of Return Among 1.5 and Second Generation Vietnamese American Skilled Migrants in Vietnam." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016): 96–121. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26377910>.

This article describes the experiences of Việt Kiều (Overseas Vietnamese), and their motivations for migrating back to Vietnam during the 2000s. Nguyen-Akbar describes this as "finding the American Dream abroad," as career success is a driving factor for this wave of return migration. Wanting to contribute to the country and seeking emotional fulfillment are also reasons. The

article also discusses “cultural ambivalence” (Nguyen-Akbar, 108) and “flexible citizenship” (Nguyen-Akbar, 101).

St. Clair, Kassia. *The Secret Lives of Color*. New York: Penguin Books, 2017.

This book explores the history of a variety of colors. It goes through how colors have been used throughout history and how it has influenced culture.

Steinburg, Rafael. *Pacific and Southeast Asian Cooking*. Canada: Joan D. Manley, 1974.

This book covers a range of countries in the Pacific and Southeast Asia, but I only have read the section on Vietnam. Titled “The Unconquerable Vietnamese Cuisine, the chapter briefly describes Vietnam’s history and provides lengthy descriptions of different Vietnamese dishes. I am hesitant about the reliability of this book, as it seems like there were not many Asian or Pacific Islanders involved in the making of it. The writing also felt strange, creeping towards Orientalism. There was also a large emphasis on China’s rule over Vietnam, as it was mentioned in almost every single paragraph.

Th30be. “Did anyone else just not relate to Crying in H Mart?” Reddit. September 23, 2024.
https://www.reddit.com/r/asianamerican/comments/1fnr21j/did_anyone_else_just_not_relate_to_crying_in_h/.

Reddit users discussing Michelle Zauner’s memoir, *Crying in H Mart*. The original poster begins the conversation by saying that the book was unrelatable, questioning how “anyone could praise this as a meaningful look at the Asian American experience.” Many users responded in opposition, saying that there is not one Asian American experience, and how the original poster was gatekeeping the Asian American experience.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*. New York, New York: The Overlook Press, 2014.

Very raw, deeply personal, and well-written story of a son trying to connect with his mother through a letter she cannot read.

DOCUMENTATION

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INTERESTED?
TALK TO KATELYN
TO PURCHASE
(PLS BRING)

\$65



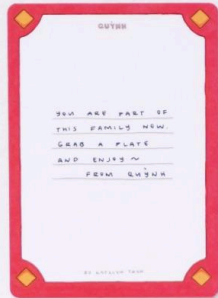


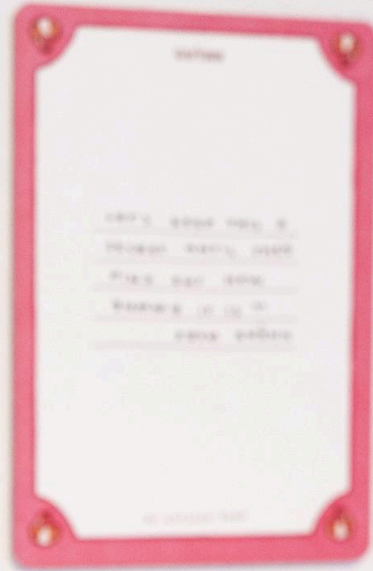






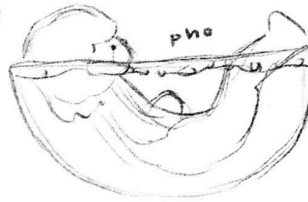






THESIS JOURNAL

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- apples ; love through action
- pho ; jealousy ? popularization of vietnamese food
- bánh bao ; love surpassing language
- con ? com tam ? com + lap xuong

- bun bo hue
- xi mui
- mit kho trung
- bánh mì
- che
- chao / canh





wow so cool!

boxes on shelves?

- 1st gallery?
- atrium?
- Bio gallery?
- somewhere else

- open space
- scale
- intimate







IMAGE FILES LIST

KATELYN TRAN // THESIS DEFENSE // PNCA FALL 2025

DOCUMENTATION

- *I love you.* PLA, acrylic paint. 3.25" x 3.25" x 2.75". Photo of figure.
 - Tran_Katelyn_AppleFigure_Detail.jpg
- *Cảm ơn Ông Bà Nội.* PLA, acrylic paint. 2" x 2.75" x 2.25". Photo of figure.
 - Tran_Katelyn_BanhBaoFigure_Detail.jpg
- *You're not Vietnamese.* PLA, acrylic paint. 2.75" x 2.75" x 2.25". Photo of figure.
 - Tran_Katelyn_PhoFigure_Detail.jpg
- *What are you eating?.* PLA, acrylic paint. 2.5" x 2.75" x 2.25". Photo of figure.
 - Tran_Katelyn_SandwichFigure_Detail.jpg
- *Before it goes bad.* PLA, acrylic paint. 2" x 2" x 3". Photo of figure.
 - Tran_Katelyn_BanhBoFigure_Detail.jpg
- *You know this?* PLA, acrylic paint. 2.25" x 1.5" x 3". Photo of figure.
 - Tran_Katelyn_ShrimpChipsFigure_Detail.jpg
- *Caring is sharing.* PLA, acrylic paint. 2" x 2" x 2.75". Photo of figure.
 - Tran_Katelyn_ChaGioFigure_Detail.jpg
- Photo of presentation space entrance.
 - Tran_Katelyn_PresentationSpace_Entrance.jpg
- Photo of box display.
 - Tran_Katelyn_BoxDisplay_Detail.jpg

THESIS JOURNAL

- Initial sketches for character design and food choices.
 - Tran_Katelyn_IdeationSketch_CharacterDesign.jpg
- Initial sketches for presentation space.
 - Tran_Katelyn_IdeationSketch_PresentationSpace.jpg
- Process photo of painting the figures.
 - Tran_Katelyn_Process_Painting.jpg
- Process photo of priming the figures.
 - Tran_Katelyn_Process_Priming.jpg
- Process photo of printing bánh bo figure.
 - Tran_Katelyn_Process_Printing.jpg