

Savanna Thao

she / they

11/14/1995

I am Hmong, and I was born and raised in Oklahoma—currently living in Minnesota since the beginning of the pandemic. Growing up, I've always loved being creative and exploring different art forms and mediums, such as drawing, dance, painting, food, sewing, and more. I really believe there should be no limits to oneself when it comes to art and expression. Whether I am creating or witnessing it, Art has always been a useful tool and a friend to help me process the world within and around me, as well as help me cope with my mental health.

Submission 1: Locked

This piece called, “Locked,” was inspired by elements of my (Hmong) culture, as well as the rampant, ongoing issues of unjust carceral systems and police violence, especially in the US. In the Hmong culture, there are these necklace pieces (spirit/soul locks) that are believed to function as talismans, protecting the wearer from harm, illnesses, or evil spirits. So, within this piece, I wanted to incorporate the Hmong, spirit/soul lock necklace pieces to juxtapose the handcuffs, prison cell bars, and barbed wires—all of which encompass some idea of being “locked” but often in a negative, dehumanizing, and/or violent way. Creating this piece pushed me to reflect deeply on my relationship and understanding of the police, carceral institutions, punishment, anti-blackness, and all other systems attached, and I hope it pushes others too. I hope that we can reach within our souls to reimagine and ask ourselves, “How can we, as individuals and a society, unlock this harmful cycle of pain and violence?” and “How does safety, accountability, healing, and community look like for us and our loved ones in a world of abolition?”

Submission 2: Hmask Up

This piece is called, “Hmask Up,” and with this piece, I wanted to touch upon the fact that many Hmong New Year events everywhere have been canceled (or made virtual) throughout the pandemic as a safety precaution to protect our communities and to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. For many families, small businesses, and community members, Hmong New Year is often THAT annual event to look forward to, with dressing up in traditional Hmong clothing, taking memorable photos, eating delicious (and nostalgic) food, witnessing skilled entertainment and sports, and so on. But most importantly, it can also be a helpful time and opportunity for many Hmong folks to finally pause, reflect, and feel even more proud and closer to their people, culture, heritage, and identity—something that the “everyday, bustling American life” sometimes can't provide. So as this pandemic goes on, we must keep moving forward, doing what is best for not only the Hmong community but for all of us. By continuing to take care of ourselves and each other—[H]masking up, social distancing, getting vaccinated, etc.—I hope we can one day find ourselves in a safe enough environment to celebrate and attend Hmong New Year in person once again.