

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

I Do Not Know
I Am a Guest When I Dream
夢裡不知身是客

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I do not know I am a guest when I dream is one sentence of a poem from one thousand years ago.

梦里不知身是客，

一晌贪欢。

流水落花春去也，

天上人间。

I do not know I am a guest when I dream

A feast of one night

The flower has gone with the flowing river

The spring left

The heaven, the earth

- Li Yu¹

¹ Xie Tao Fang, *Tang Song Ci Pu Cui Bian* (Cheng Dou: Si Chuan Ren Min Chu Ban She, 2010), 44.

Spiritual Dilemma

When I was eighteen years old, studying in one of the biggest and the most prosperous cities in my country China—Beijing, I was out on a winter night, wandering with my friends in the streets. All we could see was the glaring and resplendent lamplight of this city. We turned into a street which felt a little bit deserted than the main street. I was staring at the stores on the street : some retail stores, hardware stores, a tiny hair salon which had an outdated look, the others become a blur in my mind. The light spread out from the bulbs and draw the outline of these stores. I was staring at the street which was decorated with all these colorful lights, but it still could not hide its bleakness. I felt spontaneous dismay, like I suddenly understood that these brilliant gorgeous decorations of night, this dazzling and aspirational stuff which could make a cinema look like a palace, they are all just bulbs, linked together. Of course, I already knew that they were bulbs, but this time was different. It was like the light of the city which gave me imagination about the future and the word had suddenly lost its charm. They suddenly just became boring toys that had been made by poor workers on the cold assembly line. Instead of being obsessed by the tempting light they spread, I could see they were just something made of plastic; I could see they had been made by molds; I could see piles of them being packed into paper boxes. It is like I had found a door between two rooms, one room was full of beautiful fantasy, and the other one let you see the cold reality. I opened the door and could not decide which room to go in. In this moment I remember repeatedly, actually nothing really happened.

Now, I am twenty-eight and chose ceramic art to be my life career. What I am making in my studio is approaching the moment that this shift happened in my mind. In my producing, I am pursuing visual complexity, pursuing for more details. Then, I use white to cover all of these complicated shapes to make them look uniform. This is one way that I use to talk about the contradictory state - monotonous color and intricate shapes.

I grew up in a developing country's booming economy. The pursuit of wealth is the end goal for most people. The western concepts of materialism are mixed into every part of our daily life, through tempting and trendy images. Globalization enriches our cultural notion, and assimilates it as well. The rapid economic development and the assimilation of culture brings contemporary Chinese people a feeling of panic.

One story I heard several years ago is a migrant worker named Xu Lizhi who worked in international factory in south China, he committed suicide because of his desperation. He was one of million people who works in international factory in China. He was a talented and prolific poet. I keep trying to understand the reason why he could not insist on living from his poetry and realized how narrow the space is that has been left for our spirit and deep emotion in contemporary life. It seems that everything should be done quickly in a fast developing country, even a funeral.

When I was young, I attended several funerals in the country side of my hometown. At that time funeral takes around three days or even more. People would hand make a lot of different things for the funeral. But now it feels that the

funeral need be done in half day because the quick pace of the contemporary lifestyle. People just need show up and leave quickly. There is barely the opportunity and time for people to release their grief and fear. In my country, the traditional culture we have relied on is dissolving, and our emotion is floating in the air with nowhere to go now. As an artist I put this sense of panic and loss in my work.



Left: (Figure 1) Untitled, Stoneware, Cone 04, 2018, phone by Chengou Yu



Right: (Figure 2) Untitled, Stoneware, Cone 04, 2018, phone by Chengou Yu

I use the image of rabbits as a repeated theme. It seems like their long ears show our yearning for the answer and the thoughtful facial expression conveys a sense of loss. At the same time, the image of the rabbit has different meanings in different cultures, which could create different thoughts for my audience. To most

Americans, it symbolizes fertility, cuteness, and Easter. In Chinese culture, it is believed that there is a rabbit that makes medicine on the moon. Because of this, the rabbit becomes the symbol of the moon and long life. In pop culture, the image of a bunny has been used as a way of objectifying the Female body. For people who are critics of politics in China, a rabbit becomes a euphemism for Chinese Communists. This is because when Mao called people 'Tongzhi', which means friends, it sounds like "tuzi", which means rabbit in Chinese. I am attracted by this kind of unsure understanding of one image.

Studying in America as a foreigner, I have experienced chaos and complexity that can arise when people from different cultures are trying to understand each other. I get stuck by the vagueness of communication. While the unsure understanding of image exactly reflects my situation. The barrier in language and the difference experience of growing up in another culture makes me feel more isolated and unclear.

In a panel with an art critic and writer, she asked me and my classmates to use three words to describe ourselves and our work. I used "foreigner" to describe myself because I thought it was the biggest difference between me and my classmate. She affirmed my answer and said: "In some condition, we all have been a foreigner". That inspired me. We are so sensitive about the difference in culture and different countries, or between east and west. But, even between the closest people, there still is inevitable misunderstanding. So more and more, I feel like I am not trying to hide the differences between me and others but accept it

and leave more space for it. I hope the cultural misreading could, to some extent, float among my audience and the installation I create. It can be a place that contains these differences, a place that makes everyone feel accepted and a place to know you do not know and feel Okay about it.

Ritual, Temporary Shelter

A space full of ritual sense is what I am trying to create in order to place panic and anxiety. What I am very interested in is that in ritual it seems like it can heal people by presenting contradictory feeling and a shifting moment.

For example, the Greek's traditional festival - Dionysia comes from a tale like this: Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, gave the first grapevine to a farmer and told him how to make wine. Then the farmer's friend drank the wine and fell asleep because of the alcohol. The villagers thought the farmer killed his friend because they didn't understand wine. They beat the farmer to death. Then the farmer's daughter came and saw her father's dead body. She was so sad that she hung herself. During the Dionysian festival, there are several kinds of competitions. One of which is a swing game for girls. These girls on the swings remember the body of the poor daughter. Here, the horrible memory of daughter's death mixes with the exciting laughter of these kids together. Through imitating tragedy that happened in the past, people release individual ego and are reborn through play. There is no strict division between tragedy and celebration. People repeat tribulation by a game at a carnival. By doing this, they can face the pain and conquer the fear.²

In ancient China, the ritual of worshipping the "Sky" was important. As a community, people would beg for protection from the "Sky" and appreciate its gift. People recognized the transformation from the ritual itself was important as well. In the rituals of the Zhou dynasty, people had certain actions, expressions, and way of speaking. The elegant and accurate execution helped people forget

² Karen Armstrong, Yanyan Sun, and Yanbing Bai, *Zhou Xin Shi Dai: Ren Lei Wei Da Zong Jiao Chuan Tong De Kai Duan* (Hakou: Hainan Chu Ban She, 2010), 70.

themselves in daily life and focus on playing the role in the ritual. When people came back to reality, they felt purified. This purity stayed with them and influenced their inner ego.³

In the festivals and rituals in these two cultures, people realized that they cannot understand pain and fear totally. Instead, they go to the spiritual place through imitation and playing while discarding themselves, if only for a second, feeling a purer peace in the mixture of happiness and misery.

Play as Healing

Today, gallery is somewhere people decide to have a look when they feel like they want to see something different. A place they can wander around and fully involved and do not have to fully understand what they are looking at. So, I can say, a gallery works similar as ritual space at some point nowadays.

³ Karen Armstrong, Yanyan Sun, and Yanbing Bai, *Zhou Xin Shi Dai: Ren Lei Wei Da Zong Jiao Chuan Tong De Kai Duan* (Hakou: Hainan Chu Ban She, 2010), 86.



(Figure3) Installation View, Stoneware, paper, glass, metal, 2018, phone by Chengou Yu

In my installation, white paper acts as soft sculpture and creates a special space. The idea comes from the funeral ritual in China. These white long strip-like papers accumulate together and create a huge but soft and fragile space. The light of the gallery could go through the papers, which helps create a space having different layers of brightness. They hang on the ceiling of the gallery and swing a little bit by chance, exhaling a spiritual sense to people in the space. The inspiration of the spiritual sense of hanging paper comes from the funeral rituals I attend. These are rituals be rooted in the Chinese traditional notion of the bloodline. People bid farewell to their family member or friend and witness the departed going into a new state of existence. It is a ritual of a shift.



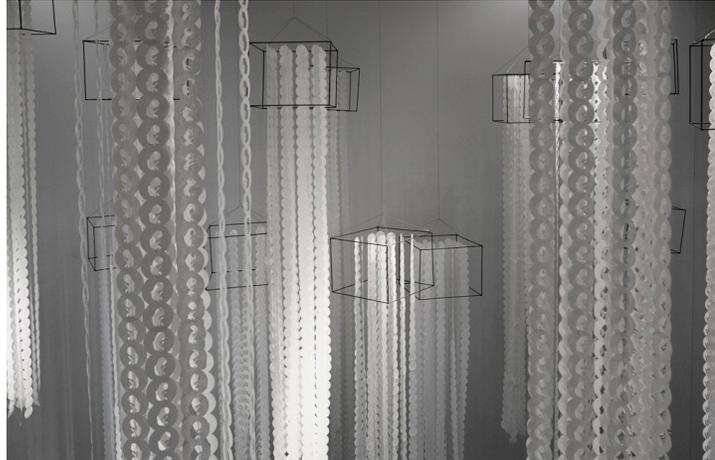
(Figure 4) Installation View, Stoneware, paper, glass, metal, 2018, phone by Chengou Yu

In a Chinese traditional funeral, people's emotion shifts in the ritual and their feelings of mourning and celebration mix together. They know they are staying in a spiritual and sacred space-time; they believe the ghosts and gods and talk with them inside that moment. I am trying to make a space like that, the time could feel slower. People could just observe the subtle swing of paper and forget time. They could find some sort of belongingness here.⁴

There are several types of images hidden in these papers: plants, roots, babies, language and an ancient coin image which is used in Chinese funeral. The

⁴ Zheng Xiao Jiang, Xu Chun Lin, and Chen Shi Liang, *Zhong Guo Bin Zang Wen Hua* (Shang Hai: Shang Hai Wen Hua Chu Ban She, 2012), 6.

audience might not divide them because they mix together and create a new field, waiting for new meanings.



(Figure 5) Installation View, paper, metal, 2018, phone by Chengou Yu

The ceramic sculptures scattered in the central area of the space have pagoda-like shape, soul jar like decoration. Soul jar is one kind of funerary objects which is popular in Song Dynasty. They are jars decorated by architecture, flower and leaves, birds and beasts and also immortals sometimes. They are used for preserving the deceased's soul and they also carry the good wish for the afterlife. The intricate flowers in my work may create a spiritual sense mixed with fantasy. But sometimes it creates a decadent sense, just like the moment when a flower fully opens is the moment it begins to decay.



(Figure 6) Installation View, Stoneware, paper, metal, 2018, phone by Chengou Yu

These sculptures, stand in a way that feels like growing. Some of them are supported by animal legs, some of them look like growing roots. They contain a mix of contradicting emotions, fear in the rapture, grow in the collapse, attempt to die in the survival, deify in the indignity. I hope this sort of contradiction could be understood by viewing my works.



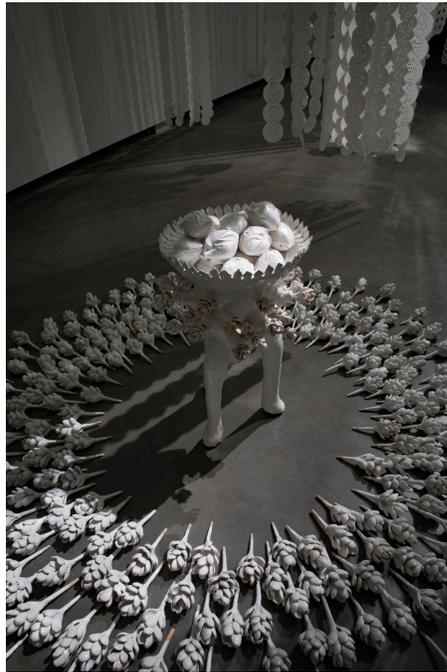
Left: (Figure 7) Untitled, Stoneware, Cone 04, 2018, photo by Chengou Yu



Right: (Figure 8) Untitled, Stoneware, Cone 04, 2018, photo by Chengou Yu

The movement that audience brings in is one essential part of my work, too. Their wandering in the space which is isolated by paper would become one part of ritual. The same activity in the same space could help people create a feeling of connection with others and increase the possibility of empathy. Besides, there is always a part in my work that invites people to look inside. Some parts of the sculptures are contained by glass cylinder and some part are seen through different layers. Some part of work has scattered flowers around on the floor. The arrangement of the flowers invites viewers to find out where they belong in the sculpture. This also invites people to look closer and tempt them to act. Like

praying in temples, through these actions, people are invited to participate in the ritual of the installation which guide people's spirit to concentrate and become meditative and purified hopefully.



(Figure 9) Untitled, Stoneware, Cone 04, 2018, photo by Chengou Yu

Making as Praying

As a ceramic artist, when I am working in my studio, the first thing I feel is frustration. Clay being pinched, molded and shaped by my hand could not stay the way it is. It has its own structure and follows its own will. In the process of drying and firing, what I made may deformed and crack. Sometimes they show an ugly

scar after I open the kiln door. I have to accept it and think about what I can do, remake or fix. So, choosing clay as my material means that there always a panic feeling between me and my work. This is not enjoyable, but makes me get used to fear, get used to that the fact that the work I made might collapse and crack and become a pile of dry clumps again, like nothing ever happened. But, on the other hand, I do feel calm in my making. When I repetitively making the flowers in my work, I almost thinking about everything in my life but nothing about my work. My hands just keep moving and my head is light and clean. I think it is a way to transfer my confusion and my fear, from my mind to my hand, from my hand to clay. Like I am pull my emotion out from my body. I feel the same thing in temple when I am praying like others. We light an incense, hold it and make a bow in front of the Buddha statue. Like we are holding our fear and sorrow. And then we put this incense into the censer and feel released.

Making clay, for me, is like doing something for no reason, it is like a kind of ritual, it does not have practical reason, but it can heal in someway and give me a vague reason that I am here.

Sweet Dream in the Garden

游园惊梦

What I want to explore in my work is a space used for wondering, realizing, and healing.

I am inspired by a Chinese traditional Kun Opera *Sweet Dream in the Garden* (游园惊梦). It describes a love story of a girl who falls asleep in a beautiful garden and fall in love with a young man in her dream. Then she dies because she misses the man who appeared in her dream too much and she was ressorected because of love. The garden is essential in this story. Why can the audience accept the absurdity in this story? I think it is partly because this fabulous spring garden, it is too beautiful to be true. In a space like that, it seems easier for people to accept the unexplained things.

I use the image of plants, animal bodies, industrial elements and people's organ in my sculpture. They are randomly arranged in the translucent white paper environment, offering scattered unstable clues to audiences. When people go into this pure white space, they can make up different stories based on their personal experience. There is no full understanding between Isolated individuals, just like the inevitable misunderstanding and gap. But when people go into the space and form a mutual viewing, a kind of communication and caring is begining to start. Some parts of the work sent an invitation to view and action. I believe the action which is driven by a kind of instinctual desire helps create an empathetic

space. After getting out from the space, they may get some kind of purification from the ritual and live with it in their daily life for a while, just like ancient Chinese.

My works, through the audiences' view, transform between victim, shrine and counterpart to the audience. At last, between the works and audience, and between the audience and themselves, they could be healed by this shared space and action.

References

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Technical Statement

Materials

1. Ceramic
2. Glass
3. Paper
4. Metal

Ceramic Technique

1. Hand Building
2. Mold made

Recipe of Clay Body and Glaze

Matt Wedel's Sculpture Body

Fire Temperature:
cone 04 – cone 10

Hawthorn	45 lb.
Nepy Sy	30 lb.
OM4	15 lb.
EPK	7.5 lb.
Bentonite	
Talc	3 lb.
20 mesh grog	30 lb.
35 mesh grog	30 lb.
6 rolls of toilet paper	

MJ's Majolica

Fire Temperature:
cone 04

Frit 3124	65.7%
Minspar 200	17.1%
Neph Sy	6.3 %
Tile 6 Clay	10.8%
Zirco Pax	14.0%

Lisa Orr's Beautiful Leaf

Fire Temperature:
cone 04

Frit 3110	67%
Gerstley Borate	10%
Soda Ash	16%
EPK	5%
Silica	8%
Bentonite	2%

Red Iron Oxide	12%
Copper Carb	4%
Chrome Oxide	.25%
CMC	2%

Stick up Slip

Fire Temperature:
cone 04 – cone 10

Grolleg	30%
EPK	15%
XX Sagger	25%
Neph Sy	15%
Flint	15%
Darvon 811	.5%

Add 8% CMC gum and 5 – 15 % corn syrup for drawing with this slip, using piping bag.

Paper Technique

Laser cut

Metal Technique

Metal Welding