

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Transmission

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Abstract

My explorations are guided by the experiences and feeling of being caught in the spaces among different cultures, landscape, daily surroundings, and languages. In my recent work, I have been exploring nature, identity, miniature, dislocation, cultures and conventions. Comparing and utilizing linguistic systems, symbols, and values from the east and the west, I trace my past, find my position. Eastern and western perspectives are very distinct from each other; in the transitional space of my work, both 'landscapes' exist here.

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If the distance between China and here is 7723 km, then what is the distance
between the previous me and the current me? Between home
and here, what time is it for me now?

Shifting and Traveling in Different Places

I was born and raised in a small city called Guilin in southern China. As the only child, I rarely had questions or options I could answer or choose by myself when I was young. Until I was considered an adult at eighteen, questions were usually solved and choices were made by my parents. This situation resulted in two decisions made by myself later - one was becoming a ceramic artist, which is not a proper job to make a living in my parents' opinion; the second was bringing my art practice abroad, which they were against for a long time.

Leaving my country not only changed my approach to how I make my work, but also some parts of my personality and mindset.

I've been living in North America now for six years. Six years could be short. It is too short to be able to adapt myself to the environment here. Six years could be long. It is long enough to nearly get lost in the city where I lived for almost twenty years.

Like my life experience, my memory of ceramics did not start in North America but in Jingdezhen, known as the "porcelain city" since the Song Dynasty¹ in China. Studying there for four years helped me gain many skills and an understanding of Chinese traditions in ceramics; the strict requirement of technique and skill, subtle aesthetics and high respect for tradition and history. This experience did not help me in the beginning of my adventure in the west. Here, I found the focus to be more about the development of conceptual ideas

¹ The Song Dynasty, Chinese: 宋朝; pinyin: sòng cháo; 960–1279

and personal vision. Reassessing my habits and relationship to my ideas and established technique became the first step I needed to begin.

China has a long history and priceless treasures. My hometown Guilin attracted people all over the world because of its breathtaking landscape and scenery. Jingdezhen, a place full of precious materials, techniques, and equipment could help ceramic artists turn their visions into reality. Until I moved away from home, I had little conscious appreciation of my surroundings; I did not see what I was living amongst.

When I was young, my dad always taught me that we should navigate our life out of detours and dead ends. As I grew up, I started to doubt this 'value of success.'

Life is a journey rather than a destination for me. Every experience happening in the process takes account - some destinations you can only arrive at by making a detour.

The Newness and the Oldness: Language in Process

When a new life meets an old one, that moment draws me close. Tasting newness and oldness at the same time, I become the distance and difference; I am there, here, then, now. Language for me is a lens to sense culture, identity and location. My voice changes when I speak another language.

My thoughts and words are not balanced at times using English. They have jetlag. How can I convey something complex with limited words?

What happens between the words? Is this translation, or did my thought become different?





























My feelings about English are anxious, fleeting and precarious. These feelings keep me absorbing unknown vocabularies and analyzing conversations. If one word is not working, I jump to another. It is a process of continually checking, discarding, and searching.

The sequences of English and Chinese are opposite; using English is like arranging. Twenty-six letters can create tons of words. While I am using English, each letter, word, or phrase pops up in my brain randomly like bubbles, awaiting arrangement into a passage that can explain my thoughts and get my meaning across correctly. One word has many meanings, and my game is to put it in the right place.

Alternatively,

Chinese is like an old friend to me. I can be late to catch on to my true feeling and thoughts from my words. It is not only a language but a tool to understand

myself, my culture, and the values behind it.

Picture	Evolution			Modern character	English		
	→		→		→		sun
	→		→		→		moon
	→		→		→		tree
	→		→		→		mountain
	→		→		→		water
	→		→		→		field
	→		→		→		door

The evolution of pictographic characters

Chinese was developed through the use of images. It is the only existing pictographic language in the modern world, and one of the oldest languages still being used.² The process of learning Chinese, especially writing, is like learning how to draw an image - using a combination of technical skill and imagination, considering each shape of stroke, and balancing spaces in between to compose an overall beautiful structure. This sense of balancing requires years of practice and training - perhaps this contributes to why I am so obsessed with image making in my studio.

The Changing Nature, the Moving Glazes

I studied Chinese traditional ink painting and calligraphy from the age of three, both of these art forms like many of the arts in China draw fundamental inspirations from nature.³

Nature changes a lot. It moves, as I have moved. Here, in North America, the bottoms of trees are protected with mounds of mulch, surrounded by grass instead of painted white as they are in China. The squirrels and deer are many and run freely here - they are not afraid of humans. When the water fell, my first winter here, it was not just rain but the big frozen⁴ (the ice storm), this extreme temperature froze the moment and I could see its beauty.

² "Chinese Language Interpreting and its Difference with English," Day Tranlations, last modified June 3, 2019, <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/chinese-vs-english/>

³ Yee Chiang. "Chinese Calligraphy." Britannica Online Academic Edition, 31 July 2019, <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/471222>.

⁴ Big frozen, translated literally from Chinese 冰暴 (meaning the ice storm) combining with my own impression of this phenomenon. 冰: frozen, 暴: big, violent. It was a mistake in English grammar but also a new word created by the artist self.

The extreme temperatures during firing also ‘freeze’ the glazes’ movement and allow me to see this beauty in my work.

Glazes run, as does the ink in the trail of the brush in my drawings. My drawings are painted with Chinese brush and ink but not on the traditional Xuan paper.⁵ I use the same ink, brush and method as I did in China but the paper, bought here from the local art store, does not absorb the ink wash and the ink runs to the bottom of the easel.⁶

In my ceramic work, the soft color palette and velvety glaze surfaces mimic the color of the Chinese pigment: azure blue (天青蓝), gamboge (藤黄), malachite (石绿), ochre (赭石) and cinnabar(朱砂). Glazes run and pool naturally with gravity and form, bringing a sense of nature into the work.

If the stroke, dot, or space in calligraphy is part of the life in a pictograph of a natural object - each pinch, press, or glaze movement represents the energy and beauty of living things in my work. Calligraphy is the standard by which Chinese painting is judged; the early experience of practicing both arts sets the invisible logic in my work. Although I have lost most of these conscious memories, it remains presently merged with possibilities I see from this distance after departure.

⁵ Xuan paper, aka Chinese rice paper, features great tensile strength, smooth surface, and clean stroke. It is very sensitive with superb absorbency, very strong during repeated washing or wet mounting.

⁶ Easel, also not proper equipment for Chinese painting - the paper is usually placed on top of a table over a thick felt mat to absorb the ink and water.

The Miniature: In History and in My Work

Reassembling observations of nature and my surroundings are my key to making sculpture. I collect these as many different lives in my imagination - each one stored, as collage elements for future work.

Mountains, clouds, and rivers appear frequently in my work. These natural elements have different relationship to locations. Some elements like mountains are distinctive of certain places. Clouds, however, are the same even though I see them from different parts of the globe. Rivers flow down the hill in response to the topography and gravity. Recalling the image of these elements in my memory gives me the ability to interpret, imagine, and graft them together in a poetic ceramic moment. My work starts with the depiction of my hometown's karst⁷ limestone mountains. Different than gigantic mountains encompassing our body, or the installation allowing the viewer to walk amongst, mimicking the landscape in my hand evokes the idea of the miniature. The miniature reflects the power of nature in another way - small yet human can envision something grand through it. This small, intimate scale is an invitation to come closer. It invites the viewer to slow down and take the time, bend down and look at the work, to see additional and different aspects of the works in a new focus. No matter if the mountain shrinks down to a stone, or a stone magnifies the landscape, the rock here is the basic building block; embellished with rivers, clouds, birds, and winding path, becoming a complete world.

⁷ Karst, is a topography formed from the dissolution of soluble rocks such as limestone, dolomite, and gypsum. My hometown Guilin has long been renowned for its scenery of karst topography.

The scholar's rock is known in my country as gòng shí (供石), meaning "respected stones." The Chinese literati not only appreciates these stones but respects them for their beauty and their upright, refined, and persevering character. This appreciation of the scholar's rock, that mirrors the philosophical concept of harmony between humankind and nature coming from Confucianism and Taoism,⁸ relates to my feelings about my early memory of calligraphy and ink painting, my culture and tradition.

Nature exists around us, and includes us on this planet. Since ancient times, humans sense importance in experiences and surroundings in order to survive, perceiving pattern in nature and interpreting this with depth. Although humans are part of nature, what we do (human activity) is often understood as a separate category - culture. The role of the scholar's rock is conflictual and shifting. In the beginning it was to bring-in nature, to observe and experience. When the rock turns valuable and appreciated, this shifts to the role of re-created cultural artifact. Making this form with clay, the rock become a construction of a second layer of artifice. It is not only a representation of the actual landscape as it is in history, it is a practice and poetic expression in relation to myself and my culture.

My work and explorations have roots in my culture and Chinese heritage but develop under the influence of being caught in the spaces among different surroundings, languages and cultures. Unlike the traditional way to display the

⁸ Kemin Hu and Thomas S. Elias, *Spirit Stones: The Ancient Art of The Scholar's Rock*, (New York: Abbeville Press), 11

scholar's rock on top of a wooden base or table, my rock may be installed against the wall, on a white pedestal, with a found object or metal frame, becomes an 'environment.'

In *Given*, the large ceramic stone (44x30x16") can only stand with the support of its surroundings. The appearances of this rock are distinct, depending on the position of the viewer. If seen from the front, the rock stands upright, similar to the vertical stroke (竖, shù)⁹ in Chinese calligraphy. It is long, still, slim, with no bottom. When one moves to the side, the actual and dynamic gesture of



Given

the rock reveals. A tiny part of the rock attached to the wall, together with a white pedestal, balances the rock in this unique corner.

⁹ Chinese Characters all rely on a very limited set of strokes. Stroke in Chinese Calligraphy include eight basic strokes, the vertical stroke 竖 (shù) is a vertical segment of Chinese character.

In between the rock and the pedestal, is a tiny black circle. Inspired by another example of the miniature “bonsai,” a Japanese term that means “planted in a container,” this circle in the work is not a shadow but a portrayal of a living space, subtly reflecting the rock, making an expanded gesture. This art form begins with the ancient Chinese horticultural practice, redeveloped under the influence of Japanese Zen Buddhism.¹⁰ In the micro-world of bonsai, the ‘plant’ is the subject, and the ‘container’ represents its environment. While taking considerable time and effort to cultivate a bonsai, gardeners usually transfer the plant into different pots every few years in order to keep it strong. The angle of the plant shifts and changes, becomes a new work of art. The bonsai plants are adapting to the environment and growing; in the end have kept the most valuable part by sacrificing unnecessary branches and leaves, to create a sense of harmony.

If I were a plant, my homeland, along with the instructions from my parents would be the ‘greenhouse’ for the seed; in the course of transplanting, the plant absorbed and acclimatized in both soils, will grow bigger and stronger.

During the process of making, firing, and installing my work, the rock’s position has shifted and changed as well. I make many of my sculptures including *Given* without a blueprint. I start, part by part, and assembled them together once I have plenty. If the sculpture needs to stand straight, I make it horizontal on the table. It is usually too fragile to move therefore I can only find its place through completion of the process and reorientation.

¹⁰ “What is Bonsai: Definition and Meaning,” Bonsai Empire, <https://www.bonsaiempire.com/origin/what-is-bonsai>

I am rich. I am blessed with three chances to reveal my work - assembling, glazing, and reorienting.

Reflection and Void Spaces

indicate my interest in different materials aside from ceramic. The found furniture and metal frame in these two pieces can be read as symbols of western habitat - they also speak of an unconventional display of the scholar's rock. In *Reflection*, the rock hangs on the edge of a found wooden table. This table has traveled between places and repainted - it has histories.



Reflection

The rock has a gesture, sticking its head out and seems to stare into the 'rock' on the mirror. The smaller 'rock' with a similar shape of the scholar's stone, however, was made in a very different way. Underneath it is a hexagon mirror, reflecting and reminding you of who you are and what you used to be.

Abstract nature can make a picture not of a mountain or specific landscape anymore, but of energy. It resembles the ink painting, the principle and thinking behind it. The brush stroke or sculpture is not only about itself, but also reinforces the empty paper and space.

In Chinese art, 'empty space' (留白) is expected to convey information through its very lack of control and imagery. Those untouched spaces are not determined by the artist but given, as important as the piece. It emphasizes the weak over the strong, the space between things rather than the things themselves. In this way, knowing and designing the 'white' is the beginning of the myriad things.¹¹

A heavy ceramic rock in *Void Spaces* 'floats' on top of a rectangular, thin metal frame. The volume and weight of the stone in contrast to the emptiness of the frame, and the glaze movement versus the simple black metal construction, not only speaks about controversy and confusion, but possibilities. The bottom of the mountain's silhouette, along with the edge of the frame creates a negative space, an optical illusion, a sheer



Void Spaces

'lake' space, 'ending' the gravity in the middle of the work. This is where the surreal starts to take place. The displacement is being placed, moving from one culture to another.

¹¹ "Empty Space," Watch Me Paint, last modified September 13, 2017, <https://watchmepaint.blogspot.com/2017/09/empty-space.html>

Compared to my ceramic work, less alteration is made to the found objects. They are not deformed, but still compose a modification because they change our perception of their original utility and status. I let these objects and the rock live together in my work. By retaining and choosing to juxtapose both images, they amplify each other's meaning and together state an unfamiliar disposition.

With these 'miniatures' I made in my studio, I can get intimately close to nature and wander through mountains and rivers in my mind. No matter if the scenery is coming from my past or current, the east or the west, in the transitional space of my work, both landscapes exist here.

"Tradition means transmission rather than conservation. This transmission does not imply that we simply leave things unchanged and merely conserve them. It means learning how to grasp and express the past anew."¹²

The process of making my work now is in a loop between pulling the elements apart from the past and reassembling them back together in a different manner. I treat this system as a way to rethink and rediscover the parts I used, as the letters of the alphabet can rearrange as different words to create new meaning.

Art practice and life experience bound tightly. As I move around, my work continues to change and is ongoing. I am a chronic shifter and seeker - drawn to

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer and Robert Bernasconi, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49.

environments, 'landscapes' and new 'contexts' for myself to be and the work to become. It has left questions; the future is awaiting me.

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Artist Statement

If the distance between China and North America is 7723 km, then what is the distance between the previous me and the current me? If there are 12 hours between home and here, what time is it now? When a new life meets an old one, that moment draws me close. Tasting newness and oldness at the same time, I become the distance and difference; I am there, here, then, now.

Language for me is a lens to sense culture, identity and location. My voice changes when I speak another language. Stepping away can intensify focus. Interest shifts and switches here to there, back and forth. Art practice and life experience bound tightly. I move around, my work continues to change my point of view. Living and moving among cultures, histories, values, languages, and assumptions always brings more – a question or an answer?

In my recent work, I have been exploring nature, identity, miniature, dislocation, cultures and conventions. Comparing and utilizing the symbols and values from the east and the west, I trace my past, find my position. The scene now looks ambiguous - it is neither the picture of my hometown nor the view of here. It is something extracted from a recollection of experience and imagination; it comes from a person who appreciates the past and embraces the possibilities of the future.

Technical Statement

Clay Bodies

- CYC Stoneware Revised (Original recipe from Ching-Yuan Chang)

Foundry Hill Crème – 50lbs

Hawthorn – 50lbs

Kyanite 100 Mesh – 50lbs

Grog 48 Mesh – 50lbs

Grog 35 Mesh – 25lbs

Red Art – 50lbs

+ (Optional) a handful of Nylon Fiber if needed

This clay body is easy to mix - one bag of material is 50 lbs. If mix 2 batches in Muller, I only need to weight 2 material, which is 25lbs of Grog 35 Mesh, and Kyanite 100 Mesh (Kyanite is 100lbs per bag). After measurement, I leave the rest in the bag in order to mix the second round. I add a handful of nylon fiber for making large scale sculptures. This clay body has very low shrinkage at high temperature - about 6.8% when firing to cone 10.

I bisque fire my work to different temperatures depending on the final glaze temperature. For the large sculpture, I prefer to bisque fire to cone 6 to make it strong enough, then glaze fire it back to cone 04. For the fragile, delicate, or outdoor sculpture, I bisque to cone 04 and glaze fire them to cone 10 to make it vitrified and stronger.

Glaze Progress

By choosing and preparing several glazes already mixed as the base, I brush all different layers under or over certain tests. After a couple of rounds of testing, I will apply them to different areas as needed to achieve the color variation in one piece. My glazing process requires many layers and sometimes multiple firing. I always try to glaze my work at least one day before loading the kiln.

Layers include:

(colorant here means different oxides, stain or colorant blends)

- glazes with colorant
- water with colorant
- different type of terra sigillata with colorant
- different underglazes

Silica Sand & Calcined Kaolin

I usually apply about 1 inch thick 'sand combination' between the piece and the kiln shelf for glaze firing. Calcined kaolin is denser than silica sand but very powdery. I use a combination of both - 1:1 ratio by volume. It stops the glaze better than silica sand and also reduces the chance of cracking of the work and the glaze. The calcined kaolin I use could be straight calcined kaolin, or EPK fired to cone 10 (2345°F).

Cone 04 Glaze Recipes

- Kelly's Lo-Fire Shine Flesh (very runny, use with caution)

Lithium Carb. – 29
Neph Sy – 70
E.P.K – 11
+ Rutile – 6
+ Manganese Carb. – 0.5

- Jacquie's Base

Gerstly Borate – 38
Lithium Carb. – 10
Neph Sy – 5
E.P.K – 5
Silica – 42
+ (Grey) Iron Chromate – 4
+ (Crimson) Crimson Stain – 10
+ (Pale Green) Chrome Oxide – 0.25

- RISD Lithium Matt

Lithium Carb. – 23.29

Whiting – 2.91

Frit 3124 – 8.83

E.P.K – 10.15

Silica – 45.9

Bentonite – 8.83

+ (Optional) Mason Lavender 6319 – 4

- No Boron Matt

Silica – 42

Kaolin – 22

Lithium Carb. 10

Whiting – 10

Zinc – 10

Barium – 6

- South Seas Turquoise (Very runny, use with caution)

Barium Carb. – 20

Strontium Carb. – 20

Grolleg – 15

Neph Sy – 35

Lithium Carb. – 10

+ Copper Carb. – 2

+ Tin Oxide – 2

Cone 10 Glaze Recipes

- Heyde Red

Custer Feldspar – 46

Dolomite – 15

Whiting – 9

Bone Ash – 7

E.P.K – 23

+ R.I.O – 5

+ Tin Oxide – 5

- Martian Jawbreaker Base

Custer Feldspar – 30

E.P.K – 24

Spodumene – 20

Dolomite – 22

Whiting – 4

+ Copper Carb. – 0.5

Terra Sigillata Recipes

General Terra Sigillata Composition Originally from Anton Reijnders

Terra Sigillata Ratios		
Clay	Water	Darvan 7
Kaolin	140% - 150%	1%
Porcelain	130% - 150%	1%
Ball Clays	180% - 190%	2% - 3%
High White Body	160% - 170%	2% - 3%
Stoneware Clay	210% - 240%	4% - 8%
Stoneware Body	200% - 220%	4% - 8%
Plastic Terra Cotta	200% - 220%	4% - 8%

I first decide which type of clay I want to use in this chart and reference the percentage of water and deflocculant. I start with the lowest water and deflocculant of the recommended range to test. Mix the components in a clear container and leave it undisturbed. Within 3-10 minutes, vertical lines should show up as sedimentation begins to occur. If not, I increase the darvan first and then the water but always stay in the recommended ranges. After 24 hours, the terra sig will be settled into 2 layers. I will prepare another clean container and pour the top layer into it as my terra sig, leave the rest (bottom part) to dry then dump it into the garbage bin.

More Specific Ratio of My Terra Sigillata:

- Grolleg Terra Sig: 140% water, 1% darvan 7
- XX Sagger Terra Sig: 180% water, 3% darvan 7
- OM-4 Terra Sig: 180% water, 3% darvan 7
- Lizella Terra Sig: 200% water, 6% darvan 7
- Red Art Terra Sig: 200% water, 6% darvan 7
- Gold Art Terra Sig: 210% water, 6% darvan 7
- New Foundry Hill Terra Sig: 210% water, 6% darvan 7

I add different oxides or stain in it, always shake or stir before use. I use the *Chart of Colorant Blends* from the Grinding Room, which can find online.