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EXPRESSIONISM IN FURNITURE
ZIHAN ZHANG



Introduction

I like fishing, especially like saltwater fishing. That doesn't mean how much I am really interested in fishing itself, but I love ocean, love the sense when the waves pat my feet, love the fear of being alone in the face of sea fog, love the moment of staying with the whole nature, love the sound when the summer sea breeze blows over my ears. In the summer, I usually drove alone to seaside which is very far, as far as no one lives, and fish all day. I often leave very early and come back until midnight. In these days, I tried to avoid using modern tools such as cell phone or flashlight whenever possible, the reasons about why I did it is that, on the one hand, these modern tools are too fragile, for example, my phone is not waterproof, a wave may be able to easily break it. On the other hand, this is a great opportunity to communicate and discover, realize the essence of our nature just through my real body such as eyes or ears without any distractions from our modern society.

In our current lives, we always develop a wide range of standards for everything, such as using number to express time or making a variety of parameters to manage how much protein we should take in every day. As a result, we adapt to and rely on even enjoy these standards, thus, we have forgotten the reason about why these standards are created, and have lost the skill of discovering the essence of things. A case in point is that, in the fishing time, instead of the clock in my cell phone, I speculate the time through the change of the surrounding environment. In the sunny day, I guess the time through the position of sun or the color of the sky, in cloudy day, I am able to observe the change of the tide to feel the time, I can even observe the moving track of the galaxy or the moon to know when I should go home. For me, personally, the position of sun, the color of the sky, the change of tide and the moving track of the galaxy are all the most direct way to reflect time.



Thinking about our lives, we have completely depended on a wealth of standards such as realizing time through a number or pointer on a clock, since this approach is indeed very convenient for managing and arranging our lives. However, they tend to be too abstract to reflect the essence of mother nature. These criteria are paralyzing our nerves, making us lose the most basic ability of judgment for pinpointing essence of things. Moreover, this paralysis is also spreading to our ability of self-knowledge. Although the compaction, standardization and stereotype of our current society are promoting our material lives, at the same time, they are also lead us deviate from step away from self-knowledge. We create excessive schedules for our lives, make ourselves live like a machine, the future which most of us are looking forward to is actually defined by the standards we established, we have ignored the original intention of our lives- 'what are we living for?' and 'why are we living?'

In the first 25 years of my life, I always thought I was a free man, I followed my passion to choose art and design as my career, and strived to enter the best design school. However, until I moving to Providence, and fished on a beach over the midnight, I finally realized, actually I am the victim in dilemma who is always paralyzed by the standards we created. In that midnight, I realized time is not only a number, it can be the track of galaxy or the fluctuation of tide. And I introspected myself why my schools are the best, just because people defined they are? Did I contemplate about whether they are the most suitable for me? The answer is clear, I always follow suit which is defined by other people, and actually I don't have my own judgment, I'm living in standards we created. But, I'm lucky, at last, I realize it. Most of time, we need to 'See through the appearance to perceive the essence', find the truth which belongs to ourselves. Just like Expressionism, artists create projects to express emotion through abundant color and exaggerated figure rather than depicting objective things. We need to directly re-think the essence of our world without any appearances.



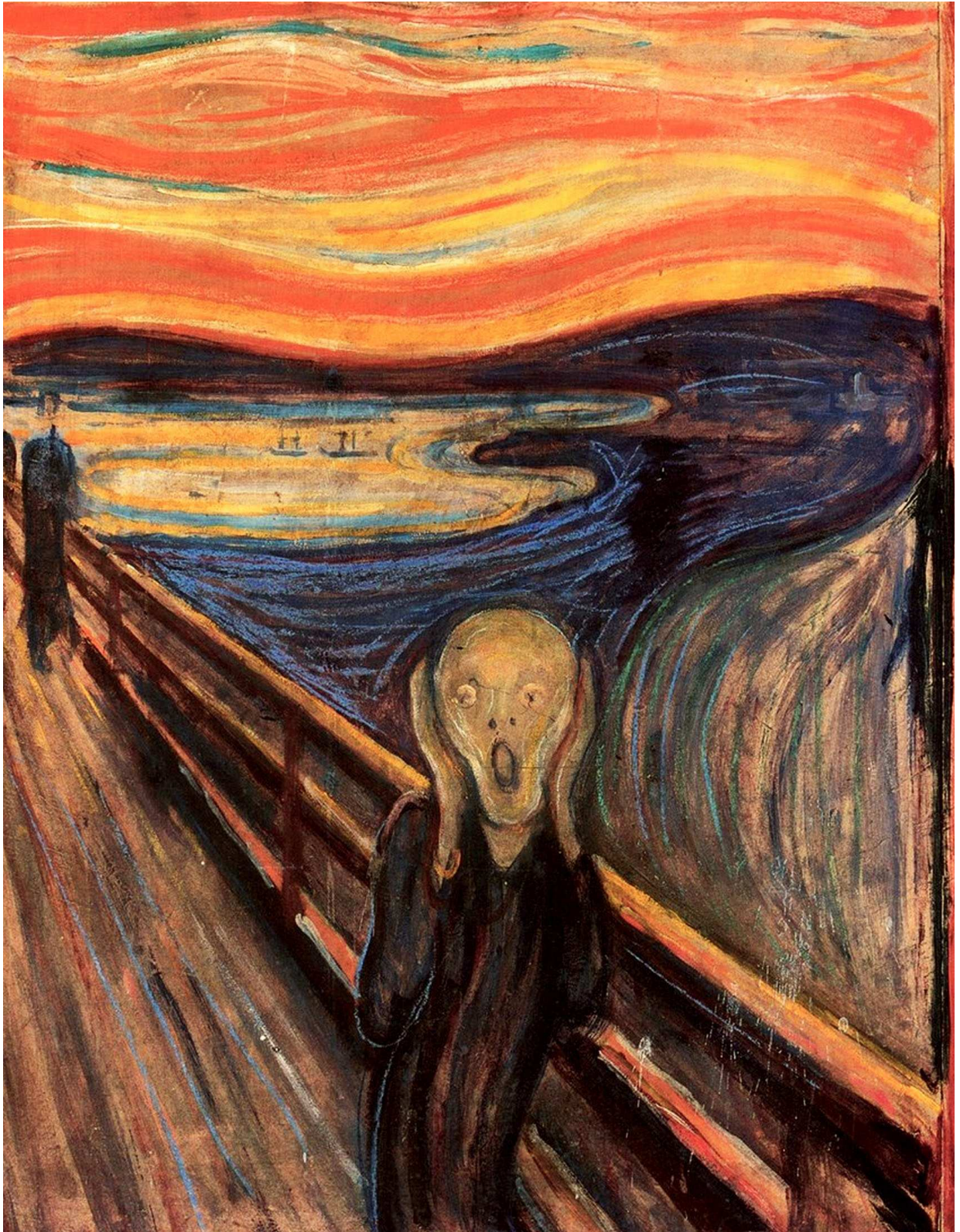
Expressionism

As a enthusiast dedicated to design, I wish my work can be able to awaken the discovering spirit of the general public for the essence of the world and themselves, spark their enthusiasm and inspiration or motivation to find back their inner world from the mundane standard life. My favorite designer Kenya Hara who is a household name, Japanese product and graphic designer contended that 'Design is not only to design a form or function, but also able to awaken people by some ways' in his exhibition 'Designing Design'. A couple of weeks ago, I discussed expressionism with my confidant who is a painter. In my mind, the definition of expressionism serves as a perfect match for my ideals. Expressionism is that artists focus on expressing their inner emotion and neglect depicting the form of objects. Therefore, it usually expresses as a distortion and abstraction for reality. Generally, expressionism means every type of art which can convey inner essence, the works of expressionism can avoid all disturbances from external factor and directly reflect the essence of our world and ourselves, the 'External factor' here seems like 'standard we made for ourselves' I established at the first paragraph, and expressionism just broke this 'standard' to prioritize the essence. As a consequence, the works concerning expressionism we know, especially for painting works, are featured by some generalities: vivid color, distorted form, unconcern of drawing skill, flat style, no perspective and base on emotion rather than intellect.



Edvard Munch
(1863-1944)

In 'Phaidon Encyclopedia of Expressionism', some great projects can be able to completely explain my thought. specifically, 'The Scream' is a very meritorious representative masterpiece during the period of expressionism, it was created by Edvard Munch (1863-1944) a towering representative artist of expressionism, he painted landscapes suffused with mysterious forces; men moulded by dark impulses; fear, hatred, jealousy, loneliness and death; paintings display increasingly pessimistic visions of the artist's own fate. In this painting, we are unable to find any details about the woman's face and the background, even can not speculate the gender of the figure, just because of this, we can feel the scared and sorrowful power which is extraordinarily strong. In my mind, the artist deliberately abstracted all the details, since these details would in some cases disturb us to feel and realize the essence of the scared moment.



The Scream
1893

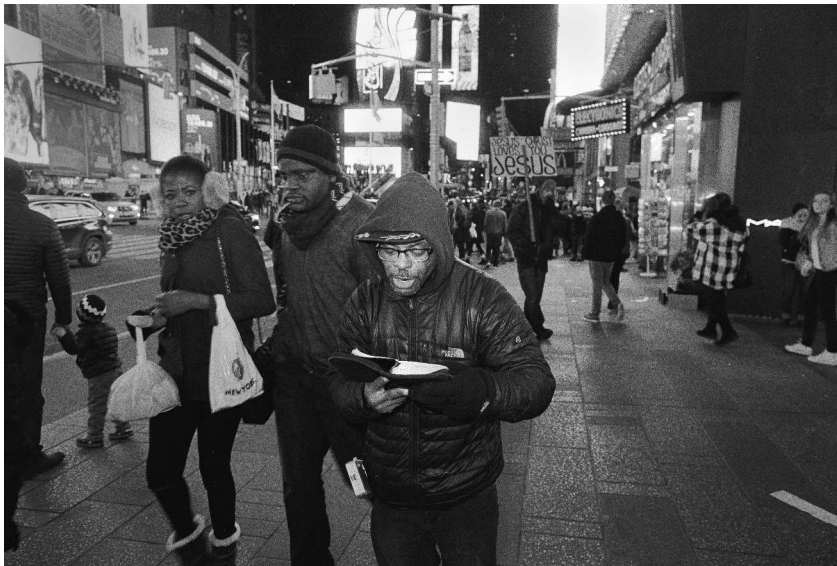


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In my photography project 'Choking City', I referenced Edvard's mode to create and clarify. This photography series is focused on observing vivid behaviors of city dwellers to discuss how the pressure and burden from metropolis. In the series, no color, no any representative objects of a big city such as skyscraper, light or street, the only object appears in my photos is people's behavior, we can imagine what the people's inner world is and what the city is through some particulars of their behavior, expression and background. We also can analyze whether their behavior hides or express their true emotion. In my photography project 'Choking City', I referenced Edvard's mode to create and clarify. This photography series is focused on observing vivid behaviors of city dwellers to discuss how the pressure and burden from metropolis. In the series, no color, no any representative objects of a big city such as skyscraper, light or street, the only object appears in my photos is people's behavior, we can imagine what the people's inner world is and what the city is through some particulars of their behavior, expression and background. We also can analyze whether their behavior hides or express their true emotion.







Egon Schiele
(1890-1918)

Another painting project is entitled Self-portrait which was created by Egon Schiele, although he died at only 28 years old, he left such an indelible mark for expressionism. The feature of his works is intense expression, his theme always highlights self-portrait and figure, most figures in his works are all the painful, helpless and confusing sufferers. Especially in this work, his strange posture tells us he is still a young man, but if we look at his sight, it shows an exceeding sense of helplessness and sorrow which is not typical for his age. Combined with his background, we can directly realize the disappointment thought of people for the future before the First World War.



Egon Schiele
1914

Self-portrait
1914



Egon employed his paintbrush to directly record his life and portray his thinking, as viewers, the only one way to comprehend his projects is that we have to enter and understand his life and background, otherwise, his works are too abstract to be comprehend. In furniture design, I hope furniture can be a tool as like as 'Egon's paintbrush' to preserve people's personal life. So I designed a series 'NOT YET' which includes a paper table and a paper notebook to portray user's normal life, I named the series as 'NOT YET' because they are actually unfinished, I hope users can join in the process of making furniture, make a piece of unique furniture. Table top is completely white, and users can write or draw down anything they want on the notebook, then they can tear these paper and stick them on the surface of table top. Only the users can understand these paper pieces' meanings, and the table can be a history, memory, schedule even secret book building a bridge with the users. So after the sticking process, the table is just like 'Egon's paintbrush' to record users' lives, nobody can interpret the meaning of the table except the user and someone who is familiar with user's life.



Abstract Expressionism

In my opinion, although expressionists strive to directly reflect the essence of our world and ourselves without any disturbances of external factor, they fail to completely avoid these disturbances. Because, they are still crystallizing everything's essence through portraying an objective scene or figure, although they have weakened all details, the influence from these objective scenes or figures must be existent. However, after The Second World War, the appearance of abstract expressionism revolutionized this scenario, because artists stop describing the external factor, and transform into directly reflecting the essence through using a completely abstract way. The purpose of abstract expressionism is not portraying concretization but depicting the essence of inner emotion, igniting people's imagination entirely through point, line, plane, color, form and composition.

It is universally acknowledged, somehow, an essence must be expressed by some patterns of manifestation, for example, the change of the sky color or the movement of the galaxy track are both the patterns of manifestation about the essence of time. Abstract expressionists create their work to only follow the steps of essence, and left us a huge space for imagining what the patterns of manifestation about this infinity and beyond are in our lives. As a result, the first thing we can feel in abstract expressionism works is the essence of something, then our imagination will bring the essence into our minds and make us think about how the essence appears and influences our lives.



Jackson Pollock
(1912-1956)

It could be evidenced by the instance that, in 'Abstract Expressionism - Themes and Movements' introduced the painting artist Jackson Pollock. His model of creation is completely different from previous style, he makes an efficient use of his behavior to create painting, through the disorderly lines and abundant colors, we can see the track of his dancing on the painting canvas. As we know, behavior is a pattern of manifestation about our inner world such as our emotion and memory, so painting by behavior can be able to record and express the change of Pollock's inner world. When we look at his work and combine with his background, we can feel what his emotion is when he was drawing (dancing). Then, because his work does not possess any objective forms, so we have a vast space to imagine how this emotion effects our lives, so for different people, even for the same people in different situation, the answer of the painting is completely divergent. However, the point is his work can make people directly understand the essence and rethink how the essence shapes our lives.

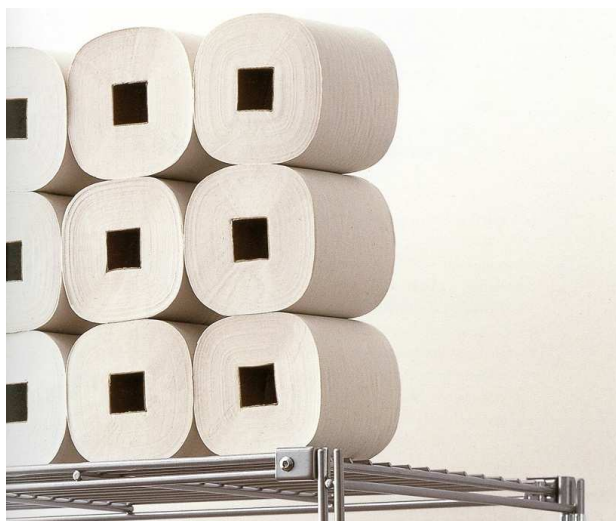


Enchanted
Forest
1947



Related Design Works

As my favorite designer, I continue to be inspired by Kenya Hara's works. Kenya Hara is a Japanese designer who emphasize the design of both objects and experiences. His works always focus on how to awaken people's inner world. In his exhibition 'designing design 2011', he displayed a project which is very relational with my thesis concept. It is a roll toilet paper.



The roll toilet paper

It seems like a normal roll toilet paper, but the center is not a cycle but a square. So when users hang it on a wall, and try to pull the paper out, the paper's each edge is going to touch the wall, and gives users a weak resistance, which relates to the idea of waste. In my viewpoint, it is really a smart design, he just changed the product a little, but changed our mindset a lot, awakened people consciousness about deforestation problem and environmental contamination problem through a very simple and small adjustment.



Personal Works

Our inner world is very complex, innumerable emotions such as sadness, happiness or indignation, the memories even the imaginations, belong to our inner world. However, no matter how complicated it is, it has only one way to express its essence, the way is 'Behavior'. That's just like that we can observe the change of sky color to speculate time, we can also and we can only realize the variation of our inner world through delving the change of our behaviors. In general, our behavior should be divided into two aspects, one is the body behavior, such as body movement and facial expression, the other is the voice behavior, such as language and shout. Consequently, every essence needs a or some mediums to express, behavior is the exclusive medium to express our inner world. If a design project can make us realize our inner world more easily, it must possess a function which is able to reflect and enlarge our behavior. To achieve this purpose, I have created a couple of design projects to practice. I will introduce two projects I already made to explain my concept more specifically.



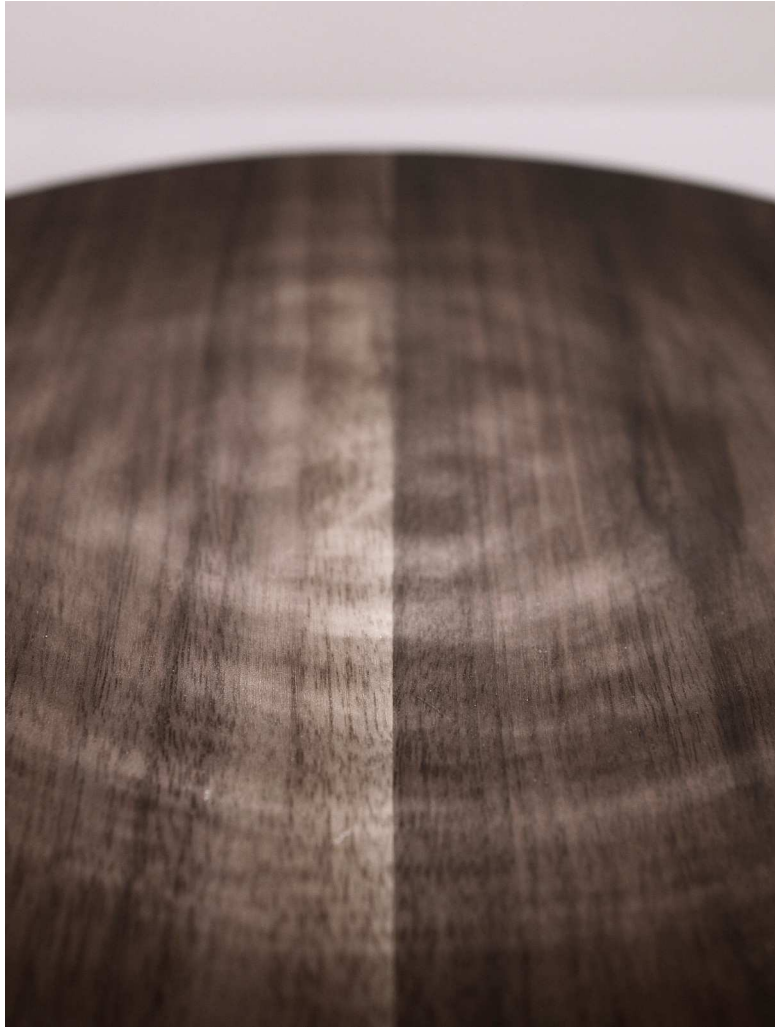
Balance stool

Balance stool actually involves 4 single 'stool', but only one side of each single stool has leg, as a result, the unique method about how to use the whole stool is that, 4 single stool should be jointed with each other one by one. Otherwise, the whole stool will be not balance and can not work if it loses any component. That's why I named it as 'Balance stool'.

The balance stool is such an introduction about my thesis, because my thesis is analyzing how to make people re-think their inner world as much as possible, and their different behaviors reflect their whole inner world, so behavior and inner world have a balanced relationship, just like the stool, the inner world is not intact if any behavior loses. On the other hand, the leg of each single stool is movable, users are able to choose any leg they like, in this regard each stool represents users' different personality and the whole stool means their whole inner world.







Water rippler lamp

'Variable' and 'visual' are the concept of the lamp, I tried to transfer people behavior into perceivable variations in this lamp. It is worth noting that, our inner world is not only intricate, but also exquisite. Most time, it leads to that our behavior changes too imperceptibly. For example, when you are doing something challenging, then you gradually lose your patience, your voice starts to become loud and your behavior starts to become uncourteous. However, because these changes has long process, and as a part of these changes, you can not easily realize them, but colleagues around you are able to feel the change of your behavior. As a result, I tried to seek a material which can be easily changed by people behavior, and I think water is the best one, it is very sensitive, even an impalpable movement can ripple its shape. So water is able to enlarge our behavior to be variable by the change of its shape.

The lamp is equipped with a water culture dish under the bulb, so the bulb seems like a spotlight which can depict the shape of water on the surface of bottom below. The water rippler is completely 'sincere', our every motion can change it in different dimensions. When we touch the lamp softly, the water ripple will move very weak, when we knock it strongly, the ripple will move very fiercely. And if we knock the table or walk on floor, it could also change the water ripple to diversified shapes. So the water rippler can directly and sincerely transfer and enlarge our behavior to be variable, we can witness our behavior change through observing the water ripple. Furthermore, after realizing the change of behavior, understanding our inner world is going to be very seamless.







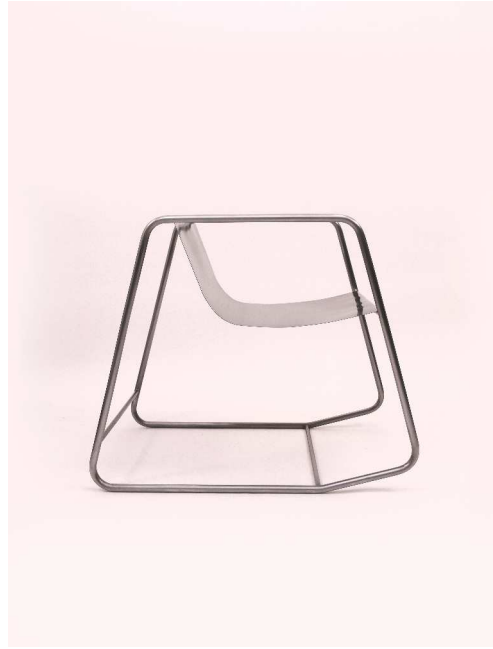
Behavior chair

'Sensible' is the central word for this chair. In our life, we always formulate a considerable number of standards to define whether a behavior is acceptable. For example, when I was a young boy, I always unconsciously incline my chair to my front for the sake of convenience, but in this situation, only the front two legs of the my chair touch the ground, my mom always tells me, this is not an appropriate behavior, it is too dangerous, don't do that any more. However, until now, I still think this behavior is much better than other ways for my study, so I think it is time to reconsider the standard for our behavior.

After observing and thinking my behavior, I discovered that when I sit on a chair to relax such as watching movie or just meditating, my center of gravity is usually at the rear side of the chair, but if I'm studying such as writing paper or reading book, my barycenter is usually shifted to the front part of the chair, so that's why I prefer to incline the chair to forward when studying.

Bear that in mind I designed two usages for the new chair. One is relaxing usage, and the other is studying usage. When you try to relax on the chair, you just need to move your barycenter to rear side, the chair will automatically change to flat to fit for your relaxing behavior, if you move your body forward to study, the chair will also automatically change the angle to fit for your studying behavior. For users' safety, both usages would witness that, the chair always has a enough surface to touch the ground, it will guarantee the safety. And on the other hand, the angle curve on the leg I warped is very clear, because I hope that when you use it, the clear angle change can precisely make you feel the change of the usage and also realize the change of your behavior, once you know you will enter the studying behavior, you will assuredly pay more attention to it.

A normal chair can not make you easily feel the difference between your behaviors, but the 'behavior chair' can do it. It is kind of like the water ripple lamp, being able to enlarge the change of your behaviors.





Reference Books

'Phaidon Encyclopedia of Expressionism'

'Abstract Expressionism - Themes and Movements'

Thesis Advisors

Patricia Johnson

Chris Rose

Ben Blanc

Zihan Zhang



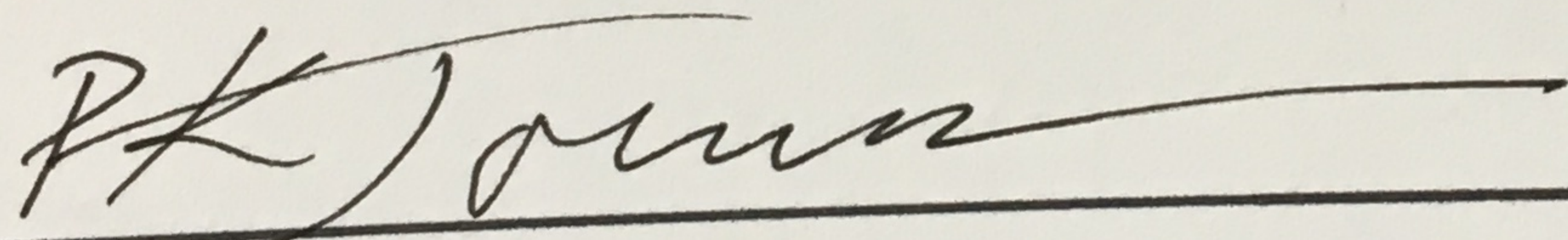
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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Furniture Design Department of the Rhode Island School of Design.

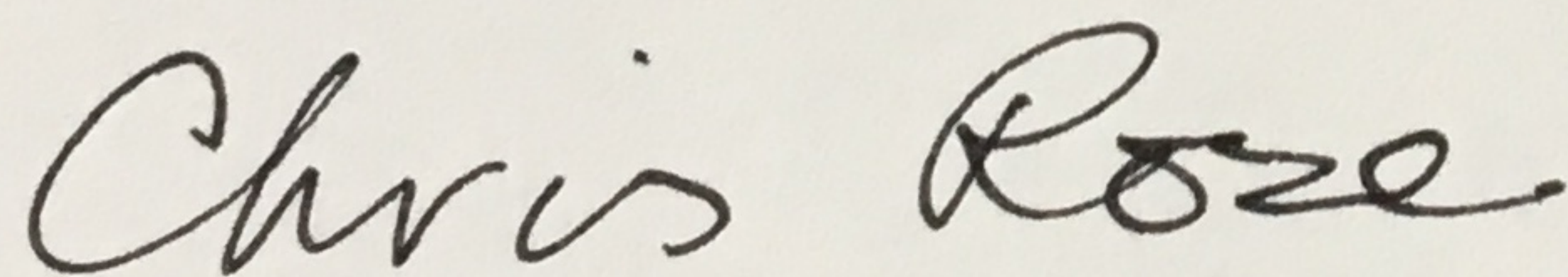
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Zihan Zhang
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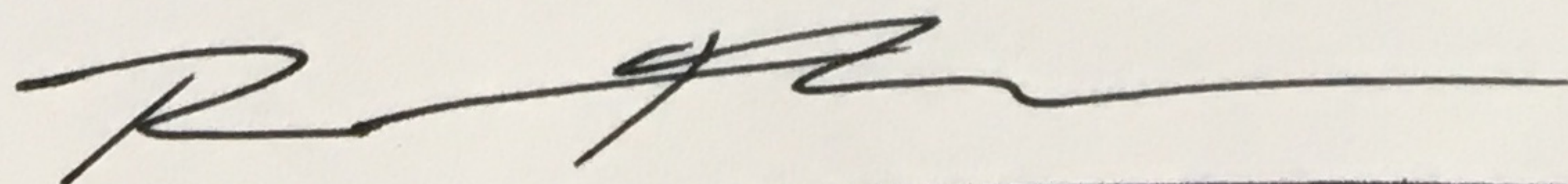
Approved by Master's Examination Committee:



Patricia Johnson, Department of Furniture Design, Thesis Chair.



Chris Rose, Department of Furniture Design, Thesis Advisor



Benjamin Blanc, Department of Furniture Design, Thesis Advisor