

Distance

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Place



Distance Is A Place

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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the Jewelry + Metalsmithing in the Department of Jewelry + Metalsmithing of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

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Abstract

Distance is a Place documents a body of work and a process — a journey in translation, where a quality of feeling becomes an effort of physical capture in jewelry.

The desire to reveal how a deep responsiveness to the atmospheric distance of the sky is associated with an innermost nonverbal place of refuge motivates me to make perceptible this awareness for contemplation. Incorporating photographic images of the immeasurable dimensions of sky within translucent resin, a spatial distance collapses into wearable, tangible stillness to be worn on the body as an eternal present.

Perception is our absolute proximity to things and, at the same time, our irremediable distance from them.¹

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Introduction

I used to be trapped in the limbo of wearability, the fragment of the vulnerable boundary in contemporary jewelry. Some jewelry does not have a chance to be worn, so what does this mean for the life of this object? What lies in the essence of wearing a piece of jewelry? What do we expect from it? And, how it is meaningful in my work? In proximity to things, I cannot help to ask what kind of intimate relationship do I care to pursue? This is where my thesis making begins—of human and object, the power dynamic of the “in-between”.

Being a foreigner in another country and experiencing a physical distance to my hometown, has directed my gaze towards the sky, an affective topophilia—an immense and inclusive place. My making becomes a reverie, contemplating its grandeur. I reify the singular moment of gazing into the physical object in the immediate world as a continuous extension of my vision. My work describes both the temporal and spatial dimension of the skyward space. By capturing the transient moment into a permanent object and defining its boundary through being worn, a new ground emerges and a transcendental conversation begins.

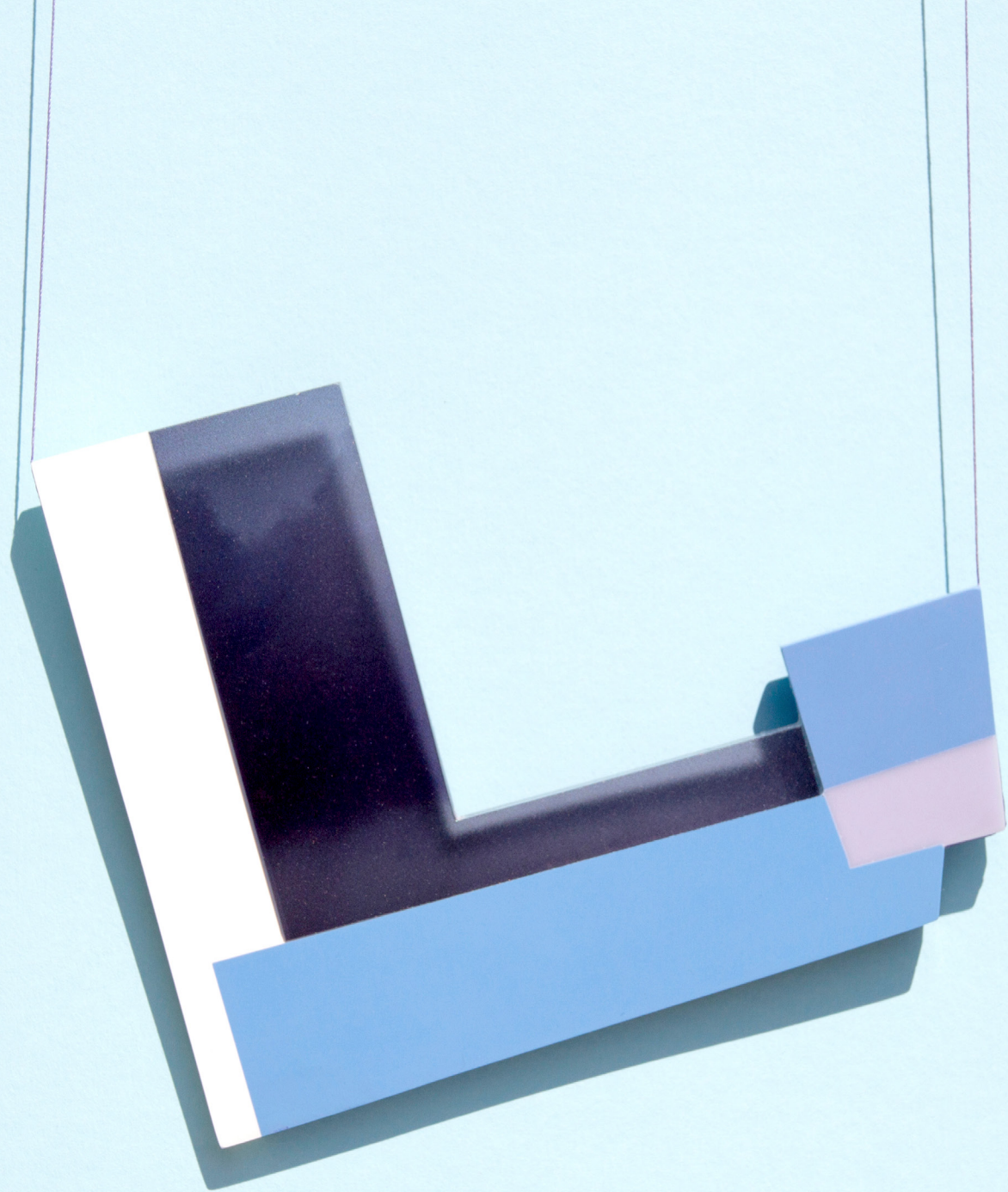
Unable to perceive the shape of you.
I find you all around me.
Your presence fills my eyes with your love.
It humbles my heart.
For you are everywhere.²

— Hakim Sanai

To be with *you*,
I become an abstract perceiver.

Called

An Abstract Perceiver



Topophilia and Distance

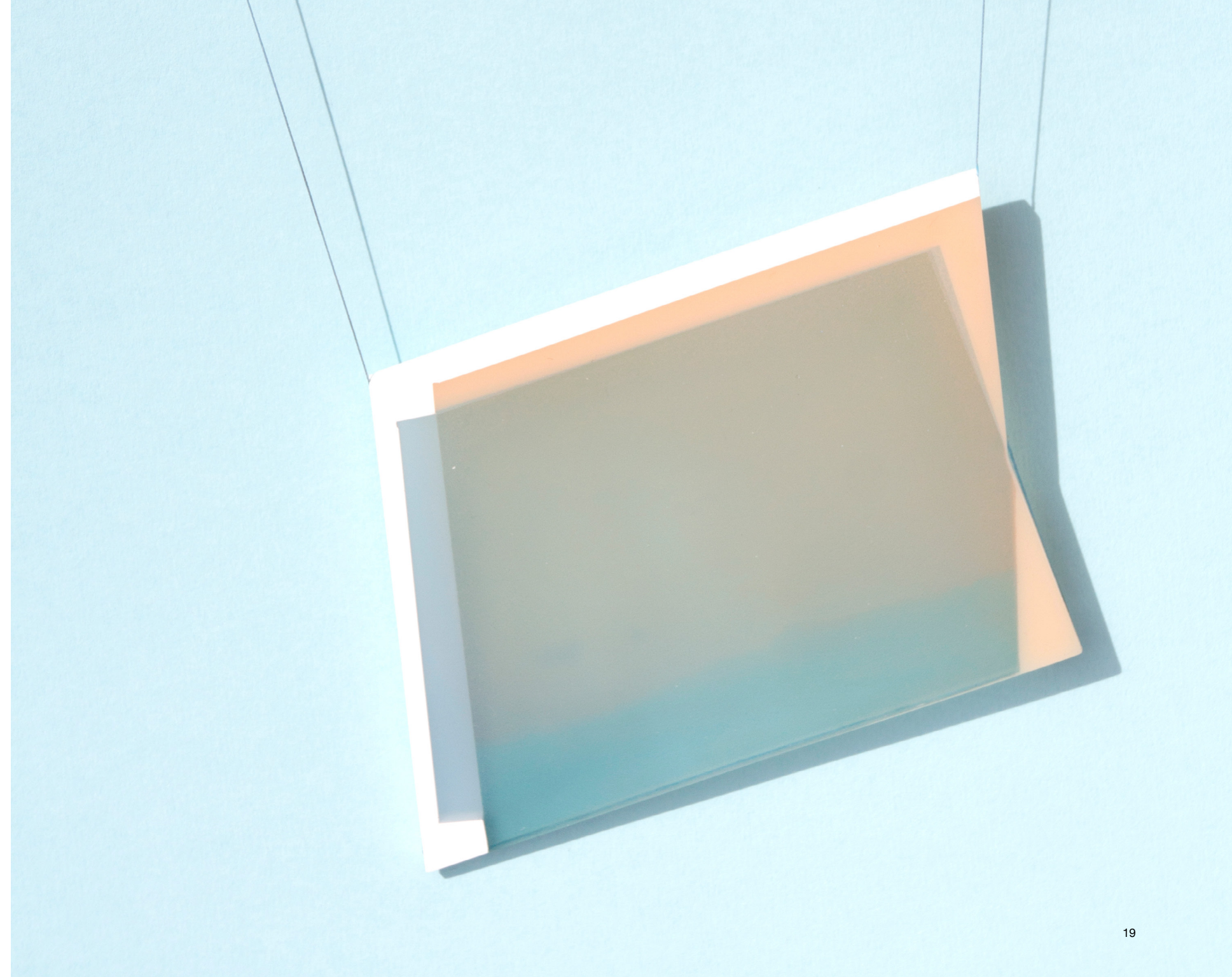
Within the without, I am situated as a topophile shifting back and forth from the familiar unknown seeking a true ground for myself. This true ground generates a renewed condition for seeing and an urgency to treasure the present.

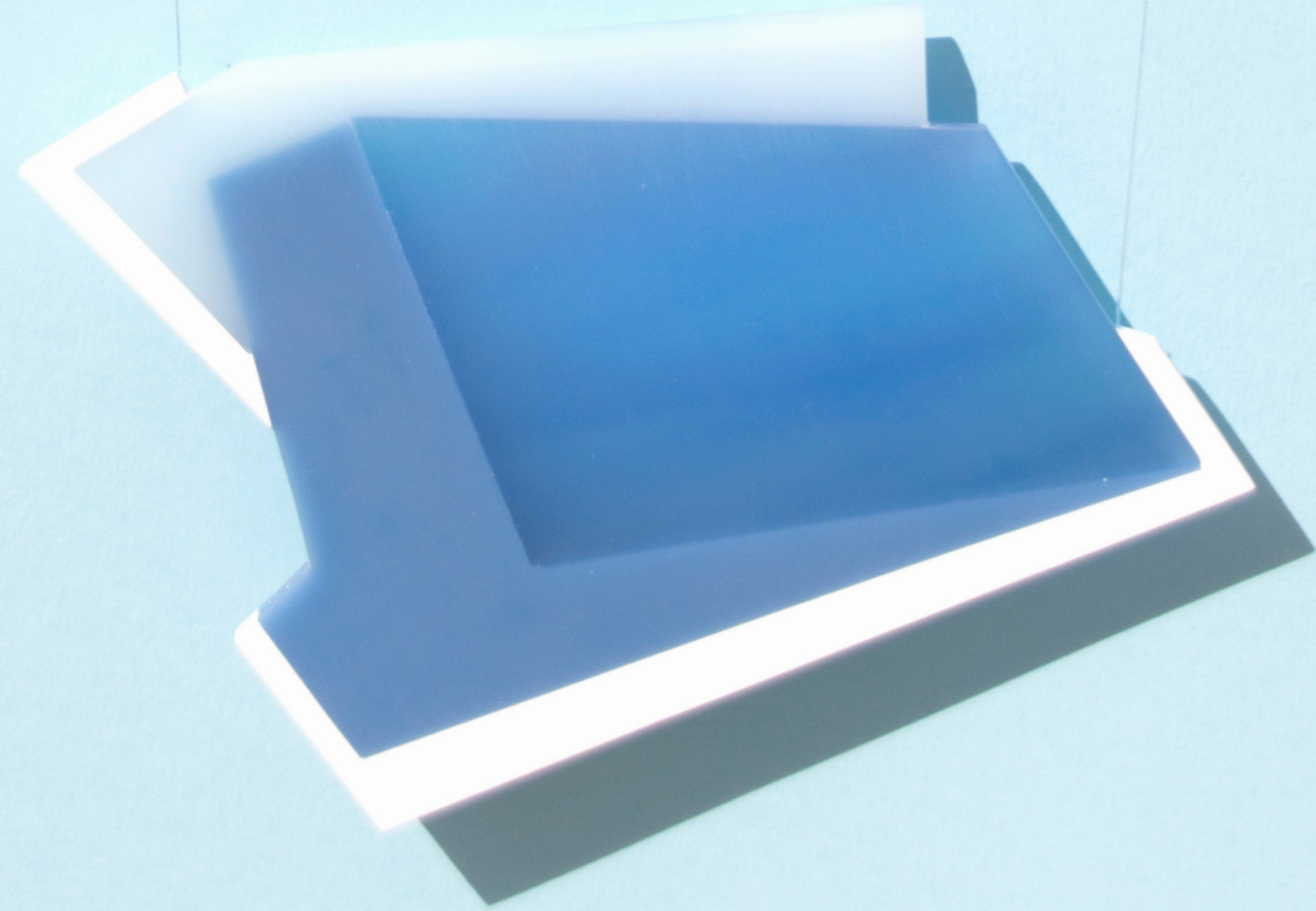
From Greek τόπος (topos) meaning place, and φιλία (philia) meaning love, motivated by the love of a place – the interwar suburbs of England, the British poet John Betjeman invented the word topophilia in 1947. Twenty-seven years later, Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan expanded this term. In a way to bridge the feeling-link between person and place as part of his development of the humanistic geography. He contextualizes between geographical activities, phenomenological awareness and human experience in its ambiguity, ambivalence, and complexity.² I resonate with Tuan's motivation. For me, Topophilia is an invisible channel that penetrates the space between cultural identity and affective expression, between my abstract emotion and physical practice as a maker, between my current physical setting and home. It is an invisible bridge between myself and immeasurable vastness - the sky. The hemispheric distance that I cannot stride across elevates my sky-gazing. The sky as a universal home welcomes and embraces every independent individual. I carry a sense of longing and project my subjective interior into this boundlessness. As a perceiver, the sky abstracts and incarnates into a transcendent portal, and as time goes by, this transcendence shortens the distance psychologically. The physical distance surrounding me and the outer world forms a space. It is the in-between space of this visual field that is captured by my sight and perception.

Suspended walking, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread

I express my personal topophilia through the lens of contemporary jewelry, which is a more subjective and open format that allows for a personal narrative to a heterogeneous space.³ This state of becoming activates my body, and the body's feedback stabilizes what I see as if the body is a carrier of this message. I see, and I am conditioned by what I see. Topophilia as an affective tie which energizes the power of this paradox condition. I align with Umberto Eco's thoughts on this matter, "The contradiction which we feel exists between the world's reality and its incompetence is identical to the one that exists between the ubiquity of consciousness and its commitment to a field of presence."³ Between consciousness and presence, I explore to describe what the transcendental interior space of my sky looks like. It is a liminal space cast by a transparent internal shadow. This space formed by the physical and mental distance merging the ambiguous boundary between my subjective emotional boundary and the object upward space boundary. I am the witness behind this intangible veil.

Breathing mist, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread





Proximity and Structure

I approach space through my roles as a perceiver and a maker. The proximity inherent to the format of jewelry forms a silent language between body and object, body and audience. This intimate experience in jewelry occurs between the different perspectives of the wearer, audience, and maker. The action of wearing a piece of jewelry happens in an intimate sphere, mostly the distant phase of the intimate distance, which Hall defines from six to eighteen inches.⁵ The intimate nature of jewelry requires a clue to vision, a subtle experience. But it also deeply brings back a primary human intimacy that feels like one inside of another without a word.

As a way of attaching and connecting, jewelry is a mediator of physical contact, and also measures a distance and defines the balance between relationships, from the inanimate object to the lived body. My desire to be understood intuitively lead me to restore and construct scenes in my mind over and over again. I was called by a slight shimmer between the light and darkness, like an intimate signal appears on my bedrooms window. As American architect Louis Kahn says, “Light is the measurable, the giver of presence. Between Silence and Light is a threshold over which movement takes place from one to the other. The language of this threshold, called Treasury of Shadow, which is art.”⁶ Light defines our visual space. Shadow hides us from visual space and can give us a sense of longing for the light. The sky is the source of light. In my artistic practice, the dynamic space between the light and shadow is the place to which I am called. Within this place, I am not just a beholder, outside of this threshold, but rather a participant in encountering and translating the shape of my mind. I realize I transfer my role as an inward maker to the outer world. I see through the frame, the shape of reflection. On the way our gaze reached its destination. Our vision has already been shaped on its way. I translate this process through the layering of shifting structure. The structure of space mediates the distant vastness and my intimate making process. This may be a practice without end, always perceiving in the shifting moment. Making is an act of capturing the unspoken in-between space helps me start my exploratory traveling. I stand on our “so-called” ground and look up the sky. It is an enchanted void, another ground. I float on its softness.

Shifting blue, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread

Touched

The Familiar Unknown

“You never enjoy the world alright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with stars.”

—Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditations, 1908

I am a space traveler, and time is my trajectory. I go back and forth trying to grab something from the always-shifting space before and beyond me. Yet on my way back, everything starts to diminish. I need to find a true ground for my impressions and describe this overlay of experience in my work. How can I translate that space and visualize an intangible experience through a physical object? Specifically rely on photography to frame these transient encounters and to mediate between the physical and intangible. Photography is an interruption of time, a freeze frame of the moment. Once captured through the lens, an image becomes fixed, permanent — a hold onto the evanescent illusion.

One day, a phenomenon attracted me. Through the mediation of light and the reflection cast by a translucent glass window, the outer physical partly-clouded blue sky created an overlay with indoor seascape of a photographic print. A piece of cloud perfectly settled onto the printed sea, and with this perspective, the two proportionally distorted compressing into one another. From this image, heaven met earth; reality met the virtual through an in-between transparent plane. I am drawn into this placeless place that is created by the medium of the in-between. The image can shorten the distance and let the impossibility of these two worlds encounter each other.

Intimate Encountering

My skyward archives help me build an apprenticeship to the sky's inclusive openness seeking the power of being a part of the vastness. My physical setting is a contained witness to how the sky facade dims the earthly theatre to night and lights it up to continue to a new day. Like James Turrell's installation Meeting, it is a chamber and a meditative space of witnessing the shifting sky, from dawn to dusk. I still remember the first time I was in this installation. It was such an immersive space that I felt so close to the sky. Also, because the space is closed only with an aperture in the ceiling, can I be open to the sky. The opening framed my vision, offering an unprecedented intimacy with this boundless immensity. The familiarity of this universal field makes me feel like I am looking at the sky in my hometown. The simple act of witnessing the sky reveals how we internally create seeing and thus, our perceived reality. I cannot help to ask how could jewelry also intrigue this kind of immersive feeling of being in a space and surrounding by it in such a refining scale? A feeling between the physical and the metaphysical. And how do I visualize these singular evanescent moments by the tangible and touchable material through the canon of the psyche? As Bachelard addressed in his book The Poetics of Space,

Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being with that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.”⁷

-Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space

Translucency and Becoming

Translucency is an important quality of the sky, and also, the different density of transparency forms a different relationship in between. Bachelard believes that the invention of structure results in the transparency through which we need to view the world. I explore transparency in my work. It offers a membrane through which the visible and invisible touch one another the seen and the unseen - suspending our sight in a between the layer of vision. It has both a veiled and muted quality, with a loss of contrast. As a material, transparent resin has the capacity to view through to the physicality of the object. Through my pieces, I build different densities of transparency through layering and tinting to provide a physical volume and a depth of breath. The variation of visibility holds the tension to transform the imagery through its dimension, similar to the feeling of breathing.

In *The Fallen Sky I*, the blue void intervenes with the continuity of a partly cloudy sky. The void performs as a suspending silence between the physical and the psychic, offering an interval of contemplation. I see my work as an index of an aggregating state, a place of belonging. When the work inhabits the body, it touches back. The connected point figuratively penetrates the surface of the flesh, unfolding an illusory portal for the body to approach its own subjectivity, and to dive into the sublime. This medial state arises between the transcendent lived body and the object itself. When one connects, *The Fallen Sky* elevates one's focal point towards a distant paradise. At the same time, the work situates itself as a beholder in a translucent layer of refining space. A space within the space. It flows and invites mental closeness in reciprocal action.

In transition, 2018
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread





Unfolding pause, 2018
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread

Imagery and Infinite Reverie

Photographic jewelry can be traced back to the Victorian era. It is the first time that photography, in the format of jewelry, was worn. This locket pendant lies a portrait of the Prince Albert, on one side of the interior, in the form a circular tintype behind glass. On the other side, also behind glass, is a small clipping of human hair. (fig.3) The starting point of the photographic locket in the nineteenth century becomes a popular commercial product. In the *Scientific American* of 1865 the writer concludes, an owner can have with him always, in this elegant locket, the faces of his dear kindred an friends. For me, when a photography comes into a portable format, it began to build a deeper intimacy directly to the person who wears it. An intimate resonance generates that go beyond the format of jewelry itself. This is also what I pursue as a contemporary jeweler, a contemporary making. It is a calling of the authentic intimacy inspired after I touched by this photographic locket.

My goal of using photographic sky imagery is to create a space for the audience and give a space to go beyond. The imagery as an index of a serendipitous moment becomes a physical compositional presence. I reference the vastness in my work and meanwhile, zoom in and frame this vast space close to our physical body in a wearable and portable format. In this way, I create an intimacy through the tension of focal point from far to near. As Elizabeth Grosz says in *The Volatile Body*, “An image, traditionally, has three characteristics: it presents a manifold field or set of events in terms of simultaneity (it is the only non-temporal or synchronous sense); it functions at a distance, setting up a space or field between the seer and seen, the physical and the psychical; and it does not imply or presume causality (because the other senses are momentary and occasioned by events, vision is ongoing and needs not to be focused on or caused by any object).”⁸

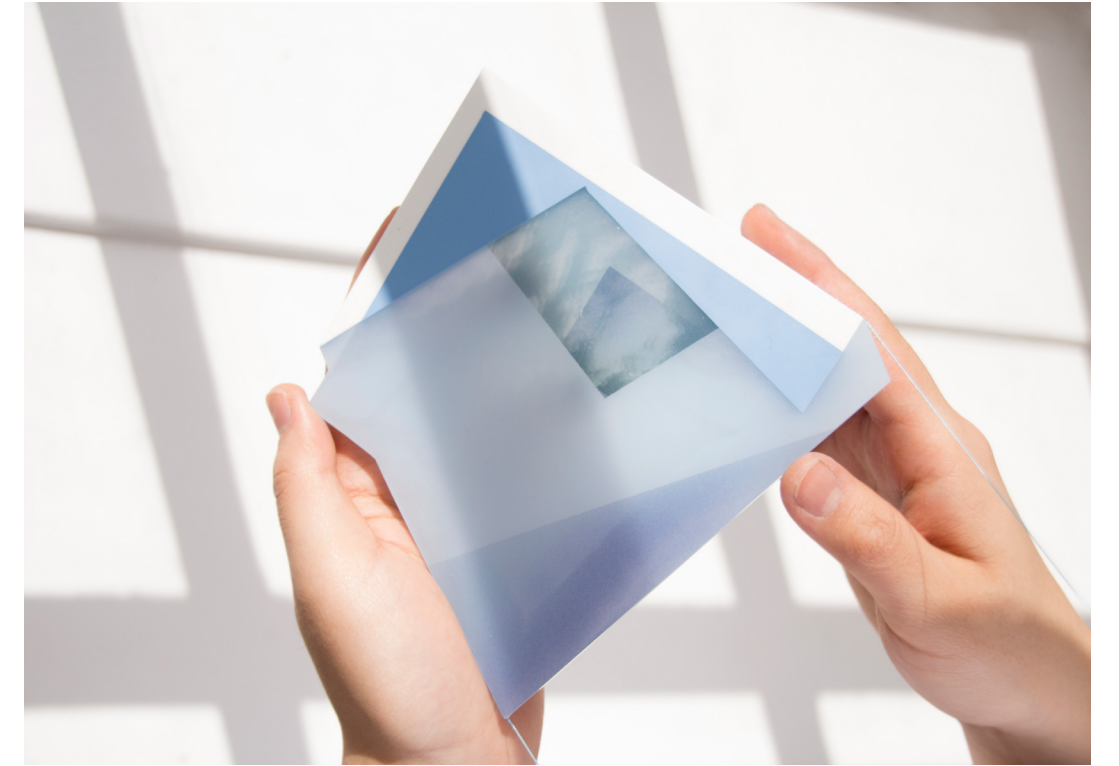
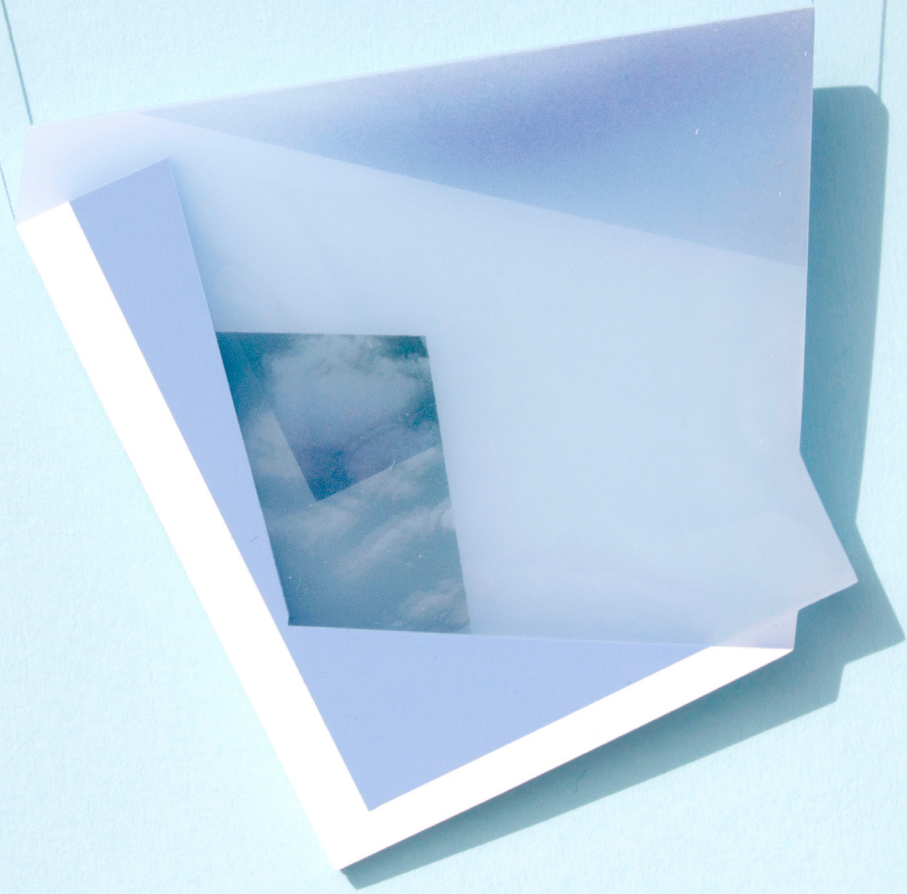




The sky is a familiar place. It is universally familiar. With my digital camera, often set with long exposure, I regularly photograph and document the sky. With a focus on the color of the sky and the texture of clouds, I build an archive of this shifting field. The concrete layering of multiple exposures into a single surface develops the depth to the moment of encounter. When these images are post-processed, actions such as cutting, cropping, integrating, and ordering informs the object image and its construction. With the image composite, a new narrative emerges which affirms my affinity and existence within this vastness. This movement from boundless reality to an inscribed boundary brings forth a specificity of location. To render an infinite, I firstly define the finite, which is the specific geometrical field, the color and different densities of transparency to then come into conversation with the body. Visually, and when worn, the works serve as a type of portal, connecting the singular with the immeasurable. The work is a middle space in the contradiction. The process of making an object is a way of seeking my self-objectification. Through the brilliance of photography, every singular moment in the passing time resounds with echoes. I aim to make permanent my reverie for the poetic sky as a phenomenology for the soul. In itself, reverie constitutes a psychic condition.

Carried

A Humanistic Gift



Blue echoes, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread

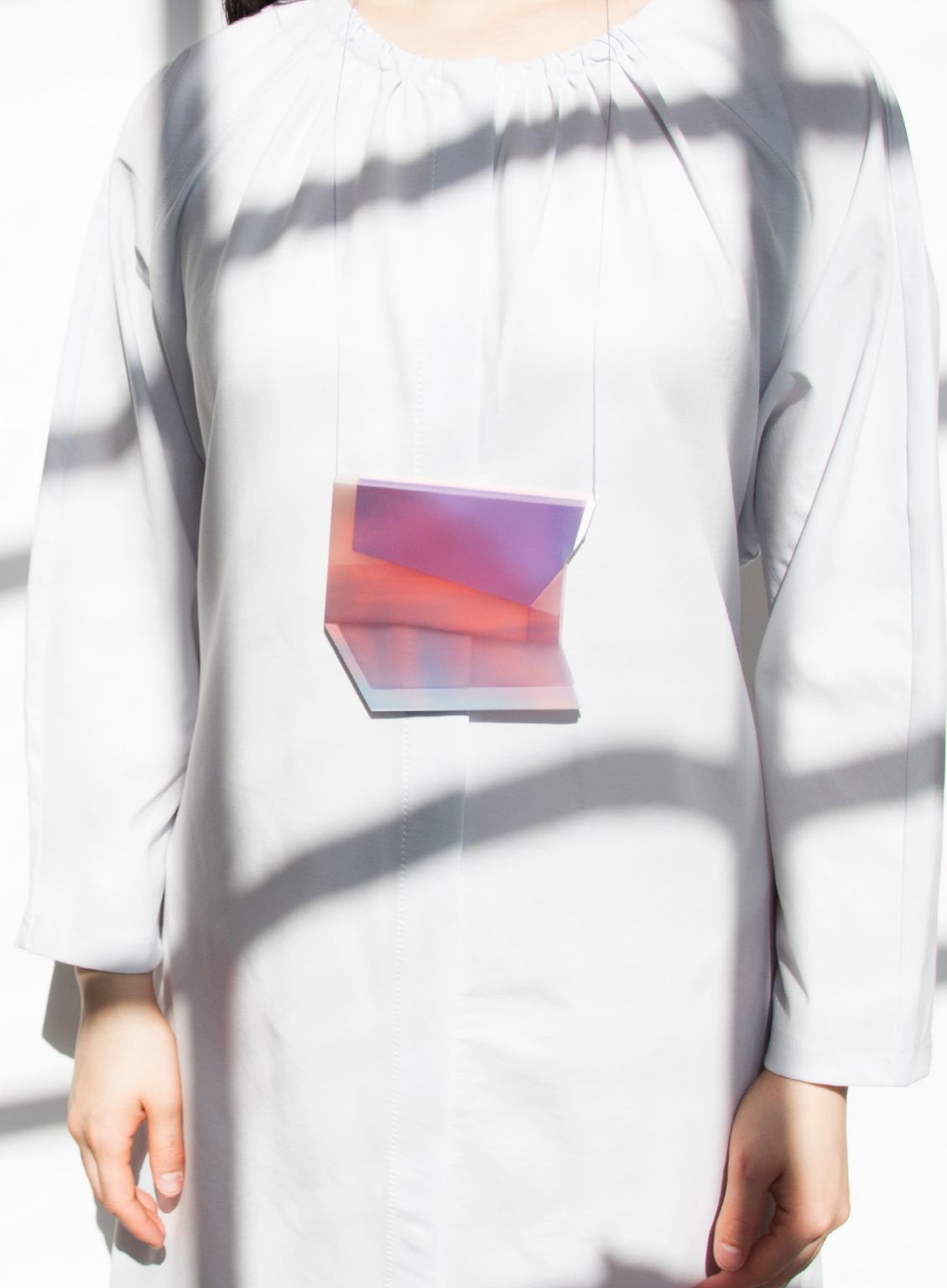
Reciprocal Balance

No matter what method I learn and what knowledge system I build for myself, I still practice thinking and seeing in a way as an unlearning process of seeing and perceiving. It is like when a child looks up at the sky and points to a cloud, describing what it looks like to her mother. I look into the depth of the sky, seeing the blue sky through a layer of clouds, and am drawn deeper and deeper. I appreciate beauty. I search for beauty. Jewelry is always inseparable with beauty. In contemporary jewelry especially in contemporary jewelry, beauty seems like a taboo to show to express. But there is nothing wrong with beauty itself and the desire to search for beauty. But how to use beauty and the aim to use it is matter. The beauty I pursue is beyond the eye-catching beautiful quality. In my jewelry, I capture the shifted eternal beauty and reconstruct through my vision and authentic response to search inner beauty. I would not call the wearing of my jewelry beautifying, but a way of purifying then being in a peaceful self-learning condition.

As time passes by, I see a place in the interior of myself, the actual place my soul lives. The result may be highly subjective, but it is a way to balance the outer objectivity and inner subjectivity through the in-and-out, back-and-forth reverie process. For me, this is an inner balancing to retrieve a pure way of looking that protects my authentic feeling. The authenticity of perceiving and translating is a promise in my creative process, and also a practice to respect myself and my audience. Through my own language of the structure of flatness, and the depth of the imagery my work requires a deep perceiving through stillness.

Unbounded daydream, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread





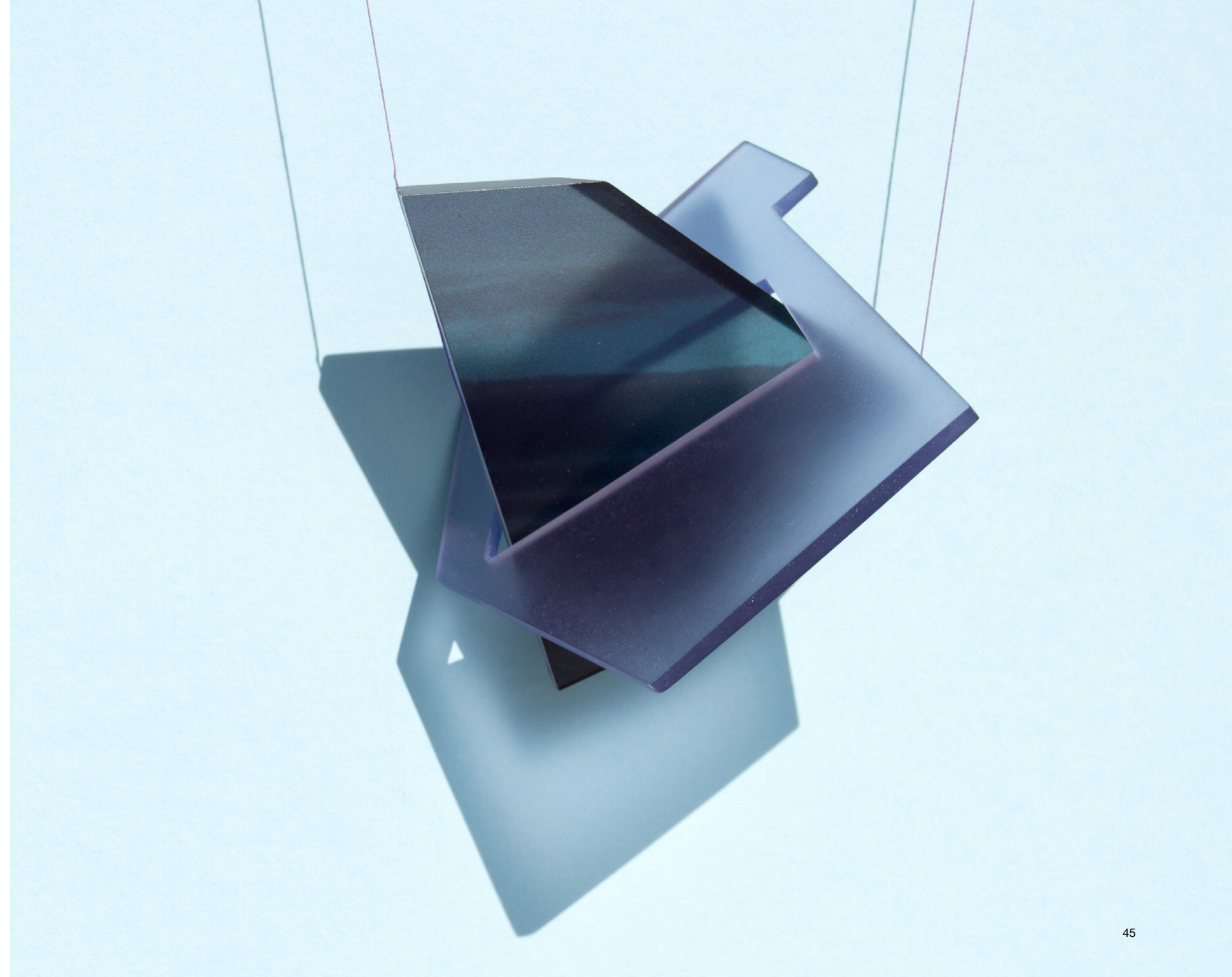
When a piece of jewelry is worn, this inanimate object comes close to the flesh. The connection point lands on a plane, the surface of the flesh. It is still not close to the body subject, but this landing creates an invisible portal for the body entering its own subject — a sublime launch into other space. It might be a space with desire, memory or simple delight, or total illusion. The openness of the space is a meditative state that the mental closeness generates between the transcendent lived body and the object itself. In the contexts of interaction and exchange, people may simultaneously present or objectify themselves to themselves and be surprised by the result (Strathern 1991).⁹ Their self-objectification can thus be revelatory. Through the wearer's efforts of deep mental connection and understanding, once the self-objectification meets the mindset contained inside the object, the wearer and the object get close to one other generating the intimacy possible of the soul. The efforts began from the maker, but also requires the wearer to delve beyond the eye-catching surface.

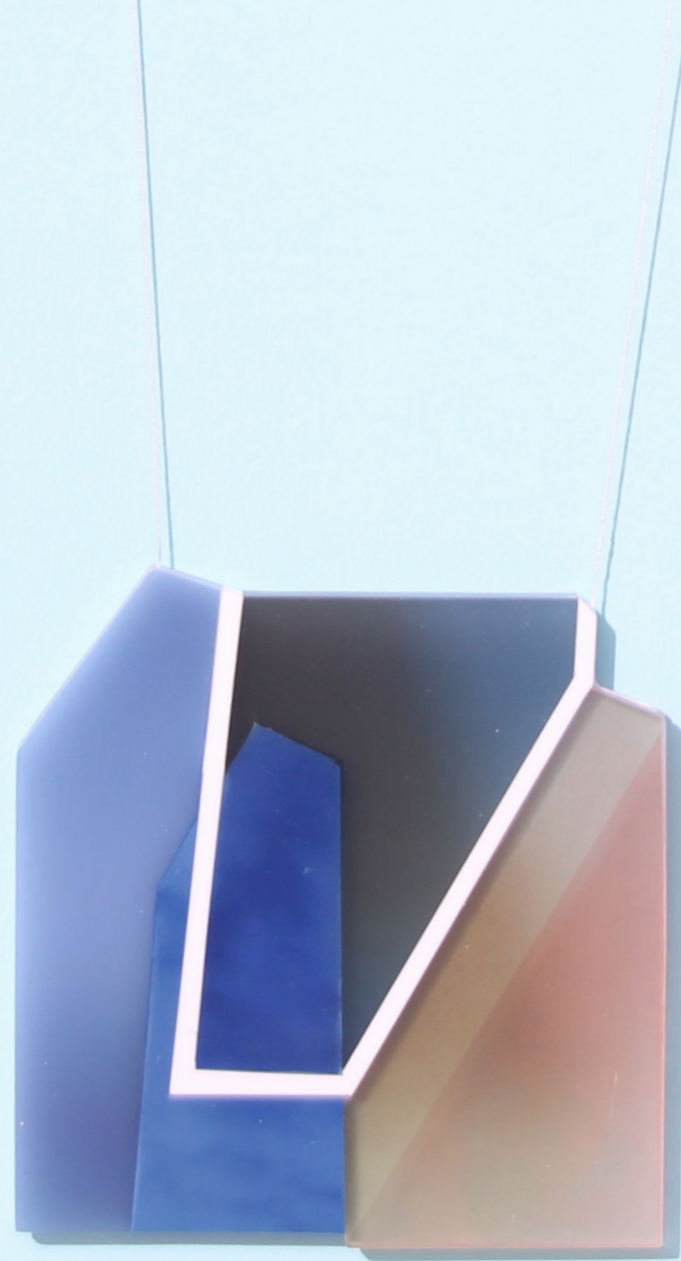
Jewelry is a token of identity and inherently tied to the body. When a piece of jewelry is touched or worn, it is physically close to the body. At the same time, it creates a distance with the outer world. This reversibility allows the transparency a spatial concreteness of two faces: the inner and the outer, to see and be seen. It is seen by the outer audience and opens up the space of imagination through the surface. Jewelry is inevitably present to the outer surroundings and another human interaction. The original body activates the mute conversation since the moment of wearing. With the natural gravity of the necklace, my works bring a sense of awareness of presence, a suspension of reality in mid-air. As the body moves, it moves far and near. The conversation conveys through the commentary of the format and also how the format melds with the personality of the wearer. The maker fades away, the work can occupy a life on its own, and the audience engages. This reciprocal in-between dynamic helps publish and object to the outer world and make its objecthood complete.

Rosy impression, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread

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Floating chamber, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread





A Portable Place

The transitional Persian garden was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world. From Michel Foucault's *Of Other Space*, the carpets were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space). The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity. The portable places I created use the sky as an opening source for inner meditating and imagination, as a transitional medium to capture moments of beauty to bring me to my deeper mind. The place I create is a hybrid of the current physical present and the mind present. It is an intimate coincide that juxtapose in a single real place several spaces that are in themselves incompatible.

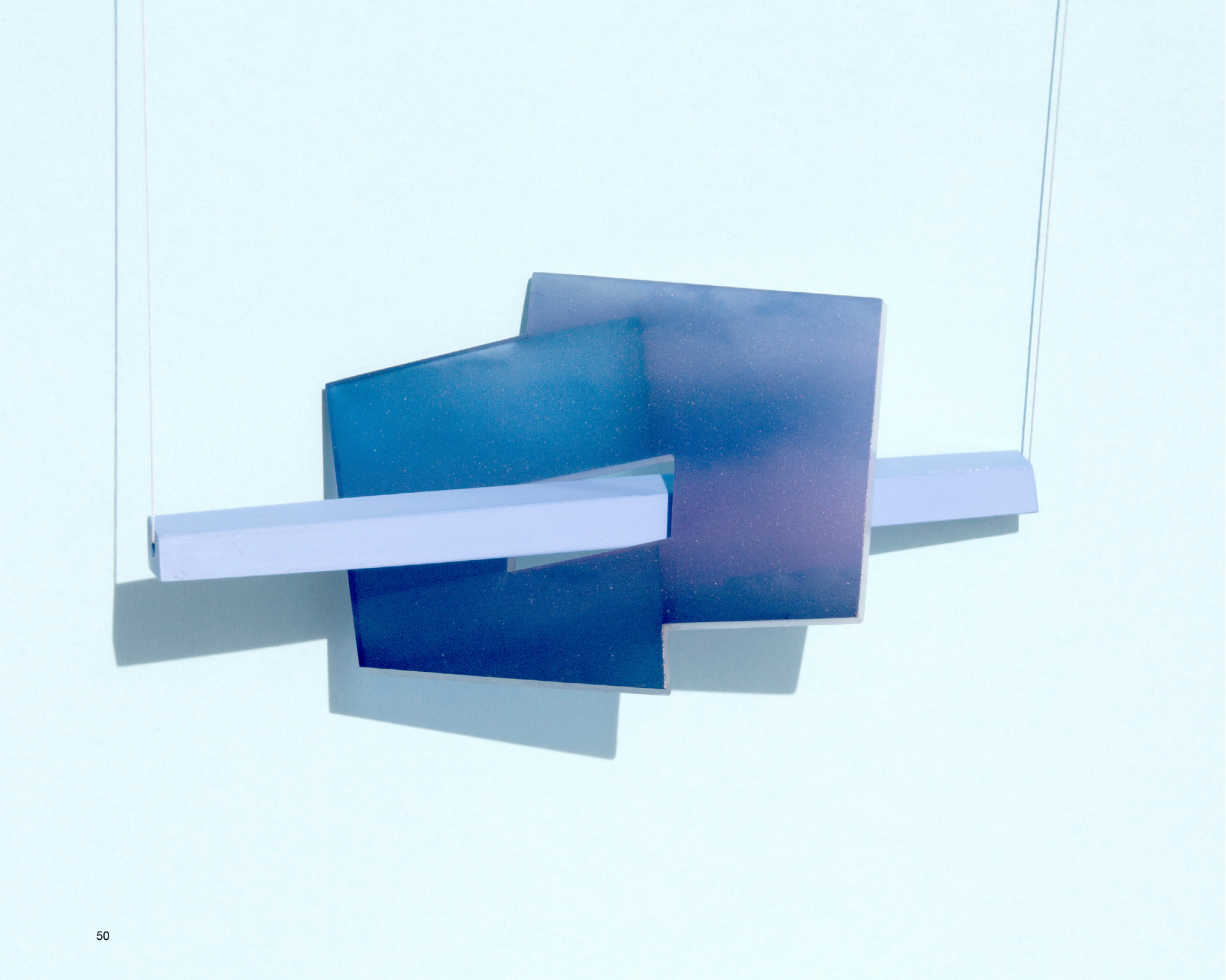
It is always a reciprocal relationship between the human and the object, and there is always a reciprocity generated through wearing. Our awareness of the dimension, the deeper space that an object communicates is important, as Sherry Turkle states in *Evocative Objects*, "We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought."¹⁰ It is true as Turkle says that we are more accustomed to doing familiar things, which is the opposite of exploring the unknown. Through the boundary of the surface, I pursue a dynamic of the flatness, the tension between imagery and imagination, vision and the mind. The process of perception and translation is always between unknown and known, unfamiliar and familiar. Jewelry as an enchanted vehicle that facilitates the form through the space of its making. The openness of contemporary jewelry continues the magic and gives a translucent habitat for the things that take place across boundaries. The flexibility of this new vehicle carries both the modern intellect and enduring emotion in the same place.

Interweaved frontier, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread

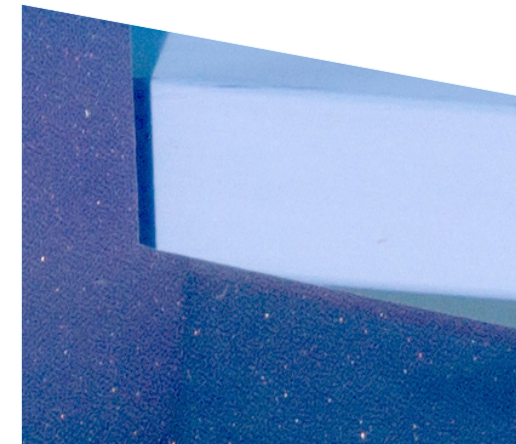
My original premise was primarily philosophical, grounded in a deeply felt love for my daily surrounds. The sky is a natural film, which is always changing but always there. I explore different versions of sky, through the medium of photography, with the static and moving interwoven in one plane. The choice between representing space and confounding the viewer's understanding of the space is integral to my whole body of work. Expanding openness of subjectivity can maximize the essence of humanistic understanding. I believe, with a mentally open interior space, a physically exterior space in the real world will open as well. When the sky as a distant longing inhabits the body, it both opens and softens an inner channel — a place to hold and hide peacefully beneath.

Unspoken drifter. 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread





Crossing portal, 2019
Necklace, UV Printed resin, silk thread



Notes

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2. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*, (Prentice-Hall, 1974).
3. Heterogeneous space is also called "Third Space". Edward W. Soja, an American scholar, put forward and applied an important concept of interdisciplinary criticism. The "third space" is a space of "difference" between reality and imagination, a space of "third" and "otherness" besides reality and imagination. In other words, "the third space" is a flexible strategy of presenting space, a possibility of transcending the traditional dualistic cognitive space.
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5. Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, (Doubleday & Company, 1996).
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