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PARTY FOR ONE:
A MONOLOGUE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF ONESELF
THROUGH BOOK ARTS

by

JACOB ZHEFU WAN
B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the importance of oneself through sexuality, context, and introspection in the art of book arts.

I work with memories, imagination, and consciousness in the form of book arts to express the importance of the self from my personal experience. Through the use of colors, materials, spatial compositions, and other visual components to manifest the content of my art, I want to illuminate the awareness of otherness including gender issues and an individual's vulnerability. Playing with the texts of Chinese and English, I intend to create narratives with languages, images, and other mixed media. In addition to crafting traditional bound books with handmade paper and assembling sculptural book-like objects, I also expand the idea of a book into space. With my books, I share my experience of being a loner, yet solitude helps me to be my better self.

Through sharing my personal stories, I hope to invite my audience to empathize themselves with their sympathy and invoke a sense of the importance of the self.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my gratitude to my dearest professors who have been supporting me throughout this journey. Thanks to my thesis committee members, you have helped me to be the person I am today. Thanks to co-chair, Prof. Carla Poindexter who inspires me and gives me a chance to be me. Thanks to Dr. Joo Kim with all of your intelligence and support, and thanks to Larry Cooper for letting me bother you whenever I can. Thanks to my chair Jason Burrell for working closely with me and helping me in any way you can. Also, there are many thanks to other faculties and staff from the Department of Visual Art and Design who care and help to make me feel like home. You guys have influenced me greatly to be a student, a teacher, and a human being; I am thankful for everything.

Also, I want to thank my parents 万泽平 and 陈怡, who have worked hard to provide me the opportunity with your unconditional loves.

我爱你们，爸爸妈妈。

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INTRODUCTION

An individual's awareness is often impacted by their surroundings. Singular identity and uniqueness are often influenced by outside forces.¹ The social standards, social comparison, and social stereotypes labeling people are based on a myriad of societal and biological constructs such as their races, genders, cultures, and other civic statuses. Identity brings challenges to an individual's decision making, relations, and self-expectations. As a Chinese gay man, I struggled with my identity. Reflecting on the past, I questioned the person that people ask me to be, and I am urged to seek my understanding of myself.

I wonder how my social relationships, conflicts, and histories have shaped my identity and perspective; the contradiction of external and internal challenges on my constructive experiences. Seeking evidence of identity through revisiting memories, I want to experiment with materiality, concepts, and emotion to express my consciousness in the form of book arts. Through working with the traditional bound books, book-like objects, and the idea of book as space, I offer personal narratives in the form of covers, threads, and pages. In my art, my goal is to create a dialogue within myself to discuss the emotion of lonesomeness and explore the power of solitude. I long for an answer to my identity as wholesome.

¹ Jean Roberson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 60.

CHAPTER TWO

Book

A traditional book is made up of pages of paper stitched together along one edge to be viewed. The form of books emerged and developed throughout history, from writing on wax tablets, stone, and wood in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, bamboo or silk scrolls in China² to the digital formats of current E-books, audiobooks, and virtual books of today.³

Bookbinding is a process of making a book by stitching a stack of paper together with threads for the benefit of recording, expanding and inheriting information and knowledge. The process slowly became mechanized in the publishing industry through the industrial age.⁴ Many artists and bookbinders experiment with new aesthetic and artistic techniques to create book decorations and book-like objects to express their ideas. William Blake (1755-1827) was the earliest artist to use images, texts, prints, and other techniques in the form of books.⁵ Figure 1 is titled *There Is No Natural Religion*. It is an illuminated book that was illustrated and printed using etched plates to create pages, which were bound together to express his personal ideas on religion and faith in 1788. With that, the book arts (Artist's Book) became a unique art form that gave voice to artists in the late twentieth century including art movements such as Dadaism, Constructivism, and Fluxus.

² Craig Kallendorf, "The Ancient Book," *The Book: A Global History*, OUP Oxford, 2013, 39-41.

³ Eileen Gardiner and Ronald G. Musto, "The Electronic Book," *The Book: A Global History*, OUP Oxford, 2013, 271-273.

⁴ Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*, Verso, 1997, 39-43.

⁵ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, Granary Books, 1995, 21.



Figure 1. *There Is No Natural Religion*, William Blake, 1788, The William Blake Archive,

www.blakearchive.org/copy/nnr.a?descId=nnr.a.illbk.01

Buzz Spector is a Chicago born contemporary artist, who uses books both as subjects and objects in his artworks. He is interested in the metaphor of books and the idea of reading. For his work “*The Humanities Book Art Project*” in Figure 2, he asked the faculty, staff, and students at Cornell University to lend him books that are authored by “Cornellians”. Spector wanted to discuss and express his idea of the interrelatedness of scholarship and readership of Cornell’s audiences. He started by building the structure of the installation using the form of the letter “C” (C for Cornell University) to shape a sculpture that is created with hundreds of books. The C-form gave audiences a way to walk around the installation or into the installation. By viewing

books in this new way, audiences may find books they have read or new books they want to read. Instead of experiencing traditional forms of single books, the new installation is reborn into a structure of many books opening up new possibilities, ideas, and desires for audiences to discover things that were unknown to them. The installation was built with ideas, not merely individual books. As audiences experience the new structure of the installation, there is a new reading about the connection between the artwork and the audiences. The piece itself has become a sculpture of books that exists in the space. Each book that makes up the whole installation represents an individual who contains a unique identity and unique human experiences. Spector claims that:

Books share this quality of real time with film and video. Their structural parceling of information enforces a duration of attention, a period of time which can be postponed or quickly consumed, at the volition of the reader.” and “Reading, with the physical interaction and luxurious duration that characterize it as an activity, evokes another order of significance, a seriousness of purpose, a seeking after truth, which the depiction of reading itself represents.⁶

⁶ Buzz Spector, *The Book Maker's Desire*, Umbrella Editions, 1995, 10.



Figure 2. *Big Red C*, Buzz Spector, [Edition: 40], Interior dye diffusion print (Polaroid), image size 20" x 24", 2007.

As a contemporary artist, to me, the book arts is an artform that combines two-dimensions and three-dimensions, sequences of thoughts, and a collection of moments that portrays a story. Along with crafting traditional bound books with handmade paper and assembling mixed media books with unconventional materials, I have explored the different possibilities of book arts in expanded fields. Experimenting with color, composition, and materiality to indicate my experience as an individual brings awareness to social issues such as identity, gender, culture, and more.

CHAPTER THREE

Stories

One's identity is often shaped by personal experience and background. Life experiences and awareness affect the personality and characteristics of each individual. We are often influenced by our surroundings, consciously or unconsciously. Our identities are connected to the environments where we have been and the memories that we retained, "Identity is fluid and transformable as the context changes, including the other people we are connected with at any given moment."⁷ Memory is the carrier of experience; humans select their memories consciously, and unconsciously. According to British philosopher John Locke, there are two types of experience, "...along with calling the other 'sensation', I call this reflection".⁸ The sensation is the external experience, and the reflection is about internal understanding. Revisiting memories builds a dialogue with the self which leads to the discovery of former unawareness. Introspection is self-reflection; it involves reviewing behavior through memories, evaluating causes, effects and context, and developing a healthier and better sense of self-awareness based on the past.

Most of my stories are about memories, consciousness, and awareness from personal experience. Because of stereotypes, gender rules, and social expectations, people must hide the self. As a Chinese gay man, I am being misread, mistaken, and misunderstood from time to time. My lonesomeness comes from being different, being other, and being in-between. I believe that

⁷ Jean Roberson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 77.

⁸ John Locke, "Book II", *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, Enlightenment, 2011, www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0101-60832019000400097&script=sci_arttext. Accessed 20 Nov. 2019.

my individual experience is relevant to many others who share my characteristics. There are people personally hiding, hiding their identity, hiding their emotions, and hiding their dreams. Some of them give up, some of them stand up, but the rest of them are hiding and pretending to be fine. I aspire to create artwork that sympathizes and empathizes with the vulnerability of others and embraces the importance of self.

Rabbit

As an educational space, school is a social community most people experience in their early lives. Most students in schools are developing their personality and awareness. Immaturity and lack of discernment shape their behaviors. Their opinions can be easily impacted, and social standards greatly influence the perception of these young people. In this social group, school bullying has been an issue that causes damages to an individual's physical and mental health, and the stability of the society. According to Lee and Yen's study of *Relationships of homophobic bullying during childhood and adolescence with problematic internet and smartphone use in early adulthood among sexual minority men in Taiwan*, from their samples, 40% of 500 homosexual/bisexual males have experienced homophobic bullying since their elementary school.⁹

Speaking from personal experience, I was not bothered or frustrated with identity until I attended middle school. At that age, youths develop an awareness of sexuality and aesthetic; but

⁹ Ji Lee and CF Yen, "Relationships of Homophobic Bullying during Childhood and Adolescence with Problematic Internet and Smartphone Used in Early Adulthood among Sexual Minority Men in Taiwan," *Archives of Clinical Psychiatry*, vol.45 no.4, July/Aug, 2019, www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0101-60832019000400097&script=sci_arttext. Accessed 8 Jan. 2020.

sadly, due to the different backgrounds, parenting, and other social influences on children, they often become careless and aggressive. I was being bullied because I was a feminine boy who had buckteeth and braces and it directly and deeply affected my mental health and confidence. There are countless people who have been, and still are being judged, hurt, and treated unfairly because of their sexual orientation. One of my goals is visualizing my experience to open a discussion of school bullying and how this social issue has impacted me as an individual.

Yarn played important role expressing myself in my middle school period, and I recreate my memories by incorporating this material. With my research, I found similar work in the intensive tension and presentation of Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota uses yarn in her art. She creates works about her dreams, memories, and relationships. Starting with the idea of drawing in the air, Shiota uses threads as her material to create lines in space. She creates labor intensive, site-specific installations with threads and other related materials. For her, thread is the mirror of her feelings, the connection of human to human, and the traces of her memories. She uses strings to create dreamlike environment to express her own imagination and the emotions she has experienced in her life. For example, Shiota's installation *Beyond Time* (Figure 3) in Yorkshire Sculpture Park within an eighteenth-century Chapel in England. Shiota decided to reference the past moments of the space. As a chapel, the space was full of significance, and she sensed the memories of the place. She created a metal piano structure without music, but she intended to use the strings to make the visual melody flow. The strings filled the space, and there were paper copies of documents from the chapel's past that were threaded across and in between the lines. The evidence of the past is connected by the strings, and people who helped with the installation were connected because the installation was so labor intensive. Shiota states that strings are the

cuts, the mirror of her feelings, and the relationship from human to human.¹⁰ She wanted to express the existence of the invisible beings, the memories that exist in space and time. *Beyond Time* is a massive installation that compels a physical emotional response to the audiences with the space and parts of the artwork. By weaving and webbing, Chiharu Shiota uses threads to connect herself, the space, and the audience together to build an atmosphere comprised of the silent memories of the past.



Figure 3. *Beyond Time*, Chiharu Shiota, 2018. White thread, metal piano, musical notes.

Copyright VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2018 and the artist. Courtesy Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Photo © Jonty Wilde

¹⁰ Chiharu Shiota, “Chiharu Shiota: Beyond Time.” *Youtube*, uploaded by Yorkshire Sculpture Park, April. 25, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=L51F-TL1_Tk. Accessed 8 Jan. 2020.

Although my work, *Soft Biter* pre-dates Shiota's *Beyond Time*, there is a strong resonance. Between our installations, *Soft Biter* (Figure 4) is a body of on-going work that provides me with opportunities to revisit my memories through art. I began by designing and creating a character with a rabbit mask to reflect my past. I was called "rabbit" by classmates because I was a small girly boy who had buckteeth with braces. I was being bullied due to my appearance, and I questioned my existence as an individual in society. Being isolated has caused me to make bad decisions, and I desire to analyze my behaviors and explore the social standards of myself as an individual.



Figure 4. *Soft Biter* (installation), Jacob Wan, 2017

This installation (Figure 4) presents a mixed media painting hanging against the edge of the ceiling along with other objects set in space. A river made of yarn pom-poms falls from above and floods into the space. It is a river of memories, and the pom-poms can be read as the fur from the rabbit, or as a carrier of memories. Two paintings of the boy-rabbit character in a white and red background are meant to imply the two sides of one human being, to remind the audiences of the contrast between good and evil. The pom-pom objects are the evidence of me seeking acceptance. The handmade pom-pom was significant because it was the gift I gave to others in the hope to gain the emotion of belonging. It was a way to create a connection with people. Like a friendship that builds on a superficial relationship, it does not last long. Red and white are symbolic colors. They have different implications in different scenarios and cultures. In western culture, red is often recognized as anger, warning, things that contain dangers, and white symbolizes purity, holiness, and innocence; yet in my context within China, red is a color of celebration, happiness, and power, but white is often used for death, loss, and solemn mourning.¹¹ Both colors have different or opposing meanings in different contexts. This makes it difficult to communicate a clear meaning for what they are intended to symbolize in my work.

¹¹ Guimei He, "English and Chinese Cultural Connotation of Color Words in Comparison," *Asian Social Science*, Vol.5, No.7, July 2009, www.citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.927.1847&rep=rep1&type=pdf. Accessed 12 Dec. 2019.



Figure 5. untitled (Rabbit mask), paints on paper mache, Jacob Wan, 2017

In *Soft Biter*, the rabbit mask (Figure 5) was made of paper mache, another form of paper. The mask emphasizes the buckteeth and my two earrings on the left ear. My middle school teacher once punished me for getting my ear pierced due to its perception as inappropriate for male students to do “girly” things and also, it is a potential symbol for “gang” member behavior. The conflict between the two gender stereotypes has made me question the general perception of gender but I was simply appreciating the aesthetic. Animal masks are often used in religious, ceremonies, and other events. A mask can be read as protection, connection of the mind and the spirits, and it can also symbolize another self. By hiding behind the mask, the true identity can avoid reality. The first time I saw a rabbit or knew of the animal in my life was in my great grandmother’s house when I was three years old. I remember a white furry ball with red eyes

shaking in the corner of the cage, it looked so scared yet scary. The white rabbit with red eyes was stamped into my mind whenever I heard people call me rabbit, and the white and red colors of my memories cross over and merge into the image of a hiding shaking rabbit. In the middle of the mixed media painting, a rabbit is illustrated on a small canvas with barbed wires around the sides. The barbed wire is used for building defensive fences with sharp wire teeth, and it appears to me like the brace I had on my buck teeth. In my mind it is a piece of thread that binds the self-consciousness and self-development. The rabbit is trapped within the wires, but it is trying to escape, an implication of me sinking in the past and still affected by memories. The dripping yarn and pom-poms illustrate a river of memories falling from the heights of the wall and extending across the space.



Figure 6 *Tooth Hurts* (page detail), threads on paper, Jacob Wan, 2017

I also created a mixed media book (Figure 6) that contains more messages and narratives to enrich the emotions of the audience's experience of *Soft Biter*. Along with these elements, I intend to make an environment surrounded by expression, memories, and emotions, for audiences to sense the mixture and contradictions of my experiences and emotions. As a person who has been bullied and who has been a bully, my intention is to bring awareness to the issue of school bullying. People label others based on the social standards set by others. The standards shifts in different places and different cultures, yet it is ignorant to judge or harm a person based on social standards. In my experience, "good" people do evil things, and "evil" people have done good things. The standard of "good" and "evil" is easily impacted by the mass population's conventional wisdom and constantly changes.

Originally, this body of work was a discussion of the good and evil within one individual; however, with deeper research on the topic, the development of my works, and a better understanding of myself, this work has shifted slightly to a different meaning. I see now that this body of work is about living in the world as an individual dealing with complicated social structures and relationships, and about weaving my the different connections and memories together to seek a sense of identity by breaking down the social standard yet retain the moral standard. By reviewing the past, it allows me to observe and analyze the parts that I was not aware of at the time in order to give psychological closure. The memories of the past still come back subconsciously though I am in a totally different position, place, and time now, however the old memories have shaped my personality and ways of thinking.

Moon

Due to my sexual orientation and where I come from, nighttime has become the time I fantasize my desires the most. At night, I allow myself to use my imagination freely to weave different stories of the future and immerse myself into the moment. Moon appears when the nighttime comes. In the Chinese culture, the symbol of moon represents the immortality and eternity of life, a reunion, fullness and success, purity, and the pursuit of love.¹² Personally, the moon has witnessed my relationships, listened to my wishes, and shared my tears night after night. Moon is a symbol of the ideal, the perfect life.

As in life, during the process of making my art, the stream of consciousness I experience at night plays an important role in my creativity. It happens subconsciously, and meanings develop during the process. During the night, the aloneness becomes an introspection, a conversation within my deeper self. It starts fragmentarily; I try to catch important memories, abstract the moment and reconstruct with my imagination to assemble them into a visual image. Then, I record or recreate the vision to start exploring and reflecting based on my ideas. I begin the work with a color, or a material, or the unconscious sense that has occupied my mind for a while. By responding to the process and the materials, decisions are made. I work on different pieces simultaneously which helps me to be flexible. Starting with more than one project and working in-between helps me to discover new concepts and forms.

¹² Xianghua Sun, "The Cultural Implication of the Chinese Lexicon Containing 'Moon'," *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol.6, no.12, Academy Publication, 2016, www.academypublication.com/ojs/index.php/tpls/article/view/tpls061223042308/992. Accessed 24 Dec. 2019.

Most traditional books are made of papers, and paper is the physical material that holds the information. The process of papermaking was originally invented and developed in China 105CE.¹³ I have been folding, drawing, and cutting copy papers to play with in my alone time since my childhood. As a Chinese, I was interested in knowing if the paper itself was made of things that carry memories and experimenting with the materials and form of the art to explore gender identity through the act of visualizing my longing for love.



Figure 7. *Pillowtalk*, Artist's book with handmade paper, Jacob Wan, 2018

¹³ Mark Cartwright, "Paper in Ancient China," *Ancient History*, 2017, www.ancient.eu/article/1120/paper-in-ancient-china/. Accessed 27 Dec. 2019.

Pillowtalk (Figure 7) is a book that is bound in traditional chain stitch with handmade paper and found text. It is a book that contains the moments and thoughts of my relationships as a homosexual male who grew up in a traditional Chinese culture. The chain stitch is one of the strongest stitches, and to me, it implies a chain to bind two people together in a romantic relationship. This book has individual sheets of purple papers that record unspoken words and these pages hang delicately above the book with clips. The pink-toned paper was handmade using linear cotton sheets and cotton fillings of pillows. I left an invisible “I love you” mark with letterpress on the pages. “I love you” can be used in different scenarios; saying it to a romantic partner, a friend, or a family member express different levels of closeness. It is not always easy for someone to express the emotion of love to another person. An unreadable “I love you” is a reflection of the vulnerability of love. It appears to be weak for men to commit to strong emotions in this society,¹⁴ and many expressions of “I love you” have been swallowed before it comes out. The pink paper was mixed with red and white pulp. Color is important in my works because the implied meanings of color shifts with the context of my intentions, to imply my struggle with the social standards of my identity. The purple paper in the book was a mixture of different colors made from clothes I have collected from my boyfriends. Clothes are the second layer of the skin; they hold memories, moments, and stories. The cloth is fiber, the fiber is paper, the paper is memory. Making paper from clothes is a process of deconstructing the original memory carrier into a material which is used for recording histories. It is a process that, allows me to explore a new physical form for holding my memories. Symbolically, I can then begin to

¹⁴ Janice R. Kelly, and Sarah L. Huston-Comeaux, “Gender-Emotion Stereotypes are context Specific,” *Sex Roles*, Vol.40, issue 1-2, 1999, 108.

seek for the “threads” between my materials. In figure 8, I contrast the idea of visibility versus invisibility by comparing faded silver to bold gold in the way I have stamped the names on the pages to emphasize the present rather than the past. Under the names, there are unspoken conversations that are signified by letters that have been pressed onto the paper without foils, which makes the words hidden or non-existent. It is an implication of the unsaid moments that are often happen in relationships yet, are remembered in the heart. By doing this, I am asking viewers of my book to approach the surface and to look closely to read the words, which imply the hidden truths behind the unspoken moments of people in their relationships.

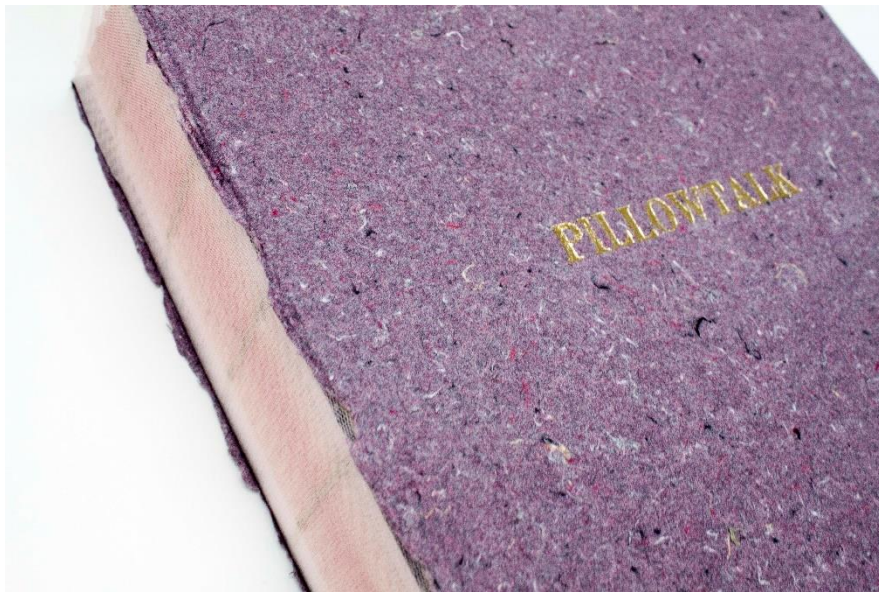


Figure 8. *Pillowtalk* (page detail), Artist’s book with handmade paper, Jacob Wan, 2018

The broken pages were stitched over with delicate gold thread (Figure 9). In Chinese culture, gold implies strength, honesty, and loyalty.¹⁵ The brokenness is a metaphor that the

¹⁵ Emma C. Bunker, “Gold in the Ancient Chinese World: A Cultural Puzzle,” *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 53, no.1/2, 1993, 28.

relationship is imperfect; the perfect relationship is stitched or put back together by the lovers. There are many moments that damage a relationship, but the ideal idea of love is fixing what is imperfect and working together. Love happens suddenly, and this is the reason I chose to depict the subconsciousness through improvisation. The found texts that I use for this book were from random romantic novels. They were cut from random pages that I chose improvisationally that express common romantic emotions. When I ended up with a box of random texts, I rearranged the order and mood to make a narrative, and I pressed the texts into the handmade paper. The randomness reflects memories that appears subconsciously and fragmentally. With more than eighty pages, I kept the texts and other elements of the book minimal and simply stated because I was interested in depicting the emotions of love that I was not allowed to express as a Chinese gay man.



Figure 9. *Pillowtalk* (page detail), Artist's book with handmade paper, Jacob Wan, 2018

The moon is tidally locked: the new moons, half-moons, and full moons. We often see the moon change day by day. However, the moon never really changes, it is the way we see the moon that changes. Making *Pillowtalk* with its unspoken words and hidden texts symbolizes that nighttime is a secret space where I can dream of the fantasies and the ideal relationship I imagine. Hiding my feelings and desires and expressing the loneliness of seeking love and finding the perfect one, is all expressed in this book. I include the relationships that were shaped by my demands, by the demands or desires of another person and the way I behaved in relationships. Reflecting on the experiences and outcomes of my relationships, I have come to an understanding that although it is important to love someone; it is also important to know how to love someone. We often feel our partner is changing, but most likely it is we, who have changed our view of them.

Leave

The world is developing. With the growth of the economy and cultural exchange, the importance of international education has been introduced to many Chinese families. They have been working hard and depositing extra savings to improve the life quality of their children by investing in the education of the next generation. Some families are able to afford to spend the money for their children to study abroad through their efforts of hard work because most of the children of my generation are the product of the one-child-only policy (1979-2015) in China. Millions of Chinese students have experienced studying in another country since 1979;¹⁶ as one

¹⁶ Xuezhi Liu, "Comparison on the Developmental Trends Between Chinese Students Studying Abroad and Foreign Students Studying in China," *Journal of International Students*, vol.4, Issue 1, 2014, 36.

of them, I also have experienced the differences between cultures and the nostalgia of being away from my hometown.

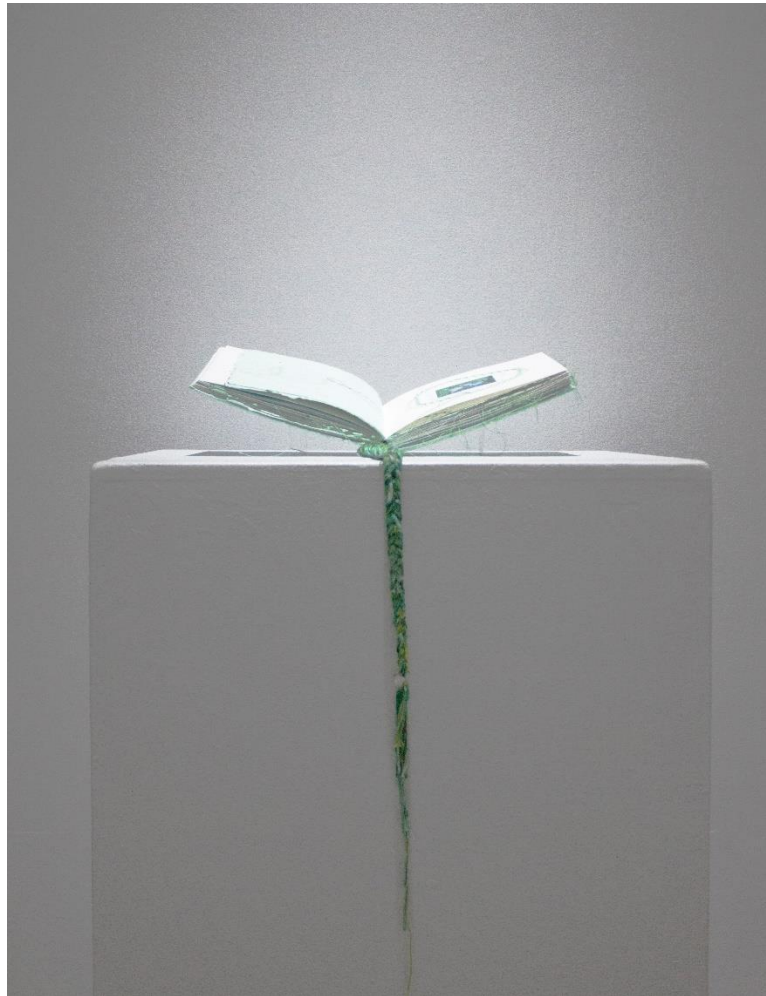


Figure 10. *Leaves*, Artist's book with handmade paper, Jacob Wan, 2018

Leaves (Figure 10) is a traditional bound book with handmade paper as the cover. It is a collection of pictures about my two cousins and me, and memories of our childhood. I visited my hometown Xianju in the summer, 2018, and I took hundreds of photos of my hometown, friends, and family. As a child, summer was the only time I was able to enjoy being a child due to my

busy school life. My two cousins often came to our grandparents' home where we used to hang out, and those were the best memories of my childhood. Being away and not seeing them often, it was my intention to record my memories of our old times to remind me to cherish what is gone.

All the photos in *Leaves* were taken on the hill we used to visit when we were children. I braided my cousins' hair as I had done in the past and we revisited spaces from old times to rebuild a connection between the present and past. We dressed in white to represent the innocence of childhood and we created a memorial ceremony of lost times. For the book, I rearranged the photos along with the texts to create the narrative of a connection between family, memories, and self. The green paper was made from the clothes from my cousins. The green paper pulp reminds me of the garden in my grandparents' house, the trails we walked, and the summer we remember.

The braided binding of this book, that is a reminder of braided hair, is the evidence of me noticing my sexual orientation early in my life, because I used to love playing with my cousins' long hair, braiding them, and wishing I had the same. As I stated earlier in this thesis, the Chinese are raised to not express emotions; it is considered soft and vulnerable of someone to be emotional in my culture. Hiding our true feelings is a way to show consideration of others and protection of the self. I use threads to express my emotions in this book I stitch over pages with different shades of green threads in a leaf pattern (Figure 11), and each shade signifies each of us. Leaving extra threads hanging from pages signifies just how thoughts of the far-away family are; sometimes they hide, and sometimes they overgrow, just like the emotions. My grandmother taught me to sew; and to me, the thread represents consciousness and thoughts that tie our

memories together. The path of the threads happens unconsciously; it stops, it knots, and it overgrows sometimes, like the thoughts of missing my family. The thoughts and the threads have become a part of me. Just as my grandmother used a big old metal sewing table, I use a small computerized sewing machine. It is the updating of life, yet it is also an inheritance between generations. A person leaves, the leaves of books, the leaves of growing thoughts; they are the leaves.



Figure 11. *Leaves* (page detail), Artist's book with handmade paper, Jacob Wan, 2018

I have noticed that my consciousness is an indispensable element in the process. In traditional Chinese painting, the process is more important and meaningful than the final product to the artist. In China, artists enjoy concentrating on the process to push themselves into a mode of consciousness which is called “Zen”.¹⁷ When the painter starts painting the work

¹⁷ Arthur Waley, *An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting*, Charles Scribner's Son, 1923, 73.

unconsciously - the painter becomes the stroke, and the stroke is the painter. Working with threads is like working with painting or drawing with pencil. It is a process of dancing with the threads which allows the subconsciousness to lead. It allows accidents and surprises to happen when we are not expecting it, and it is a significant philosophy for me to stray away from my comfort zone and keep being creative. I am interested in the process of experimenting with different materials and elements in layers. By working improvisationally; I can keep textures and mark making organically just as memories appear subconsciously. Adjusting by editing, continuing by building, and exploring by combining other objects. Pages of my book provide a sensation of hiding and discovering, which is the experience I sense personally. The threads are symbolically connected consciousness moments to a sense of the whole. When this method is applied with bookbinding, consciousness takes over the control of our behaviors, each thread, page, and object become a representation and a clue of my identity and to the pages within.



Figure 12. *Forest*, Artist's book, installation of scroll books, Jacob Wan, 2018

Fig. 12 is an installation of scroll books, and it is my longing and nostalgia of my hometown, my loneliness of being away from the most familiar space. Homeland is the root of my identity, and it impacts me in many ways. I come from a small town that is surrounded by many blue and green mountains in China, waves of mountains. There are streams and rivers, sewing the town together. The place is slightly different than what I remembered after leaving my hometown for so many years. I intend to build a piece that contains my memories of my

home and an expression of emotions to evoke my longing by experimenting with the materiality of the book.

I started working with the aqua blue vellum paper to make the scroll books reflect my memory of my homeland. It can become a forest made of aqua scroll books, a forest of faded memories, and a forest of moments crossing each other. The audience can walk through the books to share the memories recorded in the books. The different moments that happened on the pages are memories shifting unconsciously, like disconnection and forgetfulness. According to Barthes “Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.”¹⁸ The use of Chinese and English in the text can create a dilution between the pieces. Allowing the audience to experience the narratives by crossing over the fragments and flashes from the falling scroll books to create their own visions of the storyline. The two languages are not direct translations, they are two individual storylines but in a similar mood. The Chinese viewers can read Chinese; the English audiences can read English and an additional story for people who are able to speak both languages. Hometown is an epitome of my life in China, it is more than just a location. The language deficiency has caused misunderstanding and miscommunication during learning English as my second language. I enjoy the pronunciation and different meanings of vocabularies, and misspelling often creates

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, “The death of the Author,” *Image Music Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 148.

new purpose for the words. This piece includes family, friends, the history of who I am, the foundation of a continued me. It is a group of things being familiar, a longing of belongings.

The choice of vellum paper was based on my childhood memory that my grandparents used to buy me snacks bagged in vellum paper, and it is the paper to make envelopes which is a carrier of thoughts. Even so, I enjoyed and am satisfied with the installation and presentation, but the hardness and plastic-like texture of the vellum paper reduced the psychological feeling of the tenderness that the cherished memories should be. Being away from my family, I miss and think of them the most is the nighttime. I am urged to find another material that is more meaningful. I often struggle and regret that I am not around them and makes them feel lonely, yet my desires and ideal could not be accepted where I come from. The internal battle shows on the non-stopping toss and turn, and it leaves marks on the bedsheets. Working with bedsheets in another piece (see Figure 19), I have realized the importance of this material to me personally, it is a page that records my dreams, desires, and desperation. Therefore, I decided to revisit this artwork with a different approach by replacing the vellum paper with bedsheets. I slept on them, dyed them, rubbed earth on them, rinsed them, and then dried them. In Chinese folktales, the earth is the dirty, mud, soil, and some traveler will keep a small pitch of earth from their hometown on their journey to have the mental secure of homesickness in China. Washing and sun drying the bedsheets are how traditional Chinese family does the laundry, and nature would leave its history on the sheets. It was difficult to print images digitally on the bedsheets based on the equipment I have. The material is soft, and in order to print images on them with a toner printer, I will need to either work with chemicals to make the fabric harder or attach the sheets on a steadier surface. After trying different ways such as chemical dipping and stitching the

fabric on a paper then run it through a printer, I decided on iron-on fabric sheets. I did not want to damage the printer due to the ink needle will be caught by the fibers on the bedsheet surface, and the chemical process is taking away the softness of the bedsheets. With the iron-on fabric sheets, I was able to transfer images on to the bedsheets with less time and more natural effects. With using the bedsheets, the presentation of untitled (Figure 13) becomes more inviting, and the material is less vulnerable and easier to store.



Figure 13. *Forest*, Artist's book, installation of scroll books, Jacob Wan, 2018

I am a piece of lonely leaf, riding the wind through longing for the familiar. Besides using leaves as a third-person verb “he leaves”, and a noun for plural leaf and book pages “leaves”; there is one more layer of meaning for “leaves”. An expression from China states “落叶归根,” the leaf falls back to the roots, implying the travelers who are away from their home, eventually they would want to go back to the source. Revisiting my hometown after 3 years,

there is a familiar and unfamiliar, connection and disconnection, similarity and difference crossing over memories and reality. I have noticed that I am changing, the place is changing; I am developing, the place is developing at the same time. We change simultaneously and subconsciously, and I am relieved to see the development and improvement that is happening in my hometown, and the growth of China. As the root of my identity, it continually strengthens and completes me as an individual.

Cigarette

Smoking often is seen as a social activity, a habit, a symbol of being an adult, or simply cool. People hold different social attitudes toward cigarette smoking. Many people are against smoking because of the smells, secondhand smoke, harm to health, and pollution to the environment; yet through the mass media, cigarettes are shown as an impression of being luxurious, fashionable, and self-confident.¹⁹ From movies, advertisements, and other media productions, usually the cigarette is used to describe the masculinity of a man, an image of a tough, strong, and independent figure.²⁰ With the shaping of gender stereotypes, external pressures, and social expectations, it is a shame for men to show their emotions, fears, and vulnerabilities.²¹

¹⁹ Ahmad Abdan Syakur, Rusdiawan, Muhammad Sukri, "Text of Cigarette Advertisement: A Semiology Study of Roland Barthes," *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*, vol. 4, no.3, May 2018, www.sloap.org/journals/index.php/ijllc/article/view/182/719. Accessed 7 Jan. 2020.

²⁰ Michael E. Starr, "The Marlboro Man: Cigarette Smoking and Masculinity in America," *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol.17, issue 4, 1984, 45.

²¹ Matthew Jakupcak, Matthew T. Tull, and Lizabeth Roemer, "Masculinity, Shame, and Fear of Emotions as Predictors of Men's Expressions of Anger and Hostility," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, vol.6 no. 4, 2018, 277.

My father has smoked ever since I can remember. I never guessed about his thoughts when he smoked; and I never asked. He told me to not smoke, but I learned how to smoke when I was a teenager. Smoking only happens when I face blocks in life nowadays. It allows me to take a moment to reflect, like meditation, away from social activity.

I started painting cigarette butts during a recent creative block and I became more aware of the behavior of others; that smoking is like an excuse to be alone - a getaway from reality. Observing and having conversations with others, I realized smoking can be a way of finding solitude. Especially in downtown cities, people often take a smoke break from work. They stand by the street with the cigarette in hand, but they are on a journey within themselves. They would think about things happening in life, ideals, desires, and a seeking for answers. Then, they snuff out the cigarette and return to reality when time is up. The dead cigarette butt is like punctuation, a period ends the conversation they are having with themselves. Different people kill cigarettes butts in different ways, some do it gently and some stamp it hard; the dead cigarette butts are the dead dreams, each person handles in their own way. I painted them on the handmade papers made from cigarettes (Figure 14), and the postures of each of the butts start to look like dead bodies. The cigarette butt is the clue of what was in the mind, and it is the end of the story. It physically carries the smoker's identity, and it also metaphorically contains their consciousness. It is an evidence of the internal conversation.



Figure 14. untitled, pages of Artist's book, acrylic paint on handmade paper of cigarettes, Jacob Wan, 2018

Secrettes (Figure 15) is a cigarette box book, a book of empty dreams. As a book object, box is the cover and the butts are the pages. “Experiencing a(n) (non-traditional) work of book art is similar in some ways to experiencing a normal book, but it usually provides an enhanced opportunity for viewers to interact with the art. The process of turning the pages to reveal new portions of the artwork may be done in a number of ways, thus increasing the spatiality of the book, while perusing the book art the viewer’s own pace exaggerates the sensation that a book is a time based and intimate art form.”²² With the idea of collecting other people’s dead dreams, I created cigarette box books to express my thoughts when I smoke. This book is made up of handmade paper I made from of cigarettes and I stitched it together with golden threads, and I sewed twenty individual cigarette butts together to pages. Because smoking is often associated

²² Jean Roberson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 297.

with male figures, and it is a common symbol for the masculinity in the media. According to Steve Craig in *Men, Masculinity and the Media*, "...masculinity becomes a focus of inquiry. Masculinity is what a culture expects of its men."²³ Males are not allowed to express their fragility due to gender rules and social stereotypes. Be strong, be tough, and be powerful are characteristics that society expects men to embody, and it is a shame for them to express their fragility because of these gender rules and social stereotypes.²⁴ I am contrasting the idea of trash or treasure on an empty cigarette box covered with gold leaf and burned holes to express an impression that brokenness can be cherished or as a forgotten preciousness. With the texts "Fuck, I fucked it up again" on the cigarette butts, I wanted to deliver the idea of the struggle and fear of being a failure, a desire of making right decisions because men are asked to be responsible and successful. I have realized that smoking is a moment of reviewing the contradiction between the ideal and reality, a personal space for meditation, and a conversation within the self. It is not the behavior of smoking; it is about the process of introspection. It is an initiative for finding isolation, and a seeking for a private moment.

²³ Steve Craig, *Men, Masculinity and the Media*, SAGE Publication, 1992, 3.

²⁴ Fred J. Fejes, "Masculinity as Fact: A Review of Empirical Mass Communication Research on Masculinity," *Men, Masculinity and the Media*, SAGE Publication, 1992, 15.



Figure 15. *Secrettes I*, Artist's book, cigarette butts, threads, handmade paper of cigarettes, Jacob Wan, 2018

This new book attempted to reflect what book artist Buzz Spector states in *The Book Maker's Desire*,

“The unique book, also called “book object,” is a genre of artwork that refers to the forms, relations, and configurations of the book. The history of this practice, and its several meanings, is informed by the histories of manuscripts and printed books, but the technological evolution of the codex form is of less importance in knowing the book object than is the reading these objects simultaneously solicit and refute.”

Through my creative process, I have noticed that the cover is the most direct thing a viewer will pay attention to at first sight. It is intended to be the attention-grabber, and it is the gate to another space. My works displays delicacy, precision, and quietness on the surface, but

the narratives exist in the brokenness of the pieces. Wabi-sabi is a Japanese aesthetic that advocates the beauty of brokenness.²⁵ The brokenness exists in the details, in the parts, and in the stories. My identity has caused my insecurity and over-sensitivity, and it has subconsciously affected the way I see things, sense things, and create things. My artworks reflect my desires to be accepted and my need to be in a position of wholeness. Flaws are allowed to exist in my books to imply that humans are not perfect. The imperfectness strives for the perfectness. It is a battle between internal idealism and realism, and the artwork is both the experience and the aftermath.

Thread combines parts together. Physically it creates the line that sews things together; psychologically it symbolizes the conscious action to link thoughts. My grandmother often knitted and sewed clothes for the family when we were poor, and she taught me how to work with thread. Unlike other boys, I always liked to make clothes for Barbie dolls with leftover fabric pieces. Personally, it is the memory that binds the family, it is my impression of my grandmother's expression of motherhood, and it is a part of my identity. Sewing with threads can also be seen as the relationships between people and connecting elements in this world. The visual flow of an audience viewing the work can also represent the threads. The ideas a viewer may build in their mind from the art symbolizes the threads, and the artwork symbolizes the thread between the artist and the audience.

Pages are the moments, memories, and fragments. They make up the diary of expression, a notebook for decision making, and a sketchbook for imagination and wishes. The materiality of

²⁵ Leonard Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, Imperfect Publishing, 2008, 21.

a page is not limited to paper. A blank page is a beginning; a completed page is the history. I challenge the idea of what a page can be by exploring different mixed media materials and methods. Working with the sequences of the pages is called pagination. It is a method to build emotions by designing the flow of visual information. I enjoy designing the flow with the empty pages, illustrated pages, the pages with texts, and the broken pages to represent the many different stages of a period, a time, or a storyline. It is exciting to create a visual flow and to take control of the reading speed and rhythm of the reader to enrich their immersive experience.

I have crafted traditional bound books with handmade paper and sculpted mixed media book-objects. Regardless of what form the book will be, there are three elements I am paying attention to when I make books: the cover, the thread, and the page. Every book has its own cover, thread, and page; every book needs the threads to weave the pages together and then be contained behind the cover.

I have come to understand that,

The cover is the form, the surface, and the first impression.

The thread is the consciousness, the connections, and the relationships.

The page is the canvas, the memories, and the moments.

Taking the reader on a journey with the pages, layouts, and narratives builds tension through the presentation of layers of content, like walking through a story with a conscious mind. The moments have been stitched together and sealed behind the cover. This is the principle that drives me.

Night

The experience of being gay is different in China and the USA. People in the USA are not afraid of being who they are, they fight for their rights, and they support what they love. America legalizing homosexual marriage in 2015, along with the influence of LGBTQ+ members speaking their voices, and a more friendly social attitude have helped people to feel more comfortable with their identities. With the development of technology, it is easier to connect with other similar individuals. The usage of social dating apps provides opportunities for people to meet each other, but many people look for sexual activities only, and many people face dating difficulties because of their race, shape, age, and other physical qualities.²⁶ It is a culture that values appearance, is highly sex-driven, and is attention-seeking. A young masculine attractive light skin male is in the spotlight of the gay world. As a small-sized feminine Asian, my artworks express my experiences and the struggles of my romantic relationships.

British artist Tracy Emin worked on similar subject matter. Her most discussed work *My Bed* (Figure 16) is a found object installation that has become an iconic artwork that engages the idea of art as it expresses her honesty about her personal life. She used objects from her bedroom: an unmade messy bed, alcohol bottles, condoms, and dirty underwear to illustrate her present life. She was struggling with anxiety, depression, and having several sexual partners. By displaying her personal objects directly and exposing who she is, a process of understanding herself emerges. The raw and direct message from her art boldly embodies the material, and it is

²⁶ John E. Pachankis and Marvin R. Goldfried, "Social Anxiety in Young Gay Men," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, vol. 20, issue 8, 2006, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0887618506000028. Accessed 7 Jan. 2020.

an inspiration for me to be honest with my artmaking. Working with readymade materials in a meaningful way to share the bareness of my emotions was the goal for the next piece.



Figure 16. *My Bed*, Tracy Emin, 1998, wikipedia,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Bed#/media/File:Emin-My-Bed.jpg

Figure 17 begins with flash memories of my dresser which I bought when I just arrived in the USA. It was a kid's dresser but cheap and big enough to not take over too much space. An idea of a dresser book grew in my mind, and I was excited about the way of drawers can represent different chapters in a book. It was a three-drawer dresser, and I painted it in pure white. I intended to leave a personal object that contains special meaning in the first drawer as chapter one; different shades of red underwear in the second drawer as chapter two; and a pair of white pajamas in the bottom drawer as chapter three. The male underwear is dyed in washed red. The dye from one pair of underwear stains another pair when they were rinsed together, in the same way people influence each other. Each underwear is stitched, letter stamped or printed with images, and they become pages when people go through the drawer. The narrative can be bound

together based on the way it read, and the order of the book is organically put together by the reader's consciousness. The dresser book can be seen as a found-object sculptural book or it can be read as an interactive book based on the setting it occupies.



Figure 17 untitled, Artist's book, dresser, underwear, mixed media, Jacob Wan, 2018

People who experienced this dresser-book were unsure if the artwork should be touchable because of the object's personal nature and they feared to violate gallery etiquette. I was given a challenge to expand the personal to a more universal approach to my subject. I started looking for a way to create a new form for the experience for others to relate to. The feelings and thoughts from my romances are scattered and I consciously try to emphasize the moments that are personal, yet symbolically universal. Cuddling, talking, loving, arguing, fighting, kissing, having sexual intercourse, and more; these behaviors and actions start becoming the connections or interactions of two individuals. After reviewing the memories of my lovers, some moments showed up uncontrollably; I was able to remember things that I thought I forgot, and I was able

to analyze my behaviors at the moment. I remember the falling cigarette ash burned into the bedsheet with the after-sex cigarette; I remember the cover was stained with the breakfast orange juice; and I remember our dirty underwear lying on the floor next to each other. These forgotten things are evidence of the events, and they inspired me to explore the intimacy of my forgotten past and the lack of awareness of elements of my life in the present. I realized the underwear could stand in for an individual being. Underwear is the closest clothing to the most private body parts; it is covering, protecting, and it is hiding. Taking off the underwear is a behavior of exposing the self, being honest to another, and experiencing intimacy skin to skin. The underwear contains the identity, the familiarity, of a person.

In the artwork *Underaware*, I want to explore intimacy and tenderness by assembling personal objects and arrangements to tell stories of my love experiences as a Chinese gay man. Figure 18 is an individual piece from *Underaware*. I hand-dyed my boyfriend and my underwear in a washed red dye. The use of different values and hues of red implies the influence of the “gayness” of a person because some of my relationship partners claimed they were “straight” or “just curious”. The arrangement of the underwear is purposeful. The large-sized underwear is slightly covering the small-sized underwear, and the small one is leaning on the big one. The gesture suggests that they are two figures cuddling each other, an intimate moment that is shared by lovers. I letter stamped “Kiss Me” on the small underwear because as a gay man, my insecurity and demands are often shown vocally and hidden secretively. In the beginning, I included personal objects from the relationships in each piece. In this one, I originally included keys. A key usually mean access, belonging, and security. In this piece, the key represents a promise, a promise to build a home with each other. However, I felt the moment may be

overstated by including the objects, it broke down the balance and the imagination for the audiences. Therefore, I decided to remove some objects and keeping only two pieces with personal elements. All objects are framed in a white shadow box; it becomes a bed for two people, and it becomes a page of an intimate moment. The pure white square provides a structure and visually locks the moment for audiences to focus on the object itself, and the presentation is more inviting and solves the issue of touching. With the other six pages of my relationship status, *Underaware* is a series of work that expresses and discusses my personal moments with loved ones as a homosexual man.



Figure 18. *Underaware 6*, page of Artist's book, hand-dyed underwear with letter stamp foil in shadow box,

Jacob Wan, 2018

Using underwear as an art object is a metaphorical expression and has a special meaning to LGBTQ people. The underwear expresses the conflicts of my identity; it is a symbol of my gender, yet it is the same gender I am attracted to.

Dream

Despite increased tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality in western cultures, the dangers and harm to the LGBTQ community have not been solved yet. Homophobic violence, social anxiety, and internal struggles are damaging people's lives. According to Tanya Nystedt, Maria Rosvall, and Martin Lindstrom's research *Sexual Orientation, Suicide Ideation and Suicide Attempt: A Population-based Study* that "Sexual minorities have higher odds ratios of suicide ideation and attempts with bisexuals being particularly vulnerable, and bisexual women have the highest odds ratios. Only homosexual men, and not homosexual women, have higher odds ratios for suicide ideation and suicide attempt."²⁷ From the local massive shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL (a gay club where I met my boyfriend) to the Anti-Homo propaganda Laws to punish homosexual behaviors in Russia,²⁸ people tormented to death in Islamic societies,²⁹ this community is still being attacked by hatred. Compared to Taiwan's admittance of same-sex marriage in 2018, mainland China still holds an opposite attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community members. Muting online topics of homosexuality on social media, blurring rainbow

²⁷ Tanya Nystedt, Maria Rosvall, Martin Lindstrom, "Sexual Orientation, Suicide Ideation and Suicide Attempt: A Population-based Study," *Psychiatry Research* (ELSVEIER, 2019), 360.

²⁸ Cai Wilkinson, "Putting 'Traditional Values' Into Practices: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia," *Journal of Human Rights*, vol 13, issue 3, 2014.

²⁹ Nicole Kligerman, "Homosexuality in Islam: A Difficult Paradox," *Macalester Islam Journal*, vol. 2, issue. 3, 2007, 61.

flags and other LGBTQ+ elements on mass media, and limiting the promotion of LGBTQ+ education in schools.³⁰ I personally think these attitude are impacted by not only the Chinese government but it is also affected the international relationships. In order to maintain a safe and friendly border between Russia and neighboring countries that are predominately Muslim, China sides with their opinions on LGBTQ+ human rights.³¹ I feel the urge to speak for the group, comfort them, and remind people that hope exists. By sharing my experience of my journey to seek my identity through my artworks, I can empathize with others' pain, struggles, and fear; and I want to evoke a sense of personal importance and value. In a world with so many dangers, supporting the self supports the power of individuals.

In the third year of my MFA studies, I decided to revisit my previous works to create a more consistent body of work that connects my experiences as a whole. By reviewing the symbols in the works, I focused back on the rabbit. It contains further personal meaning to me, and the term “兔子” (Tu'zi, rabbit in Chinese) has been used as a slang to describe homosexuality in China, and originally it was a term used for male prostitutes. From my research, a Chinese folktale of a rabbit god “兔儿神”, is a Chinese deity who is in charge and controls homosexual male love. The story from *What the Master Would Not Discuss* (子不语), written by Yuan Mei during the Qing dynasty, talks about a man falling in love with another man

³⁰ Wei Wei, “The Normalization Project: The Progress and Limitations of Promoting LGBTQ Research and Teaching in Mainland China,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 67, 2018, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00918369.2018.1530883?casa_token=Ypl6cxqEwIYAAA%3A4GnBRV39jY4COJ0MZawtbOBI7OZUbXqccBCrYLfUyNYUYGkwM9NfRRnMQVhknv5JldBvs7nMQ5Nqlg. Accessed 7 Jan. 2020.

³¹ Nikita Sleptcov, “Pilitical Homophobia as a State Strategy in Russia,” *Journal of Global Initiatives*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2017, 155.

but is killed by homophobic violence and becomes a deity who protects homosexual male relationships.

Here is the story from Yuan Mei's *What the Master Would Not Discuss*,

“At the beginning of this dynasty, a censor had passed the imperial examination at a very young age and was selected as provincial governor of Fujian. A man named Hu Tianbao admired his handsome good looks, and every time the governor got onto the sedan chair to go on an inspection tour or took a seat in the main hall handling official business, Hu would be hanging around to sneak a look at him. The governor felt suspicious but couldn't imagine why Hu would behave like that. The other officials did not dare tell him the truth either. Before long, the governor travelled to another county to make inspections and Hu followed him. He furtively hid in the bathroom and, when the governor came in, he peeped at his buttocks. Even more suspicious now, the governor called Hu in and questioned him. Hu refused to reveal his reasons at first but, after he was beaten, he confessed: “Ever since I first saw you and noticed how handsome you are, I haven't been able to forget you, my lord. Even though I am well aware that you are [as beautiful] as the hade cherry bay in Heaven and therefore can't be inhabited by ordinary birds [like me], I am still crazy about you and can't help being so impertinent.” Enraged, the governor ordered Hu beaten to death under a decayed tree.

The following month, Hu appeared in a dream to a fellow villager and said: ‘I deserved to die, for I offended a nobleman with my deviant desire. But after all, I did love him very much and it was not just a temporary infatuation or illusion. I am not like some people who actually hurt others. In the netherworld, all the officials laughed at me, even

taunted me, but none of them felt angry with me. Now the government in the netherworld has conferred upon me the title 'Rabbit God' and I am mainly in charge of matters relating to men who love men in the world of the living. You can build a temple for me in order to attract people to offer me incense.' In Fujian, there is a custom of having a relationship with a male by becoming his adopted brother, so when the locals heard about the villager's dream, they all wanted to contribute money towards the building of the temple. Once the temple was built, it did in fact attract worshippers. Anybody who wished to have a clandestine love affair with another man, but couldn't, went to the temple to pray.

Cheng Yumen said: 'that governor hadn't read the book 'Springs and Autumns by Yanzi', which recommends that homosexual men not be executed: therefore, he punished the man far too harshly. Mr. Di Weiren was not at all like that. It was said that back when Di was working as a compiler for the Hanlin Imperial Academy, he was young and handsome. A young wagoner came to work for Di by driving his carriage. He was hardworking and careful and whenever Mr. Di gave him his salary, he never accepted it. Mr. Di was fond of him too. Soon, however, the wagoner became terminally ill and no doctor could cure him. Just as he was about to die, he asked for his master to come and told him: 'I have to tell you the truth before I die. The reason I have fallen ill and am now on the brink of death is all because I love your handsome face.' Mr. Di burst out laughing

and patted his shoulder, saying: ‘Silly servant! Why didn’t you tell me your feelings earlier?’ After the young man died, Di buried him with full ceremony.”³²

The rabbit is a feeble and fearful animal that often gets hunted by others and it has been used in many cultures and works in different meanings. Rabbit has been in the literary world since the early period; from Ancient Chinese tales of a rabbit lives on the moon and make immortal herb medicine³³ to reliefs of three hares in threefold rotational symmetry to present trinity.³⁴ Different myths of the jackalope, lucky rabbit feet, the jade rabbit, and there are many tales over the world that enriches the characteristics of the rabbit. In modern pop culture, rabbit symbols of vulnerability and sensuality, and it has been used as a sexual icon such as magazine *Playboy*, cartoon character Jessica Rabbit, and the image of pop singer Ariana Grade in music video *Dangerous Woman*. As a popular element, the rabbit contains many different meanings, and I seek the significations to me. With the mixed culture experiences from my background, I agree with Roberson and McDaniel that “hybridity can be especially dramatic in the art of recently arrived immigrants or those who live along borders or in places where strong ethnic enclaves exist side by side.”³⁵ Therefore, creating my own vision of a rabbit character with layers

³² Yuan Mei, *What the Master Would Not Discuss*, translated by Paolo Santangelo, Brill, 2013, p. 930-932.

³³ Xianghua Sun, “The Cultural Implication of the Chinese Lexicon Containing ‘Moon’,” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol.6, no.12, Academy Publication, 2016, www.academypublication.com/ojs/index.php/tpls/article/view/tpls061223042308/992. Accessed 24 Dec. 2019.

³⁴ Felice Naomi Wonnenberg, “How Do The Rabbits Get Into The Synagogue? From China via Middle East and Germany to Galizia: On the Tracks of The Rotating Rabbits Symbol,” *The Hare Project Research Group*, 2012, www.sites.google.com/site/felicenaomi/videosandfilms3. Accessed 7 Jan. 2020.

³⁵ Jean Roberson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 73.

of different meanings from different references to reflect my experiences and understanding of life to bring awareness and sympathy of others is my intention.

Growing up as a gay boy, the bed has become a safe place to be away from the outside and immerse myself into fantasies. It is a utopia and comfort zone for hiding and avoiding the attention of hatreds; seeking and imagining the demands that are not allowed by society. The lonesomeness and imagination of ideal love has developed in me the habit of introspection before sleep, and the subconscious thoughts are the materials that I am seeking. With my interest of reintroducing rabbit and moon in my work, I want to make the page vague, raw, and honest.



Figure 19. *Late Night* (installation), Artist's book, installation, hand-dyed bed sheets, threads, letter stamp foil, paints, Jacob Wan, 2018

The bedsheet has become the second skin, the closest layer to the body. Besides the psychological moments, the sheet also carries fragments of skin, hair, and body fluid, the physical evidence of the identity. It becomes a page that records time, thoughts, and dreams; demounting the protection, decompressing the tensions, and immersing into consciousness. The idea of using bedsheets is inspired by the private experiences of avoiding reality. Creating a book to express this feeling, I intend to make an installation book of bedsheets (Figure 19). According to Johanna Drucker, “Artist’ books take every possible form, participate in every possible convention of book making, every possible “ism” of mainstream art and literature, every possible mode of production, every shape, every degree of ephemerality or archival durability,”³⁶ and I believe a large scaled book is able to convey my emotions of longing. The sheets were washed, dried, and slept on, and the marks and histories were left on originally. Washing down the red pigment and dye those sheets in different shades to build up different textures, and I continually react to them by rinsing or adding more dyes base on the surface. I kept the sheets in faded red, a pinkish tone instead of bright red because of how the society has been trying to erase the existence of the LGBTQ+ identity, and it is similar to the color often reflected in gender stereotypes.³⁷ Working in between two sheets which allows me to work back and forth without stacking or overworking, and I can respond to pieces flexibly. On top of the sheets, I used different techniques such as sewing, painting, letter stamping, etc. The different colors of the threads relate to the other bodies of work, and they present different relations or identity roles based on the colors. Thoughts of love, family, and the ideal. A transformation from a thread to a

³⁶ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, Granary Books, 1995, 14.

³⁷ Willemijn Drost, “A Study in Pink and Other Feminine Stereotypes,” *University of Twente*, 2013, www.essay.utwente.nl/63823/1/MSc_Willemijn_Drost.pdf. Accessed 7 Jan. 2020.

rabbit was stitched with three colors, the lighter to darker shades forming the rabbit shows the stronger emotion. The moon appears in different sheets in different ways; the golden threaded moon is the dream weaved by the dreamer, the red moon was painted by watercolor which implies the moon in the water is uncatchable, and the golden moon with letter presents the faraway hope. Keeping the silhouette to hiding the representation and providing mystery and intimacy. It reduces the distance between the audiences and the art to create a closer connection. The crossing of rabbits and figures are merging which building up the relation mentally, and the narrative is discovered by the illustrated images. In figure 20, a rabbit looking at the moon, an implication of seeking for hope and wishing for the ideal. People's life experience can be damaged by ignorance and misconception. As a person who has faced those challenges, I want to express that hope exists. It is a goal we set for ourselves, and a destination that we are working towards. Believing in the self is a power to continue living in the world and reduce harm from the outside.



Figure 20. *Late Night*, page of Artist's book, installation, hand-dyed bed sheets, threads, letter stamp foil, paints,
Jacob Wan, 2018

I have been lost, confused, and perplexed in life from my identity, and art has helped me understand the importance of introspection and self-worth. By reviewing the past, solitude allows me to have a better understanding of the reasons for my behaviors, thoughts, and motivations in specific situations. It benefits me in many ways, personally and professionally, physically and psychologically. Through making this bedsheet book, I intend to deliver a message of the importance of having hopes and believing in the self.

CHAPTER FOUR

Book as space

I make traditional and nontraditional artist's books. I enjoy practicing the process of handmaking paper and stitching them into a bounded book. Also, I like to challenge the idea of what a book can be by making sculptural book-objects with unusual materials.

The book is an important and meaningful format of a narrative, a memory, or a moment. The journey is sealed behind the cover, and reading a book is an intimate behavior between the reader and the story. Usually, a book only allows one audience at a time to immerse into the storyline by reading through it; after finishing the book, the audience leaves the emotions and moods behind with the book when they close it and put it back. I, personally, always enjoy this moment; the book is like a gate to a rabbit hole of wonders, it is a utopia of otherness, and it is a paradise to escape from reality. Johanna Drucker's statement that, "...every book is a metaphor, an object of associations and history, cultural meanings and production values, spiritual possibilities and poetic spaces, and all of these are a part of the field from which the artist's book derives its identity, its shared connections and distinguishing features as a book whose realized form and thematic intentions are only the most evident aspects of its totality as an idea."³⁸ The idea starts with lifting up the cover, then carries the emotion with the book through the last page until the cover is shut. There is a sense of ceremony in the action of opening and closing the book. It drives curiosity and enriches the content when the reader flips the cover over. Closing the cover allows the reader to exit the mood and leave it behind with the book.

³⁸ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, Granary Books, 1995, 42.

Incorporating this action, I am interested to work on the idea of “book as space”, with multimedia book installations that evoke a dreamlike atmosphere in a physical space to invoke the action of reading a book. There are elements which visually bind different types of books together and allows an audience to read the whole installation as a completed book. Drucker also says that,

“the layering of pages is an emphatic recognition of the standardized features of construction and a thorough deconstruction of the conventional flat surface of the sheet. The page’s flatness is now actual and literal rather than merely serving as a visual support for illusion... Conventions of bookness become subject matter – a turning page becomes a physical, sculptural element rather than an incidental activity. Linear sequence becomes spatialized. Surface pattern transforms into height and depth, channels of access and areas of blockage, which read simultaneously as a visual pattern and a shaped form. The fact that the work is bound goes beyond mere convenience of constraint and fastening and becomes a means to articulate these relations.”³⁹

Audiences would experience a space as a book. Starting the journey when they enter the space; may terminate the journey when they exit the space. The installation book is activated by the behavior of the audience. They would discover evidence and fragments through the journey to complete the storyline. The positions of the artworks, the walls, and the paths are pages that in a way the audiences can stitch together with each step.

³⁹ Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, Granary Books, 1995, 74.

Many artists work with spaces and site-specific installations to creating environments that deliver their messages. Ann Hamilton has been one of my favorites because of the maturity and thoughtfulness of her artworks. Ann Hamilton is an interdisciplinary artist who creates large scale, interactive multimedia installations. After graduating from Yale University, Hamilton has been working with different cities over the world to build site-specific installations that are dedicated to the history of the cities. With a background in textiles, she uses it as a media to bind the audiences, herself, and art in an immersive experience. In her work *The Event of A Thread* (Figure 21), she took over a 55,000 square feet space in Park Avenue Armory and delivered a multi-sensory experience. An enormous, white curtain was hung from the ceiling and attached to several swings. The participants would sit on the swing and the action of the swing would pull the curtain to create movements. There were writers writing texts on one side of the space and readers reading the texts on another side. The readers' voices were heard through a speaker, which was hidden in a paper bag that the audiences could carry around. Several ways to experience the installation: walking through space, laying down under the curtain to listen to the movement, and swinging along with joy. At a moment, cages of pigeons were released and flying freely in the building. The different actions and behaviors of the audiences were weaving the piece as a whole. Identifying herself as a reader, Hamilton wanted to emphasize the idea of crossing; the swing and the curtains were the threads cross each other to weave cloth, the audience crosses the installation as the bodies cross space, and the writers and the readers were pages across messages. The audiences, the texts, the sounds, and the movements that made the piece change day-by-day, the different moments cross each other to evoke a nostalgic emotion of the past. The activities of reading, crossing, and walking around mimic the experience of the city

and the life in the city. Hamilton intended to use the metaphor of weaving the cloth to imply the relation in humans, that the whole is made of the different lines. It is a gathering of individuals and using the event as a social act to weave everyone together, her understanding of the impression of New York City.



Figure 21. *The Event of A Thread*, installation, Ann Hamilton, 2012, Park Avenue Armory, photo by Thibault

Jeansen

www.annhamiltonstudio.com/projects/armory.html

Inspired by the connections and relationship between the arts and humans, I intended to include the idea of working with space to activate the sense of a book, and the audience can experience the book freely and consciously. As Spector says,

“The reader’s passage through a book is a repetitive activity, with a great many sweeping and attentive gazes leading to somewhat fewer turnings of pages. We call deluxe precisely those volumes that supplement mere cognition with a rhetoric of apprehension and handling. The whole book can only be known if we add the knowledge of the hand, ear, and nose to that of the eye. This is not a trivial point: a book that cannot comfortably be held; or which stinks of mildew; or whose pages crumble when turned, will be more difficult to read very well.”⁴⁰

Titling my MFA thesis exhibition *Party for One*, my intension is threading my concepts, my works, and the exhibition together. As the first one-person exhibition, *Party for One* would be the Vol. 1 of my solo exhibitions. With the subject matter of solitude, party is the celebration for the lonesome, and one is similar pronunciation with my last name Wan. Vol. 1, *Party for One*, by Jacob Wan will be the implication of my bodies of work. I have planned to curate the exhibition as a book of my growth, a three-chapter book that records my lostness, loneliness, and awareness. With the space I have been assigned, I have designed three rooms with three bodies of work. From the isolation of being other, the apartness of being away from loved ones, to the singlehood of seeking for the ideal love; I desire to use layers of stories to expose my individual experience as a gay, as an Asian, as a man in books in order to share and empathize my vulnerabilities with audiences.

Soft Biter is the beginning chapter (Figure 22), the room includes the symbol of the rabbit and explores the social standards of “good” and “bad”. With the entrance on the right bottom corner, the audience would read the statement to have a brief idea of the content about the

⁴⁰ Buzz Spector, *The Book Maker’s Desire*, Umbrella Editions, 1995, 75.

exhibition, and then they would split to view different pieces based on their preference. Two figure paintings hang on both sides of the pom-pom installation to create the contrast of “good” and “bad”. The lines of yarn create a directional force that leads the audiences’ view of the rabbit mask in the center and continually moves to the book, which is across the room. The rabbit painting and the rabbits in the glass cases are located on the opposite sides of the room, and they can interact with each other to build a loop to enrich the connection between the figure and the rabbit. In this chapter, I intend to bring awareness to school bullying that was caused by the social standards of “good” and “bad”.

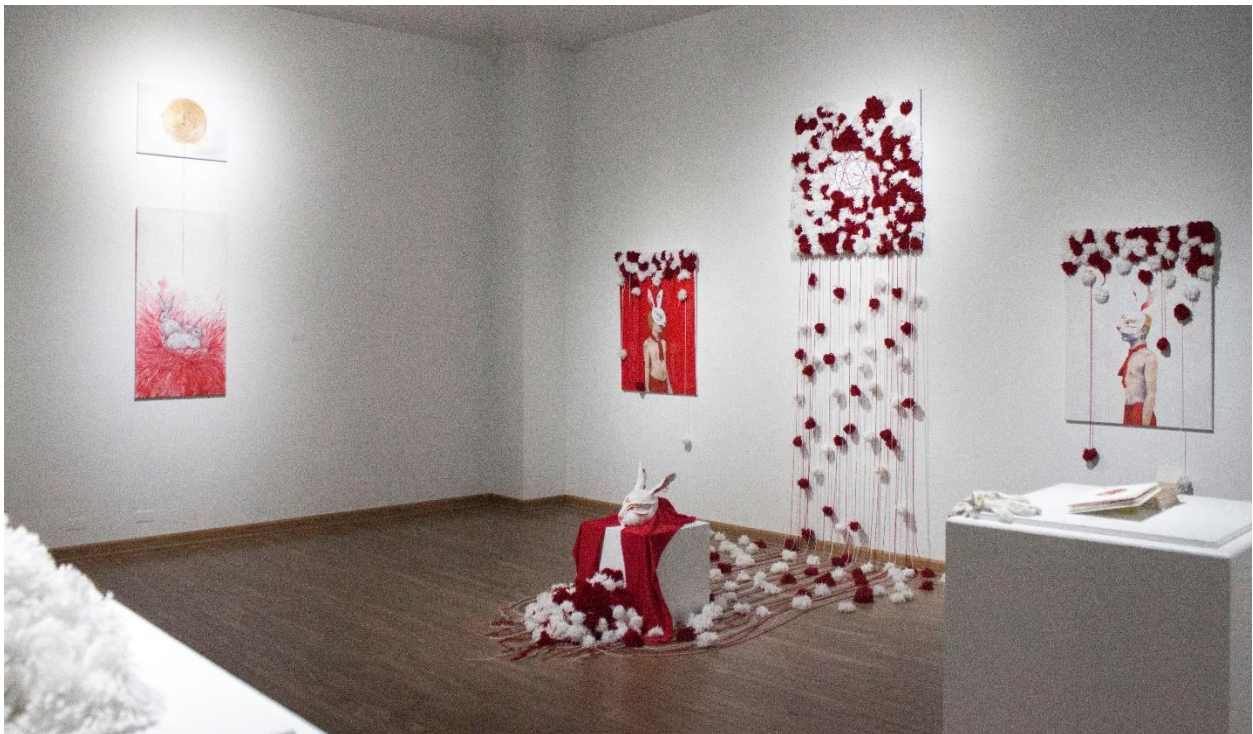


Figure 22. gallery layout (*Soft Biter*)

Entering the second room (Figure 23), this chapter contains the memories of my hometown. Being away from the place where I grew up, there are things I miss and not miss. I miss the surroundings: the trees, hills, and rivers; but I do not miss the characters of small-town people: gossipy, closed-minded, and exclusive. The scroll book installation in the middle records fragments of my life back in my hometown. I rearranged them with narratives and transferred them with iron-on paper. Placing this installation in the middle of the room to part childhood and adulthood builds a division. The audience is allowed to walk through the space to read the stories. Depending on which side they start with; it could go with the *Secrette* (see Figure 14) wall of the battle between the ideal or reality, or the book *Leaves* (see Figure 10) of my memories of my childhood with my cousins in my hometown. This chapter expresses my struggle of the self with the family, a sign of transferring between boyhood and manhood.

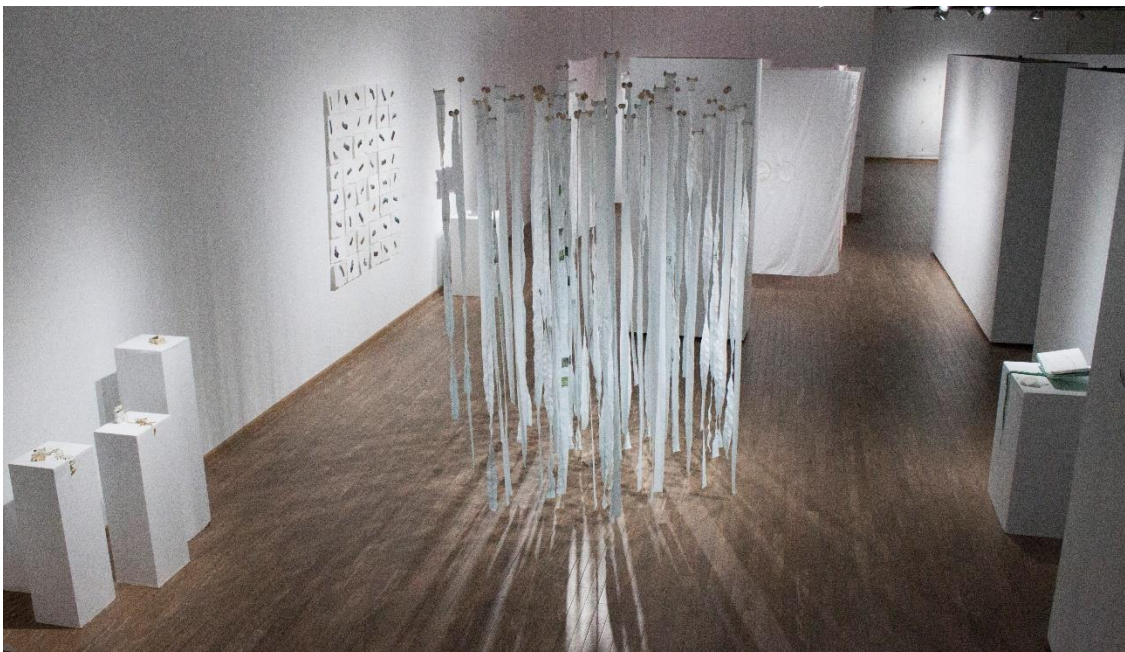


Figure 23. gallery layout (*Shade*)

Chapter 3 (Figure 24) is a room of my bedroom, my private consciousness, and my seeking of the ideal love. It is a chapter that records my secrets, desires, and dirtiness. By opening the room with bedsheets hanging from the ceiling, I intended to use layers to create a sense of loss, searching, or hiding. Like identity, it is a continued seeking process. The bedsheets move when the audience walks in between them. It is like hugging and it is like running. These sheets are double-sided and can be read back and forth. The audience can connect the pages with their imagination. On the left side of the space, *Underaware* (see figure 18) is displayed to share the deeper emotions of my romantic experience, which discusses the difficulty about finding an ideal; and on the right side, *Pillowtalk* (see Figure 8) represents the internal dialog of “if the soulmate or Mr. Right exists?” These two bodies of works are the reflection of each other, the external contact with others and the internal demands of the self. I am eager to discuss the importance of the self, and how the ideal has motivated me to keep hoping and working towards my wishes. In this room, I want to share my consciousness of self-love and belief in self is the most important thing we need to have in mind.



Figure 24. gallery layout (*Boy and Moonlight*)

By dividing my thesis works in three chapters chronologically, I believe it helps to provoke the audience's curiosity for the narrative, build layers of the progressive mood, and revealing the messages with the imagined pages in the art form of a book. The storyline stays clear as the audience passes through each room, and the atmosphere maintains emotions in the individual chapter. "Sequence can function meaningfully outside of narrative structures" and "Sequence works as a framework within which each element or page make a contribution and has a place" is stated by Drucker in *The Century of Artists' Books*. The sequence of the rooms, artwork, and space is designed to create an atmosphere of seeking and hiding for the audience to walk through.

In my art, I explore this idea by revisiting the loneliness in me from different perspective and creating books that respond to these moments. I am curious about the power behind solitude

and interested in how it can help me, or others, be a better individual for themselves. I believe that we can balance the human psyche by reflecting on ourselves from the past and projecting a prospective future. Roberson and McDaniel state that,

“History refers to a recording and analysis of the past, performed from a perspective that aims for factuality, even neutrality,” and “memory itself has been the subject of research in an enormously broad range of fields, including behavioral neuroscience, cognitive psychology, animal conditioning, history, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and archaeology.”⁴¹

I desire to speak for the otherness, lostness, and fragility as a storyteller through my book arts. In this graduate program, starting with the idea of bringing more awareness to the social issue of school bullying, youths’ mental health, and the gender issue of identity and sexuality, I was able to have a deeper conversation with myself. Creating *Secrettes* and *Leaves* to express the powerless and separateness as an individual from growing up; the nostalgia of the free careless childhood in China; the internal battle of an ideal of reality. From the careless, hoping for the future, and purity of boyhood to adulthood, growing up - a fact that we cannot reject. From there, I am able to analyze my behaviors to clarify my desires and motivations and create a dialogue within the self. From *Underaware* and *bedsheets* book, I am able to think from others’ perspectives; reflecting on my own emotions; and realizing the importance of self and others, the importance of individual self-determination and self-expression. It is important for people to remember or understand who they are in a world full of different opinions. If we carry sympathy

⁴¹ Jean Roberson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 184.

and look over other's vulnerability, I believe it will create a better society, a living space, and a world for everyone. With empathy, it can help an individual to sense their own tenderness, cherish their existence, and empower their own values. The power to understand and love the self.

A book is an expression of emotions, a book is a sequence of consciousness, and a book is a collection of moments. A book is similar to a human. Human beings are made of fragments of memories; a human is a book of countless memories. The cover is the appearance, the title is the name, and the pages are the memories. The writing starts the second we are born, and the last period ends at the moment we leave the world. Life is a book of marks that we make and evidence that shows who we are. The memories are recorded consciously and unconsciously. Some of them we keep precious and some stain the pages even when we try to erase them. These unconscious memories appear constantly and unwarily are clues to identity and a chance that these memories reflect the information that helps us to develop a more complete self-awareness.⁴² They are the parts of us that we are not familiar with or aware of, they are the undiscovered identity. Books provided companionship and imagination, and loneliness has taught me to question these memories to review the past from another perspective and look for the unconsciousness consciously in my personal and artistic practice.

Party For One is a book of an exhibition, a book of a collection of three stories, and it is a book of a lonely Chinese gay man, yet he accompanies himself.

⁴² Jean Roberson and Craig McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 55.

CONCLUSION

Being a member of LGBTQ+ community, I have experienced the different social attitudes from the different cultures. I believe that there are many individuals who share my characteristics and have been in similar situations. I sympathize with the people who have been struggling with their identity, and I empathize with those who have been questing and lost in life.

Through using the materiality of the book, I visualize personal narratives to familiarize my audience with the concepts to convey the emotion of longing. From more traditional books such as *Pillowtalk* and *Leaves*, to book-like objects in the cigarette boxes series and *Underaware*, and book installations, I have experimented with different materials and elements to seek clarity of the self. In my books, I intend to bring awareness to the importance of the self. Identity is stitching the moments together through one's consciousness with introspection to combine as a complex whole. As an individual, besides keeping equal relationships with others, we need to maintain a healthy relationship with the self. Being alone is not necessarily being lonely and being lonely is not being abandoned. It is an opportunity to be solitary, sensitive with awareness, and host a conversation with the self. Humans are lonely, and I make a collection of loneliness into books. A book is a collection of moments and a human is a collection of memories.

I am a contemporary bookbinder who creates conceptual books to celebrate solitude and express the importance of oneself through exploring sexuality, cultural influence, and introspection.

A human is a book.

Life is a book.

APPENDIX: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION LETTERS

RE: Request for permission.



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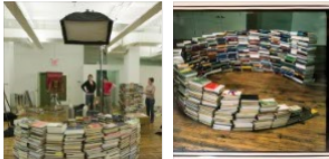


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3/2/2020 12:50 PM



To: Zhefu Wan

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Dear Zhefu Jacob Wan,

The Santa Reparata International School of Art forwarded to me your request for permission to use an image of me with my 2007 installation, *Big Red C*. The image in your message is a screen grab from "The Rise and Fall of Books," Jake Gorst's film about me and that installation project. I'm happy to offer my permission for you to use the image, but please include information about the film in your listing of photographs. Also attached are two other photographs, both of which I made, from that installation. One is a cellphone pic of the 20x24 Polaroid camera and crew as we prepared to make the photo edition accompanying the book structure. The second is a photograph of one example from that edition, to be credited like this:

Buzz Spector

Big Red C, 2007 [Edition: 40]

Interior dye diffusion print (Polaroid)

Image size: 20 x 24 inches

All best wishes for a successful completion of your writing,

Buzz Spector

Re: Request for Permission.



Neve McNamara
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Hi Jacob,

Thanks for getting in touch. I can't find the image below in our files and so therefore don't think it's ours and unfortunately can't give you permission to use.

I have attached an alternative, which is one of our images, which you can use if the following credit is included:

Chiharu Shiota, Beyond Time, 2018. White thread, metal piano, musical notes. Copyright VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2018 and the artist. Courtesy Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Photo © Jonty Wilde

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