

Spring 2021

Surface, Depth and the Ephemeral Experience

Naghmeh Hachempour

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SURFACE, DEPTH AND THE EPHEMERAL EXPERIENCE

by

NAGHMEH HACHEMPOUR

(Under the Direction of Jason Hoelscher)

ABSTRACT

Music has long been an important medium for fulfilling and expressing emotional needs. In fact, music can become a powerful tool to create emotional responses in humans, such as happiness, sadness, awareness, as we see in recent decades in cinema, social media and advertisement. Today, a combination of different media is used to arouse our emotion and feeling, but often music has been used to accompany a visual realization, rather than vice versa. In my work I explore new modes of communication between people and sound by transfiguring music notation to a visual graphic. The scope and scale of my work ranges from miniature individual components to artworks the size of a room. Through my realization, the technique that I use permits me to play with images in the way that musicians play with sounds. In this paper, I introduce this new language, which is an art form based on unlimited combinations of simple elements that are capable of expressing a broad range of human emotion and experience.

INDEX WORDS: Music, Emotion, Communication, Music notation, Visual graphic, Human emotion, Experience

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by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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SURFACE, DEPTH AND THE EPHEMERAL EXPERIENCE

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May 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest appreciation to my husband, Saman, who has been by my side throughout my journey, encouraging, struggling, and overcoming along with me. Thank you for everything you have done.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*A music is energy transferred from where the composer got it... by way of the music itself, all the way over to, the listener.*¹

One and a half years ago, I started a project focused on communication. The objective was to improve the way that we transmit information through visual signs and symbols to create meaning. In addition to language, we unconsciously get information from our surrounding environment. Think about the rustling of leaves for a minute. The gentle swishing sound of rustling leaves is sometimes referred to as psithurism, which means whispering. Psithurism has inspired many writers and poets over the ages, such as John Muir and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. As with other artists, writers and poets, a composer is influenced by his surrounding environment. He starts to create a new structured conversation with the listener. I have been influenced by music composers more than with the music of nature, and I think it is only because I am familiar with and I consider the music theory as if it was a language of communication. In consequence, I can feel the intent of the composer better than the nature itself.

The foundation of what I create is what I hear. But not exactly. I don't create my work like a synesthete artist. Synesthete artists are inspired by what they hear while listening to the music but in my work, I use the manuscript paper² of each piece of music and translate each

¹ "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it... by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader." Charles Olson

² Music manuscript is any system used to visually represent aurally perceived music played with instruments or sung by the human voice using written, printed, or otherwise-produced symbols, including notation for durations of absence of sound such as rests. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_notation

component into a visual element. Each visual element functions as a single distinct meaningful element to form a visual language. This art form is called Lumia. Lumia permits visual artists to play images in the way that musicians play sound. As Adrian Klein described “*Form, color and motion are three basic factors in Lumia — as in all visual experience — and form and motion are the two most important*”.³ Though the idea of creating Lumia has a long historical tradition, modern graphically based computers make it possible to design instruments for creating Lumia that are more flexible and easier to play than at any previous time in history of art.⁴

As an introductory example of this, and of my working approach in general, consider my work, *The Meadow* (figure 2). The intent with this piece was to create an artwork that can be read like a story book along with the music. The smallest component is a cube. The cube rotates in different ways and at any positions it illustrates a particular note. The juxtaposition of these cubes creates motion in a certain way like a traditional animation or a zoetrope. I arranged the cube to be read from left to right or right to left due to the fact that reading from down to up is difficult to keep up. After creating multiple pieces, I realized that from a distance, the whole piece (the meadow) doesn't manifest or reveal anything about the context of the piece. It is only when you get close up that it becomes meaningful. This fact bothered me. The whole piece needed to communicate aside from the cube reading. In order to do that, I needed to break some rules that I had made and focus not only on the details, but on the overall form of the piece. This was a distinct shift in my recent work, which has had major effects on my artistic approach.

³ Collopy, Fred. “Color, Form, and Motion: Dimensions of a Musical Art of Light.” *Leonardo*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2000, pp. 355–360. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1576878.

⁴ Klein, Adrian Bernard. “Colour-Music: The art of Light.” *London: Crosby Lockwood & Son*, 1930, p.195

CHAPTER 2

INSPIRATION

1. The Meadow by Alexandre Desplat

The movie starts with a panorama of greenery and sequoia trees in Oregon and British Columbia, with a romantic orchestral score. The temperature of the music is light and pure. After watching the whole movie, I replayed this scene of great trees again and again. The scene and the symphony were harmonized and unified. Whenever I cannot get a piece of music off my mind, I check the music score just out of curiosity to see what it looks like, and then I read it while listening along.



*Figure 1 Landscape Scene*⁵

Music sheets are aesthetically pleasant to me. I think watching many small dots that become significant only because of their location and their relationships is interesting. In this music sheet I could see repetition, legato, few crescendo and decrescendo. The graphic appearance of the music sheet is as clear and simple as the movie scene. In order to bring the same feeling into my work, I needed first to make it simple to read. In addition to that, the

⁵ <http://twilightgirlportland.com/twilight-edwards-reveal-filmed-in-six-locations/>

arrangement needed to be free of ambiguities and different interpretations. I tried different ways, but the simplest method to read the piece was from left to right and right to left. The use of only four colors offered a clarity that helped the viewer to follow and to reduce any distraction at the same time. As a result, my piece *The Meadow* looks minimal because of the use of pure geometric form, the arrangement and the limitation of colors.

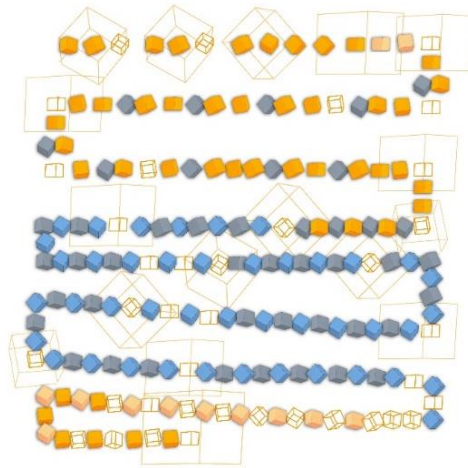


Figure 2 *The Meadow*

2. Lalaland Epilogue by Justin Hurwitz

Lalaland was composed by the American composer Justin Hurwitz. Like the beginning of a film or novel, the music starts with an introduction to catch the listener’s attention—music has a verse and an outro as well. The verse of a musical piece is where the composer tells the story. The outro is the end of the music. Lalaland is a musical work that we can easily distinguish with these phases. I decided to work on the first 1 minute and 26 seconds of the entire “Epilogue” track, as played by David MacDonald.⁶ The composer plays a lot with the tempo and dynamic marks, so navigating one’s way into it is not that difficult. In my triptych *Lalaland* piece I

⁶ <https://youtu.be/wHF-D08gDGI>

separated these phases into different panels. Each panel represents a phase and has its own color palette.

The first panel (figure 3) is the intro, and the colors are pale and subtle, and the cubes are distinctly scattered as if they just landed on the canvas. Cubes are the storyteller in the piece. They try to reunite to communicate with us. The cubes become more saturated and bolder at the end of the sheet to indicate their departure to the next phase with an *accelerando* tempo. This panel equates to one minute of music.

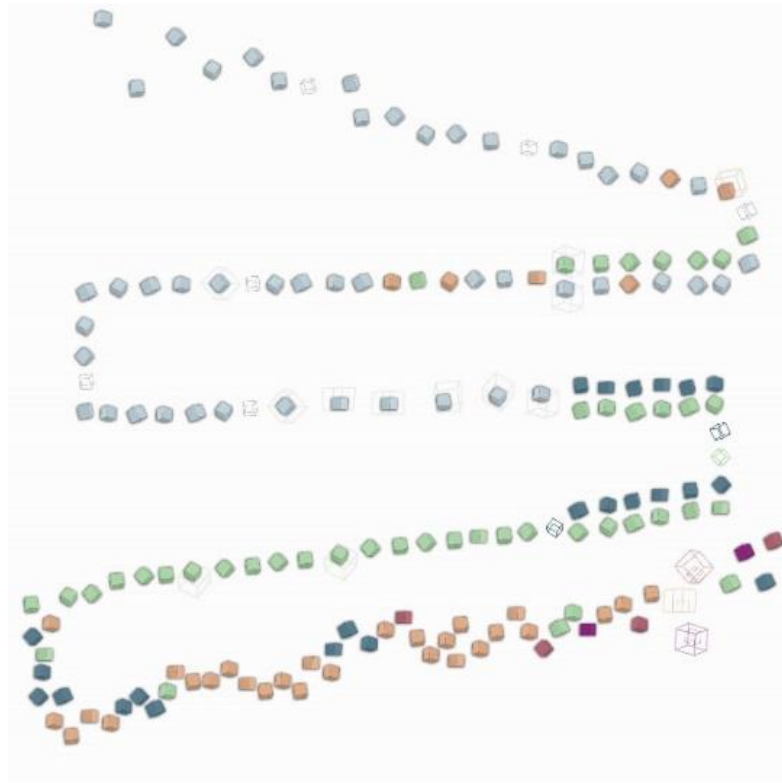


Figure 3 Lalaland (first panel)

The second panel (figure 4) represents only 12 seconds of music. The cubes flow freely in the second panel compared to the first one. The cubes enter from the left and exit to the right

to the next panel. This panel represents just a few seconds of music, and the tempo goes faster. The colors needed to be saturated here, since this part of the music is played Forte and Allegro (very vivid forms of playing). The cubes are scattered on the panel in a certain way, and at the end of this phase the cubes become more isolated to show their departure.

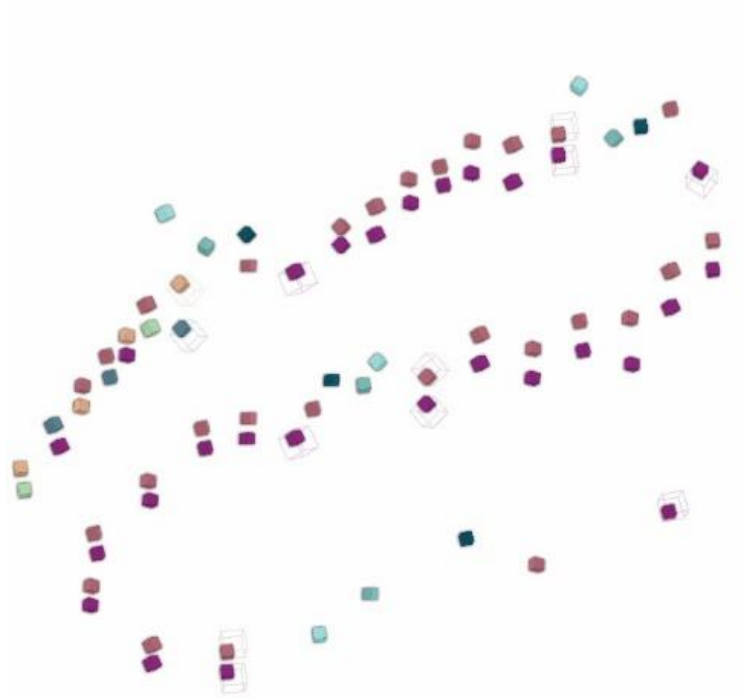


Figure 4 Lalaland (second panel)

The last panel (figure 5) starts at the 1:12 minute mark and ends at 1:26 minutes. The rhythm goes faster, and it is even more vivid and brilliant. The music becomes more energetic with a lot of staccatos, meaning it is performed with each note sharply detached or separated from the others. I had never created this musical articulation before. Staccatos need to remain sharp and bold, so I thought duplication would help to represent this articulation, since we often use repetition as emphasis. In this panel the smaller cubes are the staccatos, and the overall form has a curved shape that looks like a river that goes up from the left and exits the panel to the

bottom. Most of my work does not have termination or a full stop at the end, which helps to leave room for future development.

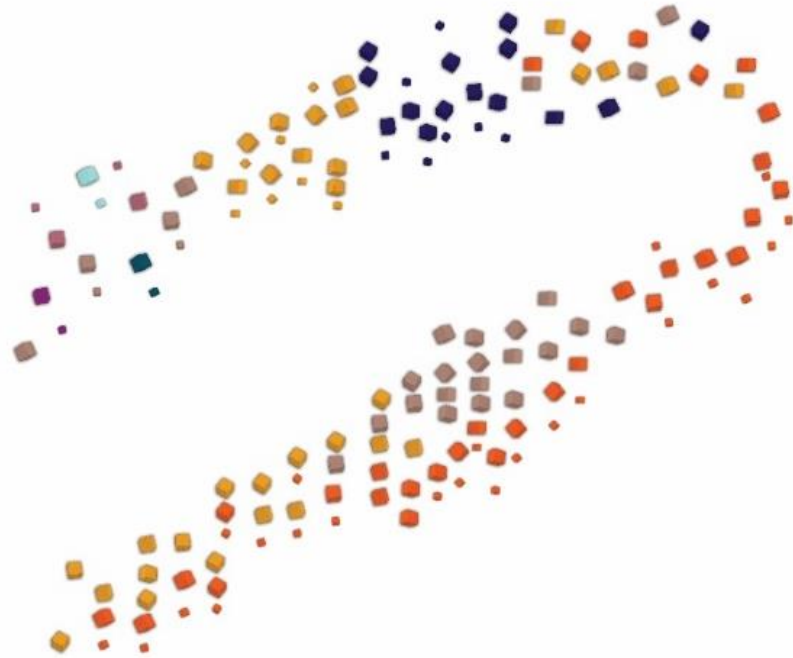


Figure 5 Lalaland (third panel)

3. The Light of the Seven by Ramin Djawadi

One of the musical works that I have been inspired is *The Light of the Seven*, a ten minute long orchestral symphony. The image on the album cover is a hall of 6 faces. The music is mysterious and dramatic, and has many silent notes and pause. I had not had so many silent notes in my previous work, and I needed to explore how it would look on a sheet of paper. In this work I used cool and dry colors, similar to the album cover. The music's theme has many ups and downs, and conveys a sentiment of continuous trouble. A knot was the idea that came to me, for how this music feels. I searched and checked different types of knots, and chose the bowline knot, which is also called the king of knots (figure 6). The bowline has the clearest rope

circulation compare than other knots. I have made an animation for this work, in which the tenuto notes and the legato articulation, while having a cube navigating on the screen without interruption, are palpable.

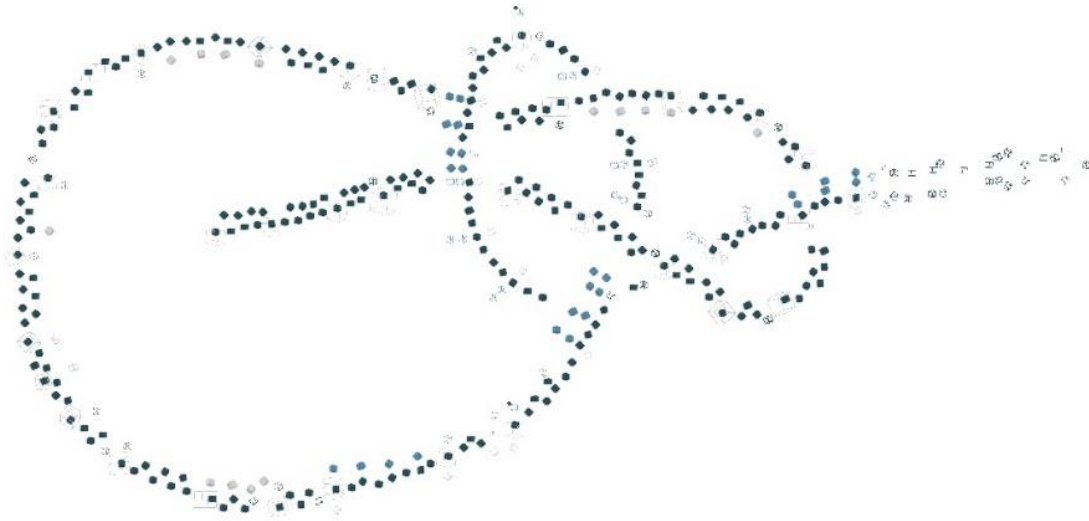


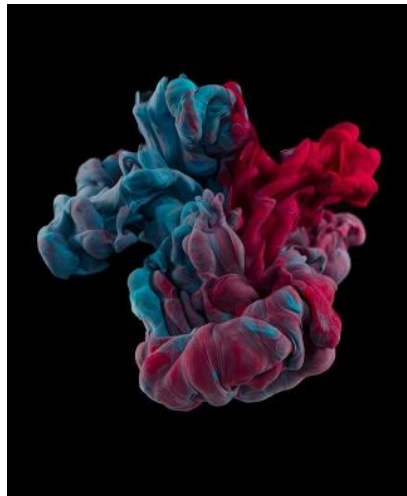
Figure 6 The king of knots

4. Now We Are Free

Now We Are Free is composed by Hans Zimmer and it has been created for the *Gladiator* movie. The music is soft and melancholic. The desire for freedom is what I could feel in this music. I tried to find a way to show this feeling, and I thought of an ink drop. An ink drop disperses when it touches the surface of the water, and to me it represents freedom in a sense. While researching, I came across the work of an Italian graphic designer and photographer named Alberto Seveso. He stated that he was inspired by the art on album covers of heavy metal albums and skateboard decks, and he decided to create similar art by pouring ink into water⁷. The

⁷ Tirosh, Udi. “Beautiful High Speed Photographs of Ink and Water”, *DiyPhotography*, April 2014, <https://www.diyphotography.net/beautiful-high-speed-photographs-ink-water/>

images seem surreal and open to interpretation, and the mix of different colors creates a texture that reminds me of fumes (figures 7 and 8). After experimenting with ink and water, I tried to replicate the motion of the ink's dispersion by placing the cubes in different ways on the canvas, using the cubes in different scales to give an impression of floating cubes in the air (figure 9). Some cubes are more translucent than others, which helps me to create new colors from those I have used in previous pieces. The path of the music in this piece does not seem to be as clear as in my other work, but the arrangement of the cube are made from right to left which is the same way that we read in English.



Figures 7 Photography by Alberto Seveso



Figures 8 process of creation by Alberto Seveso

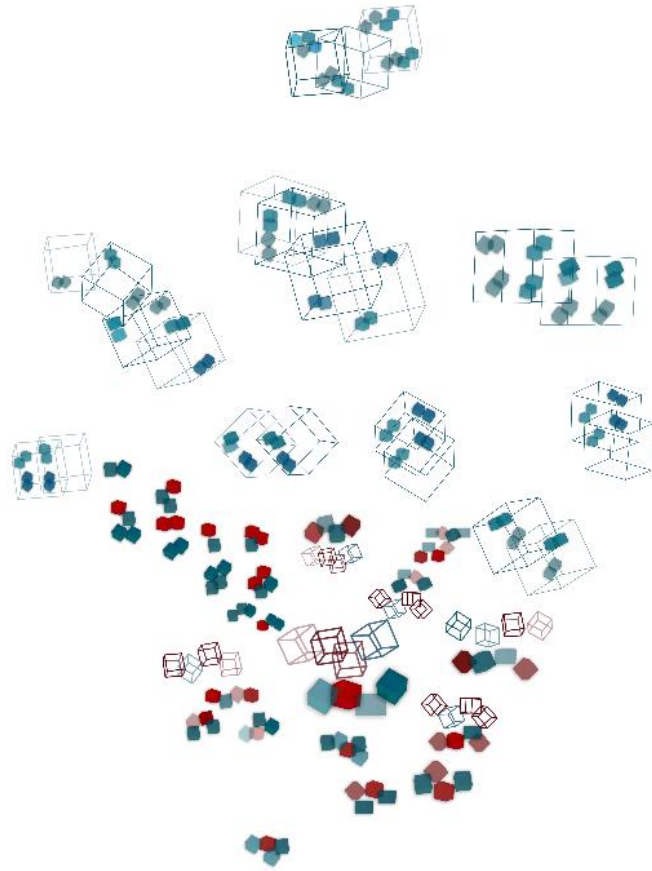


Figure 9 Now We Are Free

CHAPTER 3

TRANSFIGURATION FROM MUSIC NOTATION TO VISUAL GRAPHICS

In order to create a visual form of music I needed to study music theory thoroughly and find a way to correspond each musical component to its own visual component. To avoid complexity, I thought of using only one single shape, the cube. Cubes are simple, clear and pure. Cubes are just the right form to use. Six faces, twelve edges, and eight vertices that are the only things that I needed know. I visualize a cube as a floating element that plays different sounds in the air. The idea was to connect each music note to the position of the cube (figure 10). In the process of the experimentation and creation, I made more connections. The more connections I made, the more significant the artwork became.

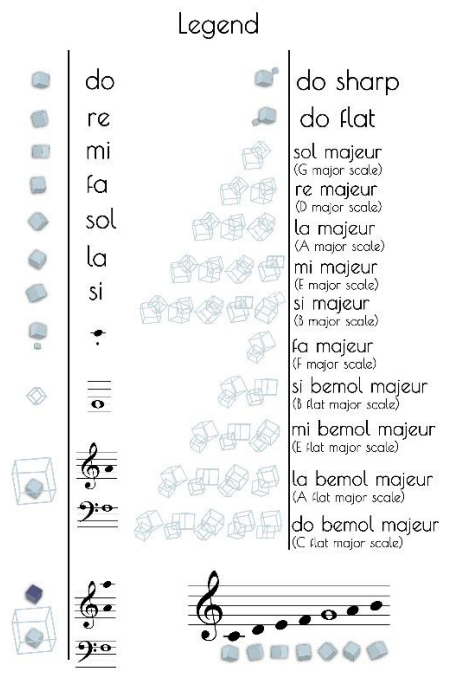


Figure 10 The Legend

After looking at some documents from my architectural studies I realized this was not the first time I had created a visual language from music notation. Fifteen years ago, when I was a sophomore in architecture, we had an assignment to design a residential building for someone who inspired us. I chose Schumann, a great composer in the history of music. The building I designed has a conceptual design, and the windows all the way around have a unique pattern created based on Schumann's music notation. The form and shape of the language is different than what I am creating right now, but the source of my inspiration is very similar.

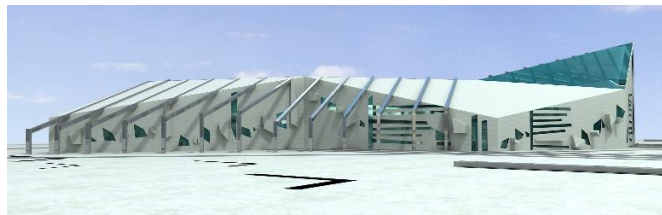


Figure 11 Schumann Elevation View

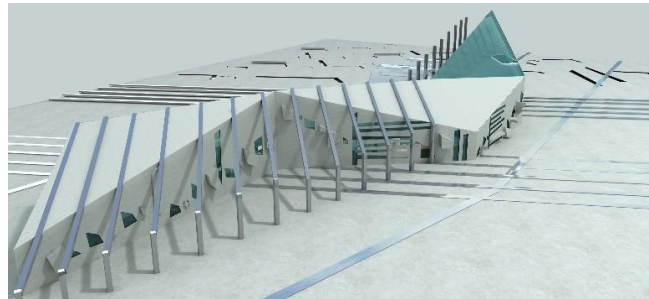


Figure 12 Schumann Bird View



Figure 13 Schumann Interior View

However, with my current work, the choice of cube was not immediate, and it took a while to figure out which form would be the right form. Below are some of my initial sketches, which would soon leave two dimensions to become three dimensional.

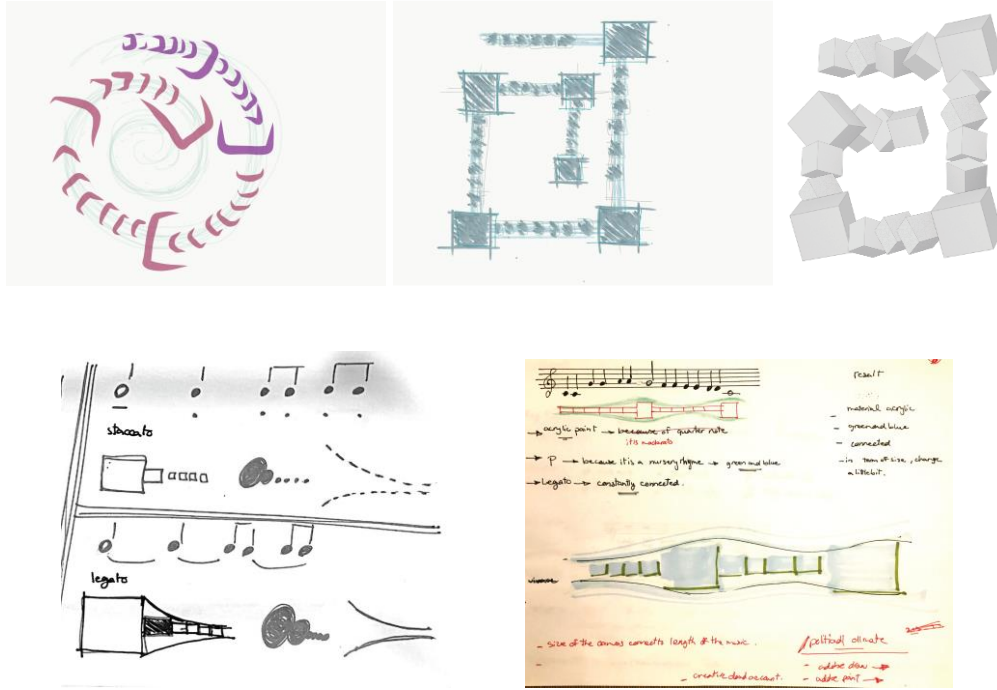


Figure 14 Initial Sketches

CHAPTER 4

3D REALIZATIONS

a. Autumn Leaves

My recent work *Autumn Leaves* (figure 15) uses a visual language of shape, form and color to create a composition that might exist with a degree of independence from visual references in the world.



Figure 15 *Autumn Leaves*

At first glance the figure might look like a leaf but in reality, *Autumn Leaves* represents the omnipresence of someone that we love, and we have lost. The arrangement of cubes and the use of the reflective materials creates a unique and evanescent experience. I wanted to incorporate light in this work, and my research in lighting led me first to a prism, and then to a holographic material.

I had not initially planned to use the holographic material in the way I ended up using it in this piece. After making these cubes out of plastic post jackets, I added the holographic material and started to move the cubes under a huge industrial light. The reflection created by the holographic material inside the cubes was intriguing and uncommon.



Figure 16 Autumn Leaves No. 2

I have always been inspired by perceptual artists because I like the way they challenge the viewer's boundaries, using multidimensional techniques in order to create three-dimensional renderings of flat images. I thought having the cubes arranged in many different directions (figure 16) would help to create a different perspective as the audience shifts, changing with their every movement, and as seen differently from every angle. Based on the feedback that I have received, I found out that each viewer has their own favorite view, and likes to stand from a specific place to observe the piece.

b. River

Aluminum is an interesting material to work with. It is sharp and soft. It reacts differently depending on how we use it. I decided to make some small cubes with this material. I cut the aluminum with a jewelry shear and I used a bending brake to create the edges. This part of the process was very meditative for me. I bent aluminum for nine hours in the jewelry studio over the course of one day. It demands a lot of concentration, because I needed to focus on positioning these small pieces of aluminum perfectly in the machine to create identical forms.



Figure 17 Small Pieces of Aluminum

We mostly see aluminum as a strong, rigid and cold material. I decided to use this material in my work and combine it with my Lalaland piece. It was challenging, because the music is soft and delicate, but the material is sharp and cold. The third panel of my Lalaland piece (figure 5) looks like a river with a soft curve. I needed a base to put these cubes on, something smooth and flexible to lessen the rigidity of the aluminum. Wax was a good option because it is a soft and an easy material to manipulate.

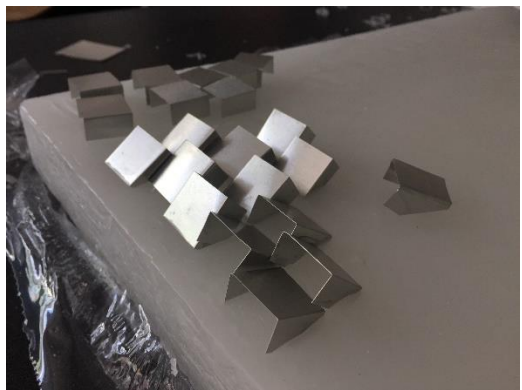


Figure 18 The Cubes on The Wax

I placed the cubes on the wax sheet, and I tried to replicate the Lalaland piece. The way I placed the cubes makes me think of footprints in the sand. In here the music appears as a footprint in the wax for me. The circulation created on the whole piece is palpable, but does not lessen the attention of the use of opposite material. This piece was a starting point to a new domain.

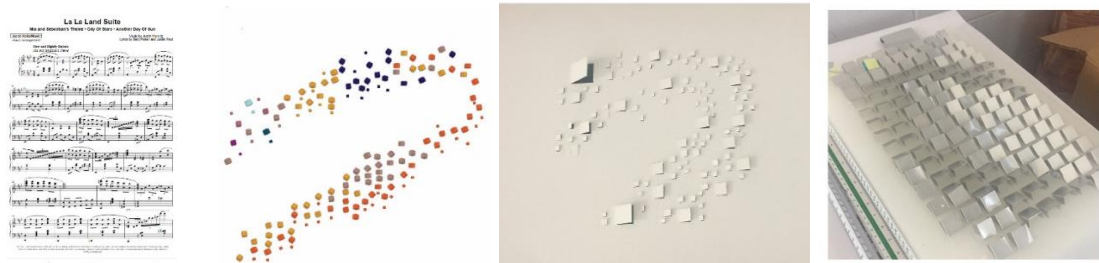


Figure 19 The Process of The Creation

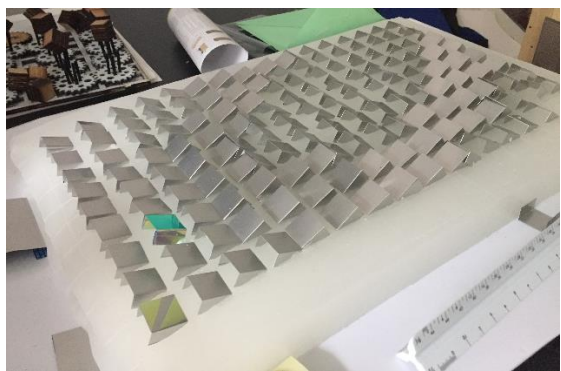


Figure 20 The river

Among the artists I was inspired by for this piece is the surface designer, Giles Miller (figure 20). Unlike many other designers who use available items in the market, Miller creates all his components in his studio. He mostly uses modular shapes to create his designs, and by changing the orientation of the repeated modular elements he creates a significant piece.



Figure 21 Shingle Covered Pavilion by Giles Miller

Miller uses different elements, such as hexagon, triangle and oval shapes. He creates artworks from miniature individual components, to artworks the size of buildings. I realized that the technique of modular shapes that he uses gives him more flexibility, and the opportunity to design in any domain (figure 21).

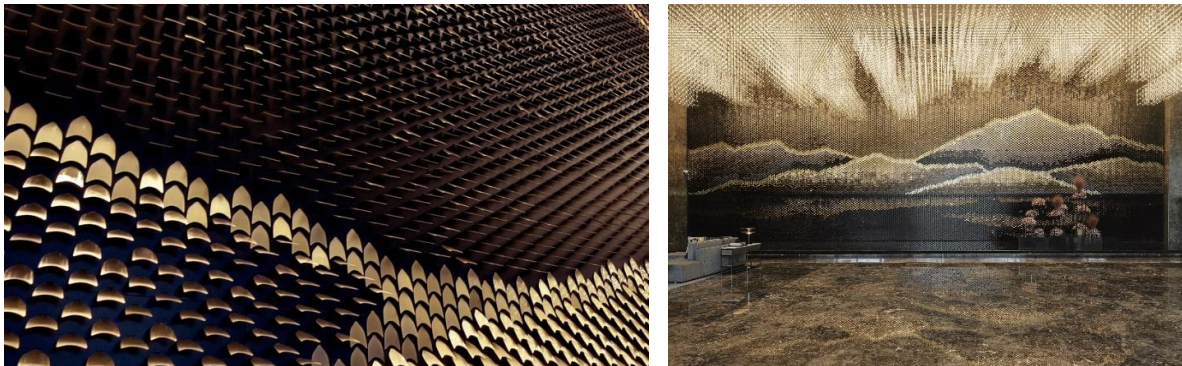


Figure 22 Where The Mountains Meet The River by Giles Miller

c. Rain

My work *Rain* (figure 22) is different than the other pieces that I have made so far. I usually create based on music notation, but this time I just created the work based on the sound and the traces left by the rain on a lake. Now you might ask what is the difference between music and sound, or you might ask if rustling leaves play music, or they are just sound?



Figure 23 Rain

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines music as “the science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationships to produce a composition having unity and continuity.” I believe the definition and purpose of music and its distinction from mere sound depends on the individual; it is arbitrary and must stay that way.



Figure 24 Rain No. 2

For *Rain* I used tracing paper, aluminum, elastic stretch, and holographic vinyl (figure 23). The tracing paper is fourteen feet long, and is placed on a series of elastic stretches, which helps the tracing paper navigate the space smoothly. I used holographic material on a few aluminum pieces—not all of them—to reflect the light on the piece (figure 24). In some ways, this work relates to the *Uberorgan* artwork made by Tim Hawkinson, because the use of paper and the pattern that creates music is common in both works.

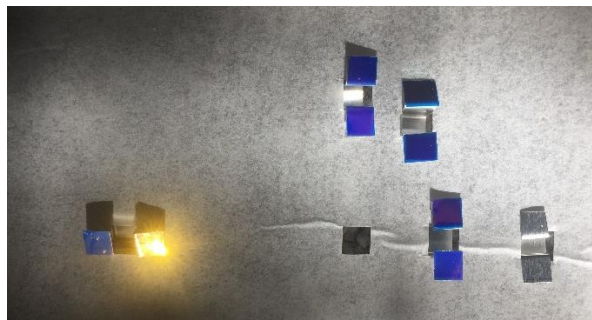


Figure 25 Rain No. 3

d. Faded

Faded is a replica of *The King of Knots*. This piece is made of tracing paper with reflective vinyl, and is installed on four windows (figure 25). Our surrounding environment is

constantly changing and evolving: the sun, clouds, trees and falling leaves are unstable inputs. The more the surrounding environment is unstable, more interactive this artwork becomes.

I compare this piece to *Autumn Leaves*, because it depends on the natural light over which I do not have any control. The environment decides what to create and the viewer accordingly decides what to perceive. The piece seems to be more interactive and mysterious compared to *Autumn Leaves*. My hope is that the day-to-day weather alterations motivate the viewer to visit the piece repeatedly, and at different times during the day.



Figure 26 *Faded* (second window)

In *Faded*, the modular shape that repeats at the same size all over the piece is a square. The piece looks like an unrolled pin drum of a musical box. This was not my intent. My intent was to create rhythms and motions on the windows without blocking the light's ability to get into the building.

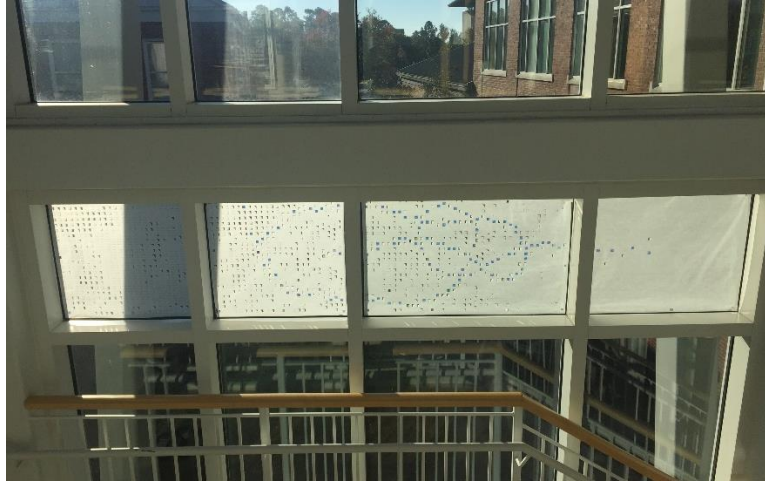


Figure 27 Faded

Tracing paper is translucent and thin. In the past I had used tracing paper for drawing purposes only when I was a student in architecture, but I had never used it to create an artwork before this piece. I think paper has more potential than we think. I always check on the recent work of Matt Shlian. He is a paper engineer; his work is somewhat between art and science.

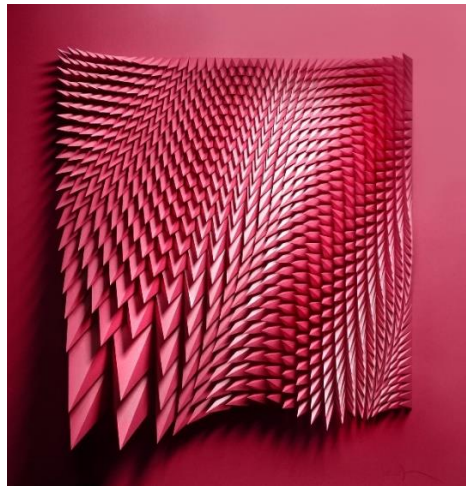


Figure 28 Now we put the river on sleep by Matt Shlian

Paper is a strange material and can be used in a different way. You can draw on it, create an origami artwork, a home model, or a complex sculpture. All your ideas can be achieved.

e. The Starry Night

In this work I combine different mediums, such as oil paint on acetate and soap on a light pad. In the *Lalaland* piece, I explored wax only as a base to position small aluminum pieces. Wax was not easy to manipulate and melting the material was difficult, so I looked for another option, and eventually tried soap. The translucent soap opened new possibilities and motivated me to explore this new medium in much more detail. Based on feedback and comments from my peers and professors, I decided to work with the soap not only as a base but as a principal element in my work. I created some cubes out of soap to see what would happen, and the cubes come out clean but not totally clear.



Figure 29 Exploring Soap and Aluminum

Because of this translucency, the reaction of soap to light was fascinating and mesmerizing. I placed a few cubes on a light pad in different configurations and discovered that when the cubes are placed vertically on the top of each other, the diffusion of light became more interesting. Suddenly, the cubes begin to suggest architecture, and look like skyscrapers to me (figure 29).



Figure 30 Cubes and Skyline

The feedback from my peers was extremely helpful in this project. Everyone had different points of view, but their excitement gave me more confidence and energy to explore the possibilities. Bringing color in this project was challenging. Color is among the strongest stimuli that our brain receives—it has been found to affect heart rate, perceptions of time, estimate of weight, size, and temperature, as well as how we experience loudness and noise.⁸ I had already used color as a tool in my work to express a broad range of human emotion and experience, so for this artwork I first painted each cube with oil paint, then thought it would be better to paint on the light pad instead of painting the cubes themselves. In the end, I painted various cubes in different colors on an acetate sheet, then placed the sheet on the light pad (figure 30).



Figure 31 Oil paint on Acetate

⁸ Mahnke, Frank H., “Color, Environment, and Human Response”, *New York: John Wiley & Sons*, 1966, pp.71-77

When I covered the light pad with the soap cubes, the colors became subtle (figure 31). The combination of paint and soap opened new doors to my forthcoming work, but now the way that I bring music into my work needed to be different. In my initial method I converted music notation based on the position of a floating cube, but now I needed to define a new language that functioned with a flat surface. Furthermore, in addition to that, there was now the possibility for the cubes and their arrangements to evolve vertically, so cutting the cubes was not a good idea.



Figure 32 Cubes Arranged on The Painted Acetated Sheet and The Light Pad

Figure 32 is a picture of initial sketches of the new language that I propose, still a work in progress. The project has a lot of potential and can be developed in different ways.

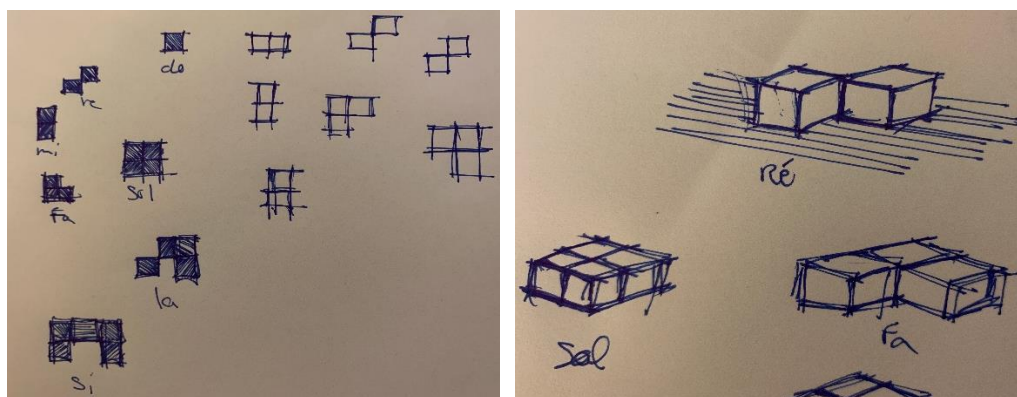


Figure 33 Sketches

The cube as a single element can create seemingly infinite combinations. I believe this artwork and the related music needs to be played together, and when I recently came across a paper saying that this idea took root in the early decades of the twentieth century—though it appeared as an idea even in the writings of Newton and Leonardo—this gave me confidence that the piece needs to be viewed with its music.

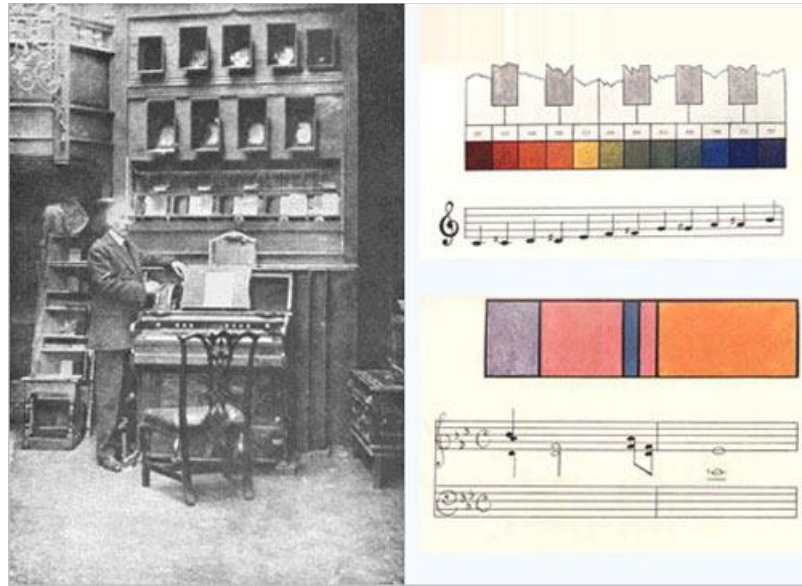


Figure 34 Color Organ by Alexander Wallace Rimington

CHAPTER 5

CUBE, Surface, Depth and the Ephemeral Experience: THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition itself showcased the recent development of my work from illustration to 3d forms. In my exhibition I included five illustrations printed on a glossy paper and five other pieces which they were totally different in terms of techniques and materials. I installed *Autumn Leaves* at the corner of the exhibition. The light was playing differently on the walls than what I had seen before. This piece becomes interactive when you touch and push the cubes. I wish I wrote “Push Me” next to the wall to encouraging people to do it. The combination of light and motion animated the space behind the wall.



Figure 35 Autumn Leaves at the Exhibition

At the thesis defense all questions were interesting and challenging. Some questions are still on my mind. One of the questions was “I know that you were inspired by surface design throughout this process. Is music a surface?” The question was simple and clear but since I never thought about it, it was complicated to answer the question immediately. My answer was “No, music is a path. It has an entrance, its ups and downs, a story to tell and an end. However, my

work is the surface of it.” I believe that my work is somehow timeless in contrary to music. You can experience the music without listening to it for a minute or more and see overall how it looks like. Even though I prefer my pieces to be read while listening to its music because I believe excitements and emotions arise through this process. At my exhibition a violinist came and asked me about the QR codes that I had placed next to each piece. I explained that the viewer can scan the code and listen to the music of each creation while exploring the piece at the same time. He scanned the code and started to read my *Lalaland* piece. I was amazed. His gesture and the manner that he was reading effortlessly made me feel that he totally received what I was offering. I realized people with a background in music can read the piece easier than others and I believe it is only because musicians have a better understanding of rhythm, tempo, legato, and overall the music theory.



Figure 36 *Lalaland* at the Exhibition

The installation of *Rain* was challenging because of the organic movement of the paper. I installed the piece in the middle of the exhibition by using transparent elastic wires. I noticed some reflections on the flooring created by the aluminum pieces and the holographic components that I had not seen before. In *Rain* and *Autumn Leaves*, light plays an important role. These two

pieces depend tremendously on the space. Therefore, wherever I install them I perceive them differently and see them as a new piece.



Figure 37 Rain at the Exhibition

The thesis defense was an exceptional experience to me, and I think it is not an end to a study or research but a starting point to create art with confidence by knowing who we are and what we are capable of in the art world.

CONCLUSION

Through the process of my creation I explored different medium and technique to achieve particular psychological and emotional effects. I found out that playing visual in performance with music can be a perfect tool to release emotional tension or mental strain and additionally a new way to introduce all key component of a music. I believe music is more than what we hear and has numerous undiscovered fields. Many artists of the early twentieth century wrote about how music and painting could be related and even built machines to explore the relation between colors and forms. Computer and video technology make it possible to achieve what could only be dreamed of then. I am convinced that anyone can create his/her own language as long as all major component in visual art and music correspond appropriately. I will continue to investigate the relationship between visual art and music while exploring different possibilities of creation in different discipline.

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