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## **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to reveal the origin and evolution of the work I have made, thereby establishing the foundation for my future practice. The core purpose of my work is to provoke introspection and to question, if not reverse, entrenched and stereotypical assumptions toward women. I derive inspiration from my confrontational relationship with my mother, who is a prominent female figure in my life. Our confrontations arise from our differing perspectives and beliefs regarding the roles and aspirations of women. These unpleasant confrontations are the origin of my practice, which is based on questioning assumptions and norms that affect my life. Ultimately, my work aims to build connections with those who have similar struggles to mine and advocate for women's autonomy.

Carrying the Longings

by

Shuoran Zhou

B.F.A, China Academy of Art, 2019

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts  
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## Awakening

Before my twenties, my world operated in the *supposed* way. It was a common thing to hear family and friends talk about their visions on my future marital life. Almost like a biological instinct, most parents start to build the blueprint for their children's future from the moment the children are born; marriage and producing future generations occupy an absolute prominent position. My parents are no exception. It seemed like everything in my life could be related to my future marriage.

*“Learn to do the housework, this way you can manage your family better after marriage.”*

*“How did you make such a mess in your room!? Never mind, you’ll know how to keep things tidy when you have kids.....raising children is the greatest task for women!”*

*“I probably should retire in twenty years. At that time, you would probably be married, maybe even have your own kids already.”*

...

These words were ubiquitous in my everyday life; my parents said them thoughtlessly, and I listened mindlessly. I never felt anything was wrong or worthy of scrutiny with these words, nor did I passionately look forward to these imaginary life scenes, I just agreed and believed.

Until I fell in love with a woman when I was 21.

Uncertainty, confusion, self-doubt; suddenly my conception of the world was going through an unprecedented “upgrade” because, for the very first time, I was not operating in the *supposed* way<sup>1</sup>. This subverted my beliefs and challenged the credibility of other parts of my life, mostly the parts related to marriage, sexuality, and reproduction.

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<sup>1</sup> I used to identify myself as a heterosexual and had made firm statements about never possibly being gay. I unconsciously grouped LGBTQ people as a distant community that did not have much association with my life.

Being in a same-sex relationship was new to both my partner and me. Although we were “inexperienced”, and maybe “thoughtless” and “impulsive” in others’ eyes, we were deeply aware that we not only fell in love with a person of the same sex, but also with the freedom of being able to deviate from the norms that we were expected and *supposed* to follow. We were both carriers of the “predetermined blueprint” from our parents, and we suddenly realized that, either with a man or a woman, we did not *have* to get married and have children, nor did we want to.

This shifted mindset became the foundation of my art practice, which then became, and continues to be, fueled by the changes in the relationship between my parents and I.

My parents were not happy when I told them I was in love with a woman and did not intend to get married or have children. When opinions diverge, confrontations between us begin, most often with my mother. As a woman who quit her career to pursue what she calls “family integrity”, my mom holds the belief that marriage and having children is “the most important and greatest of accomplishments” in a woman’s life. She has been centered around her husband and child, which she believes is something women are *supposed* to be doing.

She cried to me at the dinner table, argued with me through texts and over the phone, and expressed her position in provocative tones.

We were, and still are, caught in this endless battle, deadlocked.

...

When my words are not heard, art became my voice. I fused my struggles into my work to materialize my arguments. Although the inspirations of my art derive from the unpleasant, confrontational experiences I had mostly with my mom, I don’t address these specific

experiences in my practice; rather, I developed my practice based on questioning assumptions and norms that affect my life.

The many confrontations between my mother and I caused me to wonder: If marriage and motherhood are the “required tasks” of a woman’s life, does it mean we are not women if we choose to not marry or become mothers? What defines our identity as women? While sex is determined biologically, the formation of our gender is a cultural reinforcement<sup>2</sup>. As stated in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*: “One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” We were born females biologically, but what really makes us *become* women? Is it the way we view ourselves? Or the way others view us?



Figure 1. *Untitled*, 2019

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<sup>2</sup> Butler, Judith. “Subject of Sex/Gender/Desire.” *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1989, pp. 6–16. “When the relevant ‘culture’ that ‘constructs’ gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.”



I sculpted two pieces of wood into suggestive forms that resemble human body parts (Fig.1). One form is hollow on top, and the other one has a pendant attached to it. Though I intentionally avoided gender classification of these two pieces, I aimed to provoke and guide the viewers' assumptions of their gender. It appears as if the hollow is made for the pendant to fill, but they do not fit. In addition to the gender aspect, I call their function into question as well. Unlike most of my other work, these pieces do not have obvious practical functions; they are not to be worn, not to be carried, nor are they only for display. Rather, I endow them with the sole function of provoking thoughts.

Introspection is an essential, precious quality. As I go through this period of constantly questioning perceptions and assumptions about gender and womanhood, I pose these questions to the audience through my work, without expectations for answers. Rather, I wish for them to face their assumptions, to doubt, to be confused, and then to hopefully have an unexpected realization dawn on them that moves them beyond their initial assumptions.



Figure 2. *Xiào (filial piety)*, Pei Wu, 2020

As I was going through this tough phase of conflict with my parents, which led me to reconsider the definition of female identity, I had a strong resonance with Pei Wu's work *Xiào* (filial piety) at first glance (Fig.2). As an artist who is dedicated to making jewelry regarding parent-child relationships, Pei Wu uses stones as the main material in her practice to capture the contradicting emotions she experienced with her parents. In her artist's statement, she elaborates on two questions: What forms us? What affects our personality? In the work *Xiào*, a piece of pink quartz is shaped into a form that conveys a sense of gentleness and softness, while the process of shaping it required immense tension and pressure. When the quartz is detached from the gold clip, it retains the squeezed shape, preserving the pressure left by the clip. My interpretation of this piece is that what we received from our parents made us who we are; the pressure is profound. Intentionally or not, their words shaped us into certain forms, even when we detach, we still have their ineradicable influence embedded in us.

### **I choose to...**

*It was a year after I came out to my parents and expressed my will of not having children in the future.*

*One day, I was telling my parents that I was the only one in my class who does not have siblings.*

*"I already regret having only one child, I wish we had more, so you could have some company with your sibling.", said my dad.*

*"We'll help take care of your kids when they're born!", said my mom.*

*"I don't want kids." I responded calmly and firmly, feeling angry toward my mom's neglect toward the choice I had made and announced a year earlier.*

*"Remember that one's life task is to constantly learn how to love!", my mom replied in a tough tone.*

*To this day, I do not think the life task of "learning how to love" requires having kids.*

As always, I seek the deeper meaning behind these confrontations between my mom and me. While my mom regards having and raising children as the most valuable and indispensable task of a woman's life, as the product of her practice of this task, I cannot agree with her, especially after witnessing how this choice has cultivated her stubbornness and close-mindedness. Sometimes I try to imagine what my mom's life would be like if she decided not to have kids. Did she ever think of taking a different path?

When I asked my dad if he knew he had the option of not getting married and having children, he firmly responded, "No." He only *knew* that it was time to get married and be a father. Nowadays when my parents talk about their "choice" of having me, they emphasize the significant, pure, joy they gained with my arrival. I believe them, but, as my father implied, it was more so an expectation than an intentional choice.

I feel relieved that I have become aware of my "other options" at this age, which my parents did not achieve. Even though this realization has created conflicts between me and my mom, I still cherish it. It helps me to think critically and endows me with the courage to go against social norms. I want to enable other people, mostly women, to obtain this awareness.

The required quarantine in March 2020 due to COVID19 provided me an opportunity to learn techniques that could be done in domestic spaces rather than in the fully equipped studio at school. Being inspired by Liza Lou's *Kitchen*<sup>3</sup>, I started my journey with a material that I had never worked with before—seed beads. I saw the similarity between the beads and women's

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<sup>3</sup> Started in 1991 and finished in 1996, Liza Lou built a full-size kitchen site and covered every inch of it with seed beads. This work embodies a labor that is linked to gender, and in Liza Lou's words, "argues for the dignity of labor".

social status; beads are regarded as a “hobbyist” craft material and often belittled and underrated by the art world, similar to how women are sometimes not taken seriously in society.



Figure 3. *Cradle*, 2020



Figure 4. *Cradle*, 2020

*Cradle* (Fig.3-6) embodies a discussion about the valuation of a woman’s life—is parenting the most and only valuable pursuit for a woman? I stitched the beads into hollow stone-like forms representing womanhood and formed silver into crystal-like forms representing women’s offspring. The stone-like forms can be worn as brooches, pendants, and rings, if the crystals are detached from them. Contrary to the beads, silver is always regarded as a precious and orthodox material in the jewelry industry. However, in this instance, the silver crystals are the components that obstruct the wearability, implying that having children may hinder or limit other possibilities in women’s lives.

My choice of using different materials aims at evoking a reassessment on the value and meaning of the materials and the functions they are associated with. These pieces can be both wearable jewelry and non-wearable objects. By giving my audience the freedom to think and the



Figure 5. *Cradle*, 2020



Figure 6. *Cradle*, 2020

right to choose their own definitions of the object’s function, I wish to evoke their realization of women’s freedom and right to choose their life paths.

To convey the message more efficiently, the works were presented to the audience with a question: What aspect do you think makes the piece “valuable”? The craftsmanship of its fabrication? The labor of stitching the beads? The wearability? The golden color of the beads on the inside? There is no fixed answer to this question, and the variety of the audience’s response contributes a part in the consummation of the concept—everyone evaluates the work differently as they *choose* to believe in and prioritize different criteria; similar to a woman’s evaluation of her own life—it may be different from the traditional conceptions of motherhood, but it is what she *chooses* to believe that makes her life valuable.

***“That’s impossible.”***

*One night when I was roughly ten years old, my mom was driving my childhood friend and I to piano class. My friend’s mom was sitting in the front passenger seat chatting with my mom about something related to marriage and parenthood. I started a conversation with my friend on the same topic, and we ended up having a little argument.*

*Now, as years have passed by, I can't remember our entire debate, but I clearly remember the last two sentences:*

*"Why do I have to marry a man and have kids? I don't want to get married or have kids." , said my friend who was a year older than me.*

*"That's impossible." , I replied.*

*My friend did not say anything back to me, as the conversation ended with a burst of laughter from our amused moms.*

When I look back on my life before that “awakening” moment at age 21, this particular memory is especially outstanding. It is intriguing to see how the ten-year-old me was so convinced that avoiding marriage and parenting is “impossible” for a woman, or in other words, how I believed that marrying a man and becoming a mother is essential to being a woman.

This mindset of having a predetermined “to-do list” for a woman is no longer valid for me, but it is still prevailing among other people today. In China, people use “vase” to describe a woman who has a beautiful exterior but no real talent. As I wonder what the “real talent” refers to, a comment left on Liping Yang’s social media proved that a large group of people think it is a woman’s capability, if not duty, to marry and have children<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Liping Yang is a famous and world-renowned Chinese dancer and choreographer. She is entitled the “Peacock Princess of China” and has performed over 1000 shows in more than 30 countries and regions. Besides her artistic achievements, it is a well-known fact that Liping Yang is divorced and childless, most likely a result of her full dedication in her dancing career.

On her social media, someone left a comment to this 62-year-old venerable dance artist:

“A woman's greatest failure is being childless, and the so-called self-achievement is nothing but a lie. No matter how accomplished you are in your dancing career, you can't escape the ravages of age, and you won't be able to enjoy the happiness of family union when you can't dance any more in your nineties.” This incident went viral on the internet. Some people wrote follow-up comments to oppose it, while there were eleven thousand likes.

Besides considering a woman as a “vase” in Chinese culture, the fact that women’s reproductive systems are “constructed” to “receive” and “contain” easily evoke the analogy between women and vessels. I look to Victoria McIntosh’s *I’m a Little Teapot* series (Fig.7) and *My Handbag, My Choice* (Fig.8), in which she embodied very blunt metaphors for women’s bodies as objects meant for containing. She made teapots with holes near the bottom, directly invalidating the teapots’ function of containing the liquid materials that they are “meant” to contain. The handbag, shaped like women’s underwear and with a uterus and fallopian tubes



Figure 7. *I’m a Little Teapot series*, Victoria McIntosh



Figure 8. *My Handbag, My Choice*, Victoria McIntosh

stitched on the front, has tools for knitting and crochet inside, and is displayed with a mirror printed with the word “mother”. Associating these objects with the Chinese cultural analogy between women and vases, I resonate with McIntosh’s work as I read a strong representation of the expectations of womanhood through these objects.

As women, my partner and I both feel that our efforts toward self-development and independent choice are being neglected and unrewarded when compared to having and raising children. We work hard and dedicate ourselves to the pursuit of the careers that we feel most passionate about, while our parents constantly try to alter our minds and persuade each of us to

make the choice of becoming a mother. No matter how much talent we have, in their eyes, the “real talent” is still lacking; the biggest “void” is still not filled.

In the process of working with seed beads, I discovered another intriguing quality about them—comparing the miniscule size of each bead to the larger completed bead form, the labor of the maker is revealed in a more visible way and compels the viewer to look at them more closely. I used this quality to highlight and praise the unrewarded, belittled efforts women make for self-development that do not include having and raising children.



Figure 9. *Fulfilled*, 2020



Figure 10. *Fulfilled*, 2020

With reference to McIntosh’s work, *Fulfilled* is my attempt to materialize the analogy of viewing women’s bodies as vessels (Fig.9-10). I raised copper plates into vessels in different



profiles and sizes, then covered their interiors with seed beads. When we look at vessels, we think of their capacity. The beaded interiors are intended to visualize the labor and time spent on them in the hope of diminishing the desire to fill the vessels. The interior beadwork extends outward to form handles and straps that enable the vessels to be carried, endowing them with another possible function while preserving their capacity. The vessels are still “empty”; the beads line the interior void without hindering the void's purported function to contain. In these vessels, emptiness is celebrated as fulfillment.

They are empty, but also complete.

We are women without children, and we are complete.

I later found striking similarities with Gretal Ferguson’s work which addresses the shifting roles of women in craft and society, and also questions the concept of what women are “supposed to do” versus women’s actual capabilities (Fig.11). Ferguson’s *Stitched* combines crafts that are perceived as typically masculine and feminine, metalsmithing and hand stitching, respectively, to challenge the enrooted gender roles in craft and society. Though the metal parts

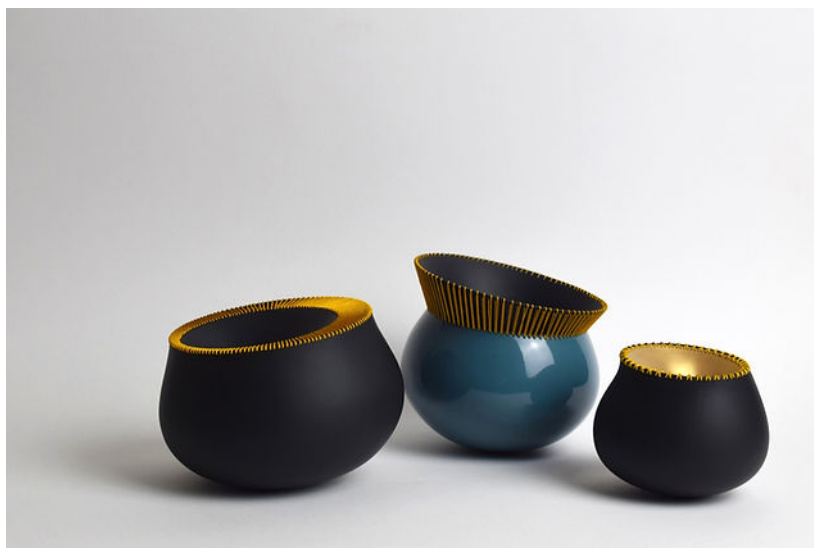


Figure 11. *Stitched*, Gretal Ferguson

seem to play a dominant role, the silk threads are the vital and structural components that hold the pieces together.

Ferguson's work inspired me to revisit my own work. I was not conscious of the stereotypical connection to gender associated with the materials I used in *Fulfilled*. Her work reminded me of the fact that metalsmithing is regarded a male-dominated craft, while sewing, beading, and stitching are considered women's crafts. Interestingly, I also learned about male domination in the production of glass beads, since the physical demands of fashioning molten glass were considered exclusively masculine<sup>5</sup>. Though it was not surprising, it was illuminating to learn about the male-dominated origins of some of the materials and craft processes that I incorporated in this series. It seems that I, a female artist, practiced craft processes and used the materials produced from male-dominated industries to make these vessels that address the assumed role, if not definition, of women. The addressed questioning of womanhood in these vessels therefore adds an additional layer to the statement articulating a woman's capability outside of what she is thought to *only* be capable of.

### **Mom, it's heavy**

Though the tension between my mom and I is ongoing, I have a soft spot in my heart for her. In fact, most of my frustration derives from this soft spot—I wish we could have a harmonious relationship, one in which we understand, support, and encourage each other. Being eager to feel understood, I first tried to understand my mom's perspective. As the old Chinese saying goes: “Store up grains against famine, raise children to provide against loneliness in old age.” It is not

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<sup>5</sup> Sciamia, Lidia D., and Joanne Bubolz Eicher. “Gender in the Making, Trading and Uses of Beads: An Introductory Essay.” *Beads and Bead Makers: Gender, Material Culture, and Meaning*, Berg, Oxford, 2001, pp. 5.

hard to understand that all the frustration and disappointment my mom experiences regarding my choices derive from a well-meaning starting point--which is a mother's instinctive desire to protect her child from being lonely, forlorn, and unloved, along with the eager expectation for the child to build a blissful family.

For centuries, Chinese people have used crafts to embody the expectations of their children's marital life. My attention was drawn to an ancient Chinese tradition, Nügong, which refers to the crafts of textile weaving, embroidery, sewing, and other crafts that were done only by women, Nügong also refers to the finished products of these crafts. In English, "Nügong" means "needlework"; however, if the term could be translated word by word, it would be written as "Woman Red". The term is blatantly gendered in Chinese, and so are the crafts it refers to.

Because of its gender exclusiveness, Nügong played a prominent role in mother-daughter relationships in ancient China. In the documentary *Chinese Nügong*<sup>6</sup>, young girls were expected to be skillful, and to specialize in at least one of the Nügong techniques. These expectations were intended as proof of their competence toward being a good wife in order to receive proposals from men when they were at "the right age" for marriage. The crafts were passed down from generation to generation; when the girls became mothers and when their daughters were getting married, the mothers would make exquisite dowries using the same set of skills for their daughters.

I was fascinated by the work these women produced and was deeply amazed by the creativity spawned by expectations. Those mothers dedicated a significant amount of effort into pinning their expectations on the dowries to express their best wishes to their daughters. The

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<sup>6</sup> *Chinese Nügong* is a six-episode documentary that introduces the tradition of twenty two different needlework techniques practices by Chinese women.

products are elaborate and are often decorated with motifs or patterns that have significant meanings, which mostly indicate fecundity.

...

The documentary renders the scenes with a harmonious, pleasant atmosphere. It praises the women's craftsmanship fueled by their visions of marriage and parenting. Reflecting on my own struggle of defending how I *don't* want those aspects in my life, it is fascinating to acknowledge my contradicting emotions toward the same subject—I feel frustrated and depressed when my mom is expressing these expectations, which she believes are good wishes and blessings.



Figure 12. *Pomegranate*, 2021

*Pomegranate* (Fig.12-13) embodies this contradiction. It is my first attempt at not using metal in my work. I learned to weave and sew textiles and incorporated the textiles as a materialization of the expectation of women's mastery of needlework. I created slots on the textile pieces and sewed beads on the inner layer to imitate the appearance of a ripe, "chapped"



Figure 11. *Pomegranate*, 2021

pomegranate. The image of pomegranates was commonly used in Chinese textile works and porcelains to symbolize people’s wishes for having great generations of offspring, as the term “seedy” in Chinese has the same pronunciation as another term which means “many children”.

Although beads and textiles are not usually considered heavy materials, the beads resembling pomegranate seeds contain the most weight in the work. Attached to the textile pieces are thin strings consisting of seed beads, which serve as necklaces. The necklace is intentionally made in such a thin gauge to embody the contradiction between lightness and heaviness—the thinness and lightness of the necklace causes the wearer to feel especially aware of the heaviness of the beads resembling pomegranate seeds hanging below, indicating the negative pressure and emotional weight that I feel when my mom expresses her seemingly positive wishes and expectations.

## Who am I, where am I?

*The teacher in my eighth-grade class asked parents to write a letter to their children, as part of a workshop on parent-child bonding. This is a section of the letter my dad wrote to me:*

*“On the second day of your birth, I stood at the gate of the hospital and watched the snowflakes whirling in the sky like a myriad of feathers, feeling extremely delighted with your arrival. A wave of sadness suddenly struck me as I thought of the day you would get married. The moment I envisioned my beloved daughter leaving me one day, I couldn’t help bursting into tears.”*

In the process of making *Pomegranate*, I learned to weave on a loom to make the textiles, then sewed the separate textile pieces together using a sewing machine. The experience of weaving and sewing was strange and intriguing. While practicing these particular crafts, which have such profound gender associations, I found it nearly impossible to approach them as a person instead of as a woman. At least according to Nügong, these are the things that women were *supposed* to do, and to be good at as well.

As a woman living in the modern age, where the expectation for women’s mastery of needlework is no longer prevailing, I am still carrying the burden of the expected roles implied by these crafts, which is the role of either a mother or a wife, or both. Even on the second day I was born, my dad already started envisioning his beloved daughter getting married.

After I came out to my parents, and with my mom knowing about my ongoing, close relationship with my partner, she *still* expects a man to be involved in my life as a potential future husband. As I consider my work to be a more powerful “voice” than my words, I speak to my parents by showing them my work, hoping that through each project they will have a better understanding of my thinking, my struggle, and my standpoint. The “battle” between me and my mom is a prolonged one; even though I realized this from the very beginning, it is still frustrating

when she refuses to acknowledge my autonomy and persistently expresses her expectations in various ways.

In our conversations, where she always shifts the topic and asks if there is a man in my life who is interested in me, I realize how much she is focused on the expected roles she wants me to fulfill. As she expects me to be someone's wife and someone's mother, her obsession with these unfulfilled expectations makes me feel the absence of my individuality—no matter who I *am*, and what roles I am currently fulfilling in my own life, I am still *not* a wife, *not* a mother.

I look to Weijue Wang, who uses pink wool felt as the main material to embody the struggles she experiences as a woman (Fig.14). She states that pink is always labelled as a feminine color, and wool felt is often defined as a material for “girly” crafts. While felt is a soft and fluffy material, it requires repetitive poking by a barbed needle to be shaped into forms.



Figure 12. *A Room of One's Own*, Weijue Wang, 2018

Through her giant installations made with this gender-labeled material and the repetitive, “violent” poking process, she attempts to embody the physical and mental trauma a woman may suffer from cosmetic surgery based on social beauty standards.

Resonating with Weijue Wang’s process of her work, I found Judith Butler’s theory that validated the association I made between repetitive actions and gender identification, as she states that gender is “an identity instituted through stylized repetition of acts”<sup>7</sup>. A large proportion of my struggle and frustration comes from people’s, most often my mom’s, carelessly repeated expressions of their perceptions and assumptions of women. I want to materialize these expressions through the motion of beading, which is equally mechanical and repetitive, to visualize the impact they have on me.

*Absent* (Fig.15-16) embodies the absence of a woman’s individuality caused by the expected roles that she didn’t, and may never, fulfill. Each bead is hand stitched, while at a distance the finished piece looks like a mass-produced textile. Through thousands of repeated beading actions, I stitched my story, my statement, and my emotions into this semi-translucent bead veil that covers me, blurring my face and muting my personality. The pores of the beadwork allow people to vaguely see my face underneath the veil, inviting them to try to discern who it is.

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, Judith. “*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.*” *Theater Journal*, 1988, pp. 519–531. “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”





Figure 15. *Absent*, 2021



Figure 16. *Absent*, 2021

### **\*Dawn (Ending)**

*As she often does from time to time, my mom was recently telling me that she was tired of my dad's complaints about trivial matters in life.*

*“I told your dad that I want to be away from him for a little while. I asked him to stay at the other apartment and not to come back for a few days, I want to stay with myself. Don't get me wrong, we're not separating, I just simply want some solitude for reading and thinking.”*

*Throughout these years, as a woman who ended her career and fully devoted herself to “pursue family integrity”, this was the first time I heard about my mom's desire to shift her focus to herself. A sudden joy expanded from the soft spot in my heart and wrapped me.*

*“I'm so glad to hear that, mom. I hope you can enjoy some time with yourself, only yourself. Don't worry about what to prepare for dad's dinner today, and don't worry about me. Allow yourself to be ‘selfish’, enjoy the solitude.”*

*Finally, I got to do what I have been longing for: to understand her, to support her, to encourage her.*

*“I hear you.”, she replied.*

Our prolonged “battle” is also one with no victory or defeat. As I want to be able to help and encourage other women with similar experiences to mine, I have been longing for a time when my mom could be included in the conversation, but not as the enemy. I am not sure how effective my art may be to my parents or other viewers, but it has assuredly transformed the negativities in my life into a gentle but powerful force, supporting me to look and move forward.

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