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Adapting Cultural Storytelling Styles to Modern Media

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ADAPTING CULTURAL STORYTELLING STYLES TO MODERN MEDIA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Digital Production Arts

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by
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May 2023

Accepted by:
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Abstract

In the face of modern media, it is inevitable that certain cultural art forms will fade in popularity. Some may even fade out of existence altogether. However, there are continuous efforts to reframe these cultural gems in contemporary forms to preserve them for the younger generations. Digital media, such as animation and video games, provide the perfect vehicle to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary. This paper investigates how storytelling practices have been carried through time and the creative ways they have evolved in the face of an ever-changing media-scape.

To support this research, I present a narrative in storyboard form that borrows stylistic elements and techniques of Chinese opera. The Beijing and Sichuan opera substyles were specifically chosen for their dramatic presence, vibrant costuming, and Sichuan opera's face-changing act known as *bian lian*.

Artist Statement

Stories have always been inextricably bound with culture. Societies historically rely on shared stories to reinforce generations of cultural values and traditions. The practice of storytelling has persisted for centuries, recording and even shaping the changes of the world. As life and culture change at an increasingly rapid pace, so too does storytelling. It is fascinating to trace its evolution as we enter the age of advanced digital media and immersive formats.

As a first generation Chinese American, I am grateful this project allows me the opportunity to dive deeper into a part of my own culture. From a young age, my parents have always encouraged me to maintain a connection to it. Thus, my childhood was rich with not only the classic Disney and Studio Ghibli movies, but traditional Chinese stories like *Bao Lian Deng*, *Sun Wukong and the Journey to the West*, and *Ne Zha* as well. As I grew older, I found myself drawn more and more towards Western media simply because that was what I was surrounded by. The past few years have been ones of self-reflection and nostalgia. The tales from my childhood persisted in my memory and I was struck by the desire to reconnect with them. As I revisited these age-old films and their adaptations, I came to understand how growing up with them contributed a great deal to my fascination with stories and folklore.

When I was about seven, I visited China to see my family and we all went to a Beijing opera show. Beijing opera lyrics are traditionally sung with a stretch to the syllables, and all in a characteristic high, nasally pitch that was so different from the radio pop songs I was used to. Coupled with my elementary school level grasp of Mandarin, I really couldn't understand what was happening. But I remember the costumes, with their vibrant colors and intricate designs, and the grace with which the painted actors and actresses glided across the stage. It wasn't until many years later that I found myself actively seeking out this unique art form with renewed appreciation.

The popularity of Chinese opera is no longer in its prime, at least amongst the younger

audience. But more recently there has been a resurgence of interest in the art and efforts to include it in pop culture. On an international scale, artists throughout the span of history have come up with innovative ways to preserve certain cultural styles in their own works. The art of Chinese opera now becomes a vehicle I can use to carry out a poignant story.

The narrative of my project, "Chasing Faces", centers around themes of loss, grief, and the journey towards acceptance. I always create art with the intention to help people and connect with them emotionally. As animator Glen Keane puts it, "animation is not about moving drawings, or moving images. It's about an image that will move an audience." [15] It's important to me that the topic is relatable to the general audience and the character is someone they can empathize with. Although my themes tend to be grounded in reality, the artistic freedom lies in how I choose to package and deliver them. This is the challenge I enjoy most when crafting my stories. The final deliverable of my thesis project is primarily a storyboard sequence that carries across the messages and heart of the story. Additional supporting work also includes a visual development package with relevant concept art.

This project is very personal to me, and it's my hope that by infusing it with my own lived experiences, I can engage the audience in an immersive narrative. My film does try to tackle some heavy topics. However, the intention isn't simply to punch the audience in the gut for the sake of it, but rather encourage perseverance through something painful. I want to drive home the point that it's okay to be human. Emotions can be painful, but they can also be healing–transformative, even. I hope people can learn something about themselves from watching my piece.

Dedication

To my grandparents who always joyously welcomed me into your homes when I visited, shared your stories while eagerly listening to mine, and insisted on piling more food into my already overflowing bowl. My memories of the time I spent with you are a harbor to which I tether my Chinese identity, even an ocean away. I carry your legacies with me.

To my friend Harrison Diesl, who was one of the first friends I ever made here at Clemson. Your kindness, warmth, and humor made me feel so at home in this new place. Thank you for sharing your time with me.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my gratitude to everyone who has helped me on this journey. Thank you to my family, who provided me with support, love, and guidance. Thank you to my committee members and professors, who have all been a constant source of encouragement and wisdom throughout not only my thesis, but all my years at Clemson. And last but definitely not least, thank you to my friends. Your companionship and unwavering belief in me have made all of this possible, and I am endlessly thankful that I met you all.

I truly could not have done this without each and every one of you.

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Chapter 1

A History of Storytelling

Storytelling has been an integral part of society since the earliest records of communication. It is often practiced in a community environment as a form of entertainment and social bonding. The idea conjures up the familiar image of a group of children gathered around an elder, who regales the captivated audience with fantastic tales. However, storytelling is far more than fables and fairytales. In the most elemental definition, stories are simply a way to preserve and pass along information–sometimes even for generations. This versatility and inherent appeal to pathos is what makes stories such powerful tools in a society's development. They shape traditions, give religious context, serve as teaching aids, and even leverage social and political change.

1.1 Cultural Traditions of Storytelling

It goes without saying that there exists innumerable cultures across the globe. Within each culture also exists subcultures defined by historical, religious, or regional differences. It is this variety that creates a rich diversity of distinct storytelling practices and histories.

Much of visual art lends itself to narrative purposes, whether it be in the form of pottery, weavings, paintings, carvings, or drawings. Some of the earliest recorded evidence of storytelling exist in the form of cave paintings. Early humans would use natural pigments such as mud or clay to depict images of animals and themes of survival. The Chauvet cave in France is a famous example. The walls of the cave are decorated with beautifully rendered depictions of bison, rhinos, bears, and other creatures. The Chauvet cave drawings date back 30,000 years, a testament to the lasting

universality of art. [19]

Figure 1.1: Drawing of rhinos, Chauvet cave in France. Photo taken by user Patilpv25

Communication by way of speech precedes written documentation, so naturally many cultures have a longstanding tradition of oral storytelling that has carried on to this day. This practice can take on many forms, such as poetry recitation, songs, chants, rhymes, and more. In African culture, nighttime storytelling sessions after a long day's work has been a community activity for generations. People would gather together for recitations, music, singing, and performances. In many western African countries, storytelling is a profession held by individuals called *griots*. Women storytellers are called *griottes*. With their exceptional memorization abilities, these professionals serve important social roles that designate them as not only storytellers, but also historians, genealogists, musicians, advisors, messengers, and ambassadors [32]. In other regions of Africa where storytelling is not a professional occupation, the practice is no less valued. In Cameroon, for example, tales are told by a storyteller standing in the middle of a scene. There is also a level of interaction as oftentimes, the audience may be invited to participate in the storytelling experience [32].

Native American tribes have a similar tradition of oral storytelling. Full of allegories and mystical elements, these stories are rooted in the Earth and meant to honor the indigenous connection to it. They serve recordkeeping, spiritual, and educational purposes and often tell of how the natural

world came to be [23]. The Irish people also have a rich history of folklore that has been heartily intertwined with its culture for generations. Traveling keepers of stories were called the *seanchaí*. Through gestures and voice, they would speak of legends and myths as well as historical happenings and local news [21].

Text is another ubiquitous format in which to record information. Stories that rely solely on the memories of those that pass them on may be forgotten or misremembered. But once written down in the form of books, scrolls, and tablets, they can be preserved for thousands of years.

Religious texts, for example, tend to have ancient roots. The Bible has gone through thousands of changes throughout the centuries and the teachings continue to be passed down. The stories told within the Bible preserve narrative histories and provide structure to religious practices. A number of these tales, such as the Nativity of Jesus, serve as the basis for Christian holidays and are retold annually. For the Jewish community, Passover, or Pesach, is a major holiday that commemorates the exodus of the Israelites' from slavery in Egypt. The celebration proceedings include a storytelling ritual called the Seder, which occurs on the first and second night of Passover over the course of a ceremonial dinner. The story of the Jewish people's liberation is described in the Book of Exodus in the Torah, and the Haggadah is the text that contains the Seder service [30]. This story is passed down from generation to generation to preserve its significance to the Jewish people.

Religious texts are far from being the only types of written cultural stories. Epic poems are lengthy narratives told in prose form, and are another form of ancient storytelling. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2500–1300 BCE) originated from ancient Mesopotamia and is considered the world's earliest surviving epic poem. The *Shahnameh*, or "The Book of Kings", is one of the world's longest epic poems and was written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi between c. 977 and 1010 CE. A massive collection of Persian history, legends, language, and culture, it is the national epic of Iran [17]. Other notable poems include Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey, which contain a mix of historical narrative and mythology. The themes and philosophies featured in these epics greatly influenced the culture of the Greek Classical age and continue to be significant pieces of the European literary world [20].

Oral tellings of stories are often accompanied by gestures and acting to better engage the audience, a trait shared with dramatic and performing arts. This category includes plays, dances, pantomimes, and many other varieties of live performances. From ancient Greek and Roman the-

ater to Japanese kabuki dance-drama, to classic Italian operas and more, the performing arts have spanned centuries and exist in a wealth of diverse styles across the world.

Opera and musicals are theatrical arts for which music and singing forms the backbone of the performance. The narrative is told primarily through lyrics that speak to the events happening on stage as well as the characters' inner thoughts. Chinese opera is a dramatic art that involves dancing, singing, music, and acrobatics. The stories performed range from historical retellings, to forbidden romances, to fantastical legends and more.

In Indian culture, dancing is a highly valued skill and an integral part of the country's heritage. One such dance is the Kathak, indigenous to northern India and one of the main forms of classical dance-drama. The term Kathak is derived from the root word Katha, meaning "story" in Sanskrit. Traveling bards known as Kathakars communicated stories through dance and song, incorporating rhythmic footwork, hand gestures, facial expressions, and eye movements [12]. Early Kathak was primarily performed in temples but continued to evolve over the centuries. It remains an integral part of India's many cultural arts.

In Hawaiian culture, storytellers were honored members of society. Tales were passed down orally but were also expressed through mele (song or poetry), oli (chant), and hula (dance). The tales speak of the interconnectivity between the people, land, ocean, and spirituality of the culture. Dances and chants are passed down through generations, as are the stories associated with them. Hula instructor and President of the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation, Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahele, describes hula as "a reflection of life. Hula is a way of retelling history. Hula is a way of taking what is thought and what is seen into a movement, and accepting all of these as a way of keeping our history of retelling stories, of remembering births." [14]

1.2   Modern Storytelling in the Digital Age

The bloom of the digital age brought with it a rapid explosion of artistic expansion. Writers and artists alike rushed to explore the burgeoning new space of creativity and fill it with stories. From oral traditions and music to pages of text, to dramatic arts onstage, the technology of today now brings with it new mediums to facilitate the transposition of tales.

Many Chinese children, regardless of where in the world they reside, grew up with the same familiar folktales. Perhaps it is this nostalgia that encourages creators to continue sharing these

stories for generations. Certain tales like "Sun Wukong and the Journey to the West", "The Ballad of Mulan", and "Ne Zha" have remained favorites to retell and have collected a healthy amount of film and even video game adaptations.

Studios like Disney and DreamWorks have produced their fair share of original stories, but they have also built a strong collection of adapting age-old tales. Disney especially has made a name for itself by retelling classic fairytales in an animated format, with *Snow White* as its first full length feature film. Other movies like *Cinderella*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Frozen*, and many more followed over the years with varying degrees of creative liberty taken. In adaptations where certain heritages are featured prominently, filmmakers will research to apply relevant cultural elements to their films.

On the other side of the world, Japan's Studio Ghibli has built its own reputation bringing stories to life. Currently helmed by master storyteller Hayao Miyazaki as the studio's director, Ghibli films are known for their moving stories and beautiful animations. While these films are not necessarily based on specific fairy tales, they do incorporate a great deal of Japanese folklore and mythology. The movie titled *Spirited Away*, for example, is derived from *Kamikakushi*, a term that literally means "to spirit away" and is used to attribute the mysterious disappearance of an individual to being taken by spirits [10]. The film presents a cast of characters from Japanese mythology such as Yubaba the witch, Kamaji the spider spirit, and Haku the river deity.

However, the creativity in modern storytelling lies in much more than simply retelling fairy tales or incorporating cultural folklore as subject matter. Some artists add another layer of cultural immersion by seamlessly integrating traditional styles and practices on a technical aspect.

In the Pixar movie *Coco*, paper cutting art in the beginning to tell the story of Miguel's great great grandparents. Called *papel picado* in Spanish, which literally translates to "punched paper", the art has deep roots dating back to pre-Hispanic Mexico. The Aztec people would chisel tree bark to make decor for temples and religious events. When Chinese imports in the 1700s brought paper to Mexico, the art evolved to become the *papel picado* still used today in celebration decorations [13]. By opening with *papel picado*, it not only holds visual interest during a lengthy background exposition but does it in a way that is unabashedly Mexican from the very beginning.

Figure 1.2: Shot from *Coco*, 2017

In a similar fashion, a short film titled "The Mountain of SGaana" is a Haida folktale told in a short animated film format. Director and animator Christopher Auchter incorporates indigenous weaving and singing into the way he tells his narrative. Throughout the film, intricate Haida patterns can be seen on the clothing, boat, and creatures. The way Auchter utilizes these designs is quite unique. They serve as story panels through which the audience can view the narrative in a sequential format–as if presented with windows through which he presents his Haida heritage. Although there is Haida singing, the film is ultimately told exclusively through visual means with no dialogue or written words. Writer Darren Wiesner, who interviewed Auchter, remarks that "'The Mountain of SGaana' can be understood internationally without having to translate with captioning throughout it, allowing your eyes and ears to better appreciate and the tale to permeate all your senses" [33]. The universality of the film allows it to be enjoyed by all viewers regardless of cultural background, and the Haida elements woven into enriches it with authenticity.

Figure 1.3: Shots from "The Mountain of SGaana" by Christopher Auchter, 2017

Cartoon Saloon is the studio best known for producing the series of Irish folktale-inspired 2D animated movies, which includes *The Secret of Kells*, *Song of the Sea*, and *Wolfwalkers*. Director Tomm Moore's motivation in creating these films is to preserve the local folktales that have persevered for generations throughout Ireland's history. "I realized that these were stories that we were losing– that connection to the landscape, that folklore, was dying out," Moore explains in an interview. "I was hoping to make a film that reinvigorated the folklore for kids of my son's generation, and I thought an animated film would be an ambitious vehicle to do that with" [22].

Concept artists working on *The Secret of Kells* studied the actual "Book of Kells" the story is based on, referencing the intricate illustrations and beautiful Celtic patterns. The resulting style is one deeply reminiscent of Irish and medieval art with flat imagery, false perspectives, and rich colors. During the clean-up stage, thicker outer lines were employed to obtain stained-glass effect [5].

Figure 1.4: Abbey of Kells - Scanned from Treasures of Irish Art, 1500 B.C. to 1500 A.D. From the Collections of the National Museum of Ireland, Royal Irish Academy, and Trinity College, Dublin, Metropolitan Museum of Art and Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1977.

Figure 1.5: Shots from *The Secret of Kells*, 2009

In conceptualizing the idea for *Song of the Sea*, Moore took inspiration from a book of folk stories called 'The People of the Sea'. The style of *Song of the Sea* imitates watercolor illustrations of fairytale books with artistic influences from abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky, old rock carvings, and traditional Irish art. In a similar fashion, the design language of *Wolfwalkers* also borrows from the cultural arts of the story's setting. The village with its false perspectives and rigid,

square shapes resemble 17th-century European woodcut prints, while the natural landscapes are reminiscent of Celtic artwork and runes [18]. The forests were purposefully done in pencil, charcoal, and watercolors to preserve an authentic feel, according to assistant director Mark Mullery, as such mediums were commonly used in medieval European art.

Figure 1.6: Shot depicting the village from *Wolfwalkers*, 2020

All of the aforementioned examples are animated films that embrace traditional story techniques that existed long before digital media, but are ultimately meant to be viewed on a screen. Technology homogenizes visual experiences to a certain extent. Live theater acts, such as those performed on Broadway, are still highly valued forms of entertainment. People still read text, whether physically in books or on digital devices. However, it must be acknowledged that there has been quite a significant paradigm shift in the way information and art is consumed nowadays.

Media is often formatted to fit the rectangular bounds of a movie or television screen, computer monitor, or smartphone. This is not to say that new technological mediums have overall a net negative effect on the art of storytelling. In fact, the nature of modern digital information makes sharing stories far more accessible. What was once local to specific regions is now able to be spread on a global level. Reflecting upon his film "The Mountain of SGaana", Christopher Auchter states that "through animation I'm able to use it as a metaphor to remind us to remember our history and heritage" [33]. By continuing to incorporate these cultural styles into the media, the stories

are ultimately diversified, allowing each one to be distinct. Additionally, traditions are able to be preserved and built upon for generations to come.

1.3   Appropriation versus Thoughtful Adaptation

It would be remiss to study cultural heritage in contemporary media without discussing the sensitivities of preserving authenticity. After all, cultural appropriation in the entertainment industry has long been an ongoing issue. The outcome is often, at best, a dilution of the original and at worst, a racist stereotype. So then, how does one go about carrying cultural elements forward in time in a respectful manner?

To start, a significant number of the creators already doing the work of preserving traditional arts are individuals from that specific culture. They are often able to draw from their own experiences and are more intimately knowledgeable about the topic. "The Mountain of SGaana" director Christopher Auchter, for instance, drew inspiration from his film from a childhood of fishing with his grandfather and listening to the stories told by his relatives [33]. Similarly, Thomm Moore of Cartoon Saloon was motivated by his desire to preserve the tales from his Irish heritage.

However, to presume all individuals of a certain culture are deeply connected to their heritage would be a broad assumption that ignores differing individual experiences. Even if the artist is from the culture or specific subculture they are presenting, they may still be removed from the origin of it for a variety of reasons. Humans have participated in global dispersion all through history, and the resulting diasporas cultivate unique cultural elements of their own. The Asian experience, for instance, is distinct from the Asian American experience. And neither the Asian nor Asian American experience exists monolithically.

The animated television series *Avatar: the Last Airbender* is commonly used to exemplify the other side of coin. The show does a commendable job of showcasing Asian and Indigenous cultures, despite the creators and writer not being from either of the aforementioned cultures. The success of *Avatar* can be attributed to team's research and professional consultation. Rather than drawing on reductive stereotypes or exoticism, the show takes the opposite approach [25]. The world feels tangible, familiar even, because it builds itself from the existing histories of these cultures.

It should be noted that even with *Avatar*'s relative cultural authenticity, the people in leadership, the voice actors, and those profiting the most from the success of the franchise are

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almost exclusively non-Asian and non-Indigenous. It's important to understand that due to this, one must take this and other similar works with a grain of salt. For example, the sequel series *The Legend of Korra* depicts the two entities Raava and Vaatu as the Chinese philosophical of yin and yang. According to this philosophy, the two exist in cosmological balance where yin is feminine, dark, and passive while yang is masculine, bright, and active. In *Korra*, the gender associations of Raava and Vaatu are flipped and their characters take on a more Western flavor where light and goodness is pitted against darkness and evil. This narrative dominates the original philosophy of balance in yin and yang where neither represents good nor evil.

Figure 1.7: Shot depicting Raava and Vaatu from season two of *The Legend of Korra*, 2013

Some may argue that a fantasy world setting relinquishes creators from the boundaries of cultural accuracy. However, this is not the case–far from it in fact, because the world of *Avatar* is still built entirely on existing cultures. It is also a simplification of a vastly diverse selection of cultures akin to a sampling platter. Of course, this aspect is understandable given the intended framework and audience of the work. *Avatar: the Last Airbender* is ultimately a Western's view of Eastern culture, philosophy, and history. Despite this, it still stands as a meritorious piece of media that presents complex, empathetic characters and culturally significant world-building. The show provided much needed, non-tokenizing representation for a generation of Asian and Indigenous children.

As stated earlier, we are in an incredible age of worldwide information sharing and accessible media. But with a global audience comes heightened responsibility. With misinformation abound, it's more crucial than ever to be mindful of what is put out into the world. Media shapes perception, whether for the better or worse. This is especially important when telling minority stories in spheres where mainstream showcasing of such minority experiences is scarce. Mistakes are inevitable as we as a society learn to be more culturally accepting, and that is understandable as long as proper effort is set forth to acknowledge and fix them. Disney Studios, for one, has had its share of racial and culturally insensitive controversies in film, from *Song of the South* to *Pocahontas*. On a more uplifting note, visible strides are being taken to ensure more respectful representation. Movies such as *Coco*, *Moana*, and *Encanto* were produced with in-depth research and representation in both cast and crew.

Appropriation versus appreciation is a fine line to ride that often gets blurred. At the end of the day, however, sharing cultures enriches the human connection and should be celebrated. The best way to ascertain it is done in a gracious, non-appropriative manner is with proper research and genuine respect for the culture. Additionally, credit should always be given where it's due. We should always empower the voices of creators from the culture being portrayed. This is what I strive to keep in mind as I pursue my own creative endeavors.

Chapter 2

Chinese Opera

2.1 Introduction

Chinese opera is a theatrical art that combines music, dancing, acting, and acrobatics. It is an umbrella term that encompasses over 360 different branches, each with their own regional flavor and unique characteristics. The most widely known variant is perhaps Beijing or Peking opera. As of 2010, it is included in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Still, there are some commonalities that commonly define Chinese opera. For one, the stage and setting is traditionally empty, save for the occasional chair, table, or ladder that serve a multitude of prop roles as the story requires. Props in general are used in a more representational manner in combination with pantomiming to convey emotion and action. Miming is a tool used alongside other Chinese opera techniques to "express a reality rather than recreate it as is the practice in Western naturalist theatre" [28]. Over time, miming became a stage language of its own. Certain actions, often coupled with simple props, on stage are interpreted to mean specific things. This allows the expression of complex or difficult actions onstage using minimal props. Other common elements across Chinese opera styles include acrobatics, music, costume manipulation, and weapons handling.

2.2 A Brief History

2.2.1 Origins

Dramatic arts in China have deeply ancient roots. In recordings as early as 1000 BCE, priests or shamans would perform dances in religious and ceremonial settings. These dances served to communicate with the heavenly spirits, perform rituals, and affect the forces of the natural world. An early form of what can be loosely defined as "drama", or at least a predecessor to it occurred in the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE). Players would perform singing, dancing, and acrobatics for the courts. They also donned masks and performed short plays called masques. Stories and important events were reenacted in a musical, rhythmic format, which were then passed down as a form of recordkeeping.

During the Three Kingdoms Period (220–280 CE), the dramatic arts were popularized in the form of plays. The Tang Dynasty saw a blossoming in the advancements of performing arts. One popular play performed during this time was called *Daimian*, meaning "mask", in which gentle-faced Prince Lan Ling wore a frightening mask into battle to intimidate his enemies. It is speculated that the face painting practice of contemporary Chinese opera originated from this play [1].

As time went on, the art continued to evolve and variations cropped up across the different regions of China. Under the Song Dynasty (960–1127), professional theater districts were established, and playhouses bloomed as Chinese opera continued to grow in popularity. During the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368), scholars removed from their government positions by the conquering Mongols turned to writing dramas. From this, the writings for Chinese operas flourished. Many plays from this era have lasted up to today. The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) saw the creation of *kunqu*, a southern-style popular musical and opera style that was the predecessor of Beijing Opera. It wouldn't be until the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911/12) that the northern-style Beijing opera would come into being, thus replacing Kunqu opera in popularity [1].

With the fall of the Qing dynasty in the early 1900s, women began taking to the stage. The earlier era of Chinese opera was male dominated as women were not permitted onstage. Traditionally, the opera only casted male characters who would also play female roles. As this gender barrier gradually disintegrated, women were able to begin reclaiming these roles. However, there was still lingering gender segregation as it was considered improper for men and women to interact on the same stage. As it follows, male and female only troupes were formed. Shaoxing opera troupes, once

consisting of only male performers, were populated by all-women casts by 1939 [4].

2.2.2   Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) ushered in a tumultuous period for Chinese opera. Chairman Mao's wife and former film actress, Jiang Qing, decried what she considered antiquated qualities of the art. She pushed for a contemporary restructuring of Chinese opera, which was subsequently led by a radical Maoist political faction called the Gang of Four. Alongside other long-established cultural arts, traditional opera performances were squashed-–banned with the exception of eight "model operas", which were used mainly to convey political messages. Some traditions were overhauled during this establishment, such as costumes, makeup, set and props. The intent was to modernize the art and make it more naturalistic [27].

2.2.3   Revival

After the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, there was a revival of traditional Chinese Opera. However, all the years of its banishment did not leave the art unscathed. Its popularity and familiarity to the general populace was no longer as it had been before the Revolution, and the majority of its audience-base laid in the older population. Authors Wang-Ngai Siu and Peter Lovrick remark that "the challenge is to continue an exquisite tradition in a lively way and to regain a lost audience. Chinese opera must avoid fossilization yet at the same time maintain the thread that gives it its identity" [27]. Indeed, Chinese opera now faced the task of reintroducing itself to a generation now unfamiliar with the tradition. Reinvention is always an option to appeal to the changing palette of its younger audience, but not at the cost of its identity. The qualities that make Chinese opera distinct amongst other forms must remain to preserve its cultural integrity.

2.3   Modern Day

The landscape has certainly changed since the times Chinese operas once held a dominant role in the Chinese performing arts world. Despite these changes, operas continue to be performed publicly. There is a strong sense of cultural pride rooted in the traditional art form that ensures its continued appreciation. The annual Spring Festival Gala in China, an elaborate performance event celebrating Chinese New Year with art and entertainment, has included Chinese opera acts in its

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programs. Opera troupes still exist and often travel to share their performances. With the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many pivoted to online streaming platforms to deliver their performances in an effort to survive amid the public health restrictions [3].

Artists of the younger generation have also taken renewed interest in the art as a source of inspiration. Musical artists have incorporated traditional instruments and samples of opera singing into modern genres of music. The song "Chang An Gu Niang" ("Miss Chang An") composed by Tan Nuo Long, for example, was released in the year 2020 and makes use of traditional instruments and voice techniques that are characteristic of Chinese opera. Set to a drum set beat and a lively melody, the result is a pop music fusion complemented by the accent flavor of traditional opera style.

This trend of incorporating Chinese opera aesthetics can be seen applied across a variety of artistic media. For Lunar New Year 2020, the video game *Overwatch* released a special skin for its character, Sombra, that celebrates Sichuan Opera. Donned in a costume distinctly reminiscent of Sichuan opera costumes, Sombra has six unique masks she can cycle through in a *bian lian* act. Artistic liberties were taken, of course, to better fit within the style of the character and setting of the environment. Sombra is a hacker who hides her true identity, and her masks change with a computerized "glitchy" effect that fits well with her character. According to concept artist Daryl Tan, "there's an air of playfulness and elegance about Sombra, and combined with her stealthy, glitchy abilities, we felt she would bring out the face-changing theme very well" [6].

Figure 2.1: *Overwatch* Sombra's face changer skin from the 2020 Lunar New Year event

Yun Jin is a character from the game *Genshin Impact* whose design is also based on Chinese opera. She is the director of the Yun-Han Opera Troupe and was featured in her own animated cutscene that shows off her Chinese opera singing abilities [11]. The character was somewhat controversial upon release–many non-Chinese fans who had previously no exposure to Chinese opera reacted negatively, even racially to the unfamiliar style of singing. On the other hand, it also garnered interest from people genuinely intrigued by her performance. Curious fans began actively seeking out videos of Chinese opera. The introduction of Yun Jin, a character who is an unapologetic representation of Chinese opera, to a game as far-reaching as *Genshin Impact* opened a window into the historic cultural art.
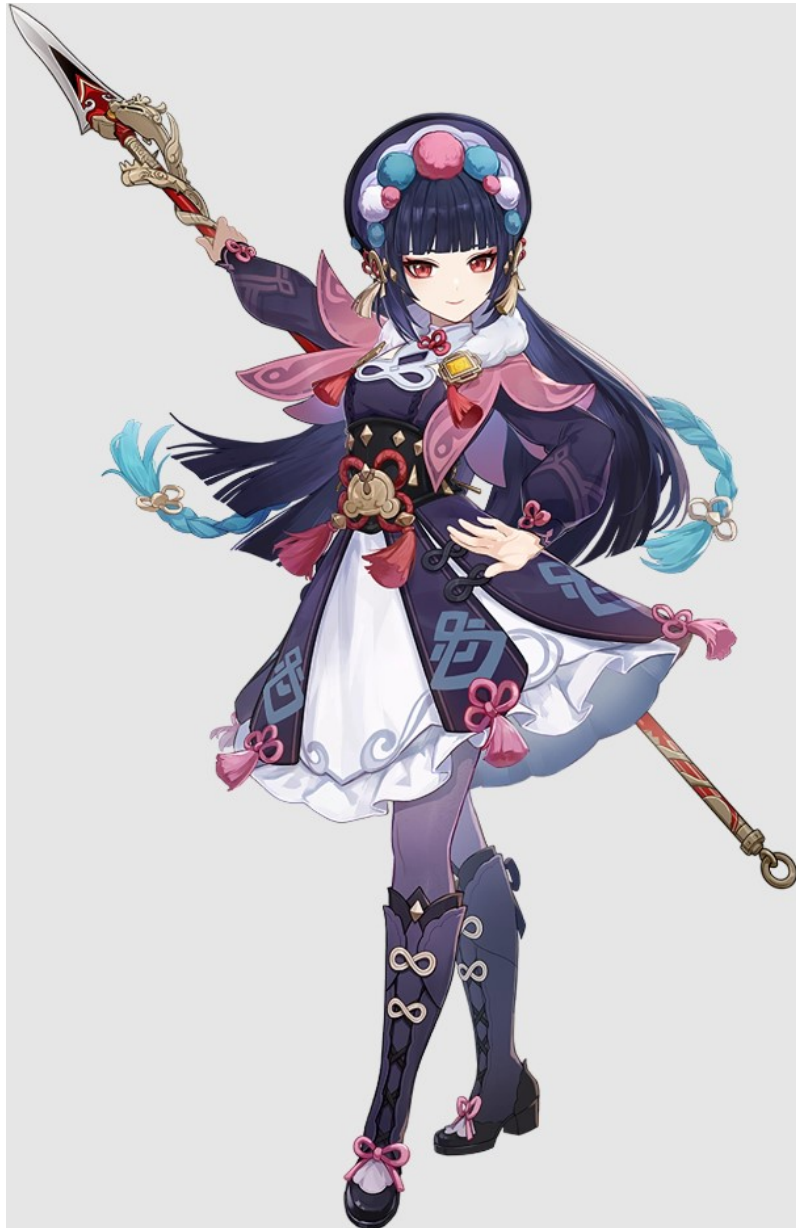
Figure 2.2: Yun Jin from *Genshin Impact*

Student filmmakers are also exploring cultural arts, particularly in animation. "Opera" is a short film by CalArts student Janelle Feng. It presents a commentary on the identity struggle of a diaspora–specifically, in this case, of Chinese identity when placed before the eyes of a Western majority. Feng's choice to use Chinese opera in her film deliberately places something that is very unique to the culture before an audience unfamiliar with it. She then presents several different

perspectives to personify this dynamic.

Figure 2.3: Shot from Janelle Feng's "Opera", 2022

"Le Serpent Blanc" is a short film created by Gobelins students as a trailer for the 2017 Annecy Film festival. The theme for that year was "China", and the five student-created film trailers each featured an aspect of Chinese culture. "Le Serpent Blanc" depicts an opera troupe performing "The Legend of the White Snake" interspersed with shots of the performers backstage preparing for the performance. The film is very short with minimal full-body shots so there is almost no choreography shown. Instead, the audience catches just snippets of the performer's body as she moves. The focus seems to be more about the atmosphere. It plays up the contrast between the very natural, human energy of the backstage and the polished presentation of the performers onstage.

Figure 2.4: Shot from "Le Serpent Blanc" (Antoine Bonnet, Mathilde Laillet, Mathilde Loubes, Claire Matz, James Molle, Victoria Niu), 2017

It is interesting to note that both films have ample focus on the backstage versus the actual performance. They are telling not so much the story of the opera performance, but the story behind the art and in doing so, humanizing the performers. Both films are visually very stylized. With the intricacy of Chinese opera designs, it makes sense on a practical level to simplify the design language in an animation. Whether intentional or not, they are also reminiscent of classic Chinese storybook illustrations and animations like the film *Havoc in Heaven*.

Figure 2.5: Shot from the classic Chinese cartoon *Havoc in Heaven*, 1961

2.4 Beijing and Sichuan Opera

My project, "Chasing Faces", takes inspiration primarily from the Beijing opera and Sichuan opera styles. Beijing opera, also known as Peking opera or *jingxi*, is currently the dominant style of Chinese opera known for its dazzling visuals and distinct tonal vocalizations. It was fully developed in the late eighteenth century from the characteristics of surrounding regional styles like Shanxi, Gansu, and Anhui. As a synthesis of these different operas, Beijing opera developed into a distinct style of its own that celebrates lively percussion and dramatic acrobatics. In comparison to the more restrained style of its predecessors, Beijing opera is high energy and vibrantly theatrical [1]. It is also a highly stylized art form, relying on established symbolic conventions of pantomine shorthand and visual design to convey more complex meaning [26].

Sichuan Opera was developed earlier than Beijing opera, around 1700. A blend of five local regional styles, Sichuan opera is known for its singing and tendency towards fantastical elements. It is an "opera of myth and legend" [27], often incorporating supernatural characters and powers. Sichuan opera also features certain special skills like the "third eye kick" and *bian lian* that lend to the supernatural flavor of the style.

Bian lian, or the "face-changing act" in English, has been a longstanding and integral part of Sichuan opera. Like its name suggests, it is an art form that involves a quick alteration of the actor's face mid-performance. These alterations tie into the plot and serve to reflect emotion, character changes, or magical transformations. The secret to this seemingly mystical skill has been closely guarded for centuries. An early form of the act involved the actor blowing into bowls of colored powder. The powder would spray up and cling to the actor's makeup. Other methods include using their fingertips to spread hidden pigments onto their faces during their acts. The advent of the 20th century saw the rise of a method that used exquisitely designed silk masks. Faster than the blink of an eye, an actor would skillfully switch out these masks onstage [28]. To the audience, the actor appears to command a magical, ever-changing mask. A master of the arts can change up to 10 masks in less than 20 seconds.

2.5 Compare and Contrast with Western Opera and Theater

Although both Chinese and Western opera share the title of "opera" in the realm of the performing arts, there are distinct characteristics that set them apart each other. One notable dis-

tinction is the stage set-up. Nowadays, set designers are harnessing modern stage technology in increasingly creative ways, but the Chinese opera stage is traditionally very simplistic. In comparison, Western theater tends to be more vivid with a multitude of props and set pieces. Chinese opera makeup and dress is also bolder and more complex, the designs of which are symbolic to the character roles of the actors. Western opera performers also wear costumes and stage makeup meant to make them stand out onstage, but they tend to be much more natural [29].

One thing both Chinese and Western opera have in common is their evolution into contemporary formats. The degree to which new adaptations adhere to the original source material varies greatly depending on the creative freedom taken. William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, has been retold hundreds of times over the centuries in a variety of forms. It has even inspired a contemporary musical interpretation–*West Side Story*, that in itself has been presented in theater and movie forms. The *Legend of the White Snake* is a classic Chinese folk tale that has been adapted into a variety of Chinese opera styles. From there, the story has branched off into other media adaptations that include live action films, television series, and most recently a series of animated movies produced by Light Chaser Animation Studios.

For both Eastern and Western performing arts, the dedication to preserving these stories in any form is a testament to the admiration they garner. These timeless stories have inspired generations of creators and will continue to be told as new media formats emerge.

Chapter 3

Project Production

3.1   Introduction and Brief Synopsis

The storyline of "Chasing Faces" features a character, Willow, struggling to cope with the emotions of grief after the loss of May, her twin sister. In Act One, a backstory told through a series of photos shows the two's bond through the years with an emphasis on their shared participation in Chinese opera. As Willow sits on a boat, numbly burning joss paper and old photos, her sister's mask blows into the water. When she goes to pick it up from the water, her "reflection" manifests into a physical being wearing the mask that drags her into the water.

Act Two happens in this new setting where everything is dark and empty, and she comes faced to face with this figure dressed in an opera costume. At this part of the film, the artistic style leans heavily into the more theatrical flavor of Chinese opera. The performer dances around her, shifting masks to reflect the complex and changing emotions experienced in grief. This performance becomes more chaotic and distressing to Willow until it climaxes with her removing the last mask from the performer's face. It's finally revealed that the performer is actually Willow herself, and the scenario is a reflection of her repressed emotions. When she finally gains acceptance of not necessarily the death itself, but rather her journey towards healing, she wakes back up on the boat. The third Act ends the story with her being more at peace with herself.

3.2 Ideation

Early on in my thesis topic brainstorming process, I tossed around the idea of researching the way different cultures practiced art. As someone who had been involved in multicultural organizations throughout my high school and undergraduate years, the topic greatly interested me. My very first project idea was an animation to present dances across cultures drawn in their respective artistic styles. Once I sat down to begin my research, it became clear that this would be a very ambitious project. There is a rich profusion of cultures in the world, all of which are endlessly intriguing to me. This made it difficult to be selective in choosing the specific dances to focus on. I was also concerned about my ability to be accurate and culturally sensitive in the way I portrayed customs unfamiliar to me.

For these reasons, I decided to focus on storytelling methods and narrow my project down to a culture I'm more familiar with–Chinese. Within Chinese culture, I wanted to tackle something not seen very often in the Western world and was drawn in by the designs of Chinese opera. The idea of using masks was always one I wanted to explore because it has a lot of creative potential. A dramatic art using masks is a perfect way to represent something intangible, like emotions. A few initial ideas include using a mask to represent social anxiety, loneliness, or just simply as a prop to move the story along. After considering the vast variety of designs the masks could have, I realized that it would be the perfect way to portray the stages of grief. Grief is not something I'm unfamiliar with. I can remember clearly the emotions I went through along with the strange numbness that accompanied them. Grief is often a difficult topic to approach sensitively, and perhaps in using these masks as a metaphorical tool, I can visually present the process in a clear way.

I also wanted to explore the dynamic between the contemporary Chinese identity and the past by setting the story in the modern day while using an ancient art. In her book *Alternative Chinese Opera in the Age of Globalization: Performing Zero*, author Daphne Lei remarks that "Chinese opera might be the only place where modern Chinese encounter classical Chinese language or poetry" [16]. It is uniquely Chinese, a persevering thread anchored by a shared identity throughout the centuries. The challenge is to tie it into the film in a way that is more palatable to a modern audience without removing its essential characteristics. To achieve this, I would use what I've learned in my research to apply elements of Chinese opera that would enhance the story.

With the general theme of my original narrative in place, it was time to establish the

characters. I chose female characters because of how overwhelmingly masculine the majority of Chinese opera's casting history is. My story idea was simply this–two female characters with a close relationship where one passes away and the other is left to figure out how to deal with it. Inserting a random opera scene in the middle of the story without any relation to the characters would be jarring and disjointed. At the same time, the purpose of the film isn't meant to center Chinese opera itself. Thus, I crafted a backstory where one character is a painter who crafts the masks the other performs in. This solidified a cohesive connection between the art form and the characters' backgrounds, a connection which can then be used to strengthen the story.

3.3   Initial Research and Revisions

To begin my research and familiarize myself more with the art, I started watching a variety of Chinese opera videos on YouTube. The Smithsonian has a video series dedicated to Asian folk art, among which includes videos on Chinese opera. One is simply titled "Chinese Opera" [8], which gives a brief introduction to Chinese opera in general, and the others are "The Man with Fifteen Faces: Secrets of the Zhejiang Wu Opera" [7] and "Face Changing in Chinese Sichuan Opera" [9], which focus specifically on the *bian lian* sub-genre of Sichuan opera. It was through this initial round or research that I understood the sheer number of subcategories that exist within Chinese opera. I chose to set my focus on mainly two forms: Beijing and Sichuan opera.

As I began writing, I created a story breakdown as a basic form of a screenplay. It includes important narrative points I want to hit in my boards and allows me to quickly transfer my thoughts to an external form. From there, I could easily change bullet points as my story evolved. Using this breakdown, I categorized the events in my story into its three distinct acts. The story went through multiple revisions throughout this process. For instance, there was the specification of the deceased character being the twin sister, rather than a friend or partner. The erasure of this ambiguity provides more context to characters' bond and strengthens the narrative. My original idea had May show up at the end of the opera scene as a final farewell, but after discussing with Professor Summey, we decided that it was a little too heavy handed. Seeing lost loved ones one last time is a comforting thought, but the ultimate goal was to have Willow learn to be there for herself.

3.4 Grieving and Funerals

Grief is the main theme of my story and I wanted to make sure I was able to accurately portray it in my film. Therefore, it was important that I do adequate research on some of the more prominent models of the grieving process.

For years, psychologists have attempted to deconstruct the grieving experience into categorizable components–a difficult undertaking, given the subjective nature of human emotion. The most popular model to date was coined by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. Aptly named Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Dying or The Five Stages of Grief, Kübler-Ross's model breaks down the grieving process into five stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Denial is a defense mechanism often characterized by numbness, shock, and inability to reconcile with the overwhelming reality. Anger can manifest in short temper, frustration, and blame towards oneself or others. Bargaining is an attempt at regaining control, which can include negotiations with a higher power, constant revisiting of past scenarios, and statements of "what if" and "if only". The depression stage is associated with fatigue, hopelessness, and an inability to experience pleasure. And lastly, there is acceptance. While not necessarily any less difficult than the other stages, the acceptance stage invites an understanding of what has happened and potential to move on from it.

Kübler-Ross developed these stages initially to describe the process experienced by terminally ill patients, but later expanded its application to more general experiences of loss. It should be noted that the model is not meant to be interpreted strictly, and the experience varies greatly depending on the individual. Instead, its purpose is to "provide a heuristic for patterns of thought, emotions, and behavior" [31].

Kübler-Ross model, though well known, is far from perfect. For some people, certain stages may manifest multiple times or not at all or may be accompanied by other emotions. Many other experts have created their own models on the grieving process. These models include Bowlby and Parkes' Four Phases of Grief, Worden's Four Basic Tasks in Adapting To Loss, Wolfelt's Companioning Approach to Grieving, and many others. In the end, these are just all attempts to quantify something intangible. The grieving process is a nebulous thing and is completely subjective to the individual.

It is because of this subjectivity that I decided to take creative liberties with my own

interpretation for my film. Although the process I am depicting is heavily based on the Kübler-Ross model, which was chosen for its popularity, I replaced the Bargaining stage with Helplessness. Helplessness is easier to depict and a more recognizable emotion than Bargaining that still embodies the lack of control one feels while grieving.

From my own personal experience, grief isn't a clean progression of stages–rather messy and jumbled and sometimes all at once. This is consequently reflected in the film, particularly at the climactic performance in Act Two. The masks shift between each emotion represented at an increasingly chaotic pace and in no particular order.

Grief and funeral customs go hand in hand. In this case, I portrayed some funeral customs specific to Chinese culture such as the burning of joss paper and incense sticks. As part of the story background, Willow has left the funeral shortly after it ended to pay her respects to her sister in a more private manner. This is where the story opens to her burning joss paper, incense sticks, and memorabilia.

Joss paper, also known as "spirit money" or "Hell bank notes", is essentially money burnt during funerals and certain festivals as offerings for the deceased to spend in the afterlife. It's an ancient practice that stems from the belief that life for spirits continue on after death and material goods can be sent with them. As ancestral and familial respect is highly valued in Chinese culture, people naturally want to make sure their loved ones have everything they need in the afterlife. The act of burning is what allows the joss paper and other goods to transcend the realm of the living. Incense sticks are lit in bundles of three as another way of honoring the spirits of gods and the deceased. As the sticks burn, the smoke carries prayers and messages up to the spiritual world[24].

3.5   Designs

An important step in my design process was compiling styleboards, particularly for the characters, masks, costumes, environment designs. I knew the Chinese opera designs would be on the more complex side, so I wanted a simpler style overall for the characters to emphasize that. I drew inspiration from student films such as Patricia Cmak's "Within, Without", Gobelin's "Sundown", and Janelle Feng's "Opera". There was also an animated music video directed by Zac Wong of the song "Birds" by the band Imagine Dragons that I took inspiration from. These films all lean into the stylized end of the design spectrum with basic forms and clear features.
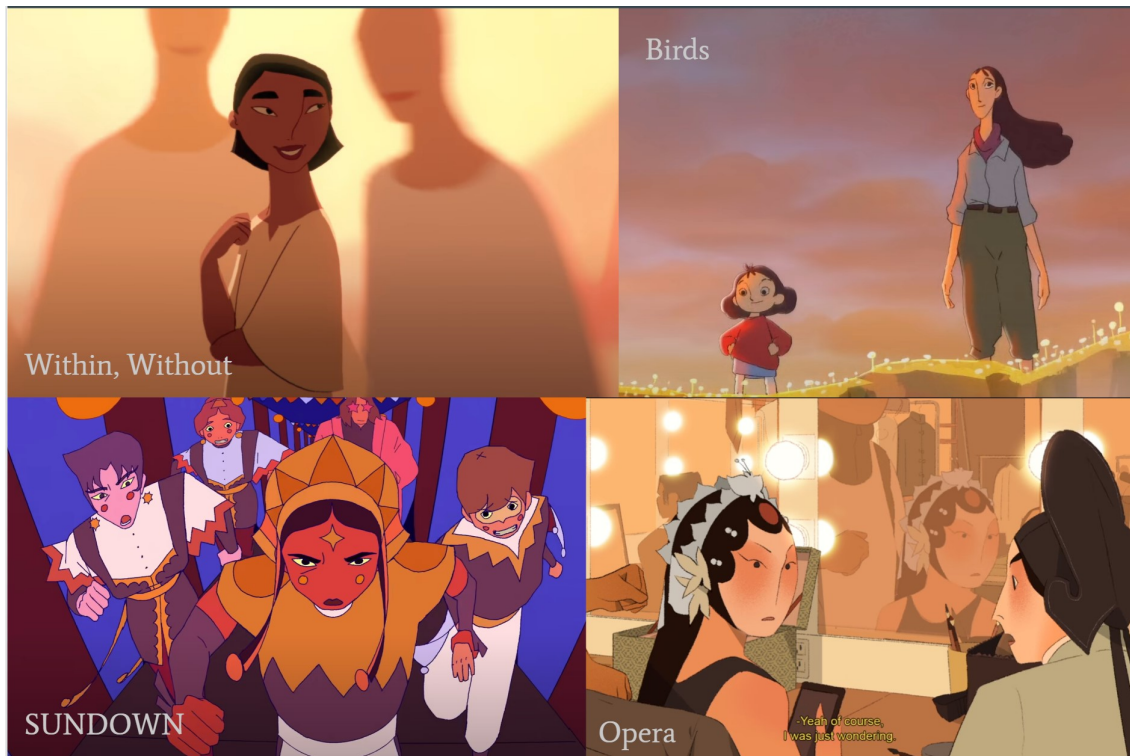
Figure 3.1: Character design styleboard. From left to right, top to bottom: "Within, Without" directed by Patricia Cmak, "Birds" directed by Zac Wong, "Sundown" directed by Juliette Brocal, Camille Letouze, Ana Moniz, Ruitao She, and Shanshan Zou, and "Opera" directed by Janelle Feng
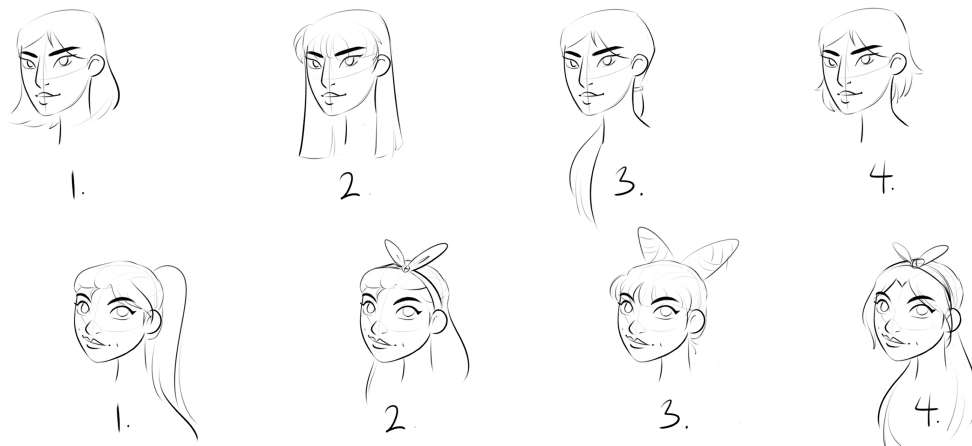
Figure 3.2: Initial character design faces for Willow and May

The sisters' body types are very similar to support a story point. The audience is purposely misdirected into thinking the masked performer is May, so the two characters have to be indecipherable from each other when their faces are covered. Their faces, however, have distinct characteristics. Willow's face is slimmer with narrow features, a heavier brow, and altogether serious demeanor. Her sister has rounder and more open features to showcase her bright, uplifting personality. Both character designs allude to butterflies–May with her tied ribbon hairband, and Willow with her two hair tufts on top of her head. As silhouettes, these elements resemble butterfly antennas or wings.

Willow wears a black outfit when she is on the lake, indicating that she had been attending the funeral of her sister prior to the start of the narrative. White has traditionally been the color of death and mourning in Chinese culture. Nowadays, however, black is considered an equally acceptable mourning color to wear even at Chinese funerals. Still, when Willow enters the water into the Chinese opera world, her clothing becomes white to indicate this shift. It also makes her stand out against the dark environment in an almost ghostly manner.
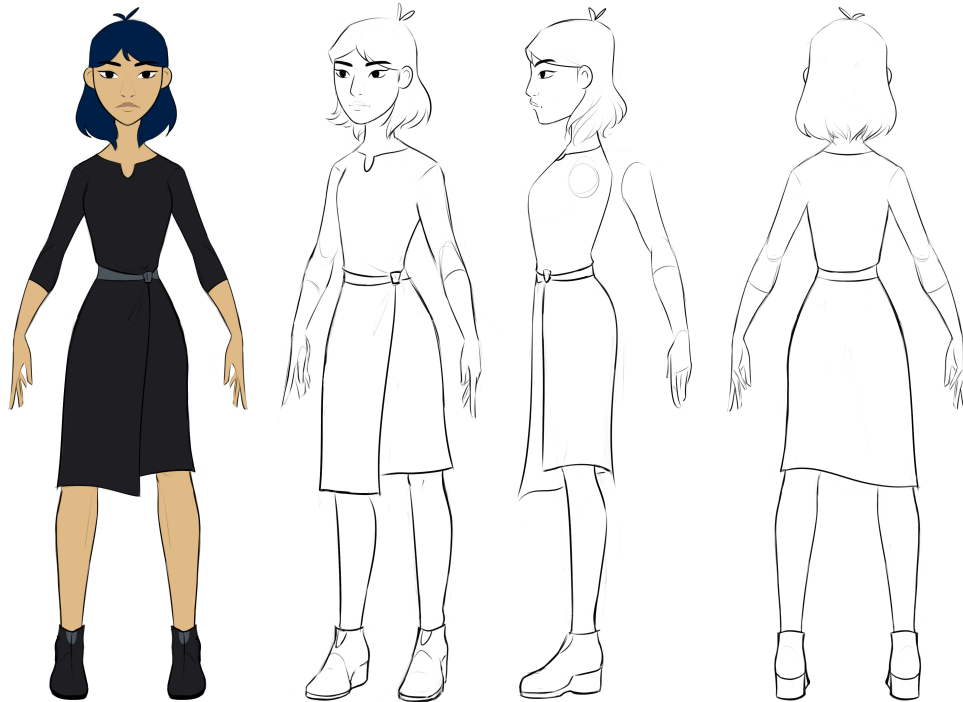
Figure 3.3: Willow turnaround black outfit
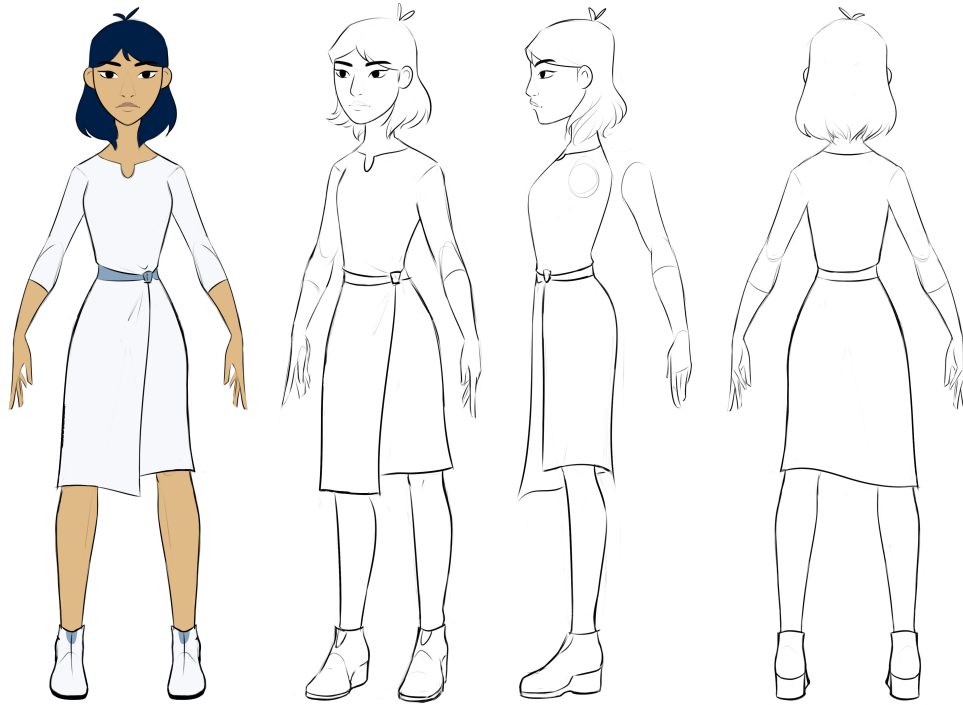
Figure 3.4: Willow turnaround white outfit

To design the masks and costumes, I did ample research on design elements in Chinese opera and their significance. The roles in Chinese opera are very distinct and are defined by both color and costume design. There are four main role types: *dan, sheng, jing* and *chou. Dan* refers to the female role while *sheng* refers to the male. Each of these roles are broken down into further subcategories that specify the class, age, and occupation of the character. The *jing* role refers to the painted-face character that is often a high-ranking official or warrior. And lastly, the *chou* or clown is the comic relief–and sometimes villainous character [27].

I chose to assign my opera character the *wudan* role, a subcategory of the *dan* role. The *wudan* is the warrior woman, a role that displays acrobatics and martial prowess. As a *wudan*, the opera character in "Chasing Faces" is domineering and even combative at times. This reflects the overwhelmingly tumultuous emotions Willow struggles with. In this way, she is quite literally battling with herself. The *wudan* costume tends to be more practical than those of the other maiden roles to better suit her military skills. The costume worn by the opera character in my film combines

the dress of the *wudan* with the cloak and shoulder pieces of the traditionally male Sichuan opera *bian lian* outfit.

Figure 3.5: *Raid on Hu Village*, Tianjin Youth Peking Opera Troupe, 1990 [28]

Figure 3.6: Practitioner of Sichuan *bian lian* Hu Yibo

Figure 3.7: Final opera costume design

The only exception is during the depression stage of the performance when the opera char-
acter appears with water sleeves, which are not a characteristic of the *wudan* role. Water sleeves
are long, flowing silk sleeves that express elegance and a variety of emotions [28].

The two pheasant tails on the headdress are often worn by the warriors of Chinese opera.
Like with the water sleeves, the performer wields these feathers to emphasize emotions such as joy,
determination, fear, and anger. They also underscore the movements of the performer as they move

across the stage [28]. In "Chasing Faces", the two feathers of the opera character serve an additional purpose; they resemble the antennae of a butterfly and thus calls back to the spirit of the deceased sister.

The specific colors worn by a character in Chinese opera are representative of their personality and quality, which help the audience understand what character archetype is being played. The color associations are as follows [2]:

Red: Loyal, courageous

Yellow: Bold, powerful, hot-tempered, insidious

Blue: Stubborn, calculating

Green: Bold, reckless, powerful, irascibility

Black: Upright, serious, honest

White: Treacherous, headstrong, crafty–on another note, can also indicate old or white-haired person

Purple: Honest, calm, upright

Silver and gold: Supernatural (gods, spirits, demons)

Another point to note is that traditional opera masks are made of ceramic, and specifically *bian lian* masks are paper or silk. I made the artistic choice to go with a Papier-mâché mask material for its flammability and better readability in the story.

In designing the main mask that symbolizes the sisters' bond, I began by choosing butterflies that would represent each of the sisters. I eventually settled on two butterflies native to China: the Leopard Lacewing and the Alpine Black Swallowtail. The Leopard Lacewing is a striking palette of orange, red, and yellow with a spattering of blue. As per Chinese opera traditions, the character profile of the colors indicates loyalty, integrity, boldness, and courage. The lively colors and patterns matched the sunny disposition of the deceased sister. On the other hand, the Alpine Black Swallowtail has iridescent scales of primarily blue, green, and black with splashes of red. The character profiles mark these colors as representative of a stubborn, irascible, strong, and serious disposition–which fits well with Willow. The opposite natures of the butterfly designs as well as the sisters' personalities creates a *yin* and *yang* relationship, which in itself is a keystone of Chinese philosophy.

(a) (c)Johnathon Soong

(b) (c)Pasha Kirillov

Figure 3.8: Leopard Lacewing Butterfly

(a) (c)Hyun-tae Kim

(b) (c)Alpsdake

Figure 3.9: Alpine Black Swallowtail Butterfly

Because I referenced butterfly wing patterns and the intricate painted designs of traditional Chinese opera masks, my first attempt at the main mask resulted in a very complex design. I had to simplify it quite a bit in order to make it more appropriate for the animated medium for which it was intended.

Figure 3.10: Several versions of the design for the main mask

Figure 3.11: My final design for the main mask

The grief masks emulate the styles of Sichuan opera masks with some degrees of creative liberties taken. Rather than portraying a character's personality or role, the design of each one reflects an emotion commonly felt during the grieving process.

<div align="center">

Denial   Helplessness   Anger   Depression

</div>

Figure 3.12: Designs corresponding to the stages or emotions of grief

For the environment, I had two locations I needed to consider a design for: the lake in the beginning and end of the story, and the Chinese opera scene sandwiched in between. I mocked up 3D proxy models of the lake environment in Maya to help with perspective, camera movement, and camera angles for my storyboards. The opera section in Act Two does not have a complex environment. Instead, the environment is purposefully empty to both emulate traditional Chinese opera stage setting and Willow's emotional suppression. The resulting backdrop for Act Two is a dark void much like the Chamber of Exquisite Sadness from the movie *Over the Moon*, which also deals with themes of overcoming grief. Visually, this allows a striking contrast between the vibrant colors of the opera performer character as well as the white grieving outfit worn by Willow.

Figure 3.13: Chamber of Exquisite Sadness – *Over the Moon*, 2020

3.6 Thumbnails and Storyboards

I first started my boarding process by sketching out rough thumbs on Procreate. I iterated through a couple versions of the introduction. At one point, I had a version that immediately starts with the photos to quickly establish the backstory, but I ultimately decided to slow down the pacing for emotional impact. In this first part of the story, I purposely included a lot of cuts and neutral facial expressions to give a sense of detachment.

Before and during my thumbnailing process, I studied storyboard resources from Dream-Works and Studio Ghibli's *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Studio Ghibli films often make use of silence and quiet moments, so their films have a natural way of "breathing". The way I paced the beginning took inspiration from that. While the cuts may seem jarring, I still wanted the scene to feel organic overall. My intention is for the audience to be able to place themself in that moment.

For my final polished deliverable, I focused on creating an animatic for Act One, beat boards for Act Two, and thumbnails for Act Three. I selected Act One as my storyboarding focus for its emotional complexity and strong story set up. It is also the act that went through the most iterations, and I felt comfortable in the level of quality I have achieved with it. I redrew each thumbnail as an independent board, fixing perspectives and adding additional frames as I went to make the sequence

more cohesive. These frames would be brought into Toon Boom's Storyboard Pro software, which I chose for its streamlined storyboard to animatic pipeline. It is also an industry standard tool that is specifically designed for storyboarding, so I took this opportunity to familiarize myself with it in preparation for my future career path. In Storyboard Pro, I made final touch-ups to my boards, timed out each frame appropriately, and exported the resulting animatic as a video file.

Act Two is primarily comprised of a choreographed performance. I had gotten some portions of this captured in thumbnails, but in the interest of time, I supplemented these with colored beat boards. In total, I have four beat boards to illustrate each of the four emotions: denial, anger, helplessness, and depression. These beat boards serve as snapshots within the second act that effectively portray the mood, lighting, and composition in a more encompassing manner than a single board would.

(a) Denial

(b) Anger

(c) Helplessness

(d) Depression

The pose, color scheme, and composition of the Act Two beat boards all serve to underscore the emotion being displayed. Anger and depression even make use of Chinese opera special skills like fire breathing and water sleeves, respectively.

Figure 3.14: An actress demonstrating her fire breath in *The Sorrow at West Lake* [28]

Figure 3.15: An actress with water sleeves expressing her character's grief in *The Butterfly Lovers* [28]

Stylistically, Act Two leans a bit into the surreal. The darkness swallows the increasingly enigmatic opera character. An ocean of sand renders Willow helpless. The fire breath sets the entire environment alight in flames. The water sleeves become a torrential river. In this strange void, the personification of grief is amplified and forcibly demands the attention of our main character.

3.7   Symbolism

My story is intended to be very metaphorical. Many aspects of the narrative have symbolic meaning. Perhaps the most obvious is the use of the face-changing *bian lian* mask. Masks are often used in narrative pieces to symbolize hidden intentions or feelings. They may also be used by a character to obscure their true self. This is the case in "Chasing Faces", which takes this idea to a more literal level.

The butterfly motif is another prominent one. Butterflies have traditionally held special meaning across multiple cultures, often with overlapping meanings. They can generally represent change, rebirth, reinvention, and freedom. In some cultures, such as Latino and Chinese, butterflies are regarded as the spirits of those who have passed on. Día de Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a Mexican holiday that celebrates departed loved ones. It is observed during the annual monarch butterfly migration, which is believed to be the souls of the departed transcending the bridge between the living and dead.

There is a famous Chinese legend called *The Butterfly Lovers* or *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* that illustrates this same belief. In this story, two lovers Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai are unable to be together after Zhu is betrothed to another man. When Liang falls ill and dies of a broken heart, Zhu visits his grave on her way to her wedding. The grave splits open in a crack of thunder, and Zhu throws herself inside in her grief. From within the grave emerges two butterflies–the eternal spirits of the lovers. The story itself has been adapted into a variety of Chinese operas over the years. The *Butterfly Lovers* centers around loss, grief, guilt, and life after death. These are themes that also feature prominently in my animated film, along with the addition of finding acceptance after the death of a loved one.

Other than the previously discussed color symbolism already encoded into Chinese opera, color in general plays an important thematic role within my narrative as well. It's a direct representation of Willow's emotions and how they progress through the film. The film would begin

with desaturated colors in Act One to reflect the numbness of the grieving character. This contrasts sharply with the theatrical atmosphere in Act Two. The background is a simple black wash, but the opera costumes and masks are vividly bright. The intensity of the colors builds throughout this act, clashing together in turbulent vibrancy. It's intentionally jarring to Willow, who up until this point hasn't allowed herself to acknowledge her emotions but now finds herself confronted with them. In the final act, the colors are not as muted as Act One, but also less saturated than Act Two. Willow has not completely resolved her grief at this point, but she has finally allowed herself to take the first step in the process. Opening her eyes to a world of color is a direct metaphor of that realization.

The colors of the butterflies reflect the personalities of the sister each butterfly correlates with–cooler colors for Willow, warmer colors for her sister. The implication is that May had always been the warmth and light in Willow's life, which makes the loss of that even more difficult to come to terms with. Having certain colors associated with each character also helps the audience identify them in the story, especially when a mask obstructs the facial features.

Duality is another recurring theme throughout the film. The concepts of duality and balance are ubiquitous in Chinese philosophy and culture, so it is interesting to explore the disharmony that follows when that balance is shifted. The story is about a set of sisters, but it opens with only half of the set, a loss that is keenly felt. There are times where Willow almost regains that balance, such as when she encounters her reflection and meets the opera character, but they are only shades of what once was. This idea of duality is also reflected in the designs. As mentioned previously, the sisters have opposite personalities that are reflected in their butterfly mask. Yet, the butterfly wings on either half still have symmetrical weight that ultimately balances out.

Lastly, I used wind as another motif throughout my story. Wind is often used as a literary device in writing and other media to symbolize change and new beginnings. Like dandelion seeds drifting off to plant new life, the ashes from the burnt joss paper and photographs are carried away from Willow by the wind. Later on in Act One, a stiff breeze snatches the mask from her hands before she can set it alight. This moment is the catalyst that drives the rest of the story. The wind becomes almost a character of its own in this narrative, and the implication I hoped to convey was that it is a stand-in for May's spirit. In Act Three (which can be viewed fully in Appendix A) the wind makes one last appearance by carrying the remnants of paper ashes into the sky. These ashes and scraps of paper form the shape of a butterfly, which hovers fleetingly before flying off into the heavens.
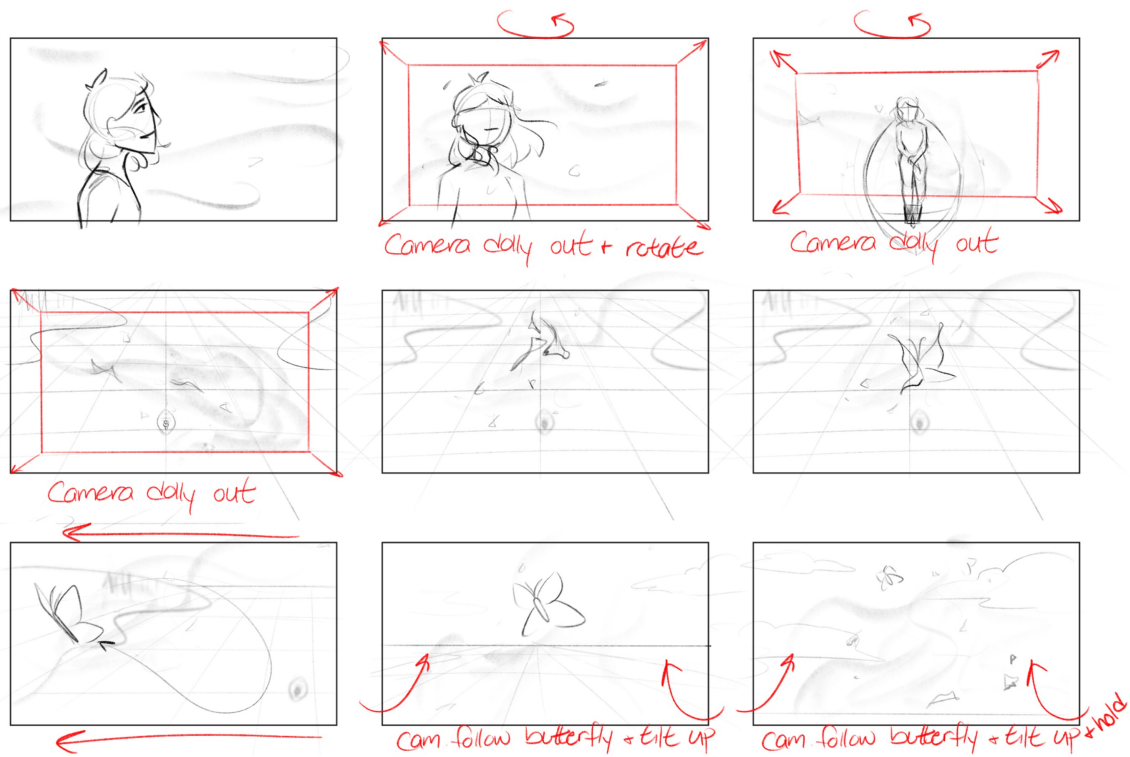
Figure 3.16: End of Act Three and the conclusion of the film

3.8 Use of Chinese Opera Styles and Techniques

Much of the incorporated Chinese opera influences are readily apparent, such as the mask designs and costuming. However, it is some of the more subtle design choices that best pays tribute to cultural authenticity. In this section, I will discuss additional techniques and cultural elements I have applied to my film.

One aspect I focused on was the choreography. Chinese traditions place great philosophical importance on circles due to its association with harmony and balance. As such, circular designs can be found in many aspects of Chinese culture, such as architecture, art, martial arts movements, and dance choreography. Chinese opera movements are no exception. In a fully completed version of the opera performance, the opera character's arm movements would tent to be round, and she would travel in circles or figure-eights. Some of this can be seen in my beat boards and preliminary thumbnails for Act Two.

Chinese opera also has distinctive hand poses and gestures that were used in the opera

portion of my film. These hand poses are referred to as "orchid hand poses" due to their resemblance to the flower. Famous Beijing opera performer Mei Lanfang created a number of these hand styles and codified them.

Figure 3.17: Mei Lanfang's "orchid hand poses" from the Memorial Hall of Mei Lanfang, 2002

The beat boards in Act Two draw inspiration from brushstrokes and the graphic style of Chinese paintings, such as Lu Yanshao's *Scholar Strolling in the Mountains*. Although mine were painted digitally, I chose and modified a set of digital brushes on Procreate to imitate traditional calligraphy brushes.
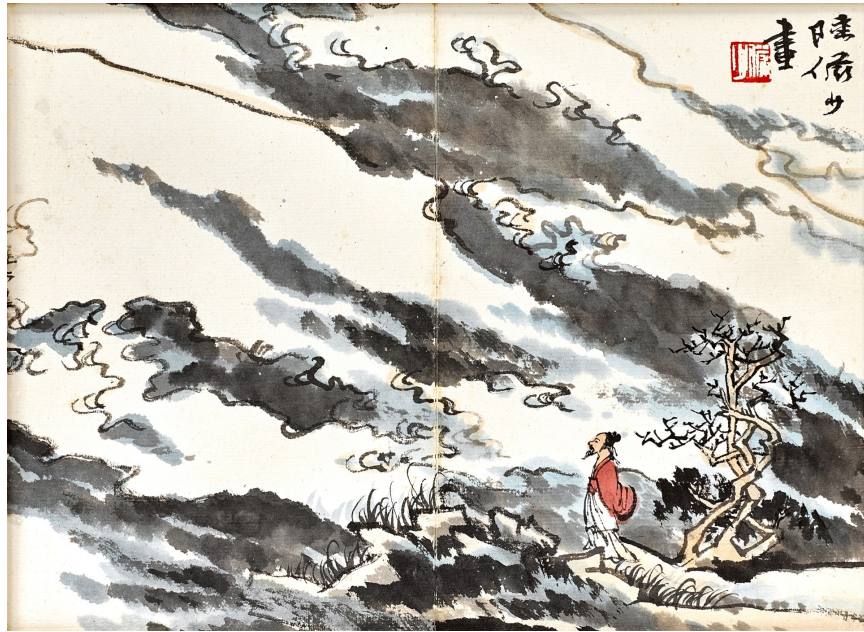
Figure 3.18: *Scholar Strolling in the Mountains* by Lu Yanshao. Note the textures of the painted brush strokes and the ink outlines

Figure 3.19: Beat board from Act Two depicting "Denial". Note the difference in how the two characters are rendered

It is worthy to note that this artistic stylization is not applied to Willow during this act. Instead, she is drawn and shaded with a flat airbrush throughout the entirety of the film. This distinction emphasizes her alienation from the opera character she faces and the world she is in.

3.9 Inspirations and Influences

Over the course of my artistic experience, I have encountered a number of artists whose works I greatly admire. Their influences have impacted my own work. With the distinction between boards for television versus feature, mine definitely lean cinematographically more towards feature animation. For this reason, I chose to study works that also fall within the feature animation realm.

One of my favorite artists is Disney veteran Glen Keane. An animator, author, and illustrator, he takes great care in bringing his characters to life in a way that allows the audience to fully connect with them. In his lectures and interviews, he often talks at length about how he deconstructs his characters' motivations, emotions, and personalities in order to construct them. Characters like the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* become real.

One of Keane's most recent films is *Over the Moon*. It is an animated movie that also deals with grief. Fei Fei, the main character, is a young girl whose mother has passed away. There's a scene where Fei Fei's father introduces her to a woman, Ms. Zhong. Unbeknownst to Fei Fie, Ms. Zhong is someone her dad is considering marrying. Keane describes the subtle character acting in this scene where both Ms. Zhong and Fei Fei's father pick up a fallen bowl and their hands brush briefly. "There's romance in that touch. It's very gentle. It's just, he keeps his hand there too long for Fei Fei, and [she] sees that, and we cut to Fei Fei's face, and it's just her eyes getting wider. And then the corners of her mouth drop, and tensions kind of like, it's literally, in talking to the animator, you are animating Fei Fei's world turning upside down right now. We are seeing it. The only way you can do that is in the expression, the emotion. [15]"

Figure 3.20: Shot from *Over the Moon*, 2020

Keane manages to emphasize the tension filling the scene without dramatic character acting. Rather, it's the micro-expressions and camera cuts that are carrying emotions. The empathy Keane achieves with his characters is what I constantly strive for in my work, especially with "Chasing

Faces". "Chasing Faces" is centered around emotions, so it was important to clearly portray not only the extremes, but the subtleties as well. In the shot where Willow brushes her hand against the side of the mask that represents her sister, there is a following beat where she cracks slightly. Up until this point she has remained relatively stoic. But at this moment, her eyebrows draw down and her lips set. There's a flash of anger, a kind of vulnerability that slips through before she shakes her head and resets her resolve.
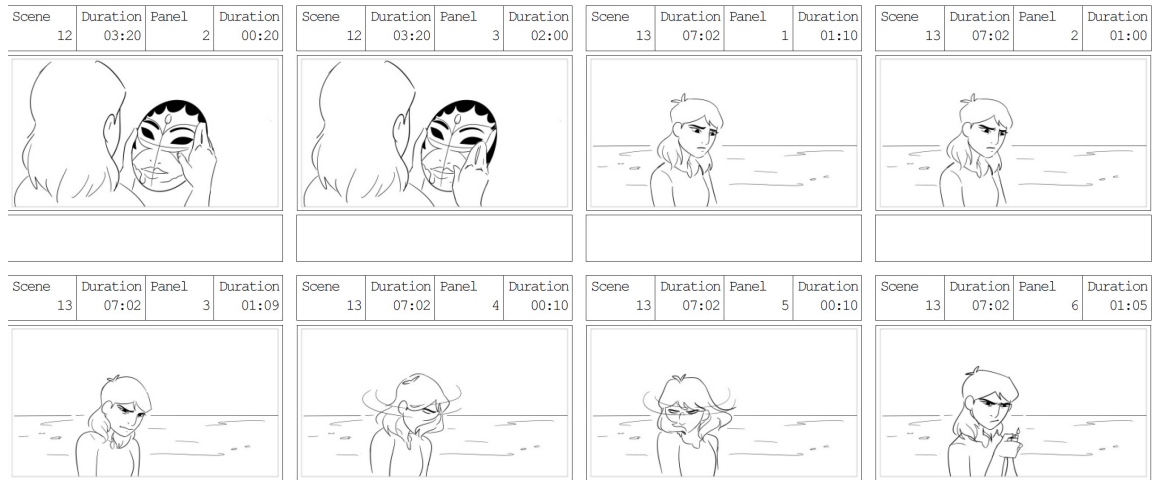
Figure 3.21: Shot from Scene 12 in "Chasing Faces"

In my visual development and concept stage, I also prepared an expressions sheet for Willow. This was part of my process in familiarizing myself with how the character would express certain emotions.

Figure 3.22: Expressions sheet for Willow

Another artist I look up to is storyboarder and comic artist Johane Matte. She has worked on projects such as *Rise of the Guardians*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, and *Avatar: the Last Airbender*. She exercises great emotive depth in her work through strong compositions, dynamic camera angles, and acute sense of pacing. She also has a robust understanding of body mechanics and the way she constructs the figures in her boards ensures they are able to be read with clarity. The ability to employ creative storytelling while maintaining clear story presentation is one of the most challenging but important parts of storyboarding.

In this unused scene Matte did for *Rise of the Guardians*, Jack's emotions are keenly felt through his expressions and actions. The transition to Pitch in the close foreground provides suspense and physical depth. Pitch is also now dominating the scene compared to Jack.
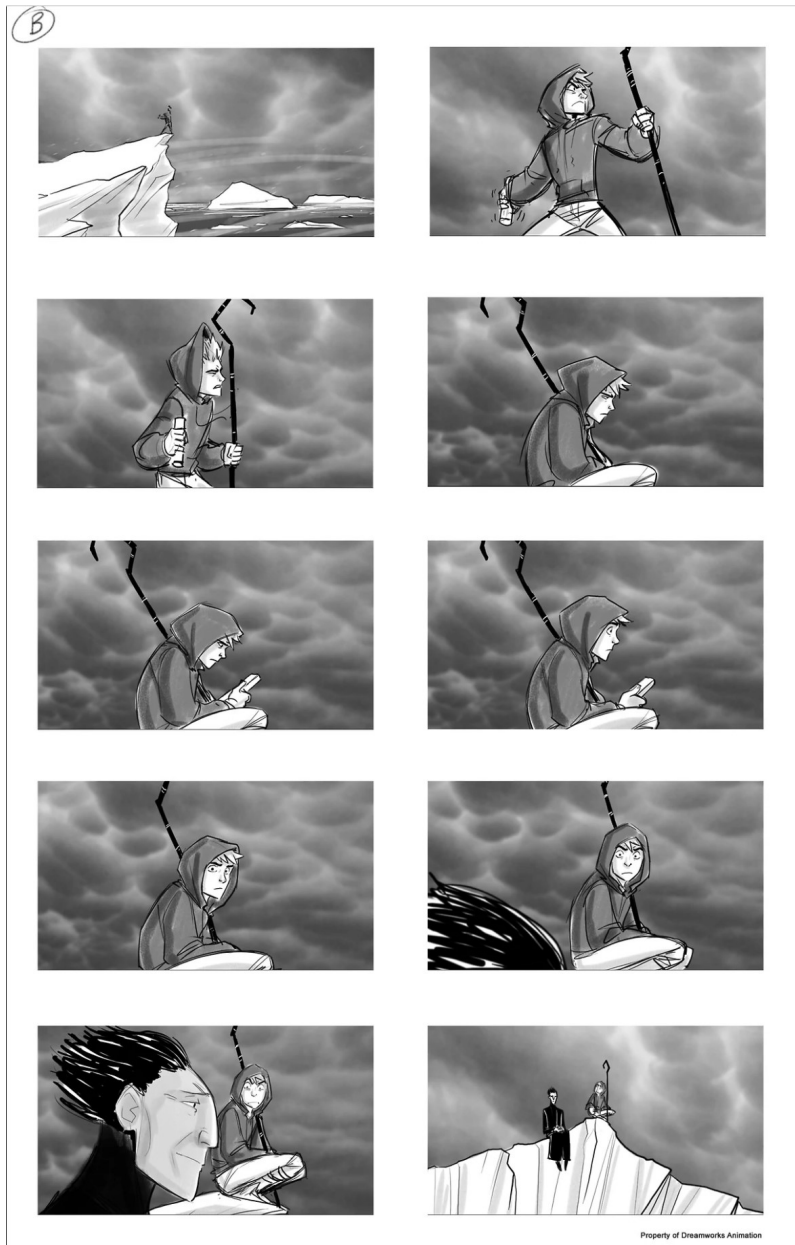
Figure 3.23: Boards done by Johane Matte for an unused scene in *Rise of the Guardians*, 2012

My earlier iterations of my boards did not have many dynamic camera angles or movement. After discussing with my committee members and studying some of Johane Matte's boards, I went through several more iterations. These later attempts utilized the camera much more heavily as a storytelling tool to enhance the atmosphere. For example, there is a scene in Act One where Willow notices the mask and goes to pick it up. The early thumbnail versions of this scene were mostly

profile or three-quarters views, which made it quite one-dimensional. My intent at the time was to keep the camera on the tame side in the beginning to mirror Willow's sense of robotic detachment and save the dramatic movement for the action later on. However, the feedback I received revealed that the abundance of straight-on shots were flattening my scenes far more than I had intended. It was restricting the story and stagnating my character.
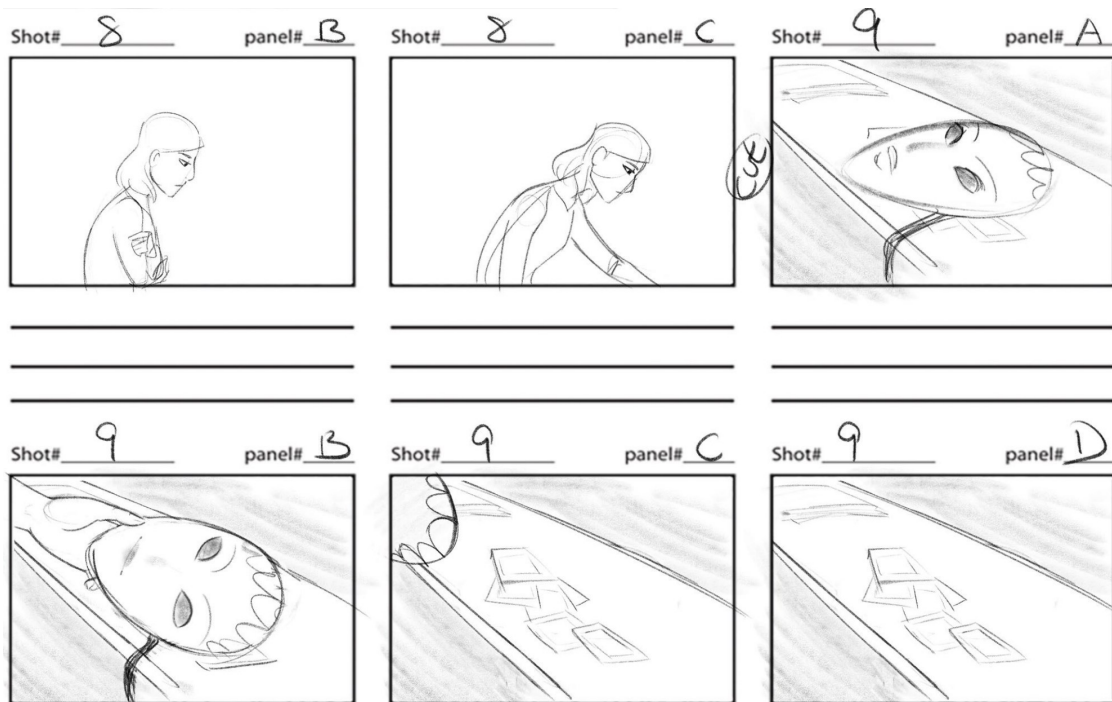
Figure 3.24: Old version of Act One excerpt in "Chasing Faces"

The new version of this scene starts with a behind-the-shoulder shot to depict Willow's point of view. The camera then switches to a low angle shot behind the mask that looks up at Willow. Although the camera is viewing her from below, Willow is actually dominated by the mask in the foreground. With her hesitation and the focal shift to the mask, the scene is painted with a sense of palpable apprehension.

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
7	04:00	4	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
8	03:20	1	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
8	03:20	2	01:16

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
8	03:20	3	01:04

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
9	02:13	1	02:13

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
10	05:14	1	02:01

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
10	05:14	2	02:04

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
10	05:14	3	01:09
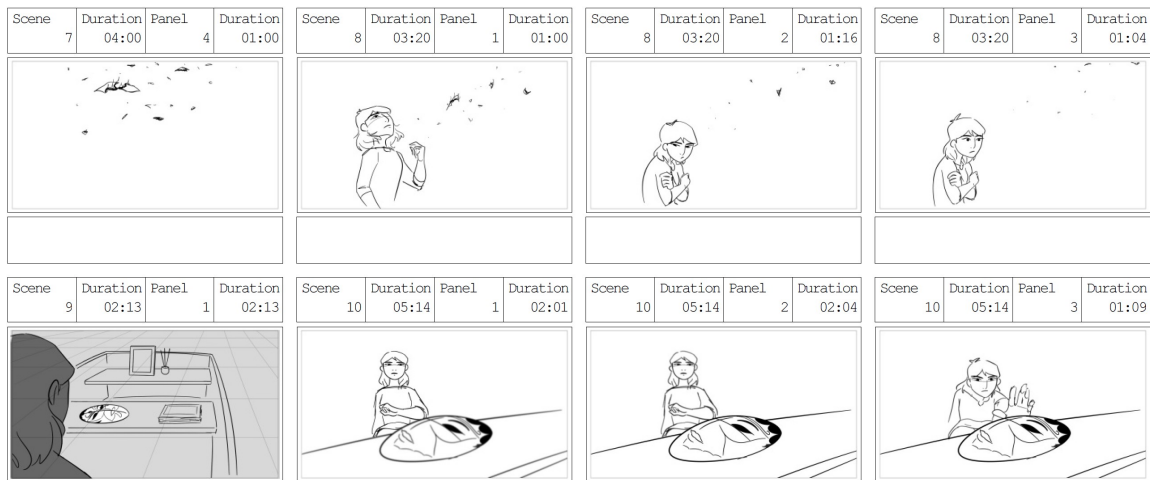
Figure 3.25: Current version of Act One excerpt in "Chasing Faces"

For the rest of my storyboards, I focused on composing my shots in ways that would heighten the emotion in the scene while still making sure to maintain story clarity. The final boards, beat boards, and thumbnails can be found in the Appendix A. Early versions of Act One can be viewed in Appendix B.

Chapter 4

Conclusion and Discussions

"Chasing Faces" was an attempt to tie together the topics of grief, cultural storytelling, and Chinese opera into one poignant narrative. Each of these topics is quite loaded in itself, and it was an interesting challenge to weave them together. As the project grew into maturity from its conception, so too did its complexity. What started out as an idea for a three to four-minute short story expanded into a film that would boast a runtime of over eight minutes. For the sake of prioritizing quality over quantity, I had to select a portion of my narrative to produce as a final animatic. If I were to continue this project in the future, I can see it as a 2D or even a mixed 2D and 3D animated film. The next steps would be to complete the storyboards for Acts Two and Three, flesh out the environment design, build 3D assets, and complete the animation.

The soundtrack and music would be another area to consider in a full production or even as something to add to my animatic. I can imagine the beginning of the first act backed purely by foley sound effects like blowing wind, burning paper, and ambient flowing water. This would highlight the focus on Willow and her feelings of isolation. Perhaps as she flips through the photographs, a soft theme would play. I don't feel that this theme needs to lean specifically into a more traditionally Eastern or Western style. However, I do think it would be interesting to include some classic Chinese instruments such as the *dizi* and *erhu*. This would help maintain a cohesive theme throughout when the film transitions to the Chinese opera scene in Act Two. Here is where the music would bloom into a full fledged Chinese opera accompaniment. Between Beijing and Sichuan opera style music, I would lean towards Sichuan for its flavorful assortment of percussive instruments. The drums and gongs that are a staple many Chinese opera styles can play up the moods of the performance as it

becomes increasingly chaotic. Once the mask is removed in the climactic moment of the story, the Chinese opera music would end. The soft theme from the beginning would then return to carry the film to a full circle ending.

This thesis was one of the most ambitious projects I've ever taken on–certainly the most research heavy. One of the most challenging parts of the film was the Chinese opera choreography for the second act. While I had an idea for what I wanted, I wasn't satisfied with the dynamics and interaction between the characters for this performance once it came time to choreograph. The beat boards ended up being the best solution for this as they effectively bridged Acts One and Three while clearly illustrating the opera elements. Future work on this project would require ample research and gestural studies of opera choreography. Another challenge I faced was the differences between Eastern and Western cultures. The color symbolism differences between the two meant I had to take some artistic liberties in order to represent my mask designs as emotions rather than character role or personality. For example, red is associated with bravery and luck in Chinese culture, but would represent rage and anger in the West. To amend this, I chose a color palette of orange, yellow, and magenta and relied mainly on a facial design that would clearly express rage.

Despite the challenges I faced, I am satisfied with what I have achieved and consider it an overall success. This project has definitely left its impact on me as an artist, storyteller, and person navigating this world. "Chasing Faces" is a piece of personal exploration. By imbuing this story with what I've learned about Chinese opera, I was able to connect with my heritage in a new way. Additionally, in order to authentically craft this narrative, I had to dissect my own experiences in dealing with loss. In doing so, I have achieved a better understanding of my own grief, both past and future. I also have a renewed appreciation for the diversity of the arts the world has to offer and a desire the preserve as much of it as possible. Despite how much I have learned about the storytelling traditions of other cultures, I know that I haven't even scratched the surface. The door has been cracked just enough for me to catch a glimpse of just how much more there is to explore and I am eager to see more. Even if I don't end up continuing this specific project as a full production, the research I have done on Chinese opera and storytelling has inspired other project ideas I'm excited to work on.

Ultimately, I strongly reject the idea that the digital age will be the death of traditional storytelling arts. As I've shown through my research and "Chasing Faces", it is fully possible to adapt storytelling techniques to contemporary formats while retaining the core elements that make

it culturally distinct. If we put forth the effort to keep these beautiful arts and stories alive, they will continue to enrich the world we live in.

Appendices

Appendix A "Chasing Faces"

The final storyboards, beat boards, and thumbnails for the story.

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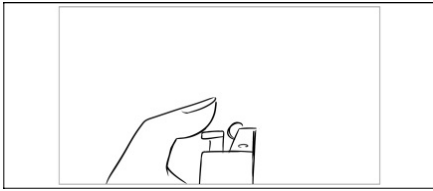
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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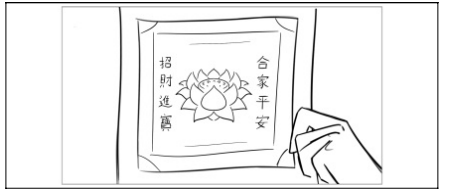
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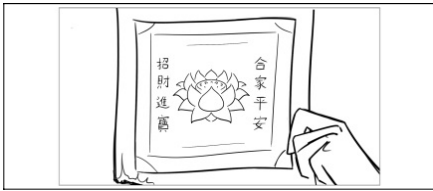
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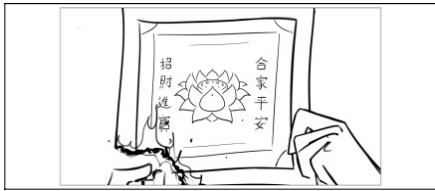
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
1	25:00	7	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
1	25:00	8	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
1	25:00	9	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
1	25:00	10	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
1	25:00	11	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
1	25:00	12	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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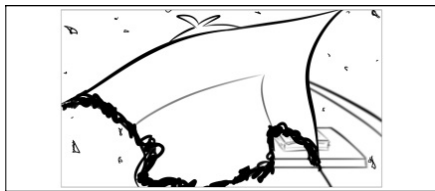
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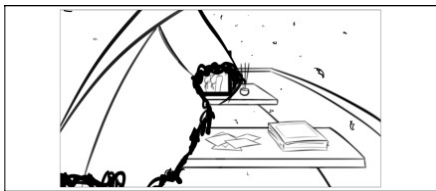
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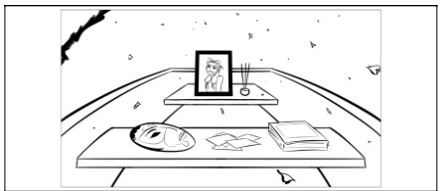
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
1	25:00	17	02:15

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
1	25:00	18	01:11

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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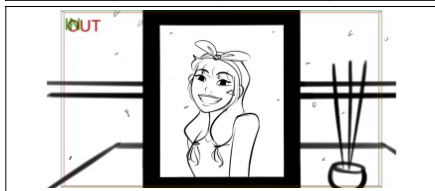
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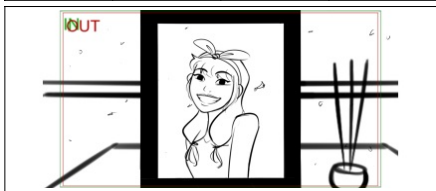
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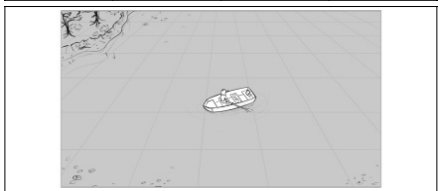
Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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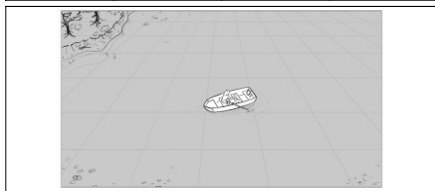
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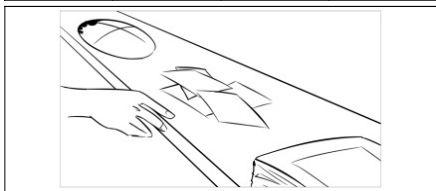
Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
3	02:08	2	01:08

Toon Boom

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
4	03:04	2	02:04

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
5	13:11	1	02:10

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
5	13:11	2	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
5	13:11	3	02:10

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
5	13:11	4	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
5	13:11	5	02:10

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
5	13:11	6	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
5	13:11	7	03:05

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
6	05:03	2	01:05

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
6	05:03	3	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
6	05:03	4	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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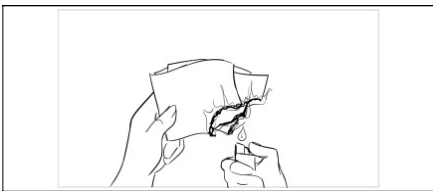
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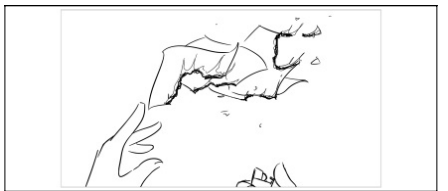
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
7	04:00	4	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
8	03:20	1	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
8	03:20	2	01:16
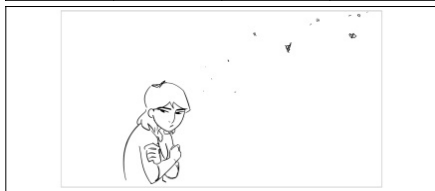
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
9	02:13	1	02:13

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
10	05:14	1	02:01

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
10	05:14	2	02:04

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
10	05:14	3	01:09

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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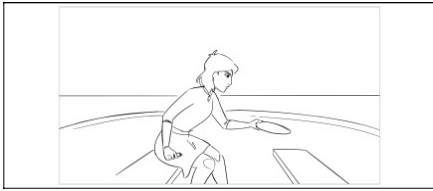
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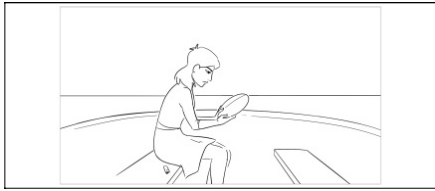
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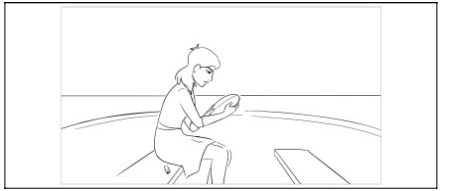
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
12	03:20	2	00:20

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
12	03:20	3	02:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
13	07:05	1	01:10

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
13	07:05	2	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
13	07:05	3	01:09

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
13	07:05	4	00:10

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
13	07:05	5	00:10

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
13	07:05	7	01:09

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
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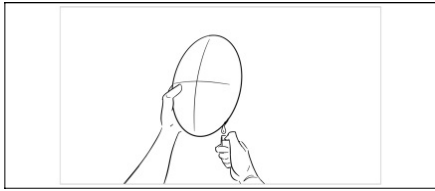
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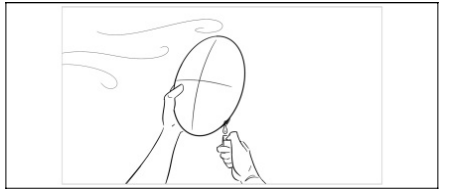
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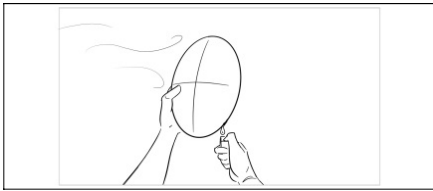
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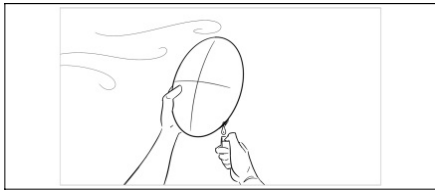
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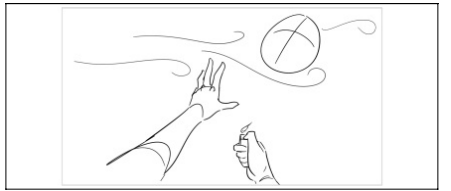
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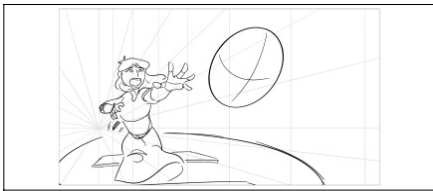
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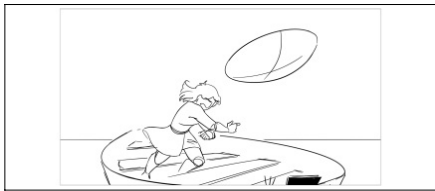
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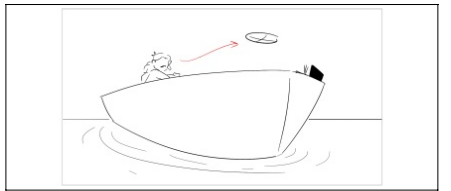
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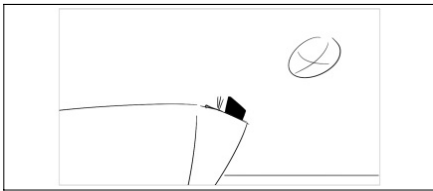
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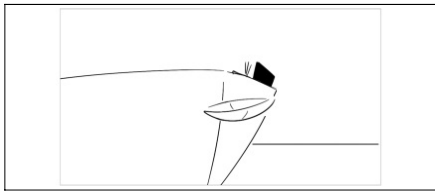
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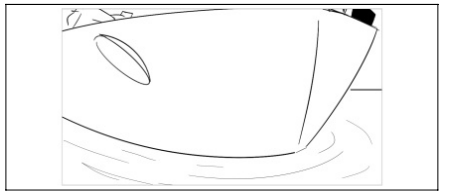
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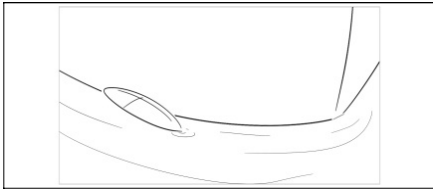
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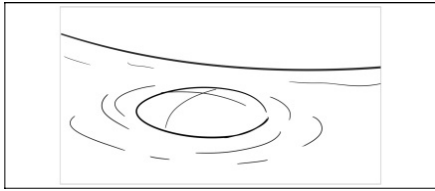
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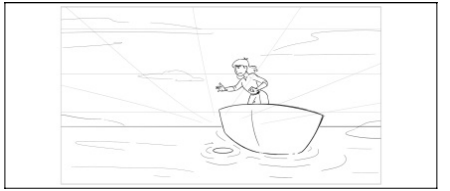
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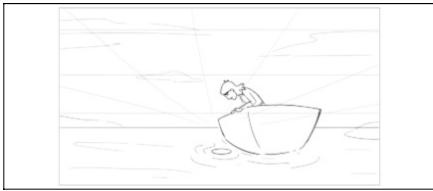
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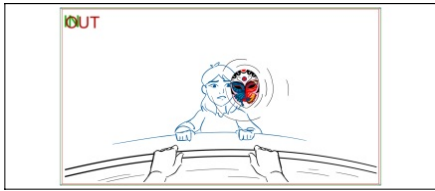
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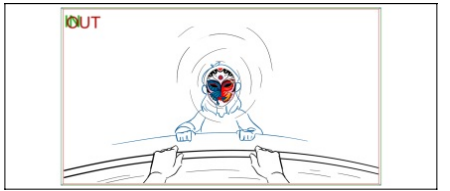
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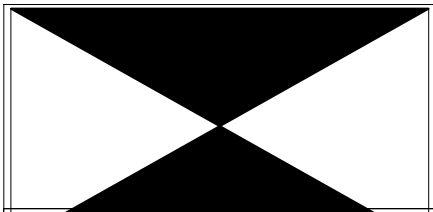
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Dissolve	Duration
	00:12
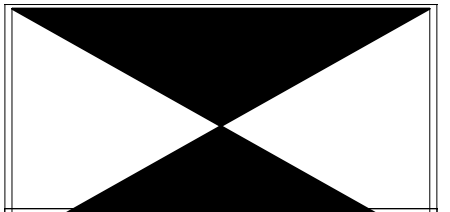
Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
20B	02:08	1	02:08

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
21	01:20	1	00:15
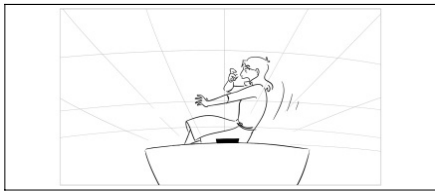
Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
21	01:20	2	01:05

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
22	04:11	1	01:04

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
22	04:11	2	01:03

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
22	04:11	3	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
22	04:11	4	01:04

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
23	05:15	1	01:00

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
23	05:15	2	01:12

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
23	05:15	3	01:04

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
23	05:15	4	01:23

Dissolve	Duration
	00:12

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
23A	02:01	1	02:01

Dissolve	Duration
	00:12

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
23B	02:03	1	02:03

Scene 24	Duration 05:09	Panel 1	Duration 02:03

Scene 24	Duration 05:09	Panel 2	Duration 03:06

Scene 25	Duration 03:02	Panel 1	Duration 01:19

Scene 25	Duration 03:02	Panel 2	Duration 01:07

Scene 26	Duration 01:00	Panel 1	Duration 01:00

Scene 27	Duration 01:12	Panel 1	Duration 01:12

Scene 28	Duration 02:06	Panel 1	Duration 02:06

Scene 29	Duration 00:16	Panel 1	Duration 00:06

Scene 29	Duration 00:16	Panel 2	Duration 00:05

Scene 29	Duration 00:16	Panel 3	Duration 00:05

Scene 30	Duration 05:06	Panel 1	Duration 00:19

Scene 30	Duration 05:06	Panel 2	Duration 00:21

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
30	05:06	3	01:05

Scene	Duration	Panel	Duration
30	05:06	4	02:09

empty frame here

SPLAT

Sudden change to Denial Mask

stand up
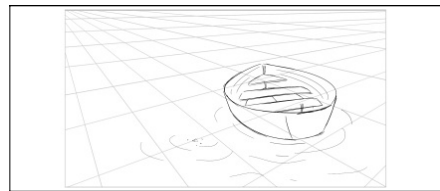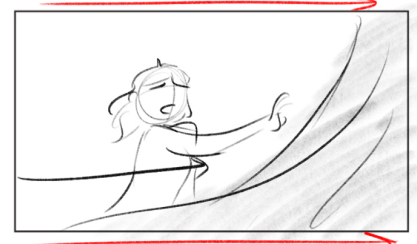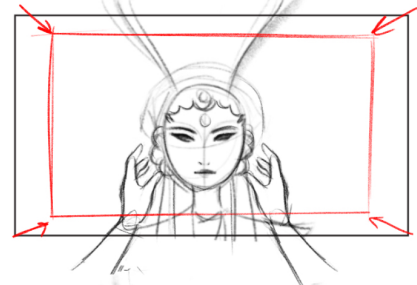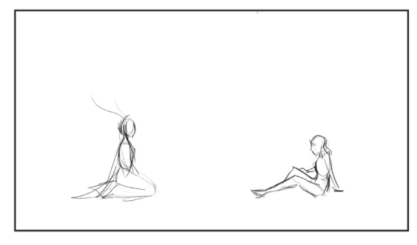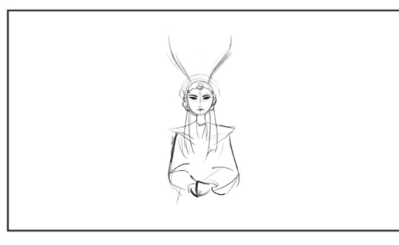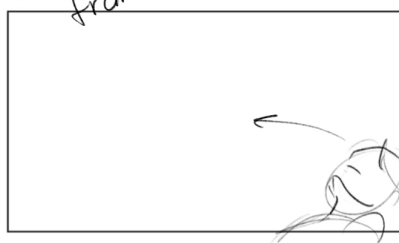
Act Two beat boards:
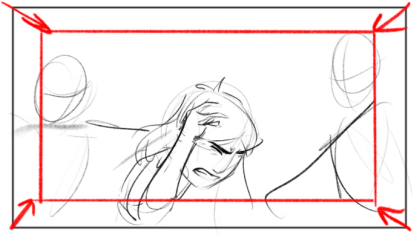
Masks facing in + out
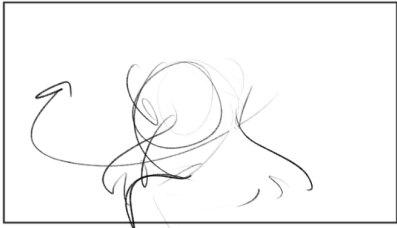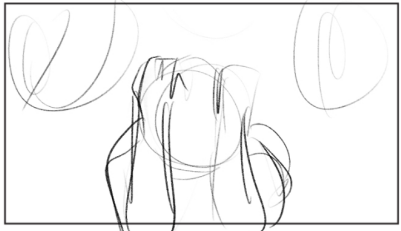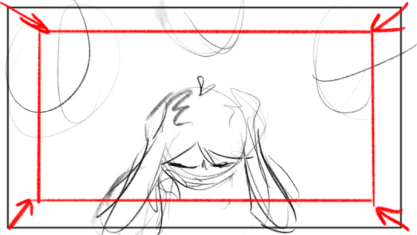
Turns to leave

cam follows as feet step →
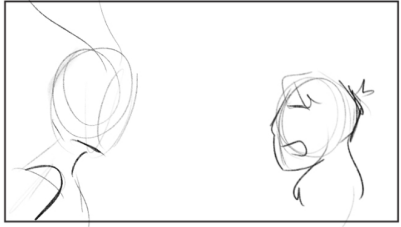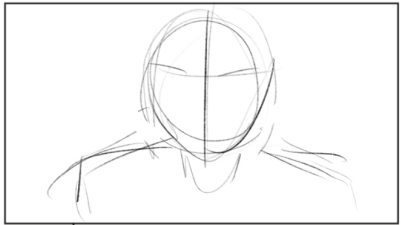
Mask change

Mask change

Back to MC

continue flipping back + forth, getting faster →
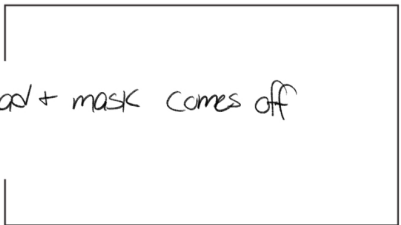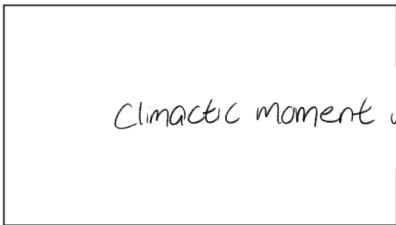
Climactic moment where everything comes to a head + mask comes off

Title **ACT 2** .... Scene ....
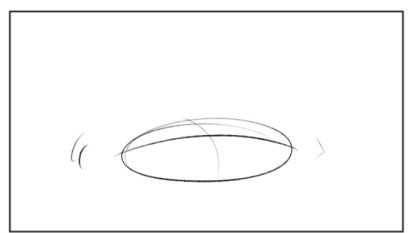
Mask clatters to ground

Cam zoom

Cut
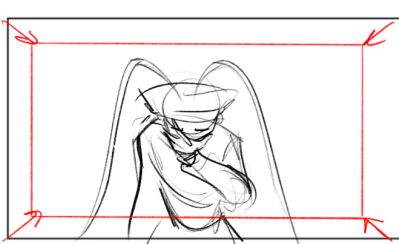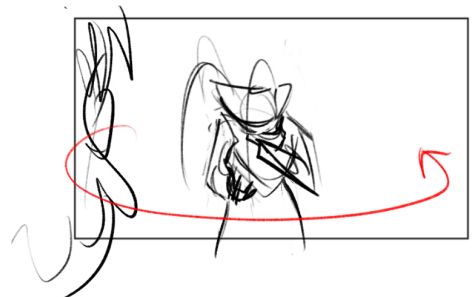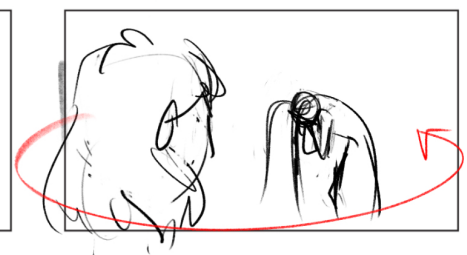
Cam zoom
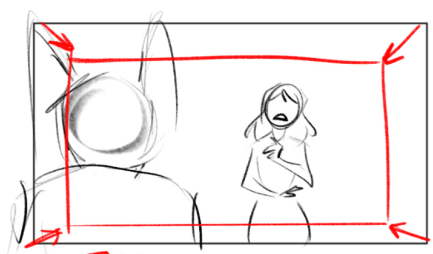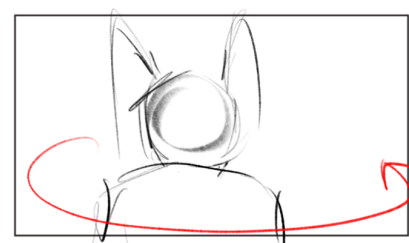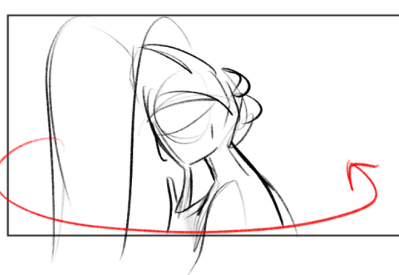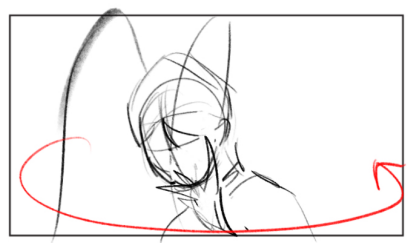
zoom

Hold this frame
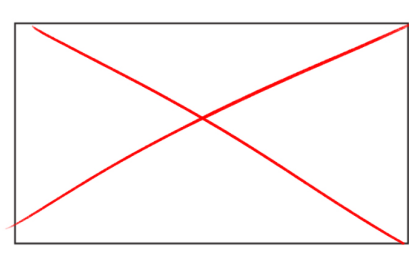
Lifts hand to touch tears
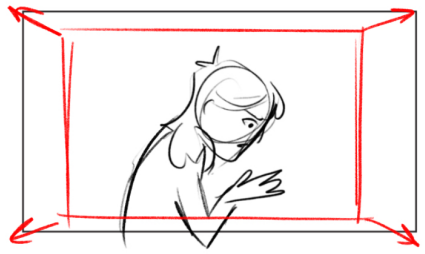
focal blur

less blur
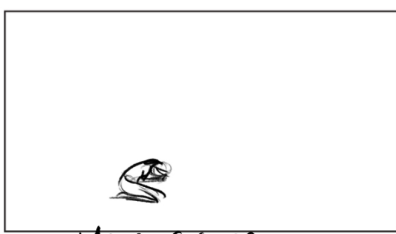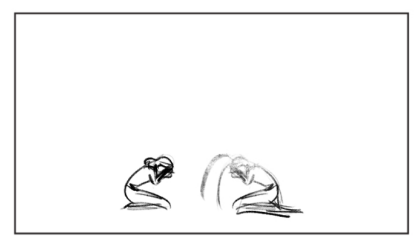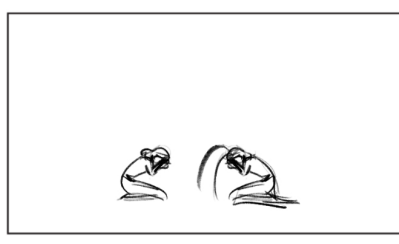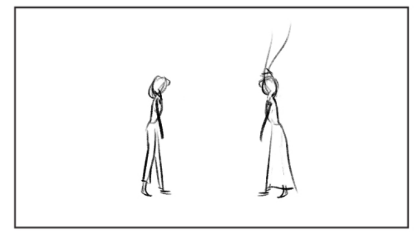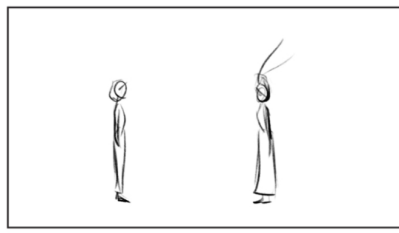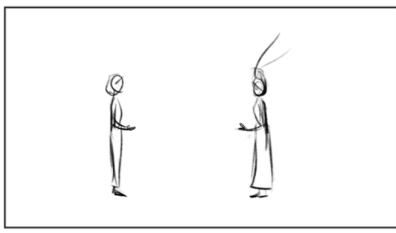
More Crying
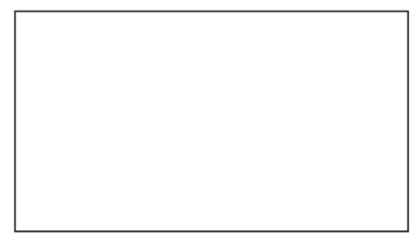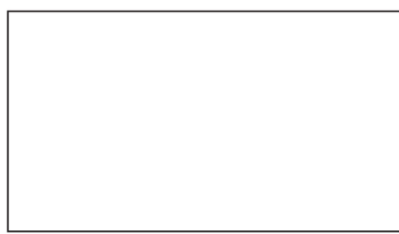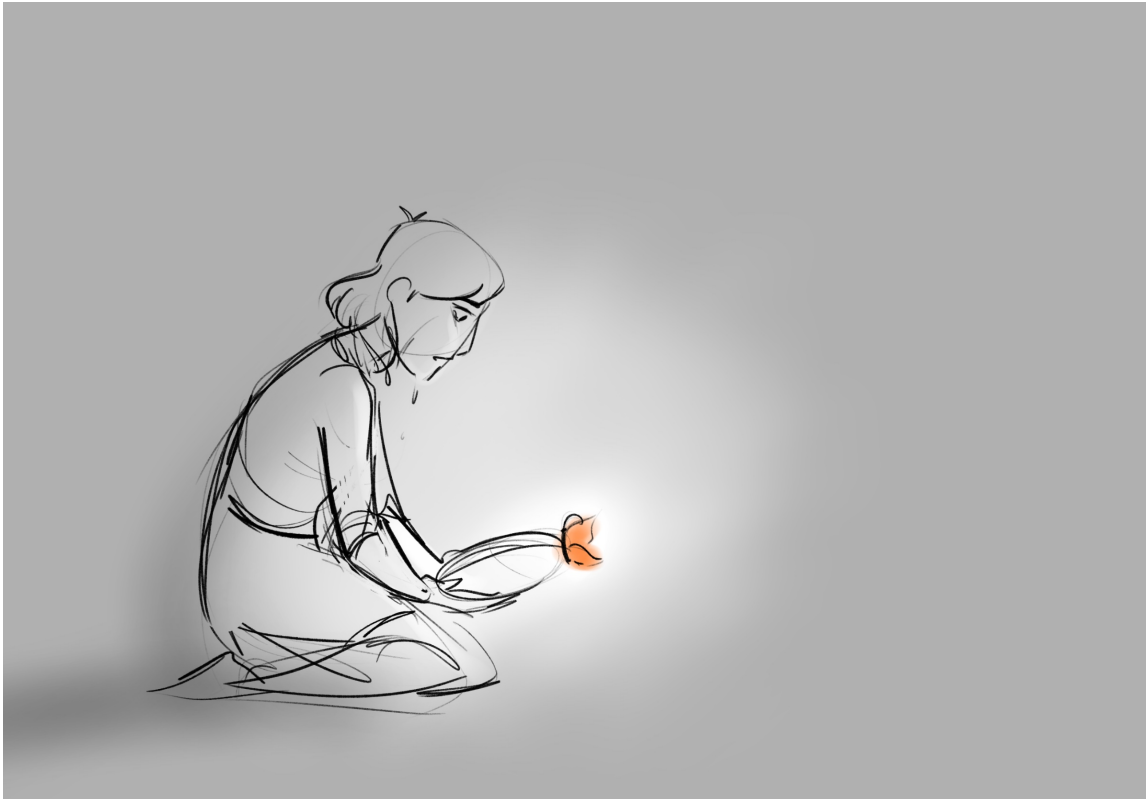
Thumbnails for Act Three to conclude the story.
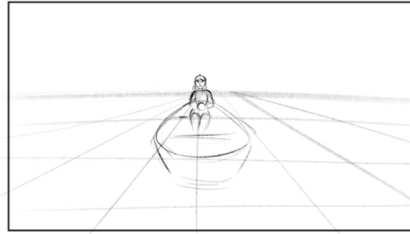
Tears scatter in wind
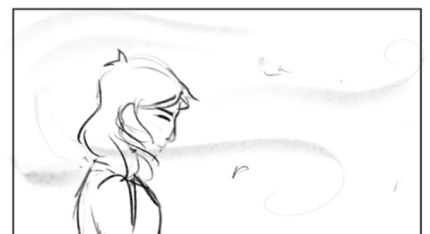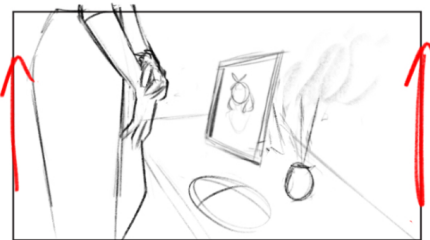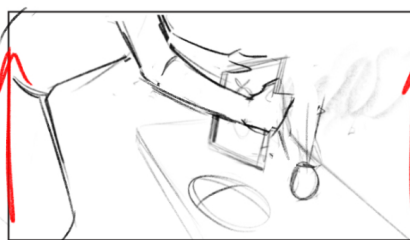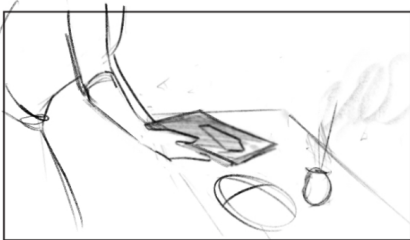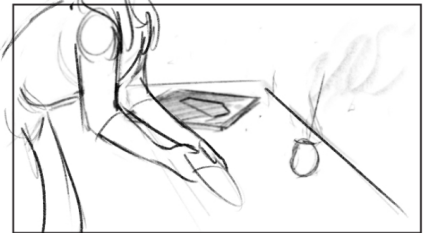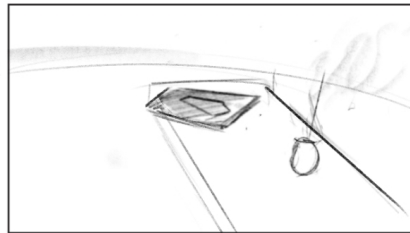
Title **ACT 3**   Scene
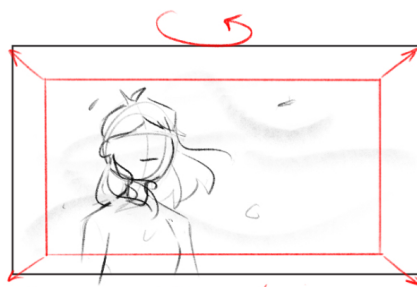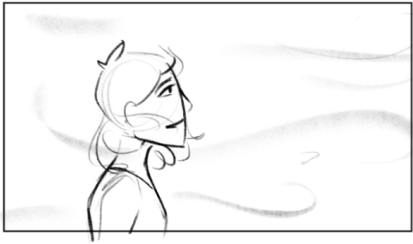
Camera dolly out + rotate
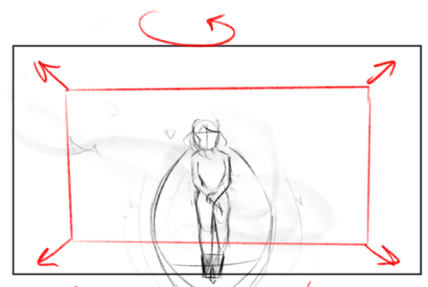
Camera dolly out
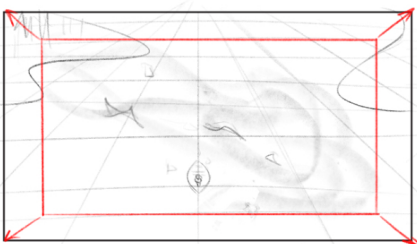
Camera dolly out
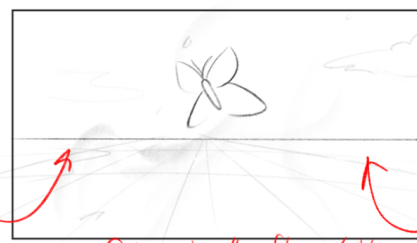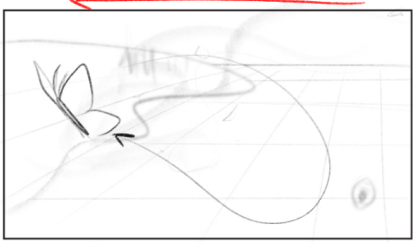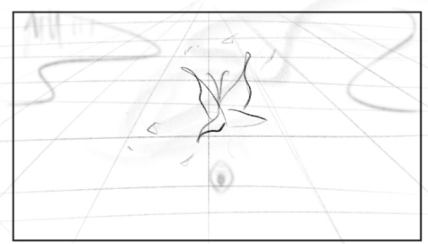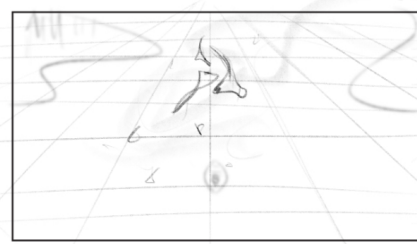
cam. follow butterfly + tilt up
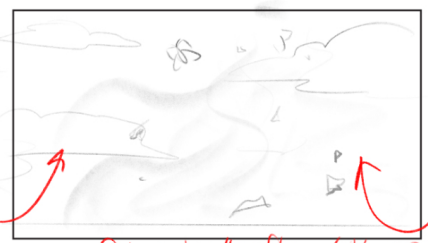
cam. follow butterfly + tilt up + hold
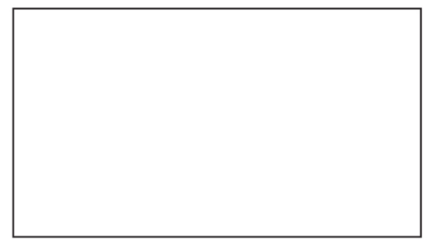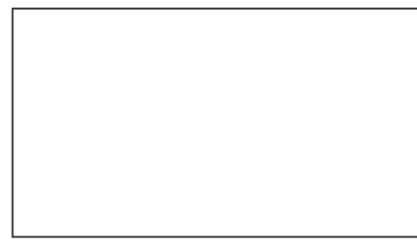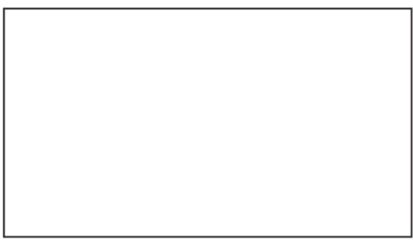
Appendix B   Act One Older Versions

Figure 1: Alternate beginning that opens with the photos burning instead of the joss paper. This was scrapped in favor of the current version that reveals the exposition in a much more gradual manner.
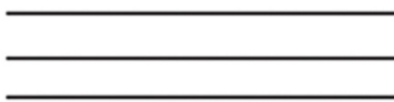
Last name: Huong　　　　　First: Julie　　　　　　　　　　　Page#　1

Shot#＿＿＿＿　　panel#＿A＿　　　Shot#＿2＿＿　　panel#＿B＿　　　Shot#＿3＿＿　　panel#＿A＿
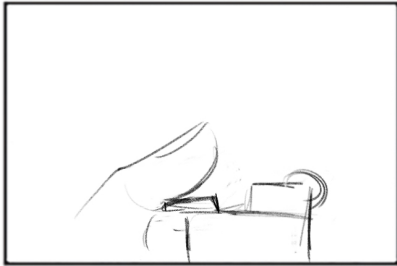
Sfx. click
Lighter clicks on

Sfx. click
Lighter clicks on
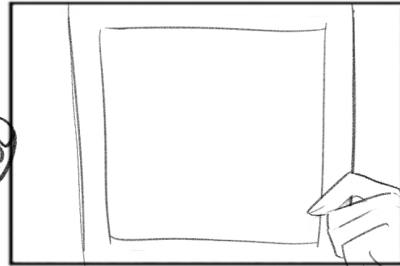
Joss paper- fills up
screen

Shot#＿3＿＿　　panel#＿B＿　　　Shot#＿3＿＿　　panel#＿C＿　　　Shot#＿3＿＿　　panel#＿D＿
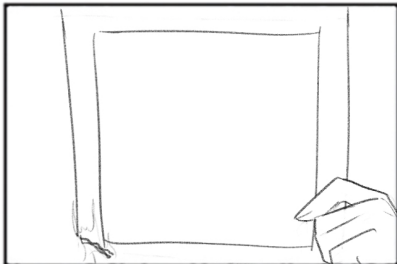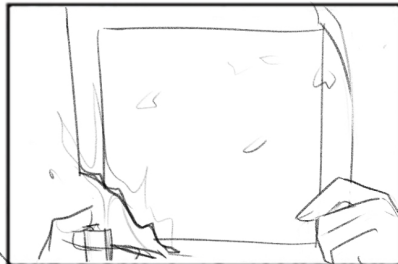
Ashes blow
toward Camera

Joss paper burns more
to reveal face

Shot# 3   panel# E

Ashes continue floating
towards camera

Shot# 4   panel# A
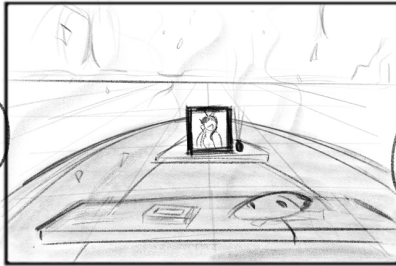
Switch to character POV
ashes continue journey past
portrait

Shot# 5   panel# A

Shot# 6   panel# A
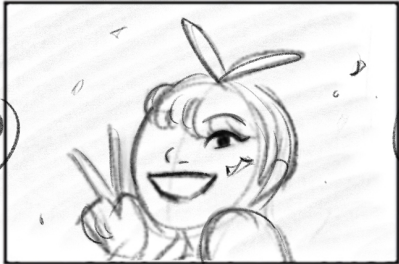
super close up of
portrait; ashes brush
past glass

Shot# 7   panel# A

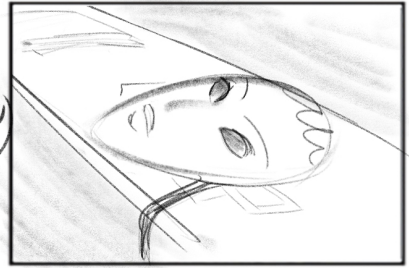

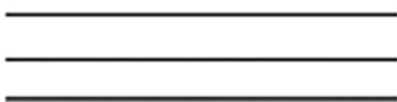Shot# 8   panel# A

Shot# 8   panel# B
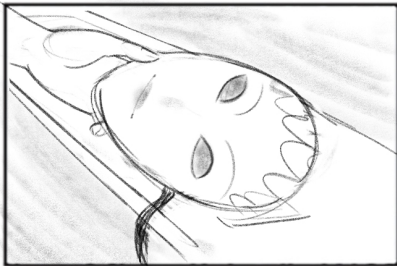

Shot# 8   panel# C
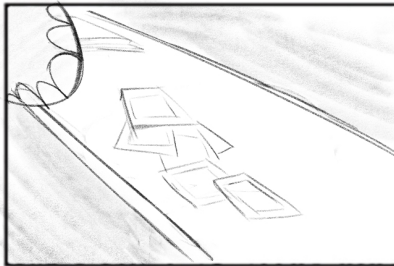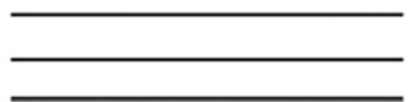

Shot# 9   panel# A
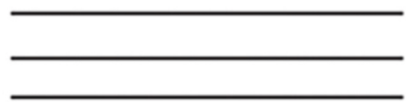
Shot# 9   panel# B

Shot# 9   panel# C

Reveal pile of
photos under mask

Shot# 9   panel# D

Shot# 9   panel# E   Shot# 9   panel# F   Shot# 10   panel# A
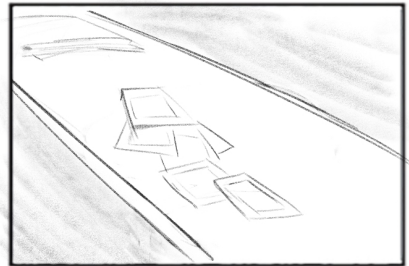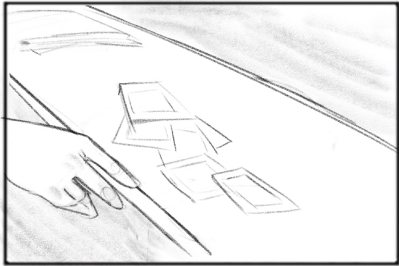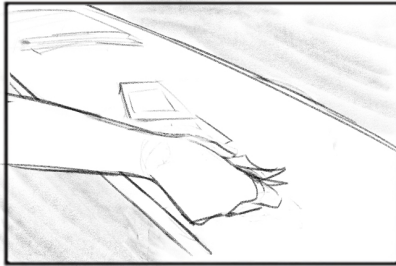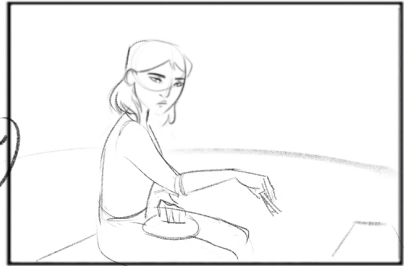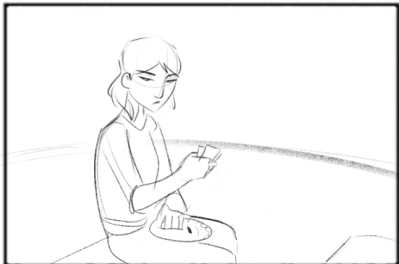

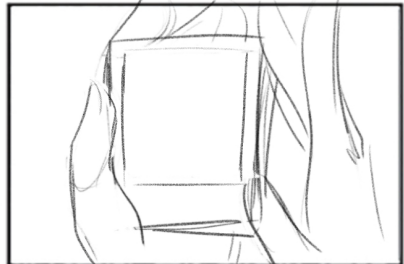Shot# 10   panel# B   Shot#   panel#   Shot#   panel#

Median shot looking   Median shot looking
@ photos   @ photos

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