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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of American Crafts
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics

Indoor Garden

By

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Abstract

A garden has a similar meaning in different cultures which is an expression of an individual's or culture's philosophy. It also has a long history in China. In the past, each Chinese scholar had an intimate garden which was a reflection of their inner world. But this garden culture was tightly connected with the lifestyle at that time. Many people living in modern society feel that they have lost their attachment to a traditional garden, which is too far away from daily life and only can be appreciated in a picture album. As a person who has a great interest in the inheritance of the past, by simplifying and abstracting the characteristic elements of the traditional Chinese garden I try to abstract basic components and combine them with scenes of daily life into installations. They are built by modern visual language but a similar approach of creating that the ancient people used, which is called 'see greatness from trivialness' in the translation of Chinese. The same thinking method can connect my work with the past more deeply, making it more than simply a copy of a visual form.

Clay is used as a primary material. Clay, especially porcelain, has a special meaning in Chinese culture through the ages, and we can see the constantly changing history of this material. It is pure, and delicate, and is a fusion of the memory of the past. I also use common materials and some ready-made objects. With the popularizing of high technology and mass production, these materials surround us all the time and represent a modern lifestyle. They are ubiquitous and can be found everywhere. So clay will be combined with these common materials, and be a key character to link different values, neutralizing conflicts between different materials. When these materials come together and create artworks with imagery, it becomes a bridge that connects past and present to show new aspects of daily life. I also hope these installations turn into a reflection of the psychological condition of people living in the city, and a discussion of different lifestyles. Within this fresh composition of materials, the viewers can make their own connection with history in the indoor garden.

Body of Document

Section 1: Context

I have been interested in Chinese traditional culture for a long time. When I was a child, I enjoyed watching TV shows that all characters wore Chinese traditional costumes, some of the stories happened 500 years ago, some were 1500 years ago. Then I grew up to 10 years old, and a lot of imitation of antique porcelains vessels and ornaments appeared in my home. However, there were not any changes in my living environment. We still lived in an ordinary apartment, had some IKEA furniture, and wore T-shirts and jeans every day. From that time, I started to have a question, is there any deep connection between the life in the past and now? Except for antique vessels, what is the cultural influence upon my life?

With these questions, I went to the US to study ceramics. This was the first time that I lived in a totally different culture, which stimulated me to realize what culture means. Because of the World War and the Chinese Communist Revolution, China has changed dramatically in the past 100 years. In addition, the globalization has brought significant influence on Chinese lifestyle. The internal and external factors both made it a difficulty over passing down the culture generation by generation. Right now the traditional culture is like the diluted odors, it is hard to tell when you are in that environment, but it turns strong and clear when you leave.

For the Chinese people, there is indeed some distance between traditional culture and daily life, but they are not far away. So when I conceived the concept of this thesis, this idea to create something related to my native culture came to mind. Although I know it would give the audience from another culture some difficulties in understanding, I want to take it as a challenge and make as many audiences as possible appreciate the fascinating nature of traditional Chinese culture. So I hope I could use my artwork to show a possibility for how traditional culture reintegrates to modern life, which is spiritual integration rather than merely an imitation of the old form or outline.

However, traditional culture is a complex topic. It is hard to discuss all the aspects at the same time. So I want to start with something that is related to the interior of a room which IS literally close to our daily lives. Luckily, I did some relevant art pieces last spring semester. They were inspired by Penjing, which is one kind of traditional Chinese garden and considered as a shrunken garden. Research holds that a traditional Chinese garden usually presents the large world of nature and the inner world of the owner simultaneously. I was fascinated by this idea, so I started further research and intended to follow this direction.

Chinese Garden History

The Chinese garden has evolved over three thousand years. There was one kind of garden called the scholars' garden, or private garden, which had been greatly developed from Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) through the end of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), "typically found in Jiangnan area in China (cities such as Suzhou and Hangzhou)"¹. It was also called Jiangnan period in the history of the Chinese garden.



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The private garden differed from the garden of the previous period. There were several significant features:

1. The size of a garden was visibly reduced
2. Stone had a prominent position
3. Pools became the center of a garden.

¹ Bo Yang and Nancy J. Volkman. "From Traditional to Contemporary: Revelations in Chinese Garden and Public Space Design." (Urban Design International 15, no. 4, 2010), 208-220.

² Bianca Maria Rinaldi, The Chinese Garden: Garden Types for Contemporary Landscape Architecture. (Basel/Berlin/Boston: Birkhäuser, 2011), 10

4. A garden was essential for a scholar
5. Garden culture became popularized ³

Especially the first feature made it possible that more and more people could have their own garden. Most of the houses were Single-storey with a courtyard at that time, so the building could be altered and extended into a garden easily. Furthermore, “life in the Chinese garden is a mixture of everyday use and contemplation. Since the Chinese garden is a symbol of the owner’s life and character, it must express and articulate his day-to-day activity as well as his abstract thoughts.”⁴ All the reasons provided favorable conditions for the developing of garden culture and made the garden culture closer to ordinary people’s lives than before.

However, if we want our modern life to join the traditional garden culture, there is a major difficulty to overcome even with the help of artwork. At present, the living environment has changed completely. Half of the population lives in the city in China, of which almost 100% lives in an apartment, which is different from the situation in the United States. Since the traditional garden is associated with living space, when the activity space of an apartment is fixed and cannot extend outward, there should be a suitable form of the garden culture adapting to the new environment.

The traditional Chinese garden was part of the house, half indoor and half outdoor, and a microcosm of the spiritual world. Also “it was a showcase to display the cultivation and aesthetic taste of the owner.”⁵ So the most important thing is how we understand a garden. If we cannot find a space outside a room, we can use the interior space instead. The restriction of space cannot stop the development of garden culture. Therefore, my intentions were to create a series of installations which are related to contemporary daily life. When all the works are installed, they will become an indoor garden revealing the inner world of the modern generation.

³ Baode Han, *Image and state of mind, the Chinese Garden*, (SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2014), 134

⁴ Maggie Keswick, *the Chinese Garden History, Art & Architecture*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1978), 196

⁵ Department of Asian Art, *Chinese gardens and collectors' rocks*, (New York: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2004), https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cgrk/hd_cgrk.htm

Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Method

There are several common aesthetic principles in the inherited Chinese aesthetic. One of them is “aesthetic turning into everyday life, the aestheticization of everyday life”⁶, which is a subset of a larger principle “Imaging the Big from the Small”. The development of the traditional garden was also influenced by this principle. Building a garden by scholars, “the aim is to see the small in the large, to see the large in the small, to see the real in the illusory and to see the illusory in the real.”⁷

While the small and the large are relative, the real and the illusion are also relatives. When a room is one room of a high-rise, it looks small, but when it bears the weight of one person’s whole life, it turns huge; when a person among the crowd, one feels small, but when we face up to our heart, “I” am a giant in the spiritual world. It is our mind that makes the scale of life change. So I want to use my artwork as an attempt, to activate an unnoticed corner of life and combine it with the traditional Chinese garden, which let the imaginary world transition between the big and small.

The Rock Element

A traditional Chinese garden consists of some basic elements of which the water and rocks are the most important part. Although rocks are small, it was a symbol of a beautiful fantasy. Since “mountains are represented by the use of rocks”⁸; A mountain “was to represent the homes of the Immortals”⁹. With the possession of the rare rocks, dreaming of the distant mountains, and the imaginary of the immortals, all the feelings of rocks were mixed together. ”Each of them stemming from a magical view of mountains and from the high metaphysical level on which rock-worship is placed. The Chinese have loved and revered

⁶ Lang Ye, *Leisure Culture and Aesthetics, General History of Chinese Aesthetics, Volume IV, the Sui and Tang Dynasties volumes*, ed. Lingyun Tang, (Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2014), 424

⁷ Maggie Keswick, *the Chinese Garden History, Art & Architecture*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1978), 196

⁸ Bianca Maria Rinaldi, *the Chinese Garden: Garden Types for Contemporary Landscape Architecture*. (Basel/Berlin/Boston: Birkhäuser, 2011), 75

⁹ Maggie Keswick, *the Chinese Garden History, Art & Architecture*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1978), 38

rocks almost in the way that we have admired and collected religious icons.”¹⁰ It is a kind of respect, and it is a kind of desire. This is a complex love of the Chinese people for mountains.



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The Water Element

The water is another important element in a Chinese garden. Many experts have commented on this when an ancestor began to build a garden, “the marriage of these two elements constituted the primary goal of the creative effort.”¹² And the importance of these design elements stems from “Surface water’s liquid horizontality, contrasted with the stony verticality of rocks, makes it the second foundational element of the Chinese Garden. The presence of water conveys a sense of spaciousness, dynamism, and vitality to the composition.”¹³ They view water as a symbolic thing that represented peace and beauty. In addition, “To the Chinese water is not just physically beautiful in a garden, but is absolutely necessary to balance the mountains, and so to represent the totality of Nature in perfect harmony. Mountains and water, like all other things, always contain within themselves some aspects of their mirror opposites.”¹⁴ The water and rocks not only are relative to each other

¹⁰ Maggie Keswick, *the Chinese Garden History, Art & Architecture*, (New York : Rizzoli, 1978), 155

¹¹ Bianca Maria Rinaldi, *The Chinese Garden : Garden Types for Contemporary Landscape Architecture*. (Basel/Berlin/Boston: Birkhäuser, 2011), 16

¹² Bianca Maria Rinaldi, *The Chinese Garden : Garden Types for Contemporary Landscape Architecture*. (Basel/Berlin/Boston: Birkhäuser, 2011), 74

¹³ Bianca Maria Rinaldi, *The Chinese Garden : Garden Types for Contemporary Landscape Architecture*. (Basel/Berlin/Boston: Birkhäuser, 2011), 81

¹⁴ Maggie Keswick, *the Chinese Garden History, Art & Architecture*, (New York : Rizzoli, 1978), 165

but also form a contrast. To some extent, the two elements could not exist along without the support of the other.



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Penjing Element

“Penjing, also known as penzai, tray landscape, potted scenery, is the Chinese art of creating miniature landscapes in containers.”¹⁶ Usually, there are two categories, tree penjing, and landscape penjing which consist of shaped rocks and water. Since the water and rocks are also the elements to compose a garden, “the development of Penjing is an ultimate application of the culture of miniaturizing in the art of garden.”¹⁷



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¹⁵ Bianca Maria Rinaldi, *The Chinese Garden : Garden Types for Contemporary Landscape Architecture*. (Basel/Berlin/Boston: Birkhäuser, 2011), 22

¹⁶ Phillip Oliver, "Penjing: Worlds of Wonderment; A Journey Exploring an Ancient Chinese Art and its History, Cultural Background, and Aesthetics." (*Library Journal* 122, no. 20, 1997), 134.

¹⁷ Baode Han, *Image and state of mind, the Chinese Garden*, (SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2014), 139

¹⁸ Bianca Maria Rinaldi, *The Chinese Garden : Garden Types for Contemporary Landscape Architecture*. (Basel/Berlin/Boston: Birkhäuser, 2011), 16

Section 2: Evolution

I was greatly inspired by the research. I also found that whether for a traditional garden or for a modern apartment, ceramic is essential as a material which carries memories of life across many generations. It is durable and related to materials used in everyday life since the history of humans began. So I hoped to use clay as a junction to connect the historical and the contemporary to create art pieces that make traditional culture fit the current lifestyle. As we know, putting traditional Chinese garden into practice is a huge topic which is hard to discuss thoroughly in a few words. When we narrowed down the list of possible materials to one main material, clay, as a thread in the series of works, it links all the elements effectively. Therefore, I consciously looked for corners where clay objects and plants exist in an apartment to find sources of inspiration for my work.

When we step into someone's apartment, on most occasions, one place where ceramic objects exist, in large numbers, is the bathroom. One reason is that the water goes through this area very frequently, flowing on the bathtub and tiles. That is why these objects which continually interact with water inspired me. They are like the water and rocks, which exist side by side and play a part together. Therefore, a bathroom became a good stage for me to compose related works on.

Moreover, artificial grass inspired me as well. There are many kinds of plants growing in an outdoor garden. But for an apartment, besides the potted flowers, another common 'plant' was the artificial green plant. Sometimes it represented cheapness and low quality, which I did not totally agree with. So I wanted to explore the possibility of building a garden with a traditional format on this artificial product and let the artificial grass become a part of an interesting new installation.

In addition, Catering Culture places an important part in Chinese culture. What was served on porcelain plates was not only the food but also a dinner that witnessed this ritual process.

The surface of a dining table was a stage for the show regarding family reunion and ceremony.

With such ideas, I created the works below.

Section 3: The Body of Work

The Moon in the Water Mirror

Since I have lived in the United States, I get a lot of new experiences of life. For example, when I took a shower in the bathtub at night, I enjoyed watching the moon through the mist and window shutters. The moon sometimes was bright, sometimes was dim, which always reminded me of the first poem I learned at 6 years old.

A Tranquil Night by Li Po

Abed, I see a silver light,
I wonder if it's frost aground.
Looking up, I find the moon bright;
Bowing, in homesickness I'm drowned.¹⁹

It talked a kind of nostalgia what was beyond a child's comprehension. However, after almost 20 years I started to understand it while standing on the US ground.

There was another story about water and the moon: in the past, scholars had a custom that put a basin in the garden filling with water and use the water as a mirror to appreciate the cloud and moon. They did not use the basin to mimic the nature. It was a reflection of observer's mind.²⁰ Therefore, when I stood in a bathtub, what I actually saw through the collected water, and through the moon was my homeland.

For these reasons, I used clay to build a bathtub and changed the design of feet from claw feet to feet of the traditional Penjing's container. Although the new bathtub was still a container

¹⁹ Translated by Yuanhong Xu

²⁰ Baode Han, *Image and state of mind, the Chinese Garden*, (SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2014), 124

for water, it was a distinct container that mixed complex emotions from different cultures. Above the bathtub, I used white wood strips to build a round shape. It was inspired by the moon I see through shutter windows. The width of each strip reduced gradually from top to bottom, as if it was disappearing gradually. At last, it merges into the water in the bathtub below.



This piece is created for all the people who have lived in foreign places. The moon reflecting in the water mirror would become a reflection of such experiences.

The Square Landscape

At the bathroom, if the tiles were stepped on for a long time, they turn old, uneven, and blotted. Cracks are very common too. Even in a small corner of the room, it recorded traces of life inevitably.



So I created four big tiles; not only did I enlarge the scale of a tile, but I also increased the degrees of high and low surfaces on tiles to make the marks clearer. Also, I changed all the differences in height into visual languages from Chinese garden, the lower part turned to a pool, and the higher part was mountains. Where the tile was peeled off and exposed the concrete foundation was altered into wetland and forests. In addition, I set the round black drain among one tile to compose a contrast to the square shape tiles.

Life itself is a collection of ‘cracks, beauty, unevenness’, but all the imperfections make it beautiful. By zooming in and focus, we can catch many ignored trivial elements of it.

Indoor Play Zone

When a family has kids, usually they would build a play zone for them. Then when children grow, toys increased gradually in that space. It remains playroom until the child grows up.

So I wonder why we could not build an indoor play zone, which can work for either adults or children, and become something that could be appreciated alone when people leave. It is a touchable art piece; it is also an appreciable toy for all families.

Therefore, I picked 5 pieces of rock in various sizes and made a plaster mold for each of them. When preparing the casting slip, I added black stain into it with various percentages from 1% to 5% to make the final clay pieces have different shades of grey after firing. Therefore, each rock was



very light and resembled real rock closely. I also kept the mould line of each casting piece on purpose, making the craft pieces look like the mass production from assembly lines. Meanwhile, I bought a large piece of artificial grass and trimmed it into an irregular shape which refers to the design of lawn in a traditional garden. At last, I placed the fired casting ceramic rock on the artificial grass. It is a piece that welcomes everyone to sit on and play with the clay rocks.

Through this work, I tried to use another way to let traditional culture get involved in our lives. Although it is hard to make the culture touchable or to enhance the interaction between audience and artwork, I would like to keep making new attempts with it.

Edible Mountain

This piece is the turning point among all the works. Catering culture has an important role in Chinese Culture, and sometimes the food equals life directly. It is like a ritualized behavior for the extended family to have dinner together. An important talk or a festival always is behind it. A cake is a kind of food that also indicates a big moment in life. When we have the feast in front of us, the activity we would usually have is 'eating'. It not only represents the interaction with food but also means a possession of food. This relationship between the food and the user gave me some inspirations. So this was where this piece started.

I created a 'feast' which was made of clay. Specifically, it is a group of porcelain mountains that are placed in a line on an oval dinner table. The visual form of composition is from Penjing. Each piece of the mountain has different design and texture, which symbolizes that rocks come from different place and geological conditions. On the top of each mountain, there is some cream flowing down. So it became – a symbol of celebration - several pieces of cake. A cut-off piece from the highest peak of the miniaturized mountain is put on the plate waiting to be enjoyed. There is only one set of utensil on the



table which indicates the person sitting by the table would have the feast without sharing. Behind the table, there is an oil painting picturing the highest peak in the world – Mount Everest- on the wall. I try to finish the image with a texture which was similar to the traditional Chinese silk painting. When the whole piece was installed, there is one and only one strong light shined from the top of the table that made the plate the lightest part and becomes darker gradually to the surroundings. It is a one-act play for the person sitting on the

chair; it is a remarkable achievement in an imaginary place, being held dramatically and ceremoniously.

Food makes us free from hunger, and the spiritual nourishment makes our spirit more fulfilled. I chose to use landscape Penjing as a symbol of traditional culture, and throw it on the dining table served as a dish, transforming the invisible spiritual nourishment into visible food. In other words, enjoying the mountain cake is to absorb nutrition from the traditional culture, which is like a golden mountain waiting for us to dig it up. On the other hand, modern life has also formed its own rules already. In this context, we don't know whether the tradition would be a burden or a weapon. But the only thing I am convinced of is that we cannot place the traditional culture into an exalted position and fear to make any changes in it.

So I expressed the traditional culture as a dish. How do we embark on "consuming" the dish? It is a question I ask myself, also a question to the person sitting in front of the table. If the first three pieces are a direct observation from life and tries to give an amusing but functional feedback, this piece is an open question, which invites the viewers to question the deep motivation and meaning behind it.

Raindrop, the Answer from Life

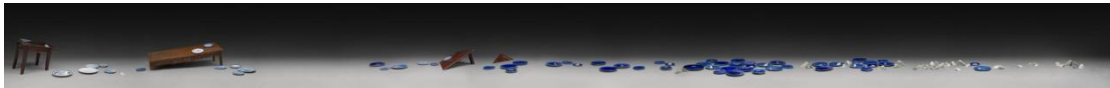
I use the previous piece to ask a question. And this piece, the last one of the whole series, is a reply without a definite answer. It is a complex installation that is comprised of a variety of media and materials, such as wood, ready-made plates, even a soundtrack. And the combination of old furniture and ceramic objects is used in this piece as well.

The long installation starts at a very ordinary scene in our life - A plate on the table, which is related to the previous work in the form. Then, the next table gradually tilts and angles to the ground, but the ready-made plates with small rocks are left and don't change, the only difference is the cobalt blue on these plates getting darker and darker. In the installation, the

ground becomes water which is submerging everything, and the sound of constantly falling raindrops suggests the passage of time. Traditional cobalt blue glaze unifies the ready-made plates, each from a different place, into the same condition. The composition of the piece is inspired by the flattened perspective typical of Chinese landscapes that are painted on long scrolls and provide no central point or focus to guide the viewer.

The ceramic plates make the intersection of these two realms possible. Plates on a table are a common part of daily life, but when stones emerge from them, they become traditional and symbolic, which represents that the passage of time has brought decay, but, as a symbol of life, the clay remains. In the final, a numerous pile of grouping plates is on the ground, and some of them are stacked. Where would we go next? Meanwhile, the rain drops continue.

Desire, memory, and reality; everything tangles together. Life goes on, and is itself is the answer to any question.

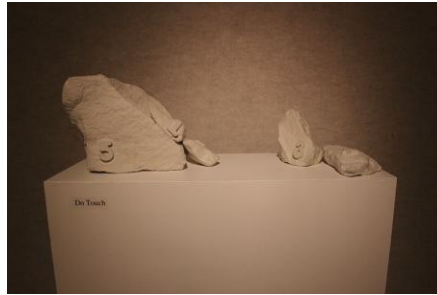


Display of Work

I classify 5 pieces into 3 chapters, which are the Chapter 1, the Chapter 2 and the final Chapter respectively, by the different stages of thinking about historical heritage.

When setting up these pieces, to guide the audience to understand the work, I placed two more small derivative pieces at the entrance of the gallery. One is a doormat with a term 'ENGAGE' on it, and the other is 5 pieces of rock that each has a number on it, from 1 to 5. Moreover, I put a sticker with a note 'Do touch' on the pedestal. These two pieces comprise

the Prologue part, which I hope could become the prompting word of the whole show to the audience. Especially with the word ‘engage’, it is an attitude towards the heritage of the past, which I would like to convey through the whole show.



When audiences enter the show space, they will meet the Chapter 1 firstly “the moon in the water mirror” “the square landscape” and “indoor play zone”, which I put near the entrance on purpose. After walking through the Chapter 1, the Chapter 2 – “Edible Mountain” meet you head-on. It is like an accent mark for the whole show, and tries to put the question ‘How do you deal with the traditional culture?’ to everyone, something I as the creator, cannot escape, either.





After the question is raised, we don't find the answer but keep searching. Later, we go to the small room. It is the Final Chapter 'Raindrop, the answer from life' of the exhibition being there. And then, we go back to our lives with the accompaniment of raining sound.



Conclusion

This year is like a long journey, from which I harvested a lot, but also feel confused and exhausted. I try to embrace as much technique as possible in this year, and experience new aspects of art, for example how to do time management when several pieces went on at the same time, especially taking the character of various clay bodies into consideration. I am so glad I had the chance to work on this topic, although it is complex and full of controversy. Also, I struggle all the time about how to finish it properly, as I want to make the meaning behind works clear and easy to be perceived by the audience from different cultural backgrounds. At last, I have found a balance between expressing the story of culture and visual language.

Meanwhile, I try to find the answer to the question “What kind of inner garden do we need in our lives?” throughout the exploring process. I am not sure about the answer yet, maybe nobody knows, either. So I want to use artwork to provide some space for the audience to find their own answer. Many years ago, there was a Chinese who said “In the mind of the Chinese people, the design of a garden is not only the work of experts, everybody can intervene”²¹ After all, life belongs to everyone. Everyone has their own opinion towards cultural heritage, and no matter whether the attitude is positive or negative, the independent thinking is the most important.

In conclusion, we will keep exploring the beauty of culture with our efforts, generation by generation.

²¹ Baode Han, Image and state of mind, the Chinese Garden, (SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2014), 252

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