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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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

Thinking About Life: Being Balanced

by

Xinhao Yang

Date: 7/31/2018

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ABSTRACT

My thesis work represents my thinking about life at present. It is influenced by Chinese culture and Chinese philosophy as well as my own experience. I was also inspired by the Yin Yang doctrine of Taosim. Everything is composed of a pair of contrary elements: positive and negative. Balance is the keyword of my life view currently. I believe that everyone's life should be balanced. This means enjoying the positive parts and not resenting the negative parts because they are equally important in our lives. It is the negative element of life that enhances the positive element. I suggest experiencing both and trying to balance them, accept what life has to offer and follow the rules of nature.

The mirror is the most appropriate material I found for expressing this concept. Outside the mirror, there is a positive world which is real and touchable, while inside it is a negative one that is unreal. It is the same as our lives. Each contains both positive and negative. In my thesis, I show my concept of both positive and negative in life through the positive and negative world in the mirror. I researched, developed and invented different methods of shaping and making mirrors for different purposes in my projects. In addition to mirror, I used materials such as steel, silver and wood to complete my pieces. I learned new techniques and invented new methods as they became needed in my projects. This allowed me to express my concept freely instead of being limited by the techniques that I had already learned. In my thesis show I used not only traditional art forms such as sculpture and jewelry, but also installations, videos and interactive pieces.

Audiences can understand my view of life from my thesis work or come to their own comprehension from my pieces. Artwork should reflect the present and arouse people to experience deep thinking. This is my view of art as well as my hope for my thesis work.

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Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

Human beings are born to be curious. We ask questions starting in early childhood. We question what we see, what we hear, and what we are taught. We receive answers from our parents, teachers, books and more recently, the internet. Questioning is the beginning of a process of understanding.

I am thankful that I didn't lose my curiosity when I grew up. I always raise questions about life and try to find answers. For example, what is the meaning of life? Why do people prefer to be happy? What is happiness? What should I pursue? At the end of my life, how would I prefer my lifetime to have been spent? The answers to those questions are the guides for my daily life.

Focusing on my present life, I wonder *Should I push myself harder or should I enjoy an easy and peaceful life? Which is more important: family or career? There is always something that I don't want to do but it seems that I need to; so should I do it?* There is always a gap between ideality and reality, sometimes even contradictions between them. I want to know whether I want to insist on following my heart and whether I have the ability to do so in this complicated society.

Turning my attention to society, I found that people often evaluate other's abilities according to their financial success. I wonder: *Is that a right way to judge people? Should I care about others' judgement? When I choose my career, should I follow my interests or seek a field in which the average salary is higher?*

As the questions become more and more complex, it is harder and harder to find an answer. Most of the questions don't have an exact answer. The answers to those questions vary from person to person.

There is no right or wrong in this sense. It depends on people's own experience and view of life. An

answer from one person could be changed years later. Because the answers are not immutable, people can't get a standard answer. Therefore, some people are not interested in thinking of those questions. It doesn't make sense for them to do something without a judgement or an end. While I believe it is important to consider the meaning of life (Descartes suggested "I think, therefore I am"). Thinking is an endless task. It helps us to know better what we want. Life is precious and limited. We shouldn't just let nature take its course. We should care about knowing ourselves and making plans for the future. We need to always keep thinking about life. It helps knowing what we want to be reach our goal. This makes it less likely for us to feel regret.

Art is a way for me to express my understanding of life. It is a direct way to share my thoughts with others. I record the questions I raise and my answers at present through art. I hope my artwork can arouse audiences to think about life, or bring them to a different perspective on thinking, or provide a topic for discussion among viewers.

Chapter 2 CONTEXT

I was born and raised in China. I learned the Chinese language, Chinese culture, and Chinese philosophy. Those are the roots of my view of life and my philosophical thoughts. There are many schools of thought in China. Among them, the thoughts of Taoism best match my view of life. Taoists emphasize that there are existing rules in nature and human beings should follow them instead of going against them. We shouldn't break the rules of nature, but rather learn and obey them. In this way, two opposite elements, such as Yin and Yang, will stay stable in their positions and everything in the world will balance with every other thing.

Positive and negative are a basic pair of contrary elements. They can be used to describe figures, emotions and events. There is nothing that is absolutely good or bad. Everything is a double-edged sword. I believe that there is also a balance between the positive and the negative.

There is a Chinese tale that says,

"Near China's northern borders lived a man well versed in the practices of Taoism. His horse, for no reason at all, got into the territory of the northern tribes. Everyone commiserated with him.

"Perhaps this will soon turn out to be a blessing," said his father.

After a few months, his animal came back, leading a fine horse from the north. Everyone congratulated him.

"Perhaps this will soon turn out to be a cause of misfortune," said his father.

Since he was well-off and kept good horses his son became fond of riding and eventually broke his thigh bone falling from a horse. Everyone commiserated with him.

"Perhaps this will soon turn out to be a blessing," said his father.

One year later, the northern tribes started a big invasion of the border regions. All able-bodied young men took up arms and fought against the invaders, and as a result, around the border nine out of ten men died. This man's son did not join in the fighting because he was crippled and so both the boy and his father survived."

Misfortune might be a blessing in disguise. There is positive in negative.

As the *Tao Te Ching* implies, nothing can exist without its opposite. For example, you will never enjoy happiness if you never experienced sadness. You can never prove something is good while nothing bad is compared. A pair of contrastive aspects always exists together. Positive and negative are a common pair of opposite sides. They are equally important in our lives. Balancing the two sides keeps people in a state of harmony.

The 2nd Chapter of *Tao Te Ching* says,

"Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness.

All can know good as good only because there is evil.

Therefore having and not having arise together;

Difficult and easy complement each other;

Long and short contrast each other;

High and low rest upon each other;

Voice and sound harmonize each other;

Front and back follow each other.

Therefore the wise go about doing nothing, teaching-no-talking.

The ten thousand things rise and fall without cease,

Creating, yet not possessing,

Working, yet not taking credit.

Work is done, then forgotten.

Therefore it lasts forever."²

You can know what happiness is, only when you have an unhappy experience. The greater unhappiness you experience, the happier you will feel in the future. As stated earlier, a pair of contrastive aspects always exists together. You can't get one without the other. John McDonald, the first Prime Minister of Canada, says, "There must be a positive and negative in everything in the universe in order to complete a circuit or circle, without which there would be no activity, no motion."

I found that the most appropriate material to express this view is the mirror. There is a real world outside the mirror that is positive, while inside it there is an unreal world that is negative. I am able to show my view of both positive and negative sides of things through art made of pieces of mirrored acrylic and glass. Another perfect feature of a mirror is that it only reflects the present and I believe that art should only record the present. Reflection from a mirror is changing all the time as its surrounding environment changes. In this same way people are changed when the world around them is altered.

Among the artists who have used the mirror in art pieces, I appreciate Anish Kapoor the most. He changes how the world looks. For example, he introduced sky into city using a mirror. I also admire the simplicity of his art. There is only the mirror, the form, and the immediate world it reflects but no ornament.



Anish Kapoor
Cloud Gate
2004
Stainless steel
10 x 20 x 12.8 m
Millennium Park, Chicago
Image from http://anishkapoor.com/110/cloud-gate-2



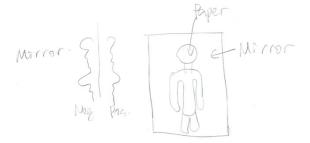
Anish Kapoor
Sky Mirror
2009
Stainless steel
270 x 270 x 151 cm
Pavilion Gardens, Brighton Festival
Image from http://anishkapoor.com/274/sky-mirror-2

Chapter 3 EVOLUTION

I dove into the process of creating with mirrors. Thinking of positive and negative, as well as continuing the thought of life, I had ideas that kept arising.

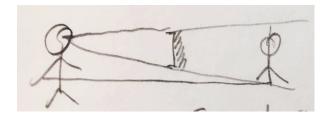
3.1 First Idea

First, I came up with an idea of cutting a human shape out of the center of a mirror and replacing it with a piece of paper. If you stand in front of the piece, you will see that you are represented by just a piece of paper. When you move, you will see your actual self. When you stand far away, you will see the whole world. The work tells you not to put yourself too close to a situation as you will lose your perspective. If you keep a distance from it, you will understand better both the situation and the role you play in it.



3.2 Physical Law: Limitation and Infinity

Theoretically, a mirror could reflect the whole world, but a person could only see a limited image from the mirror according to physical law. As the sketch below shows, when the mirror is shorter than half of your height, no matter how far you stand away from the mirror, you could only see a part of yourself. A mirror's negative world is limited.



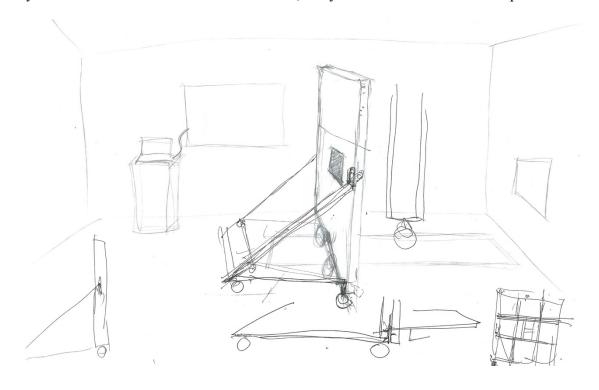
This characteristic of mirrors makes me link it with the relationship between limitation and infinity. The world in the mirror is infinite, but we can see only a limited part. It is the same as the attitude we have towards certain situations. When we face some difficult times, it is easy to lose ourselves in negative moods, such as complaining and struggling, but then we miss many more wonderful things that could have happened during that time in our lives. The inside world of a mirror is negative. Negativity is limiting to people.

It will not be clear enough to show this idea if I simply put a short mirror in the exhibition space.

People won't recognize that they can only see a limited world when they look into it so I showed a video of what they are supposed to see to help them better understand.

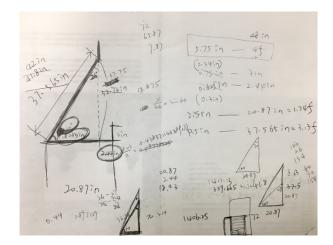
Then I came up with the idea of a making a painting with bright colors, indicating positive things in life, and black, indicating negative things in life. I put a short mirror opposite the painting. When you look at the mirror from the center of the painting, you can see only the black parts no matter how far you are away from the mirror. Only when you keep your attention away from the mirror, which

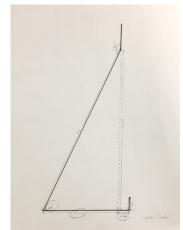
indicates that you pull yourself from the negative parts of your life, are you able to see the colorful parts of your life. You will still see the black color, but you won't miss the colorful parts.



To do this, I needed the painting to be movable and to put a camera at the center of it. The sketch shows how the painting would be installed onto a metal frame with wheels underneath and how it would be organized in the exhibition area. The entire installation should not be too big so it would fit inside the exhibit space, and the mirror cannot be too small, so people will be able to see it. I finally decided to use a wooden board for painting, which would be sized as 4 feet x 4 feet, and the mirror would be 12 inches x 12 inches. I calculated the appropriate length and the angle of the metal frame

and drew a clear engineering drawing of the sideview of the metal piece for a metal treatment factory to help me bend two flat metal sheets into the right form.





I built the structure of the wooden board and included a shelf for a camera.







I am inspired by Jackson Pollock's artwork. There are no figures in his paintings. I like the way that he drips colors onto canvas. I can see freedom from his movement and his moods from colors. I want to express the moods of positivity in my painting through vivid colors and active lines, and do not want to include any figures indicating any specific things in life.



One: Number 31, 1950
Jackson Pollock
Oil and enamel paint on canvas
Picture taken at MoMA







Process of making the painting





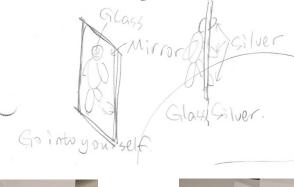


Process of Welding the Wheel and Fixing the Frame onto the Painting

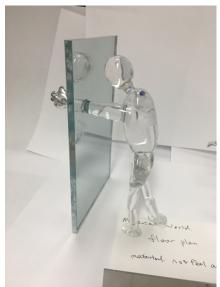
3.3 Coating the Back: Positive Inside Negative

Mirror is made in two parts: the glass and the back cover. Mostly glass mirrors are coated with silver or aluminum. Some are coated with tin chloride, chemical activator or paint.

I decided to create a human figure with glass and coated the back to make it into a mirror. The audience sees a "mirror man" that is going into the mirror, into the negative. The mirror man is going into himself to search deeply in himself. When you are too much into something, you are in the negative.







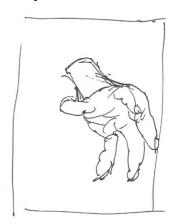
Before and After Coating the Back





A Group of the Pieces

Some more examples of the evolution of the pieces:



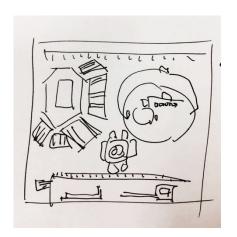
Hand coming from mirror

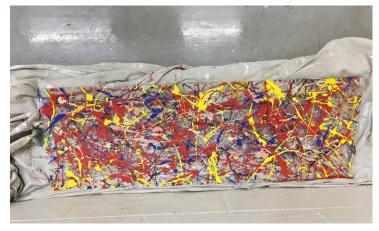
The mirror represents the negative world while the real world represents the positive world. A hand is coming from the negative world, trying to catch the viewer, the positive you. The hand comes from the reflecting mirror, which means the negative you is catching the positive you.



Climbing Outside of the Negative

A "mirror man" is trying to escape from the negative space. The negative is part of him. A person can't live absolutely without the negative. The negative is part of our lives.





In addition to human figures, I thought of putting something between the glass and the coat layer.

Colorful paintings came to mind again. Inside the mirror, there is a negative world. Colors are inside the mirror, but they are not illusions. They are real, existing objects, which means they are positive.

This reveals that you would find positive inside the negative.

3.4 Half Ball: Research the World

I wanted to get a round, ball-shaped mirror and put it on a model's head as a helmet. The result is that when people see you, they will see themselves. The idea was inspired by Marina Abramović's performance art piece *The Artist Is Present*. She is the art herself. When you see her, you see her art. When you see her art, you see her.



The Artist Is Present The Museum of Modern Art March 14–May 31, 2010



In creating this piece, I faced the problem of finding useful materials. I found some half mirrors, but it was impossible to cut a hole in them for the neck. I also found some half plastic balls, but they don't

work with the coating material that could make them into mirror. I tried making glass balls by myself, but due to the limitations of my technique, I could only make small ones.

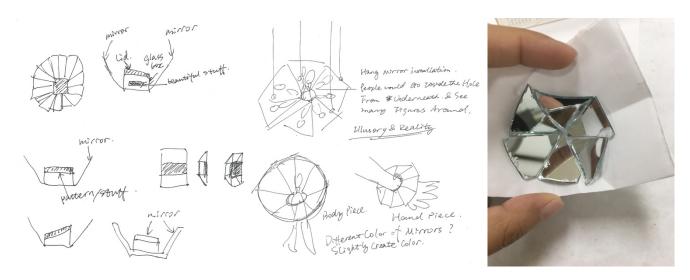
Looking at the half balls, I had another idea. I wanted to make different sizes of balls and put the smaller ones into the bigger ones. When you open the bigger one, a smaller one appears. Each one of them reflects the same world. This is how I feel when I ask the question "What is the meaning of life?" It is like an endless question. I cannot get a satisfying answer. What is the truth? What is in the negative world?





I made movable mirror balls. When you open one, you will see another. I want to let audiences move the balls. They are searching for the truth, but they will not get the answer. There is not always an answer to every question.

3.5 Positive and Negative: Negative Enlarges Positive



If you cut and reconstruct several pieces of mirror and put an object in the middle, you will see several figures reflected in the mirrors. My understanding of jewelry is that it is designed to interact with people. Combining these two ideas, I thought of making a ring by putting a finger at the center, or a bracelet by putting a hand at the center, or a body piece by standing at the center of the piece. I hoped the image of the combination of the positive body part and the negative reflections would be beautiful and attractive. It would be clear that existence of the negative is enhancing and enlarging the positive.

I made a sample with mirror fragments. I assembled them using papier mâché. But I felt it was hard to put the mirrors at the place I want, as the shape of papier-mâché is not predictable, and it was hard to hold the whole piece to maintain the shape before the paper dries.

Then I thought of making metal frames to carry the mirror pieces, but the problem would be how to combine metal frames together. Normally I would solder metals together, but it was impossible to do it in this piece as it contains mirrors. Lastly, I decided to include plastic backs for each piece of mirror and chemically adhere them together. I chose plastic because these forms could then be easily shaped

and adhered. I calculated the right degree of angle that each edge of plastic board should have and made it a symmetrical hexagon that closes well without a gap or overlap.



I shot a short video of myself wearing the ring piece and uploaded it to YouTube here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqVZpip1vvs

You can see how interesting the image is when moving the finger while wearing the piece. When I see the piece worn by others, I consider that mirrors are the positive part of the piece, while there are negative figures in the mirrors as well. It confused me whether the mirror part is positive or negative. This inspires me to think that in our lives, it is a similar fact that sometimes the boundaries are not clear.

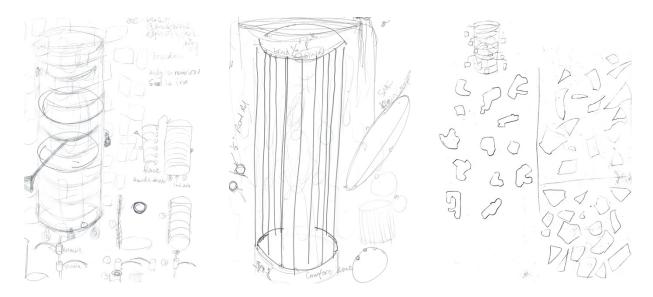
3.6 Broken Sole: Comfort Zone

When a person is in his or her comfort zone, he or she feels safe and predicts the result of the case he or she is working on even before starting it. There is nothing new happening in his or her life. If your day today is the same as yesterday, what is the meaning of your life today? I believe that when I am in my comfort zone, my soul is dead. I feel uncomfortable in my comfort zone. I always try to explore new things in my life.

It is always easy to be in the comfort zone. You don't need to think much. You can just do what you did before or do as other people do. It is risky to challenge the cognition of the majority, but it is the challenge of the normal knowledge that is pushing the development of our lives and society. It is hard to challenge yourself, but only in this way would you experience more of life and feel really alive.

When I was in high school, I was told by teachers and parents that I should go to university. In China, it is necessary to hold a bachelor's degree in order to get a good job. I was wondering about the meaning of entering a university. I thought there is no difference between learning in the world and learning in school. In addition, I was not sure of the field that I was interested in at that time. I thought that if I found my interest later and wanted to learn it specifically, I could always go back to school. I was young and didn't dare to take the risk of not being able to get a good job without entering the university. I followed the majority and entered a university at last. That was the period that I felt the most safe but also the most uncomfortable. I felt as I was being locked into something against my will and pushed by teachers and parents, following other students' steps and not my own.

Cages are the first icon that came into my mind to express the feeling of being locked up. I wanted the cage to be big enough to contain myself, so that I can be locked in it. I wanted to be pushed by other people and be forced to follow other people.



To express the feeling of losing my mind even when I am in my comfort zone, I thought of placing fragmented mirror pieces around the cage. People who enter into the cage can see themselves but in broken segments. You would feel your soul is broken, just like what I felt in high school. It was only my body that is alive, but not my soul.





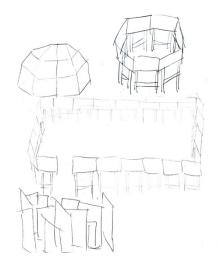
I welded the cage and made the fragmented mirror pieces. To allow the cage to be movable, I welded wheels beneath the bottom panel. I shot a video to show myself in the comfort zone, pushed by and following other people. I had a "leader" in front of me and a "pusher" behind me. It inspires people to

think of angel and devil, which would help them link the video with the concept of "being dead in the comfort zone." The URL of the video is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeXkva-kzYQ

3.7 Exhibition Ways

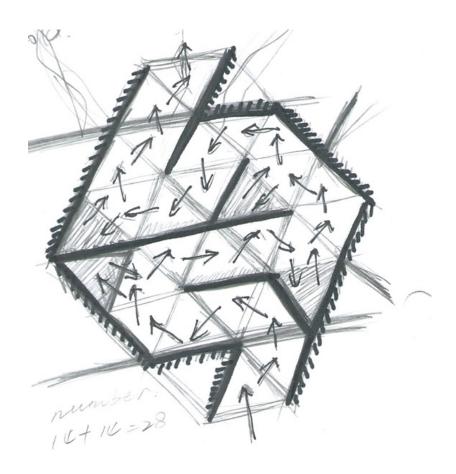
There are several different kinds of mirror. One of them is the one-way mirror. It is partially reflective and partially transparent. When one side is brightly lit and the other side is dark, people from the dark side can see the bright side and people at the bright side can see themselves reflected in the mirror. I thought of taking advantage of this one-way mirror's feature to exhibit my pieces. I wanted to use a one-way mirror to build my exhibiting area and make it bright inside. When audiences go inside the area to see my pieces, people outside the area would see them, but the audiences won't see people outside. The audiences are also a part of my exhibition, but they won't be aware of that fact.





Another idea of exhibiting is to build a maze using large mirrors the same height as human beings. When people walk in, the complicated reflections would confuse them in relation to the right way to lead them to the exit. In the maze, people would see an unreal, negative world as a result of mirror. The reflections of themselves are from the negative world, which indicates they are the negative part of them. Feeling challenged to find their way out of the maze is just like people getting lost in the negative

emotions in their lives. When you are focusing on the negative, it's hard to get out and sometimes you knock into the mirror and hurt yourself when you choose a wrong way. When you lose yourself in the negative parts of life you can instead try to see the positive parts of life.



Chapter 4 THE BODY OF WORK

Because of the costs of materials and time constraints I could not realize all of my ideas. I chose some from them, evaluated their success and finished them.



Title: Fetter Medium: Acrylic, Copper, Zinc Size: 28" x 32" x 7"

The world is transforming rapidly in this digital, data-based, and information-exploded era. There are many new products providing us a better life. With money, you can get everything you want: a good

book, wonderful travel or an enjoyable massage. In this situation, people believe that the more money a person has, the better life he or she will have. Some people judge others by the property they own instead of their real ability. I wonder *Is it right to judge people? Should I care about others' judgement? When I choose my career, should I follow my interests or seek a field where the average salary is higher?*

As an art maker, a jeweler, a craftsman, I regard the value of creativity, the passion for innovation, the patience during the making process. But artists and craftsmen are not regarded as much as they should be in this fast-tempo society. It is impossible to precisely evaluate how much a person's ability is deserved. Judgements from people who only pay attention to the amount of property they possess are depressing to me. I expressed my view in the neck piece *Fetter*.

This neck piece is shaped as a larger version of a traditional Chinese coin, which has a round outside shape and a square hole in the middle. The wearer's head is literally "going into the money." Two heads' reflections indicate that people are judged not only by their real ability (real head), but also by money (heads reflected by the coin-shaped mirror). The neck piece restricts the wearer, which is the same as the way money fetters people. Many people are working and living for money without a clear reason. Whereas, what one's fortune reflects is not real ability. It is same as the illusion in the mirror.

This piece only speaks out when a person is wearing it. It says nothing without the model. Jewelry and wearer are having a relationship in that they are not only influencing the other, but are also relying on each other.



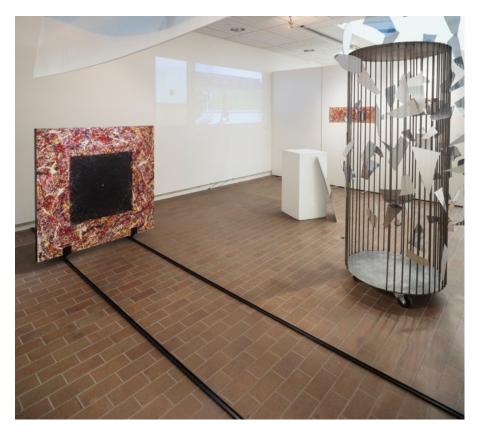
Title: Positive and Negative Medium: Mirror, Silver, Plastic Size: 4" x 3.3" x 2"

Inside the mirror, there is a negative world. Outside the mirror, there is a positive world. Only when we acknowledge both the positive and negative aspects of the world, can we have the entire world. People always think negative is bad such as referring to the "negative" emotions of upset and unhappiness. But without negative emotions, how would positive emotions exist? If you have never experienced unhappiness, how could you know what happiness is? Wearing this ring, many fingers are reflected from the mirrors. The negative world is enhancing and enlarging the positive world.



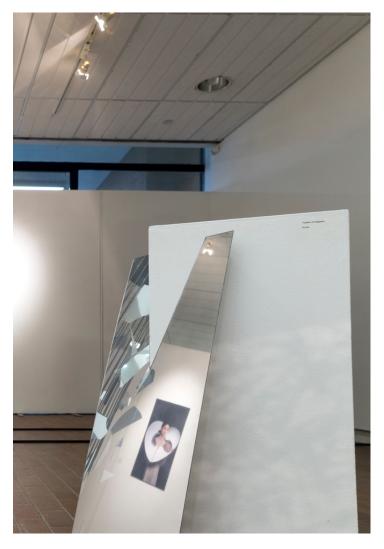
Title: Yourself and the World Medium: Acrylic Mirror Size: 24" x 24", 12" x 36"

I created boards that are partly reflective and partly transparent. You can see yourself reflected by the mirror from the reflective part and see the object behind the board through the transparent part. When you pay attention to yourself in the mirror, you can't see the world. When you focus on the world, you can't notice yourself. There are parts in between that are semi-reflective and semi-transparent. That stands for the recommendation that you balance yourself and the surrounding world. This piece tells people not only to focus on oneself but also on the world. We must pay attention to both in order to be balanced.



Title: Limitation and Infinity
Medium: Wood, Oil Paint, Steel, Mirror, Camera
Size: 48" x 48" x 2" (Wood Board Only)

Theoretically, one piece of mirror can reflect the whole world. But what you see from the mirror is just part of the world. It can be explained by physical laws. In the piece *Limitation and Infinity*, there is a camera settled in the board. It will shoot the image reflected from the mirror on the opposite wall. If you focus on that mirror, you can see only the black part. Only when you turn to see the positive world, can you see the colorful image, which indicates the colorful nature of life. Sometimes noticing the negative is good, but do not sink yourself into it. Turn to the positive world frequently.



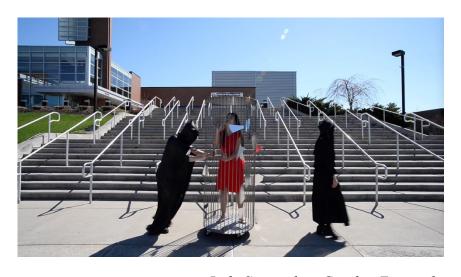
Title: Positive vs Negative Medium: Acrylic Mirror Size: 16" x 36"

I try to show that positive and negative contain each other in the piece *Positive vs Negative*. Positive is inside the negative because it is reflected in the mirror. The block is breaking into the mirror, including part of the mirror in the block, which means the negative is inside the positive. Two opposite elements exist together, and you can always find one in the other.



Title: Positive Inside Negative Medium: Glass, Oil Painting, Mirror Coating Size: 12" x 48"

There are three layers in this piece. The front one is glass, the middle is an oil painting, and the back layer is the mirror coating. In the mirror, it is a negative world. I would consider the painting as a positive object. In this case, I directly included the positive in the negative. I wish people could always see some positive aspects even from negative issues.





Left: Screenshot, Comfort Zone video Right: Comfort Zone Medium: Steel, Wheel, Acrylic Mirror, Fishing Line Size: 75" x 40" x 40"

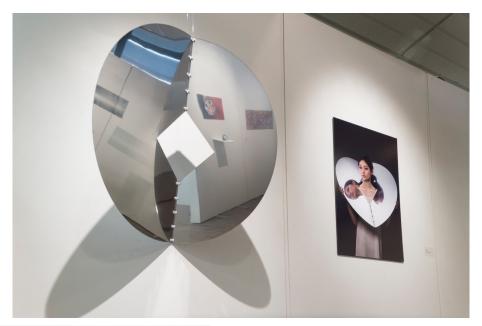
In the performance, I stay in my cage, being led by others. I even don't know the person who is leading me. I enjoy this position. I don't have to do anything. Life is easy. I don't want to escape. I have to follow—otherwise I will never find my way back to this comfort zone.

I am still following. I don't know where I am going. I don't know the meaning of my life. I don't have my own mind. I can't manage my own life. The only thing I can do is follow others. My soul is broken into fragments. I am staying in my comfort zone, but I am not feeling comfortable.

But I can't stand it. I want to handle my life. I leave my cage. I collect my broken soul and patch the fragments back together. I stay with my soul. But I don't know what to do. I can't even follow other people.

Chapter 5 INSTALLATION

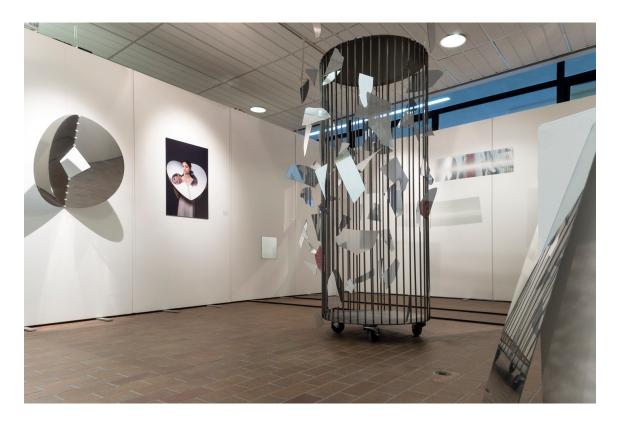
In the exhibition, I included images of a model wearing my jewelry forms to show audiences what the combination of positive figure and negative images looks like. I also included videos to show the movements of two of my pieces. Audiences were welcome to interact with my compositions.







My pieces are reflecting each other in the exhibition area. It is a mysterious world. The art works are looking at each other and communicating.





I would like to invite audiences to interact with my art. They can feel what it is like to be in the cage.

They can watch though the hole of the large painted board. They can take photos with their figures reflected in the pieces.





Chapter 6 CONCLUSION

Although my major is Metals and Jewelry Design, I did not restrict myself to these fields during my thesis project. I believe that when art is limited in a way, it will lose the liberty of expression and therefore is at high risk of losing its power. I did not force myself to use only metal as the material or force myself to make jewelry. I used the material that best expresses my concept and made whatever art form works best, including sculpture, jewelry, video, painting. All of my pieces were generated naturally from my heart and were developed following my concept.

I have thought about the meaning of life. I have asked and considered questions that sometimes had answers, sometimes did not. I asked questions that made me upset and resulted in struggle. I solved problems with a sense of achievement. I found my way of expressing myself and discovered how to show my ideas through art. I found a way to find the most appropriate material to express my concepts as well as discovering the technique to support my process.

I like thinking about life. I believe I have some thoughts that deserve to be shared with other people. I will keep asking questions about life and exploring them through my art pieces. The thesis opened a door for me to go into the larger art field. Art shows ideas directly. Art has its own beauty of language. Art is a tool to communicate with people. I learned that, and am now able to use it in a freer way.

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