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Gazing Upon the Moon

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts

School of Art
College of Art and Design

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ABSTRACT

Relationships are universal, they exist across cultures, geographic boundaries, and other barriers. This idea intrigues me as I have lived and currently study abroad. The emotion, the sense of unease; I was surrounded by these feelings. Everything changed when I took the first step and looked into others' stories, and realized I was not alone. Overall, my inspiration for my thesis stems from a poem regarding the moon, and the idea of “we are always together”.

INTRODUCTION

“even though we are thousands of miles apart, we are gazing upon the same moon”¹

This thesis examines feelings towards relationships between family, friends, lovers, even strangers. Through artwork that defies the boundaries of medium, I explore intimacy across cultures, time, and different people’s hearts.

¹ Su Shi, “Water Melody”, (China: Su Shi, 1076)

Context

I am an international student from an Eastern culture world, who flew across the globe to get here. I felt so alone for a long time. I lost my mentor - Jang Lin, and my great-grandmother during my years here. I remember crying brutally in the studio the morning I was informed of my mentor's death. The professor came and asked if I needed to be back home, and I said no. "He wouldn't mind, I know it." During that week, I had put some thought into the distance between people. Like the fact that I know he wouldn't mind me not showing up, I realize it's never about the physical distance we are apart, but the level of awareness and acknowledgement of our connection.

Later on I met a friend, who is also an international student. She made me realize I'm not the only one who felt that way. Everyone here, even the locals, are apart from someone in some way too. This feeling is universal. We all get it regardless of our race, language, and where we are living. Now, we are here together. We are not alone.

*"Before my bed a pool of light,
I wonder if it's frost aground.
Looking up, I find the moon bright,
Bowing, in homesickness I'm drowned."*

²This is a poem created by Lee-Phi from Tang dynasty.

I grew up with Ancient Chinese tales and poets. There are numerous beautiful poems created in the Tang and Song dynasty that are well known among Chinese children. I found out that there are so many similar stories in western culture too. For example the poem, *"Even though we are thousands of miles apart, we are gazing upon the same moon"* versus the "we are under the same big blue sky."

² Lee-Phi, "In the Still of the Night", (China: Lee-Phi, 1041-1099)

These words of wisdom connect true feelings that are still relatable to today's society. The main idea of my work is inspired by them. They are so touching and some really match the circumstances of what I am facing. I translated them into images and patterns to incorporate into my work. It's interesting that most stories and poems regarding connections have the element of the moon and the round shape. This is a powerful and also meaningful symbol.

Inspiration

Casimir is an artist that inspires me. Casimir is a computer graphics artist, and he used to sell digital images and his printed-out posters. In recent years, he started to add different features to them, starting with different printing methods. His work reminds me of Maria Mucha's approach to change materials to increase the overall value. When he faced a limit of sales price with his printmaking work, he tried out printing on silk. He has changed his work from "posters" to "art pieces" in people's eyes. It's may be uncomfortable to some to discuss money and the value of art, but it's still crucial to artists. In Casimir's art career, we can see he is trying to add physical value to his work.

In addition, I have always been a fan of decorative art work. From Alfons Maria Mucha, to Gustav Klimt, their work all contain a great degree of shapes and patterns. Patterns tell stories. This type of artwork allows the viewer to stay focused and spend more time on it. It's so much fun to hide metaphors and secrets in artwork in order to have an interactive audience.

A shimmer textured paper is printed in his first attempt. Starting with that, Casimir starts to look into printing methods, trying out all different materials he can get his hands on: glass, steel, acrylic, wood, etc. I am a fan of creating multimedia work too. Trying materials and experimenting with creative methods has always been an enjoyable process to me. When I see his work, I know that is what I want to create. Also, I am very lucky to study in Fu-Jen University and Rochester Institute of Technology, where we have facilities and resources to learn and create different materials.

A well known luxury brand- Van Cleef & Arpels' lets me know that jewelry can be much more than just jewelry, it can be works of art too. With delicate design and magic-like craftsmanship, Van Cleef & Arpels creates a feast for the eyes of the audience. As artists, they make me want to be the bridge between designer and artisan. Nowadays, as the boundary between the different fields has faded, we have started to collaborate with each other to make unexpected breakthroughs. It's inspiring.

Evaluation

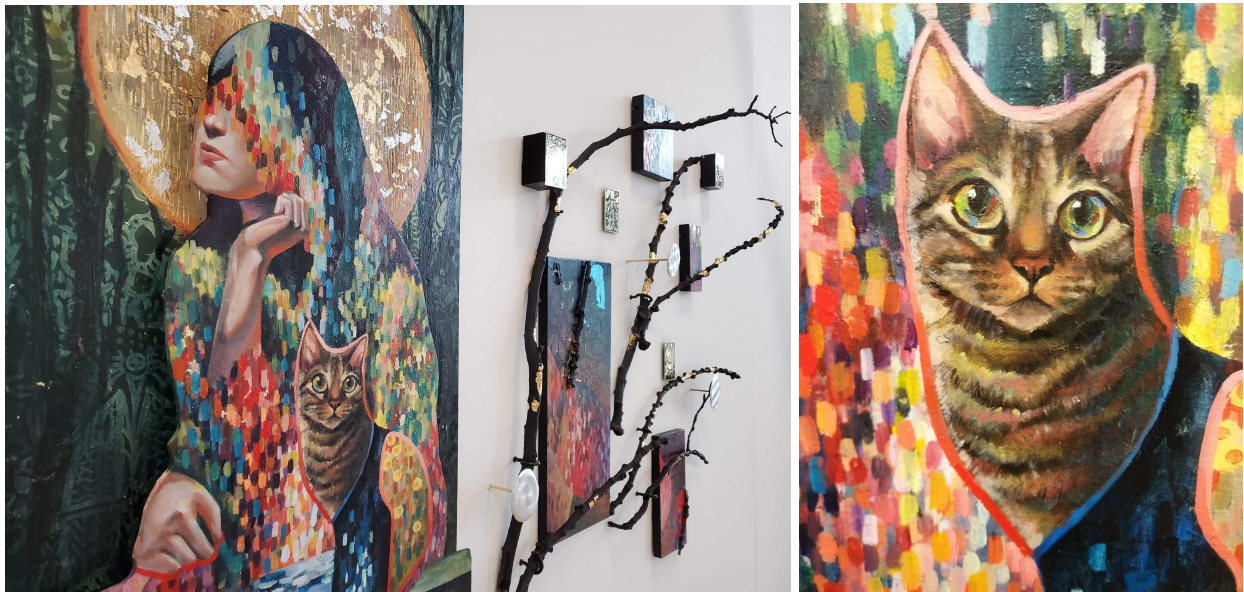
I wanted to create something that reminds us of the human connection and thought of ways to present this idea. I interviewed classmates, collecting letters from friends and family far apart, and also put out notepaper asking strangers to leave their stories. In the process, I found out that I do not want to make this a personal story. This kind of feeling is universal. It should not be about one person.

Trying to fit all of my concepts into the work, I started to design all the little elements to put it together later as a whole piece. I started with an overall sketch of a person sitting in the center. Having a big bright moon behind her, it gently shines and embraces the whole scene. My idea was to make a hanging piece for home. By having little hiding drawers in the piece, the owner gets to take or place little accessories inside from everyday life. As the work went forward, I began to feel something odd about the composition. I used to paint all the time, which looked nice in a square dimension. This time however, I felt like no matter how precise I made all the elements of the different pieces, they never felt complete. My professor, Elizabeth Kronfield, pointed out the problem might have something to do with its frame. Once I expanded the pieces and branches to be farther

apart, it all started to make sense. My work is more than just a painting, it has height/depth and multiple textures.



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³ Fang Yu Chang, "Gazing upon the moon", 2021, muly-media, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester

Body of Work

My work is a congregation of interactive, static, and portable art. The main concept serves to remind us that no matter how far apart we are and how lonely we feel, connections are always close by our side.

This installation is composed of three components; the main piece, smaller additional pieces, and interactive parts. The overall size is around 40"x160"x2".

In the center painting, a girl looks up towards the sky with the moon in the middle, accompanied by a black cat. She is sitting quietly, having a lot on her mind. The girl is looking upon the moon, thinking of her family from far away, while the cat is looking straight at the audience. We can't tell the identity of the girl, for she can be any one of us. She seems to be searching for company, longing for connection. Long, soft hair lay on the girl's back and flows down throughout the painting, connecting the piece together, illustrating the longing feeling inside her.

In the night sky, layers of patterns peek through the background. It's deep, it's rich, it captures the stories of relationships. Sitting beside her is a cat. It has been said that cats can see things that human eyes cannot observe. By looking straight at the audience, the work is suggesting that the cat sees connections among us. This brings not only the work itself, but the surrounding, space and audience together, sharing the same emotions.

The work is composed of multi-media elements, woodwork, metal work, and oil painting, showing a person looking upon the night sky. The work itself is an installation, containing one main piece, several middle pieces and some extended pieces. They all can be arranged in different ways to change the overall composition and allow for different showing spaces.

I wanted to build a piece by having 2D things in a 3D arrangement. My main idea of the work would be to remind my audience that connections

are always around ourselves. The connections are always among us, yet we often fail to see them.

These branches serve as a visual link that connects the various pieces together. They are also made using the same uniform material, which adds a physical connection. With these connections, it brings the installation together and creates the sensation of a whole.

The work has hidden spaces in it. Within them, little trinkets reside. These represent our connection. I wanted to have some hidden accessories within my piece so that the owner can always bring a piece with them anywhere they go. These small tokens of jewelry can act as a reminder of the piece, just as our connections and memories will always be tied to us.

This is a poem I wrote when I was composing the ideas for “Gazing Upon the Moon”.

*Sparkly stars up on high,
peeking out from dark blue sky.
They wish to be found, but what does it take?
“Just look up!” the word they say.*

When we fail to recognize that connections are always around us, it is easy to feel frustrated. As the poem suggests, all we need is to look around and soon we will notice our relationships, our friends and families are there waiting and hoping to be found.

Because the Moon is the main element of my work, it represents our connection among people.

We live by a lunar calendar, which means we can expect a bright full moon on the 15th of each month. Our life has been tied to the moon, and lots of stories and idioms originate from our fantasies of the moon. For centuries, the round shape has had an auspicious meaning of consummation in my culture. That is why we often tie the meaning of reunion, relationships, and family to the moon/circles. The mid-Autumn festival, or Moon Festival is a major holiday for millions of people. It is the time of the year for family

members to get together from near and far, to share the scene of the moon on a cool breezy mid-Autumn night. The figure in my main piece is looking up to the sky, thinking about whether her family are gathered around under this same big full moon.

“Even though we are thousands of miles apart, we are gazing upon the same moon.” This is a poem from the Song dynasty, China.

Since I began my study abroad, I have realized the connection with my family is essential to me. I feel the connection getting stronger since I left. Every night I cried myself to sleep, worrying about missing important moments of the lives of my family members, wondering if there will be gaps between me and my cousins of the same age. The relationships that I took for granted, seem so precious to me now. Then I realized, the feeling, the need for intimacy goes both ways, and it is universal.

I feel like people are attracted to stories. In my work the small trinkets represent some passed down stories from my childhood. One of the stories goes like this: Two lovers are separated by a war, they promise each other to meet again at the Lantern Festival if they lose touch, and reunite by selling their love token- a broken-in-half bronze mirror in the fair. The husband found a servant selling his other half mirror at the fair the following year. He heard the story of his poor wife from the servant, and left a message for her by carving into the mirror: "You left me with your broken mirror. Now the mirror is back, but not you. I can no longer see your reflection in the mirror, only the bright moon, but not you". This poem was brought back to his wife, and touches the guy who wishes to marry her. The wife is released and two separated lovers are finally reunited. I carved a continuous pattern on a round bronze plate, then divided it in half to make a pair of earrings. Like the story, the lovers were separated by war and these two pieces are hidden in different places in my thesis work. By combining the two pieces of jewelry, they have reunited just like the husband and wife in the story.

I find the texture and features of acrylic has multiple applications to my work. The transparency of base meets a matted pattern that creates a deep

3D space effect on the piece. It is like our relationships; sometimes see-through and obvious, sometimes in fog. Even when we are clear of the bonding we have, there can still be an invisible boundary, a forced wall between us that keeps us from reaching out to one another.

Each material adds a different dimension to the work, and it all comes together as a full piece in harmony. Wood, gold leaf, oil-paint, metal and lacquerware, are all so different, in application, in process, in appearance. My challenge was to make them work together. During the process, piece by piece, they started to fall into place with each other. It was like they had been assigned a place and fell into harmony.

Each different material requires a specific approach. I tried out different methods and realized some of them can actually work with other material applications. This process is kind of like new relationships, we all need to give some time and see which ways works best for us.

I played with negative space and the concept of mixing 2D and 3D together in this work. A cut-out cat with no form, thick shaped acrylic, a human subject on a sunken wooden moon while the sky is hard and flat upon the level... the mix of 2D and 3D creates an odd relationship and perception of space. Just as our connection with individuals, there is no boundary, no shape, no visibility, and sometimes, even no sense.

The conflict and harmony within these kinds of artworks always fascinates me. Flat patterns on a 3D figure painting create an illusion of space in between, and with physical layers of different materials overlapping each other adds dimension. I have looked into the works of some great artists such as Gustav Klimt, Alfons Maria Mucha and other artists from Les Fauves, to see how they manipulate space, pattern, color and movement within their work. Take Klimt's work for example, he uses a lot of gold pigment in his work. The reflective feature of the material catches the viewer's eyes, and isolates the shape itself, so we can no longer consider them as the extension of the figure, but see it as a shape and appreciate the beauty of its silhouette. Also, it creates a boundary between the figure

and the space. Matisse's work inspired me to be bold and work with colors/patterns that I never thought would work well with each other. The illusion he created manipulates the space and the relationship of primary and secondary focal points. They all weave together in a weird, but harmonious way. As for works by Alfon Mucha, they seem to elicit a sense of romance and the overwhelming desire to look deep into his work. Dazzled patterns whirl in detection, guiding the viewers' eye to travel around the art work. All three of the artists use loads of patterns in their work, and fit them perfectly in a way that appears planned.

I created my own patterns incorporated into the background of Gazing Upon the Moon. My plan was to weave stories between them. There are elements like eyes, hair, dirt and plants for example. In my culture, we interpret connections as thread, in forms of hair, rope or string. “結髮夫妻”- the couple who tied their hair together; this is a ceremony of marriage, by cutting couples hair and tying them together, we have a token of love, indicating they will never be apart. The god of relationships-“月下老人” The Old Man under the Moon; he ties people together with a red thread, and creates serendipity for them.

The eyes looking upward represent the eyes of travelers who miss their family, looking upon the sky, wondering when they will meet their loved ones again. As for the element of dirt and plants, I consider each and every one of us as a unique plant, some growing well in different places, some struggling in unsuitable dirt. Also, a handful of dirt from homeland has a special meaning in some cultures. It represents the connection of your land and not forgetting where you came from. The dirt contains memories, and the history of ancestors. We have an old saying that suggests that when you have a digestion problem in a foreign country, you should drink some water with your homeland dirt in it. It says that the gods that protect the homeland will look after you. I suppose it has something to do with the microorganisms within the dirt that is familiar to one's previous diet in their homeland that helps them overcome the transition period. Either way, I find this tradition romantic. Always have a handful of dirt from your homeland with you, and the homeland will always look after you no matter where you

are. That is why the pattern that represents dirt constantly appears in the work.

Patterned brass possesses hidden metaphors and stories. Shining backgrounds overlapping each other create dazzling visual effects just as beautiful moonlight shimmering down around the whole painting.

My thesis work as a whole is somewhat in symmetry. In my main piece, the moon on the top echoes with the reflections on the ground, background permutations throughout the whole piece, two characters are there to accompany each other. Reaching out from the main piece are branches growing symmetrically and expanding from the center, connecting pieces along with the main piece, creating a calm and balancing composition. All of the elements have something in which to work in concert, showing the main idea of the work and suggesting we are never truly alone.

I have branches connecting my piece, tying all the parts together representing our well-known term “family tree.” We can see how this icon relates to the meaning of close relationships, connection and binding. There is a romantic theory stating that there is never a forest on the globe, for there are no trees. There is only one “tree” on earth. The “trees” we see are connected to each other in the way humans cannot understand, no matter their species or location. They are tied to each other and share memories. Cutting down a “tree” is just like cutting down a tiny root of a whole big tree. This idea fits the impetus for my thesis work. It touches me, and in a way, makes so much sense to me. Every living thing, object, particle has a connection somehow that we, as a life in three-dimensional space, cannot “see” or explain.

The final components of the installation are portable jewelry pieces. Often, we forget that we are loved and there are people out there who care about us. Like what I said in the previous paragraph, we cannot see our connections and therefore we tend to forget. I wanted to have something memorable, something to keep us company. Wearable artwork serves that purpose in this work. There are numerous jewelry pieces, each with their

own meaning and beautiful story behind them, whether hidden or displayed on the piece, allowing the owner to take a piece with him/her to start the difficult day, and always having something to remind them that they are loved.

Conclusion

In my undergraduate exhibition, I presented a similar concept work. Which combined static 2D painting with 3D craft pieces. The idea of integrating such different forms fascinates me. Majoring in jewelry, I always want to create something that is different from what we think of as common jewelry pieces. I've once seen an artist stack up rings together and assemble them with his custom stands. The whole piece looks like a rocket ship with the rings in the middle. The jewelry itself, along with the container are both works of art and go along with each other. That is what I want; not just a pretty jewelry with a pretty box or a painting on the wall. I want my work to complement each other, whether in concept or in overall design.

In the Fine Art Studio program, I was introduced to different art forms like sculpture, installation and interactive art. This is a start for me to think of more possibilities than my original idea. By finishing my thesis work, I now have more executive abilities and techniques to design and form future pieces. I believe I will be doing more experimental work to pursue this idea. To me, the completion of this thesis work is not the end, it is the start of something new.