

Rochester Institute of Technology

## RIT Digital Institutional Repository

---

Theses

---

9-21-2023

### Tabula Rasa

Yaoxuan Liu  
yl3439@rit.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Liu, Yaoxuan, "Tabula Rasa" (2023). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact [repository@rit.edu](mailto:repository@rit.edu).

**Tabula Rasa**

By

Yaoxuan Liu

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine  
Arts in Metals and Jewelry Design

School of Art

The College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

September 21, 2023

**Committee Approval:**

---

John Aasp

September 21, 2023

Professor, School of American Craft/Associate Advisor

---

Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez

September 21, 2023

Professor, School of American Craft/Associate Advisor

---

Elizabeth Kronfield

September 21, 2023

Professor/ School Director, School of Art/ Associate Advisor

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	3
<b>Context</b>	
1: Introduction.....	4-5
2: Retriever the Initial.....	6-8
<b>Evolution</b> .....	9-12
<b>Body of Work</b>	
1: Place, People, Self.....	13-24
2: Kaleidoscope.....	25-27
<b>Visual Installation in the City Art Space Gallery</b>	
<b>Gallery Space</b> .....	28-30
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	31-32
<b>Citation</b> .....	33

## Abstract

"We often talk about "seeing through the eyes of a child," but if we think back to how we saw the world when we were kids, it feels an awful lot like the way we "see" things now. As children, the stakes felt as high, the triumphs as monumental, and the fears certainly just as real. If anything, we remember the imaginings of our childhood being more potent — the veil between what we imagined and what was so much flimsier." (April Daniels Hussar, Janet Manley, and Anne Vorrasi, July 16, 2019.)

While growing up, we are constantly learning new things and understanding new principles. Still, at the same time, we are also framed by all that knowledge.

My work explores how to develop creative thinking as an artist, using childhood memories as a foundation. Viewing the surroundings through a child's perspective helps me break the world's cognition as an adult. When we were young, we were filled with all kinds of imagination, like imagining how wonderful the world was. When growing up, all our thinking is limited to a fixed frame, and all things have a prescribed saying. Having a "child-like" mind is vital to creative lives. Growing up does not necessarily mean abandoning the child's mindset but developing it as a tool for a brighter future. My work aims to ask people not to be afraid of their curiosity. Younger children learn the world through their senses, including touch, listening, taste, and smell. At a young age, kids tend to destroy things, take them apart, and build them back; that is how we learn about the world.

## Introduction

Working in my studio makes me feel like a machine that works along the automatic assembly line. I have lost my ability to create in the past few years. Education has trained me to become a knowledgeable person. Still, it is undeniable that all this knowledge has put me into a zone where I lose my ability to think more creatively. Moreover, right now, I am facing confusion about my future. I see a dead end as an artist. Thus, this thesis allows me to break my creative block and retrieve the ability to create.

John Locke, a European philosopher in the seventeenth century, developed a theory called "Tabula Rasa,"<sup>1</sup> which proposed that children come into this world with an empty mind. The experiences and knowledge we absorb through growing up and our surroundings shape our personality and identity.

This thesis explores reactivating the creative process and redefining a studio practice by drawing upon my childhood memories prompted by a simulated child's perspective. Researching children's minds and how they view the world has become a helpful method for me to create and think more alternatively and help dump my connatural cognizance towards the world around me.

"The relationship between age and creativity" (Creating Minds.org) talks about how our ability to create will become less malleable as we age because the cells in our

---

<sup>1</sup> John Locke, Europe philosopher

Tabula Rasa : an absence of preconceived ideas or predetermined goals; a clean slate.

brain are reducing as we age, but also because of the values and rules we accept when growing up.

My thesis asks people to explore their surroundings with a “child-like” mind confidently. I created a space that provided sounds, visuals, and a touchable environment that allowed viewers to abandon their knowledge and experience and to see them with a curious mind.

## **Context**

### **Retriever the Initial**

My family runs an antique shop where I have been submerged in the atmosphere of art. I was raised in a rather traditional family, growing up in an environment full of Chinese cultural atmosphere. I have always believed that art is in my blood because of the creative endeavors of others surrounding me. My parents always wanted me to grow into a kind, polite, and good listener instead of a talker who likes to argue or express opinions; I became an observer. I started to pay attention to small things that no one cares about, like facial expressions, such as raising eyebrows when surprised, retractile alarm when talking, and little movements of a pinkie when doing something. Through all those details, I imagined what people were thinking and tried to feel what they felt at that moment. I then draw them on a piece of paper.

I like to think of my art as a secret tree hole, a mystery in Asian culture. A person with secrets should look for a tree with a spot, and after whispering the secrets into the tree, the secret would stay in the tree forever.

I am sentimental, which is not a perfect character for people, but it is ideal for the artist, at least for me. Many of my artistic inspirations have come from my unspeakable emotions and feelings. These are the unspeakable emotions and feelings, at least not in



the language we use to communicate with people. My art is based on my synesthesia<sup>2</sup>. Synesthesia is a strange blending of the senses in which the stimulation of one modality simultaneously produces sensation in a different modality. "Synesthetes hear colors, feel sounds, and taste shapes." Color is a powerful language, just like good music can motivate people's emotions; for me, color plays a role as a chord in my work. I very much enjoy those moments. However, as I aged, I wanted more than paper and paints. I want to experience more. Unlike the exam-oriented education system in China, studying in the US has taught me a lot of different artistic expression forms and techniques in various arts areas and about becoming a more vital, independent woman. I learned jewelry making during my undergraduate period. I enjoy working with metal. Jewelry making provides a very different vibe than other art formats, not only because of its commercial value but because it has more forms of expression than any other discipline; both in materials and techniques. Metal has become the vessel of my feelings and emotions. It replaced paper.

I have needed help in the past few years. Metal and jewelry making feels like a rope squeezed into my flesh. My art has become a machine-made mode. I realized my family philosophy steadily controlled my mind as I aged.

I do not enjoy those moments of making like I used to. All the academic assignments and critical judgment have taken away my desire to explore and my courage to change. Doing what I have been told has taken my ability to think deeper.

---

<sup>2</sup> Synesthesia is an anomalous blending of the senses in which the stimulation of one modality simultaneously produces sensation in a different modality. Synesthetes hear colors, feel sounds and taste shapes.

"How to draw like a child" is a TEDx talk by Gav Barbey<sup>3</sup>, a Melbourne-based artist. What about the drawings of children that we, as adults, find so difficult to replicate? Gav used his daughter as an example to explain how childhood scribbles and doodles, far from being simplistic and formless, speak to us in a beautiful pictorial language. When children draw human hands, they sometimes have more than ten fingers because when people wave, the movement shows more lines in the visual world. A childlike mindset is essential because it provides more ideas beyond the first one and allows me to see the problem differently.

The way children think about how this world operates is different than it is for adults. In their world, there is no right or wrong. It is all about intuition and direct feedback. All children have this ability to see the core through things because there is no knowledge or cognition to correct the mind. We know the cloud is white, and the sky is blue, but due to various factors, the atmosphere can be all different colors, and shadows can be different shapes. What I want to find is the wonder and amazement when I first see the colorful sky. That desire for exploration is the juice of my creativity and power.

Every child is an artist. At a young age, kids tend to destroy things, take them apart, and build them back; that is how they learn something. An article called "Kindergarten Approach to Learning" – (is characterized by a spiraling cycle of imagining. The philosophy behind this approach is creating, Playing, Sharing, Reflecting, and going back to reckoning.) I do not view my thesis as a task or assignment. I use memories as my inspiration source and the feelings and emotions I

---

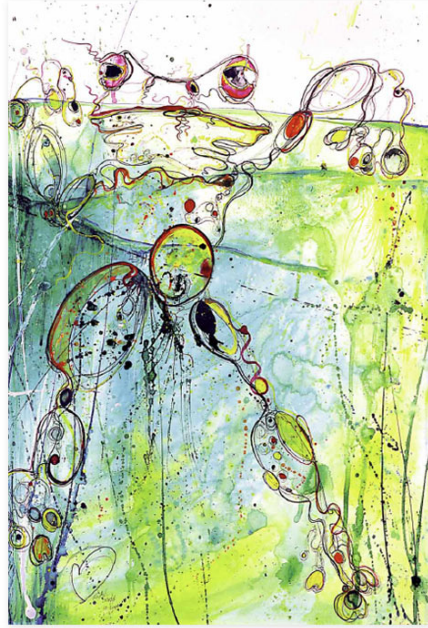
<sup>3</sup> Gav Barbey: Melbourne based artist, Gav barbey is a multi-disciplinary artist

had at that time to create pieces. My work directly answers my memories; it is my initial thought. In this thesis, words like 'rules' and 'discipline' do not belong to my art.

After many years of practice living in society, I realized that I had lost the passion for pursuing new things in my heart through growing up. My thesis practice is a starting point where I can regain my love for exploring new possibilities in the art field.

## **Evolution**

"Green Tree Frog Climbing on Reed 2007" by a famous Australian painter, Gav Barbey; unlike most other traditional oil paintings, Gav's work includes many line structures that create shapes and provide a sense of visual movement. Gav Barbey spent seven years in a modest backyard in Springvale North. He has spent most of his time in the woods with animals and other nature. The concept of his work inspired the way I think about creatures. The line work in his paintings reminds me of how children would draw more than ten figures when people waved. The connection between his painting and children's drawings is mind-provoking. Those paintings are not realistic, but the sense of movement in his work makes sense and feels alive in a different dimension. Furthermore, that sense of motion present in a still object is something I want to present to viewers in my thesis.



<http://www.gavbarbey.com/bio/index.html>

The goal is to provide a visual experience that can find the tone for an adult's viewing environment. I start with an empty mind and sketches on paper. Have you ever wondered why all creatures are in different colors and forms? Why do we all have different skin tones even the same breed as humans? My mother constantly hummed a nursery rhyme for me when I was young called "Ocean." Ocean is a word full of fantasy for many people, but this word means home for me.

The term "Ocean" also reminds me of a famous Roma Glassmith, Daniela Forti's<sup>4</sup> work. Her work is mainly associated with colorful upside-down glass. In Daniela's work, people can sense the movement of the material, and the sense of dripping on her sculpture makes it more alive and vivid. She uses a technique called glass fusing, which is melting glass at a very high temperature and then letting the glass cool down under gravity, giving the piece this fluid movement and jelly-like softness. Also, the nature of

---

<sup>4</sup> Daniela Forti was born in Rome in 1960. She studied and learned in the artisan shops of the capital the techniques of the art of glass. In 1982 she moved to Tuscany, where she opened her studio.

glass allows the work to capture light and transform it into evanescent colors, making her work look like it is floating in the air.



[Dripping Glass Fusion “Jellyfish” Sculptures by Daniela Forti,](#)

Most people see the beauty in her work. I see a memory from my childhood. Daniela Forti's work inspired my first thesis series, "The Place I Come From." I grew up on an island called Hainan. Living by the ocean allowed me to see many sea creatures, like colorful seashells or fish after the tide washed them onto the beach.

Moreover, one of them was jellyfish. I can always find jellyfish dead or still alive on beaches right after the retreating tide, but I have always been told not to touch them because their venom might still exist in their tentacles even if they're already dead. They look like a plastic bag or a big puddle of clear vomit from a distance. However, In my memory, jellyfish are the most beautiful sea creatures. They are elegant and exist to light up the darkness. They are like fatal elves in the sea world.

I always wonder why those jellyfish on the beaches look not as pretty as in the ocean; I did not learn until I was older that their colors come from their food-- plankton in the sea. Back then, I thought that it was because their soul had color, and the color faded away when they died. Thus, I use my memory and imagination about my 'color of

the soul' theory to create this series. I made a unique "jellyfish-like" object that represents the imagination of the beauty of death in my childhood memory.

Metal has become the primary material, which is a material that could be long-preserved. White-gray has become the leading tone that helped me emphasize the message of death. A powder coating<sup>5</sup> technique allows me to bake color onto any metal surface. I pick an air gun to shoot dry plastic powder onto a copper surface and bake it under 400 degrees Fahrenheit to apply paint.

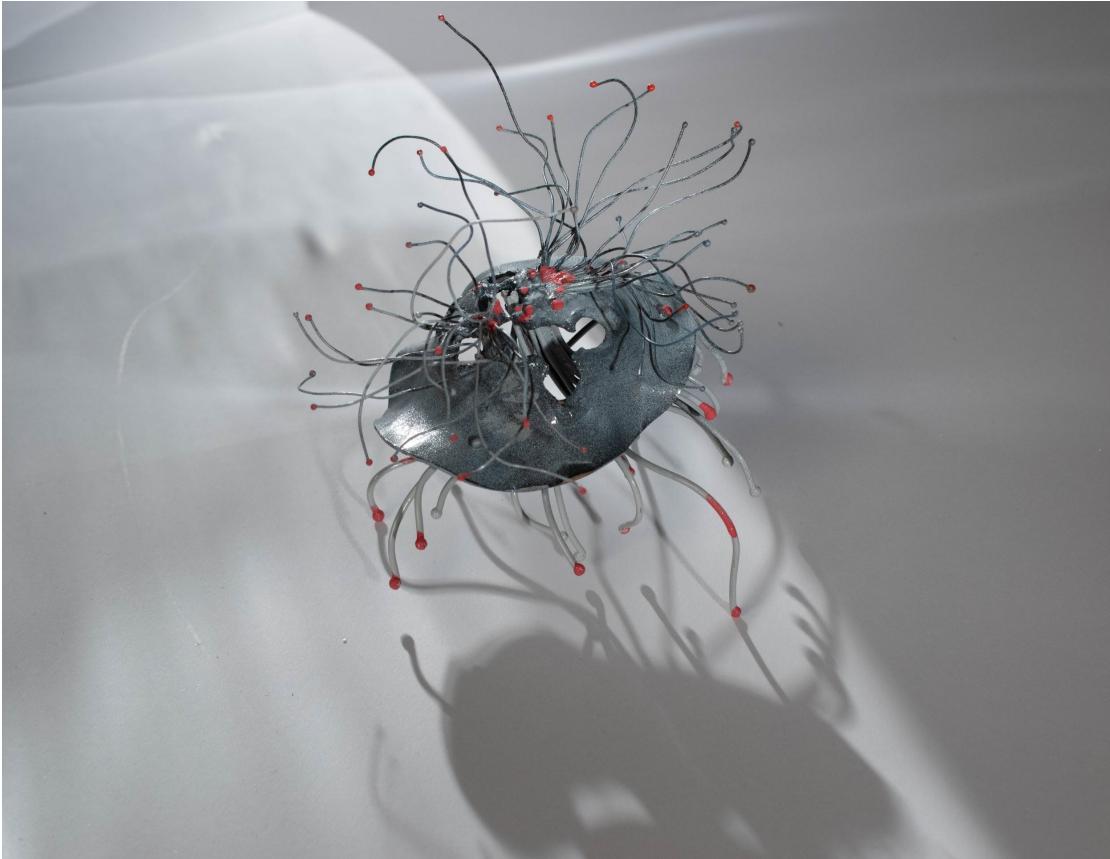
I use 22-gauge and 16-gauge copper wires to mimic the tentacles. I created a feeling of lightness, capturing the moving motion. I balled up the end of each wire to remove the metal's sharpness and make sense of softness and safeness, which provided a signal that it was safe to touch. Carefully mixing different proportions of the white and black powder allows me to create a splashed movement of color.

Wet patting pink powder onto each "tentacle" end to brighten the overall tone and attract attention was used. Visual ability is vital to learning our surroundings.

---

<sup>5</sup> Powder Coating: It's a dry finishing process created by an electric charge that causes a dry powder to fuse to the surface of the metal. This is then baked in a curing oven to achieve a smooth coating.

## Body of Work



**The Place I come from**

**Ocean 0.1**

**Objects**

Powder-coating.

Copper, brass

5" x 4.5" x 7.5" 2023

**Photo Credit: Skyler**

This series is based on the emotion of homesickness. I am using

a flacking<sup>6</sup> technique that helped to add a varied element to my object, providing softness and a more lively feeling. My inspiration for version 0.2 is the combination of the octopus and Ferris wheel. I used a brush to wet pad powders onto the object to remove the smoothness and create texture. Adding multiple colors to my "octopus" removes the reality and creates a fantastic atmosphere in the scene. Stones and Pearls provide a sense of value to the object. The fanciness that I present on the surface also indicates how people would be drawn to beautiful things regardless of age, and it would attract viewers to come closer and look at the details.

The inspiration for "Ocean 0.3" combines the sea anemone and a kid's toy called "Spinning Top."<sup>7</sup> It goes back to ancient times. I used to play it all the time when I was small.



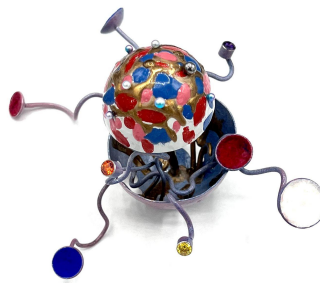
( Google image: Spinning top toy)

---

<sup>6</sup> is a technique similar to or instead inspired by the Japanese practice of kintsugi, only instead of repairing with gold, Ememem uses tiles, majolica, or beautiful mosaics.

<sup>7</sup> Spinning top is a children's toy goes back to ancient times and is very famous in Portugal. It comes with a rope that must be tightly rolled around the wooden spinning top and thrown to the floor with a rapid movement, to make sure it will spin and dance for as long as possible.





**The Place I Come From**  
**Ocean 0.2**  
**Object**

**Photo Credit: Skyler**

Powder-coating  
Copper, CZ stones, flocking  
3.5" x 6" x 5.5" 2022-2023



**The Place I Come From**  
**Ocean 0.3**  
**Object**

**Photo Credit: Skyler**

Powder-coating  
Copper, brass, enamel  
5.5" x 6" x 3.5"  
2021-2022



**The Place I Come From**  
**Ocean 0.4**  
**object**

Photo Credit: Skyler

Powder-coating  
Brass, copper  
2022



**The Place I Come From**  
**Place 0.1**  
**object**

Photo Credit: Yaoxuan Liu

Powder-coating & flocking on copper  
3.5" x 3.5" x 1.7"  
2022



**The Place I Come From**  
**Place 0.2**  
**Object**

**Photo Credit:** Yaoxuan Liu

Powder-coating  
Copper, CZ stones, flocking  
8" x 3.5" 2"  
2022-2023

Applying a mirror sheet underneath each piece can show the inside details of my art, and the concept of self-retrieving indicates that I am using different perspectives to view things. When we see ourselves in a mirror, we build up the idea that this person is me, which is the initial thought. Using my initial reactions to find my "initial thought" will allow me to explore a deeper place within ourselves. Also, the reflection draws attention

and invites people to come close to look where it is coming from. I aim to motivate people's curiosity and give people a space to think and to experience.

When my father inherited the antique shop from my grandfather, he occasionally would bring back a few sacks of things with a powerful fishy smell. He told me those were broken pieces of porcelain that people fished up. The scientific name for those porcelain pieces is " Sea pottery,"<sup>8</sup> which is an appeal for porcelain salvaged from the seabed in the collection market. He told me these broken china pieces are costly and have unique historical values. They contain the souls of ancient artisans. I refabricated these pieces of broken sea pottery that I brought from home, in combination with metal, gemstones, felt, and powder coating to provide a whole new meaning that now only shows my respect to the ancient artisans but also a part of my memory that I see as a necessary part of my creative practice.

**Photo Credit: Jian Liu (father)**



---

<sup>8</sup> Sea pottery :Sea pottery (also known as "sea china," "sea porcelain," or "beach pottery") is pottery that is broken into worn pieces and shards and found on beaches along oceans or large lakes. (Wikipedia)



**The beauty of the fractured 0.1  
Brooch**

Broken sea pottery  
Powder-coating on copper.  
2.5" x 2.5" x 1"  
2022

Photo Credit: Yaoxuan Liu



**The beauty of the fractured 0.2  
Necklaces**

Photo Credit: Yaoxuan Liu

Broken sea pottery  
Powder-coating & flocking on copper, sterling silver, and felt.  
13" x 7" x 2.5"  
2022





**The beauty of the fractured 0.3  
Brooch**

Photo Credit: Yaoxuan Liu

Broken sea pottery, powder-coating & flocking on copper  
Silk thread, CZ stone, blue moonstone  
6" x 4.7" x 3.5"  
2022

For the beauty of the fractured series, I mainly used pure color, which allowed me to express my indescribable respect for ancient artworks and represents my interpretation of the spark of cultures colliding. I am using my imagination, like playing with legos, to build upon them and recreate them into a new version.

In a visual art environment in a gallery, I created an aesthetic experiment.

I used PVC pipe and wood to make shifts that appear outside the wall. I created a clean pathway for people to come closer and look at my work.

I deliberately designed all my pedestals and even the body of my white kaleidoscope to blend seamlessly into the space, creating an almost floating effect, drawing people's attention to the mini sculptures and the reflections they cast above them. I intended to create a fantastic atmosphere for viewers. Some of my work implies wearability, like brooches and necklaces, which allow them to be touched and worn. The desire to connect but not need to feel is attractive here.

## Kaleidoscope

"Kaleidoscope"<sup>9</sup> was written by Eleanor Farjeon, an English author of children's stories. The author writes, "Anthony grew up in the loveliest place in the world; his father called it the Eye of the Earth. But to Anthony, the "eye of the earth" was the old mill-pound near his home - a place of mystery and enchantment." (Eleanor Farjeon 1)

This book is about the story of a little boy Anthony. He sees a world full of fantasy and surprises. The tree shakes when the wind comes, but in his little head, he thinks that the tree makes the wind because the trees shake. Anthony can always see things around him in a particular way and make up many bizarre stories. Anthony lives in a world of "kaleidoscopes," where everything in his perspective is packed with unexpected possibilities. The inspiration for making a kaleidoscope that tells stories of myself to others comes from this book. I learned from it that the ability of innocent creativity is the treasure of a child's life, and childlike creativity is the treasure of everyone's life. By creating this device, I aimed to tell my story and illustrate the possibility of things to others.

I engraved images of myself from different periods onto a large gear wheel placed in front of the kaleidoscope to demonstrate the changes in my identity over time, and on top of those images, I glued on seven clear circular boxes representing seven days a week. These boxes contain found objects that represent childhood memories and my identity as a jewelry maker.

---

<sup>9</sup> <Kaleidoscope> was written by Eleanor Farjeon, (born Feb. 13, 1881, London—died June 5, 1965, Hampstead, London), English writer for children whose magical but unsentimental tales, which often mock the behaviour of adults, earned her a revered place in many British nurseries

I used wood, copper, silver, glass, pearls, paper, hair, sea pottery, and rocks. Those materials are found objects in my studio and things I have been deeply bound to since I was a kid, like a sea pottery my father gave me. It is a simple toothed gearing device motivated by a 3MM gear motor. The main body includes three pieces of 12" x 8.5" composite wood combined with 3D printed frames to create a triangular hollow construction and 38 pieces of 6x 6 inches sheet mirrors to cover the interior space.

Furthermore, I laser-cut two pieces of triangular-shaped clear acrylic as the cover for the front and back; laser-cut a gear wheel of radius 5.5 inches and a gear wheel of radius 0.25 inches, with clear acrylic Dowel rod was used as the bearings and was placed on the center of the front cover. Cutting a circle of 1-inch diameter in the center of the back cover allows viewers to use it and see through the kaleidoscope.

The device is automatic; I extended the original copper wire to 10', connecting the battery and gear motor. To hide the battery box, I used a white D-line cable cover to ensconce the wire and placed the battery box on the surface of the pedestal. Symmetric patterns that represent China porcelain are projected onto the wall. I used blue lines to create those symmetric patterns and placed them on a white background to make a kaleidoscope effect visually. Putting the art piece in front of the wall allows viewers to see the combination of overlapping patterns and the kaleidoscope.

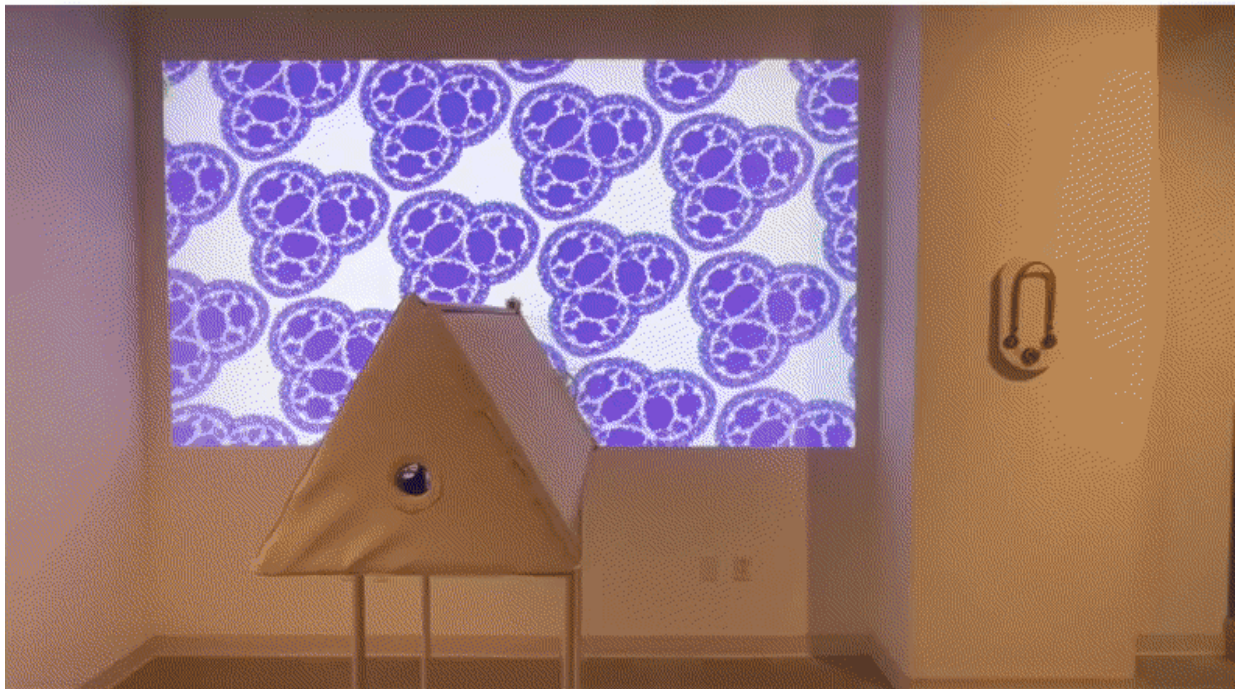
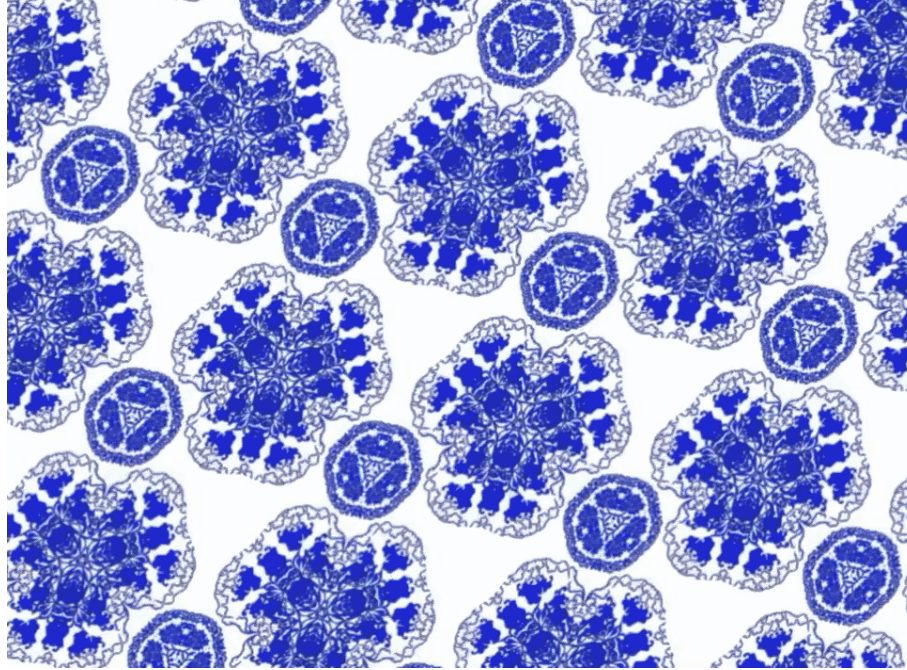


Photo Credit: Yaoxuan Liu

## Visual Installation in the City Art Space Gallery



Photo Credit: Yaoxuan Liu



Photo Credit: Yaoxuan Liu



Photo Credit: Yaoxuan Liu



## Conclusion

In this section, I would like to start with my sincerest thanks to Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez, John Aäsp, and Elizabeth Kronfield. Without your support, I would not have succeeded.

I enjoyed making by experimenting with new materials and methods to try out different possibilities. The process of making opened my mind; for those years when I was working in my studio, metals have always become the primary material because I was familiar with them. That is my comfort zone. When I decided to step out of that zone, I felt so scared; I was so worried about making a mistake; what if this wasn't going to work?

Nevertheless, throughout making, I realized that I was framed in that small corner for so long that I did not know so many great things were waiting for me to explore. I am not willing to define myself as a jewelry artist. I combine different materials with trying out other things. Every piece in this show can be interpreted as a piece of the puzzle of my identity. Putting sea pottery in my creation is not only because of its historical meaning but also because of its past message. The memories from those old objects are genuine treasures to me, as it is valued in the culture; childhood memories are invaluable to grown-ups.

This thesis aims to draw viewers into this space that presents my personal history, the history of making crafts, and the connection between the maker and the material. My work represents the generation's knowledge passing, and having them in a

gallery space becomes a sublimation. Due to the successful experience of the show, I am going to continue incorporating it into my art random objects for future creativity.

## Citations

“John Locke.” *Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation*, 11 Mar. 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Locke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Locke).

“How to Draw like a Child | Gav Barbey | TEDxUniMelb.” *YouTube, YouTube*, 21 May 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_cWb1oa4qE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_cWb1oa4qE).

“kindergarten approach to learning” “Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI Conference on Creativity & Cognition.” *ACM Conferences*, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/proceedings/10.1145/1254960>.

Resnick, Mitchel. “All I Really Need to Know (about Creative Thinking) I Learned (by ...” *ACM DL Digital Library, Association for Computing Machinery New York, NY, United States*, 2007, <https://web.media.mit.edu/~mres/papers/kindergarten-learning-approach.pdf>.

“How to Draw like a Child | Gav Barbey | TEDxUniMelb.” *YouTube, YouTube*, 21 May 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_cWb1oa4qE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_cWb1oa4qE).

“Green Tree Frog Climbing on Reed 2007”  
<http://www.gavbarbey.com/bio/index.html>

Roma Glassmith, Daniela Forti  
[Dripping Glass Fusion “Jellyfish” Sculptures by Daniela Forti](#),

*Kaleidoscope by Eleanor Farjeon (Ebook) - Ebooks.Com*, [www.ebooks.com/en-us/book/1138070/kaleidoscope/eleanor-farjeon/](http://www.ebooks.com/en-us/book/1138070/kaleidoscope/eleanor-farjeon/). Accessed 8 June 2023.