

Rochester Institute of Technology

## RIT Digital Institutional Repository

---

Theses

---

4-29-2024

### Osmanthus

Zixuan Ni  
zn4280@rit.edu

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

---

#### Recommended Citation

Ni, Zixuan, "Osmanthus" (2024). 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).

# RIT

## Osmanthus

by

Zixuan Ni

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

School for American Crafts  
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, NY  
April 29, 2024



**Thesis Approval**

---

Thesis Title

---

Thesis Author

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
The School  
Rochester Institute of Technology | Rochester, New York

---

Name

Title

---

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat

---

Name

Title

---

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat

---

Name (Optional for some programs)

Title (Optional for some programs)

---

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat (Optional for some programs)

---

Name (Optional for some programs)

Title (Optional for some programs)

---

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat (Optional for some programs)

# Content

I. Abstract .....	3
II. Introduction .....	4
III. Context .....	7
IV. Evolution .....	10
V. The body of work .....	13
VI. Conclusion .....	19
VII. Bibliography .....	21

## I. Abstract

Observation serves as the cornerstone for all my artistic endeavors. This thesis will explore the nuanced emotions that emerge during and after the observation process. Specifically, it delves into instances where elements in the city I currently inhabit are mistakenly associated with my hometown, providing a platform for expressing my sentiments towards the sweet-scented osmanthus flowers of my roots. The discourse within the thesis extends beyond the realms of contemporary metal and jewelry art, encompassing references to olfactory art and various other crafts as I explore the forms and fragrances of Osmanthus.

## II. Introduction

I've always considered myself an observer. I enjoy observing the environment and things around me and use what I observe as the theme of my artwork. It may have started when I had my first mobile phone that could take photos. I like to use my mobile phone to record the world I observe and the details I want on the road or in any environment. When I grew up, I had my camera. Compared with mobile phones, the photos they take are more explicit and record more details. So, I like to walk around with my camera, observing and recording the world with my eyes.

With this habit, I came to Rochester, New York a city in the U.S.A. This place is different from my hometown. It lacks the hustle and bustle of some big cities and has a little more tranquility and the calmness of small towns. Here, what I observe more is nature.

While visiting the park near Ontario Beach Park last year, I encountered a tree with small yellow flowers. At that time, my heart beat vehemently, and I thought: This flowering tree is not the flowering tree of my hometown that I miss day and night. I stood there looking at the tree from a distance, with tiny flowers of different colors but no leaves on the branches. I was a little lost for a moment because the tree in my heart was evergreen all year round. I walked into that tree with a questioning mind, and when I got close, I kept comforting myself; maybe the tree in front of me and the tree in my heart were relatives. But unsurprisingly, when I looked closer and saw the flowers on the tree, I knew I was looking at it wrong. Even though I realized in my heart that this tree could not be a flowering tree in my hometown, I still felt a sense of loss. At that moment, I

began to reflect and blame myself for while I knew there were differences., I still thought it was the flowering tree of my hometown.

The flowering tree that I miss in my hometown is the osmanthus tree.

Learning and experiencing different cultures has always been the pursuit of my life. Through these journeys, I have become a keen observer of the world, noticing significant differences between various cultures. These differences have led me to profound reflections on my own culture. I have come to realize that the environment I am in has a unique impact on me. Every time I enter a new environment, I find myself contemplating more about the places I have lived and learned before. It is through this reflection that I noticed the osmanthus, which I had previously overlooked. At home, I only found it inadvertently, and I only began to miss it when I left. When I encountered a flower similar to it, I found myself immersed in deep nostalgia.

This series of work reflects my feelings when I encounter plants reminiscent of the osmanthus from my hometown and fell into memories. Osmanthus is a plant that evokes endless associations with my hometown, and its fragrance and color will be the core elements of this series. In my view, metals and jewelry are items that will not deteriorate even after thousands of years of inheritance. Therefore, I want to use these artistic forms to present the osmanthus that I long for. Although the fragrance of osmanthus does not last long, as it only blooms at a fixed time each year, as long as the osmanthus tree exists, the fragrance will surely return. Even if my works temporarily lose their fragrance, the form remains. Although I cannot buy fresh osmanthus

from my hometown here, when the fragrance of osmanthus fills my container, the audience can experience a sense of presence.



### III. Context

If somebody asks me what is the most profound impression of my hometown, then I will definitely say that when autumn comes, I am surrounded by the fragrance of sweet-scented osmanthus. At that moment, the sweet scent gave me happiness. Osmanthus is my memory of my hometown. In the writings of countless Chinese literati, osmanthus has a strong and sweet scent, and people often can smell it, but be unable to find it. When found, people will see that every individual Osmanthus is really small, but grow in clusters on the branches. Osmanthus is mostly yellow and orange but occasionally silver (light yellow or white). Although they are bright in color, they are often covered by the surrounding dark green leaves, which is why they are not easy to find. Whenever the sweet-scented Osmanthus is in full bloom, the fragrance drifts into every corner of the city with the breeze. It blew gently into my face, with its rich sweetness into my nasal cavity and into my heart.

The longing for sweet-scented Osmanthus can also be said to be my longing for my hometown and is a symbol of my nostalgia.

Like the flowering tree in Ontario Beach Park, the yellow flowers on the tree bloom in clusters, and each small flower is composed of four petals. But Osmanthus is different from it in many ways. The most significant difference is that Osmanthus has a robust and sweet-scented fragrance, while the flower trees in the park have no smell. Its petals are pointed and curled outwards, and its stamens are very long. The petals of sweet-scented Osmanthus are mostly wide ovals with small sharp corners, which gather together and move inwards. The filaments are also

extremely short and difficult to observe. The tree that I found in the park had three to four small yellow-green leaves under each cluster of flowers while the Osmanthus has one dark green leaf under each cluster of pungent flowers (see Fig. 1 & 2). The sweet scent of the Osmanthus, however, is its most significant attribute and is responsible for arousing strong personal emotions (Shiner). Although I am far away from my hometown, whenever I smell the fragrance of Osmanthus, I always feel embraced by my hometown.



Figure. 1 This image was taken by author Zixuan Ni in Ontario Beach Park, Rochester on Apr 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022

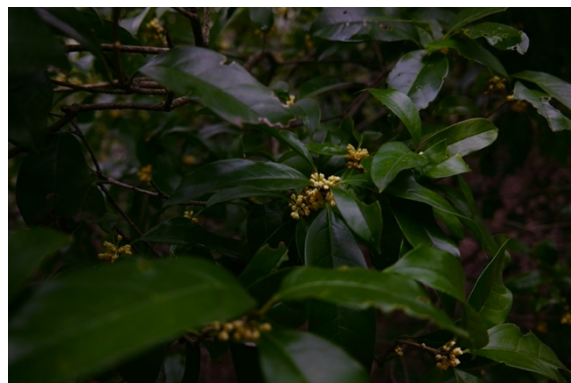


Figure. 2 This image was taken by author Zixuan Ni in Linggu Temple, Nanjing on Jan 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020

In this series, I envisioned a small scene where I accidentally knocked over a vase, and the water filled with the fragrance of Osmanthus instantly spread, carrying the scent of Osmanthus throughout the entire space. I lifted the fallen vase and water from the ground, attempting to bring the aroma of Osmanthus into my nose. Greedily, I inhaled the fragrance in my hands, trying to etch it into my memory. At this very moment, Osmanthus surrounded me, offering a comforting presence as its scent enveloped me.

My creative work is closely connected to Nanjing. This became particularly apparent when I was studying abroad in the United States. I realized that Nanjing's influence on me was much stronger than I had initially thought. I cannot forget the fragrance of Osmanthus that fills the entire city when autumn arrives. For every artist who uses their culture and personal experiences

as the background for their creations, it is impossible to understand their work without delving into the context of the artist's background. As Rüdiger Joppien wrote about Ramón Puig Cuyàs, "Without this sense of belonging, without deep knowledge of the forces driving his homeland, it would not be possible to understand his artistic world."(Joppien)

## IV. Evolution

Before the production started, I considered the fact that each natural sweet-scented osmanthus flower was very small and had a wide oval shape (Chinese Field Herbarium). Because sweet-scented Osmanthus is my theme, shapes related to flowers are the main patterns and shapes I designed. Because this work mainly discusses my feelings about the sweet-scented Osmanthus in my hometown, in the designing process, I not only considered the shape of the flowers mentioned above but also considered my feelings.

*“To create is to invent oneself, search for oneself, and project oneself beyond the horizons of known and certain things. To create is an adventure that finds along the way what exists between pre-feeling and the experience of feeling. Creation is also driven by the wish to find whatever it is we're missing.*

*Creating isn't communication, creation is solitude, a serenely accepted solitude. It's a making that is dialogue, interrogation, and confrontation with oneself. It requires concentration, prompting an inner silence such that we can listen to the resonances of our deepest feelings. Feelings in which we seek to recognize ourselves as if in a mirror while also recognizing the reflection of those universal feelings shared by all human beings. The object leaves our hands in this way, not as a communication; rather, it's a way of sharing with others the experience lived through the work process, what we found, discovered, and made visible there.” (Cuyàs)*

In the process of creating this work, I would close my eyes to contemplate, allowing thoughts and feeling to emerge and slowly spread to every part of my body. I visualized gathering them

together with my hands and slowly bringing them close to my face and take a deep breath. This process reflects the desire of my greedy nose to smell the fragrance of Osmanthus on my hands.

The sentiments I've described embody a delicate resonance akin to the solitary presence of a petite, sweet-scented osmanthus. When these moments stand alone, their emotional impact may not be forceful enough to induce an emotional eruption within. Yet, as they coalesce, my emotions surge forth like an unrestrained torrent. The fragrance of Osmanthus emerges as the most yearned-for scent in a foreign realm—a scent that encapsulates the essence of my longing for home. I yearn not merely to experience it but to clasp it, drawing it intimately towards me, ensuring its perpetual presence by my side. Thus, the gesture of "grasping" becomes an integral motif in my artistic composition, a symbolic attempt to seize and encapsulate the elusive essence of Osmanthus within my creative endeavors.

An important element in the creation of my thesis work was how to add floral fragrance. I refer to *Anamnesis* made by artist Otobong Nkanga in 2015(see Fig. 3). *Anamnesis* is a work that uses spices to embody the artist's expression of anti-colonial ideas. Viewers are watching a river created by the artist around a white wall, which is filled with various spices from the African colonial trading period. Colonial trade carried the products of colonial plantations to the many powerful civilizations via rivers and seas (Shiner). The artist uses various symbolic spices and some elements that reflect the transportation of colonial products to create a large installation sculpture. Although my work does not discuss some profound historical issues like hers, I think her way of combining vision and smell is similar. As I developed my plans, I knew the shape of the flower and its fragrance would be the main elements of my work. There are three

representative varieties of sweet-scented Osmanthus, namely Jingui, Dangui, and Yingui (Shu), which correspond to the three colors of yellow, vermilion, and white. My choice of materials basically revolved around these three colors. For the main medium, I chose to use metals. One is because I understand metals, so I can use them better. The second is that the main jewelry materials are brass, copper, and silver. Their colors correspond to the three representatives of the Osmanthus's color. Silver and copper are the metals with which I have more experience. In my heart, Osmanthus represents hometown, and hometown occupies a place in my heart. The use of precious metals like silver is to highlight how precious they are in my heart.

The aroma of Osmanthus is strong and light, spreading widely in the air. In order to reflect this light feeling, I used very thin metal wires and thin metal sheet. I also used bamboo strips for the composite material, which are similarly thin and move with the body. As a common plant in China, bamboo is associated with many traditional Chinese crafts. This material can be made very thin, becoming light while maintaining its strength. The toughness of bamboo also expresses my feelings for my hometown.

Materials and fabrication techniques were complementary. In addition to traditional jewelry-making techniques, I also used metal fabrication technique-forming, which includes forging and planishing. I used it to make vessels to contain the fragrance and dry Osmanthus. Because I chose bamboo strips as one of the materials, I learned bamboo weaving to make it a part of the work.

## V. The body of work

The forms and organization of my thesis exhibition, all started from a story I imagined, which is divided into six short chapters as follows.

### 1. Fallen Vase

A wanderer far away from her hometown can only take the essence of natural things with her. I created a little vase to hold invisible osmanthus and all of my thoughts about this flower. Daily, I filled the vase with water to provide moisture for my "osmanthus". But today, I accidentally knocked over the vase. I was very panicked, afraid that my "osmanthus" would disappear with the water. This accident, at this moment, created a deeper longing for Osmanthus than ever before.



Figure. (3) Image credit: Shiyi Zhu.

## 2. Flying

The image of the sweet-scented osmanthus gradually became clearer in my mind, as if it wanted me to see it clearly. Such a small flower looked huge in front of my eyes. It gradually came closer to me with its rich aroma.



Figure. (4) Image credit: Shiyi Zhu



### 3. Diffusion

As it got closer to me, it slowly began to get smaller and stayed on my hand so that I could better smell its aroma.



Figure. (5) Image credit: Shiyi Zhu

#### 4. Caress

As I held the sweet-scented osmanthus in my hand and let it get closer and closer to me, and its image gradually became real. It hugged my face softly as I tried to find its scent. All of this is in my imagination. The sweet-scented osmanthus did not really appear in front of me. I smell it but cannot find it; I see it but cannot smell it.



Figure. (6) Image credit: Shiyi Zhu

## 5. My Heart Is Filled With It

All of my emotions poured into the storage box of my heart when the story reached its climax. What I think in my heart is pure and precious, like this piece of albino silver. These emotions, however, cannot be completely hidden in the heart. When the storage box is full, some emotions begin to spread outward. I feel that I am full of osmanthus, and it is symbolic of my mood at the moment. It is magnified it because Osmanthus is my heart at this moment. I shrunk the size of my heart box down because emotions are unbearable, and when the box is full, it will only break. The small escaping flowers began to spread outward, layer by layer, like ripples in water.

The climax of the story is the most emotional moment for me, but the introverted culture I learned since childhood taught me, "Don't let others know what's on your mind." Homesickness is a very personal emotion, and I'm not sure if everyone understands so the size of this box only needed to accommodate my own thoughts.



Figure. (7) Image credit: Zixuan Ni



Figure. (8) Image credit Zixuan Ni

## 6. Embrace

As the story comes to an end, everything returns to normal. The sweet-scented osmanthus disappeared into the flowing water, leaving only its lingering fragrance around me. Finally, it hugged me tightly, like a farewell.



Figure. (9) Image credit: Shiyi Zhu

## VI. Conclusion

In China, there is an idiom called "触景生情(Chu Jing Sheng Qing)," which means that seeing a scene can evoke certain thoughts and emotions through association. This phenomenon is particularly evident in individuals who are far from their hometown, and it is also the subject that this thesis project aims to narrate. After encountering plants that closely resemble the osmanthus from my hometown, I employed the imagery of the osmanthus plant to convey my longing for home.

The process of determining the expression of this content, involved much contemplation and discussion. Tackling a topic that is largely unfamiliar to most people in a place with a completely different cultural background posed a challenge for me. The challenge lay in how to make my audience understand the narrative of my thesis project. After numerous discussions, I firmly decided to ground my expression in my own perspective, conveying my reflections and emotions. Emotions are something universal. Even if our cultural backgrounds are entirely different, we can all relate to the yearning for one's hometown.

In the creative process, through the exploration of various art forms, including contemporary metal and jewelry art, olfactory art, and various crafts, I aimed to encapsulate the essence of osmanthus from both visual and olfactory perspectives. As I scrutinized the characteristics of osmanthus, I delved not only into the realms of artistic creation but also into the intersections of cultural identity and sensory experiences.

Expressing emotions is an enduring theme for artists, and art can possess a transcendent power

that weaves together diverse emotions such as personal introspection, cultural identity, and sensory perception. My works emphasize the capacity for creative expression to bridge geographical and emotional distances, enabling a profound exploration of one's roots and eliciting emotional resonance in the fragrant memories of home.

## VII. Bibliography

1. Chinese Field Herbarium. "Osmanthus fragrans (Thunb.) Lour. 1790." *Chinese Field Herbarium*, <https://www.cfh.ac.cn/34635.spage>.
2. Cuyàs, Ramón Puig. "Art for the body." *When the jewellery becomes a metaphor : 30 years of contemporary jewellery*, SD-Edicions, 2019, pp. 34–72.
3. Joppien, Rüdiger. "Jewellery Poems, or "Beauty Protects"." *When the jewellery becomes a metaphor : 30 years of contemporary jewellery*, SD-Edicions, 2019, pp. 17–30.
4. Shiner, Larry. "Art And Scent." *Larry Shiner*, <https://www.larryshiner.com/art-and-scent>. Accessed 20 Feb. 2023.
5. Shu, Yinglan. "A Brief Hstory of Osmanthus(《桂花简史》)." *Garden(《园林》)*, no. 2008 Issue 10, Late Autumn Edition, pp. 22–23.