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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Metals and Jewelry Making
Department of the School for American Craft

About Me

By

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Date: January 2014

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Abstract

I am inspired by my life experiences and try to reflect them in my art. The main media in my work is silver, along with resin and fabric, which I use to express my thoughts and observations about my life. During the procedure of creation, I have been influenced by Louise Josephine Bourgeois and Vincent van Gogh, and, a book called *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck. While my perspective is that of a Chinese female living in the U.S. for four years, I believe that we all share similarities as human beings.

My hands, guided by my thoughts and creativity, use various tools for my art. Every movement produces a new dot on the map of my life, which is a combination of self-exploration, self-observation, self-construction and deconstruction. My life progresses, time clicks by, and I feel like I am flying in space.

Introduction

My life is a self-exploration process made up of countless short events. While at the beginning of my life my own particular self was indistinct, slowly my true shape is emerging. I have faced unknowns in every new moment, and have I experienced many diverse happenings. I thrive by accumulating mental energy and little by little, the unique image of my life is being drawn. My art lets me communicate with the world; it carries my thoughts and represents my ideas. It is a subtle but powerful representation of me.

Jewelry is my chosen art form because of its intimate, functional, and aesthetic relationship with the human body fascinates me. The relationship between jewelry and the human body has a long and varied history; jewelry artists have produced a wide range of pieces manifesting their ideas. The process of jewelry making is like shaping one's life, since repeated polishing or hammering continues to constantly change the form of a piece of jewelry.

Metal is the primary material for my work. In addition, I like to incorporate resin, silk, rice paper and fabrics in my jewelry. Large-scale sculptural forms and two-dimensional paintings also play a major role in my current thesis work.

Sources and Research

A famous artist who also used her art to express her own personal history was Louis Josephine Bourgeois, a French-American artist and sculptor who was born in Paris in 1911 and died in New York in 2010.¹ She is considered to be the founder (some say “the mother”) of “confessional art”—an art term used by artists to denote female artists who include autobiographical elements in their work.² While her work is abstract, it suggests the human figure and also themes of betrayal, anxiety and loneliness. “Her work was wholly autobiographical, inspired by her childhood trauma of discovering that her English governess was also her father’s mistress.”³



Maman 1999 in London, 2007⁴



Arch of Hysteria, 1993⁵

Bourgeois’s experience makes me think of the impact of childhood on personality. In my own case, I lived with my aunt’s family before attending college and felt like an outsider in that family. I started to crave security and attention, which led me to be so sensitive that I could not get along with others very well. I was alone most of time but blamed my many bad feelings on others. My first year in the U.S. was not easy for me either. I was still a quiet and defensive girl. It was my art that helped me to come out of my shell and grow into the person I am becoming.

Confessional art is an artist's attempt to express his or her true self. The 2010 *Encyclopedia of Identity* defines confessional art as:

a form of contemporary art that focuses on an intentional revelation of the private self. Confessional art encourages an intimate analysis of the artist's, artist's subjects, or spectator's confidential, and often controversial, experiences and emotions.⁶

Some people may question whether exposing one's "confession" to public scrutiny is a good thing. Will not revealing your private thoughts simply alienate you from others? I would disagree. Human beings resemble each other in so many ways. The inner workings of people's minds are similar, and we all have to face similar problems in our lives. Confessional art, in whatever form it may take, can be an emotional exit not just for the artist but also for the audience.

To speak my true voice via my thesis work, my roots in China had to be considered. Some things that I thought I knew to be real I now question. Since arriving in the U.S. to study metals and jewelry making, I have been through a process of self-exploration, transforming many "unknowns" into "knowns," and discovering more unknowns. All of this has led to self-reconstruction and self-growth, which I have attempted to reveal in my work.

Another step along my self-exploration journey was to read *Lust for Life*, a biographical novel by Irving Stone based on the life of the famous Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh.⁷ I can understand Van Gogh's art better after learning what difficulties he went through, because his work, which came from his thoughts, was derived from his experience. What he sensed and what he pondered, and all of his collected thoughts, still today interact through his artwork with his audience, regular people like me who, in fact, to a greater or lesser degree, share the same experiences and emotions that he had. Comprehending Van Gogh's tragic but resolute life helps

me to go beyond the bright colors and powerful strokes in his paintings to see the loneliness and hunger that he experienced throughout his life. In other words, he overcame his difficulties by hearing and responding to the call that he felt to record, interpret, and paint objects, scenes, and emotions in his own particular way.

Like Louise Bourgeois's work, Van Gogh's paintings reflect different stages of life. As a young man, Van Gogh tried to be a pastor to help mineworkers. It did not work out the way he expected, which made him doubt the meaning of life. At that time, his paintings were dark, gloomy, and full of struggle. Then he moved to various new locations, including Paris, with limited monthly financial support from his brother. He invested most of his money into tools for his painting, and tried to find "his own voice" in art. He painted quickly with vivid colors and unstrained lines, letting his paint brush carry his dream of Utopia into the real world. Later, he left Paris and his friends to go to southern France to be closer to the sun and his ideal world. But instead, the sun kept beating down on him and sometimes caused him to be in a bad mood, and his mental health deteriorated. His paintings were influenced to some degree by the physical and emotional issues he was experiencing. He became more and more ill, and died in July 1890 from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. "Until recently it has always been assumed that he shot himself in the chest, wishing to end his life,"⁸ but new evidence suggests that his death may have been an accident.⁹

One of the last paintings was *Wheat Field with Crows* which Vincent van Gogh did in July 1890.¹⁰ He wrote to his brother Theo about this field: "They are vast stretches of wheat under troubled skies, and I did not have to go out of my way very much in order to try to express sadness and extreme loneliness."⁷ This painting reflects the last stage of Van Gogh's life, which was full of struggle and questions.



Wheat Field with Crows, c. 1890¹¹

M. Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled*¹², introduced me to a strange and interesting way to consider life. One of his ideas is to celebrate self-actualization as life's highest purpose. This seemed wild to me. As long as I accept myself and judge myself objectively, I see myself as the center of my life, the world revolving around me. But in fact, I only exist as a tiny part of all the social connections surrounding me. From a macroscopic vision, I am simply a small link in a huge time-space construction.

Critical Analysis

Looking for the right forms of expression for my thesis work, I went back to what I had learned about Louise Bourgeois, She was not afraid to change her style, try new things, and reveal who she was. In her life work, she

made the transition from wood and upright structures to marble, plaster and bronze as she investigated concerns like fear, vulnerability and loss of control. This transition was a turning point. She referred to her art as a series or sequence closely related to days and circumstances, describing her early work as the fear of falling which later transformed into the art of falling and the final evolution as the art of hanging in there. Her conflicts in real life empowered her to authenticate her experiences and struggles through a unique art form.¹³

Modeling my approach after hers, I decided to employ silver rounds and squares to abstractly represent events in my life experience. My procedure of using abstract geometric metal pieces was coherent with my self-exploration, a celebration of my own self-existence: sometimes planning out my actions but definitely allowing for uncertainty, letting events occur one after another.

To show different facets of my life, I discovered a suitable carrier, resin. While we cannot stop time, we may be able to retain some of our life's moments in a physical form- for example, photos or souvenirs. Those who are healthy are all given the gift of time in the same measure; what distinguishes us is how we use that time and what we create.

The meaning of a piece of jewelry emerges when it is put on one's body; my own jewelry collection reveals my own confession about finding my true self. In the collection *About Me: With My Name On*, silver fits my definition of jewelry (finding my true self) in color, quality and texture, and the resin signifies a unique split second of time as an occurrence that can be frozen in a specific time and space. I put my Chinese name stamp on rice papers and dissolved them inside each resin piece. The random alignment of the rice papers in each piece imitates the

randomness of the happenings in my life. Further, the choice of red and yellow cotton fabric as my jewelry material is meant to signify, among other things, softness and feminine characteristics. Red color is very significant in Chinese culture, meaning luck, marriage, and new birth. And yellow is another symbolic Chinese color representing power, high class and wealth.

In the process of creating the jewelry for my thesis, the idea of a large-scale piece occurred to me because the size of such a sculpture would help to declare boldly my concept of self-exploration. *About Me: Between Sharp Edge and Soft Fabric* is a combined work of aluminum objects constructed of irregular cut pieces. These pieces are connected to show the space of my life's events, and the yellow chain represents the time travelling through my events. Using a similar yellow- chain timeline, I also created five paintings drawn with ink-wash on rice paper named *About Me: In Two Bright Colors*. Recalling the red and yellow cotton I used in my jewelry, these red fragments and yellow chains interpret my understanding of the three-dimensional time-space relationship in a two-dimensional way. The chains are the time containers of all the slices of my life's happenings. If we see the center painting as the present, the past and future spread away from it and go in different directions. All the events that have happened around those time linkages are shown as the yellow-chain forms.

The Work

About Me: With My Name On # 1 (Figures 1, 2)

I adopted the words “*With My Name On*” for my jewelry collection because a name is a special identification for each unique individual. Normally, parents consider very carefully what name to give to a new baby. While a person’s last name is inherited, his or her first name contains all the parents’ hope for a good life. My full name, Wenyao Jia (贾雯瑶 in Chinese), means beautiful clouds and flawless jade. My own Chinese name stamp as used in my *With My Name On* jewelry collection makes me the main character of the work.

To interpret my concept about treasured moments in my self-exploration process, the center concave indicates the buildup of captured moments. This concave piece is made out of round and oval silver pieces and holds the red resin containing my name stamps. The round edges of the silver discs provide wearability as a necklace.

Surrounding the center piece, I applied the traditional Chinese *Qipao* twist-knot detail to the necklace chain. If we regard the silver discs as certain captured moments, the knot-chain becomes the time passing before and after those moments. Openable knots allow the convenience of putting on and taking off the necklace, and give it an adjustable length. *Qipao* was a mainstay of ladies’ fashion in the early 1900s, especially in my hometown of Shanghai. Alternating silver and red colors brings the piece a pleasing contrast.



Qipao twist knot (shown here slightly below the neckline) ¹⁴

About Me: With My Name On # 2 (Figures 3, 4)

This second piece is a brooch, carrying the same concept as the necklace but in a different presentation and function. In addition to the concept of the knot chain mimicking time and the rivet-connected and textured silver discs representing moments in my life, three resin objects blossom from the silver discs and stand on top of them. When I wear the brooch on my body, these slightly different forms of yellow resin reveal different, specific moments of my life story by growing out of the silver time chunk.

About Me: With My Name On # 3 (Figures 5, 6)

My third piece goes beyond the traditional jewelry form. The red chain of this body piece starts at the neck and flows to the wrist, just like my self-exploration timeline flows across my body. A flat silver sheet with a gathering of my Chinese name stamps on it sits still on my heart and extends with more name stamps to another two red resin blocks. The soft, puffy red linkages on both ends ensure that this unusual piece is comfortable to wear.

About Me: With My Name On Display (Figure 7)

In addition to the individual pieces in my jewelry collection, the display itself plays an important role in my exhibition. I made three resin trays for each single *With My Name On* jewelry piece, and a copper table for supporting the series. The resin trays are irregularly-shaped square forms made with dried white rice paper. In the style of the concave silver discs from the individual jewelry pieces, the copper table platform is composed of large copper discs riveted together. After being oxidized, the ancient color that emerged reflects the trace of time and serves as a foil to my jewelry pieces.

About Me: Between Sharp Edge and Soft Fabric (Figures 8, 9, 10, 11)

Scaling up my self-exploration concept from delicate jewelry pieces to a full sculptural form, I created three spaces echoing the same themes as my *With My Name On* jewelry collection. The pedestal is an isolated island – a four-by-sixteen inch white platform – that also evokes stories about me. The yellow chain is an enlarged version of the knot-chain from my jewelry collection, depicting the passage of time and moving into the three spaces of sharp-edged aluminum fragments. I used aluminum because of its silver-like color and light weight. All of the irregular

sheets making up the three aluminum objects are connected by small copper tubes, which give them flexibility to bend. When people walk by this small island, my hope is that they physically interact with the sculpture in order to sense my *About Me* concept more strongly. *Between Sharp Edges and Soft Fabric* reveals the philosophy of balance that I carry through my life exploration in the seams between splintery conflicts and good, smooth moments.

About Me: In Two Bright Colors (Figures 12, 13, 14)

In my experience looking at similarities between jewelry and painting, I noticed an interesting phenomenon: the interaction between jewelry and the body resembles the interaction between strokes of color and the substrate in my case, rice paper. The blank areas, spacing and scale all affect the aesthetic of the final piece. When I compressed my three-dimensional work to a two-dimensional format, I need to attend more to the time-space relationship. I intended for the red and yellow colors to keep their original meanings in other words, the yellow parts signify time and the red parts signify happenings. Each of the five paintings elaborate how different events in my life move through various time periods, and the five paintings taken together elaborate the concept of a longer period of time filled with even more events. The paintings making up the *In Two Bright Colors* work resonate with and are a response to both my sculpture *Between Sharp Edges and Soft Fabric*, and my jewelry collection *With My Name On*.

Conclusion

I am experiencing my life in this changing world, consciously and subconsciously.

I am reacting, responding to my life happenings by the representation of my art work and my

thesis, a

s a child, a

s a friend, a

s a foreigner, a

s a Chinese, a

s who I am, a

s who you know, a

s Wenyao Jia, a

s me...

Figures



Figure 1. *About Me: With My Name On # 1*



Figure 2. *About Me: With My Name On # 1* (detail)



Figure 3. *About Me: With My Name On # 2*



Figure 4. *About Me: With My Name On # 2* (detail)



Figure 5. *About Me: With My Name On # 3*

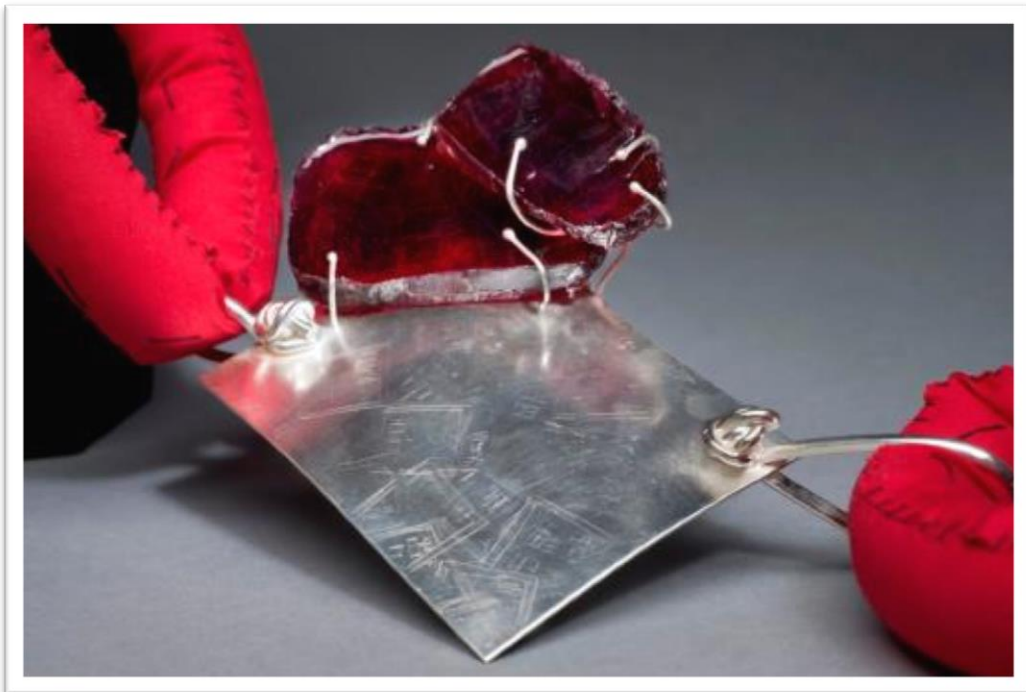


Figure 6. *About Me: With My Name On # 3* (detail)



Figure 7. *About Me: With My Name On Collection*



Figure 8. *About Me: Between Sharp Edge and Soft Fabric*



Figure 9. *About Me: Between Sharp Edge and Soft Fabric*



Figure 10. *About Me: Between Sharp Edge and Soft Fabric*

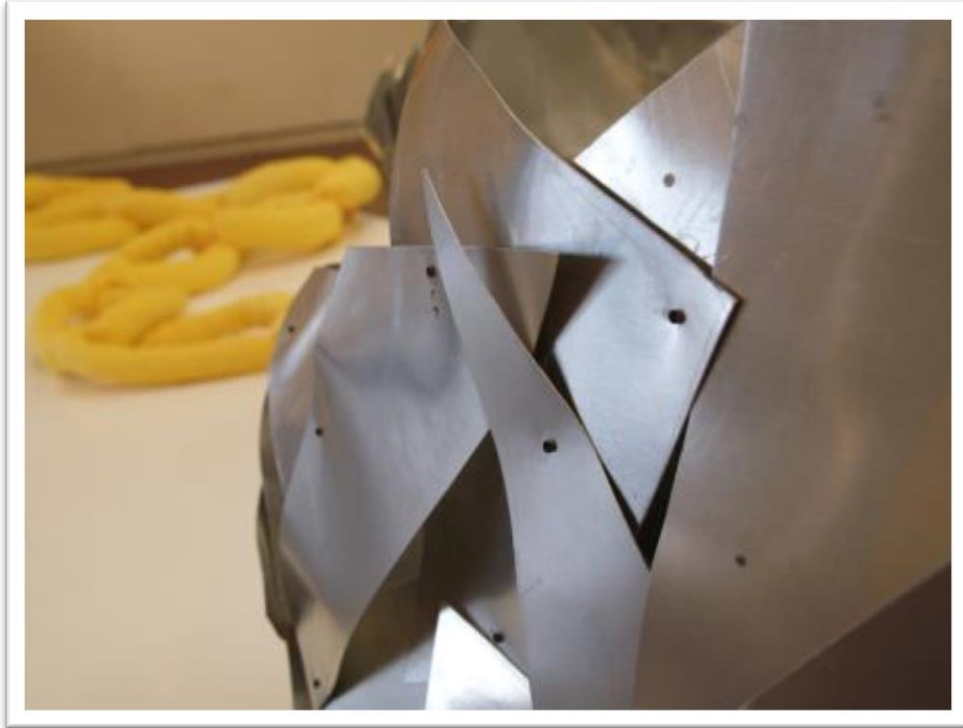


Figure 11. *About Me: Between Sharp Edge and Soft Fabric* (detail)



Figure 12. *About Me: In Two Bright Colors*



Figure 13. *About Me: In Two Bright Colors*



Figure 14. *About Me: In Two Bright Colors*

Endnotes

¹ "Louise Bourgeois," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Bourgeois

² The term "confessional art" is defined on Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:KDS4444/Confessional_art

³ "Louise Bourgeois," Wikipedia.

⁴ AP file photo by Nathan Strange, 2007, reproduced in Jennifer Peltz, "Sculptor Louise Bourgeois Plumbed Depths of Female Psyche, Made Giant Freaky Spiders," *Christian Science Monitor* (June 1, 2010), <http://www.csmonitor.com/From-the-news-wires/2010/0601/Sculptor-Louise-Bourgeois-plumbed-depths-of-female-psyche-made-giant-freaky-spiders>

⁵ Photo courtesy Louise Bourgeois Studio, New York, reproduced in Nettrice Gaskins, "Weekly Roundup," *Art 21 Magazine*, March 21, 2011, <http://blog.art21.org/2011/03/21/weekly-roundup-95/#.Ut1RfRAo600>

⁶ Outi Remes, "Confessional Art," in Ronald L. Jackson II and Michael Hogg (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Identity*, vol. 1 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2010), 124–127.

⁷ Irving Stone, *Lust for Life*, Chinese edition, (Beijing: Beijing Publishing Group, 2008).

⁸ "Death of Vincent van Gogh" from Wikipedia,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Vincent_van_Gogh#Changing_mood_at_Auvers_from_May_1890

⁹ Ibid. This evidence comes from a 2011 biography of van Gogh by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith.

¹⁰ Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Auvers-sur-Oise, c. July 10, 1890.

<http://www.webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/21/649.html>

¹¹ File:Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Wikimedia,

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincent_van_Gogh_%281853-1890%29_-_Wheat_Field_with_Crows_%281890%29.jpg

¹² M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Touchstone, 2003).

¹³ "Louise Bourgeois," Wikipedia.

¹⁴ Shanghai Style Qipao,

http://traditions.cultural-china.com/chinaWH/images/exbig_images/55e8e4177409fce172ae8c1c24c5600f.jpg