Sky is Sinking
Below the Trees

野旷天低

Two Years of
Documentation and Observations
Sky is Sinking
Below the Trees
Two Years of Documentation and Observations

Xuelun Li
For mom,
who believes in me, inspires me to write and draw,
reminds me to always eat well and sleep well.
Abstract

I see landscape through my own eyes, hands and body, and also through the lenses of Chinese poetry, calligraphy and ink painting. These art forms are rich in metaphor. The way they imagine and depict landscape is romantic, often including observations on dual concepts as lightness and heaviness, movement and stillness, change and stability, all of which have inspired this collection of work.

These furniture pieces include benches, tables and lamps. They are abstracted landscapes, to spark imagination about natural forces and transformations, both through the process with which they’ve been made and through their final forms. I engage with concrete casting, bent lamination and stone selecting in making these pieces, which are processes that include chemical reaction, transformation and allow accidents. Their forms are abstracted from the landscape—curve, dimple and solid mass. I hope that they will bring about tactile connection with the environment through being touched and used. And most of all, they exist to help open up an empty space for senses and imagination to fill in.
This thesis book connects my works, my working process and segments of thought into a continuous experience of moving, through the loose storyline of travelling though landscape and cities. I move fast and slow, glancing at surroundings, stopping occasionally, filling in gaps with imagination, and capturing fleeting moments.

The book begins with my daily walks from home to studio in Providence, which has grown from foreign to familiar during the two years I lived here. It ends with a moment when my plane landed onto the ground, which happens as I flew between Beijing and the United States. The book contains observations, works and thoughts that happened on the road, in the two different cultures.
Contents

1. The air of Providence
2. In Invisible City
3. I take a 20 minute walk
4. The online game
5. A passersby
6. The aqua sky
7. It bored me
8. Once I took photos
9. An accidental moment
10. The structure of Tang Dynasty poetry
11. In his book In praise of Shadows
12. During peak hours in summer nights
13. Almost every light
14. A vertical element
15. My mom
16. One word
17. Another Chinese word
18. Do you happen to know
19. It was a short segment of Great Wall
20. A maar lake
21. In making dry stone wall
22. During Architecture training
23. Pouring concrete
24. The process of calligraphy writing
25. Three continuous dots
26. Water trapped
27. Casting is an open-ended process
28. I imagined
29. On the scientific side
30. Prior to concrete casting
31. I don't know why
32. Possible Failures of Casting
33. I put on my respirator
34. Cutting, folding and grinding
35. I enjoy
36. The benches
37. The piece seems to be breathing
38. A concrete block
39. Three different ways
40. I joined my uncle
41. Taking a trip
42. My eyes
43. A piece of stone
44. My design and making process
45. I saw a short hill
46. Walking, driving and flying
47. The sea is calm
48. When my plane lands in a city at night
The air of Providence always smells like the sea. The wind in spring is warm, wet and salty; it touches my skin freshly. It is a very unfamiliar scent for me as I grew up in a dry inland city. The moment I step outdoors, my body instinctively knows that it is not at home. I feel wide awake, knowing that there are new experiences waiting to be discovered today.
In Invisible City, Italo Calvino writes, “Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had,” suggesting a search for something slipping away. This quote describes an imaginary adventure, anticipating new surprises and findings ahead, which is similar to how I often find my design process, and how I hope I can discover moments in life in general. It is venturing into future unknowns and finding new meaning about the past.
I take a 20 minute walk from home to studio everyday, passing the same streets, stores, squares, waiting at the same traffic lights. But there are always new things to notice. A third floor facade that I’ve never paid attention to, or a new advertisement from a local restaurant. The sidewalk pavement has been eroded by rain and wind over time, exposing red and grey gravels. The streets are usually not busy. Meeting homeless people is inevitable, so are seeing construction sites, a signal light that never turns green, and slippery snow on the winter days.
The online game called Geoguesser challenges players to guess their location based on Google Earth street view. Players are randomly placed onto a road in the world map, where they can only move forward, backward or make a turn. Based on the view, languages, buildings, people, and any available information, they have to guess a location on the map, which may turn out to be half an earth away from the actual place.

I enjoyed this game during a long summer vacation, back when detailed information on Google Earth was unfamiliar and surprising to the public. I would arrive at a new place, try to read blurry signs and texts on a track, continuing on a never-ending muddy road across the woods. Sometimes I was in a familiar city where there were Seven-Elevens, but most of the times, I was in the middle of a field, and kept clicking the forward button but not seeing anything except an extending road.

On the journey I also encountered people. A man in the map passed on a bicycle and looked back at me. A boy was climbing into the back of a truck, his face blurred into pixels. No wonder there is news that people find their lost loved ones in Google Map. These transient moments of a place are kept in the cloud of the internet when a camera sweeps across a three-dimensional space, and translates it to flat and strange images on the screen.
A Passersby

Glanced at me through her glasses with green frames.

Neon red rain coat. Grasping her white and black umbrella like she is holding something heavy and precious in her hand.

Wearing helmets, waterproof coats, waterproof bags, the essential things for biking in New England winter. They are trying to unlock their bikes on the sidewalk.

Her bag is so heavy and her heels so high that I feel sorry for her lower back. Her upper body is leaning forward, shoulders and arms in tension.

His head faces up, under a baseball hat kept really so low that it covers up his face. He is glancing under the hat. With AirPods plugged into his ear, his pace shows that he is immersed in his own world, his own street.

Her bright red skirt swings lively with her pace, resonating with the same bright red umbrella in her hand.

A green knitted shopping bag swings back and forth at the side of his body. This is the relaxed rhythm of the street.
The aqua sky slowly turns into a pale yellow as it approaches the sea. What is in between these colours? How do two distinct colors mix? The horizon is calm and smooth, extending far in a slight curve. What is in between the air and sea?
It bored me so much that I decided to try a new shared scooter. It changed my perception of the city — I paid more attention to the street pavement for the first time, and my viewpoint became slightly higher than before. As I sped up, with each acceleration, the distance between my home and studio shortened. This daily walk felt lighter and fleeting.
Once I took photos of village scenery from a moving car. I discovered that I like this way of taking photos much better than stopping the car at particular places and shooting a particular scene. I like that each picture doesn’t have a planned composition, and is not framed intentionally. Scenery, buildings, become blurry and skewed in these photos. People walking become silhouettes; while green fields extend far.

I like these pictures because they captured these villages in a distant and abstracted way. The blurry images documented how the car moved in the second my hand pressed the shutter. In a way, they are not the real villages, but the village I saw in that moment of the day through that window in that moving car. They captured those particular moments and abstracted a large amount of information into pixels.
An accidental moment of apricots fallen onto the gravel.
The structure of Tang Dynasty poetry required five or seven characters in each sentence. Characters in the first and second sentences should follow strict rules in both their meaning and sound to stay in rhyme. These rules forced poets to compose extremely concisely. To use the exact right word in order to express multi-meaning within limited expressions.

One example is:

野旷天低树，江清月近人

Which can be translated by its meaning into:
“The field is so vast that I feel the sky in a distance is sinking below the trees near me, the river is so clear that I feel the reflection of the moon is moving closer and closer to me.”

If I try to translate word by word, it would roughly be:
“field vast sky below tree, river clear moon close to me”

In these poems grammar doesn’t matter as much as the scene its depicting. By putting words together, they give readers a chance to make associations and use their imagination. The thing I like the best about this sentence is how it gives us a whole picture of the night the poet saw on a boat in the river. It has a imaginary movement, so much captured in a few words.
In his book *In Praise of Shadows*, Junichiro Tanizaki describes the experience of enjoying food in dim light. When the large amount of information we gather from our eyes is taken away, there is space for the smell, taste and touch of the food to dominate. Dim light also implies quietness. This is very different from a meal as an important social occasion when people chat and socialise. Eating in quietness turns one’s attention fully to the food and the moment being experienced. I occasionally take a bath in dim light, instead of under the cool white fluorescent light that is installed in my bathroom.
During peak hours in summer nights as people turned on air conditioning, the electric system in Beijing wasn’t able to support drastically increasing demands, and our apartment would lose electricity. It would happen all of a sudden, during dinner or TV time. Everyone in the family would have a chance to stop, to come sit together using hand fans and chat in the dark, like we were farmers who wouldn’t have to work in the fields anymore until the next morning. Sometimes we lit candles and shimmering shadows were cast onto our walls. The ordinary night changed so dramatically until all of a sudden again, the lights went on and everything went back to normal.
Almost every light we see naturally or use in architectural lighting is indirect light. Sun light travels through space, dispersed by the Earth’s atmosphere, diffusely reflected on dust in the air, plants and the ground, softly and evenly lighting up the day. Some modern light bulbs apply a layer of diffuser on the inner surface to scatter light.

A lot of times when we see light, we are not seeing light sources but a lit surface. When surrounding surfaces are lit up—meaning light waves are reflecting against them—we see the environment.
A *vertical element*, a brush stroke grows out of the ground. It has an indentation that is emitting light.

Hard forms tempered down with softened edges.
My mom started to learn ink painting recently, something she has always wanted to do but just got a chance to start. From time to time, she proudly shows me her paintings and asks for my opinion. A lot of our communication across a 12-hour time difference have come to be about paintings. Once she asked me how to translate some expressions about painting techniques into English, which made me think about how words are used to express ideas around ink painting aesthetics, what do they really mean.
One word that refers to painting is “枯荣”, translated (by me) into “Flourishing and Withering”.

It is often used to describe the life cycle of grass and trees over the seasons. In painting, the state of plants is depicted by brush strokes, thus the time of the year is visible on paper. By juxtapositioning two opposite states of plants, this word suggests how things move in full cycle and eventually remain unchanged in time, connecting the sadness of withering with the happiness of next flourishing, and then tendering this happiness by the next withering. This view of nature can be seen in many traditional arts and literatures, such as Su Shi’s depiction of the moon remaining unchanged even though it looks different everyday in a month.
Another Chinese word about painting is “浓淡”, meaning “Opaque and Clear”.

It refers to the amount of ink on a brush versus the amount of water, which will result in a spectrum from opaque to clear. An opaque, sometimes dry brush stroke depicts well the strength in tree branches and flower scapes. When more water is on the paint brush, it spreads out on rice paper, carrying ink or colour pigment with it, resulting in a brush stroke that fades away into the surrounding space with an undefined edge.
客亦知夫水与月乎？逝者如斯，而未尝往也；盈虚者如彼，而卒莫消长也。盖将自其变者而观之，则天地曾不能以一瞬；自其不变者而观之，则物与我皆无尽也，而又何羡乎！

“Do you happen to know the nature of water or the moon? Water is always on the run like this, but never lost in its course; the moon always waxes and wanes like that, but never out of its sphere. When viewed from a changing perspective, nothing in this universe can withstand a blink of an eye, but when looked at from an unchanging perspective, everything conserves itself, and so do we. Therefore, what’s in them to be admired?”

This part of an essay written by Su Shi is one of my all time favourites. This observation of how the moon remains unchanged in the long term, demonstrates that the state of changing can encompass stability.
It was a short segment of Great Wall on top of a hill in the rural area of Beijing, that included three consecutive towers with steep decayed steps in between. We followed a narrow path through the bushes up the hill to reach it. The stairs leading into a tower had been damaged over time, so we climbed up with both our hands and body. The night was cold and windy. We found shelter in one of the towers. That night as I slept, the sharp edges of the stone pressed against my body. At dawn we sat on top of the tower to watch the sunrise. I felt connected to the ground, to the structure that has accumulated a collective history.

Visiting as a tourist, I saw the Great Wall as a symbol, as a spectacular structure that was built in the past. But being able to spend time in the tower changed my perspective. Experiencing it with my body, eyes, hands and ears, gave the structure new meaning, which would otherwise be an abstract concept. I was able to imagine how this man-made structure was built, changed in time, gradually decaying into the environment.
A maar lake is a shallow lake formed on a volcanic crater. During an eruption, when hot lava comes into contact with groundwater, a violent expansion of gas and steam forms a round and shallow indent. If it’s later filled with water then a lake forms on the crater. It is often separated from the groundwater system but connected with underground water, enabling it to keep a stable water level all year round. Volcanic rocks surrounding it gradually erode over years. Plants grow around it, and the bodies of animals deposit onto the lake bottom. It is ancient, mysterious, ever-changing.
In making dry stone wall, stones are fit together without using mortar or any kind of bonding material. In Kilmacduagh Church, Ireland, I saw how these walls faded into nature in time. The roof of this church is gone, and each individual stone has been eroded. The line between man-made and nature, and between architectural element and monument is blurred. This way of building resembles the neolithic “stone circle” structure, which was a primitive and intuitive way of building shelter that maintain a close connection to nature.
During architecture training, I got used to thinking about forms on a computer screen in abstract material. After I “figured out” the form, I begin to “apply” texture to it. A lot of works are perfect cubes with walls painted completely white. Now I am creating my work by hand with physical materials, and enjoying how materials bring associations, meanings and emotional reactions. The edges are no longer perfectly straight. There are small imperfections, which are evidence of the hands or tools that shaped them, proof that they exist in the physical space.
Pouring concrete into a mold is always a moment full of excitement and the unknown, even if everything has been planned out beforehand. The speed and position I pour is relevant. There is a lot to be decided by my hand in the mixing and pouring process, which makes every block of concrete unique, and makes my experience more of a discovery than an execution.
The process of calligraphy writing is full of tension. It requires the writer to be accurate, smooth, rapid and intuitive. There is little chance for alteration once a character has been written onto the paper. It is more about controlling the movement of the arm, or even the whole body, than trying to control the actual writing. If you lift arm at the end of a stroke, wave it in the air and land heavily onto the paper again to make another stroke, the path of the brush is readable through the ink on paper. Viewers can fill in these movements in their imagination when they are presented with a finished calligraphic work that is the result of these gestures.

Chinese people engage in a kind of real-time calligraphic performance because it is dancing and writing combined. Seeing body movements of the calligrapher is a part of understanding the work.
Three continuous dots placed together vertically from top to bottom stand for water in Chinese characters. The symbol derives from pictograph character of “water”. It is used on the top of on of my Calligraphy Stone piece.
Water trapped between mixed liquid concrete and the mold leaves infinite tiny indents on the concrete surface, appearing to be rock eroded naturally by water. This flaw is the documentation of millions of incidents that happen in the moment of pouring.
Casting is an open-ended process, different from methods that involve planning ahead and executing each step later carefully. While mixing concrete, I feel the mixture changing density each time I add an ingredient. With more stirring, it becomes smoother and increasingly even. Each mixing is irreversible. I have to work to a tight time frame. There is not much chance to add cement, add water or aggregate to adjust, because, once-mixed, it’s already started to cure. When I add concrete dye, and how much I stir is evident in the result. Thus one particular mixing process is documented in one particular piece.
I imagined this process of casting:

Concrete is poured into a mold partially filled with sand. After spreading loose and dry sand within the mold into sand dunes, I pour the concrete mix onto these shapes. The flow of the concrete pushes the sand into organic shapes, while leaving casting blocks in an opposite form. The concrete surface takes on the coarse texture of sand. The same process can also be done with wet sand, hand shaped into a desired form before pouring, to achieve a more controlled shape.
On the scientific side, concrete is a composite material of cement, water and aggregate. After being mixed together at a certain proportion, cement reacts with water, gradually hardens while giving out heat. The reaction slows down after the parts are mixed, but concrete keeps hardening for months.

Cement is used as a binder in the process. There is non-hydraulic cement and hydraulic cement; the latter is used in most concrete mix. When cement meets water, a chemical reaction creates mineral hydrates that are durable, not soluble and safe under chemical attack. Aggregates can be natural gravels, crushed glass, sand. They can be exposed afterwards to become ornamental.

Concrete is often associated with construction sites, factories or maybe bridges and dams. But it is also a material loaded with historical information and warmth. Concrete was extensively used by the Romans from 300 BC to 476 AD. It is one of the early inventions in the history of manmade structures that lasts and holds weight. It is a stone invented by humanity in some sense, but easier to shape and build with.
Prior to concrete casting, I always need to encourage myself and do some mental preparation, because I know there will be a lot of heavy lifting, plus the result is hard to anticipate. Casting is a labour-intensive process, especially as the scale of my pieces increase. Sometimes I need to call my friends to help.
I don't know why I need six different sizes of buckets at once, just to cast two small samples. And why are they all so covered in grey dust? So are my scale, my hands, my apron, and even my face. How am I ever going to make anything out of this mess?
Possible failures of casting (Some I’ve experienced)

Cracking:
Too much water in the mixture or water evaporates too fast.
Cured concrete will be weak.

Sand coming off surface:
Too much water/ too much sand, not enough cement.
Unable to maintain an even, smooth surface

Concrete dried in bucket:
Mixing for too long.
The bucket filled with concrete becomes the piece, sometimes with the mixer in it.

Unable to demold:
Mold has undercuts or the mold surface became porous without applying mold release.
Try to break the piece out of mold. End up with a new piece if it breaks in the process.
I put on my respirator, apron and gloves, gather every ingredient and tools I need by hand. I get cement mix into a bucket with a small cup, read the number on the scale until it reaches the weight I want. Then I start to pour water into another bucket until it reaches calculated weight as well. I pour the cement mix into water, smoke rises from the mix. After stirring, the mixture becomes even, smooth, thick and fluid. I pour it into my mold, watch it sink into the bottom, filling up every space. It starts to turn warm, solid, with subtle shades of grey on surface.
Cutting, folding and grinding put mechanical force into material and lead to immediate results, while casting and lamination take time and then sudden transformation happens. The evaporation of water, the hardening of chemicals, allow the piece to take on new form of its own.
I enjoy pressing veneers tightly together into a solid curve. After this transformation, they take on a sense of permanence. Something new is created out of the sum of parts. Glue sinks into the veneers, binds them tightly with little gap in between, resulting in a glue joint that is even stronger than wood itself.
The benches would ideally live in a small opening in the middle of woods, its concrete base arising from the ground, and its horizontal sitting surface contrasting with vertical trees in the background. The curve and the surface seem to be extending far into the shadow of deep woods. Passersbys sit on it to be with the environment for a while, touch its surface and feel it supporting their bodies from beneath.
“The piece seems to be breathing.”
A concrete block is used as weight in Float Bench. It holds up one end of the bench and also keeps it down when people sit on the other end. In making this bench, I questioned myself: Is concrete supporting the wood or is part of the wood embedded into the concrete? Should this connection look effortless or elaborate? What is the relationship between these two elements? This series of works are experiments to answer these questions to some degree, by creating different relationships between lightness and heaviness.
Three different ways of creating a solid mass:
Concrete casting,
Finding natural stone,
Turning a wood block.
I joined my uncle on his morning mountain hiking routine the last time I went back to China. He always carries a walking stick with him. It is a segment of dried bamboo, with a light brown color, slightly thicker at each knot, and naturally curved in the way it grew. It is lightweight but strong enough to be a good choice on a mountain hiking tour. I get why he likes these bamboo sticks so much that he keeps buying and collecting them. Each of them is unique. Their simple form documents information about their growth, shows natural changes and time. I find an honest poetry within this bamboo stick that you can buy for 15 yuan off the street.
Taking a trip to find a stone as a part of my table, is trying to bring in a scent of nature into this sometimes abstract and isolated design context. The trips take me out of studio into nature. Picking a stone is more about selecting, than prescribing, a form.
My eyes scan through the ground for a piece of stone of the right size. I nudge stones out of the ground, turn them over, wipe away dust to see their surface. I push those I can’t lift or that are not suitable back into their spot again, trying not to leave a trace. The dirt beneath them is still wet from yesterday’s rain. Moss covers their surface because of the humid seashore weather. I am immersed in the scent of rain and dirt and grass.
A piece of stone is laying in the middle of the stream, creating a dimple: its weight fighting against the flow of water, while being pushed onto the river bed by this force.
My design and making process is three days of hard works leading to one moment of breakthrough. Or maybe an hour of preparation for 15 seconds of pouring. But the moments of breakthrough and pouring are exciting and full of tension. And then, there is a long wait before seeing the result, leaving room for expectation.
I saw a short hill in the distance after driving on plain ground for hours. As our car approached it, layers and layer of hills unfolded from behind. The touch point, where the highway disappeared behind the hill, became gradually enlarged—the road actually extended far beyond this point. We drove past the hill, passing grass and trees on it, led by the highway into the mountainous area where the roads were twisted and views were blocked.

Surely there is no clear division between the plain and the mountainous areas, but when approaching by car, this geological shift could be perceived through a tangible moment.
Walking, driving and flying are very different ways of experiencing landscapes, travelling within or above it.
The sea is calm, transitioning into wet marshland and then into the ground I am standing on. Looking out, I see water and golden islands of grass forming a maze, gradually disappearing into each other. At the very end, gold and blue merge, followed by a long strip of beach. And then, on the outside, is the Atlantic Ocean.
When my plane lands in a city at night, the excitement after a long flight makes even my hometown seem unfamiliar and full of wonder. When the clouds and fog clear out, I see how strangely our cities are organised by roads, how fields are cut into square blocks, and how so many tiny houses look identical from above. Sometimes when the plane makes a sharp turn, I see the vast dark lands in a distance, and I see how the lights of the city merge into the ground, or are cut off by an edge of the sea. As the plane approaches the ground, cars and trees grow bigger. With turbulence, the plane lands, and suddenly I am back from the top of cloud into the structure of the world again.