

Wanderer

*A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree Master of Fine Arts in Digital + Media in the Depart-
ment of Digital + Media of the Rhode Island School of Design,
Providence, Rhode Island*

by

Yuhan Ma

2022

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

Shona Kitchen, Associate Professor

Department of Digital + Media, Thesis Chair

Fletcher Bach, Critic

Experimental & Foundation Studies, Thesis Advisor

Mattia Casalegno, Critic

Experimental & Foundation Studies, Guest Critic

Stephen Cooke, Art & Design Research Technologist

Department of Digital + Media, Technologist

Abstract

*My thesis writings include four chapters. It begins by my self-reflection, an introduction to my liminal space and inward investigation, and how they have become a spiritual endeavor. Building on that, the second chapter — **Encounters** elaborates on my childhood memory; the following two, the **Non-resident alien**, **A Sanctuary**, respectively express my recent concerns or situations that have greatly affected my perceptions, and a mythological idea of sanctuary that can keep me away from the chaos. These chapters have been influenced by the eastern ideologies, such as buddhism and the culture of reclusion. They have examined a process of me dissecting and reassembling myself, as a result, showing **who I am** as a fundamental of **what I make** when becoming an artist.*

Latent Potentials

I like to indulge myself with nostalgia and daydreams, of conversations and fantasies about some previous nonsense still hanging around in my mind. This may help explain why my art practice appears to be scattered, or incoherent: I've always considered the essential phenomenal experience of being a human as the essential subject of art. However, I have to confess that I have been conflicted recently about how to choose these access points for my art, and the mediums with which I would like to work. It started when I lost confidence in myself. I began to believe that I'm not sophisticated enough to make artwork addressing subjective experiences of life. I became uncertain of whether I can empower myself as the author of my stories' characters, subjects who are laden with the full gamut of human emotions.

I wasn't always an astute observer, until I became completely disoriented and dissatisfied with my outputs. In response, I started to deliberately reflect on my choices and judgments, to understand my own viewpoint of the world, as it's potentially the most reliable source for true and persuasive art. The deeper I dug into analyzing my own perceptions, the more I became convinced that fully knowing my own consciousness would be an inward investigation that would take a lifetime. At least.

*I used to savor the dreamy feelings of submerging into the deep ocean of my subconscious. I have tried to depict it in words: **the fascination of memories lies in between the isolation of myself from presence and the phantom moods, feelings, and sounds revisiting me from the past moments.** But diving inward takes full concentration of oneself, since the subconscious is not a fully awakened state of mind; exploring the subconscious in my dreamy*

*submersions, I realized, wouldn't let me truly get as deep into my psyche as I wanted. I now can appreciate how the Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chogyam Trungpa talks about awareness in his book **True Perception**: "We are here, nowhere else. Since we are here, why not be here?" (20). As I attempted to gain sensitivity and awareness in order to learn about my own perception of personal phenomenal experiences, I stumbled across the word **liminality**, which refers to the state of transition between important thresholds in life. With this word, I've stepped across the threshold of the subconscious and can try to comprehend now the meanings of my eternally liminal place in life, with constantly evolving goals, curiosities, and passions.*

The liminal space sits between a liminar's detached past and the coming state. Placing oneself knowingly into the midst of liminality evokes a forced awareness of the past versus the future, the present acting as a catalyst for analysis. This awareness of one's known and unknown histories can lead to a deeper understanding of life's causes and effects, meanings, and values when awareness of the always liminal present is used to examine not only possibilities but latent potential. No matter how aware one wants to become though, achieving that presence is an ambiguous and indeterminate process, confronting liminars with confusion and disorientation. For me, the liminal space is omnipresent, with its dual offering of inspiration and discouragement as I struggle to dive further inward and to reach the elusive pinnacle of insight each time. Moving forward within the liminal space becomes a path of spiritual endeavors.

It's essential to retain a balanced, non-aggressive attitude toward the unpleasantness and setbacks that inevitably cropped up during my private dives into the liminal spaces of my psyche. If I am filled only with negative perspectives, then concentrating myself

on tasks that demand inspiration and creativity becomes hardly probable. I learned that practicing meditation frequently helps to empty my mind, leaving it blank to allow room for new attempts in any field, to regain my sensitivity, and to place myself back on the ground and stabilize myself. Sometimes I return to the fresh mindset of a newborn as I conceive projects, with the pure joy of appreciating the surroundings. The joy comes from a non-aggressive, unharmed state of mind; it's not stuffy and tasteless like lukewarm water in a mug. Instead, "there is a real sense of real richness taking place from that perspective of nonaggression, nonpossessiveness" (21), as Trungpa states in **True Perception**. "Aggressiveness brings competitiveness, money concerns, comparison, frustration, excitement, all kinds of things" (21), he continues, to which I add that aggression happens when you make a display of your fully stuffed mind, when you are driven by competitiveness, when you are achievement oriented, and when you are consumed by your ego, losing sight of the bigger picture always around you in the present.

One might ask, having the richness of a healthy perspective in mind, **how am I going to fit into reality as a mixture of aggressiveness?** For me, both aggression and peacefulness are inevitably entangled in the path that I must follow during my phenomenal experiences. I remind myself to not avoid confronting aggression, to not get too personally involved with it, and to not be driven by aggressiveness. Instead, I must remember to keep a flexible harmony between both elements whenever I encounter one or both of them. It takes confidence to navigate the path, the same confidence that first assured me that a total awareness and a fuller knowledge of my own perception are worth pursuing. This is the same confidence that supports me when I am fully awake, when I am concentrating on tasks at hand, or carrying on the joy of making, or when I am

consciously negotiating with pesky aggression. The path inwards has required me to develop an awareness and mastery of these skills in order to handle the journey through my own mind, but these same skills are necessary to have in waking life. To understand what it means to be in a liminal space helps to understand what reality is: an awakened liminal space.

In the end, it all comes down to what I practice, especially in art. Everything begins with my own awareness of the phenomenal world. Keeping my mind open, and preparing my art with this openness, cultivates healthy conversations among audiences, myself, and the work. You might think that such openness is likely based on preconceived judgments and biases about the work based on what can be immediately seen. As Trungpa elaborates in his book: “If you have a completely open mind and open eyes, you can discriminate further, and you can judge the situation accordingly ... In fact, quite possibly you could open yourself further by presenting yourself and acting on the situation. In that way, as long as you know their dangers and their merits, even questionable subjects could be included” (14). To invite all kinds of audiences, my work is open to receiving preconceived judgements and biases, in order to begin a conversation about the viewer’s perception of the art, and my own perception from having made the art. With a little deliberation in the setup of a discussion, thoughtfulness will happen spontaneously and effortlessly, becoming an uninhibited flow of creativity and absolute instinct, on which my spiritual endeavors move forward.

Encounters

The moon was beautifully radiant in the dark, its pale light reached into my room. I was woken up by the moonlight and sat up alone on my bed. Looked through my large window from the fifth floor, I stared at the gently swinging shadows of the trees and chimney. It was a large factory I contemplated, but in my memory, everything was shrunken down and brought so close to me.

On multiple quiet nights, I woke up from the darkness and allured by the radiant moonlight. It seems, as if by magic, intimate meetings between me, a child and the sophisticated moon. I didn't have a clue why I was so obsessed with the encounters. Maybe it was the sublime, profound look. Maybe I recognized we both were lonely, and the moon had found me. I was a child who didn't know words to describe melancholy, but somehow the moon resonated with my gloom. I contemplated the vast being, knowing that it won't give me answers, and there are many unknowns ahead of me.

Ever since, I have become easily entangled in memories, attached to the places I encountered, and the period of time I spent. I miss myself wandering around unacquainted places, which have been expanded from my home to thousands of miles away. I daydream of walking on the gravels in the sunset, the rustling sound of footsteps reverberating through the ancient walls, in an old town I once traveled to. I miss the old copies of sketches that guided me to learn drawing in middle school; the sour instant noodle soup that my mom often cooked for me, which I tried but just couldn't reproduce the flavor; and the list of songs I rewound many times everyday during the days I prepared for college tests... The fascination of memories lies in between the isolation of myself from presence and the phantom moods, feelings, and sounds revisiting me from the past

moments. I finally realized: I am a resilient traveler who wanders across time and space within the imaginations and memories. I am living with the tension between my energy and urge, mundane and fascination.

Non-Resident alien

Every moment of leaving helps me understand the encounter. Regardless if I am prepared to leave emotionally or not, moving out from a place takes some steps. I remember the chaos of my last couple of days in Chicago, when I had to deal with the graduate school application and my move to San Francisco together. I put the application first, and had only three days to move myself entirely out of the apartment, leaving no trace of me there. I didn't have a chance to sleep in the last forty-eight hours. I kept unfolding the moving boxes, taping and securing their bottoms, loading my belongings orderly, and sealing them up. After running out of the only ten boxes and shipping labels, I had to decide to abandon whatever was left, but it also wasn't easy. Twelve hours before I left to the airport, I borrowed a cart from the concierge and started to put inside anything that could fit: frozen food, bottles of spice, drinks, carpet, lamp, box of gouache, papers, towels, quilt, office chair, nightstand, pedestal for my kinetic sculpture... I remember disassembling my queen bed with a hand drill piece by piece, and the large metal structure I made for my bachelor's degree graduation show. I went back and forth from the seventeenth floor to the first dozens of times, to throw them into the trash bin, left them in the recycle room, and the clothes donation box.

Four hours left, I started to clean up the whole space, wiped the kitchen island, and the microwave. I put my vacuum back in its shipping box and moved the heavily loaded containers to the package room, where I could let them be picked up by the shipping company.

With two hours left, I took a nap on the carpet, then a shower. I put on clean clothes and went to the trash room the last time. It was so bizarre to look at my nightstand with the vase and

fabric flowers, my chair and the other furniture standing there, isolating themselves from the concrete walls and rusty trash bins, and my attachment to each of them. What I threw out was the pieces of the last connection between me and the three years of life in Chicago, so hastily and even ruthlessly.

When there was half an hour left, I closed my luggage, zipped my bag, and moved them to the entrance of the apartment. I re-examined the empty rooms, made sure there was nothing left out. Lastly, I locked the door, carried my belongings, and took the elevator to the lobby. I handed the little envelope of keys to the concierge, and walked out of the building to wait for my uber ride. I had a strong feeling of relief and void at the moment, being displaced, by another identity as an alien to the city. Now everything I had to do there came to an end, I fought for not leaving any trace, which is cruel for me.

It might be because of the intense work, my nose started to bleed after the plane took off. I had to pinch my nose with a napkin, and keep my face upward. Memories of the first time I came to Chicago flushed into my mind. I was also in a predicament. I came unprepared, and left in a hurry. The two stages somehow proved my feeling of never belonging to the city. It brought to me the memories of my many moves between cities and countries, and the question: How many times did I consider the place as home?

*I never felt like being at home when I lived alone in different cities for years, until I met my husband, who makes me feel safe and warm, being understood and supported. I'm willing to call the place we live in California as home, where we have got married and decided to have two dogs together. After multiple leaves and encounters, the meaning of home has altered. It becomes a feeling I could have in the country where I'm called a **non-resident alien**, same as the other hundreds of thousands of people.*

A Sanctuary

The ancient belief of reclusion transcends the limitation of ages in Chinese culture. It depicts a life of living in solitude without the hustle and bustle of society and the turbulence of the world. The renowned ancient Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, who abandoned his life as a politician during the six dynasty and chose to be reclusive, portrayed an utopian secret world in his fable The Peach Blossom Spring, which was composed during a period of political turmoil and national disunity. What Tao depicted is a fisherman sails into a forest grown only with peach trees, and its ground is covered fully by peach blossom petals. The astonishingly sublime scene of nature allures him to move forward with his boat, until he comes closer to a grotto with a hint of light. He gets off his boat, and walks into the grotto which is so narrow at first with only the width of a person. He keeps walking forward dozens of steps and the space opens up suddenly. The hint of light has led him to a village, where the residents are completely isolated from the society and the turmoil; their life is self-sufficient and prosperous. The fisherman is treated with hospitality by the villagers and he finds out that they don't even know the alternation of the dynasties.

Switching back from ancient China, since last year, we have also been experiencing isolation due to the pandemic, implementing self-quarantine at home, stepping away from the social gathering and family reunion. But it doesn't make life tranquil and peaceful; the plausible news, irritating words on social media, and the surge in unemployment agitate people and incite anger. I shut off TV and logged out from social media accounts to try to stay calm, and stay away from the hypocritical justice, and the hate speech on the internet. I have the urge of living a life of reclusion, like the ancient

Chinese. I am already back to school yet the desire of living in an utopia or wandering around in the world of fantasy still lingers. I started to plan my thesis project with such wishes in mind. It reproduces the scenes sticking in my head, either true or false, reflecting my unconsciousness, visualizing my urges, and comforting my anxiousness. With which all of these end is the small grotto, alluring me to get in with a glimpse of fantasy, but forcing me to feel tense, and experience the difficulties of moving through a narrow and bumpy route, until I'm ready to appreciate the broad horizon with a sudden delight.

References

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