

ABSTRACT

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My thesis work is a series of drawings that mainly develops from my imaginations in reading and serves as a visual translation of these intangible experience. Being Chinese and growing up learning English as a second language, I deeply understand the awkwardness of not being able to properly interpret something in a foreign language. I still remember the first time I tried to read a book in English in high school – *The Scarlet Letter* – how much I struggled while looking up definitions of words to understand just a sentence, or how miserable I felt trying to empathize with Hester who spoke strangely to me. Instead of insisting to search for explanations, at these moments, I wished that these lines of text would just slowly melt and form a straight line of black ink, or perhaps that someone could put a veil over this strange text to shield me from it. Sometimes, I merely enjoyed looking at the text without wondering what it meant. I took it all in as a unified image.

These thoughts lingered in my heart for years. As I become more fluent in English, these memories started to fade away. My desire to share my experience developed into this series of work that explores my imagination and feelings generated from my difficulty in reading English.

The Reading Imagination series is made using only two mediums – ink and paper, simply like a printed book. The whole body of work is divided into two themes, *the veil* and *the string*, in accordance to my two anxieties when reading English. Each theme involves a type of pattern. *The veil* represents the pattern of massive lines inspired by Cao Shu, a Chinese calligraphy style that is famous for its messiness. *The string* represents the pattern of straight lines drawn in an intuitive order, inspired by Agnes Martin's grid paintings. In both themes, these patterns are pushed beyond my reading experience to form images that please audiences' visual sensation, in which language is rather powerless.

Imagination in Reading to Abstract Art

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Language is the keyword that leads my navigation in art. As an artist interested in abstract art, my thesis project focuses on transforming my imaginations in reading into abstract drawings. Beyond direct translation of my imaginations, this series of work also includes abstract drawings that are inspired by my research on Chinese calligraphy and optical art.

Learning English as my second language and living in America, I frequently feel the restriction in expression due to my lack of English vocabulary, and experience the fear of encountering unfamiliar words. However, it constantly stimulates a sense of wonder that drives me to explore the beautiful structure of written language without caring much about the meaning. In other words, I see these letters simply as shapes or groups of shapes. Back in high school, when I read my first English book — the Scarlet Letter — I was overwhelmed by the complexity of English literature language, while frustrated with constantly having to look up definitions of unfamiliar words. At that moment, I wished that these lines of text would just slowly melt and form a straight line of black ink, or perhaps that someone could put a veil over this strange text to shield me from it. For me, these imaginations become something more splendid than the content of the book. Sometimes, I even just hoped to have a second of merely enjoying looking at the text without wondering what it meant, as if I took it all in as a unified image.

I found my imagination, in reading, very similar to my way of viewing or understanding abstract art, and also connected to my appreciation of Chinese calligraphy. In both abstract art and Chinese calligraphy, the audience mostly enjoys the beautiful

forms and compositions, constructed with lines, shapes, and color, and as a result, they tend not to focus on the objective meaning. The immediately intuitive feeling viewers perceive at the moment of seeing the artwork becomes more significant for me as an artist than an analytical explanation of what each element might mean.

This connection leads to another topic that I am interested in — the relationship between seeing and thinking. Before studying and making art, I often visited galleries and museums from a purely audience or student point of view. From time to time, I entered the museum to see artworks as if coming to an art history exam. I think about whether I understand a piece of art in the same way the artist wants me to, or at least whether my thoughts match the description of the work in the pamphlet I picked up at the entrance. This kind of art viewing experience makes viewing art a heavy burden. As I struggle with understanding the artist's intention in my mind, I notice that my eyes no longer focus on the artwork hanging in front of me. When I unconsciously draw more attention to my inner perception, I start to neglect the visual sensation of viewing the beautiful image. It is equivalent to my previous experience of reading an English story that contains several unfamiliar words. I have to stop every time I see a strange word to look it up in a dictionary. It not only confuses me with different definitions, but also interrupts my flow of reading the story. As I often feel viewing a piece of abstract artwork also needs a smooth flow like reading a story, I begin to think that maybe without being too troubled by searching for a presumably hidden meaning, I could better appreciate a piece of abstract artwork. Simply enjoy the visual element without struggling with finding a

certain explanation. Thus, I aim to create a series of artwork in which an audience can purely appreciate the visual sensation they perceive through viewing my artwork, while using my imaginations in reading as primary inspiration. At the same time, I hope to extend from my personal experience to discuss the relationship between writing and drawing, and reflect upon my own journey pursuing art as well as my cultural background.

This project is divided into two themes based on the patterns and also includes one extra piece that serves as a suggestion for my future work after the completion of the thesis. One of the themes is *The Veil*, which represents the massive lines inspired by Cao Shu, a Chinese calligraphy style that is famous for its messiness, and signature writing. The other one is *The String*, which represents the pattern of straight lines drawn in an intuitive order, partly inspired by Agnes Martin's grid paintings. In both themes, these patterns are pushed beyond portraying my reading experience to form images that please audiences' visual sensation, in which language is rather powerless.

The piece *Veil I* is a straightforward recreation of my imagination about having a mysterious veil to protect me from the challenge of reading. I first wrote the English version of the Heart Sutra, the most representative script in Buddhist literature, and then wrote over the text with gestural strokes. Although the text is said to be the English version of the Heart Sutra, English letters actually serve as phonetic symbols here. Writing the text, I omitted all the punctuation and left equal space between each letter, since both punctuation and unequal space may suggest the potential meaning hidden

behind. The gestural strokes are inspired by the daily action of signing signatures, which can be incredibly unreadable sometimes. For me, written language originates from drawing, and signature is where we can most accurately capture the close lineage between art and language. The gestural strokes form a gradated veil layered over the text which gradually reveals part of the text from the top to the bottom. I hope an audience can be lured in by this partially shown text, and when they get closer to try and read it, they would realize the letters are formed in a nonsensical order to people without any knowledge of sanskrit. Due to its unreadable quality, it would be difficult for the audience to draw any reference from knowledge they have learned in English. Hopefully, the conflict can let the audience free themselves from searching for a profound meaning, and they can instead simply “see” the piece. In continuation of this project, I created another three pieces using the same method — *The Veil II*, *The Veil III* and *The Veil IV*. In these later pieces, I developed the gestural strokes into a pattern and experimented with using this pattern to create negative space.

After making the *The Veil I*, I gained an even stronger interest in exploring the fine line between drawing and writing, especially in signature writing and Chinese calligraphy. To further explore this subject, I began to look at more and more Cao Shu, a type of Chinese calligraphy that is famous for its unreadable but free style. This type of calligraphy started as a way to save time in cases of emergency or conversation. These characters written in Cao Shu are mostly unreadable for anyone other than the original writer, but sometimes even the writer cannot read his or her own handwriting after a

while. After the meaning of these characters has been forgotten, only the beauty of these black brush strokes is left.

The study of Cao Shu inspired me to create another piece called *Veil V*. Although, this piece does not stem from or pertain to my imagination in reading, I still consider it closely related to my investigation of the relationship between handwriting and drawing. In this piece particularly, I used sumi brush as the tool and deep blue ink as the main medium. Sumi brush tends to leave emotional or expressive strokes, while fountain pen draws more defined or contained lines. The quick motion of my brush is suggested by the disappearing quality of each brush stroke. In traditional calligraphy practice, a character is often done within a red dashed square space to measure whether the strokes are in balance, so I choose to use a square sheet of paper in accordance to the tradition. This piece is done in several layers, and each layer holds the same intensity as the others, which eventually gives this flat piece a three-dimensional illusion. Layering over the light brush strokes, each brush stroke appears to have a fuzzy look which is not expected at the beginning, but exciting as a result. In addition to the light brush strokes, however, one problem I bear in mind during the drawing process is how to maintain an overall structure that allows the audience to maintain their focus on the piece. In the traditional Chinese calligraphy, most people believe that a beautiful character must look like a person who can stand straight and firmly on his or her own, in comparison to characters in some bad calligraphy pieces, that look quite clumsy and leaning to the side. Essentially, it means a good character needs to look balanced. No side should look heavier or lighter than any

other. Because my speed of drawing is generally fast and the placement of each stroke is rather intuitive, achieving a balanced image is the main challenge in this piece. Thus, to achieve the final image that I am satisfied with, I have to draw several experiments, since one misplaced stroke can possibly throw off the balance of an entire image.

As I was pursuing balance in my pieces, I encountered Agnes Martin's work. The pieces that I respond to the most are her paintings in which soft and light pastel color stripes are placed adjacent to each other, and her grid paintings. They are simple and quiet, but moving. As Holland Cotter describes his experience when he sees Agnes Martin's stripe paintings, "Move in very close, and you find that the surfaces are marked with hand-drawn lines, often faint but always firm, and regularly spaced, like the lines of a musical staff, or an accounting ledger, or a school notebook." (Cotter 1) Every element in these images spreads out, but at the same time they hold together and support each other. When I had the chance to view one of her artworks in person, I was left speechless and stopped thinking for a while. I felt as if I would rather simply let my vision drift on its own freely without being controlled by the brain to purposefully look at the painting and brainstorm the meaning. This relaxed and tranquil feeling it delivered to me is truly unforgettable and joyful, and I am eager to portray these feelings through my work.

As these feelings were still lingering in my heart, I made the piece *The String I*, in which I still used ink and paper. Different than previous work, the lines I drew in this piece are all straight and seem to follow a certain order in their placement. As a result, *The String I* appears to be more static. At this point, my lines still have almost equal

space in between and the intensity of these lines remain the same throughout the piece. However, during the making process, I started to question the value of negative space in my pieces. To emphasize the importance of a negative space, I intentionally left a blank space in the bottom of my piece. It feels like a piece of music that plays, pauses and then plays again. That few seconds of pause often give time to let the audience's emotion to accumulate and then burst with the resumption music. The blank space in my drawing works the same as the that pause in music.

After completing *The String I*, I began to question how can the negative space be woven into my drawing more seamlessly in contrast to being abrupt. Therefore, I made *The String II* which consists of two panels and incorporates both the thin negative space and the relatively large blankness. The theme relates back to my first imagination in reading. In this project, I imagine each panel of this piece as a page of a story. One line represents a line of words or phrases. Just like how people arrange words in different orders to create sentence and carry out meanings, I arrange these lines with different spaces in between to suggest a potential order like writing code. However, these lines are not placed according to a certain rule, but instead in a rather intuitive manner. In terms of constructing a Chinese character, spaces between strokes leave room for the reader to breathe, instead of feeling overwhelmed. In this piece, the negative space plays a similar role to the blank space in a Chinese character. Maybe to a certain degree, the negative space even suggests a rhythm, like a piece of music. From the visual perspective, if the audience looks from a far distance, the image appears to be stripes of greyness in

different tones. However, upon moving closer, due to the nature of the material I chose, these stripes split into fine lines that are delicately placed with spaces between each other and a few spots of smudges. Despite the initial impression for many people that the piece is printed, the smudges suggest the actual intense human labor involved. To add even more playful and man made characteristics to this piece, I purposefully tilted a few lines in both panels. These tilted lines become somewhat a disturbance, or maybe even a surprise in this calm sea of lines. At the same time, although the overall appearance of this piece is motionless, these lines incorporate a slight sense of movement into the drawing.

Following the finish of *String II*, I've come to realize that it suggests a strong sense of optical art, which is a type of art that is mostly associated with optical illusions and often leaves the audience an impression of movement. During my research of the artists who produce work in the optical art field, I encountered Robert Irwin, an American visual artist who was the crucial figure in the light and space movement, which originated in the 1960s. One example of his optical art related work is *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* made in 2006. This piece consists two sets of three aluminum panels painted red, yellow and blue individually. One set is placed on the floor with equal space in between, while the other set is identically suspended from the ceiling facing toward the floor pieces. Ben LaRocco described this piece in his article for *The Brooklyn Rail*, "It distorts light so that fellow viewers on the opposite side of the work seem to hover. Lateral and vertical space seems non-existent and one's senses begin to swim." (LaRocco

1) Robert Irwin's work reflects his unique and revolutionary view on what defines painting, and how painting can take other forms besides simply oil paint on canvas, which has great influence on my work. I was especially drawn to a line he wrote in his book *Notes Toward A Conditional Art*, "I slowly dismantled the act of painting to consider the possibility that no-thing ever really transcends its immediate environment." (Irwin 164) In his opinion, the enchanting atmosphere, or the immersive experience a piece of artwork brings, is supreme and untranscendable. However, how is it possible to directly generate a certain atmosphere through my artwork to embrace my audience, or in other words, how to paint the air? I managed to find the answer through my experiments in optical art.

Inspired by the idea of visual illusion and Robert Irwin's work, I started to notice the power of pattern. I've come to realize that a pattern does not necessarily equal to identical repetitions, but can also include seemingly repeating marks. Having this thought in mind, I decided to develop my line marks further into a pattern, or even a style. Using this pattern, I started to experiment with forming shapes and tried to create visual illusions, during which I made the piece *The String III*. In this project, I drew my pattern repetitively on a 36' x 36' square piece of paper, starting from each corner. Each triangle indicates a repetition of the pattern. As the pattern builds up around the paper, the sharp angle formed when two repetitions of pattern meet becomes smoother and smoother. As a result, these patterns gradually transform the negative space they surround into a polygon. If this process is repeated for an infinite number of times, using the principle of calculus,

the negative space will eventually become a circle. Visually, when the audience looks at the piece, especially in person, they may feel that it seems to be a moving object rather than a static drawing, because of the dynamic movement this pattern implies and also the large size of this drawing. The negative space seems to be growing and trying to break through the edge of the paper. As a result, it becomes the dominant element compared to the black lines. Although, this project does not stem from my imaginations in reading or relate to this experience conceptually, I still include it in this series of work as a link between my current work and my future ones.

After finishing the drawing series of my thesis project, I am still seeking a visual compelling idea to connect the Veil and the String series. In 2016, I made the piece *Reading*, to make which I shredded old books and individually connect each piece to another in order to form a long paper string. Using my knowledge in papermaking and gaining inspiration from *Reading*, I made the piece String IV using handmade paper and black ink. Firstly, I draw over the handmade paper I made with bleached abaca, and then cut and twist each piece of paper into a thin thread. The black ink slightly shows on the surface of each thread and the thread itself has an organic form that looks like tree branches. To display, I carefully stack each paper thread horizontally on a narrow shelf, and because of its hardness, negative space is formed within the pile. Under the light, the paper strings cast shadow around themselves and visually enlarge the object while create a beautiful image. The organic form and linear shape serve as the linkage between and resonate with the two series of drawings.

Agnes Martin once said in an interview at Tate, “From music people accept pure emotion, but from art they demand explanation.” (Tate) Maybe it is true that it is human nature to question and figure out the underlying reasons behind things. However, when people search for concrete explanations or meanings, we tend to focus on our thoughts rather than enjoying the artwork through our senses in the very moment. These visual sensations are memorable moments that I have always been keeping as treasure deeply in my mind. Although, as time passes by, my memories of these impressive moments start to gradually fade away, the best method to memorize and frame or to share and reveal these unspeakable feelings we experience through anxiety is portraying them through abstract art.

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Irwin, Robert, and Matthew Thomas. Simms. "Notes Toward a Model." *Notes toward a Conditional Art*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011. 164. Print.

LaRocco, Ben. "Robert Irwin." *The Brooklyn Rail*. The Brooklyn Rail, 02 Feb. 2007. Web. 30 Apr. 2017.

LIST OF ARTWORKS

1. *Veil I*
2017 Drawing 36 x 36 inches
Ink on paper
2. *Veil II*
2017 Drawing 18 x 18 inches
Ink on paper
3. *Veil III*
2017 Drawing 18 x 18 inches
Ink on paper
4. *Veil IV*
2017 Drawing 7.5 x 16 inches
Ink on paper
5. *Veil V*
2017 Drawing 18 x 18 inches
Ink on paper
6. *String I*
2017 Drawing 7 x 16 inches
Ink on paper
7. *String II*
2017 Drawing 12 x 36 inches x 2
Ink on paper
8. *String III*
2017 Drawing 36 x 36 inches
Ink on paper
9. *String IV*
2017 Sculpture Variable dimensions
Length of threads approximately 36inches
Ink on handmade abaca paper