The Incarnation

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THE INCARNATION

by

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AUGUST 2017
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Abstract

In this thesis, I talk about the influence in my growth and the development of my artworks during these past two years in fine arts studio of Rochester Institute of Technology where I pursued my Master of Fine Arts degree. I analyze how I get ideas from my childhood memory and my childhood fantasy and how I begin to record my everyday dreams and put them in my artworks. Besides, I explain how I mix my dream artworks with an observation of reality at the end of my graduate study. Besides, I analyze my use of materials, my improvement of skills, the success and failure of my thesis artworks and the installation of my thesis show. In addition, I mention how I try to transfer my ideas into abstract paintings, and what I am going to explore in the future.
Introduction

I have dreams almost every night, so I have been interested in exploring dreams for a long time. For me, a dream is a storyteller, who gives me lots of inspiration, ideas, stories and a new perspective to the real world. I am curious about where my dreams come from, how does my consciousness impact on them, why some dreams are irrational and even successive.

Recording dreams through writing and visual arts has been one of my daily tasks. I am so fond of recording them because of two reasons. First, the stories themselves are interesting enough for me to record them. Second, the process of recalling a dream is like trying hard to remember a story which is told by an old friend. However, this old friend is actually myself, another me who lives in my mind. I believe my personal experience, my personality and “true me” are right behind my daily dreams. So for me, recording the dreams is actually questioning “who I am” to myself through my unconsciousness.

In my dream, I have a strong sense of reality. Usually, I cannot distinguish the world of my dreams and the real world while I am dreaming. So I would be nervous, angry, happy or sad like I would be in reality. I think those sensations are the bridge which could connect my dreams and my viewers, to let them feel what I felt. Therefore, the emotional feeling that I will give to my viewers will be an important aspect of my work.
Also, the media I chose is another important aspect. The nature of each media will be helpful for expressing different feelings. I have tried and experimented with lots of materials; they are pencil, pen, marker, charcoal, ink, pastel, oil pastel, watercolor, acrylic, oil, screenprint, woodcut, etching, and drypoint. Among them, I use pen and oil most, they were my primary materials for my thesis works. I spent most of my time developing my paintings during my thesis year; I did research mostly on Expressionist artists like Max Beckmann, Philip Guston, Dana Schutz, Todd Bienvenu and Georg Baselitz. To figure out how to transfer my dreams to a sophisticated painting was my essential work.
Context and Influences

Vent of Emotion

I was born in a Chinese middle-class family; I was taught to be prudent all the time, to avoid making any mistakes or failures. When I look back and think about the education in my family, I believe it must have some connections with one of my personalities, which is also characterized by the most common Chinese philosophy called "Neilian." "Neilian" means restraining, my position of everything should be on the medium level, which is "to be normal." The individual is conspicuous, but the community is not. Hiding in collective makes me safe, none would notice mistakes that I made when everyone around me makes the same mistakes. As I grow up, I suppose being "Neilian" is one of my underlying paths by responding to the education of my family. Because for me, "Neilian" is a passive way that makes those mistakes or failures not that noticeable. However, "Neilian" suppresses my desire for expression. To be normal, I need to be quiet first. But it doesn't mean that I don't want to express myself. Therefore I regard art as a perfect substitute of my self-expression so that I can indirectly speak about something powerful. So for me, my art has to be an emotional expression.
The Forming of Me

I had learned Chinese calligraphy for three years when I was young. The using of lines in the practice of calligraphy impacts my works later on. In high school, I made a heap of comic strips. I exaggerated some ordinary things that happened to my classmates and teachers, kind of similar as the sketches I do currently.


Then I began to be fond of unknown and mysterious things, which gave me the opportunity to use my imagination, such as the distant galaxies, abysmal sea, and my brain. At the time I started to be extremely curious about my dreams, I found that those things that I am afraid to
do when I am awake, I do them automatically in my dreams. And the variety of feelings in my dreams is as real as in reality. Things happened in my dreams and this unconscious fantasy exposed my weakness and my desire directly; They gave me the freedom to think about who I am from another perspective. I have been making music since 2011. My dreams inspired most of my songs. My very first song is called "Unable to be awake," and the second song is called "The second dream." I described what happened in my dreams and how I strongly felt in those dreams. Nothing was hiding there; I faced everything courageously, I was experiencing a greater sense of truth in those dreams than that in reality.

At the end of 2012, I began to paint. I was drawn to post-impressionists and expressionists. I was inspired by them a lot, especially Edvard Munch. I was trying to learn how to use the language of line, and relatively pure color to express emotions, just like what he did.

Hope, Digital painting, 2013
Evolution

Rhetoric

After I entered Rochester Institute of Technology and began my graduate study, I started to look for change intentionally. As I said, I would indirectly say something in my works, so I was trying to create my artworks rhetorically in the first semester. I did a set of self-portrait, used a live puppet with an armor-like appearance as the substitute for me. I was protected by myself; I felt safe but lonely.

Hope 2, Watercolor, 2015
Get Back to be Funny

At the end of the first semester, I wanted to do something like those comic strips that I did in high school, so I did a series of prints, which made me decide to do linear sketches later.
Studio, Drypoint, 2015

Playground, Drypoint, 2015
When I was a kid, there was a giant in my fantasy and dreams; it showed up frequently.

Sometimes it looked at me through the window, sometimes it broke into my room and tried to scare me. The giant looked fearful, but it was naughty and harmless, it just scared someone else for fun. After I had come to the US from China, I have dreamed about this giant a couple of times. So at the beginning of my second semester, I created a character of this giant, and I have been using this character to represent myself in my artworks later.

Stop Laughing, Acrylic, 2016
For Sigmund Freud, there was no such thing as memory loss. Joan Gibbons talks about this point in her book “Contemporary Art and Memory.” She mentioned that "The mind is like the wax surface of a mystic writing pad upon which that which is experienced or learnt is inscribed, leaving an imprint below the surface, which may become more and more deeply buried, but is never completely effaced." ¹ The theory of unconsciousness and dream by Freud is one of the reasons why I am so interested in my dreams. Those memories that I thought I forgot appeared in my dreams sometimes. According to Freud; I believe that most of my dreams come from my deep

unconsciousness. As well as things in consciousness, those things in unconsciousness and dreams are also from my personal experience; And they also stand for my identity\textsuperscript{2}. I have been recording my everyday dreams since February 23\textsuperscript{rd} of 2016; I believe that to get the content of my unconsciousness, recording dreams is the most efficient way. In a word, most of my dreams are like reorganized memory, which are without my control of morality or knowledge. In a sense, a dream is more real than reality, it reflects my potential requests, and those requests are suppressed in the daytime and usually will not show up when I am awake. I regard my dream as a supplement of my personality and of reality; I cannot learn about myself entirely without recording my dreams.

\textit{Dream of 4.5.2016, Oil Pastel, 2016}

\textsuperscript{2} Sigmund Freud, and Fang Housheng, Die Traumdeutung. Hangzhou: Zhangjiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2016
Something Behind

I have been feverish with Philip Guston’s artworks since the end of my undergraduate study. Not only his painting skill in color and composition but also that he gave his viewer enough space to imagine. As I said, I would like to say something in my works indirectly, like rhetoric, symbolism or metaphor, describe my subject matter, not display it, make my artwork like a poem or a novel. My art is ambiguous in a way, which makes more room for the audience to think. For example, I would say it is a sweet red fruit instead of saying it is an apple; I want to use abstract adjectives to expand the limitations of definition, so that an apple could be something else, which depends on the experience of each viewer.

There are some methods that I usually use. The first is a lack of something. It is a guide for the audience; I would like to question the viewers: what should be there? Why isn’t it there? It is a gate for the audience to get in and start thinking. The second method is coverage. Coverage means unknown; Compositionally, I prefer to create a space for putting something behind; It is also questioning the viewer: what is hiding there? Third, the use of an edge. Visually, I would like to give a sense of extension on the edge of my work; The subject is cut off by the edge, the viewers have to think about the rest of the subject by themselves. It is – like I said – an extension of space from my work to reality, so the viewers are involved, which is exactly what I feel in my dream. The Fourth method is to create a situation in my artwork, which make my viewers believe something has happened, something is going on, or something is going to happen. That is why I sometimes call my artwork a graphic novel. Some stories from my dreams are linear in development; I usually pick up the most important scene of the timeline, the
audience becomes partly the director of my dream, and makes my artworks an integrated story. Fifth of all, juxtaposition and visual paradox. The dream is irrational. Things are detached from their background and environment, recombining in a brand-new space. Juxtaposition and paradox not only usually happen in dreams but also they make a contradiction, which makes my works stronger.

_Dream of 4.4.2016, Pen, 2016_
Dream in Reality

During my thesis year, my concentration was painting. I was stuck in making a good painting. I have tried a different medium, new techniques and I did lots of experiments. However, I was not satisfied with my paintings, and I believe that my fundamental skills should be improved. Therefore, I stopped pushing myself and went back to do some observation-based painting. In the meantime, I noticed that I could find the reference from reality for my painting of a dream. So I mixed my dream with reality by making up a scene which was the same as what happened in my dream. Then paint the scene based on observation. I quite like this idea. It allowed me to pay more attention to the quality of painting itself, such as the use of color, composition, and brushstrokes. Two paintings in the thesis show named Dream of 9.25.2016 and Dream of 3.21.2017 are based on this idea.
The Body of Work

a) Drawing

My drawings are a major part of my thesis show; I put seventeen pieces in my exhibition. I believe my drawings are the most typical part of my artwork. First of all, I started recording my dreams with drawings. I almost have dreams every day, so that I was looking for a quick way to document them. At this point, I have already made more than 400 dream drawings. These seventeen pieces that I picked up from those 400 pieces represented one of the most important parts of my art making. Second, drawing is quick, whenever I have a new idea which needs to be visualized, it is easy to do it with drawing. So it is evident how I have developed my ideas and techniques from the very beginning to the present by looking at my drawings. Third, I have done many drawings in these past two years. I have been forming my drawing language gradually. My skill is getting sophisticated as well with constant practice. Fourth, I have done lots of tests with different media, such as pencil, colored pencil, pen, charcoal, pastel, oil pastel, ink, and marker. It becomes obvious to see how each medium works with my dreams.

I enjoy doing drypoint, etching, and woodcut. They are mostly line-based printmaking techniques - like drawing. However, they have more possibilities than drawing does. I made two copper plates for my thesis show. I did drypoint with a very fine needle, which allowed me to work on those tiny details.
Dream of 2.11.2017, Drypoint&Etching, 2017

Dream of 2.12.2017, Etching, 2017
I was sick when I had these two dreams; I fell in half-asleep because of fever. The dreams were too fuzzy to remember. But that feeling hurt so sharply. I distorted the figures and made them in an uncomfortable gesture. I distinguished every part with different values and let the figure be miserable and alone, but still playful.

Woodcut is a new technique for me. It is hard to cut the soft line on the wood board like my drawing does, but the hard line of a woodcut makes an image strong and powerful. I was excited at the moment that the print came out. Every piece is different from what I expected. The texture and the value are random by accident, which sometimes is a surprise.

Dream of 2.21.2017, Woodcut, 2017
This dream was a nightmare. I was so excited to meet our king with the crowd; What we did not know was, the king was going to eat us in a few minutes. In the dream, I was terrified. So I chose to use black and white color to make a vast space, which was crowded but silent. Something was going to happen shortly.

c) Painting

_Dream of 2.1.2017, Oil on Wood, 2017_
I had a hard time with painting when I was doing this piece. I wanted to do some loose paintings, but I needed to know how to balance a whole image before I can be able to make my painting looser. So I decided to do some detailed painting on a thin wood board as a practice. I spent a lot of time adjusting the background and foreground to lead the eyes of the viewer to the focal point. I tightened the forms up with lines like I do in my drawing. This dream was a nightmare as well; So I was trying to create an uncanny tune. I exaggerated the perspectives and twisted those parts of the figure. Background and the body of the red freak is covered by the slab in the foreground. The fragments of the figure seemed alive and were controlled by the freaking, who was also controlled by the unknown. I like the atmosphere that I made in this painting. However, I would say the composition of this piece is relatively simple. And for the use of color and brushstroke, this painting is not interesting enough.

*Dream of 9.25.2016, Oil on Canvas, 2017*
This is the first piece that I tried to mix my dream with the reality. The dream was that I got hurt by an unknown plant which was wounded by a knife. I went to the Buffalo Botanical Garden to observe plants and took photos of them. Then I picked out those plants that I was interested in and reorganized them as the background of my dream. When I was doing the first version of this piece, I found that I cannot help focusing on details, which annoyed me a lot.

I got frustrated and started over. I tried to concentrate on the color and ignore the details, and only deal with the focal point and the color itself. To be honest, for the color and the
composition, I like the original painting better. However, the final one was an exploration of reduction and an experiment of simplification.

This painting was a new experiment. At the time, I was drawn to Michele Bubacco’s painting. I was trying to loosen and tighten specific things to create space. I put flowing paint on the wood board directly and left the drips as a part of the composition. I wanted some texture as well so that I wiped the wet paint with a cloth and scratched the board until the surface of the wood came out. It looks quite well. I like the variety of texture in those different areas, but the forms of objects still need to be refined until they are at the same level.
In the spring break, I went to Toronto for an exhibition. I was caught in the paintings of a Canadian painter Lawren Harris immediately when I got there. Even though most of Lawren’s paintings are landscape, I found something similar with my works. In his paintings, trees and mountains are covered by snow, which act like a blanket. Lawren exaggerated the gesture of trees and mountains, which makes me feel those trees and mountains have their own personalities. The truth is behind the snow and it is waiting for people to discover it. I was encouraged a lot by Lawren Harris, and I spent a short time to finish this painting, which is also the biggest painting I have ever tried so far. This dream was that a giant passed by and left this scene behind. For the
reference, I found a hill with snow in downtown Rochester; I was shocked by the beautiful light, so I used this landscape as my background. In the process of art making, I was excited by dealing with the various white colors. I observed and analyzed how weather impacted the color, how white color changed from shadow to the bright area, and how snow reflected its environment. The canvas is so big that I had the freedom to move my body when I was making this painting. Therefore I feel that my use of line in this piece is much better than before. However, the form of this piece is not strong enough. It is still flat, with no depth in it.

In the process of making this painting, the brushstroke in right bottom corner interested me so much. Those strokes are simply put, but the color is correct and comfortable.

The details of Dream of 3.21.2017
I like the comparison of color and the contrast between thick and thin. I wanted to explore more. So I did another painting during my thesis show to experiment this kind of brushstroke.

*Dream of 4.19.2017, Oil on Wood, 2017*

I made every element in my dream a geometry, and I tried to reorganize them in a harmonic way. I did this piece with oil paint, charcoal, and oil pastel. Also, I scratched the surface to make textures like what I did in some of my drawings. I quite like this piece and enjoy making it.
**Presentation**

**Installation**

The last step was installing my works in the gallery. My space was a relatively small in the corner of Bevier Gallery. I had 24 pieces of two-dimensional artwork to fill in such a small space. Therefore, the installation became very important to me. I left the biggest wall for those 20 small framed pieces of my prints and drawings. I attempted many variations of arrangements until there was one that suited my works well. Then I put a movable wall opposite my prints and drawings, with two small oil paintings on the movable wall, which made the corner a personal space. I installed my biggest two paintings on the wall of the entrance where it was very easy for people to see them. At the entry of another side, I put a pedestal there with my artist statement and business cards on it. In this way, people would be attracted by my biggest painting. Then they could know who I am and what I have done when they leave.

*The Installation of Thesis Show*
Naming

I had considered about giving each piece a particular name. However, I finally chose to name them with the date when I had the dream of each work. First, I did not want to put any clue that related to my work in the title, which would lead the thought of my audience. Second, I had been recording my dreams for a long time. For me, my artworks were not only drawings, prints and paintings, but also consequences of my dream recording process. Therefore, I wanted to look at them as documents.
Conclusion

In conclusion, the body of work has allowed me to think and analyze the development of my art making. Everything I did influenced me a lot. Such as learning calligraphy and making comic strips, my experience helps me decide how my art looks and who I am. Besides, after testing a large number of techniques and media, I finally can pick out my favorite and concentrate on them.

Dream recording has become a part of my daily task. The unexpected happenings in my dreams are what attract me to the act of recording. The process of documenting my ideas allows me to be a narrator and witness to my internal feelings. Recounting my dreams creates a greater awareness of myself and how I perceive my surroundings. As I said, dream recording is the easiest way to get to my unconsciousness. I regard my dream as a supplement of my personality and of reality; I cannot learn about myself entirely without recording my dreams. As a result, dream recording will be a long-term work for me.

For the painting, I will continue to explore painterly abstract painting. In addition, I will carefully test the difference between the surface of a canvas and a wood board. Especially how the scratch looks work on each of them. It is interesting that I noticed that all those painters that I like best are expressionists or expressionist-like painters. Such as Edvard Munch, Max Beckmann, Philip Guston, Willem De Kooning, Dana Schutz, and Todd Bienvenu. I do not even need to think about what I like and who I am intentionally. Time will give me the answer.

The etching and the woodcut suit my style very much. So I will keep exploring those two techniques. Also, I will refine my process of printmaking, make my prints better and more
Furthermore, I would like to try collage with cloth and paint on it. I am so fond of the quality of cloth, and I have already prepared everything for my experiment, but did not start yet. I am looking forward to doing collage to see how it works and if it will turn out as I expected.
Bibliography


