Fallen Leaves

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by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Art in Film Production

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College of Art and Design

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Abstract:

This thesis demonstrates the process of creating my thesis film - *FALLEN LEAVES*, and it describes how this short film is completed from a simple idea to a finished project. Secondly, the documentation also depicts how my initial thought is shaped, and the background story from the aspects of cultural differences and family relationship.

Furthermore, this paper discusses how I used cinematic techniques to help to improve the storytelling of my thesis film. The documentation also includes the research I did for writing the script and making this film.
**Origins:**

It is still unbelievable to me that I have already gone this far on my path of education overseas. Especially in the last term, the moment I finished my thesis film, I was amazed by how an initial idea, or even a mirage, became the film that represents my achievements during my graduate study at RIT. As I was working on *FALLEN LEAVES*, there certainly was self-doubt, overcoming obstacles, and a lot of mistakes in the process of making this film. But, at the same time, this journey also contained joy, self-discovery, and progress in learning film theory and technique.

Traveling to the United States was the first time in my life I had gone abroad and experienced a completely different culture over such a long period of time. I was unsure then what might happen if I didn't attend graduate school, and what my future career would be without an MFA. I was also nervous about going abroad alone even though I knew the path I chose was always my dream, which is striving for success in the film industry. My anxiety about graduate study not only derived from the fact that I was physically and culturally away from home, but also from my lack of narrative filmmaking experience. My undergraduate education was related to art history and the techniques used to make experimental films and video art. Filmmaking, especially traditional commercial film production, seemed a very different direction. However, I realized to create polished work, awareness of professional filmmaking was vital.

The biggest challenge I felt after the first time I attended class at RIT
was not only confusion about the language of filmmaking, but also the cultural differences I experienced. When a professor showed us the short films made by previous RIT graduate students, I was surprised by how fine the films were in terms of the cinematography and lighting and how well-organized the storylines were. It was something I had never experienced before at a university level. Those films were inspirations for my eventual thesis film, but I didn't realize it during that time. I was continually thinking, “what if I made a film as polished as those films but derived from my own life experience?” That would make for a most-treasured memory. I then started to think about the ideas for making my own films. Those older RIT films set a standard for me in terms of filmmaking and storytelling.

During that fall, I was fortunate enough to attend a conference held in downtown Rochester where renowned director Ang Lee talked about how he used advanced film techniques to enhance storytelling. I was in the first row with a small notebook in my hand and thinking about what Ang Lee might be like in person. I imagined he might show up on the stage like a Hollywood movie star then start talking about how difficult it was to make his first step in the film industry. However, he was quite different from what I imagined when he arrived. His modesty and sense of humor captivated me. He talked about *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, the movie he just finished. He spoke not only about the technical aspect of the film but also how he spent effort on using 4K 120fps to improve the storytelling. This part of his speech was so compelling to me that I spontaneously started to associate his experience with my own experience. It was the first year of my school, and his speech encouraged me to explore the possibilities of what directions my films could
go in terms of the content and technique.

During that time, I always made films about modern culture, using more contemporary elements to constitute my films, especially components that are related to pop culture or crime. I had preferred to concentrate on visual perspective as I was sensitive to the image and composition of the picture. Therefore, my first reaction to a screenplay or a story was how it would look in terms of color, lighting, and composition. However, my lack of experience in narrative theory gradually became a stumbling block for me. My screenwriting professor Frank Deese provided me plenty of help in writing as I was in his graduate screenwriting class. But the more skills I learned, the more I realized that my stories would not be as interesting as I hoped they would be if they didn’t derive from my background and personal feelings.

“Do not tell a story you know nothing about.” I still remember Frank told me this after I finished my first draft of my first screenplay in RIT.

In the winter of 2018, after I finished the Hybrid Form class with Professor Ambarien Alqadar, I started to create an idea of my thesis film. After studying the development and theory of filmmaking and film history, I felt I was able to consider my thesis film idea thoroughly and comprehensively. More than that, the video art research I did in my undergraduate education eventually helped me to better comprehend my film visually. The hybrid form class provided me a solid foundation of filmmaking theory.

In the summer of 2019, a feature film drastically inspired me. The film was *At Eternity's Gate*, a biographical study of Vincent Van Gogh. It
revealed Van Gogh’s life and the path of his artistic achievement. Initially, I watched it merely because I am obsessed with Van Gogh’s paintings, and I was curious about how this film presents the process of him creating his extraordinary work. However, when I thoroughly watched this film, I was stunned by the voice of the director - especially in the scenes that delineated Van Gogh making his masterpieces.

Furthermore, the marvelous factor of this film is that it connected us to Van Gogh's miserable life and his remarkable paintings by telling an engaging story. From the perspective of film technique, it didn't have intense editing or splendid action scenes. Yet it was still as powerful, or more so, than some visually-focused films. Mise-en-scène helped audiences become absorbed in the story and performance to experience Van Gogh's life. There was a scene where he set his easel in his tiny shabby bedroom with the biting wind blowing into the room through a hole in the window. He wanted to draw a still life, but the bedroom had nothing but walls. So he took off his shoes, put them in front of the easel then started painting. There was neither dialogue nor editing. His performance and emotion contained in each of his moves and expression led the audience into the story. This film inspired me not only from the perspective of the filmmaking technique but also from the aspect of conception. The idea of my thesis film was becoming specific.

I organized my thoughts and ideas about the directions that I might choose. I gradually determined to tell a story that related to the cultural differences and the feeling of being immersed in those differences. I still
hadn’t had a complete storyline yet, but I had gotten the outline of the story I wanted to tell. I thought it was time to improve the story, move forward to the next step, and so I started to build up my proposal.

So after a few weeks, I went to my writing professor Frank Deese, shared my rough idea, and asked him to be my thesis advisor. He liked the idea, but both of us agreed that it needed to be simplified and made specific. The initial meeting was productive.

**The Proposal:**

The entry point of my film was food because I felt it was the most significant difference between the US and my homeland. The way people prepare and eat food is extremely diverse. I felt there was a lot to explore. But I didn't propose this idea immediately to the committee members because I thought it wasn't substantial enough to support this film. Even the logline was uncertain.

As I started to complete the proposal, Ang Lee’s films came back to my mind. *Eat Drink Man Woman* was a film that demonstrates the change of a traditional Chinese family by revealing different types of food at various stages of the story. I felt this method would be a perfect medium to start this story, but I still thought it too insubstantial to extend to the entire. But family and love are the timeless topics for all the filmmakers. As I looked back to all the films I had done before, I realized none of them are love stories. Therefore, I thought “why not push myself and try to
overcome another challenge?” So I started to write my treatment of a love story that related to food. Originally, the story was about a Chinese boy who tries to get an American girl's attention by cooking Chinese food. I was satisfied with this story as the treatment was getting detailed and complete. I thought I was ready for my proposal meeting.

At the thesis proposal meeting, I was quite excited about telling my story to the committee. I thought it was an attractive film that the audiences would have a strong emotional connection to. However, the committee raised a couple of questions that I hadn't thought through before. For instance, (1) compared to the male character, the female character was a little bit flat - she needed more and varied characteristics. (2) Some of the scenes were handled with blunt cliché; they needed to be revised. (3) The script was too long. It needed to be simplified. And the biggest of them all was I needed to dig more background story of the female character. But the committee members still passed my proposal and gave me time to solve those issues.

As I started to work on the female character, I realized that I was having a problem with delving into the characteristics of her role. I felt this character was a person who was not familiar to me. Along with the further development of my script, this problem still bothered me. Eventually, I realized something I didn't expect: I didn't know enough about this role. Further, I didn't like this character. I couldn't build a connection between her and the rest of the characters.
Hence, a month later, after the proposal meeting, I made a tough decision from the perspective of scheduling, but eventually beneficial to the story. I rewrote the script. I spoke with Frank about this idea. He thought the story I had before was quite solid, but just a revision. From the story structure, I agreed with Frank. However, the more I worked on the treatment, the less I was engaged with it. In my opinion, if I, as the writer and director of this film, didn't enjoy the story, the audience would not enjoy it either.

As I kept delving into the new story of my thesis film, another film came into my mind: *Whiplash.* This film not only profoundly inspired me in terms of the storyline but also the development of the character relationships. This film presented the change of the lead character by showing different stages of his drumming skill. The plot was driven by the character's artistic achievement and the relationship between the teacher and the students. I strongly relate to this story as a painter, an international filmmaker, and a student. I gradually felt a story that related to art and food was the direction I would love to go. So I told Frank about my thoughts: A story that happened between a Chinese art student and an American painting professor. When I look back on that time now, I genuinely appreciate his understanding and the creative freedom he gave me. He said that the problems of the first story I had weren't unsolvable, but he respected my choice and would love to help me to work on the new logline and treatment. Therefore, I started to delve into this new story and
outlined the script.

**The Script:**

Finally, I had gotten the outline approved. It was time to focus on the screenplay. I have always considered writing as one of the most challenging portions of the filmmaking process. It is even harder for someone like me who is working with English as a second language. There is always a need to put in a little bit more effort than my English-speaking peers need to. I figured the dialogue of the scripts I wrote sometimes were either wordy or confused. I knew that if I wanted the last script of my student career to be perfect, I needed to work hard on it as much as I possibly could.

Watching a lot of films has always been one of my strategies to learn English. While I was watching a movie, I would write down the words or the sentences that I thought would be helpful for my films. As I was writing them down, I found out those words inspired me in terms of building characterization and designing the plots. More than that, considering my film was a story that happened between two individuals who were from different countries, the dialogue was supposed to derive from their life experiences. It was simpler for me to outline the Chinese character, so I spent more time on the role of the professor and tried to create a strict teacher who has high standards for his students’ artworks.

After the first draft was finished, Frank and I had a meeting to talk
about what worked and what didn't. He thought there still were a lot of potential themes that could be dug out within the script. Secondly, the role of the painting professor was unattractive. He was too mean and unlikable so that the audience would not engage in the story. Some of the professor's lines would not likely be spoken by a college art professor. Thirdly, the story could be simpler and shorter. There were some subplots that not only confused but also did not so much help in promoting the story. Through the discussion, I found out the issues I didn't realize before. After I spoke with Frank, I started to explore more details behind those two characters from the perspective of their background story, their personalities, and the relationship between them. The more I explored, the more I knew about those characters. I tried to put myself into them. “If I was in his situation, what would I do?” I had been reading a book called “Story,” written by Robert McKee. He said, "Story is about thoroughness, not shortcuts.” Throughout the process of developing the character's background, I utterly comprehended the meaning behind this sentence.

Along with my second draft started, the story was getting manageable, and the characters were gradually becoming vivid.

**Scheduling:**

Coordinating has always been one of the most challenging aspects of the production process. Scheduling the crew members you want to work with at the same time on a project is even harder. My producer Zichen
Liang and I had a meeting to discuss the shooting locations and schedules. We decided to shoot two weekends in order to leave enough time for shooting. As I tried to contact locations, I realized three locations needed to be secured: the painting studio, the art gallery, and Lee’s (the student’s) apartment. An ordinary apartment wasn’t hard to find at all. The main obstacle was to find a place that was fully decorated with art pieces of both western and eastern style – and possibly one where there were painting materials, like an easel and paints. I knew all those issues could be solved in the process of production design, but I thought it would be more natural and efficient in terms of the shooting schedule. Hence, this location was the priority for us on the schedule.

Fortunately, Zichen found a homeowner who was willing to rent his house for us as Lee's apartment in my film. Better yet, his wife was a painter. She had been painting for ten years, and she had a painting studio in their house. She had all her best works hanging in her bedroom, studio, living room, and kitchen. It was the perfect location for this film. So we gave the host a call, then went to the house. We were worried that the host wouldn't agree because we might have to move around his wife's paintings and his furniture. But, after he heard our plan, he was excited about the story. He told us his wife is a “YouTuber,” she had been doing videos on YouTube for years, but this was the first time they had a film production crew in their home. Though we are students, he still thought this would be one of his best experiences.

After we figured out this difficult location, the rest of them were more
manageable. Frank introduced me to a fine art professor at RIT, Emily Glass. She helped me schedule the painting studio and even offered that I could have some of her students as the extra actors. Then I went to the RIT gallery and finalized the shooting dates with the manager.

Along with the locations, an experienced, cooperative cinematographer was another essential factor that profoundly affected the quality of the film. Fortunately, my friend, Jer Graczka, who has been working with me since my second film in RIT, agreed to collaborate with me on my thesis film. He is very experienced, and we always enjoy working together on set.

As we finally figured out all the locations and crew, we settled on a schedule for November 15th to the 17th and 22nd to the 24th.

**Casting:**

In the beginning, my producer and I put up some casting calls on social media. Facebook generally is the place where we find most of the actors for RIT student films. The one advantage of shooting films in Rochester is that there are always either stage actors or people who love to act in order to advance their film career. The upside of it is, we can always find the actors we need. Under most circumstances, they are willing to help students and require only a little bit of compensation. According to the experience of my previous films, most of them were professional and very easy to collaborate with. The downside is, those actors sometimes
have to work on multiple films during the same week. The result of that is that the process, including casting, shooting, and rehearsal, is occasionally not as smooth as we thought it would be. But most of the time tended to be productive and we did get most of the ideal actors we wanted in a short time.

However, the lead role of my thesis film had to be an Asian actor, to be more specific, a Chinese actor. So I needed someone who was not only Chinese but also could speak fluent English. I tried to find an Asian-American actor around the Rochester area, but I couldn't find any. Either they were too far away from Rochester, or they could not speak Chinese.

After I spent weeks finding a Chinese actor, I realized it could take forever if I kept searching in Rochester. So Zichen and I started to try to find an actor in New York City. The result of that was I had to raise my budget. I thought there were decent actors within the range of my budget. However, I underestimated how expensive actors are in New York City. Zichen did contact several actors either from the theater or the Screen Actors Guild - but they were too costly, especially considering I had six shooting days. Though the actors we contacted were talented, it was almost impossible for me to have them in my film. Along with the scheduled shooting dates approaching, Zichen posted the casting call on IMDB, and I started to look for actors in LA.

Luckily, I found a Chinese actor in a WeChat group who was from LA and willing to come to Rochester. We had a brief video meeting then
settled the schedule. By the time I scheduled the rehearsal time with him. Most of my cast was ready to go.

THE MAIN ACTORS:

**Anthony Tai (Lee):**

As I mentioned before, Anthony was an LA-based actor. He wasn’t the first choice for the role of Lee in terms of location. Anthony is experienced, has done films both in China and in the United States. He was interested in this project, but his age did not quite fit the script: he was a bit older. But after I watched his clips, I was attracted by his acting immediately, the way he revealed his emotion and characteristics was precise and natural. I thought it would be excellent to coordinate with a professional actor like him in my last film at RIT. So I set up an audition with him. He played the scene so naturally as my story was actually his own story, especially the part where he talks with his parents on the phone.

As for his appearance, he had good looks, and he was energetic. Though he was a little bit older than the character I set up, with the makeup and costume, he still looked near the right age. I was going to take a chance.

So Zichen booked the flight for him and we settled on the schedule.
Lee is hanging his painting in the gallery.

**Bob Coldicott (Professor Matthews):**

As for the role of professor, I imagined he was about late 40 with a stern face. While I was picturing his appearance, I kept thinking about the professor in Whiplash as my reference.

Casting for this role wasn't as difficult as finding the lead role. Bob is a stage actor from Buffalo. But after I saw the reel he sent me, I thought he could be the ideal choice for this role. I watched his theater show and the reel he sent me. His powerful performance not only helped to express the story but also made me believe that he is the one in the story. I had already liked him even before we set up an audition. I thought I wouldn't be disappointed.

Furthermore, his mustache, haircut, stature, and his voice was all fit for the role of Professor Matthews. So I decided to bring him on board.
The professor is making an announcement about an exhibition to the class.

Zhilin Liu & Wenfang Cao (Mom & Dad):

The process of finding the actors to play the parents was quite interesting. As I mentioned before, finding Chinese actors around the Rochester area was pretty tricky. Zichen kept posting casting calls of the role of the parents in WeChat, Facebook groups, and other casting websites. Unfortunately, only a few people responded and they weren't the ideal individuals for the films.

So my producer Zichen and I started to ask our friends whose parents may be interested in acting. I knew this put more risks in the film, but I had no choice, at least during that period. However, after a couple of days, a Chinese actress who was one of the actors in Zichen's thesis, contacted her. She said she was interested in this project, and she was willing to take the role of Lee's mother. I had seen her performance in Zichen's film, so I was excited about having her on board. After she read the script, she said the dialogue was just like the way she usually would speak to her daughter. We had an audition, and she did a great job.

What surprised us, even more, was that she heard that we still needed a
middle-aged actor to play the role of Lee’s father. She called her husband right after the audition and asked him if he was interested in performing in this film. She told us her husband was a part-time actor in Buffalo, then showed us his reel and photos. We never thought she could give us this offer. More importantly, her husband was good at acting, he used to be a Beijing Opera actor. I liked his performance and appearance, and I said yes almost without hesitation. So we found an actual couple to play the role of the couple.

Lee’s parents are talking with him on the phone.

Laron Spratt (Jason)

Laron is a great stage actor. We’ve known each other for a pretty long time but never had a chance to work together. I met him in a local theater. He was an actor in a play directed by my former professor Brian Coughlin. He introduced Laron to me and told me he is a talented actor.

I had a few applicants who were willing to play the role of Jason. But the script had changed after Frank suggested that I shorten Jason's portion. As I
told them the modification of the script, some of the prospective actors lost interest. Since Jason's scene had already been cut to a single page, I didn't think it was worth going through the whole process of casting and auditioning.

So I gave Laron a call a week before we started shooting, and told him it would be great if we could have him on board. He read the script and said he could do us this favor. We were set.

Jason is talking with Lee in the hallway after an artist's seminar.

**Rehearsals:**

A formal table reading for all the actors was impossible. There was never a time that worked for everybody. So I rehearsed with different actors individually. I rehearsed with Laron first since his part was the shortest. It went pretty well. Bob and I only did several readings on the phone. Bob didn't have any problems with performance and emotion. However, he couldn't have his lines memorized perfectly. I personally don't like to be thrown into a situation where I have to compromise on
something that could have been better, especially on set. I told him to keep working on his lines and we will be more efficient during the shoot.

In early-October, I decided to have an online table reading with my Chinese actors who weren't in Rochester. I created a WeChat group, which was easier for us to communicate. I thought it would be helpful for me to be on the lookout to catch lines of dialogue that were not working as I would have liked. The video chat scene was actually going very well - the scene where the parents were asking how's their son doing overseas. It was so natural that I felt it was like a real family talking. Immediately, it reminded me of my parents and got me homesick. After the first rehearsal, I completely let go of my worries and had confidence in focusing on cinematography and production design.

The Photographic Style:

As a painter, I have always been sensitive to cinematography and photographic style. Before I started the discussion about cinematography, even before the script was finished, I had already had a picture of the ideal style. Instead of having a stylized image like my last film, I was thinking of a more lifelike cinematography language.
The opening shot of my last film *Dripping in Gold.*

I told my cinematographer Jer Graczka that I wanted the cinematography to be more "story-based." By that, I meant the picture is more realistic, with fewer camera movements to minimalize the existence of the camera. Under this consensus, I started to work on the concept design of the scenes that I had a pretty clear vision in my mind.

As I shared those paintings with my cinematographer Jer, he liked the idea immediately.

However, those two pictures were not supportive enough for the afterward preparation. Hence, I started to look for more references to inspire me in terms of composition. I expanded my vision in the area of paintings, not only the classical paintings but also the contemporary masterpieces. I figured that styles like either cubism, minimalism, or even comic books are derived, in terms of composition and the other techniques,
from classical art pieces like religious paintings. Therefore, during the summer of 2019, I went to the Guggenheim Museum in New York. There was a contemporary art exhibition called "Artistic License." It was an exhibition about the history of post-war art. I constantly thought about how to utilize their elements to contribute to my picture when I was looking at those paintings. I had a little notebook with me, and occasionally scratched some compositions that I thought would be helpful for my film.

Then, after a few weeks, I came across a Japanese film: *Honey and Clover*. It was a film about the friendship of four young artists and a professor. The story itself didn't catch my attention too much. The photography style, however, perfectly captured the spirit of what I was going for. It makes use of less contrast color, long takes, static camera, and precise framing that presents the characters' emotions in the paintings.
The film that inspired me as well was another of Ang Lee's film, *Wedding Banquet*. The movie was about a gay Taiwanese immigrant man who marries a mainland Chinese woman to placate his parents and get her a green card. His plan backfires when his parents arrive in the United States to plan his wedding banquet, and he has to hide the truth of his partner. It was a film both related to family and cultural differences. However, from the perspective of framing and cinematography, even though it's a comedy-drama, the style of its cinematography was still tended toward realism, especially the scene where the lead actor talks to his father by a river. This film used the photographic style that I would prefer to shoot my film: a lot of static shots, less dramatic camera movements, lots of medium shots to express the transitions of characters' emotions. I grabbed several screenshots then collated them with the other materials I collected and the concept design I drew. I took them to my
cinematographer, Jeremiah, making sure we were on the same page.

Since then, we were set. Based on the agreement we had, the process of working on the storyboard and the shot list was productive and efficient. I was amazed at how close the shots in the final film were to the storyboard I drew during pre-production.
The Cinematographic Process:

Jeremiah had done a lot of commercials, and we had been working on multiple films before my thesis. We always had decent chemistry, either on set or in the process of pre-production. We are good friends as well. Throughout all those collaborations, we figured out our way of working.

Fallen Leaves was a story about an international art student who tried to seek his artistic voice that derived from the culture in which he grew up. In consequence, the changing of the character's painting style was vital for the development of the storyline. To get across the isolation of his art style, we saturated Lee's skin tone and de-saturated his costume to isolate him from the rest of the students and the professor.

With lighting and coloring, Jeremiah went for a very naturalistic look. We used 750 watts Arri light with silk as the key light for most of the time. And the rest we utilized the natural sunlight to keep the naturalistic look. For the night scene, we tried to light up the location with only practicals and a single 300 watts as the fill light. For the home studio scene, we used a table lamp as the main source of this scene. As for the attic scene, we still used a single lamp as the key source, then the Arri Skypanel was used as the background light to create a warm, cozy atmosphere.

As for the cooking and painting close-ups, we used a single 300-watt under silk. We wanted to create a look with high contrast but soft highlights. But we went for a different color temperature under different
circumstances.

In terms of camera movement, as I mentioned above, I thought the static camera setup would be ideal for most of the film. But when we shot the scene where the professor criticizes Lee’s second painting, Jeremiah decided to use a hand-held camera to film this conversation. to create a sense of intenseness. It turned out much better than what I thought it would be.

The camera we used was the Red Epic, and we shot on 8k scope recording in raw. We used a set of Zeiss Prime lenses with cine-filters to reduce the exposure. In certain scenes like the attic and kitchen, we also added a mist filter to create a beautiful soft look. Additionally, I rented out a Laowa probe lens in order to get some extreme close-ups. It worked perfectly as we got lots of extraordinary shots with it.

After we were done with shooting and went to the post-production process, the Red Raw footage gave us plenty of space in post-production, especially for color grading. More on this later.

Costume Design:

As for the costume design, I didn't want to make it so complicated that it distracted people from the characters' performances. I prefer to have a naturalistic costume to match the cinematographic style and the story. To reveal the characteristics of the two main actors: Lee and the professor, I planned to focus on the differences between the color of their costume.

At this point, I set up two tones for each character: dark and bright.
As the antagonist of the film, I figured the dark tone would be fit for his characteristic: a strict perfectionist. But wearing a suit would be hidebound for an artist. So when Bob and I were discussing his wardrobe, we had an agreement on having a dark gray jacket and a black sweater with a pair of navy blue or black pants. Keeping the main tone of his costume dark was beneficial in creating contrast with his skin tone.

Contrarily, I kept the color of Lee's wardrobe light and delicate. I had him wear only a white T-shirt and jeans. Therefore, the contrast between his skin tone and the costume would be enhanced. More importantly, in this method, Lee would be isolated visually from the rest of the students and the professor.

Up to now, the costume was settled and I was ready to move on to the next step.

*One of the reference pictures of the costume for the professor.*
Production Design

The production design was one of the aspects that I spent much effort on except directing before post-production. The main reason was I needed to decorate the home studio and attic to look like places where a young artist lives. Another reason was that paintings were the most vital elements for the production design. I also drew a concept design of bedroom and kitchen to ensure what exactly I wanted the set to look like. I drew them before I found the location, so I was a little bit worried about the possibility that I couldn’t find the place ideal for what I was imagining. But as I mentioned above, fortunately, we found a house that belonged to a painter. And the painting studio we booked at RIT was a real classroom. So those locations were already fully decorated. But in order to express the idea that Lee was capable of doing different styles, I borrowed more paintings from my friend Marcia Liu, who is a fine art student in RIT. Beyond that, during my shooting days, I only had Komal Ashfaq, who was my art person, to make some adjustments on set.
The concept design I painted for the kitchen scene and home studio scene..

As for Lee's paintings in the film, it was the most challenging problem. The painting he made in the first scene, and the rest of the paintings that revealed the change of his art style were extremely crucial. In the beginning, I tried to look for paintings on eBay and some artists' communities. But soon I found out the prices were too expensive. Over a
thousand dollars each. Then I tried to contact some eBay sellers for art prints. However, the texture was so different from the actual paintings. I had been struggling with finding the ideal paintings for weeks, but I still couldn't find any. As the shooting day approached, I decided to paint those by myself.

When I started to paint, I immediately realized I should have done this earlier. I knew exactly what I wanted in terms of style and content precisely. It was much faster than looking for the right painting endlessly on the internet. I showed Frank after I finished the first one, and he was impressed. I knew I was on the right track. So I finished the rest of the paintings in a week. I painted the one from the opening scene, the one in Lee's home studio, and the three-painting set in the gallery.
Principal Photography:

We had six days of production. We started with the longest and hardest scene first. We had a decent plan for the first week to try our best to prevent the circumstances that might force me to compromise.

On the first day on set, we had detailed call sheets and shot lists printed out for each crew member. I also had storyboards printed out and as we had in the Production Process. Jeremiah and the camera crew effectively set up the camera. We finished all the lighting and prop setups ahead of schedule. As I called the first "action!" of my thesis film, that was it - we seemed well-prepared for the first day. The rest of that weekend was as efficient as the first day. I was surprised by how productive the crew was, and I was glad I had a very collaborative team.

The last day of the first weekend was a little bit rough. Because the day after it was Monday, most of my crew had morning classes so they couldn't stay too long. I had a limited crew that afternoon, but I scheduled the kitchen scene for that day, so by the time my team started to leave, we only had several inserts on the list. However, we still couldn't wrap
punctually because some of the shots required someone to manually hold
the light. Based on the equipment reserved for the following weekend,
Jeremiah and I rescheduled part of the closeups for another day of
production.

On the first day of the second week, we had a trip to Buffalo. We had
permission from the actors who played the role of parents to film in their
house. I kept the group small since we only had two scenes that needed to
be done.

The only regret I have regarding my two weekends of production,
when I look back now, was that I couldn't have Jordan Whiteside, who had
been my still photographer ever since my first film in RIT, participate in
my production all the way through. We couldn't work together because of
the scheduling issue. He was directing his own short exactly on the same
weekend as mine. But I'm glad he was able to help us one day, which was
the day we shot the gallery scene on campus.
Working on the scene of the gallery (photo by Jordan Whiteside.)

Production Sound:

I had an entire semester to do the pre-production, so I did spend some time scouting for the best crew members—especially the sound crew.

My second film, *Man to Man*, was pretty successful. However, I couldn’t find any production sound mixer, so I had to hire a friend of mine who did not specialize in sound. It turned out to be an inadequacy. I learned my lesson from it, so I told Zichen that we needed to find the best sound person at RIT.

Fortunately, I had two decent sound mixers for my production. Isaiah Gates and Creighton Yanchar. I had always wanted to work with Creighton even since my last short. But as I mentioned above, it didn’t happen because of the scheduling. So this time, I wanted to make sure
that I could have Creighton on board.

In mid-September, by the time I finished the final version of my script, I shared it with Creighton then asked his availability right after he read the script. He said he liked the story and would like to be part of it.

We had a brief meeting about some specific sound designs that I might prefer to have. I thought in certain scenes, like the painting montage, would require some "texture" - as well as the cutting and cooking sound effects in the kitchen scene, were essential.

Additionally, in the first week of my production, Creighton had a schedule conflict with another production set, so he called Isaiah Gates, who is another reliable mixer, to be my sound mixer. It worked very well.

**Directing:**

I took both advanced directing and acting classes two semesters before shooting my thesis. I thought learning how to direct from the perspective of an actor was equally helpful as taking the directing class.

When I was working on the script, I had already thought about the process of directing. I thought if I'm directing my actors, what would I do to help them have a further understanding of the characters? So I identified the goal for each character. I would then discuss it with my actors until we came to a certain agreement in terms of what we would be trying to get out of a scene.

Besides, Brian Coughlin, who is my former directing professor, taught me a little trick when I took his class. Each actor needs to have a secret in
their background stories. Unlike goals, characters' secrets are more like things that they don't want each other to know or feel, but they derive the way actors talk and act. The goals would also reflect the characters' secrets, and the secret would affect how they deliver their dialogue. I spoke with my actors to discuss what secrets they try to hide during their conversation scene. I think that this made both directing and acting more comfortable and, in terms of the final cut, it makes the film better.

**Editing:**

I didn't start editing until I finished all the shooting - not because I didn't want to, but because I already had a vision of what my film would be. So I didn't rush into it. What I did was I kept watching movies to absorb inspiration from them.

For example, in the attic scene where Lee is talking with his parents on the laptop, I cut to Lee drawing his mother's portrait, instead of only keeping the camera on his face while his parents are talking. I cut to the closeup of his mother's painting to present the sense of homesickness. This method did bring improvement to that scene.
The Closeup of Lee is painting his mother while they're talking.

Throughout the entire film, I didn't use too many closeups and dramatic transitions. I kept the flow peaceful and realistic.

**Coloring:**

I've always been more sensitive to image than to story. I have to admit putting images ahead of the story is a weakness as a filmmaker and a storyteller. As a colorist, however, it helps me to set up the tone for each scene to capture the right emotion.

I separated the film into several tones: blue, cyan, and orange. Scenes like the painting studio, hallway, I wanted to keep it either a cold tone or a naturalistic look because Lee doesn't enjoy being here yet he still has an enthusiasm for painting. So I wanted to create a sense of isolation.

For the painting studio scene, I set the studio as a blue, cyan, and dark blue-violet tone. At the same time, the character's skin tone is a bit warmer. Thus I could separate the character from the background.
As for the last scene, since he made himself to the gallery. The protagonist achieved his goal, so the environment tended to be warm and cozy. I created a warm tone, low contrast image to demonstrate this feeling.

*The gallery scene.*

Another aspect I put effort into was the skin tone. I enhanced Lee's and the professor's skin tone to present the differences in their personalities.

Lee is a painter who is young and passionate. The professor is a guy who is strict and unemotional. Based on that, I saturated and added a little bit of red to Lee's skin, but de-saturated and added contrast to the professor's.
Lee and the professor talking about his painting in Lee's house.

Music:

I tended to use music very sparingly in films. I believe that it's only good to be used when it is necessary. In Fallen Leaves, I told my composer, Yuechen, only to use the piano to create all the pieces. The reason was still the same - keep the music simple and spare.

Yuchen is a decent composer who interpreted my film language into the music precisely. We didn't even have a meeting to talk it through. I sent him my film, he watched it, then he said, "I know what you want." After two days, he sent me a version that was already pretty ideal. I compiled several notes about certain scenes that needed some extra pieces to reveal the transitions. Then, that was it. I was satisfied with what I had.

Sound Design:

Creighton was my sound designer. He went through the pre-production to the post-production of my thesis film. I briefly talked about the idea of sound design in the production sound section initially. As we
went to the process of post-production, Creighton and I listed out some sound effects I would like to have. I had a pretty clear picture of what I wanted after watching it countless times during the editing.

As I discussed in the production sound section, I wanted to add some texture in sound. Creighton added some effects like cutting garlic, pouring oil in a pan, boiling water, and the sound of painting.

As Creighton sent me the final version of the sound file, I had the last piece of my puzzle. The film was finished.

**Exhibition:**

This is one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life. Due to COVID-19, we had, the first time ever, a YouTube online live RIT screening. I was a little bit nervous while I was uploading the film because I didn't know how the audience would comment on my final product. This thesis film is the milestone of my three years of graduate study. I was looking forward to the questions and comments. As my film appeared on the screen, I held my breath and stared at the comment block.

But after the film was over, I was relieved. Tons of compliments popped up on the screen. People were impressed by how well-told the story was and how impactful the performances were. At the same time, I received messages from my phone and my Facebook: some Asian students said that they very much related to it. I felt like my hard work was finally paying off.

**Done:**
Fallen Leaves means a lot to me, especially during this difficult period.

The process of making this film will be one of the most unforgettable memories in my life. A film that related to my family and my culture has been a sort of mental support for me as COVID-19 is spreading all over the world.

Like everyone else, I put so much effort into this project ever since last year. I enjoyed doing it. I didn't think it was a tedious process. I'm glad I finished this story that I was burning to tell. As a filmmaker, there are always thoughts like "my film could have been better if I did this," "the performance of this scene would have been more powerful if he or she could get lines memorized better" - there is always room for improvement. Despite that, I was impressed by how I went from an international student who had very limited knowledge of filmmaking to a young trained filmmaker. This thesis project is a milestone in my three years of MFA studying.

There's a whole journey ahead. There will be so much more to learn as I continue making films, regardless of scale. But one thing is certain: three years of learning filmmaking at RIT is one of my most treasured experiences.