

I REMEMBER. I REMEMBER

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I REMEMBER. I REMEMBER

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ABSTRACT

I Remember. I Remember – the scent on my mother carries love and comfort. Even though she is not physically with me, her blessing and love stay with me in my memories. Losing my mother is the trigger for me to paint my memories. I experienced a great loss, so I want to externalize the memories physically to remember. I find narrative in my memories that evoke particular emotions of love and grief. I dig deeper into these emotional memories related to specific moments and selected people. Connecting people to daily familiar activity is the passion of my art genre. My stories have two ways of interpretation. The first layer lends itself to the more universal interpretation of my work. The next layer involves a personal reflection from the death of my mother and the waves of grief that I have struggled with that have partly shaped me into the person I am today. I find my healing from grieving in my paintings. Painting my memories is a process of self-healing and reflecting on the immutable past in life.

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DEDICATION

To God-Thank you for giving me love and peace, and leaving the flock of ninety-nine sheep in order to find the one which was lost.

To my mother in heaven- for loving me unconditionally. I regret all the times I did not spend with you. I miss you and I will move on carrying your love with me.

To my father- thank you for being strong, and taking care of the whole family and me after my mother passed away.

To Grace Kim- for you are the first one in my life who showed me the Love of God, and you provided me comfort and safety, like a true mother, when I was vulnerable in grief.

To Bing Liu- for giving me much help both spiritually and physically in my life. This thesis includes part of your editing. Thank you so much for including me in your prayers.

EPIGRAPH

*Keep my memory with you,
For memories never die;
I will be there with you,
When you look across the sky.
I will be there in the clouds,
In the birds that fill the air;
In the beauty of a fragrant rose,
You will find my memory there.*

*You will feel me in the tenderness,
Of a tiny baby's touch;
You will hear me if you listen,
In the twilight's gentle hush.
When your hearts are heavy,
And you feel that you are alone;
Just reach down deep inside of you,
For your heart is now my home.*

*I will always be with you,
I will never go away;
For I will live on in your hearts,
Forever and a day.*

-Allison Chambers Coxsey
Keep My Memories

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I REMEMBER, I REMEMBER

Do you know how much I love you? ... I love you so much. My mother asked me this question so frequently when I did not even take it seriously every time. It was a rhetorical question or self-expression for her instead of a real question for me. In fact, I never answer it directly. *I love you so*(我爱你) - sounds like a simple and easy statement to say, but I never say said this to her and unfortunately, I will not get to say it to her anymore. I think back to the day she was extremely sick in the hospital with a brain tumor that eventually caused her to not recognize family and friends. She could not remember the only daughter to whom she said, *I love you*, every single day. I was not shocked or depressed at that moment, but I did feel an emptiness. The emptiness just like falling into an unending dark deep hole. All the cherished memories we have been through suddenly seemed to disappear. The word, *love*, becomes meaningless to say because she does not know who is saying it to her. Her memories have gone and also her body, but our memories together always stay with me.

I have the fear of forgetting her memories after she has passed away, and also fear that I will not recognize the voices or faces of the people whom I love. Thus, I choose to seal my memories and my experiences on my physical canvas with oil paint. A medium can last for hundreds of years. When I am no longer here one day, my memories will still live on the canvas. Nothing can take those memories away in any situation - even through death. Starting now, my paintings will remind me of the precious time that I spent with my beloved people in our familiar places. Every painting in my thesis work, *I Remember I Remember*, is like a character of my life story, it tells a life changing moment in my life, what I have been through and how I became who I am today – a quiet and complex storyteller.

DESCRIPTION

I remember. I remember — my grandparents' old traditional Chinese house, called Si Guan Da Wu, where I grew up. The sun came through the stained-glass windows and reflected different colors of light on the floor. *I remember. I remember* — my mother folding clothes in her room; I called to her but she did not look back. *I remember. I remember* — the scent of the slippery stone-sloped road after the rain as I walked with my mother. I turned back and held her hands while walking in the rain. I could not see her face but I knew she was smiling. My memories get more and more blurred as time passes. I am making new memories every day, while my old memories are slowly fading. I am afraid of forgetting the people I care about and the moments that have influenced my life. I use my paintings to preserve my fading memories. My thesis body of work captures and reinterprets these memories into allegories. Each center on a singular narrative depicted through an isolated figure set inside a chaotic but quiet environment. This figure is typically at peace; comfortable in the environment that appears to be neither peaceful nor comfortable. I composed my works with hidden details and nuanced representations to suggest hidden meaning or allegory. This work conveys a desire to run away from the comfortable memories and move on to a new story, while at the same time, it conveys a desire to hold on to them.

In my thesis work, *I Remember I Remember*, I paint through a narrative of fond memories I share with my beloved family set in our familiar places. Layered with meaning, the environment wraps around the isolated figures that I compose - filling the space and shielding them from the outside world. In this way, the settings in my paintings are just as important as the figures. To begin, I use my still life painting *Plumeria* to introduce my thesis works. The symbolism and metaphor I create through the still life objects in this piece connect to all my

other paintings in my thesis. The flowers in the scene project the same emotion of love for my grandparents as my *Store* series. The *Store* series represents my early childhood. These paintings share similar themes, compositions, and emotions, through the way I compose a chaotic scene surrounding isolated figures. My *Love* series focuses on a self-portrait connecting me and my mother in a quiet and peaceful environment. All of these paintings show my most profound memories and represent me at different times in my life. I connect to my viewers by sharing familiar objects like toys and books, and universal emotions like the love of family.

Still Life

I remember. I remember—I close my eyes. I smell the Plumeria flowers on the street. My mother smells like the familiar Plumeria. The scent of Plumeria reminds me of the smell of her. It is a scent of home and comfort in my memories. I grew up with many Plumeria trees on my street. My mother and I liked to collect the fallen flowers from the Plumeria trees. My grandmother would boil them with water to drink, or put them in my bedroom in a little container. *Plumeria Flowers* (2018) is both a summary of and introduction to my memory paintings (Fig. 1). The inanimate objects in the scene symbolize my past and present. Each object also represents a particular time in my memories. The dog doll and paint brush represent more current memories, while the flowers represent a more distant past. The composition of this still life is like a table of contents, the narrative I share through my paintings.



Fig. 1. Shiyun Zhou, *Memories*, 2018, Oil on claybord, 12x12 in, Private Collection

The composition of *Plumeria Flowers* is a fan shape hanging upside down under a muted turquoise blanket backdrop. At the head of the fan shape, close to the top edge of the

canvas, are a dog keychain and two rotting yellow plumerias inside a low pattern metal bowl. A pile of dried flowers representing the past is in a rhombus shape moving down while a few flowers disappear on the right side of the canvas. Close to the viewer, at the bottom of my fan shape, I placed a fresh yellow Plumeria which represents my current life. Follow the yellow plumeria to the left and my black paintbrush leads back toward the dried flowers. My still life memory scene is completed with flowers representing my childhood, and my paintbrush which represents my present.

The lifeless dried flower and the vivid live flower represent the symbolic transition in my own life. From the sorrow of my mother's death to finding strength to live a thriving life, the two flowers represent how I have recovered to find strength like a blooming new flower. The Plumeria flowers represent the past and my deceased loved one. The dog doll is made in my dog Peace's image. Peace represents an emotional comfort and peace for my sorrow, and an unconditional love to me. He supported me with love and companionship through the time I was grieving my mother. The keys are the symbol of home. The keys and dog are attached together because my dog also represents home to me. Flowers are grouped together with the keys and the dog doll in the middle, but the singular paint brush is being isolated in the corner. It breaks into the scene from the left corner with a sharp clean highlight on the barrel. Different from the soft flower petals and fluffy dog, the bright sharp light describes a sense of ambition and determination inside of me. The paint brush represents me as a painter and my certainty to pursue a career in the fine arts. Flowers and the dog keychain represent an emotion of grief and love while a brush stands for a sharp aggressive desire. These still life objects simply conclude my emotional changes from my childhood to present life. They are indispensable pieces in my memories story just like a key goes with a home.

Beyond objects, I use a warm tone to create an inviting atmosphere. I use a warm yellow table lamp as my light source. In the book *How to Use Colour in Art and Design*, the author states that yellow light sources have a warmer color temperature, bring out warmer objects, and enhance reds and oranges below (Feisner 59). It works this way in my art as well. My backdrop is a muted turquoise-colored blanket that reflects the warm light source and becomes a warm turquoise. Turquoise is a calming color that reminds me of a comfortable and peaceful home. I brush a thin glaze of Indian yellow over the whole painting. This helps to enrich my warm orange, like the brown-orange dead flowers, and to warm the cool areas such as the shadow and the blanket. The warm glaze gives an old yellowed photograph quality to my painting. It reminds me of pleasant childhood pictures in my family album. I maintain a quiet and comfortable mood for my viewers by avoiding brilliant colors, choosing muted and warm colors like grey turquoise and burnt sienna instead.

Memories are supposed to be vague and faded just like an old photo, strong color contrast is visually too aggressive for my viewers to feel the comfort in my quiet serene scene. The soft and cozy blanket with the yellow reading light slowly fades into dark blue shadow. I describe my interpretation of home to my viewers with the light gradient. A home is like a warm light with comfort and safety in the dark. I am carefully wrapping and containing my past and present in this small canvas and maintaining a serene and casual atmosphere.

Store Series

I introduce a similar theme, composition, and mood, with different allegories related to my life's experiences, in my *Store* series. Three paintings comprise the narrative *Store* series: *Birdcage Store* (2019), *Bookstore* (2020), *Toy Store* (2020) (Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4). The subjects, along with a few animals, sit quietly in their confined and comfortable spaces. They are surrounded by the clutter of repetitive objects—goods, toys, or books—which seem to be blocking their view of old stores, my interpretation of the clutter around the store clerks is also a phenomenon of some old stores. The stores are forgotten and passed by as technology and society march forward. The animals, the most common and familiar scenery in my life, represent me. They are casual observers to the store clerks in the scene. I use animals as a way of inserting myself into the narrative. These three paintings share a familiar and similar theme, but they have their individual scenes and messages at the same time. Each piece reminds me of a memorable moment or a particular family member from my childhood. As I describe each painting in the following paragraphs. I begin with a quote that alludes to the narrative I am painting.

Birdcage Store

Insanity is relative. It depends on who has who locked in what cage.

-Ray Bradbury, *The Meadow*

I remember. I remember — I close my eyes. I hear the birds singing far away from the store. My grandfather is feeding the birds on the floor. My neighborhood has a birdcage store where they sell all kinds of different birds and handmade wood cages. My grandfather will buy a bag of bird food a mix of live worms and grain, and we feed the birds together. In my narrative

Birdcage Store, an old man is feeding his birds in a store filled with enormous empty cages. He loves his bird so much that he gives them the freedom to stay outside of the cages with him. He has locked himself and his birds in the cage of comfort and is stuck in a rut. They appear to be free and pleasant, but they have already locked themselves in the satisfaction of comfort with no urge to leave.

In this scene, I painted an old man in the image of my grandfather, sitting comfortably



Fig. 2. Shiyun Zhou, *Birdcage Store*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 24x30 in, Private Collection

and quietly with his beloved birds (Fig. 2). I reflect on my grandfather's tenderness and doting in his relaxed posture, right hand extended and stroking the birds in front of him. He wears the familiar loose white shirt and comfortable rubber slippers I remember from childhood. The characteristics of appearance describes the image of my beloved grandfather from my memories. A mass of empty cages wrap around this man and his birds. The

birds are free to fly, but they choose to stay. They are waiting quietly and patiently to be fed. The man and his beloved birds are so comfortable with each other staying inside of their cages, isolated from the outside world.

I interpret the old man and the birds in two ways. The first layer is about the old man who lives with his birds in happiness and comfort without disruption from the outside world. This little confined space is their paradise. The empty cages are the metaphor that both the man and bird are living freely. On the other way, the second layer hints that they actually locked themselves inside their “mental cage” with comfort and safety. As well as I locked myself in the

memories with my mother. I do not want to live in a space that does not have my mother, so I prefer to live in my loving memories with her and her love. Even though we are free to move on, I locked myself in a particular memory as the old man and his birds. I project this personal layer in my birds and the man.

Birds belong to the sky, but the birds in this scene choose to stay around all the empty cages. They focus on eating the food from the man and pay no attention to the viewers outside. Only a brilliant blue Macaw stands in the middle and is looking straight at the viewers. This bird is different from the other kind. He is questioning this comfortability, and so do I. He became the reflection of myself. He is asking the viewers to look at him and see the story of them. I speak of the birdcage store filled with different kinds of birds and cages in my memories, and I also attach my personal story longing for the past on the other side.

Bookstore

Vellichor is the strange wistfulness of used bookstores, which are somehow infused with the passage of time — filled with thousands of old books you'll never have time to read, each of which is itself locked in its own era, bound and dated and papered over like an old room the author abandoned years ago, a hidden annex littered with thoughts left just as they were on the day they were captured.

-John Koenig, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*

I remember. I remember — I follow the cat. Walking into the old bookstore, I smell the familiar and pleasant scent of the old books. Odor carries memories. The old-book-smell reminds me of the only used bookstore in my neighborhood. It had nineteen cats living there, all adopted by the owner. I stop by and play with a store cat sitting in front of the gate. Following the cat into the store, I smell the scent of used books, called Vellichor. A smell, like a book, carries content. My memories are like those used books in the bookstore. Each of my memories is locked in its

own era, preserved until the day I need to open it. At that time, a flood of forgotten emotional memories will hit me, "...just as they were on the day they were captured" (Koenig).

Looking at *Bookstore*, a foreground full of horizontally stacked books comes into view (Fig. 3). The clear details on the books represent the present. A big brown cat is sitting on one of



Fig. 3. Shiyun Zhou, *Bookstore*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 24x30 in, Private Collection

the book piles on the right, but he has no interest in the books under him. He is staring at a young woman in a light pink sweater, holding a book in her hands. In the light mid-ground filled with bookshelves, she is the only human figure. Having an open book in her hands, she has been disturbed from her reading. She looks above. There is a small grey striped cat hiding in the shadows. Only his head is showing. He is

sitting on the shelf above her. On top of this bookshelf are the oldest books, cluttered together in shadow and dust. They have been left on the top shelf, untouched for decades. They represent the once-great history of the past. On the top right side of this bookshelf, a black cat is walking into the shadow. He is leading the viewers to a yellow cat in the right corner. This cat, also in shadow, is looking straight back at the big cat in the foreground. I introduce my store space by tracking the cats going around in a circle. I arrange my main human character and the animal characters in their own separate space, and I connect the foreground, mid-ground, and background space with cats.

The purpose of *Bookstore* is to remind me of those old memories being forgotten in the corner. Memories are like old books. Sometimes I open one of them and remember. Sometimes they are left on the shelf and I temporarily forget. When I look back at my memories, it is like

finding an old used book in these stacks. I cannot open them one by one and read their content, but I sense the mass around me. I am comforted by the thought that my memories have a place to be stored and will never be lost. Therefore, these used books are my wealth of memories. Some of them might be forgotten like those books hidden in shadows, but they are always there, just waiting for me to reopen them.

I depict this story as both universal and personal. In one interpretation, this is a story about my feelings of nostalgia and pity for the used bookstore that belongs to the past and is gradually disappearing in modern times. The big cat in the foreground sits next to *The Call of The Wild*, creating a contrast between freedom in the wild and comfort in this safe enclosed space. A cat's nature is to hunt and explore outdoors, but those cats are comfortable inside a store and have lost their desire to explore the outside world. I interpret this conflict as being comfortable and safe in my memories, but I also want to make a connection to the present and future as I understand I cannot live in my memories forever.

Toy Store

Childhood memories are sometimes covered and obscured beneath the things that come later, like childhood toys forgotten at the bottom of a crammed adult closet, but they are never lost for good.

-Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

I remember. I remember — I used to pass this toy store near my house, and each time I did, I would beg my mother to buy me a new toy. She promised to buy me one if I behaved. Every time I pass the toy store in my neighborhood, I could not stop myself from staring at the toys and snacks inside. My pleasant childhood memories are filled with my family's love and caring, but toys are also a special part of it. Toys helped assuage the loneliness in me as I grew

up without siblings to play with. I will never forget the pink bunny that slept with me every night. I am an adult now, and I do not sleep with my bunny anymore. My everyday life is filled with different kinds of chaos now. The chaos makes me forget my old toys which are lost or packed away somewhere. As I think about my toys, I remember my childhood memories of time spent with these lovely items. None of them are really lost because they are stored in my memories. These old toys carry so much joy and happiness in my childhood memories and no one can ever steal them from me.

My childhood toy store scene includes an old married couple, a cat, as well as a plethora of toys and snacks (Fig. 4). The number of brilliantly colored toys overwhelm the viewers' eyes. The toys are from the 90s: my favorite fishing toy,



Fig. 4. Shiyun Zhou, *Toy Store*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 24x30 in, Private Collection

baby dolls, yellow rubber ducks, mickey mouse, etc. An ice cream sign reading “Wu Yang” means Five Goats is hanging next to the man. This is one of the most representative snacks from my childhood. An opened box of pink stuffed animals is on the floor, and my pink bunny is sitting inside, reminding me she is there to keep my nightmares away. In the middle of the scene, an old couple is sitting separated among the chaotic toys. Under a dim orange light, the wife focuses on reading her newspaper and pays no attention to her husband. The husband, with grey hair, is sitting on the left, leaning his arm toward his wife but looking in the opposite direction. There is a mysterious atmosphere between this couple; they are sitting close to each other but have no eye contact. At the same time, a comfortable silence between them creates a relaxed and calm space. Below the couple, a small cat trying to grab a plastic ball becomes the only active

and energetic character in this quiet scene. Having my toy store dream revealed on the canvas, I have marked down one of my favorite childhood memories filled with sweetness and fun.

I have almost forgotten that it was my childhood dream to be able to pick any toys I wanted in a toy store. As a child, getting a new toy could make me excited for an entire week. I was so easily satisfied back then. I want to remind myself that this simple life is good, and to metaphorically fulfill my dream of owning a toy store. The toys and snacks that were popular in the 1990s remind me of the good and fun memories from my childhood, taking me at least for a moment, away from my complicated and often messy adult life. The meaning behind the story is just as simple as it seems: it is about finding old toys from my childhood. However, I also added a different implication to my toy story. I put the old store owner couple in a children's toy store. The owners are comfortably surrounded by the chaos of toys and snacks. However, they are waiting for the kids to stop by and pick a toy on the shelf, and they will get an opportunity to talk to them. They cannot leave the store, but they are waiting for a connection with the youth. Showing all the brilliant toys, the owners not only want to sell their product, but they also want to build a connection to the youth to break their loneliness.

Animals

I include animals in most of my paintings. They only play a cameo role, so they do not disrupt my story. I put myself in their role which allows me to become part of the story inside my painting. I am a storyteller outside of the painting, and I am also part of my story, watching quietly from the corner. In *Birdcage Store*, I am the blue Macaw. I stand with the other birds, but I am looking directly at the viewers. At the same time, I am also looking at myself. It is like a reflection in a mirror. I am questioning the comfortable environment for my viewers, but actually, this is a question I am asking myself. Similarly in *Bookstore*, I put myself in the role of

the big cat sitting in the front and watching the story develop in silence. I use the animals' perspective to look at myself from different angles, while I let myself participate in my own story for self-reflection and as a self-preference.

Love Series

Life has to end, she said. Love doesn't.

-Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*

I remember. I remember—her voice speaks of her love when she is looking at me. My mother used to tell me how much she loves me. Her smiling eyes in a crescent moon shape and her gentle voice all remind me she loves me so much. After she passed away, I felt her love leaving with her. I was filled with grief for a long time. Then, I started to work on a personal painting to release the sorrow caused by my loss. In the process of painting my regret and grief I also found love. When I dig into ideas to finish this piece, I think about my mother a lot; not about her death, but about our time together. Her comforting smile, her gentle voice, and the way she called me that made me feel safe and at home. I realized that my mother's love never leaves me; it is carefully preserved in my memories.

Red Spider Lily (2018) was my first painting about sorrow. It resulted from a class project with Cynthia Sitton, an artist who mentors and teaches at Laguna College of Art and Design. I painted a young girl in a white dress laying on a bed and holding a vivid-red spider lily, the flower of the afterlife. A yellow butterfly stops on the flower, near the open window. The butterfly is ready to fly away. While working on sketches, memories of my mother kept flooding back to me. I found through the painting process that she and her love are living with me. The

brilliant colors and the composition of the painting are not strong enough to speak of either my sorrow or a mother's love.

I decided to try again in *Butterflies* (2019) and *Sketch 02* (2019) (Fig. 5)(Fig. 6). The first shows a group of golden butterflies flying above a young lady, while the second is a sketch of myself holding prayer beads while surrounded by butterflies. I opted to execute the former because I am not yet



Fig. 5. Shiyun Zhou, *Butterflies*, 2019, Oil on panel, 12x16 in, Private Collection.

ready to appear in a painting discussing

my grief directly. In *Butterflies*, the young lady is my friend. She is sitting on the floor and looking up at the butterflies. Her black shirt makes her merge into the dark background, while her hands are opened to receive the butterflies. Against a solid black background, the golden butterflies and the light-pink flesh tone of the lady stand. The solid black also delivers a solemn mood. Then I glazed a thin layer of resin on the whole painting, and I painted another layer of butterflies

on top. By painting the butterflies in layers of resin, the form of the butterflies becomes three dimensional.

I learned this technique of 3D resin painting technique from Japanese artist, Riusuke Fukahori's Goldfish resin works, such as *Kingyo-sake Name Yuki* (Fig. 7). According to Fukahori stated in his *Reflection*, he paints three-dimensional goldfish embedded in layers of resin in a container such as a wooden bucket or a shell. He was inspired by painting his beloved



Fig. 6. Shiyun Zhou, *Sketch 02*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 9x12 in, Private Collection

goldfish, Kingyo, in resin. The goldfish and their memories will be preserved forever inside of this transparent medium. Underneath the layer of resin, “Kingyo is past, present and eternity” (Fukahori). Their memories will never go away. I admire how Fukahori uses resin and paint to preserve his memories, so I use resin to seal this piece and with it, the memories of my mother. However, I felt that my *Butterflies* painting did not sufficiently elaborate on my relationship with my mother. It has a mysterious atmosphere with the gold against the black background, but for me it did not evoke the particular emotion of love in my memories.



Fig. 7. Riusuke Fukahori, *Kingyo-sake Name Yuki*, 2012, Japanese cypress sake cup, Acrylic on resin, 2.15 x 3.35 x 3.35 in, Private Collection

It took six months for me to restart a new painting of the same theme. In this new piece, I have decided to divide the theme of the relationship between me and my mother into a diptych. I paint the image of my mother in the form of a butterfly on a small, 12 by 12 inch canvas, titled *Do You Know How Much I Love You* (2020) (Fig.



Fig. 9. Shiyun Zhou, *Do You Know How Much I Love You*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 12x12, Private Collection



Fig. 8. Shiyun Zhou, *I Love You So*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 18x20, Private Collection.

8). I painted myself on a larger, 18 by 20 inch canvas, titled *I Love You So* (2020)

(Fig. 9). In *I Love You So*, I let myself play the character in the story.

Seen from a bird’s-eye view, I stand under a tree in the foreground of the painting. I am contained and surrounded by trees and grass in the corner. The shadow of the tree’s leaves are cast on my face and dark blue my shirt as I look to the sky above. I am turning my body and eyes slightly to the right, avoiding direct eye contact with my

viewers. In my right hand, I am holding my mother's jade necklace. Behind me is an empty, lonely, metal garden chair under a spot of sunlight covering half of it in tree shadow. The chair is a little rusty, the grey surface mixing with some brown-orange spots.

Following my gaze up, you find the painting of my mother, *Do You Know*. I paint this in a worm's-eye view. Enormous golden butterflies with black patterns are flying in a circular composition. Representing the butterflies only in gold and black conveys a sense of elegance and solemnity. This image was inspired by the American artist Alessandra Maria's *Reverie II* (2014) (Fig. 10). Maria uses only gold and black to describe butterflies as an iconic subject around her female figures. Black represents solemnity. Gold represents the sacred. She creates a mysterious and quiet atmosphere by combining the two. In an interview with the UK online gallery WOW x WOW, Maria said that the gold identifies a space belonging to memories, and there exists a distinct connection with the past, along with a relationship in the present with the young female image (Maria). I borrow Maria's gold and black motif to paint my mother in a butterfly image that relates to my memories and describes a space in heaven.

The butterflies are looking down at me inside of *I Love You*. I use simple shapes to describe the distant butterflies. Moving from the edge to the center, the butterflies become larger, with clear shapes and patterns. I paint the image of my mother in a butterfly near the center of the painting. Compared to the others, she has no obvious pattern, and is the only butterfly painted a brilliant golden color. My background is a vignette, with the bright center fading to a dark edge. The big butterfly is placed next to the bright center. This placement gives the



Fig. 10. Alessandra Maria, *Reverie II*, 2014, 13 x 13.5 in., Giclee with 23 k Gold Hand-embellished, Private Collection.

illusion that she is attached to the light. In another interpretation, she is looking down at me surrounded by a bright halo.

The purpose of my *Love* series is to resolve my regret of not telling my mother I love her when she was still with me. The arrangement and perspective of the two paintings, with the butterfly painting above my self-portrait, is reminiscent of how a mother will look down at her newborn daughter. I used more symbols in this series than my other paintings because these paintings have a particular story and meaning, one I need to convey to my viewers. The butterfly is the symbol that I have continued to use since *Red Spider Lily*. It is a specific symbol of the afterlife and spirit in my Chinese culture. Thus, I used it to represent the image of my mother and to imply she deceased. In *I Love You*, the lonely empty chair in the scene also represents my mother. I distinguish the space between my butterfly mother and my place on the earth by adding natural and manmade elements. I combine trees and grass with brick floors and a chair to present an earthly scene in *I Love*. I use only light and shadow to define the background and hint at heaven or a place other than earth in *How Much*. I paint my *Love* series to fulfill my wish to look at my mother one more time and convey my love to her. I understand that there are certain things in life that cannot be revisited. I accept the unchangeable. In painting this piece I am telling myself that it is ok to both hold onto my mother's memory and to move on.

I use oil paintings to store my memories. As in the poem *Keep My Memory*, "...they will always be with me and never go away" (Coxsey). Even though beloved people and familiar places are absent, the memories filled with love and grief stay with me and remind me of them. Grief is not an emotion to get over. Grieving for my mother is an expression/method that I used to memorize and love her: as I am remembering her love in grief, she is always with me. But her absence is a gap in my life that I have to face every single day until I am no longer here. There is

healing power in the process of painting grief. My paintings are filled with both grief and love, and they become synonymous during my painting process. I live in my old memories, filled with my sorrow and love for my deceased loved one. I know it is time to move on and find new memories, so I paint the vulnerable me beneath my story. I remember. I remember — I close my eyes. Now I remember her voice speaks of her love, her smell like a comfort and a lavender scent on my laundry clothes, her gentle touch always carries the roughness of the wedding ring on her finger, her taste of love coming with chicken soup in the kitchen. I store every chapter moment in my memories with my heart, so as my paintings.

RESEARCH

I am a fine artist who uses oil paint to depict allegorical narratives based on my memories. These memories are associated with specific people and environments that invoke a specific feeling. I paint figures true to form, while I capture the effects of light to create a mood in my paintings. I consider myself both a realistic and impressionistic artist. Growing up in a traditional Chinese family, I felt the weight of my parent's high expectations. I reacted to the stress with introspection and silence. Growing up in China was chaotic, but familiar and secure. Living with my grandparents and losing my mother to cancer have added deep layers to my narrative. My experiences have made me a quiet storyteller, and quiet chaos is the underlying theme of my stories.

I prefer to invite people into my story in layers, slowly taking them deeper. I am not someone who grabs the viewer by the lapels and drags them in with brilliant colors, expressive brushwork or energetic facial expressions. This comes in part from my culture. In my parents' generation, Chinese people did not show much affection. Physical contact of any sort was considered very intimate, and my father felt very awkward when hugging me. This reserve can

also be seen in Chinese art. Chinese poets express their feelings tactfully and metaphorically. A *Little Primer of Tu Fu* has translated the famous Chinese poet Tu Fu's poetry *Thinking of My Brothers on a Moonlit Night*, "...This moon is the same one that shines upon my homeplace. My brothers are all scattered..." (11). In terms of The Analysis of Tu Fu's Original, Tu expresses his yearning for his brother in this poem. He uses the bright moon as a metaphor for the home where he and his brother can connect. I have borrowed from the Chinese undemonstrative style by using metaphors to express my feelings in my paintings. Examples of using metaphors in my paintings, cages represent isolation and a sitting cat represents curiosity. I use metaphors to deliver layers of meaning in my art. The first layer is the main story while the second layer is the hidden personal meaning.

The memories I have from living with my grandparents contribute to my understanding of simple, joyful expression and the naive attitude in the first layer of my quietness. This is a surface layer that viewers can understand directly by looking at the subject matter. The experience of living with my grandparents taught me the beauty of quietness and the vitality of life in my childhood. We did the same activities every day; playing with the old bookstore cats, begging my grandfather for a new toy from the toy store, looking at the birds in a bird store. None of these activities is particularly exciting, but each one is real. During that time, I was drawing in my diary every day. I used simple line drawings to record the scenes and peaceful moments with my grandparents. These sketches have now turned into the inspiration for my store series paintings. Every scene is a narrative in itself, but they are all connected by their emotional roots in my memories.

Losing my mother deeply affected me and my art. The intense emotions of regret, anger, and desperation nearly overwhelm my warm, quiet scene in the first layer in most of my

paintings. The emotional shift adds a second layer of fear and anger. The negative emotions reflect my self-isolation brought on by death. It is the reason that I prefer to use a singular character in each painting. The environment of my paintings remains similarly quiet; no exaggerated facial expression, no angry person, not even a dramatic color change. I avoid flourishes and describe only small emotional changes through specific details. For example, in *Birdcages Store*, the surface layer of the narrative is about an old man playing with his bird, a comfortable daily activity spent in his isolated environment. The birds and empty cages hint at my second layer of meaning. This quality of hidden meanings in my art also makes me a painter of allegories.

There are two layers of meaning in my art, and I define these layers of meaning as allegory. “Allegory in art is when the subject of the artwork, or the various elements that form the composition, is used to symbolize a deeper moral or spiritual meaning such as life, death, love, virtue, justice, etc.” (Tate). In my paintings, I have one layer that involves the way my grandparents taught me about the discontentment and contentment found in the everyday aspects of a life filled with love. This layer lends itself to the more universal interpretation of my work. The other layer involves the death of my mother and the waves of grief and struggle that I have learned to accept and incorporate into my life.

I specifically paint cages without birds in them in *Birdcages Store*. The birds stand outside the cages, free to fly away, but the allegory is that they are trapped in the environment spiritually. This reflects my feelings of being trapped at the moment of losing my mother, and how I only want to stay in the past where I still have my complete family. This hidden layer is more personal and sensitive, and as such. I do not expect my viewers to understand or connect to it completely. Various layers of emotions provide a depth of content and message to my

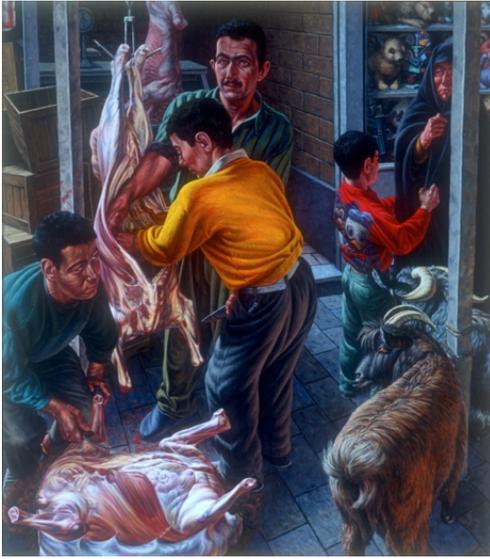


Fig. 11. F. Scott, Hess, *Butcher Boys*, 1993, 52 x 48 in, Oil on canvas, Private Collection.

narrative. Allegories such as the empty birdcages support my hidden meaning in some of my narrative paintings.

American Realist oil painter, F. Scott Hess mentored me in how to incorporate references and details to speak for a hidden inner layer. Hess uses meaningful objects in his paintings, such as text, gesture, or metaphorical shape to guide viewers to a deeper story (Knight). The way to use minimal amounts of detailed

objects can be shown in the following example: Hess

shared his narrative painting, *Butcher Boys* (1993), and the background story with me in our mentor meeting (Fig. 11). The artist himself was asked by a butcher store boy to have sex with him or with a goat when he visited the Islamic Republic of Iran. He refused the request and ran away right after. Later, he chose to paint this experience indirectly because the Iran government is sensitive to sexual subject matters. He painted the butcher boy stabbing his knife into a goat, cut-open in a vaginal shape, to hint at the relationship between sex, the butcher boy and the goat. The vagina shape became the metaphoric shape and the stabbing gesture of the boy is the minimal detail he used to hint at his encounter. Without knowing the background story and second layer meaning, the painting itself is about an experience considered honorable in Iran. In Iranian culture, sheep and goats are slaughtered for big events like weddings and feasts. The uncle of Hess's wife had offered the headman's two sons jobs, so they cut the goat in his honor and shared it with Hess's family. There are also religious connotations to goat/sheep killing, a common offering to the gods.

Hess mentioned that, because of cultural differences regarding sexuality, his American viewers see the hidden meaning pretty easily, while Iranians did not. Hiding the meaning also protects Hess from offending Iran's culture and the local government. The surface meaning of this story is about hardworking boys and the slaughtering of a goat. For the artist, however, it is about the relationship between sex and a goat. The hidden meaning gives depth to the content and makes the whole painting more interesting. As he told me, "...if you are open to seeing it, you will; if not, you won't". It is like reading a story within a story that is accompanied by a surprise. When the author opens the story to everybody, different people will read a different message based on their cultural differences and points of view. I use details to evoke responses from viewers who share experiences similar to mine, but I do not expect all of my viewers to connect to this layer.

Not everyone has experienced sudden, posttraumatic growth. My quiet communication is often lacking in explanation, but I paint this personal layer because I need to relieve myself of sorrow and find a place to store my sensitive and vulnerable self. I keep saying: *Life and time will just sneak out of your pocket if you don't take it seriously. Do not live your life filled with regrets.* Loss leads me to paint my memories before they fade. I need to record all of the important moments while I can still remember.

Animals are minor but important elements in my paintings. The time I spend with animals relieves my loneliness. To fulfill my desire for lovely and furry animals, I allow myself to add them to my narrative, albeit in a supporting role. This is not unlike Marvel's Stan Lee who plays different cameos, such as a pedestrian or a security guard, in all the Marvel movies. His minor character does not help tell the story, but the movie director shows his respect and honor for the original writer by letting him play a small role in the story.

To capture my strongest memories of the past, a clear story scene comes to mind, so I paint it. For example, I used to walk with my grandparents through the neighborhood stores every day. I would look at the products they sold, the faces of the friendly owners, or their shop animals. When I think about my grandparents, I recall the caring and love that accompanied our daily store visits. When I paint the people from these stores, I am, at least in part, painting about my love for my grandparents.

According to *The Birth of Perspective*, linear perspective invites viewers to look through an “open window” on the canvas. The arrangement of subjects in linear perspective is similar to how the human eye sees the world (Motta). Objects that are closer to the viewer appear to be larger, while objects that are farther away appear to be smaller. I offer my viewers a small *open window* to explore my story. Using linear perspective, I invite viewers to read my story from the closest to farthest element. In *Toy Store*, for example, I bring a familiar childhood toy store forward to the viewer's eyes (Fig. 4). The foreground space is filled with detailed objects and a variety of big shapes. As viewers look farther behind the scene, their eyes are allowed to rest in a less busy midground that only has a few lollipops and water bottles. Finally, there is the background with only a few vague highlights of wine bottles hidden in the dark. By introducing the store products from clear to vague, close to far, I create depth of space for this narrative. I build a space filled with objects around my figure to isolate and protect them from the outside world. I am protecting my figure in the story, but I am also protecting my memories.



Fig. 12. Wen Liang Yan, *The Kitchen*, 1920, 48 x 62 cm, Pastel on paper.

This quiet scene from my childhood experiences is similar to those of first-generation Chinese Impressionist, Yan Wenliang. In the article *Yan Wenliang*, art critic Ren explained that Yan's paintings have the characteristic Chinese quiet atmosphere, warm yellowish earth tone, and soft light. This warm mood also describes the fading of time (Ren). Because this correlation applies to my memory narrative, I used a lot of warm tones in my old *Store* series to achieve a similar nostalgic effect. In Yan's composition, there is a lighting contrast between the foreground and background. The contrast not only divides the space, but it sets a particular mood

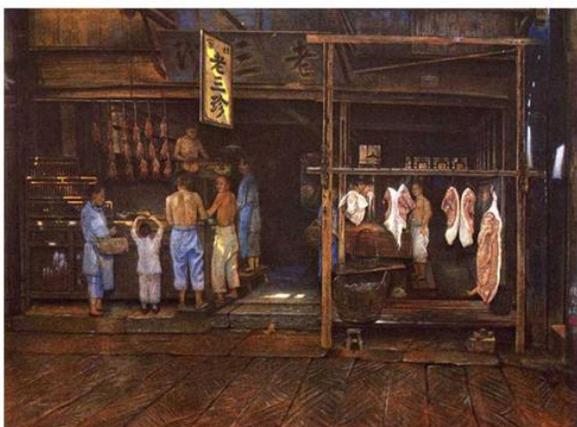


Fig. 13. Wen Liang Yan, *Butcher Store*, 1921, 48 x 62 cm, Pastel on paper.

with dark and light lighting. The mood is the main source of expression in my painting, so I also divide my space in the same way. In Yan's paintings, such as *The Kitchen* (1920) and *Butcher Store* (1921), the figures are still (Fig. 12)(Fig. 13). The little girl in *The Kitchen* is sitting on the floor putting her feet together with one arm extending and playing with the cats in front of her, while the boy in front of her is sleeping on a chair with his arm under his chin. Both figures are comfortable in their environment. I have applied a similar kind of calm gesture to my figures, which fits my introverted character. For example, I painted an old man character sitting on a chair with his hand gently touching the birds in *Birdcage* (Fig. 2). As Yan and I share the same culture, there is

a similarity in the way we describe the environment in China. I drew inspiration from Yan's work to build the narrative scenes in my *China Store* series.

Chinese contemporary female artist, Yu Hong inspired me to try a different approach in some of my paintings. Her artwork is grounded in a Socialist Realist style. She uses multiple perspectives to portray the shifting position of women in Chinese society across the generations (Tate). Compared to Yan who uses traditional linear perspective, Yu's use of a variety of perspectives offers viewers the ability to see the contemporary Chinese female in a refreshing and unusual angle, as in her *Golden Sky series*,

Atrium(2009) (Fig. 14). "You only need to change your perspective to discover that this world is very unfamiliar" (Yu). I borrowed Yu's viewpoint to see the world from unexpected perspectives and to communicate in a less familiar way, such as a bird's eye or worm's eye view in my *Love* series.



Fig. 14. Hong Yu, *Atrium*, 2009, 500x 600 cm, Acrylic on canvas

Love is a series talking about the relationship between my mother and me after she passed away. I tell my story from a bird's-eye view in *I Love You So* (**Error! Reference source not found.**). I depict my mother's view through a worm's-eye view in *Do You Know How Much I Love* (**Error! Reference source not found.**). These are atypical perspectives when compared with my other works. I am experiencing a new angle to connect differently with my viewers. Deeper emotions are revealed in these two paintings. Their compositional arrangement where *Do You Know* is placed above *I Love You So* allows for a conversation between the two paintings.

By placing the painting with the worm's eye view above the one with the bird's eye view, viewers see the two paintings as one story.

I use Realism and Impressionism to depict figures and environments in my paintings. In *What is Realism*, the author, Taubes, defines Realism as "...realistic appearance of objects and realism in representation of human behaviorism" (44). I paint my subjects in a manner true and honest to life. According to Tate Institution, Impressionism refers to landscapes and scenes of everyday life and captures the momentary effects of light (Tate). To create an environment for my subjects, I use the tenets of impressionism. By increasing the contrast of my light and dark, I get the dramatic light source similar to a direct spotlight effect. For example, the old man in *Birdcage* has bright sunlight hitting his face. The background around him is extremely dark, obscuring the surrounding birdcages in shadow. The bright light and dark shadow create great contrast, while also setting a mood of mystery.

Brushstrokes are another tool used by impressionists to express light and mood. I used rough brushstrokes to barely identify the shape of elements hidden far away in the back. These elements, like the cages in *Birdcage* are less important and vague, so I do not need to paint them in detail. I only use simple lines and a few big brush strokes to present an outline of the birdcage shape. Compared to the defined and detailed cages in the foreground, the cages in the back are fuzzy enough to be read as far away. Big and rough brushstrokes work well to push the background element further, but still able to define the certain object by a simplified shape and stroke. The combination of the true subject and my invented environment completes the mood in my memory scene.

My compositions and figures are also inspired in a round-about way by the western master of Expressionism, Gustav Klimt (Natter 34). In the Japanese animated program “Ayakashi” (a story about how an evil spirit fed and grew by human’s fear and desire for sexuality), many of Klimt’s nude paintings appear in the background. They hint at sexuality, but the characters in the story never show any skin themselves. The director also introduces Klimt’s approach to love.

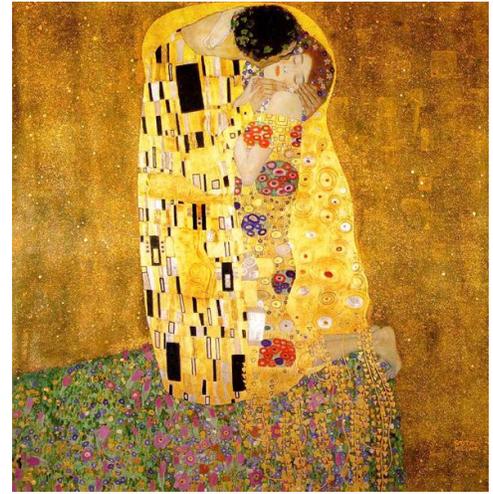


Fig. 15. Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss (Lovers)*, 1907–1908, Oil and gold leaf on canvas, 180 × 180 cm, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna.

Klimt wrapped his beloved female figures tightly with patterns or garments, as in *Kiss* (Fig. 15). I transformed Klimt’s composition of love into my memory scene because I want to wrap my subjects with caring and protection.

In my *Store* series, I surrounded my characters with chaotic objects and products. In *Birdcages*, the old man sits in a sea of birdcages. In *Bookstore*, I placed the female character in claustrophobic stacks of old books. In *Toy Store*, the old are barely visible among the toys and snacks. I use objects and chaos around my characters in the same way Klimt wrapped his figures in fabrics. In these womb-like settings, I share an emotion of love and care for the figures in my story.

Figures and the composition of their environment help me tell my story in layered allegories. I build my story in layers of meanings, and I hide inner meaning in the layers of my works. Through allegory in my art, I can share my life’s story in a way that is more universal to my viewers. Layers of meaning combine with the compositional elements to complete my memory narratives. Tone, mood, and perspective in my composition inform the thematic

interpretation of my narrative. Tone explains the surrounding atmosphere and temperature with the contrast between light and dark. As the mood is created by specific lighting and temperature, my memories start flowing in the scene. I used to think about composition in very straightforward terms, like a linear perspective that sees things from near to far. However, using an unfamiliar perspective from a different angle allows me to think about my narrative from another point of view. I put myself into the place of the viewer, or my character, and imagine how I see my story through their eyes. Switching perspective helps me connect to my viewers.

METHODOLOGY

Reading layers of meaning in a story allows me to look at myself and others from a different perspective. The process of digging deeper and searching for more information is one I enjoy. When I create my narratives, I choose to give myself, and my viewers, multiple points of view to discover my characters and their stories. I use allegory to express this multi-angle message, while the mood is the pathos to connect every layer. My narrative painting process could be compared to brewing a cup of aromatic tea. The sense of smell is strong and evokes a particular memory, inside which I find my idea. The narrative is the delicate, warm teacup where my painting begins. Paintings need good ideas, just as tea needs a good cup. The composition and the character designs are the main ingredients; the tea leaves inside the cup. They decide the flavor of my story. I use mood in my art like a scent I cannot see but will get to appreciate during the brewing process. By adding extra ingredients like value, color, or the unexpected idea block, I enhance the experience. A bit of glazing provides a teaspoon of refreshing mint at the end. The final taste of my art is complex; a combination of sweet, sour, or bitter in different layers.

The element of mood is like a delicate aroma that accompanies me throughout the painting process. I finish other elements such as tone/value and color one layer after another, but

the mood intersperses among each layer. When I start a new idea, I think about the mood and how it will help convey my ideas. For example, an old nostalgic mood tells a story about memories, and a grave mood tells a story about life and death. A nostalgic mood tells a story about memories, while a grave mood tells a story about life and death. I continue this approach as I dive deeper into the elements of the painting. If I have a natural outdoor environment in my background, I will create a peaceful and quiet mood with less color contrast and smooth lighting in the scene. The character in the environment reflects this kind of atmosphere by affecting a relaxed gesture and gentle expression, as someone familiar to me. I use glazing at the end of the process to adjust value or color, ensuring that these elements are helping to convey my intended mood. My goal is to select the right aroma for the painting so it can connect with the viewer on a subconscious level.

I explore ideas from the most lovely and peaceful moments in my childhood when I was innocent and life was simple. It was a time when I believed everything around me to be good, and that everyone loved each other. I dig ideas from those naive moments, turning them into sketches. Looking at these small images, I find the one that speaks to me, evoking a particular emotion like joy, empathy, or gratitude—all originating from the foundation of love. In *Toy Store*, the idea originated from my childhood wish to own a toy store so I could play with all the new toys for free. It sparked emotions of excitement and satisfaction when my childhood dream came true on canvas. My initial idea was too vague, so I looked for more ingredients to add to my concoction. Through a series of drawings, I add and remove different elements until it becomes the right shape and image.

I am painting narratives from my memories, and it is natural for memories to be unclear. However, “Narrative Art tells a story. It uses the power of the visual image to ignite

imagination, evoke emotions and capture universal cultural truths and aspirations” (Lucas Museum of Narrative). My paintings should be able to deliver a clear story with a basic message, supported by a specific and clear image and emotion. A clear story allows my viewers to connect with a specific emotion and subject. For instance, in *Toy Store*, I add wine to show my curiosity and connection to the adult world, and snacks to fulfill my desire for playing while eating. This is similar to the way I mix flowers and spices into my tea leaves when I feel the flavor is not strong enough. The addition of snacks and wine strengthens the flavor of my toy store idea. When I struggle to find the right ingredients, I find inspiration in photo references and the work of other artists and writers. These outside sources, representing the experiences of other people, can provide me a different perspective as I review my ideas.

As I keep developing the complexity of my body of work, I look for ideas from my more recent memories. As an adult, I have a better understanding of emotions when compared to my childhood. In my youth, I never fully understood the emotion of loss and separation from an important person in my life. Today, I have more skills to describe this grief. The sorrow of death evokes strong, complex emotions that cause the main characters to evolve in my mind. In my *Love Series*, I seek to make a painting to speak to my mother after she had passed away. The depth of my grief brings two clear images to mind; one of my mother and another of a butterfly. With my main characters chosen, I select an environment to support the narrative. To help refine my idea I write a list of objects and their meanings, such as the butterfly being the symbol of spirit. I make edits, crossing out meaningless or unclear objects that do not tell the story. Finally, the objects that remain on the list are the most meaningful and necessary elements to develop my idea.

When I have settled on an idea, I begin my composition. I call this space-design. I divide my space into the foreground, midground, and background, to create visual depth in my environment. I begin to think about how to arrange my objects in this space to increase the sense of depth. I place an object in the foreground, close to viewers and bigger in scale compared to the objects in the background. I use size variation to increase the sense of distance between spaces. Another way I define space is through the use of compositional shapes. I use the theory like a connect-the-dots game. My objects and characters are these little dots, and I place them in a certain shape, such as a circle or triangle. As I connect these dots, I see movement flowing in my space. An example of this is seen in *The Madonna of the Meadow* (1505–1506) by Raphael, a master classical painter and architect in the Italian High Renaissance (Fig. 16). In this painting, Raphael had arranged his three main characters in a pyramidal composition. Mary's head is the top dot in the triangle shape, her right extended foot is the right base dot, and John the Baptist at the bottom left is the left dot. This famous triangular composition taught me how to use a shape in composition to direct and keep the viewer's eyes in that particular space. Before planning to put my characters into a space, I always consider the relationship between my characters and their environment in a particular shape first.



Fig. 16. Raphael, *The Madonna of the Meadow*, 1505 - 1506, Oil on board, 44 x 35 in, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

I place my main character, and a cameo role in a particular arrangement based on my composition. My main character is the major storyteller, so I put them in the focal point of my painting, where they will draw the viewers' eyes first. To create a focal point in my composition,



Fig. 17. Shiyun Zhou, *Hong Fen Ku Lou (Pink Skeleton)*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in, Private Collection.

I use both difference and contrast. For example, in *Hong Fen Ku Lou (Pink Skeleton)* (2020), my main character is a pink skeleton squeezed among multiple nude female bodies (Fig. 17). Being the only figure without flesh, my skeleton naturally became a focal point. To make the skeleton even more prominent, I increase the value contrast between her and the surrounding figures. The very bright light pink makes this character become the brightest point in the painting. To isolate the pink of the skeleton from the live flesh, I

wrap it with a dark brown garment which is the darkest dark in my painting. This high contrast draws the eye to the skeleton, making her stand out and become an obvious focal point.

For my supporting characters, I prefer to use animals. They are different from my main characters, and I often identify more with these animals. I like to hide them among a mass of other similar objects in my composition. In *Toy Store*, I place my two main characters sitting in the middle of the scene surrounded by a mass of toys and goods. A kitty of similar size and value as the toys is hidden in the scene. I make her almost invisible so she will not interrupt the story that belongs to my main characters. I suggest my personal preference for animals by including them, but not letting them steal the attention. Sometimes I use them as a stand-in for myself, an avatar, an audience quietly watching the story happen. For Instance, In *Bookstore*, I painted myself as a big cat standing in the dark front corner, her back to the audience. Compared to other

characters in the light, she is just an observer. This is a reflection of me being the painter in the story and connecting to my other characters.

I plan my values after the composition and character designs but before the color. Light, mid-tone, and dark are the three values I use to design a composition. For example, in *Plein Air Study Fall* (2019), after I found my composition and what plant I would include in my painting, I did a quick thumbnail sketch of the values in my composition (Fig. 18). *Where is my light? Where is my mid-tone? Where is my dark?* I try different value combinations such as a light foreground with a mid-tone midground and a dark background, or a dark foreground with a light midground and a mid-tone background. I keep switching light, dark, and mid-tone into different spaces until I find the value composition that makes my main character stand out. I



Fig. 18. Shiyun Zhou, *Plein Air Study Fall*, 2019, 12 x 16, Private Collection.

chose a dark foreground with a yucca plant in *Plein Air*. My main character, a Sweetgum Tree with beautiful star-shaped leaves turning bright red, yellow, and orange, is a mid-tone in the middle ground. The light sky in the background pushes the mid-tone tree forward because of the light and dark value contrast. The light background and the dark foreground create a depth of space from close to far. Grouping my values and arranging them in my composition determines the depth of my space and aids in determining the color-value choices I will make in the next step.

After I transfer my sketch to a painting support, I will use one transparent color to apply a thin first layer of paint, establishing the light, mid-tone, and dark values. Transparent colors like burnt sienna, sap green, or Arizona crimson are my standard choices for this stage. I choose transparent colors for my underlayer because they are bright and provide good contrast to the

opaque color I will apply in my second layer. When I apply my second layers, some of this under-paint can show through, which creates a multi-layer effect and adds visual thickness to my subject. I apply the second layer with multiple colors. While I am applying these layers of color, I will choose the color palette carefully. It needs to be able to convey the mood which I had in mind. In *Bookstore*, I picked a warm yellow orchid and burnt umber palette to define an old second-hand bookstore. The burnt umber is an earth color that creates a nostalgic and calm environmental mood for this bookstore hidden in the street corner. I use warm colors like yellow orchid and cobalt blue to describe the particular vellichor scent of these forgotten old books. This color-accent reminded me of the atmosphere of an old Chinese bookstore in my childhood. This palette creates a sense of isolation and being forgotten, and the color of the books speaks of their loneliness. Limiting my color palette choice is necessary to support my message and convey the specific emotion I want to deliver to my viewers.

As I keep adding different colors of paint to fill up all the blank space on my canvas, the narrative starts to take shape. Sometimes, however, I hit an idea block. I realize that the image in front of me is not the one I visualized in my mind. The colors and light sources do not speak to me; it is lacking emotional content. I know it is time to pause, to think, and to write. I will ask myself questions like *what do I want to communicate, what kind of emotion/mood do I want to express, where is my lightest light and my darkest dark, etc.* Until I figure out the answers, I choose to stay away and work on my other paintings for a while. Sometimes I find a solution while I am working on the other paintings, but what works best for me is to take a picture and look at it on a small screen, or to seek inspiration from another artist's work. Sometimes I will throw in different topics and unrelated elements that change the flavor of my piece. This is like throwing a tube of wasabi in sushi to freeze your brain with desperate tears, or mixing durian

into a pizza, which is unbelievably good. This mixing and matching can lead to surprising and unpredicted accents or sometimes create an awkward result. Eventually, I break through my blocks, and my story takes shape and scent.

Glazing is another solution to increase the sense of space and enrich color in some areas without needing to repaint every single detail. I add a glaze to adjust contrasts, like when I find an area is too bright to create the depth I want in the environment. This thin, dark layer can push my background farther back, or unify an area with too much variety in value. In *Birdcage*, I use Ultramarine Blue and Umber to glaze the space behind the figure. This causes the background space to push even further back, and the bright figure to stand out more. As the lightest value, the figure becomes the focal point, while the contrast creates a dramatic mood that tells the viewers there is a story.

When I need to enrich the colors in small areas like clothes, a face, or a highlight, I will also use a glaze. A layer of India yellow will add life to a dull face. If a cloth is too cool or bright, I add a glaze of warm Burnt Sienna to tone it down. Warm colors counteract cool colors and vice-versa. This technique provides a quick way to make adjustments to contrast, temperature, and color saturation. Glazing is like a teaspoon of honey or lemon leaves in my tea brewing process, it strengthens the flavor without overwhelming the main ideas.

I enjoy my tea brewing and painting processes; both benefit from creativity and patience. Brewing a nice cup of tea starts with a delightful teacup. I like to choose a cup that evokes a warm memory of a place or a person; a teacup with a story. I begin my paintings in a similar way.

My painting ideas come from my persistent memories of beloved people, families, familiar places, or animals. They come from the warm fluffy animals and the old book store

smell, the orange and green store tiles, and the hubbub of the crowded neighborhood where I spent my childhood with my grandparents. These precious memories inspire my ideas. In painting my memories, I fulfill my desire to record all the joy, love, and even sorrow of my life in my paintings. A painting is a physical object that I can touch and see; not like a memory that will fade in time. I will not forget the people I love and the place where I grew up when I have these memory paintings with me. I will continue to record all the precious moments in shapes and colors on canvas so that even if I forget one day, I can look at my paintings and be reminded.

CONCLUSION

Through my experience in the MFA program at LCAD, I have found my personal inner voice in my body of work. I have grown in my identity as a painter, a thinker, and a storyteller, but most of all I have come to realize my true identity as both an artist and as a daughter. Learning how to incorporate the stories behind these two major identities (artist and daughter), finding the emotional connection, creating character and environment placement, makes me understand how to use my painting to tell a story. The foundation of the program is not only about painting, but also about finding who I am. And finding what motivates me to paint, and discovering how to interpret my meaning.

It is a growing and changing process. I have grown in painting technique, and most importantly, in my personal voice. I like to tell stories, so I passionately paint narrative art. I live in the grief of losing my mother with a fear to show vulnerability, so I paint allegory and allow myself to express it in metaphor. From analyzing, researching, and describing every piece of the memories of my work, I find my personal healing from the loss of my mother with regret and grief that I could not release before.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. Shiyun Zhou, *Memories*, 2018, Oil on clay board, 12x12 in, Private Collection



Plate 2. Shiyun Zhou, *Birdcage Store*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 24x30 in, Private Collection



Plate 3. Shiyun Zhou, *Bookstore*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 24x30 in, Private Collection



Plate 4. Shiyun Zhou, *Toy Store*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 24x30 in, Private Collection



Plate 5. Shiyun Zhou, *Do You Know How Much I Love You*, 2020



Plate 6. Shiyun Zhou, *I Love You So*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 18x20, Private Collection.

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