

LOST & FOUND

LOST & FOUND

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Laguna College of Art & Design

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

May 2022

Laguna College of Art and Design
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Approval
Signature Page

Title of Thesis: Lost & Found

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ABSTRACT

This series of oil paintings is an analysis, a summary, a diary, and a confession. For me, creating art is a process of self-knowledge and excavation. Through art, I refocus on feelings and emotions to create a connection to the world around me. Time passes, and many factors influence who we are. Over our lifetimes, people experience similar struggles, regrets, and moments of relief. With every choice, there is loss and gain. Sunlight always comes with shadows, and every cloud has a silver lining. Art provides me an opportunity for non-verbal expression and communication about these ideas. Each person is a unique part of this world. I want to cherish this uniqueness in myself and others. The graduate program has enabled me to explore my inner mental activity more than ever before. Although I paint specific individuals, I am also recording the impressions, feelings, and abstract stories that swirl around them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my friends and many artists, whose encouragement and support are essential to my pursuit of art. Especially my mentor, Alla Bartoshchuk, cared for me in art and life. Her purpose and understanding of art and freedom have given me more confidence and courage. She is not only a mentor but also an incomparable and beneficial friend. Thanks, Peter Zokosky, an ever-contemplating artist and educator who always brings me a different feeling and perspective. Thank you, Peter, for your critical thinking and long-term vision. And thanks to the many, many of my friends and peer artists, you are the gentle side of the world and my fortune.

DEDICATION

To my friends, you will always be my fellow travelers. To my family, who, even though so different, we still try to tolerate each other.

EPIGRAPH

我想说生命并不是逻辑的，尽管它有逻辑的成份在。再低微的骨头里也有江河。我写，是因为我有话要说。

-陈年喜

I would like to say that life is not logical, although it has logical elements in it. Even the lowest bones have rivers in them. I write because I have something to say.

- Chen Nianxi

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LOST & FOUND

DESCRIPTION

As of September 20, 2021, the world population was approximately 7,864,437,300. Each of those people has a unique profile. A single person embodies a story, and a single person holds a fresh perspective on the world. 7,864,437,300 does not include the narratives of those who have passed away. For as long as I can remember, my portraiture has been character driven. Figure painting can be an endless subject.

No matter how different people are, their basic needs are the same. The need to live safely and freely, the need to be loved and respected and understood, and beyond that, to pursue an ambition. No one is an island, and the bell tolls for all of us. No one can live in this world without any connections. The stories of people, their relationships, and their choices form their lives. Each decision affects that life. Before becoming an artist, I had many thoughts and experienced many struggles. Why must I do art? Why must I choose a life full of uncertainty? During my teenage years, art was a subconscious choice, and I wanted to escape, to find a space where I could breathe. As an adult, my career path seemed like a spiral I had no control over, and art had an irresistible gravitational pull on me. Why did I have to make art, or rather, why did I have to face my inner world?

My thesis paintings, although portraits of other people, are about my story, which is about self-healing and communication. We are part of the world. I am part of the world. So, in my second year of graduate school, I decided to face myself sincerely with a series of paintings called *Lost and Found*. This series of works is about women—a subject I know best, told from my perspective. These paintings are visualizations of emotions. They are

symbolic memories. They are not specific stories with details. Instead, they are focused on characters and their corresponding emotions as I see them.

I hadn't had any significant setbacks in my academic, professional, and social life for the past twelve years, but I was diagnosed with depression eight years ago. I had high-functioning depression and at the worst time, I always had uncontrollable urges to cry. However, I didn't feel miserable about myself, so I started thinking, why is this happening? What was going on deep inside me that I couldn't overcome?

Perhaps it was family. Family relationships have always been tricky for me. When I was born, my relatives on my father's side immediately left the hospital because I was a girl. In 1991 China was still implementing the one-child policy, and my father was my grandfather's only son. So, the fact that I was a girl who couldn't carry on the family name was a disaster. For various reasons, my grandparents on my mother's side ended up raising me off and on until I was ten years old. During that time, my parents and I probably lived together for a total of two years. I never visited my paternal grandparents' house during this period. They refused to see me. In those days when the one-child policy was still strict, they forced my parents to risk losing their jobs by threatening to go on a hunger strike unless my mother gave birth to a son. There is a 7-year difference between us. Until I was 10, I didn't know what any of this meant to me because my grandparents on my mother's side were so good, and I thought my family was nothing special. But everything changed after that.



Fig 1. LinHui Ding, *Self-portrait Lost and Found*, 2020, oil on canvas, 36" x 24".

When I returned to my own home at age 10, my brother was already three years old, and I was not close to my parents. They did their job as parents, supporting me through school and raising me. Yet beyond that, I had to learn to take care of my brother and put his needs first. I am naturally over-assertive, and they didn't like me as a daughter with lots of opinions. We rarely communicated. At that time, my

mother told me that all the kindness people showed me was fake and only a result of their being polite, while her harsh preaching was real. So, until I went to college, I believed I was unable to gain my parents' approval because I was rude, ugly, and stupid. At the same time, I wasn't a sensitive kid, so I just accepted that and moved on with my life.

My painting 29 (Fig. 2) is based on one of my self-portraits from 2020. I was 29 in that painting. Those pink blobs in my arm represent the kindnesses of others which allowed me to keep going when I was sad and upset. The earlier version, *Self-portrait Lost and Found* (Fig. 1), has more color and information in the picture. This painting has a special meaning to me, it represents a milestone in my life. But at that time, my technique was not in place and this work was too rusty. So, I decided to repaint this story. Even as I accepted the reality that I was not worthy of love from my family, my subconscious mind was seeking love and



Fig 2. LinHui Ding, 29, 2021, oil on board, 30" x 24".

affirmation. Fortunately, I met many kind people in my formative years. My friends, my high school teachers, my aunts. The affirmation and support they gave me have become very precious and fill me with warm memories. My self-portrait 29 shows how I find the dignity that sustains me in the darkness. I had to hold on to these abstract memories and feelings so that I felt I had something to fall back on.

Self-portrait Lost and Found is the only painting from my first year of graduate school that felt dear to my heart. With the portraits of people, I wanted to make the message unambiguous. The face is the most recognizable part of the human body to other humans, and beyond that, the way feelings are conveyed varies widely. What are love and warmth? What are pain and loneliness? I wanted narrative chaos in my portraits at the time, so I decided to use large areas of color and texture to convey emotion in addition to the person's likeness. At the same time, I consciously used these elements to shape a sense of abstract space, where there was a particular spatial relationship between the figures and these blocks of color. This abstract space does not fit any environment. Then I painted 29, which led to this new series. The new series is more inclined to portray the personality of the character and the overall atmosphere of that person, no longer just an objective perspective, but a subjective sensation.

My parents weren't supportive of my choice to have an art career. Once I entered college, my hard work in my major paid off, and I was consistently in the top 5% of my

class. As the animation student union president and student representative, I became involved in school administration and started working outside of school as an illustrator. Everything seemed to be going well. However, my parents' negative comments about me never really improved. By the time I graduated, I had received the honor of being the best graduate in Shanghai, meaning that I was in the top 0.2% of graduates in the city that year, based on specific standards. Yet my parents did not even attend my graduation ceremony. After graduating, I worked, studied abroad, and kept my family at arm's length. We also called weekly and met on holidays that required family fun. My painful childhood was like a blurry bystander that no one paid attention to anymore, including me. But as I grew up, many realities began to surface. When my brother was 16, he received two houses, and I had nothing. When I wanted to start my own business, my parents refused to provide support, and they gave my brother 30% of the two companies under their name. They told me I could not get help to start my business because I was unqualified.

Meanwhile, my brother has never worked. They would continue to support my education, but I could not own property. Finally, I realized that because I am a woman, they believed that any material support given to me would ultimately belong to my husband's family. On top of it, the prevailing view in my society was that women had to go into marriage and become someone's wife and mother. I'm a completely self-supporting independent woman. So why should I change my personality and lifestyle for a potential spouse? Am I not entitled to have a life and aspirations of my own as a woman? And why can't my mother, who is also a woman, support my choice? Then I realized that my family and the environment around me were systematically misogynistic, and women were not allowed to have a life of their own. These thoughts brought me constant doubt and denial.



Fig 3. LinHui Ding. 30, 2021, oil on board, 30" x 24".

No matter how hard I tried to earn myself temporary freedom, it seemed to them that my ultimate destiny should be to walk into a nuclear family of my own. My career and aspirations didn't matter. Individual pursuits and ideas are secondary in this environment, where everyone has an assigned identity and destiny. My parents just happened to conform to their social roles, and they didn't understand that there was anything worth fighting for beyond that. We were

like the two ends of a rope, pulling at each other. And how much power can an individual have? They couldn't convince me, and I couldn't change them. I have scars from my family, but Chinese society perhaps suffocated me even more. Even if my parents had done better, I would not have achieved complete freedom in that environment.

After so many years of long reflection, I could finally accept my situation. Even though I know that my family is toxic, how can I not feel guilty that I am not the daughter they wanted? They are, after all, the family that raised me. Maybe my life would have been simpler if I wasn't me. But we cannot choose our destiny. The injustice I have suffered is not my fault. They do not know how to love others for who they are. A perfect life is a fairy tale and does not exist. Everyone has their struggles and challenges. Loss is an inevitable part of life. Instead of constant regret and worry, I believe we should accept the truth of life. 30



Fig 4. LinHui Ding, *Betty*, 2021, oil on board, 36" x 20".



Fig 5. LinHui Ding, *Abuela de Norwalk*, 2021, oil on board, 30" x 20".

(Fig. 3) symbolizes my self-reconciliation, my acceptance of the incomplete. Life is not perfect, but I am moving forward. My eyes are now open to my pain. In any case, that is a part of my life.

Growing up in such an atmosphere made it impossible for me to stop asking questions. Why does a person make choices, under what circumstances can they love others, and how can they choose to hurt others? What makes individuals so different? In difficult situations, should I fight or submit? Seeing the suffering of others, does one decide to understand or ignore it? I kept looking, listening, and searching for answers. I am not alone in my pain. I am even lucky that I have had the opportunity to grow, that I have had the chance to create and to speak my mind. It's not gender that causes my pain. It is people's perception of me. The only thing that can transcend that, I think, is genuine understanding and respect.

Slowly, I am learning to recognize, accept, and treasure the kindness of others and to accept the negative aspects of my life. Life is full of loss and gain, and I want to record it all in my paintings. Everyone is so different, and I see many different paths in life for



Fig 6. LinHui Ding, *Yo-Yo & Mao-Mao*, 2021, oil on board, 30" x 30".

me and my friends and family around me. It's so fascinating that language and cultural backgrounds don't stop us from making connections. This material gives me the urge to create. I admire them and value their sparkle and uniqueness. So, my *Lost and Found* series is about the people I've met in my life. I am most interested in their relationship to me, and how I see their life stories in relation to my own.

In my visual language, large areas of light color are cheerful and pleasant, while large areas of dark color are calming and thought-provoking. The paintings with bright yellow backgrounds belong to the *Found* series. In two paintings, *Betty* (Fig. 4) and *Abuela de Norwalk* (Fig. 5), I tell the story of the friendliness, affirmation, and encouragement I have received from others. There is a positive atmosphere around each figure. Both ladies are in their 70s, and they have wisdom and openness that has been tested over time. In *Yo-Yo & Mao-Mao* (Fig. 6) and *Masks* (Fig. 7), my nieces and nephews are still innocent children. I have good wishes for them. I hope they will have a better life and better opportunities than the children of my generation in China did. The large bright yellow color creates a positive atmosphere and offers my blessing and hope to them.

Each woman I am painting is so unique that I want to celebrate the differences between my friends. The world is vast, and each person's life is different, but we share a common experience as women. And what I want to express is respect for the individual. The *Lost and Found* series maps my personal experience. The models I chose are all women at



Fig 7. LinHui Ding, *Masks*, 2021, oil on board, 48" x 36".

different stages of their lives. They range in age from 3 to over 70 years old, and they show different stories. I care about these people, and I want to express that care. All these people, including myself, are ordinary individuals who have the value to tell their extraordinary lives.

The *Lost and Found* series includes various combinations of abstraction and figuration as well as different textures. Last year, I

experimented with textures in other works, such as thick oil paint to shape the edges of forms and a palette knife to carve lines on the wood panels. The textures and colors direct the viewer's attention and enrich the images. These abstract brushstrokes and textures are the language that I did not utter with my voice; they are part of the emotional story expressed through paint. These figures and blocks of color combinations are not rational conclusions but reflect my artistic intuition.



Fig 8. LinHui Ding, 26-1, 2022, oil on board, 23.5" x 40".

And the predominantly pinkish-gray paintings are projections of my world and belong to the *Lost* series. In the *Lost* series, I painted my friends. They are at different stages of their lives. Some are in their 20s like Emma (Fig. 8), and Jill is in her 50s (Fig. 9). I named the paintings in the *Lost* series after the age of the characters to reflect the stage of life they are currently in. But these numbers don't limit their choices; it's just the amount of time they've been through. Some are still finding their way; others are already taking stock of what they have lost and gained. What I show are the impressions and feelings they give to me. Emma looks directly into the camera and into the eyes of the viewer in this painting (Fig. 8). She is young and fearless. Especially in art, she has her own unique perspective and way of expression. And Jill, she always gives me a feeling of tender care. She is a gentle, great woman who really cares about the people around her. Her family also has experienced love and tears. Jill is a daughter and a mother who has been through thick and thin. She

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Fig 9. LinHui Ding, 56, 2022, oil on board, 36" x 40".

and her mother also had their differences, but she chose to accept and understand them. Her daughter was stricken with cancer as a child, and Jill did what she could to fight it. At the same time, she was a high school teacher. She was willing to understand and tolerate her adolescent students. I often think that she may not have known what a valuable quality this is. She was able to break the cycle in her family and become a loving mother. And when it came to the people in her life, she was free of bitterness and resentment, and she was able to understand the lives of others with a perspective full of kindness. Her art is also colorful and full of life—a feminine strength. I don't have her strength yet, and my current life phase is like living in ruins. Jill, on the other hand, has grown out of the chaos and cruelty of her reality.

RESEARCH

刀を鳥に加へて鳥の血に悲しめど、魚の血に悲しまず。聲ある者は幸福也、
叫ぶ者は幸福也、泣得るものは幸福也、今の所謂詩人は幸福也。」

出典は 齊藤緑雨「半文銭」

'Cut the bird with a knife, and sorrow for the bird's blood, but not for the blood of the fish. Lucky is the one who cries, lucky is the one who weeps, lucky is the one who cries, lucky is the so-called poet toda'.

When I was 14 years old, I remembered this passage from a Japanese movie *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*. Those who can make a sound are lucky. The voice here is not only the literal voice but the ability to express it. If there is no opportunity to communicate, there is no opportunity to be understood. If there is no voice, no one will pay attention to your message. The most important thing about art for me is expression and communication.

Limited by the physical body, it is difficult for people to see the world from the perspective of others.

On the other hand, art allows the audience to break through the boundaries that separate our bodies and feel the collision of souls. No matter what kind of art form, the essence of artmaking is an individual seeking recognition and understanding through communication.

Frida Kahlo's work is very inspiring to me because she taps into similar issues to my own. Her work contains a fiery intensity of feeling and shows her indomitable soul. Due to my background in academic training and commercial illustration, my fine art style is not fully defined yet. However, I aspire to qualities I do not possess, so I sincerely appreciate her paintings. For example, in the painting *Little Deer* (Fig. 10), she combines her portrait with a deer's body, shot by several arrows. This painting is a vivid self-analysis in which she records her pain and thoughts, and the deer pierced with arrows depicts her inner world. I



Fig 10. Frida Kahlo, *La venadita (little deer)*, 1946, oil on masonite, 9" x 12".

think the body of the deer symbolizes her vulnerability, and she is a victim in the story narrated in this painting. She conveys her pain, her feelings, and her understanding of the world through her

visual language. Likewise, my thesis series speaks to some of my struggles and feelings about the inner world. My challenge in creating this series of paintings is to communicate the universal human experience of pain and self-realization and have my emotions resonate with others. Using a strong voice, I wanted to show individuality and sincerity in the *Lost and Found* series. Loosely speaking, perhaps every person in this world is worth painting. Some of these individuals have gone through many struggles and much pain, and I shed tears for their hard path. But I don't seem to have the right to paint people I don't personally know.

For this reason, I thought it was better to draw people I knew and authentic experiences that I had. So, I decided to make life-size oil paintings of people or even larger scale paintings to intensify the individual's presence. With a clear and unmistakable voice, I want to show that this person is essential. I want to tell not just a story about this person, but also my impression of them. For example, the first painting of my thesis series was *29* (Fig. 2). It is a story about me and my warm memories. This work includes both loss and finding myself. There are always good things that happen occasionally, and these bright moments that have become memories continue to uplift me along the way. To convey my message, the parts about memory are abstract shapes in warm tones, with overall shades of pink and rose. And my visage is in black and white. This strong color contrast allows the viewer to understand the difference between my physical presence and my internal emotions. In this work, the grays of my body are stiff and cold, and the pink mass is soft and warm. Overall, the painting is a combination of figurative and abstract elements, a concrete person, and an abstract memory. The most fundamental aspects of my series are self-analysis and personal experience. Through this self-portrait, I expressed my story, but at the same time the process allowed me to better embrace my story. It is like reconnecting with myself by writing down



Fig 11. Ruprecht von Kaufmann, *Leaders*, 2017, oil on linoleum, 15 3/4" x 11 3/4".

the memory. I found the story and the feelings I wanted to express through my visual language. My memories, for example, are a bundle of soft, fragile, and fluid brushstrokes in the painting.

Regarding textures and lines, the work of Ruprecht von Kaufmann has had a significant influence on me. The realistic aspects of his portraits represent reality, while the abstract elements represent feelings and concepts, just as they do in my work. In Kaufmann's painting *Leaders* (Fig. 11), he uses abstract graphics and textures to create a

dream-like atmosphere around the figure. From my point of view, this artistic language is like poetry, giving the viewer more room for imagination. This resonance allows the viewer to channel their thoughts and feelings. In *Leaders*, Kaufmann draws the figure with soft and delicate brush strokes and boldly uses abstract graphics to cover the upper part of the figure's head. It makes the viewer think about the connection between abstraction and figuration, as well as the author's message. Likewise, in my *29*, I use soft rendering to represent the figure, followed by free and bold lines and abstract elements to symbolize memories and feelings. The combination of abstraction and figuration conveys



Fig 12. LinHui Ding, *23*, 2022, oil on board, 19.5" x 24".

the emotional message I want to express. There is something precious to me that warms me. The abstract elements outweigh the characters' importance because these abstract graphics are the protagonists of this story about emotions.

However, my work leans more towards large-scale graphic design than Kaufmann's complex visual language and muted colors. Because I have a background in commercial illustration, I am drawn to clear outer contour lines and simple graphic stages to convey my message. At the same time, abstract textures can have a storytelling quality. You can see that the marks and textures become part of the story. They are emotional. So, in my works, 23 (Fig. 12) and 37 (Fig. 13), the textures and colors become narrative elements. The painting 23 shows my friend Ryanne's struggles and negative emotions as she navigates the MFA program. At her young age, people are energetic and hopeful, but they also feel a lot of



Fig 13. LinHui Ding, 37, 2022, oil on board, 23.5" x 40".

uncertainty and insecurity. Many black blocks around her portrait are props to echo the expressiveness of her movements and her uncertainty. Alternatively, in the painting of 37, there is no doubt that the figure is in control of her destiny. The pink textures in the background are thoughts and feelings, yet KJ, also a friend and colleague at MFA, is in her 30s and is no longer overwhelmed by the things that sometimes unsettle Ryanne. KJ is the master of her thoughts. In these works, simple components can convey feelings more directly.

In my series *Found*, the figures are in the visual center of the image. All the graphics and colors direct the viewer's attention to the figure as the main subject of the painting. J. Louis also does this. His paintings have minimalist backgrounds and a pictorial sense of space, with the figure existing in the color space he shapes. His painting *Tsunami* (Fig. 14) is a simplified large block of color, with a wave of dark blue shaped like a recliner bearing the weight of the figure. These blue graphic elements exist over warm underpainting in Louis' painting that also includes rich textures and color layers. The same is true for the light blue in the background. The blue pigment covers a warm orange underpainting, shaping the depth of the space and giving more rich layers to the picture. Compared to the backgrounds, his figures are hazy and soft. His paintings of the figure are very focused on the depiction of the skin. The faces and hands of the figures have rich details and smooth textures. In this respect, my approach to painting the figure is similar, only more rigid and precise. His figures are soft



Fig 14. J. Louis, *Tsunami*, 2017, oil on linen mounted on a cradled panel, 48" x 48".

and light, mine are like plaster sculptures. Louis has also simplified the figure's clothing, allowing the viewer's attention to focus on the figure's face.

When I paint, what am I trying to say? This question has haunted me for a long time. Visual language is not a precise language, and people can interpret different messages

from one image. When I work as an illustrator and designer, I need to tell someone else's story, or to make a simple message look more prosperous and more engaging. For the whole of last year, I struggled with how to express my feelings. I'm very good at piling up images with pretty elements, and in a way, the real world doesn't fit the dramatic quality I want. In past paintings, I described an unreal world with lots of flashy visual cues or words to add drama to the scene. Now I'm faced with the challenge of telling a story in one sentence. And in that one sentence, what should I say? It's like that popular question, if you were stuck on an isolated island in the middle of the ocean for three years, what five things would you take with you? And of those five things, what two would you never give up? In this current series, I've chosen to tell each story in one sentence using two main things—characters and textures.

I'm looking for what is minimal. What are the things that are essential and what are optional? Do I need the background? Do I need this dress? Do the folds of this fabric help me? Maybe they do, perhaps they don't. I want to see if I can make someone understand my thoughts if I say only two words—a noun and a verb. Sometimes, I feel that oil painting is silent communication. The noun and verb are spoken with textured pigment, not words. So, I have given all I want to say, and you, in turn, can see everything you want to see.

In my painting called *Betty* (Fig. 4), I made this choice. Betty's head is meticulously depicted, except her clothing and background are large blocks of color with rich textures. There is no doubt that Betty gives me a lot of encouragement and affirmation as a professor. But there was a little story between us once, and she probably does not even know the impact on me. In 2018, I took her oil painting class when I first felt like making pure fine art my second major. As a double-major in animation and fine art, my schedule was packed, with at least 18 credits per semester. At the end of the semester, we had to present our final work.

When it was my turn, I did not even begin to talk about it, and Betty told the class that I had worked very hard on both majors and that I had done a great job on my final work, and so on. It was a very new experience for me. I did not even know Betty well at that time, and I was just an average student, so why did she care about me? It was so unique, even a little strange. After that, I maintained a friendly relationship with Betty. She encouraged me to continue my major in oil painting and wrote me letters of recommendation. I am very grateful for the kindness she offered me, and I haven't told her this story yet, because I feel weird sharing it.

Due to the pandemic, I did not have the opportunity to meet and shoot reference photos with Betty, so I asked her directly for her favorite photos. One of the photos that caught my attention was a photo of her in Italy. She was sitting in an old stone chair, smiling up and basking in the sun. I concentrated on portraying her face and hair in this painting, and I simplified her clothing into large blocks of white. The strong sunlight makes all the colors bright and cheerful, which fits the theme perfectly. Except for Betty's portrait, the whole picture is a large block of bright colors, creating a positive atmosphere full of hope. Since the visual elements of the image are relatively simple, I used different textures for her clothing and the background, with the yellow mainly shaped by the thickness of the knife and the white shaped by the large bristle brush to create the texture of the fabric.

The painting *Masks* (Fig. 7) shows my niece. I do not have much personal interaction with her, but I grew up with her mother. My works contain memories and expectations. In



Fig 15. Photo by Wong Mao, 2011



Fig 16. Photo by Yang YiMin, 2019

this way they are visualizations of my feelings. Sometimes a painting begins with a keyword like “masks.” What do I think of when I hear the word mask? Masks from the pandemic? Clown masks? Masks are often used to hide identity or to represent a specific meaning. When I think of masks, I also think of the Nuo opera (Fig 15), which I was interested in before making this painting. This primitive and rugged folk art with its ritualistic origins has often struck me as uncanny. The masks of Nuo opera (Fig 16) represent the gods or ghosts of

Chinese culture, and the gods and ghosts have powers beyond the ordinary. To me, these masks represent different groups of people, different paths of growth, and different choices.

A person's cultural background is almost never something they can choose. From the time an individual is a child, the culture surrounds them. It becomes part of you. I often wonder what it would have been like for me to grow up in a different background. Would I have been able to accept myself better? Probably not. Nothing is perfect. But these are useless speculations. Time cannot be turned back, and there are not that many choices in life. In my home culture, the traditional North China Plain culture, women are secondary. But there is hope for the younger generation of the future. I hope they can truly break free from the shackles of identity and become the characters they seek to be. The masks surrounding

my niece developed with Nuo dance from the 15th century. Nuo is a folklore activity that has been passed down. It is often accompanied by primitive dance movements and loud traditional music. People put on masks and take on the guise of mythological figures, sometimes begging for rain from the dragon in charge of wind and rain, sometimes taking on the guise of the land god to get rid of the plague. The actors mostly wear masks representing the gods, and in some areas of China, they apply face makeup. This activity is a simple combination of folk entertainment and prayer. I did not choose the elaborately carved idols in the Chinese temples; they are too distant and do not belong to everyday life as these ancient Nuo opera masks do. These masks are rough, exaggerated, and have a rustic vitality.

According to tradition, Chinese genealogies only record the names of males, and daughters are just numbers or not eligible to be recorded at all. There are shades of patriarchy everywhere in local traditional Chinese cultures. From my point of view, I don't think the culture the masks symbolize is more important than any one individual. So, in this work, they are just symbolic decorative elements representing possible human choices for my niece to make in her life. And my niece, the eleven-year-old girl, is the center and subject of the picture. In this work, the Chinese culture represented by the masks is the background element. I like to think that children are free and that they have unlimited possibilities. The Nuo opera culture, on the other hand, is for people to put on masks and become a symbol in the culture. I hope she can break free from the traditional cultural expectations to develop her own potential.

My niece loves to draw. She is also a child's clothing model, and her mother would like to be her best friend. I want her to be able to choose her life without constraints and be



Fig 17. LinHui Ding, *Plan 1 for Masks*, 2021, digital



Fig 18. LinHui Ding, *Plan 2 for Masks*, 2021, digital



Fig 19. LinHui Ding, *Plan 3 for Masks*, 2021, digital

initiative. As shown in *Plan 4 for Masks*, I combined a reference photograph of my niece with my sketch of the

who she wants to be. These masks were initially intensely colored, but I decided to paint them to appear as unpainted wood to maintain the color unity of the image. In addition, I did not want these masks to overpower my niece as the main character. All that bright yellow in the background is her bright future.

METHODOLOGY

Focused on the word “mask,” I made some sketches for my painting of my niece. Having some visual examples for my thinking helped me plan for the painting. Fig. 17 is the initial sketch, in which She seems to be outweighed by the masks. I rejected my next drawing (Fig. 18) even though it had strong storytelling potential, because it did not convey that she is the main character who acts. My next step was to design a digital color sketch, *Plan 4 for Masks*

(Fig. 20), from a black and white digital sketch (Fig. 19). I wanted to express that the choices represented by each of the masks are equal, and that my niece is in the very center of the picture and has absolute



Fig 20. LinHui Ding, *Plan 4 for Masks*, 2021, digital

masks in Photoshop to establish the composition for the full-scale painting. To better illustrate the details of the figure and the masks, I chose a 36" by 48" canvas. Larger features and a figure in direct eye contact with the viewer can capture our attention and hold it. I used a pencil to make abbreviated lines on the canvas to decide the position and size of the elements to represent.

Next, I used Raw Umber to under-paint the masks and the portrait as shown in Fig. 21. After that, I experimented with three different yellows to develop a sunflower-like bright yellow for the base color. The yellow in this step was still very thin and could not cover my previous pencil sketches. Through discussions with my instructor and classmates, I subtly changed the design in the last drawing and created some texture in the background (Fig. 7). At this stage, the figure becomes the undisputed subject, and the surrounding masks exist only as decorative elements.



Fig 21. LinHui Ding, *Masks (in progress)*, 2021, oil on board, 48"x 36".

I want the *Lost and Found* series to express my pursuit of life's destiny, as well as how my artist friends have pursued that journey. There are always missing parts in life. Especially as artists, we need to keep conversing with our inner selves to understand what they are. We develop ways to fight against loss and confusion. Neither the world nor our experience of reality is perfect, so this image series includes chaos and depression. We search for order and logic in the



Fig 22. LinHui Ding, 26-2 (*in progress 1*), 2022, oil on board, 23.5" x 40".



Fig 23. LinHui Ding, 26-2 (*in progress 2*), 2022, oil on board, 23.5" x 40".

chaos, as we explore our inner world. Our inner world changes with time, hopefully in a positive direction.

I painted a series of portraits of my friends, reflecting their different character traits. Each of them has a story that inspires me. My painting 26-2 of Jackie, a friend and colleague at MFA, emphasizes her subtlety and focus (see Plate 4). Jackie's works are highly rendered, large-scale canvases, mostly depicting people and plants. Her painting is also the result of her self-examination of her inner world.

When I first saw her work, I was struck by the amount of energy she puts into a piece. Such highly rendered canvases require a long period of concentration and effort. It is a very different style of art from mine.

As I began to design the portrait of Jackie, I created a series of sketches. Then I decided I wanted to focus on her face. After arranging the right lighting conditions with lamps, I took reference photographs in my studio. Since many of the other works in my series were on a white background, I decided this one should be unique. I started with a black background as

shown in Fig. 22. After roughly determining the proportions, it was time to start the basic painting. In this process, I considered the scale of the work. I painted with a large brush



Fig 24. LinHui Ding, 26-2 (*in progress 4*), 2022, oil on board, 23.5" x 40".



Fig 25. LinHui Ding, 26-2, 2022, oil on board, 23.5" x 40".

directly. At this stage, I used blue tones of Payne's Grey, and some pastels as shown in Fig. 23. But after an interval, I decided that this color combination was not severe enough. This portrait should be more realistic, and too much color would prevent me from adding abstract elements later. The viewer's attention was drawn to the pink of the face, which is not what I wanted. So, I decided to cover it with ivory black and titanium white grays. After about three layers of painting, I felt that the character's face had achieved my desired effect. At the same time, I kept some design surprises, such as the dripping and flowing paint.

To create a difference in value and create a contrast with the softness of the face, I started shaping the background with a large silicone wedge and pure ivory black as shown in Fig. 24. The silicone wedge can make an even surface and a thick edge if pushed hard enough. This texture became an essential part of the *Lost* series because this texture shapes a sense of broken space, giving the image the appearance of existing between sanity and dream. At this point, I needed to start working on the final design. 26-2 (Fig. 24) was complete

enough as a character to have a recognizable resemblance. She looked calm, serene, and had

a bright, determined gaze. The next step was to tell the story I was trying to convey in the picture—her wisdom and ability to see through the fog to focus on artistic expression (Fig. 25). Producing large-scale works requires thoughtful planning and long-term dedication, self-discipline, and commitment. It is difficult to predict the rewards in an art career, but the strong desire to create keeps us from leaving. I see these traits in Jackie. The shades of pink paint are very fluid due to the addition of a large amount of Gamblin mineral spirits. I used a large brush and a silicon wedge tool to push the color out repeatedly, creating curved swirls around her eyes. These abstract elements represent the fog she is able to break through. I also accentuated the details of her eyes to make her gaze more intense.

CONCLUSION

These paintings are intuitive and full of emotion. However, when I describe them through words, I truly understand their meaning. Over two years, I have gradually learned to understand, listen to, and express my subconscious. Therefore, this is not only a series of visual artworks but evidence of a dialogue. As such, the *Lost and Found* series records the unity of knowledge and action. Knowledge without action is madness, and action without knowledge is emptiness. I am very grateful to have this opportunity to reconcile my past experiences. Now that I understand them, I want to stop, rest, and find my direction forward. I am thankful to all the people I have met in these years. The paths of others may not be replicable, but they can offer a light in the fog. There is no end to my path in art, and I will continue to explore as I find my way.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. LinHui Ding, 29, 2021, oil on board, 24 in. x 30 in.

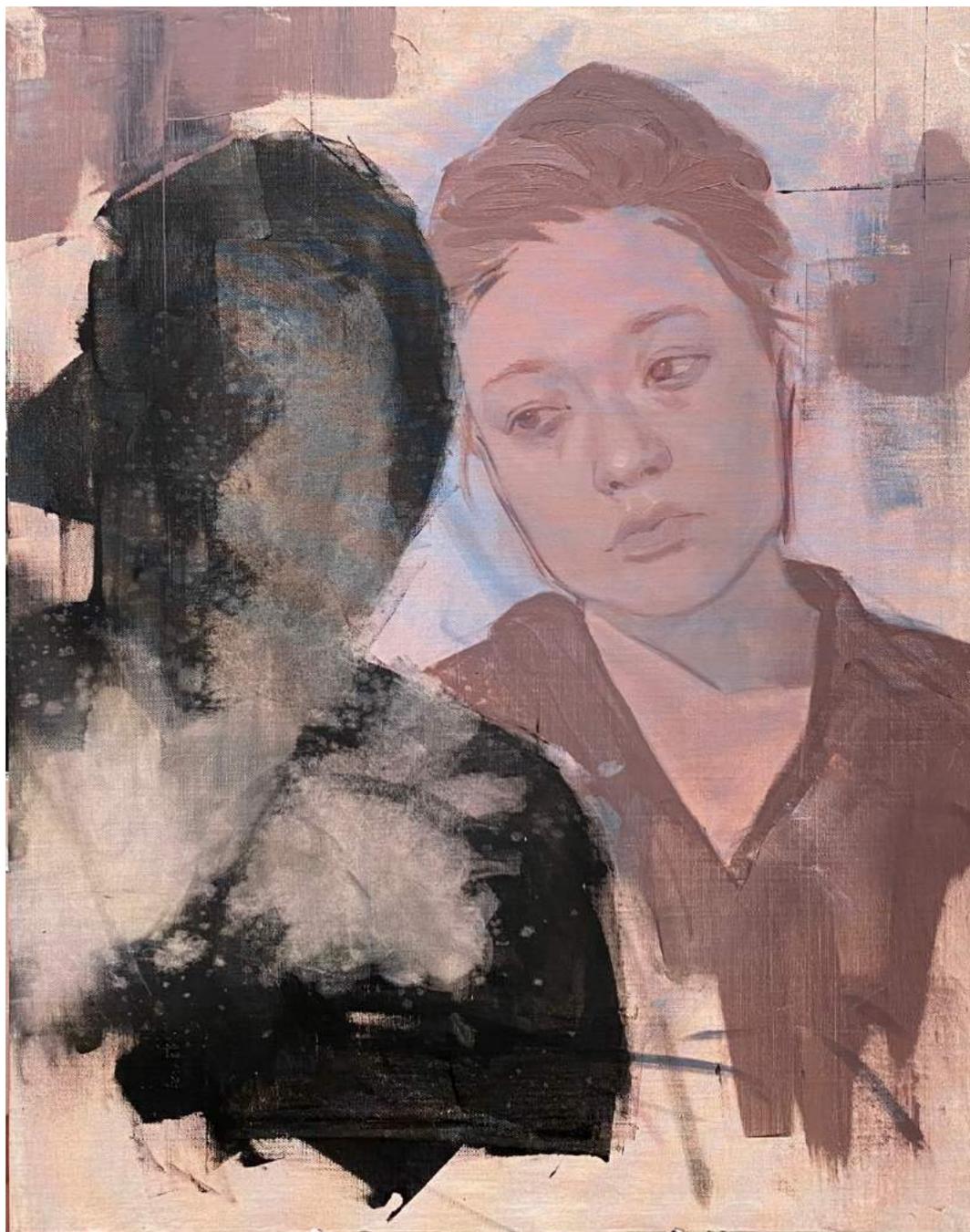


Plate 2. LinHui Ding, *30*, 2021, oil on board, 24 in. x 30 in.



Plate 3. LinHui Ding, *26-1*, 2022, oil on board, 23.5 in. x 40 in.



Plate 4. LinHui Ding, 26-2, 2022, oil on board, 23.5 in. x 40 in.



Plate 5. LinHui Ding, 37, 2022, oil on board, 23.5 in. x 40 in.



Plate 6. LinHui Ding, 56, 2022, oil on board, 36 in. x 40 in.



Plate 7. LinHui Ding, *Betty*, 2021, oil on board, 20 in. x 36 in.



Plate 8. LinHui Ding, *Abuela de Norwalk*, 2021, oil on board, 20 in. x 30 in.



Plate 9. LinHui Ding, *Masks*, 2021, oil on board, 36 in. x 48 in.



Plate 10. LinHui Ding, 23, 2022, oil on board, 24 in. x 30 in.



Plate 11. LinHui Ding, *45*, 2022, oil on board, 24 in. x 30 in.



Plate 12. LinHui Ding, *Self-portrait Lost and Found*, 2020, oil on canvas, 36" x 24".

ARTIST'S NOTE

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