

## **Ancient Chinese Art and Culture Through a Contemporary Lens**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the intersection of traditional Chinese craft, personal aesthetics, and a deep fascination of working with paper in the creative. Drawing upon the rich heritage of Chinese paper-making techniques and Chinese traditional craft, I examine how these practices have influenced my artistic practice and shaped my unique visual language.

Through a detailed analysis of their creative process, I demonstrate how making becomes the content of work and how careful attention to materiality and technique forms the basis of my practice. Ultimately, this paper argues for the importance of process in artistic production and invites readers to consider how the act of making can shape an artistic expression's form and meaning. My work combines historical and contemporary elements. My passion with the past, particularly traditional craftsmanship, and my desire to engage the present by reinterpreting Chinese traditional work are at the heart of it.

**Introduction:**

There is a system in most of the crafts I have come across. In pottery, it is the proportion of water and the thickness of the glaze, or the reaction of metal and heat. And printmaking has its stubborn systems and unpredictable results, such as the use of acid in etching print process. One difference between visual art and craft is that, for example, in painting the focus is on the final result, while in craft figuring out how to achieve the result is as important as the outcome itself. The process of a craft practice becomes the main focus.

My creations are not about getting a result. My practice is the process of competing with myself. It takes a lot of time and I am continually faced with unforeseen problems. In addition, my process is about "communication," communication with myself, the tools in my hands, and the materials. When I start to work, the material I'm working with and have researched and learned about controls me, telling me what is possible. The material is a stubborn lover and I am a flexible partner.

The subject of my creation changes from day to day, and most of the time it is very fluid. In all my studies, I found myself fascinated by traditional Chinese culture and traditional crafts. China's cultural contents and documents have become a massive database for me. The unparalleled craftsmanship and aesthetics of China's long history constantly

challenge me and inspires me to experiment. The experimentation inspires respect for the artists and craftsmen. In exploring their arts in my own way, I connect with people of another time, understanding how they expressed themselves. By incorporating this exploration into my work, I blend the ancient with what I see and feel in the present.

I am not a sharer. Often my work is like a diary. When I am making it, I am a solitary explorer of an unfamiliar world, and when I finish it, I am released from that world.

Moreover, many of my works change from one exhibition to the next. Just as the material chooses me, the exhibition spaces also choose me. As a maker, I want to make the best of these materials, techniques, and venues. Any feelings the viewer experiences are their own, whether the same or different from mine, because the moment the work is exhibited, it is no just mine.

### **The Importance of Traditional Culture and Craft for My Art**

For me, making art is about respecting the traditional culture and pursuing self-identity through belonging to that tradition. Since I was young, I have been interested in learning many Chinese cultural arts—painting, calligraphy, music, and dance. Craft and art support each other and for me can't be separated. I am very interested in many arts in China, mainly because of their fantastic craftsmanship. However, these traditional crafts require a lifetime of study, so most masters specialize in one craft from the beginning. Although I

studied them for a short time, in my own way I transformed them into visual art.

The boundary between craft and art is blurred. Craft and art can be inseparable or distinct. The first time I understood what craft means was during the holidays. In my mind, I see the old grandmother holding old-fashioned scissors and creating a zodiac paper-cut for me in less than a minute. I assumed I could just cut it out one thread at a time thread at the time, but when she gave me the scissors, it took me a long time to complete it, and I accidentally removed a few connection points. This was the first time I understood that practice makes perfect. Any skill, be it craft or playing an instrument or performing, needs time and practice. From then on, I searched for the right place to build my skills. I learned to play piano because I love music, but although I enjoyed it. I was still always a spectator in performing arts. Being a visual artist is the avenue that lets me feel I am creating something.

When I look at my practice, it's composed of objects that have passed under my hands, like a museum full of well-loved books, ceramic. Sometimes I describe myself as nostalgic, because I am obsessed with making these objects. The reason for many crafted objects is that they are made to be used, but under the skillful hands of the master, their design and pattern becomes art. At the end, a beautiful window is still a window, and an exquisite fan is still a fan. And they all need the intervention of people's senses to be complete. This perspective has influenced my absorption of different types of art. My

hope is that my audience will experience my art through their various senses.

Traditional Chinese images, colors, and patterns have always been my fascination. As a researcher, I try to understand the meaning behind them as much as possible, which is difficult since every object and shape has various meanings in Chinese culture. On a more personal level, I am fond of using circles and squares as basic shapes. In ancient Chinese culture, the concept of harmony between Heaven and Earth played a significant role in society. People believed Heaven was round, representing completeness and unity, while Earth was square, representing stability and balance. This belief was reflected in many aspects of ancient Chinese life, including the design of the architecture, the binding of books, the concept of emptiness in a drawing. The most intuitive of these are square and round designs commonly used in buildings and other structures to symbolize the harmonic balance of Heaven and Earth. This belief also influenced the layout and design of cities and gardens and the placement of temples and other religious buildings. Up to today, square and circular patterns influence even such concepts as yin and yang and feng shui.

As my essential source of inspiration, those principles let me find balance in the way I work. I made the photo book *Time* in 2021 mostly of film and cyanotypes. This book reflects my understanding and interpretation of basic structural shapes. When I decided to make it, I collected expired black and white



*Time*

film for the book image. The book is printed as cyanotypes and is structured as a square

with a circle as the central image. The lines and surfaces have equilibrium.



*The Ebony Seven Screen Scroll Chair*

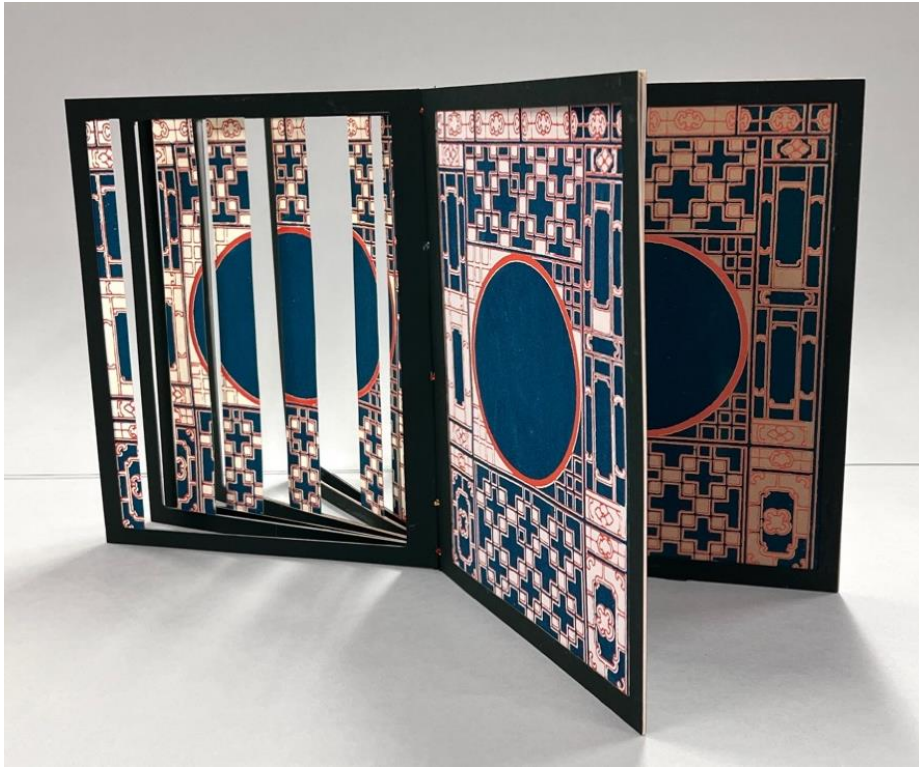
One of my books from last year, *Moonlight – Home*, consists of silk-screened images. The pictures in it are the forms and patterns of traditional furniture. When I was making this book, I studied a lot of different traditional furniture and architecture. The Ebony Seven Screen Scroll Armchair is an ebony chair from

the early Qing Dynasty. The overall shape is square, and the round-cut wood has the prominent transitional style characteristics of the Ming Dynasty through the Qing Dynasty. I got the idea of my *Moonlight – Home* book from this chair. I used squares as the main pattern and the central circles to echo the Chinese round window. It is a double-sided book used to interpret the effect of viewing the scenery from the window. For the first time, with this book I was inspired by an actual object. The patterns in that chair are presented in the form of a book.



*Moonlight – Home*





*Moonlight – Home*

### **Material and Craft as Key to the Scientific Process of Art Making**

One of the most flexible materials in fine art creation, paper, provides a good example of how closely materials and skill are related. Paper is foundational to many types of fine art, including paper crafts, printmaking, and drawing. Paper is a perfect material for these mediums because of its qualities, including its absorbency, texture, and strength. Paper may also be worked in various ways, such as folding, cutting, stacking, and embossing, which enables the creation of a wide range of finished goods from a single raw material.

Materials, fine art, and crafts are closely and intricately related. The direct similarities

between many crafts and the adaptability of materials like paper are two essential elements that distinguish this relationship. The term "fine art craft" refers to a diverse range of mediums, each of which calls for a particular combination of tools and methods. Every medium, from painting to printmaking, mandates the use the use of special materials that have been carefully chosen for their unique characteristics. The interplay between materials and craftsmanship is an essential aspect of the creative process, and it highlights the limitless possibilities of human imagination and skill.

The scientific method and the creative process both involve experimentation and observation, creating and testing hypotheses, and applying methodical problem-solving techniques. Artists employ their imagination and technical prowess when creating art to investigate novel concepts, mediums, and methods. Therefore, artmaking can be seen as a form of scientific research.

The scientific method starts with a query or problem and then uses observation and experimentation to address it. I learn about the world and find inspiration through observation, through looking at other artworks, watching nature, or being aware of my environment. I frequently begin with a concept or idea with which to develop in my work. Those ideas might be from my personal experience, recent news, or just my imagination. Then I use tools, methods, and procedures to realize my concept. I do much the same investigating crafts associated with paper.

In my research, I found a British designer Shannon Clegg employs plants and flowers as a starting point and traditional craftsmanship as a format. To create something fresh and distinctive through thoughtful usage and reconstruction. With a fresh mindset, Clegg incorporates tradition and nature into modern living through home goods and kitchenware. One such attempt is her Bouquet Gallery series, in which she gathers abandoned, soon-to-wither flowers and plants and molds them using homemade molds. To form the items and flowers into a basket-like shape, she organizes and compresses them. Typically, fresh flowers live around 10 days, but after her process, they can last up to 5 years. The plants are entirely different in shape, but they retain their original structure and colors despite losing moisture. The conventional pressed flower inspired the piece, but by changing it from a plane to a three-dimensional shape, she made it sculptural and three-dimensional. Clegg begins her art by going back to archival methods of conserving flowers. She studies plants preserved by botanists throughout the world and the sorts of equipment they used for gathering and pressing. (“Dried and Pressed Flowers Are Molded into”) Clegg’s way of creating art suggests the importance of a scientific methodology, which has similarities to my methodology.

In the beginning, my understanding of the scientific process in art making was vague and confusing. Artist John Cage, his artwork and methodology, helped me find my way to my standard way of working, the scientific process. He persistently rejected traditional

aesthetics in his work, irrespective of the medium, by restricting or removing the artist's freedom of choice. Cage used a system of random numbers drawn from the Yijing to compose his paintings, which was his preferred way of randomizing his operations.



*Grow Alter- Detail*



*Grow Alter*

Similarly, when I work, I always set up some rules. My 2022 Work in Progress Exhibition included the piece *Grow Alter*, a folding paper installation. I used papers that differed in size, color, and texture, but limited the folding technique to bellows folding and Yoshimura origami. This structure gives flexibility and mobility to the paper with adopted the same folding technique. I utilized elasticity and foldability to change the

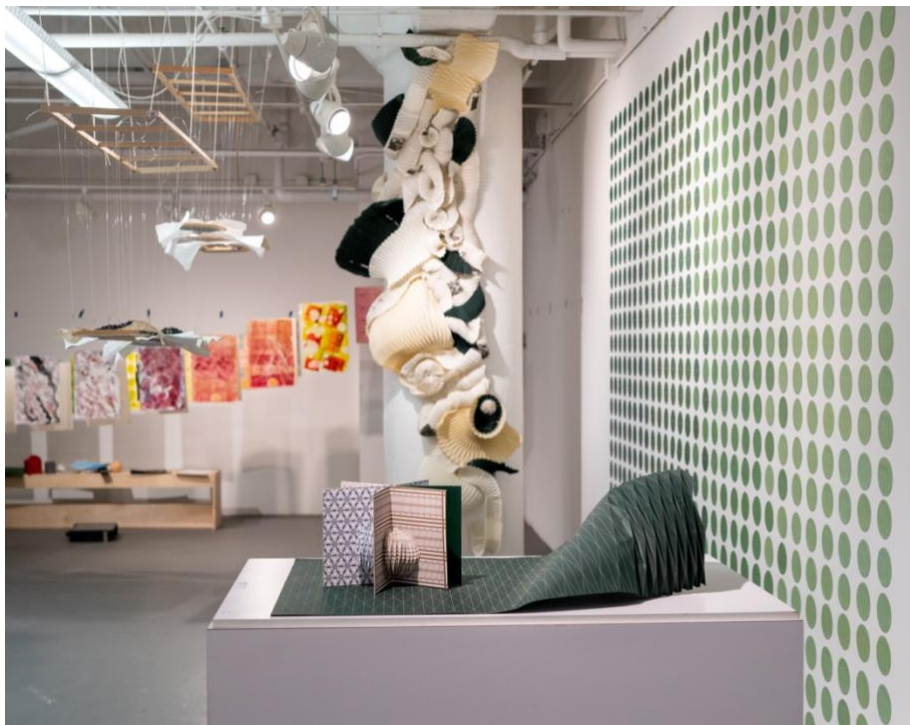
dimensions of each piece of paper. It was presented as something organic from the deep sea. The folding itself is architectural and mathematical, and the simple paper-folding sculpture is imbued with vitality as a result of the refraction caused by the interaction of different angles and light.

In the world of art, the debate between hand-made and machine-made has been ongoing for years. While some artists swear by the traditional methods of hand-crafting their art, others embrace the use of technology to create their masterpieces. In my own work, I have found that the boundary between the two is often blurred, and I have come to appreciate both hand-made and machine-made techniques. I am committed to exploring different techniques and approaches to my craft. In addition to purely hand-made works, I have also learned to use various machines in my art-making process. For instance, when I was making *Grow Alter*, I found that using a laser cutter to etch the lines was more efficient and precise than hand-drawing them. I know that I am not perfect, and if I want to draw regular and repeating crease lines on a large sheet of paper, I prefer to use a machine to ensure that the lines are uniform and consistent.

Creativity is frequently regarded as the driving force behind the production of masterpieces in the world of art. However, the act of creating art is not always glamorous or inspiring. Artists must sometimes work long hours and repeat the same duties over and over, almost like a machine. In my creative process, I've discovered that repetitive labor

can be challenging and rewarding. When making art, I frequently have to follow a series of rules or guidelines to accomplish the desired effect. For example, following a particular color scheme or using specific materials can feel excessively constricting. However, I have found that by embracing these rules and treating my work like a machine, I am able to produce consistent and high-quality results.

Systematic and creative boundaries are clearly evident in my artwork. The fixed use of color in my works is an expression of my aesthetic. How I conceive and design a work also takes into account how it will be presented in an exhibition. In the 2022 Book and Print Work in Progress exhibition, I attended to the theme of mechanics and repetition. I limited the theme color. The primary colors of the large, multi-section piece on the wall



2022 Book and Print Work in Progress exhibition

are green and beige. And beige is used as a breathing color. When I work out a color scheme there is always a breathing color. That is unconsciously chosen which reflects my subconscious need for harmony in my work. I attribute the inclusion of these colors to the personal meditation resulting from the mechanical repetition involved in craft and art making. Creating in this way is therapeutic for me; when I'm in the zone and going through a sequence of steps, I lose myself in the process and almost become a machine. There's a certain satisfaction in repeating a job and seeing incremental improvements with each iteration.

Of course, this repetitive labor can become tedious and draining. It can be difficult to remain motivated and engaged when working on a project requiring the same task for hours. At these times, I try to break up the monotony by taking a break, experimenting with new techniques, or discovering new sources of inspiration. This combination of disciplined repetition and creative experimentation, I think, is important to the art-making process. However, embracing rules and approaching my work like a machine, as well as research, are essential in my producing proficient and emotionally resonating art.

### **Paper in My Craft: What Exactly Is Paper**

Paper is a common medium, used for many purposes, drawing to industrial paper products. Paper has always been with me as a consumable. It is a common medium,

used for many purposes, drawing to industrial paper products. Printmaking was the beginning of my learning more about it. I learned that different printing techniques used different paper. However, it was in 2020 that I started to understand paper in a fundamentally different way. At the time, I knew little more than that paper varied in thickness and toughness. I understood that paper was a common medium, used for many purposes from drawing to industrial products. Now, I see components. Paper is made from fibers extracted from various plants, such as trees, bamboo, and cotton. The fibers are cooked, beaten, and turned into virgin pulp, the first step in making anything that involves paper. The unique properties of pulp, such as softness, hardness, and flexibility, make it an exciting and versatile medium for artistic expression. I became fascinated by the questions: What is paper? What is paper art?

In my practice, I follow my intuition and let the material, in this case paper, guide me. So I go back to the beginning, to “pulp.” The works in my thesis exhibition involve different processes, but they all begin the same, with pulp. Paper is the subject of each work, rather than having a supporting role. The first step in papermaking is to combine fiber and liquid. To make the materials I need, I choose different types of fibers depending on their characteristics and then stir in compounds such as polyethylene oxide (PEO) and polyacrylamide (PNS) to slow down the water flow to help me have more control. When I am making paper by hand, the unknown and uncontrollable are always part of the process. I can choose the fiber, how finely it is cut, and how long it is pressed, but I



cannot remove the elements of temperature, water flow, or human intervention. This is why in many cases, works that start with paper are both feasible and infeasible.



*Paper-rug collection – Bloom*

I use various colors of pulp for several pieces in my exhibition. The paper rug collection includes large-scale flat handmade paper. Each piece can be used as an independent work or laid out together to create an atmosphere. In my exhibition they provide an atmosphere for my paper sculpture *Resting Stop*. *Resting Stop* is a hollow three-dimensional sculpture made of pure paper pulp, which in this case combine

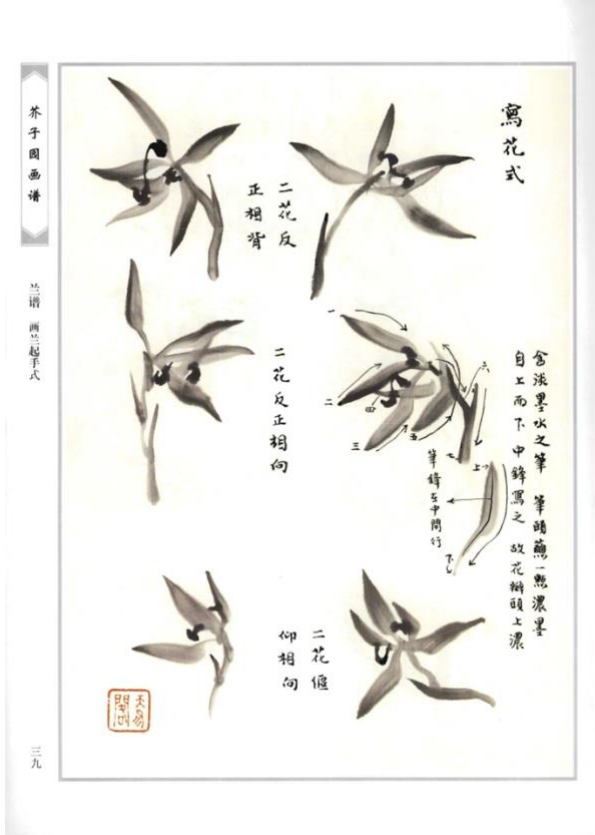
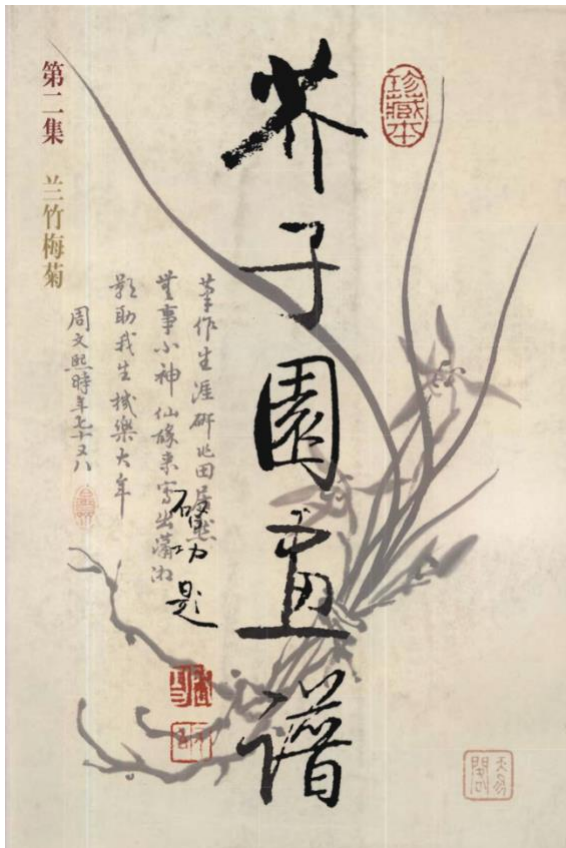


*Resting Stop*

the softness of cotton fiber and the toughness of abaca fiber. Uncharacteristic of what we think paper can do, this sculpture can bear heavy objects. Although for this exhibition, I chose to use the platform to showcase further paper works. The paper flowers that are made with Kozo fiber using Eastern paper making methods. The paper made by this method has a natural fiber texture which simulates the botanical texture of flowers. The overall treatment of flowers refers to the treatment of traditional Chinese hairpin flowers, and the dyeing method is borrowed from the petal treatment method of silk flower craft.

Pulp painting, painting directly on a surface using colored pulp, is a craft that can be seen throughout my thesis exhibition. The pulp used in pulp painting is super fine. This is a long-beaten fiber, and, because it is extremely fine, because it is extremely fine it can be incorporated into the surface of handmade paper like paint.. It contrasts to regular paper which is crisp and fragile. My primary reference was *Mustard Seed Garden Book*, also known as *Jieziyuan Painting Biography* and *Jieziyuan Painting Book*, a famous manual of traditional Chinese painting compiled in the early Qing Dynasty. The manual includes early examples of color printing, making it a valuable historical artifact. But I particularly value it because it is a painting textbook. In Chinese painting, the canvas is rice paper (Xuan). The pigments are ink and Chinese painting pigments. Chinese painting pigments

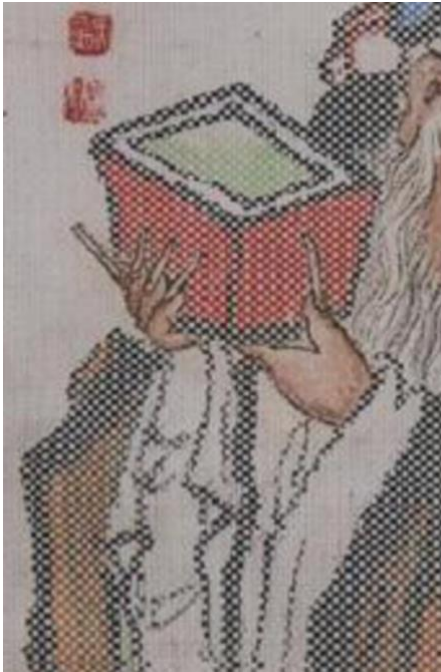
behave similarly to watercolors which originated in Europe, but the two are entirely different types of pigment. Chinese painting pigments are more similar to gouache. In



### *Mustard Seed Garden Book*

order to create the effect I wanted, I mixed the paper pulp with gradient colors and also used a brush and watercolor to touch up areas. The colored pulp simulates the intensity of color, and the watercolor works as a final color check. The original rice paper (Xuan) is closer to Kozo, but I chose sisal as the base paper to create a similar feeling as rice paper (Xuan) and is good for pulp painting. When I made the sisal, I kept the fibers medium-length to create a feel similar to rice paper (Xuan) and create a good base for the pulp painting.





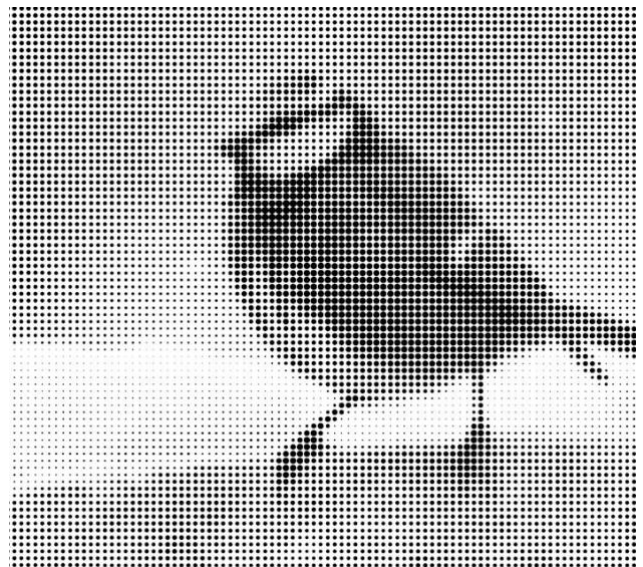
*Traditional Yunchung paper Weaving*

In my thesis exhibition I include works that use pulp painting as only the first step. The next step involves the craft of paper weaving painting, another traditional Chinese art. That art begins with a traditional Chinese painting which is then cut into 2-3 mm and then cross-woven with 2-3 mm rice paper. This technique can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty. It is a craft that is about to be lost. One reason for this is that this craft was

historically related to women, which led to its being passed down only to women and primarily in Yunchung Country, Fujian Province. Another reason for the disappearance



*雾里看花- Flower in the Fog*



*halftone*

of the crafts is that paper weaving techniques cannot be replaced by machines. One striking quality of this craft is that the resulting works have a visual effect similar to the halftones in contemporary printing.

After completing my pulp paintings, I cut them into strips and began weaving strips of plain paper through the painting. This process made me into a laborer. After a while, I thought about using laser cutting instead of traditional cutting, but the softness of the paper made that impossible. So I went back to the traditional process of cutting it by hand. I experienced tension, fatigue, and feedback from my own body. It made me wonder if the ancients felt the same when doing this. If you make one wrong cut, the painting will be ruined. I physically felt the interaction of paper and tool – the hardness and flexibility of the different types of paper, the sensation of the blade cutting, and the different feel when weaving occasioned by varying densities. In my graduation



幽竹烟雨—Misty rain, deep in the bamboo forest 21

exhibition, I extracted this intense experience of paper-weaving my paintings, presenting three weavings with different visual effects. At the same time, I also used some Chinese vertical scroll mounting techniques to complete the wall display.

It is always important for me to provide a unifying atmosphere for pieces in an exhibition. In this case, the theme colors for the whole exhibition are the colors of spring. The works are different, but central to each is the theme of paper. Each work is simultaneously independent and complementary.

## **Conclusion**

The intersection of history and contemporary art has become an increasingly prevalent theme in the art world. Contemporary artists are drawing inspiration from historical events and figures and, in turn, are challenging the conventional narratives of history. The reinterpretation of Chinese traditional artwork in contemporary art encourages us to engage with China's rich cultural heritage. Contemporary artists are drawing on traditional Chinese art forms and using them in new and innovative ways. For example, the artist Xu Bing's work incorporates traditional Chinese calligraphy into contemporary art, creating installations that challenge our understanding of language and communication. Language is an enduring theme for Xu Bing and is explored and

investigated through various mediums.

After going to other countries, Xu Bing felt he related and appreciated his own culture more. As time goes by, I feel the same way. In an interview, Xu Bing was asked, “If artists keep their eyes on tradition, and even use the topic of Chinese culture/ China as a strategy, will it be a limit to their creativity?” (“Xu Bing: Instead of Relying on Tradition, What Do You Rely on?”) To that he replied that limitations can add fuel to creative works. Also, that one does not create a piece of artwork based on how much it is associated with a tradition or culture.

Xu Bing’s creations have no fixed form, which gives me more confidence to try various mediums. His work *The Book from the Sky* was produced without him knowing how long it would take to finish and what it would evolve into. He created a new typeface, which he printed in the traditional way, using the old skill of carving and printing the characters. The characters were based on the traditional Chinese writing style, but they had no meaning. I too follow the traditional crafts, learning and practicing them step by step, but then questioning what I could add or do differently.

In my research, I discovered a Chinese puzzle ball called Guigong Ball (Chinese: 鬼工球; pinyin: guǐ gōng qiú). I saw it on the website of the Palace Museum. The ball includes 9-15 different hollow balls each with a diameter of less than half an inch and



Guigong Ball

each able to rotate freely. Modern technology, whether 3D printing or CNC cutting, cannot replicate the craft of creating such balls. I experienced that limitation when I made my paper-weaving paintings. Technology is a new tool that can help me go in creative directions, but it cannot do everything. History and modernity coexist for me. I learn from and am inspired by history. But I have used contemporary technology such as 3D printing, laser cutting, and material rendering in connection with papermaking to create watermarks. And for my thesis exhibition, rather than creating a traditional Chinese painting, I painted with paper pulp, but then accessed the ancient craft of paper weaving paintings.



My art reveals a collusion of history and contemporary art. At its core are both my fascination with the past, including traditional craftsmanship, and my interest in engaging the present by reinterpreting Chinese traditional work.

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