

Exploring Jingnan

Jingnan Cheng

Master of Fine Arts

Book Arts / Printmaking

The University of the Arts

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Thesis Committee:

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Abstract

My art is presented through different mediums and methods, including pulp sculpture, screen prints, monoprints, tie-dyeing, installation art, and more. The mediums and methods I choose are all used to express my inner thoughts, from pain and anxiety to lighter, happier feelings, like inspiration and joy. My art doesn't have a pre-made form. It is subconsciously inspired by what I experience. It is abstract, not illustrative, and time is thematically important. I place great value on interactive pieces because I feel that is the most powerful way to experience art.

The first time I drew was in kindergarten. My father bought me colored crayons, and I didn't choose a color, but instead randomly picked up the crayons and started to scribble on a piece of paper. The pattern was very chaotic. The paper was filled with swaths of color. Little did I know that this random crayon-scribbling kid would grow up to be an artist preparing her Thesis Exhibition.

I never thought I would study art. When I was a kid, art was uncommon in China, and studying art was treated as an escape for people who were terrible at academic study. Also, only those who were already good at painting or were very good at drawing could study art. I did not think I was good at drawing and did not like drawing. But today in China, studying art is more respected, and my mom, after seeing talent in me, sent me to art school. Now, I've gone from scribbling with crayons to having my Exhibition.

When I was applying to schools, I had to prepare a portfolio. I started with sketches. In China, we were taught to copy other people's artwork. There was no creative innovation involved. But when I came to The University of the Arts, I didn't need to copy a painting endlessly and repeatedly. The University focused on everyone's individual creativity. I love this. I think I am more suitable for American education. Once I came to The University of the Arts, I began to enjoy making art. But it came with its own set of problems. Instead of making a piece of art because I felt inspired, I would just make art to fulfill homework requirements. During each work critique, it was difficult for me to speak about the meaning of the work. In my sophomore year, I started to think about how to put some meaningful thoughts into my work. By my junior year, I began to find something that inspired me: my hometown in China.

In my senior year, I started to get into making art about my hometown and Chinese traditional culture, and this continued into my first year of graduate school. My hometown is a beautiful city that is surrounded by mountains and water.



Jingnan Cheng, *Mountain*, 2022, pulp paper installation.

When making my mountain piece I spent a long time by myself figuring out how to make it three-dimensional using paper. I finally got some advice from my teacher. I made the mountain out of pulp paper. First, the fabric needed to be beaten into a pulp, and then the pulp had to be colored. The mountains were layered one by one and hung on the wall: from a distance, the mountains seemed to float in the air. To create depth, I used different shades of blue and green in two different sections. The mountains on one side are colorful and vibrant. On the other side, they are quieter. The whole work presents a mirage scene: the brighter side is beautiful and fantastical, and the quieter side is more realistic.

When I made my mountains, I needed to shape them with my hands little by little. There was no fixed shape for each mountain in advance; everything happened little by little in the

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process of creation. It was the same when I was creating monotypes during the first semester of my second year in grad school. I didn't know what the pattern would look like before I finished it because I didn't have a draft in advance. I am not afraid of making mistakes in the creative process. I love art that is sudden and inspiring rather than art that is too pre-planned. Whatever happens, will happen.

I didn't realize it for quite some time, but a lot of my work was inspired by my feelings. A health crisis the summer before my second year of graduate school led to my art becoming even more explicitly tied to my inner thoughts, especially my darker and more painful ones.



Self-Portrait II: Death, 2022, screen print on muslin, 35 × 44 in.

In my *Self-Portrait II: Death* screen print, which I am including in my Thesis Exhibition, I explore some of those darker thoughts. As seen in the image above, those dark thoughts were expressed in part through exceptionally bright colors. I got the idea from the artist Daisy Parris, who uses bright colors even in work that evokes feelings that are far from happy. She inspired me to use the most brilliant yellow for death in this print. For this piece, yellow represents sunshine masking pain. When I was at my worst, I felt numb and unhealthy. My heart would beat quickly, and I would feel like the next second I was going to die, and I would imagine falling into a pool of blood and giving up struggling. I represented this feeling through the blood-like red at the side of the image in my screen print, which also doubled as the bloody pain I felt inside. Because I couldn't control my painful feelings, I didn't know when they would come or what other new symptoms would arise. So, I would just wait, and time would pass slowly. The yarn poking out of the screen print represents my hair and the long passage of time—my hair kept growing while I waited. I became so emotional and scared that I didn't want to look in the mirror, which I represented in this self-portrait with blue dots covering my face. I felt like I was dying. But I wouldn't show that to anyone. I became very sensitive, and it caused me to not be able to live normally. Now, I can express these feelings through art and will be doing so in my Exhibition Thesis.

That first semester of my second graduate year, I turned to monoprints to express my feelings and my deeper emotions. For a while, I was making monotypes every day because every day came with different/new emotions. This daily exercise helped release my stress. I enjoyed the process a lot. The pressure I exerted as I handled my tools and the feeling of those tools as I applied paint to my matrix, the plastic board, let out emotions. When I make art inspired by my dark feelings, it's usually more abstract and focused on pattern and color rather than the realism

of my mountains. It doesn't have a pre-made form, but it is subconsciously inspired by what I experience: patterns, texture, and color express my inner thoughts.

Daisy Parris is a painter of psychological space (SIM SMITH). Her works are examples of how abstract paintings, especially through color, can express reflections, emotions, and fears. In my work, I often use bright colors to represent happiness and darker colors to represent sadness, as I did in my Fall 2022 monoprints. However, Parris uses colors in the opposite way. She taught me that bright colors could also evoke the negative, as I did in my self-portrait, especially depending on how they're presented. For example, in Parris's *CRYING IN YOUR ARMS*, the brushstrokes are very jagged and messy rather than smooth and pretty. I look at the texture and see the struggle. The harsh lines are dark and resemble blood. It looks like she took her anger out on the canvas. In her piece *MY MIND HURTS*, however, Parris used red, but there are also other colors like orange, pink, green, and blue. This makes the painting more lively, with the action all over the surface rather than concentrated in only certain areas of the canvas. The brush strokes, although some are harsh, are mostly smoother scribbles that resemble crayons like those of a child.



CRYING IN YOUR ARMS, 2020 oil paint on canvas, 79 x 165 inches (200 x 420 cm)

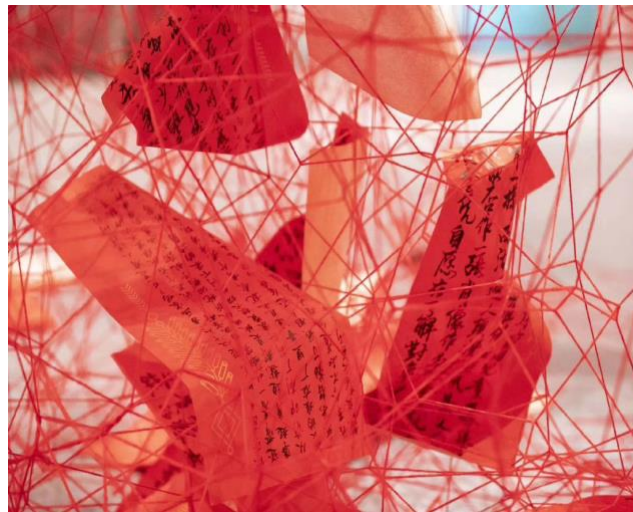


MY MIND HURTS, 2020 oil and collage on canvas, 200 × 320 cm (78 ¾ × 126 in)

The Japanese installation artist Chiharu Shiota is one of my greatest inspirations. I have learned much from her work. Those works represent her thinking about the body, mind, and soul, as her reflections on life and death (Mun-Delsalle). She also uses color to convey emotion. She talks about how she uses black, white, and red thread to represent different feelings (Mun-Delsalle). My work is more personal, but her art, like mine, isn't literal, but abstract. In 2019 I saw her massive artwork *Hand to Hand* at her *Textile Art Triennial* show at the Zhejiang Art Museum in Hangzhou, China. It was shocking to see a whole installation composed primarily of silk threads, which is also the most important medium for her three-dimensional creations. Walking into this work, I seemed to be wrapped in the red threads. The color red in this installation is more about life and death and painful human experiences rather than the positive ones that I usually associate with it. In that installation the audience seemed to be part of the work; people were connected by the red threads, which were intertwined with each other, like the intricate relationship and connection between and among people. In her piece *Hand to Hand*, the red thread wraps wishing papers, red paper on which wishes were written. I stood in the

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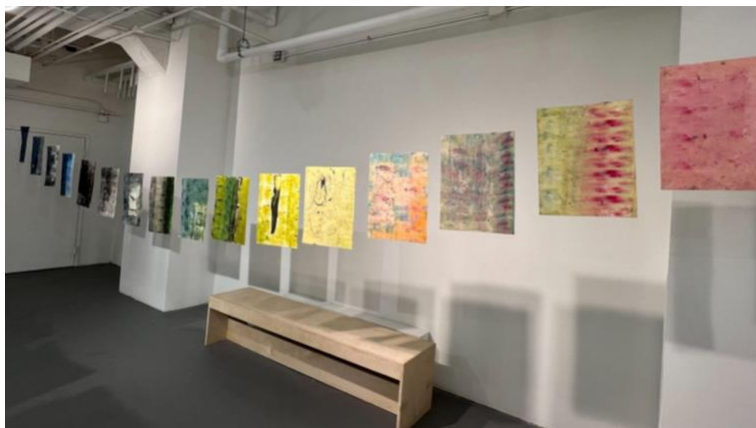
installation reading one of the wishing papers, making me, and everyone else who did the same, part of the work. It felt unifying, and I liked that. I thought it was beautiful that art could do that.



Chiharu Shiota's *Hand to Hand* at Zhejiang Art Museum, Hangzhou 2019

Shiota's influence helped me think of my mountain artwork as an installation. I wanted to present my hometown mountains on a large and interactive scale. That seemed the best medium

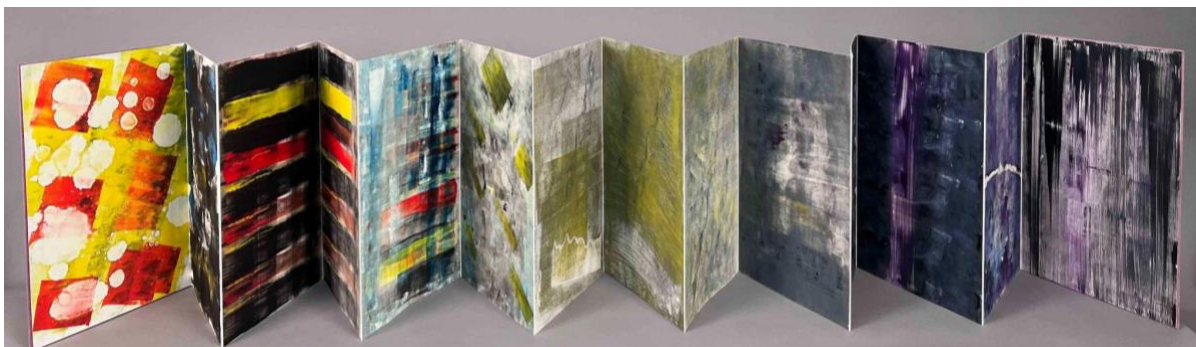
to show where I come from, to immerse my audience in how I was feeling. When I considered presenting my monoprints in the fall 2022 exhibition, I thought of turning them into an installation. I wanted to order the monoprints from dark to light to show the audience what it was like to go from darker thoughts to lighter and happier ones. I wanted the placement to be very intentional, just as Shiota presents her work. I wanted to give the audience the sense of being immersed in those emotions.



Jingnan Cheng monotype prints, installation 2022

Unfortunately, when I finally put up my installation, I did not get the feeling or the result I was hoping for. The visual impact wasn't as strong as I needed it to be. My teacher then

suggested that I create an accordion book out of them. When I did that, the images became more interactive and gave the reader a sense of shifting through emotions; when I held the book, I felt surrounded by the images. The work in my hands had become huge, and I had become small. This is the effect I wanted to achieve from the beginning. I will be including this book in my Thesis Exhibition.

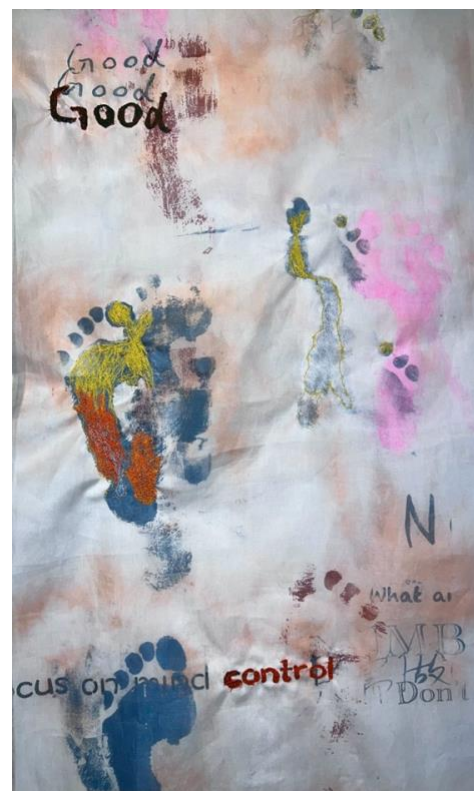
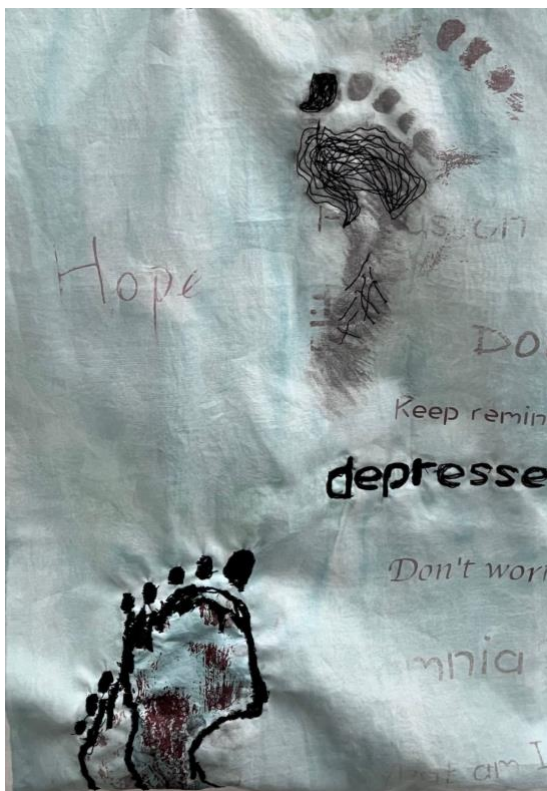


Jingnan Cheng Inner World (accordion book version) 2023

The final part of my Exhibition is a piece called *Footprint Journal*. This work reflects my feelings that success is achieved by taking one step at a time, doing so steadily, and knowing bad things will pass. When I heard the English phrase “One step at a time,” it got me thinking in terms of long paper trails on which there would be images of my footprints, representing the

journey of my life. My *Footprint Journal* is an interactive documentation of my experiences with anxiety.

The first thing I printed on the cloth was my footprints, made by brushing black ink on the bottoms of my feet. As I developed the project, those footprints changed considerably. I made them in different hues and values and in different ways, sometimes creating marks with thread. But they all remained prints of my feet. By documenting my footprints, I have left a physical record of the steps I took and the struggles I faced. Footprints can also represent a physical presence, and in my work, they can capture my physical presence as I move through the world.

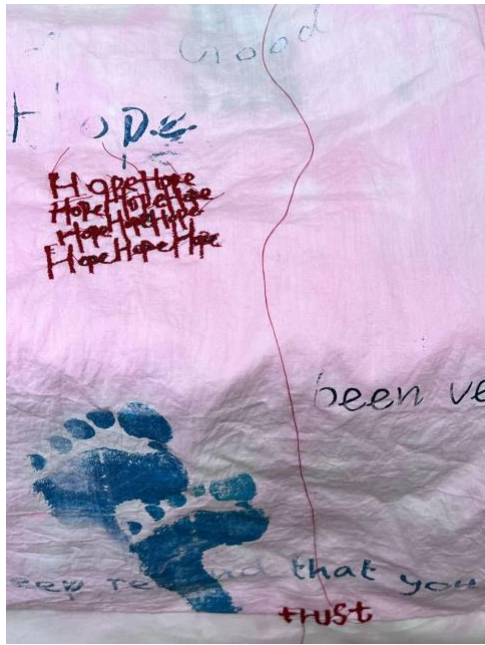


Jingnan Cheng *Footprint Journal detail on foot* 2023

This piece also includes language, in part inspired by Daisy Parris's use of language in her work. In her painting *SORRY SIX TIMES* "Sorry" is written six times. "Sorry" is a word that resonates with me. Someone can say "sorry" for feeling bad about something, even a small mishap. When I first came to America, my English was much worse than it is now. I used to be afraid to talk with people because I might not understand them. I kept saying "sorry" when people would talk to me because I felt bad and wanted them to excuse my language mistakes. I learned from Parris's use of language in her artwork that I could combine words with visual art to help get my thoughts across. The text in Parris's painting adds to the piece visually, providing a focal point. These visuals express feelings that the meaning of the word cannot express alone. The painting connects the visual and language.



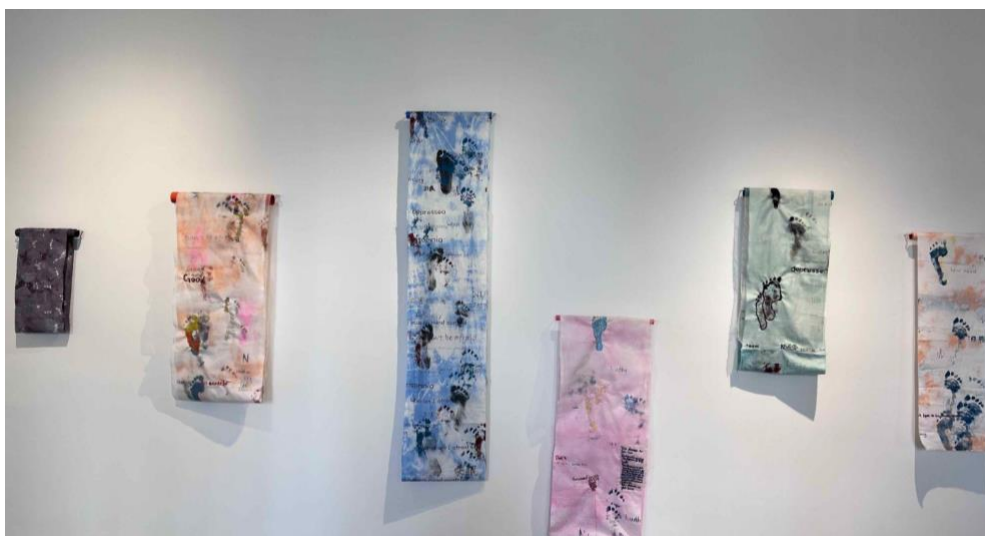
SORRY SIX TIMES, 2022, Daisy Parris oil and collaged canvas on canvas 50 × 40 cm (19 ¾ × 15 ¾ in).

Jingnan Cheng Footprint *Journal detail on text 2023*

When I had my panic attack, I wrote down my feelings in my diary. In that diary, I always used Chinese, so that I wouldn't have to think about how to write my thoughts down. For the background of my footprints piece, I transcribed some of my diaries from this painful time. I have also supplied English translations for the non-Chinese audience. The phrases record how I found my power and hope. I want to create a dialogue between the meaning of words and how they are visualized. Sometimes just fragments of words can be seen, sometimes they are layered over each other, sometimes they are handwritten, sometimes created with the sewing machine, and sometimes printed in different typefaces and colors. Language shapes our perceptions and experiences in part by how they are rendered visually. The text from my diary, now on the fabric, supports the themes of the artwork and offers additional layers of meaning and interpretation. Language contributes to the richness and complexity of the artwork and helps to convey its message in an impactful and nuanced way.

In my footprint piece, the cloth is sewn together to form a loop. This creates a sense of continuity and never-ending motion, which can represent the cyclical nature of anxiety and the cyclical nature of living. Each cloth will be looped around a roller mounted to the wall of the gallery. The audience will be able to pull the cloth down like it's a never-ending roll of fabric. In so doing, the audience contributes to the continuous motion of the piece, engaging with it in a personal and meaningful way.

For this piece, I used different kinds of cloth: muslin, silk, and organza. I sewed organza on top of muslin, following the shape of footprints, to create different layers of mark and color. I also tie-dyed some of the cloth. Tie-dyeing is a way of coloring fabric by folding, twisting, or crumpling it into different patterns, tying it with string or rubber bands to hold the shape, and then dyeing it. The resulting pattern in my exhibition represents the chaotic and jumbled nature of anxiety. The use of bright, bold colors in tie-dye cloth can be seen as a way of expressing emotions that are often difficult to put into words. When I experience anxiety, it is sometimes a struggle to articulate how I feel, and tie-dyeing, for me, physically releases and visually expresses those emotions.



Jingnan Cheng Footprint *Journal 2023*

The overriding theme for my Thesis Exhibition is resilience in the face of pain. I want to show, through my use of color, materials, and installations, that no matter what happens in life, life keeps going, and we have the strength to keep up with it. My artwork aims to capture and heal the complex emotions that people experience. I believe that art can be a powerful tool for self-expression and thus for healing, and that's what I want to convey in my work.

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