



The River of Time

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Abstract

Through a visual art practice and research, this thesis explores my personal background as a Chinese immigrant, through depicting scattered childhood memory to seek overlooked connections among people, objects, and places. By investigation of theories of human geography, social psychology, philosophy, especially Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* and Maurice Halbwachs's *On Collective Memory*, I considered how people's sense of belonging to homeland is strengthened through memories of ordinary objects and everyday interactions. In relationship to my practice, I define memory as a semi-fabricated hallucination. I further invoke time in my projects in reference to Svetlana Boym's concept of contemporary nostalgia.

The paper analyzes my projects, *The Tuesday Afternoon*, *Snow*, and *River*, which I produced during my study in the MFA program of Emily Carr University. I employ watercolor painting and animation installation as my medium, inspired by artists Luc Tuymans, Christian Boltanski and William Kentridge, to explore the following questions: how do fragmented still images and dynamic animations in dark spaces transmit the feelings of loss and disorder caused during immigration, and the ambivalence of memory? Could these practices create a space of intersection for personal and collective memory? How does the use of obsolete technology contrast with the contemporary concept of time in rapidly developing society?

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I also wish to acknowledge my parents and friends for their love that supported me though this process.

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my grandmother.

Introduction

As an artist, I like to depict ordinary objects and humble experiences from my memories with watercolor paintings, animation and installation. I am interested in these daily memories because they hold values that can link people with a place. As a Chinese immigrant who arrived in Canada at the age of twelve, I went through a difficult process of adapting to a new life and reconstructing identity. During that process, memories of my old home haunted me in the form of scattered images. From these memory images I can learn how I gradually build connections with people, objects and places through everyday interactions. At the same time, these memories reveal a sense of ambivalence because they are mixed of real and constructed information. I am curious about how this form of reminiscence might be linked with the dislocated¹ experience of immigration.

Due to the increasingly globalized world and rapidly developing transportation in recent decades, traveling through geopolitical regions becomes a prevalent phenomenon. The International Organization for Migration estimates “that there are 244 million international migrants globally (or 3.3% of the world’s population),” and about a quarter of the population are from China. (World Migration Report 2018) These immigrants usually face a complex psychological process that affects an individual’s identity, resulting from culture shock and mourning over the losses inherent in migration. This mourning process often accompanied by nostalgia -the yearning for old homeland. I notice that I share the difficult process with a large group of people. In order to further address this universal experience, I look into theories of human geography, social psychology, philosophy, and also works from artists who interested in similar topics of diaspora, memory, narrative and time to find inspirations for my artistic practice. My research began with my personal immigration background, through depicting scattered childhood memory to seek overlooked

¹ I use this term to generalize the uncomfortable feeling of people who are away from their native land, and not able to fully integrate into the new culture and linguistic environment.

connections among people, objects and places. During my study in the MFA program at Emily Carr University, I choose watercolor painting and animation installation as my medium to explore how fragmented still images and dynamic animations in dark spaces transmit the feeling of loss and disorder during immigration, and the ambivalence of memory? Could these practices create a space of intersection of personal and collective memory?

I am employing autobiography² as a support to research on self and identity. To ask questions and seek answers to phenomena I experience in life is a mode of thinking for me. This attitude keeps me reflectively attentive to the ways I live through experiences, thus I can better understand myself, and find solutions to life. I begin my practice with a recollection of self history in order to interpret the past from the standpoint of the present, and then build my understanding on immigration, memory, narrative and time through theoretical research. Also, I investigate artists' works that navigate similar interests I mentioned above to understand the situation of my work in the contemporary art making context, and to expand on the potential of my research area.

Through the artmaking process, I adopt the form of autobiography as a catalyst in the recollection of personal experience that speaks to the power of memory in generating affect. I also transform theoretical reference into visual language create a space for viewers to experience. The major medium I use shifted from watercolor painting to animation installation in the Fall semester of 2018. This decision was made due to the intention to enclose viewers in a dark space with larger-than-life dynamic images to trigger an immersive experience. Each project followed with a test on small group of people to experiment if the topic and question is transported to viewers, in order to optimize my creative practice.

² Autobiography is a method used to understand one's self. "A significant feature of human lives is that they require recollection,... resituating, reinterpreting, and rewriting the past as a function of one's ever-changing present. Life events, therefore, may be considered "episodes" in an evolving narrative of the self, and just as the past is perpetually rewritten from the standpoint of the present, so too is the self"(Given 47) Therefore, the relationship between self and autobiographical narrative is being a dialectical one, as the self is the source of autobiography, autobiography is the source of the self (Given 47).

Subject Position

I had two major moves in my childhood. Each time it caused me a pain due to separation from home and the change in living habits. At the age of ten, I moved from Jiangsu to the more developed province of Zhejiang with my parents. I have been rootless³ since then. It was my first time experiencing the uncomfortable mood swings caused by loneliness and dislocation. When I was twelve years old, I immigrated to Canada. The resettling process came with a strong sense of loss: loss of friends, loss of familiar linguistic environment and loss of a sense of belonging. I suffered from the pressure and anxiety of acquiring a new language, assuming new roles, and experiencing new ways to relate to others.

This change in my life, however, stimulated my art practice. I see visual art, especially when depicting personal memories, as a way to retrospect and consolidate my identity; at the same time it operates as an external communicative tool, by passing the need for specific linguistic knowledge. I became an observer and collector of memories and the ordinary in everyday life. In my way of seeking values in the memorable experiences, I notice that the meaning of a geographical place does shift by people's affect. In other words, intimate experience can attach people to a place from which can evolve one's sense of belonging to homeland.

Even after 10 years living in Canada, the same length I lived in my hometown, the strong sense of rootlessness continues to haunt me. The growing uncertainty of where I belong is destabilized further by the fact that I am disjointed from both Chinese and Western culture. This promoted me to pursue an explicit identity. There is an ambivalence between longing for a Chinese community while simultaneously being habituated to a Canadian living environment. I am now far away from my

³ The word rootlessness I used here is to describe myself have no sense of belonging to a particular place. I no longer have a home to return in my birth place Jiangsu since my whole family moved to Zhejiang. However, I only lived two years in Zhejiang before I came to Canada, I do not see it as my hometown.

hometown, geographically and in terms of time. How do I feed the young self, who stops growing, and exists in the internal of me with the hunger for belonging?

Even by knowing that home is a fantasy that does not exist, the imperfection of the land is concealed by the sentiment of longing, and I still intensively bond to it. I share an idea with media artist and professor of comparative literature Svetlana Boym that the past reveals the potentialities where the future is born in. Boym states in his book *The Future of Nostalgia*, “[O]ne is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future.” (351) In my art practice, I create space for the fantasy of home to lie, to expand, to activate reflection.

I am also inspired by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity, “that is, a sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function.” (Ricoeur, 73) In Ricoeur’s idea, the knowledge of the self is an interpretation, “that the self, narratively interpreted, is itself a figured self - a self which figures itself as this or that.” (80) In a sense, the remembered personal history is sometimes fabricated or mixes with fact and fiction. It embodies his/her imagination to the past to fill in gaps of memories and create a coherent life story from the standpoint of the present. This concept helps me to form a fundamental concept of my practice. It is through the narrative mediation in my work integrating discordant fragments into a concordance story that I interpret my experience being a Chinese immigrant. Also, from the work I produce my viewers can appropriate the narrative to project their own life story, which is related to their identity.

There is a memory deeply imprinted in my mind. The first few years when I started my life in Canada, I often turned off the lights and used the computer in the dark room to chat with my family and friends back home. The act of turning off the light is a manifestation of longing to isolate myself from the outside world. Hiding in the dark enables me to concentrate without being disturbed by the surrounding environment. Even though I was talking about living in the present moment with family and friends, images of childhood memories come to haunt me. I cannot remember a complete scenario. They are broken, magnified in details. I see in my

memories: my grandmother, childhood playmates, my father, my mother, my mother's colleagues in the hospital, the shop keeper, the milkman, and sometimes the figure of myself. I am not able to recall the person's face clearly, only a part of their body. With this memory, I have the following questions for myself to consider during the creating process: What can a dark space bring to people? Can the darkness be a tool to create an immersive space for viewer? Why does the memory of home after immigration occupy a significant position, and in such a scattered form? Do other people have similar experiences? Therefore, I begin searching for mediums to address these questions. This is where my practice begin.

1. Memory Image

Memories are the traces of past experiences retrieved when needed, a pathway to discover who one is. We gain the ability to learn, to develop knowledge, relationships, and identity due to this information process system of our brain. It plays an important role in establishing relationships between the past, present and future.

My paper will mainly focus on episodic memory, which is the collection of autobiographic events occurring in a particular time and space. The term episodic memory was coined by Canadian experimental psychologist Endel Tulving. In his article "Episodic Memory: From Mind to Brain", (2002) Tulving states that episodic memory "makes possible mental time travel through subjective time, from the present to the past, thus allowing one to re-experience, through autonoetic awareness, one's own previous experiences"(5). He also mentions, this "mental time travel involves awareness not only of what has been but also of what may come"(20). Different from other types of memories, episodic memories directly involve the subject. Under the mediation of episodic memory, we are able to know our own life stories to form an identity, and we can plan for the future based on past experiences. Also, these episodic memories often bear one's emotion attached to the experience. This concept of mental time traveling reminds me how I create works through revisiting past personal experiences to slowly unfold an image of home after I immigrated to Canada. That image of home is composed of numerous episodes. Since I have the ability, as

most people have, to retrieve these memories, I am able to better understand myself connected to a place, and feel more rooted there.

The initial reason that stimulated my interest in making art with episodic memories is that I noticed they have not only cognitive and affective aspects, but also visual and spacial perspectives from which I can translate them into visual language. A common phenomenon in the case of recalling is how we recall visual representations of that experience, namely the memory image. A memory image, in simple terms, is a representation of something we have previously experienced. The memory image can help us to “see” the scene of the event we are recalling. The German sociologist and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer compares memory images with photography in his article “Memory Images”. He states, “Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory images retain what is given only in so far as it has significance”(46). According to him, memory images are full of gaps, do not fully capture a frequent flow of time, but appear in fragmented key frames.



Figure 1 *The Tuesday Afternoon*, watercolor on paper, 24 x 36, 2018

The work *The Tuesday Afternoon* I created in the spring of 2018 for the MFA Interim Exhibition explores on the struggle of not being able to recall clear and complete memories (Fig. 1). The memory images appear in partial and intimate

details. The work is comprised of three watercolor paintings on paper. Each painting shows 88 squares in the form of the grid. The squared ratio symbolizes a cropped proportion of whether landscaped or portrait format in traditional photography. The painting provides details of my personal experience between 2000 to 2005 in my hometown of Jiangsu, China. In the work I intend to reveal the quality of a place by archiving memorable architecture, objects and intimate human interactions that form episodic memories from my childhood. I created a list in my head including every detail I could remember that could represent my childhood. The list could be a place, name of an object, or symbolic imagery. I divided them into three categories and placed them into three paintings, which are the environment, objects, and figures respectively. Most of the things on the list could easily fit into the three categories, only a few of them were indistinct. I decided to temporarily abandon things that did not fit in the three categories, and save them for the future when I have a larger group of them. In this sense, this is an ongoing project that I can always create more paintings to join them. Some of the squares remain abstract as, for those personal experiences, I have no approach to put them into visual languages yet. I amplified eaves and iron fences, cropped everyday objects, close up on parts of body, claiming a metaphor of fragmentation. I paint on small scaled squares scrupulously with my breath unconsciously held, and with my head lowered to make my eyes focus on only one block area, and so I can see clearly how the tip of my brush moves through the paper surface. I paint a narrative that I repeat over and over again in my mind to reveal intimate momentary episodes.



Figure 2 *The Tuesday Afternoon*, detail, 2018



Figure 3 *The Tuesday Afternoon*, detail 2, 2018

I was inspired by Australian artist Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival*. Both the concept and the arrangement of drawings in the book resonate with me (Fig. 4). In his article "Comments on *The Arrival*" written for Viewpoint Magazine (reprinted on Tan's website) describing the idea and process behind the book, Tan shares that in the research of migrant stories, he found "it was the day to day details that seemed most telling and suggested some common, universal human experiences". Also, he shows an interest in a more fragmented visual sequence, which can capture a certain feeling of uncertainty and discovery revealed in migrant stories. These two ideas facilitated the initial structure of my work *The Tuesday Afternoon*, to paint close-ups of everyday objects to represent memories of past day to day details and reflect on difficulties immigrants face after their migration. In his graphic novel, Tan also lays out numerous squared drawings on pages to form narratives. Some of pages contains 12 squared drawings depicting an action, to resemble how a storyboard of an animation or a film shows movements. This type of arrangement invites readers to speed up in order to get a consecutive flow of the action. I resonate more with the squares depicting objects from the environment. In this way, these drawings give readers more information on details of the character's daily routine, thus adding to the narrative from a different perspective.




Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 4 *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan, Graphic Novel, 2006

My ideas when constructing the project also overlap with the cropped composition Belgian painter Luc Tuymans presents in his work. This form creates an ambiguous collage of disconnected pieces and details. This composition signals Tuymans's belief that representations can only be partial and subjective, and meaning must be pieced together, like memories, through isolated fragments.(Tate) In his work entitled *The Rumour*, he shows a series of paintings of pigeons, people, and a cage, and three paintings of pigeons' eyes (Fig. 5). Through enlargement, cropping, and editing, the eyes are elevated and dislocated from the natural world and the rendering makes the object abstract and disappear. From one painting, readers are able to generate other images by formulating and reformulating them. When people consider the relationship between the images, they begin to construct a narrative and put their own narrative approach into the understanding of the work.

Similarly, my work also aims to construct narratives, to fill the gap of memory. In *The Tuesday Afternoon*, every square represents an everyday scene I retrieve by recalling. As we know, memory images are not always preserved from the past

sometimes they are reconstructed into a different modality. We might see ourselves as figures in a childhood recollection, and my work is created with this type of image where reality and fiction can coalesce. In the book *Remembering from the Outside: Personal Memory and the Perspectival Mind*, Dr.Christopher McCarroll also mentions this phenomenon as “one see[ing] oneself from a visual perspective that one could not have occupied in the past” and argues that memory can be constructive and reconstructive but also accurate and faithful to the past (X). The use of the observer’s perspective in my own work parallels this idea. According to McCarroll, remembering a scene from a different perspective is the result of the encoding process. I see this perspective as an interpretation of memory from a different standpoint, the standpoint of the present. Putting myself in the picture of what I remember is a way to reconsider the past experience.



Figure 5 *The Rumour* by Luc Tuymans, Suite of 7 lithographs encased in painted wood & plexi, with wooden birdcage in four panels, 91.56x516x6.5cm 2002-2003

2. Home Place

Homes of the past often appear in the memories of immigrants. This is a kind of psychological expression that occurs when people are facing life pressures and mental tension. According to Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (qtd. in Datta), “home is both a physical location and a set of feelings ... a process of creating and understanding

forms of dwelling and belonging” (55). When immigrants settle into a new place, images of their old home, which bears a sense of belonging, appears to form a contrast to the present situation. Salman Akhtar, an Indian immigrant psychoanalyst who is practicing in the United States, also states that immigrants may have fantasies about their old homes, about if they hadn’t left their home when they did, or believing they will return home one day in the future (1065).

The French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs also addressed the question of why immigrants are so attached to their old home surroundings in his book *On Collective Memory*. From one aspect, one’s home surroundings that rarely change provide an image of permanence and stability, which gives people a feeling of order and tranquility. From the other aspect, the physical objects of homeland possess significance because they bear people’s imprints, are evidences of evaluations and comparisons which recalls for one’s older customs and social distinctions. Halbwachs also puts forward an idea about how “the permanence and interior appearance of a home impose[s] on the group a comforting image of its own continuity”(169). This is the reason why members of a group still retain traditional costumes as souvenirs from home.

I have a similar experience. As an adult, I still have an intensive connection with my childhood home. Therefore, childhood memories are the main content of my own works, which serve as a metaphor of the yearning for a no-longer existing home of immigrants.

In retrospect, I often have memory images of me getting along with family and friends at the old home place. Sometimes I “see” buildings and nearby environments, and sometimes furniture and decorations in the old home. These memories make up the image of a home, which is influenced by my immediate experiences. The Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his book *Space and Place* conceptualized the idea of how space is transformed into place as it acquires meaning and definition. Place is “an archive of fond memories and splendid achievements that inspire the present; place is permanent and hence reassuring to man, who sees frailty in himself and chance and flux everywhere” (154). Tuan’s point explains a place as a

specific area that holds positive memories to people, and intimate experience can devote to build these positive memories. These experiences can be humble events that build strong sentiments in people without the need of any drama.

Tuan mentions an episode in Paul Horgan's novel, a teenager proposes the question "what moves us?" with answers: the vapor lights on the tall aluminum poles over the highway create dizzying beauty when the evening comes, are the most beautiful things in town (Tuan 142). I agree with this teenager, because I had the same feeling that I often touched by things that are not planned but ordinary in life. This is also the reason why everyday scenes and objects often appear in my own body of works. These living objects are easily ignored by people since they interact with them too often. However precisely because of this, these objects hold value and memories. For instance, the traditional dish comforts an immigrant not merely because it provides him energy to survive, but rather reminds him the security and stability within the house with the presence of those he loves. Akht mentions, under the migration circumstances, physical possessions, like family albums, books, and relics etc acquire the status of "linking object" between old home and new home to give immigrants emotional refueling (1062). The images of living objects also appear in *The Tuesday Afternoon* function as links between me and my native land. Meanwhile, the intention of making these objects exist in the form of paintings rather than entities speaks to the absence of the physical objects.

I was attracted to the art piece *Les Archives du Cœur*, by the French artist Christian Boltanski who is interested in exploring life, death, and memory in his practice. This project is to archive recordings of the heartbeats of people throughout the world in a permanent house. Many years later, people of different regions, colors and cultures would use this remote house as the destination of their journey to listen to the heartbeat of their loved ones, this action itself has becoming an important part of the work. When people listen to the heartbeat of another person, the sound amplifies the absence of that person through a trace he left to the archive. The organized grid form in *The Tuesday Afternoon* also an archive, but collects only virtual images to highlight the irretrievable time and place, leaving only traces.

Though my artwork points to the nostalgia for the old homeland, I am not intending to reconstruct the past. The American sociologist Fred Davis in his book *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* talks about how although nostalgia draws from the past, it is clearly a product of the present. Nostalgia is always evoked in the context of current fears and anxieties and looks to alleviate those fears by "using the past in specially reconstructed ways" (11). What drives our mind to reconstruct a memory can be referred to as the "hallucinatory seduction of [the] imaginary" that French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre discussed in his book *The Psychology of Imagination*, as "an incantation destined to produce the object of one's thoughts, the thing one desires, in a manner that one can take possession of it," and "a way of playing at satisfying [one's] desire" (177,179). In the case of diaspora, when people mourn over their loss during the migration process they often elevate the pleasant experiences in their old homes to prominence, and filter out painful memories.

With the notion of the image of homeland as maybe only a reconstructed fantasy, I aim to reconsider and explore the ambivalence of the real and fabricated content contained in the image of home. My works show the subjective sentiments toward my hometown and my dependence on the native culture. At the same time, my works also aim to enrich the meaning of its existence by creating the intersection of individual memory and collective memory, which serve as a way to connect an individual and a community.

According to Tuan, "each culture has its own symbols of intimacy, widely recognized by its people" (147). In my art, I deliberately place symbols, avoid being clichéd, to slowly unfold the lasting sentiment planted in the viewer by their own life experience. I painted color bars on a TV⁴, spinning black bicycle wheels⁵, a wall-mounted telephone⁶, and toys familiar to my generation. Though these objects

⁴ Begun in 1978, the China Central Television sets up a maintenance period on Tuesday afternoon from 14:30 to 17:00. Almost every television channel during that period appears with a test pattern. This regulation lasted until 1997, some local television station kept the maintenance period for a few years longer. This becomes a collective memory of people who lived in China in that period.

⁵ Refer to the appearance of Phoenix Bicycle prevalent in 90s China.

⁶ This is a type of phone widely used for interconnection in a community.

are directly involving my subjectivity, they serve as clues for people from my culture to recognize the roots of the work. One of my viewer, who is an international student from China, told me she recognized the color bar when she first time saw my work, which reminds her the childhood memory of every Tuesday afternoon with the pattern on TV. Then she starts to share with me an episode she remembered from her childhood about a toy I illustrated in the animation and her feelings generated from the memories. On the other hand, there are many symbols relate to general human experiences. For instance, bicycle wheels, telephone lines, rivers, and stairs are common in all cultures, when viewers see these things they can relate to the meaning of links and transit between locations based on their own life experience. In this way, I am seeking potential overlaps in the culture where I currently reside.

3. The Nostalgia of Time

After the first semester of my MFA, I began to notice that there was something lacking in my watercolor practice. Memories involve experiences of time that cannot always be translated into still images. In the summer of 2018, I began to search for a new approach to explore how to create a virtual space which can intensify the experience of time. Referring back again to Tan's *The Arrival*, the use of consecutive squared frames in one page to show movements facilitated my initial idea of turning still drawings into animations. I was also inspired by the editor Ian Farr's description in the book *Memory* of how video installations transposed from cinema can create a space within which

an intensified level of immersiveness, spectacular enchantment and
distantiation, through which culture difference, displacement or trauma could
be evoked and mediated in virtual sites of assimilated collective memory.

(Farr 13)

The darkness of the space where video installations happen can shut off the distraction from the outside world for a moment when viewers enter and immerse themselves. Instead of making film works, I decided to use frame-by-frame animation as the medium. I see this medium as a form of film making that resists realistic

representations and highlights a subjective feature. The form encourages me to fill in my interpretation and affective response to the historical experience. The creative process of making an animation also emphasizes the one's experience of time. Due to the gesture of repetition and overlapping in the making process, the later images are superimposed on previous ones to construct a summation of the past and present. I share this idea with the animation artist William Kentridge, who describes the process of making animation as “an accumulation of time” in a interview with Keli-Safia Maksud. When creating frame-by-frame animation, every layer of drawing matters in making a coherent animated instant. The parallel between animation and memory gradually become visible; both are traces of history, extracting the past from the standpoint of the present.

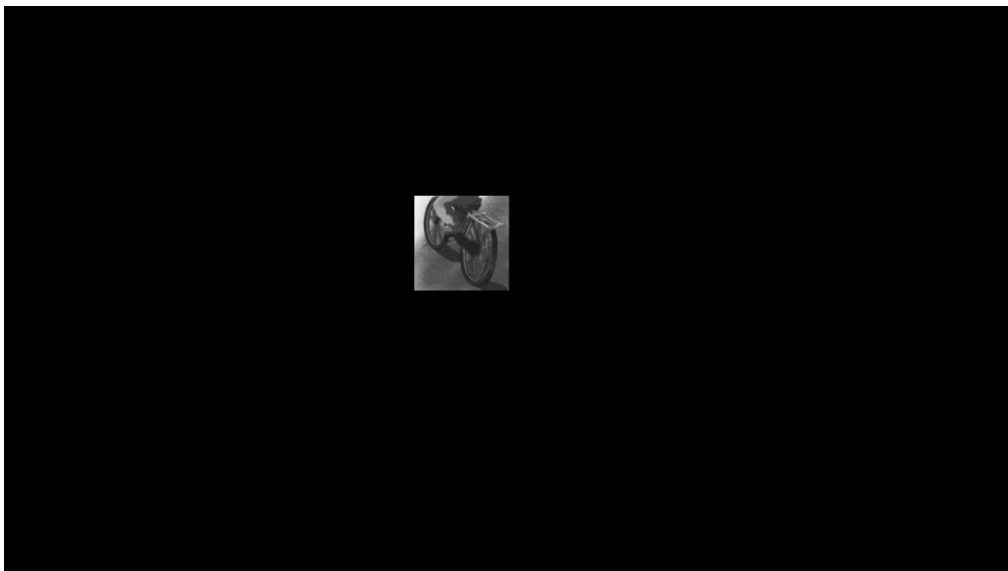


Figure 6 *Snow*, animation, 2018

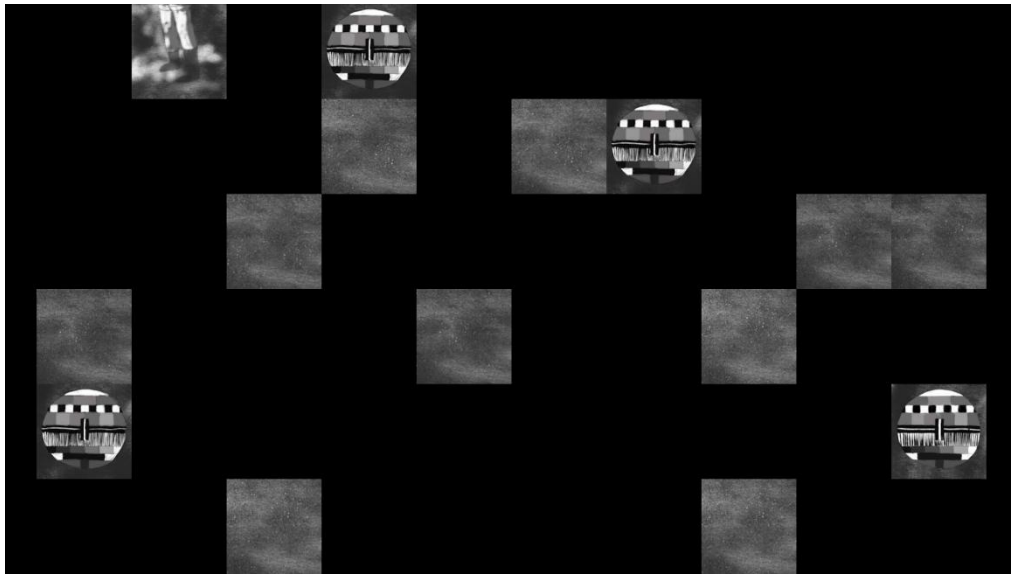


Figure 7 *Snow*, view 2, animation, 2018

The work *Snow*(2018) was the first animation project I produced in the MFA program(Fig. 6 & 7). This work has been projected on a wall in a gallery space. The entrance was covered by a lightproof curtain in order to create a dark space isolated from the outside world that viewer can enter or exit. This work consists of eight animated scenes composed by one hundred and sixty-seven drawings. Each animation is one-sixtieth the size of the entire projection, in the squared ratio adapted from the watercolor piece. In my practice, the way of making an animation is to depict a slice of the past and make it have a duration in real time. While making this work, I considered how can I use the playing method as a different way of storytelling. The work begins with a single frame in the middle. The frame disappears and reappears at a fast speed, which creates an unfixed and flicking feeling. As the video plays, the number of frames slowly increases to fill up the whole projection and creates a chaotic impression. All of a sudden, every scene changes into color bars then into static screens, they cut off audiences' expectation for more information as if the TV lost its signal. The static television screen depicts “snowflakes” implanted in my memory from when I was still a child. It contains a collective memory from before the digital era when television was still the major media in the public sight. As the researcher of Communication and Media and Aesthetic Dominik Schrey points out in his essay “Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation” , “Media

can serve as a means of virtual accessing the past, and are thus an important resource for cultural memory”(29). In my own work, the use of this image of a static screen is intended to have viewers make an association with the old technology and memories of the last century.

I use this snowflake image also as a metaphor to represent failure, the failure to recall a proper memory, and the failure of being unable to access the western culture when I first arrived in Canada, as these “snowflakes” frustrated people when they expected to get information from the television.

Animation has a long history. The earliest hand-drawn frame by frame animated cartoon was produced in 1908 by the French caricaturist Emile Cohl. The technique developed rapidly in the past hundred years. The choice of this obsolete animation technique in my own work, instead of a more advanced one, was made because of the enchantment of the physicality of making the drawing frame by frame, and the effort and attention I evenly paid to every single frame. Even when I am using advanced technology, an iPad and an Apple pencil, to create digital drawing for the project due the need of complete a large amount of work in a limited time frame⁷, I am prudent to use the copy and paste function when making repetitive frames. This action also represents a yearning to slow down and be self reflexive about the fast productivity of digital media.

This retrospective celebration reminds me of Svetlana Boym’s idea of contemporary nostalgia. Although the fast-progressed technology shortened the distance between home and abroad, people in the twenty-first century still cannot eliminate that painful feeling. On the contrary, the rapid development of technology creates a contemporary nostalgia, the nostalgia of time. In the book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym suggest that:

Nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or

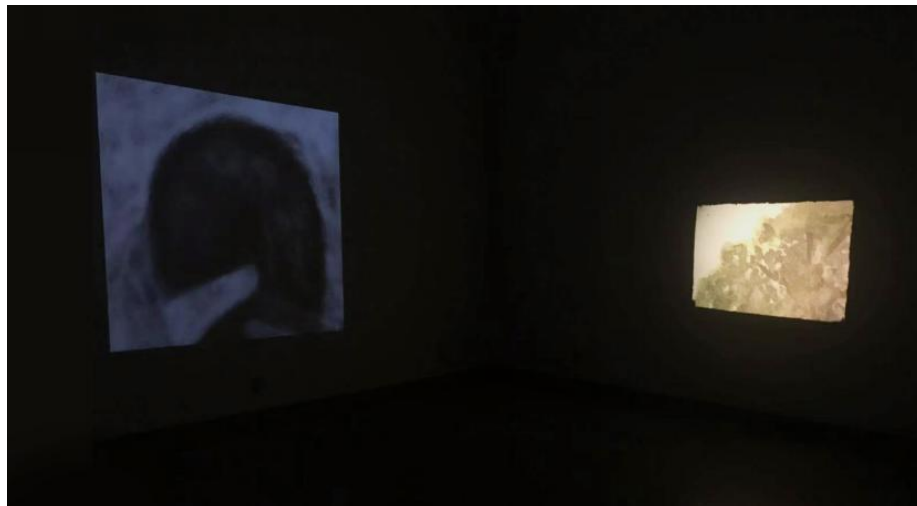
⁷ The portability of iPad and Apple pencil allow me to draw anytime of the day. Lots of the drawings were made in fragmented time of daily life, for instance when I was on transport, breaks, waiting for a meeting, etc.

collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (XV)

This nostalgia is no longer a longing for a geographical place, but instead, it is a longing for the “slow rhythm of our childhood” (Boym XV). In other words, in an era people oppressed by multitasking and managerial efficiency, they yearn to find psychological treatment to deal with the pressure of time. People cannot revise the flow of time in physical reality, but can achieve it mentally; as Tulving describes the ability of remembering, “When one thinks today about what one did yesterday, time’s arrow is bent into a loop. The rememberer has mentally traveled back into her past and thus violated the law of the irreversibility of the flow of time”(2). Old technologies, and people’s memory of them, become a mediator which can cause people’s attention to travel back to trigger memories and emotional responses.

Figure 8 *River*, installation view, 2018

Therefore leading me to create work with obsolete equipment no longer used, to



evoke attention to the vanishing of old culture and technology, aiming to interpret the melancholy and sense of longing for a place that has gradually vanished in distance and time.

The work *River* (Fig.8) is an animation work I made later in the fall semester of 2018. This work is a combination of projected animation and automatic slideshow. Both parts of the work are based on impressions from my childhood everyday life but represented with different approaches. The word river in the title is a translation in

English of the first character of my hometown, Jiang Su, which refers to the Yangtze River.⁸ Chinese culture characterizes rivers as “mothers” who gave birth to civilization. This metaphor left an impression on me when I was a child, living near to a river, and everyday I crossed the bridge with my grandmother. This ineffable affect is ingrained in me, also in the creation of work. The word river also operates as a metaphor for the phrase “the river of time” as a means to imply the irreversible flow of life.

The animation is silent, lasts 2 minutes and 50 seconds, and is played on a continuous loop(Fig.9). The animation expresses the intimate relationship I had with the place I lived until I was ten, the employee family member community⁹ of the hospital my mother worked in. Images change from a row of trees to a pair of wrinkled hands tying up hair for a girl and continue change until they finally become a river, back to the beginning, forming a loop. With the notion of the old homeland has passed out of existence, I pierced by the nostalgia and the sense of loss. I intend to convey this sense of loss and the irreversibility in my practice. While making the animation part of this project, I did not redraw every frame, instead, I erased and overwrote the previous one to create the next drawing. When the animation plays with an extremely slow rhythm, audiences can see the gesture of erasure and altering, which can draw their attention to the traces, the traces of drawings that no longer existed, just like memories.

⁸ Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia, its river basin is home to nearly one third of Chinese population.

⁹This type of community formed in the planned economy period of China. State-owned enterprise allots houses as a benefit for the employee. The experience of living in an employee family member community has been a common memory of Chinese people for decades.

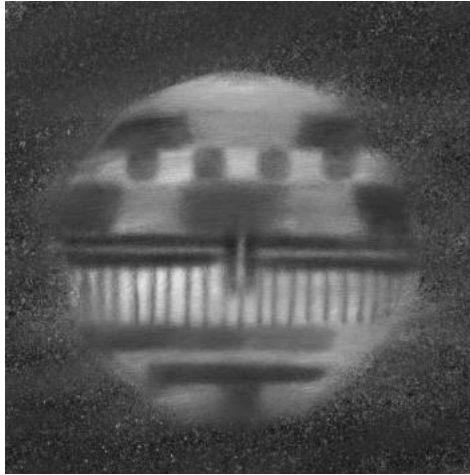


Figure 9 River detail(Animation), 2018

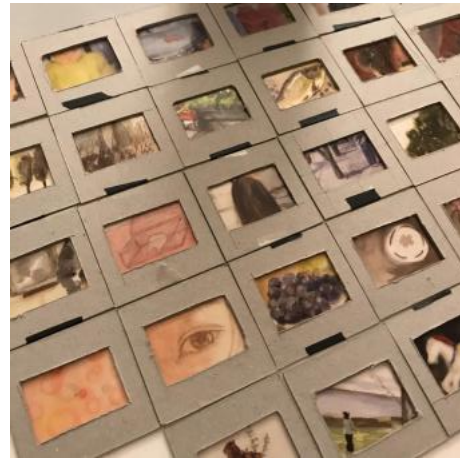


Figure 10 River detail (Slides), 2018

The slideshow, projected on the wall beside where the animation projects, contains 40 pieces of 24 x 36 mm watercolor paintings printed on transparency film and mounted with hand-carved slide mounts, shown with a Kodak slide projector(Fig. 10). The use of this obsolete technology speaks to the physicality in the making process. Each slide mount was carved by myself with a x-acto knife. The gesture of leaving traces on the material and fuzzy edges show in the projection both mark the presence of the artist, suggesting the image from memories were artificially reshaped, as well as provide an aged appearance to the slides. The time spent carving intensifies the effort I put into the retrospect process as a ritual of cherishing one's own heritage.

Some of the slideshows remind people of photos from a family album, and some are more like glances in life. Warm and bright light pass through the routine scenes printed on transparency to illuminate the space. The clicking sound of the projector accompanies the whole playing process. Empty slides unevenly placed in the projector intentionally create gaps between images as a means to frustrate viewers' expectations when the equipment clicked but no new images appeared. This refers to the gap between memories I mentioned earlier, to simulate the struggle when people are aware of something is missing, but cannot be retrieve.

While two projections overlap in one gallery space, they supplement information for each other. Viewers can also experience a perceptual effect while viewing two parts in one space. The flashing bright light disturbs the viewing experience of the

animation which may create a visceral uncomfortable feeling. However, this aims to highlight the vivid feeling of loss and failure, which is a metaphor for the feeling of one striving to integrate into a new culture. Though the artist's life stories are not accessible to viewers, the aural and visual language they perceive provide them with clues to the information. This ambivalence shapes a dynamic tension between viewers and the work.

The project also creates a space where viewers can connect things they are viewing back into their own life experience. Giving the freedom to viewers to understand the work is also a key concept in completing the work. As Claire Bishop stated in the introduction, "Viewers as Producers", of the book *Participation*, "(...) we are all equally capable of inventing our own translations." and "(...) not divide audiences into active and passive, capable and incapable, but instead would invite us all to appropriate works for ourselves and make use of these in ways that their authors might never have dreamed possible." (16) In my own work, no matter of my squared watercolor drawings, animations, or projections, I intend to provide audiences a lot of fragmented information at one time, they will have the tendency to fill in the gaps. When viewers see an image of a girl talking on the telephone, and then a pair of feet coming down the stairs, they may begin to think about the content of the phone call, and the girl's whereabouts. After being filled, the narratives often have meanings that cannot be found in the separate existence of each frame, which are made up of memories, knowledge, and imaginations of viewers and become a part of their stories. In one hand, audiences' reinterpretation speaks to an impossibility of reconstructing the memories I called up while making the work. In the other hand, liberating viewers from a resolved narrative is to give the work the ability to be narrated in a different social background and identity.

Conclusion

Memory transcends the span of objective time and integrates the past into the present. Through making animation installations, I attempt to create a space at the intersection of individual memory and collective memory. Not concentrating on

memorial historical events or representative heritage of my culture, I put the spotlight on humble, daily life, to reconstruct the past in ways ordinary people more likely experienced. With the knowledge that memories are part fabricated hallucination, I am interested in how and why we still find a sense of continuity in the relationship between us and the past. From the affective aspect of memory, the connection between a person and a place usually depends on the intimate experience and relationships in the past. In my artistic practice, I use autobiographical memory images as the starting point to create watercolor paintings and animations, which shows my relationship with home, and roots in my personal immigration experience in a dynamic picture. The interplay between inaccessible private information and accessible perceptual elements gives viewers a dynamic relation to the work. The dark cinematic gallery of projection-based works creates a space where viewers can concentrate and immerse themselves. I am interested in creating visceral and emotional responses to fragmented and vanishing visual language for the viewer. The replay process of the animation and speed reinforce the sense of participation in time, and the outdated machine involved contrasts in another way with the contemporary concept of time in rapidly developing society. Overall, through my work, I intend to highlight the uncertainty of memory from which express sentiments immigrants may experience in their settlement.

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