

Displacement and Painting

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Abstract

Xinan Yang's research analyses case studies of prominent artists who successfully incorporate their own life stories and subjective perspectives into their practices. By drawing on experiences of personal dislocation and the exploration of familial relationships as rich sources of creative inspiration, the study emphasises how painting has been employed to convey the emotional, psychological, and socio-political aspects of displacement. The analysis is structured around three core themes: the role of painting in examining family dynamics in relation to family photographs, the potential of painting and social media to foster cross-cultural dialogue and empathy, and the use of painting as a means of understanding cultural identity and preserving familial connections in the face of displacement.

Keywords:

Family photograph, family dynamic, globalisation, identity, social media, autobiography

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Introduction

This doctoral study explores the complexities of Chinese family dynamics and the impact of geographical displacement on these relationships through the medium of painting. My research was initiated by examining cultural movement, and the artistic practice evolved through four distinct stages. The initial stage of dislocation arose from the gap between my personal experiences and the cultural expectations imposed upon me. I painted a found family photograph to critique and question these ingrained structures. The second phase was informed by personal experiences of geographical displacement, which provided an opportunity to re-evaluate identity and the formative influences of family dynamics. This investigation involved using painting as a means to critically analyse both my own family photographs and vintage family portraits and snapshots acquired from marketplaces. The third stage was precipitated by the distinct sense of separateness and disconnection during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly experienced on social media platforms. I painted my Instagram posts and stories as a method of critiquing internet culture. In the final stage, I employed painting to capture my experiences of dislocation from my homeland and family, creating a space that existed both in the realm of imagination and reality.

Informed by scholar Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" theory, a sense of alienation from the power structure and cultural hybridity emerges. By analysing the works of Tracey Emin and Zhang Xiaogang, with a focus on the autobiographical aspects of their artistic practices, I begin to investigate traditional forms of identity through family photographs. I examine Alexis Soul Gray's approach to using found photographs to preserve memory, serving as a counter-narrative. Subsequently, I explore Amalia Ulman's oeuvre, which provides a poignant critique of self-representation in the virtual realm. In the final stage, my research considers four artists' utilisation of displacement. I adopt Pierre Bonnard's psychological depiction of daily life, characterised by his distinct use of colour, unconventional compositions, and visual ambiguity. During the final year, I refined my methodology, initially experimenting with intimate small-scale paintings to explore more imaginative visual language before transitioning to larger works. I examined Peter Doig's application of landscape to displace audience attention, Guimi You's portrayal of everyday life to alter the viewer's emotional state, and Liu Xiaodong's realist perspective to represent the global experience of displacement and

uprootedness. This process facilitated the development of my personal symbolic language and the maturation of my perspective.

I incorporate these symbolic languages, such as dog and door, which are derived from ordinary moments in my personal life, into my artwork. When I create paintings, I weave these elements seamlessly into the canvas's reality. They transform each other into something magical, taking on new roles as storytellers and reconstructing the world and reality on the canvas into an unexpected realm of magical realism. Most of the painters I discuss here, in particular Surrealist Dorothea Tanning and contemporary artist Guimi You could be considered related to magical realism, as their work blurs boundaries in ordinary settings. In Guimi You's landscape paintings, a conspicuous infusion of fantastical and dreamlike colours serves to enhance the portrayal of reality. Conversely, in Tanning's work, there is a discernible incorporation of imaginative elements, such as doors superimposed onto reality. In my artistic compositions, intentionally including a door or family dog serves as a deliberate artistic device symbolizing the transformative power of symbolism transferring everyday realism to the realm of imagination. This device, in turn, functions to provoke contemplation among the audience, questioning the boundaries between reality and imagination, along with the absurdities of everyday life. Simultaneously, the symbolic language I employ is deeply intertwined with the cultural and historical context of my region. It delves into the intricacies of identity, tradition, and distinctive social issues. For me, these elements transcend mere symbols of geographical displacement; they also represent a state of mind that allows me to navigate my displacement through the use of magical realism.

In this report, I explore the dynamics of family life, its cultural aspects, and the role of painting as a means for critiquing social issues, with a particular emphasis on Chinese family dynamics and geographical displacement. This journey has enriched my artistic practice and contributed to a deeper understanding of the complexities of family life and my own use of painting as a means of articulating personal and collective realities.

Personal and Creative Context

In this section, I aim to narrate my journey and reflect on the pivotal moments and essential works that have led me to my current position as a candidate for a doctorate in fine art. As the eldest child of a couple who migrated to Shanghai in the early 1990s after the economic reforms, my childhood was marked by intense parental affection and high expectations. My parents, who were the youngest members of their respective families and were born at the end of the cultural revolution of the 1970s, had limited access to education and family support. Thus, they were eager to establish a new life in cosmopolitan Shanghai and provide me with opportunities that had not been available to them. Due to their disadvantaged upbringing, my parents ensured that I had access to various interest-oriented classes, such as ballet, calligraphy, and erhu (a traditional Chinese instrument), to give me opportunities they never had. Despite their efforts, I found it challenging to integrate into the local community due to the language barriers of the Shanghai dialect and my family's regional background, which hindered my academic performance in elementary school.

I often felt anxious about parent-teacher meetings, during which I had to confront two disappointed parents. Nevertheless, my art teacher's praise for my collages of baby chickens made of cream-yellow circle paper sheets provided a moment of respite. My father, who had previously frowned in disappointment, beamed with pride and gave me a big thumbs-up in front of the other parents. During this time, I discovered my interest in visual art, particularly in colour, shape, and narrative. However, my somewhat whimsical declarations, such as persuading a classmate to quit school to become a movie director or announcing my intention to become a cartoonist, would haunt my parents' memories when my headteacher called them out. Recognising my lack of stability, my father insisted that I study the erhu to cultivate discipline. My rebellious and mischievous attitude towards this instrument was a hallmark of my teenage years. Upon reaching high school, I became an art student and underwent a nine-month cramming system aimed solely at passing the national college entrance examination. While I enjoyed learning, the system failed to ignite any excitement about being an artist, as everyone seemed to paint and draw in the same style.

During my university years, I pursued animation as a major, aiming to fulfil some of my childhood aspirations. However, painting on electronic devices sparked a different excitement than animation, and my interest soon turned towards film's composition

and visual language. Encountering talented seniors in other fields, such as sculpture and photography, broadened my horizons and practices and led me to indulge in various creative disciplines in the studio. Although I could draw well and imitate others' artistic styles, I needed to gain the innovative ability to create my own painting style. Nevertheless, my proficiency in drawing and my passion for storytelling led me to develop an ambition for oil painting in my later professional art career.

As time progressed, uncertainty regarding my career path following graduation prompted me to seek solace in creating art. I converted one of my parents' conservatories into a studio. I spent countless hours painting and experimenting with various media, specifically Acrylic liquid art, using acrylics, unconventional shapes and colours. In retrospect, this endeavour, during the summer of 2017, allowed me a period of personal exploration and resulted in the sale of paintings to private collectors through Chinese social media. The catalyst for my entrance into the professional fine art world arose when my cousin, soon to commence his MA in film at the University of the Arts London, visited my studio and strongly recommended that I create a portfolio and apply for a Fine Art MA program in England.

During the summer of 2017, I embarked on a week-long motorbike excursion to Sichuan. This journey took me from the city to a town and, ultimately, to remote rural areas. I became wholly engrossed in the vivid flora and fauna, and a part of me emerged, poetically and abstractly, from the rubble of concrete Shanghai. Upon returning to Shanghai, I began documenting my experiences with a film camera, capturing street scenes and gestures of strangers, and I then painted from the photographs. The photographs and paintings that resulted from this project served as the foundation for my subsequent work in painting and photography. During this time my brother fell ill during his first year at the University of Colorado. Neither of my parents spoke English, so I urgently travelled to the United States. Unfortunately, I lost my passport on the second day, leaving me stateless in a foreign country. Two additional projects were developed from these experiences, delving into self-reflection and elucidating intangible feelings and thoughts through animation and video. This unique experience was a crucial impetus for two fundamental themes in my art practice: familial bonds and identity. My journey in the arts has been a winding road with ups and downs, a testament to the fact that creative talent and passion can come

from various sources. Still, my passion for art's visual and storytelling aspects has been a consistent thread throughout.

In September 2018, I commenced a two-year MFA program at Wimbledon College of Arts in London. This laid the foundation for my doctoral research. The first painting I produced, "I Still Care," garnered positive responses from peers and critics alike. This autobiographical work depicts childhood memories from an adult perspective, exploring interpersonal family dynamics and how memories can be stored and distorted over time. The central figure in the painting is a self-portrait of myself at the age of four, with an unwavering gaze fixed on the viewer. Positioned alongside me are my parents, wearing ghostly masks and cradling an innocent infant. While this painting appeared to be headed in a promising direction, I hesitated to delve deeper into my personal life. Although it created a visceral connection between myself and my family members, I was overwhelmed by the emotional exposure and concerned that it may come across as overly self-centred.



Figure 1: Xinan Yang, *I Still Care*, 2018. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 125x95cm

My cultural background greatly emphasises preserving social order over individual promotion. My difficulties in being candid about various aspects of Chinese family life inhibited me from disclosing my motivations within the context of familial dynamics. Consequently, I veered away from painting and experimented with other mediums, such as street photography, silkscreen printing, and realistic sculpture. I found joy in these unfamiliar mediums; the unease that had persisted since childhood precluded me from committing to any one medium.



Figure 2: Xinan Yang, *Specimen*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 96x80cm

During the summer of 2019, I turned to Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger* (1942) to escape my artistic difficulties. As a result, I began to question my reality and purpose in this world. Drawing on my uneasiness as a source of inspiration, I created a new painting titled *Specimen*, which depicts a chimaera consisting of a butterfly fused with

a child being held captive by humans. The idea for this image emerged from a dream and prompted me to re-evaluate my childhood explorations through family photographs.

I was compelled to reflect on domestic space and my identity as an Asian female through an investigative studio process. I began manipulating old family photographs to alter the original appearance of the subjects into an ambiguous grimace. As I worked with these photographs, I realised that although they serve as evidence of the past, they can also be unreliable witnesses due to their failure to capture the entire truth. My artwork highlights the unreliability of photographs, revealing something closer to a 'masked truth.'



Figure 3: Xinan Yang, *Hey Babe!*, 2019, Acrylic, oil, and gold flake on canvas, 127x89cm

While I had a grasp on how to reshape memory through painting, I remained concerned about narcissism and was hesitant to reveal personal domestic experiences. In *Hey Babe!* (2019), I aimed to explore the complexities of self-image and the implications of the modern-day selfie culture. The painting captures the subject's self-absorption and self-obsession, both integral elements of narcissism. There is an ethical question about painting this when the ownership of images is

ambiguous. Modern life is rife with the overly familiar sharing of intimacy, potentially crossing a line into intimidation within a society where photographic narcissism is everywhere. The thoughtless and endless sharing of these images can pollute the perception of authentic identity. Selfie culture is one of the most common narcissistic representations within my millennial generation in contemporary society.

In March 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a widespread shift towards remote work, including for myself. The frustration of expanding the theme of Narcissus and belatedly acknowledging the dilemma of confronting fragile self-awareness amid the turmoil of existence like Camus' protagonist in *The Stranger* led me back to the first painting, an unfinished story, *I Still Care*. This awareness overcame the difficulty of balancing inward ideas and outward practice, as the only protagonist within the painting is the tender girl with the direct gaze.



Figure 4: Xinan Yang, *Immoral Daughter*, 2020, Oil and mix mediums on canvas, 80x65cm.

In exploring narrative memory within the family sphere, I became aware of the threat posed by my past cultural understanding of the family. The Chinese proverb "A peaceful family prospers" (jia he wan shi xing) is deeply ingrained in my cultural conception of family and heavily influenced by Confucian ideas. Family reputation is commonly referred as 'face,' the facade of 'harmony.' I recognise that the traditional Chinese family structure has at times repressed my self-identity. The final result for the degree show was 'Immoral Daughter,' a confessional painting highlighting the distinction between self-identity and family identity.



Figure 5: Xinan Yang, *Immoral Daughter*, 2020, Oil and mix mediums on canvas, 105x120cm

The next painting I made, *Immoral Daughter*, came from an anniversary photograph of my parents that I stumbled upon. The photograph had been cut in a peculiar way

and reassembled using transparent tape on the back of the photo, with the cut running across my father's head. The reason for the damage remains unclear to me, but I presume my mother was responsible. In my painting, I used embroidery to stitch across the cut. While embroidery is traditionally seen as a symbol of love and care, it represents rebellion and violence in this context. As an artist and the offspring of my parents, the act of stitching serves as a personal and creative tool for me. The repetitive stitching on the canvas embodies a dialogue between my parents' relationship and my memory of it. Similarly, the transparent tape on the back of the photo symbolises my parents' generation's inclination to maintain their marital union for their children's benefit, representing the real repaired relationship. It has nothing to do with conformity; it is more like a subversion of my memory of them.

According to Rozsika Parker, 'the art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of where they are made and who makes them.' (1984, p5) On an emotional and practical level, it has been an obligation for me to rehabilitate the relationship between painting and stitching and family relationships with an emotional 'reparation' that acts in a 'transformational' capacity. To my mind, it is also about aggression and destruction. A sense of moral uneasiness was unwittingly covering my father's gaze in the painting when re-evaluating the familial relationship through painting, which was highly influenced by the authoritative, patriarchal structure supported by Confucian philosophy in China society.

Figure 6: Xinan Yang, Exhibition Poster, 2020

The graduation show for my Master's programme in 2020 was unfortunately cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions. Despite this setback, I was fortunate to receive an invitation from the prestigious Saatchi Gallery to participate in an open call designed to provide a platform for graduating students to showcase their work in a safe, high-quality gallery space. My painting, entitled *I Still Care*, was selected for inclusion in the

London Grads Now exhibition, which featured the works of 150 artists who had graduated from London's leading fine art schools, including the Royal College of Art, UCL's Slade School of Art, Goldsmiths University of London, UAL's Chelsea College of Arts, UAL's Wimbledon College of Arts, UAL's Camberwell College of Arts, and UAL's Central Saint Martins. The Saatchi Gallery generously provided seven separate gallery spaces, which were entirely curated by participating students and lecturers, for the duration of the exhibition, from September 3rd through October 11th, 2020. I felt deeply honoured to have been included in this exhibition and to have had the opportunity to share my work with such a distinguished audience.

CREATIVE PRACTICE and THEORY

1.Cultural Movement

Relocating to London in 2018 for my Master of Fine Arts degree was a transformative experience that has become a space for self-exploration. "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul," philosopher Simone Weil declared in the "uprootedness" chapter of her famous 1949 essay, "*The Need for Roots*" (p. 43). As a result of being uprooted from my original cultural context, I experience disorientation and a persistent longing to return to my roots, as the new environment disrupts my sense of belonging and identity. Authors Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller highlight the unceasing aspiration for nostalgic roots driven by globalisation, which is symptomatic of my post-millennial moment (2011, p.2). Although I enjoy my life in London, which has become my second home. I still feel like an outsider. In his essay "*Reflections on Exile*", academic Edward Said's argued that modern Western culture is the result of exile and cultural displacement (1984). Similarly, my experience as a willing "exile" in London might be the product of transcultural exchange and transnationalism. Globalisation has made foreign countries less alien, and the prevalent issue of identity is a result of fluid identity influenced by culture and history. As one of the millennials, my generation has been battered by a tsunami of technological advancements, urbanisation, and globalisation, which constantly shift our identity, belief, value, and position. In parallel to my research, migration in England is being repositioned in a globalised economic society and

cultural turmoil marked by ceaseless change and formation. The displacement implies the formation of new identities and navigating new cultural contexts and experiences. The concept of "third space" was developed by the postcolonial theorist Homi Kharshedji Bhabha reflecting the experiences of people uprooted from their original cultures and forced to navigate new cultural contexts (1994, P.55). He argued that the interaction between different cultures creates a "third space" that is neither wholly one culture nor the other. This third space, according to Bhabha, is a site of cultural hybridity, where new cultural forms and identities can emerge. It reflects how different cultures and identities are increasingly interconnected and interdependent in a globalised world. This new understanding of identity allows me to connect with the world in a more meaningful way, transcending traditional cultural boundaries and fostering a greater sense of interconnectedness.

Autobiography is one of the key strategies that I use in my art practice. Autobiography is crucial in my art practice as it represents the relationship from private to the public of our time. The way contemporary artists produce art is influenced by their lived experiences, social frameworks, and historical circumstances. Art can explore both individual narrative and their social construction. 17th-century paintings of Rembrandt van Rijn involved powerful self-scrutiny and coincided with the rise of individualism within western society (Gibbons, 2007, p. 9). Autobiography subjects were traditionally predominated by bourgeois white males within the political and literature fields, as they had access to better education. However, for the past four decades, feminist scholars have driven the redefinition of culture from a feminist perspective, encapsulated in the 1970s slogan 'the personal is political.' Here, memory evolves into a more intimate form, such as letters, photographs, diaries, and collections related to the past. They are based on everyday talk and personal narratives. This kind of everyday communication is part of cultural memory referred to as communicative memory, where everyone's memory is the basis of communication with others. These 'other' are groups that 'conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past' (Assman and Czaplicka, 1995, p.127). The term 'cultural memory' refers to James Young's notion of 'received memory,' which entails the study of both what occurred and how it has been passed down to us (Young 1997, p.41). The concealed narrative of women's emotions has recently become more evident, blurring the boundary between public and private spheres. This concept is reflected in Tracey Emin's

autobiographical works that utilise various forms of media to focus on specific events, which have been influenced by the historical origins of autobiography and confession.

Tracey Emin work is renowned for her direct autobiographical, confession-based approach to making art. Janice Peck argues that the historical origins of autobiography can be traced back to confession, which has its roots in religious and psychoanalytic traditions. However, she also contends that contemporary autobiography has evolved into a diverse range of mass media that transmit morals and shape human behaviour (Peck, 1995, pp.134-155). Emin's work does not fit into the traditional framework of confession, as she does not censor her work on moral grounds. Admirers prize her frankness; critics condemn her narcissism.

Figure 7: Tracy Emin, *And So It Felt Like This*, 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 183x122cm

In her recent show, *A Fortnight of Tears* (2019) in White Cube Bermondsey, Tracey Emin delves into deeply personal and emotional themes of loss, love, and morality, drawing from her memories of an earlier abortion, the rape she endured as a teenager and the death of her parents. Alongside the artist's self-portraits documenting her sleepless nights, the painting featuring ghostly figures consisting of raw and crude brushstrokes captured my attention. The technique employed in these paintings was accomplished through powerful, quick sketching and scribbles around the bodies, lending a sense of urgency and immediacy to the works and demonstrating strong emotional energy. Facial structures are not identifiable in any of the paintings, and some of them show the rendering process, with opaque white paint covering the original figure. This creative process offers me a deeper insight into how the works were conceived. The watery nature of the crimson paint liquid drips from these spectral figures evokes a sense of blood, pain and grief. Death is a complex and thorny subject that affects all families, and Emin's paintings offer a poignant exploration of this theme.

Figure 8: Tracy Emin, *It was all too Much*, 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 182.3 x 182.3cm

Emin deliberately chose a limited colour palette, focusing on shades of black, white, and grey. Despite the monochromatic scheme, her paintings were highly emotional and expressive, evoking an intense sense of rawness and emotional depth. The paintings were richly textured and layered, with subtle variations in tone and hue that added complexity and depth to the overall composition.

I found the show to be a deeply moving experience. While not necessarily because of the technical execution of the works, I greatly admire the artist's willingness to put herself in a vulnerable position, which requires immense persistence and courage. Although our methods for approaching subject matter differ, Emin's painting style is more abstract and mine is more figurative, our artistic practices share a common root in a compassionate exploration of our personal lives. In *How Societies Remember* (Connerton, 1989), memory is regarded as a cultural rather than an individual faculty. Autobiography, in this respect, becomes a cultural empathic method to build a connection between the artist's and the audience's personal and cultural experiences.

During the doctorate, I discovered that my practice focused on familial estrangement and emerging identities through pictorial means. In Chinese culture, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining social order over individual expression. This cultural value can be traced back to the long history of Confucianism, which values collectivism and discourages individual expression. As someone from this cultural background, I encountered difficulties in openly disclosing the personal motivations behind the dynamics within my family that inspired my work during my earlier professional career practice. This was due to the cultural pressure to prioritise social harmony over personal expression. However, exposure to Western artists such as Tracy Emin, who employed personal backstories to create an individual persona and her own life as an intrinsic subject for creativity, motivated me to overcome my reluctance towards divergent cultural values and identity in my artistic practice.

Maintaining harmony within the family unit is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture. The family is acknowledged as a significant structural unit in Chinese culture and is generally regarded as one of its central institutions. Less attention, however, is given

to the private sphere within the family. The households represent the “residual” place of “invisible domestic labour” in China (Hershatter, 2003, pp. 270–271). In the seemingly perpetual family patriarchal system, particularly within the Confucian framework of China, the household labour performed by housewives was traditionally considered to be subordinate to that of their partners. This resulted in the perpetuation of gendered domestic roles, leading to a constraint on the autonomy of individual families and a limitation on women's personal freedoms (Ji et al., 2017; Jiang, 2009; Song, 2001B). Gender inequality in China is predominantly rooted in the traditional gendered division of labour, which often leads to constraints on women's personal autonomy and perpetuates the societal expectation for young women in urban areas to marry by a certain age, leading to what is commonly referred to as the “marriage predicament” (Hizi, 2018). Gender inequality is gradually being eroded by the ideas of individual autonomy through economic reforms.

Although my parents did not impose any pressure on me, I have observed that my female friends of the same age in China have experienced societal expectations of getting married, as well as observing my mother's role as a full-time mother. To address these multifaceted concerns, I investigated the potential of employing oil painting as an autobiographical method to critique gender inequality and the anxieties associated with marital relationships within the hidden realm of domestic life. This choice of medium is rooted in my familiarity with oil painting since my graduate studies. Through this approach, I aim to provide a reflection on the challenges women face in the socio-historical context of China. This approach may enable the navigation of tensions between traditional gender roles and desires for personal autonomy.



Figure 9: Xinan Yang, *Yes, I do*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 75x110cm

At the core of my artistic creation is the use of strong visual contrasts and unsettling narratives to displace the façade ideology of the family. The objective is to evoke an emotional response by intensifying the representation of reality, prioritising my own intuitive qualities over theoretical aspects. My creative process initially began with the use of Photoshop techniques to recompose scenes from a found photograph, incorporating male and female protagonists' gestures and expressions, the 'staging' i.e., the background (the room, the chair, the photo frame) to form a new understanding of the scene to construct a narrative. The collage and reconstruction of multiple source materials stem from integrating my repressed unconscious mind, which becomes distorted or amalgamated with unfamiliar elements, generating an eerie or unsettling effect for the setting. This disquieting sensation arises from the reactivation of repressed infantile complexes due to certain stimuli or the apparent confirmation of once-surmounted primitive beliefs, as elucidated in Freud's theory of the Uncanny (1919). Although the creation of oil paintings has already begun, the work produced thus far does not generally constitute the final product.

Painting as a fragmented construction is a phenomenological process that investigates the nature of conscious experiences, including thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and actions, by exploring how they are experienced from the individual's unique perspective. Thus, new elements accompany the creative process on the canvas. Throughout the painting process, I integrated traditional Chinese wedding headdresses for the female characters, imbuing the work with cultural symbolism. The female figure is depicted wearing a vintage 1990s blazer with shoulder pads, which creates a sense of temporal dissonance. Simultaneously, I purposefully incorporated a silent observer, my family dog in China, and a photo frame with two faint individuals as integral elements of my narrative structure. This notion aligns with author Ralph Rugoff's concept of utilising ambiguous historical coordinates to challenge the perception of a singular contemporary identity (2021, p.8). In this way, painting serves as a dialogic platform that embraces a multi-layered present, seamlessly integrating diverse past trajectories and influences. These elements serve to signify how the image should be perceived. Consequently, the scene coalesces into a poignant, cinematic narrative moment that elicits a psychological tension between the viewer and the portrayed characters, thereby generating a disquieting gaze.

Contemporary Chinese surrealist painter, Zhang Xiaogang (born 1958) is aligned with autobiographical practice, centred around self-reflection and cultural analysis, and values subjectivity and emotions as part of the research process. Xiaogang's oeuvre centres around the theme of his family during the Cultural Revolution, a tumultuous period in Chinese history characterised by violent socio-political movements that occurred between 1966 and 1976, during which the government took his parents away for re-education. It was not until he visited Germany in the 1990s and gained a fresh perspective on his Chinese cultural identity that his career began to flourish and the mental distress of his childhood began to ease. Zhang subsequently refocused his artistic priorities on the theme of family vicissitudes, parallel with the progress of Chinese society, allowing viewers to critically examine their own experiences and understand their place in socio-historical contexts.

Figure 10: Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: Big Family No.3*, 1995, Oil on canvas, 179x229 cm

As an individual with the same cultural background, I discern that Xiaogang's works are more emblematic of his Chinese roots than my own due to his works continually revisiting the troubled history of China. Although memory is generally considered an individual experience, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs explored the concept of "collective memory," stating that:

"It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognise, and localise their memories" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38).

Collective memory is a cultural product interconnected with autobiography shaped by social and historical contexts. One of Zhang Xiaogang's most famous series is "*Bloodline: Big Family*," which reflects Chinese society's dominant values and beliefs. The series comprises portraits of members of an imagined family from the Communist period, all with similar ghostly facial features and attire. By transmuting personal memory into a static image on canvas, the artist substantiates the profound significance of family photographs as a cultural artefact of the past whilst also orienting the viewer to China's collectively tragic experience. His paintings, distinguished by

their subdued colour palette, flattened forms and stylised realism on a monochrome background that conveys a sense of melancholy and introspection, evoke the visual language of black-and-white films. Meanwhile, the aberrant marks on the face symbolise the social stigma the family endured during the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution.

Figure 11: Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: Big Family No.2*, 1993, Oil on canvas, 110x130cm

Halbwachs theory of memory has been expanded and revised by subsequent scholars, while his theory on the collective character of memory and the influence of social frameworks in shaping memory content remains significant. According to Halbwachs, memory is influenced by group membership and social arrangements. In this regard, while artist Zhang Xiaogang and I share a common interest in family portrait painting rooted in personal memory and imbued with provocative narrative, there are notable differences in our works that can be attributed to our respective cultural backgrounds and experiences. Specifically, while Xiaogang's work is characterised by a strong emphasis on his Chinese identity and a nostalgic portrayal of Mao's collective socialism, my own works tend to be less explicitly tied to my Chinese identity, and memory is often portrayed as being elastic and unreliable. My work has been more heavily influenced by the economic revolution, individualism, and globalisation shaping contemporary China. The difference between our works might be illuminated by British psychologist Frederic Bartlett's concept of memory;

"It may be that we have occasion to recall some event or other of our family life which is 'engraven upon our memory.' If we try to cut out all those traditional ideas and judgments which are a part of the family proper, nothing remains. Or rather, try how we will, we cannot make this kind of dissociation. We cannot distinguish, in our remembering of the particular event, between 'the image which has but one place and time' and the notions which reflect in a general way 'our experience of the manner of life of our parents'." (Bartlett, 1932, p.295).

Figure 12 - Left: Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: Big Family No.2*, 1993, Oil on canvas, 10x130cm

Figure 13- Right: Xinan Yang, *Yes, I do*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 75x110cm

In Xiaogang's work, the aberrant marks on the face symbolize the social stigma the family had borne during the upheaval Cultural Revolution period. Similar to his method, my artistic practice involves using a scribbling method as a form of graffiti to depict the protagonist's face in my painting titled '*Yes, I do*', which suggests a violent cancelling out. As expressed by Ralph Rugoff, the internal compositional dynamics in a painting encompassing the interplay and opposition among various artistic elements activate or initiate a range of possibilities for how an image is represented and engages with diverse viewers (Rugoff, 2021, p. 6). This interpretive code developed unconsciously in my first painting enables me to translate and redefine the photograph through the painting medium. Through manipulation of old photos, I have distorted the original appearance of the male subject, creating an ambiguous grimace. The distorted facial features possess an unsettling quality as a struggle against the stereotypical impressions of the subordinate subject. This also relates to resolving gendered power dynamics in relationships that centre female experiences and challenge traditional gender norms.

Moving to England and experiencing a different cultural environment has further informed my practice as I become more aware of the nuances and complexities of gender dynamics and societal expectations across cultures. This displacement has allowed me to reflect on the challenges women face in the socio-historical context of China and deepened my understanding of the universal struggle for personal autonomy and the revaluations of traditional gender roles. Oil painting is a creative autobiography inquiry that portrays alternative gender dynamics through narrativity, providing a more provocative perspective on family relationships.

2. Family Photo Album

In this section, I investigate the use of painting as an autobiographical method for critiquing personal family photographs (*She'll Always Be Your Little Girl 97/8/20*) and acquired family images (*Missed*). The analysis centres on the notable examples of Cindy Sherman and Alexis Soul Gray. As a result of my personal experiences, I have chosen to forgo exploring feminism through painting and instead concentrate on following my intuition and emotions within my practice, which is fundamental to the autobiographical approach.

Figure 14: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #28*, 1979, Gelatin silver print, 19.1x24cm

Cindy Sherman, a female American artist whose work explores identity, gender, and representation through conceptual self-portraits, is renowned for her visionary contributions to the field. Her ground-breaking series, *Untitled Film Still*, contains 69 black-and-white photographs created between 1977 and 1980. Sherman transformed into various fictional female characters in this series, using 1950s costumes, makeup, and props to create surreal and thought-provoking images focusing on how females are portrayed in popular culture and the media. The series features unique cinematic scenes that mimic film angles, lighting, and dramatization but are not from any specific movie. The initial scene starts with Sherman's apartment's interior, then moves to urban and landscape settings. This ambiguity weaves the incomplete narrative element into the series, allowing the audience to add imagination to the storyline.

Figure 15: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978, Gelatin silver print, 19.1x24cm

In the case of the *United Film Series*, a recognisable Hollywood visual style is not used to critique the mass media but serves as a framework to explore and expose modes of femininity. (Alphen, 2011) This femininity in the image is fetishist, replacing the missing subject as an object invoking viewer desire. While the work focuses on the representation of female stereotypes in mass media, it also links to the fragility of human existence and identity construction. As Ernst Van Alphen observed in Cindy Sherman's work, "the standard relation between subject and representation is now reversed. We don't see a transparent representation of a 'full' subjectivity, instead, we see a photograph of a subject constructed in the image of representation" (2011). Precisely due to its reliance on mechanically facilitated reproduction and its portrayal of the human body. (Alphen, 2011)

She'll Always Be Your Little Girl 97/8/20

My previous artistic practice began with a collection of family photographs, selected by my mother, intending to prioritise her memories and undermine the patriarchal culture within the family archive. This approach was influenced by Cindy Sherman's use of photography as a feminist critique. However, personal challenges, such as my father's life-threatening lung cancer during the 2020 lockdown in China, temporarily halted my investigation of feminism. With my brother stranded in the United States and myself confined in London, the situation further complicated our family's circumstances and dynamic. The tension between personal memory and the social act of memory formation within my art production revealed the multifaceted nature of autobiographical exploration. By pausing my engagement with feminism, I had the opportunity to reflect on the relationships between my personal experiences, artistic expression, and autobiographical approaches. This introspection allowed me to better understand the complex dynamics between these elements, considering my displacement situation while still acknowledging the importance of feminism in shaping my perspective.

I found this photograph, taken on August 20th, 1997, when I was only three years old. Aesthetically, it fits into the social function of traditional family portraits. The message conveyed is not necessarily novel. Instead, I consider them rather ordinary and bland,

like family propaganda. They shout: "Look at us and see how lovely we are. We are such a great family!" Despite the seemingly ordinary nature and adherence to traditional presentation, this photo served as evidence of my heritage and influenced my current identity. As Roland Barthes's posits, "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent..... A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze... " (1988, pp. 80–81). The metaphor of the umbilical cord symbolises the enduring bond between my family and me, transcending geographical distances and reflecting a connection prevalent in most cultures. The delicate nature of the photographic paper underscores the tension between present and past, alluding to the subject's impending demise in front of the camera, as the photographed individual is no longer physically present. Likewise, the cherished moments spent laughing and interacting with my family can never be truly replicated, emphasising the ephemerality of these experiences.

Interpreting family photograph activates self-recognition, contributing to the essence of identification. This idea resonates with John Berger's notion that a radical system should surround a photograph, allowing for perception on multiple levels, including personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday, and historical. Image reading serves as a radical approach to understanding political and social contexts (1980, p.63). Although some of Berger's perspectives may be considered outdated, his concept of photography as a technique for fostering self-awareness through observation remains relevant. Berger's views provide insight into the interaction between the language of paintings and photography, suggesting that painting can function as a response to photography and employ a unique language to generate meaning (2013).

In my artistic practice, I transitioned from using a scribbling method for painting the protagonist's face to a different approach in creating *She'll Always Be Your Little Girl* 97/8/20. This artwork conveys a poignant sense of bittersweet nostalgia as a psychological substitute for my physical absence. It embodies the conflict inherent in constructing family memory and identity while expressing my longing for affectionate parenthood, pride in our family, and the imagined reality of supporting my father. The painting captures the ever-evolving nature of family stories and memories, which are not static but constantly reconstructed in the present. The language of painting transcends the authority of the photograph, creating a tangible reality with powerful

intention, rather than merely documenting while evoking emotions that surpass the limitations of a single moment and its duration.



Figure 16: Xinan Yang, *She'll Always Be Your Little Girl* 97/8/20, 2020. Oil, thread, mix mediums on canvas, 105x120cm

The painting serves as an emotional compensation for the transience of family togetherness, imbuing the fleeting moment with a sense of the eternal. I was captivated by the painting due to its ability to produce a more permeable narrative, reflecting the immobilising memory captured in a still photograph. The figure within the painting was intentionally accomplished with a traditional realistic style that relies on the rhetorical strategy of mimesis. The reminiscent colour tone and hue of the 1990s in a conventional family photograph are identifiable. The male figure seemingly points at the camera, while the background features a floral wallpaper, adding a sense of domesticity to the painting.

Without any motivation to alter the pleasant family moments depicted in the images, my artistic approach shifted towards exploring materials, allowing the canvas to serve as a space for assembling various components. Leonardo da Vinci described the painting as a mental object, primarily driven by cognitive processes. This involves gathering and interrelating elements from various sources, mimicking the mental leaps we make when comparing one project or idea with another.

This creative method aligns with Rugoff's concept of painting as dialogue, wherein the soft wool and cold clocks on the canvas engage in an uninterrupted aesthetic confrontation (2021, p. 6). On the left side of the canvas, an installed clock shows China Standard Time, emphasising the difference between the present and the past. The ticking clock symbolises the omnipresent time, incorporating the relativity of time. It also becomes the imbalanced power on the static flat surface of the canvas, breaking the nostalgic family's past and imagined future togetherness.



Figure 17-Left: Xinan Yang, *She'll Always Be Your Little Girl 97/8/20*, 2020, Oil, thread, mix mediums on canvas, 105x120cm

Figure 18-Right: Xinan Yang, *I Still Care*, 2018, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 125x95cm

In the right corner of the painting, a miniature of my first oil painting, "*I Still Care*" acts as a clue that leads the audience to past familial memories and the fluidity of memory. The disintegration and integration of domestic memory that happened simultaneously as an ever-negotiable role complicates the perpetual photographic moment: the artist's current condition and its reflection contest between the ideology of family and the reality of family.

In the original photograph, it is evident that considerable investment has been made in our clothes. My sibling and I are well taken care of by my mother, who fulfils her duties as a full-time caregiver. Our appearance in the photo serves as a testament to the labour of care and affection she has devoted to us. As Annette Kuhn underlined in her ethnographic writing, 'The baby's body is here quite literally a blank canvas, screen of the mother's desire—desire to make good the insufficiencies of her own childhood, desire to transcend these lacks by caring for her deprived self through a love for her baby that takes particular cultural forms' (2002, p53).



Figure 19: Xinan Yang, wet felting work in progress

I incorporated wet felting, a feminist crafting technique, onto the cloth my sibling and I wore. The use of soft and gentle wool fibres symbolises the unconditional love and attention we received from our mother and shows credit to her. Our appearance in the photograph is the body of mom's canvas, which is her own work of art. A comparison can be drawn between my artistic interests in materials and Bahamas artist Cydne Jasmin's vibrantly coloured mixed-media work. Her use of African wax print patterns, along with fabric and embellishment of frills and ruffles, as graphic collages that celebrate the matriarchs of her family. Adding the finished wet felt to the painting is a rewarding experience for me and a way to celebrate feminine energy.

Painting as an autobiographic critique in this context is a powerful means to explore and express personal experiences, cultural identity, and familial dynamics. By embracing the multi-layered approach, the artwork invites the viewer to deeply contemplate family dynamics, transcending surface-level aesthetics. The piece becomes a means of reflecting on the intricacies of family life, from the tenderness

and affection of caregiving to the negotiation of power dynamics and the interplay of cultural influences.

Missed project

The experience of geographical displacement also offers an opportunity to re-examine the identity and the formative experience of the family dynamic. To explore the notion of family belongings beyond my own family, I began to collect old photographs from markets, which evokes a new understanding of belonging. The aim is to use painting as a sociological practice, employing Verstehen sociology to empathise with others' experiences. Verstehen, a sociological inquiry developed by Max Weber, involves understanding the object of inquiry through empathy, intuition, and imagination rather than achieving knowledge through calculation and observation. (Weber, 1968)

Using Verstehen, I seek to explore the intersections of individual and collective memory and how memory shapes the social body and social worlds. Photographs as source material emphasises negotiation and intersubjectivity. First, start with established procedures for analysing these materials with new insights and understanding.

A brief protocol for analysing the photo (Kuhn, 2002, p. 8; Kuhn, 2007, p.284):

1. Identity human subjects and visualise oneself as the subject within the photo to evoke feelings.
2. Consider the production of the photo: where, how, when, by whom and why it was taken.
3. Examine the technology and the aesthetic of the photo.
4. Reflect on the photo's context or reception.

I started examining the human subject within the image and identifying its content. In the twentieth century, the invention of photography profoundly altered the relationship between painting and photography. It enabled the accurate depiction of the world

around us and the ability to capture the fleeting moment. Since the creation of "Kodak," photography has become integral to everyday and family life. The limited number of shots in the film era added a sense of authenticity.

Cameras are commonly used to record meaningful events such as family reunions, grand events like weddings, or simply everyday moments. The documented ritual events indicate the family albums as representational source material for family memory. These captured moments may not provide a first-hand experience but do represent the actual events. For better or worse, the limited number of photos taken will be physically stored in an album as a memory heritage for further offspring, rarely discarded. A family image inherently offers a visual record for its viewers, providing information about the time, location, subject, photographer, mode of capture, purpose, and archivist. Additionally, it is steeped in entrenched conventions and historical circumstances, such as racial, sexual, aesthetic, ethnic, class ideologies and is instrumental in defining the familial ethos. Ultimately, the nature of family photography lies in preserving the cohesiveness of the family unit.



Figure 20: Xinan Yang, founded family photograph.

The information accompanying the photos reveals the majority of them were shot in white Western families, with a focus on the theme of relationships and everyday life. The absence of colour in the image captures meaningful events such as family reunions and the daily lives of children. Although ritual activities may vary across different cultures, I can still identify similarities in childhood experiences and family gatherings between these images and my own experience. The photo sources I began collecting range from the 1930s to the 1990s and were found at flea markets and on eBay. Ironically, family memory heirlooms have become marketable commodities in this context.

These photographs are the only physical evidence that these once-present individuals existed in the world. Each ghostly black and white figure on the small, fragile piece of paper evokes the cultural memory of domestic life from the 1930s to the 1990s, challenging fundamental binary oppositions such as "past/present," "alive/dead," and

"present/absent." The presence of their past surrounds me. The absence of colour within the images captures meaningful events such as family reunions and the everyday lives of children. With significant cultural value, the documented ritual events suggest that family albums served as source material for performances of family memory, expressing identity and emotion. While the photographer's identity is often uncertain, further research on major film camera company Kodak reveals that women were the primary clients before the advent of digital photography in 1981. In its advertisements, the leading role was typically a woman capturing moments of domestic bliss for posterity, propagating the image of a caring mother and responsible housewife.

In comparing the availability of family photographs during the 1970s in China to those in the United Kingdom, it is evident that there is a significant discrepancy. My parents possess a limited number of photographs from their youth, reflecting the scarcity of family photography in China during the Cultural Revolution. Under Maoist ideologies, such activities were discouraged, leading to politicising the private sphere and a subsequent distinction between private and public activities (Buruma 2001; Huang 2005). This lack of family photographs from my parents' childhood starkly contrasts the abundance of family portraits I collected in the UK. The current whereabouts of the individuals in these photographs, the identity of the photographer, and the reason for their presence in a public marketplace all remain uncertain. It raises the question of whether these images hold sentimental value for anyone in the present day. Realising this may not be the case is disheartening and illustrates a significant shift from the contemporary image-saturated world.

The dislocation of family photographs and their subsequent possession by an unrelated individual elicits intense emotions associated with love and loss. As writer Susan Sontag asserts in *On Photography*, "Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives towards their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photos of people" (1977, p. 89). These images may represent the sole remaining physical evidence of the subjects' existence. With this newfound understanding and empathy, my artistic practice has evolved to emphasise preserving and cherishing such visual records. These visual artefacts serve as invaluable

documentation of personal and cultural histories, providing a tangible link to the past and a means to connect with the lives and experiences of those who came before us. Through this artistic exploration, I seek to honour and celebrate the significance of these photographic memories, ensuring that the stories they tell are not forgotten or lost to time.

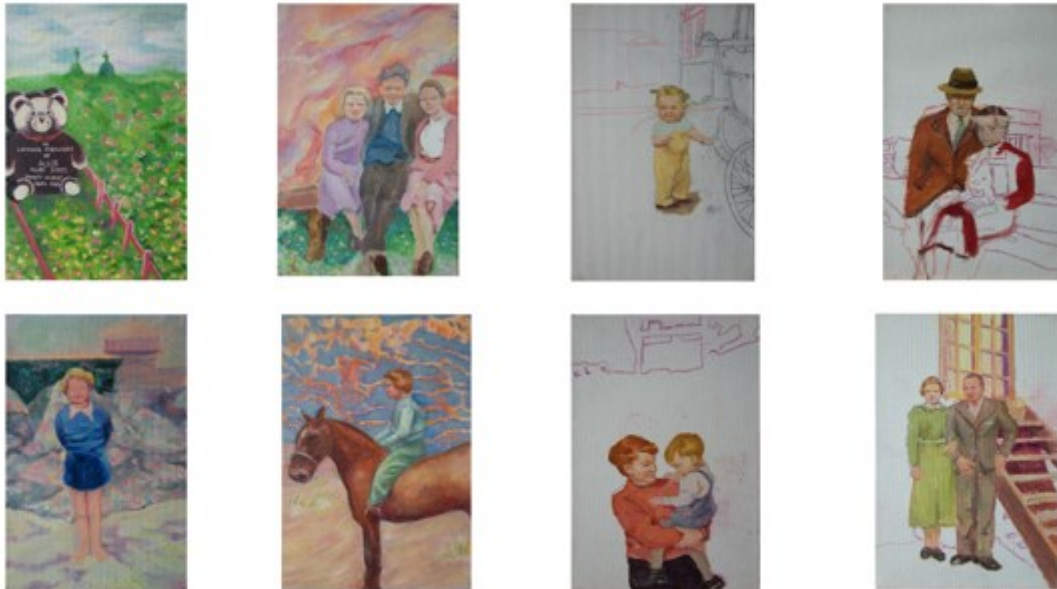


Figure 21: Xinan Yang, *Missed project*, 2022, oil on panel, 12x18cm

In creating paintings from these photographs, I deliberately utilise small panels and various orientations to evoke a sense of intimacy, akin to how we handle family photographs. Hirsch (2002) posits that photography's relationship with loss and death serves not as a mediator for individual and collective memory but rather to bring back the past as a ghostly revenant, highlighting its immutable, irreversible, and irretrievable nature (p. 20). The many images function as a poignant elegy, with no descendants to recount their story. I intend to fill the voids of what has been missed through vibrant colour oil paint, allowing these forsaken photos to act as a catalyst for nostalgia and imaginative projections. Rich colour schemes offer a rich array of temporalities and painted spaces, allowing for a diverse exploration of time and spatial dimensions within the artwork. I endeavour to make fewer imaginative investments in mediating memory

during interpretation and creation, displaying unintrusive respect rather than deconstructing the narrative.

Figure 22: Ellen Harvey, *The Disappointed Tourist*, an ongoing project since 2020
Oil and acrylic on Gessoboard, each painting 18 x 24 in

Drawing inspiration from Ellen Harvey's *The Disappointed Tourist*, I aim to convey collective memory through my artwork. *The Disappointed Project* comprises 100 oil and acrylic paintings that resurrect cherished and lost places based on individuals' responses to online queries regarding locations they long to visit or revisit but no longer exist. The project localises existential memories, spanning a spectrum from traumatic experiences such as war, racism, and ecological disasters to more mundane losses resulting from technological advancements or gentrification and from renowned cultural sites to deeply personal, favoured spots.



Figure 23: Xinan Yang, *Missed project*, 2022, oil on panel, 12x18cm

Similarly, artists like Alexis Soul Gray (b.1980, UK) have explored intimate personal journeys through found materials. Gray was fortunate to be exposed to art early on, as her house was filled with art prints and books. Gray's parents studied art and design

and frequently took her to see art in person. However, when she was about 2 years old, she was separated from the man she knew as her father. Later, at 25, she lost her mother following a brief yet intensely painful battle with cancer. Her mother bravely chose to end her life at the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland, a decision Gray deeply respects. The period leading up to these events was traumatic and profoundly impacted her emotional well-being.

Figure 24: Alexis Soul Gray, *Cry Baby*, 2022, Oil on linen, 110x90cm

Gray's artwork captures fleeting moments of remembrance through collected family photos found in markets, delving into themes of loss, memory, and grief. French literary theorist Roland Barthes posits that photography opposes mourning (1981, p. 82), as it fails to encapsulate the essence of memory and instead serves as a counter-memory. In Gray's case, the primary motivation behind her artistic pursuits is not to intentionally evoke melancholic sentiments but rather to preserve memories as a counter-narrative. This approach inadvertently leads to the recurrence of sadness and stillness throughout her work.

Figure 25: Alexis Soul Gray, *The Orange Eater*, 2022, Oil on linen, 130x150cm

Soul Gray's methodology consists of utilising and reinterpreting paper ephemera and found objects as reference materials, transforming them to express both personal trauma and the universal experiences of loss and nostalgia. By engaging with counter-memory, Gray's art contributes to a richer and more inclusive understanding of the complexities of human experiences and emotional landscapes. Through exploring these themes, Gray highlights the significance of preserving these once-forgotten images and memories, emphasising the importance of recognising and valuing the diverse narratives that form our collective human history.



Figure 26: Xinan Yang, Cooper leaf material

I always seek to incorporate references from an intercultural and multinational context into my painting, employing my own cultural rituals of commemoration to establish a connection with the deceased. In Chinese culture, the act of burning paper or joss sticks symbolises honouring the dead and conveying love to their afterlife. When exploring this theme, I initially considered using heated copper leaf sheets in the finished paintings, aiming to mirror the essence of my cultural commemorative ritual. Heated copper leaf flakes will create a mottled, burning impression reminiscent of the common Asian tradition of burning family photographs as a tribute to the deceased. However, this pursuit was discontinued due to technical complexity as I was experimenting with copper leaf application for the first time. The unpredictability of the mottled rust effects contrasting with the colour tones depicted in the artwork, arose from the inherent limitations and stochastic nature of colouration resulting from copper leaf's chemical reactions. Although technical challenges prevented me from fully

exploring this approach at the time, I intend to revisit in the future.

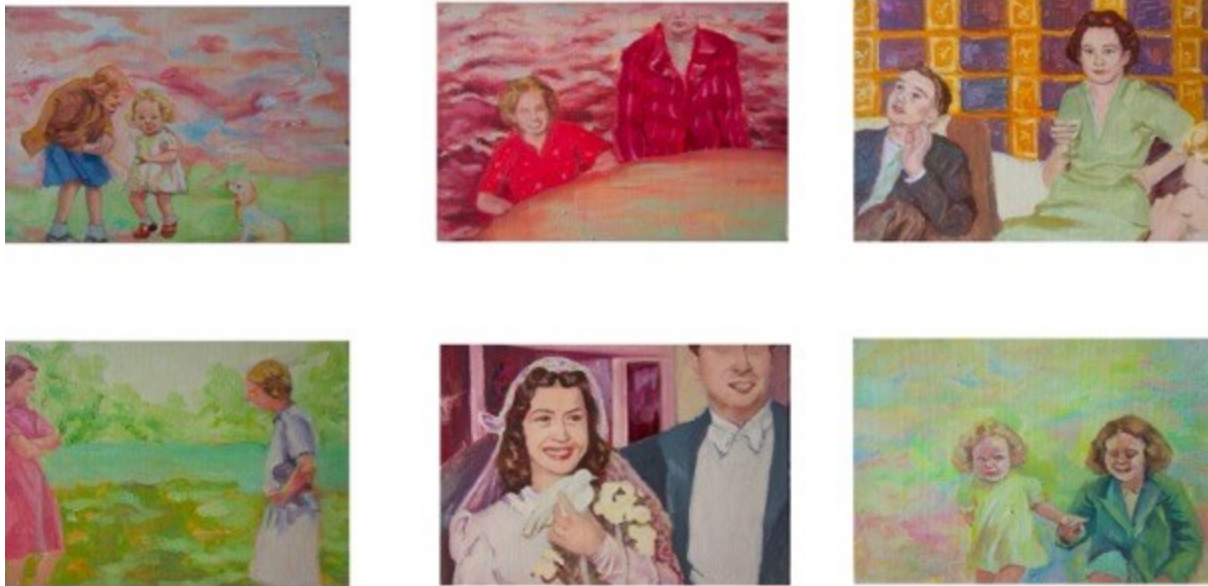


Figure 27: Xinan Yang, *Missed Project*, 2022, oil on panel, 12x18cm

Considering the concerns raised by my supervisors about the overwhelming impact of photographic references within the "*Missed*" project, I recognised the need to pause the project's advancement, despite having reached its midpoint. Ultimately, painting serves as a means of interweaving interpersonal family dynamics that contribute to our collective understanding of family. We can all identify traces of our past family life within the paintings. My approach to the images of my Chinese heritage emphasises solemn respect. Throughout this project, paintings present a countercultural stance, starkly contrasting the rapid photography prevalent in family photos, resisting the acceleration of everyday life. My perception of colour has been significantly enhanced. Through in-depth practice, I have gradually developed the ability to utilise colour in my artwork to convey emotions, establish an atmosphere, and accentuate the focal points of the composition. By engaging with both personal and public archives, painting enables me to weave a narrative that connects societal decisions and defines the social meaning and symbols essential to developing collective memories and identities. By interacting with these diverse sources, the artwork fosters a deeper understanding of shared experiences and the cultural context that shapes them.



Figure 28: Xinan Yang, *Missed project*, 2022, oil on panel, 18x24cm

3. Social Media

In parallel to my research, migration in England is being repositioned in a globalised economic society and cultural turmoil marked by ceaseless change and formation. This change implies the disintegration of self-unified, collective identity obscured by Western cultural influences and compounded by new virtual technologies, contributing to a crisis of reality and a struggle for recognition. The self has become relatively detached from collective structures and traditions, becoming more rooted in individual needs and desires.

From my personal experience, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the disintegration of identity. Since the pandemic, our perception of reality has been beset by social media and the internet, forcing us to engage in intense relationship with them. As a collective "nation," society experiences a similar sense of detachment from ourselves, our bodies, our communities, and our families across time and space. The special experience of virtual diaspora leads me to the excessive usage of virtual space for connection during the lockdown in London. It has also allowed me to re-evaluate the family's narrative and dynamics, re-thinking individual identity as a collective entity through the virtual pathway. Will this pandemic lifestyle be remembered as a collective lockdown culture that shapes our future? This might be my subjective viewpoint, as Scholar Luisa Passerini posits that individual subjectivity is shaped by the interplay between inherited socialisation and the ability to critically reflect upon oneself (1979, p.104).

In my mind, I have observed and reflected on the lockdown culture both cognitively and emotionally through virtual space. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration has suggested that the pandemic has led to a "forced deceleration" (2020b) but also has the potential to encourage a collective resonance with our surroundings (2020a). In comparison, the Spanish Flu 1918/19 left few memory relics e.g. memoirs, paintings, and novels, but existed in the scientific memory system (Erl 2020, p. 864). Further investigation on memory and the pandemic led me to Astrid Erl's recent thesis on *Afterword: Memory worlds in times of Corona*, which examines how the new social rhythms engendered by Covid-19 embrace the role of collective memory.

Figure 29: Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections* (Instagram Update, 1st June 2014), 2014

In contrast to Cindy Sherman's old master-style female portraits, Amalia Ulman's work showcases a stereotype of social media self-representation. Roland Barthes articulates in *Camera Lucida* that the "photographic referent" is not a discretionary representation of reality, but rather the essential reality positioned before the lens, without which no photograph could exist (1981, p. 76). He argues that a photograph should not be regarded as a mere 'copy' of reality but as an 'emanation of past reality' (1981, p. 88). Consequently, an image represents the material emanation of past reality, capturing a transient moment while the subject undergoes transformation—a process Barthes terms a "cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (1981, p. 12). In summary, while being photographed, the subject consistently displays self-consciousness when posing for the lens and future viewers, ultimately diverging from their true selves.

Connecting Barthes' concepts to Ulman's practice, it becomes evident how the artist's work mirrors and elaborates on the ideas of the photographic referent and the separation of consciousness from identity within social media. Amalia Ulman's self-portrait series, *Excellences & Perfections*, is particularly relevant to contemporary society. This four-month performance on her Instagram account fabricated a fictional character, illustrating how social media can distort authenticity and identity. Ulman's account, @amaliaulman, presents a seemingly genuine depiction of her life that obscures the distinction between identity and performance. The account features fetishized selfies accompanied by luxury beauty products, hashtags, and images of upscale restaurants and hotels. Following a breakup, Ulman's content became more superficial and self-absorbed, with posts about breast augmentation, drug use, and working as an escort. This oversharing of her personal life reflects the mundane experiences in the millennial online experience. Ulman eventually disclosed that her work was fictional and self-directed.

As an emerging artist utilising social media to exhibit my work, I find Ulman's Instagram-centric method highly relatable. As a non-traditional space for crafting narratives, the internet contributes to the erosion of authenticity in identity. Consequently, social media participates in all these meaning-making dimensions, causing the original significance attached to an image's codes to fade. The credibility of self-portrait photographs diminishes as the artist continually presents their body as the artistic subject, performing various personas. Ulman's work epitomises that in today's digital realm, individuals can assume any identity at any moment, as identity is not inherent but socially constructed. This perspective aligns with Barthes' theories on photography and self-representation. Moreover, the performative aspect of social media significantly influences the construction and maintenance of these personas. In contemporary society, the widespread availability of camera smartphones enables individuals to create and share innumerable photos instantly, leading to an influx of food images on social platforms. As a young person immersed in this snapshot culture, I habitually generate and discard images that do not conform to the prevailing aesthetic norms. This aesthetic is anchored in the representation of women in mass media, illustrating a reciprocal relationship between how we consume images and how they consume us in return.

The sheer volume of images today, particularly through camera smartphones, reshapes how millennials perceive their surroundings, as their experiences are increasingly mediated through screens. This visual onslaught also encroaches on the formation of memory, with photography becoming a cognitive offloading tool, evident in easily retrievable images like parking space numbers (Storm, Soares, 2018). The growing dependence on digital devices for recollection and the fleeting nature of digital memory has contributed to the depreciation of images and a sense of empty, mechanised time. In a similar vein, Marianne Hirsch (2002) argued that "photography, while creating the illusion of a straightforward transcription of reality as a direct imprint left by the event it documents, also has the effect of naturalising cultural practices and obscuring their stereotypical and coded nature" (p. 7). What often goes unnoticed is that the static moment captured by the camera fails to represent reality accurately before the lens's interference. This interplay establishes a reciprocal connection between the photographer and the subject in producing ideology.

Critic Martin Herbert asserts that painting is a cultural counterforce against the ever-accelerating pace of daily life in the 21st century (2019). This countertendency goes beyond visual art and permeates other aspects of life. Advocates for a slower lifestyle, such as Carl Honoré and Milan Kundera, emphasise the significance of appreciating experiences like food, physical books, and painting, rather than being engulfed by the rapid tempo of the technology-driven world (2019, p. 9). In an era characterised by swift technological progress and the relentless barrage of information, painting can remind us that pausing to savour and genuinely engage with art and experiences can provide distinctive insights and foster a deeper connection with the world around us. Drawing on Herbert's notion and the fluidity of identities, the *Missing Place Missing Face* project incorporates autobiographical elements through painting, exploring the broader implications of media culture and the representation of subjectivity. In his 2018 essay collection, *ATTENTION: Dispatches from a Land of Distraction*, Joshua Cohen explains that distraction is not a sudden disintegration of the senses but rather a gradual imbalance that begins with an initial intoxication and continues to self-intoxicate (p.6). This concept can also be applied to social media and snapshot culture. This project aims to displace attention back onto the canvas while navigating the complexities and absurdities of snapshot culture and social media.

All original images for this project were sourced from my Instagram stories and posts during the lockdown, informed by daily experience and contemporary aesthetics. They are embedded with a social and cultural framework characterised by their intrinsic immediacy and sociality, emphasising an idealized lifestyle. The nature of these images is closely tied to their origin on social media platforms, where sharing and engagement occur immediately and continuously. Social media references process a short-lived nature, with a lifespan of merely 24 hours, undermining the tension between memory and oblivion (D'AIOIA, 2016, p12). Archiving through social media platforms was an unanticipated method of exploring the relationship between personal and public domains since self-creation and consumption occurred unintentionally on Instagram. However, the project progressed slowly as the lockdown restrictions were lifted.

My approach involved working on an easel with the digital version of the photo displayed on an iPad and the original photograph, enabling me to collage certain elements through Photoshop compositions. As author Muzzarelli (2016) indicates, snapshot photography should not be viewed merely as “technological painting,” but rather as a method for cultivating an aesthetic relationship with the world. It encompasses a performative, autobiographical, and personal experience that leverages technology to enable a conceptual engagement with how reality is perceived. Due to the complexity of the photo referent in this project, the colour palette has evolved to incorporate a greater range of hues to convey light-hearted humour and satirical commentary. Author Jens Rachatz (2008) suggests that photography represents ‘externalisation’ and ‘trace’ of memory. This notion deeply resonates with my perspective, as, in comparison with the final production, image references in my work function as unreliable evidence.



Figure 30-Left: Xinan Yang, *#tonight*, 2021, Oil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.5x22.6cm



Figure 31-Right: Xinan Yang, *High art*, 2021, Oil and pencil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.5x22.6cm

Work *#tonight* references a vulgar performance, whereas *High Art* from Heather Phillipson's artwork *The End* in Trafalgar Square embodies a sense of playfulness. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams, in his ground-breaking article *Culture is Ordinary*, demonstrates that culture is, as the title suggests, ordinary; it encompasses not only high arts but also the everyday aspects of life, being the "product of a man's whole committed personal and social experience" (Williams, 1958). These photos are from my life experience, but the two art forms coexist harmoniously in my phone album and paintings. This juxtaposition demonstrates the multifaceted nature of culture, which can accommodate both the vulgar and the refined, the playful and the serious while remaining intrinsically connected to the individual's personal and social experiences. Painting serves as a microcosm of the broader cultural landscape, illustrating the increasingly fluid boundaries between high and low art, and between individual experiences and collective cultural expressions within snapshot culture.



Figure 32-Left: Xinan Yang, *After*, 2021 Oil acrylic and on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.5x22.6cm

Figure 33-Right: Xinan Yang, *Before*, 2021, Oil and pencil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.2x22.6cm

In the artworks "*Before*" and "*After*," distorted identity and individuality are strikingly evident, as the paintings exaggerate the relationship between fiction and reality. The fabrication of identity and individuality, stemming from the performative nature of social media, is eccentrically and satirically illustrated through contrasting elements. Examples include a dozen Corona beers alongside a Louis Vuitton bag, a realistic face morphing into a cartoonish doll visage, or a human hand transforming into a Mickey Mouse-like appendage.

Utilising humour enables the communication of intricate messages or social critiques in a manner that is more accessible and engaging for the audience. This approach aligns with Ralph Rugoff's assertion that paintings can simultaneously offer glimpses of the 'real' world and serve as constructed fabrications (2021, p. 15). By presenting these dual aspects, the artworks challenge viewers to confront the blurred lines between reality and painting while also considering the impact of social media on our perception of identity and individuality.

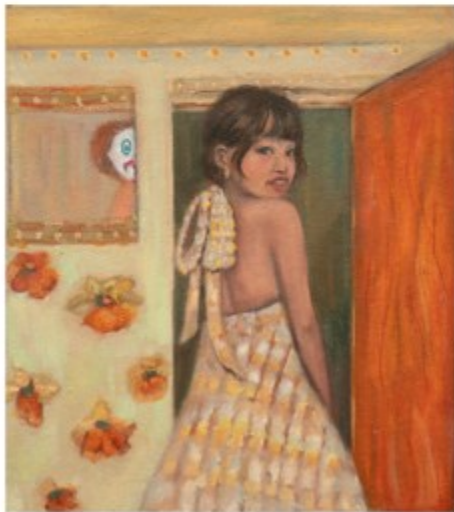
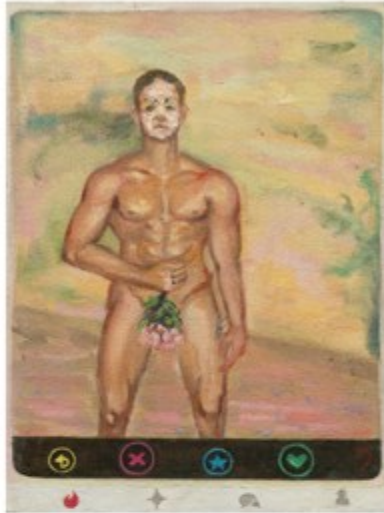


Figure 34-Up left: Xinan Yang, *New match*, 2021, Oil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.2x21.8cm

Figure 35-Up right: Xinan Yang, *High art*, 2021, Oil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.5x22.4cm

Figure 36-Down left: Xinan Yang, *Feel cute might delete it later*, 2021, Oil and pencil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 25.1x22cm

Figure 37-Down right: Xinan Yang, *Before and After*, 2021, Oil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 24.3x22.4cm

I aimed to utilise masks and caricatures to subvert the relationship between subject and representation. Digressing from mimetic figuration, I used masks and carefully placed emojis to create anonymous, faceless figures and morph the recognizably human figures into caricature characters to dismantle portraiture. Benjamin Buchloh

characterises the function of the mask and the caricature in the following manner: [...] both caricature and mask conceive of a person's physiognomy as fixed rather than a fluid field; in singling out particular traits, they reduce the infinity of differentiated facial expressions to a metonymic set. Thus, the fixity of mask and caricature deny outright the promise of fullness and the traditional aspirations toward an organic mediation of the essential characteristics of the differentiated bourgeois subject" (Buchloh, 1994, p.54). Caricature and emoji mechanised the individual subject, transforming them into a ghoulish figure.

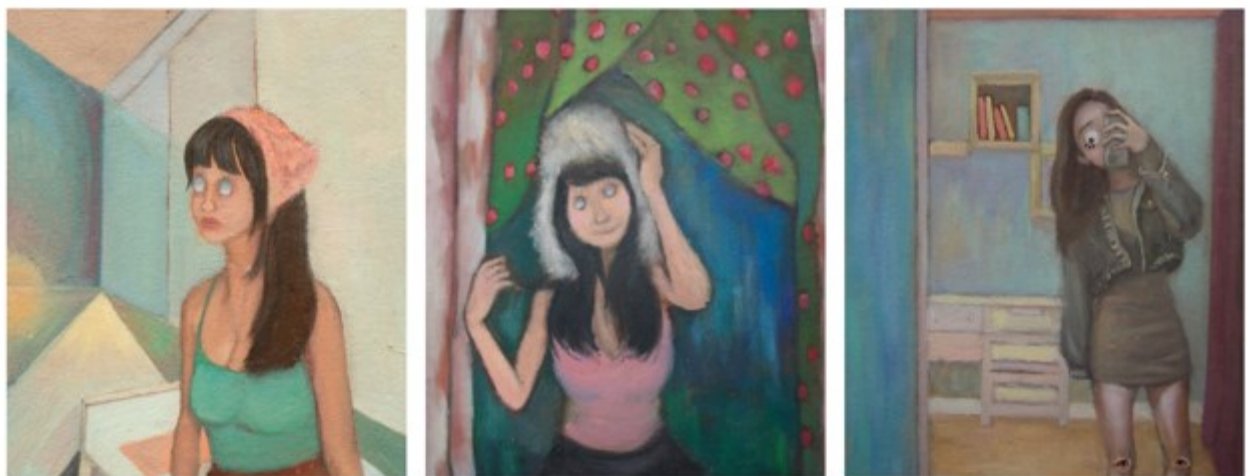


Figure 38- Left: Xinan Yang, *Work From Home*, 2021, Oil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 24.6x22cm

Figure 39-Middle: Xinan Yang, *#Missing*, 2021, Oil and pastel on canvas pasted on wood panel, 24.6x22.5cm

Figure 40-Right: Xinan Yang, *#today*, 2021, Oil and pastel on canvas pasted on wood panel, 24.6x22.5cm

Furthermore, in addition to depicting vacant eyes in works such as *Work From Home* and *#Missing*, I adopted a collage technique to incorporate eyes from photographs into my paintings. As exemplified in piece *#today*, a pair of eyes unexpectedly appears on the subject's knee, challenging the representational norms of traditional painting and infusing the artwork with a sense of unpredictability. This inventive approach, which I previously employed in the creation of *She'll Always Be Your Little Girl 97/8/20*,

resonates with Ralph Rugoff's concept of painting as a dialogue. According to Rugoff (2021, p.7), within any given canvas, individual elements interact with and influence one another, leading to an ongoing aesthetic confrontation that pushes the boundaries of artistic expression and encourages new ways of perceiving the artwork.



Figure 41: Xinan Yang, *Sad face*, 2021, Oil and pencil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.2x22.6cm

Simultaneously, my intention was to convey the social nature of selfies on Instagram through the medium of painting. Consequently, within the artwork titled "*Sad Face*," numerous smiling faces were depicted on the flowers, prompting the audience to assist in discerning the sorrowful expressions. This method facilitates viewer engagement in the interpretation of my artistic creation. The interactive aspect is also related to the social dynamics of the comment function on social media platforms, as both encourage participation and dialogue in the appreciation and understanding of the subject matter.

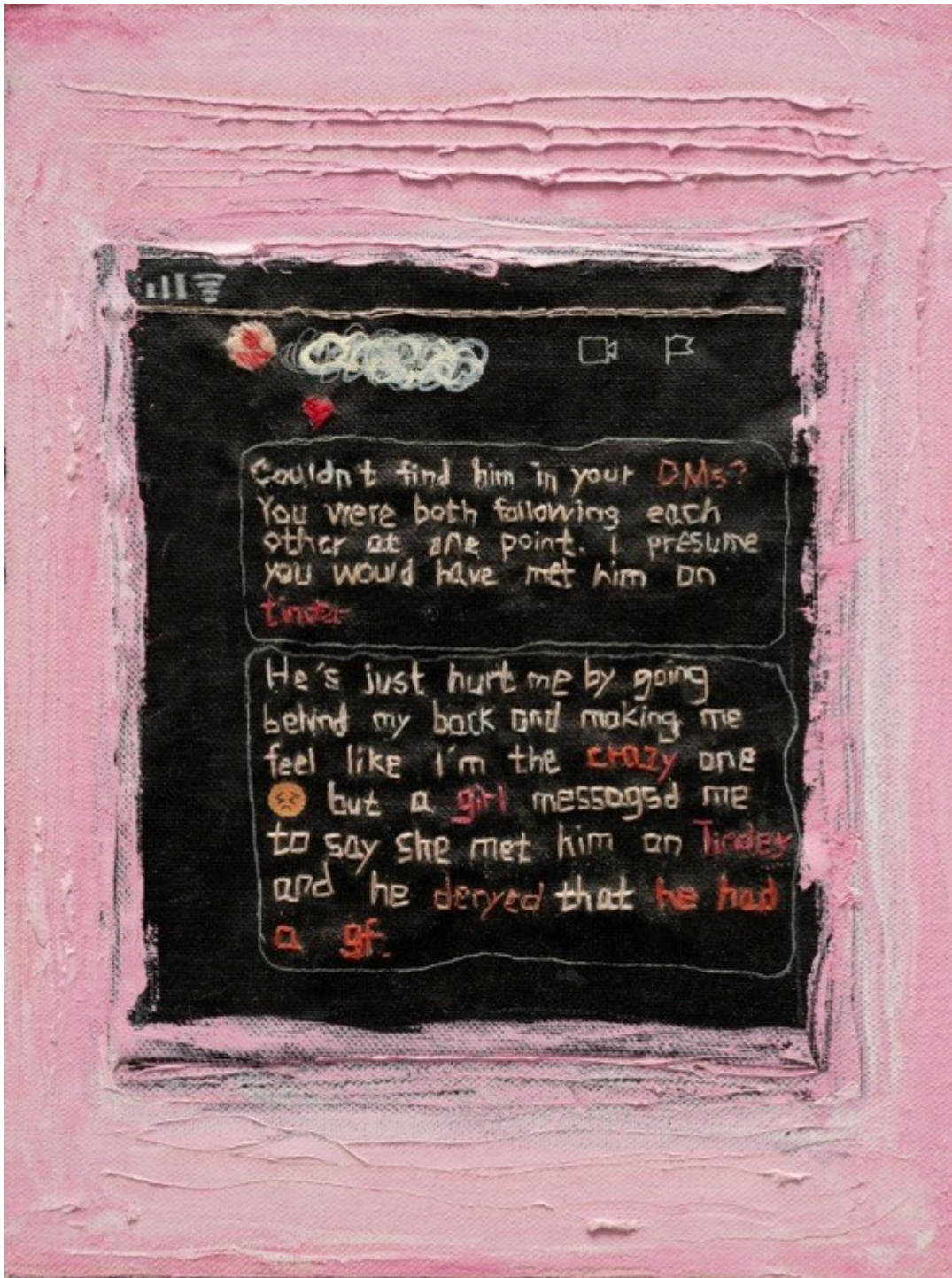


Figure 42: Xinan Yang, *Notification*, 2021, Oil, acrylic and strings on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.2x21.7cm

The unpredictability, sociability and anonymity are further accentuated and imbued with a satirical undertone in the artwork "*Notification*." Utilising embroidery as a medium to represent text, the artwork highlights how emotional detachment inherent in social media communication is diminished to a mere visual representation. The practice of embroidery is influenced by Rozsika Parker's writing on power dynamics,

gender, and representation within the context of feminism. Meanwhile, the rapid execution of typing on social media has resulted in a loss of emotional depth and meaning in the conveyed messages and texts, with only emojis remaining as a form of expression. Through my usage of simple hand-sewing techniques, I aimed to compel the audience to slow down and actively engage in deciphering the underlying meanings of the conveyed messages. Sewing an image acts as a counterpoint to the instant nature of social media imagery, slowing down reception while also evoking memories of the past due to the change in domestic technologies. In forthcoming contexts deemed appropriate, I intend to continue employing this technique.

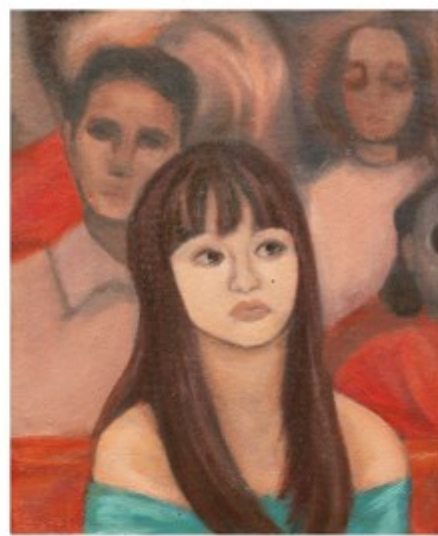


Figure 43-Up left: Xinan Yang, *Tube*, 2021, Oil and pencil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.2x22.6cm

Figure 44-Up right: Xinan Yang, *Oblivion*, 2021, Oil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 29.2x22.6cm

Figure 45-Down left: Xinan Yang, *Bestie Forever*, 2021, Oil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 24.8x22cm

Figure 46-Down right: Xinan Yang, *Team*, 2021, Oil on canvas pasted on wood panel, 24.8x22cm

Concurrently, a non-human, alien-like entity emerges within the artwork, frequently portrayed as weeping or concealing itself in darkness. This element remained inexplicable during the early stages of the project. During the final year of my doctoral studies, I came to understand that this imagery is closely linked to the slow process of oil painting, which entails extracting elements from reality and reconfiguring them on the canvas. This process arises from the harmonious interaction between the artist's subjective consciousness and the depicted objects on the canvas, manifesting as the tangible embodiment of the subconscious flowing on the canvas. It is another self, that represents the emotional and psychological challenges of displacement while accelerating during the lockdown. The entity (or another self) with unexpected associations and participation in the construction of reality on the canvas, offers viewers an opportunity to explore a range of potential narratives.

Painting refracts photographic stereotyped reality, emphasising its alleged longevity and legacy beyond a given life. This medium grants equal importance to the implication of creative content, which lets subjective perception take control, dismantling the original narrativity and emphasising the development of individuality. These two mediums hold different missions within my practice: the photographic image represents the indexical relationship to past reality, while painting reflects a reality closer to my intentional perception. It is an unreliable testimony of reality, aligning with Kuhn's statement, "Memory work undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered," while they are not true but serve as evidential material for interpretation and interrogation (2000, p.186). Autobiography work through painting serves as a creative skill that allows me to connect to the world I reconstruct. Reality is shaped primarily by my own need to recall and understand, leaving a certain amount of ambivalence for the audience. My

painting work reflects "a conscious and purposeful staging of memory" (Kuhn 2000, p.186).

Painting, the most laborious practice I have chosen since starting the doctorate programme, contrasts with the fleeting nature of the world I am familiar with. Painting seems to reject technical advancements and refuses to fit into the digitalisation of mass media. As author Westgeest's states in "*The Slow Painting: Contemplation and Critique in the Digital Age*," "The immediacy of photography is nowadays connected to the immediacy of its disappearance as well" (2022, p.39). The actual painting process and time spent in studio practice indicate that painting is the perfect medium to slow down the fleeting nature of mass media and interrogate the visual mediations we encounter daily. A photograph captures a decisive moment, whereas a painting represents a prolonged moment. Painting may be connected to value and based on the authority and history of painting to stabilise the ebb and flow of photographic themes.

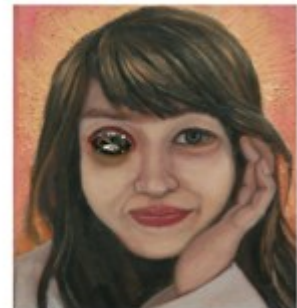


Figure 47-Left: Xinan Yang, *#Selfie*, 2021, Oil and pastel on canvas pasted on wood, 25.1x22cm

Figure 48-Middle: Xinan Yang, *#new*, 2021, Oil and gem on canvas pasted on wood, 25.1x22cm

Figure 49-Right: Xinan Yang, *#today*, 2021, Oil and pastel on canvas pasted on wood, 25.1x22cm

In my research, I found that transitioning from traditional family photographs to digital memory storage represents a conflict between the eternal and the ephemeral. As I compare an original photograph to a curated image posted on social media, along with other digital artefacts such as visited locations, random screenshots, and unexpected messages from strangers, a loose archive of my life emerges. In this context, I became an enthusiastic producer of transient images. The performative nature of social media and the unreliability of memory in its representation on other digital devices for self-representation has intensified my snapshot activity, highlighting its immediacy, unpredictability, unintentionality, and superficiality. As a cultural medium, painting is a fundamental means of constructing the aesthetic relationship between the self and the world and an archive for individual and collective memories. Consequently, the impetus to address narration within the image exacerbates a pathological sense of estrangement and absurdity, obfuscating the distinctions between subject and object. My vivid and satirical paintings explore the complexity and absurdity of internet culture, fostering feelings of alienation and disconnection. They capture our collective yearning for connection, emphasising what we are missing: the place and the face. Through my autobiographical exploration, I have come to realise that my artwork is not only a reflection of my personal experiences but also a reflect of the wider cultural shifts that have come about due to digital technologies and social media.

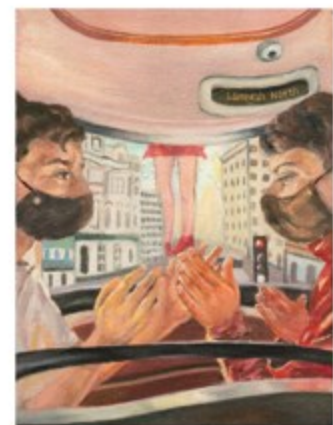
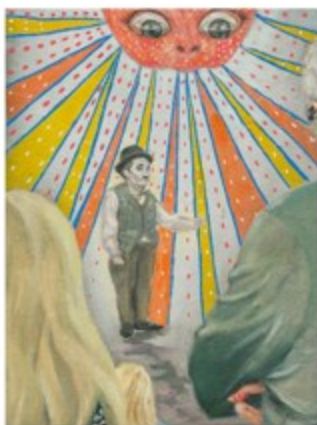


Figure 50-Left: Xinan Yang, *Family time*, 2021, Oil and acrylic on canvas pasted on wood, 29.3x21.7cm

Figure 51-Middle: Xinan Yang, *Somewhere in earth*, 2021, Oil and acrylic on canvas pasted on wood, 29.2x22.6cm

Figure 52-Right: Xinan Yang, *Siblings moments*, 2021, Oil and acrylic on canvas pasted on wood, 29.4x22.6cm

4. Painting Displacement

In the final stage of my doctoral research, I transitioned from critiquing my family album and commenting on social media to capturing my experiences of displacement from my homeland and family through painting.

Upon reflecting on the "*Missing Place Missing Face*" project, I have realised that its fragility speaks to my protean identity in the face of contemporary globalisation, which has left me feeling dislocated and alienated in London. As an artist, I believe that the essence of my work lies in questioning my original identity and culture, thereby creating a memory chain that helps me establish a direct link to my authentic connection, roots, and family bond in London. This has led me back to the family sphere, where the embrace of diasporic existence and the desire for return have never conflicted. The elements that define me as an entity in foreign lands include the photographs I collected at flea markets, the digital pixel images in family group chats, and my daily snapshot activity, which constantly negotiates between new and old lifestyles. Between my London life and family members across the world is the lost future of our family, which we once shared. An artist who inspired me to revisit my nostalgic tale and consider the experience of displacement is John Clang.

Figure 53: John Clang, *Being together*, 2010-2012, Fine art archival print

John Clang's photography project, "*Being Together*," documents the experience of dislocation by showing how modern technology can bridge the distance between families separated by diaspora and busy lifestyles. Clang, based in Singapore, has family members scattered around the world. In this poignant work, families grapple with the predicament of separation through time and space, similar to that of my own family. As scholar James Clifford notes, my practice is characterised by constantly mediating the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living in one place while remembering and desiring another (1994, p. 311). Inspired by the works of John Clang, I will examine how painting serves as a mediator that negotiates my family's and my own existence within time and space dimensions, utilising displacement as a central thematic element.

Authors Pratt and Rosner(2012), in the introduction to their edited volume "*The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*," extend the feminist tradition of challenging gender-based opposition by upending hierarchies of space and scale. They assert that a recurring pattern connecting gender, sex, and the global imaginary is what links the global and the intimate, and they emphasise the intertwined narrative of global relations as specific, quotidian, affective, and eccentric. This intimacy frame, when combined with global forces, makes the personal experience and exchange possible.

Although I am not explicitly aligning myself with feminist theory, I aim to draw on ideas elaborated above to inform my painting and storytelling, addressing the complexities of globalisation and the intimate spaces of everyday life in the 21st century, particularly in the context of family dynamics. However, translating theory into practice is challenging and requires persistent practice and a willingness to make mistakes. I seek to create a nostalgic dual-vision journey that combines spatial, cultural, social, and temporal divisions, focusing on family dynamics and tensions, ultimately taking on a more symbolic and universal form.

Below is a list of symbolic language I have developed in my paintings, which serves as a visual vocabulary for exploring the theme of displacement.

Compositions: Compositions create distance between the viewer and the subject matter, positioning the viewer as both a voyeur and an active participant in the scene.

Colour: Colour brings in emotions and visual ambiguity.

Characters:

- Bird: Symbolises the desire to re-establishing spiritual connections.
- Communication Devices: Symbolises the role of technology in facilitating globalisation and interconnectedness, as well as the potential for disconnection and isolation.
- Dog: Symbolises emotional substitution for familial bonds and altered perspectives.
- Family member: Symbolises the individual experience within the context of globalisation.

Metaphorical Space:

- Domestic setting: Symbolizes intimate personal space and emotional attachment to home and family.
- Door: Representations of the Unknown and thresholds between two spaces.
- Chinese landscape: Express personal cultural identity and convey the narrative of displacement.

These symbolic languages serve as my yearning and hope for a return to my homeland. Through painting and a shared narrative, these elements establish connections among my geographically dispersed family members. I incorporated these elements to create domestic voyeuristic scenes that invite viewers to explore spaces that are both concealed and revealed beyond what the eye can normally see.

The concept of human intimacy is closely tied to our personal space, and for me, this space has often been associated with the home. Since the initial lockdown in March of 2020, my bedroom and living room have served as my studio space, and each room in the home has taken on a symbolic meaning for me. Behind each door lies a space that I retreat to each night, illuminated by warm lamplight. The hot bath provides a comforting respite, reminding me of the warmth and safety of home. The dinner table serves as a site of social practice, facilitating the sharing of food and contributing to the formation of social bonds in the familial and ceremonial contexts.

The bird, which appears in the background of each painting, represents a symbolic link between the works. The image of the bird represents the idea of breaking the balance between subjectivity and reality. Birds symbolise the perpetual migration of individuals who traverse the world in search of a better life or personal growth, carrying with them a yearning for the comfort and security of their roots. I have viewed them as magical creatures, reflecting my own experience of leaving my homeland and seeking a new place in the world.

My past work has explored the theme of fragile communication in the context of my experiences abroad, utilising social media, dating apps, and digital albums. I aim to incorporate modern communication to bridge the gap between myself and my lost personal and familial histories due to its ability to connect and isolate the individual.

Figure 54: Dorothea Tanning, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, 1943, Oil on canvas, 40.7x61cm

The fascination with doors in this work is heavily influenced by artist Dorothea Tanning. In her memoir, *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2004), Tanning wrote, "I want to lead the eye into spaces that hide, revealed as if they had appeared with no help from me." She further explained in an interview, "Everything is in motion. Behind the invisible door (or doors), there is another door...There is no showing who one really is." (Tanning, 1993). Tanning considered the open door a "talisman for the things happening" in her life, and this talisman represents the power of art over the spectator as well. According to Tanning, it is crucial to leave "the door open to the imagination." (Tanning, 1991). She believed that enigma is a healthy thing because it encourages the viewer to look beyond the obvious and commonplace. (Tanning, 1991). The erotic symbolism of the door, its power to divide and police the private and public spheres, is also significant. In this context, perhaps opening that door may represent the artist's parents' home back in Shanghai.

Initially, painting my family dog was a spontaneous decision that resulted in the creation of 'Yes, I do'. In this painting, I have depicted my family dog with sensitivity and kindness, inviting viewers to engage with her gaze and creating a dynamic space within the painting. However, it was not until my supervisors began to notice the dog that she became a significant talking point within the works. This prompted me to consider the narrative role of the dog in my paintings from a more analytical perspective.

On a personal level, the presence of a dog in my paintings holds significant meaning, which can be understood within the broader context of pet-human relationships in Chinese mid-age families. In China, particularly following the implementation of the one-child policy in 1979, families had fewer children due to the policy, which led to a stronger attachment to pets as companions and sources of emotional support. Even though the one-child policy was eased in 2013, dogs have increasingly served as emotional substitutes for children who have grown up and moved away (Coren, 2018). The attachment to them can be incredibly strong, especially when family members are separated by distance or time. In my own experience, dogs have served as a replacement for the absence of children, particularly in situations where I am unable to be physically present with my loved ones. For instance, when both my brother and I were unable to return home to support our father during his surgery, my mother told me that our family dog had provided comfort and companionship to my father while he was in the hospital. This experience reinforces the idea that dogs, and by extension my paintings featuring them, can symbolise familial bonds that transcend physical distance.

In my triptych painting, "*I Still Care*," French artist Pierre Bonnard significantly influenced the creative process. My objective is to express my personal experience of displacement within my family, which is event-driven, and examine how painting can generate enduring engagement for the audience. To expand on this concept, I integrated elements of my own practice with Bonnard's work in the creation of this triptych.

Figure 55: Pierre Bonnard, *The Dressing Table with a bunch of Red and Yellow Flowers*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 125 x 110 cm

Diverging from Bonnard's technique of utilising sketches to reconstruct his initial impressions of a scene, my methodology entailed photographing my domestic space first and subsequently recreating the composition using Photoshop and Procreate. Nevertheless, I preserved Bonnard's approach to constructing space by forgoing a linear perspective in favour of a more natural perspective. Bonnard's wide-angle scenes simultaneously present the entire view, engendering a seemingly natural appearance and fostering an intimate, present atmosphere, as illustrated in the image above. Such an approach is atypical for still life and indoor scenes, given that wide-angle views can appear distorted when portrayed using a traditional linear perspective.



Figure 56: Xinan Yang, digital Sketch for *I still care*

Influenced by Bonnard, I composed the characters within a 180-degree angle (corresponding to the full width of human vision) and maintained narrative coherence within the secure confines of a bed. A distinct aspect of my artistic practice is the emphasis on narrativity. For the other two paintings, I employed a linear composition, incorporating elements from my previous work, such as birds and doors, to disrupt the

composition. Upon constructing sketches for the painting, my supervisor assisted me in re-establishing the hierarchy of elements within the image and eliminating unnecessary components, such as the bed's headboard.

Figure 57 -left Pierre Bonnard, *Nu dans le bain*, 1936, Oil on canvas, 125 x 110 cm

Figure 58-right Pierre Bonnard, *Nu dans le bain*, 1936, Oil on canvas, 125 x 110 cm

In this series, I deviated from a naturalistic colour palette and adopted a more expressive and vibrant colour palette characterised by strong contrasts. This approach is related to Bonnard's utilisation of colour contrasts, which involve complementary colours. This technique is evident in the painting, as seen in the complementary colours of purple and yellow on the wall and the complementary colours of blue and orange on the skin, generating visual stimulation when placed in proximity. Bonnard's secondary strategy employs colours with similar brightness but contrasting hues, as observed in the monochrome version of "*Bathers*."



Figure 59: Xinan Yang, *I Still Care*, 2022, oil on canvas, 120x85cm

I aimed to create visual tension through colour and light interactions. This intention is exemplified in the background wall of one triptych painting, which features a colour transition from indigo to orange, followed by gold-orange. This progression provokes a discord between neighbouring colours, further accentuated by a thick layer of light blue oil paint combined with Liquin, culminating in a juxtaposition of complementary colours. Concurrently, I persistently applied oil paint to render the gradual transition of light, whether behind the door or outside the window. Moreover, by capturing images of the painting at various stages of development, I refined my colour application, ultimately discerning the optimal moment to cease the painting process.

I recognised that Bonnard deliberately left certain areas of his paintings with vague imagery, encouraging viewers to maintain their curiosity and explore further. Bonnard's method of enhancing attention in his work is achieved through the ambiguity of form and figure, resulting in visual uncertainty. Gestalt psychology indicates that visual uncertainty in artwork leads to longer viewing durations and stronger aesthetic responses, implying that investing more effort in decoding a piece of art yields a richer experience (Wagemans, 2012). In "Bathers," for instance, we can clearly discern the

subjects of a person and a bathtub; however, the surrounding space appears to be an amalgamation of colours.



Figure 60: Xinan Yang, *I Still Care*, 2022, oil on canvas, 120x85cm, 120x85cm

In my own painting, I attempted to emulate this approach, though I feel it was not entirely successful, possibly due to how I applied brushstrokes on the canvas. Nevertheless, I integrated the striking pattern illusion of the relationship between the figures and their vivid, intricately patterned painted backgrounds, a technique employed by Bonnard. This integration involved the strong interplay between objects, figures, and colourful, complex background designs.

While creating the triptych, I employed techniques inspired by Pierre Bonnard's psychological domestic paintings. These techniques include the symbolic role of colour, unconventional compositions, intimate portrayal of everyday life, and an intentional attempt at visual ambiguity. Using fragmented patches of colour in my own work led to the emergence of an ambiguous representation of form traversing a spatial plane, particularly when conveying warmth. This technique manifests itself in two aspects within my paintings. Firstly, it engenders a chromatic luminosity that was absent in my previous work. This coloured light instils a sense of empathy in the

artwork, transcending a mere portrayal of loved family members. Additionally, it fosters ambiguity in the spatial delineation of the wall, which could alternatively be perceived as a cloud, evoking an emotional response. The most significant distinction in these three works is the birds in each painting, which traverse the compositions, symbolising a spirit connection for the home and serving as a unifying element between the paintings and their different settings.

In the triptych, the incorporation of communication devices within each individual's space to convey a narrative. These devices connect and influence the other paintings, resulting in a multi-layered narrative within a single space, requiring viewers to approach the artwork more closely to discern the content fully. Furthermore, I incorporated my family dog again as the foundation of my storyline, a similar method shown in the work "Yes, I Do". This storytelling approach encourages deeper engagement and stimulates curiosity, inviting the audience to become active participants in deciphering the underlying narrative connections among the different paintings.



Figure 61: Xinan Yang, *I Still Care*, 2022, oil on canvas, 120x85cm

The final year has been an emotionally and physically taxing period for me, during which I have confronted the loss of a close college friend, a suicide attempt by a friend in London, and the demise of my cherished grandfather. These experiences centred around themes of death, have engendered feelings of confusion regarding my personal identity and profound sorrow. A major contributor to this distress arises from my status as a foreigner in a far-off land; when faced with the need to grieve and pay tribute, I find myself at a loss, as the culturally significant and ritualistic practices I am familiar with are unavailable in my current environment. Another contributing factor is that, over the past three years, I have only managed to reunite with my family in China on one occasion. As a result, I have instinctively returned to my cultural origins, which can be traced back to my childhood experiences of accompanying my parents to temples for prayer. This re-engagement with my cultural identity has exacerbated my sense of identity uncertainty within a context of displacement, as well as heightened my yearning for a return to my homeland.

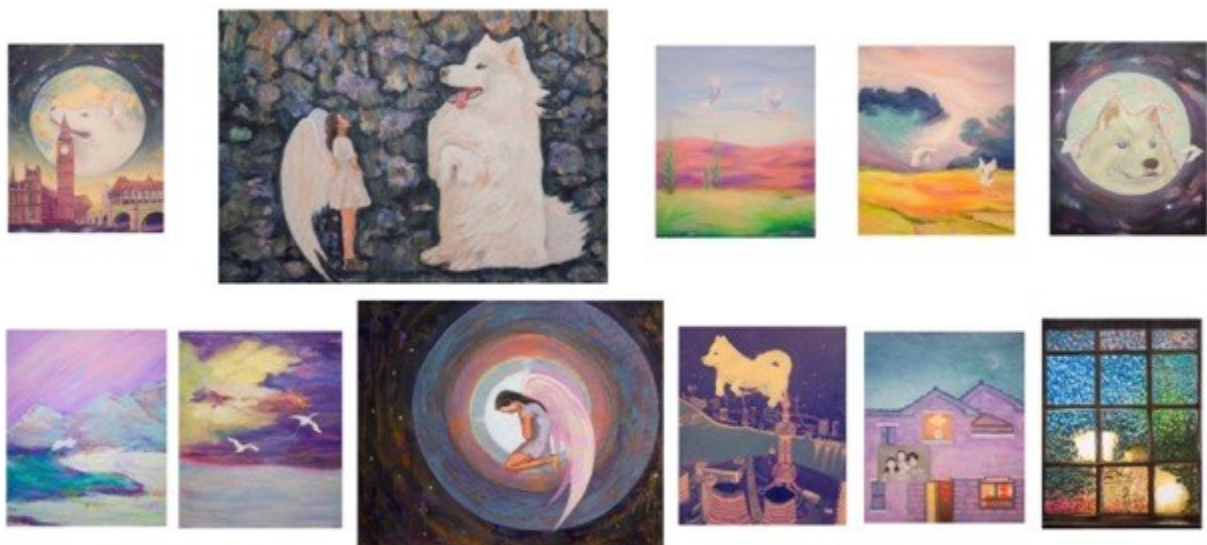


Figure 62-Up image 1: Xinan Yang, *Here*, 2023, Oil on wood panel,30.1x36.4cm

Figure 63-Up image 2: Xinan Yang, *Reunion I*, 2023, Oil on canvas,86.4x59.5cm

Figure 64-Up image 3: Xinan Yang, *Voyage I*, 2023, Oil on wood panel, 30.1x36.4cm

Figure 65-Up image 4: Xinan Yang, *Voyage II*, 2023, Oil on wood panel, 30.1x36.4cm

Figure 66-Up image 5: Xinan Yang, *Looming at Moon I*, 2023, Oil on wood panel, 30.1x36.4cm

Figure 67-Down image 1: Xinan Yang, *Voyage III*, 2023, Oil on wood panel, 30.1x36.4cm

Figure 68-Down image 2: Xinan Yang, *Voyage IV*, 2023, Oil on wood panel, 30.1x36.4cm

Figure 69-Down image 3: Xinan Yang, *Looming at Moon II*, 2023, Oil on canvas, 40x50cm

Figure 70-Down image 4: Xinan Yang, *There*, 2023, Oil on wood panel, 30.1x36.4cm

Figure 71-Down image 5: Xinan Yang, *Sleepless Home I*, 2023, Oil on wood panel, 30.1x36.4cm

Figure 72-Down image 6: Xinan Yang, *Sleepless Home II*, 2023, Oil on wood panel, 30x40cm

During this period, I initially embarked on creating small-scale works on various wood panels and canvases, with a primary emphasis on the themes of longing and belonging. My creative process happened to align with the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival in October of the previous year. Comparable to Western Thanksgiving, the Mid-Autumn Festival is a traditional Chinese event. Families congregate to appreciate the full moon, celebrate cherished family moments, and contemplate absent loved ones who cannot join the gathering. Regrettably, due to my displacement, I could not partake in this festival with my family for five years. In Chinese literature, the moon is intimately linked to the sentiment of homesickness. Li Bai's "Quiet Night Thoughts" (1940) conveys nostalgia as the poet gazes at the moon, reflecting on home.

Quiet Night Thoughts

By Li Bai

Before my bed lies a pool of moonlight

I could imagine that it's frost on the ground

I look up and see the bright shining moon

Bowing my head I am thinking of home

Chinese mythology - features a moon goddess named Chang'e, who is said to reside on the moon alongside a rabbit. The mythological narrative of a divine figure living on the moon with a celestial animal evoked a sense of wonder and mystery. The possibility of lunar inhabitants and the poetry of Li Bai served as an imaginative cornerstone for my early interest in creating small-scale, magical paintings. As a testing ground, these paintings reinterpreted everyday scenes through a fantastical lens, incorporating elements such as birds and dogs. Subsequently, these explorations informed larger works in which memory is grounded in real space but has access to the space of imagination, myth and fantasy previously explored in the small paintings.

My painting provides a visual interpretation of the universal human desire to belong and the complex emotions experienced by those uprooted from their native environment. The inclusion of the migratory birds, which I developed in the triptych as a central motif, invites viewers to reflect on their own journeys and the concept of home while fostering empathy for those who continually grapple with issues of displacement and identity. I use symbolic imagery, particularly the recurring motif of birds, to represent the spirits of those who navigate new environments while longing for the familiarity of home. In this painting, the dog differs from the one in the larger triptych as it appears more magical and less realistic. Similarly to the triptych, it reflects my desire to connect with my family despite being separated. Painting has the remarkable ability to facilitate an imaginative connection that transcends physical constraints. The dog serves as a powerful symbol of this imaginative connection, embodying both myself as I journey through displacement and time, and the transformative power of imagination.

In subsequent discussions, I will elaborate on how I have utilised painting to incorporate this reconnection with my cultural identity and how I have applied these

elements to augment the visual complexity of my major artwork. The artists whose work resonates with me are Peter Doig, Guimi You, Liu Xiaodong.

My creative approach shifted from concentrating on single paintings on an easel to working on multiple canvases mounted on the wall simultaneously. Notable aspects of this method within the triptych are the interlinked communication devices and the complex interplay of light. My primary goal in this venture is to express the tension between personal and cultural identities, employing various elements to amplify the level of visual ambiguity in my artwork. Consequently, I retained the non-human entity beings that spontaneously emerged in my previous work, "Missing Place Missing Face." The appearance of the snake as a symbol emerged unconsciously; however, upon learning of my grandfather's severe illness, I quickly understood that my subconscious perceived it as a binary force opposing family unity and togetherness.

Throughout this creative phase, I developed and expanded upon specific elements from experimental small-scale paintings, undergoing intricate alterations and merging various sources. A potential reason for this shift occurred during the second-year critique when one of my colleagues noted the triptych painting was successful, but it still adhered to a conservative tradition of figurative painting. This observation prompted me to reflect on the nature of the work and reconsider the new composition. In response, I moved away from portraying literal, unambiguous moments based on my experiences. Instead, I began weaving my personal narrative to convey a range of emotions reflecting contemporary feelings of isolation, melancholy, and uncertainty caused by my displacement.

This relates to the creative approach of Peter Doig. Doig's work is renowned for exploring themes of displacement and cultural dislocation. This is connected to his complex upbringing; he was born in Scotland but grew up in Trinidad, Canada, and London. By employing dreamlike imagery and other visual elements, Doig invites viewers to ponder their own experiences of belonging and identity, and to reflect on how our experiences of place and displacement shape our self-awareness.

Figure 73: Peter Doig, *Hitchhiker*, 1990, Oil on canvas

He often uses landscape paintings as a means to investigate the theme of displacement. This can be seen in his early work, *Hitchhiker*, where we do not see any human figures in the painting, just remote and isolated locations. This can create a sense of separation from the rest of society. The success of *Hitch Hiker* inspired Doig to incorporate his Canadian experiences into his work when he realised it provided a unique subject matter. The dislocation he experienced in London led him to become captivated by his second home, Canada. He went on to paint "homely" houses, frozen ponds, ski areas, and open fields. Doig's early paintings often feature uninhabited, desolate houses, seen through trees, underbrush, or obscured by falling snow.

In his interview with art critic Martin Gayford, Doig stated 'That's not true of the paintings I'm doing now so much, but at one time I was making paintings that felt as if they put the viewer in a voyeuristic position – the position of an intruder, traveller, or hunter. That was something I was trying to do with the paintings in the forest.' (Doig, 2005). For Doig, displacement is represented by the landscapes he has witnessed. In my case, displacement signifies turning towards mountains and rivers, representing a journey home that passes through these landscapes on a plane and is also an essential element in ancient Chinese paintings. This reflects my cultural identity and is a re-encoding of visual elements based on my personal experiences. I aim to incorporate the natural scenery into the paintings in a way that inserts reality within reality, allowing both to coexist on the same plane.



Figure 74: Xinan Yang, *Bound Me*, 2023, Oil on canvas, 120x70cm

In contrast to Doig's approach of using landscapes from past life experiences to displace audience attention, I drew upon elements of early Chinese landscape paintings to express my personal cultural identity and convey my narrative of displacement and dislocation while creating within a foreign context. By weaving mountains and rivers into the existing intimate domestic spaces, I create a new reality upon the original one. Through the combination of public and private landscape themes, the merging and fusion of internal and external realities, the question of who we are inevitably becomes entangled with our relationship to the surrounding world. My creative work aims to redirect the viewer's attention towards the interdependence between humans and the environment, requiring the audience to observe these paintings for an extended period without delving into their depths. By establishing unexpected formal correspondences between people, objects, and places, everything in the world seems to be connected to everything else. The unsettling blend of personal subjectivity with the human-made aspects of our material and social environment addresses the issue of how cultures collide in a state of displacement. This series explores the dynamic significance between individual and collective identities as they emerge from these collisions.

Figure 75: Peter Doig, *Pink Snow*, 1991, Oil on canvas, 243.5x198cm

In contrast to Pierre Bonnard, Peter Doig does not rely on memories from direct observation. Instead, he draws inspiration from using photographs and magazines to combine personal recollections with his artistic practice. In his work, *Pink Snow*, Doig employs a scribble method to create a visual effect resembling snow or a storm, simultaneously obstructing the viewer's ability to fully observe the scene. Reflecting on this piece, he explains, "you are constantly looking through things, seeing the foreground and the background at the same time" (Doig, 2008). In some ways, this approach produces a similar effect to Bonnard's visual uncertainty, slowing the viewer's attention and directing their focus towards the snow and other elements within the composition. As a means of displacing the viewer from the emotional center of the work, Doig later clarified that his technique "[captures] the space that is behind the eyes. It's as if you were lying in bed trying hard to remember what something looked like. And Bonnard managed to paint that strange state. It is not a photographic space at all. It is a memory space, but one which is based on reality" (Doig, 2007).



Figure 76: Xinan Yang, *Bound You*, 2023, Oil on linen, 120x70cm

In my artwork, I aim to manifest the concept of a memory space that is rooted in reality. Through my research on displacement and painting, this memory space is derived from family photographs, which possess a distinct temporal dimension that evoke nostalgia. By capturing the essence of cherished family moments from the past, my paintings serve as a poignant homage to the passage of time. I emphasise the desire to harmonise the ephemeral and eternal elements, reflecting my mature understanding of family relationships and my concern for the connection between the past and the present. These monochromatic images intersect with the canvas's original composition and narrative, striving for a balanced coexistence within the artwork. The depicted figures appear confined in an unstable space. This facilitates the exploration of alternative interpretations of historical images by recontextualising them and incorporating the identity seeker into an open-ended narrative. This approach poses questions to the audience, invoking the intangible presence of an absent home or bygone era, thereby generating a sense of temporal discord. This perspective capitalises on ambiguous historical coordinates to challenge and destabilise the notion of contemporaneity (Rugoff, 2021, P. 7). Through the fragile nature of black and white photography, a single image becomes intertwined with diverse perspectives on the present and past, as well as the real and the imagined. This necessitates that viewers examine the artwork more closely, as the indistinct, shadowy expressions reveal the artist's decision-making process. The juxtaposition of these photographs with the colourful, dynamic figurative paintings can illustrate the tension between personal history and the ongoing experience of displacement.

Figure 77: Guimi You, *Watering*, 2022, Oil on linen, 182.8x152.4cm

In the final years of my research, I further strengthened my understanding of Bonnard's colour technique, which involves layering two or three colours on top of one another, in order to better convey compassion and empathy in some of my painting. Additionally, I adapted a bold approach to colour hue, drawing inspiration from the works of Guimi You, an American-based Korean artist. Contrasting with Guimi You's

direct approach of employing landscapes to implicitly express personal identity and emotional states, I opted to integrate private spaces within a public landscape, utilising compositional techniques to achieve this juxtaposition. I was captivated by her skilful use of colour and paint application, which produced a dreamlike, therapeutic effect. Guimi's works reflect the vibrant pastel colours of Pierre Bonnard, whereas the curling fluid forms draw parallels with Felix Vallotton landscape painting. Her daring colour palette is inspired by her child's collage art, and her paintings often depict the Californian landscape she observes on her way to the studio. Guimi's abstract forms and vibrantly coloured paintings frequently feature a single character without facial structures, set in indoor or outdoor scenes.

Figure 78: Guimi You, *Flower Land*, 2022, Oil on linen, 227.3x181.8cm

In an interview, the artist Guimi You shared her thoughts on the representation of figures in her paintings: "I also prefer not to depict the figures' faces in detail, as the figures can represent anyone as opposed to a specific person. I hope that my paintings could evoke special memories or emotions from the viewers' past." (You, 2021)

The anonymous representation of people in her work reflects the influence of ancient Korean traditional art, which itself has been shaped by Chinese and Buddhist art. These artistic traditions often feature simplified facial features with minimal lines and shapes to effectively convey emotions, character, and the inner nature of the subject. This fusion of Eastern and Western artistic traditions can be seen as an expression of Guimi's personal experiences with cultural displacement, evoking feelings of isolation and ambiguity.

Liu Xiaodong is a contemporary Chinese realist painter whose early work focused on his friends and family. His residencies in New York in 1993 and Spain in 1998 influenced his choice of themes, as he aimed to use painting to document the tense relationship between individuals and society. Since then, his work has become renowned for its cultural observations and for capturing the impact of globalisation and modernisation on society through on-site paintings. With a focus on diverse and

socially structured groups, Liu emphasises personal narratives, capturing subjects such as the LGBT community, Mexican immigrant shelters, and Chinese migrant workers. Despite the differences in their lives, these subjects all experience isolation, displacement, and marginalisation. Liu's artistic expressions span paintings, sketches, project journals, and photos. One of his biggest influences is the famous British painter Lucian Freud. His early interest in film production has significantly shaped the honest, unembellished portrayal of contemporary life in his paintings. Liu is also known for his involvement in the 1994 film "The Days," directed by Wang Xiaoshuai, which highlights his familiarity with the porous boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and technique.

Figure 79: Liu Xiaodong, *A Mexican Family, The Martinez*, 2019, oil on canvas, 250x300cm

As a realist painter, Liu goes to where his subjects live and work instead of having them come to him. His large-scale works are often completed on-site, with photos occasionally used to refine specific details. This approach expands our understanding of being an observational painter and challenges our relationship with realism and realist painting.

Figure 80: Liu Xiaodong, *Geoffrey and his Family*, 2019, oil on canvas, 140x150cm

Liu is particularly interested in the relationship between his subjects and their environments, and how they shape each other. He has stated, "My only goal is to confront people and see them as they really are." (Yau, 2021, p. 112). By immersing himself in various communities, Liu uses paintings to depict immigrants and individuals whose lives are being altered by societal changes. His work captures the misalignment that underlies these experiences, as demonstrated in his exhibitions such as "New England" at 2020 London Massimo de Carlo Gallery and "Border" at the 2021 Dallas Contemporary. The exhibition 'New England' mainly focuses on Chinese upper-class immigrants in London, while 'Border' focuses on displaced immigrants on the US-Mexico border. Unlike Liu Xiaodong, collective anxieties and social realities in my

practice are explored through personal experience. This is linked to my autobiographical research. Liu Xiaodong's methodologies for addressing the subject matter warrant consideration, and it is possible that, in the future, I may continue exploring the "Missing" project.



Figure 81: Xinan Yang, *Family Dinner*, 2023, Oil on canvas, 152.5x122cm

During my final year of artistic exploration, I was influenced by fellow artists in refining my oil painting medium composition, which consisted of 40% linseed oil, 40% turpentine, and 20% damar varnish. I purposefully portrayed the subjects within my

paintings looking downwards, precluding any connection with external viewers. These figures seem isolated within their individual environments. It is worth mentioning that I have successfully applied Bonnard's visual uncertainty in my work, such as in Bound You, where the image on the computer is just a cluster of yellow colour blocks, or the arch design at the top of Family Dinner, encouraging viewers to engage in prolonged observation.

Professional Practice

Solo exhibitions

2022, Taymour Grahne Projects, 'Missing Place Missing Face', London (online)

Sixteen oil painting sizes vary from 29. 2x22. 6cm to 127x89cm

Joint exhibitions

2023, Mother London, 'Diaspora and Belonging', Oil painting, 120x85cm, 'I Still Care.'

2022, Candid Arts Gallery, 'Muse', Group exhibition, London, United Kingdom, 'Specimen', Oil painting, 96x80cm

2022, Chelsea College of Arts, Fine Art Alumni 2020, Group exhibition, London, United Kingdom

Triptych oil painting, 120x85cm, "I still care

2022, A.V.A studio, Professional Doctorate Summer Show, Group exhibition, London, United Kingdom

Twenty-four oil paintings from the collection of Missing place Missing face size 29. 2x22. 6cm and a triptych oil painting, 'I Still Care' 120x85cm

2021, A.V.A studio, Professional Doctorate Summer Show, Group exhibition, London, United Kingdom, Oil painting, 75x110cm, 'Yes, I do

2021, Noho Studios, 'Contemporary Domesticity', Group exhibition, 'Immoral Daughter', Oil painting, 90x102cm 'She'll Always Be Your Little Girl 97/8/20', Oil painting, 105x120cm 'I Still Care', Oil painting, 125x95cm

2020, Copeland, 'Emergent Vision', Group exhibition, 'Immoral Daughter', Oil painting, 90x102cm

2020, Saatchi Gallery, 'London Grads Now', Group exhibition, 'I Still Care', Oil painting, 125x95cm 2020, Deptford Does Art, "Gods, Devils & Software Engineers", Group exhibition, 'Hey Babe!', Oil Painting, 127x89cm

2020, Online, "Wall Without Walls", Group exhibition, 'I Still Care', Oil painting, 125x95cm

2020, Sprout Art, "10 Degree +", Group exhibition, 'Specimen', Oil painting, 96x80cm

2019, Platform Southwark, "Emergency", Group exhibition, 'Cage', Light installation, Dimension variable

2019, The Crypt Gallery, "Immurement", Group exhibition, 'Narcissus', Light installation, Dimension variable

2019, Wimbledon Colleges of Arts, "Collaborative Corridor Exhibition", Group exhibition, 'Monopoly', Installation, Dimension variable

2019, Ugly Duck, "Postoptia", Group exhibition, 'Uterus', Mix media installation, Dimension variable

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Triptych oil painting 'I Still Care' p70-73

Professional Practice (2020-2023)

Since the London Grads Now exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in September 2020, my art career has seen a significant upswing in visibility and success. As a result, several professional galleries have contacted me to explore potential collaboration opportunities. Following a virtual studio visit, I participated in a group exhibition with the Taymour Grahne Project. This gallery is located in West London. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing lockdown, the exhibition was repeatedly delayed and rescheduled for early 2021.

Figure 82: Exhibition view at Contemporary Domesticity, 2020, NoHo Studios, London, United Kingdom

The overarching theme of the Contemporary Domesticity exhibition is to examine how modern artists interact with domestic spaces, ranging from everyday objects to ornamental items, and how these spaces are significant in preserving memories and holding family gatherings. The exhibition, which featured 28 talented artists from across the globe, was held off-site at Noho studio, a vibrant location at the heart of London, from April 14th to April 24th 2021. As a participant, I was thrilled to collaborate with artists outside my academic circle. I presented three family portrait paintings that focused on the fluidity and unreliability of domestic memories.



Figure 83: Exhibition view at Contemporary Domesticity, 2020, NoHo Studios, London, United Kingdom

Following my previous exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery and a year of navigating the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, I eagerly anticipated the opportunity to showcase my work in the upcoming exhibition. While my educational background provided a strong foundation in creative and conceptual development, I recognised the need to approach my career entrepreneurially. To this end, I updated my artist website, ensured my professional profile and CV were current and utilised social media to send invitations to the exhibition's opening. During the exhibition's opening, I made a deliberate effort to engage in reciprocal conversations with attendees and to be physically present, which allowed me to become more comfortable and confident in interacting with the public. Moreover, I capitalised on the opportunity to network with fellow artists who exhibited, further expanding my professional connections. Following the exhibition, I expressed my gratitude to all attendees through social media and corresponded with the exhibition's organisers and staff to thank them for their support and dedication in facilitating my artistic advancement. This act bolstered my professional profile and demonstrated my

appreciation for the assistance that aided me in achieving my goals. At the end of the exhibition, all three of my paintings were sold to various collectors; it is great to have that form of validation.

In June 2022, I achieved a significant milestone in my professional art career by holding my first solo online exhibition, entitled "Missing Place Missing Face," in collaboration with the Taymour Grahne Project. The show presented in an online platform KUNSTMATRIX(<https://artspaces.kunstmatrix.com/en/exhibition/10547772/catalog>) garnered recognition through press coverage on prominent art websites such as Mutual Art. The concept of the "Missing Place Missing Face" project emerged during a period of personal isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a sense of detachment from society and family, exacerbated by the ubiquitous digital diaspora. To reconnect, I turned to social media platforms, and my supervisor suggested exploring the theme of the unreliability of digital memory archives and their representation on other digital devices, ultimately resulting in the creation of the "Missing Place Missing Face" project. Despite the creative merits of the exhibition, its sales performance has been lacklustre. While it is customary for me to evaluate their success through the lens of commercial viability, it may be more valuable to prioritise a lifelong commitment to honing a distinctive and authentic artistic voice and maintaining my self-belief.

Summary

In conclusion, my doctoral journey originated from a certain discontent with Chinese family dynamics and their cultural context. This journey began with examining family photographs, leading to the creation of disquieting paintings based on images that critiqued gender inequality within the domestic sphere. Personal experiences of geographical dislocation led to a compassionate re-evaluation of family dynamics through painting my own family photos and acquiring Western family photos, to bridge cultural differences and understand diverse family experiences. Subsequently, this exploration prompted an investigation into using painting as a means for critiquing social media and human connections.

As my research deepened, I became increasingly aware of themes such as displacement and alienation, culminating in developing my own family narrative through painting. To support the new works, my research considered four artists' use of displacement. I adopted Pierre Bonnard's psychological depiction of daily life, which is characterised by his distinct use of colour, unconventional compositions, and visual ambiguity. During the final year, I refined my methodology, initially experimenting with magical small-scale paintings to explore the emotional space and later transitioning to larger paintings. I examined Peter Doig's use of landscape to displace audience attention, Guimi You's employment of everyday life to displace the viewer's emotional state, and Liu Xiaodong's realism perspective to depict the global experience of displacement and uprootedness. My experiments and research into these painters facilitated the development of my personal symbolic language and the maturation of my perspective.

Throughout the research, it became evident that the initial dislocation arose from the incongruity between my individual experiences and the cultural expectations imposed upon me. However, living outside the boundaries of my own culture deepened my awareness of the various manifestations of dislocation. A pertinent question arises: what would a perfect location entail, and what would it mean?

The answer is ever-changing, as the centre remains fluid. Especially in the context of globalisation, there is increased fluidity and uncertainty in identity and location. The virtual realm has to some degree, unfixed us from our bodies, which previously provided a grounded sense of identity and place. Globalisation allows movement around the globe and social media allows us to create alternative identities. From the very beginning, we are continuously dislocated from a fixed sense of being, and innately subject to various degrees of separation. Dislocation is an inherent aspect of our lives, as we are always adapting, relearning, or repositioning our understanding based on our emotional or spatial locations.

Creating paintings serves as a means to locate myself and integrate the disparate parts of my identity and experiences. Even if the subject matter is fragmentation or displacement, painting ultimately attempts to locate, integrate, and create something

whole. My work has become part of the discourse of personal and cultural displacement, addressing the inherent uncertainty that is present of human existence. Dislocation can be cultural, class-based, or even result from being separated from our feelings, loved ones, or familiar spaces and memory; it encompasses both emotional and spatial dislocation. Consequently, my perceptions and feelings towards family have evolved and matured. I gained a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances within familial relationships and the diverse ways in which different cultures experience and navigate family dynamics. This growth in understanding has enriched my artistic practice, enabling me to create more emotionally resonant and culturally informed works that capture the intricate tapestry of family life. In my future practice, I aim to continue exploring the causes and manifestations of displacement within families and communities.

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