

The Transparent Labyrinth

A PALIMPSESTIC FIELD OF PAINTING

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Abstract

The Transparent Labyrinth: A Palimpsestic Field of Painting

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This practice-based research investigates what can be described as the fundamental conditions of painting: the surface. While often overlooked, the surface acts as an in-between space between the tangible world and the illusionistic space of the painting. However, across traditions, the surface has been perceived in fragmented ways such as concealment in Renaissance painting, flatness in modernist abstraction, or continuous revelation in Chinese ink painting, all in service of particular modes of visual representation. Each of these approaches illuminates only one aspect of surface perception.

The research emerges from a desire to re-locate this in-betweenness, therefore considers a deceptively simple question on painting's surface: how is the painting's surface perceived, or encountered, as an in-between space? It seeks to explore how the surface might be reactivated to reveal its potential as a perceptual, spatial, and temporal site.

An exploration of painting's surface as an in-between space in relation to spatial perception has led to a concept of painting as palimpsest—a metaphor borrowed from a layered manuscript where new writing overlays effaced earlier texts. Palimpsest becomes both a method and a perceptual model that provokes interdisciplinary encounters. To understand the palimpsestic conditions of painting, the research raises three key research questions focused on the surface transparency and spatial multiplicity,

- In what ways does the painting's surface create a state of in-betweenness that shifts perception?

- How does transparent painting reconfigure the traditional figure-ground relationship?
- How does painting become palimpsestic and contribute to a spatial perception theory that creates haunted, multi-sited visual fields?

This thesis proposes that painting's surface as a palimpsestic field activates a multi-temporal and multi-spatial perception. To address these questions, a series of large-scale cyanotypes on transparent fabrics were produced and installed within a walk-in labyrinth. The comparative strategies employed in this project to intertwine elements of Chinese landscape painting with Western aesthetics. The labyrinth reconstructs paintings in fluid boundaries of form and emptiness, presence and absence, enabling the viewer to experience these shifting visual fields as a sense of being in multiple places at once. The implications of this research extend to rethinking spatial perception in contemporary painting. The palimpsest, as both method and model, offers new insights into the expanded field of painting and cultural identity.

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Declaration

I, Zan Wang, hereby declare that this thesis titled *The Transparent Labyrinth: A Palimpsestic Field of Painting* is my own work and has not been submitted, in substantially the same form, for the award of a higher degree at any other institution.

Signed: 

Date: 28 July 2025.

Introduction

The surface is one of the fundamental conditions of painting. How to see the painting's surface today in the face of the specter of relativism? By relativism, I mean that the definition of painting is not fixed but emerges through the interaction between the artwork's materiality, its historical and cultural context, and the viewer's perspective. This fluidity is fundamental today to understanding painting as a surface in relations.

Since Arthur Danto's notion of "The End of Art" (Danto, 2014, p. 21)— which proposed that art as a historical narrative had concluded, leaving no single dominant movement — painting has continued to expand and transform into a plurality of practices. In a world without strict historical frameworks, the questions of what defines painting and what makes it relevant must be reconsidered. Traditional theories, such as mimetic theory (which focuses on representation) and formalist theory (which emphasizes pictorial design through line and shape), focus on specific artistic tendencies tied to philosophies or aesthetic goals of the time. However, these theories and art movements often overlook painting as a surface, not just as a representation, but as a site where multiple modes of interaction take place.

These interactions, between material and image, viewer and surface, presence and absence, create an in-between tension that actively shapes how the painting is perceived and understood in relation. To embrace painting in a relativistic condition is a way to acknowledge the plurality of contemporary painting practices—practices that exist across diverse cultures, histories, and contexts, without being confined to a singular definition or trajectory.

Recent discussions of painting have increasingly shifted toward an expanded and relational understanding of painting. In this context, this relational way of perceiving painting can be traced back to Rudolf Arnheim's early account of the pictorial surface in 1954. Arnheim argues that the surface operates as a dual structure, simultaneously

functioning as a physical plane and a perceptual field of spatial depth (Arnheim, 2004, pp.247–248).

Building on this perceptual duality, the French art historian Hubert Damisch further complicates the notion of surface by introducing the concept of thickness, in which the surface functions as a layered and interwoven plane (Damisch, 2019, p. 28). Central to his definition of this thickness is the idea that painting is “defined as a system of relations, connections, however complex they may be, representable in the plane” (Damisch, 2019, p. 35). These relations, as he further contends, are often structured through binary oppositions on the surface, such as light/shadow and above/below, which do not resolve but remain independent yet interwoven, producing a complex structure (Damisch, 2019, p. 35).

Furthermore, cloud serves as a key example that Damisch considers as an indicator of heterogeneity and instability within painting. It points to an alternative pictorial system that challenges linear perspective and spatial rationalization (Damisch, 2002, p. 204). Through cross-cultural comparison, he shows that while the cloud appears as an anomaly in Western perspective, it functions as a generative element in Chinese painting, constructing a “recapitulation of the landscape” (Damisch, 2002, p. 201). Using the cloud as an example, Damisch shifts the understanding of painting away from a unified representational system toward a relational interaction between multiple spatial logics.

Damisch is not alone in his assertion; Yve-Alain Bois approaches painting as an “enigmatic surface” (Bois, 2019, p. 49), arguing that the surface is complex and destabilized. Bois draws attention to transparency as a material condition that shapes both the structure of the surface as painting and the viewer’s experience. The surface is thus constituted through processes of “superimposition, aerial depth, thickness, and short-circuiting in the weaving of the inscriptions” (Bois, 2019, p. 49). Under such conditions, the painting becomes complex and, in many ways, incomprehensible (Bois, 2019, p. 54). It is important to note that Bois’s emphasis on transparency plays an important role in informing this project’s use of transparent fabric.

Extending the discussion from surface to wider networks, David Joselit, in his essay *Reassembling Painting*, redefines painting as a networked visual and palpable practice, in which the painting articulates itself through circuits, negotiating the relationships between images and viewers (Joselit, 2015, p. 179).

However, Isabelle Graw offers a different perspective by centering painting on its indexicality, in which the index establishes a connection between the work and its referent (Graw, 2025, p.260). For her, the painting's indexicality suggests a physical relation that links the painting not to any external relations, but to the absent author. She further contends that the painting's value is grounded in the impression of labor, which in turn heightens its vitality (Graw, 2025, p.261). However, Graw's emphasis on indexicality re-centers the painting as a value object anchored in authorial presence, thereby stabilizing the painting as a fixed point of reference. Such a position overlooks the extent to which the surface operates as a site of relational interaction produced through the interplay between material, image, and viewer.

In contemporary artistic practices, an expanded understanding of surface is reflected in works of Christian Bonnefoi and Simon Hantaï, who explore the surface as a site of relations between layers, materials, and perception. Bonnefoi investigates surface through transparency and flexibility, using layered transfers and superimposition on tarlatan fabric, where marks shift between front and back, producing an unstable and partially illegible surface. Similarly, Hantaï's pliage method reconfigures the surface through folding and unfolding, generating a surface structured by discontinuity, absence, and chance rather than pre-composed representation.

While these theoretical and practical approaches expand the understanding of surface as relational and unstable, less attention has been given to the perceptual operation of the surface as an in-between spatial condition. While existing studies have emphasized the complexity, instability, and relationality of the pictorial surface, they tend to focus either on its internal structure—such as binary oppositions and material layering—or on its broader circulation within networks of images and social relations. Bois highlights

transparency but its potential to extend the surface into spatial dimensions remains underexplored. In addition, although Damisch identifies painting in relation, the surface is still largely treated as confined within the pictorial plane, rather than as a medium that operates across image, space, and viewer.

As a result, the role of the surface as a mediating condition remains insufficiently theorized. While existing studies frame painting as relational, they often present these relations as separate positions, overlooking their potential to be understood as mutually supplementary.

The gap lies in the lack of understanding of the pictorial surface as a relational and porous field. Such a surface, as perceptual mechanism, suggests the possibility for perceptual modes to shift and overlap across image, space, and viewer. This becomes especially significant when the surface is considered as both a material and perceptual condition.

This project addresses this gap by proposing the surface as a relational medium that shifts between different perceptual modes, in which image, space, and viewer are continuously negotiated. It investigates how the surface can make visible porous relations between painting, space, and viewer—between presence and absence, surface and space, visibility and invisibility, and seeing and being seen. In doing so, this project challenges fixed binaries on the pictorial plane and demonstrates how the surface, as a medium, activates, structures, and reconfigures relational perception through practice.

Situated within this relational and porous field of painting, this research is grounded not in formal or stylistic concerns, but in a particular mode of perceptual experience inherent to the surface itself. This surface perception allows the surface to connect different poles while remaining undecidable, always hovers, shifts, and resists fixed definition. It is a condition of in-betweenness in which painting opens itself to relation, engaging with temporality, space, and viewers. Building on this, the aim of this research is to explore how painting's surface operates as an in-between space—one that oscillates between multiple modes of perception.

This interest also emerges from personal encounters with painting. It's hard to describe this ungraspable floating perception of surface that always lingers on the margin. I first encountered this in-between perception when I revisited Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* at the Museum of Modern Art. What draws my attention is how repetitive brushstrokes that resemble waves of water, floating plants, and water lilies overlap and mix with each other to create a complex assemblage of strokes as impressions. James Elkins describes the painting as "in substances and processes" (Elkins, 2000). However, the overlap is not simply adding another layer on top, but rather painting while the earlier layer is still wet, thereby contaminating the earlier painted layer. Monet paints in overlay, creating a contaminated in-between space so the layers between marks become hard to separate and recognize.



Figure 0.1

I also find an echo of in-betweenness on the surface in *Alpinist* (Doig, 2022) [Figure 0.1] by Peter Doig, which oscillates between marks and representation. At first glance, it was a

deeply atmospheric winter landscape with an alpinist standing on the highland, the background was snow-covered forest and a glacier. However, as the eye moved closer into the painting, the forest in the background appeared as a collection of small triangular shapes [Figure 0.2]. What first seemed a representational image suddenly disappeared and faded into purely abstraction, making the viewer's perception oscillate between marks and representation. Doig also deliberately leaves areas unfinished, with loose brushstrokes or exposed underpainting, creating intentional gaps in the painting, much like in Chinese landscape painting. These visual absences function as a kind of buffer space, inviting viewers to mentally complete the image. William Davie states that it is the unresolved effect that invites the viewer to search for potential answers within the pictorial tension (Davie, 2018).

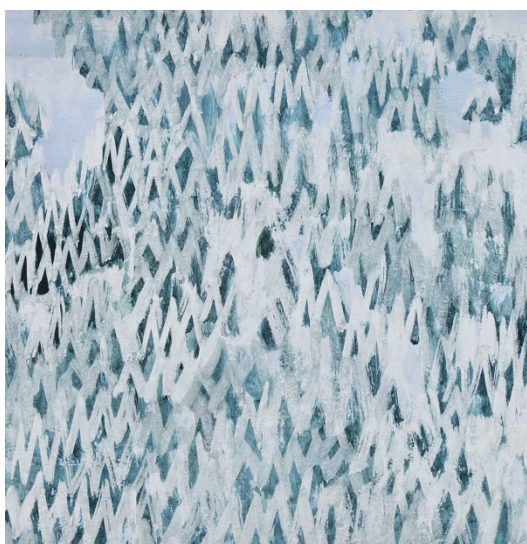


Figure 0.2

The two painting examples helped me understand that the surface's in-betweenness can function in multiple ways such as an overlay and an oscillation between mark and representation. A spatial and cultural installation that strongly resonates with my own cultural dislocation as an in-between perception is *Home Within Home Within Home Within Home Within Home Within Home* (Suh, 2013) by Korean artist Do Ho Suh [Figure 0.3]. Cultural dislocation for me is an in-between space because it exists in the tension between

belonging and estrangement. It is a space of overlap or grafting, where the past experience coexists, merges, or blurs with the present one.

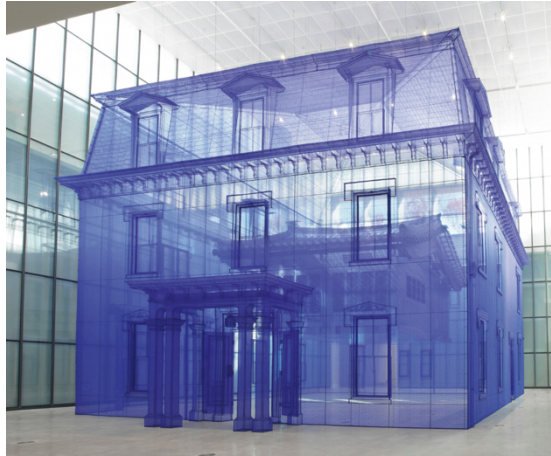


Figure 0.3

Suh's work, through its use of transparency and layering, consists of life-sized, translucent fabric sculptures of the homes he has lived in: his traditional Korean childhood home nested within a replica of his Western-style apartment in Providence, Rhode Island. Critic Lucy Ives states that Suh's architectural spaces "make us look at what is normally invisible: space itself" (Ives, 2022).

Suh's installation made me realize a crucial aspect of my research on surface as in-between space: the overlap. The surface not only oscillates, but also holds multiple perceptions simultaneously. The overlap captures the feeling of being both present and elsewhere. It is this layered, spatial ambiguity that helped foment my research question on how the surface is perceived within space.

Upon reviewing the paintings made prior to this research, I realized that my practice had already been deeply engaged with strategies of in-betweenness. These works pictorially constructed porous spaces that are both interior and exterior [Figure 0.4], presented an oscillation between mark and representation through geometric forms and multiple perspectives [Figure 0.5], and explored material layering through thick and thin transparencies [Figure 0.6].



Figure 0.4



Figure 0.5



Figure 0.6

What these previous paintings are helpful for is that they explored the surface as an in-between space within the pictorial plane. The paintings also suggest that the pictorial plane alone did not fully reveal the potential of the surface as an in-between space. My earlier paintings and examples of Monet, Doig, and Suh help to situate the discussion of painting not only within the pictorial plane but also as an encounter experienced in space. The research questions regarding the surface as an in-between space, therefore, register on both pictorial and phenomenological levels.

The research questions that emerge from this understanding of in-betweenness are as follows:

In what ways does the painting's surface create a state of in-betweenness that shifts perception?

The surface in this research is not understood as a passive support, but as a space of negotiation between material, spatial, and pictorial elements. The term "in-betweenness" is used to describe the surface's liminal condition, as both a material entity and a pictorial representation. Here, I define the surface as a liminal space that operates through

perception and encounter, where material presence and visual engagement are constantly negotiated.

How does transparent painting reconfigure the traditional figure-ground relationship as traditionally understood in painting?

This question examines cyanotype as an interdisciplinary painting medium I employ in my practice, which challenges the traditional figure-ground relationship through a condition of in-betweenness. The **figure-ground relationship** has historically been understood as the way one distinguishes a form (the figure) from its surrounding space (the ground). It is a perceptual relation between what one focuses on and what recedes into the background. By transparent painting, I refer to the use of cyanotype as a shadow painting medium on a transparent surface, which leaves imprints to create marks. Within this research, such a strategy destabilizes the binary of figure and ground, rendering their relationship fluid rather than static.

How do transparent paintings become palimpsestic and contribute to a spatial perception theory that creates haunted, multi-sited visual fields?

This last question brings the surface as a perceptual plane into spatial experience. The notion of the **palimpsest** is central here as a structural principle in constructing paintings in a space. Through installation strategies, paintings generate a multi-sited viewing, both linear and non-linear. The idea of **“haunting”** describes an overlapped sensation between presence and absence through the way layers of paintings interfere with one another. This question engages painting with installation and spatial phenomenology to propose an alternative model of how painting constructs and mediates space, and how one experiences the world around us.

Key Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks

To investigate aspects of the surface in painting, it is useful to briefly define the key concepts and theorists that inform this research. This clarification supports the discussion developed throughout the thesis.

At the foundation of this research is the understanding of the painting's surface as a relational interface, where material, image, and perception interact. The notion of in-betweenness is used throughout the thesis to describe a surface condition that exists between two states without resolving into either one, such as presence and absence, full and void, or seeing and being seen. The term oscillation captures this condition most clearly, referring to the continuous perceptual movement between opposing poles that resists fixed resolution.

To describe this in-between surface, I first draw on the notion of the hymen, introduced by Jacques Derrida, which describes a membrane-like structure that both separates and connects. The hymen disrupts the binary between inside and outside by locating between them.

The concept of the palimpsest extends this hymenal logic as a spatial model within my practice. In this research, the palimpsest refers to a layered structure in which erased traces remain and interfere with present perception. The palimpsestic surface therefore invites complex experiential encounters, where layers overlap and reshape the viewer's experience.

Because of the complex interaction between layers, I employ the concept of contamination to describe this condition. Contamination refers to the way different visual elements or layers do not simply coexist but actively transform one another through overlap and interference. This notion becomes particularly significant in the viewing experience of the large-scale painting installation *Transparent Labyrinth*, which I constructed in this project.

These concepts form the conceptual vocabulary through which the painting surface is examined in this thesis. While developed through practice, they are informed by a number of theoretical perspectives through three interconnected aspects: the surface as a relational field, the methodological framework and the perceptual experience.

For a surface to be understood as relational, Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics provides an important starting point. Bourriaud describes contemporary art as a site of intersubjective relations produced through interactions between viewers, artworks, and spatial situations. In addition, I draw on Jacques Derrida's thought as a methodological approach. Through this approach, I examine how the painting's surface challenges stable binaries and operates as an undecidable threshold between opposites. Several Derridean concepts—such as hymen, trace, hauntology and contamination—are therefore employed to describe relational conditions of the surface within my practice. This research is also informed by phenomenological perspectives on perception and spatial experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodied perception and the reciprocal relationship between viewer and world is particularly important for understanding the embodied viewing and walking experience within the painting installation. This phenomenological perspective is further expanded through spatial theories developed by Yi-Fu Tuan, Gaston Bachelard, and Michel de Certeau, whose writings explore how space and place are continually interchangeable through movement, memory, and lived experience.

Together, these key concepts and theoretical perspectives support the conceptual framework developed in this thesis, allowing the painting's surface to be examined as an in-between relational field.

Dissertation structure

The dissertation is structured in five chapters: the first two chapters provide art historical and philosophical contexts within which my research is positioned, and the latter three chapters are grounded in practice-based research.

Chapter One offers a historical review of the painting's surface perception from spatial, temporal and material perspectives. It first draws a comparative analysis between Western and Chinese pictorial spatial strategies, exploring how the surface is perceived in different visual systems. Then the chapter takes a temporal perspective on how painting captures an image, comparing the works of English painter J.M.W. Turner and Chinese painter Muqi. From a material perspective, a shared condition, that both Western and Chinese painting surfaces are materially present, serves as a point of departure to understand how each tradition only reveals one aspect of surface perception. Using monochrome as an example, the Western surface emphasizes painting as an encounter, whereas the Chinese surface is perceived as an oscillation within the pictorial plane. Drawing on three perspectives on the surface perception, the chapter introduces my contention that the surface is an in-between space that both sows oscillation between the opposites and stands as an encounter. To elaborate on this, the chapter discusses the conceptual definitions of the surface's in-betweenness, typified by Jacques Derrida's notion of hymen, "a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms" (Derrida, 1981, p. 212). Chapter One concludes by relating the surface to space and viewers, discussing how the painting's surface engages the viewer through its in-between condition.

Chapter Two examines how the surface is situated in space. The notion of palimpsest is used as a thread in this chapter to describe a contaminated relation of the surface's opposites when situated in space. The palimpsest here is an extensive model of the in-between surface in space than hymen structure by taking the surface in a layered temporal and spatial condition. Chapter Two will begin by reviewing psychoanalytic and phenomenological theories on the palimpsestic surface, its encounter with non-linear temporalities, and its haunting nature to argue that the surface functions both as erasure and as inscription. Chapter Two specifically focuses on the surface's haunted layering between presence and absence, using the surface of moving water as a metaphor with comparative examples from Andrei Tarkovsky's cinema and Song Dong's *Water Diary*

installations. Chapter Two also considers the surface as a cultural palimpsest, drawing on contemporary artists' experiences of cultural dislocation and my personal experience through the juxtaposition of the familiar and the estranged. By examining the surface as a cultural overlap, the chapter will argue that the surface as an in-between space generates a layered viewing in which the perception of different spaces and times is interwoven.

Chapter Three shifts the focus to practice, charting the development of the transparent surface and shadow as a haunted painting medium. The chapter begins with a series of material experiments of the surface to examine how transparency positions the surface as an in-between space through the perception shifts of inside and outside, image and space. The chapter also introduces the cyanotype, a light-sensitive material, as a haunted painting medium suitable for in-betweenness because of its ability to oscillate between presence and absence. Chapter Three expands on how the experimental use of cyanotype can be a transformative painting medium through experiments on its haunting nature and imprints as marks.

Chapter Four extends the material inquiry into questions of painterly composition and modular construction. This chapter first examines the modular system from Chinese painting traditions. To explore whether cyanotype traces can be reconfigured as an absent landscape, this chapter traces the development of a series of cyanotype works on transparent surfaces that draw on Chinese aesthetics as compositional strategies, including the handscroll format, modular systems, and the use of emptiness. How cyanotype works on transparent surfaces through an interplay between presence and absence, responding to my second research question.

The final chapter charts the spatial development of how the series of paintings is situated in layered space. Chapter Five responds to the palimpsestic field discussed in Chapter Two, using the labyrinth as the installation model. The labyrinth marks an important stage in the realization of the project, directly responding to all three research questions,

specifically to the third. Through iterations of labyrinths, the chapter examines how viewers navigate and engage with the installation. The chapter also considers the labyrinth's palimpsestic perception in relation to cultural overlay and a layered sense of place, which expands the enquiry from painting's perception to a new way of perceiving the surroundings.

Methodology

An embodied knowing and felt understanding are central to this practice-based research. My engagement with the notion of in-betweenness comes from my own situation and how I perceive the world. To apprehend that in-betweenness which is central to my research, it is only through art practice as representation that a heuristic and phenomenological understanding unfolds. Therefore, a central contribution of my practice-based research is that it reveals complex and subtle interactions based on my personal experience, unfolding those subtle relations as an image in ways that make them noticeable to people. Tom Barone and Elliot W. Eisner describe this power of an image, stating that: “the presence of images are often more powerful in explaining a situation than a discursive rendering of the same situation” (Barone, 2012, p. 157).

My engagement with the notion of in-betweenness informs my methodology. Because the kind of knowledge generated from my research is a felt perception that can only be revealed through encounters with artworks, I first compared a wide range of artworks from both Chinese and Western art history, focusing on works that either reveal or conceal the surface from perception through different visual strategies. Since my research centers on the surface as an in-between space, comparative case studies were useful in revealing its undecidability, as the surface only becomes perceivable through its continual oscillation. I am not suggesting the comparison would come to a universal conclusion about painting’s surface and the way it functions but it did reveal that different approaches only represent one aspect of how surface functions as the paintings were understood to be indications of a different philosophy and aesthetic, in which painters produced works under varying conditions respond to his time. The comparison for this research is what Erwin K. Scheuch describes as “to show differences and specify time-space coordinates for a phenomenon” (Oysen, 1990, p. 31). This comparative approach carries a potential in-betweenness, ultimately transforming the perception of painting’s surface not as a fixed binary but as an unlimited supplement.

I then engaged with a range of phenomenological, psychological, and philosophical readings that examined the relations between the surface as an interchangeable space, perception, overlap, and time. Both phenomenological and psychological texts helped understand individuals' perceptions of subjective experience and how one interacts with a work of art or a space. I ultimately focused on the concept of the hymen by Jacques Derrida, and the spectrality of the palimpsest to explore the in-betweenness of the surface in overlapping temporality. I also gave examples of contemporary artists who work with in-betweenness through cultural dislocation, which resonate with my own living experience. Their approach to the surface as a palimpsest helped me reflect on the different visual strategies and how my practice might work differently.

Central to my research, my studio practice employed a series of interdisciplinary strategies to address my concerns on the surface as an in-between space. I think of the definition of painting as the condition of applying a medium to a surface. The construction of a painting involves three key elements: surface, painting medium, and the painting itself as an encounter. Therefore, my practice involves the exploration of these three aspects.

Firstly, I explored the surface's transparency through experiments on non-traditional mediums. These experiments helped develop an in-between strategy in connecting inside and outside that would inform the surface as an in-between space. A serendipitous shadow projection of the surface's transparent experiment inspired the use of shadow as a painting medium. The cyanotype, a light-sensitive material, was found to be a haunting medium for in-betweenness because of the way elements on the surface influenced and interacted with each other, rendering the in-betweenness through an interplay between presence and absence. A series of cyanotype experiments, exploring its haunting effect, painterly marks, and role in composition, were tested and discussed in Chapters Three and Four. In addition, a series of cyanotypes on transparent fabrics was produced to help determine how they functioned together as a painting. As the painting developed, I, at the same time, explored how the painting was situated as a palimpsestic encounter in space. I

made a number of floor plans and constructed labyrinth models in both small-scale samples and digital installations to explore how surfaces were positioned in overlay.

Throughout the research, I employed a range of strategies and mediums that themselves carry a potential in-betweenness. The use of these strategies and interdisciplinary mediums helped reveal complex and subtle experiences in a way that people can perceive through interactions with the practice. As Tom Barone and Elliot W. Eisner argue that, “utilizing the expressive properties of a medium is one of the primary ways in which arts based research contributes to human understanding” (Barone, 2012, p. 171). This in-between nature in my practice helped expand painting’s attempt to reach outside of itself, as David Joselit put it, the painting then is relational and networked, existing alongside other systems and formats (Joselit, 2009, p. 134).

In addition, these in-between approaches not only support the expansion of painting but also offer viewers an opportunity to perceive their surroundings as layered, shifting, and interconnected. Johan Galtung reminds us that, “only by cultivating a variety...within us can we be mentally prepared to reflect and construct variety around us” (Oysen, 1990, p. 111). Therefore, the methodology used for this research is not only a means of making, but a model for how we might engage with the world around us.

Chapter One: Painting's Surface as In-Between Space

Painting is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a representation on a surface executed in paint or colours” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). The surface, then, is not a neutral support but where three-dimensional reality is translated into two-dimensional form, an in-between space between the tangible world and the illusionistic space of the painting. Here, the artist's hand reaches out from the real toward the imagined, rendering physical brushstrokes into representation.

While the long history of painting has focused on the evolution of paint materials and subject matter, surface itself has rarely been treated as a critical inquiry, not until modernist discourse of flatness brought it to the table. However, at roughly the same time that formalist discourse in art criticism, particularly in the work of Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss, emphasized flatness, psychological theory was already suggesting the duality of the surface. According to psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim, the pictorial surface cannot be reduced to “a strictly flat, two-dimensional image” (Arnheim, 2004, p. 219). Instead, the surface operates as a dual structure, functioning simultaneously as a flat, physical object and a perceptual field of three-dimensional, illusory space, allowing flatness and spatial illusion to coexist (Arnheim, 2004, pp. 247-248). Building on this perceptual duality, French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman further destabilizes the notion of the surface by critiquing the certainty of traditional art history (Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 2). He argues that the painted surface cannot be fully grasped through rational understanding because it does not present itself as “terms in a logic susceptible of being expressed as propositions, true or false, correct or incorrect” (Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 142). Instead, the image's structure is “open... rent, breached, [and] ruined at its center” (Didi-Huberman, 2005, p. 142). In this sense, the pictorial surface operates as a site where forms lose clarity and defy rational understanding in painting. David Joselit shifts the discussion from the internal structure of

the image to its circulation within a larger network, proposing that the painting's surface functions as a node within broader circuits of images and human action (Joselit, 2015, p. 179). The painting is thus understood through the connections and relations between these interlocking circuits.

However, this complexity of the pictorial surface is not entirely a contemporary concern; an early attempt to understand painting in terms of surface can be found in the writings of Prussian philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder. Herder suggests that the surface is not merely a support, but a distinct mode of being that sets painting apart from sculpture and poetry. Herder describes that painting is the art of the surface, the art of "parts next to each other" on the picture plane (Barasch, 2000, p. 170).

This practice-based research begins from here with a deceptively simple question on painting's surface: how is the painting's surface perceived, or overlooked? More specifically, how is the surface encountered—as something visible, hidden, or somewhere in between? To explore these questions, I begin by examining how the surface has been historically constructed and visually perceived across Western and Chinese traditions. The comparison across time and culture is useful to unfold how the painting's surface comes into perceptual being.

1.1 The Spatial Surface, Marks and Visibility

The often-remarked notion of a painted image as a window is suggested by the 15th-century Florentine polymath Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On Painting*:

I will say what I myself do when I paint. First I trace as large a quadrangle as I wish, with right angles, on the surface to be painted; in this place, it

[the rectangular quadrangle] certainly functions for me as an open window through which the *historia* is observed (Alberti, 2011, p. 39).

By defining painting as an "open window," Alberti establishes painting as a framed view, a veil stretched across the frame. He further advises that the artist should use the painting surface to measure what they see by dividing the visual field into a grid on the canvas for accurate profiles (Alberti, 2011, pp. 50-51). This measurement is what Alberti significantly brought to the art of painting: one-point perspective. The one-point perspective allows a three-dimensional form to translate onto a two-dimensional surface. Alberti describes the surface as "cut of the veil" (Alberti, 2011, p. 51) because the framed surface represents a "cut" between the eye and the object, a two-dimensional projection of the depicted object. Austrian art historian Ernst Gombrich, in his book *Art and Illusion*, relates Alberti's notion of the window to its ability to open onto a picture world:

As in classical times, the narrative was again to be presented to the beholder as if he were an eyewitness to imaginary events. Alberti drew the final conclusion from this reviving demand when he described the frame as a window through which the beholder looks into the world of the picture (Gombrich, 2023, p. 238).

The Florentine artist Masaccio's *Holy Trinity* (Masaccio, c.1426-1428) [Figure 1.1] is one of the earliest and most famous examples of one-point perspective in Western painting, creating illusionistic depth and causing the surface to visually recede. In *Holy Trinity*, Masaccio constructed a mathematical illusion of architectural depth so the vanishing point is placed at the foot of the cross, directly at the viewer's eye level. The painted columns, arches, and coffered ceiling appear proportionally to extend real space backwards; the wall, the painted surface, has dissolved, revealing a sacred chamber beyond. From a fixed point, the surface disappears, and painted space feels almost touchable as if one could step forward and enter the quiet divine.



Figure 1.1

During the broader Renaissance period, beyond Alberti's conception of the surface "as a window" for its mathematical function, the notion of the surface also emphasized access to an illusionistic world, divine or mythical. Painters employed the glazing technique to make the surface recede again, transforming it into a transparent portal between the viewer and the depicted world.

The glazing technique was applied with thin washes of paint mixed with varnish to create a unified atmospheric effect: a golden glaze might bathe a scene in the glow of sunset, while a bluish glaze could transform a day scene into a nocturne (Elkins, 2000, p. 166).

James Elkins describes il Sassetta's marks of late medieval tempera painting as "delicate light touches that fall like lines of rain over the skin" (Elkins, 2000, p. 3). The painter's brushstrokes were so light that they were almost hidden in service to the sacred image and the time devoted to making a painting marked a spiritual devotion.

Titian became particularly renowned for his mastery of glazes. It would be worth quoting Elkins's description of Titian's method on this point:

The glazes and thin layers are all about smoothing, softening, and blurring. Each layer adds a cloudy harmony, blurring lights into shadows and slurring one form into another. Sharp forms are made toward the beginning, and again at the end. Everything else is slurring, glazing, and veiling, working to unify the paint across the entire canvas (Elkins, 2000, p. 171).

Titian used glazes to render living flesh, glowing skies, and flowing drapery as an illusion on the painting's surface. Because the glazes were slurring, a microscopic section through a Renaissance painting today reveals "the astonishing patience that went into their making" (Elkins, 2000, p. 166). The Western glazing technique, through time-accumulated layered brushstrokes, minimizes the visibility of the surface itself, causing it to recede for an optical illusion.

However, this paradigm of constructing illusionistic depth, which causes the surface to recede, is not shared by all painting traditions. Rather than emphasizing accuracy and illusionistic depth through solid forms, Chinese painting pursues a continuous flow. Painters employ a completely different visual strategy of perspective and brushstroke techniques that render the surface present and active.

Chinese painting uses a scattered perspective, which presents multiple viewpoints within one composition, allowing multiple viewpoints to coexist and enabling a moving, sequential viewing experience. This approach is especially prominent in landscape and

handscroll paintings. Tenth century painter Gu Hongzhong's *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* (Hongzhong, 10th-century) [Figure 1.2] and Early twelfth century painter Wang Ximeng's *One Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* (Ximeng, 12th-century) [Figure 1.3] are two famous examples of the greatest masterpieces of Chinese art that both employed scattered perspective. Both works employ a temporal unfolding through pictorial space, designed to be unrolled section by section rather than viewed all at once. The handscroll's horizontal format constructs space across the surface, not into it as illusory depth. Scattered perspective synchronizes bodily movement with vision—as the scroll is unrolled, the eye moves across the surface. The surface thus becomes an active agent in the viewer's perceptual experience. To clarify this mode of progressive engagement, it is useful to contrast it with a Western example: Giovanni di Paolo's *The Life of Saint John the Baptist* (Paolo, 1454) [Figure 1.4]. While it also presents a continuous narrative, its events are compressed within a single, unified background, intended to be viewed in one glance as a static pictorial instant.



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3



Figure 1.4

Thus, while both Chinese and Western paintings may depict continuous narratives, their viewing logic and relation to surface differ. Chinese painting suggests a temporal-spatial journey anchored to the surface, whereas Western painting often presents an illusionistic

scene viewed in an instant. Art historian Wu Hung describes this different perspective system and viewing logic between Chinese and Western painting:

Realizing the inapplicability of Western 'scientific' perspective to traditional Chinese painting, some scholars have tried, quite admirably in my opinion, to discover an indigenous Chinese perspective. This attempt, however, has often led to forced conclusions, mainly because its underlying premise remains that a painting, even in a non-Western tradition, must be governed by a highly rational, overarching geometric system, which has priority over individual pictorial images and motifs (Hung, 1996, pp. 18-19).

Beyond this perspectival difference between Chinese and Western painting, the Chinese ink brushwork provides a clear demonstration of surface presence and interaction. Unlike Western realist traditions, where brushwork is often concealed to construct illusionistic depth, Chinese painting foregrounds the strokes. The viewer continuously senses the rhythmic flow of ink as it travels across the surface. The Chinese painter seeks to capture spirit; the brushstroke becomes a conduit for ch'i 气 (breath, spirit), yun 韵 (rhythm, harmony), yun 运 (to revolve), and sheng tung 生动 (living-movement) (Wang, 1977, pp. 614-615) through the interaction with the surface. These expressive principles correspond to the first canon of traditional Chinese painting and animate the surface as a space of breath and vitality.

Having shown how perspective and brushwork in Western and Chinese painting shape the perceptual visibility of the surface, while the Western tradition conceals it and the Chinese tradition keeps it present, the next section turns to how the surface engages with time.

1.2 Temporal Surface: Frozen and Fluid

John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* would probably be different without the invention of photography. In the mid-19th century, Ruskin defended painting as the supreme means to capture nature. The whole art of painting, according to Ruskin, was understood as "the art of faithfully representing any natural object" (Ruskin, 1903, pp. 87-88). A great painter, in his view, was defined by "precision and force in the language of lines" (Ruskin, 1903, p. 88). When Ruskin was writing, Romanticism and Neoclassicism were both prominent artistic movements. Despite their stylistic differences, both movements commit to accurate representation. However, photography, invented in 1826, challenged the role of Western painting for truthful representation with its convenient production and more accurate image.

The 19th-century enthusiasm for photography and painters' deep obsession with accurate representation reflected a longstanding Western pursuit of ideal form, beauty, and truth rooted in Greek philosophy. This tradition privileged form and the visual mastery of nature. As a result, both painting and photography came to share a common commitment to freezing a moment of reality, capturing it as a static image frozen in time.

This notion of painting as a frozen instant is also evident in many Western paintings of the time. For instance, John Ruskin praised J.M.W. Turner for his truth to nature in capturing the atmospheric essence of a landscape (Ruskin, 1903, p. 82). However, Turner's painting still captures a single instant. Despite Turner's foggy subjects in motion and his swirling brushstrokes, described by Ruskin as "melting into each other, or straggling over each other" (Ruskin, 1903, p. 83), the surface of Turner's painting remains frozen, not in motion.

Turner's *Lake of Lucerne* (Turner, 1841) [Figure 1.5] presents a serene landscape with his dramatic use of light, making the lake in a luminous and ethereal atmosphere. This depiction of nature's overwhelming force reflects what Kant defines as "dynamical sublime" (Kant, 1987, p. 119), where nature's raw power evokes fear but remains at a safe

distance. However, this sublime is caught in an eternal present. The painting is frozen in time as the moment it is completed. Turner achieves this sense of the frozen instant by capturing the climax of a moment, holding the viewer in a suspended state of tension that never resolves.

Chinese painters capture time in a completely different way. A Chinese example I will use in comparison with Turner's instant depiction of the sublime is the work of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) monk painter Muqi (牧溪) (c.1250). Muqi painted solely with ink, using bold, spontaneous brushstrokes and pushing negative space to the extreme, letting landscapes dissolve into emptiness. Although emptiness is an integral component in Chinese painting, Muqi's extensive use of it drew criticism in his time. During Yuan dynasty (13th-14th century), several theorists criticized Muqi's work as coarse and lacking refinement. Zhuang Su (庄肃, 14th century), a book collector¹ and commentator, dismissed Muqi's paintings as only suitable for monastic use in *Huaji Buyi* (画继补遗, *Supplement to the Continuation of Painting*). This critical art catalogue documented aesthetic judgements and shaped the reputations of Chinese painters. Tang Hou (汤垕, 14th century), as a noted painting connoisseur and critic whose views reflected the ideal aesthetics of the Yuan literati, called Muqi's ink bamboo crude in *Hua Jian* (画鉴, *Painting Appraisal*), one of the most influential manuals on painting criticism. Xia Wenyan (夏文彦, late 14th century), a painter and writer, echoed these critiques in *Tuhui Baojianshang* (图绘宝鉴赏, *The Treasure of Painting Appreciation*), the book as one of the earliest systematic anthologies of Chinese painters. It was not until centuries later that Muqi's painting gained wider recognition in China. In Ming dynasty (14th-17th century), Shen Zhou (沈周, c. 1500), a leading figure of the Wu School of painting, which emphasized

¹ In traditional Chinese art culture, book collectors were often elite scholars who collected rare works and served as connoisseurs, evaluating the authenticity and value of works. They wrote commentaries that became influential sources in art criticism.

personal expression over technique, greatly admired Muqi's spontaneity. Later during the Qing dynasty (17th-early 20th century), Bada Shanren (八大山人, c. 1700), one of the most famous painters of the Qing dynasty for his combination of Chan Buddhism with literati painting, was deeply influenced by Muqi's abstraction and use of emptiness. Muqi's impact also reached Japan since the 13th century, where he became central to the development of Zen painting in Japan.

To unravel how Muqi and Turner, Chinese and Western approaches, differ in their treatment of temporality through surface, it is worth briefly examining the notion of emptiness.

The emptiness in painting, or the unseen, is deeply rooted in Daoist and Chan Buddhist traditions and can be understood through two key terms: "wu" (无) and "hsu" (虚). In *Empty and Full*, Chinese-born French writer François Cheng defines these terms through their opposites. "Wu," contrasted with "you" (有, being), is translated as "nonbeing" or "nothingness," while "hsu," the opposite of "shih" (实, fullness, solidity), is translated as "emptiness" (Cheng, 1994, p. 43). Cheng cites Lao-tzu's statement on the relationship between emptiness and being:

Being produces the ten thousand existents, but being is produced by nothing (wu) (Cheng, 1994, p. 44).

Emptiness, then, is not a void, but a generative force through which fullness can emerge. As Cheng further writes, emptiness "is the nodal point where potentiality and becoming interweave, in which deficiency and plenitude, self-sameness and otherness, meet" (Cheng, 1994, p. 51).



Figure 1.5



Figure 1.6

In *Fishing Village at Sunset* (Muqi, 13th century) [Figure 1.6], Muqi also depicted a foggy scene as Turner did. Boats fade into the foliage along the shore, reappear in the stream, and then dissolve into the vast emptiness beyond. Between the visible mountains and flowing water, clouds drift silently, transforming into mist that rises through the valleys. Chinese-born French writer François Cheng discussed this fading in and out of mist as *yin-hsien* (invisible-visible) in landscape painting, notes:

It applies especially to landscape painting, where the artist has to cultivate the art of not showing everything in order to keep the breath alive and the mystery intact (Cheng, 1994, p. 75).

It is through the empty space that the surface does not capture a frozen instant but is in flux, in which mountains and water enter a process of mutual transformation. Here, form emerges from absence, just as mist gradually reveals and obscures the landscape, making the presence within absence.

Emptiness activates a transformation between ink strokes and vacant space, and therefore activates the surface as a space of potential where the seen and unseen, the solid and the ethereal, exist in constant dialogue. The way form emerges from the void can perhaps be best understood through Chinese nationalist philosopher, historian, and poet Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692), it would be worth to quote in length:

Since the Great Course is formless and cannot be seen, all that is learned, whether from bamboo and silk, bindings and manuscripts, ink and seals, recitations, direct hearing and seeing, or words and phrases, is just insubstantial echoes. What it all begins from is drift, murkiness, darkness, obscurity— one suspects something is there, but there never has been. The guesses and suspicions about beginnings and no beginnings were transmitted by means of these “transforming voices”. Thus, these transforming sounds, though blowing forth like pipings from bamboo, never find that from which they sprout, and yet the Radiance of Drift and Doubt has never ceased to be lodged in their self-transformations (Zhuangzi, 2009).

The Chinese painting's surface, therefore, is a continuous transformation. It suggests a temporality of constant becoming, a temporality that can only be felt as a lived and embodied experience.

It is not coincidental that both Muqi and Turner depict foggy conditions as an expression of energy and unseen forces within nature. As a dense and moist atmospheric condition, fog exists in a state of constant transformation, shifting between water, rain, cloud, mist, and ice. In this sense, foggy conditions can be understood as a material condition of in-betweenness. This shared interest in foggy conditions across Western and Chinese contexts emerges from its capacity to destabilize the certainty of the image. It offers a way of understanding the painting surface as relational, where meaning emerges through the oscillation between what is seen and what remains unresolved. This interest is further explored in my later painting practice, particularly through cyanotype experiments with soft, diffused edges, which resonate with the misty qualities of Chinese landscape painting.

However, Muqi and Turner engage with foggy conditions in fundamentally different ways: Muqi emphasizes continuous transformation, while Turner foregrounds the sublime and a heightened emotional and sensory experience of nature. Their treatment of foggy conditions therefore reveals a fundamental difference between Western and Chinese traditions in how temporality is constructed on the painted surface. This distinction can be further understood through broader philosophical and linguistic frameworks.

Western painting traditions have often tended to fix a single instant. It reflects a Western tradition that values clarity, representation, and ideal forms. As Jullien highlights, the Western (Greek) tradition privileges "the formed and distinct, which gave rise to the cult of definitive Form exemplified by the Nude," whereas Chinese "thinks—and paints—the transitional and the indicial" (Jullien, 2007, pp. 75-77). However, this tendency should be understood as historically specific to traditions from the Renaissance through Neoclassicism to Romanticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including Turner's practice. It is later complicated in modernity by more fluid and open-

ended temporal experiences associated with urban perception, such as the *flâneur* described by Baudelaire and Benjamin.

In Turner's work, fog produces a condition of flux in which visible elements dissolve and interact. As filmmaker Patrick Keiller describes, there is often "an act of transformation" in Turner's work shaped by experience with a "kind of 'if only' feeling" (Keiller & House, 2005). This indicates that the transformation is a fictional effect that gives the impression of movement while remaining contained within a single moment.

In contrast, Chinese tradition emphasizes continuous transformation. Philosophically, Chinese thought—rooted in Daoism and Chan Buddhism—prioritizes spirit, transformation, and becoming. In Muqi's ink painting, mist operates as a form of emptiness that enables continuous transformation. The misty surface suggests shifting relations—water becomes cloud, river, or mist—producing an ongoing oscillation between presence and absence. Muqi allows forms to emerge from emptiness, reflecting a worldview where the universe is interconnected and ever-changing. As French philosopher François Jullien writes, Chinese artists:

Do aspire to capturing the invisible through visible, to tapping into the dimension of the invisible efficiency or spirit (*shen*) (and, as such, infinite) that unceasingly pervades and animates the visible (Jullien, 2007, p. 38).

In addition, linguistic differences may also contribute to these divergent approaches to the painted surface. Chinese lacks fixed tense structures, reflecting a more fluid conception of time, whereas English divides time into fragments through its use of tense, reinforcing a more rationalized linear time view and a desire to define or capture a present moment.

Having explored the temporal condition of the surface, the interest in fogginess and the role of emptiness in shifting perception, I now turn to the materiality of the surface itself.

What shifts when the surface asserts its objecthood—no longer functioning solely as image, but as thing? This third section moves surface from a representational plane to a spatial presence, exploring how the material surface is perceived from both Western and Chinese perspectives.

1.3 Material Surface: Optical Illusion, Monochrome and Emptiness

Surface firstly reveals its material condition in the modernist painting of the twentieth century, representing a medium-specific purity that rejected illusion. American art critic Clement Greenberg brought this trend to prominence. As Greenberg explains, modernist painting engages in a kind of self-critique to reaffirm its essential properties (Fracina, 1983, p. 5). In his view, flatness of the surface became a self-referential condition (Fracina, 1983, p. 6). Greenberg continues to compare how the Old Masters and the Modernists treat the surface differently:

The Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane: that is, to signify the enduring presence of flatness under the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space...Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first. This is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist, but Modernism imposes it as the only and necessary way, and Modernism's success in doing so is a success of self-criticism (Fracina, 1983, p. 6).

The surface, used to be ignored in the Old Masters's realistic and naturalistic paintings, came to be regarded as a positive factor when modernist painting investigated and revealed the surface's formal condition as flatness. While modernist art critic Michael Fried in his 1964 essay *Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism* values Greenberg's approach that modernist painting is defined by self-awareness, he's also aware that a rigid formalism can become too narrow. He writes:

One may deplore, if one chooses, the decision of critics such as Mr. Fry and Mr. Greenberg to concentrate their attention upon the formal characteristics of the works they discuss... This is not to imply that only the formal aspect of their paintings is worthy of interest (Fried, 1964, p. 642).

According to American art critic Rosalind Krauss, Greenberg's formalism and purity of medium may not escape the logic of Alberti's window. In *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss argues that modernism's flatness, while rejecting illusionistic depth, still treated the surface as a formal problem by maintaining it as a controlled optical field. She uses the wall as an example to reveal the paradox in Greenberg's idea of flatness: a surface meant to assert material presence ends up dissolving into something less stable. Originally, the wall confirmed painting as an object, rejecting illusion (Krauss, 1996, p. 245). But as Greenberg pushed this ideal further, the painting shifted from object to field. As Krauss writes,

Greenberg's first word for this was 'hallucinated,' as he began to search for a term that would capture the way this expansive vertical surface seemed to outrun the very world of facts, and the wall itself appeared to give way: 'object' now rewritten as 'field' (Krauss, 1996, p. 246).

Greenberg's attempt to deny illusion in order to preserve the surface's material ultimately generated a new kind of illusion. The effort to eliminate the window-like illusion of depth is only replaced by another illusion, the surface as an endless optical field. At this point, a central paradox of formalism and medium purity becomes apparent: the more one attempts to assert the purity of the surface through flatness, the more the surface ends up destabilizing itself and dissolving material certainty.

If the so-called purity of the surface is itself a kind of illusion, then it calls into question what is actually seen when one claims to see the surface. This returns us to the question I posed at the start: how can the surface be perceived? A comparison between Chinese and

Western monochrome is helpful to this discussion, particularly in relation to a central research question of my project: might the surface be understood as a perceptual in-between space that constantly shifts? The monochrome's emptiness, shared by both traditions yet expressed differently, offers an entry point into this discussion.

Chinese ink painting, often rendered in black ink on white paper or silk, is commonly perceived as monochrome. Two mainstream Song painters I chose as examples of Chinese monochrome, who helped shape the classical logic of emptiness, are Ma Yuan (马远, c. 1160–1225) and Xia Gui (夏珪, c. 1195–1224). They were leading masters of the one-corner composition, a distinctive spatial strategy popular in the Southern Song period. In this approach, the main subject is placed in one corner or along one side of the surface, leaving large areas of the composition empty to suggest mist, snow, or the vastness. Ma Yuan is known for his sharp, angular brushstrokes and precise compositions. His work, such as *Singing while Dancing* (Yuan, late 12th -early 13th century) [Figure 1.7], exemplifies his signature style of asymmetric composition and jagged mountain forms, creating a sense of stillness and clarity. In contrast, Xia Gui uses fluid ink washes and soft contours to evoke movement and atmosphere. For example, *Mountain Market, Clearing Mist* (Gui, Early 13th century) [Figure 1.8], captures a fleeting quality of mist, rain, or distant landscapes dissolving into nothingness. While Ma's approach is more structured, Xia's is more ephemeral, both employ emptiness as a key compositional element. Their works create a space where the visible and invisible coexist, and forms emerge from and dissolve into emptiness. Emptiness here offers a fluid transformation between opposites. Each element exists in relation to and in supplement of the other. Space continuously oscillates between illusion and materiality, the painted and the vacant, the real and the imagined. Perception becomes possible only through the relations on the surface. This understanding of emptiness finds early resonance in artist Tsung Ping (375-443)'s *The Significance of Landscape*, the earliest text on landscape painting. He states: "Sages, possessing the Tao, respond to things. The virtuous, purifying their thoughts, savor images" (Bush, 2012, p. 38). Here, response and savoring reflect a perception rooted in

openness, relation, and spiritual receptivity, precisely the oscillation that defines emptiness in the Chinese monochrome paintings.



Figure 1.7

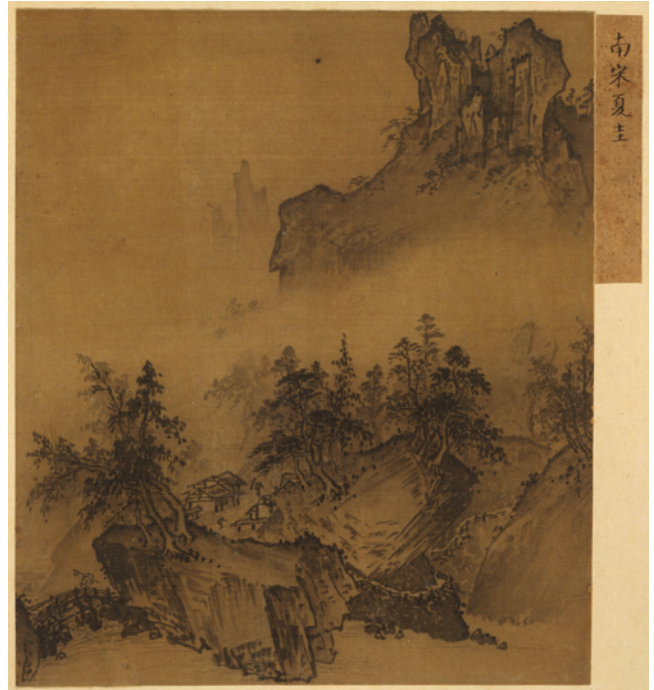


Figure 1.8

However, if we look at Western monochrome paintings, we find that emptiness takes on a reductionist form. Abstract painter and art theorist Ad Reinhardt was one of the most radical proponents of monochrome painting, particularly through his black paintings such as *Abstract Painting No. 5* (Reinhardt, 1962) [Figure 1.9], which he saw as the ultimate reduction of art to its purest form. The founder of Spatialism Lucio Fontana cut the canvas with perfection in the work *Spatial Concept 'Waiting'* (Fontana, 1960) [Figure 1.10], transforming the monochrome surface into a three-dimensional rupture, and critiquing the traditional two-dimensional pictorial plane. American painter Robert Ryman, who was best known for abstract, white-on-white paintings such as *Twin* (Ryman, 1966) [Figure 1.11], treated monochrome as an exploration of materials, surface and light interaction,

shifting focus from representation to perceptual engagement. The perception of Western monochrome painting often unfolds through engagement with the material surface. Broadly speaking, I categorize them into two types of surface engagement. One is the optical field, as described by Krauss—for example, in Reinhardt's paintings, where the surface remains illusory and self-referential. The other engages directly with physical space, treating the surface as a site of phenomenological encounter. Artists like Ryman and Fontana approach painting as a physical object situated in space. Their works activate

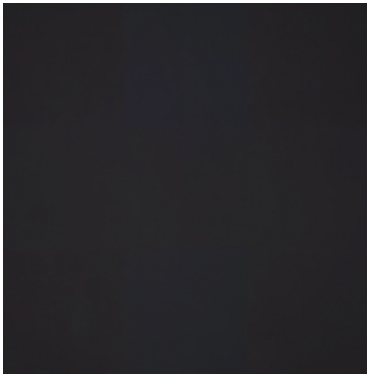


Figure 1.9



Figure 1.10

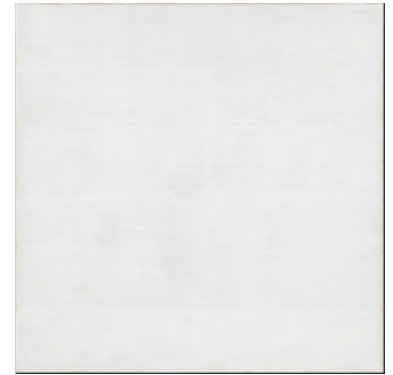


Figure 1.11

the surface through the viewer's bodily and perceptual interaction, making it phenomenological.

I chose monochrome because both Western and Chinese monochrome share a similar temporality that unfolds over time, requiring the viewer to actively participate. This durational experience stands in contrast to both Old Master realism and modernist painting, which aim to depict a singular, instantaneous moment. The emphasis on duration resonates with the concerns of Minimal art, which Michael Fried criticizes for its reliance on temporal and spatial interaction, what he calls "theatricality." According to Fried, this temporal unfolding marks a shift away from the modernist painting's ideal of "presentness" that the painting should be experienced as immediate, whole, and outside of time (Fried, 1998, p. 167). In this sense, the emptiness in both Western and Chinese monochrome, however, resists this ideal of clarity or purity. Emptiness in both cases introduces a time that unfolds, an in-betweenness that blurs the line between painting and event.

However, my intention in making this comparison is not to draw conclusions about which tradition better embodies this in-betweenness, but to examine whether there is a new way of perceiving surface. In minimalist monochrome, the surface becomes a site of phenomenological encounter. In Chinese ink painting, the surface unfolds through the fluid oscillation of opposites, emptiness and form, presence and absence, within the pictorial plane. By placing these two engagements with surface in dialogue, I ask whether the surface can be understood as something that unfolds through relations.

This leads to a broader rethinking of how a painting's surface might be perceived. These contrasting traditions do not define the surface, but rather open up one possibility for its interpretation. One thing to acknowledge first is that the surface becomes a site that unsettles the very notion of full presence. It resists being fixed or fully grasped, instead unfolding through oscillation, relational tension, and perceptual shifts. To understand the surface, then, it becomes necessary to think beyond a singular mode of presence and to consider other modes as supplements. The surface, therefore, exists somewhere in between these modes of presence. I propose that it is through continual oscillation that the perception of surface unfolds.

This awareness was reflected in my studio practice, where I worked toward creating a sense of in-betweenness, drawing from both Western and Chinese traditions of emptiness. Many of my experiments explored oscillation not only on a pictorial level but also as a physical encounter. The surface became a site of perceptual shifts: between presence and absence, illusion and materiality, solidity and void, interiority and exteriority. Through these processes, I tried to open a space where the surface existed in-between, as an ongoing oscillation grounded in relation rather than resolution.

Having examined the physical condition of the surface from both Chinese and Western perspectives, I propose that for the surface's perceptual being to unfold, there must be a continual oscillation. To situate my own practice within this in-between margin, the next

section explores how the surface's in-betweenness might operate through a both/and structure, drawing on philosophical discussions of function within in-between space.

1.4 In-between Surface: Hymen, Rhizome, Becoming and Supplement

Surface is the place of interaction. It connects the inside and outside, the hand and mind, and the representation and world. Philosopher Michel Serres may describe the surface as a skin, one that functions not only as a boundary, but as a space of in-betweenness. He writes:

In it[skin], through it, with it, the world and my body touch each other, the feeling and the felt, it defines their common edge... things mingle with each other and that I am no exception to that. I mix with the world which mixes with me (Serres, 2016, p. 80).

The surface's in-betweenness embodies a beauty of ambiguity—a state that is neither fixed nor fully knowable, but always relational. I find this in-betweenness most vividly in the traditional surface of Chinese painting: rice paper and silk. Unlike the dense and opaque cotton used for Western oil painting, the rice paper and silk are not simply supports, but membranes. Silk and rice paper are thin, matte, absorbent, and semi-transparent. The ink seeps into the fibres rather than resting on top, resulting in soft, gradient marks. Japanese author Junichiro Tanizaki in the essay *In Praise of Shadows* describes rice paper as soft, pliant, and almost silent when handled, noting how it absorbs light rather than deflecting it (Tanizaki, 1977, p. 10). In Chinese tradition, silk and rice paper were also used to make lanterns and windows. The in-betweenness can be seen when these surfaces hold both inside and outside simultaneously. Lanterns glow from within, while windows filter the sunlight through.

To describe a surface that suggests in-betweenness, Derrida's hymen offers a both/and structure that connects the contradictions. It is worth quoting at length what Derrida writes:

The hymen, the confusion between the present and the nonpresent, along with all the indifferences it entails within the whole series of opposites (perception/nonperception, memory/image, memory/desire, etc.), produces the effect of a medium (a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms). It is an operation that both sows confusion between opposites and stands between the opposites “at once.” What counts here is the between, the in-between-ness of the hymen. The hymen “takes place” in the “inter-,” in the spacing between desire and fulfillment, between perpetration and its recollection. But this medium of the entre has nothing to do with a center (Derrida, 1981, p. 212).

Hymen, in Derrida’s writing, is thus in-betweenness. Julian Wolfreys in *Deconstruction - Derrida* explains how the hymen connects different poles but remains itself an undecidable place:

Hymen...connects opposites...allows their meaning to be understood in relation to one another, while reserving to itself a non-determined place for which a univocal meaning cannot be given...At the non-place of the margin, the border, the limit not simply of one but of both figures in opposition – hymen is the limit of both inside and outside – hymen betrays the fact that inside and outside are never simply or completely separate (Wolfreys, 1988, p. 109).

Chinese ink painting can be seen as a hymeneal surface because it connects and oscillates between the opposites of presence and absence. This is evident in Muqi’s use of empty space as a space of potentiality, where elements interrelate without rigid boundaries. Presence emerges from the absent void, like a ship sailing out of the mist, an unfolding that continues endlessly. This process of empty space makes everything interrelated reminding me of what Deleuze’s called “rhizomatic” (Deleuze, 1987, p. 8) of multiplicity, offering multiple entry points for the viewer. This multiplicity has “neither subject nor

object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions" (Deleuze, 1987, p. 8). In Muqi's painting, presence and absence interweave fluidly, each giving rise to the other without a stable center. The space of in-betweenness, as Doreen Massey describes, is "constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly waiting to be determined by the construction of new relations" (Groom, 2013, pp. 121-122).

This in-betweenness, according to Derrida, is understood as the movement of 'difference-itself' preserved through contradiction (Derrida, 2013, p. lxx). If the hymen names this in-betweenness, it also gestures toward what Derrida calls the supplement. Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, describes the supplement in relation to in-betweenness, absence and emptiness. He writes,

But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence... As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness (Derrida, 2013, p. 149).

Though the supplement appears to be an addition to something that is already complete, Derrida reveals that there is no so-called original. The supplement points to a lack in the original—there is no pure presence, only deferral, substitution, and relational difference. This shows that meaning or presence is always dependent on something external. In this sense, the hymen and supplement both occupy a space in between, a space between presence and absence, fullness and void. The painting surface, too, becomes a supplemental site where each mark does not stand alone, but supplements in relation to what is absent and void.

This surface, where interactions occur, is described by Gilles Deleuze as a becoming. Deleuze, in *The Logic of Sense*, describes Alice's journey in *Through the Looking Glass* as a climb to the surface, rather than a descent into hidden depth. For Deleuze, meaning and

transformation are not buried in bodies but unfold at the incorporeal surface—across a mist, a mirror, a chessboard (Deleuze, 1990, p. 9). Deleuze continues to explain that the surface is a threshold, a becoming, an incorporeal event. As he writes, this incorporeal event is marked by constant reversals—between future and past, active and passive, more and less—“always both at once” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 8). The event that Deleuze describes is neither active nor passive but their common result (Deleuze, 1990, p. 8). Though not identical, both Deleuze’s becoming and Derrida’s hysteresis describe a state that connects opposites, holds them simultaneously, but remains itself undecidable.

1.5 Surface in Relations

Having discussed the surface as an in-between space and its both/and structure, it becomes clear that the surface is not an isolated entity but something understood through its relations. It will be worthwhile discussing how the surface engages the viewer through its in-between condition—simultaneously holding inside and outside—and how this interaction shifts perception, presence, and subjectivity.

British art critic Peter Fuller used Robert Rauschenberg’s work to describe the surface as a psychological margin activated through the viewer’s engagement. Taking Robert Rauschenberg’s *Field Mouse: Angel* (Rauschenberg, 1971) [Figure 1.12] for example, the painting creates shimmering veils of color that hover as an illusion of depth. The boundary between material surface and illusionary space dissolves. Fuller, in his 1974 introduction to Rauschenberg’s exhibition catalogue, draws on psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s concept of “potential space”, the transitional space between mother and child, to understand how the viewer engages with the painting. He writes:

The dynamic of our interaction with Rauschenberg’s canvases took the form of a seduction into an experience where the distinction between the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the picture became ambiguous (Fuller, as cited in Glover, 1998).



Figure 1.12

Fuller's reading of Robert Natkin's work suggests that the surface operates in an ambiguous space between inside and outside from a psychological perspective. In Winnicott's mirroring effect theory, the infant first comes to know himself through the mother's gaze. The mother's face functions like a mirror. When the mother responds to the infant's feelings through her expression, the infant begins to develop a sense of self (Winnicott, 2012, p. 158). Fuller finds a similar mirror effect in Natkin's paintings. Natkin himself remarked that, from his early portraits, the painted surface represented a face. Fuller extends this idea by suggesting that the painted surface takes the role of the mother's face: a surface that reflects and responds. Making and looking at the painting both become a reciprocal exchange. Natkin not just paints but sees himself reflected back by the surface. The viewer is not just seeing, but being seen, and being affirmed through the surface. The surface blurs the distinction between inside and outside, creating an in-between space where the viewer enters into a relationship with the painted surface. In this sense, Natkin's work holds boundaries like a hymen. It is interesting to note that Fuller

himself also connects Natkin's abstract work in the fifties to a membrane condition that the painting was “characterised by a search for limiting membrane, a skin that can contain the fragmented elements out of which the painting was made” (Fuller, as cited in Glover, 1998).

While Natkin’s work engages the viewer on a psychological level, it also reveals how the surface connects to something beyond itself—something situated in the surrounding space. This resonates with Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of Relational Aesthetics, which frames contemporary art as a site of intersubjective relations. Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* proposes a way of understanding art based on human interaction and social connectivity. He defines relational art as:

A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 113).

American art critic Rosalind Krauss, in her 1979 essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, anticipated this postmodern condition by proposing a relational understanding of artistic practices that occupy hybrid, contaminated spaces:

Practice is not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used (Krauss, 1979, p. 42).

The in-between surface, when it engages the spectator as a participant, operates as a hymen, where the boundaries between artwork and its environment, interior and exterior, self and other, are intermingled and layered. In art practices, this surface engagement operates a both inside/outside structure, not only functions as a mirror metaphor in Natkin’s work, but also as objects and representations through the use of mirror and glass. Glass, with its full transparency, allows the painting to project directly

into the surrounding space. The painting becomes porous, oscillating between inside and outside, plane and space. Mirror folds the space and viewer back into its reflective surface, showing a multiplicity of perspectives. Through projection and reflection, these materials make the surface a spatial event, a layered, and open-ended site of perception.

Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (Duchamp, 1915-23) [Figure 1.13] is composed of two large glass panels, with paint, lead wire, and foil embedded within, disrupting the traditional painting surface's opacity. The forms appear to float within the glass rather than rest on the surface. By treating transparency as an active pictorial device, Duchamp creates a spatial projection of the painting's surroundings. This projection incorporates the viewer into the work, bringing the outside in through a state of intermingling where the viewer hovers between interior and exterior. At the same time, the viewer can simultaneously see an overlap of the imagery and the environment beyond the glass, blurring the boundary between artwork and space.



Figure 1.13



Figure 1.14

Nick Mauss's *Images in Mind* (Mauss, 2018) [Figure 1.14] reconfigured the in-between surface with glass as a medium and spatial device. Mauss employs a range of mark-making techniques on reversed glass—including rubbing, rasping, stenciling, scraping, silk-screening, and printing, creating a shifting interplay of opacity, translucency, and reflectivity. The mirrored surfaces transforms the act of viewing into an interactive encounter, as the spectator and the environment become part of the painted surface. In

this process, the surface becomes a threshold: not only between artwork and space, but also between self and other. The viewer is in a continual oscillation between presence and image, interior and exterior, seeing and being seen. The mirror's reflective surface as an in-between space unsettles fixed subjectivity, making perception relational and flickering.

Not only found in modern and contemporary art practices, this use of projection and reflection can also be traced back to earlier works such as Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* (Velázquez, 1656) [Figure 1.15]. Michel Foucault, in his reading of *Las Meninas*, links the act of viewing to the reflective mirror and the projected gaze. He writes:

We are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us. A mere confrontation, eyes catching one another's glance, direct looks superimposing themselves upon one another as they cross. And yet this slender line of reciprocal visibility embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints. The painter is turning his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. But, inversely, the painter's gaze, addressed to the void confronting him outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators; in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange (Foucault, 2001, p. 5).

Unlike contemporary artists who utilize interdisciplinary mediums, Velázquez creates an in-between surface using only oil paint. In *Las Meninas*, the painter's gaze seizes the viewer, suggesting that the viewer takes the place of the King and Queen in the painting. The gazes of other figures in the painting interweave, forming a complex visual network in which it becomes impossible to determine who is the subject and who is the object. The

viewer's position is always fluid and uncertain. The viewer stands outside the painting, while simultaneously being pulled into the painting by the gazes of the depicted figures. He then becomes part of the composition. Through the painted mirror and projected gaze, the subjectivity becomes fluid and destructs its own stability. As a result, subjectivity is in a constant shift through the interweaving of viewing and representation.



Figure 1.15

The interplay of reflection and projection, seen in *Las Meninas* as well as the works of Duchamp, Mauss, and even Natkin, underscores the surface's in-betweenness. Mirrors and glass generate liminal zones where subject and object continuously exchange. The subjectivity exists in a continuous exchange too through looking and being looked at. As a result, the viewer's position becomes hybrid: simultaneously inside and outside the work. Building on this, the in-betweened surface, by reflecting and projecting beyond itself into the space, begins to function as a transparent surface. In doing so, the surface opens to the outside, allowing the surrounding space and the viewer to become part of the painting. This dynamic creates an oscillation between surface and space, which is not fully realized as separate poles, but as supplements layered upon one another. Thus, the in-

between surface acts as a transparent threshold that enables oscillation between visibility and invisibility, and between presence and absence.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the chapter, I stated that the surface in painting is not only a physical support but an in-between space where different interactions occur, connecting the tangible world and the illusionistic world depicted. What interests me is how the surface comes into perceptual being, not through fixed presence, but through a fluctuating visibility that both enables and eludes attention.

To explore this, I traced how the surface has been historically constructed and perceived across both Western and Chinese traditions. From a spatial perspective, Renaissance painters treated the surface as a transparent window, making it visually disappear through perspective and glazing. In contrast, Chinese painters treat the surface as an active site of spirit and movement, keeping it perceptually present. From a temporal perspective, I compared Turner and Muqi to show two contrasting attitudes: the Western pursuit of freezing a single instant and the Chinese perception of time as a continuous transformation, rendering the surface as a flux where form and emptiness remain in constant interplay. The notion of emptiness plays a central role in the notion of surface as an in-between space. It activates the oscillation between image and non-image, figure and ground—allowing the surface to hold both presence and absence simultaneously. This introduces an in-betweenness through relational tension. From a material perspective, while modern Western painting began to acknowledge the surface's materiality, it often overemphasizes objecthood and fullness.

I argue that the painted surface is an in-between medium, one that lingers between materiality and illusion, between marks and representation. An interesting case of Chinese and Western monochrome further clarified this and answers my first research question: How does the painting's surface create a state of in-betweenness that shifts perception? The comparison reveals that the surface can be neither fully representational nor purely

material. It is the oscillation that repositions the surface as an in-between space. This liminal space is constituted through oscillations between the opposites: presence and absence, inside and outside, form and void, illusion and materiality. Painting's surface, therefore, challenges its own binary perceptual existence of either presence or absence by existing somewhere in between. This has been described by Jacques Derrida as hymen: a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms (Derrida, 1981, p. 212).

Focused as it is on painting's surface, the notion of in-betweenness is discussed through a series of comparative case studies—some situated within the same historical moment, others spanning across time and culture—from Renaissance painting to contemporary mixed media practices.

This pluralized and heterogeneous comparative approach invites one to reconsider the medium specificity of art practices. For painting to release itself from the narrow self definitions, the comparative examples have shown another possibility as a supplement, a contamination of other mediums or other modes of perception internalized by painting. These comparisons made me recognize that the perception of surface always exceeds a singular mode of presence. It calls for other modes to be considered as supplements. Therefore, the surface, as I have argued, is not solely defined by a single category or condition; it is relational and shifting between unfixed poles.

This oscillation between opposites, this surface's in-betweenness, also raises the question of whether there might be a new way of perceiving the surface: one that oscillates between Western and Eastern, phenomenological and pictorial, as something in-between, something that possesses and holds both. At the end of this chapter, I discussed the in-between surface as it opens to the outside, where opposites are not only realized as separate poles but also as relational supplements layered upon one another. Building on this, the next chapter explores how such layering unfolds in space, extending the in-between surface into spatial conditions, which opens up the possibility for a new way of perceiving the surface.

Chapter Two: Surface as Palimpsest.

The surface as an in-between space that simultaneously connects and separates has already unsettled the very notion of single mode of presence in Chapter One. Its perception unfolds through slippage and supplementation. Because my practice involves situating in-between surfaces in space, it is essential to discuss how the in-between space in spatial conditions unfolds. Chapter Two follows this direction to examine the surface in space, exploring the surface as a grafting site of presence and absence as it is encountered in contemporary paintings and my personal experience. I use the term grafting because the surface's relation of opposites, such as looking/being looked, surface/space, presence/absence, inside/outside, in space is always in contamination: both being perceived at once, and one affects the perception of the other. This contaminated perception of different poles leads to a unique combination of overlapped perceptions, which I call a palimpsest. The palimpsest, as *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is:

A parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier writing (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023).

Thomas De Quincey describes the palimpsest as a membrane. He writes,

A palimpsest, then, is a membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions (De Quincey, 1890, p. 341).

The palimpsest, like Derrida's hymen, is permeable and continually affected by contamination between the opposites. However, the palimpsest distinguishes itself through its layered structure. It does not just separate past and present layers, but also accumulates all past inscriptions. The perception of the in-between space unfolds through

multiple surfaces across different times and spaces. The palimpsest, here, offers a more extensive and inventive model of the in-between space than hymen by taking the surface to a multi-spatial and multi-temporal level.

2.1 Surface, Palimpsest, and Psyche

In attempting to identify the characteristics of palimpsest as a surface in between, I find it useful to look at the palimpsest's psychological application in how it shifts perception. Derrida in the forward *Fors to The Wolf Man's Magic Word* draws attention to the palimpsestic structure of the mind. He describes the palimpsest of the mind as a crypt, a crypt that is "a parasitic inclusion, an inside heterogeneous to the inside of the Self" (Abraham, 1986, p. xvi). This reminds me of Freud's model of the Mystic Writing-Pad. The Mystic Writing-Pad is a child's toy consisting of a clear plastic sheet over wax paper. When one writes on it with any pointed instrument, the mark appears on the plastic surface and leaves an impression on the wax layer beneath. Lifting the plastic sheet erases the visible mark and makes the pad clean again. However, the permanent trace was retained on the wax surface. In this way, Freud suggests that the Pad provides two surfaces: one receptive surface that can be used for infinite times, and one that records all the traces that have been written. The Pad combines two functions by "dividing them between two separate but interrelated component parts or systems" (Freud, 2001, p. 230). For Freud, this toy serves as a "mental apparatus" that performs the perceptual functions: the conscious surface receives impressions from the external but remains seemingly unmarked, while the unconscious below preserves all the traces of these impressions (Freud, 2001, p. 230). Derrida also reflected on the mystic pad as a model of memory and writing. The model suggests that memory and writing are layered and never fully erased (Derrida & Mehlman, 1972). The mystic writing pad and the palimpsest function similarly. Both models separate and connect layers, and what seems erased still lingers as a spectral trace. However, Derrida makes the difference between the two concepts through a deconstructive view on the unconscious. He suggests that a crypt "no longer rallies the easy metaphors of the Unconscious (hidden, secret, underground, latent, other, etc.), of the prime object, in sum

of any psychoanalysis” (Abraham, 1986, p. xiii). In fact, the prime object is a kind of “false unconscious” grafted within the “divided self” in the first place (Abraham, 1986, p. xiii). The relation between the layers of palimpsest, according to Derrida, is a grafting relation that cannot be simply reduced to a binary.

Josephine McDonagh, as cited by Sarah Dillon, distinguishes between the two from a phenomenological perspective. McDonagh makes the case that the palimpsest better captures the transformative and felt nature of mental processes. She writes, “the pad cannot, by itself, bring about the recollection of memory traces, whereas the palimpsest can. That is the possibility of recollection” (Dillon, 2007, p. 30). The palimpsest, unlike Freud’s passive recording surface, has an imaginative force. It does not store past impressions in the unconscious that one is incapable of recalling as he wishes. The palimpsest can be activated through daydream and fantasies, generating new configurations. In this sense, the palimpsest becomes an inventive model to show the mind’s creative capacity to shift perceptions as oscillation and blur the boundaries between inside and outside, linear and non-linear temporality, between present awareness and the haunting absence of memories and fantasies.

In addition, if one looks at the traditional palimpsest, one would notice that the layers of a palimpsest have no necessary or predetermined relation to each other. However, it is precisely this no-relation that makes palimpsest an inventive model. The viewer actively engages with surfaces, making new connections and assemblages through resonances and recognitions. The viewing becomes an imaginative and generative process. In this sense, the palimpsest as an inventive modular system inscribes new meaning through layering. As invisible traces resurface over time and as one continues to write on top, the palimpsest remains open to reconfiguration.

2.2 Palimpsestic Surface and Non-linear Temporality

Through a comparison with the Mystic Pad, the palimpsest has the characteristics of grafting and generating new assemblages through inventive, unrelated linking. Since the palimpsest is activated through daydream and fantasies, it is worth elaborating on these affective non-linear temporalities and how they entangle with the present to make the palimpsest inventive.

These non-linear traces return spectrally and disrupt a linear temporality of perception. The viewing means engaging with multiple temporalities at once — past, present, and even imagined futures. Memory and imagination register a non-linear timeline as extra into the present, one that differs from both linear time and Henri Bergson's concept of duration. Duration for Bergson is lived time. In his first book *Time and Free Will*, he defines duration as "the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states" (Bergson, 2001, p. 100). The timeline introduced by memory and imagination interrupts and overlays linear time and Bergson's duration, inserting itself as a fragmented, discontinuous, and often simultaneous one.

Childhood Memory

The first type of non-linear temporality is childhood memory, which often emerges not as an accurate recollection but as a poetic return to a past that is reshaped through imagination. For example, my experience of standing before a Christmas window display in New York when, unexpectedly, a memory of Chinese Spring Festival from my childhood surfaced—not as a clear recollection, but as a vague, emotional echo that lingered like a daydream. The experience wasn't about remembering a factual past; it was about daydreaming a past in the present. As Gaston Bachelard writes, "It is on the plane of the daydream and not on that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us. Through this permanent childhood, we maintain the poetry of the past" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 16). This daydreamed childhood memory carries a paradoxical quality—it feels both familiar and new at the same time—like remembering something

you've always known, but seeing it in a different light. It is a spectral self that holds past within present as a haunted trace.

Involuntary Memory

The second nonlinear temporality is found in involuntary memory, as famously explored by Marcel Proust. In *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator trips on uneven cobblestones on the way to the Guermantes' party, and this sudden jolt triggers an involuntary, vivid memory of Venice.:

again the dazzling and indistinct vision fluttered near me...And almost at once I recognized the vision: it was Venice, of which my efforts to describe it and the supposed snapshots taken by my memory had never told me anything, but which the sensation which I had once experienced as I stood upon two uneven stones in the baptistery of St Mark's had, recurring a moment ago, restored to me (Proust, 2012).

Involuntary memory returns with difference. In Marcel Proust's work, these memories emerge unexpectedly, triggered by sensory experiences, and they are always mingled with the present moment, creating a layered perception. The involuntary memory functions like a palimpsest. The original memory trace remains, but it is rewritten, reframed, and felt differently each time. This means the recurrence of memory is contingent, always contaminated and shifts over time.

Daydream

The third type is active daydreaming or imaginative drift, exemplified in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, especially through the consciousness of Mrs. Ramsay. Her thoughts wander freely—between children and household details without clear boundaries between self and world, present and imagined:

She looked up—what demon possessed him, her youngest, her cherished?—and saw the room, saw the chairs, thought them fearfully shabby. Their entrails, as Andrew said the other day, were all over the floor; but then what was the point, she asked, of buying good chairs to let them spoil up here all through the winter when the house, with only one old woman to see to it, positively dripped with wet? (Woolf, 1927, pp. 45-46)

This daydream produces a polyphonic present, populated by the overlap of psychical and material reality. It is about being present in a drifting awareness, where imagination and presence intertwine in a continuous unfolding. The in-between nature of daydream folds real time with imagined time. Daydream, like the palimpsest, creates a state of undecidability as it blurs the boundary between internal fantasy and external reality.

All three of these nonlinear experiences give rise to what Bachelard calls the poetic image—an opening, a rupture in time and self. “The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche,” he writes, and through it “the distant past resounds with echoes” (Bachelard, 1994, pp. xv-xvi). These extra timelines resemble Borges's forking paths in time, exist in a “network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another” (Borges, 2000, p. 53).

The inscription of these spectral experiences in the present is never quite the same. Each time we perceive them, the experience differs from the first encounter. Derrida explains this phenomenon as iterability, the idea that every repetition carries difference, and meaning is never fixed but always altered. He writes,

One can perhaps come to recognize other possibilities in it by inscribing it or grafting it onto other chains. No context can entirely enclose it. Nor any code, the code here being both the possibility and impossibility of writing, of its essential iterability (repetition/alterity) (Derrida, 1988, p. 9).

Every time, these nonlinear experiences graft themselves onto other chains of meaning, opening up new possibilities with each repetition. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the palimpsest of the mind links seemingly unrelated elements across time, generating new relationships through their superimposition. When one encounters something in the present, one finds resonance with non-linear traces from the past through memory and daydream. The present perception becomes layered, haunted by these spectral fragments. In this way, the palimpsest actively inscribes the past within the present, overlapping these layered traces as one unique perception.

2.3 Palimpsest, Heterotopia and Spectrality

The palimpsest is a process of layering; although the earlier text has been erased, it was not perfectly done, and the ghostly trace would reappear and overlap with the new text written later. It reveals that a palimpsest's surface presence is never fully present, but always already haunted by traces of absence.

Derrida would likely affirm the spectral return of the palimpsest, as it echoes the condition of haunting he articulates in his concept of hauntology. Derrida introduced the term "hauntology" in *Specters of Marx* to challenge the narrative of the early 1990s, particularly Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, which claimed that ideological conflicts had concluded with the fall of the Soviet Union. Derrida argued that supposedly buried ideas, such as Marxism, would continue to return as spectral traces. Derrida writes: "To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept" (Derrida, 2006, p. 202). Derrida returns to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to draw attention to the ghost as a lingering force. In *Hamlet*, the ghost of King Hamlet signals a past that refuses to stay buried. For Derrida, this ghost is not merely a character but reveals how history operates: it is never fully present, always continually

haunted by what is absent. Martin Hagglund adds to the idea of “specter” that: “What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer or not yet*” (Hagglund, 2008, p. 82).

Hauntology, then, is equivalent to the palimpsest in describing how time folds in on itself. Both reveal how the past lives on in the present, not as something to be resolved, but as a spectral presence that destabilizes a linear history, or a stable identity. The surface becomes a site of layered temporality, where traces accumulate, allowing presence and absence to coexist.

The trace, the earlier text on the palimpsest, represents something that was not fully there. Derrida expands on the notion of trace in *Dissemination* as something never fully present but instead lingers between anticipation and recollection:

There remain only traces, announcements and souvenirs, foreplays and aftereffects [avant-coups et après-coups] which no present will have preceded or followed and which cannot be arranged on a line around a point, traces “here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, *under the false appearance of a present*” (Derrida, 1981, p. 211).

A different case that shares the palimpsest’s characteristic of connection and separation is Michel Foucault’s heterotopia. He describes them as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Museums, gardens, or cemeteries are heterotopias that juxtapose multiple, often contradictory realities within a single space. It connects opposites, resists linear time and layers multiple temporalities. However, the oppositions of Foucault’s heterotopia are too neatly separated. The palimpsest suggests a relation more entangled. Everything contaminates the perception of everything else. Its layers bleed into one another, and traces are never fully erased but remain partially visible, coexisting through residue and haunting. This layered undecidability makes the palimpsest

a more generative model for representing surfaces that do not simply hold the opposites, but continually rewrite and re-inscribe them.

2.4 The Palimpsestic Surface as Water

De Quincey describes a haunted mind as the surface of moving water, where the specular subject becomes haunted by human figures. He writes that the water “unfolds itself slowly like a scroll” (Dillon, 2007, p. 36).

Water, like the palimpsest, its surface reflects and reveals in spectral, overlapping layers. It continuously flows, much like thought, memory, or dream, that shifts, overlaps, and returns in fragments. In this sense, seeing the palimpsestic surface as water is especially useful for examining my research question of how the in-between surfaces shift perception, since water naturally embodies many of the key qualities of a palimpsest. For instance, water contains visible and invisible layers: the surface, the water flow, and the ground residues. What lies beneath is not always fully seen, but it continues to affect what we perceive the surface. Moreover, the flowing water distorts and reflects in constantly shifting ways like the palimpsest, whose superimpositions are never fully stable but always layered and contingent. Water, just as palimpsest, blurs boundaries between surface and depth, reflecting an in-between logic in oscillation.

A compelling example of the palimpsest as water is found in the pool sequence of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (Stalker, 1979). Tarkovsky's montage and time-rhythm editing create dreamlike imagery in *Stalker*. The real world is depicted in black and white, while the mysterious *Zone*, a mysterious, forbidden area surrounded by ruins and desolation, appears in color. The pool sequence [Figure 2.1] in *Stalker* unfolds like a moving scroll painting. The scene develops through a slow, meditative tracking shot as the camera glides over the surface of a shallow, murky pool. The color palette is muted and earthy, dominated by shades of brown. At first, the pool's bottom appears so white that it resembles a mirror reflecting water. Then upon closer look, the water is subtly rippling as

if breathing. Scattered across the pool bed are coins, tarnished and covered in sediment. The camera then moves from the bottom of a religious icon beneath the rippling surface, following a slow trajectory of the icon: from a piece of fabric to a hand holding a book, and then to a head gazing left into the distance. A firearm lies among the debris, its metal corroded. Nearby, paper fragments dissolve into the water, the words on top are hard to read. Light refracts through the water, making everything appear suspended in time. Through long and continuous shots, Tarkovsky transforms an almost stagnant pool into a moving canvas like a Chinese scroll painting.

The water of the pool sequence involves layered transparencies as the palimpsest, which enable new assemblages of superimposed images to flicker through oscillation. The long and continuous shots resemble Chinese scroll painting for the scattered and temporal unfolding. It is not surprising to find an influence of Taoist thought, central to Chinese painting, in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. A direct reference appears in Tarkovsky's diary entry on August 26, 1977, where he cites Lao Tzu's philosophy:

'Weakness is great, strength is insignificant. When man is born he is weak and malleable. When he dies he is strong and callused.

'When a tree is still growing it is flexible and tender, and when it is dry and hard, it dies. Callosity and strength are the companions of death.

'Pliancy and weakness are signs of the freshness of being. What has grown hard will therefore never triumph.'—Lao-Tzu, taken by Leskov as the epigraph to Pamphalon the Buffoon (Tarkovsky, 2018, p. 147).

This passage, spoken by a character in *Stalker*, reflects a core Taoist belief: flexibility and softness embody life, while rigidity leads to decay. Though we cannot confirm that Tarkovsky studied Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* in depth because he did not use direct quote, his fascination with Eastern thought is evident. His April 1972 diary entry further reveals an interest in Zen Buddhism—a philosophy that originated from the integration of Taoism

with traditional Buddhism in China. He writes: "I'm very excited by Zen. At present I'm reading somebody's dissertation (or simply research notes) about Koan. Very interesting" (Tarkovsky, 2018, p. 56).



Figure 2.1

A hauntological critique of Tarkovsky's cinema is particularly relevant here, as it echoes back the palimpsest's haunting nature. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, I described the palimpsest's spectral return as a haunting condition drawing on Derrida's concept of "hauntology." Mark Fisher expands on this spectral presence, identifying "landscapes stained by time", spaces where time refuses to progress linearly and instead remains haunted by what could have been (Fisher, 2012, p. 21). Tarkovsky's *Stalker* embodies this, as the Zone is a site of deferred presence, where past ambitions of Soviet industrial expansion have failed, leaving behind a space in a perpetual state of liminality, an in-between space caught between present and past.

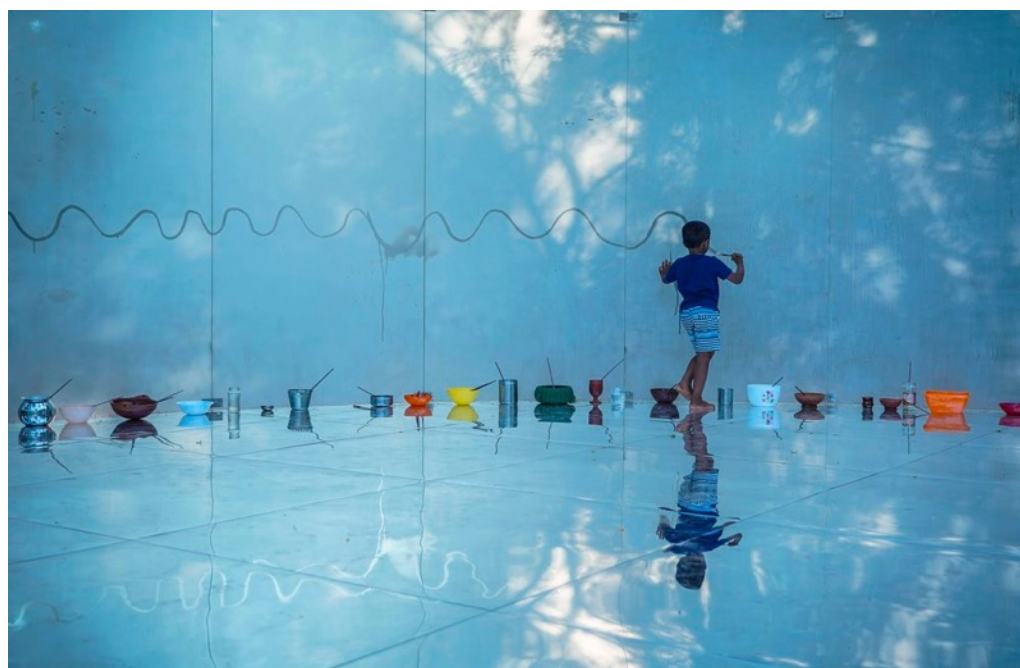


Figure 2.2

Whereas the pool sequence in *Stalker* acts as a still surface that reflects a haunted layering of past and histories, Chinese contemporary artist Song Dong's *Writing Diary with Water* (Dong, 2018) presents a water surface between presence and absence. Song Dong's *Writing Diary with Water* [Figure 2.2], exhibited at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, was housed within a circular glass structure. Different-sized water containers were placed along the translucent wall, each containing a paintbrush and water. Visitors were invited to use the brush to paint on the wall. However, the painted water marks would vanish moments

later, leaving no trace on the wall. Although the marks left no physical appearance, the surface became layered with invisible traces. It held an ongoing oscillation between inscription and disappearance, closely echoing Derrida's notion of the trace. According to Song, the work is about impermanence. He explained: "The interactive sculpture allows the same meditation on impermanence in a shared, secular space as a metaphor for the processes of history, lack of communication and alienation that the world is steeped in. Even the mirrored floors denote the temporariness. The reflection stays only when you are there. When the person leaves the place, it too vanishes" (Pacegallery, 2023). Watching the marks vanish, viewers were invited to reflect on the impermanence of their actions and experiences. The installation becomes a palimpsestic space, where presence and absence are simultaneously inscribed and remembered.

2.5 Palimpsestic Surface as Culture Overlay

In our lived experience, the palimpsest also describes the entanglement of cultural and historical layers that shape identity and perception. Cultural overlays demonstrate that each previous layer would spectrally return and alter the present meaning of the palimpsest. This superimposition creates something new by holding these layers in tension. Drawing on my personal experience of cultural overlay, I will explore what can possibly be generated from the in-between space as a cultural palimpsest. Firstly, I will discuss the interchangeable terms of space and place, which oscillate between the contaminated opposites of the familiar and the foreign, memory and immediacy, and home and displacement.

While space often refers to an area which is free or unoccupied, place carries a deeper sense of meaning and attachment. If one word marks the difference, it would be "home," a concept that transforms space into place through memory, emotion, and familiar experience. In this sense, place can be understood as haunted space, and home becomes the most densely layered of such places, carrying the spectral traces, echoes, and attachments.

Chinese-born American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, and French scholar Michel de Certeau articulate three modes of transition between space and place. Tuan sees a place emerging from the layering of personal memory and lived experience. Bachelard emphasizes the role of poetic imagination and psychic inhabitation, treating space not merely as a physical container but as a shelter for dream. Meanwhile, de Certeau shifts the discussion toward practice, suggesting that space is produced by acts of walking, moving, and inhabiting.

According to Tuan, space and place are not fixed categories but are dynamically interconnected and can be transformed:

In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. "Space" is more abstract than "place." What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value...The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (Tuan, 1977, p. 6).

Tuan used Kronborg Castle as an example to show the transformation between space and place. Physically, the castle consists only of stones. However, the space is transformed into place when visitors imagine that Hamlet once lived there, even "the walls and the ramparts speak a quite different language" (Tuan, 1977, p. 4).

According to Tuan, place emerges through moments of pause. Movement through space offers a continuous flow of experience. But when one stops, even briefly, to look, to feel, to dwell, one differentiates a point from the continuum of space. In the pause, attention is focused and presence is ruptured. The perception, memory, and emotion are activated to anchor meaning to location, transforming the space into place (Tuan, 1977, p. 161).

It is worth noting Gaston Bachelard's understanding of place in his book *The Poetics of Space* is published nearly twenty years before Tuan's *Space and Place*. Although Bachelard does not explicitly mention a comparison between space and place, his key insights align closely with Tuan's later discussion: both emphasize that home, as an intimate place, is less defined by its overall architecture than by the small components and furnishings that can be touched, smelled, and personally experienced (Tuan, 1977, p. 144). Bachelard focuses on the imaginative and poetic inhabitation of space. He explains that small, familiar spaces like houses, attics, and cellars help shape how people imagine and feel their inner worlds. For Bachelard, the quality of place lies in its capacity to nurture the poetic imagination:

The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace (Bachelard, 1994, p. 6).

Michel de Certeau distinguishes space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*) by defining space as something produced through practice, through walking, movement, speaking, and living, composed of mobile elements, in contrast to place, which implies fixed, ordered stability. In this case, walking inverts place into space in its everyday, often improvisational nature, reworks and reinterprets place, making the place dynamic, personal, and experienced. De Certeau describes this relation between space and place:

On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts... In short, space is a practiced place (Certeau, 2011, p. 117).

Together, these perspectives from Tuan, Bachelard and de Certeau provide a phenomenological understanding of how space and place exist in a constant oscillation, shaped by memory, imagination, and embodied action. This phenomenological perspective is particularly valuable for understanding the in-between space as a lived, rewritten experience. Based on this understanding, I will discuss the in-between space as a palimpsest from a cultural perspective and draw examples from works of artists who oscillate between different places and my personal experience. This layered condition of the palimpsest disrupts any fixed notion of home, identity and perception, generating something unique from the grafting of overlapping traces and the present.

Oscillating Place

My palimpsestic experience involves moving across different cultures and landscapes, including China, the United States, and the United Kingdom. I often feel an overlap: memories carried from one place seem to echo into the next, making every new location feel both strange and familiar. Alternatively, I find myself constantly shifting vantage points, seeing and sensing space through layered attachments, memories, and perspectives.

How can I describe this layered perception of an in-between space where past and present places overlap? I feel this overlapped perception most strongly when I looked through a glass window on the street. Perhaps that is why, in Chapter One, I chose mirror and glass, mediums that fold opposite worlds together, to explore how the in-between surface engages the viewer by simultaneously holding inside and outside.

Earlier in this chapter on childhood memory, I mentioned my experience of looking through a glass window during Christmas time. That memory returns to me again and again, each time I feel something new. When I look at the glass, my gaze splits into two directions at once: I see the reflections of the outside — the moving figures, the faded daylight, the passing streetlight — while simultaneously catching glimpses of the interior

— the Christmas decorations and warm festival light. The glass as a transparent medium does not simply separate inside from outside; it fuses them into a single, permeable field. It fuses inside with outside, reflection with depth. My body remains on the sidewalk, but my vision fractures, and a certain sense of time and orientation dissolves. The distinction between the present moment and another hidden timeline becomes porous.

I stand there, feeling the cold of the evening, and suddenly, the scent of roasted red potatoes rises, veiled, like a ghost from memory. I suddenly become lost. Where am I? Am I on my way home to see my parents because it is the last day of school? Should we hurry and buy gifts before the shops close for the Spring Festival? These thoughts summon themselves to me — rushing up like the first warm puff of steam when opening the oven, when the grilled chicken is lifted out on Christmas night.

Two worlds, separated by thousands of miles, tug at me. The faint, festive smells of one culture interweave with another, I float somewhere between them, unable to anchor fully to either. There is a tint of excitement in this overlap perception, but it slips away, shifting too quickly to hold onto. The scent changes and becomes the thick, salty smell of a New York deli's mac and cheese. Suddenly, I'm back on the street, standing in front of the glass window. I notice this overlap and try to feel it again. I tilt my head, take a few steps aside, trying to refocus on the window, on the present moment, and yet I feel a stronger slipping and drifting between two worlds. Space itself feels layered and unstable.

However, not only do present objects trigger this overlapping perception, memory of past objects does too. As Bachelard and Tuan note, the smaller and more familiar the object, the stronger its enchantment.

In a small thrift shop just a few blocks from where I lived in New York's East Village, I found a vintage ceramic duck paperweight — a small, ordinary object, yet it unfolded entire summers from my childhood memory. It reminded me of the animal-shaped

paperweights on the old wooden shelf in my grandparents' study—there was a pair of ducks, a cat, a dog, and a pig. I remember spending long afternoons there, the room filled with the scent of ink and aged newspapers, with the hum of cicadas thick in the air. I would take down the small ceramic animals, arranging them by my side as I read my maze puzzle book — a book I must have walked through a hundred times. I placed that book among the heavy, fabric-bound volumes of *Dream of the Red Chamber* that belonged to my grandparents, believing it, too, deserved a place on the shelf.

The experience of overlapping perception makes me ponder this in-between space may be something uniquely intensified by departure from home. The overlap perception of current space and past places may undergo a constant shifting. My studio practices largely center on this oscillation from cultural dislocation. Many of the trials have attempted to visualize this multiplied, drifting perception through multiple layers of painted surfaces.

It is worth noting that some contemporary artists have already explored this oscillation from a cultural dislocation as an in-between space. Artists such as Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Hurvin Anderson, and Zeinab Saleh each navigate this differently, revealing the surface as a palimpsest shaped by personal histories, diasporic memory, and everyday life.

Layered Belonging

Crosby explores her Nigerian-American identity through a dual possession of both “here” and “there.” In her painting *Blend In – Stand Out* (Crosby, 2019) [Figure 2.3], she constructs a hybrid space layered with visual and emotional references to contemporary life in Nigeria—where she was born—and the United States, where she now lives. The work depicts an intimate interior scene where a standing figure, often read as a self-portrait, leaning over to embrace her husband. The scene feels both interior and exterior. On one hand, it depicts a moment of domestic intimacy. On the other hand, the painting leaves large areas as flat colors, making it feel like a new home one just moved in. Interiors are also filled with public and historical references, which blur the boundary between the private and the public. Parts of the painting are painted as flat acrylic

surfaces, while other areas are collaged with photo transfers from Nigerian magazines, family photographs, and album covers. Over these collages, Crosby applies translucent color washes, painting collaged areas into abstract blocks for a faded effect. As she describes it: “It’s like a faint, faded memory of a place I used to know, a place I used to live in” (Los Angeles Times, 2017).

The space feels both familiar and strange, interior and exterior. Here, home is not a fixed or static concept, but a palimpsest of overlapping places and times. In this in-between space, identity is continuously negotiated through dislocation, memory, and reinvention. This overlapped perception destabilises a singular cultural identity. Instead, identity is layered and grafted from one cultural influence onto another. Crosby’s own words best capture the layered identity:

It really is about what it means to be someone who has existed between multiple worlds and carries all those influences with them at once — for me, a rural Nigerian person, an urban Nigerian person and an American at the same time. I’m trying to use my work, and my life story, to explore this idea of a liminal space, or a third space, where multiple things come together to yield a new thing (Los Angeles Times, 2017).

Fractured Distance

Anderson constructs a space which is marked by separation and estrangement. Unlike Crosby’s emphasis on an intimate hybridity, Anderson argues that these cultural traces haunt the self in conflicting ways.

In *Welcome: Carib* (Anderson, 2005) [Figure 2.4], the setting is based on a barbershop in Birmingham in the Caribbean community, a seemingly familiar and communal space. Yet, Anderson renders it with a detachment: grids and partitions create internal barriers within the scene. The barbershop appears behind a grid-like structure that blocks the viewer

from stepping further in. No human figures are present. This absence and grid-like separation isolate the space from the Caribbean and British communities.

This sense of in-betweenness creates a neither/nor structure. Caribbean heritage and the British environment do not blend but instead remain parallel. Windows, frames, and grids act as both literal and metaphorical barriers that suggest a struggle to move between identities in postcolonial Britain. What results is a kind of non-place: a space charged with cultural memory but lacking comfort or a sense of home.

Such spatial and cultural uncertainty echoes questions about perception and presence in modern painting. Maurice Merleau-Ponty once wrote that Cézanne's greatest success lay in his uncertainty (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 9), a deep doubt about the relationship between body, vision, and the world, which led to a shifting approach to painting:

He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 13).

Similarly, Anderson's work seems to emerge from a place of doubt—of unresolved spatial and cultural belonging. And as with Cézanne, this doubt becomes the source of an unsettling sensation.



Figure 2.3



Figure 2.4

Fading Memory

Saleh's practice is grounded in memory, intimacy, and the quiet poetics of domestic space, something universal to everyone from different backgrounds. She draws viewers into a palimpsest of presence and absence that resembles a faded recollection or a dream half-remembered.

In contrast to Crosby and Anderson, Saleh evokes a deep resonance with everyone through recollections of everyday experience. The work depicts scenes from her personal life, unlocking fragments both nostalgic and open-ended. The materials she works with are soft, often ephemeral materials like pastel, pencil, and watercolor. She uses transparency, smudging, and layering in her making to create a liminal space both intimate and distant, like memory, like dream: always shifting, partial, and subjective.

In the paintings *My body drops an octave* (left image in [Figure 2.5]) and *In another life* (right image in [Figure 2.5]), for instance, the forms are ambiguous. Ghostlike traces, pastel light tones, and delicate linear marks point to fragments of objects or interiors, but never quite define them. Nothing is solid or fixed; instead, the viewers are invited into a memory and daydream. Saleh creates an in-between space that resists closure, as if caught between waking and dreaming. Critic Ellen Mara De Wachter describes Saleh's work:

Presence is subtle and ambiguous in these spaces: Saleh herself is not visible, yet from the richness with which she renders haptic effects of texture, light and scale, we surmise that these are rooms she knows very well... Such deft handling of materials produces a rich perceptual world, the kind best enjoyed from a place of stillness, where the body feels safe and calm, the senses open to nuance and subtlety (Wachter, 2024).



Figure 2.5

The examples I have provided from three artists and my personal experience all resonate with a kind of palimpsest. It's precisely this ambiguous in-between margin—between the familiar and the foreign, memory and immediacy, home and displacement—that generates a more complex sense of perception, identity, and belonging. One feels nostalgia, unease, fragmentation, or intensity, and these sensations are unlikely to arise from possession of a single place. In this sense, cultural palimpsests generate a more layered perception and meaning through resonance, interference, and re-inscription—a perception that exists only in the interplay between presence and absence, the oscillation of opposite poles.

Conclusion

This chapter situates the in-between space within spatial conditions by proposing the palimpsest as a conceptual model for understanding surfaces suspended between presence and absence. I explored this multi-spatial and multi-temporal status of the palimpsestic surface through metaphors, Chinese and Western art practices in comparison and contemporary paintings that center on cultural overlay.

Drawing on Derrida in comparison with Freud, I began by considering the psychological dimension of the palimpsest. The palimpsest has a grafting nature that makes it an inventive model by generating meaning through linking unrelated layers. Psychologically, the palimpsest can be activated by daydream and fantasy as recollections. Because of the activation, I then examined three kinds of non-linear temporality and the specific ways the palimpsest holds in them in overlap with the present. In addition, through resonances with trace, heterotopia, and spectrality, I discovered that palimpsest, as an in-between surface, suggests an entangled relation and possesses a haunting quality.

Then I found water is a medium that both Western and Chinese artist use in their practice for a palimpsestic haunting between presence and absence. In Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, water becomes a spectral scroll where time is suspended, while in Song Dong's *Writing Diary with Water*, the disappearing surface becomes a participatory meditation on impermanence.

To situate palimpsest as in-between space within my experience, I turn to artists such as Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Hurvin Anderson, and Zeinab Saleh who encounter cultural overlay as a kind of palimpsest. Their work, along with my own phenomenological encounter as a cultural palimpsest, responds to my central research question of how painting becomes palimpsestic. It is the layered condition of presence and absence that makes painting palimpsestic, generating a more complex layered perception that exists only in oscillation.

In the following chapters, I will turn to my studio practice and discuss how I work to make the surface an in-between space. The practice unfolds along two intertwined trajectories and produce different account of surface specificity as supplement to each other. One explores the surface's transparency like a hymen, and the other examines the surface's overlay as a spatial, multi-layered palimpsest. These two strands are not separate but mutually contaminating: they interfere with each other, both conceptually and materially.

In the next chapter, I will begin with the material investigation of the two-dimensional surface as in-between space. In the chapters that follow, my exploration of the surface will shift gradually from surface to space, as the work becomes increasingly engaged with the viewers as a palimpsestic experience.

Chapter Three: Transparent Painting.

This chapter develops the methodology in great depth. It examines both viable and non-viable ways I have explored in relation to painting in which the surface operates as a site of in-betweenness. This undecidable oscillation of perception can be related to the experience of waking from a dream. It manifests as a multi-layered experience of perceptual uncertainty and blurred subjectivity: I am both myself and the lingering presence of my dream-self. This notion of in-betweenness also echoes Zhuangzi's reflection on the butterfly dream—he wakes, uncertain whether he was a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming of being a man. Upon awakening, the boundary between self and other blurs into an interconnected whole.

I can vividly reimagine the scene of Zhuangzi's dream of the butterfly in the form of a Chinese ink painting, and this association leads me to consider how this in-between space might manifest on the surface of the painting. That is, how could the surface be represented as an in-between space?

3.1 The Transparent Surface

My first attempt is to grasp an experience upon awakening, which blurs the perception of reality and dream, leaving both unresolved. Peter Doig's dreamscape, I mentioned in the Introduction, is this kind of lingering image that suspends in an unfinished state. In response, my first approach to exploring this in-betweenness is to create paintings that remain unfinished. I created a series of twelve small-scale paintings using watercolor,

acrylic, and oil paint on both paper and canvas [Figures 3.1-3.4]. To clarify the poles that both connect and separate within the in-between space, I identify them as the mark and what it represents. The mark is abstract and tactile, while representation refers to the recognizable depiction of something. The series of paintings captures childhood and everyday life experiences. I paint in soft, thinned transparent layers on the surface to create an unfinished state that somehow represents the experience's ephemeral quality, which allows for multiple interpretations. The in-between space here is understood as an oscillation on the surface between the mark of thinned smoky brushstrokes and the childhood experience it depicts.

This in-between surface, which blurs the mark and what it represents, reminds me of Virginia Woolf's depiction of the small mark on the wall in *The Mark On The Wall* (Woolf,



Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2



Figure 3.3



Figure 3.4

1919). Woolf's narrator noticed for the first time a mark on the white wall. She wondered if the mark was a rose leaf from last summer, a nail hole, or a crack in the wood. The possibilities lead the woman to various reflections and imaginations. The man (perhaps her husband) interrupted her thought and told her that there was a snail on their wall. If one reads Woolf's text, one sees a purposeful aimlessness (Walkowitz, 2006, p. 124). This purposeless wander of the mark on the wall shows an ambiguity where the oscillation between mark and representation is perpetually deferred.

As I revisited Peter Doig's dreamscape paintings, I realized that the oscillation between abstract marks and representation occurs not only in its unfinished state but more importantly through shifts in viewing distance. As one moves closer or further away, the focus shifts—what first appears as marks dissolves into image, and vice versa. Taking Doig's *Alpinist* as an example, when one looks closely at the forest, it disappears and dissolves into abstract geometric triangles. This oscillation between different poles may be key to the in-between space and the perceptual shift.

Having that in mind, this series of small-scale paintings failed to achieve the oscillation between mark and representation because the painting's small size does not allow for a perceptual shift through viewing distance. However, this first experiment provides a valuable reflection, leading me to realize that not only the painted image itself, but the peripheral elements play a significant role in how we see a painting. I also began to reconsider that the oscillation, as a condition for the in-between space, may lie in perceptual changes shaped by viewing distance and the size of the work.

Because I am interested in the in-between space that connects inside and outside, I began to wonder if approaching painting's transparency through its surface, rather than through the medium of paint, might better reveal this in-betweenness. To examine the transparency of the surface, I tested how painting looks on different medium surfaces. My focus on surface stems from its dual function: it is not merely a barrier between the internal and external but also the very site of their mutual contamination.

The selection of materials began with various transparent fabrics, testing the compatibility between semi-transparent textiles and water-based pigments. At this point in testing materials, the transparency test resonates with my exploration of surface as a hymen that both connects and separates in Chapter One. Interestingly, Derrida specifically mentions what hymen material is when he uses French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's work as an example to show how the poet incorporates imagery of veils, folds, and fabrics as metaphors for a liminal space. Derrida states:

The hymen is thus a sort of textile. Its threads should be interwoven with all the veils, gauzes, canvases, fabrics, moires, wings, feathers, all the curtains and fans that hold within their folds all—almost—of the Mallarméan corpus (Derrida, 1981).

The material I used is this hymen material that both reveals and conceals, filters and fragments. The material's transparency allows it to oscillate between visibility and invisibility, inside and outside, presence and absence.



Figure 3.5

To explore the transparent surface and its relationship to the space it inhabits, I investigated how the surface functions within a both/and structure through its transparency. I produced a series of paintings using dyed gauze and cotton stretched on a painted frame [Figure 3.5].

I soaked and poured the unprimed gauze in thinned colored acrylic buckets, allowing the pigment to soak into the fabric rather than sit on top. This created soft, fluid, and translucent color fields that blurred the distinction between figure and ground. Color merged and only a few rainbow-colored elements stained the surface. This soak-stain technique stands in direct relation to what Helen Frankenthaler did in her breakthrough painting *Mountains and Sea* (Frankenthaler, 1952) [see Figure 3.6]. This technique emphasized the gesture, materiality, and the interaction between paint and surface, making the canvas an active participant in the composition rather than a passive support. Here, one small square painting in the later diptych experiment was put here to test if the frame within the frame works as a composition.



Figure 3.6

Both the transparent canvas and frame separate and connect the pictorial illusion and the space the painting inhabits. They establish a liminal boundary that blurs inside and outside while making themselves undecidable and peripheral. In my case, the surface's transparency makes the surface both reveal the representation and open to external reality, existing in between. Derrida, in his critical commentary on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, introduced the concept of parergon (frame) as possessing the same intermediary nature,

The parergon inscribes something which comes as an extra, exterior to the proper field (...) but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play,

abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking. It is lacking in something and it is lacking from itself (Derrida, 1987, p. 56).

The transparent surface, neither purely internal nor entirely external, operates as a “parergon”. It facilitates an open interaction between the internal and external, blurring their boundaries. Through its transparency, the painting transcends its conventional form as one image viewed on the wall, becoming a transparent painting with a hymen structure. The painting, when transparent, is relational and perceptually contingent on its spatial conditions.

This exercise, however, still needs areas of improvement. I was dissatisfied with the way the color randomly merging with gauze surface as a color field with no control and I can't paint anything on top or decide any detailed composition. Further, the gauze and cotton layers between the wooden frame were too close together, and the painting was still traditionally hung on a white wall, limiting the degree to which the transparent painting could open.

I decided at an early stage to create transparent paintings arranged in space, so that each painting stands in relation to the others, forming hymen-like layers suspended within the spatial environment. To create more layers of the transparent painting in between, a diptych of watercolor on dyed gauze mounted on wood frames were also produced [Figures 3.7-3.8]. I stretched the diptych onto a frame, watercolor-stained the surface, and drew topographical symbols and multiple forms of mark-making in watercolor on top. Instead of hanging the diptych on a wall, I suspended the two panels from the ceiling, 50 cm apart. As viewers walk between the panels, the work projects itself to the space it situated through transparency. The success of this experiment is that water-based pigments and transparent gauze materials are compatible. It allows both the imagery and the surrounding space, and

people moving through it, to remain visible in oscillation. From a distance, the viewer perceived the painted abstraction on the surface, while up close, one saw the space surrounded, filtered through the transparent monochrome painting. The transparent monochrome, therefore, creates an interplay between surface and depth.



Figure 3.7



Figure 3.8

Up to this point, transparent fabric has proven to be an ideal in-between medium that both connects and separates. Distance also is important in shifting the perception of surface and depth. What draws my attention is whether there is a painting medium that also carries in-betweenness, or show itself as absent.

The experience of looking into a glass window shop sparked the idea to experiment with non-traditional paint materials better suited to creating an in-between surface. I mentioned this experienced in Chapter Two as an oscillating experience of being in two places at once. The glass is this transparent medium that connects and separates inside and outside, creating perceptual shifts and allowing multiple layers of perception to be experienced simultaneously. I discussed in Chapter One on Duchamp's glass work that the transparency of glass allows the painting on its surface to be directly projected into the

surrounding space, enabling a seamless transition between painting and spatial perception.

The original plan to work with transparent non-traditional mediums was to paint on mirrors or glass. However, because these materials are too heavy, I used vellum paper as a lighter alternative. I experimented with acrylic on vellum surface, using scraping, rubbing, and abrasion to create marks.

A serendipitous moment in the studio at night transformed the work in an unexpected way. Initially, I wanted to test whether overlapping of transparent layers would generate new assemblages. However, an accidental discovery changed everything. In the darkened studio, I happened to turn on my phone's flashlight, and suddenly, the work changed. The marks on the vellum's surface were projected onto the wall, leaving only contours that strongly resembled the Rorschach Inkblot Test. The following two samples [Figures 3.9-3.10] are short recordings of my cast shadow paintings, moving light from right to left and from bottom to top, and back again. What emerged was a paradoxical figure: the shadow painting on the wall existed in a state of both presence and absence. This trace-like



Figure 3.9

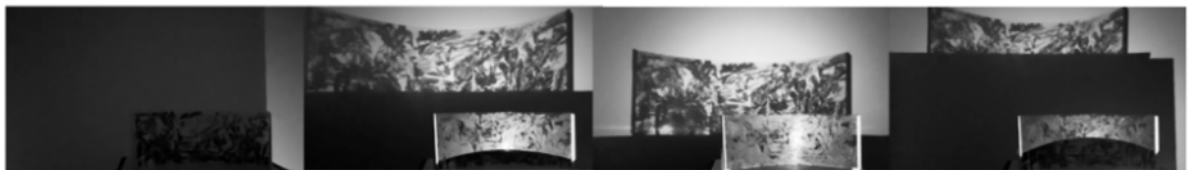


Figure 3.10

existence resonates with Derrida's notion of trace that it is never fully present. Through this projection, the shadow itself became the subject.

Although installations involving light and projection are visually alluring, my primary interest lies in how painting, through its fundamental condition, the surface, and its spatial positioning, can shift perception as an in-between space. The projection experiment inspires a shadow medium that inscribes itself on the surface so naturally that the surface and medium become one. I found this medium in painting's long-time rival, photography. By incorporating the transparent qualities of photography into painting, I discovered a way to address potential issues that cannot be resolved within painting's own conditions.

3.2 The Shadow as Haunting Medium: The Cyanotype

Shadow is the silent architect of space, making depth and distance ambiguous, and invites imagination and daydreaming. It is ghost of the visible—always present, yet never fully graspable. Emerging where light fades, shadow remains tethered to body yet forever slipping beyond it. The shadow, to me, is not the mere opposite of light, but rather as a different, more sensuous form of illumination. This illumination of shadow is reflected in the work of the Middle Tang dynasty painter and poet Wang Wei, particularly in his poetry *The Deer Park* (鹿柴). The scene unfolds within the damp, hushed atmosphere of a forest. Though never directly described, shadow permeates every corner of the scene:

Empty mountains:

no one to be seen.

Yet—hear—

human sounds and echoes.

Returning sunlight

enters the dark woods;

Again shining

on the green moss, above (Weinberger, 2016, p. 58).

Eliot Weinberger's *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* examines how a four-line Chinese poem *The Deer Park* by Wang Wei has been translated in multiple ways. Each translation is different and can be seen as a trace that both carries and alters the original. I chose Gary Snyder's translation out of the 19 renditions of *The Deer Park*. Snyder interpreted "above" as referring to sunlight filtering through the trees to illuminate moss up on the branches, rather than moss on the rocks below (Weinberger, 2016, pp. 59-60). Yet, I see "above" as more than just a reference to look at moss—it encapsulates an unfocused gaze upon the space of light and shadow. The word "above" subtly prompts the viewer to look up, toward the space where light filters through gaps in the forest. Reading the poem, I can visualize myself standing beyond the moss-covered ground, perhaps in shadow, gazing at a beam of light piercing through the leaves. Tiny motes of dust float and dance in the air, visible only as they catch the returning sunlight, while beyond its reach, the space remains unseen, dissolving into the hushed obscurity of the shadowed deep forest. Though shadow is never explicitly mentioned, its presence is deeply felt through the interplay of light, space, and emptiness, lingering in the depths of the forest, woven into the fading glow of the retreating sunlight.

Seeking a way to preserve the shadow, which may have an equivalent effect to the projection experiment I conducted, I turned to light-sensitive materials. Fortunately, in my studio back home in China, I had material boxes filled with papers and experimental materials I had collected over the years, keeping them in anticipation of future use. Among them, I found specially treated cyanotype papers that had been sitting there, waiting.

Cyanotype is a simple yet effective printing method—its two key ingredients can be mixed in various proportions to achieve a successful print. The process begins by dissolving potassium ferricyanide in water to create one solution and ferric ammonium citrate in water to create another. When these two solutions are combined in equal parts, they form a light-sensitive mixture that reacts to UV light. To create a print, a sheet of paper is coated with the cyanotype mixture and left to dry. Objects are then placed on top of the coated surface, held in place with a sheet of glass to ensure sharp edges. Once exposed to sunlight or another UV light source, the uncovered areas darken while the blocked areas remain light. After the desired exposure time, the print is rinsed with water to wash away unreacted chemicals, revealing a striking blue imprint.

The way cyanotype reveals presence within absence may be a key factor in generating an in-between space that shifts perception. Through its process of tracing, imprinting, and layering, cyanotype captures what is no longer physically present yet remains visible as a spectral mark. In this sense, the trace on the surface can be understood as a form of ruin: the material residue of what has been erased. What is erased and what remains are held in tension, producing a surface that is fragmented, incomplete, and open to further interpretation. Rather than signifying loss or nostalgia, the erasure can be understood as a process through which traces are reconfigured, allowing the surface to remain contingent and generative—a “kind of restoration,” as Brian Dillon suggests (Dillon, 2011, p. 212). This erasure in cyanotype is not a failure, but a condition through which the trace emerges. As Jacques Derrida suggests, it “figures the very chance of the work” (cited in Dillon, 2011, p.42). As such, the cyanotype does not simply record what was once present; rather, it captures the trace of disappearance, preserving absence as a visible mark. Cyanotype thus holds shadow in suspension. It makes the shadow as a permanent trace. Unlike projections that vanish with shifting light, cyanotype fixes the ephemeral, transforming absence into presence, a residual haunting of form. Here, the shadow is not a fleeting illusion but a physical imprint—an intersection of time, touch, and light.

Unlike traditional photography, which captures the full detail of an object, cyanotype produces a negative imprint—a ghostly blue trace of what once interrupted the light. It does not capture the physical object itself but rather the space where it was, preserving its absence as a permanent trace. This is a hauntological condition: the object is gone, but its shadow remains, its form lingers—not as representation, but as an imprint of absence. This haunting condition, according to Derrida, embodies something that should have vanished yet remains:

This haunting displaces itself like an anonymous silhouette or the figure of an extra [figurante] who might be the principal or capital character (Derrida, 2006, p. 189).

Cyanotype print is this silhouette that formed through the absence. The process itself embodies a spectral presence. It is both absent and present, material and immaterial. It functions as a haunted medium of shadow, where what is visible is defined by what has disappeared, and what is anticipated emerges only through the process of its becoming.

As I conducted background research and carried out my cyanotype experiments, I noticed that my development of cyanotype as a transformative painting medium aligns with what early historical skepticism of cyanotype criticized. Conversely, the very aspects of cyanotype that I see as its potential for innovation in painting are the same ones that early photography critics dismissed as fraudulent.

The cyanotype technique was first developed by John Herschel in 1842 and was soon utilized by botanist Anna Atkins to document plant specimens. In 1843, Atkins produced the first photographic illustrated book, *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became a favored method among amateur photographers due to its user-friendly nature (Burns, 2016, p. 13). However, within fine art photography circles, it was often regarded as unsuitable for final

prints. Photographers would only use it for test images and postcards than treated it as a legitimate artistic medium. The earliest histories of photography largely overlooked cyanotype due to its negative assessment. Though popular among amateurs and promoted in journals such as *The Art Amateur* and *Amateur Photography*, according to Nancy Kathryn Burns, the cyanotype “almost entirely disappeared from the historical survey of photography by the early twentieth century (Burns, 2016, p. 14).” P. H. Emerson, an influential British writer and photographer in the 1800s, famously commented on the selective acceptance of color processes in photography. He dismissed cyanotype, stating: "No one but a vandal would print a landscape in red, or in cyanotype" (Emerson, 1889, p. 196).

In 1903, Kodak introduced the 3A Folding Pocket Camera, which replaced cyanotype postcards with black-and-white tones that were more fashionable at the time. (Burns, 2016, p. 13) The cyanotype process gradually faded from popular use, especially as other photographic methods gained prominence. By the mid-century, its role was largely reduced to an inexpensive reproduction technique in fields like architecture and engineering (Pitt, 1880, p. 210).

In the 1950s and 1970s, artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil revisited cyanotypes and worked collaboratively (Kirkland, 1951) [Figure 3.11] for large scale cyanotypes (Lobel, 2016). Since then, more contemporary artists incorporate cyanotype and reimagine its relevance in modern artistic practice.



Figure 3.11

I chose cyanotype not only for its haunting quality but also for its marginal quality, which emerged from its historical marginalization in early photography and popular use in photocopying industry. As I mentioned, it was widely used as a popular copying process for architectural drawings, rather than being limited to image-based prints from negatives. I argue that it is precisely cyanotype's unique and multifaceted practical applications that rescue it from being confined solely to the discipline of photography. Furthermore, its practical application enables it to be an ambiguous medium, one that extends beyond medium specificity—what Clement Greenberg suggested as "the unique and proper area of competence" (Greenberg, 1982, p. 5). Therefore, the cyanotype has the capacity to linger between disciplines, functioning as a transformative medium.

Before getting into the details of my cyanotype experiments, I would like to clarify that my approach to cyanotype is rooted in art, rather than chemistry or photography. Rather than

treating cyanotype as a precise scientific process, I see it as an intuitive medium. My cyanotype studies also differ from photography because it does not solely rely on negatives. I work with cyanotype as a painterly method through compositions directly on the cyanotype surface. The works are not reproductions of any pre-existing objects but rather entirely new creations. This has allowed me a unique perspective to share these processes, which ultimately result in an interdisciplinary painting practice.

To familiarize myself first with cyanotype's property and to explore the factors that may influence its coloration, I produced a series of small-scale cyanotypes on different papers [Figure 3]. I chose A4 printing paper, xuan paper, cardboard, watercolor paper and printmaking paper to test how the thickness of paper may influence the light exposure. The use of different light source, weather condition, resting time of cyanotype mixture, application of coating, detail of image chosen for reproduction are also considered as possible influential factors.

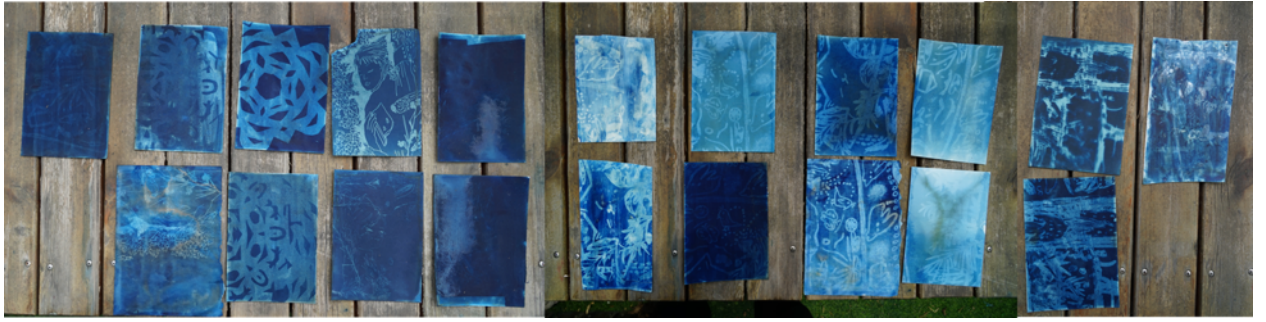


Figure 3.12

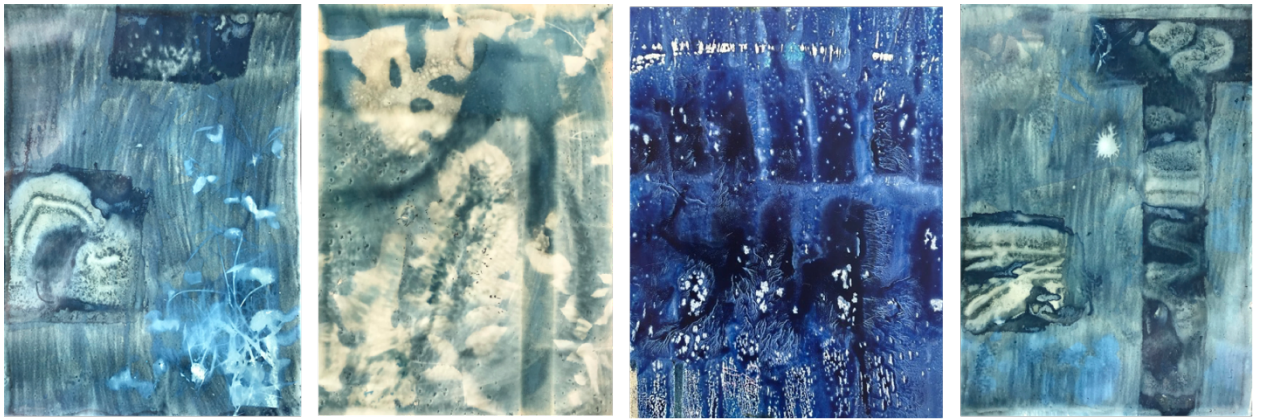


Figure 3.13

Each material produced distinctly different textures with the cyanotype [Figures 3.12-3.13]. As a result, cyanotype on A4 printer paper appears glossy with sharp detail, but its texture appears low quality after absorbing chemicals. Meanwhile, watercolor and printmaking papers offer a matte finish that best captures the crispy, detailed imprints I made with a marker or black acrylic paint brush. In contrast, cardboard proved the most experimental because its water-resistant surface allowed the solution to flow and pool, creating rich textures resembling Peter Doig’s dotted and diffused patterns. To block the surface, I layered cut pieces of A4 printer paper that had already been used.

Unexpectedly, the cyanotype on the scrap paper reacted again with the cyanotype on the cardboard, resulting in a glazing-like glaze. Xuan paper, a kind of Chinese rice paper, is soft and fabric-like. It is highly absorbent and develops a clear image, making it a strong fabric substitute for testing cyanotype surfaces.

One observation was that in summer, strong UV light causes vapor buildup under transparent layers, blurring images and creating unintended shadow effects—an accident I later used on larger cyanotype works to create a mist effect. Exposure conditions also vary with the seasons: in summer, cyanotype exposure can be done in 20 minutes, while in winter or on cloudy days, it requires days-long exposures, which can also cause the cyanotype's color to change to green or yellow. These color variations became central in my later plant-based cyanotype series.

I also considered the edge sharpness of the cyanotype image. Since my focus is on the natural interplay of light and shadow, I used natural UV light instead of screen-printing. Under strong sunlight, moisture from the film causes lines to blur. I actually like this effect of blurriness. Another point to mention is that I often work with wet paper, which creates a foggy effect further softening the image's edge. This technique of using a wet surface and film was later applied to transparent fabric paintings, particularly suited to misty Chinese landscapes, which, as Juhani Pallasmaa suggested, "gives rise to an unfocused way of looking, evoking a trance-like, meditative state" (Pallasmaa, 2012, p. 50).

This series of cyanotype experiments helped me to become familiar with the haunting properties of the medium and those unexpected discoveries later were used in my practice. These findings expanded cyanotype's creative possibilities and contributed to its realization as a transformative medium in painting.

3.3 Cyanotype and the Transparent Surface

An important factor in considering cyanotype as a painting medium is its interaction with a transparent surface. In the section on transparent surfaces, I explored how fabrics like gauze serve as ideal in-between surfaces. This section examines how cyanotype works on a transparent surface, and this will determine whether cyanotype is suitable as a paint medium for transparent painting.

To examine how cyanotype works on transparent fabrics, I conducted a series of experiments on transparent fabrics [Figure 3.14-3.15]. The fabrics used in these experiments measured 0.5 × 1.2 m and included a range of materials: linen, low thread count cotton (canvas cotton), high thread count cotton (bedding cotton), chiffon, gauze, organza, mesh gauze, polyester mesh, and nylon. I applied the cyanotype solution to the fabric and placed cut cardboard, ferns, stones, dried flowers, and shrub leaves on top. The fabric was then exposed to sunlight for 20 minutes, rinsed, and air-dried.

Through these tests, I noticed that cyanotype color varies across fabrics: more absorbent fabric materials create deeper blues, while less absorbent ones produce lighter tones. Canvas cotton (with a low thread count) absorbs the most cyanotype solution, resulting in the richest, most intense blue. Linen and high thread count cotton (like bedding cotton), follows closely, producing deep blues. Chiffon and gauze develop moderate tones and embody a both/and structure, balancing transparency to see through with surface imprints. In contrast, mesh gauze and organza, produce light blues as they retain less solution. Synthetic fabrics like polyester and nylon absorb very little or no solution, resulting in faint or nearly invisible images.

Cyanotype proved itself to be a suitable paint medium for transparent painting. Its transparency and blue tones are key in the later construction of the painting in spatial arrangements. For example, highly transparent nylon draws the gaze to oscillate between surface and depth, while dense cotton acts as a Chinese scroll painting, shaping how space is perceived differently.



Figure 3.14



Figure 3.15

To further explore cyanotype on transparent fabric, it was essential to test the range of marks it could produce. Early paper-based experiments revealed that rice paper could substitute for fabric due to its similar absorbency and texture. I conducted a comparative test with rice paper and cotton fabric [Figure 3.16], and the results were very similar. Therefore, I chose rice paper as a substitute for its fast-drying properties. Since I had decided that the final works would be large-scale fabric pieces (8–16m), using small xuan paper sheets for testing helped save both time and labour.

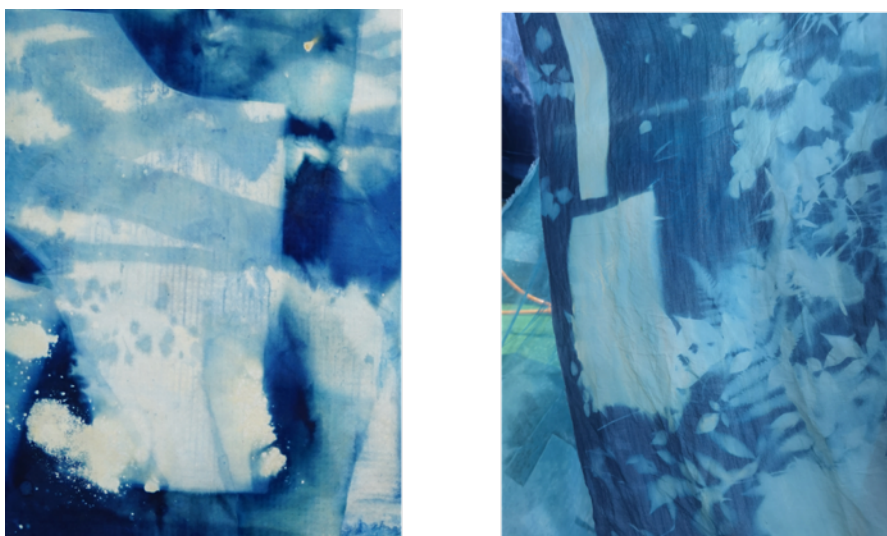


Figure 3. 16

3.4 Imprints as Marks

To explore cyanotype as an inventive painterly medium that oscillates between marks and representation, presence and absence, I needed to test its ability to produce painterly marks such as dots, lines, and shapes.

The first mark studies tested the effects of different paintbrushes on film [Figure 3.17]. The left side used black acrylic with a paintbrush; the right used a marker. Acrylic produced more natural strokes—small gaps in the marks allowed UV light to partially pass through, creating a handmade texture and deeper blue. The marker, although providing clear contours, reacted with moisture on the film, resulting in a blurred image. Both materials faced some degree of moisture issues. Sunlight caused condensation on the transparent film, causing a blurred image. To address this, future tests will use film only in selected areas to reduce moisture’s impact on image clarity.

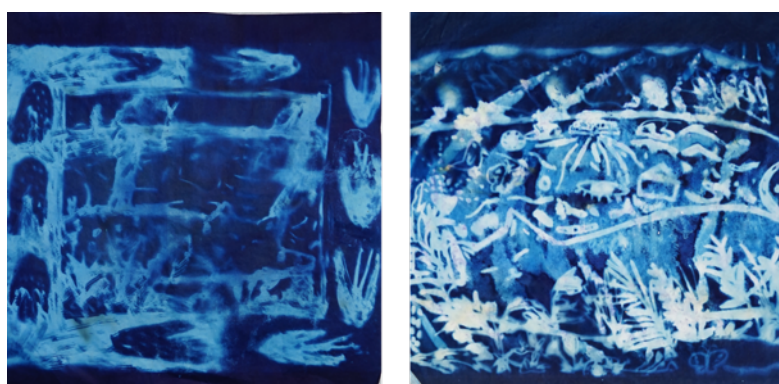


Figure 3.17



Figure 3.18

The second set of mark experiments was based on gestural abstraction, exploring the potential of cyanotype as gestural painting [Figure 3.19]. I refer to this as gestural painting

because I used cyanotype as a blue painting pigment rather than relying on its ability to depict absence. Using a brush dipped in cyanotype solution, I painted expressive strokes on xuan paper, applying gestural techniques such as splattering and dripping [Figure 3.18]. Due to the high absorbency of rice paper, the strokes naturally bled into the surface, resulting in soft, diffused cyanotype marks.



Figure 3.19

Although this gesture experiment does not directly use cyanotype as a negative imprint but more like a positive stroke, it helps ground an understanding of how a mark can operate as a trace, too. During the process, I focused on how invisible energy, such as movement and rhythm, could become visible as marks. It reveals that the marks carry something authentic, serving as an important supplement because representation or legibility of content alone cannot fully convey. This brought to mind both Chinese calligraphy and Jackson Pollock's gestural abstraction. As Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu said, "The great image has no form" (Lao-Tzu , 1993). It means that the most profound

things cannot be fully grasped through fixed forms or definitions. True meaning often lies in what is fluid, open, or beyond clear representation. It invites people to perceive through intuition rather than a concrete form. I assembled rice paper sheets covered with varied calligraphic strokes, letting them merge into an image that is open-ended. Here, gesture becomes not only a mark but also a trace of the body. Therefore, the marks have the ability to turn the invisible visible, and the absent present. When assembled together, the marks exist in a continuum of movement that transcends fixed form. They remain in constant transformation, allowing the eye to move freely in between. Any point can be connected to anything else, forming an open-ended network of relationships. This continuum, as Deleuze describes, is a rhizomatic structure that does not follow linear or

hierarchical patterns but instead operates through multiple, interconnected pathways (Deleuze, 1987, p. 7).

One artist and one calligrapher I relate to are Brice Marden and Wang Dongling, both of whom conceptualize writing as mark and gesture as trace. Their performative approaches show that meaning is embedded in the physical mark itself, influencing my studio practice to take mark-making seriously. I was reminded of the exhibition Poetry and Painting at Chambers Fine Art in New York, which I saw a few years ago. Both Wang's chaos script and Marden's Cold Mountain Series in the exhibition dissolve the line between mark and representation.



Figure 3.20



Figure 3.21

Brice Marden's *Cold Mountain* series (1988–1991) emerged from his fascination with Chinese calligraphy and poetry. *The Cold Mountain Series, Zen Study 5 (Early State)* [Figure 3.21] is an etching with sugarlift aquatint (Marden, 1990). The title and visual forms of the series reference the writings of Han Shan, a Tang dynasty poet known as “Cold Mountain,” who retreated to T’ien-T’ai (Heavenly Terrace) in search of spiritual enlightenment. Rooted in Buddhist and Taoist thought, his poetry explores solitude and transcendence. Marden was drawn to its visual composition, focusing on the written sign’s visual presence rather than its meaning. Marden created layered, vine-like lines that follow the top-to-bottom, right-to-left direction of Chinese script, abstracting language into fluid, interconnected movements beyond literal interpretation.

Wang Dongling's *luan shu* (chaos script) (Dongling, 2018) [Figure 3.20] takes this abstraction further by completely abandoning the legibility of characters. As critic Gao Shiming observes, Wang's calligraphy is "detached from all the traditional ways in which calligraphy refers to objects or concepts and graspable images of things, writing becomes pure trace" (Chambers Fine Art, 2018). The gestural act of writing becomes the only focus, with the brush moving freely across the surface, forming spontaneous marks.

Viewed together, these Eastern and Western approaches offer new ways to think about trace, mark-making and legibility. Both align with Derrida's idea of iterability, the notion that “a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context” (Derrida, 1982, p. 317). This suggests meaning is never fixed but shaped by past traces and future interpretations. For Wang and Marden, writing becomes a trace—not tied to a specific moment or intention, but open to new contexts through gesture as mark.

Returning to my cyanotype experiments, the idea of writing as trace and mark-making makes me realize the importance of the invisible energy carried within the traces. While this experiment with gesture trace explored movement and fluidity, it still used cyanotype as a positive form. However, since my research interest lies in the surface as an in-between space, I still want to engage with the cyanotype's core potential as a shadow medium. The strength of a shadow medium is its ability to make the visible invisible, which aligns closely with the nature of in-between space that both reveals and conceals. This realization shifted my focus to capturing trace as an imprint rather than treating

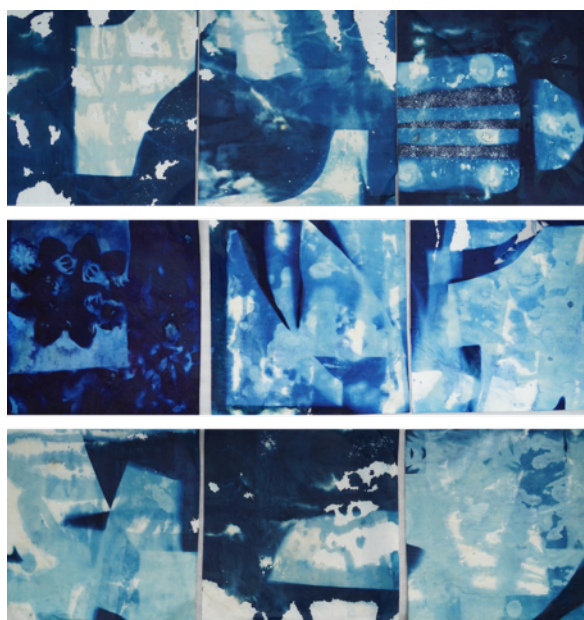


Figure 3.22



Figure 3.23

cyanotype simply as a painterly or calligraphic stroke.

The third mark study shifts the focus to cyanotype's ability to create traces as imprints. Unlike the first two cyanotype studies, this experiment used cut paper shapes as blocking objects, emphasizing cyanotype's negative space [Figures 3.22-3.24]. The bold, rounded shapes allowed cyanotype's white imprints to become the focal point, resembling the delicate color of traditional Chinese porcelain.

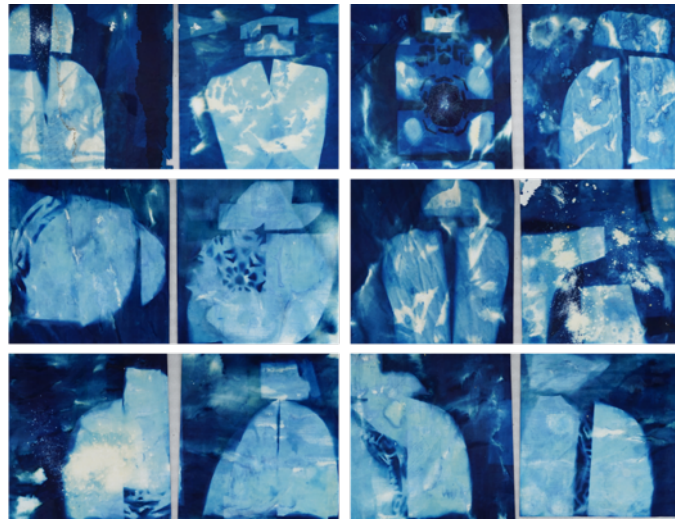


Figure 3.24

What this series achieved was the effective use of cyanotype's negative space. This use of absence allows the subject to exist as a trace, defined not by its physical presence but by what is absent. The haunting paradox of the cyanotype's form is that its visibility is created by concealment, situating the surface as an ongoing oscillation between presence and absence. This use of negative space echoes the Chinese aesthetic concept of emptiness, as discussed in Chapter One. In Chinese painting and Daoist philosophy, emptiness is a generative space in which everything arises. It resonates again with Laozi's notion that "The great image has no form." The form resists clear and visible definition and is experienced only through the intuition of the invisible. Cyanotype, as a shadow medium, aligns with this Chinese concept of emptiness. The image is spectral and the subject becomes a trace of what once existed. By using cyanotype, the surface allows itself to function as an in-between space. It is precisely this connection and separation between presence and absence that enables cyanotype to create a surface that oscillates between and shifts perceptions. Most importantly, this cyanotype's innovative use of negative

space possesses properties that help address my research question of how the traditional figure-ground relationship in painting might be re-positioned.

An artist who creates silhouette paintings that use negative space to invert the traditional figure-ground relationship is Kara Walker. Walker's work examines themes of race, gender, sexuality, violence, and identity. In *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress* (Walker, 2001) [Figure 3.25], Kara Walker constructs a sprawling, large-scale silhouette installation. Walker references 19th-century imperialist propaganda, European primitivism, comic illustrations, African caricatures, and American antebellum history, collapsing them into a chaotic, dreamlike composition. The black cut-paper figures are placed against a stark white background. Some figures appear in motion—lunging, grasping, and contorting—while others remain static, frozen in ambiguous moments of conflict. There is no center and no vanishing point, no landscape, and no narrative to follow. The interplay between positive and negative space in Walker's work is crucial—her figures exist only as voids cut, and their presence are shaped by absence. The black cutouts against white walls create an ambiguous figure-ground interplay, while the large scale further immerses the audience. Viewers become part of the visual narrative, haunted not only by the shadows of others but by their own presence cast onto the walls, dissolving distinctions between observer and subject.

Shadow mediums, both silhouette and cyanotype shift the viewer's perception by challenging conventional modes of seeing, inverting traditional subject-object relations. They function similarly to Foucault's deconstruction of the subject through gaze in *Las Meninas*, as the viewer is pulled into the painting. By engaging with the work of absence, viewers are compelled to fill in the gaps and complete the mapping of the terrain for themselves.

That being said, the limitation of the third experiment with negative space is that the cut paper pieces are too small to be suitable for large-scale fabric works. The shapes are

relatively similar, with sharp edges and flat surfaces. I need to find lighter, more flexible materials that can combine dots, lines, and planes, and can be adjusted to fit different sizes of cyanotype fabric.



Figure 3.25

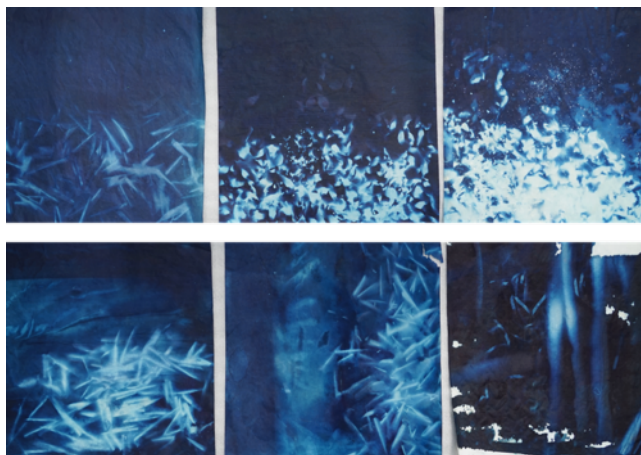


Figure 3.26

The fourth mark studies marked a turning point, as I began using natural elements [Figures 3.26-3.28]—such as winter jasmine and bamboo leaves—as cyanotype blocking objects. Using natural elements like plants as cyanotype blocking objects introduced

organic textures, soft edges, and layered depth that paper cutouts and brush marks could not achieve. Their varying opacity and tilted leaves allowed light to pass unevenly, producing rich tonal variations and shadow effects. I also experimented with extended exposure and resting time, which gave the blue cyanotype an aged, earthy tone. In addition, the surprising use of bleach and laundry detergent created unpredictable, rippling textures that are reminiscent of flowing spring water.

Compared to other imprints, such as brush marks and paper cutouts, plants offered a more dynamic and spatially complex imprint. Their organic forms, varying opacities, and natural three-dimensionality create a rich oscillation between what they are and what they resemble. When used as compositional elements arranged on the cyanotype surface, they can evoke landscape-like forms, enabling a potential shift in perceptions between marks and representation.

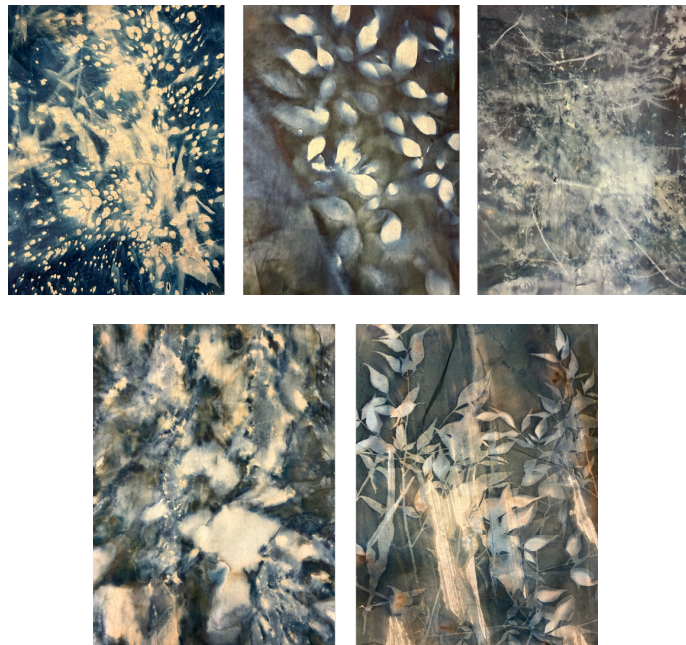


Figure 3.27



Figure 3.28

3.5 Cyanotype and Beyond

The following experiments served as a supplement to my exploration of cyanotype as an interdisciplinary painting medium. They responded to the criticism of cyanotype's limited blue-toned imagery by expanding its color possibilities through two approaches: acrylic underpainting and chemical toning. I also presented some studio works using colored cyanotype as an expanded painting approach. Although the resulting colored cyanotypes were not directly applied in the current research due to time constraints, they offered valuable potential for future exploration.

One set of cyanotype tests involved pre-coating the surface with a thin layer of acrylic paint on xuan paper [Figures 3.29-3.30]. I applied beige and pink acrylic as a base, which altered the final image's tone. When pink acrylic is mixed with cyanotype blue, it creates purplish hues, showing how base color layering can expand cyanotype's tonal range beyond its typical monochrome.

Another series focused on chemical toning. I experimented with bleaching (using sodium carbonate) and staining (with tannic acid) to shift the blue into yellow, brown, and violet tones [Figures 3.31–3.32]. This process revealed subtle textures that were previously lost, allowing for greater control of the image's surface details.

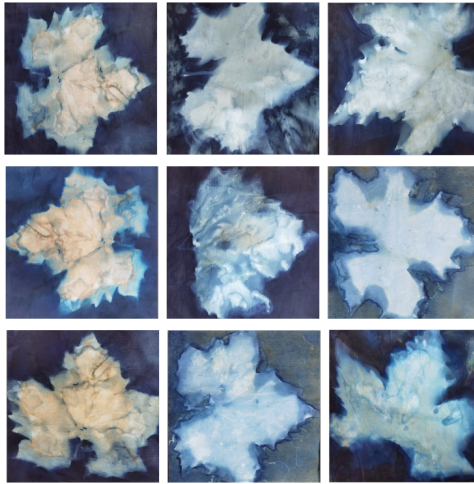


Figure 3.29

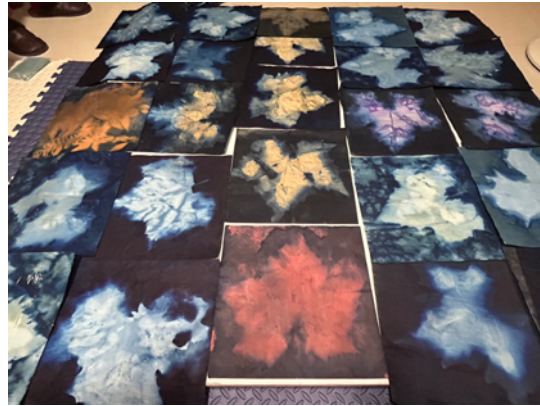


Figure 3.30



Figure 3.31



Figure 3.32



Figure 3.33



Figure 3.34

I also created small and large cyanotype collages in my studio to explore the painterly potential of cyanotype through re-composition [Figures 3.33-3.34]. While not central to my thesis on transparent painting in space, they offer a different pictorial overlay. The overlay introduced unstable and open-ended spatial relationships that reverse traditional figure-ground relations. This overlap structure echoes Derrida's notion of grafting, where meaning is constantly rewritten through recombination (Derrida, 1982, p. 317). The illusion of the overlapped collage suggests an openness for viewers to navigate the work, through constantly adjusting their focus and discovering new spatial relations.

In addition, I explored whether the toning effects on paper could similarly be applied to fabric. However, the fabric toning tests were less successful because bleach faded too quickly [Figure 3.35]. That said, a few observations may provide valuable insights on cyanotype as a painting medium. Through the toning experiments, I observed how it can significantly alter the cyanotype's visual qualities. Here, the top and bottom cyanotypes illustrate the effect before and after toning [Figure 3.36]. We could observe that hidden details were revealed through toning. The staining process helped tone down the intense blues in some rice paper that had been left under the sun for too long, softening the cyanotype's blue intensity and creating a more balanced and nuanced tone, similar to the color of Ancient Chinese painting, which tends to turn yellow over time.



Figure 3.35



Figure 3.36

Conclusion

Through practice, this chapter develops two key mediums in articulating the in-between space: a transparent surface medium and a shadow painting medium applied on top. At the start of this chapter, I reflected on Zhuangzi's dream of the butterfly—a state of in-betweenness where the boundary between interior and exterior dissolves. This notion became a guiding thread for me to explore how the painting's surface functions as a hymen structure. Firstly, through a series of experiments, I found the transparent textile as my surface medium, which both divides and allows passage. The transparency allows the surface to function in a both/and structure, making it relational and perceptually contingent on its spatial conditions.

Cyanotype emerged as a transformative painting medium utilizing shadow. Defined by what has disappeared, cyanotype inscribes absence onto the surface, making the absent trace visible. As part of the conclusion, the essential property of cyanotype as an in-between medium is its haunting nature. The cyanotype surface embodies a spectral presence. It becomes an in-between space where presence and absence, memory and present, are suspended in a state of undecidability. Numerous tests and strategies were developed to evaluate cyanotype's properties and its potential for mark-making as an innovative painting medium. Among various mark-making experiments with different imprint sources, plants prove to be the most effective cyanotype subjects.

In this chapter's discussion, I have only highlighted a selection of cases that I found most insightful and relevant, while many others remain undocumented in my studio. I find conducting a large number of tests and experiments is the key to encounter unexpected results, most of which later became essential in my fabric-based cyanotype installations.

Having established transparent fabric as the surface and cyanotype as the painting medium, both lingering at the margin between inside and outside, presence and absence, the next chapter explores how cyanotype works on transparent fabric as painting. The

main discussion will focus on how the plant cyanotypes are rearranged through compositional strategies. Taking the cyanotype imprints as components, painting becomes an absent landscape, haunted by traces.

Chapter Four: Haunting Surface and Absent Landscape.

In this chapter, I turn to how cyanotype imprints can be rearranged compositionally as painting, focusing on the interaction of elements across the surface, figure-ground relationships, and the logic of pictorial composition. In Chapter Three, I chose plants as the primary imprints. When used as compositional elements, the traces are possible to reconfigure into a kind of landscape painting—a painting made of absence, an absent landscape. To determine whether cyanotype can be transformed into an absent landscape, it is useful to adopt a modular system to reconfigure how traces function within pictorial compositions.

4.1 The Manual and Modular System

One important modular system can be found in the Chinese painting manual. Back in those times, for aspiring Chinese painters without access to private collections, the painting manual became an invaluable resource to teach them how to paint with ink for centuries. The *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* (芥子园画谱, *Chieh Tzu Yüan Hua Chuan*) serves as a foundational guide for artists, providing a structured yet flexible framework for composition and brushwork. The Manual was compiled during the early-Qing Dynasty and divided into thirteen books, covering landscape elements like trees, rocks, and figures; specific plants such as orchid, bamboo, plum, and chrysanthemum; and grasses, insects, animals, and additional examples (Wang, 1977, p. ix). Artists adapt the elements from the manual—bamboo, cranes, grasses—into new compositions, such as a serene Bamboo and Crane painting, embodying a Chinese artistic belief in constant transformation within tradition. Rather than a rigid set of instructions, the manual functions as a modular system for artists to reuse and transform the elements into a painting.

The first thing that caught my attention in this painting manual was the equivalence between the imprints of my plant cyanotype and the plant illustrations in the manual [Figures 4.1-4.2]. The cyanotype in [Figure 4.1] was created by placing summer bamboo on cotton coated with cyanotype solution and exposing it to UV light, resulting in the final imprint. The bamboo imprints in cyanotype closely resemble the bamboo marks in the painting manual. The way cyanotype captures the bamboo silhouette is similar to how

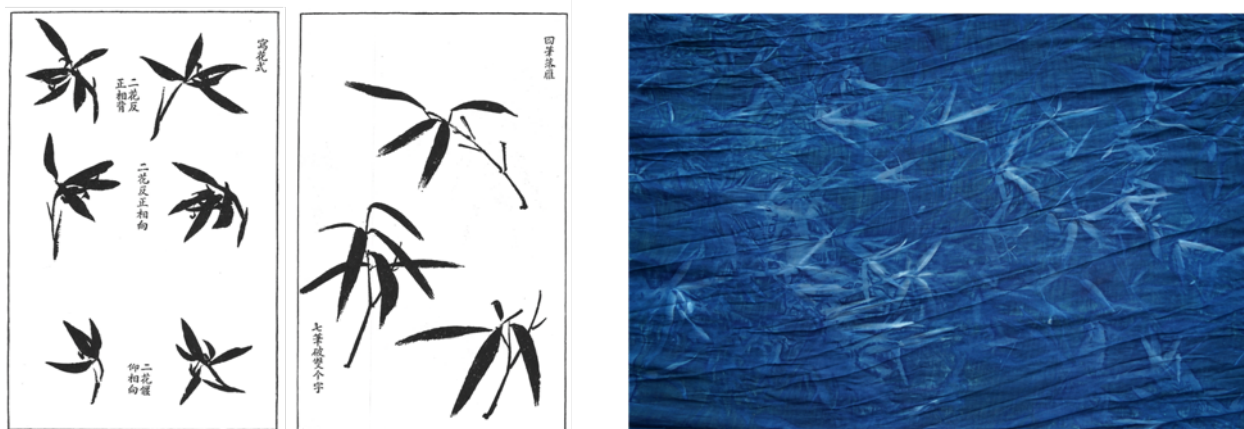


Figure 4.1

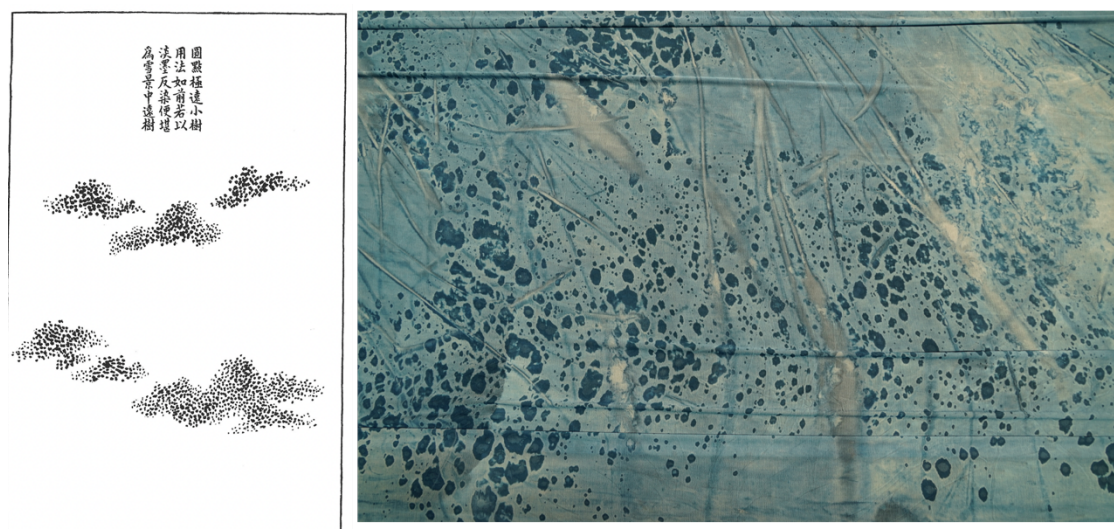


Figure 4.2

Chinese paintings capture the spirit through a non-mimetic representation. This spirit, described by French philosopher François Jullien as a "dimension of invisible efficiency" (Jullien, 2007, p. 39), is something that Western culture does not inherently carry.

The water droplet imprints in the cyanotype [Figure 4.2] also have a striking resemblance to the dotted marks in the manual's *Book of Trees* section. In the manual, distant trees are composed of small, densely arranged dots that form the shape of the tree canopy. In cyanotype, water vapor condenses randomly, creating dots of varying sizes on transparent plastic placed over gauze and casting water droplets' shadows on the gauze to form the imprints. The imprints closely resemble the distant tree brush techniques in the painting manual.

What I find most innovative about the manual is its modular approach to combining elements to create a painting. In the manual, each subject is divided into components that can be learned separately and then recombined in countless ways. Chinese painting can be seen as an assemblage, using strokes and subjects as modular components. According to Byung-Chul Han, *The Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* employs this modular technology, in which painting is structured through repeatable and combinable elements:

The famous Chinese treatise on painting, the Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden, contains an infinite row of component parts from which a painting could be composed or indeed assembled (Han, 2017).

An example of how Chinese artists used painting elements in a modular way can be seen in the comparison between sections from *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* and a Ming dynasty painting [Figure 4.3]. On the left is a digital collage of three painting elements I created from the *Books of Feathers-and-Fur*, *Book of Rocks*, and *Book of Bamboo* from the manual. On the right is the painting *Crane in a Bamboo Grove* (Unidentified Artist, 14th-early 15th century), housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, created by an unidentified Chinese artist. The painting on the right depicts a red-crowned crane strolling through the palace garden. *Crane in a Bamboo Grove* uses bamboo, the crane and stones, which can be found in the manual. What the artist has done is rearrange the elements within the pictorial space. This evidence demonstrates that the modular system provides a repeatable, structured framework that allows one to create numerous



Figure 4.3

paintings based on the existing painting elements, which makes it a suitable model for determining the spatial composition in cyanotype painting.

The first experiment of cyanotype composition is based on a modular system. The painting is carefully designed in scattered perspective. The images [Figure 4.4] show a before-and-after comparison of the fabric before and after cyanotype exposure. In the left image, different plants, frames, and cut papers serve as compositional elements. Some are first arranged on fabric coated with cyanotype solution in a dim room, then taken outside to be exposed to sunlight. During the exposure, additional cut papers and plants are

continuously placed onto the fabric, resulting in imprints with different intensities of whites.



Figure 4.4



Figure 4.5



Figure 4.6

The resulting cyanotype paintings show different levels of whiteness [Figures 4.5-4.6]. The images show a series of large-scale cyanotype works that folded on the shelf. The installation shown in the images is not the final spatial arrangement. Because of the length of the fabric pieces, they are temporarily displayed this way for documentation. It is clear to see that the different textiles have different blue shades. The cotton tends to absorb more solution, resulting in dark blue colors, but sheer tends to have a lighter blue tone and a stronger contrast between the white areas and the blue cyanotype. In some areas, it is easy to see the white imprints, while in others, it takes more time to unfold. However, the digital image cannot capture the delicate marks that only unfold over time. The white exposed imprints only emerge slowly from the dark blue empty space. The longer the viewer spends with the painting, the more is revealed.



Figure 4.7

An equivalent contemporary art practice that uses painting elements in a modular way and utilizes light and shadow is Chinese artist Xu Bing's *Background Story* series (Bing, 2014). Xu Bing found inspiration for *Background Story* during a connecting flight when he noticed potted plants behind a frosted glass wall, their blurred silhouettes resembling a smudged Chinese painting. In the series, he reinterprets the Chinese landscape painting tradition by replacing brush, ink, and paper with natural debris and light boxes. Each composition is modelled after a well-known historical masterwork but recreated using "non-art" materials such as dried plants and torn plastic sheets.

The example shown here, *Background Story 9* (2014) [Figure 4.7], exhibited at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, presents a strikingly traditional landscape at first glance—steeply receding mountains, forests, and rivers. However, stepping behind the installation reveals a completely different view: an assemblage of branches, leaves, twigs, teased hemp fibres, crumpled paper, and other debris. These materials are attached to the back of a frosted glass panel, where light in the back casts their shadows to form what appears to be a monochrome ink painting in the front view. Xu Bing has not painted with ink but instead created the illusion of brushstrokes through the shadows of these materials. He employs painting elements in a modular way by deconstructing traditional Chinese landscape painting into reconfigurable components. These natural materials serve as stand-ins for individual brushstrokes. Each branch, leaf, or fibres corresponds to a specific mark or stroke, which, when arranged together, forms an illusion of a painting. The way the shadows change in depth, darkness, and clarity depends on how distant the materials are from the surface. This variation mimics the delicate wash of ink in Chinese painting. The illusion of painting functions as a contemporary *trompe-l'œil*², challenging the boundaries between representation and materiality.

A key difference between my work and Xu Bing's work is the absence. In *Background Story 9*, the organic materials remain physically present in the installation but my work relies on

² It is an artistic technique that creates the optical illusion of three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface. It uses realistic imagery, perspective, shading, and depth to trick viewers into perceiving painted elements as real objects.

the absence of the physical objects. The plants only become part of the artwork when they leave an imprint; their presence is defined by their disappearance. This distinction determines the way the viewer engages with the work, while Xu Bing's piece relies on the real-time perception of cast shadows, my cyanotypes inscribe a haunted perception of what has disappeared, forming an absent landscape.

4.2 The Handscroll

What I found useful in the first composition experiment with the modular system is not only how elements are arranged, but also the long scroll format. The scroll format, as discussed in Chapter One, is a temporal and processual image that unfolds. Interestingly, I found this scattered perspective in the urban structure of Venice, too. The city's waterways connect buildings, boats, and bridges, disrupting any fixed viewpoint of the cityscape. No matter where one stands, the viewer's perspective drifts freely across space. Because of this drifting in-betweenness, I adopted the scroll composition in each piece made since then.

A new series of large-scale cyanotype works on fabric was made outdoors. The new experiments involved more cyanotype imprints on various transparent fabrics, including organza, cotton, sheer, and gauze, with each piece ranging from 8 to 12 meters in length. I work outdoors for two main reasons. First, the scale of each piece makes indoor rinsing and putting elements on fabric difficult. Second, the outdoor environment introduces coincidence, making the imprints experimental. Previous experiments with plant cyanotypes demonstrated how using plants and stones outdoors gives unexpected outcomes. In addition, the works were created by the riverside [Figure 4.10]. Practically, the riverside offered many shadows under the trees for applying cyanotype solution, plenty of local plants to collect as blocking objects, easy access to shallow water for rinsing using a pump, and large sunlit stones for drying the fabric.

When I used the long scroll, I also referred to a surface of moving water. This water surface, as I discussed in Chapter Two, is a palimpsestic surface that reflects and reveals in

spectral, overlapping layers. The different exposure times of cyanotype result in layers of imprints with varying whiteness. When layers of plants as imprints overlap, the final transparent fabric results as a new assemblage of superimposed images to flicker through oscillation.

I created different compositions on transparent textiles; some were dense and some were scattered. For instance, the textile in [Figure 4.8] featured a densely layered composition. Multiple layers of plants and stones were stacked to create imprints, which are overlapped three to four times, forming a reversed outline of a landscape painting. It resembled a Chinese painting of bamboo groves and mountain waterfalls, where one can only catch a glimpse of the waterfall (in the upper right corner) through the thick shadows of the trees. Soon the waterfall fades and disappears into the foliage below.

Some of the works employed a more scattered, dispersed composition. In [Figure 4.11], reeds and grasses were placed loosely across the surface. The highly absorbent fabric captured only the solid outlines of the plants with no details. In contrast, the less absorbent fabric in [Figure 4.9] revealed more intricate details. Here, the left and right images [Figure 4.9] showed different uses of moisture in creating the cyanotype marks. On the left, clustered dark blue dots resembled the Chinese painting manual's distant trees, where small, densely arranged marks form the shape of treetop canopies. These dots were created by putting transparent plastic onto the fabric, with water droplets unevenly sprinkled on the plastic. The water cast shadows that left imprints on the surface. The right image [Figure 4.9] appeared more abstract and looked like the fiber structures under a microscope. Reeds found near the river were placed on the surface to leave imprints. The blurred areas and faint water stains resulted from directly splashing water onto the fabric, diluting the cyanotype solution unevenly and creating a diffused, textured effect.



Figure 4.8





Figure 4.10



Figure 4.11

4.3 Absent Landscape

Of all the cyanotypes I created on transparent fabrics as long scrolls, some need to be situated in space in overlap to see their palimpsestic qualities. However, the cyanotype scroll, which resembles a landscape [Figure 4.8], draws special attention. Because of its complex mark-making and layerings, this scroll exemplifies how cyanotype turns the painting into an absent landscape through a reversed figure-ground relationship.

The images [Figure 4.12] showed a close-up of the cyanotype effect on transparent fabric. I collected plants such as ferns, shrubs, bamboo, and reeds and arranged them on the fabric. During the drying process, I splashed water unevenly onto the surface, allowing the cyanotype solution to diffuse softly. I also sprinkled dry detergent onto the surface to absorb parts of the solution, creating star-like textures. Due to the uneven distribution of the cyanotype solution, parts of the final painting present a hazy, mist-like whiteness, reminiscent of the empty space in Chinese ink painting.

At first glance, the cyanotype painting looked like a reversed Chinese landscape painting. The imprints of plants presented an inversion, both visually and conceptually. In traditional Chinese painting, the relationship between figure and background is defined as full and empty: the figure is the full and the painted ink area, while the background is the empty and unpainted area. However, in the cyanotype painting, this relationship is subverted. The figure is covered by the blocking objects, resulting in unexposed white areas, while the ground is exposed and shown in deep blue. The relation is then reversed as the ground is full, while the figure becomes an absent void. This reversion also answers my research question of how painting reconfigures the traditional figure-ground relations. Through using cyanotype as a shadow medium, painting subverts the conventional relationship between full and empty, thereby reversing the figure-ground relations.



Figure 4.12

It is important to note that the figure in traditional painting used to be present as full, now has become absent. The painting can then be understood as an absent landscape. It constructs a new perception that oscillates through the interplay of presence and absence. The longer one looks, the more the imprints emerge from the blued emptiness. This invites the viewer to linger, keeping the painting in a constant flux.



Figure 4.13

The cyanotype paintings resemble a landscape obscured by frosted glass—a scene that Xu Bing drew inspiration from for his *Background Story* series. Interestingly, I've noticed this hazy quality not only in my own work but also in the historical painting *Pine Trees* [Figure 4.13] (Tōhaku, Late 16th century) by Japanese admirer of Muqi Hasegawa Tōhaku.

When Chan Buddhism spread from China to Japan, it evolved into Japanese Zen. Muqi's Chan painting serves as a model for Japanese Zen monk-painters who seek to capture the essence of emptiness. *Pine Trees* consists of six panels, created with Indian ink on paper attached to wooden frames. It depicts a grove of pines shrouded in mist, where trees emerge and recede into the dense atmosphere of cold, moist air. Tōhaku, used only black ink to create a layered depth of space and simplified emptiness in a minimal approach. For example, in this painting, he isolated a single element, pine trees, from a landscape painting and expanded it into a large-scale composition. Although Tōhaku painted the pine trees as a present object, the ink shading creates an ambiguous spatial perception, transforming the subject into an absent silhouette, as if the ink trees were shadows cast on a permeable screen from the other side. Standing in front of the painting, one can almost feel the trees trembling gently beyond the screen.

4.4 Chinese Dreams as Method

In the production of cyanotype paintings on transparent fabrics, I have employed strategies such as scroll composition, modular system, and emptiness that all relate to Chinese aesthetics and ink paintings. However, my approach to Chinese aesthetics is not a direct cultural inheritance. Like many contemporary Chinese artists, including Xu Bing, I engage with tradition not through strict preservation but by deconstructing and reinterpreting its visual logic in a new context.

As Eric Hayot argues in *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel*, China has long functioned as an elusive dream, both an aesthetic inspiration and method for many Western artists and writers, too. Modernist poet Ezra Pound adapted classical Chinese poetry in *Cathay* (1915), using Ernest Fenollosa's notes to craft Modernist free verse, making it as newly written original piece rather than a mere translation. Charles Olson, a modernist poet and key figure at Black Mountain College, was influenced by Chinese calligraphy to develop his own version of American history and place in *The Maximus Poems*. The way Olson used open-field composition mirrors the fluidity of Chinese characters to expand the poem's spatial depth. In addition, during the time when Olson served as rector of Black Mountain College from 1951 to 1956, the college also supported John Cage, Cy Twombly, and many other members of the 1950s American avant-garde to create experimental works.

For example, John Cage explored Daoist principles of chance and non-intention by employing the *I Ching (Book of Changes)* in his solo piano *Music of Changes* (1951). An ancient Chinese divination text, the *I Ching* is based on a system of hexagrams that guide decision-making through randomness and interpretation. Using this method, Cage composed a fully indeterminate piece, making *Music of Changes* the first instrumental work to incorporate chance throughout its entirety.

In addition, Artist Cy Twombly was also significantly influenced by Chinese calligraphy. For example, in his expressive, gestural mark-making work *Nini's Painting* (Twombly, 1971) [Figure 4.14], Twombly referenced the fluidity and spontaneity of traditional Chinese script. The painting is a tribute to Nini Pirandello, the wife of Twombly's gallerist Plinio De Martiis, who died by suicide in 1971 (Museum Brandhorst, 2024). Faint letters and words, like "Cy" and "Nini," emerge between the lines but never form clear language. The scribbled drawings resemble Chinese calligraphy, inviting viewers to engage with the visual form rather than its linguistic meaning.



Figure 4.14

Conclusion

This chapter, informed by Chinese aesthetics, employs a modular system and scroll painting as compositional strategies for cyanotype painting. These approaches reveal how haunting and supplement are inscribed as an in-betweenness, an oscillation of presence and absence, in painting. This in-betweenness manifests in both the absence and the reversed figure-ground relationships. By making the figure a trace and scattering the elements on a scroll format, the painting allows an engagement that oscillates between presence and absence, thus becoming, as Byung-Chul Han describes, “an image of absence” (Han, 2017). Transparent painting, then, is suspended in a continual state of oscillation that can never be fully exhausted.

As I was conducting research for this practical thesis, I noticed that what intrigues me most is how qualities historically dismissed often contain the greatest potential for interdisciplinary quality. To embrace these interdisciplinary qualities in painting is to make it reach beyond itself—what David Joselit describes as situating itself beside itself. I was drawn to both cyanotype and the emptiness in Muqi’s painting for their overlooked and once-criticized qualities—practices that did not conform to the dominant definitions of their time. It is those so-called imperfections that allow the painting to linger in between states, remaining fluid, unsettled, and continually becoming.

The next chapter will explore how paintings, when placed within space, take on a palimpsestic quality—functioning simultaneously as transparent imprints and layered presences. As Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*: “A masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost” (Derrida, 2006, pp. 20-21). It is this spectral movement—between presence and absence, imprint and erasure, surface and space—that will be the focus of next chapter.

Chapter Five: The Palimpsest of Space

This chapter explores how a series of transparent paintings operates within space. This spatial development unfolds across three stages: the Rotating Labyrinth, the Digital Labyrinth, and the Transparent Labyrinth. I use the labyrinth as the spatial structure for this project because the labyrinth evokes a sense of loss and wandering, inviting shifts in perception. The Rotating Labyrinth turns flat surfaces into a walk-in spatial experience by rotating like revolving doors. The Digital Labyrinth represents a virtual, immersive environment, a digital blueprint for navigation, used to determine the spatial layout before the construction of the physical site. The Transparent Labyrinth marks an important stage in the realization of this project, directly responding to my research questions and demonstrating how painting can shift in spatial perception when encountered within space.

This spatial perception dates back to the spatial turn—a major shift in the humanities and social sciences that occurred during the late 20th century, when scholars began to understand space as an active, socially constructed dimension of human experience. Since then, concepts such as space, place, border, boundary, topography, and mapping have become central to the analysis of culture, politics, art, and social life. A key moment in this intellectual shift was marked by Michel Foucault's 1967 lecture:

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein (Foucault, 1986, p. 22).

Building on this idea of space as a network, my inquiry is grounded in what can be described as a contamination of spatial relations through the overlap of transparent painting layers. This contamination refers to the ways in which the paintings intermingle, influence, and destabilize the perception of one another within the spatial arrangement.

Here, space is not merely an environment in which paintings are situated, but a palimpsestic field where experiences of cultural overlay traverse time and space. As I described in Chapter Two, this palimpsestic field is a haunted, multi-sited visual space in which temporal, spatial, and affective traces intersect.

5.1 Before Labyrinth

The spatial installation I designed is to house the multi-layered surfaces. However, the labyrinth was not part of the original conception. It was only through the development and testing of two smaller spatial models that the labyrinth emerged as the most fitting structure—a space designed to be physically entered and navigated. It is worth noting that the development of transparent painting I discussed in Chapter Three and Four and installation in this chapter were constructed simultaneously and became conceptually intertwined, supplementing each other throughout the process.

The first spatial painting experiment began with a small-scale model made of painted vellum and printed reproductions of my previous work on foamboard [Figure 5.1]. A foamboard figurine simulated a human-scale installation. The model had two rings: an outer ring of five folded translucent vellum screens and an inner ring of printed paintings. I paint acrylic marks on the vellum to suggest vague forms when viewed through multiple layers. The initial aim was that, as the viewer moved between two layers, one would see new visual assemblages from the overlap.



Figure 5.1

However, this early attempt was ultimately unsuccessful. The inner prints, the prints of my earlier work, were already in a finished state, which limited the viewer's perception of ambiguity or openness. For a more multiplied reading, the components need to remain unfinished and unresolved—never fully complete, yet constantly shaping meaning through their incompleteness. At this stage, I had not yet discovered cyanotype on fabric as the surface and medium for this project. The use of glass or vellum at human scale felt unsuitable due to their material qualities—their rigidity, weight, and less responsive to the concepts I was exploring. However, what this model did achieve was to introduce a clear shift between the surface's solidity and transparency and the aesthetic potential of unfinishedness, or void.



Figure 5.2

The second experiment was based on the projection test previously discussed in Chapter Three on transparent painting [Figure 5.2]. I constructed a cubic frame using foamboard and suspended fragmented pieces of vellum paper and A4 paper, painted with acrylic, from the top of the structure. When illuminated, these layered fragments cast enlarged projections onto the wall. By moving the projector, the fragmented images were compressed into different overlapping shadow compositions.

One of the strengths of this model was the creation of entirely new visual assemblages through projection. As the light source shifted, new layers of shadow emerged, forming a changing constellation of images. However, the model also revealed some limitations. It could only be viewed from the front and outside, while the interior was too chaotic to enter. It emphasized a frozen moment, but what I was interested in was an overlapping flow of time. Also, as noted in earlier projection tests, my research centered on how painting, as a medium, can be positioned in space rather than projection. These

reflections made me realize the need for an inhabitable space for layered surfaces that can be entered and moved through.

5.2 The Rotating Labyrinth

Following the two small-scale model experiments, I turned to a walk-in, inhabitable space in which painting could be situated. Rather than treating painting as something to be viewed from a distance, I believe that enabling viewers to physically enter, move through, and experience the layered surfaces from within is key to generating a shift in spatial perception.

To address this, I use the labyrinth as a spatial structure. The labyrinth offers a singular, continuous pathway designed for slow wandering and contemplation. Unlike a maze, which emphasizes confusion through puzzling routes and dead ends, or a matrix, which suggests a rigid, ordered grid, the labyrinth offers a path that invites slow wandering, fluid progression, and an evolving spatial experience.

Umberto Eco's description of three distinct models of the labyrinth provides a useful framework for introducing and contextualizing the spatial models of labyrinth developed in this discussion. Umberto Eco discusses three distinct models of the labyrinth for conjecturability. The first is the classical Greek labyrinth, as in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, where there is a single continuous path leading to the center and back out again. The second model is the mannerist labyrinth which is more complex and tree-like. It creates multiple paths but only one leads to the exit. This form may get people lost and needs careful navigation and possibly external guidance. The third is the network labyrinth, which Eco compares to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome. In this model, every point connects to every other point; there is no clear center, no periphery, and no singular exit. The structure is open-ended and dynamic, encouraging endless wandering, reconnections, and reinterpretations without closure (Rosso, 1983).

My development of labyrinth is this third kind of labyrinth—the network or rhizomatic labyrinth. Rather than providing a linear or goal-oriented navigation, my spatial experiments are designed as dynamic fields where perception unfolds through drifting, layering, and shifting relational encounters. The iterations from the Rotating Labyrinth to the Digital Labyrinth, and finally to the Transparent Labyrinth, were developed to resolve issues and embody an overlapping perceptual experience.

It is worthwhile stating here that the development of the labyrinth installations and the exploration of transparent painting create an overlapping timeline. The early small-scale spatial models I made before the labyrinth and the experiments with painting's transparent surface evolved in parallel. It was not until the final stages of the Rotating Labyrinth that I began exploring cyanotype as a medium. The spatial installations since then have been significantly shaped by the ethereal, fleeting qualities of cyanotype on fabric.

In the first test of the Rotating Labyrinth, I constructed a movable framework. [Figures 5.3-5.4] shows the front, top, and side views of the model. The design references revolving doors and traditional folding screens. It adopted a double-panel structure that allows the panels to rotate. Moving the position of each panel modularly creates an infinite number of spatial combinations. Semi-transparent painted fabrics were suspended from the rotating frames; at this stage, the fabrics were considered as monochromatic color field paintings because I hadn't found cyanotype as a medium yet. As viewers rotated the screens, different layers of transparency overlapped, creating new color combinations, such as blue merging with red to form purple.

The strength of the Rotating Labyrinth is its ability to regroup as endless possibilities. However, this approach also revealed some practical challenges. First, if to stretch traditional canvas on the frame, it would expose wooden supports on the back. To resolve this, the work would need to become a true double-sided surface without stretcher bars or visible staples. The second issue was the wood required for human-scale installation. While the small model stood easily, a human-scale version would require more wood, making the structure heavier, which is contrary to the lightness and ephemerality I am seeking. The third issue was the mechanical complexity. What worked smoothly in the model would at full scale involve problems like inertia, friction, axle stress, and user safety. Addressing these would shift the focus from spatial perception to engineering, moving the project away from its intended research direction.



Figure 5.3

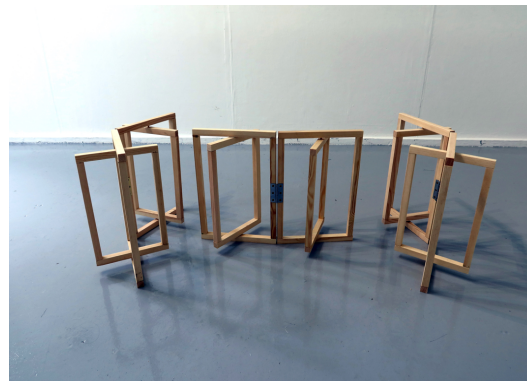


Figure 5.4

Later, using cyanotype as a medium helped resolve several challenges from the first Rotating Labyrinth test. Since cyanotype on fabric doesn't require stretcher bars, it allows for double-sided viewing. Cyanotype is also suitable for a light suspended installation. Finally, the difficulty of mechanical rotation led to a new spatial approach as a walk-in labyrinth that allows multiple pathways, inviting encounters through bodily navigation rather than the rotation of panels.

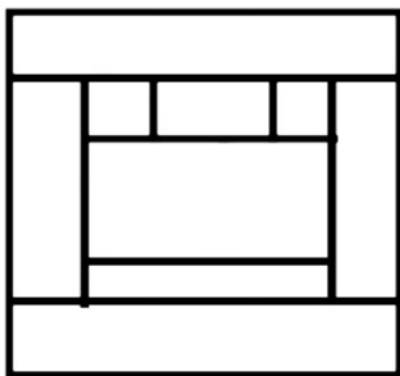


Figure 5.5



Figure 5.6

A more advanced model was developed to address the issues that arose during the Rotating Labyrinth experiment. A digital floor plan was first created to guide the construction of a small-scale physical installation model [Figure 5.5]. In this evolved version, the labyrinth no longer relied on rotation mechanisms, but instead emphasized pathways for walking. Moving toward a lighter construction strategy, the new labyrinth

model suspended its structure from the ceiling, constructing a floor plan above to hang the painting in a specific location. This transitional model can be seen as a prototype for the later Transparent Labyrinth.

The floor plan and model established a preliminary square-shaped layout for the labyrinth. The floor plan shows a wooden structure designed to support the suspended fabrics from the ceiling [Figure 5.5]. Seen from above, the structure takes the form of a square, drawing a metaphorical link to a liminal space between presence and absence inherent in the structure of Chinese seals. Historically, Chinese seals functioned as mediums for cross-temporal communication, with later admirers inscribing or stamping seals onto earlier artworks as a form of dialogue and appreciation across time. Byung-Chul Han reflects on this practice, noting:

Thus with his seal the Chinese painter does not establish his presence as a creative subjectivity. Rather, he uses it to open a field of dialogue by merely marking a trace that serves to take it forward... The seal stamps on Chinese paintings do not actually finalize anything. Rather, they open up a communicative space (Han, 2017).

The painting *Night-Shining White* (Gan, ca. 750) [Figure 5.6] offers a vivid example of how seals can open a dialogue between presence and absence, one that spans more than a thousand years. The painting is created by Han Gan, a leading horse painter of the Tang dynasty. The seals and inscriptions were added later by owners and admirers to show their admirations. The more seals on the painting, usually signals a greater impact the painting has.

The seal-like structure's liminality mirrors the labyrinth walking experience, where mutual visibility and shared presence unfold. As viewers move through it, their bodies become part of one another's visual landscape—appearing, disappearing, and reappearing through translucent layers. In this way, the labyrinth becomes a site of embodied dialogue, extending the artwork into a space of collective perception.

The floor plan deliberately varies in the widths of the corridors. In the wider spaces, visitors can step back and see more of the space in layers. In the narrower sections, one must slow down and adjust his bodies to see what's on the surface. This rhythmic alternation between spacious and compressed zones encourages a perceptual shift between surface and space: the labyrinth becomes at once a surface to be seen and felt, and a spatial, immersive experience to be traversed.

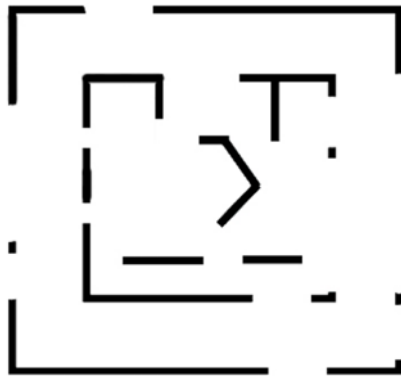


Figure 5.7



Figure 5.8

I then created a walking diagram [Figure 5.7] based on the floor plan, mapping potential pathways through the labyrinth. Multiple exits were designed to allow for meandering movement, where perception can shift at each turn. The folded corners are key: the viewer's position and angle constantly alter the visible scene. This design draws from the principle of multi-perspective viewing, inspired by the Nine-Turn Bridge, commonly found in classical Chinese gardens, especially in southeastern China, where I grew up. The photo shows the Nine-Turn Bridge (Wikimedia Commons, 2009) [Figure 5.8] from the Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou that connects two pavilions not through a straight line but via a zigzagging path. Traditionally made of stone, the bridge changes direction at multiple points, offering ever-shifting viewpoints. The journey becomes a sequence of unfolding perspectives, inviting viewers to slow down, pause, and reorient, transforming a simple passage into a contemplative spatial experience. The experience reminds me of



Figure 5.9



Figure 5.10

Borges's forking path for its multi-perspective nature (Borges, 2000). Both invite viewers to a layered experience in space and time.

A small-scale labyrinth model was created based on the walking diagram [Figure 5.7]. In the model, pastel-colored rice papers (in pinks and greens) were suspended in layers to mimic transparent fabrics, with smaller paintings attached to them [Figures 5.9–5.10]. This model demonstrated a clear concern with layered transparency and folded pathways to enhance multi-perspective viewing. It also revealed a strong intuitive desire to use transparent fabrics that could evoke a kind of “hymen”—a space of in-betweenness that, as Derrida describes, simultaneously separates and connects, blurring the boundaries between inside and outside (Derrida, 1981, p. 212). As the second iteration of the Rotating Labyrinth, this model marked an important transitional step toward the full-scale Transparent Labyrinth. Cyanotype fabric was introduced only after this model was completed, replacing the earlier monochromatic rice paper layers and attached paintings. However, the square floor plan established in this model remained a foundational structure for the final installation.



Figure 5.11

The use of folded pathways and color fields in my labyrinth model resonates with the conceptual work of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, particularly his efforts to bring painting into real time and space. His *PN 28 Penetrable, Nas Quebradas* (Oiticica, 1979) features a gravel path winding through an architectural structure made of yellow panels, wood, brick, and jute—a space participants physically enter and navigate [Figure 5.11]. Inspired by the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the structure, made from everyday materials, evokes the winding, narrow streets of these neighborhoods. In 1961, Oiticica wrote about the *Penetrables*:

Here, color exudes both the decorative and the architectural... so as to become purely aesthetic and intensely experienced [vivenciada]. They are like movable frescos on a human scale—except that (most importantly) they are penetrable (Galerie Lelong, 2012).

While Oiticica's goal is to fuse art and life, my work focuses on an in-between surface that shifts in perception—one that moves between presence and absence, here and there. Conceptually, where Oiticica constructs a lived, sensory environment, my labyrinth lingers

in the in-between: neither fully present nor fully absent, but a perceptual oscillation between what has slipped, faded, or refused to settle, and the present.

5.3 The Digital Labyrinth

While advancing the spatial structure of the labyrinth, I also worked on transparent paintings. Given the physical complexity of building a large-scale installation, especially when experimenting with different suspending materials, the construction was uncertain. To facilitate the visualization of space during intervals in the development of transparent painting, I created the Digital Labyrinth [Figures 5.12-5.13].

It is important to clarify that this digital labyrinth was not final format. It was used to preview the spatial layout of the installation before I constructed the physical one. Using the walking diagram [Figure 5.7] I had previously drawn, I placed cyanotype fabric images as mockups onto the walls of a simulated exhibition space, constructing a digital transparent labyrinth through 3d modelling software. The series of photos shows the top view of the digital labyrinth and the walking view within the labyrinth [Figure 5.12]. In the top view, eight digital stations (1–8) mark a suggested walking route—by sequentially clicking through the stations, one can virtually walk a full circle through the labyrinth. Alternatively, the viewer can choose their path freely. Since the images are mock-ups applied directly onto the virtual walls, they appear opaque; however, during the walking experience, it is still possible to perceive the overlapping layers within the digital space. This digital labyrinth could also be experienced in an immersive way using VR goggles [Figure 5.13]. Although I did not pursue anything digitally interactive for this project, it provided an immersive extension of the digital walking before I built the installation.

The advantages of the digital labyrinth included the ability to preview spatial compositions and overlapping visual fields, offering valuable references for the physical installation. However, what I noticed about the digital labyrinth that differs from the physical one is that the virtual spaces seemed larger than in physical space. It creates a strange gap

between what I saw and how my body expected to move, making walking feel less grounded. Moreover, the digital labyrinth is designed for a single-user experience. It lacks the possibility of viewers encountering one another and becoming part of each other's landscape within the space. Additionally, the materiality, transparency, and the subtle interplay between form and void on the cyanotype fabric could not be replicated in the digital labyrinth.

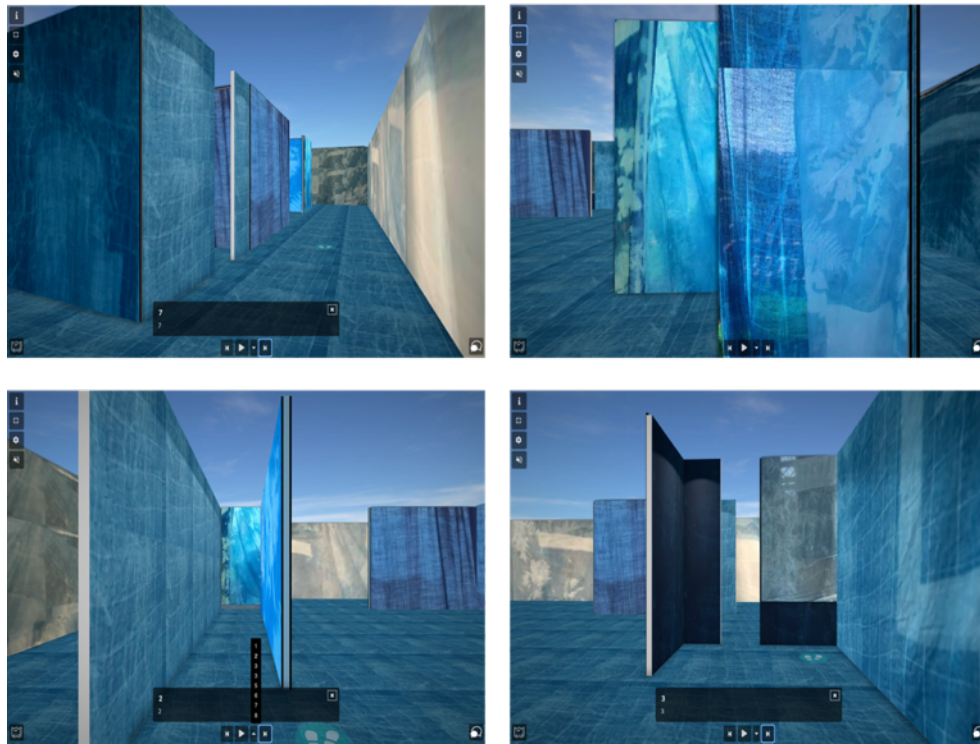
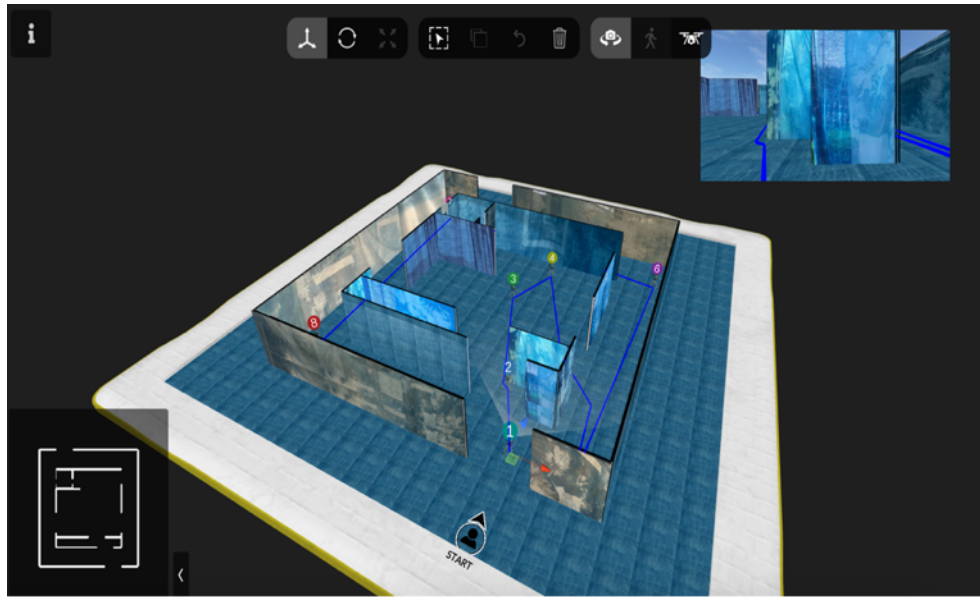


Figure 5.12

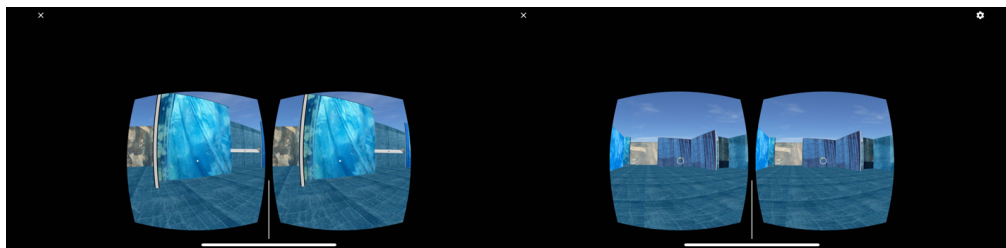


Figure 5.13

5.4 The Transparent Labyrinth

The final installation, the Transparent Labyrinth, builds on the iterative experiments of the Rotating Labyrinth and Digital Labyrinth. Although I had already determined that the installation would be constructed using suspended transparent fabrics, its realization went through several refinements. These revisions were crucial to creating a more fluid and immersive experience of walking the labyrinth.

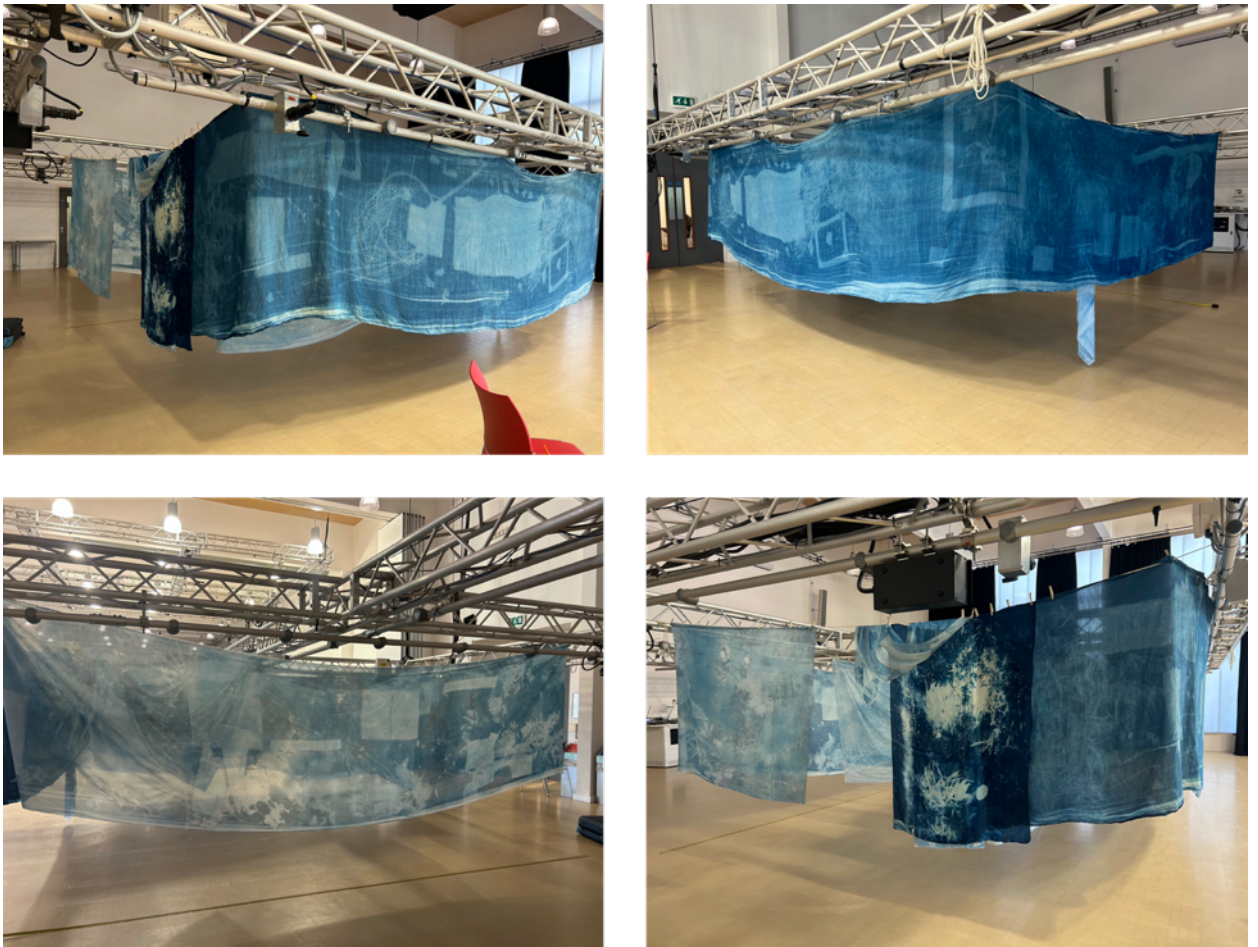


Figure 5.14

In the first trial of the Transparent Labyrinth, I used ropes to hang the fabrics in a natural light space. The ropes are temporarily secured with clothes pegs as a labyrinth [Figure 5.14]. The internal layout in this version did not strictly follow the walking diagram, but adopted a more flexible composition, as the trial was designed to test how the material could be hung. The rope is good for its near invisibility, which makes the labyrinth feel

ephemeral. However, because of the large scale, it's noticeable to see the ropes sag in the middle, resulting in a loose and unstable structure. I tried using pipes, but during practical testing, they were limited to two meters and required multiple joints, which were not secure enough and were possible to collapse. Therefore, I decided to use a wooden structure. Wood not only allowed for easier joining and cutting, but also provided a much more stable structure for fabric suspension and spatial adjustments.

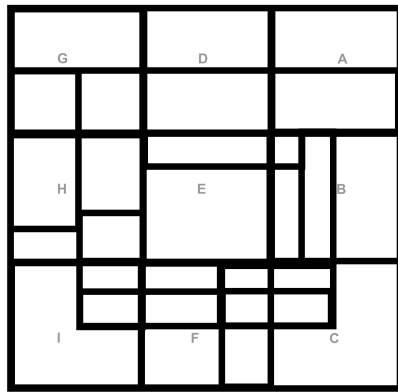


Figure 5.15

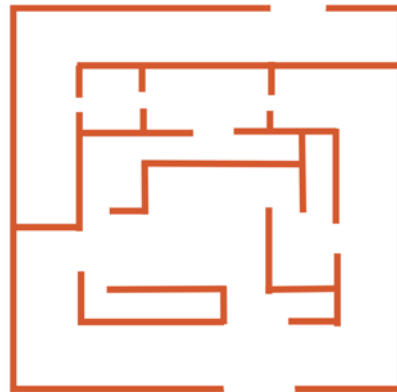


Figure 5.16



Figure 5.17



Figure 5.18

I created a more detailed floor plan for constructing the Transparent Labyrinth [Figure 5.15]. The hanging of the fabrics was guided by the new diagram [Figure 5.16], which included pathways and multiple exits. The images documented various stages of the process [Figure 5.17]. I chose to set up the final installation in a fully enclosed, dark room because of the haunting nature of cyanotype fabric. The imprints would reveal more under low-light illuminations and shifts in oscillation between surface and depth in a subtle way.

Approximately 60% of the anticipated visual and spatial effects had been realized at this stage [Figure 5.18]. For the final installation, I adjusted the lighting to a dimmer light, painted the natural wood tone to black, and simplified the labyrinth pathways, which had disrupted the unfolding of the scroll-like cyanotype compositions in this version [Figure 5.18]. These adjustments helped to enhance a stronger sense of transparency and overlap.



Figure 5.19

The final Transparent Labyrinth was adjusted based on the new internal layout [Figure 5.19]. This revised layout reduced unnecessary folding in the pathways. The final labyrinth used 12 cyanotype fabrics, each ranging from 8 to 16 meters, and varying in transparency.

To be precise, my Transparent Labyrinth is a series of transparent scrolls that unfold and overlap in space [Figures 5.20–5.22], accompanied by a video documentation available via the University's PURE repository (accessible through EPrints and the Lancaster Research Directory). Its see-through fabric scrolls create a space that is both open and layered, preventing any single space from stabilizing. Each transparent layer acts as a permeable scroll, where surface imprints, spatial depth, and passing bodies coexist in unstable superposition. A leaf's edge may sharpen while a visitor's silhouette merges with a cyanotype shape, forming hybrid figures—neither fully image nor body, neither here nor there. This see-through condition multiplies vantage points, as the gaze itself becomes itinerant, oscillating between here and there, now and then.



Figure 5.20



Figure 5.21 Transparent Labyrinth, installation views (1–4).

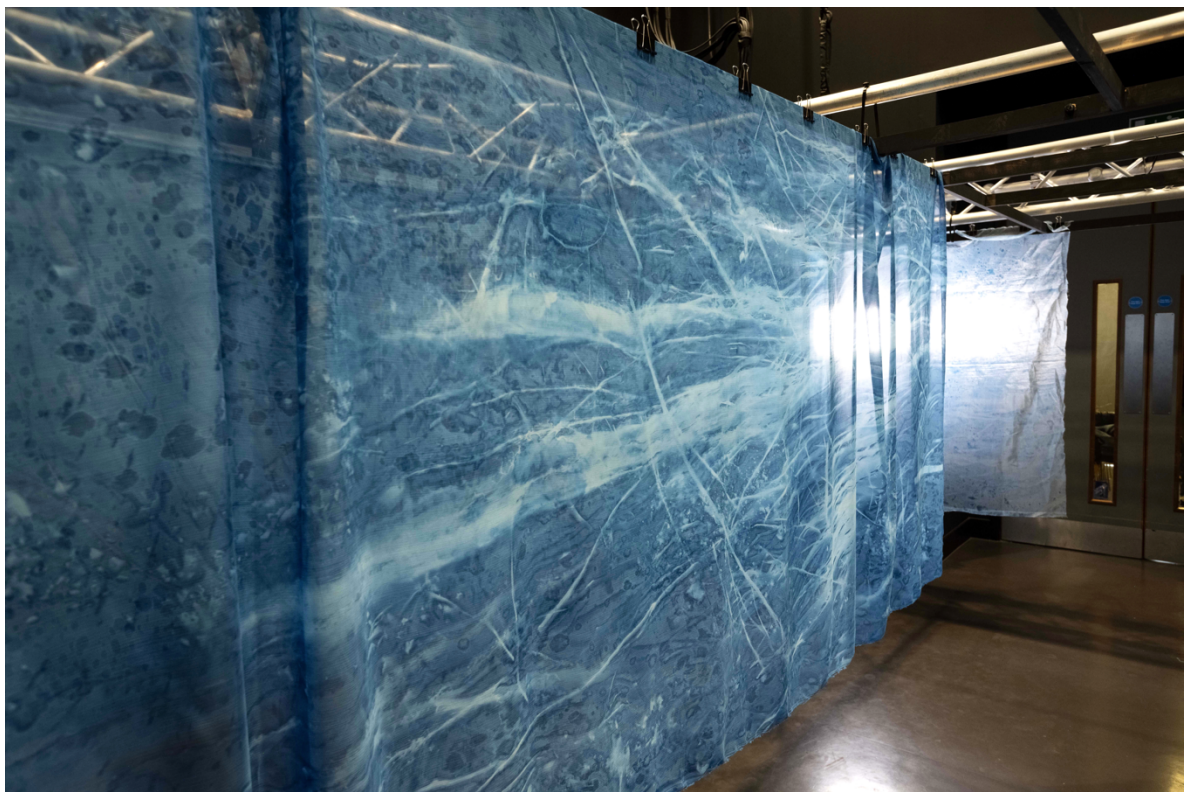


Figure 5.21 (continued), view 2.



Figure 5.21 (continued), view 3.



Figure 5.21 (continued), view 4.



Figure 5.22 Transparent Labyrinth, installation views (1–3).



Figure 5.22 (continued), view 2.



Figure 5.22 (continued), view 3.

5.5 Walking the Labyrinth

The experience of the labyrinth is like walking into a garden of forking paths. Each viewer's gaze is interrupted, extended, or refracted by the physical and perceptual layering of the space, turning transparent painting into a multi-spatial event.

When viewers walk the labyrinth, they experience their bodies move between layers of transparency [Figure 5.23]. I found this in-betweenness at work in an oscillation between surface and depth. When I pause, my attention is drawn to the material surface and the imprints on top; when I walk, the experience transitions into a transparent perception of space, seeing them in layers.



Figure 5.23

This experience of moving through the space reveals how walking becomes a way of seeing, drawing one into a palimpsestic field of perception. As discussed in Chapter Two, the palimpsest is a process of layering—a membrane marked by acts of erasure and superimposition. Similarly, the perceptual shifts between surface and space are not distinctly separate but superimposed. Through walking, the labyrinth is experienced as a palimpsestic field.

In *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Walter Benjamin used a labyrinth to describe his walking experience in the city. He describes this as an intention to give up linear thinking and to walk without a goal, allowing oneself to embrace all possibilities. Benjamin writes:

Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling...This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks (Benjamin, 2006, pp. 53-54).

The experience of walking the labyrinth can be described as a flâneur. The figure of the flâneur, as described by poet Charles Baudelaire and later theorized by Walter Benjamin, embodies a mode of purposeless wandering that embraces openness and possibility. Baudelaire describes the flâneur as "to be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home" (Baudelaire, 1967, p. 9). Benjamin later theorized this flâneur in the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris in his unfinished work *The Arcades Project*. He argues that through this wandering, the city is both landscape and interior, uniting all times and places into a dreamlike continuum. Benjamin writes:

Landscape—that, in fact, is what Paris becomes for the flâneur. Or, more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it close around him as a room (Benjamin, 1999, p. 417).

This liminal presence, perceived as both inside and outside, mirrors the in-between condition of my labyrinth. It is not a coincidence that the structure of *The Arcades Project* itself mirrors the labyrinth as a non-linear assemblage of fragments and reflections that drift. As Robert Macfarlane writes in *Underland*, reading *The Arcades Project* is "to enter a labyrinth of passages that do not seem ever to repeat their routes" (Macfarlane, 2020, p. 134).

Notably, a group of Chinese international students were particularly attuned to the interplay between the transparent layers and cyanotype surface. They were drawn to how the imprints simultaneously embodied presence and absence, here and elsewhere—an idea that resonated deeply with their own experiences of cultural displacement and layered senses of home.

Several viewers remarked on how the scroll format of the compositions prompted a slowing down of perception. This recalls the cinematic rhythm found in the pool sequence of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Just as Tarkovsky's camera lingers and glides across water to evoke a meditative temporality, the experience of walking through the cyanotype scrolls creates a suspension in time. The painting unfolds slowly, inviting a spontaneous roaming of eye.

However, this roaming is not only physical but also inward, resonating with Chinese aesthetics and philosophy. In traditional shanshui (landscape) painting, viewers engage in a non-linear, roaming gaze that mirrors a philosophical worldview that everything remains in transformation. As the scroll gradually unfolds, perception becomes a quiet drift—an embodied, temporal act of wandering. This perceptual roaming aligns with Zhuangzi's *xiaoyao you* (逍遥游), or "spontaneous wandering". Zhuangzi suggests that it is a way of being that transcends binaries of inside and outside, self and other, and embraces freedom through attunement. Zhuangzi contrasts the great bird Peng, who soars with the aid of cosmic breath (Zhuangzi, 2022, p. 4), with a deeper form of freedom: one who rides the "rectitude of Heaven and Earth," not using self-conscious effort because they move in

harmony with the Dao, the harmony with the transformations of the world (Zhuangzi, 2022, pp. 8-9). This form of freedom arises not through control or effort, but through letting go. Thus, by inviting wandering, the labyrinth becomes a site of release—a freedom to participate in transformation.

5.6 Labyrinth, and Palimpsestic Perception

Perception in the transparent labyrinth cannot be understood through an object-based interpretation. It requires an approach that attends to how space is experienced through the body, movement, and shifting viewpoints. Phenomenology, grounded in attentiveness to how things appear in experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 143), offers a way to foreground perception as an embodied condition.

This application of phenomenology in art history and criticism can be traced back to the mid-1960s, a time of crisis for dominant formalist criticism and the rise of minimalist art (Moxey, Cheetham and Holly, 1998, p.148). Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried both recognized the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in addressing the claims of the new art, particularly for its holistic understanding of perception as an embodied activity that cannot be reduced to an abstract, disembodied eye (Moxey, Cheetham and Holly, 1998, p.148). While Fried draws on Merleau-Ponty to deepen perceptual experience within the pictorial, Krauss uses his account of embodiment to extend perception toward spatial experience (Moxey, Cheetham and Holly, 1998, p.148). However, what Krauss and Fried share is a concern with articulating their bodily relation to the artwork. In this sense, phenomenology is understood as a form of judgment in relation (Moxey, Cheetham and Holly, 1998, p.153). Based on such judgment, I would argue that the phenomenology, a perception through bodily experience, opens a fluid relation in the labyrinth, in which perception is continuously negotiated.

The phenomenology as a form of judgment in relation is closely tied to the notion of binary and the opposite poles of doubt and belief. Richard Shiff demonstrates that the psychological complexity of doubt and belief exceeds binary logic, as distinctions such as coolness and warmth operate not as fixed opposites but as overlapping terms along a continuum of bodily and emotional experience (Shiff, 2008). Perception, therefore, unfolds as a shifting and unstable field of relations.

The perception in the labyrinth, in this sense, is a shifting and embodied experience. Walking becomes a sensory-motor practice through which perception is actively constituted. As one moves through the labyrinth, vision is continuously reoriented. What one sees is inseparable from how one moves; changes in viewpoint are not secondary but constitutive of perception itself.

Moreover, the layered transparency of the labyrinth produces an overlapping visual field. What I describe as an in-between space emerges precisely from this overlapping condition, where perception moves across and shifting between different states. Shiff helps to clarify this condition: “When we concentrate on the extremes of the binary opposition, we fail to see that the middle is also an extreme—the extreme of the two other extremes, both their limit and the terrain vague where they meet as one, so that the one becomes the other” (Shiff, 2008). Overlap, in Shiff’s sense, is an interval where distinctions remain present while also becoming unstable. This is important for the labyrinth, because the experience of transparent layers does not simply alternate between one state and another, such as surface or depth, visibility or invisibility. Rather, these states are held in relation, and perception occurs within their constant transition. The in-between, therefore, becomes a perceptual condition in which binaries are made fluid.

This overlapping condition of the surface also reveals the inherent nature of the surface as a transparent medium through which relations are experienced. Merleau-Ponty’s description of seeing the tiles at the bottom of a pool is especially helpful here: one does

not see the tiles despite the water, but “through” it and “because of” it (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 182). The water's thickness, shimmer, and reflection do not block the tiles from vision, but enable them to appear as depth, distance, and material presence. In other words, what is seen is not given in spite of mediation, but through mediation. The transparent surface is this similar medium. The elongated transparent surface is designed to function as a watery surface, operating as a medium through which perception is filtered, refracted, and reconfigured. Merleau-Ponty elaborates this further when he writes that water is not simply contained within the pool, but “inhabits it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 182). Painting's surface, as a watery and layered medium, therefore offers a way of thinking about how the image comes into visibility and how the perception is experienced within and through the surface.

The same is true when surfaces are constructed as a transparent labyrinth. The viewing is an experiential condition produced by the viewer's bodily relation to layered surfaces in space. The transparency and overlap of surface do not need to be overcome in order to access the image; the surface is the means by which the image becomes unstable and relational. The surface therefore behaves like a medium through which vision is continuously reorganized.

The overlap condition also reveals a relation to the viewer. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the fact that things overlap or hide one another does not belong to the objects themselves but expresses one's bodily solidarity with the things (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 173). The overlapped perception therefore depends on where the viewer stands and how they move. This helps explain the relation between viewer and image in the labyrinth. For example, when one sees a bamboo form through transparent layers, what appears is not only an external image but also something that resonates inwardly, as if the visible finds an echo within the body. Merleau-Ponty's account of things having an “internal equivalent” in one's body is useful here to suggest that the visible is not simply received (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 164). The image stirs a bodily response through which the image is felt as much as seen.

Perception here thus becomes reciprocal, making act of viewing no longer in one-direction. The viewer is not only looking but is also caught within a field of visibility by the transparent labyrinth. Merleau-Ponty' elaborates on this point in his notion of reversibility in *The Visible and the Invisible*, where "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139). In the labyrinth, layered transparency makes the viewer aware of being visible and exposed to others.

This reversibility establishes a conceptual thread that connects different elements through what I describe as the surface as an in-between space. It suggests a more complex mode of viewing in the labyrinth, in which multiple binary relations—particularly subject and object—are perceived as shifting and can be experienced simultaneously. These relations extend beyond that between viewer and image to a broader set of binaries, including seeing and being seen, surface and space, visibility and invisibility, and presence and absence.

Due to this reversible relation between subject and object, the perception of the labyrinth becomes twofold. When one looks in the transparent labyrinth, one is also being looked at. As the viewer stands in between the translucent layers, their own silhouette is drawn into the transparent painting layer by the gaze of others—they become both the subject who sees, and the object being seen [Figures 5.45-5.25]. This projective gaze recalls Foucault's analysis in *Las Meninas*, where he describes the politics of visibility: "this slender line of reciprocal visibility embraces a whole network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints" (Foucault, 2002, p. 5). In the labyrinth, the boundary between subject and object dissolves: subjectivity is then constantly reconstituted through the oscillation of seeing and being seen.

As a result, it is precisely this instability of the transparent surface that defines the in-between condition—a condition that not only maintains a reversible relation between binaries but also allows different perceptual modes of binary opposites to coexist and

continuously transform. The labyrinth therefore presents perception as an overlapping, fluid, and embodied process.



Figure 5.24



Figure 5.25

What I have discussed above is the onsite perceptual experience of the labyrinth. Yet we must not forget that the palimpsestic surface is always haunted by absence. The in-between space is not only perceived as transparent, but also possesses the ability to oscillate between presence and absence, recollection, and the present, the estranged and the familiar.

A few points are useful to bring up again in the discussion of spatial perception. In Chapter Two, I discussed how Tuan, Bachelard, and de Certeau offer phenomenological perspectives on the interchangeability of space and place. De Certeau's theorization of walking offers an important clue that spatial perception is not static but formed through movement and walking destabilizes any fixed meanings of place. He writes,

To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper (Certeau, 2011, p. 103).

Similarly, Tuan emphasizes the transformative power of the pause:

If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (Tuan, 1977, p. 6).

He further notes that:

place is whatever stable object catches our attention. As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest. Each pause is time enough to create an image of place that looms large momentarily in our view. The pause may be of such short duration and the interest so fleeting that we may not be fully aware of having focused on any particular object; we believe we have simply been looking at the general scene. Nonetheless these pauses have occurred. It is not possible to look

at a scene in general; our eyes keep searching for points of rest (Tuan, 1977, p. 161).

When one pauses—even briefly—to look, to feel, or to imagine, attention breaks from the flow of linear time. In that pause, another timeline is inserted, shaped by memory, emotion, and projection.

These fragments carry a palimpsestic temporality. When one pauses their gaze to look in the labyrinth, a simultaneous perception of different times and spatial references is layered in the present moment. As I discussed in Chapter Two, these fragments are involuntary memories, childhood memories, and daydreams, and each generates its own non-linear timeline that interrupts and overlays with the present one.

The Transparent Labyrinth draws directly from my experience of cultural palimpsest. It is in finding a home elsewhere, in becoming familiar with what was once unfamiliar, in belonging that becomes never singular, that this layered sense of place begins to take shape. This oscillation traverse times and spaces responds my central research question of how transparent painting, within a labyrinthine structure, generate a haunted, multi-sited spatial perception. By activating simultaneous timelines and spatial references through transparent layering, the work transforms perception into an overlapped field—haunted by memory, shaped by movement, and never fully locatable in a single time or place.

In the labyrinth, things both unfold and overlap, remembered, imagined, and inhabited, just as Jorge Luis Borges said about the labyrinth, where an oscillation takes shape:

Beneath English trees I meditated on that lost maze: I imagined it inviolate and perfect at the secret crest of a mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or beneath the water; I imagined it infinite, no longer composed of octagonal kiosks and returning paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms... I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of

one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars (Borges, 2000, p. 48).

Conclusion

In this chapter, in order to discuss an in-between perception through a contamination of spatial relations, I created 15 large-scale cyanotype fabrics (8–16 meters long) and installed them in a walk-in labyrinth.

The initial Rotating Labyrinth, while allowing screens to overlap, still limits to a single-sided viewing. The Rotating Labyrinth cannot support a palimpsestic viewing from both front and back. In response, I developed an evolved model that was lighter and suspended and introduced transparent cyanotype fabric for double-sided visibility. The labyrinth, since then, has become a permeable field that allows reversible viewing of looking and being looked. This evolved model marked a key transitional step toward the full-scale Transparent Labyrinth. The Digital Labyrinth further supported this development by visualizing the layout and spatial construction in advance, serving as a digital blueprint for the final installation.

The Transparent Labyrinth refines and builds upon the earlier Rotating and Digital Labyrinths, adopting their strengths while addressing their limitations. When installed, the transparent cyanotype scrolls meandered into a walkable labyrinth. The transparent painting within this labyrinth appears as recurring, overlapping images, resembling what Janet H. Murray describes as “a labyrinth that folds back upon itself in infinite regression” (Murray, 2003, p. 3). Within such a structure, space unfolds as an endless network of overlapping routes, where walking becomes a key mode of engagement, activating a palimpsestic field of perception.

The Transparent Labyrinth can be understood as relational in Bourriaud's sense, in that it "takes as [its] theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 113). Through its spatial perception of home—not as a fixed origin but as a humanized space encountered elsewhere—the work invites viewers into a haunted, multi-sited field.

As Merleau-Ponty wrote of Cézanne, the labyrinth attempts "to make visible how the world touches us" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 19). This visibility emerges through movement and moments of pausing and drifting. Therefore, the labyrinth becomes a space-in-between, a palimpsestic field that oscillates between presence and absence, near and distant, estranged and familiar, space and place, depth and surface, sensed and imagined.

What the Transparent Labyrinth suggests is a mode of perception-in-motion—one that shifts with the body, with our current situation, through layered transparency, and reveals how we come to feel the world. It seeks to reveal something we already know but do not yet know we knew until we see it in an overlapped condition. This shifting, dual perception becomes a multi-temporal, and ultimately multi-spatial, experience—where memory, imagination, and presence co-exist.

What I perceive—and hope to share in the labyrinth experience—is this flickering, this subtle oscillation, where perception is never stable but always becoming. In this, the labyrinth opens toward what Derrida might call the space of the "yet unwritten page"—a field of possibility shaped through embodied encounter and shifting perspective (Derrida, 1981, p. 212).

Conclusion

This concluding chapter revisits the central premise of this research: that the surface of painting can be understood as a space of in-betweenness, one that oscillates between material and image, presence and absence, and perception and imagination. Through practice, this in-betweenness was explored not only as a surface plane condition but as an embodied spatial experience in the labyrinth. In what follows, I will respond to the three research questions that guided this inquiry, followed by key findings, the project's limitations, future research directions, and how painting as an in-between space can be extended to broader applications and contributions.

In what ways does the painting's surface create a state of in-betweenness that shifts perception?

In order to examine how this in-betweenness works on the painting's surface, Chapter One first located this hard-to-grasp margin through a historical comparative analysis of how the surfaces of Western and Chinese paintings are perceived in pictorial spatial, temporal and material conditions. The comparison of paintings from a pictorial spatial perspective revealed that Western surfaces employed a linear strategy and glazing marks to conceal the surface from perception, whereas Chinese surfaces utilised a scattered perspective and marks to reveal the surface as always present. When compared as temporal surfaces, the Western painting captures the image as an instant while the Chinese painting captures it as a timeless transformation, resulting in the former surface as a static image and the latter as a continuous flow. When both Western and Chinese surface material presence are recognized, the Western monochromatic surface turns the painting into an encounter, while the Chinese monochromatic surface unfolds through the oscillation of emptiness and form within the picture plane.

The comparison of Western and Chinese surfaces from these three perspectives has led to a revelation that each tradition only reveals part of the surface's potential. Therefore, the surface is not fixed in one model of representation, but moves between them, and that movement is what constitutes oscillation. I have argued that Chinese and Western monochrome further clarified this research question that the surface can be neither fully representational nor purely material, but oscillates between. Painting's surface, so to speak, challenges its own binary perceptual existence of either presence or absence by existing somewhere in between.

It is the oscillation as an operational system that enables the surface to create a state of in-betweenness and unlocks the potential of painting as not just one model of representation. This in-between surface has been described by Jacques Derrida as hymen: "a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms" (Derrida, 1981, p. 212). This means the in-between surface has a both/and structure, both visible and invisible, representational and abstract. The surface, then, resists being fully grasped but unfolds as a threshold—always relational, always shifting.

I have produced *The Transparent Labyrinth* to demonstrate how this oscillation operates on three interwoven levels for surface to function as an in-between space. Firstly, my surface experiments have revealed a spatial oscillation between the inside and outside, image and space, where the transparent surface becomes both a site of encounter and a pictorial plane. Secondly, when using cyanotype in composition on a transparent surface, emptiness takes a role in the interactions of form and void. The cyanotype renders the surface haunted, enacting a timeless transformation and oscillation between form and void, marks and representation, presence and absence. Third, *The Transparent Labyrinth*, housing the paintings in overlay, have revealed a temporal oscillation between linear and non-linear perception of the surface. These oscillations on pictorial, spatial, and temporal levels do not simply alternate between oppositional poles, but sustain a continuous shifting, keeping the surface in an ongoing oscillation that never settles.

This continuous shifting unsettles the viewer's perceptual certainty about the surface, drawing attention to its inherent instability. As the surface resists resolution, constantly moving between opposing conditions, the viewer perceives not through fixed binaries but through relations. Therefore, perception, too, remains in a constant state of flux.

How does transparent painting reconfigure the traditional figure-ground relationship?

The traditional figure-ground relationship is the way a painting separates the main subject (the figure) from its background (the ground). It assumes the two are in a fixed binary where the figure is active and central, while the ground is passive and secondary.

In my practice on surface transparency and the transformative use of cyanotype as a shadow painting medium discussed in Chapters Three and Four, I have produced a transparent painting which uses cyanotype on the transparent surface.

The mechanics of transparent painting's ability to reconfigure the traditional figure-ground relationship lie in the way it activates the surface as a haunting site. To haunt means the presence is never fully present, always continually felt through the absence. The cyanotype records the trace left by an object rather than the object itself, making the surface an in-between space. In this sense, it becomes a haunting medium, in the way the presence lingers as a spectral trace. To examine how the absence is registered as presence, experiments on imprints as marks are conducted to determine the optimal shadow object that works best with cyanotype to produce imprints on transparent fabrics.

The cyanotype painting on the transparent surface I produced resembles a reversed Chinese landscape painting. In traditional Chinese landscape painting, the inked areas are perceived as the figure and full, while the unpainted space is understood as the ground and empty. However, in the cyanotype, this relationship is reversed: the ground is full and the marked deep blue, while the figure becomes an absent void of unexposed whites. The painting can then be understood as an absent landscape. Therefore, cyanotype, as a

shadow painting medium, subverts the conventional relationship between full and empty, thereby reversing the figure-ground relations by creating an absence rather than presence.

The absent landscape painting situates itself as an in-between space by constructing a new mode of looking that oscillates between presence and absence. What one used to look for in the active and meaningful figure to unfold an image now turns to the ground as an active site, the blue imprints. The longer one looks at the ground, the more the imprints emerge from the blued emptiness. By engaging with the image of absence, viewers are compelled to fill in the gaps with recognition and imagination, thereby completing the mapping of the traces for themselves.

How do transparent paintings become palimpsestic and contribute to a spatial perception theory that creates haunted, multi-sited visual fields?

To respond to this question, it will be useful first to determine how transparent paintings become palimpsestic. I have argued in Chapter Two that the surface in palimpsest structure generates a more inventive mode of viewing than the hymen structure because the palimpsest situates the paintings in spatial layerings. The palimpsest operates between presence and absence because the traces of what was once erased reappear on the written surface, allowing past marks to haunt the present and enabling different temporalities to coexist. The palimpsestic surface thus creates a layered in-between space where past and present, absence and presence continuously overlap and interfere with one another, generating a multi-spatial and multi-temporal mode of viewing.

I have argued that what makes the palimpsest an inventive mode of viewing is its psychological possibility of recollection. The palimpsest can be activated through daydreams and fantasies, generating new configurations. When the viewer actively

engages with surfaces, the experience becomes a generative process, shaped both by memory and projection and by present perception. In this sense, the palimpsest becomes an inventive model to blur the boundaries between linear and non-linear temporality, shifting perception from fixed presence to a condition of oscillation.

Because of the spectral return of earlier text, the palimpsest structure is always in a haunting condition, which destabilizes a linear perception and a stable identity. The surface becomes a site of layered temporality, where traces accumulate, allowing presence and absence to coexist.



Figure 5.20

To determine a palimpsestic surface in practice, I have used the surface of moving water as a metaphor. Water, like the palimpsest, reflects and reveals in spectral, overlapping layers. It continuously flows, much like thought, memory, or dream, that overlaps and returns in fragments. I have shown that both a Western example of the pool sequence in

Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* and a Chinese example of *Writing Diary with Water* installations by Song Dong, overlap multiple spaces and times with water medium through presence and absence.

What makes the transparent paintings become palimpsestic is *The Transparent Labyrinth*. The labyrinth structure, according to Umberto Eco, is a network labyrinth which allows every point to connect to every other point and encourages endless wandering, reconnections, and reinterpretations without closure (Rosso, 1983). The image [Figure 5.20] from Chapter Five best describes this labyrinth, which consists of cyanotype paintings on the transparent scrolls housed in a walk-in overlapped space. The paintings both unfold in length and overlap in space, inviting both scattered and overlapped viewing.

Turning to the second part of the question—how palimpsestic paintings contribute to a spatial perception theory—it is the labyrinth that generates this shift in perception. In Chapter Two I have argued that it is the sense of cultural dislocation in my personal experience that anchors this palimpsestic perception and ultimately leads to the construction of *The Transparent Labyrinth*. The cultural palimpsest describes an entanglement of cultural and historical layers, where each previous layer spectrally returns and alters the present perception and identity. The contemporary examples of this overlapped perception as palimpsest are evident in the paintings of Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Hurvin Anderson, and Zeinab Saleh. Each has explored the in-between space as an oscillation from a culturally dislocated perspective shaped by personal histories, diasporic memory, and everyday life.

It is the viewer's embodied engagement in the labyrinth—through walking, pausing, and looking—that activates a new spatial perception. I have argued that the perception shift between space and place generates a new spatial perception. The difference between space and place is that space is often open and present, while place is associated with emotion and memory, making it inherently multi-temporal. I have examined the

perception of space and place in the labyrinth can be experienced as a shift between the space and surface.

Tuan notes that place is whatever stable object catches our attention. In this sense, place, triggering memory and imagination, is often registered on the surface within the labyrinth, as it is the surface that draws the viewer's gaze, becoming a haunted site where memory and presence converge. The use of cyanotype introduces an open-ended sense of place through its surface. The local plants, studio materials, and personal objects I expose through this process appear not as exact reproductions, but as ghostlike silhouettes—partial and open to interpretation. These are components infused with a sense of home, evoking a quiet, calming presence. As both Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan suggest, home is less defined by its structural form than by the intimate objects and textures within it—those we touch, smell, or carry with us in memory. These imprints never fully define themselves, leaving space for the viewer's own memories and imagination to drift in. In this way, the surface becomes a multi-temporal place shaped by memory and emotion.

An interplay between space and surface can be experienced while walking through the different transparent layers of the labyrinth. For instance, in transparent organza, space and surface are perceived equally and simultaneously [Figures 5.27]. One sees the overlapping of the spectator, translucent fabric layers in the background, and a cyanotype surface in the foreground, suggesting a multi-perception of place (surface) and space (depth). In contrast, cotton fabric, being more opaque, tends to evoke place: its surface holds the viewer's gaze, and the cyanotype imprints recall absent domestic objects, triggering nostalgic and open-ended emotional associations [Figure 5.26]. Here, the imprint becomes not only a site of memory but also a space for projection, where viewers may “fill in” their own recollections. The most diaphanous material, gauze, offers no surface imprint. Instead, it evokes space—a sense of the present unfolding.



Figure 5.26



Figure 5.27

I have stated in Chapter Five that for de Certeau, walking destabilizes any fixed meanings of place, to walk is to be “absent and in search of a proper” (Certeau, 2011, p. 103). For Yi-Fu Tuan, the pause transforms the space into a place, because place “is whatever stable object catches our attention” (Tuan, 1977, p. 161). The phenomenological definitions from Tuan and de Certeau help to explain that space and place are interchangeable, not only experienced through space and surface but also through walking and pausing.

Through pausing, the viewer’s gaze opens a multi-temporal perceptual field. When the gaze fixes on a point of interest, that brief moment of stillness transforms space into place. In motion, however, wandering suggests a kind of release—a letting go. One allows the mind to drift freely, guided by spatial flow, sometimes toward the present, and at other times toward a distant, imagined elsewhere. Tuan reflects on this phenomenon, noting that imagination changes how we perceive distance and closeness, creating an inner distance even within immediate surroundings:

Thought creates distance and destroys the immediacy of direct experience, yet it is by thoughtful reflection that the elusive moments of the past draw near to us in present reality and gain a measure of permanence (Tuan, 1977, p. 148).

Together, the viewer's movement and stillness, attention and imagination on surface and space, activate the labyrinth as a palimpsestic field—what I term a haunted, multi-sited visual field. This overlapping perception is not a simple accumulation of layers; rather, it transforms and affects the way each layer is seen, blurring and contaminating their boundaries. Derrida describes this process as contamination within the graft, where the two elements "are transformed, deform each other, contaminate each other’s content, tend at times to reject each other, or pass elliptically one into the other" (Derrida, 1981, p. 109).

It’s precisely this palimpsestic structure that generates a more complex sense of spatial perception, one that's overlapped and always open to change. This new spatial perception

also affects the viewer's position, creating a more complex network of subject-object relations. The viewer stands outside the painting, while simultaneously being pulled into it by the gazes of others in the labyrinth. Through this interplay of looking and being looked at in this haunted, multi-sited field, subjectivity becomes fluid, relational, and always in flux.

Findings, Limitations, Questions and Future Research

By the time the *Transparent Labyrinth* was constructed in the installation room at Lancaster University, I invited the audience to visit the exhibition. Although Chapter Five may cover some of the observations already, I will reiterate several observations when I saw the audience's response to the labyrinth and the transparent paintings within it. The observations are key to understanding the limitations and possible future questions.

- To better show the transparency through layers, the ceiling light was dimmed, and only spotlights from the side were used to illuminate the surface of the paintings, resulting in a rather dark space. This dim light atmosphere caused viewers to enter more quietly and keep their voices low. The whole space had a meditative feeling.
- When viewers first entered the room, there were two paths to choose from—one leading from the side of the labyrinth with a medium level of transparent layers, and the other toward the center with the most transparent layers. They tended to walk toward the center of the labyrinth, which consisted of the most transparent layers. The viewers looked around 360 degrees to see the overlapped layers and then reoriented themselves to view the less transparent layers, such as cotton. In addition, viewers were observed not to walk around the outside of the labyrinth, but instead to move in and through the layers.

- As the viewers looked at the imprints on the paintings, many were curious about how the white areas were created. They did not associate this with a photographic medium, but guessed that it was traditional tie-dye or paint on fabric. Once they learned that the imprints were photographic reproductions of plants and everyday objects, it largely changed how they perceived the white imprints, as they then tried to recognize what the imprints referred to.
- In terms of time spent on different transparent layers, viewers were observed to spend less time on the more transparent ones and more time looking at the cotton scrolls with marks on them. Some of the marks were more abstract than others, and viewers were observed taking a close look, then stepping back, and moving back and forth to determine the marks and what they represented.
- Viewers were seen standing still and looking through the more transparent layers, but walking to view the long, non-transparent scrolls. They tended to follow their gaze along the long scrolls, usually slowly, moving section by section.
- The viewers I invited also included Chinese international students. On the exhibition day, they came to talk to me about how many of them found the cotton long scrolls and *Absent Landscape* painting nostalgic, as it felt like they were encountering something familiar in a new setting. Other international students or people with culturally immigrant backgrounds responded strongly to the overlapped transparency, as it felt like being in multiple places at once.

Based on the observations, I want to mention a few limitations of the research and future questions that this research has not had a chance to cover. To test the research depends on the space it is situated in and participant feedback. Because the transparent installation needs to be hung with a truss, it is limited to specific installation rooms with

trusses and technical help from technicians. I did not get many test runs as the install and de-install of the labyrinth took three days and required numerous people to help hang the fabrics together. The site and way of hanging on the truss limits where and how the work can be tested or iterated and limits opportunities for future repeat exhibitions. In addition, while the space did situate the paintings, the limited room size did not allow for an outside view of the whole labyrinth.

The difficulty in securing the space for a continuous time slot made it hard to gather participant feedback, since the exhibition time was shorter than originally intended. The observations of the viewers were made during the last iteration of the transparent labyrinth, which came quite late in the research project. While I was able to speak with Chinese and diasporic students whose responses offered meaningful cultural perspectives, the project did not have the opportunity to gather responses from a broader range of cultural participants of different ages. This leaves open further questions around how people with different perceptual or cognitive frameworks might engage with layered transparency in the labyrinth.

The questions also arise from the painting's transparency and haunting characteristics in the labyrinth. It may be useful to consider how degrees of transparency in layered paintings affect viewers' temporal perception, and in what ways the sense of time might shift between transparent and opaque surfaces. It is also worth exploring what it is about cyanotype and its use of negative space that evokes a haunted, mnemonic response more intensely than positive mark-making in traditional painting. The exploration of how such haunting effects are generated may be the key to translating them into conventional painting practices as inventive strategies. These considerations serve both as possible directions for future research and as limitations that this current project was not able to fully address.

For instance, future research might examine how degrees of transparency across spatial layers influence perceptual shifts when viewed from different positions. It is also worth exploring how other strategies of overlay, such as mixed media collage, time-based media, and stitching as interweaving, affect the perceptual shifts for individuals with differing cultural backgrounds. Future practice-based studies might also investigate the haunting effect of negative space and the erasure and resurfacing of the palimpsest, in terms of how the spectral absence evokes a different perception from traditional, additive mark-making.

Applications and Contributions

This research uses interdisciplinary mediums and strategies to address my concerns on the painting's surface as an in-between space. This research contributes to the field of contemporary painting by exploring how the surface of painting can operate as an in-between space, one that challenges the fixed binaries and exists not only in a network of relations but in oscillation of these different modes, which relates to representation, material interaction and spatial encounter. By working with interdisciplinary media, this research not only expands painting but renders its boundaries fluid and porous, making it a multi-sited and relational practice.

In terms of methodology, this practice-based research demonstrates how the expressive capacity of materials—cyanotype, transparency, and spatial composition—can be utilized to contribute to human understanding. It offers a methodological model for other artist-researchers interested in interdisciplinary practice, particularly those exploring subtle human experience.

One of the most distinct contributions is that this research makes visible what is usually subtle, invisible, or unspoken through practice. I described in the introduction that the in-between surface was ungraspable. However, through layering and haunting silhouettes, the work gives shape to this in-between margin. It thus provides a compelling example of

how artistic practice itself serves as a method for other theoretical research and knowledge production as a felt experienced knowledge.

For example, through comparative studies of Chinese and Western aesthetics, the research contributes to cultural comparative and identity-based inquiry by examining how identity is formed and layered in painting practice. Through visual strategies such as transparency, overlap, and absence, the research proposes a new visual application for cultural dislocation. In addition, the research contributes to phenomenological theories, particularly in understanding how in-betweenness and relational and overlapped viewing influence the experience of artwork in space. The research also extends to psychological dimensions of both palimpsest theory and visual art, inviting further investigation into how negative space and non-linear temporality operate within the visual field.

I have stated that the painting, by using interdisciplinary approaches, situates itself in an expanded condition. The implications of this research carry potential for applications in interdisciplinary approaches. I will provide a number of examples based on my own artistic practice, higher education teaching experience, and curatorial project to demonstrate how the outcomes of this research can be applied in artistic practice, pedagogy, and curatorial strategies.

This research has been a journey to find the most resonant medium that gives form to the ungraspable notion of in-betweenness and makes it visible. As a painter, my role is to seek out moments of resonance within the flowing current of the unknown—resonance that, in turn, reaches the viewer and reveals how I perceive the world. This echo aligns with what Tom Barone and Elliot W. Eisner describe as “utilizing the expressive properties of a medium is one of the primary ways in which arts based research contributes to human understanding” (Barone, 2012, p. 171). Due to the interdisciplinary nature of in-betweenness, works developed alongside the Transparent Labyrinth have been exhibited at the London Design Festival (2024) [Figure 5.28] and London Craft Week (2025) [Figure

5.29]. These series were selected for their ability to translate the research into visual forms that refine the notion of green design as innovative sustainability, and for their echoes of presence that resonates across material, cultural, and perceptual thresholds.



Figure 5.28



Figure 5.29

For the application of this research in higher education teaching, I center on a multimodal approach that transcends disciplinary boundaries, encouraging students to experience art as a living, evolving practice. Multimodal methods emphasize the use of diverse forms of representation, enabling art students to explore concepts through multiple modes of expression. Drawing from my research on overlap, multi-perspective, and interdisciplinary approaches, I designed a series of exercises for a first-year drawing class in Lancaster

University, such as painting in overlay, touch-based comparative drawing, and a mark-making warm-up exercise [Figures 5.30-5.32].

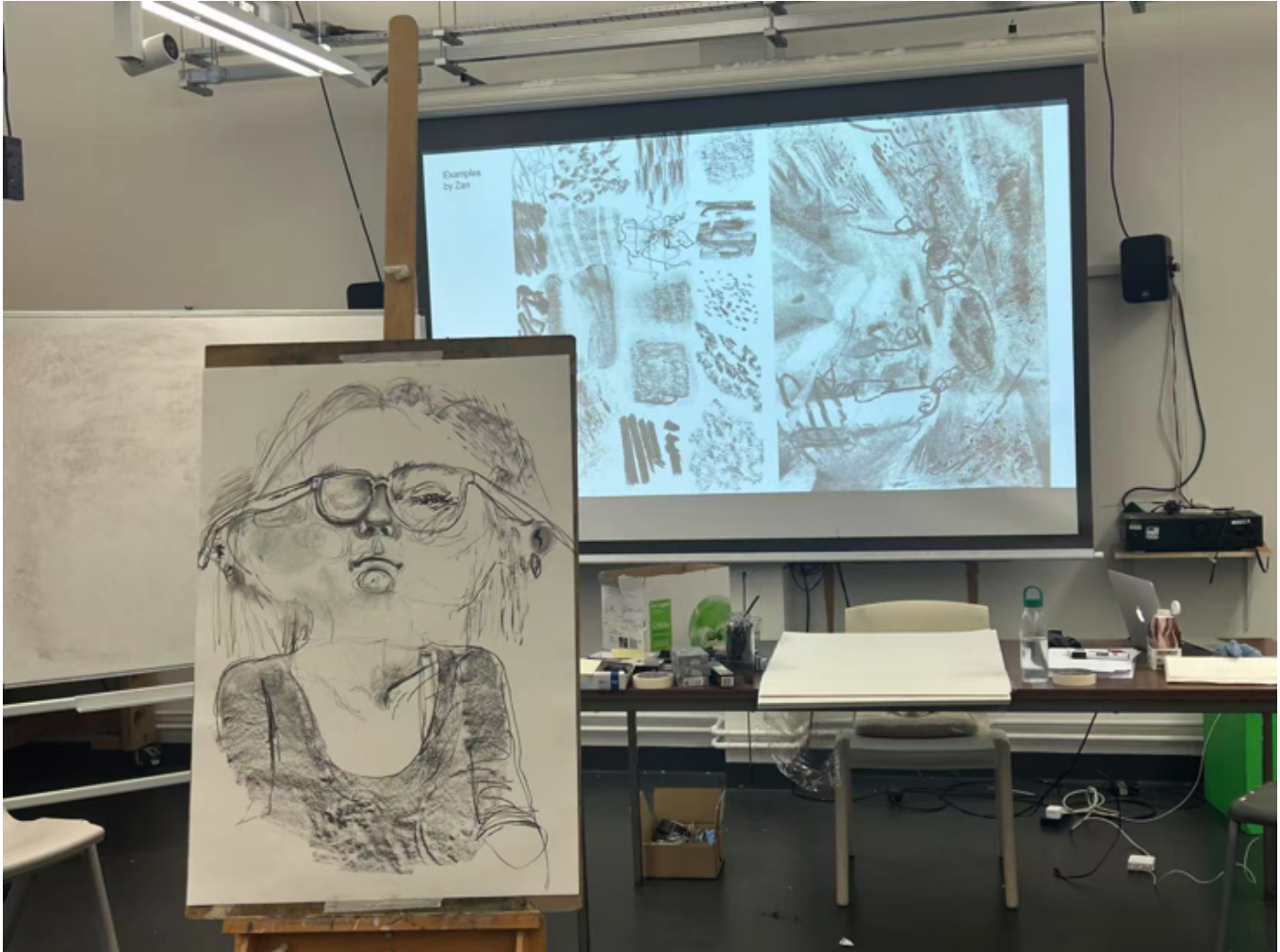


Figure 5.30

The design of these exercises encourages students to develop a more embodied understanding of form and space through multi-sensory experiences. It challenges traditional notions of representation in art by revealing that one learns to draw not simply by drawing, but by learning to perceive on different levels. By integrating sensory, conceptual, and material explorations into drawing, the exercises invite students to embrace a more fluid and responsive approach to their work. The result is a series of

pieces that feel grounded in the tangible world yet remain open to personal interpretation.



Figure 5.31



Figure 5.32

As a final application of this research, I curated the exhibition *Two Worlds* [Figure 5.33], *One Bay* for the Bay International Film Festival. Featuring 40 photographs capturing the natural beauty of Morecambe Bay alongside artist Josh Backhouse's miniature recreations of iconic film scenes, the exhibition explored the interplay between reality and fiction. I designed the exhibition space based on the notion of in-betweenness. By alternating between photography and miniatures, the layout created a layered viewing between two forms of storytelling, inviting viewers to move through shifting spatial and narrative layers.

In-betweenness, often quietly embedded within the surface of painting, emerges through this research as a dynamic state of oscillating relations. It not only enables painting to expand beyond its conventional limits but also offers viewers a way to see the world as layered, fluid, and intimately connected.



Figure 5.33

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