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Death Like Dreaming

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Abstract

This written dissertation accompanies my thesis exhibition, *Death Like Dreaming*, which took place in Sculpture Gallery in the spring of 2023. This show was the culmination of my MFA at the University of Arkansas and centered around my most recent *zhenmushou* sculpture. I began making these mythical beings from my mythology in the summer of 2022. This essay will provide theoretical, historical, and personal context to the work, expanding upon my artistic journey and exploration during my degree. I will focus on my conceptual and formal decision making, areas of research, and discuss the world building and personal mythology that inspires my work. This writing is a reflection and meditation on the ongoing evolution of my art practice.

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Introduction: Becoming a Pretentious Dreamer

Growing up, I remember feeling acutely embarrassed by my Chinese identity. I resented my own face for disrupting my American-ness, inviting the questions ‘where are you really from?’ and ‘how did you learn to speak such good English?’ Although I have no memory of this incident, my mom tells me that I came home from kindergarten one day and told her I no longer wanted to speak Chinese. It’s no wonder then that today my Chinese is comparable to that of a five-year-old today. I wish my childhood self could have realized the pain that loss of language would eventually become.

One of the deadliest symptoms of the Asian American condition is the ease with which we learn to hate ourselves and each other. The prospect of invisibility, blending into the group and relinquishing our individuality is omnipresent. For some, this is a source of shelter and protection. However, I never found a safe haven there. Instead, I remember the paranoia of losing my identity the moment another Asian person was in the room. And I still dread the silent shame I feel when someone inevitably mixes up my name with another Asian individual’s, and I find myself unable to correct them. It was a long time before I realized that, by fearing the presence of other Asians, I was enacting and mirroring the same violence that society had forced upon me: robbing us of our subjecthood.

Being non-White in America means constantly having to justify your presence here. People of color have all developed their way of responding to that unspoken demand. For Asian Americans, the ‘model minority’ disease is like some masochistic compulsion to prove how much we appreciate the opportunities offered to us. I say masochistic because this myth is also self-enforced: so many of us have bought into this brainwashing that was created to divide and oppress us all. I know I have also been guilty of enforcing that myth upon myself. Raised by

immigrant parents who moved here hoping for a better life, I grew up unthinkingly checking off the list of Chinese American stereotypes: straight-A student, good at math, took all the AP courses, played classical piano, always obedient, attended prestigious universities (and more importantly, studied respectable, employable disciplines).

My greatest rebellion in life so far has been deciding to become an artist. I escaped to Italy before I dared to tell my mom (via email because I was too scared to say it out loud) that I was about to trade my carefully prepared life and career for a wild card. It was every Asian parent's nightmare; it was also the dream I had stowed away, secret and unacknowledged. It has been six years since that fateful decision, but some days I am still amazed to realize that I am somehow, improbably, here.

As an artist, my work is not 'about' my identity as a Chinese American woman. I am wary of art as representation because I have no desire to present my selfhood for consumption. Furthermore, who I am is constantly changing. As Glissant (1997) so beautifully expressed in the *Poetics of Relation*, some parts of myself are unknowable – even to me. It goes without saying, then, that the multitudes we hold cannot be distilled into pieces of art. So my work is not *about* my experiences moving through this world, yet those experiences are the conditions that make my work possible.

My practice allows me to process and make sense of my life. As such, it has become a mode of survival, a way of realizing my agency. The poet Ocean Vuong has written and spoken extensively regarding the condition of the Asian-American artist. Specifically, he points to how Asian American creativity usually exists in service of other, generally Western, art (the obvious example is classical musicians playing Bach and Beethoven). But what happens when Asian American artistry stops acting as merely a conduit but takes on a life of its own?

...as an Asian-American when you dare to have your own agency, your own dreams, when you no longer become the instrument, the empty vessel of larger, pre-made art, you will be called pretentious. You will be called unrestrained. They will not be ready for your mind when it creates its own thing. That doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. You should do it. But be prepared. Expect it. And even more so, why not? Why not be as ambitious as you want to be? Why not be pretentious? What is pretentious but to have the pretense to the assumption that you belong here? (Vuong, 2019b)

As an artist, 'creating my own thing' quickly became the only way forward. It allowed me to create a sense of belonging, even if only to myself, during periods of intense isolation. My thesis, *Death Like Dreaming*, is the culmination of these efforts. As a woman and a person of color, my body is political. I have been denied autonomy because society has made certain assumptions about who I am and can be. In a conversation with fellow AAPI poets Sally Wen Mao and Jennifer Tseng, Vuong (2019a) cites Teju Cole in arguing that:

For the politicized body, which is often abstracted by a larger, often mainstream, agenda and connotation, one only reclaims a selfhood, an idiosyncratic selfhood through the person...*One of the ways to find agency for yourself is to go deeper into the minutiae of your own world the way you experience it, and so then it makes you indispensable to yourself* [emphasis added].

Throughout this dissertation, I will share and examine some of the minutiae that make up my world. The first chapter will provide my work's theoretical and art historical context. A detailed analysis of the formal qualities and conceptual implications of my work in the second chapter will follow this. Chapter three presents a creative interlude where I share a narrative from my mythology, which inspired my thesis work. In chapter four, I then turn to the specifics of my thesis exhibition *Death Like Dreaming*, tying together aesthetic and conceptual decision-making and reflecting on creating the work. Finally, I conclude with some remarks on my artistic practice and goals.

Chapter One: Inhabiting the In-Between (Theoretical and Historical Context)

In a conversation with the filmmaker Manthia Diawara, the Martinican philosopher and writer Édouard Glissant describes ‘departure’ as ‘the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me, every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity’ (Diawara, 2009). I have inhabited such multiplicity for as long as I can remember, not only as a child of immigrants but also growing up in a biracial household where Chinese, Romanian, and English were spoken, attending school as often the only Asian student in class, and living in various countries over several years. My research investigates the paradoxical feeling of belonging both everywhere and nowhere and the resulting experience of Otherness.

Frantz Fanon (1967) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1996) wrote about the self-alienation that Black people experience because they are forced to always view themselves through the eyes of Whiteness. In other words, as a person of colour you are already made ‘Other,’ even by yourself. Building upon this, Black feminists have created Triple Consciousness Theory, which draws upon Du Bois’ ‘double consciousness,’ and compounds it with the additional marginalisation that women of colour experience due to their gender (Welang, 2018). Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) intersectional theory adds further complexity, as all dimensions of an individual’s social identity (e.g. gender, race, sexuality, class) cumulatively work together to empower or oppress.

As a queer Chicana woman, Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) conception of feminist ‘border thinking’ similarly emphasises the importance of overlapping identities, while also making room for individual agency. Her framework was further developed by decolonial theorists, including Walter Mignolo and Maria Lugones, to critique the dominant logic of oppression and advocate for resistance from a perspective of subalternity. Border thinking acknowledges the ongoing

effects of coloniality and troubles the idea that there is a simple division between colonizer and colonized. As a result, the border reveals itself to be not just a split, but a space where ‘a newness of be-ing’ is made possible. (Lugones, 2010, p.753).

Consequently, developing alternative forms of existence becomes a way to survive and reclaim some level of autonomy. In *Ornamentalism*, Anne Anlin Cheng (2018) focuses on the aesthetic objecthood of the Asiatic woman and how, despite its foreclosure of true subjecthood, it nevertheless offers other modes of being. However, her theory stops short of offering a politics of racialized femininity or any path to restore subjecthood to the Asian woman. On the other hand, Anzaldúa (2002) identifies transformative potential within the ‘reverie, dreaming, and artistic creativity’ enacted by ‘la nepantlera’ (an in-between or threshold being) (p.568). For Anzaldúa, then, liminality becomes a space of potentiality and possibility:

The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo*. I belong to myself and not to any one people. (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 209)

Like Anzaldúa, ‘building my own universe’ has become a way for me to reclaim my identity and assert my right to self-definition. My work’s invented narratives and mythologies center around Nu Xingtian, my re-imagining of a Chinese mythological deity, as a personal symbol of feminist resistance. The world created within these images exists as an imaginary realm where the liminal becomes a space of alternative existence. Drawing upon the fantasy and self-(re)invention inherent within diasporic societies, my work reveals the fluid nature of identity as inherited stories and traditions continually evolve.

My practice is in conversation with contemporary artists creating narrative-driven work featuring recurring protagonists within visually idiosyncratic worlds, such as Trenton Doyle Hancock, Simphiwe Ndzube, Laylah Ali (although she does not use the term world-building),

Naudline Pierre, and Marcel Dzama. Trenton Doyle Hancock has been particularly instrumental for me as a permission-giver, helping me to embrace the bizarre and humorous in my work and to take ownership of my invented narratives. I also look to traditional forms from my Chinese ancestry for inspiration. This form of artistic excavation is a foundational element of artists such as Heidi Lau and Guadalupe Maravilla. My exploration of existing between cultures and feminism contributes to the body of work from fellow Asian-American artists like Jennifer Ling Datchuk, Stephanie Syjuco, Catalina Ouyang, and Dominique Fung. Transnational female artists including Firelei Baez, Shahzia Sikander, and Wangechi Mutu have also been highly influential in how they combine mythology, fantasy, and femininity to bring attention to marginalized perspectives.

Furthermore, I take inspiration from the lineage of Surrealism's many manifestations beyond Europe, specifically within the Egyptian and Caribbean contexts. In these former colonies, surrealism was seen as a tool for liberation. Under the group name Art et Liberté, Cairo Surrealists like Amy Nimr drew upon Egyptian motifs and symbols and particularly emphasized the oppression of women within society. Meanwhile, in Martinique the celebrated writers and poets Aimé and Suzanne Césaire created their Surrealist publication, *Tropiques*, in the 1940s. For them, surrealism offered the possibility of transcending colonial dependencies and asserting the right to define Martinican cultural identity. In an interview, Aimé Césaire (1972) described surrealism as a 'process of disalienation,' a way to reclaim his own heritage and identity (p. 84).

Finally, I locate my progression into narrative abstraction within a history of women abstract painters. In particular, artists like Loie Hollowell and Judy Chicago have blurred the line between abstraction and figuration in their depictions of the female figure/anatomy as shapes within symmetrical designs. Transcendental painters like Agnes Pelton and one of the earliest

abstract painters, Hilma af Klint, have also been influential in their connection of the abstract and the spiritual in their work. Their use of visual metaphors, symbols, and visions contributed to my development of narrative abstraction, particularly in how shapes and icons could be seen as abstract and narratively specific. A contemporary exemplar of this is Torkwase Dyson's concept of 'hyper shapes' – the way geometry in the form of a box or a curve can reference Black movements of self-liberation. Her work originally inspired me to begin interrogating how my formal choices could embody concepts, the subject which I turn to now in the following chapter.

Chapter Two: Formal Qualities and Conceptual Implications

I am interested in how we perceive the world around us, both physically and conceptually. In an artist talk, Torkwase Dyson (2018) referred to perspective as ‘a Western construction of visualizing space.’ This ‘Western construction’ operates as a tool of domination by dismissing other modes of perception as being inaccurate or untrue. Yet by the same token, can alternative ways of visualizing space be transformed into pathways for liberation? In my work, I employ flatness, opacity, and negative space as strategies of spatial and symbolic contestation.

I see flatness as an Eastern artistic convention that counters the Western use of perspective. At the same time, this quality also performs the function of excluding interiority. In Glissant’s (1997) *Poetics of Relation*, he describes how Faulkner never attempted to write ‘interior monologues’ of Black characters: ‘Thus Lucas, the black character who is the principal hero of *Intruder in the Dust*, is never interiorized by Faulkner; he is described entirely through postures and gestures, a silhouette filled in against a horizon’ (p. 66). This protection of personhood is visually embodied in my use of ‘postures and gestures’ and ‘silhouette’ and shape. These are the visible forms, yet legibility is restricted without access to specific knowledge.

Glissant famously called for ‘the right to opacity for everyone’ (1997, p. 194). In doing so, he asserts the necessity of discussing and acknowledging Otherness (both in others and ourselves) without reducing it into something that can be grasped or known. I utilize inviting colours and forms to draw viewers into my world, but I mediate the legibility of their access through the build-up of visual density with layers of color and form and varying levels of recognizability of the abstracted forms and symbols which reoccur across my work. In doing so, I enact the ornamentality of the Asian woman as described by Cheng (2018): ‘The Asian female body, by virtue of what is on its sartorial surface, is posed teasingly as liminality itself, connoting both

inaccessible interiority and inviting exteriority, inscrutable and yet all too legible' (p. 56). This emphasis on the outside refers back the silhouette so that flatness becomes surface and opacity.

Yet, not all surfaces are equal. I am drawn to transparency because it creates an opening in what Cheng terms 'inaccessible interiority.' At the same time, this apparent vulnerability is paradoxically a source of density because what you see through the layers of colour or material is not a void. Instead, multiple visual elements can accumulate and metamorphose as the work is approached from different angles. For this reason, I choose to work with thin silks for my paintings and translucent inks for my prints. Similarly, I am drawn to how negative space functions as an opening, a threshold to cross over and enter other layers of the work. These moments of transformation, when absence becomes embodied, reflect how in-betweenness can be expansive rather than limiting. This creates a continuous cycle of movement both within works and between them, as foreground and background repeatedly shift. For Glissant, 'the difference between Relation and totality lies in the fact that Relation is active within itself, whereas totality, already in its very concept, is in danger of immobility...movement is precisely that which realizes itself absolutely. *Relation is movement* [emphasis added]' (1997, p. 171).

I see this relational movement not only in the visual qualities of my work but also in the practice of narrative abstraction. Narrative abstraction operates both in terms of content and process. For the prior, the repetition of specific shapes and gestures across my work, especially when translated across media, accumulate significance as icons and symbols within my invented narratives and mythologies. Yet the varying degrees of legibility/recognizability blur the line between representation and abstraction. As for the latter, the increasing abstraction in my work has initiated a feedback loop between mental and physical creation. As a result, the hierarchy of

storytelling dictating the art object has been destabilized, as abstracted shapes and moments unexpectedly appear in my work and begin to demand their own narratives.

I am interested in framing abstraction as opacity. In his *Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction*, Getsy (2019) asks us to ‘recall that it can be an act of resistance to refuse immediate recognizability’ (p. 69). He goes on to argue that:

Abstraction as a visual strategy is particularly useful as a means of discussing questions of difference, intersectionality, and power because it asks the linked questions “What is visible?” and “What are you looking for?” These questions, simply put, *mean differently* when asked from or of positions of cultural difference such as queerness, Blackness, gender non-conforming, differently abled, and *intersections thereof*.’ (p. 69-70)

In my practice, I have been moving towards greater abstraction because I am apprehensive of how visual representation undermines my right to opacity by making it possible for viewers to see, ‘understand,’ and consume. As Chuh (2014) has argued, identitarian modifiers like ‘Asian American’ preceding art often focus on the identity (Asian American) rather than the art. In the same vein, Robert Storr states that ‘loudly declaiming who you are [in America] frequently pre-empts showing an audience what you see’ (Storr, quoted in Muñoz, 1999, p. 165). Although visual complexity and ambiguity are often discussed regarding the viewer’s pleasure, I see them as a necessary mode of artistic self-preservation.

Aranke (2021) asserts that for Black artists, works that blur the line between representation and abstraction ‘embody the indisputable possibilities that manifest in nonrepresentational forms to rethink the political, social, and affective contours of Black life’ (63). In other words, abstraction begins to work against the modes and categories larger society expects Blackness to conform to. This non-essentialization is precisely the opacity Glissant urges, as opposed to the flatness of reductivity. This flattening is pervasive in the cultural production of artists of color.

For this reason, Muñoz (1999) and Chuh (2014) argue for anti-identitarian identity politics.

According to Muñoz:

...anti-identitarian identity politics [is a politics] in which commonality is not forged through shared images and fixed identifications but fashioned instead from connotative images that invoke communal structures of feelings. The structures of feeling that are invoked point to a world in which exile and ethnicity are not stigmatized aberrations, but instead everyday aspects of national culture. (1999, p. 176)

This emphasis on networks and interconnectivity reinforces the importance of relation and movement against the destructive force of totality. In this vein, Glissant (1997) borrows Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome in his analysis of creolisation. The rhizome is a plant that grows underground and whose roots grow around other roots, meeting and entangling.

According to Glissant: 'Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other' (1997, p. 11). Facile notions of identity cut off these roots, preventing the possibility of complex, hybrid identities which naturally form within liminal spaces.

There is a violence inherent in forcing Black, Asian, queer, and other minority lives into mainstream roles. The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres was particularly vocal in speaking out against this form of restriction:

As in a glass vitrine, "we" - the "other" - have to accomplish ritual, exotic performances to satisfy the needs of the majority. This parody is becoming boring very quickly. Who is going to define my culture? It's not just Borges and Garcia Marquez, but also Gertrude Stein and Freud and Guy Debord - they are all part of my formation.' (Gonzalez-Torres, quoted in Muñoz, 1999, p. 165-66)

As an Asian artist, I felt an automatic and unspoken pressure to make 'Asian' art at the beginning of my MFA. I was preoccupied with studying Chinese tradition and art history for most of my first year. Consequently, I created work in archetypal forms such as scrolls, ink paintings, and porcelain. However, this resulted in a form of mimicry that made me feel increasingly Other-ed

as I was repeatedly confronted with the gaps in my Chinese-ness. Only when I began to view my in-betweenness as a space for possibility rather than self-alienation did my work evolve in ways that felt authentic to my lived experiences and identities. Being able to work between the binary structures, to take from both Eastern and Western influences, continues to fuel my artistic practice. ‘Who is going to define my culture?’ I am the only one with the right to do so.

Chapter Three: The Spirit of Yu Feng Mountain (Narrative Interlude)

Once there was a mountain. Before the mountain, there was a betrayal. Before the betrayal, there was harmony.

That was then.

Then, the universe held all things in balance. Then, all halves were destined to become whole.

Then, every Nu Xingtian was joined with a Tou.

However, there came a time when this cosmic order was disrupted by a great betrayal that arose from an ill-fated union. A misfortunate Nu Xingtian united with a partner who was greedy for a taste of her flesh.

He took more than a taste.

In the aftermath, only a fragment was found: a handful of flesh without a home. When her sisters made this sorrowful discovery, they realized the tragic fate that had befallen her. The only mercy they could offer were the rituals of passing, to ensure her soul a safe return to Tian Yinxue, embraced on all sides by the stars and cradled by four moons.

With bare hands, they scraped, burrowed, and pushed into the soil. In this soft dark womb nestled underground, they gently placed her remains (and all that did remain was a single breast). Then handful upon handful of dirt was gathered, placed, and pressed until a gentle slope of land

was formed. This curve was the last witness to the fact that she had once walked, danced, and run upon it.

That night, the skies smoldered violet and crimson, smothered by steaming clouds. As the four moons aligned across the sky, the ground began to murmur and hum. Yet, it was so hushed that all slept on, tucked away under a soft blanket of moonlight.

In the morning when the Nu Xingtian returned, they encountered a landscape transformed overnight. Where the shallow mound of dirt had been, there was now a mountain. And the peak of the mountain, rising up to kiss the sky, was the shapely curve of a nipple.

Waves of surprise and delight rushed from the gathering, surging high then receding into an excited hush of anticipation. The time had arrived for the burial rites, and the sisters gathered at the base of the mountain. Their hands performed an ancient dance to communicate directly to the mother goddess watching over them from the Tian Yinxue. As their choreography reached a conclusion, they shut their eyes and prayed fervently for the return of their lost sister's soul to the mountain that now housed her remains.

But what arrived was not what they were expecting. Rather than the familiar silhouette of their sister, individual ghostly limbs swarmed towards them. The Nu Xingtian were frightened until one of them suddenly cried out: 'I see her thigh, curved like the peach moon during the week of white dew!' And then another shout of recognition: 'And there is her eye, curved like the wing of a fei ru when it first emerges from its cocoon!'

A murmur of surprise, then joyful revelation, rose from the crowd. They were no longer afraid, for all around them they saw their sister. They recognized her little foot with its slightly crooked big toe. Then came her mouth, chanting to a soundless chorus, revealing her enviably straight large teeth.

Yet even in their familiarity, these ghostly apparitions accumulated and reproduced until they swarmed around the Nu Xingtian who froze in awe and terror. All around them, an infinity of shimmering forms wove amorphous patterns in the air. Her mouth, impossibly reflected a hundred times all around them, suddenly opened and spoke in unison:

You have summoned me, and I have come. But my sisters, I am no longer whole. See how I gather around you in pieces, in multiple. From this day, portions of my soul will ascend to the Tian Yingxue when the moons form a straight line in the sky, just as they have this past night. When the time comes, you must perform the rituals to help me pass on peacefully.

And so it was.

Every time the four moons aligned across the sky, a new phantom would appear, bursting forth in an iridescent shower from the nipple of the Yu Feng mountain. These beings took on various configurations, her limbs constantly rearranging into new formations. They came to be known as the *zhenmushou*, the guardian protectors of the mountain where her remains were buried.

And every time a new *zhenmushou* appeared, the remaining sisters performed their rituals to soothe her wandering soul. And what happened next, and what were these rituals?

That is a story for another time.

Chapter Four: Death Like Dreaming

In the summer of 2022, I began a new body of work, creating large-scale sculptures out of interlocking pieces of dyed wood and painted silk. Although each piece has a distinct personality and title, as a whole, I refer to these beings as *zhenmushou*: the name of the ancient Chinese tomb guardian figurines which inspired them. In my mythology, the *zhenmushou* are guardians of the Yu Feng mountain, the resting place (and therefore tomb) of the slain Nu Xingtian, whose story I shared in the preceding narrative interlude. For my thesis exhibition, I decided to create *Cosmic Frontier*: a new *zhenmushou* that was far more ambitious in scale and construction than the first two sculptures and would further embody Glissant's concepts of poetic relation and opacity. The final installation, *Death Like Dreaming*, includes the sculpture as well as hand-cut paper and gold vinyl installed on the wall and floor respectively. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss: 1) The physical and material choices in making the work, 2) the importance of color and its connotations, and finally 3) the role of history and tradition, and how research intersects with fantasy in my worldbuilding.

I initially conceived of the piece as a two-headed dragon, and as my narrative evolved, so did the specific shapes I created. Although my original sketches included a couple of human faces, as soon as I understood that the *zhenmushou* emerged from the severed parts of Nu Xingtian's spirit trying to come back together, I knew that the design could not include any human heads. Nu Xingtian is headless, and a head (Tou) killed her. Therefore, the final form was composed entirely of legs, arms, hands, mouths, and a vagina. It also became necessary to make the structure feel light and unbounded because the *zhenmushou* are spirits and not of the corporeal world. My strategies for resolving this focused on raising as much of the body off the ground as possible and introducing hinges which allowed me to adjust the form to fit the space.

The resulting form is dynamic and creates a sense of movement, which is emphasized by how various surfaces relate to one another in this installation. Since last fall, I have been experimenting with colored light gels to tint the shadows created by my sculptures on the walls and the floor. I also introduced reflections by using a brushed gold vinyl on the floor for *Death Like Dreaming*. These extensions of the sculpture activate the space around it, inviting the eye to move around it repeatedly. The piece also encourages viewers to physically move around it, as the work constantly shifts depending on the viewing angle. When I began creating my *zhenmushou* in the summer, I was immediately struck by what happened when I started looking through the translucent silk or an opening in the wood. In the same way that I think about negative space in my prints and paintings, the cut-out shapes in my sculptures become literal windows and portals that offer a different perspective of the work. I wanted to exploit this quality by incorporating numerous negative shapes, including twenty-two silk paintings, thereby expanding the opportunities to look through and between. The most exciting moments for me occur when viewing multiple openings through one another, creating a cascade of transparencies that build visual density and opacity.

The ability to change and metamorphose is a crucial element of *Cosmic Frontier*, and I intend to develop this quality in future work. I plan to eventually amass a collection of parts that I can begin recombining in different installations so that pieces from various sculptures can generate new *zhenmushou*. This modularity is present on a small scale in *Cosmic Frontier* in the way the mouth frames that run like vertebrae along the spinal sections are all interchangeable. I am drawn to this idea for two reasons. First, it is a physical manifestation of the etiological mythology of the *Zhenmushou* as these phantom limbs are literally reforming, multiplying, and rearranging continually. Secondly, it reinforces the sense of movement – and ‘relation is

movement,’ to return to the Glissant (1997) quote from before (p. 171). There is micro movement which occurs within a singular installation, and the potential for macro movement occurring across multiple future installations.

Modularity is also materially significant concerning my use of wood, because in combination they reference the tradition of Chinese architecture. Interlocking wood joinery and modular construction has been characteristic of Chinese architecture since the fifth millennium BCE (Steinhardt, 2019). In fact, ‘interchangeability of mass-produced parts is a basic tenet...of Chinese art and architecture’ (ibid, p. 49). I fabricate my wood pieces with a CNC router, a contemporary industrial means of generating ‘mass-produced parts.’ However, I did not want the final result to look manufactured, so I chose surface treatments to emphasize the organic qualities of the wood. First, I painted the edges with opaque gold to hide the plywood layers, which give an industrial feel. Then I dyed the surface of the wood to emphasize the wood grain. Finally, I painted subtle phantom-like arms and gestures on the larger pieces to leave the mark of my hand and iconography. Through these interventions, I aimed to create a being that felt whole and powerful, not an assemblage of machine-made parts. I wanted *Cosmic Frontier* to transcend its material while simultaneously inhabiting its historical referentiality.

The other material component of my sculpture is the painted silk stretched within the shaped wooden frames. I began experimenting with silk and Chinese inksticks last winter because I wanted to start selecting materials intentionally to add more meaning to my work. Working with these substances is a physical metaphor for my identity as someone with Chinese ancestry that is channeled through a liminal diasporic perspective. Although using pigments on silk is archetypal within Chinese art history, I do not follow any of its conventions. Instead, I have adapted methods that I learned from European printmaking, specifically the technique of

pochoir (stencil printing/painting), to create my own version of silk art that supports my formal commitment to flatness, negative shape, and opacity. Subsequently, when I began to combine this silk painting with sculpture, the work diverged further from Eastern and Western conventions. I have created a syncretic form that borrows from both, but has evolved into a distinctly alternative medium between these binary spaces.

This liminality is also embodied by the dominant blue-green colour I used in *Cosmic Frontier*. In Chinese, blue-green is most often translated as *qing*, but this color term can specify various colors in different situations. *Qing* can refer to green, blue, or black depending on context: for example, in *qingshan* (green mountain), *qing* is green; in *qinghuaci* (blue-and-white porcelain), it is blue; and in *qingsi* (black hair), it is black (Wang & Guan, 2022). Adding to this complexity is the fact that *qing* can also be used as a ‘visual but non-colour term’ (Tao & Wong, 2020, cited in Wang & Guan, 2022, p. 3). For instance, in *qingtian* (*tian* meaning sky) or *qingyun* (*yun* meaning cloud), *qing* can be interpreted as describing a ‘clear sky,’ ‘high,’ or ‘blue’ (Wang & Guan, 2022, p. 3). As these examples show, *qing* is a relational term whose meaning shifts constantly. For this reason, *qing* is a visual metaphor for the relational movement Glissant describes, the antithesis of totality.

This resistance to totality is also expressed in the way *qing* interrogates how language constructs our world. In chapter two, I discussed how Western linear perspective delineates space and wields power by establishing ideals of objectivity and ‘reality.’ However, perspective extends beyond the spatial to our broader conceptual outlook. In the example of *qing*, we can see how Western language has also shaped the way we see color:

...in English there are 11 basic color terms, which are: white, black, red, blue, green yellow, brown, orange, grey, purple, and pink. These basic color terms originating from English (more specifically, Anglo) language and culture have been so influential or intrusive that so many languages, together with their perception and categorization of

colors, have been transformed to be in line with the English basic color classification. So, it is no wonder that in postcolonial language studies the spread of English color concept has become a research topic in its own right. *Deeply affected by the so-called Anglocentrism in the field of color, qing, which was far back in Chinese history a basic color term, is no longer used as an ordinary basic color term in modern Chinese [emphasis added].*' (Wang & Guan, 2022, p. 4)

In other words, *qing* – once a central aspect of Chinese visual culture – has been suppressed to conform to English patterns of thought. The dominance of Western culture has led to this perspective becoming the default normative baseline. I, too, formerly participated in this unthinking acceptance, which is why I have been fascinated by *qing* since I first came across it. Aranke (2021) has written about the work of Black artists like Kerry James Marshall, who work symbolically with the color black: '...the social chromaticism of the color black entangles questions of aesthetics, politics, and social relations' (74). I believe *qing* also exhibits 'social chromaticism' because this unusual shape-shifting color connotes a fundamentally different way of seeing the world. *Qing* embraces ambiguity and circumvents binarist thinking, which insists that something is either this or that. This anti-essentialism lies at the heart of opacity, allowing for complexities and hybridities to arise: nothing is fixed. Instead, it is constantly being made and remade in relation to its context and surroundings.

I will now turn to my other choices of color as historical referents, specifically concerning my recent research on Daoist art. Daoism is the indigenous religion of China and emphasizes balance and harmony, both internally and outwardly with the cosmos. In one example of a Daoist handscroll from the Ming Dynasty, *Festival of the Peaches of Longevity*, the painting is done in an 'archaistic blue-and-green style, with gold accents on the rocks' (Little, 2000, p. 159). This is an example of *qinglu shanshui* (blue-green landscape), which is characterized by 'blue-green colors [which] were used as allusions to the distant past or to paradisiacal realms' and were 'sometimes outlined in gold...More than just a representation of

the natural world, therefore, the paintings also embodied the magical properties associated with the imagined realms of the immortals' (Princeton University Art Museum, n.d.). As I had already determined to reference *qing* for its conceptual connotations, this further research convinced me to paint the edges of the wood with gold. After all, these edges are essentially outlines of the forms projected into real space. By creating my *zhenmushou* in *qing* and gold, I wanted to create the impression of a supernatural being that had stepped out of a *qinglu shanshui*, with all its associated implications of immortality and the ethereal plane.

I created a pathway out of gold vinyl to further separate the *Zhenmushou* from our physical world. I also wanted this vinyl to reference a *shendao* (spirit road), which is the ritual path leading to a Chinese tomb: 'this path was built not for the living but for the departing soul, which, it was commonly believed, travelled along the path from its old home to its new abode' (Wu, 1994, p. 57-8). The golden *shendao* I created leads to the silhouette of Yu Feng mountain (the tomb), which I made as a negative shape on the wall by wheat-pasting cloud shapes that I cut from Kumogorashi paper (Japanese 'cloud' paper). I needed to have the mountain in the installation, even in this subtle way, both to serve the narrative (it is the new abode of the *zhenmushou* and also the end point of the *shendao*) and to reinforce the recent Taoist and spiritual undercurrent of the work. In Daoism, mountains are considered to be 'an axis joining heaven and earth,' a space which connects the mortal and divine realms (Little, 2000, p. 148). A *dong tian* is a Taoist 'grotto-heaven' which is believed to be hidden underground inside of mountains, and which serves as a 'mysterious gateway to the spirit world' (Wu, 2010, p. 60).

As someone not aligned with any religious faith, coming across this research that affirmed my mythological narratives after I had written them felt akin to a spiritual experience. Furthermore, unlike most realms of Chinese tradition, which are severely heteronormative and

paternalistic, Taoism stands apart: ‘among the religions of China, Taoism is distinguished by its emphasis on the vital role of the *yin* force – the feminine aspect of the world’ (Little, 2000, p. 275). Through my practice, I have unexpectedly found myself on a spiritual path that is now beginning to generate new work as well. The unexpected ways my art continues to enrich my personal life humbles me, and I often reflect on how close I came to not becoming an artist. I need to acknowledge the critical roles both research into Chinese culture and tradition and my imagination have played. A symbiotic relationship has developed between historical inspiration and fantasy, which has provided immense personal and artistic fulfilment.

Another instance of this has been incorporating hand gestures from Peking opera (traditional Chinese theatre) into my work since last summer. The gestures I reference are known as ‘orchid hand patterns,’ and they were popularised and codified by the most famous Peking opera performer, Mei Lanfang. These gestures are used by the ‘tan’ character in opera, which are the female roles. However, the tan is ‘an interpretation of woman rather than a representation of woman. And the ‘tan’ is realistic just as the Chinese landscape painting is realistic, as the iridescent drop distilled from the refined essence of reality’ (March, date unknown, as cited in Xiao, 2016, p. 77). In other words, the ‘tan’ is an abstract idea of woman rather than an actual woman. I have drawn upon orchid hands as cultural referents and symbols of femininity.

At the same time, I want to exercise caution when directly replicating traditional Chinese forms. Chinese culture is highly paternalistic, and in Peking opera, the ‘tan’ is never the lead but only a supporting role. However, I see my use of orchid hand patterns as performing a gesture, in the sense of the term as defined by Juana Maria Rodriguez (2014). According to Rodriguez, gesture is a particular form of movement informed by social boundaries. She gives the example of daddy play: by ‘playing Daddy’ queer individuals are able to engage on their own terms with

the racial, social, and familial hierarchies of power that were forced upon them. Like Rodriguez, Ramos (2016) points to how mimicry can be a form of resistance to dominant power structures. When working within the liminal space between resisting and replicating dominant power structures, there is always a danger of reinforcing those systems of oppression. However, both Rodriguez and Ramos argue that by re-enacting the power dynamics that exclude us, we can reclaim the dominant paternal state and/or domestic structures that oppress us.

Working within power structures is a crucial tenet of Cheng's theory of ornamentalism, which I discussed in chapters one and two. Orchid hand patterns fit into the mold of what she terms an ornamental gesture: 'Ornamentalism describes the peculiar processes (legally, materially, imaginatively) whereby *personhood is named or conceived through ornamental gestures*, which speak through the minute, the sartorial, the prosthetic, and the decorative' (Cheng, 2018, p. 18). Yet for Cheng, this form of personhood destroys autonomy:

In the end, this complicated congealment may be what is possible in a life of precariousness. Sometimes, disposable lives find themselves through disposable objects. (Is this why, for some Asian American subjects, given limited options, they would rather be ornamental than Oriental?) Freedom for the captured may not be the gift of uncompromised liberty but instead the more modest and demanding task of existing within an entombed shell. (2018, p. 105)

As I argued in chapter one, however, I see more potential for liminal existence than Cheng, drawing upon the theoretical writing of Gloria Anzaldúa (2002), who argues for the creative potentiality of those who inhabit the in-between. While I cannot claim that my practice of world-building offers me 'uncompromised liberty,' I believe in more beyond existence 'within an entombed shell.' Yet I find the concept of 'ornamental gesture' useful as a coded form of communication that is not legible, or even visible, to everyone. However, this hidden nature does not preclude substance; rather, it is another instance of opacity. I believe a gesture can be both ornamental and opaque, that being 'decorative' does not render it 'minute.'

When it comes to the orchid hand patterns as ornamental gestures, a distinction must be made between the theater of Peking opera (which exists as its own contained fiction), and the reality that begins at the edge of the stage. These hand gestures mean differently within that imaginary world's boundaries than when they are seen as acting on a stage. Within the play's confines, they are the communication of an actual female character. Removed from a specific narrative, however, they are performances of abstracted femininity. In my work, I select specific gestures that convey the meanings I want to express. By separating these orchid hands from the stage of Chinese opera, where they can only be expressed by supporting characters, I subvert tradition by turning these gestures into the leading roles and 'speakers' in my work.

Concluding Thoughts and Looking Forward

It is important to me to work from a contemporary perspective and not to create facile representations of my identity. In our society, the cultural production of artists of color is too often presented as frozen in time, referencing a distant past that is now only a memory or a blanket stereotype that homogenizes the varied experiences of individual lives. I am a contemporary being, and so is my culture. Multiple aspects of my identity shape my work, but I have no desire for the work to transmit these specificities directly. Instead, I aim for the work to look distinctly my own, to embody my individuality rather than a generality of the ‘exotic’ or formulaically ‘Asian.’

Moving forward, I intend to explore performance within my practice. As my narrative has developed, this has felt increasingly necessary for the work. I see the potential for theater and plays, dance, costume design, and using my body to interact with the work. One specific project I have planned takes inspiration from Chinese burial/funerary traditions, specifically ancestral spirit tablets. My ability to access information regarding these practices was erratic (at least in the English language), so I have drawn knowledge from untraditional sources, including conversations with family and faculty in addition to conventional academic resources.

I first learned of the existence of ancestral spirit tablets during a studio visit with Professor Oh-Mee Lee here at the University of Arkansas. She described them as a form of contract with the spirit world, and while I have struggled to find more information on that aspect of the tablet’s function, my subsequent research made me think of the times when my mother shared her childhood experiences with me. Ancestral worship is still a standard part of everyday Chinese life, and because my grandmother passed away when my mother was only five years old, her childhood was shadowed by the persistent burden of mourning. While I knew of other

widespread practices, such as offering food to the dead or visiting their burial sites on specific dates, I had never heard of spirit tablets before.

Although I will present my research on spirit tablets in a straightforward manner, the process of finding this knowledge was anything but. There was extensive searching and going back and forth with family members to excavate traditions and translate certain words/characters. In conversations with my mom, she always shares how the Communist Party tried to erase ancient folk traditions, which is why she knew nothing of the history of these spirit tablets. So we spent a few weeks searching for the Chinese characters for certain words I read about in English-language articles (notably the ‘chu’ in the ritual of ‘dotting the chu,’ which I will describe in the following section). Because Chinese is a tonal language, seeing the Romanized version of a word is imprecise. Added to this confusion is the variation in the Romanized spellings of Chinese words. For instance, if we return to the case of the word ‘chu’: when I eventually found an article that included the Chinese character for this word, my mom immediately replied that it should have been spelled ‘zhu.’ For this reason, she could not figure out which word was being referenced even though I had an English spelling and translation of its meaning. This research methodology, which involves my family, oral traditions, and working across generations, has become an extension of my art practice. In many ways, it is a manifestation of my experience existing in-between cultures, languages, geography, and time.

The ancestral spirit tablet is generally made of wood, although its size varies from eight to eighteen inches in height and two to four inches in width (Addison, 1924). The tablets generally sit upon a pedestal and have basic information inscribed, including the title and name of the deceased, the hour of birth and death, the place of burial, and the name of the son who erects the tablet (ibid). The tablet is installed in the family shrine and is believed to be the home

of the deceased's spirit following a combination of Daoist and Buddhist beliefs, wherein the individual possesses three souls: one that remains in the body in the grave, one in the tablet, and one that ascends to the 'other world.' (ibid). Having a place on the family altar is important because the spirit might otherwise wander and potentially become malevolent (Schwartz, 2010).

However, an important ritual known as 'dotting the chu' or 'dotting the tablet' must be performed before the spirit takes permanent residence within in and the tablet can be installed on the family altar (Addison, 1924). The one who performs such rites is the head of the household – either the most senior member or the eldest son of the deceased (ibid). While I have not found scholarly literature that explicitly states that this specific ritual must be performed by a man, I think that can be assumed given the patrilineal nature of traditional Chinese society. Within this ritual, the person in question would add vermilion to the engraved characters of 'chu' (主) and 'wei' (位). These specific characters are prepared with a dot missing in each for this purpose), thereby consecrating the tablet (Addison, 1924).

During my art history course this past fall (*Trans, Queer, and Feminist Art* taught by Dr. Alexis Salas), I created paper spirit tablets for my *zhenmushou*. For the information included on the tablet, I placed the inscription for either 'shen chu' (神主) or 'shen wei' (神位) at the top of the tablet to signify that this is where the spirit resides. The center of the tablet usually contains title(s) of the deceased, and in this area I have placed the sculpture's title. The titles are derived from the Peking opera hand gestures I reference in the sculpture. Their Chinese names are part of my research, which is why I use their characters in the title. Birth and death dates usually flank the title, so I have placed the completion date on the side. I wrote the date in English as I do not know how to write this in Chinese without using a translator. Nearly all the tablets I have seen also include the burial site (sometimes also the birth site) near the bottom of the tablet. I placed

my name in this section, as these spirits and beings are born from my imagination. The characters of my name are the only ones I know by heart, so it is important to me to write them in Chinese. These tablets have a mixture of Chinese characters and English, reflecting my research methodology and diasporic identity as a Chinese-American. Paper tablets provide a temporary home for the spirit until the permanent, wooden version can be created and the ceremony performed (Hsieh, 1991). In the future, I plan to remake these paper tablets in wood and subsequently to perform the ritual of ‘dotting the chu’ of these spirit tablets to consecrate the tablets.

When I initially began my research, I read the following opening passage of an article on Chinese spirit tablets:

In traditional Chinese ghost stories the principal character is often a fetchingly lovely female ghost. This no doubt heightens the tension of the story, but there is also a good reason behind it -- unmarried women who die young have no male progeny to carry out ancestral worship within their spouse's family, neither can they be accommodated in their own family's ancestral spirit tablet, which means their fate is more liable than most to be that of a wandering ghost. (Hsieh, 1991)

This account exposes the cruelty of Chinese tradition towards women – they are doomed to become wandering ghosts unless they consent to heterosexual marriage and fulfill their duty of providing male offspring. The practice of spirit tablets upholds the heteropatriarchy, and values women exclusively through their kinship to men. Whereas men who die before marriage can still be memorialized on their father’s tablet in the ancestral altar, women are denied this right and therefore cannot receive familial veneration if they die before marriage (Schattschneider, 2001; Schwartze, 2010). Spirit tablets are a practice of heterosexual male privilege: a woman needs to marry a man to have a patrilineal line to attach her name to; she needs to have a male son to venerate her after her death; and she needs to have male family members carry out the ritual so that her spirit can reside within her tablet.

Once again, invoking the term defined by Rodriguez (2014), I am performing a *gesture* when I recreate the spirit tablet and the ceremony of ‘dotting the chu.’ Taking inspiration from her theory, I see my creation and performance of spirit tablets for one of my Nu Xingtian as also playing with Chinese hierarchies. By engaging in this act, I am freeing a female spirit from the demands of having (male) children and being married. It is also significant that I am an unmarried Chinese woman performing this act, as I am a member of the group who would have been excluded from these rites. By re-enacting this rite which historically perpetuated the heteropatriarchy, I am reclaiming and resisting it.

It is essential to acknowledge the role of fantasy that is central to my artistic practice. I am invested in world-building as a way of processing and coming to terms with my experiences, even though I know this does not change my objective world. Cvetkovich (2003) shares the following description of filmmaker Jean Carlomusto:

As a cross-dressing butch lesbian, Carlomusto enters and revivifies the historical past, closing the gap that separates her from it while also openly acknowledging her version as a reconstruction or fantasy. She clings to the story because it represents “an omen about how the past could become apparent and could be savored.” (p. 259)

Fantasy might not be historical in the traditional sense, but that does not make it any less real to its creator(s). According to Bosi (1992), ‘fantasy amounts to memory, either expanded upon or compounded’ (23). Fantasy is a living form of memory that continually evolves and shifts; it is also a way for the past to continue living. And as long history is alive, we can still engage with it. According to Anzaldua (1993), this engagement defines the artist who exists in-between: ‘The border artist constantly reinvents her/himself. Through art s/he is able to re-read, reinterpret, re-envision, and reconstruct her/his culture’s present as well as its past.’ (p. 183)

What are the possibilities of affective histories, and can they live alongside more traditionally accepted notions of history? Cvetkovich (2003) explores queer archives and how

their focus on materiality challenges conventional ideas of history, revealing ‘the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science’ (268). I am drawn to this idea of history transcending facticity. We all need history because it provides context for our existence. Yet, for marginalized individuals and communities, the facts of history can be traumatic and stifling. However, as Bosi (1992) points out: ‘The past helps compose the forms of the present, but it is the present that draws old or new garments from the chest of the past’ (p. 23). Re-imagining and reframing the past offers a way to expand upon those histories and engage with them on our terms.

Throughout this dissertation, I have written extensively on how my practice is essential for me. Yet as an artist, I present my work for others to see. I do not view this as merely a byproduct, or an avenue of self-affirmation. Instead, like so many artists before me, I believe in art’s ability to inspire change. In conversation, James Baldwin described the purpose of literature as follows:

The bottom line is this: you write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can’t, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. In some way, your aspirations and concern for a single man in fact do begin to change the world. The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way a person looks or people look at reality, then you can change it. (Baldwin, cited in Romano, 1979)

These words apply to the art of any form and medium. In presenting my imaginary world and mythology to the public, I am offering my work as a platform for conversation.

The premise of world-building relies on asking the question: ‘what if things were otherwise?’ By sharing my work, I hope to inspire others to look at their own worlds and wonder what could (or should) be otherwise.

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Figures



Figure 1. Junli Song, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 2. Junli Song, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 3. Junli Song, detail of work, *Death Like Dreaming*, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 4. Junli Song, detail of work, *Death Like Dreaming*, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 5. Junli Song, detail of work, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 6. Junli Song, detail of work, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 7. Junli Song, detail of work, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 8. Junli Song, detail of work, *Death Like Dreaming*, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.

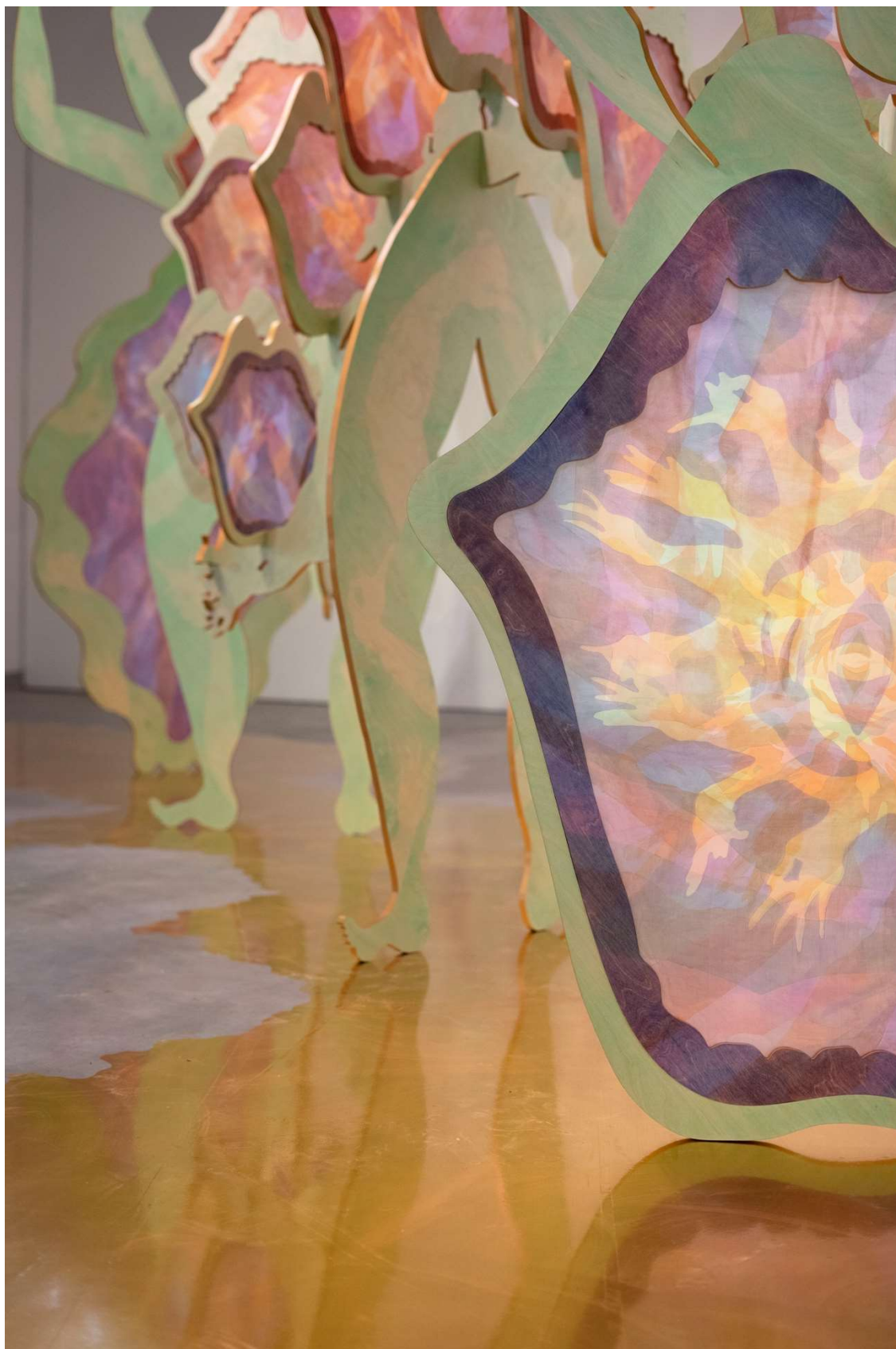


Figure 9. Junli Song, detail of work, *Death Like Dreaming*, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 10. Junli Song, detail of work, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.

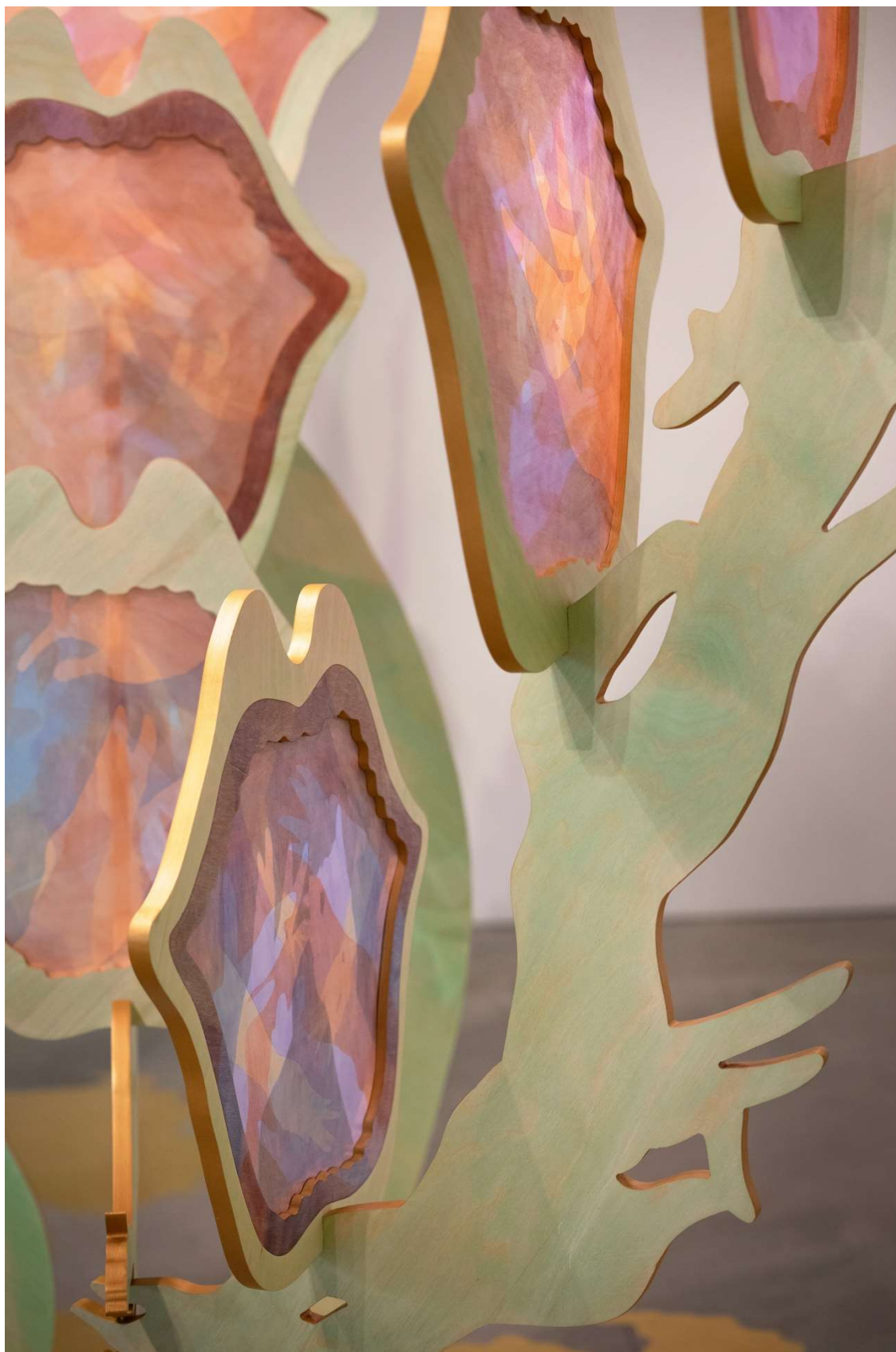


Figure 11. Junli Song, detail of work, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 12. Junli Song, detail of work, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 13. Junli Song, detail of work, *Death Like Dreaming*, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.



Figure 14. Junli Song, detail of work, Death Like Dreaming, 2023. Photo by Sky Maggiore.