Bursting Bubbles:

A moving image exploration of contemporary Chinese individuality

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Abstract

My strong motivation to look at the contemporary Chinese individuality in modern Chinese individuals has been driven by my own exposure to a foreign culture and its influence on me and other Chinese while living in New Zealand.

This thesis is a practical project which involves moving images and paintings as a medium to explore the aspects that relate to existent phenomenon of contemporary China, with particular focus on "bubbles" as metaphors for the influence of Chinese political transformation e.g. Open Door Policy, western thought, values and beliefs and the perceived impact on individuals and society that naturally occurs.

My aim has been to portray this phenomenon through artistic practices on screens. By reflecting and engaging with moving images and paintings, underpinned by theoretical research and method including data collecting, self-reflecting on data, practical manifestation and self-inquiry, I have attempted to unfold the phenomenon for the purveyors of my art of modern Chinese individuality as influenced today by a mix of external and internal political forces manifesting in a series of moving images and paintings I create.

Introduction

An individual is the primary unit of existence and the ultimate standard of value ever presented among human experience. My view is not to deny that societies exist or that people benefit from being participated, but I see society as a collection of individuals rather than something overarching them.

The Western impact is significant on today's Chinese ideological thoughts that are constructed with the encouraged uniformity of the earlier generations. The advancement of modern technology along with the introduction of mass media such as internet, live internationally broadcast television and new foreign movies have become influencing media that fuel intellectual and cultural stimulus among the new generation and are prime instigator of change.

The advocating of a materialised life style plays a critical role when considering Chinese individualism. Just as importantly, it is considerable value for contemporary Chinese to see themselves through their own mirror or perceptions of individuality and what this has affected means for their own personal identity.

Through the exploring of the modern social phenomenon of China, I draw on media of film and painting to express my personal views. I am interested in employing 'bubbles' as metaphors to represent contemporary Chinese individualism. I deliberately concentrate on an investigation to express the inter-relationship between individuals and society, and elucidate the subtle influence between the union of individuals apparent through the "opening of China's door to the West". Finally, I trace individuals on paper and canvas in an abstract attempt to respond to the social phenomenon.

From my perspective, I think Chinese individuals are always rebuilding themselves from their influence on each other, and exposing to other cultures and schools of thought. Thus initiates transformation and transition of culture and thinking pattern.

This project is an artistic reflection on the pursuit of individual identity of contemporary Chinese. Individuals, who value individual privacy and personal freedom, have developed a strong sense of "self" during the change of Chinese society. I

focus on the reflection upon the visual interpretation of the potential collapse of traditional Chinese ideology and the traces of craving for a self-identity of contemporary Chinese. Therefore, I decided to create a series of three moving images – *"Bubbles of Life I, II, III"* to represent the response of different age individuals to the society. The moving images imply Chinese individuals have been experiencing the process of traditional culture losing to its regress, in addition, the trace on the paper imply the journey of the individuals in search of their self-identity.

The exegesis is structured into four parts. The first part explores Chinese individuality through analysis and discussion to the comprehension of Western individuality in Chinese individuals' thinking pattern. In the second part I propose my perspective on individualism and make connection with my practice. The third part discusses the concept of a series of moving images which use bubbles as a metaphor, and states the journey of my practical works while the final part illustrates on the methods that I have employed.

- **Original concept -- 'molecules notion'**

The original concept 'molecules notion' was first generated in my mind on one summer day in China 2003, when I was standing on a bridge watching the constant stream of cars and people. I realised individuals as molecules[1] representing the makeup of our society, and the similarities of molecules that makes up substance. The two charts below illustrate these principles:
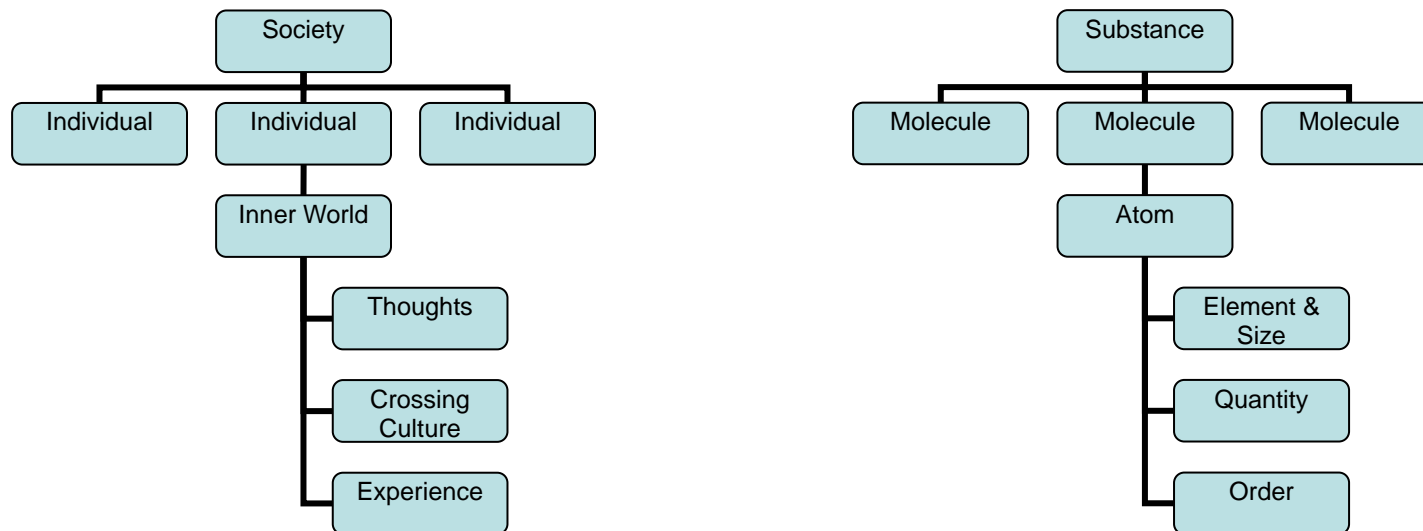

Atoms are continuously moving and differ in their size; they have different quantities and have their own order, which create substances of huge variety. Similarly the individuality of individual which is formed by their different thoughts, culture and experiences create different senses of individuality.

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[1] "A molecule, in turn, is constructed from two or more atoms bonded together in a well-defined fashion. A shorthand way to describe the makeup of a molecule is its molecular formula, which lists the number and kinds of atoms present in the molecule. (Macomber, 1996, p.22)

The development of concept in my earlier paintings

This 'molecule notion' has been in my mind for long time, and I always seek a way to express it artistically. In the final year of my visual art degree in 2006, I first employed oil paintings to express my unique notion. The theme of the paintings *"Cream of the Cream I, II, III"* focused on the social background but not so much on individuals in society. Individuals and society are interrelated, and my thought of individuals as the 'molecules' consisting as society encourages me to explore the individuals in such society. Hence, the research concept and pursuit of a master degree and study is a departure from here.
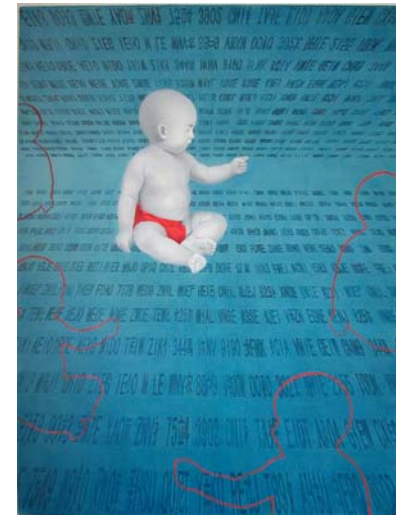
Gao, Y. *Cream of the Cream I, II, III.* oil & acrylic on canvas. 1200mm x 900mm (2006).

In my mind, I imagined a bubble which has a similar characteristic with a molecule in what I have termed 'molecule notion'. The forms of molecules are different round spheres, and they are also dynamic, so I chose the "bubble" to represent my notion as it embodied these two key characteristics. Moreover, the bubble has similar characteristics with individuals. I will state the reasons as I use bubble as a metaphor to express the individual below.

According to the 'molecule notion', an individual is only a single 'molecule' in a society. But society, which consists of

individuals, would be focused. In other words, when people see a substance they do not normally think of its molecules, they only focus on it as a whole substance. Bubbles express my 'molecule notion' best as they exist but are hard to see without any outer world reflection. With the completion of the movies with a model, I was turning back to my painting; I added some bubbles into my painting *'Cream of the cream III'*. However, the meaning of these bubbles is different from the one in my 'molecule notion', because I portrayed the baby in a realistic way in the painting, as the baby is best seen as a unique individual.

Gao, Y. *Cream of the Cream III.* oil & acrylic on canvas. 1200mm x 900mm (2006-2007).

The development of concept in earlier moving images

My movie "Conserving some inner space"

Base on the 'molecule notion' I experiment my earlier practice to reflect upon contemporary Chinese individuality, I used a Chinese model to perform in a moving images. I took a narrative approach to represent the inner self of individual. To portray this new outreaching I created a movie called *'Conserving some inner space'* (See Appendix 1) to express the transition from lack of information to information overloaded. I used the sounds of heartbeat in the beginning and the end of the movie to express aspiration, loneliness and innermost quietude, and to represent the expanding desire and the impulse of yearning to understand the world outside China.

Post to the chaotic Cultural Revolution and shut down of information, people desire for better understanding of the outside world. Throughout the moving images *'Conserving some inner space'* I use a mixture of songs to represent change and transformation as a way to express a person's developing process of personal thought and the acceptance or resistance to change. I also use audio of computer games, television program and telephone ringing to represent the diverse and integrated communicating system in a technologically driven society. These audio effects are mixed together to deliberately instill a sense of chaos and confusion.

The movie to take a person as metaphor of individuality who wilders in the chaotic era, and the movie also expresses the journey to seeking and building one's individuality.

Gao, Y, A still from my movie, *Conserving some inner space,* October, *2007*

3.0.2 Moving image "Vestige"

It was hard to find a workable approach to combine the moving image and painting. This gave rise to the question of how I could portray bubbles while incorporating the characteristics of Chinese culture. In the end, I scribed Chinese characters on Xuan zhi[2] and blew bubbles that settled onto the surface until they became one. This moving image was named *'Vestige'*. I created the colourless bubbles to expresses that individuality of people who were reliant on others for their intellectual prowess and out of touch with the value of the traditional culture during the era of Cultural Revolution right through to the momentous emergence of China's Open Door Policy.

I pondered to myself: can the bubbles really express individuals in contemporary China? Also, by using Chinese characters, there is no specific meaning intended to communicate in the Chinese characters in the moving images: does it give a sense that the moving images emphasise Chinese traditional culture? I questioned myself if in fact Chinese traditional culture had been lost? This approach to the artwork led me to understand that it did not provide a satisfactory means of expression of contemporary China.
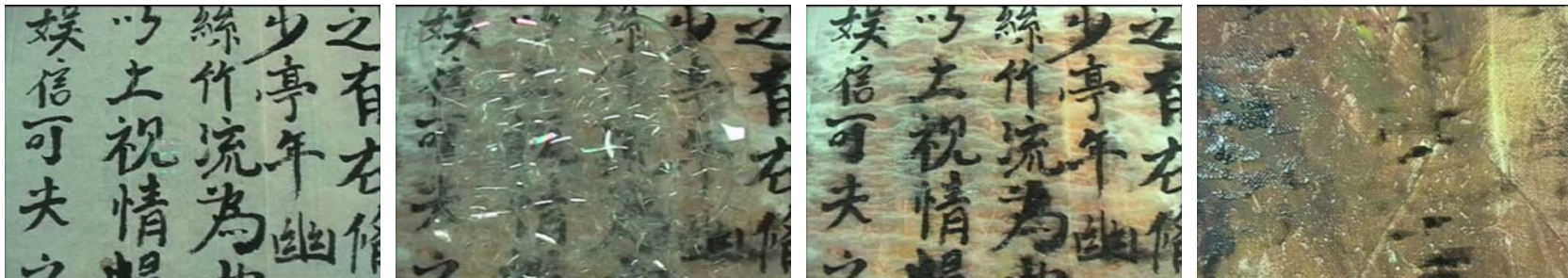

Gao, Y. *vestige.* The stills from Moving images, 2008

3.0.3 Moving image "The life . The time"

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[2] Xuan zhi around the beginning of Tang Dynasty, 618 - 907 AD, a fine paper was made from straw of rice in Xuancheng. This paper, known as Xuan zhi to the world, was named after its producing area. Today, all similar kinds of paper carry its name although they are produced elsewhere in China. (Author unknown, year unknown)

With a view to contemporary China, I created the further series of moving images. I concentrated my focus on individuals with social culture and ideology as a background in my work. The influence from the outer world on individuals became obvious by the reflection on each of the bubbles. Those moving images express that individuals are in pursuit of their own dreams. My most inner thoughts were to represent the contemporary Chinese social phenomenon such as economic transformation, technological advancement and the blind pursuit of a material world. However, I came to the realisation that these moving images could only represent and express chaos.
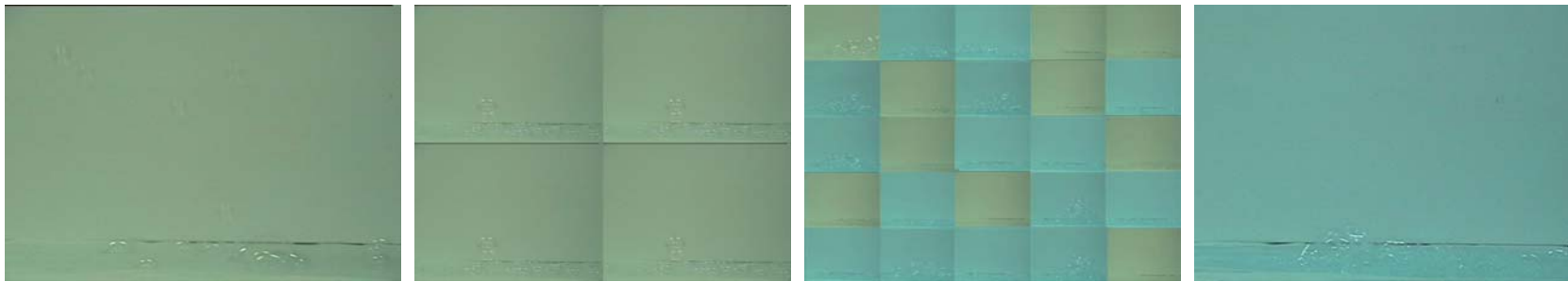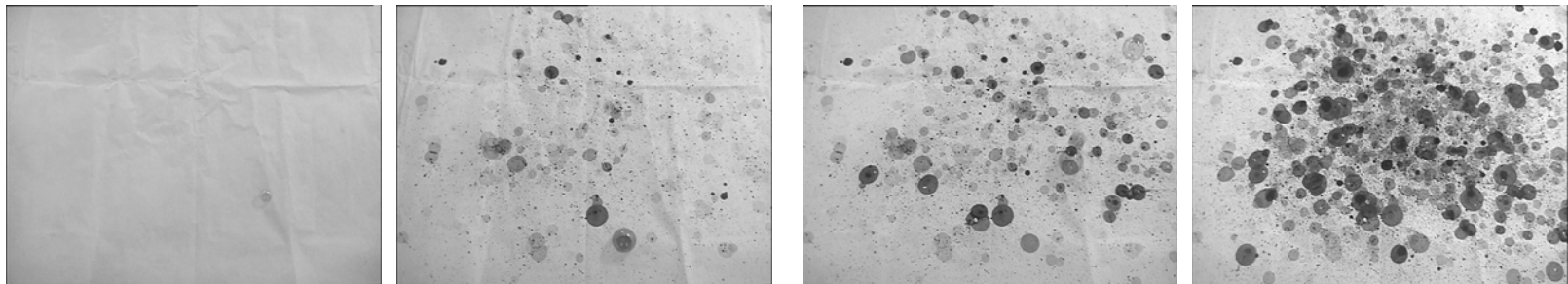

Gao, Y. *A series moving images I,* Stills, 2008

By objectively evaluating the outcome of this series of works, I noted a sense of imbalance; painting as one of the two artistic approaches had diminished and had been left behind. Then, I started to question myself of the role of painting in my artwork, the kind of relationship between the background and the 'bubbles'? Based on the outcome of these moving images and my self reflection, I returned to my original artistic approach which was a more balanced combination of moving images and paintings.

3.0.4 Experimental moving images I

In the next series of artwork, I focused on how to combine painting with moving images. In this experimental artwork, I placed emphasis on both the bubbles' performance and the effects of painting. The remnants of 'bubbles' is uncontrolled as they are materialised on the xuan zhi. The 'bubbles' became the artistic instrument of their own and created a picture, that was spontaneous giving effect to "my" uncontrolled painting.

Those moving images gave realisation to the significance of their performance. The bubble as the conductor of my artwork, I was considering: should their sizes be different when representing different 'individuals'? There is no doubt, the reason behind choosing ink and xuan zhi as material in my moving images is to express some of the most representative elements of Chinese traditional culture and thoughts. I still pondered however, what is the true relationship between the paper, painting and bubbles?

Gao, Y. *A series moving images I,* Stills, 2008

3.0.5 Experimental moving images II

Following my process of self-inquiry, I chose the use of coloured backlighting for my films as an instrument to link the xuan zhi, shadow, and remnants of the bubbles. In this artwork, I ignored the bubbles but emphasised a holistic artistic effect. I blew the bubbles between the light and paper; the reflection of the bubbles flew across the paper and disappeared as quickly as they appeared. My aim was to portray and to record the exact moment of the bubble burst and its remnant became one of the "individual" in these moving images. But there were some problems on the moving images; the ink ran after the bubbles burst on the paper, changing the remnants of the burst bubbles. On the reverse side, the paper waved because of airflow, actually, I needed a steady background. I made a decision to stick with my original idea and refine it further.
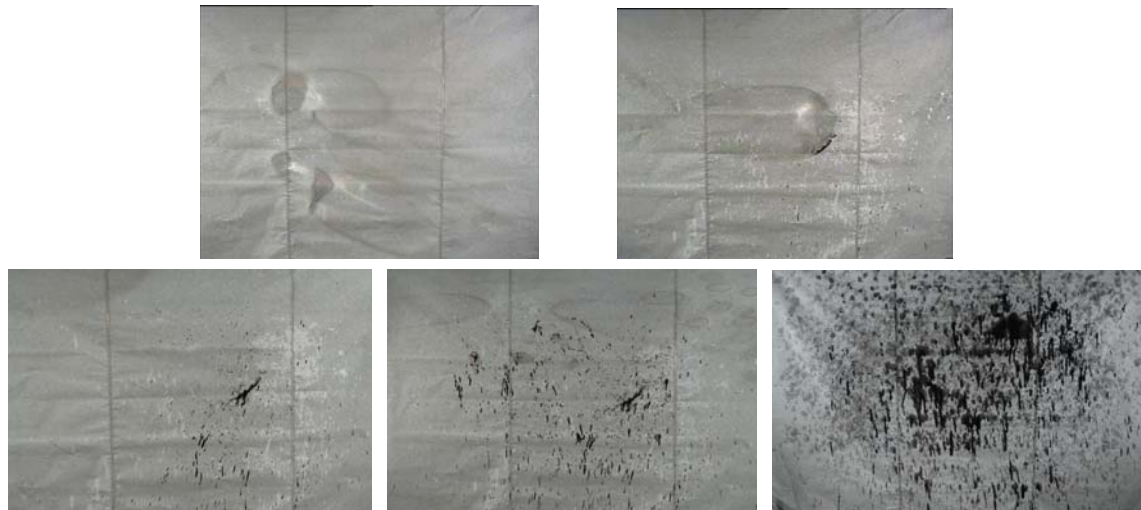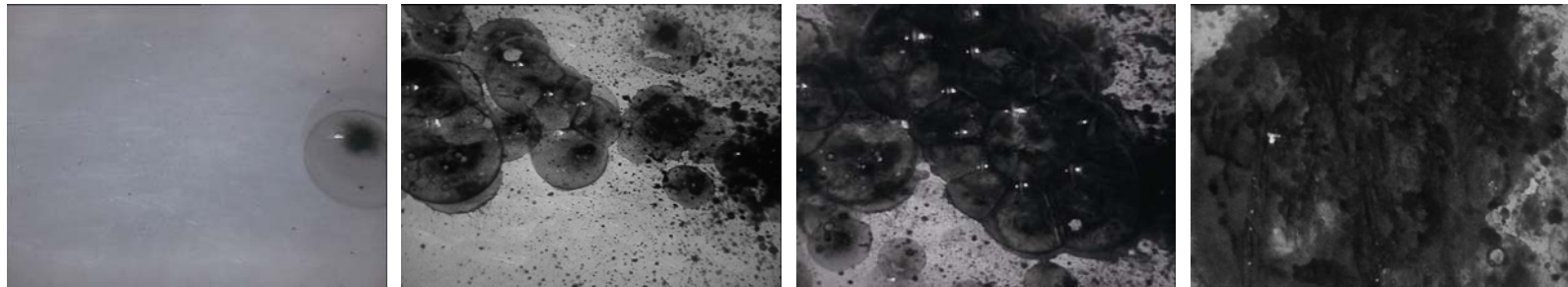

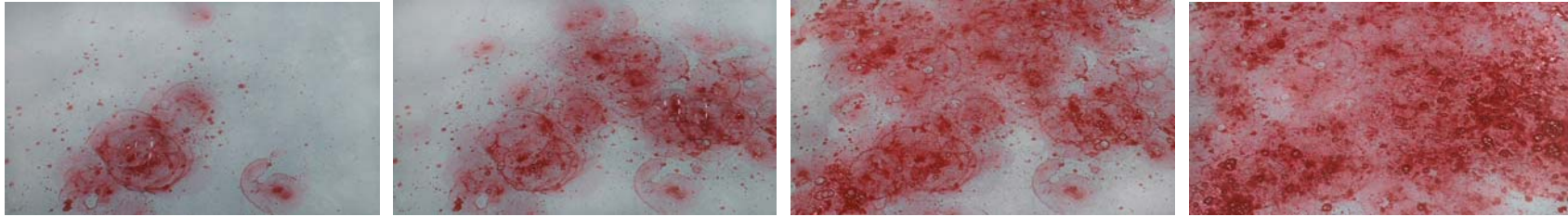Gao, Y. *A series moving images II,* Stills, 2008

3.0.6 Experimental moving images III

After I made decision to focus on the original idea, I tested new materials — watercolour paper and paints. By using watercolour paper, each bubble can be emphasised at the same time. However, the issue with using watercolour was that as the colours dried, the purity of the colours was reduced and they faded away.

Using a canvas that has been covered by modeling clay has had a dramatically different effect. The modeling clay was rubbed by a scraper on canvas. I then used the scraper to make the effect of a rough and uneven surface on the canvas. Modeling clay also has the distinct advantage of holding the colour on a specific part of the canvas rather then the colour flowing around. I blew bubbles onto the canvas after the modeling clay has dried. The chromatic bubbles could not form the round shapes because of the special surface. As they splashed on the surface of the canvas they formed into abstract shapes and become abstract artwork. However, in those works there are some Chinese elements that have been lost. For example, canvas is the primary western oil painting material.

Gao, Y. *Experimental moving images III*, Stills, 2008

Gao, Y. *Experimental moving images IIII*, Stills, 2008

Exhibition

In the exhibition, the three parts of clear bubbles, black bubbles and red bubbles make up the whole artwork. They are displayed individually and play on three separate screens simultaneously.

The relationship among the moving images is tacit: the change of era. *Bubbles of life I* expresses a time that individuals were not well regarded. *Bubbles of life II* represents the vicissitudes of Chinese culture, at the same time accepting the external influence of foreign culture and thinking: Individuals were born with elements of cross-cultural thinking. *Bubbles of life III* represents a time when society, culture, and individual thought were developing concurrently; individuals were bringing their new ideas and expressing themselves freely. The bubbles play together on three separate screens, distinct yet in harmony, each acting at their own rhythmic pace and understanding of life; they co-exist as interacting and complimentary opposites that portray the distinct and individual paradigms emerging in contemporary China.

Showing the moving images simultaneously is a means to portray three stages of society's philosophical development that has been continuously evolving and transforming over time. On screen, the bubbles float, drop, burst and form their shape in a myriad of different ways. Meanwhile, the speed of the bubbles is different on each screen, which gives each its own sense of rhythm and uniqueness. The dots play by themselves and form the formless painting with a sense of self-direction. Against the white paper with fawn, the black and red colours become distinct and contrasting. The white and fawn painting gives a sense of paleness and dreariness, whereas the black painting appears thick and heavy; mild, yet intense. The red painting represents the sense of what is fresh, clear and definite, and the vigour of life's vital essence. The three works showing on separate monitors represent the connection of the three groups of people that hold on to their own beliefs, and live harmoniously in this society. Collectivistic thinking as the root has brought the Chinese towards moulding a more considerate individual way of thinking that is significant in the development of individuality.
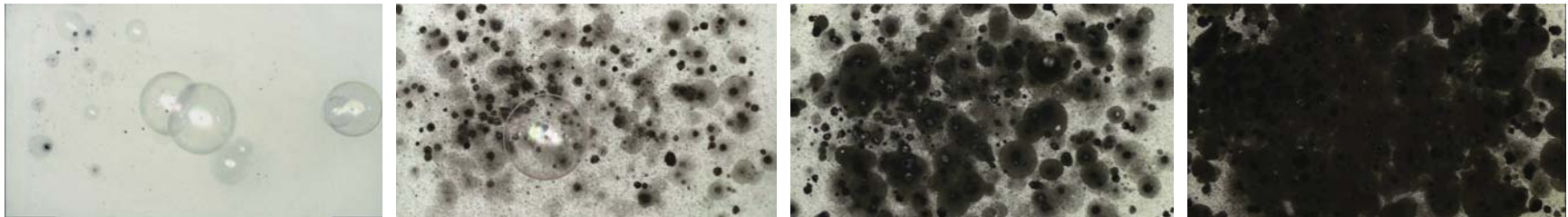
Exhibition I
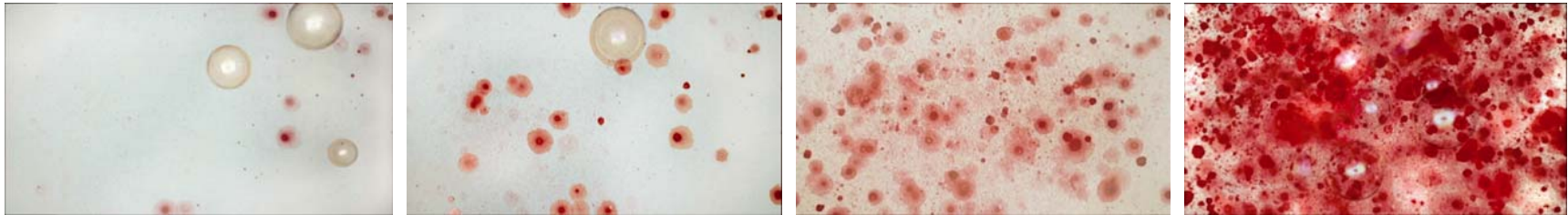
Gao, Y, *Bubbles of Life II,* The stills from moving images, 2008
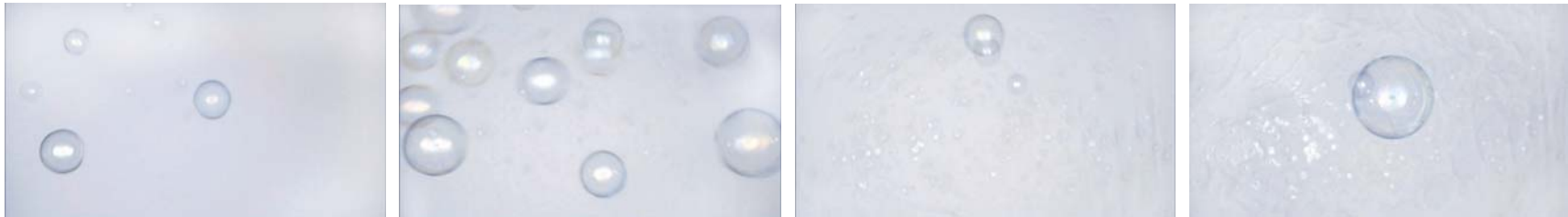
Exhibition II

Gao, Y, *Bubbles of Life I,* The stills from moving images, 2008

Exhibition III

Gao, Y, *Bubbles of Life III,* The stills from moving images, 2008

- **There were three main reasons** that I decided to use sized xuan zhi: firstly, the original shapes of burst bubbles will be better preserved on paper, and they could naturally overlapped by each other; second, it can hold dense colours better; and thirdly, minimising the possibility of any water stains.

- ## Painting as performance

The bubbles burst on the paper sporadically, and the colour of the remnants transformed from light to dense colours. The bubbles' remnants seem like brush marks on the paper. This left the visual illusion of bubbles (individuals) flying on to the paper (of life) appearing and disappearing in a mere moment. One or two bubbles may have played a major role and others have been ignored and fallen from grace. The remnants of the bubbles form the formless artistic expressions, which show the relationship of the individuals and society. The paintings played to their own chorus, and even the bubbles that were ignored left their trace having subtly played a role in the overall performance.

The clear bubbles appeared to lack any meaning until they descended and burst on the paper leaving only colourless wrinkles. The colourless bubbles left behind wrinkles on paper as the only evidence of their lone previous existence. In my point view, the increase of the dots on the paper attracted me to wait and find out their final creations.

- ## Bubbles as performance

The bubble is similar in nature to a looking glass and its appearance can only be seen by reflections in which it portrays what is actually happening in the outside world. These reflections are also meant to represent society or the world. As the thinking of individuals changes, so does the phenomenon we call society.

I added the Chinese black ink and red colour paint into soapy water to make different kinds of bubbles. Bubbles were blown from random angles to descend unguided onto the paper. They also mimicked individuals running and chasing from different sides as if on to the "screen" of life, unpredictable in where they would land and leave their trace.

My camera served as a window to a new way of looking at life; it captured the artistic process as it unfolded, without any bias. My camera became me and I became my camera to portray my bubble metaphors. Therefore I, the artist, am only an observer watching the bubbles (individuals) playing by themselves. It has been argued that there is no such thing as an unbiased representation using the medium of photography, and to an extent the camera represents the constructed perspective of the artist. In deciding on the camera angles, I set the camera in a position where it caused minimal distortion in order to simulate human perception, and in this way I had the minimum interference on the bubbles' performance.

- **Operalisation of metaphor**

I employ metaphor as an aesthetic representation that underpins artworks and notions: "As a linguistic phenomenon, where 'a word which is usually applied to one sort of thing [is applied] to another sort of thing', the metaphor is a ubiquitous constituent of both aesthetic and cognitive creativity" (Livingstone & Harrison, 1981, p. 95).

My initial use of bubbles in my artworks was in one of my oil paintings in 2007. Using bubbles as a metaphor has developed from there. As I have mentioned above, no one particular individual is clearly defined in my work; I can only sense what an individual is really like from their outward behaviour and their external appearance. Their innermost thoughts are manifested in society and are reflected *on* individuals *by* individuals in a myriad of spontaneous ways: I think there are some vague, but obvious, similarities between a bubble and an individual.