

Layers of Memory: an exploration of Yijing through palimpsest, frame and colour.

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Abstract

My project aims to navigate various layers of memory across different periods of my life to understand and sit with them. The Chinese term Yijing serves as the framework for this practice-led research methodology. It also serves as a method of introspective exploration. I find myself looking through treasures of old writings, photos, objects and belongings that my grandma kept for decades, while experiencing nature and the ethics of everyday life. In many ways, Yijing resonates with the emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical quality of creating.

Following the framework of Yijing, this project explores recollections of peripheral memories from my childhood home in China to compose memory images between the past and the present. Through an autobiographical visual language, I paint the layering of memory and experiment with the aperture of the everyday lens, aiming to create a body of work that reflects the fluctuating nature of everyday life.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

10 May 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Encounters with different timelines

Yijing provides a framework for the methodology of this practice-led research; I use it to navigate recollections of memory. I have recently found myself looking through the treasures of old writings, photos, objects, and belongings that my grandmother kept for decades. In many ways, Yijing resonates with the emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical qualities of creating. The term Yijing stems from Chinese poetry and can be broken down into two characters that explain how it can serve as a method of introspective exploration. My interpretation of Yi(意) in Yijing refers to the intentionality/ consciousness of the mind, and Jing(境) means realm, periphery and space. This method describes the artworks' intentions as arising from the artist's inner world. When applied to Chinese landscape painting, it can reflect the artist's imaginative composition of their inner landscape. Following the framework of Yijing for this project, I am recollecting fragments of my childhood memories surrounding my home in China and reconnecting with them in my everyday life through painting. In addition to my interpretation of Yijing, Chinese calligraphy influences can be seen in my art practice as I experiment, for example, with the composition of ants across the painted surface that resembles the Chinese character "I" (我), again emphasising a method of introspective exploration. Through my practice-led research, I paint the layering of memory and experiment with the aperture of the everyday lens, aiming to create a body of work that reflects the fluctuating nature of memories.

In the first chapter, I discuss the perception of memory: how, over time, it appears non-fixed and fluid. I compare the notion of śūnyatā, as presented by the philosopher Keiji Nishitani, with my painting practice, using methods that recognise the painted image as inseparable from the process of painting. I then find similarity between methods of painting, removing thin layers of paint and painting thinly, to the process of palimpsests, where fragments of the past appear in my paintings. I argue that a painted image can dissolve an inert approach to seeing the everyday.

Chapter 2 explores peripheral recollections embodied in windows within my paintings, which I refer to as memory images. Chinese poetry terms such as Yijing (Intention/Realm), Qingjing (Emotion/Scene), and Liubai (Leaving White) serve as formative frameworks for this painting practice, as I also apply these methods to visualise the compositions of the painted memories. Through research on the poet Li Bai, I discovered that leaving gaps in the poetic images through ambiguity creates a space for the

spectator to co-create the narrative. Windows, as the framing device in my painting, are then used on two levels: conceptual and pictorial. The window framework I use in my compositions draws inspiration from the cropping methods of Edward Hopper and Pierre Bonnard. They become a threshold where I hover between the internal and external.

Chapter 3 investigates the use of colour to underlay emotionally charged memories, as colours remind me of my childhood in China. I perceive the colour red as nostalgic and bittersweet; in my paintings, it hovers somewhere between the transition from colour to grey. I then use grey to convey a sense of time-shifting and memory loss. Light, chroma, value and hues are also discussed in this chapter as I unpack Auckland painter Brunelle Dias Primbs' paintings and her approach to the transience of everyday life and its seasonal relationships through painting.

CHAPTER 1 Palimpsest as method: Layering of memory

I wondered why only special occasions were recorded and what aspect of them made them more important than the others. Confused about why certain memories were so important to keep, I searched through the layers of my own home. I recall memories and refer to them as memory compositions in my paintings, as recollections at times misalign with memory. When I paint the recollections, the objects, and scenes from everyday life appear unintentionally fabricated in this painting process. Recording my memories led to the idea of the palimpsest method, which will be used in its metaphorical sense, and as a guiding framework for the painting in this studio-based practice: to display instances where my perception of memory is non-fixed and fluid. In a single frame, the memory image layers memories, and the past manifests itself visually.

Semi-transparent paint and layers

My paintings are built with semi-transparent layers, where the initial layers remain partially visible, like fragments of memory surfacing over time. In *Vision and Visuality*, Keiji Nishitani discusses the philosophy of *śūnyatā*, and I understand this as seeing beyond the perceived form of the object into a field where its past interconnects with the present. In my painting, the orchid does not occupy time as its own separate self. In this painting, *A Gift in September* (see fig. 1), I have been experimenting with staining by working with semi-transparent pigments such as zinc white, lemon yellow, alizarin crimson, cadmiums, and titanium white, which range from semi-transparent to opaque. Most of these paints have a high staining tendency, leaving a slight tint when wiped away gently. Opaque pigments can cover the surface entirely, burying the underlayers. I paint thinly with semi-transparent paint, as it shows the process of layering, and the final painting is viewed as something not separated from its process. The present state of the orchid is occupied by its past as a seed and its future as dust, and by using semi-transparent paint, they become interconnected in the frame of the canvas through areas where the mark crosses over. Even though it is not fully visible as a memory of seed or dust, my intention to use thinly applied painting methods shows fragments of memory surfacing and then disappearing. The painting process doesn't produce a still image but a palimpsest of several recorded layers that appear to be fluid, moving. Within the canvas, the painted image appears as a non-confined form tied to the idea of *śūnyatā*. In the painting *A Gift in September*, the first layer was applied using a

squeegee. I applied some pressure to the canvas with the squeegee and traced the window-like shapes of the canvas stretcher frame with a mixture of yellow ochre, red, and white.

The orchid, the window and the curtain in the painting become erased and resurrected like a palimpsest under exposed light. The overlapping layers negotiate an equilibrium with the ephemeral nature of memory, guiding the spectator towards a malleable, ambiguous painted image that conveys a sense of śūnyatā. In this case, a rupture of equilibrium can manifest as an emotional state as memories fade into the historical past at an alarming rate, disrupting the present. As the flower's shape is partly erased, not fully lost within the painting, it floats from foreground to background. Remembering the photo album, I realise countless timelines appear and disappear in that same room; time is ephemeral, and moments last for a short while. The fleetingness I experience in the everyday can be tied to the method of painting with semi-transparent layers, as I find moments I want to hold on to in the past and present.



Figure 1, Detail of *A Gift in September*.



Figure 2, Detail of *A Gift in September*.



Figure 3, Xin Bi, *A Gift in September*, 2026, Oil on canvas, 120cm x 90cm.

Past, present, future

Returning to a notion of *sūnyatā* in Nishitani's description, the object is found to exist outside the frame in the total field of the universal remainder:

If we want to know the meaning of an individual word, and look it up in a dictionary, what the dictionary gives is not the meaning of that one word, but *other* words, synonyms. As one reads a sentence, one does not know what a word in mid-sentence means until one reaches the end of the sentence, and that sentence in turn changes as one moves to the next sentence, or paragraph, or page. Meaning in a sense never arrives; and in the same way, for Nishitani, being never arrives (beings never arrive). The form of the seed is already turning into the form of the flower, and the flower is already becoming dust. The present state of the object appearing as the flower is inhabited by its past as seed and its future as dust, in a continuous motion of postponement, whose effect is that the flower is never presently *there*, any more than seed or dust are there.¹

And here the flower takes us back to the memories of its past, present and future. Meaning, in a sense, never arrives, as it is never inert. Through Nishitani's experience of decentring a moment, I am also transported back to my childhood memories of home.

Painting the image, in a sense, can be ambiguous; the meaning never fully arrives as it is always being renewed. My memory of my current home is interconnected with my past home, and the present space constantly evolves. I experience my current home in a state of transition between the past and my future, from being occupied by presence to being a site of memory and then a potential space for future memories. The speed at which memory solidifies into history worries me; it rushes me to come to conclusions. Understanding that they are not inert or simply erased or fully lost shows me that present memory evolves and changes, as memories are collective; they can be altered and are in constant slippage between the present and history. The process of painting an image, in a sense, can be ambiguous; meaning never fully arrives, as it is always in a state of becoming. The aim of painting in this practice is that the painting does not have a single unmoving, inert part. The opacity of the paint does not predominate the painted marks; therefore, the painted image is viewed as not a definitively formed

¹ Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Bay Press, 1988) page 98,99.

object. It means letting things unfold in their own time, as marks accumulate and memories change; through that, the painting's perceptions also evolve. The painted image is seen to transform from colour, marks, and layers to the fragmented form of memory.

Nishitani's account of gazing at reality acknowledges that the object is not always in a stable location; it does not have a permanent, enduring form. For an orchid to exist, it should be connected to the universal field of transformation. Meaning, in a sense, is always in a state of postponement.² This philosophical phenomenon appears in my everyday life through the observations I make of the relationships between my family and me, in the photographs, and in nature and household objects. Gazing at the everyday through this lens connects my surroundings to their past and future, and to the unfolding of nature.

Methods to resist overpainting the painted object as an entity separate from its process, with the intention of freeing the narrative from the gaze, can create an ambiguous, fluid painted memory. The painted recollection is familiar yet not distinguishable, therefore opening a space for reinterpretation through the spectator's own imagination. Using Yijing as methodology, these emotionally charged memories and observations create a memory composition with the intention of revealing the states of postponement through a palimpsest method. The edges of the painted forms are unclear and appear fuzzy; it is to be narrated through the spectator's own gaze. As colours, marks, and paint interact with the feelings arising from my peripheral recollection, Yijing becomes a notion to guide me in navigating inspiration from nature and the everyday. In my paintings devoid of figures, memories of a space within transience open a window into an internal landscape. In that landscape, peripheral recollections of my own experience are co-created through the spectator's own narration. I can also compare this to the experience of making dumpling skins with my grandmother. The malleable material of the dumpling skin is hand-rolled, and if I mess up, I can start over again, or my grandmother can take over from where I left off. Like making dumplings with my grandmother, the forms of my painted objects remain malleable, open to reinterpretation, and therefore a space for co-creation.

Sometimes sound recordings can serve as examples of palimpsests. I listened to composer William Basinski's music while painting the orchids. The recorded sound of *The Disintegration Loops* echoes over time through the recording of his digitised tapes, oscillating between tape and drive; returning to the original track and shifting from pre to post as the tapes lose their magnetised metal during recording. This captures the deterioration of the music down to its finest details as the previous sounds

² Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," page number 98,99.

appear fragmented in the newly formed loops. In his loops of sound, the music returns to its beginning, is exposed to elements outside its original state, and returns at fragmented intervals; each loop recurs, and almost every loop contains some distortion of the previous sounds. A palimpsest requires information to be stored and resurrected; Basinski's music creates a space where memories slip from the present into history, like a memory composition.

Like my painting with semi-transparent paint over opaque layers, I registered that the painted image is malleable, accumulative and records the traces of change. At the end of *The Disintegration Loop* track, we hear the air moving within space, with some sounds barely audible. The loss of crisp sounds against the recurrence of distorted sounds evokes the eternal return and the poignancy of the everyday's disappearing presence, reminding me of the moment when I stand in an empty room, and memories flood back.³ In my room, time is constantly changing outside, the marks (I make) in paintings resurrect older memories, and the traces accumulate presence as the paint's fluidity appears to blend the object into the background. The memories and signifiers I see every day are formed by paths and networks laid down before me; perhaps for my family, their ways of seeing are also laid down by paths before them through daily routines and rituals. They echo through time and are collected through traces.

In my practice-led project, I am also interested in frames. Frames operate on two levels: first, they are a key subject matter in my painted scenes, and they have a formative aspect that creates a dialect between the external and the internal. Second, they operate as a conceptual idea that helps me to understand the ontological aspects of my everyday life through internal and external perspectives. It also refers to the framing devices in my paintings, and a window into fragmented memories. In this case, my understanding of seeing the everyday through the frames of my window can be understood as an introspective exploration. This became the following research question in the next chapter: How do peripheral recollections of memories become embodied by windows as a framing device in painting?

³ Paul Benzon, *Archival Time, Absent Time: On William Basinski's The Disintegration Loops*, accessed April 25, 2026, https://median.newmediacaucus.org/the_aesthetics_of_erasure/the-disintegration-loops/.

Chapter 2: Dialects of inside and outside, the window, the threshold and time

A conceptual framing device I apply to the painting comes from Qing(情)and jing(景), which are a part of the Yijing notion.⁴ In Chinese cultural tradition, the function of poetry has been to express Qingjing/emotion and scene through minimum words. In my paintings, the aperture of the peripheral recollection is seen through the subject matter of a frame, which, in turn, is viewed behind or through a painted window. In the memory composition, the window format serves as a mediator. In a literary sense, the notion of Yijing is used to create a poetic image that references the poetry of Li Bai discussed below. As I navigate my practice through Yijing, I notice gaps within paintings that resemble the Chinese painting technique Liu bai(留白), which stands for leaving blanks or the interplay of void/Xu(虚) and solid/Shi(实). The poet uses this method to evoke what is not there.⁵ The memory image then becomes a shared experience with the spectator, and the philosophical phenomenon of the poetic image continues within the canvas frame as an internal landscape.

⁴ Yanfang Tang, *Translating across Cultures: Yi Jing and Understanding Chinese Poetry*, (USA), 2014, <https://media.sciltp.com/articles/sciltp/ics/2014/13-Yanfang-Tang.pdf>.

⁵ Tang, *Translating across Cultures: Yi Jing and Understanding Chinese Poetry*.

Window as threshold

My paintings often begin with a moment of recollection. When I was younger, I always sat by the window while painting and drawing. I used to gaze out the window, noticing that time inside seemed to slow down while I painted, and the world outside did too. I use the window motif as a mediator in the painting between the internal and the external, creating a dialect. An ontological perspective on painting peripheral recollections is explored through overlapping marks, the removal of thin layers of paint, and the creation of ambiguity within the memory image, like a palimpsest. In this chapter, I will also unpack Yijing, which serves as the methodology for this practice-led research as I navigate various layers of memory across different periods of my life to understand and sit with them. I found myself looking through the treasures of old writings, photos, objects, and belongings that my grandma kept for decades. In many ways, Yijing resonates with the emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical quality of creating.

The term Yijing stems from Chinese poetry and can be broken down into two characters that explain how it can serve as a method of introspective exploration. As already mentioned, my interpretation of ‘Yi’ (意) in Yijing refers to the intentionality/consciousness of the mind, and ‘Jing’ (境) means realm, place, space.⁶ This method describes the artworks' intentions as arising from the artist's inner world. When applied to Chinese landscape painting, it can reflect the artist's imaginative composition of their inner landscape.

Observations made on my walk around the park near my house provided a scene which could embody the experience I feel in everyday life. I noticed that the trees in the distance had a rhythmic pattern to their arrangement. They seemed to multiply when I focused my gaze on the horizon: my painting would focus on the trees and the cyclical rhythm of life.

I became interested in the shapes of Chinese scroll paintings. The four frames of the polyptych *Forrest Hill Road* form the periphery of the painted memory; together they create a large-scale landscape that you can walk through. In this painting, the window frame becomes the threshold through which I gaze into the cyclical nature of the everyday, through the barely visible frames, I hover between the observed

⁶ Qi Li and John Ryan, “Nature, Engagement, Empathy: ‘Yijing’ as a Chinese Ecological Aesthetics,” *Environmental Values* 26, no. 3 (2017): 343–64.

time and peripheral recollections. I observed that in the painting, the tension between something busy and something simpler draws the gaze, along with the contrast between a high-chroma colour and a lower-intensity background. In this painting, we are on the inside of the frame, gazing towards the horizon, and an empty vase sits tentatively on the sill, occupying the foreground.

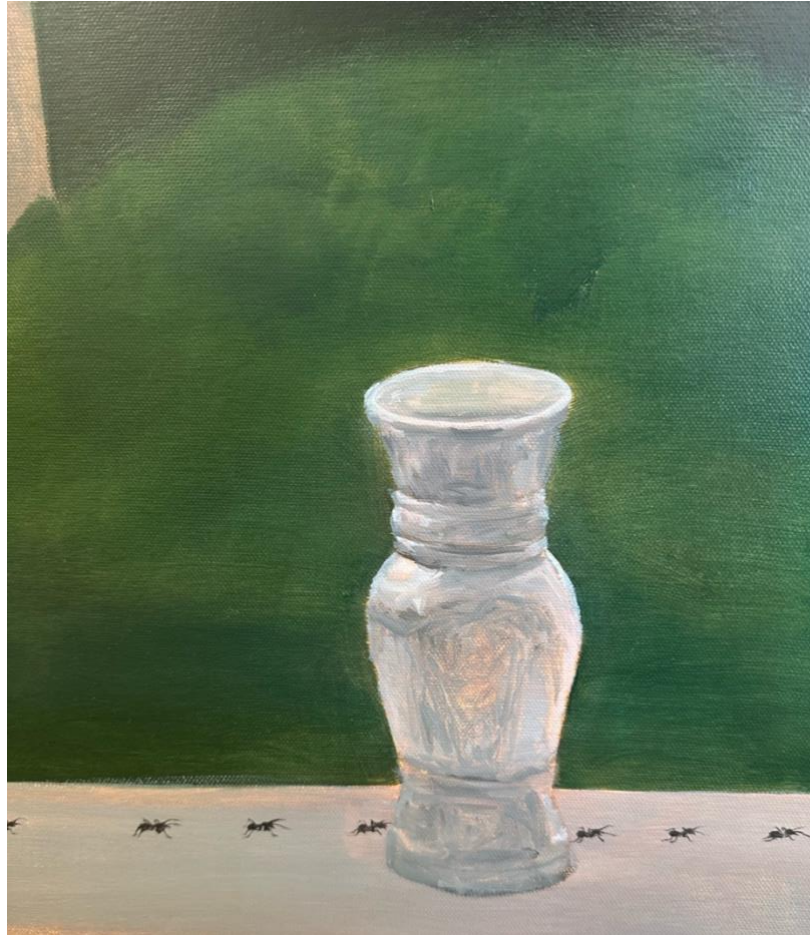


Figure 4, Detail of *Forrest Hill Road*.

Internal and external

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 5, Edward Hopper, *Seven A.M.*, 1948, Oil on canvas, 76.7cm x 101.9cm, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/732>.

I became interested in *Seven A.M.* by Edward Hopper and in how he uses symbols to indicate a void. The painting *Seven A.M.*, devoid of presence, contains a passive silence; it evokes my own experience of the everyday facing the emptiness of loss and holds tension in its carefully composed elements. The trees in the painting are painted in a dark colour, and even at close range, the lighter tree trunks are barely visible. Its interior, compared to the few items displayed in the shop window, is almost empty. A sharp contrast is

created in this painting between the forest and the building's white exterior.

I am reminded of my own room in China, with its bare walls. In *Forrest Hill Road*, my painting of the trees is a mix of red, phthalo green, yellow, and blue, in contrast to the barely visible grey windowsill. And in *Seven A.M.*, in contrast to the forest's impermanence and the building's fragile appearance, Hopper seems to hint at the relationship between transience, decay, and death found in nature and the everyday. In *Forrest Hill Road* from this perspective within the frame, the ants cut across the gaze; they symbolise renewal and decay. At first glance, an eerie silence pervades; we can only feel the presence in the face of absence, and as we search the painted image, we notice the ants slowly walking across the sill and disappearing behind the green curtain.

Beyond the windowpane, the trees multiply and echo. I wanted the eye to drift across the horizon, amongst the trees and houses, unable to settle on one certain house in this trail of time. In the second panel, the small vase contrasts with the large tree. On the other hand, I utilise the canvas's framing device to break the painting into four frames; the open space in between each canvas can be perceived as a gap in time. In this way, the gaps in the painting become space for adjusting the aperture of multiple memories. The four frames of the canvas echo a similar cyclical nature to everyday life. In the lower section, the ants are painted in a calligraphic style and resemble the Chinese character 我 (I). This relates to my main theme of Yijing as an introspective exploration, as if I were surveying the painting from the foreground.

This evocative expression of leaving space, or gaps, resembles the Chinese painting technique Liubai (留白).⁷ In this case, the peripheral memories surrounding my homes are embodied in an internal landscape that appears on this side of the window as a fragmented memory composition in my paintings, and, inside the frame of the canvas in *Forrest Hill Road*, the external time beyond the windows reflects my encounter with the everyday and my own perception of time. There is an interplay of void/ Xu(虚) and solid/Shi(实) between the theme of windows and the conceptual understanding of windows. The window serves as a threshold for peripheral recollection to hover between spaces, colour composition, surface treatment, and is a signifier I use to evoke the sound of silence I experience through this encounter with time.

In the void/Xu the uninhabited, absent, and what appears to be a normal scene becomes a sign within a sign. I became interested in what inspired Edward Hopper to address such subjects and how this might help me understand my own use of framing, cropping, and stillness in a painted image, while also drawing on Nishitani's notion of nothingness. Hopper's unique style conveys a sense of tension between the internal and the external; often, we are standing behind the frame, looking into a seemingly quiet yet unusual scene unfolding behind another window.

⁷ Tang, *Translating across Cultures: Yi Jing and Understanding Chinese Poetry*.



Figure 6, Xin Bi, *Forrest Hill Road*, 2026, Oil on canvas, 150cm x 200cm.

Frame within frame

In chapter 5 of the book *American Silences*, in an interview with Brian O'Doherty in 1963, Hopper mentions that he draws on visual images in his poems, especially those whose subjects are silence, and that he uses them as inspiration for his drawings.⁸ This is perhaps similar to how Norman Bryson in *Vision and Visuality* acknowledges that the elements outside the paintings can reveal the essence of the world outside their frame:

And what the image also has to acknowledge, even while it records the narrow passage of light that travels to an empirical observer, is the viewer's remainder, the sum of other views that the viewer excludes by assuming this view, the surrounding envelope of invisibility. What painting risks, in the Ch'an perspective, is the production of a false ontology in which the seer and the seen commune in tunnel vision: the subject mistaking what is only a profile of the object for the object itself; the profile, thus cut out, creating for itself a hypostasized viewing subject, pinned at the other end of the tunnel.⁹

⁸ Joseph Ward, ed., "Edward Hopper," in *American Silences, The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans, and Edward Hopper* (Louisiana State Press, 1985; repr., Routledge, 2017), <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.aut.ac.nz/reader/read-online/5e2bcb3c-2c22-4120-b3a2-c3f82dd28287/book/epub?context=ubx>.

⁹ Ch'an painting also referred to flung ink, is a Japanese calligraphy painting practice.

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 7, Edward Hopper, *Automat*, 1927, Oil on canvas, 71.4cm x 91.4cm,
<https://www.edwardhopper.net/automat.jsp>

In *Automat* (see fig. 7), the silence Hopper depicts is tense and unnatural; a female figure sits by the window, and in this seemingly ordinary external world, the window feels like a threshold into the emptiness. Amid the empty space around them, the painted figure's stillness intensifies the silence's tension. Even though most of his subjects reside in a negative, silent, lonely, and largely absent world, it speaks of truths we do not usually disclose. Behind Hopper's act of cropping and choice of composition lies a message. In these restrictive frames, we see paintings as scenes not fully revealed, as if we cannot see everything there is to see.

His discussion opened a window into some of my peripheral memories of my childhood in China; I immediately thought of a core memory: reading the poem "*Quiet Night Thought*" with my childhood friends. This poem by Li Bai goes like this:

Moonlight bright in front of bed,
seems like frost upon ground.
Lifts head watch the bright moon,
lower head think of home.

床前明月光，
疑是地上霜。
举头望明月，
低头思故乡。

In a conversation with my grandmother, I asked her what she thought of the poetic image of *Quiet Night Thought*. She replied to my question with a story that resonated with the poem's image.

"The night was extremely quiet, and any noises could be heard. I hushed her (grandmother's sister) because she was being too loud; it was quiet and eerie. But we still pushed each other out of the way, taking turns seeing through the hole in the window." As she took a brief pause to catch her breath at the sight of this memory, she explained: "It was beautiful, the moon was bright, and the ground seemed like it was covered in frost." My encounter with the poetic image from the poem, mixed with the memory image my grandmother described to me, was co-created by the ambiguity of the poetic image and her story. In *Quiet Night Thought*, Li's lack of first-person pronouns creates a poetic world capable of generating a shared memory through the spectator's interpretations. It is timeless in the sense that this is a still image reinterpreted through the present and will remain relevant in the future. It lives through collective memory, using a few words to convey the emotion of homesickness; the poem emphasises the poet's diaspora, as Li is far from home and unable to connect with his community. In a poetic sense, Yijing embodies the human emotional experiences and dissolves perceptual boundaries, leaving space for co-creation. The poetic image transcends time through culture, memory, encounters and the moon is the witness.

Through this conversation with my grandmother, we brought back memories of a spontaneous encounter, and this poetic image became our private phenomenon. In his poem, Li looks out his

window towards the night sky from his bed and thinks of his home.¹⁰ I notice diaspora in my interpersonal relationships; talking about memories of China with my grandmother helps slightly by keeping the past active. This peripheral memory can also be applied to conjuring ideas for paintings. I began sketching an idea for something that could embody the poetic phenomenon, using framing, cropping, and symbols.

In this painting, *Room in Forest Hill* (see fig. 8), the tree through the window moves with the direction of the air; the wind outside the window seems to howl, and the sky is an orange-red colour, suggestive of the start of a storm. I created a memory composition of a particular silent evening where the tops of the trees on the horizon were glazed by the setting sun. The reference images for this painting were taken at separate times, a few weeks apart. In this painting, there is an interplay between the void (虚) and the concrete (实) as I paint from memory and reference images. When sketching out the composition before starting the painting, I wanted to highlight the framing techniques and included everyday objects, such as a curtain, chairs, windowpanes, and open doorways. The use of frames, door rectangles, shadows, light, and colour corresponds with the canvas geometry and functions as a frame within a frame. To crop the composition, I decided to lower the windowpanes' frame heights, so that the almost empty interior would be more visible in contrast with the tree in front of it. The large window, the muted bare walls, and the open doorways in the painting call forth the moment of contact with this silent memory and frame the composition with forms.

In summary, the notion of Yijing can be conveyed in this painting through a framing device: peripheral recollections within the painted memory create an emotional space, while the internal and external elements provide a visual image that connects the void and the concrete. There is a saying in Chinese, “意中有景, 景中有意” which translates to there is a scene in thought, thought in scene. From this perspective, the poetics of Yijing have a striking similarity to the formative aspects of windows as a framing device, as the window serves as a framework and threshold into the internal landscape of my paintings.

¹⁰ Li Bai's poems often depict his longing for home, back to the time of the Tang dynasty where communication and the difference between rural and countryside was significant.



Figure 8, Xin Bi, *Room In Forrest Hill*, 2026, Oil on canvas, 110cm x 90cm.

Chapter 3 Peripheral recollections, notes on red and grey

In my paintings, red is an emotionally charged colour that serves as the framework and underlayer. As discussed in the first chapter, present memory recedes into the background as fragmented memories resurface through thinly painted layers. Similarly, in this chapter I explain that color can embody ontological transformations. As a second-generation immigrant facing alienation and noticing it in my interpersonal relationships, I navigate my paintings with colours that remind me of home, similar to Marcel Proust's madeleine effect: I hold on to these moments through the recall of colour.¹¹ When speaking of this phenomenon, I am referring to the moment when a particular scent (a madeleine dipped in tea) takes us back down memory lane, where older memories begin to pour out. In my case, using a particular colour is a way to bring emotionally charged moments into the present and preserve them through painting.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs : The Complete Text*, trans, Richard Howard (University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Page number 53,57.

Peripheral recollections

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Figure 9, Pierre Bonnard, *Coffee*, 1947, Oil on canvas, 106.4cm x 73cm, <https://www.kingandmcgaw.com/prints/pierre-bonnard>.

Bonnard describes his painting method as “*pantheistic painting*.”¹² Similarly, I find śūnyatā has qualities that connect the painted object with the surrounding field outside the pictorial surface. Referring again to Bonnard’s *Coffee*, the external and internal settings in the painting are unified by his attention to this method of painting. The elements of the painting create a field of transformation that opens onto a space where marks, colour, light, and scenes interconnect,

and, through Bonnard's painting, the frames of objects dissolve within the pictorial surface. In relation to the notion of śūnyata, light diffused under a prism becomes colours, and colour alone does not exist in the white light without the refraction of light from something outside its containment.¹³ The object absorbs light at certain wavelengths, and then the reflected light from its surface enters our eyes, revealing the colour. Without outside elements, colour has no inherent existence. Bonnard notices this, and the opposing colours in his painting are emotionally charged, with light bouncing off objects and colours interacting. He believes all details, such as colour and surface treatment, should be treated equally. In his notion of painting, he also refers to light as the essence of life. This field of transformation is also apparent in the works of Korean artist Do Ho Suh through his use of colour and transparent materials.

¹² Anna McNay, “Bonnard: En Toute Intimité,” Studio International, January 13, 2017, <https://www.studiointernational.com/pierre-bonnard-en-toute-intimite-review>.

¹³ Todd M. Casey, “The Language of Colour: The Science of Colour,” in *The Oil Painter’s Color Handbook A Contemporary Guide to Color Mixing, Pigments, Palettes, and Harmony* (Monacelli Studio, 2022). Page 27.

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Figure 10, Do Ho Suh, *North Wall*, 2005. Installation view at Leeum Museum of Art, 2012. Photography by Jeon Taeg Su. © Do Ho Suh

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki houses a sculpture by Do Ho Suh titled *North Wall*, which traces his father's studio wall in Korea.¹⁴ This transparent structure speaks of displacement and memories of home; the green symbolises the roof of a traditional scholar's home, a colour reminiscent of his childhood home in Korea. While looking up at the green sculpture, I noticed that it moved with the direction of the air flow; the elements outside of the fabric- the light, air, and movement interconnect the form to a field of transformation.

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Figure 11, Do Ho Suh, *Hub/s*, Naoshima, 2025.

I encountered a second installation by Suh in the Naoshima New Museum of Art. The work originated from his visit to a home on the island; the inspiration for the 'Hub' installation came from conversations with the people there and is based on a corridor in the interviewees' home. As light passes through these diaphanous structures, the white wall of the gallery collects the pink, green, and blue, creating a rainbow of colour. These installations by Do Ho Suh have influenced colour choices in my painting practice. I use colours reminiscent of a memory; the forms of the objects in the scene seem to be diffused by a ray of light.

The reference images I use for my painting also display remnants of the light outside the image. At first glance, the surrounding objects, both inside and outside the frame, cast their reflected colours into the shadow in the reference photograph I took for the preliminary sketches. Looking closely, I can see that the vase in the reference photograph contains blue, purple, red, and yellow. Referring to Bonnard's treatment of light in painting, he makes a white tablecloth appear blue, green, and yellow, and these colours hover in the shadows within the marks of other colours. In my painting *Afternoon in China*, I acknowledge the transformation of light through refraction and the fading of memory over time. In a sense, memory flourishes and becomes mobile as it

¹⁴ "Do Ho Suh: *North Wall*," Auckland Art Gallery, accessed date 5 May, 2026. <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/whats-on/exhibition/do-ho-suh-or-north-wall>.

does not exist on its own, but rather through interactions with people, culture, and emotions. In the painting, the room's interior is half-seen, as the window fills the entire canvas. The diaphanous quality of soft pastels, when applied over oil paint, illuminates this painted memory and reflects it in a soft green haze. In the reference images, I noticed the hints of CMYK in the photo transfer experiment. I then applied magenta, cyan, and yellow to the soft pastel painting. As the painting's value was already determined by the monochromatic underpainting, applying a lighter layer of soft pastels produced a similar effect to the orchid painting, with the colour applied as a glaze that does not fully conceal the underpainting.



Figure 12, Xin Bi, *Afternoon in China*, 2026, Oil paint, Soft pastel and paper mache on canvas, 110cm x 92cm.

Red

My earliest impression of red was on New Year's Day in China when we lit loud firecrackers shaped like little dynamite sticks (鞭炮, bianpao). They were red when we bought them and were made to be loud to scare away bad luck and negative energy. The next morning, I looked out my window at the courtyard in front of my house and saw the ground piled high with the paper from the firecrackers.

In this context, red means abundance, power, and confidence. It arises from the core of my memories and takes root in my painting. Stories reminiscent of colour experiences can be found in the corners of my home, as I observed that the living space is interconnected with the past, and the residue of my culture and memories appears in the present moment.

In my pastel drawings, *Everything Everywhere* and *Everything Everywhere Take 2*, the color red appears in fragments. It appears in the cast shadows of objects, in the underlayer, and in forms that seem to dissolve. Methods of cropping the painting are applied through the configurations of the everyday objects and windowpanes. As I draw peripheral memories of the windowpane in China, the frames and the world beyond it seem to dissolve into a mix of colors, and the composed objects fade in and out within our perception. In these drawings, multiple colors, hue, chroma, and value interact with each other. I notice that in real life, if I stare at the shadow for a long time, my perception seems to adjust to the dark, and the shadow takes on a lavender-grey and a light-pink hue. Based on my observations, I applied cobalt blue to the drawing, with flocks of red marks appearing to sit within the lavender-grey and blue shadows. The previously mentioned “ontological perspective” also appears at the level of color, in relation to Bonnard’s *Coffee* and in my pastel drawing.



Figure 13, Xin Bi, *Everything Everywhere*, 2026, Soft pastel on paper, 297mm x 120mm.

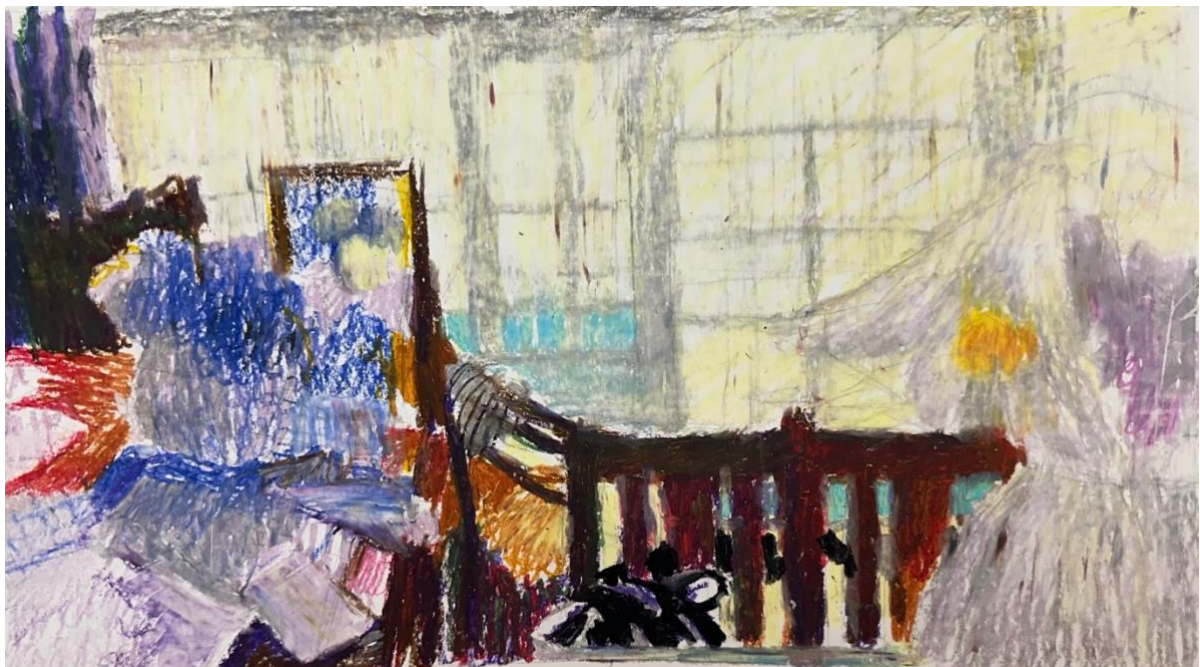


Figure 14, Xin Bi, *Everything Everywhere Take 2*, 2026, Soft pastel on paper, 297mm x 120mm.

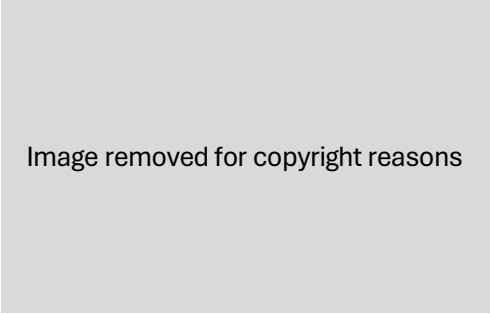


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Figure 15, Brunelle Dias Primbs, *Essential Worker*, 2020, Oil on Linen, 148 x 210 cm, <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/187d24ce-9bfc-409f-81e8-305fb3e13cfd/content>

Auckland-based painter Brunelle Dias Primbs' paintings represent the transience of everyday life and its seasonal relationships. Her painting conveys this fluidity through the way she navigates memory through her everyday life. Space for the spectator's own interpretation is welcomed in Dias Primbs' paintings, as the figure-background relations ebb and flow with colours reminiscent of memories; areas of the multicoloured canvas remain untouched, ambiguous, not inert, but aware and flowing.

Like my painting of everyday gestures, her painted moments interconnect the past to the present through noticing small things and colour. In the painting *Essential Worker* (see fig.15) by Dias Primbs, the figure rests on the couch and appears to be slipping into it. Her method of blending figures from foreground to background successfully shows a fluctuation that reflects the ebb and flow of her everyday environment. The viewer is welcomed into a space where colour meets fluidity, and our own perception of the everyday merges with the fleetingness in her paintings.



Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 16, Brunelle Dias Primbs, *a posture of confession*, 2024, oil on canvas, 1900 x 1250mm.

I see a resemblance between Dias Primbs' colour choices and my everyday encounter with colour, as I use colours that are emotionally charged; the colours carry memories of everyday life and remind me of the transient nature of the moments. From the exhibition, 'A Moment to Hold', and from an interview with Artshouse Trust, Dias Primbs mentions: "Often diaristic, my paintings capture fleeting feelings and afterthoughts of conversations and other unofficial observations. Visual cues of the temperament they hold are suggested through unorthodox compositional angles or thinned-out paint. These methods create a sense of transience akin to the sensation of memory. The nature of painting reminds me to reflect, not ruminate, to hold onto the brush lightly, to caress the skin of the canvas and to ask, 'Where is God in all of this?'" ¹⁵ There is a correlation between my use of emotionally charged colours and the painting methods observed in Dias Primbs' exhibition. As

I explore recurring moments of small gestures of love apparent in my everyday life, the use of red in my paintings signifies of ongoing memories of these fleeting moments. In the right panel of my triptych painting, *Afternoon indoors*, the lily in the vase takes up half the canvas, and the gaze follows the painted marks to what is next to it. The red dates sit on the table below the flower. When I painted the dates from memory, I arranged them on a plate; in a sense, they strongly resembled an offering. In Chinese culture, there is sometimes an unspoken agreement that when we apologise or want to show love, we try to avoid saying "I'm sorry" or "I love you" instead, we peel fruit and offer food as an apology and as a gesture of appreciation.

¹⁵ Brunelle Dias Primbs, "A Moment to Hold with Brunelle Dias Primbs," (Royal Oak, New Zealand), THE ARTS HOUSE TRUST, November 20, 2025, <https://www.artshousetrust.co.nz/journal/a-moment-to-hold-with-brunelle-dias>.

In my everyday life, I cut fruit and pour tea for my grandmother; it is a habit of mine to show gratitude and love through gestures rather than words. In *Essential Worker*, a colourful blanket is placed on the couch next to the figure, as if someone had laid it there to avoid awakening the figure. The purple-and-green patterned blanket, in contrast with the muted sleeping figure, shows all surrounding colours and objects interconnected through the layering of paint, drawing the gaze between the figure, the blanket and the surroundings.

In the painting, *a posture of confession* (see fig. 16), the figure stands near the edge of the canvas, leaning on the kitchen benchtop, as if conversing with someone we cannot see. The dining room is framed by the entrance, which appears as a dark border, directing the gaze toward what seems to be a confession unfolding. Dias Primbs' method of blending figures from foreground to background effectively captures the ebb and flow of her everyday environment. The viewer is welcomed into a space where colour meets fluidity, and our own perception of the everyday is applied to this ambiguous portrayal by the artist.

Grey: between colours and the recollection of memory

In this section, I will unpack the influence of the colour grey within my painting practice. I begin by using examples from everyday encounters with the colour, then unpack the conceptual use of grey. The idea for the painting began with this small, everyday encounter: In my current living room in New Zealand, there is a fireplace. I remember in China we used to burn coal. The coal would glow red as I sat next to the fireplace with my grandma, cooking sweet potatoes on the lid. Soon, the glowing hot coal turned grey, crumpled to the touch, and turned to ash.

There is an activity I like to do on the bus to university; it's a kind of test to strengthen my perception of colour and help me get better at identifying colour relations. The bus is driving on the motorway; it's on the route from where I live. A sunlit bridge passes by, appearing warm yellow, and the shadow cast below it (compared to the warm light) becomes a sort of red-grey with a hint of purple. In a way, I am happy to do this, as the bus is always crowded, and to avoid making eye contact, I look out the window. To distinguish a green-grey from a red-grey requires close observation of the surroundings, and comparing the relationships among hue, value, and chroma can strengthen this skill. A sunlit bridge passes by, and the top of the bridge appears to be a warm, light-yellow hue. The shadow below it, compared to the warm light, appears a shade of red-grey with a hint of purple. With a better understanding of colour, I can pinpoint that the shadow appears this due to simultaneous contrast. I then got off the bus and went into the studio to paint. Based on previous observations of the colour grey, I distributed purple-grey and red-grey marks throughout the painting *Afternoon Indoors* (see fig.17). On the left side of the painting, the orchid reappears again in the foreground, in front of the green-and-blue striped couch. The legs of the chair are a shade of brown-grey, acting as local colour that fades into the shadow; the green and blue then move forward. The results showed that the greys were pushed to the background, while the saturated blue and green were lifted to the foreground by contrast, and the objects hover between the underlayer and the newly painted layers.

The experiment of grey slipping into the background reminds me of my experience as a second-generation immigrant, as with immigration comes alienation; memories often appear half-formed and slip away through this painting practice. Thus, my memory of how we used to burn coal in China. The coal would glow red, then turn grey, then crumble to ash grey.

This shift from red to grey, then to ash, is akin to the way memory unfolds over time. An emotionally charged memory appears red, like burning coal; it is active and vivid. Over time, this fades into grey as it

slowly diminishes, not instantly but gradually cooling into ash and fragments. And through the transparency of the paint, red, grey, and other colours interweave and overlap, forming an image of my living room's current interior alongside the photo of the floor in China. In Sunday Afternoon (see fig.18), the two layers hover in a state akin to memory: the past and present, neither fully present nor fully absent. The eyes are drawn immediately to the colors as the grey recedes into the shadows, where clarity and distance co-exist in the memory composition. Painting the farthest memory in black and grey suggests a recollection rather than an immediate observation. This creates a push-and-pull effect through simultaneous contrast and illustrates a case where the memory of a place gently fades.

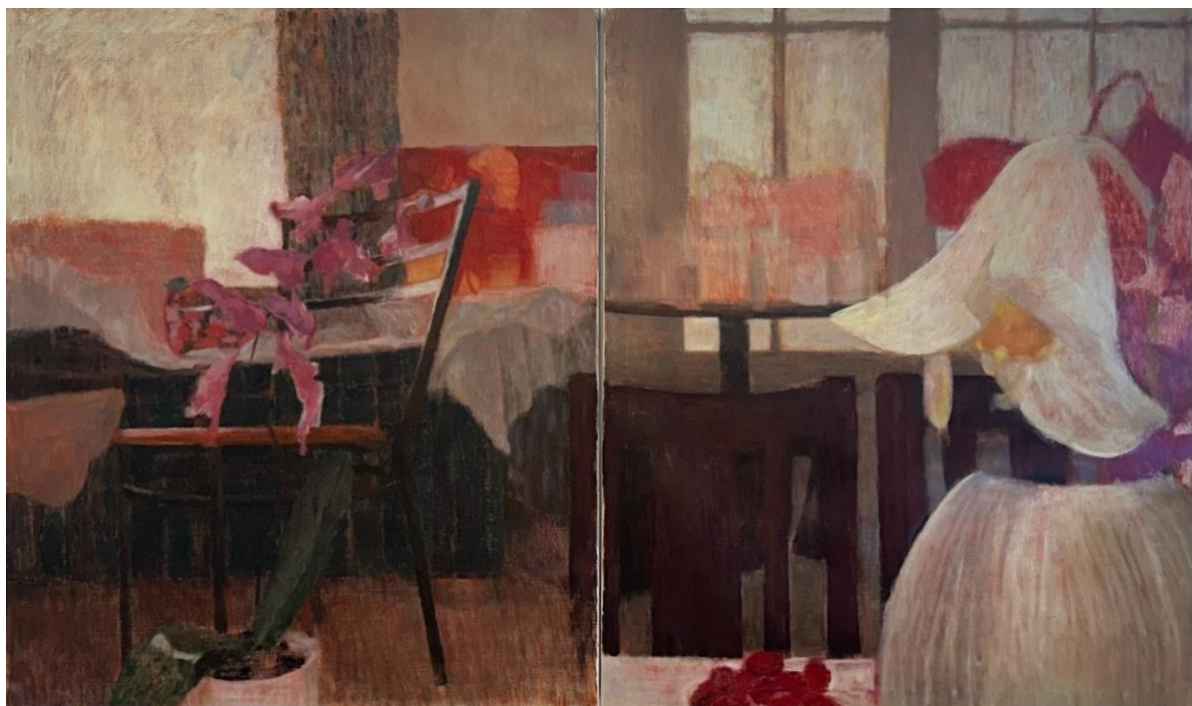


Figure 17, Xin Bi, *Afternoon Indoors*, 2026, Oil on canvas, 220cm x 100cm.



Figure 18, Xin Bi, *Sunday Afternoon*, 2026, Oil pastel, Oil paint, Acrylic on canvas, 110cm x 90cm.



Figure 19, Preparatory sketch, Pencil on paper, 2026, 148mm x 210mm.



Figure 20, Preparatory sketch, Oil pastel on paper, 2026, 148mm x 210mm.



Figure 21, Preparatory sketch, Oil on paper, 2026, 148mm x 210mm.



Figure 22, Preparatory sketch, Pencil on paper, 2026, 148mm x 210mm.

CONCLUSION

This practice-based project has given me a framework to grasp the fleeting and embody it. Yijing has served as a framework for the methodology of this practice-led research as I navigated various layers of memory across different periods of my life to understand and sit with them. Memory and the self are constantly being reconstructed in time, and I do not intend to be fixed or absolute. Painting, in a sense, is an expression of the artist's consciousness, and through applying the notion of śūnyatā, I identified methods to dissolve an inert approach to perception by consciously adjusting my perception towards a wider frame.

In the first chapter, I compared the philosophical notion of śūnyatā as presented by Keiji Nishitani with the method of painting thinly, like a palimpsest, in which fragments of the past reappear in my painted memory. I found a similarity between the methods of layering and removing paint, akin to the fluidity of time. I argued that a painted image can dissolve an inert approach to seeing the everyday.

As I emphasised in Chapter 2, leaving gaps in the narrative through poetic imagery creates a space for the spectator to co-create the narrative. By not confining the form of the painted objects, the layers of colour and marks, and the thin layers of paint, the work attempts to disrupt an inert approach to painting, leaving room for imagination and for co-creation. The painting interacts with elements outside its frame and, as a result, is transformed through the dissolution of the frame.

Colours in Chapter 3 are conceptualised as emotionally charged and serve as reflections of memory, reminiscent of bittersweet moments in everyday life. Light, chroma, value, and hues were discussed in relation to Auckland painter Brunelle Dias Primbs' paintings, in which unnoticed little gestures of the everyday and their seasonal relationships are held onto and embodied through the fluidity of painting. The methodology of Yijing, arising from the artist's inner world, creates a space on the canvas where spectators can connect with their own emotions and transcend time.

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Installation view



Figure 23, Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 1 #1, Image by Paul Chapman



Figure 24, Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 1 #2, Image by Paul Chapman



Figure 25, Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 1 #3



Figure 26, Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 1 #4

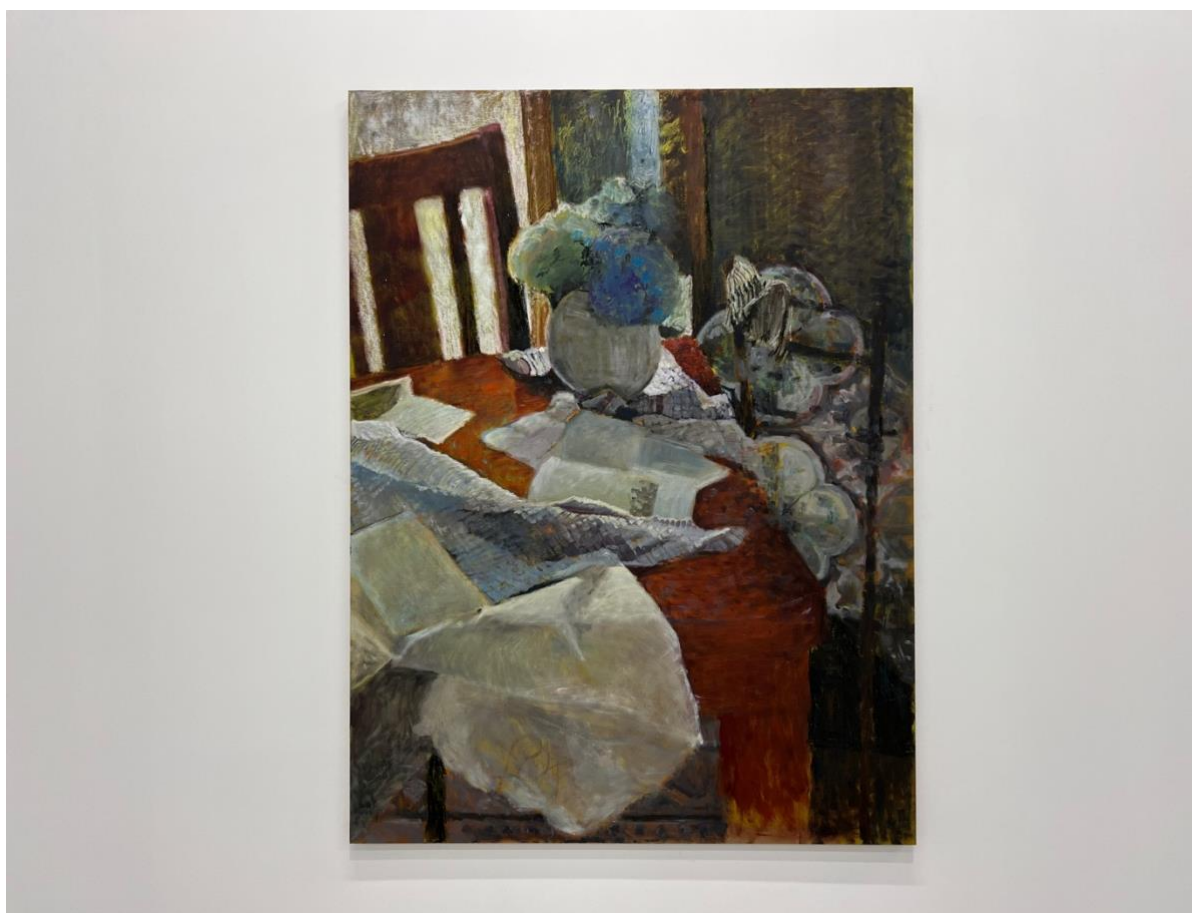


Figure 27, Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 1 #5, Image by Paul Chapman

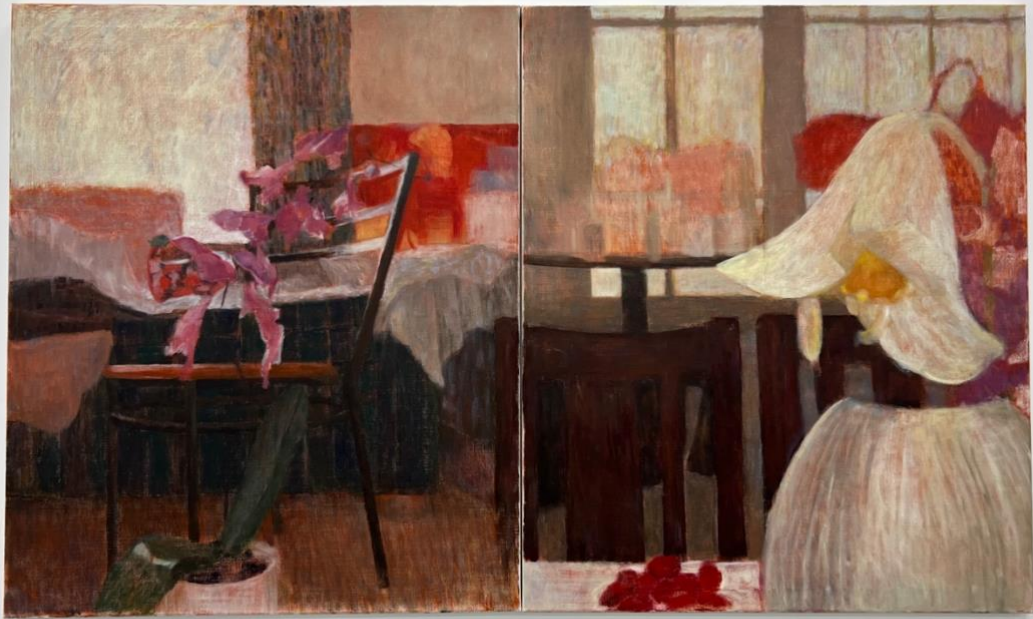


Figure 28, Exhibition installation, St Paul St Gallery 1 #6, Image by Paul Chapman