

# Chenxi Gao

## Extended Artist Statement

My artworks explore the quiet complexity of an emerging sense of self in relation to the effects of time and space. Each piece records shifting intimate spaces and social and cultural environments as I moved from one home to another, from rural to urban, and from China to the United States. I process, organize, preserve, hide, or reveal aspects of my memories in my work by manipulating various materials, such as paper, fibers, and found objects. The layers of imagery, patterns, and materials echo my thought process: where do I come from? What do I do with my memories? Should I keep them forever or put them away? Where am I going next?

Autobiographical memory, the memory of personal life events, “serves as a repository of self-information.” It constructs one’s sense of self and keeps it stable throughout the lifetime.

Autobiographical memory also helps with decision-making and socialization with others through memory-sharing.<sup>1</sup> My home is the anchor of my autobiographical memory and my “self.” The space and household objects within the space reflect who I was and who I am and shape who I will be. In my art-making process, I sift through the memories of my past and current homes, hoping to find that lost sense of self. Memories form in my mind, and the details shift whenever I recall them. Old photographs carry memories, and I always discover something new when I examine them. Objects are filled with memories. When I handle the objects, I think of the stories behind them. I find traces of my everyday life in them.

The dramatic and rapid shifts in my living spaces confused me as a child. When I was seven years old, my family moved from Laiwu, Shandong, a small town in northern China, to Nanjing, Jiangsu, a modern city in the south. Underneath the illusion of a better life in a big city, I felt humiliated about my old hand-made winter jackets among my classmates or when my northern accent slipped out. It forced me to abandon or hide my small-town past to fit in. I also secretly cherished my memories, fearing losing them forever: the handcrafted furniture, clothing, holiday ornaments, and my grandfather’s calligraphy and drawings. I withdrew to the past and asked myself: where do I belong?

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Vranić, Margareta Jelić, and Mirjana Tonković, “Functions of Autobiographical Memory in Younger and Older Adults,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 219.

In 2016, my family moved from China to the United States. After attending a boarding school for five years in Nanjing, I could finally live in an apartment with my family every day for the next three years. However, we moved frequently and had four different living spaces in the past seven years. We had to sort through our belongings and furniture each time, keep what was essential, and remake our home in a new place. The moves remind me that I will permanently lose the space that I call “home.” Can I preserve my memories of the spaces so as not to forget who I am?

My work uses indirect mark-making to record and recreate the formal qualities of mundane household objects and their dwelling spaces. I use intaglio and screenprinting techniques to create impressions from a matrix. The matrix leaves marks on the substrate; memories leave marks on me. I make embossings, rubbings, and tracings from the walls, bedding, and objects in my apartment. I also make patterns from images of my carpet. The subtle marks in my works seem fragile and may fade over time.

I often abstract and obscure the source of the imagery in my work. I layer translucent or semi-translucent materials like ink, tracing paper, thin fabrics, or projection. The layers work as a soft barrier between the viewers and my story. They ask the viewers to explore, to look closely, and not to understand. The layers are also barriers between my current and past. Am I ready to fully expose my past to myself and the viewers? Indirect mark-making and layering imply reluctance and ambiguity. While withholding some information, my work reveals parts of me that I did not know about. The push-and-pull between hiding and revealing asks the fundamental question: who am I? What is stopping me from being who I am?

Printmaking creates multiples, and repetition plays a vital role in my work. Going through my memories is a process of constant discovery. It is like folding and unfolding a piece of origami, learning about how it was made, and discovering the creases and the hidden parts of the paper. It is also like re-reading a book: I flip through the pages and remind myself of the narratives. The repeating elements in my works are like the pages of a journal. Art-making is a form of writing with textures, materials, and marks. I “write” repetitively to find the action’s meaning and process my thoughts. Whether they are squares of carpet images in the quilt of *2 Years 11 Months and 11 Days*, the ones on the pages of *Do You Know the Stories that Are Left Behind*, or the braided threads and paper tiles in *I Wander Around but Don’t Know Where to Settle*. They reflect my contemplation and wonder.

My art-making process is a journey of self-discovery. The overall tone of my works, the color choices, how I handle the materials, and the subconscious decisions I make reflect my heritage and identity.

The Chinese culture I grew up with taught me about home and nostalgia through poetry from the Tang and Song dynasties. Many classic imageries frequently appear in literature and bear symbolic meanings. The moon and moonlight symbolize recollections of home and family reunions. Threads

represent longing and familial connection. The shadows of poets symbolize loneliness. Leaves falling to the base of a tree signify going back to one's roots. The symbols obscure feelings. The homesickness is thus always subtle and quiet in the literature, and so is it in my work. The poems have become part of my life and influenced my artwork, as I am far away from home, like the poets.

The color red appears frequently in my work. Growing up surrounded by red, testified by its presence in almost all my childhood photos, I have a strong connection to it. Traditionally, in China, it is a color of good luck and blessings: my grandfather painted the furniture he made red, and my parents tied a piece of red fabric to the suitcases when we headed to the United States. Meanwhile, it represents the authority, the standard, and the rule. The teachers marked the students' assignments and exams with red ink. The examples in my elementary Chinese tracing book were in red. Red is both warm and intimidating to me. When I use red, which feeling am I going for?

The grid gradually becomes an overarching theme in my work. Grouping small pieces of prints, fabrics, or objects to form a larger composition or installation is like writing character by character in Chinese. I collect my scattered thoughts, memories, and moments in the home spaces. I organize them into a grid of squares, intentionally or unintentionally, hoping to find order and safety. The braided threads hanging from the ceiling form a square space I can enter. The images of the carpet taken at different times of the day remind me of the time I spent in my apartment. I can wrap myself inside of it by printing them on fabric and making them into a quilt. The grid is also from the Chinese character “回.” It has many definitions: (a measure word for matters or actions) a time, to circle, to go back, to turn around, to answer, and to return. Is it all about what I am exploring with my work? The shape of 回 is like an enclosed space, a home. A home that I hope to return to and discover who I am. A home that can keep me circling and unable to find the way out. Do I want to stay in that small “square” forever? Will I find my true self if I run away from my past?

Ultimately, my work is about recording my home spaces through various means and attempting to find out who I am. It is about the duality: concealing versus revealing, safety versus restriction, and staying versus fleeing. The imagery, patterns, and materials come from my memories or everyday life, but they are handled, modified, and contrasted, revealing my inner struggles. My works also record my self-exploration and discovery. They ask questions but do not necessarily provide the answers.