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A Post-Communist Picnic

A Post-Communist Picnic

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Yi Sheng

MFA Virginia Commonwealth University 2010
BFA Rhode Island School of Design 2004

Director: Peter Baldes
Associate Professor
and
Holly Morrison
Chair, Associate Professor

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2010

For Mom and Dad

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Abstract

Signaling the moon, packing balls of mud, carving a big sphere, cleaning with a giant unwieldy mop, playing with indigo, wrangling cardboard, setting sunflowers ablaze, playing a tune with a soda bottle, taking a walk with other people's laundry, kindling fire for smoke signals, weaving a bed, cracking seeds all night, listening to sleep, dressing a plant; these are some of the activities that have been incorporated into my work over the last two years. Most ideas begin in the studio and then are realized outside. Many of the tasks mentioned allow me to easily integrate into a crowd, where the project and I go unnoticed and remain indistinguishable from the buzz of day to day life. Other projects however, have been done with more consideration for its secrecy. The narratives that are incorporated in this thesis, both personal and culled from research, attempt to unpack some of the fleeting yet conceptually interwoven curiosities that have propelled me to search for these experiences.

In an attempt to revive a childhood hobby, I googled the words "cricket cages". The results returned thousands of hits for the actor Nicolas Cage.... Jump to couple of years ago... In search of a quintessential Parisian experience, a website recommended a cheap apartment away from the tourist center. Upon arriving, I realized the hostel was wedged between a Chinese grocer and a fake handbag outlet. I don't speak French and my new neighbors spoke no English, but to both of our surprise, we both quickly switched to Mandarin, and this served well for chitchatting and directions around town.

These are the kinds of experiences that nudge a kind of homesickness in me. New Jersey is where I grew up, but it's not home.

The question of where "home" is and what my fluctuating relationship to it are the immediate issues that arise. The complexity of how we situate our sense of self is the core of my work. What I put forth are the complications and contradictions of the psychology of dislocation. The experience of migration seems to leave me feeling as if I'm constantly straddling two shores, whether it is a physical separation of places, the mental and cerebral remapping of psyches, the linguistic and communicative misfires, or cultural divergences. There's a feeling of permanent impermanence, of never arriving at the destination because both beaches look close but I'm still treading water right in the middle of it all.

While my larger concerns frequently touch on gender, race, and class, my overall practice is based on personal experiences, many of which result in projects that do not fit so easily within these thematic parameters. I embrace a mix of video, performance, photography, and object-making equally. This way of making feels natural, perhaps because it reflects the exhaustive range of how our daily interactions are comprised. The seemingly disparate works are not unrelated, as they can be traced back to a single maker. The collective strength of this body of work draws from the very the fleeting connections that hold each exploration in proximity to another. Using this little book as a constellation of thoughts, wishes, and other curiosities that have shaped my work, I attempt to map in the following pages some of their interconnectivity.

Work can be defined in myriad ways. It can be engaging, pleasurable, and painful. It can be cathartic, monotonous, boring, or ambivalent. It can be one or several or all of these reactions together, happening in the mind, or in the body, or all at once in both places. In my “factory”, I am the sole worker and this implies that I must do all the work. On the surface, my interest in work is akin to the physical exertions required in menial positions. It is labor without obvious skill or training, a kind of work that has no grand ambitions; ceaseless toil centered on maintenance, on daily habits, and on meaninglessness to the finished result. Using the body to bridge wide reaches, collapse distance in time, and to satisfy a curiosity of my own limits, the experiences drawn from each event ground me in the present.

Calling artwork a “piece” has become vernacular. The use of this term can be traced back to the beginning of industrialization when workers earned their salaries by the “piecemeal”.¹ By the 1960’s, this moniker was fully integrated into art speak; artists adopted the expression to suggest a new attitude towards art making, aligning themselves with the work mode of factory workers. There’s a refusal to demonstrate the skills typically attributed to the category of a painter or a sculptor; instead artist and artist collectives presented work that seemed to require little or no effort or expertise, challenging traditional notions of the artist as a technical master of his craft.



Hi Red Center; Ochannomizu Drop (Dropping Event), 1964

Labor as Transformer

1966, China. In the name of redistributing and equalizing all aspects of social order, the new Maoist government halted day to day life. The reallocation of power and social positions included the “re-education” of the millions of youth. For almost ten years, all schools were shuttered prompting millions of young people to wander the streets out of boredom.² Within months however, the program to “re-educate” was strictly put into place, local administration handed down orders to assign youth to live and work in the fields, drive tractors, plant rice, mill steel, herd livestock, hundreds sometimes thousands of miles away from their families.³ The length of their stay was undetermined, and while some came back within these 10 years, the less lucky ones never returned home. Physical work was seen as redemptive, able to reverse China’s feudal past, and rid its people of antiquated thinking and the polluting effects of western influences. Labor could rehabilitate the privileged and have him or her reenter society as a true comrade, a believer of collective good over individual goals.

It can be assumed that the leaders in charge believed that the mind-body connection could alter the ideology of an entire nation.

In America, that same period of ushered in the “Summer of Love”. While the music of the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, and the Beach Boys filled the airways and blasted from car radios, race riots broke out nation wide. The generation later to be dubbed the “baby boomers”, also in their teenage years, rebelled against their parents and what they saw as a restrictive trajectory to what was considered a successful life. And so they ventured into the world, many hitchhiking to cities such as San Francisco, in search of individuality and identity. For the moment, traditional responsibilities were shunned in favor of music, drugs, free love, and rock n’ roll.

This is my springboard; the simultaneous collision and temporal alignment of two far-away places. In many ways I am the product of the two, constantly looking outwards to put my insides back together.

(top) my mother and friends, date unknown
(bottom) my father and friend, 1968



The actions of unskilled work are an untapped gateway.

On the surface, spending months to carve a ball by hand seems absurdist, unnecessarily punishing as technology could easily make the same shape in a fraction of the time. For me, to make a solid wooden ball from salvaged wood and a single chisel, is an investigation into the interiority of labor. The actions offer a way to examine both the mind and the body in the motion of work.

As the body adjusts to new movements, each action becomes increasingly fluid and streamlines to the task at hand. As the body fine-tunes itself to our demands, even the smallest gesticulation begins have grace.

Much like the body's adaptation, the mind finds satisfaction in seeing tangible progress. In the case of the indigo ball, the end of each work day saw a small improvement, the ball becomes a little more round, a bit less square, and its this small advancement that keeps the monotony of the labor at bay. The tunnel vision of perfecting the sphere partially obscures the task ahead, blocking mental and physical obstacles, ceaselessly pushing for more work. In other private moments, as the hands keep busy, the imagination wanders, weaving in and out of different musings.

Repetition in art making is easily associated with eastern traditions of meditation based in Buddhism. But being someone who grew up in central New Jersey, and know about eastern aesthetics through the likes of John Cage, some 19th century Romantic painters, and a few visits to the Asian wing of art museums, it's ironic to link my work with a direct eastern tradition. While I believe that genuine study of Zen Buddhism and other eastern strains of thought have been introduced in earnest by many western thinkers, the ideas brought forth, in no way, have been thoroughly absorbed and fully understood. The dissemination of eastern philosophy feels, often times, received at the most superficial level. I regretfully can not reclaim a Zen aspect of repetitive work because of my lack of knowledge in this field, but what i know is that my interest in reoccurring structures is partially phenomenologically driven. What engages is the repetitive actions that unlock a bodily connection to materials unfamiliar to me.



Ball, 2010
salvaged wood, indigo
15" inches in diameter



Bob Kinmont. Plate #1 from Eight Natural Handstands. 1969

The Muscle has a Mind

Research in the field of motor skills posits that repetition is crucial for the brain to exactly learn an action. This stands true for any gesture of the body, from the smallest muscles in our mouths that control inflections of speech and accents, to larger motor skills such as tying shoelaces, shooting hoops, playing an instrument, or driving a car. Repetition is a natural way to familiarize our bodies with the world at large, encoding each object, each encounter into the storage spaces of our muscles which are then connected to the brain via neural pathways.⁵



Man in a Tub, 2010
Lambda Print
18" x 24" inches

The worker's shirt:

In my earliest memories of Shanghai in the early 1980's, everyone wore a shade of deep blue. Sometimes it was the blue of a clear early evening, the deep hues of night, bright with a touch of cerulean. The deep blues came in every shade, texture, weight, and intensity, from the translucent soft blues of a well worn summer dress to the heavy duck cotton of an overcoat.

Although the graceful leaves of an indigo plant show no trace of the hue that it is famous for, legends surrounding the magic of the plant were unrivaled. In Java, it caused headaches and nausea just at the sight of a cut plant. Dutch planters believed that their "native workers who harvested and handled indigo plants were liable to suffer from sexual impotence, accompanied by a temporary semi-lameness of the lower limbs". Healers using Indigo, on the other hand, were convinced that it had medicinal properties to heal tumors, alleviate inflammation, and even cure "cataleptic and other fits".⁶

The origin of the plant and its dyestuff traces back thousands of years, Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) described a test for "true" indigo in which he said the pieces would "burn with a flame of a most beautiful purple tint". By the dye's very rot, a slow process of decay and oxidation, we begin to see the color blue.⁷

In many ways, the color blue built the American south. From the 18th to early 19th century, it was one of the most profitable export commodities from America, as much as 1,300,000 pounds of indigo was exported in 1809, and this production rate continued until the 1920's, especially in the Carolinas, and Georgia.⁸

Attempts to historicize and locate the meaning of blue have a long and multifaceted history. William Gass, wrote an entire book dedicated to the rumination of the color, and its effects on our emotions.⁹ While my interest in indigo was seeded by a simple desire to look deeper into personal memories, research has yielded more evidence of its ambiguity and the extensive record of the many attempts to comprehend its significance.

There are hundreds of species of the indigofera plant worldwide. The ubiquity of the plant makes it one of the reasons that we have such an abundance of blue. Blue denim in particular has its origins in the uniforms of workers.¹⁰ Cheap to grow and harvest, this hardy plant made Levi's Jeans possible, or in the case of communist China, the color showed modesty and allegiance to one's comrades, who wore identical sexless blue shirts and slacks.¹¹

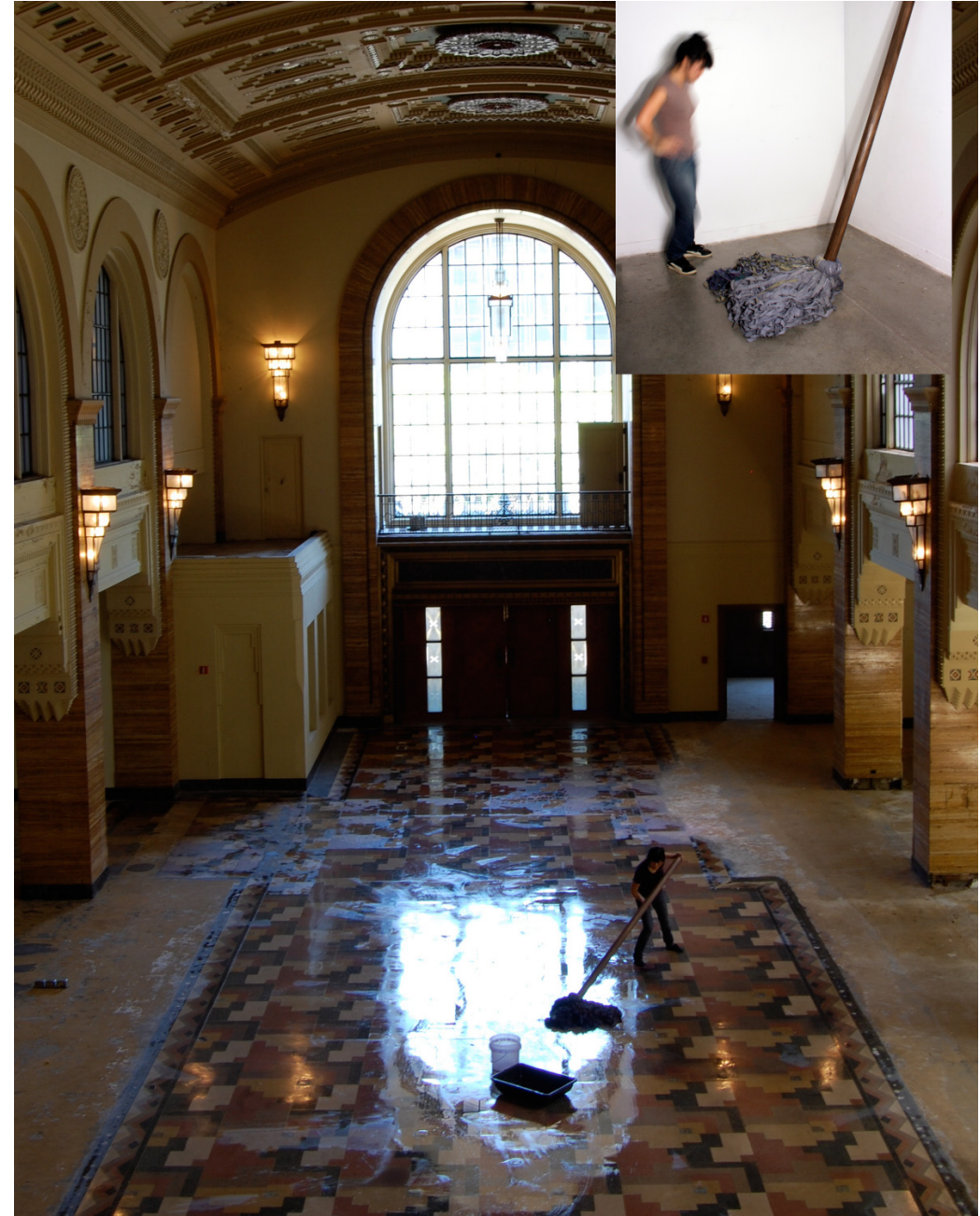
The invisible work force:

As Americans, the manner in which we emotionally negotiate our own social positions is fascinating. The long tradition of the pioneering American spirit relishes in self-reliance, and a belief in the existence of a level playing field where everyone has equal chances to steer the course of his or her own future. The collective insistence of classlessness remains strangely intact in the present yet uneasy emotions surface upon seeing the true nature of the Capitalist model at work.

When we are faced with seeing social disparities first hand, our empathic capabilities are set into motion. By identifying with taking on those unwanted tasks ourselves, we imagine assuming the position of the worker. This is a charged experience. What is inferred is the meaninglessness of the labor along with a sense of misfortune for the worker in this state. Seeing and identifying another's endless toil thins the psychological boundaries between them and us. It's a reminder of our own corporeality, throwing into question the futility of our efforts.

Physical work has increasingly been socially devalued in the modern world but paradoxically, human labor has been the driving force of the economies around the globe. Civilizations new and ancient have been founded on human labor; relying on the sweat and toil of bodies to reap natural resources, erect monuments, fight battles, maintain households, businesses, cities. Without workers, there would not be the pyramids, the Great Wall, or the skyscrapers of any major metropolis. A great part of the American economy alone was built on the labor of slaves.

The necessity for human hands and bodies to perform work does not change. What changes is our collective consciousness of its presence and impact.



Mopping the Floor, 2009
action using handmade oversized mop in the former Central National Bank in Richmond, Virginia
still image (Video 13 minutes)



Laundry Walk, 2009





Each mud ball is completely conformed to the grasp of my hand. Touching one is like understanding the size of my palms, or cupping the volume of both palms. It is a custom fit that contains the force and compression of my hands against the moist clay-rich soil of Virginia.



(top) armwrestling, 2010

(bottom) Hikaru Dorodango, 2010

During the 90's, a resurgence of mud-ball making occurred in Japan, prompted by the research of child developmental psychologist Fumio Kayo. The dorodango is much like the American version of "mud pies".

In his essay, "Mud Balls and the Naked Human Baby", Kayo argues for a kind of essence of play that is often overlooked. "The joy of hikaru dorodango is two fold: the sheer pleasure that comes with creating, that meditative and wondrous place we go sometimes in the creative moment-coupled with the desire to create the shiniest ball" The repetition of touching mud of learning the various subtleties of rubbing and smoothing bumps and making the smooth form, all of this activity, lends to the body familiarizing itself to the material. "It is because humans are born naked that we have to acquaint our physical selves with various substances that exist outside our skin in the course of growth".¹²

Observe a ball resting on the ground. Two tiny surface areas make contact. Contained in this connection point is the tension and force of two dense matters, each pushing off from the other, determinedly converging on a space that seems to be no larger than the size of a pinhead.

The mud balls come from dirt, the ground, and when they're scattered, all 80 of them, across another floor; they created another plane that feels buoyant and parallels the place from which they came. Each has its own relationship to the way it has settled and found this meeting point with the floor. A kind of funny conference of the many different layers and locations of their origin, a meeting place of dispirit lands, literally. Smithsonian would definitely call this a non-place, but my relationship to "earthworks" is a skewed one. The dirt I've collected is so carefully shaped, into a form, attempting to make the perfect sphere, that can't be found in directly tangible nature. (maybe if we could see the earth, moon, and other planets from a far). Directly beneath each sphere, imagine going through the linoleum floors, the wooden floor supports, the concrete foundations, and you will reach the dirt of each ball's making.

Blue Moon and the other Landscape Interrupted Videos

Playing with the moon

It is possible to send a light signal at night, using the light of a full moon. Whether or not your message is received is not important, as long as the attempt is made, denoting your location. You are here.

To send a message, I find myself standing in the dark playground behind my apartment, flashing my homemade signal mirror at the moon.

The light of the sun bouncing its rays off the Moon's surface makes the moon visible to us. The moon is a big mirror. I bounce rays back at it. Instantly, we are in communication.

Bringing the signal mirror into the daylight has a different result:

Typical landscape painting of the 19th century show a vastness that encompasses and overwhelms the viewer. Minute details provided by the artist encourage repeated viewing, letting the viewer immerse him or herself in the picture plane, in awe of the visible landscape

Videos can frame a similarly sublime landscape. As rays of reflected light overexposes the camera lens, the blinking beacons reprioritize the viewer's focus, making us aware of the presence of a person behind the flashing light, and thus changing the pastoral view into an event of uncertain urgency.

The silence of both videos creates an unexpected aural reaction. Perhaps prompted by the persistent blinking of the light signals, the imagination begins to fill the void of sound.

(top) Signal Mirror (Belle Isle), 2010
still from video
1 min.

(bottom) Blue Moon, Roger Out, 2010
still from video
1 min.





The Chinese countryside: Throughout the 60's and 70's, the only form of entertainment at a youth work camp was going to the movies. Entire villages gathered around make-shift screens to watch the latest dubbed Hollywood blockbuster or the newest propaganda flick.

News of the screening brought people from all the neighboring villages, many walking miles in the country night to reach their diversion. An ingenious solution of a torch made of wild sunflowers served as an efficient light source during these long journeys.

Orangina Ocarina

Drinking an Orangina is a sweet treat. Taking in the fizzy, bubbly content from the glass bottle, feeling the orange peel skin of the glass, sensing the satisfaction of the cool liquid tingling the back of the throat then finally, gulp, gulp, gulp, swallowing the tart, saccharin, soda.

When the bottle is emptied, it can be transformed and regenerated. The function of the second life of an Orangina literally reverses the motion that consumed the soda. Instead of using a straw to draw in liquid, a shortened straw now channels air into the bottle and creates a forced vibration called the Helmholtz resonance. What holds the tubes in place are colorful rubber bands, wrapped around the bottleneck with a kind of casual yet specific necessity. The bands position and slightly depress the airway to exactly bounce off the glass voicing (or whistle), splitting a breath of air 50 percent above the bottle and 50 percent inside, thus oscillating the interior chamber.¹³ With some gentle nudging of the straw, the player can find the “sweet spot” on the Ocarina, producing the most vibrant note possible. Changing the force of the breath allows for pitch manipulation as well, sometimes resulting in unexpected half notes and higher tones.

There was a period when all the bottles stood silent on my worktable because the voicing was not yet understood, the stillness and quiet of the instruments during that time highlighted an absorbing kind of energy and tension that happened when the ocarinas were at rest. In their silence, each ocarina held all the possibility of noise in the imagination.

In thinking about Marina Rosenfeld’s inclusion of non-musicians in her Sheer Frost orchestra, or the employment of high school kids in “Teenage Lontano”, and the Lontano of György Ligeti’s original composition, the performance of the ocarinas attempt to follow a trajectory of mid to late 20th century avant-garde sound making.¹⁴ Made with an inclusive experience in mind, my ocarinas do not require tradition music literacy of their performers, much like the participants of Pauline Oliveros’ worldwide tuning meditation. Also drawing directly from this influential piece, simple instructions will be given to the players to broadly guide the structure of the “song”. However other than that, all the notes to be played will be improvised.¹⁵ The players involved determine duration, pitch, tonality, rhythm, density, and more, making each performance unique to each group dynamic. The distinct quality of each circle of players injects each performance with a dose of welcomed variety and chance.



Some description of the noise produced by an Orangina Ocarina: earthy, reedy, wet, humid, shrieking, screechy, breathy, lonely, velvety, ear-piercing, funny.

The breath is an extension of each note. Whether it is the pitch, the duration, the loudness, softness, all the subtleties of each sound returns back to its source, the human breath.

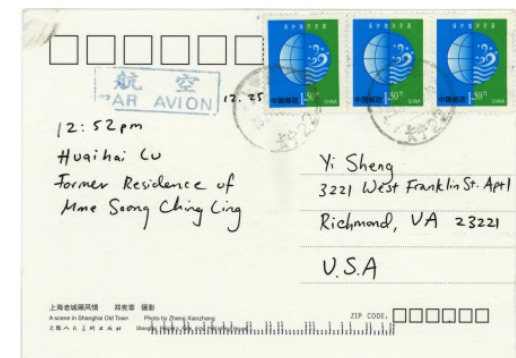
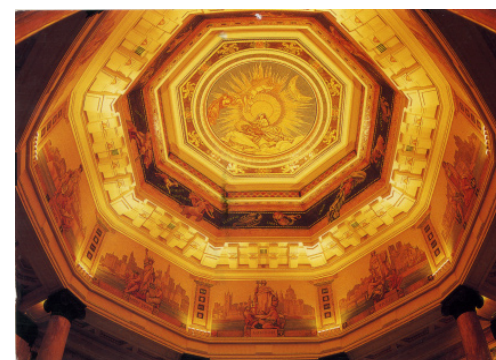
Work, labor, and play in no particular order

Each project does not always fit the expected emotional or physical expectations. Work and labor didn't always equate with physical pain and endurance, and similarly, playing with mud was not always enjoyable. But, in all the activities, whether it is hand-washing clothing in the James River, whittling away a big wooden sphere, attempting to form perfectly round balls of mud, or making and consuming an oversize noodle, the involvement of my body and the physical challenges I create for myself are purposeful albeit absurdist.

Many of the processes that fascinate me embody a spirit of self reliance and resourcefulness. Unfortunately, they are also ways of living and working that are rapidly disappearing in the face of modern convenience. Grunt work and skilled work are equally embraced and inextricably linked not so long ago. Activities such as building one's own house, farming one's land, or carving one's own living necessities, requires a person to be both engineer/designer and builder. In depth knowledge of ecology and agriculture allows for the proper planting and harvesting of crops while skills to raise a roof also are also used to make the furnishings inside the house. The frontiersman and women of the recent past often did all the work themselves and its this energy that still has a primal resonance and relevance. From my own experiences, the knowledge that come from a direct and tangible learning process allows for a kind of freedom that can temporarily wrest us from our abstracted lives.

Untitled, 2009
(At One Point, the Plant Was Exactly The Same Color as the Plastic)





Just twenty miles from Fredericksburg Virginia, under the wide arms of an oak tree, lies buried the arm of Stonewall Jackson, the general in command of the Southern forces during the Civil War. The rest of Jackson's body is interred in Lexington, some 80 miles from his arm.

After being mistakenly shot by his own men on May 2, of 1864, his shattered left arm was quickly amputated that same evening.¹⁶ Upon find the arm lying in the fields just outside of the Jackson's tent, his chaplain wrapped it in a blanket and walked in the dead of night to Ellwood Plantation and buried it in the family plot.¹⁷

Jackson succumbed to pneumonia as a result of his injuries only days later. Mrs. Jackson, when asked if they arm should be re-interred with the rest of the body, responded by saying that if the arm has had a Christian burial, then it would remain where it lay.¹⁸

(below) Commercially available replica of Michael Jackson's arm brace for the Dangerous Tour 1992 -1993



For the moment, Richmond is my home, and this has been is an illuminating experience. I've barely begun to skim the surface of the city's complex history, but in doing so has yielded unexpected connections my work and has helped to crystallize the more important aspects of my own narrative past that insist on continued attention.

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VITA

Yi Sheng was born in Shanghai, China in 1982. She moved to the United States at age 7 and was raised in central New Jersey. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2004 and her Master of Fine Arts in Painting at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010.

EDUCATION:

Virginia Commonwealth University, MFA Richmond, VA 2010

Rhode Island School of Design, BFA with Honors. Providence, RI 2004

AWARDS and RESIDENCIES

The Edward Albee Foundation. Visual Artist Fellowship. Montauk, NY. August 2010

Virginia Commonwealth University. Graduate Travel Grant (Marfa, TX) 2010

Virginia Commonwealth University. Graduate Travel Grant (Philadelphia exhibition) 2009

Virginia Commonwealth University. Graduate Travel Grant (China) 2008

Virginia Commonwealth University. Graduate Teaching Assistantship. Spring 2009

Virginia Commonwealth University Graduate Teaching Assistantship. Fall 2008

Ox-Bow Artist in Residence. Saugatuck, Michigan. August 2008

SELECT GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Master of Fine Art Thesis Exhibition. Anderson Gallery. Richmond, VA. 2010

Hood Rich. The Hexagon Space. Baltimore, MD 2010

Collections. The Fab Gallery. Richmond, VA 2010

3.5. Reference Gallery. Richmond, VA. 2010

2nd Years'. FAB Gallery. Richmond, VA. 2009

Prime. Three-person show. James Oliver Gallery. Philadelphia, PA. 2009

It's in the Bank!. MFA Candidacy Exhibition. The Central National Bank. Richmond, VA. 2009

Temporary Allegiance. At the Edge: Innovative Art in Chicago. Gallery 400. Chicago, IL. 2008

1st.Years'. Fab Gallery. Richmond, VA. 2008

Project Diversity Queens. Rockaways Artist Alliance. Far Rockaways, New York. 2007

Art Now. Juvenal Reis Studios Gallery. Long Island City, New York. 2007

Goodbye to the Beautiful Things. Two Person Show. Naked Duck Gallery. Brooklyn New York. 2007

We Are Family. Red Door Gallery. Providence, RI 2004

BFA Thesis Exhibition. Rhode Island School of Design. Woods- Gerry Gallery. 2004