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Through My Window

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Through My Window

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

By

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**Table of Contents**

List of Contents ........................................................................................................ iv

List of Figures ........................................................................................................... v

Abstract ...................................................................................................................... vii

Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1

Background ................................................................................................................ 2

I: Poetic Implication ................................................................................................. 3

II: Landscape in Jewelry, Jewelry in Landscape ..................................................... 8

1. The Hollow Window ............................................................................................. 8

2. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* .................................................... 12

III: Engaging with Contemporary thoughts ........................................................... 17

1. Material and Self-Reflexive ................................................................................ 17

2. Jewelry in Environment ..................................................................................... 21

Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 34

Bibliography ............................................................................................................. 35
# List of Figures

1. *Poetic Resonance series* .............................................................................................................. 6  
2. *Poetic Meditation* .................................................................................................................. 7  
3. *Poetry Scenes* .......................................................................................................................... 7  
4. *Silent Poetic* ............................................................................................................................ 7  
5. Hollow Windows in Suzhou Garden 1 ..................................................................................... 10  
6. Hollow Windows in Suzhou Garden 2 ..................................................................................... 11  
7. Hollow Windows in Suzhou Garden 3 ..................................................................................... 11  
8. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* (Partial 1) ....................................................... 15  
9. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* (Partial 1) ....................................................... 15  
10. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* (Partial 1) ...................................................... 16  
11. *Carnivore 2* .......................................................................................................................... 19  
12. *Carnivore 2* (back) ............................................................................................................... 20  
13. Stitch work on leaves 1 .......................................................................................................... 20  
14. Stitch work on leaves 2 .......................................................................................................... 21  
15. Ring with Fruit 1 ..................................................................................................................... 22  
16. Ring with Fruit 2 ..................................................................................................................... 23  
17. *Through My Window* .......................................................................................................... 24  
18. *Through My Window* (partial 1) .......................................................................................... 25  
19. *Through My Window* (partial 2) .......................................................................................... 25  
20. *Through My Window* (partial 3) .......................................................................................... 26  
21. *Through My Window* (partial 4) .......................................................................................... 26  
22. *Through My Window* (partial 5) .......................................................................................... 27
THROUGH MY WINDOW

By Haiyin Liang, M.F.A

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Craft & Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018.
Major Director: Susan E Ganch, Interim Department Chair/Associate Professor,
Craft and Material Studies Department

Abstract:

I convey my thoughts through art jewelry; making jewelry is my language of communication and commemoration. Inspired by historical Chinese art and contemporary jewelry, my practice pays attention to bring classical Chinese aesthetics of hazy poetic and ideal arrangement into the contemporary jewelry field. The attention to detail refers to the quiet contemplation and emotional experiences encouraged by each of my works. Through my research, I use metalsmithing language to communicate with non-precious materials finding my own way of expression and meditation. Meanwhile, I build environments that display jewelry off the body in order to construct a picturesque landscape. The research that lead to my thesis work, Through My Window, which conveys the desire for mental escape. The Jewelry pieces become the keys to open the imagination and emotionally escape into an ideal state through making and viewing them.
Introduction

I make art jewelry by incorporating elements from Chinese Classical Aesthetics into the contemporary jewelry studies. The metaphor of escaping through my work connects to the emotional narrative and desire of meditation. Influenced by an ancient Chinese blue-green landscape painting, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, and hollow window structure, I combined natural materials and metalsmithing techniques to create work that evokes *shi-yi.*

 (*Shi-yi*（詩意）: a Chinese word that describes the feeling of inner peace and tranquility achieved through the reading of poetry and painting.) The windows connect the separate spaces between the real world and an ideal state; they are the entrance of thought and imagination. And thinking about a non-traditional way of engagement with jewelry, I created a continual view for the installation of jewelry.

In my research on ancient Chinese garden landscapes, courtyard layouts, and window structures and arrangements, I focus on the interaction of manmade garden structures and nature. Manipulating nature is an important aesthetic in the history of Chinese courtyards and painting. When directly manipulating the natural elements in jewelry language with precious metals, the dedication required by the process leads to quiet contemplation. This connects the work to my memories and desires, while leaving space for the imagination.

In this paper, I will introduce my background and inspirations, as well as my research for candidacy work that about historical Chinese Poetry and its relation to my thesis work. Then, I will discuss my thesis exhibition *Through My Window* with historical and cultural references, as well as contemporary researches. I will explain my choices of making that includes material, shape, color, pattern, installation structure, and how the work interacts with the viewer.
Background

I was born and grew up in China and have been interested in participating in ancient Chinese art since I was a child. I started learning Pipa, which is a traditional Chinese string musical instrument when I was seven years old. During that time, I began to understand traditional Chinese art not only through viewing and listening but also by engaging with my body. I was always interested in classical Chinese Painting but I only had the chance to learn the line-brushwork style of traditional Chinese painting when I was seventeen for one year. I was attracted to the style and my mind was fully engaged during my year of practice; I experienced the feeling of escape.

I came to the United States when I was eighteen years old. I did my undergraduate and graduate art degrees in a metalsmithing and jewelry concentration. My cultural heritage already assimilated into my making; at the same time, I have been inspired by the innovative ideas in contemporary art jewelry, and have been re-thinking material use, display structure, conceptual meaning and communication with the viewer. While combining historical Chinese aesthetic of shi-yi into my making, I had a hard time of explaining differences in aesthetic caused by cultural differences. Therefore, through my research and making, I try to lay down clues to guide the audience cross-culturally.
I.

Poetic Implication

While translating historical Chinese Poetry in English, I faced a barrier of understanding. Even though the words can be translated and the pictures can be described, the emotion and “spirit resonance” that the poems imply are often missing. “Spirit resonance” in Chinese is “Qi- Yun (气韵),” means “the breath of life and the resonance of it.”¹ Tony Barnstone, the editor, coeditor and translator, states his experience of translating Chinese Poetry into other language: “Raw information will be preserved, but the aesthetic unity, the gestalt of the poem, will be lost in the translation.”²

In the article “The Chinese Poem: The Visible and the Invisible in Chinese Poetry,” Michelle Yeh suggests a word “Imagistic”. Yeh states that “describing the Chinese poem as ‘imagistic,’ consisting of ‘largely pictographic characters,’ and presenting a moment of ‘empty, pure perception.’”³ She continues:

“The quintessential Chinese poem is, as suggested by many American poet-translators, imagistic. Pound pointed out in "How to Read" (1928) that visual image—phanopoeia—is the most translatable part of poetic language. It is natural, then, that visual imagery receives the most attention in translation. But the tendency to see the Chinese poem as a concatenation of concrete visual images with few discursive elements is inseparable from the conception that the Chinese language is "largely pictographic" or ideographic.”³

My candidacy work is inspired by traditional Chinese poetry and imagistic that spreads through the ages, as well as the challenge of translating. “Imagistic” is one of the important characters in Chinese poems and it is meaningful to see “Chinese poetry as an unmediated expression of the concrete world of experience.”

I do not directly use imagistic, but imagistic exist in almost all poetry and affects my emotion while reading and writing. Imagistic is one of the significant parts in Chinese culture, and it is “typically nonfigurative, descriptive of nature, and juxtaposed in a non-discursive way.” Then, I move forward to view them in my personal perspective, express my own emotions toward my culture. The poetic realms are often unspeakable, and the emotions behind their imagery are often invisible. The hazy poetic becomes a kind of aesthetic that I transfer into my work.

In traditional Chinese poems, poets depict objects and landscapes to express emotion and imply deeper meanings. Nature is emotion, and the metaphor of imagery shows the human experience with natural emotions. Chinese Poets depict things by the characteristics of the body and connect them to human sensation. Chinese poems have meaning behind the words, but its association is inherent in the scenery itself. Meanwhile, Chinese poems are often combined with traditional landscape paintings. Therefore, the blue and green that relate to mountains and water are the main background color of my work; they are building a poetic environment and a quiet sense.

I refer to the Chinese classical five-character and seven-character poems and poetry painting as inspiration. The artist writes a poem on the painting that describes the scenery but also provides the deeper meaning behind the painting. When I read the poem, I can see the image

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5 Yeh, 140.
it depicts and feel the emotion it expresses. The classical poem is the way that I communicate with the ancients. But in my work, I want to transform my understanding and emotion to the viewer that may or may not know Chinese.

In my series “Poetic Resonance” that is inspired by the Chinese poetic realm, I focus on my own emotional expression. Rice paper has become the main material for this series of jewelry, which gives this historical material a non-traditional function. I write down Chinese poems on small pieces of rice paper, carefully roll them into little scrolls and tie them with metal wire. Based on my understanding and emotion toward the sentences written inside, I dye the scrolls into different colors with Chinese painting pigments. This process includes my imagination, emotion and my special care of my cultural heritage.

I am creating a poetic scene in jewelry through indirect, abstract, and personal ways. The gentle color is used as a metaphor for implicit expression and quiet meditation. The form of the jewelry and the way they fit onto the body both contain information. The series includes three pieces which refer to three stages. The necklace *Poetic Meditation* shows a moment that I am expressing my emotion through reading the poems. The small scrolls in different colors connected together to make a cross-body form as well as implied movements, which is visually attractive. The group of seven brooches *Poetry Scenes* implies the seven-character poem; I recreate the poem for my understanding. The relative small size and regular form seems easy to wear that refer to a desire of sharing and holding. The third one, *Silent Poetic*, is a mask and box-shape brooch that connects together. It contains a metaphor of not being able to describe my heart. Its imagery is a barrier of my communication. I am immersed in the Chinese poetic realm and feel it heals me. I choose a silent way to explain my understanding of Chinese poetic aesthetic, because I am experiencing a feeling that cannot be clearly described by language.

Haiyin Liang. *Poetry Scenes*. Silver, pigment and rice paper. 1.5 × 1.5 × 0.3in (each). 2017.

II.

Landscape in Jewelry, Jewelry in Landscape

Poetic implication has been used in different types of classical Chinese arts for thousands of years. In order to establish a more targeted topic, I focus on poetic achievement in manmade landscape, in particular traditional Chinese garden design and landscape painting. The ideal arrangement in the garden and painting require the harmony meditation. We Li, Wei Duan and Qu Shi state that “Landscape sprit is abandoning oneself to nature, find support of life and art inspiration, put more emphasize on the harmony between human and nature.” I would like to embody the aesthetic experience with jewelry and also engaging jewelry like viewing landscape to emphasize the metaphor of escaping into the ideal world.

1. The Hollow Window

I am looking for the interaction of manmade garden structures and nature. Manipulating nature is an important aesthetic in the history of Chinese courtyards. In particular, the window is an important functional and decorative element that allows people to engage with outside space without physically going out, and evokes the shiyi aesthetic of gazing. In Qijun Wang’s research about traditional Chinese windows, he cites a verse “The window contains the snow accumulated through thousands years on the Xiling mountains (窗含西岭千秋雪)” from Tang Dynasty Wang Wei’s quatrains poem, and describes that people can experience unlimited space and time.

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7 Wei Wang, Quatrains 3, Tang Dynasty, 712-770 A.D.
from the window and engage with the natural landscapes; people’s sight can make a small landscape expand into a larger world.  

There are many different types of window, particularly, I pay attention to the one type called hollow window (also called flower window, leaking window, window opening), which is a hollow form window without paper or glass that highly representative traditional design element that plays an indispensable role in Chinese classical garden art. Hollow windows are different from other general types of window that used in buildings and houses, The majorly of them are appeared on pavilions, cloisters and walls. Leaking window in traditional Chinese architecture pays attention to integral effect; what it pursued is an effective integration with the nature of the building, the appearance and the surrounding environment. These windows must be open in a good viewing position. They act as frames for the landscape beyond, making them like paintings.

There are many different designs of the leaking window, some of them have decorative structures and some do not. In a garden, corridors are often set up to divide the courtyard space. Leaking windows are often made on the corridors for the purpose of ventilation, lighting and decoration, as well as for increasing the level of scenery. While the leaking windows communicate scenery and space, they also make scenery looming to create an obscure beauty in distance. In some cases, the leaking windows are placed on the long wall to make a continual design. In some cases, you can look through multiple windows from one leaking window, so that the landscape never ends.

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9 Wang, 54.
10 Wang 55.
My thesis installation refers to the ideas about the leaking window. The installation includes ten white panels in two-and-a-half-inch thickness with a circular hole in each of them. Five of the panels are two feet by two feet square; they attach to the wall from the side and line up in the same level. The five panels can be seen through the central hole, which is in front of the eye level. The other five panels are free-standing that set in the middle of the room, which create a separate space for my scene. The holes are also in the eye level; some of them are attached in a ninety-degree angle. There are spaces between the panels that people can go into and walk around. The jewelry pieces are set in the holes, supported with tree twigs. The viewer can see through the holes, which seem like leaking windows, to experience the whole scene, as well as getting close enough to engage with the details of individual jewelry pieces. The delicate painting and blue and green based color are referencing a Chinese historical painting, which will be discussed in the following part.

Hollow Window in Suzhou Garden 2, Suzhou, China.
http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/16/5/6/n7821474.htm

Canglang Pavilion in Suzhou Garden 3, Suzhou, China.
2. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*

The combination of the poem and painting became a form of art that appeared often during and after the Song Dynasty. My research tends to focus on this period. The Song Dynasty had 319 years of reign, divided by the Northern Song (960-1126) and Southern Song (1127-1279). It was an era of a commodity economy, culture, education, and scientific and technological innovation in Chinese history. It was the golden age for artistic development, such as the landscape painting.

In Chinese, we use the term “mountains-waters” for landscape. The harmony between human and nature plays an important role in the artistic concept. At the same time, self-cultivation and spiritual meditation are highlighted in landscape painting by the artists in the Song dynasty. I also look at western landscape painting and take Paul Cezanne’s painting as an example with which to compare to the Song dynasty landscape painting. The idea of human-nature harmony is similar. Based on professor Jia Chen’s research that compares Cezanne’s Post-impressionist works with Chinese landscape paintings from the Northern Song Dynasty, she suggests that there are many differences between these two, but in one sense “their general vision for the primacy of embodiment in perception is similar; artists in both practices aim at a balance between representing visible forms of nature and interpreting their invisible, yet deeper meanings for human existence.”

There are two important kinds of landscape painting: Ink-Wash and Blue-Green. The Blue-Green Landscape painting is my focus here because I was attracted by one of the Song dynasty Blue-Green landscape paintings, titled: *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*. It is

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a long scroll that runs over 11 meters. It gives me the inspiration of color, operating nature and the idea of escaping, which I use to set up the tone of picture for imagination through my thesis work.

*A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* is one of the top ten classical paintings and was created by an 18-year-old artist: Ximeng Wang. Xi’meng Wang’s teacher was the last emperor of the Northern Song dynasty. He highly contributed to the development of literature and art, but could not hold his dominance. About 20 years after the painting came out, the Northern Song dynasty ended. The artist Wang disappeared from historical record after he finished this painting. Historians speculate it is because he died shortly after this painting.

The painting is framed in Jiangnan, area south of the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze river in China, but it’s not completely realistic. The artist uses his imagination and talent to manipulate natural elements and create an ideal world. The painting includes a lot details but is not messy; the color is bright but not gaudy. Danqing Chen, who is a Chinese-American artist, writer and art critic, discuss about *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* and the artist Ximeng Wang; he says that the painting includes so many self-contained scenes and each scene has so many touching details; normally grown-up masters like to do “subtraction”, means selection and generalization, however, the eighteen years old Wang was doing additions. The image is full of vitality that seems to represent the best time for an 18-year-old artist. Probably, the artist and the emperor both escape into the beautiful dream, keep the best view of this country, and hope the peace will last forever.

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12 Danqing Chen, “1: *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*,” June 16, 2015, in *Partial (局部)*, produced by Youku, Podcast, Online video, 16:40, accessed April 12, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSHc9M6j9vl&list=PLvWfRmQ8sEi4eM9awXWHx8dodWdQRvDDY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSHc9M6j9vl&list=PLvWfRmQ8sEi4eM9awXWHx8dodWdQRvDDY)
Because of the lack of historical records, mystery surrounds the young artist. Many literati groups have made stories about him. In one of the legends, Xi’meng Wang admonished the emperor to focus on governing the country. The emperor was enraged and ordered his soldiers to kill him. Wang asked to see his painting one more time before he died. His was locked with the painting in the prison, but the next day he just disappeared, with only the painting left. Other people guess that Wang escaped into his own painting.\footnote{\textit{\textquotedblleft What is The Legend Behind \textit{A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains},\textquotedblright} Website of Painting and Calligraphy Group, last modified September 15, 2017, \url{http://www.shuhua08.com/nr.php?aid=18746&cid=29}.}

The color of this painting has lasted over thousand years, because of the materials of the pigments. They are mineral pigments, including high quality lapis, malachite, turquoise, blue copper mine and so on. Many of them are often used to make jewelry. It seems like jewelry is used to paint nature, which builds the relation between the blue-green landscape painting and jewelry. The Blue-green landscape painting using jewelry to paint nature, I treat natural elements as gemstone to make jewelry. My choice of material will be discussed deeper in the later part of this paper.

Rather than show the whole image of \textit{A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains}, I paint the internal of the window hole in dark green and brown yellow to refer to the background of the painting, and intercepted the tiny fragments from the painting into my work. During the processes of reading the painting, selecting fragments, painting and arranging details, I seem to communicate with the young artist Wang that existed thousands of years ago. The fragments of painting are the prompts for imagination, transformed from my desire. My work is not meant to bring the viewer back to thousands of years ago, but to communicate the potential of combining
historical Chinese aesthetic of manipulating landscape to inspire mind escaping through my scene of jewelry.

Ximeng Wang, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* (Partial 1), Northern Song Dynasty, Pigment on silk, 1191.5 x 51.5 cm.

Ximeng Wang, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* (Partial 2), Northern Song Dynasty. Pigment on Silk, 1191.5 x 51.5 cm.
Ximeng Wang, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* (Partial 3), Northern Song Dynasty. Pigment on silk, 1191.5 x 51.5 cm.
III.

Engaging with Contemporary thoughts

1. Material and Self-Reflexive

I have brought my interest in Chinese historical art into my contemporary jewelry learning. While researching the topics in the contemporary jewelry field, I have considered the shifting role of material, concept and display in my work.

Contemporary jewelry has its own power and has become a unique field in Contemporary art. Damian Skinner discusses the “conceptual tendency”, which is a significant quality to make contemporary jewelry distinctive.\(^{14}\) Skinner points out for contemporary jewelry that “materials and skills are placed in the service of ideas, rather than being celebrated as ends in themselves.”\(^{15}\) The meaning behind the jewelry itself give the power and value.

“Materiality” is one of the important topics in contemporary jewelry and often contributes to conceptual ideas.\(^{16}\) There is a new way to value materials in contemporary jewelry which makes jewelry artists become more creative. When I am using rice paper, I am borrowing the historical significance of rice paper and introducing it into my work. Historically, paper was invented in China during the Eastern Han dynasty. After several improvements, rice paper appeared and had been widely used during the Tang dynasty. People often used it to write and paint. It is a significant traditional material used to record knowledge and has been introduced all around the world. Nowadays, paper continues to play an important role in our society. Rice paper


\(^{15}\) Skinner, 7.

is a traditional Chinese material; however, it is not a traditional material in jewelry making. Meanwhile, the soft character of rice paper gives a delicate feeling while seeing and touching.

The group of jewelry for my thesis used plant elements, such as dry tree twigs, leaves and fruits. With the idea of arranging ideal landscapes in mind, I use natural materials that are relatively small enough to be ignored when normally engaging with the landscape. The small details of nature are treated carefully and specially and reflect and recreate the landscapes in a poetic way, which bring value and attention to their narrative arrangements. The fragility of the plant requires a higher level of gentleness and soft touch for my hands compared with my previous experience with precious metals. At the same time, the act of my body affects my emotion with imagination. Therefore, I not only discover my own way of communication with the material, but also find the deeper understanding and possibility.

Moreover, “Self-reflexive” is one of the significant ideas in contemporary jewelry practice that inspires me to connect my own relationship and experience to my works. “Contemporary jewelry is a self-reflexive practice, which means that it’s concerned with reflecting on itself and the conditions in which it takes place.”

I picked up plant materials around the art building, my apartment, and school library in Richmond, as well as the balcony at my home, and a park that I often take walks in when I am in China. Those materials came from the moments that I have engaged with nature normally, but did not pay attention before. The materials themselves imply the places in my life. Meanwhile, the painting and enamel commemorate my time and experience of escaping with *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*.

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I have been looking for artists that relate their works to imagination and nature. Carina Shoshtary is an art jeweler who is recognizable for the use of characteristic materials such as graffiti paint, seeds, driftwood, etc. The work is fully inspired by her imagination, following her deep longing. In the interview, Carina Shoshtary says that graffiti is the material that attracts her attention, and she “transform it in an intuitive process with predominantly simple means”. One of her sentences about treating materials resonates with me: “I wanted to conquer the material, to bring out its qualities, but not without translating it into my personal artistic language.”

Hillary Fayle is a textile based artist who collects leaves as the material. She slices and stitches delicate patterns onto the leaves, building a relationship between the human hand and nature. In her carved and embroidered leaves, Fayle uses the elegant details to engage the viewers to look at their natural environment carefully and discover the potential value of natural elements. Also, the process of making art connects to the concept of the complex and sensitive relationship between humans and nature.\(^2\) In her works, the repetitive embroidered and sliced patterns are clearly shown in each leaf piece. The process of engaging her hand with nature is important. The delicacy and fragileness of the leaves and embroidery threads speak to the content behind the work.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Hillary Fayle, accessed March 12, 2018, https://www.hillarywfayle.com/about/
2. Jewelry in Environment

There are different ways to engage with jewelry, such as wearing jewelry, viewing jewelry worn by other people, seeing jewelry on its own (on white pedestals or white background images) and engaging jewelry with the environments built for them. Liesbeth den Beston mentions that “over the last ten years, the focus on the presentation of jewelry has become more important than ever before, resulting not only in installations but also in small interventions that transform an ‘ordinary’ gallery space into an adapted context.”²²

Belgian artist Hilde De Decker created an installation with rings that relates to an idea of manipulating nature. She made a glass house that was filled with pots of plants. De Decker cultivated vegetables that participated in all the processes in person and made fruits, such as tomatoes, peppers and aubergines, to grow from silver ring bases. The structures of the rings she made controlled the shapes of the fruits while they grew. The installation contained De Decker’s experience of engaging with her plant jewelry. Besten describes this installation that “Reality provoked imagination and resulted in ambiguous ornaments provided by nature, taking our ideas about the natural and artificial.”

Hilde De Decker, Ring with Fruit.

http://www.hillededecker.com/works/for_the_farmer_and_the_market_gardener/

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24 Besten, 54.
My thesis *Through My Window* draws attention to the alternative way of displaying jewelry that creates a contemporary jewelry installation. I borrow the classical Chinese leaking window design for the structures of my jewelry, and abstract the picturesque landscapes. The viewer might not know the leaking window, but the lined up or angled window-hole panels direct viewer’s sights that introduce the way of engaging with the continual view through leaking windows. My installation is meant to help the contents of the jewelry expand and connect the spaces from jewelry to a whole scene and create different angles of views. Meanwhile, each window hole on separate panels concentrates the viewer’s sight when he or she is looking at the jewelry piece that set in the circle. And both sides of the jewelry are designed to been seen and relate to each other.

Body is the environment for jewelry and the topic around body has been discussed in the contemporary jewelry field for decades. My series of jewelry are wearable brooches and pendants, which give a sense of wanting to bring the *shi-yi* moment of escape into life. At the
same time, the natural elements inlaid on metal structures are very delicate and fragile that require the attention to take care of while wearing, training the gentle hands with patience and calmness along with the serenity in jewelry.

On the other hand, the series of jewelry presented in the exhibition are not worn in real bodies, but sometime they seem to appear on the body. When multiple people walk through the space at the same time, the viewers might see other people through the hole in the panels behind them, and the jewelry in circle show on the person who stand behind that panel. On the contrary, people might imagine how the jewelry would present on their bodies. Therefore, this kind of view implies an ambiguous sense of wearing.


Conclusion

This paper specifically explained my research toward my thesis exhibition. I started from the poetic implications in historical Chinese poetry and indirect expression through my personal emotion. Then, I continue directed my research through an ancient Chinese blue-green landscape painting, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, and classical Chinese leaking window structure, as well as combined natural materials with jewelry language to create work that evokes *shi-yi*. Moreover, along with my studies in contemporary jewelry, I created the aesthetic of continual view for the installation, which communicate the potential of combining a *shi-yi* aesthetic of manipulating landscape to inspire a moment of mind escaping through my scene of jewelry.

My research was not only the written documents, but also the experience through my body and mind, which is important for me as a maker, an artist, and a contemporary jeweler. All of my practices and references above contribute to my thesis *Through my window*.

Walking into the space, you will see the circular leaking windows. The panels are white, and you vaguely see the green moving inside of the circular wall. There are some things in the windows you think you need to get close to see. Small elements of plants lay in the delicate metal structures, then, the tiny spots of painting attract your eyes. In the next moment, your sight passes through to the circle into the next panel behind. While looking at the details in each window, you slow down the speed, and your thoughts escape into the windows.
Bibliography


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSHc9M6j9vI&list=PLvWfRmQ8sEi4eM9awXWHx8dodWdQRvDDY


