Tracing the Unspeakable: Painting as Embodied Seeing

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DECLARATION

I, Yiwen Feng, professionally known as Yvonne Feng, confirm that the work presented in the thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Abstract

My PhD research *Tracing the Unspeakable: Painting as Embodied Seeing* originates from the dramatic incident of my mother’s imprisonment and my state of disorientation caused by it. The event becomes a story that I live out and turns into imagined experiences that I gain access to through drawing and painting. I attempt to take possession of the event and its psychological effects on me through my art practice. By continuously enacting mother’s narrative and negotiating my relationship with it, I explore how artmaking can impart meaning to an ongoing life event and furthermore, make possible the forming and empowerment of oneself.

This research involves studio-based investigations alongside a written report. Throughout the research, painting is employed as a methodology for exploring life experiences. In painting, I search for a language to represent the reality of my mother’s event and other events of entrapment, marginalisation and displacement. I examine how the absent and the unspeakable can be embodied in painting; how painting can open gaps for emotional and meaningful engagements in unsettled events; and whether painting is able to represent phenomena that are putatively unrepresentable.

In the written report, I reflect on my studio practice in relation to my changing relationship with mother’s narrative and my use of it to make work. I investigate the competence of painting in representing memory, events and atrocity by examining the discourse of history painting and other relevant artistic practices. I also present an analytical account of my research in phenomenology and
psychoanalysis on notions of perception, emotion, embodiment, body image, trauma and the self.

Derived from the personal and moving into a wider social context, this research aims to seek new representations of existence in times of great political and cultural changes, and to offer new ways of engaging experiences of the other through embodied seeing in painting.
Impact Statement

Inside academia, *Tracing the Unspeakable: Painting as Embodied Seeing* contributes to contemporary debates about the ability of drawing and painting to speak about lives with silent histories and open gaps for shared emotional and meaningful engagements. This research seeks methodologies of visual and narrative representation, representing the absent, in the form of invisible sensations and spectral figuration, and tracing the unspeakable, as a result of trauma or social suppression. By making individual subjective experiences visible, this research attempts to counteract authoritative representation of history in the context of China and benefits cultural discourse on ethics and agency of representation. This research has been presented in the following academic conferences: *Hauntopia/What If?,* EARN conference, The Research Pavilion, Venice (2017); *Judgment Calls: Ethical Dilemmas in Art and Architectural Research,* UCL, London (2017); *Against Delivery,* EARN conference, UCL, London (2015). The different modes of drawing explored in the research have been developed into drawing methodologies and pedagogic models for the cross-disciplinary undergraduate course - *Methodologies of Drawing* at the Slade School of Fine Art which I co-designed and taught from 2016-2019. The course was very well-received by students across UCL departments. It successfully facilitated a collaborative platform for both teaching and learning contemporary drawing practice.

Outside academia, this research has engaged the public and encouraged public discussions on the topics of artistic research methodologies, contemporary painting, stories of invisible lives, and ethics of representation through delivering public talks: *Artist Talk,* UCL Art Museum (2018), *Monologue Dialogue 4:*
Mysticism and Insecurity Discussion, Koppel Project (2017) and In Conversation with Baroness Helena Kennedy, Koppel Project (2016). Practices in Dialogue: Loss and Creation, Hundred Years Gallery (2015) was organised to explore one of the key questions of this research through public collaborations. By bringing different artists' practices in dialogue with each other, the event investigated the relationship between loss and creation, and furthermore the impossibility of representing the lost. Artworks created throughout this research have been acknowledged professionally and exhibited in the following public exhibitions: Figurative Now, Daniel Benjamin Gallery (2019); She Performs, London Gallery West Project Space (2018); Beyond the Borders: Joseonjok's Ambiguous Identity, Crypt Gallery (2017); Tipping Point, The Foundry (2017); The Intercontinental, Roaming Room (2017); Refuse: Refuge: Re-fuse, Koppel Project (2016); An Amnesiac's Stories (solo exhibition), Hundred Years Gallery (2015); Psychoanalytic research in the 21st century: Where we are now, Freud Museum (2015).
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“Hello?”

“Mother, where are you?”

“I just arrived at the police station,” she said in a cold manner. “Is it today?”

“Yes. The police phoned me up this morning. They asked me to come straight here after finishing work. My trial will be processed in court soon and I will be sent to a lockup tonight.”

“Really? Really...”

An officer’s voice was coming from the background: “take all the personal belongings off you!”

The phone seemed to be put down and Mother’s voice sounded distanced.

“Oh, I can't take my jade bracelet off. I have tried with soap. I have worn it for more than 30 years. It grew on my wrist,” Mother said in a slightly anxious tone. “In that case, we have to saw it off.”

Shortly afterwards, the call was cut off.

--- From my diary:

The last phone call with mother before her detainment, April 2014
The Event

This research project originates from a dramatic event in my recent family history. Since Xi became the president of China in 2012, he has attempted to legitimize the authority of the Communist Party, introducing a national-wide campaign against corruption. The campaign’s targets were not only the high-level officials, but also lower-level civil servants. Working in a state company, my mother became a victim of the campaign after the arrest of the former company director. In April 2014, she was sued by the government for corruption cooperation and was sentenced for five years of imprisonment. Her treatment was unduly strong because of the sensitive time of the campaign.

Since the outbreak of the event, I have been trapped in a state of disorientation. The shock of the incident awakened me from my innocent past - I had never dreamt of the alleged political crimes frequently reported by the Chinese media would happen to my family. The banal news turned into a crisis of my own. Because I live away from home and have no power to alter the incident directly, I feel distant from it, yet, to the same extent, connected with it. The event becomes a story that I live out. It continuously renews itself in me and forces itself on me, it is retold by me to myself and to others. It turns into imagined and felt experiences that I can only gain access to through drawing and painting.

As the event is ongoing, or still being lived through, its consequences remain ambiguous. I have an impulse to tell mother’s experiences and to feel as she feels, yet, I am not exposed to the experiences of imprisonment nor violence directly. My confrontations with the moral ambivalence of the event - the complicity in mother’s case and the State’s vicious enforcement, and my emotional states of despair, powerlessness, guilt and longing, reveal a disoriented self. Within the state of
disorientation, I encounter difficulties in narrating the meaning of the event and its consequences, and in articulating my feelings towards it. In a literal sense, I experience the event through the unspeakable.

Through an artistic practice of drawing and painting, I attempt to take possession of the event and its psychological effects on me. What is at stake is not a discourse on the politics of the event or a form of therapy, but rather a personal confrontation with the event that is lyrical and reflective from the positions of both artist and individual. Through continuously enacting mother’s narrative and negotiating my relationship with it, I explore how artmaking can impart meaning to an ongoing life event, and furthermore, make possible the forming and empowering of oneself.

Methodology and Research Questions

I have strong desires to understand the causes and consequences of the event, its meaning to me, and my impotence towards it. However, my quest for an explanation and a justification that makes the event comprehensible only leads to endless unanswered questions and ends in the silence of the world. According to Albert Camus, this ‘confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world’ \(^1\) brings forth the absurd. To understand this feeling of conflictedness and irreconcilability, I started my investigation into existentialist and realist novels by Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Samuel Beckett, George Orwell and Milan Kundera. The novel as a fictional form has the potential to imply ontological questions and provoke the thinking of the unthinkable or unthought in the realm of imagination. I wonder how its fictionalising and communicative act – the spoken, can communicate complex emotional states of both the protagonists and the author, and embody the unspeakable. From my research into literature, I

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search for methodology that can be adapted for my studio-based investigations and the realisation of this research.

1) Towards inwardness

Fiction portraying existential characters and a stress on individual subjectivity, freedom and choice, was first introduced by writers in the late 19th century, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The characters often act out their troubled minds and psyches through first-person narrations. What interests me in this type of fiction is the emphasis on the individual’s experiences and struggles in times of great political and cultural changes, crises, dislocations.

In *Notes from Underground* by Dostoyevsky, monologues of an underground man are foregrounded. A petty clerk in the Russian bureaucracy suffering from sickness and solitude, voices his spite and resentment to assert his freedom. Through his monologues, the underground man reveals the underlying psychological stratum in man and alienation in the climate of industrial revolution and liberal reform in the late nineteenth century Russia. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus shares a similar absurd sensibility evoked by an individual's internal voices. The novel is narrated in the voice of the indifferent protagonist Meursault, speaking about his trial and imprisonment after a senseless murder. Meursault is a “strange” man with no feelings for himself and others, no ambitions and morals. He lives moment by moment until his trial. Only when he is in prison, does he start to reflect on the life that he has already lost. Before his execution, when he is asked about his vision of the afterlife, he flies into a rage. In the face of death, he for the first time opens his heart to the indifferent world and reveals the meaning of his life, that is the living of it.
From a first-person perspective, the protagonists in both novels act out the contradiction and irrationality of their minds. The meaning and value of being is realised not as metaphysical theorisation, but as emotional lived experiences and the feeling of the absurd generated by their passionate engagement in life and its struggles. In existentialist novels, often the goal is not to achieve a universal meaning of human existence, but to dramatise the failure of an individual in comprehending and communicating the world. When facing the ultimate problems and questions of human life, the protagonists do not provide a reply, rather, they propound the absurd problem. When Meursault faces death, he longs for a transcendent meaning or value that would sum up his life while at the same time, he rejects consolations of God, certainty and eternal truth beyond life itself. The absurd is experienced as ambivalent longings for dehumanising the self in order to live in a world without difference and preserving the self; as feelings in-between integrity and estrangement; and as confrontations between the desire for understanding and the opacity of the world. The absurd, as Camus puts it, ‘is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together’. And ‘for the absurd man it is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing.’

Although we can never fully explain the absurd, we are elaborating a kind of self-knowledge. For Meursault, he becomes self-aware following the trial, an event which gives way to his refection. The notion of reflection operates on two levels: reflection as mirroring how the self is seen by the world, manifested in the trial and reflection as turning inwards, an introspection. The self-knowledge is obtained through an unceasing process of confronting his absurd feelings and sensibility, and explicating the unreconcilable relationship between the self and the world.

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2 Ibid., 91.
Inspired by the existentialist novels, I consider my quest for answers to mother’s event as an internal journey of reaching my inner feelings and subjective experiences. This research is a way of experiencing the event through activities of recalling, fantasising, narrating, creating and reflecting. It sets off towards personal memories and emotional experiences to bring forth speculative insights of the self and its relation to the event, and to the world. Furthermore, it aims beyond the personal, in search of experiences and sensations which are shared.

2) Imagination

The event of mother’s imprisonment was updated to me in the form of narrative. During her detention, mother’s existence resides outside my vision. The only way for me to visualise her is through tracing my memory and imagination. Throughout my research, I attempt to imagine and represent mother’s existence incarcerated in prison through exploring figuration in painting. Due to the impossibility of accessing mother’s experiences in prison, my imagination of her often turns out to be an illustration of a figure facing violence based on novels or found images. Thus, in my research, I investigate how painting can represent certain psychological states through figuration, without turning into an illustration, and how invisible sensations unfold in the depiction of the visible figure. I also explore how to represent mother’s invisible existence in the form of absence.

Although I am unable to access mother’s experiences directly, I can try to imagine what it is like to be entrapped and feel how she feels through my painting practice. In this way, painting is employed as a means of looking with the other through a bodily imagination of feeling into the other. In this report, I will also explore images and narratives of other traumatic events which resonate with my experiences of mother’s imprisonment; explaining in relation to my work, how painting as
representation may prevent the generalisation of an unsettled event and allow an empathetic understanding of others’ experiences.

3) Painting as an ontological gesture

Painting as an ontological gesture offers me a twofold experience: On the one hand, I explore the activity of painting itself to gain tactile and embodied understanding of an image, a narrative or an experience, through my bodily movements and senses. On the other hand, painting is experienced as an interrelational process, through which I confront the matrix of intimate relations between the self, others and events in the world. Painting with my bodily awareness allows my body to open its imaginary contours and experience corporeally the pains, pleasures and struggles in the other; painting then as a specular body image reflects to me my desired and foreign self. For painting, as a production of signs, communicates itself through the unsaid. Various perspectives and points of focus are often blended within a single pictorial framing. The static and fragmented properties of painting result in the transmission of meaning in uncertainty, instability and ambiguity. In this report, I will investigate how painting transmits narrative in a non-verbal way and how its meaning is generated with the viewer’s encounter. I will also examine the potentials of painting in representing memory, traumatic events and history, and in opening gaps for emotional and meaningful engagement. First and foremost, how does painting embody the absent and represent a phenomenon that is unspeakable, or even unrepresentable? I will explore these propositions and questions through reflecting on my painting practice, the discourse of history painting and the practice of the following artists: Francis Bacon, Marlene Dumas, Francisco Goya, William Kentridge, Maria Lassnig, Edvard Munch and Gerhard Richter.
My focus on my own subjectivity demonstrates the originality of this research. It originates from a dramatic event in my autobiography and demands intimate examinations of my own emotions and conflicted sense of self. I become the main subject that I research into, examining and negotiating my unspeakable experiences and subjectivity. I switch between different modes of thinking: drawing, painting, seeing as the viewer, writing, conducting public exhibitions and presentations. And I lay out an analytical account of my research couched in phenomenology and psychoanalysis on notions of perception, emotion, embodiment, body image, trauma and the self. In the following chapters, I unfold my thinking and research activities in response to how my experiences of mother’s imprisonment have changed over time.
Lost Voice

In December 2014, I visited mother in the prison for the first time. She was sitting on the other side of the window, with guards walking behind her. We were chatting through the visitor phone and I was bursting to tell her about my PhD project: ‘...I am well. I am doing a research project relating to you and…’

Mother interrupted, with her eyes flicking and looking away.

I soon noticed that we were under strict surveillance and did not know what was appropriate to say. During the 30-minute meeting time, we could not say much. We just looked at each other and repeated that we both were fine. I felt completely speechless and powerless. My inability to speak was experienced in two different ways: my free speech was suppressed under surveillance; I was astonished by my first physical encounter of the unchallengeable power manifested in the prison. The astonishment triggered a sublime moment of horror. In this state, I felt all my thoughts and motions were suspended.

After the visit, I was struck by this experience of the unspeakable. There seem to be secrets which lingered in those indescribable moments. I tried to recall them through drawing. In a sketchbook (fig.1-3), I made ink drawings of the tall walls, the security gates, the forbidden zones, the seats in the waiting room, the meeting room settings, the phones, the plasters on mother’s fingers, and all the other peculiar things that struck a chord. I used ink so that the drawing was unalterable and I could capture whatever appears in my mind without a second thought. The use of line has to be direct and immediate so that it conveys a sense of urgency before memories slip away. Those drawings attempted to capture moments from my first visit to mother, but I cannot tell how much they are made from accurate memory or from imagination. The unhinged experience that I felt in the meeting
room disrupted my objective perception of what was happening there. However, the thought that this was actually happening is real. When I felt that I was losing grip of it, I drew from literary sources or other personal encounters which can give me similar emotional affects. In a word, imposing a discipline on myself to fill a sketchbook with diaristic drawings allowed me a visual and tactile aid to overcome my uncontrollable resistance of remembering and articulating the experience.
The Mental Image

The ink drawings are my attempts to trace the particular moments of the visit from my memory. Memory is selective. It emphasises or deemphasises elements of past experiences. Fragmented images emerge from the white ground as the ink soaks into the paper. The large amount of nondescript space retains the potential of more images to come or remain hidden. What the drawings bring forth is not a real space, a complete scene, but a viewpoint, a gaze into something. They are not just representations of what I saw there, but images that I conjured in my mind when I thought of the visit. They are experienced as echoes, projections or reconstructions of my actual perceptual experiences from the past. However, according to Sartre, the mental image is not the same as perceived imagery – ‘it is a certain way that an object has of being absent within its very presence’\(^3\). In perception, consciousness is directed towards what is present and knowledge is formed by observing the object presented; whereas, in imagination, the perceived object is no longer in view and consciousness presents itself an object - an ‘analogon’ called by Sartre, which takes on the sense of the object it represents:

The mental image aims at a real thing, which exists among others in the world of perception; but it aims at it through a psychic content...in the image consciousness we apprehend an object as an ‘analogon’ for another object. Pictures, caricatures, impersonators, spots on the wall, entoptic lights: all these representatives have the common character of being objects for consciousness.\(^4\)

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\(^4\) Ibid., 52-53.
To produce an image consciousness of an absent object is to make an intentional cognitive-affective synthesis from what one knows about the object and what one desires to represent to oneself. The mental image, according to Sartre, is ‘a kind of ideal for the feeling, it represents for the affective consciousness a limiting state, the state in which desire is at the same time knowledge’. The mental image is not a picture nor an object of consciousness, but an act that aims in its corporeality at the absent or non-existent object, an imagining consciousness of the object, a relation between the subject’s desire and the object.

Recalling my visit produces in me the mental image of the visit. I imagine as if I was there, looking at the walls, the phones and mother’s gestures. However, they appear in vague and fugitive forms. They are more like impressions – the wall in vast greyness stretching to the sky, the repetition of the smooth modest phones, and mother moving in and towards the glass window. The drawings are made with an impetuous impulse to grasp the imagined forms, to reach for a more precise image of the impression in the mind, to retain the mental image. The imagined forms captured in the drawings resemble not only what I saw, but also the traits, feelings and emotions that I ascribe to them, revealing something from the past moments which I didn’t know that I know. The drawings enable a different kind of seeing, inwardly into myself, through the mind’s eye.

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5 Ibid., 72.
Being as A Winding

The following piece (fig. 4) is one of the drawings about the meeting room which I made shortly after my prison visit. It portrays a booth with telephones connected to the other side of the window. Early on in my research, my supervisor asked me about what the blue marks represent. “They are the reflections on the window,” I explained and immediately burst into tears. I was surprised by my reaction: the drawing does not describe a dramatic scene and I was not emotional while making it; but somehow, at that moment, the question about the blue marks brought me back to the suspended moment that I experienced during the visit. It was as if I encountered an alteration in my experience of time and space – the setting of the meeting room flickered and I sat in the same spot glimpsing the window, which felt intimately near, yet at a great distance.

When we feel like being distanced or dis-placed from a prior orientation, we experience emotions ‘as we begin to assume another emotional stance or “position” in adaptive response to the perceived alterations.’ Sue L. Cataldi

4. Yvonne Feng, *Drawing from Sketchbook Project, 2014-15*

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regards this felt phenomenon of disorientation as a core sense of “emotional depth”. The nature of depth in the realm of emotional experience is reversibility between observer and environment, perceiver and perceived. Cataldi’s notion of emotional depth is based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological concept of the “flesh”, which describes the phenomenon of perceiving and of being the object of perception: ‘it is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body’. Merleau-Ponty explains this experience of reciprocal tactile contact in terms of one hand touching the other:

The moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand. But this last-minute failure does not drain all truth from that presentiment I had of being able to touch myself touching: my body does not perceive, but it is as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it.  

Cataldi applies this twofold conception of percipient perceptibility to deep emotional experiences as “being as a winding”:

When I am being emotionally dis-positioned - that is, when I begin to apprehend that I am being apprehended and that, in being apprehended, I am emotionally apprehending.

Stated thus, emotions have both reversible active and passive sides. In the course of emotional experience, we can “wind up” on either side and to an extent that we can no longer tell who is perceiving and who is being perceived. In the light of Cataldi’s “emotional depth”, the felt gap which I experienced during the visit can be understood as passive emotional experience - my sense of self seemed to be

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8 Ibid., 9.
held by emotional significances. At that moment, it was the emotions that grasped me, not I who had the emotions. In the moment of being confronted with the meanings of the blue marks, I experienced my sense of self dispersively within the reversibility of emotional depth – I felt that I was here (with my supervisor) as well as there (the meeting room); what had been there was also simultaneously here; I was somehow on both sides at once. Although I was unable to describe verbally what I felt during the visit, I did experience the feelings and process them through my body. According to Cataldi, Merleau-Ponty’s logic – we cannot touch touching, is also applied to emotional percipience. We cannot just directly or immediately perceive our emotional feelings. To the extent that we can emotionally perceive, "our emotional feelings must be felt, through an evocative “other side” – “in” the perceptible."\(^\text{10}\) In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, emotional meanings are comprehended through ‘a kind of blind recognition’\(^\text{11}\) in the process of our bodies overlapping with or inhabiting a spectacle. In the moment of explaining the blue marks, my emotional self was forced into the sight of the questioner as well as to the “I” who was recalling. Through the drawing, I encountered a tactile perception - emotionally apprehending myself being grasped by emotions.

This encounter triggered my embodiment of past emotional experiences. Even though memories are fading away, feelings can cross the never-stopping, never-reversing flow of time. Although I am unable to fully perceive, or speak about, my emotional feelings of a past moment, they can be felt and sensed through the act of drawing and then through apprehending the drawings.


Drawing as (Re)Experiencing

How do the drawings transform from sight to touch and embody the state of being touched? The diaristic drawings are employed as a means to record the trace of my visit to mother in prison. I draw as if I am recalling. I limit my drawing materials to ink, water, A4 paper and a few brushes. Without concerns about managing colours and achieving a ‘finished’ quality, drawing in a direct and spontaneous manner grounds my memories and past experiences in the present. The rendering of form in drawing transforms perception into lines, marks and tones. What is rendered perceptible is not a documentation of what I saw in the meeting room. It is a kind of perception generated by touch, physically and emotionally. The process of drawing is like re-experiencing that past moment through touch. Through touch, I am sensitive to variations in shape; differentiations in texture; and fluctuations in light and temperature. The scene is absorbed through my senses, felt through my body, and drawn according to what it felt like. The physical act of drawing evokes tactile feelings from the past and connects with them through the touch of each stroke on paper. Each stroke is an attempt to get closer to the real of the experience, until finally I am, as it were, in the scene. When I traverse the threshold, drawing brings forth a lived temporality, within which the past and the present is copresent. It also opens up an affective space within which I grasp my emotional feelings of that past moment. I feel touched – emotionally affected by that situation again.

Cataldi expands on Merleau-Ponty’s view of emotionally “blind” apprehension and connects it with touch. She suggests that touch and emotion overlap. ‘Emotionally felt feelings are a way we have of being in touch with the sense of our
situational surroundings\textsuperscript{12}. Being in touch implies contact. Contact involves the presence of the body within which things outside are felt. Thus, affective space is modelled on the tactile and intermingles with situational space. Re-experiencing the meeting room scene through touch in drawing is inhabiting the tactile dimension of that space, to gain a tactile perception of it. In the process of drawing, the distinction between object and subject, visible and invisible dissolves through inner and outer interaction and engagement. The rendering of form in drawing turns the memory of an experience into tactile perception, senses the tactile feelings through touching the surface, and creates a visual trace for the emotional feelings to cross over and be revealed.

What is it that I am perplexed by in this remembered experience that I want to embody through and in drawing? Drawing is phenomenological because of its duality of being both ‘description, as object, and “describing how it describes”, as an active process’\textsuperscript{13}. It records the movement of the drawer’s body and thoughts. It becomes thought that thinks itself through its own practice. I repeat drawing the prison meeting room scene in order to grasp my emotional feelings and seek to explicate the subject. \textit{Window no.12} (fig. 5) is one of the many ink drawings that I made to trace the experience. The counter desk with visitors’ phones is brought into the foreground through use of rigid lines and strong tonal contrast. The phones represent the reachable side of the viewer. In contrast, the figures drawn with washy marks appear in ghostly existence, as reflections on glass. The phones are in the centre of focus. The curvy shapes of the handsets are emphasised, implying


the grip of the hand and the action of reaching through to the other side. In this drawing, the division between the two separated sides is highlighted. Every redrawing leads me on to see a slightly different angle of the scene. In all the drawings, I see a phantom temporality of mother sitting on the other side of the glass. They all re-enact a sense of loss from our separation as well as a sense of desire to reach the other side. Through drawing, I attempt to retain my vision of mother and to see beyond the glass and the wall. My attempts lead to a sense of the visual which continues to haunt, but can never achieve full visibility. At the destination of this visuality, nothing is seen. Or paradoxically, what is seen is the absence.

5. Yvonne Feng, *Window no.12, 2015*
The Logic of Sensation

My countless attempts to trace the experience of mother’s imprisonment always terminate with the vanishing scene of her sitting on the other side of the glass in the meeting room. What is beyond the glass is imaginary to me. I try to imagine the violence she experiences in prison. Due to the difficulty of direct communication with her, my perception of violence remains as imagination or projection based on other violent stories. Also, as the violence is not directly experienced by me or presented to me, my representation of it often turns out to be an illustration of my preconceived ideas of violence.

Study (Toxic Yellow and Shadows) is one of my depictions of imaginary violence. The painting portrays a naked blindfolded woman about to collapse, while a machine gun is aiming at her. With the figure’s firm body contour and upward facing posture, the painting is my attempt to deliver the message: she is suffering.

6. Yvonne Feng, Study (Toxic Yellow and Shadows), 2015
yet will not submit to power. As I have never experienced or witnessed a violent scene like that, the painting is a merely fictional construction. The sense of violence is illustrated, rather than embodied and felt. This painting study demonstrates my dilemma in using the narratives about mother to make art: I am not the direct victim of violence, but I feel the necessity to tell her stories; I face a split between the self who wants to feel and the self who wants to tell. This split sense of self results in two different modes of making: ink drawing on paper as an intimate, autobiographical recording of my discovery of the event as seen and remembered; and painting on canvas as an attempt to construct an event in itself to evoke sensations of violence to the viewer. How can painting represent certain psychological states through figuration without turning into an illustration? How does the act of painting unfold invisible sensations through depiction of the visible? I try to find a possible methodology in examining Francis Bacon’s paintings and how they trigger an embodied experience of sensations.

“Scream” is a recurrent motif in Bacon’s paintings. In *Head VI*, Bacon portrays a screaming pope isolated in a glass box. The screaming mouth suggests that the

7. Francis Bacon, *Head VI*, 1949
pope is in existential agony, but no narrative context is shown in the painting. The curtain-black vertical strokes shield him and us from view. Without information about the other facial features and what causes his scream, the painting captures horror in the scream resounding through the paint. The painting focuses on the pope’s open mouth, through which a disquieting vitality emerges. The mouth is a site from which we release our cries of pain and pleasure. The focus of it intensifies the tension between the physical and psychological interior space of the body and its exterior environment. The scream is not driven by visible violence that the body is subject to, but rather, from a strong desire or forces in the body. As Gilles Deleuze describes in his exhaustive analysis on Bacon’s work, *The Logic of Sensation*: ‘If we scream, it is always as victims of invisible and insensible forces that scramble every spectacle, and that even lie beyond pain and feeling.’

He cites the phrase “life screams at death” to demonstrate the coupling of the perceptible and imperceptible forces - it is not the already visible death that horrifies us, rather ‘it is this invisible force that life detects, flushes out, and makes visible through the scream’. The visible bodily movement is subordinated to the invisible forces that condition it, but the body gives them no other visibility than the body itself. While being exerted upon by these forces, the body actively struggles. In the case of painting *Head V*, the scream signifies the invisible forces acting upon the body. The body struggles within its consignment to immobility and isolation. This embodiment of still and silent endurance of the figure provokes the sensation of horror. Even though there is no horrible scene to be seen, story to be told, horror is inferred from the scream.

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15 Ibid., 62.
This notion of sensation is not equal to the "sensational", rather, it is the opposite of the facile and the cliché. According to Deleuze’s reading of Cezanne: ‘Sensation has one face turned toward the subject (the nervous system...) and one face turned toward the object (the “fact”...). Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World.’ The latter characteristic of sensation refers to the phenomenological unity of the senses. The viewer experiences sensation only by entering the painting, reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed. The pope is nevertheless represented as a figurative object. How does it break away from the primary figuration and embody sensation without becoming sensational? Bacon’s formula for this question is ‘to paint the scream more than the horror’, which means that he focuses on depicting a sensible figure more than a spectacle of the horrible. The figure, suggested by Deleuze, is one of the two approaches (the other is abstraction) of going beyond figuration (both the illustrative and the figurative). It is ‘the sensible form related to sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh.’ Painting towards the figure is to embody sensation in the body. The body here alludes to what is painted, not insofar as a represented object, but ‘as it is experienced as sustaining this sensation.’ The engagement with paint is crucial in creating the figure to break from the figurative and to evoke an intense subjective experience. In Bacon’s paintings, the paint is handled so as to empathise with the physical condition of the figure.

19 Ibid., 35.
Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion was painted by Bacon in 1944, during the Second World War. The triptych captures three grey-fleshed monstrous creatures writhing and screaming in anguish. They are depicted as a mass of ambulating flesh with an animal-like body and a human-like mouth. Only the mouth is delineated precisely, with details of every tooth, while the rest of the body is subjected to rubbing. The technique of scrubbing is significant in Bacon’s paintings. Brush-marks are applied by “chance”, which means that they are not employed for the sake of representing the visual image, but as imprints, traces of the painter’s hand movements. The “chance” here is a choice, a contrived accident. Bacon explains his thinking about order and chance:

Even if within the order there may be enormously instinctive and accidental things, nevertheless I think that they come out of a desire for ordering and for returning fact onto the nervous system in a more violent way...in my case, I know what I want to do but don’t know how to bring it
about. And that’s what I’m hoping accidents or chance or whatever you like to call it will bring about for me.\textsuperscript{20}

Bacon’s manipulated accidents permit the possibility of the deformation. The application of “free marks” destroys the nascent figuration instead of transforming the figure into a represented object. According to Deleuze, deformation subordinates movement to force, the abstract to the figure: ‘When a force is exerted on a scrubbed part…it turns this zone into a zone of indiscernibility that is common to several forms, irreducible to any of them; and the lines of forces that it creates escape every form through their very clarity, through their deforming precision.’\textsuperscript{21}

The application of “free marks” turns the figural body back to its material presence – the physicality of paint. The open mouth becomes a black hole. The body is rendered into a zone of indiscernibility by violent brushstrokes. The brushstrokes are applied as if slaughtering the body. They make visible a dynamism of forces that the figures are enduring. This bodily deformation from the body to flesh, flesh to force, renders the figures into meat-like presence. Although I cannot clearly identify whether they are human or animal bodies, they evoke the sensation of violence in my own body. The meat-like presence embodies the fear of physical vulnerability, violence and death, which is shared by both humankind and animal. ‘Meat’ as Deleuze describes, ‘is the common zone of man and the beast…a zone of indiscernibility more profound than any sentimental identification: the man who


suffers is a beast, the beast that suffers is a man.' With regard to the frailty of our body, we are potential carcasses. Because of this identity that we share, we pity the “meat”. In the moment when we see the figure’s body as the “meat”, we empathise with the subject, and experience violent sensations.

Besides the indiscernible flesh and orifice through which the body deforms and the spirit escapes, the pink oozing matter and the smooth black shadow attached to the bodies, referred by Parveen Adams as the “lamella” - ‘flat bounded shapes’ are also important features for triggering sensation. The “lamella” suggests that the figure is subjected to the force of dissipation. Both the monstrous figures and the pope are immobile and doomed to be dissipated. They are actively struggling via the scream, at the same time fading away or dissolving into the painted ground. Nothing visible happens and nothing will remain to be seen. The sensation of violence withdraws from the violence of the body, and is sustained in the void. In Bacon’s paintings, there is ‘a complete interlocking of image and paint, so that the image is the paint and vice versa.’ Ultimately, the sensation of violence is manifested in the paint.

For Bacon, painting sensation is to record the “fact” of a subjective experience, that is to make the image more immediately real to himself through the power of paint. I apply this formula to my search for a figural image which embodies the sensation of violence without turning into an illustration of violence. The painting Jade Bracelet (fig. 9) is based on the conversation between mother and a police

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officer that I overheard in our last phone call before her detainment. I heard that
the officer ordered mother to take off her jade bracelet which was too tight to
remove. After several attempts of loosening it, the officer said in a cold tone: “In
that case, we have to saw it off.” Shortly afterwards, the call was disconnected.
The act of sawing lingered in my mind in silence for quite a while. And this violent
act has remained very visual in my memory even though I did not witness it. I
attempted to encapsulate the violent sensation by depicting the imaginary moment
of cutting the bracelet off mother’s hand. I started by making an ink drawing that
portrayed a woman looking upward, while a solemn male officer was placing a
large pair of scissors on her wrist. The officer’s uniforms and a desk at the front
with a scatter of personal objects on top were also depicted in the drawing. Based
on the drawing, I painted the scene directly with oil paint on an unprimed wooden
panel. To emphasise the act of cutting, the painting depicted only the figures and
a larger pair of scissors against a Prussian blue background with yellow greenish
shimmer on the figures’ faces and the bracelet. The painting was atmospheric, but
to me the tension of the cutting act was not intense enough. It seemed to be
disrupted by the disembodied figures – their illustrative facial expressions were
unable to convey the emotional intensity or ruthlessness they ought to show. I went on to experiment with the composition further in drawing. I erased the female figure’s face and just focused on depicting her wrist. The scissors were simplified to two pieces of sharp blades. In my second attempt, on the same size of panel with a prepared ground, I only focused on depicting the necessary elements of the cutting action – the hand, the bracelet and the moving blades. The blades have sharp outlines, indicating force. The hand is drawn within a thin line rather than painted to emphasise the delicacy of the wrist. The victim fades into the white ground, suggesting a sense of impotence, whereas, the officer is given an intrusive presence. The bracelet is the only object rendered realistically to hold the centre of attention. In the process of material and formal engagement, my focus has shifted from depicting the scenario of cutting off mother’s bracelet to the moment of cutting. I try to get close to the subjective reality of the act by painting the objects towards how they feel like. When the tension of the cut is embodied through the depicted objects, despite the removal of details, the sensation of violence can be felt.

Through the repetition of drawing and painting process, I search for an economic way to embody the sensation of the cutting moment with lines and marks. The marks gradually transform from being illustrative to sensed. The violence which resides in the narrative becomes a tactile experience of my own. Two years after painting *Jade Bracelet*, I made another painting *Cut* (fig. 10), wondering if I could feel the sensation of violence again as time passed. For this painting, I do not try to recall the phone call, but focus on imagining the embodied “fact” - painting the objects and figures as they are sensed in the moment of cutting. When the painting manages to capture a felt reality, the violent sensation can be made visible again in the present. Its embodiment is no longer in reliance on the original narrative of violence.
10. Yvonne Feng, *Cut*, 2017
Encountering the Avisual

If violence in painting is not perceived as sensational figuration but as bodily sensation evoked through the figure, it has no fixed form. In this research, I search for the figural image in painting to represent mother’s existence incarcerated in prison and my own reality of alienation as a result. My attempts to trace her experience in prison always terminate with a disappearing figure, a vanishing scene or a void. For me, it is in a sense of absence where the violence of mother’s event resides and reveals itself.

Can violence take form as absence? In 2016, I was invited to make a wall drawing in situ at The Foundry, London’s new centre for social justice. I scaled up the prison phones from my sketchbook drawings and rendered them as objects on the wall. Their symbolic and illusory presence indicates the paradox between the desire to communicate and the impossibility to reach beyond the wall. The handsets embody an invisible and muted presence of the other, waiting to be heard. There

is no intended painful story to be told or terrible scene to be seen. When standing in front of the phones, I feel a sense of imposing violence brought forth by the inability of communication which the work signifies. At the exhibition opening, I had an interesting encounter with a human rights practitioner working at the Foundry. She immediately recognised the symbolic phones and identified the kind of institution they belong to. The work resonated with the struggle of communication that she has experienced throughout her 20-year practice in supporting human rights lawyers, scholars and activists in China. For her, it not only symbolised the difficulty of speaking to a detained person, but also the person’s incapacity to speak about the emotional experiences and impacts of the detainment. From this encounter and feeling the impediment of speech staged by the wall drawing, I realised that the impenetrability of a violent experience is the embodiment of the invisible violence which engenders the experience. When I try to trace the violence that mother experiences in prison, I am unable to obtain a visual view, because the furthest I can see is her on the other side of the glass in the prison meeting room. Her detention obscures her existence from society, nevertheless, she continues to exist. Such presence in absence implies a specific mode of visuality suggested by Akira Lippit – avisuality:

It determines an experience of seeing, a sense of the visual, without ever offering an image. A visuality without images, an unimaginable visuality, and images without visuality, avisuality. All signs lead to a view, but at its destination, nothing is seen. What is seen is the absence, the materiality of an avisual form or body.\(^\text{25}\)

If the avisual form is invisible, how can it be seen? Derrida explains a secret visuality:

\(^{25}\) Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 32.
One might imagine a secret that could only be penetrated or traversed, undone or opened as a secret, by hearing, or one that would only allow itself to be touched or felt, precisely because in that way it would escape the gaze or be invisible, or indeed because what was visible in it would keep secret the secret that wasn't visible. One can always reveal to the gaze something that still remains secret because its secret is accessible only to the senses other than sight.26

Derrida's secret visuality is a phenomenological sense of seeing, a visuality seen in other senses: hearing, smelling, touching or feeling.

Although mother’s existence resides outside vision during her detainment, her existence can be materialised through my feelings and imagination, in the form of narrative and sensory representation enabled by this research. The unchallengeable authoritative power that she is subject to reveals itself in avisibility. The violence of it cannot be seen, but it gives a sense of visuality through mother’s absent presence and my feelings of impotence when speaking about it.

Shadowy Imagery and Spectral Figuration

The visual materiality of memories, past events and atrocities is marked by loss, erasure or effacement. Their visuality resides in the mode of avisuality, blurring borders between past and present, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality, exteriority and interiority, reality and imagination. How can these avisual subjects be rendered visible without giving away their ambivalent essence? I sought for representational strategies through investigating the following artists’ work.

The painting *September* by Gerhard Richter is an eroded representation of the 9/11 attacks. As this atrocious event had already been imprinted on our collective memory through iconic media images, how can painting represent such an event and its elusive reality of human suffering, or offer meaningful engagement without turning into pornography of catastrophe? Richter’s painting is rendered as a monochrome, an abstracted veil of grey smudges across the canvas. The details
of the image seem to be deliberately removed or camouflaged. In contrast to the grand format of history paintings which represent spectacular events with melodramatic effect, this painting is small, unsentimental and its representational image is barely perceptible. Its scale resembles a television screen through which I and most people learned the news of the event. At the moment of the hijacked plane colliding with the World Trade Center, the event has been recorded, recycled from one media form to another and circulated over the world. It is widely known that the aim of the attack was not to destroy the WTC only but to stage the destruction of a globally recognizable icon of advanced capitalism as a media spectacle. Through the mass media, images of events are filtered and produced as proxies for reality. Historical or past events are brought to life again and again as if part of the contemporary moment through the illusionary surfaces of digital screens. At that moment, the virtual begins to interfere with reality, with memories, histories and traumas of the viewer. The attack has created a virulent form of iconoclasm, imprinted images of horror in the collective memory of the world. As W. J. T. Mitchell describes, ‘the potency of these images doesn’t reside merely in their presentness or topical currency but in their status as enigmas and omens, harbingers of uncertain futures.’

*September* was painted in 2005, four years after 9/11. Meanwhile, Richter had made numerous attempts to represent the attack in drawing and painting but felt that he failed to distil the truth of it in any single image and compete with the vividness of the direct photographic documentations. In his interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Richter revealed the hidden process of painting *September*. “The little picture of the two towers was very colourful to start with, with the garish explosion beneath the wonderful blue sky and the flying rubble. That couldn’t work;

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only when I destroyed it, so to speak, scratched it off, was it fit to be seen.’28 The scratching off effect, noted by Robert Storr, was accomplished with ‘a knife rather than with Richter’s customary squeegee or spatula’29. Richter undid the primary image through lifting the initial layers of paint. The work was transformed from depicting destruction into signifying destruction by virtue of its own physical materiality. The motion lines resulting from scratching and dragging of paint can be perceived as an allegory of the colliding force of the airplane. The grey smudges resemble the heavy smoke in the atmosphere after the explosions. *September* is a palpable representation of 9/11 more than a visual one.

The making of *September* raises the problems and potentials of painting events which have an unpaintable nature. The impact of 9/11 is immeasurable. To me, it seems impossible to condense its enormity, dramatic climax and complex meanings into a painting. Although the occurrence of the attack can be seized by a camera and transcribed into a painting, it is impossible to narrate individual fates of the victims and capture collective death in a picture. Instead of producing another photographic realist image to be added to the media spectacle, Richter’s strategy was to destroy or cancel out the media images through blurring them. Formally, it results in the loss of meaning in translation from a news image to a deteriorated painted surface. *September* only embodies a ghost of the ghostly media replica of the attack and states nothing about the attack itself. Because the event is imprinted so deeply in our collective memory, once associated with the context, the viewer is able to concretise the blurry image. However, being too familiar with the media images might have stopped us thinking about them or emotionally relating to them. The strategic blurriness of *September* effectively

correlates to the ungraspable, indeterminate impacts of 9/11. It provokes a sense of horror not through the representational image, but within the imaginative space between the projection of the painted image and the title, which may trigger new readings and engagements in the event. As Storr explains, ‘to exquisitely paint an indescribably ugly subject is not to glamorize something inherently odious but rather to call attention to it by showing tenderness toward something that has been visited by brutality, and so make it harder if not impossible for the viewer to turn away from the image once its subject has been recognized.’

The painting invites interpretation of its ambiguity and irresolution. It presents itself as a failed attempt to represent the atrocious event in a realist way but perhaps, the reality of atrocity is unpaintable and the unpaintableness is where the true subject matter resides.

Photography indexes reality. The photograph (in its literal state), as stated by Roland Barthes, constitutes a message without a code. When a photograph is viewed as a mechanical transfer of the appearance of an object or a scene, its ‘relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of transformation but of recording’. Unlike drawing or words, the photograph is able to ‘transmit the literal information without forming it by means of discontinuous signs and rules of transformation’ alluding to its analogical nature as a medium. The photograph fosters the temptation to believe that the real “there” is simply re-presented before us “here”. However, what the photograph resembles is not a purely objective reality. The process of transference involves reduction of the object to a two-dimensional plane and human interventions including framing, lighting, focus, speed and so on. The human interventions are connotative messages hidden in the denotative message that the photograph delivers. Due to the absence of codes, the photograph is

perceived as a denotative message which naturalises the connotative message as ‘a kind of natural *being-there* of objects’\(^\text{32}\). Barthes also specifies that ‘the photograph establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing but an awareness of its *having-been-there*\(^\text{33}\). The photographic reality of *having-been-there* documents what the thing has been, but cannot attest to what it is, as its reality of *here-now* is no longer certain. The indexicality of photography relies on a necessary precondition of the object’s own existence, whereas painting feigns its existence in the perpetual here and now\(^\text{34}\). In-between the virtual space of representation and the material surface, the reality of the object is not re-presented as its past state but framed by the viewer’s perception of its presence. In the informational economies of mass culture, images of events are taken and disseminated instantly. They may be or are made to be misrecognised as a denotative message, a re-presentation of real. Distributed to an excessive extent, they are perceived as information, at once inaccessible and banal. I wonder how painting can offer an undoing of these banal images and preconceived ideas of events, opening gaps for emotional and meaningful engagements.

Marlene Dumas’s paintings are often shaped from borrowed texts or media images, which she then invests with a new order of intimacy and emotion. *Alfa* (fig. 13) depicts a figure lying prone with the eyes shut and mouth open. The face is sculpted by the surrounding darkness. The blank canvas ground makes up of most

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 44.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

the skin, suggesting a sense of bloodlessness and lifelessness. From the facial features and expressions, it is hard to identify the gender of the figure and whether he/she is under the state of sleep, death or sexual ecstasy. The title, *Alfa* refers to the name of the Russian Special Forces group that stormed the Dubrovka Theater with toxic gas, killing all the terrorists and most of the hostages during the 2002 Moscow hostage crisis. Dumas painted the figure based on a photograph of a young woman’s corpse found at the siege. The image itself is ambiguous, giving no clues whether the woman is a perpetrator or a victim. Dumas further removed the figure from its context by isolating the face and eliminating details in the background. The framing of the face compels the viewer to look closely, question her visage and the inherent ambiguity that the image contains. Ambiguity means that something has more than one possible meaning, thus possibly causing confusion. Within an ambiguous state, meaning is withheld from us. In Dumas’s work, also Richter’s as previously mentioned, ambiguity is employed as a representational strategy to activate an active and subjective seeing in the viewer.

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The renditions of cropping, blurring and flattening reflect on the processes of interpretation in the photographic image. The use of the photographic image as foundation arouses expectations of certainty; concurrently, the inconclusive rendering arouses disbelief and doubt. ‘I don’t “search” for meaning,’ says Dumas in an interview, ‘meaning comes with the consciousness of the viewing process; it’s an interrelational process, not a static identity.’36 Alfa is not a commentary on the event or its representation, but an invitation to mediate on death and the political circumstances surrounding this death. The ambiguous rendering of the image suspends instantaneous reading and forces the viewer to confront with uncertainty. It also brings forth an ethical dimension to looking. How do we relate to the figure, if we are uncertain whether she represents a terrorist or a victim?

The perception of figures in Dumas’s paintings is often grounded in intimacy. Her work is charged with a heightened sense of sensitivity achieved by the close-up framing of the body, delicate touches and fluid use of wet paint. In Alfa, a faint and soft glow of rose violet goes from the lifeless figure’s forehead to the neck, suggesting the trace of touch by the painter’s hand. The painting surface assimilates to skin, acting as a sensitive and permeable layer between the self and other. Through a gentle accumulation of touch, Dumas seems to render the pain and loss of the subject as her own. What is at stake is not the objectified figure but the underlying human relationship that the figure evokes: we are all intimately related through the flesh and the body. The painting with its expressiveness of touch and surface arouses an empathetic bodily experience with the subject matter, enabling reflections on life and death in contexts of cruelty in an intimate manner.

36 Dambrot, “Interview with Marlene Dumas”, in Garrett and Robecchi, Marlene Dumas, 17, quoted in Martin Herbert, The Uncertainty Principle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 50.
Exploring the relationship between painting and photography in representing traumatic events is not the focus of my research. Nevertheless, examining the photo-painting practice of Richter and Dumas allows me to ponder the questions of what kind of connection painting has with reality; how to engage in, if not to reaffirm, media images of events; how to make present an ever-existed subject in painting? The reading of painting oscillates between forms and painterly marks, image and object. In-between the virtual space of representation and the material surface, the reality of the represented event is framed by the viewer’s perpetual here and now. To me, making a painting is creating a telling interface between rendition, subject, and surface. I explore the struggle with, and capacity for representation and communication, veering in-between the conflicting impulses to reject the image and the figure with their loaded interpretations and meanings, and to embrace codes and logic of image making to connect to others; to represent the subject on a personal and emotional level and to seek an objective and universal representation. Thus, painting as an interrelational process allows me to confront the matrix of intimate relations between the self, others and events in the world. Ambiguity as a representational strategy retains representation as relationships, as it urges the viewer to interpret representation and its meaning in relation to one’s own memory, feeling and experience. The more ambiguous meaning is represented visually, the more desirable the search becomes. An ambiguous representation triggers a closer and longer looking, with different parameters from the inside, from imagination or other’s perspective.

In the case of painting mother’s existence during her detainment, there are no visual references besides my memories of her in the meeting room. To figure an existence as such, I wonder how I can create a representation in which the subject retains an ambiguous nature of being, absent yet present, neither fully visualised nor materialised, but tangible.
In *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder recounts the origin of the art of painting, beginning with tracing an outline around a man’s shadow:

> It was through the service of that same earth that modelling portraits from clay was first invented by Butades, a potter of Sicyon, at Corinth. He did this owing to his daughter, who was in love with a young man; and she, when he was going abroad, drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by the lamp. Her father pressed clay on this and made a relief, which he hardened by exposure to fire with the rest of his pottery; and it is said that this likeness was preserved in the Shrine of the Nymphs ...  

What intrigues me in this tale is that the primitive visual representation does not take place as a direct observation of a human body, but as seizing this body’s projection. The potter’s daughter outlines the shadow of her lover cast on the wall. The shadow is marked at the place it falls and soon disappears with her lover. What is left is a contour with an empty center, a mnemonic device offering a designated space for mourning, instead of a fully realised image as a replacement of the lover. The drawn silhouette as the material trace of a fugitive body embodies the transition from the daughter’s anticipation of loss to remembrance of loss, from the object of her gaze to the subject. Pliny’s tale places the re-enactment of loss and desire at the mythical origins of painting, offering an indexical mode of commemorative representation predicated not just on likeness, but on the trace of touch. Based on the daughter’s drawing, the potter’s sculptural cast attempts to concretise a material, bodily presence of the lover. They both record the lost body through making a physical contiguous connection with the subject and the material. As the lover remains absent, the imprint of him is ultimately imagined; yet, such imaginary visual projection enables the daughter to conjoin her memory and desire.

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in the present, materialising and commemorating the loss. Representation becomes a surrogate of a desired, but irredeemably absent body. What Pliny’s tale offers is an art of the index, a mode of signification based on the material trace of touch. Shadow, projection and imprint: such ambiguous form can be considered as representational strategies of figuring the absent.

In William Kentridge’s practice, the shadow is employed as a spectral trace of subjectivity, moreover, as a means of engaging with the subject of historical trauma. *More Sweetly Play the Dance* is a circular eight-screen film installation, set up like a theatre in Kentridge’s exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery, London in 2015. A group of itinerants are projected in life size shadows, dancing in line and marching across the screen. The figures’ silhouettes and the objects they hold hint that the procession is formed by priests, fleeing refugees, miners, workers, marchers with propagandist portraits, the sick with their carriers and other anonymous. They move across an animated charcoal drawing of barren landscape. Deconstructed lines, numbering symbols, residues of partial erasure are preserved as mysterious smudges, revealing a struggle between the forces of forgetting and the resistance of remembering. Whether the destination of the marching is a utopia or a killing field remains ambiguous.

Kentridge operates iconographies at the limit of discernibility. The dancers are rendered into shadow projections, as negative images, seemingly referring to the
lives of South African in the pre-democracy era and the demeaned bodies in the social system of the stereotype. These shadowy figures concretise not presence but absence. They seem like the undead bodies returning from the past to materialise history, the historical figures and trauma through a mode of spectrality, and to haunt the cultural imagination in the present. Silhouette, shadow, spectre: each form, as form establishes an ethics of representation, a mode of encountering traumatic history, as Liza Saltzman explains:

Such forms acknowledge, in their refusal of material figuration and in their insistence upon constitutive absence, at once the incommensurability of representation and, in turn, the ways in which these unrepresentable subjects, historical and human, come to haunt the present while demanding at the same time that they fundamentally defy representation, and with that, recognition.  

Such forms hint at figures through edges of the bodies. Their lack of hues and modulation marks the insufficient visibility and the unrepresentable nature of the subjects. They make the subjects perceptible in their absent presence without reducing them to a fixed symbolic image or figuration. Such spectral mode of representation demands active recognition through memory and imagination. The activity of completing an image or a shape prompts an awareness of our agency in seeing. To see, to recognise is to acknowledge, not only perceptually, but also socially and politically.

The shadowy and spectral figuration has made it possible for me to think about how to represent the ghostly mode of existence of my mother, further, to represent other imprisoned, dispossessed and marginal figures in society. The shadow, or

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the ghost suggested by Esther Peeren is a spectral metaphor to enable cultural imagination in social inquiry:

There is the invocation of the ghost as a figure of return, capable of expressing the persistence of the past in the present…there is the appeal to the ghost as a present absence: despite being ephemeral, something is there that matters and has to be taken into account. This makes it possible to consider the social, political, ethical, psychic and affective impacts of ‘reknowing’ or ‘unforgetting’ phenomena previously overlooked or unprocessed, ranging from the empty spaces in buildings to personal or national traumas.39

Likened to ghosts in terms of their marginalised social position and lack of social visibility, figures like undocumented migrants, domestic workers and missing persons are metaphorically referred to as living ghosts by Peeren. This type of ghost materially exists, but is erased from the view. For those who lives as the invisible, the spectral, their subjectivity cannot be fully speakable nor seeable. Narrative and visual representations predicated on a logic of spectrality may enable the cultural imagination of the ghostly subjects and render their social invisibility and impotence tangible.

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An Amnesiac’s Stories

An Amnesiac’s Stories is my exhibition at the Hundred Years Gallery, which took place in London, December 2015. The exhibition includes a series of paintings and a large scale drawing installation made in situ. Amnesia implies deficits and gaps in memory. My experience of amnesia started from the interrupted phone call before mother’s detention. Since then, I tried to recall the phone call repeatedly and form a coherent narrative of it. The exhibition presents my imaginative response to and contemplation of the experiences of entrapment through an amnestic way of narrative construction - narratives that are not explicitly and linearly narrated, but implied through fragmentation and repetition of forms.

Paintings, Jade Bracelet (fig. 9) and Plaster/Phone (fig. 16) depict scenarios which refer to mother’s stories. They set a narrative context of violence and imprisonment: the former presents an enforced violent cutting act; the latter implies separation and indirect communication in detention institutions. Plaster/Phone depicts the prison meeting room scene on two panels, emphasising the division of
there and here. The hands are outlined and lightly shaded in thin oil paint on a semi-transparent polyester canvas, as flickering reflections on glass; whereas, the handsets have a more concrete presence, rendered as solid objects to be picked up. Both Jade Bracelet and Plaster/Phone imply narratives through the depiction of a moment within the event, with actions happening or about to happen. Paintings such as Immersive Darkness and Shadow do not entail a sense of happening; they only present the figure as a form of shadowy existence. In Immersive Darkness, the outlines of bare feet reveal the figures’ presence, while the rest of their bodies are edited out and merge into the monochromatic background.
The bright yellow paint spills from the bottom edge of the canvas like shaft of light, illuminating the darkness and the figures’ existence in darkness. The figures can be perceived but cannot be identified individually. The featureless feet and the barely visible, faceless profile sketch on the top right corner underline the anonymity of the figures. The immobile feet also imply that they are not autonomous individuals, but subservient to some kind of invisible force. The painting *Shadow* portrays one of the anonymous figures in insolation. The figure’s face and the upper body are cropped off from view, but their silhouettes are reflected in the shadow. The colours of the feet and the black toe nails reveal a bloodless, corpse-like body. The dichotomy between the stoical body and the soul represented by the fuzzy smiley face emerging from the shadow suggests that the figure’s spirit is free from the entrapped body.

The figures represented in the exhibitions are not self-sovereign beings. Their presence in shadow or as shadows, means that their visibility is dependent on light. The stillness of hands and feet implies restriction of movements. The faceless appearance indicates the lack of agency to express and to speak. The figures represent those who could speak but become mute. A sense of muteness permeating the gallery space triggers an imaginary sensory experience of listening to the voice in the mind and the imagined scratchy noises of pressing charcoal are evoked by the mark-making of *The Wall*. *The Wall* is a drawing installation made of 20 drawings in configuration like a set of monitor screens. The blurry patterns are created by imprinting different surfaces with charcoal on newsprints, such as the wooden floor in the studio and the brick walls in the gallery. In the shift from textures to marks, the indexical sign is opened up: it is contextual in reference to the surfaces of actual places; at the same time, it is detachable as a gesture. The mark or sign is not inscribed definitely so that the imaginary retains in the state of possibility. I trace the emergence of imaginary forms in some drawings and realise them into imaginative images of hands, feet and wooden floor boards. The drawing 19. Yvonne Feng, *The Wall*, 2016
installation evokes a mysterious sense of confined place in resonance with the atmospheric basement gallery space. The imprinted marks as traces of body gestures allude to the kind of compulsive and repetitive movements of embodying time. *The Wall* as well as the other paintings in the exhibition show signs of narratives about entrapment or imprisonment. However, who the figures are and what kind of event that they are enduring remain ambiguous. To make sense of the narratives, it demands the viewer’s active recognition through association and his/her own projection of memories and imagination onto the work.

The exhibition explores an amnestic way of narrative construction: narratives are not explicitly and linearly narrated, but implied through fragmentation and recurrence of forms. Painting transmits narratives in a non-verbal way through the embodiment of visual, aesthetical, sensory and projective experiences. The depictions of scenarios imply events. Events index existents; vice versa, existents project events. The sensations of isolation and entrapment that the figures evoke echo the feeling of claustrophobia in the underground gallery space. Unlike stories made of chain of events, *An Amnesiac’s Stories*, in the form of exhibition, unfold in the continuum of forms – hands and bare feet. These forms in combination with painterly marks and ambiguous titles, evoke a virtually infinite continuum of potential narratives. According to Seymour Chatman’s general theory of narrative, regardless of the medium, ‘narratives are communications…what is communicated is story, the formal content element of narrative; and it is communicated by discourse, the formal expression element.’

In theory, a story is ‘the continuum of events presupposing the total set of all conceivable details.’

In the case of “an amnesiac”, the order of events or the events themselves are

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41 Ibid., 28.
forgotten. A story in fragments leads to an open narrative which only takes form in the viewer’s imagination. A narrative as a mode of communication suggested by Chatman presupposes two parties - a sender and a receiver. The transmission of narrative requires the receiver to respond with an interpretation. The artwork as an ‘aesthetic object of a narrative is the story as articulated by the discourse’\(^4\). The receiver, in this case the viewer, can only unearth the virtual narrative by penetrating the intermediate material surface.

If the stories are “told” partially by the viewer, who is the amnesiac that the exhibition promises? When I try to tell the stories of mother’s event, I encounter a double role-playing: when I perform a narrator, I am also a protagonist as I am affected by the event. When rendering the stories into paintings, I play the role of the painter as well as the viewer. The interplay of different roles leads to a split sense of self and results in nonlinear communication. Just as the voices in a novel could be expressions of a multiplicity of personages, including the real author, the implied author that the reader infers from the narrative, the narrator and the protagonist, the amnesiac in the context of the exhibition is the integration of myself, a silent narrator, an individual who experiences loss, and the entrapped figure in the work and in society.

Most of the artworks in the exhibition are derived from my personal narratives, experiences and feelings of mother’s event. However, the event itself is not disclosed to the viewer. I am thinking whether my unspeakable experiences of loss, powerlessness and the split self encapsulated in the work could resonate with the viewer through the work itself. In the exhibition guestbook, a comment left by a visitor named Tim says: “The painting with a figure staring at a blur of his reflection

\(^4\) Ibid., 27.
seemed to me a story of forgetting oneself. I have been reading Kundera and it reminds me of a passage in *Immortality* about how our faces are supposed to reflect our selves, but we are more defined by an essence beyond time and appearance than the face which we own." Although one comment is not a sufficient measure of how successful the exhibition communicates personal feelings, this acute reading reveals to me that the work has the potential to embody a shared sensational space and trigger one’s imagination of an entrapped state of being in relation to one’s own memories and experiences.

Along with the exhibition, I organised a public event and discussion - *Practices in Dialogue: Loss and Creation*. Through bringing different artists’ practices in dialogue with each other, the event explored the relationship between loss and creation, and furthermore the impossibility of representing the lost. Artworks in a wide range of medium including painting, performance, sculpture and text were presented by four artists and myself. We shared our different narratives of loss in terms of intimacy, language, habitat, a meaningful object and person. The event showcased how the desire to trace the lost could engender a fertile artistic practice and brought forth the question: if the lost is not replicable, then how does it transform and what is created?
The Membrane between Outer and Inner World

In the first half of the research, I attempt to embody absence in relation to mother’s incarcerated existence and figure a spectral existence through drawing and painting. In the second half, my practice focuses on capturing the presence of figures in events and embodying the unspeakable personal and social psychological experiences within them. Instead of working directly from memories and narratives of mother’s event, I explore documentary images and narratives of social upheavals which somehow resonate my experiences of mother’s imprisonment.

The photograph (fig. 20) of south Vietnamese climbing into the US embassy in Saigon during the last days of the Vietnam War is an example. The image captures the panic of people who feared for their lives and attempted to escape with the US evacuation, as the North Vietnamese Army closed in on Saigon. Their fear and desperation are evoked through the action of climbing. This act of climbing over a fence, a wall or a border, risking life to find safety is also evident in the recent events of the European migrant crisis. The photograph (fig. 21) published by Morocco World News shows a group of 300 migrants from sub-Saharan African
who attempted to climb the border fence between Spain’s North African enclave of Melilla and Morocco on the 21st of October in 2018. The migrants risked their lives to enter Europe by climbing over the six-meter high fence without any protection. For the climbers in both images, the gate and the fence signified hopes of refuge and possibly a better future. When I first visited mother, I was overwhelmed by the formidably tall prison wall and secretly took a picture (fig. 22) before entering the security zone from the outer prison compartment. While I was looking at the wall and imagining the detained life on the other side, mother might
be staring at it from the other side and dreaming about the free life on this side. The wall marks the separation of two lives: one is invisible and restrained, the other is visible and independent. The same wall evokes different imaginations and desires, depending on being viewed from which side.

In the studio I look at the images, then I make drawings of them without looking at them. The aim of drawing is not to represent or interpret the events captured by the images through rational analysis, but to extend my looking and achieve an understanding through imagination and movement of my body. I shift my focus on the event to forms - for example, the hanging figures, their body gestures, the staging of the tall wall, and the grabbing hands. To prevent settling on an idea or a meaning too soon and the rational mind taking over, I make a drawing several times. The repetitive process does not aim to improve the likeness or reach a goal, rather, it allows the drawing to become thought that thinks itself through the physical materials and gestures. In Jean Fisher’s essay On Drawing, he points out the intimate relationship between drawing and thought:

The act of thought is the physiological dimension of making internal to poetic research itself; and the act of drawing makes possible the magical identity between thought and action because to draw is the quickest medium and can therefore protect the intensity of thought. To draw is never a transcription of thought (in the sense of writing) but rather a formulation or elaboration of the thought itself at the very moment it translates itself into an image. The artist him or herself is surprised and recognises this thought only in the moment of making.43

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Drawing as thought implies a trust in the physical and a handover of mind to the body and the medium. In Patricia Cain’s research about the enactive phenomenon of drawing based on neurophenomenology of embodied cognition and the Buddhist practice of “mindfulness”, she suggests that drawing is an act of “becoming aware”: the state of becoming aware involves contemplation ‘through the co-ordination of body and mind in order to simply be present with one’s experience as one is experiencing’⁴⁴; this act contains ‘a movement of self-induced suspension where we simultaneously re-direct our attention and a letting go of what we expect to find.’⁴⁵ When I commence a drawing, the mind clings to a fixed idea and sense of self; yet when I start to let go of my conscious thoughts and simply be present within the act of drawing, the act orientates me to pay attention to and be led by what is happening. The picture and I stimulate each other, bring each other forth.

In the process of drawing, there are constant collisions between materials and images, feelings and rationality. In his essay *The Marks, Trace, and Gestures of Drawing*, Michael Newman indicates the state of flux as the inner nature of drawing:

Drawing, because of its status as becoming (blot becoming mark, mark becoming line, line become contour, contour becoming image, image becoming sign…the direction of this movement being always reversible) posits a continuum of sense, from one sense of “sense” to the other, yet it seems impossible to observe, or to catch hold of, the precise moment, or experience, of that flip-over from the pre-sign, differentiated, but not

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⁴⁴ Patricia Cain, *Drawing: The Enactive Evolution of the Practitioner* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010), 60
⁴⁵ Ibid., 61.
yet diacritically caught in an opposition, to signification, image, and meaning.\textsuperscript{46}

Drawing concretises itself as a continuous variation in between concept, gesture and object. In its materialization, form remains active, mobile and transformational. Such a state of uncertainty embedded in the activity of drawing enables a space for visual suspicion, for giving an idea, a formulation, a material or a mark, the benefit of the doubt and for new thoughts and images to arise.

Through a repetitive process of drawing, elements from the original images of climbers are rendered into ambiguous iconographies, fragmented forms and marks. The drawings together with other drawings drawn from found images, literary narratives, memories and imaginations are stuck on and taken off my studio wall (fig. 23). Drawings in different languages – felt, symbolic, representational, conceptual with different materials – charcoal, ink, watercolor, crayon, pastel on heavy weight watercolor paper or scraps of newsprints are juxtaposed together. They encapsulate what I perceive, feel and process at different moments in the studio: changing shadows cast by light from the glass ceiling, memories of mother, flashes of past events, distress from the news, scenarios from the novel I read, all are interfused into my processing thoughts. Unfinished drawings, half formed ideas and half processed thoughts are preserved on the wall. The wall of drawings is like a visible version of the vestibule of the brain, where images are caught, deconstructed, reconstructed, interrogated and apprehended.

In *Six Drawing Lessons* - a lecture series by William Kentridge, Kentridge describes drawing as ‘the membrane between us and the world’\(^{47}\). The raw materials which come to us from the outside world – history, politics, events and conversations, get transformed into fragments and integrated with our own sense into drawing. Part of the world and part of us are revealed by the drawing. The studio, as Kentridge further recounts, is a ‘receiving station, scanning the earth for reports of the world, bombarded by particles of information we cannot escape’, as well as a transmitting station, ‘projecting, broadcasting ourselves continually’\(^{48}\).

\(^{48}\)Ibid., 25.
And between the two stations, it is an intermediate space between perception and imagination in which we make sense of ourselves and the world.

In *The Republic*, Plato’s allegory of the cave depicts the quest for knowledge as a visual journey:

'Imagine an underground chamber, like a cave with an entrance open to the daylight and running a long way underground. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Behind them and above them a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets.'

'I see.'

'Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and other materials, and that some of these men, as is natural, are talking and some not.'

... 'And so they (the prisoners) would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were in all respects real.'

'Yes, inevitably.'

The prisoners’ illusion of the shadows on the wall, as reality, symbolises the primary approach to knowledge through the imaginary. Then, a prisoner is released from the chains. This prisoner sees the real objects and the real world, and finally discovers the sun - the truth of the visible world - and reaches the stage

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of understanding. In Plato’s allegory, the prisoners come into being as spectators. Seeing plays an essential part in apprehending the world.

How the contemporary world is perceived through digital screens is equivalent to the way the prisoners in the cave are bound to reality mediated through a screen. Images of events seen in the news or on the internet can be regarded as flickering projections of the world. If the studio is considered as an analogy of Plato’s cave, then the images from the outside world are the world’s shadows cast onto the drawing paper and the studio wall. Are these images reality or illusion of the world? How can I apprehend the outside world in the studio? It is noteworthy that Plato’s prisoners are locked down as spectators. They cannot see themselves and can only see what is presented in front of them, which becomes their reality. The making of knowledge in the studio happens not only in looking, but also in making and looping in between the two. In the making of drawing, thinking is generated along the physical movement of the body through bodily senses. The act of drawing passes the mind over to the body, plunging into a zone of sensation liberated from the closures of representation and open to the free play of marks. Form emerges and urges recognition. Switching from the position of the maker to being the viewer myself, I see form as both the resemblance of what is perceived of the outside world, and also form as gesture of the body embodying what is felt. The drawing continues to evolve according to what is seen. There is no distinction between drawing from outside in and inside out. Drawing, and the studio in a wider sense, as the membrane between the outside world and my inside world gives rise to a space for negotiation between the world and the self. To me, the quest for knowledge is not leaving from shadow (material sensation) towards the sun (rational idea) as Plato’s allegory demonstrates, but seeing in between.
Bodily Awareness and Body Image

The movement of the body as a way of generating thinking in drawing implies that the body is part of the thinking subject. It is an intertwined mind-body-presence opposed to the radical mind/body separation of Cartesian dualism. The perceiving subject is not an inner entity entirely separate from the physical world but something that is situated within the world. Referring to Merleau-Ponty’s account of “flesh” – the phenomenon of reciprocal tactile contact mentioned earlier in the report50, the hand that touches can be felt as touched and vice versa, which implies an intertwining status of the body as both subject and object. The body that Merleau-Ponty describes is a lived body which is the place of interaction between the subject and the world: ‘my body is the pivot of the world: I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body’51, writes Merleau-Ponty. The lived body can be regarded as one’s lived relationship to the world. How do we understand the self and the world through our bodies? How does the body induce thinking?

Merleau-Ponty uses the example of typing to explain how the body functions as an instrument of comprehension in the phenomenon of habit:

When I sit at my typewriter, a motor space opens up beneath my hands, in which I am about to ‘play’ what I have read. The reading of the word is a modulation of visible space, the performance of the movement is a modulation of manual space, and the whole question is how a cretin physiognomy of ‘visual’ patterns can evoke a certain type of motor

50 See page 22.
response, how each ‘visual’ structure eventually provides itself with its mobile essence without there being any need to spell the word or specify the movement in detail in order to translate one into the other...To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance—and the body is our anchorage in a world...When the typist performs the necessary movements on the typewriter, these movements are governed by an intention, but the intention does not posit the keys as objective locations. It is literally true that the subject who learns to type incorporates the key-bank space into his bodily space.\textsuperscript{52}

Merleau-Ponty’s example shows that the ability to type is a knowledge embodied in the hands. The typist gets the measure of the keys with his/her body and incorporates their dimensions and layouts into their bodily space. This kind of body knowledge is formulated with bodily effort. The body performs movement and experiences qualities of things, spaces and forces through movement, which leads to a tactile understanding of how things and experiences become meaningful. The “meaning” that Merleau-Ponty discovered through his study of motility is not conceived as an act of thought, rather, it is “body schema” - ‘a total awareness of my posture in the intersensory world’\textsuperscript{53}. This meaning is a form of bodily awareness emerging from the corporeal encounter between the subject and the world. Besides phenomenological analysis of bodily movement, Mark Johnson indicates that meaning is grounded in our bodily experience from the perspective of cognitive sciences:

The core idea is that our experience of meaning is based, first, on our sensorimotor experience, our feelings, and our visceral connections to our world; and, second, on various imaginative capacities for using

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 114.
sensorimotor processes to understand abstract concepts…these meanings…must be grounded in our bodily connections with things, and they must be continuously “in the making” via our sensorimotor engagements.⁵⁴

Both Merleau-Ponty and Johnson interpret meaning as a matter of relations grounded in the bodily interaction between the body as biological organism and its environment. The meaning of something is in its actual or potential relations to other things, qualities, feelings, events and experiences. The body is thus a mediator, through which I sense, feel and embody meaning.

Drawing and painting is a way for me to gain embodied understanding of an image, a narrative, an event or someone else’s experiences. When drawing the images of climbers as mentioned previously, I experience the desperate acts of climbing and grabbing through my bodily imagination of the forceful exertions and sensations accompanying the actions. Sensing the climbing actions with my body in drawing makes possible the understanding of the emotional meaning carried by such actions. This is a process of taking possession of an event represented in image or narrative and turning it into my own bodily, imaginary and subjective experiences. I try to grasp the meaning of the event by tracing how the body moves within the image or narrative and how the image or narrative acts upon my body.

In his novel 1984, George Orwell’s description of the sexual encounter of Winston and Julia in the abandoned grove evokes vivid visual, tactile and kinaesthetic images as I read:

He pressed her down upon the grass, among the fallen bluebells. This time there was no difficulty. Presently the rising and falling of their breasts

slowed to normal speed, and in a sort of pleasant helplessness they fell apart. The sun seemed to have grown hotter...No emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act.  

When reading the passages, I sense the forces, colours, heat, movements and sounds which make the whole scene come alive. I feel in my body what Winston is experiencing – a violent but sensual moment of feeling alive in a suffocating atmosphere. The meaning of this scenario is conveyed both bodily and metaphorically. The imagistic description animates bodily experiences of immersing in lust and conflicting emotions. Then, the bodily experiences serve as an inferential framework for apprehending the metaphorical meaning of their embrace as “a blow struck against the Party”: in a society ruled and watched by Big Brother, their embrace of sexual desires and conflicting emotions is a revolt against the Party’s control. The body in the novel is employed as the locus of sensations and a metaphor for negotiating the inextricable relationships between the world and the self, power and powerlessness, the state and the individual. I attempt to apply this methodological approach of the sensational and metaphorical body in painting.

The painting *Climax A Victory* (fig.24) represents the sensational and rebellious moment of Winston and Julia’s embrace. Through making pastel and watercolour sketches, I imagined and sensed the objects which unify the scene including the tangled bodies, moving grass, and barbed wires. The purpose of the drawing was not to illustrate the imaginary scene, rather, it was for myself to take possession

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of it and to perceive it corporeally. I displaced myself into the figures and objects and searched for their tactile and subjective qualities: for example, different movements of the grass resulted from strong forces of the embracing bodies and tender breezes. The activity of drawing was a process of putting myself physically into perception and opening the self to the possibility of otherness – to sense from the positions of the depicted objects.

In the drawing process I focused on imagining what the scene looks like; whereas in painting, I concentrated on embodying how the scene feels like. I painted the objects as how they were experienced and how sensation was sustained in the novel. In the painting, the barbed wires emerge indistinctly from the background and layers of paint, implying the omnipresence of restraint. The bodies and
greenery are in vibrant colours in contrast to the gloomy grey sky, which represents the intensity of personal feelings and desires in opposition to the repressive social atmosphere. In the depiction of the grass, the application of brushstrokes shifts between functioning as traits in the symbolic sense, materialising form, and as “free marks” in accordance with Bacon’s logic of sensation, turning form into its material presence – paint, and making visible a dynamism of forces. My body incorporates the canvas and the brush into its bodily space and conducts the movement of the grass. The bodily actions move from their literal to figurative meaning, from depicting grass to embodying the invisible mixed forces that the figures are enduring, such as the forces of lust, resentment, rebellion and the physical pushing and pulling. In this process, the body gradually gives itself over to the paint, acting as line and colour to bring the scene and sensations into being. In the body-paint state, the paint expands the malleable border of the body and the body becomes an expressive space. I have gained an understanding of the proposition that embracing love and emotions is a form of rebellion through my bodily experience of the process of painting.

To quote an example given by Mark Johnson, ‘you learn the corporeal logic of circular motions with your eyes, feet, and hands, and this body knowledge carries over into your understanding of circular arguments, circular processes, and temporal circularity.’ The body is not only an instrument for making sense of spatial and perceptual experiences but also a medium for thinking about abstract, nonphysical entities and concepts. In the diptych *Vicissitudes of life (Up and Down)* (fig. 25), I try to represent an imaginary existential state of being – rising and falling in keeping with vicissitudes of life, through the depiction of bodily movement and

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56 See page 32.
sensation only, without referring to a specific narrative or scenario in real life. The depicted bodies are made of gestural brushstrokes. They are drawn from my imagination of my own body, thus taking the form of the female body, performing elevating and descending movements. The imagined postures and the performativity of mark-making stimulate my kinaesthetic sensations. I feel airy, uplifting and energetic in the up posture; weighty, tense and shattered in the down one. I then appropriate this bodily meaning into my contemplation of flows and forces in life. Through a form of imagination derived from bodily awareness and experiences, the body with its malleability and reflexivity makes possible the thinking of ontological questions and situations that I am unable to experience in person.

In Maria Lassnig’s self-portraits, she sought to paint her body awareness instead of appearance. She often depicted her body metamorphosing into foreign bodies and objects to express how her own bodily experience was impacted by outside
events. In the Maria Lassnig Tate Liverpool exhibition 2016, the section labelled “Kitchen/War” presents a group of paintings addressing her mediated experience of war through depicting herself as weapons, kitchen implements and other domestic objects. For example, in the painting *Kitchen Bride*, Lassnig portrays herself as a cheese grater. In discussing ‘body-awareness-painting’ in 1970, Lassnig remarked that she only relinquished her commitment to the subject of her own body when ‘events in the outside world were stronger than me’ and she felt the need to revolt against them. In her diary written in 1991, she mentioned her experience of the First Gulf War as mediated through television:

> War, as though it were here. It’s become a serial novel in the media. You wait hungrily to find out what will happen next. You don’t quite know what you want from whom. The tragic feeling and the dread fade after a few

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days because all you see is equipment and a rather cold-blooded looking man on television.59

Her strategy for counteracting the distancing of the trauma of war was to displace her own body into objects that she felt unease with and experience an inner reality through bodily sensations. In *Kitchen Bride*, she is a fleshy cheese grater. The purple ellipses resemble the pope’s screaming mouth in Bacon’s painting, releasing rage or pain. The lines of dots look like sharp teeth as well as a wound. The painting triggers my imagination of metamorphosing into a grater scraping off flesh from another body. I feel a hybrid of sensations from imagining actions of grating and being grated, which might be equivalent to Lassnig’s bodily imagination of the soldier in war being a perpetrator and a vulnerable victim at the same time. The use of domestic objects as self-representation to express the unease of the outside world implies that Lassnig’s revolt is also against the domestic typecasting and subjugation of women. Thus, the imaginary mutant bodies in Lassnig’s work embody not only the negotiations between what is seen and what is felt, but also negotiations of the self in the world.

Although the imaginary figures in most of my work are made to represent other’s experiences, rather than self-representation, they are incorporated into my sensational body in the process of painting and perhaps unconsciously I project my inner self onto them. The shadowy hands and feet in my work evoke the sense of entrapment that I feel in my everyday routine life. The painting *Climax A Victory* (fig. 24) unveils a part of me that desires to revolt against authority and in the other part of me the fear of doing so. The canvas is like a mirror, staging the imaginary bodies and reflecting to me something about myself and my desires.

59 Ibid., 112.
In his account of the “mirror stage”, Jacques Lacan proposes the formation of the ego with the narrative of ‘the startling spectacle of the infant in front of the mirror’\textsuperscript{60}. From the mirror image the infant subject first comes to perceive its still uncoordinated body as a coherent whole. The sense of self is achieved by a “misidentification” with this external image. The subject misrecognises the image of a unified body as the ideal “I”\textsuperscript{61} because this ideal image denies the inconsistency and chaos the subject experiences with the sensational body, what Lacan calls ‘the body in bits and pieces’\textsuperscript{62}. The successful imaginary alignment with the ideal image evokes in the subject a jubilant sense of “wholeness” and initiates the formation of a unified bodily ego. The “mirror stage” is an identification with both the “sameness” and the “otherness” paradoxically. For Lacan, the unified ego is an imaginary other which shields the spilt, fragmented subject. In The Threshold of the Visible World, Kaja Silverman points out that the jubilant “wholeness” is dependent on the subject’s insistence upon self-sameness – ‘the refusal on the part of the normative subject to form an imaginary alignment with images which remain manifestly detached from his or her sensational body, and his or her stubborn clinging to those images which can be most easily incorporated.’\textsuperscript{63} This self-sameness becomes problematic in the consideration of the mirror image as the cultural ideal. Silverman argues, ‘since the imposition of all of these forms of difference (e.g. “whiteness”, “masculinity” and “heterosexuality”) depends upon the imaginary alignment of certain subjects with what is negative rather than ideal, the images through which the subject is culturally apprehended do not always facilitate the production of a lovable bodily

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 2.
ego." Elaborating on a different reading of Lacan’s the “mirror stage” by psychologist Henri Wallon, Silverman proposes the conception of “identity-at-a-distance” which entails the incorporation of otherness. Wallon describes the infant embracing the specular image as a love object over a period of time and integrating it with the sense of itself derived from proprioception, rather than with the misrecognition of it being the self. The mirror image is experienced as the self at a distance and incorporated into the sensational body as an external form, which is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of “body schema”. As Paul Schilder observes, the formation of bodily ego results from the subject’s affective interactions with others and bodily openings with emotional salience:

The body contracts when we hate, it becomes firmer, and its outlines towards the world are more strongly marked. This is connected with the beginning of action in the voluntary muscles…We expand the body when we feel friendly and loving…and the borderline of the body-image lost their distinct character.

For Schilder, ‘we come in closest contact with the world’ by affective bodily openings. Both Wallon and Schilder suggest that the imaginary body is experienced not only cognitively but also affectively and the illusory unity which for Lacan founds the ego is precarious, inexorably turning toward disintegration. ‘This disintegration is beneficent rather than tragic; it is the precondition for change, what must transpire if the ego is to form anew’, says Silverman. The confrontation with the conflicted sensations triggered by the otherness in the mirror image forms the basis of the subject’s intentional negotiations of his/her world. In

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64 Ibid., 19.
67 Ibid., 124-125.
light of Wallon’s and Schilder’s incorporative logic of the body image, Silverman proposes “identity-at-a-distance” which requires - learning to ‘idealize outside the corporeal parameters of the self’, which means ‘to make possible our identification at a distance with bodies which we would otherwise phobically avoid, to facilitate our leap out of “difference” and into bodily otherness’.69

The imaginary figures in my paintings, and, to an extent all other figures derived from found images and narratives, function as a specular image through which I perceive and reflect on my sense of self. The specular body image reflects not only what is familiar and interior to me but also the foreign and the exterior. Painting with bodily awareness allows my body to open its imaginary contours and experience corporeally the pains, pleasures and struggles in my foreign self and in the other. The body becomes a site where the self disintegrates, then negotiates with the different selves and with the world, and subsequently reforms itself. The viewer may also perceive the figurative body in my work as a specular image and expand some aspect of his/her sentience. The figures are not painted to represent certain identities. They are merely presented as imaginary bodies for the viewer to relate to kinaesthetically and sensually. The viewer perceives through an embodied imaginary experience of being displaced into the body of the other or debordering his/her own bodily space to overlap with the other. In the next chapter, I will explore how such bodily oriented perception and imagination may lead to a more embodied and empathetic representation and understanding of experiences of others.

69 Ibid., 37.
Empathy

My experience of mother’s imprisonment is grounded in my memory and mediated through narratives delivered by other family members. My perception of other dispossessed figures in social upheavals, such as the migrant climbers mentioned earlier, is mediated through news and documentary images. Although I am unable to access their experiences directly, I try to imagine what it is like to experience the same events with them and to feel how they feel through the act of painting. In this sense, painting can be regarded as a process of active empathising at a distance.

According to Amy Coplan’s conceptualisation of empathy from both philosophical and psychological perspectives, empathy is ‘a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states (both cognitive and affective) while maintaining clear self-other differentiation’. That means, empathy is an imaginative experience of and for the observer. Through other-oriented perspective taking, an observer imagines a target’s subjective experiences in his/her place. The target’s states are ‘activated by, but not directly accessible through, the observer’s perception’. The observer replicates or reconstructs the target’s experiences, while being aware of self-other differentiation. Empathy and sympathy may often occur together, but they are different. Sympathy, as Noël Carroll explains, ‘does not necessarily require emotionally feeling anything at all but does involve a pro-attitude toward the object of one’s concern, a disposition to help or, at least, to wish that the plight of the

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71 Ibid., 6.
other be alleviated.’ The saying “I feel your pain” may be merely an expression of sympathy, as the speaker may acknowledge another person’s pain as a gesture of comfort and assurance but not necessarily put him/herself in the shoes of that person and experience it affectively. One can never feel the exact same pain of someone else, but one can attempt to approximate it through imagination. Such simulated pain is feeling generated in oneself. Thus, empathy is a first-person representation of a target’s experiences. It is a form of experiential personal understanding of another person.

Empathy is experienced not only between human beings and other sentient creatures but also through inanimate objects, like artworks. The features of empathy discussed above also apply to the cognitive and affective understanding of an artwork. In fact, the concept of empathy was first introduced by Robert Vischer in 1873 as the German term “Einfühlung” which means “feeling into”, to describe the human capacity to imbue a piece of art or any object with relevant emotions. In his essay *Empathy for Objects*, Gregory Curries explains the usage of empathy as a means of attending to the aesthetic properties of things with an example of one imagining ‘standing upright supporting a heavy load, in response to the sight of a load-bearing column’. Since the column itself feels nothing, empathy in this case is an act of projection wherein one feels the dynamic properties of the column as one’s own in the body, which involves the incorporative bodily awareness mentioned in the last chapter.

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In European art history, the iconography of atrocious suffering as a provocation of empathy can be traced back to the classical paintings of Christian saints, illness and battlefields. What I am interested in this genre are not religious paintings created to inspire faith through depictions of the suffering Christian saints or history paintings of atrocities in war made as displays of power, victory and order, rather, they are paintings which arose in Romanticism at the turning point of the 19th century, exploring new ways of looking at human history and justice through expressions of personal feelings and emotions instead of universal values. Francisco Goya’s painting *The Third of May 1808* represents a radical break from the convention of war paintings which emphasise the spectacle of the dramatic battlefield and superiority of soldiers. As the painting was not commissioned by

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

27. Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814

the state or any patron, Goya painted the historical event from his subjective viewpoint and portrayed man as a helpless victim of the horrors of war which had been restricted to paintings of the religious martyrs. *The Third of May 1808*
represents an imaginative moment of a group of Madrid civilians being executed by Napoleon’s soldiers on the date informed by the title. The horror of the scene is manifested through the absolute contrast between light and dark, victims and oppressors. The lantern on the ground puts a spotlight on the man in the white shirt, who is about to be shot and illuminates the despair and fear of the people surrounding him. Each civilian is fleshly depicted as an emotional individual, whereas the anonymous squad of soldiers are in identical unfeeling firing positions as if they merely function as killing instruments. The landscape in the background is painted primarily as darkness and atmosphere. The use of light here becomes a metaphor for danger in contrast to the traditional Christian symbolism of illumination and salvation. The tension of the incident is also reinforced by the composition. The descending hill directs the eye to the horizontal axis of the rifles which point to the man in white entrapped in front of the hillside. A sense of immediacy is embodied in the loose brushstrokes and the sketchy facial expressions of the figures. The white shirt is painted with fast gestural marks, which gives a sense of motion that the man has just raised his arms. Goya depicted the man facing death in a position that is reminiscent of Christ on the cross and turned him into a new icon for commemorating Spanish resistance.

The staging and the formal qualities of the painting evoke in the viewer the an imagination of being a face-to-face witness of the execution, with an empathetic response to the victims. I feel a sense of moral indignation for the victims in the uprising. My empathetic feeling is not the result of acknowledging the depicted event as an execution but from a kind of emotional sharing with the depicted victims. According to Noël Carroll’s account of empathy in relation to history painting, the viewer does not empathise with scenes - the representation of event itself, but with ‘characters in situations whose mental states are disclosed largely
by being contextualized in scenes". Empathy is ‘a matter of the viewer and the subject possessing similar or (somewhat) like emotions – in the sense of vectorially converging emotions – where the viewer’s emotion is caused, at least in part, by the subject or subjects having the emotions they have.’ As the soldiers cannot pose a real threat to me, my sense of distress is not the same as the weeping figures in the painting, nor is it directly informed by their facial expressions; rather, it results from my imagination of the emotional stance of the figures through bodily simulation and understanding. Like sensing a load-bearing column, I feel the dynamic properties of the figures’ gestures and expressions as sensations in my body. My emotional response emerges not only from the figurative forms but also from the mark-making and formal qualities of the painting as an affective unity. The short gap between the man’s open chest and the pointy rifles intensifies the tension of the moment. The loose and fast brushstrokes of the white shirt give the still scene a sense of motion, hinting that the firing may happen in seconds. The formal and affective qualities of the painting reveal the decision making and perspective of the artist on the subject. Besides the imagination of “feeling into” the depicted characters, the empathetic process is also what Carroll calls a ‘perspective taking’ which means that the viewer empathises with the artist’s feeling into the subject and shares the mood of the painting. This “perspective taking” enables the viewer to empathise with the subject’s emotional states, even when no sign of event is disclosed in the painting.

In the painting Despair (fig. 28), Edward Munch depicted a palpable interiority without sentimentalising the subject. A male figure leans against a railing staring at the greyish blue landscape. The sky is painted in blood-red fiery colours with

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76 Ibid., 288.
77 Ibid., 290.
restless brushstrokes. The flaming light illuminates the man’s face in the foreground. Although his facial expressions are unrevealed, I can feel his angst arising from melancholy. The expressive landscape in the background operates as a reflection of the mood of the figure in the foreground. It is also a projection of Munch’s state of mind, as he described the moment in his diaries of the 1890s:

I was walking along a path with two friends - the sun was setting - I felt a breath of melancholy - Suddenly the sky turned blood-red - I stopped and leant against the railing, deathly tired - looking out across flaming clouds that hung like – blood and a sword over the deep blue fjord and town - My friends walked on – I stood there trembling with anxiety - and I felt a great, infinite scream pass through nature.78

This subjective moment became the motif of scream later in Munch’s work. In the painting *The Scream* (fig. 31), the composition is similar to *Despair*, but the man

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in the foreground is replaced by a ghost-like anguished figure. The reflection of the orange light from the sunset permeates the picture. Apart from the diagonally receding footpath with railings and the distant figures, the rest of the painting is painted in fluid wavy lines. The sky, the landscape and the ghostly figure all seem to be caught in an unstable swirl. The figure with a ghostly, mask-like face is a motif originated from Munch’s observations of people walking on the street with their eyes staring vacantly out from their sallow faces. Alongside his sketch of a procession of figures on Karl Johan, Munch wrote:

The people passing him looked so strange and unfamiliar and he thought they were looking at him – staring at him – all these faces – so pale in the evening light…I’m about to fall and people will stop and there will be more and more people – a frightful crowd…79

79 Ibid., 94.
The ghost-like figure on the one hand personifies Munch’s state of anxiety and insecurity, and on the other hand expresses a more general feeling of alienation and helplessness in society. The screaming figure and the landscape are constructed as one wavy turmoil, broadcasting a sense of existential vulnerability in the society at the end of the 19th century. Like Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and other existentialist novels, Munch’s and Goya’s paintings from a first-person perspective, represent social crises through the portrayal of characters via the expression of individual subjectivities and struggles. The experiences of fear communicated in their paintings feel as relevant in our contemporary time as two centuries ago. This is different from classical history painting, which is composed through a tableau of protagonists in a historical event happening in a specific place as a narrative threshold; Goya’s and Munch’s paintings capture psychological states of individuals or moods as the threshold for stepping into and feeling into history. Even though the viewer does not necessarily share the depicted circumstances or know the historical contexts, through empathetic looking, the viewer can affectively imagine and experience the human condition conveyed in the paintings beyond the boundaries of personal history and time.

In my work, I explore whether representing events of social upheavals from the perspective of psychological manifestations of the human condition may evoke a more nuanced and experiential understanding of those events. The painting *Greener on the Other Side?* (fig. 30) is made in response to the images of refugee climbers (see fig. 20 & 21). However, the specificity and context of the climb are eliminated. The painting investigates the climbing act itself and the uncertainty that this act invokes. It depicts a fictional scenario which metaphorically questions the saying – “the grass is greener”. Three uniformed figures are hanging onto a
floating wall against the greeneries pushing from behind. The greeneries are painted in dynamic brushstrokes as resistant forces and as reflections of psychological states that the figures are enduring – anxiousness, urgency and elusiveness. All the brush marks stop at the right end of the wall, exposing a stripe of the canvas ground, which indicates that the existence of the greeneries is illusionary. The figures are hanging still and looking at each others in blank faces, as if they are hesitant to climb over. The title *Greener on the Other Side?* invites the viewer to contemplate with the figures on whether the climb would lead to a better future. The painting does not provide an answer or overtly sentimentalise the causes and effects of the climb; rather, it presents itself as an open question, urging the viewer to interpret the meaning in relation to his/her own feelings and memories or in association with the past and the current migrant crisis.
In the news images of the recent European refugee crisis, refugees are often perceived by the media as a body perception of vulnerability and desperation. I have noticed that this generalised representation can be counterproductive for my understanding of the complexity of the crisis and the diverse individual experiences of refugees. When I once searched about the crisis on the internet, I saw a vast number of images of vulnerable people waiting to cross borders and to be helped. Immediately, I felt sympathy with them, followed by a reticent voice in my mind – “but there is nothing I can do to help all of them”. Under the state of impotence, I felt numb to the images. In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag analyses the phenomenon of photography of suffering and states:

Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing "we" can do—but who is that "we"?—and nothing "they" can do either—and who are “they”?—then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic…People don't become inured to what they are shown—if that's the right way to describe what happens—because of the quantity of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling. The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration. But if we consider what emotions would be desirable, it seems too simple to elect sympathy…So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering.\(^{80}\)

Overwhelmed by passivity, one might automatically anesthetise one's feelings. Sympathy proclaims one's impotence as well as fear of the rupture of the ideal “I”. In her discussion about the bodily ego in relation to the "mirror stage", Silverman

recounted her panic of walking past the crowds of homeless people on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. At first, she rationalised her panic as an economic dilemma – she had the imperative to give her spare change but it was impossible to do so to every homeless person who asked. Then, she discovered this panic is not just economic, but specular:

I realized that I always studiously avoid looking at the homeless people, whom, with ruthless arbitrariness, I either help or don’t help...What I feel myself being asked to do, and what I resist with every fiber of my being, is to locate myself within bodies which would, quite simply, be ruinous of my middle-class self – within bodies that are calloused from sleeping on the pavement, chapped from their exposure to sun and rain, and grimy from weeks without access to a shower, and which can consequently make no claim to what, within our culture, passes for “ideality”. 81

The homeless bodies for Silverman, the bodies of refugees for me and the “they” raised by Sontag are the otherness reflected in the mirror image, which dispels the comforting fiction of the coherent self, the cultural ideal “we”. Subject to the fear of self-estrangement, we avert our eyes. However, looking at the suffering subject with sympathy does not necessarily entail an ethical engagement. If “I feel your pain” is said merely as a verbal identification rather than an affective one, or as an expectation to alleviate another person’s pain, this expression of sympathy annihilates the significance and even the existence of the pain to the person. One’s pain can never be replaced or removed by someone else. Facing the feeling of impotence, in a way, is respecting the suffering of others. The gesture of looking “at” implies sympathy and the superior stance of the cultural ideal “I” or “we”. Undocumented migrants, domestic workers and all the “living ghosts” who are

marginalised from society are often focalized one-sidedly through looking “at” them. Esther Peeren stresses the need for a more ethical look:

Living ghosts, who are materially present and open to exchange, attempting to see from their perspective - without appropriating it or expecting full disclosure - is an ethical imperative. Not giving the specter the opportunity to occupy the position of a self robs it of agency and exempts it from the task of taking responsibility for its other(s). Thus, Peeren proposes ‘a re-focalization that looks with rather than at the specter and recognizes that this specter is always also a self as I am always also an other.’ Looking “with” is ‘an attempt to acknowledge the ghost’s own vision, a willingness to look at the world, and at oneself, through its eyes’, which entails an empathetic reciprocity. In the cases of refugees and homeless people, this way of looking “with” could be an alternative form of engagement beyond the narratives of inclusion or exclusion, assistance or ignorance.

In July 2017, I was invited to participate in an artistic research project about the Joseonjok who are ethnographically between Korean and Chinese. Their ambiguous ethnic and national identities can be traced to their ancestors from the Korean Peninsula who settled in Jilin province in north-eastern China on the border with North Korea to search for farm land from the 1860s onwards. The region of their settlement has now become the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture governed by China. The research project focused on understanding Joseonjok’s transnational migration history and ambiguous identity through social and cultural study groups, and the outreach Joseonjok community in New Malden, London. The research outcome is a group exhibition *Beyond the Borders* (2017)

83 Ibid., 29.
84 Ibid., 26-27.
featuring artworks in response to Joseonjok's experiences in history and in contemporary society. When I joined the project, I questioned myself: How can the complexity of their migration history, identity conflicts and individual struggles be represented in an artwork? Am I entitled to represent them, if I don’t share the same identity and experiences? And from whose perspective should the artwork represent? With these questions in mind and in an attempt to get closer to the experiences of this ethnic community, I attended a meet-up organised by the curator with a Joseonjok woman at her north-eastern Chinese and Korean restaurant in New Malden. The woman was born into a North Korean family in China. She immigrated to the UK with her son due to economic hardship as a North Korean refugee 16 years ago. She has financially supported her family in China but never seen them ever since. Her experiences affirm my historical literature research, particularly about the invisible labour for economic changes in transnational migration. When the migrant (often Joseonjok woman) carries out physical labour, in many cases in the invisible market (working illegally or doing dirty work), herself and her partner or other family members also labour emotionally in the form of waiting for reunion. Due to their ambiguous ethnic identity and the foreignness attached to it, the Joseonjok had faced discrimination in China and South Korea. They are often represented as victims in their migration history. However, listening to the stories that the Joseonjok woman shared allowed me to understand their history from a different perspective. From the way she told her stories, I felt a sense of forward-looking in her pursuit of her own belief in a better future for her family and a sense of pride in creating a new life for herself. Her exile by choice has become her new “home”. Although our reasons and experiences of migration are different, there are similar emotional states that we share and based on which I made the painting I Have Come This Far (fig. 31). The
painting portrays an imaginary female figure advancing toward daylight and leaving the darkness behind her. While her body gestures and facial expressions of delight reveal her embrace with the brightness ahead, her hair is still attached to the darkness and integrated with clouds in the night sky. In this painting, I attempt to embody the mental state of in-betweenness which I have lived with since I emigrated from China to the UK 13 years ago and which I share with the Joseonjok woman. The in-betweenness is inherent in the diasporic mode of existence, according to Ghassan Hage’s theorisation of the diasporic condition. The diasporic mode of being entails ‘a pervasive logic of cross-national comparative spatiality, and a spatialization of the temporality of progress’85. The comparative spatiality means that ‘to be diasporic is to find it impossible to

experience a social phenomenon, be it a landscape, an object, a social opportunity, or a social relation on its own term without having an elsewhere shadowing it.\textsuperscript{86}

This comparative thought also applies to a diasporic person’s idea of progress in time: ‘the experience of progress involves the projection of oneself into a future that is imagined to offer the gains towards which one sees oneself as progressing. But in the process there are losses and one always yearns for a past where one can regain what is lost in the process of acquiring what is gained.’\textsuperscript{87} The oscillation between here and there, past and future entails a split of self in a ‘vacillatory mode of existence’\textsuperscript{88} which is not about being here or being there, rather, constantly inhabiting a question mark: to stay or to go (under the condition that one has a choice). The painting \textit{I Have Come This Far} is my felt representation of the diasporic mode of being.

This encounter with the Joseonjok woman has brought to light a way of thinking about my entitlement to represent experiences of mother and other dispossessed persons in society. Representation defines reality; and how to represent implies an ethical imperative. Although it is impossible to see fully the reality of the event that the other experienced or is experiencing, painting can be employed as a practice of looking with the other, through a bodily imagination of feeling into the other, but without speaking for the other. With such embodied way of seeing, painting as representation may prevent the generalisation of an unsettled event and enables a more empathetic and humane understanding of the other.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.


Trauma and the Self

‘For there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one’s own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.’

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

In empathetic seeing, the pain of the other is imagined and felt as if it is my own. This embodiment of other’s pain brings to light my own pain. Empathetic reciprocity bears an ethical imperative to care for the other. Nevertheless, how do I attend to the intensity of the otherness - my impotent, foreign and authentic self reflected in the specular image of the other, and care for myself?

Throughout my PhD research, I feel reluctant to address mother’s imprisonment as my own trauma, because the incident did not cause significant psychological disorders in me or dramatic changes in my everyday life. As I am not the one who is imprisoned and experiencing violence, I am also cautious not to appropriate mother’s traumatic experiences for my own. However, my continuous endeavours to feel her experiences in drawing and painting, look with others in crisis empathetically, write and speak about the unspeakable and even reject the idea of trauma seem to indicate that I have been experiencing my own trauma which is tied up with mother’s, but not the same as hers.

According to the definition in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trauma is marked by ‘an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s

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incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation.90 One feature of trauma indicated by Sigmund Freud is that the subject is not fully assimilated as the traumatic event occurs and returns to revisit the event only after a period of time:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. The victim has developed a “traumatic neurosis.” This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the “incubation period,” a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease…It is the feature which one might term latency.91

In the example, Freud describes that the victim of the crash “gets away, apparently unharmed”, which implies that the person is never fully conscious during the accident itself. Trauma is experienced not as a forgetting of the reality of the crash which can never be known in the first instance, but as an inherent latency, returning to haunt the victim thereafter. In her readings of Freud’s theory of trauma, Cathy Caruth emphasises that what returns to haunt the trauma victim is the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident:

The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known.\textsuperscript{92} Traumatic experience suggests a paradox: that a shocking event has happened to one drastically; that one cannot think of the event as an experience of one’s own because he/she was not fully conscious of its occurrence. To be able to consciously articulate the experience, one has to claim it and integrate it into one’s self. Thus, the lack of direct experience of a shocking incident as it occurs leads to its returns through compulsive repetitive seeing in phenomena likes flashbacks and dreams, as Caruth further explains:

The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place. Not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again.\textsuperscript{93} What returns to haunt the victim is not only the reality of a violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known. This reality revealed in the repetitive returns of the traumatic event is inextricably tied up with its belatedness and incomprehensibility.

In \textit{The Interpretation of Dreams}, Freud narrates the dream of the burning child which links his theory of dreams as wish-fulfilments to an external reality of loss: a child who has died from a fever and whose corpse caught fire from an accidentally fallen candle; and his father was sleeping and unconscious of this burning in the next room. ‘The father had a dream that his child was standing

\textsuperscript{92} Cathy Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 62.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid..
beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?” For Freud, the purpose of the dream is to prolong the sleep of the father so that he can see his dead child alive for a few moments more. However, in Lacan’s interpretations, the dream is not the realisation of the father’s desire, rather, it is itself the site of the trauma of his impossibility of responding to the child’s death. The child’s reproach, “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?” contains a more terrifying underlying reality which is what woke the father:

This sentence is itself a firebrand—of itself it brings fire where it falls—and one cannot see what is burning, for the flames blind us to the fact that the fire bears on the Unterlegt, on the Untertragen, on the real.

Lacan’s definition of the real refers to Freud’s notion of ‘the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown’, which neither Freud nor his patients were able to verbalise. The real is the primordial experience in the subject, ‘which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization; and it may perfectly well exist “alongside” and in spite of a speaker’s considerable linguistic capabilities.’ The real, for Lacan, is located at the root of trauma. Its fundamental impossibility to comprehend and to integrate into one’s sense of selfhood is what motivates one’s returns to trauma.

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In the dream of the burning child, the child's reproach evokes the real of the father’s desire, which is his own guilt with regards to his son’s death. After awakening, as Lacan points out, the subjectivity of the father splits between ‘the return to the real’ – it is I who failed to prevent the terrible incident and ‘the consciousness re-weaving itself’98 – it is I who survived and am living through all this. According to Caruth’s reading of Lacan’s interpretations of the dream, the child’s reproach is an awakening which transmits the father’s seeing of his child from the inside of the dream and of the death, to seeing from the outside:

For in awakening, in responding to the address of the dead child… the father is no longer the father of a living child, but precisely now the father as the one who can say what the death of a child is. The father’s response to the address is not a knowing, that is, but an awakening; an awakening that, like the performance of a speaking, carries with it and transmits the child’s otherness, the father’s encounter with the otherness of the dead child.99

Lacan reads the dream of the burning child as the story in which the father’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of the child. The father’s awakening bears an imperative to survive no longer as the father of a child, but as a witness who is responsible to tell the story of the dead child. Thus, Lacan’s theory of trauma implies an ethical relation to the real of the subject, and to another.

In the light of the psychoanalytic theories of trauma, the stories of mother’s traumatic experiences are also the stories of my own trauma. My encounters with the unspeakable can be regarded as my traumatic experiences, whose first

appearance can be traced to my last phone call with mother before her detainment. The phone call reached me in unpreparedness, and it was cut off before I could respond to the shocking news of her detainment. The moment when the call was cut off, my mind experienced a break in time, a long pause. I could not react to the fact that the call was my last chance to speak to mother until I could visit her, which turned out to be 8 months later. The second time that I experienced the unspeakable was in the prison meeting room during my first visit to mother. I could not express myself freely under surveillance and react to the reality of her imprisonment - for the first time seeing her in prison uniform sitting in a guarded zone separated from me. Although I am not the one who is suffering from the violence of imprisonment, my inability to experience and to be present with mother has turned into a violent experience of my own. What caused my trauma is not only the loss of mother but also my loss (or lack) of agency to speak and to act.

The diaristic drawings and the paintings about my memories of my first visit to mother made in the first year of the research are my attempts to claim the reality of the unspeakable moments which have dominated me in the state of shock. By repeatedly tracing the moments in drawing and painting, I tried to re-experience them and render fragments of the experiences into a coherent narrative. However, the repetition of a traumatic experience could be a devastating and destructive process, leading to the shattering of the self. My constant attempts to revisit my experiences of the unspeakable induced somewhat unpleasant confrontations with the real, and with my conflicted sense of self: between my impotent self who feels powerless and guilty for not being able to act and speak out against the unfair government proceedings; and my desired self who senses the urge to express myself and for mother. My encounters with the unspeakable has also brought to light my repression of self-expression. Grown up in China where moral values are imperceptibly enforced, public free speech is restricted and individual subjectivities...
are given over to familial and national values, I had never realised the significant affects of such repression on me and my urgent need for sense of agency until mother’s incident.

As a witness, I feel an imperative to tell mother’s stories. However, I am also emotionally experiencing her imprisonment, so telling her stories involves confrontations with my impotence and fear, and risks of self-exposure. At one stage in my research, in order to capture the reality of the unspeakable moments in my work, I had to force myself to relive the traumatic experiences again and again, which became too painful to continue and led to blockage in making. Therefore, I had to switch from seeing the experiences of mother and myself from the inside to the outside. Instead of working directly from memories, I started to depict other dispossessed figures in social upheavals derived from found images and narratives. The figures function as carriers of mother’s experiences and as a mirror image through which I perceive and reflect on my conflicted sense of self. Seeing my self as the other from the outside and switching between different modes of thinking enable me to examine and negotiate my unspeakable experiences and subjectivity beyond the position of a daughter and a victim of trauma. Drawing and painting allow me to trace and explore an experience or an emotional state bodily, imaginatively and sensually, evading verbalization. Switching from the position of being the painter to the viewer, I encounter my subjectivity and sense of self as otherness reflected in the work. In writing, I listen to the intimate voice in my mind and attempt to pin down the unspeakable in words through deciphering my thinking within the interplay between my literary and artistic research, painting practice, and my experiences of mother’s imprisonment. When presenting my research to the public, I perform a third-person stance and refer myself as the protagonist in my narratives. Switching in between these different modes of expression and communication makes possible the
confrontation with my traumatic loss while maintaining a safe distance from self-destruction; the continuous and transformative processes of thought; and the formation of a coherent self. According to Charles Guignon’s notion of the story-shaped selves, the act of constant enacting narratives gives prospect of cohesiveness and coherence for a self:

It is this narrative unity and continuity that defines the “I”...as we impart meaning to events by telling them to ourselves and to others, so we are constantly imparting cohesiveness and coherence to our lives by enacting a life story in our actions.100

My continuous enactment and re-enactment of narratives in relation to mother’s imprisonment induce a process of self-forming through restless negotiations between my inner self and being in the world. Undertaking this research, I am empowered with artistic agency to obtain self-knowledge and self-care, and to act upon mother’s incident, not in terms of changing the event, but making her experiences visible through revealing my experiences.

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Greener on the Other Side?

In April 2014, mother was detained. In the same month, after receiving the news of her detainment, I proposed my PhD research. This research shares the duration of mother’s sentence. Within this duration, my painting and writing can be considered as a historical act of representing the event of mother’s imprisonment and documenting an immediate history of the impact of the anti-corruption campaign launched in China, 2012. The notion of “history” that I refer to is not a single, straightforward and universal process. As the event is ongoing and I am living through it, I am unable to finalise the event and grasp its meaning in unified past-present-future linearity. The event is experienced in interstitial temporalities rather than as a succession: the representation of the past is determined by the authoritative present, but the present is still overshadowed by the past and urging for clarity, and clarity resides in the future which is not yet conceivable in the present.

As present judgments are continually changing, so is the perception of the past and the meaning of it. In the experience of an ongoing event whose consequences are still unknown, it is impossible to represent the event as a universal objective reality. In fact, I had the imperative at the outset of my research to seek alternative representations of mother’s imprisonment that are not based on a criterion of truth, to counteract the “official history” in the context of China. When history is officially recorded and presented as a means of ratification of governmental power and its celebration, individual experiences like mother’s are generally condemned and dismissed. Although I am not a direct victim of the anti-corruption campaign and cannot speak for everyone who has been affected by it, representing mother’s imprisonment through my painting and writing from the perspective of my
individual memory and subjectivity, may preserve its ever-presentness. And this allows it to become a part of my history and to be disclosed in the public domain.

Given the crime that mother committed, she received a penalty of 5-year sentence in 2014 during the sensitive time of the anti-corruption campaign. However, according to the law in 2019, the same crime is judged as business misconduct, and the penalty is only a monetary fine, no prison sentence is needed to be served. What does this fact contribute to the meaning of her 5-year prison life? For an event with such moral ambiguity, representing it as a complete black and white statement would imply the overshadowing of a moral authority which may prevent the moral content of the event from being explored. However, is it possible to represent it as absolute objective truth without moralisation and dismissal of individual experiences? In his essay *The Holocaust and Problems of Historical Representation*, Robert Braun questions the belief in the ability of representation to capture past “reality” and its universal validity with phenomena as morally, politically and intellectually challenging as the Holocaust:

"Objectivity" of representation is questioned by theorists of science as well as Philosophers of language. "Plausibility" as moral and political authority becomes problematic when the politics of interpretation is discussed. "Factuality" as an unproblematic use of evidence and proof is less unequivocal once questions related to the construction of evidence are raised. Seen in this way, historical representation of the Holocaust that is true to the traditional understanding of the criteria of objectivity, legitimacy, and factuality is not possible.101

In the case of historical narratives, Braun considers that ‘past “reality” does not exist; in its place are an endless number of realities tantamount to the various

judgments and viewpoints one can find in the present\textsuperscript{102}. The legitimation of the past by the authority of the present implies an unresolvable conflict between the supposed moral authority and experience of the past itself and the moral imperative of the narrator/witness in his or her narration. For Braun, historical representation is not a re-enactment of the past but a tool with propositional nature and self-referentiality:

The purpose of using these tools is to establish a human solidarity that is not dependent on universal validity appealing to reason to reveal "reality", but is understood as a temporary consensus arrived at in the course of free and open encounters.\textsuperscript{103}

History in this manner is conceived as neither a coherent and straightforwardly referential process nor an event of one's own, rather, as a kind of double telling, oscillating between the present and the past, the representing subject and the subject in representation. Like the paradoxical complexity manifested in the theory of trauma – as a crisis confronting both the encounter with death and the ongoing experience of having survived it, the complexity of history, as Caruth puts it, is defined by the oscillation 'between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival'\textsuperscript{104}.

A past event itself is finite, as its occurrences have passed and been experienced; whereas, the representation of it is infinite, as it is informed by how the event is remembered and interpreted in the present of the representing act. When examining personal and social narratives of separation, entrapment, eviction, longing and existential choices, what became apparent to me is that violence,
agony, desperation, helplessness and all other complex emotions have no fixed form.

As the determined circumstances of lives change, possibilities arise for new interpretations, resulting in new representations. In this sense, representation can be considered as inexhaustible. Through my painting practice, I sought new possibilities of representing mother’s event in response to how my experiences of it changed over time. I attempted to grasp its meaning in flux through employing representation as a mode of meaning construction. Meaning in painting is constructed pictorially through the production and organisation of formal elements and iconographies, and carried beyond the framing of a single painting, in sequence, repetition and exhibition presentation. It is grasped outside the act of painting, in reflection, planning, looking, the gaps between looking and painting, and physically moving around the studio. The moment when a meaning is comprehended is difficult to pinpoint, as it is never firm and fixed. In the following, I will elaborate on how I seek meaning in painting with regard to my experiences of mother’s imprisonment in the context of my presentation in *The Slade Graduate Degree Show 2017*.

In the exhibition, I presented a selection of paintings which reflect my different modes of thought and various stances that I took to represent my experiences of mother’s imprisonment. Mother is not represented as the subject in any of the paintings, rather, she is implied as an invisible muse and her state of imprisonment as a recurring motif. Each painting in the exhibition refers to a specific thought or a felt moment that I encountered at different points of my PhD research; seeing
them interacting with each other in the form of exhibition allowed me to gain new reflections.

My concept of the exhibition is centred around the existential dilemma represented in the painting *Greener on the Other Side?* (fig. 30) – a pressing situation which prompts an individual to act, causing uncertainty and mixed emotions. The painting *Unreachable Sky* (fig. 33) also depicts the motif and action of climbing. Different from the hesitating figures in *Greener on the Other Side*, the gestures of the figures in *Unreachable Sky* reveal a sense of urgency and desperation. They are fighting against each other and against the sliding force embodied by the vertical brushstrokes to reach the top of the metaphorical wall. Whether they are climbing up or sliding down is ambivalent. The figures are rendered ghostly. Their bodies partly dissolve in paint and merge into the wall, which implies that the scene in the painting is illusionary. The figures on the wall
serve as a metaphorical projection of those who climbed to reach safety in history.

The title *Unreachable Sky* suggests that the desired safety is out of reach, which incites the viewer to contemplate on the efforts and costs of the climbing act. The wall in both paintings *Unreachable Sky* and *Greener on the Other Side* is represented as a barrier. It also functions as a negotiating site for the implied narrative – to climb or not, and for the interplay between figure and ground. The relationships between figure and ground in terms of foreground and background, the figure and the painting ground, the presence and absence of the figure - are staged in all the paintings in the exhibition, alluding to my phenomenological and political negotiations between my inner self and my being-in-the-world.
The painting **A Rebellious Act** is my second attempt after **Climax A Victory** (fig. 24) to represent the sensational and rebellious moment of Winston and Julia’s embrace in Orwell’s novel *1984*. The moving grass in *Climax A Victory* is turned into flames as well as a display of expressive and restless gestures in this painting. The fiery brush marks radiate from the embracing bodies in the centre. The bodies are fused into marks, merging the boundary between foreground and background. This painting presents a further internalised view of the plot in the novel and represents the emotional state of rebellion as a fury of energy through the expressive use of colours and mark making. In the exhibition, the context of the novel is unrevealed; the painting is perceived merely through its embodiment of sensations. In relation to other paintings, it operates as “a rebellious act” (pun intended) – to assert a desire or a will overtly, whereas emotions represented in my other paintings are more reserved.
The rest of the paintings in the exhibition - *I Will Take Your Tears for Love* and *Cut* (fig. 10) are painted from my memory and imagination about my personal encounters. *I Will Take Your Tears for Love* represents an anticipation of separation and loss. Like the wall, the handkerchief serves as a barrier device of barrier, obstructing full view of the desired figure, and as a device of projection, on which the invisible part of the face is imprinted as tear marks. The faint watermarks on the empty handkerchief resemble the outline of her lover’s shadow by the potter’s daughter in Pliny’s tale and the washy marks in depiction of the window reflections in my drawings of the prison meeting room (see fig. 4 & 5). They are both material and emotional touch through which memories and longings are materialised and felt. The painting *Cut* represents a violent act of cutting, in reference to the imaginary moment of mother’s bracelet being cut off by an officer. Presented together in the exhibition, the paintings do not deliver a coherent narrative, rather, they represent my fragmented thinking and the multiple stances that I took to trace and communicate my unspeakable experiences of mother’s imprisonment – through tracing memories and intimate emotional experiences;
displacing myself into sensational and imaginary bodies in narratives; embodied seeing with others in social upheavals.

Painting as a medium constantly deals with the lost. I commence a painting with an idea, a motivation and an urgency. Once the painting is finished, the idea has moved on; or, it may not survive the duration of the painting, slipping away before I notice and recurring in a different form in a different painting. The next painting is to catch the lost thought while another lost is on its way. Meaning in painting is not confined to a single painting or viewpoint. It is grasped in the oscillations between different modes of representation, the unsaid and the title, the past and the present. For a motif recurring over time or cross-referenced in multiple paintings, its representation conveys different meanings: the act of cutting in the painting Cut (fig. 10) not only signifies the violent order of cutting off mother’s bracelet which I overheard in my last phone call with mother before her detainment, but also my traumatic experience of the call being cut off before I could react. I grasped this insight through shifting my focus from representing the imaginary scenario to the act of the cut and exploring the cut as a motif concerning both the act itself and the word “cut”. In this sense, meaning is multiplied and reinvented in the painting process.

For painting, as a production of signs, communicates itself through the unsaid. In painting, various perspectives and points of focus are often blended within a single pictorial framing. The image is not simply a literal appearance but a coded representation. The painterly stroke is not just a mark that is visible itself but is also one which makes visible a form, a gesture and a force. The static and fragmented properties of painting result in the transmission of meaning in uncertainty, instability and ambiguity, which requires the viewer to interpret the representation and its meaning in relation to his/her own memories, feelings and
experiences. The more ambiguous meaning is represented visually, the more emphatic the search becomes. In this way, painting is loaded with more potential meaning than what can be set out in words. When it comes to representing an event with moral ambiguity and uncertain consequences like mother’s imprisonment, painting allows free and open encounters to its meaning and sustains it in flux.

With the suggestive titles, my paintings invite the viewer to reflect on the conflicted emotional states or the existential questions that perplex me. To revolt or to give in? To stay or to go? Is it Greener on the Other Side? The answers reside with the desire to look, with the other and within oneself.
Seeing Further and Beyond

In the duration of her sentence, mother was invisible in society. However, her invisible existence has been made perceivable through my PhD research. She continued to haunt in the form of a motif in my paintings and narrative in my writings and research presentations. Throughout my investigation, I sought new modes of representation and understanding of how I experienced mother’s imprisonment as it changed over time. In my drawing and painting practice, I explored the figuration of mother’s incarcerated existence in the form of absence, shadowy imagery, spectral figuration and through representations of other dispossessed figures in society. I grasped and communicated my unspeakable experiences through tracing my memories and intimate emotional experiences; displacing myself into sensational and imaginary bodies in narratives; affectively looking with the other in painting. Painting as an embodied way of seeing enables an empathetic understanding of the other and a better understanding of the self and the world. Undertaking this research, I am empowered with artistic agency to obtain self-knowledge and self-care, to act upon mother’s incident, not in terms of changing the event, but in making her experiences visible through revealing my experiences.

In August 2018, mother was granted an early release and finished her 4-year-and-4-month imprisonment. After her release, I am eager to hear about her life in prison, through her own words and expressions. But in her state of trauma, she has been left unable to recount her experience, especially those encounters in prison which were distinctly unpleasant and acutely painful. Her memories of her prison life become her traumatic experiences of the unspeakable. Her friends and old acquaintances tactfully circle around the topic, avoiding any mention of her
imprisonment. Perhaps partly, to care and protect for mother, not wanting to retouch on her traumatic experiences. Perhaps, to a certain degree, this new form of the unspeakable that both mother and others around her are subject to is caused by the fear of self-exposure, exposure to the unchallengeable, the authoritative, the suppressive, a route to the revelation of their impotence. Thus, mother's prison life remains unspoken. And with it, the unfairness and injustice of her sentence, and the more than probable mistreatment and wrongdoing.

From this encounter, I realised that even though mother was released, her experiences of imprisonment are still obscured from seeing, restrained only to potential speak of the world in which she once lived. The knowledge that I sought and acquired through undertaking my PhD research is not a conclusive statement of the event of mother's imprisonment, but a suite of artistic methodology and agency. Both are enabling me to continuously trace the absent, grasp the unspeakable and present it in its new form in painting. What motivates and provokes my quest is not the objective truth of mother's imprisonment or other social upheavals and traumatic events, but my desire for embodied seeing and seeing further the experiences of mother and others like her. As past events continue to recede from the present, their meanings and consequences are not fully explored. And as contemporary events continue to emerge and demand representation, there is an ongoing challenge to seek new possibilities of representation in painting and to find the means to make these invisible lived experiences visible and matter.
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Illustrations

Fig. 1-4. Yvonne Feng, *Sketchbook Project*, 2014-15. Ink on paper, A4 sketchbook.

Fig. 5. Yvonne Feng, *Window no.12*, 2015. Ink on paper, A4.

Fig. 6. Yvonne Feng, *Study (Toxic Yellow and Shadows)*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 130 x 200 cm.

Fig. 7. Francis Bacon, *Head VI*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 93.2 x 76.5 cm. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

Fig. 8. Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944. Oil on board, each 94 x 73.7 cm. Tate, London.

Fig. 9. Yvonne Feng, *Jade Bracelet*, 2015. Oil on board, 40 x 60 cm.

Fig. 10. Yvonne Feng, *Cut*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 61 x 40 cm.

Fig. 11. Yvonne Feng, *Invisible wall*, 2016. Ink on wall, at The Foundry, London, Commissioned by Beaconsfield Gallery, 3 x 6 m.

Fig. 12. Gerhard Richter, *September*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 52 x 72 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA.

Fig. 13. Marlene Dumas, *Alfa*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 110 x 130 cm.


Fig. 15. Yvonne Feng, *An Amnesiac’s Stories*, exhibition installation view, 2015. Hundred Years Gallery, London.

Fig. 16. Yvonne Feng, *Plaster/Phone*, 2015. Oil on polyester and canvas, 101.5 x 61 cm each.

Fig. 17. Yvonne Feng, *Immersive darkness*, 2015. Charcoal, graphite and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.
Fig. 18. Yvonne Feng, *Shadow*, 2015. Charcoal, acrylic and oil on canvas, 130 x 170 cm.

Fig. 19. Yvonne Feng, *The Wall*, 2016. Drawing installation, charcoal on newsprint, 197 x 381.5 cm.

Fig. 20. Photo, AP Photo/Neal Ulevich, April 29, 1975.

Fig. 21. Photo, Morocco Wold News Online, October 21, 2018.

Fig. 22. Yvonne Feng. Photo, December 25, 2014.

Fig. 23. Yvonne Feng. Studio shot, 2017

Fig. 24. Yvonne Feng. *Climax A Victory*, 2016. Pastel, acrylic and oil on canvas, 170 x 160 cm.

Fig. 25. Yvonne Feng, *Vicissitudes of life (Up and Down)*, exhibition installation view, 2017. Chelsea Waterside Artspace, London.


Fig. 27. Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814. Oil on canvas, 268 x 347 cm. The Prado Museum, Madrid.

Fig. 28. Edward Munch, *Despair*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 92 x 67 cm. Thielska Gallery, Stockholm.

Fig. 29. Edward Munch, *The Scream*, 1893. Tempera and pastel on board. The National Gallery, Oslo.

Fig. 30. Yvonne Feng, *Greener on the Other Side?*, 2017. Pastel, acrylic and oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm.

Fig. 31. Yvonne Feng, *I Have Come This Far*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 106.5 x 76 cm.

Fig. 32. Yvonne Feng, *The Slade Graduate Degree Show 2017*, exhibition installation view, 2017. Slade School of Fine Art, London.

Fig. 33. Yvonne Feng, *Unreachable Sky*, 2017. Ink, graphite and oil on canvas, 200 x 130 cm.
Fig. 34. Yvonne Feng, *A Rebellious Act*, 2017. Pastel, acrylic and oil on canvas, 170 x 160 cm.

Fig. 35. Yvonne Feng, *I Will Take Your Tears for Love*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 61 x 61 cm.

Appendix
A postscript of drawings and writings.

NOTEBOOK (FRAGMENTS)
In search of images of the future,  
the future is imagined from images of the past.

In search of images of the past,  
the past is reconstructed from images of the present.

In search of images of the present,  
the present is still overshadowed by the past and urging for  
clarity,  
clarity resides in the future which is not yet conceivable in the present.
If a world with shadows exists on the basis of a dichotomy between light and dark, visible and invisible, good and evil, what is a world without shadows like?

In a world without shadows, there is no difference in the strength of light; there is no perception of depth and distance; there is nowhere to hide; there is no ambiguity in seeing. Which world is crueller, with or without shadows?

Seeing the world through shadows is to deny the absolute shade and form, to understand the world through 500 shades of grey distinguishable to the human eye and to be surprised by all the familiar and unfamiliar forms.
Looking is Questioning
Seeing is Believing
Mother once told me that an isolation cell is used to lock up a misbehaving prisoner for a period of time as a punishment which everyone is fearful of. I wonder how an isolated, confined space facilitate rehabilitation. A tiny space enclosed by walls may constrain one’s physical movements and actions, but it cannot stop one's mind wandering free. I imagine the physical enclosure may expand into an introspective space. The blank wall becomes a projection screen on which one's recollections and longings unfold like a disjointed movie. Within oneself, internal voices amplify. The space is designed to induce one to confront oneself and repent one's acts.

Then, how does an isolation cell function as a punishment? In the cell, there may be no natural light. It is designed to deprive the sense of time. The detained person has no clue of what is happening outside and what will happen next. The only connection with the outside is through sound and the wall's feeble vibrations caused by sounds. Nevertheless, the sounds are too inconsistent to mark the passing of time. In the disorder of time and space, can one retain a coherent sense of self?

To stay sane, one has to hide one’s desires and emotions, becoming a part of the indifferent, behaving collective. Becoming no one. It is a way of withholding oneself to preserve one's self.
Prisoners are organised into units of 5 in a 30-person cell. As a unit, they monitor each other. Every 3 months, all unit and cell members are forced to intermingle to prevent bonding.

From 7:00 to 12:00 and 14:00 to 18:00, Monday to Saturday, prisoners are re-educated through labouring. A production line made of 24 people is assigned a daily target of assembling 1000 printed circuit boards in 9 hours. Deducting two 10-minute toilet breaks, the average production speed is 1.9 printed circuit board per minute per production line. If they fail the daily target, everyone gets 1 point deducted. Having 2 points deducted, a prisoner is not eligible for the monthly recognition. With 6 monthly recognitions, a prisoner can apply for a 8-month abatement from penalty.

The prisoners have no name, no "I". They exist as numbers, in pursuit of numbers.
I See You
You are not here
When events are officially recorded and presented as a means of ratification of governmental power and its celebration in history, individuals who have lived their lives ardently with heart and soul, tears and blood, become the ashes of history.

With a snap of history's fingers, they vanish. Weightless and untraceable.
Cities rise,
burn,
regrow,
vanish…
The birds have seen it all.

Bodies fight,
bleed,
collapse,
disappear,
revive,
exult…
The birds have seen it all.

One dark and long night,
the city was shrouded by smoke.
The birds flew blindly away from the screams, gunshots and explosions.
Most fell onto the ground.
A few escaped.

When the sun came up, the smoke cleared.
The birds were whispering.
Once again, the birds have seen it all.
They say
forgetting is inevitable;
forgiving is unavoidable.
But there are things and people that I cannot forget or forgive.

Refusing to forget or forgive is to confront and resist against the feeling of inevitability and helplessness.

Like Sisyphus ceaselessly rolling a big rock to the top of a mountain, whence the rock would fall back of its own weight, the choice and the memory that I return to over and over again became a cornerstone which has shaped my identity.
It took me a long time to realise that I have lived in a trap. They are not looking for me. They have already found me.

To be exact, I have never been out of their sight. They will always find me.
Knowing that overseas mail could undergo stricter security check by prison officers and require longer processing time, I normally emailed my letters to mother to another family member who then printed them out and posted them in China. This process made my writing to mother very difficult and contrived. My words became too formal and transparent, which left no room for secret thoughts and emotions. I consciously concealed my feelings from whoever would read the letter before it reached mother. Gradually, writing to mother became a senseless routine.

Among all the letters that I sent to mother, only one is handwritten. At one point, I was eager to communicate my private feelings without revealing them to anyone else. I know that it was impossible to bypass surveillance. I tried to hide my real thoughts between words and reveal my feelings through my strokes. My handwriting sprawled across the pages torn off from my notebook. It was hasty, but still legible. In the letter, I also included some holiday photos of the beach and park I visited, so that mother could get a sense of the warm ocean breeze and imagine the smell of nature.

It took a long time to hear from mother since I posted the letter directly from the UK. Her handwritten letter was sent to me as a picture via text message by a member of my family, nothing from my letter was mentioned.

My heartfelt letter to mother never arrived.
I raise my hand and try to match the shape of the full moon with my fingers.

My hand gesture looks like a mouth screaming silently to the night sky.

I tense up my arm and sketch out further.

Rebelling in silence.
One does not overtly talk about an incarcerated person. And when an incarcerated person is set free, one chooses to forget and avoid mentioning the lost time. What does the lost time mean to the incarcerated one? What is it like to live a forgotten life?

On the day of freedom, mother walked through a gate, leaving her uniforms and other possessions behind. They searched her naked. A pair of broken glasses was the only thing she could keep. The frame of the glasses were loosely taped together, as the screws had been taken out. The moment she got into the car, she threw the glasses away. She said, “I want to leave everything behind.”

One month after her release, I asked her, “What does freedom mean to you?” She answered without hesitation. Freedom is you are not forced to work 10 hours in the factory every day; you don’t get punished for taking a shower for longer than 10 minutes; you don’t have to face up when you sleep.

That’s how they re-educate prisoners, by making them demand less. But can one’s heart really want less?

Another month later, after she reconnected with her previous life and its joy and sorrow, I asked her, “What does freedom mean to you now?” She answered with an uncertain tone, “to be free?”

What does “being free” feel like? The pair of broken glasses that she threw away, I secretly picked it up and felt its weight in my hands.
The moment mother was caressing a strand of my hair, her fingers sliding down to the tip, I felt as if there was an electric current flowing through my body. My body was shocked by the unfamiliar sensation and moved aside. I cannot recall when was the last time mother stroked my head, not since my adolescence for sure.

When mother was imprisoned, I longed for intimate connections with her. I wished I could communicate freely with her, feel how she felt and hold her hands in the prison meeting room. Now without the physical barriers and distances between us, I wonder why my body resisted her caress and why we are still unable to communicate our feelings freely. She feels strange to me, not the mother I had known.

Since when had we become strangers?
Or have we ever been close?

Mother has always been a selfless loving figure, just like in all the children’s stories that I learnt when I was a young child. In school, I remember we sang songs praising the unconditional love of a mother, and the motherland - my country. I was taught to love back without a doubt: *We love our motherland like loving our kind mother.*

When love becomes a duty, it becomes a burden; one no longer knows how to love.

To me, mother had always been a quiet, hardworking, strong and successful business woman. I had taken her as my mother and her presence for granted, until she was sent to prison, out of my reach. When I met her in prison, it was the first time I noticed her weakness and helplessness. She was not the mother, but a mother in prison. I re-sought my connections with her, and with my country.

Here she stands, still quiet, looking more vulnerable. She looked at me with her dark and sunken eyes.
I realised that I barely know her.
We have never spoken about or learnt to speak about our feelings to each other.

The connection that I long for is beyond physical presence, beyond our barriers of the unspeakable.
You became my phantom limb.
I limp along, always feeling the pain.
It constantly reminds me of what I once owned and what it is now gone.

People say a phantom limb is merely an imagination, and so is the pain.
Is this your pain that I am feeling?
Perhaps.

It is definitely mine.