Visual Narrative in Sequential Graphic Arts and Drawings

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Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts

Lancaster University

This thesis is submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

October 2024

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, whose unwavering belief in me has given me the strength to pursue my dreams and complete this PhD.

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Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work. The material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this, or any other university. This thesis does not exceed the maximum permitted word length of 40,000 words including appendices and footnotes, but excluding the bibliography. A rough estimate of the word count is: 39,900

Yawen Zheng

Contents

Acknowledgements

This journey would not have been possible without the guidance, support, and encouragement of many individuals, to whom I am deeply grateful.

First and foremost, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my supervisors, Charlie Gere and Gerry Davies, for their steadfast support, insightful feedback, and constant encouragement. Their expertise and patience have been invaluable throughout this research, guiding me to think critically and to push the boundaries of my work.

I am profoundly grateful to those who have supported me in the most meaningful ways throughout this journey. To my mother and father, thank you for your patience, love, and enduring belief in me, helping me through every challenge, both financially and emotionally. To my aunt Aifang Bu, your constant encouragement has been a source of strength, guiding me through difficult times.

To my closest friends and sisters, Dr. Raja Sarah Fatricia and Dr. Jiahui Zhao, your support, companionship, and readiness to lend a hand during hard times have been invaluable. I am deeply grateful for your presence and understanding, which have helped me navigate even the toughest moments.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to everyone who has been a part of this journey. Your impact on my life and work is deeply appreciated, and I am grateful to have shared this journey with each of you.

Thank you.

Abstract

This practice-based PhD investigates how drawing can operate as a narrative form, focusing on the intersection of text and image through the graphic structure of Chinese characters. Centred on scroll-format experiments, the research explores how visual storytelling can be generated through composition, line, rhythm, and metaphor, informed by narrative theory and visual semiotics.

The study draws from semiotic theory (Peirce), narrative frameworks (Bal and Altman), and visual language research (Cohn, Eisner, McCloud), integrating them with contemporary drawing practices to explore the following research questions:

1. How can drawing function as a narrative practice that bridges visual language and written language, particularly through the use of Chinese characters?
2. In what kind of visual language can semiotics, visual metaphor, and narrative theory inform experimental drawing processes?
3. How can different structures of image reading (e.g., graphic novel, scroll format) be used to construct layered and immersive narratives in visual art?

Through two major scroll-based drawing experiments and an early-stage prototype 3D narrative model, this thesis proposes that narrative drawing is both a temporal and spatial activity, co-produced through visual structure and embodied viewer interaction.

Contribution to Knowledge

The project contributes to contemporary visual storytelling by expanding the narrative potential of drawing across linguistic and cultural boundaries, proposing scroll-format drawing as a hybrid narrative form.

Keywords

Visual narrative, drawing, Chinese characters, semiotics, narrative theory, visual language, practice-based research, scroll, spatial storytelling, visual metaphor

Introduction

This research project was motivated by a lifetime interest in the interplay between word and image, it is an interest that began with my early encounters with *Lianhuanhua*, the Chinese palm-sized illustrated books popular throughout the twentieth century. These books present concise visual stories told across sequential images, often incorporating brief text within or beside each frame. Their unique narrative structure fascinated me, as did the way they blurred the boundary between reading and viewing. This fascination was further explored during my MA studies, where I began exploring how image-text relationships function not only as communicative tools but also as visual narrative systems that could express complex cultural, emotional, and psychological content.

Over time, I came to see those dominant theories of narrative, especially those developed around graphic and literature, offered limited frameworks for thinking about how narrative operates in visual art, particularly in the context of drawing and semiotic experimentation. My doctoral research emerged from the question: What might a visual narrative theory look like when developed through drawing, informed by both semiotics and experimental material practice? This project explores that question by engaging with the structural, spatial, and symbolic potentials of drawing as a narrative language.

Research Questions

This study is driven by three central research questions:

1. How can drawing function as a narrative practice that bridges visual language and written language, particularly through the use of Chinese characters?
2. In what kind of visual language can semiotics, visual metaphor, and narrative theory inform experimental drawing processes?

3. How can different structures of image reading (e.g., graphic novel, scroll format) be used to construct layered and immersive narratives in visual art?

These questions are addressed across the dissertation through a combination of theoretical inquiry and practice-based research. I explore the intersections between sign, structure, narrative flow, and materiality through drawing experiments that incorporate sequential image-making, visual metaphor, layered composition, and text-image integration. The research ultimately proposes a hybrid model of drawing-based visual narrative that challenges conventional distinctions between image and language.

Reader-Viewer as Audience

This research approaches drawing as both a visual and linguistic system, engaging the audience not just as viewers but also as readers. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of social semiotics highlights how images can carry representational and narrative structures that require decoding, much like language. I use the term reader-viewer to describe this hybrid engagement with visual narratives.

René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929) exemplifies this duality: understanding the work involves both reading the text and interpreting the image. Similarly, my drawing experiments invite audiences to shift between viewing and reading, reinforcing the intersection of image, text, and meaning.

Methodology and Process

The research is undertaken through a practice-based methodology, combining reflective studio experimentation with theoretical engagement. Visual experiments are not used to illustrate theory, but to produce new forms of understanding. I draw from semiotic theory (Peirce), narrative theory (Bal, Altman), and visual grammar (Cohn) to guide and reflect on the making process. In doing so, I test how conceptual models translate into compositional strategies, metaphorical expressions, and spatial drawing formats. This iterative process has

led to the development of a body of work that includes scroll drawings, visual diaries, and an early stage of speculative 3D drawing prototypes.

Contextual Themes and Visual Focus

My experimental drawings are deeply contextual, deriving from and responding to the ongoing social, cultural, and technological changes that shape our world. They explore themes such as time and travel, mobility and immobility, health and viral illness, language and communication, and the balance between freedoms and restrictions. These works are timely, reflecting the complexities of our current moment, and they resonate with the emotional and psychological landscapes of contemporary life. By incorporating rhythm, tension, and modulation—along with integrated text—my drawings present a rich, multifaceted visual experience that mirrors the complexities of lived experience and demonstrates the imaginative potential of visual art.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One examines the development of Chinese characters as visual symbols and their narrative potential through the lens of Peircean semiotics and visual language. This chapter also introduces foundational concepts of image-text integration, visual metaphor, and narrative structure.

Chapter Two extends this investigation by exploring contemporary illustration and graphic novel practices, including close readings of works by Guy Delisle. These examples demonstrate how visual expressions, narrative techniques, and non-linearity function in visual storytelling and provide comparative material for my drawing experiments.

Chapter Three focuses on visual metaphors, examining how visual elements in art and media are used to convey complex ideas and emotions. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Charles Forceville and Neil Cohn, the chapter explores applications of visual metaphor in illustrations, advertising, and sequential art, highlighting how visual symbols function in contemporary storytelling.

Chapter Four introduces my second experimental drawing *Travelling Story,* I use scroll narrative to examine the visual elements like line density, rhythm, and closure that contribute to narrative flow. The experimental drawing leads to the investigation of narrative theory in the next chapter, and the theoretical study of visual narrative.

Chapter Five develops a theoretical synthesis based on Bal's theory of fabula, story, and text; Altman's model of narrative progression; and Cohn's visual grammar. These theories are applied to the analysis of my compositional experiments, including the diagrammatic breakdown.

Chapter Six presents a concluding phase of practical work, including the final scroll drawings *Lancaster Landscape*. This chapter reflects on the previous theoretical explorations and drawing observations. By emphasising all of the research approaches the previous chapters achieved, the experimental drawing in this chapter investigates how Chinese characters and their graphic structure interact with contemporary design principles.

Through these chapters, I aim to build a research-led drawing practice that not only reflects theoretical insight but also contributes to the field of visual narrative by proposing new forms and frameworks for storytelling through drawing.

Chapter 1 The Mutual Origin of Image and Word

This chapter explores the intrinsic relationship between text and image, investigating how these two forms of communication intertwine to create a graphic narrative. The centre of this investigation is an analysis of Chinese characters, which function not only as linguistic signs but also as visual symbols rooted in pictorial and ideogrammatic traditions. By learning from their graphic structure, I highlight how textual expression has evolved alongside visual language, shaping the creation and interpretation of narratives in both historical and contemporary contexts. Following this, I explore the narrative potential of drawing on the theoretical study of visual semiotics. The purpose of this further research is to discover the nature of visual language through the symbols and signs that convey meaning in drawings.

I focus on understanding the origins and functions of graphic narratives by examining two key areas: the graphic structure of Chinese characters and the visual language in drawing. By analysing Chinese characters, the chapter highlights how visual elements and the history of textual expression shape the creation of narratives, particularly in Chinese writing.

To further elaborate on the topic and “close the loop”, I explore the possibility that drawing possesses its own narrative system and present arguments that it constitutes a graphic language.

1.1 Words are Abstractive - The Graphic Structure in Chinese Character

In Chinese character studies, there is some research about how Chinese characters are visually close to the object or agent they describe. Chinese scholar Xu Shen (around 30-124AD, Han dynasty) summarised the Chinese characters in six categories in his

book Shuowen Jiezi (100AD)[1], two of them were related to the graphic structure, they explained the pictorial origin of some characters and their later use in creating new characters. Albertine Gaur (1925-2010), a distinguished scholar and curator, specializing in the history of writing systems, mentioned Chinese calligraphy in her book *A History of Calligraphy* (1994) and explored its history from tools to cultural background, including its aesthetic value and relation to traditional Chinese painting. Gaur (1994) considers that Chinese writing does not primarily represent the sounds of a particular language but the concept by which language as such can be represented. Many of the characters have their roots in pictures derived from nature, and this pictorial origin is very often still clearly visible. In a word, the Chinese character is developed from ancient graphic design.

Another perspective is provided by Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), an American philosopher, historian, and orientalist who made significant contributions to the study of East Asian art and literature. Fenollosa promotes the idea that Chinese characters embody a visual representation of meaning, which influenced modernist poets like Ezra Pound. The essay *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* was first published in 1919 with Forwards and Notes by Ezra Pound (1885-1972), edited and published as a book by Pound in 1936. In this essay, Fenollosa discussed Chinese characters as mere ideograms and pictograms and ignored their phonetic value. He made a major mistake in trying to simplify the Chinese characters into a visual symbol of an object or scene. However, this mistake becomes a very provocative thought that emphasizes the origin of Chinese characters' graphic design and provides related ideas for their visual studies. Although he explained the Chinese language grammar in a one-sided approach, the analysis of grammar structure still provides inspiring ideas for the graphic studies of Chinese characters. Fenollosa (1936) suggested an example when mentioning the connection in every character in a sentence. He analysed the "man sees horse (人見馬)" to prove his conjecture about the natural feature link in the words of a sentence. The words Man (人), see (見), and horse (馬), are much more than just

[1] As the first dictionary to analyse the structures of Chinese characters, explain the meanings and identify the pronunciations, the book ShuoWen JieZi (literally means discussing writing and explaining characters) compiled by Xu Shen in the Eastern Han Dynasty is of important significance in the Chinese language history as well as social language history. (Xue, 2020)

arbitrary symbols, they are created to show the vivid picture which they described. According to the legs, the words man(人) and horse(馬) show their limb differences. The word see(見) is slightly more difficult than the others in this sentence. “See” as a verb, constituted by eye (目) and man (人), which means the process of seeing something is from a person’s eyes. Based on the word’s structure and other similar characters like “見(see)”, about how they represent the process of action, the pictorial clue is rooted in their nature (Fenollosa, 1936).

Besides the components of characters and their compositions showing their natural features in the structure, the temporal order in the sentence is also an essential clue in forming the character. This means that the sequence in which actions or events are expressed in Chinese tends to follow a natural progression through time—beginning, development, and outcome. Such temporal sequencing not only informs grammatical construction but also reflects the broader philosophical view of time as continuous and cyclical, which influences how meaning is encoded in the structure and logic of characters themselves. In using the Chinese language writing system, the intuitive and metaphorical nature of Chinese philosophy is reflected in the grammar and the composition of Chinese characters. Time is the most obvious but invisible element in nature, and Chinese language grammar follows the time operation closely. When describing an event, the narrative sequence mostly goes from the beginning to the end based on the experience of time. The nature of verbs, adjectives, and nouns shows different aspects, the way they were used in verbal, conscious, and format, is originated from the logic of people’s thoughts. In Fenollosa’s (1936) essay, the flexibility of the grammar in the Chinese language (old poetry before the 19th century) was highly appraised. He believes words should be expressed as free will, in order to show the sap of nature and free form of thought. “Like nature, the Chinese words are alive and plastic, because thing and action are not formally separated.” (Fenollosa, 1936) The vigorous in the characters bear the weight of Chinese philosophy, from their graphic structure and the creative theory of making new characters. In most cases, the radicals contain the material or metaphor of the essence of the characters, to identify their nature, while the phonetic compounds locate the verbal rhythm of speaking this

language. Despite the unified grammar that developed to formalize the Chinese language we are using right now, the feature of connecting object and action can still be seen in Chinese characters. This is also related to the component rules in Chinese characters which means the component of the character has some connection with the meaning, either in material or in sense. This rule is strongly implied by the graphic structure of the character.

The structure of the character is a design of the image from reality, and its graphic compositions inspire the similarity between the character and the meaning. Therefore, the nature of the object is included in the image. With an exaggerated expression, which means emphasising and abstracting the main graphic frame of the object's physical form or spiritual representation, the character might be extremely close to the original look of the object. Hence, the character is an image of the vivid, lively "thumbnail". I experimented with this idea by drawing a historical event and trying to insert the drawing into the text. I replaced some words with small drawings to explore the compatibility between the characters and drawings. Meanwhile, I drew the characters in two categories, one is readable, and another could not be recognized by themselves; however, they could still form meaningful text when put together.

In my previous drawing experiment before starting this research, *The Long March Diary*[2], the content of the text was drawn from the reports and documents of the Long March history event[3]. I used the grey bottom layer to imply the newspaper material and created the scratches and fold traces on the surface to perform the historical marks that these documents experienced. The frames of the compositions are based on the subject's characteristics, for example, in Figure 1, the main subject in this drawing is a pair of straw sandals, and the text surrounding is the winding path that the sandals walked on. The characters on the drawings were made in fragmented shapes, and parts of their components were incomplete like the rough and uneven stamp (Figure 1.1). Without the missing parts, those characters only have the major frame of their

[2] This drawing experiment was created for my research topic on visual narrative during my master's study in 2017. It consists of 5 drawings with different signature items that the soldiers used in the long march event. Each of them was set up to a size of 70x70cm on paper.

[3] The Long March (1934-1935) was a significant military retreat undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Red Army to evade the pursuit of the Kuomintang (KMT) forces led by Chiang Kai-shek (Spence, 1990).

structure, the rough contour of the body. They are still recognizable when being read, but the purpose of representing their graphic origin is completely lost. In a similar case, if a traffic sign lost a major part of its body, it might still be recognized by people's association minds, but the exact indication would fail to show. These arrangements with incomplete characters examine the reading system of the Chinese language for deciphering/recognizing the picture, our brains work out the similarity between characters and the things they represent, such as reading traffic signs, memes and emojis, which visually indicate the image they meant.

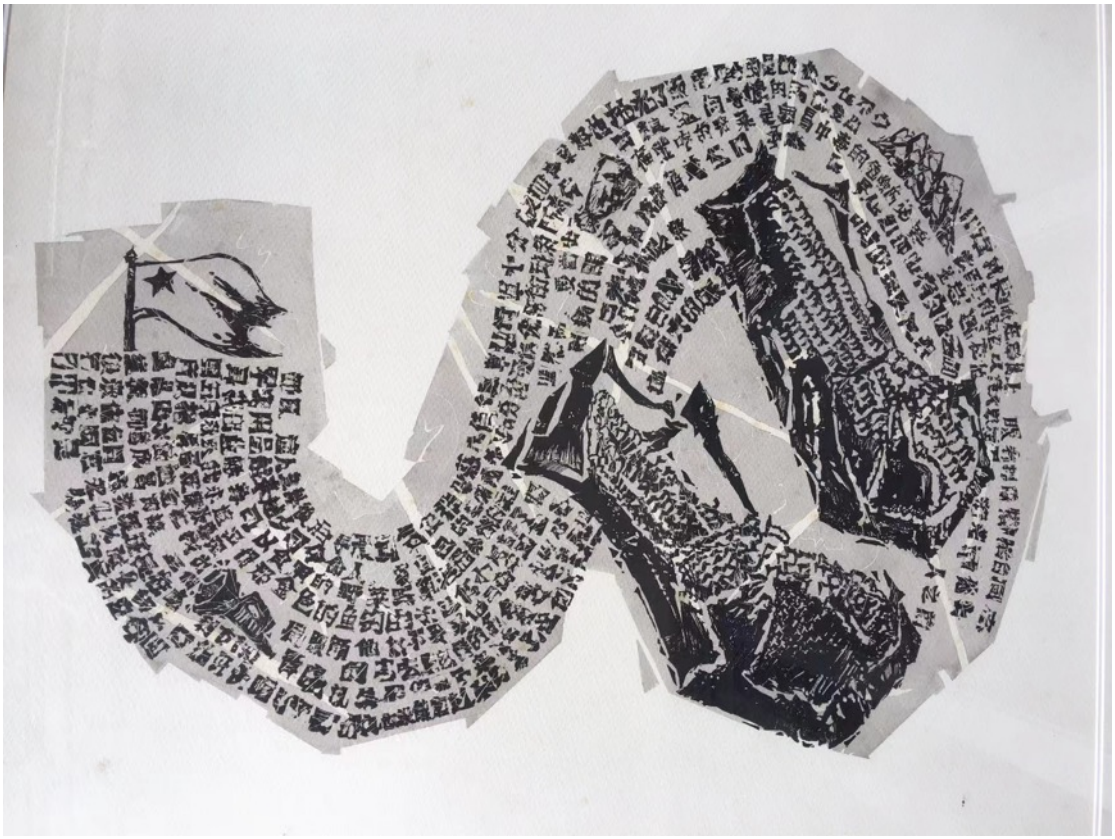


Figure 1. The Long March Diary, Yawen Zheng, 2017

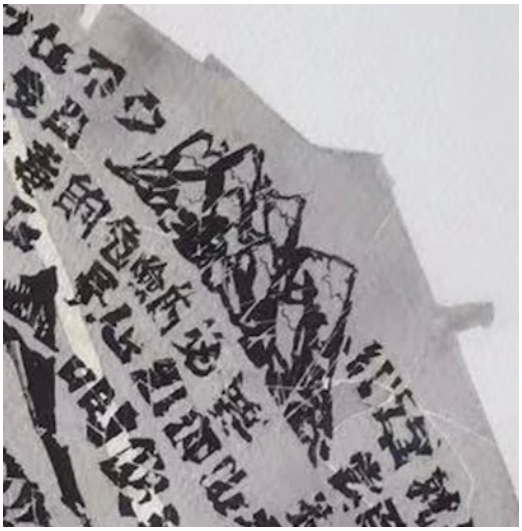


Figure 1.1. The characters in The Long March Diary

In this section, I have chosen to use the analysis of Wilder and Ingram's (1974) work on finding the visual meaning of Chinese characters. One of the reasons is that this work was conducted before the Chinese phonetic alphabetic system "Pinyin"[4] was invented. The first edition was published in 1922 and it only discusses the graphic form and the visual interpretation. In its index of characters, Wilder and Ingram used two sets of orders, one by the alphabet's order, and another by sorting by the number of every character's stroke. The alphabetical index in their book is ranked based on the phonetic alphabet before the official Mandarin pronunciation system Pinyin was promulgated, so it is no longer in use. The Pinyin index reveals the phonetic aspect of the characters. In every single alphabetic category, there are groups of characters that have the same phonetic components besides radicals that represent their pronunciation. The Chinese characters have their unique phonetic value, and their spoken four-tone pattern[5] is different from the alphabetical languages, the change of four-tone developed more sound dimensions in the spoken Chinese language, and they created different

[4] Pinyin, or Hanyu Pinyin (汉语拼音), is the official phonetic transcription system for Standard Chinese (Putonghua). Developed by linguist Zhou Youguang in the 1950s, following a program of language reform embarked upon by the government of the People's Republic of China in the hope of making China better connected to the outside world, Pinyin employs the 26 letters of the Latin alphabet, which are familiar to people in foreign countries and China's own minority groups. (Wang & Andrews, 2021)

[5] Chinese is a tonal language; each Chinese character has a tone. One syllable, pronounced in different tones will usually mean different things. Each pinyin syllable in Chinese can have 5 possible ways to pronounce it by varying the tone (pitch). There are four tones and neutral tone (toneless) in Mandarin Chinese. (Odinye, 2017)

categories to distinguish words that have the same phonetic components. The character's stroke index is ranked on the literal number of each character's stroke, which normally starts from one. The stroke counting ranking is one of the indexes that is based on the character's graphic structure. The Chinese characters have different writing complexity, they are constructed by the basic stroke units, such as dots, lines and hooks, and these strokes are written in a few directions from the central starting point (DeFrancis, 1984). Every character has a sequence of writing strokes, the stroke counting index brings the characters that have similar complexity together, people could find the character by counting its stroke number. Another index based on the character's graphic structure is the radical index. A Chinese character is constructed by its semantic radical and phonetic components, normally, the radicals have no associated pronunciation, and their contribution to characters is systematic with respect to the meaning of the compound (Feldman; Siok, 1999). The radical reveals the pictorial and metaphorical features of the character's structure in the early analysis, the radicals symbolize their image and meaning. After Pinyin became the official phonetic guidance for the Chinese spoken language, the graphic value of ideograms became subordinate. However, the radical index is related to the character's pictorial origin, the radicals normally imply elements in the character's appearance or their metaphorical relation. There are many characters created by a combination of motion and objects, or the same features they relate to. For example, "wood" is a character and also one of the semantic radicals representing tree names, products or objects constituted by woods, same as "water", "plant", "bamboo", "heart", "hand", they not only have independent characters but also have radical forms that allow them to combine with the phonetic components.

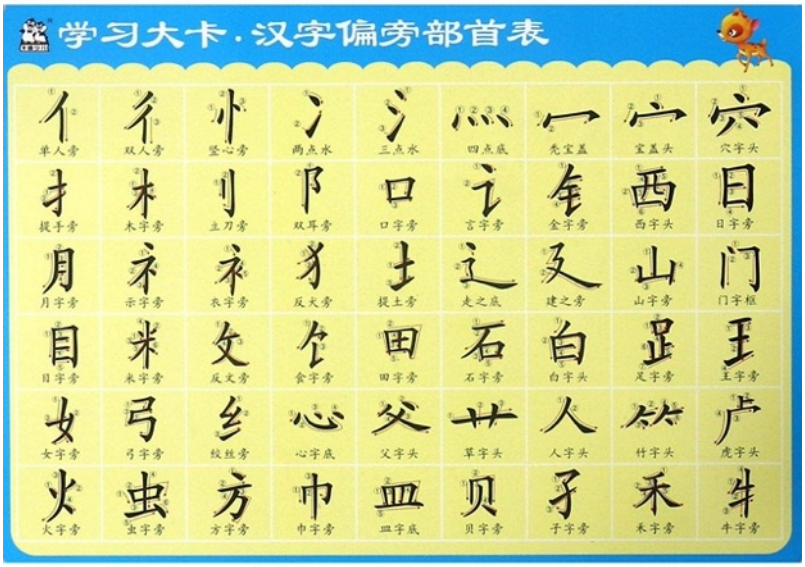


Figure 2. The Radical List. For Early Child Language Education Use.

Figure 3. Different forms of character and radical uses.

The Chinese idiom “高山流水 (High Mountain and Flowing Water)” refers to the harsh reality that talent and ability can rarely meet people who can appreciate them. In this idiom, some characters remain very close to their oracle form (Shang dynasty, approximately 1250 BC)[6], the pictorial clue is obvious in their structure. The oracle form is a hieroglyph that remains alive in modern Chinese characters, oracle characters can be considered as wonderful and time-tested sketches of the ancestor of objects in the real world (Jun et al. 2016). The oracle bone glyphs as the earliest writing symbols of the Chinese language have undergone several major changes into today’s simplified form (Long et al. 2021). In Xu Shen’s Shouwen Jiezi (100AD) which is the first major Chinese dictionary and monumental grammatology book (Rong & Benicka, 2022), the Chinese characters are categorized into six groups, two of them are developed from the pictorial origin of the Chinese characters, 象形(Xiangxing) and 形声(Xingsheng), which mean Pictogram and Picto-phonetic compounds. The oracle forms found on animal shells and bamboo were the early pictograms in Chinese characters’ history. After the Han dynasty, the growth of new characters in the pictogram category began to decline, as image-based character formation was no longer sufficient to express more abstract, metaphorical, or phonetic meanings (Tao & Qian, 2012). Pictogram, as a considerable part of the later complex characters, contributes to their pictorial value. The picto-phonetic compound category sorted out the majority of Chinese characters. “山(mountain)” (Figure 2, 4), and “水(water)” (Figure 3, 5) are very similar to the oracle forms that they evolved from. High(高) is related to the house or tall building in appearance; and the character is variously contracted, overturned and mingled with other elements. Its structure highly resembles a traditional type of house with a hall at the bottom and a loft at the top. Flowing(流) has an obvious phonetic component, the structure is different from the mountain, the radical “氵” is a variant of “水 (water)”; and according to Wilder and Ingram’s (1974) interpretation, the phonetic part is a symbolic scene of the delivery of a child.

[6] Oracle bone script is the earliest Chinese writing known to date (Boltz 2003; Keightley 2014, as cited by Liu et al., 2021).

Figure 4. Oracle character mountain

Figure 5. Oracle character water

Having explored the historical roots of Chinese characters, the chapter now turns to contemporary artistic interpretations, particularly in the works of Xu Bing[7]. Chinese

[7] Xu Bing was born in Chongqing, China in 1955 and raised in Beijing. work has been displayed in numerous prestigious venues around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Sackler National Gallery in Washington, D.C. His works are included in major art history textbooks such as Art Past, Art Present (Boston: Abrahams Inc, 1997) and Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global History (Wadsworth: Cengage in several international exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale, Sydney Biennale, São Paulo Biennale, and Johannesburg Biennale. His works are included in major art history textbooks such as Art Past, Art Present (Boston: Abrahams Inc, 1997) and Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global History (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2013). (Xu, n.d.)

artist Xu Bing focuses on the creative artistic use of language and visual communication, his works include reconstructing Chinese characters and English words and experimenting with the visual language system. One of Xu Bing's artworks explores the Chinese characters' phonetic component's structure (Figure 6), he designed a pattern to reorganize the English words, and arranged the letters in the Chinese character's "Square Words Calligraphy". English words are deconstructed and then re-configured into forms that mimic the square structure of Chinese characters, every English word as a single unit to construct a character. This experimental artwork broke the boundary between letters and characters and challenged visual recognition and reading tradition in alphabetic and ideographic written languages, even digging out the roots of two cultures' graphic reading conventions. Xu Bing's other artwork, The *Book from the Sky* (Figure 10), is a set of four books printed with more than a thousand different characters that Xu Bing invented but are devoid of any real meaning. In this series of artwork, he took the example that the Chinese characters are built up from a limited group of components that are variously combined to create a variety of characters, then designed his characters to resemble genuine ones closely (Erickson, et al. 2001). Following the basic principles of designing characters, Xu Bing recombined these genuine components in meaningless formations, sometimes with additional, invented components. "Reader" of the *Book from the Sky* might be able to infer meaning from some of the invented characters by looking at the components. For example, if a character in this artwork is combined by a radical "木 (wood)" with an invented component, people who read Chinese could infer that the character denoted a species of wood or material related to wood. This example reveals the radical's visual implication as Fenollosa and Gaur mentioned. Except for exploring Chinese characters' structures and compositions, Xu Bing emphasizes the idea that practising calligraphy means much more than simply mastering a new way of writing, he suggests calligraphy as not merely a tool of communication, but also an activity that combines both artistic expression and spiritual energy. The experimental artwork *Book from the Sky* visually demonstrates the artist's creative intention of reversing the recognition tradition when reading characters. Besides the characters' pictorial experiment, the artwork is exhibited in a way that needs to be completed with the audience, the artist still needs to

use the basic square frame as the new creation's graphic foundation and leads the audience to expect reading the characters based on the common experience of the Chinese language, then the fact that the characters are impossible to understand is what exactly the theme means (in Chinese literary, the "book from the sky" represents the mysterious literature content or the literature which is written by almost incomprehensible words).

While Xu Bing's artworks are conceptually rich and formally innovative, the narrative in his character creations still has limitations. One of the main challenges is the ambiguity, the visual complexity of characters in *Book from the Sky* may be intellectually stimulating for the art audience, but potentially unreadable for general viewers who are unfamiliar with Chinese character structure, as the visual storytelling of his creations builds on Chinese character graphic structure and conceptual art traditions. The radical's illegibility of the characters could compromise the readability of the content, undermining the interactive or interpretive engagement it seems to invite. Moreover, while Square Word Calligraphy artfully bridges linguistic systems, it depends on readers' knowledge of English and its reading hierarchy. These tensions raise problems and important questions about the accessibility and universality of Xu Bing's visual language experiments, especially when readers evaluate them in a cross-cultural context.

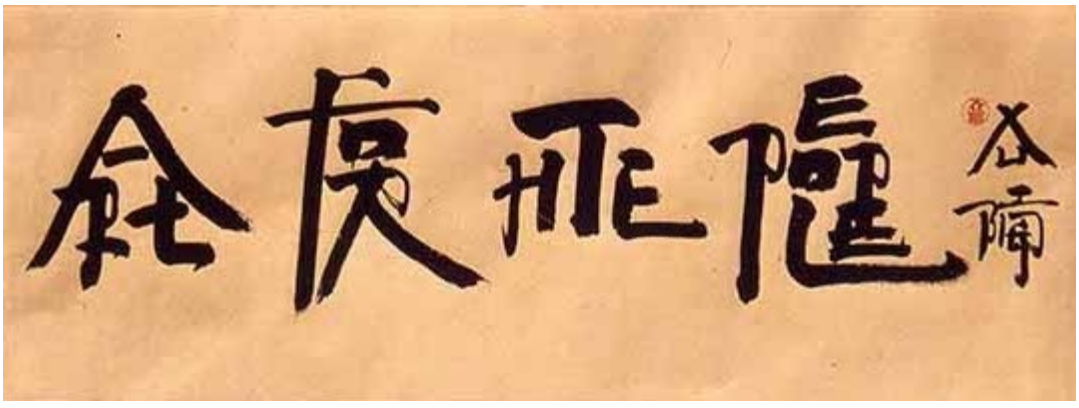


Figure 6. Art for the People. Xu Bing. 1999.

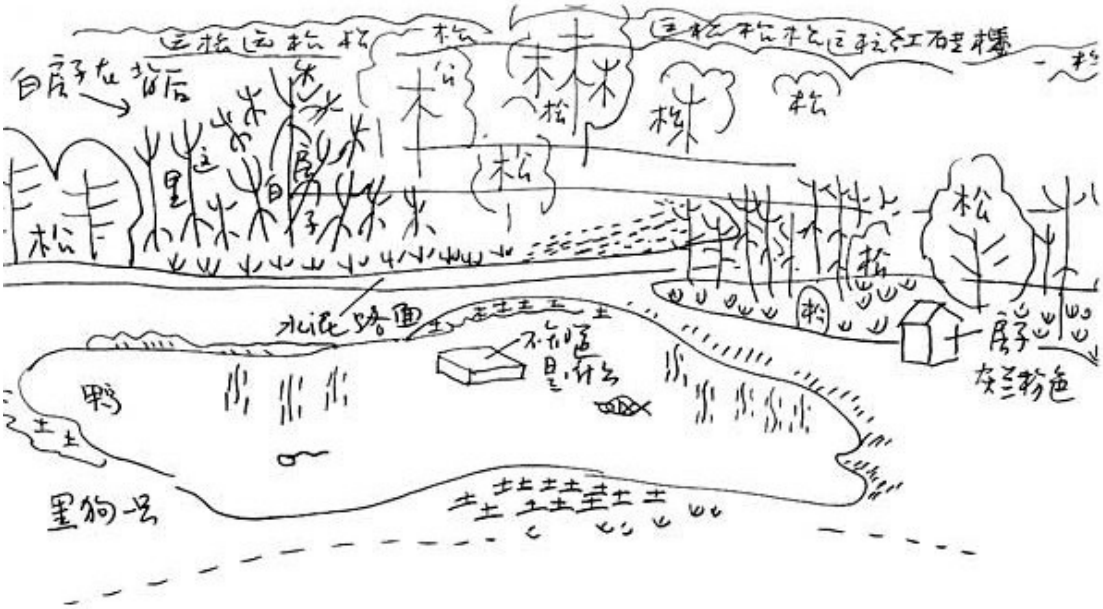


Figure 7. Landscript. Xu Bing. 1999-ongoing.

Figure 8. Landscript from the Himalayan Journal. Xu Bing. 1999.

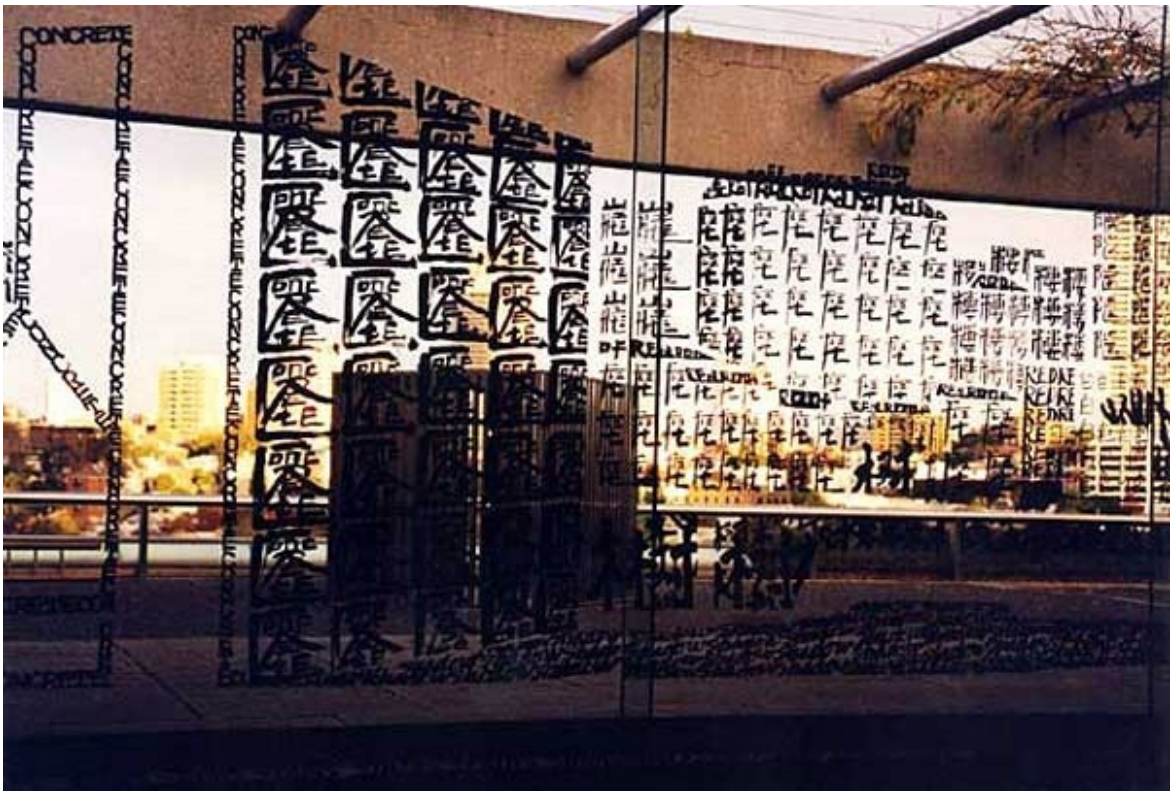


Figure 9. Landscript: Sydney. Xu Bing. 2003.

Figure 10. Book from the Sky. Xu Bing. 1987-1991.

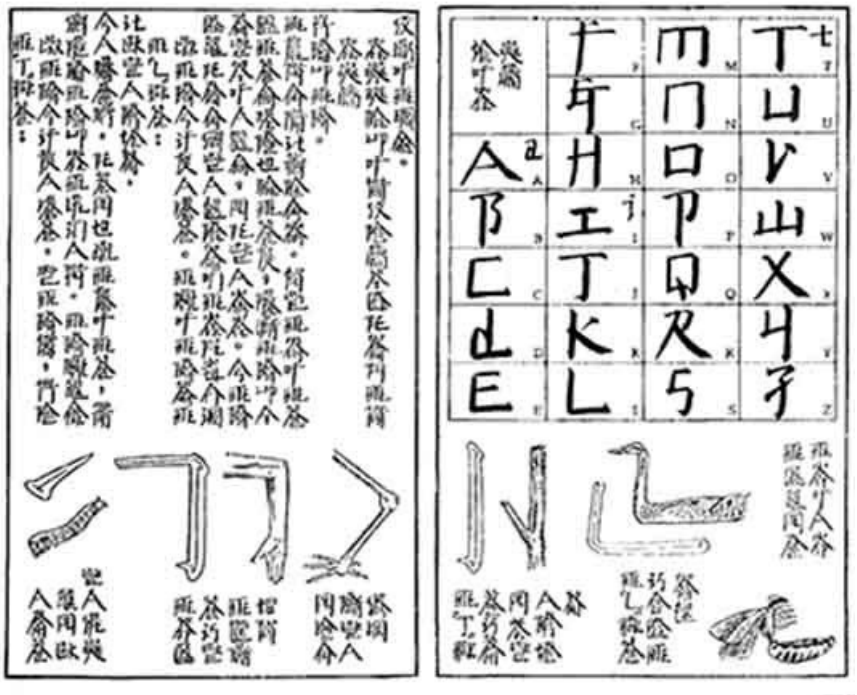


Figure 11. An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy. Xu Bing. 1994-1996.

In a series of Xu Bing's early works (Figure 7, 8, 9), Landscript, experimenting with Chinese characters' visual implications, he tried to examine the visual narrative of a drawing by using Chinese characters as the major content of the drawing. With a few simple lines and shapes, he linked the objects made by characters as a whole scene; he used common landscape composition to set the basic outline of the drawing, then filled in the main body with the characters that mean the objects themselves. In Figure 7, this early piece of artwork, there are a few primary attempts toward the pictorial origin of the Chinese characters, the trees beside the road and surrounding the small house are mainly constituted by the character "wood (木)". Compared to this "draft-like" experiment, the later Landscript artworks explored more possibilities of painting landscapes with words. In October 1999, when Xu Bing was trekking through the Himalayas, he drew the landscape by combining characters and styled lines, in one drawing of this series (Figure 8), he rendered the foreground rocks and stones and plants with the Chinese character, built up mountains for the corresponding characters. He mixed his own calligraphy style with the characters and the objects' moving trends, such as the dynamic of their natural states under the wind blowing. From the drawing experiments, the characters constitute a lively landscape scene, and the visual nature of the objects is revealed from the simplified strokes inspired by their characters' structure.

Except for the visual connection mentioned above, Fenollosa (1936) believed the Chinese language (ideogram) is a metaphor process, which uses material images to suggest immaterial relations. To represent what is imagined and unseen requires the characteristics related to the design of the character. The invisible metaphorical process happens between the actual pictorial components of a character. The components either have a visual relation to the character's meaning or a natural relation. As the Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos considered in his argument, the essential aspect of Pound-Fenollosa's essay is not the "pictographic" theory, but the "relational" claim that ideogram is a relational process, as a structural metaphor. Let us begin with the word "想象(imagine)", with "忄心(heart)" as a component at the bottom, "想" means "think",

which means to use your heart (metaphorical speech about the action of thinking). Chinese native speakers used to say, “Use your heart to think”. Here, “heart” does not represent the physical form of the organ heart, it means putting effort into something or when you mean something serious. In Wilder and Ingram (1974)’s interpretation, “想” means to think, to ponder, to hope. The whole character consists of three parts, except for the radical part “忄心”, the phonetic part made up of “木(wood)” and “目(eye)”, their combination means, “When about to build, one goes into the wood, and examines the trees until one is found which answers the requirements. The idea of appropriateness is brought out. In hope, the heart longs for that which is considered appropriate, or that which is suited to its needs.” However, the second character “象(elephant)” in this word is not as simple as the first one, its function in this word explains the meaning of the word vividly. Wilder and Ingram (1974) considered that it is difficult to explain why this symbol should have been taken for an image. In an ancient Chinese book Han Feizi, the author Han Fei (BC280-233) mentioned, “Since the environment changed, it is rare for people to see living elephant, therefore, when they saw the skeleton of a dead elephant, they pictured living elephant based on the skeleton, in this case, the occasion of using subjective consciousness to infer the original image of the object or situation, are using ‘象(elephant)’ as reference.” (direct translation from the original content) Interestingly, there was an argument on using “象(elephant)” or “像(resemble/image)” in the word “想象(想像)”. As the explanation says how people imagine elephant, using “象” is the tradition. “像” is a reconstructed character, since the activity of imagining is done by a human being, the linguist creates this character by adding “人(human being)” beside “象”, so that the character connects the subject and the activity. Chinese linguists and writers hold different opinions about which one to use in this word, hence there are some pieces of literature using different characters in their writings.

The instruments that the Chinese calligrapher used were ink and brushes, which are the same as drawing. Based on Gaur’s (1994) view of the pictorial structure of Chinese characters, the calligraphy could be manipulated in a wide range of variants. This

increases the visual variety of Chinese characters; strokes are arranged in certain patterns which similar to the painting's composition. Chinese calligrapher Cai Yong (133-192AD) described that the characters should be given the spirit they represent, and the forms must seem to be dynamic and rhythmic. They must capture and express the emotions implied in the characters and the words, the calligrapher must draw inspiration from nature, the plant's posture and the creature's vigour, the force of actions and the stillness of something eternal. When the audience faces the calligraphy, they should be able to resonate with the feelings that every image in the world has given them, then it could be qualified as a work of calligraphy.

Gaur (1994) mentioned the two factors that define a good piece of calligraphy, except for the nature of the characters, its identification with visual art also occupies a certain space in the Chinese graphic tradition. Chinese calligraphy and painting both abide by the same aesthetic principles. In the book The Record of Classification of Old Painters, Xie He[8] wrote "six principles to consider when judging a painting", in direct translation: 1. Spirit Resonance. 2. Bone Method. 3. Correspondence. 4. Suitability to Type. 5. Division and Planning. 6. Transmission by Copying (Bush & Shih, 1985). In the first principle, the spirit was mentioned to emphasise the vitality of the artwork, this is the central principle of them all. The resonance that the viewers' senses connect the feelings and thoughts between them and the artist through the artwork. The second principle indicates the brush-using method by the artists since traditional Chinese painting relies heavily on line drawing. The third principle relates to the balance of the representation and shapes. The fourth principle emphasises the adherence to art styles, both tradition and representation, ensuring the artist's expressions respect the theme of the artwork. The fifth principle involves the composition and organization of the artwork, this would ensure the overall view of the artwork is presented to the viewers in a harmonious sense. The final principle, which is an important one, values the learning process of copying a master's artwork for improvement. Together, these principles guide both calligraphy and painting, demonstrating the depth and complexity of the root of Chinese visual tradition.

[8] Xiè, H. (6th century). *古画品录 [Gǔ Huà Pǐn Lù]*.

From Pound introducing Fenollosa to the calligraphy writing principles, the discussion of nature and spirit transfer their influence through the Chinese character is always circling around the ideogramic composition. Pound used the Chinese characters as illustrational images to explain his intention or the words' meaning in his poem (Figure 12). He was introduced in Brazil as the poet who revolutionized the form of poetry at the beginning of the century (20th). Inspired by his exploration of the visual effect that combining alphabetic letters and Chinese characters, some poets started to challenge the conventional linear writing in poems. The Brazilian brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos[9] drew Pound's attention by intending to translate Pound's poetry and bring in his ideogrammic method. In the 1950s, the brothers and the poet Décio Pignatari founded a literary magazine *Noigandres*, the poets in the Noigandres group worked on disseminating Pound's work in Brazil. When they talked about concrete poetry, they introduced this art form as the product of a critical evolution of forms (Pilot Plan for the Concrete Poetry, *Noigandres* issue 4). Concrete poetry derived its name from the term originally coined by Theo Van Doesburg in the 1930 "Manifesto of Concrete Art." (Erber, 2012). It begins by noticing the graphic space as a structural agent. Instead of focusing on linguistic content and poetic symbolism alone, artists participated in the Noigandres group to reexamine the graphic forms of language and search for spatial structure arrangements of visual layout for more meaning beyond linguistics. The experiments of typography, scale, spatial creativity, and other non-linear, non-temporal development (e. g. Figure 13.). Concrete poetry liberated the word from its logical, abstract function in language and returned it to an independent object. It breaks the word from falling in line or frame and grants them infinite possibilities to develop new forms.

[9] Augusto de Campos is one of the most important Brazilian poets of the second half of the 20th century; he belongs to a generation that includes, among others, Affonso Ávila, Décio Pignatari, Ferreira Gullar, Haroldo de Campos, and Mário Faustino—all of whom have produced significant works since the 1950s, which are essential reading. Augusto remains active (along with Ávila, Pignatari, and Gullar) and recently released another poetry collection: *NÃO* (São Paulo, Perspectiva, 2003). (Ávila, 2020) (This is a direct translation from the original content)

Without[2] muan[1] bpo . . . but I anticipate.
There is no substitute for a lifetime.
The meaning of the Emperor,
ten thousand years heart's-tone-think-say,
he had reigned for 61 years

敬 reverence

and τὸ καλόν

order 孝

"Parents naturally hope their sons will be gentlemen."

正 cheng

經 king

The text is somewhat exigeant, perhaps you will consider the meaning of

cheng 正

king 經

From Kung's porch 門 mên,[3]

and not cheat the Administration.
Filial piety is very inclusive: it does not include
Family squabbles over

田 land 錢 money, etcetera

Or pretendings.
II. Ten thousand years say men have clans and descendents.
III. There are districts. Avoid litigation.

Figure 12. Page 43 in Cantos Thrones, Ezra Pound, 1960.

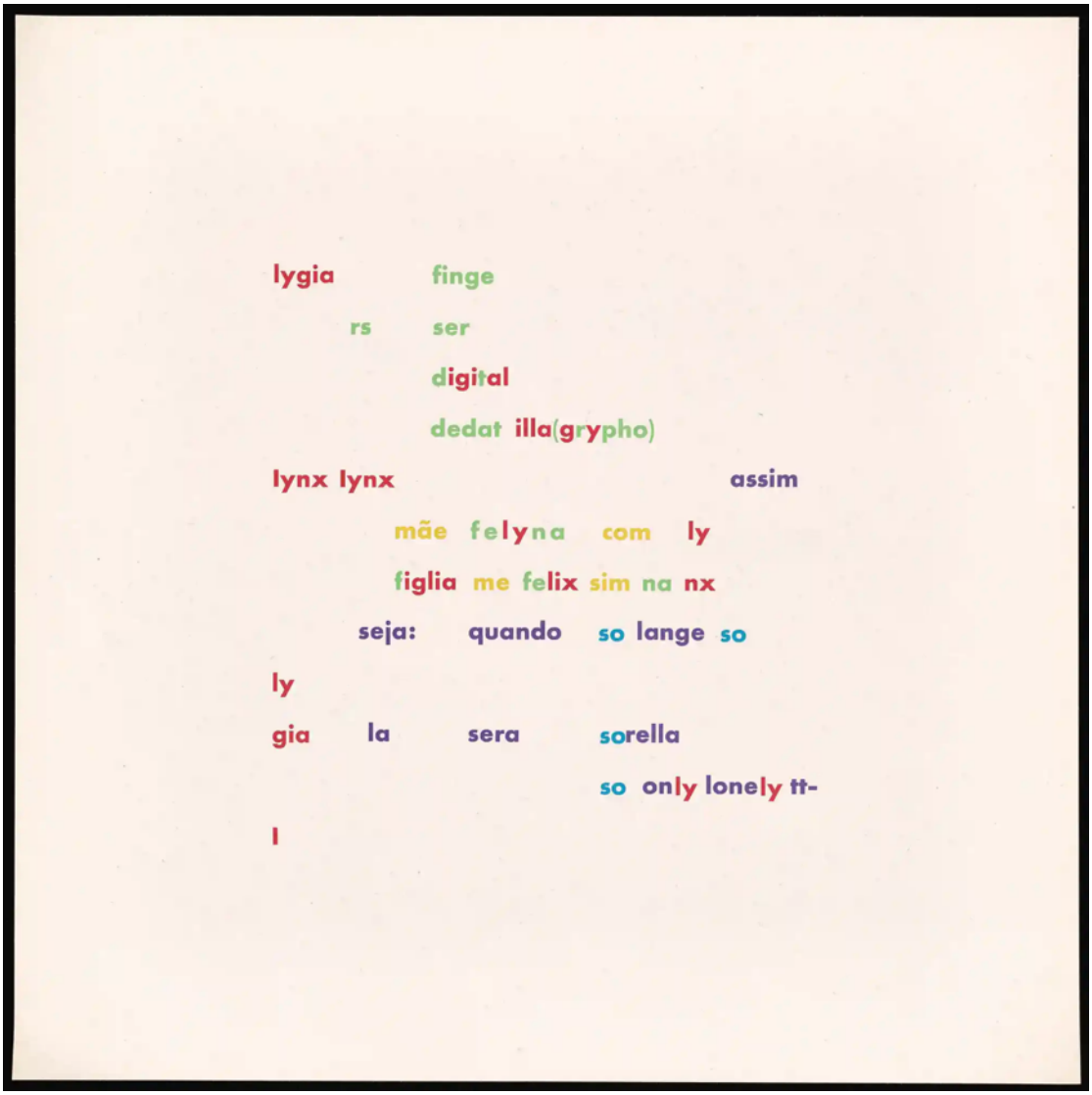


Figure 13. Lygia Fingers, Augusto de Campos, 1953.

The relationship between Chinese characters and nature extends beyond their visual form; at the level of calligraphy, they embody the essence and spirit of nature. This contrasts with modern design work, such as logos and icons, which have long been used in advertising and communication. Xu Bing's *The Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (2014) uses symbols and signs to construct a narrative, demonstrating the communicative potential of visual language. In contrast, his earlier work, *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991), explores graphic reading through Chinese characters, highlighting the shared visual principles between these designs and traditional

calligraphy. Xu Bing spent years collecting and organising icons from his surroundings, believing that people should be able to recognise signs and diagrams if they are fully immersed in modern life. Building on this idea, he created a communication system using public signs and internet emojis, hoping it would eventually function as a dictionary with practical applications. He stated, “Diagrams are employed as the primary means of communication in an attempt to explain relatively complex matters with a minimum of words” (Xu, 2001). The content of his book combines language and graphic systems, both of which have roots stretching back millions of years. Throughout human history, the development of language and graphic systems has significantly accelerated the advancement of civilization.

Figure 14. Book From the Ground Design. Xu Bing. 2003-ongoing.

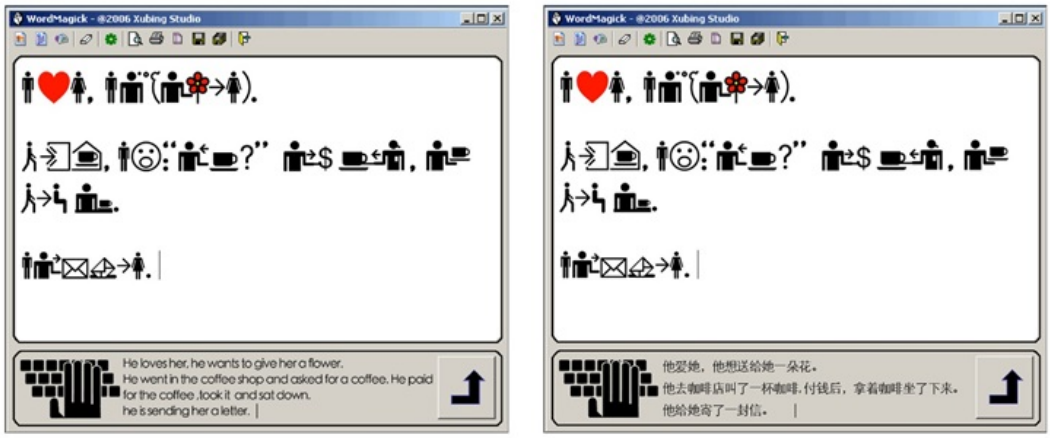


Figure 15. Book From the Ground Software. Xu Bing. 2003-ongoing.

This section sets the stage for the next one by establishing that language, particularly in the form of Chinese characters, is inherently visual and abstract. This idea is crucial since it transitions into the exploration of drawing as a language. The next section extends the discussion by analyzing how visual elements in drawing act similarly to linguistic signs, creating meaning through a system of signs, symbols, and metaphors. While investigating the language in visual components, the viewers/readers can appreciate how drawing possesses a narrative capability as well as textual and spoken language. This connects visual and textual expressions into a unified system of communication, where both drawing and language can convey complex ideas and emotions. Therefore, the transition I explore from the abstract nature of the graphic structure of characters to the visual language of drawing emphasizes a broader narrative strategy that integrates both text and imagery.

1.2 Drawing and Language

In this section, I discuss the language in drawing and how to understand its visual language by introducing Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics theories. In each of the sign systems in their theories, I explore the visual language in images and how the artists apply them in their artworks. I use this part of the investigation to reflect on my

studio practice and analyse my studio practice by using the study of signs. I begin with Saussure's establishment as the "signifier and signified" in the sign system, and Roland Barthes's built-on research of "denotation and connotation" on it. To make my investigation deeper and illustrate my point of view on the visual language in drawing, I looked at Peirce's development of the categorization of signs, which focuses on meaning interpretation. I also connect Barthes with Peirce when they interpreted the meaning in signs, Barthes considered how to decode the message in the image, while Peirce sought to explain the conceptual idea of how signs work in constructing meaning. Besides exploring the theoretical aspects of visual language, I use the artworks of R. B. Kitaj and Robert Rauschenberg as examples to validate my investigation of visual language. Kitaj's artworks engage with signs, symbols, and layered narratives, his distinctive fusion of literary allusions and visual components creates a rich environment for semiotic investigation in his artworks. Rauschenberg mixed visual language, signs, and symbols in a way that made his art defy classification, the audience is encouraged to investigate the intricacies of cultural context and meaning through his works. While talking about the concept of the sign system, I chose Xu Bing's artwork (which I mentioned before in the last section) and historical symbols as examples and found the matching process of analysing the visual language in signs. This section of investigation benefits my studio practice by inspiring me to use signs to create new narratives and lead the research direction to discover them in my drawing.

Saussure was a Swiss linguist and philosopher and is recognised as one of the pioneers in establishing the field of semiotics. Saussure's semiotic method is founded on the differentiation of the signifier and the signified. He posited that in language (as in visual communication), signs are composed of the interconnection between these two components. The signifier represents the tangible form of the sign, which could be a word, image, or sound, while the signified corresponds to the concept or meaning linked to the signifier. (Saussure, 1959)

I have employed different types of signifiers in my drawings, each representing the signified content to varying degrees. For instance, in 'Scroll on the Wall', the representative figures and colour patterns contribute to depicting a specific event and passive reading. While words have the power to connect signs and convey obvious meanings, the language

of drawing can adjust, structure then disconnect sign from meaning, and so open to our imagination other passive connections. Saussure mentioned the image is not like the tangible sound itself, but rather the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it leaves on our senses. In other words, the image is not a physical manifestation of sound, but rather a mental representation of it. Alongside examining the semiotics of Saussure and others, I will use evidence of visual semiotics in the work of R. B. Kitaj (1932-2007) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) to analyze the theory of visual semiotics that I am developing.

When it comes to conveying information, imagery possesses its own language, just like written and spoken language. When Saussure introduced the concept of “unit” in the system of words -- it refers to the primary level of a single letter or character in written language and the shortest pronunciation in spoken language, he opened up a new research possibility for the “unit” in visual language. Saussure specifically analyzed the phonetic words by deconstructing the succession of their pronunciation. His analysis focuses on the syllable of a word, which is the smallest unit of spoken language.

In visual semiotics, the sign is normally a clear “unit” in communication which represents something specific, for example, the word “apple” and an apple in an image; while the symbol is a “unit” that indicates a deeper meaning in context, the “apple” as a symbol might indicate desire or temptation in a religious background. The “unit” here is different from the one in the language system, and it is clearly not going to function in a syntax structure. In a corresponding experiment in my drawing, I designed the compositions with signs that are non-language-based, in comparison to the language-based drawing experiment I mentioned earlier. Concerning my practice, the image might have its own “unit” that constructs the visual language, I composed them in my planning of the drawing, and the units are planned in every aspect of the drawing, such as scale, composition, and brushwork, and in a deeper connection, the materials that I draw from, such as the photographs I took, images from the media and found images from publications and online platforms. The “units” of visual materials mentioned above are experimented with in my language-based drawing, which I manipulate, structure, layer, break apart and re-assemble into new assemblages.

In Saussure's interpretation of the tradition of signs, every mode of communication employed in society fundamentally relies on collective actions or, essentially, on dialogue. He compared "signs" with "rules" and pointed out their shared characteristic is that they are obliged to use under some specific social activities. This statement could be proved by looking at the representative figures in nature and different cultures, such as traffic lights, the red-light signal (signifier) indicates that vehicles should halt (signified). Social conventions ensure that people understand the colour's meaning even though it is not immediately apparent. In the way that Saussure identifies the auditory signifier, the sound form of a linguistic sign, which has a linear feature, it represents a span and is measurable in a single dimension. It unfolds sequentially in time and follows a specific order. Imagine pronouncing the word "dog", the sounds of "d", "o", and "g" occur one after the other, creating a linear sequence, each sound contributing to the overall meaning of the word. The auditory signifier is a temporal phenomenon that unfolds solely in time, and its span can be measured along a single dimension. When we listen or speak, the sounds unfold in a continuous stream, and it occurs in a duration. This linear nature of the auditory signifier is the basis of the concept of syntagmatic relation, which is a fundamental concept in Saussure's theory of language. The syntagmatic relation describes how linguistic components are arranged in a sentence or conversation in a particular order. Put otherwise, the relationship between sounds and words in a certain context. The concept of syntagmatic relation helps us understand how words and signs combine to create coherent communication.

I believe most people are familiar with the verbal signifiers (sounds and oral language) and recognize their expression, verbal expression is often more straightforward and direct compared to visual expression. Since verbal expression unfolds in a span of time in a linear sequence, it relies on the language rules to describe the content and they are explicit. Visual signifiers often require context, symbolism, and individual perception. To understand the visual content, it needs to engage with the viewers' senses, emotions, and cultural backgrounds. If it is a storytelling visual narrative, there are often involved multiple layers of interpretation, there might be a chance the complicity of reading and decoding the narratives costs more effort and time.

To extend the investigation, the visual signifiers are more complicated than the verbal ones, the difference is built on the mode of expression and interpretation. Visual signs are designed to convey meaning without the need for direct interaction with a person. For example, we understand the icons we use on smartphones without asking for clarification, we also read the road signs without asking anyone to explain them. The ambiguous and confusing signs are intriguing, we would try to investigate them and decipher their inbuilt contradictions. The visual narratives in building non-sensical signs require multiple layers of storytelling.

Visual materials equally rely on shared understanding within the present or dominant visual culture. Signs point to established meanings within an iconography, for example, they are symbols in Western Christian or Eastern Buddhist, such as the cross figure or lotus figure. Thus, the expression of the visual content is much more complicated than the verbal content. Saussure's semiotics approach was based on linguistic understanding, he considered the relationship between a signifier and its matching signified to be arbitrary. Moriarty (2002) described Saussure's theory as the fundamental element of visuals since it links to linguistic theory, they both use clues and cues to signify what they represent, and they are both organized by codes and units. Building on the understanding of Saussure's semiotics approach, Roland Barthes (1915-1980) developed his approach in denotation and connotation (the terms Barthes used in his research) in photographic images as a system of signs, and claimed that semiology analysis can be applied to modes other than language. According to Barthes, denotation is the literal, objective meaning of an image, while connotation is the subjective, cultural meaning that is associated with the image. Denotation refers to the basic surface-level and literal meaning of the image, while connotation refers to the deeper, symbolic meaning that is associated with the image. (Barthes, 1972)

On the denotation level in reading graphic content, the audience could understand the narrative on the linguistic layer. On the connotation level, there is not only subjectivity within one whole undisturbed image or photograph but becomes hyper-active when two or more images are combined, layered or collaborated. Connotations abound when visual references and mixed, and purity is replaced by plurality. To put it another way, graphic

content explores our feelings, memories, and inferences in addition to what we see. This is a dynamic environment where multiplicity and subjectivity are dominant, where connotations thrive.

The contemporary graphic artists who explore signs are mostly using collages to create montages and narratives. The narrative of collage hardly counts as language-based, but is closer to a combination of signs, which means the art form of collage is in a range of visual semiotics. Ulmer (1983) employs semiotics to investigate how methods like choreography, collage, analogy, and allegory can alter texts. Texts that construct language and carry messages can make connections, generate new meanings, convey multiple levels of meaning, and organize and visualize information. When discussing collages, Ulmer references Eddie Wolfram's observations in *History of Collage* (1975) to introduce the concept:

"these tangible and non-illusionistic objects presented a new and original source of the interplay between artistic expressions and the experience of the everyday world. An unpredicted and significant step in bringing art and life closer to being a simultaneous experience had been taken." (Wolfram, 1975, as cited in Ulmer)

This means by using collages, artists use collage to intentionally create new forms of narrative, narratives that utilize cuts, breaks and juxtaposition to create tensions, paradoxes and discontinuity. They use signs as the smallest unit in their practice. The combinations of signs create visual languages, just as sentences are constituted by words, or a word is constituted by syllables.

R.B Kitaj's painting *If Not, Not* (1975-1976), is an example of narrative discontinuity archived through collaging imagery from various sources to achieve poetic sense rather than an immediately understandable logic (Figure 16). The artwork depicts a convoluted and disorganised scenario that alludes to different historical and cultural occurrences, including the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, T. S. Eliot's passing, and Bob Dylan's musical output. The artwork demonstrates Kitaj's political and social commentary as well as his ability to draw comparisons and links between various realities and narratives using words and imagery. Different from the common meaning an element in an image symbolizes, the elements used in this artwork symbolized Kitaj's perspectives of meaning, and the

connotations implicated in this artwork form a context that could explain his intention. Kitaj leaves gaps and ellipses, his art creates a dialogue with the viewer by using a collaboration of connotations. His canvases are collages of time, the fragments tell stories under the narratives that invite the viewers to complete. He is playing with the ambiguity of signs, offering an opportunity for the viewers to create their interpretations. Instead of a rational straightforward narrative, Kitaj intends to build a map for the viewers to walk through and gain their experience of understanding his art.

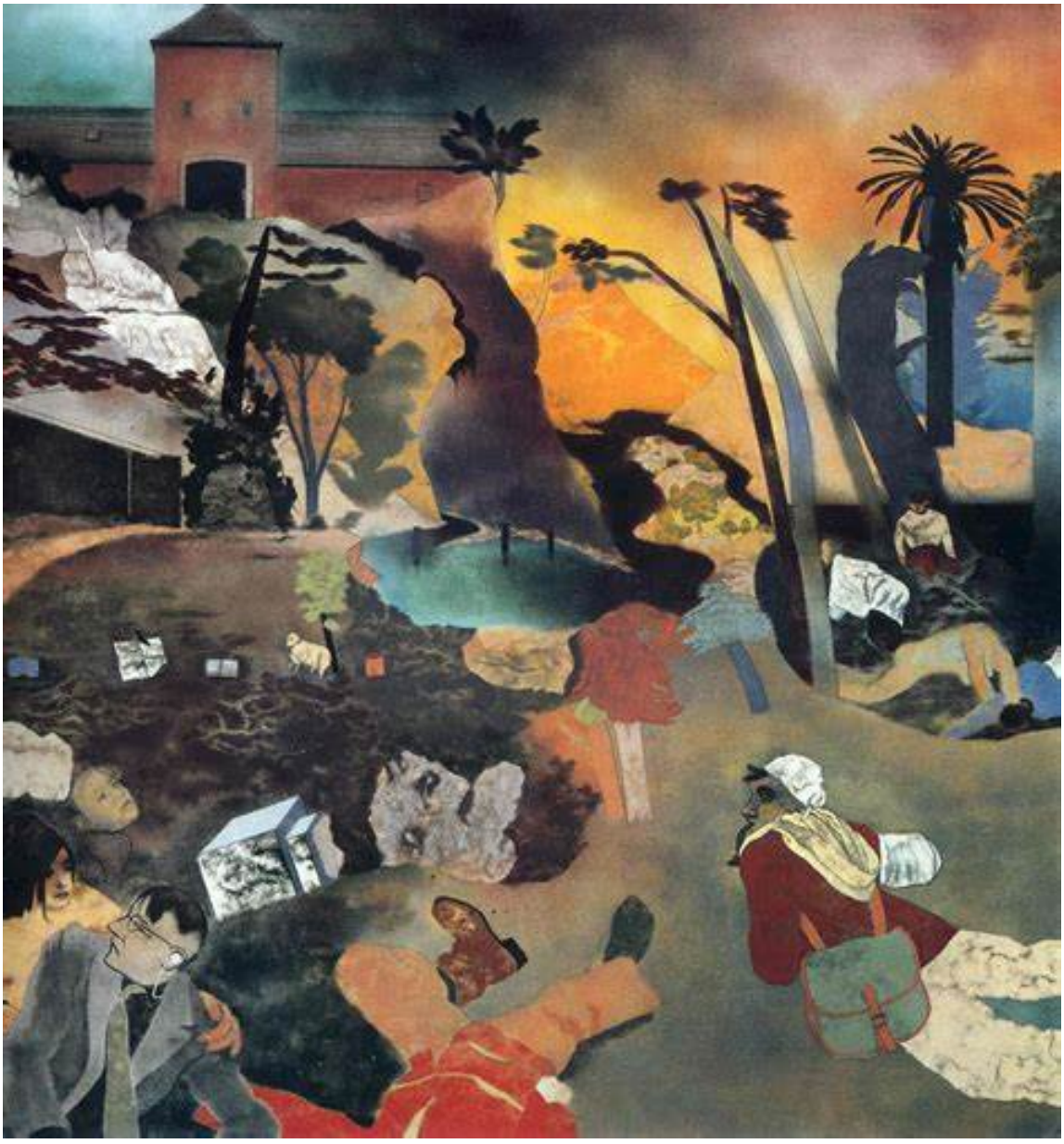


Figure 16. *If Not, Not*. R. B. Kitaj. (1975-1976)

Figure 17. *Signs*. Robert Rauschenberg. (1970)

And another example, from one of Rauschenberg's commissions, *Signs* (Figure 17) is a montage of iconic symbols of 1960s culture, such as the Vietnam War, the moon landing, the civil rights movement, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. In this screenprint, different-sized figures seem to float and overlap, as though they are the inhabitants of a warped dream world. Rauschenberg builds the combination to show the contraction and complexity of the decade, and how images and words can have different interpretations and effects. In both artworks, different realities are sewed together in artists' narratives, on the denotation level, the audience receives messages from the artwork by recognizing the representations of the events, however, on the connotation level, the way the artists put these messages together, create unique expressions of their own opinions.

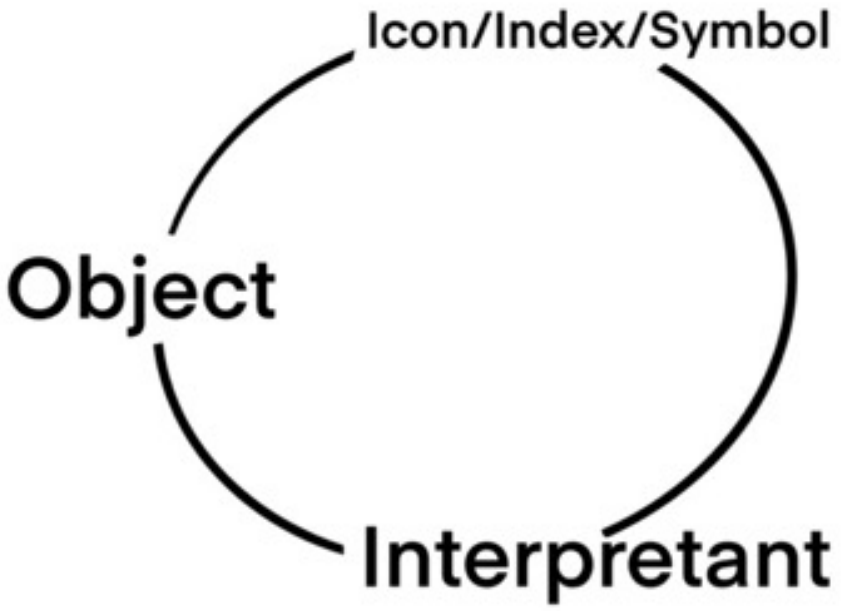


Figure 18. Peircean signs interpretation.

If we turn to the other sides of the sign studies, some researchers focus on finding the functions of different signs from the concept. In some studies, icons, indices, and symbols are included in the sign's categories.

In the 19th century, American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce developed comprehensive theories of signs to elucidate reference, meaning, communication, and cognition. Peirce's approach to semiotics from cognitive philosophy focuses on meaning interpretation. One of the pivotal and pioneering aspects of his theories was the categorization of signs into icons, indexes, and symbols. Peirce's perspective posits that every act of signification comprises three interconnected components: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. The three categories of signs connect to different interpretants, hence forming three types of relations between signs and objects (Figure 18). Icons have been widely acknowledged as simple patterns or forms that resemble the contour or the simplified outline of objects. Peirce identified icons as a direct depiction of representations, characters, and types, and they have explicit embodiments, unlike indices and symbols which need logical and scientific connections and cultural and social relations to complete the concepts that they refer to. The icon of a human being (Figure 19) is an excellent example of explaining the concept, as we can clearly see the resemblance between the icon and a simplified outline of a human being, the head and the torso and the arms and legs are indicated in the image, it represents the meaning of human being and it is used wherever suits the context of indicating the present of the human being. The symbols are the ones related to language and other types of communication the most, Peirce trusts symbols to be arbitrary, and their meanings are defined by the ever-changing social and cultural development. However, there have been many discussions about whether the symbols are arbitrary or not. I also designed an experiment in my drawings to test the relations between symbols and their meanings. In my drawing observations, there are different interpretations connecting the symbols and their implications, and most of them are open to different interpretations depending on the context, cultural background, and heritage. Symbols tend to accumulate their meanings gradually with the passing of time, similar to any language, they develop themselves with the culture and social background. In the following example the Nazi Germany symbol (Figure 20)and the Buddhism symbol "卐" (Figure 21), the similar shape of these two symbols were given two ideas. Since the historical and social origin decided the meanings

behind the swastika symbol, the one on Nazi Germany's flag represents the Nazi party's identity and left a negative image in public value, however in Buddhist belief, the swastika signifies auspiciousness and good fortune. In the early centuries of Christianity, the ichthys emblem served as a means for early Christians to recognize one another in times of persecution. It has a rich historical background. Nowadays, it's usually used as a symbol to declare one's Christian affiliation on apparel and accessories. The examples above make a point of the fluid interpretations of symbols, and the extending research direction especially directs to the free circulation of signs in modern and contemporary media. Between finding the structure of constituting signs and identifying the types of signs, the difference between Saussure and Peirce's semiotics approaches happened to reflect a key issue of visual semiotics: whether drawing belongs to a linguistic system. Numerous scholars have endeavoured to discern a language-like structure within visual artworks. Barthes (1977) notably employed the concept of "the paradox of a message without a code" when addressing the photographic message. Peirce explained the process of finding meaning is a continuous and ongoing process that involves the use of all available signification techniques. To extend and connect Peirce and Barthes, interpreting a sign could trigger a chain reaction of inference, link meanings and create unlimited types of visual expressions by using signs with non-language modes of combing signs. In my research project, I have developed both critical approaches: creating language structure and constructing meaning in my drawings, through developing signs, symbols and metaphors to construct expression within visual compositions. In my drawing experiments, the visual storytelling structures are both language-based and non-language-based, since non-language-based structures do not rely on linguistic system support, only pieces of visual metaphor and symbols that combine to construct an assemblage. Under this categorized theory, the signs in my drawing experiments show links that connect linguistic theory and the practice of drawing and experience of interpretation.

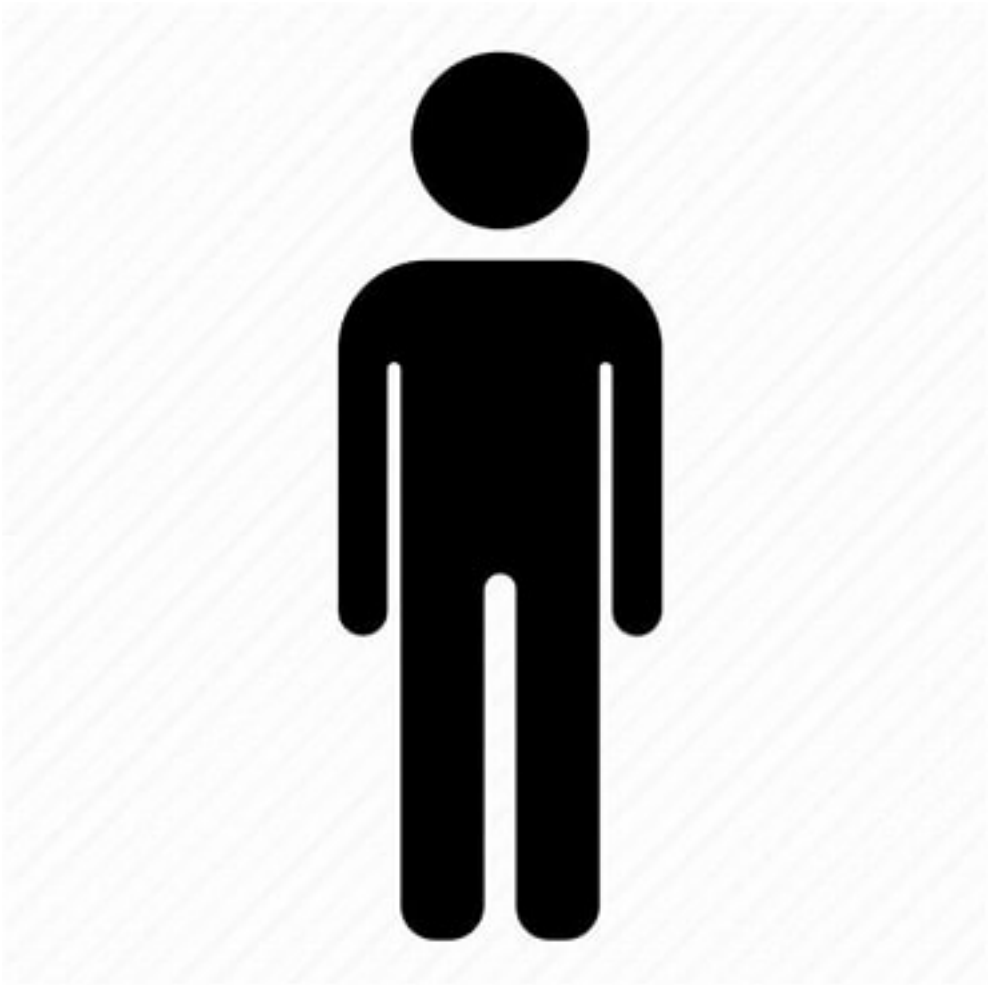


Figure 19. Icon of human being

Figure 20. Buddhism swastika.

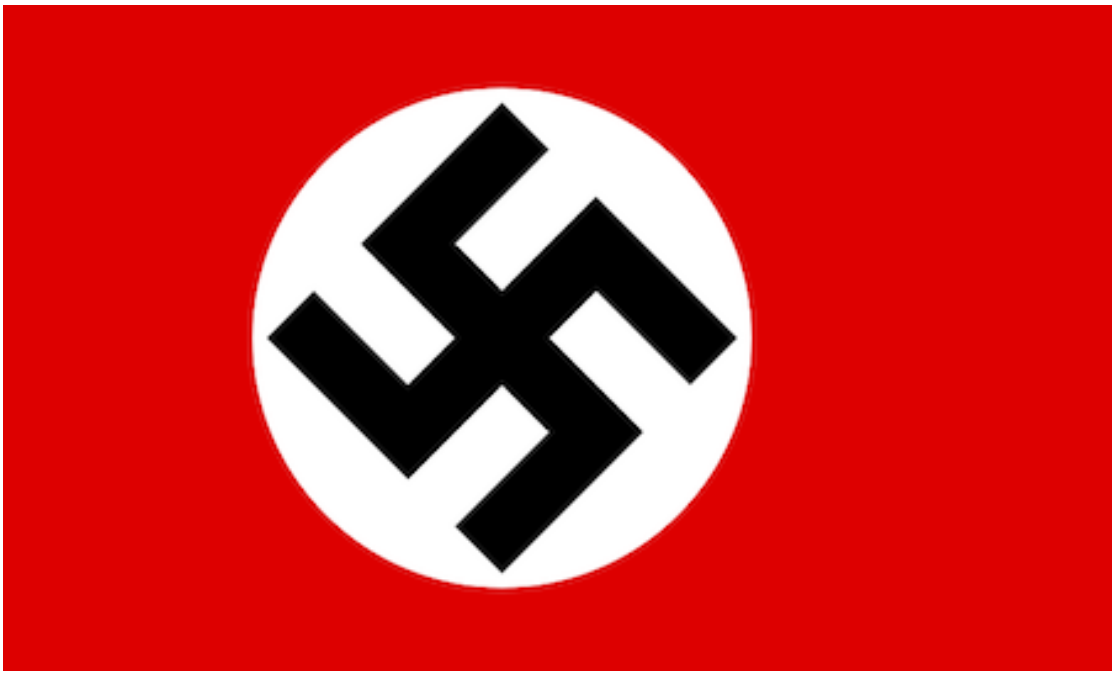


Figure 21. Nazi Germany flag.

The visual metaphor I discussed relates to conceptual metaphor theory. Apart from concrete forms that indicate specific objects, various types of lines in drawings and the use of colours target emotional arousal. For example, drawing an actual "apple" conveys clear information about the fruit and provides an image that stimulates the meaning when using an apple as a symbol in context. However, using red or other warm colour patterns in a drawing represents a joyful or passionate emotional atmosphere, as warm colours symbolize items or events associated with warmth or fiery feelings. In *If Not, Not*, Kitaj uses the overlapping warmth and cold colours to imply the fierce and grief feelings to enhance the visual effect and act as a metaphorical device in visual semiotics. When we mention warm colours, we often instinctively think of sunlight, sand, and tropical fruits. The signified and signifier in Saussure's theory only structure part of the symbolic system, the deeper interpretation has not been represented in the theory, but as the feature of their connection, the interpretation will always be developing new boundings. There is a certain system of symbolism that constitutes a universal language, the images in this system carry similar meanings across different cultures. Xu Bing experimented with this system in his book *Book from the Ground*, following this attempt, he used the signs he collected to create a communication system. This experimental creation tests the compatibility of the sign system and language system and tries to form a language that breaks the barrier in different spoken and written languages. This language is completely built by graphic signs and symbols, which are the signifiers in Saussure's theory. I am guessing the signs Xu Bing used could be mostly icons, with fewer indices and symbols, which ingeniously avoids the situation that the meaning could be arbitrary. Since using icons to construct specific content, lands other arbitrary meanings in an obvious context, the visual language of the book could be consistent and reduce misunderstandings of the signs. In Peirce's three type of signs, he considered symbols could be arbitrary, however, if the symbols are used in a certain content with the same range of cultural and social background with other types of signs, they could be recognized as their appearance and function as the icons or indices. Messaris (1997) considers that symbols are not arbitrary, and they have more connections with their indication than the part that relates to language and other types of communication. Messaris believes visual content does not have propositional syntax --

word order and grammar rules, so their proposition needs symbols to construct. My understanding is that visual content has its way of organizing the implications and inferences in symbols. In other words, visual content could construct their meanings in "sentence" like language. Since visual language is a way of communication and not only acts as a linguistic-based structure. Symbols thus could be used to build a language or a non-language visual content. In Moriarty (2002)'s *The Symbiotics of Semiotics and Visual Communication,* she listed the four definitions of signs based on different notions of how the process of signification works, which are:

Arbitrary signification: works by convention

Mimetic signification: works by iconic representation

Evidential signification: works by cues and clues

Signaling: works by recognition (hard-wired or convention)

The mimetic and evidential significations are basically pointed to icon and index concepts from Peirce's theory. The arbitrary signification and signalling separate the concept of symbol and represent the two parts where the symbol works by convention and recognition.

Concrete poetry is an experimental art form that pushes the boundaries of expression in both written and visual language. It weaves together the two types of visual semiotics in a unique combination of linguistic and graphic art. The body of a concrete poem has a basic language structure, with sentences arranged according to the rules of poetry. However, it also has graphic implications that suggest shapes and images, which are used to convey meaning. The words are arranged in such a way as to form shapes that indicate a certain meaning, making them function as signs that convey a message to the audience.

"Reader-Viewer" as Audience

When trying to identify the audience that appreciates a drawing, it is important to consider whether the drawing is a language or a non-language communication system. If the drawing has a language system, the audience could be called readers since they are reading the constructed language. On the other hand, if the drawing has a non-language

communication system, the audience should be called viewers since they are receiving the content by decoding the organized signs in the drawing. This distinction is essential because it affects how the audience interacts with the drawing and how they derive meaning from it. Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotics analysis addresses three main questions about analysing the image's meaning potentials, their representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. In the representational meaning, they identified narrative structures and conceptual structures both in reading an image, that put language-based narrative and non-language-based narrative structures existence in the same image. According to their analysis, an image could have the audience read and view the content at the same time, since the audience is decoding what the creator encoded, both in language narrative and non-language narrative. I am willing to call the audience "reader-viewer" since they are both when seeing visual content.

Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte (1898-1967) investigated in his works the relationship between art and semiotics and signs. He created paradoxes and contradictions that went against the accepted views of reality through the use of words and images. He questioned the Western metaphysical oppositions and presumptions about things like visibility and invisibility, speech and writing, representation and reality, and presence and absence. Additionally, he experimented with many meaning approaches, including collage, choreography, analogy, and allegory. He demonstrated how symbols are distinct from the objects they stand for and how meaning is more complicated and erratic than clear-cut. He urged the audience to view his paintings as dynamic and open rather than as finished pieces or simple images.

Magritte examined various boundaries, including those between art and literature. His work on art and reality, language and object, and signifier and signified remains relevant to anyone interested in the relationship between art and literature, as well as "The Use of Words" in general. His artworks explored linguistic rhetoric in visual content through the surrealistic genre, which brings more dimensions of evidence to prove his ideas. Concerning metaphor and semiotics theory that I discussed before, Magritte's artworks make perfect examples of visual language and sign systems. In his famous artwork, *This is Not a Pipe* (Figure 22), there is the signifier of a realistic image of a pipe and the signified

of the object that the image represents. The artwork is a sign that has the signifier of a sentence in French and the signified of a negation of the image. Magritte is playing with the definition of the signifier and the signified, and the relation between the image and the reality. He means to show the painting of a pipe is not the pipe itself, but a representation of a pipe, and the representation is not equal to reality. In a further explanation, the words are not the reality, but a way of describing or interpreting the reality. The interpretation process of this artwork requires both the reading action of the words in it and the viewing action of the image of the pipe, it is an explicit example of how these two actions combined, and the audience hence should be called “reader-viewer”.

Figure 22. *This is Not a Pipe*. René Magritte (1929)

Building on the visual semiotic and narrative theories previously discussed, this section connects those early findings to the practical strategies that later shaped my drawing experiment *Lancaster Landscape*. By revisiting the foundational concepts of visual language, semiotics, and narrative structure, I begin to explore how these theories support the integration of text and image within visual narrative. In particular, the abstract graphic

nature of words, the structural composition of Chinese characters, and the function of visual metaphor serve as theoretical pillars in guiding this development. These insights not only informed the direction of my visual storytelling approach but also supported the generation of new knowledge through experimental, drawing-based narrative research.

My research into the graphic structure of Chinese characters traced the historical and cultural evolution of textual expression and revealed how ideographic writing systems can function as both linguistic and pictorial forms. By comparing these structures with phonetic systems, I examined how meaning, form, and visuality converge in narrative expression. These observations laid the groundwork for understanding drawing itself as a narrative medium, capable of conveying complex emotional and conceptual content through sequential or spatial arrangements. Drawing, in this view, becomes a kind of graphic language, which is capable of translating personal, cultural, and environmental experience into symbolic visual form.

To illustrate how these ideas informed my practice, I designed the scroll drawing *Lancaster Landscape* (see Appendix 4), which applies the visual principles of Chinese characters to a spatial narrative composition. The story begins with a series of natural elements—rain, mountain, water, people, stone—which are not only emblematic of the local environment (Lancaster city and campus) but also serve as semantic and visual anchors in the narrative. The transitions between each visual episode are constructed through the metaphorical and structural logic of the Chinese characters themselves. For instance, the composition flows between character forms and environmental imagery, merging text with visual metaphor to build scenes that range from close-up observations of animals and plants to panoramic depictions of coastlines and pathways.

In the following chapter, I will introduce the design process behind my first drawing experiment and the research question it seeks to address. The theoretical insights discussed here inform the fundamental visual structure of the experiment, guiding it toward art styles that incorporate storytelling elements. This experiment is designed to investigate the visual components that contribute to narrative creation in illustrations and sequential drawings, further bridging theory with practice in visual storytelling.

Chapter 2 Drawing Observation

In this chapter, I focus on different drawing languages and their narratives. I began my research by studying various art styles and narratives. Some artists draw based on scripts, while others use drawing to tell stories. In this section of the artist review, I found examples from illustrations, documentary drawings, and graphic novels.

Illustration often begins with a written script, which provides the narrative foundation for the artwork. Artists heavily rely on the script's description, resulting in very descriptive drawings. To illustrate this, I've chosen some illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley and John Minton, showcasing how their narratives depict sophisticated content based on text.

Reportage drawing serves as the visual equivalent of a diary or journal. It constructs stories from direct observation, presenting itself as a 'first thought,' even though it likely reflects the accumulation of several moments. Ronald Searle and Jill Gibbon's war drawings perfectly demonstrate how artists use drawing to create visual narratives by documenting scenes they witness.

The graphic novel narrative provides an experimental approach. The graphic novel *Unflattening*, for instance, experiments with various graphic narratives. Its page layout and visual content format draw from traditional comics and graphic novel storytelling but incorporate innovative ideas. Nick Sousanis explores page layouts and creates new narratives through experiments with compositions on each page, contributing valuable material to comics' narrative research.

After reviewing these three narrative types, I reflected on my visual diary experiments and gained new insights. First, I realised drawing conveys emotional and social narratives in layers, especially with the absence of text, by carefully manipulating composition, rhythm, and symbolic form. Second, I discovered that real-life observation combined with metaphorical drawings can create a narrative pattern that is both deeply personal and widely relatable, as seen in my pandemic topic illustrations. Third, through experimenting with sequential drawings, I identified more designs for presenting visual information that have the potential to affect readers' navigations, and how layout, rhythm, and transitions

contribute to the pacing, mood, and interpretation. I then analyzed the graphic novel *Hostage* (2017) as an example of a sequential drawing narrative. *Hostage* is a true story of Christophe André, a Médecins Sans Frontières administrator who was kidnapped in Chechnya in 1997 and held captive for over three months. The visual expression in this book is highly relevant to my visual diary drawings, my analysis focused on elements like the sense of time, rhythm, emphasis, sound, and visualization of feelings as main characters, analyzing their expression and use of symbols, exploring how they powerfully express time, uncertainty, and inner experience.

Finally, I extended the topic by integrating my visual diary experiment into the context and introducing visual narratives for communication purposes. The analysis and discussion of visual rhetoric lay the groundwork for the next chapter on visual metaphor.

2.1 Artist Review

For this PhD, my academic research in visual narrative construction is accompanied by a supporting studio practice in drawing. My drawings aim to utilise techniques and approaches appropriate to making graphic narratives, these include single lines for clarity of description, dynamic composition to engage the viewer and a synchronous appearance of people and events. The visual language of Covid-19 Diary, the first sequence of my studio works, is descriptive and takes its influence from a range of fine artists, illustrators, and visual journalists, including Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), John Minton (1917-1957), Ronald Searle (1920-2011), Jill Gibbon (n.d.), Nick Sousanis (n.d.), Sergio Toppi (1932-2012). They have inspired me through their unique art style, and the visual language in their artwork provided me with creative clues in my studio practice.

Aubrey Beardsley

Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) is a master in drawing the richly indicative outline. His art style is distinctive and easily recognizable due to the combination of elegance, grotesque

elements, and often erotic themes. His illustrations are marked by the sense of movement and fluidity that is formed by the flowing and curvy lines. Although Beardsley's drawings never include shadow, or a sense of the three-dimensional form of an object through volume or mass, he does create space through the use of scale and recession.

The two essential drawing features that I take from Beardsley are the combination of black and white and the use of lines to create a clear depiction, a graphic means to describe objects and features with certainty. Beardsley's picture is composed with careful attention to proportion and balance, creating a visually harmonious design. In his illustration, the pure black and white are direct, uncomplicated, and essential to the communication of the narrative, their shapes and forms are immediately recognizable and "pure". They are unencumbered by colour and tone, the visual language of mono-colour speaks loud and clear.

Unexpectedly Beardsley is influenced by two very different traditions, the spatial organization in Ukiyo-e prints and the mix of line and flat space of Japanese woodblocks and complexity in Rococo ornament. By the nineties, *Japonisme* (The term "Japonisme" originates from French and describes the attraction and impact of Japanese art and design on Western European artists during the 1800s, especially after Japan resumed its overseas trade in 1858.) was a taste that had been growing for a considerable period. Beardsley adapted to this trend and kept his style at the same time, he had no overwhelmingly compelling desire to copy the oriental art style and the Japanese prints, instead, he simply extracted the essence that would spark his imagination, inform his technique and enrich his vision (Calloway, 2020).

For example, The Peacock Skirt (1893) is one of Beardsley's illustrations that has the representative feature (Figure 23), it is commissioned for the first English edition of Salome (Oscar Wilde, 1893). The refined curving lines and the small pattern detail make a good balance of the drawing. The overall visual impact of this illustration appears to be given by the headdress and the peacock feather pattern on the dress. Fine lines slice through contrasting black and white areas and are arranged in a highly stylised composition that defines the main shapes and enhances the ornamental qualities. The peacock feather symbolizes beauty, pride, and exoticism, Beardsley chose to incorporate them to add the

implicity and depth to the composition. In modern art studies and research of illustration and the art style of storytelling drawing, there are visual symbols worth discussing in Beardsley's drawing. As we can see in the drawing, the line works he used on the expression of human bodies imply gender, femininity, and masculinity topics. The sensuality is also wildly discussed in his drawing content. In this drawing, it could be sensed clearly that Beardsley was influenced by James McNeill Whistler's decorations in the Peacock Room (1877), which drew inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints. Beardsley's interpretation of Whistler's "The Princess from the Land of Porcelain" adds another layer of intertextuality.

Figure 23. The Peacock Skirt, Aubrey Beardsley, 1893.

Beardsley's illustration is rich in symbolism, he often used images and motifs that reference literature, mythology and history. The references give the drawing a deep meaning, hence his illustrations express unique narratives under his design.

I drew inspiration from Beardsley's use of linearity and contrast, interpreting them as figurative expressions that convey sophisticated emotions and layered meanings. Applying this insight to my own drawing practice, I experimented with black-and-white elements by using negative (empty) and positive (filled) spaces. Beyond the stark colour palette, Beardsley's fluid lines often created a rhythmic composition on the page. In my work titled 'Panic Shopping' (Figure 24), I harnessed swirling, undulating lines to evoke feelings of anxiety and fear within the narrative. Simultaneously, I strategically employed black-and-white spaces to outline the shapes of toilet paper rolls. These winding, path-like forms stack up, creating tension in the drawing. The story depicted in this drawing captures the frenzy of panic shopping for toilet paper rolls during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than illustrating the literal scene of people in a supermarket, I deliberately composed an image featuring an individual encircled by stacks of toilet paper rolls. These rolls sprawl across the entire page, their movement conveying a sense of chaos, disorder, and stress. Yet, amidst this turmoil, there exists a rhythmic harmony—a balance between chaos and motion.

In my other drawing, 'Indoor Activities 3' (Figure 25), a similar expression of rhythm and motion emerges. This piece portrays the lives of a group of international students living together in a household. Purposefully employing an overlapped structure, I convey the intricate interactions between these students—the way their paths intersect, and their experiences leave traces on one another. The repetitive line work within the composition fills the gaps, visually representing the concept of 'influence.' These lines create a rhythmic flow, emphasizing the interconnectedness of their lives.

Figure 24. Panic Shopping, Covid-19 Diary, Yawen Zheng, 2019-2021

Figure 25. Indoor Activities 3, Covid-19 Diary, Yawen Zheng, 2019-2021

John Minton

John Minton (1917–1957), known for his varied style and subjects, is particularly compelling to my project for his ability to evoke melancholic emotions, mood, and atmosphere. He achieves this not only through characterization but also by skillfully weaving patterns and texture into his works. He excelled at capturing the expressions and gestures of characters in his artwork. By conveying melancholy through the characters' eyes, he evoked a sense of emotional weight that could resonate with the audience. In his artwork, both nature scenes and urban settings evoke powerful emotions. The thick lines and deep, dark colours are remarkably impactful. Through skillful line work, he achieves varying shades in his depictions of water, mountains, and clouds. This deliberate control of line density creates a unique rhythm within his drawings.

On the interaction between text and image, Neal (2018) discusses the concept of autonomy in relation to John Minton's illustration *Time Was Away* (1948), suggesting it exemplifies a spectrum of text–image relationships ranging from autonomous to supportive (Figure 26). The term autonomous refers to illustrations that are capable of standing independently, without depending on the accompanying text for meaning. In *Time Was Away*, Neal cautions against over-interpreting the apparent semantic disjunctions—moments where the meaning between text and image seems disconnected—as doing so risks overlooking the book's broader objective. Rather than functioning as straightforward visual supplements, Minton's images work alongside the text to construct a more layered and immersive representation of place and atmosphere. This collaborative approach enriches the reader's experience by presenting parallel yet complementary perspectives from the writer and illustrator. Ultimately, Neal argues that the interaction between text and image in this work resists simplistic categorisation, illustrating a more nuanced and interdependent relationship than what the binary terms "autonomous" or "supportive" alone can capture.

Figures 27 and 28—John Minton's front and back paper designs for Points of Contact (1946)—further exemplify his capacity to create immersive narrative environments through illustration. These decorative papers are not direct illustrations of specific textual passages, but they establish the tone and emotional landscape of the book, setting a visual mood that

frames the reader's engagement. Their abstracted architectural forms, intricate line work, and evocative spatial layering directly inform my research question on how drawing functions as a narrative device in the absence of linear storytelling. These images also support my inquiry into how artists use composition and visual language to generate atmosphere, a method I have explored in my own scroll drawing experiments. The designs' ability to stand independently while enhancing the textual content aligns with my study of the text-image relationship and the potential for autonomous visual narratives.

Minton's illustrations are characterized by a suggestive design that communicates emotions more potently than it portrays literal content. The juxtaposition of large and small forms creates a sense of distance, serving to accentuate the melancholic scenes. These emphases beckon the viewers to delve into the image, inviting them to interpret the symbolic language woven into Minton's designs. This approach to illustration, while not directly mirroring the text, enriches the narrative by adding layers of emotional depth and complexity. As evident in the attached artwork, Minton has skilfully manipulated forms of varying sizes to construct perspectives of natural scenes and objects within his compositional designs. In one drawing from my 'COVID-19 Diary' series, I experimented with the depiction of everyday life through the design of forms and highly abstractive drawing. The primary scenes were inspired by life during the lockdown period (Figure 29). Consequently, the emphasis was on creating a quiet and peaceful atmosphere to reflect the reality of that time. The design of the forms within the scene entices viewers to decipher the hidden symbols in this drawing. The emotional expressions guide them towards experiencing the sense of emptiness and stillness present in the scene.

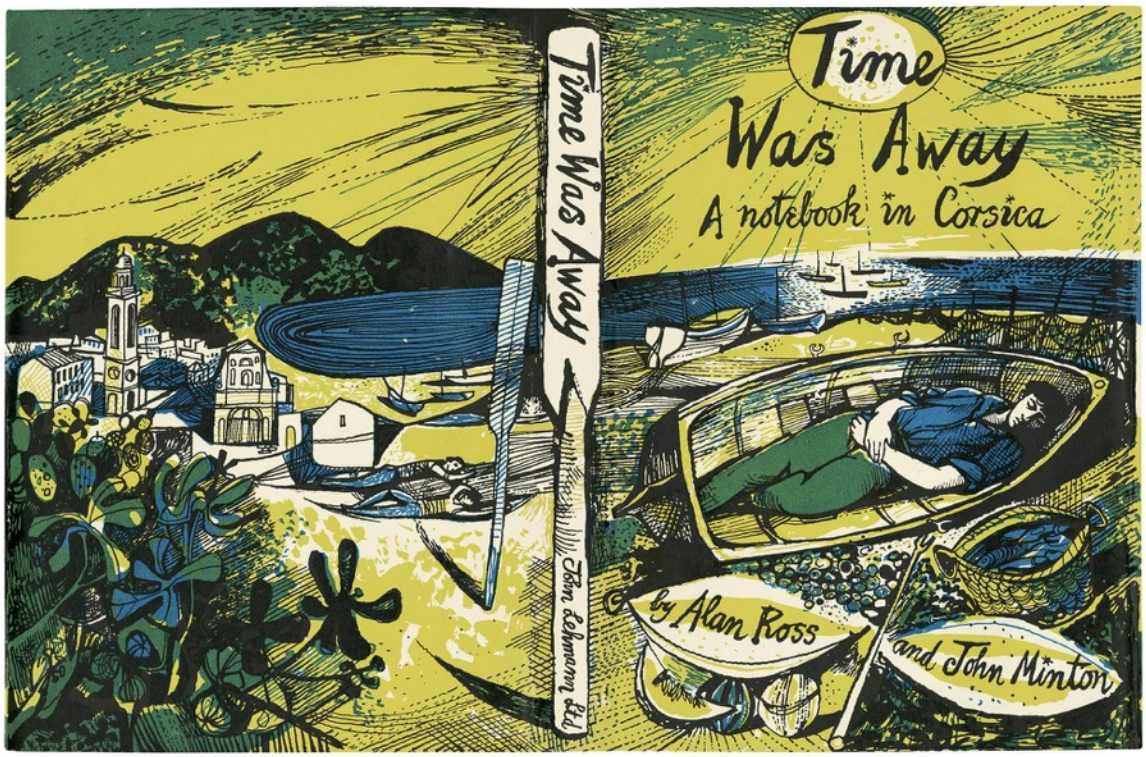


Figure 26. Time Was Away, Alan Ross, John Lehmann. John Minton, 1948

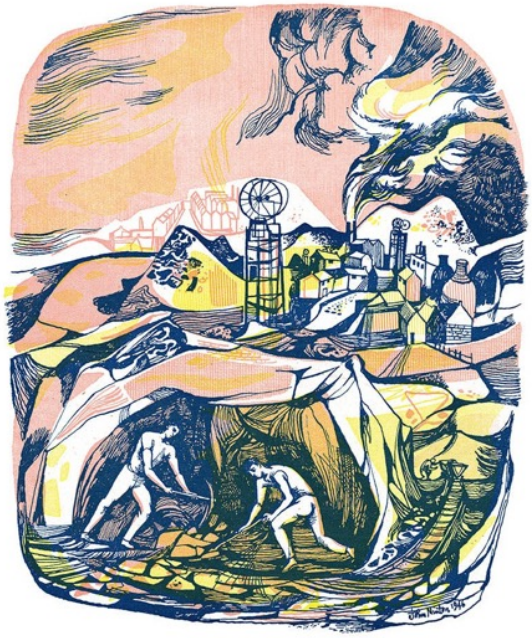


Figure 27. Front Paper for Points of Contact, John Minton, 1946

Figure 28. Back Paper for Points of Contact, John Minton, 1946

Figure 29. Life Under the Lockdown, Covid-19 Diary, Yawen Zheng, 2019-2021

Ronald Searle

Ronald Searle (1920-2011) is no doubt the greatest British cartoonist of the 20th century (Rowson, 2012). Searle was a prisoner of war of the Japanese from February 1942 to August 1945, he was able to chronicle his years of suffering as a prisoner in Singapore and on the Burma-Siam Railway through drawings because of his bravery and tenacity. He refers to the drawings in this book as "the graffiti of a condemned man, intending to leave a rough witness of his passing through, but who found himself - to his surprise and delight - among the reprieved." (Searle, 2006) Searle's illustrations serve as a remarkable example of a visual diary, with the scenes he selected being highly representative of the times. Despite the constraints imposed by challenging circumstances, Searle demonstrated an exceptional ability to manipulate lines, ingeniously utilizing any tools at his disposal to create his art.

Figure 30. Left: 'Man Sick with Tropical Ulcers and Fever, Three Days before Death' (26 July 1943). Right: 'Cholera Lines – Thai-Burma Railway' (1943). Ronald Searle.

These two drawings by Ronald Searle—Man Sick with Tropical Ulcers and Fever, Three Days before Death (26 July 1943) and Cholera Lines – Thai-Burma Railway (1943)—are selected for their acute relevance to my research question on how drawing can serve as a

narrative tool under extreme constraints and emotional intensity. These images exemplify how visual language operates when textual narration is absent or impossible. Searle's work, created during his internment as a prisoner of war, stands as a powerful testament to drawing as witness, memory, and survival. His minimalist use of line, combined with stark compositional framing, conveys the brutal reality of disease and suffering with visceral clarity. These drawings function not only as records but also as emotionally charged narratives, composed under duress and using minimal materials. They support my investigation into how drawing can both document lived experience and construct narrative when conventional storytelling mechanisms are unavailable. By selecting these works over more formally illustrative ones, I aim to foreground drawing's capacity to embody urgency, temporality, and affect, which are the key concerns throughout this thesis.

War and plague are both catastrophes that profoundly affect humanity. When artists choose to document these disasters, one of the challenges they face is infusing their artwork with the emotions they experienced at the time. This is an aspect I intend to concentrate on in my visual diary. According to the backstory of this set of drawings, the artist was compelled to live under extreme conditions, which gave him a purpose: to record the scenes he witnessed. These drawings offer invaluable insights into the Second World War, presenting a stark record of the war's cruelty, depravity, and savagery. Contrasting with the intense conflict of war, the lockdown life of an international student during this pandemic is quiet and monotonous. The difficulties and hardships faced are not life-threatening but are significant in their own way. When I depicted scenes from lockdown life, I chose scenarios that are unlikely to occur under normal circumstances. Beyond merely presenting my personal experiences, I also sought to intertwine my emotions regarding this event and the continuous changes in life into a cohesive narrative.

Jill Gibbon

Jill Gibbon's art (2018) - *The Etiquette of the Arms Trade* - is a powerful blend of observation and social commentary (Figure 31, 32). As a British artist, she is best known

for her undercover sketches of individuals involved in the arms trade. Her work is characterised by a unique approach that combines elements of caricature and observational drawing.

The creation process of Gibbon's artworks was notably intense, as she willingly placed herself in the perilous context of the arms trade. Much like Searle, her creations emerged from a sensitive environment. Observing and sketching in such pressing circumstances can unveil the artist's immediate perspective. It's crucial to convey the unique viewpoints of artists through their observational work. Her art is about what is unseen and could not be discovered by the majority, hence the way she depicts the picture through her composition and narrative, that the line work and the layers are designed with stories behind the combination. Gibbon ingeniously adapted her persona, appearance, and credentials to gain entry into an arms fair, and she modified her drawing style to capture the likenesses of arms dealers effectively.

In essence, she assumed a role to secure access to the arms fairs and refined her drawing technique to sketch swiftly without detection. She operated undercover, embodying the role of an investigative journalist armed with a sketchbook. Her work represents a form of political narrative art, offering a potent commentary on the arms trade.

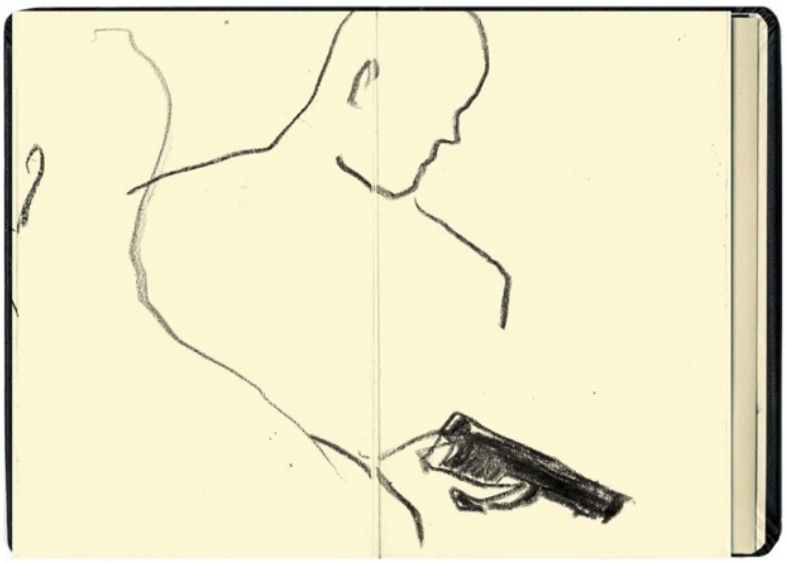


Figure 31. Undercover Drawings, *The Etiquette of the Arms Trade,* Jill Gibbon, 2008-2018

Figure 32. Undercover Drawings, *The Etiquette of the Arms Trade*, Jill Gibbon, 2008-2018

Gibbon's work is particularly relevant to my research in its demonstration of how drawing can operate simultaneously as narrative, evidence, and embodied performance. Her sketchbooks do not merely record events; they implicate the viewer in a layered act of witnessing. The speed, compression, and spontaneity of her mark-making become narrative devices, conveying tension, subterfuge, and ethical discomfort. Her drawings question what it means to observe and represent truthfully within a system designed to obscure. By drawing from within the spaces she critiques, Gibbon subverts traditional documentary modes and suggests how visual storytelling can unfold through partial glimpses, fragmented gestures, and embodied risk. Her work affirms that drawing can be both a critical method and a political act, which strongly informs the conceptual grounding of my own narrative experiments.

Nick Sousanis

Nick Sousanis' exploration of visual thinking in his research has greatly influenced my approach to my visual diary. His book, '*Unflattening*' (2015), uniquely visualizes his imagination through his drawings. He employs the repetition of human figures to symbolize social phenomena and uses the common education system as a metaphor to express his views on how people perceive and understand the world. This groundbreaking work challenges the dominance of words over images, asserting that both are equally vital in creating meaning. '*Unflattening*' is a rebellion against a fixed viewpoint, skillfully interweaving diverse perspectives drawn from science, philosophy, art, literature, and mythology. By using the medium of comic strips, Sousanis ingeniously crafts experimental narratives that serve as catalysts, stimulating contemplation about the interplay between the words we read and the images we perceive. In his experimental comic strips, he articulates his concepts through a distinctive fusion of textual and visual elements.

The comic art style that I frequently encounter encompasses elements such as panels, speech bubbles, sound effects, gutters, and captions. McCloud (2006) delineated five fundamental elements integral to the creation of comics: moment, frame, image, word, and

flow. He posited these elements as the arenas where the choices of comic artists can pivot the narrative from clear, compelling storytelling to a disarrayed mess. The process commences with the '**moment**' element, where artists must discern which moments to encapsulate within the comic's narrative and which to omit. Choosing what to show and what to leave out introduces temporal dynamics into the static image. To depict a moment, the artist is sculpting a visual narrative instead of measuring the narrative linearly. Subsequently, they must select the appropriate distance and angle to view these moments and determine their placement within **frames**. The frames control what is seen and how it is seen, implying perspectives, outlining the scale of the content, and thematic emphasis. It might be a key element that relates to the reader's attention, reading pacing, and interpretative nuance. The choice of frames influences the action that happens in the single image, showing the distance perspective, angle, and detail of the content. The frames are then populated with **images** that vividly render characters, objects, and environments. These visual aspects need symbolic references, metaphorical forms, and artistic visual techniques to communicate visual language. They fulfil the content with well-structured visual information. The next step involves choosing **words** that not only supplement valuable information but also harmonize with the surrounding images. They may appear as dialogue, narration, and onomatopoeia, they not only carry information for the readers to read, but they also create rhythmic devices to control the narrative and reading sequence. The interaction between text and image influences the visual meaning, and anchors or expands the message delivered by images. Finally, artists guide readers through and between panels on a page or screen, ensuring a seamless narrative **flow**. The choice of flow directs the eye through the reader's expectations and content, using moment, frame, image, and word in tandem. In comparison of these common use comic creation techniques, I explore techniques both within the page space and without the limitation of the page.

In addition to standalone illustrations in *Unflattening*, many of the full-page comic strips employ S-shaped and diffused-shaped compositions (Figure 33). In the S-shaped comic strips, the story unfolds through a connected sequential narrative. From beginning to end, the drawings are interrelated. Some evolve gradually, incorporating imaginative scenes, while others present variations associated with the scene. The S-shaped narrative style is an

effective method for guiding the audience's thought process, immersing them in the artist's work.

I intend to select the diffused-shaped narrative as one of the examples from Sousanis' experimental narratives for a deeper examination. A diffused-shaped narrative structure diverges from the linear narrative commonly found in comic art styles, as it interconnects clues in a non-linear fashion. For instance, on page 144, a montage displays several moments of the narrative. The primary spiral shape in the background serves as a guide for the reading direction.

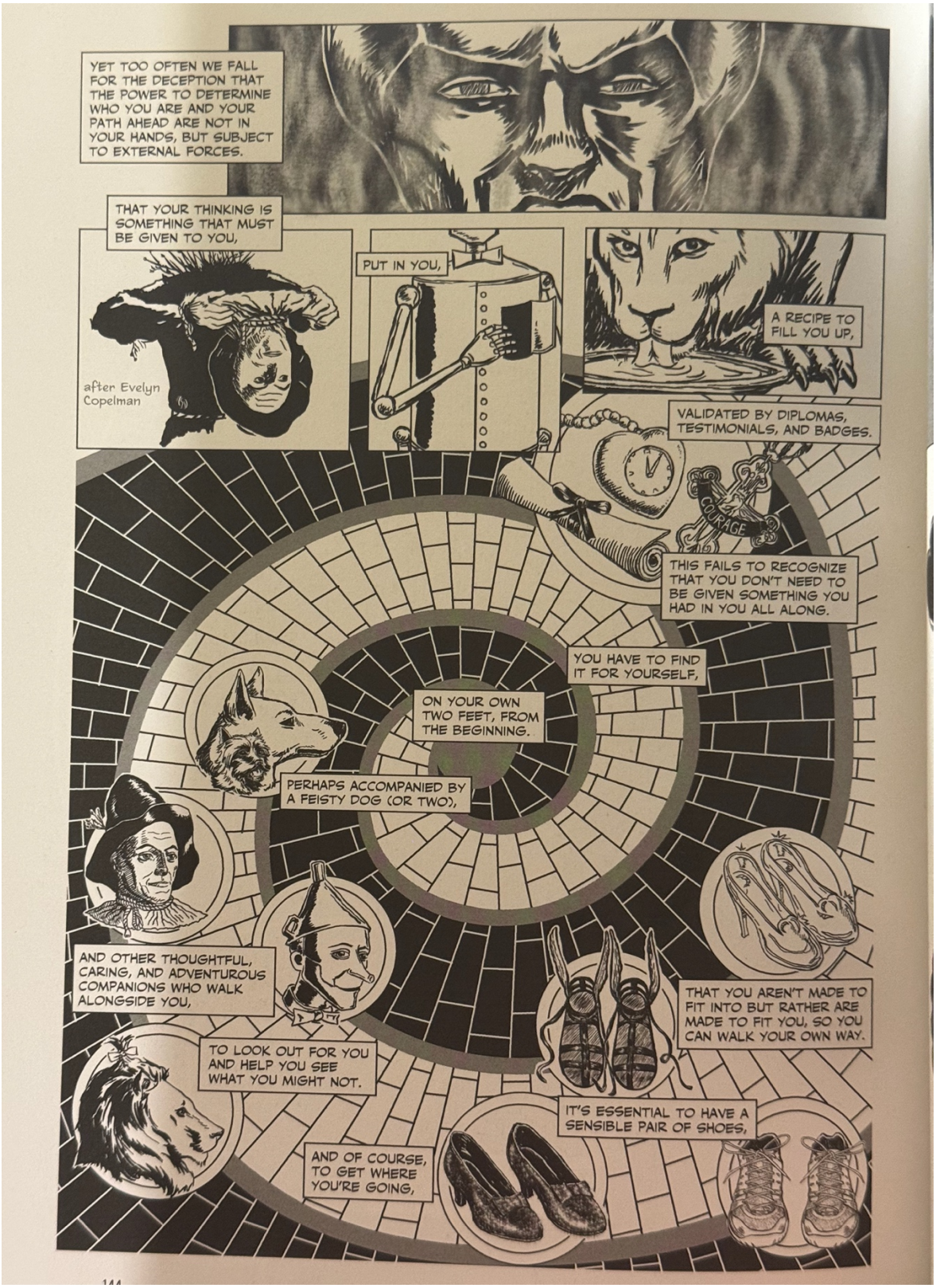


Figure 33. Unflattening Page 144, Nick Sousanis, 2015

Also, it could be related thoughts according to the objects in the centre. The same form of the example could be seen in P132 (Figure 34).

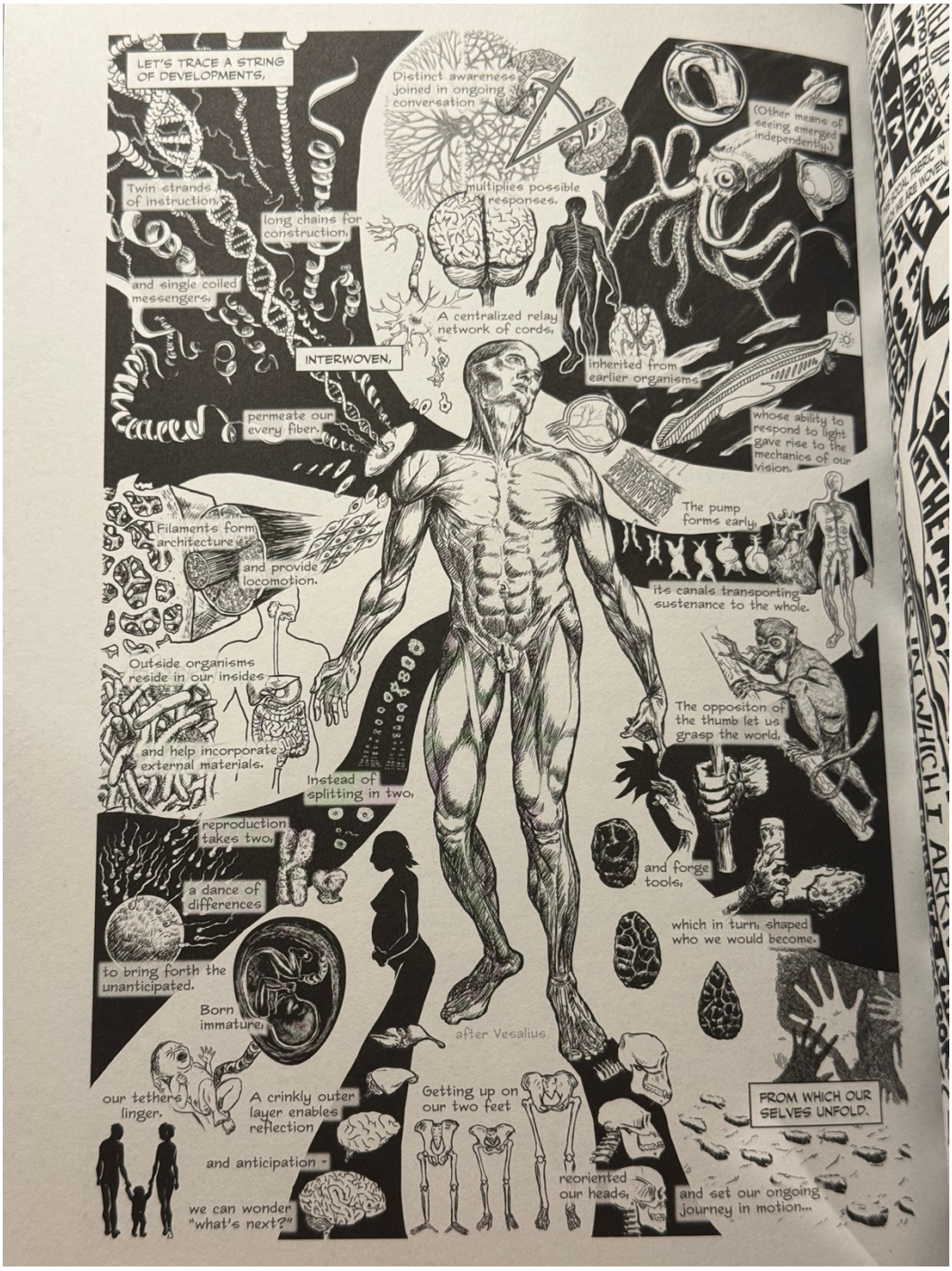


Figure 34. Unflattening Page 132, Nick Sousanis, 2015

From my reading experience, the diffused-shaped drawings in this book seem to offer the most expansive contemplation of the narrative. Each branch of the scenario prompts thoughts that resonate with the theme of the drawing. The illustrations in this book have been enlightening for my research on composition. Sousanis' studies of visual analysis samples and grid gestures serve as excellent analytical material from which I can learn. My analysis of the layouts, compositions, structures, and various graphic inventions that Sousanis employs in Unflattening has been instrumental in shaping an appropriate language for my COVID-19 diary.

In my drawings for the COVID-19 Diary, I have developed graphic tropes to depict images and icons, thereby articulating the narrative flow. For instance, inspired by media articles speculating about the source of the virus outbreak during the pandemic, I have created a panel in the middle of the story that contemplates global food trade and the potential mixing of incompatible products (Figure 35). I used linear conduits (graphic pathways resembling pipelines or transport routes) to symbolise the movement of goods, services, and supply chains, while darker intersections suggest points of collision and viral spread. I've experimented with a multi-linear narrative by using tubes to mimic the process from food transport to business lines. The key clues of this narrative are placed at the intersection of this drawing, which also serves as the link to the topic in this drawing.

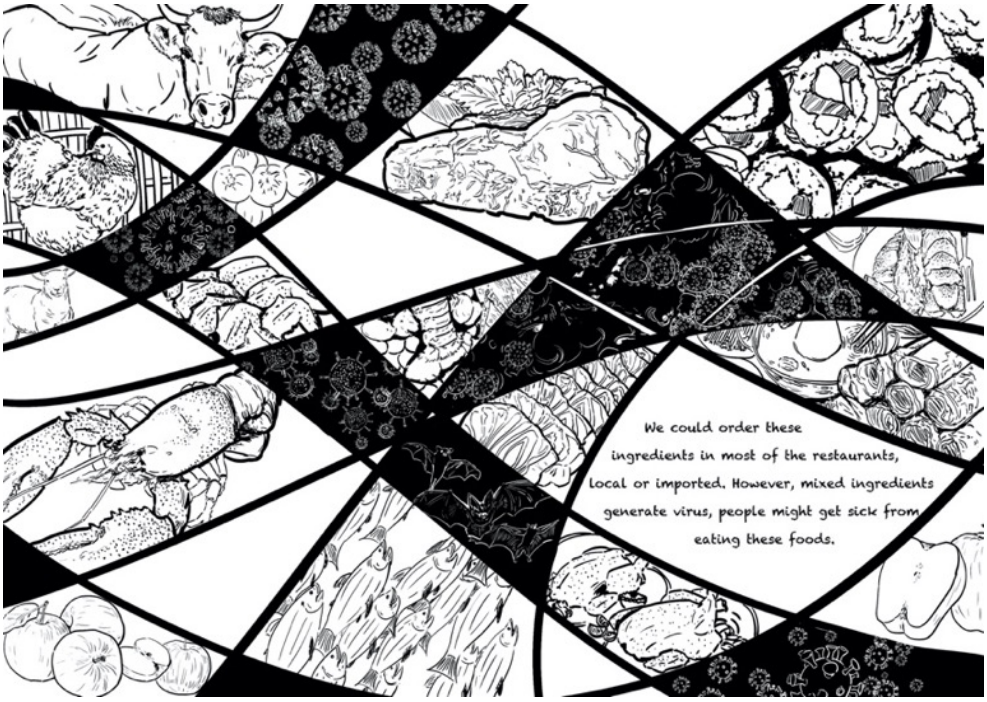


Figure 35. Global food transport, Covid-19 Diary, Yawen Zheng, 2019-2021

Sergio Toppi

Sergio Toppi (1932-2012) was a remarkable Milanese comic artist and illustrator. He was a creative comic book writer and illustrator whose work went beyond the conventional boundaries of graphic storytelling. Toppi's work is renowned for his detailed line work and dynamic compositions. It also demonstrates his mastery of black-and-white illustration and his capacity to use imagery to powerfully tell stories. The distinctive geometric dominance and loose, sketchy pencil work that combine to create a wonderful fusion of tone, pattern, and texture define Toppi's pictures. The book *Sharaz-de: Tales from the Arabian Nights* (2013) is his most well-known work, demonstrates his talent for experimenting with page layout and focuses more on composition than conventional narrative structure (Figure 36, 37). It was in this comic that Toppi played greatly with the graphic design of the page. Toppi's reputation as a master of the Italian school of comics is cemented by his legacy, which continues to inspire readers and artists alike.

The illustrations featured in this section demonstrate how Toppi ingeniously adapted tales from the classic “1001 Arabian Nights”. Toppi’s version of the stories are adult tales that explore the complexities of politics and power, and the eternal struggle between good and evil. These stories primarily explore themes of hubris, humility, betrayal, honour, and magic. Toppi’s full-page illustrations are designed with a composition that accentuates the pivotal moments and characters that form the backbone of the narrative. These moments and characters are depicted through solemn, intricate, bold, and rough line works, creating a striking contrast and a proportionally balanced design.

His audacious use of white space delves into the concept that emptiness can also contribute to storytelling. It carves out the heavily illustrated side of the page and infuses a serene atmosphere to construct the narrative. This technique also influences the storytelling when large areas of the page are filled with colour.

Figure 36. Sharaz-de: Tales from the Arabian Nights, Sergio Toppi, 2013 (1)

Figure 37. Sharaz-de: Tales from the Arabian Nights, Sergio Toppi, 2013 (2)

In this section, I have discussed the works of several artists who have significantly influenced my creative process. Drawing inspiration from Beardsley and Minton, I have adopted their art styles as a reference point for evoking emotion in my own practice. Especially Beardsley's sophisticated aesthetic and Minton's infectious emotional drawing. The sharp sense of tension and the ability to distil essential elements in a reportage narrative, as demonstrated by Searle and Gibbon, have been particularly instructive. This approach has proven invaluable in my visual experimentation within the 'Covid-19 Diary' project. Furthermore, the narrative studies and methodologies I have learned from Sousanis and Toppi have been instrumental in shaping my exploration of narrative drawing. For Sousanis, I was particularly influenced by his use of non-linear visual structure, such as spiral, radial, and fragmented layouts, which challenge conventional panel sequences. These experiments in *Unflattening* encouraged me to explore narrative arrangements and visual flow, and I applied similar visual principles in my own drawings, especially when composing layered or open-ended visual storytelling. Sousanis' innovative design of narrative experiments on the conventional graphic novel format has inspired me a lot in designing my own experiments. On the other hand, Toppi's fantastical composition in illustrations provided me with a bold example of narrative visualization. His visual storytelling is not bound by traditional grids but instead emphasizes contras, texture, and dynamic focuses. Their work has provided me with the narrative experimentation techniques necessary to complement my theoretical research, inspired me to take greater risks with page structure, negative space, and visual metaphor to communicate meaning beyond literal representations. Together, their approaches encouraged me to explore open possibilities for the narrative system and convey meanings through structure as much as content.

To examine the visual narrative further in sequential art, I will use the case of *Hostage* as an example of a graphic novel' visual narrative by analyzing its visual elements and how they contribute to the storytelling. Meanwhile, I will introduce the next theoretical research I developed from my first drawing experiment, this will inform my next theoretical studies on visual metaphor, and bridge my later drawing experiments.

2.2 The Visual Language in the Graphic Novel *Hostage*

In this section, I will use the graphic novel *Hostage* as an example for my analysis of the successful graphic novel storytelling techniques. The analysis of the graphic novel format helps to extract the adopted features in visual storytelling nowadays. Moreover, the analysis of the visual language in *Hostage* provides a perspective and broadens my studies on different visual storytelling formats.

In Guy Delisle's graphic novel *Hostage* (2017), the concept of time is visually presented to the audience in many "tricks". To tell the story, the artist uses a chronological narrative to phrase the experience that the character has, the events that happened in this story are only from the hostage's perspective. The first-person perspective has a direct effect that draws the audience's attention to the story, it creates an immersive environment that leads the audience to follow the images and text and experience the abduction again. The balance of using text and images could be a fine example for exploring how they cooperate to phrase a story.

Hostage is a graphic novel that depicts the true story of Christophe André, a humanitarian worker for Médecins Sans Frontières, who was kidnapped in 1997 in Chechnya. Held captive for 111 days, André endured isolation and uncertainty, a period that Delisle captures through the graphic novel's minimalist illustrations and attention to the passage of time (Brown, 2017). Delisle illustrates the story from the perspective of André's psychological state, leading the readers into the slow, painful passage of time that he experienced during the captivity. This story has brought a strong sense of resonance to me while experiencing the self-quarantine life of the COVID-19 pandemic, only the abductor of this situation is the virus threat of infection and lockdown, not terrorists.

The artist uses a few methods to describe how time flies, the major scenario of describing this idea is drawing the sense of waiting. Also, the major phrase technique is to capture the key gesture and small changes to phrase the development of the story. The phrase technique

he used appears as many detailed elements as possible of symbols and signs. The main elements are light, text, and the distribution of proportion in boxes on every page.

The anxiety and fear of impending danger are vividly portrayed throughout the series of images. As readers immerse themselves in the intense narrative, they are guided by the artist's subtle hints, allowing their own imagination to fill in the gaps. Through hidden clues and numerous assumptions, the artist crafts a mysterious atmosphere that invites the audience to explore further. From the abductee's perspective, the character's mental struggles and uncertainties are richly depicted. The constant guessing and waiting to build an atmosphere of suspense, drawing readers deeper into the story. This suspense not only fuels their curiosity but also compels them to continue reading, eager to uncover the truth behind the mysteries and discover how the story concludes.

The emotional features are presented by enlightening the detail of the environment around the character and the small movements due to the limited and changeless space. The character uses all his wisdom and strength to analyse every small event and change that he can possibly observe, the lightbulb on the ceiling, the sunlight through the gap of the blocked window, and the behaviour of the abductors become the only traces that the character could follow. Every sound and shadow they have made becomes something meaningful and worth analysing. The terrorists who did this abduction speak a foreign language, and they rarely communicate with the hostage. In this case, the intimidation grows with time and uncertainty. The drawing is full of invisible content because of the suspicious abductor and the hostage's secret attempt to escape.

The character (hostage)'s thoughts of trying to escape are the main storyline that is presented directly to the audience, those thoughts are explicitly stated through the text content and the movements of the character in the images. When the audience follows the storyline, they naturally read and view his fear and the desire for survival from the textual and visual content. The artist plans the storytelling by visualising the character's thinking process, as well as using text to show the questions the character has toward the unknown situation, and the questions develop along with the plot's changes. The readers must follow his questions and continue reading the story if they want to find out the answer. By using

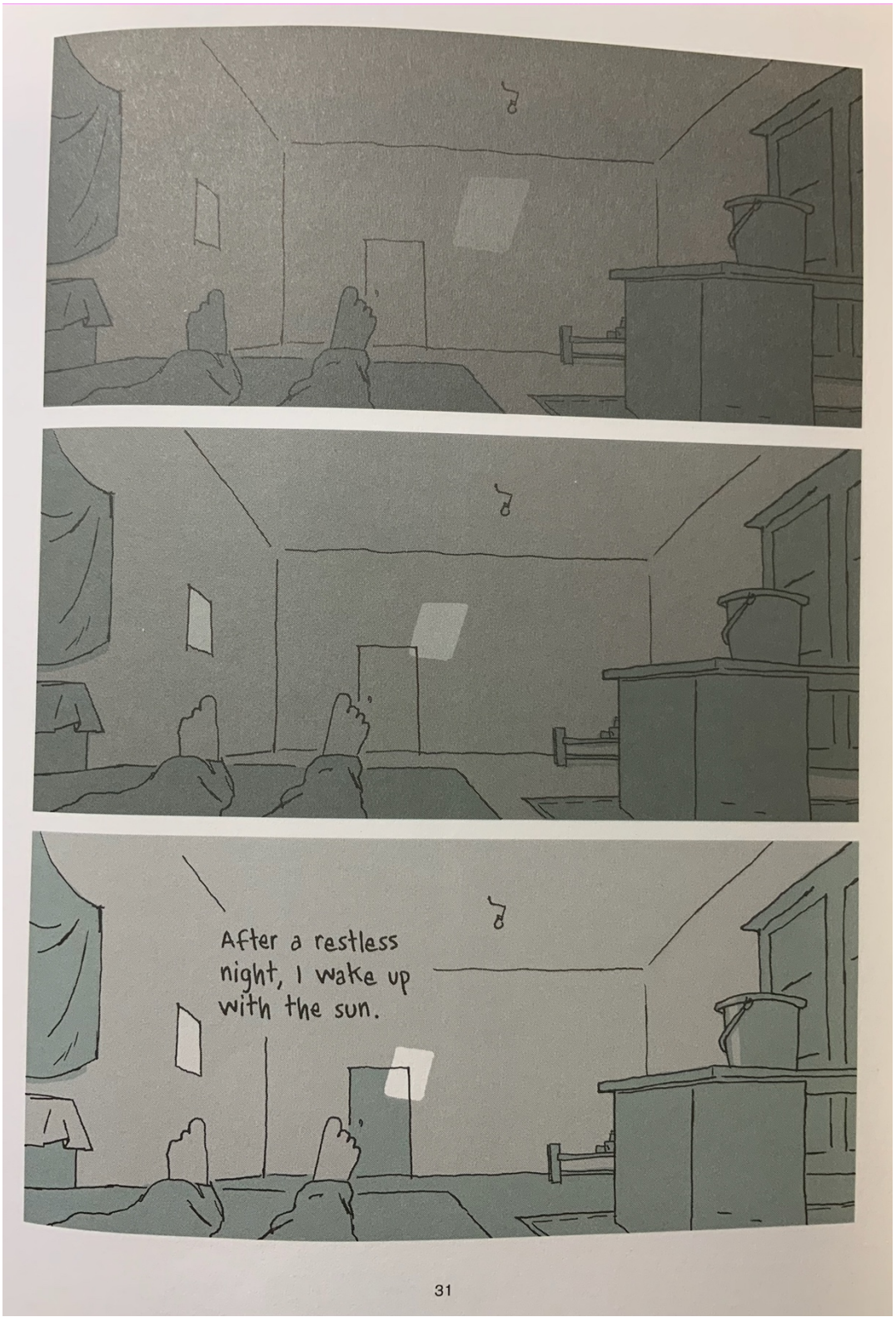
the questions to invite the reader's curiosity, the artist used a few visual storytelling techniques. In the following sections, I will analyse the visual storytelling techniques that create the dominant narrative style, which I identified in three categories: the time, the rhythm and emphasis, and the sound. They are organised into different groups of pages that represent certain narrative techniques and form the narrative flow.

Framing/Spaced Out the Time

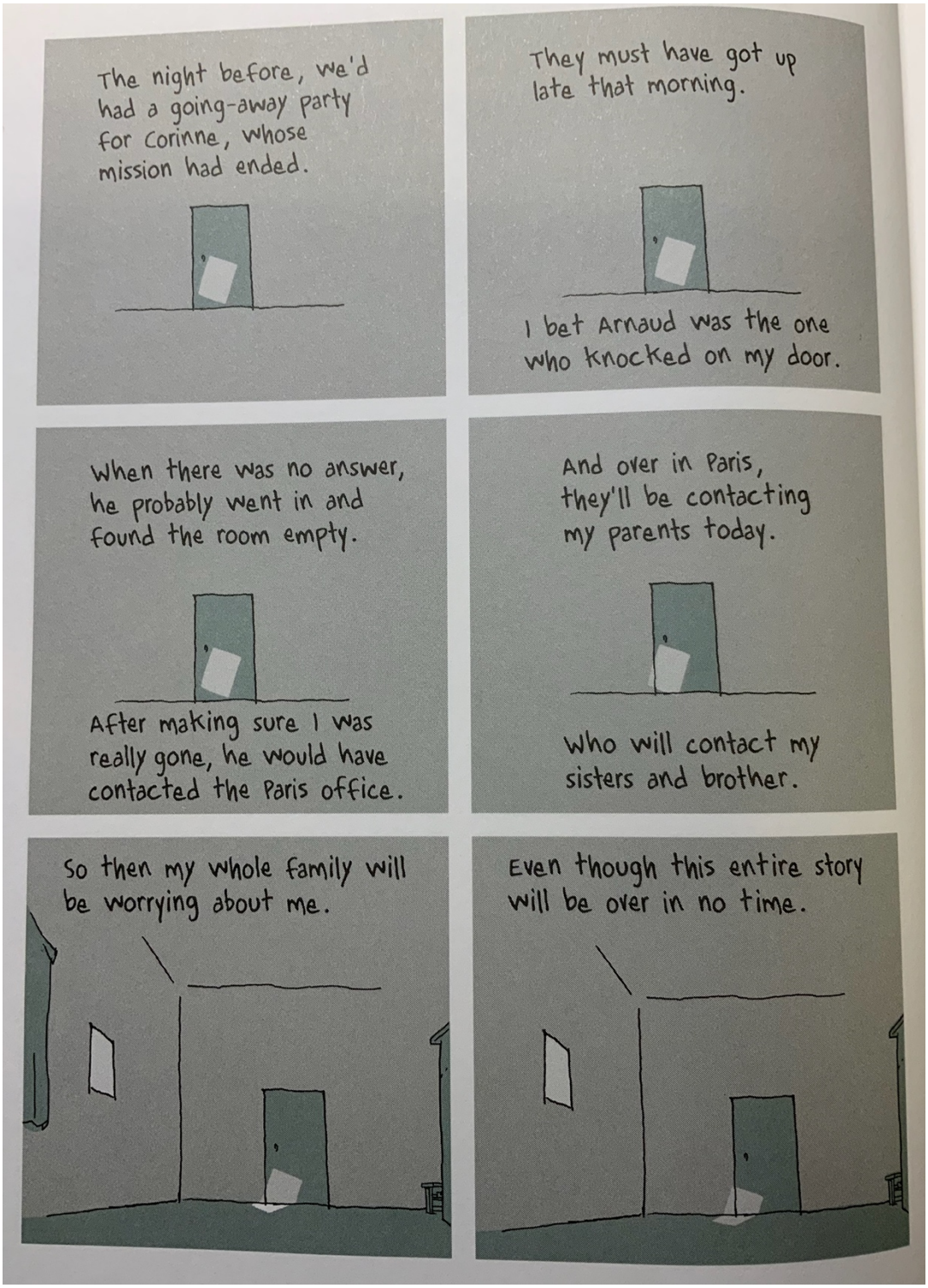
The sense of time in this graphic novel is framed by different visual techniques. Will Eisner (1917-2005) discusses how comics convey the passage of time and emotional experience through visual means. He compares this to auditory art forms like music, where rhythm or "beat" is achieved by the duration of time. "In graphics, the experience is conveyed by the use of illusions and symbols and their arrangement" (Eisner, 1985). Inspired by Eisner's comparison, I discovered that Delisle has applied illusions and symbols in his images to frame the sense of time. On pages 31 and 35-36 (Figure 38), the scenes depict the character's assumptions of what might happen when people discover that he has been kidnapped. The images on these pages are nearly identical, with only slight changes that accompany the continuous flow of the text. The artist aims to convey the idea that the hostage is quietly reflecting, remaining still for an extended period in a small, empty room. The passage of time is illustrated through a series of images showing the movement of daylight, represented by a light square of sunlight shining through the window. By observing the changing position of this light square, the readers can perceive the time period that the hostage is kept in the room. The perspective in these images is from the hostage's point of view, allowing the readers to share his perspective and build an emotional connection with the character. On these pages, the text carries most of the narrative, while the images supplement the story by indicating the length of time. Together, the text and images enable the audience to gauge the hostage's mood and mental state, fostering a sense of empathy with him.

Further study on the sense of time in sequential images, I borrow Eisner's arguments to explain how people interpret the visuals of the concept of time. Eisner (1985) argues that

"the phenomenon of duration and its experience—commonly referred to as ‘time’—is a dimension integral to sequential art" (p. 23). In this graphic novel, the concept of time and its portrayal through sequential drawings is effectively demonstrated. Eisner (1985) notes that in primitive societies, time was often measured by the movement of sunlight. Human beings are naturally attuned to a biological clock closely linked to the movement and changes in the hue of sunlight. This is not only because of people’s basic need for sunlight, but also because people’s vision relies on light reflection to perceive the view of the world. In *Hostage*, the protagonist is deprived of any time-keeping devices, leaving sunlight as his only means of estimating the passage of time. During moments of activity involving the abductors, artificial light—whether from the room or vehicle headlights—takes on a significant role in the unfolding plot. By visualising how the hostage spends time in the room, Delisle masterfully emphasizes the presence of both natural and artificial light, drawing attention to their role in shaping the intensity and mood of the scenes.



31


The night before, we'd had a going-away party for Corinne, whose mission had ended.
They must have got up late that morning.
I bet Arnaud was the one who knocked on my door.
When there was no answer, he probably went in and found the room empty.
After making sure I was really gone, he would have contacted the Paris office.
And over in Paris, they'll be contacting my parents today.
Who will contact my sisters and brother.
So then my whole family will be worrying about me.
Even though this entire story will be over in no time.

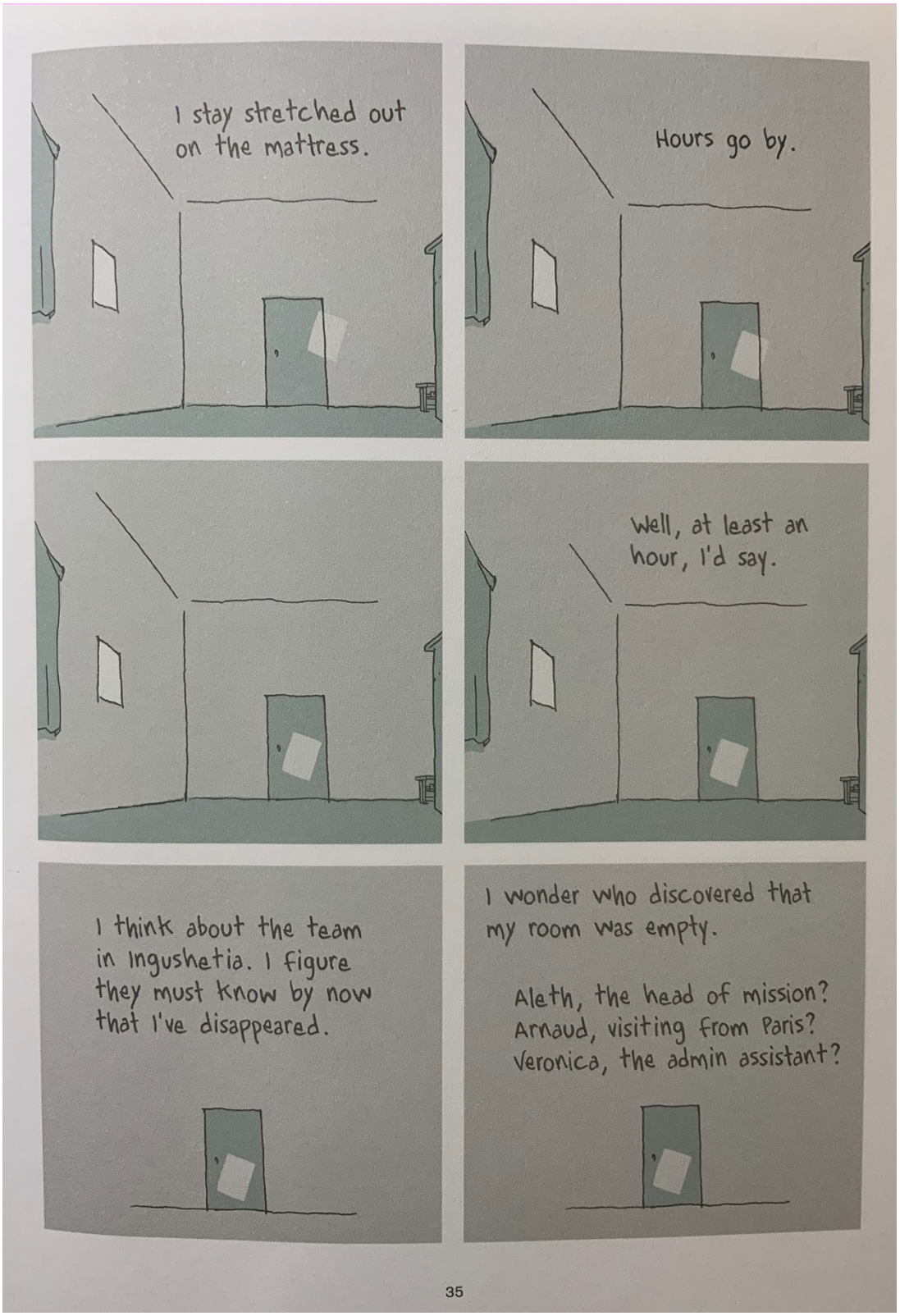


Figure 38. Page 31, 35-36 in *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

This subtle framing of time through repetition and light not only aligns with Eisner's ideas but also resonates with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's theory in *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1873). Lessing argues that visual art, unlike poetry, must capture the most "pregnant moment", the moment that implies what came before and what might come next. In *Hostage*, the repetition of a sequence of images with only the light shape does not depict action directly, but symbolizes psychological duration and implies the slow passage of time. These images capture the essence of a narrative, which allows the readers to interpret the flow of time and action from a static image.

On pages 42 and 86 (Figure 39), time is consistently visible throughout the panels. In addition to the position of the sunlight reflecting on the wall, the gradual change in the shades and hues of light indicates the time of day, transitioning from bright to dark or vice versa. In portraying time within a static environment, the artist focuses solely on the changing light, guiding the audience to sense its passage. The hostage's life was highly restricted—his freedom, personal belongings, and even the ability to stand and walk were temporarily taken away. Despite this limited space and movement, the hostage's mind remained active. The artist draws from the hostage's perspective, offering insight into his analysis of his surroundings and captors.

This confinement and the looming sense of danger are conveyed through the hostage's viewpoint. The artist uses seemingly insignificant events to build suspense, offering clues to move the story forward and keep the audience engaged. Throughout the narrative, the artist weaves in social connections, personalities, and the hostage's life experiences through the illusion of plot development. This makes the readers relate to the hostage, viewing him as an ordinary person, which in turn deepens their emotional connection to his fate.

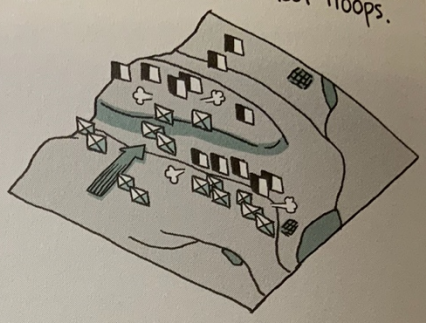

Not much noise today.
There was some chanting at one point.
A radio or something.
I think they were praying.

Figure 39. Page 42, 86 in *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

The audience is rarely shown the facial expressions of the abductors, and their movements and behaviours are often implied rather than explicitly depicted. However, the sense of their violence and menace is still palpable. This effect is primarily achieved through the text, which reflects the hostage's assumptions and fears (Figure 40. Page 176, 178). The artist deliberately avoids spending many pages illustrating the terrorists' brutality, instead allowing the incomplete portrayal of the characters to be fleshed out by the hostage's inner thoughts and imagination. This minimalist approach amplifies the tension, leaving much to be interpreted through the text and the viewer's own imagination.

In the north, Lannes and Murat try to contain Bagration's advance.

In the centre, Soult and Bernadotte charge up the Pratzen Heights to take on Kollwrath's last troops.



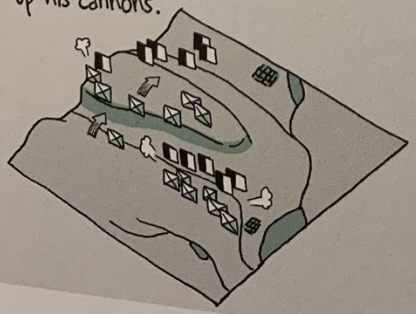
Langeron manages to take Sokolnitz, while Doctorow loses Telnitz to a counterattack by Davout.

Langeron
General of infantry

Davout
Marshal of the Empire

Attacked from three sides, Saint-Hilaire orders a bayonet charge that proves successful.

In the centre, Bernadotte seizes Blasowitz, while Soult takes back the Pratzen Heights, where he sets up his cannons.



Davout (south) and Lannes (north) manage to push back the enemy.

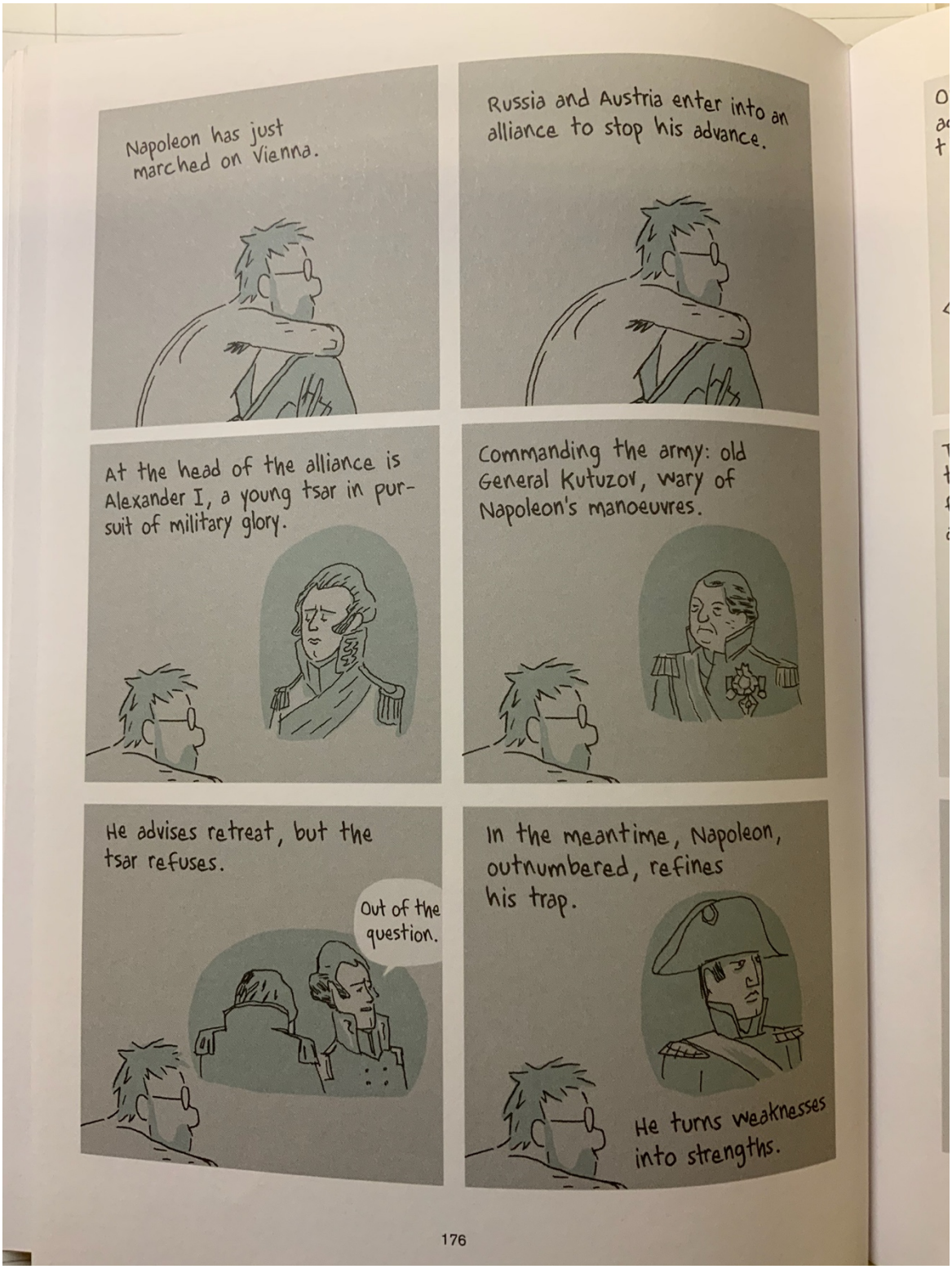
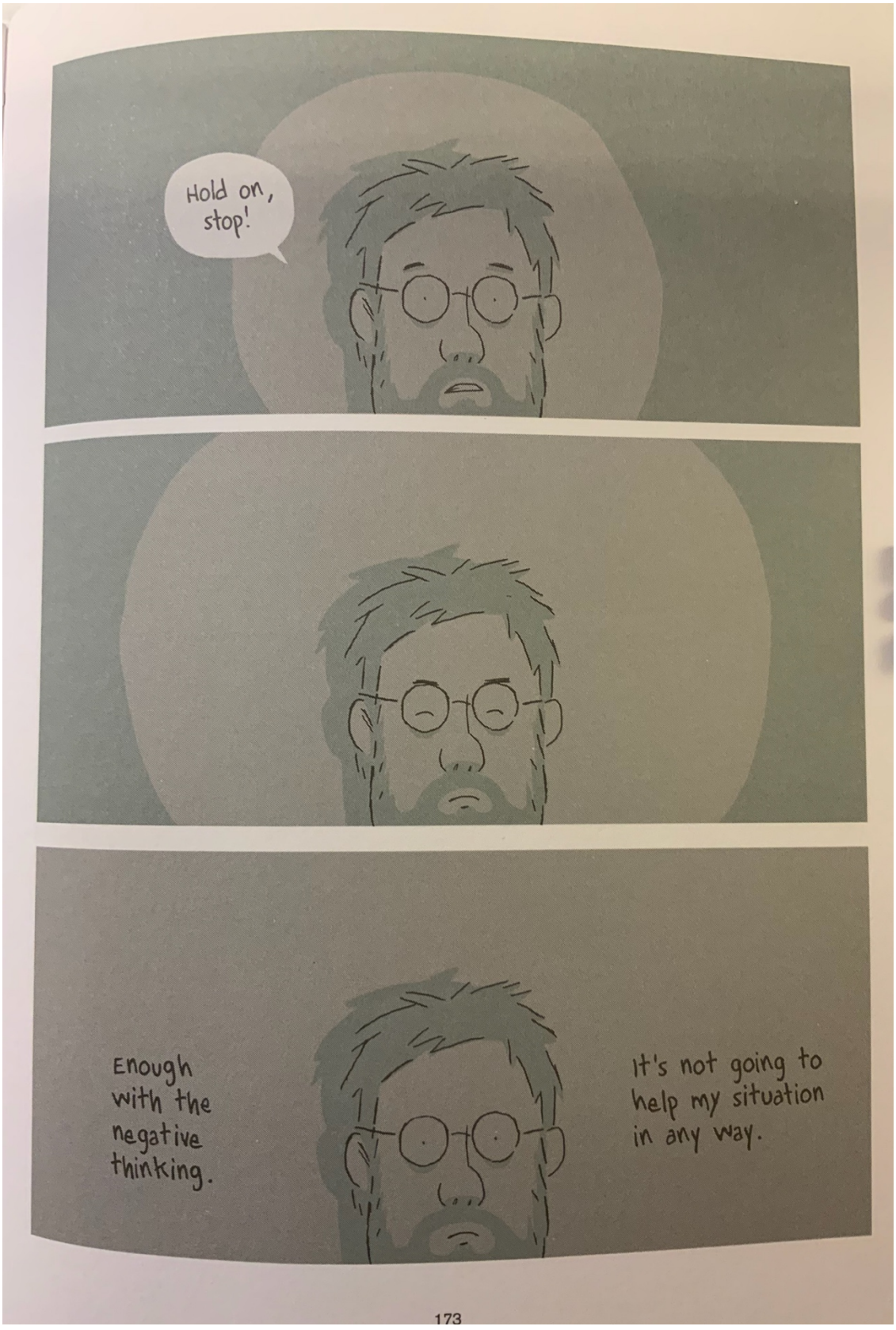


Figure 40. Page 176, 178 in *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

The pacing of the story and the arrangement of panels on each page carefully guide the readers' reading experience. Across the 422 pages of sequential images, the artist devotes the majority of the narrative to depicting life as a hostage, while the final 50 pages focus on the escape. As the novel is told from the hostage's own perspective, the first-person narrative requires the readers' empathy, meaning the reading pace must align with the hostage's experience. The artist achieves this by alternating between imagined events and real occurrences, and when particular moments require more attention, emphasis techniques are employed to capture the audience's focus. Page layout is a crucial tool for controlling the rhythm of the story. This effect is most evident in the arrangement of panels on each page, which together create a unique and immersive reading experience.

The Rhythm and the Emphasis


Hold on, stop!
Enough with the negative thinking.
It's not going to help my situation in any way.

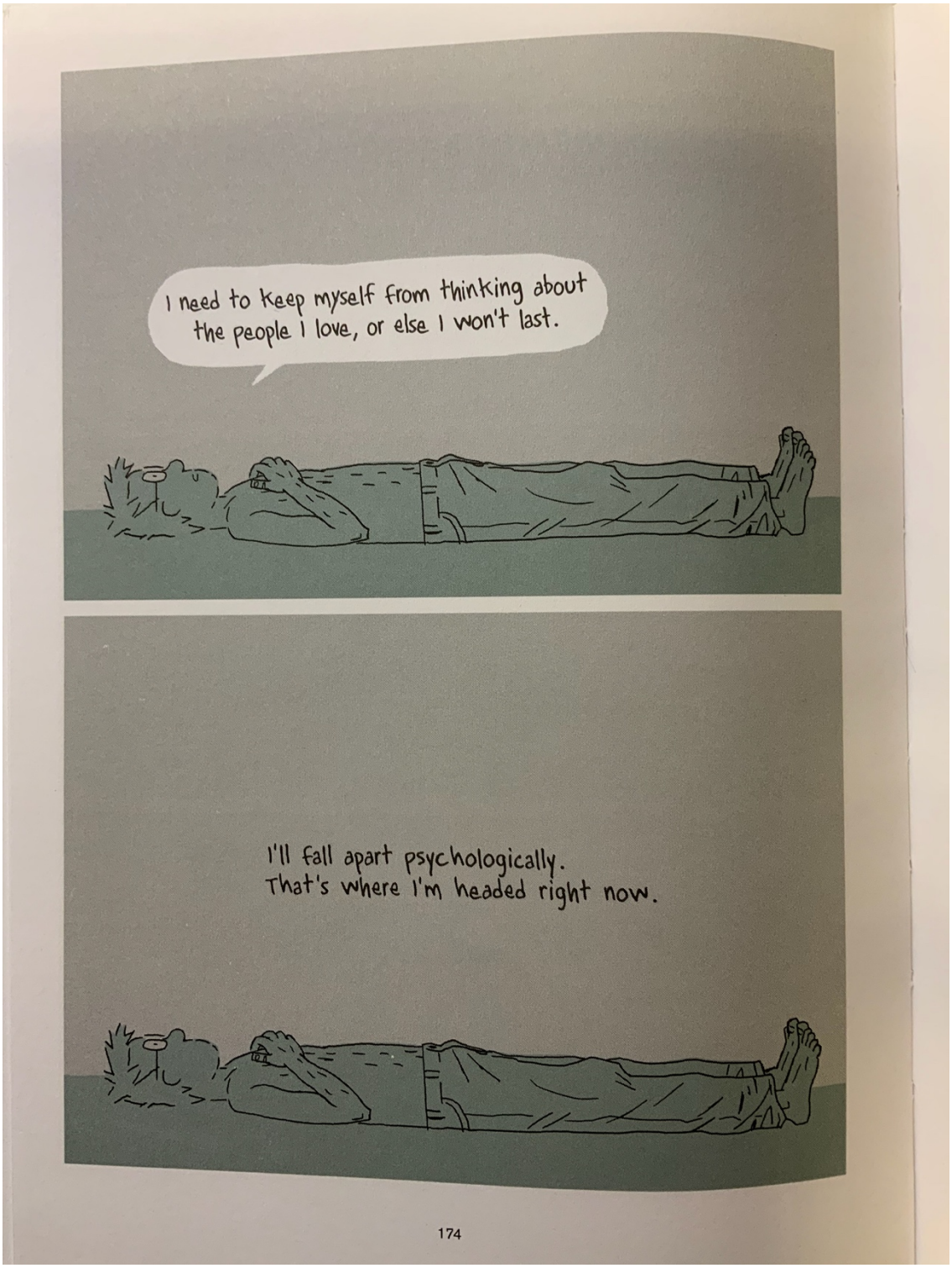


Figure 41. Page 173, 174 in *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

Pages 173 and 174 (Figure 41) stand out due to their distinct panel arrangements, differing from the more typical layouts seen throughout the book. The artist intentionally uses fewer

panels on these pages to emphasise the content, allowing the visuals to carry more weight of the storytelling. The light either real or illusory was the strongest sign in this book, the crucial clues of the development of the story were all rely on the light changes. These light variations provide the key implications that drive the plots' development, the examples are also shown in single-box narratives like Figure 42 and 43. The single-box panels serve to slow down the pacing, drawing attention to the subtle changes in light and atmosphere, which reflect the protagonist's psychological state, and attract the readers to the subtleties of the hostage's mental and emotional journey. The lighting manipulation in this graphic novel is used as both a literal and metaphorical element, adding layers of meaning to the story.

In addition to using natural sunlight as an indicator, the artist employs various artificial light sources throughout the story. These include light from a bulb, the glow of a car lamp, and the reflection of light from a phone screen on the character's face. The artist uses a subtle range of shades, varying between white and celadon green, to illustrate the movement of these light sources. The shapes created by the lights—often depicted as blank or white spaces—serve as visual cues for events occurring within the environment. By carefully manipulating these light sources, the artist adds a layer of symbolic meaning, guiding the readers' focus and contributing to the overall atmosphere of the narrative.

Figure 42. *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

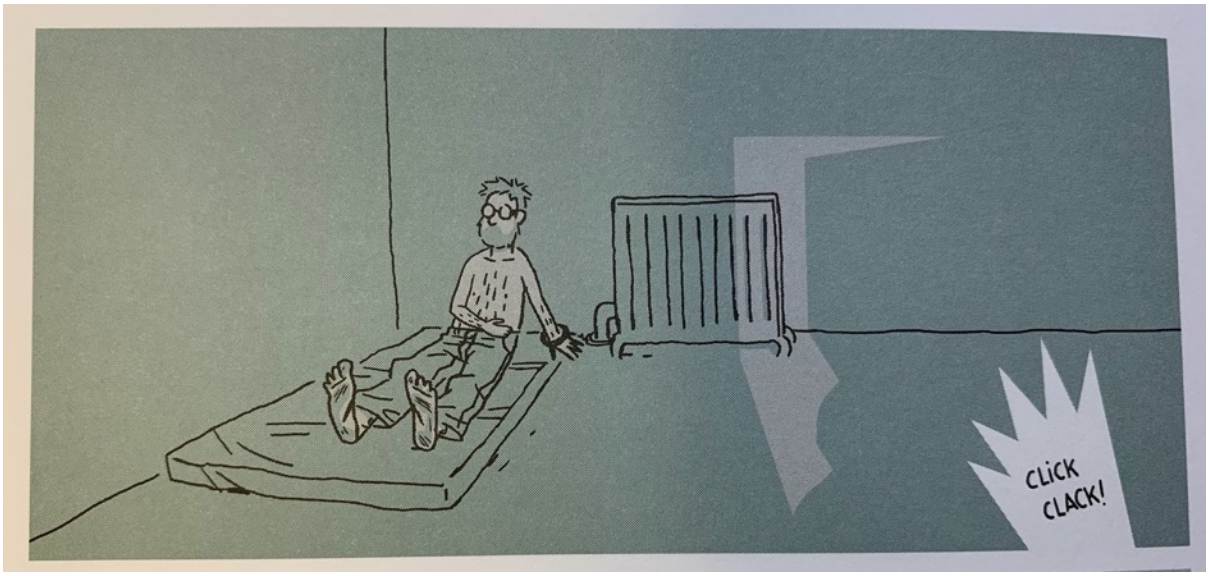


Figure 43. *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

Repetition is one of the most frequently used techniques in this graphic novel, it creates a sense of rhythm and reinforces key thematic elements. In Figure 44, the hostage's non-stop thoughts during the day are symbolised not through explicit words, but through the visual representation of question marks in bubbles. The artist uses nine bubbles that are filled with question marks to illustrate the idea of uncounted numbers of questions, representing the hostage's overwhelming uncertainty. The use of nine question-mark-filled balloons also carries a deeper cultural significance. From the perspective of a native speaker, In Chinese literature, the repetition of events or descriptions in multiples of three, six, or nine is often used as a metaphor for infinity or the intensification of an idea. The number three, in particular, holds a special place in Chinese idiom and literary tradition, where repetition in sets of three or its multiples is understood to imply something boundless or unmeasurable. The artist's choice to include nine bubbles subtly taps into this cultural motif, suggesting the infinite nature of the hostage's doubts and fears, which continue to grow and spiral out of control.

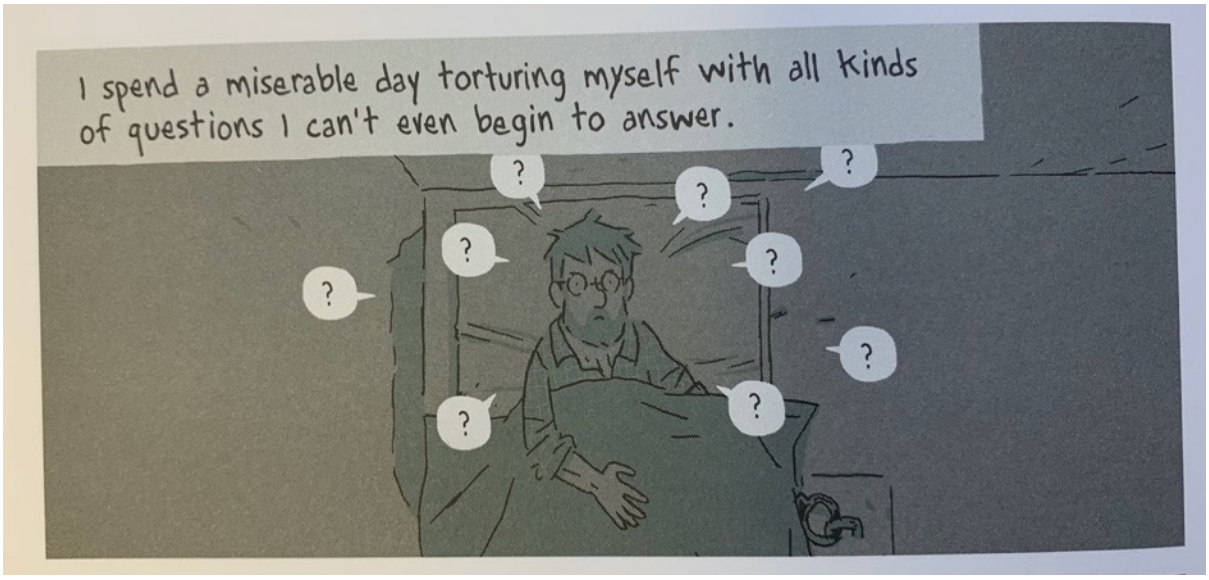


Figure 44. *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

The Sound

In this graphic novel, conversation and the environment sound in the story were designed to be in the traditional bubbles. Delisle has used irregular shapes and different fonts of the text in the bubbles to visualize the vocal elements.

Eisner (1985) explores the traditional use of dialogue bubbles, how they are used in comics and what they represent in different styles. On page 93 (Figure 45), the hostage's internal monologue plays a significant role in the narrative. The text outside of dialogue bubbles represents his personal reflections on the kidnapping, capturing his thoughts as he endures the unbearable treatment. This use of text without bubbles signifies the internal voice of the hostage, offering the audience insight into his subjective experience. Meanwhile, the spoken words of the characters are enclosed within dialogue balloons, each with a pointed tail directed at the speaker. This clear distinction between unspoken thoughts and spoken dialogue allows the readers to easily differentiate between the two, helping them understand which parts of the narrative reflect the hostage's internal world and which are direct verbal exchanges between characters.

Figure 45. Page 93 in *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017


CLACK!
The tall guy is back.
CLICK!
In the washroom, I take the opportunity to try to cool down.
I eat sitting on the mattress. The heat is exhausting.
167


Schrrr...
cling!
Bom!
Brrrmmm...
All day long, there were unusual sounds.
Blang!
Bom!
Schrrr...
People came, they talked.
Furniture or heavy objects were moved around.
Brrrrmmmm!
272

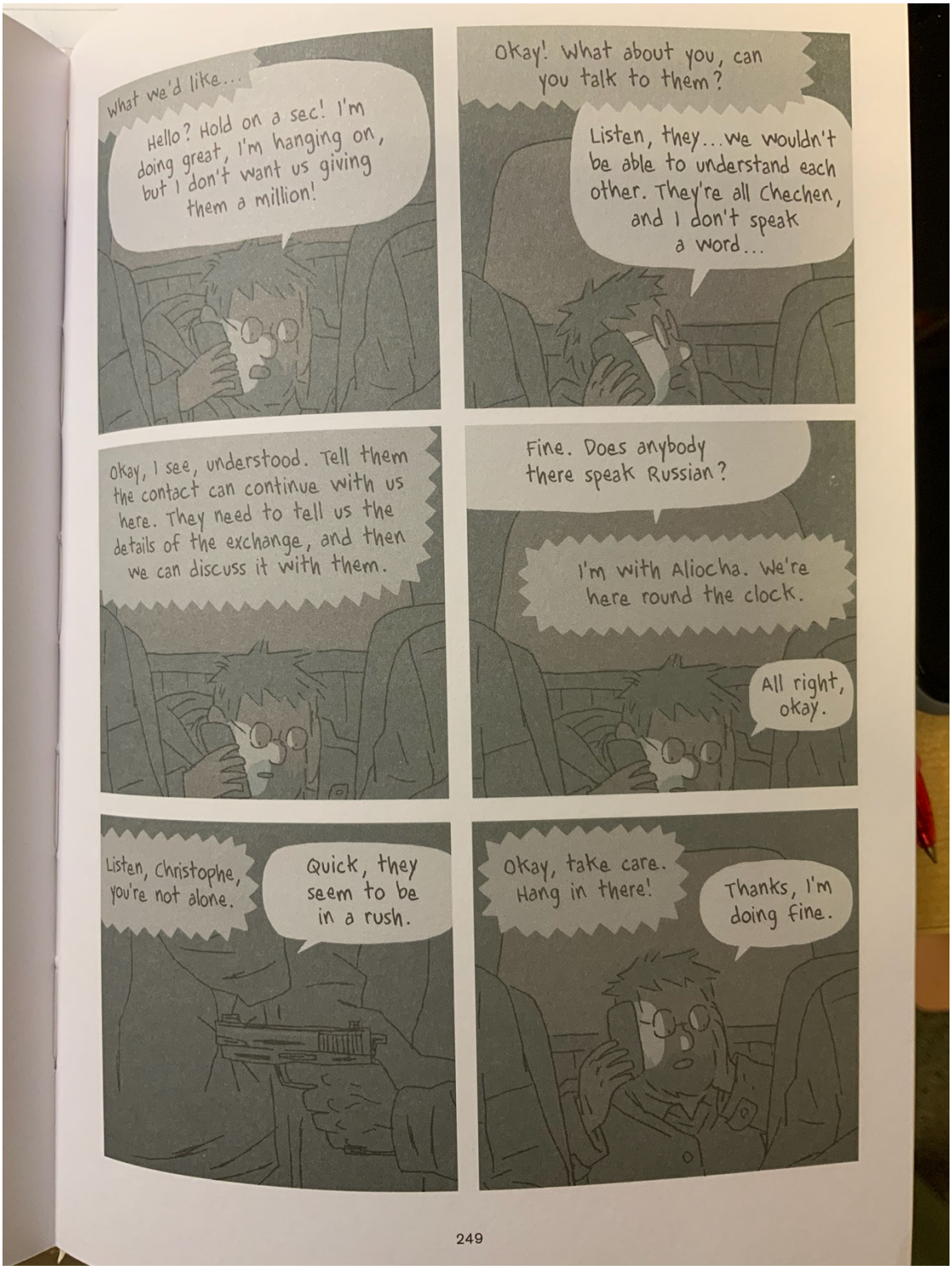


Figure 46. Page 167, 249, 272 in *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

The speech bubbles in this graphic novel vary in both shape and font, enhancing the storytelling by reflecting the different tones and emotions of the characters. A special case

occurs when the artist illustrates illusions, incorporating sound to further immerse the readers. On page 167 (Figure 46), for example, the illusion of the hostage shatters like glass, accompanied by the onomatopoeic word "clack". This visual metaphor for fragility aligns with the delicate nature of illusions, which can easily vanish when disrupted, much like glass breaking under pressure.

The artist uses the physical properties of glass—its fragility and tendency to crack—to symbolise the hostage's shattered illusions. By visually representing the illusion as fractured glass, the artist provides the audience with an immediate and direct visual cue. The accompanying sound, represented by the word "clack" within the bubble, reinforces the action, creating a multi-sensory experience. This combination of visual and auditory cues allows the artist to vividly portray both the character's movement and the collapse of the hostage's mental state. The readers are reading this word as a sign, meaning that the glass is cracking, they read the word to understand the story in this image, and the pronunciation of this word connects the readers to a sound effect that visualises the scenario from multiple perspectives.

Similar cases happen on pages 249 and 272 as well (Figure 46), the sharp and distant sound from outside of the room is designed in the spiky shape bubbles. The visualization of two types of sounds is an obvious comparison in these two pages, the composition of these bubbles organized a chaotic atmosphere in the narrative. The bubbles that create tensions indicate different sources of sounds and the conflicts between the character and the voice of others.

Through this integration of visual signs and sound symbols, the artist connects the visual and auditory elements, enriching the readers' understanding of the scene. The use of onomatopoeia, along with the depiction of broken glass, highlights the fragility of the hostage's psychological state, merging physical and emotional fragility into one powerful moment.

Figure 47. Page 288 in *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

The same effects are reflected in the images on page 288 (Figure 47), where the harsh shouting and foreign language, which made no sense to the hostage, are visualised through rough, hand-lettered text. The artist uses strokes that resemble the raw, jagged trace of chalk scratching on a blackboard. By observing these strokes, the readers can relate the spiky shapes of bubbles to the hearing of the piercing harshness voice. These features of handwriting activate our imagination, allowing us to associate the visual with the auditory as well as the earlier examples. As Eisner (1985) explains in *Comics and Sequential Art*, "A hand-lettered balloon conveys a personality that is quite different from that of a typeset letter. It also has an effect on the sound and style of speaking" (p. 10). In this scene, the

handwritten letters represent both the sound of a hit and shouting. The artist sharpens the sense of the impact by using the onomatopoeic word "smack" and large, rough, hand-lettered text, enhancing the intensity of the hit. The shape of the speech bubbles further intensifies the sudden, heavy movement by mimicking the explosive nature of the sound.

Another effect created by the hand-lettered text is how it alters the way the content is understood. Eisner (1985) suggests that hand-lettering is one of the most idiosyncratic and expressive ways to insert words into bubbles and text panels. This effect is also evident on page 288, where the abductor's words are meaningless to the hostage, so the dialogue within the bubbles is written as fragmented, incomplete sentences. The oversized text reflects the excessively loud volume of the voice, adding to the sense of chaos and confusion.

On page 347 (Figure 48), the speech bubbles take on irregular shapes, with their position and form crafted to imitate the experience of listening to music from a distant source. The musical notes inside the bubbles appear feeble and slender, conveying a sense of fragility as they linger in the hostage's hearing. These visual features of the notes serve as symbolic representations of the sound itself, capturing its distant and delicate nature. The artist effectively uses these visual cues to convey the weakness and remoteness of the sound, translating auditory sensations into visual elements that evoke a similar emotional response.

These examples showcase how the artist integrates hand-lettered text, visual shapes, and symbols to convey sound and emotion, combining visual and auditory elements to guide the readers' engagement with the story.

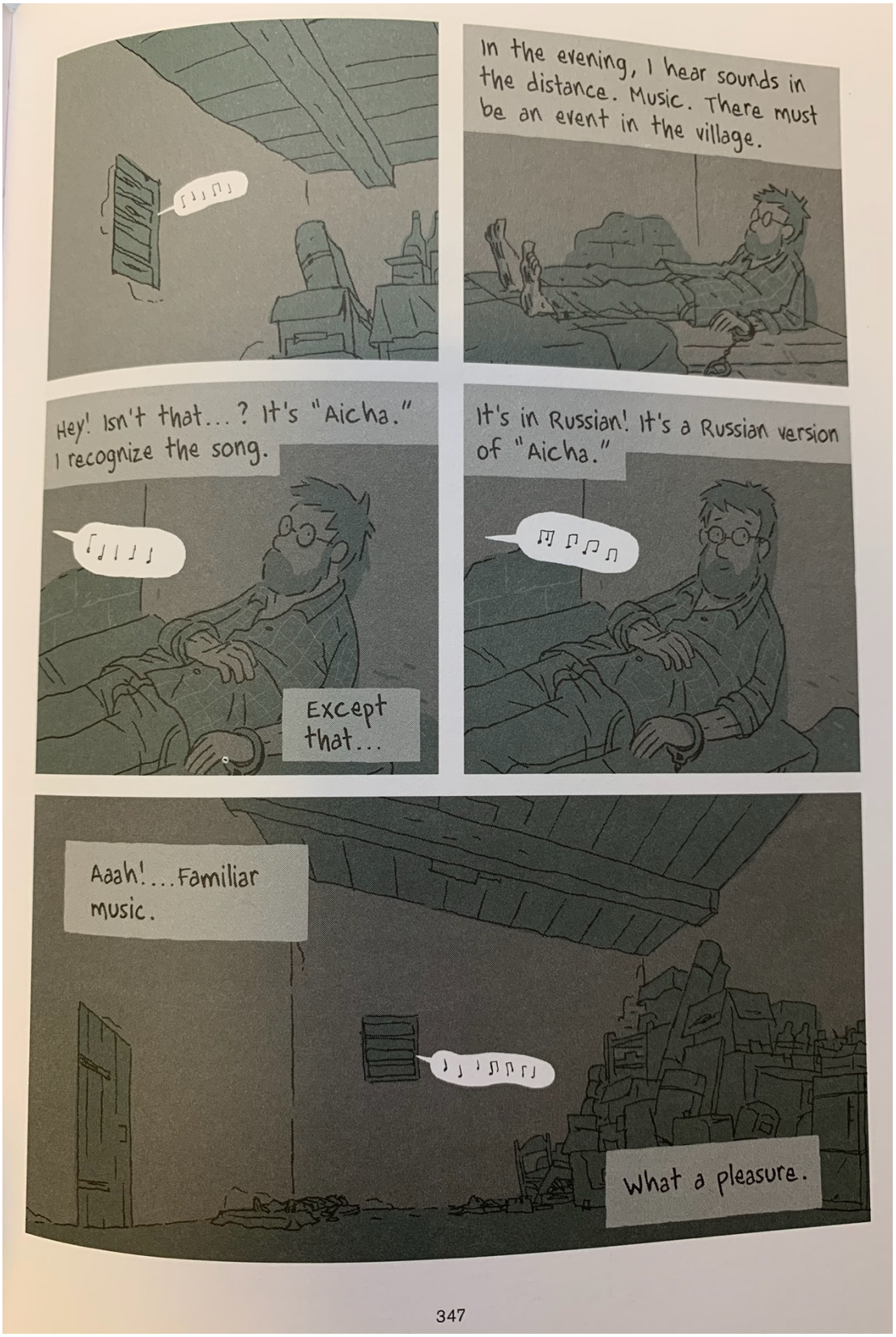


Figure 48. Page 347 in *Hostage,* Guy Delisle, 2017

In the next section, I will introduce the first drawing experiment I designed as the result of the study of artistic styles and the narrative in the graphic novel.

2.3 Critical Thinking on the First Drawing Experiment

Context of the Covid-19 Diary

Inspired by the graphic novel Hostage and the period that I started this research, the related topic of the COVID-19 pandemic became the most suitable theme to visualize (see Appendix 2). According to the life scenes during this huge crisis, the inevitable conflicts and struggles create dramatic dynamics physically and emotionally, these narrative materials contribute to the visual narrative design and provide layers of expression to the creation of drawings.

COVID-19 Diary is a visual diary that is structured around three main themes: my personal experience and immediate surroundings, the city and broader context, and the emotional and psychological impact of the pandemic. The drawings were initially created using traditional media, such as pencil and paper, and later processed digitally. In the process of making these drawings, the sketches and final pieces varied in scale, tone, and levels of expression. Thanks to the diverse possibilities offered by digital devices for rendering and image editing, new characteristics emerged. The evolving relationship between digital and hand-drawn elements, from drafts to their final form, has become a key feature of this phase of research.

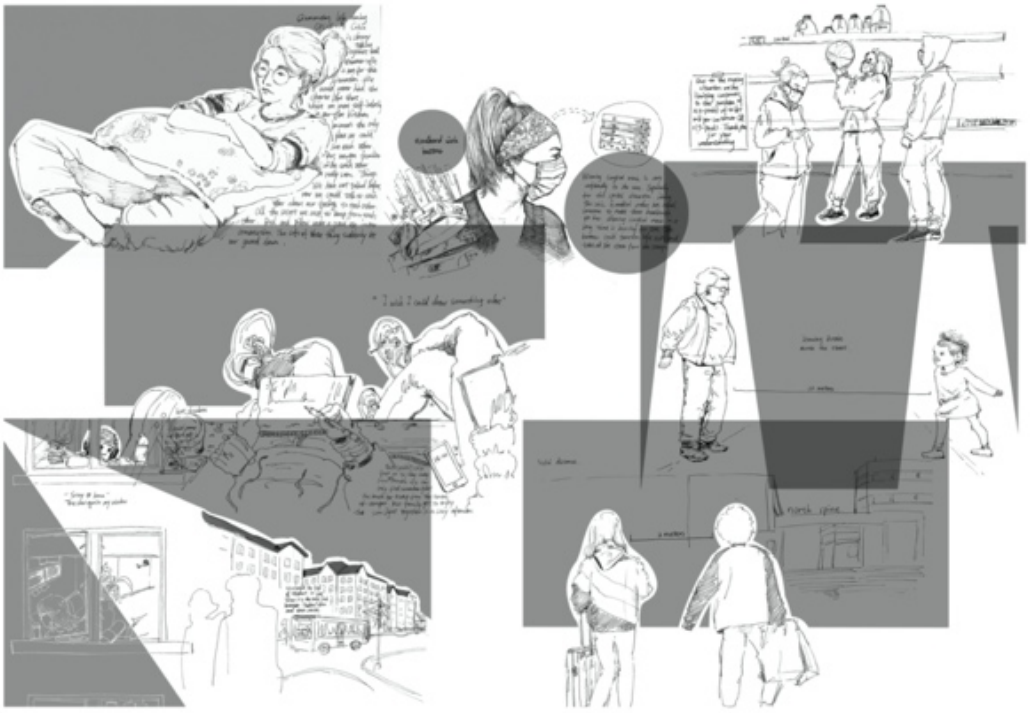


Figure 49. Group Figures 1

Figure 50. Group Figures 2

The group figure drawings (Figure 49, 50) were created at the beginning of the pandemic (February 2020), marking the initial stage of the narrative I have been building. These drawings represent observations of life under self-quarantine and depict experiences from both a personal and broader perspective. In the drawing on Group Figures 1, composed of a few separate images, the silence on campus drove the process. Group activities were banned due to the virus's contagiousness, weakening the usual forms of face-to-face communication. Masks and social distancing took away the subtle gestures that enrich communication—facial expressions, body language, and lip movements. Even though words were spoken, the efficiency of verbal communication was suddenly interrupted. Listeners often rely on visual cues like lip movements to understand speech, especially when accents or individual differences make the spoken words less clear. However, with

the rules blocking facial contact, the process of communication became more strained and fragmented.

The drawing on Group Figures 1 begins with an atmospheric representation of the surroundings, capturing scenes that were highly indicative of the life I observed. The grey dividing areas are used for “layering the meaning” (the shade of blocks that identify the layers of the story), they also have the function of separating different scenes, locations, and timeframes. The sequence is arranged progressively, starting with the familiar setting of the home and interactions with others, eventually shifting to a depiction of life tinged with the fear of venturing outside. The narrative goal of these drawings is to evoke the underlying anxieties surrounding the virus—feelings that are subtle yet ever-present beneath normal behaviour. This fear is not akin to facing an immediate, violent threat; rather, it is more like the haunting presence of an invisible danger. Based on real-life experience from a personal perspective, in the early phase of the pandemic, there was no clear or positive response to confronting the virus—only a deepening sense of unease, with negative emotions gradually consuming daily life as time passed.

The scenes depicted on Group Figures 1 and 2 emphasize small details of everyday life that international students live in the accommodation of a UK university. Group Figures 2, in particular, illustrates life in university accommodation through a magnifying lens, as students attempt to make their self-quarantine lives as normal as possible. Since no one knew the full extent of the pandemic’s damage or how long it would last, people tended to believe most information they encountered, whether it was accurate or merely rumours. In response, they followed the instructions given by family and friends, stayed in their flats, and minimized face-to-face contact. The international students in the drawings were unaware of what effect this would have on their mental health. The scenes on this page reflect the students’ daily attempts to balance work and leisure, stripped of almost all activities outside their flats. The drawing portrays each figure struggling to adjust to the new routine of isolation. During self-quarantine and lockdown, the international students were bound together in their flats. They made efforts to stay connected, sharing their feelings to avoid loneliness in their disconnection from the outside world. They played card games, and video games, and even tried new activities like dyeing their hair – things they

would probably not be doing together if it were not for the pandemic. Although characters in the drawings appeared to be living under their regular routines, the underlying fear of being trapped in their "box-like" rooms lingered in their facial and physical expressions. The scenes depict the students' highly concentrated life together. Initially, the design of these figures was individual observations, capturing people at different stages of movement. But as these scenes collaged together, the meaning and context of the drawings became richer and more complex.

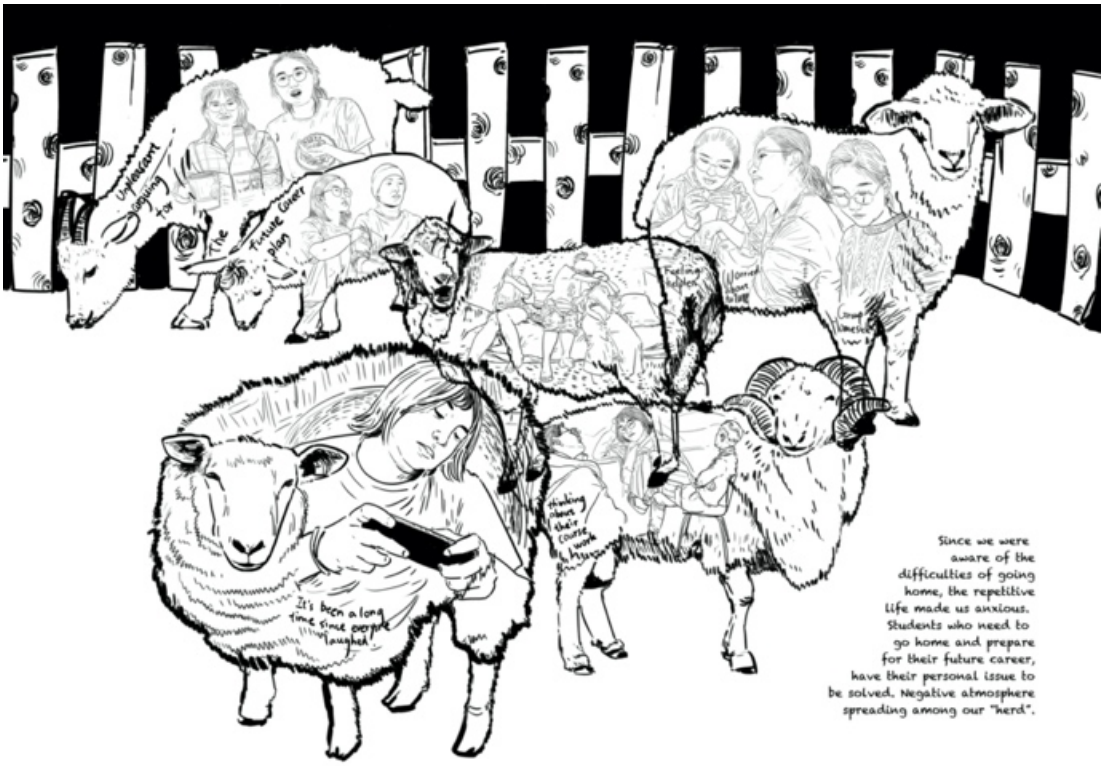


Figure 51. Accommodation Life Under the Quarantine, *Covid-19 Diary*, Yawen Zheng, 2020-2021

Figure 52. Quiet Campus, *Covid-19 Diary*, Yawen Zheng, 2020-2021

Visual Communication Techniques in the Drawings

While composing the pages Accommodation Life Under the Quarantine (Figure 51) and Quiet Campus (Figure 52), I explored the analogy between international students penned in by pandemic restrictions and domesticated animals, and the mental status of residents around their living environment. In the outdoor environment, gulls, ducks, and squirrels carried on as usual, while the international students were put in a trapped environment and metaphorically compared to sheep. These drawings reinterpret scenes from observation of daily life around a UK university campus, where life seemed balanced between human and animal existence. The two sides of lives, confusingly synchronized, reflect the negative atmosphere such as boredom due to avoiding physical contact with others and anxiety from international students' uncertain future plans.

The scene on Accommodation Life Under the Quarantine illustrates an association between the mental state of students and sheep. The trapped situation, coupled with mind-numbing

facial expressions, creates a connection between the two. The thought of this metaphorical link emerged from similar features: students confined to their accommodation during the pandemic, much like sheep fenced in. This visual metaphor is reminiscent of political satire, where figures are often employed to comment on societal issues. The metaphor combines the international students' life scenes and the scene of a group of sheep from the farm. the initial observation focuses on external life scenes, particularly the facial expressions of people engaging in conversations filled with tension.

The drawing Quiet Campus portrays a scene during the COVID-19 pandemic on a university campus, where the isolation of daily life is illustrated through human and animal figures, with visual metaphors representing loneliness and solitude. Their symbolic meanings construct the visual metaphors, especially where the little boy and the grown-up man as the central human figures in the scene are outdoors, attempting to enjoy fresh air and exercise. Their isolation is significant; they are depicted alone, emphasizing the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The boy on a bicycle and the seated man suggest different stages of life, but both share the same emotional response to isolation: loneliness. The pandemic forced people to be physically distant, and this drawing visualizes that sense of detachment. The other visual elements include sea animals and wildlife on the grass symbolising different visual content that adds layers to the narrative. The sea creatures, such as the large, looming figures of a walrus-like animal and a dolphin-like animal, represent the emotional burden of isolation in the two figures in the drawing. These creatures, traditionally seen as solitary in vast oceans, reflect the mental state of the characters, they are projections of the two people in the drawing and their shared loneliness bound their feelings and disconnection. The walrus and the dolphin shapes meet up in the water wrinkles patterns that are accompanied by the fish patterns corresponding with every visual element in a real-life scene, constructing a system of visual metaphors in the narrative. Overall, the drawing communicates themes of isolation, emotional burden, and the tension between normalcy and restriction. The use of animals and surreal imagery heightens the emotional impact, making the sense of loneliness more palpable. It contrasts the freedom of animals with the constrictions on human life, portraying the strange new reality shaped by the pandemic.

As Charles Darwin pointed out, “The power of communication between the members of the same tribe utilizing language has been of paramount importance in the development of man; the force of language is much aided by the expressive movements of the face and body” (*The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, 1872, p. 354). This insight ties directly into my design of the drawing experiment, where I investigate how emotions are conveyed through visual narrative, particularly gestures and expressions. As Darwin notes, the face and body are integral to communication. These expressions have evolved into symbols and signs that are easily recognized when seen. In my drawing experiments, composing a visual diary mirrors the process of phrasing words in a written story. A graphic novel operates in two directions: describing scenes and conveying emotions. The settings establish a specific situation or 'stage' on which the action unfolds.

Transition to Visual Metaphor Study

In this series of experimental drawings, I practised a number of metaphorical visual elements in their visual narratives, one of the explorations of the boundaries in visual metaphors can be found in the "Dandelion (Figure 53)" in the COVID-19 Diary. This page offers a rich attempt to transform a literary metaphor into a visual form, much like the representation of students as sheep in the drawing Accommodation Life Under the Quarantine. In these drawings, I examine the rhetorical device of visual metaphor, focusing on the interplay between real-life scenes and metaphorical scenes. This relationship, where both start as abstract graphics governed by rhythm, prompts an exploration of how visual metaphors communicate meaning through symbolic representations.

This experiment focuses on the emotional and mental states experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to highlight the key themes: isolation, the search for normalcy, and the struggle to balance the personal and external environment. The use of visual metaphors, such as representing students as domesticated animals trapped in confinement, adds depth to the emotional experience, portraying the human tendency to adapt while feeling restrained. The visual diary illustrates how facial expressions, body language, and even mundane activities become significant in expressing underlying emotions, especially in times of crisis.

This leads directly into Chapter 3, which explores visual metaphors more deeply. The application of visual metaphor introduced in this chapter serves as a bridge to understanding broader applications of visual metaphor across different media. Chapter 3 expands the study of metaphor beyond the drawings of daily life into the fields of advertising, cinema, and cognitive and rhetorical functions, continuing the inquiry into how images can express complex ideas in ways that transcend verbal language.

This experiment provides a basis for understanding how visual metaphors operate in sequential drawings, serving as a bridge between abstract concepts and tangible, emotionally resonant imagery. In the next chapter, the study will move to commercial and artistic contexts, and the transition from emotional focus to more technical investigation becomes clear. This research method provides a comprehensive exploration of how visual elements communicate nuanced messages across various platforms, deepening our understanding of visual semiotics and metaphorical expression.

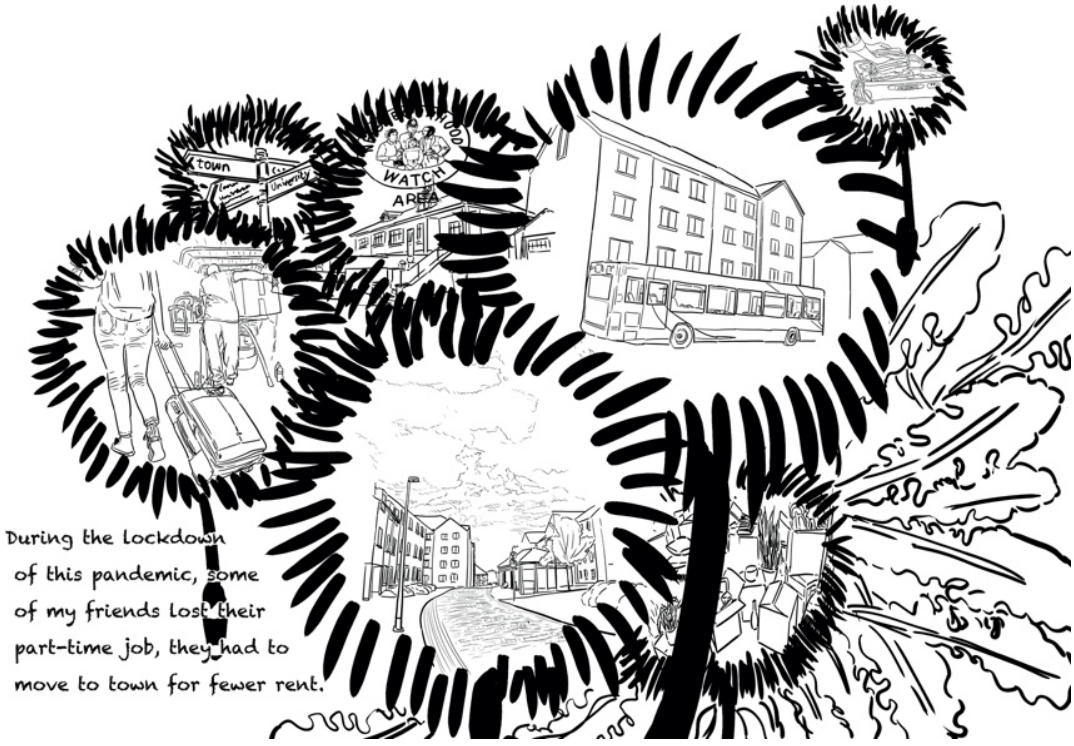


Figure 53. Dandelion, *Covid-19 Diary*, Yawen Zheng, 2020-2021

Chapter 3 Visual Semiotics/Metaphor

This chapter is devoted to my investigation of visual metaphors across various media: drawings, advertising, illustrations, and films. First, I begin by introducing specific aspects of visual metaphors that I focus on. These metaphors go beyond mere surface-level comparisons; they operate at a deeper level within visual expression. In the following section, I discuss visual metaphors in advertising, highlighting their practical applications since advertising relies heavily on visual metaphors to convey messages succinctly. Also, I explore how visual metaphors are employed strategically to evoke emotions, create associations, and communicate complex ideas efficiently.

Secondly, I engage in critical analysis to enhance my understanding and inspire my studio practice. In my analysis, I examine drawings and illustrations, dissecting how artists use visual metaphors to convey layered meanings. By combining theoretical insights with practical exploration, I aim to enhance my creative process.

Additionally, I investigate cinematic metaphors – those subtle visual cues that construct narratives, completing my study of the narrative structures that employ metaphorical expressions within visual materials.

In summary, this chapter bridges theory and practice, weaving together conceptual understanding, artistic exploration, and cinematic inspiration. By appreciating visual metaphors across diverse contexts, I hope to deepen my own artistic language and contribute to the broader discourse on visual communication.

In the next chapter, I will introduce my second experiment (following the first experiment, Covid-19 Diary), which is designed to examine visual metaphors and other forms of visual expression. This experiment will also test new approaches to visual narrative, expanding on the concepts explored in previous chapters. Through this study, I aim to further develop and

refine my understanding of how visual elements can be used to convey complex ideas and emotions in innovative ways.

3.1 What is Visual Metaphor?

In the study of metaphor theory, researchers and linguists have conducted academic research on cognitive metaphor. On the one side, Charles Forceville's (1994), and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (1980) description of *metaphor* is consistent, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." On the other side, Barthes (2003) starts from the ancient etymology of the word *image* - "to copy or imitate", he claimed the centre of studying image is the semiology and questioned if the analogical representation (the 'copy') produces true systems of signs and not merely simple agglutination of symbols. Barthes suggests that the rhetoric of images relates to language through "relaying" and "anchoring". In the relaying function, he claimed language and image are in a complementary relation mainly manifested in cartoons and comic strips; In the anchoring function, the linguistic message guides the identification and interpretation of the pictorial components of the image. Combining the two sides to see the position of visual metaphor, it has come to be recognised as an important rhetorical device in a wide range of multimodal communication situations (Forceville, 2008).

To comprehend visual metaphors, Elisabeth el Refaie (2003) suggests that we should describe them in terms of their underlying metaphorical concepts. In her article "*Understanding Visual Metaphor: The Example of Newspaper Cartoons*", she explores the "grammar" of visual metaphor using Austrian newspaper cartoons as an example. she views visual metaphors as pictorial expressions that engage in metaphorical thinking. Importantly, she aligns with the perspective that metaphors are cognitive phenomena, transcending mere linguistic constructs. In her research of understanding visual metaphor through analysing newspaper cartoons, the view she claims matches the main tenets of cognitive metaphor theory.

Besides having a peek into the fields of cognitive science, linguistics and advertising, Noel Carroll (1994) gives visual metaphor a restricted rule in film research. He defined visual

metaphor as a visual fusion of elements from two separate areas into one spatially bounded entity. E. H. Gombrich (1971) once described a political cartoon in a similar form of visual fusion. In the research of cartoons, instead of attempting a definition of a visual metaphor according to its surface realization that any visual depiction can be seen as an instance of metaphor, ‘provide that its use is intended to occasion a metaphoric thought’. (Kennedy. et al., 1993)

3.2 Visual Metaphor Application

As Leroi-Gourhan (1964) eloquently states, human thought refines its understanding by abstracting symbols from reality. These symbols constitute our language, mirroring the real world and providing a means to grapple with our experience. It is worth to mention, graphic symbols operate within the language of sight, distinct from verbal language. Their interpretive process involves navigating multiple dimensions of space, resulting in an extraordinarily rich system. Consider modern advertising, where figurative symbols abound, these visual metaphors convey complex meanings, often transcending explicit language. Whether subtly or boldly, they engage viewers, inviting interpretation and connection.

Visual narratives in advertising and picture books like graphic novels, comics and cartoons draw me into critical thinking of visual metaphors. Advertising relies heavily on visual metaphors to convey messages efficiently. Unlike personal interpretation, where metaphors evoke individual associations, advertising aims for clarity and impact. Symbols become powerful tools for transmitting specific information. Whether it is a sleek logo representing a brand’s ethos or an eye-catching billboard, visual metaphors play a strategic role in advertising. Picture books often associated with childhood, offer a fascinating perspective. While they engage readers through creative consecutiveness and layered storytelling, they also serve as vehicles for conveying information. The interplay of text and imagery sparks curiosity and invites exploration. The visual metaphors in picture books bridge the gap between imagination and understanding. In both advertising and picture books, indicative

images – those that point beyond themselves – hold significance. Whether it is a simple arrow indicating direction or a complex visual metaphor, audiences intuitively grasp their meaning. The images in advertising and picture books resonate because they tap into shared cultural knowledge and evoke emotions. Picture books aim at young readers, and often use indicative images to enhance comprehension. Similarly, advertisements strategically employ symbols to communicate messages swiftly. Visual metaphors connect diverse contexts, they invite us to explore the layers of meaning hidden within images, fostering a rich dialogue between creators and audiences.

According to Phillips and McQuarrie's research (2004), they adopt a rhetorical approach to analyze and comprehend advertising visuals. They develop visual rhetoric, specifically visual metaphor, using a two-dimensional framework: visible structure and meaning operation. The dimension of visible structure refers to how the elements comprising a visual rhetorical figure are physically depicted in an advertisement. Phillips and McQuarrie identify three possibilities: **Juxtaposition**, **Fusion** and **Replacement**. In the section investigating visual metaphors in advertising, I use modern advertisements and my own studio practice as examples to explore these visual rhetorical techniques.

Daniel Serig is a noted researcher in the fields of cognitive sciences and visual arts. His study on visual metaphor has been influential in understanding how metaphoric thinking extends beyond language into the field of visual imagery. Serig's work focuses on how visual metaphors are both defined and interpreted, emphasizing the close relationship between visual and linguistic metaphors. By examining the practices and exhibitions of diverse artists, Serig highlighted the various ways in which metaphoric thinking is applied in visual art. His research also contrasts two philosophical perspectives: Virgil Aldrich's inclusive view that all art is visual metaphor, and Cathy Dent's more stringent criteria for what constitutes a visual metaphor. Serig's conceptual definitions of visual metaphors serve as valuable tools for identifying visual narrative techniques, particularly in drawing and graphic art. During my visual experiment with the Covid-19 Diary, I noticed that certain illustrations incorporate visual rhetoric, resulting in distinctive visual narratives.

The Conceptual Structure of Visual Metaphor

Returning to the foundational investigation of the definition, it is crucial for subsequent research, as it determines the context in which the study can advance. Serig's research, "A Conceptual Structure of Visual Metaphor"(2006), explores how visual metaphors are defined and interpreted, highlighting their connection to linguistic metaphors. His research examined the practices and exhibitions of artists to understand how they apply metaphorical thinking in their work. In his research (2006), he suggested that metaphoric thinking emerged alongside the development of cognitive sciences. Through his examination of visual metaphor, Serig discovered that researchers either strive to define visual metaphor or interpret artwork as visual metaphor. He also asserted that almost all research connects visual metaphor with linguistic metaphor. The results of his study on the conceptual structure of visual metaphor stemmed from the practices and exhibitions of various artists. His analysis provides a comprehensive reference on how artists from diverse mindsets and backgrounds apply metaphoric thinking to visual artworks.

Serig's research into existing definitions of visual metaphor revealed two opposing positions within a philosophical context, each with a spectrum of possibilities. At one end of the spectrum, Virgil Aldrich (1968, 1971) considers all art as a visual metaphor. Aldrich (1968) quoted Picasso's words, "My sculptures are plastic metaphors. It's the same principle as in painting," as a preface and an example to illustrate his explanation. On the other end, Cathy Dent (1987; Dent & Rosenberg, 1990) imposes strict criteria on what constitutes a visual metaphor. They also emphasize another characteristic based on their theory: while Aldrich believes both the creator and viewer of the images are integral, Dent focuses on the interpreter's effort to establish the pictorial rules of 'grammar,' thus creating an isomorphism with linguistic notions of metaphor.

In Aldrich's exploration of visual metaphor, both the creator and the viewer actively participate in shaping its conceptual essence. He emphasizes that although artworks result from the fusion of two subjects, the viewer perceives this fusion rather than the individual

components. The subjects lose their distinct identities, merging into a unified whole. Consider Dandelion in the COVID-19 Diary as an illustrative example. As the creator, my intention is to convey the compelling "force" driving students to leave campus. I employ the dandelion (A) as my material, while the scenes—the buildings, suitcases, people, and vehicles (B)—serve to express this force (C). The dandelion acts as a framing device, capturing the essence of movement and transition.

Aldrich (1986) introduces the concept of "seeing-as." Viewers recognize one subject as another, experiencing a cognitive shift. To achieve this, they must look at object A, acknowledge that it is not B, and yet perceive A as B. This "seeing-as". Visual metaphors invite us to transcend literal boundaries, merging elements into evocative wholes—a dance between creator, viewer, and the interplay of perception. In Dent's studies (1987; Dent & Rosenberg, 1990), she focuses on pictorial metaphor, aligning it with verbal metaphor in linguistic contexts. Their research emphasizes the power of metaphor, drawing from shared experiences of tangible natural objects and events. Visual expressions trigger verbal metaphors, creating a dynamic interplay. According to Dent and Rosenberg (1990), pictorial metaphor involves depicting one thing in terms of another—objects that differ in kind but bear a tangible resemblance. While verbal metaphors rely on words, pictorial metaphors operate without them. The two subjects in this definition must be explicitly present, with an interaction between them. Additionally, one subject must be more prominent than the other.

Serig (2006) offers a contrasting perspective. He believes that Aldrich (1971) adopts a broad concept, while Dent (1987) provides a narrower characterization of visual metaphor. Serig explores a continuum of possible explanations, seeking consensus. His observations and interviews with artists provided new perspectives for these definitions, contributing thought-provoking insights. According to Serig's research, the study of visual metaphor remains dynamic, bridging artistic creation, perception, and conceptual understanding.

The central question in Serig's research is "Is there a conceptual structure to the creation of visual metaphors by artists that closely aligns with the cognitive view of metaphoric thinking?" This inquiry resonates with my own curiosity about how visual rhetorical techniques, particularly metaphor, manifest in sequential images. My research interest lies

in images that serve a narrative purpose, traced from the early visual narratives in ancient cave art to modern sequential graphic art (including graphic novels, comics and picture books), engaging viewers, weaving stories through metaphorical expressions. Reflecting on the history of visual representation, we find that it "did not begin with naive representations of reality but with abstraction." (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964). Early examples, such as Paleolithic incisions known as "hunting tallies" and Australian churinga (Figure 58), reveal a dual expression: verbal (rhythmic) motricity and graphism generated through rhythmic processes. Figurative art's earliest forms were intrinsically linked to language. Unlike mere descriptions of artworks, these early expressions were akin to writing. The fusion of visual and linguistic elements created a powerful mode of communication. To seek the rhythmicity and nonfigurative in modern arts, the thoughts must start from the arts of the primitive period which provides a comprehensive perspective and new departure. Here lies a comprehensive perspective—a departure point for understanding metaphor's broad conceptual reach across visual art and language. As Serig suggests, visual metaphor evolves alongside cognitive science. It adapts, transforms, and resonates across cultures and epochs. Its potential applications span diverse domains, from artistic expression to everyday communication.

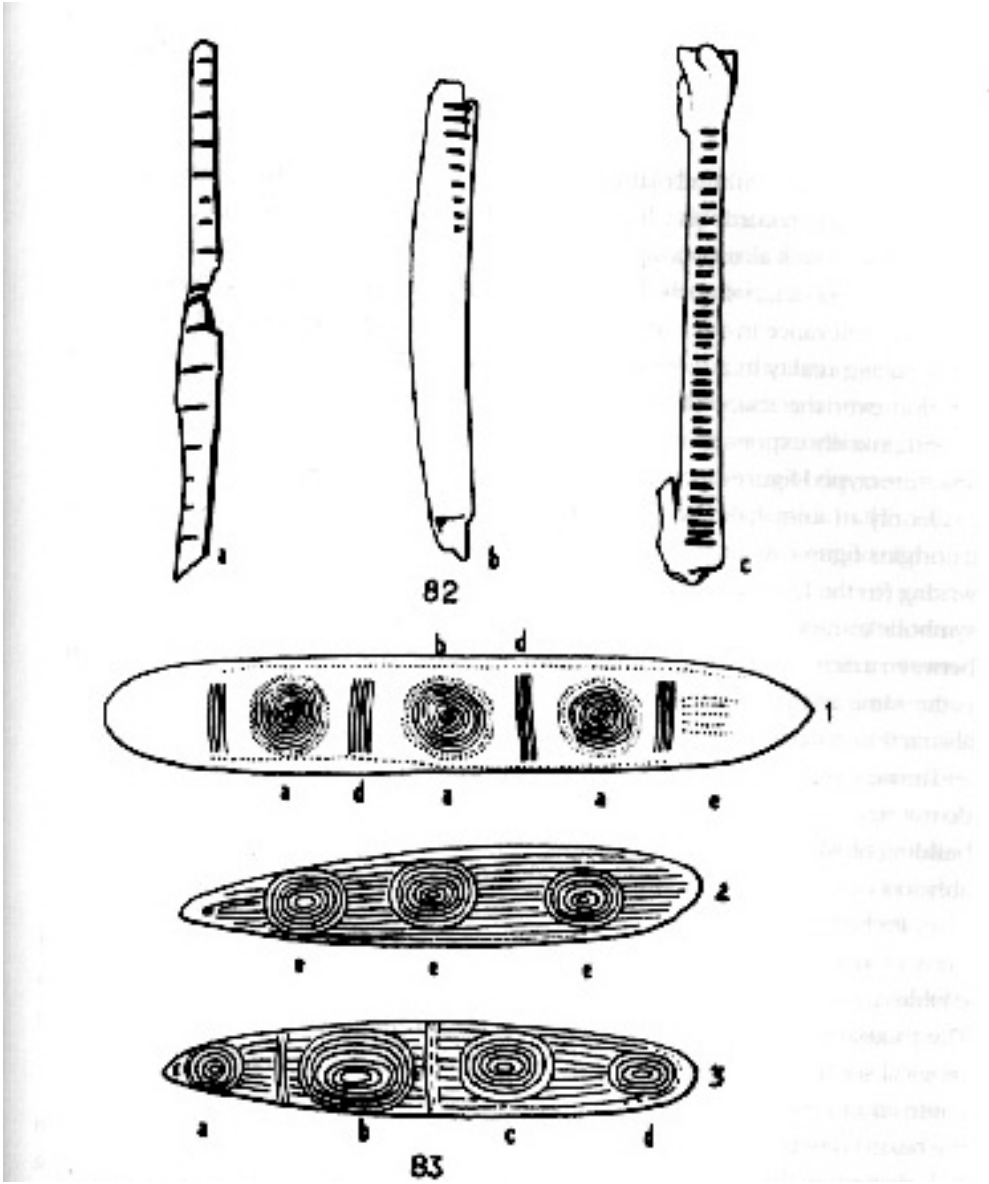


Figure 58. Paleolithic incisions “hunting tallies”.

Serig (2006) achieves open results after observing and interviewing a consortium of artists. The consortium in his research refers to a collaborative network of diverse partners – individuals or organisations – working together to address common research questions or goals. He concludes that the definition of visual metaphor continuously evolves through interpretations from both artists and audiences. His conceptual structure of visual metaphor could not be distilled into a simple formula, as it arises from the interactions within a complex

network of domains. Serig identifies a range of definitions tied to linguistic techniques and the relationships in artworks between creators and viewers. He emphasises that metaphoric expression is rooted in the dialogues artists have with themselves through their materials.

The Visual Metaphors in Drawing

Through analysing interviews with artists, Serig identifies several major elements that shaped how visual metaphors are constructed in practice. He found that the conceptual framework varied, revealing different aspects at each phase of the artists' practices. This included the initial conception of an artwork and its reception by the audiences. The evolving meanings are shaped not only by the artist's intention, but also by the cultural, social and educational contexts of viewers. Refaie (2003) similarly argues that the meaning of visual metaphor is highly context-dependent, with the boundaries between literal and metaphorical often blurred. In this case, visual metaphors must be interpreted through their socio-political and cultural frames, acknowledging that both creators and viewers bring distinct backgrounds that affect their understandings. In the following discussion, I look into how Serig summarised insights from his interviews and how artists embed personal and communal narratives into visual forms.

In the interviews, one topic emerged from Serig's research: the complex relationship between artists and their artwork. As artists compose their pieces, they draw upon connections with various communities, enriching their experiences and broadening their perspectives. Lee Misenheimer, an artist from Serig's consortium (Figure 59), eloquently expressed this dynamic. Misenheimer articulates how web-era design culture fostered a collaborative culture, a vibrant design community where artists shared their work, clients' projects, and ideas. In his painting "*Current*," he uses layered lines that envelop the human figure to visualise the social connections and dynamic communities. The layers of line are distinguished by varying shades, representing diverse connections and communities. His composition uses a horizontal layout and strategic framing of the artwork to create visual movement and immersion, guiding the viewers' attention across the artwork. The artwork employs swirling abstract forms to evoke emotional complexity, fluidity, and the interplay between the human figure and abstract elements.

Figure 59. Lee Misenheimer, Current, 2004, Digital-print, 36 x 60 inches.

My drawing “Hiding from the Room in Bed” experiments with similar visual strategies. Rather than abstracting experience, I create a dynamic, multi-layered composition in the space of a bedroom, the layers I design operate both formally and symbolically, such as the overlapping video call scenes and the strange perspective of the smart phone screen on the walls, the different video frames represent digital communications from various devices. These layers are put into a panoramic layout that invites the viewers to experience an immersive narrative and read across the space and uncover the emotional depth. I intentionally design the screen shapes and the video frames from everyday life scenes that carry symbolic weight, rather than using abstract graphic expression. The screen shapes with video call scenes on the wall imply multiple dimensions of hidden relationships, the relationships that the character in the drawing associate within their communities. The video call scenes with faces and messages on the screen suggest a narrative of digital communication, creating tensions of isolation and exposure. The figure in the bed, presenting a hiding gesture, contrasts with the active screens, creating a tension between disconnection and constant communication. This compositional approach reflects its broader concerns about mental health, digital intimacy, and the fragmentation of personal

space during pandemic lockdowns, which is the central topic that provides me with inspiration for my narrative drawing practice.

Figure 60. Hiding from the Room in Bed (Page 27-28), *Covid-19 Diary*, Yawen Zheng, 2020-2021.

From Serig's interviews to my experiment, I discussed the similarities in Misenheimer's artwork and my experiment. Learning from these similarities, I discover artists absorb divergent thinking and diverse viewpoints from others, often influenced by societal culture and phenomena. Through interaction and observation, they shape their metaphoric expression within art objects. These artworks reflect ideas that emerge while processing concepts from fellow artists or non-artists. In my drawings, the connection between artists and other communities manifests in two ways: the choice of drawing themes and the drawing style. The drawing themes are not randomly selected, they represent scenes from community life, particularly during the global pandemic. For instance, in the drawing of the Group Figure 1 and 2, diverse scenes unfold across different times and spaces. The human figures within these scenes epitomize sympathetic emotions and behaviours, capturing the essence of the chosen group.

Regarding drawing style, I have been influenced by other artists. I have taken cues from Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, particularly in terms of composition and lines. By understanding other artists' expressions – such as their use of lines and colours – I have honed my own figural expression. For example, sensing the sophistication and delicacy in Beardsley's illustrations, I have employed similar compositional techniques in my own drawings. Panic Shopping page 15-16 and 18, with themes like rolled paper and growing

nature, showcase this influence. Beardsley himself drew inspiration from various sources – the pre-Raphaelites, Greek pots, Japanese prints, and Rococo ornament. He synthesized these elements into a distinct, pure, black-and-white graphic style ideal for line-block reproduction. Beyond aesthetics, I have also valued woodcut painting techniques during my drawing process. Adaptations from woodcuts have influenced how I create shadows and textures, I will explain the drawing techniques further in the next chapter of drawing observation.

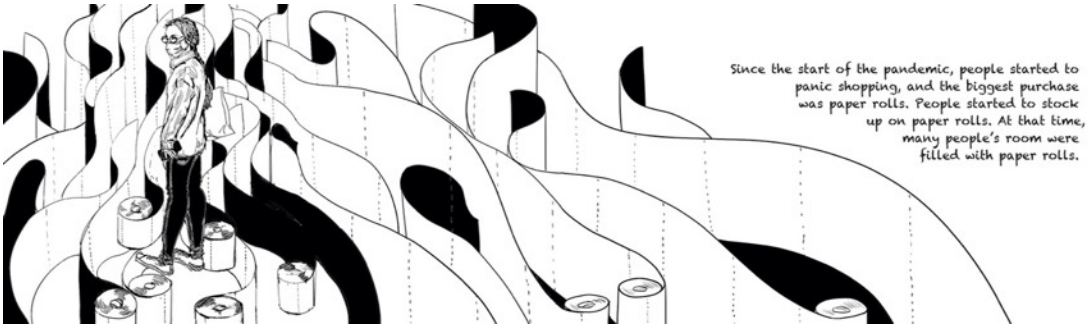


Figure 61. Panic Shopping Page 15-16

Figure 62. Page 18

“The thinking of the process in artmaking is reflexive, one of the features in this process is that there is no linear progression.” One of the artists in Serig’s research, Jason Swift, said, “Things radiate out in different points and then come back, stay there to clarify something that’s way over to the other side – such a big giant mess of stuff that just keeps rolling like a snowball and keeps building up.” From creating my drawing in the diary, I discovered the same progress of designing and operating the idea in layers, the drawing process was not performed in a single line, it was developed in different parts and formed along with the everchanging sense of expression. In contrast to literary writing, drawing is rather constructed by the artist’s instant sense of the content than creating in a certain sequence, not to mention the linear progression like writing a sentence. The same experience happened to artist Eleanor Moreton in her painting process that she shared in a virtual talk event. When she chose painting material, she indicated that the oil painting would be the first choice since the colour could be covered in that pigment. Therefore, she could rethink the change during the painting process (figure 3.). In the viewers perspective, to interpret the metaphor in the artwork, they have to look “all over the place” instead of just seeing single subject.

“The process of artmaking is reflexive,” notes one of the artists in Serig’s research, Jason Swift. “It doesn’t follow a linear progression. Instead, it radiates out in different directions, circles back, and clarifies ideas that seem distant—like a giant, rolling snowball accumulating layers.” My own experience creating drawings for the COVID-19 Diary mirrors this dynamic. Designing and shaping ideas occur in layers, not along a single linear path. Unlike literary writing, where sentences unfold sequentially, drawing emerges from the artist’s immediate sense of content. It defies rigid order, adapting to changing expressions. Artist Eleanor Moreton shares a similar journey. In a virtual talk, she discussed her painting process. Choosing oil paint allows her to cover and reconsider colours—a fluid approach that mirrors the ever-evolving creative journey (Figure 63). For viewers, interpreting metaphors in artwork requires looking beyond a single subject. It’s about

exploring every corner, embracing the messiness, and discovering meaning “all over the place.”

In summary, visual metaphor evolves with the innovation of new art forms and is widely employed in various creative visual works, including advertising and drawing. In the next section, I will investigate the use of visual metaphors in film and explore their application in other fields to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this concept.

Figure 66. Quiet Campus, *Covid-19 Diary*, Yawen Zheng, 2019-2021

Carroll (1996) argued that visual images are a unique type of symbol that does not require codes or a dictionary for comprehension. Spectators can recognize what an image represents through standard perception, based on the idea that people trust what they see

with their own eyes. The audience is inclined to consider the referent of the image as a physically possible thing. Once the visual image is accepted as the carrier, viewers explore connections and similarities among the referents. When encountering physically non-compossible referents, they search for symbolic meanings and test metaphorical interpretations to make sense of the image.

Reflecting on my drawing and using Digital Life (Figure 69) as an example, it effectively uses symbolic meaning and visual metaphor to communicate its themes. The three figures in the drawing, each engaged with digital devices, represent different aspects of modern digital life. During the lockdown of the pandemic, working remotely and digital entertaining occupied most of our time. The use of the internet for maintaining personal connections, professional dependence and its pervasive influence on everyday life. The “screen time” consumed our time and energy significantly. I composited this drawing intending to present the strange situation that people around me and myself experienced and the impact it has on our life.

The visual metaphor is further emphasized by the cables connecting the figures to their devices, symbolizing the inescapable tethering to digital communication. The black blocks behind each figure reinforce the isolating and consuming nature of digital interaction. The overall composition suggests a commentary on how the internet, while connecting us, also has the potential to dominate and control various aspects of our lives, from personal relationships to work commitments.

Figure 69. Digital Life, *Covid-19 Diary*, Yawen Zheng, 2019-2021

Chapter 4 Drawing Observation II

In this chapter, I present the line of thinking that guided my survey, selection, and construction of the essential graphic elements for my second experiment. I will detail the drawing aspects of my experiment, including the materials used, the drawing process, and brushwork techniques. Following this, I will discuss the visual storytelling and narrative discovered within my scroll drawings.

I engage with Philip Rawson's (1969) argument that visual principles in drawing emphasise that, while foundational elements such as composition, balance, and contrast might provide structures for a drawing, they are not rigid rules but guidelines open to extensive modification and interpretation. To investigate these possibilities, I adopted a non-traditional approach to drawing, incorporating figurative, representative, and metaphorical elements to establish a foundation for narrative expression. This approach is further enriched by the use of layers of drawings, which introduces the complexity of the visual narrative. Drawing inspiration from the concepts of "Hyperdrawing", I aim to create a new piece of visual knowledge in my experimental scroll drawings, showcasing how innovative approaches contribute to the creation of a dynamic and layered visual narrative. Developed through research by TRACEY, a drawing research collective based at Loughborough University, "Hyperdrawing" investigates the expanded field of drawing, pushing beyond conventional boundaries to explore its interdisciplinary potential. The term "Hyperdrawing" refers to drawing practices that challenge, expand, or reject traditional definitions of drawing, engaging with new media, spatial forms, and conceptual frameworks. Combined with the previous discussions on visual metaphor, I will consider various elements such as narrative structure, the scale of the drawing, the art style adopted, the rhythm and line work in the drawing, and the materials used as media for the experiment.

In the conclusion, I will summarize the results of the experiment and identify further research questions in visual narrative. This will set the stage for continued investigation into narrative theory in the next chapter.

4.1 Scroll Narratives

In my studio practice for this project, I have explored two distinct types of storytelling, each underpinned by different visual principles. My approach has involved an extensive exploration of visual languages and the use of varied artistic codes and conventions drawn from fields such as book illustrations and reportage drawing. This was particularly evident in my experiments like the COVID-19 Diary, where I aimed to test the boundaries of visual language structure through the lens of graphic communication, informed by my research into the evolution and transformation of the graphic origins of the Chinese language.

The scroll drawing *Travelling Story* (see Appendix 3) discussed in this chapter, presents a contrasting approach. It exhibits a systematic and articulated thought process but adopts a more fluid and less formally structured visual expression. In this scroll, the use of metaphor and symbolism plays a critical role in narrative development, allowing for a more interpretative and less literal storytelling style.

As my work progressed, the principles and styles of drawing evolved, leading to the continual development of graphic narrative languages characterized by new styles and the discovery of visual symbols. The early experiments, inspired by real-life scenes depicted in my COVID-19 diary, laid the groundwork for this evolution. The visual expression in my scroll drawing merges documentary drawing with clear, concise fine line drawing, akin to the visual style of graphic novels.

This experimental scroll drawing employs visual principles from diverse traditions, including fine art drawing, collage composition, graphic novels, and picture books. Despite their apparent differences, these styles converge to form a unique and cohesive visual

language that enriches the storytelling experience, demonstrating the dynamic and evolving nature of graphic narrative in contemporary art practice.

Like the rules of a game, the language of drawing possesses its own logical system, enabling effective communication with an audience. This system hinges on a set of visual signs and symbols that are widely recognized, allowing viewers to decipher the artist's design and intentions. This concept raises an intriguing question: Can artists design graphic narratives in the same manner as game designers craft games, with defined rules guiding the logic for readers or viewers to understand the narrative? This approach could endow a drawing with the characteristics of a graphic novel, or other forms of narrative.

Inspired by this idea, I started exploring visual expression in my visual narrative experiments and what hints they give out to the viewers about narrative. Through these experiments, particularly evident in my COVID-19 Diary and later scroll drawings, I explored a pivotal question: "How can linguistic forms be hybridized with narrative structures to formulate new rules and logic for storytelling?" This exploration seeks to merge traditional linguistic expressions with innovative narrative frameworks, creating fresh paradigms for visual storytelling.

Theoretical Framework

Philip Rawson[10] (1969) compared drawing structure with the rules of games in his book Drawing. He suggests that while both domains operate under governing systems, the nature of these systems and their implications for interaction differ significantly. Rawson did not match the rules of games to the principles of narrative in drawings, he points out that the rules of a game are explicit and fixed, designed to guide players through structured interactions and challenges. These rules dictate the boundaries and objectives, compelling players to solve specific “puzzles” or achieve set goals within the prescribed framework of the game. In contrast, the visual principles in a drawing are not as rigid or explicit. While a

[10] Philip S. Rawson was a specialist on Eastern art, and wrote widely on the subject in books and for various publications. During his lifetime he served as a UNESCO expert on museology in India, and organized a number of exhibitions on Indian art in Britain. Among his appointments were Senior Tutor at the Royal College of Art, London, Keeper of the Gulbenkian Museum of Oriental Art and Archaeology at the University of Durham, Assistant Keeper of the Department of Eastern Art at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and latterly Dean of the School of Art and Design at Goldsmiths' College, London. (Rawson, n.d.)

drawing may adhere to certain foundational principles of composition, balance, and contrast, these are not fixed rules but rather guidelines that allow for extensive modification and reinterpretation. This flexibility affords the artist the creative freedom to revise and reshape these principles to better express their vision.

Moreover, Rawson (1969) emphasizes that, unlike the explicit rules of a game that direct player interaction, the visual principles in a drawing are more subtle and suggestive. They do not force an interpretation upon the viewer but rather extend an implicit invitation to explore and interpret. This characteristic of drawing encourages a more personal and introspective engagement from the audience, allowing them to uncover hidden layers of meaning and connect with the artwork in unique ways.

However seemingly different, the initial idea of designing a game and a drawing that uses a narrative pattern share certain similarities. Both strive to captivate the audience's attention and engage them in a process of discovery and interpretation. Just as games use structured rules to attract and guide players, narrative drawings use visual elements to draw viewers in and encourage their respective audience, albeit through different means and with varying degrees of freedom and explicitness in the rules or principles they employ.

Building on the COVID-19 diary, I experimented with new mixes of materials and approaches. This period of testing and trialling was underpinned by influential theoretical frameworks and contemporary research. Rosalind Krauss' essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979) provided a conceptual foundation, encouraging an exploration of boundaries and definitions within artistic practices. Krauss challenges the traditional boundaries of sculpture, proposing that the medium had undergone a radical transformation by the late 20th century. Additionally, Bernice Rose's introductory essays to her seminal works *Drawing Now* (1976) and *Allegories of Modernism* (1992) offered critical insights into the evolution and reinterpretation of drawing as a medium. Especially in *Allegories of Modernism*, Rose explores how contemporary artists challenge the conventional boundaries of drawing, blending it with painting, printmaking, and even installation art to create new visual narratives and meanings. Krauss and Rose recognise that modern and contemporary art practices often transcend single categories, creating a hybrid and interdisciplinary

approach to art making. Following these findings, I designed visual narratives in drawing that could be experimented with and tested the boundaries and forms.

In this drawing experiment, I intend to try different materials and combine them in different layers. I adopted a non-traditional drawing type to practice the narrative theory, I used figurative drawing, representative trace and metaphorical drawing to set up the foundation of narrative expression. To fill in the narrative content, I used tracing paper to cover part of the drawing story. In the collaboration of the main storyline and covering film, they present the method of collage. The visual narrative is enriched by the collage method and creates interpretations with the layers.

From the angle of challenging the traditional drawing type, the idea of innovation comes across the experiment of "Hyperdrawing". The exploration of Hyperdrawing was organized in *TRACEY*[11] (School of the Arts at Loughborough University)'s second book, published by I.B. Tauris in 2012. This publication curates images to extend into the use of other materials including time, space and sound, such as those by Dennis de Caires who focuses on integrating drawing with other media and exploring narrative structures, and Sarah Casey who focuses on the materiality and temporality of drawing. Their artworks discussed the position of drawing and concluded the definition of hyperdrawing is ambiguous.

In examining forms of drawing beyond the conventional Hyperdrawing arrived at three categories, three new conceptions which push up against drawings' boundaries, against the paradigm. They are: "Self-Identified" which we take to mean the drawings that declare their own identity, transcending traditional classifications. "Intermedia" can be understood as a fusion of drawing with other art forms and mediums. "Self-Differentiated" for our purposes means the drawings that distinguish themselves through unique methods, materials, or conceptual approaches.

The drawing experiment in my research is fundamentally related to the nature of communication, as it necessitates an interactive relationship between the artist and the

[11] TRACEY is a research collective based at Loughborough University, dedicated to the study and exploration of contemporary drawing practices. "Hyperdrawing" is one of their notable projects, which explores the expanded field of drawing, challenging traditional definitions and exploring its interdisciplinary.

reader or viewer through the medium of drawing. In my work, the visual principles I employ are inspired by the narrative structure of graphic novels which employ a unique narrative style that combines visual art with textual storytelling. In the last chapter, I examined visual metaphors and compared their use across different fields. This discussion highlighted the varying roles that visual metaphors play in conveying layers of meaning in drawings, the practical applications in advertisements, and the subtle visual cues in films.

Following the concepts of Hyperdrawing, which emphasize the mixing of new and sometimes discordant approaches and forms, I will describe in detail the research method used in my later scroll drawings. This method includes the theories from Hyperdrawing, such as the accommodation of differences and even opposites.

My approach combines direct observation with imaginative projection, integrating what I see in real life with what I envision. This blend allows for a dynamic interplay between realistic and fantastical elements. My scroll drawings feature a juxtaposition of close-up views with distant perspectives, merging fact with memory. This combination creates a layered narrative, where unfolding stories coexist with single, impactful scenes. The visual content used in my scroll drawing is built around the rhythm and modulation of tensions and releases, creating a sense of movement and flow within the drawing. Patterns and breaks, logic and illogic, are key components of this method. These elements introduce a sense of unpredictability and complexity, challenging the viewer to engage more deeply with the work.

Using this research method, drawing becomes an active process of gathering, examining, sorting, and rearranging images and experiences to create entirely new visual statements. These statements reflect the contemporary experience of living, capturing the essence of our times. By drawing scenes from real life as visual references, I transform them into graphic narratives that reimagine my memories and observations. This approach is not just about discovering existing details but about constructing new, expressive narratives that present the dynamic interaction of personal and collective experiences.

My experimental drawings are deeply contextual, deriving from and responding to the ongoing social, cultural, and technological changes that shape our world. They explore themes of time and travel, mobility and immobility, health and viral illness, language and

communication, and the balance between freedoms and restrictions. These works are timely, reflecting the complexities of our current period, and they resonate with the emotional and psychological landscapes of modern life. By incorporating rhythm, tension and modulation, along with text integration, my drawings offer a rich, multifaceted visual experience that reflects both the complexity of real life and the imaginative potential of visual art.

Scale

In order to direct a viewer's attention around a drawing that utilizes collage, the mixing of visual languages, and changes of formal order on a large scale, it is necessary to consider how the drawing exists in space. The reading distance of large-scale parts is different from that for details: a person must move toward and away from the drawing. In addition, the scroll format leads the viewer along a wall and across a corner, linking together the narrative flow with the mobility of the viewer. This spatial interaction enhances the dynamic relationship between the viewer and the artwork, encouraging a deeper engagement with the visual narrative.

Michel de Certeau's discussion of *trajectory* in *The practice of everyday life* offers a compelling theoretical frame through which to consider this relationship between narrative flow and viewer mobility. He discusses the lived, temporal movement of walking through a city and the static, flattened representation of that movement on a map. While the map presents a neat, reversible line, the actual trajectory is a sequence of irreversible acts, shaped by timing, attention, and opportunity (1984, pp. 35-36). In a similar case, the viewer's physical journey along a scroll drawing is not simply a visual tracing of a linear artwork, it is a performance that unfolds in time. As viewers physically move along to read the scroll, their changing positions form an active reading experience, turning observation into a tactical, interpretive act. De Certeau discusses between imposed strategies, such as the layout of a city or the structured format of the scroll, and tactics, which are the improvised, bodily ways users navigate these systems. In this context, viewers create their own rhythm of reading: walking at different speeds, pausing, stepping back, or leaning in. These movements mirror the pacing of the narrative, allowing the visual flow to unfold not

just through image sequencing but through spatial engagement. The scroll, therefore, is not only seen but performed, and its meaning is shaped through the viewer’s bodily negotiation with the artwork's spatial design.

If the readers view the scroll drawings from a seated position, at a distance like how we typically read books, they can investigate the details and analyze the narrative contained in a specific area of the drawings (Figure 70). The tradition of drawing requires a rectangular shape of a blank sheet of drawing paper. Illustrations in picture books such as graphic novels and comics also have a tradition of using a square or rectangular shape of the page. The scale of a traditional drawing and a page of illustration only differ in size. Although the scroll I made is long and needs to be rolled to view, it can still be read while stationary. For example, if the viewer puts the scroll on the desk and reads it by rolling one side and pulling to release the other side. This seated nature of the experience affords a certain type of concentration and analysis, as it does not involve moving around the work, looking at it from different angles, or walking toward or away from it. This static interaction allows for a focused and in-depth examination of the intricate details and nuances within the drawings. On the other hand, if they read the scroll from a distance, they could easily turn their eyes and observe the entire scroll, including its borders and headers. This perspective allows them to take in the space around the scroll, the other elements that accommodate the work, the context of the room, and the nature of the wall, floor, and ceiling. This broader view leads the reader to follow the scroll narrative in a direction that aligns with the overall spatial context.

Figure 70. Scroll Drawing viewing, Yawen Zheng, 2025

This scroll drawing I made has a horizontal reading sequence, from left to right, the transitions link six scenes as a travelling story. Different transitions might show the connection between two spaces and time. When the spaces work together as the background of the drawing, the perspective I want to create as the fundamental tone of the drawing becomes the key to constructing the scale.

Figure 71. Travelling Story, Yawen Zheng, 2023

Figure 72. Travelling Story, Yawen Zheng, 2023

Line work

Line is one of the most fundamental elements in drawing, I experimented with a range of expressive, structural, and narrative functions. In my scroll drawing practice, I use line not merely as a figurative boundary but as a conceptual tool, it involves rhythm, emotion, time, and spatial flow. In Philip Rawson's view, line is "an extension of gesture" that "records movement, energy, and intention" (Rawson, 1987), I approach the line as a dynamic force which transforms the pictorial surface into a stage for temporal unfolding.

The scroll's format allows line to function as a guide, it not only directs the narrative across the visual surface, but also across the temporal experience of reading. Tim Ingold (2011)'s concept of line-as-path supports my scroll format experiment. He emphasizes lines are not static outlines but paths of becoming: they "grow" through movement, just as walking makes a path. In my scroll drawing, lines emerge from the flow of thought and drawing movement. Some are continuous, acting like roads that guide the viewer's eyes like foot steps across the scene, others are broken or rhythmic, inviting pauses and interpretive leaps. These lines are not simply visual techniques but also narrative flow, they direct how a viewer navigates the story both spatially and emotionally.

Other than Rawson and Ingold, this approach I make also aligns with Paul Klee's famous dictum that "a line is a dot that went for a walk" (Klee, 1961), suggesting the performative quality of mark-making. In my scroll drawings, I intentionally try different line types, thick, thin, dashed, wavering. The line experiments are not just for texture, but to suggest changes in tone, rhythm, or atmosphere. For example, high density line arrangement evoke tension or interruption, while soft, sinuous lines suggest continuity or reflection. When layered or overlaid with transparent materials like tracing paper, these lines create a visual space with different dimensions, as well as a temporal layering where moments coexist and overlap. This layering technique enhances the narrative depth, allowing the viewer to interpret the scene not as a static single frame, but as an unfolding dynamic duration.

Rather than presenting finished compositions, I design many sections of the scroll as a sketch-like openness style. This aesthetic choice invites the viewer to participate in the "completion" of the image through what Scott McCloud calls "closure"—the mental act of filling in gaps between visual elements (McCloud, 1993), which I will mention in the later section and discuss further why it is one of the key visual techniques in my study of visual narrative, and how it informs my practice to new findings. In this scroll experiment, my use of line becomes an invitation: an open gesture toward interpretation. Thus, the line in my work is never merely structural, it is performative, temporal, and dialogic.

I experimented on different line expressions, and recorded the process and findings. The expression of curve lines shapes both the art style and the forms that are created by those curves. I drew a few testing lines before starting the scroll, not only to try out the possibilities that the brush and ink work together but also to test the suitable expression of lines in my later drawings. In Figure 73 and 74, I practised the free directional lines on tracing paper, and different volumes of ink in filled brushes. To form the aligned traces of the brush effect, I needed to hold the brush gently and vertically straight up, also with the flattened brush tip and split hair to make multiple tiny "tips". The ink volume needed to be stored mainly in the body of the brush head and ran through the split hair in a subtle drag of line drawing. In Figure 75 and 76, the brush traces are dry and contain particle-like gaps in one stroke, this effect was caused by the paper material. The brown paper has two sides, I chose the less smooth side to emphasize the comparison of drawing on brown paper and tracing paper. The end of one stroke on tracing paper was smooth and left a long tail until the brush tip completely left the paper. On brown paper, the brush tips left dot-like and scrappy tails, just like they were running out of ink. This experiment with brush and paper echoes the discipline of calligraphy, emphasizing repetition to achieve form, meaning, and expression. It also has aesthetic links to traditional Chinese Mountain and Water Painting[12]. I strive to connect the influences from traditional Chinese painting with Western watercolour techniques and expressions. This hybrid art style goes beyond providing inspiration, it represents a powerful contrast that I am intentionally staging, it is a

[12] Traditional Chinese Mountain and Water Painting, known as *shān shuǐ* (山水), literally translates to "mountain-water." fitting for a genre that always features these two elements, often in the form of a grand mountain peak and a waterfall or rolling hills along a river. Whether real locations or imagined settings, painted landscapes evoke the experience of being in nature and offer a virtual means of escape from the hardships of urban living. (East Asian Art Program, n.d.)

challenging collision between different drawing cultures and traditions, enabling me to create innovative visual content through a mixed drawing experiment.

Figure 73. Experiments on tracing paper.

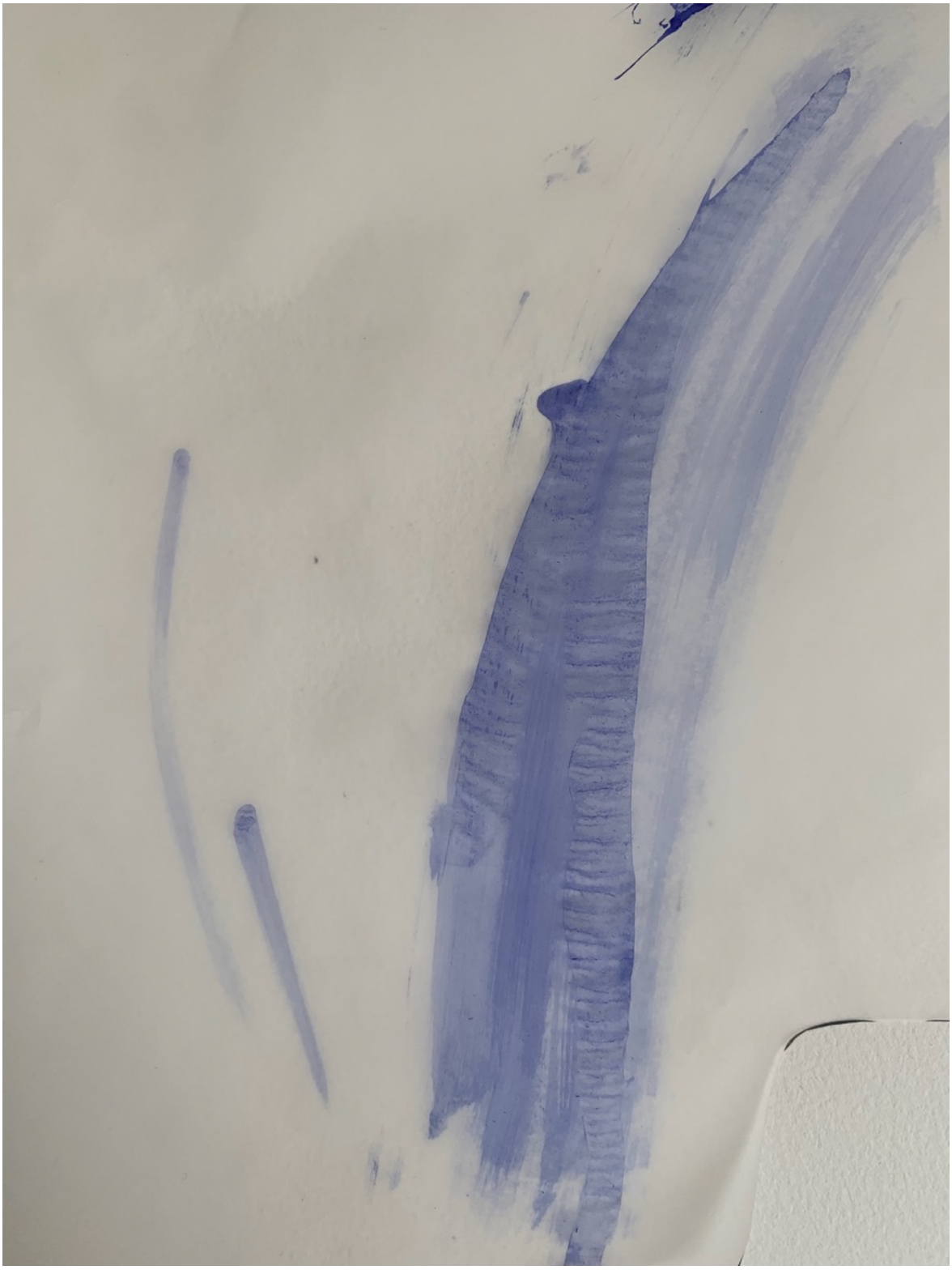


Figure 74. Experiments on tracing paper.

Figure 75. Brush experiments on brown paper.

Figure 76. Brush experiments on brown paper.

Following on from the above, while the inked line is consistent with calligraphy and Beardsley's work and both are influential in my drawing, the differences are as significant as the similarities. The two artists that represent the elegant-delicate and smooth line drawing art style, Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) and Sergio Toppi (1932-2012) I mentioned earlier in the visual research in Chapter 2, have provided me with a representative example of co-mingling of Eastern and Western traditions of drawing particularly line drawing. In Beardsley's work, the line is 'settled,' designed, controlled, and accurate, with the expression and meaning imposed by the artist. Borrowed from Beardsley, the line from my ink pens has similar control and accuracy, while making their own sense as they go, the lines are well organized to form shapes. Using the drawing content of elephants in this scroll as an example (Figure 77), the lines are well-arranged to form the shapes of elephants. This distinction highlights the unique dynamic in my approach, where the line itself contributes to the expression and meaning. Their line expression settles both the forms and techniques to complement the drawing content, leaving areas that could be filled with decorative patterns and enrich the symbolic system. They essentially built their art styles based on the line's expression.

Figure 77. The elephants in the scroll drawing.

Rhythm

The large area of background colours combined with scratches and white traces, creates the rhythm in this piece of work. I designed them as the background of fine line work to avoid overpowering the foreground of the drawing. The colour and pattern form a rhythm that not only helps with the composition of the scroll narrative but also guides the direction of the storyline and evokes the viewers' sense of feelings based on their perspectives. Rawson (1969) discusses how rhythmic elements can lead the viewer's eye through the composition, enhancing the narrative and emotional impact of the artwork. In my work, the background colours and textures establish this dynamic rhythm. The scratches and white traces interrupt the uniformity of the colour fields, creating a visual tempo that resonates throughout the piece. The rhythm created by the interplay of colours and patterns also serves a narrative function. It helps to organize the composition, making the scroll easier to navigate and understand. The visual rhythm guides the viewer's eyes along the storyline,

highlighting key moments and transitions in the narrative. Learning from Rawson's insight on rhythm, I intend to create a cohesive and dynamic artwork where every element, from the background textures to the fine lines, contributes to a unified visual narrative rhythm.

Figure 78. Rhythm in the drawing.

Figure 79. Rhythm in the drawing.

4.2 Material Processes and Approaches

Material Selection

The material, methods and processes I used were selected specifically. The key materials I used were the frisk cartridge paper scroll, tracing paper, calligraphy brush, watercolour brush, refilled watercolour brush, fine line pens and masking fluid. These tools include surfaces and instruments with different functions, different functions, contrasting textures and very different levels of flexibility and control. In this experimental drawing, I aimed to use contrasting effects of, for example, fine lines, and painterly ink to create visual tensions.

The frisk cartridge paper scroll provides a continuous, expansive surface for large-scale and continuous drawings. The ability to unroll the paper as needed offers a sense of freedom and fluidity, allowing for uninterrupted creative flow and extensive compositions. Another surface I used for drawing is tracing paper, used as collage patches it allows for layering, transferring, and refining designs without directly altering the original work. I have two main reasons for using the tracing paper in my experiment. First, they are invaluable for experimenting with overlapping elements, making precise adjustments, and testing out ideas before committing them to the final piece. Second, they are portable and can be easily moved to uncover the scroll paper beneath. This adaptability allows for seamless changes and alterations to the scenes on the background paper, enhancing the flexibility and dynamic nature of the overall composition.

I used calligraphy brushes to draw the main structure and the outline of the objects in the drawing. The calligraphy brush allows me to create bold, expressive strokes with varying thicknesses. They are ideal for adding dynamic lines and emphasizing movement, contributing to the overall expressiveness of the drawing. They significantly contribute to setting the basic tone of my drawing. The watercolour brush has different visual effects compared to the calligraphy brush, they are designed to hold the water-based paint in the brush and release slower than other brushes. They applied watercolour paint smoothly, allowing for gradient effects and soft transitions. Since they are perfect for adding washes of colour, creating depth, and blending hues seamlessly, I used them to lay different colours and created the overlap effects on huge colour blocks. Another type of watercolour brush I used was the refilled watercolour brush, they are the combination of a brush with a built-in water reservoir, providing a consistent flow of water to the bristles. This type of watercolour brush enhances control over water and pigment application, facilitating more intricate detailing and smoother gradients.

Fine line pens are the major drawing tools I used during the work of this drawing. They are fit for producing precise, consistent lines. I mainly used them for detailed work, outlining, and adding fine textures, contributing to the clarity and intricacy of the illustration.

During the drawing experiment, I specifically tried the masking fluid and explored its possibilities for composition and layering. The masking fluid temporarily covers areas of

the paper to protect it from paint or ink. They allow me to create edges for the shapes I need in the areas that are filled with blocks of colours. They preserve white spaces and enable more complex layering and highlighting techniques (Figure 80). For example, in the testing work of masking fluid (Figure 81, 82), the masking fluid was applied to protect the blank space, in order to form the contrast shapes, these techniques are designed to bring opposites into proximity, wet and dry, quick and slow, precise and expressive. Also, the masking fluid works as a way of creating a visual momentum to the drawing, a dynamic interplay between contrasting elements, enhancing the visual rhythm and guiding the viewer's eye across the composition.

Figure 80. Preserved space as highlights in the drawing.

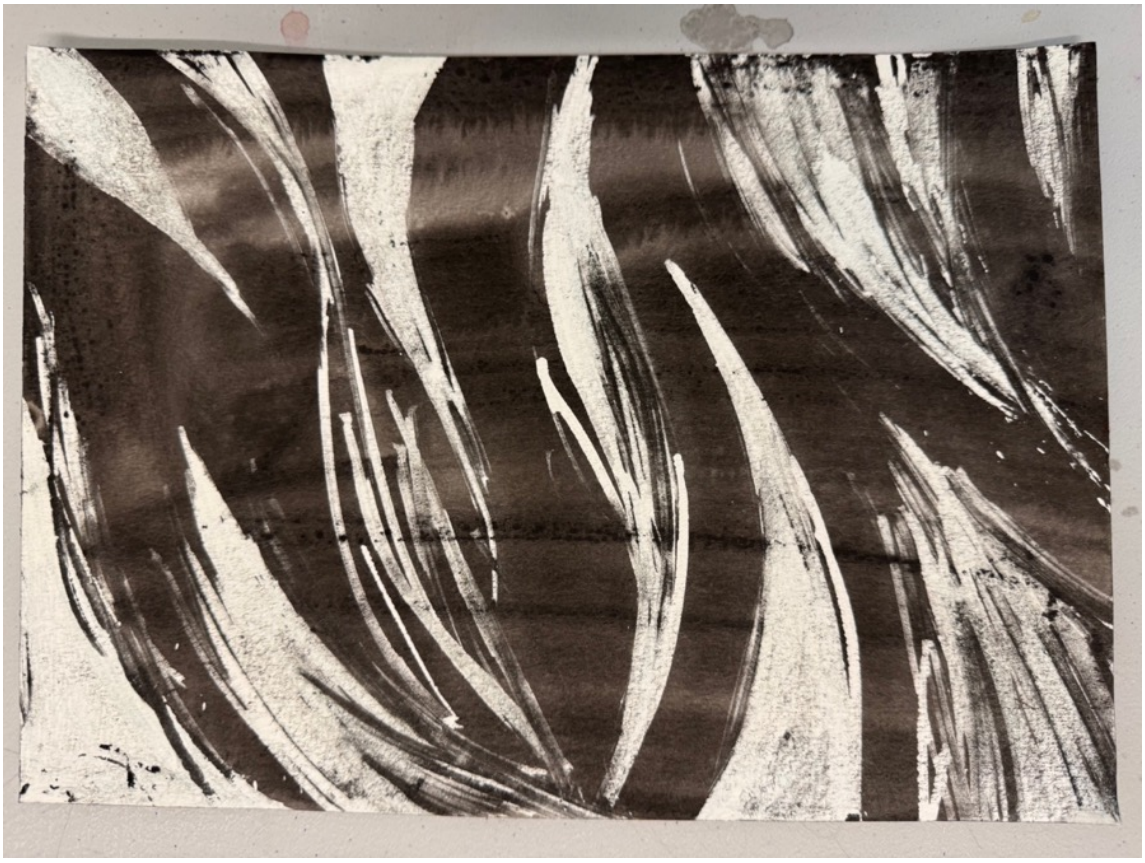


Figure 81. Experiment on masking fluid.

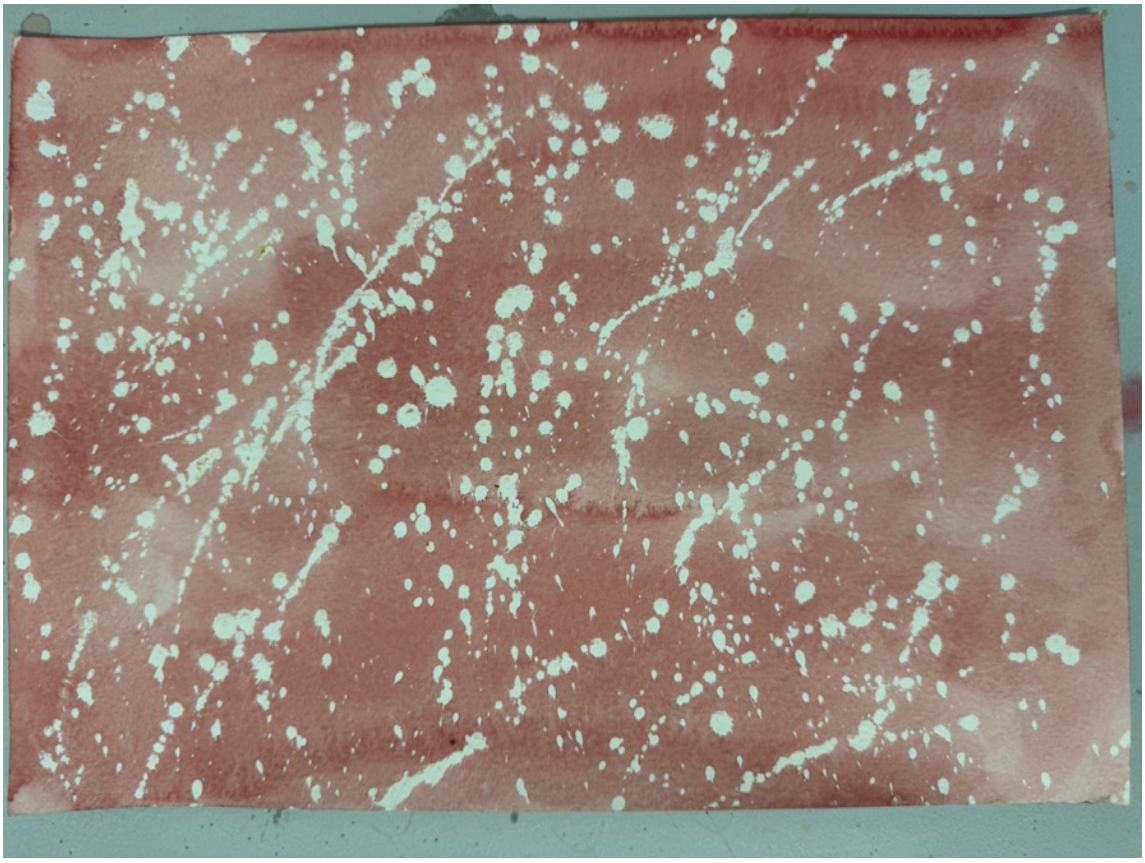


Figure 82. Experiment on masking fluid.

Drawing Process

At the preparation stage, I began by unrolling the Frisk cartridge paper scroll to a desired length, securing it in place to provide a stable working surface. Hence, I decided to pin it on the wall at a suitable height that I could view and draw on. The expansive space encouraged large, uninhibited gestures and broad compositions. I first observed the space in my studio and planned to spread the scroll paper against the wall. Since the size of the single face of the wall limited the length of the scroll paper I needed to extend, I chose to make the scroll "turn" at the corner between the two faces of the wall (Figure 83). The scroll paper changed perspective when going through the corner, and the area of paper around the corner needed to be treated carefully during the drawing process.

Figure 83. The “turn” of the drawing on the wall

The development process of the drawing involved the thinking length of the scroll paper, the narrative flow and the composition of the drawing overall, the transitions and the specific drawing content. In this long period of gathering and collecting ideas, there were a few tests that failed to apply to the final scroll drawing experiment. Except for the tool testing such as the masking fluid and the brush and tracing paper, I designed a selection of the draft composition on a length of scroll drawing (Figure 84).

When the draft composition was applied to the scroll pinning on the wall, I started the initial sketching by using fine-line pens, I sketched the basic outlines of my design and settled on the main structure of the drawing. This initial phase focused on building the overall structure and composition of the piece. I especially paid attention to the dynamic

lines and movement, I used the calligraphy brush to add bold, expressive strokes. These dynamic lines introduced a sense of movement and energy, emphasizing key areas of the composition. Except for the draft compositions, I experimented with presenting the perspective on the scrolls (Figure 87, 88) and the transition of scenes in the storytelling (Figure 85, 86), the bulk of the drawings are attached in Appendix 1. From these two types of experiments, I have selected the visual possibilities that could form the scroll narrative and suitable visual content to express the narrative techniques.

After the sketching, I continued with the layering and refinement process. Firstly, I painted the layer of colour blocks, with the watercolour brush and refilled watercolour brush. I applied washes of colour to the drawing. The combination of these tools allowed for both broad, sweeping areas of colour and delicate, controlled shading. The nature of the watercolour blocks decided their place as the first layer of the drawing. Since they cannot be removed or covered completely, the colouring process needs to be as precise as my design. These forms in different colours create a flow for the dynamic viewing process, their smooth edges guiding the flow, leading the viewer to explore the following flows. After the colour blocks were settled, I started detailing and texturing my fine line drawing. Fine line pens were used to add intricate details and textures, enhancing the depth and complexity of the illustration. This step involved meticulous work to ensure precision and clarity. The colour blocks and the fine line drawings work together to add layers of interpretations to the visual narratives, from the abstract and figurative drawing content.

At the next stage, I employed tracing paper to experiment with different elements of the design. By layering tracing paper over the initial sketch, I could refine details and test variations without altering the original drawing. My intention in drawing the scenes that could fill in the gap in the spaces where the fine line drawings did not cover is to explain “closure” and how to apply it in the visual narratives. The fine line drawings create the major visual narrative in this experiment and present strong visual effects that the drawing content could be recognized easily.

It is worth mentioning that masking fluid create a bunch of visual effects in one of my experiments, it was applied to areas meant to remain white or be highlighted later. After

applying watercolour over these areas, the masking fluid was removed, revealing sharp, clean edges and bright highlights.

The experiment yielded a multi-layered, visually rich illustration that effectively combined various textures, colours, and line qualities. The use of diverse materials enabled a dynamic interplay between bold strokes and fine details, resulting in a composition that felt both expansive and intricate.

Figure 84. Draft compositions of the scroll

Figure 85. Draft transitions 1

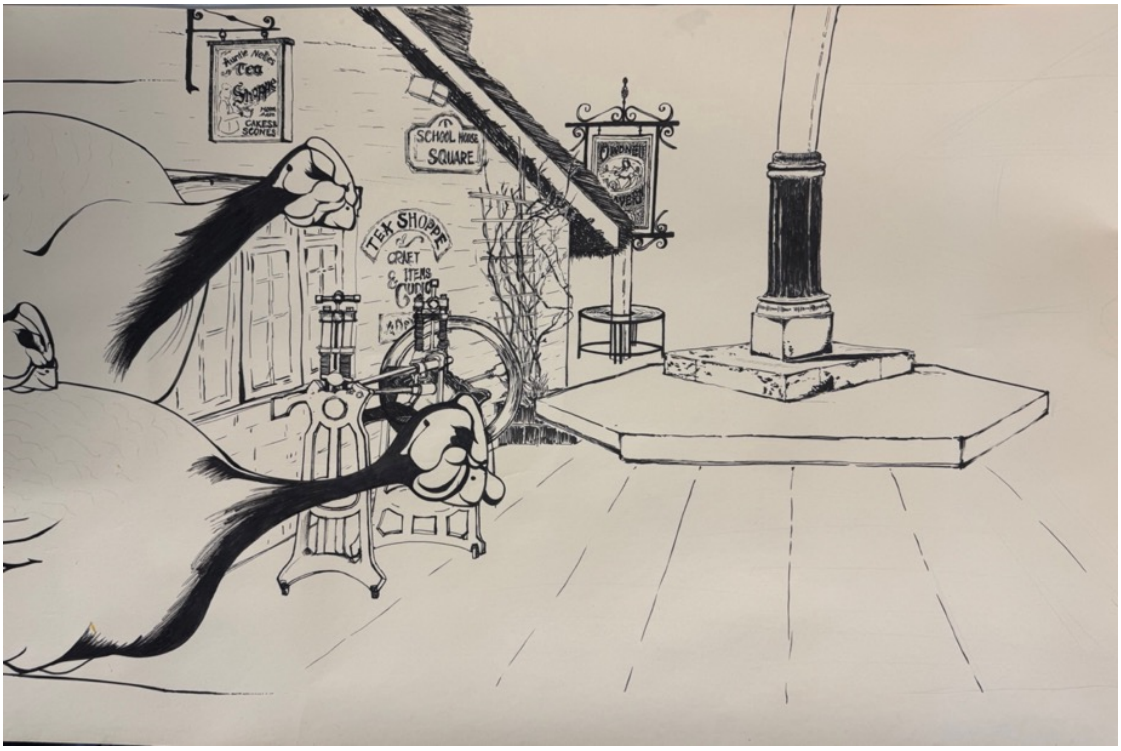


Figure 86. Draft transitions 2

Figure 87. Draft perspectives 1

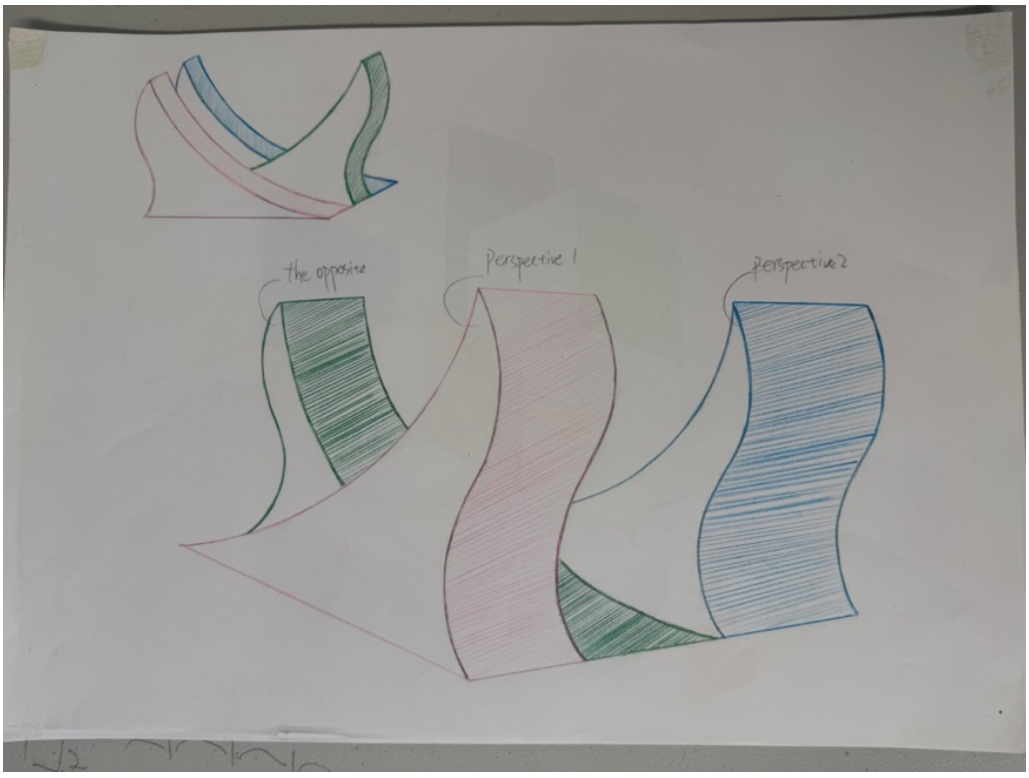


Figure 88. Draft perspectives 2

3D Narrative Experiment

As part of my research into the material possibilities of drawing and narrative form, I developed a three-dimensional digital modelling experiment to explore how hand-drawn visual language might evolve in spatial and interactive contexts. This stage of my project marked a conceptual expansion of the scroll format, adapting its layered structure into a digital spatial environment. Rather than guiding the viewer's experience through horizontal flow alone, the 3D version allowed visual and narrative elements that encouraged the viewer to move around, between, and through the imagery. (Figure 87, 88)

By learning from the geometric forms on 3D modelling software (Tinkercad), I composed an immersive environment where drawn fragments (figures, textures, architectural elements, symbolic motifs) were arranged not on a flat surface, but in depth, suspended across a navigable virtual space. The composition was designed not as a linear path but as a story space, where the viewer's proximity, movement, and attention determined the unfolding of the narrative. This transition from surface to space aligns with my broader interest in embodied perception, and aligns with Michel de Certeau's claim that "space is a practiced place" (1984, p. 117), which means the transition emerging through movement, not from fixed structures alone.

In these immersive narrative forms, I drew on the concept of the Möbius strip, a surface with only one side and one edge, where the distinction between inside and outside dissolves. The Möbius strip offered a compelling structural analogy for the experience I was constructing: one where narrative flow and spatial movement are inseparable, and where the viewer's position continuously loops and redefines the relationship between narrative elements. Unlike traditional linear formats, this model opens to non-linearity, inversion, and cyclical narrative motion, enabling a layered, recursive reading that evolves through physical navigation rather than sequential layout.

From a platform perspective, this work demonstrates the potential for drawn narrative to evolve beyond flat formats into immersive, spatially engaged experiences. My favourite example is the digital graphic novel *Phallaina*, developed by Marietta Ren and produced by

France Télévisions. *Phallaina* presents a continuous, horizontal scroll-like narrative designed for touchscreen navigation. Unlike traditional printed comics, it invites the reader to actively move the story forward through physical engagement, blending the cinematic rhythm of side-scrolling with the intimate tactility of reading. The result is a fluid narrative experience where time, space, and viewer interaction are tightly interwoven.

The reason I chose not to further develop this strand within the main focus of the current research is that I decided to maintain focus on scroll format and physical drawing research. I consider this experiment as the beginning of a future starting point. It locates narrative drawing as a flexible, hybrid practice with the capacity to contribute to the field of interactive storytelling, where visual language and spatial interaction co-produce meaning.

In this way, the three-dimensional drawing experiment demonstrates how narrative drawing can move beyond flat space to become an interactive, mobile, and spatially entangled experience, where the viewer does not simply read an image, but navigates, interprets, and co-constructs its unfolding.

This experiment demonstrated the value of selecting materials that align with the artist's creative narrative and intentions. Each tool brought a unique quality to the illustration, contributing to a cohesive yet varied visual expression. By exploring the possibilities offered by different surfaces and instruments, I was able to push the boundaries of traditional drawing and illustration techniques, leading to innovative and expressive narrative outcomes.

Creation of Visual Narrative

As a large-sized scroll drawing, the emptiness and sense of space are also integral parts of the narrative. Many researchers in both Chinese and Western drawing traditions discuss the significance of empty space in visual artwork.

For example, there is a tradition in traditional Chinese drawing to appreciate emptiness and consider it as part of the narrative. In François Cheng's *Empty and Full: The Language of*

Chinese Painting (1994), he explores the concept of “emptiness” as a central principle in Chinese art, emphasising that emptiness is not merely the absence of forms, but a dynamic space that allows for transformation and interaction between the elements. This concept originated from the Taoist and Buddhist ideas that regard emptiness as a source of potential and harmony. In comics, this concept of emptiness is defined as “closure” by Scott McCloud. "Closure" is a concept discussed extensively by McCloud in his seminal work, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993). The emptiness offers a stage for the performance of “closure.” In the context of comics and visual storytelling, “closure” describes the process by which readers bridge the narrative gaps between panels to produce a seamless whole. According to McCloud, closure is essential to how people understand sequential art because they translate broken visual cues into meaning by using their imagination and past experiences. If the drawing were covered with content without any space for imagination, it would appear lifeless. Thus, I decided to leave spaces open to fulfil the idea of “closure” in this experimental drawing, allowing connections to happen between the frames and details.

Drawing the empty space in the scroll is a deliberate process that allows me to explore and articulate the intended meaning of the piece from different perspectives, both as an artist and as a viewer. By planning the content and narrative in advance, I establish a conceptual foundation that informs the visual language of the drawing. When adopting the viewer’s perspective, I draw on my critical thinking and life experiences to envision scenes and imagery that effectively complement the narrative structure. This intentional approach ensures that each visual element actively contributes to the overarching theme, resulting in a cohesive and thoughtfully developed piece.

I added content to these spaces at a later stage when I felt it would benefit the overall experiment, as in building a visual narrative flow. One crucial aspect of the empty area is that once it is occupied, significant changes cannot be made. Therefore, leaving these spaces open initially provides flexibility and enhances the viewer’s engagement, encouraging them to use their imagination to complete the narrative.

In the fine line drawings for this work, I carefully considered which visual elements to emphasize and which to subtly suggest or leave open to interpretation. This decision-

making process reflects my exploration of "closure," which aims to guide viewers in actively engaging with the artwork by completing it in their imagination. One technique involved layering scenes on tracing paper to create a dialogue between the foreground and background elements. For example, in Figure 71, I designed a scene by closely measuring the size and perspective of the underlying background image. I then rendered this additional scene separately on tracing paper, positioning it over the background. The transparency of the tracing paper allows certain elements to be pulled forward while others recede, creating a layered interaction between the images (Figure 71). This layered composition invites viewers to mentally fill in the visual gaps, participating in an imaginative process that completes the narrative. By presenting elements in an incomplete state, I aim to evoke a sense of closure, where viewers are encouraged to reconstruct the scenes and narratives through their own interpretation.

Following the narrative approach in this drawing, I will discuss further narrative theory and explore more possibilities in scroll drawing. By examining different techniques and theoretical perspectives, I aim to deepen my understanding of visual storytelling and enhance the dynamic interplay between the viewer’s imagination and the artwork. This exploration will continue to push the boundaries of traditional drawing methods and expand the expressive potential of my work.

Chapter 5 Narrative Theory

In this chapter, I explore the evolution and application of narrative theory across various media, focusing on visual narratives through text and image interactions. This research provides crucial experimental ideas for my studio practice, particularly for the second scroll drawing.

I start by discussing Rick Altman's integration of narrative traditions and the interplay between narrative elements and the audience. To support this study, I analyze the artworks of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Barbara Kruger, highlighting their use of text and imagery to convey complex messages, paralleling Xu Bing's exploration of Chinese characters and their graphic structure.

Next, I introduce Neil Cohn's visual language theory, examining how cultural backgrounds influence visual lexicons in graphic narratives. I also incorporate insights from Will Eisner and Scott McCloud on comic narratives to study sequential imagery.

In conclusion, I summarize these ideas and organize them to inform the design of my next drawing experiment.

5.1 The Investigation of Narrative Theory

Theoretical Framework - Narrative and Visual Narrative Theory

In this research, I will introduce narrative theory from two major theoretical studies by Mieke Bal and Rick Altman. The narrative theory I learned from them has become increasingly relevant in my contemporary drawing practices that explore time, sequence, and spatial storytelling. In my drawing experiments, drawing is not merely a method of visualisation, but a narrative material through which events, relationships, and psychological states unfold across surface and space. This section studies a theoretical foundation for understanding how narrative operates within visual practice, drawing on key

contributions from Charles Sanders Peirce, Mieke Bal, and Rick Altman. When I critically analyse their theories and synthesise their key arguments on narrative, the analysis offers a framework for explaining how my drawings generate, structure, and modulate narrative content through visual materials and viewer interpretation.

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic model offers a foundational lens for understanding how visual signs generate meaning. His triadic model (icon, index, and symbol) that I mentioned in chapter 1 explains how a sign relates to its referent. In visual narrative, these different types of signs interact with each other to create layers of meaning that change over time and through interpretation. For example, in Xu Bing's Book from the Ground, icons derived from global signage systems serve not only as symbols but also as narrative units, their meaning contingent on sequence, context, and cultural familiarity. In my own drawing experiments, Peircean semiotics helps explain how visual forms—lines, symbols, metaphoric figures—function as narrative indicators, not only representing ideas but acting within a temporal sequence of meaning-making.

Learning from Mieke Bal's narrative theory approach, which distinguishes between the fabula (chronological events), story (structured presentation), and text (material manifestation). In visual storytelling, these layers unfold simultaneously. The fabula is implied in visual motifs and character actions; the story emerges through compositional rhythm and transitions; and the text is the drawn or spatial surface itself. In visual narrative, fabula refers to the events suggested or implied by a sequence of images, even if not fully spelt out. Bal's concept of focalization is particularly relevant to visual art: it refers to the question "who sees?", the relationship between the elements presented, which is "seen" or perceived, and the vision through which they are seen or presented (Bal, 2001). In my drawing, focalization shifts between internal and external perspectives, inviting viewers to adapt the point of view of a figure within the drawing or observe events from a creator's perspective. The scroll format, by inviting the viewer's physical movement while viewing the content, turns the viewer into a mobile focalizer whose gaze activates and sequences the narrative.

Another perspective, Rick Altman's model complements Bal's structural focus by highlighting narrative as a dynamic process. His studies especially focus on film, but are

applicable to visual media too. He proposes three components: narrative material (the content), narrational activity (how it is told), and narrative drive (how interest is sustained). This is especially relevant in formats like the scroll, where narrative momentum is not driven by textual cues but by visual rhythm, metaphor, and spatial layout. As viewers navigate the scroll, they experience a blend of progression and modulation, which are moments of visual continuity disrupted by pause, repetition, or symbolic density. Altman's framework emphasises movement, rhythm, and audience progression, validating the use of pacing, spacing, and visual inflection as tools to guide engagement and emotional response.

Together, these theories offer a hybrid framework for understanding drawing as narrative: Peirce explains how signs operate and shift meaning; Bal clarifies how narrative is structured and perceived; and Altman frames narrative as an evolving rhythm that engages the viewer. In my practice, drawing becomes both a site and method of storytelling—not just representing events, but inviting the viewer to co-construct them through movement, perception, and time. Whether on the scroll or in immersive space, narrative is not fixed; it is lived, layered, and mobile.

I investigate Altman's theory for further research on visual narrative since it aligns with such in a few aspects. For Altman, the traditional narrative theory is organized into three basic areas that define narrative: "**Narrative material** that encompasses the minimal textual characteristics necessary to produce narrative. **Narrational activity** involves the presence of a narrating instance capable of presenting and organizing the narrative material. **Narrative drive** designates a reading practice required for narrative material and narrational activity to surface in the interpretive process." (Altman, 2008) His new approach to narrative analysis focuses on the term "following", and it reveals narrational activity while organizing the narrative material. Under this theory, Altman introduces the "following-unit" as the smallest narrative element or unit that the audience can follow, "modulations" as the shifts or changes in narrative focus or perspective in the "following-unit", and "following-pattern" as the overarching structure or pattern that emerges from the sequence of following-units and modulations. (p.21-27) In drawings, the "following-unit" could be a stroke or a piece of repetitive pattern that constructs the larger perspective. For the use of the interplay of text and images, it could refer to a word or a part of a graphic

structure in the character. This is particularly evident in the use of concrete poetry, pop arts, and Chinese characters, which possess ideogrammatic value due to their graphic structure (as discussed in Chapter 1). The "modulations" play the part of the transition or the compositional techniques that add layers to the drawing content. The "following-pattern" corresponds with the aspect of visual sequence and flow, just like the textual narrative, the visual narrative follows a sequence, and the image's arrangement leads the viewer to navigate the storytelling. The viewer's engagement is guided by the linear or non-linear narrative in the images. The linear narrative follows a clear chronological order while the non-linear order unfolds in a more fragmented or episodic manner. He also emphasized the engagement of the audience in his narrative theory, which is also a crucial element in visual narrative. The engagement could be achieved through compelling imagery, designing dynamic composition, and strategically using visual and textual elements to evoke emotions and provoke thoughts. The relationship between definition and structure is equally significant in visual narratives. In the case of drawings, particularly those unframed and presented within three-dimensional space, the arrangement becomes a defining structural element of the narrative. This spatial organization and visual sequencing function similarly to how text sequences establish narratives in written works, creating a framework that guides the viewer's understanding and interpretation.

The English text and Chinese characters in the visual narrative, which I took as essential evidence to study the relationship between image and text earlier, can be explored through three examples that are worth investigating. Raymond Pettibon (b. 1957) is an American artist known for his ink drawings that blend image and handwritten text in a way that invites layered, often ambiguous interpretations. Emerging from the punk and underground zine culture of the 1980s, Pettibon's work draws on literary, political, and pop cultural references. The handwritten text in his drawings ranges from poetic fragments to critical commentary, and it often contradicts or complicates the imagery it accompanies. In works such as *No Title (But the sand...)* (Figure 89) and *No Title (I blush to...)* (Figure 90), Pettibon combines figurative drawings with narrative captions that create tension between the seen and the said. The expressive line work and spontaneous aesthetic of his ink drawings evoke a sense of immediacy, while the fragmented, sometimes cryptic texts provoke viewers to construct meaning through interpretation. Unlike a linear storyline,

Pettibon's artworks rely on a collage-like structure of disjointed thoughts and visual cues, creating a visual-textual dialogue. His work is particularly relevant to narrative theory as discussed by Mieke Bal and Rick Altman: the shifting voices and perspectives function as focalizations, and the contrast between word and image generates narrative modulation that challenges fixed readings. Text and image in his compositions are not subservient to one another; rather, they exist in a relational tension that reflects complex emotional, cultural, and social narratives.

My second example is Barbara Kruger, an American conceptual artist known for her distinctive use of black-and-white imagery overlaid with bold, provocative text, normally red blocks engraved with white text (Figure 91). Kruger communicates through the language of media and politics, using a style that is sensational, commanding, and straightforward. She frequently incorporates personal pronouns like "you" and "I" into her works, engaging the viewer directly and making them an active participant in the artwork (The Broad, n.d.). The text in her artwork emphasizes the engagement and resonation of viewers, she uses the artwork to demonstrate an attitude and the concise text matches with the prominent figures in her artwork to make a firm stand. The message passed from her art style is clear and loud, pushing the viewers to interpret it based on their understanding.

My third example is Chinese artist Xu Bing whose work I discussed earlier explores Chinese characters' graphic structure with different forms of artwork. His works across from scroll drawings and calligraphy, to creating visual sign language systems. Using different media and techniques, he demonstrates the flexibility of creating Chinese characters based on their graphic structure and further investigates the code of visual signs. According to Altman's revisits on the nature of narrative theory, the narrative material, narrational activity and narrative drive are all evident in Xu Bing's artworks. The Chinese characters he creates in multiple experiments, such as *Book from the Sky* (1987-1991) and *Square Word Calligraphy* (Figure 92) use the visual form of language to build a narrative experience without a readable text, this could be seen as manipulating the narrative materials. The single character serves as the basic element through which Xu Bing conveys themes of communication, cultural identity, and the arbitrary nature of language. The narrational activity in Xu Bing's artworks could be seen in how he put his designs of

characters in traditional Chinese reading environments, such as scrolls and books. The narrative drive in his artworks could refer to the environments that invite the readers to engage with the interpretation of his character design, in which he combines English words with Chinese calligraphic techniques. This design leads the audience to explore cross-cultural communication and achieve an experiment on the fusion of two language systems.

Figure 89. *No Title (B n' W Express. Th' ...).* Reymond Pettibon., 2020

Figure 90. *No Title (Doing what he...).* Reymond Pettibon, 2020.

Figure 91. *Untitled*, Barbara Kruger, 1989 (Your body is a battleground)

Figure 92. *Square Word Calligraphy*, Xu Bing, 1994-ongoing

Since the Aristotelian revival of the late Renaissance, the plot-based definitions of narrative and plot-based notions of structure have dominated Western narrative theory. Altman (2008) engaged with Edward Branigan's idea from *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (1992) to emphasize the European standard of narrative composition that developed from Aristotle's definition of narrative. "Stories must be coherent; they must have a distinct beginning, middle, and end; they must connect their parts through clearly motivated causes; and they must expunge any material unrelated to this unity of action." (Altman, 2008, p. 3). Branigan (1992), as cited in Altman (2008), connects to Kruger, "Some person, objects, or situation undergoes a particular type of change and this change is measured by a sequence of attributions which apply to the thing at different times." (p. 6) He even extended the notion to groups of pictures and gestures or dance movements, in each of these categories, they tight together attribute a beginning, middle, and end to something. To take this further, Branigan quotes Tzvetan Todorov (1971), as cited in Altman (2008), and his five basic stages of a narrative (the equilibrium theory): state of equilibrium, disruption appears, recognition of disruption, repairing the disruption, and reinstatement of equilibrium. (p. 6)

Altman (2008) used Pieter Bruegel's painting *Children's Games* (1560) as a primary example of a multiple-focus narrative in visual art (Figure 93). This approach involves illustrating different scenes or characters within a single composition, each scene has its own storytelling. In this painting, the artist draws our attention to numerous small figures filling the foreground. (Altman, 2008, p. 204) The use of multiple focal points in this painting exemplifies how artists can utilize visual narrative techniques to convey complex, layered stories. Altman studies the space and the focus in the painting and concludes how complex visual compositions can serve as sophisticated narrative structures. In his theory of narrative drive that I mentioned earlier, he emphasizes the viewers' engagement with the narrative, and it could be presented in *Children's Games.* The multiple-focus narrative brings layers and enriches the painting's visual content. It acts as a complicated storytelling, inviting viewers to piece together the stories that are depicted within the scenes. From analysing the plot focus in Bruegel's paintings, it is obvious that how artists arrange the

composition or sequence of the plot in images decides the narrative foundation and the process they are interpreted by the audience.

Figure 93. *Children's Game,* Pieter Bruegel, 1560.

The conventional narrative structures are usually stable, an aspect which might not work for different narrative materials. While these classic frameworks of narrative provide a solid foundation for understanding the narrative structure, they may not be able to work appropriately for the complexities and innovations present in contemporary visual narrative forms. Traditional narrative structure determines the stability feature in their nature, making it challenging to develop innovative structures within them. The general visual storytelling in modern formats, such as digital and interactive media, often pushes the boundaries of these traditional narrative types. These "new media" formats are utilised to stimulate visual effects and are designed to capture attention. For example, the non-linear and interactive narratives found in video games and virtual reality challenge the traditional linearity and fixed structures described by Aristotle, Branigan and Todorov. These new types of narrative

normally create multiple pathways and endings, providing a more personalised and immersive experience for the audience. They are different from the traditional narrative not only in the digital techniques but also in the media formats. The evolution of these narrative types highlights a change to a more dynamic mode and encourages the audience's participation in storytelling, which allows the viewers to engage with narratives and explore them in a self-directed manner.

These new types of narratives continue to evolve through advancements in digital techniques, employing unique visual languages and various creative methods to communicate their stories. The relationship between visual language and narrative is symbiotic, and modern media expands the possibilities of creating new, multi-layered visual languages and provides the technical support necessary for building compelling narratives. Therefore, studying visual language in the context of modern narratives is crucial.

Visual Language

Drawings and sequential images have been a fundamental form of human expression since at least the era of cave paintings. In modern times, they most prominently exist in the forms of comics and graphic novels. In the study of visual language, I intend to start by introducing the research into visual language by Neil Cohn, who is internationally recognised for his research on the overlap of sequential images and language in cognition. Cohn has developed a comprehensive system of visual language theory. He defines visual language as "the systems guiding people's abilities to produce and comprehend graphic expressions (i.e., drawings), particularly those in sequences" (Cohn, 2020). In *The Visual Language of Comics* (2013), Cohn uses written and verbal language as references to conceptualise visual language and tests this concept with existing linguistic theories. The core components of visual language for Cohn are **meaning**, **modality**, and **grammar**. Meaning refers to the concepts or messages conveyed through visual elements, similar to the semantics in verbal language. Modality involves the system of drawing expressions, such as marks on the surfaces (lines and shapes), that create a visual structure, comparable to phonology or sounds in spoken language. Grammar in visual language is the set of rules

governing how visual elements are arranged and interpreted, similar to syntax in verbal languages. These components interact in the following way: “meaning, which becomes expressed through modalities, and is organized by grammar.”

Cohn identifies graphic patterns as a visual lexicon in visual language, comparable to words in verbal language. This visual lexicon, stored in the artist's long-term memory, is recognised by viewers and varies across cultures, as a "visual style." For example, American, Japanese, and Maya art each have distinct visual styles serving various purposes, like superhero comics or instruction manuals. Cohn uses these cultural variations to illustrate the systematic nature of the visual lexicon and its patterns across diverse cultural backgrounds. He references Brent Wilson and colleagues’ research on how children draw, concluding that the creators draw from their long-term memory and combine these elements to create novel representations (Wilson and Wilson, 1977, as cited in Cohn, 2013). This suggests that an artist’s cultural background and traditional graphic elements in their environment form their visual style, reflecting their cultural and social experiences. Similar to how monolingual individuals may struggle to understand each other across different languages, the question of whether visual language is universally comprehensible poses foundational challenges in visual narrative research. In my previous study of text and images, I based the research on the understanding of English and Chinese. This exploration reveals distinct modalities in the visual languages under their respective narrative structures.

Considering Altman’s (2008) narrative analysis theory, specifically the concepts of "following" (following-unit, modulation, following-pattern), we can draw parallels with Cohn’s visual narrative theory in sequential art. In Cohn’s (2013) framework, a "following unit" could be a single image within a series that carries its narrative. "Modulation" refers to how the artist arranges these images in sequence, while the "following pattern" pertains to the layout of a page or panel. Although Cohn (2013) focuses on two-dimensional sequential art, his insights into narrative structure are highly applicable. This framework can guide the design of experimental drawing projects within this format.

In exploring narrative forms, my research extended slightly beyond traditional text and images to include comparisons with interactive visual art, particularly virtual reality (VR)

technology. This comparison highlights how new technological developments are reshaping narrative experiences. In comparison to traditional filmmaking and animation, VR narratives utilize cameras and drawing techniques. However, VR's unique capacity for immersion sets it apart. Unlike conventional films projected onto a screen, VR experiences can deeply engage the audience, creating a sense of presence. In VR storytelling, three critical components are required: the camera, the narrative structure, and active audience engagement. According to the study "Multi-Device Storyboards for Cinematic Narratives in VR," seven key considerations are outlined for crafting VR stories (Henrikson, Araujo, Chevalier, Singh, & Balakrishnan, 2016). The most significant difference between traditional filmmaking and VR narratives is the concept of "presence," where viewers feel as though they are part of the story. This immersive quality is achieved through carefully crafted visuals, soundscapes, and interactive elements that engage the viewer's senses. From my experience of encountering VR entertaining devices, compared to traditional graphic novels, where transitions between scenes are controlled and deliberate in linear or non-linear narratives, VR narratives may involve sudden "teleportations" between scenes, enhancing the sense of immediacy and participation for the audience. These elements, including sound design, staging, lighting, and movement, are meticulously crafted to draw and maintain the audience’s attention. By incorporating these aspects, VR technology redefines the viewer's role from passive observer to active participant, opening new avenues for creative expression in narrative construction. This exploration underscores the need for a deeper understanding of visual language in the context of modern, immersive media.

The immersive experience provided by VR devices is distinct, as it uses optical aids to enhance the audience's vision, allowing for full control over the viewing angle through head movements. This level of interactivity gives the audience a sense of agency in the narrative experience. However, despite the three-dimensional models, the storytelling remains visually two-dimensional, as the designed perspective tricks the mind into perceiving depth and space. This controlled visual experience still relies on two-dimensional visual principles to convey the illusion of a three-dimensional environment.

5.2 Conjuring Graphic Narrative in Studio Work

In previous chapters, I have explored the graphic structure in ideograms, particularly in Chinese characters, highlighting the relationship between text and images. This relationship extends beyond direct visual interpretation and the decoding of early graphic structures in ideograms. I emphasised the symbolic features in the characters and how they contribute to the visual language in drawings. The narrative functions of text and images evolve, continually finding new ways to be brought together, they are especially evident in sequential drawings. In comics, manga, graphic novels, and picture books, text and images interact in diverse ways, particularly in how they manipulate space and time within panels, pages, or scrolls. Unlike literature, film, and graphic design, these visual storytelling mediums uniquely bridge initial concepts with static sequential drawings, offering accessible and engaging content. Building on the research of text and images, this study will draw inspiration from these findings to inform studio practice design.

The Words in Comics

Scott McCloud, a renowned comics theorist and artist, provides an in-depth exploration of the function of words in comics in his book *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels* (2006). This book can be read as a rhetoric of comics, offering readers practical and theoretical advice for creating aesthetically effective and engaging comics. It also demonstrates its arguments in a sophisticated yet visually appealing manner, covering a vast array of technical, artistic, and rhetorical tools available to authors and artists.

McCloud (2006) examines how text and images function separately, emphasizing that words are a fundamental tool for describing situations, scenarios, or cases. Text can succinctly compress a story by summarizing significant changes in a single caption, especially in scene-to-scene transitions. He emphasized our ability to "read" often

prioritizes text over images, and in content creation, text offers a broader range of rhetorical devices and uses. As text became the dominant form of communication, we developed an association between written and verbal language. In creating dialogue and sound, text is the sole tool for this task. In comics, text and images must work together seamlessly, ensuring that readers transition smoothly between the two without noticing.

By placing text at the forefront, McCloud emphasizes his research perspective: “Words evoke feelings, sensations, and abstract concepts that pictures alone can only begin to capture” (McCloud, 2006). Artists can manipulate time in their sequential graphic artwork, either compressing or expanding it and creating new sensations by combining text with images. Text is often used to represent conversations and sounds that images alone cannot convey precisely. As seen in the evolution of ideograms and phonetic language, these early forms gradually became more complex, capable of expressing a wider range of emotions and sounds. In studying Chinese characters, early oracle bone inscriptions were designed to visually mimic objects in nature and our environment. These basic characters later became the roots for new phonetic characters, as discussed in the chapter on the graphic origins of Chinese characters. In modern graphic artworks like comics, graphic novels, and picture books, text serves a similar role to sound, while images provide visual narrative value, much like the oracle bone characters. I compare modern graphic artwork to the oracle bone characters as an example that they both have certain sequences in arranging images and forming visual narratives. The development of graphic marks to images is also a history of the evolution of graphic storytelling. In my opinion, comics and graphic novels created in the English context are considered the visual language of English, while manga represents the visual form of the Japanese language. Similarly, Chinese manhua (Chinese sequential drawings) is rooted in Chinese language expression.

Henry Pratt, who researches narrative theory in visual media, conducted an in-depth analysis of Scott McCloud's narrative theory in comics and other sequential artworks. Pratt (2009) compared comics to film and concluded that the narrative devices in comics can be more effective. He identified four types of words commonly used in comics: “word balloons”, “narration”, “sound effects”, and “text combined with images”. These elements are essential for narrating the story and conveying information, often adding a literary

narrative dimension to the visual medium. By incorporating text to represent sound, comics offer a richer narrative experience than visual imagery alone. Text can successfully indicate characters' dialogue and extend the narrative into the auditory dimension, enhancing both sight and hearing. Even though hearing is stimulated by onomatopoetic words rather than actual sounds, it still breaks the silence of the imagery and connects readers' visual and verbal reading experiences.

According to Lawrence Abbott's research on the characteristics and potentialities of comics as a narrative medium (1986), text is often the primary focus of attention for readers, even though comics are a hybrid art form. Abbott argues that text guides the narrative and provides clarity, which is essential for understanding the story. However, I found this theory on reading experience only applicable to text-dominant content. When it comes to image-dominant content or a combination of both, the pictures tend to draw more attention, or attention is divided equally. This relates to the information capacity of words and pictures; if a piece of text or an image is highly complex, it will influence the amount of attention readers allocate to it. Research by McCloud (1993) supports this, suggesting that images in comics are not merely illustrative but integral to the narrative structure. Regarding reading sequence, my personal habits prioritize pictures over words, reflecting a common trend where visual elements initially attract attention before the narrative details are explored through text. This self-explored motivation encourages me to study more about the dynamic interplay between visual and verbal elements, which enriches the reading experience and highlights the importance of both modalities in sequential art.

The Pictures in Comics

Pratt (2006) emphasized the pictorial feature in comics, defining the graphic content as the main body of comics. I agree with this argument, as images are the essential elements that distinguish comics and graphic novels from textual literature. However, within this framework, the relationship between text and images holds a defining position in the study of understanding these visual narratives. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), McCloud identified seven distinct categories of word/picture combinations, there are seven relationships to link the word and the picture: “word-specific”, “picture-specific”,

“duo-specific”, “intersecting”, “interdependent”, “parallel”, and “montage”. These categories illustrate the various ways text and images interact to create meaning and narrative depth in comics. Regardless of the combinations artists use to create a single panel, the picture part always establishes a foundation for the narrative. Pratt (2006) identified three key functions of pictures in comics, they brought a unique reading experience than other forms of media. 1. A single picture provides spatial relationships to readers' perceptions, constructing the space and concept of the story for immersive engagement. 2. Readers can interpret visual rhetoric and graphic narrative through the picture’s art style. 3. Pictures visualise characters' emotional performances and mental states, offering readers a perceptual visual effect of the story. Analyzing different media reveals that interpretation connects to graphic content, artistic style, and emotional resonance. This could lead to an intriguing question, does a story conveyed through words leave more imaginative space for readers than a graphic narrative? This issue was partially addressed in my research on ideograms and phonetic language. Imagination based on text and images stems from different dimensions of thinking. Comprehending written language and visual language requires distinct cognitive processes. The further findings about this question also lie with Cohn’s (2013) investigation about how visual narrative involves unique cognitive processes that combine both linguistic and visual comprehension. He considers the visual elements provide context and emotional depth, while the text offers clarity and detail.

In addition to the research and studies mentioned above, another strong piece of evidence supporting the study of visual narratives through comics is the work of Will Eisner (1917-2005), often referred to as "the father of modern comics" by many within the graphic novel and sequential art communities. (Santa Clara County Library District, 2022). Eisner's concept of "sequential art" refers to the use of images deployed in a specific order to tell a story or convey information, this term is introduced in his seminal work *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), and it is foundational in understanding comics as a legitimate form of artistic and narrative expression. Eisner (1985) emphasized that sequential art is not merely about individual pictures but about the relationship between images and the way they are arranged to create meaning and narrative flow. In comparison to the approaching methods, Eisner defined comics as sequential art using simple phrases, emphasizing the

importance of sequence in storytelling. Pratt (2006) approached this concept by comparing comics to the pictorial narrative of film. He argued that film has lower flexibility than comics and graphic novels because film images occupy the same space consecutively, while sequential pictures in comics take up different spaces on a page simultaneously. Juxtaposition is a widely used visual rhetorical device in comics and graphic novels, enabling them to accomplish storytelling purposes through visual rhetoric. In contrast, video scenes only display the area within the frame, limiting their narrative flexibility.

In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner (1985) explores the principles of visual storytelling, including the use of time, space, and graphic elements to communicate a narrative. He discusses the interplay between text and image, emphasizing that the composition and arrangement of these elements are crucial in guiding the reader's experience and understanding of the story. This work, along with his other publications, significantly contributed to the academic study of comics and graphic novels, laying the groundwork for modern comics studies and influencing subsequent scholars like Scott McCloud. Eisner and McCloud's research defines the visual principles of sequential drawings, which provided valuable visual references for designing my experimental visual narrative drawings. In creating the two scroll drawings, I explored possibilities beyond the traditional definitions they summarized, identifying gaps in traditional visual narrative approaches. Furthermore, I aimed to innovate and develop new forms of visual narrative.

McCloud calls the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole in reading comic panels "closure." He considers closure as a medium of communication and expression that helps the audience understand the narrative. "Closure" acts as the agent of change, time, and motion. Time and space always have unlimited potential for experimentation in any narrative or sequential graphic art. Closure has been extensively explored in comics, film, and other narrative arts through the manipulation of time and space in rhythm, moments, composition, and more. Rhetorical devices in visual language and transitions in comics both contribute to creating closure. Between seemingly irrelevant or unconnected comic panels lies the connection that triggers closure in readers. The concept of closure deserves further experimentation in narrative art forms, especially in comics and graphic novels.

Pratt praised the narrative function of comics, considering their richness in conveying information to be superior to other media. He mentioned that controlling the timeline is crucial to achieving closure. When artists create different time gaps between two panels, they can choose to speed up or slow down the storyline. Comparing drawing as storytelling and drawing as fine art practice reveals a blurry common area between these two genres, proving they are not entirely different. Fine art practice encompasses a wider range of visual language, layers, and perception than comics and graphic novels, with both genres sharing a foundation in metaphorical expression.

Between the visual content and the message that artists want their audience to understand, closure can be triggered from different angles and dimensions, sometimes even constituted by multiple layers. However, closure in comics, graphic novels, and films relies on continuous and repetitive series of pictures and visual experiences derived from daily observation. This difference is also why people generally find fine art drawing more challenging to interpret than storytelling drawing.

Different language system has its corresponding visual language. As a form of sequential art in Japan, manga is an immersive storytelling medium where images dominate. The Japanese characters for manga translate to "pictures run riot" or "pictures unbounded." In China, sequential graphic artwork is called manhua, meaning "casual drawings" or "freestyle drawings." Unlike manga, manhua inherited the early Chinese sequential drawing narrative, forming a peaceful and metaphorical modern narrative. Manga excels in visualizing movement and is intensely vibrant, representing a significant advancement in graphic narrative. It is known for its minimal reliance on words, focusing primarily on line drawing and the visual development of each character. Manga's visually immersive quality pushes the limits of imagination, continually offering new narratives and appealing to readers of all ages.

Visual Language in Different Verbal Language Systems

Based on the investigation in this chapter, I designed my second and last scroll drawing experiment according to the concept of the relationship between Chinese characters and

images in traditional Chinese ink painting, and the “closure” in the visual narrative. The idea of putting Chinese painting style and comic visual narrative research together is inspired by Roy Lichtenstein's comic art style painting. Abbott (1986) mentions Lichtenstein’s comics, asserting that they can be seen as independent artworks or part of sequential drawings that provide the context of a whole story. The emergence of mass production and pop art influenced communication methods and created an environment conducive to the birth of comic art. In this context, language is constantly developing and changing, and reading has evolved beyond traditional paper books. This change affects not only language and literature but also visual language and graphic literature. In the previous chapter, I discussed Xu Bing’s art project, where he experimented with modern symbols and signs to create a communication system. Contemporary signs and symbols are more complex than their graphic origins, although they may look similar in conveying information. And Lichtenstein’s artwork explores visual language within the realm of graphic literature as well.

The structure of language determines the structure of visual language, thereby influencing the creation of graphic literature. As the panel is the fundamental unit of comic art—the smallest unit where the complex interaction of text and picture occurs—words play the same role in written language. The major difference between representational artwork and comic drawing is that comics direct the reader's interpretation more explicitly, limiting the perception of visual language.

This chapter integrates traditional narrative theories with visual narrative practices, drawing connections between texts, imagery, and audience engagement. By looking into the works of influential artists and scholars, the investigation in this chapter establishes a framework for developing new forms of visual storytelling. The research in this chapter discovers the evolving nature of narrative theory and its applications in modern media, guiding new research that needs to be visualised in experimental drawing. This foundation provides theoretical insights for subsequent drawing experiments, emphasising the importance of dynamic and layered narrative structures in visual language. In the next chapter, I will introduce the last experimental drawing and the approach taken for this research.

Chapter 6 Drawing Observation

In this drawing observation, I have come full circle in my research journey. Beginning with an exploration of the graphic origins of images and text, I progressed to investigating visual narratives in drawing, culminating in the experimental design of a graphic narrative using Chinese characters. This experiment examines how these characters interact with the drawing flow to create a visual narrative.

Building on the previous chapter's exploration of narrative theory across various media, with a focus on visual narratives through text and image interactions, I integrated visual semiotics from Chapter 1 to design an experiment that delves into the narrative potential of the graphic structure of Chinese characters. This experiment, conducted within the framework of scroll drawing, decodes the meaning of Chinese characters and investigates how they construct visual narratives.

Additionally, applying the concept of "closure" from sequential image studies, I experimented with this narrative technique in the scroll drawing, seeking to uncover additional narrative possibilities that extend what closure leaves to the viewer.

This experiment successfully synthesized the theoretical studies from earlier chapters, offering a comprehensive exploration of visual narratives. It provided answers to the research focus and set the stage for future inquiries in this area.

6.1 Visual Narrative Approach

The Graphic and Semiotic Structure of Chinese Characters

As discussed in Chapter One, the graphic and semiotic structure of Chinese characters laid the foundation for my narrative design in Lancaster Landscape. In this experiment, I extended those early observations into a large-scale visual narrative by using drawing combining the Chinese characters, which are recognised as symbolic imitations of the targeted meaning. For example, the character "雨 (rain)" (Figure 94) is shown in the image and integrated into the overall composition. The character itself is abstracted and repeated throughout this part of the drawing, forming a pattern that visually mimics the sense that the rain gives out (the interpretation of the origin of the oracle character in Figure 96). From the origin of the oracle character, the top horizontal stroke resembles a cloud, and the vertical strokes symbolize falling rain. I used the characters repeatedly to form the failing pattern of rain, and I manipulated the characters artistically to blend them into the larger form, creating a seamless transition between the character and the abstract representation of rain. The rhythmic pattern I create represents the continuous and gentle nature of rainfall. By organizing characters in different sizes, orientations, and densities within the drawing, I aim to achieve a dynamic and flowing sense of movement, abstractedly mimicking the rain when it falls. The curvilinear arrangement suggests the motion and wind force direction, vividly presenting the natural elements of rain to the viewers. In another part of this drawing, I created a different style pattern for the 雨 characters, as the pattern shown in Figure 90, I chose to elongate the shape of the characters, almost stretching to form wave-like raindrops. The pattern forms a tapestry-dropping texture, with dot-like elements, illustrating a light drizzle of rainfall which is different from what the previous part of the drawing shows. Compared to the heavy downpour in Figure 94, the rainfall in Figure 95 is more delicate and swifter, adding to the illusion of movement and flow.

Figure 94. Rain character narrative.

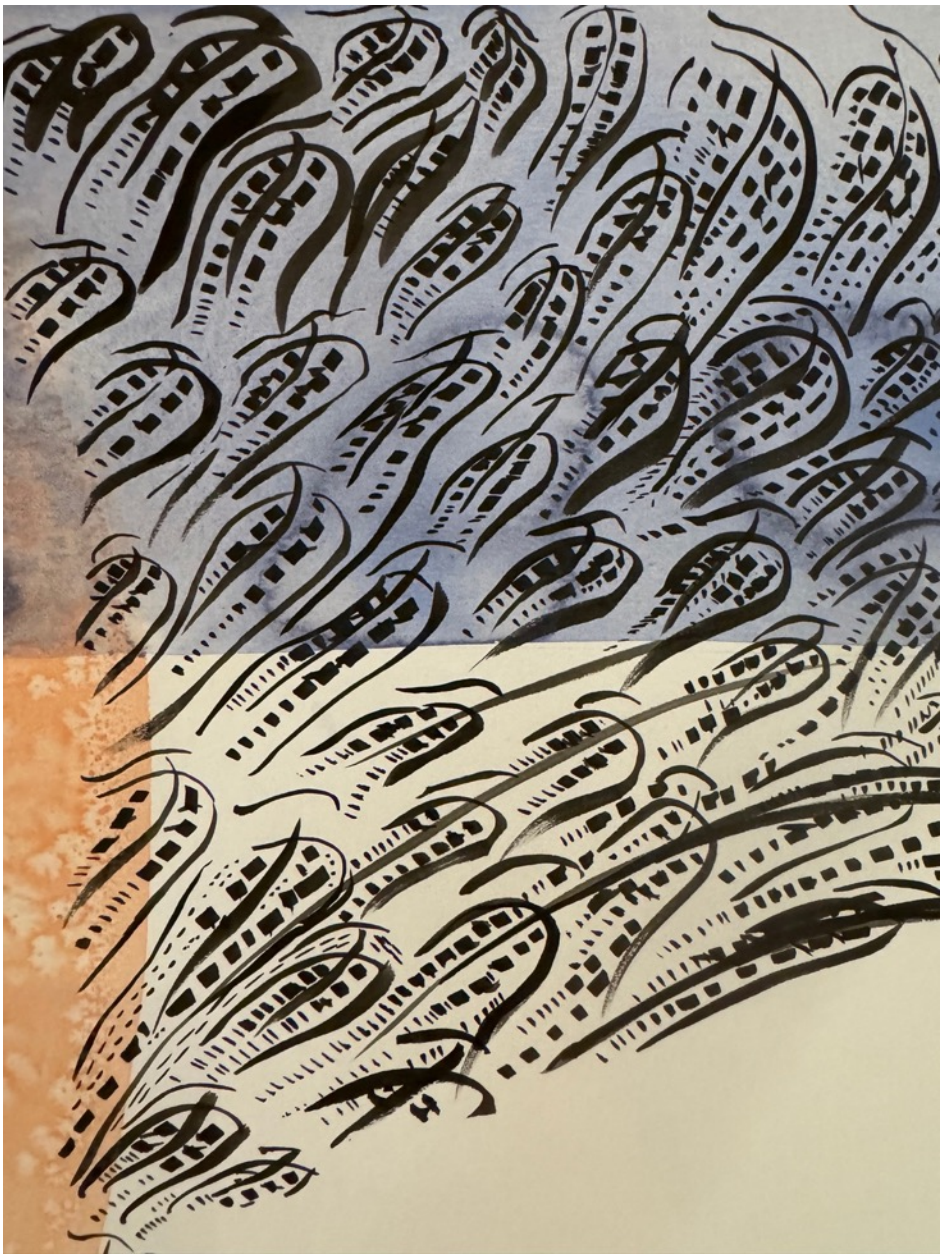


Figure 95. Rain character narrative.

Figure 96. The interpretation of the origin of the oracle character “rain”.

This portion of the drawing depicts an abstractive form of the Chinese character “石 (stone)” (Figure 97). The character itself possesses an angular, geometric shape, resembling the appearance of stone. I repeatedly put the characters in different orientations and layers, stacked numbers of variants formed by different sizes and shapes into a structure, similar to the stone piles, rocky hills or even mountains. The imitation I aim to create lies in the structural elements, the stone structure is the most prominent feature of their natural look. This abstract interpretation of a scene with a stone pile metaphorically and physically represents its meaning at the same time. It allows me to build a landscape that is both symbolic and literal. In Chinese culture, the character 石 (stone) is often associated with strength, stability, and endurance. They reflect the deep cultural reverence for endurance and immovability that link to intellectual and spiritual strength and symbolize resilience and stability, not just in the physical world but in moral and philosophical realms as well. (Kong et al., 2023). These qualities relate to the sense of squareness, straight lines and sharp corners, and contribute to my creative thoughts about building the form with its graphic implication.

In Figure 98, the scene depicts the tree above the building. The falling branches and leaves are organized by the Chinese character “树 (tree)”, the pattern represents a group of trees beside the buildings. The pictographic origin of this character evolved from roots, woods and plants, this origin inspired me with the features of these elements, and I visualized the features of these elements with lines and patterns. The force I designed for the pattern is leaning from up to down and left to right. In this drawing, the visual structure and composition are organized by the graphic of the character, for example, the graphic of wood and plant has filled the majority portion of graphic pattern. The repetition of the character provides a sense of rhythmic flow, mirroring the organic structure of a mass of trees swaying in the wind. The character is stylized and simplified into flowing, calligraphic strokes, with arranged lines and dots that create the texture of the trees’ image. The transformation of the character into a symbol blurs the borderline between text and image, demonstrating how Chinese characters can be used in forming complex visual narratives with their pictographic origin. The pattern built by the characters in this piece of drawing becomes part of the landscape literally and figuratively rather than just a word.

The stone scene and the tree figure like my earlier rain-themed drawings, illustrate how traditional Chinese characters' graphic function in drawing, and their symbolic function of modern visual expressions, merging cultural heritage with contemporary artistic practices.

Figure 97. The stone character narrative.

Figure 98. The tree character narrative.

Visual Metaphors – Flow and Closure

In Figures 99, 100, and 101, I used dynamic patterns function as visual metaphors that represent natural forces. The abstractive brush strokes with various sizes, directions and curviness, illustrate the sense of flowing (water, wind or organic movement). The fluid movement and the repetitive patterns echo the ideas of continuity and change, mirroring how visual metaphors connect disparate elements to evoke complex emotions and ideas. The application of dynamic patterns aligns with Daniel Serig's notion I mentioned in Chapter 3, that visual metaphors blend elements from different domains into a unified form, enhancing conceptual understanding.

The narrative of "closure" practised in this experiment is present in the space covered by the mylar papers. The areas under the paper leave certain spaces in different sizes that waiting for filling in content and transitioning the scene between abstract and figurative drawings (Figure 102, 103). It forms a contrast between dynamic and static, and a rhythm built by different tensions in composition. The contrast between the heavy, dark, swirling lines and the enclosed, empty spaces suggests a narrative from active to still. This could be seen as a narrative flow, a story arc, where symbolic features shift to literal features, and abstractive senses transit into figurative content. The dynamic flow patterns represent a visual metaphor of force that pushes the viewers to interpret the narrative, and the enclosed spaces of "closure" offer a balance of detail and representative meaning in the flow. I used this two storytelling to form a visual contrast that guides the viewers toward a sense of completion and closure.

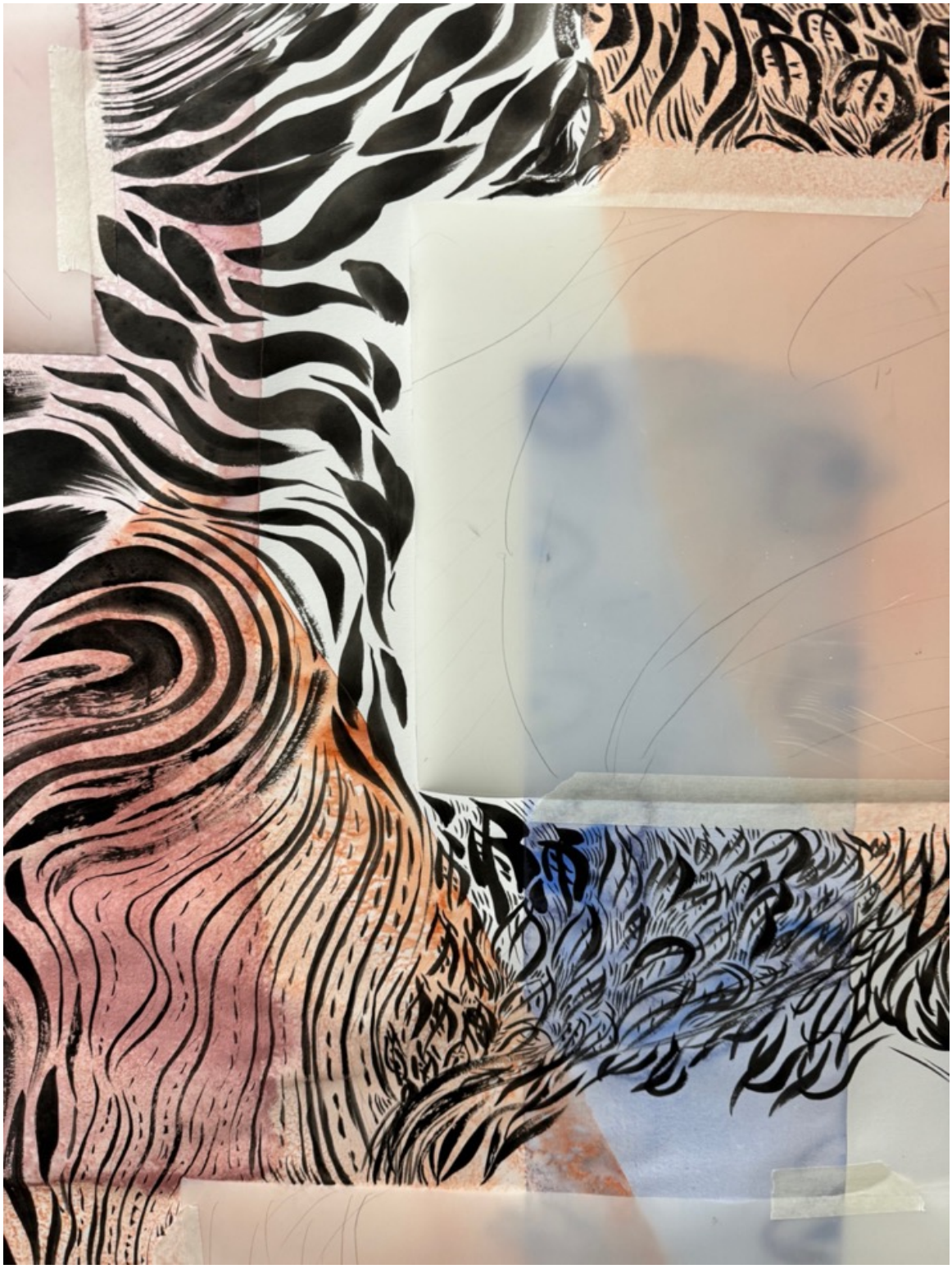


Figure 99. Dynamic patterns.

Figure 100. Dynamic patterns.

Figure 101. Dynamic patterns.

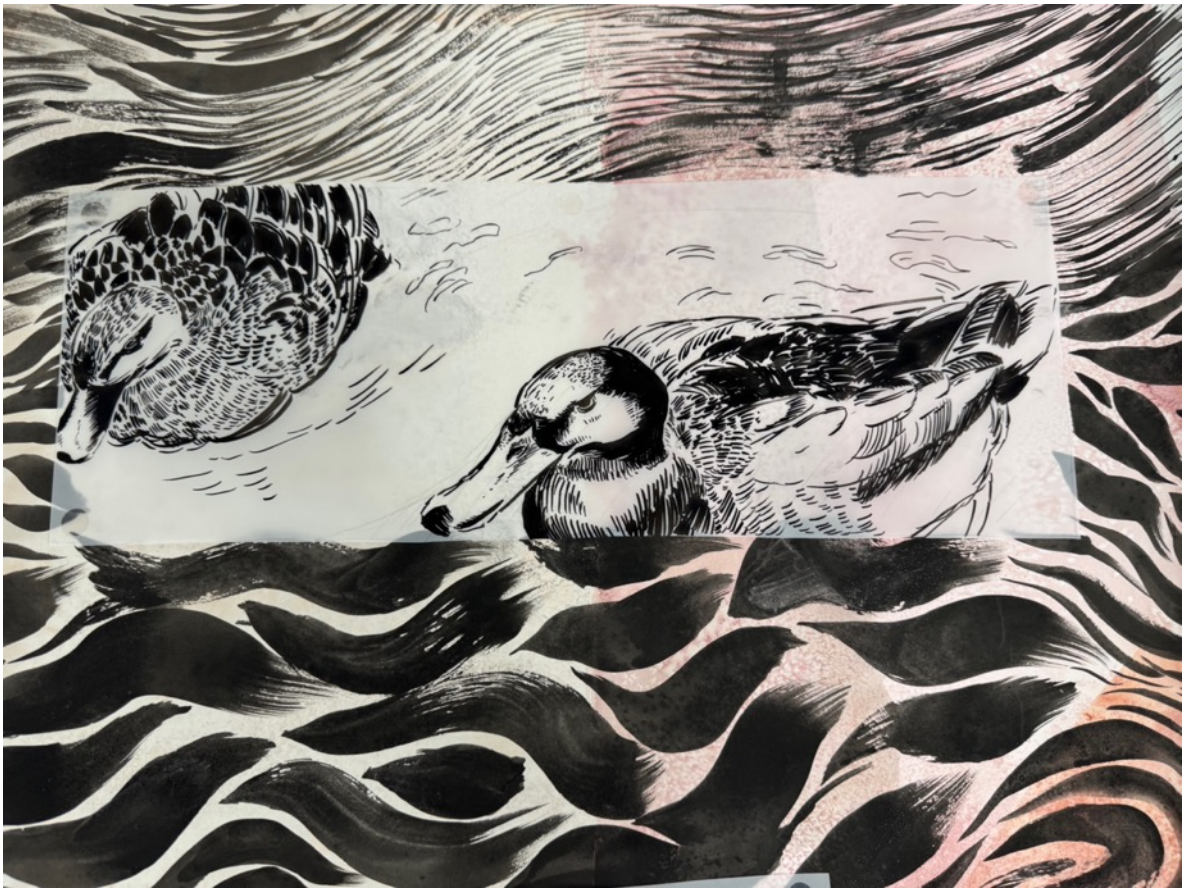


Figure 102. Figurative drawing 1.

Figure 103. Figurative drawing 2.

Visual Narrative – Storytelling

Before starting this experimental drawing, I designed different flows that present different types of storytelling. I intended to experiment with three specific compositional techniques: **layering**, **filling**, and **overlapping** (Figure 104). Each of these devices offers a different contribution to the overall visual narrative in my works.

In the topic of the **layering** draft in the top section of Figure 104, the narrative technique I applied is used to express the continuous narrative flows and isolate individual stories. This approach is established in my investigation of Altman's concept of "following units" in Chapter 5, where small visual elements combine to create a cohesive narrative. Each of these individual stories contributes to the whole narrative as a fragmented graphic element, their interactions with the flow create a sequential layered structure that draws the viewer's attention from one to another. The layers of individual stories add multiple depths to the overall narrative, constructing a multi-surface composition, a dynamic rhythm, and a multi-dimensional visual narrative.

The middle section of the scroll utilizes a technique of **filling**, where the space is densely populated with patterns, and systematically organized with varying line densities. This technique creates a visual rhythm, functioning as a continuous backdrop or "heartbeat" that maintains the flow throughout the composition. The rhythmic patterning acts as a form of visual glue, holding together the overlapping elements and layers. This echoes Cohn's concept of "visual grammar", as mentioned in Chapter 5, which discusses the repeated and systematic use of visual elements to build meaning in a drawing. The variation in line density across the space creates a structured rhythm, much like how text and images in graphic novels are sequentially arranged to guide the reader through the narrative. This continuous flow of visual rhythm emphasizes different elements in the composition, directing the viewer's attention with an almost musical progression, creating a seamless reading experience of the visual story.

In the bottom section of Figure 104, the narrative technique focuses on **overlapping**, the shapes formed by the lines are used to create a sense of depth and movement. This approach aligns with the idea of the visual modulation concept mentioned in Chapter 5, where transitions between different visual units lead to a dynamic and evolving narrative. This narrative technique introduces an intertwined reading sequence in which one piece of the drawing layers above and below another. The layers of narrative cover one another, building smooth storytelling that uses the overlapping movement as the transition pushing the reading activity. The curved and sweeping black stripes overlap in varied directions, suggesting multiple visual "storylines" moving at the same time. This overlapping is not only a graphic technique, but also a narrative device. Each band of line carries its own implied motion and visual weight, symbolising a narrative strand or moment. As these lines intersect and obscure parts of one another, they visually replicate the way stories, memories, or experiences interlace and cover one another in time. For example, a dominant curved stripe may glide over a finer hatching pattern beneath it, partially concealing what came before. This act of concealment visually echoes how in storytelling, a new narrative moment can partially obscure or reinterpret previous ones, but never fully erase them. The use of varied line densities and directionality reinforces this: some narratives come forward, sharply defined in black ink, while others recede, lighter and thinner, as though they are being temporarily masked. The technique of overlapping here transforms the drawing into a temporal space, where the viewer reads not from left to right but through a visual rhythm of emergence and concealment. The eye is guided across surfaces where the past and present blur, and meaning is constructed through layered relationships rather than a linear sequence. This method aligns with Rick Altman’s concept of modulation (visual transitions that prompt narrative shifts) and with Mieke Bal’s focalization, as the viewpoint continually shifts between surface layers. Each visual “layer” invites the viewer to interpret what is partially visible beneath, reflecting the way narrative layers coexist, interrupt, and enrich one another.

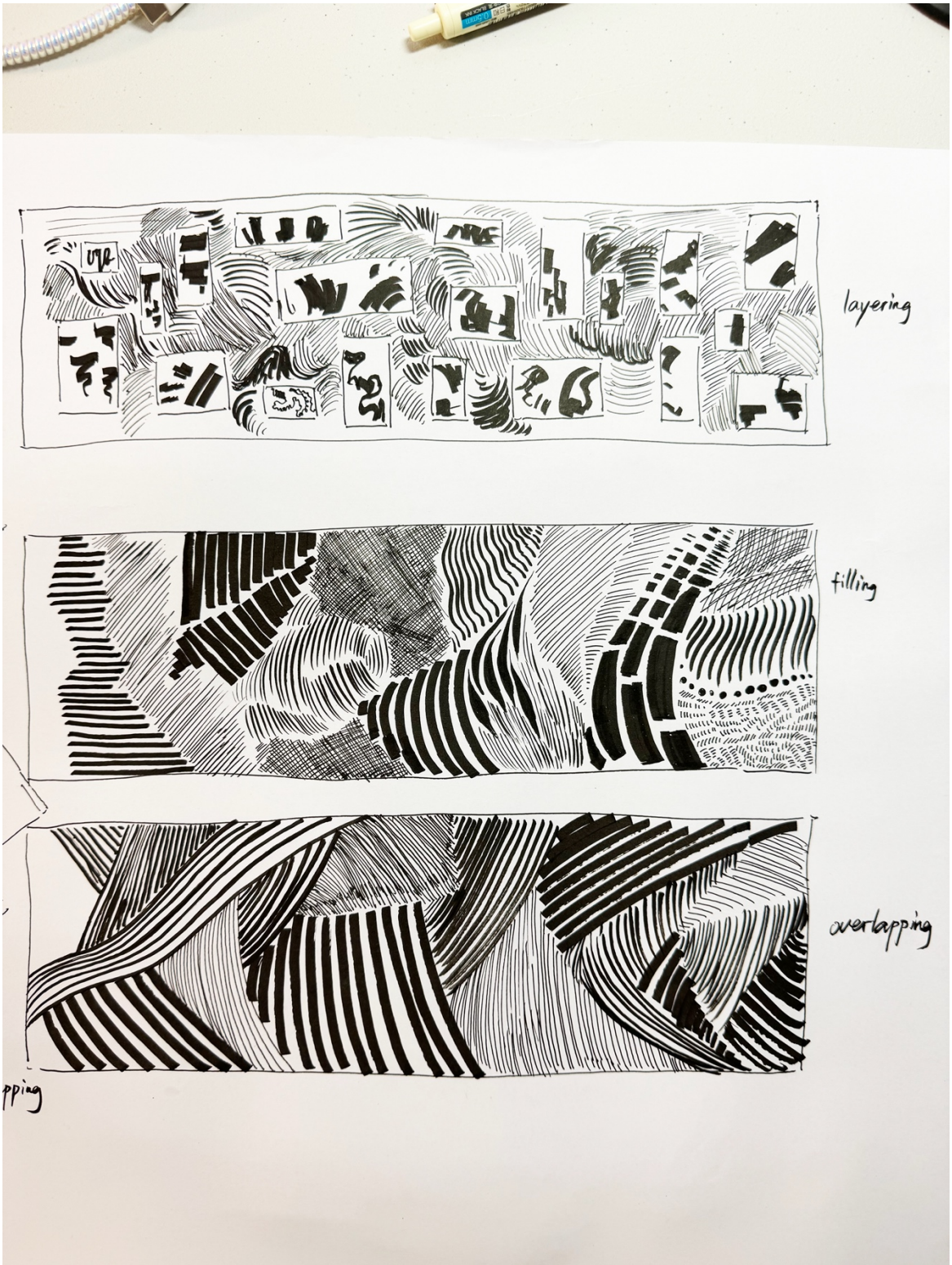


Figure 104. Compositional techniques.

While creating this draft for the narrative experiment, a few investigation results in Chapter 5 informed the design process. The theory of visual narratives functions similarly to written language in Neil Cohn's research on visual language, the concept of "following-units" and "following-patterns" that guide how viewers engage with visual narratives in Rick Altman's narrative theory, and the concept of closure as explored in both Scott McCloud's and Will Eisner's work on visual narrative.

6.2 Experimental Approaches

In this experimental drawing (*Lancaster Landscape*), the primary objective is to explore how text particularly Chinese characters, interacts with visual elements to create a coherent and compelling visual narrative. The process of designing this experiment involves revisions to the previous theoretical investigations, experience from the previous drawing experiment, and the conclusion of the experiment outcomes. I will introduce the visual research I have done before starting this experiment; the visual elements I considered under the drawing theme, such as the layers, texture, brush works, abstractive characters, visual patterns, and rhythmic mark making.

Combining text and image in visual art can deepen the narrative by allowing for multiple layers of meaning, where text provides explicit or implicit context to the visual elements. The text and image combinations in this drawing experiment contain more than one layer in narrative perspectives that create different levels of interpretations. The Chinese characters I utilized in this experiment create narratives on both literal, textual levels, and interpretable graphic levels. The literal level explains what they represent in their meaning by reading their textual content, for example, the characters I mentioned earlier in this chapter, which mean rain, stone, and tree. The graphic level provides the perspective that their graphic origin could be used as abstract visual elements to build the narratives. Among the references used to design the text in this experiment, I have drawn on the work of artists like Xu Bing, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Barbara Kruger, who integrate text into their

visual art, which provided me with great inspiration. Their work highlights the power of text-image combinations to challenge and engage the viewer. In their artworks, the text or characters function as reading materials, symbols, and components in the narrative flows, which inform my investigations and then reflect on my experiment.

The integration of text can anchor, disrupt, or add layers to the visual narrative, influencing the viewer's interpretation in multiple ways, and it all builds on the background visual narrative flow. The experiment on the characters and their graphic structure for the composition of the drawing includes the design of the first layer of colour blocks in the background. I started with the experiment on colour blocks, and transparency, to explore how colour blocks with varying transparency levels affect the visual flow and narrative of the drawing (Figure 105, 106). The narrative flow created by these solid forms presents a natural reading sequence formed by the connection between each block, they are connected by their border or overlapping on each other, and the transparency provides the possibility of generating new colour effects where they cover each other. Building on the background colour blocks, the layer that covers the flow is the character and calligraphic brushes. The flow forms a foundational narrative structure for the brush strokes to perform, since it leads the narrative, to examine the visual narrative while the flow creates the narrative structure that directs the viewers' attention.

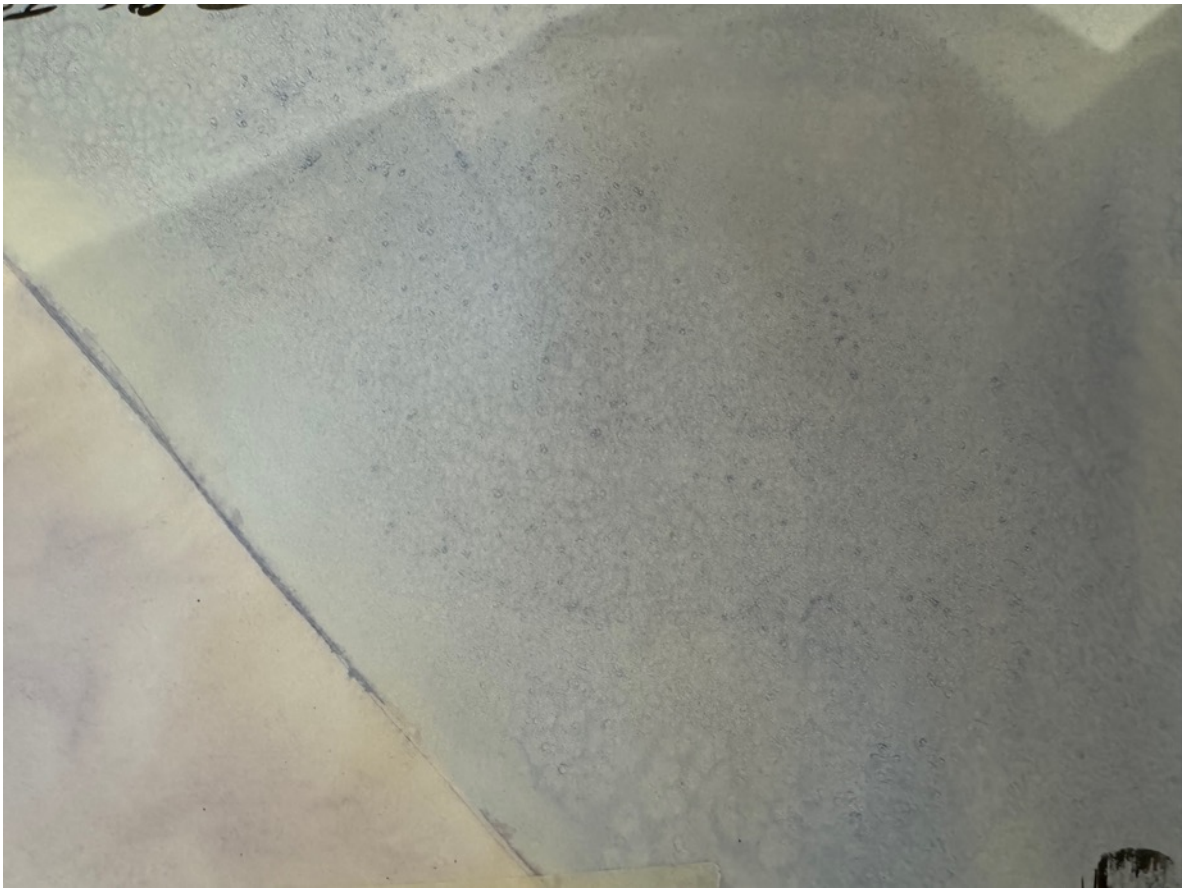


Figure 105. Colour blocks experiment 1.

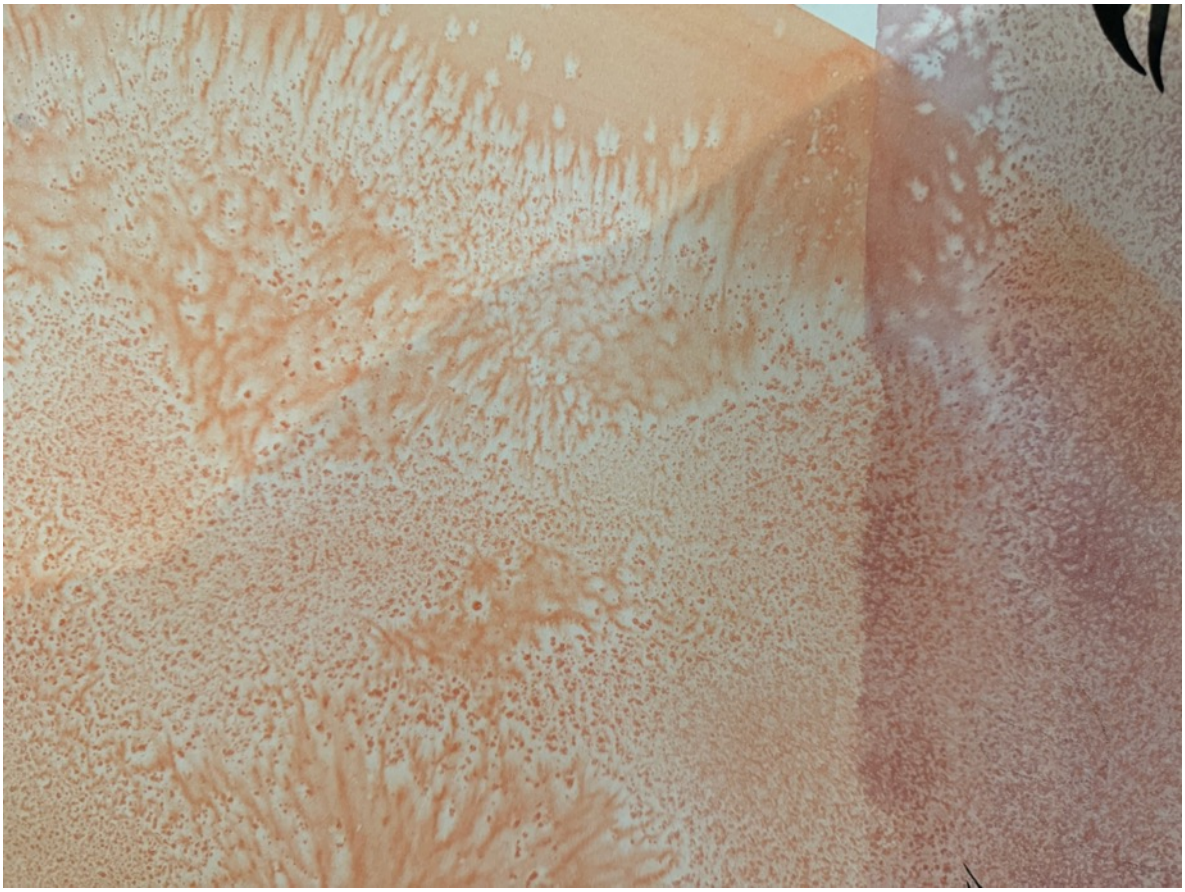


Figure 106. Colour blocks experiment 2.

The texture of the background colour blocks contributes to the tactile quality of the drawing and its narrative elements. I applied salt during the drawing process on the surface of the colour blocks while the ink was still fresh and with sufficient water. The water dissolved the salt, creating erosion-like patterns and natural texture as essential visual elements that match the drawing theme, which depicts abstract scenes and landscapes in Lancaster. Brush drawing exploration, the transition and space in the drawing, to explore how brush strokes can create transitions and define space within the drawing, contributing to the narrative's pacing and structure.

The graphic design of the characters in this drawing investigates how abstract character patterns can be both readable and rhythmic, contributing to the narrative's overall structure. The placement and style of text are crucial in guiding the viewer's eye, suggesting

hierarchy, and impacting the narrative’s emotional and intellectual resonance. They influence the viewer's interpretations and instruct them to understand the content in different aspects. The investigation of how the graphic structure of Chinese characters contributes to the drawing’s visual narrative.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the following research questions:

4. How can drawing function as a narrative practice that bridges visual language and written language, particularly through the use of Chinese characters?
5. In what kind of visual language can semiotics, visual metaphor, and narrative theory inform experimental drawing processes?
6. How can different structures of image reading (e.g., graphic novel, scroll format) be used to construct layered and immersive narratives in visual art?

Through a practice-based methodology and theoretical synthesis, these questions were examined across six chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of visual narrative creation.

Chapters One and Two (Foundations in Semiotics and Visual Language)

In Chapter One, I examined the visual and semantic structures of Chinese characters as an ideographic writing system. By comparing their graphic construction to phonetic alphabets, I positioned the Chinese character as a hybrid form that blurs boundaries between image and text. Through Peircean semiotics, I unpacked how icons, indices, and symbols function within this system to encode cultural and narrative meaning. Visual examples, such as Xu Bing's Square Word Calligraphy, served to illustrate these theoretical ideas. Chapter Two expanded this by reviewing how visual storytelling practices in illustration and graphic novels also employ visual metaphor and semiotic layering. I analysed case studies, including illustrations from different artists and graphic novels by Guy Delisle, and Nick Sousanis, whose works emphasize spatial reading, non-linear narrative flow, and layered meaning, all of which informed my subsequent drawing experiments.

Chapter Three (Experimental Drawing Methods and Narrative Grammar)

Chapter Three focused on material experimentation and the role of structure and rhythm in visual storytelling. Drawing on Mieke Bal's narrative theory of focalization, Neil Cohn's theory of visual grammar and Rick Altman's concepts of narrative modulation and

following-units, I applied visual strategies such as repetition, interruption, and patterning to construct visual narratives with varying pacing and density. Visual evidence of these ideas was explored in the sequential development of my drawing experiments, particularly in the of the Covid-19 Diary, where each spread tested different modes of narrative rhythm and viewer engagement.

Chapter Four (Language, Structure, and Semiotic Experimentation)

Chapter Four documented the development of my second major drawing experiment *Travelling Story*, with a focus on how material processes and compositional strategies contribute to narrative construction. Through experiments in layering, line, rhythm, and scale, I explored drawing as a narrative method that unfolds across a scroll format. Drawing from Philip Rawson's theories of visual logic, the TRACEY project's concept of Hyperdrawing, and Tim Ingold's idea of the line-as-path, this chapter investigates how the act of drawing becomes performative and temporal. It also reflects on the role of visual metaphor, calligraphic influences, and cross-cultural aesthetics, integrating Chinese ink traditions with contemporary graphic storytelling. A key part of this exploration includes the incorporation of tracing paper and masking fluid to test layering and collage, which in turn support viewer interaction and the principle of closure as defined by Scott McCloud. The chapter concludes with an early stage of speculative 3D model perspectives drawing, where the scroll's layered structure is transformed into a spatial narrative field. This experiment draws on Michel de Certeau's theory of trajectory and the Möbius strip as a model of recursive, non-linear storytelling, proposing a hybrid future for narrative drawing that engages with interactive spatial platforms.

Chapter Five (Narrative Theory and Visual Semiotics)

Chapter Five synthesised the theoretical groundwork for this practice-based research by exploring narrative through key perspectives in semiotics and visual storytelling. Drawing on Mieke Bal's concepts of fabula and focalization, Rick Altman's theory of narrative structure and viewer engagement, and Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic model, I establish a framework for how meaning is constructed and modulated in visual narrative. This is further supported by Neil Cohn's visual language theory and Scott McCloud's idea of "closure." Case studies of artists such as Raymond Pettibon, Barbara Kruger, and Xu Bing

illustrate how text and image interplay can challenge linear storytelling and provoke interpretive dialogue. Together, these insights inform the design and interpretation of my final drawing experiment.

Chapter Six (Practice-Based Outcomes and Speculative Expansion)

Chapter Six brought the research journey full circle by synthesising theoretical insights into a final practice-based experiment. Drawing on earlier studies of visual semiotics, narrative theory, and the graphic structure of Chinese characters, I designed a large-scale scroll drawing that integrates symbolic text with visual storytelling. The chapter explores how characters like "雨" (rain), "石" (stone), and "树" (tree) are reimagined as both linguistic signs and graphic components to build narrative scenes. Through techniques of layering, rhythm, and visual metaphor, the experiment applies key concepts from Peirce, Bal, Altman, and McCloud—particularly the ideas of closure, focalization, and narrative flow. The experimental process includes research into materiality, brushwork, and compositional transitions, culminating in a hybrid narrative form that merges text and image to generate new modes of meaning. This final drawing experiment demonstrates how cultural symbols and visual structures can co-produce narrative, offering both a reflection of and a contribution to contemporary visual storytelling.

Contributions to Knowledge

This research contributes to knowledge by positioning drawing as a semiotic and narrative system that can operate independently or in dialogue with written language. It demonstrates how traditional visual elements (line, rhythm, sequence) can carry narrative function and how ideographic language structures like Chinese characters can enrich visual storytelling. Through practice-based inquiry, the research also proposes a model of scroll drawing and spatial composition as a method of organising narrative experience across both linear and immersive formats.

Audience and Future Research Directions

This research communicates to a diverse and interdisciplinary audience, including visual artists, illustrators, scholars in visual semiotics, comics studies, and practitioners working across language, design, and narrative theory. By proposing a hybrid model that integrates

semiotic theory, drawing-based narrative, and experimental formats such as scrolls and 3D visual fields, this thesis offers a new conceptual and methodological framework for understanding how stories can be constructed and communicated through drawing.

Several potential directions for future development emerged in this research. I explored the scroll format, traditionally a linear, surface-bound medium, as a spatial and temporal storytelling structure. Future exploration could involve scroll-based installations that engage the viewer physically and perceptually, where movement through space influences narrative progression. The viewer becomes a participant, enacting focalization and modulation through embodied experience.

The early-stage development of 3D modelling experiments is a significant contribution of this thesis, which points towards the creation of immersive narrative environments. These could be expanded into virtual reality, architectural storytelling, or interactive installations where drawing evolves beyond surface into a spatial-temporal medium. Such work opens new possibilities in fields such as digital art, immersive design, and the digital humanities, demonstrating how visual narratives can unfold dynamically across both two- and three-dimensional spaces.

This research also highlights the potential of Chinese characters as narrative elements, inviting deeper cross-cultural studies into how visual language varies across writing systems. Future research might explore how different semiotic systems influence the construction and reception of visual storytelling, contributing to intercultural dialogue and translingual design practice.

The thesis further suggests opportunities for studying audience engagement through the aspects of visual grammar, closure, and modulation. These narrative functions could be tested empirically, analysing how viewers read, interpret, and emotionally respond to different compositional strategies. As such, the work can be extended into viewer studies or user-centred research in visual communication.

Additionally, the sequential and layered structure of the drawing experiments lends itself well to digital adaptation. Scroll narratives could be developed into screen-based publications, apps, or interactive platforms, integrating sound, motion, and user control to

enhance narrative depth. These developments would align with emerging media formats and create new spaces for public engagement with experimental visual storytelling.

Lastly, the research methods I developed here, particularly those involving visual metaphor, narrative structuring, and material experimentation, offer strong pedagogical potential. They can inform the teaching of drawing, illustration, comics, and visual communication, encouraging students to explore the intersection of theory and practice and to develop narrative strategies that respond critically to contemporary cultural, social, and technological conditions.

In drawing together visual form, material process, cultural symbolism, and theoretical reflection, this thesis builds the foundation for future studies in drawing-based narrative research. It opens up a distinctive space for storytelling that is spatial, cross-linguistic, and multisensory, suggesting that drawing is not merely a representational tool but a vital site for constructing and experiencing complex narratives in contemporary art and design.

By extending drawing into new dimensions (both conceptual and spatial), this project lays the groundwork for narrative drawing as a form of hybrid research and storytelling practice that operates across disciplines, media, and cultures.

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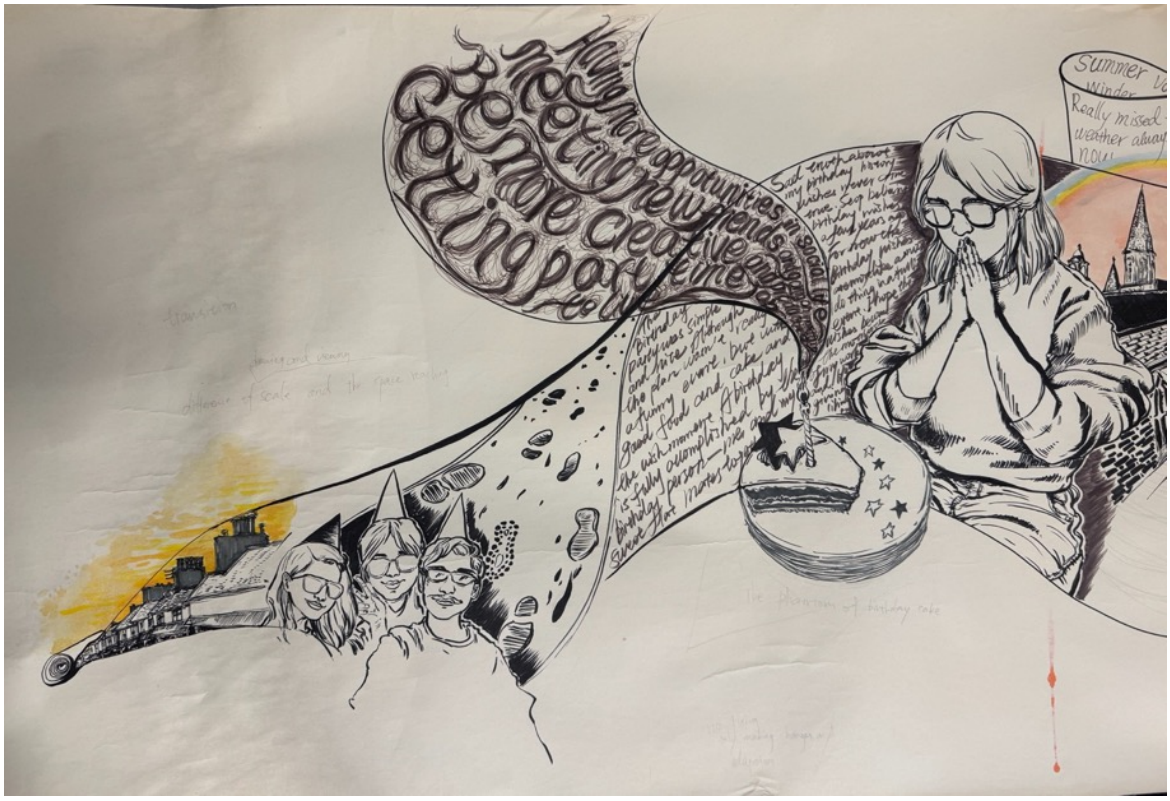
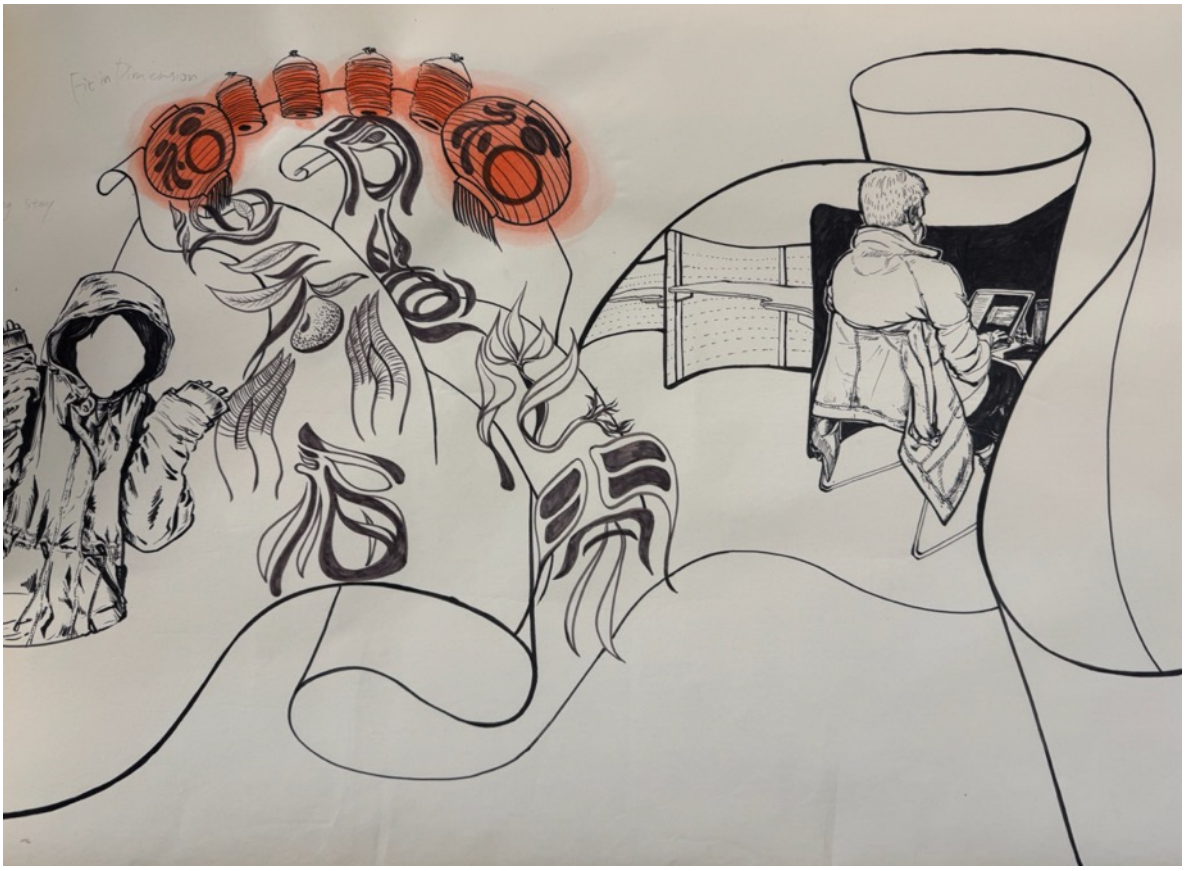
Appendix 1 Drafts for the Drawing Experiments

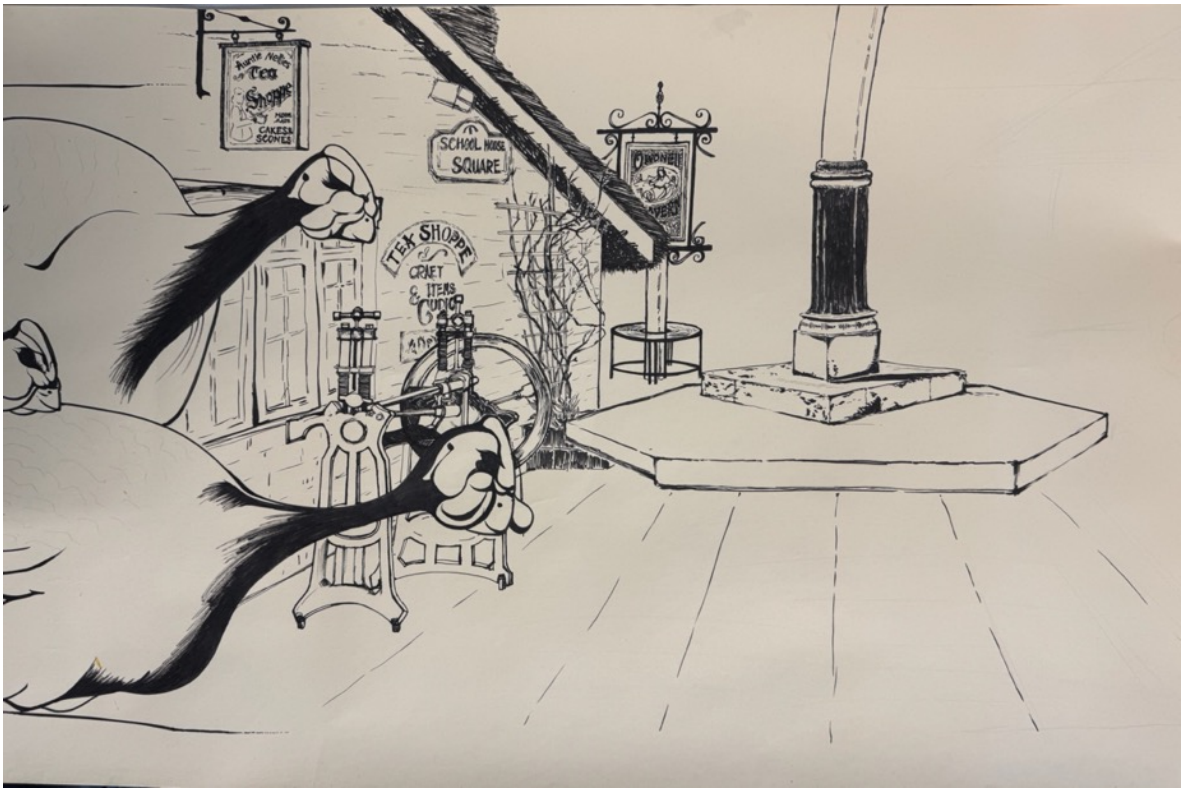
Group Image 1. 1. Pre-experiment on scroll drawing narratives.

This group drawings collects the major studio work of pre-experiment drafts in different stage of research through out the process of making three experimental drawings.

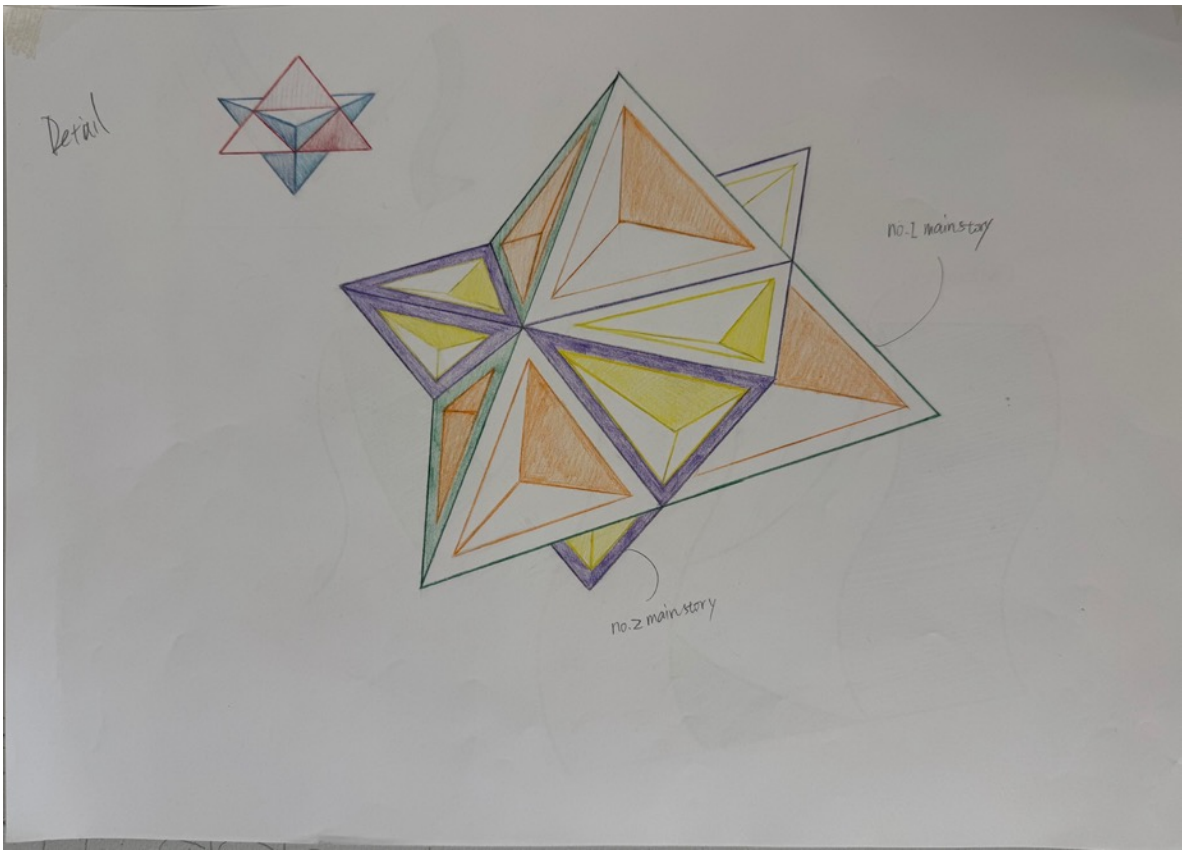


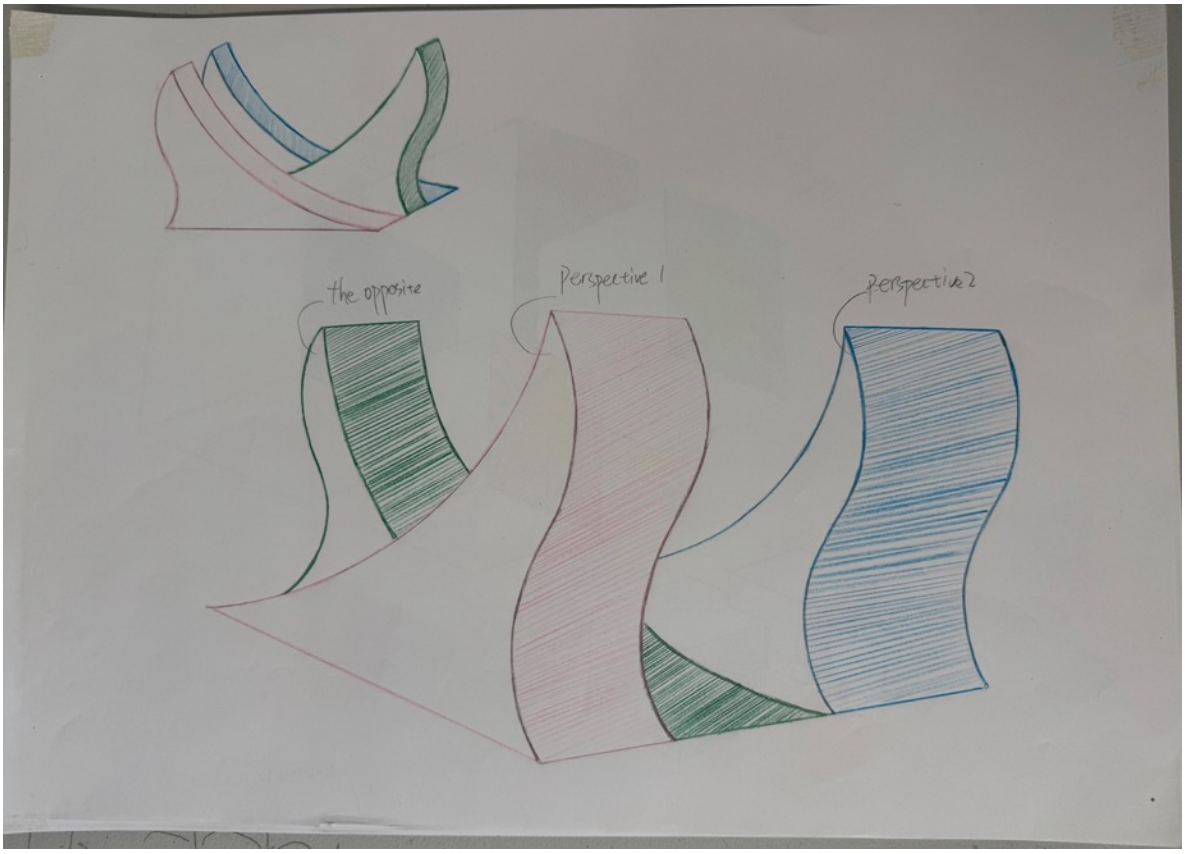

Summer vaca
Really missed the
weather always
now
Creating
view outside of window the
Colour palette
as a luxury for my
bunny

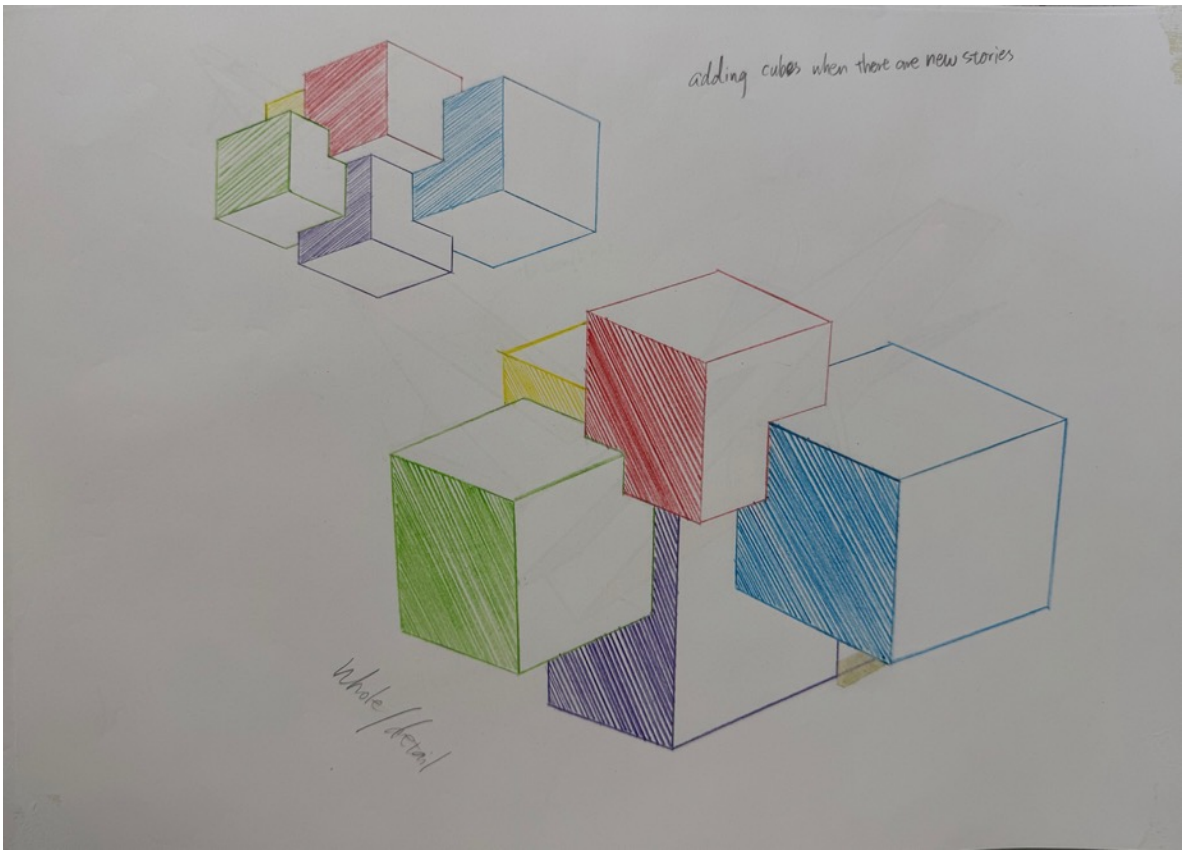


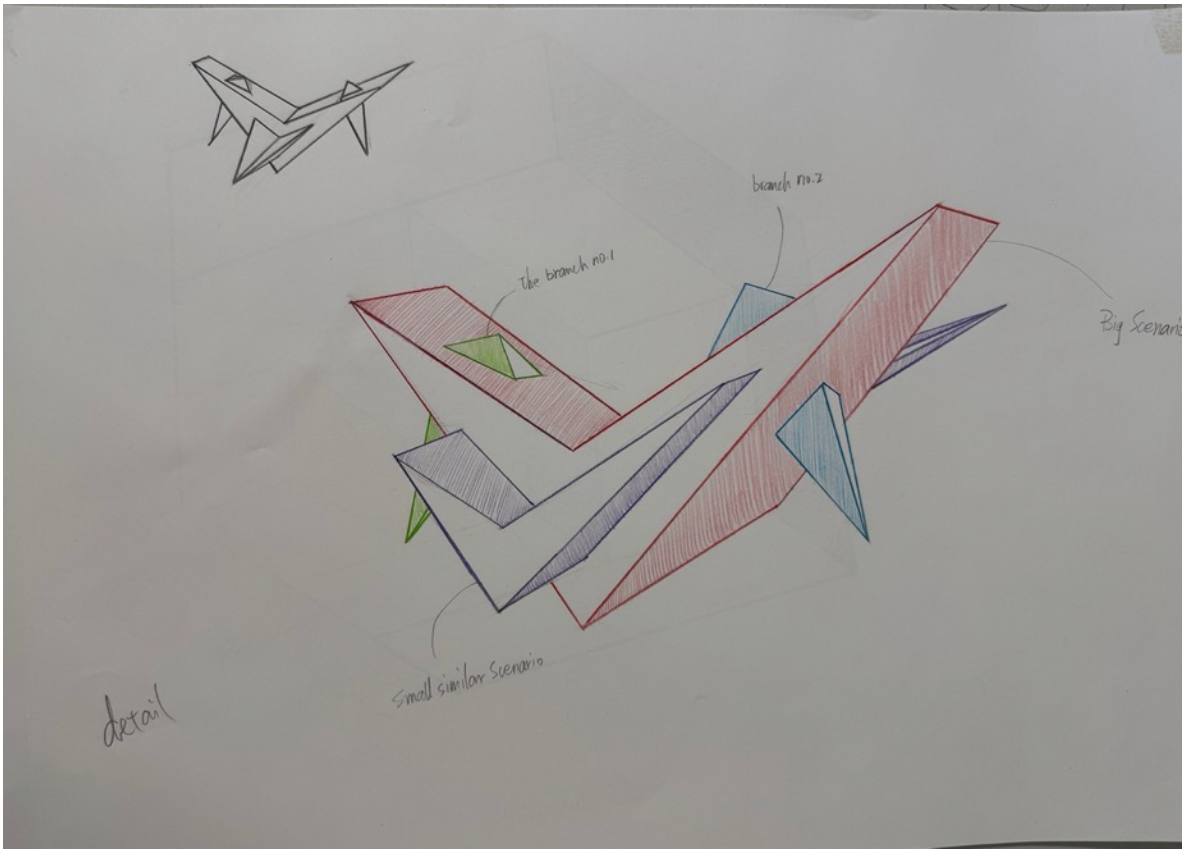

Tea
Shoppe
CAKES& SCONES
SCHOOL HOUSE SQUARE
TEK SHOPPE

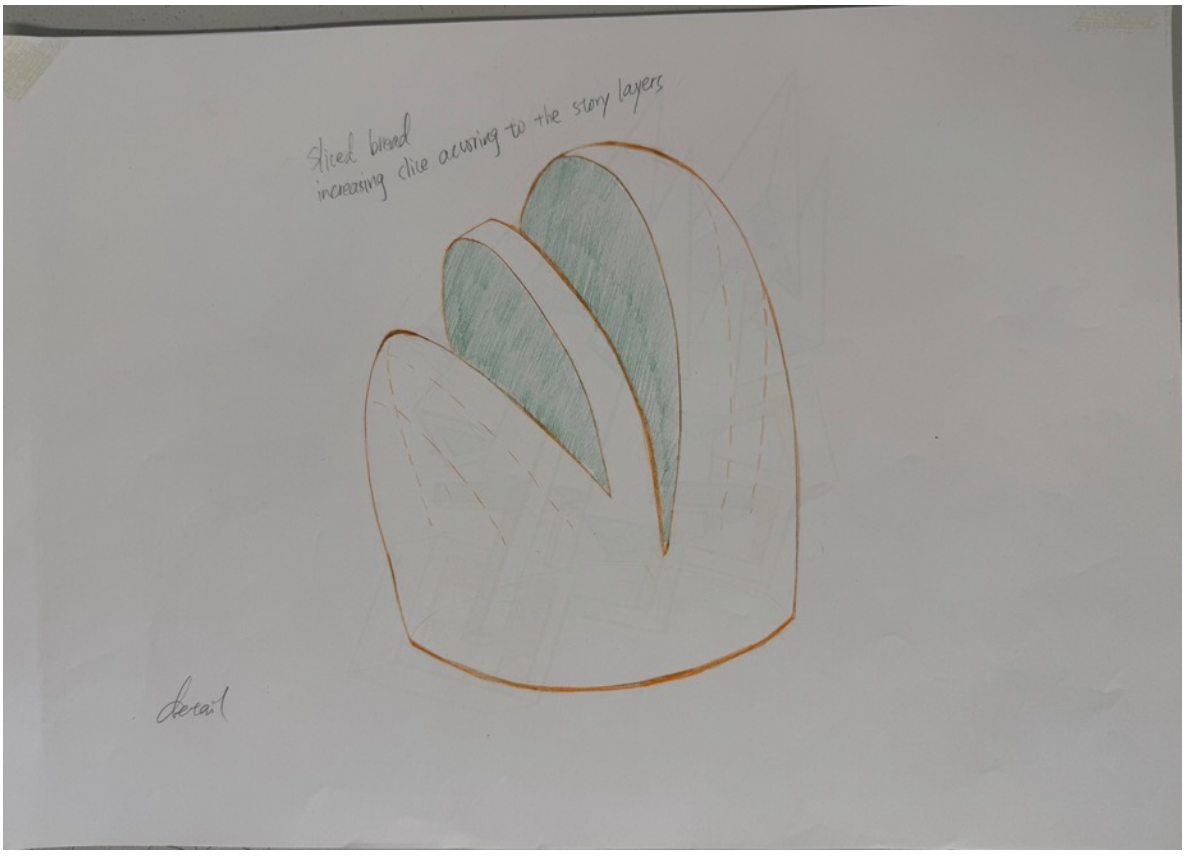
Group image 1. 2. Pre-experiment on the drawing perspective and the visual expressions in the space.

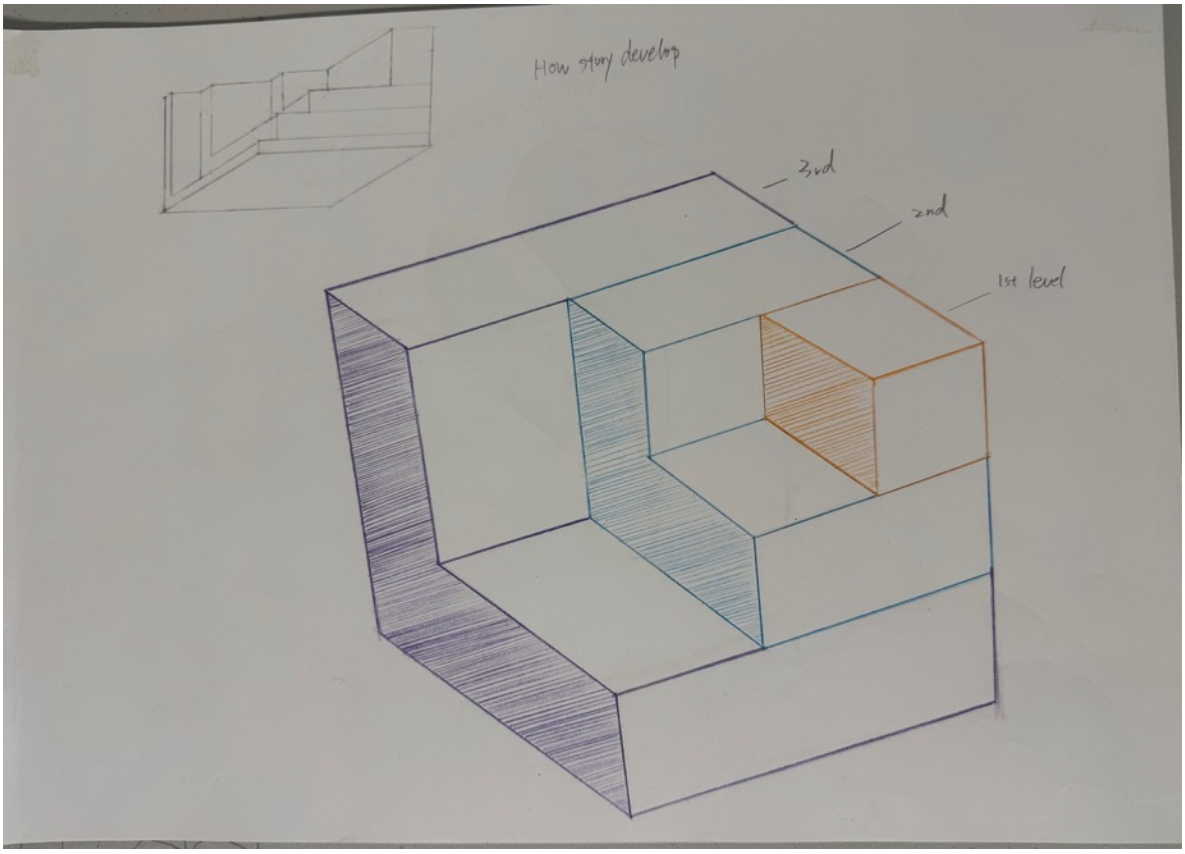


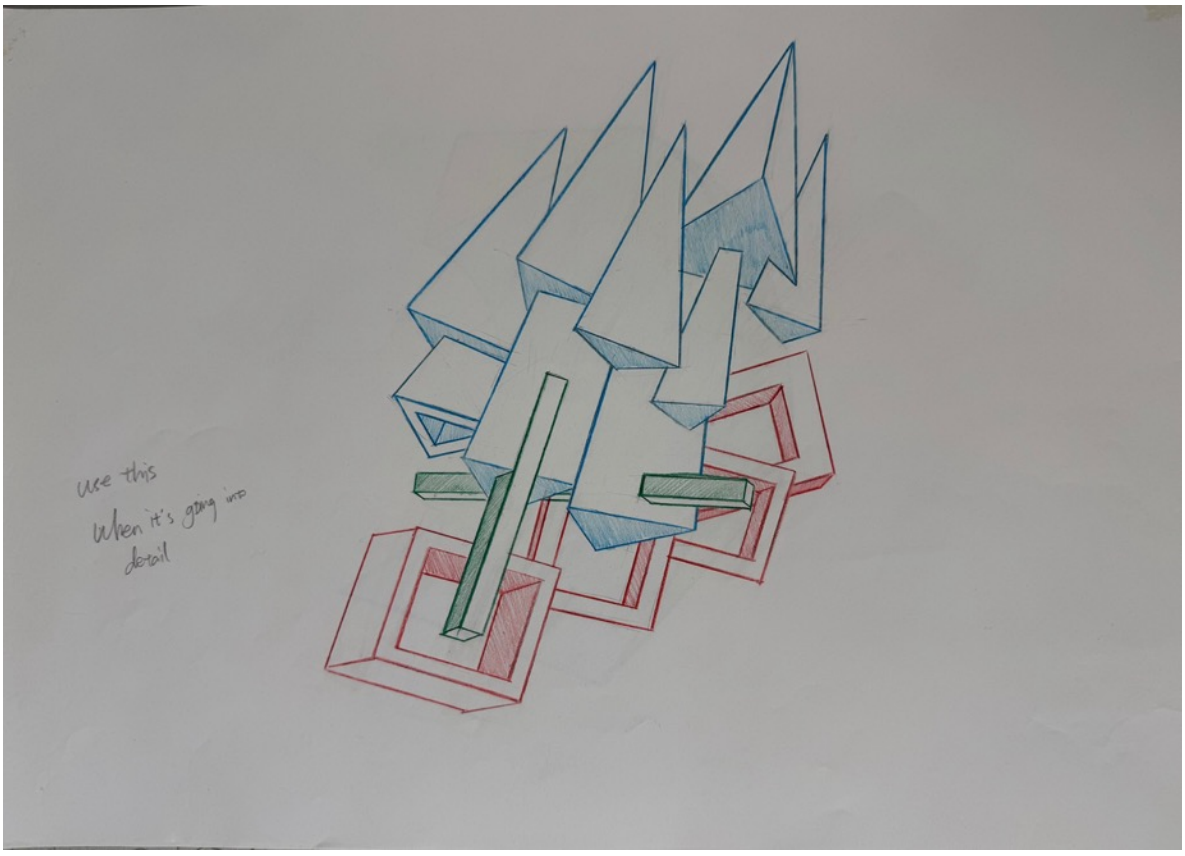

the opposite
Perspective 1
Perspective 2

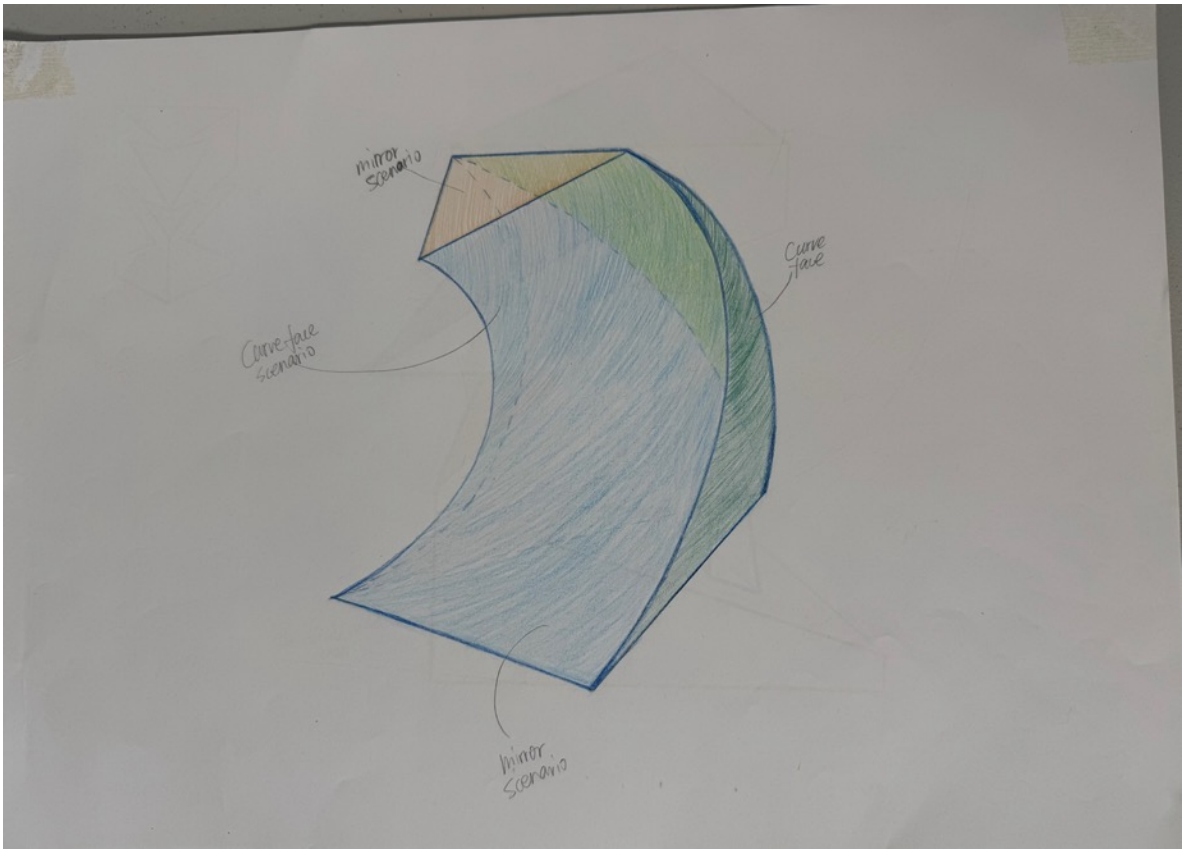

adding cubes when there are new stories
whole / detail

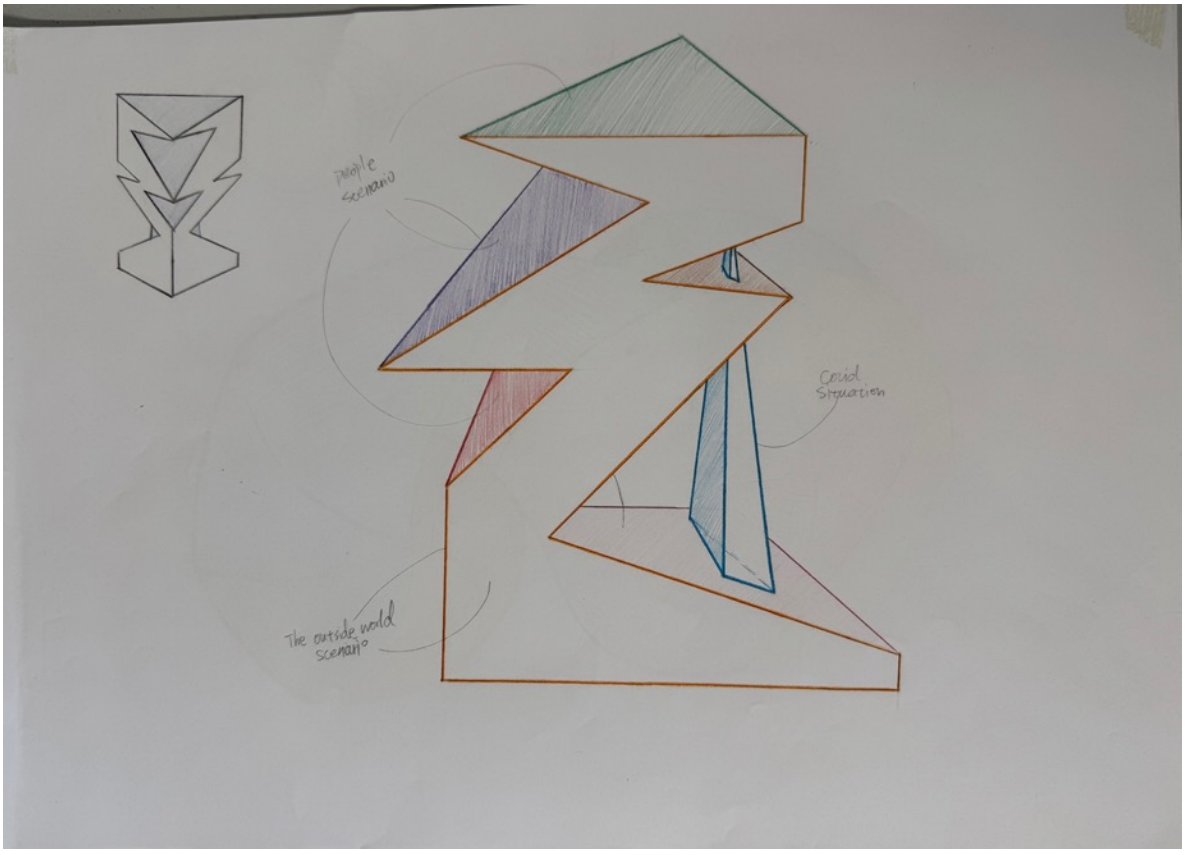

branch no.2
the branch no.1
Big Scenario
Small similar Scenario
detail

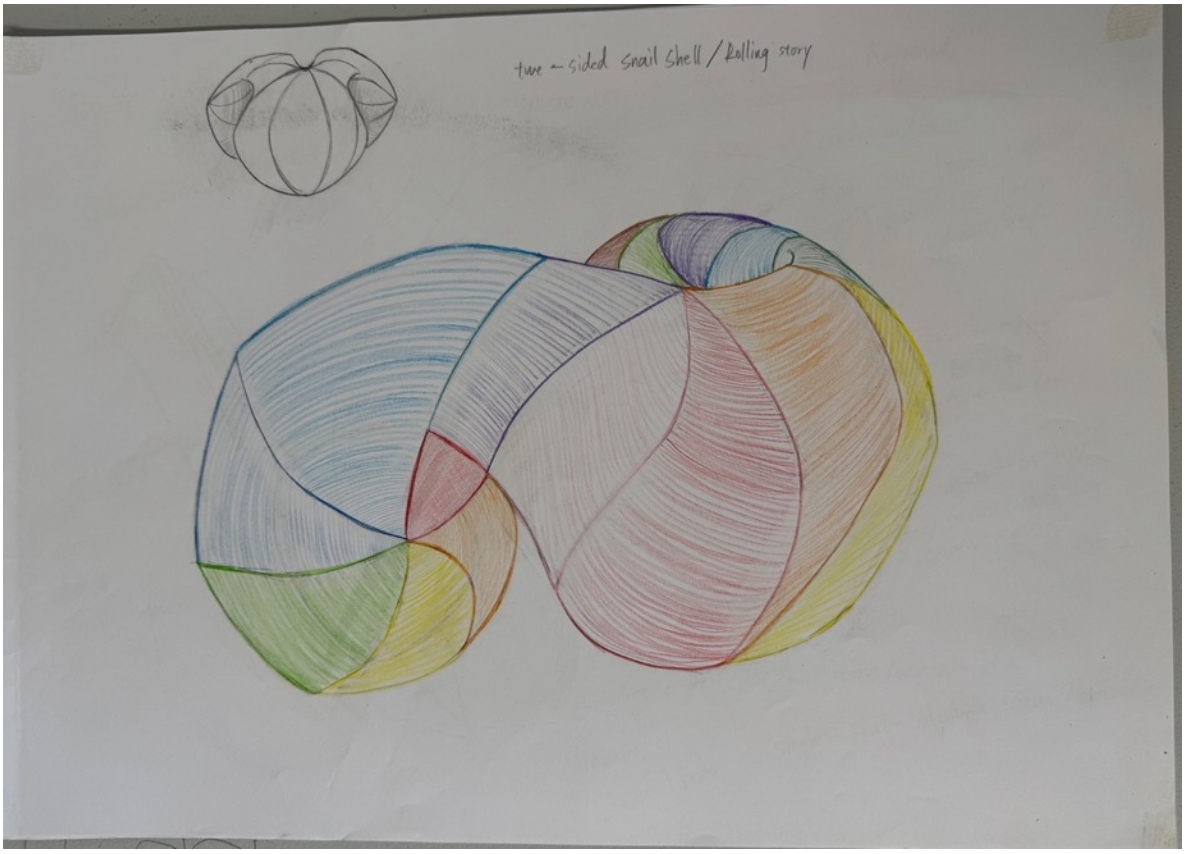

sliced bread
increasing slice acoring to the story layers
detail

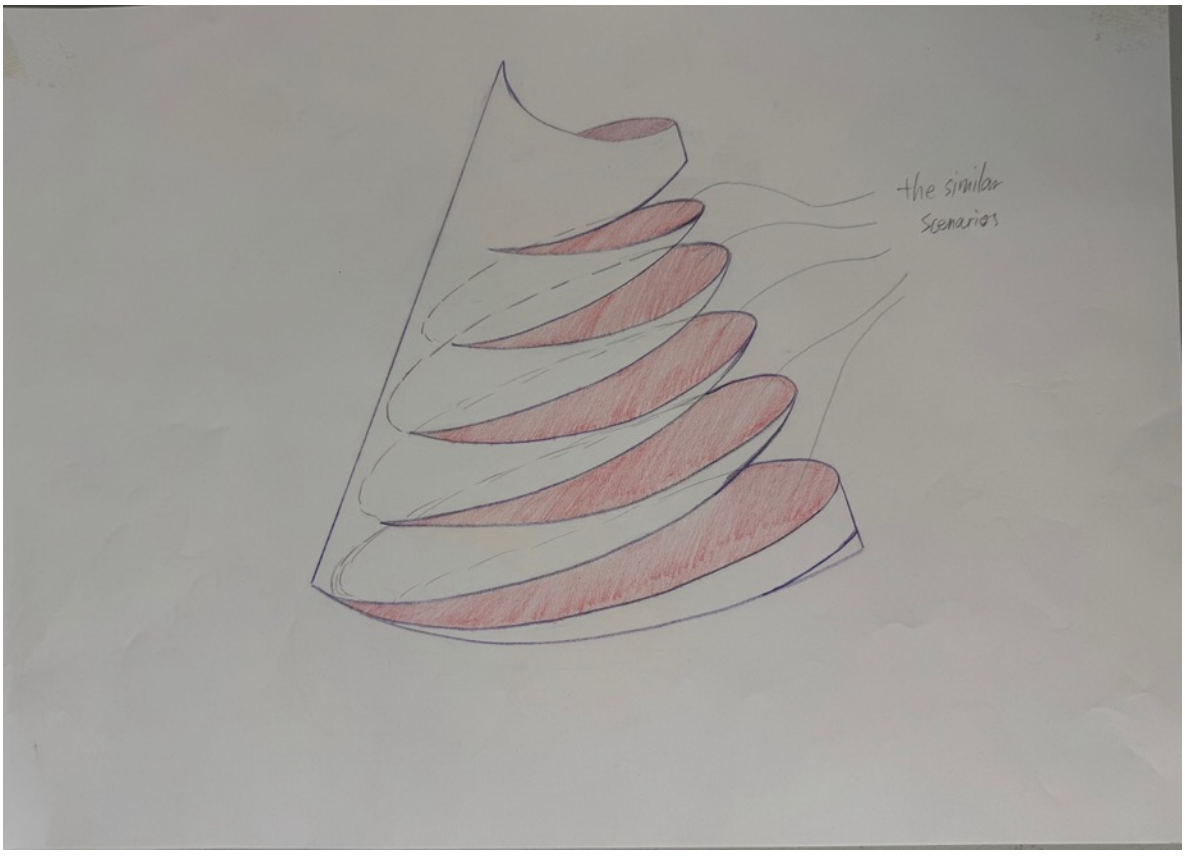

How story develop
3rd
2nd
1st level

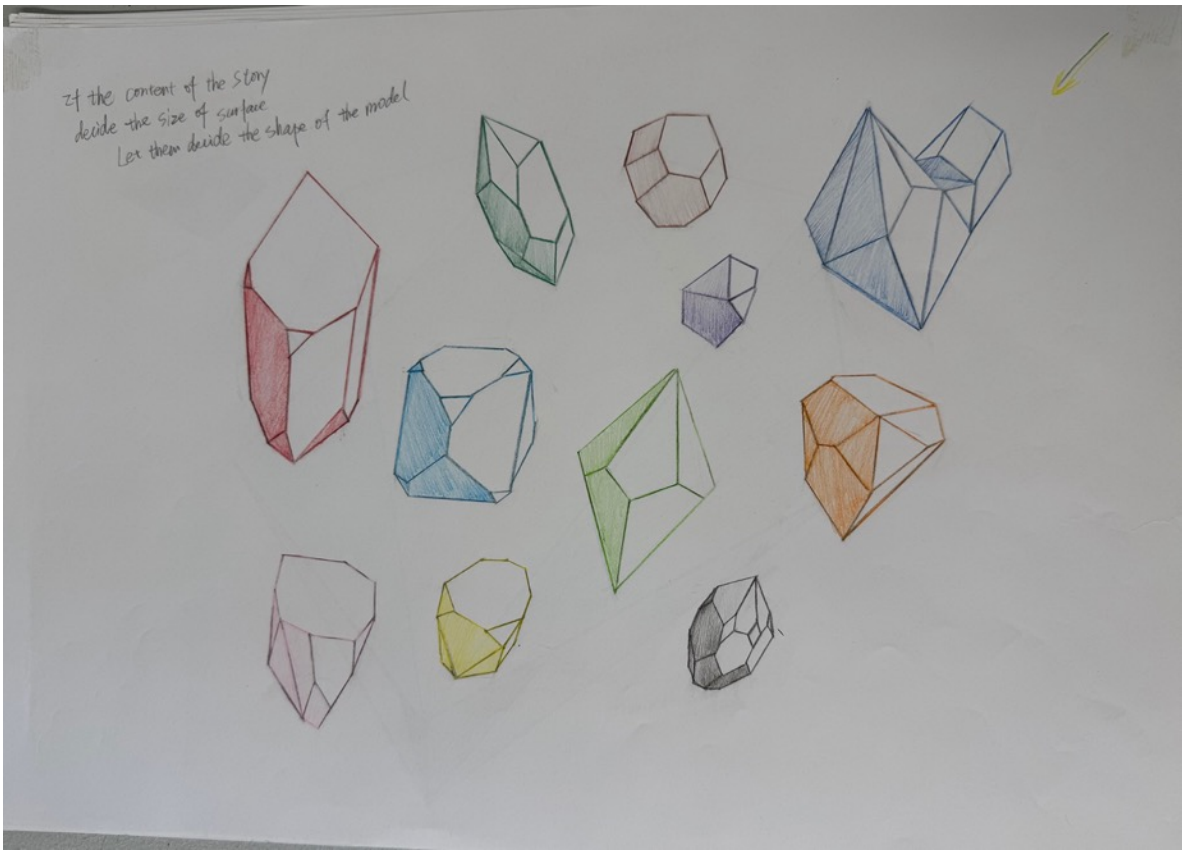

use this
when it's going into
detail

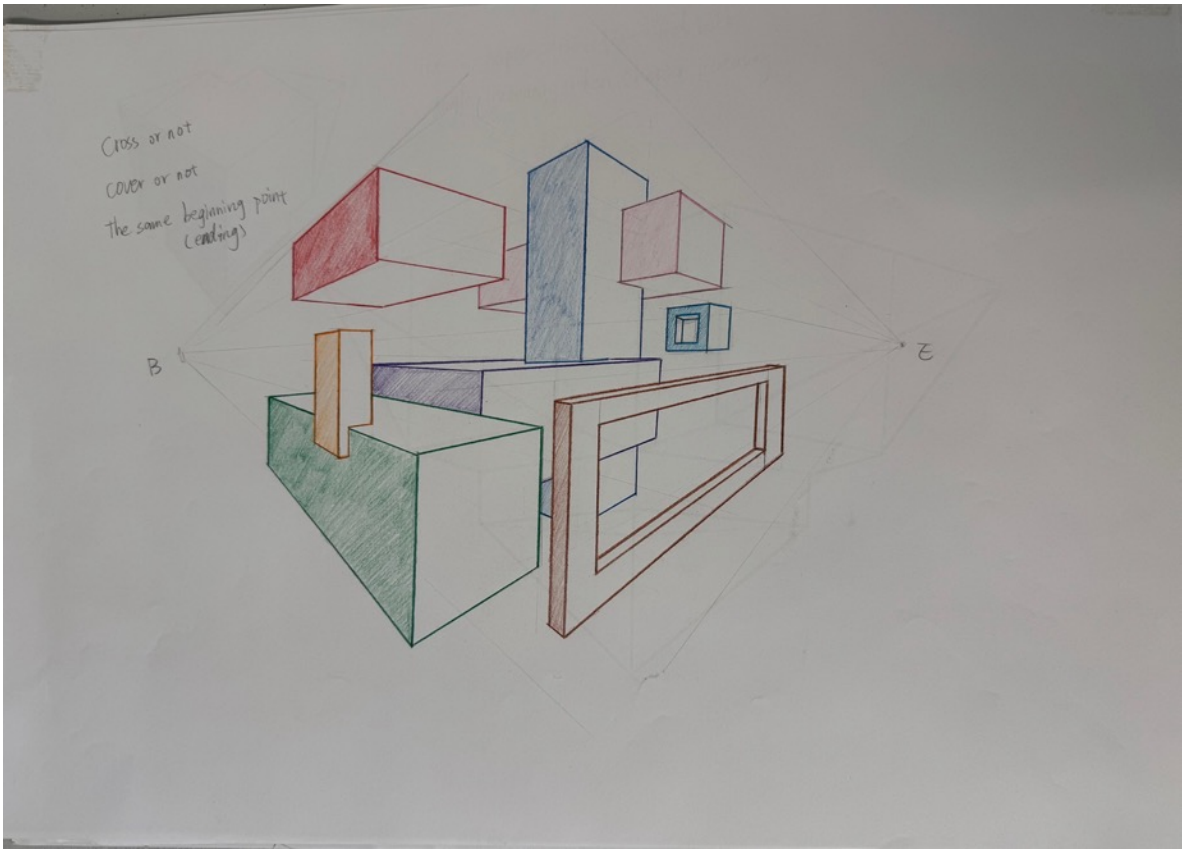

mirror scenario
Curve face
Curve face scenario
mirror scenario

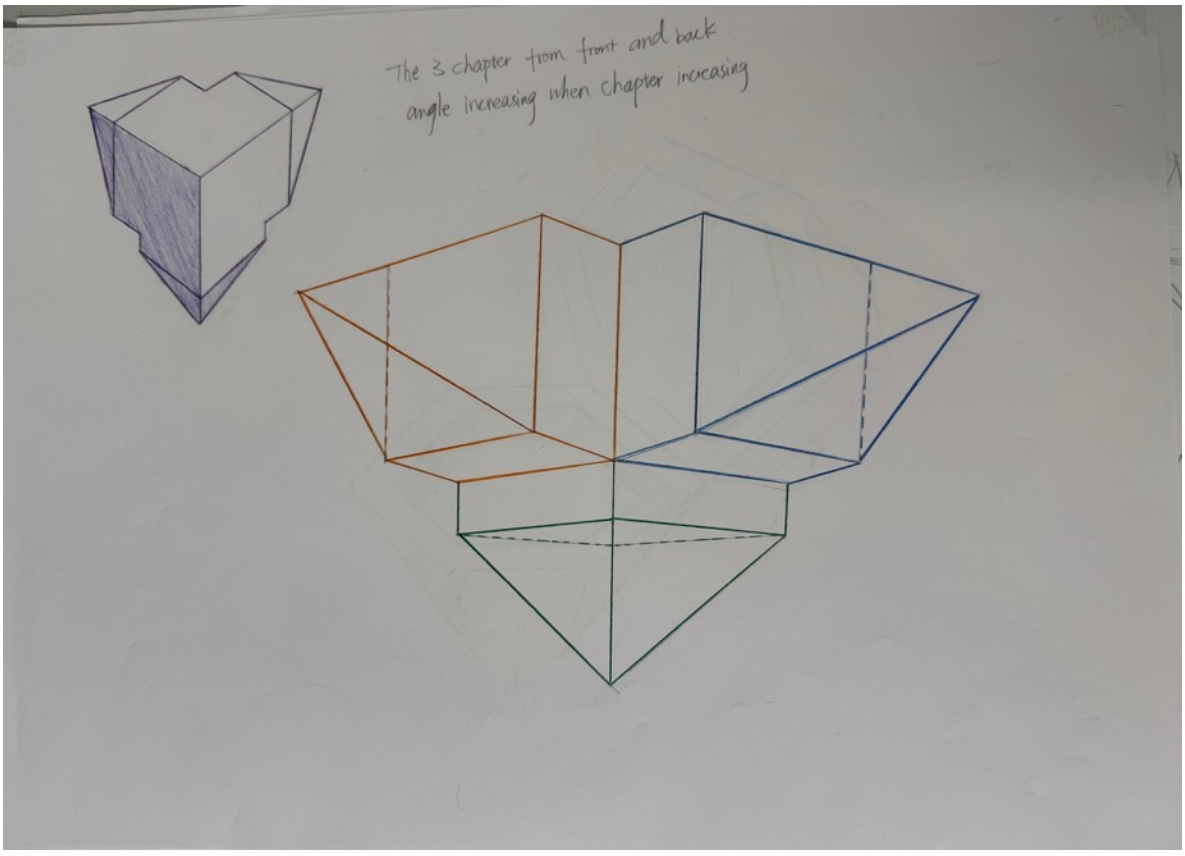

people scenario
Could Situation
The outside world scenario

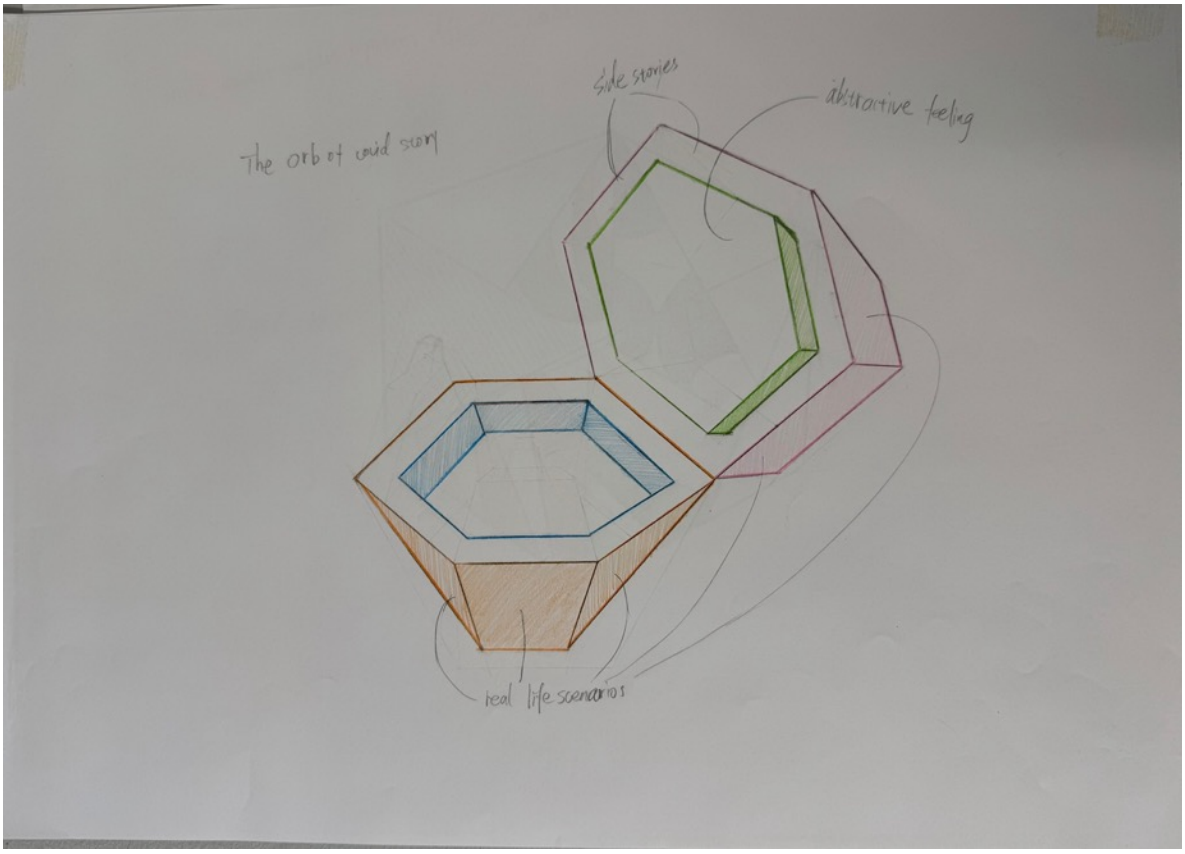

two-sided snail shell / Rolling story

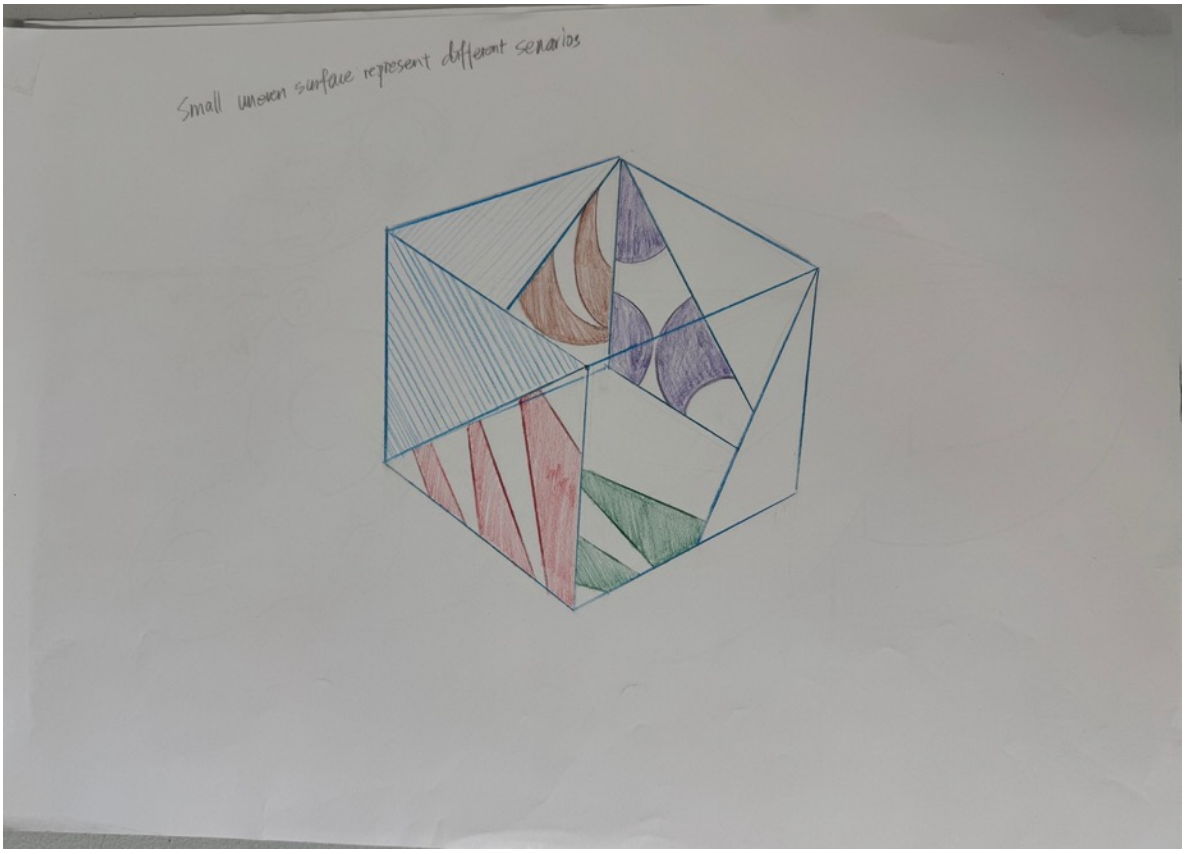

the similar
scenarios


If the content of the story
decide the size of surface
Let them decide the shape of the model


Cross or not
Cover or not
The same beginning point
(ending)
B
E

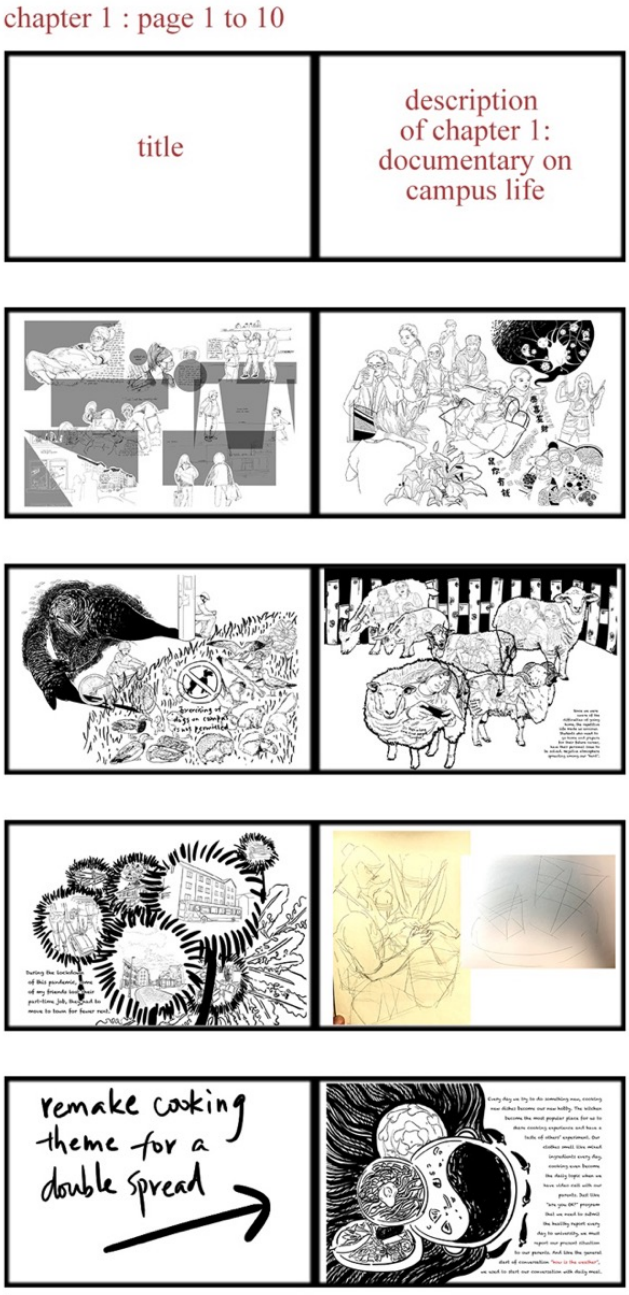

The 3 chapter from front and back
angle increasing when chapter increasing


The orb of void scorn
Side stories
abstractive feeling
real life scenarios

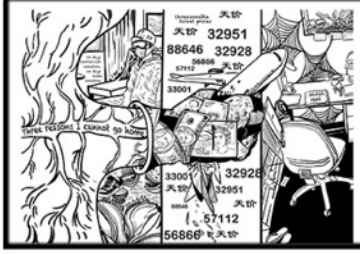
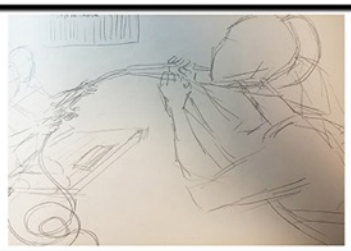
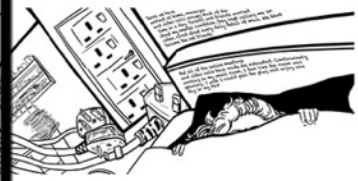

Small uneven surface represent different scenarios

Appendix 2 Drawing Experiment 1

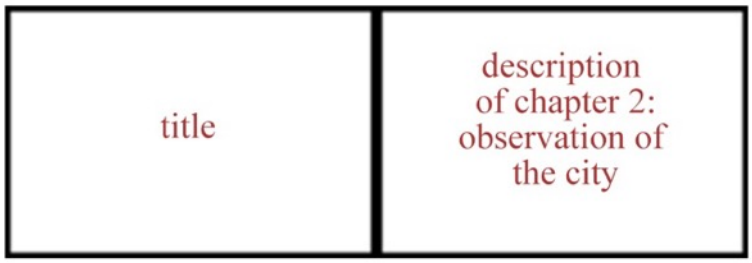
Group image 2. 1. Storyboards for the COVID-19 Diary

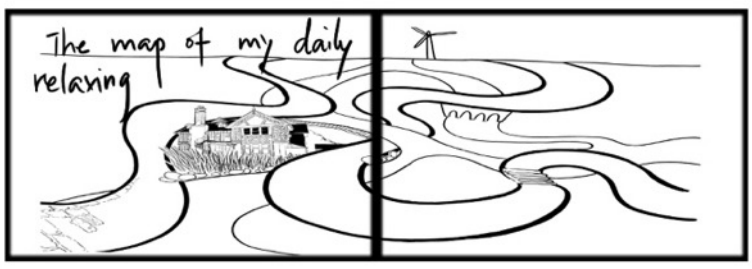


chapter 3 : page 21 to 30

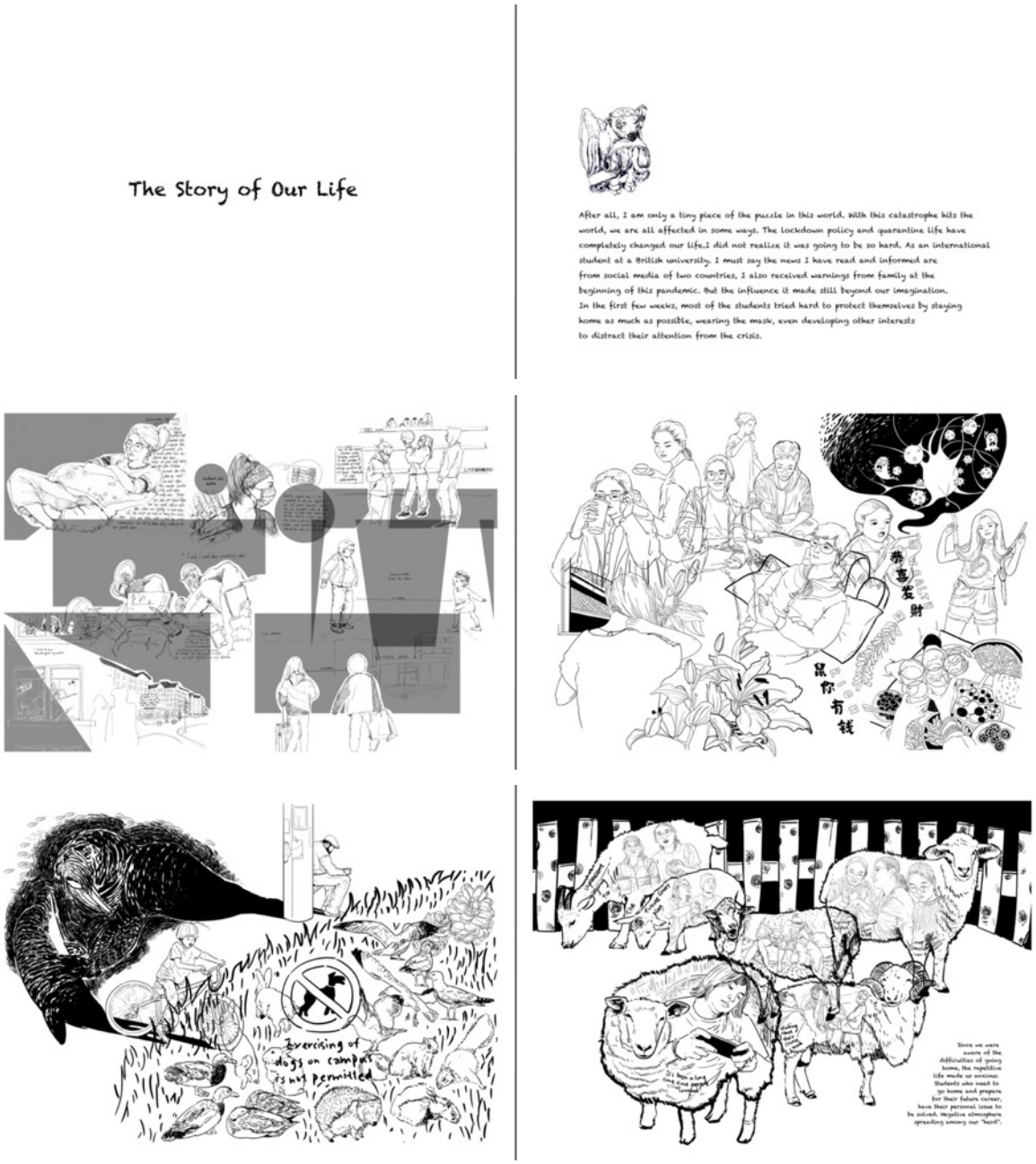
title	description of chapter 3: the thoughts during this crisis
	expression of homesickness.
The invisible control of internet	
	
Creative thoughts toward the last double spread page	How the words are using as part of drawing

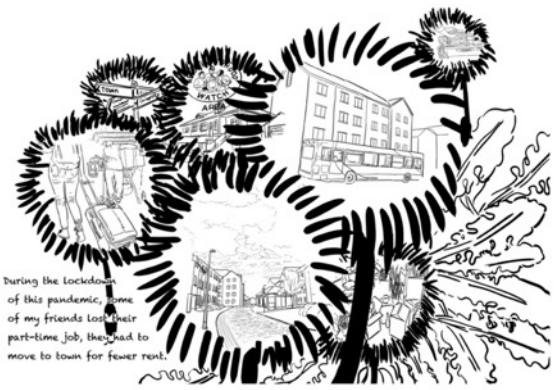
chapter 2 : page 11 to 20





Group Image 2. 2. COVID-19 Diary





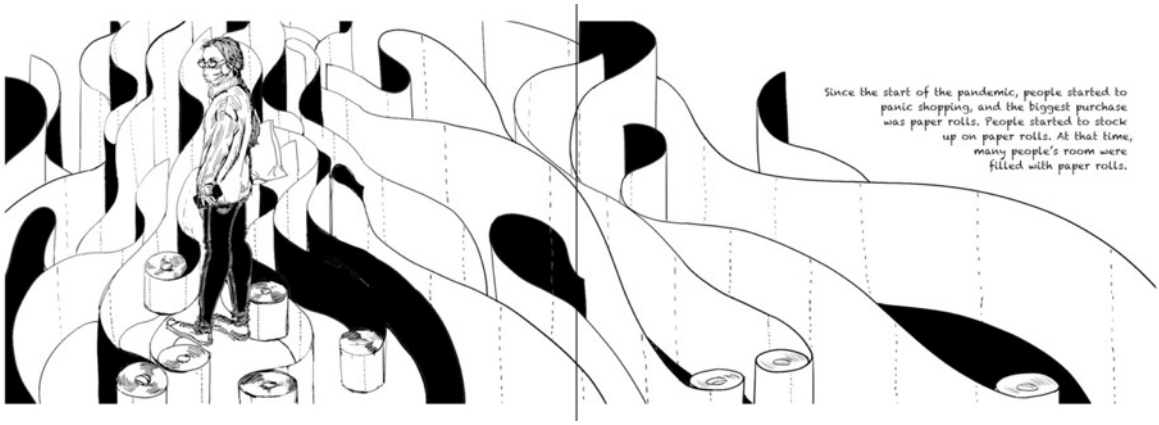
Every day we try to do something new, cooking new dishes become our new hobby. The kitchen become the most popular place for us to share cooking experience and have a taste of others' experiment. Our clothes smell like mixed ingredients every day, cooking even become the daily topic when we have video call with our parents. Just like "are you OK?" program that we need to submit the healthy report every day to university, we must report our present situation to our parents. And like the general start of conversation "how is the weather", we used to start our conversation with daily meal.

Feel the City

When we have to go out for shopping, we experienced the public protection measures in the city. Social distance, sanitizer, mask, cordon. Most of the people followed public instruction willingly, but there were still inconveniences in our life. So, we try to reduce the number of times we go out for shopping. However, despite the multiple troubles and bad news in our life, nature never stops growing. While people in our society have slowed down the pace of life, life in nature seems growing fast than before.

Cordon was used everywhere in public place, they make a notice to the social distance between others. It was a safe method of could also cause a "social restriction" among people. I have not flatmates for a long while, sometime I could have message chat I miss meeting them and the great time we had together.

people that we should mind maintaining order, but this been tailored to others but my with my friends who live in town,

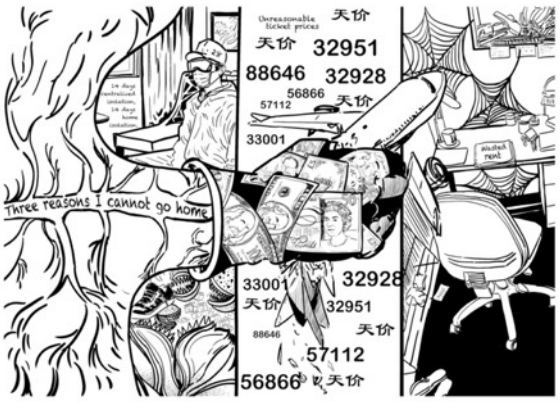


Since the start of the pandemic, people started to panic shopping, and the biggest purchase was paper rolls. People started to stock up on paper rolls. At that time, many people's room were filled with paper rolls.

The nature grow fast when there are less human activities.

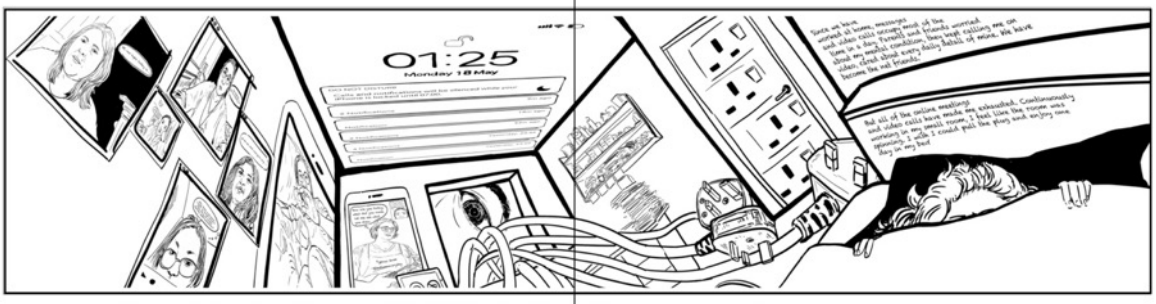
The Thoughts of the Invisible Troubles

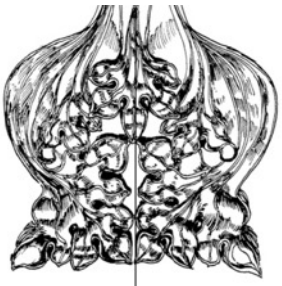
Beside the actual difficulties, the invisible stress existing all the time during the crisis. Homesickness is the source of many psychological problems. Apart from our family, and the familiar environment, we are far away from our "comfort zone". When we have to face the difficulties alone, the negative emotion is confusing us.



For all the difficulties we were facing, homesickness comes to the first. When we finish the study of a year, some of my friends would like to go home and have a holiday with their families for summer vacation. Since the start of the pandemic, I do not think any travel plan would come true this summer. For the things we are experiencing, I only wish to be with my family. I miss my mom's special recipes, the karaoke party with my friends and I miss the time when my parents and I went to the cinema watching films. When we were discussing the story of the film, their opinions always make me laugh. I feel safe when I stay with them, especially during this difficult time. Now there are so many difficulties on my way home. I suddenly felt homesick.

Since the crisis put a heavy load on communication on the internet, we have to use the internet in many ways. people who work through the internet are tied to the device. For example, if it is not for this situation, I could experiment on the conventional painting by using brush and paper.



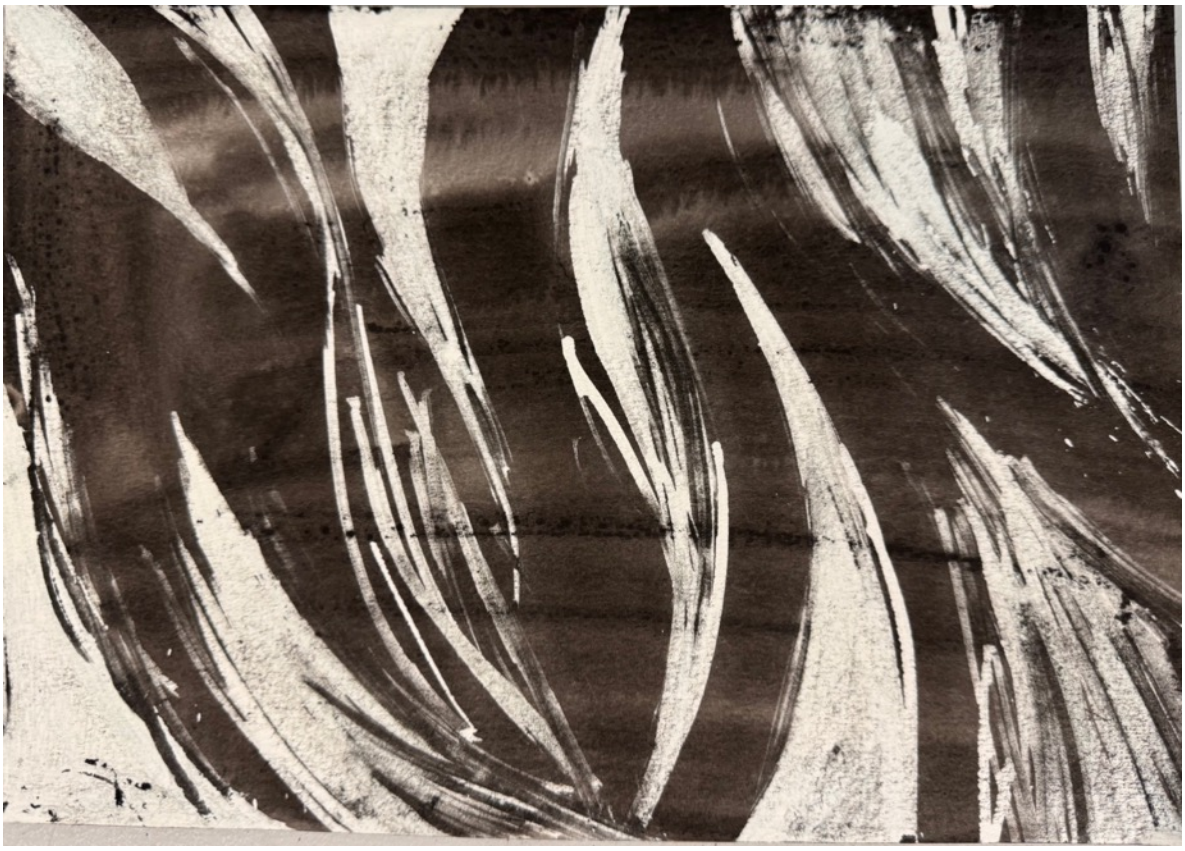


The text in this drawing is placing in part of the picture. Comic bubbles are the direct way to show what people say in the drawing, I use comic bubbles in the imaginary screen to illustrate the scene of a video meeting. The text on the ceiling is meant to fill the screen notification of the phone, as the same function of the text on the wall and bedside.

The text is divided into different time and space, the comic bubbles are the words that come out from people who attend the video meeting, the notification appears on a different device to emphasize the differences which similar to the wall facing different directions. I combine the text to the wall to imitate the tablets we are facing in our life, especially the time we have to work and social through the internet, screens, and cameras are all around us.

Appendix 3 Drawing Experiment 2

Group Image 3. 1. Masking Fluid experiment



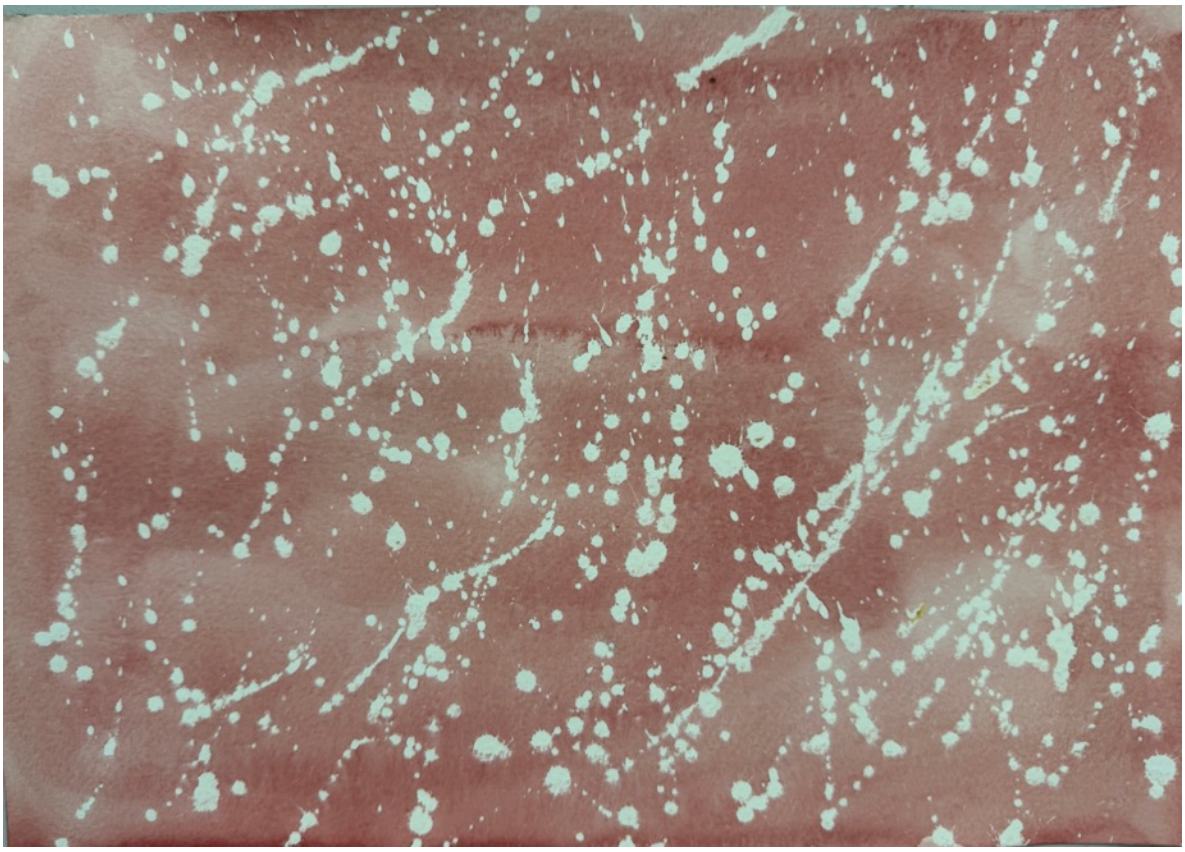


Figure 3. 2. Mylar Paper drawing test

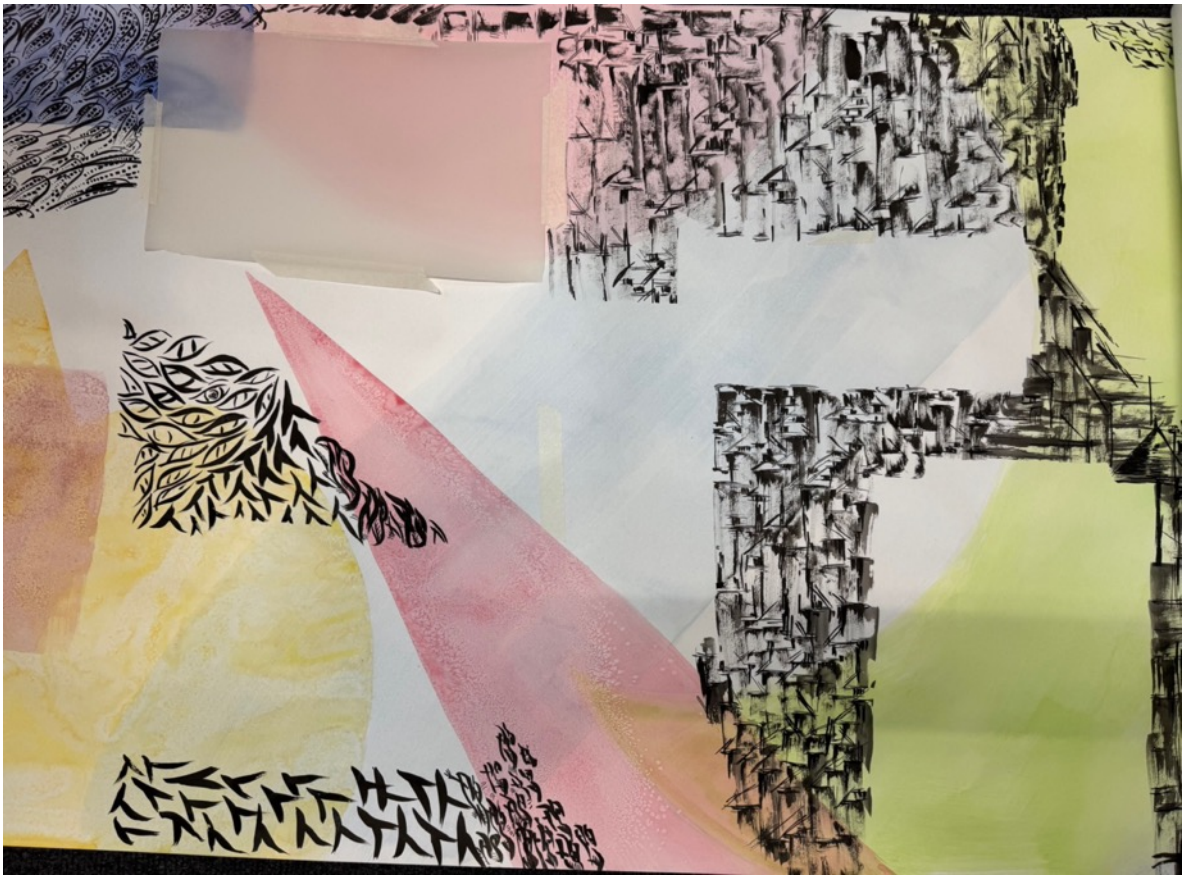
Group Image 3. 3. Scroll drawing experiment *Travelling Story*.

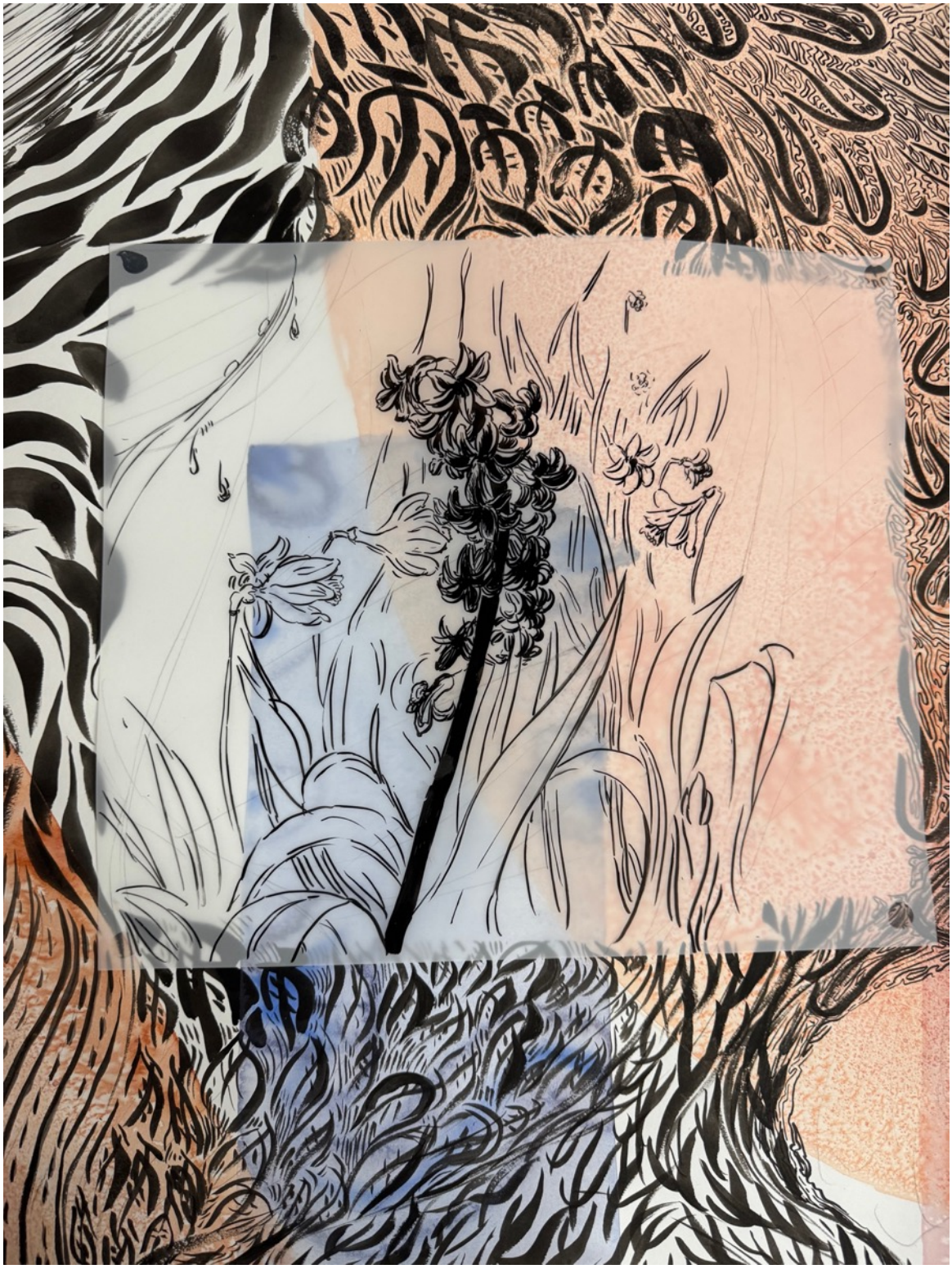

Time Destination

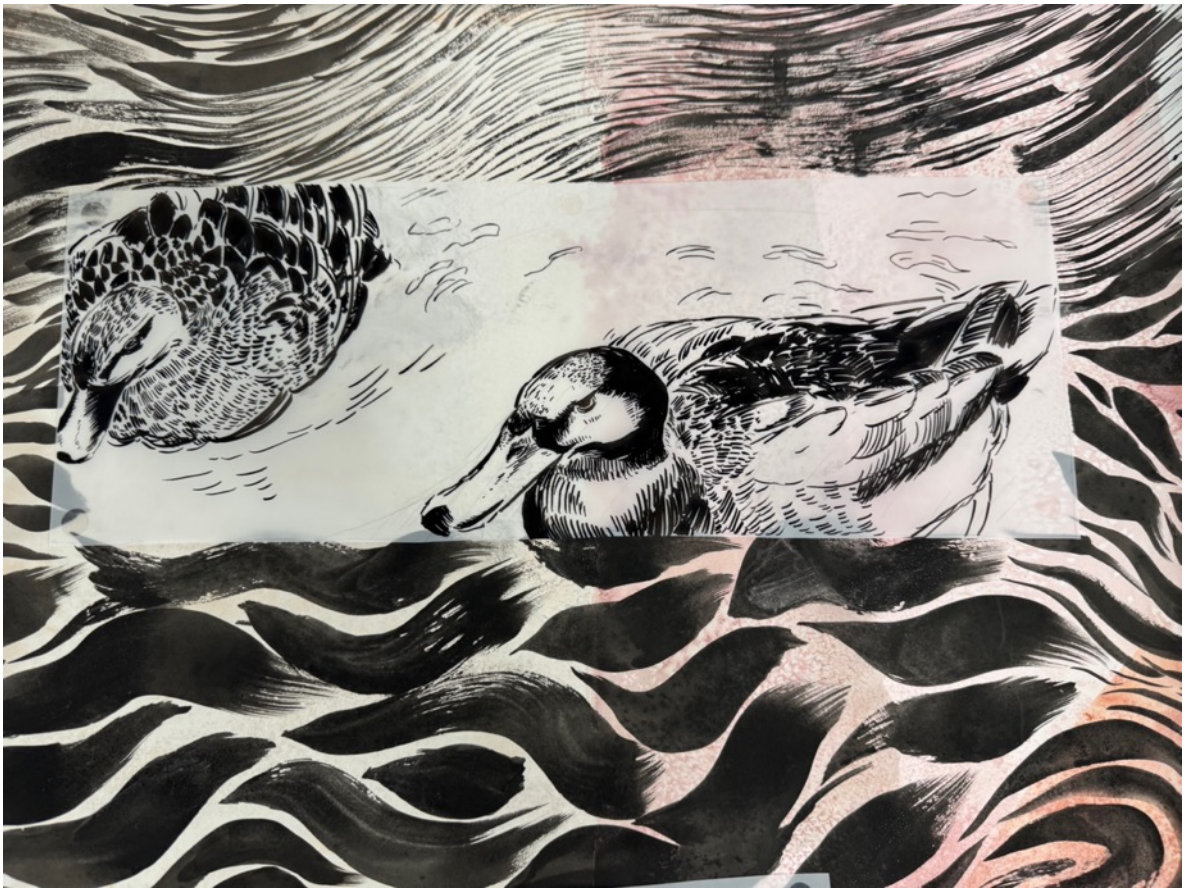

Time Destination Express

Appendix 4 Drawing Experiment 3

Group Image 4. Scroll drawing experiment *Lancaster Landscape*.







Appendix 5 Brushwork Techniques: Mastering Fine-Line and Brush Pens

When it comes to using fine-line pens and brush pens, I have summarised several distinctive features and techniques that significantly impact the drawing process. These characteristics can be harnessed to achieve unique artistic effects, styles, and meanings.

1. Split Ends of the Tips

One of the most noticeable features of brush pens is the split ends of the tips. These split ends contribute to creating an accidentally natural trace, whether drawn horizontally or vertically. This effect can add a layer of organic texture and variability to the lines, enhancing the overall aesthetic of the artwork, creating a sense of naturalness. The repetitive pattern formed by these split ends can introduce an element of unpredictability, making each stroke unique.

2. Softness and Flexibility

The softness of the brush pen tip plays a crucial role in determining the thickness of lines. The high flexibility in direction allows for a wide range of line variations, which can be shaped to form intricate details or broader strokes. However, this flexibility also introduces a level of difficulty in managing the pen, requiring a steady hand and practised control. The ability to adjust the pressure and angle of the pen is essential for achieving the desired line quality.

3. Using Indian Ink in Water Colour Brushes

In my practice, I have filled the tube of a Pentel watercolour brush with Indian ink. This choice of ink provides a rich, deep black that is ideal for bold, striking lines. The water-based nature of the ink also allows for smooth flow and easy manipulation on paper, contributing to the fluidity of the brushwork.

4. Handling Plastic Fiber Tips

The brush tip, made of plastic fibre, presents its own set of challenges. It is harder and more unstable to handle compared to the Uni Pin fine line pen. To ensure a consistent flow of ink, I must periodically squish the tube to replenish the ink supply at the brush tip. This manual control over the ink flow requires careful attention and practice but is crucial for maintaining the desired consistency in the lines.

5. Managing Moisture and Drawing Speed

The brush tip remains moist with ink, especially in the middle body of the pen. When drawing slowly, this moisture ensures that the line is smooth and evenly filled, responding well to the applied pressure. However, if the drawing speed increases, the brush trace can become dry, spotty, and blobby. These faster strokes may appear as if they lack sufficient ink or water, creating a distinct texture that can be both a challenge and a creative opportunity.

Conclusion

Mastering the use of fine-line pens and brush pens involves understanding and adapting to the unique characteristics of each tool. From the split ends of the tips to the flexibility and moisture management, each aspect contributes to the final artwork. Through practice and experimentation, one can learn to control these variables and use them to enhance the expressive quality of their brushwork. The combination of deliberate technique and the inherent unpredictability of the tools can result in dynamic and captivating drawings.

List of Illustrations