Familiar Unfamiliar Residential Landscapes

The Tactility of Memory, Echoes of the Subconscious, and Spiritual Space in Painting

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media, and Design (IAMD)
Critique Room 418, 205 Richmond St W, March 18-22, 2026

March 2026

Abstract

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This thesis explores how painting and material surface can function as a spiritual space within homogenized contemporary living environments. My research begins from a personal and bodily experience of residential space: repeated interiors, standardized layouts, and over-familiar surroundings often create a subtle emotional flattening, making it difficult for the body to pause, feel, or reconnect with memory. In response, I use painting not to represent a room directly, but to construct a surface that can hold delay, ambiguity, and quiet psychological tension.

Through a practice-led methodology grounded in observation, translation, and material experimentation, I transform fragments of everyday residential space into works that slow perception and reactivate bodily awareness. Wood, silk, mineral pigments, ink, and irregular framing structures are central to this process. These materials do not simply support the image; they shape how space is sensed, how memory is carried, and how a viewer encounters instability within the familiar.

Across a series of small wooden panel works, silk paintings, and installation-based experiments, this thesis examines how ordinary spatial elements—such as thresholds, corners, walls, shadows, and furniture—can become sites of affective and perceptual shift. Rather than offering a narrative of home, the work opens a suspended space between recognition and estrangement, where suppressed memory, emotional residue, and bodily hesitation can surface again.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that painting can create a subtle form of resistance to the emotional and spatial standardization of contemporary life. By loosening familiar order and making room for pause, the work proposes painting as a lived and sensorial container: a place where memory, tension, and inner space may re-emerge.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank those who made space for this thesis to happen.

My deepest thanks go to my primary advisor, Herman Pi‘ikea Clark, for his guidance, patience, and trust throughout this process. I am also grateful to Amanda Boulos for her support, and to Leah Shenandoah, whose generous help during the later stage of this thesis gave me clarity and reassurance when I needed it.

I want to thank the people who supported this work in visible and invisible ways: through conversation, critique, encouragement, care, and presence. Some people helped by offering words, and others simply helped by holding space around me while this work slowly took shape.

I especially want to thank my family in China. Across distance, their love and care have remained part of my daily life and part of the emotional ground of this thesis. My understanding of space did not begin in theory. It began in the rooms I grew up in, in the objects that stayed quietly beside me, and in the homes my family made meaningful through use, memory, and feeling. The cultural objects, furniture, and small domestic details that shaped those spaces continue to live inside this work.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the objects and memories that stayed with me throughout this process. They reminded me that space is never empty. It carries attachment, history, protection, and loss. This thesis grew from that understanding, and from my wish to remain close to the fragile but persistent relationship between space, memory, and the body.

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Introduction

Research Background

This thesis begins with a feeling of over-familiarity. The residential spaces I have known since the early 2000s often repeat themselves in slightly varied forms: similar entrances, corridors, lighting conditions, furniture heights, and spatial distances between objects. As these spaces become increasingly standardized, they also bring a kind of emotional flattening. They appear neutral, almost without mood or atmosphere. Over time, the body learns to move through them almost automatically: how to walk along a given path, where to pause, where to sit, and where the gaze naturally settles while waiting.

I am interested in the rare moments when this smooth order loosens slightly. These are moments when light seems to linger, when an edge does not fully align, or when a patch of shadow beside a chair feels strangely more alive than the room itself.

My creative practice centers on these subtle bodily experiences. I do not try to reconstruct a room exactly as it appeared or retell memory in a direct way. What I try to preserve is a bodily shift: a hesitation, a slowed perception, or a quiet sense that something within the familiar order has become slightly unstable. The response often arrives before clear thought. It comes through the body, through habits and spatial memory carried from earlier experiences rather than through a linear narrative.

My sensitivity to these small disturbances is shaped in part by Chinese ways of perceiving space. I have long understood space as something unfolding through movement, pause, distance, and transition. What matters is not only the visual appearance of a room, but also the way the body is guided through it: where it slows down, where it turns, and where it senses a shift from outside to inside, public to private, noise to quiet. This remains deeply important in my practice, especially as I reflect on how many contemporary residential interiors have gradually weakened these transitional experiences.

Research Question

This leads to the central question of my thesis:

"How can painting and material surface function as a 'spiritual space' that reactivates memory and affect within homogenized contemporary living environments?"

I am interested in whether painting can hold attention, delay recognition, and allow the body to feel space differently, even for a brief moment. In this thesis, painting is approached not simply as representation, but as a material and perceptual condition through which memory and affect can become active again.

Thesis Structure

This thesis unfolds through creative practice. The first part establishes the conceptual and methodological framework of my work by discussing the living environments that shape my perception, defining the key terms I rely on, and clarifying how my process operates through observation, material translation, and documentation. The second part turns to works and projects, beginning with small wooden panel experiments and moving into two major case studies: 'The Shadow Woke Up Before I Did' and 'Threshold.' Each work approaches the same research problem from a different angle. Taken together, they trace how my practice moves

from fragmentary memory and tactile material toward broader questions of transition, surface, attention, and bodily pause.

Familiarity, Standardization, and the Quiet Violence of Living Space

My creative practice has long been accompanied by a kind of "Chinese spatial perception." This does not refer to a single cultural theme or direct reuse of traditional style. It describes a bodily instinct that only became clearer after living and studying in Canada. I gradually became more aware of my own way of being in space: I consistently understand space through rhythms of movement, pause, and breath. This way of seeing had remained submerged for a long time, and it continuously shaped the way I observed everyday residential environments, organized images, and felt drawn to specific materials and structures, such as wood and textile surfaces, and the ways they carry experience.

I understand space through movement and experience. I experience space as a path to be walked through. A person enters, turns, pauses, and continues moving, and only then does the space gradually unfold. In traditional Chinese architecture and painting, this unfolding often depends on interfaces, layering, and rhythm. Walls, doors, windows, columns, and furniture all take on the task of dividing and connecting, allowing space to remain open and extended. A flat painting can operate like an open map, allowing both the gaze and the body to wander through it freely. Corners, boundaries, gaps, changes in height, obstructions, and empty intervals naturally become the points that interest me most, because they guide walking, pause, and breath.

To make this spatial experience clearer for readers who may not be familiar with Chinese visual traditions, I simplify it into two observable characteristics.

Flowing Viewpoint: Space Unfolds Through Movement

In traditional Chinese painting, especially handscrolls, ruled-line painting, and garden-like viewing structures, looking is a continuous process of seeing while moving. Space is linked in segments, and doors, windows, corridors, columns, and furniture together form a visual path. I bring this experience into my observation of everyday Canadian spaces, including condos, classrooms, and ordinary objects such as tables and chairs. In my images, I integrate the turns, pauses, and boundary rhythms felt through movement, allowing space to appear slow, layered, and open. I do not pursue the exact perspective of a single fixed viewpoint.

Architecture and Furniture

In traditional Chinese space, doors, windows, railings, screens, and beams function as elements of transition and guidance, producing a spatial effect that is separated but not broken, sheltered but not blocked. They regulate rhythm, direct vision, and keep the space breathable and permeable. Under this influence, my work focuses on how objects define space and create blanks and intervals. Even when the image seems to depict a daily indoor scene, the core of the work often lies in the study of how interface relations organize spatial emotion.

The objects I paint are often the most ordinary things: tables, chairs, walls, empty rooms. These everyday objects quietly establish spatial order and shape bodily perception and action over time. Many of my images do not contain a figure, but the presence of the human has not disappeared. It remains embedded in layout, distance, and implied lines of sight. I am drawn to this kind of

absent presence: the picture is empty, but one can feel that someone has just left, or that someone has lived there for a long time, or imagine where one's own body would be located within it.

This way of seeing is not a theoretical framework I chose afterward. It is a habit that occurs naturally when I face an ordinary room. I instinctively pay attention to turns, edges, gaps, level changes, and intervals. My focus does not center on the image itself. I tend to record space while moving, rather than remaining fixed at one viewpoint. I value blankness, leftover space, and after-feeling, and I avoid filling the image completely. I treat objects as part of space, rather than isolated visual subjects. I am especially sensitive to transitional spaces: entrances, foyers, corridors, stairwells, waiting areas, and corners. These are often the places where the body is most easily disciplined and also most likely to hesitate.

Within the cross-cultural environment of Canada, I have felt the homogenization of contemporary residential space more directly. Spaces like pre-construction condos are not only visually similar; they also present a standardized template driven by logics of efficiency. Space becomes stable, smooth, and reproducible, while also becoming more neutral. A condo floor plan is often enough for one to imagine the actual space in broad terms. It can feel like a surface wiped too clean to hold subtle emotion. What Byung-Chul Han describes as the modern impulse toward constant production and optimization pushes life toward continuous output and can impoverish perception and ritual (Han, 2020). In these spaces, I feel a kind of fatigue: the body follows a route fluently, yet is rarely fully present, and attention struggles to remain for long.

My creative goal is much smaller and more precise. I want to loosen this familiar order gently, through tiny adjustments of proportion, boundary, perspective, light, and distance. Even a slight shift can make a familiar scene strange again, allowing space to recover emotion. Hito Steyerl, in discussing "free fall," describes a contemporary visual experience in which viewing loses stable ground and hovers between suspension and descent (Steyerl, 2011). I feel a strong connection to this instability. I choose to place it back into the most ordinary scenes. Entrances, corridors, tables, chairs, and corners—spaces that seem most stable—can also at certain moments, take on a dreamlike quality, as if reality has briefly forgotten its own rules.

Terms as Working Tools

I use certain terms in both my making and writing that may sound abstract and unclear at first. I do not approach them as floating concepts. I treat them as precise and workable tools: tools for capturing bodily experiences that are difficult to name, for sorting through the internal logic of the work, and for protecting my intention from being simplified too quickly. Each term corresponds to a real spatial experience and to a concrete way of seeing, thinking, and making.

Spiritual Space: A Non-Religious State of Bodily and Mental Presence

What I call spiritual space is built on the interaction between bodily perception and spatial atmosphere. It points toward a clear and concentrated state of presence. This state has no connection to religion. It does not depend on manufactured ambience or romanticized expression. It describes a personal inner focusing triggered by space: the way attention is lightly pulled by the environment, the way inner restlessness slowly settles in quietness, and the way one's sense of existence becomes unexpectedly sharp.

A space does not need to touch the body physically in order to affect it. It can make a person slow down, and become aware again of distance, boundary, interval, and position. I want

painting to become a medium that carries this state, so that the viewer does not simply passively see a scene, but is drawn into an awareness of their own bodily position and tempo in space.

Subconscious: The Echo of Body Memory

My use of subconscious does not follow a strict clinical definition. It does not point to pathology. I understand it more as the echo of body memory: an intuitive response that arrives before language, before narrative, and before rational explanation. Many feelings triggered by space do not wait to be named—hesitation, pause, alertness, fatigue, trance, calm. The body has already responded. These reactions hide in tiny deviations of movement, in where vision lands, and in the rhythm of breath. In this sense, my use of the term stays closer to an experiential understanding of unconscious response than to a diagnostic one, even if it resonates loosely with psychoanalytic accounts of how feeling and association surface before full conscious articulation (Freud, 1999).

My work tries to preserve these mysterious echoes on the surface and in the structure of the image. I do not aim to organize them into a fully logical and narratively complete story.

Earliest Memory of Space: Habits Trained into the Body

For me, the earliest memory of space is not a specific childhood story. It is not a clearly retrievable scene. It points instead to a deeper and more durable bodily mechanism: the sensory habits first trained into the body by space itself.

Why does one naturally pause at a threshold? Why does the body slow down in a transitional zone? Why does vision instinctively look for a relatively stable point of rest? These reactions form something like an internalized grammar of sensing and behaving. Most of the time, one hardly notices it and it continues to direct how one moves, pauses, looks, and judges an environment.

Warped Reality: Slight Loosening from Within Reality

What I call warped reality refers to subtle slippages within reality. I am not referring to spectacular, surreal effects. It appears in tiny shifts of proportion, softened boundaries, delayed light rhythms, and slight overlaps of perspective. Reality as a whole remains recognizable, but local areas become briefly questionable and strange, and through that, emotion re-enters the space.

This feeling is close to the unstable visual condition Steyerl describes, where viewing no longer stands on a solid and certain ground but feels pulled, sunk, and suspended at once (Steyerl, 2011). A slight distortion lets familiar reality temporarily lose its inertia and opens space for new perception.

Residential Landscapes: Fragments of Everyday Living Space

The residential landscapes I refer to are not limited to closed interiors. The term includes all the spatial fragments related to dwelling that one repeatedly passes through in daily life: rooms, entrances, foyers, corridors, stairwells, transitional zones, hallway corners, and the small boundaries of residential compounds.

These are among the most common but most easily overlooked sites in contemporary living environments. They appear ordinary, neutral, and repetitive, yet they most quietly organize and discipline bodily experience. My interest does not lie in classifying building types. It lies in

asking how these repeated fragments organize bodily perception, and how that organization can be restaged, restructured, and rewritten through painting.

Method: A Poetic Mode of Looking: (Perception → Observation → Translation → Container)

My way of working almost always begins with a very specific and real bodily moment. When an ordinary residential space suddenly catches me; when an indescribable atmosphere descends, when the body pauses before thought; when breath slows without warning…I record that moment through photography. The purpose of photographing is not to produce objective, neutral visual material. It is to lock that trigger point in place, so that once I return to the studio, I can re-enter that bodily state and emotional atmosphere.

Perception: Trigger and Record

I usually photograph in moments of strong bodily perception:

1. when a space suddenly causes me to slow down, pause, or hesitate, such as at a doorway, corner, entrance transition, corridor end, or stair turn;

2. when light and shadow appear delayed, stretched, displaced, or slightly illogical;

3. when distances, alignments, and spatial order between objects create discomfort, numbness, or a mechanical feeling;

4. when a space produces a complex feeling I cannot directly describe in language, and I want to record it immediately and continue thinking about its source.

I do not treat photographs as objective evidence of reality. What I want to preserve is the exact location, lighting condition, spatial relation, and mental state in which the bodily response first occurred.

A Poetic Mode of Looking

Back in the studio, observation truly begins. I look back at these photographs slowly and attentively, outside the tempo of everyday efficiency, and allow a more perceptual form of seeing to take over. I call this a poetic mode of looking. It describes a deliberate method of training attention.

I first sense the general atmosphere: the pressure of the space, its openness, brightness, quietness, and whether the light feels delayed, dragging, or slowly seeping.

I then observe interface relations: where separation happens, where connection forms, where transitions remain unbroken, and where vision is asked to turn.

Finally, I consider the existence of things: a chair is not simply a functional object, but something that creates distance, guides pause, and divides a zone; a wall corner is not just a structural node, but a point that produces hesitation in vision and judgment in the body.

At this stage, I often place the photograph aside and use memory and bodily feeling to fill in the space as it was experienced while moving. What I really want to catch is not a single static viewpoint, but the rhythm and layering through which space gradually unfolds in motion.

Translation: How I Turn “the Dark Area Beside a Chair” into Pictorial Action

Translation is the central keyword in my working method. Walter Benjamin described translation not as copying the original, but as allowing something to continue living and growing in another form and language (Benjamin, 1996). My understanding of artistic translation follows a similar logic.

I do not reproduce the original appearance of a space. I extract from reality a certain atmosphere, rhythm, or bodily echo, and then re-place and re-structure it within the image and the material system.

The chair is one of the objects that most easily triggers me. It is so ordinary, so neutral, that people often assume it carries no emotion. However, that very ordinariness reveals how space disciplines the body: the height at which one sits, the distance from the tabletop to backrest, the gap between the chair and the wall corner, the invisible behavioural rule between the chair leg and the floor.

Very often, what actually triggers me is not the chair itself, but the dark area beside it. In movement, it occupies an emotional position before anything else does. Repeatedly looking at these chairs pulls me back toward a more primitive bodily reaction, something formed earlier and more instinctively.

Once back in the studio, I do not aim to "paint it accurately." I am more interested in a set of smaller questions: Why does that dark area feel heavier? How can it make the space slightly unstable without becoming explicitly threatening? In the image, the chair no longer appears simply as furniture, but as an interface: it quietly regulates distance, and at the same time quietly exposes distance.

Using the chair as an example, I translate bodily feeling into pictorial language through a series of specific actions:

• Colour choice: I do not follow the photograph's literal colour. I make the dark area heavier, slower, and more lingering, as if emotion has rested there.

• Composition: I place the chair in a visually uneasy position—too close to the edge, too near the corner, or using the chair back as an interface that cuts the space into parts, so the viewer's gaze must detour instead of moving smoothly.

• Proportional pull: I make chair legs longer, backrests taller, or table height slightly deviate from the daily norm. A tiny displacement is enough to loosen familiar order.

• Removal of elements: I wipe away some functional and explanatory information, leave the wall emptier, simplify the setting, and reduce the safety that comes from a fully explained environment. I may also weaken the contact between the chair and floor, so it no longer seems fully grounded.

• Layered perspectives: The structural lines of a chair are suitable for carrying multiple perspectives. I compress together two viewpoints from moving observation: one from standing, one from sinking slightly as the body prepares to approach. Once layered, reality begins to bend very slightly.

• Leaving blank and erasing: The "air" around the chair matters equally to me. I soften certain boundaries, drag out shadows, and let light seep in as if it has arrived late, so the area around the chair holds a sense of delay, as if space has not completely settled yet.

These actions appear to be formal decisions, and for me, they are also ways of writing bodily experience into the picture. I try to preserve the moment of being stopped by that dark area beside the chair and allow it to continue occurring in the work.

At the same time, I also understand translation as an action against the template. Don Mee Choi argues that translation can resist the flattening effects of the dominant order (Choi, 2020). For me, as living space increasingly resembles a reproducible standardized model, translation also becomes a refusal: I do not return space to the "correct image." I keep delay, ambiguity, difference, unease, and breath. The more ordinary the chair is, the more I want it to lose its neutrality and become perceptible, touchable, and thinkable again.

Material System: Silk + Irregular Three-Dimensional Wooden Frame + Light

My use of silk departs from the flat mounted display of traditional silk painting. I stretch and fix silk directly onto hand-cut irregular three-dimensional wooden frames. The shapes of these frames are inspired by discarded building materials: cut-offs, leftovers, and abandoned fragments that already carry traces of structure and time.

The lightness, softness, and semi-transparency of silk allow natural curvature, tension, and folds to appear along edges and turns. Light passes through the silk surface and creates layers, shadows, and breath between silk and wood. At this point, silk is no longer merely the flat support of an image, and the wooden frame is no longer a simple border. Together, they form a miniature spatial component. The work itself becomes like a fragment of space that has been folded, suspended, and extracted.

There is also a striking contrast between the fragility and transparency of silk and the thickness, strength, and modularity of post-2000 architectural materials. Painting fragments of contemporary living space on such a light and sensitive material produces a distinctive experience of looking and sensing. Materials are therefore not neutral supports in this project. Their active role in shaping relations and form also resonates with recent discussions of materiality that challenge the view of matter as a passive backdrop (Harman, 2025).

Painting as Container

Ultimately, I understand the work as a kind of spatial container. It holds the atmosphere, delay, misstep, and bodily echo I captured in the site, and places attention, unease, silence, and body memory onto a surface and structure that can be stayed with and entered.

What I want to test is a small but very real question: Can familiar order be loosened, even just a little?

If the viewer's gaze is slowed, if pause becomes questionable, if the body begins to notice boundary and distance again, then the spatial emotions flattened by homogenization may have a chance to return, bringing a release and clarity that approaches a dream without leaving reality.

Documentation: Process Records as Research

Throughout the whole making process, I keep continuous records: site photographs, studio notes, material tests, reflective writing, and periodic thoughts. They are tools for tracing every choice: how material changes structure, how structure changes image, and how image changes my own bodily response.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us that method is never neutral; it is tied to how knowledge is

produced, who gets to define the problem, and how the researcher takes responsibility for their own position (Smith, 1999). I do not treat my practice as an objective scientific experiment, but I do want it to remain traceable, discussable, and understandable. The ways I judge, choose, observe, and turn experience into work should be made visible and written carefully.

Transitional Before Case Studies

Before turning to the later chapters, it is important to clarify that the works discussed in this thesis do not function as illustrations of theory. Each one begins from a specific spatial experience and develops its own material logic. The early small wooden panel works establish the basic direction of the research by showing how fragments, tactility, and memory begin to emerge as structural questions. From there, several related works and experiments continue to expand these concerns through different scales, materials, and spatial strategies. Some remain closer to the painted surface, while others move toward installation, object-like construction, or spatial intervention. Together, these works trace the development of my practice from fragmentary and tactile investigations toward a broader exploration of pause, boundary, transition, and embodied perception. The major case studies discussed later in the thesis, therefore, should be understood not as isolated examples, but as part of a larger continuum of making through which my thinking about space, material, and bodily response gradually became more precise.

Case study

Small-Scale Wood Panel Works: Awakening Spatial Memories Through Fragments

My current project began with a series of small-scale wood panel works. Ranging mostly from 10 to 30 centimeters, each piece resembles a cropped fragment, and they present the texture of my childhood home's flooring, scars on the skin, or traces left on the body. Light enough to hold in one hand or tuck into a crossbody bag, these small paintings emerged organically, not as preliminary sketches for larger projects. Instead, they served as a raw, spontaneous starting point: a way to engage with memory through fragments and to anchor my bodily recollections through hands-on creation, long before I could clearly articulate concepts like home, belonging, and spatial homogenization.

Figure 1. Zhuyu Li, Early Wooden panel Study Series, 2024, colored pencil, wood, and acrylic. Photo by the artist.

My earliest creative question was both simple and elusive: where do I come from? This is the question my Primary Advisor asked during the first year of the program. A century of rapid transformation in China has disrupted the continuity of family culture and traditional heritage. These fragmented cultural legacies, colliding with the shocks of the times, have shaped my richly layered memories. For me, this question cannot be answered through concrete statements of identity. Instead, I turn to bodily sensations and the feelings evoked by specific spaces: the slight height difference beneath my feet when stepping through a door, the sudden shift from noise to silence, the way light filters through gaps and rests on walls, or the faint scent of wood. Many spatial experiences manifest not as visual images, but as touch, smell, and rhythm. Through these bodily memories and intuitions, I seek to define my sense of self and build a cohesive creative system. For this reason, I abandoned depictions of complete interior scenes, focusing instead on fragments—salvaging scattered shards of memory and laying them bare on a visible surface.

Wood became my primary material for its inherent weight of memory. Each plank bears unique grain, direction, hardness, and traces of time. Far from a neutral canvas, every piece of wood is distinctive, actively shaping my creative choices: where to pause, where pigment sinks in, where the material resists. The persistent presence of wood grain lends the works an underlying presence, like the ambient hum of a space, or the indelible parts of memory. The scent, texture, and heft of wood constantly grounded me in physical sensation, rather than remaining trapped in visual narrative.

Figure 2. Zhuyu Li, early wooden panel study detail image, 2024, colored pencil, wood, and acrylic. Photo by the artist.

In these small works, I often use colored pencils to sketch delicate lines—quiet, tentative records that stabilize fleeting sensations into rhythm. The pressure of the pencil embeds itself into the wood. Watercolor and mineral pigments follow, layering, seeping, settling, and sometimes pushing lines deeper into the surface. This process mirrors how memory works: some things are covered but never erased; some glow brightly on the surface yet remain inexplicable. The small scale allows works to exist in a state of incompletion, free from definitive conclusions. They rest at a threshold that stirs perception, much like memory itself: fragmented and authentic.

This fragmented exploration has reshaped my understanding of viewing. Small pieces demand closeness and slowed observation. At first glance, they may read as blocks of color or abstract compositions, but upon closer inspection, they reveal quiet resonances: a faint bodily touch, a corner of a space, a fleeting emotional pause. For me, this gradual shift from distance to proximity is integral to the work, viewing becomes a physical act, not just an act of information gathering. The audience must adjust their distance and posture to enter the work's temporal realm. This aligns deeply with my later inquiries: spatial experience rarely resides in grand scenes, but in transitions, margins, and overlooked details.

It was through this phase that I realized my true focus is not what space looks like, but how subtle spatial structures shape bodily rhythm and emotion. Pauses at entryways, partial obstruction when turning, the quiet shift from outside to inside. These principles are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese residential design: thresholds, screens, curtains, winding paths, and the contrast between movement and stillness. My memories are filled with threshold spaces and

quiet objects that demand gentle crossing, such as the slightly raised floor depicted in one painting. These details signal bodily transition, guiding the body from noise to calm, from public to private. Such nuances are increasingly flattened in contemporary living spaces: open layouts minimize transitions, soften entryways, and blur boundaries. We may feel freer, yet our bodies lose moments of pause and sensory awareness. These small wood panel works led me to this core question early on: when spatial transitions fade, how can art revive them?

Thus, this series not only awakens my own spatial memories but also establishes the methodology for my thesis. I began to treat material as an integral part of research. Wood taught me that a medium is not merely a passive support. It carries experience and triggers memory. It clarified that exploring themes of belonging, intimate space, and identity drift requires materials deeply connected to my own body. Canvas oil painting, familiar and standardized from my training, is effective, but it does not convey the tactile quality and temporal weight I seek. This led me naturally to silk: a lighter, more sensitive material that embodies spatial dynamics.

Silk is, to me, the skin of space. Thin and translucent, it interacts with air, humidity, and light. It is not a fixed surface, but a threshold like a screen, curtain, or doorway that separates and connects, shields and reveals. Crucially, silk extends the painting beyond its frame, compelling me to consider its relationship with ambient light, walls, viewing distance, and movement through space. This shifts my research from fragments of memory to the mechanics of space, reintroducing traditional spatial motifs like thresholds and screens into a contemporary context: using material to rebuild transitions, viewing to restore pauses, and art to resist the erasure of bodily rhythm by homogenized spaces.

In retrospect, these small-scale wood panel works are both a starting point and a foundational logic. I first awaken memory through fragments, then translate memory into tangible structures through material. I begin with the body, then examine how space shapes the body. They lay the critical groundwork for my subsequent silk paintings and installations: I am not seeking easily legible images, but a spatial language that lets the body once again feel entry, pause, transition, obstruction, and breath.

Case Study I

“椅子的影子比我提前醒来”

Figure 3. Zhuyu Li, “椅子的影子比我提前醒来” The Shadow Woke Up Before I Did. Chinese Ink and Water Color on Silk, 2025, Photo by the artist.

This work starts with something completely ordinary: a chair—the kind you find in any classroom or apartment. Light, standard, mass-produced, it has no distinct character or memorable features, but it is this very anonymity that makes it act like a quiet, unspoken instruction, gently guiding how the body rests, how we sit, and where we direct our attention within a space. Its function is so consistent that we almost instinctively overlook it. Space is never a neutral, objective container, and daily life is never an empty background.

More often than not, what stops me isn’t the chair’s shape itself, but the faint shadow beside it, shifting softly with light. Before I even notice, the shadow seems to have woken up, occupying a subtle, emotional place in the room. The feeling is understated, not dramatic. It’s more like a tiny shift in rhythm: light arrives a moment late, the shadow stretches quietly, and the rigid order of the space loosens almost imperceptibly. In that instant, my body pauses before my mind does, and words cannot yet catch up.

I try to bring that fleeting, unsteady moment back to the studio. Instead of translating it into a language, I let the materials speak. Mineral pigments and ink are not just choices for a traditional aesthetic; they carry their own sense of speed and weight. Mineral pigments are clear and firm, settling solidly onto the surface. Ink bleeds and seeps, leaving uncontrollable, natural edges within the silk fibers. Layer by layer, the solid, cold object gradually becomes something that

breathes.

The Process

Layer 1: I begin with a breath of air

I rarely start by drawing the outline of the chair. The first layer is more like spreading a field of atmosphere, a kind of humidity that fills the space. I use highly diluted blue-green to set a particular mood. This blue-green is not bright or decorative; it resembles the damp, muted tone of Shanghai's rainy season—air thick with moisture, soft, gentle light, everything wrapped in a fine mist. Light as it is, the mineral pigment already establishes the temperature and feeling of the space, leaving the work half-awake and dreamlike.

Silk is essential here. It does not provide a perfectly flat, stable surface; instead, it allows pigment to move through its fibers. Some areas absorb color quickly, their edges blurring naturally; others hold softly, leaving thin, transparent layers. Once the first layer dries, a delicate, film-like texture emerges. The forms of the space have not fully appeared, but the atmosphere has already settled in.

Layers 2–4: I let the chair emerge slowly, never fully fixing it

In the layers that follow, the chair gradually takes shape. I use more concentrated mineral pigments, or firmer ink lines, to gently touch the layer of air I have laid down: outlining the upright of the backrest, the supporting structure of the legs, a turn along a table edge, or a corner of the wall. I do not rush to define its structure completely. I even leave some lines intentionally open, breaking and softening them before they reach a corner.

In my experience, real everyday space is never sharp or clear. We do not stop in daily life to look at a chair in perfect completeness; more often, we glance and pass by. So the chair in the painting is less a fully defined object, and more a hint of presence.

Throughout these layers, I keep adjusting the density and tone of the blue-green: thinning it in some places to make it lighter and mistier, building it up in others to make it heavier and more stable. The layered blue-green creates a subtle sense of drift. You think you see a definite space, yet the color gently pulls it back, as if clear reality is softened by damp air.

Figure 4. Zhuyu Li, Photo by the artist. The Shadow Woke Up Before I Did. (Process Photo) Chinese Ink and Water Color on Silk, 2025

Layers 5–7: Erase, leave blank, let it spread — blur is intentional

The blur I aim for is not simply smudging the image. It is a repeated process of letting forms appear, then fade away. Midway through, I begin using water and wiping: I gently lift some pigment while it is half-dry, leaving soft traces; I rewet dry areas to loosen edges again; and I leave sections completely blank, letting the brightness of the silk itself become part of the space.

After this treatment, the edges are no longer just out of focus. They feel softened by time. You can sense they were once sharp, then pulled back into mist. I apply this effect most heavily around the chair, especially where it meets the wall and floor. I see this zone as the emotional trigger of the space: letting structural lines soften, letting tonal shifts slow down, letting the air grow denser.

For anyone looking closely, this is not chaotic fog. It is the accumulation of countless pushes, pauses, wipes, and overlays, the trace of slow, quiet labor.

Layers 8–10: Deepen the shadow, let the dark wake first

The heart of this work is not the chair itself; it is the quiet shadow beside it. For this shadow, I do not use pure black. Instead, I layer calm, cool tones—darker and slower than the blue-green, yet still quietly clear. I want it to be an alert presence: not just a natural shadow under the chair, but one that has already claimed an emotional space in the room.

Similarly, I do not make the shadow's edges clean and sharp. I stretch it slightly on purpose, so it looks "a little unnatural" as if the light was late, and the shadow lingered a moment longer. This unnaturalness must be extremely subtle: too much, and it becomes forced; too little, and the moment of shift is lost. What I want is the space in between: you cannot name exactly what is off, but you cannot help but stop and look.

Final adjustment: Hold the space, keep a tiny shift

In the final stage, I return to the overall spatial relationship, rebalancing the distances between

chair, wall, floor, and table edge. I use lighter layers to realign the rhythm so the painting does not fall apart. But I intentionally keep one small shift: a perspective line that does not fully close, an edge that does not align perfectly, light at a corner that lags just behind logical order.

To me, this tiny shift is the breathing point of the work. It keeps the eye from reading the painting in one breath; the gaze is forced to slow down and circle, making the pause meaningful. The intuitive physical response comes before thought.

The hazy blue-green is a way to enter the space

In this work, blue-green is not a simple emotional label. It is a way to enter the space. It makes the room less rigid, less precisely measurable, and gives it humidity and resonance. From a distance, the viewer is softly wrapped in this mist… the painting glows with the soft, diffused light of a rainy day. Up close, you realize "hazy" is not just blur, but the trace of time left by layers of action: spreading, pausing, erasing, bleeding again. You can feel how the surface was pushed toward clarity, then returned to ambiguity, over and over.

This work does not tell a complete story. It preserves one extremely specific moment: when I thought I was already used to these standardized living spaces, my body suddenly stopped at a shadow, at a delayed ray of light.

The chair is the entrance to this perception. Silk makes this entrance soft. Mineral pigments let time settle. Ink lets edges drift freely. Together, they hold that fleeting, subtle shift on the canvas…like a shadow waking first, like reality loosening briefly, then closing again.

Case Study II: Threshold

Mixed media installation (wood, silk, mineral pigments, ink), 2025

In my previous case study, 'The Chair's Shadow Wakes Before I Did', I embedded "pause" within the surface: mineral pigments settling, ink bleeding into the silk, shades of blue-green lingering like dampness on a rainy day. Edges gradually softened, and the order of reality slowed down within the frame. Threshold emerges from the same line of inquiry, shifting this sense of pause from the painted surface into the viewer's physical movement through space. Rather than asking the audience to interpret a concept, the work invites them to approach, circle, pause, and pass through. Pause becomes a bodily event, and time extends from inside the image into the entire space.

Why Threshold

In traditional Chinese living spaces, the threshold was once a tangible, everyday presence. When Duirng my childhood, visiting relatives' homes—older houses untouched by demolition, still preserving their original layouts—the threshold was the first thing one encountered upon entering. More than just a wooden beam or architectural detail, it embodied a physical rhythm that separated the outside from the inside, noise from quiet: lifting one's foot, stepping over, pausing briefly, then moving inward.

That pause was so brief it often went unnoticed, yet it acted like a switch, shifting the body from the hurried pace of the street to the calm rhythm of home. The threshold marked a transition: it signaled entry into a different space, one that demanded a different posture.

Figure 5. Traditional Chinese threshold at the entrance of a courtyard residence. Image source: Baidu Baike, accessed March 9, 2026, https://wapbaike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=7a442b40a55e1ac8e0b3fbb9.

Over time, this experience has faded. Modern living spaces prioritize openness and fluidity; entrances are downplayed, transitions flattened, and passage made smooth and effortless. While movement becomes faster, the chance to pause during "entry" diminishes. Contemporary architecture and interiors often weaken our connection to the natural environment, creating a quiet kind of enclosure and isolation. For me, this shift is not merely formal, it reshapes bodily and mental rhythms. We are less frequently compelled to slow down, less aware of boundaries, and less attuned to the subtle breathing of space.

I chose the threshold as a starting point because it is at once ordinary and deeply sensitive. It is not a grand symbolic gesture, but a structure embedded in daily life, something crossed repeatedly. Its meaning is fluid: it can be a physical height difference, or a psychological turning point. To build a work for it is to recover a flattened sense of transition—to give viewers back the possibility of pausing while entering.

Wood and silk carry this transformation: wood retains the threshold's structural weight and solidity, while silk shifts it from a functional object to a perceptible surface, allowing light and time to make the pause visible.

Structure: Threshold as a Transitional Element

The work begins with wooden construction. I built a series of thick, angular wooden frames, designed less like picture borders and more like miniature architectural components. The weight and hardness of wood are intentional: they naturally slow viewers down as they approach. Corners, depth, and shifts in plane force people to adjust their position and become conscious of their placement in the space.

I did not create a functional, step-over threshold—this would reduce the piece to a utilitarian object. Instead, I dismantled the logic of the threshold into a visible structural relationship: where surfaces form, where gaps appear, where sightlines are gently diverted. The threshold is no longer a single point, but an extended, constructed transition.

First Installation Using Silk: Replacing Function with Attention

Although this is labeled Case Study II, it marks my first time using silk in an installation. A traditional threshold is direct: hard, heavy, durable, built to separate spaces and guide movement across. Silk offers none of this practicality—it is light, soft, translucent, and delicate. This substitution is deliberate.

When the threshold is stripped of its function, viewers' attention is freed. In the gallery, people no longer simply pass through; they begin to observe: Why do I slow down here? How does this thin surface alter my perception? How does light pass through? Why do shadows shift? This exchange lies at the core of the work: I give up the threshold's solidity and utility in exchange for a more sensitive mode of seeing. Where wood says "step over," silk says "pause, and look again."

Figure 6. Zhuyu Li, Threshold I, 2025, wood strip, silk, and mineral pigment. First threshold sample.

Imagery: From "Depicting a Threshold" to "Letting a Threshold Occur"

During the making process, the work underwent a clear shift in direction. Initially, I attempted to represent the threshold figuratively—as a distinct symbol or image, even painting wood grain directly onto the silk. I soon realized this approach was too literal. The image fixed meaning; viewers might "understand" it immediately, but they would not necessarily experience the transition.

I later turned toward open brushwork and layering. The marks draw from two sets of memories: the layered, worn textures of old residential buildings, and the compressed, stacked quality of industrial materials: overlapping, pressed, yet still holding gaps. These marks never resolve into a clear image; instead, they float as traces activated by light: interrupted by folds, faded by brightness, thickened in shadow. The work retains an unfinished, unfolding quality, closer to the sense of transition I intended.

Material System: Transparency as a Gateway for Time

I tested silks of varying thicknesses and found that thinner silk offered greater transparency, allowing shadows from the wooden structure to filter naturally onto the surface. This discovery

led to a key decision: rather than sealing the silk into a flat, closed picture plane, I left it open within the structure—covering only sections and leaving intentional gaps for light and movement to pass through.

The subtle curves, tension, and folds of silk across angular wooden planes become temporal traces. Unlike the fixed wood, silk shifts with changing light and viewing angles. In this sense, transparency transforms the structure from a static object into an active, unfolding surface.

Figure 7. Zhuyu Li, Threshold, 2025, installation view, silk, wood, and mineral pigment. Photo by the artist.

Installation Surprise: Sunlight Merges Work and Space

The most unexpected moment arrived after installation. Once placed in the gallery, the silk began to interact with natural sunlight. Light passing through the material activated layered brushstrokes, gentle folds, and the weight of wooden frames, casting shifting shadows. As the sun moves across the sky throughout the day, shadows glide, and visual layers rearrange: some areas brighten, others recede, boundaries dissolve, and sharp planes re-emerge.

In that moment, the work was no longer simply an object. It became intertwined with the space. Time passed through it, not as a narrated idea, but as a real, physical occurrence of light and space. A quiet rhythm emerged: pause, pass, look back; light advances, shadow retreats; structure appears, then softens into translucency. For me, this was when the threshold truly

"occurred": every time a viewer approached, they entered a transition that was always changing.

Figure 8. Zhuyu Li, Threshold, 2025, detail view showing sunlight passing through the silk surface and activating layered shadows. Photo by the artist.

Viewing Path: Pause, Pass, Look Back

Threshold is not meant to be viewed head-on like a painting. It functions more like a constructed path. Viewers are first gently obstructed by the depth and edges of the wooden structure; only by shifting position do the brushstrokes on silk emerge. Moving further, the interplay of wooden shadows and translucent silk transforms again. The work compels slowing down, and emphasizes that entering is not a single moment, but a duration.

What I hope to offer is not comprehension, but a bodily shift: pause becomes tangible, speed is altered, and attention is drawn to boundaries, gaps, light, and shadow. In this way, the work temporarily suspends the smooth, exhausted rhythm of everyday movement, allowing space to breathe again.

How This Case Study Advanced My Practice

If The Chair's Shadow located delay within the materials—in bleeding pigments and drifting edges—Threshold revealed another form of delay, one rooted in the site itself. Time lives not only in pigment, but in sunlight; the work is completed not only in the studio, but in the gallery.

Transparency here is no longer just a visual effect, it is a temporal mechanism, enabling an ongoing exchange between the work and its environment, so that transition repeats and renews over time. This piece became a foundational revelation for the environment and tonal

language of my overall project, establishing the aesthetic direction for my subsequent silk-based works.

Thesis Exhibition

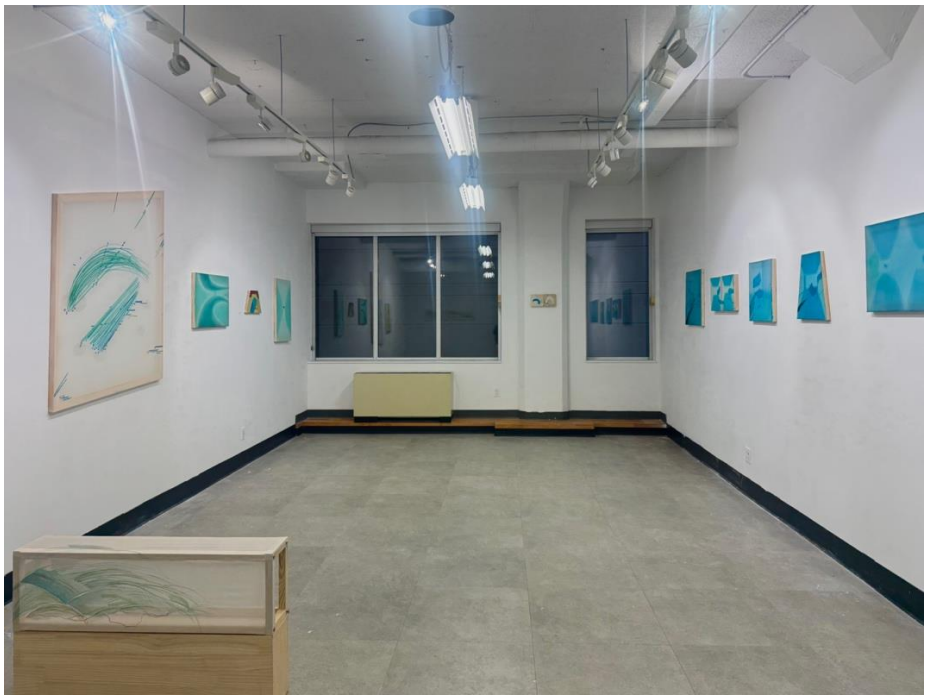

Figure 9. Zhuyu Li, Thesis Show, 2026, installation view (1). Photo by the artist

The thesis exhibition provided a final way to test how these works function in relation to an actual room and helped me rethink the relationship between my work and the space it occupies. Once the work was installed in the gallery, I did not only experience it being 'shown'—I felt a much more direct kind of encounter. The feelings of pause, barrier, closeness, and compression that exist within my work emerged again in the physical space. The exhibition space brought the relationships already inside the work to the surface, making them easier to feel with the body and to activate through looking.

The exhibition was held in a relatively enclosed room with two windows. When the windows are open, they face another building very close by, so natural light is limited. This spatial condition left a strong impression on me. Windows are usually linked to openness, movement, and connection to the outside. But in this room, they create a different feeling: your eyes are drawn outward, but quickly blocked by another building. The space seems to extend a little, but never truly opens up. This subtle experience is very close to the spatial feeling in my work—a sense of apparent openness, but with underlying compression and slowness. It is a common bodily experience in modern living spaces, yet one that is often ignored.

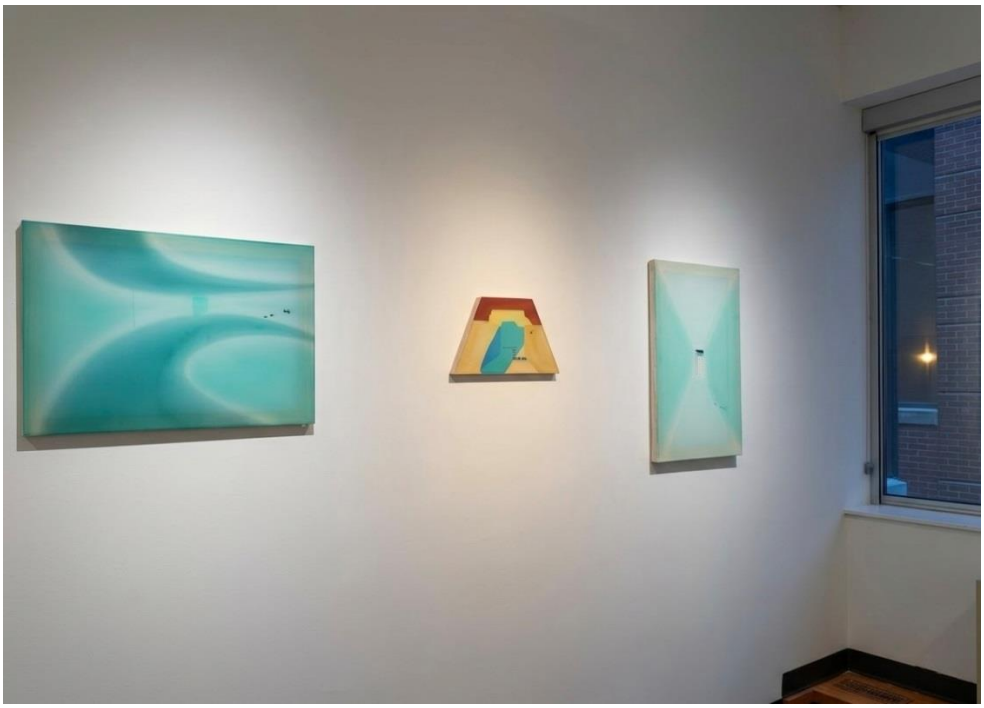

Figure 10. Zhuyu Li, Thesis Show, 2026, installation view (2). Photo by the artist

Figure 11. Zhuyu Li, Thesis Show, 2026, installation view (3). Photo by the artist

For this reason, the room and my work naturally echoed each other. The space did not change the direction of my work, but it made the relationships within it clearer: openness and enclosure, closeness and separation, movement and stillness. When viewers enter the room, they do not just look at individual artworks—they enter a sensory environment created together by the work and the space. The room's structure, light, and sense of distance slow down viewing, and make small,

easily overlooked details more noticeable.

Besides the relationship between the windows and the building outside, I was also very aware of the room's slightly uneven interior walls. Their small bumps, angles, and irregularities did not make the space messy. Instead, they reminded me of traces left on surfaces by memory. They are like subtle, raised marks—unnoticeable at first, but they make the body aware that no surface is ever completely smooth or neutral. These walls created a special connection with my small wooden panel works. The wood itself has grain, cut edges, and material traces, while the wall's unevenness is like surface memory on a larger scale. When hung, the works did not simply attach to the wall; they responded to another layered, marked surface.

This was perhaps the most meaningful part of the exhibition. The relationship between the work and the space went beyond simple installation. It gradually became a dialogue. The walls were not quiet backgrounds, the windows were not just for light and air, and even the room's slight sense of closure and pressure became part of how people experienced the work. The space began to participate in presenting the work, and gave clear form to feelings that had been hidden inside the pieces.

Looking back, this thesis exhibition feels like a continuation of my research in physical space. The spatial experiences, material memories, and subtle bodily compressions of modern living that I discussed in my writing were no longer just theoretical. They were experienced again in this room. For me, the exhibition was not just a presentation of final results. It was a confirmation: confirmation that my work can continue to communicate in real space, and that space itself can slowly reveal what has always been inside the work.

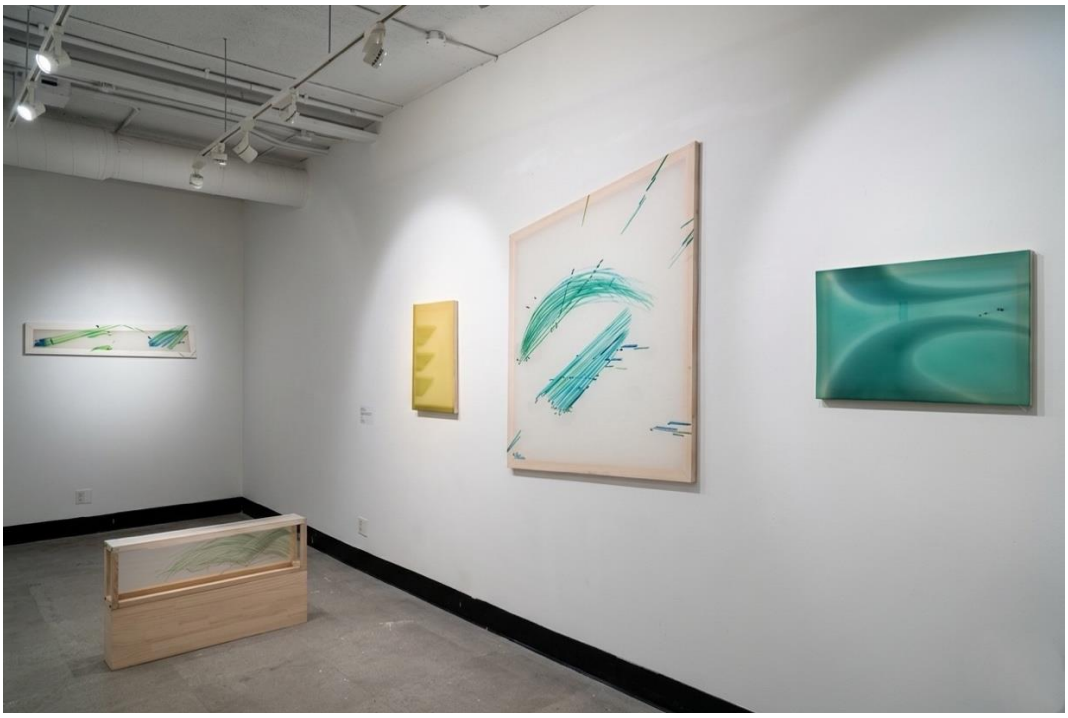

Figure 12. Zhuyu Li, Thesis Show, 2026, installation view (4). Photo by the artist

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