

In Between: Dream, Body, and Identity in a Liminal Space

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Abstract

In Between is a liminal space where I hide from the reality, to dream and to have conversations with myself. Being in between allows me the freedom to feel and to explore the sense of belonging and self-acceptance, to claim myself back from the sense of otherness and body dysphoria caused by the mainstream viewpoints and standards from the environment that I grew up with in China. The idea is inspired by doubts in my existence in this world: why should I be “born to” question myself not fitting into the mainstream and not be “standard” or “normal”? *In Between* reveals an inner struggle between my physical body and my conscious mind. It intends to seek people unseen in the general public who may resonate with my feelings of identity crisis by creating an imagined scenario, where my identity splits into a group of small characters, from my mind. In sharing this thesis, I hope it becomes a way for people to be seen and find validation in having feelings similar to the way I do.

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1. Introduction

This thesis is based on my experience of living in this world from 2001 until now. Growing up in China and later moving to Canada, I gradually developed a strong sense of not fitting in and not fully belonging within the environments around me. I often feel like I exist in between different identities, cultures, and expectations, without completely belonging to any of them. These feelings of otherness have shaped the way I understand myself, my body, and my relationship with the world around me.

This research asks how dream-like and liminal spaces can be used to explore feelings of identity crisis, body dysphoria, and the experience of existing in between socially constructed categories. In response to these questions, the *In Between* (see *Figure 1*) is an interdisciplinary exhibition project combining painting, ceramics, and sound installation. The exhibition functions as an imagined dream space where I can have conversations with myself and temporarily escape from the pressure of reality. Instead of presenting identity as something fixed or complete, the project reflects my ongoing process of trying to understand where I belong and how I relate to my body, consciousness, gender, culture, and emotions.

The visual and conceptual direction of this thesis is influenced by 3 pivotal moments of intersection: *Dreamcore* internet aesthetics, Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream, and labyrinths from the popular Japanese anime show called *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. Although these references come from very different cultural contexts, they all explore unstable boundaries between dream and reality, self and other, body and consciousness I experienced and have used to inform my methods of research. Throughout this thesis I use autoethnography as a method to reflect on

these lived experiences and to explore how identity can be fragmented, unstable, and constantly shifting. I introduce case studies starting with Dreamcore aesthetics that use nostalgic and liminal spaces to create emotional feelings of uncertainty, loneliness, and escape. I then reflect on ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream, an influential text that questions whether reality and illusion can truly be separated. I use the witches' labyrinths in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* as a strategy to transform emotional states into surreal spaces that reflect inner psychological conditions. These influences have shaped the way I approach space-making in my own art practice, where imagined environments become a way for me to process emotions and visualize experiences that are difficult to explain through words alone.

The thesis begins by discussing my experiences with family, cultural identity, gender expectations, body dysphoria, and internet culture as the origins of my sense of otherness. It then analyzes the philosophical and artistic influences that informed the development of *In Between*. Finally, the paper examines the exhibition itself, including the use of painting, ceramics, sound, and installation to construct a dream-like liminal space that reflects my ongoing process of searching for identity and belonging. Rather than trying to fully resolve these conflicts, *In Between* accepts uncertainty as part of my lived experience and treats existing "in between" as a continuous state of becoming.



Figure 1 Partial view of In Between. Zhizhe Yan. 2026. Photograph by Feifan Yang.

2. Where am I from?

The confusions of my identity started ~~in an early stage of my life since back~~ in my childhood since I had the ability to think. I'll unpack my early life experience to demonstrate the questioning stage of my identity crisis through my family background and the views on gender roles in family and school.

The first time that I had the dilemma of choosing between identities was when I questioned where I came from since my parents are from two different counties. I was born and raised in Hu Nan(湖南) Province, in China. My parents are both from Hunan, but my mother is from Bai Tu Tan(白兔潭) Village, Li Ling (醴陵) City, and my father is from Lao Hu Chong(老虎冲) Community, Cha Ling(茶陵) County. Both regions are under the administering of Zhu Zhou(株洲) City, and geographically, the regions are not far from each other (see *Figure 2*), but still they speak different dialects. I was born in Cha Ling County where is my father's side of the family is from, but I only stayed there until I was 4 years old, and I didn't get the chance to learn Cha Ling dialect. Chinese kinship is often understood as a highly rigid form of patrilineality structured around male lineage and fixed by birth (Stafford 2000, 56). It emphasizes stable, unchanging relationships within clearly defined family lines, while excluding those outside them. Within this system, women are positioned as outsiders, whose influence is limited and often seen as disruptive rather than central (56). Since China is a patriarchal society country, the father's side of family was my default family, so I lived and moved along with them to Chang Sha(长沙) City, the capital of Hu Nan Province when I was 4. Even though I lived with my paternal family from Cha Ling for a long time and I understood their dialect, to this day I don't know how to

speak in Cha Ling dialect. On the other hand, I feel closer to my mother's side of family in Li Ling.

Although I visit Li Ling occasionally, I am fluent in their dialect. I think it's because my grandparents in Li Ling took care of me the most when I was little. I spent more time in person with my grandmother from Li Ling the most, compared with the time I stayed with my paternal family, because she visited me and my mother a lot in Cha Ling to help my mother take care of me. However, there was a neighbour in Li Ling who always teased me by calling me a little Cha Ling Lao(茶陵佬), when ever he saw me visiting. The way he calls me Cha Ling Lao, means a person from Cha Ling in slang, made me feel like a stranger to the county; I did not belong.

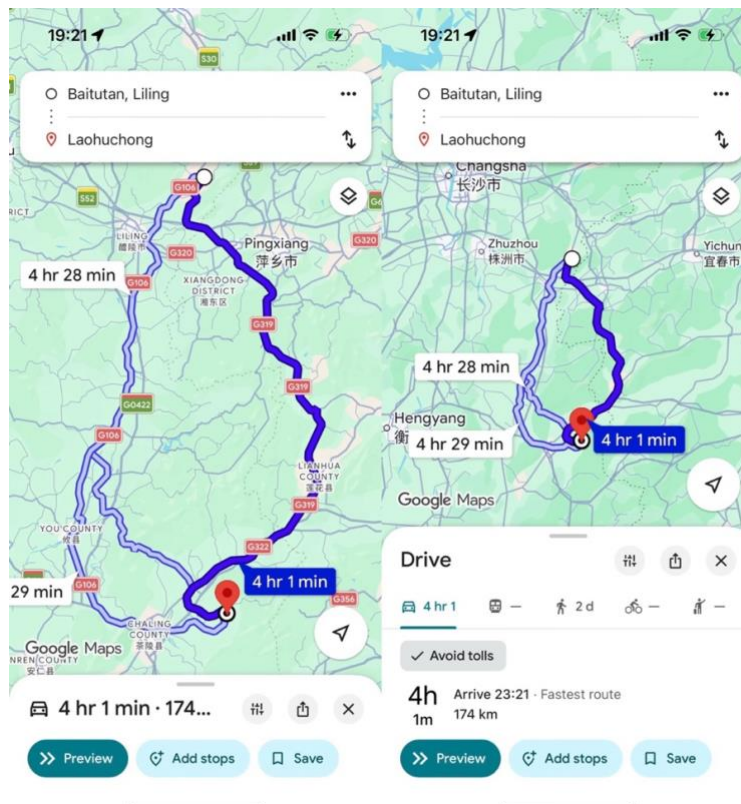


Figure 2 Distance between Baitutan, Liling and Laohuchong, Chaling. Google Maps. Accessed on April 7th, 2026. Showing the distance between two places is 174 kilometers and takes about 4 hours and 1 minute driving.

When I moved to Chang Sha City and lived with my grandparents from Cha Ling at 4 years old, the question of where I am from became more difficult to answer when I started school in the new city. Cha Ling is where I was born, and where the society signed as my default family, but in my understanding, I felt closer to Li Ling, I wanted to call Li Ling my hometown, but at the same time it didn't feel right. The question of where I belong did not only come from geography or family background, but also from how other people identified me before I had the chance to understand myself. Looking back now, this feeling of existing between different identities became the beginning of my sense of otherness.

2.1 I'm Not a Girl, but am I a Boy?

As I grew older, this sense of “in betweenness” gradually extended beyond family and regional identity into gender expectations and the way I was expected to behave as a boy. My father always said to me that I should behave like a boy, that I should be interested in sports instead of watching magical girl-themed cartoons, that I should speak louder instead of whispering words that nobody can hear, and that I should grow taller and fitter but don't eat too much so I can become a son that my father is proud of. A researcher from Bei Jing, China, Lin Xin, who works with Bei Jing Dami Weilai Technology Co., Ltd., ~~whose research~~ focuses on gender identity, education, and literacy, especially in early childhood development. Lin Xin published an article discussing gender identity exploration in early education in China, specifically about young boys' gender identity. In the article “*Young boys' Gender Identity in China: Exploring Implication on Gender Identity and Literacy in Early Child Education*” Xin had researched statistics on women who are receiving advanced education. While most women stay in the workplace even if they get married and have children, in the current society such

efforts do not support equality for women in the country. Men still hold the essential power and manage the society's beliefs despite women's status having been raised higher than before; therefore, boys with masculine characteristics are still more favored than girls with feminine traits (Xin 2021, 64). I think this bias is why my father expected me to develop into the role he thinks is good for me, that made me feel I was wrong and never enough, because I behave with "feminine" traits more than masculine ways I had been taught. Xin talks about the difference in boy's and girl's gender identity trajectories in their article. Xin points out children's realization of gender category and labelling by interacting with their surroundings. For example, boys are often expected to grow into men or fathers who are strong and brave, while girls are expected to become women or mothers who are drawn to beauty, caregiving, and upholding an ideal appearance (Xin, 62). While I was surrounded by many female family members as a child, when it came to my father's expectations leading me to become more masculine, I felt like a boy trying to learn how to pretend to be "The Boy", the boy that fits in the stereotypical gender role of boy.

I can't help but to be attracted to the things that I am naturally drawn to, while also feeling guilty at the same time because I'm not practicing becoming the boy that my father was expecting. Since I was more interested in hobbies and topics that stereotypically had been considered feminine, I go along with girls more in school rather than the boys. However, I was interested in many things that included both feminine and masculine stereotypes, but I had been excluded by the boys because I was too feminine to consider as a part of their group. It was inevitable for children to be surrounded in stereotypical norms for gender difference. In literature that school included in textbooks, children's literature often presents female characters as calm, caring, polite, and elegant, while male characters are depicted as strong, powerful, active, and

sometimes even aggressive or heroic (Xin, 64). For example, I was interested in drawing when I was in elementary school, but there was once a boy classmate who caught me drawing during recess, and he said to me that “drawing was for girls and we boys only play with boy’s stuffs”. The boy’s stuffs that he talked about were some games like flipping game cards on the floor, spinning top fight, tag you’re it, and any games that are active and feisty. I only got invited to those games a few times and once the boys found me too slow in the game or I was always hanging out with girls, they stopped interacting with me. The schools that I went to back in China were mostly all boarding schools, so most of the time the opportunity to build relations with people and to practice my social skills was in school. The boys always teased me, saying I am a girl because my voice was thin and high-pitched and eventually they made fun of me and isolated me. I could not blend into the boys’ community because of my personality, behavior, and my interests, and I did not belong with the girls because of my biological sex. Existing between the masculine and feminine social expectations made me constantly question how I should behave, speak, and present myself. Over time, these pressures not only affected my social relationships, but they also changed the way I understood and judged my own body.

3. My Body and Me

My relationship with my body became increasingly complicated as I grew older, especially within an environment where masculinity and femininity were defined through rigid stereotypes. It has been mentioned previously that my father has a certain standard for me to become the ideal son with the ideal body for the average man: tall and fit. Even though he, my father is short by community standards, and there is no “tall” person in our family, he expected me to grow taller and to marry a tall woman to change the biological stature of our family for future generations. This pressure had been placed on me since childhood until now. When I reflected on this, I researched how family expectations can affect the younger generations. One study by Dr. Eddie Brummelman and 5 other researchers studying psychology and communication science conclude with one of their research projects that some parents will transfer their unfulfilled ambitions onto their children hoping they will make their broken dreams come true (Brummelman et al. 2013, 3). My father can be seen as one example in this situation. It has deeply influenced me to think that my body is born with a mistake, and I must fix it back to a normal ideal for me, for my father, for my family, and for my present-day body to not exist in future generations.

Around the time when I was in middle school, I started to realize that I was attracted to boys, realizing my sexual orientation was different from people around me. In the early 20th century, Western theories had influenced the dominant view on homosexuality in China. From the early 1900s to 1979, homosexuality in China was largely defined through a medical and scientific lens as something outside the norm. It was treated as a form of deviance that needed to be corrected, suppressed for disrupting heterosexual norms, and controlled for challenging

patriarchal social structures (Kong 2016, 500). The negative perceptions of homosexuality shaped my parents' and their generations' views towards the related topics. Growing up surrounded by heterosexual norms resulted in emphasizing my existence as a mistake, because homosexuality was, and until now for majority of people in China is, considered as abnormal and perverted. I had no ideas about the concept of marginalization or queerness at that time, and even though I had friend to share these thoughts with, we all implicitly agreed that homosexuality was something inappropriate and should be hidden away from the public for fear of be bullied or isolated. At the same time, gender roles shifted in my subconscious: I should learn from the girls at school to think like them and to be like them in order to make boys interested in me. On one hand, I still wanted to practice masculinity so I can fit in the traditional heterosexual gender norms; on the other hand, I want to get attention from boys just like how girls were being interesting and attractive to boys. In the traditional view of beauty in women, it emphasizes the aesthetics of paleness, youth, and slenderness, and these beauty standards are represented in cultural products like literature, folklore, and art (Zhang and Wahab 2024, 1529). Anxiety around my body caused by the traditional values of societal beauty also had an impact on me, even though I am not a woman. However, I wanted to be attractive to men, so I put myself in a similar position to women. Gender dysphoria refers to the distress or discomfort that arises when a person's sense of their own gender does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth (Jassi, McLaren, and Krebs 2023, 3). Meanwhile, the in betweenness of my identity was causing body dysphoria, which is experienced as a sense that one's body "does not feel right," reflecting a deeper incongruence between physical form and identity. When puberty started, I had body dysphoria because I started to have body hair, my voice got deeper, pimples started to grow on my face, and I was chubby. I was growing in the opposite direction to the beauty standard of

women. I questioned myself and asked, “if I was a girl, will everything go easier for me?” I became self-judgemental, and I judged my body when I looked at the mirror as if my body is another individual other than me. The more disconnected I felt from my body and identity, the more I wanted to find answers outside of the environment I was growing up in. Since I could not openly discuss these feelings in the reality, I gradually turned towards the internet as another space for exploration and escape.

4. The Internet: Portals to Escape, to Another World

The internet became one of the few places where I could encounter perspectives, identities, and experiences that were unavailable in my immediate surroundings. In terms of the questions that I had about homosexuality and body dysphoria, I had no one around for me to consult with, and no example for me to look up to in real life. I was transferred to a Chinese-Canadian international boarding school in grade 9, and the school was in Jiang Men(江門) City, Guang Dong(广东) Province. I went there myself without the accompany of any families. The internet became the most convenient tool for me to know about the world outside of school. However, China created a project called the Golden Shield, that uses the Great Firewall of China to restrict Chinese citizens browsing websites that are outside of the boarder (Tang 2016, 2). In this case, I didn't have direct access to foreign platforms like YouTube or Instagram. The mainstream platforms in China are Weibo and WeChat, but the Chinese LGBTQ+ communities' right to spread messages and contents are restricted by officials (Group 4 2022, 3). Luckily, I found another platform called Bilibili(哔哩哔哩), where some Chinese international students studying outside of China will post video logs to share their dailies and perspectives of cultural differences.

Meanwhile, as I was already in an international school to prepare studying abroad, I sank myself in the digital world and discovered more influences from foreign cultures that were new and interesting to me. Later, I learnt about VPN, which allowed me to access foreign internet

inside of China.¹ Once I was granted access to Western social media, I found more content that would be considered as forbidden in China that shows the Western lifestyle (homosexual marriage, sex education in early school years, public protests) and even critiques and controversial content talking about China and East Asia (critiquing communism and socialism, or anything political sensitive content about China). I found access to a more authentic foreign internet experience that made me think getting out of China was the way to find the answers to my questions, and my sense of belonging. Through the internet, I was exposed to new ways of understanding identity and belonging, but I also became emotionally attached to online spaces themselves. During the pandemic especially, digital spaces began to feel more emotionally real to me than physical reality.

¹ A Virtual Private Network (VPN) routes internet traffic through secure protocols via an external server, making websites register the server's location rather than the user's actual location; Chao Tang, "In-depth Analysis of the Great Firewall of China," December 14, 2016, 11.

5. Dreamcore and Dream

One of the internet aesthetics that deeply resonated with me during the start of the global pandemic was Dreamcore, which uses liminal and dream-like imagery to create feelings of nostalgia, loneliness, and displacement. I moved to Toronto, Canada in mid 2019 to start my art and design studying in university. The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 started in early 2020. An early study of online habits during the pandemic shows that the rise in internet usage had increased from 40% to 100%, comparing it to times before the lockdown (De', Pandey, and Pal 2020, 1). Under this circumstance, my bond with the internet became even closer. Through my browsing journey on the internet, I became interested in this internet aesthetic category called the Dreamcore. Dreamcore art combines strange spaces with a feeling that time is both moving fast and stuck at the same time, creating a unique visual style (Liang and Zhang 2025, 92). In those Dreamcore aesthetic images, the settings are usually in abandoned shopping malls, empty corridors, familiar rooms, and blurred end of corridors (Liang and Zhang). During the Covid-19 lockdown, these settings made me relate to the public space around me during the pandemic, and they evoked nostalgic and sad feelings because I missed the time and experience before the global lockdown. This feeling got stronger as the pandemic went on longer. When I found Dreamcore arts on social media, the contents usually came in a photo or video post with nostalgic background music that made me feel like I was separating my consciousness from my body just to dive in the aesthetic atmosphere, taking a moment to escape from reality. In Liang and Zhang's research about Dreamcore art, they describe its unique visual traits like rough and fuzzy images, nostalgic dreamy settings, and nonlinear narrative in space and time: "the past has not yet passed, and the future has not yet arrived". The researchers frame this concept as a form of hauntology, which describes the way the past continues to linger in the present – almost like a

ghost – shaping how we think, feel, and imagine what comes next (Liang and Zhang 2025, 95). The liminal space of Dreamcore photos can be either outdoor like an empty playground (see *Figure 3*) or indoors (see *Figure 4*), in which both instances are vacant. Dreamcore arts usually use liminal spaces as background, with blurred or shaded human beings or animals collaged in the space, and sometimes texts are also included (see *Figure 5* and *Figure 6*). From my perspective, Dreamcore means an aesthetic using visual elements to collage a space in between the reality and dream, the intention is to visualize and forming a dream into a tangible art in the reality. The aesthetic deeply influenced me for my art and design practice since the pandemic, and it also made me curious about the artistic possibilities of exploring the concept of dreaming, and how dream space relates to an imagined inner world, and I can find ways to express some emotions and experiences beyond words. Dreamcore made me think deeply about the relationship between dream and reality, and how imagined spaces can sometimes feel emotionally more truthful than physical environments. These ideas later connected strongly to my understanding of Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream.



Figure 3 Children Playground in Ching Wang Court, 06:33, 11 August 2006



Figure 4 空店。Empty Retail Space. March 7, 2008. Flickr.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/chrstphre/2321734355/>



Figure 5 "Piratedreamcore." Aesthetics Wiki. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/aesthetics/images/d/d8/Piratedreamcore.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20211020134130>



Figure 6 "Why Are You Scare." Aesthetics Wiki. Accessed April 8, 2026.
https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/aesthetics/images/1/19/Why_are_you_scare.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20250326135218

6. Zhuang Zhou and His Dream of the Butterfly

Although Dreamcore is a contemporary internet aesthetic, the uncertainty between dream and reality that it explores can also be found in much earlier philosophical ideas, especially in Zhuang Zhou's story of the butterfly dream.

昔者庄周梦为胡蝶，栩栩然胡蝶也，自喻适志与，不知周也。俄然觉，则遽遽然周也。不知周之梦为胡蝶与，胡蝶之梦为周与？周与胡蝶，则必有分矣。此之谓物化。（《庄子·齐物论》）（“庄周梦蝶文言文” n.d.）

The Chinese texts shown above is a quote from Zhuang Zhou's text. Zhuang Zhou(庄周), a Chinese Daoist philosopher who wrote the ancient text of *Zhuangzi*(庄子) during the late Warring States period (476-221 BCE). In *Zhuangzi*, there is a story that Zhuang Zhou once dreamed that he was a butterfly, free and happy, but the butterfly didn't know that he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up from the dream and realized he was Zhuang Zhou, but he started to question whether he was Zhuang Zhou who had a dream about turning to the butterfly, or now he is in the dream of the butterfly that turned to Zhuang Zhou. At the end of the story, Zhuang Zhou wrote there was a significant difference between the butterfly and Zhuang Zhou, this difference he called the “transformation of things” (物化). Jingjing Chen, a scholar of Chinese literature who examines how classical concepts, such as dreams in *Zhuangzi*, change in meaning across different historical and cultural contexts, claims in their article that the transformation is a switch in one's consciousness between the real world and imagined illusion (Chen 2020, 2). Zhuang Zhou's dream of the butterfly is leading me to ask whether I belong in

the reality or the illusion, or whether I live in a reality that is in fact an illusion. Every time I am dreaming, I go back to the reality that I thought was the illusion. More questions follow: is my body an illusion or a form of consciousness in the reality where I am in at this moment, where reality is the illusion? And if the illusion of me in my dream is my real body, is the reality that I assumed the illusion, from the opposite position?

In Hans-Georg Möller's study of Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream, they point out another Chinese researcher, Guo Xiang(郭象), who claimed since Zhuang Zhou does not remember "he" is the butterfly in the dream, there is no reason to doubt anything because there is no continuous stage between dream and reality. Both dream and reality are at their own time, and everything is according to their own intentions. (Möller 1999, 440). Therefore, the difference between staying awake and dreaming is as the same as the distinction between life and death, so there is no reason to worry about death while alive just like there is no reason to doubt the dream while waking (Möller 1999, 443). Hans-Georg Möller's main point is that the Daoist view does not see different states as connected by a continuous identity; instead, it emphasizes that each state is separate, and this separation is what makes all states equally real and valid (Möller 1999, 442-443). In my opinion, this research is suggesting for me to ground myself in the reality, and not to worry about the other or the opposite side of the reality. However, I was not able to find the answer to my confusions – especially on my identity and my belonging – in the reality while in the environment that I grew up in. Since dreaming requires its own time and intention, to me in reality the dream may just be a reflection of the reality, so the "me" who is grounded in the reality is trying to seek an answer and purpose in a space between dream and reality. Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream influenced the way I think about consciousness, identity, and the unstable

boundary between reality and illusion. These ideas later became important foundations for the artistic influences that shaped my own visual language and space-making process.

7. Influences and Inspirations

In terms of my art practice, many of my visual influences come from animation and internet culture, which both shaped the way I imagine emotional and psychological space. Art practice has been my way to speak of my emotions and feelings that are hard to form into words in terms of the influences that I learnt my “art language” from. Cartoon animation and an internet aesthetic culture are two of the major categories that spoke to me in my formative years. I came to understand animation as another world artificially created as a space that is inspired by either someone’s life experience or someone’s inner world reflected from their real life. As for internet aesthetic culture, it is a convenient way to keep up with diverse art and design aesthetics in a most affordable way possible for me, and it is a cyber community that is safe for me to share and access collections of intimate emotional experiences stimulated visually and audibly, that are created with in this community.

7.1 Animation of Magical Girls

Magical girl themed animation is one of the big categories of tv shows that I grew up watching; it was my awakening for feminine and magical aesthetics for my art practice. During the global pandemic in the early 2020s, I found a show, called *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, that inspired me with new perspectives in exploring my identity. The background of this story is about a group of young teenage girls who can transform into magical girls wearing stylized colour-coded costumes fighting against witches, who enshrine themselves in their own labyrinths. The labyrinth it seems is an endless and fantastical space where the witch sends out familiars to resist magical girls, and the girls will have to fight until they get into the centre of the

labyrinth (see *Figure 7*) to defeat the witch. Once the witch is defeated, they will leave with a grief seed that magical girls can use to clean their soul gem, which is the source of the girls' magical power containing the girls' soul, in order to survive (James 2017, 41). It has shown in the later part of the show that if a magical girl does not purify her soul gem with a grief seed, her gem will be full of despair and darkness and eventually turn to a grief seed. In this case the magical girl will turn into a witch herself (James 2017, 42). There is a character named Kyubey, he is a cat-like-looking alien constantly seeking young girls to make contracts, that if the girl agrees to become a magical girl, he will grant a wish, that can be anything the girl asks for (Chu 2020, 118). It has been explained later in the show that Kyubey is an alien who came from a civilization which found energy generated from changes of emotional states. However, emotions are considered a rare disease, so Kyubey that been sent on the Earth works in a role as the “incubator”, who found the ebb and flow of human desire, especially when adolescent females experiencing emotion transition from hope to despair and can be the best energy source. The transformation of magical girls into witches is described as a miraculous process that appears to go against the laws of thermodynamics – that the process of energy transformed into entropy can be reversed. By reversing the natural increase of entropy, Kyubey views the girls as ideal for preventing the universe's eventual heat death—or at least for preserving it for aliens who see sacrificing individuals from a “lower” civilization as a logical decision (Chu 2020, 125-126). Kyubey tricked the girls to sign a contract with him with a grant of a wish, and transforms them to magical girls. The grant of a wish is a sign of hope that the girls can achieve what they desire, but in the end if the magical girls got defeated or ran out of purity, they turn into witches; at this time hope transform to despair, when Kyubey harvests the energy to keep the universe running.

Among the magical girls in the series, one character, Sayaka Miki was one that I emotionally related to the most because of her complicated relationship with her body and sense of self.



Figure 7 Gertrud's labyrinth, Puella Magi Madoka Magica, Episode 2 (2011) Screen shot captured.

7.1.1 Sayaka Miki and Imperfect Body

Sayaka Miki's story especially resonated with me because it reflects the separation between body and consciousness that I also experienced in my own life. Sayaka Miki is a character in the show who specifically talked about her relationship with her body. The wish that she asked of Kyubey is to cure the body of a male violist that she has feelings with, so he can return to the stage. After finding out the truth of becoming a magical girl, meaning her body and soul are now separated: her original human physical body is now just an immortal shell that will be shut down if it is too distanced and separated from her soul gem, which is a physical form of her soul, consciousness, and her source of power. In Sayaka's sense, her body is contaminated, and degraded into a "zombie", so she can no longer ask the violist to reciprocate her feelings (Chu 2020, 122).

In the heterosexual dominated environment that I grew up in, I feel a degrading of my body in a similar way. I will never be desirable to any other boy because I am in a boy's body, and I think boys will only be attracted to girls because I am the weird one who is stuck in between. Being self-judgemental is making me not accept my body and eventually makes me feel like my body and my conscious are two individuals that are forced to be bonded together. My thoughts become the evidence of self-objectification, my consciousness is judging and blaming my body by standing at the opposite side, as if they are two equally valid existences, but in this case, I feel more as myself as my consciousness and my body is a physical shell where I, my soul, live inside of. It is like the separation of the magical girls' body and soul gem: self-objectification and self-degradation become stronger when I don't feel like one complete individual. Sayaka's transformation made me reflect on how social expectations and self-objectification can separate a person from their own body and identity.

7.1.2 Kyubey—a Sign of Patriarchy?

Beyond the magical girls themselves, I also became interested in the system controlling them, especially through the character of Kyubey. In my opinion, Kyubey (see *Figure 8*), the cat-like alien, is a representation of patriarchy in the real world. He harvests energy from the sacrifices of magical girls' body and emotion and claiming it as reasonable decision to sacrifice "lower" civilization, but adolescent females have always been the biggest victim under the magical girl system. Kyubey never tells the truth of the magical girl when he offers the contract, because he needs the energy from the change of emotional states of magical girls when they lose their hope and find out the truth by themselves. The granting of a wish is just a way to trick and manipulate young girls to sign the contract that Kyubey thinks is for the best of the whole world.

I think it is similar to the patriarchal expectation of citizens' "obligation" to reproduce and increase population in China. I once had a conversation with my parents to not have children in the future, but they claim it is humanity's obligation to have children, and it will lead to human extinction if everybody has the same idea as I do. My parents also asked who is going to take care of me when I got old, if I don't have children? What's more, I heard this a lot from my parents when they got frustrated because of my choice and said: "you will understand us when you have kids in the future", as if it was already determined that I will have child. I question the purpose of why my parents gave birth to me when I hear their opinions. Am I significant enough to save the population of the earth? Does the population need to be saved? Am I born to take care of my parents when they get old? Am I an insurance that they invested for their later life? Will I be emotionally and financially stable enough to raise a child in the future, or will I have enough to take care of me later? Why would I bring another life to this earth if I already find it frustrating to live happily? Why was I born? Why am I being born without my consent? Relating to the magical girl contract, the reason why my parents gave birth to me seems like they fell for the social norms under patriarchy, and it is similar to how Kyubey tricks the consent from young girls by granting a wish as a distraction to prevent them from finding out the truth. Based on what my parents said earlier, they seem to have been "tricked" by the social norms and gave birth to me, but my existence is somehow going against the norms given by patriarchy; in other words, I am not a traditional male image and I do not want to reproduce in the way the society norms expected. My existence becomes questionable and marginalized, and the environment surrounding me makes me question, "would it be better if I have never been born?", since it seems I'm failing to fulfill the obligation given by the system. The magical girl system in the show reflects a structure where emotional suffering and sacrifice are normalized under the name

of a greater purpose. At the same time, the visual environments created by the witches became equally influential to my understanding of identity and emotional space.



Figure 8 Kyubey, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, Episode 1 (2011) Screen shot captured.

7.1.3 Witch's Labyrinth, Influence of Space Making in Identity Exploration

One of the most visually inspiring elements in *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* is the witches' labyrinths, which transform emotional and psychological states into surreal spatial environments. In Kevin Cooley's paper about *Madoka Magica*, they describe the labyrinths of witches as horrifying, dreamlike spaces filled with strange, paper-like creatures, combining surreal artistic styles reminiscent of Takashi Murakami's Superflat art and Lotte Reiniger's animated films (Cooley 2020, 28). The labyrinths' visual style is in collage-like layers with bold colours and strange texts, which is very different from the rest of the show to distinguish from the reality, the labyrinths' surreal style makes them to look like space in between the reality. Sara Cleto and Erin Kathleen Bahl worked together and wrote a research paper based on the labyrinth

in *Madoka Magica*, claiming the labyrinth is a confusing, maze-like space that serves both as protection and as a weapon, shielding the witch from surprise attacks while forcing magical girls to navigate it before reaching her. It also reflects the witch's inner will, acting as a personal, expressive arena where battles between the witch and magical girls unfold (Cleto and Bahl 2016, 2). That is to say, the labyrinth is the witch's identity, in a way formed into a space. It has been mentioned previously that if the magical girl lost their hope and were filled with despair, she transforms to a witch, so the labyrinth is where she processes her grief, anger, confusion, and any of her negative emotions that lead to despair. For example, Sayaka Miki's labyrinth (see *Figure 9*) takes the form of a theatrical, music hall-like setting, where the witch's familiars appear as shadowy silhouettes of violists. Musical scores float across the space in front of rows of red audience seats. These elements all point back to Sayaka's identity, shaped by her devotion to the violist for whom she became a magical girl. The labyrinth becomes the space that keeps the witch away from the reality, keeping her safe and isolated to exploring inwards, and it is the space she creates for her emotions and herself to belong in. Witch's labyrinth from *Madoka Magica* is one of the art influences for me to take the idea of space making in my art practice and research. The labyrinths influenced the way I think about space as an extension of identity, where emotions and internal conflicts can be visualized through immersive environments.



Figure 9 Oktavia von Seckendorff's labyrinth (Sayaka Miki), *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, Episode 8 (2011) Screen shot captured.

7.2 Digital Artist, Female Pentimento

Similar ideas of emotional space and imagined environments can also be found in the work of the digital artist Female Pentimento, whose portal imagery became another major influence for my project. Female Pentimento is an anonymous contemporary artist whose work explores identity, spirituality, and environmental themes through surreal, digitally layered imagery. Drawing on the concept of “pentimento”—the visible traces of earlier layers in a painting—the artist presents identity as fluid, evolving, and shaped by overlapping experiences. Their photographs often combine natural landscapes with glowing, otherworldly elements, creating dreamlike scenes that blur the boundary between reality and imagination. Using tools such as smartphone photography and digital manipulation, Female Pentimento constructs visually rich compositions that reflect both personal introspection and broader concerns about the environment and human existence. In summary, light, portal, and nature are the three main

inspirations of Pentimento's art practice. In NR Magazine's interview, Pentimento claims, nature is the catalyst, the subject, and the artist in their mind, and they find light, and nature are universally understood language, without the complexity or restrictions that come with other topics ("Female Pentimento" 2023). I am interested in how often they use portal as a passage to unearthly worlds in their art, as portals are one of the most magical elements they explore in their work. While portals can feel fantastical or unreal, they believe part of being an artist is existing in a kind of alternate reality—imagining possibilities beyond what is known. Staying in that space of endless potential keeps them curious and inspired ("Female Pentimento" 2023). Pentimento's art gives me a sense of comfort and release, especially the works with a light portal, they look magical and inviting, and giving me the illusion of taking me away from the reality. The warm and bright portal that is usually placed in a nature setting in Pentimento's work (see Figure 10) gives me a sense of guidance, that allows me to imagine and be creative towards my own practice in building up my safe realm that exist in between or parallel to the reality that I want to be away from. Female Pentimento's use of portals and dream-like landscapes encouraged me to think about how I could build my own imagined space that exists between reality and illusion.



Figure 10 Female Pentimento. "Untitled." In *Female Pentimento*. NR Magazine, Spring/Summer 2023. <https://nr.world/female-pentimento/>

8. In Between Project

Influenced by these philosophical ideas, internet aesthetics, animations, and artistic references, I developed *In Between* as a dream-like installation space to reflect my experiences of identity fragmentation and belonging. Based on my life experience on this planet Earth so far, the In Between exhibition is expressing my state of mind, spiritually where I am, and my relationship with my own body, by putting my language through art works. Starting with discussing the name of my show—In Between, meaning my position in between a series of paired up topics of worlds, identities, and ways of being. The exhibition dedicated to the learning and creating process in my MFA study is mainly focusing on the topics of my physical body versus my conscious mind, dreams versus reality; but they are inspired by topics like my sense of otherness versus a sense of belonging, femininity versus masculinity, cultural environment in China versus in Canada, my art practice in illustration versus in ceramic, and a small portion of life versus death. In general, the In Between is presenting a stage of my progress exploring my non-binary identity and position in between several binary concepts that are significant to me.

8.1 Acrylic Paint and Clay Body

Painting and ceramic are two major fields of my interdisciplinary practice. They are very different media, but both are meaningful as for my languages to express my inner world other than words. My initial impression of art in childhood is drawing on a flat surface. Art to me was flat and colourful, usually they are just things in nature like animals and plants in a variety of climates and eco-environments. My early memories of drawing were using coloured chalks on concrete floor in the front yard of my grandparents' house back in early 2000s. My father and my

grandmother, from my father's side, they both know how to draw, so my families always said to me that I got their genes, and I can be a good painter in the future. I liked the recognition, even though I was not sure if I will be a good painter, but I thought I liked drawing and painting. Once I started school and art class became my favourite subject, I loved taking my finished art class project and showing them to my parents, so I can get compliments from them, something I could not get as much as from any subject other than art. When I was in elementary school, it seemed most of my classmates had an afterschool class, whether it was about learning an instrument, a kind of dancing or sports, calligraphy, drawing, painting, and so on. I can't remember if I wanted it or my parents just felt the pressure that almost all children were having afterschool classes back then, so they signed me up for drawing and painting class. Throughout those years until I was in grade 7th or 8th, I had been learning drawing and painting every weekend. I was so sure that I will be doing painting for the rest of my life until I stopped it to take English afterschool classes in order to apply for university in Canada while in high school. When it was time for applying to programs for university, my parents signed me up for illustration instead of drawing and painting. They said I will have a better chance to find a job as an illustrator when I graduate.

I did not like my experience in illustration programs, by lack of practice in drawing and painting during high school, I felt so behind and ashamed of my skill, and I lost my confidence in becoming a painter, and was forced to learn to become an illustrator. In the later years of my undergraduate degree, I took more illustrative painting classes other than the main courses that teach more advanced knowledge of illustration, because I felt more of the need to practice my basic skill of drawing and painting before entering professional illustration making. The more I spent in illustrative painting class, the more I realized that I just didn't like how illustration

learning is more of focusing on the skill to fulfill commercial requirements instead of painting more freely in illustrative painting.

Acrylic paint is my most used medium for painting, it has strong coverage and dries up quickly. Based on my experience with acrylic, it is a material that I need to work fast to accommodate with, but it often gives me pressure because I am a slow working person. It does not feel nice to be a slow person in today's fast developing society, my parents were always so upset about how slow I am, and I got detention a lot in elementary school because I couldn't finish my schoolwork and homework on time. The environment keeps telling me to be faster, bolder, smarter, more productive, more efficient, and be considerable to my community. Painting was like my safe spot, a piece of peace among the fast-developing lifestyle around me. However, when drawing and painting become my direction of my professional practice of illustration, when I entered undergraduate school abroad in Canada, learning the new disciplines created new pressures: that I should be skillful in mastering in a shorter time for me to be validated.

I registered for some elective courses in ceramics making in the last two years of my undergrad study, and I found the new medium that I saw myself working long term with, for my future art practice, at that time. The first kind of ceramic making that I learned is slip-casting. First, I build a model out of clay, and then pouring liquid plaster (mixed in with water and plaster powder) around the clay model, hold by plastic or wood (depends on the shape of the mold that you are making, plastic cottle for round or more organic shapes, and wood cottle boards for rectangular shapes) cottle walls for a while to wait until plaster solidifies. After the plaster set for at least 45 minutes, then the cottles can be removed and clay model also can be taken out of the

plaster mould. After carefully cleaning the mould and letting it dry out completely, the mould is ready to be used. Although the process of making the plaster mould is finicky, the slip-casting part is much simpler and more slow-paced. I pour casting slip (a clay body in liquid form with a chemical agent called deflocculant, that help the particles in slip repel each other so the clay slip can stay in a steady consistency with only small amount of water) in the plaster mould, and let it set for at least 45 minutes, then pour out the extra slip. There will be a thin layer of slip left in the mold, letting the left-over slip set for another hour and then take it out, there I have a ceramic piece in greenware stage that is ready for the next step. The mould can be used multiple times until it aged out and not working properly, so I am able to cast the same shape of design many times easily. As an example, the very first mould that I made is for a small flower shaped bowl, after the greenware stage, I let my ceramic bowls go through the first firing, called the bisque firing, to cone 06 (1850 Fahrenheit), then the greenware bowls will be vitrified to bisqueware (a stage of the ceramic that is stronger to be held and still porous for the glaze to stick on), after glazing the bisqueware, the bisqueware bowls will go through the second firing to cone 6 (2200 Fahrenheit), that is called the glaze firing, to be fully vitrified, and then I have my ceramic bowls completed. It is very rewarding for me that I can use the bowl I made in daily life, I feel like ceramic making is more meaningful and valuable for me comparing to illustration study and drawing and painting.

When I am working with clay body, I feel really close to the material, there is a lot of touching and handling involved in the ceramic making. Touching is important in what I have learned about ceramic making, it is the way in most of the time for me to communicate with the material. Clay body is a material for ceramic making, that artificially mixes in with clay and

other chemicals and mineral materials, it is a kind of material that human being as the craft person should accommodate, because it will change based on not just how the ceramicist treats it but also depends on the working environment in terms of the weather, especially the humidity and the temperature. In each stage of ceramic making, I am asked to touch and feel the texture and temperature of my ceramic piece, and to judge if it is ready for the next step or not. A greenware ceramic piece should be fully dry out to a stage called bone dry to be ready for firing process, otherwise the piece may crack or explode in the kiln because there is water trapped in the piece, and as how fast the temperature rises in the kiln, it forces the left over moisture in the clay to escape out of the piece faster than it evaporates and lead to crack or explode the work. My point here is clay body is a material that people can not make a clear and exact schedule to work with, it involves a lot of touching, observing, and recording, and is like taking care of something that is alive. What's more, the glaze will mostly not turn out exactly the same in the way that is shown on test tile examples, glazes can turn out differently according to the environment in the kiln, whether the ceramic piece is closer to the kiln elements (metal wires that will be heat up when the kiln is on) or not, whether the piece is in the bottom, middle, or top layer in the kiln, and also other pieces that have different glazing containing different ingredient may react to each and turn out differently. I am interested in the uncertainty of ceramic making, and I like the making process is similar to taking care of my creation as it is similar to a living creature, these traits of ceramics make me feel intimate and bonded with whatever I create. When I hold the finished ceramic work in my hand, it feels precious, permanent, and gives me a strong sense of achievement, that I don't feel it as strong when completing a painting, because painting is more like – although something I created as well – something trapped in the 2-dimensional world, that is untouchable and isolated away from me.

Acrylic paint and Clay body both symbolize a part of me, acrylic paint is like my past, lost safe spot, background, and original way of approaching art practice, while clay body is like my present, new safe spot, a short cut to get closer to material and art, and potential future. I stayed away from painting for almost the whole time in my undergraduate study, instead I put myself in ceramic making in most of the time. I realized that maybe I liked drawing and painting for the validations and compliments from my parents. I found clay body, as a new medium, has more potential for me to explore, and I just wanted to stay away from drawing and painting that I spent so many years on and still not achieving the standard that I set for myself and considering ceramics as a new beginning. As I started taking ceramic classes in undergraduate studies, I already felt like I was stepping out of the illustration community, since clay body is a time-consuming material, I spent most of my time in the ceramic studio and putting drawing and painting aside. After about 1.5 years of fully committed to ceramic making, I started to realize it won't take any less than practicing in drawing and painting for me, than in practicing in ceramic learning, especially I had started to make works in ceramic for only few years. When I first started to dedicate more time in ceramics while still learning illustration, I started to feel like I did not belong to the field of illustration, because I felt I'm never good enough, and I felt unmotivated, and there was no direction for me to follow, I did not know what I wanted to achieve. Therefore, ceramics fulfilled all my dissatisfaction at that time because it was a brand-new field for me. At the end of the day, I can't define myself as an illustrator, a painter, or a ceramic maker, I don't feel qualified in skills to be an illustrator or painter, and I don't feel I had practiced long enough in ceramics to even be considered as a potter, so I am stuck in between again.

In the project of *In Between*, I incorporated both paintings and ceramics, since I don't feel I belong in neither of the field. The exhibition is a chance for me to explore my sense of belonging in between both, in interdisciplinary art practice. Since my exhibition is related to the concept of a dream-like space, using both media together can help me to approach that idea. In illustration, we tend to speak through our visual works on a flat surface. I was practicing in using compositions and perspectives to describe a sense of space on canvas or wooden panel. The audience will be expected to experience my works by looking at them in 2-dimention, as for paintings. On the other hand, ceramics allow me to extend the experience out of the flat surface into 3-dimention. In my opinion, dream is somewhere between 2D and 3D, and something between abstract and concrete, therefore, the stillness of paintings and ceramics is like capturing the moment in a dream like a photo but is in a way demonstrated in actual space that allows the audience to enter and to look at them from different perspectives. Combining painting and ceramics allowed me to build a space that exists between flatness and physicality, similar to how dreams exist between imagination and reality.

8.2 Voice

While painting and ceramics shaped the visual experience of the exhibition, I also wanted the space to communicate emotionally through sound. Adding audio to my project as a third medium challenge me to work with a new media that may help me open to more options of art making in the future. It adds more layer to my project to make *In Between* space more dream-like. I recorded my voice whispering phrases of "who are you?" and "wake up," and edited them by layering up the sounds so the audio sounds like echoes, and then played it in repeat with two audio players in the gallery space. The audio is the first thing people will notice of the exhibition,

because people can hear it before they enter the gallery space. The purpose of adding the audio is to lead the audience into the space and to build up to the atmosphere of the exhibition by stimulating the audience with sound. The phrase of “who are you?” is the ultimate question of my life, but for this exhibition and thesis is too big to answer; but *In Between* is inspired by this question, and it explores an inner space within me where it allows me to process what my identity crisis is about. The phrase “wake up,” leads me out of the identity crisis to ground myself in the reality. As I was hearing the whispers during the *In Between* exhibition, I felt like I had taken a part of me out of my body and placing it in the same room with me. I experienced the voice from a third person point of view opposite to the voice as if it is its own existing being. It opened my thinking to express myself through audio as a new medium that I can explore for my interdisciplinary art practice. The intent of the layered whispers was to create a psychologically immersive exhibition space, as if fragments of my consciousness were existing independently within the room.

8.3 Bunnies and Babies

Alongside sound, recurring symbolic characters also became important in constructing the emotional language of *In Between*. In the first year of my graduate study, I produced two ceramic series of work that became my origins of the *In Between* project. The first series is named “School(学校)” (see *Figure 11*). I made a two-pieces plaster mould and casted 6 vases out of it. The vases are all in the same human baby figure, in a calmly sitting pose, except half of the vases have a flower design on their head. This series was inspired by a prompt question of “Who are you came from?”, and I chose school because of my experience back in China that I spent most of my time in boarding school. The “School” series was made to reflect on the

Chinese education system that I came from, and how I see the experience back in there is similar to mould making. The plaster mould is representing the standard that had set for all the students to follow, and the slip-casting ceramic vases are the students, who are the products of this moulding system. As for the reason why half of the baby vases have flower on their head is to differentiate them as girls, the purpose is to emphasize the gender-binary norms in the education system. The baby figure in a vase form means human body can be seen as a container for containing thoughts, the vases are moulded in the same shape for all the babies for holding the same “amount” of thoughts, to be consistent, in the situation of the “School” series.



Figure 11 School(学校). Zhizhe Yan. 2024. Photograph by Songshu Liu.

The second series is named “Chasing, Tracing(追逐, 追溯)” (see *Figure 12*), and this series was inspired by the prompt question of “Who/what are you looking at?”. My idea for the question is “looking back/backwards”, in this case I think how often I look back to my past

experience even my life is forced to moving forwards. I revisit, reflect, and learn from my past and that becomes my knowledges, inspirations, and motivations to go forward. It has always been important for me to look back at the mistakes and choices I mad in the past, and to learn, to improve from them, so I am able to be more experienced to take new and unknow adventures and challenges in life for the future. I challenged myself to make two multi-pieces moulds for two poses of bunnies for slip-casting for this series. I made two poses of the bunnies, and casted four from each mould, therefore I have 8 bunnies in total that I arranged them alternately in a circle. The bunnies were glued on a pottery wheel that allows me to spin them in circle while displayed them in an exhibition. As the bunnies are spinning on the wheel, it seems they all are moving forwards, but I designed them to all looking backwards to line with my idea of chasing forwards but tracing backwards. Bunny figure is used here to represent human being metaphorically, based on my impressions of how fast both bunnies and humans reproduces, and how similar that humans are little comparing to the world is like how bunnies are little comparing to us as humans.



Figure 12 Chasing, Tracing(追逐, 追溯). Zhizhe Yan. 2025. Photograph by Yuyi Zhang.

The baby vase and the bunny figure influenced me to produce two characters representing my body and my soul respectively. It is because of the baby vase is like an empty shell and vessel that has the trait to contain, it is a reminder that the body can be a shell to contain my soul, therefore the baby vase is the original work representing my body. I admire how active and energetic, and how fast the bunnies can run as an animal, and I feel like my soul is just as active as the bunny but trapped in a slow body, so I use the bunny to symbolize my soul. I have added newly casted baby vases and bunnies for the *In Between* show, as a recalling of my memories of first year graduate study in my dream space. The baby figures and bunny characters gradually evolved into representations of my body and consciousness, becoming the foundation for the figures of “Flesh” and “Soul”.

8.4 Flesh and Soul

In *In Between*, I developed these ideas further by separating my body and consciousness into two distinct ceramic characters: “Flesh” and “Soul”. I substantiated the representations of my physical body and my conscious mind, in slip-casting ceramics, in two figures: a chubby and bald kid representing my body, and a small person with big bunny-ears hat representing my consciousness (see *Figure 13*). When I was planning these two figures, I wanted to pick up some realistic traits on my physical body to design the smaller figure of my body. Meanwhile, I wanted to go as creative as possible for the figure of my mind. Starting from here, I used “Flesh” to refer to the figure for my body, and used “Soul” to refer the figure for my consciousness. The Flesh is created to show the softness, weakness, and innocence of my physical body that has been judged by the social standards of man, and the self-degrading, self-rejecting, and self-denying from my subconscious, therefore the Soul separated from the Flesh and became in their own existence. The Soul is to show my pride, my ambition, and my desire to be free from my body, their body is small that seems can be contained by the Flesh, but their hat is too big to be held by the Flesh. I casted 12 figures for each Flesh and Soul, 24 figures in total, and glazed them in black glaze named dark matter. The colour choice is influenced by the Dreamcore aesthetic that human beings in photos will be blurred in shadow to be anonymous. I arranged them in 3 rows and 8 columns, and one Flesh is paired up with one Soul. The way of displaying them is influenced by my experience back in boarding school, where we had flag-raising ceremony on every Monday’s morning, when boys and girls should separate in different columns and facing the flag and praise to it. In terms of my exhibition, the ceramic figures are facing to a long painting on the wall (see *Figure 14*). The long painting is showing several silhouettes of Flesh and Soul, blurred in light, and floating in front of the landscape, connected to each other,

and fused into one in the middle of the painting. The relation between the long painting with the figures is similar to the Monday flag-raising ceremony, that the Flesh and Soul are put together to worship the painting as the fusion in the middle is their destination, to fuse back in one individual, which connecting to the situation in the reality is telling me to put myself together. This group of work is a recall of my memory back school in China, but metaphorically suggesting my identity crisis in the artificial dream space in the In Between. The relationship between Flesh and Soul reflects my ongoing attempt to reconnect fragmented parts of myself within the dream-like environment of the exhibition.



Figure 13 Soul(left 1) and Flesh(right1) greenware. Zhizhe Yan. 2026.



Figure 14 Fleshes and Souls facing the long painting. Zhizhe Yan. 2026. Photograph by Feifan Yang.

8.5. Dream and Reality

This unstable relationship between body and consciousness also extends into the structure of the exhibition space itself, which operates between dream and reality. I painted two wooden panels with acrylics, they both have a back ground of my bedroom, a red Chinese character of the “Door(门)” floating in the front, and a Chinese phrase down below the door, and a ceramic cloud hanging in the middle of the panel. One door works as the entrance of this dream-like space, and the other door is the exit. The background of the entrance is the ceiling of my bedroom. It is the view that I always see the last before I fall asleep, while the red door character is expanding to help the cloud in the middle looks like it is poking out of the painting and entered

the space. The Chinese phrase on the entrance painting is “晚安贝贝,” which means “good night babe” (see *Figure 15*). As for the background of the exit painting, it is my bed, and the door character seems to be squeezed towards the centre where the ceramic cloud hanged also sinking into the painting in the middle. “醒醒,” which means “wake up,” (see *Figure 16*) is the phrase painted in this painting. The doors work as the connections between the reality and this dream-like space, while the audience will be standing in the real reality to look at the exhibition, that the reality behind the door paintings is false reality. The contrast of the real and false realities allows the artificial dream-like space to the space *In Between*. The entrance and exit paintings suggest movement between different states of reality, positioning the exhibition itself as a liminal space existing in between worlds.



Figure 15 The Entrance(入口). Zhizhe Yan. 2026. Photograph by Feifan Yang.



Figure 16 *The Exit(出口)*. Zhizhe Yan. 2026. Photograph by Feifan Yang.

8.6 The Sense of Otherness and the Sense of Belonging

Within this imagined environment, the sense of being an outsider gradually transforms into a search for belonging. Going back to the idea of sense of otherness and sense of belonging, I use clouds that are ceramics, as a metaphor of me being the audience or a passenger to this space. I made clouds with clay so that they are solid and heavy, which is the opposite to the clouds in the reality. The unnatural clouds make them to create the quality of otherness but may be reasonable for them to exist in the dream-like space. The cloud also reflects Zhuang Zhou's dream of the butterfly. Instead of using the butterfly, I use the cloud as if I dreamed myself as the cloud wandering around in the space. The existence of a heavy ceramic cloud would be considered as the other, and the weird creature, by assuming clouds can judge like humans; while the solid cloud can find their sense of belonging in the *In Between* space that I made. In the photograph below (*see Figure 17*), there are two groups of works presenting the clouds interacting with the native creatures in the *In Between*. Although the exhibition creates a temporary space of comfort and reflection, it does not fully resolve the questions surrounding my identity and sense of belonging.



Figure 17 Clouds and the natives. Zhizhe Yan. 2026. Photograph by Feifan Yang.

9. The Ongoing process

Instead, the *In Between* represents only one stage within an ongoing process of self-reflection, artistic experimentation, and identity exploration. Most of the inspirations and influences for my research is coming from the internet, and the artworks that I made for *In Between* are showing my inner struggle of claiming back my identity that had been invalidated for years by the environment that I grew up in, and by demonstrating the emotional process of putting myself together is a result under the influence of the internet culture. I learned so much from the internet of how to be authentic to myself, but beyond the information cocoon that algorithm shields me under, it is the bigger issue of internet hegemony. For my future study, I'd like to research more deeply in how internet cultures are formed and how it is affecting people, especially my generation, to form their sense of identity and position in the fast-developing society.

In terms of my interdisciplinary art practice, I always wanted to work with new media and to try new materials. Drawing and painting have taken the majority of time in my practice, especially in the years of learning illustration in my undergraduate study. In the few recent years, I found ceramics as a new media for me to express messages through art and it felt so fresh and different from illustration. Illustration to me is a very literal way of showing messages in art, I was taught in my undergraduate study that the purpose of illustration is to present words and information in a visual and illustrative way. Although illustration is about drawing and painting, the way that I move my pencils and brushes are like writing words on surfaces, while ceramics has a very intimate experience when working with the material, because it involves touching and feeling with my hand and the clay, and that felt more like taking care of something that is alive.

Clay has memories, it will remember everything that you did to it, even how tiny it is. If you scratched it with your nails, the scratch would always show even after firing, and it may even crack from the scratch in the worst case of scenario. The *In Between* provided an opportunity for me to add audio, a new medium that I haven't worked with before, which added a new dimension to my thesis project. When I was in the gallery space for my exhibition, the whispering audio triggered emotions because I can hear my confusion and desiring the answer of my identity. Learning to practice in different media for art is like learning new languages: interdisciplinary art practice to me means practicing different fields as my art languages in order to describe and spread my message that can be expressed beyond words. As both my identity and artistic practice continue to change, the process of questioning and rebuilding myself also remains unfinished.

10. Conclusion

The *In Between* project is not meant to give a clear or final answer to the question of who I am. Instead, it reflects where I am right now in the process of understanding myself. Looking back at my experiences growing up, I can see how my sense of otherness has been shaped by my family, cultural expectations, gender norms, and the environments I have lived in. These experiences made me question my identity, my body, and my place in the world for a long time. Rather than trying to force myself to fit into a fixed role or definition, I begin to accept that I exist in a space in between different states—between my physical body and my consciousness, masculinity and femininity, reality and dream, and feeling like I belong and feeling like I do not.

Through this project, I am giving form to feelings that are difficult to explain with words. By using painting, ceramics, and sound together, I build a space that feels similar to a dream—uncertain, emotional, and personal. This space allows me to step away from the pressure of reality and spend time with myself, to reflect, and to understand my thoughts and emotions more deeply. The influence of Dreamcore, philosophical ideas like Zhuang Zhou’s butterfly dream, and visual elements such as the witch’s labyrinth help me imagine this “in-between” space as something real and meaningful. It becomes a place where my inner struggles are not hidden, but visible and shared. At the same time, this project is also about reconnecting with myself. For a long time, I felt disconnected from my body, as if my body and my consciousness were separate. Through making and touching materials like clay, and through building characters like Flesh and Soul presented in the exhibition, I begin to explore this relationship in a more physical and emotional way. The process of creating becomes a way for me to slowly bring these parts together, even if they are still not fully unified.

In Between is also a space that I hope others can relate to. Even though it comes from my personal experience, I believe the feeling of being “in between” is something many people experience in different ways. By sharing this space, I want to create a moment where people can pause, reflect, and maybe see parts of themselves in it. In the end, this project does not solve my identity crisis, and it does not need to. Instead, it allows me to accept uncertainty as part of my life. Being in between is not a weakness, but a state where I can continue to question, imagine, and grow. Rather than trying to reach a fixed destination, I am learning to stay in this space of possibility, where my identity is always changing and still becoming.

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