

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF ARTS & CULTURES

**Still Life and Urban Landscape:  
Exploring the Space In-between in Contemporary Painting**

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**Practice-based PhD Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

Still life and landscape, as two different genres in painting, possess their own characteristics: still life mainly focuses on domestic inanimate objects, while the landscape is more about outdoor views. However, is it possible to combine these two genres to create a kind of space in-between and, furthermore, deflate the distinction between still life and landscape? This practice-based research investigates the relationship between still life and landscape and further explores the possibility of integrating the characteristics of landscape to conceive new representations of still life not only in historical but also in contemporary contexts. In this research, still life and landscape are not two separate categories but interchange and merge together, which leads to uncertainty in the interpretation of work.

I use watercolour as the main method in this research to support the breach of the aforementioned categories. On the one hand, the fluidity of watercolour mirrors this uncertainty and ambiguity. On the other hand, if still life emphasises control while the landscape is more about uncontrol, the oscillation between control and uncontrol in watercolour provides an experimental space for understanding the relationship between still life and landscape.

Three different series of watercolour paintings born out of this research have led to new insights between still life and landscape, specifically the interrelation of still life and urban landscape. Firstly, this research departs from the notion of 'nature morte' and has contributed to the field of traditional still life painting; secondly, it has also offered new possibilities for contemporary art practice of everyday objects.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
List of Figures .....	vi
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1. Still Life and Landscape .....	17
1.1 Introduction .....	17
1.2 Space .....	18
1.3 Perspective .....	34
1.4 Background .....	42
1.5 Exclusion of Human Form .....	54
1.6 Conclusion .....	59
Chapter 2. Research Methods .....	61
2.1 Introduction .....	61
2.2 Connection with Landscape .....	64
2.3 Fluidity .....	72
2.4 The Fabrication of Painting .....	76
2.5 The Release of Control .....	85
2.6 Reflections on the Control .....	93
2.7 Contemporary Western and Chinese Watercolour .....	102
2.8 Experiments on Other Mediums .....	110
2.9 Painting Based on Photography .....	119
2.10 Role of Studio .....	128
2.11 Conclusion .....	132
Chapter 3. Overlooked Objects .....	134
3.1 Introduction .....	134
3.2 Newcastle Diaries .....	135

3.2.1 The Connection with Urban Landscape .....	135
3.2.2 Viewing in the Pandemic Life .....	141
3.2.3 Daily Snapshots .....	144
3.2.4 Accidental and Ephemeral .....	147
3.3 Fragments Series .....	150
3.3.1 The Role of Objects .....	150
3.3.2 Rhopography .....	154
3.3.3 Presence and Absence .....	158
3.4 Reflections on 'Overlooked' .....	161
3.5 Block Series .....	164
3.5.1 Why Egg Cartons? .....	164
3.5.2 Ephemeral Objects .....	173
3.5.3 A Metaphor for Safety .....	181
3.5.4 Decontextualisation .....	182
3.5.5 World-building .....	183
3.5.6 Ambiguity of Scale .....	197
3.6 Conclusion .....	198
Conclusion .....	200
Appendices .....	214
Bibliography .....	344

## List of Figures

### Introduction

- Figure 0.1      Qirui Tan, *Twilight City III*, 2017, Watercolour on paper, 82cm x 113cm
- Figure 0.2      Max Ernst, *Adam and Eve Expelled from the Garden of Eden*, 1946-47, Gouache on cardstock, 1.4cm x 3.6cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
[https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2014/07/31/max-ernst-tktk/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2014/07/31/max-ernst-tktk/), accessed on 25.07.2024
- Figure 0.3      Paul Nash, *Equivalents for the Megaliths*, 1935, Oil on canvas, 45.7cm x 66cm. Tate Britain Collection, London.  
Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 0.4      Qirui Tan, *Untitled II*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 17cm x 25cm
- Figure 0.5      Page from *Sept microbes vus à travers un tempérament*. Paris: Les Éditions Cercle des arts, 1953. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York.  
Photo taken in "Seeing Through an (American) Temperament: Max Ernst's Microbes, 1946-1953," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 10:1 (2009), 32

### Chapter 1

- Figure 1.1      Giovanni Antonio, *The Grand Canal with S. Simeone Piccolo*, c.1740, Oil on canvas, 124.5cm x 204.6cm. The National Gallery, London.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovanni\\_Antonio\\_Canal\\_-\\_Venice-\\_The\\_Grand\\_Canal\\_with\\_S.\\_Simeone\\_Piccolo\\_-\\_National\\_Gallery\\_London.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovanni_Antonio_Canal_-_Venice-_The_Grand_Canal_with_S._Simeone_Piccolo_-_National_Gallery_London.jpg), accessed on 06.12.2023

- Figure 1.2 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruit*, c.1599, Oil on canvas, 46cm x 64.5cm. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basket\\_of\\_Fruit\\_\(Caravaggio\)#/media/File:Canestra\\_di\\_frutta\\_\(Caravaggio\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basket_of_Fruit_(Caravaggio)#/media/File:Canestra_di_frutta_(Caravaggio).jpg), accessed on 10.12.2023
- Figure 1.3 Euan Uglow, *Boxing Day, Christmas Tree*, 1990, Oil on panel, 28.2cm x 24.3cm. Photo taken in *Euan Uglow: The Complete Paintings*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p.343
- Figure 1.4 Qirui Tan, *Fragments II*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 63cm x 45cm
- Figure 1.5 Raoul de Keyser, *Camping II*, 1969, Acrylic on canvas, 177cm x 138cm. Stedelijk Museum for Aktuele Kunst, Gent.  
<https://www.kunstbeziehung.de/work.php?wCode=5d3752b8108fb>, accessed on 30.07.2024
- Figure 1.6 Qirui Tan, *Block I*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm
- Figure 1.7 Claude Lorrain, *The Ford*, c.1644, Oil on canvas, 68cm x 99cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Ford\\_\(painting\)#/media/File:El\\_vado,\\_Claudio\\_de\\_Lorena.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ford_(painting)#/media/File:El_vado,_Claudio_de_Lorena.jpg), accessed on 10.12.2023
- Figure 1.8 Point-by-point plotting of a course in Fig 1.7
- Figure 1.9 Qirui Tan, *Egg cartons on table*, 2023, Photography
- Figure 1.10 Qirui Tan, *Painting Experiment #3*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm
- Figure 1.11 Luc Tuymans, *Still Life*, 2002, Oil on canvas, 347cm x 500cm. Pinault Collection.  
[https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/luc\\_tuymans](https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/luc_tuymans), accessed on 30.07.2024
- Figure 1.12 Qirui Tan, *Block V*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 70cm x 52cm
- Figure 1.13 Claude Monet, *Charing Cross Bridge, the Thames*, 1903, Oil on canvas, 73.4cm x 100.3cm. Musee des Beaux-Arts, Lyon.

<https://courtauld.ac.uk/whats-on/exh-monet-and-london-views-of-the-thames/#&gid=1&pid=2>, accessed on 30.07.2024

- Figure 1.14 Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Blue Pot*, c.1900-06, Watercolour over graphite, 48.1cm x 63.2cm. Getty Museum, Los Angeles. <https://www.getty.edu/news/the-miracle-of-paul-cezannes-watercolors/>, accessed on 19.10.2023
- Figure 1.15 Jing Hao, *Mount Kuanglu*, c.907-923, Ink on silk, 185.8cm x 106.8cm. The National Palace Museum, Taipei. [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%8C%A1%E5%BB%AC%E5%9C%96#/media/File:Jing\\_Hao.Mount\\_Kuanglu.\\_National\\_Palace\\_Museum,\\_Taipei,\\_Taiwan.jpg](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%8C%A1%E5%BB%AC%E5%9C%96#/media/File:Jing_Hao.Mount_Kuanglu._National_Palace_Museum,_Taipei,_Taiwan.jpg), accessed on 10.12.2023
- Figure 1.16 Fan Kuan, *Travelers Amid Streams and Mountains*, c.960-1127, Ink on silk, 206.3cm x 103.3cm. The National Palace Museum, Taipei. [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fan\\_Kuan\\_-\\_Travelers\\_Among\\_Mountains\\_and\\_Streams\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fan_Kuan_-_Travelers_Among_Mountains_and_Streams_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg), accessed on 10.12.2023
- Figure 1.17 Qirui Tan, *Twilight City I*, 2016, Watercolour on paper, 83cm x 112cm
- Figure 1.18 Qirui Tan, *Block VIII*, 2023, Watercolour on canvas, 40cm x 50cm
- Figure 1.19 Qirui Tan, *The panromantic view of London from the Sky Garden*, 2023, Photography
- Figure 1.20 Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Teapot*, c.1902-06, Oil on canvas, 58.4cm x 72.4cm. National Museum Cardiff, Cardiff. <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/still-life-with-a-teapot-116836>, accessed on 26.02.2024
- Figure 1.21 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte Victoire with Large Pine*, c.1887, Oil on canvas, 67cm x 92cm. The Courtauld, London [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mont\\_Sainte-](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mont_Sainte-)

Victoire\_with\_Large\_Pine#/media/File:Mont\_Sainte-  
Victoire\_with\_Large\_Pine,\_by\_Paul\_C%C3%A9zanne.jpg,  
accessed on 26.02.2024

Figure 1.22 Details of Figure 1.20

Figure 1.23 Carol Rhodes, *Carpark Canal*, 1994, Oil on board, 51.4cm x  
44.6cm. Estate of the Artist.

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/50427>,  
accessed on 25.02.2024

Figure 1.24 Details of Figure 1.23

Figure 1.25 Qirui Tan, *Block IV*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 72cm x 53cm

Figure 1.26 Willem Kalf, *Still Life with Nautilus Cup*, c.1662, Oil on canvas,  
79.4cm x 67.3cm. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
Madrid.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Still\\_Life\\_with\\_Chinese\\_Bowl\\_and\\_Nautilus\\_1662\\_Willem\\_Kalf.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Still_Life_with_Chinese_Bowl_and_Nautilus_1662_Willem_Kalf.jpg), accessed on  
26.02.2024

Figure 1.27 Willem Claesz. Heda, *Breakfast Still Life*, c.1637, Oil on wood  
panel, 44cm x 55cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Willem\\_Claesz.\\_Heda\\_-\\_Breakfast\\_Still-Life\\_-\\_WGA11232.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Willem_Claesz._Heda_-_Breakfast_Still-Life_-_WGA11232.jpg), accessed on  
26.02.2024

Figure 1.28 Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Glass Vase*,  
c.1650, Oil on wood panel, 47cm x 36cm. Gemäldegalerie,  
Berlin.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan\\_Davidsz.\\_de\\_Heem\\_-\\_Bouquet\\_in\\_a\\_Glass\\_Vase\\_-\\_WGA11272.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Davidsz._de_Heem_-_Bouquet_in_a_Glass_Vase_-_WGA11272.jpg), accessed  
on 03.03.2024

Figure 1.29 Abraham Brueghel, *Flowers and Fruits in a Landscape*, c.1677,  
Oil on canvas, 127cm x 177cm. Musées royaux des Beaux-  
Arts de Belgique, Brussels.



[https://arthive.com/zh/artists/3089~Abraham\\_Brueghel/works/197815~Flowers\\_and\\_fruits\\_in\\_the\\_landscape](https://arthive.com/zh/artists/3089~Abraham_Brueghel/works/197815~Flowers_and_fruits_in_the_landscape), accessed on 29.11.2023

- Figure 1.30 Eugène Delacroix, *Still Life with Lobsters*, c.1826, Oil on canvas, 80cm x 106cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.  
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/eugene-delacroix/still-life-with-lobsters-1827>, accessed on 26.02.2024
- Figure 1.31 Qirui Tan, *Block VII*, 2023, Watercolour on canvas, 50cm x 40cm
- Figure 1.32 Qirui Tan, *Block IX*, 2024, Watercolour on paper, 70cm x 52cm
- Figure 1.33 Details of Figure 1.32
- Figure 1.34 Details of Figure 1.42
- Figure 1.35 Ambrosius Boschaert the Elder, *Bouquet in a Niche*. c.1618, Oil on panel, 64cm x 46cm. Mauritshuis, Hague.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vase\\_of\\_Flowers\\_in\\_a\\_Window\\_Niche#/media/File:Ambrosius\\_Bosschaert\\_de\\_Oude\\_-\\_Vase\\_of\\_Flowers\\_in\\_a\\_Window\\_-\\_679\\_-\\_Mauritshuis.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vase_of_Flowers_in_a_Window_Niche#/media/File:Ambrosius_Bosschaert_de_Oude_-_Vase_of_Flowers_in_a_Window_-_679_-_Mauritshuis.jpg), accessed on 31.07.2024
- Figure 1.36 Cornelia Parker, *Drowned Monument*, 1985, Lead casts of souvenir, models of famous monuments, bathwater. Photo taken in *Cornelia Parker*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2013, p.24
- Figure 1.37 Cornelia Parker, *Inventories of Room: The Weather Within*, 1987, Lead casts of European cathedrals, pigeon droppings. Photo taken in *Cornelia Parker*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2013, p.27
- Figure 1.38 Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, c.1602, Oil on canvas, 69cm x 84cm. San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quince,\\_Cabbage,\\_Melon\\_and\\_C](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quince,_Cabbage,_Melon_and_C)

ucumber#/media/File:S%C3%A1nchez\_Cot%C3%A1n\_(Bodeg  
%C3%B3n\_con\_membrillo,\_repollo,\_mel%C3%B3n\_y\_pepino)  
.jpg, accessed on 04.03.2024

Figure 1.39 Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas Still Life*, c.1628-30, Oil on wood panel, 36cm x 59cm. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg.  
[https://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/c/claesz/vanitas1.html](https://www.wga.hu/html_m/c/claesz/vanitas1.html), accessed on 03.03.2024

Figure 1.40 Details of Figure 1.39

Figure 1.41 Qirui Tan, *The empty and quiet campus during the pandemic lockdown*, 2020, Photography

## Chapter 2

Figure 2.1 J.M.W. Turner, *A Beach ?near the Tour de Croy, Wimereux*, c.1845, Pencil and watercolour on white wove paper, 23.7cm x 33.7cm. Tate Collection.  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/joseph-mallord-william-turner-a-beach-near-the-tour-de-croy-wimereux-r1173486>, accessed on 19.10.2023

Figure 2.2 John Constable, *Cottages and A Windmill*, c.1834, Watercolour on paper, 12.7cm x 20.6cm. The British Museum, London.  
<https://arthive.com/zh/johnconstable/works/526167~>, accessed on 19.10.2023

Figure 2.3 Barbara Nicholls, *Seafloor Spreading*, 2015, Watercolour on Saunders Waterford HP 638gsm, 220cm x 152cm. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.barbaranicholls.co.uk/copy-of-stiftung-germany-2017>, accessed on 24.03.2024

Figure 2.4 Aerial view of the terrace fields in Yunhe County, Lishui City, Zhejiang Province, China  
<http://zj.people.com.cn/n2/2023/0610/c186327-40452032.html>,

accessed on 12.03.2024

- Figure 2.5 Barbara Nicholls, *Sink Hole Return*, 2016, Watercolour on paper in sand. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://www.barbaranicholls.co.uk/lake-mungo-australia>,  
accessed on 25.04.2024
- Figure 2.6 Leanne Shapton, *Olympic Amsterdam*, 2016. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.leanneshapton.com/olympic-amsterdam>,  
accessed on 21.08.2024
- Figure 2.7 Yong Wang, *Clouds around Mountains*, 2017, Watercolour on paper, 55cm x 75cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9BxiZV-V3XytxzWTF9Pklw>,  
accessed on 25.04.2024
- Figure 2.8 Jian Chen, *Mystery*, 2019, Watercolour on paper, 79cm x 196cm. Estate of the Artist.  
[https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/jR3sivt7zZxHKVSo\\_yPJyA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/jR3sivt7zZxHKVSo_yPJyA),  
accessed on 25.04.2024
- Figure 2.9 Peter Matthews painting on the beach. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://petermatthews.org/new-zealand-and-cornwall-paintings>,  
accessed on 26.04.2024
- Figure 2.10 Minyoung Choi, *Sunset 11*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 28cm x 20.3cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://www.minyoungchoi.co.uk/Watercolours>, accessed on  
25.04.2024
- Figure 2.11 Preparation for the painting. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.12 Painting stage 1 for *Block IV*. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.13 Large size flat brush. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.14 Painting stage 2 for *Block IV*. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.15 Middle size flat brush. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.16 Spray bottle. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.17 Painting stage 3 for *Block IV*. Photograph by Qirui Tan.

- Figure 2.18 Chinese painting brush (left), Mop brush (middle), Rigger brush (right). Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.19 Painting stage 4 for *Block IV*. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.20 Details in *Block IV*
- Figure 2.21 Yong Wang, *Living in the South Mountain*, 2015, Watercolour on paper, 50cm x 66cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9BxiZV-V3XytxzWTF9Pklw>, accessed on 25.04.2024
- Figure 2.22 Helen Frankenthaler, *Flood*, 1967, Acrylic on canvas, 315.6cm x 356.9cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.  
<https://whitney.org/collection/works/2879>, accessed on 22.04.2024
- Figure 2.23 Helen Frankenthaler at work on a large canvas in 1969. Ernst Hass/Getty Images. <https://hypebeast.com/2021/9/helen-frankenthaler-imagining-landscapes-exhibition-gagosian-london>, accessed on 22.04.2024
- Figure 2.24 William Tillyer, *Hebrus*, 2015, Watercolour on paper, 76.2cm x 57.2cm. Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London.  
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/william-tillyer-hebrus-1>, accessed on 26.04.2024
- Figure 2.25 Barbara Nicholls, *Telpost*, 2013, Watercolour on paper, 38cm x 28cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://www.barbaranicholls.co.uk/copy-2-of-2-2m-x-1-52m-watercolours>, accessed on 13.03.2024
- Figure 2.26 Screen-grab #1 from *Telpost 2013*, produced by Anton Houtappels <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TckEQV7YVUY>, accessed on 04.03.2024
- Figure 2.27 Screen-grab #2 from *Telpost 2013*, produced by Anton Houtappels <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TckEQV7YVUY>, accessed on 04.03.2024

- Figure 2.28 Screen-grab #3 from *Telpost 2013*, produced by Anton Houtappels <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TckEQV7YVUY>, accessed on 04.03.2024
- Figure 2.29 Screen-grab #4 from *Telpost 2013*, produced by Anton Houtappels <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TckEQV7YVUY>, accessed on 04.03.2024
- Figure 2.30 Details of Fig 1.25
- Figure 2.31 Different kinds of straight lines in *Block IV*
- Figure 2.32 Jane and Louise Wilson, *Blind Landing: Lab 4, H-Bomb Test Site, Orford Ness, Suffolk*, 2013, C-type mounted on aluminum with diasec, 180cm x 225cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://janeandlouisewilson.co.uk/project/5/>
- Figure 2.33 Qirui Tan, *Statue*, 2022, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 63cm x 45cm
- Figure 2.34 Qirui Tan, *Painting Experiment #2*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 30.5cm x 40.6cm
- Figure 2.35 Ed Ruscha, *Rancho*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 152.4cm x 137.2cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
<https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2017/12/04/ed-ruscha-and-joanne-northrup/>, accessed on 26.04.2024
- Figure 2.36 Qirui Tan, *Fast Painting #3*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm
- Figure 2.37 Shouxiang Liu, *Still Life with White Pot*, 2017, Watercolour on paper, 75cm x 85cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/SxjZBQhAZ5nMIIR4OEUoNg>, accessed on 17.03.2024
- Figure 2.38 Shouxiang Liu, *Impressions of the Apennines #3*, 2016, Watercolour on paper, 74cm x 54cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/SxjZBQhAZ5nMIIR4OEUoNg>, accessed on 17.03.2024

- Figure 2.39 David Hockney, *The Garden of Eden*, 2002, Watercolour on paper, 91.44cm x 121.92cm. Private Collection.  
<https://www.thedavidhockneyfoundation.org/chronology/2002>, accessed on 26.04.2024
- Figure 2.40 William Tillyer, *The Age of Anxiety/The Kerry Sunset*, 2001, Watercolour on paper, 56cm x 76cm. Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/william-tillyer-the-age-of-anxiety-slash-the-kerry-sunset-watercolours-2>, accessed on 26.04.2024
- Figure 2.41 Minyoung Choi, *Search*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 26cm x 34.4cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://www.minyoungchoi.co.uk/Watercolours>, accessed on 25.04.2024
- Figure 2.42 Qirui Tan, *Comfort Zone*, 2023, Watercolour and print ink on paper, 50cm x 35cm
- Figure 2.43 Qirui Tan, *Block III*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 48cm x 63cm
- Figure 2.44 Details of Fig 1.4
- Figure 2.45 Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2019, Oil, screen printing ink and charcoal on linen, 175.3cm x 152.4cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://www.owenslaura.com/piece/lo-718/?e=1276>, accessed on 21.04.2024
- Figure 2.46 Qirui Tan, *Sharpener*, 2022, Oil on panel, 15cm x 15cm
- Figure 2.47 Watercolour experiment on mineral fibre board. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.48 Qirui Tan, *Untitled*, Watercolour on mineral fibre board, 2023
- Figure 2.49 Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954-1955, Encaustic, oil and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, 107.3cm x 153.8cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
<https://www.kingandmcgaw.com/prints/jasper-johns/flag-1954-134639#134639::media:0>, accessed on 25.03.2024

- Figure 2.50 Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze (Ballantine Ale)*, 1960, Painted bronze, 14cm x 20.3cm x 12.1cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.  
<https://www.artchive.com/artwork/painted-bronze-ballantine-ale-1960-by-jasper-johns/>, accessed on 25.03.2024
- Figure 2.51 Qirui Tan, *Fragment II*, 2022, Photography
- Figure 2.52 Qirui Tan, *Monument*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm
- Figure 2.53 Qirui Tan, *Monument*, 2023, Photography
- Figure 2.54 Qirui Tan, *Different stacked egg cartons on table*, 2023, Photography
- Figure 2.55 Fede Galizia, *Peaches in a White Ceramic Basket*, c.1610, Oil on panel, 30cm x 42cm. Silvano Lodi Collection, Campione.  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c2/Fede\\_Galizia\\_White\\_Ceramic\\_Bowl\\_with\\_Peaches\\_and\\_Red\\_and\\_Blue\\_Plums.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c2/Fede_Galizia_White_Ceramic_Bowl_with_Peaches_and_Red_and_Blue_Plums.jpg), accessed on 10.12.2023
- Figure 2.56 Studio view. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 2.57 Barbara Nicholls working in her studio. Photograph by Livia Lazar.  
<https://www.royalwatercoloursociety.co.uk/competition/selectors>, accessed on 26.04.2024
- Figure 2.58 Peter Matthews working on the coast. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://petermatthews.org/along-the-atlantic-ocean-colour-copy>, accessed on 26.04.2024

### Chapter 3

- Figure 3.1 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries*, 2020-2022, Watercolour and mixed media on paper, 8cm x 8cm x 80
- Figure 3.2 *Newcastle Diaries* #6, #32, #44 (from left to right)
- Figure 3.3 *Newcastle Diaries* #39, #40, #47 (from left to right)

- Figure 3.4 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #21*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm
- Figure 3.5 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #74*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm
- Figure 3.6 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #29*, 2022, Mixed media on paper, 8cm x 8cm
- Figure 3.7 Skyscrapers in London (view from the Sky Garden).  
Photograph by Qirui Tan
- Figure 3.8 Work in progress. Photograph by Qirui Tan.
- Figure 3.9 Gerhard Richter, *Townscape PL*, 1970, Oil on canvas, 170cm x 170cm. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/townscapes-24/townscape-pl-5706>, accessed on 29.08.2024
- Figure 3.10 Qirui Tan, *This Is What We Have Gone Through*, 2021, Mixed media on paper, sound. Photograph by Colin Davison.
- Figure 3.11 Chen Yongjin, *Pandemic Diaries series*, 2020, Mixed media on paper, 15cm x 15cm x 60. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/kl9cSNd9YUQ3mpGIOxyq1w>, accessed on 04.03.2024
- Figure 3.12 Caroline Walker, *Giorgia and Noemi*, 2021, Oil on linen, 190cm x 215cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://carolinewalker.org/nearby.html>, accessed on 15.06.2024
- Figure 3.13 Qirui Tan, *Daily Snapshots*, 2021, Photography, 8cm x 8cm x 36
- Figure 3.14 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #79*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm
- Figure 3.15 Thomas Demand, *Daily #11*, 2011, Photography. Estate of the Artist. <https://matthewmarks.com/exhibitions/thomas-demand-dailies-11-2013>, accessed on 17.04.2024
- Figure 3.16 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #75*, 2021, Watercolour on paper,



8cm x 8cm

Figure 3.17 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #57*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm

Figure 3.18 Thomas Demand, *Daily #15*, 2011, Photography. Estate of the Artist. <https://matthewmarks.com/exhibitions/thomas-demand-dailies-11-2013>, accessed on 17.04.2024

Figure 3.19 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #20*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm

Figure 3.20 Qirui Tan, *Fragments III*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 31cm x 41cm

Figure 3.21 De Heem, *The Desserts*, c.1640, Oil on canvas, 149cm x 203cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.  
[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jan\\_Davidsz.\\_de\\_Heem\\_-\\_A\\_Table\\_of\\_Desserts\\_-\\_WGA11289.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Davidsz._de_Heem_-_A_Table_of_Desserts_-_WGA11289.jpg), accessed on 05.04.2024

Figure 3.22 *The Unswept Room* (Oikos Asarotos), Hadrianic, copy by Herakleitos (second century CE) after Sosos of Pergamon.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Unswept\\_Floor\\_mosaic\\_\(Gregoriano\\_Profano\\_Museum\)#/media/File:Restes\\_du\\_banquet,\\_mosa%C3%AFque.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Unswept_Floor_mosaic_(Gregoriano_Profano_Museum)#/media/File:Restes_du_banquet,_mosa%C3%AFque.jpg), accessed on 30.12.2023

Figure 3.23 Sterling Ruby, *EXHM (3915)*, 2012, Collage. Estate of the Artist.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sterling\\_Ruby#/media/File:Sterling\\_RubyEXHM3915.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sterling_Ruby#/media/File:Sterling_RubyEXHM3915.jpg), accessed on 15.06.2024

Figure 3.24 Man Ray, *Dust Breeding*, 1920, Gelatin silver print, 23.9cm x 30.4cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
<https://davidcompany.com/dust-breeding-man-ray-1920/>, accessed on 15.06.2024

Figure 3.25 Robert Rauschenberg, *Dirt Painting (for John Cage)*, 1953, Dirt and mold in wood box, 39.7cm x 40.2cm x 6.4cm. Robert

Rauschenberg Foundation.

<https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/dirt-painting-john-cage>, accessed on 15.06.2024

- Figure 3.26 Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with Oysters, a Rummer, a Lemon and a Silver Bowl*, c.1634, Oil on panel, 43cm x 57cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Willem\\_Claesz.\\_Heda\\_-\\_Still\\_Life\\_with\\_Oysters,\\_a\\_Rummer,\\_a\\_Lemon\\_and\\_a\\_Silver\\_Bowl\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Willem_Claesz._Heda_-_Still_Life_with_Oysters,_a_Rummer,_a_Lemon_and_a_Silver_Bowl_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg), accessed on 29.05.2024
- Figure 3.27 Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Still-Life Three Salmon Steak*, c.1808-1812, Oil on canvas, 45cm x 62cm. Am Römerholz, Winterthur.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco\\_de\\_Goya\\_y\\_Lucientes\\_-\\_Still-Life\\_Three\\_Salmon\\_Steaks\\_-\\_WGA10065.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco_de_Goya_y_Lucientes_-_Still-Life_Three_Salmon_Steaks_-_WGA10065.jpg), accessed on 29.05.2024
- Figure 3.28 Qirui Tan, *Fragments I*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm
- Figure 3.29 Alexis Rockman, *Transient Passage*, 2022, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 131.1cm x 188cm. Estate of the Artist.  
<https://alexisrockman.net/oceanus/>, accessed on 20.04.2024
- Figure 3.30 Qirui Tan, *Architectural Spaces*, 2020, Photography
- Figure 3.31 Frederick Kiesler, *Model for the Endless House*, 1959, Cement, steel wire mesh, and plastic, 90.5cm x 247cm x 100.5cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.  
<https://whitney.org/collection/works/7371>, accessed on 16.04.2024
- Figure 3.32 Giorgio de Chirico, *Turin Spring*, 1914, Oil on canvas, 124cm x 99.5cm. Private Collection.  
<https://www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/giorgio-de->

chirico/turin-spring/, accessed on 17.06.2024

- Figure 3.33 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1963-80, Gelatin silver prints, 40.4cm x 31cm x 16. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/what-bernd-and-hilla-becher-saw-in-the-remnants-of-industry>, accessed on 20.08.2024
- Figure 3.34 Qirui Tan, *Block VI-Faded*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 55cm x 70cm
- Figure 3.35 Peter Dreher, *Day by Day, Good Day*, starting 1974, Oil on canvas, each 25cm x 20cm. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.koeniggalerie.com/blogs/online-magazine/the-grand-opening-peter-dreher-featuring-sophie-hunger>, accessed on 11.04.2024
- Figure 3.36 Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life (Natura morta)*, 1956, Oil on canvas, 36cm x 45.7cm. Fondation Mattioli Rossi, Suisse. <http://www.alaintruong.com/archives/2019/04/06/37238717.html>, accessed on 29.11.2023
- Figure 3.37 Giorgio Morandi, *Courtyard at Via Fondazza*, 1958, Oil on canvas, 30.6cm x 40.5cm. Museo Morandi, Bologna. <https://www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/giorgio-morandi/cortile-di-via-fondazza/>, accessed on 29.11.2023
- Figure 3.38 Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life (Natura morta)*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 36cm x 45.7cm. Private Collection. [https://www.cranekalman.com/exhibitions/30/works/image\\_standalone832/](https://www.cranekalman.com/exhibitions/30/works/image_standalone832/), accessed on 29.11.2023
- Figure 3.39 Bologna – Italy ©Jürgen Reichenpfader
- Figure 3.40 Details of Fig 1.6
- Figure 3.41 Details of Fig 1.12
- Figure 3.42 Details of Fig 1.32
- Figure 3.43 Sam Taylor-Wood, *Still Life*, 2001, Film still. Estate of the Artist.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-9-spring-2007/matter-time>, accessed on 26.04.2024

- Figure 3.44 Johanna Mårtensson, *Decor* (Stage 3), 2009, Photo installation, a series of six photographs, 48cm x 60cm. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2318227/City-bread-Urban-landscape-dough-decays-eyes.html>, accessed on 26.04.2024
- Figure 3.45 Andy Warhol, *Colored Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1965. Photograph by Elisabeth Bernstein. <https://www.mnuchingallery.com/exhibitions/andy-warhol4#tab:slideshow;slide:8>, accessed on 23.04.2024
- Figure 3.46 Tom Wesselmann, *Still Life #35*, 1963, Oil and collage on canvas, 304.8cm x 487.7cm. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.tomwesselmannestate.org/artwork/still-life/>, accessed on 23.04.2024
- Figure 3.47 Arman Fernandez, *Petits Déchets Bourgeois*, 1959. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.armanstudio.com/artworks/poubelles>, accessed on 23.04.2024
- Figure 3.48 Qirui Tan, *Twilight City series*, 2016-2019, Watercolour on paper, 83cm x 112cm x 4
- Figure 3.49 John Ruskin, *Mountain Rock and Alpine Rose*, 1844-49, Black ink, watercolour and bodycolour on white paper, 29.8cm x 41.4cm. Ruskin Foundation. <https://victorianweb.org/victorian/painting/ruskin/wc/67.html>, accessed on 17.06.2024
- Figure 3.50 Robbie Bushe, *The Moray Estate Interchange*, 2023, Oil on canvas, 155cm x 170cm. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.robbeibushe.com/large-paintings-2017-23/>, accessed on 30.05.2024
- Figure 3.51 Qirui Tan, *The Drowned World*, 2020, ABS Plastic, acrylic paint,

lichen, capsules, and resin, 23.5cm x 32cm x 9.5cm

Figure 3.52 Qirui Tan, *A Warmer World*, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 82cm x 113cm

Figure 3.53 Screen-grab from *Metropolis*, 1927, directed by Fritz Lang.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W\\_4no842TX8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_4no842TX8), accessed on 15.10.2023

Figure 3.54 Harrison & Abramovitz, *Exxon Building* ("XYZ Buildings"), 1972, New York. Photograph by Ezra Stoller.  
<https://adidassler.tumblr.com/post/44800699797/harrison-abramovitz-exxon-building-xyz>, accessed on 20.06.2024

Figure 3.55 Raymond Hood, *A City under a Single Roof*-model in typical midtown context (smoke added). Photo taken in *Delirious New York*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994, p.175

Figure 3.56 Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp, *The City of the Captive Globe*, 1972, Gouache and graphite on paper, 31.8cm x 44.1cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/104696>, accessed on 22.04.2024

Figure 3.57 Claes Oldenburg, *Clothespin*, 1976, Steel sculpture, 3.73m x 1.37m x 14m. Photograph by Chris Petrak.  
<https://exploringphiladelphia.blogspot.com/2015/03/clothespin.html>, accessed on 20.06.2024

Figure 3.58 Tatsuya Tanaka, *Bread City*, *Electri-City*, *Citytionery* (from left to right), Photography. Estate of the Artist. <https://miniature-calendar.com/tag/city/>, accessed on 13.04.2024

Figure 3.59 Luc Tuymans, *Flemish Village*, 1995, Oil on canvas, 110.5cm x 144.5cm. Estate of the Artist. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/luc-tuymans/flemish-village-1995>, accessed on 17.06.2024

Figure 3.60 Richard Forster, *Levittown*, *Levittown I*, 2015, Graphite and acrylic medium on paper, 48.26cm x 31.16cm. Estate of the

Artist. <https://www.lorareynolds.com/exhibitions/richard-forster-levittown/>, accessed on 20.08.2024

Figure 3.61 Michaël Borremans, *3-D House of Opportunities*, 2006, Polyurethane resin, wood, enamel, paint, wooden shelf, model sculptures, book cover, 50cm x 50cm x 50cm. Photograph by Uwe Walter.

<https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/personen/127/michal-borremans>, accessed on 17.06.2024

Figure 3.62 Screen-grab #1 from *The Secret World of Arrietty*, 2010, directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi

Figure 3.63 Screen-grab #2 from *The Secret World of Arrietty*, 2010, directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi

Figure 3.64 Screen-grab #3 from *The Secret World of Arrietty*, 2010, directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi

Figure 3.65 Michaël Borremans, *In the Louvre-The House of Opportunity*, 2003, Watercolour, pencil, and oil on paper, 26.6cm x 27.9cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[https://www.moma.org/collection/works/95598?artist\\_id=25181&page=1&sov\\_referrer=artist](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/95598?artist_id=25181&page=1&sov_referrer=artist), accessed on 09.04.2024

## Conclusion

Figure 4.1 Details of the wall painting of the cubiculum from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, c.50-40 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247017>, accessed on 30.07.2024

Figure 4.2 Michael Wolf, *Architecture of Density #45*, 2006, Photography. Estate of the Artist. <https://photomichaelwolf.com/#architecture-of-density/8>, accessed on 28.05.2024

# Introduction

## Overview

Still life and landscape, as two different genres in painting, possess their own characteristics: still life mainly focuses on domestic inanimate objects, while the landscape is more about outdoor views. However, is it possible to combine these two genres to create a kind of space in-between and further deflate the distinction between them?

Departing from still life, this practice-based doctoral research mainly investigates the relationship between still life and urban landscape. To be more specific, it tries to explore the space in-between through painting practice. Three key research questions were generated as follows:

- **How can landscape characteristics be integrated to conceive new representations of still life through painting practice?**

Departing from traditional still life painting, this question tries to step out the conventions to see whether it is possible to blend landscape elements with still life and how.

- **How can watercolour reinterpret the relationship between still life and landscape and further deflate the distinction between the two genres?**

This question is more based on my research method. I used watercolour painting as my method to conduct this research. The characteristics of this medium, like fluidity and uncertainty, really match the research on a practical level.

- **How can the overlooked everyday objects be re-examined in the contemporary context?**

I chose egg cartons as the main subject both for my research and practice. Egg carton, as a kind of common packaging material, represents a series of everyday objects that are overlooked in our daily life. However, reusing waste materials and transforming the residue into something else has becoming a growing field for contemporary artists. Thus, this question tries to explore how the idea of 'overlooked everyday objects' is developed in the contemporary context.

What was the motivation behind this research? First of all, urban landscape is a theme that I have always been very interested in. My previous works were all around different discussions on urban landscapes. Whether they are realistic large watercolour cityscape paintings showing urban panoramas (Fig 0.1) or surrealistic MA project conceiving floating capsules (see Fig 3.52), they all embodied my reflections on urban landscape and life. Then, due to the impact of the pandemic, my focus shifted from the macro perspective of urban landscapes to the micro perspective of everyday objects that were overlooked in my surroundings. This change made me pay more attention to still life, the history of still life painting, and the relationship between still life and daily life. More importantly, it made me think about the relationship between still life and urban landscape. Thus, I would like to know whether I can combine the two categories together to explore a kind of space in-between through painting practice.

The study of the relationship between still life and landscape is not without precedent in art history. The typical characteristic of Roman Baroque still life is combining lush flowers and fruit with a park-like landscape in a single image. (see Fig 1.29) Romanticism espoused the notion that the holy spirit was present in the natural world.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, landscape paintings gradually

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<sup>1</sup> M.A.R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 409.





Figure 0.1 Qirui Tan, *Twilight City III*, 2017, Watercolour on paper, 82cm x 113cm

gained popularity in the early 1800s, while still lifes were relegated to a lower position.<sup>2</sup> Gradually, the artistic characteristics and structural elements of landscape paintings started to be incorporated into still life paintings. Hunting still lifes, for instance, were typical of this period. (see Fig 1.30) However, all of the aforementioned were juxtapositions of still life and landscape in one painting, but they did not reach any issues like the interchange and fusion of the two genres.

Later, Paul Cézanne moved further by merging the two genres and moving them indoors. His still life paintings show the translation of landscape motifs into inanimate objects and small scale of still life.<sup>3</sup> Carol Armstrong, speaking of her comparisons of Cézanne's landscape with still life painting, argues that 'the subject in Cézanne's case asserts its in-betweenness, between indoor

<sup>2</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999), 287.

<sup>3</sup> I will expand the discussion on Cézanne's still lifes further in Chapter 1.

and outdoor study.’<sup>4</sup> She continues to suggest that ‘close enough to still lifes in their spatiality to straddle the boundary between one genre and the other, or at least to pose the question of what distinguish one kind of study from the other, the indoors from the outdoors.’<sup>5</sup> Bridget Alsdorf also speaks in relation to Cézanne’s landscape-like qualities of his still lifes: ‘These miniaturized reflections of nature happen not through internal formal correspondences, but through a forced collapse of two diametrically opposed modes of painting, landscape ghosting still life.’<sup>6</sup>

In addition, Morandi’s paintings also reflect his thinking on the relationship between still life and landscape.<sup>7</sup> His work’s composition of bottles and jars is similar to the architectural form of his hometown — Bologna. Also, the overlap of landscape painting and small objects seem closely interconnected. For example, Max Ernst’s microscopic drawings (Fig 0.2) show a strong presence, but somehow they also seem to combine the surrealist idea of objects and landscapes. Fascinated with the mystical qualities of inanimate objects, Paul Nash substitutes the Neolithic stones for modern geometric forms in *Equivalents for the Megaliths* (Fig 0.3), showing an experiment of creating still arrangements from small found objects.

Based on the aforementioned research, this PhD programme will continue to investigate the relationship between still life and urban landscape and lead to some new insights into these two categories. Firstly, this research departs from the notion of ‘nature morte’ and has contributed to the field of traditional still life painting; secondly, it has also offered new possibilities for contemporary art practice of everyday objects.

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Armstrong, *Cézanne in the Studio: Still Life in Watercolors* (Los Angeles: J.P. Getty Museum, 2004), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>6</sup> Bridget Alsdorf, “Interior Landscapes: Metaphor and Meaning in Cézanne’s Late Still Lifes,” *Word & Image* 26 (2010): 320.

<sup>7</sup> I will expand the discussion on Morandi’s still lifes further in Chapter 3.



Figure 0.2 Max Ernst, *Adam and Eve Expelled from the Garden of Eden*, 1946-47, Gouache on cardstock, 1.4cm x 3.6cm



Figure 0.3 Paul Nash, *Equivalents for the Megaliths*, 1935, Oil on canvas, 45.7cm x 66cm

As indicated by the title of the thesis, my various arguments about the in-between space pertain to a kind of space oscillating between still life and urban landscape. In that sense, it neither entirely belongs to still-life or urban space. This research will offer an opportunity to explore the possibility of integrating these two categories but also try to analyse this in-between space and the ambiguity inherent in the work in order to clarify this in-between space through the research and practice. However, this kind of ambiguity keeps the

research open-ended, and the uncertainty of reading leads the viewers to further rethink the interrelation of still life and urban landscape as well as how one's perspective influences the interpretations.

### ***Research Turning Point 1: From Surrealism and Architecture to Still Life***

I have always been interested in cities and urban spaces. Before I did the PhD research, my paintings were especially about large-scale bird's-eye-view cityscapes. (see Fig 3.49) While studying for my MA course at Camberwell College of Arts in London, my project revolved around Surrealism. It explored surreal methods and ideas of dreams, trying to combine Surrealism with cities, architecture, and living spaces. Therefore, I proposed a future living form, the floating capsule, based on the background of global warming and rising sea levels. The outcomes were a large watercolour painting (see Fig 3.53) and a model (see Fig 3.52), showing a dystopia view of the future. Following that idea, my initial idea for this PhD research was to continue that path and further explore the relationship between Surrealism, architecture and urban spaces.

In my first year, the research and practice had been divided into two parts:

One was I explored the ideas and methods of Surrealism (mainly about the surrealist techniques in painting). The outcome was a series of abstract paintings showing no recognisable objects but just geometric shapes and lines. Surrealism contains aspects of automatism, of automatic writing and painting finding the unexpected. For example, Max Ernst used 'decalcomania', a surrealist technique of pressing one surface (a sheet of paper or glass) with paint onto another surface such as a canvas to create unexpected images. I also practiced this surrealist technique to create some unintended shapes on four sides of the painting. (Fig 0.4)





Figure 0.4 Qirui Tan, *Untitled II*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 17cm x 25cm

Another part was I made a series of small works (see Fig 3.1) as a response to the observation and thinking in pandemic life.<sup>8</sup> By comparing these two bodies of works, firstly, I decided to use painting as my research method. Secondly, regarding the two types of painting, I felt more interested in those small paintings because the abstract ones are full of possibilities of interpretation and give me too much uncertainty. In contrast, the small works are more realistic, which also helps convey my ideas to the audience. Thus, I decided to choose a more realistic way to make paintings later in the research. That realistic way of painting also triggered my discussion and reflection on the relationship between painting and photography.<sup>9</sup> To sum up, the comparison of two types of paintings made me think about how I wanted to do my research next, and to be more specific, shifting the research from Surrealism and architecture to still life and everyday objects. For me, this shift contains two parts (subject and perspective):

<sup>8</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 3.2 Newcastle Diaries in Chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 2.9 Painting Based on Photography in Chapter 2.

At the beginning of this PhD research, my initial research topic was about Surrealism and its relation to architecture. Surrealism, a past movement in art history, was the most crucial part of my research then. However, the lockdown life during the pandemic in my first year had drawn me from 'Surrealism' to 'Reality'. I came to Newcastle alone at the end of 2020 when the UK was still in lockdown due to the pandemic. With my curiosity about this new living environment and the influence of the pandemic, I started to observe this city and urban spaces from a very realistic level rather than the Surrealism in the proposal. For me, the things happening in everyday life, especially in that challenging time, became more impressive and attractive than a particular historical period, as what I was facing daily were those things in my surroundings instead of those artists and genres in art history. Thus, at the end of the first year, I shifted my research from the macroscopic postmodern surrealist architecture to the microscopic still life, everyday objects and the overlooked. On the one hand, this kind of shift embodied how I, as an independent individual, interacted with the living environment around me. On the other hand, it also reflected my continuous attention to everyday objects, life, and urban space. This reminds me of Max Ernst's tiny drawings again. The 'Microbes', a series of thumbnail images (Fig 0.5), as the artist referred to them, captured the eerie stillness of the vast arid landscapes in Sedona, Arizona.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the restriction and limitation of space (usually studio, apartment and in-between) also changed my perspective of seeing in daily life. From a panromantic perspective, which was common in my previous works before PhD research, to a close-up perspective, this shift presented how I explored

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<sup>10</sup> Esther Adler, comment on Max Ernst, "MoMA's Tiniest Drawing: A Max Ernst Microbe," *INSIDE/OUT: A MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog*, July 31, 2014, [https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2014/07/31/max-ernst-tktk/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2014/07/31/max-ernst-tktk/)

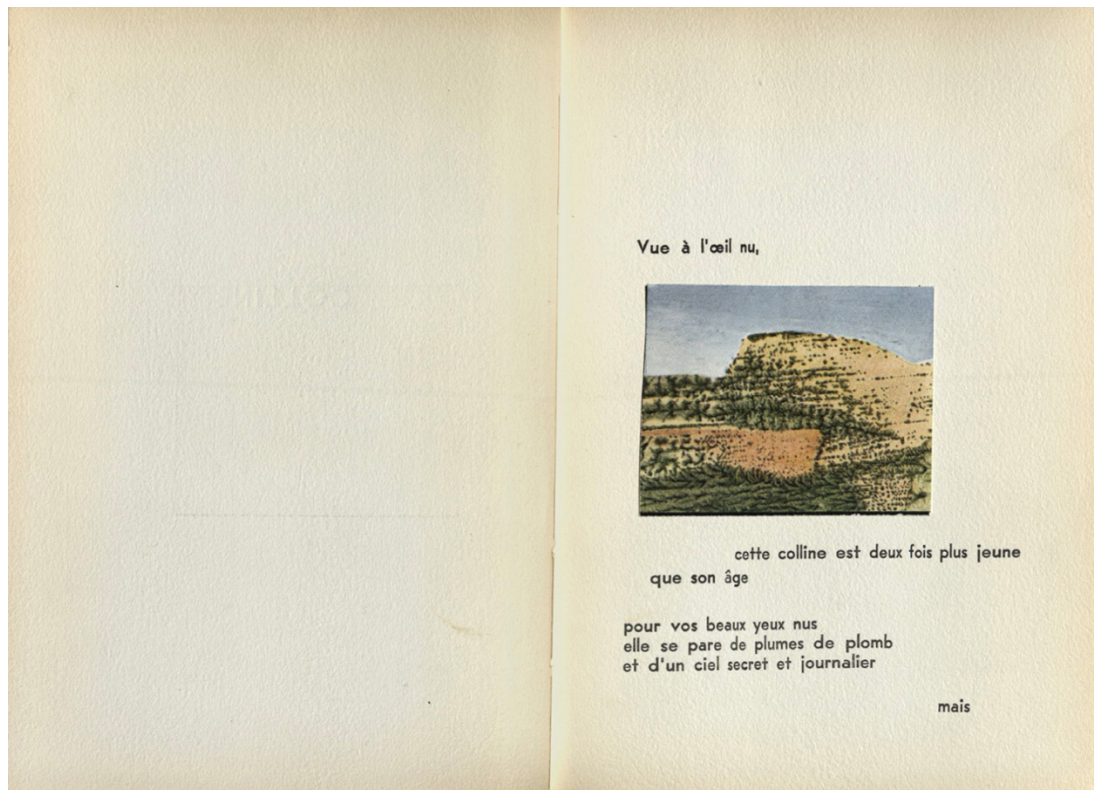


Figure 0.5 Page from *Sept microbes vus à travers un tempérament*. Paris: Les Éditions Cercle des arts, 1953.

the relationship between the city and me. In my earlier works, I put myself in an objective position as if standing outside the city to see it. In this way, I saw more about the whole view of the city with broad space. However, with the change of perspective, I now choose to be in the city, which means I set myself there to feel connected. I see the city's specific appearance, streets, and corners. Those everyday objects I encountered became a bridge connecting the city and me. They appear as still life but, at the same time, form parts of the urban landscape.

### ***Research Turning Point 2: Exploration of Still Life and Everyday Objects***

The second year of this research has been the most challenging and demanding for me. I chose to shift the research topic at the end of the first year, and tried to think about how to move from the microscopic, found, overlooked objects to the next stage. I had been searching for new research questions since the beginning of the second year. However, this triggered me to step back and reflect on my paintings because the research question I was

searching for should come from the works. In my research, which mainly consisting of still life, everyday objects and urban landscape, I tried to let the paintings guide me to go next and then find the most important discussion around the themes behind the works including space, scale, perspective, fragmented objects, ambiguity and comfort zone by analysing them to summarise the research question from that. It was in this year that I kept reflecting on my paintings and adjusting the research direction.

The second year saw my research on still life and its history.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, I made a series of still life paintings focusing on some fragments and leftovers. At this stage, I focused more on how to paint these leftovers, for example the garlic peels in *Fragments I* (see Fig 3.28), without stepping back and thinking about the implications behind the paintings. This made it very unclear to me what the research question was. Based on the paintings I made, I tried to propose two research questions:

- How can I generate a kind of beauty through painting based on mundane objects?
- How does a photographic image's meaning and information inevitably

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to know what other writers or art historians think about still life, for example, Norman Bryson remarks that still life unfolds at the interface between 'three culture zones': the life of table and everyday routine; sign systems that coding the life of table through discourses which relate it to other cultural concerns; the techniques of painting and its material practice and development. See Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 14. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, in *Still Life: A History*, considers 'still lifes constitute a rich source for social and cultural history; quite apart from their artistic value, they tell us our present-day situation and how we got here.' See Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999), 12. Charles Sterling, speaking of the attractions of inanimate things for human, argues that 'still life is the life the artist imparts to it, for he finds in inanimate things the stuff of dreams, and is prompted to evoke a crystalline calm or dramatic tension.' See Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Present Time* (New York: Universe Books, 1959), 134. Hanneke Grootenboer, speaking of still life from another perspective, argues that 'still life painting is the genre *par excellence* for philosophising.' It is because still life can lead the viewer into a state of contemplation through visual language, thus transcending the limitations of language and narrative. Still life painting provides a unique space for philosophical thinking through its unique static aesthetics and exploration of time, existence and subjectivity. This makes still life painting not only an important genre in art history, but also a form of thought. Grootenboer also argues that the exclusion of human form makes still life a blank space for thought, into which the viewer can freely project his or her own thoughts and emotions. This openness makes still life a philosophical medium that can inspire deep reflection on subjectivity, the relationship between self and the world. See Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Pensive Image: Art as a Form of Thinking* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2020).



change when it is reinvented as the subject of a paper?

However, after analysing these two questions, I found the first one on the idea of beauty too abstract and superficial, and my paintings were not just about beauty.<sup>12</sup> The second one looks more like a discussion on the relationship between painting and photography, which was also beyond my research topic. Therefore, I continued to think about what I wanted to investigate through painting everyday objects.

To find the answer, at the end of the second year, I turned my attention to the motivations behind my paintings. I would like to know if the reasons why I made these paintings can help me to find the ideas behind them. For me, the motivations consisted of two parts:

On the one hand, from the objective perspective, the motivation came from the influence of the pandemic, which I have already mentioned before.

According to this, I came up with two research questions:

- How can the change of circumstance, like the pandemic, affect painters and change their painting practice?
- How can the pandemic change the way painters see the world in their surroundings?

However, looking back at these two questions, I found they functioned more like a kind of self-reflection, guiding me to think about how the pandemic influenced me as a painter. While I am aware that they cannot serve as the

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<sup>12</sup> By 'beauty', I mean it is the unexpected and the overlooked. Since what I depicted in the paintings at this stage were some fragments and leftovers, the beauty also referred to the 'beauty of imperfection' from wabi-sabi. In traditional Japanese aesthetics, wabi-sabi is a world view centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. The beauty of wabi-sabi is sometimes described as the beauty that is imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. See "*Wabi-sabi*", Wikipedia, last modified July 25, 2024, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabi-sabi>

research questions for my entire research since my research topic was around still life and everyday objects, I am nevertheless interested in the idea of ‘world-building’ and to what extent this has become an important aspect in recent art.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, from a subjective point of view, I also thought about how my personality caused me to make these paintings. Control and order in my work came from the fear of losing control, and I prefer to stay in my comfort zone to eliminate any risks. This idea of comfort zone is also embodied in the process of making watercolour paintings.<sup>14</sup> Does painting these everyday objects suggest an ordered comfort zone to some extent? Thus, I proposed this question:

- How can I artistically use everyday objects to suggest an ordered comfort zone and its influence?

Following that path, I tried to express my understanding of the comfort zone by making the work *Comfort Zone* (see Fig 2.41), making the comfort zone my research focus. However, after reflecting on this painting, I realised that my research got off track. My research should have gone back to discussing everyday objects and thinking about what kind of research questions could be proposed under this topic rather than discussing the comfort zone. Therefore, I adjusted my direction and got the research back on track.

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<sup>13</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 3.5.5 World-building in Chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 2.6 Reflections on the Control in Chapter 2. In addition to personality, the pandemic also triggered my reflections on ‘comfort zone’ and the idea of ‘safety’. I will expand the discussion of how painters have responded to the pandemic and the idea of comfort zone in Section 3.2.2 Viewing in the Pandemic Life in Chapter 3. Jörg Heiser, speaking of ‘artists in quarantine’, remarks that ‘artists and intellectuals should be prepared to acknowledge uncertainty, to embrace instability, and to rethink their ideas.’ He continues to argue that instead of using meaningless words to fill the emptiness, it is necessary to engage in thoughtful contemplation about the significance of existing in that emptiness. See Jörg Heiser, “‘Artists in Quarantine’, Public Intellectuals, and the Trouble with Empty Heroics” *E-flux Criticism*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/332992/artists-in-quarantine-public-intellectuals-and-the-trouble-with-empty-heroics>

Although I deviated from the direction of my research at this stage, I found such disorientation, a deviation or failure in the process significant for the research. It was because of this deviation that I realised the right direction my research should follow. At the same time, this kind of self-reflection also made me aware of those behind the paintings. Although the comfort zone did not form the subject of my research, it also helped me to think about who I am to some extent. Therefore, such an experience in the research was still meaningful.

To sum up, during the second year, I tried different paths and explored different kinds of possibilities of the research. On the one hand, I kept searching for the research questions. On the other hand, I made some attempts and experiments with other painting mediums.<sup>15</sup> I found this lost and disoriented stage quite significant towards my research. Research cannot always be smooth. Research is not about clarifying one's research questions at the beginning and then conducting them in the next three years, like building a house. Once I have a blueprint, the only thing I need to do is to follow the steps. However, the research requires a process from uncertainty to certainty, which is the meaning of doing research. It is not something that has been planned at the beginning but a constant process of adjusting, updating, and deepening. This is also the characteristic of practice-based doctoral research, which requires continuous practice to guide the research.

### ***Research Turning Point 3: Connecting Still Life to Urban landscape***

At the beginning of the third year, after getting the research back on track, I returned to the everyday objects in my surroundings. The empty egg cartons I have been collecting since the beginning of the research attracted my attention again. I started to think about why I kept collecting them and whether

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<sup>15</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 2.8 Experiments on Other Mediums in Chapter 2.

they could serve as the subject matter both for the research and my paintings.<sup>16</sup> One day, when I was in the studio and looking at the stacked egg cartons with some other stationery on the table from a specific viewpoint, I found it looked like a city block. Based on that interesting idea, I made the painting *Block I* (see Fig 1.6), which also opened up the gate for the *Block* series. As I mentioned before, painting different kinds of everyday objects made my research subject unclear. It seems that I painted one thing for a while and then turned to other objects immediately, which made the depiction and research on each everyday object relatively superficial. When I had the meetings with my supervisors and panels, they all suggested me to make a series of works rather than just a single piece. That triggered me to consider the importance of making the paintings into a series. Usually, it is difficult to draw lots of ideas from one piece of painting, while making a series of works can become an excellent way to help find the connections between different works dealing with the same subject. Something in common among these paintings might be the core idea of the research question. Thus, I made a painting series using egg cartons as the main subject. Through analysing these paintings, I found what I investigated in the research was the relationship between still life and landscape. This series of works, which was not still life in a traditional sense, looks more like landscapes, or more specifically, urban landscapes. The interchange and uncertainty between still life and landscape became the most important part I wanted to discuss in the research. On the one hand, that allowed me to think about the difference between my still life paintings and those traditional ones. On the other hand, is it possible to combine landscape characteristics to conceive new representations of still life? Also, what is the connection between those representations born out of the research and the urban landscape?

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<sup>16</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 3.5.1 Why Egg Cartons? in Chapter 3.

During my painting practice, I also thought about the role watercolour played in this research. I tried to figure out how the properties of watercolour, especially its uncertainty and fluidity, help investigate the relationship between still life and landscape. Watercolour, a very popular medium in making landscape paintings, is closely related to landscape because of its fluidity, transparency and uncertainty. The transience and passing of time, similar to the transient feelings landscape gives us, are distinctive in the watercolour medium. Therefore, How can watercolour reinterpret the relationship between still life and landscape?<sup>17</sup>

In the third year, I tried to narrow down the research and make it more specific by focusing on a particular everyday object (egg carton), which made the research questions clearer. The urban landscapes in my *Block* series were different from those in reality, as the city in my painting was made of egg cartons. On the one hand, this urban landscape was surreal, but on the other, it integrated my own experience and understanding of urban life. This was a kind of urban landscape I reconstructed based on reality, strangely real yet unreal. Also, the *Block* series shows an idea of world-building, which has always been evident in my works.<sup>18</sup>

## **Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter 1 discusses the relationship between still life and landscape through several ideas such as space, perspective, background and exclusion of human form. By demonstrating the differences between still life and landscape, I argue if it is possible to combine landscape characteristics to propose new representations of still life through painting practice. Mainly scrutinising the *Block* series, this chapter further considers the possibility of negating the boundary between these two genres.

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<sup>17</sup> I will expand the discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 3.5.5 World-building in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the medium of watercolour, which is the main method used in this practical research. This chapter not only briefly introduces the properties of watercolour but, more importantly, investigates what role watercolour plays in the research and how its properties like fluidity and uncertainty help reinterpret the relationship between still life and landscape and further deflate the distinction between the two categories. This chapter also sees my reflections on watercolour itself. On the one hand, I discuss the control and uncontrol in watercolour. If still life emphasises control, while the landscape is more about uncontrol, the oscillation between control and uncontrol in watercolour provides an experimental space for understanding the relationship between still life and landscape. On the other hand, I tried other mediums during the research and compared the difference between these mediums and watercolour as a way of defending watercolour. If the aforementioned can be characterised as ‘talking about’ what medium I choose in practice, the rest of this chapter can be regarded as how I use watercolour, further exploring the role of the studio and the aesthetic overlaps of painting and photography.

Chapter 3 turns to the idea of ‘overlooked everyday objects’ in this research with more work-specific discussions. Starting with two case studies of painting in the first two years, this chapter continues to explore the relationship between everyday objects and urban landscape, not only to see how the microcosmic still life epitomises the macrocosmic world but also to investigate how these early works become precedents for later works creating cityscapes out of everyday objects. In this chapter, I also discuss my understanding of ‘overlooked objects’ and how that helps me expand discussions on choosing egg cartons as the specific subject for my paintings. As Chapter 1 has already examined the *Block* series through several ideas, this chapter will further unpack this series around concepts such as decay, ephemeral objects, decontextualisation, world-building and ambiguity of scale.

## Chapter 1. Still Life and Landscape

### 1.1 Introduction

Still life and landscape are both significant genres of painting, each with its unique characteristics and ways of capturing the world. Still life typically involves arranging and depicting inanimate objects like fruits, flowers, utensils, or everyday items in a composition, and painters often focus on light, shadow, texture, and arrangement to create a compelling visual narrative. In contrast, landscapes showcase outdoor scenes, encompassing natural elements and sometimes including human-made structures. Perspective, light, and colours are essential to convey a mood or evoke emotions tied to the environment depicted. In terms of this, I shall ask: How can I combine the characteristics of landscape to conceive new representations of still life through painting practice?

In this chapter, I will specifically investigate the relationship between still life and landscape through several ideas. The aim of this chapter is to discuss how I explored the relationship between still life and landscape through my paintings.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the chapter, I will discuss the difference between still life and landscape first and then try to rethink the still life through the perspective of landscape. How do the characteristics of landscape influence my representation of still life? If I use the way of making a landscape painting to depict the still life, what will that still life be like?

In order to answer these questions, I used painting as a way of experimenting

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<sup>19</sup> Most of my paintings discussed in this chapter come from some painting experiments and a series of paintings called *Block* in the third year of this research programme, while others are the paintings made in the first two years or earlier.

to investigate which characteristics of traditional still life paintings I kept and preserved in my works and which parts I tried to break up and question.<sup>20</sup>

When discussing my works, I also brought some historical contexts into the discussion to determine the differences between my paintings and those historical ones and, more importantly, consider what new ideas on still life I can contribute based on some precedent research.

## 1.2 Space

The landscape always showcases the outdoor scene with broad and deep space. When we look at a landscape, all the things in front of our eyes form layers of depth. In Western art, linear perspective often creates illusions of perceptual volume and space. In the book *De Pictura*, Leon Battista Alberti claims that paintings should create realistic and mimetic illusions. He regarded the frame of a painting as a window to the world by concluding that 'First I trace as large a quadrangle as I wish, with right angles, on the surface to be painted; in this place, it [the rectangular quadrangle] certainly functions for me as an open window through which the *historia* is observed.'<sup>21</sup> The painting called *The Grand Canal with S. Simeone Piccolo* (Fig 1.1) by Giovanni Antonio illustrates how One-point Perspective generates an illusion of space. As the buildings on both sides of the canal recede in space from the audience, buildings appear to the eye to shrink, and parallel lines and planes converge to the infinitely distant vanishing point. The surface of the canvas opened up a more profound space where we could see far away. Besides the linear perspective, Hazy and colour shifts that suggest air and distance, which is called atmospheric perspective, is another typical characteristic of the landscape.

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<sup>20</sup> By 'traditional', I mean it refers to domestic table still lifes between sixteenth to eighteenth century.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura*, trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1.19.



However, most of the traditional still lifes are regarded as flat spaces because still life can be seen as a kind of stage set up indoors.<sup>22</sup> Different from exterior space, the interior space, usually a room or studio, is limited, which means it contains less space than outdoors. When making a still life painting, we see all the objects clearly in front of our eyes, even if some of them are a little far away. Here, I am following Bryson's critique where he argues that the space of still life paintings is exactly anti-Albertian, which means it opposes the idea of regarding the canvas as a window to the outside world.<sup>23</sup> The anti-Albertian here doesn't refer to the inside and outside relationship, but to how the objects are positioned within still life.



Figure 1.1 Giovanni Antonio, *The Grand Canal with S. Simeone Piccolo*, c.1740, Oil on canvas, 124.5cm x 204.6cm

In his classic *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Bryson, speaking of spatial characteristics of still life, remarks that instead of expansive views, archways, distant horizons, and the commanding view of the

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<sup>22</sup> By 'most', I mean not all still lifes in history contain a flat spatial quality, and there were some historical exceptions. I will explain it further in Section 1.4 Background.

<sup>23</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 71.

eye, it presents a significantly smaller area focused on the body.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 1.2 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruit*, c.1599, Oil on canvas, 46cm x 64.5cm

There is another reason why still life is often characterised as flat space. The background of most traditional still life paintings is a super flat black plane or a vertical flat plane, which probably indicates a wall which blocks any deeper space behind the objects. Here, it is worth considering Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* (Fig 1.2) and thinking more about the space in this work. That space is quite limited. Seeing in front of the objects with a close-up view, we can only perceive the space offered by this basket of fruit itself. The yellow background of this painting looks so flat, as if it is a wall that blocks any deeper space. However, from another perspective, the background could also be seen as an ambiguous space as if it is a sky or a void. This blank background completely concentrates the focus of the image on the basket of fruit, leading a sense of detachment as if this basket does not belong to this place. It seems that the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

artist deliberately combined the basket with this ambiguous background, making the painting strangely familiar yet unfamiliar. The table surface, which can offer inner space, is also absent in this painting, resulting in a collage-like motif.

That kind of flat space is also shown in Euan Uglow's still life paintings. The backgrounds in most of his still life works are often processed in a flattened manner, without a clear sense of space. This contrasts sharply with the use of distant views as backgrounds in landscape paintings to create deep spaces. Like this work, *Boxing Day, Christmas Tree* (Fig 1.3) depicts a small Christmas tree-like trinket, and we can recognise the volume of it as the tree shows different sides. However, the background, consisting of three colour planes, looks almost flat without indicating much sense of deeper space behind the tree. Things would be the same if we chose a bird's-eye view to see the still life. For example, in my work *Fragments II* (Fig 1.4), the floor as the background is flat, and there is no deeper space we can look into. It is also noticeable that both Uglow's work and my own painting show a sense of detachment. The objects seem detached from their surroundings, which can be seen as a particular Modernist trope, where the work shows a transitory aspect, disrupting established patterns, and an altering schemata. (The broken glass bottle gives a clear sense of disorder, debunking the traditional sense of order.) The alteration of established values is the characteristic of the Modernist movement, for example, Raoul De Keyser's painting, a representative of the Belgium artist movement *Nieuwe Visie*. The titles of some of his paintings such as *Camping II* (Fig 1.5) and *Clochard* suggest something of the transitory in his work, disrupting established patterns and altering schemata. Adrian Searle, speaking of his work, characterises him as having something 'unsettling' about him where 'nothing seems to remain





Figure 1.3 Euan Uglow, *Boxing Day, Christmas Tree*, 1990, Oil on panel, 28.2cm x 24.3cm



Figure 1.4 Qirui Tan, *Fragments II*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 63cm x 45cm

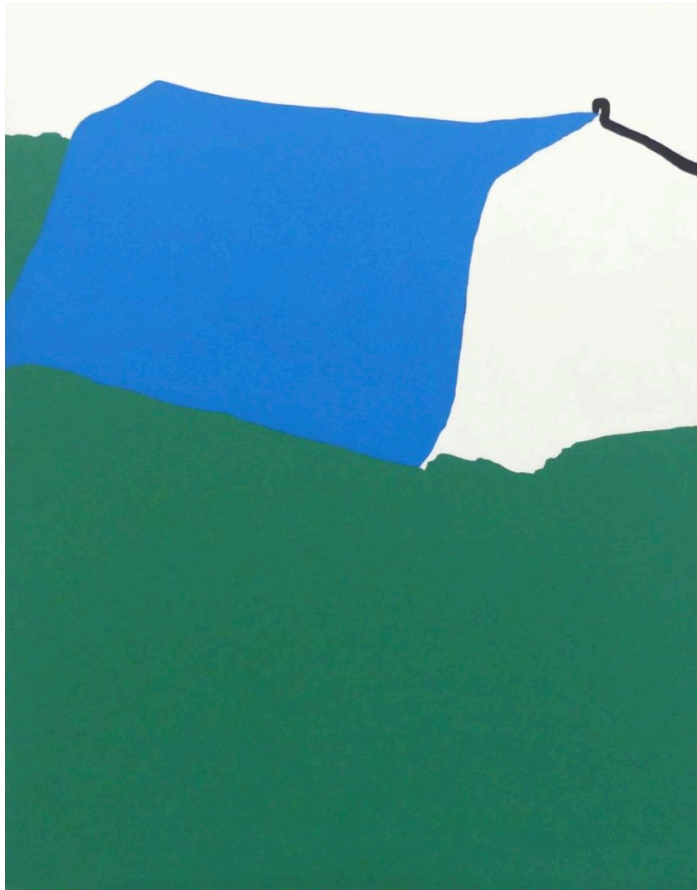


Figure 1.5 Raoul de Keyser, *Camping II*, 1969, Acrylic on canvas, 177cm x 138cm

except residue, or a ground disfigured with brush wiping.<sup>25</sup> Similar to de Keyser's work, this idea of residue and destruction is distinct in my *Fragments* series, where I showed a sense of chaos as a response to the pandemic which could be regarded as a disrupted and subverted normal life.<sup>26</sup>

What would it be like if I put the deep space outdoors into the depiction of still life? To answer this question, I did some painting experiments with egg cartons in my studio.

Let us consider the painting *Block I* first. *Block I* (Fig 1.6) depicts some objects in the studio, and the upper right table corner indicates that these objects are on the table. This is a still life painting in terms of the subject matter depicted.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Searle, *Painter's Painter* in Anthony Spira (ed.) *Raoul de Keyser* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2004), 17.

<sup>26</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 3.3 Fragments Series in Chapter 3.

However, from the perspective of space, it has characteristics of landscape painting.

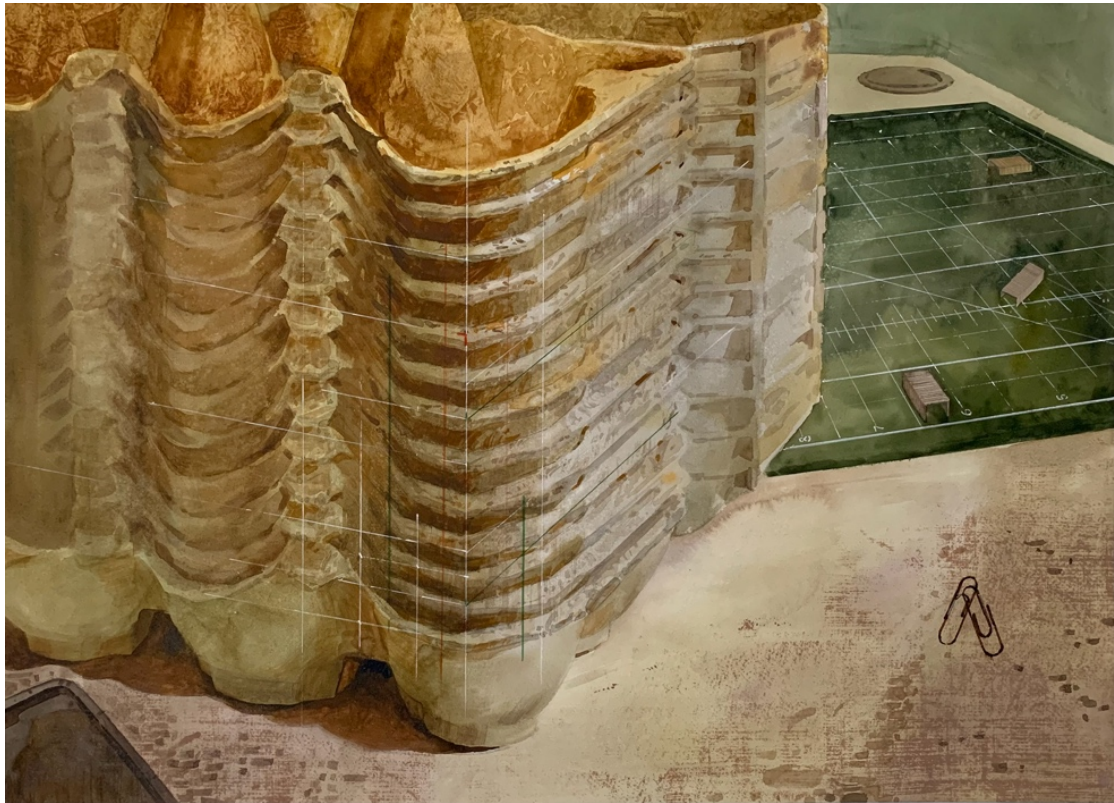


Figure 1.6 Qirui Tan, *Block I*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm

The foreground, middle ground, and background, which consist of three layers of space, are essential characteristics of the French classical landscape paintings. It is evident when we consider Claude Lorrain's painting *The Ford* (Fig 1.7), in which the artist applied point-by-point plotting of a course as a strategy to create a sense of space. The shepherd with two cattle in the foreground forms Point A, while the other two cattle opposite in the middle ground act as Point B. The small boat serves as Point C, and the bridge in the background can be regarded as Point D. When the viewers follow these points, they seem to travel through this landscape, which generates a strong sense of space. (Fig 1.8)

Looking back at *Block I*, we can also see the clips and egg cartons in the front, some staples on the cutting mat in the middle and the table corner in the





Figure 1.7 Claude Lorrain, *The Ford*, c.1644, Oil on canvas, 68cm x 99cm

background together form several points, following which we can journey through the painting from front to back as if it is a kind of landscape. This sense of space gives the work more possibilities for reading, for example, whether it could be seen as a cityscape where there are some cars in the



Figure 1.8 Point-by-point plotting of a course in Fig 1.7

parking lot next to a museum-like building, and the clips resembling the pedestrian walk towards the building. Could it be argued then, in line with Bryson's argument that still life painting has a potential to 'outstrip' nature, *Block I* combines different and unexpected qualities.<sup>27</sup>

Then, it is worth considering another experiment. Here, the two images form an interesting comparison. The first one (Fig 1.9) is a photo of the egg cartons on the table, and the second one is the painting I made. In the painting (Fig 1.10), the front carton is distinct because of the light casting on the edge of it, while the one in the background is hazy and ambiguous as if it is a waterfall or a faraway building in the mist. This haziness reminds me of Tuymans' paintings where he often used faded colours. For example, the large scale painting *Still Life* (Fig 1.11) is characterised as distancing viewers from the blurred depiction of objects. As Mieves puts it, 'Despite its enormous scale the



Figure 1.9 Qirui Tan, *Egg cartons on table*, 2023, Photography

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<sup>27</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 105.





Figure 1.10 Qirui Tan, *Painting Experiment #3*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm



Figure 1.11 Luc Tuymans, *Still Life*, 2002, Oil on canvas, 347cm x 500cm

painting *Still Life*, because of its faded colours, enacts a kind of tenuous or modest expression.<sup>28</sup> Back to my painting, the stacked egg cartons form a strong contrast on paper, and it looks like they are far from each other. However, what is interesting is that they are actually very close in reality, according to the photo.

Through this painting experiment, I added a deep space existing in the landscape into the still life. I think it remains a still life painting, but it is one which looks like a landscape. Using atmospheric perspective to indicate deeper space also occurs in my other works. For example, the stacked egg cartons, which are right behind in *Block V* (Fig 1.12), show a sense of haziness and enhance the sense of space in the painting. It is interesting to consider to what extent haziness of fog is an essential part in the history of painting, which can be illustrated in paintings by Turner, Whistler and Monet (Fig 1.13) and the nineteenth-century interest in misty cityscapes. As Monet once said, 'How could the English painters of the nineteenth century have painted its houses brick by brick? Without the fog, London would not be a beautiful city.'<sup>29</sup>

This sense of space from landscape outdoors also occurs in Cézanne's watercolour still life paintings. *Still Life with Blue Pot* (Fig.1.14) resembles a typical still life painting indoors, but it evokes a strong sense of landscape. The four spheres (not sure whether they are apples, oranges or onions) in the foreground give off a warm orange-red colour with high saturation. However, in sharp contrast, the colour of the rest in the middle ground is more yellowish and greenish. This colour shift, which suggests air and distance, is the typical characteristic of atmospheric perspective. The flowered tapestry in the middle

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<sup>28</sup> Christian Mieves, "Distant Toys, Dissected Bodies and Reality TV: Luc Tuymans and Painting in the Age of Ritual and New Media," *International Journal of Arts and Technology* Vol.6 No.3 (2013): 309.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Keiller and John House, "River of Dreams," *TATE ETC*, January 1, 2005, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-3-spring-2005/river-dreams>

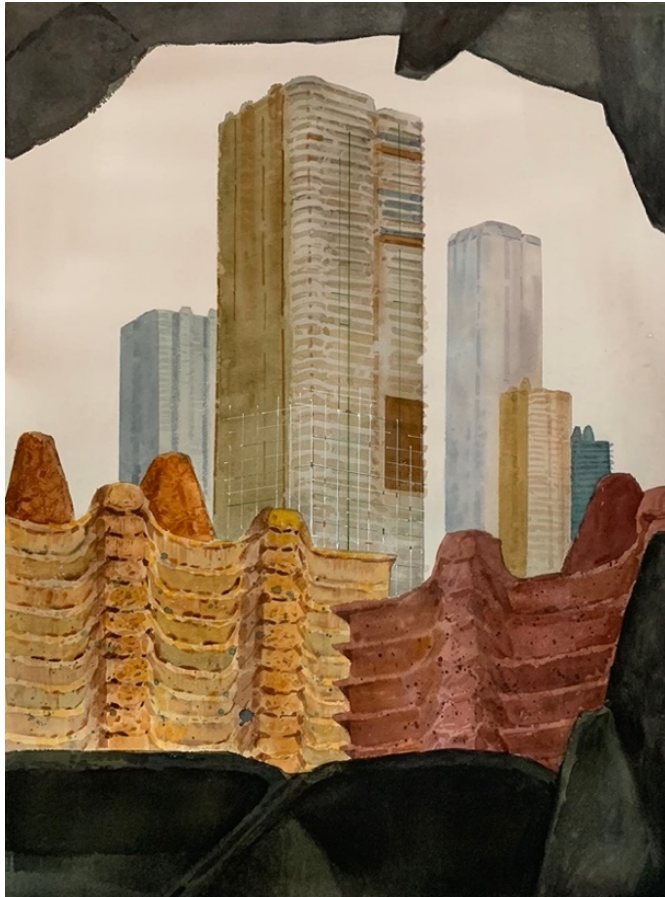


Figure 1.12 Qirui Tan, *Block V*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 70cm x 52cm



Figure 1.13 Claude Monet, *Charing Cross Bridge, the Thames*, 1903, Oil on canvas, 73.4cm x 100.3cm





Figure 1.14 Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Blue Pot*, c.1900-06, Watercolour over graphite, 48.1cm x 63.2cm

ground meanders like a mountain, with streams flowing out of it, forming the waterfall of the white cloth in the foreground. Another distinctive characteristic of the landscape is the horizontal line. In the background, the upper edge of the wooden panel resembles a horizontal line that divides the background into two parts. The blue-green wall above resembles the sky, full of air, while the brown wooden panel below resembles the earth. The wainscoting creates the illusion of being a horizontal plane supporting the still life in front, but in reality, it is a vertical plane that serves as the background. In Cézanne's still life painting, as Alsdorf remarks, 'landscape is no longer background to still life, but rather worked into its very forms.'<sup>30</sup>

In addition, I also tried to apply another typical method, which comes from ancient Chinese landscape paintings, to generate space. Overlapping is a

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<sup>30</sup> Bridget Alsdorf, "Interior Landscapes: Metaphor and Meaning in Cézanne's Late Still Lives," *Word & Image* 26 (2010): 317.

crucial point through which we can perceive the relationship between the front and back, even if they are two figures without volume. Traditional Chinese painting is mainly based on lines, supplemented by colour, and focuses on the sense of decoration, making the pictorial space flat. The Chinese painting primarily relies on an overlapping relationship to create the space instead of depending on light and dark, colours and perspective in the Western painting. This difference also embodies how visibility can be culturally constructed. In Chinese landscape paintings, painters always deal with spatial relationships to express a profound sense of space by advancing the mountains layer by layer. *Mount Kuanglu* (Fig 1.15) by Jing Hao illustrates how overlapping generates deep space. In this painting, it can be seen that the overlapping between mountains indicates space. There are neither clear relationships of colour nor strong contrast between light and dark, but only overlapping relationships between different figures. Although we cannot see linear or atmospheric perspective in the work, we can still perceive a sense of space. The painter relies on the perception and psychological effects formed by an overlapping relationship to create a deep space. This method of overlapping was also applied to my paintings. For example, *Block V* (see Fig 1.12) generated the space by overlaying the egg cartons layer by layer. With three distinct sections, which are foreground, middle ground, and background, this painting shows some similarities with *Mount Kuanglu*, especially in how different elements in the painting were arranged and composed.

In addition, the spatial representation of traditional Chinese landscape paintings is quite different from that of Western landscape paintings. Since the Renaissance, perspectival construction of space has played a vital role in the depiction of three-dimensionality in the west. A very representative idea from Leon Battista Alberti I mentioned before was to regard a view in a painting as if one is looking at outside views from a window. The horizontal set up and linear perspective are often applied in western landscape paintings to realise

the illusion of recession behind a two-dimensional surface while in traditional Chinese painting, painters usually use vertical format to create a landscape image on an additive basis. For example, in *Mount Kuanglu* (see Fig 1.15), it is obvious that the upper and lower parts of the image are presented to the viewer from different angles. As a result, the viewer will interpret the image separately. In his classic *Images of the Mind*, Wen C. Fong, speaking of a Song painting *Travelers Amid Streams and Mountains* by Fan Kuan (Fig 1.16), argues that ‘the result is not a representation of any particular view of nature but, instead, we are confronted with a conceptual vision of the macrocosmic universe.’<sup>31</sup>



Figure 1.15 Jing Hao, *Mount Kuanglu*, c.907-923, Ink on silk, 185.8cm x 106.8cm

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<sup>31</sup> Wen C. Fong, *Images of the Mind: Selections from the Edward L. Elliott Family and John B. Elliott Collections of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 47.





Figure 1.16 Fan Kuan, *Travelers Amid Streams and Mountains*, c.960-1127, Ink on silk, 206.3cm x 103.3cm

My painting *Block V* also creates a vertical composition, which is typical in traditional Chinese landscape, in egg cartons in contrast to the horizontal Western still-life set up. This can be regarded as another way to breach the boundary between still life and landscape.

### 1.3 Perspective

Traditional still life painting, usually from a frontal perspective, allows a clear view of all objects. As Hal Foster puts it, 'in many still lifes, the objects are centred or seen straight on.'<sup>32</sup> Bryson, speaking of the spatial characteristic of still life, remarks that still life presents a significantly smaller area centred on the object.<sup>33</sup> However, there are more possibilities of choosing perspective in seeing a landscape, like seeing in front, looking up or using a bird's-eye view. In this section, I am going to discuss how the perspective of viewing a landscape influenced my depiction of still life by taking some paintings from the *Block* series as examples.

The bird's-eye view has always been used in my previous large urban landscape paintings. In my still life paintings, the choice of the perspective is obviously influenced by the way of seeing in landscape. A kind of strategy of looking down was kept and extended in my depiction of still life, making the still life works contain strong characteristics of landscape. Furthermore, the building-like stacked egg cartons, as the subject for my painting, make the atmosphere of the urban landscape even more distinct.

Let us consider two paintings here. The first one (Fig 1.17) is an urban landscape painting I made several years ago, and it depicts the panoramic cityscape of Paris, which I viewed through the window of Centre Pompidou. The same bird's-eye views occur again in the second painting, *Block VIII* (Fig 1.18), but the painting's content changed this time. What was supposed to be a stadium was replaced by a pile of empty egg cartons, which were interestingly in the shape of a stadium. Thus, should we say it is an urban landscape painting? Or is it a still life painting that depicts egg cartons? The

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<sup>32</sup> Hal Foster, "Dailiness According to Demand," *October* 158, October 2016, 102.

<sup>33</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 71.





Figure 1.17 Qirui Tan, *Twilight City I*, 2016, Watercolour on paper, 83cm x 112cm



Figure 1.18 Qirui Tan, *Block VIII*, 2023, Watercolour on canvas, 40cm x 50cm



Figure 1.19 Qirui Tan, *The panromantic view of London from the Sky Garden*, 2023, Photography

painting provides me with a new understanding of the relationship between still life and urban landscape. It reminds me of when I was standing at the Sky Garden last year, looking at the panoramic cityscape of London with a bird's-eye view through the window. (Fig 1.19) What I saw was a series of closely packed buildings. But imagine that if the land is a vast table with the sky serving as the background wall behind the table, can these buildings be viewed as still lifes on the table of different sizes? It is through this way that the border between still life and landscape seems to be blurred and cancelled, with the urban landscape being an exterior still life. Back to the second painting I mentioned above (see Fig 1.18), when the land is viewed as the big table surface and the sky as the background, this is a still life painting which depicts a pile of egg cartons, or more specifically, a still life *en plein air* (French for 'outdoors').

It is also worth considering *Still Life with Tea Pot* (Fig 1.20), another still life





Figure 1.20 Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Teapot*, c.1902-06, Oil on canvas, 58.4cm x 72.4cm



Figure 1.21 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte Victoire with Large Pine*, c.1887, Oil on canvas, 67cm x 92cm





Figure 1.22 Details of Figure 1.20

from Cézanne. First of all, in this painting, Cézanne adopts the same method of dealing with colour in his landscape paintings, where he always changes colour layers to indicate the distance of the space. Here, he uses warm colours to depict the objects in the front while in the background, he chooses cold and grey colours. This 'natural' sense of colour, indicating atmospheric perspective in landscape paintings, is reflected here in his depiction of still life.

In addition, Cézanne applies a distinct panoramic perspective to highlight the characteristic of landscape painting. His landscape paintings usually do not rely on a single linear perspective, but create spatial depth through the gradual change of colours, the change of shapes, and the overlap of objects. In *Still Life with Teapot*, we can also see a similar strategy. Although the objects in the image, such as the teapot, the sugar bowl, and fruits, are static, Cézanne presents a more layered and deep space through overlapping the objects. The front-to-back relationship, size changes, and light-and-shadow changes of different objects form a sense of distance and hierarchy similar to that in landscape paintings.

This still life work also somehow resonates one of his famous landscape paintings *Mont Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine* (Fig 1.21) in terms of the way

he simplifies the shapes. In this landscape painting, Cézanne abstracts trees and mountains into geometric shapes, indicating the 'order' of nature. *In Still Life with Teapot*, the objects are also simplified into geometric forms, such as ellipses, spheres and cylinders, which not only reveals the geometric structure of the objects but also presents the potential order and law of natural world. In the upper half of this painting (Fig 1.22), the blue-green background with fluid brushstrokes evokes a sense of sky, and the flowered tapestry forms the figure of the mountain where there is a sugar bowl behind the teapot resembling a small hut. Here, the still life becomes a kind of interior landscape, a landscape on the table, and this work somehow responds to the question from Alpers: 'How can one put a landscape on a table?'<sup>34</sup> Compared to my work *Block VIII* (see Fig 1.18), the similarity lies in that both Cézanne and I apply a distinct panoramic perspective to depict the objects. In addition, Cézanne combines still life and landscape painting in one image, but he does it in a very specific way where shapes recall the landscape only. The *Block* series also strikes a balance between the two categories where the egg cartons resemble the idea of high-rise buildings only, as Alsdorf argues in relation to Cézanne that 'the materiality of the things-in-themselves is rendered over and against their figurative resemblances, and space and surface quality are always in tension with evocative shape.'<sup>35</sup> However, the difference between his work and mine is still noticeable. In *Still Life with Teapot*, Cézanne shows his intention to bring the landscape into the interior space while my idea is to depict the egg cartons in a way that not limited to the inside. The *Block* series shows my attempt to portray the still life somehow en plein air.

The bird's-eye view also reminds me of Carol Rhodes' landscape paintings.

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<sup>34</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and Others* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 38.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

What seems a key part in Rhodes' work is that it connects objects and background through the bird's-eye view. In a conversation with Rhodes, Andrew Mummery remarks that her paintings have been described as 'lying between fiction and documentary'.<sup>36</sup> It becomes interesting in her work where we are too close that it becomes abstract, but too far away that we can see it clearly. *Block I* (see Fig 1.6) forms an interesting echo with her work *Carpark*, *Canal* (Fig 1.23). In *Block I*, the stacked egg cartons, staples, and cutting mat together form a view of the city block, where several cars are parked in the parking lot next to the building. Rhodes also painted a carpark in her work where she used an aerial point to create a feeling of distancing and surveillance. The difference between these two paintings is that her work is a landscape painting, while mine is a still life painting which looks like a landscape. Another interesting point is that there is a brown shape resembling part of a small house in the low left corner of this painting (Fig 1.24), which corresponds to the shape of egg cartons in *Block I*. With both using the same bird's-eye-view perspective, *Block I* seems to have become an enlarged version of Rhodes' work. In terms of the viewpoints in both paintings, the viewpoint of my work is closer than that of her, making a strong sense of close-up.

This kind of close-up derives from the change of viewing distance when I depict the egg cartons. Due to the limitation of the studio space, I cannot stand at a high point to observe the egg cartons, just like I see the panoramic view of a city, which means the distance between the egg cartons and me becomes closer. Even if it is a close-up view, I will not get too close to see the surface of the egg cartons. What I chose is a middle aerial point, neither too close nor too far, and it is through this viewpoint that I see parts of the egg cartons. This close-up view is distinctive in *Block IV* (Fig 1.25), where each

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Mummery (ed.), *Carol Rhodes* (Milano: Skira Editore, 2018), 75.



Figure 1.23 Carol Rhodes, *Carpark Canal*, 1994, Oil on board, 51.4cm x 44.6cm



Figure 1.24 Details of Figure 1.23

stack of egg cartons does not show its complete appearance. The painting shows more about the relationship between them, how they contact and separate from each other. On the one hand, this kind of close-up brings a strong sense of surveillance into the painting as if it is a surveillance image coming from a drone. On the other hand, this view also evokes a sense of alienation because we usually will not look at the egg cartons this way. What we do is either looking at it in hand, or looking at it as a whole.



Figure 1.25 Qirui Tan, *Block IV*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 72cm x 53cm

## 1.4 Background

The discussion on the background of still life can be associated with its quality of space. As I have mentioned in Section 1.2 above, the majority of still lifes in



history contain a flat spatial quality. Norman Bryson, speaking of still-life space in his book, observes that 'its disinclination to portray the world beyond the far edge of the table...this zone beyond the edge, often a blank vertical wall, must be suppressed if still life is to create its principal spatial value: nearness.'<sup>37</sup>

However, this statement might have two limitations that I want to question. One is 'often a blank vertical wall'. In terms of this, I might say this is distinctive, especially in Dutch Table Still Lifes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is a super flat black background in Willem Kalf's still life (Fig 1.26), and in the breakfast still life of Heda (Fig 1.27), there is a wall-like plane in the background. But there are still some exceptions to this.



Figure 1.26 Willem Kalf, *Still Life with Nautilus Cup*, c.1662, Oil on canvas, 79.4cm x 67.3cm

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<sup>37</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 71.



Figure 1.27 Willem Claesz. Heda, *Breakfast Still Life*, c.1637, Oil on wood panel, 44cm x 55cm



Figure 1.28 Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Glass Vase*, c.1650, Oil on wood panel, 47cm x 36cm



For example, in the flower painting of De Heem (Fig 1.28), the background behind the table is not a completely flat vertical plane but a curtain drawn aside to reveal additional interior space. With the light coming in from a window, the painter put an atmospheric element into his work.

Another one I shall question is the 'nearness' as the spatial value of still life. There are also historical exceptions that depict deep space. This is why I used 'most' in Section 1.2 Space when talking about the flat spatial quality of still life. The juxtaposition of still life and landscape in a single image has precedents in the history of still life. Brueghel's painting *Flowers and Fruits in a Landscape* (Fig 1.29) is a typical Roman Baroque still life, the characteristic of which is combining still life with landscape in one picture. It is a sumptuous



Figure 1.29 Abraham Brueghel, *Flowers and Fruits in a Landscape*, c.1677, Oil on canvas, 127cm x 177cm

still life with its seemingly spontaneous abundance of fruits and flowers in front of a park-like landscape. Another example is Eugène Delacroix, who makes a rare synthesis of the two genres in his painting *Still Life with Lobsters* (Fig 1.30). In this work, he brings some landscape characteristics into still life through juxtaposing these two genres. First of all, different from the



Figure 1.30 Eugène Delacroix, *Still Life with Lobsters*, c.1826, Oil on canvas, 80cm x 106cm

background in traditional table still lifes, the background in this image presents a broad field under the sky where there are hunters on horseback. In this way, he brings the space of landscape into the still-life expression. Secondly, the bright red colour of the lobsters and the feathers in the front forms a sharp contrast to the soft rustic tones in the background. Such a tonal transition from foreground to background not only highlights the still life in the foreground, but also resonates the colour gradient from near to far in the landscape. In addition, the shotguns, wild birds and lobsters in the painting indicate a successful hunting, which enhances the narrative of the image. The dead animals symbolise the gifts of nature, while the pastoral background of the painting highlights the importance of nature as a stage for human activity. Through the visual analysis above, it can be seen that Delacroix not only broadens the expressiveness of still life painting but also shows Romantic style's deep concern for nature and emotions. David O'Brien, speaking of Delacroix's hunting paintings with wild animals, argues that 'it suggests

Delacroix's desire to convey visceral emotions through the visual effects of painting, to connect painting to the raw, uncivilized, immediate emotions and actions of the hunt, to link the sensual pleasure of painting to primal, untamed experience.'<sup>38</sup>

Both *Flowers and Fruits in a Landscape* and *Still Life with Lobsters*, in which landscape functions as the background of the still life, seem to deny the 'nearness' Bryson mentioned as the spatial value of still life, showing more deep space.

Based on the discussion above, now the question might be: Does a still life painting have to be indoors? To be more specific, what would that be like if I changed the background of a still life into a landscape in my practice? What is the difference between my painting and those historical precedents, such as those mentioned above?

*Block VII* (Fig 1.31) can be regarded as an experiment in which I changed the background of the picture into an orange sunset view. This shift adds more landscape atmosphere to the painting, triggering viewers to ask questions: What am I looking at? Egg cartons or buildings?

The same strategy also occurs in *Block IX* (Fig 1.32), in which I set up a sunset view in the background. The top-down colour gradient effect (Fig 1.33) is so natural and real that one might think it is an urban landscape painting at first glance. However, these are all still life when seen carefully. Here, the background change is more accurately a contextual shift. If *Block I* can still be recognised as a table still life in the studio, then in this work, the sunset view completely decontextualises the egg cartons and their objects, making it a still

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<sup>38</sup> David O'Brien, *Exiled in Modernity: Delacroix, Civilization, and Barbarism* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 132.





Figure 1.31 Qirui Tan, *Block VII*, 2023, Watercolour on canvas, 50cm x 40cm

life outdoors. And it is through this way that the still life connects with the urban landscape. What is also interesting in this work is that I tried to make the interpretation of the egg cartons more ambiguous and uncertain. In the left upper corner, I painted a reflective effect on the surface of the egg cartons to change their quality, and this glass reflection enlarges the architectural quality of the egg cartons, making them like those office buildings in the business district of a metropolis. However, to not completely change the egg cartons into the buildings, I also depicted the words and the nutrition formula table inside the egg carton (Fig 1.42) to remind viewers that it is merely an empty egg carton that just looks like a building when stacked.



Figure 1.32 Qirui Tan, *Block IX*, 2024, Watercolour on paper, 70cm x 52cm

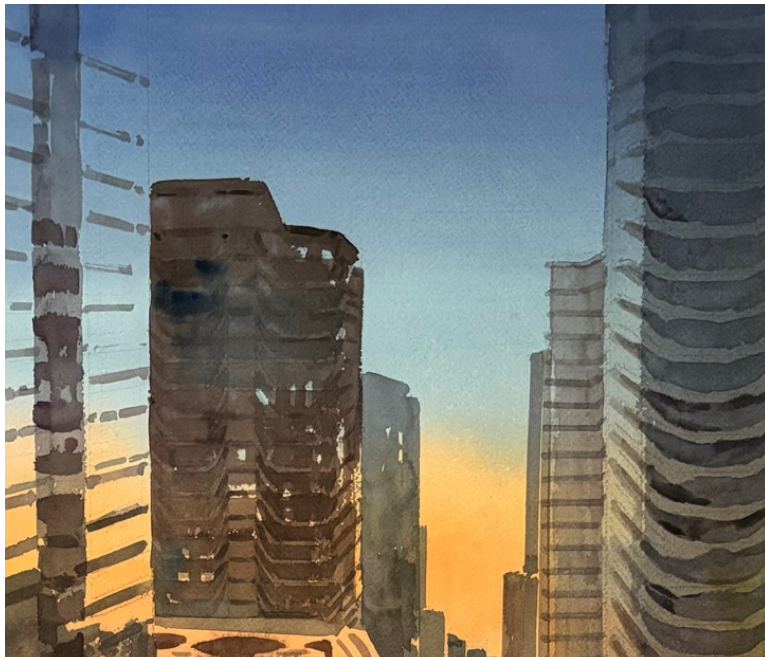


Figure 1.33 Details of Figure 1.32



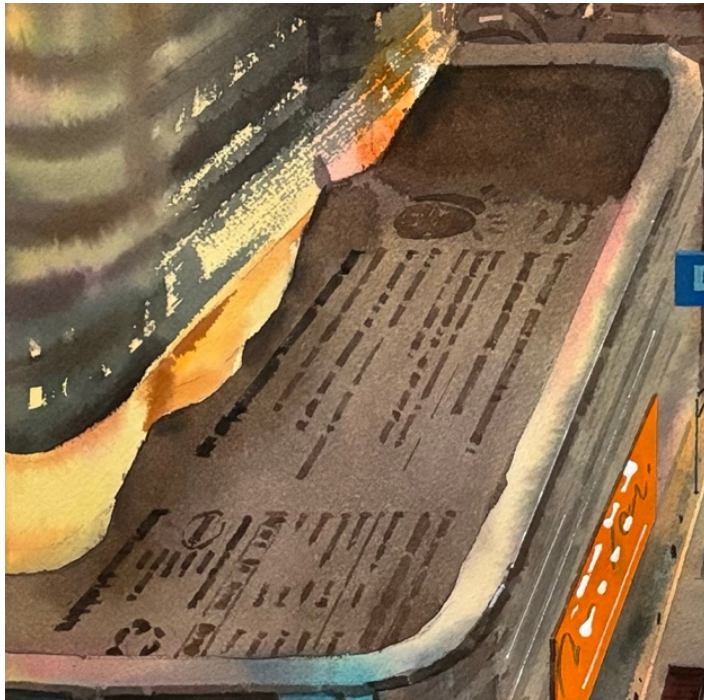


Figure 1.34 Details of Figure 1.32

However, looking back to *Still Life with Lobsters* I mentioned above, the juxtaposition of still life and landscape in those works gives a strong sense of collage. From my perspective, the dead animals in the picture are not in harmony with their environment, that is, the scenery in the background. They would make more sense in a kitchen scene rather than in a pastoral landscape like this. The painter puts them in such a landscape through contextual shift, which is more like collage than into this landscape. It looks more like a juxtaposition of still life and landscape, rather than a good fusion of them. It also reminds me of Bryson's comments on Boschaert's flower painting (Fig 1.35). As Bryson puts it, the distinction between still life and the landscape is very noticeable, 'Between the bouquet (as still life) and the landscape behind it, no connection can be discovered. What the landscape provides instead is the idea of a limitless space mastered by a prospect, and the idea of a sudden leap from far to near.'<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 105.



Compared with *Still Life with Lobsters*, my works are more about how to integrate still life into the landscape, or as I mentioned before, to create a kind of still life en plein air. For example, *Block IX* conflates this separation of still life and landscape by integrating the egg cartons and other small objects into the urban scenery without the sense of collage. Because the shape of the stacked egg cartons resembles urban buildings, it fits in very well with such an urban sunset environment. In this work, I did not simply juxtapose the egg cartons with the sunset scenery, but tried to integrate it with the scenery by highlighting the architectural quality of the egg cartons.



Figure 1.35 Ambrosius Boschaert the Elder, *Bouquet in a Niche*. c.1618, Oil on panel, 64cm x 46cm

In addition, the contextual shift in my paintings also reminds me of Cornelia Parker's works. What fascinates me most is a series of works she created by using pocket-sized and cheap souvenirs. She started collecting pocket-sized

souvenirs in the 1980s, which were iconic landmarks from cities in various countries, and she made a lot of miniature models of these landmarks by recasting them in the lead. She then placed these small castings in different locations and combined them with the environment to form interesting installations. In one of the series, *Drowned Monuments* (Fig 1.36), Parker placed her small lead casts of landmark buildings in a gutter filled with bathwater in the corner of her garden. The entire work looks like a submerged cityscape. These landmarks often represent and symbolise a famous and splendid country, but she placed them in such a humble environment as the gutter, which questioned the so-called rights and superiority with a sense of irony and ridicule. However, from another perspective, this scene has a different interpretation. As she remarks, 'When seen from above, they appeared as an aerial view of a city bathed in clouds.'<sup>40</sup>

There is another typical work in this series called *Inventories of Rooms: The Weather Within* (Fig 1.37), in which she cast some of her lead models of churches and placed them on a bell tower outside a church. The bell tower has been covered with pigeon droppings over time. Because the models are placed in such an environment with the accumulation and impact of these droppings, the entire scene looks like a bombed city landscape. By re-contextualising the lead models in a witty way, Parker vividly shows how nature influences and destroys culture.

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<sup>40</sup> Iwona Blazwick et al., *Cornelia Parker* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 24.



Figure 1.36 Cornelia Parker, *Drowned Monument*, 1985, Lead casts of souvenir, models of famous monuments, bathwater



Figure 1.37 Cornelia Parker, *Inventories of Room: The Weather Within*, 1987, Lead casts of European cathedrals, pigeon droppings

## 1.5 Exclusion of Human Form

In his book *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Norman Bryson examines the exclusion of human form in still life by claiming that the act of constructing and establishing human beings as the primary subject of depiction is negated by still life. Not only does human presence physically disappear from still life, but it also drives out the ideals that humanity forces upon the world.<sup>41</sup> This subverting of human beings' significance is represented in Cotán's still-life paintings. In his painting *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (Fig 1.38), he depicted a corner of a cold storage place with some common vegetables and fruits. Let us consider this painting and see how he showed the exclusion of human form through painting. Firstly, it is a corner of the refrigerated area rather than the kitchen, which weakens the connection between the work and human form. Compared to the kitchen, the refrigerated area is a place where human activities are less visible. Furthermore, Cotán tried to depict the objects in a hanging way to weaken the sense of touch, which also weakened the sense of weight from hands and left only pure vision. This echoes what Bryson remarks, 'their motionlessness is the mark of human absence, distance from the hand that reaches to eat; and it renders them immaculate.'<sup>42</sup> And finally, in terms of the composition, the painting emphasises the geometric form, and the abstract and unified geometric space has nothing to do with the human body. Instead of creating a composition or an order through intentional manipulation, the painter completely left it to the geometric order generated by mathematical forms. From this aspect, the work somehow refused the engagement of human form. Bryson concludes that the painting is regarded as a spiritual discipline bound up with 'self-negation and the reduction of ego.'<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 60.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.





Figure 1.38 Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, c.1602, Oil on canvas, 69cm x 84cm

However, Bryson's ideas on the exclusion of human form in still life might not be true. As Alpers puts it, 'in seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, the artist at his easel is often reflected on the surface of objects.'<sup>44</sup> Pieter Claesz's work *Vanitas Still Life* (Fig 1.39) can serve as a typical example. Within the history of still life painting, *vanitas* is a particular type that incorporates a series of symbolic objects designed to remind the viewers of their own mortality and the worthlessness of worldly goods and pleasures. The painters depicted objects such as skulls and extinguished candles in their works, not just to show the objects themselves but to let the viewers look through them to think about the passing of time and remind them of the ephemerality of the world and life. In this painting, the painter portrays himself in the reflection of the glass sphere, shaped like a soap bubble (Fig 1.40), to indicate that his life

<sup>44</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: John Murray, 1983), 179.



Figure 1.39 Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas Still Life*, c.1628-30, Oil on wood panel, 36cm x 59cm



Figure 1.40 Details of Figure 1.39

is as fleeting as the soap bubble. The motif of the soap bubble symbolises *homo bulla*, a Latin metaphorical expression which means man vanishes like the ephemeral product of a child's play.<sup>45</sup> Claesz believed in the power of

<sup>45</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999), 86.

painting to transcend time and the painting's ability to give permanence to the ephemeral, which is his life here, and thereby overcome death. Obviously, the vanitas still life is opposite to Bryson's idea that still life shows self-negation and the reduction of ego. Painters like Pieter Claesz reflected on the morality of their own lives and expressed their wishes to transcend time through painting.

There is no human being in my still life paintings, but I disagreed with the idea of regarding the still life as self-negation and the reduction of ego. I believe that still life painting can be a way of responding to the environment and reflecting on urban life. The lockdown caused by the pandemic impressed me the most, and life seems to have been pressed on the pause button, leaving a standstill in the outside world. That period of time generated a series of special urban landscapes, like the empty streets, the closed shops and the quiet campus (Fig 1.41). These were the urban landscapes without humans, which are precisely the same as my still life paintings showing the exclusion of human form. *Fragment II* (see Fig 1.4) depicted a daily scene in which fragments of broken glass bottles were scattered quietly on the pedestrian road. This might be a familiar scene that we can see everywhere daily. Just imagine that when we walk on the street and look down sometimes, we can always find some glass debris like this. If it were not for this particular period of the pandemic, I would not take them seriously and observe them carefully. The uncontrolled and disordered feelings brought by the paintings are exactly what the pandemic brought to us. This depiction of chaos, a response to the pandemic environment, visualised the psychological activities and reinterpreted the pandemic life. Here, the fragment is no longer itself but a kind of metaphor symbolising the life broken by the pandemic. The daily life during the pandemic was both still and disordered, just like the fragments depicted in the paintings. It is through this way that this still life epitomises the



entire urban landscape during the pandemic.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 1.41 Qirui Tan, *The empty and quiet campus during the pandemic lockdown*, 2020, Photography

Talking about the exclusion of human form in still life leads to another question: Where does the author come into still life? Like the discussion above, Pieter Claesz, as the author, came into his still life work by portraying himself on reflective objects. Back to the *Block* series, how did I come into those works?

On the one hand, these egg cartons are the objects I have been collecting for the past three years.<sup>47</sup> They strongly connect with me because I, not anyone else, keep collecting them, making them unique. The meaning would change

if I bought them online or picked them up from somewhere else. There is no actual figure of myself in my works, but I painted these cartons I collected by

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<sup>46</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Chapter 3.

<sup>47</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 3.5.1 Why Egg Cartons? in Chapter 3.

myself, which can somehow be regarded as a way of putting myself and my experience into the paintings.

On the other hand, the *Block series* is a body of paintings based on photographic images. Before making the paintings, I organised the egg cartons on the table to test different compositions and play with the perspective by photographing them from various viewpoints. The final paintings are the results of that process.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the paintings contain my ideas and a strong sense of myself, which is another way to come into the still life.

## 1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on several ideas to discuss the similarities and differences between still life and landscape. Based on that, I boldly proposed whether landscape characteristics could be brought into still life painting to conceive new representations of still life.<sup>49</sup>

In the discussion of space, I applied the deep space from landscape to the *Block series*, questioning the spatial value of nearness in most still life paintings.

In the perspective part, I mainly thought about other possibilities of choosing perspective in still life painting in addition to the frontal perspective. Taking the bird's-eye view as an example, I analysed the influence of the bird's-eye view in my previous panromantic cityscape paintings on my current still life paintings, especially the *Block series*.

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<sup>48</sup> I will explain it further in Section 2.9 Painting based on Photography in Chapter 2.

<sup>49</sup> Most of my paintings discussed in this chapter come from the *Block series*. Chapter 3 will unpack more ideas in this series.

The background usually serves as an overlooked part of a still life. The background of most traditional still life paintings is a super flat black plane or a vertical flat plane, which probably indicates a wall. Associating the exploration of space in still life paintings, I changed the background of a still life into a landscape as a contextual shift to question the domestic feature of most still life paintings. Still life can also be outdoors. If that, how can it be better integrated with the urban landscape?

Finally, in terms of the discussion on the exclusion of human form in still life painting, using the reflective objects to show the figure of the painter in seventeenth Dutch still lifes breaks up the idea of expelling the human presence as well as 'self-negation and the reduction of ego' from Norman Bryson. However, whether there is a human form in the picture or not potentially reflects the artist's self-thinking and engagement in still life painting. Does still life painting merely represent objects, or does it express the relationship between the object and the painter, or the object and the environment?

In the next Chapter, I will discuss my practice from the perspective of research methods. That will include watercolour in my practice, a discussion of painting based on photography, other experiments on different mediums and materials, and the role of the studio in my research.

## Chapter 2. Research Methods

### 2.1 Introduction

In this practical research, I use watercolour as my main method to investigate the relationship between still life and landscape.

Firstly, watercolour appears more often in landscape paintings and has strong connections with landscape because of its properties like transparency and fluidity, making it suitable to depict changing outdoor views, as discussed later in the chapter. However, in the history of watercolour, as Vladimir London puts it, watercolour were frequently used by Baroque easel painters only for sketches, copies, or design drawings.<sup>50</sup> The detailed depiction of still life paintings requires a long time, which contradicts the fast and convenient characteristics of using watercolour. Regarding my watercolour paintings, I give up those ideas of speed and convenience but conduct them systematically and rigorously.<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, watercolour is characterised by being free, thin and light, while still life has a clear shape and weight, so it is often hard to depict solid objects with watercolour. However, in my practice, I showed more control of watercolour to depict these everyday objects. The control towards watercolour can be regarded as a way to challenge the uncontrollable nature of water and further explore the expressive possibilities of watercolour. Also, I am thinking here not only of the breakdown of traditional categories such as paint, surface, control and agency of the paint itself, and to what extent this becomes interconnected with conceptual questions, such as how can watercolour reinterpret the relationship between still life and landscape. I am

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<sup>50</sup> Vladimir London, *The Book on Watercolor* (Independently published, 2021), 23.

<sup>51</sup> I will expand this further in Section 2.4 The Fabrication of Painting.

furthermore interested in the deflation of the distinction between still life and landscape, and to what extent this allows us to perceive painting, and in particular the making process, in a different way.

Thirdly, watercolour is an ancient and traditional medium. Watercolour painting can be seen as one of the oldest techniques and was widely used before the appearance of oil painting.<sup>52</sup> However, I feel that watercolour will allow me to deal productively with contemporary topics like everyday, everyday objects, cities, and world-building.<sup>53</sup> This also explores the contemporary expression of watercolour to some extent.

Having learned watercolour painting for seven years in my BA and MA courses in China before gave me a relatively comprehensive understanding of this medium. Because of that, watercolour painting became my first choice as the research method for this PhD programme. However, this three-year research also allowed me to rethink the watercolour in my practice, especially the balance between control and uncontrol. This also offered me an opportunity to rethink the perception of painting as somehow static and fixed representation of the external world. I am following Bryson here in his critique, when he argues that painting is not only a way for the painter to render the object in a naturalistic way.<sup>54</sup> Bryson departs from this fixed image by emphasising particularly on the 'bodily' aspect of the painter and viewer.<sup>55</sup> On a practical level, I gradually found that the way I made watercolour paintings, for example, through rigorous steps or controlling watercolour was a very one-sided, simplified understanding because I ignored to embrace the aspect of

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<sup>52</sup> Jean Leymarie, *Watercolours, From Dürer to Balthus* (Geneva: Skira, 1984), 7.

<sup>53</sup> I will expand this discussion further in Chapter 3.

<sup>54</sup> Bryson argues that 'Naturalisation is not, then, the goal of the image alone.' See Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 14. He also argues that painting can never hope to produce an absolute image that corresponds optical truth perfectly by referring to Gombrich's critique: 'The painter does not gaze on the world with innocent or naive vision and then set out to record with his brush what his gaze has disclosed.' See Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 21.

<sup>55</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 171.

chance as intrinsic to artistic creation itself. I will discuss this later in the chapter by comparing contemporary Western and Chinese watercolours.

Also, I have never stopped critically reflecting on watercolour during the research. On the one hand, I have tried other mediums like oil painting and printmaking during the research and compared the difference between these mediums and watercolour, thinking of this as an opportunity in defense of watercolour since other media could be used in a similar way. On the other hand, I have also thought about the possibilities of watercolour and tried to explore other representations of watercolour with material experiments. Yet, watercolour, in a quite unique way, stretches the traditional boundaries: a form would be fixed and, within moments, washed away. The final image would still be transmuting. A backflow occurs where watercolour is washed off or seeped back in paint and paper merge; transparent paint raises the notion of presence and absence; water in itself has a long tradition of being 'uncontrollable'.

Furthermore, I will also discuss my reflections on the relationship between painting and photography and analyse the role of photography in my paintings. This is particularly important in relation to my practice, as Ralph Rugoff and others have discussed that photography is often linked to the caption of everyday objects, which is essential in my paintings as well. As most of my paintings are based on photographic images, I will explore the aesthetic overlaps of painting and photography in my work and discuss this later in the chapter.

The role of the studio forms the final discussion in this chapter. Since my research and practice were both undertaken in the studio, I will investigate the significance of studio in this research and how it helped me think about the relationship between still life and landscape.

## **2.2 Connection with Landscape**

What is watercolour? In its broadest sense, watercolour is any water-based paint. However, the watercolour we usually discuss is transparent watercolour, which consists of three components: pigments, a binding agent (usually gum arabic), and water. Sometimes, if white paint is added to the watercolour, it will make the colour opaque, and that is usually called gouache or bodycolour. Here, the transparent watercolour refers to the one without white paint.

Water is transparent, but when the pigment is thinned in the water, it cannot be completely transparent due to the mixing of the pigment. To be more specific, it is translucent. When the colour pigments are thinned in water and then applied, watercolour creates a fabulous translucent effect on paper. This translucency makes the colour appear brighter on paper, giving off a strong sense of light.

In addition, watercolour pigments are thinned and mixed with water, and because of that, watercolour also shows the same fluidity as water. This fluidity also reflects the uncontrollable quality of watercolour. Although different kinds of pictorial effects can be reached by adjusting the proportion of the water and pigments, the liquidity of water is always unpredictable. Fluidity makes watercolour full of change, accident, and uncertainty. This echoes the aspect of change and uncontrol in Barbara Nicholls' work, which I will discuss later in the chapter.

These particular qualities make watercolour suitable for depicting landscapes. In the history of watercolour, watercolour landscape painting originally derives from topographic map which emphasised the utility of watercolour as a recording tool. In the eighteenth century, England launched the modern rise of



watercolour thanks to a group of watercolour practitioners.<sup>56</sup> Under the influence of Romantics, watercolour painting at that time maximised spontaneity, the cult of nature and obsession with the natural view. It can be seen that the transparent and fluid nature of watercolour makes it suitable to represent ephemeral and contingent aspects of the visible world, like luminist landscapes and sea views because these subjects can present the watercolour's capacity to evoke climatic effects such as light dappling through clouds, mist shrouding forests and rainbow appearing over the seashore.

Here, I choose two British watercolour painters as examples, William Turner and John Constable. The similarity lies in that both Turner and Constable use nature as their main theme and their works are full of affectionate praise for nature. Both painters use the transparent characteristics of watercolour to give the picture a sense of lightness and fluidity. Their works have strong romantic characteristics, not only showing nature itself but also conveying emotions and spiritual experiences through the pictures.

Although they are well known for landscape painting, the landscape paintings they present with watercolours are different, which also shows the richness and diversity of watercolour medium in landscape expression.

Turner's watercolours are more abstract and dramatic. He is keen on expressing the light, colour and atmosphere in nature, especially some dramatic natural phenomenon, such as sea waves, storms and sunrise. His works sometimes blur the details of natural objects and create a dynamic sense of picture with light, shadow and colour blocks. For example, in this painting (Fig 2.1), Turner created a low sun above the horizon by 'lifting out' a small area of yellow paint. The quick and loose brushstrokes bring out the

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<sup>56</sup> Jean Leymarie, *Watercolours, From Dürer to Balthus* (Geneva: Skira, 1984), 9.

intrinsic language and characteristics of watercolour to the fullest.

Based on the British countryside views, Constable's style is more realistic, and he often depicts natural details in his watercolours, such as the texture of trees, vegetation in the fields, and buildings in the village. His works are often full of rustic rural atmosphere. It can be seen from the work *Cottages and A Windmill* (Fig 2.2) that, unlike Turner's abstract way of expression, Constable focuses more on the authenticity and meticulous depiction of nature. Turner uses watercolours to express the powerful force of nature and the insignificance of human beings. His works are full of intense emotional fluctuations, with romantic drama and transcendence. Compared with that, Constable's watercolour paintings express a natural peace and tranquility, emphasising the harmonious relationship between man and nature. In all these landscapes, the scale of the human in the vast landscape seems to play a role. In this Romantic fashion, it is also the relationship between body and nature, and relinquishing of control.



Figure 2.1 J.M.W. Turner, *A Beach near the Tour de Croy, Wimereux*, c.1845, Pencil and watercolour on white wove paper, 23.7cm x 33.7cm



Figure 2.2 John Constable, *Cottages and A Windmill*, c.1834, Watercolour on paper, 12.7cm x 20.6cm

Besides these historical watercolour painters, it is also worth looking at some contemporary watercolour practitioners and seeing how they use watercolour to deal with the landscape.

The first work I want to mention here is *Seafloor Spreading* (Fig 2.3) by Barbara Nicholls. Although the painting looks abstract, it still connects with the landscape. On the one hand, the traces left on paper remind me of the traces I saw on the beach when the tide went out. It seems that the art making on paper echoes those happening in nature. On the other hand, the painting looks like a distant bird's eye view of long stretches of terraced fields. (Fig 2.4) Roulstone, speaking of Nicholls' work, argues that 'this topographical parallel describes a conversation between the production context and the current environmental circumstances, which translate into Nicholls' actual lived experience.'<sup>57</sup> Nicholls is surrounded by expansive, natural outdoor areas while working in her Peak District studio in Bollington. These spaces are constantly changing landscapes being pursued by elemental forces. I think

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<sup>57</sup> Karen Roulstone, "Barbara Nicholls," *Turps Banana* 20, July 2018, 64.





Figure 2.3 Barbara Nicholls, *Seafloor Spreading*, 2015, Watercolour on Saunders Waterford HP 638gsm, 220cm x 152cm



Figure 2.4 Aerial view of the terrace fields in Yunhe County, Lishui City, Zhejiang Province, China

that experience in the natural environment influences how she works. She uses electric fans in the studio to mimic the climate outdoors, which accelerates the evaporation of the pools of watercolour on paper.

The connection with landscape becomes more evident when looking at another work, *Sink Hole Return* (Fig 2.5), which was a residence project she did in Lake Mungo in Australia. This time, Nicholls physically engaged in the creation of her watercolours within the landscape by submerging them in the sand within a dry region where former lakes have evaporated, leaving behind layers of sediment and clay that have accumulated over the ages. The connection between her methods and how the natural world is formed is quite distinct. In this work, watercolour was not merely a medium applied to depict landscape but was integrated into the landscape, where the paperwork became part of the natural environment. This use of watercolour also resonates Leanne Shapton's work *Olympic Amsterdam* (Fig 2.6), a large painted facade for a building development, where the painting becomes part of the urban landscape.

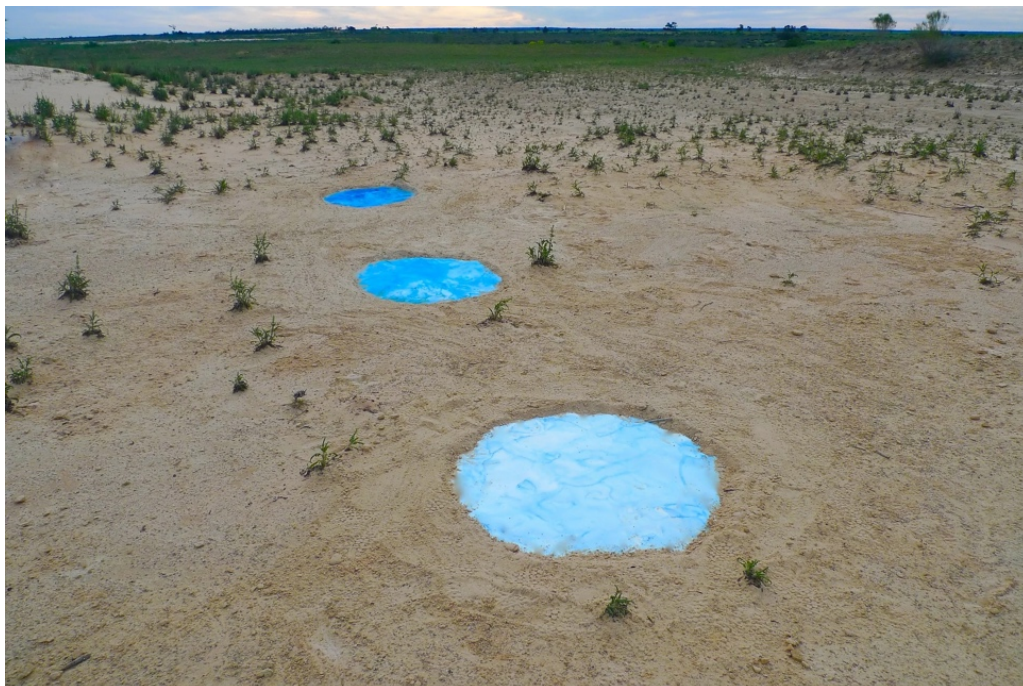


Figure 2.5 Barbara Nicholls, *Sink Hole Return*, 2016, Watercolour on paper in sand





Figure 2.6 Leanne Shapton, *Olympic Amsterdam*, 2016

In China, watercolour has also given birth to some landscapes that depict Chinese temperament and spirit. For example, the hazy and misty atmosphere in Yong Wang's work *Clouds around Mountains* (Fig 2.7) evokes a sense of Chinese pastoralism, calling up the desire of Chinese literati to stay away from the hustle of the city and retreat to the mountains and forests. Different from the turbulent waves in Turner's work, the sea in Jian Chen's painting (Fig 2.8) looks strangely tranquil. Chinese landscape painting has always pursued a sense of sublimity, which is quite distinct when looking at those vast and massive mountains on paper. Here, the sea view also gives out an overwhelming feeling that also reminds me of the painting practice of Peter Matthews, who works along the coast and makes paintings on the beach. (Fig 2.9) Although he does not use watercolour as the medium for painting, this kind of painting performance can also be regarded as a way of not only combining 'water' (sea) and 'colour' (painting on canvas) but also connecting himself to the landscape, evoking a sense of sublimity which lies in the contrast between the insignificance of human being and the vastness of the sea.



Figure 2.7 Yong Wang, *Clouds around Mountains*, 2017, Watercolour on paper, 55cm x 75cm



Figure 2.8 Jian Chen, *Mystery*, 2019, Watercolour on paper, 79cm x 196cm



Figure 2.9 Peter Matthews painting on the beach

## 2.3 Fluidity

Fluidity and solidity are inherently two opposing concepts. Using the lightness of watercolour to express heaviness, or in other words, using fluidity to show solidity, becomes a challenge to the watercolour medium. It is apparent that watercolour is suitable for depicting ephemeral things, but it can also express something solid (stacked egg cartons) in my works. However, using watercolour to represent egg carton-like buildings in my work has another ironic meaning.

On the one hand, these solid buildings are egg cartons, which are very fragile.<sup>58</sup> They also symbolise the seemingly prosperous metropolis where all the glamour is superficial. In the painting *Block IX* (see Fig 1.32), behind the brilliance of neon signs, there is actually a feeling of emptiness inside, just like

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<sup>58</sup> The fragile and ephemeral qualities of egg cartons also reminds me of the idea of 'ephemeral architecture', which is the art or technique of designing and building structures that are transient and temporary. Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas speaks about that idea in a conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans: 'more and more with engineers, we develop a kind of logic where if a building is no longer viable, you can cut it, dismantle it and we build it in different conformation somewhere else.' See Tate Talks. "Book for Architects: Wolfgang Tillmans in Conversation with Rem Koolhaas." *YouTube*, May 23, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITtJRbL5Rzg>

those empty egg cartons. Under the brilliant lights at night, this kind of carnival and excitement in the metropolis is ephemeral and fleeting, like a gorgeous glass house, beautiful but fragile.

On the other hand, water looks very light and soft, but it can penetrate everywhere. The solidity of water lies in that water cannot be taken apart into different pieces on the physical level. Yve-Alain Bois, speaking of the difference between language and liquid, argues that 'liquid, on the contrary (except on the molecular level), is indivisible (of course one can divide up a certain quantity of liquid into different containers, but it remains identical to itself in each of its parts).'<sup>59</sup> However, once those high-rise buildings in the city collapse and become fragments, they cannot be restored. For this reason, those buildings are less solid than water. In my paintings, I used water as the medium, which is light and fragile, to express the solid high-rise buildings, but the philosophical idea behind is that what seems solid (egg carton-like building) is fragile, and what looks fragile (water) is solid.

The ephemeral and fleeting feelings in this painting not only comes from the atmosphere of metropolis but also from the sunset, which gives me a strong sense of time. Sunset, during which time is being visualised, usually means a day is ending, and it is in the sunset that the natural light changes obviously, leading to different views for each minute. The sky gradually getting dark evokes ephemeral and fleeting feelings. This reminds me of *Sunset 11* (Fig 2.10), a small watercolour painting by Minyoung Choi, in which she combines a small fish tank in the front with a fascinating sunset view in the background, blending her palette of oranges with blues and purples. In addition to the sunset, there are also some interesting parallels between this painting and *Block IX* (see Fig 1.32), which not only lie in the same portrait layout but also

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<sup>59</sup> Bois, Y-A. and Krauss, R. (eds.), *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 124.





Figure 2.10 Minyoung Choi, *Sunset 11*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 28cm x 20.3cm

come from the reflective surface reflecting the sky in the upper left corner of both paintings. Different from the outdoor space in *Block IX*, this painting presents a domestic view. Also, this use of reflective and transparent surfaces in Choi's work somehow links back to still life painting tradition and use of specific material such as glass and metal.<sup>60</sup> This also echoes some of Cézanne's still lifes where the outside world comes into through the reflection of a window on the reflective surface of a vase. From another perspective, I am not sure whether this painting was a conscious reflection of the pandemic, as the fish in the tank suggests a strong sense of confinement. In general, this painting can be seen as a response to the transience and precarity of

<sup>60</sup> In seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish still life paintings, artists depicted glass and metallic surfaces to suggest windows behind the beholder or provide a glimpse of the artist reflected in a vessel. As Alpers puts it, in seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, the artist at his easel is often reflected on the surface of objects. See Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: John Murray, 1983), 179. I have already discussed this in Section 1.2.6 Exclusion of Human Form in Chapter 1 when referring to Pieter Claesz's vanitas still life (see Fig 1.3) where he painted himself at his easel in the reflection of the glass ball.



contemporary urban life.

These ephemeral and fleeting feelings in the metropolis also remind me of what Charles Baudelaire said about modernity, “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”<sup>61</sup> He is credited with coining the term ‘modernity’ (*modernité*) to designate the fleeting, ephemeral experience of life in an urban metropolis and the responsibility of artistic expression to capture that experience.<sup>62</sup> It seems that the fluidity of watercolour matches that fleeting and ephemeral experience, and I made the painting *Block IX* to capture that experience in response to him. When talking about modernity, Zygmunt Bauman used the word ‘liquid’ to describe it by acclaiming that ‘Solid’ modernity was an era of mutual engagement. ‘Fluid’ modernity is the epoch of disengagement, elusiveness, facile escape and hopeless chase.<sup>63</sup> The transition from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ modernity is the shift from a world in which human beings were seeking to create a well-ordered world of stable structures to a world in which the very ideas of order and stability no longer have any purchase, a world in which change is the only permanence and uncertainty the only certainty.<sup>64</sup> Associating these ideas with my practice, I shall question whether making watercolour paintings can be my potential response to the fluidity and uncertainty of modern life.

The fluidity of watercolour helps me investigate the relationship between still life and landscape in the research. How can this fluidity of watercolour interpret the relationship between still life and landscape? As I mentioned before, still life and landscape are not two separate subjects. Although they are different based on the subject they depict, landscape painting is about

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<sup>61</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life: and other essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), 13.

<sup>62</sup> “Charles Baudelaire”, Wikipedia, last modified March 12, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Baudelaire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Baudelaire)

<sup>63</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 120.

<sup>64</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), Back cover.

outdoor views, which are exterior. In contrast, still life painting concentrates more on everyday objects, which are more domestic and interior. However, the still life and landscape are intertwined. The form of still life painting can be integrated into the landscape, and some elements of the landscape can also be reflected in the still life painting. The fluidity of watercolour contains a dynamic and changing process, and I shall argue that the relationship between still life and landscape is always a fluid relation rather than a solid. Back to the *Block* series, with the egg boxes assuming the character of buildings, the pictorial ambiguity breaks the reading of the painting from a particular fixed perspective and makes the understanding of the works dynamic. The reading of the works flows between still life and urban landscape, which gives the interpretations more possibilities.

To sum up, the idea of ephemerality and fluidity not only closely link to watercolours but also, as Bryson argues, a different understanding of painting.<sup>65</sup> This is not the eye and the object only, but also the process itself, which has become significant in my work. He distinguishes between the mimetic Western painting and the Chinese painting, and mentions the idea of the brushstrokes and traces.<sup>66</sup> Although I did not speak explicitly about brushstrokes, I mentioned the fluidity and will discuss the process of painting in the next section.

## **2.4 The Fabrication of Painting**

Suppose the fabrication of a painting is regarded as a line connected by two points. In that case, one is all the materials needed, and the other is the final piece of painting. What lies between them is the part I participated in as the

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<sup>65</sup> Bryson emphasises the painting process as the display of 'the body of labour.' The temporality of Western representational painting is rarely the deictic time of the painting as process. See Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 92.

<sup>66</sup> Through analysing Chinese painting, Bryson argues that 'Chinese painting has always selected forms that permit a maximum of integrity and visibility to the constitutive strokes of the brush.' He also argues that, 'the work of production is constantly displayed in the wake of its traces.' See Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 89-92.

painter. Even if the same material is used, the final work will vary from person to person. Here, the question might be: How does the watercolour and the way I use it enable me to make the paintings extraordinary and particular? To answer this question, I want to use the painting *Block IV* (see Fig 1.25) as an example to tell a detailed story of the fabrication of the painting by describing what supplies I used and each stage in the process.

A painting always begins with preparation. Different kinds of watercolour paper have different qualities based on the sense of grain on the surface. Usually, there are three types: hot press, cold press and rough. Hot press paper has a super flat surface without any sense of grain and is usually used for highly detailed paintings such as illustrations. The rough one has a strong sense of grain on the surface, and it is suitable for application in a 'dry' manner, with the brush dragged across the surface of the paper until it runs out. For this painting, I chose the cold press, which has a middle sense of grain between the hot press and the rough.

In this preparation stage, I will wet the paper for both sides first and then use the brown gummed paper tape to fix it on a flat wooden board. The paper will become super flat after drying out. (Fig 2.11) I did this because the size of the painting is not standard, like A4 or A3, which means I need to cut the paper to the size I want from a watercolour paper roll. It is inconvenient to paint on that curled paper, thus I have to wet the paper to make it flat. Sometimes, even if I paint on a paper sheet of standard size, which is already flat, I will also wet and fix it on the board before painting because, on the one hand, the paper moves around during the painting if not fixed, on the other hand, when the paper is wet, it becomes wrinkled, which makes it hard to paint on that surface. Registering the paper on the board, as the preparation for the painting, becomes an essential fundament for the painting later.



Figure 2.11 Preparation for the painting

Before painting, another important step is to use a pencil to draw the shape and position of the object on the paper. (Fig 2.12) The more detailed the pencil drawing is, the better because pencil traces help me navigate the part I want to paint. Pencil traces are like the skeleton of a watercolour painting. Especially when depicting an object with a complex structure, if the pencil traces are not clear, the flow of watercolour makes me feel disoriented. For this painting, I used pencil to draw the shape and structure of the egg carton in several areas so that even when I painted it with watercolour later, I still got clear figures. What seems significant in the work process is the aspects of control and planning on one side, and the relinquish certain parts of control later on the other.



Figure 2.12 Painting stage 1 for *Block IV*

After finishing the pencil drawing, it is the stage of using watercolour. What I always use in my painting are two basic techniques: wet-on-wet and wet-on-dry. The difference between these two techniques is whether the paper is wet or dry before painting. At the beginning of a painting, I usually use the wet-on-wet technique to make the first layer of colours on paper. The wet-on-wet technique means applying the wet brush with pigments onto the wet paper. It is usually used to saturate large areas on paper with colours to conduct flat or graduated wash. Here in this painting, I choose the large-size flat brush (Fig 2.13) to totally wet the paper and do a flat wash in large areas. Colours will spread and penetrate naturally with the flow of water. (Fig 2.14) At this stage, I took full advantage of the transparency and weak-covering nature of watercolour. The colours will penetrate into the fibres of the paper with the water so that the existing pencil traces will not be covered, which facilitates



subsequent depiction. The transparency of watercolour makes it different from oil painting. The oil paint is opaque and sets on the surface of the canvas rather than being absorbed into the paper like watercolour, which means the oil paint will obscure the pencil traces underneath, making it difficult to paint details later. When using the wet-on-wet technique, because the water on the paper keeps evaporating, it is also very important to paint quickly with a large-size flat brush, which helps complete all the saturating before the paper dries and allows the colours to penetrate naturally.



Figure 2.13 Large size flat brush

It comes to the next stage when the paper has completely dried. At this stage, I will choose the middle-size flat brush (Fig 2.15), which has the same function as the large one to do the wash in specific smaller areas. The spray bottle (Fig 2.16) is another helpful tool when I need to re-wet some particular areas on paper to realise the natural flow of colours. The aim of this is to make the colour shades of different areas more obvious. (Fig 2.17) Furthermore, I will use the round brush for detailed depiction by adding more layers of colours on the paper. There are different types of round brushes based on the shapes of the belly. The three I usually use are the Chinese painting brush, which is



Figure 2.14 Painting stage 2 for *Block IV*



Figure 2.15 Middle size flat brush



Figure 2.16 Spray bottle



suitable for painting regular lines or planes; the mop brush, which contains a big belly and helps to paint changing lines and irregular shapes; and the rigger brush, which is for depicting tiny details and strings. (Fig 2.18) Here, I



Figure 2.17 Painting stage 3 for *Block IV*



Figure 2.18 Chinese painting brush (left), Mop brush (middle), Rigger brush (right)



Figure 2.19 Painting stage 4 for *Block IV*

used these brushes through the wet-on-dry technique to make the shape and structure of the egg cartons clearer. The wet-on-dry technique literally means painting on dry paper. It is usually done by placing a layer of paint on the paper, allowing it to dry, and then painting another layer on the top. Compared to the last stage, this stage saw more controlling and shaping parts added to the painting to reach a balance between control and uncontrol. (Fig 2.19) The process of adding more layers of colour on paper realised a shift from disorder to order, showing watercolour is a game playing between order and chaos.

The final stage of the painting was mainly about adding more details into the picture. I continued to use the wet-on-dry technique to depict small items in the painting, such as staples, pedestrian lines and flags. I also used a small



amount of acrylic paint to depict the thin white lines and billboards in this work. (Fig 2.20) Acrylic has a stronger covering ability than watercolour, so it is suitable for covering existing watercolour layers.



Figure 2.20 Details in *Block IV*

In addition, it is worth rethinking the word ‘fabrication’ here as it has dual definitions. According to the etymology, beyond the meaning of making and constructing, it also has the connotation of ‘lying, falsehood and forgery’.<sup>67</sup> This word’s second meaning is very interesting because it matches what I have done in the *Block* series. This kind of pretending is evident in the paintings where I painted the egg cartons to look like buildings and made the staples resemble cars in a stream of heavy traffic, but they are actually not real buildings and vehicles. Thus, the ‘fabrication’ is not only about how I made the paintings through different stages of rigorous steps but also itself

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<sup>67</sup> See the etymology of ‘fabrication’.  
[https://www.etymonline.com/word/fabrication#:~:text=fabrication%20\(n.\),%2C%20forgery%22%20is%20from%201790.](https://www.etymonline.com/word/fabrication#:~:text=fabrication%20(n.),%2C%20forgery%22%20is%20from%201790.)



becomes the purpose of these paintings to create an illusion. When the viewers look at the painting from a distance, they will see a city block with buildings, streets and cars, but when they walk in and see the work closely, they will suddenly realise that these are just egg cartons and some everyday stationery. This uncanny quality of the paintings reminds me of what Malcolm Morley describes, 'If what the viewer is experiencing far away is totally different to what is going on up close, then something is happening in them, not in the picture. They are actually having hallucinations. Painting that doesn't hallucinate is not painting.'<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, the *Block* series presents another aspect that is the transformation of ordinary materials into something else, as part of an enchantment process. Contemporary art shows a constant fascination with debris and valueless elements (as in my case, the empty egg cartons).<sup>69</sup> Hence, the strategy of reusing waste materials and transforming the residue into something else has become a growing field for contemporary artists, which can be described as possible 're-enchantment of the world'.<sup>70</sup>

## 2.5 The Release of Control

The wet-on-wet technique, in which the pigments penetrate naturally, makes it suitable to express ephemeral landscape elements such as natural light, sky and clouds. In *Block IX* (see Fig 1.32), I used the wet-on-wet technique to depict a sunset sky in the background with a top-down graduated wash from blue to orange. More importantly, it is closely linked to theoretical concerns, such as the ambiguity of imagery. This ambiguity becomes more distinct when looking at one of the painting experiments I mentioned in Chapter 1 (see Fig

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Storr, "Let's Get Lost: Interview with Malcolm Morley", *Art Press*, May 1993, 3-7.

<sup>69</sup> I will expand the discussion further in Section 3.3.2 Rhopography in Chapter 3.

<sup>70</sup> See Antoine Picon, "Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust," *Grey Room* 01 (September 2000): 79-81.

1.10), where I also used this technique to create a misty and hazy figure of stacked egg cartons in the background. Using this technique not only made this image ambiguous but also made the reading of the work uncertain, with the hazy figure resembling a waterfall in the distance. This misty effect on paper reminds me of Chinese watercolour artist Yong Wang's work (see Fig 2.7). Here, it is also worth considering his other still life work (Fig 2.21), where he fully uses the wet-on-wet technique, depicting two Chinese blue and white porcelain vases with flowers on the table. Although it looks like a table still life,



Figure 2.21 Yong Wang, *Living in the South Mountain*, 2015, Watercolour on paper, 50cm x 66cm

it conveys a foggy atmosphere as if it were a landscape painting. This misty effect makes the figure of the vases quite ambiguous, and through the patterns on the vases, it can be recognised that one vase sits in front of another, but it is hard to tell the exact figures. Here, the question of 'presence' becomes relevant, and how can something be present and faded at the same time. This echoes Luc Tuymans' *Still Life* (see Fig 1.11) where he tries to

represent what is unrepresentable.<sup>71</sup> Back to Wang's work, the patterns on the porcelains suggest an ancient Chinese landscape painting, making the reading of the work intriguing and ambiguous. It looks as if the still life and landscape are totally mixed up in one image, making me wonder if it is a still life or a landscape.



Figure 2.22 Helen Frankenthaler, *Flood*, 1967, Acrylic on canvas, 315.6cm x 356.9cm

In addition to the ambiguity of imagery, the wet-on-wet technique also indicates more release of control, or more specifically, the uncontrol of water. In *Painting Photography Painting: Timelines and Medium Specificities*, Carol Armstrong mentions 'mechanics of fluids' when talking about Helen Frankenthaler's working method as a pour of liquid that oscillates between intention and chance, where the fluid condition of one colour collides with and

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<sup>71</sup> Tuymans says it is a response to the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. Instead of explicitly depicting the attack's violence and pathos, he chose to make a modest still life in large size where the void surrounding the practically transparent motif assumes an unsettling presence. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/667796>

affects the continuous flow of another.<sup>72</sup> In the painting *Flood* (Fig 2.22), Frankenthaler dilutes acrylic paint to resemble the consistency of watercolour to create expansive, flowing swathes of varied colours on canvas. In her practice, she always lays the canvas flat on the ground and pours the paint from above, mostly without using a brush. (Fig 2.23) This improvisation with huge uncertainty well presents the release of control, and uncontrollable water flows.



Figure 2.23 Helen Frankenthaler at work on a large canvas in 1969, Ernst Hass/Getty Images

This not only reminds me of the free-flowing washes in William Tillyer's work (Fig 2.24), showing a hesitant and quivering feeling of unity, both physically and spiritually, with the natural environment but also calls up a similar strategy in the watercolour practice of Barbara Nicholls. Her paintings present more uncontrollable parts of watercolour, such as the free flow of the water and the natural interpenetration of colours on paper. Taking the painting *Telpost 2013* (Fig 2.25) as an example. At the beginning of the painting, she wet parts of paper and made pigments penetrate naturally into that area. Then, she

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<sup>72</sup> Graw, I. and Lajer-Burcharth, E. (eds.) *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 127.



Figure 2.24 William Tillyer, *Hebrus*, 2015, Watercolour on paper, 76.2cm x57.2cm

expanded the area, adding different pigments to it through the wet-on-wet technique. (Fig 2.26) In the meantime, she also directly poured some water onto the paper (Fig 2.27) to create this watercolour pool. (Fig 2.28) After that, the rest of the time would be totally given to nature. The water gradually evaporated, making the pigments eventually settle down on the paper and form different edges. (Fig 2.29) By giving up parts of control in her painting, she provided watercolour with a bigger stage to perform by itself.

The release of control is also evident in the difficulty for the viewer to estimate scale, which is a key part for my egg-carton paintings. As Stewart argues, “the reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature





Figure 2.25 Barbara Nicholls, *Telpost*, 2013, Watercolour on paper, 38cm x 28cm

finds its 'use value' transformed into the infinite time of reverie."<sup>73</sup> Here, I would like to go back to Chapter 1, where I mentioned Bryson's argument on still life painting that it 'outstrips' nature to distort time and space relationships by combining in a painting different elements, locations, and timeframes that would not be possible in nature. I am interested here in particular to what extent then my paintings of *Block* series work in similar ways, namely debunking traditional categories including large/small, animate/inanimate or closeness/distance. This 'dynamic' or 'fluid' context is also reflected on a very practical level.

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<sup>73</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1993), 65.

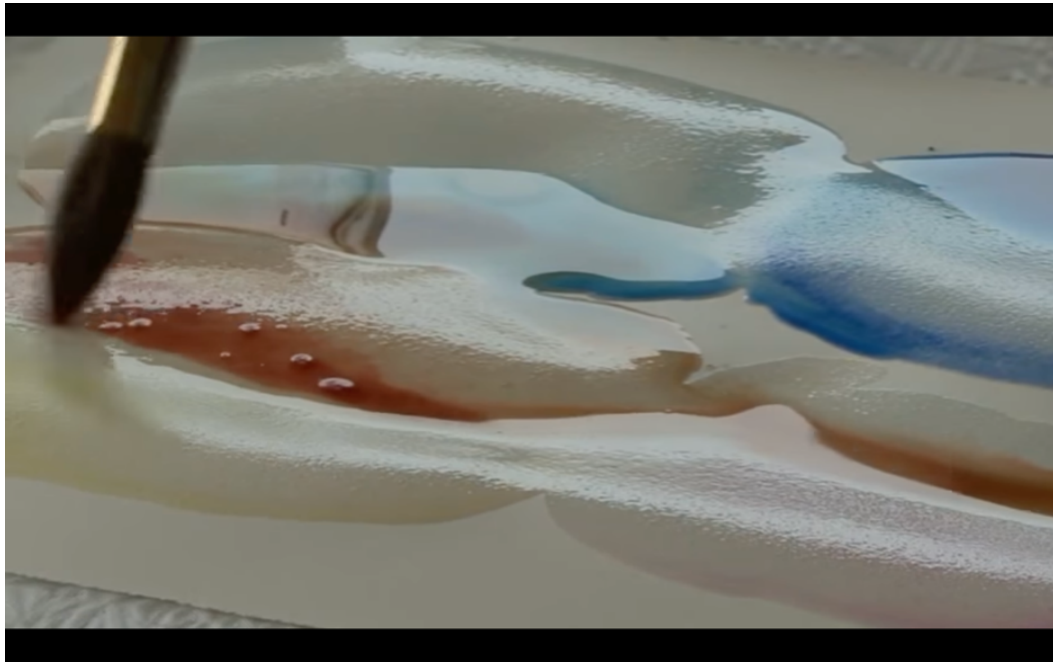


Figure 2.26 Screen-grab #2 from *Telpost* 2013, produced by Anton Houtappels



Figure 2.27 Screen-grab #3 from *Telpost* 2013, produced by Anton Houtappels



Figure 2.28 Screen-grab #4 from *Telpost 2013*, produced by Anton Houtappels



Figure 2.29 Screen-grab #5 from *Telpost 2013*, produced by Anton Houtappels

## 2.6 Reflections on the Control

Alsdorf, speaking of Cézanne's still lifes, argues that 'the landscape forms are even more forced figurative aspect of his still lifes as microcosmic world, testing the limits of proximity, control-ability, and humanity associated with simple domestic things.'<sup>74</sup> In my watercolour paintings, the control parts are more distinct than the uncontrol. Especially when looking at the *Block* series, the uncontrol of watercolour almost disappeared. The control in my works is reflected in several aspects:

Firstly, I need to 'control' their figures because I depicted objects with clear structures and shapes, such as the egg cartons assuming the character of buildings. To achieve this 'control', as I mentioned in the fabrication of the painting, I always use the wet-on-dry technique to paint layer by layer, especially when dealing with the structure of egg cartons. (Fig 2.30) Those distinctive brushstrokes on paper from this technique well illustrated the process of shaping and controlling.

Secondly, the straight lines that show a strong sense of control are distinct in my paintings, such as some thin lines, the cropped edges of some colour blocks, and the structure lines of the egg cartons. (Fig 2.31) However, in watercolour, what is interesting is that it is almost impossible to draw a line as straight as a ruler without the help of other tools and methods, not only because the fluidity of watercolour itself makes it difficult to control, but also because the bristles of watercolour brushes are inherently soft, a slight deviation in the strength of the brush will cause uneven thickness of the lines drawn. Looking back at my works, it seems that I intentionally suppress and resist the fluidity of watercolour. The egg carton I depicted is an object with a clear shape and structure, and the fluidity and uncertainty of watercolour

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<sup>74</sup> Bridget Alsdorf, "Interior Landscapes: Metaphor and Meaning in Cézanne's Late Still Lifes," *Word & Image* 26 (2010): 316.



would hinder me from depicting the structure and outline of it. Thus, I chose to reduce the fluidity of watercolour in depicting the egg carton. The frequent use



Figure 2.30 Details of Fig 1.25



Figure 2.31 Different kinds of straight lines in *Block IV*





photographs have a distinctive painterly palette.<sup>75</sup> The duality between order (control) and disorder (loss of control) not only lies in my watercolour painting process, a shift from disorder to order, as I mentioned before, but also in the painting itself. For example, *Statue* (Fig 2.33) shows some interesting parallels with Wilson's work, in which the grid lines give a sense of order to the chaos of egg cartons behind, keeping a balance between the two sides.



Figure 2.33 Qirui Tan, *Statue*, 2022, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 63cm x 45cm

In addition, the control also lies in manipulating water. What I mean here is not the control of water because water itself is always uncontrollable, but the amount of water both in the brush and on paper. In watercolour, the pigments

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<sup>75</sup> Media Farzin, "Jane and Louise Wilson" *E-flux Criticism*, July 22, 2013, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/234887/jane-and-louise-wilson>

are mixed with water. Even if the same amount of pigments with different amounts of water, the effects on the paper will be different. Therefore, in the process of painting watercolours, I am constantly faced with the problem of the proportion of pigments and water. To be more specific, the question is: How much water is in my brush and on paper at the moment? For the water in the brush, it is hard to answer because no instrument can measure it in real time and tell how much water is currently in the brush. Because of that, the judgment is always based on experience. Familiar with watercolour, I can judge whether my current brush has more or less water based on the effect I want and then make adjustments on the colour palette. Also, the essence of watercolour painting is a process in which the paper absorbs the water carrying the pigment and then gradually dries over time. During this process, the picture will be in a dynamic stage; that is, the water will evaporate over time, and the wetness of the watercolour paper will constantly change. According to this, the amount of water on paper cannot be measured either. However, it can be estimated through observation. We can infer the degree of wetness by observing the degree of reflection of the picture under light. If the reflection is obvious, it means that the water has not been completely absorbed by the paper, and it still flows on the surface of the paper. At this time, the paper is overly wet. If pigments are applied onto the paper, they will flow with the water and are not absorbed by the fibres of the paper. After about 5-10 minutes (under average temperature, the time in a hot environment will be shortened), we will find that the surface of the watercolour paper is no longer reflective and shows a matte effect. At this time, the water is totally absorbed into the paper, and no extra water is flowing on the surface. When applied to the paper, the pigments will naturally saturate and be quickly absorbed to penetrate into the fibres of the paper. This is very suitable for using the wet-on-wet technique to render large areas. As the water evaporates, the paper gradually dries, resulting in different effects on the paper. Taking this small painting (Fig 2.34) as an example, the egg cartons at



the front, middle and back positions have different appearances because of the different amounts of water on the paper. The less water there is on the paper, the clearer the edges of the figures depicted. Therefore, I need to control the amount of water on the paper to realise the different effects on the paper I want.



Figure 2.34 Qirui Tan, *Painting Experiment #2*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 30.5cm x 40.6cm

This idea of manipulating water to control calls up Ed Ruscha's liquid words. For example, the work *Rancho* (Fig. 2.35) depicts some liquid spillage on the floor. However, when seen carefully, the liquid actually forms the word 'Rancho'. Water splashing always appears random, but paradoxically, the water in this work is manipulated and presented as a specific word. Yve-Alain Bois, speaking of the difference between language and liquid, remarks that although language has its own rules of combination and continuity, irreducible atoms make up the majority of its constituent parts.<sup>76</sup> For instance, the letter serves as the distinguishing unit in alphabetical writing. However, liquid, on

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<sup>76</sup> Bois, Y-A. and Krauss, R. (eds.), *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 124.

the contrary, is indivisible. Even if a certain amount of liquid is divided into different containers, it remains identical to itself in each of its parts.<sup>77</sup> What Ruscha did in his painting was to give the uncontrollable liquid a sense of order and control, which mirrors my strategy of using watercolour. In the *Block* series, I tried to control the free flow of watercolour by manipulating water to achieve clear and concrete colour shapes and figures.



Figure 2.35 Ed Ruscha, *Rancho*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 152.4cm x 137.2cm

Furthermore, the sense of control in my paintings also comes from the systematic and rigorous painting steps I always conduct in watercolour. On the one hand, the one-time nature of watercolour cannot allow you to return to the previous step to revise. On the other hand, it is rooted deeply in the influence of my learning experience in my BA courses in China. When

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



learning watercolour for the first time, I was taught that I needed to obey very systematic steps to make watercolour paintings, which are from wetness to dryness. To be more specific, as I have mentioned in the fabrication of painting, it is by using wet-on-wet technique first to saturate the paper with colours and then using wet-on-dry technique to add more layers for meticulous depiction till the finishing of the work. I was also taught to be very careful in each step of painting to avoid some accidental water stains on paper called 'failures' as they destroy the beautiful appearance of the painting and cannot be removed. That idea of 'perfection' made me get used to painting in that way, and this habit has gradually become my comfort zone, in which I try to make everything in order and cannot accept any uncontrol and disorder such as the fluidity and uncontrol of watercolour. That explained why not much sense of flow appeared in my paintings.

However, I started to reflect on that when comparing two paintings. I conducted rigorous steps in making *Block IX* (see Fig 1.32), but I did not follow those steps in another small painting (Fig 2.36) and painted quickly on paper. Thus, there were many water stains left on the paper. However, does it mean this fast painting failed, whilst *Block IX* succeeded? Now, I don't think so. Instead, I would say the fast painting shows more fluidity of watercolour, and that sense of flow is exactly what the *Block* series is missing.

Here, I want to mention Barbara Nicholls again not only because her painting shows the release of control that I have already mentioned but also because it embodies a kind of balance between control and uncontrol.

Because of Nicholls' unique approach to watercolour, we are drawn into the fluidity of the paint's dilution and dispersion, which depends on the massively



Figure 2.36 Qirui Tan, *Fast Painting #3*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm

expansive play of chance, control, and containment.<sup>78</sup> Compared to my *Block* series, in which the control parts are more distinct than the uncontrol, her painting presents more uncontrol parts of watercolour, such as the free flow of the water and natural interpenetration of colours on paper, which are usually missing in my works. When looking at her paintings, for example, *Seafloor Spreading* (see Fig 2.3), nothing can be recognised from the painting to say it is an object or a portrait. But it is this abstract expression without figurative recognition that maximises the fluidity of watercolour.

However, it is also worth considering the control parts in her works. Roulstone, speaking of the different colour edges (see Fig 2.29), remarks that these are highly deliberate and thoughtful organic lines of demarcation despite the erratically flowing nature of water and the seemingly chaotic

<sup>78</sup> Karen Roulstone, "Barbara Nicholls," *Turps Painting Magazine*, July 20, 2018, 69.

potential for large-scale colour interplay.<sup>79</sup> The control parts in her work lie in the long-term and extensive experimentation with the characteristics of watercolour. Different pigment weights create different effects on paper; for example, the lighter pigments travel in the water while the weightier pigments sink down. She uses her knowledge of material properties to allow the pigments to create different boundaries and edges in the painting. Unlike my work, in which the sense of control is quite apparent and can be read directly from the painting, the control parts in Nicholls' work become invisible and hide behind the paintings.

In this three-year research, I used watercolour to depict different kinds of everyday objects in my surroundings. It was because I was too familiar with it and paid more attention to the subject of the painting that I tended to overlook watercolour as the medium itself. It seems that I keep using watercolour but never actually stop to reflect on it. However, I am using neither oil paint nor print ink; I am using watercolour. Looking back at my works, with more and more control parts occupying the painting, I ask myself: Where is the watercolour? The fluidity and uncertainty of watercolour are gradually disappearing. Seeing Nicholls's paintings draws my attention back to this particular medium, watercolour. I gradually realised that it would be better to show more properties of watercolour in my paintings by adding more fluid and uncertain parts. It is not to give up the control parts but to adjust the balance between control and uncontrol to make the uncontrol parts more distinct.

## **2.7 Contemporary Western and Chinese Watercolour**

There are some similarities between traditional Chinese ink drawing and Western watercolour painting. First of all, they both use water as the medium

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 66.

and use the fluidity and transparency of water to express the layering and changes of the picture on paper. In addition, both ink and watercolour pigments have certain transparent properties, which can produce rich tones through multiple superpositions. In terms of techniques, both use wet-on-wet technique to realise a natural gradient effect on paper. Also, they both emphasise the art of leaving blank space. In that way, Ink drawing shows the beauty of emptiness, while watercolour painting uses blank space to express light and sense of space.

However, due to different cultural backgrounds, there are still some differences between these two types of painting. Ink drawing, as an important part of traditional Chinese art, is deeply influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, and focuses on expressing the painter's inner emotions and philosophical thinking. It pursues freehand brushwork (image expression) rather than realism, and often emphasises more on the beauty of blank space. Watercolour painting originated in the West, and it was more influenced by the Renaissance and Impressionism. It focuses on the authenticity of light, shadow and colour. Although it also expresses emotions, it is mostly centered on visual experience.

Although there are similarities in the techniques of the two, traditional Chinese ink drawings emphasises philosophical conception and simple aesthetics, while Western watercolour painting focuses on the realistic beauty of nature through light, shadow and colour. The two represent the unique understanding of nature and art in different cultural backgrounds.

Watercolour was introduced to China from the west in the late 19th century and quickly spread in China due to its similarities to traditional Chinese painting. Here, I would like to further develop the discussion on the differences between contemporary Western and Chinese watercolour through

aspects of space, time, perspective and materiality.



Figure 2.37 Shouxiang Liu, *Still Life with White Pot*, 2017, Watercolour on paper, 75cm x 85cm

Since it was deeply influenced by the Soviet realistic modeling system in its early days, contemporary Chinese watercolour painting still mainly continues the realistic painting language. Thus, painters tend to pursue authenticity of space in their paintings. For example, this still life work (Fig 2.37) from Chinese watercolour artist Shouxiang Liu illustrates how he used excellent watercolour techniques to generate such a realistic space with domestic objects. In his another landscape painting (Fig 2.38), it can be seen that he used linear perspective to create an urban space. However, things become





Figure 2.38 Shouxiang Liu, *Impressions of the Apennines #3*, 2016, Watercolour on paper, 74cm x 54cm

different when we look at some Western watercolour artists, for example, Cézanne's watercolours. As I have already discussed in Chapter 1, his work *Still Life with Teapot* (see Fig 1.20) not only presents a domestic still-life space but also somehow integrates landscape space into that, making it not a realistic space. Moreover, Cézanne often uses different viewpoints and blends them together in one image, breaking up the tradition of using linear perspective to generate space. This strategy also resonates how David Hockney deals with space in his paintings. In this watercolour painting (Fig 2.39), he didn't use perspective to generate space at all. As he once said about this: "What did the Garden of Eden look like? That seemed to me an interesting visual problem...Here Adam and Eve are leaving Paradise, where

there is no perspective, no shadows, and no measurements.”<sup>80</sup>



Figure 2.39 David Hockney, *The Garden of Eden*, 2002, Watercolour on paper, 91.44cm x 121.92cm

In terms of time aspect, contemporary Chinese watercolour painters tend to gradually present the picture through delicate brushstrokes and layered rendering. Thus, it usually takes several days or weeks to finish one painting. On the contrary, Western watercolour paintings are usually more concerned with capturing a specific dynamic moment, such as the changing light, a busy street scene, or a certain moment in natural scenery. Also, because watercolour dries quickly, many Western artists emphasise improvisation and rapid expression to capture the feeling of the moment, which is closely related to the ‘instantaneous’ aesthetics of Impressionism. For example, William Tillyer’s other work (Fig 2.40) demonstrates the free calligraphic brushstrokes with flowing and splashing of watercolour.

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<sup>80</sup> David Hockney Quotes. <https://www.thedavidhockneyfoundation.org/chronology/2002>





Figure 2.40 William Tillyer, *The Age of Anxiety / The Kerry Sunset*, 2001, Watercolour on paper, 56cm x 76cm

For the aspect of materiality, I would to associate the discussion with some problems in contemporary Chinese watercolour painting. Watercolour has developed rapidly in China in recent years. However, at the same time, some phenomena have also emerged: mindlessly pursuing realism by imitating photos, relying too much on techniques, enlarging the paper size, and constantly adding layers of colours to achieve a sense of weightiness in oil paintings. Having learned watercolour in China for seven years, I witnessed those phenomena and was deeply influenced.

In *Iteration and Boundary: 'New Watercolour' Conception*, Jinfei Yin argues that, "New Watercolour' advocates 'de-technologization', that is, trying to avoid the familiarity, routine and rigidity of techniques, and encourages leaving the 'comfort zone' and exploring in unfamiliar fields.'<sup>81</sup> I agreed with his idea because I always tried to show my control of watercolour through

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<sup>81</sup> Jinfei Yin, "Iteration and Boundary: 'New Watercolour' Conception," in "The Inheritance and Development of Chinese Watercolour Painting in the New Era," *Art News of China*, February 26, 2024, 02-05.

those techniques, which became my comfort zone. And I gradually forgot the most fascinating nature of watercolour is its uncontrol.

Hui Shang, speaking of the development of Chinese watercolour painting in the new era, argues that 'contemporary Chinese watercolour paintings may have more creative forms than those of any other country. In addition to the continuous enlarging of the size of the works, its innovative capacity also contains more aesthetic qualities such as subtlety, attraction and thickness.'<sup>82</sup> On the one hand, I am afraid I disagree with what he said: 'Contemporary Chinese watercolour paintings may have more creative forms than any other country.' It is evident that watercolour in China is developing fast, but watercolour painters in other countries are also exploring watercolour in their own ways; for example, Barbara Nicholls, as I mentioned before, presents watercolour paintings on a monumental scale. It is hard to say watercolour in which country develops more creative forms.

On the other hand, I want to discuss the 'thickness' in his words more. A striking feature of contemporary Chinese watercolour painting is the pursuit of the same sense of thickness as oil painting. The free-flowing characteristic of watercolour is almost invisible, and a watercolour painting is often mistaken for an oil painting. Although allowing watercolour to show the same thickness as oil painting seems to expand the possibilities of watercolour expression, it also weakens the characteristics of watercolour to a certain extent. Suppose we pursue the sense of thickness at the expense of losing the properties of watercolour and cannot tell whether it is a watercolour or an oil painting. Is this innovation of watercolour right?

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<sup>82</sup> Hui Shang, "The Historical, Subjective and Innovative Consciousness of Contemporary Chinese Watercolour Painters," in "The Inheritance and Development of Chinese Watercolour Painting in the New Era," *Art News of China*, February 26, 2024, 02-05.

Making a comparison of two still life paintings here, one is Shouxiang Liu's work I mentioned before (see Fig 2.37), while the other is Paul Cézanne's work *Still Life with Blue Pot* (see Fig 1.14). Here, I will not make a judgement to say whose work is better because both are very fascinating paintings. I will pay more attention to the sense of watercolour in each painting. Although Liu's work was painted with watercolour, it looks like an oil painting with a strong sense of thickness and heaviness. The yellow colours are more opaque than transparent, especially when looking at the lemons. Also, the brushstrokes in this work almost disappeared, which forms a strong contrast to the clear and loose brushstrokes in Cézanne's painting, where the transparency of watercolour is also distinct, making each layer of colour clear to see even after overlapping. Although Liu's work appears more realistic and shows excellent techniques, I prefer that sense of watercolour in Cézanne's work. Here, I would like to mention Bryson again, especially his idea of brushstrokes. When comparing the difference between Western oil paint and Chinese ink, Bryson argues that oil paint is regarded as an erasable medium which covers its own tracks, while with ink-painting, everything marked on the surface remains visible.<sup>83</sup> Unlike Liu's work, the large amount of brushstrokes in Cézanne's painting unfold the making process as a significant aspect in painting where, as Bryson puts it, 'the body of labour is on constantly displayed.'<sup>84</sup>

This comparison reflects the difference of materiality between contemporary Chinese and Western watercolours. Unlike Chinese watercolour, which pursues realism and the thickness of oil painting, Western watercolour pays more attention to retaining and displaying the free-flowing characteristics of watercolour itself.

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<sup>83</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vison and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 92.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.



As I mentioned before, the large watercolour paintings from Barbara Nicholls fully show the nature of watercolour. Also, in Minyoung Choi's aquarium painting (Fig 2.41), she used watercolour to depict water, showing the transparency and fluidity of this medium.

Back to Chinese watercolour: If watercolour appears more like oil painting, where does its particularity exist? For me, there is nothing wrong with exploring more possibilities of watercolour, but it should be based on retaining its fluid and transparent properties.



Figure 2.41 Minyoung Choi, *Search*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 26cm x 34.4cm

## 2.8 Experiments on Other Mediums

Besides watercolour, I also tried other mediums during the research. Not only as experiments on different mediums but, more importantly, these new attempts made me think about the particularity of watercolour and its difference from other mediums. Also, can these attempts be an opportunity in

defense of watercolour since other mediums could be used in a similar way?

Let us consider the print first. There are some similarities between print and painting, as Richard Hamilton speaks about the composite figures and the different layers of print that resemble painting. I agree with his idea, but the results on paper vary from different mediums, for example, print and watercolour.

In the second year, when making *Comfort Zone* (Fig 2.42), I wondered whether I could combine print and watercolour in a single image. Following that idea, I drew a figure of the balloon on the cardboard first, cut off the motif afterwards, used a brayer roller to apply ink on one side and printed it on the paper. The same strategy was also applied to paint platforms and yellow lines. However, after I finished this work and looked at it again, I found the printed and watercolour parts were not integrated well and felt entirely separated. The printed areas give a strong sense of order with clear figures and shapes, while watercolour quality feels more uncertain. It looks ambivalent when juxtaposing them in this painting. Meanwhile, the balloon printed on paper lost its translucent and smooth qualities, with only the figure left, forming a strong contrast with some objects depicted in other works. In *Block III* (Fig 2.43), I used watercolour to express the old quality of the key. In *Fragments II*, I made full use of the nature of watercolour to show the reflective and transparent qualities of glass. (Fig 2.44) However, in terms of the balloons, platforms and yellow lines depicted in this painting, they all lost their qualities and textures, becoming simple shapes with opaque colours.



Figure 2.42 Qirui Tan, *Comfort Zone*, 2023, Watercolour and print ink on paper, 50cm x 35cm



Figure 2.43 Qirui Tan, *Block III*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 48cm x 63cm





Figure 2.44 Details of Fig 1.4

In *Painting Photography Painting*, Carol Armstrong, speaking of Rauschenberg's work, remarks that the 'combine' is a cross between painting, photography, printmaking, drawing, collage and construction. Rauschenberg's work not only shows the medium hybridity but also indicates the phenomenon that photography invaded painting and redefined it.<sup>85</sup> This idea of integrating different mediums into one painting reminds me of the work of Laura Owens (Fig 2.45), in which she combines oil, screen printing and charcoal. The screen printing looks quite similar to watercolour painting because both embody transparency. The layer underneath can usually be seen through the layer on the top. However, the screen printing does not show the fluidity of paint like watercolour on paper. Also, I can feel and control how the brush moves on paper when painting with watercolour. Whether it is a quick sketch or a meticulous depiction, my hand engages in that process. However, when doing screen printing, for instance, squeegeeing replaces those physical gestures. Since the fluidity and physicality of watercolour painting fascinate

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<sup>85</sup> Graw, I. and Lajer-Burcharth, E. (eds.) *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 130.

me more than the print, I decided to continue to use watercolour in the later paintings.

The essential of watercolour is the process in which the water dries through evaporation. Some of the pigments will be absorbed by the paper by penetrating into the fibres of the paper with the water, while the rest will settle on the paper, forming a thin layer of colour. That makes watercolours different from oil paints because most oil paints settle on the surface of the canvas or paper, forming a thicker layer of paint after drying. Also, because oil paint is more attached to the surface of the canvas, it can be modified by scraping off the colour with a scraper. However, watercolour painting cannot be modified because the pigment penetrates into the fibres of the paper.



Figure 2.45 Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2019, Oil, screen printing ink and charcoal on linen, 175.3cm x 152.4cm



I also tried oil paintings (Fig 2.46) in the second year. When using watercolour to depict some everyday objects, I just questioned whether watercolour was suitable for depicting all kinds of objects. Watercolour has transparent and fluid qualities, which make it ideal for depicting natural light and landscape. However, when depicting some heavy and hard objects, the watercolour feels too light and soft without too much weight. Oil paint dries very slowly, and it is easy to revise. It also gives a strong sense of heaviness, which is hard to find in watercolour paintings. While I am aware that each medium has its own characteristics, I am nevertheless interested in watercolour and how it can reinterpret the relationship between still life and landscape on a practical level.



Figure 2.46 Qirui Tan, *Sharpener*, 2022, Oil on panel, 15cm x 15cm

Watercolour usually engages with the medium of paper. However, trying watercolour on other special support can be regarded as a way of exploring the possibility of watercolour. I found the mineral fibre board, a common building material for making ceilings, and I did a painting experiment to see whether watercolour could be applied. What I did was painting on it in the

same way I did on paper. I saturated it with colours first (Fig 2.47) and then depicted the repetitive surface of the stacked egg cartons. (Fig 2.48) The result was exciting and proved that this material can serve as the support for watercolour painting. The colours penetrated the support just like on paper. However, painting on mineral fibre boards also differs from painting on paper. Usually, if it is watercolour paper, what we see more is the content of the painting rather than the paper itself. However, mineral fibre boards have strong textures, and the one I got was a fragment with an irregular shape



Figure 2.47 Watercolour experiment on mineral fibre board

different from a standard rectangular piece of paper. Because of that, the characteristics of this material become quite distinctive. When applying watercolour to it, I can see what I depicted without losing the quality of the material because of the transparency of the watercolour. Just imagine if it is oil paint or acrylic, which is opaque; the quality of the mineral fibre board will



be reduced due to the covering of the paints.

It is not only painting on an object like painting on paper but also the painting itself becomes an object, making viewers wonder if it is a painting or a piece of external wall from a building. That reminds me of the painting *Flag* (Fig 2.49) by Jasper Johns. In *Flag*, the stars and stripes fill the entire space: the

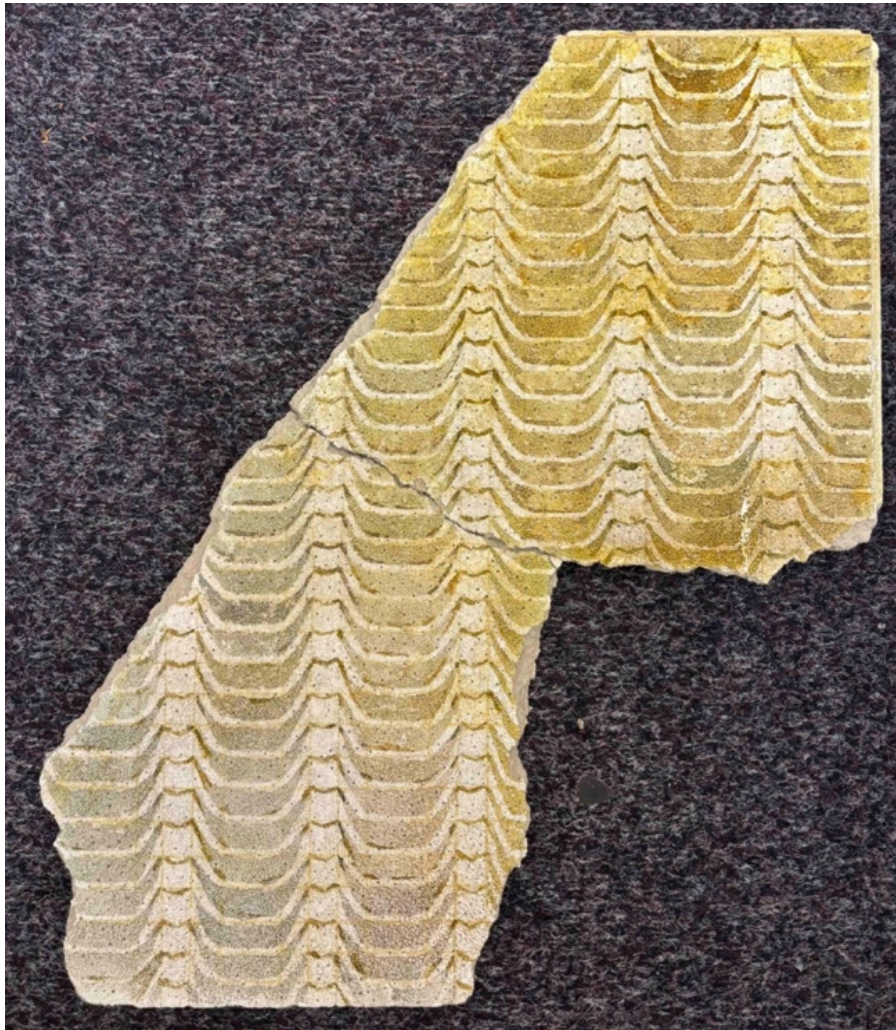


Figure 2.48 Qirui Tan, *Untitled*, Watercolour on mineral fibre board, 2023

painting itself becomes a physical object.<sup>86</sup> Also, another work, *Painted Bronze* (Fig 2.50), tries to blur the boundary between artworks and real objects, making viewers wonder if they are representations of beer cans or real ones. Johns once remarked, ‘a very large part of my work has been

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<sup>86</sup> Christian Geelhaar, *Jasper Johns: Working Proofs* (London: Petersburg Press, 1980), 15.

involved with painting as object, as a real thing in itself.<sup>187</sup> Different from painting on a flat two-dimensional surface like paper or canvas, he painted on a three-dimensional object. In that sense, he expands the definition of painting and shows what else a painting can be. Imagine an empty room with white walls, and I paint it with different colours, which can also be considered a painting.



Figure 2.49 Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954-1955, Encaustic, oil and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, 107.3cm x 153.8cm

As outlined above, these material experiments allowed me to reflect further on the quality of watercolour. It also became evident that the close link between support and the medium has become a significant factor in my work. The representation of paper-based egg cartons on watercolour paper points not only to a close overlap of medium and depiction but also an openness where elements are not disguised or pretend to be something they are not. This intersection of paper and paint addresses a key issue of painting, as Bryson argues: 'To understand the painting as sign, we have to forget the prosenic

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.





Figure 2.50 Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze (Ballantine Ale)*, 1960, Painted bronze, 14cm x 20.3cm x 12.1cm

surface of the image and think behind it: not to an original perception in which the surface is luminously bathed, but to the body whose activity – for the painter as for the viewer – is always and only a transformation of material signs.’<sup>88</sup> Considering painting therefore beyond its surface and reflecting on the making process as part of the painting itself were the things I set out to test and discuss in the previous pages when I spoke about the use of water and the departure from a ‘naturalistic depiction’.

## 2.9 Painting Based on Photography

The relationship between painting and photography is a broad topic. Since the invention of the camera, painting has always been impacted by photography. In this section, I will not analyse the history of how they influenced each other because that would be an enormous and systematic research, and it is not my PhD research topic. Instead, based on my painting methods, I want to discuss

<sup>88</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 171.

my understanding of the relationship between painting and what role the photographic image plays in my painting process.

Since most of my paintings were based on photos, the key question might be: What was the difference between a photographic image and a painting based



Figure 2.51 Qirui Tan, *Fragment II*, 2022, Photography

on that? The first time I came up with this question was in my second year of research when I was making *Fragments II* (see Fig 1.4), a painting based on a photo (Fig 2.51) I took on the street. Let us consider following questions generated at that time.

1. What is the point of making the paintings if the photography is already there?

2. Why did I use watercolour to re-make the image rather than just seeing the photo as a piece of photographic work?
3. What is the difference between painting and photography?

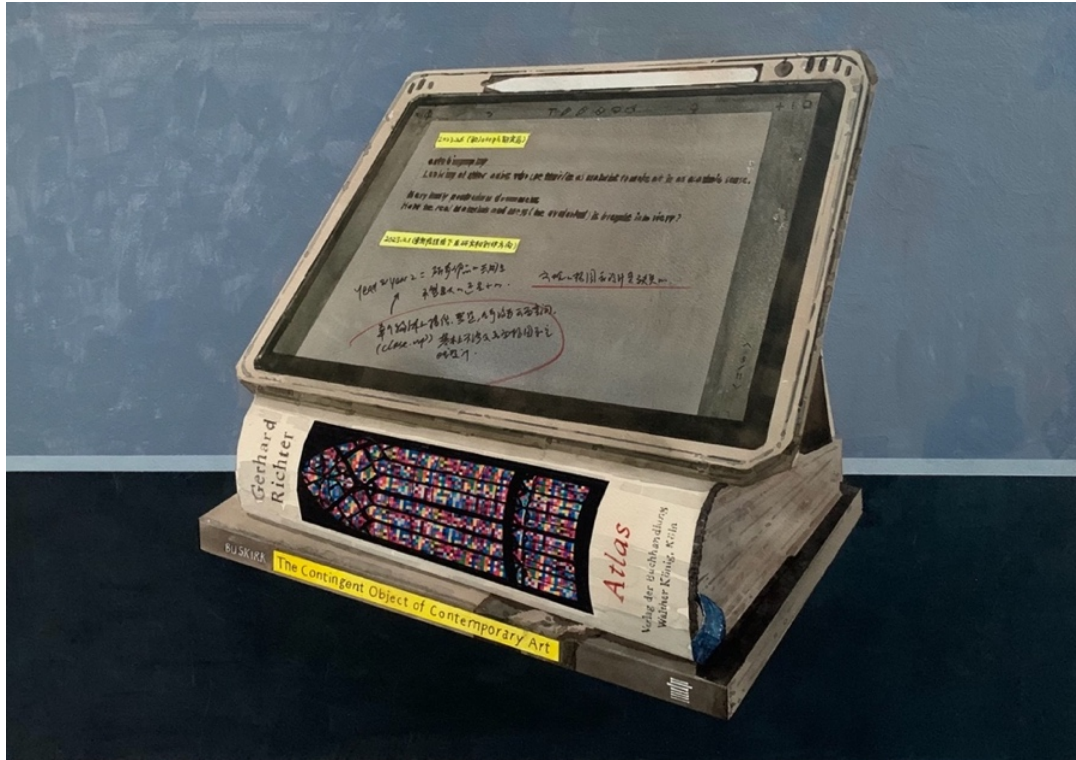


Figure 2.52 Qirui Tan, *Monument*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm

As mentioned above, what puzzled me most at that time was that the photo image was already here, and I could directly use it as a photographic work. So, what was the point of painting it? The same question occurred again at the beginning of the third year when I was making the painting *Monument* (Fig 2.52), which was also based on a photo (Fig 2.53). Why did I make the painting and show it to the viewers rather than simply showing them the photo? Was it redundant to turn the image into a painting? These questions puzzled me for a long time and made me wonder whether I was painting rather than copying photos. With the thinking and making works over the past few years, I developed some new ideas on this issue. Now, when I look back at the questions raised above, I would like to discuss them more and try to answer them.



In terms of the first question, I felt confused at that time because I simply equated the function of painting with recording. Whether they are photos or paintings, they are ultimately presented as images. Both these two types of

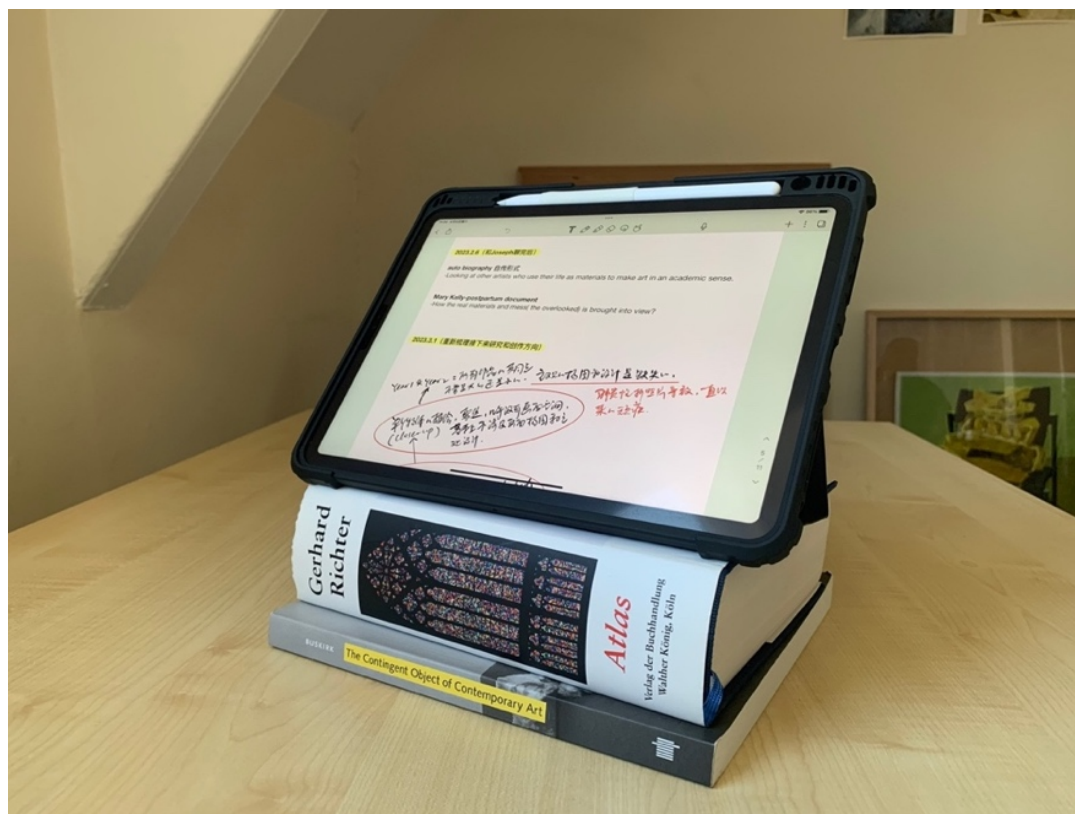


Figure 2.53 Qirui Tan, *Monument*, 2023, Photography

images can be used for recording, illustrating or describing a specific realistic scene. However, photos are obviously more convenient and efficient than paintings because the common perception of photography is that it has an indexical, or direct, connection to reality.<sup>89</sup> However, a painting does not only have the function of recording, as mentioned above in relation to Bryson's critique, where he argues that painting is not only the eye of the painter rendering the object in a naturalistic way.<sup>90</sup> In addition to showing what is depicted, it also has some implications behind the work, which cannot be seen from the picture itself and needs interpretation, as Bryson argues, 'to

<sup>89</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Castello di Rivoli and Hayward Gallery, *The Painting of Modern Life: 1960s to Now*, (London: Hayward Publishing, 2007), 14.

<sup>90</sup> Bryson argues that painting can never hope to produce an absolute image that corresponds optical truth perfectly by referring to Gombrich's critique: 'The painter does not gaze on the world with innocent or naive vision and then set out to record with his brush what his gaze has disclosed.' See Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 21.



understand the painting as sign, we have to forget the proscenic surface of the image and think behind it.<sup>91</sup> In *Painting Modern Life*, Ralph Rugoff, speaking of some famous photography-based painters in the 1960s, remarks that 'their paintings tackled the phenomena of how the world was represented in addition to the reality they lived in.'<sup>92</sup> He continues to argue that 'their work probed the role that conventions and codes have in shaping our view and knowledge of the world while upending preconceptions about both media by fusing photography and painting codes to generate complicated and conflicting sets of pictorial indications.'<sup>93</sup> Eva Hesse often said about her work, 'Don't ask what it means or what it refers to. Rather, see what the work does.'<sup>94</sup> Looking back at the two images above, whether it is a photo or a painting, it is more important to say what it does rather than comparing them in terms of what they describe. The painting does something. Part of what it does is to do with the image, but part of what it does is to do with the image painted the way it is painted. It is not the image, but the image rendered in watercolour on paper on that scale by me. That gives the painting its particularity. Imagine someone else is also using watercolour to paint based on the same photo, and the work will be different from mine. In this sense, the photography and painting are different.

For the second question, first of all, it is possible to think of this photo as a photographic work, and there is no conflict between this photo and the painting. However, in terms of why I am using watercolour, it has something to do with the nature of watercolour I mentioned before. On the one hand, the transparency of watercolour makes it suitable for depicting natural light. This matches the transparent and reflective qualities of the glass depicted in the painting. On the other hand, watercolour shows the balance between order

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<sup>91</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 171.

<sup>92</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Castello di Rivoli and Hayward Gallery, *The Painting of Modern Life: 1960s to Now*, (London: Hayward Publishing, 2007), 11.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>94</sup> Eva Hesse Quotes. [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/eva\\_hesse\\_864986](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/eva_hesse_864986)

and chaos, which I have also mentioned before. Here, what I depicted is very disordered, but I tried to paint this state of disorder in an ordered way through watercolour, which reflects my desire to use watercolour to find a balance between order and disorder.

In terms of the last question, I think both painting and photography have their essential characteristics respectively. Firstly, from the perspective of materiality, the uniform and homogeneous flatness of a photographic surface is quite different from the surface of a painting. Secondly, in terms of time, when comparing a photograph's smooth and consistent flatness to the layering of information in a painting - including its initial sketch, application of washes, multiple layers of paint, and the intricate blending of colours - it becomes evident that processing a painting requires far more time.<sup>95</sup> In addition, the temporality of photography is quite different from that of painting. Photography always depicts a specific moment in the past, while painting emphasises the unfolding present more. In the painting based on photography, the conflicting temporal characteristics of these two media were seamlessly combined. The painting forms a dialogue in which our present is connected to specific moments from the past.

Taking the work *Monument* (see Fig 2.52) as an example, the photo (see Fig 2.53) just recorded the appearance of these objects from a specific angle to a particular moment in the past. However, when painting based on this photo, I need to think about these questions: Should I use the same perspective and colours as the photo? Where are these objects located in my painting? Is it the table in the photo or somewhere else? How to deal with the background of the painting?

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<sup>95</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Castello di Rivoli and Hayward Gallery, *The Painting of Modern Life: 1960s to Now*, (London: Hayward Publishing, 2007), 16.

After considering these questions, I will definitely make the painting different from the photo. Thus, it is how to use photos in the painting practice that matters. What is the implication behind using photos as raw materials to make paintings? I agree with what Gerhard Richter remarks, 'I am not trying to imitate a photograph; I am trying to make one.'<sup>96</sup> In his article on photography and painting, Hamilton remarks, 'I felt that I would like to see how close to photography I could stay yet still be a painter in intent.'<sup>97</sup>

Looking back now, it seems that what I did in the *Fragments II* at that time was trying to imitate a photograph, and I did not think too much about what I would do with this painting. However, when the same question came to the *Monument*, I started to think about how I used the photograph rather than just imitating it. It was not until that moment that I thought the role of photographic images was to assist my painting practice. Later, when making each painting in the *Block* series, I took many photos of the stacked egg cartons before painting. (Fig 2.54) The process of taking photos served as an experiment in which I tested different perspectives and distances and then chose the best to apply to the painting from all these possibilities.

Also, I use photography as a cropping device. As I have mentioned above, most of my paintings were based on the photos I took by myself. When photographing, I often use a close-up way to highlight the most attracting parts of the object, while weakening and reducing the area of the background. This strategy was applied to my daily snapshots (see Fig 3.13) which focused on some overlooked everyday objects and corners in my surroundings. In addition, in the image below (see Fig 2.54), it can also be seen that I used photography as a crucial framing device when taking the photos of the egg

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<sup>96</sup> Gerhard Richter, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Anthony d'Offay (Firm), *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 66.

<sup>97</sup> Richard Hamilton, "Photography and Painting", *Studio International*, March 1969, 120.

cartons.



Figure 2.54 Qirui Tan, *Different stacked egg cartons on table*, 2023, Photography

Cropping of images is also a very obvious feature of my paintings. Here, I would like to further discuss the use of cropping in my works through a series of visual analysis of Fede Galiza's still life *Peaches in a White Ceramic Basket* (Fig 2.55). In this painting, the white ceramic bowl with some peaches almost takes up the whole picture, and the edge of the peach in the upper left corner is nearly tangent to the upper edge of the image. Through this bold or even 'brutal' cropping, firstly, she enhances the visual focus of the picture while reducing the background interference, so that the eyes of viewers are attracted to the bowl of peaches. Secondly, the cropping weakens the depth of traditional perspective, bringing the objects closer to the viewer and creating a sense of intimacy. Moreover, the cropping of images also indicates the space outside the painting, which can arouse the viewer's thinking and imagination.

In 17th-century still life paintings, most painters tended to depict the objects in





Figure 2.55 Fede Galizia, *Peaches in a White Ceramic Basket*, c.1610, Oil on panel, 30cm x 42cm

the picture completely, pursuing a 'panoramic' still-life arrangement, such as Heda's table still life (see Fig 1.27). However, cropping breaks the traditional still life painting's reliance on completeness and symmetry, adding a modern feel and visual tension to the picture. Through cropping, Galizia created a more modern sense of composition which foreshadowed the bolder and simplified composition methods in later still life paintings (the cropping of images used by French painters in still life paintings in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as Cézanne's still lifes and Degas' works). At the same time, it also created a closer visual experience. Her cropping made the viewer feel as if they were at the table, only one step away from the still life. This composition method was more immersive and intimate than the 'distant-view' composition of many painters at the time.

In my paintings, for example, *Block IV* (see Fig 1.25) which I mentioned in Chapter 1, The egg cartons are always partially presented in the picture, rather than in their entirety. On the one hand, by cropping, I highlighted the

visual centre and details I wanted to present while maintaining the visual balance of the picture, which enhanced the visual impact of the picture. On the other hand, cropping implies the parts outside the picture, making the viewer curious about the larger space beyond. In addition, because the egg cartons are cropped, it is difficult to determine their actual size, making the scale of the egg cartons ambiguous. Are they egg cartons placed on the table? Or are they buildings resembling egg cartons in the urban landscape?

## **2.10 Role of Studio**

The studio is of great importance to my PhD research. First of all, my research and practice were both undertaken in the studio, which is different from other types of practice-based research, such as site-specific research in public space or collaborative research with other people and institutions. My studio experience emphasises the individual more; that is, the studio experience is presented as what an individual sees and experiences. This kind of working alone, on the one hand, eliminated the interference of other factors on the research, and on the other hand, gave me more opportunities to concentrate on the dialogue with the interior landscape of the studio, whether it is a corner of the studio or stacked egg cartons on the table. In this circumstance, the studio is not only a place where tools or painting materials are placed, but its significance lies in how I experience it as a painter. The realities of the studio are not only what is observed there (how the world is put together) but the artist's visual and, often, bodily or phenomenological experience of it (how it is experienced).<sup>98</sup>

The studio provided me with a place where I could create various stacking compositions by using the collected empty egg cartons. Every egg carton

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<sup>98</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and Others* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 14.

functions like a Lego brick, and I tried to play with these 'bricks' to construct different stacking forms. This makes the studio look like a laboratory where I can make different attempts and do many tests on the egg cartons. I made them look like various cityscapes, buildings, and streets, but they were just piles of empty egg cartons. This ambiguity interests me, and it allows me to think about the relationship between still life and landscape. This visual uncertainty blurs the clear and solid distinction between still life and landscape, making the relationship between them fluid; that is, they can interchange with each other. Still life and landscape are no longer two completely isolated subjects but are intertwined with each other. In my research, I brought my experience and observation of the outside world and the city back to the studio's space. What the painter in their painting makes of the world so experienced is central to the studio as an experimental site.<sup>99</sup> Here, painting becomes an investigation which brings two outcomes:

One is that I reconstruct reality through painting. The work reflects my understanding of reality, more specifically, my knowledge of the city. This reminds me of the experience of place in Carol Rhodes' work, as she has written that her paintings are a reaction to things seen in the real world.<sup>100</sup> The landscape in her painting is described as 'edgeland' — 'somewhere on the edge of recognition', detached and recognisable at the same time.<sup>101</sup> The *Block* series is not landscape-based work but a series of paintings based on photography. The entire painting process took place in the studio, but the picture showed the outdoor urban space, forming an interesting paradox. I re-experienced the city in the studio by organising and placing the egg cartons and constructing them on paper. It can be seen that there is an interesting dialogue between the object (stacked egg cartons), the photographic image,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Andrew Mummery (ed.), *Carol Rhodes* (Milano: Skira Editore, 2018), 77.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 75.

and the painting. (Fig 2.56)



Figure 2.56 Studio view

Another is that the uncertainty in reality is transformed into pictorial ambiguity. This ambiguity gives the audience more possibilities to interpret the work. It is a matter of how we see rather than what we see. Whether it is a still life or a landscape depends on how we look at it and our perspective. Alpers, speaking of pictorial ambiguity, remarks that in a studio setting, pictorial ambiguity becomes an artistic inquiry rather than just a tool of the medium. This allows the painting to have a forward lean and probe. It is a question of finding, not of proof.<sup>102</sup>

Barbara Nicholls also makes watercolour paintings in her studio. Unlike my studio practice, she simulates the natural environment outdoors in the studio by using electronic fans to control the rate of water evaporation. (Fig 2.57)

Peter Matthews, the painter I mentioned before, applies a totally different

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<sup>102</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and Others* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 30.



approach that goes against the idea of 'painting in the studio'. He works along the coast, painting on the beach with the process of being out directly in the landscape (Fig 2.58). This immersion with the ocean and nature, emphasising the physicality, presents how he experiences time, space, place, the transient, the impermanent, and the sublime.



Figure 2.57 Barbara Nicholls working in her studio



Figure 2.58 Peter Matthews working on the coast

## 2.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, I first discussed watercolour's properties and how they connected to my research on the relationship between still life and landscape. Still life and landscape are intertwined rather than separated. The fluidity of watercolour contains a dynamic and changing process, which visualises the fluid relationship between still life and landscape. In the *Block* series, the work's interpretation is ambiguous and uncertain, flowing between still life and urban landscape. Wet and dry are opposites, but they are intertwined in watercolour painting, like the relationship between uncontrol and control. As time goes by, the state of the next second will be a little drier than the previous second. This is a process that is constantly changing and flowing. In this sense, the relationship between still life and landscape can also be regarded as a fluid relation in which the still life and landscape interchange with each other.

Through systematically discussing the fabrication of painting, I looked deeply into the use of watercolour in my practice. This allowed me to reflect on the way I conducted the watercolour paintings. Because of my previous educational experience, I always showed a strong sense of control and order in my works but gradually overlooked watercolour as the medium itself. Since there is too much control in the paintings, it would be better to show more release of control by adding more fluid and uncertain parts. It is not to give up the control parts but to adjust the balance between control and uncontrol to make the uncontrol parts more distinct.

This chapter also saw my further reflection on the possibility of watercolour. Pursuing the same sense of thickness as oil painting becomes a distinctive phenomenon in contemporary Chinese watercolour paintings. Although there is nothing wrong with exploring more possibilities of watercolour, I think that should be done without losing the properties of watercolour, as the

transparency and fluidity make watercolours unique and particular. During the research, I also tried other mediums and compared their differences with watercolour, which made me decide to insist on watercolour as the main method. In the meantime, I tried to explore more possibilities of watercolour by testing whether it could be applied to other supports besides watercolour papers. The mineral fibre board became an interesting finding.

Most of my paintings were based on photos taken in the studio. On the one hand, I discussed my understanding of the relationship between painting and photography through reflections on the problems I met during the painting practice. The three-year research also witnessed my shift from copying and imitating photos to considering photos as possibilities where I can choose suitable ones to assist the paintings later. On the other hand, I discussed the idea of 'cropping of images' in my practice. I argued that cropping not only highlights the visual centre and details but also implies the parts outside the image, leaving space for the viewer's imagination. In addition, the studio played an essential role in my research and practice. Functioning like an experimental site, it provided me with a space to create various stacking compositions of empty egg cartons and reconstruct urban spaces through painting.

In the next chapter, I shall discuss the everyday objects that are overlooked. Looking at the idea of 'overlooked', I will give my understanding of it and investigate how that idea is embodied in this whole research. I shall not only turn my attention back to the paintings in the first two years, thinking about the everyday objects depicted in those works but also focus more on the egg cartons. I shall explain why I chose it as the research's main subject and try to unpack further discussion on it.

## Chapter 3. Overlooked Objects

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the idea of ‘overlooked everyday objects’ in my research with more work-specific discussions.

Starting with the *Newcastle Diaries*, a series of small paper-based works in Year 1, I will try to unpack more ideas and reflections from this body of works. Not only serving as a series of visual documents, these small works also reveal their relationship with the urban landscape, especially in the first year of the pandemic period (2020-2021). The painted ‘snapshots’ of this series not only evoke a strong sense of accident and transience, which can characterise the modern living experience but also signal a tension between the history of an ancient medium — watercolour, as discussed above, and the contemporary topics of urban life.<sup>103</sup>

The second case study of the *Fragments* series begins with discussions on the role of objects, trying to investigate how the microcosmic still life epitomises the macrocosmic world. As reusing waste materials and transforming the residue into something else has become a growing field for contemporary artists, the discussion around the leftovers on the floor also draws our attention to the use of dirt and rubbish more widely in contemporary art practice.

In addition, I will also discuss my reflections on ‘overlooked’ to see how that

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<sup>103</sup> By ‘contemporary topics’, I mean the topics, such as everyday, everyday objects, and world-building. For example, in the exhibition *The Painting of Modern Life* (2007), Wilhelm Sasnal once remarks in conversation with The Hayward that ‘my paintings do record certain histories: ordinary, everyday history as seen through my own eyes, and my personal history. Painting is always like writing a diary.’ See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Castello di Rivoli and Hayward Gallery, *The Painting of Modern Life: 1960s to Now*, (London: Hayward Publishing, 2007), 145.



idea of 'overlooked objects' influenced the choice of egg cartons as the specific subject for my paintings.<sup>104</sup> In terms of the *Block* series, as I have already discussed several ideas on the relationship between still life and landscape in Chapter 1, the rest of this chapter will be given to further discussions on this series from other perspectives.

## **3.2 Newcastle Diaries**

The *Newcastle Diaries* (Fig 3.1) contains 80 small paper-based paintings, drawings, and mixed-media works. Blending figuration and abstraction, these works served as a series of visual documents to record feelings and experiences during the pandemic. Focusing on everyday objects overlooked in my surroundings, these works also became my first response to life during the pandemic.

### **3.2.1 The Connection with Urban Landscape**

The connection with urban landscape in this series consists of two parts:

From the contents of the works, some are apparent urban landscapes, depicting empty streets, the campus and other urban spaces. (Fig 3.2) While some are particular everyday objects, to be more specific, the very stuff of building and construction, such as bricks and scaffolds. (Fig 3.3) While those buildings under construction are typical urban landscapes, the building material points clearly toward the notion of change and transformation, erecting new constructions and demolishing outdated buildings. In this sense, these objects have a strong relationship with urban landscapes and change. If

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<sup>104</sup> In *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Bryson, speaking of still life painting, argues that it forces both painter and viewer to pay attention to the preterite objects in the world which are too familiar to be noticed. 'Since still life needs to look at the overlooked, it has to bring into view objects which perception normally screens out.' See Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 87. Here, I agree with Bryson's idea of 'the overlooked', and I use 'familiarity' to characterise the overlooked objects as I will discuss later in the chapter.

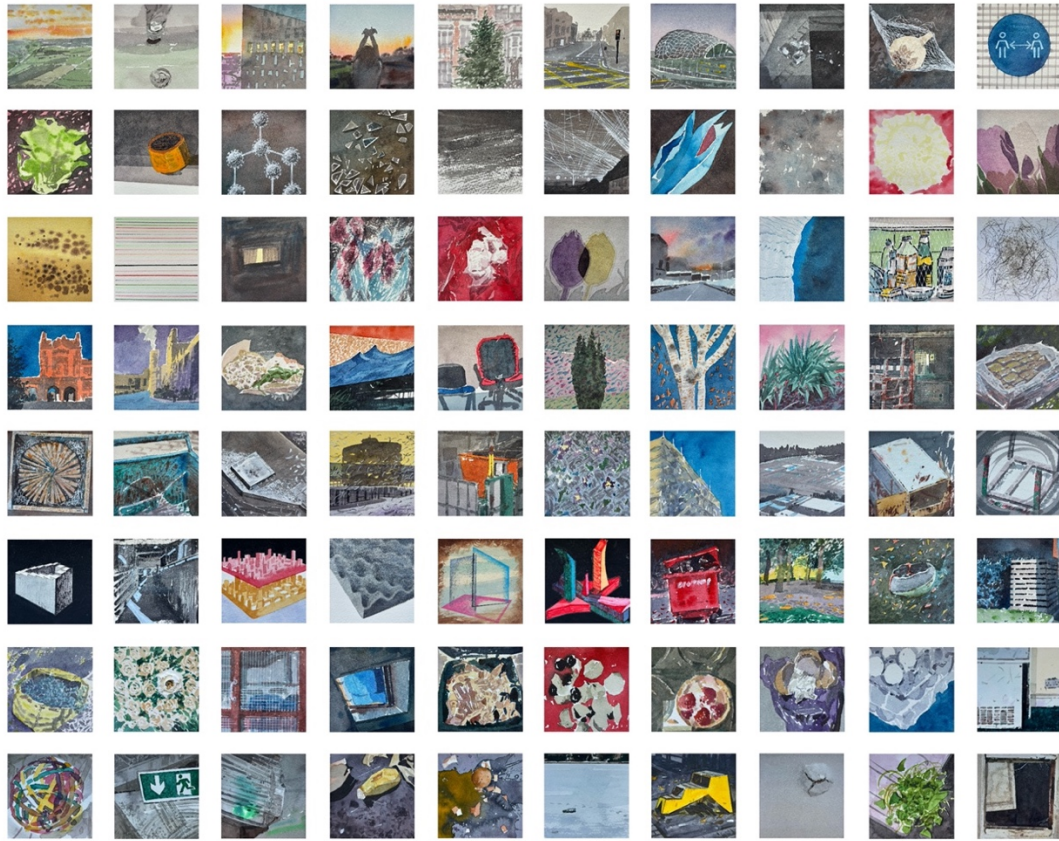


Figure 3.1 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries*, 2020-2022, Watercolour and mixed media on paper, 8cm x 8cm x 80

those I mentioned are all about something outdoors, it is also worth considering the objects indoors to see how inside and outside become interchangeable when viewing the ground. For example, the close-up view of the banana skin (Fig 3.4) resembles a bird-eye view of a city from a plane, which again calls up Carol Rhodes' aerial cityscape paintings. That enchantment also occurs in several other pieces dealing with leftovers, such as the aerial view of garlic debris. (Fig 3.5) Besides that, there is another work (Fig 3.6) depicting a corner of the kitchen with condiment bottles and cutlery, the composition of which echoes those skyscrapers in London (Fig 3.7), and this allusion of the cityscape becomes a precedent for later works creating cityscapes out of everyday objects. It can be seen that the subject matter I selected for this series is a particular type of everyday object, which is industrial and architectural. When I was making these works in the first year, I did not think too much about this potential relationship with the urban landscape. However, the exploration of the relationship between still life and



Figure 3.2 *Newcastle Diaries* #6, #32, #44 (from left to right)

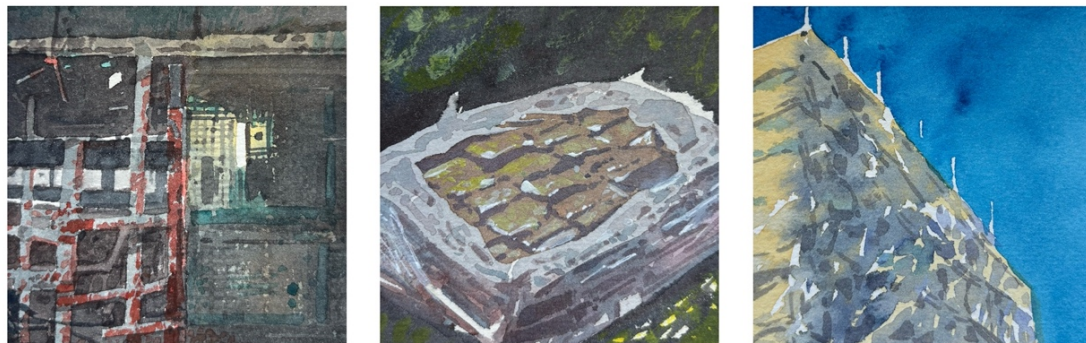


Figure 3.3 *Newcastle Diaries* #39, #40, #47 (from left to right)

urban landscape had already begun at that time, which could be seen as a series of early experiments that inspired my later paintings.

The way of making and exhibiting these works forms another interesting connection. When making these works, I used masking tape to divide the paper into 12 squares with a grid form (Fig 3.8) and then painted them one by one from left to right. I also applied the grid form to exhibit the works. (see Fig 3.1) I chose the grid form at that time because it corresponded with the form of the calendar, and because of that, I named this series 'Diaries' to show a sense of time. However, when I look back and see the grid again, it echoes the grid-like streets in the city from a bird's-eye view, not only reminding me of the urban landscape of German painter Gerhard Richter (Fig 3.9) but also of the grid structures in Post-War British painter Prunella Clough. It seems that this painting series becomes a city I constructed by myself. On the one hand, as the number of paintings increases, the city is expanding; on the other, every painting occupies a part of urban space, just like a building. Throughout



the diary series, the element of the grid structure attracted my attention as a compositional element that had both an urban and industrial connotation, at the same time also allowed us to see through (as noticeable in the work of Prunella Clough or more contemporary painter Hurvin Anderson, among others).

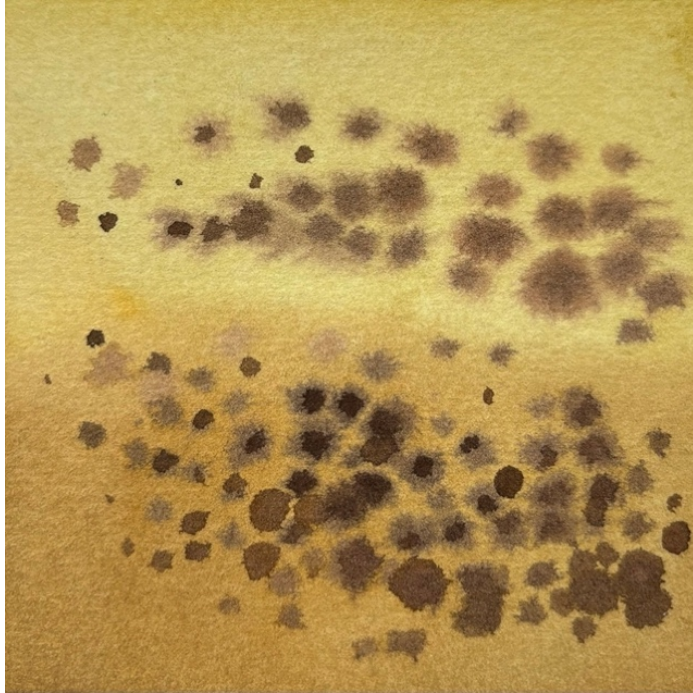


Figure 3.4 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #21*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm



Figure 3.5 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #74*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





Figure 3.6 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #29*, 2021, Mixed media on paper, 8cm x 8cm



Figure 3.7 Skyscrapers in London (view from the Sky Garden)



Figure 3.8 Work in progress



Figure 3.9 Gerhard Richter, *Townscape PL*, 1970, Oil on canvas, 170cm x 170cm

### ***3.2.2 Viewing in the Pandemic Life***

Viewing is related to psychology. Viewing is not just a visual but also a mental activity. These small paintings serve not only as visual representations but also as psychological responses. Parts of them are urban landscapes such as streets and particular urban spaces, while some are close-up depictions of everyday objects or a specific corner of space (city, studio or home). The depictions in these two parts are figurative, just like daily snapshots. In addition to figurative ones, there are some abstract paintings consisting of dots, lines and planes, which reflect and visualise the feelings of pandemic life, such as loneliness, alienation and disorder. Choosing different depicting methods also reflects my search for a balance between abstraction and figuration. When looking at these objects, I thought about integrating my feelings and emotions into the depiction. Thus, when the audience looks at my works, on the one hand, they see the content depicted in my works, while on the other hand, the works also call up their feelings and experiences of urban life during the pandemic. I wondered to what extent the personal emotional expressions in my works represent the general consciousness of most people.

In August 2021, I exhibited these small works at the Long Gallery (Fig 3.10), arranging them chronologically from left to right on the wall. Besides the visual dimension, I also tried to combine the exhibition with the auditory dimension to create an immersive experience. Therefore, I also added an audio piece to the space, which contains some inconspicuous sounds that I recorded in daily life, such as the sound of typing on the mobile phone keyboard, the sound of water drops, the friction between the chair and the floor, and the sound of turning book pages. I thought it helped viewers better understand the context of the works and read them based on their own experiences.





Figure 3.10 Qirui Tan, *This Is What We Have Gone Through*, 2021, Mixed media on paper, sound

Similarly, it is worth considering how other artists respond to the pandemic. Chinese painter Yongjin Chen created the *Pandemic Diaries* series (Fig 3.11) to record and respond to that particular period. These small square pictures not only show the silhouette of pandemic life but also convey his feelings towards that challenging time. The overlooked everyday objects depicted in the paintings seem to become the characters, facing the audience, whispering and telling the unknown stories of that time. Scottish painter Caroline Walker, known for voyeuristic paintings of women working, also made a series of paintings during the lockdown period. The subjects of these works consist of neighbours and the working women in her local area who do indispensable but underestimated and overlooked daily work. (Fig 3.12) As she observed in a conversation, ‘the pandemic has meant that these subjects are now framed by this new wider recognition for those that keep us all going on a daily basis.’<sup>105</sup>

<sup>105</sup> “In Conversation with Caroline Walker”, *Philips*, April 2021.





Figure 3.11 Yongjin Chen, *Pandemic Diaries series*, 2020, Mixed media on paper, 15cm x 15cm x 60



Figure 3.12 Caroline Walker, *Giorgia and Noemi*, 2021, Oil on linen, 190cm x 215cm

### 3.2.3 Daily Snapshots

Most of the small paintings in the series were based on daily snapshots that I took of peculiar arrangements I came across while carrying out my daily routines during the pandemic. (Fig 3.13)

The idea of daily snapshots calls up *The Dailies* from Thomas Demand. Compared to his works, although the way of engaging with these photographic images was different as my way was representation through painting, while he always reconstructed the scenes through modelling and sculpture, the contents were quite similar to the shared interests in everyday objects usually set indoors. Consider the kinds of objects pictured in some of *Newcastle Diaries*, such as the leftovers in the kitchen (Fig 3.14), which echo the green seeds on the floor in *Daily #11*(Fig 3.15).

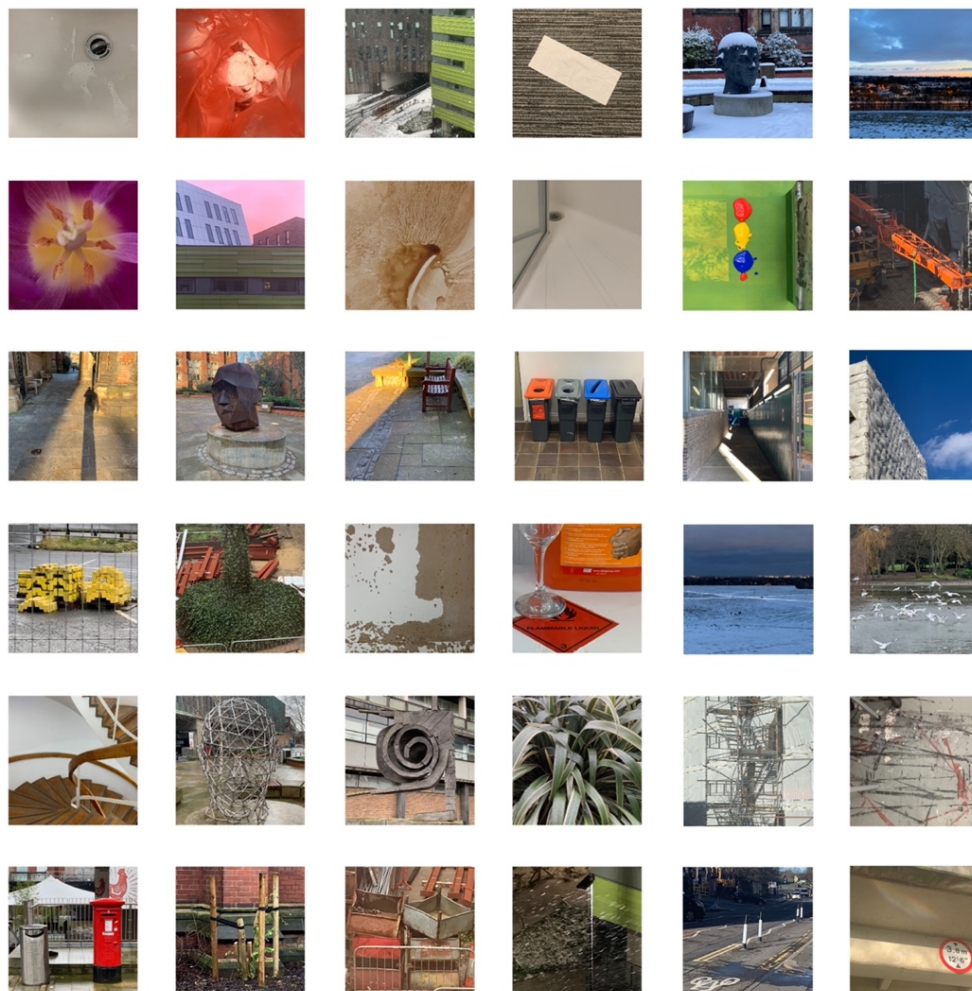


Figure 3.13 Qirui Tan, *Daily Snapshots*, 2021, Photography, 8cm x 8cm x 36





Figure 3.14 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #79*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm



Figure 3.15 Thomas Demand, *Daily #11*, 2011, Photography

Traditional still life painting, usually from a frontal perspective, allows a clear view of all objects. Not so here: some of these snapshot-like images in *Newcastle Diaries* took a different perspective strategy, which was a bird's-eye view similar, perhaps, to Demand's works. Hal Foster, speaking of the viewpoint in *The Dailies*, remarks that 'Often caught at an angle, they appears as if glimpsed, usually from above, as if they had caught the interest of the artist, here in the guise of a flâneur-observer of the everyday, in passing.'<sup>106</sup> This observation from Foster also characterised what I did during the pandemic. I thought I was acting as a flâneur then, wandering around the city streets, glimpsing at different corners and experiencing urban life.<sup>107</sup> The phone camera in my hand helped me play that role, just like Susan Sontag describes in her book *On Photography*, how, since the development of handheld cameras in the early 20th century, the camera has evolved into the tool of the flâneur.<sup>108</sup> Francis Alÿs, speaking of walking, observed that 'Also, when you are walking, you are aware of, or awake to, everything that happens in your peripheral vision: the little incidents, smells, images, sounds.'<sup>109</sup> It was through this walking around that I came across those objects which connected me to the city. In his classic, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau considers walking as 'a space of enunciation'. He argues that 'the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered.'<sup>110</sup> I thought the walking could also be a space of writing.

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<sup>106</sup> Hal Foster, "Dailiness According to Demand," *October* 158, Fall 2016, 102.

<sup>107</sup> Flâneur is a French term popularized in the nineteenth-century for a type of urban male 'stroller', 'lounger', 'saunterer', or 'loafer'. Traditionally depicted as male, a flâneur is an ambivalent figure of urban affluence and modernity, representing the ability to wander detached from society with no other purpose than to be an acute observer of industrialized, contemporary life. Charles Baudelaire discusses 'The Man of the Crowd' in "The Painter of Modern Life", presented a memorable portrait of the flâneur as the artist-poet of the modern metropolis. See Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life: and other essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964), 9.

<sup>108</sup> See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 55.

<sup>109</sup> Francis Alÿs and James Lingwood, extract from interview edited from two conversations in London on 11 and 20 July 2005, in Francis Alÿs, *Seven Walks* (London: Artangel, 2006).

<sup>110</sup> De Certeau argues that walking has a triple 'enunciative' function: the pedestrian appropriates the topographical system just as the speaker takes on the language; it is a spatial acting-out of the place just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language; and it indicates relations among pragmatic 'contracts' in the form of movements, which is just as verbal enunciation puts contracts between interlocutors into action. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 97-98.



If walking in the city could be seen as an article about the urban experience, can these snapshots be regarded as punctuation marks in the article?

### **3.2.4 Accidental and Ephemeral**

Like *The Dailies*, the scenes pictured in most small works appear accidental. It was not a traditional still life setting up where I prepared some objects and intentionally made an arrangement of them on the table. Instead, I encountered them accidentally in my daily routine, such as the broken egg in #75 (Fig 3.16) or the red dumpster in the street corner in #57 (Fig 3.17).



Figure 3.16 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #75*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm

The same aleatory strategies were also seen in Demand's works, such as two stacked paper cups stuck in the wire fence in *Daily #15* (Fig 3.18). Unlike I used painting to represent these objects on paper, Demand directly used paper to reconstruct the objects through modelling. That formed an ambivalence because, on the one hand, he reconstructed the scenes by composing the objects, but on the other, he had to make the works appear accidental and undesigned. According to this, Foster remarks that Demand creates a series of contradictory pictures that seem both intentional and

arbitrary, which is not the same as random, by playing the look of non-composition against the fact of composition.<sup>111</sup>



Figure 3.17 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries* #57, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm

Also featured in *Newcastle Diaries* is the sense of ephemerality, as in #20 (Fig 3.19), which shows the silhouette of tulips reflected on the window. With a degree of descriptive details and a poetic concision, this image calls up some Imagist poems influenced and inspired by haiku. For example, there is a typical one from Ezra Pound — ‘The apparition of these faces in the crowd: Petals on a wet, black bough.’<sup>112</sup> The apparitional quality, suggesting the fleeting of life, evokes a strong sense of transience and triggers our reflections on such a status in contemporary urban life. Charles Baudelaire first used the term ‘modernity’ (*modernité*) to describe the ephemeral, transient experience of living in a metropolis.<sup>113</sup> Baudelaire’s call for painters to focus on the world around them and capture that experience closely mirrors Ralph Rugoff’s

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<sup>111</sup> Hal Foster, “Dailiness According to Demand,” *October* 158, Fall 2016, 105.

<sup>112</sup> Ezra Pound, *In a Station of the Metro*, 1913. Wikipedia, last modified April 25, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In\\_a\\_Station\\_of\\_the\\_Metro](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_a_Station_of_the_Metro)

<sup>113</sup> “*Charles Baudelaire*”, Wikipedia, last modified March 12, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Baudelaire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Baudelaire)



Figure 3.18 Thomas Demand, *Daily #15*, 2011, Photography



Figure 3.19 Qirui Tan, *Newcastle Diaries #20*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm



argument where he remarks that 'framing the immediacy of contemporary experience within the history of an ancient medium, so that the subject of even the most casual snapshot took on an unexpected gravity when translated to the canvas.'<sup>114</sup> This observation matches what I have done in *Newcastle Diaries*, but unlike those painters using oil paints, I used watercolour, another ancient and traditional medium. More importantly, I applied this ancient medium to dealing with contemporary ideas like everyday, everyday objects and fleeting experiences of urban life. It could be seen that exhibition *The Painting of Modern Life* is a continuation of Baudelaire's idea where the painters are not only interested in urban phenomenon but also in ephemerality of photographic images which underlines the ephemeral idea I mentioned above, as Gerhard Richter puts it, 'Photographs are ephemeral images of this communication — as are the pictures that I painted from photographs.'<sup>115</sup>

### 3.3 Fragments Series

#### 3.3.1 The Role of Objects

Apart from showing themselves, the objects depicted in still life paintings are also symbolic and reflect something behind the paintings. Still life paintings are 'pictures of things' which attract signs and referents, making us look through objects and lose the thing itself. In his article *Thing Theory*, Bill Brown has observed that we look through objects (to discover what they reveal about history, society, nature, or culture — most importantly, what they reveal about us) as they travel through our lives.<sup>116</sup> In addition, Shklovsky, the Russian Formalist theorist, also remarks that the technique of art is to render objects

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<sup>114</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Castello di Rivoli and Hayward Gallery, *The Painting of Modern Life: 1960s to Now*, (London: Hayward Publishing, 2007), 11.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>116</sup> Bill Brown, "The Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 4.



‘unfamiliar’, to create complex forms, and to prolong the perception process.<sup>117</sup> In terms of this, he continues, art is a way of perceiving the aesthetic qualities of an object, where the object itself holds no importance.<sup>118</sup>

My *Fragments* series depicted fragments of everyday objects, such as the garlic skin in *Fragments I*, the broken glass bottle in *Fragments II*, and cabbage debris in *Fragments III* (Fig 3.20), which were always in front of my eyes during the lockdown. If it were not for this special period of the pandemic, I would not have taken them seriously and observed them carefully.



Figure 3.20 Qirui Tan, *Fragments III*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 31cm x 41cm

What can we get when looking through these fragments? Is the overlap of ‘microcosmic and macrocosmic scale’ highly relevant in this painting series,

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<sup>117</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essay*, edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3-24.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

as Alsdorf suggested it before in relation to Cezanne's still life paintings?<sup>119</sup> Specifically, can these micro fragments epitomise the macro urban landscape in the pandemic, and moreover, the everyday objects removed from their original context create ambiguities about scale, functions and contexts, as suggested by Stewart?<sup>120</sup> For me, the chaos, disorder and uncontrollability dealt with in the paintings are exactly what the pandemic brought to us, which becomes a key aspect of still life painting, as Alsdorf suggested in relation to Cezanne's work, 'painting objects that recall that world but in such a way as to put its coziness and enclosure radically in doubt.'<sup>121</sup> This depiction of chaos, a response to the pandemic environment, visualised the psychological activities and emotions and reinterpreted the pandemic life. Here, the fragment is no longer itself but a metaphor symbolising the life broken by the pandemic. The daily life during the pandemic was still and disordered, just like the fragments depicted in the paintings. The sense of stillness comes from the prohibition of public activities, and the sense of disorder is due to the breaking up of the normal and ordered way of life.

This depiction of fragments calls up De Heem's *The Desserts* (Fig 3.21), demonstrating how microcosmic still life can epitomise all the riches of the macrocosmic world. In this painting, the objects on the table not only show themselves but are also integrated with different cultures and societies, which decontextualises domestic objects from their practical use. More than a picture of things, it depicts an interior realm of aristocratic desires and material affluence.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> See Bridget Alsdorf, "Interior Landscapes: Metaphor and Meaning in Cézanne's Late Still Lifes," *Word & Image* 26 (2010): 314.

<sup>120</sup> Stewart argues that miniature objects are 'not objects of use value, but a pure object, an object which will not be taken up in the changing sphere of lived reality but rather will remain complete at a distance.' See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1993), 125.

<sup>121</sup> Bridget Alsdorf, "Interior Landscapes: Metaphor and Meaning in Cézanne's Late Still Lifes," *Word & Image* 26 (2010): 321.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.



Figure 3.21 De Heem, *The Desserts*, c.1640, Oil on canvas, 149cm x 203cm

Looking back on the still life history, we can find that even if the painting appears similar, the role of objects in still life paintings can be different. The reading becomes completely different when a similar appearance is put in other times and cultural backgrounds. Compared to my *Fragments* series, the *Unswep Room* (Fig 3.22), a copy of Herakleitos after Sosos of Pergamon Floor mosaic fragment, shared the same subject matter, the leftovers. The perspective is also the same; both use the bird's-eye view. However, the symbolic meaning of the leftovers in each painting is different. In my work, the fragments served as a mirror, reflecting the living situation in the pandemic, while in *Unswep Room*, the debris showed more religious meaning. According to Pliny, sweeping up the remains of a meal was bad luck, and from the belief held by the Hellenistic Greeks and Etruscans, the food leftovers on the ground were left for the dead people.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>123</sup> See Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999), 16-18.





Figure 3.22 *The Unswept Room* (Oikos Asarotos), Hadrianic, copy by Herakleitos (second century CE) after Sosos of Pergamon

### 3.3.2 Rhopography

The idea of looking at the overlooked was reflected as 'rhopography' in ancient still lifes. Charles Sterling distinguishes 'megalography' and 'rhopography' by concluding that Megalography portrays the big things in the world, such as historical crises, hero battles, and god legends. Rhopography, which derives from rhopos, portrays insignificant things, the modest material



foundation of existence that 'importance' continuously ignores.<sup>124</sup> According to this, Norman Bryson remarks that still life explores what 'importance' tramples on. It attends to the world disregarded by the human desire to produce greatness.<sup>125</sup>

In his book *Natural History*, Pliny The Elder talks about the painter Peiraikos by describing that Peiraikos was ranked behind a few painters in terms of competence; he probably gained distinction through his choice of topics insofar as he earned the pinnacle of glory in that field although adopting a modest line. He painted barbershops and cobblers' stalls, asses, viands, and the like, obtaining the name 'painter of sordid subjects'.<sup>126</sup> This description of the so-called 'dirt painter' proves that painters in that early time had already shown their interest in mundane and humble objects and used these overlooked things in daily life as the subject for painting.

By reusing discarded materials, contemporary artists are increasingly focusing on the issue of transforming leftovers into something else, which they refer to as 're-enchantment of the world'.<sup>127</sup> There are other painters who include actual dirt in their paintings; for example, Sterling Ruby uses discarded cardboard combined with prescription packages and other found images in his work *EXHM* (Fig 3.23) to create autobiographical archaeology, drawing a close link between excavation site and aerial views. Krauss' references to Jackson Pollock's *Full Fathom Five*, as the incorporation of 'resublimated debris' draws our attention to the use of rubbish and dirt more widely in contemporary practice, including Man Ray's *Dust Breeding* (Fig 3.24) and

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<sup>124</sup> Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Present Time* (New York: Universe Books, 1959), 11.

<sup>125</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 61.

<sup>126</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History, Volume IX: Books 35*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 345.

<sup>127</sup> Antoine Picon, "Anxious Landscapes: From the Ruin to Rust," *Grey Room* 01 (September 2000): 81.

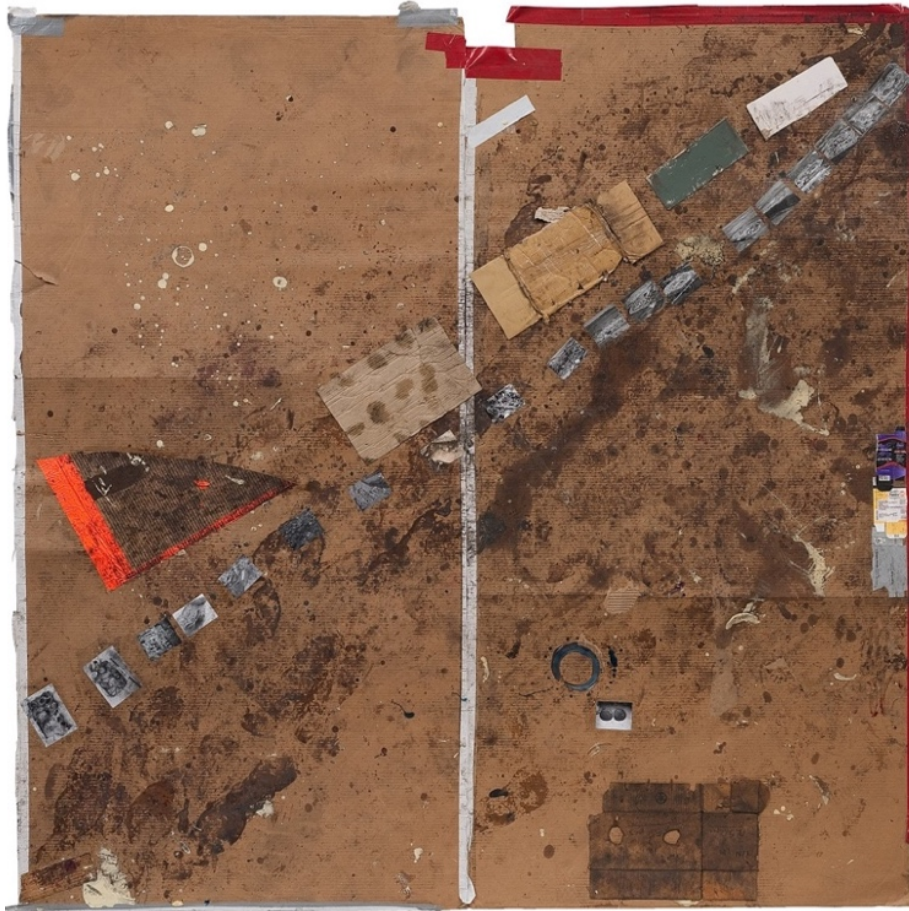


Figure 3.23 Sterling Ruby, *EXHM* (3915), 2012, Collage

Robert Rauschenberg's *Dirt Painting* (Fig 3.25).<sup>128</sup> This transformation of residue into something else is also distinct in the *Block* series, where I turned the 'waste' into high-rise buildings. (I will expand the discussion later in Section 3.5.5 World-building.) Artists mentioned here not only radically review the use of classical artist's material by using dust and dirt but also question the notion of artistic creation altogether, when the 'making process' takes place outside the control of the artist where objects are seemingly accidentally created or placed.

<sup>128</sup> Bois, Y-A. and Krauss, R. (eds.), *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 95.

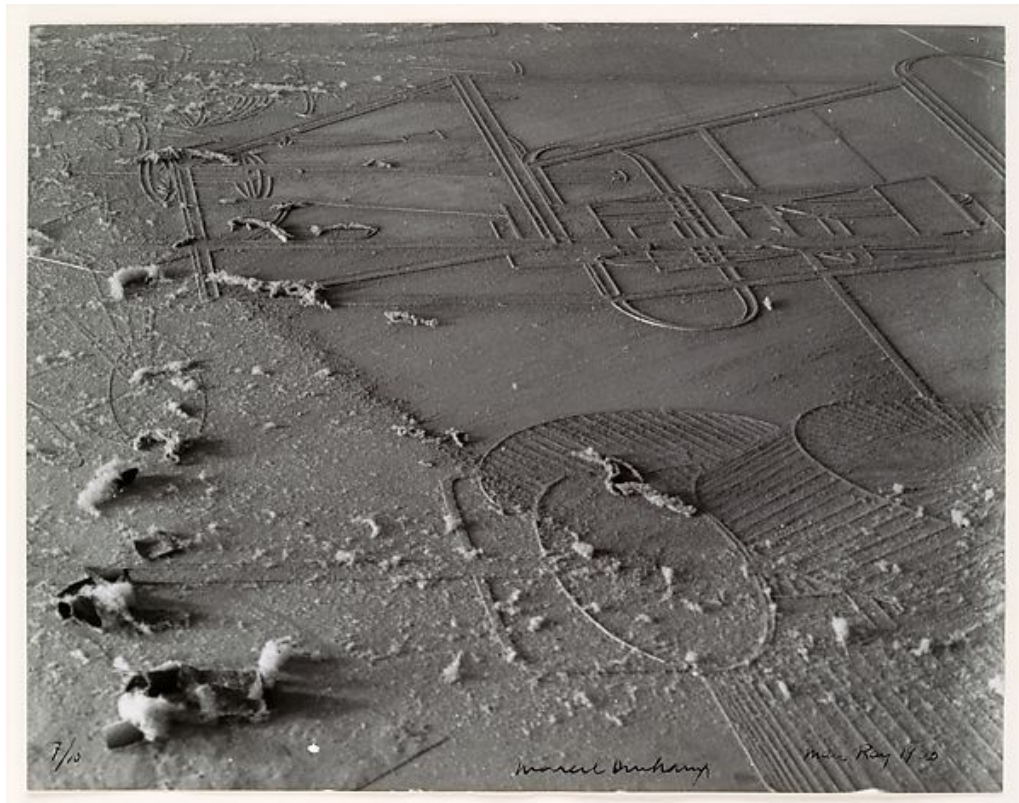


Figure 3.24 Man Ray, *Dust Breeding*, 1920, Gelatin silver print, 23.9cm x 30.4cm



Figure 3.25 Robert Rauschenberg, *Dirt Painting (for John Cage)*, 1953, Dirt and mold in wood box, 39.7cm x 40.2cm x 6.4cm



### 3.3.3 Presence and Absence

The leftovers depicted in the *Fragments* series are ephemeral because they are often cleared away quickly as waste. And in that sense, they call up the notion of presence and absence. Although there are no human beings in this series of paintings, the traces of humans remain. In seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, the 'technique of flaying' was frequently used to reveal the insides, undersides and outsides of objects, and further reflect multiple surfaces.<sup>129</sup> That was typically applied in Willem Claesz. Heda's still life (Fig 3.26). Here in this work, whether it is nuts, lemons, oysters or glasses and



Figure 3.26 Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with Oysters, a Rummer, a Lemon and a Silver Bowl*, c.1634, Oil on panel, 43cm x 57cm

silver bowls, they all present signs of destruction, offering the view of insides, outsides or the undersides. The same technique also occurred in Goya's work (Fig 3.27), where he depicted the flesh slices of salmon to indicate the

<sup>129</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: John Murray, 1983), 91.





Figure 3.27 Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Still-Life Three Salmon Steak*, c.1808-1812, Oil on canvas, 45cm x 62cm

corpses of victims in the war. This kind of destruction not only shows the multiple surfaces of objects, like insides and outsides, but also suggests past human activities, for example, peeling off the garlic in *Fragments I* (Fig 3.28), which evokes a strong sense of presence and absence. Again, this resonates the idea of 'inter-space' as Joanna Woodall speaks in relation to Dutch still life painting: 'The incidence of such studio scenes in the Netherlands, potentially displayed alongside pictures of laden tables, made possible what might be described as an 'inter-space', a relation in which consumption and production, looking and making, could speak to one another.'<sup>130</sup>

This also reminds me of Alex Rockman's watercolour painting (Fig 3.29), in which he used watercolour to paint water (sea), showing the fluidity of watercolour. On the one hand, transparent paint raises the notion of presence

<sup>130</sup> Joanna Woodall, "Laying the Table: The Procedures of Still Life," *Art History* Vol.35 Issue 5 (November 2012): 991.



Figure 3.28 Qirui Tan, *Fragment I*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm



Figure 3.29 Alexis Rockman, *Transient Passage*, 2022, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 131.1cm x 188cm

and absence. On the other hand, associating with the title *Transient Passage*, human figures were absent in this work, but traces of their presence — the buoy and plastic bottle were left. It is their ‘transient passage’ on the sea that

has brought permanent pollution to the ocean. Of course, the fascination with the hybrids, defamiliarising of objects and look beyond the surface, has been a key aspect of metaphysical painting, as for example Giorgio de Chirico in the early twentieth century. De Chirico's work notably points towards the hidden aspect of objects (underneath the surface) or architectural urban elements. (see Fig 3.32) Again, this seems to be another example of transition between inside and outside.

### **3.4 Reflections on 'Overlooked'**

Since my research topic has always revolved around overlooked everyday objects, it is also worth considering how to understand the word 'overlooked'.

The scope of everyday objects is very broad, making the research topic somehow unclear. For example, in traditional still lifes, we see fruits, flowers, vegetables, and utensils. Their functions are different, but they all can be called 'everyday objects'. Although the overall scope seems to be narrowed after adding the word 'overlooked', the problem is that the word 'overlook' itself is a very subjective behaviour. For example, the fragments of a broken glass bottle on the street will be overlooked by pedestrians because they usually will not notice these fragments when walking on the street. However, if they are not pedestrians but street cleaners whose job is to clean the streets, then the garbage and debris that appear on the streets are not overlooked, but the things they need to pay attention to and clean up intentionally. Therefore, in my research, the overlooked everyday objects I refer to are defined more from my subjective angle rather than an objective definition. Perhaps some objects are quite common that most people see as the overlooked, but not everyone agrees. According to this, I need to figure out what kind of overlooked objects I refer to in the research. For me, familiarity, waste, and repetition characterise overlooked objects well.

Firstly, we take objects for granted because of familiarity. This familiarity in daily life tends to make the objects escape our attention. In his book *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-life Painting*, Norman Bryson has observed that its entire goal compels the subject, both painter and viewer, to pay special attention to the world's preterite objects, which, precisely because they are so familiar, elude regular notice.<sup>131</sup> Familiarity also manifests itself in the way we interact with objects. In the famous analysis of tools, Heidegger mentions two states of the existence of objects, using the hammer as an example. For Heidegger, the hammer exists simultaneously in at least two states: the state of 'vorhanden' (present-to-hand) and the state of 'zuhanden' (ready-to-hand).<sup>132</sup> The way we deal with hammers is not to keep them in hand to observe them. We pick them up naturally to hammer nails instead of directly putting them in front of our eyes as a research object to observe and think carefully. In this state of picking up the hammer and using it, the hammer is in the vorhanden state. Only when abnormal conditions occur, such as the hammer is broken, much heavier than expected, or the hammer is not made of the usual colour, we observe the hammer as an object, bringing it into the zuhanden state. When the hammer is in the vorhanden state, it is removed from our attention, not as a single thing presented to consciousness as in the zuhanden state. Thus, the vorhanden state leads us to overlook them. For example, we can think about the relationship between a pair of glasses and the person wearing them. As long as the glasses are not broken or blurred, the person will not notice the existence of the glasses.

Secondly, waste could be a typical characteristic of overlooked objects. Yuriko Saito argues in her book that whatever they may be, 'everyday' objects and

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<sup>131</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 87.

<sup>132</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).



activities are typically experienced via a pragmatic lens.<sup>133</sup> We naturally tend to overlook when the objects lose their value in use to become waste. Broken and discarded, they also indicate our consumption more than being used.

Lastly, repetition cannot be omitted. Lefebvre declares in his article *Everyday and Everydayness* that everyday life has always had a repetitious quality.<sup>134</sup> He subsequently argues that the everyday is located at the meeting point of two repetition modes: the linear, which predominates in 'rational' processes, and the cyclical, which predominates in natural processes. On the one hand, everyday implicates the repetition of nature, such as day and night, life and death, seasons and harvest. On the other hand, it lies in the linear and repetitive processes like work and consumption, which are driven by human reason.<sup>135</sup> When talking about the development of everyday objects such as plates, bowls, and pots in different eras and cultures, Norman Bryson remarks that these items are all connected to behaviours that are the same for all users throughout generations; they portray everyday life as being significantly more about repetition than it is about individual creativity and innovation.<sup>136</sup> Many forms of everyday objects have been taken for granted by generations in obscurity. Bryson concludes that they are always overlooked because they contain such immense forces of repetition.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, many everyday objects, especially consumer products, are produced through manufacturing. This continuous repetition of the same form dilutes its specificity on the one hand. It weakens our curiosity about it, on the other, which ultimately causes such everyday objects to be overlooked.

In terms of my research, the subjects are exactly the everyday objects that

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<sup>133</sup> Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-making* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>134</sup> Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," *Yale French Studies*, No. 73 (1987): 10.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 139.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 140.

possess these three characteristics. An egg carton is a typical example. First, it is a very familiar and common object in daily life. Second, after the eggs are removed, the empty egg carton loses its original value in use, so it is often discarded and ignored. Finally, the continuous repetition of manufacturing also causes it to lose its particularity.

Through choosing different perspectives, I tried to re-examine these daily objects and finally presented my thoughts through painting. Through my works, I hope to allow the audience to rethink those inconspicuous things in daily life that may even be directly discarded and ignored. Can we find the extraordinary from the ordinary by choosing a new perspective? Can we discover the potential creativity of these everyday objects and give them new possibilities and values? By looking at these objects in my paintings from a bird's-eye view, the objects against the ground, the frequent outside objects were 'compressed' into seemingly shallow interior spaces, decontextualising the domestic items from their practical use or 'natural' environment, as I will discuss later in the chapter.

### **3.5 Block Series**

#### ***3.5.1 Why Egg Cartons?***

First of all, I was attracted by the egg carton because of its structural and architectural shape. At the beginning of the PhD programme, since my initial research topic was about Surrealism and architecture, it made me think about what surrealist architecture looks like. Motivated by this question, I started to play with the egg cartons I collected, creating different compositions (Fig 3.30), which were not only inspired by Frederick Kiesler's model called *Endless House* (Fig 3.31), but also Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings where there might be a link between egg cartons and his use of

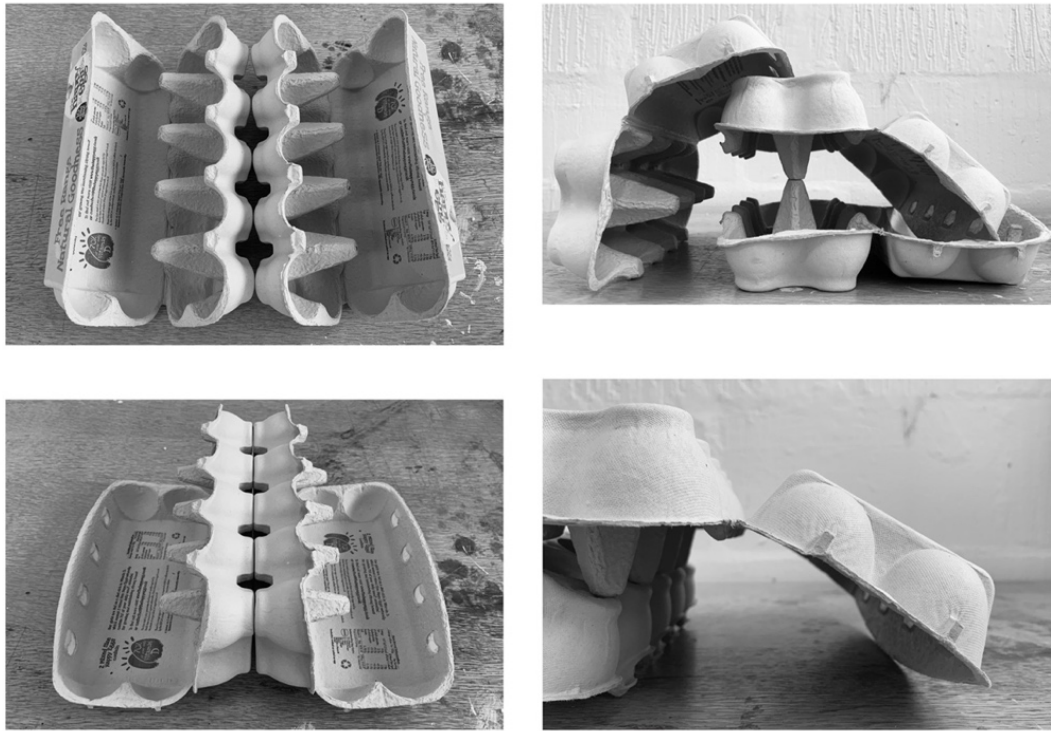


Figure 3.30 Qirui Tan, *Architectural Spaces*, 2020, Photography



Figure 3.31 Frederick Kiesler, *Model for the Endless House*, 1959, Cement, steel wire mesh, and plastic, 90.5cm x 247cm x 100.5cm

shell forms such as eggs, gloves and banana peels. (Fig 3.32) This first attempt made me want more egg cartons, and I continued to collect them. Even after that, I have shifted the research topic from Surrealism and architecture to still life. The collection of egg cartons has never stopped and lasted more than three years. Now, these stacked egg cartons serve as the main subject in my paintings.



Figure 3.32 Giorgio de Chirico, *Turin Spring*, 1914, Oil on canvas, 124cm x 99.5cm

Besides serving as the main subject for my painting practice, this repetitive behaviour itself of collecting the same object again and again is significant to my practice. Here, a seemingly casual action — stacking one empty egg carton on top of another became meaningful due to the repetition. Because the collecting is continuous rather than instantaneous, it indicates the passing of time. This calls up Roman Opalka's lifelong project, in which he painted



numbers on the canvas from 1 to 5,607,249 to explore time. These numbers on canvas are not only paintings but also visualisations of time. For me, these stacked egg cartons also visualised those past years of doing the research. On the one hand, it looks as if I kept collecting and observing them, but on the other, they also looked back at me as an accompany, witnessing my whole PhD research. In addition, each empty egg carton served as a brick, and stacking egg cartons could also be regarded as accumulation and establishment, similar to stacking bricks to build a house. It is not until the completion of this research that my 'research building' will be finally built. The repetitive architectural feature also resonates to certain extent with Bernd & Hilla Becher's documentary photographs of a disappearing German industrial landscape (Fig 3.33). Rendering of the post-industrial ruins are taken in an

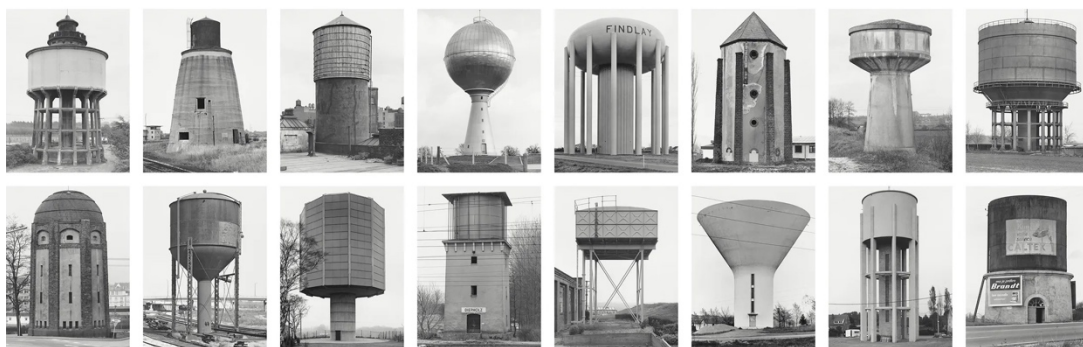


Figure 3.33 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1963-80, Gelatin silver prints, 40.4cm x 31cm x 16

impassioned, timeless fashion of photographs of industrial buildings. While the presentation as typology in its original state allows a comparison between individual buildings, the 'anonymous sculptures' makes it increasingly difficult to spot any differences. And again, this repetitive notion becomes an important aspect of the making process in my practice itself.

The repetition not only lies in the continuous collecting of egg cartons but also in painting them repeatedly. The *Block VI-Faded* (Fig 3.34) depicted the oxidation of colours on the surface of egg cartons, showing the fading of the colour from top to bottom. Painting each row repeatedly made this work echo Agnes Martin's abstract paintings. Although each egg carton looks quite the



Figure 3.34 Qirui Tan, *Block VI-Faded*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 55cm x 70cm

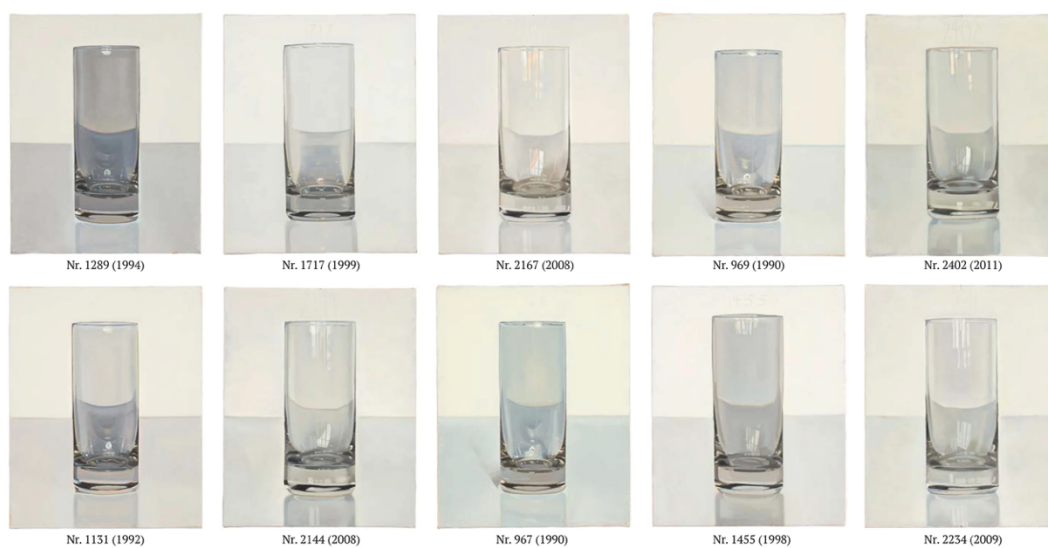


Figure 3.35 Peter Dreher, *Day by Day, Good Day*, starting 1974, Oil on canvas, each 25cm x 20cm

same, they are different individuals, just like the grid lines in Martin's works, which look the same but unique. This repetitive depiction of the same object in my paintings also calls up *Day by Day, Good Day* (Fig 3.35) from Peter Dreher, in which he painted the same empty glass more than 5,000 times. There are depictions of the same glass from the same distance and scale, but each painting appears different based on different lighting conditions in a day.

In the reflection of the glass, the window presents a different state, being covered or not. In front of these paintings, not only do I see the appearance of a simple glass, but I also look through the object and see Dreher's everyday life, which reminds me of an idiom in Chinese Buddhism — 'To see a world in a wild flower, and a bodhi in a leaf.'<sup>138</sup>

Secondly, as I mentioned in the reflection on 'overlooked', an empty egg carton is an overlooked object. On the one hand, it is a kind of familiar and common packaging material in daily life; on the other, it tends to be a waste after the eggs are taken out, losing its value in use. Moreover, because it is made of paper, it can be recycled and re-made easily through manufacturing, increasing the probability of being overlooked and discarded. Since my research is looking at the overlooked, the egg carton became my choice for the subject.

Furthermore, the egg carton also functioned as a good connection between still life and urban landscape, which helped me investigate the relationship and interchange between these two categories. For one thing, as an everyday object, it contains the domestic quality of still life. At the same time, when stacked together, it is quite architectural and industrial, not only assuming the character of buildings in the city but also forming an urban atmosphere. The egg cartons play a similar role in my research as the bottles in Morandi's works, where he explored the relationship between still life and landscape. Here, let us consider how he transformed some landscape characteristics into his still life paintings.

On the one hand, colour is considered a significant factor in Morandi's work.

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<sup>138</sup> The abstract noun *bodhi* means the knowledge or wisdom, or awakened intellect, of a Buddha. See "Enlightenment in Buddhism", Wikipedia, last modified August 19, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightenment\\_in\\_Buddhism#cite\\_note-MW\\_bodhi-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightenment_in_Buddhism#cite_note-MW_bodhi-1)

Unlike the bright and fresh colours of traditional still life paintings, the colours of Morandi's paintings evoke a matte and neutral feeling. Morandi spent most of his time working in the studio in the countryside near Bologna, and the paintings capture the distinct qualities of the Emilian environment, such as the wet, misty lighting of spring and autumn and the intense summer sunlight. For example, when looking at the work *Still Life 1956* (Fig 3.36), we can feel a strong sense of haziness, which also comes out of the landscape painting *Courtyard at Via Fondazza, 1958* (Fig 3.37) because of the lighting condition from the baking sun. In addition, thick layers of dust accumulating on the objects in his studio weaken the reflection of light to some extent, strengthening this sense of matte and blurry. Also the colours of the buildings in Bologna influenced Morandi as he often used colours similar to brick red, earth red, yellow and rose in his still life paintings.

On the other hand, it is also worth thinking about the composition of Morandi's paintings and how the bottles and jars he selected in the studio were arranged and placed in the paintings. For example, In *Still Life, 1952* (Fig 3.38), Morandi presented these objects in a way that objects often overlap. The intertwined relationship between these objects is like the cityscape of his hometown, Bologna (Fig 3.39), making the object itself equally important to the surrounding 'negative' space. In Morandi's still life works, we can also see his concern for homogeneity and diversity. Morandi's still life paintings appear quite similar at first glance, but when looking carefully, each of his works has subtle changes. Because he added or removed any object, moved it to a new position, or changed its direction, he could create a new relationship between these objects and a new light condition. This collection of novel visual occurrences, despite its potential familiarity, will provide the spectator with a distinct and unique experience. Indeed, the more attentively we examine



Morandi's artwork, the more individualistic each image appears.<sup>139</sup> This quality of homogeneity and diversity is so typical of Bologna itself that the writer Umberto Eco has observed that to properly comprehend Morandi, one must first explore the streets and arcades of this city and grasp the fact that a seemingly uniform crimson hue can distinguish one house from another and one street from another.<sup>140</sup> What is crucial for the discussion of my research project, is the intersection of still life and landscape painting, which appears essential for the understanding of Morandi's paintings. Again, in Morandi's



Figure 3.36 Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life (Natura morta)*, 1956, Oil on canvas, 36cm x 45.7cm

work, as mentioned before, the macrocosmic street scenes of the Italian city and microcosmic still-life objects seem closely interconnected, where the one resembles the other and vice versa. While in my paintings, as egg cartons resemble the idea of high-rise buildings, the link between model and

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<sup>139</sup> Karen Wilkin and Giorgio Morandi, *Giorgio Morandi: Works, Writings and Interviews* (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2007), 106.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

representation is significant. Model-making, scale and the shifting from still life to landscape seem an important aspect of contemporary painting practice.<sup>141</sup>



Figure 3.37 Giorgio Morandi, *Courtyard at Via Fondazza*, 1958, Oil on canvas, 30.6cm x 40.5cm

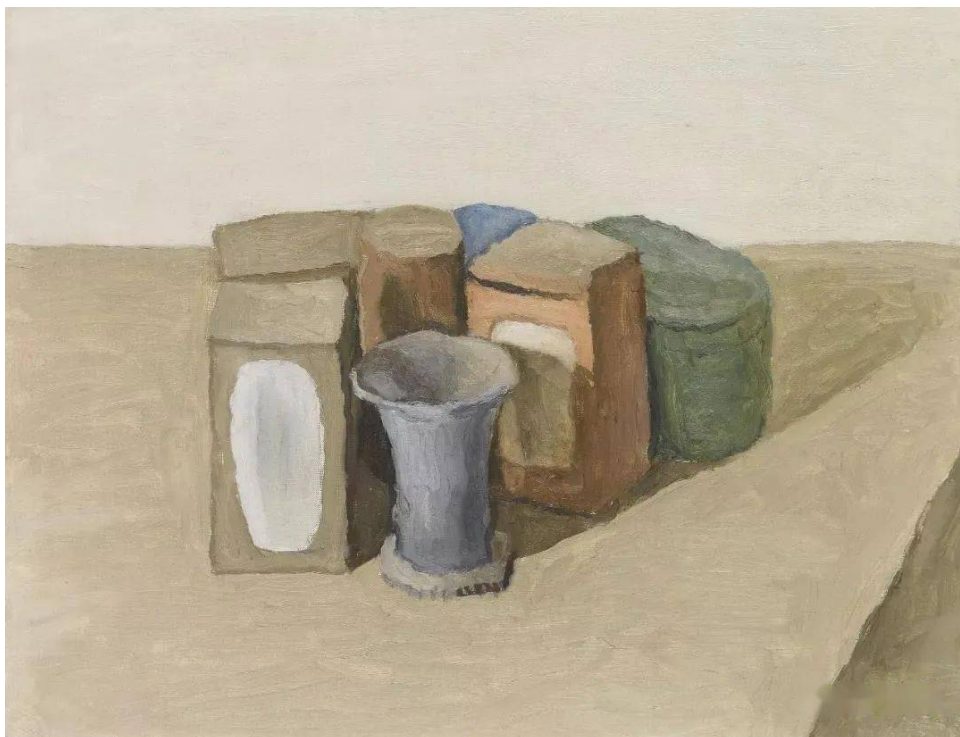


Figure 3.38 Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life (Natura morta)*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 36cm x 45.7cm

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<sup>141</sup> I will discuss this later in Section 3.5.5 World-building.





Figure 3.39 Bologna – Italy ©Jürgen Reichenpfader

### **3.5.2 Ephemeral Objects**

The *Block* series forms an interesting dialogue with Thomas Demand's work. The similarity lies in the fact that we both use paper material to make work, but with different strategies. Thomas Demand used paper to build some interior spaces, such as domestic and office views, while I used paper (egg cartons) to create exterior urban spaces. However, more importantly, Demand always destroys his paper models after taking photos of them, making these objects quite ephemeral. In my practice, the egg carton is also ephemeral.

For one thing, the decay process on the surface of egg cartons indicates the passing of time. In Chapter 1, the discussion on time is about whether the painting process is time-consuming. In Chapter 2, time means the water dries through evaporation. However, time also shows itself in the decay process. Because the stacked empty cartons were exposed to the air for a long time, the colour on the surface of the egg carton gradually oxidised and faded, corresponding with the paint peeling off the building's facade over time. This

sense of decay is quite distinct in the *Block* series. For example, in both details of *Block I* (Fig 3.40) and *Block V* (Fig 3.41), the smudge effect of the watercolour well presented the decay of the building's exterior wall. The *Block VI-Faded* (see Fig 3.34) depicted the oxidation of colours on the surface of egg cartons, showing the colour change from top to bottom. *Block IX* looks like a metropolis from a distance, but upon closer inspection, it is full of signs of decay. (Fig 3.42)

In most traditional still lifes, painters tried to use immortal paints to depict those ephemeral things, and the paintings froze those flowers and food in their freshest moments. However, this kind of freezing does not exist in real life as time will inevitably change the still life. *Basket of Fruit* (see Fig 1.11), a still life painting by Caravaggio, recorded the first trace of decay. The slightly rotted fruits and withered and yellowed leaves indicate the inexorable passing



Figure 3.40 Details of Fig 1.6





Figure 3.41 Details of Fig 1.12



Figure 3.42 Details of Fig 1.32

of time. Here, it is also worth considering another work, *Still Life 2001* (Fig 3.43) by Sam Taylor-Wood. This video shows how a Caravaggio display of fruit gradually transforms into a collapsed mass of rotting matter. Using the

form of time-lapse digital video not only brings time into the discussion on still life from the technology perspective but also serves as a way to question the immortality in those traditional still life paintings.



Figure 3.43 Sam Taylor-Wood, *Still Life*, 2001, Film still

Another thing is that egg cartons are unstable and fragile as they are made of paper, which is a typical ephemeral object. As paper is crucial to the practice of Demand, it also plays an important role in my paintings, especially in the *Block* series where 'I used paper to paint paper on paper'. In Chapter 2, when talking about the fluidity, I mentioned that these buildings in my works are actually egg cartons which are very fragile and less solid than water. They look solid, but actually not, as they can be destroyed easily due to the properties of paper. The egg cartons assuming the high-rise buildings in my paintings form an interesting paradox between the ephemeral quality of egg cartons and the inherent stability of buildings.

Back to the traditional still life context, ephemeral objects frequently occurred in *vanitas* still lifes, such as skulls, extinguished candles, opened pocket watches, and soap bubble-like mirrored balls. (see Fig 1.39) *Vanitas* is a particular type of still life painting that incorporates a series of symbolic objects designed to remind the viewers of their own mortality and the

worthlessness of worldly goods and pleasures. Through depicting these ephemeral objects, the painters tried to make the viewers look through these objects to remind them of the ephemerality of the world and life. In that sense, it seems that the *Block* series also has the meaning of *vanitas*, but the difference lies in the scope, which is no longer domestic space but a kind of exterior urban space. By depicting the fading and decay of the egg cartons, the paintings evoke a reflection on ephemeral and fleeting urban life, which is very similar to the meaning of *vanitas*.

This decay of buildings also echoes Johanna Mårtensson's work *Decor* (Fig 3.44), in which she used a special kind of bread to create a city model and then recorded the collapse of the city through photography. Although it looks like an apocalyptic scenario, could it be considered a kind of contemporary *vanitas* still life? Bread, as a common domestic object, often appears in traditional still life paintings. However, in this work, bread is presented in a moldy form. Just like the moldy fruit in Sam Taylor-Wood's work (see Fig



Figure 3.44 Johanna Mårtensson, *Decor* (Stage 3), 2009, Photo installation, a series of six photographs, 48cm x 60cm

3.43), the mold on the bread, as a product of decay, visualises the passing of time. It has the same symbolic meaning as the objects depicted in classic *vanitas* still lifes, such as open pocket watches and extinguished candles, reminding the viewers to reflect on the ephemerality of the world and life through decay. What's more interesting is that in this work, the artist made the bread into the shape of high-rise buildings. As the bread decayed, the buildings gradually collapsed. This picture seems to imply that if we don't cherish and protect the environment we live in, one day we will lose our homes. This kind of reflection on life and mortality makes this work like a *vanitas* in contemporary dress.

In addition, with time dating back to modern times, the use of ephemeral everyday objects could also be found in the Pop Art movement. The Pop artists re-examined the object as both a celebrated symbol of a rising consumer society and throwaway trash in a growing culture of waste.<sup>142</sup> Both dealing with everyday objects; it would be quite interesting to figure out the difference between my works and those of Pop artists.

Consumerism is often linked to bright colours, advertising and mass production. This is distinct, for example, not only in Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans (Fig 3.45) but also in the kitchen still life from Tom Wesselmann (Fig 3.46). However, compared to more materials and fresh colours in Pop Art, the egg cartons in my work are the opposite, showing more fading colours and decay, which can be regarded as a critical reflection on consumerism, or, to be more specific, an emphasis on the futility of consumerism. This calls up Arman's junk heaps (Fig 3.47), which reflects the anxieties of the throwaway society. It turned out that the new anxieties were the ones we had known for a long time: fear of death and concern over the transience of time. To combat

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<sup>142</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life: A History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999), 378.



them, we either hoard stuff or buy new ones all the time to replace the old ones.<sup>143</sup> In her book *Still Life: A History*, Sybille Ebert-Schifferer regards Arman's assemblages as 'classic *vanitas* still lifes in modern dress.'<sup>144</sup>



Figure 3.45 Andy Warhol, *Colored Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1965



Figure 3.46 Tom Wesselmann, *Still Life #35*, 1963, Oil and collage on canvas, 304.8cm x 487.7cm

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 388.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3.47 Arman Fernandez, *Petits Déchets Bourgeois*, 1959

If *vanitas* acts as a moral reflection on the material wealth of Dutch society and the ephemerality of life, can the *Block* series be seen as a kind of contemporary '*urban vanitas*'? Compared to *vanitas* still life, the paintings in the *Block* series are not only still lifes but also have an urban connotation. Also, the scope is no longer domestic but a kind of exterior urban space. More importantly, depicting the fading and decay of an egg carton evokes a reflection on urban life, emphasising ephemeral feelings of it. From this point of view, it is very similar to the meaning of *vanitas*. Consumerism means advertising and bright colours, and the egg carton in my work is the opposite, showing more fading colours and decay. This can be regarded as a critical reflection on consumerism.

### 3.5.3 A Metaphor for Safety

The egg carton is also symbolic in the *Block* series. On the one hand, from the appearance, the stacked egg cartons represent the highly repetitive urban buildings. On the other hand, in terms of function, the egg carton protects eggs just like the building protects people, becoming a metaphor for a safe space. As a common packaging material with a shell-like form, the egg carton mainly stores eggs and plays a role in buffering and protecting eggs during transportation. The space provided by egg cartons is safe, and this sense of security has been highlighted and emphasised during the pandemic, as Jürgen Habermas said in an interview: ‘We have never understood better how little we know, and about the constraint of having to act and live under conditions of insecurity.’<sup>145</sup> During the pandemic, I started collecting empty egg cartons, which, in a sense, reflected my thinking about safety and safe space. Let us consider the state of eggs in an egg carton. Each egg is restricted to its own unit and does not come into contact with each other. Such a state is like the relationship between people during the pandemic. Even if they are both in the same space, people always maintain a safe distance and refuse physical contact. Everyone operates in their own limited unit and does not interfere with each other. The buildings depicted in the *Block* series comprise many such continuously stacked safe spaces — egg cartons. Also, the distance in viewing, the middle viewpoint in this series, echoes the idea of distance in the pandemic. However, it is interesting that many of my small diary paintings seem to suggest the opposite. Instead of safety and distance they suggest the idea of explosion, spreading, breaching boundaries and disintegration.

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<sup>145</sup> Markus Schwering, “Jürgen Habermas über Corona: ‘So viel Wissen über unser Nichtwissen gab es noch nie’” (“Jürgen Habermas on Corona: ‘There has never been so much knowledge about our ignorance’”) *Frankfurter Rundschau*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/juergen-habermas-coronavirus-krise-covid19-interview-13642491.html>

Also see Jörg Heiser, “‘Artists in Quarantine’, Public Intellectuals, and the Trouble with Empty Heroics” *E-flux Criticism*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/332992/artists-in-quarantine-public-intellectuals-and-the-trouble-with-empty-heroics>

### 3.5.4 Decontextualisation

In terms of the egg carton, it is used to store eggs. As a commodity, it usually appears on supermarket shelves. As a daily object, it appears more often in domestic spaces like the kitchen. Here, egg cartons appear on the desktop in the studio. This change of context has resulted in different interpretations of egg cartons. The studio decontextualises the egg cartons and frees them from their utilitarian kitchen functions, making them familiar yet unfamiliar. It is easy to put a still life on the table, but is it possible to put a landscape on the table? I tried to answer this question by placing the egg cartons and other stationery on the table to make them look like cityscapes. It seems I experienced the cityscape in a studio, an interior space, rather than going outside the studio and back to the streets.

When turning to the *Block* series, this idea of contextualisation is also quite evident. If the space in *Block I* (see Fig 1.6) can still be recognised as an interior space because the upper right corner of the painting suggests a table corner, the space in other paintings became hard to tell. No hint of room frees the egg cartons from the domestic space and their storage function, which makes them inhabit a space between the utilitarian and the aesthetic, the ordinary and the uncanny. In his book, Norman Bryson remarks that since still life focuses on the overlooked, it must display items typically filtered out by perception. The challenge lies in making visible the aspects of perception that are usually overlooked, which can cause the visual field to appear significantly unfamiliar and alienated.<sup>146</sup> One interesting example is when looking back at *Basket of Fruit* (see Fig 1.2), Caravaggio intentionally removes any identifiable commonplace setting from his still life, making the objects occupy an inexplicably unfamiliar space. Alsdorf, speaking of Cézanne's still lifes, remarks that painting has the capacity to capture, condense, and simplify a

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<sup>146</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 87.



portion of indoor space, removing domestic objects from their original context and practical functions.<sup>147</sup>

Taking *Block IV* (see Fig 1.25) as an example, on the one hand, the egg cartons familiarise the cityscape, make it over in a miniature model form, and that cityscape, in turn, defamiliarise the egg cartons, making the familiar unfamiliar. On the other hand, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, the middle perspective in this painting looks like an aerial view from a drone, evoking a strong sense of surveillance and uncanniness. For me, uncanniness can be defined as transforming a familiar object into something suspicious or mysteriously unusual, which causes a state of uneasy bewilderment regarding its nature.

### **3.5.5 World-building**

I have always been interested in the city and the idea of world-building. In contemporary fine art practice, 'world-building' refers to the process of creating immersive, imaginary or alternative realities within an artistic framework. Beyond conventional narrative structures, this idea encompasses the overall development of environments, systems and experiences that reflect, criticize or reimagine certain aspects of the real world. It usually combines visual, conceptual and experiential elements to form complex and self-contained 'worlds' that invite audiences to participate and explore. Mark J.P. Wolf, speaking of this, argues that 'an imaginary world is always finite...gaps and missing pieces invite participation and speculation, examination of a world's many details, and many return visits.'<sup>148</sup> The way of world-building in contemporary fine art practices contains lots of aspects, for

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<sup>147</sup> Bridget Alsdorf, "Interior Landscapes: Metaphor and Meaning in Cézanne's Late Still Lifes," *Word & Image* 26 (2010): 316.

<sup>148</sup> Mark J.P. Wolf, *Exploring Imaginary Worlds: Essays on Media, Structure, and Subcreation* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021),<sup>1</sup>

example, some artists create immersive spatial installations through multimedia or digital technology, completely enveloping the audience in a realised scene. *The Weather Project* by Olafur Eliasson is a typical example for that where he built an atmospheric experience through recreating and reinterpreting natural phenomena. In addition, some artists try to imagine future scenarios through world-building. For example, in Alexis Rockman's paintings, he created some weird and dystopia future landscapes based on environmental problems, such as industrial pollution and global warming.

This idea of world-building consists of two different paths in my paintings:

One is from reality and trying to reconstruct the cities through painting. Let us consider the *Twilight City series* (Fig 3.48), which is a typical example of my previous works. This series of large watercolour cityscape paintings was based on the photos I took from the Centre Pompidou, depicting the panoramic city view of Paris. Romantic and massive, this series of works



Figure 3.48 Qirui Tan, *Twilight City series*, 2016-2019, Watercolour on paper, 83cm x 112cm x 4

offers a sense of freedom. This kind of freedom not only lies in the paintings of residue I mentioned before but also in painting the buildings here, which are not limited or restricted and are different to particular objects. Just imagine if a roof was added or a window was removed in the picture; nobody would say that is wrong. This idea of freedom reminds me of John Ruskin's paintings of



Figure 3.49 John Ruskin, *Mountain Rock and Alpine Rose*, 1844-49, Black ink, watercolour and bodycolour on white paper, 29.8cm x 41.4cm

rocks and mountains, where the overlap of figuration and abstraction has led to unintelligibility. (Fig 3.49) As Ruskin once remarked, 'perceive that all distinct drawing must be bad drawing, and that nothing can be right, till it is unintelligible.'<sup>149</sup> More importantly, the panoramic view of the city evokes a sense of sublime, making the city overwhelming, just like a sea of buildings. This not only calls up Robbie Bushe's cityscape painting (Fig 3.50) but also echoes Peter Matthews' immersion in the ocean and nature (see Fig 2.9), which shows how he experienced the sublime.

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<sup>149</sup> Mark Prince, "New Realism", *Art Monthly* 376 (2014): 6.



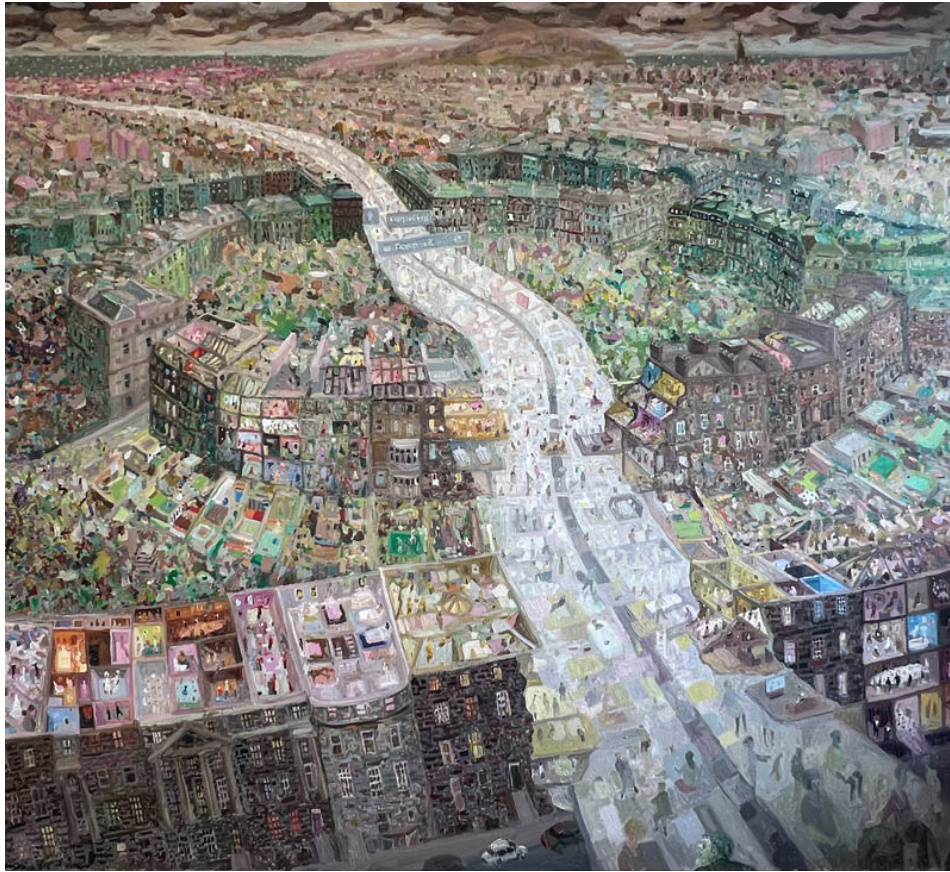


Figure 3.50 Robbie Bushe, *The Moray Estate Interchange*, 2023, Oil on canvas, 155cm x 170cm

In addition, based on reality, this series of works also evokes a strong sense of uncanny, which derives from two aspects:

The first comes from the aerial viewpoint in these paintings. I have talked about how this particular viewpoint gave a feeling of distance and surveillance when I mentioned the landscape paintings by Carol Rhodes in Chapter 1. Here, in these works, this bird's-eye view also has the same function, creating a sense of alienation as if I set the city aside and observe it like an object. This seems to separate me from the city, which is quite strange because the usual way we experience the city is actually being in it.

The colour of these paintings is another part that gives rise to the uncanny feeling. With the grey colour saturating the whole city, each picture gives quite uneasy feelings, creating a tension oscillating between something that has happened and something that will happen. This makes the city depicted in the



paintings strangely familiar yet unfamiliar. On the one hand, it is a city based on reality, but on the other hand, it is not the same as Paris in reality, but another one I reconstructed from reality through painting.

In addition to reconstructing a city from reality, another path of world-making is based on Surrealism and, through imagination, creating a kind of world that



Figure 3.51 Qirui Tan, *The Drowned World*, 2020, ABS Plastic, acrylic paint, lichen, capsules, and resin, 23.5cm x 32cm x 9.5cm

does not exist in reality. This could be a dystopia world when looking at what I made in my MA project. Inspired by the rising sea level caused by global warming, I imagined a possible world in the future by making a model (Fig 3.51), which presents a drowned world where people have to give up the high-rises and live in capsule-like spaces on the sea. This kind of catastrophe view in the future also shows in the painting *A Warmer World* (Fig 3.52), where polar animals such as polar bears and penguins are gradually losing their homes and facing an unprecedented survival crisis because of the spread of forest fires and the continuous rise of sea level. Humans will also adapt to live in the floating capsules when facing a crisis. This imaginative

idea of the floating capsule, a kind of living space in the possible future, came from my observation of capsules in daily life.



Figure 3.52 Qirui Tan, *A Warmer World*, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 82cm x 113cm

This surrealist idea also came back in this PhD research when looking at the *Block* series in which I not only depicted the egg carton as an everyday object but also conducted the idea of world-building to create an egg-carton city based on the imagination. Taking *Block IV* (see Fig 1.25) as an example, the appearance of the stacked egg cartons not only echoes the buildings in the film *Metropolis* (Fig 3.53) but also reminds me of the black and white cityscape images of New York (Fig 3.54). Stephen Graham discusses the use of bird's-eye view and helicopter and references to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* where the dystopian city was 'laced together by swarms of aerial vehicles.'<sup>150</sup> He also speaks in relation to high-rise buildings of 'compression' of time and space (this relevant to my argument of the still life painting combining different locations, seasons and timeframes in Chapter 1.): "What geographers call 'time-space compression' — the use of new technologies to pull disparate

<sup>150</sup> Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers*, (New York: Verso, 2016), 60.

sites into a functional routine through speed — thus takes place across the volume of air above the city, region and nation, rather than on the surface of the earth, the subsurface (through subway trains), or the higher atmosphere



Figure 3.53 Screen-grab from *Metropolis*, 1927, directed by Fritz Lang

(through air travel)."<sup>151</sup> In terms of conceiving and imagining a kind of urban space, this painting also forms an interesting conversation with the model (Fig 3.55) from Raymond Hood, who proposed a project plan called *A City under a Single Roof* in his urban design for the New York City. Furthermore, the perspective in this work also interestingly mirrors the drawing (Fig 3.56) by Rem Koolhaas and Madelon Vriesendorp. More importantly, as I mentioned before, the egg carton tends to be a waste after the eggs are removed, losing its value in use. In that sense, what I have done in the *Block* series was to transform the 'rubbish' into the buildings, realising a process of turning the inconspicuous into something monumental.

This strategy reminds me of Claes Oldenburg, who is well-known for his huge sculptures of everyday objects. One typical example is that he transforms an

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 62.

inconspicuous and tiny clothespin into a colossal and giant sculpture (Fig 3.57) at Centre Square in Philadelphia. Here, instead of talking about why he made this sculpture, I will focus more on the idea of turning the inconspicuous into something monumental. What is the difference between a four-hundred-foot-high clothespin and the one I can hold in my hand? Obviously, the one in my hand is an everyday object, but how about the giant one surrounded by those high-rises? It is more than an object but becomes an urban landscape viewed from afar. It looks like I am doing the same thing as Oldenburg but through a different path. Back to my *Block* series, how do we understand those stacked egg cartons in the paintings? Are they egg cartons in reality or high-rise buildings in a metropolis? The representations of scale in these paintings caused viewers to read the contents in ambiguous ways, and invited them to reflect critically on how they looked and its effect on interpretation.



Figure 3.54 Harrison & Abramovitz, *Exxon Building* (“XYZ Buildings”), 1972, New York



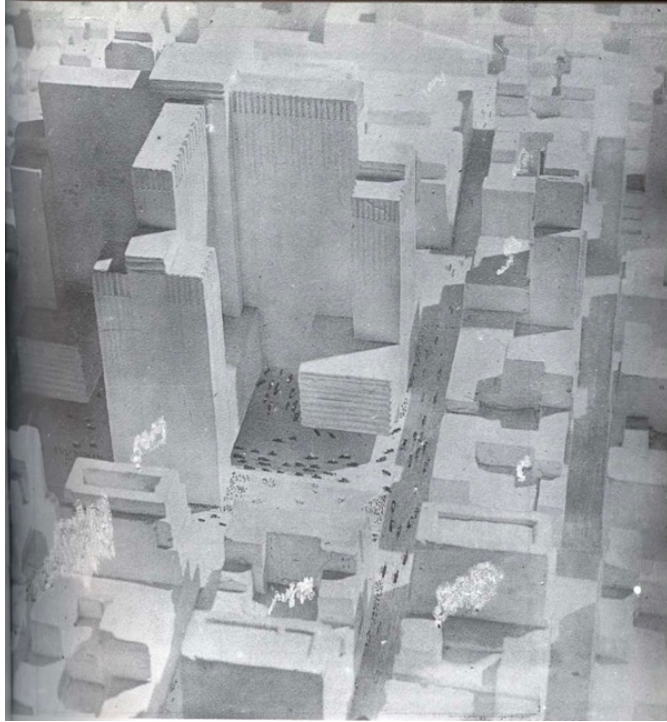


Figure 3.55 Raymond Hood, *A City under a Single Roof*-model in typical midtown context (smoke added)



Figure 3.56 Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp, *The City of the Captive Globe*, 1972, Gouache and graphite on paper, 31.8cm x 44.1cm



Figure 3.57 Claes Oldenburg, *Clothespin*, 1976, Steel sculpture, 3.73m x 1.37m x 14m

Whether it is a capsule or an egg carton, those everyday objects gave me a new perspective to think about and imagine the city. The living space, usually the buildings, in the city does not need to be so gorgeous or novel.

Architecture that pursues novel experiments separates architecture and us even further, making us feel out of reach. However, the buildings are actually very close to us, appearing around us like those everyday objects. We stay in these buildings daily, whether in our homes, studios or office buildings. Being actually in these spaces, we not only experience but also think about our relationship with them. Therefore, can these everyday objects, such as the capsule or the egg carton that appear around but are easily overlooked by us, inspire new living spaces or buildings?

Tatsuya Tanaka's works illustrate how he engages with the idea of world-building. As a miniature photographer, he is very good at using inconspicuous small objects in life, such as stationery like staples, paper clips or daily food

like broccoli and bread, to create surprising and humorous little scenes of life or landscape with his imagination and creative ideas. Compared to my *Block* series, some of his works convey a similar idea and strategy of using different kinds of everyday objects to build a world, such as bread in *Bread City*, plug boards in *Electri-City* and stationery in *Citytionery*. (Fig 3.58) I was impressed by the imagination he applied to make these urban landscapes look surreal. When speaking of the messages he wanted to convey through his works, he remarks, ‘Taking some daily necessities for example. When people grow up, they rarely take the things around them seriously, and this attitude has become rare. I hope that when people see my works, they will realise the new value of objects, treasure the things around them more, and cherish the things they already own. It would be great if people can feel that through the works.’<sup>152</sup> Tatsuya Tanaka’s works give a very concrete and vivid explanation of the value and meaning of looking at the overlooked in contemporary times. He uses witty and poetic ideas to explore the possibilities of mundane everyday objects around him, discovering the extraordinary from the ordinary.



Figure 3.58 Tatsuya Tanaka, *Bread City*, *Electri-City*, *Citytionery* (from left to right), Photography

As mentioned in Chapter 2, I always create different stacking compositions by using the collected empty egg cartons and then photographing them as raw materials for later paintings. This strategy of making models for artmaking not only occurs in the aforementioned photography works of Tatsuya Tanaka but also draws our attention to a contemporary context of model houses or

<sup>152</sup> Still. ink, “Master of Miniature Scene—Tatsuya Tanaka.”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7hXtDLZ5sc&t=186s>





Figure 3.59 Luc Tuymans, *Flemish Village*, 1995, Oil on canvas, 110.5cm x 144.5cm



Figure 3.60 Richard Forster, *Levittown, Levittown I*, 2015, Graphite and acrylic medium on paper, 48.26cm x 31.16cm



environments more widely including, for example, *Flemish Village* of Luc Tuymans (Fig 3.59), Richard Forster's drawings of tiny houses in Levittown (Fig 3.60) and Michaël Borremans' house model (Fig 3.61) which he used as the subject for a series of drawings.



Figure 3.61 Michaël Borremans, *3-D House of Opportunities*, 2006, Polyurethane resin, wood, enamel, paint, wooden shelf, model sculptures, book cover, 50cm x 50cm x 50cm

Associating with the idea of world-building, the *Block* series also calls up a Japanese animation called *The Secret World of Arrietty*, which tells the story of a family of tiny people living secretly under the floor of a human house and borrowing goods from humans to survive. The scene that impressed me most was when Arrietty and his father tried to steal a sugar cube in the kitchen. (Fig 3.62) From the perspective of Arrietty, the kitchen was different from the standard size humans saw, but rather as huge as an urban space. (Fig 3.63) Because they were tiny, even a fridge looked enormous, like a high-rise in their eyes. (Fig 3.64) So, what does an egg carton look like in Arrietty's eyes? Looking back at the *Block* series, it seems I was observing these stacked egg cartons in the guise of Arrietty. Unlike the kitchen space, which is domestic and interior, the space presented in these paintings looks more outdoor. In

that sense, can the *Block* series become an Industrial Arrietty, an urban version of that?



Figure 3.62 Screen-grab #1 from *The Secret World of Arrietty*, 2010, directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi



Figure 3.63 Screen-grab #2 from *The Secret World of Arrietty*, 2010, directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi



Figure 3.64 Screen-grab #3 from *The Secret World of Arrietty*, 2010, directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi

### 3.5.6 Ambiguity of Scale

The discussion of scale is also critical in terms of the *Block* series. I investigated how scale representation caused viewers to read the painting's content in an ambiguous way, with the egg cartons assuming the character of buildings or other architecture.

The idea of playing with scale in the *Block* series reminds me of Michaël Borremans who I mentioned before. *In the Louvre* (Fig 3.65), one of the series of drawings titled *The House of Opportunity*, depicts a house as a work of art displayed in the exhibiting hall. The house, which looks like a real house in reality, is actually a scale model. In this drawing, the house appears disproportionate to the area where it is exhibited and its scale varies for the visitors as the people appear to be different sizes. His strategy of making a model and playing with its scale echoes how I dealt with the egg cartons in the *Block* series.

My research explores the relationship between still life and urban landscape, with the egg cartons assuming the character of buildings. The problem is that those staples resembling the cars in the paintings will lead the viewers to read these works as urban landscape paintings, making the reading of the paintings quite distinct. However, my initial idea was to keep that ambiguity and make the interpretation of the works uncertain through questioning: Are they still lifes or cityscapes? For example, if hints like the staples in *Block IV* (see Fig 1.25) are removed, the scale of those egg cartons becomes uncertain without a reference, which makes it a much more intriguing image. Is it a still life that looks like an urban landscape or still life placed in the urban landscape? This ambiguous representation of scale from the painting will invite the viewers to not only think about the relationship between still life and urban landscape but also engage in a thoughtful analysis of how the perspective influenced their interpretation.

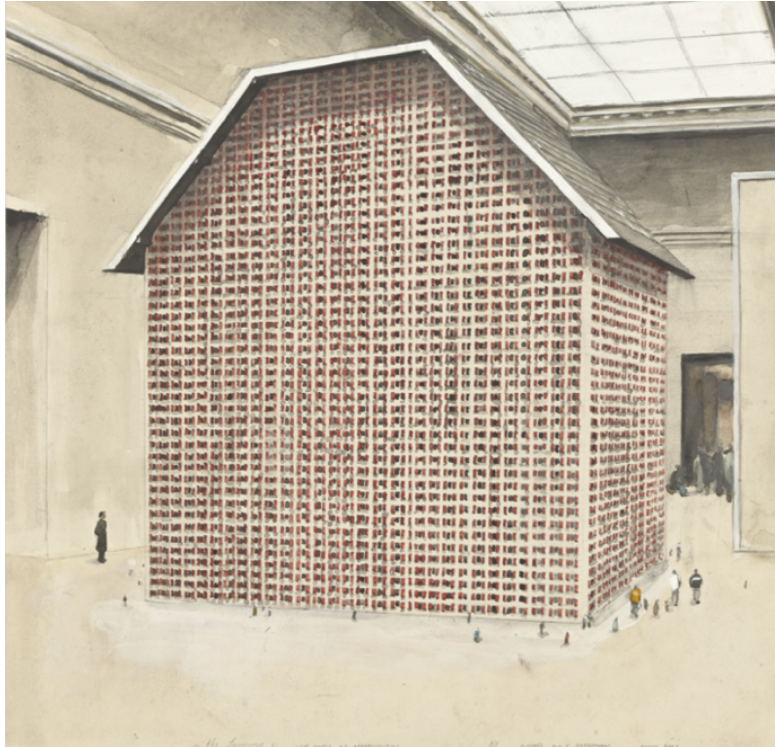


Figure 3.65 Michaël Borremans, *In the Louvre-The House of Opportunity*, 2003, Watercolour, pencil, and oil on paper, 26.6cm x 27.9cm

### 3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, starting with two sections with quite similar structures and beginning with a case study that was subsequently addressed from different ideas and perspectives, I explored the interrelations of everyday objects and urban landscapes in the early stages of the PhD research. I not only tried to investigate how the microcosmic still life epitomises the macrocosmic world, especially associated with the pandemic period, but also examined how these early works become precedents for later works creating cityscapes out of everyday objects.

The remnants of something that had fallen onto the floor in my *Fragments* series, as in the floor mosaic, became a metaphor for leftovers or residue that people no longer value. This not only evoked the discussion on the use of dirt and rubbish widely in avant-garde art practices but also drew my attention to the understanding of ‘overlooked objects,’ which further helped me expand



more discussions on the choice of egg cartons as the specific subject for my paintings.

As Chapter 1 has already examined the *Block* series through several ideas, the rest of this chapter further unpacked this series around concepts such as decay, ephemeral objects, decontextualisation and world-building as a response to one of the research questions: How can the overlooked everyday objects be re-examined in a contemporary context?

## Conclusion

This practice-based PhD research was incorporated into a rigorous and original body of artworks that emphasised 'overlooked' objects, while exploring the relationship between still life and urban landscape through the medium of watercolour. Before discussing contributions, limitation and future research, I will restate the arguments made in response to the aforementioned research questions.

### **How can landscape characteristics be integrated to conceive new representations of still life through painting practice?**

Chapter 1 mainly examined the relationship between still life and landscape from four aspects: space, perspective, background and exclusion of human form. Based on the differences between the two genres, I further investigated the possibility of integrating the characteristics of landscape into the representation of still life. In addition to some traditional table still lifes in art history, this chapter focused on still life works of Cézanne and Delacroix as very typical precedents of combining still life with landscape.

Cézanne incorporates the landscape characteristics into his representation of still life from several aspects, such as colour, perspective and quick brushstrokes, making his still life a kind of interior landscape. Compared with his works, my paintings started from another perspective, trying to break the limited domestic space of traditional still life paintings and generate a deeper space like landscape paintings, so as to realise an exterior still life, or still life en plein air as I argued.

This way of using the vast landscape as a background for still life is evident in

Delacroix's *Still Life with Lobsters*. As a typical work of Romanticism, this painting juxtaposes still life with pastoral landscape, combining the narrative of the scene with still life, which not only expands the expressiveness of still life painting but also reflects the deep concern for nature and emotion in the Romantic style. However, from another perspective, I also argued that this work gives a sense of collage as it looks more like a juxtaposition of still life and landscape, rather than a good fusion of them. Unlike his way of setting up still life in the landscape as a foreground, in my work, the egg cartons were not simply placed in the urban landscape, but as buildings, becoming parts of the urban landscape.

In addition, in the sub-chapter *Exclusion of Human Form*, I started from traditional still lifes, examining the absence of human in Cotán's still life painting as well as the exception of Dutch still life which uses reflections on the surface of objects to present the painter's image. I disagreed with Bryson's idea of regarding the still life as 'self-negation and the reduction of ego', while I argued that still life painting can be a way of responding to the environment and reflecting on urban life. Following this idea, I have examined the connections between still life and urban landscape in the context of the pandemic, and how still life can epitomise the entire urban landscape. In terms of the influence of the pandemic on my research and practice, I will expand the discussion later in the conclusion.

### **How can watercolour reinterpret the relationship between still life and landscape and further deflate the distinction between the two genres?**

Starting from research methods, Chapter 2 aimed to examine how the medium of watercolour can help reinterpret the relationship between still life and landscape. This chapter first scrutinized the connections between watercolour and landscape. As a tool of recording, watercolour landscape

painting originally derived from topographic maps. It then gradually developed into an independent painting genre in Europe. Britain played a prominent role in the development of watercolour, especially in pushing watercolour landscape painting to its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries. Through analysing the landscape works from Turner and Constable, it can be seen that the properties of watercolour, especially its transparency and fluidity well fit the characteristics of natural scenery. Section 2.3 scrutinized the fluidity of watercolour, in which I argued that the fluidity well interpreted the relationship between still life and landscape as a fluid and changing relation rather than a fixed and separated one. The fluidity of watercolour contains a dynamic and changing process, which helps to transgress the boundary in-between and explore the integration of these two categories. Also, the uncertainty and release of control in watercolour itself triggered me to reflect on my own watercolour painting practice, especially the sense of 'control' reflected in my works. In addition, based on my educational background, I also began to think about the differences between contemporary Chinese and Western watercolour in terms of space, time, perspective and materiality.

This chapter also examined the way of painting based on photographic images. On the one hand, it triggered my thinking about the relationship between painting and photography and how I use photographic materials in painting. On the other hand, it also reflects my use of photography as a cropping device. Cropping of images is not only applied into the process of taking photos but also a very evident feature in my paintings. I argued that cropping not only highlights the visual centre of the image but also indicates the space outside the picture, arousing the view's thinking and imagination. In addition, it also evokes the ambiguity of scale in my paintings.

**How can the overlooked everyday objects be re-examined in the contemporary context?**



Chapter 3 investigated the development of traditional still-life ideas in order to figure out how the ‘overlooked’ everyday objects can be re-examined in the contemporary context. This chapter began with the case study of two painting series: *Diaries* and *Fragments*, exploring the potential connections between the overlooked everyday objects and urban landscape. Then, through analysing the characteristics of overlooked objects and the reasons of being overlooked, I argued that familiarity, waste, and repetition can characterise the overlooked objects well. As a common and familiar packaging material made of paper through repetitive manufacture, egg carton is always discarded as waste after use, which makes it a typically overlooked everyday object. The *Block* series uses empty egg cartons as the subject of depiction, aiming to explore the relationship between still life and urban landscape. This series of works, on the one hand, continues the idea of world-building through surreal imagination in my MA project, and on the other hand, it also reflects transforming leftovers and waste materials into something else in contemporary art practice, which can be regarded as ‘re-enchantment of the world’.

How is the ‘re-enchantment of the world’ reflected in the *Block* series? Firstly, it is worth looking at an interesting paradox in the word ‘still life’ itself. On the one hand, derived from the Dutch word ‘stilleven’, still life refers to the inanimate object usually known as ‘nature morte’. Here, ‘still’ means ‘motionless, stable, fixed, stationary’, emphasising the stationary state of the object.<sup>153</sup> However, on the other, ‘still life’ can also be interpreted from another perspective. As the adverb, the word ‘still’ also means ‘without change or cessation, continual’, and ‘life’ means the condition of being a living thing.<sup>154</sup> In that sense, the idea of remaining alive seems to contradict that inanimate state. This kind of paradox is quite distinct in my *Block* series as the

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<sup>153</sup> See the etymology of ‘still life’. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=still%20life>

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

paintings enliven the inanimate objects by suggesting life forms and human activities, which allows a sense of enchantment to give life to the muteness of material through its 'charisma'.<sup>155</sup> In addition, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, *Block* series turned the banal and inconspicuous everyday objects (empty egg cartons, staples and other small objects) into something monumental and sublime (high-rise buildings and urban landscape) through a humorous and poetic way. This kind of transformation can also be regarded as 're-enchantment of the world'.

As the title of this thesis states, the ultimate goal of tackling the above research questions is trying to explore and address the space in-between. If still life focuses on a kind of domestic and inside space, while urban landscape represents a kind of outside space, investigating the space between still life and urban landscape is actually exploring the relationship between inside and outside.

Here, it is worth looking at *Block IX* (see Fig 1.32) again. With stacked egg cartons resembling the high-rises in the city, this painting looks like an urban landscape outdoors. But in fact, these are the egg cartons and staples I depicted indoors. In that sense, it is a still life painting that looks like a landscape, which conflating notions of inside and outside. In *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Bryson speaks about how the bowl of fruit in the wall painting (Fig 4.1) has the capacity to 'mediate' the room's interior (inside) and idyllic locale (outside).<sup>156</sup> Like the bowl has introduced the invigorating atmosphere of the grotto into the inside of the house, this painting has brought the busyness and transience of city inside the studio space.

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<sup>155</sup> Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2010), 17.

<sup>156</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 46.



Figure 4.1 Details of the wall painting of the cubiculum from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, c.50-40 BCE.

In his classic *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard, speaking of the notions of inside and outside, argues that ‘outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything.’<sup>157</sup> However, in his critique, he points out that this opposition is not absolute, but a dialectical relationship. The inside and the outside often influence each other alternately, and even penetrate each other, breaking the simple boundaries.<sup>158</sup>

Following Bachelard’s critique, I would like to argue that the ‘in-between space’ born out of this research can be defined as a half-open door which is

<sup>157</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 211.

<sup>158</sup> See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 211-231.

both a channel for the outside world to enter the inside world and a window for the inside to look out. It reflects the tension and interaction between the inside and the outside. In addition, this 'in-between space' makes the boundary between still life and landscape ambiguous. The relationship between these two categories is not like the sharpness of yes and no, but a dialectical relation in which still life and landscape influence and penetrate each other, forming a fluid relationship. Moreover, as the 'in-between space' was born out of imagination, it reminds me of Surrealist poet Tristan Tzara's words: 'The market of the sun has come into my room. And the room into my buzzing head.'<sup>159</sup> This poem suggests a surreal relationship between the room and me: I am in the room, while the room is also in my head. I think this can also characterise the relationship between still life and landscape that still life comes into the landscape, and vice versa, the landscape blends into the still life.

## Contributions

This practice-based PhD research has made contributions to the field of still life from several aspects:

First of all, this research could serve as a breakthrough in traditional still life painting. Most of the traditional still lifes depicted inanimate objects in a domestic space. However, in this research, I tried to explore still life further by bringing the characteristics of the landscape into still life to conceive a kind of still life *en plein air*. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, through comparing and analysing the difference between still life and landscape in terms of space, perspective, background and exclusion of human form, this research combined the features of the landscape to explore new representations of still life, which could be regarded as an attempt to expand the possibilities of still

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<sup>159</sup> Tristan Tzara, from *Où boivent les loups*, quoted by Gaston Bachelard in "The Dialectics of Outside and Inside," *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 226.



life painting.

This research also offered an opportunity to re-examine the relationship between still life and landscape. Different from landscape painting trying to capture nature, still life, as Bryson puts it, 'outstrip' the nature because it combines different timeframes and locations in one image to transcend any spatial or seasonal limitations.<sup>160</sup> Could it be argued then, still life makes it possible for landscape characteristics to be integrated, as in this practical research, still life and landscape are not two separate categories but interchange and merge together. By deflating the distinction between still life and landscape, this research provided new insights into further understanding of the relationship between still life and landscape. For instance, the new representations of still life presented in the *Block* series could potentially re-examine and re-construct urban landscapes, providing ideas for conceiving and imagining new urban spaces.

In addition, this research also tried to bring some new ideas into the discussions on everyday objects in contemporary art practice. The word 'overlooked' is of great importance in my research as what I have chosen for the subjects of the paintings were a series of overlooked everyday objects. Finding the beauty of the overlooked and unexpected has always been an essential part both in my research and practice. In his book *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Norman Bryson remarks that still life focuses on the overlooked and displayed items that are typically filtered out by perception.<sup>161</sup> However, how to understand the overlooked, especially in a contemporary context, became an interesting question in my research. It is impossible to figure out what the overlooked everyday objects

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<sup>160</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 105.

<sup>161</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 87.

are because the understanding of them is quite subjective and varies from person to person. However, familiarity, waste, and repetition can characterise the overlooked objects well. As a common packaging material made through repetitive manufacture, egg carton is a typically overlooked everyday object. The strategy I took on a practical level was I reused the discarded egg cartons and transformed them into high-rise buildings and city blocks. Again, the use of egg cartons in the research was not only reflected in using them as the subject of paintings to investigate the relationship between still life and landscape but also as a vehicle to explore more social and urban topics in the contemporary context, such as environmental protection and sustainability of living. Just as Bill Brown argues in *The Thing Theory*, 'we look through objects to discover what they reveal about history, society, nature, or culture — most importantly, what they reveal about us as they circulate through our lives.'<sup>162</sup>

## Limitations

This practice-based research was conducted in the form of painting, producing different series of watercolour paintings. Watercolour proved to be a suitable and effective method in this research. On the one hand, the fluidity of watercolour leads to the ambiguous interpretation of the work, which further helps deflate the boundary between still life and landscape. On the other hand, if still life emphasises control while the landscape is more about uncontrol, then the oscillation between control and uncontrol in watercolour provides an experimental space for understanding the flowing relationship between still life and landscape.

However, conducting research only through painting seems to be one of the limitations. Although still life painting still exists in the contemporary context, in addition to painting, many other mediums and methods are used to study and

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<sup>162</sup> Bill Brown, "The Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 4.

express everyday objects, such as sculpture, readymade, and photography. However, my research was only conducted in the form of painting. The limitation of a single methodology might make the research insufficiently rich and comprehensive.

In addition, another potential limitation of this research might lie in choosing egg cartons as the subject matter for the research. The egg carton was a good connection between still life and urban landscape. For one thing, as an everyday object, it contains the domestic quality of still life. At the same time, for another, when stacked together, it is quite architectural and industrial, assuming the character of buildings. However, it is because the visual similarity between stacked egg cartons and the high-rise flats is distinct, and the layout of stacked egg cartons on the table echoes pre-existing architectural environments that it seems the cityscape is already there to some extent. Critically reflecting on this, the question might be: Would this research still be feasible if the chosen subject was not the egg carton?

### **Influence of Covid-19 Pandemic**

Here, I would like to further discuss the influence of the pandemic on my entire research programme. In fact, the pandemic mainly affected the first year of this PhD research. As I mentioned in the Introduction part, I came to Newcastle alone at the end of 2020. At that time, UK was still in the lockdown period when schools and many shops were still closed. People had to stay at home for a long time and try to avoid unnecessary going out. As an international student, it became more difficult for me to adapt to a new environment at such a special time. However, it was such a special environment that gave me more time and space to observe the surroundings, to pay more attention to the everyday objects or corners that we usually overlook or take for granted. Before the pandemic, my paintings were all based on realistic cityscapes, showing grandeur of the city through panoramic

perspective. However, the pandemic brought me a completely different urban landscape from the past. There was no hustle and crowds here, only closed shops and unswept leftovers and fragments on the street. Thus, the pandemic provided me with a new perspective to see and feel the city. This urban landscape was exactly the opposite of the surreal and imaginary mentioned in my initial research proposal. It was very realistic. Based on these daily observations, I began to create *Newcastle Diaries* series (see Fig 3.1) in which I tried to communicate with those overlooked everyday objects and corners, and convey my feelings and reflections on pandemic life through painting. This also triggered me to change my research topic, from Surrealism and architecture to the study of still life, especially the overlooked objects. Following this path, I later found egg cartons as the subject both for my research and painting practice. In addition to being a good connection between still life and urban landscape, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, the egg carton could also be regarded as a metaphor for safety. In that sense, choosing and collecting egg cartons also reflected my thinking about what was safe during the pandemic.

In short, the constraints of the pandemic did not stop my research, but instead became a key factor in promoting my research. Although this research did not focus on the pandemic itself, such as investigating how it affected the way artists see the world, the pandemic was an indispensable part of my research as the background at the beginning.

### **Future Research and Practice**

Although this PhD programme is coming to an end, it does not mean my research and practice are going to stop. After this PhD journey, I will continue and extend this research through two potential paths:

First of all, because of the visual similarity between stacked egg cartons and



the high-rise flats, there might be a further discussion on some urban issues and problems, such as how cities are populated and inhabited. The appearance of the stacked egg cartons reminds me of Michael Wolf's *Architecture of Density*, a series of photographs showing the dense residential buildings in Hong Kong. (Fig 4.2) The large population and limited land area have caused serious housing problems in Hong Kong where these densely packed high-rise buildings have formed a unique urban landscape. I am wondering if the stacked egg cartons in my research could form some connections with this particular urban landscape? In my future research, I would like to present a large amount of stacked egg cartons to arouse people's attention and reflection on the population housing problems in cities such as Hong Kong.



Figure 4.2 Michael Wolf, *Architecture of Density* #45, 2006, Photography

From another perspective, I would like to see whether this in-between space can be applied into the interdisciplinary research area of fine art and architecture. As I have already mentioned in the thesis, I found egg carton got two types of properties at the same time. On the one hand, as a kind of still life, it has its practicality for storing and protecting eggs. On the other hand,

the stacked empty egg cartons also present building properties. This makes egg carton a good connection to bridge between fine art and architecture. In addition, because the egg carton is made of paper, it also evokes ideas of recycling and reproduction. If these ideas are applied into the architectural design, can this in-between space contribute to the envision of alternative living form, thereby achieving a kind of sustainable development of living in the future? Based on this question, I will try to find some interdisciplinary practice and cooperation with architecture in the future.

We usually think that it is difficult to make a connection between still life and urban landscape. However, through this practice-based research, it proves that there exists some connections between these two categories. Here, when stepping back and looking at the whole three-year research, it formed an interesting path that began with architecture and urban spaces, then turned to the exploration of still life and everyday objects, and finally came back to the connections with urban landscape again. It was not a linear process from 'A' to 'B' to 'C', but more like a circle from 'A' to 'B' and to 'A' again. However, this coming back was very special because the last 'A' was totally different from the 'A' at the beginning, which looks like a spiral. I also found that my interest in cities and architecture has never disappeared, but is more hidden underneath the study of still life. Before this PhD research, I just saw the urban landscape as urban landscape. But now, this in-between space born out of this research helps me see the urban landscape from a new perspective, that is through the lens of still life.

This research also means a lot to me. On the one hand, it was a PhD research, in which I got a specific topic and answered the research questions through practice. But on the other, it was also a process of exploring myself and finding who I am. For me, it was not just a degree, but a very important stage in both my art career and life. Although it comes to the end now as a

four-year PhD programme, I will continue the research, embark on new adventures and confront future challenges with full confidence.

## Appendices

### Appendix A. Paintings

#### ***Newcastle Diaries***

The following images constitute the series of paintings, titled *Newcastle Diaries*.



*Newcastle Diaries #1*, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





*Newcastle Diaries #2, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #3*, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





*Newcastle Diaries #4, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*

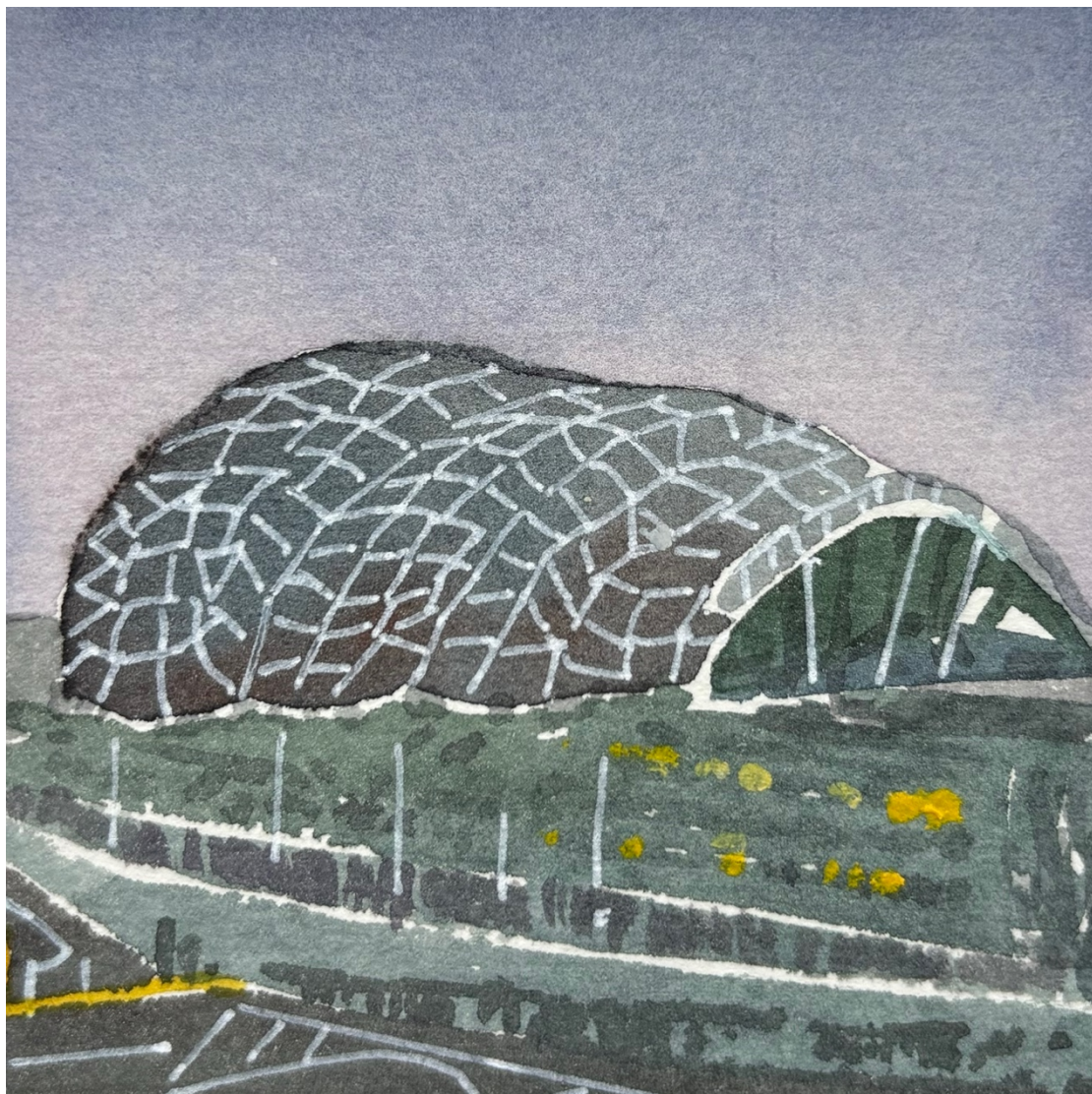


*Newcastle Diaries #5, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #6, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #7, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





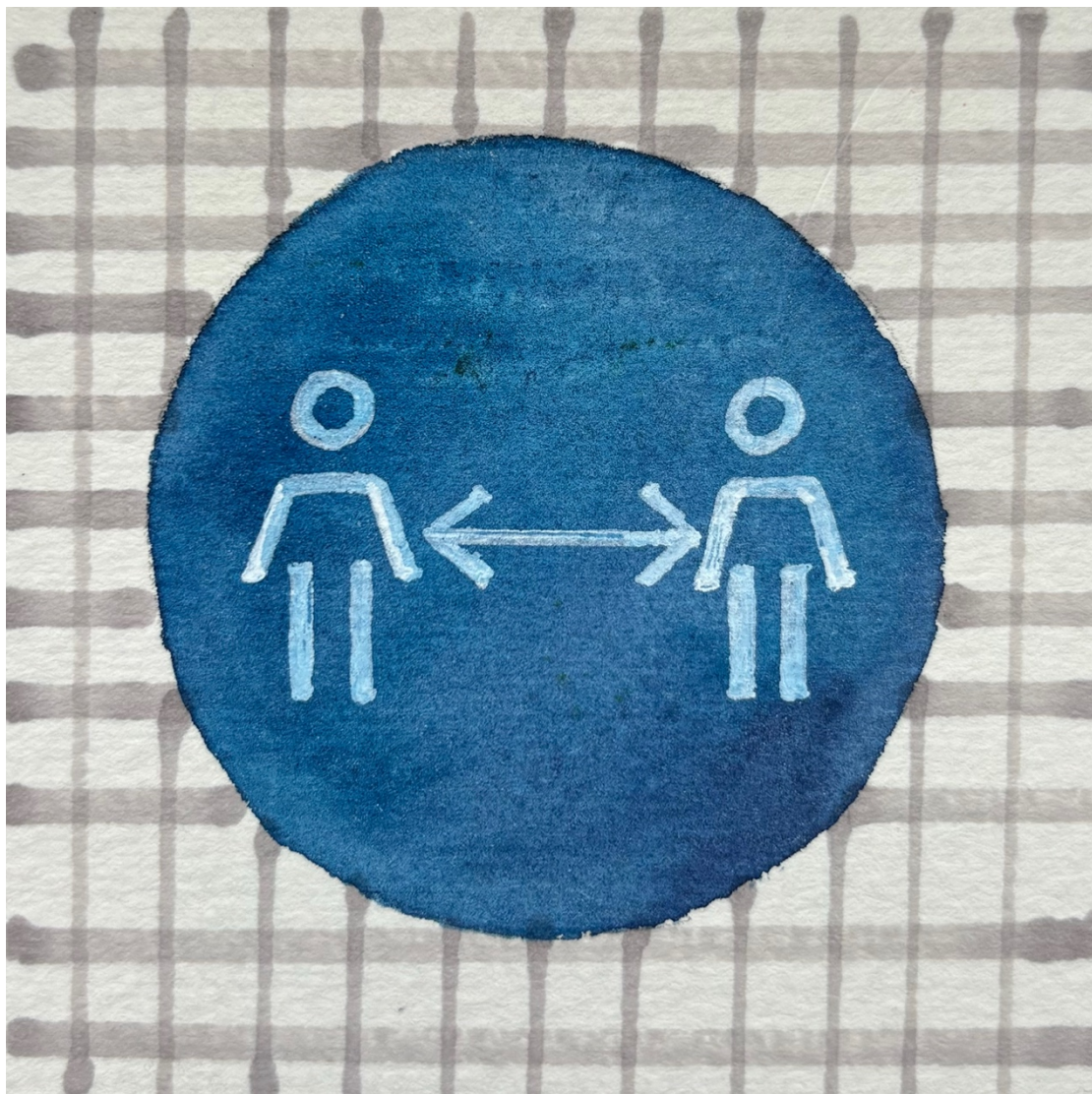
*Newcastle Diaries #8, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #9, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #10, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



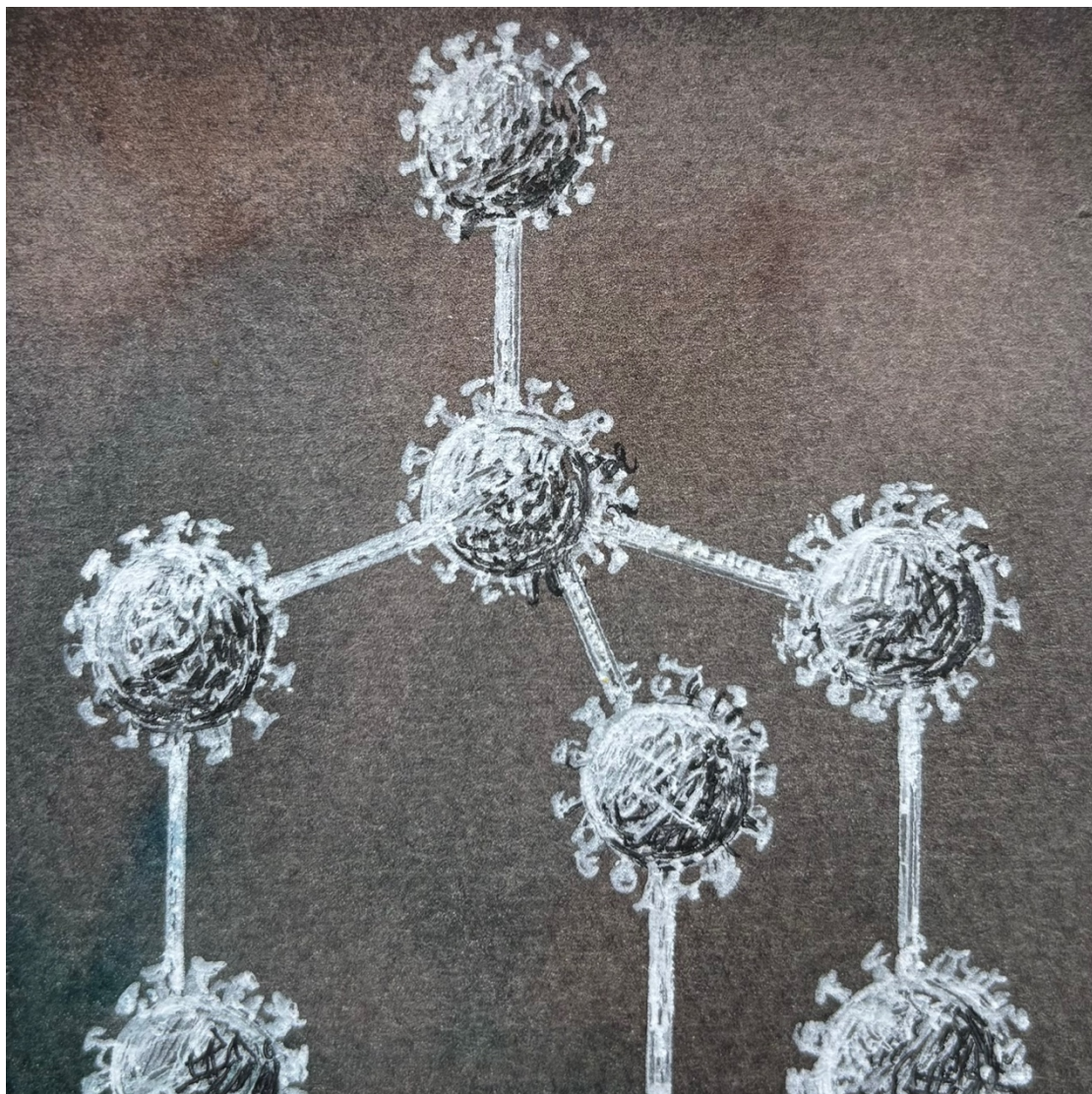
*Newcastle Diaries #11, 2020, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





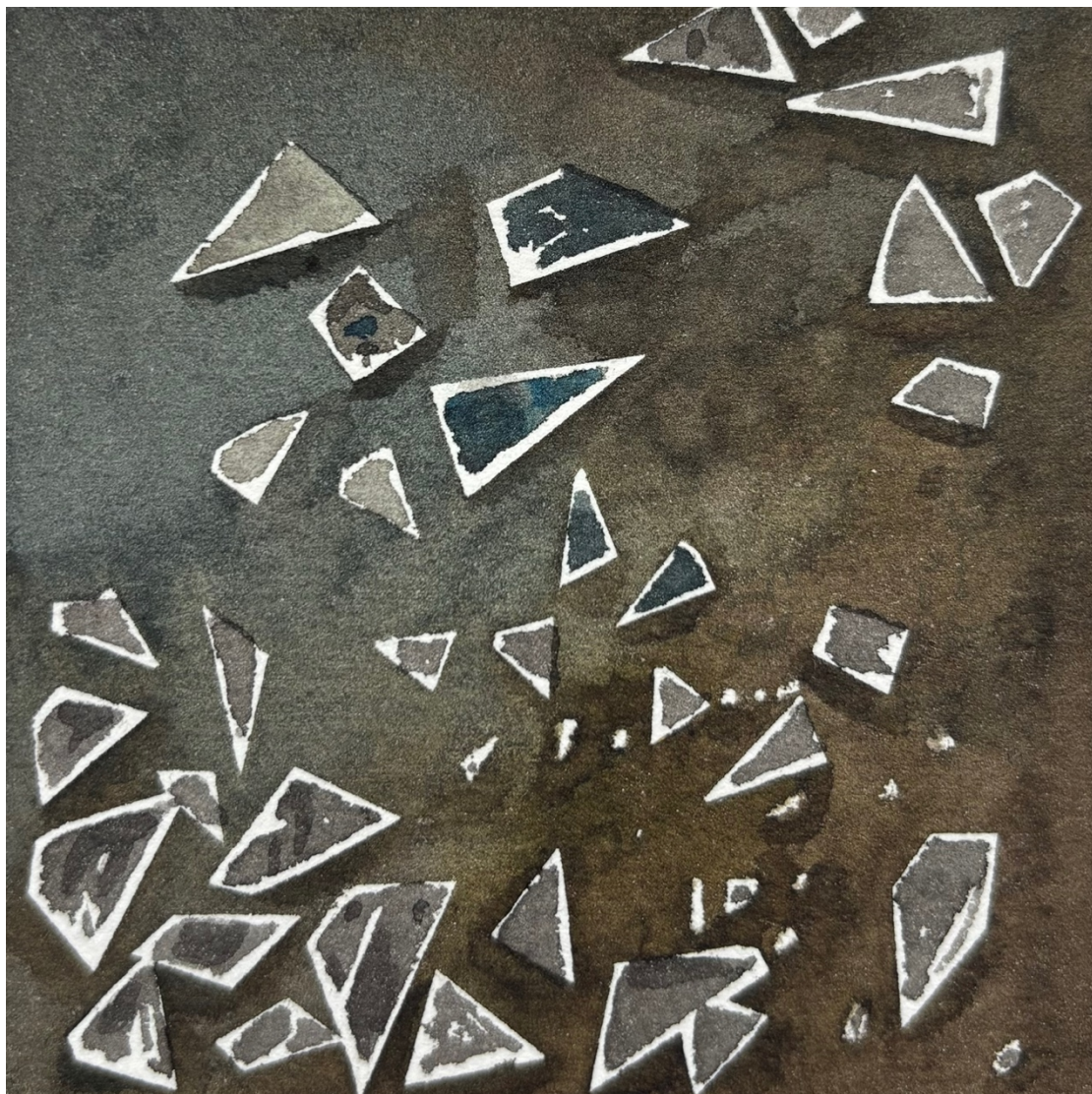
*Newcastle Diaries #12, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





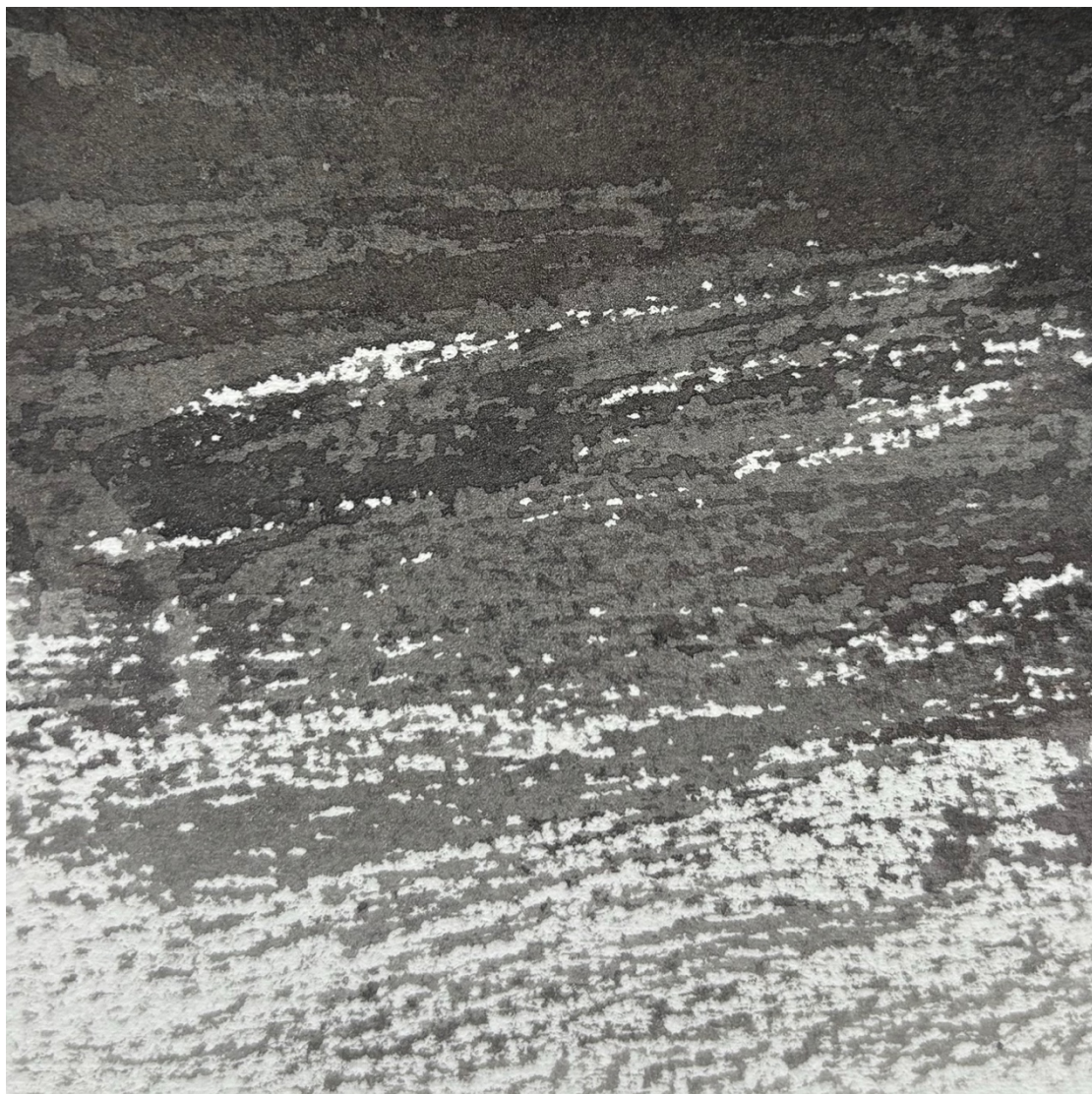
*Newcastle Diaries #13, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #14*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





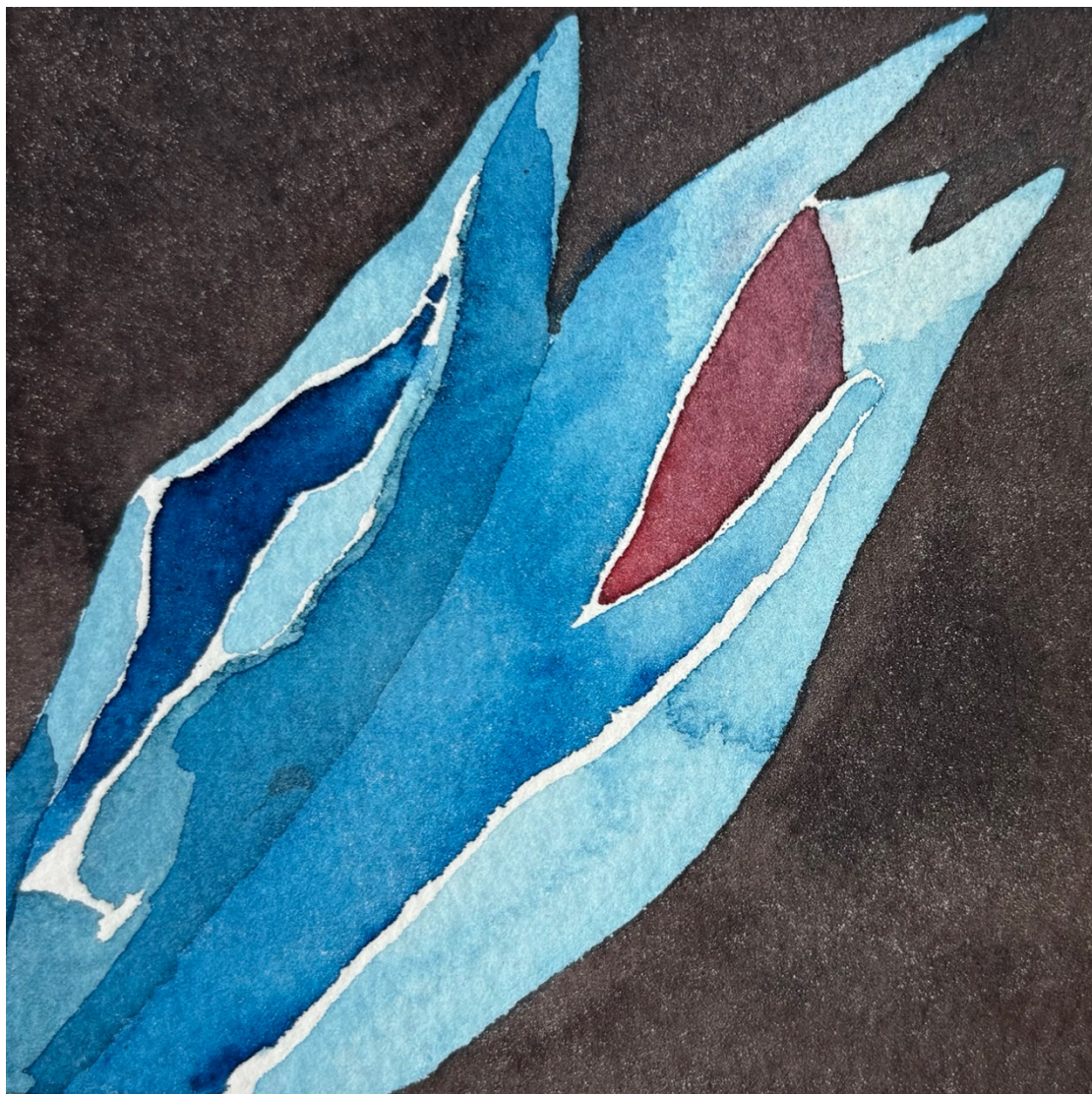
*Newcastle Diaries #15, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





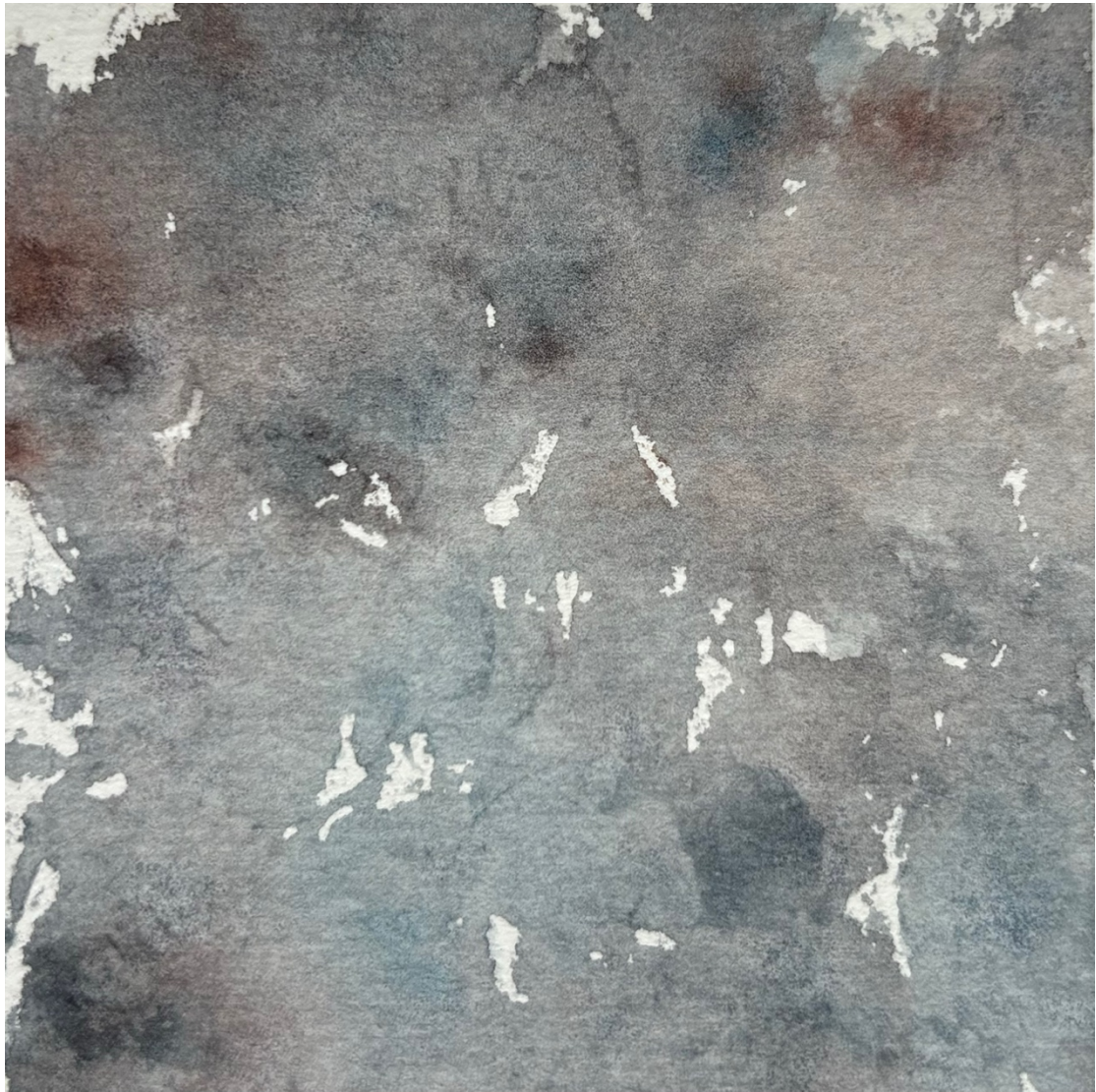
*Newcastle Diaries #16, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



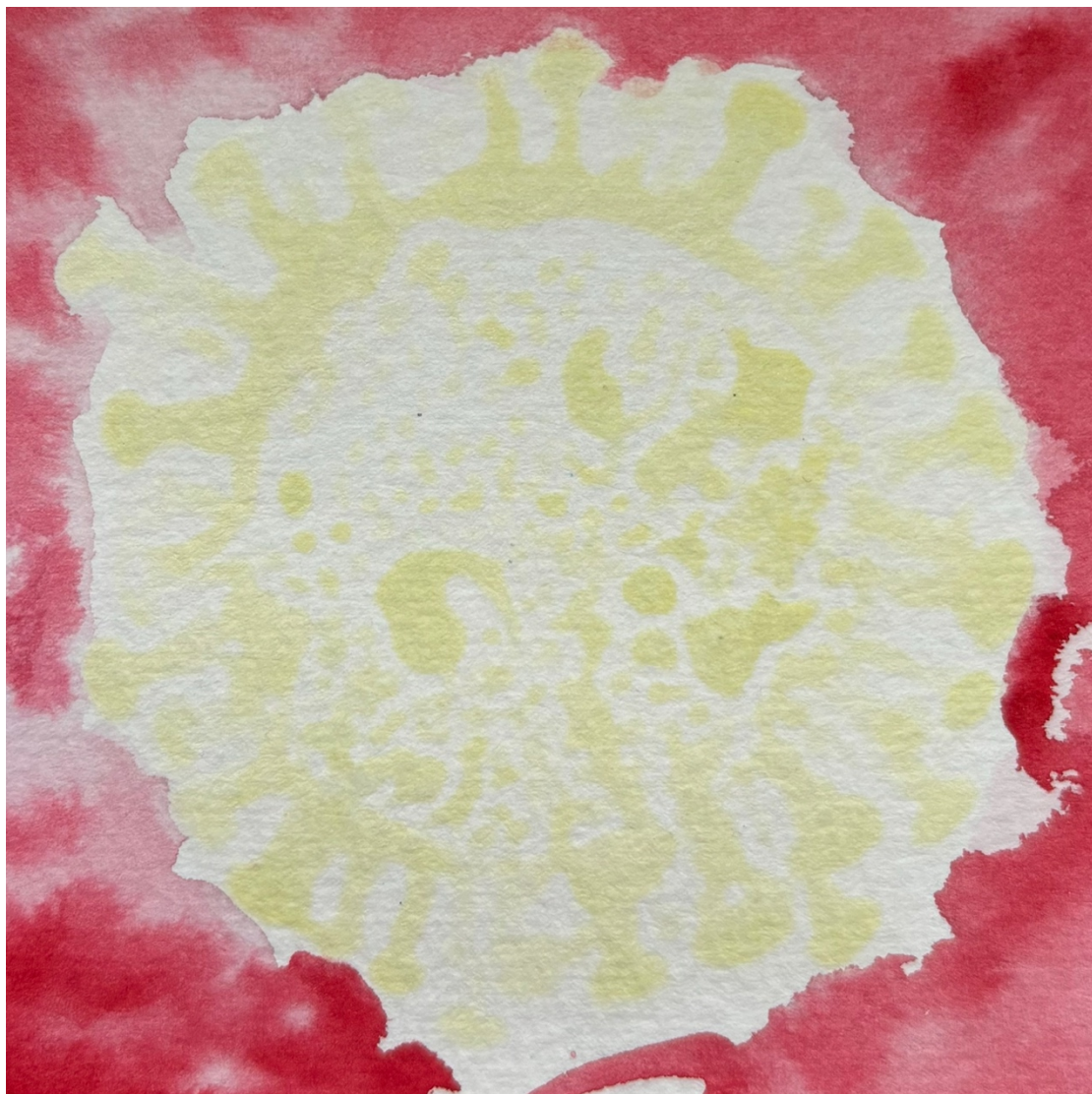


*Newcastle Diaries #17, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #18, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*

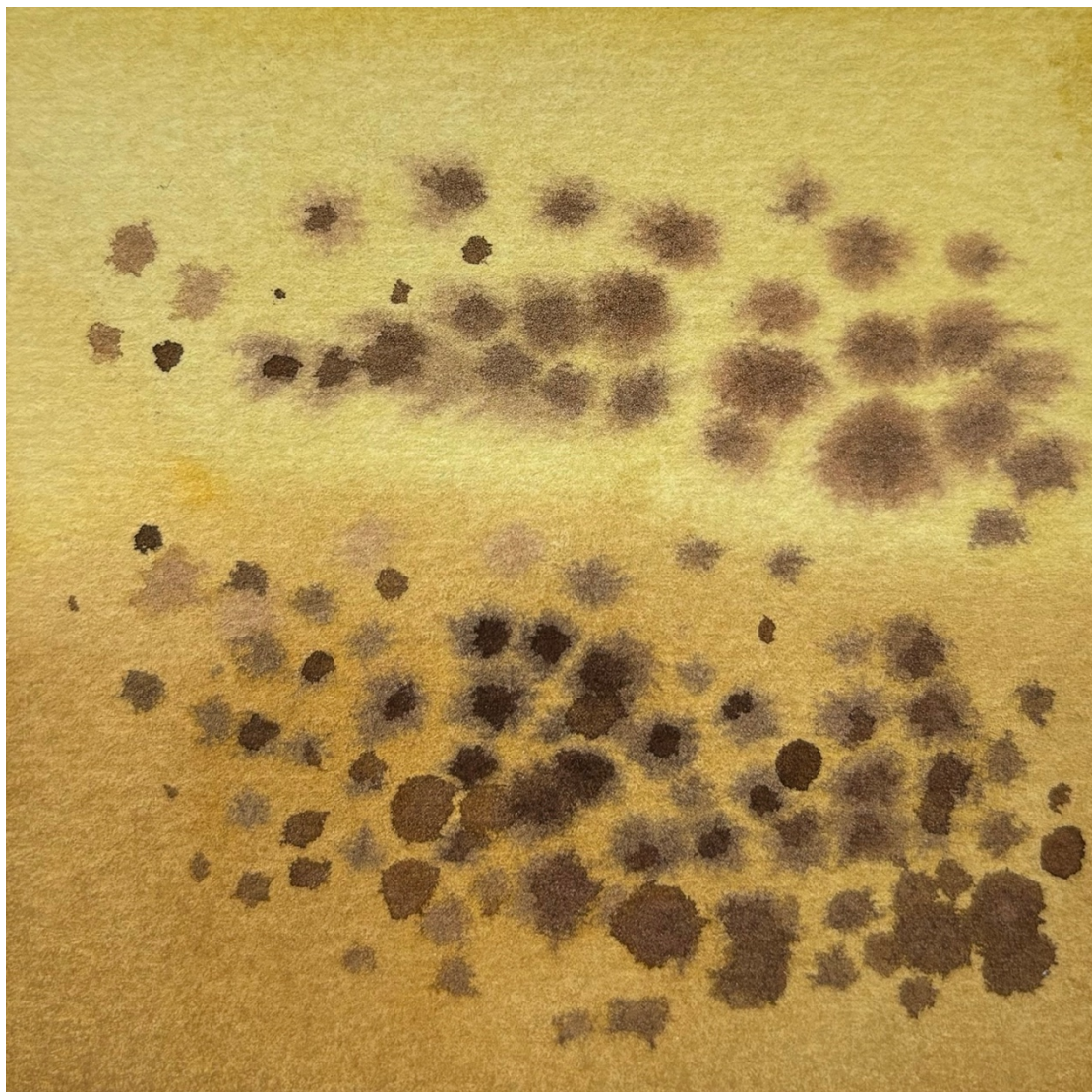


*Newcastle Diaries #19, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



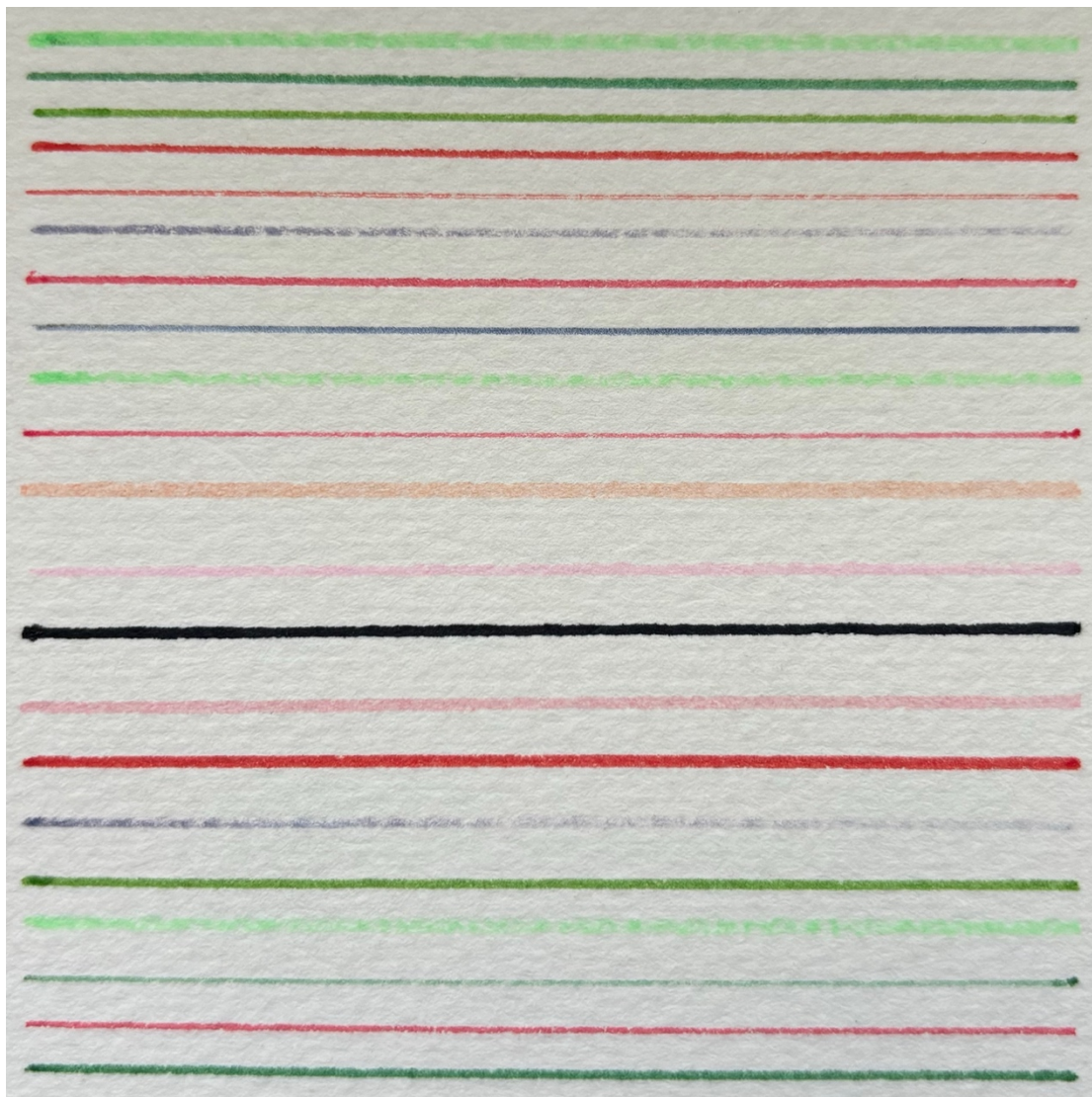


*Newcastle Diaries #20, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #21, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #22, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #23, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





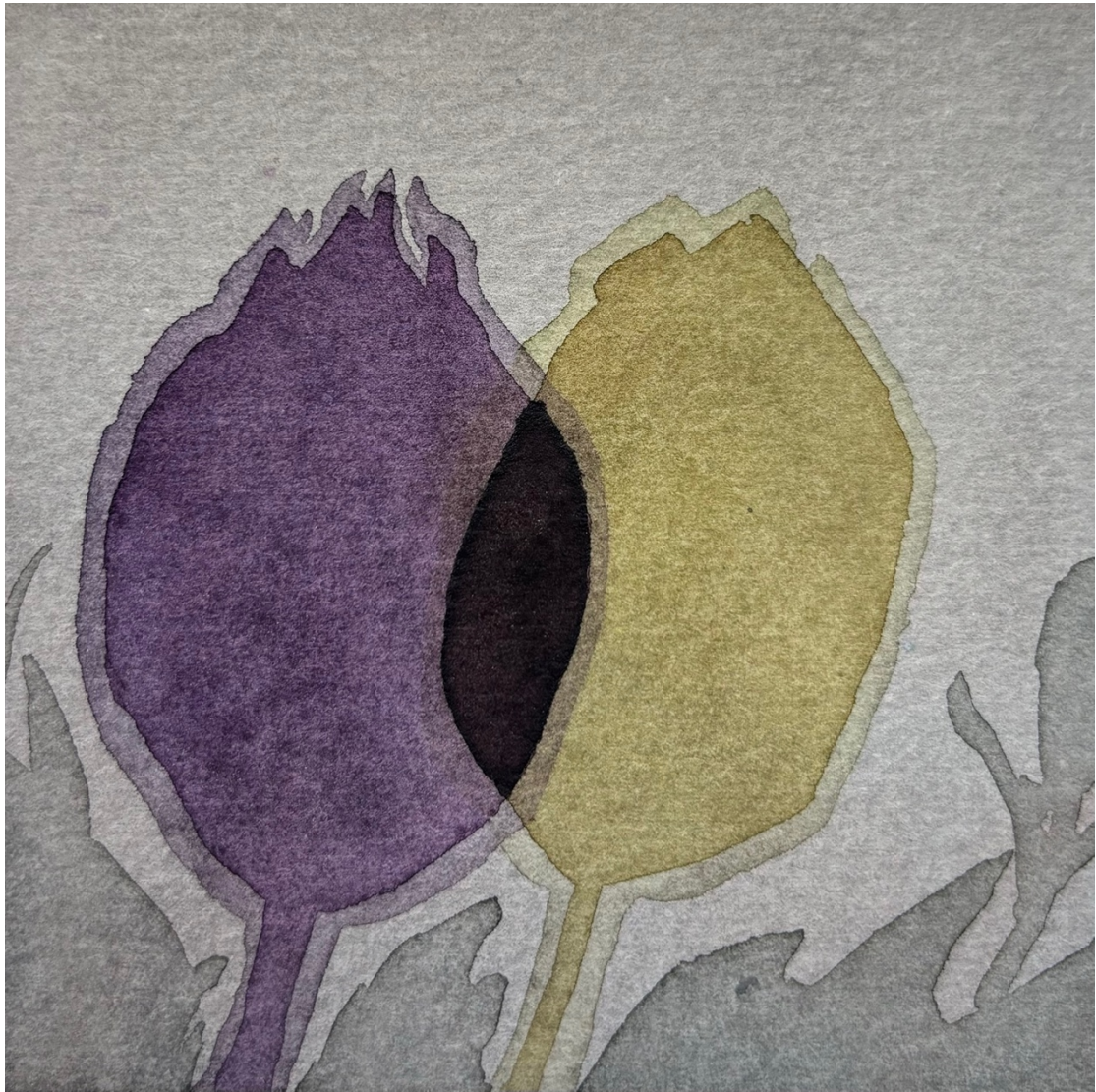
*Newcastle Diaries #24, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #25*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm



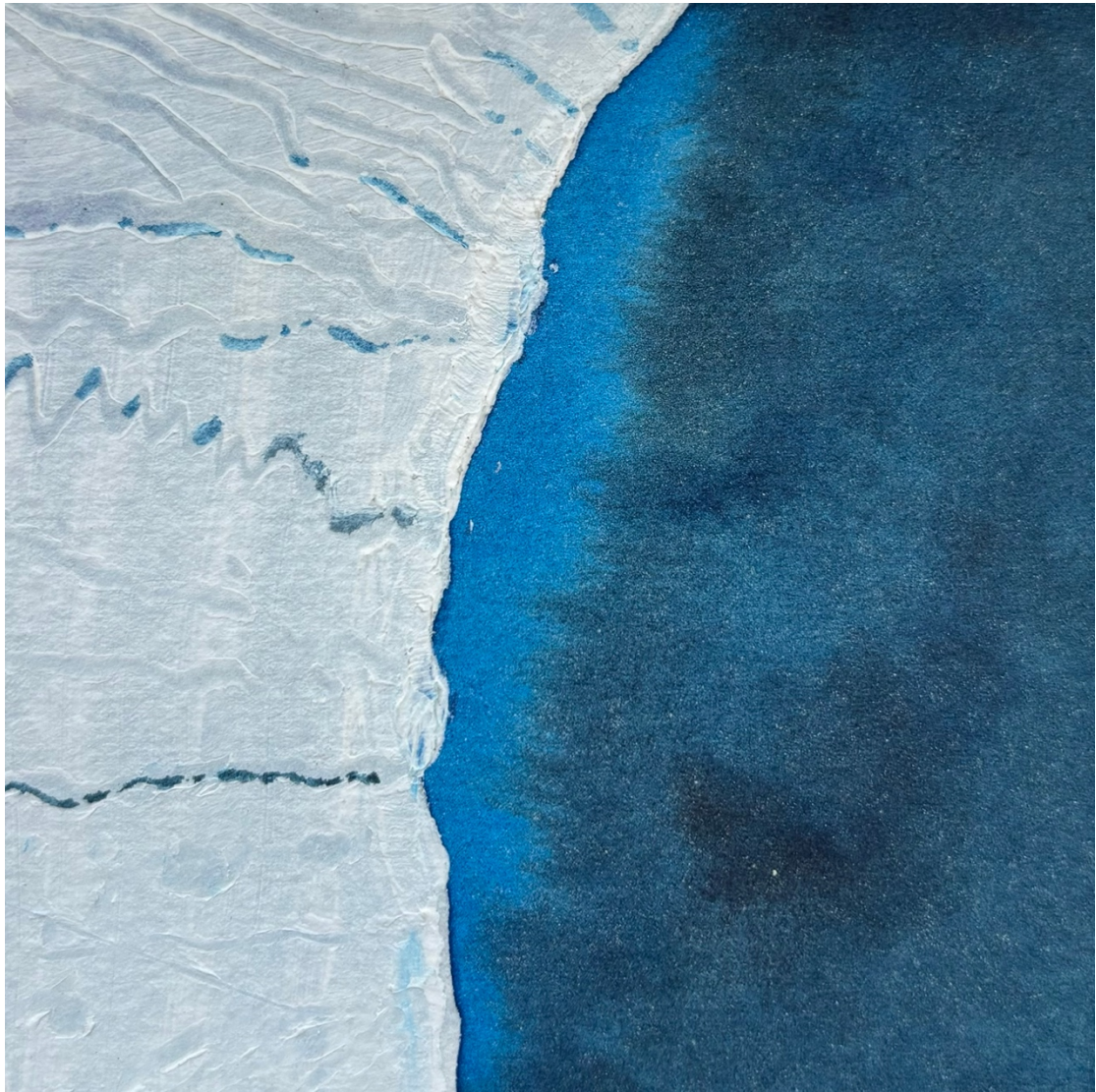


*Newcastle Diaries #26, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #27, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #28, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #29, 2021, Mixed media on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #30, 2021, Mixed media on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #31, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





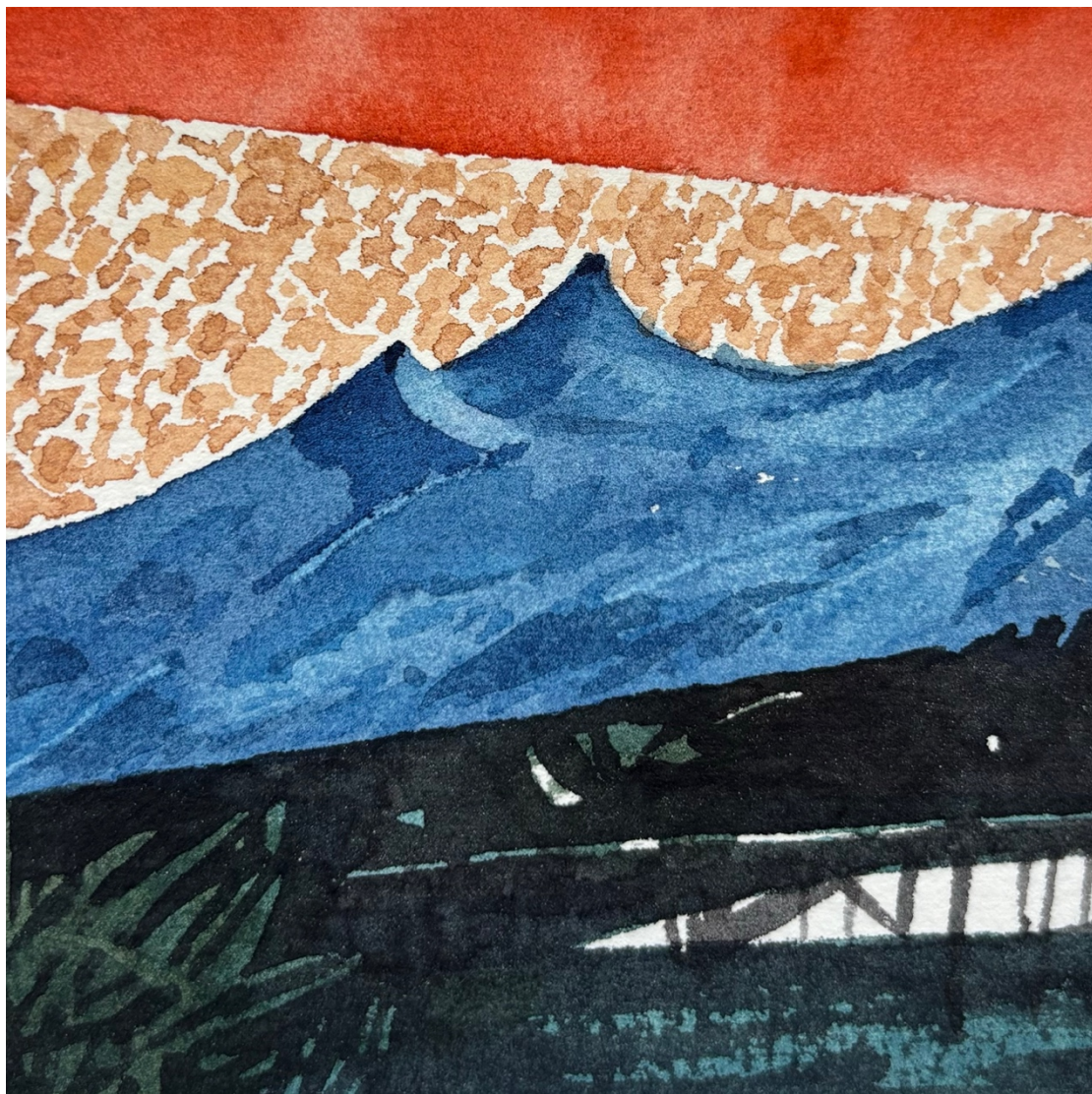
*Newcastle Diaries #32, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





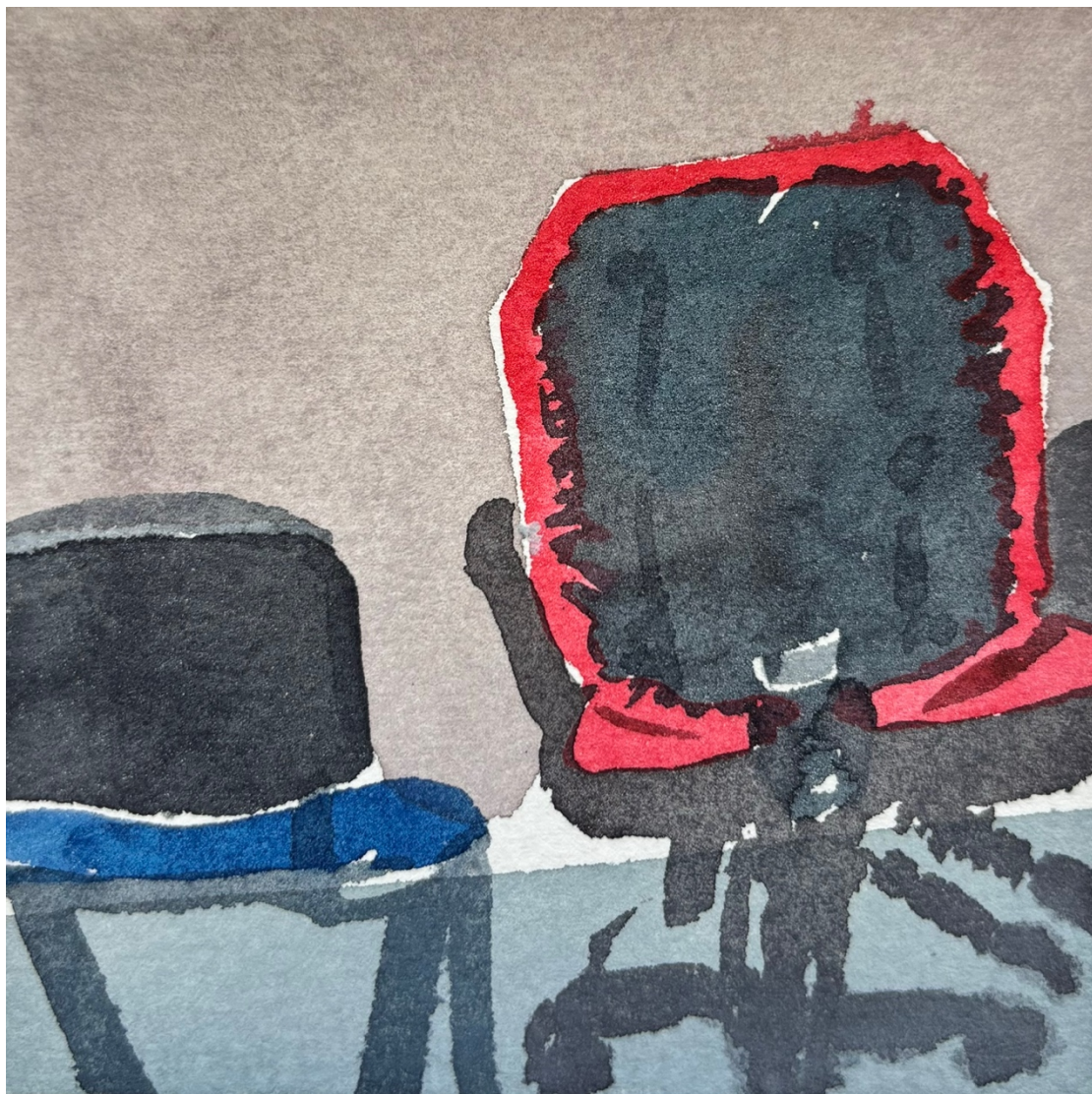
*Newcastle Diaries #33, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #34, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #35, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #36, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #37*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





*Newcastle Diaries #38, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #39, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #40, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





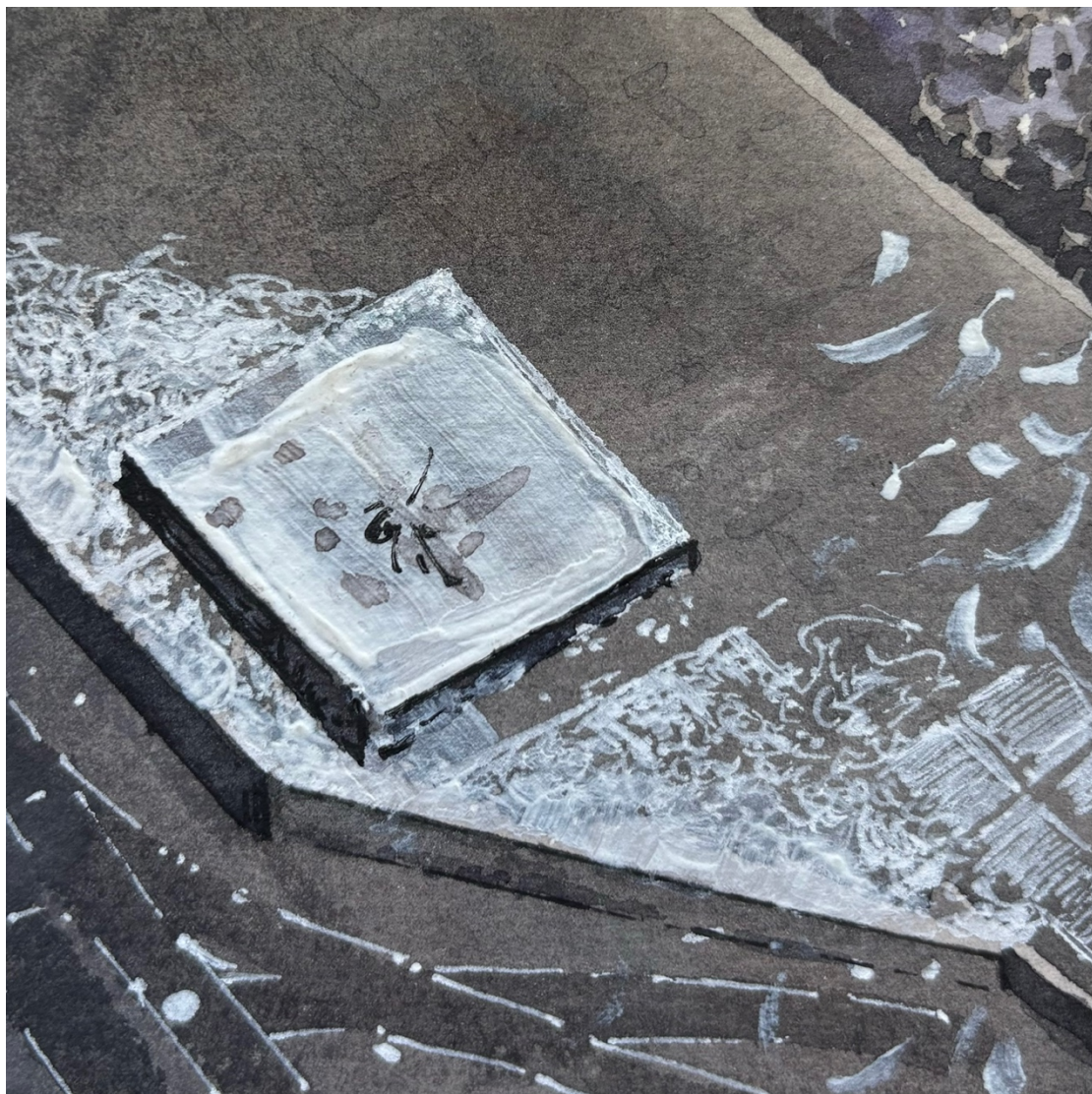
*Newcastle Diaries #41, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #42*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





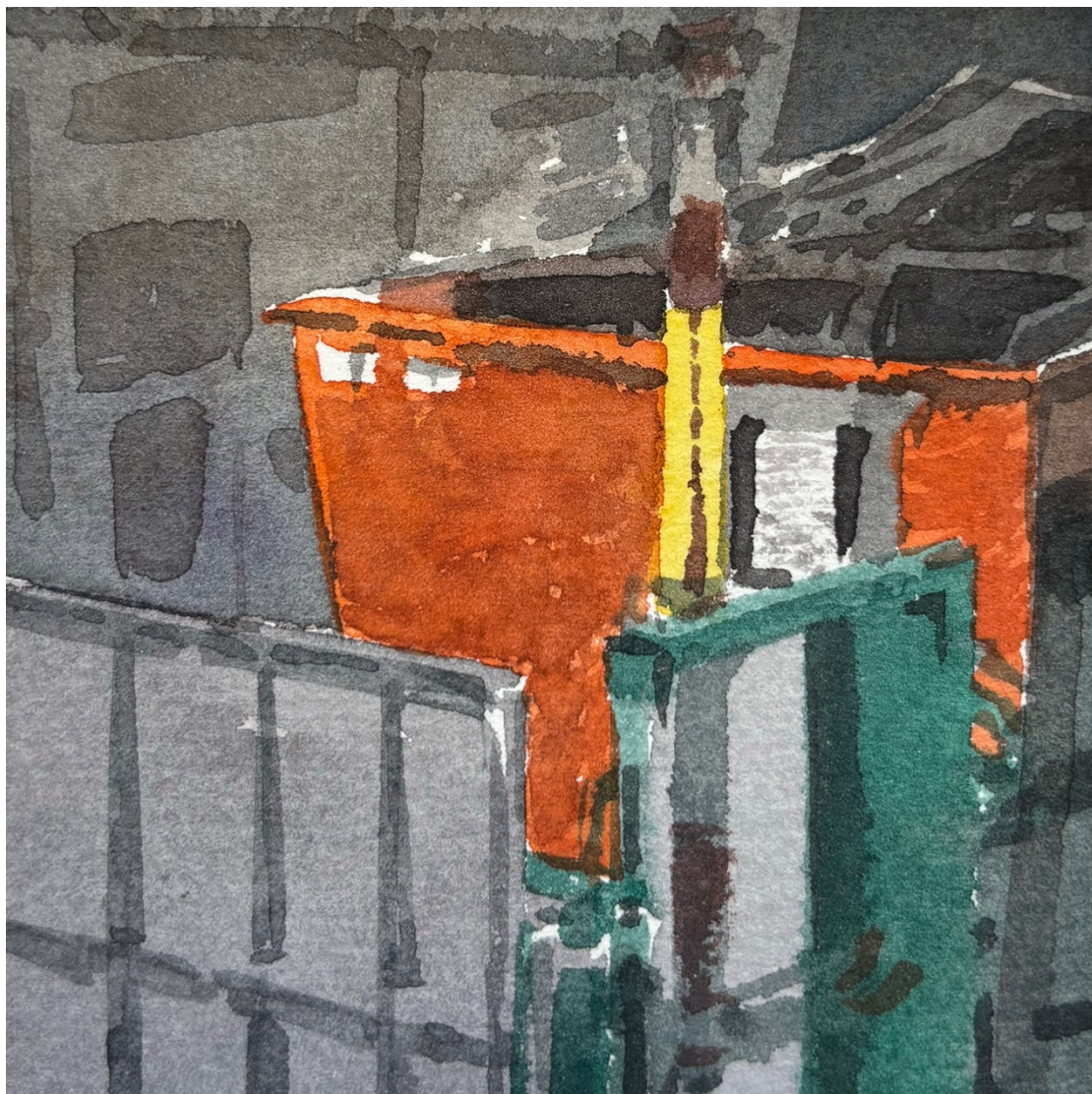
*Newcastle Diaries #43*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





*Newcastle Diaries #44*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





*Newcastle Diaries #45*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm



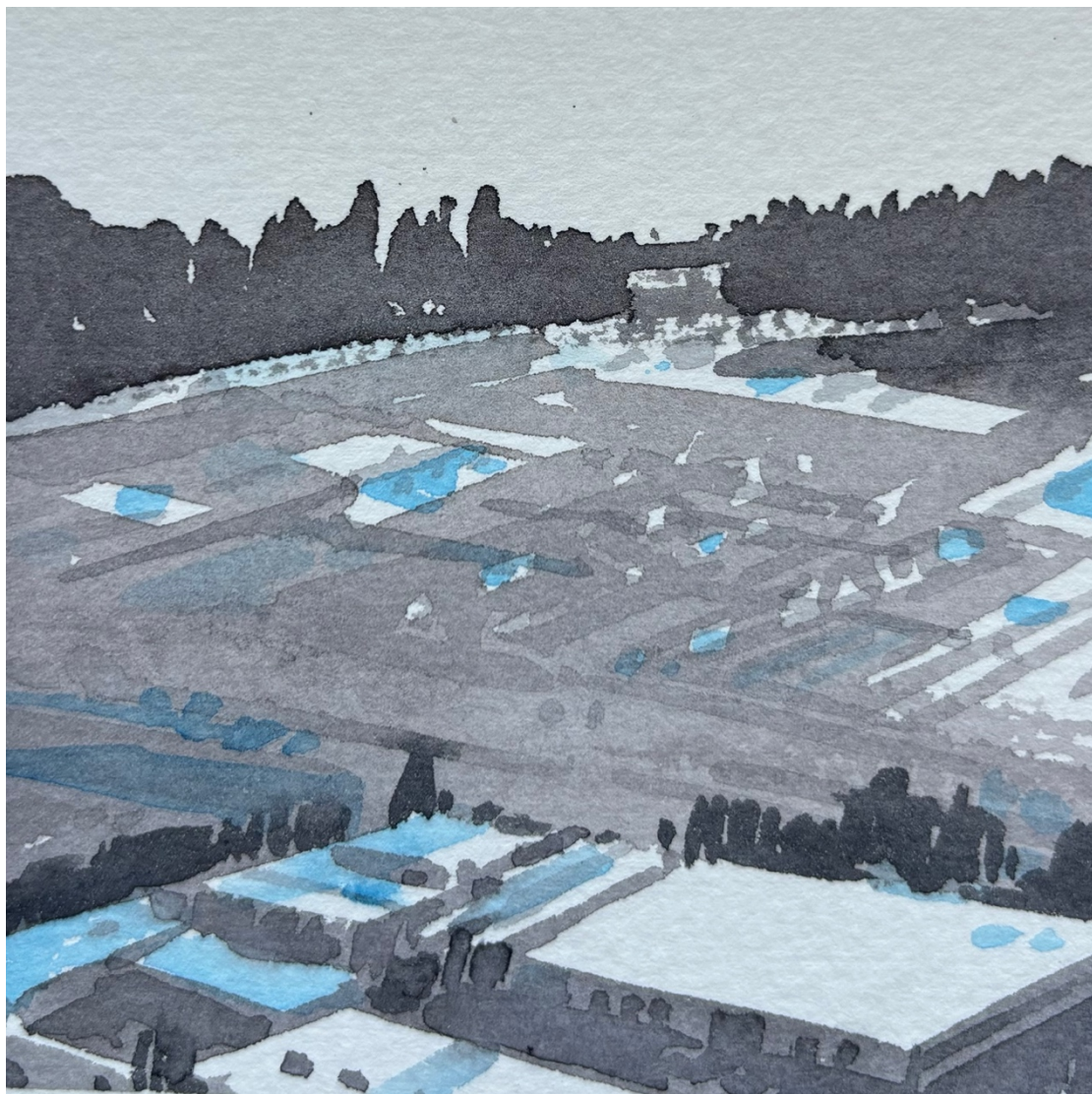


*Newcastle Diaries #46, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #47, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #48, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



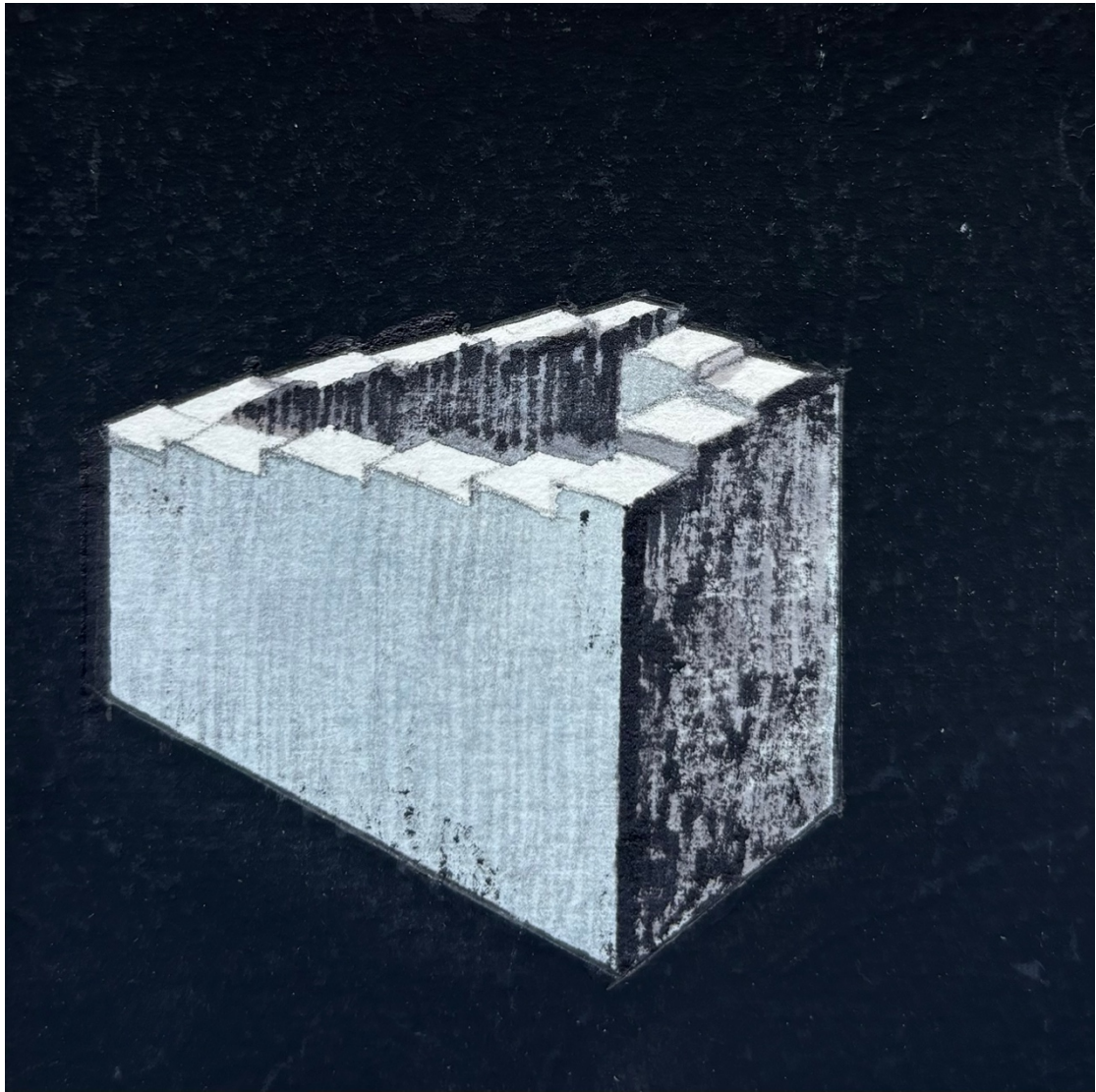


*Newcastle Diaries #49*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm



*Newcastle Diaries #50*, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





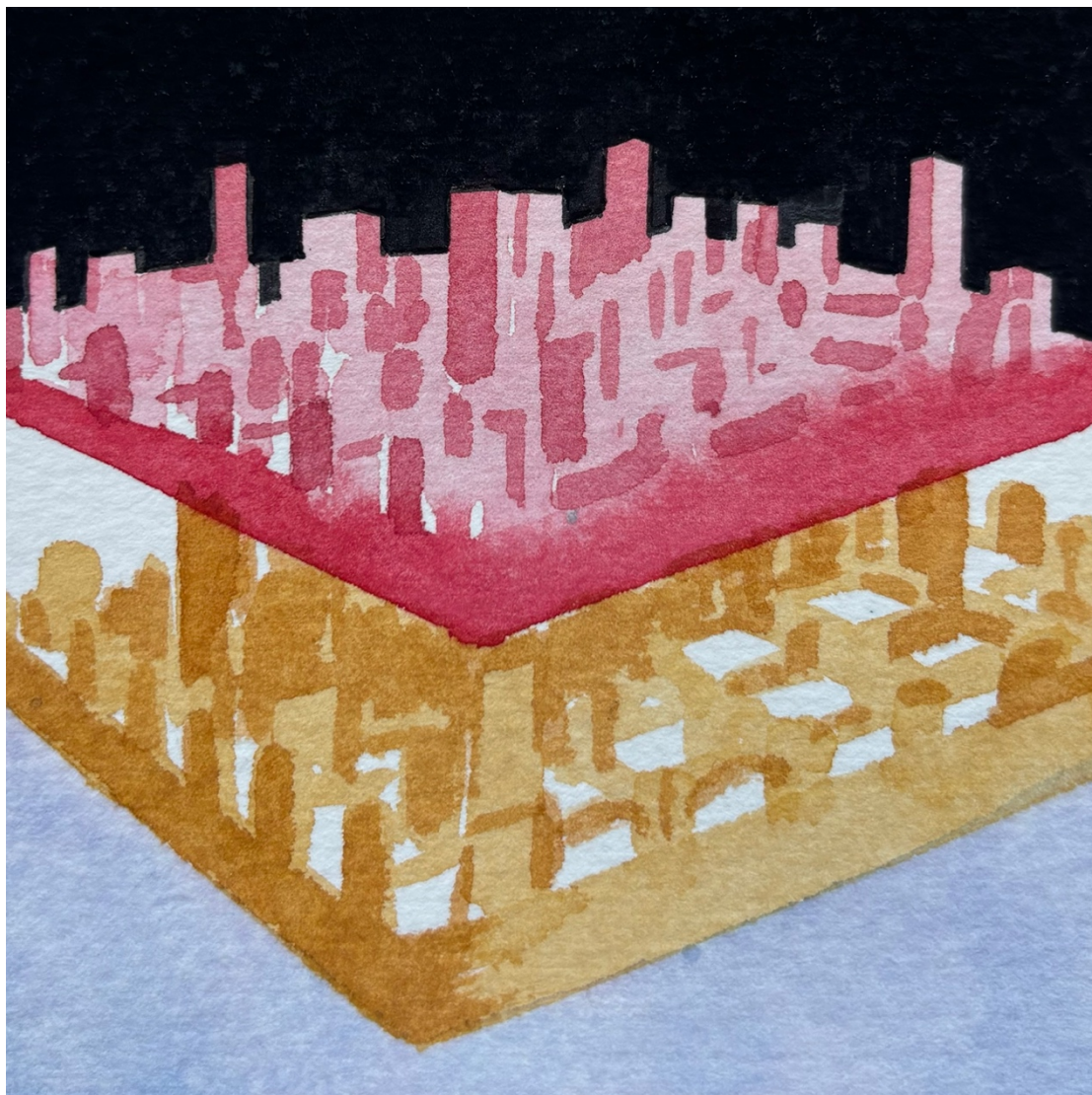
*Newcastle Diaries #51, 2021, Watercolour and graphite on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





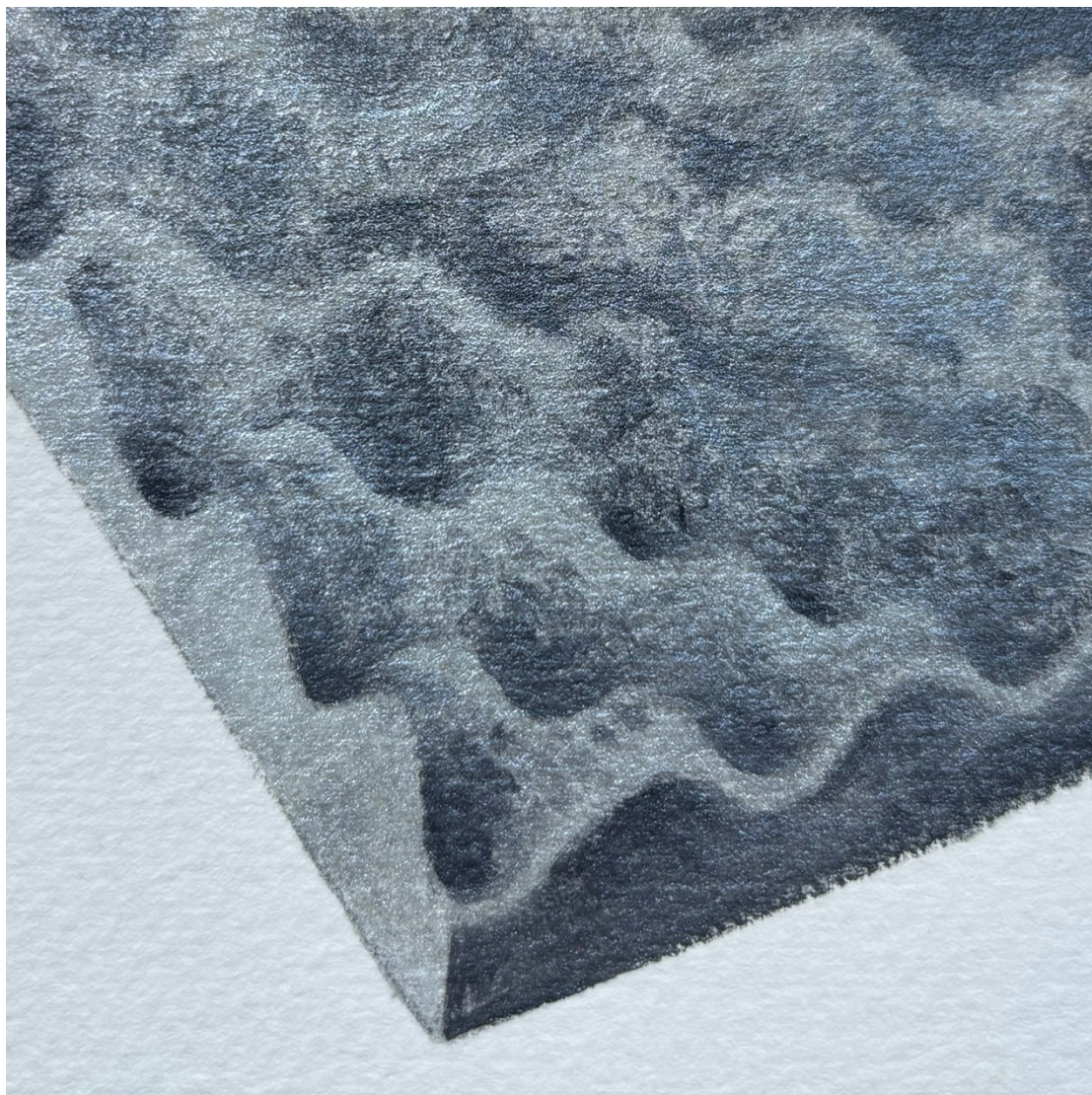
*Newcastle Diaries #52*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 8cm x 8cm





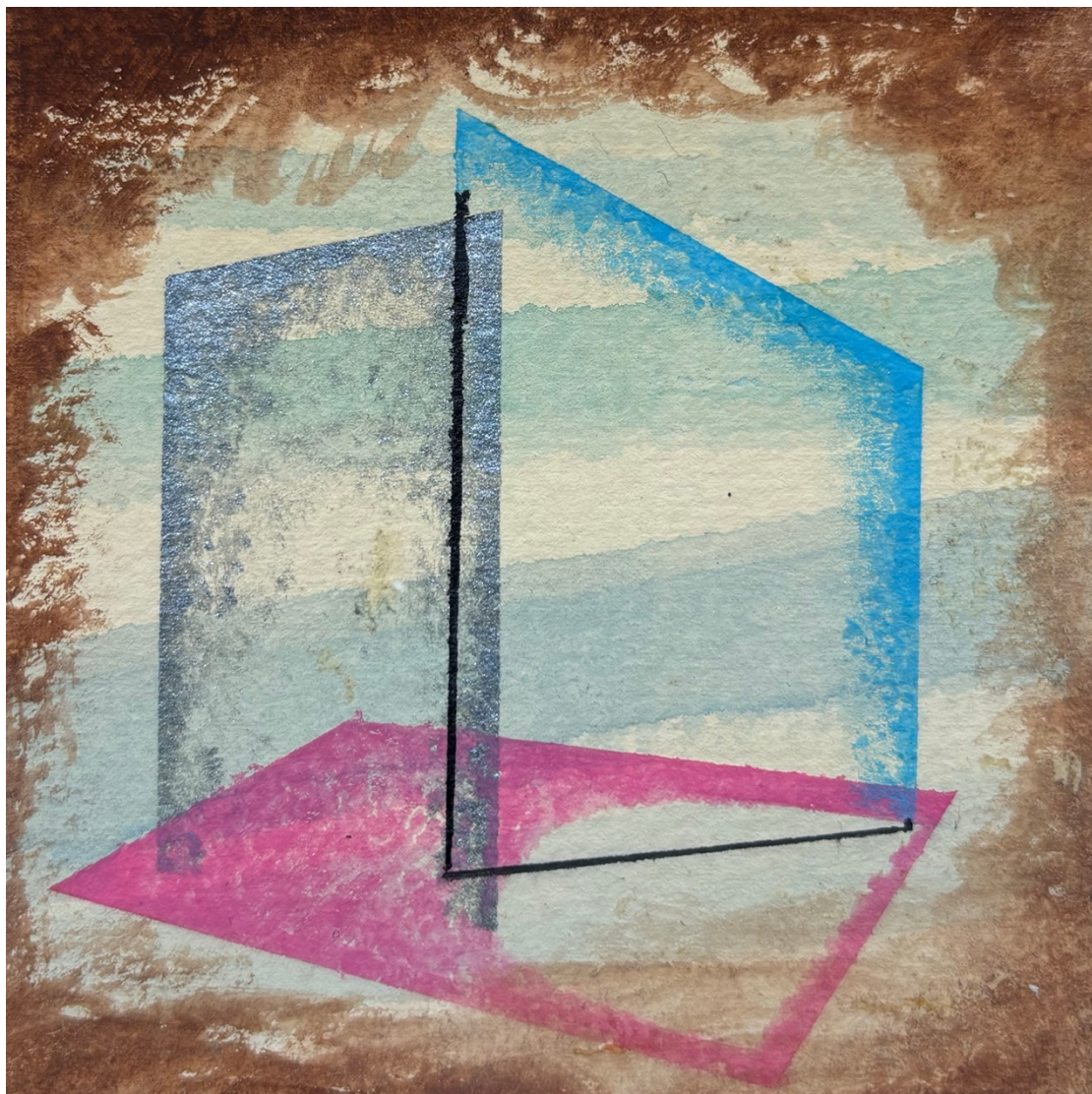
*Newcastle Diaries #53, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #54*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 8cm x 8cm





*Newcastle Diaries #55*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 8cm x 8cm



*Newcastle Diaries #56, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #57, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #58, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





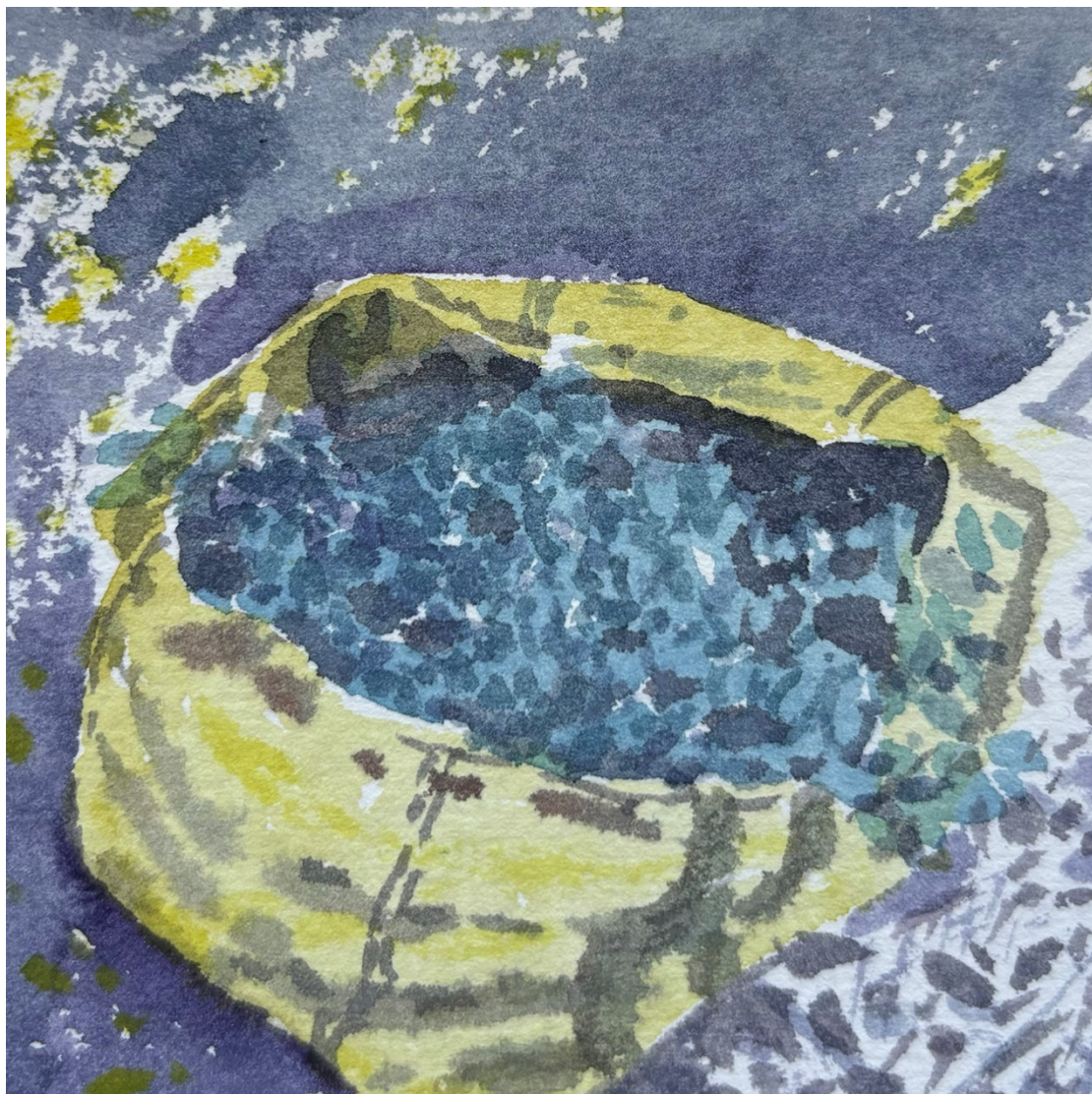
*Newcastle Diaries #59, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #60, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





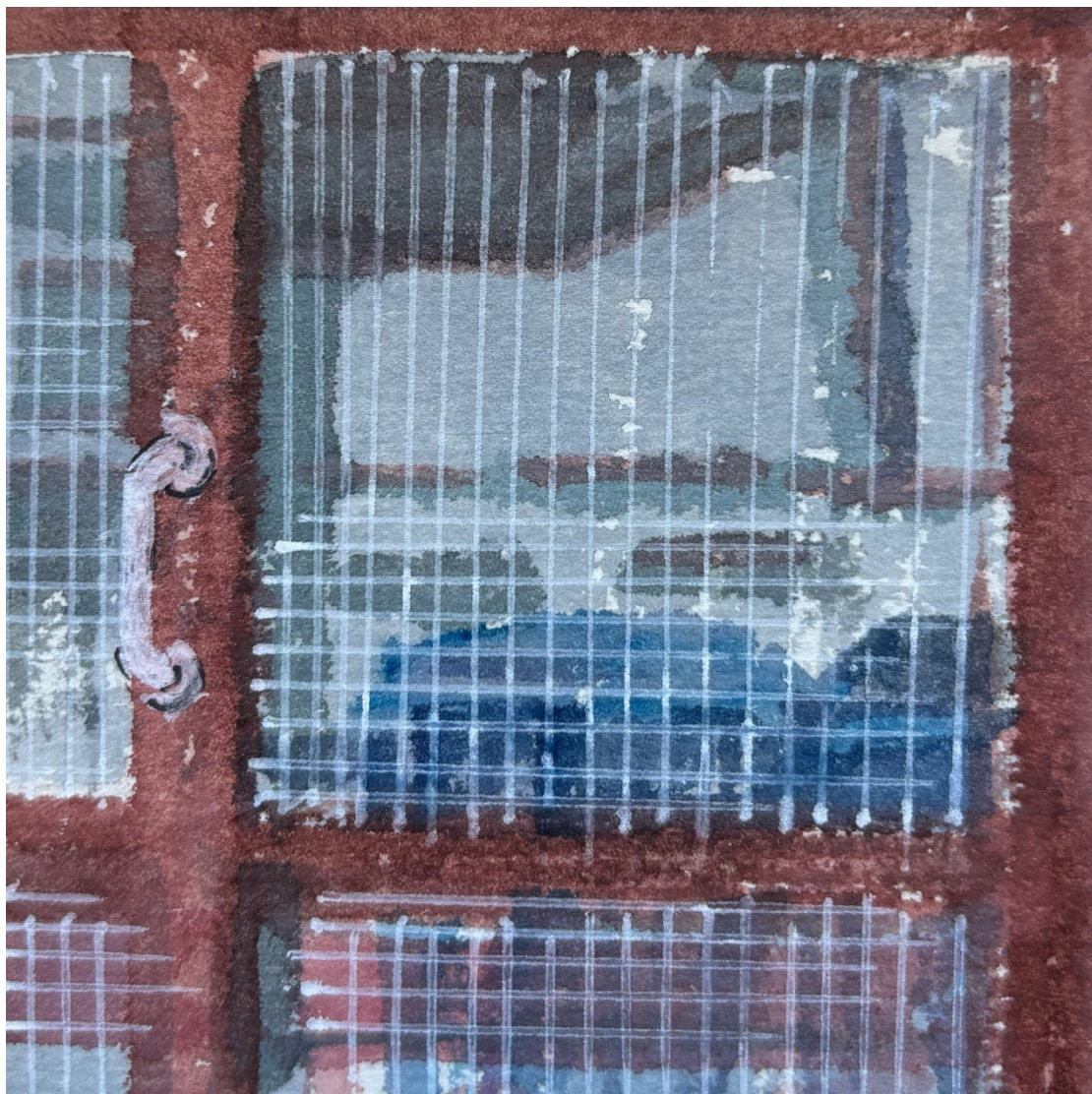
*Newcastle Diaries #61, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





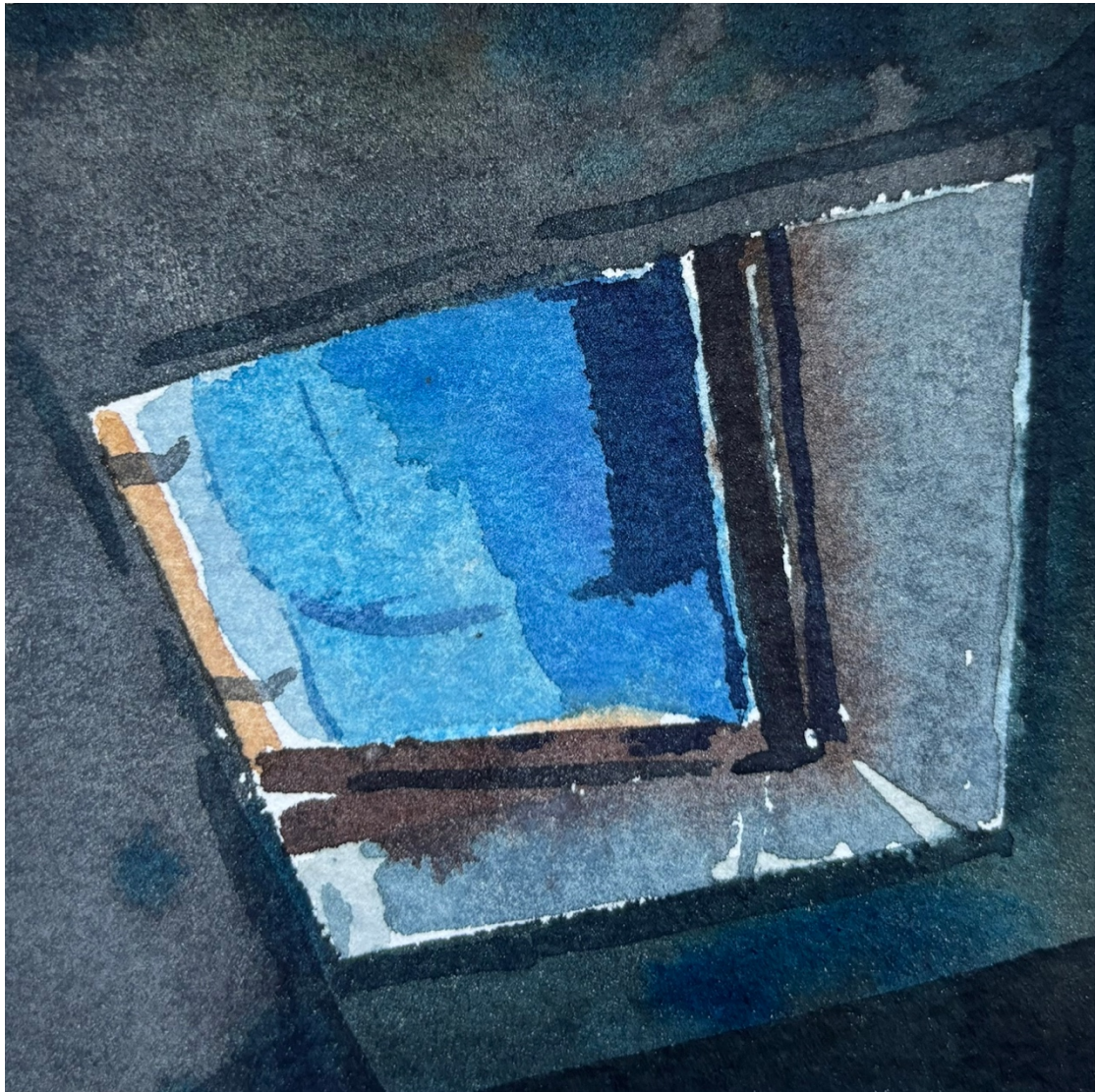
*Newcastle Diaries #62, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #63, 2021, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #64*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm





*Newcastle Diaries #65, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #66, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



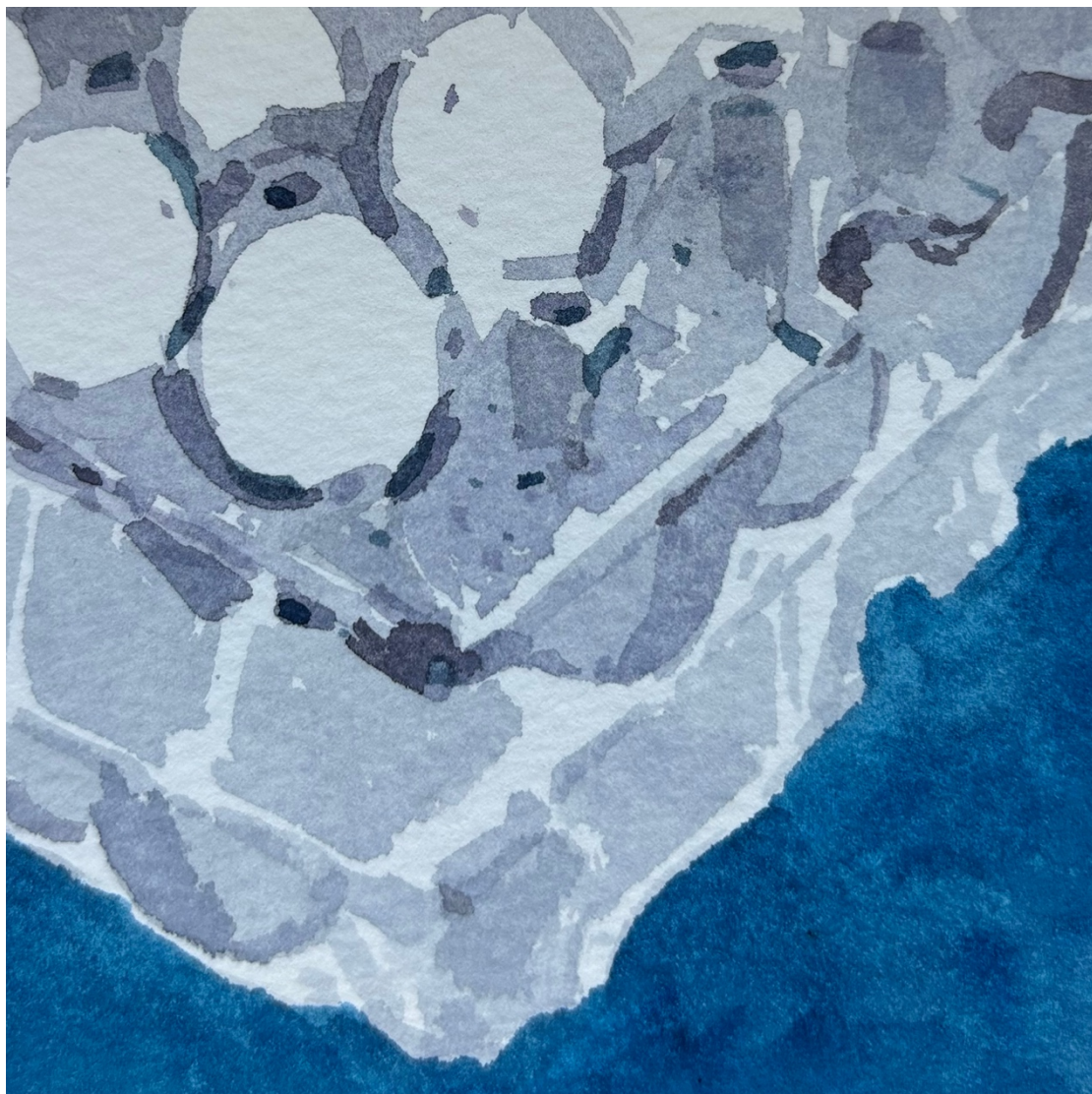


*Newcastle Diaries #67, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #68, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #69, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #70, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



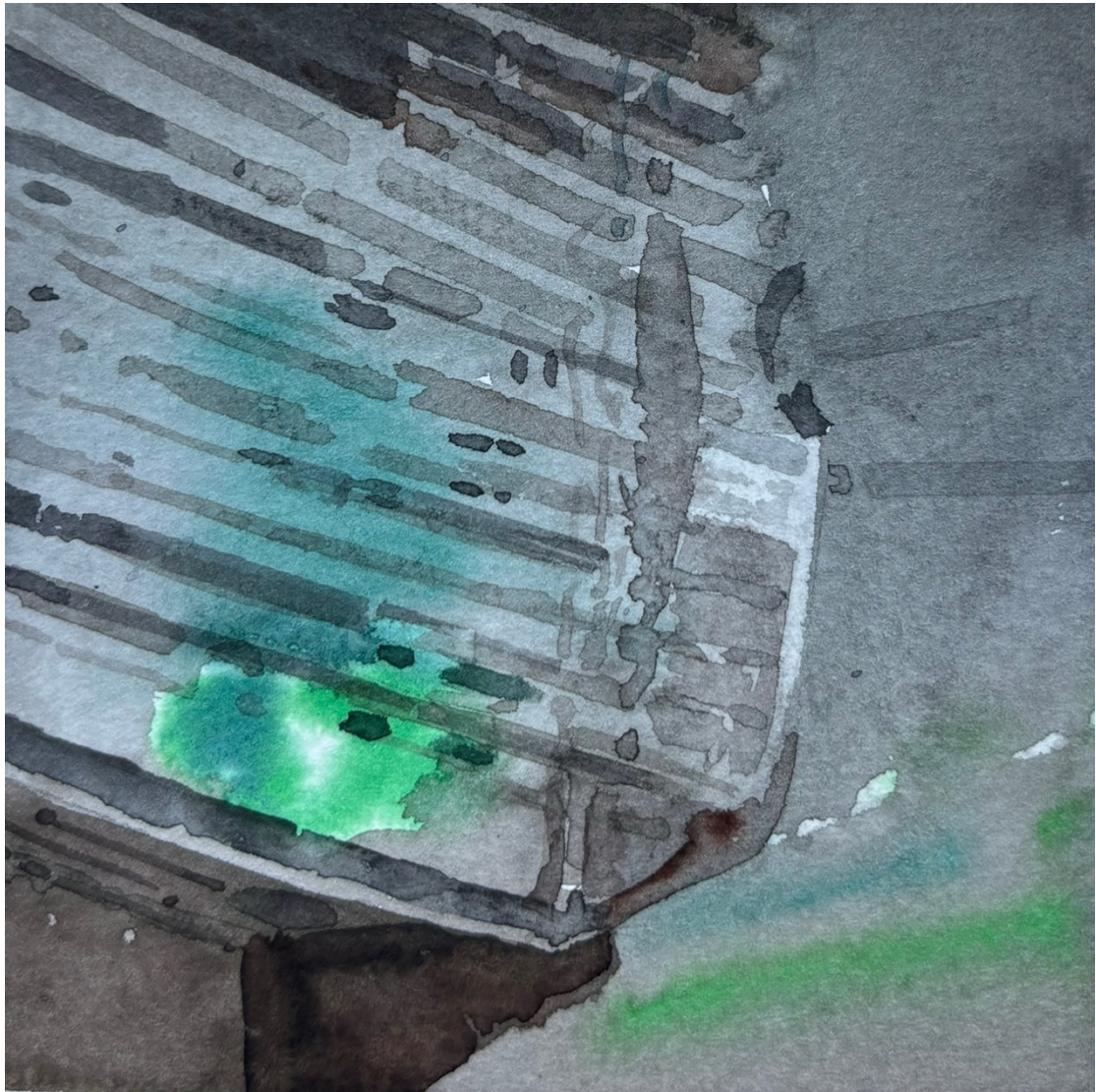
*Newcastle Diaries #71, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #72, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



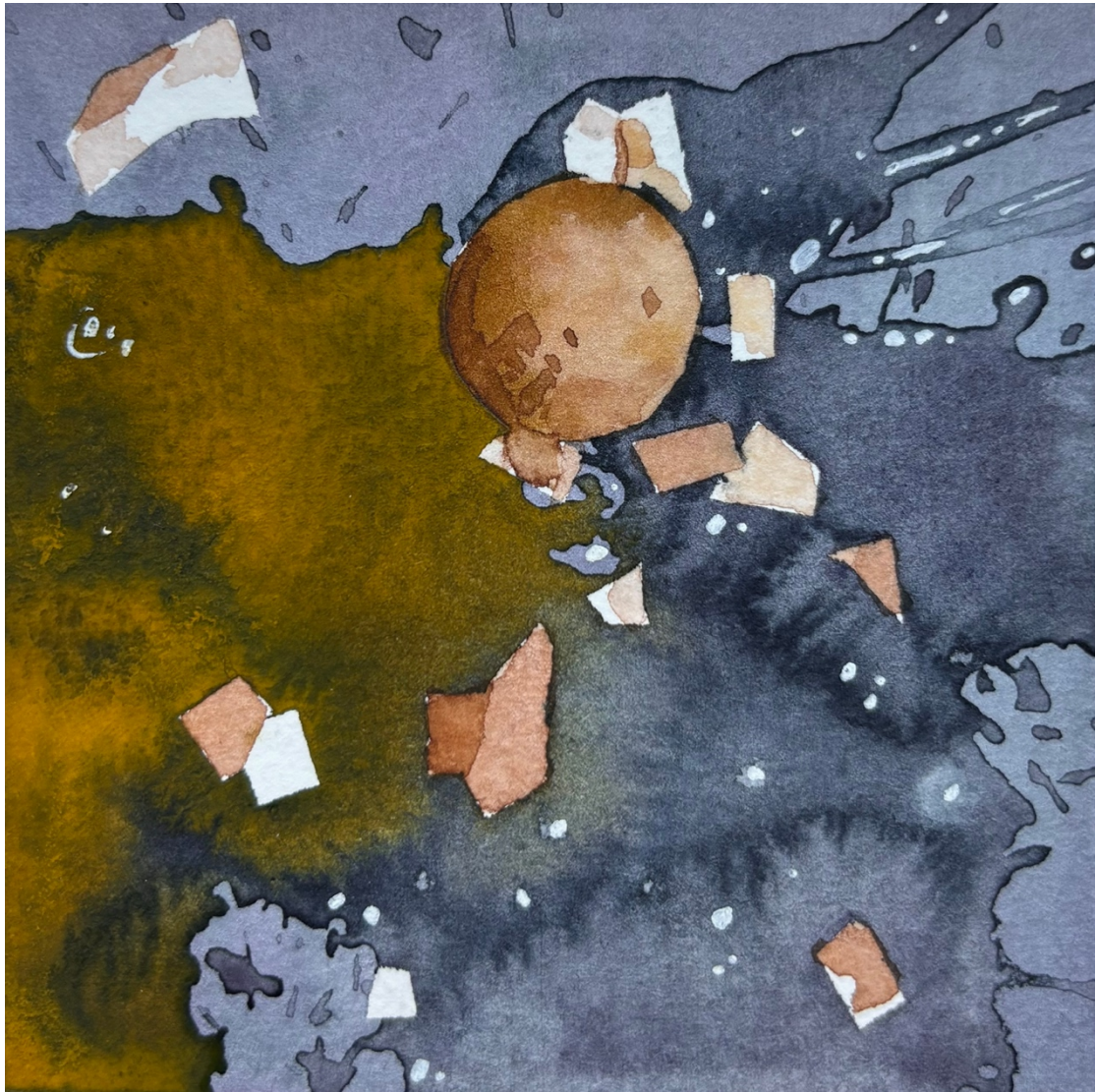


*Newcastle Diaries #73, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #74, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #75, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #76, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #77, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #78, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*





*Newcastle Diaries #79, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



*Newcastle Diaries #80, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 8cm x 8cm*



## ***Fragments***

The following images constitute the series of paintings, titled *Fragments*.



*Fragments I*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm





*Fragments II*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 63cm x 45cm



*Fragments III*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 31cm x 41cm



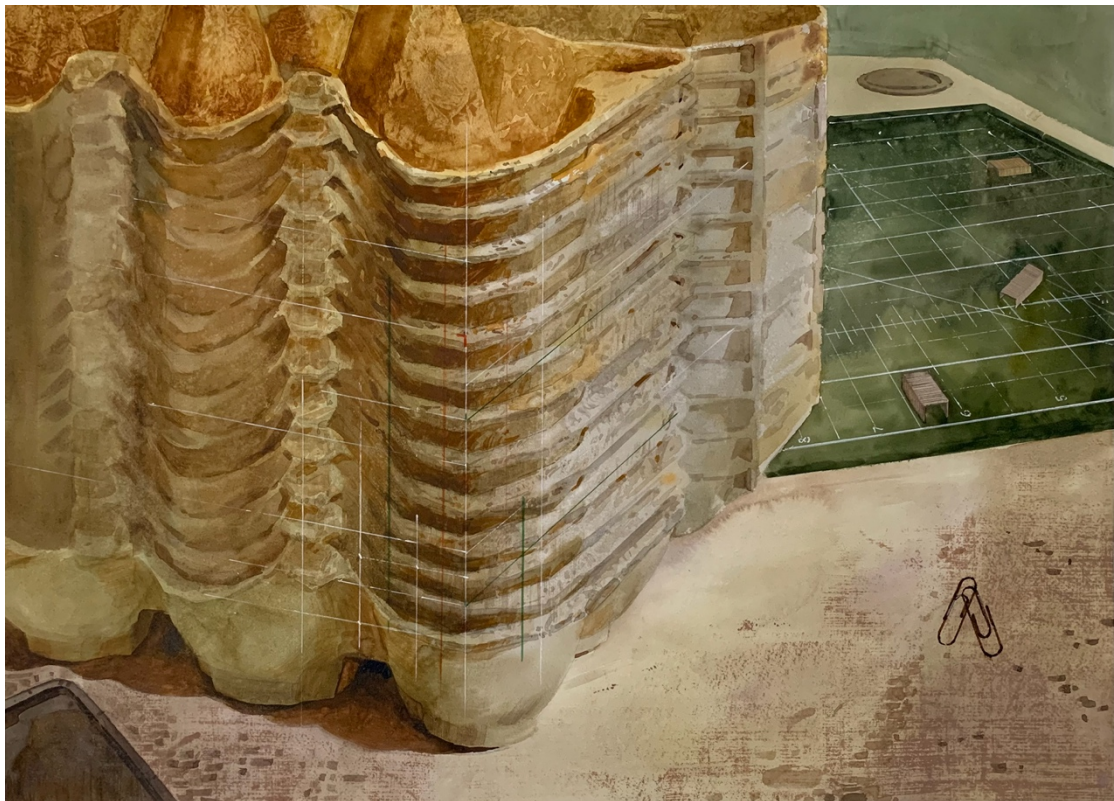


*Fragments IV*, 2022, Watercolour on paper, 31cm x 41cm



## ***Block***

The following images constitute the series of paintings, titled *Block*.



*Block I*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm



*Block II*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 63cm x 45cm





*Block III*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm





*Block IV*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 72cm x 53cm





*Block V*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 70cm x 52cm



*Block VI-Faded*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 55cm x 70cm





*Block VII*, 2023, Watercolour on canvas, 50cm x 40cm





*Block VIII*, 2023, Watercolour on canvas, 40cm x 50cm





*Block IX*, 2024, Watercolour on paper, 70cm x 52cm



## Other Paintings and Experiments

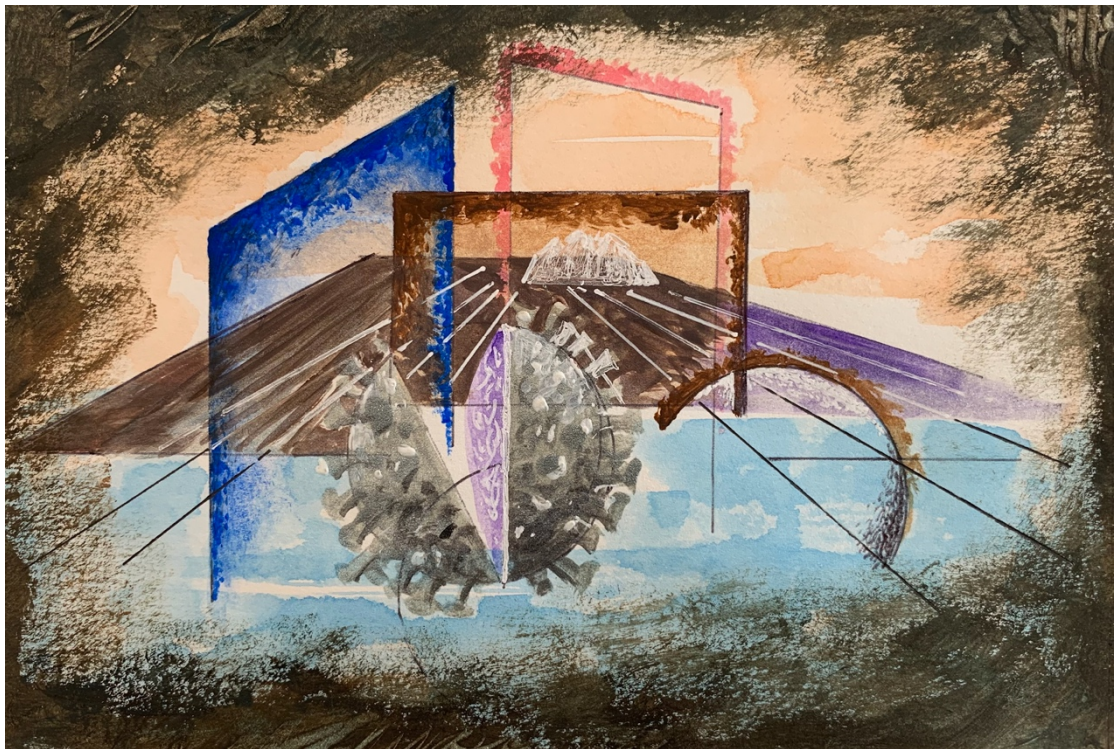


*Untitled I*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 17cm x 25cm



*Untitled II*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 17cm x 25cm





*Untitled III*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 17cm x 25cm





*Untitled IV*, 2021, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 17cm x 25cm



*Statue*, 2022, Watercolour and acrylic on paper, 63cm x 45cm





*Egg Cartons*, 2022, Oil on panel, 15cm x 15cm





*Chairs*, 2022, Oil on panel, 15cm x 15cm





*Brush Holder*, 2022, Oil on panel, 15cm x 15cm

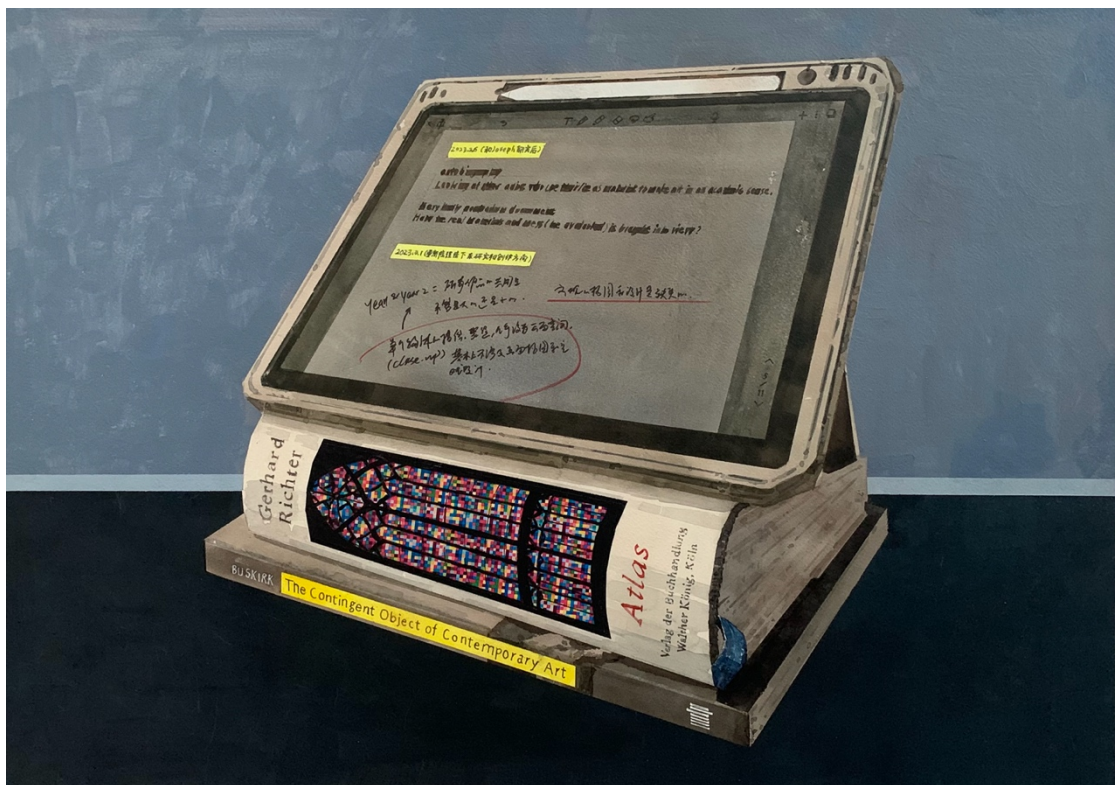


*Sharpener*, 2022, Oil on panel, 15cm x 15cm



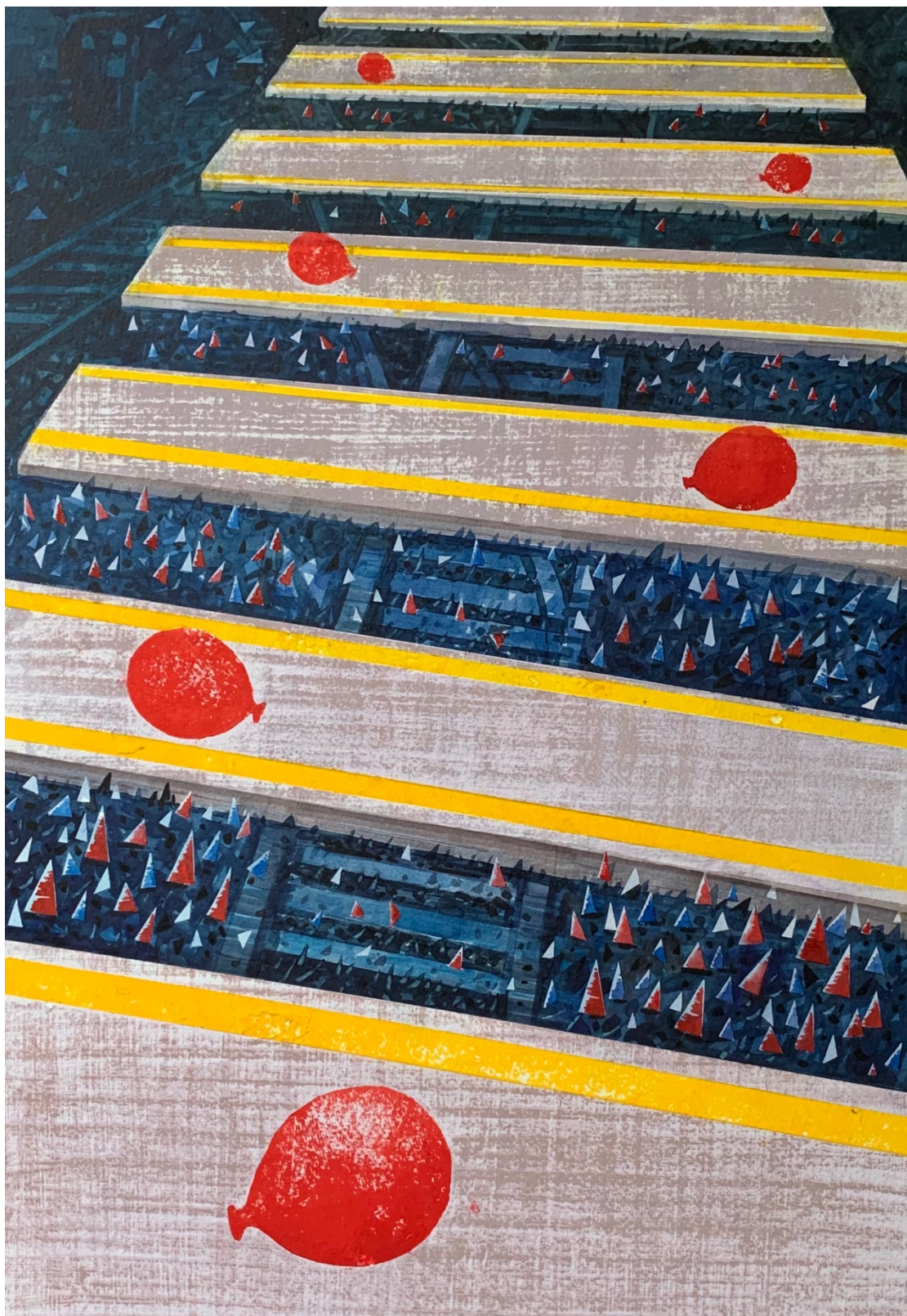


*Ice Cream*, 2022, Oil on panel, 15cm x 15cm



*Monument*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 45cm x 63cm





*Comfort Zone*, 2023, Watercolour and print ink on paper, 63cm x 45cm





*Painting Experiment #1*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 30.5cm x 40.6cm



*Painting Experiment #2*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 30.5cm x 40.6cm





*Painting Experiment #3*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm





*Fast Painting #1*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm





*Fast Painting #2*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm





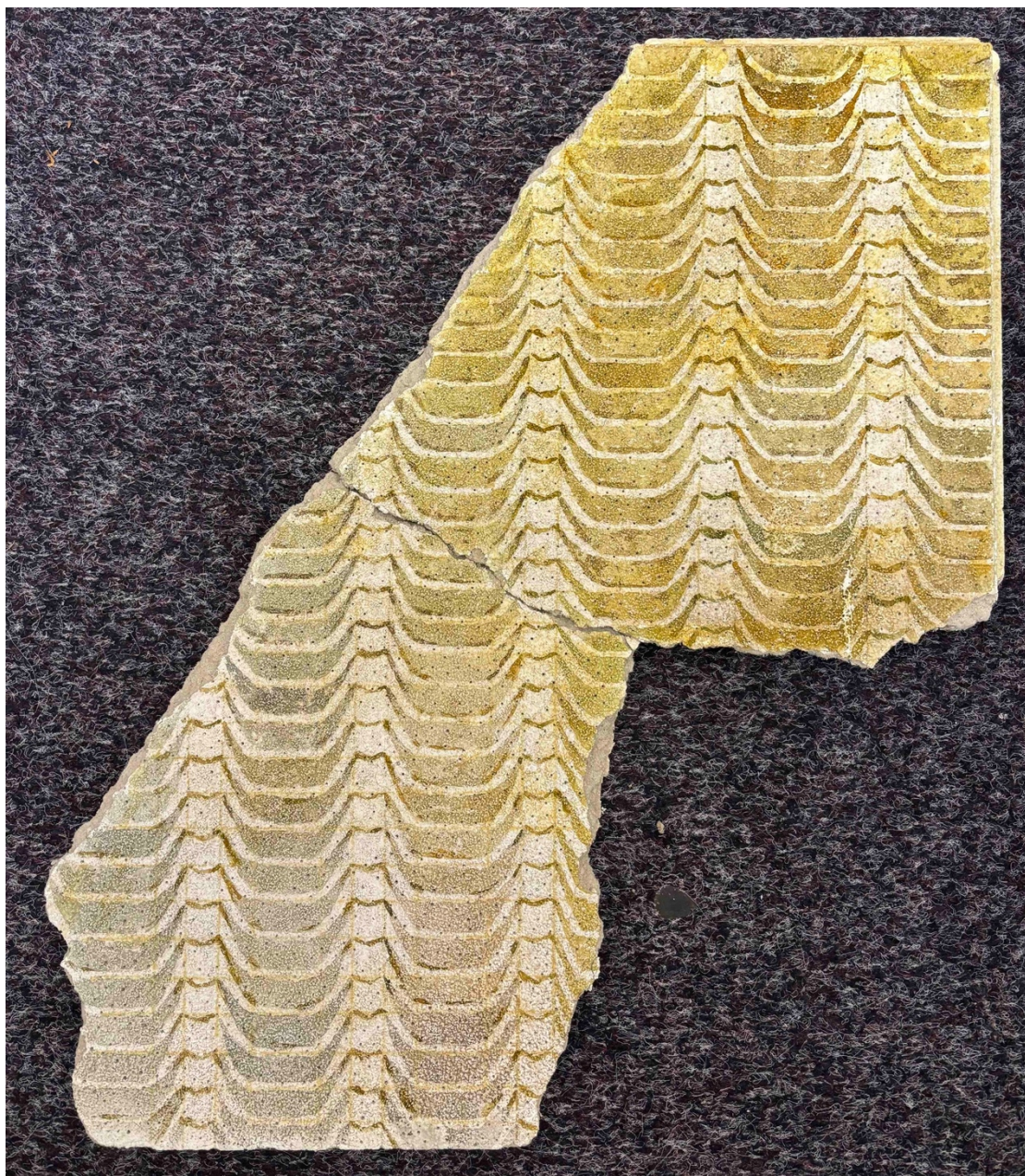
*Fast Painting #3*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm





*Fast Painting #4*, 2023, Watercolour on paper, 40.6cm x 30.5cm



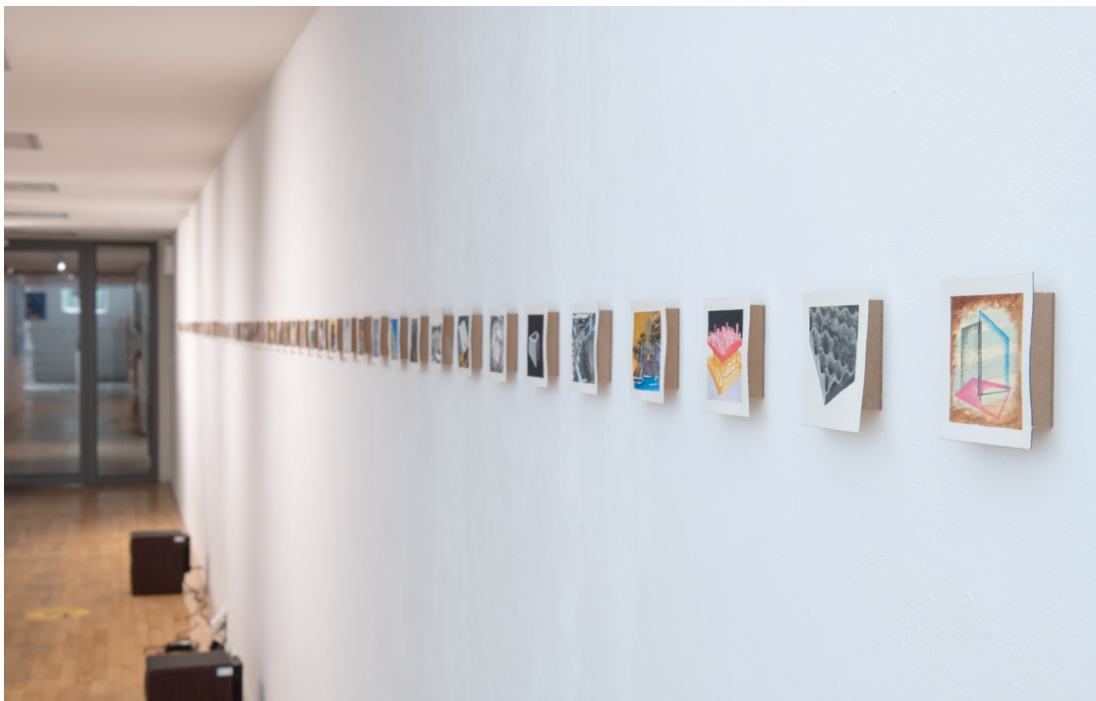


*Untitled*, 2023, Watercolour on mineral fibre board



## Appendix B. Exhibitions

### Year 1



*This Is What We Have Gone Through.* The Long Gallery, Newcastle University, August 2021. Photograph by Colin Davison.





*This Is What We Have Gone Through.* The Long Gallery, Newcastle University, August 2021. Photograph by Qirui Tan.

## Year 2



*Everyday Objects.* Fine Art Studio 1.12, Newcastle University, August 2022.

Photograph by Colin Davison.



*Everyday Objects*. Fine Art Studio 1.12, Newcastle University, August 2022.

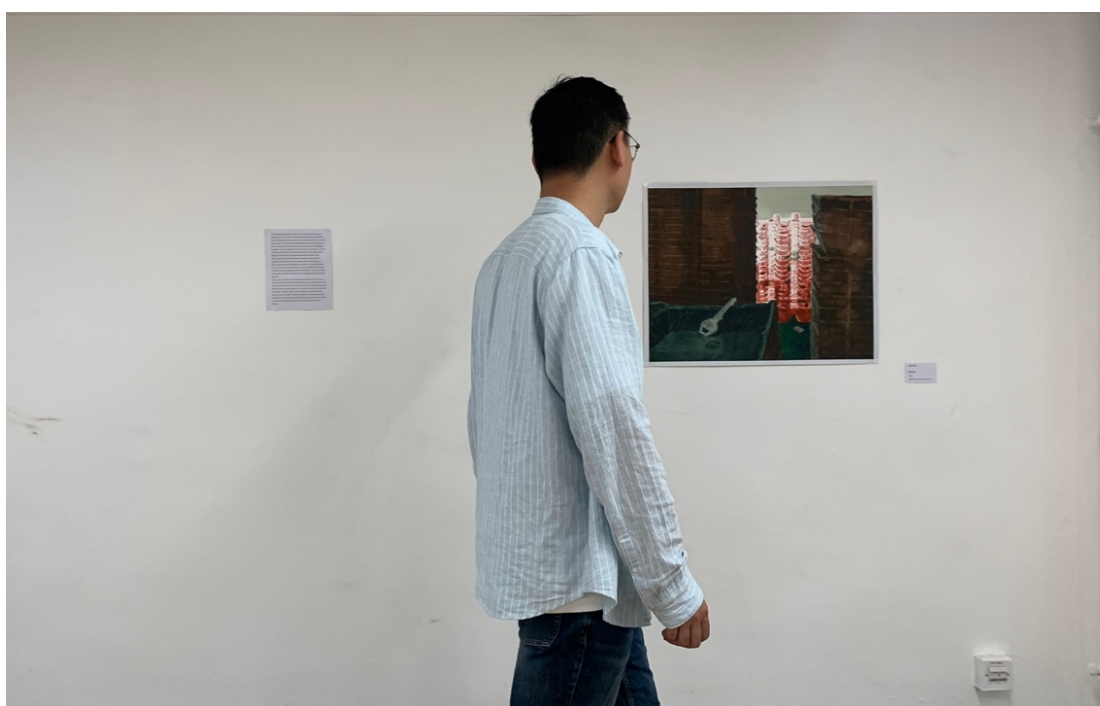
Photograph by Qirui Tan.



### Year 3



*Block*. Fine Art Studio 2.21, Newcastle University, August 2023. Photograph by Colin Davison.



*Block*. Fine Art Studio 2.21, Newcastle University, August 2023. Photograph by Qirui Tan.



## Year 4 Final Show









*Rethinking Relations: Still Life / Landscape; Inanimate / Animate.* Hatton Gallery, Newcastle University, August 2024. Photograph by Qirui Tan.



## Appendix C. Reflective Journals

### *Reflections on Close-up Paintings* 8 December 2021

Through the analysis of more than 60 small paintings, I found that these works have something in common, but this commonality is something I didn't pay special attention to when I created them. My works are mainly based on photography, and these photographic objects are mainly objects which comes from everyday life. When I am taking pictures of them, I prefer to record them in a close-up way, zooming in on a specific part of the object. As a result, the images are always some parts of the object rather than the whole. For example, in those small paintings, most of the works show the characteristics of close-up. Therefore, my works naturally give people a sense of fragmentation. In this fragmented expression, I explore the traces left by time in space.

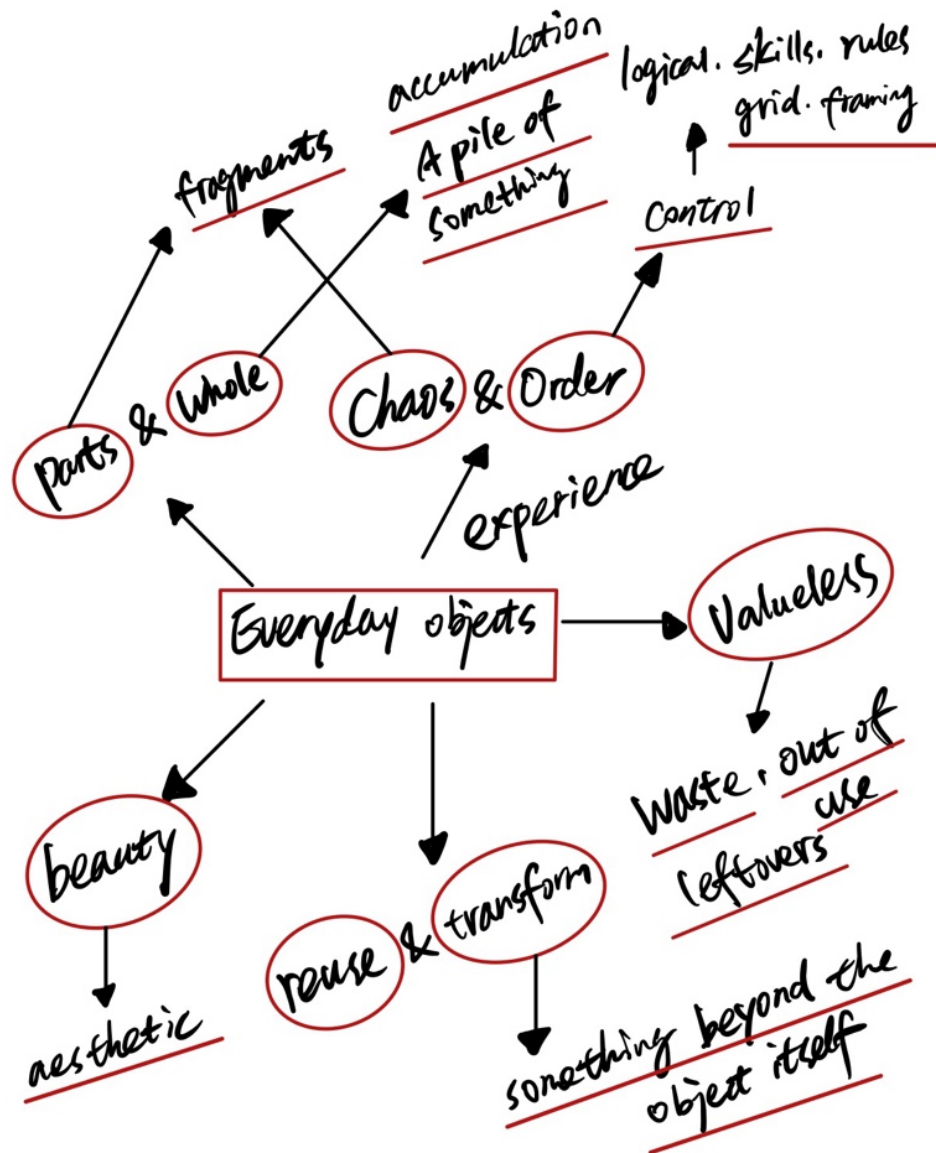
When painting based on photography, the objects in the works are no longer the ones seen in reality. Does this representation connected with the passage of time and the distance of space realize the self-alienation of objects to some extent?

In terms of depicting reality, photography is far more accurate than painting, so what is the point of painting? What is the function of painting? What I am trying to investigate is the relationship between painting and photography in today's era. What is the difference between painting based on photos and photos themselves?





# Research Mind Map



## Year 2 = Research Chronological Summary

Nov. 2021: close-up paintings.

Looking at some small things in the studio.

paint something about time, trace.

explore the traces left by time in space.

The relationship between painting & photography.

The paintings based on photography & photos themselves.

Mar. 2021: 1. Fragments paintings Everyday objects (overlooked, leftovers)

disorder & disruption.

depict the appearance of the fragments when I saw them.

Set a stage for such a sense of disorder.

State, beauty, authenticity, value, still life paintings.

Natural state? Express what?

The differences between the paintings & photos?

2. Looking at David Hockney's ideas about painting & photography,

Experiments on photographic collage.

Break up the traditional way of seeing things. (fixed view point, perspective)

Apr & May, 2022: How you experience the everyday objects?

The process of experiencing & perceiving (what does it bring to you & how you feel?)

Looking at egg boxes. A pile of egg boxes on the chair.

disorder, composition, shape.

subjective, not copy the photos.

June. 2022: The way of expression. Objects + space (surroundings)

watercolor → acrylic → oil painting (experiments)

chaos & order parts & whole

delicate → color plate mainly about method.

how to paint?





2022.11.22 (和Chris聊完后)

framing/contextualizing the research, context and field, understand the contribution to the field.

→ (bring yourself into the debate)

Research Question (4个方向 potential) :

1871 (2022) 疫情以来各种现象上呈现已经  
是 contribution?

**1. How can I generate a kind of beauty through painting based on mundane objects?**

(beauty)

→ overlooked, out of use, waste, valueless

**2. How the meaning and information of a photographic image inevitably changes when it is reinvented as the subject of a paper?**

(the relationship between painting and photography, the meaning of representation painting)

**3. How can I use everyday objects through an artistic way to suggest ordered comfort zone and its influence?**

(metaphor of everyday objects), (personal experience), self reflection, (social phenomenon),

(express some ideas through painting), (implication of the work?) → comfort zone

**4. How can flat abstract elements be applied into figurative painting?**

(the relationship between abstract and figurative), (painting in modern art before abstract?),

(flatness)

4个问题中更倾向1和3。2和4不是不行，只是太common了，而且是已经被讨论太多的问题，很难在这个基础上再有什么新的点。对于research而言太familiar了。相比而言，comfort zone 或者说restriction (环境导致lockdown) 以及环境的改变对于创作的影响，这些有可挖的点。但无论是什么点，都需要找到evidence。不光是自己的定义，社会学家的定义？不光自己知道，别人能不能明白？

2022.11.24 (和学姐聊完后)

### Motivation:

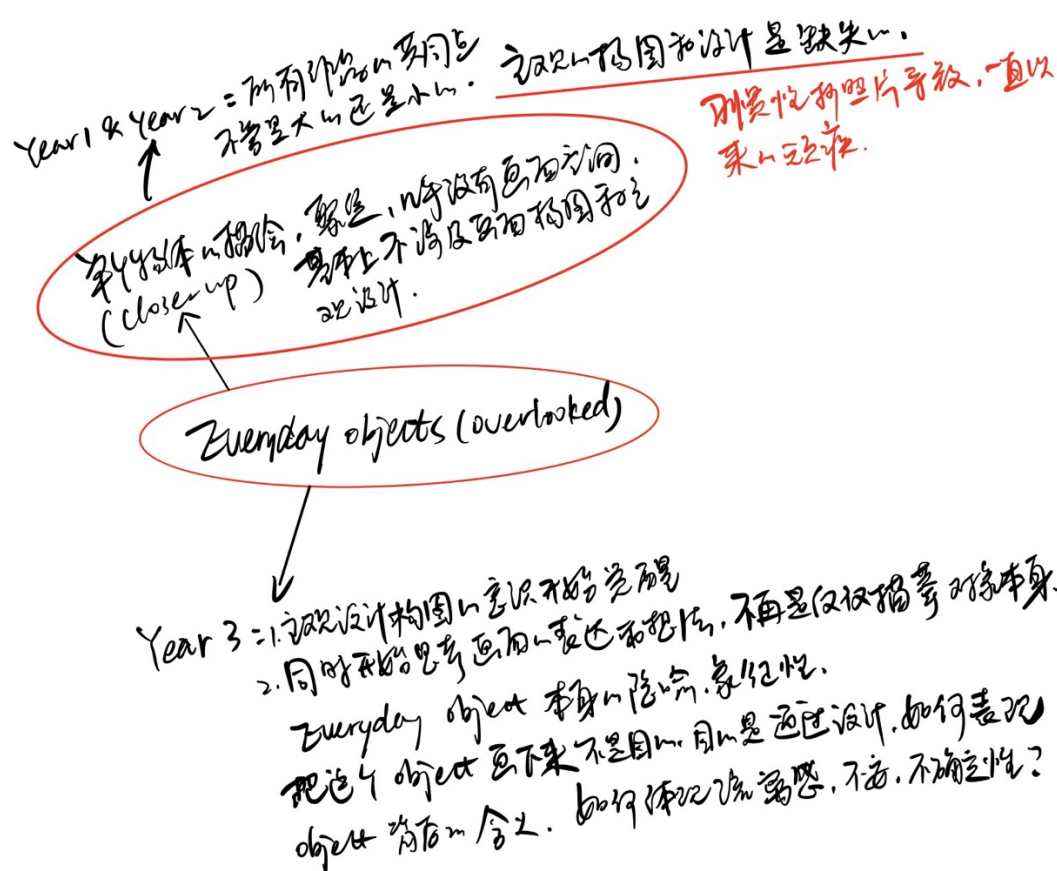
疫情的出现改变了我看待世界观察世界的方式和角度。疫情之前，我的创作是宏观的，大的城市全景，大的工业场景。但疫情的到来，改变了我的创作方式。20年底独自来到纽卡，那时英国还处于lockdown，陌生的环境加上疫情的影响，让我产生了巨大的隔离感和与外部世界的疏离感。因为每天都处于一个小的有限的空间（寝室，画室，上下学的路）我开始注意到和我同处于这个空间的物体，那些出现在我身边的日常物。隔离的环境给了我机会观察它们，感受它们并与它们

2023.2.21 (反思)

1.关于接下来的创作方向，还是回到有素材（照片或实景）为基础的画面，身边被忽略的东西，角落，有趣的场景。反映模糊和不确定性，充满不安的情绪，似乎什么将要发生或者已经发生，戏剧性。主观设计画面的点线面排布、构图布局上如何体现不安、如何体现不确定性？不要抄照片！！

2.想到博一阶段画的那些小稿，一方面可能有疫情的影响，环境的影响导致自己更多关注身边的事物，但另一方面，也反映了自己画画的问题，就是在国内画画一直都是喜欢用投影仪，这样抄照片画画搞习惯了，从来没有思考过画面的设计构图这方面的问题，然后来到国外就一下子懵了，离开照片就不知道画什么了，没有投影仪不会打形了，画不了大画就只能去画小画，因为容错率高，画幅小没啥细节也不用去想怎么设计构图，因为画面太小都看不出来。其实就是因为自己逃避问题，觉得画小画保险。但这样的选择也是必然要经历的事情，因为从国内那种创作方式不可能一下子就变成有丰富表达的画，中间肯定有过程怎么一步步变来的，而我经历的痛苦的感觉就是这个转变所必需经历的。

### 2023.3.1 (重新梳理接下来研究和创作方向)



从描述年-物体到全球创作, 追求想法和观念表达

以照片为基础  
无平面设计意识

观念想象构图, 无照片参考, 报道  
难度过大, 画面有些空。

现在再回到以照片为基础  
的创作上来, 与当初直接照抄  
照片没有区别, 肯定不一样了。  
因为现在有了平面设计画面的意识了。

因此后期创作大致分为两个部分同时进行 =

Everyday objects (overlooked)

形式感, 氛围感

隐喻和象征性。

被忽视的角落, 由各种 everyday objects  
组成, 与构图排列, 设计构图, 表  
现主观和客观存在, 什么将要发生或  
有什么已经发生? 对联想。  
在环境中寻找以视觉传达关系, 传达  
的信息。

对于构图的要求。  
有形式感, 形式感, 用  
人的思维结构作为基础  
材料, 做艺术作品, 当代  
艺术的表现方式, 从非架  
构的角度去思考, 是否可  
以用其他形式表现?  
摄影, 绘画, 装置, 行为?  
重要的是观念和思想  
表达, 什么形式更有助于表  
达, 用什么形式。



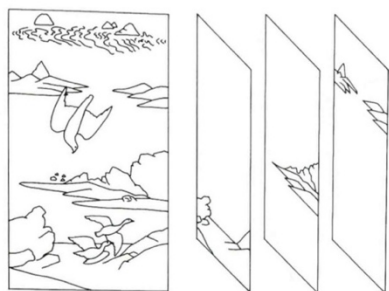


图13a, b 《春晴图》局部，原图见本书图18，为三层分离后退的附加山石母题。



图14a, b 《溪山图》局部，原图见本书图19，为连续后退的重叠山石母题。

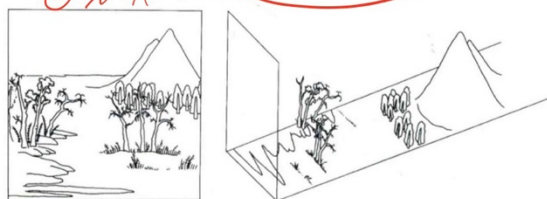


图15a, b 赵孟頫《鹊华秋色图》局部，原图见本书图66，为沿着一个连续后退的地面安置山水因子。

线以重量和遮挡形成空间上  
一前压后。

视觉切片。

画鸡岩金时能否运用  
这种视觉切片来制造  
深度空间，而不单只  
用二维平面上的线性  
遮挡去制造视觉欺骗？

③ 元代以后

可尝试：

① 视觉切片

② 在展开的纸面表面画鸡岩金纹样，制造出一种类似鸡岩金以  
立体。

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