

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: EVERY PLACE WE'VE BEEN

Elaine Qiu, Master of Fine Arts, 2023

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Combining printmaking and painting, hovering between abstraction and representation, "Every Place We've Been" documents the disorienting experiences of the last years on both a collective and personal level. Using images culled from various archival sources, as well as personal snapshots, the installation examines how history becomes a collective embodied memory and draws attention to the boundaries between the personal and the public.

Every Place We've Been

By

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## EXILE

Exile is a heart-rending odyssey through the uncharted realms of isolation, where the soul aches for belonging and the heart yearns for familiar shores. In the disorienting whirlwind of recent years, the pandemic experience potentially arises as one of exile, both on a personal and collective level. The narratives entwine sorrow and transformation, echoing the haunting refrain of exiles, where human anguish, cultural metamorphosis, and the birth of new identities collide.

On a personal level, the pandemic plunged individuals into an abyss of isolation and separation, tearing them away from loved ones, friends, and colleagues. For those grieving the loss of family or friends, the experience was a heartrending challenge, compounded by the absence of their usual support networks. As daily routines were disrupted, individuals grappled with maintaining a sense of normalcy and purpose in their lives, while enduring the suffocating grip of loneliness, anxiety, and despair.

On a collective level, the pandemic wrought a mournful sense of exile upon communities and societies, where strict lockdowns and travel bans evoked isolation and detachment from the wider world. As social inequalities were laid bare and deepened by the virus and its economic impacts, marginalized communities and low-income households bore the brunt of its devastating effects.

Exile, a collective trauma, evokes a haunting sense of displacement and disorientation. Throughout history, artists have been captivated by the theme of exile, as seen in works ranging from Théodore Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa" to Pablo Picasso's "Guernica."



Fig. 1 Gerhard Richter, September, 2005 Oil on canvas, 28 1/3 x 20 1/2 inches (72 x 52 cm)  
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Alongside other artists exploring themes of exile and collective trauma, German artist Gerhard Richter painted "September", years after 9/11. The painting serves as a poignant reminder of the collective trauma etched into the hearts of many, evoking haunting memories of the aftermath of 9/11. The blurred and distorted image of a plane striking the World Trade Center towers hints at Richter's own sense of shock and horror, as well as the broader impact of the event on our collective psyche. Drawing from his experiences of World War II, Richter illuminates the role of images in shaping our understanding of historical events, and the fragmented, disorienting nature of trauma.

In the same vein, "Every Place We've Been" documents the collective and personal trauma of the pandemic, capturing the imprints it has left on society and individual. Amidst the labyrinthine pathways of the installation, viewers find themselves wandering through a shattered reality, searching for a way out of the disorienting structure, which is composed of fragments of archival images. The installation serves as a symbol for the disorienting experiences of recent times, as the world longs for the stability of a past that has been forever altered, while individuals struggle to navigate the uncertainties of the present. The use of archival images as the basis for the work highlights the way that images elevate our understanding of historical events. The blurred and distorted nature of the image serves as a commentary on how our collective consciousness, history, and personal memory form in our minds.

## STORYTELLING AS ROADMAP

“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story  
or tell a story about them.”

-Hannah Arendt

Throughout history, amidst the tumultuous trials, human resilience and innate determination always unfurl as ethereal cartography, plotting a course through the tempests and uncharted terrains. The ability to narrate regenerative stories is a strength inherent in us as a species. The Holocaust has inspired transformative stories about the importance of speaking out against injustice and the power of memory and commemoration. Survivors and their descendants worked tirelessly to ensure that the memory of the victims was not forgotten. This has resulted in the establishment of museums and memorials, the recording and preservation of survivor testimonies, and continued education about the Holocaust in schools and universities worldwide. These stories serve as a testament to the enduring importance of honoring and preserving the past, even in the face of unimaginable tragedy and loss. The ecological, racial, economic, and social reckonings bring us back to seeing and participating in telling a generative story in our time.

Hannah Arendt captures the profound relationship between storytelling and reconciliation when she writes, "When the storyteller is loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have

spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence." She eloquently posits that storytelling can illuminate a path out of the exile's labyrinth.

I find myself in agreement with Arendt, recognizing that for the bereaved, the act of sharing their stories is indispensable, their voices yearning to be heard amidst the turmoil of sorrow. Through the art of storytelling, individuals can excavate, express, and navigate their deepest emotions, experiences, and traumas within a safe and imaginative sanctuary. By remaining loyal to the essence of their narrative, we can embrace the totality of our experiences and discover solace through the act of sharing and connecting with others.

The authenticity and potency of the story are vital components in this transformative process, offering a channel through which we can wholly engage with our emotions and attain a sense of catharsis and resolution. As a powerful tool for both personal metamorphosis and community bonding, storytelling fosters profound connections among individuals, unifying us through our shared narratives.

Embracing the ancient power of storytelling, I seek to explore and comprehend our world and our time through art. My aspiration is for my work to convey the narrative of collective grief—a grief experienced by a community, a nation, or even the world as a whole.

"Every Place We've Been" comprises a series of landscape paintings on long paper scrolls. These visuals, reminiscent of cartography and roadmaps, document both the physical and psychological spaces we inhabit. Functioning as a map, the artwork seemingly conveys a sense of direction and distance, guiding the viewer through the visual memories and landscape of recent years. The ever-changing natural seasons and political landscapes intermingle through the semi-transparent paper, forming a new, simultaneously familiar and foreign scenery. It narrates

the stories of the last years, chronicling the journey we took collectively through a pandemic-laden landscape. The translucent long scrolls appear as illuminated pathways, connecting the shadows of the past with the dawn of a new horizon.

Navigating the installation is akin to traversing winding trails, with the experience unfurling like a whispered promise, guiding us through the painful and bewildering exile of recent years. Embracing the lessons of bygone days, the viewer journeys toward the solace of homecoming.

## INNER LANDSCAPE

"An environment is also an inward reality".

-James Baldwin

James Baldwin's profound insight that "an environment is also an inward reality" calls our attention to the bond between the physical spaces we inhabit and the intricate, richly textured terrain of our inner selves. Our inner landscape—a lively fusion of the mind and soul—is not just the product of our imagination; it is also shaped by our experiences, hopes, and desires, as well as the very essence of who we are.

The inner landscape is perpetually evolving and transforming as we traverse the winding path of life. This private sanctuary functions as an archive of the past, a mirror reflecting the present, and a harbinger of the future. Delving into this multifaceted domain, we come to understand and appreciate the interlacing of our identities and the world that envelops us.

Chinese ink landscapes are great examples of inner landscapes. Often monochromatic, these paintings go beyond mere representation and reveal the artist's inner topography. Mountains, rivers, and forests transcend the physical and morph into a reflection of the artist's soul. Through these ethereal gateways, the artists allow us to glimpse their feelings, ideologies, and contemplative recollections.

The symbiotic relationship between the external and internal realms is exemplified through the creative process, as evidenced in Helen Frankenthaler's "Interior Landscape" (1964).

This abstract expressionist artist infused her very essence into her work, channeling the spirit of the landscape that resided within her and manifesting it through the fluidity of her brushstrokes.



Fig. 2 Helen Frankenthaler "Interior Landscape" (1964)

## PALIMPSEST AND SHUL

My creative process includes recurring patterns of painting, erasing, removing, covering, excavating, and then revealing. It is analogous to the concept of a "palimpsest." A palimpsest is an old, weathered parchment that records the history of writing, erasing, and transcription in multiple layers of text. Writers used to inscribe their stories on the skins of lambs or calves, but as the ink faded, they scraped it off and added new material. Despite the paper being washed and scraped, remnants of the original inscription were still discernible, and over time, they resurfaced as a secret message that is now ready to be revealed.

In a similar spirit, shul, in Yiddish, denotes the lingering impressions and recollections of people, places, and experiences that are no longer present. Like the tracks left by walking, shul underscores the notion that each moment leaves an indelible mark, shaping the world around us in often unseen but profound ways. Whether through a cherished memory or the subtle art of tracking in indigenous cultures, shul speaks to the enduring connections that persist even after our departure.

"Every Place We've Been" functions as both a palimpsest and a shul. Much like a palimpsest, it embodies the complex layering of narratives, incidents, and experiences that have been revised, obliterated, and reinterpreted over time. Yet, much like a shul, it speaks to the imprints and memories that persist even after a physical presence has departed. The installation reflects the fluidity of history and the subjectivity of human experience.

## ARCHITECTURE AND SPACE

Architecture, an art form deeply intertwined with the human experience, has inspired me to explore the profound emotions and experiences embedded within our built environment. The architectural elements in the works of Anselm Kiefer, a renowned German painter and sculptor, have particularly captivated my interest.

Kiefer's large-scale creations explore themes of memory, history, and identity, with a strong emphasis on architectural components. His paintings often feature images of ruins, deserted buildings, and deteriorating structures, evoking a sense of loss and decay intricately connected to the passage of time. These architectural elements serve as tangible manifestations of our past, embodying the aspirations, hopes, and fears we have as humans.



Fig. 3 Anselm Kiefer, Sulamith, 1983

I am inspired by the way Kiefer investigates the complex and sometimes tumultuous relationships between individuals, their surroundings, the delicate equilibrium between creation and destruction, and the power structures that influence their lives through the lens of architecture. Kiefer's work prompts me to delve deeper into the captivating intersection of architecture and the human experience. In "Every Place We've Been", architectural space serves as a conduit for exploring the intricacies of memory, history, and the human experience. I employ architectural forms to create spaces that resonate with both the weight of the past and the potential for transcendence. In the layered compositions, architectural structures emerge as metaphors for the complexities of the human psyche and the ever-shifting boundaries between the individual and the collective, the material and the spiritual.

In "Every Place We've Been," ruins, decaying and desolate, underscore human endeavors' fleeting nature, reminding us of time's passage and decay's inevitability. They also serve as vessels of collective memory, imbued with past inhabitants' stories. Architectural spaces connect tangibly to history, evoking loss, longing, and the inescapable past. In the installation, spaces possess transformative qualities, merging natural and man-made elements, suggesting spiritual transcendence and universal interconnectivity. Architectural environments become metaphysical portals to contemplate existence's secrets and the universe' immensity. "Every Place We've Been" also explores cultural and historical narratives through symbolic landmarks. By using images from social media, news, and archival sources, I imbue architectural shapes with layers of significance that stimulate contemplation and meditation.

The installation's overall form is reminiscent of three symbolic archetypes: the whirlwind, the tree of life, and the ascending spiral. The whirlwind represents life's dualistic nature, encapsulating chaos and destruction alongside transformative power. This dynamic

symbol invites contemplation of the cycle of creation and annihilation; The tree of life, a sanctuary for the exiled, offers solace and protection amidst its boughs. a symbol of interconnectedness and renewal, it so cradles those cast out, fostering unity and providing a haven where healing and growth can flourish; And the upward spiral captures human progress and spiritual evolution, embodying our desire to surpass physical limitations and explore ontological possibilities.

## BLACK, WHITE, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

The monochromatic "Every Place We've Been" embodies traditional Chinese ink paintings, known as "sumi-e" or "shuǐmò huà" (水墨画). The black and white paintings focus on capturing the subject's essence rather than detailed realism. The interplay of blacks and whites is not simply a matter of aesthetics; it's a profound expression of the inherent dualities within nature and the human spirit. The harmony of these opposing forces, the deep blacks of ink and the untouched whites of paper, reflect the ancient Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang. Black strokes imbue life, evoking the vitality of mountains, trees, and water, while white spaces embody the emptiness, allowing for the viewer's contemplation and imagination to take flight.

The vital component of Chinese ink paintings, "liú bái" (留白), refers to the unpainted white space, evoking emptiness and negative space. Embracing omission and ambiguity, the unpainted areas embodies Taoist philosophy's "wu" (無), or emptiness, as a positive quality. It offers balance and harmony, foster openness and possibility, invites imaginative participation from the viewer.

These empty spaces or "voids" signify the importance of embracing the unknown and seeking harmony between the tangible and intangible aspects of existence.

As a color, black, or Negro, is often associated with mourning, sadness, and grief in many cultures. In traditional Chinese ink paintings, black frequently symbolizes grief and sadness. In the language of alchemy, Negro represents a profound stage of transformation, a journey into the depths of the unconscious.

At the individual level, Negro evokes the notion of the "unlived life"—those facets of our being that are veiled or unadmitted. It beckons these concealed elements to resurface, presenting us with a chance for reintegration. Negro also bears a shadowed side, exposing disconcerting realities that may precipitate a disquieting dissolution of the ego. Though this process can be tumultuous and agonizing, it is an essential part of our transformative journey.

Using black in artworks provides a cathartic means to externalize emotions like despair, sadness, and fear that follow traumatic events, while simultaneously creating contrast and depth, emphasizing details and complexities within the work. This device of visual storytelling is particularly relevant during the pandemic, as it represents the decomposition and putrefaction experienced in times of suffering and grief.

However, the potential of black to regenerate, which can be observed in a variety of natural phenomena, is an attribute that is sometimes overlooked. As day yields to night, shadows offer respite, rejuvenation, and renewal. Black holes contribute to the genesis of stars and the development of galaxies, while the aftermath of forest fires and volcanic eruptions enrich the soil, sparking a cycle of renewal. Decomposition transforms organisms into dark, fertile humus, teeming with potential. The new moon's unseen presence symbolizes rebirth, as life thrives within the inky depths of caves. Blackness also serves as a place of incubation. In the fertile darkness of black soil, seeds awaken their life force below the surface, finding nourishment and

thriving within the earth's organic embrace. Jung once declared, "Everything psychic is pregnant with the future." As we face our mortality and the fragility, we learn to find solace in darkness and embrace the promise of transformation.

Moving beyond the simplistic dichotomy of black and white, "Every Place We've Been" unveils a mesmerizing spectrum of intermediate shades. As blacks and whites intermingle and converge, a new landscape emerges, emphasizing the complexity of grays, which seem to symbolize our daily encounters with paradoxes and oxymorons.

F. Scott Fitzgerald insightfully noted that first-rate intelligence entails balancing contradictory ideas while preserving functionality, signaling an openness to life's complexities. In an age of information cocoons and echo chambers, embracing dissonant thoughts and clashing convictions offers profound insight, as we confront the great divide in our contemporary political landscape, intensified by factors like geographic sorting, social media proliferation, and economic insecurity, we need to challenge binary thinking to foster a more nuanced understanding of complex issues. By transcending simplistic notions and engaging with diverse viewpoints, we cultivate informed perspectives that bridge the gap between polarized factions and empower collective progress. The monochromatic palette in "Every Place We've Been" poignantly accentuates the multifaceted essence of truth, illuminating the delicate balance of juxtaposed realities: power and vulnerability, rebirth and decay, life and death, sorrow and joy, mystery and conviction. Journeying through the installation, visitors embrace and harmonize these dualities, embarking on a metamorphic quest that deepens their understanding of existence and our place within it.

## NETTING AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Netting is a prominent motif recently discovered and employed in my work.

In the natural world, netting encapsulates the delicate, interwoven connections that permeate the manifold facets of life. It is a fragile lattice, composed of both visible and invisible threads, knitting together organisms, ecosystems, and physical processes in an ethereal dance.

The visible aspects of these nets highlight the tangible connections interwoven within the natural world. Pollination, as an example, paints a tableau of the exchange between plants and their pollinators, fostering biodiversity and nourishing the abundance of our sustenance. Similarly, symbiotic ties provide glimpses into the dynamic ballet of mutualism, commensalism, and parasitism, unveiling the intricate dependencies that thread through the tapestry of life. Seasonal migrations highlight the interconnectedness of ecosystems, underlining the importance of preserving habitat connectivity.

Conversely, the hidden facets of nets expose the understated, frequently imperceptible connections that are equally essential. The water cycle, with its unending choreography of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation, orchestrates Earth's climate, weather patterns, and the very essence of life, even as these processes often escape our immediate awareness. Nutrient cycles, such as those entwining carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus, embody the unseen ties that link living organisms, the atmosphere, and our planet's geology, enabling the unbroken exchange of vital elements. Earth's climate system, with its interconnected parts like the atmosphere, oceans, ice sheets, and land surfaces, impacts one another in ways that are often indiscernible, yet deeply significant. Soil ecosystems, although frequently hidden from view, shelter a rich diversity of microorganisms, plants, and animals that participate in complex interactions,

creating sophisticated networks vital for soil fertility, nutrient cycling, and plant growth. Finally, the subterranean tectonic processes spin unseen threads that sculpt our planet's geology and exert influence over climate, ocean circulation, and species distribution.

In the delicate weave of nettings, the ancient Chinese concept of Yin and Yang finds expression, illuminating both nurturing and confining forces. Here, a dual symbolism emerges, embracing the tenderness of support while resisting the suffocating reality of constraint.

As a compassionate giver, Yin provides a safety net of welfare programs, unemployment benefits, and other forms of assistance. This maternal, nurturing essence cradles those caught in life's uncertainties, offering sustenance and refuge.

Yet, in the shadows lurks the Yang, assertive and controlling. The nets' darker aspect manifests in the suffocating grip of internet censorship, where freedom of information and thought are ensnared. This masculine force exercises authority, filtering and silencing voices to mold a singular narrative.

The paradox of netting, the interdependence of Yin and Yang, necessitates a delicate equilibrium between safety and confinement.

## THE SEEN AND UNSEEN

I always view my studio practice as an inward journey, as well as an effort to give a voice to the unspeakable and a name to the unnamable. Likewise, I always hold an interest in the tension between the seen and unseen, and in things that lie beneath the surface: like the force that makes trees bud overnight or the inner moments before someone breaks into tears. I gravitate towards things that exist solely in the mind's eye, and I strive to render in paint the concepts that elude expression in other forms.

In Every Place We've Been, I contemplate the dichotomy between the seen and unseen, the exposed and the concealed.

The unseen encompasses collective trauma—the emotional and psychological wounds inherited through generations as a consequence of harrowing experiences. Such trauma is deemed "hidden" as it is seldom acknowledged or openly discussed. Amidst the pandemic, a multitude of individuals were subjected to merciless persecution, encompassing confinement, torment, and public humiliation, along with the disintegration of familial bonds. The reverberations of these occurrences resonate deeply within the human psyche, spanning across time and space, culminating in the phenomenon of hidden collective trauma.

On a personal level, I have spent considerable time reflecting on my father's diagnosis and his final years battling Alzheimer's disease. Much of my work emphasizes the fading of things, the conclusion of various aspects of life, and the elusive, intangible nature of existence. As the imagery and brushstrokes remain fragmentary and seemingly arrested in time, the artwork symbolizes an extended meditation on the untimely cessation of things, as well as the presence that endures, albeit incomplete.

In her insightful book, *The Myth of Closure*, Pauline Boss examines the intricate interplay between absence and presence, illuminating the profound nature of the seen and unseen in shaping our understanding of the world around us (Boss, 2021). She illuminates the notion of ambiguous grief, a form of sorrow that arises not from a sudden death or a definitive ending, but from the gradual dissolution of something or someone. This elusive grief is marked by a lingering ache, the anticipation of an unavoidable decline, and an uncertain future, pregnant with its inherent emptiness.

Through "Every Place We've Been," I want to create a contemplative space for viewers to revisit and re-experience the isolation and loneliness that permeated the pandemic. Even though there were other people there, like family members or even a pet, the truth is that each of us navigated this shared experience on our own. In this way, the seen and unseen aspects of our lives intertwine, reminding us that both the visible and invisible dimensions of our existence contribute to the complexity of human experience.

## THRESHOLD AND TIME CAPSULE

"Every Place We've Been" draws inspiration from the traditional Chinese "handscrolls," long scrolls often used for depicting landscapes on paper or silk. These landscapes uniquely blend linear and circular concepts of time. As the handscrolls are unraveled, the linear progression of scenes creates a sense of motion and narrative, while temporal elements such as changing seasons and celestial movements emphasize the passage of time. Simultaneously, these landscape paintings represent a timeless world where multiple seasons and weather patterns coexist within a single image, reflecting a non-linear perspective on time. This dual approach to time, which combines linear and cyclical perspectives, highlights the interconnectedness of all things and the fluidity of existence. In "Every Place We've Been," multiple seasons and weather patterns coexist within a single image, conveying the idea that time is not fixed but constantly shifting and changing.

Threshold, the liminal space rich in symbolism and potential, captivates my artistic sensibilities. Historically, the threshold has carried practical significance, as seen in medieval times when a threshold plank kept barnyard "threshings" outside the house. In the sciences, it refers to a limit that, once crossed, ushers in a definitive change. Human development, too, acknowledges these life stage thresholds through ritual and celebration. The threshold's symbolism in psychoanalytic work is particularly poignant, offering a visible but not literal representation that calls consciousness to grasp a larger, unseen reality.

In my work, threshold typically takes the form of ambiguous spaces or moments: the interplay between light and dark, the cusp of dawn and dusk, or the instant of coming together or

falling apart. These are moments electrified with possibilities, embodying the process of transitioning into a new reality.

Serving as a powerful metaphor for the concept of thresholds, Amber, a fossilized resin, acts like a time capsule, preserves organic material for millions of years, symbolizes the moment between life and death. Similarly, my artwork aims to preserve glimpses into the human experience during pivotal moments in time, such as the pandemic. By capturing these sensibilities, I hope to offer future viewers insights into the ongoing process of change and the transformative power of thresholds. By exploring these liminal spaces, I hope to inspire a deeper appreciation for the delicate balance of our existence and the potential for growth that lies within.

## APPENDIX

The following figures are images of installation “Every Place We’ve Been” from: Euphoric Mourning: an MFA exhibition, on view at the University of Maryland’s Art Gallery, May 4 – May 26, 2023.



Fig. 4- Qiu, Elaine. Installation shot from the MFA thesis exhibition. *Every Place We've Been*, 2023, Dimensions varied. Ink, silk screen, markers, acrylic on Yupo paper.

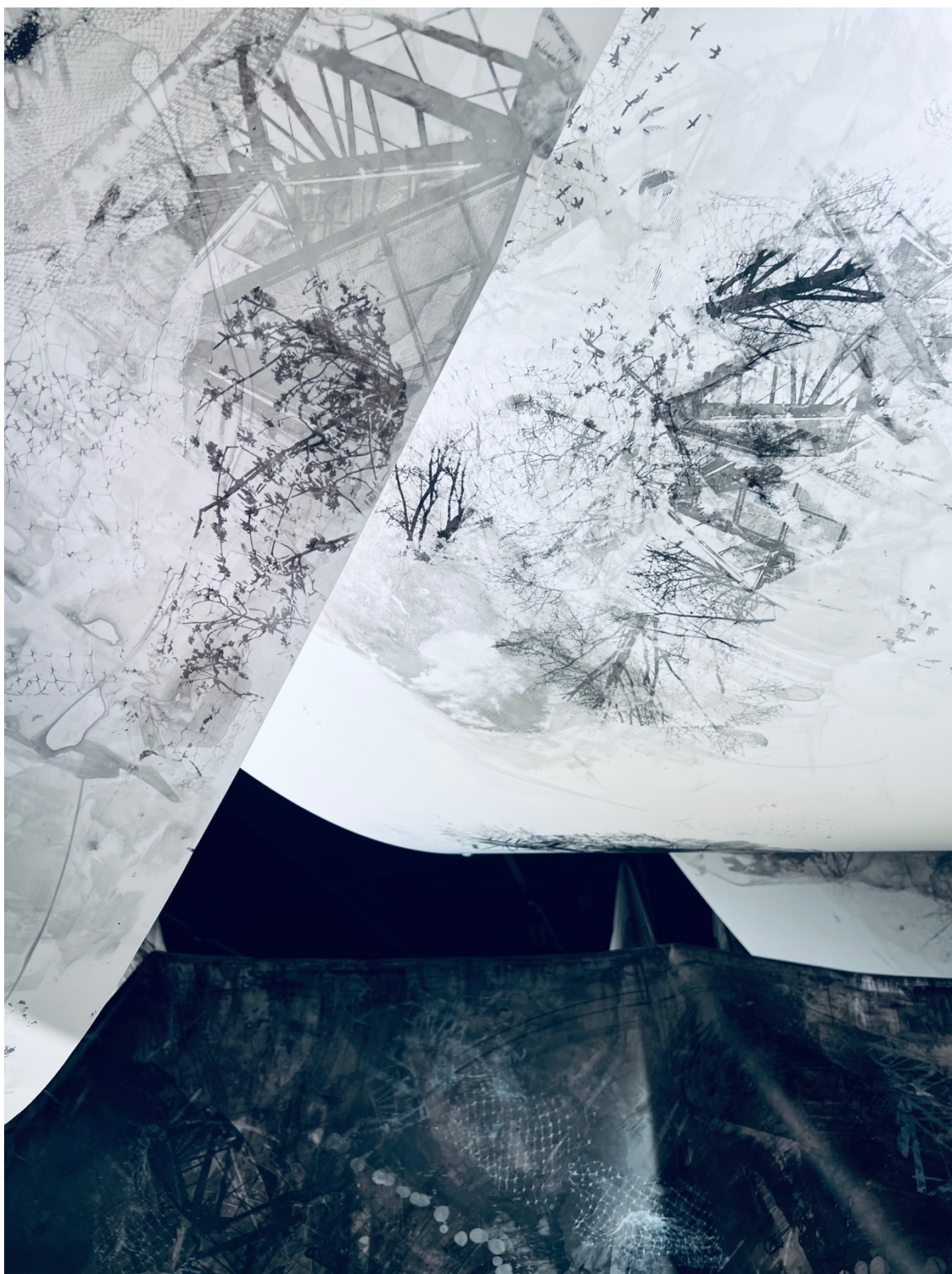


Fig. 5- Qiu, Elaine. Installation shot from the MFA thesis exhibition. *Every Place We've Been*, 2023, Dimensions varied. Ink, silk screen, markers, acrylic on Yupo paper.



Fig. 6- Qiu, Elaine. Installation shot from the MFA thesis exhibition. *Every Place We've Been*, 2023, Dimensions varied. Ink, silk screen, markers, acrylic on Yupo paper



Fig. 7- Qiu, Elaine. Installation shot from the MFA thesis exhibition. *Every Place We've Been*, 2023, Dimensions varied. Ink, silk screen, markers, acrylic on Yupo paper



Fig. 8- Qiu, Elaine. Installation shot from the MFA thesis exhibition. *Every Place We've Been*, 2023, Dimensions varied. Ink, silk screen, markers, acrylic on Yupo paper.



Fig. 9- Qiu, Elaine. Installation shot from the MFA thesis exhibition. *Every Place We've Been*, 2023, Dimensions varied. Ink, silk screen, markers, acrylic on Yupo paper.

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