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## My Work - My Diary - My Inner Thoughts

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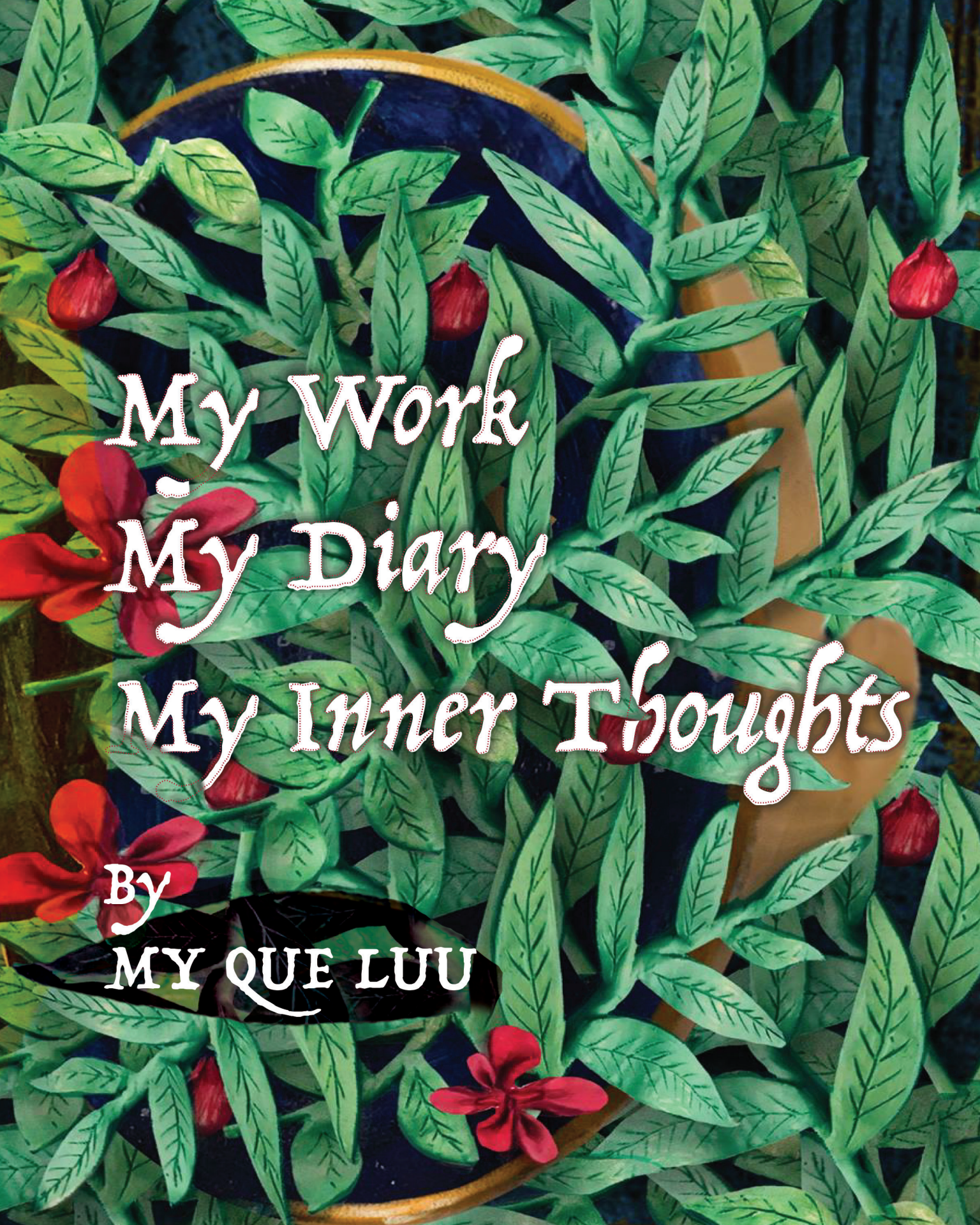
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Do you belong somewhere?





My Work  
My Diary  
My Inner Thoughts

By  
MY QUE LUU







MY WORK  
MY DIARY  
MY INNER THOUGHTS

MY QUE LUU

Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri

May 3, 2019



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#### PUBLICATION CREDITS

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Photographs: My Que Luu

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## **MY WORK - MY DIARY - MY INNER THOUGHTS**

Art and Design Department

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Fine Arts

My Que Luu

### **ABSTRACT:**

My work is about my self-discovery. Upon my move to the United States to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Studies, I took the opportunity to explore the concept of “self-image” and tell my life story, which I rarely discuss in real life conversations. Through my body of work, I intend to identify and expose my true-self.

**KEYWORDS:** self-identity, inner thoughts, cultural differences, changes, combination

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Eric Pervukhin, Advisory Committee  
Missouri State University



**MY WORK - MY DIARY - MY INNER THOUGHTS**

By

My Que Luu

A Master's Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College

Of Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Studies

May 2019

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**DEDICATION**

TO ERIC PERVUKHIN and SHARON HARPER for all the support and walking me through this journey.



## INTRODUCTION

After 5 years of art education in my home country, I was trained to follow what instructors said, even though my major in graphic design requires creativity and imagination. We were told to pursue the school's style, and no personal style was accepted. After graduation, all students possess the same style, reaching the same level, and are afraid of judgment. When people see our work, they can tell what school the artist was trained at, instead of WHO made the work.

It's not the issue of educational systems. This happens in every aspect of life. It's the problem of my culture. As a child, I had no right to do what I wanted. The society and culture set a model for all kids to follow. I was always stuck between what people wanted me to do and what I wanted to do, what society expects me to be and what I wanted to be. Upon my move to the United States to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Studies, I took the opportunity to explore the concept of "self-image" and tell my life story, which I rarely discuss in real life conversations. Through my body of work, I intend to identify and expose my true self.

I reflect on my experience in Vietnamese culture and how things have changed over my three years of studying abroad. I'm looking at how to define myself amidst these cultural differences. I make use of digital illustrations and paintings to explore these topics.



My background is in Graphic Design and I combine digital skills with traditional hand drawing so my medium can tell my story from the beginning until present time. I create pieces that expose my trueself. I tell about my past experiences, and experiment with all kinds of art that I'm interested in but never had a chance to try in my previous art education. As an art student with an Asian background, I've been provided a wide range of skills in traditional drawing and the technical skills in computer programs. I came to graduate school to step out of my comfort zone and broaden my horizons. I was eager to learn new techniques but also wanted to take advantage of my skills that have been sharpened the past few years.

Even though I grew up with limitations and traditional conventions imposed by my family, schools, and culture, I respect my cultural values. However, my desire to expand my self-awareness took me to the other side of the Earth to gain different perspectives that allow me to grow with no limits. My work contains a variety of media and experiments, which strongly support my theme.

I knew about etching but I had not learned how to use it until I came here. It is basically a process of drawing, but instead of pen and paper, I draw with a needle scratching into a ground-covered metal plate, which is then immersed in an acid bath to deepen the incised lines. It requires much patience and attention to details, which forces me to make decisions about which part should be scratched first and how long the metal should be placed in acid. Even though etching is new to me. I have it under my control. I keep challenging myself with a large-scale plate or plates with unusual dimensions. Drawing has always been my comfort zone. At times, it has been hard to decide a clear direction because I was overwhelmed by opportunities and possibilities. Etching has been a place to center myself.

One of my works, “The Coral Cemetery” is on a long rectangular plate and is inspired by a sci-fi novel named “20, 000 Leagues Under The Sea”. I chose the unusual shape to focus on the depth of the ocean. It’s the journey of a captain and his crew exploring the bottom of the ocean. They have no idea what is waiting for them but they are all adventurous people who do not let the deep ocean limit them. That is the spirit I admire. In coming to a new country, I find the different culture to be the adventure for me. That is the reason why I choose this book to illustrate.



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*The Coral Cemetery*, 2016. Etching. 10"x24".

As its title, I depict a dark scene of the undersea world with the coral reef and stones. I did not focus on the coffin or the death. I was inspired by a sentence of my classmate's when she gave me advice for my work: "The cemetery is a place where the dead people live". Using the stone images with the closing eyes and ears, I intend to refer to the sense of living. For me, the symbol of stones is the embodiment of the dead people. They are sleeping but still hearing, and importantly, they seemingly are still alive. I want to convey a positive feeling through my work, leaving slight hope behind depressed and sorrowed subjects.

In addition, one common subject in my work is the apartment building. I portray it in etching and also in other media.



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*The Apartment Building*, 2017. Etching. 24"x36".



The apartment building represents my childhood, and how I grew up, which has strongly impacted my character and personality. The apartment buildings are really old, poor quality, and overpopulated. This kind of building is represented by the subsidy period in my home country, which ended in 1986. That meant that all people would go out to work and earn money to feed their families, and to be able to escape those tiny apartments. I'm a child of the 90s and being left in that apartment while parents went to work was a thing that happened every day. I still remember sitting quietly on my balcony and drawing children of opposite apartment buildings.

My subject might be dark and sorrowful but I always hide some hope behind it. The children in my work are trapped in those apartments, but their minds are already floating outside of it. They mentally escape from the building, from the box that somebody put them in, and from the strict traditional conventions that do not fit their generation. This work is to speak up on behalf of children at that time... And I was one of them.

\*\*\*

To be able to get away from the strict academic education, I completely threw myself into a field with no prior experience. The feeling I have of not belonging anywhere started affecting my work. I found myself really interested in 3D illustration, using a combination of my digital computer skills combined with hand-rendering techniques applied to three-dimension objects.

My penchant for photographing 3D objects comes from its unique qualities that are different from 2D illustrations. In my research of this form, I found Chris Sickel's illustrations. Sickel is a 3D illustration artist whose work is a combination of well-chosen picture angles, impressive character design, and highly skilled craftsmanship. He is an inspiration for me to challenge myself in a field I'm still learning about. Additionally, I chose to explore

the path of 3D illustration after reading this quote from one of his articles: “I was naïve enough to think I could make it [...] If I was smarter or had better foresight I probably would have given up”<sup>1</sup>. At that moment, I was reassured this good path for me to follow.

Using clay to form the figures and retouching them in Photoshop, I define my own style. I’m attracted to the liveliness of the 3D object and the flexibility of Photoshop-based illustration. My figures or 3D objects might be physically imperfect, but they’re easily adjusted with the use of computer tablet and digital coloring.



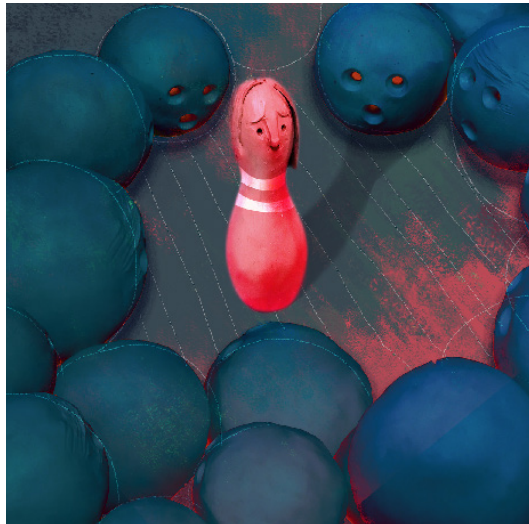
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*Captain Nemo, 2016. Digital Illustration from  
20 000 Leagues Under The Sea*

<sup>1</sup> Megan Lane Patrick, “Behind the scenes with Chris Sickels: Imaginative Illustrator,” accessed January 17, 2016, <http://homedesign.com/design-creativity/design-inspiration/chris-sickels/>

I first applied this medium in the series “Inside my head”. This series is about a passive girl surrounded by narrowed and limited environments. I chose cold colors to highlight its loneliness and hopelessness.

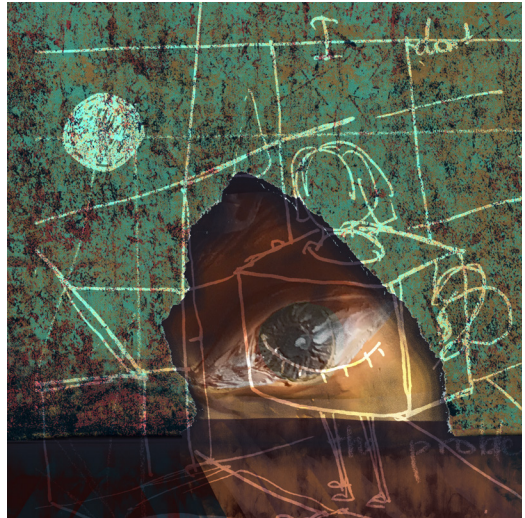
### INSIDE MY HEAD SERIES



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Top: *Inside My Head Series*, 2017. Digital Illustration. 15”x15”.  
Bottom: *Inside My Head Series*, 2017. Digital Illustration. 15”x15”.



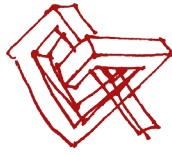


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Top: *Inside My Head Series*, 2017. Digital Illustration. 15"x15".  
Bottom: *Inside My Head Series*, 2017. Digital Illustration. 15"x15".

The picture book “The Red Tree” of Shaun Tan was influential to my series. In Tan’s work, readers follow the development of a tiny seed along with a small sorrowful girl. The symbol of her depression is a massive flying fish. Tan’s interested in portraying a dark misery that is thought-provoking, less resolved, and demands contemplation. Like Tan, I would like to convey a meaning that, while not difficult to understand, cannot be merely viewed. It must be considered. I always depict figures with no facial expression. I don’t want to divulge any notions of happiness or sadness. I want the connection between the girl and her environment to achieve that mission.

The reason why I barely use facial emotions in my work is a key factor throughout my body of work. It’s related to my background. In the past, I tried to fit into approved stereotypes in order to meet society’s expectations. I built a persona that I wanted people to see, while hiding all of my feelings. Gradually, this persona became another “self” that is hidden inside of me. Especially in Asian cultures, one’s true “self image” must be blurred. People must act the same way and wear the same style; no one has personal marks. However, I had always seen myself as having another side that is sick of being forced to adopt prescribed mannerisms and behaviors.



In my second year of graduate school, I went back to my home country for summer vacation. Talking with my family, friends and teachers brought up a lot of nostalgic memories. I decided to bring something especially related to my home country into the work in the US.

I think about lacquer - a classic Asian technique that I learned prior to beginning studies abroad. It's original to my home country, Viet Nam, and further developed by other Asian countries. In terms of technique, using lacquer is a time-consuming process. I must apply layer after layer and wait for each layer to dry out. Afterward, I sand the surface of it and some parts of each layer are removed and exposed. The more it is sanded, the smoother it is. It is unpredictable but it always creates a beautiful texture.

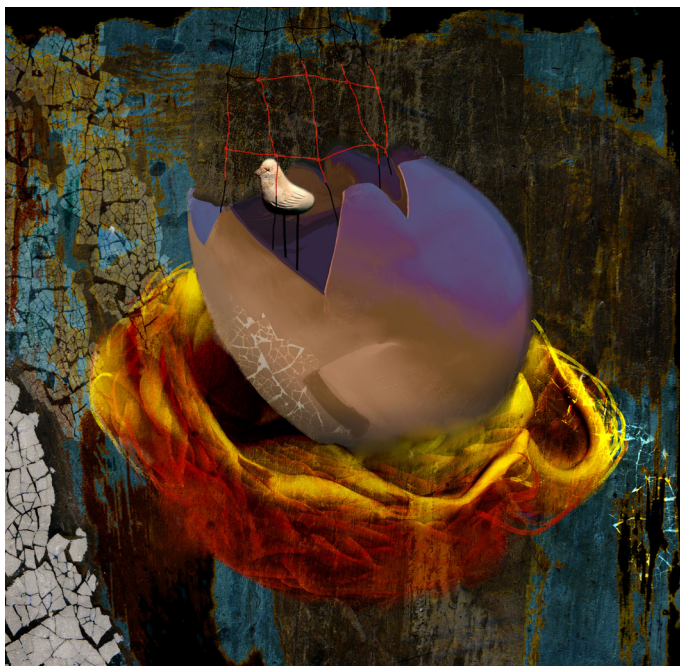
I use Vietnamese lacquer as a background for my illustrations, thus combining an Asian art technique with the idea formed in my Western education. While exploring personal identity, I also attach traditional symbols related to my native country. For example, roosters representing the expectation of parents toward their kids and strings refer to my hopeless attempts at escaping the traditional customs and the relationship between my family and me, and the culture that I grew up in.




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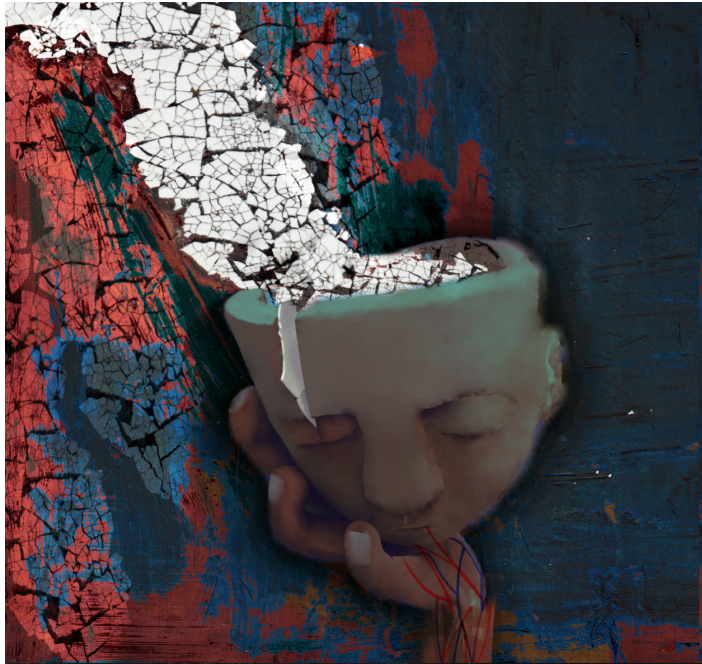
Top: *The Red Bonding Series*, 2018. Digital Illustration. 15"x15".  
 Bottom: *The Red Bonding Series*, 2018. Digital Illustration. 15"x15".






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Top: *The Red Bonding Series*, 2018. Digital Illustration. 15"x15".  
 Bottom: *The Red Bonding Series*, 2018. Digital Illustration. 15"x15".



Working with digital illustration is a fresh experience. I have no limit in combining mediums or trying new ideas without being afraid of ruining the previous efforts. It can be fixed just by some clicks in Photoshop. Nevertheless, thinking about my works that rely too much on computers or can be easily reproduced millions of times makes me feel unsatisfied. Furthermore, sometimes all of my work just relies on the quality of a printer. I have a collection of proof prints and decided to make use of them. I hate the feeling of wasting materials. It's like the feeling of being left behind, being forgotten. Therefore, being able to turn something useless into artwork is compelling. I use parts of these proofs in my collage and paint them to achieve unity. Holding brushes gives me a break from using digital tools. I'm not able to fix anything just by a click anymore. I have to sketch and think in advance about the position, the shape, the emotion and the idea, that I'm going to convey through my work. The main subject in my paintings is still faces and dark environments. However, if I just only apply lacquer texture in the background in digital illustration, I always have to deal with the connection between backgrounds and main objects. In paintings, lacquer materials such as egg shell or silver leaf can be used more flexibly. The progress takes more time but I think this approach is visually and emotionally more provocative than prints. An illustrator whose works I always look to when I struggle between 2D and 3D mediums is Dave McKean.

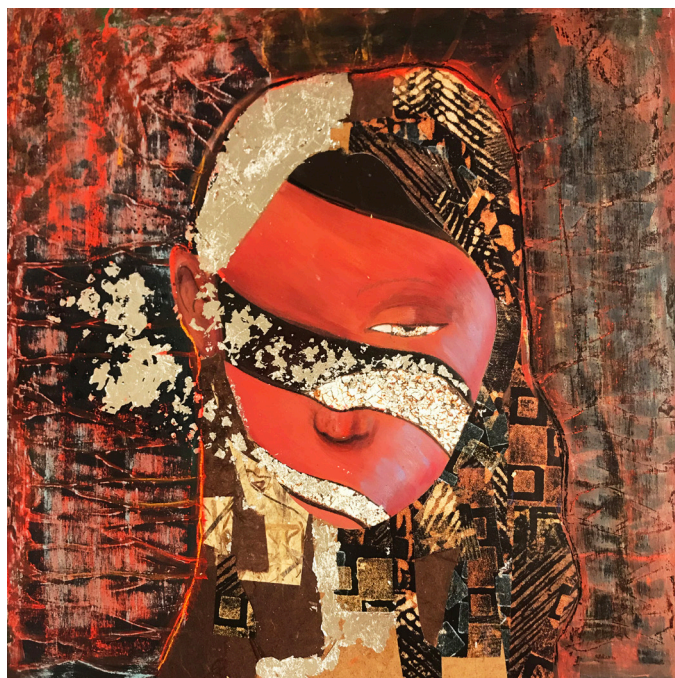
He is an English illustrator and photographer who is influenced by comic books, collage, sculpture and digital art. McKean has played an important role in my painting experiments. McKean's imaginative world inspires me a lot. I'm impressed with his color schemes and the way he makes use of collage and 3D objects.



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*Dreaming. Mixed media. 15"x15".*






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Top: *Keep Silent and Listen!*, 2018. Mixed Media. 36"x36".  
 Bottom: *Shattered 1*, 2018. Acrylic, Pastel, Eggshell. 20"x20".




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Top: *Shattered 2*, 2018. Acrylic, Pastel, Eggshell. 36"x36".  
 Bottom: *Untitled 1*, 2018. Mixed Media. 36"x36".






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Top: *Mind Control*, 2018. Mixed Media. 36"x36".  
 Bottom: *Dear Childhood*, 2018. Mixed Media. 36"x36".

## “MY BOOK, MY DIARY, AND MY INNER THOUGHTS”

My latest work is a story that I tell about my inner thoughts and the questions I ask myself every day, like “What am I looking for” and “Who do I want to be”. I use sketches and handwriting from my every day sketchbook to focus on personal experience. I want to create a mutual feeling and a story that people can relate to. The words might be spare and make no sense because I write down my thoughts in different days, different moods, and different languages. But it’s true to me that our minds can create our own narratives and try to make sense of it all.

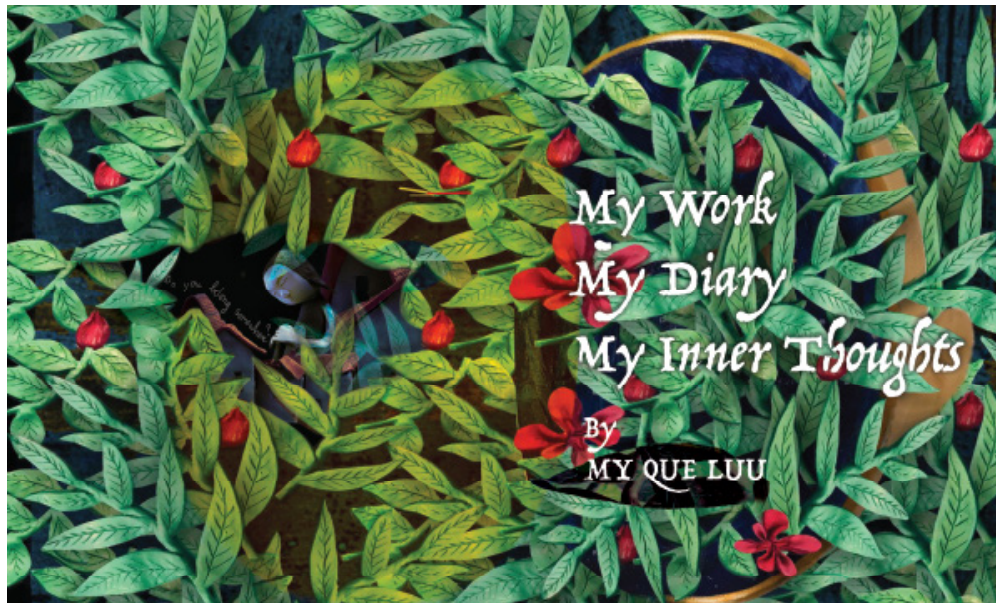
I use the traditional handmade papers to print my illustrations for my diary book. This kind of paper was used to print ancient woodcut pictures that express the thoughts and wishes of people toward their children, for example the Vinh hoa (eminence) and the Phú quý (prosperity and honour)



*The Vinh hoa (Eminence) and The Phú quý (Prosperity And Honour). Woodcut.*

This paper is old-fashioned and no one uses it to print nowadays. I've realized that nothing can express my own theme better than taking advantage of this paper's qualities. I attach importance to the traditional aesthetic value of those old paintings. However, it represents the expectations of parents and society toward children - the role model that I mentioned earlier. I collage my prints to imply the brokenness of old-fashioned traditional customs. I sew red waxed-strings directly on my work to refer to my hopeless escape from traditional customs and relation between me, my family, and the culture that I grew up in. I did use a digital image of strings in my art works before. But in my book, it has to be real, something stronger. In this book and the illustrations made for it, my true-self is exposed beyond the society's expectations and stereotypes.

The following pictures are the spread illustrations from my book.

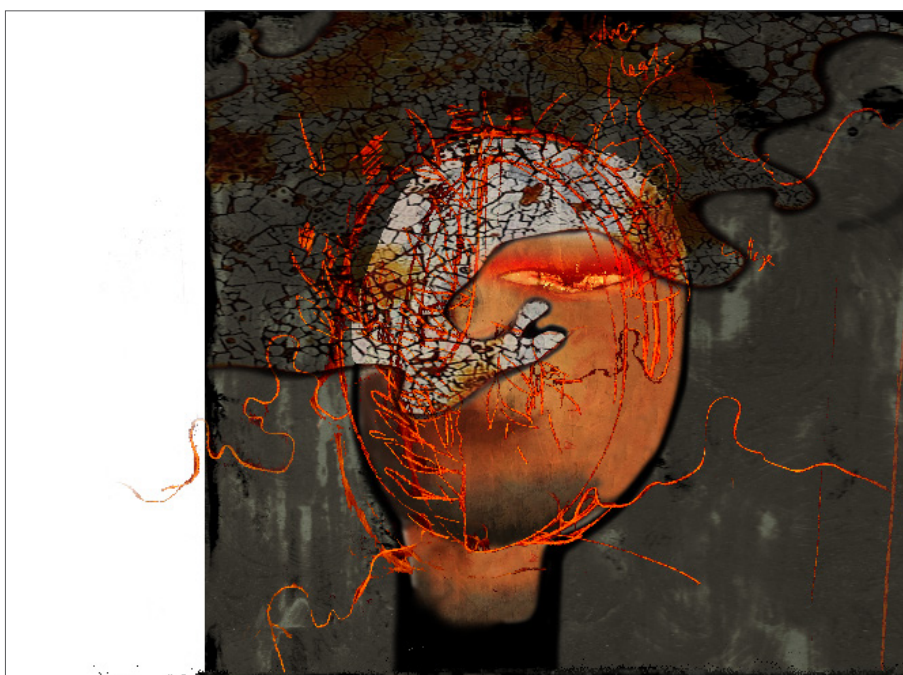
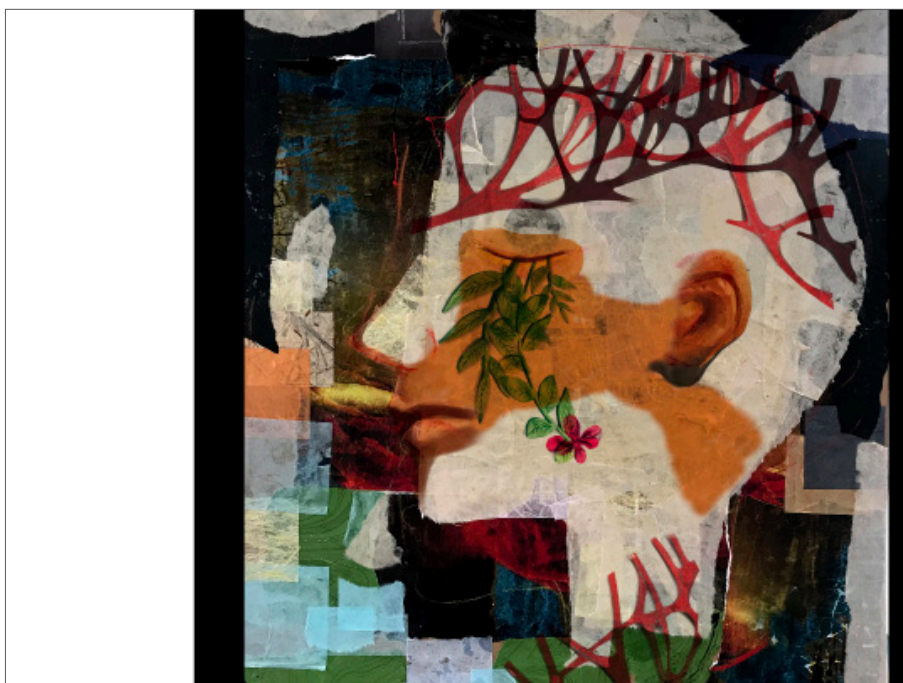


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*Front And Back Cover. Digital illustration. 11"x8.5".*







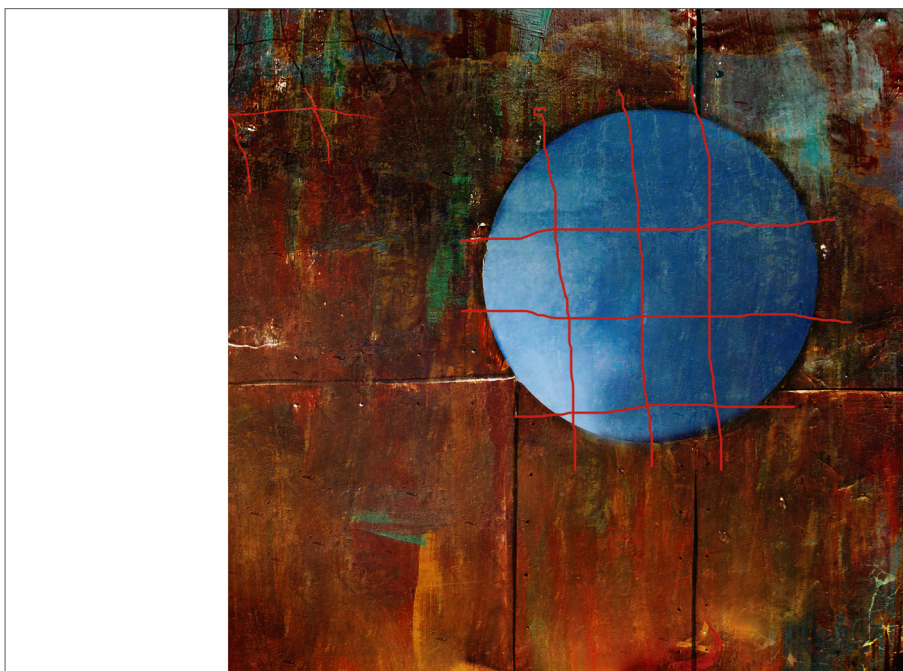
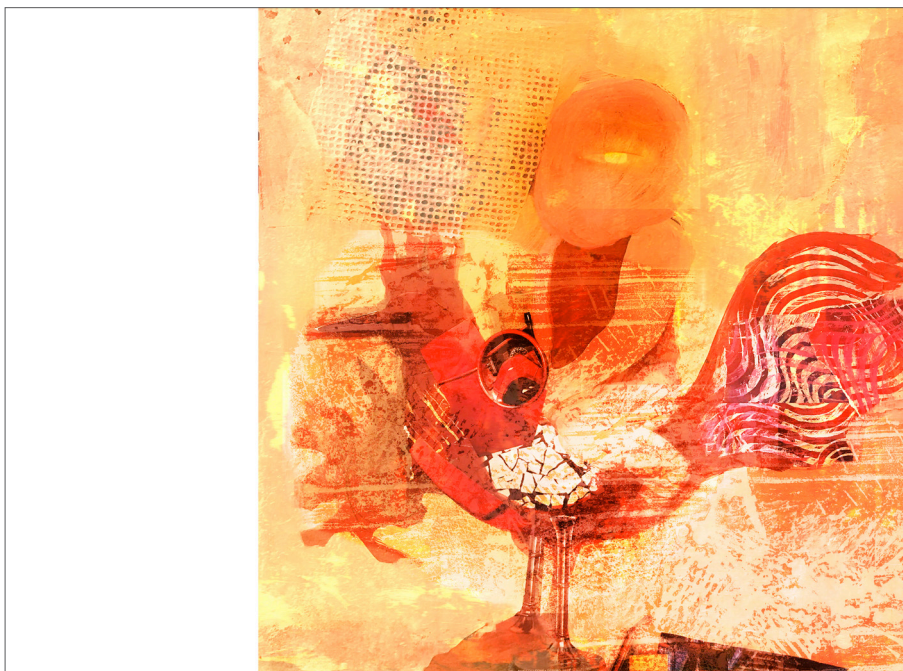
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Top and Bottom: Illustration from *My Book - My Diary - My Inner Thoughts*.  
Digital illustration. 11"x8.5".





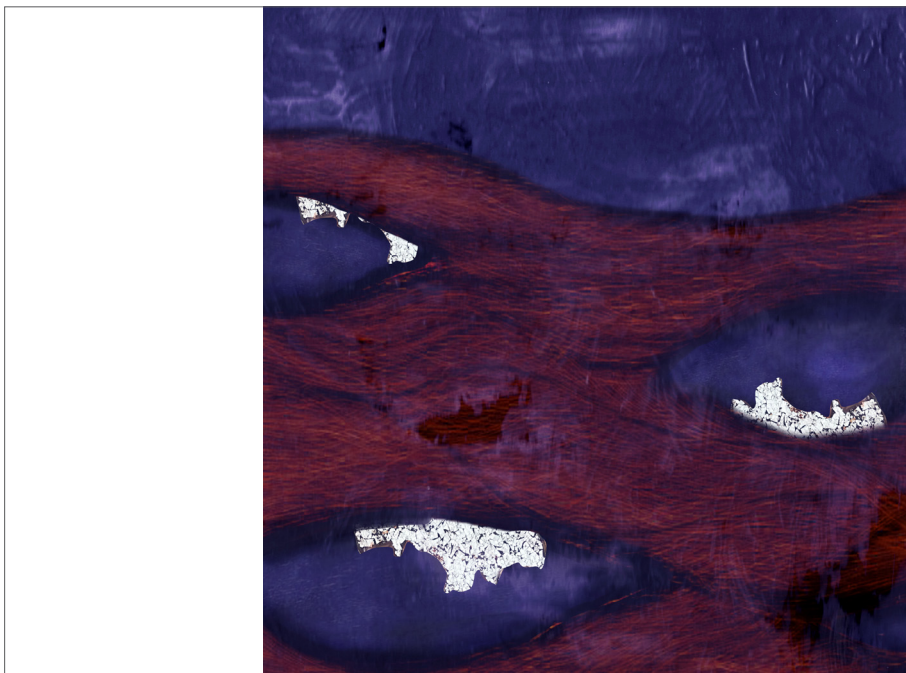
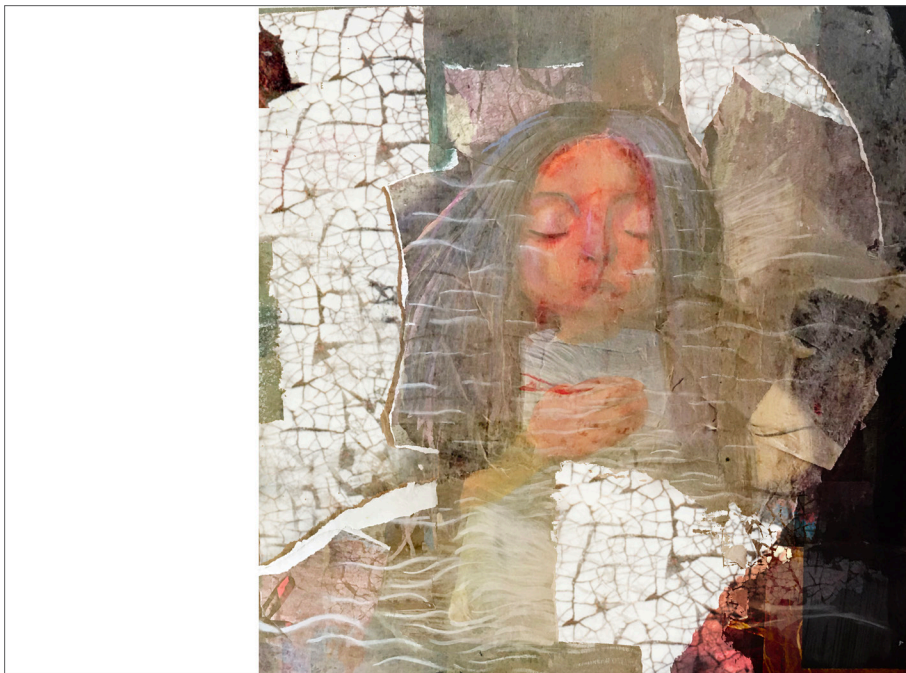
Top and Bottom: Illustration from *My Book - My Diary - My Inner Thoughts*.  
Digital illustration. 11"x8.5".



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Top and Bottom: Illustration from *My Book - My Diary - My Inner Thoughts*.  
Digital illustration. 11"x8.5".





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Top and Bottom: Illustration from *My Book - My Diary - My Inner Thoughts*.  
Digital illustration. 11"x8.5".





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Top and Bottom: Illustration from *My Book - My Diary - My Inner Thoughts*.  
Digital illustration. 11"x8.5".

## CONCLUSION

The objects in my work are often in unusual shapes and appear surreal. The color scheme is dark and miserable. However, the atmosphere in my work is usually neutral and dreamy rather than passing on negative feelings. I intend to create a connection between my works and the viewer. The subject matter comes from my past experiences and my feelings, yet I believe I'm not the only one feeling lost in this world. The feeling of being understood and arousing empathy are goals that I want to accomplish.

\*\*\*

My experiences in graduate school will end. I have changed a lot in terms of artistic growth and personality. I'm not afraid of speaking out. I'm not afraid of defeating new challenges. I think outside of the box. I learned that failure is not the end of the world. Those lessons are life companions that I will take with me anywhere I go from now on. Those are the values that I'm eager to share and pass on to the art students in my home country in specific, and younger generations in general.

This is the beginning of my own journey of finding myself, chasing my reflection and catching my dreams.

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Accessed January 17, 2008. <http://homedesign.com/design-creativity/chris-sickels/>

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