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Imaging of Our Ancestors Written by Italo Calvino Through Illustrations and An Animation

Wenpei Li
Syracuse University

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The aim of this thesis is to combine my artwork with literature. The first part of the thesis is an examination of Italo Calvino's role in 20th-century literature, *Our Ancestor*. The second section of the thesis explains my evolution as a creative artist. I made an animation called *Drifting of A Leaf*.

From 1952 to 1957, Italo Calvino published three novels: *The Cloven Viscount* (1952), *The Baron in the Trees* (1957), and *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959). I want to show how an illustrator thinking about this book. It is a series of 8 pieces of illustrations. In this illustration part, I decided to use only digital. From draft to final work, I used digital to work. As an illustrator, I have a chance to find another world for literature. I prefer to tell others that my artwork is based on the stories, but not limited to the stories themselves. In my animation, I combined hand-painting and digital work. In this animation, I tried to tell the audience what I thought when I read the book.

As I want to become an illustrator and an animator, I used a year to find my voice through this thesis. During this year, I think I have found what I really want to do in the future.

Imaging of *Our Ancestors* Written by Italo Calvino
Through Illustrations and An Animation

by

Wenpei Li

B.A, China University of Geosciences, 2014

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Illustration.

Syracuse University

August 2020

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I. Literature and Me

One part of my thesis artwork is a series of illustration for for *Our Ancestors*. The other part is an animation called *Drifting of A Leaf*. These ideas are both inspired one book *Our Ancestors* written by Italo Calvino (1923-1985). Reading is a vital resource in my artwork. Many new ideas come from reading. There are various sources of inspiration for artists. I have heard people who are inspired by nature, movies, criminal cases(especially in this era) , and mine is literature. It is also one important reason why I want to become an illustrator.

I think the reason why literature is so important to me is that it can give me different life experiences. When my parents gave me my first book, literature opened a window for me. This is very important for me, who grew up in the city and is under China's exam-oriented education. My early experience helped me develop the habit of thinking about finding inspiration in literature. I was shocked by the author's ideas in a new book countless times. I wish I could get into the author's brain to see what is special.

Illustrated books are an important part of my life. Reading literature and illustrating them for a book I love is another kind of connection with the writer. As a reader, I enjoy seeing other illustrators' work. As an illustrator, it is a chance for me to make another world.

For some published books, their illustrations are an important part of them. I still remember the black and white illustrations of *One Thousand and One Nights* when I was seven years old. It is hard for me to remember the details of this book. But the two exotic women and man's face on its book jacket are still in my head.

“Few would contest the canonization of *Bleak House*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, but these classics have something in common we may be prone to disregard: each was published with profuse illustrations, and in each case, the author relied on the artwork not only to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the book but to add meaningfully to the story. ”¹

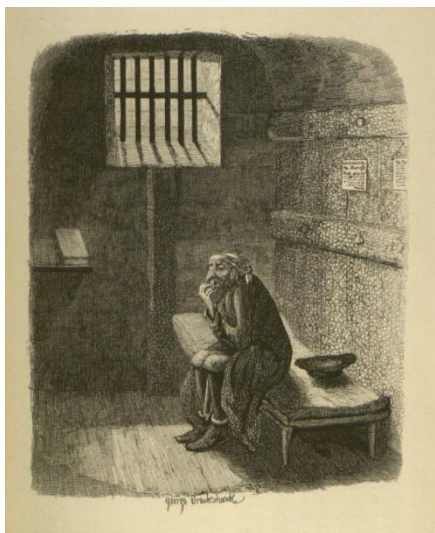


Fig 1 George Cruikshank (1792-1878), Fagin in his cell, 1838.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cruikshank_fagin_cell.jpg

¹ Sacks, Sam. “Bring Back the Illustrated Book!” *The New Yorker*, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/bring-back-the-illustrated-book.

If writers paint in readers' minds, illustrators will have a chance to develop those thoughts for the books. I once read a rare version of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In this version, illustrator Gai Qi (1773-1828) took 15 years to illustrate this masterpiece. It helps readers understand people's lives far from modern times. He not only wanted to tell the story of what the writer told us but also add many meaningful details in his illustrations.

"Even for Yuan Chun, who is a lady in the palace, instead of portraying the front of her scenery, Gai Qi painted a lonely back."²

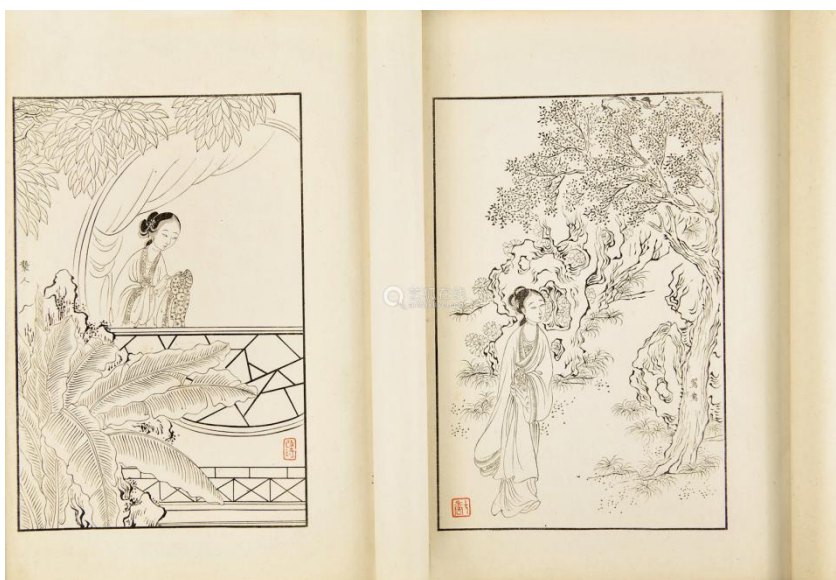


Fig 2 Gai Qi, *Illustrated Ode to "Dream of the Red Chamber"*, 1820

<https://www.artfoxlive.com/product/286617.html>

² "An Elegant Collection on Paper--Taking Gaiqi's 'Dream of Dreams in Red Mansions' as an Example." *The Paper*, www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1802994.

II. *Our Ancestors*

a. As a Reader

I knew Italo Calvino was from another writer I love, Wang Xiaobo. Wang often wrote about Calvino in his books. He said: From mid-age, Calvino tried his best to find endless possibilities in his stories. The way he talked about Calvino made me interested in reading his books. He thought Calvino was his spiritual teacher. After reading Calvino's name many times in Wang's book, I thought I should know his writing. Wang was a sharp and witty writer. Wang and Calvino have some common ground in writing although they used two different languages.



Fig 3 Mark Leong, Wang Xiaobo and his wife Li Yinhe at Beijing, 1996

<https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20171220/wang-xiaobo-sexual-life-in-modern-china/>

“Calvino’ s *Our Ancestors*, everyone who has read it would like it. This is his work when he was young. I think this book is a model of using lightness writing language.”³

Invisible City was the first book by Calvino I read. Calvino wrote it in his old age. I fell in love with Calvino’s imagination. It is fantastic he could write a story in this way. Then I read *The Baron in The Tree*, the last and longest story of *Our Ancestors*. A boy fled the people and things he hated and lived between heaven and earth ever since. He was accompanied by friends, lovers, and even a loyal puppy. This reminds me of my childhood. Although I grew up in the city, when I was a child, I lived in a community with trees that were hundreds of years old. The community was at the foot of the mountain. My happiest times were spent climbing was to climb the tree with my friends and playing on the hill next to our community.

I read this book when I was in undergrad school. At that time I was depressed with my situation and relationship. When Cosimo climbed from a branch and never come back from the trees, that what I wanted to do. By then I could read the whole book and I reread *the Baron in The Tree*. Many new ideas came out several years ago.

³ Wang, Xiaobo. *Chen Mo De Da Duo Shu*. Beijing Shi Yue Wen Yi Chu Ban She, 2011.



Fig 4 Wenpei Li, *Cosimo Flees*, 2020 , the thesis of Wenpei Li

i. The Birth of a Superstar

Italo Calvino was an Italian writer. writer, although he was born in Havana, Cuba. His father Mario was an agronomist. His mother Eva was a botanist. The family spent several years in Latin America. Then they moved back to Italy and lived in Liguria when Calvino was two years old. The family lived at San Remo, between Italo's father's working station and the family's country house in the hills.

“When the Germans occupied Liguria and the rest of northern Italy during World War II, Calvino and his sixteen-year-old brother evaded the Fascist draft and joined the partisans.”⁴

⁴ Weaver, William, and Damien Pettigrew. “Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction No. 130.” *The Paris Review*, 24 Feb. 2020, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2027/the-art-of-fiction-no-130-italo-calvino.

Calvino started writing after that. Most of his books are about his wartime experience. He published his first story, at the same time he changed major from agriculture to literature. During this period, he wrote his first novel *Path to the Nest of Spiders* and submitted it to a competition sponsored by Mondadori Publishing Company. Calvino established an important relationship in his life because of this novel. He met his publisher, Giulio Einaudi.

ii. The Life of the Three Nobles

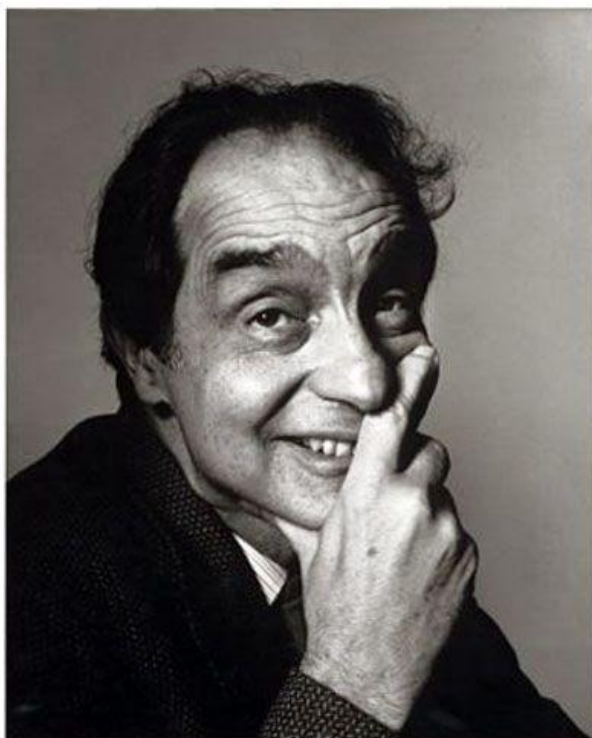


Fig 5 Irving Penn, *Italo Calvino*, 1997.37.17

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/178455203959432287/>

The Cloven Viscount was first published in 1952. In his story, Torralba's Viscount Medardo and his squire Kurt crossed the Bohemian plague-ridden plains and joined

the Christian army in the 17th-century Turkish war. On the first day of the battle, a Turkish swordsman canceled the training of an experienced Viscountess. Medardo competed on the battlefield and was hit by a pair of shells, split in two. There are two viscounts, a good - Buono and a bad one - Gramo. The two half-victims finally return to their land. Gramo lives in the castle and Buono lives in the forest. Buono wandered around like a vagabond, trying to make up for the damage caused by the other half. The lives of the residents were completely disrupted by the two Viscounts.

The Baron on the Tree was published in 1957. It is described as a metaphor of Comte's philosophy and independence, and it is about a boy who climbed a tree to spend the rest of his life living in the tree-dwelling kingdom. The young baron, Cosimo Piovasco di Rond, is a descendant of a noble family. Cosimo climbed the trees of the family garden and promised never to fall again. Cosimo's rest of life was spent the trees of his town. The novel is told by the protagonist's younger brother Biagio.

The Nonexistent Knight was first published in Italian in 1959. The protagonists of this novel are two paladins of Charlemagne: the non-existent knight named Agilulf and an inexperienced young man, Rambaldo. Agilulfo fights for duty, presumably convinced of his faith even if this point is never clear in the novel, with morals that is admired by all the paladins. Charlemagne made his paladins clash with the enemies, when they met Gurdul. He was appointed as a squire to Agilulf.

b. Standing on the Shoulders of My Predecessors

i. Artwork Which Affects Me

Looking at the artists I love before or during an assignment is an essential part of process. I enjoy getting inspiration from them. Before I started my thesis, I spent a lot of time looking at the artwork of artists.



Fig 6 Cave 85, Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China, Late Tang dynasty (848-907 CE)

https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/cave_temples_dunhuang/gallery.html

In 2014, I traveled to Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China, where I'd always dreamed of visiting. It is located on the western edge of the Gobi Desert, close to the ancient oasis town. I saw hundreds of cave temples carved on cliffs and decorated with Buddhist murals and sculptures. As per their protective policy, I could only enter ten

caves that day. Even though these were only 10 of the 500 caves, they changed my life. I have seen different versions of their murals. It is my habit to flip through these books. In the murals, you can see how people told stories, what the history was and what kind of clothes they wore 600 hundred years ago. That art will never be outdated.

“From the 4th to the 14th century, Dunhuang bore witness to intense religious, commercial, and cultural exchange along the trade routes linking the East and West, known collectively as the Silk Road. The documents and artifacts discovered in the site’s famed Library Cave, along with the paintings and sculptures found in almost 500 other caves, focus primarily on Buddhism.”⁵



Fig 7 Marc Chagall, *Over the Town*,1918

<https://fineartamerica.com/featured/over-the-town-marc-chagall.html>

⁵ Stephan, Annelisa. “14 Fascinating Facts about the Cave Temples of Dunhuang.” The Getty Iris, 28 June 2017, blogs.getty.edu/iris/14-facts-cave-temples-dunhuang/.

Another artist I have been studying for a long time is Marc Chagall (1887-1985).

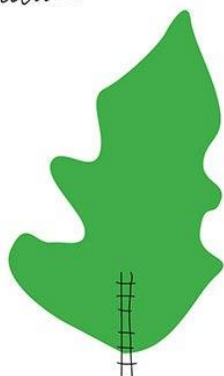
Chagall was born Marc Zakharovich Chagall, a Russian and French artist of Belarusian Jewish descent. There is a saying in Yiddish: when you visit someone's house, you call it: "Flying over to there house". Chagall used her pen to let people fly. Chagall actually painted in his mother language. There are many similarities between Chagall and Calvino's book.

They lived as contemporaries and in Europe for a long time, although Chagall also lived in North America for some time, and Calvino's life was closely connected to South America. They both experienced European conflict during World War II. One of them once supported the Russian Revolution and the other once supported the Italian Communist Party. Because they saw his as being problematic, they subsequently changed their direction.

With such a background, their works are full of grotesque imagination. If the language can be described, then Chagall's work is childlike like Calvino's, and Calvino's work is full of Chagall's colorfulness. With both men's works, there is a profound satire of society.

ii. They All Illustrated for Calvino

Calvino



The Baron in the Trees

Fig 8 Peter Mendelsund, *The Baron In The Tree*, 2017

https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Baron_in_the_Trees/twywDAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1

If people look for Calvino's books in a bookstore, they will definitely notice a series of Calvino books designed by Peter Mendelsund. Giovanna Calvino, Calvino's daughter, personally contacted Mendelsund to design these covers. Mendelsund interfered with the reader's reading with certain illustrations. Others would give readers more complex imagery by illustrators or designers. The cover he designed is composed of simple forms.

“But somehow I worried that they wouldn’t sell the book properly that they might be too visually busy to be viscerally affecting. So I started thinking about doing illustrations of abstract shapes that by themselves don’t

necessarily have a ton of meaning, and on each one drawing a line or two that would add to that meaning, or bring it into focus.”⁶



Fig 9 Roger Olmos, *Comte*, 2018

<https://www.abebooks.com/first-edition/Cosimo-Roger-Olmos-Logos-Illustrati-Modena/20959675398/bd>

Unlike Peter Mendelsund, Barcelona-based illustrator Roger Olmos dedicated a book to commemorate Cosimo, the protagonist of *the Baron on Trees*. The children's book illustrator continued his style, using thick colored pencils to outline another Comte.

⁶ Terzian, Peter, and Rachel Arons. "Portrait of a Cover Artist: An Interview with Peter Mendelsund." *The New Yorker*, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/portrait-cover-artist-interview-peter-mendelsund.

Olmos believed that Cosimo was the incarnation of freedom. He had the courage to resist and never returned to the ground. Green was used in large areas in his works, making Cosimo's home vivid.

"The Baron in the Trees is one of Olmos' favorite books, and he wanted my personal view of this character. I knew about this book, but I had never read it, so I did it, one, two, three, and four times. She told me that I was completely free to interpret it, I had like 250 pages to adapt the story with images. So I decided to choose, among its 33 chapters, those images that are more representative, those that are stuck in the minds of Italians that have read Calvino's book. "⁷

c. From Reading to Drawing

"With Calvino, every word had to be weighed. I would hesitate for whole minutes over the simplest word-*bello* (beautiful) or *cattivo* (bad). Every word had to be tried out. When I was translating *Invisible Cities*, my weekend guests in the country always were made to listen to a city or two read aloud."⁸

It is a pity that I do not understand Italian, so I read the Chinese and English translations. I read the English version first. This version's translator was William

⁷ Classe, Lorenzo Barberis. "Interview with Roger Olmos." Lo Spazio Bianco, 1 Dec. 2019, www.lospaziobianco.it/en/interview-with-roger-olmos/.

⁸ Weaver, William, and Damien Pettigrew. "Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction No. 130." The Paris Review, 24 Feb. 2020, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2027/the-art-of-fiction-no-130-italo-calvino.

Weaver(1923-2013), Calvino's longtime English translator. In linguistics, Italian has more in common with English than my first language. As I had not read *The Cloven Viscount* and *The Nonexistent Knight*, I wanted to become familiar with this book through a language more closely related to Italian. Then I read the Chinese version translated by Wu Zhengyi(1947-). Wu was also a Calvino's long time translator.

“Writers do not necessarily cherish their translators, and I occasionally had the feeling that Calvino would have preferred to translate his books himself. In later years he liked to see the galleys of the translation; he would make changes—in his English. The changes were not necessarily corrections of the translation; more often they were revisions, alterations of his own text.

Calvino's English was more theoretical than idiomatic.”⁹

As Wang Xiaobo said the "simple language" trait in the writing process is the premise of Calvino weaving this dream world; but at the same time, it is only for "writing".

When I read this book I tended to give the novel a serious modern meaning. “I hope they are seen as the ancestral family diagrams of modern people, each of which has certain characteristics of the people around us, yours, my own.”¹⁰This is Calvino's afterword in the more complex imagery by remarks at the end. His statement is my thought.

⁹ Weaver, William, and Damien Pettigrew. “Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction No. 130.” *The Paris Review*, 24 Feb. 2020, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2027/the-art-of-fiction-no-130-italo-calvino.

¹⁰ Calvino, Italo. *Our Ancestors: Three Novels*. Secker & Warburg, 1980.

d. My Progress

i. Sketches

When I was reading his books, I always wanted to bring out my brushes to paint. In his stories, there are many exotic worlds. Well, these stories make me think about the world I live in. Calvino created these stories in the turbulent nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties. Although many things have changed since then, some issues have not been resolved or existed forever, and like identities, ideologies. I tried to understand Calvino's world and showed his imagination of it.

THE CLOVEN VISCOUNT

3

When my uncle made his return to Terralba I was seven or eight years old. It was late, after dusk, in October. The sky was cloudy. During the day we had been working on the vintage, and over the vine rows we saw approaching, on the grey sea, the sails of a ship flying the Imperial flag. At every ship we saw then we used to say, "There's Master Medardo back," not because we were impatient for his return, but in order to have something to wait for. This time we guessed right; and that evening we were sure, when a youth called Fiorfiero, who was pounding at the grapes on top of the vat, cried, "Ah, look down there!" It was almost dark and down in the valley we saw a row of torches being lit on the mule path. Then when the procession passed the bridge we made out a litter borne by hand. There was no doubt; it was the Viscount returning from the wars.

The news spread through the valley. People gathered in the castle courtyard: retainers, domestics, vintagers, shepherds, men at arms. The one person missing was Medardo's father, old Viscount Aiolfo, my grandfather, who had not been down to the courtyard for ages. Weary of worldly cares, he had renounced the privileges of his

title in favor of his only son before the latter left for the wars. Now his passion for birds, which he raised in a huge aviary within the castle, was beginning to exclude all else. The old man had recently had his bed taken into the aviary too, and in there he shut himself, and didn't leave it night or day. His meals were handed through the grill of the cage together with the bird seed, which Aiolfo shared. And he spent his hours stroking pheasants and turtle doves, as he awaited his son's return.

Never had I seen so many people in the courtyard of our castle; gone were the days, which I'd only heard about, of feasts and neighbor's feuds. For the first time I realized how ravaged were the walls and towers, and how muddy the yard where we now foddered goats and filled troughs for pigs. As they waited, all were discussing in what state the Viscount Medardo would return. Rumors had reached us some time before of grave wounds inflicted by the Turks, but no one quite knew yet if he was mutilated or sick or only scored by scars. At the sight of the litter we prepared for the worst.

Now the litter was set on the ground, and from the blackness within came the glitter of a pupil. Sebastiana, his old nurse, made a move towards it, but from the dark came a raised hand with a sharp gesture of refusal. Then the body in the litter was seen to give angular and convulsive movements, and before our eyes Medardo of Terralba jumped to the ground, leaning on a crutch. A black cloak and hood covered him from head to foot; the right-hand part was thrown back, showing half his face and body

Fig 10 Italo Calvino, *The Cloven Viscount*, 1952 , P15, *The Cloven Viscount*

As I said before, I did want to be bound by the tools, and wanted to break through my idea of being bound by the tool. In this illustration part, I decided to use only digital media. From draft to final work, I used my iPad Pro to create.

The idea came with my reading, no matter which translation I read, I marked the chapters of interest. These chapters were pictorial, which made me want to create. I usually generated some ideas while reading, and then I put my books away.

Sometimes it was the composition of the whole picture, sometimes it was details of a character.

I started to draw sketches. In addition to reading the details of the story at the beginning of the draft, most of the time I put the book aside. I created my own memories of the book and the ideas thrown out by these memories.

ii. Final work



Fig 11 Wenpei Li, *Arrival*, 2019, the thesis of Wenpei Li

The creation of the final draft was a pleasant and difficult process, and I finally created a total of eight works. From line drawing to finalization, there were always new ideas. I enjoyed the process very much, but it also caused a lot of trouble with my progress.

In the past few years of creation, I have been trying to make myself confident in the creative process. I have thought about taking shortcuts, but after a long time, I discovered that the only way forward is to keep thinking and creating. And I think I should return to the simplest period. I was used to the repetition in my creation, but after adjusting to it, I felt I found the way I wanted to go.

III. *Drifting of A Leaf*

a. All Mine

When I was a reporter, there was a period of creative fatigue. The same has been true for me as an illustrator. If I always tell other people's stories, in a certain sense, I will be limited in my expression. So, I wanted to make a short animation.

Two years ago, I started working with animation, and I quickly fell in love with this form. I used to make short films and documentaries, and video art was very attractive to me, but it required a lot of equipment, personnel, and funds. I do not want to focus on those areas that I was not interested in. Animation opened another door for me.

I can use some very simple materials to make an animation, even just a pen. Flaws are allowed in my animation, because these flaws are taken away in a frame by frame combination, just like time.

b. They gave me inspiration.

South African draftsman, performer, and filmmaker William Kentridge is one of my favorites artists this year. I start focusing on watching other artists' animation since I made my own. Before Kentridge made animations, he painted and performed. He then discovered that he could use black charcoal and ink to draw a schematic sketch of his iconic expression. In his animation, one drawing was retouched time and time

again to create a film from other image, and each new image was the lightest, with signs of deleting the previous drawing.

He said that making movies is the process by which people understand the world. His animation was made illogically in the logical world. There will always be some inspired images, and people can use them. He thinks the best idea may be really bad. He thinks he may be bad at telling stories, but when he tries to communicate with others, he can make a difference.



Fig 12 William Kentridge, *Drawing for the film History of the Main Complaint*, 1995

<https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2001/William-Kentridge>

Kentridge and I both like Beckett and Mayakovsky. He feels that writing is a much bigger influence on what he makes than images. One important reason that I like

Kentridge is that we are influenced by the same writers. And one interesting thing about artists reading the same book is that they might make a whole different art in the end.

I found *Pretending is Lying* in 2019. The charcoal painting attracted me when I read it. Its writer was Dominique Goblet. In the beginning, Goblet and her three-year-old daughter Nikita visited his retired father. Dominique's naive paintings and yellowish colors inside the book make the story more interesting. It talked about the relationship between Goblet and his friend, family members, and partner, like her alcoholic blowhard father, her distant partner, her abusive mother.



Fig 13 Dominique Goblet, The cover of *Pretending is Lying*, 2007

<https://www.amazon.com/Pretending-Lying-Dominique-Goblet/dp/1681370476>

“Goblet's characters are incredibly alive, full-bodied and appealing even when they hurt one another. In the best tradition of Expressionism, she distorts people's bodies to reflect their impact on those around them. A child's fear of her alcoholic father and, years later, Goblet's disgust with him is conveyed through an exaggerated black mustache and the zooming, changeable lines of his limbs and belly.”¹¹

c.Process

Reading *Our Ancestors* produced the original intention of creating this animation. As I said before, nature, especially the big tree, was an important element at the beginning of my life. I put the beginning of the story into the Jurassic era, and then back to that era at the end, I thought "this is the cycle of life". No matter what the form of life is, it always has a beginning and an end. Humans, a small part of this link, become so small and insignificant.

If I could have another life, I'd hope I could become a bird or a tree. Because I grew up at the foot of Mount Tai, my childhood was running through trees at least hundreds of years old. In *Our Ancestors*, trees, and birds are very important images. These gave me a lot of creative desires, especially *the Baron In The Tree*. I made these two items become her protagonist in the animation. The animation is called *Drifting of a*

¹¹ Lehoczky, Etelka. “With A Photographer's Eye, A French Cartoonist Interrogates Truth.” NPR, NPR, 5 Feb. 2017, www.npr.org/2017/02/05/512043013/with-a-photographers-eye-a-french-cartoonist-interrogates-truth.

leaf. A little leaf becoming a bird flies in the world. It never is a leaf or a bird. It does not know where its root is. Or it thinks the root is all this world.



Fig 14 A scene of *Drifting of A Leaf*, Wenpei Li, 2020

This animation tells the story of how a leaf drifts in time and space. It has seen people in many places and finally found its original self. I chose to use watercolor as a primer, and use digital to make further details. I only used black and white watercolors and added some colors appropriately.

V. New road

I feel my artwork has gone through changes during the past few years of working. The work may have changed a great deal, I, but it's all my real perceptions from my heart. There is more and more clearly recognition of my artwork. I once was stuck onto certain media. I thought only when I use different, special materials that could

make good artwork. I used different drawing materials, ceramics, printmaking, and even fabrics. It's lots of fun when using new materials, but I do not think that is so important for me. I think that to express what you want is more important than using novelty materials as an illustrator. If the story is interesting, the lines of one pencil could be more interesting than an acrylic painting.

It's as if there are two of me: one must be observing and recording, and the other is creating. Observing everything in life, like entanglement, and the relationship between human beings, these endless sources of creation make me keep thinking about how to find my next intersection. I was 13 years old, the first time I said I wanted to be an artist. At that time, I did not really know what an artist was. This word seemed to save me as someone in a repressive adolescence. Seeing my favorite artist Chen Danqing criticize what I liked, I just wanted to know if I also became an artist, so I no longer have to listen to teachers and parents directing my life.

When I started on this road, I kept asking myself what kind of illustrator and artist I wanted to be. Now it seems that I understand my choice more clearly. In the end, what I want to do is tell the stories in my own way. There are always new things and new ideas. I don't know what the future world will become, but I hope I can maintain my creativity.

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Vitae

NAME OF AUTHOR: Wenpei Li

PLACE OF BIRTH: Tai'an, Shandong, China

DATE OF BIRTH: July 04, 1990

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED: China University of
Geosciences(Wuhan)

DEGREES AWARDED:

Bachelor of Radio and Television Journalism, 2014, University of
Geosciences(Wuhan)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

International Students Liasion, Syracuse Univesity 2018-present

Teaching Assistant, Syracuse University, 2019