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Abstract

In this paper, *6847 Miles*, I discuss how my time in graduate school and developing my artistic practice has led me to my thesis project. The paper is divided into chapters that discuss how I gradually made my work about myself and my family in relation to themes of self-discovery, self-reconstruction, and acceptance of the fragility and contradiction of familial love. I use photography and video to articulate these themes and my vulnerability.

6847 MILES

by

Ze Tian

B.F.A, The University of Iowa, 2020

Thesis

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

Syracuse University

May 2024

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PART ONE

Introduction: Overview, Preview, and Context

The term “identity” is a profound concept that links with every one of us on a personal level. “Identity is a development described in terms of individual coherence and continuity, which follows an essentially linear course and is oriented towards agents of socialization such as family, school, or work.” (Orde 6) My discussion about “identity” focuses on how we see ourselves within our family. My familial identity was shaped by my parents, memories, and childhood experiences, but I began to reevaluate my identity as I got older to better position myself within my family’s dynamic. It seems that identity is something that we all can change and explore. We are aware of our identity when we reflect on how we fit and where we belong.

Rapper Jay-Z has said identity, “Identity is a prison you can never escape, but the way to redeem your past is not to run from it, but to try to understand it, and use it as a foundation to grow.”¹ Searching for identity forces us to confront the complexity of who we are in an environment that is constantly changing. The journey to unravel one’s identity is often painful. It comes with introspection, self-doubt, and sometimes denial. With photography, the captured images are not only a shimmering moment of a human being but also an opportunity to get on a path of self-discovery. Photography serves as a mirror through which individuals can better examine the complex landscape of one’s inner life. I am on a journey to discover my identity while also using photography and video to create a narrative that allows me to see myself clearly in my art-making process. The process comes with painful self-denial, emotional shifts, internal conflicts, and external influences. This thesis will discuss where photography, identity, and re-invention intersect.

¹ Jay-Z. *Decoded*. USA, Random House Publishing Group, 2010 <https://www.elitedaily.com/life/motivation/5-inspiring-quotes-from-jayz/759200>

Artists are able to add different layers of experience to their work as they explore identities relative to memory, family, and society. They either freeze the moments or contemplate identity over time. My primary artistic sources are Garry Winogrand, Jia Zhangke, Paul Graham, and Ron Jude. Winogrand's work centers on the unscripted moments in the everyday lives of people. Capturing the complexity and candid society, his work makes me question my goal as a photographer because of the unbalanced experience I got from both China and America. Graham works in a similar way in street photography: his body of work *A Shimmer of Possibility* focuses on ordinary life but asks the viewer to explore a sequence of images to find meaning rather than contemplate singular remarkable moments. The images often encourage me to consider how to value the intention behind an image from the photographer's perspective.

Ron Jude, though, evokes the feelings of mystery using ordinary objects. In his landscape work *12 HZ: Forest Floor* he captured the essence of the branches with distinguished visual content compared to how we usually think of branches to transform them into the magic storyteller that can evoke memories.

In this thesis, I have drawn from Deborah Bright as my sources to discuss my emotional shifts around seeking my identity with my evolving artistic practices while shooting landscape photography. Deborah Bright wants the viewers to question how landscapes are constructed, mediated, and interpreted. She warns against the uncritical acceptance of traditional landscape photography without further self-reflexiveness.

Jia Zhangke works with film to explore identity and memory in scenarios like family and society. "Duration" in their films often plays a significant role, showing how the relentless passing of time can shape a person or a family. In Jia Zhangke's *Mountains May Depart*, he created a twenty-five-year story narrated by Shen Tao who connects two generations to witness

the shifts caused by time. With the changes of a few characters, the emotional twist, memory loss, and the shifts of families and country were revealed on the big screen.

PART TWO

Chapter 1: Seek the Path

When I was studying film in The University of Iowa, I was intrigued by Sergei Eisenstein's practice of montage. Juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images can create something metaphorical that makes the viewers consider ideas beyond what they see on the screen. I often think that photography can also be cinematic. Through well-designed expressions, gestures, and actions in the frame, the thoughtfully crafted image can also suggest a narrative or a message. Sometimes the viewers are excited to see a body of work because they wish to connect all the images to complete the photographer's intention. A series of still images is also the bridge that links the single image with the moving ones. I remember when I got into photography for the first time at the University of Iowa. I noticed that I have full control over still images captured by a DSLR camera. I could adjust every setting to get basically what I wanted all by myself. At that time, I had just arrived in America. The people, the culture, and the way the university works here were brand-new experiences for me. I couldn't wait to capture all the "fresh" moments I could never experience back in China.

I. Streets: Everyday Life

Garry Winogrand was one of my early influences. His method of shooting street photography fits every fantasy I had as a foreigner to document life. Winogrand shot around ten rolls of film a day. He shot at least 5,850,000 photos in his lifetime.² He treats street photography as a dedication to capturing the unscripted moments of everyday life. His photographs can reveal the authentic nature of people in certain environments. In Winogrand's photograph, *Untitled 1961*, an African American man wearing a fashionable suit is crossing the street with a white woman. (figure 1.0) We can see that many people around them on the street are looking at this couple. From there, we see that African Americans faced social discrimination and racial prejudice in the Civil Right Era. I can even put myself into the same moment and same situation considering similar stories of Chinese immigrants.



Figure 1.0 Garry Winogrand, Untitled, 1961

² Mervyn d'Arbes, *No one moment is important... Any moment can be something*, 2016
<https://mervynmccracken.wordpress.com/2016/01/17/garry-winogrand-no-one-moment-is-important-any-moment-can-be-something/>

At first, I was a “slow shooter.” I thought too much before I clicked the shutter. Inspired by Winogrand, I began to mimic his method. Shooting more became my goal. The experience helped me with my patience and sense of timing: I could freeze time to provoke thoughts and emotions. For me, street photography goes beyond mere documentation; it’s the visual language that communicates the diversity and complexity of human society. The image itself conveys a wide range of emotions and stories, and it showcases a wide array of people. It’s a bridge that connects the unique qualities of everyone in the society. I would spend a few days capturing the moments that were unscripted and otherwise unnoticed as I traveled throughout America. In an early series, *The Missing Moments*, I captured an old man standing in front of a traditional Cuban-style architecture calling someone, with a stroke of light on his face. (figure 1.1) The worry on his face compelled me to take the image but I had no idea what he was going through. I was a photographer who sat behind his camera, isolating myself from people and speaking to the subject matter I wanted to discuss. As a foreigner the distance provides safety, and the less you know about the people you’re photographing the fewer preconceptions you will have with your work.

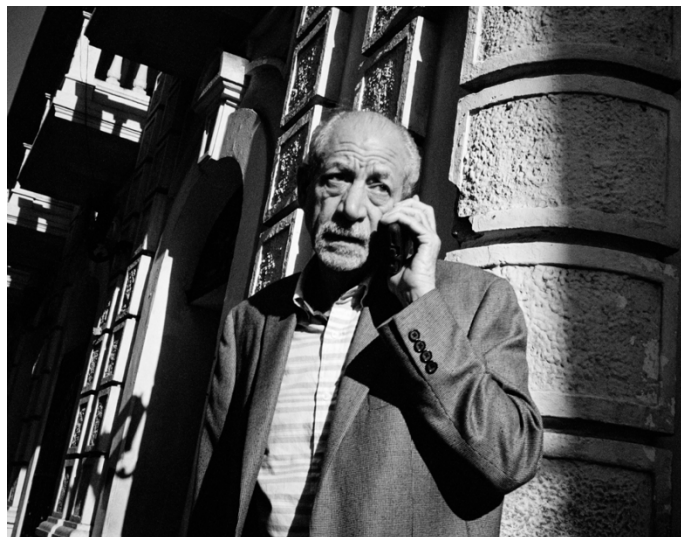


Figure 1.1 Ze Tian, *Old Man with His Phone*, *The Missing Moments*, 2019

In Paul Graham's *A Shimmer of Possibility*, there is a brief moment of indefinite life that's hidden beneath people's behavior. The images are the art form that seeks to reveal the extraordinary within the ordinary. The photographs in which a person mows the lawn every day seems dreary, but with a huge amount of the lawn in the frame, the behavior of mowing becomes the right thing and the perfect thing that should happen in the images. It's like the person and the lawn becomes the environment. (figure 1.2) Graham's images lead me to question the purpose behind my photography. The behavior of taking photographs of the environment I live in with other strangers has become a way of experiencing and engaging with the world around me. However, if I only photograph strangers and my surroundings, how should I define myself beyond being a mere "documenter"? My images hardly reveal any information about who I am. As I delve deeper into street photography, I feel the inability to know myself.



Figure 1.2 Paul Graham, *A Shimmer of Possibility*, 2004-2006

I started to question how my work as an artist reflected my identity after I moved to Syracuse for graduate study. Am I only a student who will spend a couple of years here to get a diploma? I will still be an outsider here in the new environment. It's also urgent that I want my images to change as I find myself in a new place because I want to use my photographs as a tool to see myself better in this new environment. I want to know more about the new place. I feel safer when I can see how I am going to live a life here. My idea was to photograph this new

environment; not with other strangers, but with myself. Something that can reveal my life in the images. I am not satisfied by simply documenting other people's lives—I want to look at mine.

II. Woods: Landscape Photography in “Exotic” Forests

After weeks in Syracuse, I got interested in the forests around Syracuse. I call them “exotic” because I was born in a city, and I never got the chance to have a close look at any forest. I started to take images of the woods in the parks around Syracuse. Landscape photography was where I landed at the first stop. I enjoyed every moment that I had in the forest to take images of the woods that resonated with me emotionally. I felt relieved in the woods.

At that time, I felt that I didn’t belong anywhere except the woods. I developed the environmental ethic: there is an interconnectedness between me and the woods, that I couldn’t feel elsewhere. The sense that my actions impact nature and nature also impact me gradually became a vital part of my identity, connecting me as a person to nature. Ron Jude’s *12 HZ: Forest Floor* inspired me to think about how to present this relationship to my viewers. He opens the magic portal for us and suddenly we are amid dense roots, trunks, and branches. We are surrounded by the organic lives that we don’t usually experience in human society. (figure 1.3) The ordinary object presents itself in a mysterious way, causing the viewers to see it unfamiliarly. From how the branches entangled with each other and the darkness of the thin roots, we can discover what’s really in there, in between the branches. That’s where you find the interactions between the photographer and the woods.

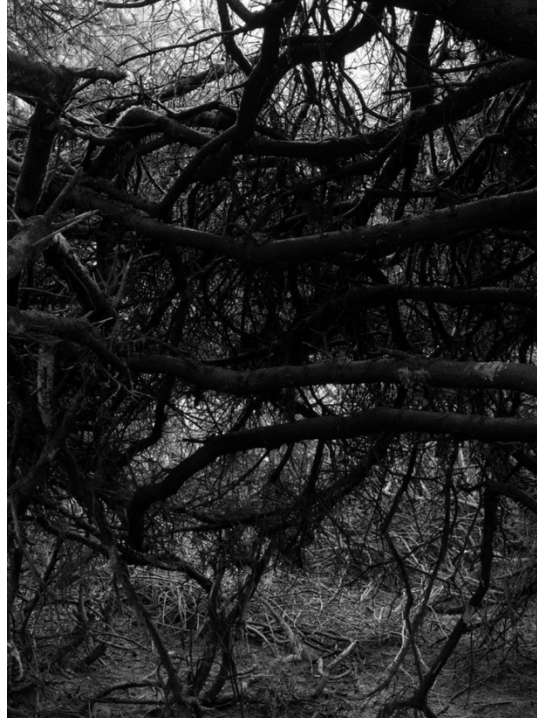


Figure 1.3 Ron Jude, 12 HZ: Forest Floor, 2017-2020

Instinctively, I began photographing the woods as I walked through them. In my *Shanghai* project, I tried to reveal every detail that I could get from the woods and complicate the typical feelings of peace and relaxation. My goal was to leave my viewers feeling lost, isolated, and unsettled. (figure 1.4) I slowed down my pace using a medium format camera to better notice how the woods changed throughout the day. Over time, I began to regard the woods as a spot that's safe for me to escape the day-to-day interactions that had with people in society. Later on, I decided to go to the woods at night to embrace and confront my loneliness. (figure 1.5)



Figure 1.4 Ze Tian, *Untitled*, Shanghai, 2020



Figure 1.5 Ze Tian, *The Entrance*, Shanghai, 2021

Upon realizing why I felt I belonged here. The woods offer me the same peace and freedom I felt in my hometown where I could set myself free from other people's judgment. However, my perspective towards the woods altered a little after I read Deborah Bright's essay *Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography*. Bright wrote of how cultural and social institutions construct and shape the perception of landscape photography. Historically, Americans have seen landscape photography as the extension of a mythic version of American History and culture. For Lewis Baltz, however,

the landscape was merely a set of conditions that embodied human actions.³ Bright suggested we reevaluate and expand our understanding of landscape:

If we are to redeem landscape photography from its narrow, self-reflexive project, why not openly question the assumptions about nature and culture that it has traditionally served and use our practice instead to criticize them? Landscape is not the open field of ideological neutrality that Baltz fancies it to be. Rather, it is an historical construction that can be viewed as a record of the material facts of our social reality and what we have made of them. (Bright 17)⁴

I need to consider the images associated with landscape photography. This gives the landscape its own meaning back. It's not merely a document for human activity. I realized that the juxtaposition of two different cultural backgrounds highlights how I understand the representation of this specific environment. The American landscape presents an additional layer of longing for the familiar and familial comforts of home. I created my personal landscapes; a place was viewed as a "reality" that connected me to somewhere I feel safer and willing to reevaluate myself.

³ Baltz, Lewis, *Landscape Problems*, Aperture, No.98, Spring 1985.

⁴ Bright, Deborah. Chapter: *Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography*, pp17, 1996

Chapter Two: Define through Motion

I started filmmaking when I was undergraduate. I struggled to work with film crews, sets and actors, and chose to work alone. The multisensory experience from video offered me a different perspective from still images and the ability to work with movement, dialog, and narrative. One of the biggest impacts on my identity was the “place” where I was born and raised: my roots. Instead of seeking solace in the woods, I began to consider how my birthplace impacts my identity. As Chinese, we have a special trust in our roots. Roots symbolizes how we are entangled and related everything around us. I found myself resonating with Jia Zhangke’s film *Mountains May Depart*. (2015) In this film, Dollar, a Chinese immigrant who was born in Australia, has been struggling with his cultural identity. Despite having never been to China, he still grapples with a longing for his roots, especially after falling in love with his Chinese teacher. After a series of conflicts with his father, he embraces his Chinese heritage, finding a sense of belonging at the moment when he sees the picture of his father standing along the Yellow River thirty years ago. (figure 2.0)



Figure 2.0 Jia Zhangke, still from *Mountains May Depart*, 2015

In 2019, I was suffering from homesickness. Because of the pandemic. Airlines between China and the United States were grounded. My need to return home and find my roots became urgent. In 2022, I realized the distance from Alaska to my home is actually shorter than the distance from Alaska to Syracuse. Since flight cancellations made it impossible for me to get back home to China from Syracuse, I travelled to Alaska to be as close to my family as possible and if I was lucky, cure my homesickness with some tiny sense of connection to my homeland.

When I returned from Alaska, I made a film, *The Map*. In this film, I used an online map to navigate the distance between Syracuse to Alaska and the distance between Alaska to my childhood home. (figure 2.1) In the film, I walk on the iced highway in Alaska; the road seems to be endless, indicating my inability to go home. With my voice-over, I talk about a dream I had in Alaska that:

I had a dream that I was waiting for a boat at Anchorage airport, but I can't remember if it was a freighter or a canoe. The boat was heading towards the west from the Gulf of Alaska. I cannot remember how long has passed, whether it has been hours or days, years or even centuries, but I have been on this boat, slowly sailing west. I felt like I was nearing home, but the waves grew stronger. When I opened my eyes, I was still on my way to Anchorage. (figure 2.2)

While the mountains, forests, and oceans I filmed in Alaska were strange and new, it was still geographically closer to my hometown than Syracuse. I felt like Zhangke's character, Dollar with his overwhelming desire to return to China and embrace his roots. My film is a bridge that links my past, present, and future, enabling me to express my fragile emotions toward my place of origin and connect with others who have experienced homesickness and longing during challenging times.

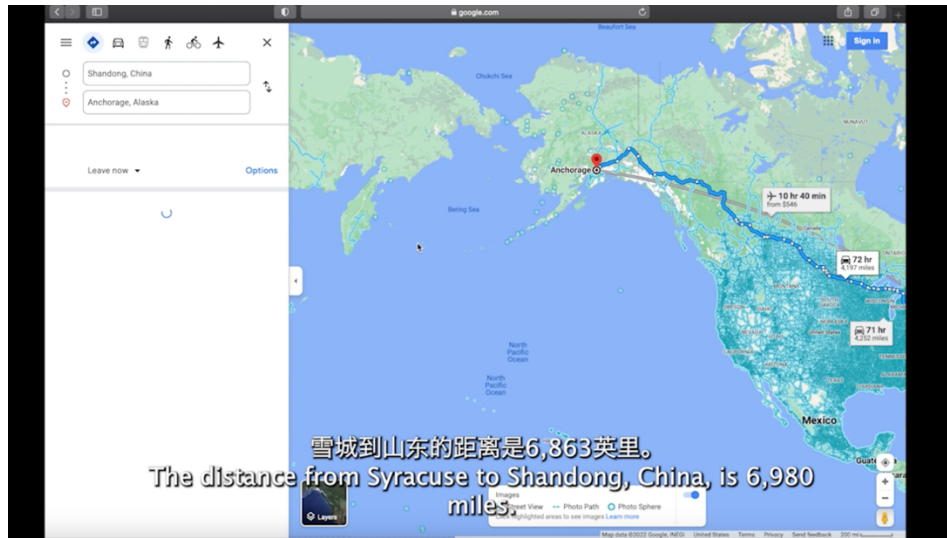


Figure 2.1 Ze Tian, still from *Map*, 2022

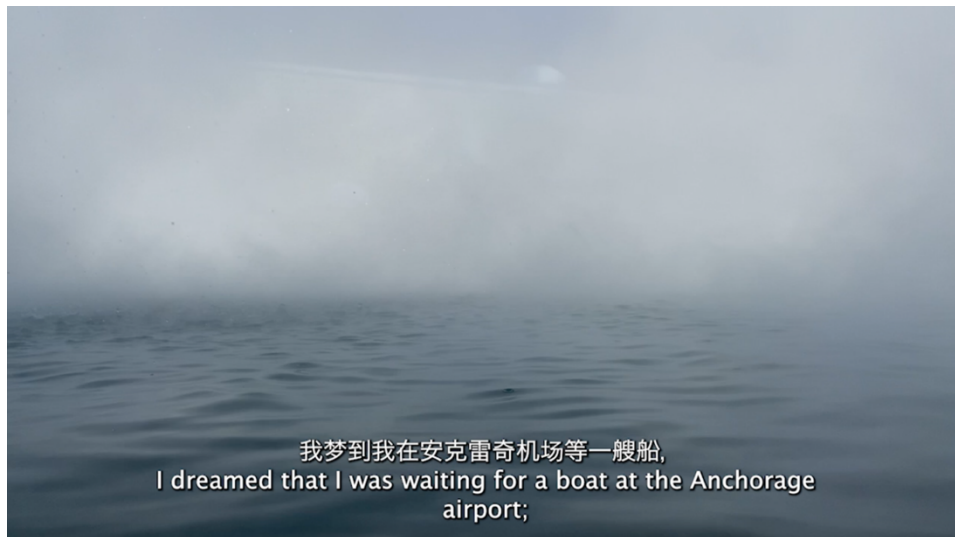


Figure 2.2 Ze Tian, still from *Map*, 2022

Chapter Three: The Way Back

When I finally returned home in the summer of 2022, things had changed. A rift between my two aunts after my grandfather passed away twenty years ago, had gotten worse. To compound matters, my uncle, who was my closest relative, barely interacted with me and had seemingly disappeared from my familial landscape.

I found a loose collection of old pictures from my younger aunt's house, which went back to my father's childhood. As I delved into those archives, I found I had lost certain memories of growing up: the place where my grandparents were originally buried, the details of their old house, and countless interactions I had with my relatives had become foggy in my mind. With the archive, my goal was to document the family changes in the last twenty years and try to figure out if I could find my place in my family again.

The resulting film, *6847 Miles*, includes my voice-over narration, phone conversations between me and my father, and a clip of a video call with my mother to talk about how the distance changed the way my family and I communicate since I came to the United State almost ten years ago. In my voice-over narration, I tried to explore the family history from my father's perspective. When listening to how my father talks about his childhood and what changed after my grandfather's death, I felt our roles change as I became the caregiver in the family. The landscapes in the film were near my home and became the backdrop to my memories of family before I departed for America. Through the tensions between my nostalgic voice-over and my conversations with my father and mother, I convey the fragility of the family that has shaped me.

I also discussed my feelings about my aunt's cancer which had grown serious and life-threatening, making more urgent my father's hope for a reconciliation between his estranged

sisters. I shared the story of my parents and I visiting her in the hospital which brought back memories of visiting her at her home many years ago when I was a child. As I filmed the mountains near her house, her old garden where she grows cucumbers, I recalled how my aunt had always shown me care.

During the visits in the hospital, I took some photographs and filmed her. I had hoped to talk to her about the family, her siblings, and her childhood. Unfortunately, the ruthless disease came to her first. The first time we went to visit her, she lay on the bed, one of her eyes swollen from medication. She talked, slowly. I sat on the side of her bed, and she asked me when I would get married. We were both laughing at that time. The second time I went to visit her by myself. Her condition was getting worse -- there was a tube in her nose, providing nutrition. She could barely talk, and just stared at me. I captured the last moments of her life with my camera, while in the background, my father argues and pleads with my younger aunt to visit her dying sister. (figure 3.0)



Figure 3.0 Ze Tian, *Elder Aunt*, still from *6847 Miles*, 2023

Last summer, I visited my younger aunt many times. She treated me like the child she remembered by preparing all the food I liked many years ago and asking me earnest questions

about my studies abroad. She also showed me many old pictures from her childhood. I could tell that she was still treasuring the memories she had about the time before my grandfather died and she was close to her sister. However, every time we talked about her relationship with my elder aunt, she stayed silent. I photographed my younger aunt sitting on the bed looking out the window after I tried to talk to her about my elder aunt's illness. (figure 3.1) She still held a grudge against my old aunt, even though she knew she would never see her again.



Figure 3.1 Ze Tian, Younger Aunt, 6847 Miles, 2023

I know the love between my family members is complex, they all have their difficulties. My elder aunt acted like she didn't care about other people, but still asked about my younger aunt every time we visited her. My younger aunt treated her sister's cancer seriously but remained silent as if no one understood what she had gone through. When my father argued with my younger aunt (after drinking too much) to see her older sister, I could see in her eyes how her anger hid her sadness and longing for the old times. My father doesn't want me to dwell on our family problems. He told me, "With too much regret, it becomes no regret at all." Yet he will still shed a tear after dinner with my younger aunt.

Old Town is an old picture I found from my father's bedside table. (figure 3.2) It's a small grocery store that can often bring my father back to his childhood when he could have dinner with all his family members while not having to think about anything else. I think that's also why he doesn't want me to take the burden off his shoulders. However, as I dig deeper into the hidden family history, I know where I should land in my family. I know I will one day become my father and try to bring the family closer.



Figure 3.2 Ze Tian, Old Town, 6847 Miles, 2023

PART THREE

Conclusion

My works have been about self-discovery, self-reconstruction, and acceptance of the fragility and contradictions of familial love. The thesis project began when I thought deeply about my previous work and started to explore “Who I am?”

From discovering myself in America as a student, to revalue myself within my family, I witnessed my transformation from a young kid to a grown-up man. While I investigated the hidden history of my family, I experienced the role shifting between my father and me. I am gradually taking over my father’s task of bringing the family together. The sudden tragedy that happened to my elder aunt pushed me to the last step of asking myself “What should I do for my family?”

I plan to continue working on this project after my graduation. My goal is to understand what I can do for my family and help my father to bring everyone closer. I want to know how to prevent family members from becoming estranged from the people they love. I will keep researching until I can answer myself and find a resonating area for others who are suffering from a fast-paced society. I can be honest with myself and the audience by showing the most vulnerable part of me to my family. From there, I find new meanings that challenge me to delve deeper.

APPENDIX

Artist Statement (246 Words)

6,847 Miles is a film that reevaluates my old familial shifts from a different lens, one that is deeply impacted by the almost ten years I spent living in the United States. Examining twenty years of familial tensions between my aunts, the absence of my uncle, and the fading memories of my youth, the film captures my family members in different emotional states.

Narrating over landscapes filmed near my home, I present various places that have deep significance to myself and my entire family. Object and domestic spaces don't appear but are spoken about in conversations between myself and my father. Using these conversations almost as symbols, I convey the fragility of the family bonds that have shaped me. The conversations center around homes and places my family used to gather that no longer exist; they were lost during the long-lasting conflicts in the family. In the film these conversations with my father serve as a bridge to my fading memories and as evidence of the tension I experience while trying to find my place within my family scenario.

This work is not intended to expose or take advantage of the weak side of my family, but to witness and explore the realness of the kinship present. By expressing this fragility, I want to talk about the almost universal experience of family members becoming estranged from the people they love and the way this separation is exacerbated by the fast-pace of change of society in China.

Artist Statement (441 Words)

During the pandemic, an increasing sense of homesickness drove me back to my childhood home. After being away for almost five years, as I delved into my family archive, I found myself losing my memories of certain things that occurred as I grew up. The place where my grandparents were originally buried, the site of their old house, and countless interactions I had with my relatives had become a fog in my mind. It is almost as if they disappeared along with the quarrels between my relatives, dissipating like a wisp of smoke from burning joss paper.

6,847 Miles is a film that reevaluates my old familial shifts from a different lens, one that is deeply impacted by the almost ten years I spent living in the United States. That distance changed many of the ways my family and I interact and communicate with each other. Living away from my family made me question who I am, specifically who I am to my family in China when I'm living in the United States.

Examining twenty years of familial tensions between my aunts, the absence of my uncle, and the fading memories of my youth, the film captures my family members in different emotional states. Narrating over landscapes filmed near my home, I present various places that have significance in my narration of the film. Object and domestic spaces don't appear but are spoken about in conversations between myself and my father. Using these conversations almost as symbols, I convey the fragility of the family bonds that have shaped me. The conversations center around homes and places my family used to gather that no longer exist; they were lost during the long-lasting conflicts in the family. In the film these conversations with my father serve as a bridge to my fading memories and as evidence of the tension I experience while trying to find my place within my family scenario. This tension is highlighted especially when the camera is focused on my older aunt, who has been battling cancer. In the film I am capturing the

last moments of her life, something that will become even more precious with the passage of time, while in the background, there is a heated argument happening between my family members. The inclusion of this moment is not intended to expose them or take advantage of the weak side of my family, but to witness and explore the realness of the kinship present. By expressing this fragility, I want to talk about the almost universal experience of family members becoming estranged from the people they love and the way this separation is exacerbated by the fast-pace of change of society in China.

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Biography

Born in 1997 in Shandong, China, Ze Tian studied at The University of Iowa where he received his BFA in 2020 in Art Photography and Film. Ze is currently pursuing an MFA in Art Photography from Syracuse University. He has exhibited in Drewelowe Gallery (Iowa City, Iowa), Levitt Gallery (Iowa City), Point of Contact Gallery (Syracuse), 16x16x16 traveling exhibition in Omaha, Lincoln, Iowa City, and Lawrence.

While studying Art Photography in The University of Iowa, Ze became enamored by classic street photography. Street photography allows him to observe the Western world from a wonderer's perspective—capturing other people's lives with the camera to document the moments that are precious to him. During the pandemic period, he started thinking about the fragile connection between his family members and exploring what's behind the bond that ties everyone together in a dramatic way. The road to understanding “kinship” is also the way for him to consider what makes him an artist.

Ze draws inspiration from his experiences traveling across diverse landscapes and cultures. He has traveled to Alaska, Cuba, Thailand and Mexico, With the reflections of his odyssey, the experiences became a vessel for his art practice, and heavily influenced his work.