



# TRAPPED

**MFA in Medium and Material-based Art**

**Art and Craft**

**Oslo National Academy of the Arts**

**Xin Liang**



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**Oslo National Academy of the Arts  
MFA in Medium and Material-based Art 2022  
Xin Liang**



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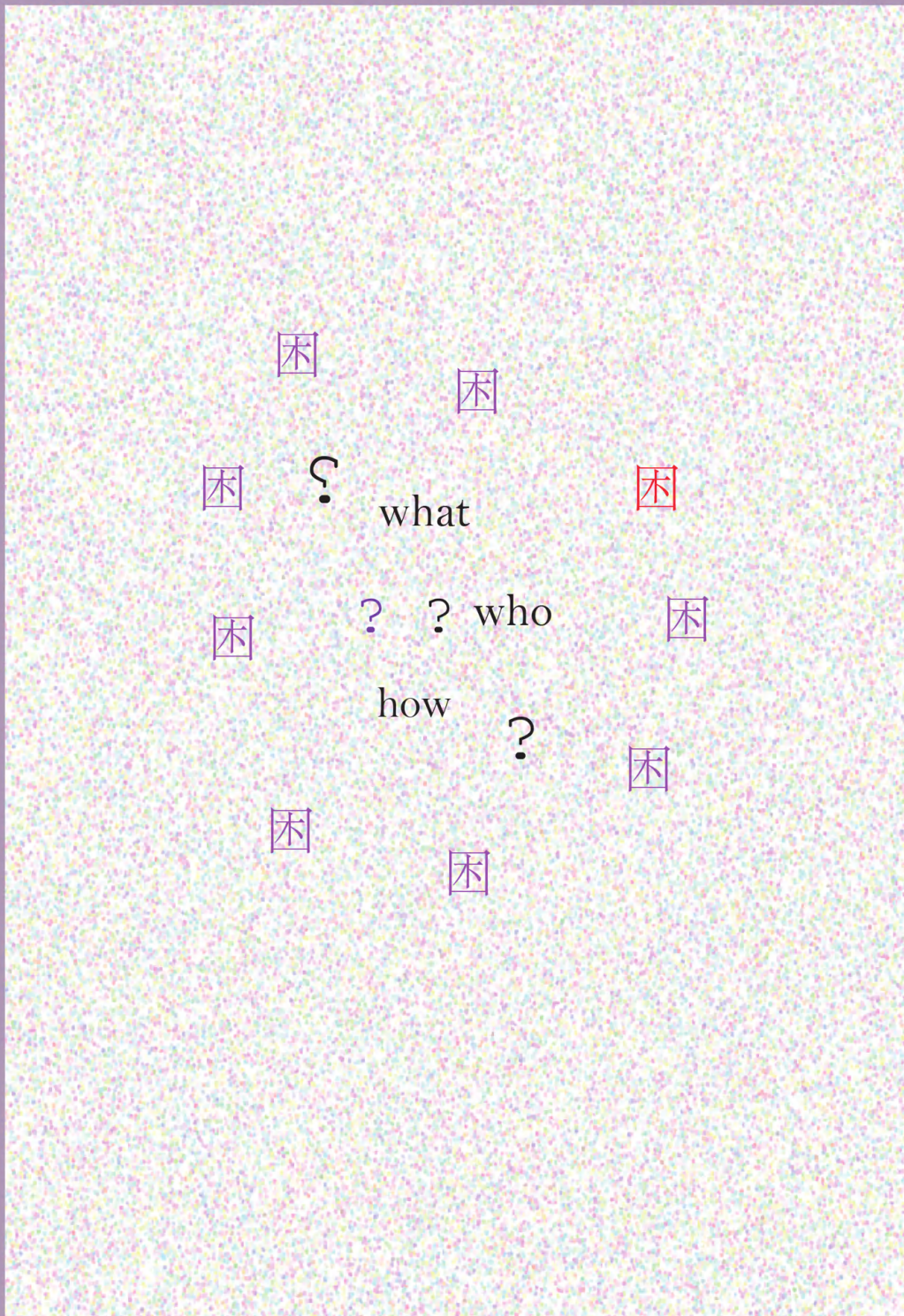
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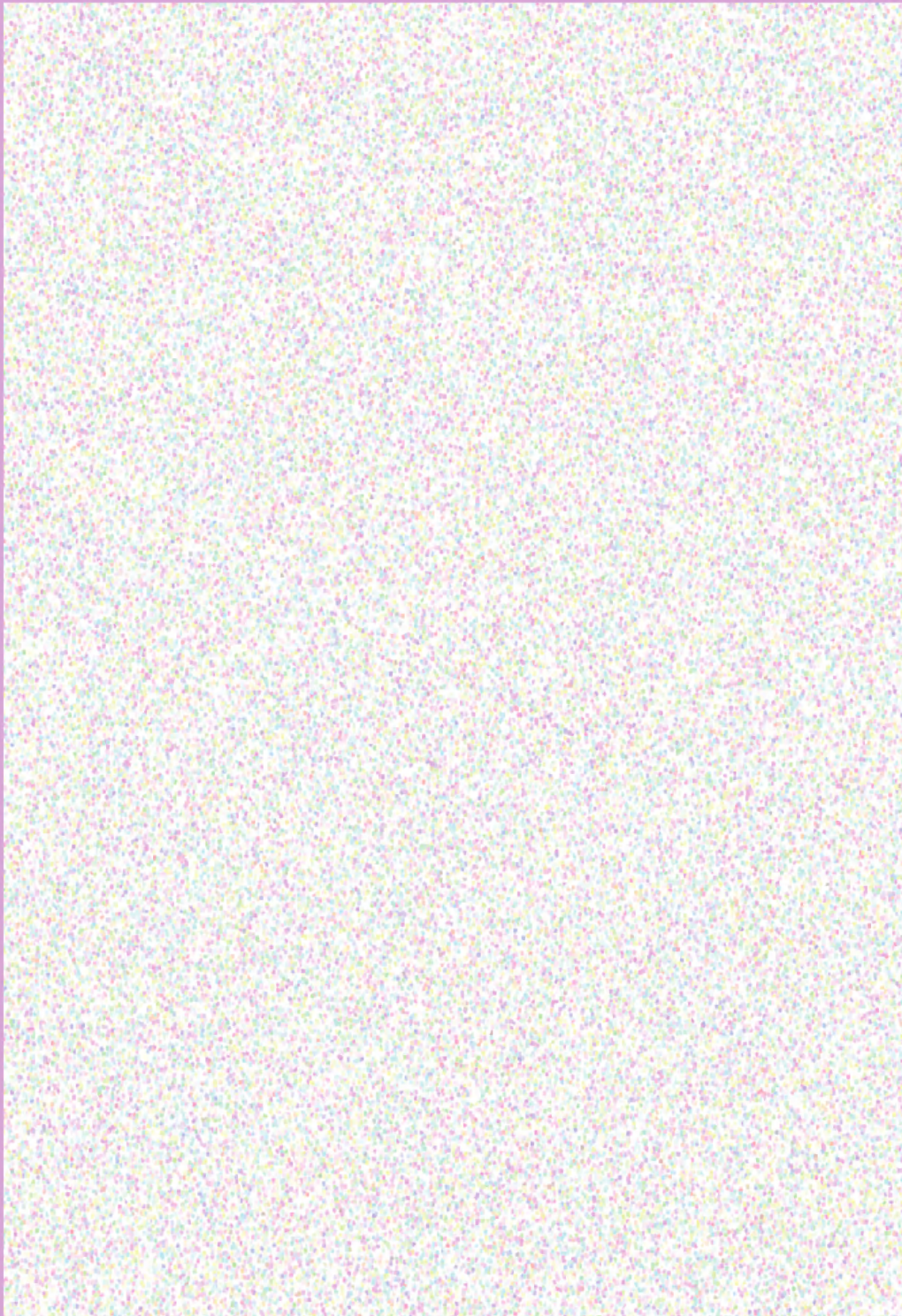


## Conceptualizing 'Trapped'

困 meaning 'trapped' is the keyword in my artistic practice.

Trapped is derived from a layer of meaning in the Chinese character 困 (pronounced kun) that means surrounded, strained, or trapped. Chinese characters are usually made up of components that work as semantic indicators or phonetic indicators. 困 is a combination of 囗 and 木. Both components are semantic indicators, 囗 functions as a morpheme of the term 'enclosure' or 'surrounded', and 木 is a pictographic element of tree.

Using the word 'trapped' as a springboard, the relationship between humans and nature has been the central area of investigation in my master's project. However, the focus became twofold during the process. One part is the trapping of nature by humans, but the process of trapping also includes the trapping of people by people in social structures of hierarchy. Together these two types of trappings constitute the conceptual base of my project and led to my two related art productions *Trapped Branches* and *Trapped individuals*.



## The backstory of Trapped Branches

The inspiration to carry out my study can be traced back to 2019, a year before I came to Norway. At that time recycling became a trending topic in China and the government had decided to promote sustainable waste management and encourage it through media platforms. Garbage collection and sorting policies were displayed to the public via official media platforms. A reality show aimed at young viewers aired a segment called 'Extreme Challenge' to create public awareness. The reality show involved actors using garbage collection boats to remove garbage washed down from upstream the Huangpu River. It saddened me to see huge heaps of plastic bags trapped in the mud. The '2020 China Marine Ecological Environment official report' showed that each square kilometer of water had on average 27 pieces of large garbage, and plastic accounted for 85.7% of that waste material. Plastics in nature are known to be hard to degrade and cause harm to plant and animal life. Currently, the main waste disposal methods in China are landfill and incineration. Both methods can be described as sub-par, seen from an environmentalist point of view. Landfill waste mixed in the soil adversely affects the growth of plants and limits biodiversity.

All this made me more aware of the relationship between nature and a major bi-product of human society, plastic waste. I realized that nature is trapped by the human-made pollution problem.



<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-50449659>

口	+	木	=	困
enclosure		tree		trapped
口	+	人	=	囚
enclosure		people		prisoner
口	+	古	=	固
enclosure		ancient		stubborn

## Trapped Branches

I describe the impact caused by human beings on the environment as the 'trapping' of nature. To illustrate how humans have 'trapped' nature, I began working on a series of works displaying trapped plants. I used plastic bags as the main material and turned them into organic shapes from biology such as tree branches and embryophytes. During the test stage, I collected plastic objects such as bottles, cups, and bottle caps from my neighborhood and at the subway station in central Oslo. Acrylic epoxy was obtained from my school's dustbins. However, I was not able to turn them into organic natural shapes like tree branches and thus decided to use plastic bags as the main material in my work. By combining the synthetic materiality of plastics with the visual language of natural organisms, I try to ignite a discussion about the relationship between humans and nature. It is an interesting coincidence that the Chinese character 困, which consists of 木 (tree/plants) and 口 (enclosure), literally means 'being trapped'. To develop the concept further, I also experimented with tying tree branches to metal frames with fishing string, as well as fixing embryophytes with transparent silicone plastic. the possibility of framing the plastic texture within self-made baroque-style frames was also explored.

The heavily ornate stylistic language of the Baroque period has been a favorite element during my whole period at KHIO, and I also wanted to include it in my thesis project. A major tendency in the heyday of the baroque style was a rejuvenated interest in nature ignited by developments in science and a broadening of geographic exploration that produced a new sense both of human insignificance and a fascination for the complexity and infinitude of the natural world. Baroque interior design, and especially painting frames, frequently featured pattern designs reminiscent of elements from the natural world, such as spiraling foliage.

Additionally, the original baroque painting frame stems from the period before mass production and plastics. They are made of what we now call natural materials.

As opposed to metal and plastic, wood is an organic element. If a baroque frame was disposed of, it would as a biodegradable item decompose easily without causing harm to the environment.

One can point to several innate functions in a painting frame. The first and main affordance is the protection of the painting.



*Xin Liang, Trapped Embryo, plastic bag, epoxy, brooch, 9×8cm, 2020*





Xin Liang, *Trapped Embryo*, plastic bag, epoxy, brooch, 6×7cm, 2020

Furthermore, it displays a physical attachment to the wall, and enhances the subject and color scheme, while remaining subordinate to the picture. According to Mitchell and Roberts, it also defines the picture's perimeter and helps the focusing of the spectator's attention on the subject. It is an area of transition between the real world and that of the picture.

When frames work to protect art and indicate the focus of attention, they show a subtle parallel to the term 'trapped'. I used the frame as a symbol of the so-called protective constraint, and initially also wanted the specific baroque style to work as a metaphor for being trapped by a well-decorated trap.

The work with the baroque frames was something I initially planned on working on as a decorative side project. Later I found myself being trapped in the idea of having to make decorative pieces of jewelry. I had to break out of my working framework and come up with new ways of working. I moved on from the need to include a baroque style frame, as I found out the core of my project still could be expressed using other types of frames. The metal frame is a metaphor for railings. A symbol of being trapped or imprisoned. The coincidence of the pictograph characters and the combination of the frame with trees shows the struggle and the suffering caused by the garbage to plants.



*Xin Liang, Trapped Branches, plastic bag,, 100×80cm, 2021*



*Xin Liang, Trapped Branches, plastic bag, iron, 18×25cm, 2021*



*Xin Liang, Trapped Branches, plastic bag, iron, 20×35cm, 2021*



Xin Liang, *Trapped Branches*, plastic bag, iron, 20×35cm, 2021



Xin Liang, *Trapped Branches*, plastic bag, iron, 18×25cm, 2021

"  
**Art Education In China: Assembly line for Artisans.**

Lydia  
Hong

## **The backstory of Trapped Individuals**

When the Covid-19 virus spread through the world in 2020, I was still in China and experienced extremely strict quarantine restrictions firsthand. The lockdown policy in China has been different from the rest of the world. Residents were locked indoors and some even experienced their doors being welded shut from the outside. Those who tested positive were sent under escort to hospitals with poor conditions. I felt very imprisoned. This meant that the trip from China to Norway, for me, was not just a change of physical location, but also the process of acquiring increased access to freedom. The experience of being trapped still haunted me even though my life had changed drastically. I wanted to explore the cultural differences in order to put my trauma aside. Chinese culture is relatively conservative compared to its impressive economic development. Furthermore, the relationship between people and nature is completely different in the two countries. Inclusiveness towards people considered “different” also varies greatly. In China, various norms of behavior are ever-present, including the expectation that even art students should behave properly. A clear example is the fact that the artist education program includes Yi Kao, one giant standardized art exam, designed to quickly evaluate students’ academic potential based on their scores. In a system like this, well-behaved became the standard of behavior in China.



[http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2018-02/24/c\\_129816078\\_5.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2018-02/24/c_129816078_5.htm)



<https://medium.com/writ340-summer2020/art-education-in-china-assembly-line-for-artisans-876872f4c079>

There are more struggles in our lives than there are characters in the Chinese language. As a woman artist from China, I have witnessed countless trapped people who were completely trapped. During the recent years women were victims of human trafficking, torture, slavery, and detention at a designated location under the justification of residence surveillance. They had not committed any crime but suddenly lost contact with their families. The decision-makers said it would be fine if rules were obeyed and followed suit. However, it's hard to believe that a person can escape from being trapped by obeying rules that are ruthless towards individuality. Ironically, obedience was seen as a duty of the Chinese since childhood, so during covid restrictions, the absurd rules were gradually accepted without even building critical thinking to question them. I, too, was trapped by traditional discipline, which kept me from being able to transcend in my artistic development and I understood that my thesis project marked the beginning of a new chapter in my artistic career, where I could explore these problems freely through my artwork.

✕ "obedience" and "tolerance" ✕

乖

## Trapped Individuals

Animals are trapped in cages; humans are trapped in concrete jungles and social hierarchies. There are many actors in society who are trapped by various frames, not just nature. Restrictions exist everywhere and people have for long adopted them without question. People need to ask themselves that if the trapped embryos represent humans that grow into individuals, which new frames will be trapping them in society?

The steel bar is a basic material in urban life today: I used it to imply the ubiquity of restrictions that are trapping us despite being necessary. Invisible frames that trap people exist, like social frames. They trap and assimilate individuals. For example, Chinese women are forbidden from working in mines based on a 'protective policy.' Additionally, women were not allowed to participate in competitive sports until the 1930s, based on a similar excuse of protection. Those protections worked as restrictions. In my work, I am showing a group of child-shaped objects surrounded by a metal frame painted in red, with stamps of Chinese social norms such as 'obedience' and 'tolerance' written and applied with red ink. I invite viewers to stamp on the child-shaped objects. Through this interactive process I try to tell the story of a 'social frame' that represents collective unconsciousness. Trapped individuals are stamped with social norms that gradually turn them indistinguishable from their background.

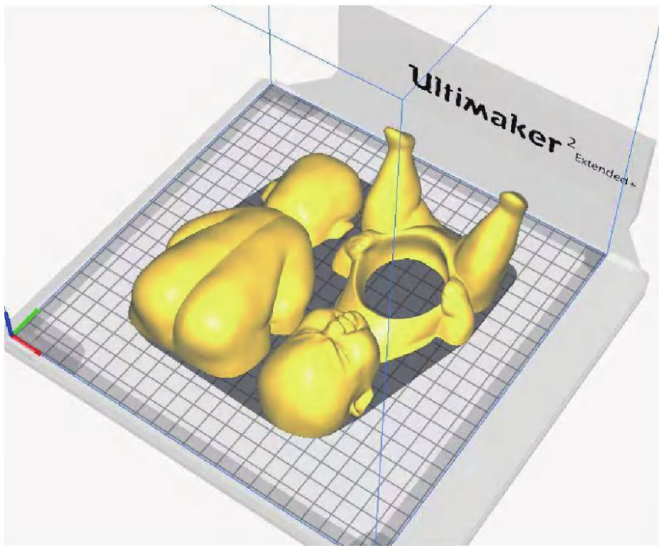
Every child-shaped object is placed inside the invisible dimension that is enclosed by the frame, leaving only its back parts to be seen. Initially, I had created a 3D model of a whole-body baby whose facial expression showed anger and lament. Later I realized that most people live in misery and do not even have the opportunity to express their feelings. So I deleted the front part of the baby model, including its facial expression. When the sliced objects were stuck on the wall and enclosed by a metal frame, they looked like being trapped both by the wall and by the frame.

The shape of the baby implies the twofold trapped-plight existing in China: Conservative societal norms and self-restrictions, starting from the first day we were born. When people get used to it as a social norm, the environment can strengthen the control unscrupulously. Under coercion from both culture and society, the assimilation of being silent became the best survival strategy. In total, the work consists of dozens of characters made of plaster. Each character's intense colors and identical shape express the potential conflict between the ego and the environment, and they want to escape while being trapped.

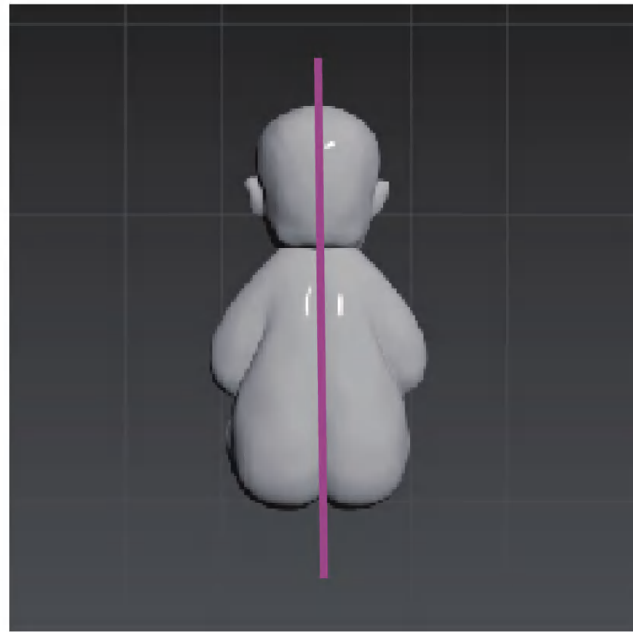


*The 3D model of a whole-body baby with facial expression.*





*The first cut*



The second cut



The final shape I used



Xin Liang, *Trapped Individuals*, plaster, iron, 200×200cm, 2022

**" The beauty of art is that you can still feel the emotion from the artwork, even if you throw away the functionality of the traditional language.**

**"**

**Xu Bing**

## **Artistic and material Inspiration**

It became a challenge for me to convey the idea to my viewers who are not familiar with the Chinese language. I did some research on the method to convey language-based artistic ideas beyond a certain context, fortunately, I found the eminent work 'Tianshu' by Chinese artist Xu Bing. Xu Bing's works provided me with the idea of communicating that isn't necessarily language-based in the traditional sense.

Chinese characters tell stories from their shape and appearance through their pictographic components. In that sense, they have strong connections to visual arts. They convey information beyond the context of different languages. In Xu Bing's work 'Tianshu', he deconstructs Chinese characters cleverly and innovatively. He takes apart the character's components before reassembling them following the structural logic of the Chinese character system. This results in a set of characters that visually resemble the Chinese writing system, but in fact, lack the semantic element of the written language. They are pseudo-Chinese characters, and the imitated books that make up his artworks feature page numbers, footnotes, and other elements in the same style as a real Chinese book volume.

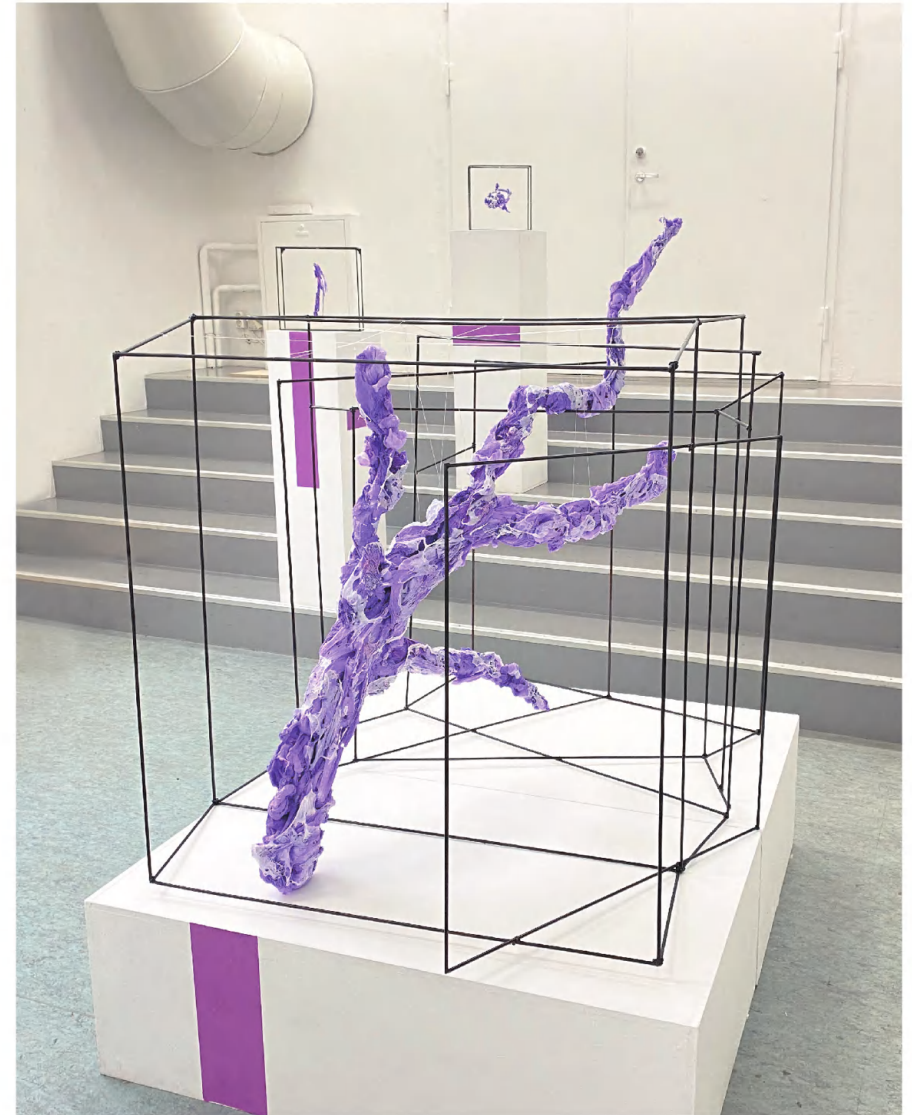
Xu Bing combined Chinese characters into his artworks by splitting, reorganizing, integrating, and forming new characters without meaning. According to Xu Bing, the texts were divided into two parts: one part is the functional part of the text as a language of communication in the usual sense, and the other part is the shell of the text. His focus on the shell of text is not only due to his intuitive sensitivity to non-functional content as an artist, but also because this shell can reflect history and traditions. He took away the meaning of characters, which is the main function of language as a tool, and left meaningless shells remaining.



Xu Bing, *Tian Shu*, 1987-1991

“In my opinion, the important thing about art is not whether it looks like art or not, but whether it can take people to a new place and suggest a new way of looking at things.” Xu Bing

The methodology of breaking down the inherent rules of Chinese characters and playing with the audience's impression of Chinese characters that Xu displayed in his Tianshu project had a great influence on my artistic exercise. I adopted a similar procedure in the early stages of my Trapped Branches series. First, I subtracted the essential Chinese base characters 口 (enclosure) and 木 (wood-tree). After reorganizing and playing with the visual properties of the character, the next step was to develop a space frame structure that not only supported the rest of the artwork but also displayed the mouth character. The Wood aspect, on the other hand, has a more straightforward meaning. In my case, wood is pointing towards the materiality of the sculpture. Although it is made from a deceiving plastic material, the object has an organic outer structure and resembles a tree and its branches. A series of sculptures followed that culminated in the 120cm long main branch. The combination of all these explorations resulted in what I describe as the Trapped Branches project.



*Xin Liang, Trapped Branches, plastic bag, iron, Installation work, 190×210cm, 2021*

*Duo exhibition at Kunstnernes Hus Akademirommet, Oslo*

In the 'trapped branches' series, the transition from small to large frames, and from small branches to large trees, are not only in terms of size but also in the sense that I have moved from the field of jewelry to the artistic field of objects and sculptures. In this process, the facilities provided by KHIO have been decisive. I never tried large-scale work before, but the support of KHIO's extensive workshops that helped me realize work in any field, made me want to expand my practice. Creating a spatially and formally beautiful frame from idea to finished product is an important piece of knowledge. I have spent a lot of time making and exploring picture frameworks by 3D modeling, printing, and casting.

Originally wanting to lean more towards jewelry, I have been struggling with whether to return to jewelry, but my tutor told me that I could do any form of art at KHIO, so I began to experiment with other metals in my work, not just the usual precious materials found within standard jewelry production such as gold and silver. The artist Zhou Wenjing was a huge inspiration to me at this stage.

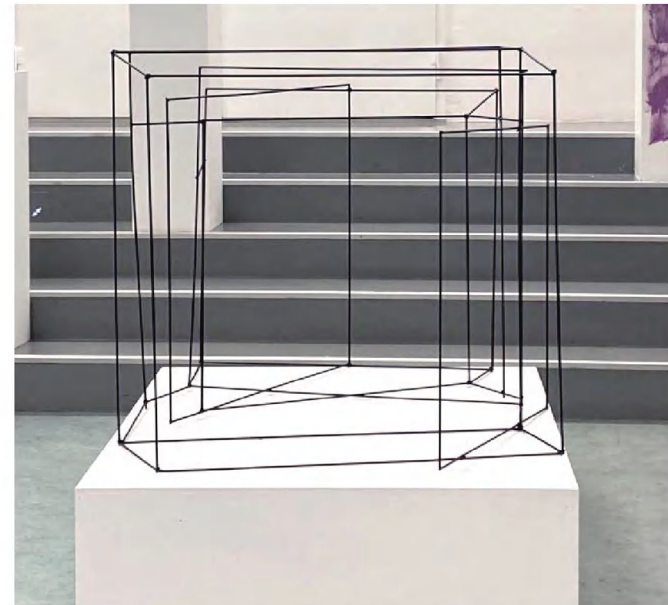


Zhou Wenjing, "Woman Series · IUD" 2014

Zhou makes works of art with birth control rings. She has made over 300 pieces of jewelry from her collection of true-size birth control devices and placed them on a blue velvet cloth as an installation. The shapes are beautiful at first glance, with a certain irony. Isn't the birth control ring a frame that can trap the female body? Many women have experienced adverse reactions such as bleeding, back pain, abdominal cramps, and in severe cases, uterine perforation and infected lesions after implanting an IUD.

In my own work, I chose to use round steel bars to show how cold and hard the plant-trapping frame is. The mere 15mm width does not make the complex frame structure heavy but maximizes the aesthetic of the structure. Like Zhou's art, it looks beautiful, but the content is violent and painful. I cut the steel bars into many pieces and then made a lot of □ shapes. First using tape to stabilize the structure and then welding each piece together. The whole structure should be stable whilst looking light. I used a straight linear structure form with varying sizes and directions of the connecting short iron bars.

For the tree part, I started by unwrapping the plastic bags I bought and then cut them into strips with scissors before winding them up and thermoforming them, using the plasticity of the plastic bags at high temperatures for detailed shapes and textures, ultimately attempting to show the struggle of plants as they are exposed to plastic pollution. I felt connected to the situation when I saw the spontaneous tension emerging between the branch, fishing string, and metal frame.

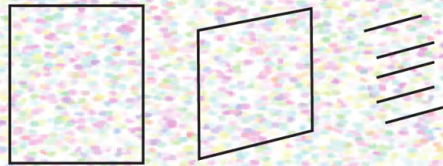


*The framework I made with iron.*

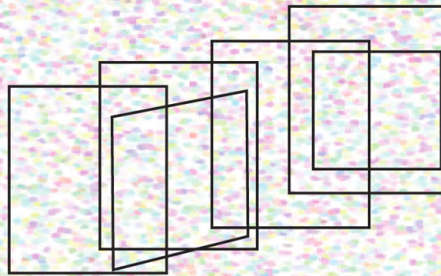
困 口 木

The Chinese character 困, which consists of 木 (tree/plants) and 口 (enclosure), literally means 'being trapped'.

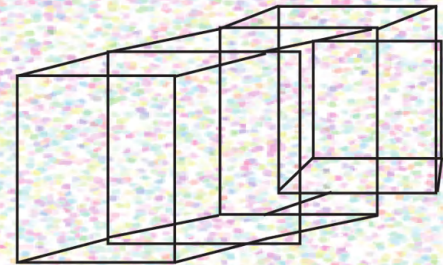
木 is a tree, and when a tree is wrapped, it is trapped and cannot grow.



Extraction of basic elements



Visually showing trapped



3-D showing trapped, can not grow





*Details of Trapped Individuals*

In terms of colors, I tried every color of the plastic bag I could buy; green, blue, yellow, light pink, and purple. Green is generally a symbol of hope and nature, while blue is more reminiscent of my understanding of nature and the sky. Yellow is more of an obvious wake-up call. In social life, I believe that more important than wakefulness is respect. Purple represents respect in traditional Chinese culture. In the West, purple flowers are used in ancient festivals, as they are believed to protect people from headaches and drunkenness. The practice of wrapping a newborn baby in purple cloth was once popular and was said to bring fame, wealth, and success to the child. With this in mind, I think these good wishes should be used not only for people but also for the ecological world.

In the 'Trapped individuals' project, I finally chose red as the main color. The red color has a very metaphorical meaning. Seen from behind, the expressionless baby gives a cold feeling in form, while the red color represents heat. In the middle of these cold shapes, there is red. The coldness of the form and the heat of the content clash to create the feeling of these babies being prickled. It also expresses the overwhelming struggle of humans when being trapped, emitting a sense of power and impulse, giving the viewers a visual sense of imminence and expansion.



*The process of making models*



*Details of Trapped Individuals*



*The process of making the Trapped Individuals*

I used 3D printing to build the prototype of the quarter baby for casting with plaster. The accuracy of 3D printing was perfect for me to make identical-shaped prototypes on different scales. Eventually, everyone becomes identical and featureless after a programmatic approach to discipline.

By casting the model with plaster, a material that solidifies quickly and turns fragile, I made a metaphor of how the Chinese assimilate from an early age no matter who they are. Furthermore, the properties of plaster as a material parallel the process of building up collective unconsciousness at the mercy of the power when liquid, while turning hard and fragile afterward, as if left with imprints from the social norms haunting them.

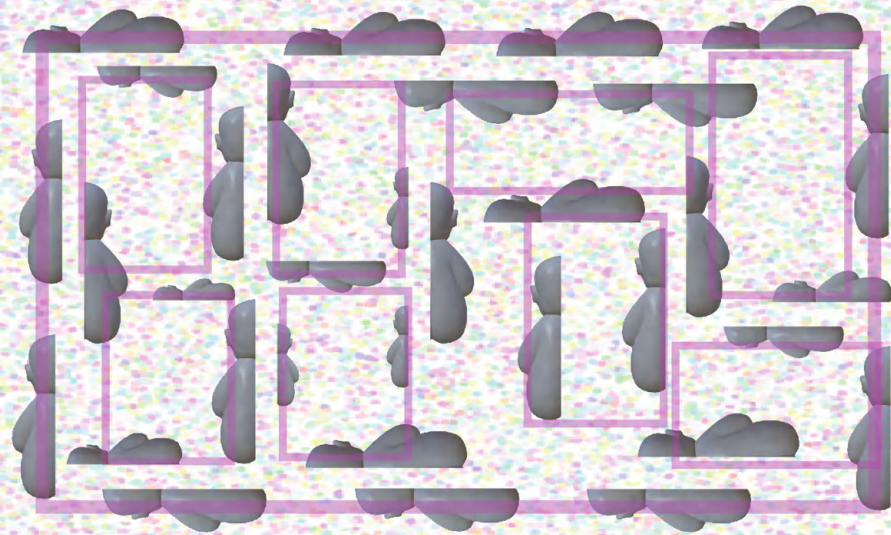


*Painted the the original model in 3D print.*

# 困 口

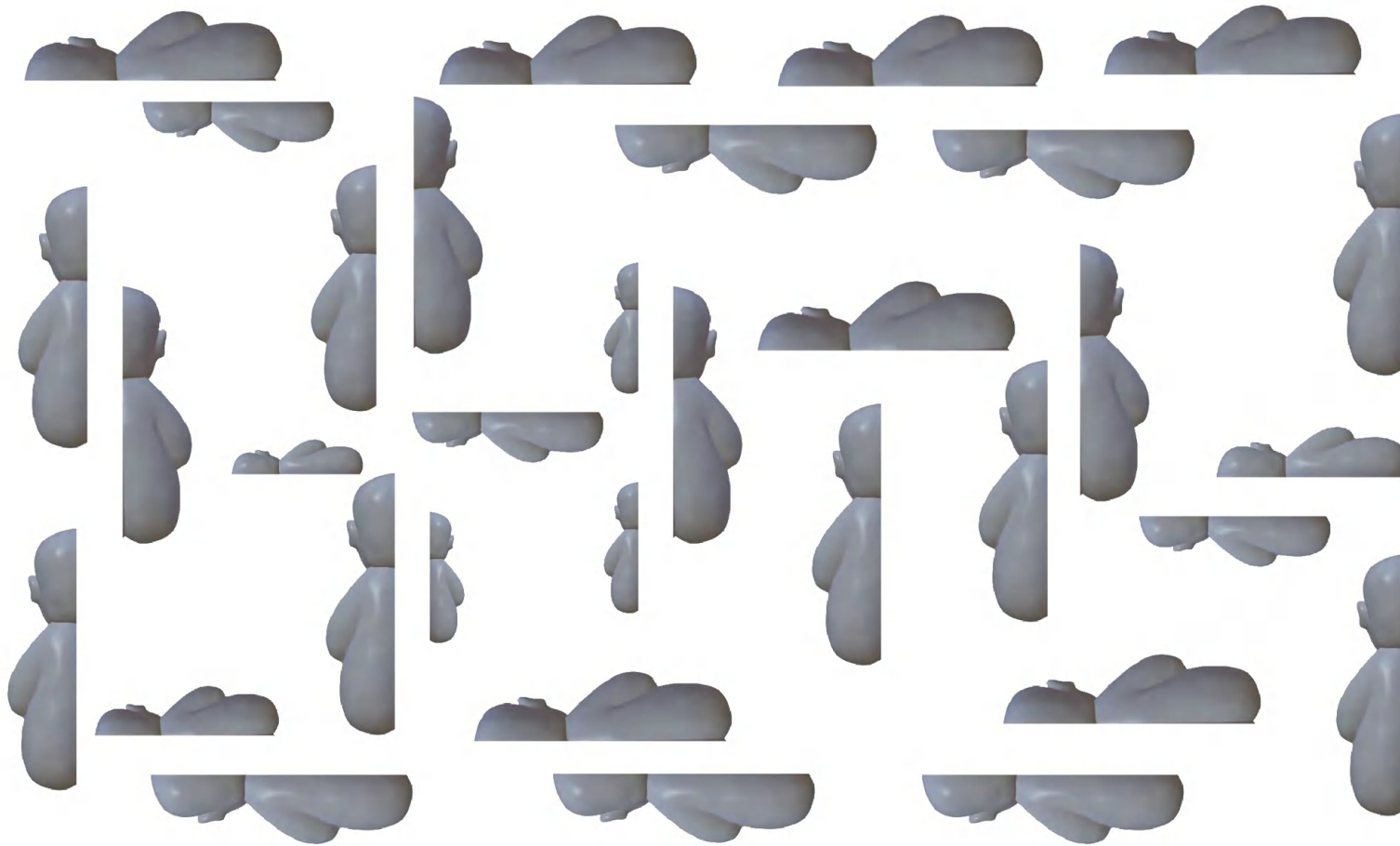


*Xin Liang, Trapped Embryo, plastic bag, epoxy, brooch, 8×10cm, 2020*

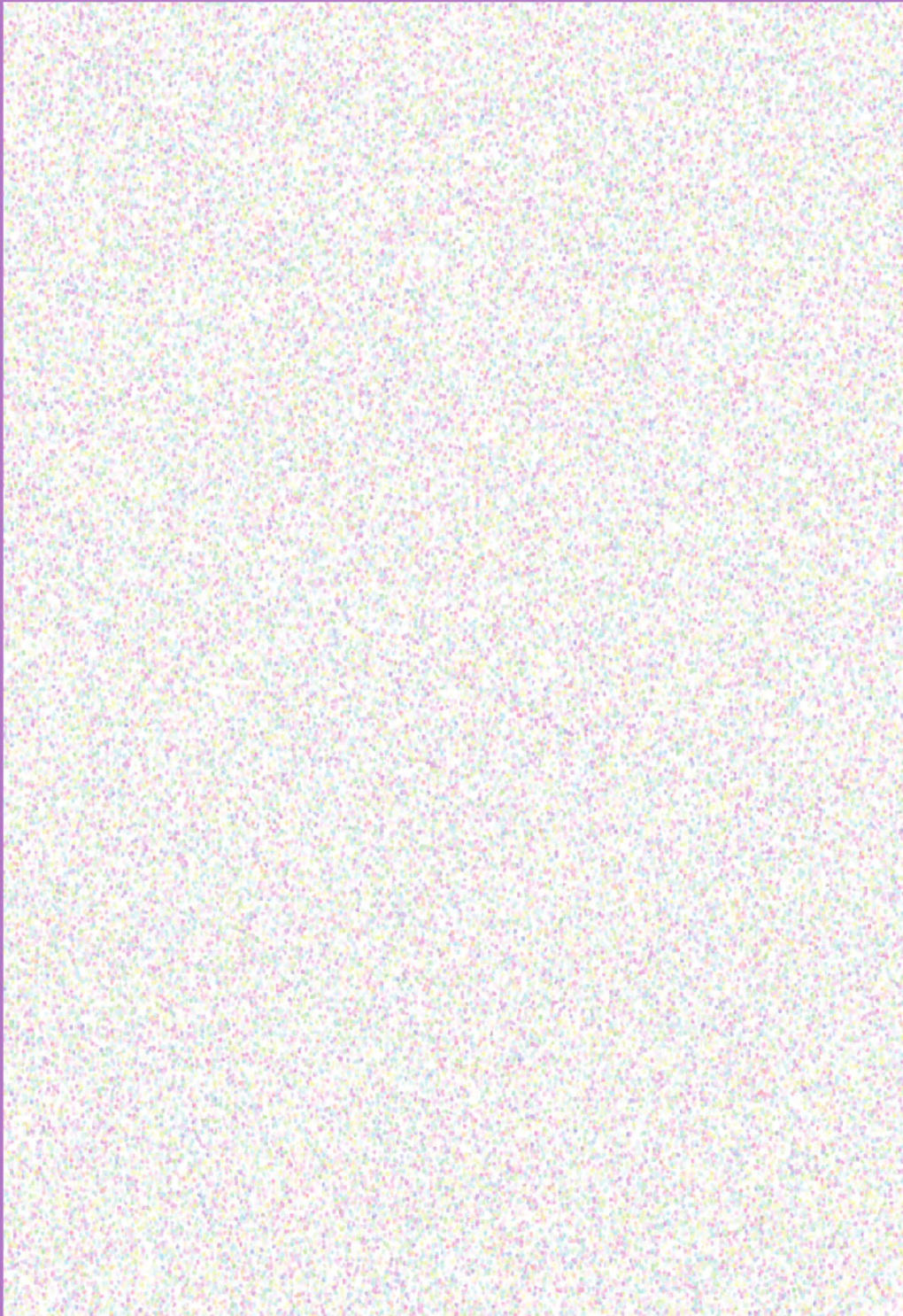


*Individuals make up the frame*

From the baroque picture frame to the exploration of the frame element in the Chinese character 困, both ideographically and visually reflect my relationship between the frame and trapped understanding.



*The stekeh of the Trapped Individuals*



## Notes

1. Artist Wenjing Zhou: "The Opposite of Body," 2020, Wenjing Zhou, SOUHU
2. Xu Bing: Tian's Blockchain Gene, 2021, Ga Yang, FENGHUANG Art
3. The hidden meaning of colours, in art, 2018, Lori Mc-Nee, [www.orimcnee.com](http://www.orimcnee.com)
4. "2020 Report on the State of China's Marine Ecological Environment", 2020, report
5. Chinese character trap, 2018, Xu Bing, Thirteen invitations
6. Baroque art and architecture, The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, BRITANNICA
7. Frameworks: Form, Function and Ornament in European Portrait Frames, 1996, Paul Mitchell; Lynn Roberts
8. Art Education In China: Assembly line for Artists, 2020, Lydia Hong

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