

James Madison University
School of Art, Design and Art History



Yulin Yuan

2024 | **MFA Thesis Catalog**

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MFA THESIS CATALOG

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K(now) W(here) by Yulin Yuan

**LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR,
SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN , AND ART HISTORY
MIKYOUNG LEE**

The Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Arts from the School of Art, Design, and Art History at James Madison University proudly presents Yulin Yuan's grand solo thesis exhibition, "K(now) W(here)," from March 28th through May 4th, 2024. Yulin Yuan is a Chinese South African who grew up and experienced two rich cultures. Her thesis artworks explore her cultural identity through Chinese mythological stories and characters.

Yulin Yuan's installation uniquely blends compelling narratives and various art forms, including mixed media sculptures, digital printings with photography, and films. The intricate layering of imagery, composition, and materials draws attention to the details and ambiguity, creating a thought-provoking experience. Her work, reminiscent of Cindy Sherman and Nancy Graves' approaches, weaves perplexing narratives through the lens of our fundamental human psychology. Yet, it resonates with many of us as immigrants or immigrants' families in the United States and worldwide. The 'K(now) W(here)' exhibition invites us to delve into the complexities of human living and the sense of belonging, leaving us with more questions than answers.

Many faculty, staff, and students' contributions, participation, and support made this successful exhibition possible. I thank Corinne Diop, Director of the MFA program, and the graduate faculty members

for their incredible dedication, mentorship, and teaching. I also would like to thank Beth Hinderliter, Director of Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Arts, and student interns and assistants for their support. I recognize and thank School of Art, Design, and Art History staff members, including Karen Gerard, Halley Conrad, Jeye Jenkins, and Matt Hardwick, for their efforts. I also thank Ruben Graciani, Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Art, for his continuous support.

Finally, I celebrate Yulin Yuan's remarkable artistic journey culminating in the 'K(now) W(here)' exhibition. This significant milestone not only showcases her talent and creativity but also marks a pivotal moment in her career. Congratulations, Yulin, on this outstanding artistic endeavor!

**LETTER FROM THE GRADUATE PROGRAM DIRECTOR
CORINNE DIOP**

Congratulations to Yulin Yuan on her stunning thesis exhibition! How can it be that someone whose personal identity is shaped by being dislocated from China to South Africa in childhood and then navigating a move to the United States can create an environment that is so welcoming and engaging? Viewers are treated to banner-sized photographs on sheer fabric, a multi-panel folding screen with areas of transparency, opaqueness, and overlap, large video projections, sculptures made of repurposed furniture and objects with surfaces ranging from slick and shiny to tufted fibers, and more.

The varied work in the exhibition is unified by Yulin's explorations of Chinese mythological characters that feel oddly familiar even if the stories are not our own. Throughout it all there is a lyrical sense of humor as she interjects herself into the narrative through her appearance in the photographs and videos or through casts of her face and body that become part of the arrangement. Much of her work stems from performance-based work in homes acquaintances have opened for her use; she creates a reenactment of herself as a goddess or other character that is inspired by the available objects that become props and spaces that become stage sets that frame her. The act of making do with what is available rather than what she is used to and her history of trying to fit into cultures she feels outsider to find

vivid expression in this work aptly titled, (K) now(W(her)).

As if a solo exhibition in our large main gallery in Duke Hall is not enough, Yulin also organized two other exhibitions on campus simultaneously. One features her ART 360 Digital Photography student work in a group show, "Sound of Lens: A Photographic Symphony", in The little Gallery Underground in the Music Library and in the other Yulin is the inaugural "featured artist" in the new Micro-Gallery in The Learning Center. This body of work, "EGG of Chaos", is made up of traditionally printed and framed photographs with her artist statement prominently displayed on a screen as a positive example of writing about art.

I extend my deep appreciation to the many graduate faculty in our interdisciplinary program who have been part of Yulin's journey. Most notably, many thanks go to the Thesis Committee Chair, Dymph de Wild, and Thesis Committee members, Beth Hinderliter and Greg Stewart, who provided their unique blend of challenge and encouragement.

Now that we are at the finish line it seems like the three years in our program went by quickly! We look forward to the many accomplishments Yulin's future surely holds.





K (now) W (here)

Classical mythologies were created narratives aimed at addressing the incomprehensible questions of past eras. These narratives reveal partial truths, customs, and deeply held convictions. As a Chinese immigrant, I was raised amidst myths surrounding South Africa, the nation into which I was instructed to assimilate, tales of my ancestral origins, and frequently, myths regarding my own identity. This experience, shared among immigrant families, engendered disruptions reminiscent of glitches within the stream of life. Upon my immigration to South Africa, I wrestled with the challenge of forging an identity, navigating the in-between space of cultural adaptation and the erosion of my heritage.

Through my creative process, I physically and metaphorically assemble narratives using traditional collage techniques, tangible objects, video documentation, and performative acts. In doing so, I assert agency over my immigration narratives, which are also collective. In this exploration, I encourage viewers to appropriate, reinterpret, and heal with me.

01.

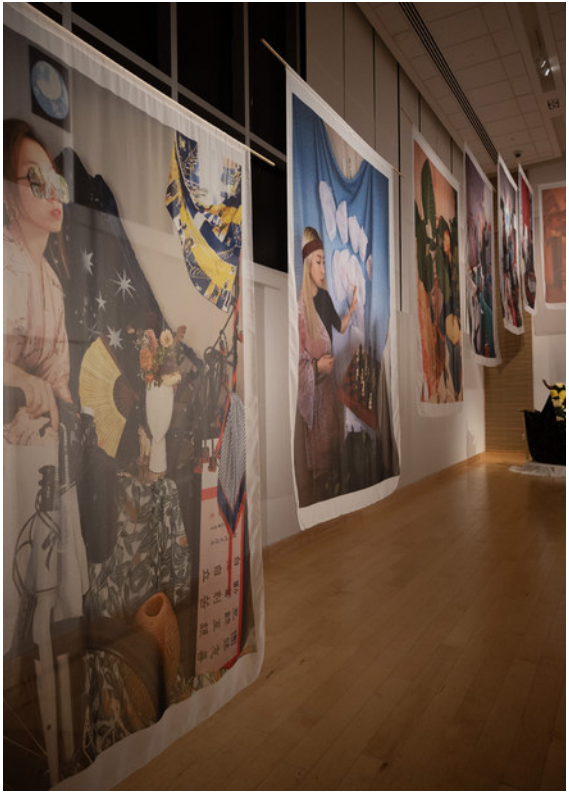
One of the ways I've tried to unravel these layered narratives is by creating moments of mythology in a space where I do not belong. The prints are a series of photographs where I constructed these individual scenes in other people's homes. I restricted myself to using only their furniture, decor, clothing and even animals. Each photograph is a reconstruction of a Chinese mythology.





PHOTOS







鲤跃龙门





02. I've been fusing fragments of my body parts with inanimate furniture and objects. As an act of transformation, the object's utilitarian roles were erased and they take on a new identity, becoming Chinese mythological beings and creatures.

SCULPTURES









BLAOM



BLAOM

The 3 channel projection presents as a scroll. Scrolls do not have folds and breaks, the story continues and you can see the full story at the same time. This work pieces my re-created mythologies into the same world. Looking into rituals of home, nature and environments.









MOON
TRILOGY

This panel installation exists as a book. The story of the moon goddess piqued my interest in various versions of tales and raised questions about the myths surrounding the moon. I assembled this structure on wheels, which can be flipped to either side and layered over itself. Myth creation always has multiple versions, and Chinese mythology evolves with history. The changing narrative over time raises questions about the power within retold stories.







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