

Research Article

An Experiment in the Expressive of The Material Language of Contemporary Sculpture-The Example of the Spiritual Plight of the Elderly Living Alone in China

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Abstract

This study aims to address the psychological state of the elderly who are now living without other family members in contemporary China and attempts to depict their mental burdens through artistic means through exploring the expressive possibilities and applications of sculptural material language. This thesis presents an attempt to exhibit the spiritual issues of China's solitary seniors through a public exhibition and collect feedback from the subjects to judge the material language of conveying meaning. The research topic and its artistic representation were addressed in a comprehensive way, with conclusions made from material experimentation and exhibition responses. The investigation also revealed how these components signified and defined limitations of material language in contemporary sculptural creation and ways of employing materials to articulate psychological dilemmas. The implications of these findings are substantial in relation to how mental health issues are conceptually expressed by contemporary sculpture. This research explores the irreplaceable role and its limitations of material language in modern sculptural art through how materials convey the gravest plight which the elderly suffers from, in addition to expressing the artist's sensitivity, life experience, and creative context.

Keywords: Contemporary Sculpture, Material Experimentation, Language of Materials, Expression, Old People Living Alone, Spiritual Plight

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Introduction

It is estimated that the number of elderly living alone has increased dramatically in China because of urbanization, migration, and changing social norms. This is in line with China's seventh round of national census results in 2021, which showed the population aged 60 and above to be 264.02 million (Ning, 2021), thus 18.70% of the total population. China's Ministry of Civil Affairs reported in January 2020 that China's elderly population living alone now totals more than 60 million (Ministry of Civil Affairs, China, 2022). As a controversial social issue, the spiritual hardships solitary seniors suffer from, such as loneliness, depression, and social isolation, have come to public attention. The Chinese government has put a variety of policies and steps into action to offer social assistance; nevertheless, the spiritual needs of elderly individuals who are living alone are often neglected. It is more insidious for solitary seniors to deal with a spiritual feeling of hardship than with more tangible cohabitation and medical problems and is worthy of attention and research on its own.

As the elderly people who live alone are forced into social isolation to comply with China's epidemic policy, their self-care skills decreased during the New Coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, this population also appeared to be isolated from family and friends, which increased the psychological stress of this population and invited a higher risk of developing several mental disorders (Zhou et al., 2020), including panic, fear, depression, and anxiety (Meng et al., 2020). Nevertheless, research on the senior elderly living on his own in academic studies in China is quite rare, especially studies within the art discipline, which are nearly nonexistent. The spiritual plight of solitary seniors in China should be investigated, as should the artistic expressions and discussions that touch the heart and have resonance.

In contemporary sculpture, the material language has a tremendous capacity for self-expression; the texture of the medium is a vital means of communication. Sculpture's visual language also comprises the materiality of sculpture, the textures and tactile qualities of which medium can be as expressive as form and line in two-dimensional art (Gardner & Kleiner, 2016). By using materials, we can discover more possibilities to communicate different visual and tactile sensations of the sculptures to the audience, with which they could experience more authentically the emotions expressed in the sculptures. The choice and treatment of the material can mean to imbue a sculpture meaning, that is, a way of exploring issues that go beyond the aesthetic field (Taylor, 2017). The exploration of human emotions and socioeconomic issues can also be done through sculptures.

Research Objectives

The significance of this research's choice to focus on elderly women living alone at an advanced age in a Chinese county lies not only in investigating, discovering, and describing the living conditions and spiritual plight of this group but also in exploring the perception of the language of materials in the creation of sculptures expressing spiritual hardship. Additionally, the study aims to experiment with the application of the qualitative nature of materials in the creation of sculptures. Based on the aforementioned, the objectives of this study are expressed as follows.

1. Survey/Design: This study aims to investigate the current situation of elderly women over 80 years old living alone in Minquan County, Shangqiu City, Henan Province, China. The research will examine the psychological plight of these solitary senior women and extract design elements from their experiences.

2. Experiment/Description: Using the key words of the design elements as a foundation, the study will experiment with transforming these elements into the language of materials. The mental dilemmas faced by elderly women living alone will be described through the expressive power of the chosen materials.

3. Display/Feedback: To verify the effectiveness of the material language and the communication of the message, the study will obtain feedback from the audience and stakeholders through an exhibition in a public space.

Research Questions

Based on the aforementioned research background and objectives, the researcher will address the following questions:

1. How can sculptural design elements be extracted from the spiritual plight of the elderly?

2. What is the process of transforming design elements into material language in the creation of sculptures?

3. How can the sculpture receive feedback to validate the use of material language?

These questions will be explored through the process of sculpture creation and material experimentation.

Research Methods

This study employs an integrated research approach with the following research process: literature review - sampling - observation - interview - extraction of elements - experimental protocol - experimental study - results - feedback - updating perceptions.

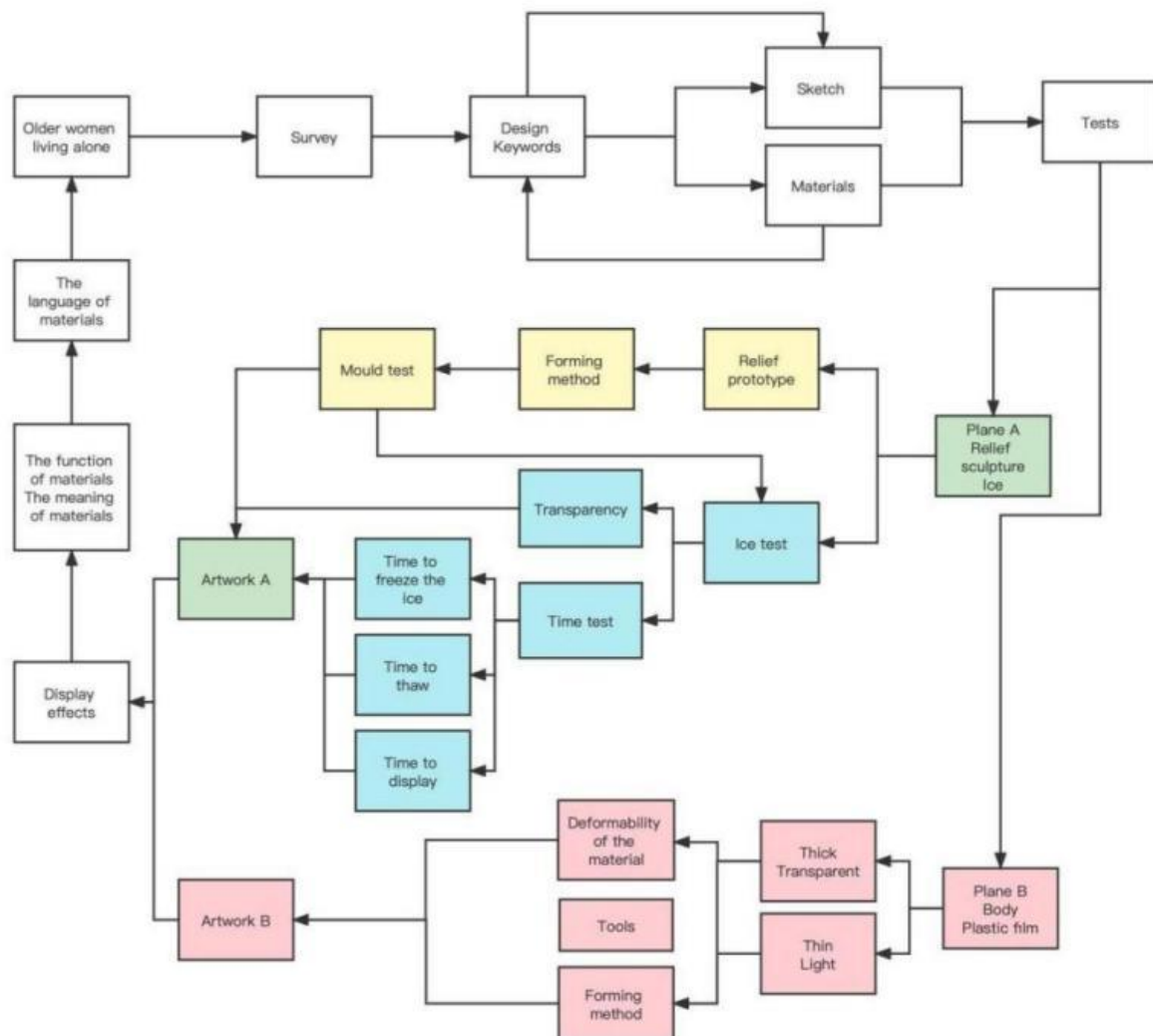


Figure 1 Pathway Map of the Research Process
source: Bei Liu, 2022

This study also incorporates microhistory's research methodology, which involves the investigation of sampled places, people, and times. The experimental process of the sculptural artwork serves as an objective record, while the subjective description of a real person and their authentic state is also considered.

The experimental nature of this study is reflected in the working method, i.e., the use of experimental methods as one's primary approach. The "experimentation" of this research can be expressed as follows: formulating a proposal, hypothesis, and sketch based on the current context and research question; designing the experimental objectives and methods; carrying out experimental work to confirm the hypothesis; and updating the cognition based on the results and feedback to conduct further experiments (ZhiJie Qiu, 2020).

The experimental nature of this research is reflected in the experimental nature of the output as well. The artistic experiments often unconsciously lead to unilateral catharsis and expression for the artist but do not communicate the ideas concisely nor arouse empathy. This research, however, emphasizes substantive experimental results (ZhiJie Qiu, 2020), considering the audience's feelings and feedback-the relationship between experimental outcomes and the falsification of hypotheses-in addition to the experimental nature of the working method.

Participants

In China, the majority of individuals aged 60 and above reside in rural areas rather than large cities (WHO Health Organization, 2016). This study is situated in Minquan County, Henan Province, where life exists somewhere between the glamour of big cities and the impoverishment of the countryside. Minquan County is among over 2,800 counties in China. It is a representative place, located in the central plain of populous Henan Province. Furthermore, one of the researcher's hometowns is in this city; he lived there for such a long period of time, therefore the most familiar and the most convenient county for the researcher to conduct this research.

Considering these factors, this study investigates women over 80 years of age living alone in Minquan County, Shangqiu City, Henan Province, using this group as both the object of sculptural representation and as stakeholders.

Experimental Process and Results

1. From Survey to Design Elements

The research site, a corner park in Minquan County, Henan Province, China, holds personal significance for the researcher. Located across the road from his childhood home, the park's yogurt stall hawking could be heard from the window while he did homework during his youth. Years ago, the park bustled with young people, children, and the elderly, with children being the most numerous. However, in recent years, the researcher noticed a shift, with the park now predominantly occupied by elderly individuals. Before embarking on this research, the researcher, like other hurried young people, merely passed by the park without truly entering and observing its elderly occupants.

The researcher conducted studies over two seasons, summer and winter, throughout 2021. On random days and at various times, the researcher entered the park to walk around, observe, engage in conversations with older people, watch them play chess, sit among them, participate in opera activities, and sometimes simply sit around as some older people do. Many of the elderly individuals frequent the park daily, as if it were their job. The researcher also conducted a one-day follow-up survey of an 80-year-old woman who lived alone, observing and recording her life for an entire day.



Figure 2 Site: Corner Park, Prosperity Square, Minquan County, Henan Province, China.
(A: Observation Study in Winter and Summer B: One-day Follow-up Case Study)
source: Bei Liu, 2022

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Some issues began to strike a theme in unstructured interviews and conversations. Another elderly woman talked about how hard she was trying to stay independent' and how, despite her best efforts, she felt something very much missing in her life—a companion. In a conversation with Insider, she described the feeling of 'hiding prerequisites' to maintain the notion of being weak. Another woman recalled feeling “helpless” thinking back to the times she woke up alone in the morning, wondering if anyone was checking in on her in case anything happened to her. Contrasted with a determination to appear strong whenever in the presence of others. The researcher recorded these key messages in Figure 3A below.

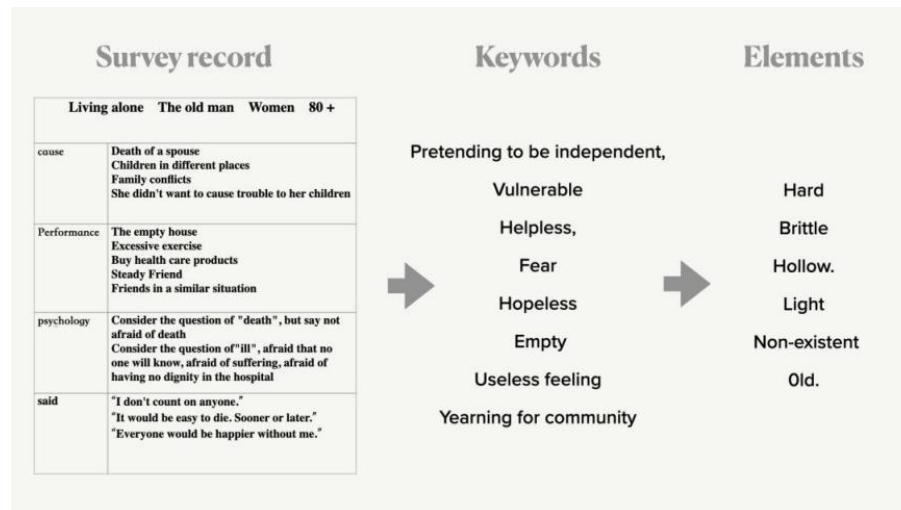


Figure 3 Extraction Process of Design Elements
source: Bei Liu, 2022

From these narratives, a tapestry of emotional states and keywords emerged: In other words, a façade of independence pretending over an insatiable need for companionship, a yearning to belong in stark contrast with the clear necessity to keep feelings of vulnerability at bay, and an insufferable feeling of helplessness, of fear, of emptiness, and the sense of uselessness. These were the bases upon which we built the design. For example, hard brittle materials represented both strength and fragility. Light, fragile, ice and transparent landscapes represented the sense of "emptiness" and "non-existence" and also presented that the elderly were fading in a fast-paced world.

As depicted in Figure 3B-C, these emotive keywords gave rise to specific design elements: hardness, brittleness, emptiness, lightness, non-existence, and age. These elements gave life to these design sketches and informed the material choice for the sculpture, in an attempt to visually call out the internal struggles of elderly women living alone.

2. From Sketch to Prototypes

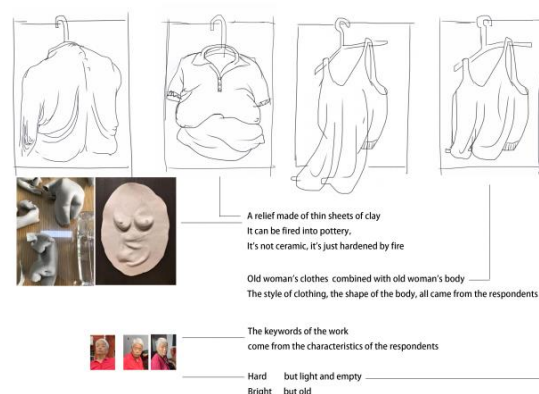


Figure 4 Scheme of Reliefs
source: Bei Liu, 2022

Figure 4 illustrates the researcher's vision: a relief crafted from thin clay sheets, molded to resemble the form of an elderly woman. The final medium chosen for this piece is ice. This frozen sculpture of an aged body, rendered as a thin sheet of ice, embodies hardness, thinness, brittleness, hollowness, and transparency. It is destined to melt until it vanishes entirely. These design choices mirror the mental and emotional characteristics of older women living alone, as uncovered by the researcher's findings.

To bring this concept to life, the researcher first created small prototypes using oil-based modeling clay. With the execution of this process, a unique forming technique of painting and relief work was developed. The technique is to press and curve thin pieces of clay to sculpture the elderly woman's body. The first prototypes, however, hit massive hurdles. Their small dimensions (20-30 cm) proved inadequate for public display. Additionally, the silicone could not be supported by the weight due to soft clay for molding, which led to deformation. To overcome these challenges, the researcher learned to focus on larger prototypes that were, at the same time, thin and stable structure-wise. By persistent experimentation and refinement, the artist was able to craft larger reliefs. Careful attention was paid to controlling the clay's dryness level, striking a delicate balance between hardness and toughness.

Final Prototypes A



Figure 5 Final Prototype of Relief

(A: The back of an elderly woman's body crafted from flaky clay;
B: Another perspective of the elderly woman's back rendered in flaky clay.)
source: Bei Liu, 2022

The culminating prototypes (Figures 5) showcase remarkable artistic and technical prowess, with a primary emphasis on form. While materials play a supporting role, the essence of these pieces remains unaltered even if different media were employed. However, this research delves deeper, exploring the semantics, functionality, and experimental potential of materials. The subsequent material experiments form the crux of this study, presenting both its core focus and its most formidable challenge.

3. Material Experiments

The subsequent phase immersed itself in material experimentation, guided by the poignant keywords "thin," "brittle," and "ignored" unearthed during the survey. Ice emerged as the primary medium for the relief sculptures, chosen for its unique properties: hardness juxtaposed with brittleness, transparency, ephemerality, and its profound capacity to symbolize impermanence and vulnerability. As a comparative counterpoint, transparent resin was prepared, offering an alternative material for experimentation. To bring the ice reliefs to life, silicone molds were meticulously crafted once the clay prototypes had achieved optimal hardness. This process yielded seven distinct molds, each a vessel for frozen artistry.

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Figure 6 Experiments on the transparency of frozen ice with different types of water
 source: Bei Liu, 2022

With the molds complete, the researcher embarked on a series of ice-freezing experiments using a domestic refrigerator. These experiments were categorized into two main areas of inquiry: transparency and freezing time. Figures 6 offer a visual journey through the transparency experiments. The researcher meticulously tested various water types, freezing speeds, and durations to pinpoint the optimal transparency for the design objectives. Figure 6A showcases experiments with different water types: ordinary tap water, purified drinking water, and boiled water. The results were illuminating, revealing that boiled pure drinking water yielded the most desirable transparency. Figure 6B presents fascinating findings on the relationship between freezing speed and ice transparency. When the researcher employed the lowest temperature for rapid freezing, the ice forms required 10 hours to solidify completely. This process resulted in streaks of filamentous crystals, which significantly diminished the ice's transparency. The conclusion was clear: rapid freezing had a detrimental effect on ice clarity, compromising the visual integrity of the sculptures. The researcher meticulously assessed the required freezing duration for molds of varying relief shapes, as illustrated in Figure 6C. Five of the swifter molds necessitated over 19 hours for complete solidification, while two deeper molds demanded more than 24 hours. These durations represent the minimum freezing times under the given experimental conditions. For future pieces, the researcher recommends extending the freezing time to enhance the ice's hardness and structural integrity.

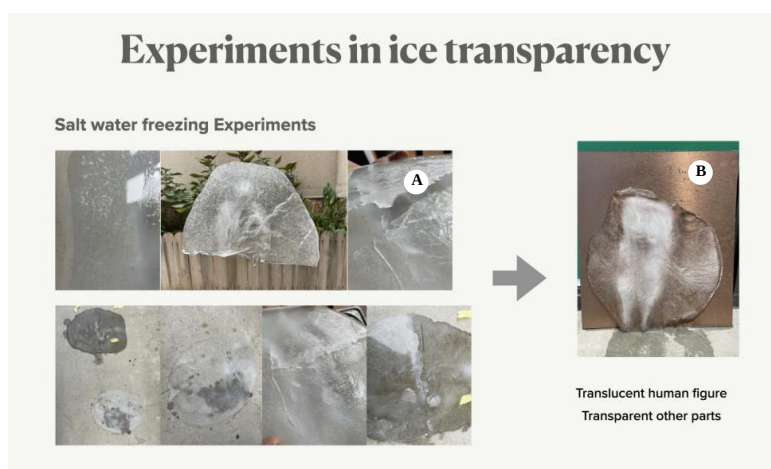


Figure 7 Experiment Using Salt Water to Freeze Ice,
 (A: High brine ratio resulting in non-freezing; B: The optimal salt water ratio)
 source: Bei Liu, 2022

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In a quest for innovation, the researchers ventured into experimenting with a special water composition: boiled pure water mixed with salt. This unique blend aimed to decelerate the ice cubes' melting process, thereby prolonging the display duration. The salt-to-water ratio was derived from online references. While initial attempts proved unsuccessful, these failures sparked a novel approach. The researcher ingeniously poured saltwater into the human-shaped section of the mold, placing it in the freezer for several hours. This technique yielded a partially solidified, yet still pliable, human-shaped ice form. The remaining mold space was then filled with boiled, cooled, pure water. The result, showcased on the right in Figure 7, marked the researcher's first triumph using this technique. The outcome was a clear, translucent human form set against a transparent background. Intriguingly, subsequent experiments failed to replicate the perfection of this initial piece. This serendipitous success underscored the unpredictable nature of artistic experimentation, where chance sometimes yields more remarkable results than deliberate attempts.



Figure 8 Experiment on the Melting Time at a Fixed Time,
(A: Rapid ice melting outdoors at midday; B: Ice melting in the morning; C: Ice melting in the evening)
source: Bei Liu, 2022



Figure 9 Experiment on the Melting Time of Different Ice Floats at Various Times of the Day,
(A: Visual effects of ice in the morning; B: Visual effects of ice at noon; C: Visual effects of ice before dusk)
source: Bei Liu, 2022

The second category of experiments centered on melting time. As depicted in Figure 8, the researcher placed an ice work outdoors at midday, only to witness its dissolution within a mere half hour—a disheartening outcome. The researcher refroze the pieces and conducted further experiments on melting times at various points throughout the day. Photographs of the ice pieces were captured from sunrise to sunset, aiming to strike a balance between extended melting time and optimal visual display. The photographs in Figure 9 reveal that

the ice appeared most visually striking at midday and sunset. However, experimental records indicated that the ice endured longest in the early morning hours, just after dawn.

Drawing from these meticulous experiments and observations, the researcher scheduled the display for an August evening, post-dinner. This decision was informed by the visual effects observed in recorded photographs and videos, as well as detailed experimental notes. The ice reliefs graced the park for a total of 3 hours and 20 minutes, measured from the moment of hanging until the final piece succumbed to complete liquefaction.

Through persistent experimentation, the researcher successfully extended the melting time of the ice floats from a mere half hour to over 3 hours. This journey, however, was fraught with challenges: insufficient transparency, improper freezing due to incorrect brine ratios, cracking during demolding, surface crystallization from over-freezing, suspension ropes detaching from the ice, and physical damage from impacts. Over a span of three months, the researchers conducted exhaustive experiments with the ice material. These efforts culminated in the creation of eight ice reliefs for outdoor exhibition and three captivating videos documenting the melting process, filmed within the confines of the studio.

3. Outcome and Exhibition

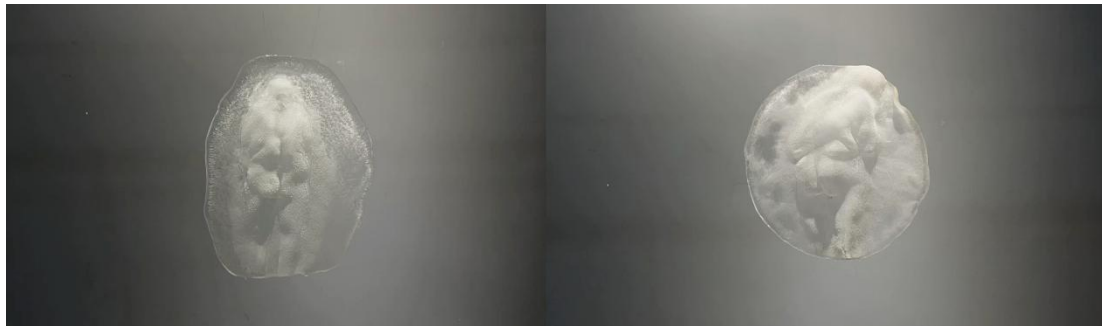


Figure 10 Research Outcome: Video of the Ice Relief Melting Process.
source: Bei Liu, 2022

Figures 10 showcase the captivating video works that delve into the physical state of older women's bodies. These pieces employ ice as their medium, crafting delicate, flaky reliefs. The videos meticulously document the gradual melting process, each capturing a three-hour transformation condensed into mere seconds, offering a poignant metaphor for the passage of time and the fragility of human existence.



Figure 11 Exhibition Scene of the Results
source: Bei Liu, 2022

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The researcher brought the experimental results full circle by exhibiting the ice reliefs in the very park where the preliminary investigations took place. This exhibition served a dual purpose: it not only showcased the artistic outcomes but also functioned as a living experiment, where its research findings were being tested and its initial questions and hypotheses were being validated.

In the park, eight pieces were exhibited; six fell off during this, and only six ice reliefs were brought to completion. Many people were here while the researcher was setting up the exhibition. Here all of the old people that had gathered in twos and threes in various places to discuss matters of state came, and they were all old people. It was very lively; the researchers gave ideas, guidance, comments, and questions. The researcher asked one old man, "Uncle, what are all the old men doing here?" "My wife still hasn't even brushed the dishes at this hour!" He said. Also to be true, after 7 p.m., the park is filled up with elderly women.



Figure 12 Exhibition,
(A:Ice work in natural light in the park, B: Ice work in the park at sunset and in the light)
source: Bei Liu, 2022

As depicted in Figures 12, on the evening of August 18, 2022, from 6:20 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., these ice floats underwent a mesmerizing transformation. The journey took over three hours, and they experienced the natural illumination of natural light, sunset lighting, and artificial lighting of park lights.

During the experiment and exhibition, several moments deeply moved the researcher. The gentle sound of water dripping onto the ground, the gradual melting and morphing of the ice, the darkening sky, and the eventual disappearance of all traces created a profound sensory experience. The ground slowly returned to its original state; just like life itself, everything seemed the same as it always was.

This is a deeper fear that many older people have. It is not just that they're afraid of dying. They are more afraid of being forgotten. When nobody knows about a person anymore, the person's gone. "Of course, the world will no longer have my involvement, but no one is ever going to even think of me again." And in fact, that day will always arrive.

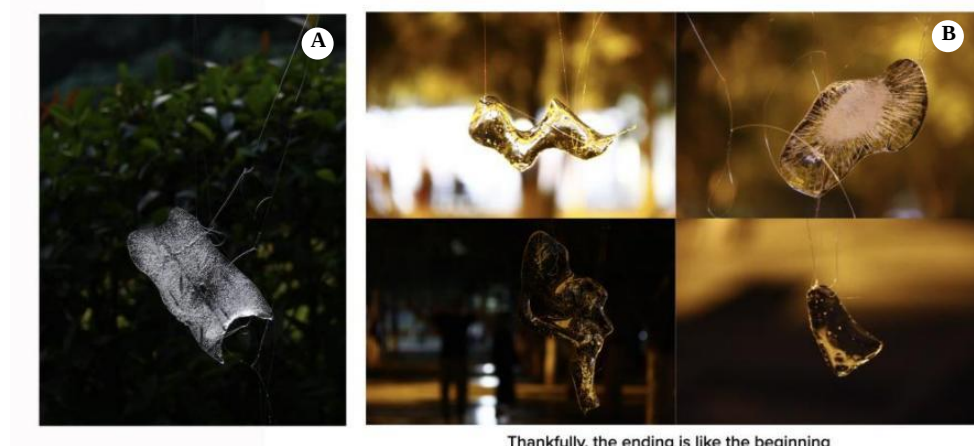


Figure 13 The Final Look of the Ice Relief under the Lights.
(A:Ice relief being blown by the wind in late melt; B: Embryonic-like ice)
source: Bei Liu, 2022

Figure 13A captures the poignant moment of the very last part of the experiment. A very delicate piece of ice that still possesses most of his melting journey dances in the warm breeze. The ice form is fragile and looks like a kite, tethered on an almost nonexistent thread, spinning and swaying at unpredictable places. This surrealistic scene is a metaphor for how the life of the elderly living alone is so unstable. Their lives are as easy to influence, as susceptible to the ways of external factors, and as quickly changeable as an ice sculpture. In Figure 13B, we see the last stage of ice melting in the park lights. The researcher observed at that moment how melted ice looked like embryos, the warmth from the lights gave a sense of being in the womb, the primordial form of life. In this manner, 'end' of the ice is also its 'beginning', if you will, referring to the cycle of life.

Conclusion

1. The Importance and Constraints of Material Language in Contemporary Sculpture

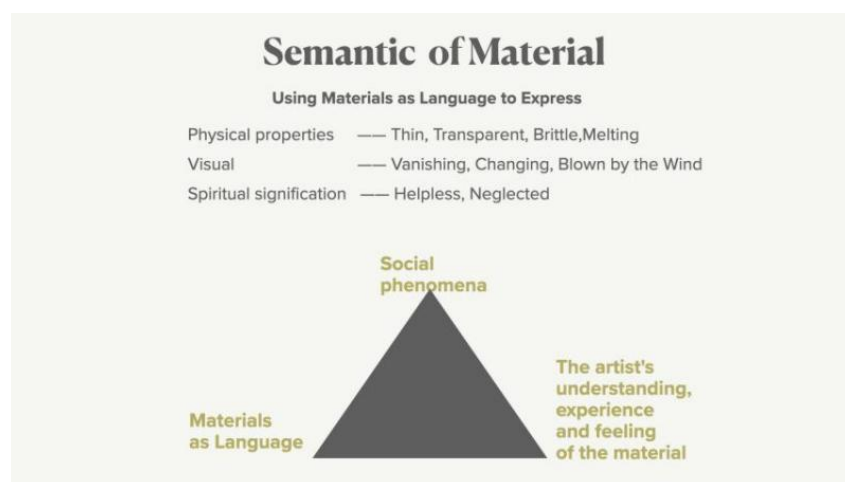


Figure 14 A Triangular Stable Relationship about Issues, Material and Artist
source: Bei Liu, 2022

For this groundbreaking study, material repositions itself away from its well-known traditional use, transformed into the primary means of expression. The inherent properties of the material are superior to sculptural form alone; they are in fact the subjects that express profound spiritual content. When harnessed as a language, material delivers the first and most immediate message to the viewer.

While artists increasingly value and utilize the cultural properties and symbolic language of materials, the researcher emphasizes the significance of material's innate qualities- those untouched by human intervention. Artwork is dictated by the visual context of these natural properties. Through the course of the material experiments in this project, the researcher privately anticipated and actually deployed ice's transparency, ephemerality, and fragility. These characteristics were a powerful semantic tie to the helplessness, disregard, vulnerability, and deeper existential fears accompanying old age. The artist's perceived understanding gives a material its true value. There are multiple considerations once materials become aesthetic objects. In everything from aesthetics to the choice of material to how the artist cognitively interprets the properties of the material to the way in which experiential feelings are communicated and atmosphere created, all of these factors greatly impact the finished impact of the art.

Choosing material presents the most formidable problem that artists encounter when using material as a medium of expression. The creator's life context and circumstances are inexorably bound up with the relationship between subject matter and material. The application of any material by an artist is necessarily limited by the life experiences that inform them. According to Billy Lee, an artist professor at the University of North Carolina, he treats the term 'sensitivity' as an artist's awareness of materials. Included as part of this sensitivity is an aesthetic intuition as well as physical properties and developmental logic awareness. While

material properties can be taught, intuitive perceptions cannot be taught through instruction alone, in Lee's emphasis on the material's spiritual elements and its visual connotations (XiaoJun, 2021).

A sculpture artist must have sensitivity, associative thinking, critical analysis, and imagination as professional prerequisites. Material and subject matter are deeply related to the creator's life background and his living conditions. These elements implicitly affect the artist's senses and consequently lead them into a particular material that would best match this vision. Furthermore, subject and material do not enjoy an absolute hierarchy between them; their connection is one of mutual influence and enmeshing.

This research clarifies the massive importance of and the inherent constraints on the material language of contemporary sculpture. This also shows a stable, triangular relationship between the artistic problem, the material in question, and the one who realizes it, the artist.

2. The Spiritual Plight of Older People as Expressed Using Language in Materials

In order to extract the sculptural design elements from the spiritual dilemmas of the elderly, a profound knowledge of their lives, feelings, and environment is necessary. Consequently, one must know about the social and cultural environment that molds their experiences. Examples of research subjects are collected through surveys and fieldwork. By interviewing the older people and seeing where they live and how they spend their day, we can get insights to their psychological needs and behavioral patterns. All of these are concrete, tangible examples of the things that these buildings have been and could be; the foundation from which these can be used to help inform and inspire the design process.

This involved the careful examination of the life histories, spiritual needs, and emotional expressions of the study participants in order to extract keywords and design elements from the collected examples. The elements of loneliness, isolation, loss, and longing—so common to the lives of older people—are made identifiable and can be incorporated into the design. Moreover, the characteristics of the physical elderly can also provide numerous design elements.

In sculpture, then, the translation from design element into material language is often engaging backwards from the concrete to the abstract, and the product is seldom considered beautiful. Elements from a concept, theme, emotion, etc. may be abstracted and have to be reflected concretely in the language of the material.

In the process of transformation, the artist has to consider aspects of the physical properties of the material chosen, the language of the material itself, and its aesthetic, and in this design, make a work from the three design elements selected above. In the course of transformation, the artist needs to experiment with the potential and limitations of the material language in order to better translate its design elements into concrete sculptural works. Through experimentation, the artist can uncover new materials and new ways of using material language to make more powerful works.

There are many ways to obtain feedback on a sculpture, and exhibitions are an important way of getting feedback on a sculpture. Artists can get feedback by showing an audience their work and by communicating with and interacting with an audience. The audience can provide information on the use of material language and aesthetic, technical, emotional, and conceptual aspects of the work itself. We can understand the expressive effect and expressive meaning of the work based on the feedback, understand the audience's feelings and reactions, further optimize and adjust the material language of the work, present the spiritual predicament of the research subjects, and draw the attention and thought of society.

3. Limitations

This research tries to gather feedback from the audience and stakeholders through a public exhibition, but it did not completely reflect in the study results. The artworks were exhibited; however, no structured tools such as surveys or interviews were used to systematically gather the audience's response or feedback on the material language and the message. Thus, this study leaves the reactions of the exhibition visitors undocumented. This, however, poses a limitation on which research with a more robust methodology will be necessary in the future. Post-exhibition interviews, questionnaires, or interactive sessions could be implemented to gain important insights into whether the material language was effective and whether the communicative impact of the material language was effective. The gathering of this feedback provides researchers with further validation of the design elements and their societal relevance to strengthen the overall findings of the study.

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