

Pieces of the Puzzle

by

Carolyn Spillane

Submitted to the School of Art+Design, Purchase College  
State University of New York

in partial fulfillment of the degree of Bachelor of Science in Visual Art

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Sponsor: Stephen Maine  
Second reader: Dr. Renqiu Yu

## Pieces of the Puzzle

All my life I have been interested in art. I don't just make art, I create it. I create art because it allows me to express myself when words simply cannot. It is a part of my identity. At SUNY Purchase I have been fortunate to receive a background in art history, theory, and techniques. I have benefited from both critiques by professors and working collaboratively with my peers. Majoring in Visual Arts has helped me grow in a multitude of ways. I have especially become more reflective. Making art allows me to ask questions and interpret meaning. Creating art has inspired me to think about my heritage as a transracial adoptee.

I was born in China in 1997 during the era of the One Child Policy. At that time the Chinese government only allowed families to have one child for economic reasons. Due to overpopulation, China could not support larger families. Sons were preferred because a son supports his parents in their old age. As was the case with many other girls, when I was a few days old my birth parents abandoned me at a government building. I was found and brought to an orphanage. Several months later I was adopted by an American couple. I grew up in Westchester County. My parents did not focus on our cultural differences. To them I was just their daughter. However, outside my family and close friends, people saw me as Chinese. I soon learned that the world saw me as Chinese and I needed to be prepared to accept and respond to that reality.

I am proud of my nationality as a Chinese American. I have chosen to learn more about Chinese culture. I have taken several Chinese History and Cinema classes at SUNY Purchase. I have also read books, listened to lectures, visited museums, and joined Chinese adoption groups as both a mentee and a mentor. This exposure provides inspiration for my work. I am fascinated by how creative I can be when I am working in different mediums. The mediums I had the

opportunity to work with here are acrylic paints, found objects, archival pieces, and digital media.

My artwork sometimes does not come out as I planned and I am fine with that. This is just how life works. You have to work with the unexpected. Sometimes the results are better than anticipated. Other times you need to change course.

I have completed my *Yellow Reflection*. I was not originally planning a self portrait for my senior project. However, because of recent events in my life, I took the time to reflect and ask questions. How do I see myself? How do others see me? My definition of a self portrait is the artist is telling the viewer how the artist wants to be seen. A person has a lot of latitude in self-portrayal. My acrylic *Yellow Reflection* measures 20 by 16 inches. When drawing and painting a self portrait, I actually like to draw a three quarter view. I chose to paint a forward view as I felt this is the best way to portray vulnerability. I used a combination of red, white and green acrylics to get the desired skin tone. Then, I mixed dark brown and a hint of black to get the hair color. I used a lighter brown to paint almond shaped eyes. The reason is to bring in authenticity. At first, I chose to keep the background abstract and ambiguous. Then I changed it to a green background that added substance and meaning. I created a bamboo forest and kept the rough background. The peeling paint reminded me of the texture of bamboo. I was inspired by the artist Frida Kahlo. Although she was Mexican, not Chinese, I could relate to her folk style and her use of nature and cultural artifacts in her self portraits.

In *Figures*, I purposely created ambiguity. The landscape is a gray tint with sweeping brush strokes that reminded me of a sonogram. In the foreground are a baby and two adult figures seen from behind. One adult is holding the baby's arm and the other has a hand on the

baby's back. I painted their arms with a skin color tone that could be interpreted as either the birth parents or the adoptive parents. In the background are two silhouette figures. The four figures and child represents the reality of adoption. Some adoptees choose to seek out more information about their birth family, others do not. I was inspired by silhouettes I have seen at my grandparents home of my mother and her siblings. The artist is unknown.

*The Eight Documents* represent my Chinese birth certificate, abandonment papers and adoption papers. Four of the documents are in Mandarin and were translated to English. This was the official paperwork regarding my life in China. I chose to enlarge the documents from 11 by 8 inches printer paper to 32 by 23 and a quarter inches poster size for display purposes. Although there are still missing pieces of the puzzle, I have been able to collect and display some important pieces. Enlarging the documents was inspired by a documentary film *One Child Nation* where the Chinese orphanages publicized photographs of abandoned children before making them available for international adoption. I thought I knew all there was to know about adoption in China and the reason for the One Child Policy. *One Child Nation* opened my eyes. The director, Nanfu Wong, interviewed people in China who had given up children for adoption. Their stories were moving. Many families said they did not have a choice, the children were taken by force.

*Child* is a photograph that I enlarged. It was taken when I was approximately two years old. It is a 2 and a half by 3 and a half inches wallet size photograph that I enlarged to 32 by 23 and a quarter inch poster size. This size is more effective for display purposes. I also used a stage lamp to shine brightly on the photograph. The angle of my face and the light shining directly on it symbolizes hope and a new start. I tried doing this with an 8 by 10 inches photograph but it did

not have the same effect. The light overpowered the photograph because it did not focus on the face.

Writing *Open Letter to My Birth Mother* was also not originally planned. As I continued to work on this project I thought about the many possible scenarios that may have taken place. I have always had questions about my past, but I began to wonder more about my origins. I wrote a letter to my birth mother on 5 by 8 inches in paper because I wanted her to know that I was raised in a loving home and had many wonderful opportunities. I wanted to thank her for making sure that I got to a safe place and was adopted. At this difficult time of COVID-19, I especially could not help but wonder if she and my family in China were well. I chose not to enlarge the letter because I wanted it to remain personal and authentic.

*Take One and Leave the Wrapper* is a found object. I located a used full-size brown wooden crib. The crib symbolizes my childhood in China. I placed a ceramic bowl of White Rabbit candy in the center of the crib. This candy is a vanilla taffy wrapped in a red, white, and blue, like a tootsie roll. It symbolizes childhood in China. The title for this piece instructs the viewer to actually take a piece of candy. During Chinese New Year, I attended Chinese New Year celebrations hosted by families with children from China. I was given White Rabbit candy with a traditional red envelope containing a dollar bill. I was always more interested in the candy. I was inspired by Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* Gonzalez-Torres used pieces of candy in his artwork and allowed viewers to take the candy with them.

*Yellow Red White and Blue* is a mixed media work. The background is red acrylic on canvas. I chose red because it is a color of the American flag and the Chinese flag. I wanted to

create a piece where I could merge my Chinese and American heritages using images associated with the two cultures: Chinese flag, American flag, Mao Zedong and the Communist Party, the Statue of Liberty, a panda bear, and Chinese lucky cat. I was inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's silkscreens and his use of symbols and colors creating abstract expressionism. I created this as a final piece during the fall semester.

In *Landscapes* I painted a traditional Chinese scene. I used watered down black acrylic paint on canvas to mimic ink. I used canvas as my scroll because I wanted the size to be large to show the size of the landmasses. I also like the natural cream color as the ground for the black paint. I was inspired by the design of a chop my parents bought for me when they traveled to China to adopt me. A chop is a stamp with an imprint on the bottom. The stamp shows both my American and Chinese names which represent my two cultures. It can be used to seal letters, documents, and scrolls. Scenes of landscape and mountains are carved on each of the four sides of my chop. These four scenes were the inspiration for *Green Mountain Perch*. The title is from a famous Chinese poem written by Li Bai.

<p>“問余何事(意)棲碧山, 笑而不答心自閒。 桃花流水杳然去; 別有天地非人間。”</p>	<p>“You ask me why I live in the blue-green mountains; I smile and do not answer , my heart at leisure. Peach blossom on flowing water goes distantly; this is not heaven nor earth, nor the place of people.”</p>
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I have especially enjoyed creating this piece because it was a new challenge for me. It is not easy to correct errors when using acrylics on canvas for a Chinese painting because once you make a mark you cannot erase or cover it up. I was very pleased with the outcome of my piece.

*Welcome Little Cuz* was a welcome gift that I received from my 10 year old cousin when I arrived from China. It is an archival piece. The poster has the referral photo that my adoptive

parents received before they traveled to China to bring me home and four groups of pink and blue ribbon. I have saved this poster for twenty years. It is very special to me because of the memories it holds.

This project has allowed me to explore, analyze, and reflect on a deeper level as to how I visualize my identity as a Chinese adoptee. It has also provided me with the opportunity to think about how the world sees me. I have learned a lot and grown over the course of my undergraduate education as a Visual Arts Major at SUNY Purchase. I credit all my professors for my success. They taught me and pushed me to do my best. Many gave me tremendous support with their critiques. I am now able to take that knowledge to further my art career.

## Bibliography

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*Self* (2020)  
Acrylic  
20 x 16 inches

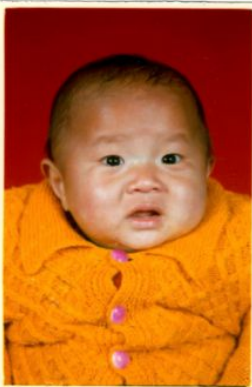


*Figures* (2020)  
Acrylic  
15 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 20 inches

## 弃婴来源情况公证书

(98)皖合证外民字第8886号

根据肥东县社会福利院出具的证明，兹证明钱东珠（女，一九九七年八月十日出生）于一九九七年八月十日在安徽省肥东县民政局被捡拾，由安徽省肥东县公安局撮镇派出所查找其亲生父母而无下落，送至肥东县社会福利院抚养。



中华人民共和国安徽省合肥市公证处

公 证 员 朱自全



IXVI00341157

NOTARIAL CERTIFICATE OF SOURCE OF ABANDONED INFANT

(Translation)

(98)HF,Min,Zi,No.8886

According to the certificate offered by the Social Welfare Institution of Feidong County, this is to certify that Qian Dongzhu (female, born on Aug. 10, 1997) was found to be abandoned at Feidong Civil Affairs Bureau of Anhui Province on Aug. 10, 1997. The infant was sent to the Social Welfare Institution of Feidong County by Cuozen Police Substation of Feidong Public Security Bureau. So far her biological parents still can not be found out.

Notary: Zhu Ziquan (Signature)

Hefei Notary Public Office (Stamp)

Anhui Province

The People's Republic of China

Sept. 1, 1998

IX VII 00341181

Eight documents [2/8]

Print

32 x 23 ¼ inches

证 明 书

(98)皖合证外民字第8887号

兹证明前面的(98)皖合证外民字第8886号《弃婴来源情况公证书》的英文译本内容与该公证书中文原本相符。

中华人民共和国安徽省合肥市公证处

公 证 员 朱自全

肥  
一九九八年九月六日  
公 证 处

DX VII 00341154

Eight documents [3/8]

Print

32 x 23 ¼ inches

CERTIFICATE

(Translation)

(98)HF,Min,Zi,No.8887

This is to certify that the preceding English translation of Notarial Certificate of Source of Abandoned Infant (98)HF, Min,Zi,No.8886 is in conformity with its original Chinese copy.

Notary: Zhu Ziquan (Signature)

Hefei Notary Public Office (Stamp)

Anhui Province

The People's Republic of China

Sept. 1, 1998

IX VII 00341178

Eight documents [4/8]

Print

32 x 23 ¼ inches

## 收养公证书

(98)皖合证外民字第8882号

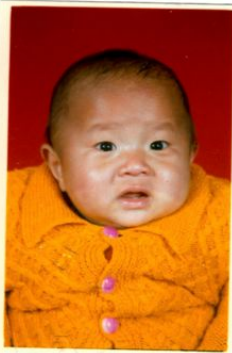
收养人：特伦斯·迈克尔·斯皮兰，男，一九五五年十二月一日出生，现住美国纽约州纽约市东20街400号公寓5F。

玛丽·安·邓利维·斯皮兰，女，一九五六年七月三十日出生，现住美国纽约州纽约市东20街400号公寓5F。

被收养人：钱东珠，女，一九九七年八月十日出生，现住安徽省肥东县社会福利院。

送养人：姚昌伦，男，一九五一年十月四日出生，现任安徽省肥东县社会福利院院长，住安徽省肥东县桥头集福利路2号。

兹证明收养人特伦斯·迈克尔·斯皮兰、玛丽·安·邓利维·斯皮兰与钱东珠的监护人肥东县社会福利院院长姚昌伦商定，特伦斯·迈克尔·斯皮兰、玛丽·安·邓利维·斯皮兰夫妇收养钱东珠为养女，特伦斯·迈克尔·斯皮兰、玛丽·安·邓利维·斯皮兰为钱东珠的养父母。钱东珠改名为卡罗琳·珠·斯皮兰。其收养关系自公证证明之日起成立。



中华人民共和国安徽省合肥市公证处

公 证 员

朱自金

一九九八年九月一日

肥  
公 证 处

IX VII 00341170

Eight documents [5/8]

Print

32 x 23 1/4 inches

NOTARIAL CERTIFICATE OF ADOPTION

(Translation)

(98)HF,Min,Zi,No.8882

Adoptive parents: Terence Michael Spillane, male, born on Dec. 1, 1955, now residing at 400 East 20th Street, New York, New York, USA.

Mary Ann Dunleavy Spillane, female, born on July 30, 1956, now residing at 400 East 20th Street, New York, New York, USA.

Adopted person: Qian Dongzhu, female, born on Aug. 10, 1997, now residing at the Social Welfare Institution of Feidong County, Anhui Province.

Guardian: Yao Changlun, male, born on Oct. 4, 1951, Director of the Social Welfare Institution of Feidong County, now residing at 2 Fuli Road, Qiaotou Town, Feidong County, Anhui Province.

This is to certify that Terence Michael Spillane and Mary Ann Dunleavy Spillane and Yao Changlun, Director of the Social Welfare Institution of Feidong County, have reached the agreement that Terence Michael Spillane and Mary Ann Dunleavy Spillane adopted Qian Dongzhu as their adoptive daughter. The adoptive relationship is established on this date when Notarial Certificate of Adoption takes effect. Terence Michael Spillane and Mary Ann Dunleavy Spillane are now Qian Dongzhu's adoptive parents. Qian Dongzhu's name is changed as Carolyn Zhu Spillane.

Notary: Zhu Ziquan (Signature)

Hefei Notary Public Office (Stamp)

Anhui Province

The People's Republic of China

Sept. 1, 1998

EX VIT00341194

Eight documents [6/8]

Print

32 x 23 ¼ inches

**SPENCE & CHAPIN**  
SERVICE AND CARING SINCE 1908

Schedule for Group #28 in China

- \* Thursday, August 27, 1998 Leave New York City
  - Saturday, August 29, 1998 Arrive Beijing (via Seoul, Korea)
  - Sunday, August 30, 1998 Day of Sightseeing (Great Wall, Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square)
  - \* Monday, August 31, 1998 Fly to Hefei
  - Tuesday, September 1, 1998 Meet babies do Notarization & Registration
  - Wednesday, Thursday & Friday, September 2, 3, & 4, 1998 Quiet days of local sightseeing and shopping and enjoying the babies.
  - Saturday, September 5, 1998 Receive Babies' papers & passports
  - \* Sunday, September 6, 1998 Fly to Guangzhou
  - Monday, September 7, 1998 Do Visa Medical
  - Tuesday, September 8, 1998 Do Visa Interview at US Consulate
  - Wednesday, September 9, 1998 Receive Visas
  - \* Thursday, September 10, 1998 Fly Home!
- |   |    |
|---|----|
| F | 11 |
| S | 12 |
| S | 13 |
| m | 14 |

In Beijing Hotel is Gloria Plaza  
Phone 011-86-10-6515

In Hefei the hotel is Golden Anhui Hotel  
Phone 011-86-551-261-6888

In Guangzhou the hotel White Swan Hotel  
Phone 011-86-20-8188-6968  
John 1 203-270 9935

Spence Contact is Flicia Van Praag

Jim 1-973 701 1305



AGREEMENT FOLLOWING A CHINESE ADOPTION

We, Terence Spillane and Mary Ann Dunleavy Spillane, husband and wife, residing at: 522 East 20th Street, # 11E, New York, New York 10009, agree as follows:

That we have, under the sponsorship of Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children, legally adopted a female child named QIAN, Dong Zhu, born on August 10, 1997 in China. She was legally adopted in China on September 1, 1998 by both of us and is now known as Carolyn Zhu Spillane.

That we agree to meet with our social worker for office visits at the end of six and twelve months post-placement and provide the agency with updated pictures of our child so that progress reports can be written by our social worker for the China Center of Adoption Affairs.

That we understand that the United States Government considers this a final adoption as we both went to China and went through the adoption process there. That it is our responsibility to take steps necessary to obtain citizenship for our child in a timely manner.

That we further agree that Spence-Chapin Services will offer post placement services to our family. That these services will be focused on helping with the adjustment of this child into my family and thinking about the adoption issues that our child and we will face in the future.

Terence Spillane

Mary Ann Dunleavy Spillane

Spence-Chapin Services to  
Families and Children

by Muri Robinson

Title Adoption Specialist

on 10/8/98

Date of Entry: September 10, 1998  
 Alien Registration # : A46865848  
 Port of Departure: Guangzhou, China via Hong Kong via Seoul  
 Port of Entry: New York  
 Airline & Flight #: Asiana 3365; 2220

Eight documents [8/8]

Print

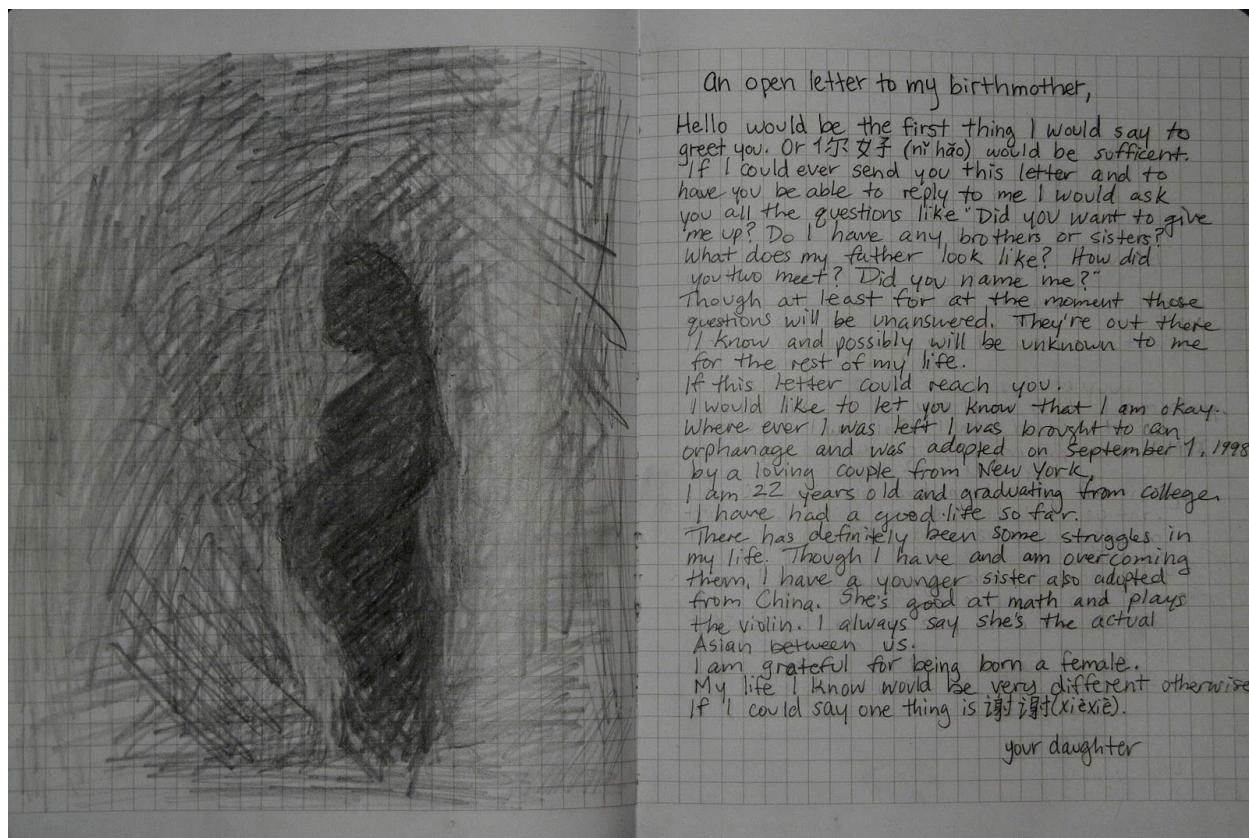
32 x 23 ¼ inches



Scene from *One Child Nation* Documentary



*Child* (2019)  
Print  
32 x 23 ¼ inches



*Open Letter to my Birth Mother (2020)*

Grid paper  
6 x 8 inches



*Take One and Leave the Wrapper (2020)*

Installation

Crib, 54 x 42 x 30 ¼ inches

White rabbit, 3 cm x 1 cm in diameter



*Yellow Red White and Blue* (2019)

mixed media work

24 x 24 inches



*Green Mountain Perch* (2020)

Acrylic on canvas

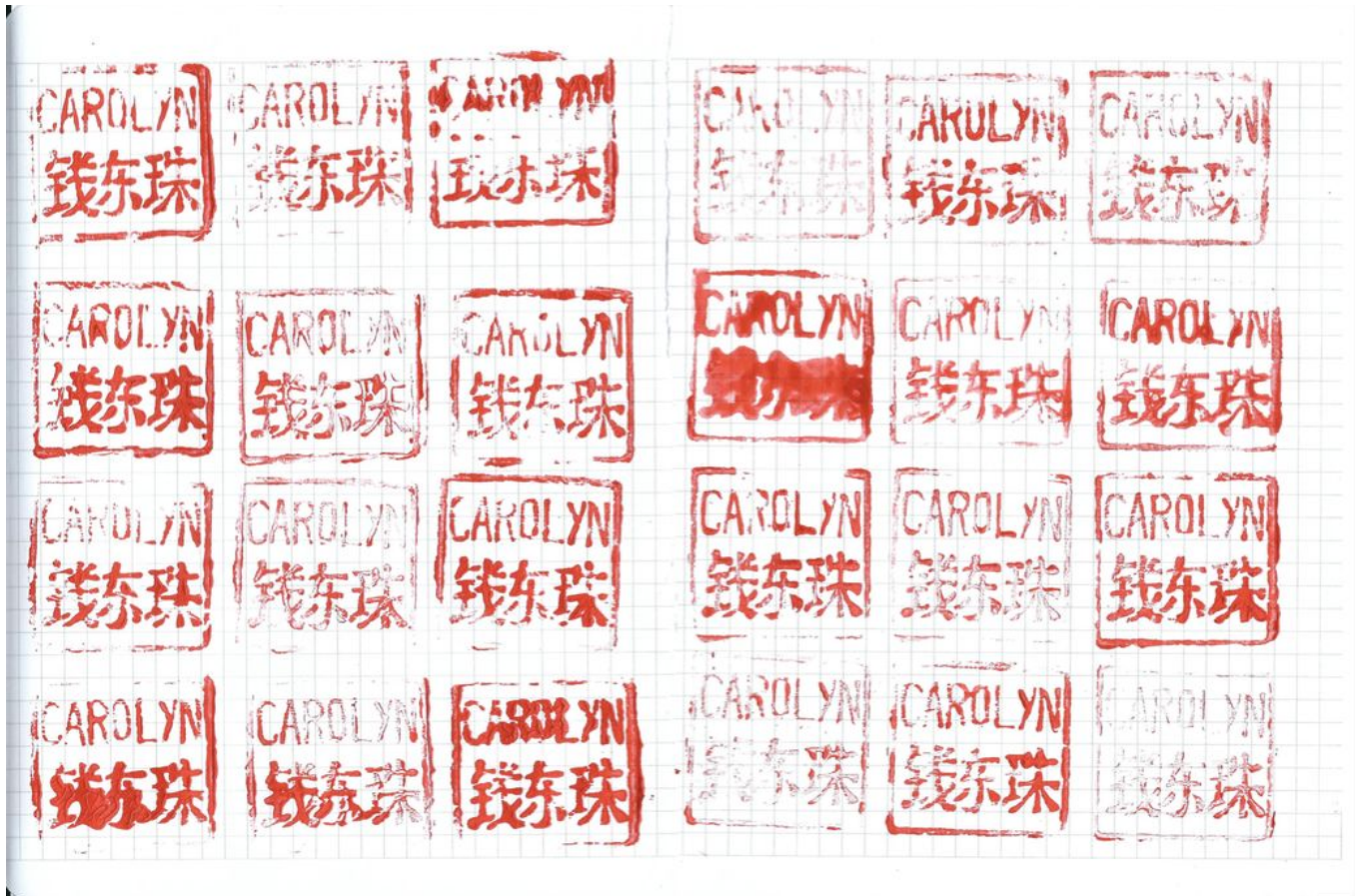
8'10" x 3' 1/2"



*Landscape* (2020)  
Acrylic on canvas  
84 x 36 inches



*Welcome Little Cuz* (1998)  
Archival by my cousin Jamie Spillane  
22 x 28 inches



*Notebook*  
Grid paper  
6 x 8 inches



Chinese Chop  
Archival custom made in China artist unknown  
4 ¾ x 1 ½ x 1 ½ inches