Good-bye Icarus

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Thesis abstract

"Goodbye Icarus" is a multimedia work comprising three parts: art book design, graphic novel, and interactive motion illustration.

Abstract:

"Good-bye Icarus" aims to blend art, history, and environmental exploration through illustration, interactive graphic novel,visual documentation, and programming language narratives.

Polish mythologist Bronislaw Malinowski's functionalist perspective suggests that myths play crucial roles in maintaining and shaping social structures, cultural identity, and values. Myths are not merely ancient stories but active elements in societal functions. This thesis examines the myths of Jingwei and Icarus, exploring their continued resonance in modern society. Both myths feature protagonists struggling against natural forces, reflecting the human impulse to transcend natural limits despite differing motivations. Through an innovative narrative technique involving anonymous characters and interwoven plots, the study contrasts these myths to highlight their functionalist roles and the underlying human motivations. The narrative design aims to evoke deeper reflections on human choices and existential questions.

In digital image processing, images are treated as two-dimensional functions, with each function value representing brightness or color intensity at specific locations. Various image processing effects, such as blurring and edge detection, are achieved through convolution with a kernel function. Mathematical morphology techniques further enhance structural information and noise removal. This study applies pixel-based function transformation programming to re-edit the movement of the ocean surface, creating six dynamic ocean visuals. This approach symbolizes the unpredictability and uncontrollable forces of nature, paralleling societal challenges faced during 2020-2024. The resulting visuals serve as metaphors for modern societal crises and the necessity of critical choices in the face of such adversity.

By reinterpreting these myths and employing advanced digital techniques, the thesis seeks to bridge ancient narratives with contemporary societal reflections, demonstrating the enduring power and relevance of mythological storytelling in understanding and addressing human experiences and challenges.

A year of coastal life in Rhode Island has provided me with endless inspiration in terms of design language. I've ventured into blending dynamic visuals from Touch-Designer with illustration, a pioneering approach as far as I'm aware. My narrative is based on seaside scenery and mythology metaphorical elements, making image programming to capture the essence of waves a focal point and central experiment of my work. Furthermore, after crafting a dynamic design visual language, I use Risograph printing to achieve a granularity as precise as digital programming, integrating book design with content to form a cohesive whole. This exploration seeks to probe the boundaries where design, motion visuals, and illustrative language converge. This work not only provides a platform for my personal design language but also offers insights and strategies for interdisciplinary collaboration in a commercial context in future.

Foreword: The story about a stone

Imagine you are holding this stone in your hand right now. This stone is something you can find anywhere; you might pick it up casually while walking along the beach. It's just an ordinary stone.

Now, let me ask you, how many of these stones would it take to fill the sea?

Does this seem like a silly question? When people see the ocean, they are usually amazed by its vastness and infinity. This planet is essentially a water world, and the sea stretches endlessly. Ancient mythology described the sea as an ouroboros, a serpent that forever swallows its own tail, signifying endlessness. However, there was once a person who tried to fill such an ocean.

We live in the third decade of the 21st century. In these times, any act of feigned tranquility seems somewhat out of place. As an illustration major, I am quite certain that when I first prepared to apply for this degree, I didn't have so many worries and concerns. Back then, I naturally didn't focus on such issues. For me, illustration was a field where functionality mattered more than research. I've worked in illustration for ten years now, and inevitably, my initial purpose has shifted. I suppose this is unavoidable; the reason I chose to engage in creative work was always because I had so much to say.

During two years of research and study, I focused on various painful issues happening around us, choosing commonalities among them to express in my work. When I received this offer, I was at a loss, locked down at home with my grandmother, who needed care. That silent spring, the lockdown permanently changed

many things. Therefore, my mood was never very high—different from usual. I believe the person I am in this project is quite different from my undergraduate self. Back then, I could still draw with vibrant colors, but now I cannot. This began with the lockdown and continued through two years of living in wartime conditions. I think everyone has endured similar pain. Many things that cannot be said or spoken are embedded in my artwork and expressions.

During the 2022 lockdown, I read all the books I had stockpiled at home because I didn't want to go online. One of the reports was about dynamic design and the use of creative programming in graphic design, which caught my attention. Some visual effects I had never seen before fascinated me. The visual images created through computer graphics are entirely different from those we draw by hand. Honestly, I have always disliked hand-drawing because of its many uncontrollable factors and the inability to quickly convey my intended message. This approach is very different from traditional illustration methods, and I have discussed this perspective with my professors many times. However, regardless of our debates, this programming method revealed new possibilities for material experimentation. I want to encode my illustrations in this way to convey my messages to more people.

Let's return to the initial question. Why would someone want to fill the sea? This is actually an allusion. In Chinese mythology, a young girl drowned in the sea and turned into a bird, determined to seek revenge on the ocean. However, the small bird had only a few scattered stones and branches to use for filling the sea. Even so, she chose to pursue revenge. The story is simple, but my reason for choosing it is complex. I believe it represents the spirit of the times, a choice people make when they have no other options.

I am not merely recreating the story's plot but questioning the motivation behind such choices, using contrasts to pose the questions I want to ask.

Icarus, the boy who flew with wings, fell because he flew too close to the sun. Why, despite his father's warning not to fly too close to the sun, did he still perish by doing exactly that? I think at that moment, he was irresistibly drawn to the light and heat, soaring higher and higher. The average distance between the Earth and the Sun is approximately 1.496 x 10^8 kilometers (about 93 million miles). This distance is also known as an astronomical unit (AU). Of course, in mythology, there are no precise units like this. However, I imagine that when Icarus was flying, he was driven by an unavoidable passion to ascend. Naturally, his fate was similar to that of the bird in the Chinese myth—they both drowned in the sea.

The location I've selected for the component researching of my project, Newport

Functionalism in Mythology

Polish mythologist Bronislaw Malinowski proposed the functionalist perspective in his research practice. Functionalism is a significant theoretical framework in mythology, primarily exploring the roles and functions of myths in society. The core idea is that myths are not just ancient stories or legends; they actively play a role in maintaining and shaping social structure, cultural identity, and values. As Malinowski pointed out, *"In indigenous societies, myths are well-known, considered true, and actively discussed in daily life."*

Myths provide people with a way to understand and cope with natural phenomena and unpredictable events in life, such as death, illness, or natural disasters. Through myths, people feel that their world is orderly, even in the face of uncontrollable forces. Malinowski further emphasized that myths are closely related to daily life and are not merely relics of the past but living cultural practices. He opposed viewing myths as pure imagination detached from reality, asserting that the key to understanding myths lies in seeing how they influence and shape social reality. For example, the myths of Jingwei filling the sea and Icarus resonate in modern and even postmodern society due to their continuous connection with social reality. Both stories involve protagonists struggling against natural forces, reflecting the impulse to transcend natural limits, though driven by different motivations: Icarus by a desire for freedom, and Jingwei by an attachment to the past.

When analyzing these two mythological texts, we can identify a common structural pattern: "distress-resistance-outcome," though the specific outcomes differ. I employed an innovative narrative technique by introducing *"anonymous characters"* at the beginning to highlight the functionalist contrast between the two ancient myths. In the early part of the story, I designed a ten-page sequence

without dialogue, using an interwoven plot technique: Icarus attempts to "fill the sea" by "throwing stones," while Jingwei vigilantly observes the rising tides from afar. This design effectively reverses the original scenario: the task of filling the sea, originally performed by Jingwei, is transferred to an unidentified young person, while Jingwei cautiously monitors the tide to avoid the danger of not retreating in time.

This narrative strategy prevents readers from immediately identifying the specific characters. Based on my research and the online publication of my work and social media interactions, I discovered that most readers knew little about the background of these famous myths. Therefore, I decided to use a narrative reversal technique, revealing the true names of the protagonists at the end of the story to provide a rational reinterpretation of the entire plot. In the initial version, the title of this work was not "Goodbye, Icarus," but rather "Goodbye, OOOO," using four meaningless symbols to avoid giving readers preconceived notions about the characters. I oppose direct and obvious expressions, even though I am aware that most people prefer straightforward narratives. In the field of illustration, many works, due to their explanatory and functional nature, have become mere heaps of elements and morphemes, lacking the necessary structure and logical framework. After abandoning this style, I deeply reflected on the depth that narrative should achieve. Illustration should be an art form that can be understood in a second but appreciated for a long time. This was the core issue I continuously considered when designing this interwoven narrative structure: when you callback to the initial pixel, you will find no redundant information.

I am here to introduce two poets who had a significant influence on me in my early life. My philosophical roots are deeply embedded in Chinese literature, and I often joke that my spirit doesn't belong to the modern era. Amidst the myriad

sufferings of life, what comforts me are ancient poems. There is a saying in traditional Chinese literature: "When the nation is in trouble, poets flourish," and another saying, "Literary talents are doomed to unfortunate fates." These sayings suggest that during times of extreme hardship and peril, geniuses emerge.

Human anxieties, fears, contradictions, and hesitations transform into luminous words under such trials, and the value of these words lies not in their beauty alone but in their poignant sincerity. When lamenting their fate, what these poets grapple with in their writing is not the function of the words themselves. Classical Chinese is a language rich in formal beauty. Often, the emotions evoked by reading can be conveyed through the rhythm and sound of the words, but this is not all.

Qu Yuan and Ruan Ji are two poets who profoundly influenced my aesthetic sensibilities. In Qu Yuan's long poem "Li Sao," he recounts his life, talents, and ambitions, denounces the slander of those he calls "petty men," expresses his grief at being alienated by his king, and declares his steadfastness in choosing virtue, his unwavering commitment to his ideals, and his refusal to compromise. In this work, Qu Yuan describes presenting his case to the gods, consulting with shamans, wavering between staying and leaving, envisioning ascending to the heavens, riding a jade chariot drawn by dragons, traveling the four corners of the world, but finding the heavenly gates closed, seeking marriage with a divine woman but failing, and ultimately staying because he cannot bear to leave his country. In Chinese textbooks, we often focus on the first half, where he discusses his political ideals. However, I am particularly drawn to the second half, where even after knocking on the doors of heaven, he cannot bear to leave. Qu Yuan ultimately drowned himself. From a young age, I have pondered what kind of death this is, and how the inability to bear leaving others culminates in punishing oneself with death. This

is an ancient story, yet it holds a profound lesson for modern people, especially those forced to leave their homeland.

Ruan Ji, a famous poet from the Wei and Jin periods, is another significant influence. He often drove his own chariot, going wherever he pleased, not following the main roads, and when the chariot could go no further, he would weep and return. This, in fact, reflects my own state of mind. I often walk aimlessly on the Cliff Walk in Newport, and as I walk, I reach the precipice—there is no path, only the waves and seagulls. The ends of the earth, that is this place. Therefore, I cannot help but think of all those who ended their lives in water—Virginia Woolf, Ophelia, Qu Yuan, Icarus, Jingwei, and many others. Did they see similar scenes in their final moments? At the edge of the world, is there a moment when they could see their own existence?

Finally, when the stone thrown by Icarus sinks into the sea, the story officially begins. Two characters who once perished in the sea are trapped again on an island with no past and no future. This island can be philosophically viewed as an exploration of the essence of existence, symbolizing thought experiments that seek meaning and essence beyond the influence of time. This echoes Heidegger's existentialist perspective, emphasizing the "being-there" of individual existence, closely linked to time. The island represents a symbol of a moment forgotten by history, a society trapped in an eternal present, unable to learn from historical experiences or plan for the future. This setting reflects the "reconstruction" of contemporary social practices in virtual space.

The dialogue between Jingwei and Icarus begins. Since this is an island without past or future, every day resets to the previous day's state. Jingwei tirelessly throws stones into the sea, vigilant against the rising tide. At sunrise, she transforms back into a human, and at sunset, she becomes a bird again. The tides continually rise and fall, and if she is not careful, she will drown in the water, making her wish to fill the sea impossible to achieve. Icarus repairs his wings day after day. The human body cannot provide shelter in the seawater, so wings are necessary. When the tide recedes, Icarus returns to the ground to repair his wings.

When the seawater floods the land, he flies away. As a consequence, his flights can no longer see the sun; it is always nighttime when the seawater submerges the island.

One day, when Icarus and Jingwei meet on the island, he is imitating Jingwei by throwing stones into the sea. He asks Jingwei, "How long have we been doing this? Only when I try to fill the sea like you do, do I truly understand the fear we must face." At this moment, I will introduce the concept of the sea.

The unfathomable depth and unpredictable storms of the ocean symbolize the cruelty and uncontrollable forces of nature. This also serves as a metaphor for human society. From 2020 to 2024, almost everything appeared out of control and temporary. Too many unpredictable events, especially between natural disasters and man-made calamities, and the constant threat of lockdowns turned life into survival, and survival into war. I always kept a box ready with all my essentials and documents, prepared to go into isolation at a moment's notice. It was then that I realized how little I actually owned. In this world, what proves my existence is only a small amount.

During long periods of communal living, I was always prepared to move at any moment. In 2019, during my gap year, to save on rent, I still lived in the school dormitory. But to avoid being discovered by the dorm manager and to facilitate leaving quickly if evicted, I kept all my belongings packed in boxes and shipping cartons. I categorized them and created a complete ecosystem for them, just to be able to leave quickly. This mindset, I'm not sure when it started, but one event I believe is closely related. When I first started college, a fire broke out in Beijing, leading to the expulsion of the so-called "low-end population." This concept needs explanation: people from my hometown engaged in low-tech small businesses like breakfast vendors and delivery workers, with low incomes. Overnight, they were driven out of their rented homes in the cold winter. When I arrived at the fire site, the ground was already in disarray: items that could not be taken in time, but were probably still in use the day before, were scattered everywhere.

Since then, I have become accustomed to reducing my possessions as much as possible. I don't want to own too much of what I am destined to lose. I packed all my belongings into boxes to be ready to flee at any moment. Back then, my pain was unknown to others; most people were still immersed in the illusion that their lives would only get better. It seemed I had foreseen this or the arrival of such survival. When the pandemic hit and the world faced the same problems I once had, I appeared adept and could even teach others how to pack quickly. This is my sociological reflection when conceiving the concept of the "sea." The sea symbolizes a sudden encounter with adversity, which does have certain patterns, but they are either difficult to detect or, if detected, offer little improvement.

However, one thing remains unchanged: everyone has the potential to be engulfed by such an encounter, never to recover. Thus, the daily survival crisis faced by the two characters on the island is my metaphor for the modern societal crisis. At any moment, a wave could sweep us into the abyss, drowning us in a place with no foothold. Therefore, choices become particularly crucial when facing such situations.

In mythological models, the hero's choices are often firm and unchangeable. However, my aim is to use this story to question human predicaments. Fundamentally, I need a human perspective to examine the hero's choices. Thus, Icarus's question is, "What are you persevering for?" The act of filling the sea with stones and branches is so irrational, and human power is especially insignificant. This question is natural. Especially in the face of a previous failure, most people fear repeating their mistakes, particularly when the failure is fatal. Without knowing the exact outcome, why persist?

Levi-Strauss believed that the core function of myths is to mediate seemingly irreconcilable opposites in the real world. For example, life and death, culture and nature, good and evil; these opposites are symbolically resolved through various symbols and actions in myths. However, the evolution of myths in contemporary times is contrary to such symbolic resolutions. We all know that the sea will never be filled, and it is impossible. In the current context where such binary oppositions are ineffective, the traditional mythological model gradually loses its effectiveness in modern contexts. Therefore, questioning the motivation behind such actions is necessary: why persist in filling the sea? When will the sea ever be filled?

Repetition and Graphics of Repetition

In digital image processing, an image is often treated as a function. Specifically, an image can be understood as a two-dimensional function, where each function value represents the brightness or color intensity at a particular location in the image. An image can be defined as a mapping from a two-dimensional space to a set of intensity values.

By convolving the image function with a kernel function (filter), various image processing effects can be achieved, such as blurring, sharpening, and edge detection. The convolution operation essentially involves applying the kernel function to each point of the image function, thereby obtaining new function values. Mathematical morphology provides a set of techniques based on the shapes of image functions, such as erosion, dilation, opening, and closing operations. These operations can help improve the structural information of image data, handling tasks such as noise removal. Images are typically stored in digital form, as a matrix of pixels. Each pixel position corresponds to one or more integer values representing grayscale or color intensity. Image processing algorithms are usually implemented on these pixel data, but conceptually, they can still be understood as processing two-dimensional functions.

When re-editing the movement of the ocean surface, I used pixel-based function transformation programming and created six dynamic ocean visuals this way. I have collected and observed the changes and signals of the waves, and I aim to combine dynamic design, interactive design, and illustration. Touch Designer provides me with convenient interactive tools, allowing me to visualize the collected sounds and images of the waves.

First, I defined the concept of waves. In my story, the waves reflect the characters' states of mind. In the first wave scene, since the future is uncertain, I chose to combine Glitch/Particle effects with multi-directional, multi-angled dynamics. Simultaneously, with the scene of falling waves, I hope to create a resonance yet distinction between the two. While maintaining dynamic expression, I also seek to convey a sense of tranquility: I want the overall feel of the work to be calm, despite the stormy environment.

The second scene involves a dialogue between characters. I want the waves to have a mercury-like texture to reflect the inner turmoil of the characters. Compared to Icarus, Jingwei's personality is more introverted and taciturn. In terms of character design, Jingwei is a slender but towering woman. She lacks feminine traits, is silent and uncommunicative, and mostly responds to Icarus's questions with actions rather than words. Jingwei is a person who is cold on the outside but warm on the inside. She possesses immense energy and a determination to fill the sea, but due to numerous injuries and prolonged solitude against the swift and changing ocean, she has become very cautious and weary. When depicting Jingwei's inner world, I use imagery as metaphors rather than excessive language: she pays more attention to the state of the sandcastle than Icarus does. Even though she verbally expresses that all efforts are in vain, she never stops her actions to fill the sea.

The third dynamic scene is called "Falling Waves." I once saw a game scene where sand poured down like a waterfall from the sky, engulfing people. At that moment, I felt suffocated. When facing the question of "when will the sea be filled," people experience the same suffocating feeling. This is indeed my daily experience. I hope to convey my feelings straightforwardly to others through such a tangible

visual weight. I want my work to evoke discomfort in the audience, using imagery to provoke their unease.

In summary, when using dynamic design, I focus on how to use motion to convey emotional changes. I am particularly fond of the phrase "still waters run deep," and I hope my work can calmly stir the thoughts of the audience, ultimately leading them to a space where they can contemplate the relevant issues.
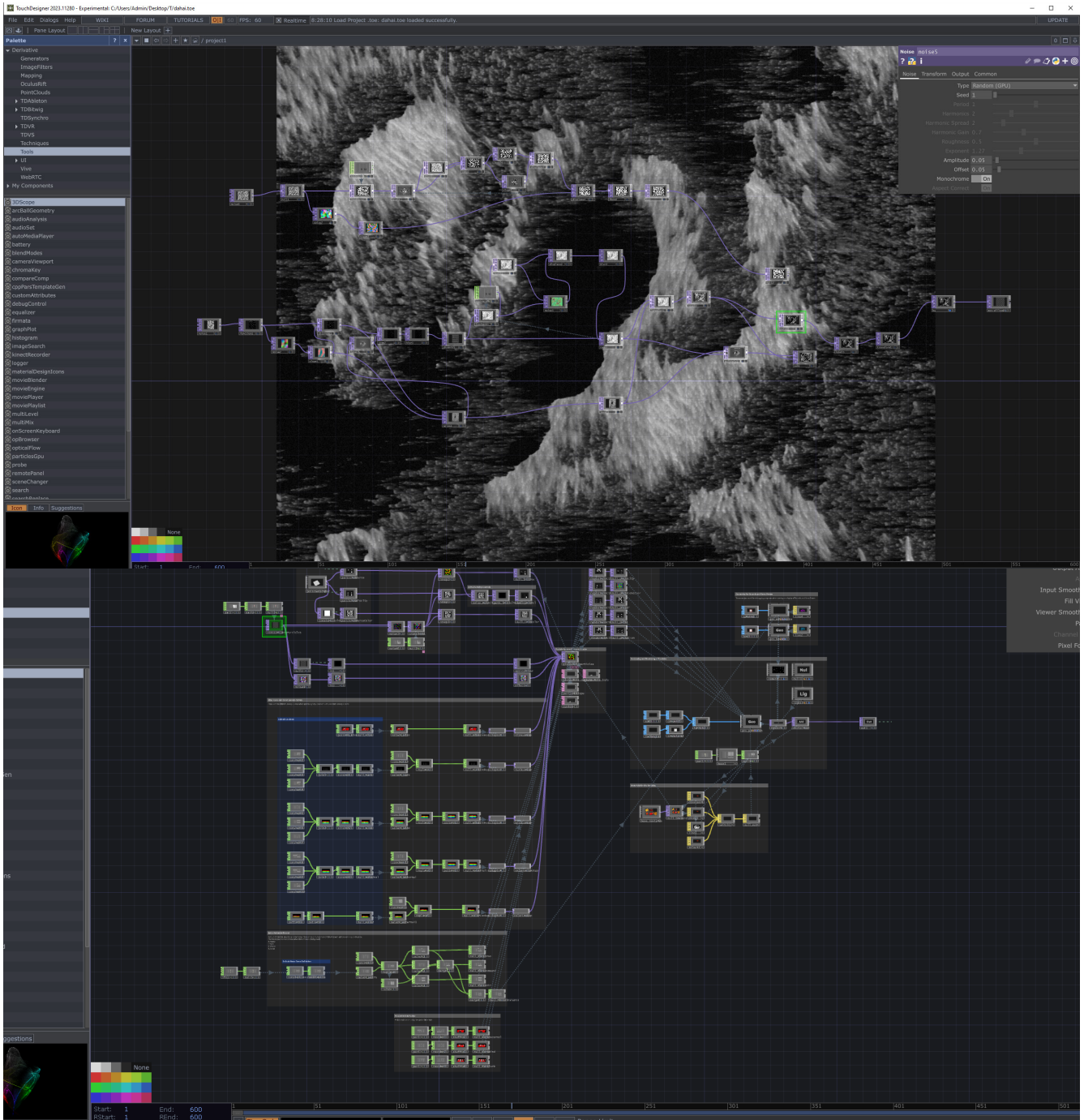
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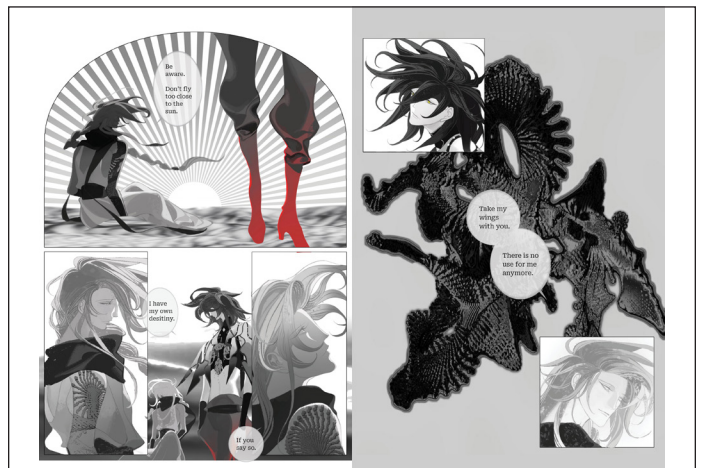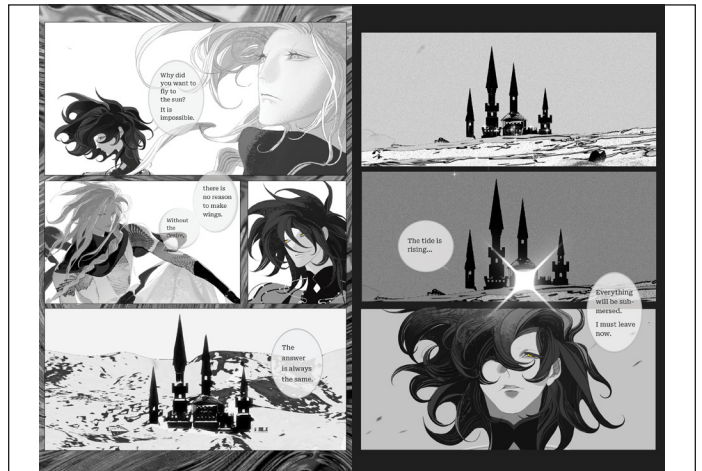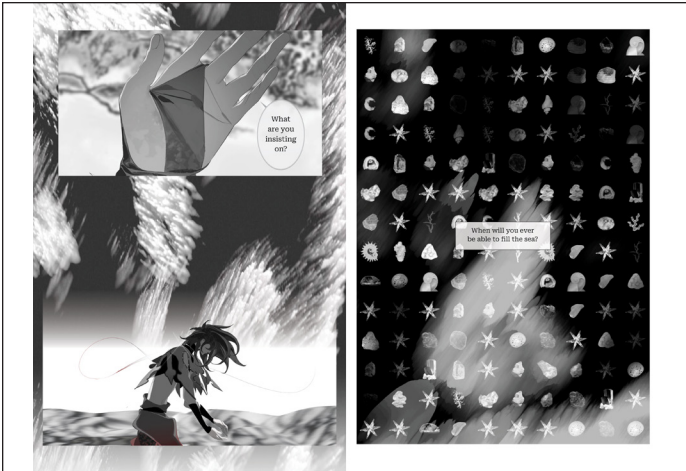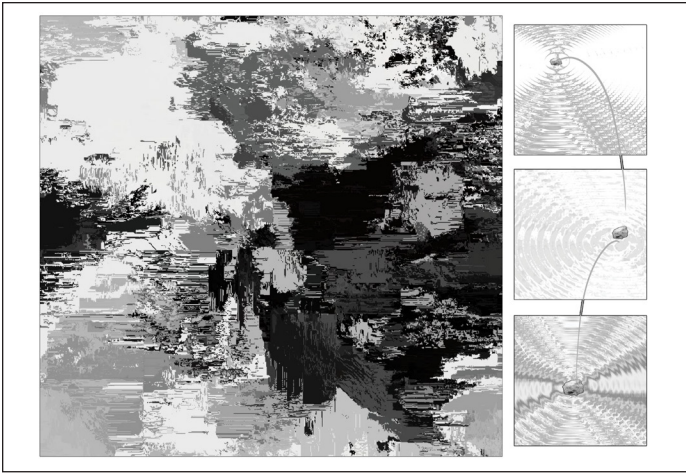
The interactive illustration practice

Book Design: Goodbye Icarus

After crafting a dynamic design visual language, I use Risograph printing to achieve a granularity as precise as digital programming, integrating book design with content to form a cohesive product. This exploration seeks to probe the boundaries where design, motion visuals, and illustrative language converge.

This section of the work involves creating an art book using illustrations and the motion graphic software TouchDesigner, based on my year-long observations and experiences along the Newport coast. TouchDesigner is utilized for dynamic visual arrangement, to collect, analyze, encode, and generate digital waves based on data.

For the book's design and binding, I used materials like metallic silver paper, transparent acrylic, and metal steel nails. The book is divided into two sections: an introduction to the background and the main story. In terms of printing, the content combines programming language with illustration, resulting in a texture that showcases the unique coded patterns of digital media. I opted for Risograph printing, known for its strong textures and dot characteristics, to produce the book. Additionally, the hot stamping silver process added a unique glossy texture, helping readers engage more deeply with the illustration content.

The design of art bwook "Good Bye Icarus"

The mirrored paper design on the final page allows the cliff from the content of the work to appear alongside the reader's face. By leveraging the material's properties to achieve interactive design, the reading experience immerses the reader into the work's environment, creating a unique reading experience.