SHIN YU PAI

ENSŌ
SHIN YU PAI

ENSŌ
I roll the ball of golden wax
between my thumb and forefinger

leftovers gleaned from the gallery
floor, during the artist’s installation

of giant cera alba ziggurats
shimmering pollen fields that

light up my imagination

the soft perfumed artifact
I take with me to tuck away

in the bottom drawer
of an unfinished cedar shrine

a keepsake activated &
sanctified so long ago,

c成都市

this token
    I held back for myself
Preface 13
Introduction 17

SIXTEEN PILLARS 21
HAIKU PRESENT 37
THE EKPHRASTIC IMPULSE 47
MAKING BOOKS 61
MOTHERING TIME 77
HEIRLOOM 93
SAME CLOTH 111
WITHOUT WORDS 117
ANIMATING THE TEXT 123
ENSŌ 141

Acknowledgments 158
Content & Image Credits 159
Biography 160
Audio & Multimedia 161
We often imagine poems as private expressions that begin in the mind and end on the page; though accurate for many cases, such a conception of poetry is necessarily restrictive. However one wants to categorize Shin Yu Pai’s *Ensō* (a document of auto-curation that honors both product and process, a kind of creative nonfictional *Künstlerroman*, an illustrated prosimetrum), it is a model book—in its expansiveness of vision—to teach us how to extend poetry beyond the page as part of a publicly engaged, collaborative, and multimediial practice. I should hasten to add that although Pai, as a former poet laureate of the City of Redmond, is adept at bringing poetry into environments outside the dimensions of the printed codex through site-specific installations and video projections, anyone who is familiar with her writing knows that she frequently fuses design, layout, and versification in creating an imaginative *mise-en-page*. 
She enjoys breaking free from the baseline of the justified left-hand margin to create a dynamic zone teeming with rich phrasings, expressive spacing, and surprising significations. In short, Pai excels both on and off the page as she carefully contemplates issues of language, form, and genre no matter the scope of the project.

Pai is a poet of discipline in the positive sense of being wholly dedicated to what she calls “the ongoingness of a regular practice.” Her artisanal practices—rigorous acts of commitment, concentration, and devotion—have engaged with a variety of time frames, demonstrating an allegiance to the variegated times of meaningful activity in contradistinction to the standardized time that structures capitalist work. For example, she has written haiku every week for a year; ekphrastically documented the same space over the span of twenty years; stenciled apples in a public orchard to demonstrate the differential exposure to sunlight; and spent several months cutting windows into the covers of her book *Sightings* to reveal text printed on the title page.

Indeed, “practice” is an important word in describing Pai’s artistic life; it, or its cognates, occur many times throughout the illuminating essays contained in this book: “I revisited practices, like Japanese tea and translation.” And: “Haiku writing has brought forth a kind of communal writing and practice that has included everything.” The word “everything” here is not merely gratuitous. Consider the following haiku that compresses within its diminutive structure a density of observation and feeling:

just shy of thirty-five weeks,
   tsukimi chakai—I gaze
   at the ripening moon.

In presenting what T. S. Eliot might call an “objective correlative,” Pai meaningfully juxtaposes ritual and gestational/reproductive temporalities while also connecting the micro- and macroscales of biology and astronomy. In the poem titled “Practice,” she asks, “but isn’t there / only this work? / day after day / heaps of words piling / up on my writing desk.” A disciplined writer, who adventurously throws herself into her work, Pai is also a poet of many disciplines
that go well beyond the boundaries of her writing desk. Open to an impressive range of artistic fields and methods, she is also a practitioner of book arts and photography. It is not surprising, then, that Pai has self-consciously put herself in a lineage of Asian and Asian American women artists who work in and across varied media—Noguchi Shohin, Ikka Nakashima, Yoko Ono, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, to name just a few. So too does Pai embrace the many cultural functions that poetry in its myriad material instantiations—from historically evocative visual poems executed through chlorophyll printing to a cloth broadside stitched with red thread to protest against a local hate crime—can perform for its communities. In other words, if Pai, as consummate craftswoman, proficiently works with the materiality of her media, she, as public poet, also considers the vital communal issues that matter.

Ultimately, Ensō celebrates a versatile sensibility that, to quote from Pai’s title poem, “emerges [from] the place of possibility,” that, however bound, is “upheld by [a] sense of boundlessness.”
As a newcomer to a city that I did not belong to, I asked myself what it would mean to engage with a single place over an extended period of time. How might that place become a part of my experience and live within my memory, just as I might become a part of its physical history and record.
Known as simply Gallery 109, the dark room tucked away in a corner of the Art Institute of Chicago escapes the notice of most visitors. I began visiting the gallery in 1998, lured by Tadao Andō’s elegant design for the space. Embedded in the Asian art galleries, amongst rooms of ceramic vessels and scrolls, the dimly lit room shows off the museum’s Japanese antiquities. My nostalgia for a place that I’d never been to drew me into the space. My lover had moved to Kyoto to study tea, while I finished school. Bereft, I gazed at beautiful artifacts I imagined my beloved to be encountering in another place and time.

It gave me a strange comfort, reaching back to my earliest memories of visiting museums with my Taiwanese parents. Inevitably, we’d end up closely studying ink paintings of birds and flowers, or mountain landscapes—my father’s favorite subjects. Even before my brother and I were born, my parents traveled long distances to experience Asian culture. As new immigrants living in rural Missouri, they drove 170 miles to visit the Chinese art collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum, one of the few places where they could see their language and cultural symbols reflected back to them.

In Chicago, I hadn’t yet discovered the rich genre of ekphrastic poetry, although like most college English majors, I’d spent time committing Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” to memory. I studied the artworks displayed in the Andō gallery with care, noticing the visitors entering and filling the space around me. How they interacted with the silence, how they interacted with one another. The patient exchange between a father and his young daughter particularly struck me. And out of these observations sprang the first poem.
Entering a darkened room
to pass between sixteen pillars
of equal height and depth,
ten feet high and one foot square,

I place my hand against the grain
hold my ear to a column
listening for something
like the sound of trees.

Across the room
six folded screens
colored ink and gold on silk

the specks of turquoise in those mountains
glimmering points of light
from a distance
the shine of moss

in memory like the lights
of houses in the hillsides
lanterns in the sea
of winter nights.
Mist erases crags and peaks.

Bearded scholars on blankets read to one another calligraphing poems under shade of bamboo and plum as servants fill cups with rice wine floated downstream on lotus pads.

My breath clouds the casing as I think of humidity and the desire to touch.

The door of the gallery opens. A father and his daughter.

*I think we’ve seen this one before*, the girl says. They look for the place where the story begins. The girl kisses glass.

*Where does the story begin?* father insists gently.

*In the mountains*, the girl cries.

Traces of handprints left on glass.

*It starts here*, she says. Here.
I’d fallen in love during a year spent studying at Naropa, a small Buddhist college nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. In search of the local tea ceremony teacher, I went to the campus teahouse to find the sensei. She remained elusive, but he was always there—opening the door, cleaning the tatami mats, preparing for tea. We regarded each other from a safe distance. I started coming around for lessons, and shyly acquiesced to preparing tea when the teacher asked. In the tiny kitchen at the back of the teahouse, I spilled bright green tea powder all over the mat, while anxiously trying to neatly scoop the tea powder into the natsume. His eyes were full of kindness, as he spoke softly to me, and took the tools from my hands to quickly mound a perfect mountain of matcha. His name was Bergman, or what translated as “Man of the Mountain.”

In Colorado, I worked on a short collection of Chinese poetry with my father, who gave me a crash course in the classical poetic tradition. In my background readings, I discovered scholars—poets like Li Bai and Tu Fu—men of leisure who drank together and inspired one another’s poems. I saw how the images from the painted screen on display in the Andō gallery mirrored this literary history.

Those years that I spent living in Chicago, I returned to the Andō gallery over and over again, with the idea that the experience of the space itself could be as profound as seeing its relics revealed. While the art might not rotate for long periods of time, the space of the gallery remained dynamic and ever changing in its continual influx of visitors who lingered beyond the typical speed-viewing of the modern, ten-second attention span. Stopping in the gallery became a part of my routine. As I began to shape a more artful life centered upon creative thinking and production, I revisited practices, like Japanese tea and translation, that had been significant to me in the past.

Tokyo Rose, the purveyor of Toguri Mercantile, a seller of Japanese sweets on Belmont Avenue, pointed me towards a tea teacher on the north side of Chicago. By the time I met Ikka Nakashima, she was already in her seventies. I didn’t know until coming across her obituary recently that Sensei had been the second woman to receive the Order of the Rising Sun—awarded to those who
have made distinguished achievements in the promotion of Japanese culture. But what really added to Sensei’s lore was her connection to a Tibetan lama in Boulder. He had paid her a visit in the hopes of persuading her to move to his mountain town to teach at the experimental college where I would eventually find myself.

I became Nakashima Sensei’s student in Chicago, and after nearly a year of practicing with her, I received formal permission from her to undertake study. From Sensei, I learned the nuances of positioning the hearth in winter nearer to the guests. When to use a lighter-colored, wider bowl in summer, in order to evoke the coolness of ice. The shallowness of the drinking vessel that allows the tea to cool more quickly. I learned a new version of a tale that I had once come across while translating poems from the ancient Chinese—the story of the cowherd and weaving girl. Two star-crossed sweethearts, separated by the Milky Way, reunite by a bridge of magpies that forms on the seventh day of the seventh month, or tanabata matsuri. In the month of July, Sensei hung a scroll with poems inspired by the stars in the tokonoma and brought out a special cha-ire—a tea container viewed just once a year.

Sensei gave me the gift of permission to encourage my tea practice and to open a door to studying at the Urasenke school in Kyoto, where I could rekindle a romance with my lost love.
columns you pass between
tower high as bamboo stalks
  grouped in a grove

a white-haired guide
  prompts school students,
  to exit in silence
  now

this rawness in the back of the throat
  heart leaping forward

while the mind turns back

to the cool darkness of
  a tea teacher’s home
  on West Carmen Street

  Monday nights
  gakusei wore woolen
    sweaters, stockings
      under ankle-length
    skirts gathered neatly
under knees

  we knelt in practice
hot water, matcha warming a bowl

the chill of the gallery dissipating
My visits to the gallery ended when I left Chicago in 2000. The man I loved returned home and presented me with an ultimatum to begin a life together in a foreign city. I boxed up my books, sold my furniture, and moved south. Dallas, Texas, hadn’t been my first choice. Living in the South for the first time, I felt acutely aware of cultural differences and expectations of gender. My eventual in-laws affectionately referred to me as “Daughter-in-Law Number One,” not fully understanding the reverberations of such an “honorable.” While I worked at a fine arts museum located across the street from a private collection of Asian artifacts, it was Andō’s space that remained in my imagination.

I had entered into a world that belonged to someone else. The history of his childhood memories were written throughout the artworks housed in the museums that we frequented in Dallas and Fort Worth. Andō’s gallery, by contrast, belonged to me alone. I had spent days, weeks, and months in the space watching life unfold and looking for something to be revealed to me about the rhythms of human life. Observed how bodies in a gallery mirrored the changing seasons, and surroundings, illuminating the analogy between Japanese time and the human experience. People became the art, as their personhood was magnified by the contrast with minimalism and silence of the space.

I saw that the visitors could reflect something of the changing seasons and sensibilities in their heavy, fur-collared winter coats and gloves, school jerseys, and ball caps with political slogans, in the same way that the curated displays of paintings revealed something about timelessness.

It seemed to me that the tracking of activity in Andō’s gallery could mimic a quality of Japanese poetics—an attention to the passage of seasons and the feel of a specific place at a given time. I decided then that with every opportunity to return to Chicago, I’d revisit the Andō gallery and write a poem—new iterations of “The Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion.”
a crop of new students
fresh-faced from St. Bridget’s
Catholic converge upon
the gallery, names emblazoned
across the backs of royal blue
fleece sweatshirts: Aguilar,
Pacheco & Guernsey
girls in maroon polos &
dark skirts, shade of “old
Bordeaux” the rusted
patina of urban overpass
a boy named Isabella
races to claim the headset
first, a flat-screen station
now animating the room
loops footage from a ritual
concert: kuniburi no utamai—
narrative tunes reaching back
to the 10th century
facing the wall, he turns
his back to handcrafted
bamboo pipes while another
youth snaps a photo of
the stringed zither inlaid
with ceramic hand picks;
this kid sealed off by earbuds
no different than I, the poet

nose stuck deep inside
a notebook, attuned to
the private experience of
encountering the music within

giant stoneware pots
that never rotate off display
sing quietly of wind
It was several years before I would return again. Much and nothing had changed. The ancient jomon jars placed along the perimeter of the room remained where they had always been. In an effort to embrace technology, the museum installed a flat-screen television with headphones that ran on a continual loop.

We continued to evolve as a couple. Our lives shifted as we tested new geographies together. We moved west and back south again. Embarked shyly and unsuccessfully on starting a family, while settling into a prosaic form of domesticity brought on by marriage.

Ten years later, the glass doors that sealed off the room from the rest of the Japanese collections were permanently removed. The Art Institute went high tech, projecting video and light upon the walls. Instead of antiquities filling the cases, modern Japanese fashion design dominated the displays. The quiet contemplative nature of the room shifted towards a different approach to engagement. The museum commissioned contemporary artist Jan Tichy to make a new work responding to the physical space. Beams of light bounced across the gallery, drawing the eye away from inward reflection.

Flooded by visitors intent on documenting intricate postures with their cell phone cameras, the integrity of the space was severely compromised by the Institute’s desire to bring more people into the space. The essential quality of the experience was abandoned—namely one of mindful awareness, a keen observation elicited by the gallery’s original quality of light.

I wanted to return to the origin, a time before poetry emerged in me, to recover a deeper calling to beauty.
jomon jars replaced by plastic mannequins, desiring definition vacant body forms, scaffolding
to bear the float of haute couture, Japanese fashion Rei Kawakubo’s slip:
“lumps & bumps”—a garment of transposable parts, butt pads shift to chest or hips
bee-stung knees, or a weight-lifter’s sinewy back; shoulders like Tilda Swinton
the site-specific video install lights up Andō’s beams like a fashion expo, visitors careen down a catwalk of columns, the space between pillars, a stage for selfies in silhouette, geometric slants echo frames of denuded posts, a scroll of light unfurled against a wall the artist’s projection measured patterns of movable parts
I returned to the Andō gallery in 2016, nearly twenty years after my first visit. I’d become a mother. Taken long breaks from art-making and left parts of myself behind to shape a new identity and life.

The same decorative folding screen that was on view when I first began writing about the Andō gallery had come back on display.

I read the didactic label closely this time. It described a painting on the backside of the screen. Locked behind glass, this painting remained unviewable. In my imagination, I walked around the partition to close the circle and look upon an image of geese and reeds.

Curated alongside the image of leisurely literati stood a separate series of panels highlighting historical Japanese poets. As I scanned the portraits for names and faces that I might recognize, I realized how little had changed throughout the ages and cultures. Male poets outnumbered the women. One woman, completely concealed by her hair, might well have been anonymous. The didactic label was unsatisfactory, and had in fact always been lacking. The poems that I’d written back then and now were my way of disrupting the silence of these informational time capsules put forth by art curators. The poems were my effort to open up a space and time beyond what the label prescribed, to create something distinct from what was visibly enshrined, translating the other into a language of self. Finding beauty in absence, coming home to both longing and belonging.
in the painted screen a woman
confined to a wheelchair sees
turquoise rocks pure as sea stacks
straight from the Pacific Northwest

fanned out at eye level, the image
on the reverse side pictures
*Geese Among Reeds*—a painting
I gaze upon in my mind’s eye

recalling eighteen years ago
a first encounter with this partition—
the depiction of men at leisure,
overlooking somehow

a spring purification rite made
more real this day by the occasion
of my return to the windy city
for a friend’s second marriage

I visit artworks in museums
like favorite family members
finding comfort in the fact
that nothing’s changed after

major expansion, the gallery
restored to a simple display—
same panel, the unevolved language
I lifted for a poem; in the wings,
a six-panel screen beneath
dimmed lights lights up twelve
immortals with their poems,
five women in multihued kimono

portrayed alongside seven male
counterparts, the curatorial text
indicates no names, scribbled waka
verse hovering above each picture,

in one portrait, a poet's kimono
pools around her floating body;
in another, a woman's features
concealed by a dark curtain

of hair; in the third sketch
a female figure faces away from
the artist's gaze, I guess
at who they are—Izumi Shikibu

Sei Shonagon, Ono no Komachi
the only names I know, scan
across the screen to notice
each male bard meeting the eye

of his onlooker, angled at 45 degrees,
the faceless immortal the viewer
projects traits upon, a name
to claim a lasting place
gilded and burnished in gold
this screen made for “women’s quarters”
dominated by virile likenesses,
I reach towards my own life,

in lieu of the art historical,
the imagination recomposes
the scene, I enter the divider,
to embody the faceless courtesan,

& in the final intervention
I displace the patriarchal form
enshrouded in mondokoro
to even up the numbers,

take my seat with symbols
of my own making: sixteen
stanzas for sixteen pillars
in this gathering space.
We encounter the same objects, day after day, walk the same paths, eat the same food, form relationships to what is familiar. What happens when we look deeper to ask how our surroundings came into being? How might that alter our relationship to time?
In the late 1990s, I spent long hours in the photo lab at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago pulling prints from chemical baths and learning to see pure blacks and details in the greys. The emergence of the image beneath the red safelights had its magic, but I hated working in the dark. The environment of the lab exacerbated my poor eyesight, and I worried about the toxic load of working around chemicals. My pregnant classmate started wearing a full-face respirator. A professor, who’d spent decades in the darkroom, shared her terminal diagnosis with colleagues. These factors colored my attitude towards darkroom work, and, eventually, I would give up printing. I longed for a process that would allow me to see the image directly revealed in light, without any need for safelights.

In 2012, on a hike to the beach near our Seattle home, I came across an open meadow planted with apple, pear, and nut trees. Piper’s Orchard, as it’s known, was established by early European settlers, and the land around it is now a city park. The few signs posted by the parks department showed a rough map of tree species and alluded with skeletal detail to the history of the land and to Andrew and Minna Piper—the homesteaders who created the orchard. I was intrigued by the mysterious grove—how it got there, who maintained it, and its heirloom strains of fruit.

A few weeks after my encounter with this orchard, an article came out in the New York Times about an apple engineered in such a way that, when cut into, the flesh would not go brown from exposure to oxygen. Years earlier, I’d written a series of poems exploring food and agricultural themes in a project called Nutritional Feed. So these types of stories tend to capture my interest.
Over the years, a group of curators and artists have organized ongoing site-specific art installations in Carkeek Park. As I walked through Piper’s Orchard, I recalled an orchard in Japan that tattooed its apples with kanji, up-selling them as artisanal products. It seemed to me that the apples, and the orchard then in its entirety, could function as a giant light-sensitive surface. Why not print a poem on an apple? Or parts of it? The exploration of genetically modified food seemed like a natural extension of that previous work. The piece could be made more poignant by printing sections of the poem on the ripening apples of the trees. I consulted a tree steward to ask if he thought sun prints could work and embarked on a pilot to test the idea.

I made a series of prints over the summer of 2014. As different apple varieties rolled into ripeness—Wealthy, Astrachan, and Dutch Mignonne—I applied decals on selected species and let the letters burn in over the course of seven to ten days. There was a lot of trial and error to find the right printing substrate, and it was necessary to cultivate deep patience in order to wait the weeks needed to see what worked and what failed, an experience with making art that I had not had before.

My son, Tomo, frequently came with me to the orchard during my field visits and printing tests. I watched my young child toddle through the meadow, picking and eating apples from the trees with the help of my husband. Tomo was learning to walk and just beginning to explore talking. I thought about how language could be made more visible and delightful to a child encountering words for the first time. And as I reflected on my child’s experiences, I realized everything I wanted to say in my poem could take the form of a field guide for visitors—for families—a text that could teach my son everything that I wanted him to know about Piper's Orchard: the fruit trees, the land, and the people who’d cared for it. Minna Piper, the mother of eleven children, had been credited historically with grafting the varietals. And it’s her name, and not her husband’s, that appears in my poem.

*Heirloom* evolved into the shape of a twenty-six section abecedarian, or alphabet poem, with each section taking a separate letter of the alphabet as its starting point. In 2015, I reentered the
orchard with words from my completed poem that I had laser cut as custom decals. I removed the white bags and nylon socks protecting the fruit from the apple maggots and burnished the letters into place with a bone folder. In each tree, I stenciled a specific grouping of words and repeated this process over several weekends with various trees.

Strangers picked and devoured the stickered apples, leaving behind the evidence of unripe, gnawed apple cores. Summer storms took down the fruit. I found artfully arranged, stenciled fruit in piles around tree trunks. Where the apples did stay on the branch, I’d return to peel away the decals to reveal the pale green words written in the trees. When further exposed to the sun, these areas reddened and reverted to their natural tendencies. Because I always knew that the installation would be overtaken by nature and endure for only a short period, I asked my friend Tom Stiles, who is an audio engineer at Jack Straw Cultural Center, to capture audio field recordings in the orchard throughout the different seasons. He recorded birdsong, the sound of wind moving through the meadow, tree stewards mulching the orchard, and apple fall.

A volunteer tree steward collected fallen apples to press cider and sent me a cell phone photo of an apple emblazoned with the word BOUNTY, before he juiced the fruit. I began to give up control of my collaboration with nature to nature. The elements erased whatever language I tried to record and recompose, and by the end of apple season, I’d come to terms with the idea that I could not control anything about the poem. I had shaped the text on the page, but fidelity to the place that inspired it meant letting the piece live differently in the real world. My words belonged to me, but once they entered the public space, I no longer owned them.

In the course of my research about Piper’s Orchard, I learned that apple orchards are often wassailed, or sung to, by the people that maintain the land in order to ensure a good harvest. I think of Heirloom as a ballad that sings the stories of Piper’s—snapshots combining with sounds collected from the land to capture the textures and colors of a place, long after the apples have gone to seed.
ANTIQUE
freckled, scabbed &
spotted Astrachans
ushered from Russia
heritage strains older
than the Arctic©

BOUNTY
gleaned & given
thousands of pounds
of unsellable fruit
circulate to city
food banks

CANOPY
arbors full of stars
five-pointed calyxes
scoring undersides
of apples

(RED) DELICIOUS
“Stark’s Hawkeye”
stocking grocers thick-
skinned, overgrown
bred for its hue, “retains
its cheerful good looks
long after its flavor has departed”
—mealy mouthfeel of
an American classic

EYE
apple
of my
FOUND  beneath ivy & thorn, 
arching cane & suckering 
root, ruin—the forest orchard 
“gone to seed”

GRAFTAGE  tree cuttings 
implanted into host 
stumps sealed w/ wax 
to propagate a vanishing line

HEIRLOOM  belonging passed 
between generations 
a historic homestead 
a grove of fruit-bearing trees 
totems of memory—an apple, 
all the way from Denmark
ANIMATING THE TEXT

I’m interested in the idea of being “in time” with a poem as it emerges and comes alive. Being in this liminal space before an audience becomes less about performance and more about connection, to one’s self and within the context of a larger public or humanity.
COMING ALIVE

When we bring poetry into the space of civic gatherings, we ask so much of it. We expect it to bring people together, to unite us through lyric experience. The crowd in front of me wanted Christmas carols and holiday lights, not to listen to poetry. And though the public played a hand in sourcing the ideas and lines that made up my poem—I felt a profound sense of disconnection.

Since making *Heirloom*, I’ve been more interested in the interplay of environment and text. I surrender my attachment to the control afforded by the written page to bring poems into a world they can inhabit, while being shaped by chance. Some of my recent projects ask how poems can be presented without me delivering their reading—I explore what it feels like to take my physicality offstage. To remove myself as go-between or vehicle of connection in order to encourage direct experience.

I’d had a long history of creating visual and shaped poems in projects like “Unnecessary Roughness” and “Nutritional Feed”—poems that guided a reader’s eye across the page using forms drawn from recognizable visual cues like play diagrams and nutritional labels. Animation expanded this visual approach by introducing movement to illuminate the text. While I set out to create a poetic experience that an audience might not expect, by bringing a new dimension to previously static work, I found new challenges and unexpected opportunities.

My project, *heyday*, draws its inspiration from urban forestry in cities built out of clear-cuts—the story of the Northwest. I knew from the start that I wanted to project this poem as large as possible and made a plan to do so on the back of Redmond’s City Hall during
1. cedar fell a for

to create the city's earliest trade;

2. with logs rolled, skidded down roads to arrive

3. timber

4. Cut

5. at a new understory, what a sampling of sylva

6. one thousand acres to be brought into active trust — the city of tree stewards recover a watershed,

7. cultivate urban vegetation, extend the forest canopy

8. to change the temperature
a winter festival. But to do this, I also needed to find someone who
could help bring my vision to reality.

Michael Barakat is a graphic designer and animator in Seattle,
who is also a musician and maker of bespoke shoes. I knew that
I could bring Michael visual examples of the strategies I wanted
to pursue and open up a conversation. We looked at visual poems
by Guillaume Apollinaire and Ian Hamilton Finlay. I’d seen an
animated text piece drawn from the language from a historical
lynching poster by Seattle artist Paul Rucker, which pointed me
towards an approach that could privilege the text and simultane-
ously re-appropriate it as image.

I wanted to create a text-based animation with minimal addi-
tional visual imagery to focus explicitly on the experience of
reading. Drawing from the strategies in the concrete poem exam-
pies I’d shared with him, Michael mocked up a simple storyboard
where the words of my poems took the shape of fallen logs, root
networks, and visual references to trees.

As I watched the winter sky darken, the projected image slowly
grew more intricate. Illuminated words danced across the three-
story building. It was nothing less than magical to see my poem about the history of the land echo off of a concrete wall so far removed from the natural past.

Around this period, I wrapped up my professional tenure with Amplifier, an activist nonprofit design firm. It made headlines in early 2017 for its “We the People” campaign, which hacked the presidential inauguration by purchasing full-page ad space in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to circulate activist art used by marchers in the much larger Women’s March the following day. Amplifier’s approach focuses on creative distribution and space hacking: taking over empty walls and public space with unsanctioned protest art, while sourcing its best ideas and images from the community.

*Puget Sound Driftwood Circle* took what I learned from *heyday* and the design processes used at Amplifier and turned my attention towards a new collaboration with a community. Once again, I knew I wanted to work with a building-scaled project, but this time, I’d arrange lines given to me by others.

The piece is a collaborative response to Richard Long’s sculpture of the same name, which was on display at the Henry Art Gallery, as part of the exhibition *The Time. The Place*. Long’s works naturally invite deeper reflection—he often assembles local and found materials, like driftwood or stone, into minimalist sculptural works. I was teaching a poetry workshop on ekphrastic writing in the galleries and asked each student to write two lines contemplating the driftwood in Long’s piece. Where did it come from? How did it get there?

I created two versions of the poem—a narrative text with line breaks; and a second version that combined the verses into a visual poem which mimicked the shape and form of actual driftwood arranged into a floor piece. I asked my *heyday* collaborator, Michael,
head raised, you see

A curling tendril and a smooth white surface
What is meaningful? This derivative
like a word shouted into the wind

I fell in the waters off Sunset Beach
after a sojourn in native waters I returned to
Useless Bay

radically worn piece of lumber, I am losing record
past slowly returning to a more natural state of decay
from the extinguished bonfire on winter solstice
that floated north at high tide

head raised, you see

creatures broke me off to wash to
the creek, the river, the endless back and
forth of the sea

blanched and polished smooth that the base of Snoqualmie Falls
we embody forces, sun, waves, cataracts
community, rocks, erosion, bulging, polishing

on the beach they were singular and beautiful
but oh, how they fit together

turbulence smoothed the surface where two lovers
had etched a record of their pining
hoping for community

a vortex of broken pieces brought into contact —
there a branch of Douglas fir, next to a door jam of rubber
wood from India

before drifting, seven woodpeckers nourished upon me
leaving holes that look like small nests

Puget Sound Driftwood Circle

the outlaw of your family

this one is not

this one, a shoe horn

this one, from which lost its home
the one, from which lost its home

the leeward side of an island with no name
flotsam from the edge of a beaver dam

the seawashed teak worn to a beautiful satin splinter
of yourself, tell me your pirate stories

remaining organic matter, a lumpy sea scarred tree limb
encircled/ensorcelled fragments
corrallled in a temporal disband pattern
that promises to

like windfall letters, like windfall letters, like windfall letters
this one’s piled surface
by snow

a different story of migration and waste
the sea does not care what it tosses back at us

127
to rework the image on the page. Michael created a visual broad-side and numbered each of the lines to create a sequential reading experience guiding a reader. I also asked him to create a new animation—one that could simulate the movement of driftwood drawn into a whirlpool. Each verse, or phrase, from the poem became its own fragment riding a current of water. Coming and going, the phrases encircled the reader in an ephemeral spiral.

We projected the fourteen-minute piece outdoors on the walls of Seattle’s Chophouse Row, juxtaposing the textures of the poem’s verses against the rough-hewn siding of the new building. I wanted to evoke the sense of material that had traveled from afar. In the context of a film screening or festival, we realized that the piece would bore audiences in its treatment of time and the extended reading experience. But in this public patio, restaurant goers, residents, and the curious could construct their own meaning through letting poetic fragments float in and out of their imaginations.

*Puget Sound Driftwood Circle* invited the creative participation of strangers and invented a structure to hold that collaboration. The act of making that work visible was a gesture towards bringing together the collective imagination of the brave writers who’d thought aloud with me—to offer them a work in which they could literally see themselves.

After creating two large-scale projections, I was interested in how movement could be used in a lo-fi, intimate experience. Moving text still operated as the central strategy, but I wanted to make something that an individual would experience only through their active participation rather than “broadcasting” a larger projected work.

Invited to take part in an arts festival at an old Boy Scout camp in West Seattle, I recalled a Nari Baker show at Edmonds Community College in 2012. Baker created View-Master reels with photographs of sites she had traveled to as part of her attempt as a Korean adoptee to reunite with her birth mother. Clicking through the frames of the artist’s wordless narrative, I had the sense of turning the pages of a family photo album and peering into a very personal history. Using a View-Master would allow me to explore motion, yet create an interaction for just an individual. It would
Branch of Douglas fir from India
invoke the past, a campground full of kids, but be used to tell an ecological tale of land recently altered.

*trout creek ≡ little water* explored the history of Longfellow Creek, which flows through Camp Long. To experience and better understand the history of Longfellow Creek, I walked the first several miles of the creek from its origination point in a park through parking lots, playfields, and other built environments until arriving at the place where the creek was daylit. I took detailed notes and passed them along to Tom Stiles, who once again created a sound project with me, indicating where he’d have to look carefully for the posted legacy trail markers directing him to the creek just beyond a public P-patch.

Knowing my designer Michael’s appreciation of analog, I called him up and asked if he could design for a View-Master. We discussed taking the poem I wrote about my walk along Longfellow Creek and turning it into a palimpsest—a form that would evoke how the land itself had been written and rewritten. These frames were loaded onto a View-Master and installed inside cabin 4, along with vintage scouting items I borrowed from the Boy Scouts of America office. Under a wooden bunk bed, we placed the audio file recording that captured the sounds and textures of Longfellow Creek. Given the constraints of time and budget for the commission, taking a lo-fi approach was critical to being able to turn around an animated project quickly.

*Trout Creek ≡ Little Water*

▶ View-Master reel.
in Roxhill Park, I pull the ribbon of connection, scout your headwaters

**TROUT CREEK**

*LITTLE WATER*

buried long ago beneath storm drain and sewage pipe,

follow posted trail markers across asphalt lots emitting heat

past unshaded ball fields to spring outwards in a thicket of shade,

unburied behind the community gardens, the turn of water moving over stone—

salmon counted returning to swim again along the legacy trail,

the tributary at first daylight

She served as the fourth poet laureate of the City of Redmond from 2015 to 2017, and has been an artist in residence for the Seattle Art Museum, Town Hall Seattle, and Pacific Science Center. In 2014, she was nominated for a Stranger Genius Award in Literature.

She is a three-time fellow of the MacDowell Colony and has also been in residence at the Ragdale Foundation, Centrum, and the National Park Service. Her visual work has been shown at the Dallas Museum of Art, the McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Three Arts Club of Chicago, and the American Jazz Museum. She lives and works on indigenous land in the traditional territory of Coast Salish peoples, specifically the Duwamish Tribe (Dkhw Duw’Absh), where she produces and curates events centered on curiosity and wonder for Atlas Obscura. For more info, visit www.shinyupai.com.
Ensō...is a model book— in its expansiveness of vision— to teach us how to extend poetry beyond the page as part of a publicly engaged, collaborative, and multimedial practice.
— Michael Leong, author of Words on Edge & Who Unfolded My Origami Brain

One of the most thoughtful poets in the Northwest.
— Paul Constant, Seattle Review of Books

Shin Yu Pai is a poet known for her wide-ranging collaborations and creative practice engaged as much in physical space as the page. With its blend of personal essays reflecting on the development of her poetics, Ensō places new work next to old, to create not only a mid-career retrospective, but a guidebook for poets interested in moving their practice off the page and into the world around them.

From her early work in place-based and ekphrastic poetry to her current experimentation with installation and projection, Ensō highlights the creative process to her poetry— the identities that resonate for her— and her thoughts on cultural hybridity, exchange and appropriation. She speaks deeply of how motherhood transformed her views of what is possible in poetry, reconnecting to her immigrant mother’s creative legacy, and how personal and systematic racism and misogyny have shaped her practice, while inviting the reader into a deeper conversation about how a poet writes with and about their community.