



Jingyao He

Nostalgia, Memory, and the Simulated City

MFA THESIS STATEMENT

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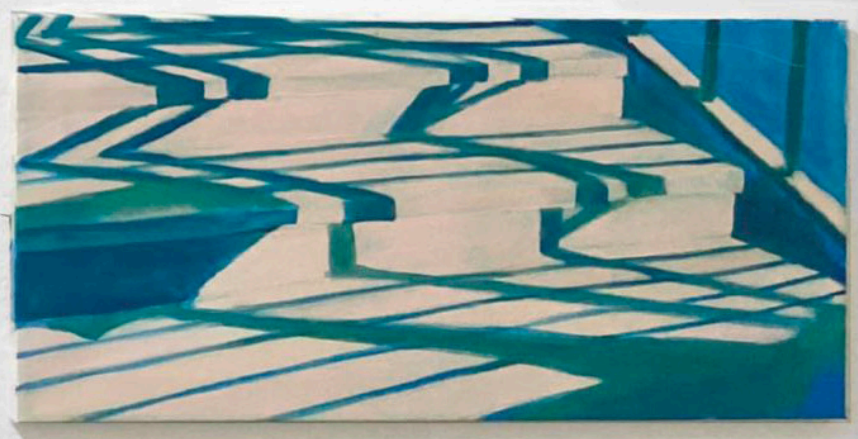
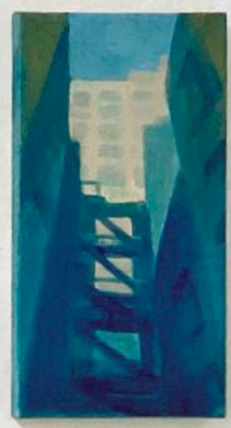
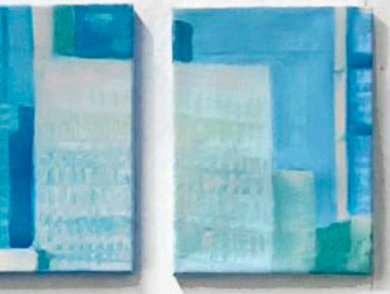
Yutong Shi

Introduction: Exploring Urban Spaces and Identity

My artistic practice delves into the intricate connection between urban spaces and personal identity, examining how architecture functions as both a physical structure and an emotional vessel. These built environments, as products of modern industrial civilization, surround us constantly, providing shelter, marking destinations, or serving as bridges that connect different places. Although static in form, the city contains a wealth of subtle movements and transformations influenced by human activity. These interactions leave imprints on its surfaces, creating shared memories and symbolic meanings.

Architecture's dual nature fascinates me. It serves both as a backdrop for human life and as a participant in shaping it. While it separates and connects spaces, it also embodies the paradox of order and fluidity, permanence and change. In this complex dynamic, I often experience a feeling that is both strange and familiar—a sensation that emerges from the layered interactions between personal identity and urban environments. These reflections set the stage for my artistic inquiry: I do not merely depict urban structures, but rather engage with the city as a continuous site of lived emotional and spatial negotiation.





The Poetics of Urban Space

I have always lived within the city. From growing up in Beijing to studying in New York and now in Boston, the urban environment has never been a backdrop I left behind. It is an ever-present atmosphere I continue to inhabit. I am surrounded by architectural fragments that feel simultaneously ordinary and profound: stair railings, corridors, windows, fences. These elements, while often overlooked, continuously activate memory—not through direct recall of a single place, but through a web of overlapping emotional associations. They are always there, not as historical references, but as part of a continuous spatial experience that shapes how I move, think, and feel.

Gaston Bachelard describes space as not merely physical, but deeply psychological and poetic. In *The Poetics of Space*, he argues that humans project emotion and identity into the spaces they inhabit, turning even the smallest corners into sites of reverie and self-reflection. My relationship to the city mirrors this sentiment. I do not depict specific locations in my artwork, but rather reimagine the city as an abstract, emotional home. It is a poetic space composed of fragments, textures, and moods—an affective environment shaped as much by memory and longing as by concrete structures.



In this sense, my paintings and collages do not seek to reproduce the visible architecture of a city, but to evoke the atmosphere of what Bachelard might call inhabited space—space that is felt, remembered, imagined. This kind of space is not bound to one time or place; it is layered, porous, and open to reinterpretation. By engaging with architectural details that are both intimate and anonymous, I hope to construct images that resonate with a shared human impulse to find a sense of familiarity, shelter, or belonging within the shifting and often overwhelming landscape of the modern city.

Traces, Memory, and Nostalgia

Many of the fragments I use in my work are drawn from architectural surfaces I encounter daily—posters on walls, paint cracks, printed patterns, and shadows on glass. These impressions are transient, often unnoticeable, and deeply embedded in everyday life. Through the process of ripping, layering, and reshaping, I translate these fleeting urban visuals into a visual language that captures both impermanence and familiarity.

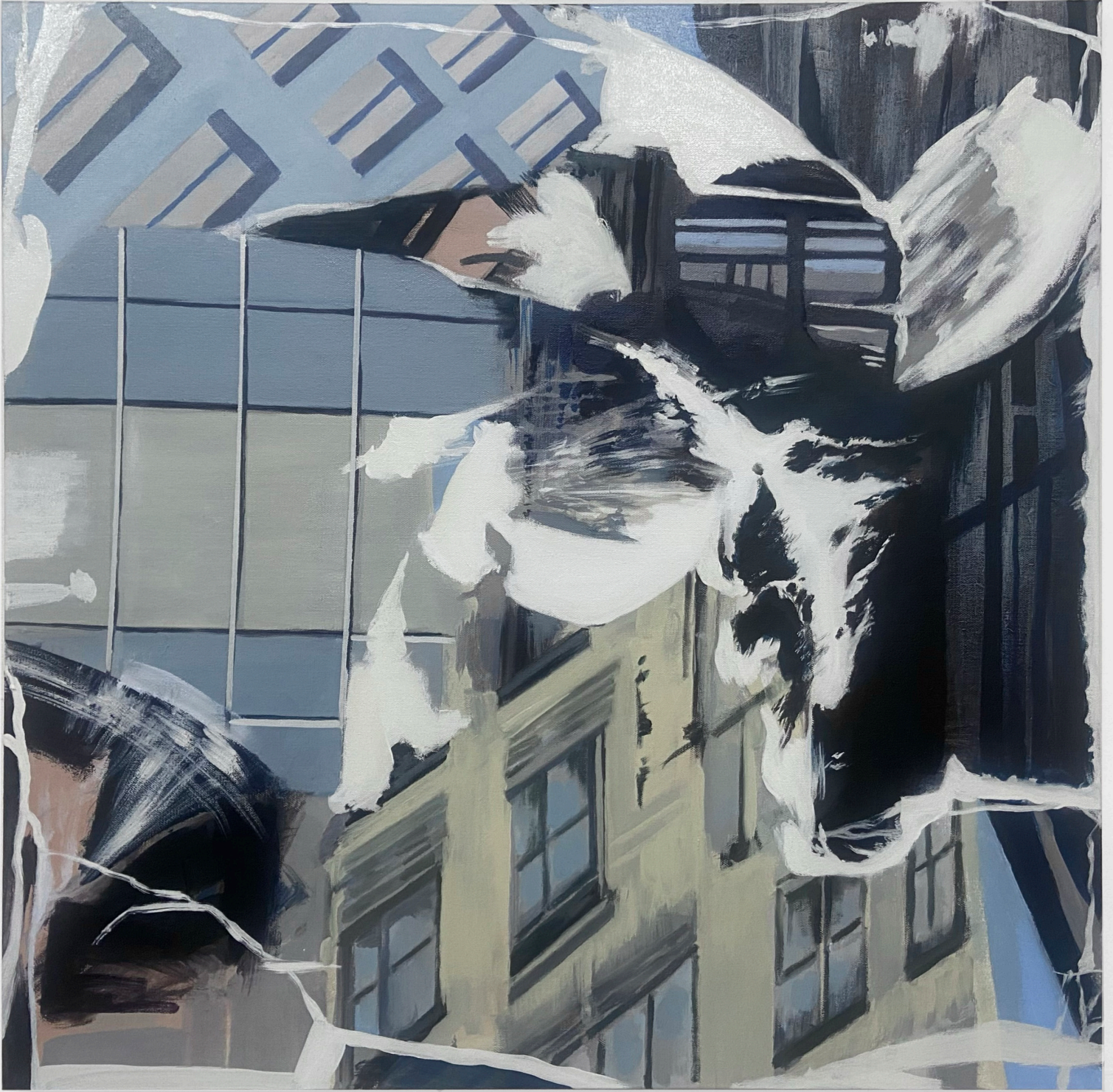
It is in this intersection of memory and construction that my idea of the urban home emerges—not as a fixed location, but as a remembered, emotional site. These fragments become symbols of shared experience—open-ended, transient, and yet curiously resonant. In this sense, what I depict is less a place and more a mood: the atmospheric residue of spaces once lived in or only imagined.



The cityscapes I construct in my work are not literal depictions of places I have lived. While they are built upon photographs, memories, and real architectural fragments, the resulting images are deliberately ambiguous, dreamlike, and fragmented. The scenes may resemble apartments, stairways, or familiar urban layouts, but they resist clear identification. They are fictional constructions that feel emotionally true, even though they do not correspond to

any specific site. These paintings blur the boundary between the familiar and the invented, simulating the experience of place rather than documenting its physicality. They are amalgamations of spatial memory, desire, and imagination. They evoke a sense of belonging or nostalgia, but not for a real place—for something constructed, perhaps lost, or even entirely invented. In this way, they become emotionally real but ontologically unstable, existing in a liminal zone where fiction and memory converge.

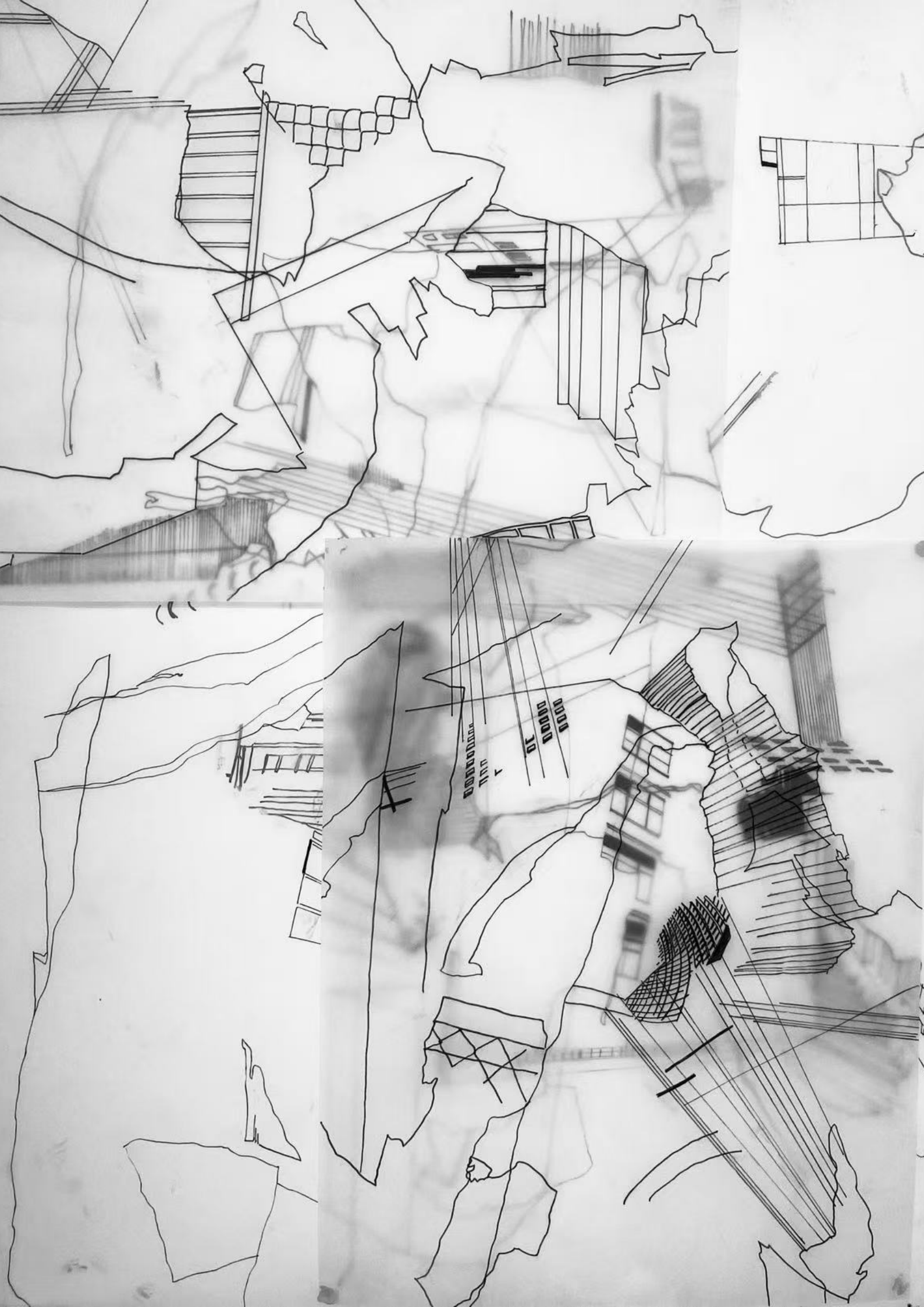
When the notion of the real becomes unstable, the desire for it intensifies. The more fragmented and alienating contemporary urban life feels, the more I seek to reconstruct a space that feels emotionally whole. Yet the wholeness I construct is not a return to a specific past, but a fabrication of familiarity—a carefully composed illusion that simulates what it feels like to remember, to belong, or to yearn for home. These imagined spaces are not documents of urban experience but poetic simulations of it—simultaneously distant and intimate, illusional and true.



Working Process

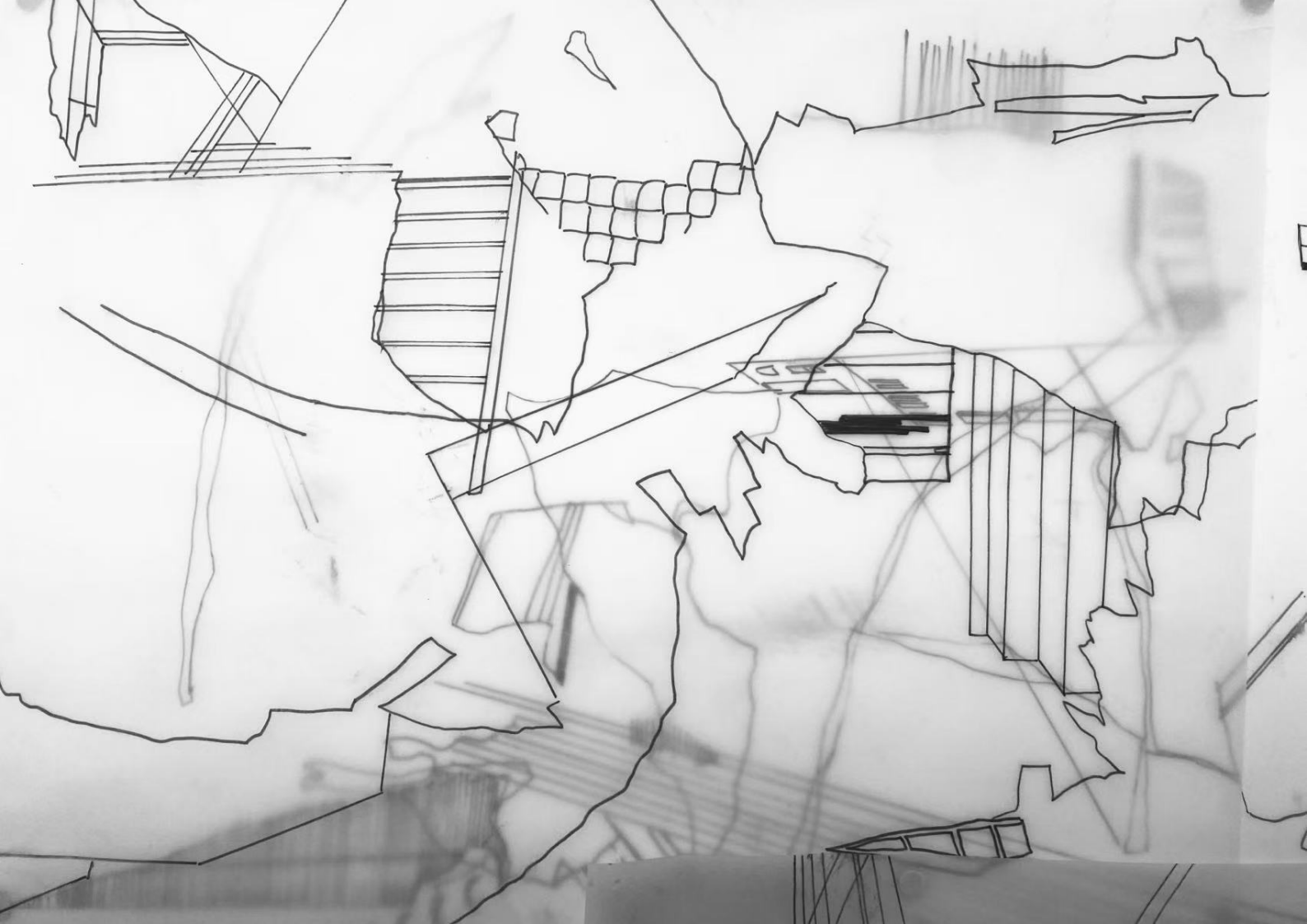
I often begin my work with digital sketches, which allow me to rapidly rearrange architectural references and emotional cues. I then transfer the composition onto canvas through drawing and painting, incorporating collage techniques that fragment and disrupt the initial image. I use transparent layers, ripped paper, and repeated structural forms to create a surface that feels layered, as if the image is in a constant state of erosion or reconstruction. These methods are ways of articulating the affective relationships I perceive between people, space, and material. It is here that the agency of the city's materiality becomes central.

Within the layered cityscapes I paint and collage, specific architectural elements—railings, windows, walls, stairwells—recur frequently. These are not passive backdrops but fragments that actively shape experience. A railing can both guide movement and obstruct it. A wall can shelter and separate. A window can invite or repel. These forms mark thresholds between interior and exterior, between personal and shared space. In this sense, they are not merely seen but felt, structuring the emotional and perceptual rhythms of urban life.



In my work, such objects take on a kind of agency. They assert presence, carry memory, and leave impressions. Their repetition and abstraction across various compositions highlight their significance—not just as formal elements, but as affective forces. The city, then, is not a static collection of built forms, but a dynamic system where human and nonhuman elements co-create the spatial and emotional environment.

In capturing the interplay between memory, architecture, and material agency, my work reflects the deep entanglement between individual lives and the urban environments they inhabit. Through abstracted imagery and layered composition, I seek to visualize the emotional pulse of the city—a place that is both real and simulated, permanent and fragile, deeply personal yet widely shared.



Reference Articles

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