

[with]drawing-room: surveying the uncertain, the estranged, the monstrous

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abstract

This visual essay presents the design research project focusing on Gao Xingjian (b. 1940), who is a Chinese-born novelist, playwright, and painter in exile. He is also a Nobel laureate in literature (2000) for the universal validity, bitter insights, and linguistic ingenuity of his writings. This essay explores the under-researched architectural and spatial allegories of Gao's literary and theatrical works by interpreting his acts of withdrawal in search of a new perspective for meaning making in a time of crisis and violence most notably marked by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–76). First, this essay examines the traumatic process of Gao's threefold withdrawal into the uncertain interior of the self. It then focuses on how such experiences of withdrawal have led to Gao's post-exile play *Between Life and Death* (1991), and his literary invention of 'fugitive pronouns' to represent an interior that is unsettled, obscure, and vague. Finally, to explore the architectural potential of Gao's play, the design research project *[with]Drawing-Room* translates the narrative of withdrawal into a spatial performance in three acts through methods of scanning, burning, and tracing. Engaging with notions of darkness and uncertainty through thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Francois Jullien, the essay argues against the light of certitude often uncritically associated with modern technology and a rationalistic mind set.

keywords

breath-image; Chinese poetics; ficto-critical; interiority; LiDAR scan

cite as:

Yuman Zeon (宇文锡安), '[with]Drawing-Room: Surveying the Uncertain, the Estranged, the Monstrous', *idea journal*, 20.1 (2023), 136–149 <<https://doi.org/10.37113/ij.v20i01.495>>

introduction

Reflecting the turbulent age of darkness within the shadow of modernity, Gao Xingjian's artistic and literary works are characterised by the creation of ambiguous images [Fig. 01, 02, 03]. These images often appear to belong to 'the order of the night and dream rather than the ordinary world.'⁰¹ Gao's works can be interpreted in relation to the sinologist Francois Jullien's notion of 'vague-drab-indistinct' conceived through traditional Chinese paintings.⁰² According to Jullien, based on Taoist thought, 'vague-drab-indistinct' is where the opposition between presence and absence, life and death, subject and object is dissolved. It represents a 'return to latency, when forms dissolve, features blur together, life comes undone, grows silent, and undergoes transformation.'⁰³ In this sense, the images and atmosphere Gao creates are referred to as 'breath-image' (*qi xiang*), a notion used in traditional Chinese paintings; where 'the energy of the undifferentiated fount comes into actuality and takes form, that image spreads as a breath-atmosphere.'⁰⁴ In relation to the creative methods and aesthetic qualities of Gao's artistic and literary works, which are driven by his never-ending journey into the interior, this essay poses several thought-provoking questions. Can Gao's creation of the 'breath-image', characterised by the sense of 'uncertainty' and 'darkness', offer a methodological detour in an era that predominantly values reason, science, and certitude? Does the visual and linguistic process of withdrawal into the latent and the fusional realms of the interior enable

the conception of a new language within architectural and spatial practice, which is currently driven by quantifiable measures and predetermined outcomes? Can the Chinese poetics of the 'nonobject' and the 'unthought', in its quest for the unobjectifiable 'fount of things', provide insights for us to reconsider the gaps within the rationalist cognition framework grounded in Western science and philosophy?

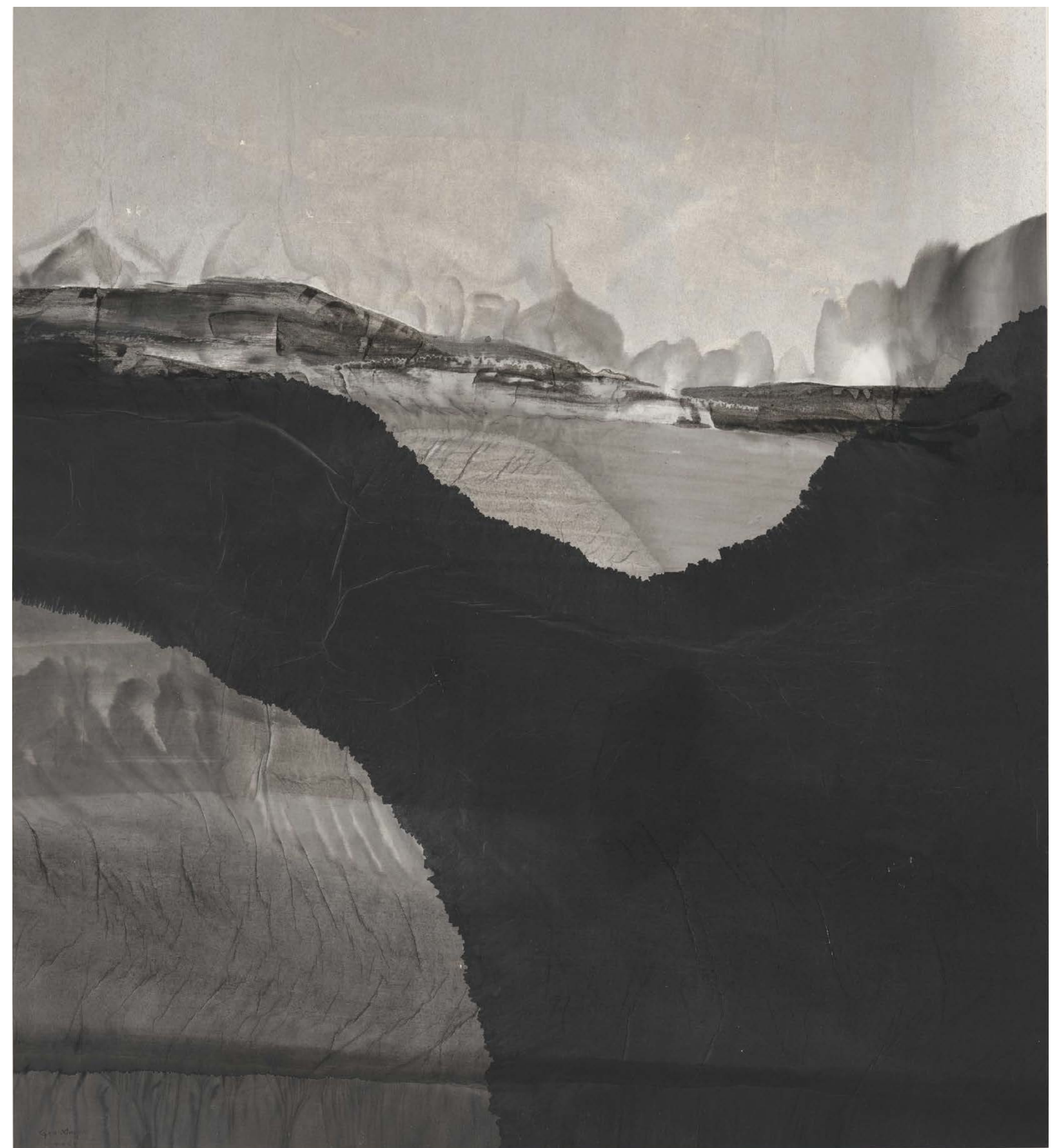


Figure 01.

The Floating City, Gao Xingjian, 2005. Courtesy of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library.



Figure 02.
Phantasmagoria. Gao Xingjian, 2003. Courtesy of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library.



Figure 03.
Ink Sketch. Gao Xingjian, 1999. Courtesy of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library.

the threefold withdrawals

At the height of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, aware his works could be accused of failing to comply with prescribed guidelines of the Communist Party and realising that it was increasingly difficult to hide them, Gao Xingjian was 'forced to burn kilos and kilos of manuscripts—burn them in secret, in fear for his life, a logistically maddening process of keeping a flame alight without creating any smoke that would give him away.'⁰⁵ Such was his initial act of self-censorship during a politically turbulent time. Gao Xingjian was born in war-torn China in the aftermath of the Japanese invasion in 1940. A Chinese émigré and later a naturalised French citizen, Gao's formative years of growth as a writer largely overlapped with the Cultural Revolution, a decade of crisis when the intellectual and creative activities of individuals were suppressed, and literature and the arts were considered distorted representations of reality. Writers and artists whose works were primarily about expressing their creative selves were unceasingly silenced. During this time, Gao developed an 'irrepressible urge for artistic self-expression resulting in several hundred works of prose, plays, poems.' Eventually, these works could no longer be hidden, and they were all burnt to ashes under the disguise of the night.⁰⁶ The night of burning manuscripts marks his first withdrawal.

In the year 1983, a politically ambiguous time after the Cultural Revolution, Gao's absurdist play *The Bus Stop* was banned from performance and criticised by the Party as 'the most pernicious work since

the establishment of the People's Republic.⁰⁷ He was threatened with the political death sentence of being sent to the notorious prison camp in Qinghai province. In a routine health check in the same year, he was diagnosed with cancer as a shadow was discovered in his lung through an X-ray scan. Having already accepted his imminent death, Gao was brought back from the brink of death when a later scan revealed the shadow in his lung had disappeared, revealing a misdiagnosis. The shadow of the double suspended death sentences marks his second withdrawal.

The reprieve was a moment of epiphany. He made a quick decision to flee Beijing and journeyed into 'the remote forest regions of Sichuan province and wandered along the Yangtze River from its source down to the coast.'⁰⁸ His third withdrawal was an odyssey into the dark forest through the Chinese countryside, covering 15,000 kilometres. He surveyed the fringes of Han Chinese civilisation and the margins of modernity, a landscape that unfolds in his autobiographical novel *Soul Mountain* (1990). It tells the story of one man's quest for roots, inner peace, and liberty. In the novel, Gao records an episode in which the protagonist accidentally encounters a Nuo mask, a horrifying face with beastly features, during his interior journey. This triggers deep reflection and a quest for his own uncertain identity:

Man cannot cast off this mask, it is a projection of his own flesh and spirit. He can no longer remove from his own face this mask which has already

grown like skin and flesh, so he is always startled as if disbelieving this is himself. He cannot remove this mask, and this is agony. But having manifested itself as his mask, it cannot be obliterated, because the mask is a replica of himself. It has no will of its own, or one could say it has a will, but no means of expression and so prefers not to have a will. Therefore, it has left man with an eternal face with which he can examine himself in amazement.⁰⁹

The reflection on the mask brings him to the borderline between memory and imagination, between history and fiction. The mask becomes a fictional alter ego of Gao Xingjian's forbidden memory, and expresses his sense of loss, fear, and horror in the silent voice of a persona. As a result, his novels and plays are his intense examination of human interiority through the 'eternal face' of the mask he discovered during his withdrawals.

fugitive pronouns

The vision of darkness through Gao's threefold withdrawals into the night, the shadow, and the dark forest becomes an endless source of inspiration for his creation. These seemingly opaque and impenetrable traumatic events are interpreted in his novel and plays as an inner journey of the self that is restless, unstable, and constantly transforming. Influenced by Beckett's theatre of the absurd, Brecht's epic theatre, and traditional Chinese opera, the 'fugitive pronouns' are key to Gao's invention of the

'cold theatre.' Gao's theatre is one of uncertain interiority and is shaped by the aesthetics of exile. Within the traditional dual relationship between the self and the role, Gao introduces a neutral actor who freely mediates between the self and the role to create a sense of uncertainty. Through this tripartite structure, the very process of the neutral actor getting in and out of the role is presented as theatre. Through this invention, the theatre represents an interior space where a rigorous and critical reflection of the self can be conducted. Technically, it is made possible by dissecting the self into the threefold pronouns 'I', 'you', and 'she.' All three pronouns are used to refer to one person, the self. Gao believes the use of shifting pronouns to address the self creates multiple distances that form an unstable psychological space. Together these pronouns constitute a composite protagonist that is always in a dynamic and unsettled inner relationship. In the solitary journey, 'you' is created out of the acute loneliness of 'I' as a reflection so that dialogue becomes possible. For the same purpose, 'she' is often created out of 'you' to allow the author to project into a woman's psyche.¹⁰

In his 1991 post-exile play *Between Life and Death*, one of his most architecturally and spatially rich and daring experiments, Gao adopts this technique to represent a room as an architectural allegory of the Woman's alter ego, where the killing of the Man takes place.¹¹ Focusing on the boundary condition and existing in the intangible realm between life and death, reality and dream, the play is a detailed study of the uncertain human

psyche and especially the dark side of the human being's inner world. It aims to reveal and examine 'the internal psychical experience in all its nakedness' that is hidden behind an ordinary façade.¹²

The play is set on an empty and dimly lit stage with a few props or spatial devices that act as symbolic signifiers during the process of the Woman's performance of a long monologue. The props include male clothes, a toy model of a house, a mannequin, and a jewellery box. The Man, who is killed, turns into a heap of folded clothes, and the toy model of a house triggers the Woman's recollections of her childhood. The fragments of the mannequin symbolise the mental collapse of the Woman and the jewellery box serves as an allegory of a sarcophagus containing the woman's precious belongings and memories.¹³ The play is written as a monologue in a stream of consciousness entirely using the pronoun 'she' to address the self with a tone of extreme coldness and detachment. The obscure psychological space of the Woman is conceived as 'an inner world that is not governed by simple rules of logic' but rather as a meeting place for 'consciousness and subconsciousness, thoughts, feelings, desires and memories.'¹⁴ After the act of killing, the room unfolds into a journey where the Woman encounters the hallucinatory figures as her alter egos. Blurring the boundary between the subjective emotion and the objective space, the constant unfolding of the Woman's uncertain interior is intertwined with the unending withdrawal of her room.

Tracing the aftermath of the killing of the Man, the room, now transformed into a monstrous slaughtering machine, is mapped as the Woman's inner landscape and marked by the never-ending process of dismemberment of her body: half a wooden leg slowly stretches out from under her skirt; an arm appears from inside the shawl; an arm falls off from the shawl; a body is being butchered; a hand covered in oozing blood of purple red. The fragmented body parts are imagined as islands scattered in a labyrinth, with each island representing a site of her hallucinatory encounter: a shrouded island with a woman in white; a shadow island with a woman carrying an umbrella and marking time; an island with a semaphore flag held by a masked man; an island made of cracked icy layers surrounded by a mass of blackness; an island in the form of a grey kasaya with a nun dissecting herself; an island like a long black robe cloaking an immeasurably tall and thin man with a painted eye in the middle.¹⁵

One feature of the aesthetics of exile, as a Gao Xingjian scholar Izabella Łabędzka points out, is the privileged position Gao gives to uncertainties, dreams, and oneiric poetics that 'embarrass the rational mind.'¹⁶ In Gao's own words, his plays are 'set up on the premise of non-reality' and aimed to 'fully mobilize the imagination.'¹⁷ The playwright suggests that the actors, while performing his play, should avoid relying on anything that belongs to the realm of rationality; rather they are encouraged to trust only their imagination. Another key

feature of Gao's aesthetics is the notion of metamorphosis. Gao's theatre focuses not only on the transformation process from actor to character, from character to object, from object to illusion, but also more broadly on the transformation from good to evil, from love to hate, and from life to death.¹⁸ Within the inner landscape of uncertainty, as Łabędzka also suggests, it is the modern man's 'scattered identity' that Gao's theatre so masterfully represents. The Woman in the story 'has to construct and reconstruct her identity by unending review of the tapes of her memory with recorded, overlapped, or blurred, incoherent fragments of her own life and the life of some other person, [which] reflects the lack of coherence, continuity, and order.' In Gao's theatre, there is no unity nor completeness; everything is in a constant flux of mosaic particles.¹⁹

[with]Drawing-Room

The performative act of the Woman in *Between Life and Death* imagines an interior that is ambiguous and uncertain. Through a structure saturated by the images of dreams, the play conveys a sense of vagueness and formlessness that escapes the logic of everyday language and any prescribed guidelines of meaning-making. Reflecting on both Gao's traumatic memories, his paintings, and his play, the design project *[with]Drawing-Room* traces the threefold withdrawals and translates them into architectural and spatial performance in three Acts.

Act I: Scanning. Echoing Gao's terrifying event of discovering a shadow in the scan of his lung that led to his withdrawal and reflecting on the autobiographical nature of his play, an act of LiDAR 3D scanning of my room is conducted. The scan is not to be taken as a survey in a conventional and rational sense but rather as a threshold towards a poetic interpretation. Gao's event of withdrawal is interpreted in the design research project as an act of masking through the 3D scan. By doing so, my room and garden are masked by a point cloud model with moments of shadows and uncertainties [Fig. 04, 05]. Shadow constantly haunts Gao at a deeply personal and existential level; hence, it has been a persistent subject matter in almost all his novels, plays, and ink paintings as if his creations are means of embodying the shadow image he once encountered. The 3D scan acts as an initial contact point with reality waiting to be completely transformed into an inner landscape.

The emphasis on the moments of obscurity within the 3D scan can be related to philosopher Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'darkness.' Agamben posits that 'the ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity.'²⁰ He further suggests that in relation to the 'contemporary,' 'darkness is something that—more than any light—turns directly and singularly towards him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the

beam of darkness that comes from his own time.'²¹ Rather than attempting to rationalise, correct, or clarify the aspects of the scan image that remain obscure, in this Act, we bring these obscurities to the forefront of our attention and engage in speculation about an existence that appears impenetrable through the grasp of the intellect. This Act is a critique against the certitude often uncritically associated with modern technology, epitomised by the LiDAR scanner.



Figure 04.
LiDAR Scans of My Room. Digital model created by the author.

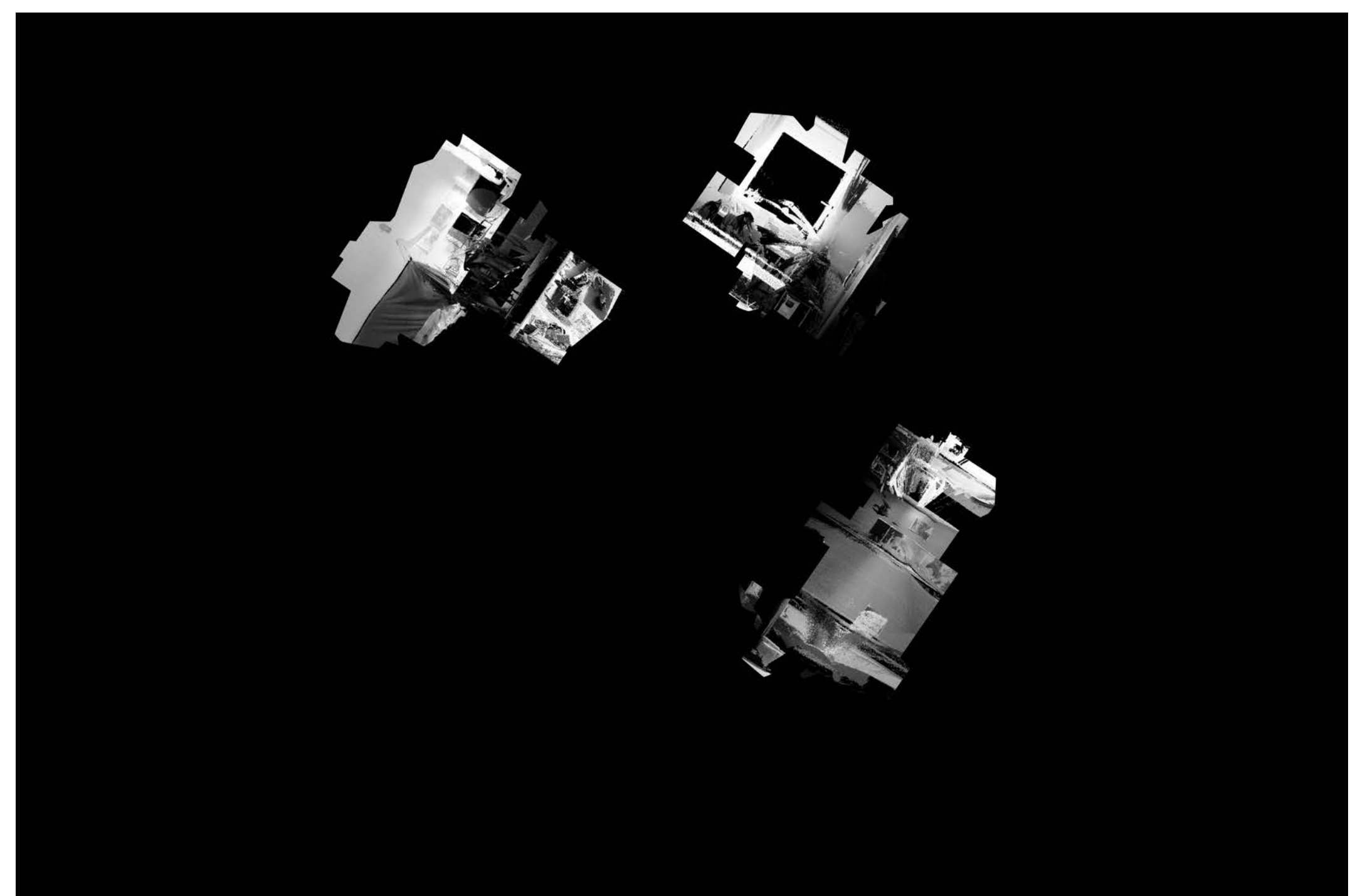


Figure 05.
LiDAR Scans of My Room. Digital model created by the author.

Agamben's understanding of 'darkness' as 'intimate obscurity' finds resonance in the notion of 'presence-absence' within Chinese poetics, as articulated by Francois Jullien. Perhaps we can get a glimpse of a certain insight by examining the 3D scan of my room in relation to Gao's ink paintings [Fig. 01, 02, 03]. Gao's paintings, recounting his experience of withdrawal into darkness, portray inner landscapes that evoke an atmosphere characterised by a 'as-if-there-were-as-if-there-were-not' quality.²² In terms of aesthetic quality, they bear resemblance to traditional Chinese landscape paintings, such as those by Dong Yuan (934–962), where 'peaks appear and disappear', and 'clouds and mists now reveal, now conceal' [Fig. 06, 07].²³ As noted by Jullien, 'Taoist thought targets that opposition through its evasive formulations expressing the evanescence of the *tao*. That is what Dong Yuan paints, shrouding mountaintops in mist, making paths come out and go back in, treetops protrude and recede.'²⁴

Jullien observes that 'painters and poets in China do not paint distinctive, much less disjunctive, aspects. They do not paint things to show them better and, by displaying them before our eyes, to bring forth their presence. Rather, they paint them between "there is" and "there is not", present-absent, half-light, half-dark, at once light-at once dark.'²⁵ When we view the 3D scans as an evasive shroud undergoing a process of transition, they begin to incite a poetic imagination of a very subtle and atmospheric quality.



Figure 06.

Riverbank (Detailed View 1). Attributed to Dong Yuan, Southern Tang Dynasty (937–976). Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 07.

Riverbank (Detailed View 2). Attributed to Dong Yuan, Southern Tang Dynasty (937–976). Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 08.

Riverbank (Detailed View 3). Attributed to Dong Yuan, Southern Tang Dynasty (937–976). Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Act II: Burning. The Act of burning re-enacts the night on which Gao burned his manuscripts. The Act is a 'poetic incitement' that interprets the traumatic event of the night. Through burning, the model of my room is turned into fragments and ashes [Fig. 09]. It also invokes the 'burning house' parable, one of the best-known stories from Buddhist teachings on the process of purification and the journey towards inner peace and freedom. Burning is here understood as a process of returning to latency and the undifferentiated origin of things.²⁶ It creates an obscure image and is the second threshold into an inner landscape. A few small caskets are designed to contain the burnt remnants that, through rescaling, also act as islands on the stage of the play. Each casket relates to an encounter with an imaginary figure during the Woman's inner journey. Reflecting the unending transformation of the Woman's interior, the stage is scripted to be reconfigured based on the positions of the caskets through design gestures of 'rescaling,' 'shifting,' 'rotating,' 'layering,' and so on [Fig. 10]. The Act of Burning as a drawing method thus creates 'obscure distance' from the logics of the everyday.

The twelfth-century Chinese theorist Han Zhuo developed a typology of 'obscure distances' in Chinese landscape painting and the various modalities of uncertainty and dimness:

Sometimes 'the riverbank is close and the water flows wide, the space is empty with mountains in the distance':

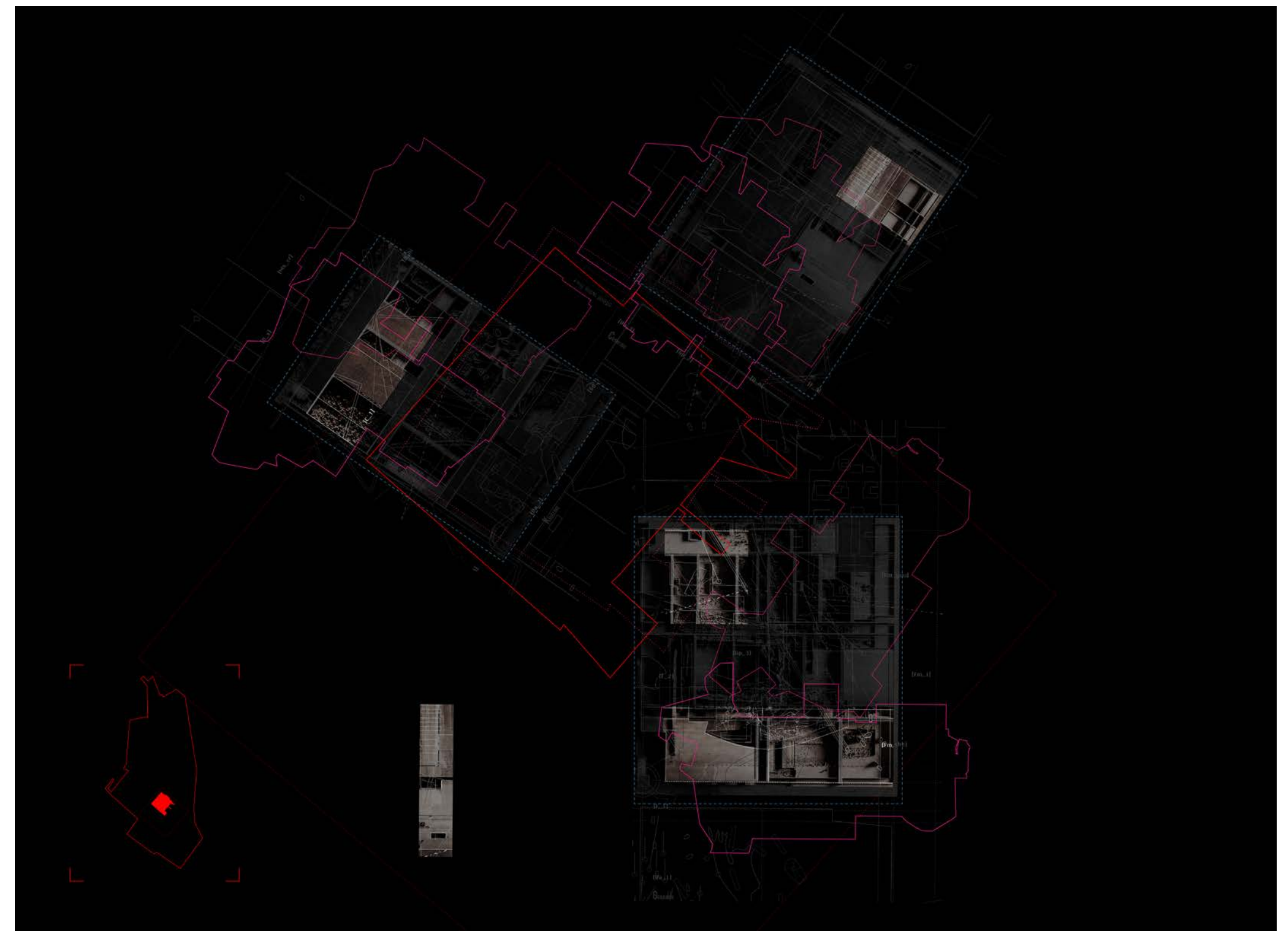


Figure 09.

Turning the scan of my room into burnt remnants. Digital drawing created by the author.

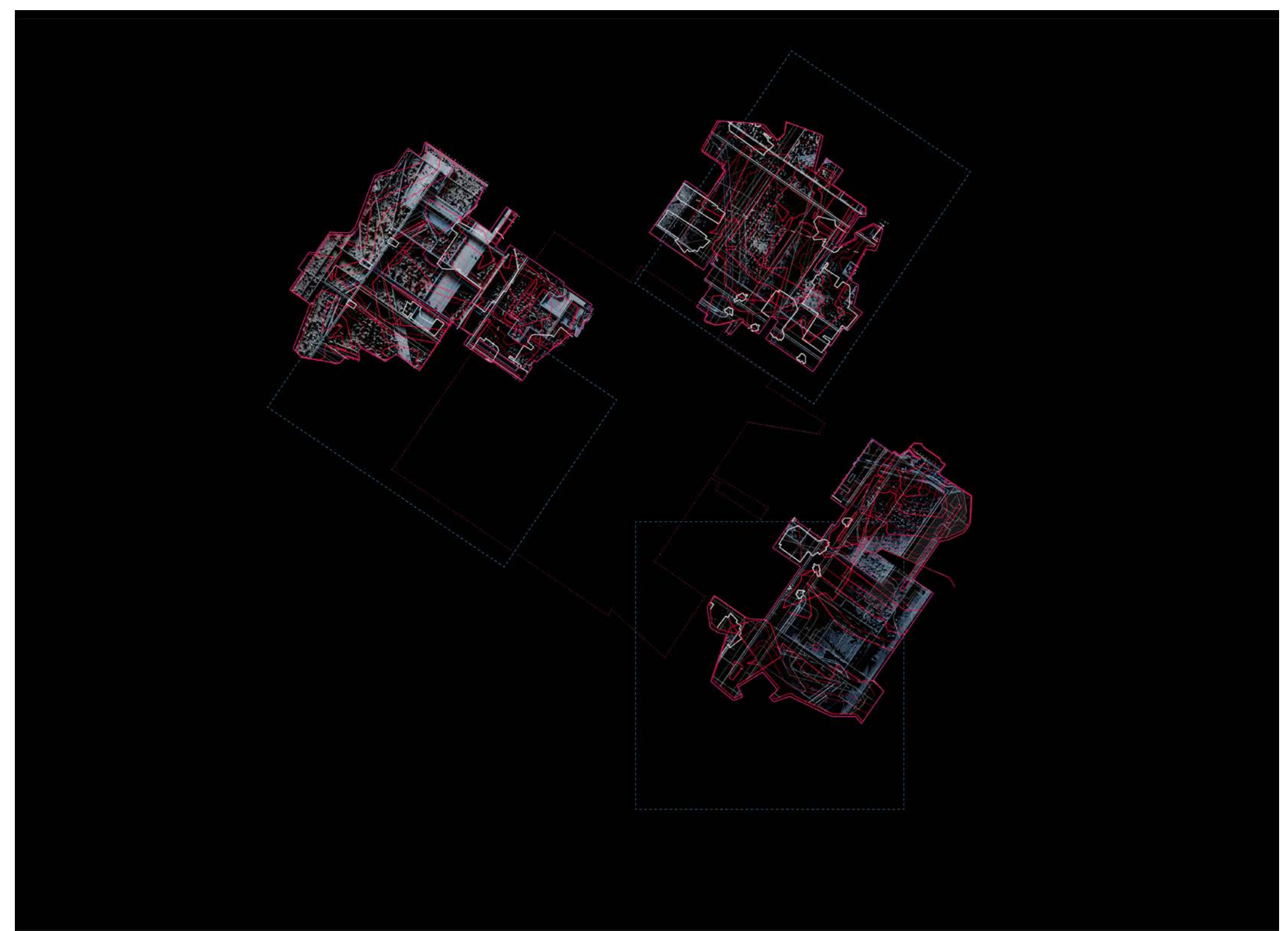


Figure 10.

Curating the caskets of ashes as islands. Digital drawing created by the author.

that is the sparse distance. Sometimes, 'mists and clouds create indistinction and, on the other side of the river, one has the impression of no longer seeing anything': that is the blurry distance. Sometimes, 'the landscape is at once extraordinarily entrancing and subtle-*evanescent*': that is the concealed distance.²⁷ [Fig. 08]

The three traditional modalities of obscure distance are also discernible in Gao's ink paintings of the inner landscape. They invoke elusive images resembling a frozen river, a wide-open valley, or a range of snow-covered mountains [Fig. 01, 02]. Jullien's observations regarding the undifferentiated fount of *tao* (the way) equally apply to Gao's paintings. These images 'do not picture but rather depict [...] The de- signifies not completion but the reverse: effacement, undoing [...] It signifies, from within the figuration itself, a silencing and softening of representation's power to figure. Here, whether these traces hold back instead of moving outward or merge together and recede instead of bringing forth, they are anti-traces, taking one to the brink of the undifferentiated.'²⁸

Consistently monochromatic and solemn in their treatment through layers of ink washes that follow spontaneous body movements and brushwork, Gao's paintings envision an interior world described as 'vague-drab-indistinct'. In response to the obscure qualities of Gao's paintings, the Act of burning within the design project introduces multiple 'obscure distances',

dissolving the distinctiveness of everyday spaces and objects. Consequently, the image reflects layers of a repetitive process involving burning, scanning, and tracing, which in turn blurs the features of my room [Fig. 09]. In essence, the notion 'vague-drab-indistinct' is not to be interpreted as attributes or specifications to characterise a particular quality of things. Instead, they are meant to be articulated 'in sequence, all on the same plane, in such a way as to dispense with the differences among them, so that we do not grab onto any one of them in particular'; hence, they are 'linked together in a single intuition.'²⁹

Act III: Tracing. A stage is envisioned by tracing the burnt remnants and gathering and curating the fragments to construct a scripted surface [Fig. 11]. It is scripted based on the narrative of the play to trace the immanent relationships between characters. The burnt remnants are thus like masks that are charged with the narrative potential of the play. Reconfiguring the bodily and architectural allegories of *Between Life and Death*, the third act translates my room into an inner landscape by taking these burnt fragments as imaginary islands described in the play [Fig. 12, 13].

Concerning the in-between, undifferentiated, and uncertain realm of Chinese poetics that escapes concrete attributes, Jullien poses a provocative question: 'could a mere preposition ("between") have more philosophical import [...] than what we usually recognise as accredited notions?'³⁰ While the concept of trace in Western

philosophical tradition 'appears to beckon openly even while enigmatically keeping the signified waiting', the trace (*ji*) in Chinese poetics 'has remained indifferent to that hermeneutics of the trace and conceives of the trace in terms of its pure phenomenality, in its mode of appearing, and hence in terms of presence-absence.'³¹ In this sense, the trace is 'precisely between the "there is" and the "there is not" [...] It is present but inhabited by absence, and, if it is a sign of, it is of taking leave. Both empty and full, concretely form and evasive, tangible, and yet escaping at the same time.'³²

The Act of tracing becomes a quest into the in-between realm of Gao's play. Following the tradition of literati painting, the trace resides in the intricate relation between painting and writing: 'The verb "to paint" (*hua*, to trace outlines, to delimit) was increasingly accompanied or even replaced by the term "to write" (*xie*). The painter no longer found it surprising to say that he wrote rocks, trees, a landscape.'³³ Within the interweaving of Gao's enigmatic images of painting and writing, the stage is carefully designed through layers of traces: traces of the burnt fragments, traces of the hazy boundaries of the 3D scan, and the traces of the words and sentences from the play [Fig. 11]. Some of these traces are perceived as absences, represented by voids, incisions, and erasures. Other traces are interpreted as presences, featuring distinctive elements such as a toy house, a jewellery box, a pair of old shoes, a pile of folded clothes, cabinet boxes, masks, and a mannequin [Fig. 12, 13].

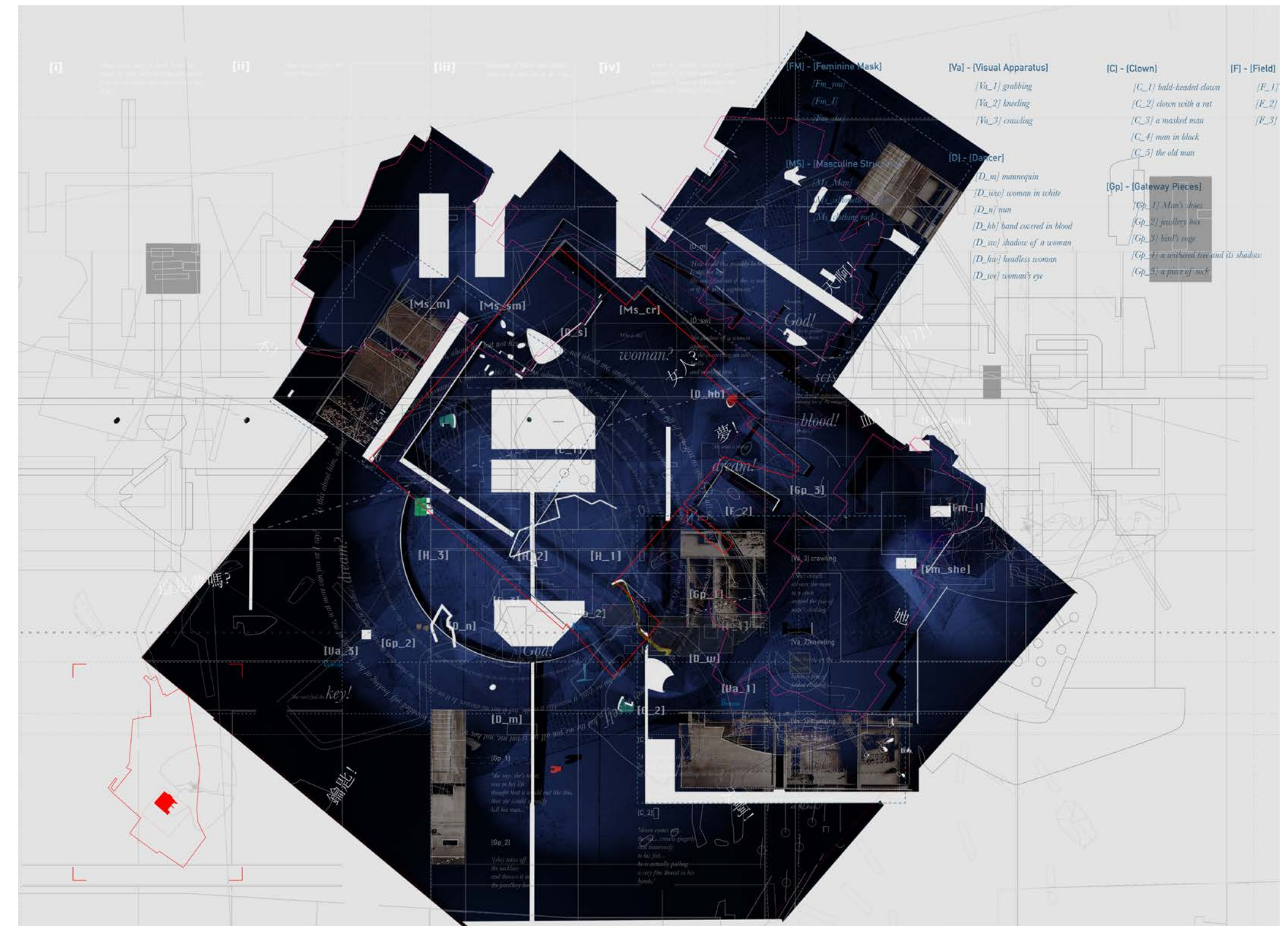


Figure 11.
Drawing the scripted surface as a stage. Digital drawing created by the author.

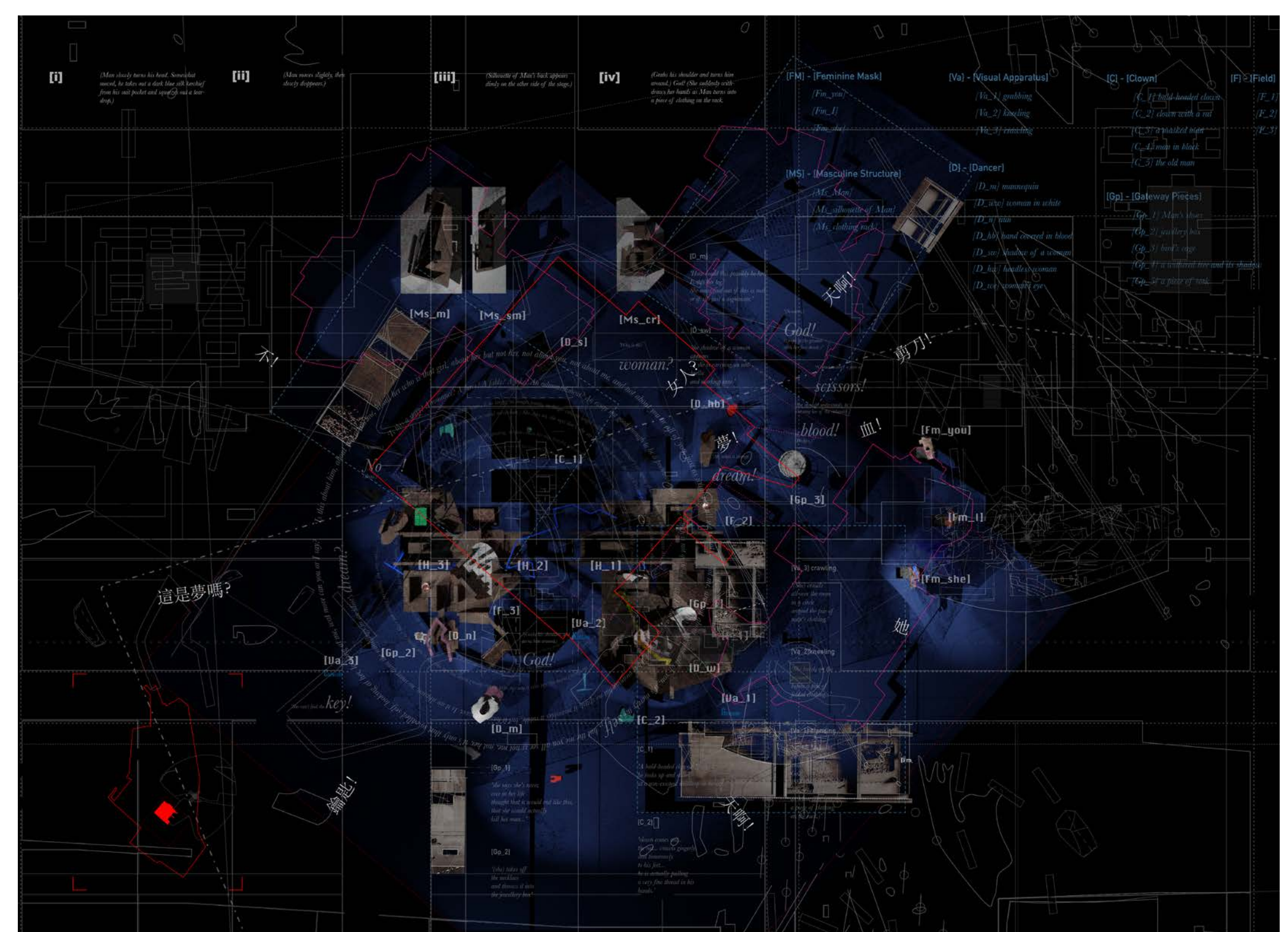


Figure 12.
Drawing a scripted surface as a stage with imaginary characters based on the play. Digital drawing created by the author.

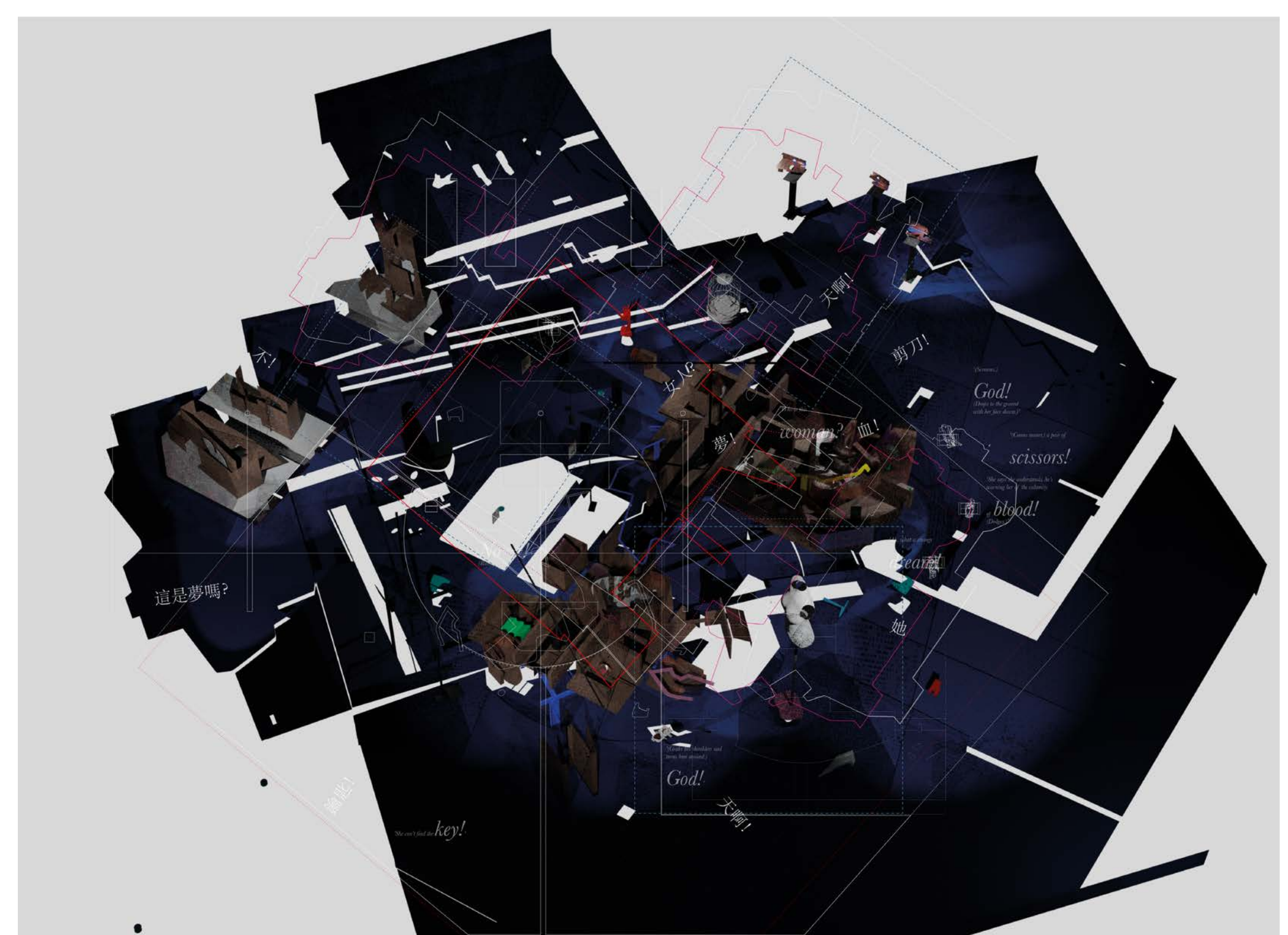


Figure 13.
Drawing a scripted surface as a stage with imaginary characters based on the play in perspective view. Digital drawing created by the author.

These traces are intended to evoke the Woman's visions of fragmented body parts and the enchanting encounters she experiences during her inner journey. Inscribed at the centre of the stage, in a spiral form, are the words uttered by the Woman as she traverses a boundless sea with no end. In this profound moment, where she has no more thoughts, no more words, no more feelings, and everything is veiled in a vast chaos of darkness, she questions: 'Is this a story? A romance? A farce? A fable? A joke? An admonishment? An essay not good enough to be a poem, or poetic prose which is not quite an essay? It's not a song, because it has meaning but no spirit, it resembles a riddle, but it has no answer. Is it an illusion, no more than the ramblings in an idiot's dream?'³⁴

conclusion

Embedded within Gao's vision of darkness, this design research project explores in three Acts a new architectural and spatial language that examines the uncertain identity of the self at multiple boundary situations: between subject and object, fiction and history, memory and imagination, form and formlessness, reality and dream. The vision of darkness is not unique to Gao but rather intrinsic to Chinese poetics. The renowned Chinese historian Zhang Hao (1937–2022) suggests the term 'dark consciousness' to describe 'the polemics of crisis and contingency ingrained in Chinese thought.'³⁵ In the Taoist canon *Laozi* there are teachings that 'the luminous *tao* (way) is seemingly dark,' 'the advancing *tao* (way) is seemingly withdrawing,' 'the great image has no form.' Let us return to Francois Jullien on

the notion of the 'breath-image': 'The breath-image breaks free from the mire of forms and unfurls figuration beyond figuration, or rather upstream from it, opening it to the undifferentiated and making it available as the "great image."³⁶ Gao's theatre, most directly manifested through *Between Life and Death*, is constructed through an unending series of 'breath-images' with rich bodily and architectural allegories that break free from the constraints of logic. It calls for a return to the formless state of pure potentiality [Fig. 14, 15].

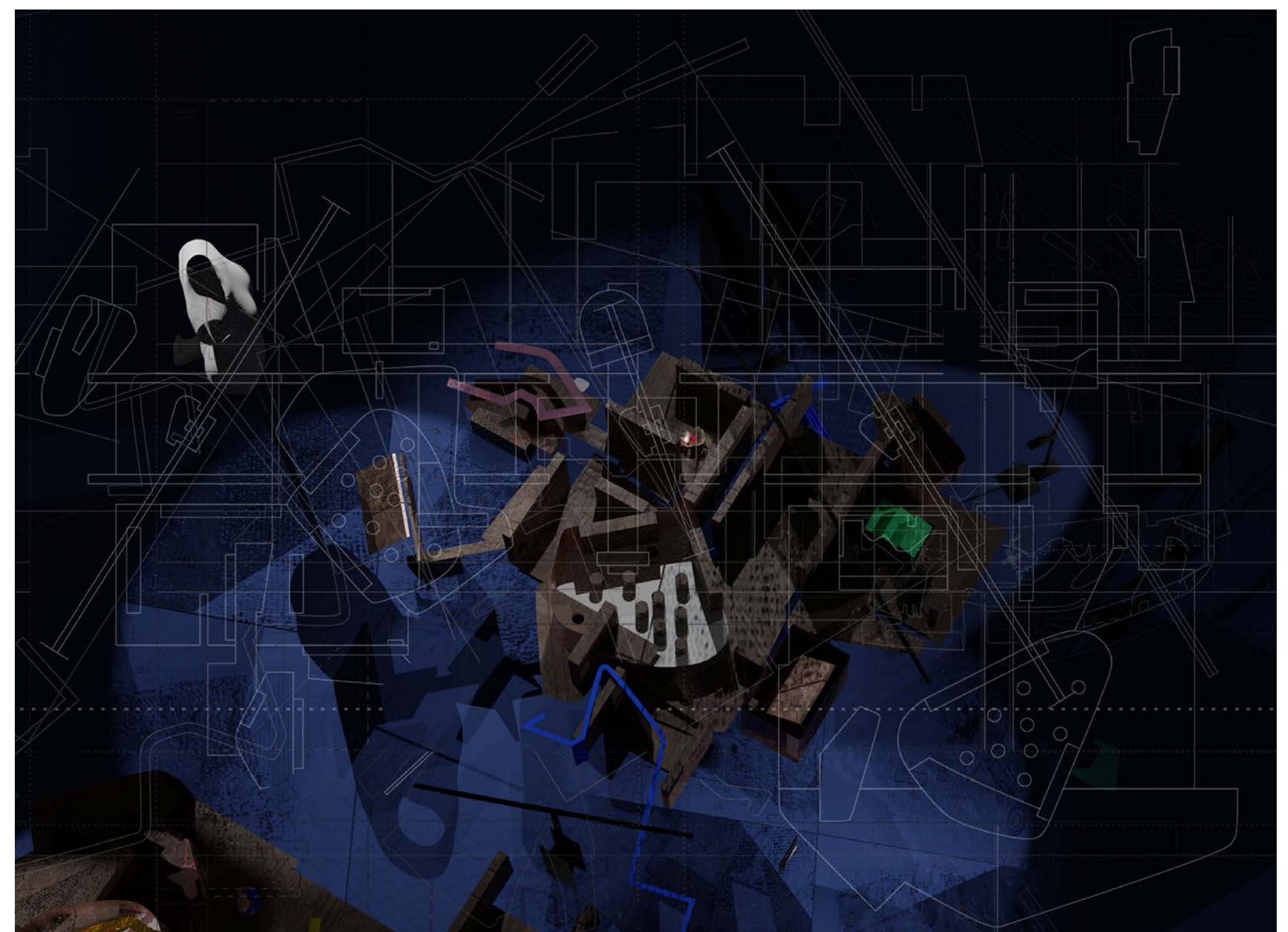


Figure 14.

Perspective view of the design research project [with]Drawing-Room. Digital drawing created by the author.

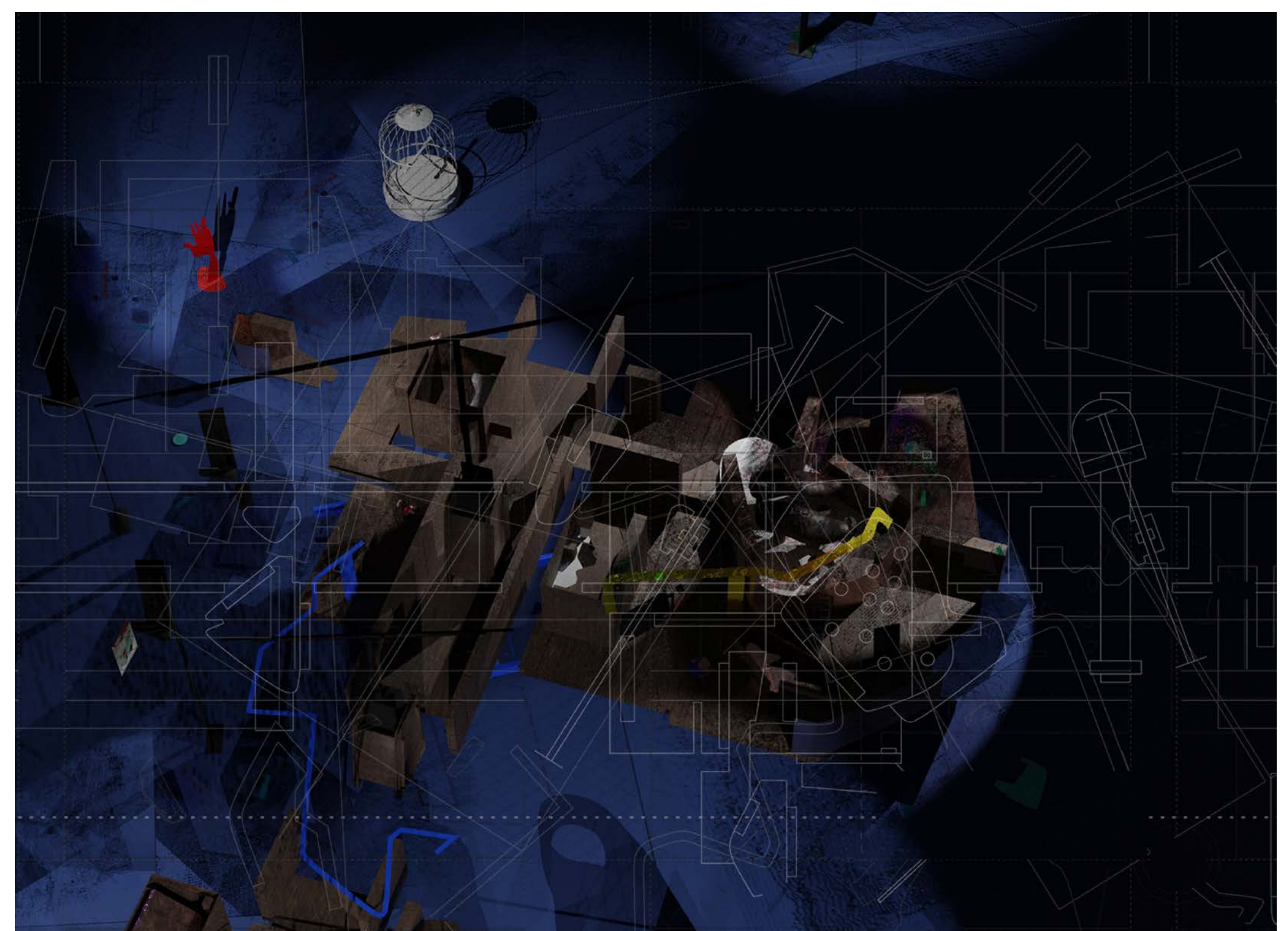


Figure 15.

Perspective view of the design research project [with]Drawing-Room. Digital drawing created by the author.

The play ends with the Woman, questioning her own identity and her thoughts in disarray within her uncertain inner world, exhaling her last words through a stream of departing thoughts: 'Is it about him, about you, about me, about her who is that girl, about her but not her, not about you, not about me, and not about you and all of you, just as what you all see is not her, not me, and not you, it's merely the self, but the me you all see is not me, not her, it's only that so-called self looking at her, looking at me, what more can you and I say?'³⁷

acknowledgements

This essay has gone through many iterations since its inception during an intense lockdown period of Covid-19. I am grateful to the editors, reviewers, my PhD supervisors, and fellow researchers who have provided inspiring feedback during the formation of this piece. I would also like to thank the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library for granting access to the images from the Gao Xingjian Archive.

biography

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notes

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- 14 Łabędzka, *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre*, p. 158.
- 15 Xingjian, *The Other Shore*.
- 16 Łabędzka, *Gao Xingjian's Idea of Theatre*, p. 153.
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- 24 Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form*, p. 28.
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