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## Some bubble universe

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SOME BUBBLE UNIVERSE

by

Dong Dong

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Book Arts in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Julia Leonard

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To Zekai

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## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

*Some Bubble Universe* is a letterpress printed artist's book that is inspired by the Inflation Theory. The book depicts a relatively stable space that is created by unstable energies—the transitions in life. With imagery created from drawings and photographs, an accordion structure, and movable elements, it explores the concepts of belonging through presenting misplacements, misunderstandings, comforts, and realizations inherent in transitional experiences.

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## PREFACE

*Some Bubble Universe* emerges from my personal experiences in big and small life transitions, my interests in the ambiguity of things, the similarities in differences, and the differences in similarities.

From 2015 to 2016, I took numerous walks and bicycle rides alongside Lake Michigan. The water looked different every time. It was different from the other waters that I encountered because I repeatedly went and watched the lake in silence. It provided me a space to ponder about the transition that was actually happening at the moment. I took photos to record the time and often looked back to them. The water changed. The only thing that did not change was its transitory nature.

This experience highlighted the tensions of transition: the comparisons, collisions, balances of the place one transits from and the place they transit to. These tensions became the subject of observation.

Through water, I set out to explore the concept of belonging while living through a transitional experience.

## SOME BUBBLE UNIVERSE

In late August of 2018, I began to work on *Some Bubble Universe*. It is part of a continuing theme of transition, exploring the concept of belonging.

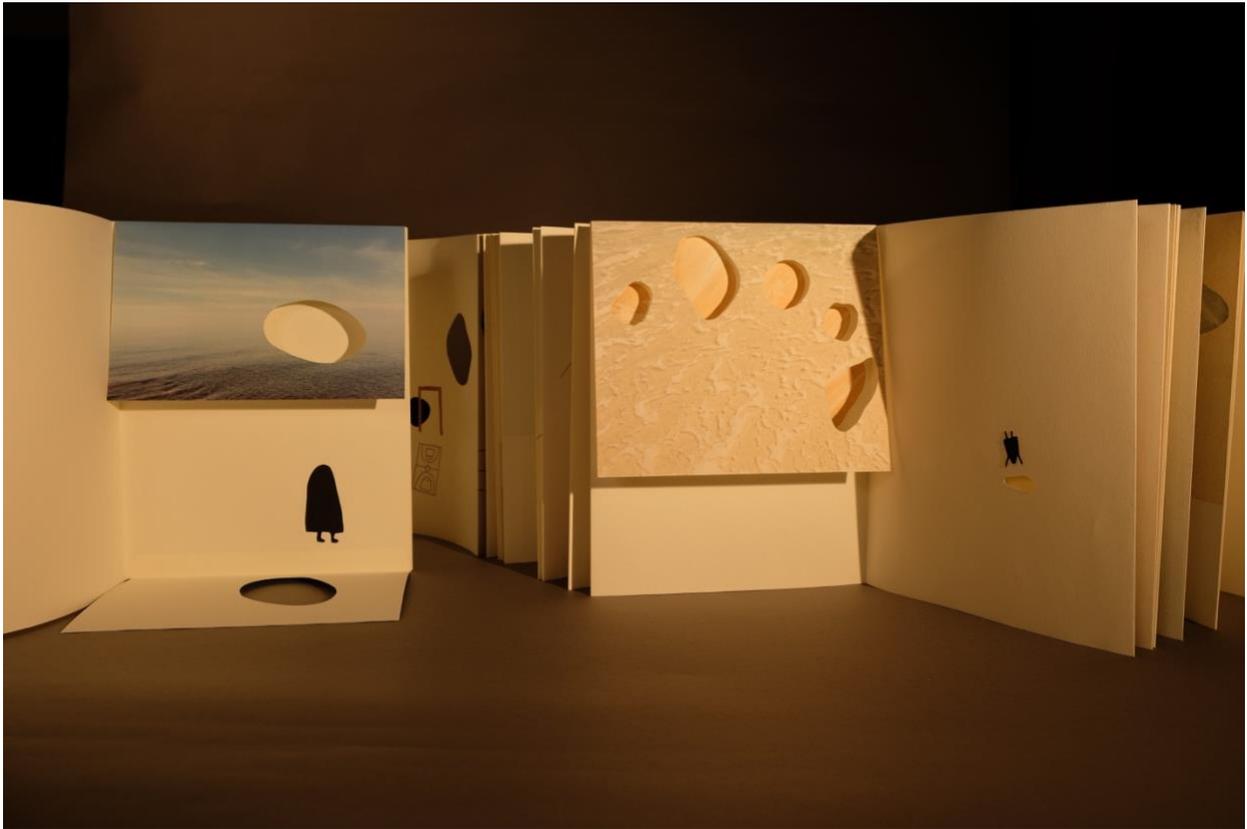
Inspired by the Inflation Theory in cosmology which describes the expansion of the early universe, and an empty basketball court with steam coming up behind it that I saw on a drizzling afternoon, I started to create images to represent this personal space that I am in every day—a space of peaceful tension. It is a space that is constantly pulled by equal forces. When there is the past, there is also the future; when there is disappointment, there is also support; when there is disconnection, there is also connection; when realization happens, it comes with both clarity and sadness.

The scene of the empty basketball court and the steam rising from behind was quiet, mysterious, and otherworldly. Yet it existed in a normal busy afternoon, people walked past it as if they did not see it. This solidified a vision for this space of peaceful tension and became a starting point from which to draw visual references.

The Inflation Theory describes a brief period of exponential expansion in the early universe (Wikipedia contributors). Universes undergo endless, eternal inflation. But in small parts of the universe, inflation may decay and form bubble universes (TED-Ed). The “bubble universe” I aim to present is only one of many. It is driven by transitions in life, especially significant ones, such as moving to another part of the world and experiencing cultural differences on a daily basis. Similar to the brief era when the incredibly rapid expansion happens, the transitions in life that cause the largest collisions lead to questions about sense of belonging. When multiple large collisions in my life happened at the same time, I was pulled by several pairs of equal forces. A bubble universe then formed as a stable space for contemplation.

## THE STRUCTURE

The structure of *Some Bubble Universe* is an accordion of 66 pages printed on soft Rives lightweight paper. Movable elements such as foldouts are also added to provide hiding/revealing opportunities. The book is 7 x 9 inches when closed. I wanted it to be manageable, but uncomfortable to handle, unsteady when fully open, echoing the feeling of clumsiness in transitions. With bigger folios, smaller characters appear to be removed and distant, putting the viewer in the position of an observer.



*Figure 1. Structure*

## THE IMAGERY: THE WATER ROCKS, THE CLOAKED FIGURE, AND MORE

The book showcases vignettes of the bubble universe. Images were created using letterpress printing, inkjet printing, paper cutting, paper engineering, and collage. Following a cloaked figure, elements from this space in the bubble universe and other spaces come into sight, form various relationships, disappear, and reappear. As each element is introduced in the book, color is used to unify elements which originate from the same space. As the book progresses, colors start to shift. By the end of the book, spaces mingle, nothing originates from any single place anymore. For example, the rocks on page 18 and the one on page 23 are from different spaces, therefore they are in different colors, but they share the same appearance. The basketball court is initially printed in lavender and by page 65-66, it is rust-colored, making its transition from the bubble universe to another space.



*Figure 2. Pages 17-18*



*Figure 3. Pages 23-24*

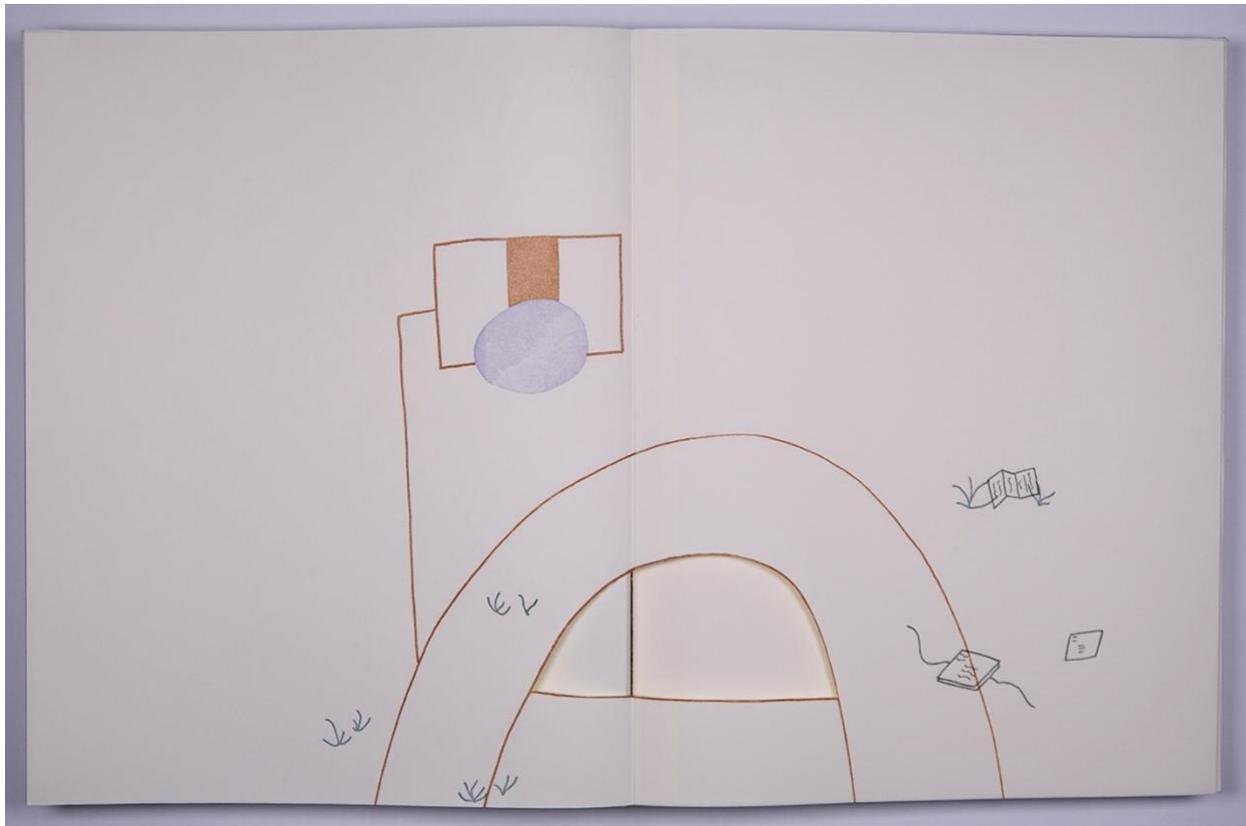


Figure 4. Pages 65-66

I chose water as part of my visual language for *Some Bubble Universe* to evoke fluidity, and to honor the ever-changing nature of transition. I selected photos of water that I took in the past to cut into rock/bubble shapes, and then made halftone photopolymer plates from them. They float, fall, disappear, suspend, and sink in this book; they represent one's personal histories and memories. The rock/bubble shapes of water can be read as heavy or light depending on the motion, as memories have different weights in emotion. By containing water into a shape, which has no boundary, into a shape, I isolate specific parts of memories and histories to represent one's relationship with their past.

Another important visual character in *Some Bubble Universe* is the cloaked figure, who leads the viewer through the book. It wears a cloak that obscures its identity, therefore it could be anyone. Scott McCloud argues in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* that in order to engage the reader, cartooning, as

part of imagemaking, is a way of seeing, “the more cartoony a face is, the more people it could be said to describe” (31). Andy Rementer believes that cartoony characters create detachment for the reader, so that they can focus on the story instead of on a human with vivid details (JUXTAPOZ, 50).

Wearing a cloak to move in an unfamiliar place also provides a sense of security. The bubble universe is a place that exists in between places. It’s neither the point of departure nor the destination, but the long train ride one takes to go from one place to another. Privacy and security are needed. When the figure feels safe in the environment, it takes off the cloak and interacts with the elements in the bubble universe. It is also when the figure is ready to leave this space.

Although removing distinct details from the cloaked figure was important, I needed it to stand out to distinguish it from the rest of the elements in the book. The figure entered the bubble universe, was there for a while, but did not belong there. To represent this, I decided to show the figure as small in scale with regards to the bubble universe for most of the book. I used hand-cut solid black paper to achieve contrast with the softer texture of the rest of the book and adhered it to the pages as collage.



*Figure 5. The cloaked figure*

One of the anticipated challenges was to translate the tensions that I experience so vividly into imagery. To undertake this challenge, I wrote down specific thoughts, observations, and memories, and revisited literature and paintings that conveyed the same atmospheres and inspired me before making this book. I also drew sketches with different mediums to find the right colors and textures for the imagery, and scanned them onto the computer to experiment with different compositions and scales.



*Figure 6. Mockups and sketches*

## THE LETTERS

A writing component was planned at the beginning of the project, living outside of the book, but in the same housing, to provide an added layer of reading. Everyone experiences transitions in their own way, therefore everyone's bubble universes are different, just as each bubble universe has its own big bang and laws of physics. The Inflation Theory argues that although bubble universes are parts of a greater multiverse, it is impossible for them to encounter one another because of the incredible rate of eternal inflation (TED-Ed). It is lonely to experience transitions alone, but connections can be found in the bubble universe with peaceful tensions. I selected the letter as a form to present these connections. Letters can indicate that someone is thinking about their loved ones when they are away. It is a form of intimacy. I wrote four letters from the perspective of an individual writing to a close friend who is experiencing a similar transition, to share thoughts, confusions, observations, and hopes. The content of the letters also shows dualities of sadness and brightness, relationships lost and found.

Symbols of envelopes and letters are printed in the book to connect both components. I hope the letters can prompt revisiting, smiles, and questions.



Figure 7. The letters

## CONCLUSION

I started the project *Some Bubble Universe* to explore the concept of belonging by presenting the feelings of dualities, such as dislocation and comfort, that I experienced during transitions in my life. Through the depictions of a figure moving through a mysterious but stable space, along with the letters, these feelings of dualities are represented with a visual narrative that describes transitions.

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## APPENDIX

Below is the content of the letters:

1.

Dear Lovely,

It's so different here. Nothing like where I was before, but also similar, almost nostalgic. This morning I woke up early. The wind was bright and warm. I tried to touch it.

I hope you have adapted. I think I have, most days. Migration is mildly unbearable, as I'm sure you know.

Before I left, I witnessed a collective parting that had nothing to do with me. Everybody was searching for someone with their eyes. I watched. I still can't decide how I feel about it. It's just separation, like a quiet room. But I imagined mine, thinking when it comes along, I'll take a walk at the beach, and let it be.

In a split second, I thought about the one who didn't return. It felt important to say something about it. But the moment when I mastered choosing the right words, they disappeared into the endless summer days.

Yours always —

2.

Dear Lovely,

The orange trees I look forward to seeing remind me of the big kapok tree I walked by every day when I was little. I no longer belong to it, and not yet to anything else.

And the rain. I think it became the ocean.

Yours always —

3.

Dear Lovely,

The new world repeats itself. What was foreign is now an instinct. There's no forest in here. Plants look like a small ball of hair. There are no locks, no fences, you go wherever you'd like. I often bump into things, gently; we don't hurt each other. When the air is light and thin and blue, everything sings softly. I often pick a spot of ground to sit and listen, sometimes for three whole afternoons. The outskirts of this place needs repair. It's so serious that it doesn't matter.

This field trip is similar to the unknown, similar to its immense tenderness too. Do you know it's almost just a dream?

Yours always —

4.

Dear Lovely,

I hope where you are is close to the water.

I hope you have some poems and beers at hand.

Yours always —