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Let All Things Pass Through Me

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Let All Things Pass Through Me

by Boya Liang



About the Artist

Boya Liang (boyaliang.com) is a Vancouver-based artist whose practice bridges art, science, and philosophy through material and conceptual explorations of existence, time, and transformation. Drawing from her Chinese heritage and informed by experiences across diverse cultures, her work engages Daoist philosophy and ecological thought to examine impermanence and the porous relationship between the human and more-than-human worlds. Using materials such as incense, Xuan paper, and ash, and working across photography, moving image, and installation, she creates environments that reveal the invisible threads connecting the microcosm of individual experience to the macrocosm of the cosmos. Liang holds an MFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design and a BA from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her recent works, including *The Wind's Breath Lingers* and *Let All Things Pass Through Me*, reflect on cycles of transformation and impermanence within the natural world.

Let All Things Pass Through Me

Boya Liang

In September 2025, when I arrived at Similkameen Artist Residency in British Columbia, the province's mountains were engulfed in wildfires. The Similkameen valley was veiled in a thick, gray haze. The mountain ridges dissolved into smoke (see Fig.1). The air carried the dry scent of burning pine. Inside my small cabin studio, doors and windows were closed against the outside smoke. Yet within this closed space, I continued my practice of burning incense on Xuan paper, deliberately creating smoke while refusing the smoke outside. This paradox haunted me. The natural smoke from burning forests and the intentional smoke from my incense stick seemed to echo each other across the threshold of the studio walls. The boundary between the natural and the artificial, outside and inside, began to blur. I realized that both forms of smoke shared the same origin: transformation through fire, matter becoming air and ash. The flames consuming the mountain forests and the small flame I held over Xuan paper were part of the same elemental process, yet my relationship to each was entirely different.

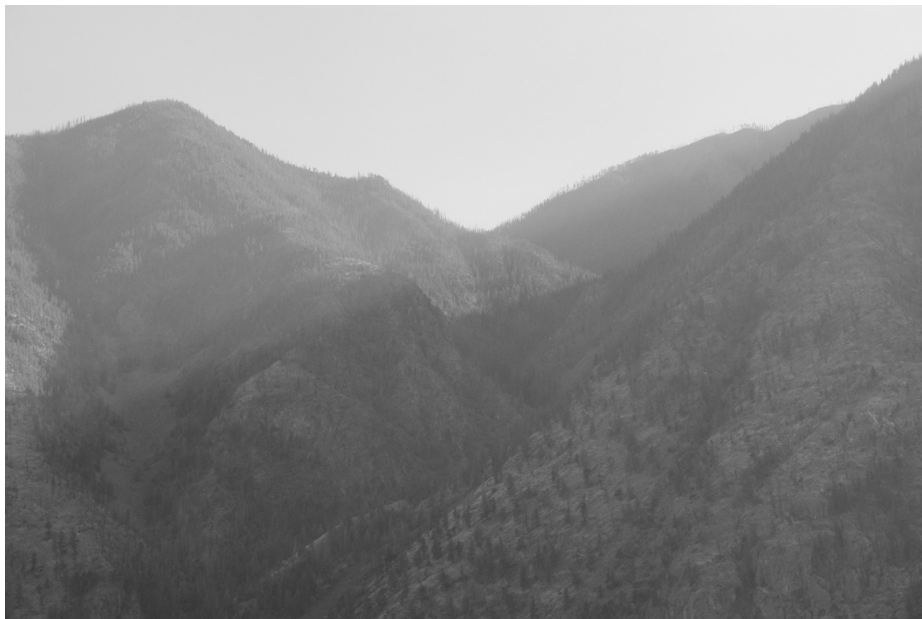


Figure 1. Liang, Boya. *Similkameen Valley*. British Columbia, Canada. 2025.

This contradiction revealed something fundamental about human existence within ecological systems. We close windows against wildfire smoke while lighting candles for ambiance. We fear natural disasters even as we create our own controlled transformations. We seek to separate ourselves from environmental forces we perceive as threatening while remaining utterly dependent on them for survival. The sealed cabin couldn't truly separate inside from outside; the smoke still seeped through, mixing with the incense I burned, creating an atmosphere that was neither purely natural nor purely cultural but something entangled, inseparable.

From this realization, my site-specific installation, *Let All Things Pass Through Me* (2025), emerged from direct engagement with the local landscape and its more-than-human inhabitants. Walking the residency grounds one afternoon, I found a branch lying in the sage bush, marked by intricate patterns left by bark beetles. These insects had lived within the wood, carving galleries beneath the bark as they fed and reproduced, creating delicate networks of lines before moving on. The branch had already been transformed by other beings before I touched it. I suspended a large sheet of Xuan paper from the branch and began following the beetles' paths with burning incense, letting their traces guide my hand as smoke rose (see Fig. 2–4). The work was never meant to remain enclosed. After the initial burning, I carried the scroll outside and hung it in the abandoned horse shed nearby, where generations of animals once sheltered. In the open air, wind, rain, and the valley's shifting weather continue to inscribe themselves into the paper. Over weeks, the work transformed, paper softening under rain, edges fraying in wind, ash dispersing across the surface. Eventually, pieces will begin to detach and fall, returning to the earth that had shaped them. The title is both description and invitation: to let all things—smoke, rain, wind, decay, transformation—pass through the work, through the false boundaries we construct between ourselves and the world.

When I was working on this piece in the studio, I lit the incense and held it close to the paper's surface, beginning to trace. I carried the shapes of the Similkameen landscape, the mountain ridges visible through smoke, the curve of the Similkameen River, and the low sage bushes scattered across the dry ground. I imagined myself as a beetle, moving across the wood's surface, carving pathways by following the material's own grain. The act of burning incense is inherently uncontrollable. Smoke moves in response to invisible air currents, and its traces on Xuan paper emerge unpredictably. If the paper began to buckle or scorch too quickly, I adjusted my pace. If the smoke drifted in an unexpected direction, I allowed it to guide the line's trajectory. When the incense broke, or the paper tore, I embraced these moments rather than seeing them as failures. The patterns left by smoke and ash were not designs I imposed but outcomes shaped by the interplay of air, fire, and paper. The process of creation is guided by the Daoist principle of *wu-wei*, often

translated as “effortless action” or “non-action.” *Wu-wei* is an active alignment with the natural flow of the world—a mode of being that emphasizes harmony, spontaneity, and adaptability. In the book *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*, sinologist Edward Slingerland explains that *wu-wei* represents an ideal state in which action arises naturally and unforcedly, in perfect resonance with the surrounding context (2003, 11). This principle informs not only the conceptual underpinnings of my work but also the processes by which the work is created.



Figure 2. Liang, Boya. *Let All Things Pass Through Me*. Keremeos, British Columbia, Canada, 2025.

But this studio burning was only the beginning of the work’s process. When I carried the scroll outside and hung it in the abandoned horse shed, the work entered direct collaboration with the land itself. In my practice, the process is not limited to what I do with my hands; it encompasses all the transformations that unfold over time, with and without human presence. The work engaged with the Similkameen landscape, and the landscape shaped the work in return. A wasp lingered on its surface, drawn by the scent of incense. Winds from the valley below set the scroll swaying, creating stress points where the paper would eventually weaken. Sunlight hitting the shed faded some burn marks while leaving others in shadow (see Fig. 5–7). Each rainstorm added new marks—ash running in rivulets, creating patterns I could never have drawn, water pooling in the

paper's low points until the weight caused small tears to begin. Anthropologist Tim Ingold's exploration in *The Life of Lines* (2015) offers a framework for understanding these dynamic interactions. When he writes, "Lines are not connectors but trails along which life is lived," it resonates with how the burned lines in my installation function (2015, 13). The lines in my work, whether burned by incense or traced by beetles, are material records of actual movement, evidence of energies and presences passing through matter and leaving traces of their passage.



Figure 3. Liang, Boya. *Let All Things Pass Through Me*, detail. Keremeos, British Columbia, Canada, 2025.



Figure 4. Liang, Boya. *Let All Things Pass Through Me*. Keremeos, British Columbia, Canada. 2025.

The paper was continually shaped by the land. The process was not something I initiated and then stepped away from. It was an ongoing, collaborative unfolding where my initial gestures became interwoven with the valley's unique climate, geology, and ecology. The work was made continuously, day and night, through the agency of wind patterns shaped by mountain topography, through rain cycles determined by atmospheric conditions, and through the decay processes inherent to organic materials exposed to the elements. This expanded understanding of process was built on my earlier MFA thesis, in which I explored burning as a methodology for investigating uncertainty and impermanence through Daoist philosophy. But here in Similkameen, something fundamental shifted. In my previous studio-based work, I had focused primarily on the act of burning itself—the transformation of matter through fire, the visibility of entropy in controlled environments. Now, working in direct relationship with a specific landscape over the course of weeks, I have become more attuned to how the process extends far beyond human action. The beetles had initiated the process before I arrived. The valley's weather patterns continued their process after my daily visits to the shed ended. The work's eventual decomposition into soil will extend the process long after I leave the residency.

This practice of *wu-wei*, in this context, becomes an ecological methodology. It offers a framework for relating to more-than-human forces without the extractive logic of mastery. The wildfire smoke made this undeniable. I could not control the wildfires burning across the land. I could not stop the wind that carried smoke into my lungs or determine when rain would fall. The environmental forces shaping my work were the same forces shaping the land. My small burnings became implicated in larger cycles—carbon released, particles dispersed, transformations cascading beyond my intention or observation. *Wu-wei* meant acknowledging my limited agency within systems vastly larger than myself, while still taking responsibility for the small gestures I could make and recognizing that those gestures would be taken up, adopted, transformed, and completed by forces I could neither predict nor control.

This dispersed agency and extended process opens onto different understandings of time and transformation. We often treat decay and entropy as loss. Objects are valued for their permanence, their resistance to the effects of time. But Daoist philosophy recognizes transformation as fundamental. Nothing remains static; all forms are temporary arrangements of *qi* (氣), vital energy flowing through all things, that will eventually disperse and reconfigure. Decay is not the opposite of life but its continuation through different states. Process does not end when the artist steps away. It continues

through weather, through microbial action, through gravity and moisture, and through all the forces that constantly act on matter.



Figure 5. Liang, Boya. *Let All Things Pass Through Me*. Keremeos, British Columbia, Canada, 2025.



Figure 6. Liang, Boya. *Let All Things Pass Through Me*. Keremeos, British Columbia, Canada, 2025.

On my last day at the residency, heavy rain fell across the valley. I walked to the horse shed to see the work one final time before leaving. The scroll was soaked, translucent with water, and sagging heavily from the branch (see Fig. 8). Sections had torn where the paper had become too weak to support its own rain-saturated weight. Ash had run in rivulets down the surface, creating new marks I had not made, patterns I could not

have predicted. The work looked utterly transformed from what I had hung weeks earlier, yet it was still there—still suspended, still holding some coherence despite the violence of wind and water. This vulnerability felt essential. The work was not meant to resist these forces but to receive them, to be shaped by them, to testify to its own ongoing process of dissolution and transformation. Standing there in the rain, watching water reshape what I had begun, I understood that the work's process would continue with or without my witness. The land was still making, still transforming.



Figure 7. Liang, Boya. *Let All Things Pass Through Me*. Keremeos, British Columbia, Canada. 2025.

Eventually, perhaps already, pieces will detach completely and fall to the ground. Some will be carried by the wind into the sagebrush. Some will land in the dirt near the shed's foundation, where moisture and microorganisms will begin breaking them down into simpler compounds. The paper that began as plant fibres, which was temporarily reorganized into sheets, marked by fire, hung in the air, transformed by weather, will ultimately integrate back into the soil. Daoist texts speak of returning to the root, the source. All things emerge from the Dao and return to it; all forms arise from formlessness and dissolve back into potential (Laozi 2018, 1). *Let All Things Pass Through Me* (2025) literalizes this return. The matter that composed my artwork persists, redistributed into other forms, other beings, other processes, where it may nourish new growth. The process of creation, of transformation, does not end here; it only changes form in the process of becoming.



Figure 8. Liang, Boya. *Let All Things Pass Through Me*. Keremeos, British Columbia, Canada, 2025.

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