IMPERMANENCE OF THINGS
“Art is a way of life, a method of being, a way of perceiving the world”

Tim Slowinski (1978)
Impermanence of things

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Abstract

I have lived most of my life engaging myself in Eastern traditions, which most of them were built upon the Buddhist philosophy. In Asian countries such as Thailand and Japan, Buddhism is the national religion and influences our ways of life, our beliefs, culture and art. I am fond of the Japanese culture because it has unique characters and fully contains with a remarkable background, which has been influenced by Zen Buddhism.

Zen is one of the dozen different branches of Buddhism in Japan. The teaching of Zen is more a philosophy than a religion. It has no supreme god and does not focus on the biography of the Buddha. And there is no worship in Zen. Rather, Zen is a form of thought that gives rise to certain way of acting. The influence of Zen in Japan has become the essence of Japanese art and culture, such as the Noh theatre, the Zen painting, the flower arrangement, the tea ceremony and the rock garden.

I have been interested in Zen philosophy, especially when it is represented through the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto. It is considered as a masterpiece of Zen and Japanese art. Some mysteries in Ryoanji rock garden are still kept secret. The mysteries enrich the meaning of this rock garden in terms of philosophy and aesthetic aspects. My curiosity of its meaning and mysteries have brought me to further study and become the starting point of this MA thesis.

The Ryoanji rock garden reveals an implementation of Zen studied to practice mindfulness and achieves the essence of Zen Buddhism philosophy about the impermanence of things. The impermanence occupies the central position in Zen Buddhism. Based on the statement that “Everything is not something stable, but a stage of change”. Buddhism teaches about equanimity in the midst of change and how to respond more wisely to impermanence because all conditioned things are transformative, unstable, and keep changing.

Based on the above, I would like to demonstrate the aspects of Zen philosophy and Japanese aesthetic ideals that are concealed in the rock garden of Ryoanji Temple. Furthermore, the intention of my MA thesis is
to create a textile art object that conveys the impermanent statement to the audience, using thousand of natural dyed cotton threads. The natural dyed technique is a natural process that is not only an expression of Japanese aesthetic appreciation, but also reflects the impermanence of nature. Additionally, the visual perception of the artwork will be changing, when the viewer’s position moves. The space between threads and the different colors of each layer create an animation of visual perception in the artwork. By seeing the thread presentation, it demonstrates the idea of my art object about the impermanence of things.
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Introduction

The Ryoanji rock garden is not only the most famous Zen’s dry landscape garden, but also a world cultural heritage site. This rock garden is composed with only fifteen grayish rocks of various sizes, on a ground of gravel. The arrangement of rocks is considerably abstract and airy, with most of the area dedicating to emptiness. Consequently, the garden’s minimal composition makes people often call it “Garden of Emptiness”.

In this abstract arrangement, several interpretations have been proposed regarding the meaning of its arrangement. And there are several answers to those mysteries of Ryoanji rock garden. However, the true intention of the creator remains silent so that it leaves some room for the imagination. According to the abstract arrangement, the significance of this dry landscape can be variedly interpreted, depending on the viewer’s own interpretation and imagination. Nevertheless, one perspective always occurs to all viewers. When viewers enter the garden— they cannot see all fifteen rocks from any viewpoint at once; one or more rocks are always hidden. This viewpoint is not only one of the mysteries in the Ryoanji rock garden, but also the Zen puzzle that invites the viewers to contemplation.

The Ryoanji rock garden is regarded as a masterpiece of Zen and Japanese art. It reflects two fundamental aesthetic ideals in that period: first, Yugen, a profound and austere elegance concealing a multi-layered symbolism, and second, Yohaku no bi, the beauty of empty space. Furthermore, all Japanese arts are based on the Wabi-sabi philosophy that encompasses essential aesthetic aspects of all Japanese art. The Wabi-sabi represents the imperfect beauty of things, impermanent and incomplete. The most revealing about Wabi-sabi is an approach to foster mysteriousness for an aesthetic reason. Moreover, the core of both Wabi-sabi and Zen involves transcending conventional ways of looking at the impermanence, existence and being in the present moment. Nothingness occupies the central position in Wabi-sabi philosophy, just as it does in Zen.
The aim of this study is to explore the Zen philosophy and aesthetic aspects behind the Ryoanji rock garden, a masterpiece of Zen and Japanese art, and to present the aspects through the textile art installation. The first part of this thesis focuses on the Ryoanji rock garden to provide the overview of Zen aspects behind the rock garden presentation. The second part examines Japanese aesthetic concepts, which is related and influences the Japanese garden art. The third part explains how my idea of impermanence is shaped and how I utilized techniques and methods to create my textile art piece "Impermanence of things".
Part 1: Ryoanji Rock Garden
Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water...

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)
The Japanese Dry Landscape

The Japanese defines the dry landscape garden, or kare-sansui in Japanese, as areas or places that imitate natural sites without using water. The garden can also be considered representing reflection seen in a sea or lake; it uses sand traced in a pattern instead of water. Most Zen gardens were based on this technique for several centuries. Zen rock garden is not designed for pleasure, but as an object of contemplation for inducing mental repose. The word "kare-sansui" means "withered mountain-water". It appeared for the first time in the eleventh century in the Sakuteki, the oldest treatise of the art of gardens in Japan. Kare-sansui was flourished in the Muromachi Period and held to be the initiation of a classical Zen garden in Japan.

In general, the Muromachi Period took place between 1392 and 1573. It was a period of disaster by constant internal conflicts and the Onin civil wars, which destroyed Kyoto to ashes by 1477. On the other hand, this period proved as one of the most creative era in Japan’s history. The age was at roughly the same time as the Renaissance in Europe. This era gave birth to some of the greatest form of Japanese culture, which was mostly influenced by Zen Buddhism, such as Noh theaters, the tea ceremony, the flower arrangement, the shoin style of Japanese architecture, and the dry landscape garden. All innovations of the Muromachi period have since come to represent the traditional Japanese culture.

The kare-sansui, or the dry landscape garden, is the great new garden prototype that appeared during the Muromachi era. The use of the gardens is an object of contemplation to be viewed from fixed vantage points. Its severe architecture and modest materials reflect the influence of Zen Thought. An example of dry landscape gardens in the Muromachi Period is Ryoanji Rock Garden.

(Opposite page) Figure 1: The rock garden of Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, Japan.
The characteristics of Ryoanji rock garden

The rock garden at Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, or "The Temple of Peaceful Dragon", is the most famous Zen dry landscape garden due to its stark beauty. The Ryoanji garden is considered to be a masterpiece of Japanese rock garden ingenuity and has influenced countless other gardens in Japan and around the world. The Ryoanji temple was founded in 1450, but the temple was destroyed by fire in 1467 during the Onin Civil Wars. The rock garden was probably established in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, and situated at the south court of the temple, the location of which signifies ritual space, and has become a place for contemplation.

The rock garden was cut off from other areas of the Ryoanji temple by the 180 cm high oil painted wall. The terrain of the garden is furnished with only fifteen grayish rocks of various sizes, on an area of 238 square meters of the raked light gray gravel. A courtyard is thirty feet deep and seventy-eight feet wide, completely flat and geometrical. The oil painted wall are running along the veranda of the abbot's quarters. No one is allowed to step on the rock garden, only views from the veranda. The rocks are arranged in five groups: one group of five rocks, two groups of two rocks, and two groups of three rocks. No tree or any other plants are allowed in the garden except for the moss around the rocks, which has grown over years.

Slawson (1987) describes that viewers enter at the left side of the garden and move along the gallery-like veranda from left to right. The rock garden can be viewed and contemplated from several seated positions on the veranda. Beginning with the most massive group, the group of five rocks is placed near the entrance at the extreme left of the garden. The second group, whale shaped contour, is settled close to the rear wall at almost the middle of garden. The remaining three groups form a tightly spaced compositional unit in the right half of garden. Effortless quality of two groups in the left half of garden are given physical form in the recumbent, while several of the rocks in the right half of garden are ambiguous as to the sense of lateral movement.

(Opposite page)
Figure 2,3: Different viewpoints of the Ryoanji rock garden from the veranda.
Figure 4: Plan and elevation of Ryoanji rock garden. Drawing by Mirei Shigemori
Furthermore, Bertheir (2000) has described that the materials in the garden are simple and that the composition is by contrast very complex. The composition is arranged asymmetrically: two groups of rocks in the half left and three groups of rocks in the half right. The composition of rocks follows an elliptical orbit and can be read left to right and right to left. The groups of rock in the orbit are all connected to each other, based on a rhythm and form of rocks that animate space. The garden combines several groups of rocks that together form a whole without losing any of the individual forms. Only two of the rocks are upright, but they are not very tall; the others lie or rest on the ground. None of them enforces by virtue of any remarkable feature; they all mutually reinforce each other's value.

Another significant element in the rock garden is gravel. The space of gravel in Ryaenji rock garden acts as a frame for art pieces, or a blank space in ink painting. The frame turns the garden into art. Similar to painting, framing is an essential element of Japanese gardens. Typically, the act of raking the gravel into a pattern evokes waves or rippling water, or creates an illusion of distance and depth in the dry landscape. The purpose of ranking gravel is not only for the aesthetics of the rock garden, but also one of Zen practices to build concentration in daily activities. Raking the sand is a Zen method used to assist a monk in putting aside daily concerns and personal thoughts; it is a form of meditation in motion.

In addition, Coat (2002) has indicated that a monk rakes a prescribed in the gravel in the readiness for the day's visitors. Zen gardeners devote many hours to mechanical raking patterns, as achieving perfection of lines needs a lot of effort. The repetitive activity clears the mind of mundane concerns and helps produce a state of pure concentration.
Figure 6: Zen monk ranks the gravel of Ryoanji rock garden as a daily activity to practice their concentration.

(Previous page)

Figure 5: Detail of two groups in the left half of Ryoanji rock garden.
(Opposite page)

Figure 7: The viewers observe the Ryoanji rock garden from the veranda in the Hojo building.
To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

William Blake (1757 - 1827)
Interpretation and puzzle of Ryoanji rock garden

Bertheir's study (2000) of this abstract arrangement entitled Reading Zen in the Rocks suggests that several interpretations have been proposed regarding the meaning of these fifteen rocks. Some interpretations are obviously related to the ancient Chinese thought, which influenced Buddhism in China and Japan in that period. A number of examples based on this thought can be seen. Firstly, one interpretation points out that the rhythm of rock grouping is based on the series 7-5-3. The 7-5-3 is a pattern reflecting the Taoist notion of the harmony of uneven numbers. The Chinese and Japanese think of uneven numbers as propitious. On the numerical scale the 5 is accorded special significance, because it is situated in the middle of the first nine numbers and refers to a symbol of the center. In the sequence of odd numbers the 3 and the 7 are closest to the central, and this is what produces the beloved numerical triad for the Japanese. Secondly, one describes that the garden is the illustration of an ancient Chinese legend, the legend of the governor Liukun and the tigers. The rocks represent the scene of the tigress helping her cubs across the water. Thirdly, one interpretation defines the rocks as a case of the Five Chinese Sacred, which symbolizes the center of the world and the four horizons, and corresponds to the five primordial elements for the Chinese. Lastly, the garden could represent a grand landscape, such as one would perceive it as the summits of high mountains breaking through a sea of cloud. Or one could understand that the rock garden performs as islands on the ocean: the rocks as the islands while the white pebbles as the ocean.

However, there is no evidence or proof for any of these interpretations. No one knows the true answer about the representation of these fifteen rocks. The Ryoanji rock garden is above all a work of art. Nothing will be able to explain its beauty or the fascination that it attempts.

There is one significance perspective of this dry landscape that always occurs to all viewers. When viewers enter the garden, they are unable to see all fifteen rocks from any viewpoint at once. One or more rocks are always hidden. This viewpoint is not only one of the mysteries in the Ryoanji Rock Garden, but also serves as the koan, a uniquely Zen question or statement, for viewers to contemplating in front of the rock garden.
In addition, the koan is a unique creation for teaching the essence of Zen. As one of the practices that Zen master always uses for training their disciples, the koan is often used to check students about their visions, or awake them to enlightenment. The koan consists of a story, dialogue, question, or statement, which the answer cannot be understood by rational thinking but may be accessible through intuition or lateral thinking. There are several approaches to introducing the koan. The ink painting is the pictorial koan and the Zen garden is the three-dimensional koan. The garden plays a role in Zen practice by inviting viewers to contemplate and interpret the puzzle of stone gardens. The Japanese reinterprets the koan as an allegory of the Zen study, by which meditation and fierce self-training could lead them to the enlightenment. Therefore, the rock gardens are a concrete expression of Zen thought, which is not accessible to ordinary people. To understand Zen gardens is as difficult as to understand one's own self.

And this our life, exempt from public haunt, tongues in the trees, book in the running brooks, sermons in stone...

Shakespeare (1564-1616), As You Like It
Hidden aspects behind Zen rock garden

The impossibility of seeing all fifteen rocks in the Ryokanji rock garden at once is served as an intuitive Zen puzzle to trap the viewers. Zen gardens are a bag of tricks and specially designed to deceive one’s perception. When most people see the rock garden, they use their own experiences to interpret the meaning of rock position and representation. On the contrary, the Zen garden is meant to be a training ground for the spirit, a device wherein the contemplative mind might reach out and touch the essence of Zen.

Muso Soseki, a Japanese Zen Master and garden designer (1275-1351), wrote in his Dream Dialogue: “He who distinguishes between the garden and practice cannot be said to have found the true way.” The meaning of the great monk’s word illustrates that to create a garden is a way of practicing Zen. His statement suggests a close connection between the art of the garden and the search for truth.

In general, Zen is more about the concept of discovering and achieving the comprehension of one’s own self or being, by simple practice and meditation. The name of Zen is derived from the Sanskrit chyan, which comes from the word “Ch’ian” that refers to meditation. Meditation is neither concentration nor contemplation, because two activities rely on the mind, on thought. Meditation means passing beyond the limit of mind or no-mind, but it does not indicate to mindlessness. No-mind means the state of full awareness, without thinking, questioning or judging the self. Zen Buddhism believes that meditation creates the “power from oneself” that could lead to enlightenment. Zen introduces meditation as the major part of its practices, which helps one to balance mind and body. The balance between the two induces humans to the tranquility of life and leads to attaining the enlightenment. Enlightenment is to see “Being or Buddha-nature”, the true essence of nature, which cannot be seen by the human eye but with the inner vision. The answer to “Buddha-nature”, or “Being”, is not written in the text and cannot be taught, because it is the inner-self and can only be individually experienced. It is the experience of disbanding the self and realizing the “vast emptiness”, the void of nonattachment.
To conclude, enlightenment is the “experience” of nothingness, of the void, emptiness, impartial awareness, “selflessness”, as we only inadequately describe it. It is not a philosophical concept but a notion deriving from personal sight.\(^5\)

"Originally there is no condition of large or small in any of the things in the universe: the large and the small are in the minds of human beings. They are nothing but illusory appearance."

Muso Soseki, Dream Dialogues

Figure 8: The minimal composition of rocks makes people often call the Ryoan-ji rock garden as ‘Garden of Emptiness’.
“Form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form.”

The Heart Sutra
The garden of Ryoanji temple represents typical contemplation gardens of the Muromachi period. The garden is an ideal space for meditation and is also recognized as the “Garden of Emptiness” because of its minimal composition. The placement of the rocks are entirely airy on a canvas of raked sand, most of which is dedicated to emptiness. The materials are restricted to an absolute minimum. The interaction between form and space is one of the keys to Ryoanji’s captivating suggestion. The empty spaces both emphasize the rocks and invite the mind to expand into the cosmological infinity. The rock garden evokes viewers a sense of the infinity in a strictly confined space. The emptiness of the space in the garden becomes the container to hold the viewers’ vision. In other words, it becomes a space onto which the viewer can project the inner-vision. The garden exhibits that the absolute truth is always void unless one sees it. Therefore, the garden of Ryoanji temple is the creator’s expression of his own enlightenment experience and reflects a living lesson in the Zen concept of nothingness and nonattachment.

Nitschke (1991) has pointed out that the Ryoanji rock garden symbolizes neither a natural nor a mythological landscape. Indeed, it symbolizes nothing. An abstract composition of “natural” objects in space is intended to induce mental repose and tranquility. Additionally, the Ryoanji rock garden belongs to the art of void.

The basic principle of Zen is very simple. Zen Buddhism does not have any statue or image of Buddha, but Zen believes that every creature holds its own “Buddha-nature”; an expression equivalent to the Christian notion of a “fragment of the divine.” Instead of worshipping the image of Buddha, Zen suggests the followers to discover their own Buddha-nature by meditation as the major practice. Zen rock gardens invite viewers to meditation and induce mental repose by contemplating the rocks. The expression of the rock garden encourages the viewers to be able to see the true essence of nature in its purest form.
The elements and expression in the rock garden are minimized. The garden had become a space with only two major elements, rock and sand. The use of two elements reflects the concept of Yin and Yang, the juxtaposition of opposing elements from the influence of Taoist in Zen. The bipolar concept of Yin and Yang is the Chinese ancient belief. It refers to the balance of two opposite elements of nature. In Ryōan-ji rock garden, there was several comparison have been proposed between the two opposite elements of Yin and Yang concept in the garden. Kaji’s research (2000) of Japanese Zen garden has demonstrated four suggestions of the Yin and Yang concept in the Ryōan-ji rock garden. Firstly, one describes that the rocks symbolize as islands, while the white pebbles refer to an ocean. Secondly, one compares that the rocks represents the existence and the space stood for the emptiness. Thirdly, one explains that the rock garden exhibits a contrast between finite and infinite senses by displaying the infinite nature of microcosmos in the limited space. Lastly, one demonstrates that the garden’s unchanging view represents eternity while its dynamic environment represents transience.

In addition, Parkes (2000) suggests that the Ryōan-ji rock garden presents the juxtaposition of opposing elements as stillness and movement. He has illustrated that the oil-painted wall cuts the rock garden off from the outside but it is low enough to permit a view of that outside from the viewing platform. This cut, which is itself the wall, is most evident in the contrast between stillness and movement. The stillness is represented by the static rock garden, within the garden an eternal stillness reign, and the only movement visible is that of the shadowed or illusory the sand traced during the day. On the other hand, the movement represents by the natural scene above the oil painted wall. All the time, the nature outside is changing and moving: swaying branches, floating clouds, and changing seasons. The difference between the garden and nature outside once being recognized can illuminate the Buddhist viewpoint of the impermanence of all things.

(Opposite page) Figure 9: The different scenes between static garden and movement nature outside.
“Everything is not something stable, but a state of change”

Buddhist Wisdom
What is the impermanence of all things? Impermanence is one of the essential doctrines, or three marks of existence in Buddhism. Impermanence is a crucial characteristic of all phenomenal beings. The term expresses the Buddhist notion that all of conditioned existence, without exception, is not something static but a state of change. All things in the universe are transformative, unstable, and keep changing, that are the evanescent nature of life. According to the impermanence doctrine, human life embodies this flux in the aging process, the cycle of birth and rebirth, and in any experience of loss. The conditioned phenomena are impermanent; attachment to them becomes the cause of future suffering. Buddhism emphasizes the transience and impermanence of human existence: all things pass away. Therefore, Buddhism teaches about equanimity in the midst of change and how to respond more wisely to impermanence by concentrating in the present moment, disbanding the self and realizing the “vast emptiness”; the void of non-attachment.

Additionally, another example of impermanence in the dry landscape was given by Hébert (2000), has suggested that sand traces in the garden also provide viewers with an impermanent experience within the rock garden. He has explained that the tracing of sand is a time performance, a series of snapshots of time where time is space in the motion. Deep reliefs on the surface of the sand neatly catch the changing light of the time and cast apparently variable shadows. Consequently, watching a sand trace throughout the day displays an experience of change in the rock garden, which points to the impermanence in Buddhism.

In conclusion, The Ryoanji Rock Garden is considered to be a masterpiece of Japanese Zen garden and art. The garden contains in many respects among Zen gardens. It provides an aesthetic quality to view, implementation of philosophy, clever use of symbolism, flexibility of its function, and balance of all the elements and concepts. Furthermore, the Ryoanji Rock Garden is an implementation of Zen studied to practice mindfulness and achieve the essence of Zen Buddhism philosophy about the impermanence of things.
Part 2: Japanese aesthetic ideals in the garden art
Japanese art and culture have a unique characteristic. They have the traditional aesthetic ideals they use to describe the special quality of beauty of their art and craft. These aesthetic principles have been used in Japanese art for several centuries. Significantly, the outstanding Japanese arts are considerably influenced by Zen philosophy. The concept of Zen believes and respects to the truth of nature. The influence of Zen thought and their aesthetic principles are intimately interconnected and overlapping in all arts in Japan. Similarly to the traditional Japanese garden art, the Zen aesthetic ideals was found and situated as the core of its design.

According to Ryoanji rock garden, it is regarded as a masterpiece of Zen and Japanese art. There are three essential aesthetic ideals that have been deeply influenced on the garden arts in the Muromachi era: Yugen, Yohaku-no-bi, and Wabi-Sabi.

Figure 10: Painting "Yugen - Mountain Mist" by Kali Higashiyama(1908-1999)
Yugen: the beauty of mystery and depth

Yu means deep, faint or dim, and something that is difficult to see. Gen means dark, mystery, profound, and sublime. Yugen thus refers as "subtle profundity" that means something too deep to be seen. Additionally, Nitschke has suggested in his Japanese Garden that "Yugen suggests an elegant beauty concealing profound depth, a beauty which lies within rather than without, and as such is tinged with the fundamental sadness of all evanescent life." Consequently, Yugen refers to the beauty of mystery and depth. It is defined as the perception of something dark or mysterious, but compellingly beautiful and indefinable. Yugen value the power to evoke, rather than the ability to state directly. It means to have the hidden meaning behind the story or surface. Fostering mysteriousness is a major objective for the aesthetic reason of Yugen. The mystery awakes the inner thought and feeling, and emits a sense of profundity that touches the soul of viewer.

In addition, Shigemori Mirei (1896-1975), the modern garden scholar, identifies that Yugen refers to one of the aesthetic ideals crucial to the creation of dry landscape in the Muromachi period. The characters of Yugen in the garden are represented by mist, shadow, and partially obscured views. Likewise, the mystery of viewpoint in Ryoanji rock garden; the impossibility of seeing fifteen rocks in the garden at once, represents the quality of Yugen in the garden. There are more mysteries remaining in Ryoanji rock garden, and the mysteries serve as the aesthetic principle in Yugen.

The definition of Yugen points to something profound, subtle, or abstruse, but with a mysterious nature. Zen and Yugen are obviously and intimately connected each other. Both are relevant to the true nature of reality, which hides behind the illusory aspects of the world.
Yohaku-no-bi: the beauty of empty space

Yo means “reminder”, and haku refers to “white”. Yohaku-no-bi denotes "the beauty of extra white" or "the beauty of empty space". For the Japanese, the blank space becomes a significant element of awareness in their art, especially in ink paintings and Zen gardens. Japanese focuses on what is left out in the art pieces, rather than what is put in. For example, as can be seen in the Ryoanji rock garden, the minimal rocks arrangement is emphasized by relatively large sections of raked sand and gravel. Similar to ink paintings, large section of paper is left unpainted. Japanese believes that the empty space leaves some room for viewers' fantasy.

For the Western, the art of Yohaku-no-bi can be understood in terms of “Less is more” by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969); widely regarded as the pioneer of modern architecture in Europe. The idea of “Less is more” refers to his aesthetic principle of creating an impression of extremely simple architecture or minimalism style. The “less” is made explicit, the more that is left to the beholder to imagine.76

The origin of Yohaku-no-bi can be comprehended in the very essence of Zen thought and meditation, about the awareness of the emptiness and nothingness concept.

(Opposite page) Figure 11: Large white space of ranked gravel in detail, rock garden of Ryoanji temple.
Figure 12: The beauty in imperfection and profundity in nature
Wabi-Sabi: the beauty of impermanence

All Japanese art in the essential of traditional Japanese beauty are based on the Wabi-sabi philosophy. Wabi-sabi's influence on Japanese aesthetic values has profoundly inspired all arts in Japan, such as the tea ceremony, flower arranging, haiku poetry, garden design and Noh theater. Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic ideal and philosophy that is best understood in terms of the Zen philosophy. Zen seeks artistic expression in pure and sublime forms, as same as Wabi-sabi. Zen and Wabi-sabi appreciates beauty that is left by the flow of nature, the effects of weathering, and human treatment. The core of both Wabi-sabi and Zen is the importance of transcending conventional ways of looking and thinking about the imperfections and impermanence of life.

It is difficult to find appropriately English word to define the meaning of wabi-sabi. Originally, the Japanese word "Wabi" comes from "Wabishii", which means the misery of living alone in nature, remotely from society. "Sabi" means "chill", "lean" or "withered". "Sabi" comes from "Sabiru", which refers to age and mature, and "Sabishi", which refers to lonely and inconsolable. Therefore, the compound word suggests a desolate beauty transformed by age and natural process, and an appreciation of the simple things that impressed with patina through usage and care.

In Wabi sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers: Koren (1994) suggests that the closet English word to Wabi-sabi is probably "rustic", which means "simple, unsophisticated, surface rough, or irregular". He describes that the Wabi-sabi philosophy represents a beauty of things, which are imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. Characteristics of the Wabi-sabi aesthetics include simplicity, modesty, asymmetry, asperity, intimacy, humbleness and the respectability of nature. He explains that Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic appreciation of the natural process, the evanescence of life and the acceptance of the inevitable. All Wabi-sabi spiritual values are based on truth that reflects from Zen Buddhism philosophy, and comes from the observation of nature. Furthermore, he has pointed out that Wabi-sabi represents the exact opposite of the Western ideal of great beauty as something monumental, spectacular, and enduring. Wabi-sabi is not found in nature at moment of bloom and lushness, but at moments of inception or subsiding. Wabi-sabi is not about gorgeous flowers, majestic trees, or bold
landscapes. Wabi-sabi is about the minor and the hidden, the tentative and the ephemeral.

However, Koren states that the understanding of Wabi-sabi concept is not easy to achieve. Wabi-sabi aesthetic ideals are considerably abstract perceptions, as well as Zen philosophy. Essential knowledge, either in Zen doctrine or Wabi-sabi, can be transmitted from mind to mind, through individually pure experience of reality, not through the written or spoken words.

Furthermore, Jupiter (2003) defines the quality of Wabi-sabi as an intuitive appreciation of a transient beauty in the physical world that reflects the irreversible flow of life in the spiritual world. Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic sensibility that finds melancholic beauty in the transience of all things. The art of Wabi-sabi is able to embody and suggest the essential truism of impermanence, which considers that everything in the universe is in flux, coming from or returning to nothing.

In addition, Jupiter suggests the properties of Wabi-sabi design and how they embody the underlying philosophical ideology, as follows:

**Organic**
The materials used in Wabi-sabi art should be organic in the nature, whether it is clay, wood, textile, or any other natural material, because natural materials allow the effect of time to be imprinted on its surface. The changes of texture and color over time provide space for the imagination. Organic materials are expressive and attractive. The natural aging effects of time, or the process of decay, in materials are served as Wabi-sabi values to the art pieces.

**Freedom of form**
The form of the piece should be personal and intimate with attention given to asymmetry or irregularity. Nature and the physical properties of the materials used have already provided the shape. The artist strives to bring out the innate beauty found in nature, rather than preserves their intellectual ideas of art and beauty. Significantly, the discipline of Japanese design is to refrain from embellishment and to let the artwork by itself without trying to improve it.

*(Opposite page) Figure 13: A wooden bowl that has been out in the weather.*
Texture
Wabi-sabi expressions tend to use the organic nature of the materials and forms to leave the object with rough and uneven surface. Rough and variegated textures formed by natural sporadic processes that reflect the imperfection and impermanence of nature as the essential values in Wabi-sabi.

Ugliness and beauty
The Wabi-sabi aesthetics can be seen as both beautiful and ugly, it is not in the realm of learned ideas of beauty and ugliness. On the other hand, the beauty of Wabi-sabi lies in an intuitive, nonintellectual feeling toward objects that can lead to the Wabi-sabi experience. True and pure aesthetics is neither beautiful nor ugly, but it is a state of mind that originally creates before any of the concepts have arisen in the intellect.

Color
Wabi-sabi appreciates the natural process. Natural materials and dyes indicate the flow of nature through uneven surfaces and fading colors. With the use of natural materials and dyes, Wabi-sabi rarely strays from the boundaries of subdued colors and lighting, for it is through these the atmosphere of intimacy can be transferred. The change of materials and colors by the passage of time and natural occurring phenomena represent the impermanence of things in Wabi-sabi. The subduing of color not only provides the most suitable environment for the subjugation of the active mind, but also invites us to the calmness and tranquility. Additionally, nearly all things considered Wabi-sabi have not just one color, but also a myriad of colors blending together to create the variety and harmony of nature.

Simplicity
Simplicity is one of the foundations of Japanese design and becomes a principle of timelessness. Simple design has stood the test of time while fashion has come and gone. The quality of simplicity has been presented through unrefined and raw natural materials. Neither embellishment nor ostentation has been added to the objects, as the purpose to mostly exhibit pure aesthetic of its quality.
Space
The concept of space in Japan has been powerfully influenced by the concept of "nothingness" in Zen philosophy. The area of "nothing" has been significantly concerned in interiors and gardens. The use of space is not just restricted to the space in which an object is placed, but also the space within it. When considering Wabi-sabi expressions, the use of space has formed an important element in the Japanese aesthetics as an active role to emphasize all accent pieces, and as an area for beholders to project their imaginations.

Balance
According to Wabi-sabi principles that regularly refer to naturally occurring phenomena, all aspects of any design must be physically balanced in a way that reflects physical balances found in the natural world. The appearance of elements balanced should look completely natural and unforced. There is no regular or uniform shape in Wabi-sabi expressions.

Sobriety
To the Japanese mind, the purity of materials and honesty of designing are vital; the eye is naturally drawn to a feeling of sincerity. All design work should approach with humility and sincerity. Therefore, the Japanese keeps the designs to be minimalism for the purpose to engaging with its spirituality.

According to Wabi-sabi aesthetic ideals, the rock garden in Ryoanji temple has considerably maintained the Wabi-sabi values in its character. The garden has celebrated for its elegant simplicity, strength, timelessness art, purity of materials used and greatly spiritual qualities. Furthermore, the walls on the south and west side of the Ryoanji rock garden are a good example of Wabi-sabi expressions. The clay used for their constructions was boiled in oil. Over time, the oil has seeped through the surfaces, creating a subdued discoloration. Uneven and transformed colors on the clay wall shed light on the Wabi-sabi aesthetic values as the appreciation of aging effects.
Figure 15: The oil-painted wall of the Ryoanji rock garden.
Part 3: The idea of impermanence
Expressing concept of “impermanence”

According to the Ryoanji’s study, I myself believe that the abstract expression of the rock garden suggests the quality of impermanence to viewers’ mind. Examples of impermanence have been emphasized and demonstrated in several ways through garden’s presentation. The viewers are invited to visualize, perceive and experiences the impermanence in nature, since the lifeblood of the nature consists of change, growth, movement and decay. And the key to understand the essence of Zen in order to achieve enlightenment is to realize and comprehend the change.

By experiencing the rock garden expression, the viewers can create a peaceful consideration of the impermanence of all things. Paradigm examples of impermanence have been presented by the contrast scenes between stillness of rock garden and movement of nature outside, and animation of sand traced shadows during the day. Additionally, the relationship between space, time, and viewpoints is the unique characteristic of the rock garden. The slightest shift of position from one point to another tricks the eyes to catch a very different pattern between the cluster of rocks and space within the garden. The variations of these perceptions also propose the impermanent concept to our mind.

All examples in the garden conceal and reveal that every existing matter remains none-eternity.

After exploring Zen aspects behind Ryoanji rock garden, idea of impermanence rooted down in my mind. It drives me to create a textile installation that conveys the message of change to the viewers’ eyes. Similar to the values of Zen gardens, the art object should not only generate calm and sophisticated atmosphere for contemplation, but it should also transmit a spirit of Zen to the viewers’ mind.

The first awareness of impermanence upon my artwork is inspired by the variety of perceptions in the rock garden, especially an animation of sand traced shadows. According to the unique characteristic of the rock garden, the relationship between form, space, time and viewpoints are
major condition I then register this relationship as the fundamental criteria of my study. My expectation is to discover the way to present an original movement of visual perception when the audiences change their viewpoint, in other words is to create an optical illusion. A natural process comes as my second awareness of impermanence. Because Japanese believe that it is an appreciation of natural aesthetic, Wabi-sabi, and it shows that nature is always transformative and unstable. The essential truism of impermanence can be embodied and suggested by adding a natural process to my artwork. An optical illusion and the use of natural process are two main conditions that I use as my expression to deliver the idea of “impermanence”, which is my conclusion from the Zen philosophy and Japanese aesthetic aspects.
Idea development and experimentation

I have chosen stretching thread and natural dyed as the main techniques of my art piece because I found that the technique of stretching thread can help generating my concentration during my work process, by repeating the action pattern, which is the same as doing raked gravel in the rock garden. So my creation will not only convey the message of Zen aspects, at the same time it works for me as a garden that I can practice my meditation.

Along my experiment, there are several outcomes that connect to the idea of impermanence. The natural dyes technique produce various shades from the same source of material and the color might fade and change after some time.

As a textile artist, I find stretching thread technique can be my tool to express my idea in the artwork. In my opinion, the stretching thread is the simplest technique to use textile materials for creating a three-dimensional object and productively forming an optical illusion effect. In addition I find the natural dyed is an absolute technique that carry the idea of impermanence behind; it transfers color from natural sources to the yarns. The pigment that extracted from plants reveals a beautiful palette. And they are special, charming, and unique. The best quality that fit perfectly to the idea of impermanence is that it can be varied, faded, converted or vanished through time. Moreover, the natural dyed technique has a limitation of sources, meaning that colors that we find from nature is the color of each season. So to use natural dyed technique is more or less to capture the very moment of the season.

Form experiment and stretching technique

At the beginning, I want to find the best solution to stretch the thread so I did an experiment on a miniature model. Threads are used as textile material in order to create three-dimensional form that represents my study of Ryconji rock garden. I tried to stretch threads in different patterns: some create twisted figures, and some patterns that combine different angle of line generate dynamic rhythm.

Opposite page: A stretching experiment on a miniature model.
According to my experiments, there is one pattern that I find it stands out from others. I find that there are ways to develop it to fit into my study. It is just a simple pattern that creates a three-dimensional curvy form; it is actually derived from 2 straight lines from different levels between 2 panels. The way that these threads place on top of each other tricks our eyes to perceive an illusion of shapes. And they can be varied from the viewers’ point of view.

I slightly adjust the pattern and add several layers on top of each other. Then I apply different colors onto each layer. A large number of lines found a transforming angle and the combination of hundreds of those angles projects the curvy shape to our eyes: a depth of several layers and the different color threads together with the negative space between threads layer generate an optical illusion, it is the picture that looks different from every single point of view. The outcome from this study model turned out almost exact what I have in mind but still the illusion picture does not clearly visible.

Then I want to exaggerate the illusion effect in my further development, I made another paper model: enlarge it from the study model by constraint all proportions. Threads and space among them act as positive and negative space in the context of my creation. This positive and negative space cause an effect to the viewers’ perception meaning when they move their point of view, the space within the model starts to transform, and those transformations deliver and optical illusion to our eyes.

*Opposite page: The development with form, color of each layer, and space between threads.*
Experiment with natural color

From my intention to capture the nature into my artwork, I chose to use the natural dyes from plant to bring the seasonal colors for my thread presentation. First and foremost, all sources of dyed materials I have gathered by myself from the nature in my neighborhood in Finland.

The list below indicates eight types of dyed materials that I have collected during summer and autumn in 2011, and the place or area where I garnered the plant materials:
- Blueberry: Nuuksio National Park, Espoo
- Raspberry: Seurasaari Island and Roihuvuori, Helsinki
- Elderberry: Siltakylänkuja, Helsinki
- Birch bark: Seurasaari Island and Roihuvuori, Helsinki
- Birch leaf: Roihuvuori and Siltakylänkuja, Helsinki
- Apple leaf: Siltakylänkuja, Helsinki
- Raspberry leaf: Sipoonkorpi national park, Vantaa, and Roihuvuori, Helsinki
- Tansy flower: Suomenlinna, Herttoniemi, and Siltakylänkuja, Helsinki

The natural dyed pigment has an occasional unpredictability and an infinite variety of the color outcomes; depending on the conditional used of fiber materials, dyed bath, mordant, and modifiers. The dissimilar conditions are affected on fibers to take up dye pigment in the different ways.

Each type of fibers has a different quality to absorb the color. Furthermore, a mordant is not only a substance to fix the dyed pigment to fibers, but it also effects the result color in the dyeing process. If the same fibers use different mordants, they will produce different colors from the same dyed bath. Additionally, a modifier is a substance to modify dye color and create more extended range of color. Color modifiers are substances applied after the initial dyeing process to vary the shades from the first dye bath.

In my experiment, I chose three different kinds of vegetable fibers, three common mordants, and four modifiers to test and explore all possibilities of color results from eight types of dyed materials.

Opposite page: Berry picking at Nuuksio National Park, July 2011
Following page: Eight types of dyed materials that were collected during summer and autumn 2011.
Dyeing process:

Step 1: Washing and cleaning fibers
Vegetable fibers contain wax and oil. Before being mordanted and dyed, fibers must be completely cleaned otherwise the dyed color may be imperfectly applied to fibers and produced uneven results. To clean the fibers, soak fibers overnight in the clear water and use one teaspoon of washing-up liquid for every 6.5 liters of water. Soak fibers in a solution of washing-up liquid for six to 12 hours, or overnight, and then remove the fibers, rinse, and wash several times. Afterwards, the fibers should be simmered for at least two hours in a solution of cleanser and washing soda by using two teaspoons of washing soda for every 4.5 liters of water. Remove the fibers from the solution and rinse thoroughly several times.

Step 2: Mordanting
The most common mordants are compounds of aluminium sulphate, copper, and iron. Before mordanting, it is crucial to soak fibers in water for one to two hours, so the fibers can fully absorb the mordant.

To mordant with aluminium sulphate, use eight teaspoons of alum and three teaspoons of washing soda per 200g of fibers, dissolve it in boiling water to make the mordant solution. Add the fibers and heat the alum solution to simmer point, turn off the heat, and leave the fibers to steep for 8 to 24 hours. Then remove the fibers and rinse well before dyeing.

For copper mordant, I made my own copper water by soaking several pieces of copper wire in a mixture of water and clear vinegar, as long as the solution obtain a bright blue liquid. To mordant, add the wet fibers to copper water, adding water as necessary, and slowly bring the solution to simmering point. Simmer for 30 minutes to one hour, then remove from heat and let the fibers cool in the solution before rinsing them well.

For iron mordant, I also produced my own iron solution with the same method of making copper water. Leave the iron to steep in the solution until it turns to a rusty-orange color. To mordant with iron, the process is similar to mordant with copper, but only simmer for 10 minutes or until the fibers appear pale orange.
Step 3: dyeing
To extract color from plant materials most effectively, the dyed materials should be soaked in water for several days, or even a week, before working process started. Then simmer them for one hour, turn off the heat and leave them steep for one hour before straining off the dye liquid. Bring the dye bath to simmering point and add the fibers to dyed bath. Simmer the fibers for one hour, turn off the heat and leave them sleep for one night before rinsing them thoroughly.

Step 4: Modifying dye colors
I have selected four kinds of modifiers; which are the 10% vinegar as acidic modifier, the washing soda solution as alkaline modifier, copper, and iron, to apply into the dyed bath for experimenting the diverse shade of colors. Acidic modifiers tend to make fiber colors more yellowish in tone, while alkaline modifiers usually create more pinkish tone but sometime it can change colors dramatically. Copper modifiers make colors either more greenish or brownish in tone but sometime copper hardly affects the shade at all. Iron modifiers tend to make color darker and somber in tone. To modifying dye colors, apply the modifier solutions to dye bath and simmer for five to 15 minutes. Then rinse and wash the fibers again.

From the experiments of the natural plant dyes, I have gained 64 different colors from the original of eight dyed materials. The color results are in the different tone of yellow, green, brown, grey, and dark blue. Some colors have slightly different shade, while some have dramatically shift the tone of color. To finalize color for my art piece, I chose 32 different colors that have a harmonic shade and tone. Additionally, the selected colors should be able to use as a gradient color for the purpose of generating an illusion effect.

Above: The selection of 32 natural dyed color from the experiment.
Opposite page: The natural dyed experiment.
Final approach and working process

The decision I have made for the final approach is concerned on the size of the artwork. My thread installation should not only display the effect of optical illusion, but also attempt to create the tranquil atmosphere to the exhibited area. Consequently, the size of the art object should be large enough to form the space and condue the viewers to contemplate it.

In order to arrange the artwork, I have decided to build a wood frame for creating the thread presentation. The size of frame is 120x120x120 cm. The frame has to be steady and strong because it will hold the tension of 1040 cotton threads. The frame is made from pine wood sheet and supported by the metal structure. There are 2,060 holes in total for weaving the threads on the installation frame. The space between each hole is 2cm. The neat holes made by the CNC machine in the wood workshop.

Above: Idea of exhibition setting for final artwork.
Opposite page: Details of the frame and working process.
The artwork consists of 16 layers of different natural dye colors, as follows:

Layer 1: tansy (no mordant)
Layer 2: birch leaf (alum mordant + alkaline modifier)
Layer 3: apple leaf (alum mordant)
Layer 4: raspberry leaf (alum mordant + alkaline modifier)
Layer 5: raspberry leaf (alum mordant + copper modifier)
Layer 6: birch leaf (alum mordant + iron modifier)
Layer 7: raspberry leaf (alum mordant + iron modifier)
Layer 8: elderberry (iron mordant)
Layer 9: blueberry (iron mordant)
Layer 10: elderberry (alum mordant)
Layer 11: birch bark (alum mordant + iron modifier)
Layer 12: raspberry (iron mordant)
Layer 13: birch bark (copper mordant)
Layer 14: raspberry (alum mordant)
Layer 15: birch bark (alum mordant)
Layer 16: natural color

The colors are organized as a gradient color to efficiently create the illusion effect to the art piece. The artwork is produced from 1,500 meters of 100% cotton yams and consumed 86 hours to stretch and finish all the threads.

Opposite Page: Color arrangement from outermost layer to innermost layer.
My “Impermanence of Things”
Conclusion

Life is a continuous of becoming and learning. During the year of doing this thesis, I have gained much experience of working in the textile art. And the aspect of creating art has broadly expanded in several ways. Tim Slowinski (1976) once said that art is a way of life, a method of being, a way of perceiving the world, and that inspired me to express my perspective of being human through my pieces of art.

In my perception, art is a way of life and life is the process of learning the impermanence. The concept of impermanence comes as the essential characteristic of all being. It is the core of Buddhism and it profoundly influences the ways of my Eastern life and beliefs. The idea of impermanence attempts us to accept the change of everything in life. It is an undeniable and inescapable fact of human life. Nothing is fixed and permanent, on the other hand everything is in a stage of change. The moment of realizing and knowing oneself help us accepting the idea of impermanence.

My final artwork provides a simple experience for the viewers to see the phenomenon of change. I present my “impermanence” idea through a textile art object: it is an object that intended to catch the eyes of the viewers with the illusion of visual perception. The audiences will be led to reconsider the intention of its creation after they go through the moment of realizing, which will happen when they take different angle point of views to my work. I create this piece of art by my desire to convey my understanding of “impermanence of things”, the changing and unpredictable of its presentation is designed to perceive by ones’ inner eyes that will initiate the idea of impermanence in life to ones eventually.
Note & Bibliography
Note:

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Figure 2 from Japan-guide.com
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Figure 3 is taken from The Architecture of the Japanese Garden: Right Angle and Natural Form. Germany: Benedikt Taschen, 1991, p.101

Figure 4 is taken from Secret Teachings in The Art of Japanese Gardens: Design Principles Aesthetic Values, p.96

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And this is the impermanent nature of our life...