



*The Nature of
Aging Gracefully*

by Jazmine Walker

*San José State University
BFA Graphic Design
Senior Thesis*

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To all my cherished ones,

*May our love grow old like fine wine,
Aging with grace and beauty divine.*

*As time passes and we see the years,
Our bond will only strengthen and cheer.*

*So let us embrace each wrinkle and line,
For they are symbols of a love that will shine.*

*Together we'll journey through life,
With joy and peace, free from strife.*

*Thank you for making me excited to age,
For with you, the years are but a page.*

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Aging Gracefully*

designed by
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San José State University
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table
of contents.

| | |
|----|---------------------------------|
| 1 | <i>proposition.</i> |
| 2 | discovering <i>wabi-sabi</i> . |
| 3 | connecting to <i>aging</i> . |
| 4 | thesis <i>positions</i> . |
| 6 | research <i>questions</i> . |
| 7 | people, places, <i>things</i> . |
| 8 | locating thesis <i>range</i> . |
| 10 | project <i>manifesto</i> . |
| 13 | <i>exploration.</i> |
| 14 | defining <i>wabi-sabi</i> . |
| 15 | framing <i>reference</i> . |
| 16 | aging in the <i>west</i> . |
| 17 | personal <i>survey</i> . |
| 18 | repository of <i>insight</i> . |
| 20 | selected <i>readings</i> . |
| 23 | <i>construction.</i> |
| 24 | initial <i>approaches</i> . |
| 26 | initial <i>feedback</i> . |
| 27 | aging in <i>nature</i> . |
| 28 | implementing <i>motion</i> . |
| 29 | spinning <i>mobiles</i> . |
| 30 | installation <i>details</i> . |
| 31 | ideal <i>location</i> . |
| 32 | disk <i>ideations</i> . |
| 34 | subsequent <i>feedback</i> . |
| 37 | <i>execution.</i> |
| 38 | mobile <i>structures</i> . |
| 46 | installation <i>plan</i> . |
| 42 | digital <i>renderings</i> . |
| 52 | pamphlet <i>guide</i> . |
| 56 | presentation <i>booklet</i> . |
| 60 | <i>recognition.</i> |
| 62 | project <i>reflection</i> . |
| 63 | special <i>thanks</i> . |
| 64 | sources <i>used</i> . |
| 65 | <i>colophon</i> . |

“Do not complain
about *growing old*.
It is a privilege
denied to many.”

- Mark Twain

proposition.

- 2 discovering wabi-sabi.
- 3 connecting to aging.
- 4 thesis position.
- 6 research questions.
- 7 people, places, things.
- 8 locating thesis range.
- 10 project manifesto.

discovering

wabi-sabi.

In the beginning of my senior year, I had the wonderful opportunity of visiting the Japanese Tea Garden in San Francisco for another class project. Upon entering the garden, it was like stepping into a serene world of tranquility and beauty, as opposed to the busy city life right outside the gates. Strolling along the winding paths and admiring the carefully crafted landscapes allowed me a much-needed retreat from the stress of my academics. I adored the feeling of being overshadowed by the trees, as if they were shielding me from the rest of the world, and allowing me peace and time to simply wander through the gardens.

It was during this visit that I was introduced to the concept of *wabi-sabi* by a knowledgeable tour guide. She explained that it was a Japanese philosophy that emphasized the unique beauty of imperfect appearances. For example, if a painted fence post becomes chipped, it is not repainted, but simply left alone and embraced as a unique feature of the fence to be appreciated.

Throughout my life, I have always felt a similar appreciation of natural life and transience, so hearing it described as an established and historic philosophy immediately captivated me. As I delved deeper into the concept, I found that it offered a unique perspective on beauty, design, and the human experience. Inspired by my visit to the tea garden and my newfound interest in *wabi-sabi*, I decided to make it the topic of my senior thesis, exploring its applications in personal philosophy, design, and everyday life.

connecting

to *aging.*

Through my research on *wabi-sabi*, I instantly related it to my personal philosophy of aging. As the youngest in a family of older step-siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins, I've been able to learn and appreciate the countless joys and privileges of growing older with the ones you love. This appreciation grew even more when I realized that as I get older year after year, so do they. With each year bringing new experiences, lessons, and understandings of life, growing older has allowed me to relate and connect to my loved ones even more during my rare visits.

These rare moments of connection with my family have become my most precious joys in life. So when I hear them making throwaway remarks hiding their worries about new gray hairs, wrinkles, or other "imperfections," it affects me. It saddens me greatly to hear them talk about themselves as if they're defined by these physical changes, when I will forever see them as the same kind, generous, and loving people who have always been there for me.

Their worth is not determined by their appearance or age, but rather by their compassion, integrity, and spirit. It's important to remind them of this, and to cherish the wisdom and experience that comes with aging. We all deserve to feel valued and loved, regardless of our age, and I will always be there to remind my family members of this fact. This project is dedicated to them and their unending love and support.

thesis abstract.

In American society, signs of aging are seen as a negative aspect brought about by the natural passage of time. Everywhere you look, anti-aging campaigns can be found advertising extreme skincare routines, intrusive plastic surgery, or some other unnatural method of physical suppression. Most of these ads are specifically targeted towards women, whose value is placed upon their youth and beauty by society from an early age.

These ingrained superficial values then lead to women feeling ashamed and disappointed with their self image once past their perceived "prime," leading to desperate attempts to salvage an artificial eternal youth. Born of ancient Greek aesthetic ideals, today's Western beauty standards demand an impossible standard of perfection, prioritizing flawless skin, proper symmetry, and most importantly, youthful vigor. Placing such unreasonable expectations against the perpetual effects of time makes western views of aging degrading and bleak.

In direct contrast, the ancient Japanese design aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* states that signs of an object's aging are exactly what make it beautiful, especially when found in nature. It finds great aesthetic appeal in imperfections, as they reveal the hidden history and character within the artifact. Furthermore, it depicts naturally aged patina as a desirable aspect instead of an eyesore. Overall, it promotes the idea of earthly objects as imperfect and impermanent, and that their inherent value is not diminished by those factors, but rather enhanced.

By applying this rhetoric that embraces and accepts rather than shames and denies, views of aging in the West could be reinterpreted into a new perspective. By recontextualizing them through the lens of nature, aging and its inevitable physical changes show the privileges of continued life rather than eventual demise. By displaying visual comparisons between human aging and nature through a set of spinning wire structures, residents of Avenidas senior enrichment center in Palo Alto will be able to gradually form their own enlightening observations, and apply this new way of thinking to themselves, and others around them.

thesis statement.

“Instead of an exhausting chase for perfection defined by impossible societal standards, older adults must embrace their natural marks of *aging* by identifying with *nature*, and appreciate them as signs of a life fully lived.”

thesis advisors.

primary Connie Hwang
Professor of Graphic Design at SJSU.

secondary Julio Martinez
Professor of Graphic Design at SJSU.

tertiary Kaeko Chiba
Professor of Japanese Traditional Arts at Akita International University.

research *questions.*

To begin this project, a trio of leading questions were developed to help guide my project and its final outcome.

1. How can the concept of *wabi-sabi* be introduced to new learners in a visual manner?
2. What is the best way to present connected visual similarities and metaphors between aged nature and aged people?
3. Rather than demanding people to love themselves, what is the best manner to gently remind them of their inherent beauty by relating to nature?

people,

To aid my initial brainstorming, I was prompted to relate my thesis to a variety of physical and abstract concepts.

places,
things.

physical places

Antique shops
Japanese tea garden
Senior enrichment center

huge objects.

Redwood trees
Japanese tea house
The Grand Canyon

tiny objects.

Kintsugi bowl
Withered flower
Rusted metal key

abstract qualities

Impermanence
Simplicity
Acceptance

physical qualities.

Patina
Asymmetry
Texture

blue collar jobs

Potter
Carpenter
Stonemason

supermarket items

Wine
Cheese
Heirloom vegetables

graphic designers.

Kenya Hara
Frank Lloyd Wright
Alexander Calder

famous films.

Pixar's Soul
Forrest Gump
It's A Wonderful Life

foundations and organizations.

AARP (American Association of Retired Persons)
GSA (The Gerontological Society of America)
NCOA (National Council on Aging)

historical events

Chinese Zen Buddhism
Japanese tea ceremony
Beauty in Ancient Greece

recent news stories

Viral "anti-wrinkle" straw
Celebrity plastic surgery procedures
Paulina Porizkova's viral photo



locating
the *thesis range*.

From the beginning of my thesis proposal, I knew I wanted to do something concerning my views of Western ageism, and its backwards attitude specifically against aged appearances. After remembering my experience at the Japanese Tea Garden and learning of *wabi-sabi*, I realized I could compare and contrast the two completely opposing views through a unique visual manner. *Wabi-sabi* would be able to lend itself to my thinking, not only as an age-old philosophy, but as a set of design principles I would be able to use throughout my project as well. My visuals would have to be asymmetrical, minimal, and imperfect, without becoming boring or sloppy. These beginning connections excited me as I continued moving forward with my proposal.

During my initial proposal meeting, I received feedback from two separate viewpoints. The first referenced my mention of wrinkles as a sign of aging, stating how an entire book could be filled about them and their inherent metaphors: wrinkles in skin, in fabric, or in time. One particular aspect that will be key in the translation of my thesis will be the level of sophistication and poetic descriptions used to display my ideas. I may be able to use a combination of visuals and personal stories listed adjacent to the content in order to further support my chosen visuals.

As for the second source of feedback, I was told it was great that my thesis had already been brought to a very specific point, and that I had appropriate correlating imagery for what I was planning to explore. However, it may be a good idea to expand it a bit further by looking into similar aesthetics born from philosophies across different cultures, not just Japan. This will create even more interesting comparisons rather than just two. If I decided to go even further, I could possibly relate these aesthetics to the creative process. The practice of kintsugi, or gold joinery for pottery, could be a specific metaphor for the different stages of conceptual ideation, from an original idea being broken, revised, and reconstructed into something completely new.

Though these were great pieces of feedback for me to either narrow or expand upon my topic, I quickly realized they both still felt too broad, and ultimately decided to go down a more personal route. As a woman who has seen the internalized ageism of my own mother, sisters, aunts and cousins, I decided to further narrow my thesis by exploring how aging affects older women in particular.

Though men and women both experience ageism as they grow older, I've noticed women often experience more negative responses due to their aged appearances in comparison to men. This can especially be seen in media portrayals of older female models, actresses, and celebrities, who often receive bad press if they are unable to keep up their youthful appearances through the years. Thus, they are forced to spend countless amounts of money on procedures, abrasive skincare, or other unnatural treatments.

These practices then become normalized and filtered down into the general public, who feel great pressure to keep up their own image, even though it's an inherently impossible task of fighting against time and nature. Therefore, I wanted to highlight this discrepancy of societal expectations against women, and offer my own position based in *wabi-sabi* through the designed experience of my thesis project.

the *wabi-sabi* way of creation

Creating just to create.

Art has been commodified into an uphill battle of constant progression and perfection. But not every day should be a hustle. The simple act and effort of creating as a beautiful expression can be enough for some days.

Following intuition over rules.

Becoming in-tune with our creative mindset and personal set of ideals allows us to make our own rules. Allowing the heart to lead us instead of our heads allows for grander opportunities of expression.

Not everything has to be a masterpiece.

While we constantly get to show off big, finished successes, we should also appreciate mindless small doodles and sketches it took to get there. They are just as important, and more charming in a way.

“This state of mind is not about lack of ambition, laziness, or giving up on learning. It’s an acceptance and comfort with the *journey*, a patience with the *process*, and an appreciation for the *present moment*.”

Christine Nishiyama

project *manifesto*.

Wabi-sabi acts not only as a philosophy of hidden beauty, but lives by a certain set of aesthetic principles to achieve this unique beauty. It also encourages certain beliefs of acceptance and discovery that can be applied to the creative process, which I attempted to abide by during my own process.

Born out of classical Greek art and European ideals, Western art aims for accuracy, constant improvement, and prioritizes finished products over process. It strives for perfection, and buries flaws. However, *wabi-sabi* acts in direct opposition of these constricting ideals.

“The idea of wabi-sabi speaks of a readiness to accept things as they are. This is contrary to Western ideals that emphasize progress and growth as necessary components to daily living.”

Wabi-sabi’s fundamental nature is about process, not final product, about decay and aging, not growth. This concept requires the art of “slowness,” a willingness to concentrate on the things that are often overlooked, the imperfections and the marks recording the passing of time.”

Richard Martin

Cherish the process, not the final product.

Learn to love the process of art making and the process of discovering our artistic styles. The making is what matters most, not the final piece. Art is impermanent, but what we learn from creating lasts forever.

Notice and embrace imperfections.

Flaws signify humanity and natural authenticity. They give art pieces character and unique history which exists in no other. Rather than erasing and sweeping them away, allow them to exist as embraced qualities.

Be patient and create modestly.

Put aside goals of fame, success, and wealth in order to truly be in the moment when creating. Focus on the art and appreciate it for what it is, rather than driving yourself crazy attempting to reach perfection.

“If you study Japanese art, you see a man who is *undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent*, who spends his time how? *He studies a blade of grass.*”

Vincent Van Gogh

exploration.

- 14 defining *wabi-sabi*.
- 15 framing *reference*.
- 16 aging in *the west*.
- 17 personal *survey*.
- 18 repository of *insight*.
- 20 selected *readings*.

defining *wabi-sabi*.

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese philosophy that emphasizes finding beauty in imperfection, simplicity, and the natural cycle of growth and decay. It's about embracing the flaws and imperfections that make things unique and seeing the beauty in things that are weathered, worn, and aged. For example, a cracked ceramic bowl can be seen as more beautiful because of its imperfection, rather than being discarded as useless.

Wabi-sabi encourages us to appreciate the simplicity and naturalness of things, rather than seeking perfection and artificiality. This philosophy can help us find contentment in the present moment, accept the changes that come with life, and cultivate a sense of gratitude for the beauty that surrounds us, even in the most unexpected places.

With that said, *wabi-sabi* is a perplexing concept that is often difficult for people to truly describe. Understanding most often comes from feeling the concept rather than listening to a definition, where language often falls short.

wabi-sabi (wah-bee sah-bee)

The Japanese philosophy of finding beauty within the imperfections of life and accepting the natural cycle of growth and decay.

celebrates all marks of time, weather, or love left behind.

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>wabi</i> | <i>sabi</i> |
| modest nature of simplicity | transience of natural life |
| understated beauty found in flaws and imperfections | constant wear and tear |



example of kintsugi

written examples

"*Wabi-Sabi is thrift shops, your Grandmother's cupboard, the well used baking tray. It's the falling leaves in autumn, the composting leaves in winter, the blossoms falling gracefully like snow in spring, and the lush green canopy in summer.*"

It's the handmade, hand sculpted, hand-turned items with marks and asymmetry that can only be accomplished with human hands. It's the smell of old leather, the cracks and the crevices in concrete, the weathered outdoor bench seat, the sun faded paper and the time worn linen. It's the half finished painting in your studio, or the vase of withering flowers on your table."

"*Wabi sabi is asymmetrical heirloom vegetables and handmade pottery, crow's feet and the frayed sleeves of a favorite wool sweater, exposed brick and the first draft of a difficult letter. You won't find wabi sabi in Botox, glass-and-steel skyscrapers, smart phones, or the drive for relentless self-improvement. It's a beauty hidden right in front of our eyes, an aesthetic of simplicity that reveals itself only when animated through the daily work of living."*

Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage by Haruki Murakami

"Compared to Edward's style, Eri's was far *simpler*, hardly reaching the finely wrought subtlety of her husband's creations. Overall there was a lush, fleshy feel to her pieces, the rims slightly *warped*, and a lack of any refined, focused beauty. But her pottery also had an unusual *warmth* that brought a sense of *comfort* and *solace*. The slight irregularities and rough texture provided a quiet sense of *calm*, like the feeling of touching natural fabric, or sitting on a porch watching the clouds go by."

framing *reference*.

In order to gain more insight into *wabi-sabi* from a professional primary source, I interviewed my tertiary advisor, Kaeko Chiba, an associate professor from Akita International University. Specializing in Japanese Traditional Arts, Professor Chiba was able to provide me with an anthropological framing of *wabi-sabi* within the context of historical Japanese culture and arts.

With over 20 years of teaching experience, she was able to help me accurately depict principles of *wabi-sabi* in my work. We were able to conduct the interview on a live video call over Zoom. It was a Thursday at 4 p.m. for me, and a Friday at 9 a.m. for her, due to the time difference between the U.S. and Japan.

How long have you been teaching Japanese traditional arts?

How do you usually describe the concept of wabi-sabi to your students who have never heard of it before?

Are there any specific examples of wabi-sabi that you refer to when explaining the concept?

How big of a part does wabi-sabi play in Japanese culture?

How often do you encounter wabi-sabi throughout daily life? If at all?

Have you noticed any differences in how the UK views imperfections versus how they're viewed in Japan after living in both countries?

synopsis

Professor Chiba has been teaching for over twenty years. She grew up in Japan, but did her research in the UK. Her grandmother was a tea ceremony teacher and taught Chiba as a young girl, inspiring her to become a teacher of the subject in her 20s.

She describes the concept of *wabi-sabi* to her students simply as "the imperfection of beauty." When asked more specifically about the concept, she described it as a combination of aesthetic and philosophy, being "an aesthetic first, with a philosophical and religious background."

Professor Chiba often uses raku tea bowls, often used in tea ceremonies, as a clear example of *wabi-sabi* to show her students. They have a rough texture, and when held it's as if "you can feel how the potter made it." A great comparative example are kyo tea bowls, which are adorned with gold and are perfectly round, the complete opposite.

Typical tea houses are also ideal examples of *wabi-sabi*, often very minimal in nature with Japanese paper walls, tatami floors for natural color, and are small in size. Once again, this nature-inspired style of architecture can be compared to the Golden Tea House, which acts as a foil.

When inquired about how often *wabi-sabi* actually appears in Japanese daily living, she responded that it is utilized more in Japanese art and design as compared to being referenced in day-to-day living.

It definitely does not appear in the Japanese cosmetic industry, which Chiba believes to have been adopted from America, as it also views aging as undesirable. Japanese women are often encouraged to dye their hair and put on makeup as a means of showing respect when outside in society.

The reasoning for this resides in the concept of *uchi* and *soto*, a woman's "inside and outside face," which encourages looking presentable when greeting others. This is in large contrast to women in Europe or the UK, who she states seem to be much more relaxed about their aged appearances, proudly leaving their grays undyed.

She believes that aging primarily affects women due to their gender position. "We are in more of a position to be selected rather than selecting others, in relation to age, marriage, and the labor market."

aging in *the west*.

Over the past century, western beauty standards have undergone a transformation that has contributed to the negative perception of aging in modern society. In the early 20th century, youth and vitality were still highly prized, but signs of aging were not as stigmatized.

However, with the rise of Hollywood and celebrity culture in the mid-20th century, a new standard of beauty emerged that placed a greater emphasis on youthfulness and physical perfection. As cosmetic surgery and other anti-aging treatments became more widespread, aging began to be viewed as a problem to be fixed rather than a natural part of the human experience.

This has led to the widespread use of ageist language and attitudes in popular culture and advertising, which reinforces the idea that aging is undesirable and something to be feared. While there has been some progress in recent years towards a more positive view of aging, many people still struggle with the negative messages and pressure to maintain a youthful appearance.

This is especially true for women, who are often subjected to increased pressure to maintain a youthful appearance, both in their personal and professional lives. Women who display signs of aging, such as wrinkles, gray hair, or sagging skin, are often judged harshly and deemed less attractive or valuable. This pressure is often reinforced by the media, which perpetuates images of young, flawless women as the standard of beauty.

The beauty industry also capitalizes on this by promoting a plethora of anti-aging products, many of which are marketed exclusively towards women. This creates a culture where women feel they must constantly fight against the natural aging process, leading to feelings of insecurity, self-doubt, and a sense of inadequacy.

aging anxiety in women

"Women are substantially more concerned about aging, especially from 30 years of age, as it affects their physical appearance throughout their lives."

Erica Aberg

"Women are socialized to invest in their appearances and are valued for bearing this capital, [therefore] maintaining it seems more important to them."

Erica Aberg

"Women can find themselves facing dual discrimination in access to employment and pensions and to key goods and services in the health and insurance sectors."

ageing-equal.org

A woman's age is central to her identity, and she is told to worry about the decrease in her "market value" across different contexts.

From a young age, women are taught to internalize ageist norms of society.

personal *survey*.

For the purpose of researching the impact of aging on women, a personal survey was conducted with a small sample group of women. The survey aimed to identify exactly which signs of aging women deem as the most undesirable and concerning on themselves.

survey question

If you had the chance to change anything about your appearance, what would you alter first?

How has your body changed and matured physically with time and age?

How has your self-image changed in the last five to ten years?

top three answers

*"Thinner body"
"Flawless skin"
"Chiseled jawline"*

*"Fluctuating weight"
"Prominent wrinkles"
"Stretch marks"*

*"I've found things to love"
"Used to be more self-conscious"
"I miss how I used to look"*

most unwanted signs of aging

forehead wrinkles
crows feet
thinning lips
smile lines
receding gums
large pores
hollowed cheeks

graying hair
thinning hair
droopy earlobes
hollowed neck
caving shoulders
liver spots
dry skin

veiny hands
sunken spine
thinning skin
stretch marks
hollow midsection
wrinkly knees
sagging breasts

repository of *insight*.

A selection of quotes that helped to guide and anchor my thesis positions in *wabi-sabi*, aging, and nature as interconnected topics.

Many of my *wabi-sabi* excerpts come from Leonard Koren, who wrote the book *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, which I referenced constantly throughout my project.

“Hold the teacup in your hands and feel the work that the craftsman put into it, how their hands shaped the clay and made this special object of which there is no other... The cup’s wear and tear is increasing every time you drink from it. It will never be the same tea cup, and you will never be the same person.”

Terin Jackson

This quote captures the essence of my thesis because it cohesively describes the universal aging process through the lens of wabi-sabi. By using a handcrafted teacup as a metaphor, it translates the elusive concept of wabi-sabi into a more easily understandable metaphor, especially when wabi-sabi is a concept that is extremely difficult to define through words.

It leads the reader to reminisce about the simple, yet joyful details of their surroundings through the basic example of a teacup, from its beginning formation out of clay, to its end function as a container to hold tea. By bringing attention to the cup’s lifespan, its imperfections that make it unique, and subsequent transient nature over time, they are able to compare it to themselves as a constantly aging human.

This singular teacup was created for one singular purpose. However, this does not mean that it could not be carefully crafted, with a high level of effort and care put into it. On the other hand, it is not a perfectly produced piece, as handcrafted objects will always leave room for human error.

But these minor imperfections are exactly what give the teacup its distinct feeling of familiarity, warmth, and comfort. It adds a layer of complexity and empathy to the piece that cannot be found in mass-produced products. This holds true in the same way for people and organic beings in nature as well.

Though “repairing” our natural imperfections may be superficially beneficial, there is also an unfortunate loss of personal character and history that is sacrificed with these fixes. For example, by hiding the yellowing or gaps in teeth with veneers, there comes the loss of their unique, one-of-a-kind smile. Carefully manicured lawns without any weeds quickly become too uniform without any sort of variety, and lose interest quickly. Rather than completely covering up any signs of progression or change, they could be appreciated for their distinct qualities that aren’t seen often, and embraced as they are.

“Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional.”

Leonard Koren

“Pare down to the essence, but don’t remove the poetry.”

Leonard Koren

“Just as it is important to know when to make choices, it is also important to know when not to make choices: to let things be.”

Leonard Koren

“Wrinkles should merely indicate where smiles have been.”

Mark Twain

“Wabi-sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: *nothing lasts, nothing is finished and nothing is perfect.*”

Richard R. Powell

“No seashell is perfectly drawn, yet we marvel at the beauty with which it curves.”

Omar Itani

“The Japanese sense of beauty has long sharply differed from its Western counterpart: it has been dominated by a love of irregularity rather than symmetry, the impermanent rather than the eternal and the simple rather than the ornate.”

Alain de Botton

“My face carries all my memories. Why would I erase them?”

Diane Von Furstenberg

“It’s a cruel thing our society does to women... to tell them they’ve failed for a process that’s totally normal and natural.”

Cameron Diaz

“Older men are distinguished. Older women are ugly.”

Kayla Blanton

“A certain male actor that was making a movie said that I was too old to be his romantic interest, and I was 20 years younger than him.”

Geena Davis

selected readings.

Åberg, Erica, Iida Kukkonen, and Outi Sarpila. "From Double to Triple Standards of Ageing: Perceptions of Physical Appearance at the Intersections of Age, Gender and Class." *Journal of Aging Studies*. December, 2020.

An in-depth study about the self-perceptions of aged individuals across numbered ranges, social classes, and separate genders. Though all of the research was conducted thoroughly and presents its findings cohesively, the sections pertaining specifically to aged women were focused on the most, as the study highlights the evidently different levels of worry between aging women and men. As stated, women are raised to be highly conscious of their physical appearance, as it connotes their social capital and identity greatly. Therefore, they are substantially shown to be more concerned about physical signs of aging throughout their lives.

Altair, Patrick. "Wabi-Sabi." *patrickaltair.com*. April 19, 2015.

Altair gives a basic description of wabi-sabi within a short essay as a seasoned design journalist. He references recognizable examples of wabi-sabi in the contexts of iconic art history for Western readers, including The Venus de Milo statue known for its missing arms, and thus, incomplete nature. Another example is the Liberty Bell, its large crack differentiating it greatly from any other bell, symbolizing the rebellious nature of its deep history, which is then celebrated rather than covered up as a mistake.

Alwyn, Richard. "In Search of Wabi-Sabi with Marcel Theroux." *BBC Documentary*. March 16, 2009.

A BBC documentary in which novelist, broadcaster, and complete outsider Marcel Theroux travels across Japan in an attempt to understand the Japanese aesthetic theory, Wabi-Sabi. By directly interacting and interviewing people of Japan in 2014, this documentary gives a more realistic perspective on how wabi-sabi appears in Japanese daily life, if at all, and how it is recognized and explained from a more general audience in Japan. Examples explored by Theroux include museum art, practicing haiku, and Japanese tea ceremonies.

Laziuk, Katarzyna. "Remedy for Perfectionism of Modern Western Culture or the Latest Design Trend?: The Western Understanding of Japanese Wabi and Sabi Aesthetics." *Intercultural Relations* 4, no. 2(8) (2021): 97–106.

This passage breaks down preconceived notions of wabi-sabi from the 2018 craze which muddled its historic principles and natural aesthetic through a Western lens of marketing. Wabi-sabi is brought back to its original, more sentimental philosophy through thorough examinations of its definitions in Japanese culture, how they differ compared to Western perceptions of the concept, and how they compare against each other across specific areas of context.

Koren, Leonard. "Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers." Stone Bridge Press, 1994.

One of the most referenced sources when discussing wabi-sabi. Koren goes over the subject in great detail with sections concerning its history in Zen Culture, and estimated definitions according to cultural contexts. He deconstructs it as an aesthetic, philosophy, and concept each to create a full understanding of wabi-sabi and its multitude of different faces.

Muhlbauer, Varda, and Joan C. Chrisler. "Women, Power, and Aging: An Introduction." *Women & Therapy*. June 28, 2012.

An article about more modern portrayals of aging women against stereotypes of frailness or incompetence. Covers a variety of relevant topics and studies concerning the recent effects of aging specifically for women. These include a newly feminist culture, the multitude of roles that have opened to women, and cultural expectations of "positive aging." It also goes over the reality of these new social norms: if older women are actually treated with respect, the pressure of cosmetic surgeries, and prejudice garnered from healthcare systems.

“The whole culture is set up to tell you that the thing that is *most natural* is *wrong*— but we’re surrounded by these beautiful trees here that *literally get better with age.*”

Oprah Winfrey

construction.

- 24 *initial approaches.*
- 26 *initial feedback.*
- 27 *aging in nature.*
- 28 *implementing motion.*
- 29 *spinning mobiles.*
- 30 *installation details.*
- 31 *ideal location.*
- 32 *disk ideations.*
- 34 *subsequent feedback.*

initial approaches.

When first determining the possible visual outcomes of my thesis, there were a series of goals I wanted to adhere to. I did this to ensure that my display would be guided by, as well as visually demonstrate *wabi-sabi* principles through art. They are as follows:

- must be physical
- must be hand crafted
- must utilize natural materials and textures
- must show change in some manner

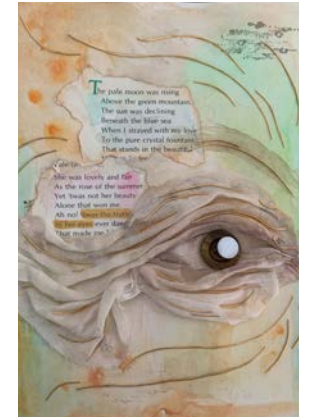
Some of my earliest ideas included a set of layered posters binded like a flipbook, peel-able posters, or a diary book featuring personal stories about people's imperfections. However, these felt extremely daunting, so I decided to condense my goal into smaller daily collages inspired by different signs of aging. This way I could utilize a variety of different objects, textures, and organic materials within my visual representations.



no 1. thin skin
watercolor, tissue layers, masking tape, sumi ink, sprig leaf.

Thus, I shifted my focus into mini visual collages of *wabi-sabi* by recreating aged features utilizing found objects and textures from antique stores, craft shops, or even simply organic plants pocketed during a walk outside.

I had planned to present these collages on top of realistic photos of the actual aged features, however I was advised that it would cover up the reality of aging rather than enhancing it, which was the opposite intention of my original thesis to accept and embrace imperfections. Therefore, it was strongly recommended to be more realistic and straightforward with my visualizations of aging onwards.



no 3. forehead wrinkles
watercolor, colored pencils, distress ink, embroidery floss, gold paint



no 2. crows feet
watercolor, print material, distress ink, fabric, buttons, gold wire.



initial feedback.

Other feedback I recieved in response to my first ideas would continue to guide me in how to handle the sensitive topics of my project throughout the rest of my process.

Don't do too many things at once.

My first exhibition idea expected my viewers to reverse their views on Western beauty, compare *wabi-sabi* and aging, learn what *wabi-sabi* is, and try to apply this novel mindset to themselves by looking at a mirror. Needless to say, this was asking way too much of people simply walking into design exhibition.

Rather than attempting an all-in-one solution that would be convoluted and confusing for viewers, I decided to narrow my visual focus to just one of my previous goals: comparing aging and nature. This way, I would be able to use *wabi-sabi* as a supporting element for my main visuals, creating a clearer heirarchy of my thesis subjects.

You can't change the world in a day.

People are inherently pushed to dislike the thought of aging, not just by society, but for what it ultimately brings: the end of life. It's an incredibly delicate topic that must be handled with a certain level of tact and grace, without expectations of instantly changing minds.

Rather attempting to revolutionize beauty standards, I was given a suggestion to design my visualization as a gentle reframing of the mind rather than a demanding statement. I should guide people through this new perspective by a slow progression of observations laid out by me, not a jarring comparison that people must work out themselves to find and understand.

Keep circumstances in mind.

Going off of the last point, it was important to consider where exactly my physical display would ideally go. People should ideally walk in with an open mind, primed to face the reality of aging in a new, more appreciative way. Otherwise, most viewers would walk in, and immediately become turned off by the subject.

Furthermore, my audience was another important point of matter. The context of my message and how it would be taken would differ heavily between a young adult audience versus a senior adult audience. Therefore, I would have to think heavily about which I would be presenting to, and what type of visual form would be best.

new keywords

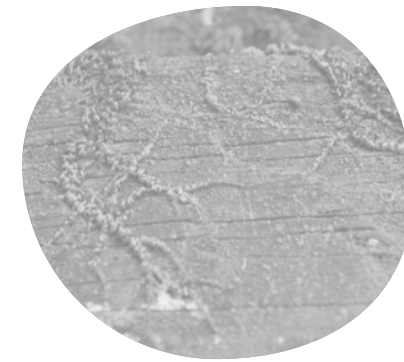
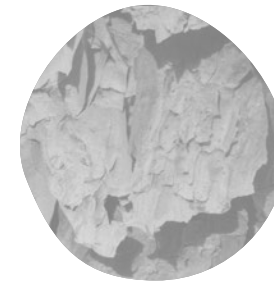
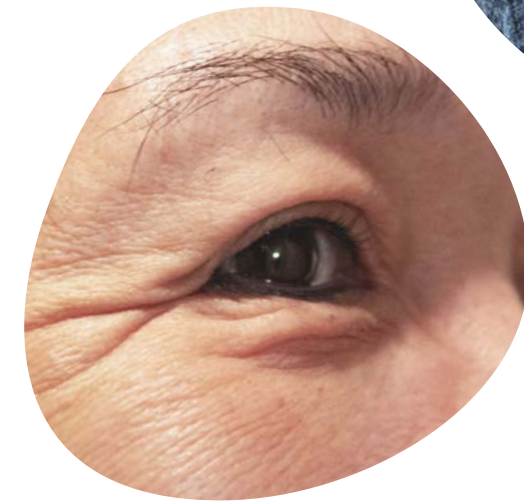
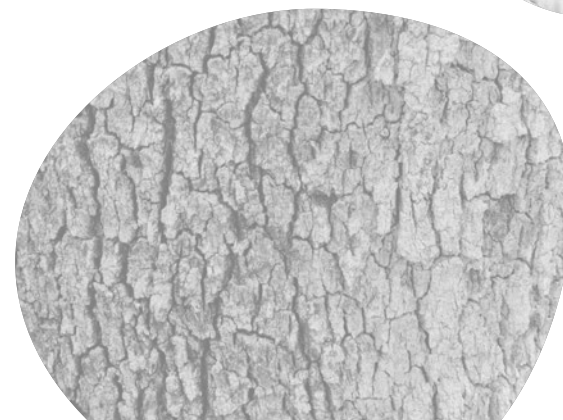
gentle
humble
peaceful
delicate
gradual
serene
rhythmic
elegant
subtle

aging in nature.

As I sat and thought to myself about how to be more realistic and authentic about my portrayals of aging, I looked out into my backyard in hopes of finding comfort in nature. It was then that I finally connected my previous thoughts of utilizing texture and materials to the natural variety of textures that could be found right outside.

By using nature as my point of reference to compare to aging, I believed it would be an easier portrayal of the unique beauty of aging for people to understand, as compared to the complex combinations of raw materials beforehand.

While photographing different parts of my backyard, I began to notice very familiar shapes and forms within the greenery around me. After asking my mother to act as a quick photo model, I put my photos together and it clicked. By using real images of aged people and nature, viewers can easily observe the visual similarities between aging perceived as both *"imperfect"* and *"beautiful."*



implementing *motion*.

As a possible solution to the jarring comparison of my physical collages, the idea of motion or morphing was brought to my attention. I began looking into time-based motion media. However, I didn't want to sacrifice the physicality that *wabi-sabi* emphasizes.

Instead, I began looking into classic animation techniques like zoetropes, or more specifically, thaumatropes, an antique yet effective optical illusion toy that utilizes two images spinning back and forth quickly to create a morphing effect. This led me to the idea of having an image of nature on one side, and a compositionally similar sign of aging on the other, allowing the viewer to easily notice the visual similarities.

I created several physical models to test different methods of spinning using thread and sticks. I also attempted various different constructed structures to allow interaction between the viewer and the mechanisms themselves: a spinning carousel mobile, a flat zoetrope, and replacable spinning films that twist.

hanging mobile zoetrope

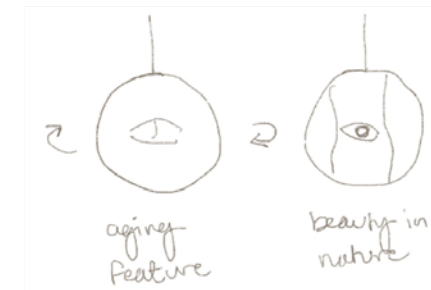
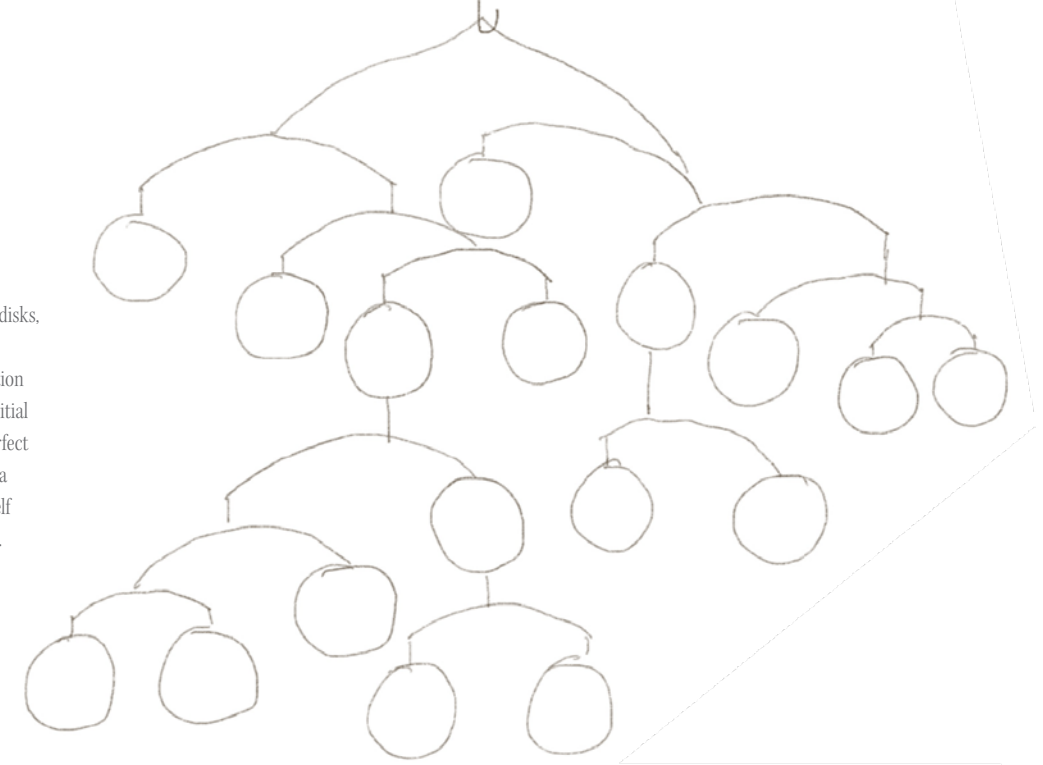


spinning *mobiles*.

To display these double-sided spinning disks, I decided on the idea of hanging kinetic wire structures, inspired by the last section of my first exhibition sketch from my initial approaches. Not only was it the perfect solution for my visuals to hang from in a delicate, slow manner, but the form itself carries inherent properties of *wabi-sabi*.

- tangibility
- tranquility
- balance
- gradual movement
- branch-like forms

In addition, this structure acts as a compromise between flat graphic design, and physical moving structures for me to step out of my comfort zone and expand my skill-set. It also allows me to display my current skills through its properties of lines, shape, form, color, and movement to create a composition and communicate my message. Like graphic design, mobiles rely on balance, contrast, and unity to create a harmonious composition.



able to slowly and quickly for animated effect



installation *details.*

With the main outcome form decided, I moved onto organizing the display and layout of my installation as a whole. Instead of having one large mobile, I designed three separate structures, split between the areas used to categorize my personal survey answers: the *face*, the *head*, and the *body*.

Meant to emulate a wilting plant, each one begins to droop more and more, expanding on the scope of aging as seen on the *body*. The first will show aging as seen on the *face*, the second will be aging around the *head*, and the third shows aging across the entire *body*.

first ideation

Initial sketches were way too complex with a huge excess of disks. However, it did demonstrate the basic form concepts of the wires slowly "wilting" with each mobile.

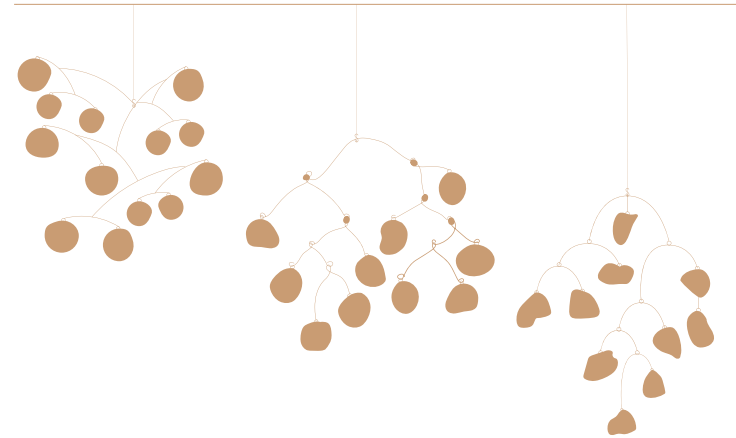
second ideation

The second designs were reduced to become more simplified, and contained abstract irregular shapes that became more and more disfigured with each mobile structure.

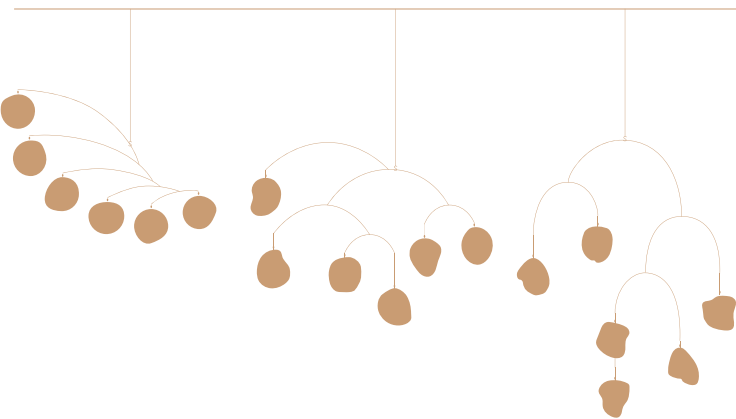
third ideation

The third became more related to nature by changing the 2nd and 3rd mobile disk shapes to be more leaf-like. Irregular shapes from the last mobile were moved to the first.

first ideation



second ideation



third ideation



ideal *location.*

Choosing a theoretical location for my mobiles to go resulted in being one of the most difficult. I went back and forth between a variety of choices throughout the entirety of the project.

I knew I wanted a place within or close to surrounding greenery, to allow my viewers the opportunity to find their own observations in nature after visiting my installation. Several locations I deliberated on choosing were gardens or parks within cities, where people could seek refuge from the outside chaos and busy streets.

initial choices

- *Huntington Falls in Strawberry Park*
- *Yerba Buena Center for the Arts*
- *SJ Japanese Friendship Garden*
- *Joshua Tree National Park*
- *SF Japanese Tea Garden*
- *Municipal Rose Gardens*
- *Portola Redwoods*
- *Santa Cruz Beach*
- *Muir Woods*
- *Lake Tahoe*

What ultimately helped me to determine my choice was *determining my audience*. When thinking about how my project could help people like my parents, I decided that I should choose a location pertaining to senior adults, who should be reminded that their signs of aging are not hindrances, but blessings over a well-lived lifetime.



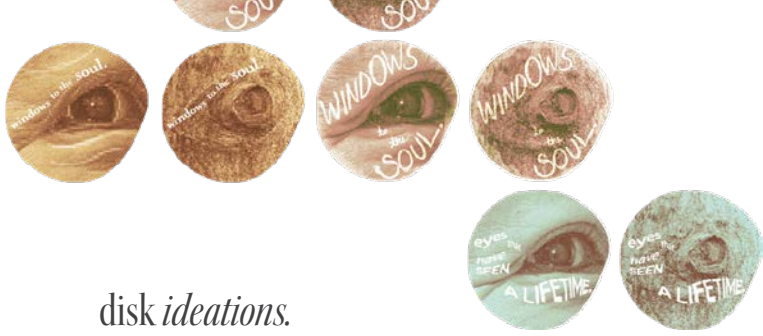
Therefore, my decided location for my installation is *Avenidas*, a senior enrichment center in Palo Alto, California.

Avenidas is a non-profit community enrichment center specifically curated towards senior adults. They offer a strong, centralized community, volunteering, and general support for healthy aging at home.

Located in the city named after redwood trees, it acts as a safe environment that seeks to positively redefine aging. Therefore, my installation would fit perfectly inside.

My installation would reside inside of the newly renovated fitness center of the building, which features glossy hardwood flooring and a wide expanse of windows looking out to the natural scenery of Cogswell Plaza next door.



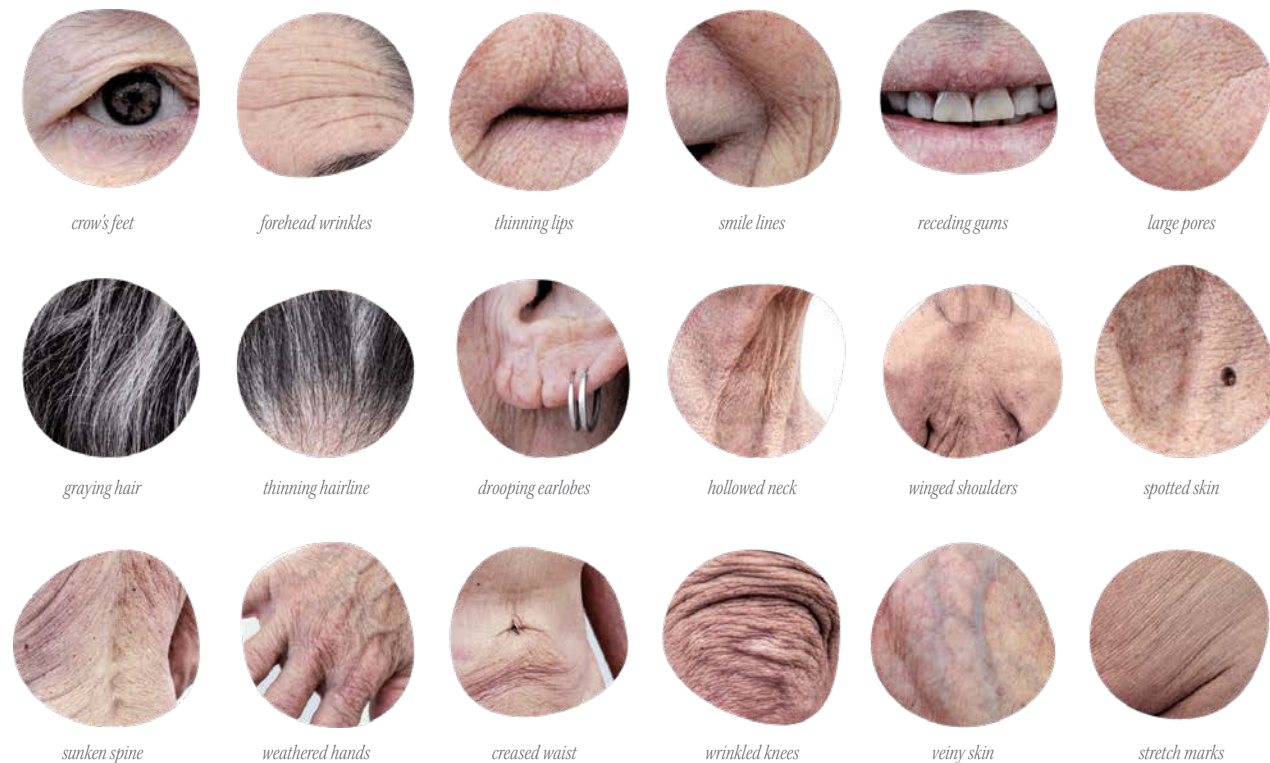


disk ideations.

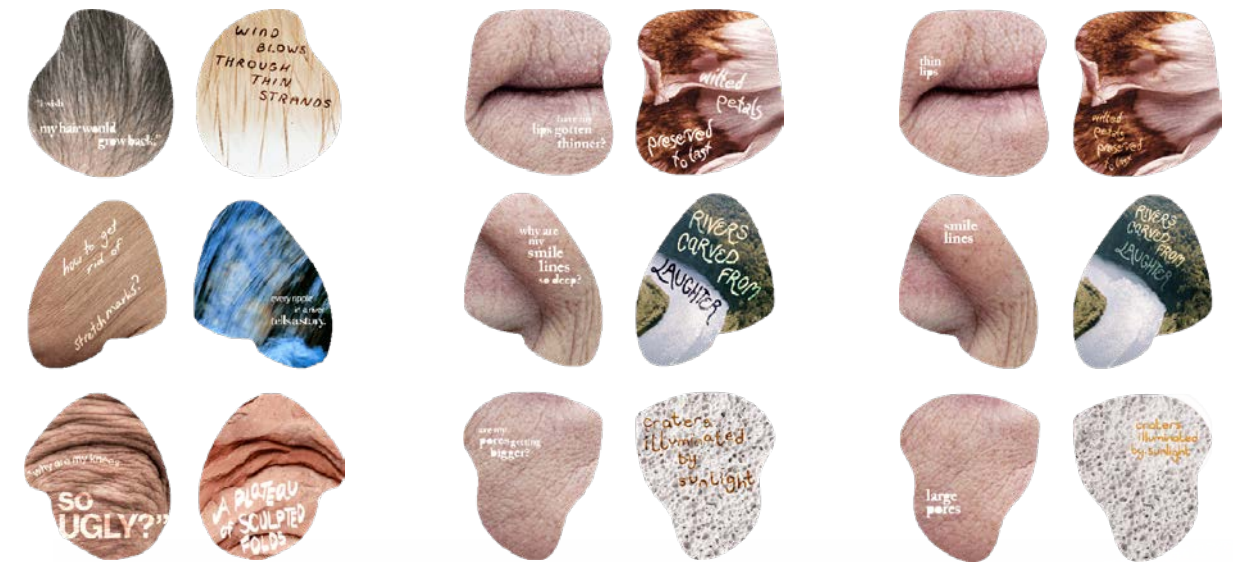
The next step I wanted to take was finding an older female model to take photographs of for the human side of my disks. For this task, I contacted the animation department at SJSU and asked if they could put me into contact with a suitable figure drawing model who would already be comfortable having their "imperfections" out in the open.

Thankfully, I was emailed soon afterwards by the lovely *Tracy Curtis*, the only female figure drawing model who was still affiliated with the department. She kindly agreed to my request, and thus, I proceeded to have my first independent photoshoot with a hired model.

Once I had all of my documented signs of aging, I was advised that using *typography* would greatly aid my efforts of drawing similarities between the two sides. I decided to use short lines of *poetry* that would metaphorically apply to both photographed subjects, inspired by the short and sweet nature of Japanese haikus.



type explorations.



first ideation

General testing of different type treatments, using both designed typefaces and stylized handlettering.

final type treatments

Inspired by the *wabi-sabi* principle of incompleteness, I used the simple yet elegant Adobe Caslon Pro on the human side of my disks. I specifically decided to delete the counter spaces within the letters to give it a sense of rudimentary simplicity and modesty.

In contrast, I wanted my specialized handlettering on the nature sides of my disks to be lively, fluid, and unique. Based on the characteristics of the nature they were written on, they are individually unique to every disk.

second ideations

Began using a restrained typeface on the human side, then expressive handlettering on the nature side.

third ideations

Reduced human to simple label rather than a question, and refined treatment on nature side to be less heavy-handed.

Adobe Caslon Pro Bold

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Adobe Caslon Pro

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

subsequent *feedback*.

After completely shifting my ideas from physical collages to dual-sided spinning photos on hanging kinetic wire structures, I recieved feedback for my next steps.

Choose the right images.

One of the most time-consuming portions was attempting to find the perfect nature images to relate to my chosen signs of aging. They needed to make sense metaphorically, aesthetically, and compositionally. This led to many late nights of digging through nearly 50 pages of stock photos to find "the one." Times six. For three mobiles.

I also needed to ensure that they wouldn't be taken the wrong way, or look odd. For instance, using my tree "eye" photo started to make the human eye look like it was decaying and cracking. Unwanted visual connections like this must be carefully avoided.

Ensure clarity of communication.

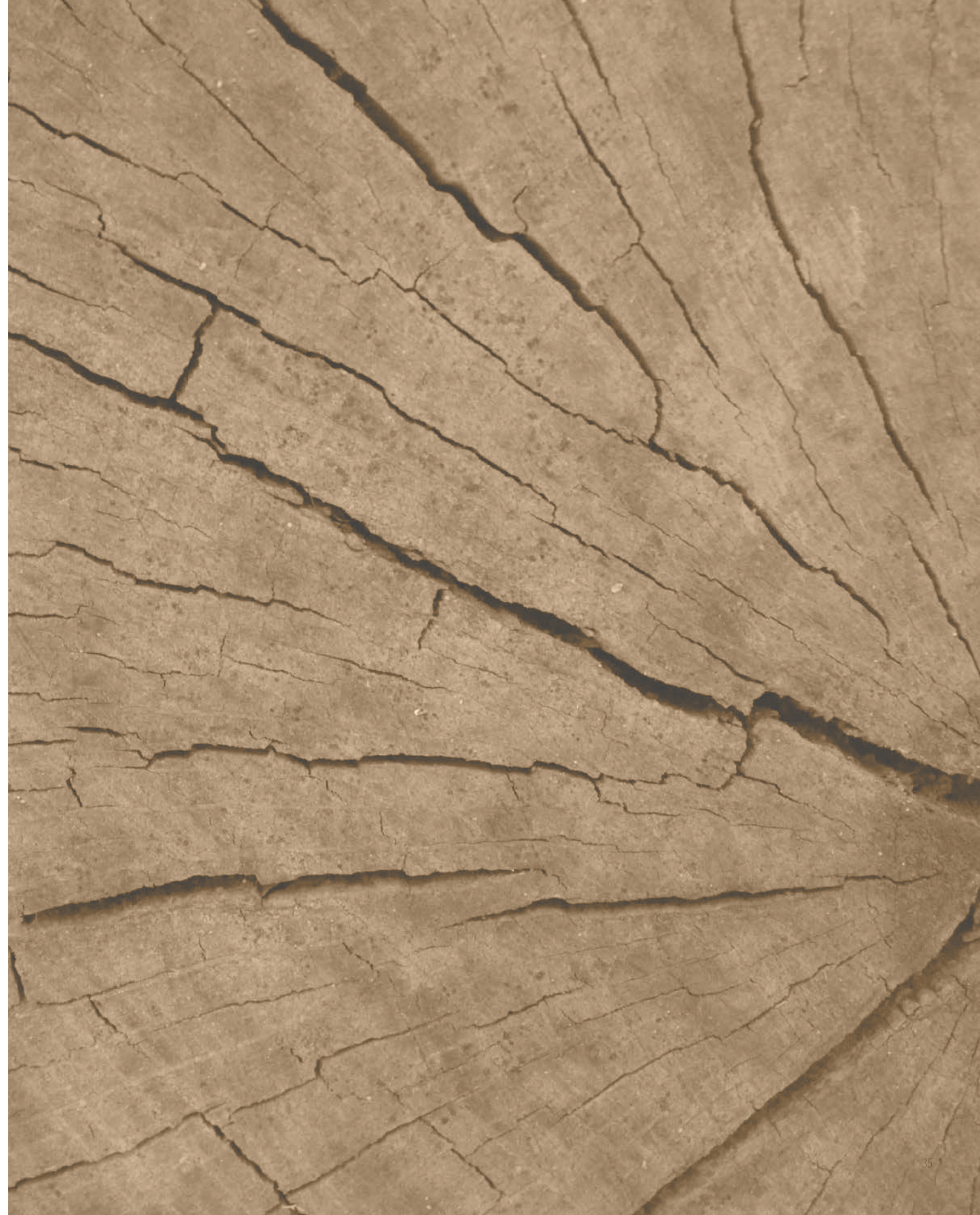
After some user testing, I quickly realized that the purpose of my outcome was difficult to recognize at first glance for newcomers. Unless given context first, viewing the mobiles alone would often lead to confusion. Crucial understanding of wabi-sabi was also lost.

Therefore, I knew I would have to provide this context of my thesis concept, and an introduction to *wabi-sabi* in a supplementary guide for people to read and understand while viewing the installation. I began to deliberate on forms of field notes, journal booklets, and finally landed on a double-sided accordion pamphlet.

Keep accessibility in mind.

My audience consists of senior visitors at the Avenidas enrichment center in Palo Alto, often nearing 50 years old and up. Therefore, keeping in mind certain age-based limitations was key to ensuring my messages would be clearly recieved by them.

This influenced several of my design decisions, such as type sizing on the disks, as well as lowering the viewing level of my mobiles to make them more accessible. I also made sure to widen the interactive writing portions of my pamphlet for my audience's larger handwriting.



“But when does something’s destiny finally come to *fruition*? Is the plant complete when it *flowers*? When it goes to *seed*? When the seeds *sprout*? When everything turns into *compost*?”

Leonard Koren

execution

- 38 mobile structures.
- 46 digital renderings.
- 52 pamphlet guide.
- 56 presentation booklet.

mobile structures.

The final forms of my kinetic wire structures contain six spinning disks each, which feature elements found in nature on one side, and a sign of aging as seen on women on the other.

By spinning quickly back and forth between the two images, viewers begin to draw connections and observe visual similarities between the two. Lines of poetic quotes are integrated into the images as well to help guide viewer's mindsets, and draw even more similarities between beauty found in nature and aging.

first mobile the face.

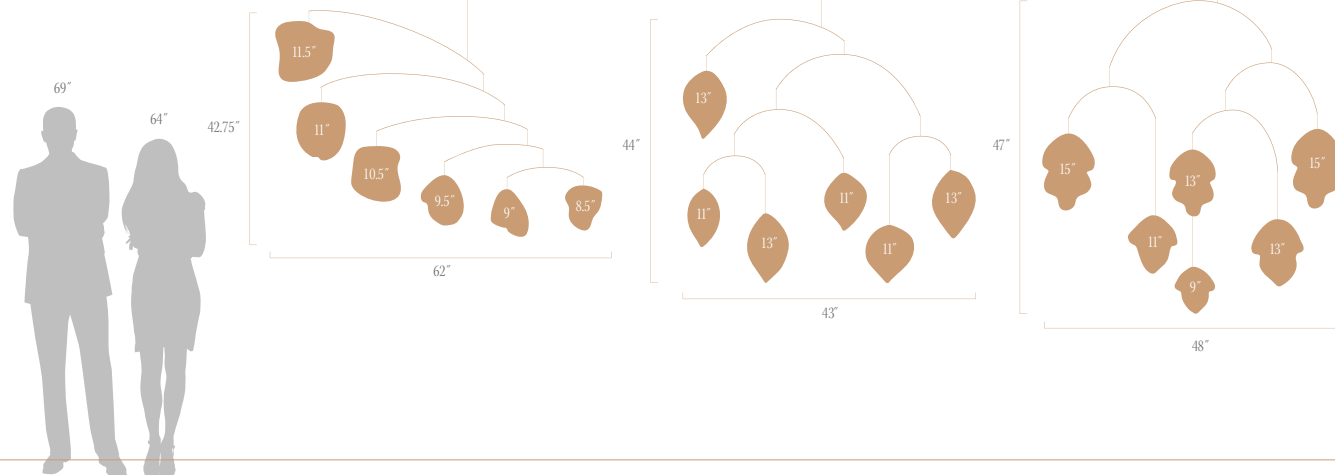
- creased forehead
- crow's feet
- thinning lips
- receding gums
- smile lines
- large pores

second mobile the head.

- graying hair
- thinning hairline
- hollowed neck
- drooping earlobes
- winged shoulders
- spotted skin

third mobile the body.

- sunken spine
- weathered hands
- veiny skin
- stretch marks
- creased waist
- wrinkly knees



building process.

This project has provided me with many new creative opportunities, and one of those was actually building my hanging mobiles. When starting my very first mobile, I soon realized the many challenges that lay ahead in building these delicate forms.

Mobile building is an incredibly unique art that requires a high level of precision and a delicate hand to complete. Making sure the wires aren't oddly bent, looping them closed with pliers, and most importantly, being able to measure the correct balance points for each bar (along with the added weights of those hanging beneath it) were crucial.

Luckily, with each new mobile, it became easier for me to understand that the balance points naturally shift towards the heavier sides, and to keep the balance as a whole structure in mind while building. For my third mobile, it only took me about 2 hours to construct in comparison to the 8 hours spent on my first mobile.

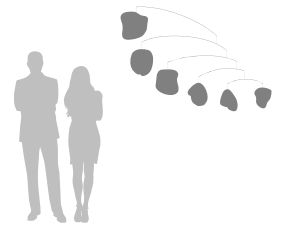
materials used

- needle nose pliers
- looping pliers
- craft scissors
- x-acto knife
- cutting mat
- 16 gauge gold wire
- gold fishing spinners
- plotter paper
- white thread
- stone beads
- tweezers



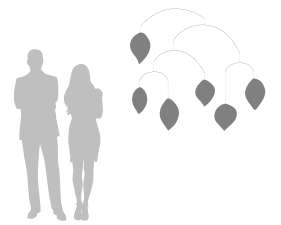
physical *model.*

first mobile
the face.



physical *model.*

second mobile
the *head.*



physical *model.*

third mobile
the body.



installation *plan.*

visitor *journey.*

The installation floorplan is set up in a triangular format. The first mobile can be seen from the front entrance and the third at the opposite corner, however visitors are welcome to go in any order they wish. Each mobile has six spinning disks morphing between aging and nature.

A center podium resides in the center of the room, offering informative pamphlets and sounds of nature from a speaker within the form. Seats made to look like stumps form around the center, allowing visitors to rest the bodies they're reminded to appreciate.

audience

older adults over 50 years of age.

Everyone ages, but my installation is focused on people who aren't often reminded of their inherent beauty: seniors fifty years and older.

tone

gentle, gradual, grateful.

Installation designed with a relaxed atmosphere in mind, which invites viewers to simply sit, watch, and form their own observations at their own pace.

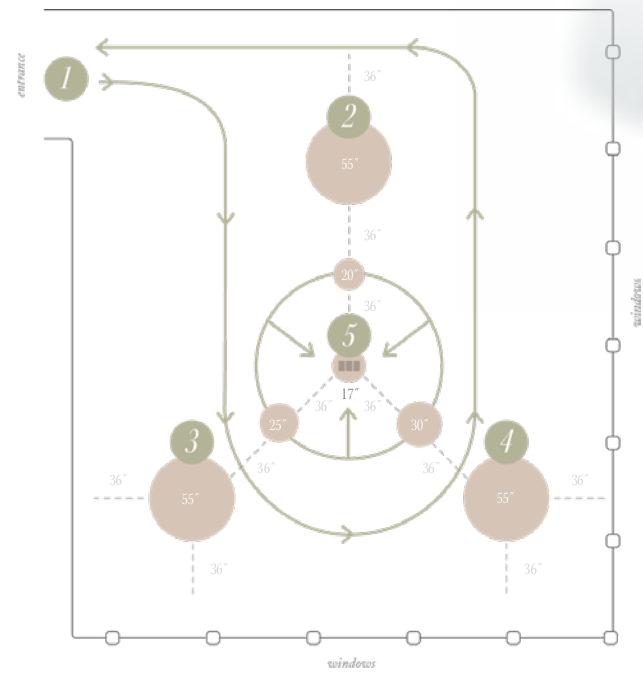
visitor outcome

aging is a privilege, not a plague.

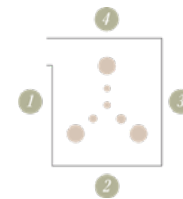
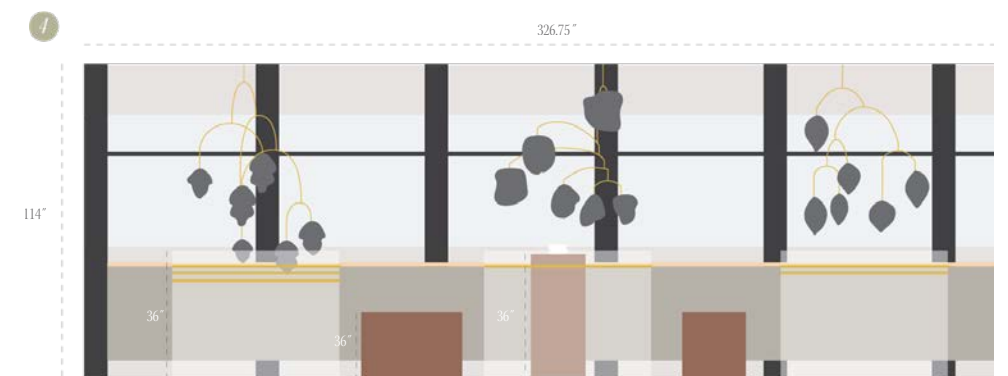
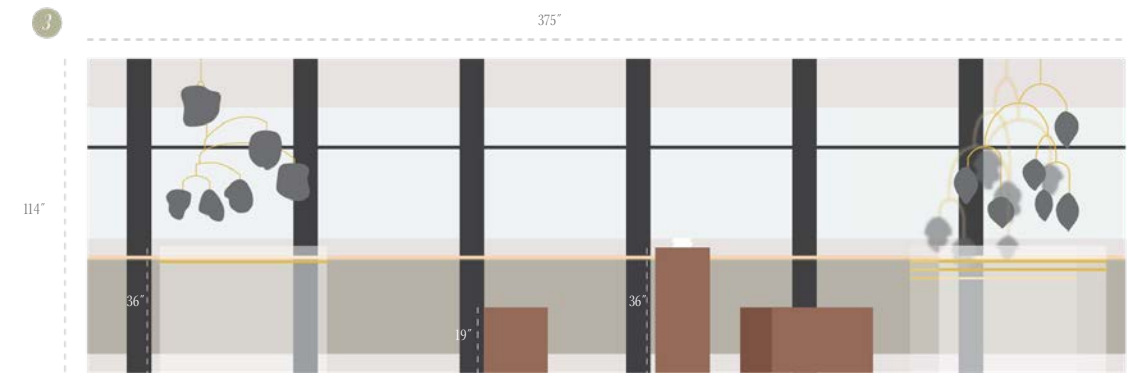
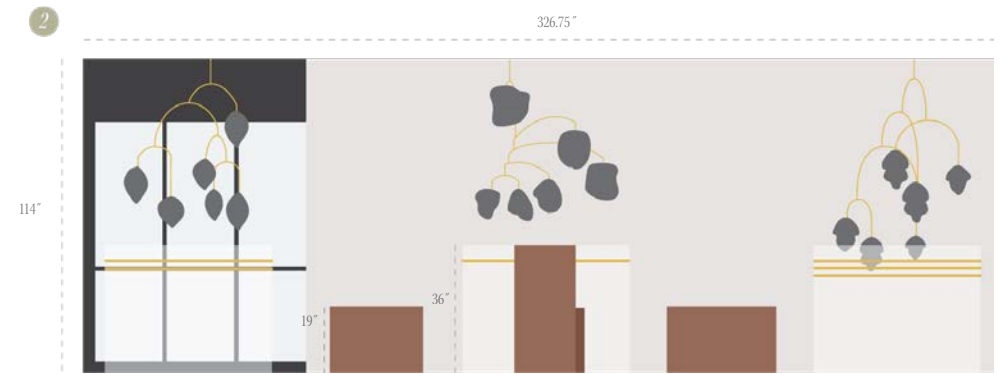
The installation will act as a gentle nudge into a diverging mindset away from modern Western beauty standards, leading people to connect aging to timeless beauty in nature, rather than just an impending end to life.

floor *plan.*

Avenidas Fitness Center



- 1 Front Entrance
single entry and exit way
- 2 First Mobile
the face
- 3 Second Mobile
the head
- 4 Third Mobile
the body
- 5 Center Podium
pamphlet guides and sound speaker



digital renderings.

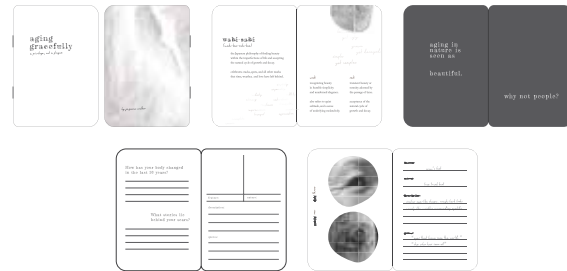




pamphlet guide.

In order to give further context to my installation, I wanted to make some type of informational print to fill this gap of communicating my intent, meaning of wabi-sabi, and having the viewers themselves try to make visual connections. This idea grew from a field notebook, to an observation journal, to a refined double-sided accordion pamphlet, similar in nature to the dual-sided disks.

This informational pamphlet acts as a guide to the installation, as well as a reflective questionnaire for the viewer to write their own natural observations about themselves. After opening it, viewers are greeted by the installation prompt, a description of wabi-sabi, as well as an overview of the display and its purpose. On the back is a preview of each mobile, and three pages for the personal questionnaire.



first ideation



second ideation



inside



outside



ful
not people?

a privilege, not a plague.

Aging has been vilified. Everywhere you look, there are advertisements for anti-aging skincare and plastic surgery. You start to notice your own wrinkles and gray hairs whenever you look in the mirror, judging yourself harshly. But aging is a completely natural process that has been written into our code as living beings since the beginning. We see moss on trees, weathered cliffsides, fallen leaves, and we appreciate them for their natural decay.

Why can't this same appreciation be applied to people?

Gallery Guide

the mobiles

the jaw



...are wing attached with memories?

...petals preserved to last?

Personal Reflection

the stories behind your scars.

Do you have any birth marks, moles, spots, scars, tattoos, ect?
Where? What forgotten histories do they reveal about you?

Handwriting lines for the reflection section, including the question: "How do these 'imperfections' and 'flaws' make you feel about yourself?"

presentation *booklet*.

In order to document all of my digital renderings and close-ups of my disks, I compiled my images into one 8" x 7" presentation booklet for viewers to ideally take a closer look if needed.





“Nothing *lasts*, nothing is *finished*, nothing is *perfect*. And therein lies its *beauty*.”

Richard Powell

recognition

- 62 project *reflection*.
- 63 sources *used*.
- 64 special *thanks*.
- 65 *colophon*.



project reflection.

This thesis project has pushed me to my creative limits, led to immense growth in my design skill set, and allowed me to explore my visual style in new ways I hadn't had the opportunity to before.

I'm so immensely proud of the work I was able to complete during this last portion of my educational journey, and will carry the memories and lessons gained from this project for the rest of my creative career.

Having the chance to creatively express a belief so personal to me and my worldviews was incredibly meaningful. Thankfully, I feel satisfied that a majority of my resulting work was executed accurately to my original visions.

If I were to redo it completely, I would want to attempt it with a target audience of young adults, similar to my own age, rather than older seniors. It would be a new challenge of how to reframe *younger* mindsets about aging.

However, for this fully realized project, I would like to take my *own* photos over the course of a longer time period, rather than having to use stock photos taken by others. This would make it feel especially personal and authentic.

I also would like to refine minor details, such as being able to have my pamphlets and presentation booklet professionally printed, and my physical mobiles at true scale. But for the time being, I am more than pleased with the fruits of my spent effort and labor.

special thanks.

A huge thank you from the bottom of my heart to everyone who aided me throughout this final educational journey.

To my family and friends, who were always ready with open arms when I needed them most. My parents, whom I was inspired by to begin this project, and was able to finish thanks to their infinite love and encouragement.

To my professors, who provided me the opportunity to show how much I've learned from such dedicated and accomplished professionals of the field.

To the SJSU Animation Department, John Clapp, and Tracy Curtis, who graciously allowed me to capture the material necessary to fully realize my thesis.

To Marjorie Kaplan and Professor Kaeko Chiba, who first introduced me to *wabi-sabi* and gifted me with their remarkable expertise.

And finally, a heartfelt thank you to my all-women BFA family. For all the late nights at the lab together, unending support when I was at my lowest, and memories full of laughter that I will forever cherish. I can't wait to see what the future holds for us.

| | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| Renee Edelman | Thy Nguyen |
| Sasina Eunirankul | Ranelle Santiago |
| Ying Gao | Maivi Tran |
| Grace Kusuma | Sabrina Tran |
| Aram Magholi | Nicole Wei |
| Richa Marathe | Kaelyn Wraase |
| Eilaria Maryousef | Polina Zabrodska |
| Paula Piva | Thank you! |



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photography

All photos of aged female model
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Special thanks to Tracy Curtis.

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| | | |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
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| <i>butterfly</i> # 512582880 | <i>leaf</i> # 248467341 | <i>roots</i> # 340641701 |
| <i>flower</i> # 276040038 | <i>canyon</i> # 276040038 | <i>aurora</i> # 533553840 |
| <i>shell</i> # 342796540 | <i>reeds</i> # 200902934 | <i>river</i> # 73218691 |
| <i>river</i> # <i>Julia Volk on pexels</i> | <i>lava</i> # 335455072 | <i>sunset</i> # 222341045 |
| <i>pumice</i> # 524607570 | <i>stars</i> # 189897098 | <i>rock</i> # 380102211 |

redwood # 303713923

Montalti, Marco. "Kintsugi Antique broken Japanese bowl
repaired with gold," istockphoto.com, October 16, 2020.

quotations

creativelysquared.com
marthastewart.com
might-could.com
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utne.com

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