



A JOURNEY IN THE LAND WHERE ART, DESIGN, AND RESEARCH INTERSECT

Daria Loi
Imperfecta Gallery
studioloi@darialoi.com

Dr. Daria Loi is a participatory artist, published designer, arts-based researcher, and former high-tech executive. She is Oregon City's Arts Commissioner, Columnist for ACM Interactions, and on the Board of Directors of several non-profits. In 2023, she founded the Imperfecta Gallery, focused on showcasing and supporting women artists and minority creatives.

Abstract: Through a series of projects, this article discusses the role that objects play when art, design, and research intersect. The article is divided into nine sections. After a preamble, I discuss *The Pea Project*, key to understanding how anomalous objects and odd experiences stimulate reflectiveness, curiosity, creativity, and collaboration. "A Surrealist Encounter" discusses how contexts can be designed to foster reflective and collaborative practice, while *Reflective Probes* focuses on artifacts designed to stimulate reflective practice. I then discuss activation of receptive modes of engagement through playful triggers and travelling containers. *Progetto in Memoriam* further explores art, research, and ethnographic practices, and *Debris* explores simultaneous roles as a designer, artist and ethnographer. While section 8, *They Said*, looks at how prior learnings were used to deepen my understanding of self, the final section provides conclusive remarks, reiterating the opportunities that exist when art, design, and research intermingle and collide.

Keywords: arts-based inquiry; ethnographic practice; collaborative practice; artist journey; design research; reflective practice

Preamble: Containers and Objects

For a long time, I have been utterly obsessed with containers. Travelling containers, paper containers, simple vessels of all shapes and sizes. It all started as a young child and the obsession never subsided. Little did I know that I would spend my life travelling, living on different continents, and even submitting a suitcase as a PhD thesis (Loi, 2004b; 2005b; 2008a).

For a long time, I have also been utterly obsessed with objects. Not necessarily precious objects, but objects with a story to tell; intriguing objects, capable of inspiring and moving the unmovable. While I have come to understand the role that objects play in my practice, they still hold a mysterious and wondrous quality as I keep including them in my work as an artist, designer, and researcher.

These obsessions have started to make sense over time, especially when, as a graduate student, I started exploring their role in art, design, and research. An intriguing interstitial space is created when research, design, and art collide. In my case, that space has consistently been filled with humble containers and wondrous objects.

In this article, I touch on a few crucial projects that showcase what one can do with objects and containers in the space where art, design, and research intersect. The projects illustrate a journey that radically transformed my practice.

The Pea Project: Anomalous Objects and Odd Experiences

In the early 2000s, together with another graduate student, I started a love affair with the notion of crafting experiences by leveraging unexpected and unanticipated elements to unlock learning, phenomenological awareness, and reflective practice. We started experimenting with little understanding of where we were headed. Eventually, we articulated the concept that, by using anomalous objects and creating odd experiences, we can dramatically expand creative and interpretive engagements between people and provide platforms where diverse interpretations can be generated (Burrows & Loi, 2002).

Armed with notions of phenomenology (Bachelard, 1958; Dastur, 2000), art-based inquiry (Eisner, 1991; McNiff, 1998), symbolic constructivism (Barry, 1996), heuristics and open-ended outcomes (Moustakas, 1990), reflective and collaborative practice (Collier, 1999; Kolb & Moeller, 1984; Loi, 2005a; Schön, 1983), and the idea of everyday people as co-creators of meaning and art (Shotter, 1993), we crafted *The Pea Project* (see Burrows & Loi, 2004; Loi & Burrows, 2006) and subsequently ran it as a

workshop at conferences and in other educational contexts in Sweden, the United States, and Australia.

The first part of the process was simple. We approached potential participants and invited them to take a fresh pea from a pod. We then asked them to hold the pea and take a photograph of their hand holding the fresh pea. Then, without any explanation, we handed participants a postcard with two questions: *What did you see? What is going on here?*

Figure 1

The Pea Project



Participants, often puzzled by the process, were invited to fill in the postcard, *mail* it in a provided container, and consider attending a second encounter the next day. At the end of day one, we collected the container, photographed the postcards, and included them in a slideshow along with the photographs of hands holding peas. The

next day, we hosted a session that started with no introductions or explanations. Instead, we played the slideshow with a soundtrack and then handed participants a postcard that was identical to the first one. After that, we waited.

We had no means to predict or control what the participants in each session generated. To our surprise, a simple pea ended up stimulating reflective awareness, curiosity, creativity, and collaborative engagements. Each time, the outcome was uncompromising (Burrows & Loi, 2002; Loi & Burrows, 2006).

“A Surrealist Encounter”: Curated Contexts and Creative Spaces

At some point, we received an invitation to run an intellectual and creative *spa* where frazzled, time-poor managers from the same organization could engage with each other in a stimulating environment. Equipped with hypotheses and questions from *The Pea Project*, and in response to the session brief, we designed a workshop entitled “A Surrealist Encounter” that included artwork from my favorite surrealist painter, René Magritte. In “A Surrealist Encounter” (see Burrows & Loi, 2004; Loi & Burrows, 2006), we decontextualized a series of objects from Magritte's (1927) painting *L'Assassin Menacé* (*The Menaced Assassin*) to elicit creative and collaborative encounters.

After we put the 36 attendees (35 female, 1 male) into groups, we invited each group to sit at a table that had a container placed in the middle. We then instructed participants to open the box and use its contents to co-create. The only criterion was that it be positive. We explained that the *what* was flexible, the *how* was not. A multitude of materials were available on a side table, including, for example, paint, paper, cardboard, and beads. Then, we stepped back and let them tackle the brief.

After numerous puzzled looks and chatter, each group opened the box and jumped into the exercise. Within minutes, the atmosphere became festive. Individuals who had been identified as having interpersonal issues and difficulty collaborating, were now giggling and co-creating as a team. The teams created a wide variety of creative outputs including, for example, a children's book and a theatre performance. After the teams shared with each other, we showed a slide show that revealed the inspiration for what each team found in their container. The items were from Magritte's (1927) painting: a wood stick, a vinyl record, a white scarf, a shoe, a fishing net, and a suitcase.

The painting depicts a dark story that is in stark contrast to what each team created. In the artwork, a naked woman is lying seemingly dead on a daybed, surrounded by a number of men with unsympathetic gazes, each holding objects that are out of context. This revelation launched an animated group discussion as people

grappled with the meaning. They asked questions like: *What do you want us to make of this? What is this supposed to mean? Why did you ask us to create something positive out of something so awful?* And that was the point of the exercise.

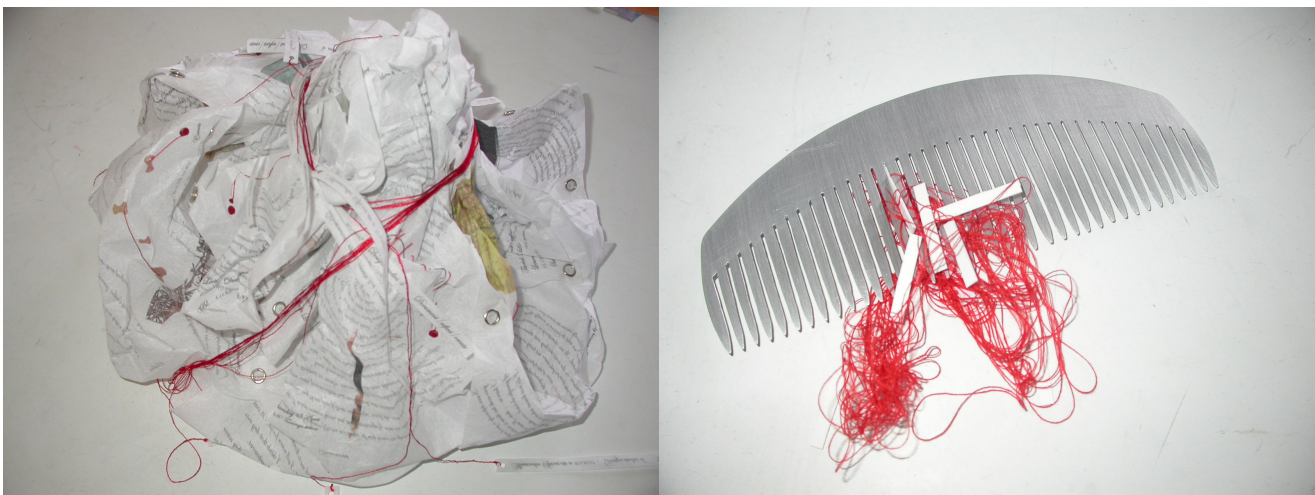
Similar to observations we made in *The Pea Project*, “A Surrealist Encounter” highlighted that people are highly creative beings and almost anything, when removed from its original context and carefully curated, can stimulate creativity and collaboration. It became evident that contexts can be designed to foster reflective and collaborative practices, tapping into the innate curiosity, playfulness, and creativity of people (Loi & Burrows, 2006).

Reflective Probes: Designed Things and Curated Creativity

Building on the above experiences, I started to explore and experiment with more tools based on the power that objects hold. I was also influenced by the concept of cultural probes in the work of Gaver, Dunne, and Pacenti (1999) and Gaver, Boucher, Pennington, and Walker (2004). I conceptualized the project *Reflective Probes* to create the conditions for reflective practice (see Schön, 1983) to “prosper through activities that take the form of creative, ambiguous, and inspiring artifacts” (Loi, 2007, p. 235). This was at the core of *Document/Reflect/Create* (Loi, 2004a). The project was conducted in the context of my teaching practice and focused on “providing students the opportunity to document and reflect on their learning while being able to create new meanings through their reflections as well as reflecting on their own reflections” (Loi, 2007, p. 235).

Figure 2

Student entries



For this project, the reflective probe was designed as a greeting card to be completed after each weekly class. On the cover, each student was to visually document what they had learned during a specific lecture. On the inside, they had to articulate their learning in writing (inside left) as well as their reflections on the learning (inside right). The back cover provided a space for them to include something that arose out of their reflection. Students received feedback on each card on a weekly basis. The cards accumulated throughout the semester and were stored in individual, custom-made containers in my office.

Figure 3

A few student containers in my office



This exercise required students to ask themselves: *What was that lecture about? What does it mean to me? What will I do with what I have just learned?* Outcomes varied enormously and ranged from design concepts and poetry, to action plans and games. The exercise, however, “invariably augmented students’ capacity to reflect and use their reflections to generate new meanings” (Loi, 2007, p. 235).

PhD Thesis: Playful Triggers and Travelling Containers

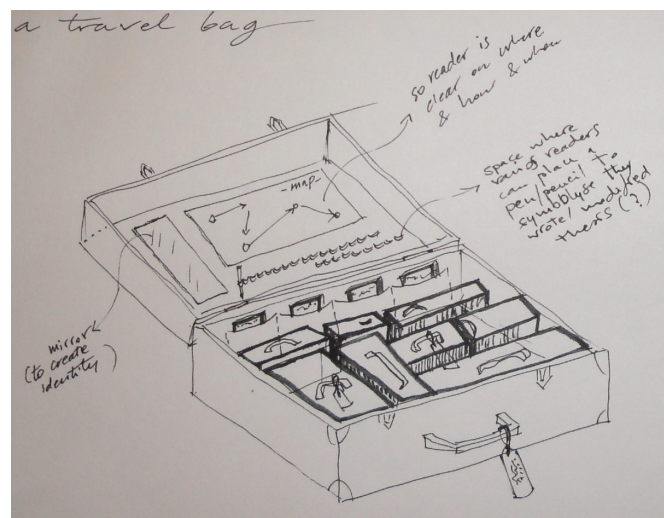
In all these explorations art, design, and research entwined. Each blurred the line between who researches and who researched, and who designs and who uses. Each experience enabled me to glean more than I had expected or planned.

Since these experiences left me with a number of unanswered questions and unexplored opportunities, it is no surprise that they influenced what I created for my PhD thesis which focused on collaboration and collaborative spaces. A major outcome of that work was a series of objects/tools that I called playful triggers (Loi, 2005b; Loi, 2007), which focused on establishing "a bond—a collaborative practice—among participants" and on "dialogue-creation, acting as communication (rather than ethnographic/empathetic) devices by activating receptive modes of engagement" (Loi, 2007, p. 237).

Another key contribution of the work was the form that the thesis took, namely that of a suitcase (Loi, 2004b; 2005b; 2008a). Indeed, my fascination for containers impacted the shape of my PhD thesis, which was submitted as a cardboard suitcase that incorporated "textual and non-textual content complementing and amplifying each other using metaphors as converging points" (Loi, 2005b, n.p.).

Figure 4

Suitcase as a PhD thesis (a) and initial sketch (b)



The suitcase embodies the metaphor of a journey; the travelling through dense spaces of a researcher developing a PhD thesis. Like all the containers that constantly

fascinated me, it is a receptacle filled with meanings, ideas, opportunities, and, of course, objects.

Progetto in Memoriam: Art Containers and Life Containers

In 2016 and 2017, I was given an opportunity to create artworks for a duo exhibition in a local art gallery. At the time, a number of global issues were impacting me emotionally, from the tensions in the Middle East to mass shootings and the prescription drug epidemic in the United States. Additionally, I still felt the need to fully process the loss of my father who had passed when I was 6. With an urge to process how these events were impacting me, I decided to use artful inquiry to overcome my sadness. In *Progetto in Memoriam* (Loi, 2019a), I created five artworks inside five mini suitcases. Travelling containers once again became the space in which I wished to play. For each suitcase, I spent considerable time researching and exploring a specific theme, wearing my researcher hat to dig deeper and find ways to process themes through art.

With the suitcase I called *They were 50* (Loi, 2019b), I focused on the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Miami, Florida. I started by educating myself on the victims and perpetrator; what their social media pages narrated, what their friends said, and what their families revealed to the press. For each individual, I read, learned, and dug deep to identify one commonality with them whether it was something they loved like a favorite color, or a little pet peeve, or a lucky number. After identifying a commonality, I removed wings from a preserved butterfly, mounted them on a microscope glass slide, included a tag with the age of the deceased, and placed the butterfly body in a smaller container. Then, I recorded the name and commonality (e.g., loved the color red) on a wooden slide container. I repeated this process 49 times, once for each victim and, then, one last time (using a different butterfly) to focus on the perpetrator.

Figure 5

“They Were 50”



With the suitcase I called *About 35%* (Loi, 2019c), I explored the Syrian refugee crisis from the perspective of the inhumane response by the United States government. With the suitcase entitled *36 Fairytales* (Loi, 2019d), I explored issues related to how the media mercilessly puts a spotlight on people's lives and deaths, exploiting and making a spectacle of their fortunes and adversities. With the suitcase I called *3 and ½ accidents* (Loi, 2019e), I dug into premature deaths due to prescription medication and, finally, with the suitcase *Uno.Sole* (Loi, 2019f), I focused on themes of love and loss through the lens of the premature death of my father.

Figure 6

"About 35%"



With *Progetto in Memoriam* (Loi, 2019a), I had the opportunity to further explore the space between art and research as well as blurred interstitial places between ethnographic practice and auto-ethnography. I did so by leveraging accumulated experiences with anomalous objects, odd experiences, curated contexts, designed things, and travelling containers.

Debris: Research Kits and Art Outcomes

For a number of years, I had been absorbed by a corporate job that focused primarily on conducting field studies around the globe. This enabled me to use a number of qualitative techniques, including a few experiments with playful triggers (see Loi, 2008b). These endeavors mixed design and research techniques, and by 2019 a key question (and opportunity) surfaced: *What happens if I design creative tools to gather qualitative data in the context of a traditional research study and then inject data into an artistic process?* In other words: *What happens if a designer creates tools to enable a researcher to gather data that is then used as a starting point for an artist to make art? What if the designer, researcher, and artist are the same person?*

Fascinated by this possibility, I invited a research colleague who doubles as a visual artist to participate to compare what would happen if the same data became the starting point for two artists. Debris (Loi & McGeachy, 2019) was the result. Since we both worked for a high-tech company, we decided to focus on people's relationships with nonhuman agents like smart home systems, intelligent agents, smart robots, and voice-based agents. The process started with designing research protocols and a creative tool kit, which practically, and unsurprisingly, were included in a small suitcase. The kit incorporated a number of playful triggers that participants were asked to engage with during a semi-structured interview. The goal was to amplify our understanding of their experiences with nonhuman agents at deeper as well as artistic levels. For example, one tool asked participants to select visuals that best described their experience with those technologies. Another tool asked them to select colors from a palette, and another included containers filled with different materials from which to choose.

Figure 7

The kit



After conducting interviews, we analyzed the data and shared rich vignettes and details from specific participants to enable shared understanding and intimacy with their lived experiences. After discussing the data, we focused on identifying the essence of the experience for each interview to establish a starting point for our artistic endeavors. We agreed to write a short elevator pitch for each interviewee. Our paths separated as the art phase began for each of us individually. We agreed to use the same canvas size, but did not disclose our individual processes, ideas, or trajectories until all artworks were completed. We unveiled our pieces to each other while installing the exhibit at a conference (see Loi & McGeachy, 2020). Our curated space included the art pieces, creative tool kits, researcher notes, photographs taken during the interviews, and sketches (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Exhibition setup (a) and artwork detail (b)



When we submitted the work to the conference, we proposed that "the collection of art pieces, objects, visual commentaries, humans-about-machines accounts" would represent "the fragments that are left behind by human interactions with smart agents," and that such a collection would "prompt reflections, re-connections, and re-discoveries of human-non-human hybrid landscapes" (Loi & McGeachy, 2020, p. 25). As I later articulated, it became evident that "*something else* took place and that we learned more than and differently from what we planned or imagined" (Loi, 2021, p. 21).

First, the experiment demonstrated that by asking the same question in multiple, diverse ways enables researchers to glean richer, deeper qualitative data. Doing this, by leveraging multisensorial input/output, not only expedites and focuses the analysis process but also enriches the ability of the researcher to get to the core of the matter. Second, while we anticipated some similarities in our creative output, a number of unexpected patterns emerged including common visual elements that had no relation to the actual interview data. Third, the experience reiterated the incredible power that objects have in our understanding of self and others. While data were analyzed objectively as a team, each artwork included deeply subjective layers that revealed hidden neurological mechanisms at the base of our own cognition. While each piece was a subjective interpretation by the artist, the participants easily recognized that the artwork was inspired by their story. Additionally, pieces became useful starting points for follow-up interviews, showing the potential of this process to gather deeper insights and contribute to longitudinal research.

Finally, our methodological decision to articulate the essence of the experience for each participant to aid the artistic practice was surprisingly helpful from a research analysis standpoint. This boosted our ability to summarize insights in clear, approachable, impactful ways.

They Said: Untold Stories and Artful Processing

Each of the above experiences demonstrates the opportunities that exist when art, design, and research intermingle and collide; opportunities to enrich a researcher's toolkit, a designer's understanding, an artist's output. In 2023, I shifted my career trajectory, left the high-tech sector, and opened an art gallery dedicated to women artists and creatives from marginalized groups. I now split my time between that endeavor and continuing my experiments with art, design, and research. This shift afforded me the opportunity to continue my explorations of what happens when art, design, and research intermingle and collide.

They Said (Loi, 2024a) is the title of a solo show that focused on applying all I learned from the journey described above while deepening my understanding of self in autoethnographic ways. My experience in the high-tech sector left me bruised with trauma related to gender bias, psychological abuse, and socio-cultural prejudice. I felt a pressing urge to leverage my artistic and research practice to share the untold stories that were trapped in my chest and to create meaningful conversations about what it means to be a woman and an immigrant in corporate America.

Each piece in the series started with deep introspection around a specific event. After listing a number of sentences (i.e., what “they said”) that represented specific events that I needed to process, I tackled each one by identifying the essence of the event as a first step. That essence-creation involved reliving the event over and over, analysing its meaning, my role in it, and ultimately being able to set it aside and move past it. Then, armed with the essence of the experience, I looked for inspiration. At times, this step was almost instantaneous and, at other times, it took weeks. Honestly, it is hard to describe how you come to know when you find the right inspiration, and yet, you do recognise it when it happens. At this point, it became a creative act that led to a work of art. The process was one where sadness, fury, beauty, and catharsis entwined.

Among the pieces included in the exhibition *They Said* (Loi, 2024/a), *You should reconsider* (Loi, 2024b) focuses on cultural bias, power and femininity, *He wrote a book* (Loi, 2024c) deals with issues related to corporate plagiarism, *You have the intuition* (Loi, 2024d) discusses gender bias, and *Here’s your table* (Loi, 2024e) tells a story of workplace mobbing. In other cases, I focus on issues related to my experiences as an immigrant in corporate America (e.g., *Analysed #1*, *Analyzed #2*).

Figure 9

You should reconsider (a), *He wrote a book* (b), and *Analysed #1* (c)





Closing

Historian France Morin (2000) said that artists have the capacity to make a lasting positive impact on people's lives by helping them to see for themselves the dignity, beauty, and sacredness of the activities of their everyday life: the creative spirit, a powerful agent of transformation that lies within everyone. In this article I shared projects that showcase my journey with objects and containers and how such things can bring meaning and opportunities in the space where art, design, and research intersect. The braid that is formed when these fields entwine continues to enrich my understanding of my context, my output, and myself. My hope is that the braid that I have woven during this lifetime will have a lasting and positive impact on others beyond myself, including you, Dear Reader.

REFERENCES

- Bachelard, G. (1958). *The poetics of space*. Beacon Press.
- Barry, D. (1996). Artful inquiry: A symbolic constructivist approach to social science research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2, 411–438.
- Burrows, P., & Loi, D. (2002). The Pea Project. In I. King, S. Linstead, & C. Watkins (Eds.), *The art of management and organisation*. The Essex Management Centre.
- Burrows, P., & Loi, D. (2004). A table, a box, and friends in a surrealist encounter: Demonstrating the use of eccentric objects and odd experiences to foster reflective and collaborative learning. 30th Annual Organizational Behaviour Teaching Conference: A Tradition of Teaching. University of Redlands, CA, USA.
- Collier, S. T. (1999). Characteristics of reflective thought during the student teaching experience. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 50(3), 173–181.
- Dastur, F. (2000). Phenomenology of the event: Waiting and surprise. *Hypatia*, 15(4), 178–189.
- Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Macmillan.
- Gaver, B., Dunne, A., & Pacenti, E. (1999). Cultural probes. *Interactions*, 6(1), 21–29.
- Gaver, B., Boucher, A., Pennington, S., & Walker, B. (2004). Cultural probes and the value of uncertainty. *Interactions*, 11(5), 53–56.
- Kolb, D. A., & Moeller, R. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Loi, D. (2004a). Document/reflect/create: Cultural probes in teaching and learning environments. PDC 2004, Vol. 2, CPSR, Toronto, Canada, 123–126.
- Loi, D. (2004b). A suitcase as a PhD?: Exploring the potential of travelling containers to articulate the multiple facets of a research thesis. Research Gate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26506944_A_suitcase_as_a_PhD_Exploring_the_potential_of_travelling_containers_to_articulate_the_multiple_facets_of_a_research_thesis.
- Loi, D. (2005a). Piazzas where to meet: Organisational settings and their unmanageable spaces in-between. *International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management*, 4.

- Loi, D (2005b). *Lavoretti per bimbi: Playful triggers as keys to foster collaborative practices and workspaces where people learn, wonder and play*. RMIT University, Australia.
- Loi, D. (2007) *Reflective probes, primitive probes and playful triggers*. *Proceedings of Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference 2007*, 232–245.
- Loi, D. (2008a), *A thought per day: My travelling inside a suitcase*. In J. G. Knowles, & A. L. Cole (Eds.), *Creating scholartistry: Imagining the arts-informed thesis or dissertation*. Backalong Books, 84–104.
- Loi, D. (2008b). *Of participation in industry: A hybridized possibility?* *Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Conference on Participatory Design, USA*, 182–185.
- Loi, D. (2019a). *Progetto in Memoriam* [Exhibition]. Gallery 114, Portland, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2019b). *They were 50* [Mixed media]. Gallery 114, Portland, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2019c). *About 35%* [Mixed media]. Gallery 114, Portland, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2019d). *36 Fairytales* [Mixed media]. Gallery 114, Portland, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2019e). *3 and ½ accidents* [Mixed media]. Gallery 114, Portland, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2019f). *Uno.Sole* [Mixed media]. Gallery 114, Portland, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2021). *Design. research. art.: Weaving voices to enrich HCI practice*. *Interactions*, 28(5) 19–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3477225>
- Loi, D. (2024a). *They said*. [Exhibition]. Imperfecta Art & Design Gallery, Oregon City, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2024b). *You should reconsider* [Mixed media]. Imperfecta Art & Design Gallery, Oregon City, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2024c). *He wrote a book* [Mixed media]. Imperfecta Art & Design Gallery, Oregon City, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2024d). *You have the intuition* [Mixed media]. Imperfecta Art & Design Gallery, Oregon City, OR, United States.
- Loi, D. (2024e). *Here's your table* [Mixed media]. Imperfecta Art & Design Gallery, Oregon City, OR, United States.

- Loi, D., & Burrows, P. (2006). Magritte and the pea: Anomalous artefacts and the contexts they create. *Working Papers in Art & Design*, 4.
- Loi, D., & McGeachy, H. (2020). Debris: Intermingling ethnography with design and artistic practice. *Proceedings of the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference*. DOI:10.1111/1559-8918.2019.01254
- Magritte, R. (1927). *L'Assassin menacé (The menaced assassin)* [Oil on board]. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, United States. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79267>
- McNiff, S. (1998). *Art-based research*. Jessica Kingsley.
- Morin, F. (2000). The quiet in the land: Everyday life, contemporary art, and Projeto Axé. *Art Journal*, 59(3), 4–17.
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology, and applications*. Sage.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities: Constructing life through language*. Sage.