

Burning Holes as a Practice-Based Exploration of Mindful Drawing and Embodied Awareness

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Abstract

This study investigates burning holes as a studio-based drawing practice that integrates meditative artmaking, embodied awareness, and expressive arts therapy principles. Incense sticks are used to burn holes on rice paper and fabric as drawing technique through a slow and repetitive process that cultivate rhythmic attention, sensory engagement, and deep focus. As an unconventional drawing method, burning holes has received limited research attention, particularly in examining how it can express feeling and emotion while developing awareness and mindful attention through the act of drawing. Instead of focusing only on visual outcomes, the practice emphasizes process, material engagement, and bodily presence, where heat, timing, and material resistance shaped each mark. Through repetition and focused making, burning holes becomes a mindful drawing process that supports awareness of bodily sensation, emotional shifts, and internal experience. Self-inquiry emerges as the artist-researcher reflects on felt sense and symbolic formation through the practice. Grounded in Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy (FOAT), the study affirms burning holes as a drawing method that supports embodied awareness, self-reflection, mindful attention and symbolic meaning-making. The outcomes include paper installations, textured fabric panels, and crumpled paper structures that visually express resilience, fragility and emotional change.

Keywords: Awareness, Burning Holes, Contemporary Drawing, Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy, Mindfulness

Introduction

This paper introduces *burning holes* as a studio-based drawing practice that moves away from conventional mark-making tools such as pencils, ink, or paint. Instead, the process used incense sticks or joss sticks to burn holes on delicate materials like rice paper and fabric. Each contact between the burning tip and the surface leaves a circular hole, a scorched edge, and a trace of time. Through repetition, these separate holes accumulate into lines, clusters, textures, and patterns.

The study draws on three connected bodies of thought. First, it is situated within the expanded field of contemporary drawing. In this field, drawing is understood as a trace of movement, pressure, time and presence rather than only the application of pigment (Herrera González, 2024; Petherbridge, n.d.). Second, it adopts a practice-led research approach, in which the studio is treated as a site where embodied and experiential knowledge is produced through making and reflection (Sullivan, 2010). Third, Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT) provides the interpretive lens for the making process. Rappaport (2014) developed FOAT from Gendlin's (1981) concept of the felt sense. Four, FOAT ideas guide the analysis, felt sense, symbol emergence, creative expression and mindful presence. They are used to examine how bodily sensation, attention, material response and visual form relate to one another during burning. Mindful presence is understood here as non-judgemental attention to present experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2004a). FOAT is used as an interpretive framework rather than a clinical protocol. The study does not test a treatment of claim that the practice can heal trauma. These ideas are developed further in the Theoretical Framework section.

As a practice, burning holes is not simply a technical experiment, it requires close engagement between the body, material and sensory environment. The final works include suspended rice paper pieces, textured fabric panels, and crumpled paper structures, in which fragility and strength appear together, the surface is weakened by every hole, yet the accumulation of marks gives the work a new structure. The materials, tools and studio procedure that produce these outcomes are detailed in the Methodology section.

Burning Holes as an unconventional drawing.

The decision to work with burning began with a questioning of what can drawing become when a mark is not added with pigment but created by removing part of the surface? Drawing can be understood as a trace of movement, pressure, time and presence. From this position, a burned hole can also operate as a mark (Petherbridge, 2010). The hole records the moment when heat touches the material, while its darkened edge records the duration and pressure of that contact. The use of fire changes drawing from an additive process into a subtractive and time-based process. The mark is produced through absence, perforation and material transformation. One hole works like a dot. Repeated holes can suggest a line, while changes in spacing, density and direction create rhythm and movement. This progression from a single mark to line, rhythm and spatial structure echoes (Kandinsky, 1979) formal analysis of the point and line as the generative units of visual composition. The absence area therefore not simply damaged parts of the surface but become active parts of the visual language.

Artists such as Alberto Burri and Cai Guo-Qiang have shown how burning and combustion can transform materials and expand the language of contemporary art (*Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting* | The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, n.d.; Nielsen, 2015). In these study, however the scale and action are quieter. Whereas Burri's blowtorch combustions and Cai Guo-Qiang's gunpowder detonations operate through a single forceful event of transformation, the present practice inverts that scale, each mark is small controlled and repeated many times, shifting combustion from spectacle into a slow accumulative drawing process. Instead of using fire as a large event, the artist-researcher uses the small glowing tip of incense. This makes burning a slow, close and repetitive drawing gesture.



Figure 1 Burning Holes using Joss Stick

Material Engagement and Contemplative Process

As a practice, burning holes is not just technical experiment. It requires close engagement between the body, material and sensory environment. The artist-researcher must observe the heat of the incense/joss stick, the smell of the smoke, the resistance of the paper or fabric, the size of each opening, and the distance between one mark and another. A short contact may leave a small brown point, while a longer contact can burn a larger hole or weaken the surrounding surface.

Because the material is fragile, the process cannot be rushed. Attention moves between the hand, breathing, surface, and changing pattern. The drawing is not fully planned in advance. It develops gradually through repetition and the artist-researcher's response to each change. The slow action can become contemplative because it repeatedly brings attention back to the present task.

The final works will include suspended rice paper pieces, textured fabric panels and crumpled paper structures. Fragility and strength appear together, the surface is weakened by every hole, yet the accumulation of marks gives the work a new structure. Light passing through the holes also extends the drawing beyond the surface by producing shadows and changing the relationship between form and void.

Ritual, Burning and Cultural Meaning

The choice of incense is also connected to the artist-researcher's cultural familiarity with the material. Within the artist-researcher's Chinese Malaysian experience, incense is encountered in religious and ancestral practices in which burning, smoke, scent and repetitive ritual actions carry associations with remembrance, offering and spiritual presence. Incense therefore enters the studio not as culturally neutral drawing tool. Its scent, smoke, heat and familiarity carry personal and cultural associations that influence how the material is experienced during art-making. Chinese traditions of incense offering and other forms of ritual burning demonstrate how fire can operate as a transformative action between material and symbolic meanings (Li & Zhang, 2024). Related incense-offering practices can also be found within Asian religious traditions. Studies of incense and burning practices in Chinese and Vietnamese contexts also show how incense and burning may carry meanings of offering, transformation, and continuity (Nguyễn, 2014; *Offering Incense - the Beauty of Belief and*

The study does not claim that incense has one shared meaning for all Malaysian or all Southeast Asian communities. Its cultural meaning is located within the artist-researcher's own experience and familiarity with incense-related rituals. When incense is moved from a ritual setting into the studio, its smell and slow burning remain important. These sensory qualities bring personal memory into the drawing process while also requiring attention to breathe, timing and bodily movement.



Figure 2 Burning of Joss Stick in Thean Hock Keong temple

Research Problem

Contemporary drawing has expanded beyond pigment-based mark making to include performative, subtractive and material transformative processes (Herrera González, 2024). However, limited research has examined repetitive burning holes as a drawing process in which marks are formed through perforation, absence and accumulated voids. Burning is often discussed as destruction, transformation or ritual but less attention is given to its use as a slow and repetitive drawing method.

Mindfulness-based and focusing-oriented art approaches are commonly discussed in therapeutic, clinical or educational setting (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020; Rappaport & Atr-Bc, n.d.). Less attention has been given to the use of Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT) as an interpretive framework for an artist-researcher's studio process. The relationship between bodily sensation, rhythmic attention, material responsiveness and the emergence of visual symbols during repetitive burning therefore remains underexplored.

There is also a contextual gap. Incense carries personal cultural meaning within the artist-researcher's Chinese Malaysian experience, yet its connection to embodied and mindfulness-oriented drawing has not been sufficiently examined. Visual arts scholarship on Malaysia Chinese cultural experience more broadly also remains limited, with recent studies noting that little is known about how such cultural material is reinterpreted through contemporary art practice (Zhang & Mokhtar, 2025). These gaps can therefore be understood as artistic, methodological and contextual. This study addresses these artistic, methodological and contextual gaps through a practice-led investigation of burning holes on rice paper and fabric.

It focuses on the artistic and experiential knowledge produced through studio practice rather than measuring clinical or therapeutic effectiveness.

Scope of the Study

This study examines burning holes as a studio-based drawing practice that supports embodied awareness and mindful attention, addressing the artistic, methodological and contextual gaps identified above. The specific objective is set out in Section 2.

The study is confined to the studio practice of single artist-researcher, carried out over a series of sessions using incense sticks on rice paper and fabric. It draws on artworks process photographs, studio notes, sketches and reflective journals entries. The findings reflect the artist-researcher's personal position and is not presented as representative of Malaysian Chinese or wider Southeast Asian Communities.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sets out the research objectives, and Section 3 introduces the theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the studio methodology and Section 5 presents the findings, Section 6 discusses what these findings mean for expanded drawing and studio-based research and Section 7 concludes by summarising the study's contribution.

Objective

The objective of this study is to examine burning holes as a studio-based drawing practice that supports embodied awareness and mindful attention. More specifically, the study seeks:

1. To explore how repetitive burning with incense stick on rice paper and fabric operates as a subtractive drawing method, in which marks are formed through perforation, absence and accumulated voids.
2. To examine how heat, scent, pressure, duration, repetition, breathing and material resistance influence bodily sensation and attention during the art-making process.
3. To identify how felt sense and visual symbols emerge through the burning process and how FOAT can support reflection on these studio experiences without turning the study into a clinical intervention.
4. To reflect on how the artist-researcher's Chinese Malaysian familiarity with incense informs the sensory and symbolic experience of the practice.

Theoretical Framework: Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy and Burning Holes as Drawing Process
Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT), developed by Laury Rappaport, brings Eugene Gendlin's concepts of Focusing into expressive art practice. Gendlin (1981) describes the felt sense as a bodily and not-yet-verbal sense of a whole situation. It may first be experienced as tightness, warmth, heaviness, movement, uneasiness or another unclear bodily feeling. Meaning develops by staying with this sensation patiently rather than explaining it too quickly.

In this studio-based research, FOAT is adapted as a reflective framework for studio practice. The artist-researcher pays attention to bodily sensation before and during burning, allows marks and patterns to develop, and later reflects on the relationship between sensation, material and image. Four connected ideas guide the interpretation: felt sense, symbol emergence, creative expression, and mindful presence (Rappaport, 2014). Table 1 summarises

these four components as they structure Rappaport's (2008,2014) FOAT model, adapted here as an interpretive lens for studio practice rather than a clinical protocol.

Mindful presence in this study means paying attention to present experience with openness and without immediate judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2004b). This does not require the artist-researcher to remove thoughts or emotions. It creates a way to notice them while returning attention to the body and the material process.

Table 1

FOAT components used to interpret the burning holes practice.

FOAT component	Meaning in this study	Connection to burning holes
Felt sense	Attention to bodily sensation before it is fully explained in words.	Breathing, hand tension, warmth, pressure, and emotional shifts are noticed during making.
Symbol emergence	A form or image develops from bodily and inner experience.	Circles, spirals, clusters, gaps, and scattered marks arise through the process.
Creative expression	Inner experience is given an external material form.	Burned holes turn sensation, movement, duration, and pressure into visible traces.
Mindful presence	Experience is observed with patience and without immediate judgment.	The repeated action returns attention to heat, scent, timing, breath, and the changing of surface.

The framework also supports an expanded understanding of drawing. Each hole is trace of touch, pressure, duration and movement. When the holes accumulate, they produce rhythm, direction, density and space. Drawing therefore emerges through removal rather than addition. FOAT helps the artist-researcher understand how this formal development is connected to bodily attention and inner experience.



Figure 3 Circular shape outcome of the burning process



Figure 4 Summary of the burning holes studio process.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a practice-led, studio-based methodology. Artistic practice is treated as a form of inquiry in which knowledge develops through art making, observing, documenting and reflecting. Sullivan (2010) explains that visual art practice can produce embodied, visual, and experiential knowledge that may not be reached through words alone. In this study, the studio becomes the main research site, while the artist-researcher is both the maker and the person reflecting on the experience.

FOAT informs the structure of attention and later interpretation. It does not function as a clinical treatment protocol. The research is based on one artist-researcher's experience and does not assess participants, compare treatment groups, or measure therapeutic outcomes.

Materials and Studio Setting

The main materials are incense sticks or we also called as joss sticks, rice paper, fabric, incense holder, fire-safe base, water and ventilation are used for safety. Rice paper responds quickly to heat and produces delicate openings with scorched edges. Fabric is more resistant and requires a different duration and pressure. These differences allow the artist-researcher to observe how the body responds to each material.



Figure 5 Tools used in burning holes process: joss stick and incense holder



Figure 6 Burning holes on unbleached fabric surface

Studio Procedure

Each studio session follows four stages. First, the artist-researcher sits quietly and uses mindful breathing and a short body scan to notice physical sensation and emotional tone. Second, the burning begins, the incense tip is brought close to contact with the surface and attention is given to heat, pressure, timing, spacing, smell, hand movement and breathing. Third, the session ends when the artwork reaches a natural pause or when concentration decreases. Finally, the artist-researcher records immediate observations through journaling, short notes, sketches and photographs.

Table 2

Grounding process through mindful breathing before burning session

Stage	Activity	Purpose
Grounding	Mindful breathing	To settle attention and body
Body Awareness	Body scanning	To notice internal sensation
Intention Setting	Silent reflection	To prepare for inner inquiry
Transition to Practice	Holding incense, observing material	To shift into making process

The visual outcome is not fixed at the beginning of every session. Some session follows a loose structure such as a circle or spiral, while others allow scattered marks to develop more freely. This balance between structure and openness makes it possible to compare how different forms influence attention and bodily response.



Figure 7 Burning holes on rice paper

Documentation and Interpretation

The research materials include completed and unfinished artworks, process photographs, studio notes, sketches and reflective journal. The documentation records bodily sensations, changes in attention, emotional shifts, repeated visual forms, material accidents, and decisions made during the process.

The materials are interpreted thematically through the four FOAT ideas described earlier. The analysis asks: What bodily sensation was noticed? What form or symbol emerged? How did the material respond? How did repetition affect attention? What changed between the beginning and the end of the session? The themes were developed by comparing repeated observations across the studio sessions rather than by making claims from a single moment.

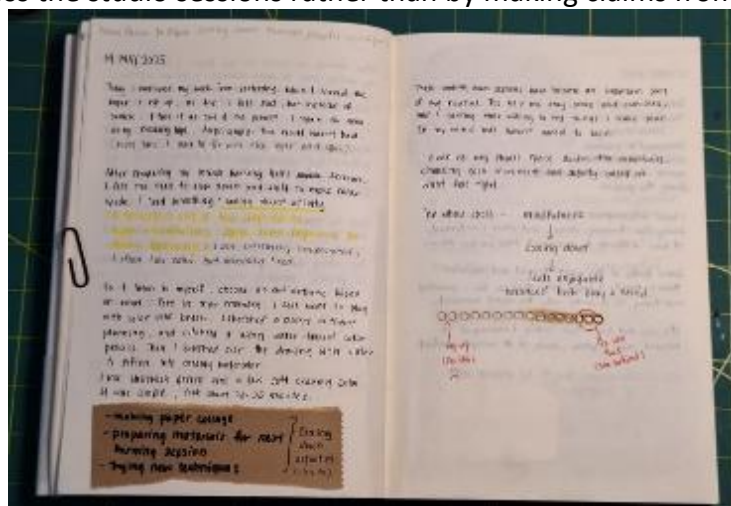


Figure 8 Journaling and reflective writing



Figure 9 Visual mock-up of an installation artwork

Findings

Activation of Felt Sense and Symbol Emergence

The first finding is that the burning process made bodily sensation more noticeable. At the beginning of some sessions, the artist researcher experienced unclear tension, heaviness or restlessness. When attention was placed on breathing and repetitive movement, these sensations became easier to notice without immediately explaining or judging them. This experience is consistent with Gendlin's (1981) idea of the felt sense, in which bodily knowing appears before a complete verbal explanation.

For example, tightness in the chest was noticed during one session and was later connected through reflection to self-pressure. In another session, warmth and heaviness brought attention to family roles and responsibility. These connections were not treated as fixed psychological interpretations. They were understood as meanings that gradually became clearer through the relationship between bodily sensation, art making and reflection.

Circular, spiral, clustered and scattered patterns often developed without detailed planning. The circular forms could suggest containment, continuity or a need for order. Spirals created a sense of movement between inward and outward attention. Scattered marks were connected to interruption, uncertainty or fragmentation. Their meaning remained open and could change between sessions. In this way, the forms acted as visual symbols that supported self-inquiry rather than as images with one final meaning.

This gradual development of meaning is consistent with McNiff's (2004) view that images made through art practice can respond to the maker and reveal meanings that were not fully known at the beginning of the process.



Figure 10 Accumulation of circular burned forms during the studio process



Figure 11 the artist-researcher holding accumulated circular outcomes.

Repetition, Rhythm and Mindful Attention

Repetition was one of the clearest elements shaping mindful attention. Each hole required a small decision about placement, pressure and duration. The same gesture was repeated many times, but no two marks were exactly the same because the heat and surface continued to change. This required a steady observation and prevented the action from becoming completely automatic.

As the sessions continued, the spacing of marks sometimes became connected with inhaling and exhaling. The hand slowed down, mental distraction became less dominant and attention returned to the contact between incense and the surface. The repeated gesture therefore acted as a practical anchor to the present moment. When attention drifted the smell, heat or changing resistance of the material brought it back to the act of the burning process.

Repetition also produced the visual structure of the artwork. A single hole appeared as a dot, while accumulated dots formed lines, pathway, clusters, waves and fields. Differences in density created areas of pressure and release. The same process therefore operated at two levels, it developed the formal language of the drawing and supported a slower, more attentive way of working.



Figure 12 Close-up of the burning outcomes

Inner Witnessing and Self-Inquiry

A further finding within the study was the development of inner witnessing. During the process, the artist-researcher became more able to observe thoughts, sensations and emotional changes without reacting to them immediately. This did not mean that difficult feelings disappeared. Instead, the repetitive task provided a steady structure within, which they could be noticed and approached gradually.

Questions emerge naturally during making and journaling: Why is this area becoming dense? Why am I protecting one part of the surface? Why do I want the pattern to remain controlled? These questions were not used to force an immediate answer. They helped the artist-researcher remain curious about the relationship between the visual decision and the felt experience.

Material accidents were also important. A burned hole could become larger than expected, two openings could join and a weak section could tear. Earlier in the practice, these changes were easily understood as mistakes. With repeated observation, they became part of the process and encouraged a less judgemental response. Accepting the material's limits supported patience and openness during art making process.

Material Transformation and Cultural Resonance

The materials shaped both the visual result and the experience of attention. Rice paper burned quickly and demanded light contact, while fabric needed more time and pressure. The risk of tearing or over-burning made the artist-researcher more aware of speed, control and bodily tension. The fragility of the surface became part of the inquiry rather than only a technical problem.

The scent of incense also produced a personal cultural connection. It recalled familiar spaces of prayer and remembrance, but the studio setting changed the purpose of the action. The incense was no longer used as an offering, it became a drawing tool. Even so, its scent and slow consumption brought memory, duration and impermanence into the artwork. This connection gave the practice cultural resonance without claiming that the meaning is the same for every viewer or community.

Discussion

Burning Holes as Expanded Drawing

The findings support an understanding of burning holes as a form of expanded drawing. The method records gesture and time even though it does not place pigment on the surface. Every burned hole carries evidence of the hand, heat, pressure, duration and movement. The drawing develops through removal and the empty spaces, become active marks. When light passes through the holes, the artwork also moves from a flat surface into space through transparency and shadow.

This contribution is different from practices that use fire mainly as spectacles or destruction. The small scale of the incense tip allows close and repeated contact. The method is therefore based on patience, accumulation and careful response to material change. It adds a slow subtractive process to discussions of unconventional drawing.

FOAT as an Interpretive Framework for Studio Practice

FOAT provided a clear sequence for understanding the studio experience. Grounding brought attention to the body, felt sense helped the artist-researcher notice unclear physical and emotional states; symbol emergence helped connect these states to visual forms, creative expression gave material presence and mindful witnessing supported later reflection. These ideas made it possible to discuss the practice as more than a formal experiment.

At the same time, the study keeps a clear boundary between artistic inquiry and clinical art therapy. The findings describe artist-researcher's self-reflection and embodied awareness. They do not demonstrate that burning holes is an effective treatment and they cannot be applied directly to people experiencing trauma, grief or mental-health conditions. The value of FOAT in this paper is methodological and interpretive, it helps explain how attention, sensation, image and meaning interact during studio practice.

Embodied Awareness, Material and Cultural Context

The practice shows that mindful attention is not produced by repetition alone. It develops through the relationship among the body, tool, material and setting. Heat requires caution, scent affects memory, pressure change the hole and material resistance shapes the speed of the hand. Awareness is therefore embodied and material at the same time (Chessick, 2007)

The use of incense also gives the artwork a personal cultural position. Rather than presenting the practice as broadly representative of Malaysian or Southeast Asian cultural, the paper locates it within the artist-researcher's Chinese Malaysian experience. This more specific position allows cultural memory to be discussed without making a general claim about other communities (Assmann, 2011).



Figure 13 Joss stick using by the artis-researcher

Limitations and Future Study

This study is limited to one artist-researcher and a selected group of studio session. The findings are based on self-observation, artworks and reflective writing. They show how the practice operated in this specific research context but cannot be generalised as a therapeutic result. The use of fire and smoke also requires careful safety procedures, ventilation and material testing.

Future research may examine how viewers experience the completed installation, how light and shadow change the reading of the burned surfaces or how different handmade papers and fabrics affect rhythm and attention.

Conclusion

This study examined burning holes as a studio-based drawing practice informed by Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT). The repetitive use of incense stick on rice paper and fabric produced marks through perforation, absence and accumulated voids. Heat, scent, timing, pressure, breathing and material resistance made drawing into a multisensory and embodied process.

The findings show that repetition helped sustain attention, while circular, spiral, clustered and scattered forms emerged in relation to bodily sensation and inner experience. Reflective journaling supported self-inquiry by allowing the artist-researcher to review changes in attention, emotion, material response and symbolic meaning. FOAT was useful as a framework for interpreting these experiences through felt sense, symbol emergence, creative expression and mindful presence.

The main contribution of the study is to position burning holes as an unconventional and mindfulness-oriented drawing method within contemporary studio practice. It also offers a simple model for connecting embodied awareness, material interaction and reflection without claiming clinical effectiveness. Located within the artist-researcher's Chinese Malaysian experience of incense, the practice brings together drawing, cultural memory and attentive making. Burning hole is therefore not only a way of changing a surface, it is a way of thinking and knowing through the body, material and time.

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