

Developing a Visual Language that Combines Western and Chinese Painting

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Eastern and Western paintings have developed separate art forms reflective of the distinct histories, cultures, religions and geographic locations of China and the US. There are obvious differences in style due in part to distinctions in techniques, materials and the ways each culture develops and prioritizes thought and expression into the artwork. Under the relatively recent influence of global economic integration, Eastern and Western artists are drawing on each other for inspiration at an unprecedented rate. For contemporary artists, whether an artwork belongs to Eastern or Western tradition seems less important. This is true for my work, but how I evolved into this understanding came through my artistic practice.

My artistic practice is focused on reconciling my Chinese roots with the expressive freedom of contemporary Western artistic expression. I create works from my observations and experiences in both cultures. My art records my real experience and understanding. I use the human figure as a vehicle to carry my soul because a naked body can hide nothing. I work with subject matter depicting opposites—things in a state of imbalance. Opposites allow for strong visual contrast and depict my beliefs. I believe our visible world (Yang) is controlled by an invisible power (Yin). A healthy society can keep the balance with the invisible power. Once this balance is broken, the invisible power will push the whole society back to the right track sooner or later by punishing or warning.

Towards finding an authentic creative voice I have experimented with materials of Chinese painting and Western oil painting. I have explored what the materials of each tradition offer and understand the limits. I found that the use of fabric as a new medium allowed me to

break the boundary between Eastern and Western art. It is a material that allows me to combine Chinese painting with oil painting.

In my work one tradition does not dominate over the other. My practice belongs to both traditions and neither. My work is “in-between.” I call it “The Third Art.” This new art form is what I want in my heart. This thesis includes many examples of my “Combination” art practice developed during my MFA study.

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DEDICATION

To my family, thank you for your support,
you are my power source.

To my friends and classmates, thank you for your company,
you make my life more colorful.

To all the faculty and staff, thank you for your teaching,
you helped me grow fast.

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INTRODUCTION

Most of my artwork expresses personal experience and understanding about this world. I like to watch news and understand what is happening in the world. I care about everything in my world and experience life seriously. When something significant happens, I think deeply about the reasons behind it and try to express them in my art practice.

I tend to combine opposite things to create a strong visual contrast in my artwork. I have lived in an environment where tradition and modernity co-exist. With more than ten years of study and work in Beijing, I have witnessed the rapid modernization of the city. When I walked through the streets in Beijing, it seemed that skyscrapers popped up suddenly among the ancient buildings. Several small alleys connecting ancient courtyard houses remain among the high-rise buildings. At that moment, tradition and modernity suddenly stood together without a process of transition. The traditional ancient buildings rooted in Chinese culture are a valuable legacy for Chinese people. Modern skyscrapers demonstrate a global/Western sensibility, and perhaps technically they are more advanced, but they are out of touch with traditional Chinese contexts. I was living in this kind of environment in which tradition and modernity, new and old, Eastern and Western co-existed. It influenced my aesthetic orientation. I believe the co-existence is beautiful. This aesthetic orientation appeared in my first creation during my BA study. When I traveled to *Xia He*, a place of ethnic minorities in the *Qinghai* province in China, I saw a lot of city people shuttling in the ethnic minority residential areas. I observed two opposite lifestyles and beliefs co-existing in the same space. This strong contrast gave me

a deep impression. At that moment I found the beauty of conflict instead of a harmonious way of life. I tried to express this feeling in my Chinese painting, *Culture Collision* (Figure 1).

As a new migrant I have faced many cultural changes. I have spent one-third of my life in the US and two-thirds of my life in China. Both cultures co-exist in my way of being. I have been gradually infused with Western culture, but I am still a Chinese person in my mind because Eastern culture was my beginning. I call myself the “The Third Man,” existing between Eastern and Western cultures. I deeply understand Eastern art while I understand and appreciate what Western artists are expressing. The understanding of different arts and cultures let my artistic perspective unknowingly. I happened upon a journey on a merging road. Like myself, my art is “The Third Art,” that stands between Eastern art and Western art.

In the painting, *The Third Man* (Figure 2), I drew two people within the body of a girl to depict my concept. I feel that Western culture and Eastern culture co-exist in my body. My Chinese friends say I am more American while in the US people always think I am Chinese. Sometimes I question myself, “Which one is the real me?” I think I am in-between cultures.

Growing up in a Chinese traditional family, the traditional Chinese philosophy of Taoism has always had an influence on me. For example, my parents used to tell me not to quarrel with classmates and to listen to teachers and elders. After I grew up, I realized that the concept of harmonious development is embodied in every aspect of the whole Chinese society. Harmonious living among people and with the environment around me

demonstrates the Taoist concept of Yin-Yang in pursuit of balance. The Yin-Yang concept holds the idea that opposite forces can be in balance. It is a way to describe both contrast and interdependence.

I introduced this notion of Yin and Yang into my art practice. According to the Taoist theory, “All elements are paired and balanced with each other.” In addition, “The Yin and Yang does not merely set opposites against each other... Yin and Yang complement each other.”ⁱ (Tower 2010, Introduction). Chinese Yin and Yang philosophy tells us that everything has an opposite. It means that if the visible world is the Yang, then the opposite side of the invisible world should exist as the Yin. Our visible world always keeps balance with the invisible world under usual circumstances. If this balance is broken, the invisible power will become stronger to keep balance with Yang. The visible power can be stronger, too. Many negative things are happening in the world right now. For example, we have the coronavirus pandemic, the sea is seriously polluted and there are insect infestations in many places. I think that these things are happening because humans have seized too much from nature. We have destroyed the balance between humans (Yang) and nature (Yin) which has resulted in a mystical power coming from nature to fight back. I want to drag this invisible power under the sun to give people access to it. Instead of showing a balanced status of Yin and Yang in my artwork, I typically combine two opposite things (or two sides of one thing) in an unbalanced status. For example, humans and nature, freedom and bondage, body and soul, woman and man, past and present and so on. I hope my art can touch people’s souls and remind them to see interdependence and interrelationship between things.

I created *Deep-Sea Breath* (Figure 3) during my second year of MFA study. I saw a photograph of a turtle wrapped in a plastic bag and fishing nets and felt the pain of the turtle. Human's pollution of the sea has caused a tragedy where death happens quietly in the deep sea in every minute. If we cannot stop polluting the environment, we will be the same as deep-sea animals not able to breathe. I created a beautiful girl in the deep sea, covered with a piece of plastic on her face to show a sense of suffocation.



Figure 1
Zhao, Dongming
Culture Collision
Chinese painting
36 × 48 inches
2000



Figure 2
Zhao, Dongming
The Third Man
Chinese painting and oil on fabric
18 × 24 inches
2019



Figure 3
Zhao, Dongming
Deep Sea Breath
Oil on canvas
20 × 24 inches
2019

CHALLENGES MERGING IN PAINTING STYLES

I began my undergraduate studies with a major in Chinese painting. Because of the differences in histories, cultures, religions, and geographic locations, traditional Chinese painting and Western painting developed their own unique art forms which show obvious differences in the art styles, drawing techniques, expressive languages and painting materials.

In addition, traditional Chinese painting was influenced by the art theory of the “Six Laws” by *Xie, He* of the Southern Qi Dynasty. The Six Laws comprehensively and accurately summarize the artistic groundwork for Chinese painting, including the use of pen and ink, the way to model structure, the principle of color, the layout and the method for learning Chinese painting.ⁱⁱ (James 1961, 380). The Six Laws have deeply influenced the aesthetic principles and evaluation standards of traditional Chinese painting. The principles have consolidated and accelerated the formation of the unique style of Chinese painting.

I studied two types of Chinese painting when I was in China. They are *GongBi* (工笔) and *Xieyi* (写意). *Xieyi* is a looser style of Chinese painting using ink and a Chinese brush to draw on the Xuan paper (known in the west as rice paper). *Xieyi* is infused with the beauty of calligraphy, Chinese philosophy, and poetry. The cultural deposits and techniques are very important in *Xieyi*. Many successful Chinese artists are also masters of Chinese philosophy, calligraphy and poetry. Two better known examples are Su, Shi (1037–1101) and Mi, Fu (1051–1107). Both were high government ministers,

calligraphers and people well-educated in literature in the Song dynasty. They are especially known for their literati painting within the art of Chinese painting.ⁱⁱⁱ (Dai 2016, 1,2).

Contemporary Chinese artists are grounded in a culture that is different in many ways from what I have just described. People now use pens and computers instead of Chinese brushes to write. Young people like to read the comic books, watch movies, play games and read news from their cell phones. The cultural shifts are reflected in contemporary Chinese painting. I majored in Chinese painting. I had to practice calligraphy every day during my undergraduate studies. But after four years of practicing calligraphy, I still could not write it well and I lost confidence in drawing *Xieyi*.

Another type of Chinese painting, *Gongbi* (工笔), a careful realistic technique in Chinese painting, gave me great confidence as an artist. Different from *Xieyi*, *Gongbi* focuses on details. The drawing needs to be more accurate in form. Under the influence of Xu, Beihong, Lin, Fengmian and other pioneers, foundation courses in the 21st century Chinese art education has infused many Western realistic drawing techniques. For example, the college entrance examination required sketching and color drawing as basic subjects. The modern art students know linear perspective, anatomy, and Western art theory.

The modern *Gongbi* has built on the foundation of Western painting. Western art techniques can help Chinese artists draw the accurate shapes in their *Gongbi* artwork. In this way, the modern *Gongbi* has already become a new art form that hybridizes Chinese painting with the foundation of Western art. The realism in *Gongbi* figure drawing has

taken a big step forward compared traditional *Gongbi* (Figure 4). As a result, many excellent painters emerged, such as He, Jiaying (Figure 5), Luo, Hanlei (Figure 6).

Following the trend of globalization, Chinese painters had greater opportunity to study art forms from other parts of the world. Should Chinese painting incorporate knowledge from Western artists or keep the national features? This question was in dispute during my undergraduate study. It divided my art teachers into two groups: traditional and innovative. The traditional group advocated to keep the national features of Chinese painting by stressing and inheriting the traditions of Chinese painting. They called for students to delve into traditional study before they developed themselves. On the other hand, the innovative teachers encouraged students to infuse contemporary Western art concepts and techniques into Chinese painting. I followed each groups' guidance and worked hard on the traditional ways in some classes while I tried new things in another classes. The following artwork: *Flowers Used to Be Red* (Figure 7) was my undergraduate capstone work. In this painting, I used the traditional way to organize lines and render colors on the figures' head area. I simplified the lines and shapes and used Japanese mineral pigments to draw a big color block on the body area. I was influenced by French Post-Impressionist artist Paul Gauguin's painting (Figure 8) for the body. Gauguin's painting shows bold colors, simplified forms and strong lines. The difference between Gauguin's painting and mine is that the Gauguin's figures are flat, but they still show a 3-D form to a certain degree, and they show the value contrast and brush strokes in some areas. My figures' bodies are totally flat because the Japanese mineral pigments are water-based materials, they are hard to create color variations and show the brush

strokes. Unconsciously, during my undergraduate study I wanted to combine Chinese painting with Western art into one piece of art to produce a strong visual contrast. It didn't work, and my paintings still looked like Chinese painting. After I came to the US, I better understood Western art. I came to understand that it is very different from Chinese painting in certain ways. Contemporary Spanish artist, Perico Pastor said that the history of Western art is like an arrow; art has always moved forwards, artists have always been looking for new breakthroughs and different ways of painting. In contrast, Chinese painting development is like the surface of a pond. Artists from different schools throw different stones into the pond in every historical period, causing different ripples. Chinese art is like the expansion of a ripple moving outwards.^{iv} (Pastor 2014, Volume VI)

The development of Chinese painting was deeply influenced by tradition. However, Modern Western art tried to break away from tradition and find different artistic concepts and language. As a result, Western art from Realism, Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism to Op Art, there are more than 20 art forms and new concepts that have been explored between modernism and postmodernism. These new Western art concepts excited me. I began to think about how I could combine them into my *Gongbi* painting. My painting would become more contemporary. As I began to explore the idea of developing Western concepts into my work, I was confronted with the limits of my materials.

Painting has always reflected the materials that are available to artists. One major difference between Western painting and Eastern painting is the use of materials.

Traditional Chinese painting is drawn on silk or *Xuan* paper. Both silk and *Xuan* paper

are thin and translucent. Neither takes thick pigments well. This became a limit because I wanted to produce the strong visual effects and textures that are possible with oil paints. Traditional Chinese pigments are made from natural dyes and minerals rather than fine pigment particles in western watercolor.^v (B. editor). It is easy to create a translucent layers and show a kind of fresh and elegant art style on *Xuan* paper. Artists can create more hues by mixing Chinese painting pigments, but mixtures of vegetable and mineral pigments lose the clean, vivid hues. Instead of mixing color together, Chinese artists tend to layer vegetable and mineral colors separately to produce more hues. This process is well planned, and the result is predictable. As a result, artists seldom get accidental effects. Many artists began to search for innovative ideas by studying other art forms and changing their materials. The study of Western art became a popular starting point. Pan, Tianshou said that the Western art influenced Chinese painting started from Zeng, Jing (1564–1647) in late Ming Dynasty. Under the influence of oil painting, Zeng, Jing created a new realistic Chinese painting style. It is called the Boneless Painting.^{vi} (Wang 2016). Since then, Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) infused oil painting techniques such as chiaroscuro and focused perspective into Chinese painting in the Qing Dynasty. Xu Beihong (1895–1953) introduced Western realistic painting techniques into Chinese painting. Lin Fengmian (1900–1991) infused modern Western art, such as impressionism, fauvism, and expressionism, into Chinese painting. Li Kuizheng (born in 1942) omitted ink lines and used colors to show the lights. These artists' art style belongs to Chinese painting. In modern times, more and more Chinese artists start living or studying in the US or Europe. They are also very interested in the fusion of Chinese painting and western painting in their art practice. Chinese French painter Wuji Zhao

(1920–2013) took the soul of Chinese landscape painting and used it into his abstract oil painting (Figure 9). His painting looks more Western.

As what said above, most of the Chinese predecessors borrowed some ideas from western art or Western artists borrowed something from Eastern art to infuse two art forms together. Their artworks consciously or unconsciously retained a strong national character of Chinese painting or oil painting and showed one art form dominates over another. People can easily classify them into either Chinese painting or Oil painting. I decided to call them “Infusion”. “Infusion” is a good art practice and the predecessors have made great achievements in this direction. But I think it is just a start and I still have large space to do more.



Figure 4
Zhoufang
Group Portrait of Noblewomen
18 × 71 inches
Tang Dynasty



Figure 5
He, Jiaying
Luoying
35½ × 20 inches
1992



Figure 6
 Luo, Hanlei
Big and Small
 65 × 49 inches
 Chinese painting on Xuan paper



Figure 7
 Zhao, Dongming
Flowers Used to Be Red
 Chinese painting on silk
 14 × 19 inches
 2001



Figure 8
Paul Gauguin
Arearea
Oil on canvas
30 × 37 inches
1892

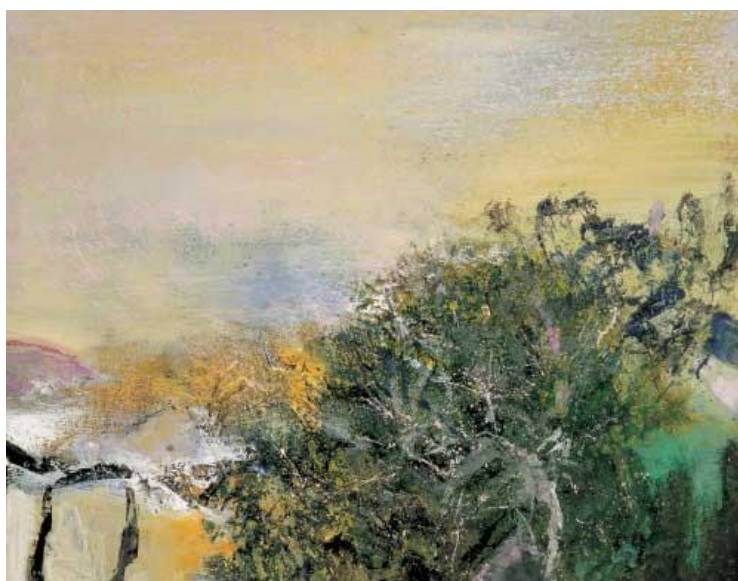


Figure 9
Zhao, Wuji
No Name
Oil on canvas
21 × 25 inches
1985

THE CONCEPT OF “COMBINATION”

As two great art forms, *Gongbi* and oil painting, both showed their unique charm. Instead of letting one art form dominate another, I would like to have them overlapped or layered together so that they can coexist and complement one another.

It will create a new “Combination” art form that combines Eastern art and Western art. The new “Combination” art is different from Robert Rauschenberg’s “Combine” art concept. Robert Rauschenberg believed that “painting relates to both art and life.”^{vii} (Jones 2014). And he invented the “Combine” art concept in the mid-1950s by attaching photographic images, clothing, newspaper clippings, ephemera or any number of three-dimensional objects to his paintings. He brought real-world images and objects into the realm of abstract painting and countered sanctioned divisions between painting and sculpture.^{viii} (Artist 2019). One of Rauschenberg’s “Combine” artwork, *Monogram* (Figure 10), was made between 1954 and 1964. In this piece, Rauschenberg combined oil, paper, fabric, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe-heel, and tennis ball on two conjoined canvases with oil on taxidermized Angora goat with brass plaque and rubber tire on a wood platform mounted on four casters 106.7 x 135.2 x 163.8 cm Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Art critic Leo Steinberg said Rauschenberg’s “Combine” artwork challenged the traditional concept of the picture plane as an extension of the viewers' space, providing a window into another reality^{ix} (R. R. editor 2019). Different from Rauschenberg’s “Combine” art, most of my “Combination” art happened between Eastern and Western traditional paintings. It did not lead the viewer into a reality but let the viewer linger between Eastern and Western art.



Figure 10
Robert Rauschenberg *Monogram*
Mixed media
42 × 63 ¼ × 64 ½ inches
1955–59

DEVELOPING A VISUAL LANGUAGE

Western artists use canvas as the medium to draw the oil painting. The canvas is very thick and shows rough textures. Oil paints are very dense, it can be drawn easily on canvas by layers to fill in the rough texture and show a delicate effect. Chinese painting pigments are a water solution, are more transparent, and they cannot fill in the rough surface of the canvas. Xuan paper is too thin and brittle, it is not oil proof and the oil paints are too dense to draw on it. If I want to combine two art forms on one piece of painting, I should find a new material to replace Xuan paper and canvas. The thickness of the new material is in between Xuan paper and canvas. It can support both Chinese painting and oil painting.

My study of fashion design gave me an opportunity to play with many kinds of fabrics. Many thicknesses of fabric are in between *Xuan* paper and canvas. Some fashion designers used dye to draw patterns on the garments. It inspired me to experiment with fabric as a drawing media. Among the materials, I found lighter weight woven cotton was the best material to replace *Xuan* paper and canvas to combine Chinese painting and oil painting. The thickness of many cotton fabrics is in between *Xuan* paper and canvas. It is stronger than *Xuan* paper, the surface is smoother than oil canvas, and it allows me to use a variety of paints. The woven fabric is my favorite for drawing because it is dimensionally stable. Using fabric as a new medium to overcome the physical weakness of *Xuan* paper and canvas to break the boundary of Eastern art and Western art become my goal to urge me to start my MFA.

In the first year of my MFA study, I tried to draw Chinese paintings directly on the cotton fabric. Because the cotton fabric is not waterproof, the water quickly spread everywhere. I couldn't control the shape of ink or the color. The result is like drawing on raw *Xuan* paper, I can draw *Xieyi* Chinese painting on it. To use the fabric to draw *Gongbi*, I needed to find a way to make the fabric waterproof. The following examples named *Models* (Figure11, Figure12), were my first try drawing on the fabric. I combined ink drawings with some dry mediums to drawing on fabric. The bird images were referenced from *Zhu Da*'s Chinese painting. From *Zhu Da*'s bird, I can feel a sense of loneliness, a lofty soul. I like his painting because of the soul of his birds. I show my understanding of fashion design in these works. I think peoples' external embellishments cannot conceal their inner souls. In this way, fashion design is meaningless for me.



Figure 11
Zhao, Dongming
Model I
Chinese painting on fabric, color pencil
15 × 20 inches
2018



Figure 12

Zhao, Dongming

Model II

Chinese painting on fabric, color pencil

15 × 20 inches

2018

Except to draw on fabric, I can sew and cut fabric to make some 3-D textures. I sewed yarns on a Xieyi painting to show how a person was trapped by themselves, by a culture, by a society or by education. The inspiration was from my working experience. It also represents a group of people who have similar experiences as I did in the big city. People cannot choose their lives because of intense competition and survival pressure. For example, working overtime is an awkward understanding between employees and employers. It pushes the vulnerable employees to silently endure the daily pain of life. I transformed this painful feeling in my *Be Trapped* painting (Figure 13) to let people feel the feeling.

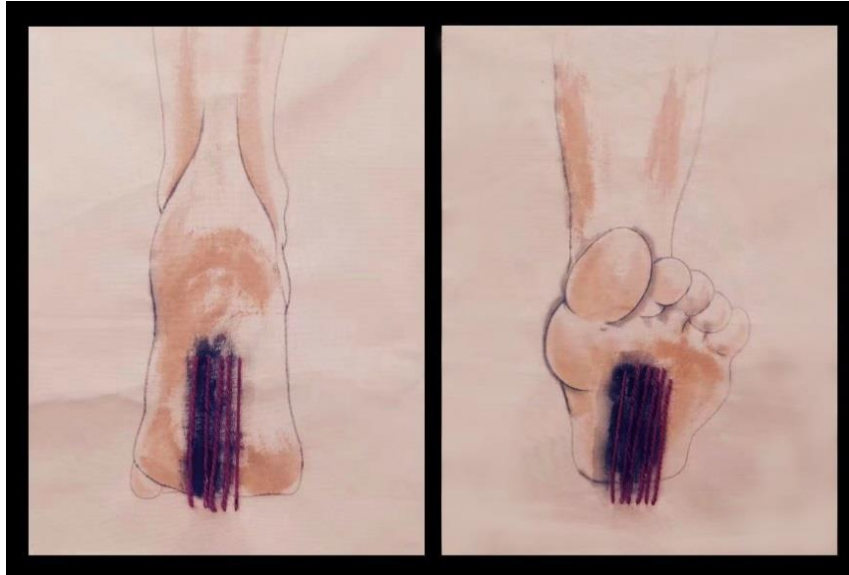


Figure 13

Zhao, Dongming

Be Trapped

Chinese painting on fabric, yarn

35 × 22 inches

2018

I tried to draw *Gongbi* on light woven cotton fabric. To make the fabric waterproof and to avoid color spreading, I used the same way of traditional Chinese painting pre-treatment on raw *Xuan* paper to pretreat the fabric. The method is to mix the glue, alum into water to make the glue alum solution, then cover it on the surface of the fabric. The proportion of glue and alum that most Chinese people used is 7:3 or according to the artists experience. My proportion of glue to alum to water on my fabric is 2:1:50. It means that if the glue is 20g, alum should be 10g and water is 500g. I adjusted the proportion of glue, alum, and water to get my desired results. Next, I drew a pencil draft on a thin paper. Then, I put graphite paper between the thin paper and the fabric to trace the line draft to the fabric. Next I rendered the color onto the surface of the fabric. After I finished the drawing part, I sewed with thread to add a 3-D texture.

In *Body and Soul* (Figure 14), I first drew *Gongbi* on a white fabric. After I finished the drawing, I felt the foreground figure was not strong enough because the body looked too transparent. I changed pigments into acrylic paints and used it on the cloth parts. This time it looked better because acrylic paints were opaque. It allowed me to add more layers to the painting. I still felt that I could do more. I sewed many threads and stretched them to the front. 3-D textures on my Chinese painting create a connection between the unseen world and reality. With this combination of materials, I show an imbalanced status between one's ideal life and reality.

With this work I returned to my experience working in Beijing. Working in Beijing for many years, I witnessed a lot of people under the pressure of lives, they had no spare time to nourish their soul. The city is a place where most people live in a cage made of steel and concrete. To support themselves then keep working. There is no opportunity to connect with nature and God. As a result, many people lack spiritual beliefs. People's bodies and souls have lost their balance.

I like the way Egon Schiele an early 20th century used the body in his artwork. The figures in Egon Schiele's paintings are ugly and twisted. You cannot tell whether they are doctors or teachers, whether they are poor or rich, whether they are noble or humble, or even if they were beautiful! They are just men or women in bed with a morbid distortion, a struggle with desire. These are the essence of all human beings in Egon Schiele's art. It has nothing to do with the identity of the individual. In his *Woman Hiding Her Face* (Figure 15) painting, Egon Schiele drew a woman hiding her face to emphasize the legs and bottom and used color blocks on the upper body and background to stress the upper

body out. I learned a lot from Egon Schiele's paintings. In my work of *Body and Soul*, I drew a woman using a hand to cover her face. I used the dark color around the body to stress the body pose out to show how this woman's struggling between body and soul. By emphasizing the body and concealing the face, like Schiele's example my work becomes more universal.

In a competitive social environment, vulnerable groups cannot express themselves and take control of their lives. Long-term work overload in high-tech companies is a common phenomenon. There is an online protest called 996.icu that refers to the 9 am to 9 pm working day, six days a week. This is the work week demanded by many technology companies. I have experienced this kind of intense workload and my health declined. The feeling was like a fish on the chopping board. My body was being hollowed out. I inserted my real-life experience and mental suffering into my art to let people reflect on their own lives.

Fish on the Chopping Board (Figure 16) and *Feel Body Be Hollowed Out* (Figure 17) are the combination of Chinese paintings with cutting and sewing techniques. 2-D art combined with 3-D art on fabric. After I finished the drawing, I still felt my drawing was not enough to show the sense of pain. I decided to cut out the fabric and used yarn to open the cut. Then I put a piece of red fabric under it to show a sense of blood. The wound is open, and the blood is flowing. I feel the pain that people are suffering in their lives.

Feel Body Be Hollowed Out is a name of a chorus song performed by the Shanghai rainbow indoor chorus in July 2016 which focused on the daily life of white-collar

workers. Because the naughty lyrics described the aspirations of the vast number of office workers, it was called by netizens and some medias as “The Divine Comedy that Overtime Dog must to Listen.”^x (W. editor 2020). The video was viewed more than three million times in just seven hours after it was released. I got inspiration from this song because this song spoke for my heart. I wanted to visualize this song in my art to resonate with the many white-collar workers. In *Feel Body Be Hollowed Out*, I wanted to create a sense of emptiness in the body. I drew a body that was hollowed out. An empty belly is covered by many small patches. People want to cover their bodies, but the patch is too small to stop the pain. My experiments with cut fabric have served my understanding. I can express meaning and separate ideas with layers and texture.



Figure 14
 Zhao, Dongming
Body and Soul
 Chinese painting on fabric/acrylic/yarn
 20 × 24 inches
 2018



Figure 15
 Schiele, Egon
Woman Hiding Her Face
 16 × 18½ inches
 1912



Figure 16
 Zhao, Dongming
Fish on the Chopping Board
 Chinese painting on fabric, acrylic, yarn
 24 × 24 inches
 2018

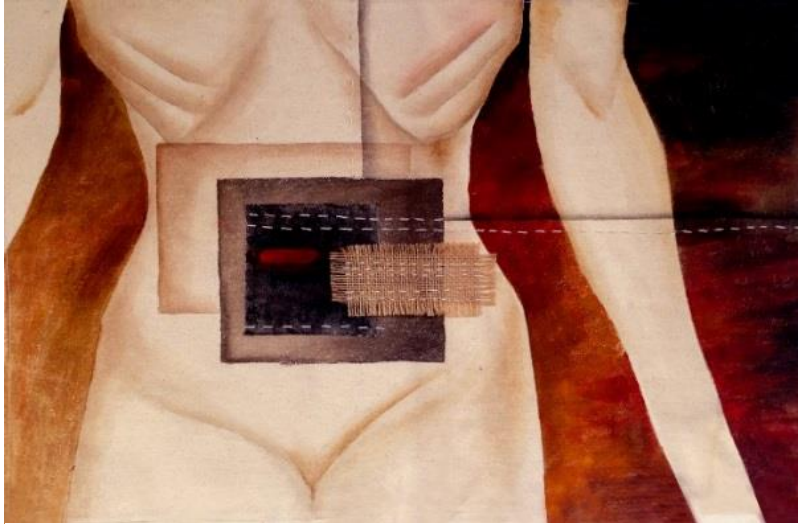


Figure 17
 Zhao, Dongming
Feel Body Be Hollowed Out
 Chinese painting on fabric, acrylic, yarn
 18 × 24 inches
 2018

Nicola Samori is one of my favorite artists. His paintings show figures in the style of the Old Masters with the highest degree of precision. But he has distorted them, smeared and disfigured some parts. He removes the half-dry skin of the uppermost layer of paint. In this way, Nicola Samori, instead of abandoning the past technique, has kept a traditional trace in some areas and destroyed it in others. He re-envisioned traditional painting towards his unique visual language. Two contrasting visual results overlap together producing a strong visual shock. Nicola Samori's painting is a kind of combination of abstract and concrete, traditional and modern. I was inspired by Nicola Samori's painting *Sordina* (Figure 18), in my work *Time is Flying* (Figure 19) and *Goulash* (Figure 20). I combine the traditional realistic painting with contemporary abstract art. Half of the face in the *Time is Flying* is a renaissance classical painting style, and the other side is abstracted into geometric shapes. These two art styles represent the past and the present.

The past remains with a few fragments in our memory, while the present is something real appearing in front of our eyes, and the future is an abstract concept with no concrete images. In order to show this concept of time, I cut some flower fragments from fabric and sewed them onto the painting. I drew half of the representational face in the classical style in the middle and half abstract face on the right. Viewers can travel back and forth in time when they look at this painting. With *Time is Flying*, I draw half of the face in traditional classical oil painting style. In *Goulash* I picked up some typical Chinese peony patterns to decorate her head. I use line to draw abstract patterns on the background. In this way, the “Combination” concept not only included different art styles, but also include different cultural elements.

Last year when I packed up my things and prepared to move to Moscow from Pullman. By chance I found study notes inserted in my husband’s Bible. The notes recorded many philosophic ideas of life. I did not throw them away because they documented our learning process from when we arrived in the US. For me the best way to keep them forever is to put them into my artworks. I placed them layer by layer on my canvas as the under layers of my painting. I drew the oil painting on the top then glued the fabric on the top of the painting. I scraped away the top layer of the surface of oil painting to let Bible notes show up. Partly visible Bible notes showed a mystical power. It seems that everything is under God’s surveillance, and he tries to reach us by simple words. He opens the big eye and watches our actions. This is the basis for *Nothing is Hidden from God’s Eye* (Figure 21).



Figure 18
 Samorì, Nicola
Sordina
 39 × 39 inches
 Dimensions
 2017



Figure 19
 Zhao, Dongming
Time is Flying
 Oil on the canvas, fabric
 24 × 24 inches
 2018



Figure 20
 Zhao, Dongming
Goulash
 Oil painting on fabric
 24 × 24 inches
 2020



Figure 21
 Zhao, Dongming
Nothing is Hidden from God's Eye
 Oil on the canvas, paper, fabric
 24 × 24 inches
 2018

Working on the fabric has given me infinite possibilities to express my “Combination” concept. After one year’s practice, something gradually came up in my mind. The idea about how to combine Chinese painting and oil painting became clearer. To better combine the two art forms, I needed to practice more oil paintings technique because I had never tried oil painting. Since my second year of MFA study, I have completed many oil paintings. I also experimented with fabric and plastic on some paintings. The fabric and plastic allowed me to show the idea of estrangement and invisible power.

Recently, the environmental pollution has become more serious. Many developing countries suffer from severe smog, and people must wear face masks every day. More and more household waste, especially plastic products, have appeared in the sea. People have found plastic particles in the fish, which means that plastic pollution has reached the top of the food chain and can harm the health of humans. People’s garbage is returning to our dining tables. Many of my paintings reflect my understanding of the environmental problems, such as *Lover* (Figure 22), *Tension* (Figure 23), *Body* (Figure 24) and *The Circle* (Figure 25).



Figure 22
Zhao, Dongming
Lover
Oil on canvas
36 × 24 inches
2019



Figure 23
Zhao, Dongming
Tension
Oil on canvas
24 × 36 inches
2019



Figure 24
Zhao, Dongming
Body
Oil on canvas
24 × 36 inches
2019



Figure 25
Zhao, Dongming
The Circle
Oil on canvas
18 × 24 inches
2019

In my third year of MFA, I started to combine oil painting and Chinese painting. My themes came from my personal life experience or my understanding of life. I appreciated every moment in my life. I thought that life was for people to experience whether it was good or bad. I wanted to share them through my artworks. These experiences are a common consensus to some people who have the similar experience with me. I hope my art can resonate with their own experiences and touch their souls.

There is a common point in my “Combination” series. They are all figure drawings, especially nude figures. I did not want to show their identities, occupations and social status by showing clothing. Without the disguise of clothing, people’s soul can be expressed directly. Many figures are transparent in my paintings. Matthew 10:26 says, “There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known.^{xi}” (Witte 2018). In my mind nothing is hidden from God’s sight. To better show a kind of mystical power, making the absent visible, I showed my subject from God’s point of view. I think that God knows what we do. We are transparent in front of God.

I like to visit the fabric store. I always purchase fabric I can draw on. Many of the fabrics have the beautiful color, texture or pattern. Once I decide on a fabric, I pretreat it using a glue and alum solution. I then draw the pencil lines on the fabric, and then color the Chinese painting first. Before I draw the oil painting, I use transparent gesso to coat the part that I will draw oil paints on.

In *Metamorphosis I* (Figure 26) and *Metamorphosis II* (Figure 27), I question what life is about. I think that life is a process of accepting new opinions and updating old knowledge with experienced. Change is another word for living. Just like the life of butterflies or

cicadas—life is a process of constant updating. This theory is from my life experience. I once dreamed to be an elementary school art teacher. Later, I changed my dream to be a university teacher. Following the dream, I kept studying to advance myself, and I have enjoyed this progress of changing. After I came to the US, I found a lot of cultural differences, and I started to accept new things. My opinions and views have evolved. I have maintained Chinese traditional living habits, but I have accepted the way of Western thinking. Now I am between Western and Eastern cultures.

I created the artwork in my *Metamorphosis* series to convey the evolution process of myself. In these art works, I drew a new body breaking free from the old body. It is like a larva morphing into a beautiful butterfly after a series of transformations. I used the butterfly pattern to represent meaning of *Metamorphosis*. The layered imagery shows the passage of time. Old is giving birth to the new while the new contains the old. In most areas of the paintings I used the way of Chinese painting to show a sense of a dream. In some parts I worked in oil painting to look more like reality. By this visual contrast, I created a sense of past and current co-existing— intertwinning together.

In both *Metamorphosis* paintings I kept the beautiful butterfly pattern that already existed on the fabric. Because Chinese painting is transparent the pattern easily shows in the background. In *Metamorphosis II*, I showed the same subject matter as the *Metamorphosis I*. Three overlapping figures represent the process of a person's growth.

The *Metamorphosis* series was influenced by Austrian Symbolist painter Gustav Klimt. Klimt creates realistic 3-D figures surrounded by vibrant patterns as that decorate the environment and clothing. With this contrast in style he achieves a stark contrast between

2-D and 3-D imagery. It is not difficult to see that Klimt has infused Eastern artistic elements into his oil painting, such as, flat and decorative features and his use of line. In his work titled *The Three Ages of Woman* (Figure 28), Klimt portrays a baby girl, a beautiful young woman, and an elderly woman, presenting the three stages of a woman's life and the circle of life. He uses a big flat background around 3-D figures and uses line and 2-D colorful patterns to portray hair, fabrics and some negative space. He has distorted the shape of figures while figures still look believable and accurate.

In my *Metamorphosis I* and *Metamorphosis II*, I kept the fabric's patterns on the figure body area as the underlayment. The flat pattern appearing on the 3-D body produced a strong visual contrast between 2-D and 3-D. I also distorted the figure while still maintaining the figure as believable. Compared with Klimt's painting, my figures are overlapped and transparent in some parts and opaque in other parts. I want to show the growing process of life.

As I get older, I feel time goes faster. My grandmother, grandfather and some aunts have started to gradually leave us. Last year, when my mom got sick, she stayed in a hospital in danger. I feared that my mom would leave us. All I could do in those days was to pray for her every day. I hoped God could help me to save my mom. Fortunately, my mom has recovered. After this experience I created the painting *Praying* (Figure 29). The Calligraphy in the work is from Buddhist scripture. With the figure I convey human frailty and insignificance under the strong mysterious powers. We can do nothing to stop many things. I always felt that life is very long, and I am still young. Since my mom got sick last summer, I feel time is running out. I created *Running Life* (Figure 30) from

God's view. I think that in God's view, people's lives are like a process of running from one part of the world to another part. We are all just passengers of time. In both pieces to show an unreal visual result, I chose fabric with abstract pattern and painted the realistic figure over the background.

After I came to the US, I saw the different family concepts between cultures. According to Shi Lizhi's research, "In China, traditionally, people prefer extended families, esp. three generations at one roof which represents happiness."^{xii} (Shi 2015, 50). In China, parents have the duty to bring up and educate their children while children have the duty to support and assist their parents when they are old. So Chinese families emphasize family responsibility and filial piety. The relationship between parents and children are more interdependent. I grew up in a traditional family. My parents were living with my father's parents until his parents died. My father got big help from his parents. My grandparents worked hard to help my parents to raise their family. When something happened, my father always had support from his parents physically and mentally. But at the same time, I felt my father was also a victim of a traditional big family; many of his decisions were restrained by his father, and he could not decide on things in his own life. He spent ten years taking care of my bedridden grandmother in his sixties. It exhausted him, and he had no freedom. Shi Lizhi in his articles also stated, "In America, people believe that they were born equal, whether fathers or sons, they are God's people. They do not value the inherent relationship between father and son, instead, they value equality. Parents also think their children are independent individuals. They love to help them, but never force them to do anything^{xiii}." (Shi 2015, 52). Shi Lizhi in his articles

also claimed, “In America, most of the families are nuclear family in modern time, consisting of a husband, wife and their children, living in a house or apartment.”^{xiv} (Shi 2015, 50) Many American kids do not want to live with their parents after they reach the age of 18 years old. Few Americans live with their parents after they get married and could take care of their parents by themselves. Many elders go to nursing homes when they are old. The family relationship causes many elders to feel lonely.

To show my understanding of the family, I created *The Family* (Figure 31). I think both family structures have advantages and disadvantages. My ideal concept of family is both dependent and independent. I feel the family is my root, with a family, my spirit will have a dwelling to live. In my mind I never left my parents even though my parents are far away across the Pacific Ocean. I would like to say, in my deep soul, my family and I are independent. But I like the equality between parents and children in Western culture. Parents should not control their children after they grow up, but I think children should try their best to take care of their parents when they are old. It is not because of duty, but out of love. In *The Family* (Figure 31), I overlap figures of father, mother and child. Together the image shows independent relationships while each of them also looks dependent.

In modern society, social media has become the main source of news. Everybody can use their cell phone to get all kinds of news from worldwide. But social media has also become increasingly popular as means to spread false narratives^{xv} (Haselton 2018).

The purpose of fake news is to mislead the public, and the content of fake news can provoke people’s basic emotions, such as anger or fear. If people cannot keep rational

views, they will become potential victims. After coming to the US, I read both Chinese news and American news. Sometimes the news is contradictory. Too much opinion and national sentiment infused into the news creates this conflict. The national sentiment and opinion mixed in with actual news gives rise hatred between people and nations. I created the work *Self-reflection* (Figure 32) to tell myself to keep self-reflecting. Master Zeng said: “吾日三省吾身”^{xvi} (Zenzi Chunqiu). It means that he reflects on himself three times a day. I agree this Zengzi’s opinion. People should always reflect on themselves because nobody is perfect from the time they are born. In my painting, *Self-reflection* the background shows three images, the Buddha, the Devil and my own shadow. They represent evil, truth and me and I am in between evil and truth. In my mind, Buddha represents the truth. There is nothing that Buddha does not know, because he has awakened from the sleep^{xvii} (Gyatso 2008). By contrast, Devil represents evil, he is the person who undermines Justitia^{xviii} (Marx 1995). The girl in the foreground holding a mirror is meditating. I want to say that people should always look in the mirror and check their soul. Avoid believing in evil. A mirror always reflects the truth and never lies.

When I first came to the US, I had strong culture shock. I felt disoriented, confused, isolated and somewhat out of the place. Hurvin Anderson’s painting, *Peter’s Sitter 3* (Figure 33) reflected my true feelings of a new immigrant. Under his influence, I created the following two pieces related to my experience as a new migrant. As a new migrant, I wished to maintain my ethnic traditions while become an integral part of the American culture. Two cultures often fight within my body. An example is when I went to church to study the Bible. I know in the US most people are Christians. I was influenced by them

and accepted what the Bible told me. But at the same time, there is another God in my mind who is Buddha. I felt if I become Christian, Buddha would condemn me. So now, there are two Gods in my mind. I accepted new culture while I could not give up my old culture. The old culture became a part of my body; the new culture is coming into my body.

Integration I (Figure 34) shows the feeling when I first came to the US. At that time, I felt I was still a Chinese and gravitated to Chinese culture. I use a woman's body as my spirit carrier to express my feeling of being in a new environment. Most of the body is immersed in the Chinese cultural background. There is very little Western culture shown in the body.

Integration II (Figure 35) is my current feeling being in the US. After staying in the US for many years, I feel half of me has changed into a person of the US and half of me is still Chinese. The past culture stigma has become a part of me and the new culture has a root in my old culture. I am the integration of Western culture and Eastern culture. In order to show the passage of time, I use Chinese painting and monochromatic color. I want to convey a sense of dream. Some parts of the body are drawn in oil painting. The oil painting shows a strong visual result and feels more realistic. This represents the current time. The body separates into different parts to show a cultural influence on me from different angles. The translucent geometric shapes create a deranged environment, conveying a sense of disorientation and depression.

George Orwell's novel "1984" communicates that people are fearful of being watched, controlled, and robbed of privacy. Yet more than half century later, his dystopian vision

of the future has gradually become the truth. Especially in the US post 9/11, an unprecedented surveillance society is coming true.

The US legislation and policy shifted to the new surveillance technology-based 'Homeland Security' strategy in the years of following the 9/11 attack. As a result, the concept of the enemy has been changed into someone who could attack any part of the national infrastructure from anywhere; the security becomes a diffuse concept applicable to all sectors of society, and to all individuals. This strategy has gradually affected and been applied in other countries. The new surveillance cultural phenomenon is worldwide. People are living in a world of monitoring and being watched. It is a very common scene that the CCTV cameras are operating 24/7. They are perched around streets, banks, hospitals, schools, airports, parking lots and stores. In recent years, digital media and the internet have become tools of governments and corporations for the surveillance and control of people. Online banking, Facebook and so on are constantly collecting more and more personal information.

Modern people have much less privacy than they once had. It is if technology allows organizations to see inside us. I have shown this new cultural phenomenon in my artwork *Under Surveillance* (Figure 36). I cannot tell if this new cultural phenomenon is good or bad. It is simply the result of social development. Each of us have accepted it either actively or passively. I've shown a person from three different angles in *Under Surveillance*. It seems that a person exposed to different monitors has become a transparent.



Figure 26
Zhao, Dongming
Metamorphosis I
Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
12 × 36 inches
2020



Figure 27
 Zhao, Dongming
Metamorphosis II
 Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
 24 × 30 inches
 2020

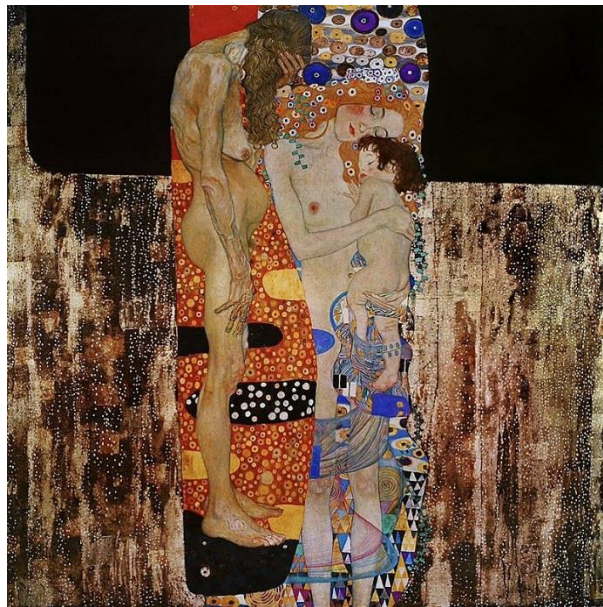


Figure 28
 Gustav Klimt
The Three Ages of Woman
 Oil Painting
 31 × 71 inches
 1905



Figure 29
 Zhao, Dongming
Praying
 Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
 36 × 30 inches
 2020

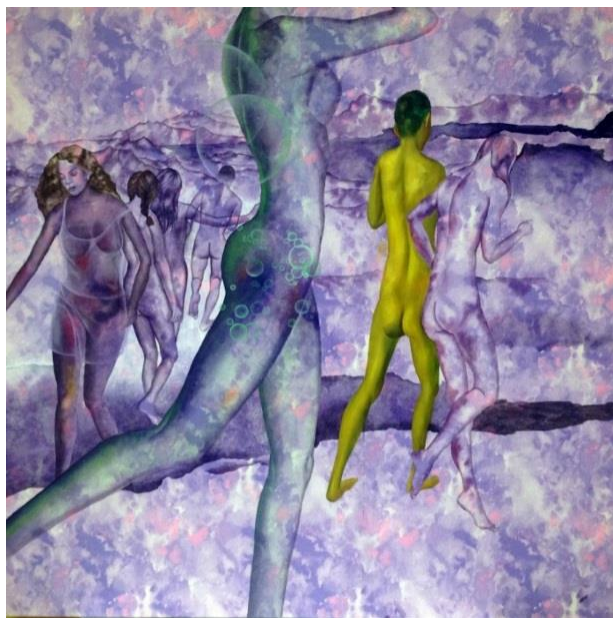


Figure 30
 Zhao, Dongming
Running Life
 Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
 36 × 36 inches
 2020



Figure 31
 Zhao, Dongming
The Family
 Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
 36 × 36 inches
 2020



Figure 32
 Zhao, Dongming
Self-reflection
 Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
 24 × 38 inches



Figure 33
Anderson, Hurvin
Peter's Sitter 3
Oil on canvas
74 × 58 inches
2009

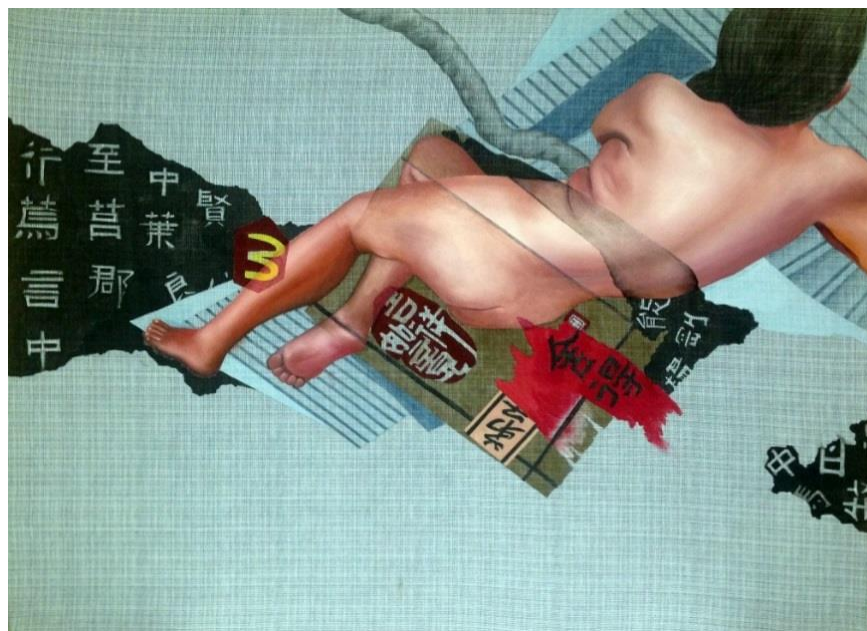


Figure 34
Zhao, Dongming
Integration (I)
Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
36 × 30 inches
2020



Figure 35
 Zhao, Dongming
Integration (II)
 Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
 24 × 36 inches
 2020



Figure 36
 Zhao, Dongming
Surveillance
 Chinese painting and oil painting on fabric
 20 × 42 inches
 2020

CONCLUSION

I deeply understand Eastern art while I understand and appreciate what Western artists are expressing. The understanding of different arts and cultures set my artistic perspective unknowingly on a journey on a merging road. In this way, I extend the “Combination” art concept from painting with sculpture to the Chinese painting with oil painting. Early “Combination” art reached an important milestone with Rauschenberg’s “Combine” art. This happened when he brought 2-D and 3-D art together. This innovation has influenced my understanding of the evolution of my own visual language. I work with traditional Chinese art forms and I use some of the visual language from Western influences. In my work styles and traditions connect, but the individual characteristics of my influences are still apparent. Through my evolution I have expanded my opportunities for expression. I think that art innovation does not mean we give up tradition and cultural characteristics. Innovation in my work is about to finding a way to let the traditions blossom again. In that way, art will not lose its root.

Everyone is a very small dust particle in the universe. People constantly explore the world around them and discover their inner world from the moment they are born. Art can encourage people to discover an invisible world behind the real world. Art helps people find something within their souls. People’s life experience is an abstract concept. Art is a good tool to visualize life experience for our shared existence. I will keep this subject matter and continue to show my understanding of the world. I will share my personal experience in my art in the future. I hope my art can provoke people’s psychological resonance and let them pay attention to some things behind this world.

I found that conflict is more interesting than harmony and perfection. I like to put opposite things together or to show the opposite sides of things in my art. I want to produce a strong visual conflict. When two things coexist and are in conflict, they will keep the balance or lose the balance. Showing the things that are staying in an unbalanced status helps me understand the forces at play. The unbalanced situation can include more Yin and less Yang or less Yin and more Yang. Between Yin and Yang there are an infinite number of different degrees of imbalanced situations happening. I want to show these different types of unbalanced situations between Yin and Yang.

I have broken some technical barriers between Western and Eastern art and gained more freedom of expression in my art. Once the artist finds their visual language, their way will become wider and wider. There is so much difference between Western art and Eastern art in artistic language, means of expression and artistic concepts. I will continue to move forward, combining the advanced Western artistic concepts while staying rooted in some Eastern traditions. In our modern society, the technology is advancing, the world is getting smaller and cultures are merging, I believe that the in-between place is getting bigger and bigger. There are too many in-between places waiting for me to explore.

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ⁱ To the Chinese, the universe is divided into polarities-Yin and Yang. Given that they are simply two sides of one principle, it is more correct to use the term Yin/Yang. In this way, all elements are paired and balanced with each other. These elements consist of primal qualities: male and female, night and day, sun and moon, moist and dry, dark and light, fire and water. It is through awareness and experience of this interdependence and interrelationship that the universe, and we humans within it, remains in balance.

“The Yin/Yang does not merely set opposites against each other... Yin and yang complement each other. That is, rather than opposing each other in primal struggle, they create each other, control each other, and even transform into each other. Extreme Yin transforms into Yang and extreme Yang transforms to Yin.

ⁱⁱ “First, engender [a sense of] movement [through] spirit consonance. Second, use the brush [with] the ‘bone method.’ Third, respond to things, image (depict) their forms. Fourth, according (adapting?) to kind, set forth (describe) colors (appearances). Fifth, dividing and planning, positioning and arranging. Sixth, transmitting and conveying [earlier models, through] copying and transcribing.”.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Chinese literati painting, which is also called the Southern School painting or Wenrenhua in Chinese, is a kind of painting that scholars like. It derives from Chinese feudal hierarchy called “Scholar-official” Chinese literati painting, which was composed by the educated elite, including scholars, poets and intellectuals, is comprised of both calligraphy and painting. From the Tang Dynasty (618-906), intellectuals, gentlemen-scholars, and Master of Literature and poetry often tried their hand at painting. For

example, the first and most famous was Wang Wei (699-759) who was a high government official, poet and also a landscape painter. Later in the Song dynasty Su Shi (1037-1101) and Mi Fu (1051-1107), also high government ministers, calligraphers and literati, formulated a new ideal in which the style of the paintings was more important than a realistic portrayal of the subject.

^{iv} The course of Chinese painting development is unlike an arrow, but similar to the surface of a pond. In every historical period, artists from different schools of painting would throw different stones into the pond, causing different ripples. In my view, unlike the forever forward moving motion of Western art, Chinese art is like the expansion of a ripple moving outwards. That is to say, within different periods of history, we can see the influence of these painting styles, big or small. The history of Western art is like an arrow, and Western artists have followed the path of the arrow for the past 4,000 years. Although there were ups and downs..., art has always moved forwards, ..., We have always been looking for new breakthroughs and different ways of painting, and we are constantly defining the avant-garde.

^v Western color is designed to be used on watercolor paper which is none absorbent, and stretched before painting, whereas Chinese watercolor is suitable to paint on rice paper stretched after painting. If you use western watercolor on rice paper, the color will run and bleed when the painting is wet-mounted, but Chinese painting color is with more stable binder. Still if you like to use heavy colors in your sumi or Chinese painting, I'd suggest you use our silicone paper to dry-mount them.

Traditional Chinese watercolor is made from natural dyes and minerals rather than finer pigment particles in western watercolor. Please do not try to use Chinese painting color on regular watercolor paper especially the mineral colors because they are more opaque, not transparent. They are supposed to be used on the wrong side of rice paper.

^{vi} 江南画法是曾鲸绘画的早期阶段，此时正恰利玛窦来朝传教，所以一些学者推测曾鲸绘画技法的转变（即墨骨法的出现）是受西洋绘画的影响。在《曾鲸的肖像画》一书中周积寅认为：在与传教士们的接触中，一定会谈到绘画方面。这时期曾鲸势必会对利氏带来的文艺复兴绘画风格有所触动，从南京教堂悬挂的西洋画天主像产生极大的兴趣，并从中得到启发。潘天寿也认为：“故中土最先受西洋画影响，而采用西法者，厥为写实派。此派之开始者，为明末间莆田人曾鲸。”他还特别强调：“所谓烘染至十数层者，即为参用西洋画法之明证，非曾氏以前之写真家所知也。”这些学者认为：利玛窦传教于南京，曾鲸出于对职业的敏感会对西洋绘画关注和产生兴趣，并观摩学习后运用于肖像画的创作中，然后技法得到转变，开创墨骨画法。

^{vii} “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made (I try to act in the gap between the two)”. This statement made by Robert Rauschenberg in 1959 acts as the guideline for this exhibition as it is key to understanding his works.

^{viii} The celebrated Combines, begun in the mid-1950s, brought real-world images and objects into the realm of abstract painting and countered sanctioned divisions between painting and sculpture.

^{ix} A term coined by Rauschenberg, combines merged aspects of painting and sculpture to become an entirely new artistic category. Art critic Leo Steinberg observed that the orientation

of the Combines challenged the traditional concept of the picture plane as an extension of the viewers space, providing a window into another reality.

^x 《感觉身体被掏空》，是由上海彩虹室内合唱团于 2016 年 7 月演唱的一首合唱曲目，以白领日常生活为主题。因为调皮的歌词描述了广大上班族的心声，被网友和部分媒体称作“加班狗必听爆红神曲”。视频发布后仅 7 个小时播放量就达到了三百多万次。

^{xi} There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known.

^{xii} In China, traditionally, people prefer extended families, esp. three generations at one roof which represents happiness.

^{xiii} In America, people believe that they were born equal, whether fathers or sons, they are God's people. They do not value the inherent relationship between father and son, instead, they value equality. Parents also think their children are independent individuals. They love to help them, but never force them to do anything

^{xiv} “In China, traditionally, people prefer extend families, esp. three generations are one roof which represents happiness. In America, most of families are nuclear family in modern time, consisting of a husband, wife and their children, living in a house or apartment.

^{xv} Social media has become increasingly popular as a means to spread false narratives.

^{xvi} 吾日三省吾身，意思是我每天多次反省自己，出自《论语·学而》，作者曾子。

^{xvii} There is nothing that Buddha does not know, because he has awakened from the sleep of ignorance and has removed all obstructions from his minds, he knows everything of the past, present, and future, directly and simultaneously. In addition, Buddha has great compassion that is completely impartial, embracing all living beings without discrimination.

^{xviii} The Devil is portrayed as a breaker of the law, as one who exercises power outside the constraints of the law or who undermines Justitia.