Singing For the Mute

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Painting and Drawing

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Daily life is a complex mixture of ever changing scenes that forms the existence of a human life. Every little detail plays a crucial role in formation of the complete image. As a painter, for me, it is important to pay extra attention to the local landscape, to analyze and process visual information through my art with my mind and soul. The landscape of everyday life has become a subject of my research. Finding the ways of transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary and manifesting the silent beauty in the natural world is an essential and challenging part of my research. The research is divided into two aspects: one is the formal interest and process related, including the use of technique, material and the tools, while the other are the concepts that develop through the form, go beyond the surface and return back to direct and influence the appearance of my work. The analysis of my research involves several factors - communicative, historical, cultural, and personal.

At first, in order to clarify the subject of my research and the interest, I have to trace the fundamental and a complex question of who am I as a person and as an artist. Examining this question helps me to orient the direction of my research. Professor Amy Cheng reinforced this concept to me, telling me: “you must give in to who you are, find out what your strengths are, and do what you understand. You, as a painter, must acknowledge what comes naturally to you, what appeals to you, in order to settle into yourself, accept who you are and where you are, and accept what you do. You cannot escape yourself.” This advice helps me begin to the inner searching, finding my identity, and expressing my own voice. Regarding formal aspects, I enjoy applying atmospheric light, dynamic marks and liberating material in order to create pictorial landscapes and painterly abstraction to “bridge the realistic and the abstract divide” (Editors of Phaidon, 26) within my work.
This intention is nurtured imperceptibly with pre-cultural aesthetics. It is possible to trace the parallel to Chinese expressive ink painting that comes as a result of my cultural background growing up in China. Chinese ink Painting, in contrast to European painting before Modernism, “are much more likely to read primarily as configurations of brushstrokes on the picture plane” (Cahill, James, 5). While Chinese landscape painting is the subtle edification of my work, it mostly reflects inner world or cultivation of the painter. At times it intends to reveal the enlightenment from nature. Landscapes, as a motif, are used more for self-expression of the maker rather than just depicting the landscape as an object.

Professor Gabe Brown inspired me by reminding me that we are the product of our culture and the circumstances that help form our personalities, perceptions and aesthetic intention. Coming from a cross-cultural background, the use of the concept embodied in landscape is influenced by oriental poetic quality and philosophy of Daoism among other things. Certain events, circumstances, and personal experiences have played an essential role in the development of themes in my work. Having at times experienced suffering, abandonment, struggles, and even a yearning for transformation, I strive to discover and represent a sentimental, magic land hiding deep in everyday life through the medium of painting. I reveal a duality – the melancholy and impermanence that lie behind the seeming exuberance and tranquility of natural world. I give voice to objects, canvases, experiences, and emotions, shedding inner power upon the landscapes, singing for the mute, the unnoticed silent natural world.

In order to make the research complete, it is necessary to closely scrutinize and examine the interest of the subject to form the personal concept by asking the following questions. What does a landscape mean to me? What are the formal structures that exist in the pastoral and how
can they inspire an aesthetic reaction? How can different pictorial forms be used to emulate a lyrical quality of nature? How could I juxtapose different forms including representation and abstraction in one painting to reveal the dynamism of nature? What are the historical and contemporary examples that inspire me to explore the spiritual state infused within a landscape? What specific emotional or spiritual state I am interested in expressing in my painting?

Every method, technique and a way of approaching an art form requires a certain vision, a philosophy and a concept. It helps to become open-minded, unbiased and reveal the inner ability of the individual. In my quest for knowledge of inner peace, I researched the philosophy of Chinese Daoism. This indigenous Chinese religion not only builds the national character of the Chinese who love mysterious, romantic and unrestrained qualities, it also has a profound impact on Chinese artistic pursuit. The foreign father of Chinese Daoism, Lao Tzi said: “Great music has the faintest Notes, great form is beyond shape”(Laozi., Ames and Hall, 131). In my understanding and epiphany, it calls for respect for the nature and pursuit of the freehand verve and spiritual likenesses. It also suggests the aesthetic intention of simplicity, implicitness and ambiguity. Even though I have been trained strictly in academic realistic painting in the undergraduate study, I try to challenge my comfort zone to give up detail description, but still capture the inner reality of an object through suggestive and vague outward likeness. I experiment in a loose and unrestricted way to heighten a certain atmosphere or feeling. Turning to philosophy concepts once again, it is important to mention another sage of Daoism, Zhuang Tzi who advocated, “do nothing”, keeping a free and unfettered spirit to cooperate with the objective world. He revealed that one could enjoy mental and physical freedom through the understanding of the rules that dominate the objective world (Moeller). This concept influenced me to allow my materials do what they want. As a result, I am not restricted to realistic
descriptive detail. I want to paint nature in the way it is. I prefer to experiment with “the
evocative potential of painting and try to push the possibilities of my medium”. A critic uses this
diction to comment the art of Peter Doig.

According to Daoism, “humans are an integral part of nature” (Ivanhoe and Laozi 46). That is highest state of Chinese traditional culture. Taoism is intoxicated with nature. The Taoist
thinks that nature approaches the truth and humans can learn from nature. Taoism regards the
human being as a part of nature that must go back to nature; the perfect state of living is a
primitive society that has not been contaminated by civilization (Liu and Laozi 22-23). My
question is: do we ever find a moment of happiness when we get close to nature and remain
carefree as the humanity transcends human subjectivity? To forsake the worldly, indifferent
values and extricate our inner being from secular concepts to expand individuals’ spiritual space,
as with Taoism, through act of painting, I am expanding my own spiritual space. I try to create
the local landscapes in a way that simultaneously personifies nature, and also carries forward that
human spirit to convert to nature’s transcendentental state.

I adopted landscapes as a mirror to reflect my individual contemplation about life and to
provoke viewers to rediscover their own muse about life. I try to endow humanity in the
landscape by finding associations between humans’ life and plants’ life to interpret duality. Bitter
and sweet, blooming and in decline… Plants in nature are tenacious and spectacular, yet fragile
and ephemeral. In order to grow, vegetation endures unexpected frustration and struggle. Finally,
their lives quietly bloom with beauty and gratitude. However, everything including beauty, love
and fame will fade with time. The only thing we can appreciate is the present moment.

Usually, the process of my work involves extracting interesting forms from the natural
world to express human emotional and spiritual states through the landscape. At first, as a
reference, I photograph the landscape that attracts me, through its external forms, I locate its internal mood that resonates with my inner spirit. Then I choose and find out which medium and texture is better applied for the particular case. It is based on the formal elements: texture, mark, patterns that a landscape shows or suggests. Professor Kathy Goodell inspired me by telling me that landscape integrates well with abstraction. By blending the variety of techniques and materials, including but not limited to: alcohol ink, gel mediums and watercolor, I create my personal version of the landscape paintings that hover between representation and abstraction to praise the silent song, the lyric quality of nature. The entire image is read as a landscape, but some portions of the image are formed by abstract marks or patterns. Sometimes I use alcohol ink to start a painting because its unpredictable quality helps me loosen up and also turns the process of creating into an adventure. When I pour the alcohol ink on Yupo paper, the ink, like a drunken person, loses control and creates unexpected marks through its physical and chemical response. On the picture plane, the materials create their own world and would not wait my decision. This process breaks all the rules that I would have to use with traditional painting tools and techniques. It forces me to cede control and fight with it each moment. The accidental marks and forms construct a microscopic world or build texture that gives a view beyond the surface of the natural world into an imaginary one.

Through pour water, splash ink, and sprinkle salt, encouraging material and medium to create its own shapes, layers, and texture. The ink, salt and marks stand in as the grass, lake or the mountains. The image in this area of painting will look as if it has been already dissolved. This playful and unpredictable process is full of risks, discoveries and miracles. It requires more experience, courage and quick determination of the painter. The process of ink application appears to replicate the forces of nature at work in the environment. Sometimes the material
flowing on the surface of paper is like a hurricane, flood or a volcano explosion sweeping the ground… In my work, the imagery grows in a way that is alternately under control or is on the verge of losing control. Therefore, it stays representational or abstract. In this way, the process of my painting reflects the landscape that is produced with the help of both - the contributions of human beings and the superlative craftsmanship of nature.

The images below (1 – 4) show the process of my work in the making. The images 5 and 6 indicate the same landscape, as I experimented with different material and approaches to expand my visual vocabulary.
Visually, my work tracks my emotions and sensations during the moments when I paint. I am interested in how tragic beauty, rich symbolism, and the depths of the human psyche are infused into the landscape scenery. Professor Robin Arnold inspired me by stating that the black and white drawing evokes a sense of the mysterious. There is truth to this statement as the contrast of black and white is a striking resemblance of duality of human existence. In my work, I use black ink to convey the duality that I perceive in nature. I create vigorous and flourishing plants in black and white to suggest that everything will fade as the time passes through the temporal and spatial domains. My most recent work focuses on monochromatic ink drawing. The landscape references are mostly photographed in the dusk. To me, the dusk is the swan song of nature in a deeply philosophical sense. There are dramatic lights and a sense of grief and regret. The most breathtaking solemn moment is also the time that approaches dimness and stillness. Everything will lose its color and die in the darkness, so the setting sun looks as if it is a sea of blood. The duality is incisively embodied through the dusk.

Once again, the work process brings me back to philosophy. One more reason to work in the grisaille in water medium is because it is influenced by Daoism. In Daoism, briefness and
ambiguity are advocated: “Less is more” (Moeller). When I use less descriptive information and color, I have to use the other methods to enrich my paintings. I vary my brush strokes and sprinkle different salt to create intriguing marks or build texture instead of realistic details in pictorial space. From a certain distance, my work is a landscape as a whole. When viewers get closer to it, I hope that their eyes can take in the rich surface composed of subtle or tangible texture.

Turning to the references in time and the historic examples I could use to explore the emotional state infused in a landscape include, I can mention the following artists: expressionist forefather, Norwegian master Edvard Munch, German Neo-expressionist, Anselm Kiefer. I am inspired by Anselm Kiefer who presents the Germany’s national trauma and tragedy through the landscape painting. In addition, I can mention the contemporary linage artists like Karin Mamma Andersson, Daniel Richter, Peter Doig and Britta Lumer. Researching their arts help me learn and understand how they make their dreamlike work, how they perfectly incorporate disparate elements in one image. It is not only the influence, but a key to understanding how the colors, techniques, approaches and the visions come together in a perfect balance, in a duality of bright and the dark, heavy and the light, inanimate and alive, the nature and the human being.

There is duality in every little detail of life – it is the endless tango of the matters that influences us daily. My work is a drop of emotion, feelings and personal experiences in the ocean of life. Through my art, I am trying to give voice to bland familiar object and help it reflect as honestly and sincerely as it is ever possible – to help the inner searching be heard, to help the unseen and ordinary be noticed, to sing for the mute.
Bibliography and Works Cited:


Images:

The Silent Song 1  60”x42”  Ink on paper, 2016
The Silent Song 2  46”x60”  Ink on paper, 2016
The Silent Song 3  42”x60”  Ink on paper, 2016
The Silent Song 4  30”x24”  Ink on paper, 2016
The Silent Song 5  46”x60”  Ink on paper, 2016
The Silent Song 6  30”x24”  Ink on paper, 2016

The Silent Song 7  36”x48”  Ink on paper, 2016
The Silent Song 8  24”x30”  Ink on paper, 2016
The Silent Song 9  40”x60”  Mix medium on paper,  2015

The Silent Song 10  48”x60”  Oil on canvas,  2015