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Chinese-American Landscape

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BFA in Studio Art, Concentration in Painting

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Abstract

Cultural hybridity is an unwillingness to succumb to the notion of choosing sides when it comes to mixed heritage and culture. The approach taken to identity has a place in the artistic sphere as well. Through an investigation of my art practice in painting alongside a contemporary and historical context, the hybrid space between Chinese and Western landscape painting is explored and determined. The goals of nature depicted through distorted perspective, abstraction and simplification of objects, and emphasis on texture are techniques employed by both artistic spheres. By utilizing these goals and mixing materials of both Chinese and Western painting, I uncover the realm of cultural hybridity in art.

Imagine a gallery, typical white walls, slate gray concrete floors, and fluorescent overhead lighting, a normal art experience. Now imagine paintings around this gallery that bounce between glistening chunky cobalt blue oil paint on stretched canvas on one side, and light washes of black ink and graphic lines on yellowed scroll mounted paper on the other. One might doubt the curator's skill at being able to put together a show upon first glance, but when considering the concept behind the two seemingly disparate formats, mediums, and depictions, the modern Western and traditional Chinese landscapes are more related than one would expect. The question is: is it possible to meld the subject matter, materials, and formats of Chinese scroll and Western landscape painting into a single harmonious form? Through the overlapping goals of nature depicted through distorted perspective, abstraction and simplification, and an emphasis on texture, the harmonious hybrid of historical Chinese and contemporary Western painting exists as Chinese-American Landscape.

It all started when I left Minnesota. When I left to pursue art in college, my mother began her journey back home. She picked up traditional calligraphy and landscape painting, sending me pictures of her progress, and I began to use her work as inspiration for my own. As a woman who has taught me so much throughout my life, I hadn't considered her role in my art until this point. The passing down of knowledge from her generation to my own could be applied to art. I used her paintings as inspiration for my own, choosing to leave out details, add my own, and utilize the Western media I am more familiar with in place of traditional ink on rice paper. In *Like Mother Like Daughter I* (Figure 1), I utilize collograph and rhoplex techniques to simplify imagery into graphic compositions with a focus on texture. Despite a distancing of imagery from actual nature, I found a new language to depict mountains and trees. As I pursued this method, I began to think about the relationship between Chinese and American art. I was raised in a Chinese-American home; everything about my upbringing was a hybrid of the Chinese heritage I

belonged to and the American culture I was raised in. Claude Monet's sunflowers overlooked my kitchen table while Ma Yuan's mountains hung in the study. Even in my childhood home this imagery remained separate, but they both influenced my artistic style. I began to consider why my current artistic interests are a result of these two seemingly disparate art worlds, which has resulted in my search for the hybrid space between Chinese and Western art.

I am not alone. Cultural hybridity is something that many people grapple with. In America, a nation of immigrants, the idea of compromising between two selves is not uncommon, but I propose a collision in its place. By normalizing the viewpoint of dual identities and considering them as one instead, "hybridity turns into a difference-erasing concept, negating the foreignness of the foreigner, the otherness of the other" and a single entity remains without identifying labels (Kompridis 322). All too often I find myself in situations where I identify more with my Chinese side, and in others my American side. The issue is that these are not separate but merely elements of my intersectional existence. Frequently the history of culture pushes "citizens of multicultural democracies to choose between their 'rights' and their 'culture'...hybridity is the ideal conceptual tool for neutralizing those claims" (322). Just as people should not have to choose between dualities in their life, I propose art should reflect this outlook as well, which is where I searched for opportunities of overlap in Chinese and Western landscape painting.



Figure 1: Jessica Wen, *Like Mother Like Daughter I*, 20½ x 26 in, Collograph and rhoplex plate on paper

When trying to find similarities between the two forms, I myself couldn't naturally make the connections considering their differences upon first glance. The immense catalog of visual information for both spheres had to be minimized, and I had to decide on a consistent subject matter to look at. While other painting genres such as bird and flower and calligraphy exist, "the Chinese consider 'streams and mountains' essential elements of landscape painting, literally a 'mountain-water' picture" because they provide a view of nature as "the embodiment of 'eternal principle'" and are therefore considered the highest form of painting (Lee 199). This eternal principle speaks to the strong emotional reactions and ties to nature the Chinese had. Considering the precedent that had been set in Chinese painting, I chose to focus specifically on shan-shui compositions in China, translating into mountain-water. By concentrating on this subject matter, I set a limitation that enabled me to explore format and materiality in both Western and Chinese art more fully.

One product of this exploration within this specific subject matter was *Mountains* (Figure 2). Laminated, graphic, red and black playing cards are seen as ubiquitously Western today, but their origin stems from Chinese roots. The "earliest official mention of playing cards in world history" was in the Tang Dynasty in 868, using leaves for cards. In 1005, sheets of paper were put into production for playing cards in China as card games gained popularity and it wasn't until 1885 that the popular American Bicycle® Brand cards were produced (A History of Playing



Figure 2: Jessica Wen, *Mountains*, 2018, ballpoint pen on Bicycle playing cards, 52 2.5 x 3.5 in playing cards

Cards). I myself had no idea cards stemmed from Chinese origins. I had only been exposed to Bicycle® Brand cards when playing Go Fish, Poker, and other card games throughout my life. By utilizing a standard deck of cards as my medium, I sought to create my own interactive game. The idea behind the game is to create a continuous mountain-scape. No two iterations can be completely the same and there is no wrong way to play because there is no right perspective. The nature of creating the image holds a similar mental capacity to Solitaire, player or players may enter a meditative state as they match the card in hand with cards already in front of them. While technically ink on paper, the card and ballpoint pen materials read more Western than Chinese material wise, but through my graphic renderings reference a Chinese language of marks. The elements of *Mountains* (Figure 2) engage with both Chinese and Western art through materials, which carried throughout my thesis work in a variety of other media.

Cut (Mountain Water) Piece I (Figure 3) utilizes traditional Chinese materials of ink and washes of color on rice paper and the practice of cut paper, but the collaged nature on stretched canvas brings these techniques into the Western sphere. I utilize washes of blue, green, and red-orange in a way that the color palette of Chinese scroll painting is present, but still inextricably tied to the Western context. Blue-and-green landscapes like *Emperor Minghuang's Journey to Sichuan* (see Figure 4) “played a major role in

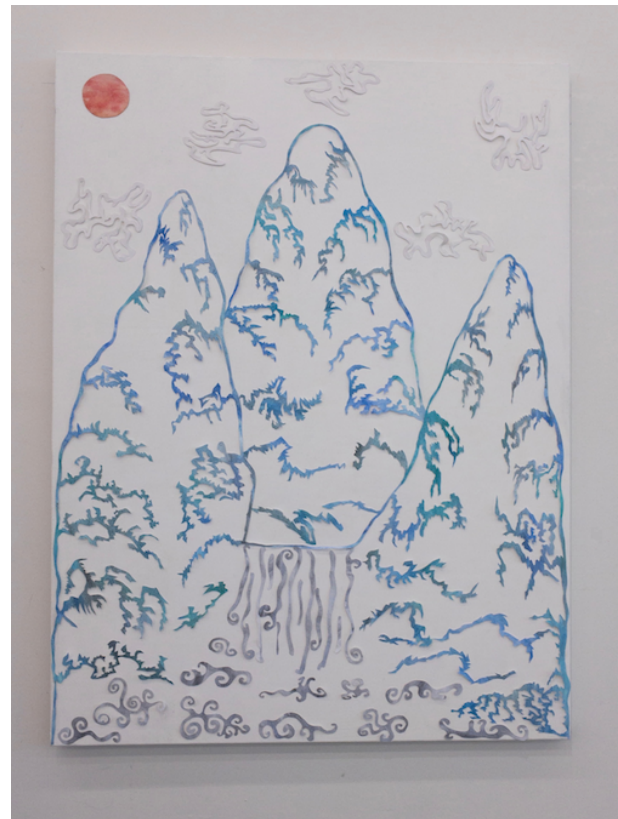


Figure 3: Jessica Wen, *Cut (Mountain Water) Piece II*, 2018, watercolor rice paper on painted stretched canvas, 30x40 in

T'ang painting” and “red was regularly included with the other two...and helped shape the classic T'ang landscape” (Silbergard 869). This classic landscape has carried into the present by artists like Liu Haisu, as seen in *Mount Huang* (Figure 4).

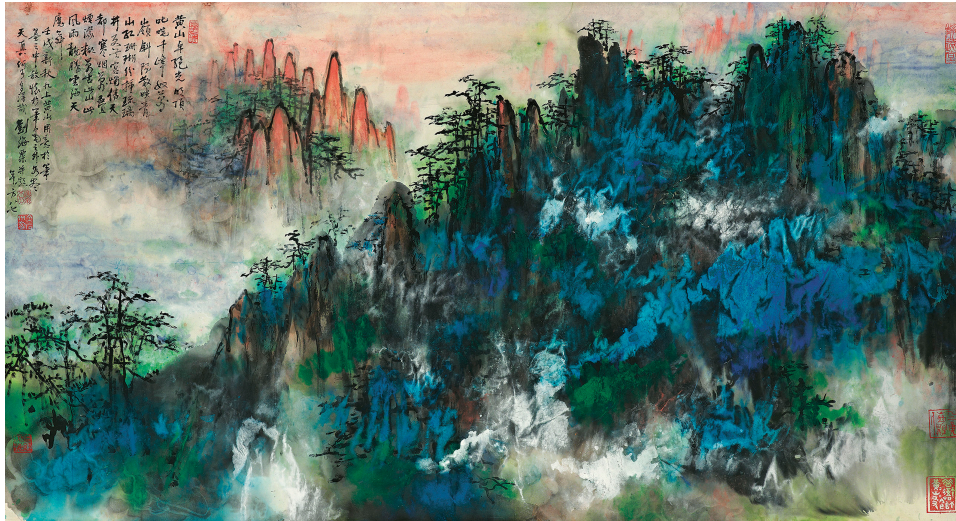


Figure 4: Liu Haisu, *Mount Huang*, 1982, scroll, mounted and framed, ink and colour on paper, 83.3 x 153.5 cm

Liu utilizes this color palette in the form of the Western material of oil paint, working with thick impasto and clearly visible brushwork. Like Liu, I considered the rich history of the palette. I utilized a similar blue-green color scheme in *Cut (Mountain Water) Piece* (Figure 3), bringing the blue-green landscape into a modern context. In my own approach, I chose to keep to the ink on paper tradition as a way to take physical cutouts of Chinese paintings and engage in a more Western conversation of collage on stretched canvas.

Haisu’s landscape vocabulary of rounded mountains and angular trees in *Mount Huang* (Figure 4) relates to the simplification and abstraction of historical Chinese landscape painters like Qu Ding’s *Summer Mountains* (see Figure 5), but this language is also evident in western art as well. Influence from the Western sphere is apparent when looking at the simplification and abstraction of shapes utilized by artists like Arthur Dove. “Dove played with color and form, producing light and rhythm on canvas to present an experience of the physical world” rather

than a straightforward depiction (McShea 26). Through his use of simplified shapes and color choices his works were more focused on the feelings of nature, rather than the actuality of it, as can be seen in his 1934 painting *Tree Trunks* (Figure 6) that gives no clear indication of a tree, but provides rounded, swirling solid forms to portray the subject matter instead. While the angular cuts of the mountains, swirling lines of water, and curling forms of clouds in *Cut (Mountain Water) Piece I* (Figure 3) do not represent a realistically rendered landscape, the cut paper does portray an experience of these forms through the cut nature of the objects. Through abstraction



Figure 6: Arthur Dove, *Tree Trunks*, 1934, oil on canvas, 45.72 x 60.96cm

and simplification, both Chinese and Western painting are able to portray a feeling of nature rather than actual nature.

Since neither sphere is limited to depicting nature through realistically rendered objects, the same applies to realistically rendered space. Space is emphasized in Chinese paintings as a positive factor and “perspective was often arbitrary” because the ultimate goal of these paintings



Figure 7: Qian Xuan, *Wang Xizhi Watching Geese*, Ca. 1295, handscroll: ink, color, and gold on paper, 23.2 x 92.7 cm

was “in the direction of esthetic fulfillment rather than in statistical completion” (Kelley 68). Perfectly straight lines and correctly sighted architecture were not privileged; instead the artist’s feelings were. In Qian Xuan’s *Wang Xizhi Watching Geese* (Figure 7), the perspective of the pagoda clearly does not represent a real three-dimensional space when looking at its roof, but the air of contemplation of the Scholar looking on at the geese is present in its place. In Chinese painting, rather than acting “as an abstract category [that] consists precisely of separation between objects... [space] has been transformed into a medium of binding...” like “glue” that is essential to the success of a piece (Sullivan 413). Rather than seeking to fill space to avoid looking empty, an emphasis is placed on it even though reality does not reflect the same proportions of objects to open area.

A contemporary Chinese artist working in Western materials that utilizes a skewed perspective is Matthew Wong. Wong utilizes distorted vantage point and mark making to engage a viewer’s attention across his paintings.



Figure 8: Matthew Wong, *The Realm of Appearances*, 2018, oil on canvas, 65 x 80 in

The tree-filled landscape as seen in Wong's *The Realm of Appearances* (Figure 8) is tilted upwards while the mountains in the background remain in direct perspective. Despite Wong's choice to work in the Western materials of oil on canvas, he still references a Chinese landscape past by utilizing mountain imagery and skewed perspective.

A final connection between Chinese landscape painting and contemporary Western art is an emphasis on texture. Without the strict rules of realism, modeling was not the most important, but instead it was texture, something I myself have been emphasizing and experimenting with in



Figure 9: Sheng Mou, *Pleasant Summer in a Mountain Retreat*, (active ca. 1330-1369), hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 120.9 x 57 cm

my work. “Chinese in all their activities, are much more sensitive to textures” which results in the attentive renderings of form from spikey trees to swirling mountains (Kelley 68). It is this sensitivity to texture that aids in depicting feelings and the mind as can be seen in the rolling rocks and pointed trees in Sheng Mou's *Pleasant Summer in a Mountain Retreat* (Figure 9). More detailed textures were emphasized in the lower portions of scroll paintings as they were meant to be read as closer to the viewer, while higher, and thereby further, objects appeared hazier. Through an emphasis of real multisensory experiences rather than basic observation, scroll paintings invoked feelings that transported viewers outside of urban life and back into nature as a result of these additions. While traditional

Chinese paintings utilized brushwork to create texture, I believe the use of materiality as is common in Western Abstract painting can speak to the importance of texture as well in a more three-dimensional sense.



Figure 10: Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950, enamel on canvas, 266.7 x 525.8 cm

Jackson Pollock, the originator of drip paintings, incorporates nature within abstract expressionism. The patterns of nature in Pollock's fractal expressionist painting *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* (Figure 10) are a product of the importance of multiple layers of paint to build up the final fractal image (Taylor et. al 205). Through his use of nontraditional tools like sticks and syringes, Pollock built up the surface of his texture paintings.

While I find texture to be important in Western painting, I know of its significance in Chinese painting as well. In my search for showing even the most Western of ideas can be achieved through Chinese themes, I arrived at a solution. To me, the most Western form of painting is the white painting. From Kazimir Malevich's *White on White* (Figure 11) to Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, many artists in the West have explored square, white paintings.

As a Suprematist artist, Malevich sought to “render direct feelings... *for the Suprematist does not observe and does not touch-he feels,*” this emphasis on feeling rather than realistic rendering sounds a lot like historical Chinese landscape painters (Neimark 64). Even the most indicative form of Western contemporary art has connections to Chinese landscape painting. The thing about white paintings that made me want to take on the challenge is how they reach beyond the “canvas’s two-dimensionality by moving outward into real space...led toward an active engagement with the

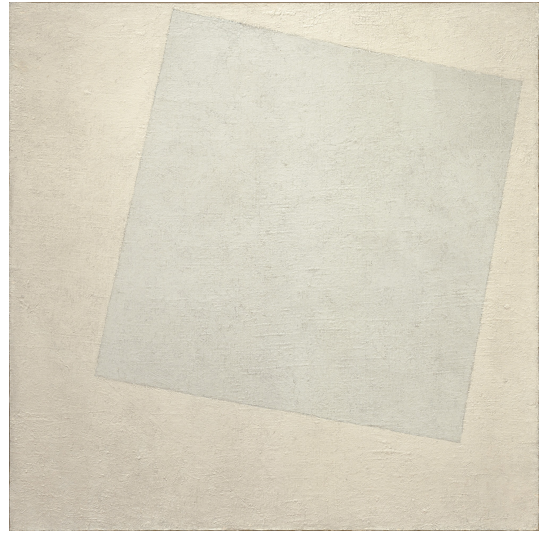


Figure 11: Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas, 79.4 x 79.4 cm

phenomenological processes of perception” (Joseph 96). White paintings capture every photon that falls on them and as a result, become part of the atmospheric background by incorporating the light phenomena outside its borders. The importance of experience in modern paintings is an aspect that has been important in traditional Chinese painting for centuries. Through my own white paintings, I could combine the goals of traditional Chinese and abstract Western painting into one.

In *Neither Here Nor There* (Figure 12) I fully engage with all the elements of connection between abstract Western and traditional Chinese landscape painting. The importance of subject matter in each of the three canvases speaks to the three places that shaped me as a cultural hybrid the most. Chengdu, where my aunts and uncles live and where I have spent summers and winters fully engrossed in the food and lifestyles of China. Missouri, where I spent four years as an undergraduate honing an artistic voice and being fully separated from ties to China and Chinese life. Finally Minnesota, my birthplace where my hybridity is most apparent, the place



Figure 12: Jessica Wen, *Neither Here Nor There*, 2018, white gesso and oil on stretched canvas, each 30 x 40 in

where I jump from conversations in Chinese around tofu and noodle soup around the dinner table, to the playgrounds, classrooms, and fields where I made my friends and learned the American culture. I use the Western materials of gesso and oil paint to depict the Chinese scenes of mountains and water in each of these three places with a vertically emphasized format that likens back to the hanging scroll. The importance of texture with thick paint that comes off the canvas speaks to a variety of mark making achieved through my use of different palette knives, sticks, rags, brushes, and my own fingers relates to built up texture on canvas held by Western painters, and the dense vocabulary of brushwork Chinese masters held in their repertoire. I used these techniques to create a de-emphasis on perspectival accuracy in the pagoda (see Figure 13), bridges, and docks. I was able to create this unique space by abstracting and simplifying shapes from leaves, to bark, to stone, all referencing the works of Chinese landscape and abstract painters alike.

By limiting myself to white, I not only referenced highly recognized Western painting but the literal whitewashing of my Chinese heritage achieved through white paint as well. The nuances of the passing of culture from generation to generation are reflected both literally and figuratively in the shifts from glossy to matte on the canvas and in slight color variations across the surface. The oil, gesso, and stretched canvas materials westernize Chinese imagery, while Western format is tied back to China in the verticality and painted imagery of the piece. The productivity of a hybrid space between the West and China is explored through *Neither Here Nor There* (Figure 12) because it pushes and pulls between the two artistic spheres. Without this conversation between the two that addresses the negatives, in addition to the positives, of living in harmony rather than between two worlds, hybridity in the art would never progress. *Neither Here Nor There* addresses the overlap between contemporary Western and traditional Chinese landscape by utilizing the goals of nature depicted through skewed perspective, abstraction and simplification, and an emphasis on texture.

Does cultural hybridity exist? Can it infiltrate the art world? Artists operating between their heritage and culture have been working in this space and I propose it is a meaningful investigation. There is no need to keep influences that shape me or anyone else as a person separate because their relationships are so intrinsic to personhood. By creating artwork that collapses the differences between Chinese and Western spheres, I provide myself, and others, with the physical manifestations of hybridity. The only way for a hypothetical gallery with both Western and Chinese painting imagery hanging on the wall to exist in reality is for the imagery to be available in the first place.

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