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<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/3889>

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TRANSFORMATION

By

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B.F.A., China Academy of Art, 2008
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A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Studio Art and Design

Department of Studio Art and Design
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2022

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TRANSFORMATION

By

Jingshuo Yang

A Thesis Approved on
March 11, 2022
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DEDICATION

To my dear husband, Xiaofei Li,
who always supported me and gave me his endless love and caring

To my cute son, Brent mobai Li,
for his sweet smile

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville
Professor Delin Lai
Professor Ying Kit Chan
Professor Mary Carothers

A&S History, University of Louisville
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A&S Philosophy, University of Louisville
Professor John Gibson

ABSTRACT

TRANSFORMATION

Jingshuo Yang

March, 11, 2022

My works mainly show my perception of life and my change of thought. The world is full of changes, and the pandemic has disrupted our lives. Many people, including me, are confused about the world. Philosophy and my observation and thinking about the world helped me to have a clearer understanding of the world.

My paintings *Licia*, *Butterfly Woman*, and *Live with Covid* reflect my understanding of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of empathy. Within my art, I also use another German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno's theory of culture industry to deepen my understanding of some social phenomena. My 3D installation *Kill a Butterfly* is my awakening to social control and resistance to assimilation of thought.

Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi's thoughts helped me to establish a complete self-system and to reflect on the relationship between my true self and society. The *Butterfly dream* series officially represents this aspect of my understanding.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Transformation is a body of work that functions as my diary, recording my growth and perception of life. Many times, our habits and ways of thinking become subtle customs that control our behavior without being noticed. We become numb, insensitive, habitually living, working, and playing, such that even our joys and sorrows are secretly controlled. Sometimes I know I feel bad, but I do not know why, and I do not want to dig deeper emotionally to understand because that itself is emotionally tiring in addition to the external world. What makes up a moral code and why? Why are certain customs the way that they are? Are they right? If not, how can we change it?

I am constantly trying to abandon my own inherited concepts and observe the society and empathy in people's life without myself, seeking to face real life instead of what the media, the government, and books want me to see. These observations and empathetic processes changed how I thought of other people. People are shaped by their experiences as I am shaped by mine, so I began to withhold my judgments and suspend empathy in their situations to better understand them. My art reflects these observations and empathy for real life interactions with others.

However, in this process, I lost myself because I was deeply affected by the social phenomena, stories, and emotions of people, and they often have a great impact on my own emotions and life. Sometimes when I feel the joy of others, I feel the world is more beautiful. In the same breath, there are times when I also feel the pain of others so deeply

that I get caught up in their pain and have doubts about the beauty in my life from my own perspective. Once this happened, it became hard for me to go back to the relatively quiet life I had before, so I began to rebuild myself. Only when I knew my true self could I avoid being easily influenced by the emotions and opinions of others. I became more rational when looking at my relationship with others and my relationship with the world. I became more tolerant of the differences between others and myself and more rational when expressing my views with artistic works to help others achieve a better life.

Throughout this process, I reflected on my observations of real life and what I learned from extending empathy to others, based on my understanding of reality. I ask myself what I want to be the real me, without the control and expectations of others.

At times, life makes me feel helpless, like it is out of control, but my inner world which I create through my art, is the only one I can completely control. It is free, safe, peaceful, and beautiful. It allows me to be awake and independent without the pain of losing myself.

INTRODUCTION

A lot of Western philosophers and any religious thinkers, deal with the concept of “Transformation.” Change and transformation are constant aspects of human culture, but I have never felt the importance of this concept as deeply as I do today. We live in a global society with rapid technological and informational development. While these developments have brought convenience to us, they have also brought us changes in our thinking and way of life, as well as endless conflicts and pressures. In carefully observing these contradictions and pressures, I can experience various relationships to others and society. Then, I use my paintings to show my analysis and understanding.

The subsequent pandemic and natural disasters magnified these social; contradictions and pressures in a special environment. In this chaotic society that cannot predict the future, people are pessimistic and desperate. The great mental pressures make most of us on the verge of collapse at any time, and our distraught emotions hurt ourselves, our relatives, and friends. Achieving a peaceful state of mind has become an aspiration that we cannot ignore at present, and the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi's thought of "no-self" has given me great inspiration to address this concern within myself.

CHAPTER 1: INSPIRATION

With the rapid development of our society in recent years, people's thoughts have been changing, confronting many conflictions between old and new ideas. The pandemic and natural disasters caused by climate change in the past two years have greatly changed our lives and brought new conflicts and ideological evolutions. In this process, my thoughts have also changed greatly. This paper will deeply explain the transformation process of my thoughts from the philosophical aspect with my paintings as the embodiment of each stage of this transformation process.

Global Changes in Thinking

With the rapid development of the Internet and transportation, the wind of freedom is blowing all over the world, giving people the opportunities to freely think for and express themselves. People, especially the younger generations, quickly welcome diverse cultural customs and advanced ideas from other countries and nationalities. Their thoughts are free and open. The conflicts with the people who have old ideologies, such as racism and sexism, are fiercer than ever. Women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community all are asserting their identities, seeking equality, and refusing oppression and marginalization. Parents and children are clashing violently because they hold different ideas for what it means to accept and love others. Personal self-examinations collide, blend, and split during these conflicts. In this age of collision of

ideas, people are more eager to figure out the concept of reality and the meaning of happiness.

The Pandemic and Natural Disasters

The pandemic has had too much impact on our world and our way of life. Governments are under unprecedented pressure not only to encourage their citizens, to coordinate supply and demand but also to prevent an economic crisis. In many public places and businesses, wearing masks has become a habit, and in many families, hand sanitizer and disinfectant have become common items. Many people have to work and study at home. Hospitals are swamped with COVID-19 patients, and those with other diseases go untreated for a long time. Many people are out of work and living in insecurity. People begin to panic under all kinds of pressure, and their spirits are not relieved for a long time. There are many new conflicts between people, and the old conflicts also are magnified in this unique environment.

The panic of the pandemic has even been exacerbated by natural disasters that have unexpectedly occurred during this time. The 2021 winter storms knocked out power for nearly 10 million homes and businesses in North America, blocking roads with snow and ice, leaving many hungry and cold. In July, severe flooding in Europe killed 120 people and left more than 1,000 missing. At the same time, a heatwave in western North America caused hundreds of sudden deaths and hundreds of large wildfires in western North America. China's Henan province has also seen unusually heavy rainfall, which has caused severe flooding in many parts of the province.

In the face of COVID-19, we may have abnormal psychological and behavioral reactions, such as feelings of fear, panic, anxiety, and depression or excessive habits like smoking, drinking, fighting, and irritability, etc. These are all normal response to a crisis event. The pandemic has continued until now, sometimes getting worse and sometimes easing. Our state of mind is constantly changing and adjusting, and many people are on the verge of collapse. There are also some people who have to face a lot of practical obstacles, such as social, family, work, study, and other problems, which makes them anxious or even unstable. These changes bring people conflict and consequential reconciliations from the cathartic outbursts.

Accessing the Inner World

Empathy is the most important way for us to deeply understand the development of people within contemporary society, by solving new problems with new understandings. Unlike sympathy, which simply observes and analyzes from an objective point of view, empathy requires us to get rid of ourselves, imagine ourselves as the other party, and think about the other party's behavior and thoughts subjectively, so that we can understand their emotions and motivations.¹²

Just as literature and movies directly provide the audience with situational experiences for their imagination, the lines, colors, and shapes in my artworks all provide the audience with the same visually experiential clues. The audience can rely on these

¹ Coplan. "Empathic Engagement With Narrative Fictions." 143

² Gregory. "Empathy for Objects." 82-98.

visual languages to imagine the situation and living status of the characters in the picture, so as to substitute themselves into the world of the subject, just like reading a novel or watching a movie, by experiencing the joy and sorrow of the object.³

In general, I enjoy depicting my family and friends that I am very familiar with, because I know them well enough in my daily life to be confident in my perception of them as painted into my works. That said, there are some models that I do not know very well. For example, I often see new people in public that I am interested in painting, so I invite them to be my models. In these situations, I usually interview the models or chat with them during painting breaks so that I can get to know them better and reflect that in the final artwork. On average, I talk to each model four to five times, and each time is about an hour. I will ask and talk with them about their life family, friends, hobbies, experiences (both painful and happy), and turning points in their life. From the experiences they provide, I substitute myself into their lives, as if I were an actor myself, to experience different roles. I live through the lives of familiar and unfamiliar people in order to extend empathy and understanding into their miseries and happinesses.

In different cultural backgrounds and living environments, people have different ways of thinking. However, the source of pain and happiness is human desires. All kinds of conflicts between people are often caused by the different cognitive levels and desires of both sides. When these innate desires go unmet, it is painful, no matter the intentions of either side. Temporary gratification gives temporary pleasure, which is quickly replaced by the pain of new desires, which Schopenhauer explains as a tragedy of life.

³ Burri. "Art and the View From Somewhere.". 308-17.

Schopenhauer characterizes ordinary human life as a constant servitude to willing, by virtue of a drive common to all living things, which he terms the “will to life” According to Schopenhauer’s empirical observations, the striving of human beings to meet these will-driven desires is generally painful, for all desire involves a painful deficiency of some sort. The satisfaction of a desire, though pleasurable, comes to us infrequently and is fleeting. Unfortunately, satisfaction when it comes at all leads fairly quickly to boredom (which is painful), and which starts the entire process of desire anew. The cycle of willing goes on until we die; then our remains may be incorporated into something else which might live, strive, suffer, etc.⁴

People suffer from an unfulfilled will, and their endless wills make their suffering endless. Empathy helps me feel the pain of others, letting me experience the pain that my own environment could not let me understand, letting me lose myself in this pain, losing my peace of mind. Likewise, the world of pain and chaos I shared with others made me restless. I wondered how I would regain my peace again.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi gave me an answer. He believed that people should have an independent self, and this self is independent cognition. Everything that is not the self is called a “thing.” The “thing” is the nourishment for the self’s continuous transformation and development, but it should not *replace* the self. For example, the pain I feel in empathy in this chaotic world is the “thing” that I should learn from but not let consume me. These experiences are just like those I learned in movies and books, which can improve the cognition of self-independence, but I do not let the “thing” affect my independence, thus, restoring myself to peace.⁵

⁴ Shapshay: *Schopenhauer’s Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*, 11–22

⁵ Chen. “Life has no intention, read Zhuangzi.” 57

To impose one's will onto an object or person is considered "use," whereas to let something or someone exist as they naturally are allows for them to have their own meaning. The "use" consumes us, and the meaning no longer wears us out. In this case, when we can find out own meaning, why should we use others? Things outside the world are confusing. When we are in this world, we should keep ourselves independent, which means "no use." To study "thing," is to observe the "use" of others and to sum up gains and losses is to "Let things be as they are."⁶

Zhuangzi's theory of "Thing and I" also gives me great inspiration for the pain brought by human will. When we are faced with our own wills, we must distinguish if these wills are the entanglement of external things, such as the senseless desire to win, the fear of facing the chaotic world, or the wills are only for bettering ourselves. Life is so short, so why should we waste our lives on the pain of entangled things? Yet, if this desire can change the self for the better, increase its own knowledge, then, why control its own will in this aspect?⁷

I hope my artworks can convey this part of Zhuangzi's idea to the audience. In this way, the audience can rationally look at their own wills and clearly distinguish things from themselves, so as to find peace and happiness in their inner worlds.

⁶ Chen, "Life has no intention, read Zhuangzi." 65

⁷ Chen, "Qi Wu Lun" *Life has no intention, read Zhuangzi*. 61

Schopenhauer said that art can make us temporarily forget our wills, forget our pain, and get temporary peace and happiness,⁸ but I would challenge this concept. Art not only functions as an escape from the pain of wills, but it also can make us *face* our wills. My works of art precisely work to make the audience face their own wills rationally, in order to make a clear distinction between things and their selves, while not indulging in the chaos of external things. In this way, we can examine our hearts and find real peace and happiness.

⁸ Shapshay. *Schopenhauer's Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*. 13

CHAPTER 2: PAINTING

Relationships, Empathy

We cannot make simple judgments about people or things without knowing them well. This part of my painting is to express my analysis and understanding of people and the world so that the audience can pay more attention to the issues I care about, so as to achieve empathy and reflection.

My Relationship with Others

The first painting *Struggle* is about my mother-in-law (fig. 1). She is an important part of my life, so I tried to analyze her personality within this composition. At first, I only knew her face and other people's opinions of her, but when she and I really lived together, I found that many of her behaviors and thoughts were beyond my original understanding. As I learned more and more about her story and experiences, after living with her for a year, I fully understood the way that she thinks because I understood how her personality was formed. This painting connects with Schopenhauer's ideas because his theories about "empathy" reflect the way I analyze my mother-in-law's personality.

My mother-in-law was a working person living at the bottom of the society she grew up in. She is a typical representative of millions of people from the bottom of the working class in China. These kinds of people are industrious and resourceful, but they

do not have the happy life they deserve. Out of situations of need, she always received help from her relatives and friends. As a result, she is always careful to show her best side out of the fear of offending others and getting a bad reputation within her community. She was always treated unfairly and hurt by those around her, even though she made constant efforts to be perceived as kind. As a sensitive person, she always felt



Fig.1. *Struggle* , Ink and watercolor on silk

anger and sadness having to deal with this treatment until she went numb to it. This long-term distorted psychological state is reflected in her current behavior and how she is treated still. She constantly complains about life, looks for a sense of existence, and does not trust anyone, but she tries to remain kind with a good heart by trying to help others.

I tried to use my painting and the artistic language in it to deeply analyze her personality and the reasons for its formation. I chose to paint more abstractly because I think realism would not have been enough for me to express my feelings about her complex situation. In my painting, there are two figures: the left is my mother-in-law and the right represents the people around her. The left figure has three faces representing three different aspects of her inner world. The red face on the right, glaring and bristling, shows that she was angry at her unfair treatment and that her heart was struggling violently. The middle

face that looks at the viewer is a white-green crying face, on behalf of her feelings in response to treating others sincerely without getting the same response, causing her to feel humiliation and fatigue. The subtle face on the left, pale ochre with closed eyes and a simplified mouth, is numb and calm, which represents her helpless acceptance of her situation. The figure's body is red, which is reminiscent of blood, physically showing her flushed anger in a heart-wrenching struggle.

The figure on the right is the white-faced monster, representing relatives, friends, and the society that treated her unfairly. It has a kind face and a smile while hiding its fanged face behind its head. The fanged face, painted like an abstracted open mouth, is full of color and energy with its chaotic application. This monster also represents the seemingly happy relationship between these relatives and friends with my mother-in-law, which is actually corrupt and twisted because they took advantage of her for so long.

Continuing my research into empathy, I created two paintings, *It is for Your Sake* Part I and II, which are about the tension between parents and their children. There are so many narratives about parent-child relationships in the news these days. Many children become depressed and even commit suicide or kill their parents because they cannot bear the suffocating family pressures in addition to other societal problems. There are a lot of people who have been affected by their childhood experiences with family, who have struggled and spent their lives trying to redeem themselves. The parents perceive it as sacrificing everything for their children, but the children see it differently. Often, the parents cannot understand why their children rebel against and blame them, making a relationship that is supposed to be full of love and affection become twisted and

terrifying. It raised a question of how to build healthy and loving relationships between parents and children?



Fig.2. *It is for Your Sake 1*, Ink and watercolor on silk

My paintings express this kind of relationship visually by analyzing the reasons for the formation of this relationship and offering solutions for how to establish a healthy parent-child relationship. Through these paintings, viewers can explore the causes and solutions of this phenomenon in their own lives with new clarity that can help them to solve the problem. I believe that only by understanding why you are suffering, can you free yourself from pain. Only when parents acknowledge their imperfections will they be willing to look for reasons and try to improve their relationship with their children. Only when children recognize their own situation in relation to others can they rebuild themselves into a stronger, more determined self, no longer afraid of the sad past. Self-reflection is the starting point to breaking the intergenerational repetition of trauma. Only by recognizing the source of the pain, can we end the pain and no longer extend this unhealthy relationship into the next generation.

In the first painting under this title (fig. 2), the middle big green portion is the child who is in his mother's arms, facing away from the viewer. Though they have grown up, their wings are broken and small. The parent, who has strong wings to shelter the child, holds a dagger to the back of the child, also confining them in their wings. The parent hugs the child, but this kind of love is like a dagger into children's bodies, inflicting lasting harm to their children.

In the second picture (fig. 3), the mother holds a cage and plays with the child in the cage with her other hand. Ignoring the pain of the caged child, she revels in the joy of being in control.



Fig.3. *It is for Your Sake 2*, Ink and watercolor on silk

Such an unhealthy parent-child relationship is more likely to appear in Africa, Asia, and South America. Their native culture puts collectivism in the more important position, the culture gave birth to the interdependent self, the people in these cultures

have more self-criticism and a lack of self-affirmation, where the feature is more defined as self and others.

In China, Confucianism occupies an absolute dominant position. In Confucianism, class consciousness is very strong. People starting from birth into a particular family are given a status that determines for them what to do and what not to do, as long prescribed by society. The identity that a person is born into reduces their humanity by making them a symbol of status. The meaning of a person's existence is to fulfill the expectations of society and family. The process of going to school, getting married, and having children is repeated from generation to generation. If one steps out of line, they will be opposed and suppressed by the whole society. Collectivism suppresses individualism. People realize their roles and values through relationships. For example, a woman is a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother, and a grandmother, and she should enact the corresponding expectations for these various roles. Without these roles, she is considered worthless. This is the ancient government's ideological control over people, which is conducive to social stability.

Some parents have no sense of self and follow local customs by forcing children to follow the system as well. Many parents think they have fulfilled the role of "parent" well by taking care of their children in every possible way and even sacrificing themselves to cultivate their children. The good or bad life of children is the embodiment of the parent's whole life value, and the public opinion around them becomes the criterion of judgment. While they are willing or not willing to be good parents, they are also asking their children to be good children. The greatest requirement they have for their children is filial piety. Confucius, a representative figure of Confucianism, believed

that benevolence and filial piety were closely related to social stability. People should be obedient to their parents, their elder brothers, and not violate the wishes of their elders and superiors, so that social stability can be maintained. In ancient China, filial piety to parents also became an important criterion for rulers to select talents, and also an important criterion for people to evaluate a person. Therefore, people subconsciously believe that showing respect to their parents is conducive to their own development and is a mandatory social rule that they should follow, which is why many people feel a great deal of guilt when they do not comply with their parents.

Some over-controlling parents demand respect and obedience from their children under the banner of "what's best" for the child, like who to make friends with, which university to attend, what major to study, when to get married, who to marry, when to have children, which city to live in, even the color of clothes, hairstyle, and what kind of meal to eat, and so on. These demands from parents greatly limit the growth space of children's independent consciousness and the ability to be frustrated in life. These children simply become puppets controlled by their parents. They are less subjective, more sensitive, more prone to depression and breakdowns, while being more likely to have parent-like personality traits in the future because of this childhood socialization.

Overly controlling parents are actually vulnerable themselves, often perceived as weak and insecure. Unable to deal with the damage from the outside, they try to prove themselves right and strong. They are afraid of being rejected and told they are not doing well. This sense of panic fills them with a desire for control. They control their children out of insecurity. If these parents want to maintain a good parent-child relationship with

their children, they must first accept their own imperfections, then, admit their imperfections to their children and work to improve the relationship with their children.⁹

Another important reason for children's lack of independence and dependence on their parents is economic. In many countries, especially in developing countries, most young people's parents bear most of the costs of getting married and buying a house. After marriage, their children are taken care of by their grandparents. Therefore, most of the parents of these young people have a great voice in their families. In some countries, such as the United States, many young people start to pay their own bills, even school fees, at the age of 18 or even younger. They less frequently use their parents' money to buy a house, get married, or let their parents take care of their children. Of course, these situations are related to the economic power and institution-building of each country, but the consequence is that young people in these countries have a strong economic dependence on their parents, which results in them having to give up some voice in their lives.

I use empathy to understand the difficulties of both sides of an unhealthy parent-child relationship. Overly controlling parents, influenced by history, social customs, psychology, and other factors, are unable to give their children the inclusive love that they themselves have never received. This kind of love cannot be understood by parents, but it is the most desired by children influenced by the new concept. Children must acknowledge that parents are not omnipotent, that they are imperfect, and that they are

⁹ Daphne. "Behind Control is Fear."

first-time parents. If parents or children cannot give each other the love they want, then the best way is not to force each other, just to be themselves.

In another series of paintings, I express my understanding of a woman named Licia and her life. Licia is an African American, model, freelance artist, and Christian. She is pure and kind-hearted with has a happy family. She earnestly enjoys the time of making art, attending exhibitions, and preaching four days a week, hoping that others will also have a happy life. Although she was not born in Africa, African culture and art have had a great influence on her art style and life.

This is a group of paintings made up of two different subjects. Each of these paintings is 20 in x 37 in. This set of paintings illustrates my understanding of Licia's life and personality. Licia is sitting in the opposite position in the two paintings, which means I want to show her from two different angles. In the first painting (fig. 4), I focused on the African elements in her art and life. As an artist, Licia has a colorful life and herself believes that every pigment color is beautiful when used in the right way. Influenced by African art, she loves to put gold leaf on her paintings. She also brought me a gorgeous piece of African calico to use as a background for my painting. She also has a distinctive style of African dress. The colors of her dress and cloth are dry yellow, gold, and yellow, so I used large areas of black, blue, and small areas of green and purple as the surrounding background colors. At the same time, I also extracted the patterns from the printed cloth to compose the picture.

I searched for African wood carvings, clothing, and ornaments on the Internet, summarized their artistic elements, and applied them to my paintings. For example, I emulated the manner in which African artists use small beads of bright color to make

geometric patterns. To do this, I carefully arranged the patterns one by one, dipping a small brush directly into tubes of thick, unwatered Japanese watercolor.



Fig.4. *Licia I*, Ink and watercolor on silk

When painting, I sprinkle salt evenly on the silk that is flattened with the frame and then drop colored ink from India and Italy directly onto it. The ink reacts with the salt, thus forming a special textural effect. Against this textural background, I cover the sketch with silk to depict the characters and fabrics. I first used deep red and deep green to draw geometric patterns as a foundation, then used white pearl powder, gold, and peach tree gum to draw patterns of flowers and leaves before finally using red ochre to dot the center of flowers, leaf stems, and veins.

Licia's dress was decorated with multiple orange flounces with the fabric that was made up of many small squares, each with a dye pattern. This cloth dyeing technology

spread to Africa from Europe during the African colonial period and became a favorite cloth-making technique of modern Africans.



Fig.5. *Licia 2*, Ink and watercolor on silk

In the second painting of Licia (fig. 5), I focused on her western life, including her pious belief and her art styles. She devoted half of her life to her God. God was a big part of her life. I want to know more about her faith and God's influence on her through this painting. To do this, I used a lot of symbolic elements of her beliefs within the picture. The background highlights I drew behind her head are a reflection of her spreading Christianity and care for society.

I am inspired by the artists like Gustave Moreau, Marc Chagall, and Odilon Redon. I also draw from the mural of the Ajanta caves in India and Dunhuang in China.

To study these different sources, I drew several pastiches of them before I start to paint my personal works so that I could learn from their techniques and compositions by practicing them.

The last series featured in my exhibition is the *Butterfly Woman* painting series. The paintings feature a cross between a butterfly and a female head to reflect my knowledge and understanding of my female friends, family, colleagues, and students in my life. I am quite familiar with these women. Through my observation and many special conversations with them, I have a deeper understanding of their life and growth experiences, personalities, views on the world, and so on. Then, I extracted colors, patterns, modeling features, and other elements from their favorite butterfly images as painting language to describe my understanding of them. Empathy allows me to understand the emotional lives of others, opening up my understanding of the world and human nature.¹⁰

One of my works from the *Butterfly Women* series depicts one of my students (fig. 6), a girl full of enthusiasm and curiosity for life. She struggles with self-discipline but is gifted at painting. Every time I see her, I smile. Yet, in talking to her, I learned that she had her own problems that I would not otherwise see. She knew from childhood that her mother raised her and her brother alone, so many times she would rather wrong herself, than let her mother worry. She was tutored by her mother until she went to university and did not attend formal school. The way of thinking and dressing is

¹⁰ Burri. 308-17.

relatively conservative. When she went to college, she began to observe and learn from her peers' more open ways of thinking and dressing.

I used red as the main color in the picture to show the main impression she left on me—warm and cheerful. Yellow represents the joy she brings to those around her. Black represents the dark side of her life where she is worried and wronged. A metal necklace with teeth represents her current free-flowing look. In the middle of the picture is her young face with a sweet smile. Patterns with curved lines represent her liveliness.



Fig.6. *Butterfly Women*, Ink and watercolor on silk

People's Lives and Relationships During the Pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, our sense of normalcy was challenged. Most of the close contact that we made to maintain our relationships was almost impossible, and

technology became the most important or only way to connect and maintain relationships between people. Technology became the outlet for people living alone through the pandemic in self-isolation. However, there were groups of people that had to cohabitate and isolate together during the pandemic. Many families and roommates spent more time together than ever before, working and studying around each other. New conflicts and perceptions came about due to this constant close contact, as illustrated in my piece *Tear* (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. *Tear*, pencil on paper

My relationship with society

I made a 3-D Installation, *Kill a Butterfly* (fig. 8), in which I covered a Dome taller than an average human covered in 30-inch resin castings of red butterflies. On one side of the dome is a doorway that people can walk through. Inside the Dome is a myriad

of crisscrossing red threads threading a luminous white hollow butterfly. And the light from the white butterfly casts the shadow of the red butterfly on the dome's surface onto the white walls around the dome.



Fig. 8. *Kill a Butterfly*, Resin, iron, thread, yarn, light, and paper

One philosophy that influenced this installation is Theodor W. Adorno's "culture industry." Adorno has shown great hostility and concern towards the cultural industry. It was a product of escaping from real life and adjusting secular psychology by means of entertainment. He laments that pure mass entertainment has cheated people of their energy and potential for more valuable and fulfilling activities, as has the cultural

industry.¹¹ It is this culture industry, the modern mass media, and the ideology of “false individualism” that make the public wear a false aura of overall integration concept. On the one hand, trying to hide in a severe materialization and alienation of social main body of the subject-object relationship with different phase total phase relationship between the contradiction between nature. On the other hand, mass production and reproduction of the same things to expand and promote the “pop culture” dimension of the form and emotional experience of the standardization. The result is to effectively encourage a kind of packaging ideology so that people are more adapted to the rule of habit, and finally, the personality unconditionally precipitated in the common, which leads to the flatness of lifestyle, the fashion of consumer behavior, and the superficially of aesthetic taste.¹²

This 3-D Installation project talks about the people are greatly influenced by the cultural industry and engage in entertainment too deeply. In that way, they are easy to accept whatever information they were given without deeper thinking about if this information is true or not. They lose their independent judgment.

The materials convey this loss of the ability of judgment as reflected in the design of the installation. Judgment is present on many levels, such as the red butterflies being all same size, the same pattern. In appearing in this way, they represent people who lose themselves to a larger collective, to the culture industry. The red butterflies are “perfect” and beautiful in the same size and the same pattern. As such, they represent the people who become what society and the government want them to be.

¹¹ Boltanski. *Christian Boltanski: Theatre D'ombres*.

¹² He. 阿多诺的批判美学理论.

The white butterfly represents the person who is not influenced by the cultural industry, who is not accepted by society and the government. The butterfly is not “perfect,” but unique and still beautiful. It pursues to be true of itself, tries to understand what the world really is, and tries to have the life it really wants. The white butterfly is supposed to wake up the people who did not notice that they had lost their independent judgment and thinking. The dying process depicted in the sculpture represents its struggling and loss of its judgment.

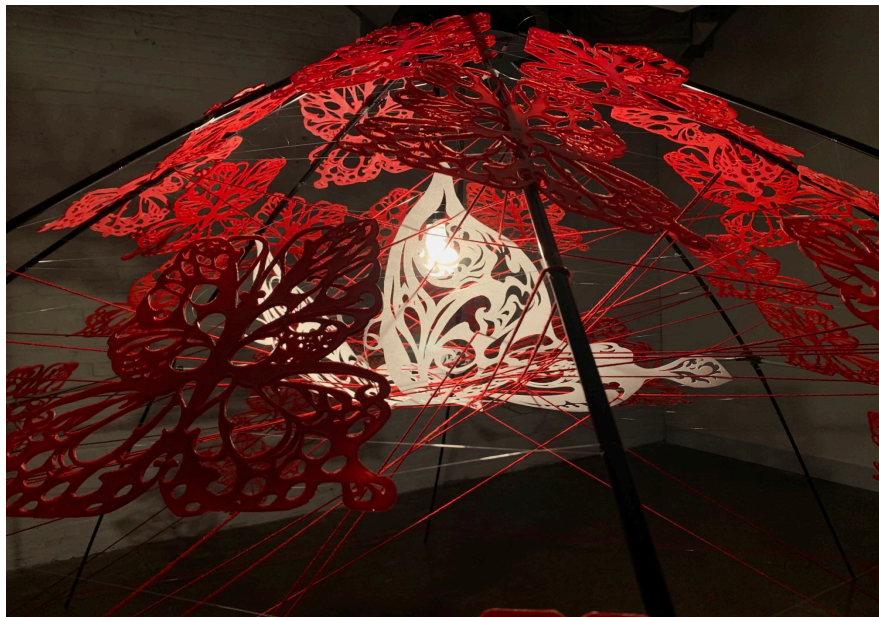


Fig. 9. *Kill a Butterfly Detail*, Resin, iron, thread, yarn, light, and paper

The red butterflies spontaneously antagonize and isolate the white butterfly, as if they must exterminate it, so that the white butterfly can become like them. They created a dense red web to grab and kill the white butterfly (fig. 9). The use of red thread was inspired by the installation work of artist Chiharu Shiota (fig. 10). However, unlike her use of red yarn web to express the intricate relationships between people, the red yarn in

my work shows the exclusion, persecution and strangulation of white butterflies by red butterflies.¹³



Fig.10. Chiharu Shiota, *Weaves an Immersive Labyrinth of Keys and Yarn*

The white butterfly is dying, but it is also blooming, as it tries to let the red butterflies rethink their lives and what they really want. What kind of person do they really want to be? Is all of their information correct? Do they feel lonely, boring, confused, or have sense of meaningless in their lives?

I applied Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage* to present-day examples of communication, such as tweets and comments posted online, wherein they have had very real consequences, such as resulting in job dismissals, arrests, and online abuse. The deleting of these tweets and comments has minimal effect. Anything posted

¹³ Shiota. "The Key in the Hand."

on the Internet potentially could last forever. Real total war has become information war. It is being fought by subtle electric informational media under cold conditions and constants.¹⁴

We live in an information age, a large amount of information is poured into our minds every day, we accepted it without thinking, and never seriously, deeply think about whether this information is manipulated into false propaganda. We see happy endings in Hollywood movies, advertisements full of smiles on TV media, and even new photos uploaded by friends on Facebook. We not only feel that the world is as beautiful as a utopia, but also that the sense of a fake, perfect world as built by the culture industry.

At the same time, we often see shocking news when a supposedly decent star suddenly does something deeply immoral, it sets off a firestorm of near-universal outrage online. Yet, years later it could turn out to be totally false. However, no one cares about the scholar's painful suffering anymore, because they are no longer famous. People are not interested in them because people's attention has been shifted to new information. They have turned to another battlefield. People move in lockstep, unknowingly, enjoying being modulated again and again. Their minds are dominated. They hardly stop to wonder if they really enjoy following celebrity scandals so much or why. Why do they fill our lives with meaningless information? Is it because this information on the Internet, in the magazines, and on the news, is full of people's lives, such that people are inescapably forced to accept this information?

¹⁴ McLuhan. *The Medium is the Massage*, 1967. 138

It is becoming a habit to accept this kind of information, and the media is more willing to create these stunts. Our government propagates every day how good our country is, how badly other countries are, and what bad things happen in other countries. However, if we actually go to other countries, we will find that things are not as advertised. This creates a vicious cycle, which lets people have a bias and lose their independent judgment and thinking. The same things are interpreted as different messages in different regions or cultures, and groups with the same backgrounds are easily trained to be people with the same ideas. Prejudices built up in people's minds over a long period of time encourage people to not accept others.

But what is the real world? Schopenhauer believes the world is a tragedy, but Nietzsche believes even our world is a tragedy. Our people should be positive, be powerful, and deal with the difficulties in our life and world. How do we keep people independent and conscious in the midst of so much information? That is what the few sane people in the world are grappling with. That is what the white butterfly in my work, unlike the unconscious red butterfly, which is shaped like a "perfect image" by society. It is painful, struggling, tragic, and not to be understood. It is punctured by countless red threads which the red butterfly shoots out unconsciously. But it was also hopeful because the white butterfly's light was shining on the red butterflies, casting their black shadow on the white wall without any hesitation, so that the red butterflies can see the darkness of their own shadows and realize how terrible they are, giving the red butterflies a chance to wake up.

My use of light and shadow was inspired by the installation work of artist Christian Boltanski: *Theatre d'ombre (Shadow Theatre)*. Like this work, I used the form

of shadows to interpret part of the meaning of the work. Although we all have shadows in our work, their meanings are different. The shadows in Christian's work represent his understanding of death, while the shadows in my work represent the influence of white butterflies on red butterflies. The Jewish artist Christian, who experienced the Holocaust as a child, expresses his deep understanding of death with eerie shadows reflected on the wall. It follows us everywhere, always beckoning in the dark, and at some points we may join the dance of shadows on the wall (fig. 11).¹⁵

This project may bring an increased awareness of how one may feel to be judged by many thereby educating the viewer. 3-D art is used to convey the connection between how many individuals may be influenced unknowingly by outside sources while passing judgment on the one that may hold a differing view. This installation will also show how art may continue to educate and inform on levels that reach the human psyche where other means go unnoticed. Influences of judgment placed on individuals knowingly or



Fig.11. Christian Boltanski, *Theatre D'ombres*

¹⁵ Boltanski, Christian. *Christian Boltanski: Theatre D'ombres*

unknowingly are hurtful. This art project is an opportunity to increase knowledge and educate others about choosing judgment over compassion.

When the audience sees the work from a distance, they will think that the red butterflies are beautiful, the dome is beautiful like a huge lantern, and the enjoyment of these sensory beauties is very pleasing. Just like the feeling brought to them by the culture industry. However, when they walk inside the dome, they will feel terrible and sad to see beautiful white butterflies pierced by red lines. This makes the audience shocked and introspective, which is the purpose of the artwork.

Built My Own World, Transcend

Facing a pessimistic world, we need to build a happy and calm personal world for ourselves, so that we can have enough strength to face the world around us and can view the world objectively, so as to make correct judgments and emotional decisions. My series of butterfly fans (fig. 12) is mainly about how individuals can stay awake and free in a chaotic world. The viewer cannot see any concrete image in the abstracted background, and this backdrop represents our unpredictable, chaotic world today, battered by pandemics and natural disasters, putting each of us in a state of tension at any moment. The beautiful butterfly in the painting represents the inner world of complete peace, happiness, and freedom, forgetting the world. It's concrete, it's more real. And the freedom and beauty of butterflies help us calm down. It allows us to get rid of the chaotic external world spiritually and establish spiritual independence and free expression of individuality in the inner world.

Under great stress, we often unconsciously take out our emotions on the people closest to us. Especially during the isolation period, people's emotions and conflicts were infinitely magnified in the narrow space. Learning to ease our emotions without hurting ourselves and the people we care about becoming an important skillset moving forward. The spiritual realm of Lao and Zhuang in Chinese Taoism, which is pure, natural, and absolutely free, helps us calm down among this chaos. It emphasizes getting rid of the chaotic external world of the spirit and establishing spiritual independence and free expression of personality in the inner world.¹⁶



Fig. 12. *Butterfly dream*, Ink and watercolor on paper

¹⁶ Chen, Keshu, "Life has no intention, read Zhuangzi." 2020.

CHAPTER 3: THE SYMBOLISM OF THE BUTTERFLY

There is a famous story about butterflies in Zhuangzi's philosophical works:

Once Zhuang Zhou (Zhuangzi) dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he did not know if he was Zhuang Zhou, who had dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou.¹⁷

Taiwan writer Xu Fuguan believes that the butterfly in Zhuangzi's theory in the form of personality, imparting the inner life of the observer. It is a direct expression of human nature, visualizing what you see into new objects to express your thoughts. The butterfly here is not a specific butterfly object in reality, but instead a reflection of Zhuangzi's inner world. Zhuangzi used the characteristic of butterflies flying freely to express the characteristic of freedom in his mind. Zhuangzi saw the butterfly in his dream, not a specific butterfly in physical reality. Zhuangzi looks at the butterfly in a state of complete absence of self. His whole spirit is concentrated on the butterfly, as if the butterfly is all that exists.

Unlike Schopenhauer's theory of "empathy," Zhuangzi is completely self-imagining what he thinks butterflies should look like. He could not imagine the difficulties of a butterfly, such as the urgency of being eaten by a natural enemy. He

¹⁷ Little with Eichman. "Laozi and the Origins of Taoism", 123.

imagined butterflies fluttering and dancing freely, imagining himself as a butterfly flying freely. The butterfly is not the butterfly itself, but the materialization of Zhuangzi's spiritual world. It is combined with Zhuangzi. Butterflies are Zhuangzi, Zhuangzi is a butterfly, they both have the characteristic of freedom.¹⁸

In my works, butterflies also are the symbol of my spiritual activities, representing my understanding of society and people. Butterflies also have different meanings in my different artistic creations, because I present different understandings of things in my different works. For example, in the series of works of *Butterfly Woman*, I use butterfly images to interpret my understanding of the characteristics of each different woman. On the other hand, in the 3D work *Kill a Butterfly*, red butterflies represent assimilated groups, and white butterfly represents individuals who think independently and fight for freedom. No matter how many different meanings these butterflies have in my work, they all have a common hidden meaning: transformation. That is, I want all my subjects and audiences to be as capable and willing as butterflies to become better versions of themselves.

¹⁸ Xu, "Chinese Art Spirit", 56-63

CONCLUSION

This exhibition is mainly about the changes in my thoughts and artwork's theme during the three years of my graduate study. Because my work is mainly about people, I pay close attention to the observation of people, analyzing the life of everyone around me to better understand what causes their unique way of life and thinking. I also look at what human relations are like, how they can be improved, what the society looks like, what our roles are within it, and what are the problems of the society. I made specific analyses and understanding from psychology, history, customs, habits, philosophy, and other perspectives to put myself into the role to experience. At the same time, my observations and experiences are also promoting my growth. Philosophy is of great help to me in understanding the world and myself. My work reflects this growth. In the future, I will continue to use the language of painting to record my growth.

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Xu, Fuguan. "Chinese Art Spirit", *East China Normal University Press*, 2001.12. 56-63

CURRICULUM VITA

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EDUCATION: **M.F.A. in Studio Art & Design**
University of Louisville, KY
2019-22

M.F.A. in Painting & Drawing
Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China
2008-11

B.F.A. in Painting & Drawing
China Academy of Art, Hanzhou, China
2004-08

AWARDS: **Graduate Network in Arts & Sciences (GNAS)**
University of Louisville, KY
2019-2022

Internship
Boys & Girls Clubs, Louisville, KY
2022

Spring Undergraduate Mentor Research Award
University of Louisville, KY
2022

Arts & Sciences Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTA)
University of Louisville, KY
2020-2022

Graduate Student Council Research Grant (GSC)
University of Louisville, KY
2021

Spring Undergraduate Mentor Research Award
University of Louisville, KY
2021

Summer Undergraduate Mentor Research Award
University of Louisville, KY
2021

Fall Undergraduate Mentor Research Award
University of Louisville, KY
2021

2020-2021 Student Champion
University of Louisville, KY

Equity and Inclusion Award,
Inaugural Cornerstone Digital Wall Call for Art,
University of Kentucky
2021

Hite Scholarship
University of Louisville, KY
2019

National Graduate Scholarship,
Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China
2008-2011

First Prize Undergraduate Scholarship
China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, China
2006

Outstanding Award of International Student Championship
Hangzhou, China
2006

First Prize Undergraduate Scholarship
China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, China
2005

Student of the Year
China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, China
2005

First Prize Undergraduate Scholarship

China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, China
2004

SOLO

EXHIBITIONS:

“Find the Inner World” Exhibition

Asia Institute Crane House, Louisville, KY
2022

“Transformation-Find the Inner World” MFA Thesis Exhibition

Louisville, KY,
2022

“Insight” Jingshuo Yang - Paintings and Drawings

Colvard Student Union Art Gallery,
Mississippi State University, MS,
2016

Beauty of Life, Ring-14 USA Charity Art Exhibition

Lafayette, IN,
2014

GROUP

EXHIBITIONS:

Summer Group MFA Exhibition

Cressman Center, Louisville, KY
2022

“2022 - 2023” Show,

University of Louisville Writing Center, KY

56th National Drawing and Small Sculpture Show

Joseph A. Cain Memorial Art Gallery, TX
2022

Asian Art Exhibition

Cressman Center, Louisville, KY
2022

“Unknowns, Artists You Should Know” Show

Kore Gallery, Louisville, KY
2022

Life with Covid-19 Art Exhibition

University of Louisville, KY
2022

Emotions - 2021 (Exhibition and Publication), Online

International True Beauty Exhibition - 2021, Online

2021 Open Studio Weekend Louisville Exhibition

Cressman Center, Louisville, KY. Juried.

MFA Student Showcase

University of Louisville, KY

2021

Open Studio Weekend

University of Louisville, KY

2021

Sali National Abstract Art Exhibition XVII

Indianapolis, IN

2021

2021 Black & White Show

Kore Gallery, Louisville, KY

Inaugural Cornerstone Call For Art

2021

Beginnings, Online Exhibition

2021

Open Studio Weekend

MFA Building, Louisville, KY

2020

Time Identity

MFA Building, Louisville, KY

2020

MFA Student Showcase

MFA Building, Louisville, KY

2019

MSU Annual Student Competitive Exhibition

Starkville, MS

2017

Holiday Showcase

Greater Starkville Development Partnership, Starkville, MS

2015-2016

M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition
CAFA Art Museum, Beijing, China
2011

Portrait of Prosperity Chang'An Street
(a 32-meters long silk picture of Beijing),
Beijing, China
2009

B.F.A. Thesis Exhibition
Art Gallery of China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, China
2008

CONFERENCES: **Presented** in Graduate Student Regional Research Conference
2022

Presented in The 61st Annual Meeting of the Southeast
Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Louisville, KY
2022

Attended the Foundations in Art: Theory & Education (FATE)
Conference Virtually, UNC, Charlotte, NC
2021

Presented in University Graduate Student Council's Graduate
Student Research Conference, Louisville, KY
2019

PUBLICATIONS: **Emotions - 2021** (Exhibition and Publication)

Creative Quarterly Award, Issue 66 Winner
2021

Ashley, Artemis Journal 2021

Creative Quarterly Award, Issue 58 Winner
2020

Creative Quarterly Award, Issue 56 Winter
Creative Quarterly Award, Issue 55 Winter
2019

Creative Quarterly Award, Issue 44 Winter
2017

PROFESSIONAL
ACTIVITY:

Artist talk

Asian Art Exhibition, Cressman Center, Louisville, KY
2022

Originally broadcast on Artists Talk

LVA on WXOX 97.1 FM/Artxfm.com on January 20, 2022,
Louisville, KY

Artist talk

Insight” Jingshuo Yang - Paintings and Drawings,
Colvard Student Union Art Gallery, Mississippi State University,
MS,
2016

TEACHING
EXPERIENCE:

Local Instructor

Boys & Girls Clubs, Louisville, KY
2022

Graduate Teaching Assistant

University of Louisville, KY
2020-2022

Drawing and painting Tutor

2008-2022

Participate in the Mentoring Academy

University of Louisville, KY
2021

Student Instructor

Demonstrated Chinese painting in ARTH 642 courses
University of Louisville, KY
2019

Student Instructor

Lectured in ART 606 courses
University of Louisville, KY
2019

Teaching Assistant

Freehand Drawing 1 summer class
Mississippi State University, MS
2016

Volunteer Teacher

Annunciation Catholic School, Columbus, MS
2015

Student Instructor

Lectured in MSU studio courses (Water media, Senior Thesis etc.), Mississippi State University, MS
2015

Student Instructor

Lectured in Chinese painting and poem class, Flying Apsaras in Dunhuang Murals, Purdue University, IN
2014

Student Instructor

Lectured in Chinese painting and poem class
Purdue University, IN
2013

Teacher, Freehand Sketching and Traditional Chinese painting
Purdue Chinese School, Lafayette, IN
2012-2013

Volunteer Teacher, Traditional Chinese painting
Lafayette Chinese church, IN
2012

Volunteer Teacher, Traditional Chinese painting
Lafayette Chinese church, IN
2012

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Figure Drawing
Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China
2009-2010

Student Instructor

Lectured in Senior research and seminar on traditional Chinese painting, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China
2010

Workshop Teacher, still life drawing
Hangzhou, China
2005-2007

VOLUNTEER:

Workshop, Rice paper painting demonstration
Crane House, Louisville, KY
2022

Portland Art & Heritage Fair, Fast Figure drawing and painting demonstration, Louisville, KY
2019

Children's art festival, taught children ceramics, McKee Park, Starkville, MS
2017

Art festival, paper cut and calligraphy demonstration, Starkville, MS
2016

Ring 14 Charity Dinner
Lafayette, IN
2014-2015

Ring 14 card,
painting for Ring14 holiday card to sell online for charity support
2014

Women Shelter, taught children paper cut techniques
Lafayette, IN
2013