

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Theses

8-6-2024

Ghost in My Heart

Xueqi Sun
xs4783@rit.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Sun, Xueqi, "Ghost in My Heart" (2024). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

RIT

Ghost in My Heart

by

Xueqi Sun

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Fine Art in Fine Art

School of Art

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

August 6, 2024

Thesis Approval

Thesis Title

Thesis Author

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
The School
Rochester Institute of Technology | Rochester, New York

Name

Title

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat

Name

Title

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat

Name (Optional for some programs)

Title (Optional for some programs)

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat (Optional for some programs)

Name (Optional for some programs)

Title (Optional for some programs)

Electronic Signature: Use Adobe Acrobat (Optional for some programs)

In Memory of

Zi

Remember the days we talk in silence

Table of Contents

Title	1
Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Context and Evolution	8
Body of Works	15
Conclusion	20
Images	21
Bibliography	23

Abstract

There is an ebb and flow to the world, things may come and go. Holding on to something and not letting go is something I cannot resist. Even though it is as fleeting as a palm of sand. But where things flow to is the question I am asking, I would like to explore the fleetingness and flaws in the impermanent natures of all things. Those segmented moments often come back as ghosts and the impermanence lingers and it bothers me. Through painting, flow with nature and find my inner peace in the painting itself.

Introduction

We have all lost something.

It's like an apple is rotting in the other room, we wish time could revert back, we wish we could see the sign clearly, we wish everything stays perfectly in the moment but is still broken. We are scared, what have we done? Why? Oh, we might just forget the truth of life, we are all part of nature. 2020.1.15

That is a note from my diary. Before that, I faced death. Through hopelessness, denial, anger, depression ...all mixing emotions, the ghost has raised in my heart. I wish to understand the world in which I exist. I have so many questions to ask. Uncertainty creates many fears, I tried to get along with them. Shifting between rational thinking and the wave of emotion, I still need to find a balance in between. I try to use my most bright (明亮) mind and all of my heart, and I know I have to do it slowly. (I need to take time, to pause, to discern, to wonder)

Such exploration has brought me in front of Death and existence. The human world is always so vague about life and death. And this is why I question How we define Death and Existent, to me the boundary is very ambiguous. So I wrote down my observations on the fleeting life and this fleeting feeling.

Something that is near nonexistent, it was not been noticed, until you got lost in the real world,

you start to feel it, and it becomes everything.

It is wordless, it is beyond words.

The dream, the void, and the dark have been ignored for a while.

It is a moan without a clear problem.

Things that you can not grab, flow like water.

Everything is uncertain, everything is possible

When you could feel those invisible(无形),

Life is undefined. 2022.2.6

It is where the undefined that drives my passion to understand and study the fundamentals of life.

As Plato describes, we cannot directly observe the existence of our world. It is like living in a cave while facing the wall. With this, it is impossible to directly observe the world beyond the cave. But we can feel the wind pass through our face and light shines on our back and it casts a long shadow upon the wall of the cave. What we see is only the shadow of our lives. How we could see the true nature of life. What is the essence of life? All those are big questions ahead of me, it seems that I couldn't answer any of them fully. My impulse towards those illusory things never stops. It would be overwhelming at first. At least, I want to try. Regardless of my beliefs, culture, or experiences different from anybody else. I still believe that it is a common feeling that we all share. To live, to love, and to die. I speak on behalf of my limits and observations. It is

rough but honest at its core. I am trying to face the question that many people choose to avoid or even ignore, what is the ghost, and where does it live?

To me, the ghost is intangible, imperceptible, amorphous, and gentle. Its existence is unquestionable to me. Things that are invisible and unknown exist in every corner that people overlook. The beauty lies in it. The very things that most people overlook and ignore are that you will find ghosts with them. With it, that stirs a feeling that humans are unable to ignore. Is it abstract? Maybe. And I choose to express it through the means of art and painting. Because they are the language that I can use. Watercolor is the medium that visualizes what is unseen and intangible.

Body of Document: CONTEXT

“Everything comes from nothingness and existence is the mother of everything.”(无, 名天地之始也。有, 名万物之母). Words from Daoist philosopher Laozi show that if we understand things through the grand universe, our existence is interdependent with the universe. The intangible transforms into the tangible, they are two interesting elements that coexist in nature. The philosophy of Daoism always enlightens my way of life. Yangming Wang’s *Study of the Mind* discusses a fascinating way to view the existence of things. “When you haven’t looked at this flower, this flower and your heart will return to silence, as if it never existed; when you look at this flower, its color is clearly displayed in front of you at this moment, so that Then you know that this flower does not exist independently of your consciousness.”(你未看此花时, 此花与汝心同归于寂; 你来看此花时, 则此花颜色一时明白起来). Existence and non-existence may just be between the blinks of our thoughts. There is an abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world. Because of the unknown, unexplored, and uncertain, we are incapable of deciding whether something does or does not exist.

“With no desire, to observe its subtlety; With desire, learn its essence and boundary.” (故恒无欲, 以观其眇; 恒有欲也, 以观其所徼) In a way, we only use our senses to observe and understand the nature of things, things that are constantly changing. How impermanent and fragile things are if I want to hold them. Our emotions resonate with this change. The river of time makes everything ambiguous. Wisdom from Buddhism, the three imprints of truth: All acts are transient, essential universal truths contain no ego-self, and the state of nirvana is perfect

tranquility. Buddhism allows me to see my desires, and the desire leads to suffering. It is a simple truth, the road to practice is long and endless.

The tree that lived in the story of Zhuangzi always reminded me not to put prejudice on anything. In the story, "There is such a big tree, why worry that it is useless, why not plant it in a place where nothing grows, plant it in the boundless wilderness, wander around the tree leisurely, and lie under the tree carelessly. A tree cannot be felled with an ax, nor can anything harm it. Although it didn't come in handy, where would there be any difficulties? " The tree is useless from the human's eye, it freely and happily survives in nature. The allowing-ness of existence is a big part that I have to deal with. Even though people tend to pursue a concrete, structured, logical, and stable object in their world, I'm looking after those ephemeral, incomplete, weak, uncertain, and disappearance of things.

The way and the truth of nature are always there, forgetting self and reliving in nature will help us find the true ground of being in this universe. As for the act of painting itself, I see it as a way of meditation. It always starts from an empty canvas or paper, the material held in my hand and me present in front of it. While doing the process, I came into a selfless stage and immersed myself in this great process. I can see that my painting reflects the inner world. Whether it is letting the emotion be said out loud, or retraining my emotion into peace. Fear may stop me from painting. It is reflective of my heart at the moment. When I explore the boundary of the painting, it is also a contemplation of life itself.

The wisdom from Buddhism and Daoism, tells how humans find their belonging on this planet. It is still a personal journey for each of us, evoking our sensation to observe the beauty of life.

“ Beauty is in your mind, not in the rose.”

Said by American abstractionist painter Agnes Martin, her words touched me.

“We say this rose is beautiful

And when this rose is destroyed then we have lost something

So that beauty has been lost

When the rose is destroyed we grieve

But really beauty is unattached

And a clear mind sees it

The rose represents nature

But it isn't the rose

Beauty is unattached, It's inspiration-it's inspiration” (The Untroubled Mind, Martin)

Body of Document: EVOLUTION

Painting is a slow process,

I like this slow, you don't have to rush anywhere.

You will be where you will be.

My thoughts were gone with the wind.

In a place where there is no start, there is no end.

I prefer silence, breeze, and unrest ocean.

You must know there are still fish that walk underwater,

Evolution of endless forms.

Absurdity makes the world interesting to live in.

Also, useless things fill our life.

The emptiness longs for the filling, the filling longs for the emptiness

Don't tell me what to do.

I usually feel sick after talking.

That try to define you is all of human bondage

Sometimes the anxiety seizes me,

When I begin to behave.

Nature conceals its tenderness and terror

Waking from a dream with a little unease

No one could interpret your dream,

you lost lots of detail anyway.

The unconsolated.

Feel the time and space,

Those are precious things that you ignored

Living

You are one among the myriad

Just breathe, and let it out 2022.04.11

During my practice in the Studio. I have been looking for the intangible.

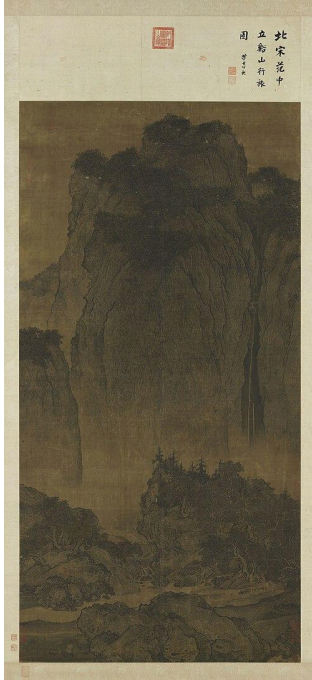
Time, Water, Emotion, Wind, and Cloud...

In the first year of exploration. I did lots of experiments. I dissolved the oil painting with gamsol, and the pigment started to dematerialize and flow. Lightly covering the muslin canvas, the color comes out from it and unfolds, like a ghost. My first Melancholy painting. What shocked me the most was when I found that the color on the canvas began to disappear after being exposed to the light of the underground studio for a long time. It is a quite surprising observation. Did the incandescent light eat the paint day by day without being noticed? After a while, I found that the sewage from the bathroom behind the wall accidentally leaked onto the painting that I stored in the closet, leaving a stain that looked like watercolor. That unawareness of change makes me rethink my effort for the painting. As time went by, I slowly accepted this imperfection and beauty.

Gradually, watercolor became a very important medium in my studio study. Water is already an interesting element that exists. With the watercolor flowing with water, then, the water transforms into the air, and only the color is left with the track marks. This medium is transparent, dynamic, and ever-changing. Luvon Shepper, my watercolor instructor and also my mentor, taught us to avoid using white color and think about the paper as the natural light source. Which makes me rethink the process of capturing light. Using the transparency of the watercolor, layer it rather than Mix the exact color, and the color becomes more lively. To leave a space purely white will give more depth to the space. The beauty of blank white, light passes through

it. As a matter of fact, my control and uncontrol of the medium will create unexpected and spectacular results. Through the understanding of the philosophy of watercolor, I practice it in my life. I journey through the flow of life and catch the intangible with the water itself.

As I study the West for a long period, I feel there is a big gap in my knowledge of ancient Chinese beauty. I start a journey to find the root and make connections with ancient Chinese beauty. Enlightenment from the book Zhao Yebai, *The Bird View of the World*, free from the rule of Renaissance perspective. If we observe the world truthfully, there is no vanishing point. Our human eyes are limited. It makes me think, we paint not only what we see, but also what we know. The universe is a large space, we cannot see the whole in one eye. How could I not only be subjective but bring objective into the thinking and painting process. To paint an object from a different perspective and beyond. Inspiration by Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, you have to climb the mountain and see it in different spaces, therefore you can see the whole picture of it. I start thinking about putting stories among the landscape. This evolution helps me transcend the limitations and constraints caused by my visual perception and try my best to show the essentials of things.



Fan Kuan. *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*. Song Dynasty. National Palace Museum,

<https://theme.npm.edu.tw/selection/Article.aspx?sNo=04000959&lang=2>.

Spending time observing nature helps my mind become quiet. I find it very soothing just watching the clouds in the sky, just like an infant watching the sway of trees. They are fleeting all the time which helps clear my mind. Most people don't like to be reminded of our temporary nature, so we hold on to what we feel is permanent. I made about 100 mono printmaking mimicking the wind blowing the clouds. During the process, my subject expands to the disappearing face (I tried to paint the face from memory); the force of nature; energy...I enjoyed using my hand gently to smooth the paint on the surface, the softness is close to the ghost feeling I have. The Chinese poet Du Fu created a beautiful poem about nature has always been silence around us, "the rain sneaks into the night with the wind, and it nourishes the earth without a trace (随风潜入夜, 润物细无声)". In the end, I would like to paint my ghost in a quiet tone.

Body of Works:

In my Graduate show, each of those works is a segment moment that I selected from the past, creating a self-dialogue in the exhibition. It contains my learning, feeling, and questioning about this impermanence of the world. The rabbit is in the center looking at the drawing book and in the back is a video loop playing endlessly. Beside the wall, I put Grandma's painting in the shadow and a painting of a vessel. I hope when the audience walks through the space, they can observe through the rabbit to be aware of the space. The grandmother's painting is in the corner hidden in shadow. I handwrite my poems and leave a thought along with the works. I hope the audience can feel the emotion beneath and lingering in their heart.

A Vessel is not a Vessel

oil painting
2021
6 x 6 inch

This work tries to convey an intermediate state, things are always transforming, and it is not as it appeared. From formlessness to form, form to formlessness. Like a ghost, the edge is vague. You could have a sense of what it is, but also be unsure. It reflects my inner state which is always shifting.

Nocturne

video
2021
48 second

微风吹吻我的脸颊, 在无声无息的风中, 我感觉到你, 回头看你却不在.

The breeze kissed my cheek. In the silence, is where I sense your presence, when I turn my head, well, you're not there.

This work recalls an experience when I felt a ghost wind on a sunset cliff in San Diego. The wind kissed my cheek and it was gone. The video tries to meditate on the illusion of life and the reality of dreams and convey emotional lifting. The impermanence moment flashes quickly in our lives and is hard to grab. The emotion is fleeting, the time is fleeting, and they are ephemeral, but constantly coming back. Like the waves in the ocean.

There is a traditional Chinese scholar called Zhuangzi. He once dreamt of a butterfly. As a butterfly, Zhuangzi flies around happily and pleasantly. He is the butterfly in the dream. He flies without knowing that he is Zhuangzi. Suddenly, he wakes up and realizes that he is Zhuangzi instead of the butterfly. He questioned if the butterfly dreamed of him or if he dreamed of the butterfly. This experience intrigues Zhuang Zi. That is why he realizes and speaks of the idea of the “transformation of thing(物化)”. (昔者庄周梦为蝴蝶, 栩栩然蝴蝶也, 自喻适志与, 不知周也。俄然觉, 则蘧蘧然周也。不知周之梦为蝴蝶与, 蝴蝶之梦为周与? 周与蝴蝶则必有分矣。此之谓物化). The transformation of things is the necessary difference between Zhuangzi and the butterfly. The transformation of things is a change in consciousness between reality and consciousness. The blurry threshold between reality and illusion is where we draw the line, but that threshold is everchanging and unfine. The video is created by stop motion. In the

video, I Changed the time element to blur the boundary of connection between the real image and the drawing. Creating a life like a dream.

Blowing wind

Clay
2023

The little rabbit (a pregnant rabbit or a baby rabbit) is made just of clay. The frailty and mutability of the material deliver the message of the fragility of the world in which we exist. It represents a stage of vulnerability. The clay is easily destroyed, but it also means it could be reshaped and change form. The hand marks indicate wind that is blowing, I hope to make this wind visible, to indicate that the force of the wind was always around us.

When I made this piece I knew I would not fire it, I am very comfortable with it. Lots of people asked me why not fire it and it is very scary that the material is easy to destroy. I have told them that the process of fire is irreversible. This is an experience I was facing in the past. Firing it is scarier for me, it would not stay the same. The student continues to tell me that even with fire, it will come back to dust eventually. I have to rethink the process, I questioned myself: will it be the same? Later, I found the answer. “No man steps into the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man,” said Heraclitus. It is a cycle, but it won’t be the same.

Grandma Painting Series No.3

Watercolor
2022
6 x 4 inch

This series is simply reflecting my feelings and recording the moments I Facetime with my grandmother who was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Her rapid change after chemotherapy is hard to accept. I was afraid of losing another person who I loved. Her skin became dark, she told me she looked ugly. Cancer is no longer a death sentence, but this unsureness is always surrounding us. The feeling of impotent, the evanescence of life, the decay of beauty, the irreversibly wane, what can I do? Will I be able to accept changes?

Emotion is very private to me, I was not comfortable sharing it in public. It took me lots of courage to present it. Soon I learned, that there are lots of people who have experienced cancer even though they look normal to me and people who have the same experiences will connect. Underneath the skin, our souls are connected.

玄牝(mysterious womb)

charcoal drawing on a Chinese booklet
2023
9 feet

“谷神不死，是谓玄牝。玄牝之门，是谓天地根。绵绵若存，用之不勤。”《道德经》第六章

The Spirit of the Valley never dies.

It is called the Mystic Womb.

The Door of the Mystic Womb

Is the root of Heaven and Earth.

Continuously, continuously,

It seems to remain.

Draw upon it

And it serves you with ease.

The mysterious womb described by Laozi symbolized the profound and invisible source of the birth of all things in the universe. As Laozi described the essential Dao of the universe, from life to death and death to life, from being to nothingness, nothingness to being. The death of an individual is a part of the cycle of life. To understand this nature, the mystical womb is a life force. It was here with me and then it passed through me. A tree grows as the wind gently sways its branches. Children grow just like trees. They grow as they feel the caress of the wind. The wind is always with us.

For this piece, I refer to the traditional Chinese scroll landscape. In the scrolling landscape, you can see everything that happens in the great universe. This piece allowed me to see death and existence in a bigger picture and allowed me to find the meaning of Death.

*The unknown of things *(poem written on the side)*

A seed is waking from sleep under the earth

When will the flames of war flare up again

As juveniles, we feel all of this

My mother once said to me, you shouldn't worry about this at your age

The melancholy didn't suit for juvenile

Youngblood should be full of vigor, to the unknown of things

Have you felt the earthquake, the ground start shaking

You won't stand still

The force of nature

Why you dead in the late winter, while the flower will bloom soon

Everything lost in oblivion

Once I left faith to pursuing science

Learning that science and religion are two good friends

They are all searching for the unknown of things. 05.2022

Conclusion:

It is a beautiful journey with a sad delight. Even though I still do not fully understand, sometimes I could never tell this enormous emotion in my heart, I learned just to feel it. Time gives dimension to things, and my emotions have become peaceful. I'm grateful that I am able to express my emotions in painting. I hope our sensibility isn't withered, and our mind is still able to absorb. Even Though it is very abstract, it is mostly close to the soul. I still remember that memorable day when I drove my mother to watch the winter sea. We walked on the beach, and she happily picked the shells to share with me. It is good to see her smile again. We watched the beautiful sun disappearing in silence.

The ghosts are always with us.

Images







A Thanks Letter

Dear Leiko

I found you in the RISD library, a low-shelf corner. Your flowing ghostly girl caught my eye. My heart flowed away too. At that time I didn't know what it was. Years later, this feeling recalled me and encouraged me, The girls wandering in the mountains and river in your painting remind me to find what I have lost. Even though we never met, I want to write this letter to thank you ~

Citation:

Martin, Agnes, and Dieter Schwarz. *Writings = Schriften*. Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1991.

Zhuang Zi, Zhuang Zhou.

Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing), Laozi, 4th century BC.

Night-shining White (Zhao yebai), Wei Xi, 2017.