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Abstraction & Chinese aesthetics

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College
of Imaging Arts and Sciences in candidacy for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Abstraction & Chinese Aesthetics

by

Huei-Ru Chang

May 18, 1999

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Date: _____ May. 24. 99

Dedicated to my father, my mother, my brother,
my professors, my favorite artists, and my lover.
Without their support, encouragement and inspiration,
this work would not have been possible.

List of Illustrations

1. Untitled Painting I - No.1
2. Untitled Painting I - No.2
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13. Wind in the Forest
14. Winter

1. Thesis statement

The purpose of my thesis is to explore a personal interpretation of abstract form, the expressive role of color, experiments in brushwork, space, movement and rhythm. It seems to me that the object matter of my painting, landscape, is the most attractive way to convey my concept. I also wish to develop the Chinese aesthetic in creating my individual artworks.

It is my hope that by evaluating natural phenomena and its visual expression, viewers will sense a passion and sensitivity to the life of physical forms within our visual world.

2 . Abstraction

"What is abstract?"

My friend asked me this question in a serious manner when he knew I was a painting student, and had worked with abstract painting idea. He was a fine art student in his college day and had an extremely academic disciplined foundation in the study of art like me.

I tried to give him a correct answer from the textbook. Unfortunately, my friend seemed to be really unsatisfied and disappointed in my reply. This superficial answer couldn't remove his doubts when he visited the abstract exhibition. And I never forgot this matter.

I studied still life drawing and watercolor at my college. I started the painting abstractly when I came to the United States. I found great artist's pictures in the library: Jackson Pollock, Sam Francis, Edward Betts, Bernard von Eichman, Selden Gile and so on. Their works have opened my eyes to the possibilities of abstract art. The major part of my work for the past two years has been inclined toward the abstract. However, "what is abstract?" After that matter, I asked myself over and

over. I see this as a part of my work, my thesis project.

So, is it the time to answer it again?

The renowned American artist, Edward Betts, presented his point in his book-*Master class in watermedia*

"To push the media beyond descriptive imitation toward the transformation of nature into solely pictorial terms, to form images that have urgency and communicative power and in which poetry or geometry is of more concern than an unimaginative list of visual facts."¹

To a foreign student, it is so hard for me, using the second language to convey some deep, non-academic meaning to this question. So I tried to find the best and closest answer from books.

3. Chinese aesthetic

Here is Professor Jerome Silbergeld writing on *Chinese Painting Style* in the book on *Indrotuction*:

"Painting is a language. It emerges from part of the conscious, and part of unconscious artists mind. It reaches us through somewhat controlled, somewhat chance manipulation of brush, pigments, and ground."²

I paint abstractly. I guess when people think about abstraction, their associations are about: intense color, geometric form, and so on. It is hard to believe that someone will consider that traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy are related to abstraction. However, to me, Chinese painting and calligraphy deeply play the an important part in my abstract work.

I am not a art critic or scholar. I don't intend to provide some academic theory or analysis as proof of what I think. These are just my feelings and viewpoints of my own work.

In my childhood, my father often brought me to the galleries and museums to visit Chinese traditional master works and forced me to learn Chinese calligraphy. In that time, I did not know

anything about art. I just held the brush and copied the old masters for a couple of years, and then forgot what I have learned in calligraphy a long time ago.

When I studied here, I found out I have a strong interest in brushwork. I enjoyed holding the brush in the different gesture and strength to press, drag or rub the surface in order to create the various line qualities. I started searching Chinese calligraphy and landscape books and was surprised to find the individual brush movements and artistic energy, the rich, varied textures, the organic shapes and nature forms made by dense brushwork. All of these inspired me during my painting process.

The Chinese painter would not have said, "I think, therefore I am," but rather "I experience, therefore I create."³

The previous statement was presented by Professor George Rowley in his book: *Principles of Chinese Painting*. I think, this description does not point out the general concept of Chinese art, but also convey my personal philosophy of art.

4. The sources of my works

In *Master Class in Watermedia*, Edward Betts described:

"Abstraction is not the sort of thing you just jump into without acquiring a thorough understanding of subject beforehand ."4

Nature is the best teacher. You never know how much you can learn from him. I enjoyed going out for a walk ever since I was a kid. Part of the reason is to observe everything around me, and I never felt bored about that even while repeating it everyday. I found myself noticing, collecting, and memorizing shapes, forms, and proportions of nature.

Most landscape painters concentrate generally toward working on location, directly from nature. However, in my own case, I enjoy working in the studio and listening to my favorite CDs. My memory is just like a storehouse from which to paint or draw impressions and images at a later time. In this way, my mind is not cluttered by complex or specific details of scenes that might weaken a picture's total impact. Memory sifts the trivia and details.

To me, music is also a source of imagery for my work.

Actually, I can't submit any obvious proof how music sparks my mind to "conceive paintings that could be the visual equivalents."⁵ But I believe, in my subconsciousness, that it works on me.

5. The media of my works

I generally mix watercolor and acrylic, applying them thickly or thinly as the painting demands. I have always enjoyed experimenting with the mix of these two water-based paints for achieving rich surfaces in combining opaque and transparent qualities. Although many great artists can create their best effects with pure watercolor or acrylic, I think that the possibilities of mixing media can offer a range of distinctly various technical effects and you can create more expressive paintings.

Acrylic and watercolor can be made to blend into one another almost imperceptibly because they have very much the same characteristics. When acrylic is greatly diluted with water, it is capable of producing the effects of transparent watercolor, even though it is classed as an opaque medium. However, when I want to give my blank, empty background a transparent, atmospheric effect, I still favor watercolor in preference for its luminosity and freshness.

But watercolor does have its limitations. It can't possibly

Missing Page

6. The methods of my works

Centuries ago, One of the great Chinese painters, Dai-Chien Chang, was fond of flung-ink techniques. In West, some contemporary artists poured, dribbled and flung their paint without the direct touch of brush to canvas. To me, the most important thing is not what methods and techniques one applies but what surface effects and textures one wants.

I always spray, spatter or stipple my paints. Various placement of the shape and overlapping of the sprayed paint produce interesting surface textures and color depth. It seems to me that rich, vivid color and various form suggest the scene of nature: a field of flowers, grasses, trees and so on.

In the early stages, I usually start painting freely and spontaneously. I dribble or fling my paints and enjoy watching unplanned things appear on my white paper. "Let the painting grow naturally."⁷ I keep my painting open and flexible to explore the relationship in color and form and then organize the overall composition. Let the image evoke my feeling and impulse, and

follow it. I quite agree the viewpoint of Edward Betts:

"when you have to said all you wanted to say, when nothing can be added or subtracted without upsetting the picture's overall organization. At that point, your painting is finished."⁸

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Endnotes

- ¹ Edward H.Betts. 1993. Master Class in Watermedia. New York:
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- ² Jerome Silbergeld. 1992. Chinese Painting Style. the University
of Washington Press. P.3
- ³ George Rowley. 1959. Principles of Chinese Painting. New
Jersey: Princeton University Press. P.31
- ⁴ Edward H.Betts. 1993. Master Class in Watermedia. New York:
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- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid. P.100



























