

Emptiness as a Visual Strategy:

An Exploration of Visual Absence in Contemporary Art Practice

Appendices

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Yue Qu Zhao

1 Documentation of Experimental Processes

Comments on the works

- This series is the departing point of my research in exploring the idea of emptiness. Although without clear directions or locations of how my project will develop, I expect to find a different vision that extends the spirit of tradition and also extends beyond myself. It is like rediscovering classical aesthetics via adapting Western painting media. Using the Chinese painting brush with acrylic on canvas, the visual outcomes look close to ink painting but contain stronger visual impact.
- I was also looking for the obscure atmosphere that encompasses painting and my mind through organic forms in order to approach the idea of emptiness. The key approach is to **experiment** and **react** to using **unexpected water** and **paint marks** within the creative process without any drafts and referenced with minimal visual elements. The process is interesting and inspiring, however I feel this painting method is very limited, and seems to have less depth both visually and metaphorically.

Selected works from left to right:
14-05-05. Acrylic on canvas. 460 x 350 mm; 12-05-05; 22-05-05; 18-05-05; 15-05-05

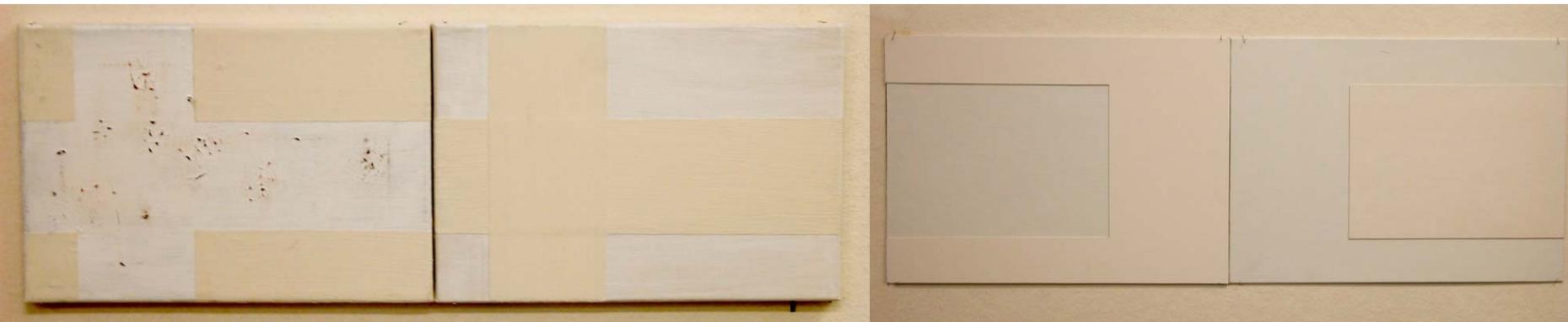


Selected works on top: 15-04-05. Acrylic on canvas. 280 x 710 mm.
Bottom left:: 05-04-05. Acrylic on canvas. 240 x 660 mm.
Bottom right: 15-04-05. White board on canvas. 280 x 710 mm.



Comments on the works

- I was interested in the physical and metaphysical meaning of white in these works. White objects seemed **pure, plain** and **mute**, they intrigue the feeling of remoteness away from the real world. They also looked weightless although they have shadow.
- I felt the texture and relief were fascinating; the idea was to let air flow through my painting surface.
- The works were made in pairs. My idea was to paint '**negatively**' and '**reversed**', like doing something, but then eliminating it. By finding the absence of both, the viewer has the choice of shifting these elements differently from the visual form and representation.
- Later, I realised that these geometric forms seemed so solid and rigid that I should look for something that is formless and spontaneous.





01-08-05. Acrylic on canvas. 610 x 610 mm.

Comments on the work

- In this work, I used **white** space and empty holes both as **negative elements** to explore emptiness. But they turned out with different qualities, suggesting a solid fullness.
- Then what is so called 'negative' or 'positive' in relation to emptiness?
- I am thinking how to **engage** the **space** strategically and effectively with limited elements.



15-03-06. Acrylic on canvas. 280 x 355 mm.



- A very similar approach as previous art works towards **likeness** through a combination of black paint and silver, the **unexpected interaction** of flowing silver and wet background black transformed from an obscure 'sky' to a dense forest and merged into a 'landscape'.
- This is an inspiring creative process and an interesting painting method for my further experiments in developing artistic imagery.



15-03-06. Acrylic on canvas. 280 x 355 mm.



11-08-05. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas, 740 x 740 mm.

Comments on the work

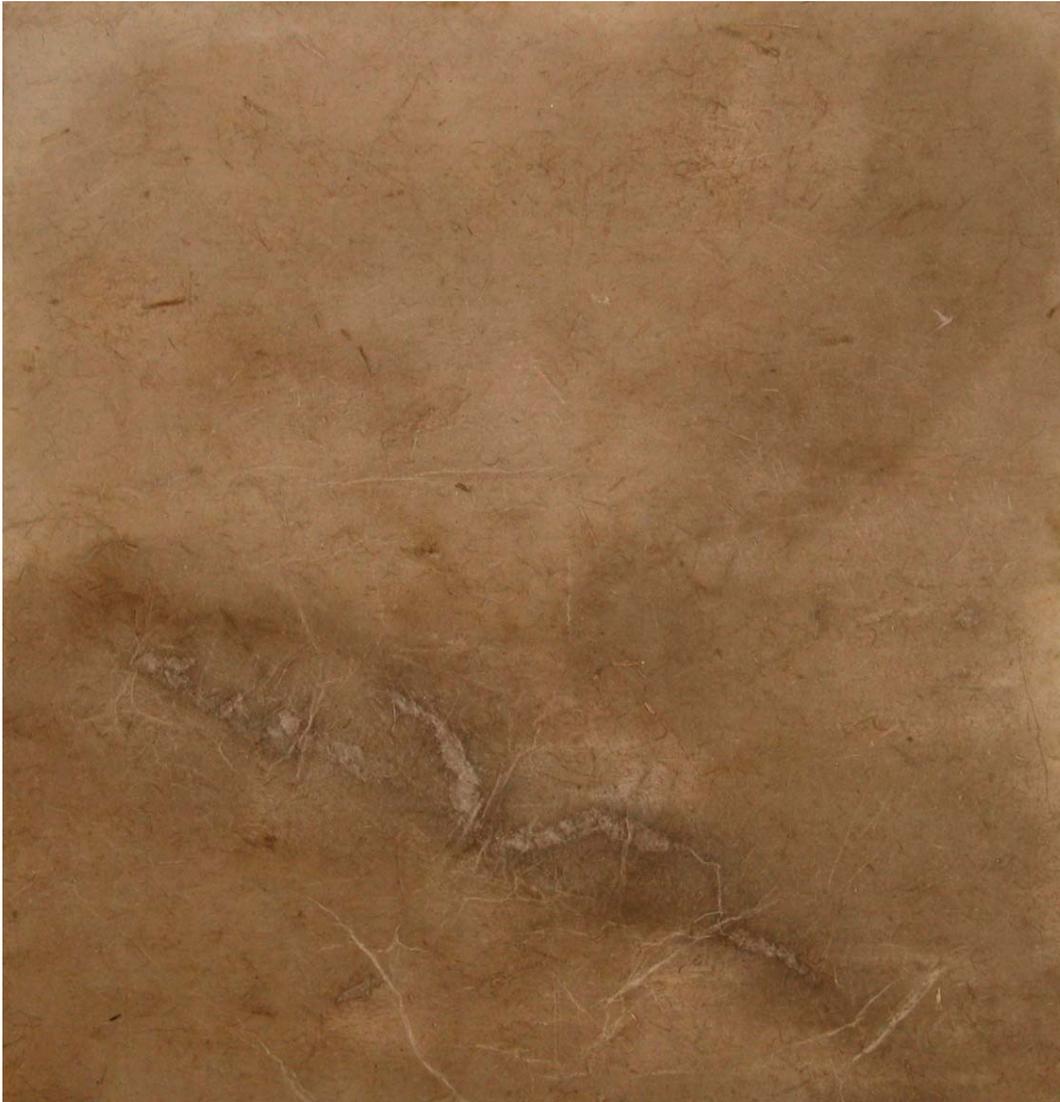
- After experiments in Chinese painting methods with Western media, I started to add Xuan Zhi in the next series of explorations but mounted it on canvas. It arouses a strong feeling of **cultural identity**, and I consider this to be my main medium for this project, because it gives me more freedom to create unique visual effects through combining and controlling the wetness of paint, movement and skill of the brush stroke, shade and line in producing visual diversity. It is also inspiring during the creative process and makes me feel confident to achieve the thing I want.
- This work refers to the metaphor of emptiness as changing and formless cloud, through exploring the visual transformation from visible to invisible via the fading shades to reflect a **moment of change**.
- It seems **poetic** when water and paint play on the paper. It permeates or dissolves **naturally** and **unexpectedly**. The water marks are **continuously** changing and extending. Thus spontaneous feelings unfold through the visible.



Partial area of last work



Partial area of last work



25-08-05. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 740 x 740 mm.

- I am trying to unfurl the void (emptiness) with an obscure brushstroke. **Everything** was **enveloped** in this **void**. From my point of view, I feel less connected to the content of calligraphy than to its form. In the **faded** white background, I am inspired by the profound historical and **cultural aura** of tradition.
- The crack emerged by accident, then I recovered the damaged surface by **wash** and **dye**. It is challenging to seek uncertainty and clarity during the creative process. It provides me with new potentials.

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Reference:
Emperor Huizong
(1082-1135) .
Circular Fan Script
of the Caoshu.
Ink on silk.
284 x 280 mm. Shanghai.



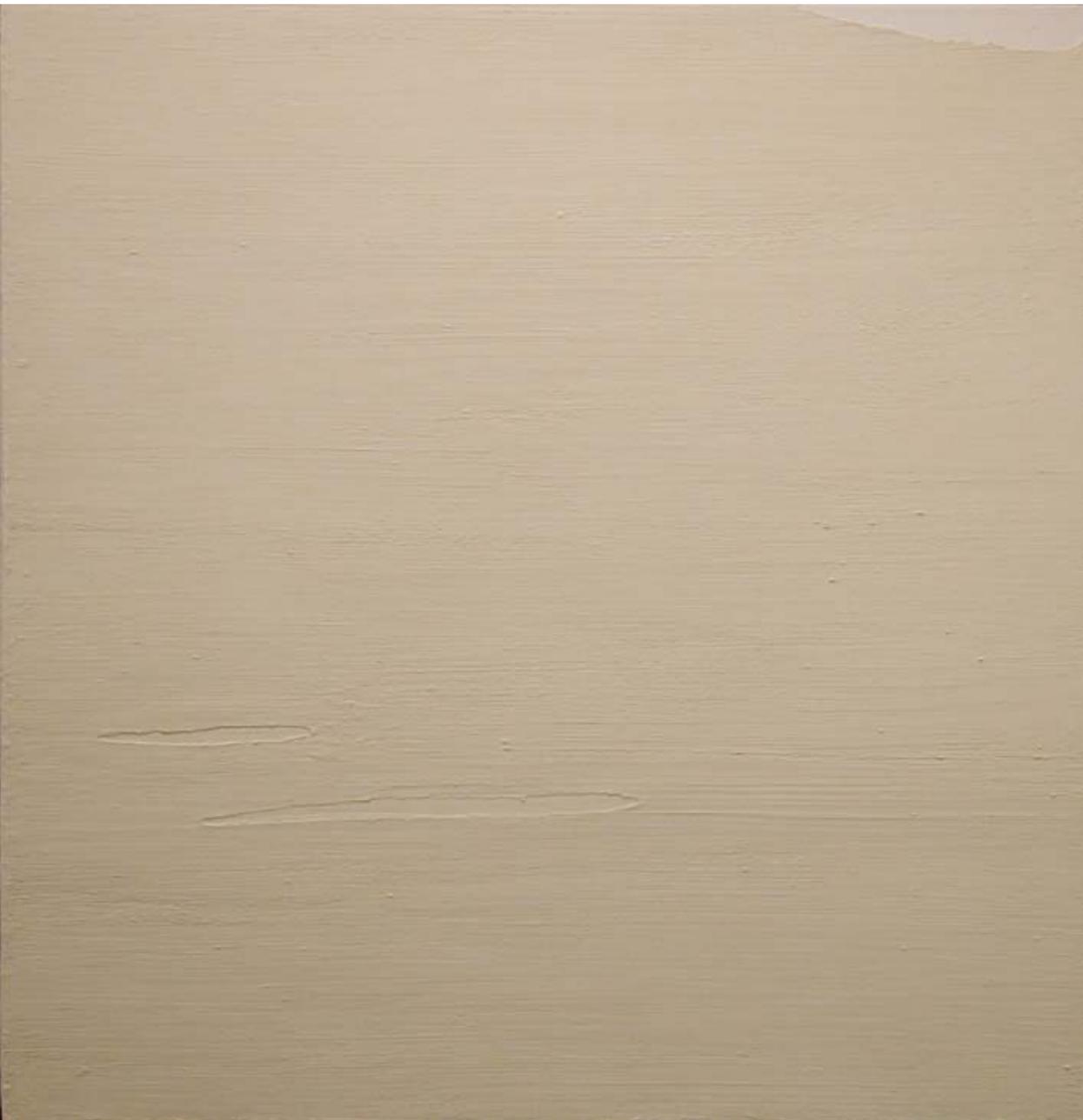
Partial area of last work



02-09-05. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 740 x 740 mm.

- Work on p. 11 and this painting structure inspired by Chinese calligraphy, I **discard this subject** in later experiments, because it may not be easily understood by people from different cultural background.
- In between the obscurity of brushstroke and clarity of the texture, I am suggesting that they are **complementing** each other through emptiness and fullness. It is visually **obscure** but **emotional full**.





Partial area of the work



Acrylic on canvas. 740 x 740 mm.



Year One Masters Exhibition Work: 07-10-2005. Acrylic on canvas. 920 x 1830 mm.

Partial area of last work



Comments on the works

- These are the works for the year one exhibition. They are separate panels with the integrated idea of emptiness and fullness. I want to suggest an **introspective thinking** rather than an acceptance.
- Each of my works started from **nothing**, and developed into a work and gave birth to another. They were **deconstructing** each other but also **connecting** to each other.
- I named my work as 'nothingness'. Like the **Sutra** of the Buddhist idea, it is a book **without words**; it is about the inner thoughts of individual.
- Using Western painting materials, which I am not familiar with, seems to make it difficult to unfurl potential artistic creations.



12-09-05. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 500 x 600 mm.

- Inspired by experimenting with the Western painting method of embossing, I set out to produce a textured surface with wrinkled Xuan Zhi as 'natural form' and to create visual interest and interactions.
- The explored painting space aroused an infinite feeling of wildness and desolation that attracts me. Partly covered with white paint, the 'scene' becomes **obscure** and **profound**.
- I feel that these two paintings may have the potentialities to develop further, but I have no idea at this stage.



15-10-05. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 740 x 740 mm.





Partial area of last work

Reflection in and on recent practices

- I realise that the white embossed series made using Western painting methods may **go too far** by only relying on concept and 'new' material. I wonder, from the Chinese perspective, whether the holes I have made on the canvas are able to serve as harmonic elements or not.
- I also wonder whether in the experiments with textured Xuan Zhi I have **provided enough visual clues** for the viewer.
- What is more important to artist? **New idea** or **philosophical thinking**? Or the approaches/methods for transform ideas into visible images?
- Is my current approach effective? What if I provide **more visual clues** - will these clues be able to trigger **viewers** to **perceive** and **unfurl** their own experiences, emotions and interpretations about the work?

Relocating the concept of the project

- After refreshing and digesting previous practical and theoretical research, I **repositioned** my location away from conceptual ideas and towards the approach of a **vigorous expression**. **Visual clarity** and **obscurity** are complemented by applying **various strokes** and **shades** in **references** to **different intentions** and **objects** in nature which inspire me.
- I realised that without enough visual clues, the **visual absence** may **not be able to unfurl** its potentiality. **Theoretical** and **philosophical thinking** can only serve as a conception; artists also have to consider how to **transform** their **internal feelings**, through their **unique skills/approaches**, into a **visible image** to stir the **viewer**. Only when artists are able to find a **balance** between **an external rationale** and **internal emotion** may they be able to achieve a perfect harmony.

Readjusting the practical approaches

- After I had experimented with different materials, I decided to choose **water-based semi-transparent** paint with Xuan Zhi as my main materials. This is because I think they are suitable for conveying the **subtle changes** in the **obscure** and yet **limpid** image, and allow the flat painting surface to reflect an internal experience to the external world.
- My previous experiments on **textual** and **obscure** space were able to be blended through my new approach as **layers** to produce **obscure atmosphere** or texture that **enriches** the painting.
- I also decided to choose **flowers** and **birds** as my **subjects** and **emotional carriers** to reflect the **discipline of nature**. Their profound yet ordinary nature vitalises my spiritual and emotional experience and enables extension from painting to be attained.
- Influenced by artists Zao Wou-ki (1989) [赵无极] and Gao Xingjian (2001,p.6) [高行健], I consider my **new** approach as **not losing** the **traditional cultural values** or **unique skills of the artist**.



07-02-06. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 800 x 1000 mm.



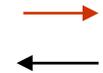
- I tried to capture a feeling of beauty in the **splendrous dancing moment** of a pair of butterflies.
- The new approach was to add **figurative elements** and to provide some clues to complement the obscurity.
- I collected some photos and experimented with them in Photoshop using it as a tool to help me **visualise** my ideas.
- I explored between dry and moist, moving and still, form and formless, partial **incompleteness** but integral **completeness** in approaching **visual emptiness** but **emotional fullness**.
- I **shuttled** my self between **outside** and **inside** the image during the creative process. **When I paint**, I feel subjectively **engaged** in this space; when I **stop**, I become an **'other'** person to judge objectively whether the approach works or not.



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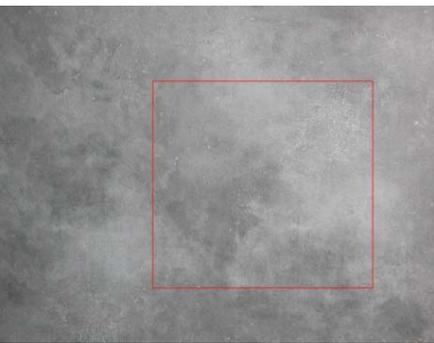
■ Computer image

■ More details of the transforming process are discussed in the following practice.

Imagery. 2006. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.

Methods, approaches and comments

- Avoiding formulaised expression, differing from traditional artists painting by memory recall, I do value life drawing, experiencing, observing and also taking photographs as important tools for discovering, recording and studying nature. These enable me to capture the direct feelings and changeable forms in nature for creation. However, for practical application in a painting, I need to **reconstruct**, **transplant** and **integrate** different ideas or intentions into an articulated artistic image.
- Working with the computer to process and develop layouts enables me to visualise and to transform natural scenes to imaginary images. It makes the transformation visible and approachable. It also provides a potential effect for me to refer to.
- Everyday experience is mundane and ordinary until we discover the emotional and spiritual nature of life. I was quite happy and excited about these transformed images, which imply the metaphoric imagery of nature and are embedded within my emotional experience.
- However, from a computer image to an art work, there is a big gap in development and transformation. Sometimes enlightenment will happen during the painting process. Brush and paint in action directed by my instinct and mental state make significant differences. My decision affects the various proportions of mixing colour and water, changing shades or shapes and the interacting **empty space presented at** the same time.



Visualising process
in computer

- A photo of a textured wall.
- Picking up the best part.
- Magnifying the interesting feature.
- Exploring colour to suit the image.
- A random shape & magnified plant.
- Feathered edge & transparency.
- Integrating two layers.



■ Computer image

■ Painting process

- I explored the same subject with different colours, shades, and expressions to see how these relevant visual elements are recomposed and interacted with each other.
- In ancient artist Ma Yuan's composition, he selects a 'small' scene rather than a panoramic view to engage the painting space from corners and edges. Through the powerful and dynamic composition, it has drawn intention from outside to inside, and the internal space extends the image to outside.
- In this series of painting, I discarded the major details of the plants as a hidden image, and covered them with a transparent obscurity to create a visual depth. The different colour and texture may arouse a subtle change of feelings.
- For me the unexpected transparent water marks are more interesting and expressive than the visuals of the later one; it looks still but moving, it implies a quiet change, suggesting a moving and extended emotional space from the subject.

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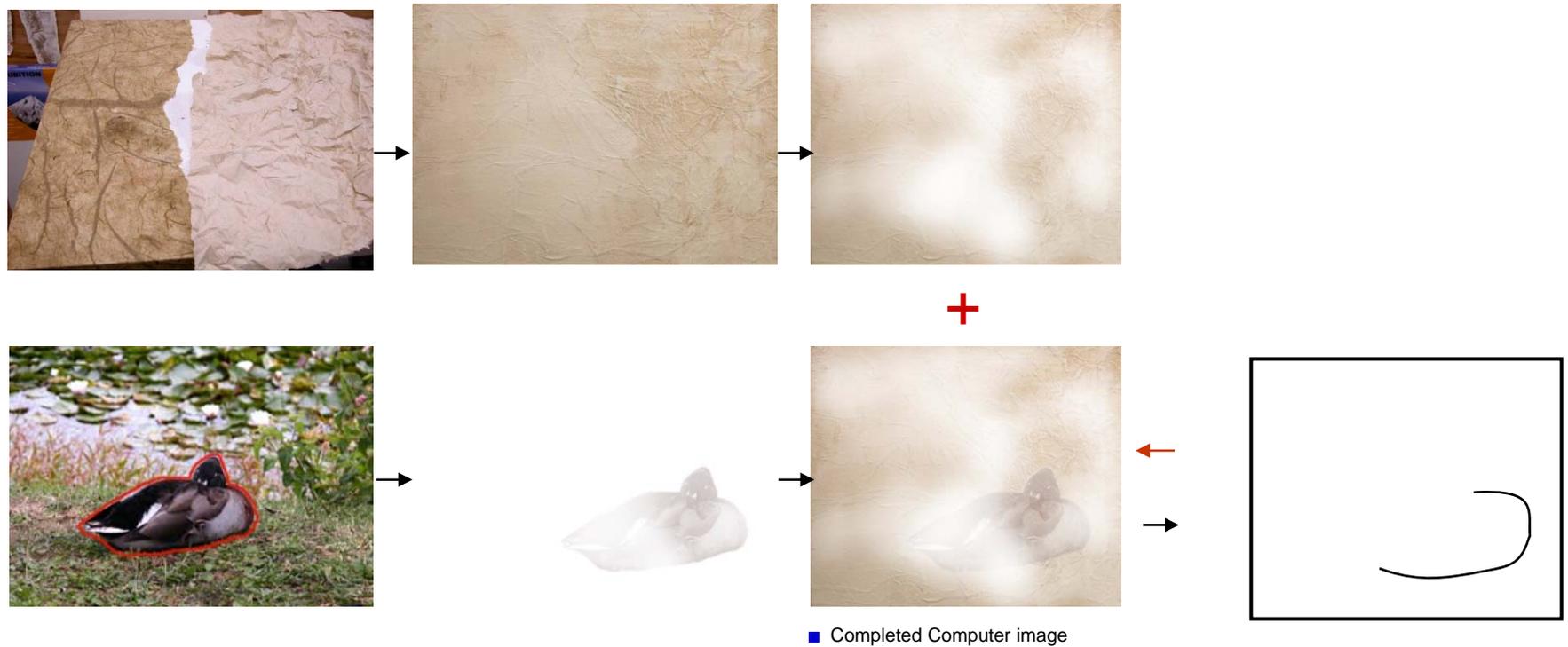
■ Ma Yuan Song Dynasty (about 1190—1224). *Plum and swimming ducks.*



Deep forest. 2008. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 1600 x 2000 mm.

Methods, Approaches and Comments

- This two-panel large scale painting contains stronger visual impact and visual space that I feel entirely involved with. It approaches a wider and deeper view, but in a non-perspective scene.
- I mounted two layers of Xuan Zhi together, so it was hard to approach the work with spontaneity. I need more experience to handle different types of Xuan Zhi. The overall colour was not what I expected.
- But the most valuable thing is that this painting draws my attention to the organisation of the visual rhythm, through interaction between dry and wet, presence and absence, detailed and not detailed, from small to big, and part to whole.
- The completed effect was produced with extensive repetition of wash and dye, sprinkled faint colour particles and rendered details in order to approach the rich but obscure feelings that evoke the feeling of deep forest.
- I chose this colour is because it aroused a feeling of ancient Chinese painting and a strong historic and cultural atmosphere.



- The duck is a common creature that lives in the natural world beside ponds, beaches and around running water and beautiful plants. A place that contains emptiness and harmony.
- In this composition, the duck was positioned at the corner and enveloped with big empty space by means of the sleeping pose with its head backing towards the inner space. The visual flow leads the viewer's intention back to the central emptiness. Part of the duck's body was dissolved into the mist to produce visual interest and depth.
- I experimented casually with pressed paper texture to recall an obscure imagery; this approach may be different from tradition. I did some painting which integrates texture with painted image. It is quite interesting, but needs more exploration of how these elements interplay.
- In the picture, I try to approach a 'nobody' scene where viewers may engage themselves with a very close part of the natural world. The **texture suggests something in between**. It may feel like wild reeds or wetland, but it is obscure.

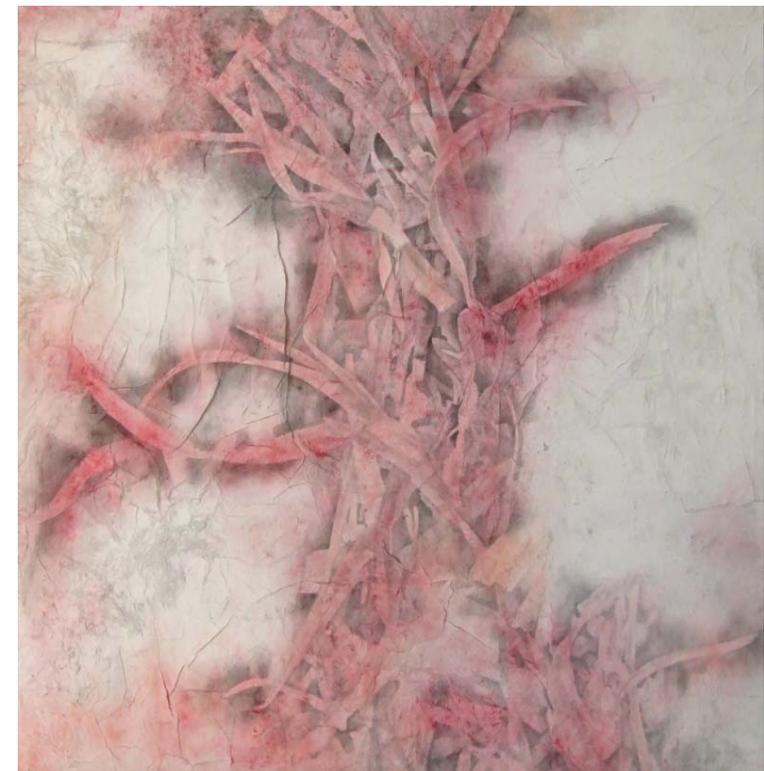
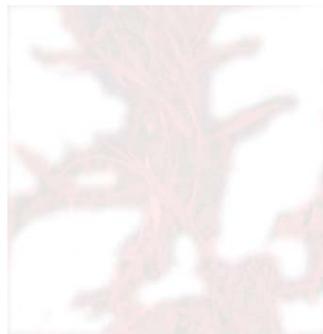


Morning Dew. 2007. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 500 x 600 mm.



Visualising the process on computer

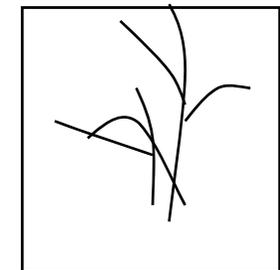
- With a textured canvas.
- Exploring colour to approach feeling.
- A selected pose of dancing grass.
- Feathered edge & transparency.
- Blending two layers.



■ Computer image

■ Painting process

- I captured a moment of **grass dancing** in the breeze, and enveloped it with the colour of **sunset**. In addition, this image evoked for me the feeling of traditional calligraphy in its visual rhythm, engaged and responded to the space, and the interplay of trends between each element.
- The composition is based on a linear structure; through the interwoven curving leaves that unfurl and extend at different angles and levels, it shows a zigzag tendency under the effect of gravity. The metaphor of grass suggests the live force of an ordinary tiny object in a harsh environment.
- Different from the traditional expression of orchids or grass, my expression has more emphasis on the perceptual feeling of a particular moment. In ancient master Shi Tao's way of thinking, all skills should serve an artist's feelings; studying nature and skills are important, but the enlightened self is crucial to achieve artistic Xiang.
- However the overall effect may not be successful, the thickness of colour and texture seem concrete and dry. The step one with remained empty background seems more effective. And the relationship between subject and empty space may feel a bit isolated.





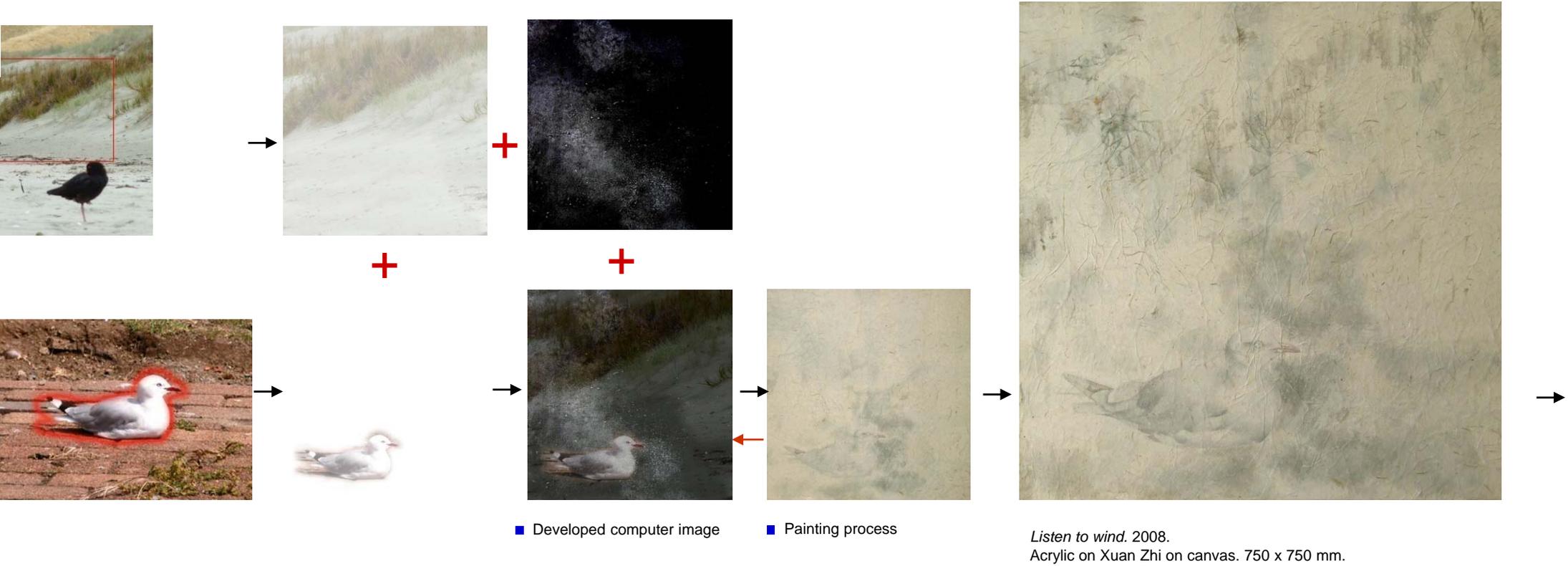
Sunset. 2008. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 750 x 750 mm.



■ Two tests on different rice papers and approaches.



- Here are two approaches using different colour, Xuan Zhi, and expressive technique. The previous one is more towards Xie Yi in sketching the form, and the interaction between the shape and spontaneous ink expression seem interesting. The later one provides more details of the rendering; the steps 2 & 3 from each work may feel more interesting than final.
- Both of them are unsuccessful. I don't feel these visuals are able to transform the immanent image. No enlightenment was involved, nothing special and nothing exciting to me.
- Another issue bothers me is that the paint fades out on the painting surface when it becomes dry. It takes time to gain the necessary experience in achieving the right effect from controlling the proportions of water and ink; I am striving for the highly experienced skill which by means of simple brush contains essential spiritual form.



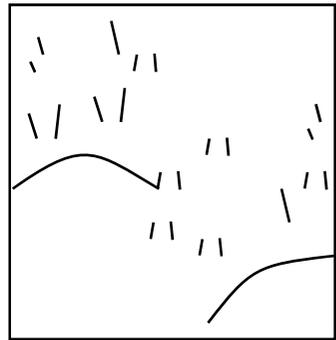
- Inspired by one of last year's art works, I explored a different scene by adding in new elements and different feelings.
- It is still unfinished; I haven't figured out how to deal with the background.

■ Observing and studying birds and their relationship with the environment





■ Zoomed-in computer image



■ Painting process



■ Testing on textured surface

- The creative process is not just simply putting everything together, it depends on whether all the elements interplay well at the same time, from intentions and ideas to appropriate visual elements, and skills (whether they can be executed in the right way). And whether an emerging new idea is able to react, reflect and transform into an effective expression.
- This work intends to communicate an obscurity that is aroused from a desolate and lush scene. Most of the visual details of grasses merge into the darkness: I achieved this effect of a mottled texture through wash and dye, and sprinkled and amassed colour particles to produce a compounded subtlety. The rich yet obscure feeling contains an uncertain likeness of the detailed particularity of the grass, and is complemented by the perceptible vast likeness.
- The approach to composition was different from the Western approach of using geometric structure; rather it communicates a sublime experience with nature through enlightened art forms and order.

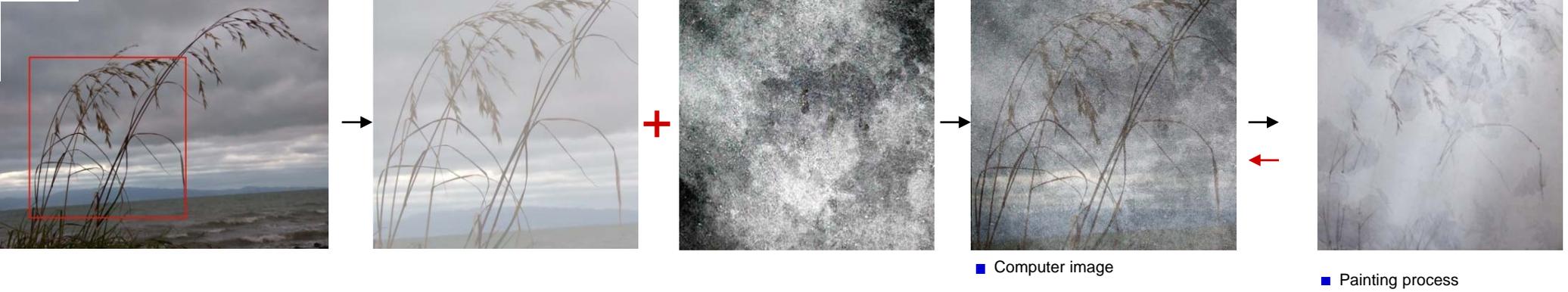


- In this image, although it looked quite 'full', I explored the visual absence through limited use of paint, and kept some part of the reeds unpainted, as a negative form.
- I used alum (明矾) to keep the form or area blank so that wet paint couldn't come through. The subject here is more like a negative shape. This could be a useful approach for me to explore later.





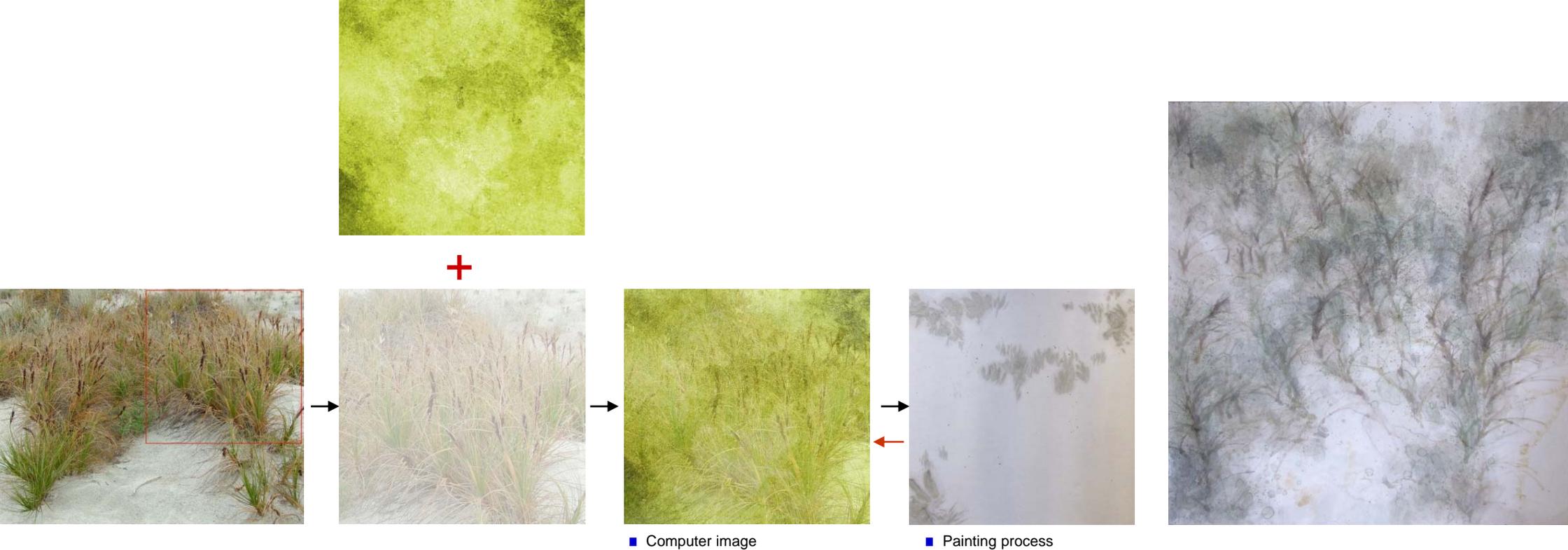
Breeze. 2008. Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



- I chose reeds as my subject, because they arouse a feeling of sadness and loneliness like winter, particularly when they are fluttering in rain or wind. I am deeply moved by this beauty in nature. From the Chinese philosophical perspective, emptiness is hiding in a wild corner of the natural world, which is tranquil, deep and serene and in no way disturbing. Thus it allows full concentration of the mind to feel the quietly changing rhythm of nature.
- The plants look still yet moving, from past to present; for them there are no big differences yet our life has changed. However, they are changing in every moment, every day or year, accompanying the season and weather. These changes in nature arouse different feelings and metaphors. However, internal feelings are unable to be approached visually except in that they constitute a carrier. So, I chose a natural scene interweaved with fog, rain, wind or an obscure environment to represent the subtle changing of feelings.
- I chose a particular feature from the above picture because the structure contained simple yet diverse changes. The waving leaves suggested movement and through their unfurled poses extending different angles divided the visual space into various triangles. Visually, the form also contains changes in long lines and small parcels, density and distance, straight and curved, dark and light. All these natural elements are compounded into a visual rhythm.
- I integrated a texture layer in the computer image, not because it looks abstract, but in order to arouse my obscure feelings and to enrich the imagery and blank space. It seems to contain a great deal of content and feeling yet is also obscure for me to refer to when painting. The sprinkled silver elements emphasise a visual rhythm to enrich and complement the subject and painting, also suggesting moving particles in air or drops of water.
- In this approach, the empty space is more effective because the inside and outside empty space of the painting seem to respond and interact. The inner space became open and extended to outside. The approach may change for different subjects, which is why I explored various subjects, expressions, forms and feelings of visual absence.

■ Photograph of Autumn reeds in different times and places





- The visual construction is enlightened and activated by the randomly wavering grass. Referencing the idea of emptiness in painting aesthetics, it is invisible yet it takes the form of things. So my consideration of developing Xiang also followed a self-referencing to the object itself to discover the inner relationship. Vigour was instilled through the gestures of wavering grasses. The interactions between repetition and order expanded the painting space and developed into a vast unity with visual rhythm. The background was purified as an empty space that opened up and extended the confined painting space.
- Naming a work is quite subjective sometimes: I relate their names to the feeling and experience that each painting might convey, what I was trying to say within the work, and what aroused me after painting had been done. Sometimes the outcome is completely different from my original idea. This obscurity and distance between painting and my immanent imagery is fascinating; it's hard to tell which one is more real.



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■ Testing on different paper



■ Painting process

■ Computer image integrating transparency and obscurity

- I paint flowers because they represent a marvel and beauty of nature. They look so weak and fragile yet they are strong enough to grow through the tough ground and environment. They are extraordinary, yet common in our everyday life.
- The composition here drew attention to the flower, although the flower is a negative and very loose shape and almost blank; however the diagonal and dense leaves outline the hiding flower. The subject is slightly off-centre to balance their tendency. The completed outline of flower is broken by a small leaf which indicates an upward tendency.
- Comparing the two practices that I have done with the same subject, the latter one seems more vigorous due to its improved physical appearance and composition, fluid vigour and obscure space. I discarded the sketching stroke in the later flower, instead using wash and dye to distinguish the differences between flower and leaf.
- Also the latter white subject is painted negatively with limited paint to render the layer of petals, but to draw more attention to establishing the background and atmosphere. It seems that the details and empty space disappear and dissolve in obscurity and extend to the outside space.



■ Photographic visual resources: Different physical appearances of the iris and natural environment in Summer





Iris 2. 2008. Water colour on paper. 190 x 210 mm.

- Though I am happy with the work *Iris*, it may be overdone in terms of providing visual details.
- As an alternative, I intend to reduce the colours, shades and physical details further to see how the imagery works.
- I used light grey as a basic shade to complement the sprinkled silver to create a subtle feelings.
- I wanted to evoke another kind of feelings through purity and simplicity.



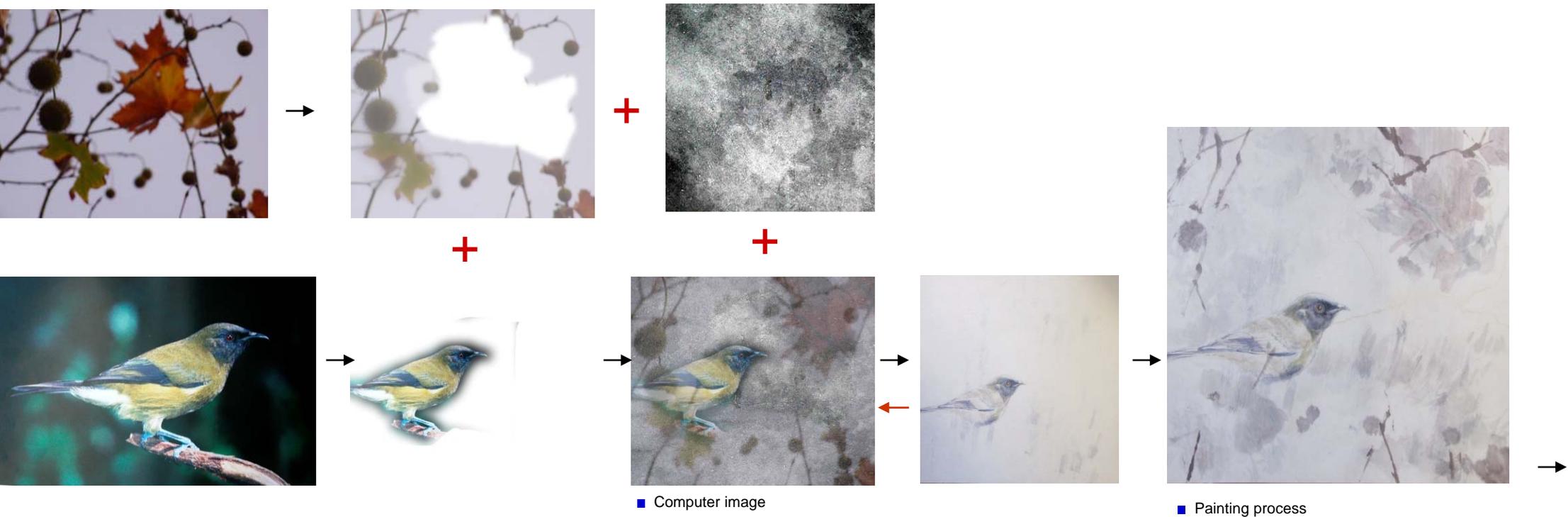
Iris 4. 2008. Water colour on paper. 190 x 210 mm.

- This work uses only one colour to approach the sensitivity and essence of form.
- It reduces the likeness of the flower with reversed painted areas and the hiding details. Thus the visual structure and inter-relationship of flower and leaves have changed.
- As such, it explores an alternative transformation of empty and full visual forms.



Iris 3. 2008. Water colour on paper. 190 x 210 mm.

- Experiments with the combination of two colours, and the details from different parts.
- The yellow seems unnecessary and is disturbing the overall obscurity.



- Different from some other approaches which have clearer intentions, I left some unsolved visual approaches for later discovery, flexibilities and possibilities.
- I reconstructed three different visual layers together by interacting the idea of bird and scattered autumn leaves with visual obscurity, also indicating a moving bird in a tranquil space with fine detail.
- However, this result may not work that well; the bird and environment have not attained an effective interaction. I felt a bit lost during the process.



Intentions of Autumn. 2008. Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



■ Computer image



■ Painting process

- I approached luminous plants on a dim background. Visually, the effect of grass seems interesting, but the background looks concrete. I shall need to explore further on the similar subject by testing the proportion of water and ink to achieve a dim but transparent visual effect.
- I am interested in rock and grass because although neither of them move, rock has no life and is concrete whereas grass is soft and usually in action. They balance and rely on each other. Parasitic grass living on rock contains vitality. Sheltered by rock, grass grows stronger. Also, visually they contain the various relationships and qualities of static and moving, big and small, full and empty, hard and soft, for me to explore. Obviously, I have not been enlightened as to the proper composition and form of expression that go beyond physical fullness.



■ Natural looking grass and rocks in different forms



Luminosity. 2008. Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



Methods, Approaches and Comments

- Inspired by the previous experiment, I found transparency and luminosity to be a form of visual obscurity suitable to paint flowers, no longer producing a dim and dark feeling.
- The combination of using a minimal tint of ink and pink seems interesting. This visual quality uniquely differs from Western art which emphasizes physical form, light and colour.



Transparency. 2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



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■ Computer image

- The visual seems fine, but I do feel its imagery is overwhelmed by conventions. Many Chinese artists from past to present have explored this subject, and the metaphor of this subject is popular, so it is hard to embed something new and fresh. Although my expression blends Gong-bi and ink skills, for me it may have less capacity in extended meaning and form.
- However, the Western viewer may not be familiar with Chinese metaphor. Will they maybe decode it in a different way?
- The composition of three main subjects and space around seems to work, and some transparent and dissolved details are useful visual experiences for me to explore further.



■ Painting process





Dance. 2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



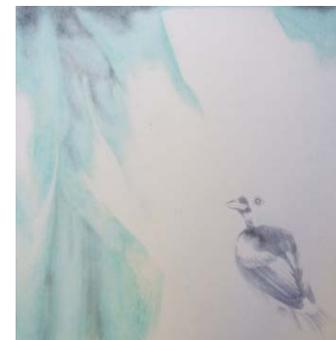
■ Photograph of Fire



■ Computer image



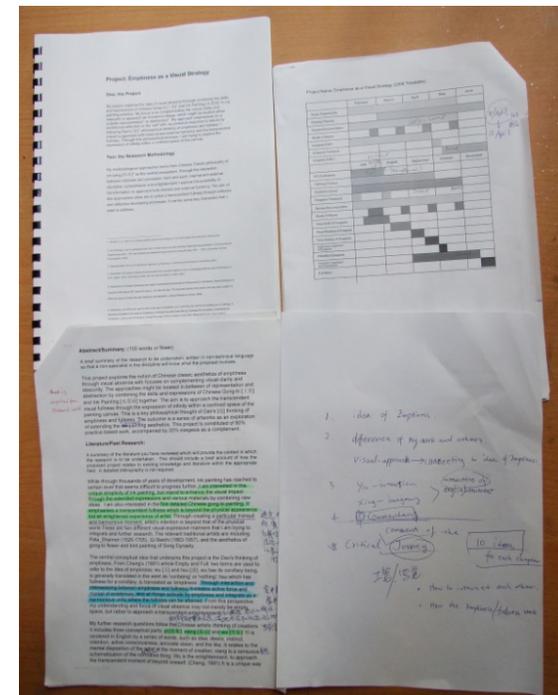
■ Painting process



- My intention wasn't quite clear when I started this work. The fire image was taken from a fireplace long time ago. I was fascinated by its formless transformation. It felt like 'something' but nothing. I 'saw' a big plants and that aroused my imaginary image.
- I drew my intention to combine the unlikeness of the 'plant' and the likeness of the bird, and also to establish a visual complementary pair of spontaneous 'leaves' and fine-detail bird.
- However, the bird and plant did not work together. I used alum to control the absorbency of Xuan Zhi for the area I needed to render, but then it became difficult to apply the spontaneity approach.



Fog. 2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



Reflections in and on the series of experiments with Xuan Zhi

- Visual absence was explored through washed-and-dyed color shade, color space, blank space, negative shape, abstract form, transplant, sketch, incompleteness, dimness, luminousness and transparency to replace visual clarity and to realise an uncertain perception.
- The obscurity associated presence with absence and established a virtual space. It invites individuals with their own experience and thought to fill up and attain fullness. I defined a conscious and imaginary obscurity through personal experience to respond to emptiness in the traditional and cultural context, realised through visual expression.
- With partly rendered flowers and bird as visual clarity, subjects embed my emotional experiences and thought, not only for their beautiful appearance, but also as a dialogue and reflection between my self, painting and the external world.
- My expression blended representation and abstraction, because my immanent imagery is limpid and contains vigorous details that have to be carefully rendered. The Xie Yi approach does not satisfy me in its established form. Yet Gong-bi expression is lacking in spiritual 'unlikeness'. Through blending, my visual approach becomes enriched and diverse, and interweaves emotion with spiritual space: where clarity attained an extension and capacity, the obscurity became an approachable feeling. It is an immanent space to approach emptiness and communicate through visual form.
- As a journey, I experienced and discovered emptiness and fullness through painting. Every painting is a small world; it is full because it brings my imagination freely to each subtle temporal feeling, even if I have failed during the process. Each painting evokes a spiritual and emotional moment from empty space, and I try to relive internal experience through creative processes. However, only few of them are able to enlighten me to reveal the perfect balance. I realise that the most moving moment is when I start to portray the immanent Xiang.

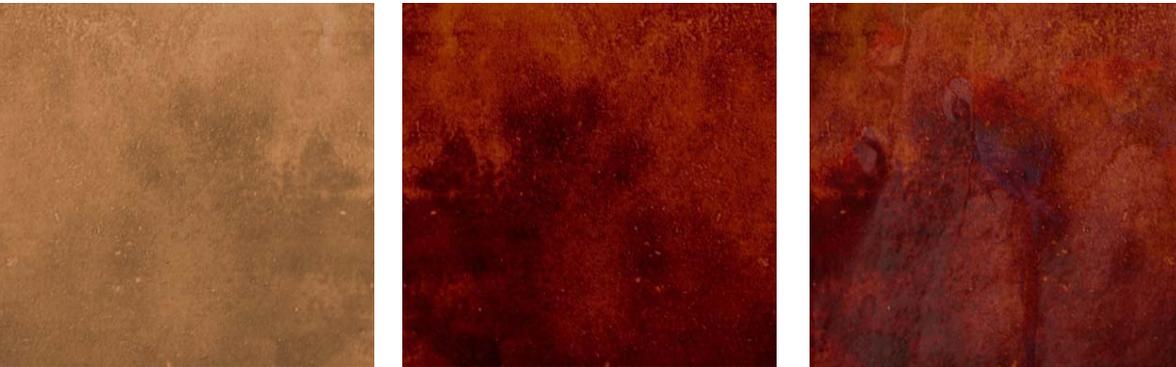


■ Painting process



2008. Acrylic on canvas. 350 x 350 mm.

- In the following series, I intend to free my self from the last series of Xuan Zhi, back to the canvas, and test how a similar approach succeeds with a different medium.
- I tried to recall an impression of autumn, tottering shadows of withered trees and leaves, mixed with obscure sad feelings. It is hard to decide which one is the most depressing: trees, autumn or emotion?
- This is an experiment on reacting to the visual effects in every steps, to see how visual form will lead me to an unknown.

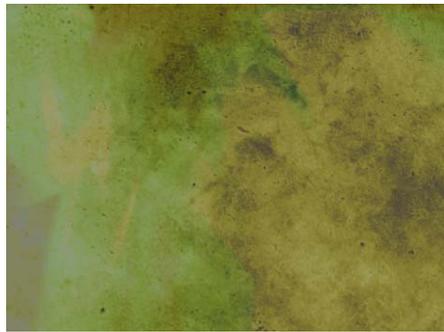
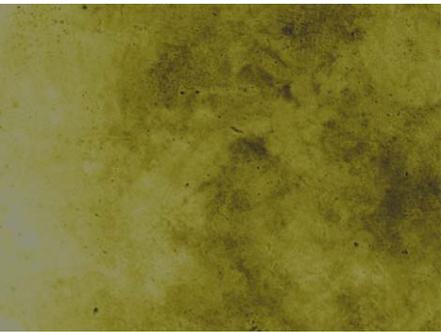


■ Computer image



- This is another extension from the last image, in a different colour.
- The computer image seems more effective than handmade work.

02-09-05. Acrylic on canvas. 350 x 350 mm.



2008. Acrylic on canvas. 350 x 350 mm.

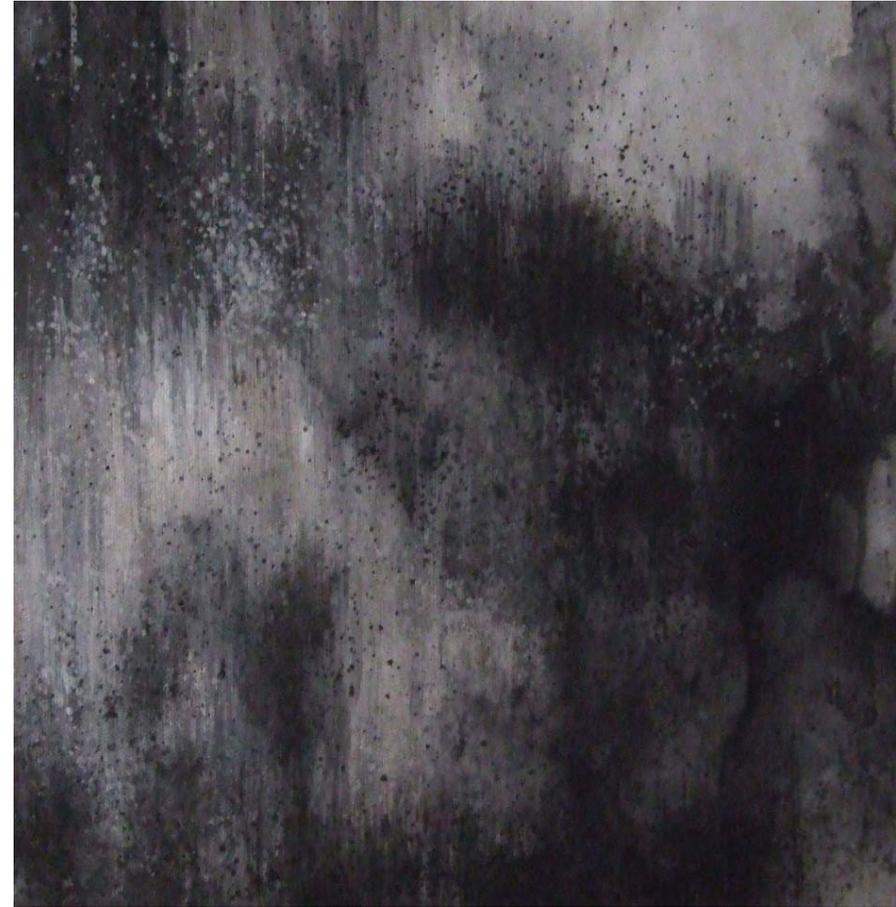
■ Computer image

- Through a computer-aided image, I obtained an unknown space that seems like a 'landscape'.
- It is composed of 'plants' and 'mountain' but contains less physical likeness in interesting form and feelings.
- However, the experiment does not achieve a similar effect, as I had difficulty controlling the effect of shade with water. And the green colour does not work well.



■ Painting process

- This has achieved an interesting extended spiritual and visual space without initial draft.
- I used Western brush to sweep vertically with colour on canvas, it aroused a snowing 'landscape', but is not realistic, because the empty and full does not follow the physical spaces, only balanced and transformed from visual.



2008. Acrylic on canvas. 350 x 350 mm.



■ Computer images



■ Testing on canvas and water colour paper.

- The extended painting and metaphor from the work *Iris* draws my attention to focus on flowers, for their changeable forms and temporal beauty.
- Drifting processes from original photographs of flowers.
- With only a small area of the object remaining, it has less character of a flower, and is more like transforming clouds that seem to be disappearing gradually.
- Although this extended image is in very simple form and colour, it is actually very difficult to approach. I tested it on different painting surfaces, but none of them were successful.



2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 740 x 740 mm.

- Unfinished work; more development may be needed later.
- This is a large scale work. The rendered details and overall shading are not working well. I intend to complete this experiment later, and to see whether the problem can be resolved.
- The difficulty is that on the one hand I intend to keep the transparency and fading effect for some areas, but on the other I want to retain some details to portray the changing form of likeness.
- To adjust the inter-relationship between details and balance is what I believe will work. I shall need to do more experiments.



2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 740 x 740 mm.

- In this work, I used large areas of empty space to affect the painted area and to emphasise the spiritual unlikeness.
- This aroused an obscure metaphoric extension. Between the untraceable emotions and transforming likeness and unlikeness of the flower, the spiritual and visual communication is inter-charged infinitely.

Summary

- [Visual absence doesn't work on its own](#), it attaches and takes form through visual presence. Critic and painter Tsung Ping [宗炳] (375-443) said: "Once spiritual contact is established, the essential forms will be realised, and the spirit of the universe will also be captured. Will a painting then be as real as nature itself?"
- As a journey, emptiness frees my mind from the possibilities and difficulties, and also challenges me to constantly seek a mental state of transcendence through the practice. It allows me to transcend the physical world to a temporal state of spiritual experience and to discover an **immanent world** of **myself**. Painting also unfolds an infinitely meditative space both for artist and viewer.
- Taking the transforming processes from Yi, Xiang and Wu, I was able to establish a visual aesthetics via organic form and blending classical Gong Bi and Xie Yi aesthetics with my skills and self-experiences, attaining enhanced impact through colour, texture, material and physical appearance to complement visual obscurity for enriching expressions, thus to extend tradition.
- The extensive and inspiring research process stimulated my creative ideas to develop my artistic thinking and skills. It has unfolded an infinite space to my further exploration to work in a cross-cultural context. As such I consider this documentation of research processes is a major output that accompanies my exhibited work. It records my ongoing reflection on the experimental processes. Though not all my works are successful, the outcome is encouraging as the focus of this research project was to develop a visual strategy for contemporary painting practice and to explore the manifestation of the processes.

2 Selected Works



Zhao Yue Qu. *Infinity*. 2008. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 760 x 760 mm.



Zhao Yue Qu. *Limpidity*. 2006. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



Zhao Yue Qu. *Fuzzy Land*. 2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



Zhao Yue Qu. *Rain*. 2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



Zhao Yue Qu. *Cool breeze*. 2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



Zhao Yue Qu. *Iris*. 2008. Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.



Zhao Yue Qu. *Deep Forest*. 2008. Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 1600 x 2000 mm.

3 Brief Chronological Table of Chinese History

Xia c. 2206 - 1766 BC	夏 公元前2206-1766年
Shang (Yin) c. 1766 - 1122 BC	商 公元前1766-1122年
Zhou c.1122 - 770 BC	周 公元前1122- 770年
Spring and Autumn Period 770 - 476 BC	春秋 公元前770 - 476年
Warring States Period 476- 221 BC	战国 公元前476 - 221年
Qin 221 - 206 BC	秦 公元前221 - 206年
Hah 206 BC - 220	汉 公元前206 - 公元220年
Three Kingdoms 220 - 265	三国 公元220 - 265年
Jin 265 - 420	晋 公元265 - 420年
Southern and Northern Dynasties 420 - 589	南北朝 公元420 - 589年
Sui 589- 618	隋 公元589 - 618年
Tang 618- 907	唐 公元618 - 907年
Five Dynasties and Ten States 907 – 960	五代十国 公元907 - 960年
Song 960 - 1280	宋 公元960 -1280年
Yuan 1280 - 1368	元 公元1280-1368年
Ming 1368 - 1644	明朝 公元1368-1644年
Qing 1644 - 1911	清朝 公元1644-1911年
Republic of China 1912- 1949	

Note: The English version retrieved on 6th October 2008 from: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/aboutchina/history.html>;
and the Chinese chronology from: <http://www.zh5000.com/zhwqn/zhonghuawuqiannian.htm>

4 Glossary

Abstract art: uses a visual language of form, colour and line to create a composition which exists independently of visual references to the world. Western art had been, from the Renaissance up to the middle of the 19th century, underpinned by the logic of perspective and an attempt to reproduce an illusion of visible reality. The arts of cultures other than the European had become accessible and showed alternative ways to the artist, of describing visual experience (see: Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh). By the end of the 19th century many artists felt a need to create a 'new kind of art' which would encompass the fundamental changes taking place in technology, science and philosophy. The sources from which individual artists drew their theoretical arguments were diverse, and reflected the social and intellectual turmoil in all areas of Western culture at that time (Wikipedia, 2008).

Abstraction: is used in the arts as a synonym for abstract art in general. Strictly speaking, it refers to art unconcerned with the literal depiction of things from the visible world. It can, however, refer to an object or image which has been distilled from the real world, or indeed, another work of art. Artwork that reshapes the natural world for expressive purposes is called abstract; that which derives from, but does not imitate a recognizable subject is called nonobjective abstraction. In the 20th century the trend toward abstraction coincided with advances in science, technology, and changes in urban life, eventually reflecting an interest in psychoanalytic theory. Later still, abstraction was manifest in more purely formal terms, such as colour, freed from objective context, and a reduction of form to basic geometric designs (ibid.).

Chan [禪]: is a major school of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. It is known for its emphasis on meditation and everyday life ahead of philosophical and scriptural pursuits (Oxford, 2006).

Ch'i [气]: the 'breath', 'air', 'steam', 'vapour', 'humour', pneuma', 'vitality', sometimes translated as 'material force' or 'psychophysical stuff' (the romanisation is generally given in the translations and commentary above). At its most crassly empirical level, the role of ch'i in literature and poetry is the breath that comes out when one intones a text; but such venting of ch'i is related to its primary function in Chinese physiology; it is a force in the body (coursing through the veins) as well as something appearing in the outer world. Ch'i has material (or pseudo-material) aspects, but it always carries other implications of 'energy', 'vitality', or 'impelling force'. In the philosophy of Chu Hsi, ch'i is the rarified, kinetic essence of matter, appearing in the world structured by some natural principle. Everyone has ch'i within them, but the functioning of ch'i is not directly subject to the will: it can only be 'fostered' and 'stored up'. At times in critical writings, ch'i is spoken of as a unitary category, though this usually means that a work has a strong or vigorous ch'i. Sometimes ch'i is spoken of in terms of various antithetical qualities, especially the distinction between 'clear' ch'i and 'turbid' or 'sluggish' ch'i. At other times ch'i admits a full range of distinct qualities; for example, a 'relaxed' ch'i, a 'fierce' ch'i; in which case it is close to 'manner' (Owen, 1992, p. 584).

Chinese painting: was essentially inspired by Daoism and enriched later on by the philosophy of Ch'an [禪]. In the Tang period, painting dominated by emptiness came into being, and reach its apogee during the Sung and Yuan Periods. The inception of an aesthetics thinking of emptiness was the Six Dynasties period. Through the study from the scholars' and artists' ideas we would see the fundamental principal that remains in aesthetics about emptiness (Cheng, 1994, p. 101).

Ch'ing [情]: the 'affections', 'emotions', 'subjective disposition', 'circumstance'. This is an exceedingly broad term, often compounded to produce a more restrictive meaning. In some uses, ch'ing refers to that aspect of the affections which would be rendered in English as the 'passion'. In the compound ch'ing-hsu [情緒], it refers to 'feelings' stirred by some particular object or experience. Generally, ch'ing is a much broader term than 'emotion' or 'passion'. In speaking of a line, a couplet, or a whole poem, ch'ing refers to cases in which a state of mind (or an action implicating a state of mind) is the topic of discourse. In other cases, ch'ing refers to the subjectivity or 'subjective nature' of a particular person; in this sense ch'ing is very close to hsing [性] 'individuating nature', with which it has been etymologically associated. In addition to being 1) a particular 'subjective state' bound to a particular circumstance, and 2) the 'subjective disposition' of a particular person, ch'ing is also the general category of 'subjectivity', or the human 'affections' in general. Ch'ing is commonly used in antithesis to ching, 'scene' (Owen, 1992, p. 585).

Ching [境]: 'world', a term often interchangeable with ching [景], 'scene'. When a distinction is present, ching, 'world', tends to be used to emphasize a coherent whole, in contrast to ching, 'scene', which stresses the particular configuration of the world. In late classical criticism the term ching is used in the compound ching-chieh [境界], a composite impression of coherence in the presented world evoked by a particular poem or by a collection of poems (ibid.).

Daoism: also called Taoism, is the Chinese philosophy and religion considered as being next to Confucianism in importance. Daoist philosophy is traced to the 6th-century BC classic of Lao-tzu, the Dao De Jing. The recurrent theme of this work is the Dao (way or path). To follow the Dao is to follow the path leading to self-realisation (Oxford, 2006).

Emptiness: two terms are used to refer to the idea of emptiness: wu [无] and hsu [虛]. wu has its corollary you [有] (being), is generally translated in the west as 'nonbeing' or 'nothing'; hsu which has shih [实] (fullness) for a corollary, is translated as 'emptiness'. For Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, though the origin of the universe is most often designated by wu, hsu is used in characterizing the original state towards which all existents should strive. Emptiness is the root of the Dao (Cheng, 1994, p. 43).

Enlightenment [悟]: in Chan, Enlightenment is the state of being with no mind. It is the disappearance of the ego. It is the loss of all identification with the body and the mind. It is freedom from beliefs, opinions, ideals and concepts. It is always sudden, because it is not an achievement; it is already the case. It is a remembering. In Chan it is called the pathless path that is, it is not something to be achieved, but it is to be realised and lived. Meditation, with no thought, simply watching, watching the breath, is the initial method to create the space for its occurrence (Wikipedia, 2008).

Gong-bi [工笔]: refers to a Chinese painting style that emphasis on the fined details and meticulous drawing skill (Oxford, 2006).

Hsing [性]: 'individuating nature', the innate characteristics that distinguish an individual or a class of individuals from others. One may speak of hsing as a general concept; one may speak of 'human hsing' (human nature); one may speak of a particular hsing belonging to a personality type; a person may speak of his own hsing as fully individuated (though its description may be in terms of a normative type). Hsing can always be translated as 'nature', though the English term 'nature' is much broader and encompasses several quite distinct semantic areas in Chinese, only one of which is hsing (Owen, 1992, p. 587).

Hsu [虚]: 'empty,' 'plastic.' The antonym of hsu is shih [实], 'solid'. In addition to the meaning of 'empty' in the common English sense, hsu means 'plastic', in the sense of something that takes the form of whatever 'solid' it encounters or which contains it, as water or air does. In poetic hsu is the attribute of ching, the 'affections'. (Which, in 'investing' themselves in certain things of the world, take the shape of those things as water might fill a container). Hsu is used to characterize certain kinds of lines and passages, those marked with subjectivity. Such 'empty' lines are often those which contain 'empty words', grammatical particles that mark the mediation of a human consciousness in a statement and thus give it a subjective coloring...hsu may refer to a quality of dispassion and artistic distance (Owen, 1992, p. 588).

Li [理]: 'principle' or 'natural principle'. Li is a central term in Chinese philosophy, and its precise significance at various periods is a matter of dispute. To describe it in a general way for our purposes, li is the underlying principle of both synchronic and diachronic structuring in the world; that is, li is both the principle of 'how things go' as well as of 'how they are'. Li is sometimes spoken of in a unitary sense: a unified li that pervades all things. At other times, li is spoken of as individuated by category, each thing or category of event having its own li. Li is immanent in the phenomenal world, knowable in experience and in poems growing out of experience. Thus, in poetry, li is sometimes the counterpart of 'meaning' as a motive in writing (conveying li and as an end of the epistemological process in reading. It should, however, be stressed that 'reading for meaning' is less a part of Chinese reading theory than Western (Owen, 1992, p. 589).

Representation: describes the signs that stand in for and take the place of something else. It is through representation people know and understand the world and reality through the act of naming it. Signs are manipulated in order to make sense of the world. For many philosophers, both ancient and modern, man is regarded as the "representational animal" or homo symbolicum, the creature whose distinct character is the creation and the manipulation of signs – things that "stand for" or "take the place of" something else. Representation has been associated with aesthetics (art) and semiotics (signs). Mitchell says "representation is an extremely elastic notion, which extends all the way from a stone representing a man to a novel representing the day in the life of several Dubliners." The term representation carries a range of meanings and interpretations. In literary theory representation is commonly defined in three ways: To look like or resemble; to stand in for something or someone; to present a second time to re-present. Representation began with early literary theory in the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, and has evolved into a significant component of language, Saussurian and communication studies (Wikipedia, 2006).

Shih [实]: 'solid', 'actual'. Sometimes used in opposition to hsu, shih refer to the fixity of definite form (as opposed to the 'plasticity' of hsu) and to the external solidity of a ching, 'scene' (as opposed to the 'empty' emotional colouring of the scene). A line is shih if it describes external things and has no 'empty' words that subordinate the description to the way the subject feels about it or interprets it. To give an example of an early usage, Liu Hsieh writes in the Wen-hsin tiao-lung: 'the force of one's talent is located within and begins with ch'i is 'empty', the mere form of an intense relation between the self and some project or goal; that empty form is filled by 'material force', ch'i, and becomes 'solid', shih; only through this process can ch'i become definite, forceful, and actual. See especially Chou Pi, 'Poetry in Three Forms', prefaces (Owen, 1992, p. 590).

Synaesthesia [通感]: a blending or confusion of different kinds of sense-impression, in which one type of sensation is referred to in terms more appropriate to another (Oxford, 2006).

Tzu-jan [自然]: one of the words commonly translated as 'Nature'. The most literal translation of tzu-jan is 'so-of-itself': things being the way they are and events occurring the way they do because that happens to the way they are or the way they occur. Distinguish hsing, 'individuating nature', the endowed disposition or nature of a particular entity. A particular hsing will follow a certain process of development and will assume certain characteristics according to tzu-jan, the larger principle (Owen, 1992, p. 593).

Xiang [象] (image): the normative visual schematisation of a thing or of the embodiment of an idea in such a schematisation. According to the neo-Daoist philosopher Wang Pi [王弼] (226 – 249), writing in reference to the ‘image’ section of the Book of Changes, xiang is that which necessarily mediates between concept yi [意] and language. Xiang is neither the particular thing [though it may be perceived as immanent in particular things] nor the ‘idea’ of a thing, but rather a sensuous schematization of the normative thing. In literary usage, beginning in the Southern Dynasties, xiang becomes strongly associated with ‘appearance’, and thus the term is sometimes used imprecisely to refer simply to the phenomenal world; for instance, xiang-wai [象外], ‘beyond xiang’, means simply ‘outside of the sensuous world’, and wan-xiang [万象], ‘the myriad images’, refer simply to all the phenomena of the sensuous world (Cheng, 1994, p. 101).

Xie Yi [写意]: is using brush and ink. It is also known as wash painting. Wash painting was first developed in China during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907) and became an established style during the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279) (Wikipedia, 2006).

Yi [意]: ‘concept’, ‘idea’, ‘meaning’. Yi is perhaps the most difficult technical term of poetics to translate, because it crosses a wide variety of quite distinct English concepts in unexpected ways. Yi has a wide range of usage, ranging from the clever interpretation of some material (much like the late-Renaissance concetto), to the ‘general case’ (a deduction from or ground for some particular observation), all the way to ‘import’ and ‘significance’. Yi is usually spoken of as occurring in the mind rather than in the world. It is often the act of giving flowers and feels a breeze: to derive from those two sensory facts the fall of the flowers at the end of spring and implications for things of the same category would be yi, an interpretive relation of sensory data. If articulated, the yi would be the general category deduced from the particular, such as ‘late spring’. The poem, however, might simply mention the flowers and breeze, and from that the reader would know the poet’s putative yi. Yi is sometimes ‘intention’ or ‘will’, and in literary usage usually carries some element of intentionality. At other times, yi is very broadly used as ‘the way someone thinks of things’. Related to this latter usage are compounds such as ku-yi [古意], ‘the ancient attitude’, ‘on an ancient motif’ (a poetic subgenre) (Owen, 1992, p. 594).