

Emptiness as a Visual Strategy:

**An Exploration of Visual Absence in Contemporary Art Practice**

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## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and believe, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor materials which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any another degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements.

*Yue Qu Zhao*

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## Abstract

This project explores the idea of visual absence in relation to the notion of Chinese classical aesthetics of emptiness. The approach is located in between representation and abstraction by combining the painting skills and expressions of Chinese Gong Bi [工笔] and Xie Yi [写意] with focuses on complementing visual clarity and obscurity. The aim of the research is to explore visual absence as a painting strategy in contemporary art practice, referring to the painting method of reduction, incompleteness and metaphor that extends the painting space and meaning through visual presence, thus unfurling an extended art form and creative strategy from Chinese classical aesthetics.

The outcome is a series of paintings as an exploration in extending the Chinese painting aesthetics. This project is constituted of 80% practice-based work, accompanied by 20% exegesis in approximately 11,000 words as a complement.

## Aims

The aim of the research is to explore visual absence as a painting strategy in contemporary art practice, using methods of reduction, incompleteness and metaphor to extend the painting space and meaning through visual presence. I intend to employ the Chinese classical philosophical concept of emptiness and apply it to my art practice to revitalise and extend classical Chinese aesthetics in a cross-cultural context, and to seek new perspectives on the painting strategy and its application of visual representation and creative art form.

## Introduction

This research on contemporary painting practice focuses on suggesting a painting strategy and painting processes that refer to the Chinese classical aesthetics of emptiness. The profound classical aesthetics invites me to enter into a world of 'colouration and affection' [情采] on Liu's [刘勰]<sup>1</sup> thought (as cited by Owen, 1992, p. 239), which are changeable yet untraceable (cross reference p. 44). It opens up infinite possibilities of creativity in my art practice; at the same time, it also raises questions and challenges of re-locating myself between the old and the new, the past and the present. The idea of pursuing emptiness is like dancing with 'fetters' to approach 'freedom'. Discussing Zao's aesthetics, Contensou (1989) quotes the famous French poet, writer and painter Henri Michaux's insights on Zao's artistic approach:

*Once the black is applied, the white of the paper, absent here and there is awoken in unexpected areas. It is the emptiness that, for the harmony of the world, must never be absent; it does not matter where.*

*... Abstraction takes its place  
abstract through detachment [sic]  
purification of presences.*

*... With the suppleness of silk  
a landing on a beach of paper  
gravity has vanished.* (Contensou, 1989, Ree, translated, p. 26).

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1. Liu Xie [刘勰] (approximate 5th century): courtesy name Yanhe [彦和], is the Chinese author of China's greatest work of literary aesthetics, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Wikipedia, 2008).



I am working toward the goal of achieving a temporal moment of harmony of internal and external unity, and through this project, a departing point to drive me to another unknown 'shore'<sup>2</sup>.

This exegesis is structured in three main parts:

Chapter 1 introduces the notion of 'emptiness' as an underpinning philosophical idea to my project research and locates it in a cross-cultural context through referencing artists' ideas and works.

Chapter 2 outlines the strategy of employing the notion of emptiness as a research method and justifies the visual integration and transformation of aesthetic thinking.

Chapter 3 contextualises the concept and method employed through my practice and artistic thinking, and focuses on how artistic intentions interact with visual elements to communicate through integrating the expression of traditional Chinese Gong Bi [工笔] and Xie Yi [写意] painting aesthetics (cross reference pp. 19-21). Emptiness as a visual strategy will be analysed through reflecting on the extended space and metaphor of the practice.

The content of the 80% practical work for this experimental project constitutes the exhibited works and a document in Appendix 3 called "Documentation of Experimental Processes", which is a major parallel to my exhibited works. It gives a comprehensive record of how I approached and examined the visual strategy of emptiness with a more reflective and reflexive state of mind.

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2. Shore: "reaching the other shore," in Buddhism, usually rendered in English as "perfection." The Buddhist philosophies and practice for obtaining enlightenment; giving, ethics, patience, effort, concentration and wisdom (Wikipedia, 2008).

## Chapter One The Notion of ‘Emptiness’ and Visual Absence

This chapter intends to make a thorough inquiry into the conceptual idea of emptiness in classical Chinese aesthetics, to relocate it in a contemporary cross-cultural context, and to explain its unique significance to the way that Chinese artists understand the world and their artistic pursuit. The aesthetic content is intended to outline my project's location and to unfold the underpinning philosophy of my practical research.

### 1.1.1 The Philosophical Idea of Emptiness

Referring to Cheng's (1994) *Empty and Full*, I intend to review the role that emptiness plays in Chinese traditional painting. The notion of emptiness<sup>3</sup> is no less essential in the system of Chinese thought than the complementary idea of Yin [阴] and Yang [阳]. Emptiness as an ‘empty space’ is profound and infinite. It is not accumulated by definiteness. It is the ‘space of innerness’, the ‘space of spirit’ and the ‘space of thinking’ of human beings, where the unknown mysterious power exists.

*Emptiness emerges as pivotal to the way the Chinese conceive the universe...It is not, as one might suppose, something vague or nonexistent. It is dynamic and active. Linked with the idea of vital breaths and with the preeminent site of transformation, the place where fullness can attain its whole measure. Emptiness introduces discontinuity and reversibility into a given system and thus permits the elements composing the system to transcend*

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3. Emptiness: two terms are used to refer to the idea of emptiness: wu [无] and hsu [虚]. 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 (ibid., p. 43).

*rigid opposition and one-sided development. At the same time, emptiness offers human beings the possibility of approaching the universe at the level of totality (pp. 35-36).*

### **1.1.2 Discipline of Nature: The Way to Approach Emptiness**

Ames & Hall (2003) discuss how 'following nature' [道法自然], Dao's<sup>4</sup> idea of creativity, is recursive, and is always exercised over and with respect to 'self' as 'self-deriving' (p. 68). Because it is the discipline of nature, we can neither step outside Dao nor can we arrest its ever-changing configuration (p. 59). They also refer to Chapter 25<sup>5</sup> of Dao De Jing and suggest that Dao is *"the leading-forth, guiding and manipulating of experience through which we participate in educating a future"* (p. 58). *"It is not only 'way', but 'way making', a forging of an always new way forward"* (ibid).

### **1.1.3 Emptiness and Fullness: As an 'Integrity' of Harmony**

As philosophical thought Dao is profound; this is my departing point of study. My understanding of Daoist philosophy is crucial.  
*"By combining and blending the conflicts and differences of positive and negative to enhance into a larger whole without losing individual*

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4. 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-realization. (Oxford, 2006). I annotate Lau's (2001, pp. ix-xxxix) introduction of Daodejing as follows: It is believed that Lao-tzu [Laozi] was a senior contemporary of Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and was the historian in charge of the archives of the Chou Dynasty. It is not certain whether Lao-tzu was the author of the 'eighty-one chapters' Dao De Jing or whether he collated it. The philosophical concept of Dao has for centuries influenced Chinese thought and the Dao De Jing is well known to the West through translation. The nebulous meanings of the text and its tenuous structure is unique and in parallel to the concept of Dao.

5. 人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。Man models himself on the Earth; The Earth models itself on Heaven; Heaven models itself on the Way; And the Way models itself on that which is so on its own (Henricks, 1993, translated, p. 80).

*distinction...that will allow an elegant order that emerges out of the artful contextualization of intrinsically related details as they maximize the unique contribution of each one"* (ibid., p. 61). From this point of view Dao actually provides an open-ended multiple space for creativity that is based on respect for and reflection on 'self'. When we know something, we always realise that there is something else hidden, waiting to be discovered intuitively. Integrity is also discussed by Ames & Hall (ibid.): "...*integrity is something becoming whole in its co-creative relationship with other things. Integrity is consummatory relatedness...Not only is change an integral characteristic of things, but real creativity is a condition of this continuing transformation process*" (p. 16).

It is said that emptiness is achieved when artist experiences internal and external harmony [和]<sup>6</sup>. But what are 'emptiness'<sup>7</sup> and 'harmony'? Within my practical approach, I also want my artworks to contain a philosophical depth and cultural value. Influenced by Daoism, I see myself as a young Chinese artist, not traditional and not westernised, not someone else, but myself at present. I want my artwork to represent how I feel, how I see, how I think, and how I approach my feeling through my skills. Every moment is temporal, my feeling is constantly shifting. I see my practice as an ongoing journey, only a record of a certain moment, and I always want to add something new in the next moment. It is like reflecting an immanent world of myself. Our contemporary society is facing issues relating to the growing impacts of science and technology and the radical development of the globalisation of economy and culture. How will we reconstruct a contemporary harmonic relationship to realise our individual value? By following Dao's philosophical idea, artists are able to reflect and will be self-enlightened at an intellectual level through their creative practice in approaching emptiness.

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6. In chapter 42 of Dao De Jing: 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。万物负阴而抱阳，中气以为和。The way gave birth to the One; the One gave birth to the Two; The Two gave birth to the Three; And the Three gave birth to the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things carry Yin on their backs and wrap their arms around Yang. Through the blending of ch'i [气] they arrive at a state of harmony (Henricks, 1993, translated, p. 12).

7. From Francois Cheng: „Emptiness is not merely a neutral space serving to defuse the shock without changing the nature of the opposition. It is the nodal point where potentiality and becoming interweave, in which deficiency and plenitude, self-sameness and otherness, meet,“ (1994, p. 51).

## 1.2 Relevant Research on Cross-Cultural Context

Zao Wouki [赵无极] is a famous Chinese artist in France, and is a very convincing paradigm for seeking new development through blending different cultural philosophical aesthetics in his work. His insight not only provokes thinking but also instils a new prospect for international painters working in a cross-cultural context. It also has significant influences for the creation of contemporary Chinese painting<sup>8</sup> under the impact of Western concepts and approaches.

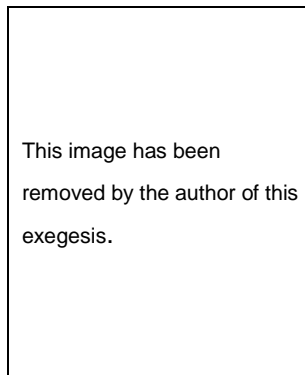


Fig. 1:1 Zao Wouki. 1-6-83. Oil on canvas.  
2000 x 1620 mm. 1983. France.

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8. Zao says: "If the influence of Paris is undeniable in the whole of my artistic development, I must also say that I have been rediscovering China as my personality has become consolidated...Cezanne helped me to 'contemplate the nature of China', the work of Paul Klee allowed me to rediscover my roots...I returned what I had received from it: through Western painting, I saw myself once again as genuine 'Chinese painter'." (Abadie & Contenson, 1989, p. 26).

The articles 《无极气象 历史回音》 written by international curators Fan & Xu<sup>9</sup>, reveal the philosophical and aesthetic thoughts of Zao's work from a range of different perspectives. In his unique painting style (Fig. 1:1), he has developed an extended painting space that allows more depth and freedom for himself (Fan & Xu, 2001, p. 1) [范迪安, 许江]. Zao's work differs from abstraction because of his emphasis on lyric freedom, and his approach also differs from the expression of the subconscious, due to his deep spiritual pursuits. Fan and Xu believe that his work also represents the equality between man and nature, the immanent harmony between spiritual perception and the order of nature. The philosophical status that he realised is the 'man in harmony with nature' from a contemporary cultural prospective. He rediscovers the substance of Chinese Xie Yi [写意] painting, manifesting the visually bright and limpid effects through ink expression, transplanting into the visual language of oil painting, thus interpreting the abstraction from an Eastern perspective<sup>10</sup> (ibid., p. 2).

### 1.3 Project Location and Philosophical Approaches

Through thousands of years of development Chinese painting has reached a certain level at which it now seems difficult to create something new. Are there any possibilities and potentials for creation? What is the real value of Chinese traditional painting that influences my painting? What is the real core conception that I try to adapt in my practice?

In his article *Return to Painting*, Gao XingJian<sup>11</sup> (2002) [高行健] suggests a perspective on Chinese traditional aesthetics as 'another kind of aesthetics' in which it is relocated into a more open and wider cultural context. It is different from contemporary

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9. This article was written in Chinese for the exhibition "Sixty Years' Retrospection of Zao Wouki's Painting". I interpreted and translated it into English.

10. He is not only adding a unique style for Western abstraction, but also grasps the subject of man and nature, pursues an intimate relationship with nature; this will not fade in time, but indication of its significance and value when our society moves towards modernity (Fan & Xu, 2001, p. 2).

11. As a painter, novelist, playwright, translator, director, and critic, Gao is the first China-born recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000.

Western aesthetic conceptions.

Gao (2001)<sup>12</sup> discusses relationships between artists, artworks, and beholders from his unique perspective. He conceives that in art:

*Artifact is more important than conception, and the richness of the artifact lasts as art, not the concept that responds to current ideology (p. 4). It seems that theoretical conception plays the leading role in art, and 'new' becomes the first judging priority and one of the key characteristics of the twentieth-century art movement. Art in the last century put emphasis on aesthetic method, and, further back, on craft (p. 6).*

I agree that without a unique visual approach and expression, the only 'new' is the conception of art. Gao has suggested two kinds of creative revolution in art making. One is developed from conception, and accompanied by the creative meaningful forms; the other one does not project any new conception, but develops new expressions based on the previous art making (ibid., p. 8). This insight helps me to clarify what is essential to project new ideas and what I should consider in establishing my proposition. From this vision, my research direction seems more connected to the latter.

I am also interested in Gao's (2002) idea of subjective self. He analyses three split positions of self in artists' creative process:

*The self, at times, may present itself as a trinity, as three distinct, separate, yet interrelated figures that go by I, you, and he. Who paints? Is it I or is it you? Then again, it may be he... The moment you withdraw from I and both the subject and the object become the target of aesthetic judgment, the artist's blind narcissism – brought about by unbridled excess – gives way to attentive observation, to searching, to tracking and capturing. Face-to face, you and I size each other up, until dark, chaotic I starts to brighten under the gaze of a third eye, he (pp. 25-26).*

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12. This part of the content is only contained in the Chinese version of Gao's publication; I translated it into English.

This is a very useful analysis that helps me to clarify how I will communicate 'myself' to 'others', it is not only psychological, but is also an actual status during the creative process. By following this idea, I also want to emphasise and agree with Gao's idea that to enable the viewers to interpret the artifact, artists have a responsibility to embody a deeper content into the perceptual materiality of the artwork. As a result, artists have to stand on a united aesthetics of spirit and form, intellect and perception grounding to create, and not only from the perspective of the viewer; otherwise, viewers may not be able to perceive the underpinning concepts.

Influenced by Gao's ideas, I want to draw attention to how artists liberate time and space from restriction and are able to achieve creative extension. Emptiness is everywhere, either inside or outside the painting, only when the artist is able to balance both internal and external worlds into an integrated unity, will he or she then experience the freedom and spiritual enlightenment of transcendence. Gao's work (Fig. 1:2) entitled *Lieu Inexistent* is an example of extending outside the painting: inexistent and yet existent. I propose that Dao exists in nature as one unity. Everything in nature is made up of Yin and Yang, the two active breaths. Through the movement of Yin-Yang, it develops and creates new things; the continuous interaction between the developed elements creates more things and reaches to a higher level up until an immense world. I am seeking a transcendent painting space through transforming both invisible and visible in order to achieve creative extension: a new direction, outside either representation or abstraction, which indicates a profound immanent world for me to unfurl. The internal image is beyond intellect and conception, but is related to perceptual experience where rationality is yet unable to reach.

Our world is so rich and diverse, and is changing in every moment: Why do we limit our expression within certain forms? If form and formless, regular and irregular, representative and abstract are visual approaches, can we push the boundary and blend them together?





Fig. 1:2 Gao XingJian.

乌有之邦. *lieu inexistent*.

Ink Painting. 515 x 400 mm. France.

Cheng, discussing Chinese painting<sup>13</sup>, and refers to Wang Wei's [王维]<sup>14</sup> statement: *"By means of a slim brush, re-create the immense body of emptiness"*. He also refers to Tsung Ping [宗炳]<sup>15</sup>: *"Once spiritual contact is established, the essential forms will be realised, and the spirit of the universe will also be captured. Spirit has no form of its own; it is through things that it takes form. Thus, the idea is to trace the inner lines of things by means of brushstrokes inhabited by shadow and by light. When things are adequately caught in this way, they become the representation of truth itself"* (1994, pp. 62-63).

I understand that the physical form of nature is objective; only when the artist attains spiritual enlightenment will the artistic image Xiang (cross reference p. 27), then emerge and the appropriate principle and method be needed. Painting reveals

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13. Chinese painting was essentially inspired by Daoism and enriched later on by the philosophy of Chan [禅]. In Tang period, painting dominated by emptiness came into being, and reach its apogee during the Sung and Yuan Periods. The inception of an aesthetics concept of emptiness was the Six Dynasties period. Through scholars, studies and artists' ideas we can see the fundamental principle that remains in aesthetics about emptiness (Cheng,1991,p. 60). (Chan [禅] is a major school of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is known for its emphasis on meditation and everyday life ahead of philosophical and scriptural pursuits) (Oxford, 2006).

14. Wang Wei [王维] (701 – 761A.D.): sometimes titled the Poet Buddha, was a Tang Dynasty Chinese poet, musician, painter and statesman (Wikipedia, 2007).

15. Tsung Ping [宗炳] (375 – 443 A.D.): painter, critic, and famous Buddhism scholar (ibid.).

spiritual enlightenment through the transformed visual form so that the viewer may share the spiritual experience beyond the painting space and nature form. Cheng also suggests that: *“Emptiness follows a spiral movement, starting from a centre and circling from level to level, as though to untie a knot...Emptiness-fullness does not appear here merely as an opposition of form or as a technique for creating depth within space...It is a living entity. The motive force of all things, it is found at the very core of fullness, which it infuses with vital breaths”* (ibid., pp. 64-65).

I intend to develop an effective approach that applies the conception of visual absence instead of presence, and of incompleteness instead of completeness, and through various methods and expressive strokes to produce elements to suggest empty spaces, such as washed or dyed effects, obscure images, and abstract forms; in a way bringing a capacity that fullness is unable to achieve. But I still intend to provide some visual clues through the images to clarify the details, such as renderings, representations, textures and forms. Without clarity, the absence is unable to unfurl its potentiality, and both obscurity and

clarity have to be executed as wholeness so that they could complement each other. In order to bring life to my painting, I will follow an obscure immanent imagery that is between physical likeness and unlikeness. Without interaction between presence and absence, image may lose its luminousness and fall into formulation. So I intend to approach an immanent image through artistic synaesthesia [通感]<sup>16</sup> rather than through an approach derived from conception and formulation.

Synaesthesia is a synergetic perception and mental action; it bridges and communicates between visual and mixed senses with time and space. It enables me to unfurl an emotional expression with sensible imagery, with enlightenment involved it enables me to approach the imaginative space to feel beyond myself.

There are various intentions that I consider as important guides when I am making decisions and seeking the significance of the ways of approach: Yi [意], Xiang [象] and Wu [悟]. Yi is what I intend to express. Xiang is the image that I am trying to develop. Wu is the transcendence when intention and image both transform into spiritual fullness. With these potentially interactive and integrated consciousnesses involved, my multiple intentions are obscure and yet limpid at stages, to decide

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16. 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).

where to go and whether I should stop, thus unfolding an extended visual space and metaphor (cross reference 2.2 Transformation Processes: From Yi, Xing to Wu, pp. 26-28).

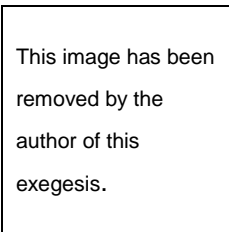


Fig. 1:3 Artist unknown. *Lotus*. Song Dynasty.  
Painted on silk. 238 x 251 mm.

I am also interested in the idea of ‘blending’<sup>17</sup> the Western and Eastern to create and develop a new direction. For me creativity is not just simply applying the skills and forms, but also involves a developed theoretical thinking behind the work. This project intends to develop new expressions, therefore an approach from ‘skill’ to ‘skill’ will only limit our thinking, whereas moving from ‘rationality’ to ‘skill’ will potentially develop a new approach to adapt ‘skills’. To locate the perfect balance between rationality and skill during my creative process will be my way of approaching creativity.

Different from Zao’s approach of working within the Western system of abstraction while following the Chinese philosophical aesthetics of emptiness, my exploration is positioned towards the Chinese traditions. Through various strokes and shades of colour, I will apply different skills of using brush and paint by combining the expressive manner of both Chinese classical Gong

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17. Chinese and Western paintings have completely different histories and forms of expression, but somehow they can inspire each other towards new creativity without losing their original cultural and spiritual value. How can an artist be intelligent in selecting the essence from different cultures to nourish individual creativity by developing the traditional immanent spirit? Many contemporary artists have introduced different Western ideas into Chinese painting, such as Xu Beihong [徐悲鸿], Wu Guanzhong [吴冠中], who are established as significant in developing fresh and diverse approaches, content and aesthetics to Chinese painting.

Bi [工笔] and Xie Yi [写意]. Gong Bi (Fig. 1:3) refers to a Chinese painting style that emphasises the finer details and meticulous drawing skill (Oxford, 2006). Xie Yi (Fig. 1:4), also known as wash painting, which was first developed in China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 A.D.) and became an established style during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 A.D.), emphasises the qualities of simplicity, metaphor and spontaneity that is based on likeness<sup>18</sup> (Wikipedia, 2006). My images intend to represent both, having visual clarity and obscurity. On the one hand, the clarity of Gong Bi may represent the object's physical character in its intriguing details; on the other hand, through its subtle changes of paint and formless washed and dyed effects, Xie Yi will help me to approach and achieve visual obscurity. Only when all these elements are properly composited and balanced with the underpinning philosophy of Yin-Yang, then strokes and paint<sup>19</sup> might be able to transform and transcend. This is the magic moment for me to capture.

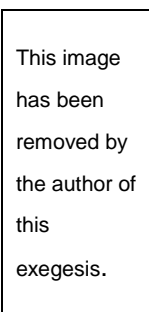


Fig. 1:4 Xu Wei. (1521 - 1593).

Ink Grapes. Ink on Xuan Zhi. 1657 x 645 mm.

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18. Xuan Zhi is the essential painting substrate for traditional painting, there are basically two kinds: raw and sized paper in different absorbencies. Raw paper is the most sensitive kind, suitable for Xie Yi painting, displaying dynamic strokes and complex shade variations with translucent fluidity and original spontaneity. Extreme absorbency and sensitivity gives infinite play to have unique visual qualities of change and limpidity through brush and shade.

19. In this project, I use the word 'paint' because I don't use traditional Chinese ink. I have adopted western acrylic paint, materials and canvas that could enhance my painting's physical quality, but to certain extent, I intend to retain the Chinese 'ink' effects in my painting. Also I use the traditional Xuan Zhi in a different way; as a cultural texture it emphasises a modern spirit in order to identify the differences between traditional and other cultures. Can my artwork still be called 'Chinese' or 'ink' painting?

Gong Bi provides me with infinite possibilities of approaching the perceptible feelings and physical likeness of objects through certain techniques. In this way, the Western approach of representation and abstraction may also inspire me to explore the inner connection of physical reality and painting materials. Xie Yi allows me to approach a spiritual likeness and absent presence rather than physical reality through applying reduction, incompleteness and uncertainty to complement visual clarity. By integrating the two into a 'third' visual expression, the extended imagery preserves certain qualities of classical aesthetics and is able to adapt new ideas. Between visual clarity and obscurity, my painting is intended to reveal the harmonious existence of the two extremes, and unfold intellectual enlightenment.

I intend to use elements from nature as my main subjects which will allow me to obtain insights and to explore harmony based on Dao's [道] thinking. Natural landscape and elements are beautiful, rich, diverse and profound and always inspire me to contemplate. When I try to capture the images during my creative process, I immerse myself in nature, for example by connecting with the worlds of the flowers and the birds, in order to establish a visual strategy.

The strategy of exploring visual absence, through combining both traditional Chinese Gong Bi and Xie Yi to approach an immanent image, it locates my project outside representation or abstraction through its emphasis on a reflective and continuous artistic synaesthesia of the 'self'. I intend to achieve an internal and external harmony by following Dao's philosophical thinking, and through applying visual clarity and obscurity, to approach invisible and transcendent fullness.

## 1.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the conceptual idea of emptiness and its complementing relationship with fullness; also, I have justified my employment of emptiness as the underpinning philosophy of my painting strategy.

From two contemporary renowned artists, Zao Wouki, and scholar artist Gao XingJian: Zao's transplanting of Chinese ink painting into the Western visual language of oil painting inspired me to review classical aesthetics and philosophy from a different perspective, and to establish my project approaches. Gao's critical insight of Chinese traditions from a contemporary

perspective on the relationship between concept and art making inspired me to conceive the importance of skills and artistic thinking, and to find a balance between the old and the new, form and spirit, subjectivity and objectivity. Their works bridge Eastern and Western cultures. Different from Gao's approach, my painting tends towards unfurling a perceivable yet obscure image, through combining an enhanced physical likeness and 'wash and dye' obscurity; and different from Zao's painting, my approach puts more emphasis on traditional expression through Chinese art substrates and expressive skills.

These key points outline the relevant aesthetic context for my project location and research rationale. In Chapter two, I will discuss how the philosophical idea of emptiness is employed as the strategic approach to the visual aesthetics.

## Chapter Two    Methods and Processes

### 2.1 Design Approaches

This chapter discuss the methods and processes of adapting the idea of emptiness in painting practice, not only as a concept and philosophy, but also as a strategic way of artistic creativity and self-cultivation. My previous practice worked towards traditional Xie Yi aesthetics before I came to New Zealand; I had difficulties in understanding the profound and untraceable idea of emptiness, integrating the classical aesthetics in my practice to find a new way to excel myself. Encountering significant cultural differences has provided me with new perspective and opened up possibilities of contemplating, and finding new locations and connections to the Chinese classical cultural background; my artistic thinking and practice has changed from an automatic acceptance to making a conscious choice.

My design approaches derive from the Chinese Classical philosophy of Yin-Yang [阴-阳] as the central component. Emptiness as the origin of Yin and Yang energises all things, yet it is also through the constant pursuit of balance between Yin and Yang that emptiness is achieved. Emptiness, as the root of Dao, activates all existence, and goes backs to the origin (Cheng, 1994, p. 43).

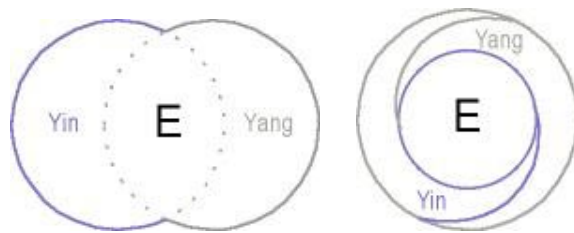


Fig. 2:1.1 & 2:1.2 Emptiness and Yin-Yang

I consider my theoretical and practical research are compounded as two active sources that are constantly interacting with each other and developing into artistic thinking and ideas, and always seeking inter-relationship and connection between concept and practice within the processes to achieve the emptiness. The idea of Yin-Yang allows the blending of all different intentions as one, with balanced emptiness and fullness, skill and thinking, internal experience and external world. The approach also works as a transforming process from my multiple intentions into an obscure image, and leads me to approach the transcendence that has originated from my constantly changing feelings and insight about emptiness and fullness (Fig. 2:1.1 & Fig. 2:1.2)<sup>20</sup>.

### 2.1.1 Theoretical Approach

The theoretical approach to research involves an active process of data collection, data analysis and synthesis in following the enquiry into the notion of emptiness. I intend to obtain a relatively objective understanding of the underlying theory. Through the study of artistic thinking and expression of emptiness, I am inspired to re-interpret or transform my ideas and intentions into an artistic scene. The theoretical approaches enable me to understand cultural and historical values at a philosophical level, and

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20. Fig. 2:1.1 to Fig. 2:3 has made reference from Francois Cheng and his publication (1994, p. 51).



function as the external discipline that helps me to establish the intellectual proposition and to trigger the conversation within the cultural context of my practice. As such that it serves as an intellectual repository of my self as an artist that invigorates the unity of my philosophical belief and my work. (Fig. 2:2)

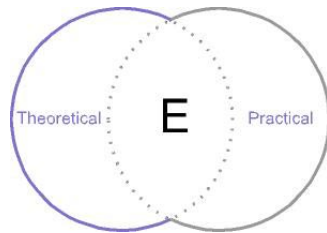


Fig. 2:2. Research Framework

### 2.1.2 Practical Approach

The practical approach is based upon the exploration of visual absence through art making. This is a visualising process to transform my aesthetic intentions into my practice, through collecting visual images, experimenting with different materials and form, expressive skills and colours etc., with which to approach the imagery. The practical approach is associated to the visual reality and the significant moment(s) of everyday experience. Through observation and everyday life experience, I analyse and extend visual expressive skills to reflect on forms and compositions, objective physical characteristics and significance of all relevant visual materials. This will be manifested through the processes of Yi [意], Xiang [象] and Wu [悟], which will be discussed later.

Based on the certain accumulation of theoretical and practical researches, my creative enlightenment will have the potential to unfold artistic thinking and extensions. This enables me to capture the inspiration with an intellectual luminosity, also to follow the obscurity without losing my direction. My understanding of emptiness and fullness may be activated by finding new connections between imagery and form, expression and meanings, or intentions and skills. The interaction between developed ideas and improved skills brings my visual manifestation to what Gao (cross reference p. 15) suggests, an intellectual level at which to experience harmony, and allows me to establish a visual language system within my painting practice.

To unfold artistic thinking and practice in an intellectual locus, the extended art works reflect my enlightened Xing which are inspired from natural forms and disciplines of nature, with input from my self-experience and spiritual pursuit. Emptiness works as an internal spiritual pursuit that activates my artistic thinking and visual approaches to balance external rationale and emotional form into a harmonious relationship of emptiness and fullness.

## **2.2 Transformation Processes: From Yi, Xing to Wu**

With reference to the established conceptual approaches and seeking an appropriate way of expression, my research follows the Chinese aesthetic discipline which includes three different creative processes for seeking the metaphoric significance of the image: Yi [意], Xiang [象] and Wu [悟]. It emphasises an integrated artistic intention of subjectivity and objectivity, emptiness and fullness, form and spirit, stillness and movement. It is a unique way and process of transforming subjective intentions into an enlightened and integrated artistic imagery. This particular approach enables me to develop insight on the inner relationships between objects and imageries, intentions and artistic approaches, forms and spirit, perceptions and expressions, synaesthesia and enlightenment, within the cultural context. Also, as an artistic discipline, I intend to balance all these important essences within my painting practice to approach the harmonious imagery from both the internal and the external. (Fig. 2:3)



Fig. 2:3 Transforming Processes

Yi has a rich meaning that is rendered in English by a series of words, such as idea, desire, instinct, intention, active consciousness, accurate vision, and the like. It relates to the mental disposition of the artist at the moment of creation (Cheng, 1994, p. 100). Yi may relate to concepts, contextual and artistic thinking about the strategic composition of presence and absence, metaphor and emotions via imagery.

*“Xiang is neither the particular thing nor the ‘idea’ of a thing, but rather a sensuous schematization of the normative thing”* (ibid.). Xiang is not only an external form, but also a reflection of inter-relationships of content. As such artistic insight is embedded in physical reality through the freely attained skill (Fig. 2:4).

Everyone may have different interpretations and feelings on reading the same image, from their own unique perspective. My intentions are always tangled with personal experiences. These decide the choice of using colour, form and style. Through painting process, the way of how I paint will lead me to experience the world in a particular way.

The interactions between Yi and Xiang contain infinite possibilities and are always interweaving. The creative process is both exciting and frustrating. During my practice, I shuttle between experience and memory, uncertainty and expression, and depending on whether I can actualise the interrelationships between them, sometimes obscurity becomes limpid and sometimes it becomes dull.

Wu is Enlightenment: the transcendent moment to feel beyond the self. It refers to emptiness, where everything is integrated as a perceivable image both for me and for the viewer. Sometimes it brings me 'being-in-the-world' where I feel timeless, and become part of it.

*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 not an achievement; it is already the case. It is a remembering. Chan [禅] considers it the pathless path (cross reference footnote 13, p. 18). 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).*

Fig 2:4<sup>21</sup> serves as a mental guide and describes the self-transforming processes. This is an integrated, interactive process for me to obtain insight on the external world to enlighten myself. Balancing rationale and perception, form and spirit, internal and external discipline, synaesthesia and enlightenment, I explore the possibility of transformation to approach both internal and external harmony. These approaches allow me to unfurl a transcendent fullness through the constantly developing reflexive and reflective processes.

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21. Figure 2:5 makes reference to Chinese painter and theorist Lu FuSheng [卢辅圣] and his publication (2001, p. 111).

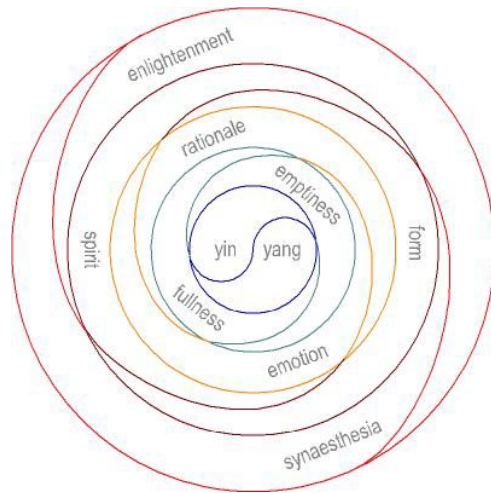


Fig. 2:4 Reflexive and Reflective Approaches

## 2.3 Visual Manifestation

By following the established contextual ideas and adapting appropriate transformation processes, all the potential artistic development will be realised through a strategic visual approach to the use of the subject, and applying particular composition and expressive manner to communicate a perceivable visual form.

### **2.3.1 Collecting Visual Resources**

I collected my primary visual data by extensively photographing natural scenes and parks around the city as personal experiences. They include plants, birds and landscapes, mottled or textured void spaces of walls, and water marks for their rich metaphor of nothingness. I only refer to a few of these images, but the experience of connecting with my subjects plays a more important role in my creation. Nature is an infinite resource, where I gather interesting and fresh ideas for my painting practice; to experience its diversity and richness and to be enlightened by the harmony that unites complexity and simplicity; to be imbued with physical realities and natural disciplines. Encountering nature, I enter a mental locus to explore obscurity.

Through visually manipulating my selected images, the potentials of visual constructions of colours, lines, and spaces trigger my emotional resonance. These images as emotional carriers establish a small but self-contained 'world' that communicates my infinite thought and feelings of every temporal moment.

### **2.3.2 Composing Approach**

My experiments consider the strategic composition of Yi and Xiang, to extract and transform the essential natural elements from primary visual data into Xing. Complementing visual absence and unlikeness to extend the metaphor, the self-deriving image will potentially achieve a state of emptiness. Between each instant moment from the original image and the evoked obscure Xiang it draws and enlightens me to interact and to reconstruct the visual form in a certain way, which is relative and responsive. In this state, emptiness activates and triggers my thinking and emotional experiences to continuously further my creative actualisation. The absence complements fullness through empty space of imagery and empty space with no imagery.

In the following, I give examples of manifestation in my own practice, with reflection on the idea of emptiness from Cheng (cross reference footnote 7, p. 12). Though these works may not be successful, they seem more enlightened in the way they interweave emptiness and fullness and transformations through various forms and approaches.

Emptiness was achieved through an extended obscure Xiang of nature as an emotional carrier, such as sky, cloud, fog, smoke, water, light, rain, dew, or wind to complement the visual clarity (Fig. 2:5).



Fig. 2:5 Zhao Yue Qu. *Duck*.  
Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 500 x 600 mm.



Fig. 2:6 Zhao Yue Qu. *Obscure Space*.  
Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 740 x 740 mm.

Figure 2:6 is a partial area of the work that refers to a coloured space with no imagery to interact with its visual structure. Between obscurity of brushstroke and clarity of texture, I suggest that they complement each other through emptiness and fullness. It is visually obscure but emotionally full. A blank space with no imagery, from figures 2:7 to 2:9: could be anything to complement the presence, as usually seen in ink painting. In the emptiness around the painting space, evolved and interacted with outside space, inside seems extended infinitely.

Empty space plays important parallel role as painted area in Chinese classical aesthetics. It implies a metaphoric space for the viewer to contemplate and involves their personal experience and interpretation to approach the extended Xiang. However, the difficulty is with the special quality of Xuan Zhi (cross reference footnote 18, p. 20); empty space may contract while the painted area expands. It is easy to add paint but very challenging to preserve empty space. I realised that visual absence does not work by itself; it complements the visual presence to create the vitality of visual rhythm.



Fig. 2:7 Zhao Yue Qu.  
Acrylic on canvas. 460 x 350 mm.



Fig. 2:8 Zhao Yue Qu .  
Acrylic on canvas. 460 x 350 mm.



Fig. 2:9 Zhao Yue Qu.  
Acrylic on canvas. 460 x 350 mm.

### 2.3.3 Expression

Artists' intentions are intricate, but visual expression is limited. The more we try to express the less we can attain. Applying incompleteness, sketching, wash and dye space or metaphor to indicate an absent presence is my intention. An overall extended Xiang is established through the viewer's shuttling between absence and presence, between Xiang and its metaphor to reveal the meaning themselves.

Xiang is compounded through visual principles: moving and still, large and small, full and empty, like and unlike, dry and moist, detailed and sketched, incomplete and complete. Enhanced by adapting suitable skills to reflect certain feelings, I am able to establish an effective expression of inter-relationships between all visual elements.

My approach does not refuse 'representation' or 'abstraction', but integrates them to become a 'third' visual expression. The expression that I applied from Going Bi is a way of producing visual details through many layers of colour rendering and



shading, to approach a likeness that seems full and yet limpid. With Xie Yi expression, I borrow the idea of incompleteness, obscurity and absence to approach the meditated space. Though these are two different visual languages, together they reveal nature through different metaphors to become a unified wholeness. Without physical appearance, the visual will become dull and empty; viewers may not be able to unfurl their imagination without physical clues. Without obscurity, the visual may lose its capacity (Fig 2:10).



Fig. 2:10 Zhao Yue Qu. *Deep Forest*. 2008.  
Acrylic on Xuan Zhi on canvas. 1600 x 2000 mm.

#### **2.3.4 Scales**

My visual explorations involve two opposite scales: large and small. The large scale painting (sizes 1600 x 2000 mm and 750 x 750 mm), contains stronger visual impact and visual space which I feel entirely involved with, from its wider and deeper view and stronger affective impact both on me and on the viewer. Although a painting size of 750 mm may not be considered large scale, it is comparatively large according to my project research (cross reference p. 47). I adapted a raw or textured absorbent Xuan Zhi mounted on canvas which is quite different from traditional presentation. This mounting method not only provides a stabilised painting space but extends the visual space outside the canvas as a contemporised art form.

In contrast, I used Xuan Zhi that is ready-mounted on cardboard which is quite small (only 332 mm x 332 mm). These are different from the traditional presentation of scroll painting that hangs on the wall. It encourages a close-up scrutiny to appreciate the work and triggers the viewer's infinite imagination through the small and confined space. It draws attention to the subtlety and diversity of every different detail of the scenes to unfold a spiritual space.

In the small-scale painting, the composition is focused on a specified small area and features particular objects from nature. Because the painting space is small, any visual element becomes an important content of the painting. The feelings are stronger through the limited rendered features. However, through the scenes and feelings aroused, a myriad Xiang is extended and is beyond the painting space.

### 2.3.5 Evaluation

Originating from the ancient scholar and painter Hsieh Ho [谢赫] (479 – 502 A.D.), is the critical thought in 'Six Canons' for Chinese painting, that vigour is essential. Jiang's (1982) discussion: *"Vigour [气] has no form or shape; it does not belong to any particular stroke or imagery, but exists in the overall integrated scene, and is approachable. Vigour is the expressive motivation for artists to affect viewers. It is far beyond physical representations. It might be understood as the notion of emptiness in relation to spiritual enlightenment; it is considered the highest level of artistic pursuit"* (p. 43).

Visually, vigour is approached and manifested through empty space within a confined painting space. In the natural world, empty space exists everywhere and nowhere, it is scattered in the middle of trees and plants, in between leaves, flowers or branches. It breaks the whole scene apart into limitless spaces. These scattered spaces enforce our shuttling between the spiritual emptiness and physical fullness, thus initiating our mental engagement. And as such that absence is evoked and interwoven with physical fullness to transform into a virtual yet enriched fullness.

There are similarities with the Western perspective on exploring the profundity of the natural world. In American contemporary artist Andrew Wyeth's work (Fig. 2:11), the nature scene is the emotional carrier of his painting which conveys a sad and lonely sentiment. However the expression is quite different from Chinese painting. His work suggests a concrete and physical thickness and texture, and painting space creates a three dimensional space. Visual balance is approached by the large areas

of empty space such as sky, mountain and field, with small density of crowded people, vibrant colour of house, car and trees. His approach to visual presence is strong and dominating.

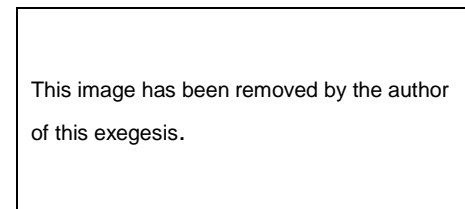


Fig. 2:11 Andrew Wyeth. *Public Sale*. 1943.  
Tempera. 580 x 1220 mm.

The key issue is that my approach is different from the Western thought of representation and abstraction, it is situated in between applying physical likeness and unlikeness to explore the transformation of images. Many Western artists, such as Ben Nicholson, Callum Innes and Robert Ryman, are dealing with a similar idea. Different from their void painting space or physical reality, my approach has a focus on pursuing lyric freedom and harmony by many means, including organic subjects and integrated visual forms and materials. I do not intend to discard the objects but rather to follow an artistic enlightenment to evoke an emotional resonance both for me and for the viewer. I agree with Spanish artist Tapies' concept of 'void' that is not a void painting space, but rather a transcendent fullness. He explores artistic expression through understanding the metaphorical meanings of materials and forms via painting, installation and performance. My visual approach relates to the Chinese cultural concept of a particular expression through form and materials.

Through further development of the empty space in my expression, I explore the visual obscurity that blurs the visually separated emptiness and fullness. As such, attention is drawn to the subtle changes in between emptiness and fullness that are seemingly dim or luminous, certain or uncertain, and partial or whole.

Realising the infinity of emptiness and fullness, the actualisation of my practice is based on the subjective understanding of my experience, so it might be considered as an infinite journey of exploration with my limited knowledge and skills. Within these processes, every painting is only a record of a temporal moment of my expression and experience.

## **2.4 Media & Materials**

Visual communication and expression not only rely on certain artistic intentions and skills, but also on the aid of appropriate methods and materials. Each medium communicates certain unique visual feelings; I chose the following media because they are in accordance with my established artistic intentions of unfolding infinite possibilities of innovation and fulfilment.

### **2.4.1 Chinese Painting Paper Xuan Zhi [宣纸]**

Xuan Zhi [宣纸] is the main medium (cross reference footnote 18, p. 20) used in this project for its organic natural materials and hand-made quality, and as such that each paper is unique. I am fascinated with the unique dynamic shades and intensity of liquid paint penetrating into the paper. It connects my feelings with the cultural context. Through the configuration of various brush strokes and shades, Xuan Zhi can manifest the subtle dimensions of colours and forms with still limpid and transparent physicality to form an internal space.

Canvas as a Western painting form is also adapted in this project for its flexibility in the contemporary aesthetic context. I have used it to frame the painted image of Xuan Zhi, or as a painting surface. I consider that blending different cultures within practice is not simply about transplanting them together, but doing so without losing the uniqueness of one's own culture. I explore the differences and uniqueness of Xuan Zhi and Canvas to achieve a better integration of form through processes.

#### **2.4.2 Water and Paint**

When working with Xuan Zhi, water is an important medium for achieving the unique visual quality of limpidity and transparency, also the naturally expanding form from controlling the proportion of water, paint and strokes to develop infinite possibilities of density, intensity and moisture. It challenges me to handle and adapt the unexpected visual to actualise effective visual form.

I do not intend to limit my painting medium to traditional materials only; my painting plates contains Chinese paint, water colour and also acrylic to compare what affect these materials have on Xuan Zhi and on canvas, and how different materials perform. In the future I also shall explore other painting materials that will bring interesting visual effects to my painting, such as fabric paint or pigment.

#### **2.4.3 Tools**

The Chinese brush is the main tool for traditional painters and calligraphers to produce changeable lines, strokes and shades

through controlling the wetness, strength, speed and the way it plays on Xuan Zhi. The way the soft brush behaves on the sensitive Xuan Zhi to manifest visual intentions and art form in a moment, is the one of the essential skills of the Chinese painter. I also use Western brush for large-scale painting or to produce large areas of shade and marks where I think suitable according to the painted object.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the established conception of emptiness is executed through a series of visual experimental researches. It employs the Chinese aesthetic principles of Xi, Xiang and Wu as the transformation processes and through self-reflective painting practice investigates the manifestation processes.

During the research processes, interaction between theoretic and practical exploration rationalised my painting practice, and transformative processes of Xi, Xiang and Wu enriched my creative approaches and enhanced my appreciative insight through the wandering journey. The failure that I encountered was valuable and necessary as an accumulation of visual experience and

creative performance; it enlightened me with insights of how things work or do not work, and as such it encouraged me to constantly alternate my way of making.

The experimental researches were extensive and vigorous, using different painting methods to approach the visual construction of subject, composition, colour and painting material, and to interact with emotional experiences in every developing moment. This strategic approach was effective, inspiring and yet challenging.

## Chapter Three    Commentary on Visual Documents

This chapter will analyse the strategic exploration of visual absence through my experimental works on the aesthetics of emptiness and fullness. With the philosophical idea of emptiness that underpins the project, absence refers to the painting methods of reduction, incompleteness and metaphor that extend the painting space and meaning through visual presence. It allows the artist to attain a state of transcendence between the existence and the unknown through visually complementing clarity and obscurity.

I shall focus on how artistic thinking interacts with the extracted organic visual elements to communicate through integrating the expression of representation and abstraction, which is inspired by traditional Chinese Gong Bi [工笔] and Xie Yi [写意] painting aesthetics. Emptiness as a visual strategy will be analysed through reflecting on the extended space and metaphor of the practice.

In analysing my practice, I focus on two visual forms: likeness and unlikeness. On one hand, I intended to emphasise the experience of physical likeness, which was inspired by nature, to unfold my stimulated emotional feelings from the subjects. On the other hand, I reordered this synthesised feeling to compound visual impression. For example, the brush strokes and

textures as extracted and transformed visual forms that contain the likeness and unlikeness characteristics of the subject themselves. The empty or wash and dye space that contains qualities of unlikeness suggested an uncertainty and an unknown. Through interaction between Yin and Yang, and between visual likeness and unlikeness, emptiness becomes full and fullness contains a capacity to extend the visual to attain an emotional space.

### 3.1 Commentary on the selected works

The following paintings are selected from over twenty visual experiments during the year, as the most enlightened work of my practice. These works may not represent the best of my painting; they however are pertinent representation of my using emptiness as a visual strategy of this research project. Emptiness is understood as spiritual representation of reality via visual presence and absence, this idea was also discussed in chapter one on Buddhism scholar Tsung Ping's [宗炳] statement (cross reference p. 17).

The following painting (Fig. 3:1) was inspired by a naturally withered palm leaf that turned yellow; the physical colour evoked the feeling of earth, a profound and mysterious source that contains infinite vitality. The moment from this particular natural scene freed my mind from chaos and allowed it to enter a state of tranquillity; like a carrier that reflected and recalled an immanent experience. The physical likeness of the withered leaf was significantly reduced and immersed in the profound obscurity. Via the configuration of strokes and shades the visual likeness and depth of subject were recreated. And with the intrusion from surrounding fuzzy spaces, the absence that complements the presence seems immense and profound. The dim and luminous ochre shade and texture merge the two different spaces and complement each other. I call this work *Limpidity*, because it communicates the drifting from present to absent, from full to empty and with capacious fullness. The limpidity of washed and dyed reflects invisible intricacy with subtlety.





Fig. 3:1 Zhao Yue Qu. *Limpidity*. 2006.  
Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.

The spontaneous naturalness of water marks was produced by controlling the wetness and amount of water to achieve the effect of migrating or fusing, and to suggest subtle movements. These were meticulously designed with consideration of their locations and relationships with the overall composition. The process itself may not have been acted as an exploration of pure spontaneity, but as the recreated and articulated 'natural' inter-relationships with the subject.

Visually, the physical fullness draws the viewer's intention towards close scrutiny, and obscurity produces a visual distance and depth that seems beyond the painting space. It encourages the viewer to shuttle between the empty and full, contemplating on the present and absent to attain his or her Xiang.



Fig. 3:2 Zhao Yue Qu. *Rain*. 2008.  
Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.

The fluttering reed in this work (Fig. 3:2) arouses lingering feelings of sadness and loneliness, in the bleak winter of rain and wind. I captured the particular structure to interact with my painting space for its diverse simplicity. Wavering leaves suggest movement, through their unfurling poses extending to different angles; they divide the empty space into various triangular spaces. Visually, the physical likeness was achieved by the changing shade of the brushstrokes, approaching the depth in two dimensions, and interpreted as interactions of diverse lines and small parcels, density and distance, straight and curved, darkness and luminosity to compound the organic relationship. There is no horizon; it suggests an infinite extension from the visual to an emotional space. The residues from washed and dyed suggest something out of nothing as a visual clue that led to endless imaginations.



Fig. 3:3 Zhao Yue Qu. *Cool Breeze*. 2008.  
Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.

In this work (Figure 3:3), the visual construction was 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 (cross reference footnote 5, p. 11). The physicality of grasses was extracted as the essential visual form, and was interpreted as configuration of brush strokes that simulated the physical likeness of grasses. Each stroke represented a small unity of 'one' in vigorous fullness; one evolves into two, and on to infinity (cross reference footnote 6, p.12). 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.

This work *Fuzzy Land* (Fig. 3:4) intended to communicate obscurity that arose from a desolate and lush scene. Most of the visual details of the grasses merged 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. Between the shades of darkness and incomplete strokes of 'grass': the likeness and unlikeness become a compound pair of 'affections and coloration' [情采] that attracts and allures the viewer. According to Liu (465-522 as cited by Owen, 1992), *"The pairing of 'affections' and 'coloration' is yet another version of the correspondence between 'inner' and 'outer' qualities...Coloration[s] primary meaning was a flashy appearance, often constituted of many bright colours. It was associated with literary ornamentation, especially in its capacity to attract and allure a reader... It has special importance as affection's external complement...In the case of the Book of Song, the poem follows from prior emotion, and the reader discovers the real emotions of the writer in the text; in the case of the rhetors, the affective qualities of the work are manipulated to make the reader admire the literary work for its own sake and the writer purely as writer"* (pp. 239-244).

Liu's insight suggests the external art form follows and accords with the artist's emotional and spiritual appeal (internal), to attain an infinite aesthetic extension and resonance.



Fig. 3:4 Zhao Yue Qu. *Fuzzy Land*. 2008.  
Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.

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 terms of Chinese aesthetics, the physical character of the flower is a metaphor for beauty, or virtue. In this painting (Fig. 3:5), I referenced the idea of a flower as a metaphor for emptiness in its temporal yet infinite beauty. The blossoming (of a flower) is temporal and yet extraordinary, just like the mundaneness of daily life; nothing is static, it is constantly changing. Although the Xiang is still, the condensed blossoming moment continues to exist.



Fig. 3:5 Zhao Yue Qu. *Iris*. 2008.

Water colour on Xuan Zhi. 332 x 332 mm.

The flower was painted negatively to emphasise its silence; I kept the subject almost blank, to suggest fragility and plainness yet gracefulness in bursting. With minimal faint shades on the petal, it communicates an emotional experience and depth: the poses of each petal were reconstructed through changing shapes, curves and tendencies to create interesting visual interactions. On the other hand, the leaves were portrayed as the 'subject', with weakened and dissolved details, and executed

as diagonal and dense lines to reveal and to complement the 'hiding' flower. *"...White, although often considered as no colour (a theory largely due to the Impressionists, who saw no white in nature), is a symbol of a world from which all colour as a definite attribute has disappeared. This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. A great silence, like an impenetrable wall, shrouds its life from our understanding. White, therefore, has this harmony of silence, which works upon us negatively, like many pauses in music that break temporarily the melody. It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities. White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age."* (Kandinsky, 1977, p. 39)

The whole image was unified with a fading-out visual effect, and some details became dissolved into the background to recall the interaction between the 'flower' and its metaphor. The scattered unpainted areas break through and activate the visual fullness as a permeable space for viewer to enter into the 'real' but conceptual world of infinite emptiness.

### **3.2 Conclusion**

Employing the philosophical idea of emptiness as a visual strategic approach during the creative processes, my practice has actualised an extended aesthetics that responded to the concept. It has also established a balanced inter-relationship between artistic intention and visual form, and an external rationale and internal pursuit to realise an insight on cultural and artistic appreciation. The painting practice merged my self-experiences with artistic intentions and developed consistently. With this attachment my painting space attained extension and an emotional enlightenment. My painting reflects a relationship between man and nature, and it is a reflexivity of my internal experience and spiritual pursuit.

The art works that I have discussed in this chapter only represent part of my practical research work. I have included in Appendix 1 a document called "Documentation of Experimental Processes" with brief reflective comments. I consider it a major output parallel to my exhibited work. This document gives a succinct record of how I approached and examined the visual strategy of emptiness. While I have extensively rephrased and edited the exegesis (as English is my second language), I must

admit that at the time I submit the exegesis for examination, there are gaps in the writing and in the appendix of Documentation of Experimental Processes, so it will require further editing. However, since the primary goal of the document is to give direct and immediate comments to facilitate the ongoing research, I approached writing the documentation in a more spontaneous way and prioritised recording my instinctive response to resolving writing gaps. I shall edit the document to an acceptable level when submitting the library copy.

The selected works for the exhibition also aim at representing the practicing strategy to achieve emptiness. Many works were done in small scale simply because large-scale works are comparatively more time consuming. As the nature of the project is focused on the processes, working on a smaller scale tends to engage me with a more reflective and reflexive state of mind. Each work may be interpreted differently from the different perspectives of different spiritual experience, and I shall leave it to the viewer to achieve a different Xiang of his or her own.

## Conclusion

Through my research and exploration from conception to practice, my understanding of traditions, cultural context and the uniqueness of Chinese art aesthetics and expressions has become clearer and deeper. I have been able to develop my own insight that allowed me to unfurl an imaginative artistic space and extend the classical Chinese aesthetics, and I have realised a changeable and untraceable world of 'affections and coloration' (cross reference p. 44) that is indistinct from profound philosophy. Crossover research of Eastern and Western aesthetic concepts also opened up new insights and expressive possibilities in painting practice within a multiple and mixed contemporary cultural context, which challenged me to adapt traditional aesthetics to confront current cultural experience, and to seek unique perspective of my painting practice.

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 traditions. Through the explored strategic visual absence during the practice, I was enlightened to discover that empty space will become vigorous and transcendental only when the complementary pairs of visual clarity and obscurity, rationale and emotion, spirit and form, emptiness and fullness, synaesthesia and enlightenment have achieved a balanced harmony to form an organic

wholeness. Brush and paint connected my internal experience with the external world, via the various forms and configurations of strokes transformed as a perceivable imagery; they reflect my ever-changing thoughts and feelings about emptiness, which is beyond a painting surface. It is temporal yet infinite.

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 the documentation



(Appendix 1) 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 to contemporary painting practice and to explore the manifestation of the processes.

The main contribution of this project is to offer a philosophical concept to approach painting practice and the appreciation of the work. It draws on and shares the wisdom of Eastern philosophy and relates to the contemporary multi-cultural context to extend a unique aesthetics and appreciation. It is different from pursuing a sensual stimulation through visual form; rather it is seeking a spiritual enlightenment and resonance for both the artist and the viewer. Our current highly developed society of materials and technology has brought about closer physical distance, but spiritual communication between peoples has drifted apart; as such the notion of emptiness provides a tranquil and limpid spiritual space for people to reside in.

Derived from interactions and integration between the Xiang of nature and unique aesthetic approaches, emptiness as a painting strategy realises my cultural identity between two different cultures; it ties my emotional experience to the enlightened insight of classical thought and leads me to constantly pursue another 'shore' (cross reference footnote 2, p. 9) towards achieving transcendental fullness. Emptiness activates my artistic creativity and aesthetic approaches to consistently pursue an immanent Xiang.

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