

# Forgetting the Line: Taoist Methods in Contemporary Ink Painting

Peter J. Hsu

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Auckland University of Technology

## Abstract

This practice-led research project uses Taoist<sup>1</sup> methods and contemporary ink painting to explore the intersection of spontaneous creativity and embodied knowledge. Taoist martial arts and meditation are practices that emphasise exploration and understanding of spontaneous creativity, or *wuwei*, also known as ‘action through non-action’. These practices utilise the Chinese concepts of *ting-chin* and *tso-wang*, or ‘listening energy’ and ‘sitting-forgetting’, as ways to access and act from this state of spontaneous creativity. By applying Taoist meditation and sensing techniques to an ink-based calligraphic painting practice, I investigate how the action of painting can arise from a state of *wuwei*. I argue that this state allows creation to proceed in an intuitive, organic manner based in embodied knowledge. I explore how the fluidity of ink and brush, when used in a painting employing Taoist methods, creates work that reflects the immediacy of ever-changing moment and how those moments continually layer on themselves to create the present. This exploration will address my key questions: how is spontaneity understood and used as a source of creativity and how can I use Taoist methods to explore spontaneous creativity through painting?

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<sup>1</sup> Although I have in the past used the currently more widespread Pinyin method of Romanisation for Chinese words, I have decided to exclusively use the Wade-Giles method for this exegesis as it is the style of Romanisation used in Taiwan.

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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 belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

9/5/2024

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# Introduction

For many years, I have practiced Taoist martial arts, meditation, and medicine as practical methods for understanding and moving through the world. I have also been playing with visual art since I was young, gravitating towards the dynamic, fluid, and immediate nature of ink, brush, and pen. I loved the sense of spontaneity and immediacy that ink painting and drawing communicate. I strive today to create artworks that embody that sense of spontaneous creativity. Until this research project, I had not made a conscious effort to apply my Taoist practices to my artistic work, content to assume their passive intermingling within myself. This research project presents me with the opportunity to bring these practices together in a focused, intentional way. It helps reveal to me a compartmentalisation that was not obvious to me before: how little I have intentionally utilised my spiritual and philosophical practices as sources for my artwork. Collapsing this unconscious boundary offers fertile ground for research into the nature of spontaneous creativity and the Tao. It is from this potential that I derive my research questions: how is spontaneity understood and used as a source of creativity and how can I use Taoist methods to explore spontaneous creativity through painting?

While I was not raised a Taoist, the philosophy and practice of Taoism has always been part of my cultural background, from the reproductions of venerated ink paintings on the walls of my childhood home to the family altar on the hearth of my grandparent's living room. However, like many second-generation Taiwanese in the United States, I was brought up in the Christian church. This was mostly for the opportunities for assimilation that it offered rather than any adherence to Abrahamic faith. Although I left the church early, I did not intentionally begin to pursue Taoism until my late teens, due to an existential crisis brought about by my mother's death and a well-timed comparative religions class. Learning more about Taoism led me to the practice of *tai chi ch'uan* beginning in my early twenties. This was followed by a degree in Chinese medicine, followed by a short stint as a practicing acupuncturist and herbalist. Taoist martial arts and philosophy are a vehicle through which I consider my relationship to my own culture and my artwork. In chapter one – 'Taoism, Brush, and Ink / History' – I present an overview of the history of Taoism, ink painting, and the brush. Along with introducing some of the basic tenets of Taoism, I draw connections between my personal practice and history with these concepts. My individual experience of these larger concepts and

histories forms the core of my practice-based methodology and situates my two main methods of inquiry.

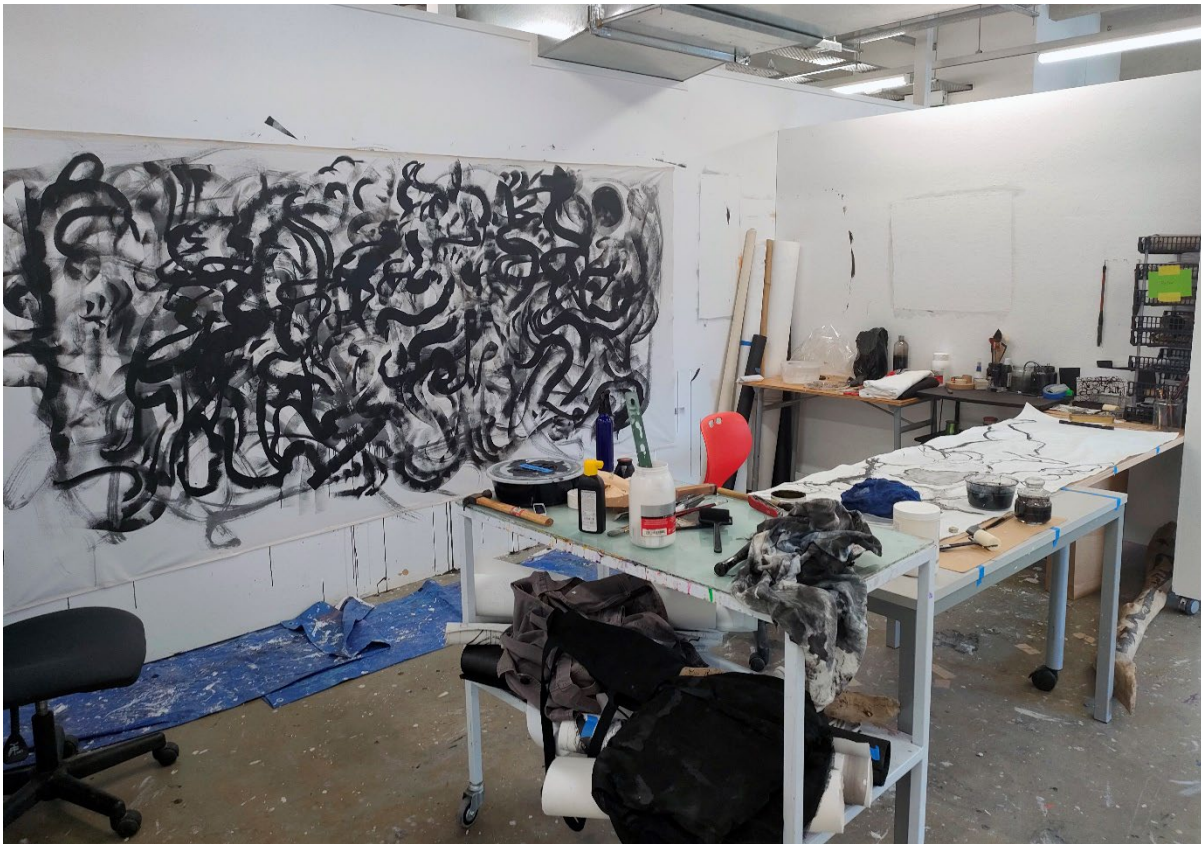
Despite my love for it, I have had no formal instruction in the use of the brush besides a few scattered lessons during primary school and time spent observing my mother, who was herself an accomplished amateur painter. I was a voracious consumer of Japanese manga, Chinese manhua, and American comics, particularly the independent comics of the 1970's and 80's. These comics were often typified by their bold, dense, and expressionistic, monochromatic brushwork. From *Maus* to *Lone Wolf and Cub*, I was fascinated by their stories, but even more so by the brushwork that gave them life. I am particularly drawn to how the dynamic linework crosses between painting and calligraphy. However, with no formal training, my brush technique is almost entirely self-taught, with accompanying assumptions on how to use it and many idiosyncrasies. Chapter two – 'Listening and Forgetting / Methods' – introduces the two primary methods I use to explore this project's overarching research question. These methods are *ting-chin* and *tso-wang*, Taoist modes of sensing and meditation that transliterate to 'listening energy' and 'sitting-forgetting', respectively. These methods provide me with the means to reveal unexamined assumptions about brushwork and painting.

My use of Chinese calligraphic techniques retains what I understand to be the classical principles of immediacy and spiritual vigour. However, my unfamiliarity with my mother language means that I separate calligraphic techniques from the traditional linguistic component of the art. Instead, I use those techniques with a contemporary focus: each line is representative of its own self, not in service of creating figuration. This positioning situates my painting into formal abstraction, verging on Abstract Expressionism in its presentation, and away from figuration and representation. In chapter three – 'Forgetting the Line, Forgetting the Brush / Application' – I discuss the process of applying my methods to my painting practice as well as the artwork produced from that application. As my paintings fall within the visual language of abstraction, I make clear the difference between my work and the canon of abstract expressionism and attempt to articulate a new conception of painting that transcends the dualism of representation versus abstraction.

Chapter four – 'Black-on-Black / All Things Arise from Nothing' – focuses on my explorations into black-on-black painting throughout this project. I also discuss issues of scale, and how I addressed them by making in a modular fashion. My

exploration of black-on-black painting is inspired by Taoist cosmology and quantum physics who both posit the spontaneous and ongoing appearance of matter from nothing. Just as those infinitesimal motes of being coalesce into larger and larger structures, so too do the panels of my final thesis painting, reflecting how even the largest and most structured of things draw their existence directly to the smallest things that arise from the emptiness of the Tao.

Finally, while Taoism and Taoist practices lie at the heart of this project, it is equally informed by my experience of life as a person living between multiple worlds, a United Statesian with Taiwanese, Japanese, and Chinese heritage. The titles of my paintings and the titles of my chapters reflect the dual thinking that arises from the schism that I navigate between these identities. Much like the separation of the Tao into *yin* and *yang* and the ensuing illusion of duality, these parallel titles can be understood as individual names and phrases. However, they become an inseparable whole when applied to the artworks or chapters that they denote.



**Figure 1:** Peter Hsu, *for all the cells that have died to keep this body alive / what we all remember* situated in art studio, 2023

**ALL THINGS ARE ONE. THE EYE OF THE SENSES AND THE  
EYE OF THE SPIRIT.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Laozi et al., *The Wisdom of Laotse* (Westport: Greenwood Pub Group, 1948), Ch. 1.3, pg. 44

# Chapter 1: Taoism, Brush, and Ink / History

The Great Square has no corners;  
The Great Vessel takes long to complete;  
The Great Tone makes little sound;  
The Great Image has no shape.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between Taoism and ink as the medium of expression in Chinese calligraphy and painting is ancient and lasting. My first chapter provides context to this historical relationship and demonstrates its connection to my practice. The project is based in my own contemplations on the nature of the Tao and my application of Taoist methods to my ink painting. My aim is to explore how these methods can enable me to paint from a place of spontaneous creativity and how that will manifest through my own practice. As a practicing Taoist, I strive to enter *wuwei* in all aspects of life. *Wuwei* is a central Taoist concept that is often translated to 'actionless action', or 'action through non-action'. I find it more accurately understood as 'non-interventive action', or a way of being in which action arises spontaneously from one's unique state of being. To enter *wuwei* is to find oneself creating without a thought of self yet creating only what the self could uniquely pull into existence. It is to make without judgement, aligned with the spontaneous creativity of the Tao.

Taoism posits that a great, invisible emptiness underlies all reality and that all things that can be known are constantly and spontaneously arising into being from this unknowable emptiness before ultimately collapsing back into it. This eternal spontaneous creative action is one of the core tenets of *Tao*, or the Way, the name given to that invisible, undifferentiated space from which all known things arise from. This ongoing, spontaneous creation creates *yin* and *yang*, the dualistic extremes of emptiness and fullness, action and inaction, darkness and light, that compose all things. These two extremes are not in opposition, but act synergistically, defining and engendering each other. Following the nature of *yin* and *yang*, all action begins in inaction, and all inaction stems from the natural end of action. This unending, spontaneous creation is one of the fundamental aspects of the Tao, and Taoist practitioners have developed a myriad of methods to align themselves with the Tao's pure creative force. To enter this space of pure creativity requires deep sensitivity

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<sup>3</sup> Lao-tzu, *Te-Tao Ching*, trans. Henricks, Robert G., 1993 Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, 1993), Chapter 41, pg. 10

and an ability to release extraneous, imposed ideas of style or technique and create from a place from embodied knowledge. This embodied knowledge is culturally inherited as well as internalised from personal experience and intellectual learning.

Chung-Yuan Chang, professor of philosophy at University of Hawaii and a foremost Taoist scholar, writes that “The pursuit of the spaceless, grasp of the invisible, is to tap the depth of the unconscious and to transform oneself. This inner serenity will permeate his entire being and will be manifested in his brush work.”<sup>4</sup> This striving for an inner state that harmonises with the external state of the universe is one of the primary tenets of Taoist thought and has been reflected in work by masters of classical Chinese painting such as Ni Tsan and Qin Feng, a contemporary Chinese artist. While the overarching forms of painting and calligraphy have expanded beyond the figurative and pictorial to include abstract and conceptual positions, the Taoist influence to strive to create from a harmonic inner state has remained a guiding force in ink painting.

I am drawn to black India ink as a medium for exploring Taoist concepts through painting. Its fluid materiality is responsive to the smallest movements of the hand or arm as well as the subtleties of the brush that is not reflected by thicker mediums such as oil or acrylic. In addition to its fluid nature, black India ink leaves indelible stains on the substrate:



Figure 2: Liu Kuo-sung, *Dance of the Black Ink* 墨象之舞, 1969, ink on paper, 47 x 48 cm. Collection of National Gallery of Singapore. Courtesy of the Liu Kuo-Sung Foundation.

making an expressive mark

requires confidence and serenity and a letting go of externalised ideas of perfection to fully commit to each stroke. Therefore, the full expression of ink lies in creating from the state of *wuwei*, painting from a spontaneous, unconstrained state as the fluidity of ink records the free and responsive movements of the brush upon the substrate. Liu Kuo-Sung's *Dance of the Black Ink* [1969][Figure 2] is an ideal example of ink's ability to depict spontaneity and creativity through calligraphic brushwork, painted as it is in two strokes that still hold the fluidity and spontaneity of a single, decisive action.

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<sup>4</sup> Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), pg. 266



**Figure 3:** Ni Zan, *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu*, 1372, Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 94.6 x 35.9 cm

While there is no lack of colour in classical Chinese painting, monochromatic painting and calligraphy has a particular connection with the spiritual pursuits of Taoism. Chang writes of Wang Wei, one of the eighth century innovators of monochromatic ink wash painting, that “Wang Wei’s ink-wash is called *p’o mo*, meaning penetrating or breaking ink, because by breaking the confining outer form reality is laid bare. This monochrome ink painting is decidedly an advance over colour painting, which is intent on imitating appearances.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Wang Wei’s actual work itself no longer exists and can only be reconstructed theoretically through records of his contemporaries and surviving copies of his works. However, later master painters and calligraphers such as Ni Tsan continued to expand on Wang Wei’s emphasis on monochromatic ink painting, a tradition that has continued through to the works of contemporary Chinese artists such as Qin Feng and Liu-Kuo Sung. Ni Tsan’s *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu* [1372] (Figure 3) is considered a masterwork and “one of the most

fully realized works of the artist's later years,” according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art<sup>6</sup>. It exemplifies the ability for monochromatic ink painting to communicate a sense of tranquillity that transcends the imitation of form in more typical landscape paintings.

<sup>5</sup> Chang, pg. 246

<sup>6</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art. ‘Ni Zan | *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu* | China | Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)’. Accessed 17 March 2024. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/45636>.

Like Wang Wei, I attempt to break from representing the outer forms of reality, by which I mean the illustration of forms as they appear to the eye. Instead, I aim to paint the underlying movement of the Tao directly. To paint this way, I consider each brushstroke to be representative of itself as an action and independent form, as opposed to only a means to an end. Like the cell in biology or *chi* in Chinese medical theory, the brushstroke is the basic building block of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Along with paper, inkstone, and ink stick, the brush is considered one of the “Four Treasures of the Study”<sup>7</sup>, a necessity for a painter-scholar to practice their creative arts. This cultural predilection for brush and ink guides how I enter this project. I focus on the brush and brushstroke, allowing me to both better understand their foundational place in my practice, and paint in a way that centres these fundamental tools to my research.



Figure 4: Peter Hsu, brushes and studio table, 2024

In Chinese martial arts, there is a saying that one’s swordplay is reflected in their brushwork and vice versa. The sword is an important spiritual symbol for Taoists<sup>8</sup>, used as symbolic instruments in exorcisms and rituals to rebalance negative energy. Due to this association, swordplay became not only a symbol of one’s martial ability but also a measure of their spiritual maturity. This is particularly important to practitioners of *tai chi ch’uan* who take the straight sword as the specialty of this martial arts practice. *Tai chi ch’uan* is sometimes described as a moving meditation, practiced slowly to better attune to the stillness from which all movement arises. These same spiritual qualities are applied to brushwork, creating a connection between swordplay, painting, and calligraphy within my research. This synchronicity between Taoism, martial arts,

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<sup>7</sup> “The name stems from the time of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (AD 420-589). Brushes (bi) and ink (mo) are two of the legendary “Four Treasures of the Study” tools of Chinese calligraphers, painters and poets over thousands of years.”

‘Four Treasures of the Study – China Online Museum’, 16 November 2015, <https://www.comuseum.com/calligraphy/four-treasures-of-the-study/>

<sup>8</sup> ‘Taoism and the Arts of China (Art Institute of Chicago)’, <https://archive.artic.edu/taoism/church/e59.php>.

and painting underpins this project, informing further exploration into embodied movement as uncovered by meditation, sensing, and forgetting.

While Taoism has a long and intertwined history with ink painting and calligraphy, I endeavour to create not from a place of overt historicity, but one of embodied cultural knowledge that exists within and is informed by contemporary contexts. As Sun Qianli, Tang dynasty author of *Shu pu*, the “Treatise on Calligraphy”, writes, “(e)stimable is the ability to write in ancient style without being in discord with one’s own time and to create modern art without going along with its shortcomings.”<sup>9</sup> In the spirit of Sun Qianli’s words, this project examines how these ancient practices and philosophies can explore *wuwei* and spontaneous creativity through a contemporary painting practice.

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<sup>9</sup> Sun Qianli and Jiang Kui, *Two Chinese Treatises on Calligraphy*, trans. Chang Ch’ung-ho and Frankel, Hans H. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pg. 2

## Chapter 2: Listening and Forgetting / Methods

Agnosia is not amnesia. *Nothing can be forgotten that was not first in mind.*<sup>10</sup>

This chapter introduces the two central methods arising from my practice-led methodology as informed by my background in Taoism. Drawing from Taoist martial arts and meditation, I apply two Taoist methods of meditation and sensing to my ink painting practice. In Chinese, these methods are named *ting-chin* and *tso-wang* and are translated as ‘listening energy’ and ‘sitting-forgetting’. The former is derived from *tai chi ch’uan*, the famous, slow-moving Taoist martial art, and the latter is first mentioned in the following passage from the eponymous classic of Chinese literature written by Chuang Tzu:

Yan Hui saw Confucius again and said, "I have made progress."  
"What do you mean?" asked Confucius.  
"I sit and forget everything."  
Confucius was alarmed and asked, "What do you mean by sitting down and forgetting everything?"  
Yan Hui replied, "I leave behind my body, perception and knowledge. Detached from both material form and mind. I become one with that which penetrates all things. This I call sitting and forgetting everything."<sup>11</sup>

*Ting-chin*, or ‘listening energy’, is a technique in *tai chi ch’uan* in which one attempts to ‘hear’ the intentions of their opponent through touch. The basic premise of *ting-chin* is that the hand always moves faster than the eye: any attempt to successfully react to the movements of an opponent after they have already begun is bound to fail. By the time a change has registered in the intellectual mind, it is already too late to properly react to the ongoing changes in the present. ‘Hearing’ with *ting-chin* involves extending one’s energy through contact with their opponent and feeling through that tactile sense for the moment of change before it has been outwardly expressed. Andreas Schoter, a scholar and Chinese internal martial arts practitioner, says this about *ting-chin*:

...with listening ting jin 聽勁, one uses contact with the opponent in order to “hear” the small movement that presages the actual

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis Hyde, *A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past* (Canongate Books, 2019), pg. 274

<sup>11</sup> Chuang Tzu et al., *Zhuangzi* (New York: Routledge, 2007), Ch. 6.14

execution of a technique. In this context employing the jin does not result in manifesting a movement, but instead requires being sensitive to the movements in your own qi caused by the opponent's intention.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than chasing after the action with a reaction, if the intention of the opponent is perceived before they begin their movement, one can intercept the action before it has been made. This allows free and reflexive movement through the full potentiality of each moment. This spontaneous movement is dependent on using *ting-chin* to 'hear' through the body, perceiving changes before they are outwardly expressed. While the more combative usage of this technique serves its martial practicality, its ability to allow the user to move confidently through each creative moment makes it a particularly interesting method to explore in painting.

Schoter's discussion further reveals that the aim of *ting-chin* is not merely to anticipate movement but to be receptive to change and how change creates immediate responses in the self via embodied knowledge. The most important aspect of *ting-chin* is the ability to listen through the body and respond spontaneously and creatively to the immediate present as it unfolds. As one progresses higher in one's understanding of *ting-chin*, one's sensitivity reaches the point where intention can be immediately 'heard'. The focus of *ting-chin* then turns to listening to the self, deciphering one's own embodied response to the imminent changes that one is 'hearing' through touch. This is a method that accesses embodied knowledge, unfiltered through intellectual process and acting spontaneously and in the moment. *Ting-chin* as a method makes perceptible that which is imperceptible<sup>13</sup>, or in a Taoist frame of reference, makes the invisible Tao momentarily visible and palpable. It is this moment of perception that allows for a spontaneous, creative action that responds to the reality of the moment and all the possibilities that derive from it. I strive to make this moment visually manifest through painting in this project, using *ting-chin* to 'hear' my materials and surfaces and respond spontaneously in the moment of painting.

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<sup>12</sup> Andreas Schoter, 'Consciousness of Movement', 26 February 2018, 7.



**Figure 5:** Peter Hsu, *a small play / human level*, 2023, ink on paper, 210 x 480 cm



**Figure 6:** Peter Hsu, detail of *a small play / human level* detail, 2023, ink on paper

Applying this method to painting necessitates rethinking and reprioritising key aspects of the painting process. The first is to embrace the tactile nature of painting and base the action of painting in the body. I use *ting-chin* to reach through the brush and ‘hear’ the immediate interaction between myself, the ink, and the substrate, painting that moment by moment. Using *ting-chin* in this way reorients the substrate and the environment, shifting them from the position of passive recipients of my actions and reframing them as active participants in the processual act of painting. In *a small play / human level* [2023](Figures 3 and 4), I paint directly with my hands on the paper, eschewing my normal tools to focus

exclusively on refining *ting-chin* through my immediate contact with ink and paper, untranslated through brush or paint roller. By painting my creative responses as they occur immediately in the present, I experience not only the moment of creativity, but also the ways that my embodied knowledge expresses itself visually when unhindered by my conscious mind. Understanding that creative moment is central to my research into acting from the ceaseless, creative present of the Tao.

*Tso-wang*, which translates to 'sitting-forgetting', is the Taoist method of meditation that I use in my project. In its most literal form, it is a type of structured sitting meditation that aims to do exactly as it says: to sit and forget. It is also used to describe a more general concept of forgetting that Taoists practice to free the self from unexamined habits and return to a way of existing based on embodied knowledge, unfettered by intellectual ways of knowing and being. While this formalised forgetting is understandable as an esoteric practice, applying *tso-wang* as a practical method for ink painting presents interesting questions as to its suitability or even practicability. The following passage from the *Tao Te Ching* provides an entry into a possible way to answer these questions:

The student of knowledge (aims at) learning day  
by day;  
The student of Tao (aims at) losing day by day.  
By continual losing  
One reaches doing nothing. (*laissez-faire*)  
By doing nothing everything is done<sup>14</sup>

This quote presents a fundamental differentiation between seeking knowledge and seeking Tao. To get closer to *wuwei*, one undergoes a process of culling acquired learning, reorienting the self to embodied knowledge. *Tso-wang* is not an attempt to forget literally everything, a practice that would make it more analogous to dying, but instead a practice of forgetting knowledge which is extraneous to knowledge that is embodied and attainable through sense and experience as opposed to logic. However, embodied knowledge is often the result of the practice of years of acquired knowledge. Inherent to this idea of forgetting is the necessity to have known things to forget in the first place. This process addresses the seeming paradoxes that arises when applying structured, even ritualistic methods of meditation and movement to enter *wuwei*

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<sup>14</sup> Laozi et al., *The Wisdom of Laozi* (Westport: Greenwood Pub Group, 1948), Ch. 48, pg. 229

and spontaneity: structure cannot be forgotten if it had not been learned to begin with.

*Tso-wang* does not preclude the importance of learned action through experience. Each moment is built from innumerable moments before which have shaped the present. Therefore, an ongoing, spontaneous reaction to each novel experience of life arises from an embodied understanding of being, built from past experiences, which remains open to the potential to change in the face of novel experiences. This openness to new potentialities in being is what prevents embodied knowledge from ossifying into a mere habituated response and keeps it flexible in navigating unforeseen experiences. *Tso-wang* is a continuous practice, akin to the eternal and ongoing expansion and contraction of the Tao, that helps to slough off external knowing and recognise that which has become embodied and unconscious over time. This positions it as a uniquely suitable method for exploring spontaneous creativity as expressed through my painting practice.

I use *ting-chin* and *tso-wang* as complementary methods, applying them in tandem to reveal and reorient assumed pillars of my painting practice. The directed forgetting of *tso-wang* engenders a need for the immediate sensory experience of *ting-chin* to engage with and better understand embodied knowledge. This leads to new understandings of materiality and process, which allow for an expanded understanding of their potential, a necessity for engendering spontaneity. These new understandings then are fully realised in a practice-led process rooted in *wuwei* and embodied knowledge.

## Chapter 3: Forgetting the Line, Forgetting the Brush / Application

The painter in his art is comparable to such artisans, not because of the meticulousness of the labor required, which the literati painter rejects with disdain, but because he acquires the capacity to produce gestures that completely incorporate the tension and vigilance of the spirit and that, freed from all intentionality governing them from outside, react perfectly to the configuration encountered and flow from it *sponte sua*.<sup>15</sup>

This chapter discusses how I apply *ting-chin* and *tso-wang* to my practice and how that shapes this project and its paintings. Applying *tso-wang* and *ting-chin* to my work reframes my relationship to my materials, reckoning with assumptions about the use of brush and ink. *Tai chi ch'uan* training begins with learning empty hand forms before progressing to weapons training. This order is to practice applying *ting-chin* through bare hand contact before beginning to learn how to apply it through an implement. The goal is to learn to 'hear' through a weapon in the same way that one can through the hand. In doing this, one extends one's awareness all the way through the implement until it feels and moves as an extension of one's own body. This requires a level of sensitivity that is difficult to achieve without developing it from a well-established foundation that begins with bare-hand touch.

Considering its tactile nature, the exact same application of *ting-chin* in martial arts could also be used in painting. While I use the brush as my primary painting implement, I have not undergone the process of using *ting-chin* with my bare hands in the context of painting. Sitting in *tso-wang* prompts me to question my assumptions about how to use brush and ink—assumptions that stretch to considerations of scale, brush size, stroke length, speed, and pressure. I also question my individual relationship to the brush as a mark making tool, and how much the way I use it is based on assumptions of how it should be used. This meditative practice makes me aware of the magnitude of these assumptions and how I can begin to use forgetting to more accurately understand whether these assumptions are based in embodied knowledge or externally applied limitations. Externally applied limitations and assumptions interrupt my ability to create spontaneously from my embodied knowledge.

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<sup>15</sup> Jullien, pg. 201

To investigate the relationship between myself and the brush as a mark-making tool, I experimented with foregoing its use and returned to painting with my bare hand and arm only. I utilised the basis of my martial arts training and developed *ting-chin* in my painting by using my bare hands and arms, relying on my direct tactile connection to the ink and the surface of my painting. This exploration is best exemplified by *a small play / human level* [2023](Figures 5 and 6). These pieces are composed of large, sweeping gestures on paper done after covering my hands and forearms in ink. When applying the ink to the paper with my hands, I apply *ting-chin* in a manner akin to how I first learned it in *tai chi ch'uan*: during an exercise called *t'ui shou* that involves the pushing of hands with a partner to feel their energy and uproot them from their stance. This familiar state prompted my body to paint with movements that vary in tempo, scale, and pressure, arising from my practice of *tai chi ch'uan* but now applied to painting. In tandem, *tso-wang* provided the necessary letting go of assumptions about body movement that is appropriate for painting, allowing me to commit fully to this new, sensation-led painting technique.

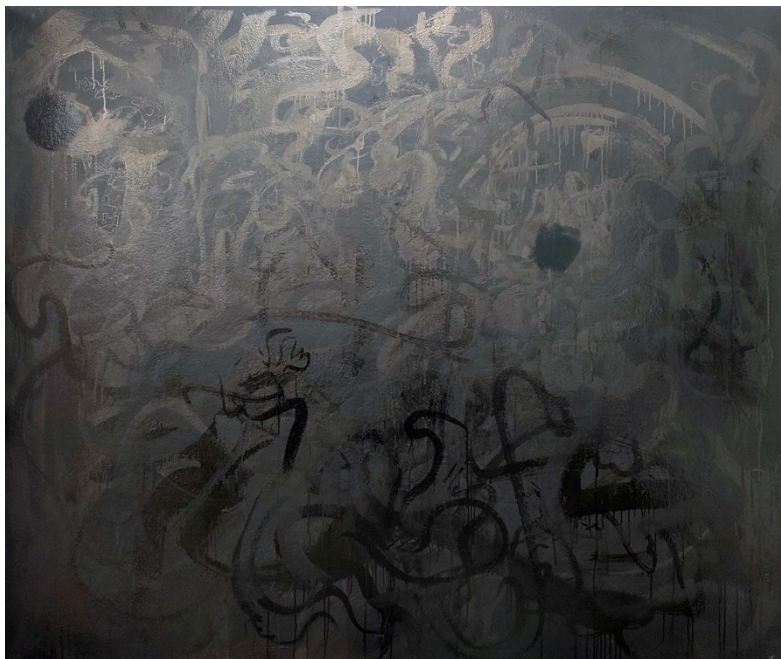
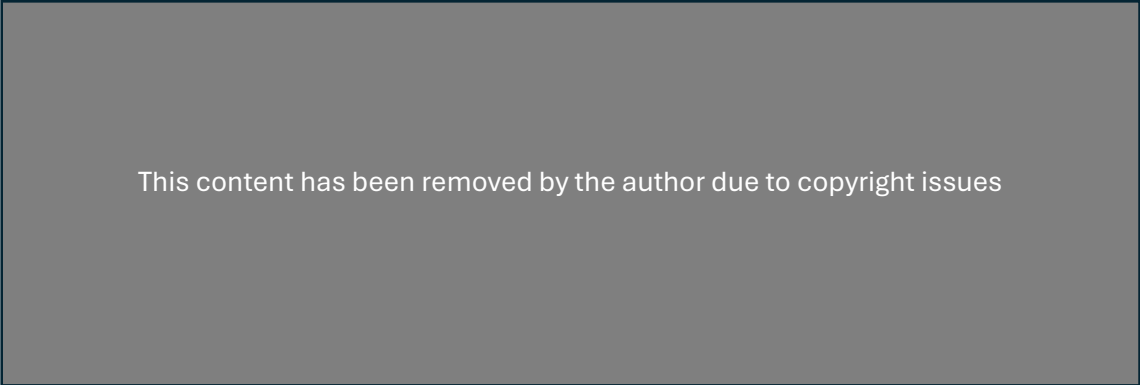


Figure 7: Peter Hsu, *black space / new words*, 2024, ink on wall, 210 x 240 cm

After *a small play / human level* and some other large works that utilised this new method, I felt confident in my ability to use *ting-chin* properly in a painting context. I reintroduced the use of the brush into my process, following the model of my martial arts training, and practice extending my awareness through to the tip of the bristles. Using the brush again, I began painting *black space / new words*

[2024](Figure 7) which demonstrates my greater sensitivity in *ting-chin* as well as an expanded, less constrained use of the brush. The painting uses more expressive body movements as engendered by *tso-wang*. My experiments in painting without a brush consider the unique realities of the brush as a tool,

particularly its ability to hold a reservoir of ink and create dynamic linework with its flexible bristles, something which the bare skin and rigid bony structure of hands and arms are unable to do. This focussed consideration of the inherent nature of the brush exposed its limitations, including the difficulty of scaling up brushes to create increasingly larger marks. In response, I started to work with standard house painting rollers as a new mark-making tool to my practice. These tools provided another, very different implement to practice the application of *ting-chin*, as well as expanding the scale of my marks, both in width and duration.



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**Figure 8:** Qin Feng, *Civilization Landscape Series*, 2004, ink on paper, 95 x 434.3 cm

Qin Feng, a contemporary Chinese painter and calligrapher from Xinjiang, also works in a Chinese brush-painting and calligraphy practice, creating artworks primarily with ink like his *Civilization Landscape* series [2004](Figure 6). His work ranges from smaller scales, under a meter, to much larger paintings up to nine meters long. In his larger artworks, such as the *Civilization Landscape* series, he uses broom and mop-sized brushes to make his marks, implements that require a full commitment from his body to fully express the brushstroke at that scale. I share key similarities with Qin Feng in both concept and execution within my practice. However, when studying his work, I notice that there is a lack in my own project with respect to variation of scale and duration of line. What I perceive as marks that are too uniform in size and marks that are too uniform in length and direction have a similar effect: they introduce an element of imposed structure on a painting, interrupting visual communication of the Taoist concepts of spontaneity and fluidity that I strive for. Although there is room for repetition and structure within paintings, a diversity in the scale of the marks best represents the dynamic nature and scale of all things that arise from the invisible Tao.

The works that result from my application of *ting-chin* and *tso-wang* appear on the surface like I am working from the established mode of abstract expressionism, but this similarity is only visual. The Tao is present in each brush stroke, each application of ink to the substrate spontaneously building to larger structures. As these larger forms organically accumulate and interact with each other, they form natural, abstract rhythms and structures that define the artwork on a larger scale. This context shows that I am not engaged in the practice of painting abstract forms as a way to intentionally refuse figuration. Instead, I use painting to create form as it is, beyond considerations of representation or abstraction. Through my use of *ting-chin* and *tso-wang* in this project, I produce works that arise from the body. I neither attempt to create a facsimile of life through figuration nor deny the reality of form in order to communicate exclusively through abstraction. Instead, I use painting as the vehicle for expressing the spontaneous creation of the Tao through time exactly as it occurs, manifested through the interaction between myself and my materials.

Using *ting-chin* and *tso-wang* as methods for exploring spontaneous creativity through painting, I have been able to reorient my understanding of painting through a new relationship with brush, ink, and substrate. These new relationships resulted in artworks that arise from a process led by the body and its sensitivity to the subtleties of each moment, expressed through the brush. These artworks record my attempts to paint from my understanding of the absolute reality of *wuwei* and the spontaneous creative moment, neither figurative nor abstract, but an expression of each brush stroke in and of itself as it spontaneously emerges from space.

## Chapter 4: Black-on-Black / All Things Arise from Nothing

To return to the tao, as the *Laozi* recommends, is thus to return to the foundational, where nothing is obstructed by specification, where the determining character of form has not yet come into play, and where haziness, between there is—there is not, is the very tonality of existence.<sup>16</sup>

This chapter explores my black-on-black paintings and considerations of scale and modularity in the making of my final thesis painting: *i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight*. The painting of black ink linework on a black field is the result of the application of *ting-chin* and *tso-wang* to my ink

painting practice. Through sensing and forgetting, I redefine my relationship to the tools and materials of ink painting and explore new ways to understand ink painting conceptually. These new ways of understanding result in my moving away from the traditional mode of painting of black ink on white paper or silk to experimenting with black-on-black painting on obsidian, untreated wood, and MDF board.

In this project, I have experimented with various types of black-on-black painting. My experiments involve working with ink painting on obsidian and black bitumen paper, both of which interest me due to their already existing pigmentation. This exploration of black-on-black painting is prompted by my considerations of the intersection between modern quantum physics and Taoist cosmology, most notably the spontaneous appearance of subatomic particles from empty space<sup>17</sup>. The artist Lee Hyun-Joung works from a similar consideration for the line emerging from empty space.

Between each uninterrupted line, the blank space left vacant on the paper is not a blank space. It corresponds to the idea,

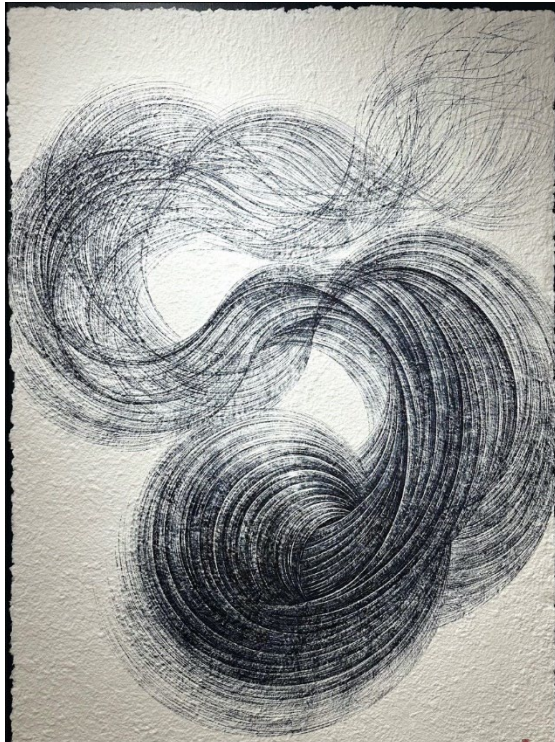
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<sup>16</sup> François Jullien and Jane Marie Todd, *The Great Image Has No Form or On the Nonobject through Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pg. 47

<sup>17</sup> "...that a vacuum is never completely empty, but instead buzzes with so-called "virtual particles" that constantly wink into and out of existence."

Choi, Charles Q. 'Something from Nothing? A Vacuum Can Yield Flashes of Light'. *Scientific American*. Accessed 7 May 2024. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/something-from-nothing-vacuum-can-yield-flashes-of-light/>.

widely held in Taoist thought of emptiness and fullness, that the interval is what makes the connection between visible objects. And it is precisely after a period of silence, points out Lee Hyun Joung(sic), that a line emerges: something happens against a background of nothing.<sup>18</sup>

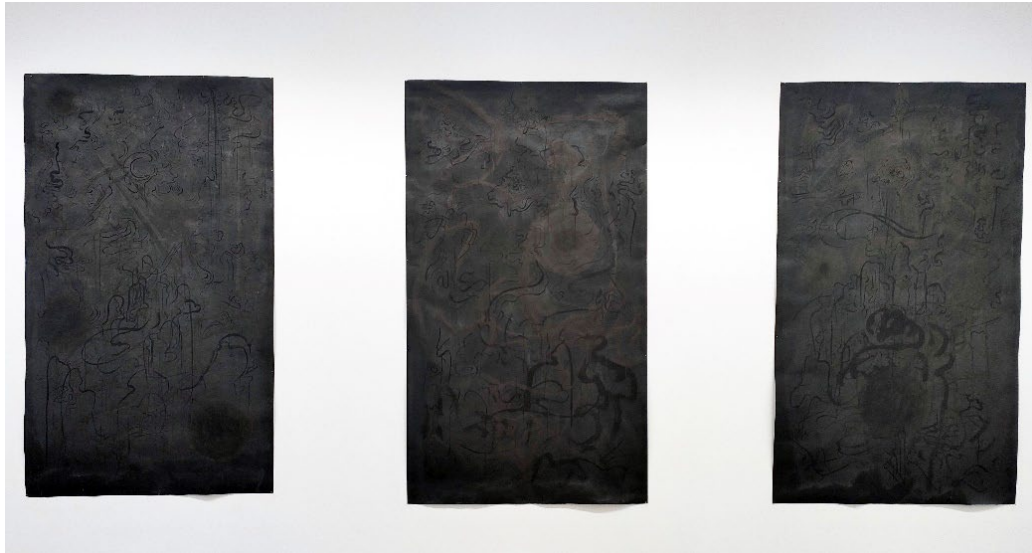


**Figure 9:** Lee Hyun-Joung, *Mémoire du Vent* “Ridge Lines”, 2023, Korean pigment on Hanji, 100 x 60 x 3.5 cm

Like Lee, I paint the spontaneous emergence of lines that coalesce around each other, interweaving and layering over and through the empty space of the substrate. My consideration of space as a lightless void leads to my imagining brushstrokes emerging from the blackness of the field around them, spontaneously brought into existence like subatomic particles. This is a departure from the traditional forms of brushing black ink onto a white background, as exemplified by Lee Hyun-Joung’s work *Mémoire du Vent* “Ridge Lines” [2023](Figure 9).

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Lee Hyun-Joung Painting Collection | Original Art | Galerie Sept’. Accessed 27 April 2024. <https://www.galeriesept.com/artist/lee-hyun-joung>.



**Figure 10:** Peter Hsu, *afternow*, 2023, ink on bitumen paper

My early experiments in black-on-black painting culminate in the creation of *afternow*, a triptych of three ink paintings on bitumen paper [2023](Figure 10). This triptych of paintings is an intermediate stage between my black-on-white paintings on paper to the black-on-black on MDF board of my final thesis painting. The bitumen makes the paper slightly water-resistant, which causes some interesting interactions with the various inks I use. However, the water-resistance necessitates that I apply such a substantial amount of ink that it warps the paper as it dries. This warping emphasises the artifice and artificiality of the painting, distracting from the brush marks themselves. This unintended consequence enabled me to consider other possible substrates that do not change material character so easily under the volume of ink and primer used.

Some issues arise that are inherent to practicing black-on-black painting on paper at the scale I work at. At a metre by a metre and a half, the black of the paper against white walls draws attention to the edge, to the detriment of the painting as a whole, as can be seen in the Figure 10. Black ink on white paper suffers from a similar effect, defined by the high-contrast difference between two extreme tones as is illustrated particularly in the dense linework of *words from the air* [2023](Figure 11). Creating a *small play / human level* [2023](Figures 5 and 6) expanded the scale of my work by preparing full studio walls with paper and primer, matching the substrate to the dimensions of the wall itself. Although



**Figure 11:** Peter Hsu, *words from the air*, 2023, ink on paper, 240 x 280 cm

the issues of scale and edge were addressed, the warping and damage to the paper continued to create problems for the finished work. While I often work on canvas, silk, and other fabrics, none of them make for acceptable solutions, due to way these materials tend to wrinkle and hang, even when pinned tightly to a surface. The best way to free myself from these material constraints involved experimenting with painting directly onto the surface of the wall. For example, in *black space / new words*

[2024](Figure 7) I painted directly onto my studio wall.

The practical appeal of black-on-black painting is that it resolves issues of intensity caused by the high contrast of black ink on a white field. Without this intensity, subtleties in the ink and the brushwork become more visible and slight tonal differences are given space to breathe and emerge for viewers. They function in the same way that the *Tao Te Ching* describes all things arising from the empty, invisible Tao, spontaneously emerging to eventually fade back into empty space. However, the subtlety of this effect can be interrupted by the placement of the black field against a white background. This creates a visual break that takes the viewer out of the artwork. While painting directly onto the wall offered a solution to this problem, this type of site-specific painting is not practical for all circumstances and contexts. This is a major contributing factor in

my development of the modular method used to create my final thesis painting for this project.



**Figure 12:** Peter Hsu, *i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight* detail, 2024, ink on MDF board

In my final thesis painting, *i don't remember what i saw when I drowned / slanted i sight* [2024](Figure 12), I expand the scale of the work to almost three by five metres. This scale provides an expanded sense of field and focus for viewers. At this scale, it is necessary to view the painting at some distance to experience it as a whole. Observing it from a closer distance obscures the boundaries of the painting, bringing the focus to the immediacy of the black lines emerging from the black ground. The painting is composed of panels of MDF board that are primed with layers of black gesso before applying layers of brushwork with several types of ink with brushes and paint rollers of varying sizes, and then installed as one large piece. The monumentality of scale allows the viewer to fully enter into the painting and observe the play of the lines with each other, without the visual distraction of edges and boundaries.

While working in this modular fashion satisfies practical issues of painting outside of conditions where I can apply ink directly to the gallery wall, it also alludes to the Taoist influence on my project. In the same way each individual brushstroke I paint builds onto those before and defines each one afterward, the

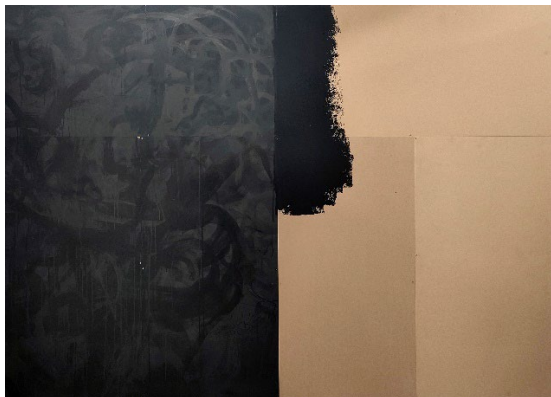
smaller painted MDF panels operate in the same manner in constructing the overall structure of the artwork. This method mirrors the way the smallest things emerge from the emptiness of the Tao and coalesce into larger forms.



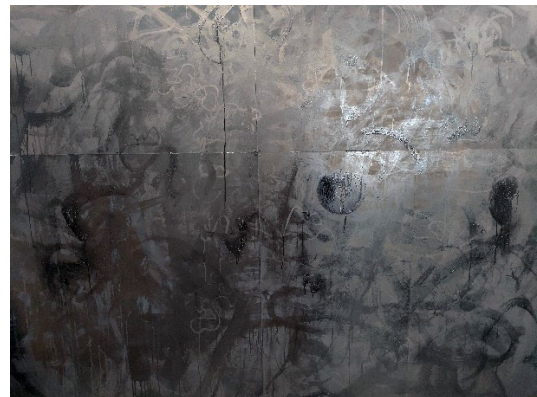
**Figure 13:** Peter Hsu, *i don't remember what I saw when I drowned / slanted i sight process*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 180 x 240 cm



**Figure 14:** Peter Hsu, *i don't remember what I saw when I drowned / slanted i sight process*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 180 x 240 cm



**Figure 15:** Peter Hsu, *i don't remember what I saw when I drowned / slanted i sight process*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 180 x 240 cm



**Figure 16:** Peter Hsu, *i don't remember what I saw when I drowned / slanted i sight process*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 180 x 240 cm

When considering a large canvas or expanse of wall to paint on, my mind can become distracted with considerations of design and overall composition. By focusing on painting smaller sections of panels, I am able to practice a 'forgetting' of the final product that allows it to grow spontaneously from its composite pieces. This modular method of creating can be used indefinitely, creating an artwork of continually growing scale and duration. For this project, I deinstall finished segments in parts, shifting them next to unpainted panels so that my brushstrokes continue to run from fully painted and layered panels onto unpainted panels (Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13). In this way, the completed piece maintains an overall sense of continuity and flow, despite being made in a more piecemeal fashion.

*i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight* is the culmination of this project which applies Taoist methods to a process-led painting practice. My use of black-on-black ink painting, and my focus on linework on a large scale, reflects the creative nature of the Tao. All things, like the abstract linework of the painting, emerge from the nothing of the Tao. I create it modularly to be installed at a scale that allows viewers to fully engage with it as an expression of spontaneous creativity through ink painting.

## Conclusion

This research arose from an inquiry into the nature of spontaneity and creativity through my ink painting practice. Drawing on Taoist martial arts and philosophy, I have explored the application of *ting-chin* and *tso-wang* to painting. This exploration resulted in artworks that represent my new understanding of spontaneous creativity in painting in which the image arises from an embodied and sensation-led process. It also forms the basis of my attempts to articulate a new conception of painting that transcends the dualism of representation or abstraction. I am tentatively calling new concept Unabstractionism, in which painting arises from the spontaneous creative reaction of the body to materials. Each mark made is representative fully of itself, not a subordinated element of figuration. The artwork then develops organically as consecutive marks are made which intuitively respond to those made before and create the context for those after. Arriving naturally at its finished state without pre-conceived design or composition, the painting is not representative of larger abstract truths but is eminently complete without the need for further interpretation in the same way each component brushstroke is complete in and of itself.

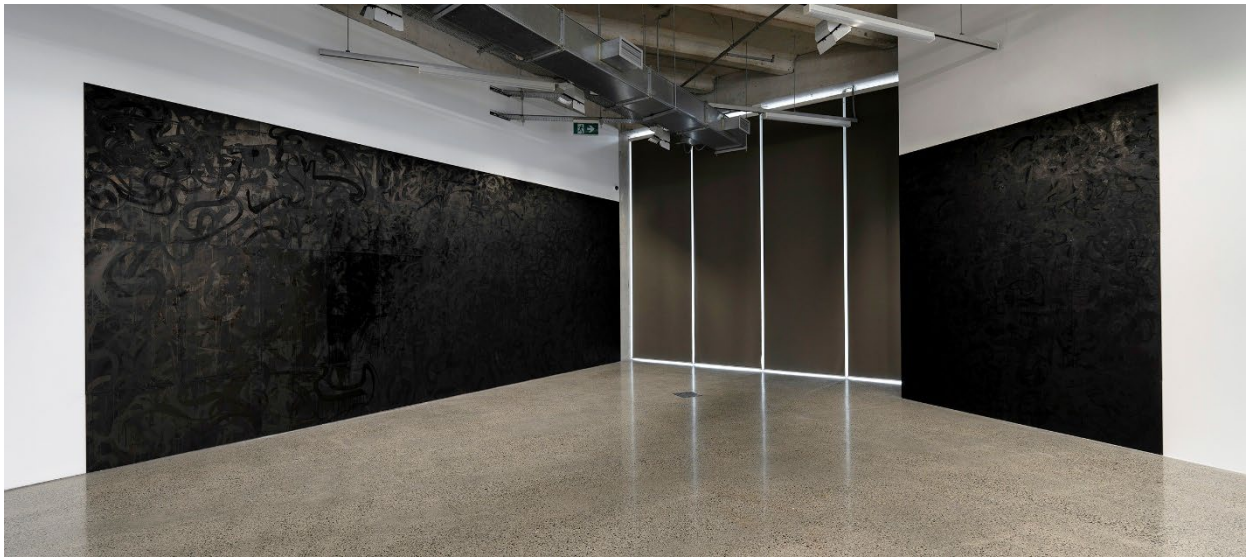
As is so often the case with both spiritual and material journeys, during this project I questioned old, habitual ways of making only to gain a new understanding of them and return to them with a renewed vigour. The process of painting with my bare-hands to develop *ting-chin* fostered a better understanding of the nature of the brush and its advantages and disadvantages as a mark making tool. Similarly, applying *tso-wang* to my painting practice helped me to reorient and recontextualise many of my assumptions about mark making and materiality. These new understandings coalesced into a new understanding of how painting itself is a vehicle for directly accessing and exploring the spontaneous, continual creation of the Tao.

*i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight* embodies my process-led experimentations into ink painting through my exploration of black-on-black painting, my focus on the line as the basic unit of the painting, and my considerations of scale and modularity. These aspects of the painting are reflections of the Tao: the spontaneous emergence of all things from nothing and the formation of the large from the natural gathering of the small. Painted with a reflexive, body-led technique, this artwork grounds itself in an understanding of spontaneous creativity derived from embodied knowledge.

# **Installation and Exhibition**

Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery

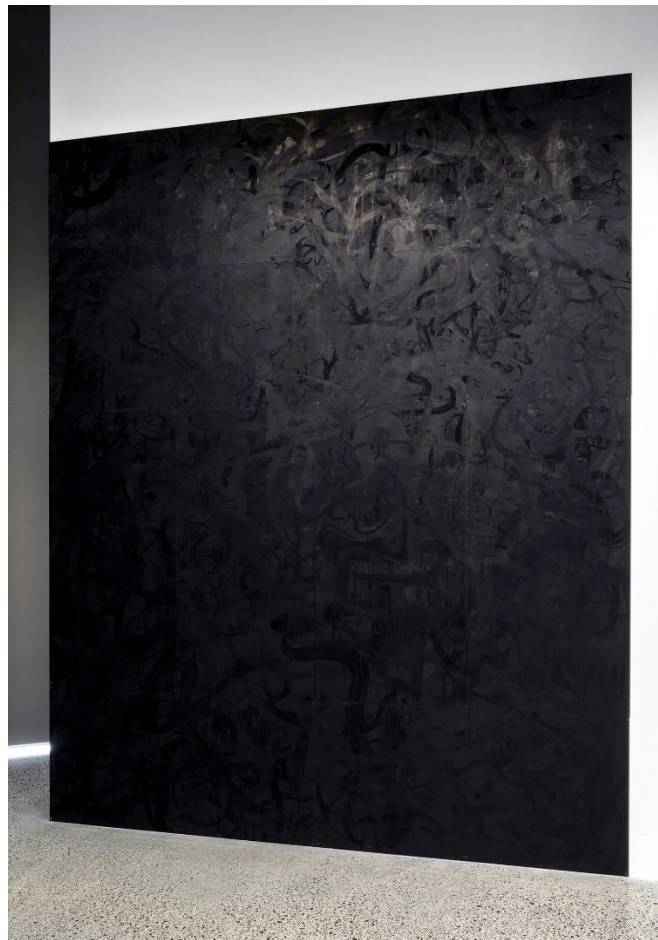
7 - 11 June 2024



**Figure 17:** Peter Hsu, *i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 300 x 920 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery One.



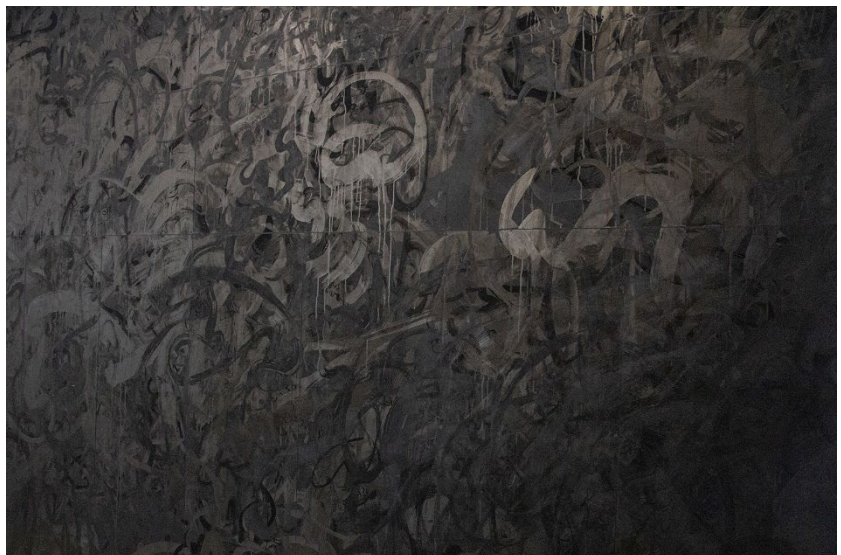
**Figure 18:** Peter Hsu, *i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight* left section, 2024, ink on MDF board, 300 x 720 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery One. Image taken by Paul Chapman



**Figure 19:** Peter Hsu, *i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight* right section, 2024, ink on MDF board, 300 x 240 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery One. Image taken by Paul Chapman



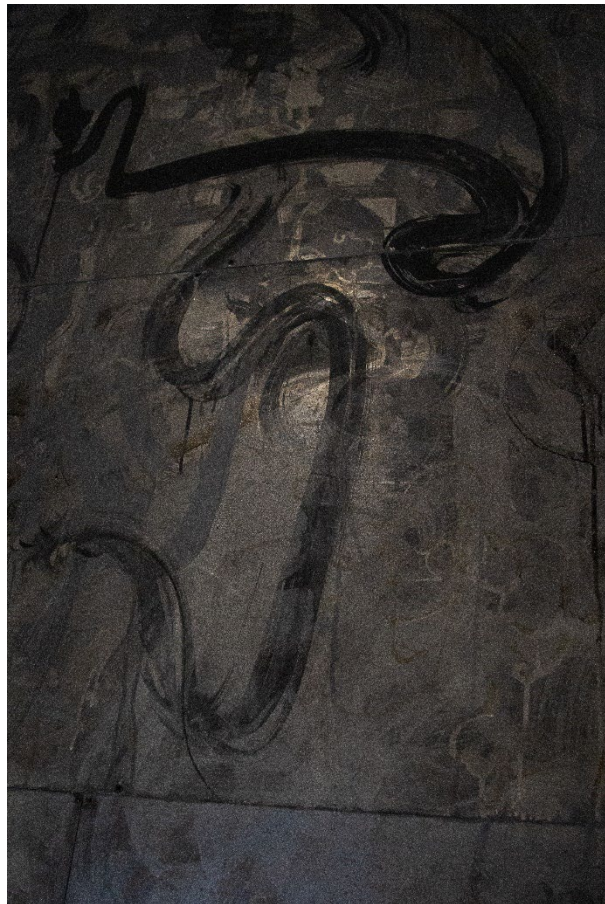
**Figure 20:** Peter Hsu, detail of *i don't remember what I saw when i drowned /slanted i sight*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 300 x 920 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery One. Image taken by Vanessa Samuels



**Figure 21:** Peter Hsu, detail of *i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 300 x 920 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery One. Image taken by Vanessa Samuels



**Figure 22:** Peter Hsu, detail of *i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 300 x 920 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery One. Image taken by Vanessa Samuels



**Figure 23:** Peter Hsu, detail of *i don't remember what i saw when i drowned / slanted i sight*, 2024, ink on MDF board, 300 x 920 cm, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery One. Image taken by Vanessa Samuels

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