

Simple Complexities: Contemporary Art Practice as a Mediator for Bridging and Celebrating Cultural Difference Through Practice- Based Research

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This paper is entitled: 'Simple Complexities: Contemporary Art Practice as a Mediator for Bridging and Celebrating Cultural Difference Through Practice-Based Research'. It could also be called: 'The Movement of Meaning'.

The paper traces the work of three artists as case studies, graduates from the RMIT MFA and DFA programs. It describes how ideas relevant to local cultures can inform and be informed by the international means of contemporary art practice and thereby mediate and celebrate difference. The paper reflects on the work of: Xia Yu Bai, a figurative painter from China; Ming-Chueh Hung, an abstract painter from Taiwan; and Jong Gu Yoon, a video installation artist from South Korea.

The paper briefly addresses the specifics of Taoism in their practice, but primarily locates the artists' strategies and methods in contemporary art practice. It places these observations within the context of the interaction between Western, particularly its Australian manifestation, and the North Asian traditions of art. I emphasise the Australian connection here for it is often assumed incorrectly by government and public that Australia has participated in the first wave of Western art education in these regions. In truth, there is a long tradition of interaction, and we need only look at the history of North Asian artists training in Europe since the early years of Twentieth century.

What we can say is that Australians are interacting differently. Australians live in the region - albeit on the periphery - and are not a traditional Western cultural centre. Australia goes into the North Asian region as an equal, at least in our eyes, with the recognition that Asia is doing quite well without Australia. Australia exchanges ideas, Australians teach there, learn there. In fact in a real sense 'we' are there, or if things have really changed...'we' are all 'here'.

As well as artists, students and lecturers coming to Australia, Australian-based art schools work in the region offshore. I cite, for example, the delivery of programs by my own university, RMIT, since the 1980s in Singapore with La Salle SIA School of Art, and our current delivery of programs in Hong Kong. Institutions such as Asialink and the Asia-Pacific Triennials have contributed to a growing discourse. Today, it is common for individual artists to exhibit throughout the region.

Australia's unique history and multicultural mix makes for a site for cultural exchange which is not one of a dominant culture...we are already 'mixed-up' and this enables us to give and permit a different mixed-up de-centred view of contemporary culture.

In saying this, we still need to be aware of our assumptions about where 'correct knowledge' lies. It lies everywhere, no one region has the answer. Australian art schools are slowly emerging from an arrogant position of the knower, the deliverer of the 'correct knowledge', that is Western knowledge to the East. It will benefit us all to more fully understand the long history of Western/Eastern interaction.

This paper, hopefully, contributes to the recognition of the longevity and benefits of interaction, and to our understanding of the interconnected nature of cultures. It argues for an understanding of complexity rather than the oversimplification of ideas and peoples so prevalent in our societies today.



Figure 1: Anonymous. 'Moon and Water', Fogg Art Museum of Fine Arts, Harvard. Album leaf, 20cms diameter. Previously attributed to Ma Lin, died after 1246.

'Moon and Waves' manifests many aspects of Taoism: change, fluidity, cyclic movement, Yin and Yang, push and pull, dynamic balance. The moon and water became one of the key motifs in Taoist visual art and poetry.

Taoism is a philosophy that developed from the 5th century B.C. in China. It is popularly known in the West through LaoTze's book the *Tao Te Ching*. Taoism can be seen as an alternative to Confucianism but is not mutually exclusive to it. If we think of Confucianism as a fixed system of society, thought, ethics that emphasises obligation and duty within a hierarchical society, with

the family and the Emperor at its head, we can view Taoism as its inverse: internal, intuitive, individualised, shifting. Confucianism stressed that the way to harmony was through fulfilling your obligations within the fixed social order. Taoism looked at the individual and the social structure as part of Nature. Taoism recognised an underlying dynamic balance and energy in Nature, *Ch'i*, present in all things. If *Ch'i* is balanced then harmony is achieved.

Tao emphasised the role of intuition and the dynamic balance of extremes of destruction and construction, manifest through the concept of the Yin and the Yang, its symbol of *T'ao-chi t'u* representing the ceaseless cycle of change. Yin represents the dark, intuitive, earth, moon, night, winter, moisture and coolness. Yang represents the bright, rational, heaven, sun, day, summer, dryness and warmth. These are unified in a dynamic harmony of movement.

Taoist thought combined with Buddhist thought influencing the development of Chan Buddhism in China, Korea and later the various schools of Zen in Japan.



Figure 2: Xiao Yu Bai. 'The Moon', 2005. Oil on canvas, 30cm x 30cms x 4 pieces.

'Moon' by Xiao Yu Bai is from a series of small oil paintings of the moon, sky and trees, intimate in scale and attentively painted. The painting is not only OF something, not only a representational, symbolic, mimetic image; it IS something, a manifestation of ideas and sensibilities. It is also the residue of process of painting, a manipulated material reality that has a signifying role in assisting us to experience its time and manner of making.

Xiao Yu Bai paints blurry paintings – impossible, according to Gerhard Richter: paint cannot blur like a photograph, paint simply is. However Xiao paints images that are perceived as blurry in order to reveal movement. Her blur exists within contexts. She has investigated the blurs of Gerhard Richter celebrating realism as illusion in relationship to the actuality of the painted surface. She has studied the European Romantic and contemplative tradition epitomised by the

work of Caspar David Friedrich. She has studied the modest masterpieces of the Australian painter of the 1930s Clarice Beckett, who like Giorgio Morandi in Italy, realised that the blur activates the perception of depth as an illusionistic atmospheric space as well as flatness and time as surface (facture). She has studied the colour field blurs of Mark Rothko, where colour floats and shifts.

The blur combines gesture with matter, movement and image, unites positive and negative forms, depicted time (image) and manifest time (process). The blur permits expressive gesture, and the observed constructed image and sensation of feeling to be manifest. Xiao Yu Bai's work enables us to reflect on being and meaning. These 'blurs as movement' operate not only in the field of Western art which I emphasise here to indicate the depth of Xiao Yu Bai's research, but also in the traditions of Chinese art manifesting the principle of change and unification. She exploits the blur as the movement of the *Tao-Ch'i* in order to reconcile opposites.

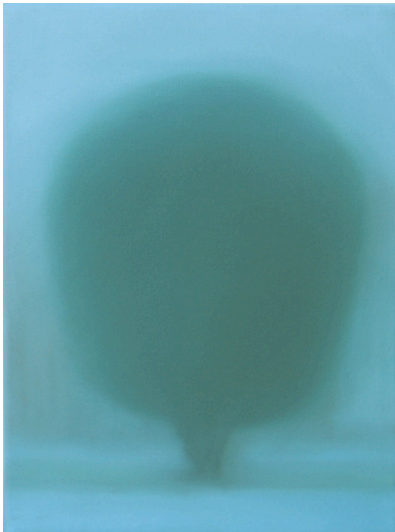


Figure 3: Xiao Yu Bai 'Tree', 2005. Oil on canvas. 30cm x 22cm.

Bai states:

I aim to make paintings that are abstract and representational; simple but ambiguous. They evoke movement, time, balance, memories and nothing. The meanings of my painting are slow to unfold and they always shift. I aim to make works which look like poetry, and give the feeling of contemplation and create peaceful and tranquil atmospheres where the shapes are very simple, the edges of forms are soft. My reason for using blurring is to unify and blend edges, I think the blur evokes movement, time, atmosphere. It unifies dualities ...I use blurring to signify balance, mixture, memory and nothing. (Bai, 2005:4)

These comments are reminiscent of the ideas found in traditional Chan and Taoist painting and are reflected in the Six principles of painting which have formed the basis of Chinese painting for millennia. Hsieh Ho from the Tang dynasty lists them so:

The first and most important (principle) is *Ch'i Yün shêng- tung*: Spirit resonance (or, Vibration of Vitality and Life Movement).

The second is: Bone Manner (i.e. Structural use of the brush).

The third is: Conform with the objects to give likeness.

The fourth is: Apply colours according to the Characteristics.

The fifth is: Plan and Design, Place Position (i.e. Composition).

The sixth is: To transmit models by drawing. (Siren, 1971:17-22)

Xiao Yu Bai does not solely use the language of traditional painting but looking at her work through the filter of these principles is rewarding. Whilst Western painting has been influential, equally she has been affected by Chinese traditions including Chinese realist painting.

The movement of meaning

The history of Chinese artists' investigation and interrogation of European art is complicated and profound. One has to acknowledge the role of Japan in the first quarter of the Twentieth century in becoming the meeting point between early Western Modernist painting and Eastern ideas and methods. It was one of the key points of transition and translation of ideas. Homi Bhaba defines 'translation' as the movement of meaning (Bhaba, 1994). Japan's modernisation and opening up to the West economically and culturally, its defeat of Imperial Russia and alliance with Western powers in World War 1 made it a successful model and haven for Chinese reformers. But it is to be remembered that Asian artists did not adopt the art of the West, but selectively interpreted it according to their own values at the same time as critically deconstructing and reconstructing their own vital traditions.

The agonising political and human history of China in the Twentieth century was accompanied by seismic shifts in the arts. As early as 1919, Kang You Wei from Shanghai went to Paris and studied conservative Western academic drawing from the model which in turn he brought back to China. His contemporary Gao Jianfu from Guang Chou attempted to reconcile traditional ink painting with a 'Western Realism' by expanding content. Cultural reform paralleled political revolution (Clark, 2000:10-13).

We can trace the turbulent complexity that is Chinese art from its interpretation of Western Academic Realism and Impressionism by artists trained in Europe and Japan, via heroic Socialist Realism, the Abstract movements in Shanghai in the the 1980s, through to the growth of installation practice amongst local artists and the Chinese diaspora. Hong Kong and Taiwan offer different histories in the story of Chinese interaction with the West where the continuation of tradition of literati painting remained unbroken but displaced, and met directly with Western Culture in differing ways to mainland China. The influence of Western Modernism was felt throughout Asia with the exception of the Communist states, particularly in Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Hong Kong.

Art Informel in France, Informel and Zero in Germany and Abstract Expressionism in the USA were movements embraced by Asian artists from the 1950s into the 1970s and adapted to their own uses. These influences were enhanced due to the return of the first post-war generation of

artists educated overseas and by the increasing availability of imagery through reproduction. Paradoxically, the very streams of Western Modernist Abstraction that they embraced were influenced by Eastern and in particular Taoist and Zen ideas, particularly via the writings of D.T. Suzuki in the UK, Germany and the USA.

By the 1950s Zen ideas via Bernard Leach in the UK had influenced fine art practice from ceramics to painting including the American Mark Tobey. In New York Ad Reinhardt, and John Cage demonstrated a deep interest in the ideas of Zen and Taoist philosophies often inspired by D.T. Suzuki's teachings. An interest in Zen was expressed by German artists including Rupprecht Geiger, Karl Otto Götz and Günther Ecker. Since the 1920s and 1930, there had been much exchange in art and philosophy between Japan and Germany. In the post-war climate Zen's links with Bushido and Japanese militarism were put aside in favour of its focus on individual perception and freedom. French artists; Jean Degottex, Pierre Alechinsky, Yves Klein, Matthieu, Soulanges and Fautrier investigated Zen ideas. For some it was seen as a way of avoiding the Existential void and replaced nihilism with the emptiness of *Sunyata* (Westgeest, 1996: 215-222).

The second wave of students and artists in the 1960s embraced anti-war, anti- nuclear, anti-authority anti-capital ideas and took onboard Minimalism, Conceptual art and happenings of Beuys, Fluxus and new technologies in order to question the nature of art and culture. The Korean Nam-June Paik was at the forefront of these ideas and likened himself to an Asian Shaman beside the German one. These events were paralleled in Asia by the Gutai and the Mono-Ha movements in Japan.

It is with these movements of knowledge in mind I would like to look at through the work of Ming-Chueh Hung from Taiwan. Before coming to RMIT, Ming-Cheuh Hung started work as an allegorical realist and landscape painter but increasingly has combining abstraction with the traditions of Chan and Taoist painting.



Figure 4: Ming-Cheuh Hung 'Four Seasons', 2004.
Ink, acrylic pigment, gesso and wires on plyboard; 90cm x 480cm.

Rather than analyse the work in detailed terms I will look at this work through the filter of Norman Bryson's essay 'The Gaze in The Expanded Field' (Bryson, 1988). After describing Satre's and Lacan's decentering of the gaze, Bryson uses Sesshu's paintings to consider the concept of *Sunyata* 'blankness' and how Chan Buddhist flung-ink painting extends the viewer's perception of the work beyond image to apprehending the painting as actual fact, as part of the

world of events and matter. Bryson focuses on the interaction Western and Japanese philosophy between the wars, on Nishida and in particular Nishitani, a student of Nishida and Heidegger, with reference to an expanded field of relations. 'What appears to be x is the difference between x and its surrounding field, and as the field is in continual mobility individual objects are constituted by *différance*, deferral in time' (Bryson, 1988: 98-101).

These ideas have a close relationship to the works of Ming-Cheuh Hung where the figure-field relationship is one of mutual permeability. Everything is 'becoming' to use a Deleuzian term. There are similarities of thought here to Sassure and Derrida's *différance* in language and connections to Henri Bergson's notion of perception: 'Perception is the object of perception minus everything that does not interest us' (Deleuze, 1997:25).

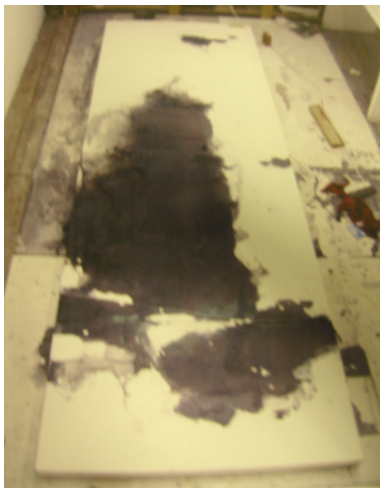


Figure 5: Ming-Cheuh Hung, Work in progress.

Ming-Chueh Hung exploits the thrown brush technique and pouring to manifest natural phenomena of process and change, and to reconcile the random and the controlled passages into a wholistic relationship. We can see connections here with the Catalan matter-painter Antonio Tàpies, but we ought not forget about its relationship to Gutai painters or the Mono-Ha painters who have their roots both in Zen.



Figure 6: Jong Gu Yoon 'Moon' 2002. Video projection. Liverpool Biennale.

Jong Gu Yoon is a Korean artist who uses video, installation and photography informed by his background in painting. His video of the reflection of the Moon transiting across the surface of water is an archetypal Taoist image translated into temporal media of video. This work was first exhibited at RMIT as a small horizontal TV image placed in a low structure creating as if one was looking onto a puddle. The reflected moon transits the surface of the water in real time to be shattered at intervals by drops of water disrupting the flat mirror-like surface of the water. Over time the ripples level to become a pure flat reflective surface again. An image in time: shattered by events, creating moments of recognition, like *Satori* or history. To achieve this poetic image, Jong Gu Yoon had simply videoed the moon reflected in a bucket of water at night.

For the Liverpool Biennale in 2002, this video was then transformed in scale, but not meaning. It was projected into the night sky and onto the side of Liverpool's Holiday Inn; the image of moonlight returning back to the night as a projection.



Figure 7: Jong Gu Yoon. 'Interaction 02'. 2002 Video Installation.

'Interaction 02' is a video installation. The major component is a projection of tofu being sliced until it turns from a solid form to a liquid state; a contemplation on transformation. The tofu remains tofu but its condition changes. The viewer is placed amid the work between images and becomes immersed in the light and shadows.

The Japanese word *Ma* is often translated as 'interval'. *Ma* means both space and time. Kitaro Nishida the Japanese philosopher states: 'the space in art from the far east is not the space facing the self but the space in which the self is situated' (Westgeest, 1996:20). Jong Gu Yoon's work manifests this complexity simply and directly. We, as an audience become aware of our role as perceiving agents amid change.

Korea has been both conduit and generator of ideas between the cultures of China and Japan, it also has been politically dominated by foreign powers for most of the twentieth century. Taoism was seen a liberation from the conservatism of neo-Confucianism and the karmic predetermination of Buddhism. South Korean history throughout the Twentieth century is a tale of growing independence from Chinese, Japanese and American domination towards democracy and economic self-reliance. Surprisingly, given its difficult and disrupted history, the story of contemporary South Korean art is one of interaction not isolation.

After the 1952 war, Korean artists travelled and studied in Europe and the USA. They returned, adapted and transformed movements such as Art Informel creating new relationships between Western and Korean traditions which were played out in the new art schools. Hong Kong, for example, emphasised Western oil painting and Modernist ideas, where as Soeul National University developed an Asian Modernism using traditional materials.

By the 1970s, a homegrown monochrome painting developed, informed by Taoist and local influences which asserted a Korean identity. Lee U-Fan helped develop these ideas which formed the influential Mono-ha movement in Japan and in South Korea. Monochrome painting has a different meaning in Korea to that of the West. I interpret *Mono* as meaning 'the natural, the whole, the thing' and relates to traditional ideas of natural simplicity and materiality, it also includes the idea of the whole as a multiplicity. This is different from certain Western

interpretations of *Mono* as meaning 'one' i.e. monochrome as one colour, a reductive and essentialist procedure. Korean monochrome painting does share mutual philosophical ideas with western Minimalism's depersonalising of the means of production regarding the use of simplicity and materiality in questioning the egocentric expressionism of the 1950s. The 1980s and 1990s saw an increasing pluralism and the adoption of new technologies in Korean art which questioned its traditional hierarchical structures. This coincided with a new opening to the world, manifest by major art exhibitions, festivals and events in Korea and abroad. A new third generation of post-war Korean artists, of which Jong Gu Yoon was part, were trained, this time in both Korean and Western art schools demonstrating that the local truly existed within a global context.

The Taoist Li Po wrote the following poem in the 8th century:

In the quiet night
The floor before my bed is bright
Moonlight like hoarfrost - in my room
I lift my head and watch the moon
I drop my head and think of home. (Seth, 1992:19)

It makes me think of the sacrifices of all those artists, students and teachers who have worked elsewhere. I thank them for moving meaning.

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