Interior Mountains & Distant Clouds

by Ping Zheng

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**Thesis Writing**

**Abstract**

Painting allows infinite scope for imaginative freedom beyond the ambiguity of the inner landscape. Painting connects the natural world outside to the inner natural world, allowing me to exist in the present while also reconciling childhood meanings. It brings me alive, allowing me to find a new identity. No longer trapped within the repressive structures of family, rigid schooling, and culture, the language of sky, land, mountain, and water become living metaphors of limitless possibilities with forms and color. My paintings are abstract, but they also present me as a character, independent and emerging from the environment. The work explores perception and the relationship between image and abstraction, combining my love for color with a simple pictorial language.

**Preface**

If freedom is one of the keys to being human, then making art offers an intuitive, boundless possibility for expressing oneself. I remember visiting an exhibition of the *Art of Food* in London and being overwhelmed by chef Ferran Adria’s creative belief that, creativity is not a job; it’s a way of understanding life. I have used cooking as a language to develop that creativity and also to have a dialogue with other disciplines like design, science, art, and architecture. To get up every morning not knowing what is going to happen during the day is what inspires me to continue creating.”  

Adria’s inspiring words hold true for making art.

**Ping**

I was born in China and grew up in different geographic regions, both in the south and the north. My strong interest in the natural environment originated in childhood. I felt free outdoors, and I could avoid family pressures. I am a third born girl in a restricted traditional Chinese family. This mean I was labeled “wrong.” Every thing I did was wrong at home. Being a girl was my biggest fault from the start. Throughout my childhood, I remember struggling with an underlying feeling of stupidity. Since living abroad, I became aware of the power of freedom and imagination in shaping my world. I have longed to find my true character, since my name holds no meaning in Chinese culture.

Turning to the outdoor environment, nature became a new dictionary. I always believe that nature cares about me. Nature has given me more understanding than humanity. Sometimes I am filled with a burst of desire to create new things from my refuge in nature.

Time Traces

In the summer of 2015, I drove west with a friend through Colorado, Arizona, and Utah to New Mexico. This trip deeply affected me, confusing my understanding of time. As we moved across the country, I was simultaneously pulled forward by a new experience while also falling back into the past. One day as I was having fun with my friend in a muddy river in a life jacket, a strong memory surfaced of how my father carried my little brother across a narrow wooded bridge, leaving me alone in a flood. In that moment, an incredible feeling stirred while I was sitting at the edge of the Canyon, with a huge drop of clear, warm air below me. Such space took my breath away.

Translated to my paintings, biological time scales often dominate geological time scales, because they communicate how I feel in life. They are states of mind. My revelations in nature inspired a radical shift in my technical approach to painting. Forms were remembered rather than reordered, and details were forgotten in that landscape of memory, abstracted in time and place so as to escape reality.
The Inner Momentum is Quiet

These are two drawings of this moment. The first scene (Fig. 2), captures on paper my observation of the real landscape alongside my imaginings of being alone in this isolated place. The shape of the land looks like a melted ice cap. I almost feel myself standing upon it, disappearing gradually over time. On the other hand, it is also the peak of the canyon surrounded by dry earth. Another drawing (Fig. 3), shows a single, tall rock, nearly reaching out to the sky. In reality, I feel small standing below the rock, awed by the energy of this atmosphere. But I also imagine myself as the rock, having magical strength and lifting the sky. I drew from what I saw and felt. There is a Serbian proverb: "Be humble for you are made of Earth. Be noble for you are made of stars." ² This work describes how I feel when I am a part of the natural world. Aesthetically and conceptually, I want my artwork to be original and charged with emotion. I think creativity comes from gradually changing over a period of time. I don’t think mere depictions evolve. I evolve, and the paintings are a reflection of me, but the painting stays in the present.

Abstraction

Georgia O’Keeffe’s abstract landscape paintings reveal exceptionally keen powers of observation and great fitness with a paintbrush. During my travel, I was happy to see her landscape paintings in the flesh. They made me think seriously about how I should develop my own landscapes. O’Keeffe depicted the landscape of her motherland. I like the way she remained independent from shifting art trends and stayed true to her own vision. Through looking at her work, I learned to abandon the realistic depiction of nature that formed the basis of traditional landscape painting in favor of a synthetic view that summarizes experience and feeling in an image. This way, I am able to express my conflicting feelings. One of O’Keeffe’s quotes supports this new way of seeing: “I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say any other way—things I had no words for.”

I conceive of painting as an expression of my freedom. I want my painting to read more than one way. My current paintings are about my emotions represented as landscape. Metaphorically, it is like being inside an aquarium. If positioned outside, you are both on the other side of the image and reflected in it. If you are on the inside, you are immersed in reality. The tension is between inside and outside. My emotions transform the general shapes of nature and they become something else. There are no straight lines in my paintings. This relates to the way I grew up in China, where the culture was cold and the environment was restrictive. People were taught to be perfect. I don’t think anyone can draw a long straight line without tools. In a painting there is no right answer. The boundary between right and wrong is unclear.

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http://www.ecognoscente.com/months/september09/08.html
Mountains

I cherish my time travel as I explore feelings from the present and the past. Drawing, another tool to inform my thinking process and my work, helps me avoid duplicating the real landscapes I see. As observations and feelings arise, I find that I often reference Ken Price’s highly original forms. His ongoing exploration of a wide range of characters and techniques taught me to persist through exploring multiple themes with pencil and ink. At first glance, the subject of his work appears to be of quite simple landscape scenes, which clearly divide sky, mountains and land. In a painting called Drifting Island, (Fig. 6) for example, Price’s implied narrative is not intimate, due to his weird forms and imaginary scenes. His drawings remind me of a National Geographic documentary shot from helicopters at different angles. There is a sudden drop in front of the drawing as if entering space; likes astronauts feel themselves gradually become weightless as they leave Earth’s gravitation pull. I understand how drawing functioned for Price as a way to relax, to stretch out and improvise imaginary scenes and at times, to fantasize. This kind of emotion brought me to my painting; I think Price’s drawing has profoundly impacted my process. Because I am a visual person, words do not surface easily.
Price believes that, “drawing is a way of seeing what you are thinking about.” My painting also provides a glimpse into my mind as a way of working out ideas. I particularly like exploring shapes and space. They are by turns quirky, unsettling, and transcendent, much like Price’s drawing. It is true that the relationship between life and the artist can change the way the art is interpreted. My ideal landscape is taken from my childhood landscape, and I want to experience it in painting because I know I never can go back and re-experience it in reality. It exists in a perfect state because it lives only in my memory.

After a studio walk-through at the beginning of the new semester, I struggled with my techniques for my new paintings. Luckily, through tutorials with my teachers, the contemporary American painter Clint Jukkala became an inspirational source. His interest is in the ways we see things and how each perceived object is seen from the perspective of a personal history. His paintings focus heavily on color to produce optical effects and amorphous shapes. They totally opened my eyes, teaching me how to be a better painter. I certainly see some connection with Jukkala in terms of the self-referential logic of abstraction, as well as in a visionary element. I’ve found that I can be frustrated with my paintings from the start; looking at the canvas, thinking over again and again about what or how to make something. But I still feel confident. I always believe that I can make something that comes from deep inside of me. I started to repaint and put extra layers on my old paintings or to remove layers in order to achieve ceramic-like qualities. I don’t want my paintings to use straight lines or hard angles, because experiences in life aren’t like that. Meanwhile my canvases are about the size of my body. The square format speaks to a personal experience and mirrors my physicality. They are about my memories, my self-exploration, and my freedom; all reflections of myself.

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This new way of making painting allows me space to rethink and reimagine my inner world.

Freedom

Freedom is as wide as the desire to expand my horizons and, through an exploration of freedom, comes a growing opportunity to express my point of view as an artist. It makes me understand how important is it for an artist to be free. I agree with the writer Walter Mosley that, "freedom is a state of mind."5 I did not feel free in China, partly due to the fact that I was raised in a traditional Chinese family culture, and also the product of a strict and backward school education in the north part of China. The strained atmosphere blocked my mind and feelings for eighteen years. I didn’t know what I liked or disliked before studying abroad, and I had no feeling from which to register a point of view. According to the traditional Chinese mindset, freedom doesn’t belong to you. Now outside of this family, I feel and understand what I like.

My curiosity toward Western culture makes me realize that in the West, the artist’s character is regarded as one of the most important facts about his or her art. In the Chinese art academy, the view is oppressive and restrictive. I deeply sympathize with those art students in China who have no freedom or knowledge upon which to develop their own art. Rather than value discovery, they must imitate teachers and work hard to improve skills. For instance, each year in the College Entrance Examination, the candidates are given the task of sketching and painting a still life. Hundreds of students mechanically copy the same subject. Free thinking isn’t encouraged. Somehow the realization of this point brings me into a deeper relationship with art. The American artist Desiree East says "It’s not just about the art, it’s about giving your soul, a voice for freedom and expression."6 Since leaving China, I make art to fight

against my memories of the past and steadily to express the deepest truth about my innermost self. While old, negative dynamics once held me back from my daily life, painting now is uplifting.

![Painting](image)

**Fig. 9 Untitled 4, oil on canvas, 60” x 52”, 2015**

There is no doubt that music helps me to escape from reality and takes me back to the past while I paint, bringing me to memories of the natural landscape. Music helps me unblock my mind. It also reminds me of Wassily Kandinsky words. He believed that, "A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art." From him, I learnt that music is essential to abstract art. In fact, Kandinsky’s writings bring me even closer to my art works because my paintings also express inner feelings of the soul rather than the exterior world. And the colors I observe from nature is my interpretation.

Color is essential to express my experiences, not to describe objective nature. My emotions are what help me put these colors together. I don’t go from one painting to next, expressing a little bit at a time. I try to be more clear, to visualize, to live in that place.

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The White Cloud

My new techniques have expanded. Freedom not only gives me a creative mind that is beyond the merely technical, but also open-ended invention and a search for discovery. I have become more comfortable with the uncertainty of process in the making of art. Painting is a constant dialogue; each gesture brings to the surface, emotion, memory and technique. Throughout the process, I discover who I am through developing my own visual language. I always try to make original artwork, which asserts my existence and aliveness. It's my motivation for life. My summer trip was my new departure to enlarge the scope of my artistic practice. I was challenging my old identity, and thus changing the way I approach my new paintings. They are more evocative and descriptive. I ask myself that if I could be something other than a human, what I would be. And what comes toward is that I would be a cloud under the blue sky, as if looking down at a massive landscape and traveling as far as I can. I think this concept offers me a new way to paint.
Bibliography


[http://www.ecognoscente.com/months/september09/08.html](http://www.ecognoscente.com/months/september09/08.html)


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