

The Beauty of Collision

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

by

Yixuan Pan  
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Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

Kevin Zucker, Department Head, Professor of Painting

Angela Dufresne, Graduate Program Director, Associate Professor of Painting

Jackie Gendel, Thesis Advisor, Associate Professor of Painting

Roger White, Thesis Advisor, Critic, Department of Painting

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### **Abstract**

As a Chinese artist living in the United States, I'm researching the integration of Eastern and Western aesthetics, as well as the loss of identity that can occur when visual cultures begin to assimilate. My work endeavors to locate the connection between Eastern and Western arts through my own memories and experiences. From the age of five, I have studied calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting with my grandfather, who was a calligraphy professor. Today, I use the shapes of traditional Chinese hand fans as symbols of youth, drawing from memories of my mother and grandmother brandishing the fans to help me fall asleep and dream. I paint American coastal landscapes on the fans in a Chinese ink style, combining two aesthetics and places. Manipulating these memories of childhood while negotiating my adult life in the United States is how I question a sense of home and place in a multi-centered society. I also used various subjects from differing class, gender, disability, occupation, age, and religious expressions of Asian immigrant groups for my painting. This allows audiences to access the often divergent and complex ways Asian Immigrants live in the states during this period of discrimination.

In this thesis, I will discuss whether Chinese painting can break thousands of years of tradition in terms of materials, expressions, forms, painting language, painting themes, and maintain relevance in today's art world. I will also study the rapid development of science and technology and the background of this era in the information age and make individual judgments and innovation requirements for traditional Chinese painting's future development.

## **Outline**

1. Introduction
2. Chinese Painting
3. Contemporary/Western
4. The Future of Chinese Painting

## **1. Introduction**

Chinese painting's content and artistic creation embody the ancients' understanding of nature, society, and related political, philosophical, religious, moral, literary, and cultural aspects. Painting, along with violin, chess, and calligraphy, is one of the most important arts of Chinese culture. There are many differences between the principles of Chinese painting and Western painting, including materiality, context, and visual properties. Because Chinese painting has its own unique culture, audiences in other countries who do not understand Chinese painting's essence are likely to see the importance of Chinese culture and art differently. As an artist who has studied traditional Chinese art since childhood but has been living in the United States, I try to use Chinese conventional cultural expressions to talk about contemporary painting ideas.

As a Chinese artist living in the United States, I am researching the integration of Eastern and Western aesthetics, as well as the loss of identity that can occur when visual cultures begin to assimilate. My work endeavors to locate the connection between Eastern and Western arts through my own memories and experiences. Today, I use the shapes of traditional Chinese hand fans as symbols of youth, drawing from memories of my mother and grandmother brandishing the fans to help me fall asleep and dream. I paint American coastal landscapes on the fans in a Chinese ink style, combining two aesthetics and places. Manipulating these memories of childhood while negotiating my adult life in the United States is how I question a sense of home and place in a multi-centered society.

## **2. Chinese Painting**

Chinese painting has a history of thousands of years. Calligraphy was considered one of the four most-sought skills and hobbies of ancient China. Chinese calligraphy, ink, and wash painting are closely related: they are accomplished using similar tools and techniques and have a

long history of shared artistry. According to Joan Stanley-Baker, “Calligraphy is sheer life experienced through energy in motion that is registered as traces on silk or paper, with time and rhythm in shifting space its main ingredients.” [1]

“The Picture of a Hairpin Lady,” a painting from the Tang Dynasty, is a thick silk and color painting by Zhou Fang [2]. The work is now in the collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum [3].



Figure 1. Artist: Zhou Fang, Title: The Picture of a Hairpin Lady, Tang Dynasty

Media: silk, Chinese painting, ink, Size: 71 inch x 18 inch

The painting depicts six beautifully dressed aristocratic women and their maids admiring flowers in the garden at the turn of spring and summer [4]. “The Picture of a Hairpin Lady” is a representative figure painting style of Zhou Fang's nobles. At the same time, it also reflects the lifestyle of aristocratic ladies who are pampered, doing nothing, and playing among flowers, butterflies, cranes, and dogs [5]. This painting is also a typical Chinese painting composition, starting from left and ending on the right-hand side.

Many traditional Chinese paintings use the form of long scrolls. This feature was inherited by Song dynasty painter Zhang Ze duan (1085–1145) in “Along the River During the Qingming Festival, in the Song Dynasty.” It is also known by its Chinese name as the Qingming Shanghe Tu (Simplified Chinese: 清明上河图 Traditional Chinese: 清明上河圖). The painting captures the

daily life of people and the landscape of the capital, Bianjing (present-day Kaifeng) during the Northern Song [6].

The paintings of different dynasties in ancient China inspired my painting language through my use of ink and rice paper, and long scroll. From the traditional paintings of various dynasties, I continue to use rice paper to paint, because it can absorb water, which is a different way to express my art. I use a brush to dip in ink, and then outline the shape of the figure, the character's hair, clothing patterns, fold details and the spirit of the trees in the still life. In my painting “Among those Who Eat Brains”, we can see that the outline made using a brush is not like a simple pencil outline. The brush outline is carried out following the techniques of Chinese calligraphy. After drawing the lines, the shapes were then filled with Chinese paints and watercolors. I use the lower-case calligraphy of the Song Dynasty as the theoretical cornerstone of my line language.

Second, I have inherited the long scroll format from “Along the River During the Qingming Festival”. Different from the Western painting, I describe my painting story in a way that extends all around.

My recent works, collectively titled “Who’s Brain Eater?” continue this traditional format, using forms extending from the left and right of the space to explore the stories of ancient and modern times.

### **3. Contemporary**

In contemporary social life, traditional Chinese painting materials appear to be relatively limited to depict contemporary, modern, and acute problems. Therefore, I tried to have contemporary conversations to express Chinese painting.

Yun-Fei Ji is a contemporary Chinese painter. His work utilizes the structures and symbols of folkloric tradition to speak truth to power, which are full of phantoms, demons, and other spectral characters [7]. Yun-Fei Ji uses this main story line to describe each family or group on

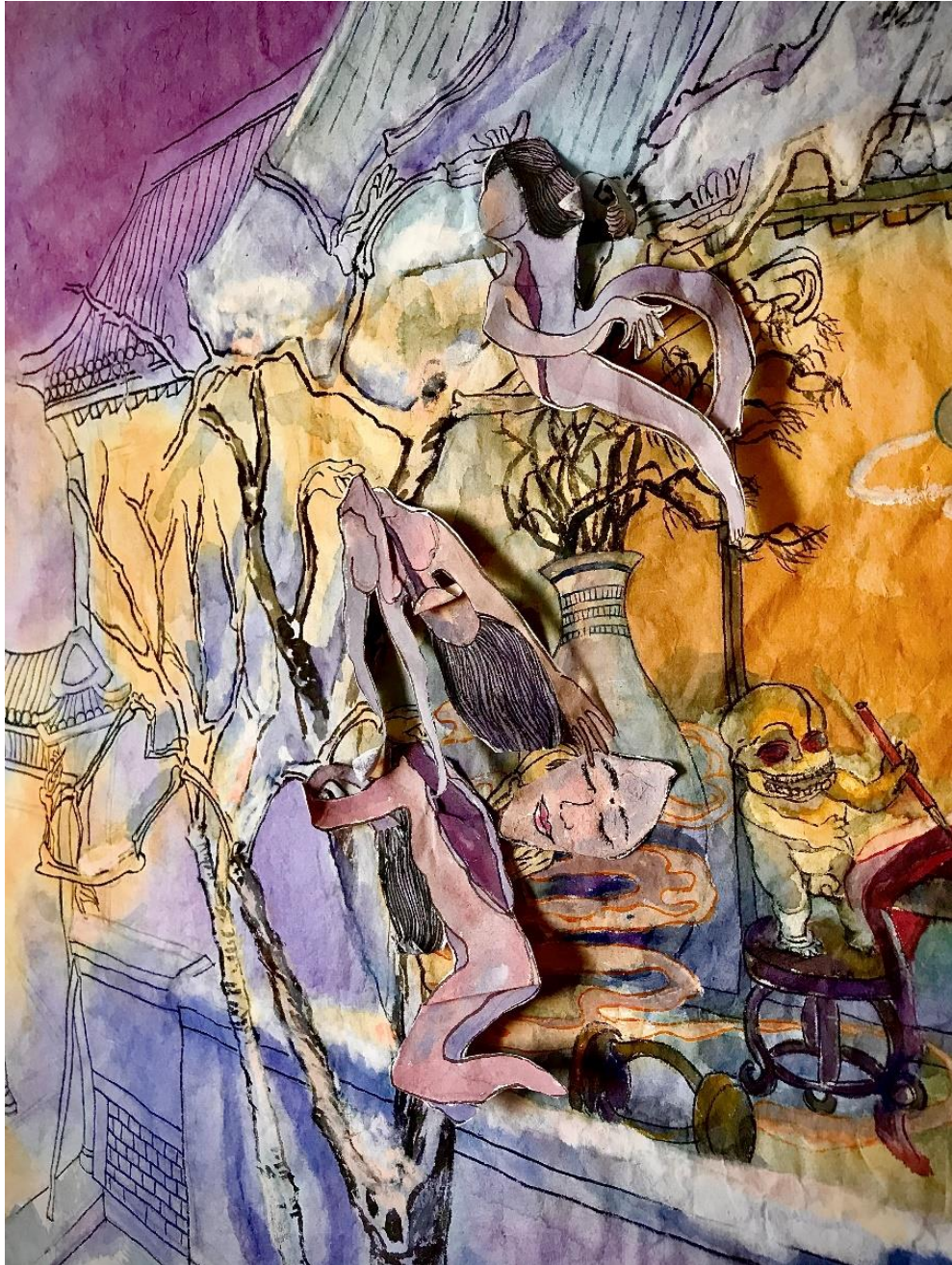


Figure 2. Artist: Yixuan Pan, Title: Who's Brain Eater? (2), 2021

Media: rice paper, ink, Chinese painting color, Size: 72 inch x 36 inch



each piece of the rice paper to make the whole story to be connected. Traditional Chinese scroll painting is used to narrate the whole story in a specific period. Narratively, the development following the traditional Chinese painting model has profoundly and characteristically displayed these people's tragic fate to contemporary foreigners.

These non-realistic character portrayals allow the audience to appreciate the unique language of painting and at the same time realize that the spiritually supportive background of traditional Chinese painting is the Taoist philosophy and Confucianism.

Xiaodong Liu and Xu Bin are Chinese contemporary artists who have influenced my work. Xiaodong Liu has made such bold declarations that “We shouldn’t try to fit into some imagined ‘international standard’; instead, we should participate in constructing the world’s new cultural scene. The pre-requisite for participation is a long-term effort by Chinese artists and critics . . . to respect themselves first. I might sound too broad, but I’m confident that full-scale participation is feasible.” [8] From these two artists’ understanding of art, I realized that we should use national culture to understand the function of art. These two artists have a similar growth background and accepted culture. My background is different, but I agree with them. I am an artist who grew up in China. Before I came to the United States, I experienced traditional Chinese culture, especially the artistic language expressed on rice paper with pen and ink. And I further studied on the contemporary art.

The contemporariness here is closely related to the timeliness that Xu talks about. Upon Xu Bin's departure, his work “Book from the Sky” has not been shown again in China for nearly 20 years, despite multiple international installations of the work. In 2007, as Xu Bin returned to China from the United States, the work was shown in the exhibitions of “85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art” at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. As the work

was reinstalled in the fall of 2018 for a major retrospective for Xu Bin, the monumental work was described as defining the post-Mao period in China, “it evokes the doubt - that old and cherished signifiers had lost their referents - that prevailed among intellectuals in post-reform China, many of whom pored over the work, obsessively looking for a single, real character.” [9]

I think the art I show is different from traditional Chinese painting, or a pure contemporary art. In “Who’s Brain Eater?” I use traditional Chinese painting language to talk about the panic caused by COVID-19, especially this group of unique ethnic groups, the source of the fear of Asians, and how to deal with it.



Figure 3. Artist: Yixuan Pan, Title: Who’s Brain Eater? (3), 2021

Media: rice paper, ink, Chinese painting color, Size: 72 inch x 36 inch

In my recent paintings, Impressionism inspired me to further enhance the atmosphere of the overall painting based on the discussions of color and light and to further portray the psychology of the characters. In my work, the appearance of the characters in “Who's Brain Eater?” carries a sense of speculation and tension. Merely using traditional Chinese painting to show

characters on rice paper with a brush is not enough to highlight such a sense of tension and suspicion. Therefore, I use the contrast of light and shadow in the impressionist school, and the contrast between large and small areas to further enhance this stimulus. Let some bad guys hide in a large area of dark places but use relatively few light sources to place them around these dark characters, which further helps me to portray the psychological descriptions of these characters who do not want to be on the bright side.

Furthermore, the influence of color and light in my life is also important. An excellent artist can empathize on the social hot spots around them, and they can also perceive themselves in the different changes in the four seasons. Through observation of the surrounding objects, they can satisfy with the natural beauty and color changes, and the discovery of cold and warm colors.



Figure 4. Artist: Yixuan Pan, Title: Who's Brain Eater? (1), 2021

Media: watercolor paper, ink, Chinese painting color, Size: 48 inch x 20 inch

The painters of the Impressionist School were fascinated by the exploration of light and shadow, and no longer deliberately emphasized the shape of the objects in the painting. And every painter in the Impressionist school has a different feeling about colors. Van Gogh pursued a kind of psychedelic excellence in light and shadow, Gauguin pursued the original charm of light and shadow, while Monet pursued the perfect fusion of light and shadow with objects. Therefore, for me, the influence of the school is more to inspire a kind of imagination. This is very similar to the blank space in Chinese painting. At this point, it emphasizes that the artist's sensibility is greater than the rigid pursuit of object volume and perspective in traditional painting.



Figure 5. Artist: Yixuan Pan, Title: Dream and Reality, 2020

Media: watercolor paper, ink, Chinese painting color, Size: 48 inch x 20 inch

#### 4. Future of Chinese Art

When thinking about themes in my work, I considered the values, characteristics, and styles of my paintings. In the contemporary life depicted in my paintings, I am focused on recording the various experiences and psychological characteristics of Asians living in the United States, especially during the pandemic period. I expressed the contemporary American society, especially the Asian community in the United States, consists of people who have different classes, cultures, and genders. By exploring the relationship and differences between abilities, I grab the attention of my audience, prompting discussion.

Traditional Chinese painting always emphasizes on pen and ink language in theory, but often ignores the research and reflection of real life. This is my most intuitive experience from my studying contemporary art in the United States.

Chinese painting does need reformation, but I have a great optimism about the future of Chinese painting. I don't think Chinese painting will come to an end. The important thing is how we use Chinese painting to talk about today's reality. This call eventually led to an unprecedented controversy, namely, "Where is Chinese painting heading?" In this debate, some people advocate focusing on realism and modeling models, some incline to the ideas that painting should not be tied to politics, some advocated breaking all old patterns and seeking the impossibility, some propose the idea of "returning to their ancestors" and call for primitive art, some emphasize on the "pure painterly" where form is more than everything, while others advocate intuition, perception, rejection of reason, and so on. [10]

From my perspective, Chinese paintings should be improved on the basis of materials that have been used for thousands of years. Because in terms of painting materials, making rice paper is extremely time-consuming and the rice paper is easily eroded by insects. Furthermore, if we do not develop new materials, the expression of the artist will be further prohibited. Among my recent

serials of “Who’s Brain Eater” works, I used rice paper’s outstanding performance of water in oil paintings with a higher texture, and the acrylic on canvas material expresses the vivid expression of water on paper and Taoist philosophy.

I have been living in a place near the sea for several years, so I have drawn from some of my memories about the sea. I also used the shape of my fan in combination with acrylic paint from Western paintings to draw some paintings. These fans are silk. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the use of acrylic paints on traditional Chinese silk materials gave me some unexpected color textures. In addition, the fan is a special tool for women in ancient China. I feel that in the modern sense, the fan is a symbol of feminism.

Chinese painting has a history of thousands of years. No matter how the dynasties changed, the basic theory of painting remains unchanged. Chinese painting pays attention to the art of painting, which means that the line is the language of painting to describe specific things, and the use of lines must be linked to the calligraphic art of a particular dynasty. There are some general standardizations of the various styles of calligraphy in this tradition. Chinese calligraphy and ink and wash painting are closely related. They are accomplished using similar tools and techniques and have a long history of shared artistry. Distinguishing features of Chinese painting and calligraphy include an emphasis on motion charged with dynamic life. According to Stanley-Baker, "Calligraphy is sheer life experienced through energy in motion that is registered as traces on silk or paper, with time and rhythm in shifting space its main ingredients." [11] Among them, in my paintings, I mostly use the lower-case calligraphy of the Song Dynasty.

In the works cited above, the role of Chinese painting is very different. In short, I agree that Chinese painting should not be a high-end, spiritual item that is entirely separated from the society. It is only in terms of expressed views and functions that can be changed. Chinese painting

should also be a scientific method for studying social processes. Traditional Chinese painting techniques have been used for long time, in modern days, we might have to think about the development of techniques for expressing the ideas.

Traditional Chinese paintings have modern meanings. And modern Chinese painters have different techniques, philosophy, and aesthetics. Here, the Chinese artists specially refer to those Chinese artists focusing on traditional Chinese painting. First, in terms of materials, some Chinese artists continue to use traditional Chinese materials and tools, while some artists use Western oil paintings and other painting tools as their main tools. Second, some Chinese artists try to express the inner theme through traditional Chinese painting theories. Sometimes, it is difficult for the audience to know the thoughts expressed in Chinese paintings when they are not clear and do not understand the theoretical and cultural thoughts of Chinese painting. Third, if a traditional artist abandons the protection of traditional Chinese culture and instead blindly paints to show the Western audiences, most Chinese audiences who only know traditional paintings will also be lost.

However, as a solid defender of traditional culture, I really want to attract a large Western audience. First of all, I feel that the texture of Chinese painting can be changed a little bit. Chinese materials are mainly expressed on rice paper, but rice paper is extremely difficult to preserve. While trying to paint on Chinese rice paper, I also tried to use acrylic medium to protect the rice paper. For this I did some attempts to combine my paintings. I think it is feasible. Without giving up on traditional culture, I mainly use the proximity of Western colors for Chinese paintings and choose suitable colors. I found that acrylic ink can be combined well with the rice paper of Chinese paintings, and acrylic paints can also reflect Chinese paintings. It can bring the change of water rhyme and the artistic conception beauty of space.

Brush and ink are the core elements of Chinese painting. Due to their important role, Chinese painters of the past dynasties have written many works on the function of pen and ink. Discussing brush and ink in Chinese painting is a topic that will never be out of date. It is a prerequisite for us to complete Chinese painting. For a painter, if there is no proficient and exquisite brush and ink skills, no matter how good the idea is, it cannot be realized. At the same time, I found that the theme of expression in Chinese painting was limited to the expression of scenery for long time. Chinese landscape painting has been confined to still life for long time, and it has been honed in expression and technique. I clearly feel that with the emergence of modern high-rise buildings, I think that Chinese painting should add more layers and content to the expression of the theme. The scenery should revolve around the human theme to narrate contemporary things. But I also understand that some deep-rooted expressions in Chinese culture are good for the spirit. Therefore, I think that Chinese painting should add more contemporary content discussions in the form of expression, instead of blindly emphasizing on the brush-and-ink games. It will also attract more Western audiences to discuss the process of Chinese painting.



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