

Sense and Spirit

by

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Abstract

My art practice is based on the study of sensory perception. How can the representation of synesthesia function in an art context, specifically painting? Further to this, what is the role of sensory perception in relation to Chinese cosmology and cosmic consciousness in my artwork? I explore synesthesia, Chinese *qi*, cosmic consciousness to approach and understand my painting practice, and the potential for artists to visualize ineffable aspects of perceptual experience. My work is influenced by both Eastern and Western painters, including Cai Guoqiang, Qiu Shihua, Timothy B. Layden, Pia Fries, and Elizabeth Neel. The large-scale paintings produced in this thesis make significant use of layering and marks that look like they were accidentally created; however, the paintings are composed intentionally using synesthetic experience and an abstract vocabulary. I am trying to approach a state of reconciliation between control and non-control and apply it into the gestures and marks of painting. I experiment with gestural and abstract painting approaches to develop a perceptual space of emptiness. I am inspired by both the concept of *qi*, which literally means “breath” and is the soul of Chinese landscape painting, and Richard M. Bucke’s definition of cosmic consciousness, which he connects to ‘intuitive logic’ and a highest level of mind. My desire is to explore a topography of spirituality that I associate with consciousness in order to reveal where sensorial experience can lead.

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Introduction and positionality

As an individual with roots in China, when I left my country and started studying in another country, Canada, I realized that the mutual influence among different cultures are subtle. When I was in China, I was more interested in the West than I am now. Because at that time, my understanding of the Western culture only came from books and the media. Since I didn't have any experience of living there, this made me full of curiosity and imagination about the West; it was mysterious for me. However, I am living far away from China, so I am more

interested in Chinese thoughts as the result of being in a very different place. I want to explore aspects of Chinese philosophy, specifically Taoist theory, that may be less familiar to westerners. Because I am living in a Western context now. I feel more freedom and less limitations to follow my own way of making art than I did in China. But sometime in this relaxed atmosphere, I hesitate, swinging like a pendulum between Chinese and Western ways of making art. But I enjoy being placed in this state, because this allows me to be at a crossroads of Chinese and Western cultures, and to look for a new perspective in my work. In order to find it, I need to take things from here and there and fuse them to frame new structures. This experience of being at a crossroads has greatly developed my understanding about how I transform things from one context to another, and restructured my perspective about how I show those relationships.

When I was very young, I could see the colour ~~on~~ around people: the people who I liked and who were familiar exuded pink; light pink on strangers who I liked; black for people who I didn't like and white for strangers I didn't know. I remember my friend's brother who I liked very much, around his body I always saw pink and purple, like the colour quality of amethyst. As the result, I preferred him more than anyone else. While with others I might refuse their touch because I saw colours that weren't so appealing to me. But when I grew up a bit, this ability seemed to disappear quietly, and I didn't notice it right away. However, when I hear a sound, or smell and taste something, I continue to see some particular images or colours that no one else can see the same way. When I said to my mother, the whistling sound of the train is an N shape, and the piano keys are multiple beating triangles; the taste of a strawberry is red, but the taste of a pomegranate is chocolate. She was shocked and looked at me, then she touched

my forehead, she thought I had a fever, though I was totally fine. Because of these experiences, I am often misunderstood by people, I seem to be a someone who is not quite normal. I remembered when I was in kindergarten, I was criticized by teachers for refusing to put celery in my meals. In fact, it was not because I was picky about what I ate, but because the colour it smelled was light yellow with a black pepper was duck red; it really didn't match the colour in my bowl. My abnormal experience made me think about the uniqueness of each person's way of perceiving the world. I was thinking that everyone was processing information and creating a personal map of their environment, which is based on a personal coding system. Therefore, it is not just synesthetes, but all people experience the world around them in fundamentally singular ways.

Method



Fig. 2 *Floating in Strawberry Milkshake*, 5" x 7", watercolour and ink on paper, 2018

I use watercolour, ink and pigments, with watercolour as the main material. I want to create a natural atmosphere and mystical in my painting, and I believe watercolor is the best medium to accomplish this. American visual artist Lawrence C. Goldsmith says, "watercolour exceeds all other media in its marvellous ability to capture the essence of atmospheric space" (Goldsmith 33). Watercolour has a large range of tonal values, both subtle and intense, it comes alive in the clear transparency. The tones appear like looking through stained glass, which creates depths that are luminous and never opaque. Paint runs or spreads promptly, sometimes unpredictably, which is largely responsible for the possibility of those ethereal and

mystical qualities, those outbursts of lyrical feeling and poetic effects (Goldsmith 12). These characteristics of watercolours allow me to depict the perceptual space of synesthesia and the ethereal, mystical and illusory atmosphere of the spiritual world.

The colour in my synesthetic visions do not match the colour of unmodified tubes of paint. They are rarely pure or solid colour, especially as the synesthesia produces colours that are very sophisticated, and I need to find the most accurate description by experimenting with a variety of colour combinations; How much water or white are added in colours and how much other colour ratios are involved in it. In addition, I used the pigments that I made myself. Maybe because of the machine, the pigments directly purchased are too smooth and the colour is relatively monotonous. Therefore, I make pigments that are closer to the texture that I want. I put coloured chalk in a small bowl, and then used a thick stick, like mashing garlic, to crush the coloured chalk into pigments. In this way, the pigments produced by hand has a particle size which is not uniform. I can also add a different colour to mix or extend the fluidity of the medium of the mix. These pigments are much better for my creative process. When there are some larger particles of pigments in the wet area, the colour will be larger and darker to precipitate and smudge on the image. The smoother pigments will flow freely into other areas and coincide with the watercolour, creating a complex colour gradient. This is how I manage to communicate the depths of synesthetic experiences.

Synesthesia

All we have to believe is our senses: the tools we use to perceive the world, our sight, our touch, our memory. If they lie to us, then nothing can be trusted. —Neil Gaiman

Synesthesia is normally understood as neurological phenomenon in which the senses blend. In *Synesthesia and the Arts*, Dani Cavallaro explains, “When synesthesia occurs, the stimulation of one sense triggers the inadvertent stimulation of other parts of the sensorium. In other words, a stimulus perceived through one of the senses automatically activates another sense” (Cavallaro 71). I have three kinds of synesthesia: sound to colour and shape, smell and taste to colour and shape. Vladimir Nabokov wrote a poem about synesthesia in 1918:

A gift exists that is unclear to science.
One hears a sound but recollects a hue,
invisible the hands that touch your heartstrings.
Not music the reverberations that ensue within; they are of light.
Sounds that are coloured...
The beauty fades, transformed to simple tunes
a crystal ringing in dahlia’s fiery facets, I perceive,
on dry grass midst the cobweb’s motley weave (176).

Science can explain how the brain and body works and why it might react a certain way to an experience, but I am more interested in expressing that inexplicable and intangible perceptual experience through art. Synesthesia is a mode of sensory perception. I seem to be placed in the space between the known and unknown; As writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley said, “There are things known and there are things unknown and in between are the doors of

perception” (Huxley 2302). Our perception explores and reveals the most subtle and hidden spaces and sensations.

With our senses so inherently tightly coupled, are we all silently synesthetic? The author Jamie Ward, In *The Frog Who Croaked Blue* argues that multisensory perception is a norm, although few people can enter the realm of synesthesia. But our senses are not independent, combining sensory information is a key attribute of our brain, whether we are synesthetic or not (Ward 58). In *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue*, American neurologist and author Richard E. Cytowic explains, in daily encounters, we constantly experience sensory stimulation of every kind, but never is one isolated from the others. The input is taken in by multiple senses about the same object or situation, and is then heavily influenced by the other senses. As an example, when watching a film, the voices seem to be coming from the figures on the screen, even if they originate from the surrounding speakers. It is an illusion that occurs, and it is compelling without the need for attention (Cytowic 106). In *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*, Cytowic argues that “synesthesia is actually a normal brain function in every one of us, but its workings reach consciousness in only a handful” (Cytowic 221). Generally, few people are aware of how often cross-sensory perceptions occur in the sense of smell. “In a technical sense, we might say that everyone is synesthetic” (Cytowic 128). For instance, people have always said that the aroma of vanilla is sweet, although sweetness is a taste. In fact, "sweetness" is the most common description of odors. One researcher asked 140 subjects to describe the smell of a strawberry. 79% said it smelled sweet, while only 43% said it smelled like strawberry, and 71% said it was fruity. Whenever a smell is heard, most people perceive taste-like qualities like sweetness

rather than explicit ones like strawberry-likeness (128). Thus, synesthesia is a fundamental perception, but might usually occur below the surface of awareness.

Most of the time we have a preconceived notion when we look at a thing, but sometimes those preconceptions block the subtle perception from our senses. French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has pointed out that when language is imposed on perception, humans initially split the single experience of the world into different categories, and then divide those into five separate sensory organs and their respective domains. Whenever the senses regain their natural power, they interact spontaneously and involve the whole body in the experience. In his own words, “synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking feel” (Merleau-Ponty 266). We are used to following common sense, which is like a default rule for everyone. If others think that way, then it seems we should think that way as well, so that we won’t be regarded as different. This also makes us lose sight of our more subtle sensations.

Socialization changes our perspective in how we perceive the world around us. In *Blue Cats and Chartreuse Kittens*, Patricia Lynne Duffy, synesthete and author, proposes that “an individual’s personal coding falls away as it is replaced by the socially endorsed standard code of society” (Duffy 650). A person's increasing ability to conform to social codes or socially accepted understandings about their circumstance and socialize erode their subjective modes of perception. This erosion can be illustrated by a typical example, which most children “lose much of their ability to visualize as they get older” (650). For young people, getting a common and socially recognized signifying system is crucial, but that doesn’t mean abandoning their

personal code altogether. As Duffy wrote, “Just as we never want to lose our first language when we learn a second one (as there are obvious benefits to knowing both), so might we discover the benefit to keeping our personal code alive even after we have learned the shared one” (Duffy 138). Cavallaro describes the persistent requirements for individual cognition: even if the synesthete’s process involves sensory cross-activation, and the non-synesthete’s code largely separates the senses, each person’s code is ultimately self-contained (Cavallaro 657). Synesthesia helps us to know that “all percept[ion] is ultimately idiosyncratic” (Cavallaro 627). All of our personal brain system is uniquely filtering out the external senses. Therefore, our senses are a very subjective and personal experience, and it is precisely this uniqueness that highlights the differences in the way people see the world.

Is synesthesia working outside consciousness? The difference between someone with synesthesia and someone without seems to awareness about they perceive the world. The difference between someone with synesthesia and someone without may be the consciousness level about how they perceive the world. In *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*, Cytowic argues that for most people, cross-sensory perception constitutes a subconscious experience (Cytowic 166). Marcia Smilack is a synesthetic artist, who similarly believes that the fundamental difference between synesthetes and non-synesthetes “might merely be a thin layer of unawareness ... my synesthesia allows me to lift up and see through perceptual layers giving me access to more layers of consciousness than are available to most people” (620). It might be argued that if a person has “more layers of consciousness”, they can observe the world through more angles and more comprehensively, and transcend the limits of overall perception to break preconceived notions.

When we are experiencing the world, there is an immeasurable amount of information that the brain has to absorb and translate for us to understand. When we see an apple tossed to us, we might think of it as a single object, but it is actually composed of bundled information. All the different systems in our brain see that the apple is something red, round, edible, and moving to conclude an answer of an apple in motion. (Cytowic 202). Within the limbic system¹, Cytowic describes “the hippocampus as the main node that makes synesthesia possible,” because this is the only area in which it is “possible to bring together information that was processed in functionally and geographically separate parts of the brain” (Cytowic 166). In this aspect, synesthesia shows how much more information than what is normally perceived is bound together. For instance, when I taste an apple, it is more than red, round, crunchy, succulent, and sweet with acid which I represent in my work, *Enjoy Apple* (see fig, 3). In the first bite of the apple, I see a large oval with mint green, and a purple thin line passing through the right side. After I crush the apple and start chewing, I see an ellipse comprised of a number of small squares, they are different shades of blue; Irregular pale yellow shadows extend below them. Apple juice overflows satisfyingly in the mouth, accompanied by the sweet and sour flesh. A light green arc passes through an irregular yellow shape. When the sweetness was greater than the sour taste, a pale pink halo passes through the yellow.

¹ The limbic system is a complex set of structures in the brain. It contains the hypothalamus, the hippocampus and the amygdala etc. The limbic system is responsible for our emotional life and plays an important role in the formation of memory.

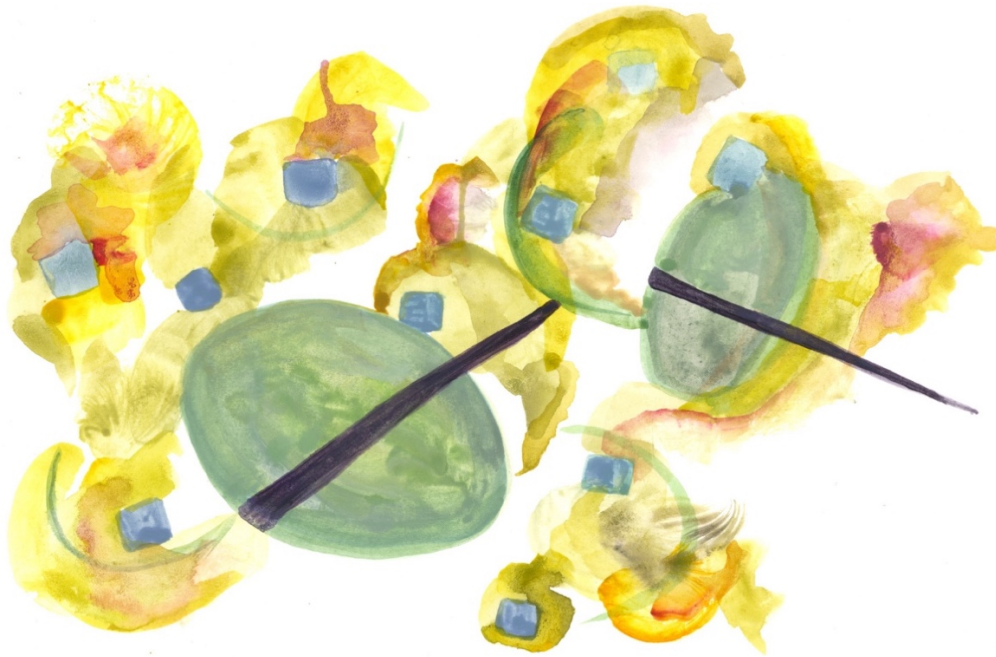


Fig. 3 *Enjoy Apple*, 7" x 11", watercolour and ink on paper, 2018

All too often subtleties of experience are lost to perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, “The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing” (Merleau-Ponty 265). The geometrical shape of an object is not its only form, we also take clues from other senses and sights for it. For example, folded linen cloth has a dryness of the fibre, and the temperature of the material (Merleau-Ponty 266). The author Dani Cavallaro has pointed out that a culmination of this sensory collaboration is that we must pay attention to the subtle, or hidden properties of an object, not just accepting the immediately perceived form as the true essence (Cavallaro 679). Using the senses, we are able to recognize an object’s hidden qualities, and its connections.

In a way, synesthesia helps me to largely detect this hidden quality. In my work, *Scented Tea* (see fig. 4) the visual picture of sensorial perception is triggered by smell and taste of a tea called *White Sky*. The crystal-clear aroma of white tea reminds me of the fragrance of ylang ylang flowers from the Indian Ocean Islands, sweet and delicious. Its front notes are lightly sweet, the middle notes have slightly astringent smell, after that the tone that is a bit acidic and fresh. The pale red bean paste is shown through a light-yellow mist, and aquamarine blue shadows are embedded from the pale red edges. Working with watercolour, I wet the areas in which I want colours to flow in order to let the next layer of colour (light yellow) blend more naturally with the newly added colour (pale red bean). Some parts of the paper remain dry, so the wet paint does not flow into those sections. The pigment pools give the impression of a more concentrated area to show the presence of obvious components in the odour. Because the first application of colour saturation is not high, I increased the intensity of the paint with overlays of colour glazes, that I sprayed with a spray bottle. This helps me to present the complexity and the layering of the picture in order to better convey the state of different odour components throughout the whole scent, and express the ineffable character of this perceptual experience.



Figure. 4 *Scented Tea*, 7" x 11", watercolour and ink on paper, 2018

Chinese Cosmology-Qi

The critic Kuiyi Shen describes that, the concept of *qi* is at the centre of Chinese cosmology, literally meaning “breath”, *qi* actually refers to the constantly moving essence of life and vital energy. It courses constantly like a flowing gas, a natural fluid, animating all living things, including the landscape (Kuiyi 68). *Qi* is the soul of Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy. Through the act of painting and writing, the artist opens themselves to communication with the natural world, allowing their *qi* to merge with that of the cosmos. This is a spiritual exchange. In “Six Canons of Painting”, Chinese painter and art theorist Xie He

points out the most essential law was to “engender movement through spirit resonance” (*qiyun shengdong*). The movement in the painting is thus that of *qi*. Because of this underlying harmony, all elements within the painting are expected to be full of vitality. At the same time, the placement of empty space is equally crucial, as the *qi* resides everywhere and contains everything. Proper arrangement of the negative space gives a place, an entrance and exit, to support the flow of *qi* (68).

Philosopher and educator Ai Chung-liang Huang describes “wu-wei” in his book, *Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain*, Qi embodies wu-wei, which is the subtlest principle of Taoism. Literally, wu-wei refers to “not doing,” and actually means to move following the flow of nature’s course that is signified by the word Tao (Huang 2). At the same time, *qi* is energy, it is subtle and strong, and circulates constantly in one’s mental and physical self. It is like breathing, it is an unconscious action, basically undefinable but makes everything become forceful and powerful (2). For me, synesthesia is also a subtle and powerful energy. It constantly affects my sensory experience and my inner spirituality. Synesthesia happens naturally like breathing, and I am absorbed in this sense of spiritual exchange. Therefore, synesthesia has the same function as *qi* for me. Qi is the Chinese concept for the essence of life, it is a universal, spiritual thing. Qi refers to wu-wei which can be also defined as emptiness or nothingness which is parallel with the highest level of the mind—cosmic consciousness.

The space of synesthesia is vivid, and it makes me feel energetic. When I completely let myself into this space, I seem to walk into an infinite galaxy. I am dragged forward by a vague and mysterious force. I see multiple colors and shapes; my sight is a bit tired. My vision begins to blur. I sit down and admire the constellations of these special patterns, which have no clear

outline, like clouds and fogs dimly discernible in front of me. I reach out and try to touch the shapes in the sky that seem to be close at hand. These shapes are organic form, natural and freedom. When I reach out to touch them, they disappear instantly in front of my eyes, like bubbles that were punctured by my fingers. At this moment, I am wrapped in an infinite void, my spirit is completely quiet. I reached the limit of perception; my senses began to recede after experiencing the climax of perception. This is a kind of sensation that occurs when I see enough things, I will forget what I see, because the experience is in my consciousness. In other words, when I master a tool, I will forget how to use it, because they have been transformed into a powerful and innate energy that acts on an unconscious level. As the artist Kazimir Malevich illustrates, "There is no existence either within or outside me; nothing can change anything, since nothing exists that could change itself or be changed" (Malevich 191). I seem to access the state of emptiness; a mute space of liberation, somewhere between stability and chaos.

The making process seems like a spiritual practice that I associate with consciousness. In the Chinese principle of Tao, this higher consciousness is hard to attain, but it is still possible to be achieved. However, the Western postmodern perspective believes it not possible to reach. Standing at the crossroads of east and west, I bridge different cultures. When I paint, I am trying to comprehend the highest state of consciousness. My Western mind tells me that I will never achieve it, but my Eastern mind tells me every step of the painting process brings me closer to it. In both my minds, the passion doesn't fade, because I keep trying to reach for that state of higher consciousness.

Artistic Influences

There are a few artists that influence my practice; they are Cai Guoqiang, Timothy B. Layden, and Qiu shihua. Cai is a Chinese painter and calligrapher. *In Cai Guoqiang: Ladder to the sky*, Kuiyi Shen points out that Cai uses gunpowder as a signature medium in his work (see fig, 5). Cai feels the accidental and uncontrollability of gunpowder creates vivid new worlds and gives power to his art. He experiments with the dangerous materials and imagines what effect they would have, but there are always unexpected results. In this confrontation between controlled and uncontrolled, between fire and canvas, unexpected effects produce new results (Kuiyi 73). There is a similar making method in my process of painting. Cai's use of gunpowder inspired me to employ watercolor as the main medium in my work. Gunpowder needs to work with fire, and watercolor needs to work with water. As Lao-tzu said, although water is soft and weak it invariably overcomes the rigid and hard (Lao 2). Water has the property of being able to contain all things. I attempt to incorporate water to express an all-inclusive mind, which is also in line with the ideas conveyed by Chinese cosmology and cosmic consciousness. Cosmic consciousness is being connected with all things, and water connects everything. Watercolour is able to create unexpected results. I want to embody the experience through the quality of unexpected results that synesthesia creates a visual space beyond our imagination. This unexpected result is often more consistent with the free state of the shapes I see, and it is also an expression of the ineffable perceptual experience.

Fig. 5

[Figure 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is Cai Guoqiang, *Light Passage–Winter*, 230 x 462 cm, gunpowder on paper, 2007.]

For Cai, the explosions create the illusion that the universe is close to us and is in a perceptual state of being born. The explosion physically produced *qi*. However, the most significant thing is this *qi* carries the spiritual transformation. The explosion turned the desire to merge into the universe into dust and fragile paper, as if they were transferred to another spiritual field (Kuiyi 74). Similarly, synesthesia effects my inner spiritual dimension; in this way, synesthesia acts as *qi* for me. In the process of painting I use negative space to release *qi*. In *Negative Space: Orbiting Inner and Outer Experience*, the artist Antonia Hirsch describes that the negative space in art describes the space around objects. This empty space becomes its own object of focus, creating something new to contemplate. Calling a space negative tends to invoke a blackness, a feeling of nothingness. Yet, this nothingness, as soon as it is given a name, becomes something. The blackness becomes a stretching infinity, like the night sky. The feeling

of emptiness is such an abstract, yet very present concept, that it often inspires metaphors which struggle to define it (Hirsch 3). In *White*, Japanese graphic designer and curator Kenya Hara proposes that, in some cases, white denotes “emptiness” (Hara 23). White as a non-color transforms into a symbol of nonbeing. This ‘nonbeing’ is predictive of a condition that will be filled with content in the future. Thus, negative space can create a powerful communication energy (Hara 35). The emptiness becomes a space to extend our potential, providing an area where our imagination is able to run free, granting a more versatile perception (Hara 38). According to these concepts, negative space causes a feeling of nothingness, and *qi* similarly refers to emptiness or nothingness.

Timothy B. Layden is an interdisciplinary artist who experiences synesthesia. Cavallaro point out that, Layden uses recordings to capture special sounds that give him a strong reaction. Through these recordings, he creates soundscapes. When the editing of a soundscape is done, he creates a mixed media study that he uses to externalize the colours and shapes of the sounds, like creating a landscape. At the end, he makes larger mixed media paintings, which gives snapshots of the experience of movement frozen in time (Cavallaro 1654). His work *The Shape of Sounds* (see fig, 6), consists of a series of small drawings on paper developed while editing eleven soundtracks. Layden explains each of those sketches “was produced through a process of automatic drawing during successive listening of the soundtracks in various stages of their development with the purpose of loosening up the hand and the sensitivity for drawing the synesthetic experience in the moment of its occurrence” (Layden 13). There is a similar strategy that I use in my painting.

Fig.6

[Figure 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is *Timothy B. Layden, The Shape of Sounds*, 22.5 x 26cm, mix media on paper, 2008.]

I try to create a landscape that is rooted in the visual images of synesthesia. In the creative process, I applied mapping strategies that are similar to Layden's works. For example, in the work *untitled*, I painted a series of images to represent the different stages of olfactory experience visually. At every different stage the smell has a different shape, but in the end they all integrate together into a whole scent and then form a complete and comprehensive image. Thus, there is a small gap between each piece displayed on the wall to emphasize a trend at different stages. These images are arranged according to the intensity of the scent, like the three stages of perfume—a top note, a body note or a middle note, and a base note. In my work, *Untitled* (see fig, 7). The first piece presents a top note, the next 3 pieces show a body note, and the last piece embodies a base note. In the article, *The Complete book of Essential Oils and Aromatherapy*, Valerie Ann Worwood describes that, the top note of the perfume can

only be maintained for a short period of time, which gives the initial overall impression. The body note of the perfume is closely followed by the top note, which gives off the main fragrance of the perfume. So, it is considered to be the most important part – it is the embodiment of the theme of the perfume (Worwood 319). Thus, I used more images to show the middle note of the perfume. In this fruity fragrance, the top note is accompanied by a strong ginger flavour, visually unfolding from a huge pattern similar to the shape of a tornado. On the opposite side is a dark green shape resembling a crescent moon. Middle notes of sweetness are mixed with the fruity aroma of lemon, and a scattering of pale pinks peek through different layers of blue and green. The smell of the middle note has similar shapes and scale without much variation, and the colour becomes lighter than that of the first smell. The finished flavour, final smell or note is fresh grapefruit peel, the smell is mild and the colours lighter; the texture of the shapes are hazy, like clouds and fog. Along with the disappearing smell, the shapes become less defined in the picture.

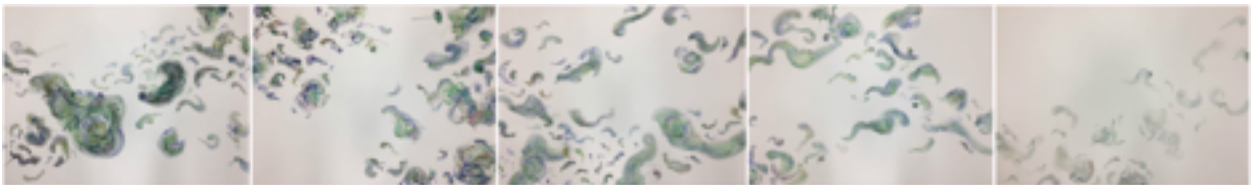


Fig.7 *Untitled*, watercolour, ink and pigments on paper, 23" x 30" (5), 2018

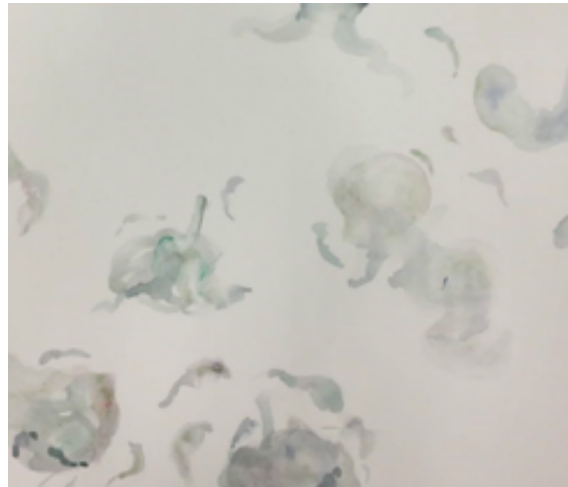
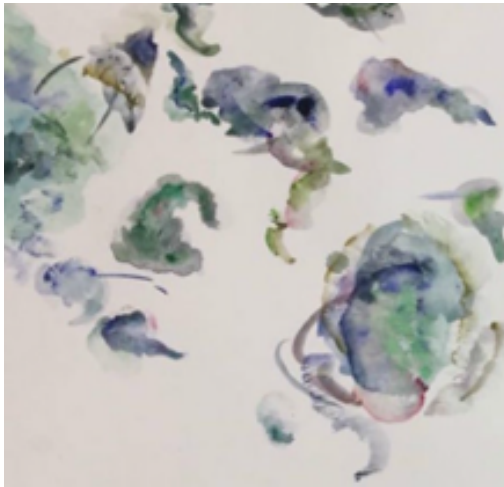


Fig.8 *Untitled*, details, 2018

Another artist who influences my practice is Qiu Shihua. He is a Chinese landscape painter. Qiu believes the visage of the soul reveals itself as it is in the state of *wu-wei* or emptiness. At first glance, his paintings seem to be a monochrome white canvas, but upon closer inspection, the viewer realizes that the complicated layers of paint create a landscape flourishing with details, depending on the viewpoint of the audience. A couple steps in another direction, and the detail fades back into the canvas. The artist uses this effect to call the moment of visibility of his painting into question. This influenced my treatment of the paint layers. When I want the next layer of paint to pass through the upper layer of paint, I will add more water-infused pigment to the first layer of paint to reduce visibility.

Yang Gallery describes his work as a combination of Western abstraction and the Eastern Taoist theories of emptiness (see fig, 9). Qiu paints an inner world. In the emptiness, the atmospheric perspective allows the viewer to admire and travel across this new world (Yang Gallery). According to Qiu, “his working process grounds on the premise of forgetting about

such painterly matters as motive, technique, emotion, thus achieving pure sensuality in the void space from which the image must emerge rather than construct itself” (Qiu). This is a kind of conscious painting that forgets all of the rules, just like a state of white paper, emptiness. When Qiu integrates himself into painting, the picture under his brush is an expression of a purest self-consciousness. At this moment, what appears on his canvas is not the ignorance of lacking experience, instead it is a natural expression of the soul through the rich inner knowledge that is transformed through an invisible powerful force and is acting on the unconscious. It is the highest state of consciousness—cosmic consciousness. This is also the spiritual dimension that my synesthetic experience has helped me comprehend. Thus, Qiu applied this consciousness to his working process in painting, which inspired me to deal with gestures and marks in my painting process.

Fig.9

[Figure 9 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is Qiu Shihua, *Untitled II*, Oil on canvas, 150 x 292 cm, unknown.]

I'm trying to find a state of reconciliation between control and non-control and apply it into the gestures and marks of painting. The synesthetic experience feels like a direct conversation with an invisible energy source; synesthesia has the same function as *qi* for me. Qi embodies wu-wei that is the subtlest principle of Taoism. Wu-wei can also be defined as the state of emptiness and nothingness. Critic and curator David Elliott describes in Western existentialism, the void, or emptiness, as a figment of terror or alienation. While, in the Eastern theory of Taoism, the emptiness is a silent space of liberation, somewhere between stability and chaos" (41). My synesthetic experience allows me to achieve this state of emptiness; I attempt to present this state through the gestures and marks between control and non-control. I make marks that look like they were accidentally created, however they were an intentional action, a movement trying to follow the flow of nature's course.

Yang Gallery states that many of Qiu's works are untitled, much is left to the eye of the beholder, and the viewer needs to use their personal apparatus of associations in order to make sense of the pieces. Disoriented, the viewer is forced to slow down, and it sets a special mood that is a prerequisite for entering the world within his works (Yang Gallery). There are a similar strategies and intentions in my painting as well. For instance, in the work *Untitled* (see fig, 10), I didn't give it a title to leave the viewers free to let their imagination and personal experience fill the gaps of connecting the pieces. This work consists of 49 images to make up the whole piece. Synaesthesia is time-based, and the images I see in this timeline are usually similar, but none of them are exactly the same. This is similar to how you cannot find two completely identical clouds in the sky, even though they appear so much alike. Meanwhile, the images that I see are static – not moving pictures such as in animation. But they do have a

dynamic tendency, similar to how before making an animation; animators draw original manuscripts with key frames. I want to illustrate the state of the image I see in my synesthesia by using the intent of deliberately assembling a picture. In *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman states that, our senses tear the reality into pieces of vitality and recombine them into a significant pattern. They take swatches, negotiate a reasonable version through subtle deals. These pieces of information are sent to the brain like a 'piece of a jigsaw puzzle' (Ackerman 5). Once enough "pieces" come together, the brain gives a definitive answer, such as, I see a banana (5). Therefore, in order to demonstrate the operational form of sensory perception in the brain, I use many pieces to collage a whole painting. At the same time, each small image, when combined together, becomes a large-scale painting. A large-scale work encourages the audience to see the whole image from a distance. And if they want to see the detail in each image, they need to get closer to the painting. When the viewer gets closer to the painting, they can use each image is a piece of information that can travel through to track another message and find the interconnections. To some extent, this is also in response to our brain using similar processes to perceive information from the senses. Either way this form of display allows the viewer to choose their viewpoint.

In my work *untitled*, I attempt to reveal a topography of the ineffable space of perceptual experience, in which my synesthesia ultimately affects my inner spiritual dimension. The palm tree candle's odour is a prelude to my inner spiritual dimension. I smelled what looked like grass mixed with a hint of bamboo charcoal after a heavy rain, which immediately made me feel relaxed and calm. I saw different shades of blue, some with a pale orange yellow, some with a faint purple, and some with a faint light shade of mint green. I used those complex

colours in different layers. At the same time those colours are organic in shape with soft edges, like clouds and fog drifting away, evoking the natural atmosphere created by landscape. I created the gestures and textures to approach this quality. I seem to be absorbed in the state of emptiness that synesthesia helped me get to. The central area of the picture is a circle which has exploded. I want to express that synesthesia has a point of release, which is released from this central area, and also implies the infinite movement and dynamic energy from our perception and consciousness. The circle, as a form, echoes the layout of a mandala, a form found in Buddhism, whereby a square with four gates includes a circle with a central point. Our senses are in the centre of the picture, and this is more like a spiritual context in which the circle is used to focus the senses, so as to create a silent space of liberation; aiding meditation and Immersion in order to invite people gradually move into deeper levels of unconsciousness and highest level of the mind—cosmic consciousness.



Fig.10 *Untitled*, watercolour and ink on paper, 11" x 14" (49), 2018

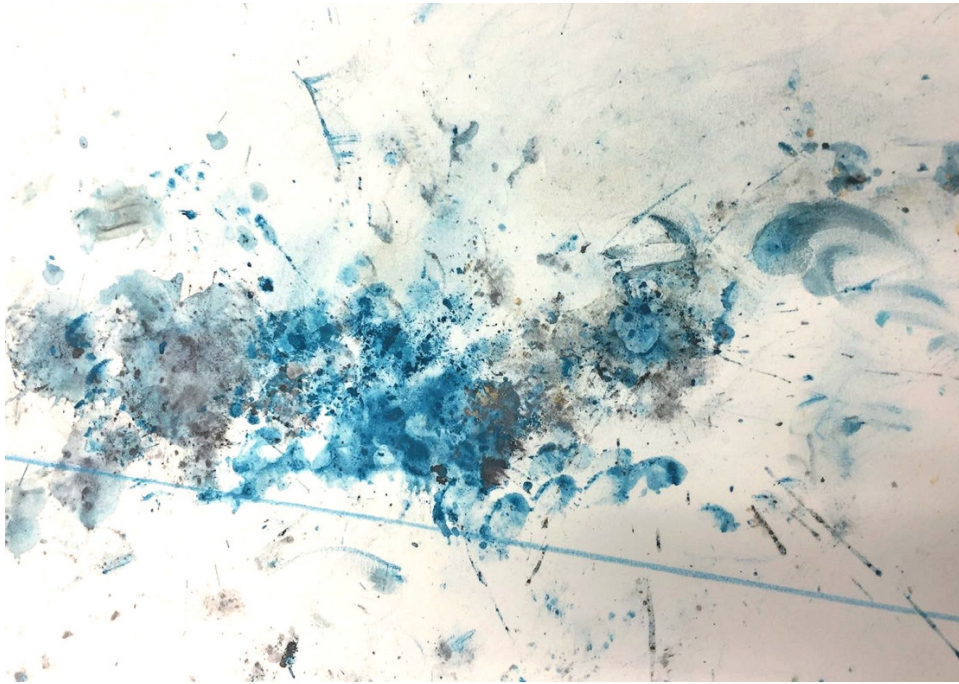


Fig. 11 *Untitled*, details, 2018



Fig. 12 *Untitled*, details, 2018

Cosmic Consciousness

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is,
as its name implies, a consciousness of the cosmos,
that is, of the life and order of the universe...

Along with consciousness of the cosmos there occurs
an intellectual enlightenment or illumination
which alone would place the individual on
a new plane of existence—would make him almost
a member of a new species (99).

—Richard M. Bucke

According to Canadian Psychologist Richard M. Bucke, in his study *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901), cosmic consciousness arouses emptiness or the sensation that nothing exists. Bucke declared “aesthetic intuition occurs at the highest level of the mind—cosmic consciousness— and that the most highly evolved minds are those of artists and poets” (Bucke 99). With frequent references to Bucke’s cosmic consciousness, the Russian esotericist Peter Ouspensky wrote an extensive treatise on the mind, *Terbium Organum*, which described how to attain the highest state of consciousness by “intuitive logic—the logic of infinity, the logic of ecstasy”. Ouspensky believed, “art is a path to cosmic consciousness” (Ouspensky 221). He argued that cosmic consciousness is like a soul suspended in a void until even void fades. There is only the constant division and dissolution of infinity that

remains. The feeling of that never-ending abyss, the essence of infinity, is a continuous illogicality (221).

In order to merge with cosmic consciousness in the painting process, I create division and dissolution through marks and layers; for instance, in my work *Immersed in pure white cotton* (see fig, 13), I try to make the marks represent a natural explosion and outburst. For the sake of presenting such an effect, I consider the work by painter Pia Fries. In *Vitamin P: new perspective in painting*, a director Dana Friis-Hansen describes how Fries utilizes a boisterous amount of colour and texture in her paintings, giving her work a high energy level (see fig, 16). Fries uses a variety of tools in her mark making, from classic ones such as palette knives and spatulas and her brushes, to more obscure things like syringes and tools she crafts herself. She then alters the consistency of her oil paints by adding resin or other mediums. When scrutinized at close range, the viewer will find many interesting marks within the work, celebrating her painterly skirmishes (Friis-Hansen 110). I used similar techniques in this work; I don't use the conventional brushes to paint, because the brush is limited to fineness and exactitude rather than enhancing that bursting quality. I employed other devices and objects, such as a spatula, sponge, squeegee, roller, watering cans and my fingers. These objects can activate a sense of natural release. I have also made a special custom brush; it consists of different materials of brushes that are bound together to form a newly invented brush with varying degrees of density and softness, which creates a floral and layered splash effect. Also, sometimes I add matte medium to watercolour to make it more viscous and able to carry the tiny gold leaves. I intend to let the audience who see the whole painting from a distance experience the work as the remnant my spiritual practice. But up close, I attempt to lead them to see every detail

closely; the details show the process of my mark-making. When they get close to the painting, they can find many interesting marks in there: and I as a painter am ecstatic when these marks are found by the viewer.



Fig.13 *Immersed in Pure White Cotton*, 59"x 96" (4), watercolour, ink and pigment on paper,

2019



Fig. 14 *Immersed in Pure White Cotton*, details, 2019



Fig. 15 *Immersed in Pure White Cotton*, details, 2019

Fig.16

[Figure 16 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is Pia Fries, *Weisswirt*, 170 x 145 cm, oil and silkscreen on wood, 2008.]

Another painter Elizabeth Neel influenced my gestures in painting. Art historian Kathleen Madden explains Neel's work creates a tension between figuration and abstraction (218). She uses excess fluids and dynamic gestures that are driven by narrative (Ibid). Historically, it is common for gestural markings to be associated with emotion. Neel is aware of this and uses her knowledge of the historical significance of gestures to direct the emotion into a narrative within her work. There is a performative aspect of her art that brings to mind painters like Jackson Pollock. In some cases, like her work *The Builder* (see fig, 17), she folds her canvas in half, resulting in a symmetrical work that could be interpreted in many different ways, from a figure to a landscape. There is a willful purpose to her work that is optimistic, but also chaotic in a way that could be considered destructive. She utilizes this style to create an opportunity for her work to have meaning, but it remains an unsolved mystery (Madden 218).

Fig.17 and Fig.18

[Figure 17 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is Elizabeth Neel, *The Builder*, 188 x 119.4 cm, Acrylic on canvas, 2015.]

[Figure 18 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is Elizabeth Neel, *ADBC*, 241.3 x 198.12 cm, Acrylic on canvas, 2015.]

My work has some similar attributes. There is a tension between control and non-control involved in my work; the balance between planning and instinct in the process. I rely on a higher consciousness – ‘intuitive logic’, I trust my instincts, my actions and responses. The gestures Neel applies in her paintings are rooted in emotion, while I employ gestures based on my intuition or instinct. I try to diminish arrangement of the specific details of the pattern, in order to leave space for unintended results. These unexpected results become an illogical agent in my making process. I consciously decide on the overall structure and a course of action, while letting materials speak to each other, rather than dominating them. Sometimes before I begin, I simulate the gestures of painting by moving my hands along in front of the canvas, just as if I were painting. Each action grows under the guidance of instinct and spontaneity. Working back

and forth, painting, repainting, discovering, rediscovering, thinking, not thinking. The sense of self dissolves, a fusion occurs between me and the painting. So, in a sense I become the painting. Neel's work *ADBC* (see fig, 18) is like a representation of history, half formed moments swirling out from the source of the Big Bang and patched together to give it those progressive and regressive tendencies (Madden 218). Neel is not restricted by the belief of newness as the goal artists should strive for; she utilizes history, and the knowledge gained from her predecessors and by making the conscious choice to reuse that knowledge, she is making it relevant once again (218). I employ the concept of *qi* and cosmic consciousness that draws on history and previous knowledge. By consciously choosing to reuse these knowledges, I make them relevant now.

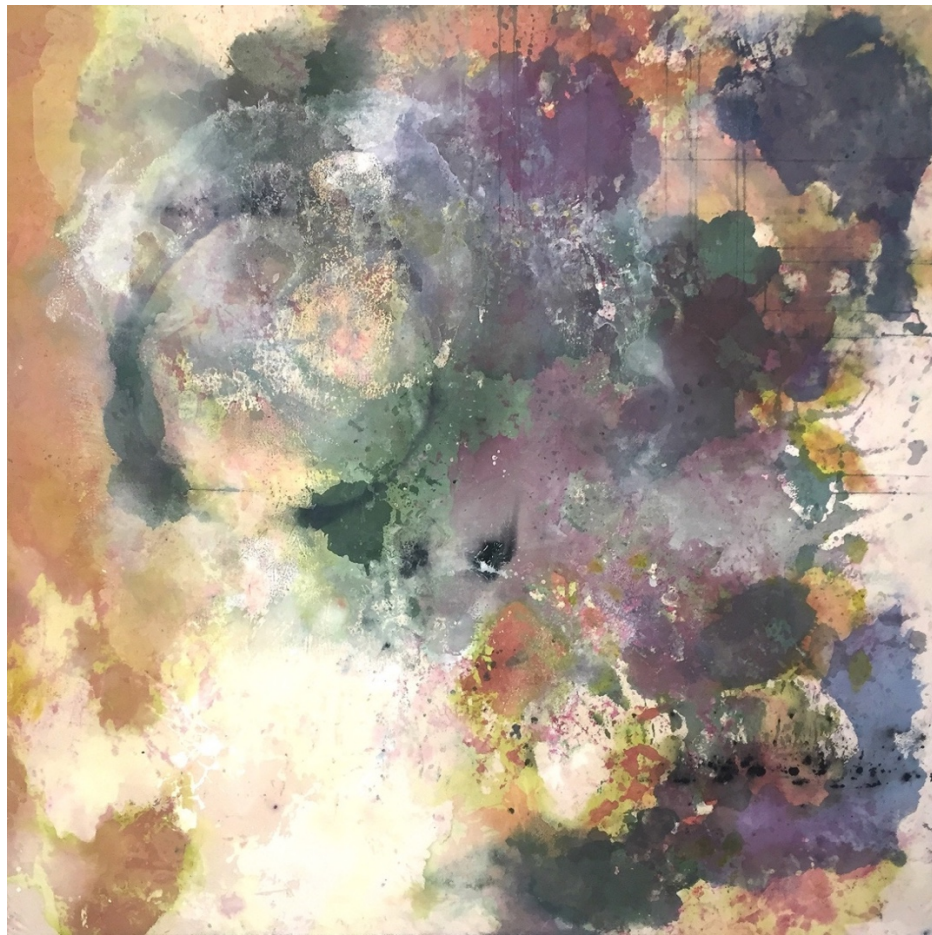


Fig.19 *Untitled*, 5ft x 5ft, watercolour, ink and pigment on canvas, 2019

Synesthesia influences my spiritual dimension, which eventually helps me comprehend cosmic consciousness. Disillusionment and immersion are the bridges in these experiences. Synesthesia is bound by time. Once the sound stops or the taste disappears, my synesthesia will disappear as well. So, when I am in synesthesia, I feel that I see infinite possibilities in a limited time. I am not capable to predict or imagine what I am going to see, because synesthesia is involuntary, and the visual picture it triggers is beyond all imagination. As the writer Dani

Cavallaro states in her book, *Synesthesia in Art*, “from the point of view of reception, synesthesia inaugurates a textual space comparable to a limitless galaxy bound always to exceed anything that might be imagined about it” (Cavallaro 2275). Thus, it could be said, synesthesia is ‘beyond reason’. I am pushed forward by an indistinct and mysterious sensation. I walk into a mystical galaxy and watch a splendid firework show. I feel emptiness when the fireworks in the air burn out, but this state of emptiness is a kind of relief. Those gorgeous scenes have ignited my heart and mind. When I embrace the world that synesthesia brings me to see, even if that world disappears with time, it has an eternal influence on my consciousness and perception. The emptiness that follows a synesthetic experience is a moment of calm after experiencing chaos; it is an absorption after a wonderful and complicated experience, it is a sublimation after the experience. This state of emptiness is not absence, but infinite possession.

In this emptiness, I seem to dance out of myself, I listen to the polyphony of my senses, I come back to nature, back to the source, I return to the purity of emptiness. This is the Buddhist idea, “all our sense of existence is mostly illusion, This world of illusion bursts, like a bubble” (Huang 159). But after it bursts, the energy returns to us in some way; we go back into the world, but not of the world (159). So, finally I come back into myself, but it is not my original self. It is like I went to the top of the mountain after a series of climbs, and finally returned to where I started. The starting point is still the starting point, but I am not the same. My synesthesia is still my synesthesia, but my understanding of synesthesia is different. Therefore, the expression of synesthesia in my painting is not just a transformation of sensory experience, but is a topology of the consciousness I comprehend through synesthesia.

Conclusion

Through my artistic practice, I have discussed synesthesia, *qi*, cosmic-consciousness, and the potential for artists to visualize ineffable aspects of perceptual experience, as well as the way invisible energy is internalized in or as consciousness. Our senses highlight the differences in the way people see the world. Synesthesia can unblock our limits of perception, something I leverage to create my paintings. I hope my work invites people to discover the subtle substance in our sensory perception, and to contemplate the impact of sensorial experience. At the same time, I attempt to draw the viewer out of their preconceptions and provide an opportunity to let them see how we perceive and experience the world in a different way. Ultimately, I am seeking a depiction of the topography of the ineffable space in perceptual experience, in which my sensory perception both affects and effects my inner consciousness. In many cases, the process is far more interesting than the result which is why I leave traces of my process in the work. My work is an invitation for the viewer to accompany me through my process, providing an opportunity to let them have a deep dialogue with themselves; to pay attention to their own feelings, asking and understanding their own experience. Through my work, I hope they will be able to notice and recognize their own sensory experience.

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