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Mountain in water- My experience of landscape

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Abstract:

Through personal experience, historical references, and exploration of materials, this writing introduces my current artwork and the source of my inspiration. Using visual art as a way to communicate and clarify concepts associated with my memories and fascination with the natural world.
Mountain in Water: My experience of landscape

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Thesis
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Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University

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Introduction:

As a person who grew up in a modernized city, I always feel chaotic and lost in the crowd and the rapid proliferation of new technologies. Because of the development of science, the most natural phenomenon has rational scientific explanations. Thus, step by step, the natural landscape and phenomena that evoke the feeling of reverence and awe have been gradually destroyed by the rapid development of technology. The power of the natural world is undermined by the world of people’s imagination. The landscape gentrified by humans not only causes ecological imbalance and environmental damage, but also dramatically changes modern attitudes toward the natural world.

In my work, I discuss how natural landscape is observed by modern people and critically question how far people are from nature in today’s technologically advanced world.
My experience of landscape

As a person who only grew up in cities, sometimes I get tired of the crowded city. But I am so used to living there. My feet are used to walking on a smooth road; my ears are used to the noise of honking that never stops; I am used to the crowds of people in the street; I am used to the night city landscape covered by artificial lights. After living in a city for a long time, I sometimes want to escape it and yearn for a vast open land. When I am truly exposed to a vast wild open land, however, a sense of threat comes along with being free.

I live and work in an enclosed space for most of the time. Feeling a natural landscape has become a luxury. I was born and grew up in Hangzhou, a city on the east coast of China. Compared with other cities on the metropolitan east coast, it is closer to nature and famous for its beautiful scenery, and you can find the eastern poetic landscape. The city is surrounded by mountains, and the center of the city is around a historical site called West Lake.\(^1\) As a famous tourist city, Hangzhou is always full of people; the huge population of over nine million makes the city always extremely crowded, especially around the West Lake area. Tourists gather in the scenic area and take photos from specific viewing points. Every time I walk by the lake, I have to keep sidestepping the crowd. After passing through the crowd, I can catch a glimpse of the peaceful corner of West Lake. I used to take photos to record the scenery through the small crevices of the crowd. The crowd and city buildings were intentionally avoided when I took photos. I only wanted to record the silent lake and the mountain behind it and create an image which looks much quieter than reality. Tourist

\(^1\) The earliest record of West Lake began in the eastern Han dynasty. In the sixth year of Sui dynasty (610), the grant canal Between Beijing and Hangzhou was dug, which connected the north and south of China.
photos usually have certain characteristics. People are trying to find local landmarks or special signs to show the difference and uniqueness of their place. Some specific and deliberate scenic spots are surrounded by people as a treasure. This satisfies our desire for novelty and the unique. The presence of these unusual places seems an accident, a departure from the norm, but they happen to coincide with the novelty we expect.

Facing the lake, the water I see is smooth and calm as a mirror. When I turn around, there is the hustle and bustle of the city. The lakeshore is covered by flagstones and artificial lights lie along the pathway. The scenery in front of me becomes like a stage. It is nature because there are mountains and water; it is not nature, because from the lakeshore to the center of the lake is artificial.

In order to experience natural landscape, I went to Tibet in northwest China. During the trip, I felt the truly boundlessness and the spaciousness of the land. I have read how poets and writers describe the compelling images of mountains, and I have seen the grandeur of the mountains in pictures and films. However, the peaks, which raised one after another, the overlapping and magnificent mountains, changed what I imagined nature could be.

Northwest China was hardly ever developed for tourism; the relatively inclement weather and the formidable nature of its terrain discourage most tourists. It is an open space that has never been subjected to human activities; it lacks established patterns of human meaning. I stood on one of the peaks, facing the vastness of the land and looked at the vultures circling in the sky. A feeling of threat was evoked from the spaciousness. Spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being free. This freedom is paralleled by a sense of exposure

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2 Tuan Yi-Fu, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1977.)
and vulnerability. On the open land, there is no sheltered place, I’m surrounded only by low shrubs and the ground is muddy. It is a completely different experience from travel in a scenic spot which is full of signposts and artificially designed for tourists. The sense of vulnerability also brings an awareness of the power of nature which makes me realize how small I am in the face of nature.

My experience of natural landscape was also enlarged during a road trip in Death Valley, Eastern California. When I was driving on an empty road, I saw the mountain covered by fog and dust and a sense of mystery arose. The morning sun through the layer of fog covered whole land. The endless scenery brought infinite mystery. What is behind the mountain, and where does the road lead? I did not sense any sorrow or joy from it and I felt time slow down. And in a moment, I didn’t even feel the existence of life. It seemed ruthless because no matter how excited I was, nature was indifferent, but it seemed passionate at the same time, because the wind from the valley, the cirrus clouds and the interlaced mountains were showing nature’s power.
The experience in both Northwest China and Death Valley were brief and so different from the environment which I grow up in. The experiences were haunting presences but also temporary. After leaving, the sense of awe and threat of nature gradually disappeared with time.

When I go back to city life, I always want to recapture the experience which natural landscapes bring to me. I started to create an indoor installation as a participatory landscape. In my work *Square* I used plastic sheeting as the primary material. I wanted to turn my experience of the natural landscape into a tangible work, but it did not need to be permanent. The material was not durable and the work did not survive after the show ended. The artificial lights mask the ordinary identity of the plastic sheet and create a visual
effect which looks like an indoor stage. The site of this piece of work is a closed room, with brick walls and overhead pipes, and I placed my memory and imagination of “landscape” in it.

**The imagery of mountain and water in Chinese Culture**

Chinese culture has always had a very persistent belief in the landscape. Landscape painting, Chinese gardens, and interior decoration reflect the important position of the landscape in traditional culture.

Nature has always been an important source of both Eastern and Western art. In the development of painting, nature is mostly used as the background of figure painting in western art. In Chinese painting, however, man is insignificant in nature and nature becomes the main object of aesthetics, which is related to the eastern philosophy’s view of nature. Ancient literati visited the mountains and water to experience the sublimes of nature.

*Shanshui*³ painting has a long history as a primary Chinese art. The painting not only renders Chinese landscape, but also embodies the traditional Chinese culture and the eastern conception of nature. On the one hand, it is connected with Daoism and other philosophies that stress the harmony between humans and the natural world. The ancient Chinese artists transformed their ideal relationship with nature into reality through painting. On the other hand, this style of landscape painting does not only depict a natural place but an inner space where the artist can rest their heart and mind. The works are depictions of imaginary and idealized lands, as well as humankind’s spiritual home. Mountains and water became the

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³ *Shanshui*, the Chinese word for landscape, is a compound of the two symbols for mountain and water, indispensable elements of historical *Shanshui* painting. Its significance lies more in its transformational potential for connecting the individual to the world than in the accurate rendering of a particular landscape.
most important metaphor for these painters, who wanted to free their spirit because nature is without any artificial element; it is pure without any intense competition and intrigues from society; it is indifferent without the greed and chaos of mundane life.

The historical painting *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* by Fan Kuan (950-1032) conveys the idea that the universe is eternal. The size of the two-meter-high scroll gives a sense of majesty to the mountain. The high mountain in the middle of the image looks like a giant monument. The tiny figure in the lower part of painting makes me think of how small I am compared with nature. In addition, it is hard to tell the exact time in the painting. It can be early morning, noon, or late night. This suspends space and time in the image period. It is not in a specific moment and the time has not been quantified.

The artist used a few straight lines to represent the waterfall and did not draw anything at the end of it. But the blank paper creates a visual effect of water vapor, vividly showing the water flying down and the mist around the mountain. The mountain and water naturally blend together in the blank space.
In front of mountains and streams, no matter if they are ordinary people or emperors, are tiny travelers; success and frustration from the perspective of nature are insignificant. The life of an individual is short, but the universe is eternal.

My experiences of Chinese culture today are so different from two years ago when I just
landed in this country. In China, I didn’t feel like I was Chinese, because I ate Chinese food with my parents and friends, and spoke Chinese. But I realized I am Chinese the first day I left there, when I introduced myself as a person from China instead a person from Hangzhou, and when I saw familiar Chinese merchandises in the imports section in a U.S grocery store. My environment changed, the language changed, and life experiences and everyday behaviors remind me that I am a Chinese.

The sense of nostalgia in an unfamiliar environment and the desire to find a sense of belonging became the original driving force for me to explore traditional Chinese art methods. The landscape is not only the physical landscape, but also functions as a culture symbol in my work.

My understanding of traditional landscape painting has changed since the change in my environment. When I was in China, I saw traditional landscape painting as a conservative tradition, rather than a creative art. And now, it not only expresses nostalgia for my native land, but also urges me to reflect on my own traditional culture.

Traditional landscape painting uses the intensity and direction of the brush to depict nature. Brush, ink, rice paper, and ink-stone are the only materials used in general. However, as an artist who has studied drawing and painting in the western academy system since childhood, I am questioning how I can explore my own “mountain and water”. Now I create landscapes, but I do not want to go back to the old traditional norms. I sometime use the Song dynasty painting as a reference, but I don’t want to get caught up in that standard, for the good inheritance of tradition carries it forward. Therefore, how to use my own language and ways to describe landscape has become a new aspiration for me.
**Creating participatory landscape**

I have been learning painting since I was a child; I followed the perspective method to depict the objective world for the purpose of realism. However, these skills failed when I tried to describe the natural landscape. I have tried to take photos of landscapes that I was fascinated by and transfer it to a drawing. However, the more realistic the depiction is, the farther it is from the true feelings brought by the mountains, rivers, rain, and clouds.

![A Sheet of Mountain. Aluminum mesh. Jie Wang. 2019](image)

In my work A Sheet of Mountain, I use aluminum mesh to manipulate a space and create a participatory landscape. On one hand, I want the relationship between my work and the
audience to be intimate. The work invites the audience to walk through and experience different angles of the scene. The work provides not only visual experience, but also physical. The work is above, under, and around the audience.

When viewed from a certain distance, the form of the material looks like a mountain range. When the audience walks closer or walks into the work, the experience of the work changes with the perspective, and the mountain ranges turned into clouds or fog.

On the other hand, I want the work to be in dialogue with the construction, the space. This work is showed in a long narrow indoor space. I consider doors, windows, beams, pillars and the shape of the space as part of my work. The experience of the landscape is about a space, so the space I am working with has the same importance as the material. The natural sunlight come into the room through windows, the shadow of mesh falls on the wall and have different shapes when the light moves. Looking from outside of the building, the shape of mesh blends with the sky reflected in the windows.

I overlay the material itself to create variations between black and white. The process of making this work is like using brush and ink to depict space. The tones of black, white, and grey give a sense of calm, which is subtly close to what I feel when I face nature. At the same time, I feel the energy of nature hidden in silence and calmness.

**Materiality--searching for the beauty of material**

We are in a time that is full of artificial materials. They are different from natural material, such as wood and rock, whose histories and stories we can tell from their surface. Artificial
materials have the same qualities of smooth, regular textures and glossy surfaces, and they
usually have specific functions. I have been using artificial materials to create participatory
installations. The materials I prefer are inexpensive; they can be easily purchased and are
very common in our daily life, such as paper, aluminum foil, and plastic sheeting. These
banal daily objects, however, inspire me. I seek the beauty of these materials and change
their original functions, then transform them into poetic imagery.

During my studio practice, I am intrigued by the wrinkled-texture of crumpled paper. Paper
has been a part of my practice since youth, which was heightened by my printmaking
background. I have a strong sensitivity to paper. The thickness, the weight, and the surface
of the paper is something I consider before printing. I collect different kinds of paper in my
studio; a ton of paper is stacked in my drawer and waiting to be drawn or printed. However, I
think paper can create great images without any ink on it. I redefine paper as a material in
my practice by using it in an innovative way and making it no longer a medium only for
two-dimensional drawings or prints. I am fascinated by how a small bit of paper can create
mountain-like forms.

To pursue more visual effects in my work, I start researching different materials. I follow my
aesthetic preferences and look for materials which can inspire me to imitate natural
landscapes or natural phenomena. The thin, light quality and reflective surface of aluminum
foil intrigues me. It can be crumpled like paper, and the shiny surface also reminds me of
glittering water which reflects the sunlight. I crum aluminum foil and coat it with a thin
layer of plaster. The visual effect it produces pulls me into a fantasy of natural land.
I also use photography to transform the image of my work. The photos are not only for documenting the work, but also transforming the three-dimensional work into another medium.

In my work *Inner Space*, I make an image look like it was taken from the foot of a mountain. At this point, the actual size of the work is hidden. The camera creates an image which expands my imaginary space. The texture of the foil creates countless pyramid-like shapes, every sharp angle representing a mountain peak. It can be a finite space which is five meters by six meters, but also a vast expanse of mountainous terrain.

In each work, I use one type of material to describe the landscape in my memory. It allows me to focus on the possibilities that the material can bring. By changing the volume and quantity, the artist can change the viewer’s perception of the material.
Conclusion

Creating participatory landscape which is based on experiences of my hometown, South Tibet in China, and Death Valley in the United States. During my studio practice, I want to discuss how I observe and feel nature as an artist. The contrast between urban and wilderness gives me a really big impression. What’s more, I left my homeland and came to the United States, the experience of immigrating inspire me to review traditional Chinese culture from a different perspective than before. I am looking for the sense of belonging from traditional landscape painting, at the same time, exploring different materials to expand my visual languages.
Bibliography


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