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TAOISM AND CREATIVE PRACTICE

THE CREATIVE PRINCIPLES OF TAOIST PHILOSOPHY AND THE PRACTICE OF ABSTRACT PAINTING

*An exegesis presented in partial
fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of*

MASTER OF DESIGN

*At Massey University,
Wellington, New Zealand.*

TAOISM AND CREATIVE PRACTICE

This study identifies creative principles within the Taoist philosophy and examines instances where these principles have influenced historical and contemporary abstract painting practices. It also explores ways in which these principles may influence changes within a personal creative practice. The creation of painted abstract interpretations of the chapters of the I Ching provides a context for exploring the relationships between these principles and the development of a particular creative process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Julieanna Preston for providing inspired advice and encouragement; my supervisors, Dr. Caroline Campbell and Lee Jensen for their guidance and care in revising my work; and to academic and administrative staff at the College of Creative Arts who have contributed their support during the course my study.

I would like to thank family and friends, with particular acknowledgement of Emma Gallagher and Mary Pickett for lending their assistance and expertise in the completion of this document. Special thanks are extended to my mother Donna Kan for the support, time and resources with which to complete this project.

I would like to dedicate this work to my partner Christopher Hill and my daughter Isla who have taught me that true mastery is never attained.

FOREWORD	6
INTRODUCTION: TAOISM AND CREATIVITY	12
TAOIST PRINCIPLES IN PAINTING	14
INTUITION AND METHOD: THE WEIMAR BAUHAUS	23
NO MIND/ ALL MIND: MAX GIMBLETT	35
CREATIVE RESPONSE:	41
SKETCHES	
I CHING EMBLEMS	
CONCLUSION	56
APPENDICES	60
LIST OF FIGURES	62
BIBLIOGRAPHY	64

FOREWORD

He who bases his evaluation of a painting on likeness of forms makes his judgment immature as that of a child. Likewise, he who when writing a poem insists on its form is surely far from being a poet.

*-Su Tung-P'o, 11th century Taoist poet**

From a young age I drew pictures. I was an opportunist and drew whenever I could, on paper, on walls, on coffee tables, and the arms of chairs. Like many children I drew compulsively, first abstractly, then noticing the things around me, I began to recreate what I saw, to draw representationally. Throughout my schooling I improved this technique. I became good at observing things and then became still better at drawing things. Perhaps because of this it was a logical choice for me to study to become an illustrator.

After training at university in the discipline of illustration, I worked freelance for seven years producing work for educational publications. This meant working to often tight parameters and interpreting a very specific brief. The work could be interesting and varied, though being for use in schools, the content had to be appropriate, clear, and politically correct. And so it went: steady comfortable work for moderate pay. And then, as if in reaction to this moderation, I became restless.

My style had always been painterly, but the brushwork started to become more visible and vigorous. I began to become more interested in how the paint went down and the random effects inherent in the paint itself. The work began to look impatient and less controlled, which was a problem when subjects needed to be depicted with absolute clarity. I found it increasingly difficult to focus on the content of the illustration. The feedback from editors was "Could you take out the watermarks, and make it less brushy?" I understood what they meant, and I realised that this was the wrong place to experiment. However, I felt I was on the edge of a discovery and it was something I had a duty to pursue.

It seemed that representational images were no longer the right avenue to express what I wanted to say. They seemed restrictive in some way. Although it was not clear to me what I wanted to say, I understood that I had to use a different language, something more open-ended and less concerned with form.

This meant abandoning everything I had learned. Practice was no longer about perfecting my technique of figure drawing, observing correct anatomy, and accurate light and shade. It became a stripping back of technique, an unlearning.

*(As cited in Chang, 1963, p. 210)

Over the course of several years my work became an exploration of painting expressive lines and washes contained within geometric shapes. Though I was not consciously trying to replicate any style or genre of art, the geometry was reminiscent of the early works of Bauhaus abstraction. The expressive brushwork contained therein was all about immediacy and was reminiscent of the brushstroke found in Chinese calligraphy.

My work had become an elemental and intuitive practice of painting and drawing without any thought to what might happen. It was a large experiment. It was both exhilarating and daunting.

In the years following the transition to abstraction, I began to consider this change in my creative process. I wondered why it had taken place and the future implications of the change for my work. I looked for possible reasons and explanations as to this spontaneous break with my former practice. Illustrative work was something I had left behind, but at the same time I was nostalgic for it. I did not wish to waste a lifetime's worth of development. In an effort to understand the changes in my practice, I began to look at philosophies pertaining to the creative process and to creativity as it related to abstract modernism. And, in an unconscious return to my own Chinese heritage, I began to look East.

Taoism is one of the most ancient Eastern philosophies and has its roots in China. Many traditions in China spring from this philosophy and its principles are woven deeply into the fibre of the culture. Not surprisingly then, Taoism has influenced artistic practice in China for thousands of years. Though I was aware of this, I did not know exactly how this philosophy manifested as art or if it related to my work at all. In undertaking this study I asked the question:

How do Taoist creative principles manifest within a specific creative practice?

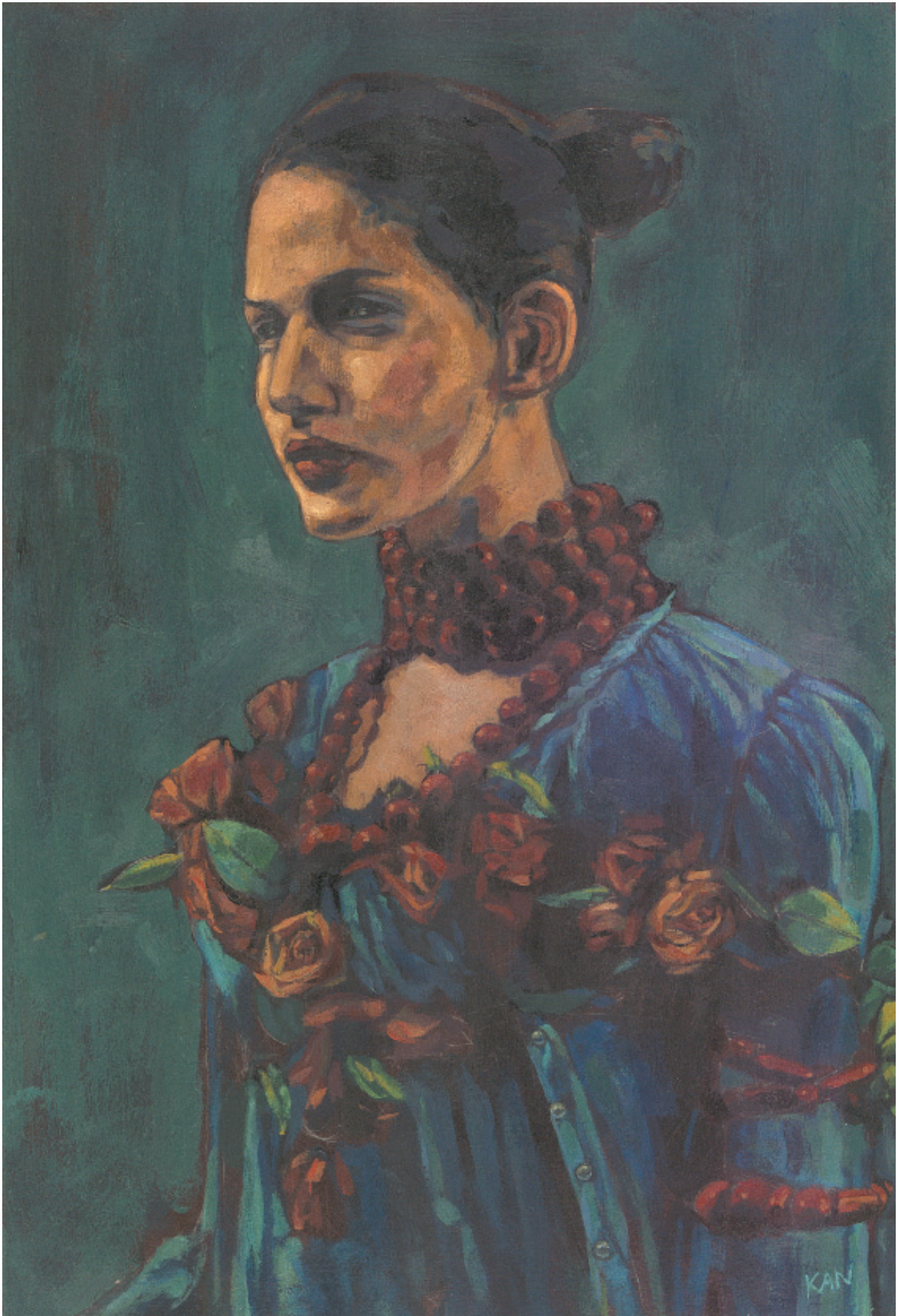




Figure 2. Untitled abstract work, image by the author, 2011.

INTRODUCTION
TAOISM AND CREATIVITY



TAOISM AND CREATIVITY

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung described Taoism as a “The union of opposites through the middle path” (Chang, 1963, p. 6) This dualist relationship is at the heart of the philosophy, and is represented by a black and white yin-yang symbol (Figure 3). The symbol represents opposite values merging and remerging in a constant generative process. Although Tao is said to be inexplicable, it is used to refer to the paradoxical process by which opposites are unified and made one. In *Creativity and Taoism* Chang cites the philosopher Hegel in describing the elusive concept of Tao “To the Chinese what is highest, the origin of all things, is nothingness, emptiness, the altogether undetermined, the abstract universal, and this is also called Tao...” (p. 4)

Because of its inexplicable and elusive nature, practitioners of Taoism approach the subject of Tao indirectly through metaphors and poetic reflection. As Kuo (1996) states in *The Taoistic Psychology of Creativity*, “The Taoists and Buddhists use proverbs and paradoxes to provoke their students to think...In Taoist teaching, a proverb or paradoxical answer is an interfusion of wisdom” (p. 209). The use of proverbs and poetry to contemplate Tao can be seen at work in the defining text of Taoist philosophy the Tao te Ching (see Appendix A). Written by the sage Lao Tzu between the 4th and 3rd centuries BC (Chang, 1963), the text is a collection of verses that express “the union of opposites”(p. 4) as allegorical metaphor. This verse from the 1948 Lin translation *The Wisdom of Lao-tze* is used by Kuo to highlight the interplay of opposites:

Being and Non-being interdependent in growth;
Difficult and easy interdependence in completion;
Long and short interdepend in position;
Tones and voice interdepend in harmony;
Front and behind interdepend in company
(Lin, 1948, p. 47)

The purpose of approaching the subject of Tao obliquely through poetical metaphor was to allow the practitioner to contemplate the meaning of Tao in a meditative state. Understanding the concept of Tao was not an intellectual pursuit, rather an intuitive stance. Tao was recognized through the reflective meditative experience, a process Chang (1963) describes thus:

The understanding of Tao is an inner experience in which distinction between subject and object vanishes. It is an intuitive, immediate awareness rather than a mediated, inferential, or intellectual process. Tao does not blossom into the vital consciousness until all distinctions between self and non-self have disappeared. (p. 19)

*Previous page: Figure 3. Yin and Yang symbol
In Anthony. C.K. (1982). A Guide to the I Ching.
Massachusetts: Anthony Publishing Company.*

According to practitioners of Taoism, Tao can only be understood experientially and the ability to relate to the meaning of Tao depends on the consciousness of the person contemplating it. This being the case, in Chinese culture Taoist philosophy has long been applied in artistic and creative fields both as a way of creating artwork and a way of understanding Tao itself. Using a practical means to explore Tao allows the practitioner to experience Tao rather than intellectualise it. The dualistic theme of Taoism is carried over into an artistic context and opposing values such as space and negative space, form and formlessness are recognized as dualism within painting (and other creative arts). The unification of these opposites within an artwork creates the artwork as a whole. The process by which opposite values are unified within an artwork, is explained by K'ung Yen-Shih in *The Secret of Painting* (Chang, 1963):

...to draw trees or rocks the solid stroke is used; to draw clouds and mists, the vacant stroke is used. Through that which is vacant the solid is moved and that which is solid becomes vacant. Thus the entire picture will be full of life rhythm. (p. 212)

Following the understanding of Tao as a unifying principle, and as a process that is experienced, another key aspect of Taoist thought centres on the idea that all events are interconnected. The concept of the interconnectivity of events is interpreted by the Buddhist monk Hua Yen as “shih shih wu ai” (Chang, 1963).

shih shih wu ai or unobstructed complete interfusion, which means that each individual event in the world of events mutually and simultaneously enters, draws in, embraces, and is being embraced. It suggests the infinitely complicated interplay among all peculiarities in the world of events. (p.70)

It is the study of opposites and the union or interfusion of these opposites that forms the basis of Taoist philosophy and it is the continual blending of opposites which makes Taoism a fundamentally creative philosophy.

TAOIST CREATIVE PRINCIPLES IN PAINTING





Figure 5. Pa-ta Shan-Jen. (1626 - 1701). Flower in Vase. Ink on silk
In Chang, C.Y. (1963). *Creativity and Taoism*. New York: Harper and Row.

Previous page: Figure 4. [Detail of untitled work by unknown artist]. (c. 1910).
Ink on paper scroll. Work property of the author.

In the book *Creativity and Taoism*, Chang (1963) describes a simple ink painting by Taoist painter Pa-ta Shan-Jen, *Flower in Vase* (Figure 5):

The artist's brush, unhampered in its action by confining and conventional rules, is carefree and at ease. No attempt is made at beauty or refinement of form; merely the primary essentials of the objects are given. Here we see innocence or the quality of the uncarved block at its best. What is within is manifested without. (Introduction, plate 10)

According to Chang (1963) and to artists of the Taoist tradition, creating a “likeness of forms” (p. 210) is a secondary concern when creating a work of art. Technical correctness and observation play a role, but merely replicating an accurate form is not seen as the highest achievement for the artist. Such an emphasis on form is termed “pa han or overbearing audacity” (Introduction, plate. 3). The Taoists are more concerned as to whether the artwork evokes the essence of its subject matter, regardless of its appearance. Artworks that convey a subject simply and directly are preferred to those executed with unnecessary embellishment or complexity. The art of Tao is created with a minimum of ‘thereness’ including only enough lines, strokes or marks to describe its subject. Such a work signifies a lack of contrivance and a state of naturalness on the part of the artist. The Taoists call this minimalism and natural style of working ‘p’o’. The literal meaning of p’o is plain and simple and it forms a core principle of Taoist creative philosophy. P’o is also referred to as “the quality of the uncarved block” (Chang, 1963, p. 37), a metaphor which likens the quality of p’o to a block of stone prior to being carved by an artist, in its natural and singular state with no form impressed upon it.

When an artist works with the principle of p’o, the artwork that they produce may appear simple and unsophisticated, but will nonetheless convey the essence of its subject matter effectively. The metaphor of the uncarved block describes not only the artwork itself, but also the artist’s approach to creativity. Therefore, p’o applies to the objective reality of the artwork and the subjective reality of the artist. This is what is meant by the statement that ‘What is within is manifested without’ (Chang, 1963, Introduction, plate 10). When the line between the artist and their art becomes blurred like this Taoists refer to it as ‘sanmei’. Sanmei is another fundamental principle of Taoist creativity and it refers to the non-differentiation between what is observed and who is observing it.



Figure 6. Mi Fei. (1051-1107).
Misty Landscape: Round Mountain Peaks and Trees. Ink on silk.
In Chang, C.Y. (1963). *Creativity and Taoism*. New York: Harper and Row.

The expression of p'o in Taoist artwork relies upon the omission of extraneous details. The work is defined as much by what is there as what is left out, so an artwork produced using the principle of p'o is equally about form and formlessness. The Taoists call the concept of negative space, or formlessness, 'wu'. The emphasis on negative space is present in many artistic traditions and is not restricted to Taoism. In this context, however, the concept of wu is extended to artists themselves. The principle of wu applies to objects as well as the artist and their creative experience. When negative space is applied to the artist it becomes non-being: when applied to the creative experience it becomes non-action or 'wu wei'. The principle of wu wei is described by Chang (1963) as evident in the work of 11th century artist Mi Fei *Misty Landscape: Round Mountain Peaks and Trees* (Figure 6).

When contemplating Mi Fei's ink wash we get the feeling that something intangible emerges between the form and the formless, between the image and the imageless. The elusive and evasive qualities of his ink wash create a rarer atmosphere ...wherein the artist's inner serenity is released (Chang, 1963, Introduction, plate. 3)

The principles of p'o, sanmei, and wu wei work simultaneously and are interlinked within the Taoist tradition of creative practice. The interplay between subject and object, space and negative space, omission and inclusion is a continuous and fluid process. When applied to the artist's practice the effects of p'o, sanmei, and wu are ontological and are as much about the act of creation as the resulting artwork itself. Hence, such artworks are described as becoming "a symbolic expression of the painters own subjective reality" (Chang, 1963, p. 8).

It is also this interplay or correspondence between things that is important in Taoist philosophy. Taoism is a dualist philosophy and is consequently concerned with the relationship between opposites. The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu describes this concept of interplay and correspondence in a riddle-like way: "Is there really no distinction between 'this' and 'that'? Not to determine 'this' and 'that' as opposites is the very essence of Tao... Affirmation and negation alike blend into the infinite One" (Chang, 1963, p. 36). Chang alludes to this relationship between opposites in creative terms when he speaks about Mi Fei's ink painting as "something intangible [emerging] between the form and the formless, between the image and the imageless". (Chang, 1963, Introduction, plate. 3)

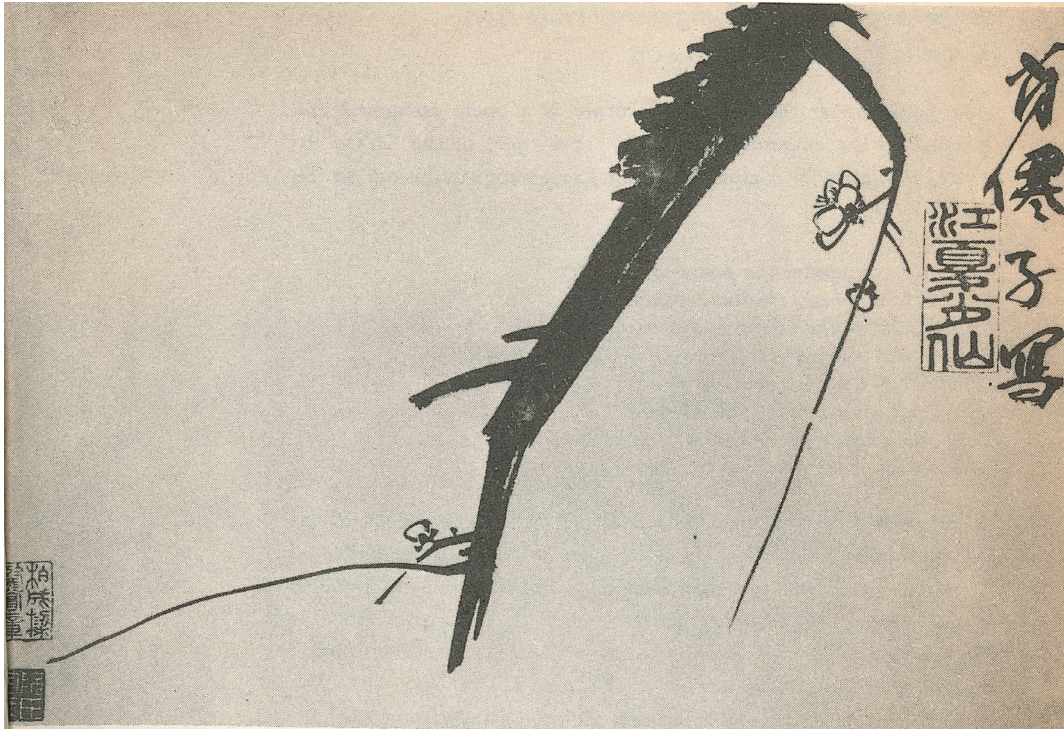


Figure 7. Wu Wei (1459-1508). Branch of Plum Blossoms. Ink on silk
In Chang, C.Y. (1963). *Creativity and Taoism*. New York: Harper and Row.


Another essential aspect of Taoist creativity is the principle of the chance occurrence. Counter to the Western concept of causality, Taoist philosophy operates by the concept of chance and coincidence. This is made particularly apparent in Carl Jung's assessment of the I Ching (see Appendix A,C). In a 1949 introduction to the English translation of the book, he wrote: "What we call coincidence seems to be the chief concern of this peculiar mind, and what we worship as causality passes almost unnoticed". (As cited in Baruth, 2004, Foreword, para. 5)

This means that events are understood and assigned meaning according to the moment in which they happen, regardless of the logical order in which they occur. They are hence seen to be connected because of this temporal relationship. The belief in the principle of chance can be seen operating creatively in the work of the artist aptly named Wu Wei (1459-1508). His painting *Branch of Plum Blossoms* (Figure 7) shows his free and spontaneous style. His process is detailed in this anecdote retold by Chang (1963):

In this picture the artist signed his name Hsiao Hsien Tzu or "Master Similar to Immortals" by which he meant to say that the spontaneity and simplicity of his brushwork resembled the work of immortals. Once, when he was sent for by the court to paint a picture of "Pines and the Running Stream," he had not fully recovered from his intoxication. When in front of the emperor, he inadvertently knocked over the ink jar and some ink splashed on the silk. Taking advantage of the splashed ink he made a wonderful drawing. The admiring emperor sighed and said, "This is indeed the stroke of an immortal". (Introduction, plate. 1)

This anecdote illustrates the importance of chance and the incidental occurrence to the Taoist approach to creativity. The ability of Hsiao Hsien Tzu to take advantage of a chance event relied on his awareness of the interconnectivity of all events or the principle of shih shih wu ai (interfusion of events). He was able to assign meaning to the spilt ink because of his awareness the role shih shih wu ai plays in creativity.

These Taoist creative principles developed simultaneously with artistic practices in China and the philosophy came to underpin many aspects of Chinese painting, poetry, calligraphy and music. Taoism had developed holistically within its culture of origin and was a part of the fabric of Chinese society. When the writings of Taoism were first introduced to the West in the early 20th century the ideas spurred a radical departure from the existing conventions and philosophies dominant at the time. The new concepts were to influence artistic practice in the West also, though here it interacted with artistic movements already underway. In the following sections I will examine instances where Taoist principles influenced Western historical and contemporary painting practices in the West.

The background of the page is a high-contrast, abstract black and white artwork. It features thick, expressive brushstrokes that create a sense of movement and depth. The strokes are primarily black, with some white areas where the paint has been applied more lightly or where the background is visible. The overall effect is one of raw, gestural energy, reminiscent of abstract expressionism or gestural abstraction.

INTUITION AND METHOD: THE WEIMAR BAUHAUS

Previous page: Figure 10. (Detail) Spontaneous painting made in 1920 by W. Graeff, a student in Itten's class at the Weimar Bauhaus. In Itten, J. (1963). *Design and Form* (J. Maass, Trans.). London: Thames and Hudson.

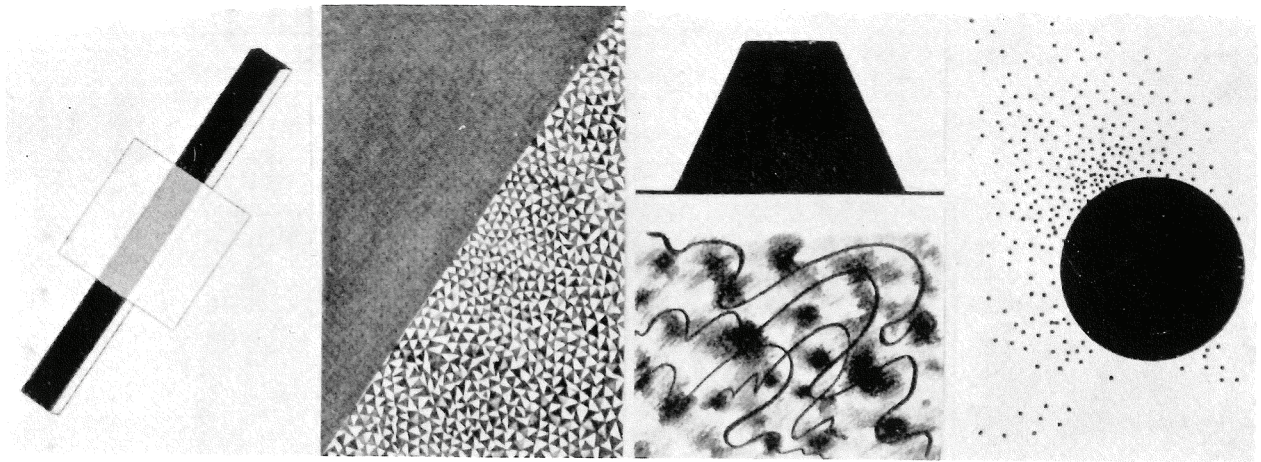
Taoist philosophy first became accessible in the West to German-speaking audiences with Richard Wilhelm's first translation of the I Ching in 1910. At the time the Western approach to science and learning was based on the law of cause and effect. This causality (Jung, 1952) ran counter to the newly available I Ching text that was based on the acausal Taoist principle of shih shih wu ai or interfusion. The introduction of Taoist thinking had a profound effect on the intellectual and artistic communities at the time. In an introduction to the English translation of the book in, a contemporary of Wilhelm, the psychoanalyst Carl Jung summed up the differences between Western and Eastern thought in his introduction to the translation (as cited in Baruth, 2004):

While the Western mind carefully sifts, weighs, selects, classifies, isolates, the Chinese picture of the moment encompasses everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment...The Chinese mind as I see it at work in the I Ching seems to be exclusively preoccupied with the chance aspect of events (para. 5).

The ideas presented in Wilhelm's translation also took root within the visual arts. Just as Taoist philosophy influenced artistic practice in its native China, so too did it influence artists in Germany. The publication of Wilhelm's translation coincided with the flourishing of Abstract Modernism in Germany and the subsequent foundation of the Bauhaus School in Weimar in 1918. Leading figures in the establishment of the Weimar Bauhaus included Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. Prominent in the Abstract Modernist movement, these artists were influenced by the new ideas Taoism offered, and they reinterpreted aspects of the philosophy as part of their teaching at the Bauhaus.

Johannes Itten played a central role in the formation of the Weimar Bauhaus and designed the first introductory course for new students. It was through him that many Eastern approaches to creativity made their way into the curriculum of the school. In opening the first student exhibition in 1918, Itten (1963) quoted the following passage from Lao Tzu's Tao te Ching

Thirty spokes meet at the hub,
But the void within them creates the essence of the wheel.
Clay forms pots,
But the void within creates the essence of the pot.
Walls with windows and doors make a house,
But the void within them creates the essence of the house.
Fundamentally:
The material contains utility
The immaterial contains essence.
(p. 18)

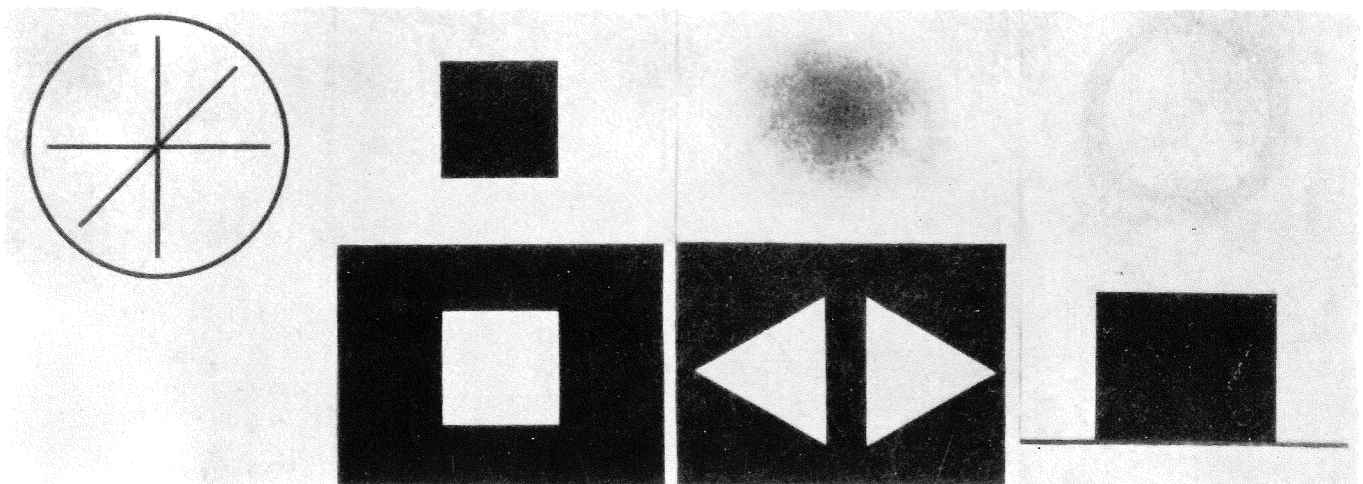


transparent-opaque

smooth-rough

rest-motion

much-little



directional contrasts

light-dark

soft-hard

light-heavy

Figure 8. Itten's Theory of Contrasts
In Itten, J. (1963). *Design and Form* (J. Maass, Trans.).
London: Thames and Hudson.

This excerpt includes a description of the Taoist principle of wu as it relates to the utility of objects. In this translation wu or nonbeing is referred to as the void and the interplay between being and non-being is the relationship between the material and the immaterial. It also features the over riding Taoist principles of dualism and paradox to explain essence and utility. Itten incorporated these principles into his teaching methods at the Weimar Bauhaus formulating lessons he called “intuition and method or subjective experience and objective recognition” (Droste, 1990, p.25). These lessons, titled using opposing terms, encapsulated the paradoxical sentiment of the Tao te Ching.

Itten (1963) integrated the Taoist principles of dialectical thinking into his “General Theory of Contrast” (p. 12). The theory involved making visual representations of opposing values such as large and small, long and short, light and heavy, soft and hard, black and white (Figure 8). Itten used the visual study of opposites to understand the possibilities for creative variation between opposite values. The Theory was his attempt to recreate the Taoist principles of creativity at the Bauhaus. The drawings produced by his students were a visual interpretation of the opposing values of Taoism’s yin and yang and the lessons functioned as a way to “provoke students to think” (1996, Kuo, p. 209). For example, Itten (1963) maintained: “Black and white are the turning points and not the terminals of the light and dark character” (p. 12). Using these poles of contrast as reference points, Itten encouraged his students to produce an infinite spectrum of variation in their work. There was an endless possibility for creative play and improvisation in the lessons and Itten described them as an exciting “new world” of opportunity (p.17).

Itten’s interpretation of Taoist creative principles extended beyond the objective drawing exercises and into the subjective experience of his students. Like the Taoists he was interested in physical and mental state of his students as they worked. As part of his teaching of ‘intuition and method’, and ‘subjective experience and objective recognition’, Itten directed his students in mental and physical exercises in order that they might understand and appreciate the



(Top) Figure 9. Itten's Morning exercises (at the Itten School, Berlin, 1931)
In Itten, J. (1963). *Design and Form* (J. Maass, Trans.). London: Thames and Hudson.

Figure 10. (Detail) Spontaneous painting made in 1920 by W. Graeff, a student in Itten's class at the Weimar Bauhaus.
In Itten, J. (1963). *Design and Form* (J. Maass, Trans.). London: Thames and Hudson.

relationship between the body, mind, and consciousness and the creative process (Figure 9). Through such exercises as breathing, relaxing and concentrating he prepared his students for the intensive experience of painting and drawing (Itten, 1963). Further, he believed that the exercises encouraged his students to work in such a way that the resulting work was a true expression of the internal state of each student. Itten's emphasis was very much on the process of creation, with the drawings being indicative of the mind of the practitioner during this process (Figure 9). His approach was consequently comparable to the Taoist principle of *sanmei* or non-differentiation between artist and artwork, a state that is expressed as "What is within is manifested without" (Chang, 1963, Introduction, plate. 10). In addition, Itten made reference to the Chinese practice of painting in 1963 in *Design and Form* (his later reflection on his time at the Bauhaus). He reiterated the connection between the mind of the practitioner and the artwork they created, observing that Chinese master painters had complete control over their minds and bodies, with seemingly simple tasks requiring complete concentration, such that the "heart and hand become one". (Itten, 1963, p. 147)

Itten was not alone in drawing inspiration from Eastern philosophy. Wassily Kandinsky, a major figure in the Abstract Modernist movement also taught at the Weimar School. Although less explicit in referencing Taoism, his 1912 publication *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* draws remarkably similar conclusions regarding art and creativity. In this treatise Kandinsky outlines and develops his personal philosophy on art as a spiritual endeavour. It signified his break with realistic depiction in art, as Stratton (1977) states: "...the departure of art from the objective world, and the discovery of a new subject matter based only on the artist's inner need" (p. Viii). This departure from the objective world to the subjective inner world of the artist required a new visual language. Kandinsky subsequently adopted pure geometry and primary colours as starting points for this new visual language. His theory was based on the fact that the primary colours of red, yellow and blue could be combined to generate a spectrum of colours, a theory that he extended to include form. Kandinsky believed that all forms originated from three elementary forms of a circle, triangle and square. (Droste, 1990, p. 66)

Furthermore, he assigned spiritual meaning to each form stating: "Form alone, even though totally abstract and geometrical, has the power of inner suggestion. A triangle has a spiritual value of its own... The case is similar with a circle, a square or any conceivable geometrical figure" (Kandinsky, 1912, p. 28). By giving these forms a spiritual value, the resulting artwork became a visual counterpart to the spiritual values of the artist himself. Like Taoist art, Kandinsky's work became a "symbol of his own subjective reality" (Chang, 1963, p. 8) and a demonstration of the principle of *sanmei* or non-differentiation.

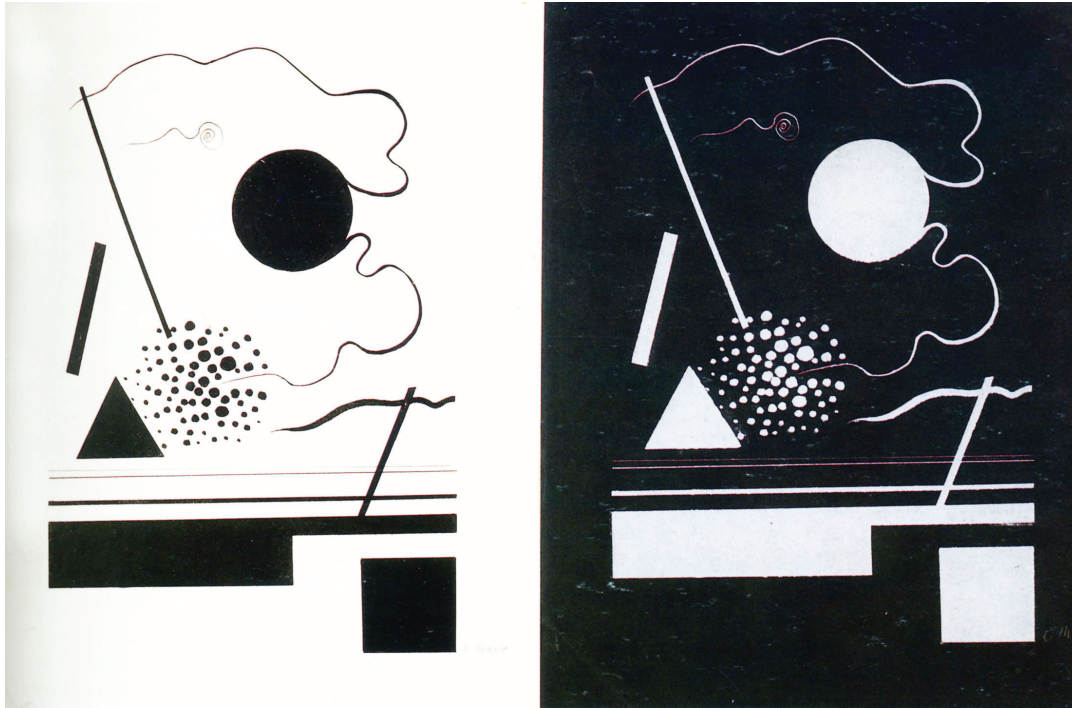


Figure 11. Kandinsky's Abstract internally harmonious paintings
In Droste, M. (1990). *Bauhaus*. Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv Museum.

Kandinsky arrived at this language via a reductive process by which he stripped natural objects down to their essential geometric shapes. What was left was “an abstract, internally harmonious painting” (Figure 11) (Droste, 1990, p. 67). It was a methodical and structured answer to a spiritual question and while esoteric, it was a visual language that gave Kandinsky a means by which to express himself. The process was similar to the way in which Taoist artists reduced forms to their essential components leaving only the “primary essentials of the objects” (Chang, 1963, plate 10). In both cases the principle of p’o is in evidence because such work relies on a stripping back to essentials to arrive at simplicity. Kandinsky (1912) noted that this new language was a means to an end and that “mastery over form”(p. 54) was not his primary objective, rather his purpose was only to represent the spiritual. This turning away from realistic form in favour of an inner language of geometry also echoed the Taoist approach of creativity, described by Chang (1963) as an avoidance of “Pa Han or overbearing audacity” (Introduction, plate. 3) of realism in art.

Like Itten, Kandinsky had sought to address the inner and subjective experience of the artist, although he approached the matter in a far more pragmatic way “... while Itten’s aim was to train the inner being intuitively, Kandinsky was concerned with the execution of a logically-structured analysis” (Droste, 1990, p.67).

At the Bauhaus Kandinsky was joined in his endeavours by Paul Klee. Klee’s approach was similar to Kandinsky in that he used a systematic means to relate to the spiritual and subjective aspects of art. Like Itten and Kandinsky, Klee was influenced by Eastern approaches to creativity. Droste (1990) describes the way in which he theorized about a “system of cosmic unity...the study of the inner being” and was later caricatured as a ‘Bauhaus Buddha’ in the Bauhaus Journal of 1929. In addition to being influenced by Kandinsky’s theory of primary forms, Klee used elementary geometry as a language to express and engage with Eastern spirituality. Droste describes Klee’s exercises as an “inexhaustible field of activity”(p. 64-5) that encouraged students to experiment with form and colour in an infinite spectrum of variation (Figure 12).

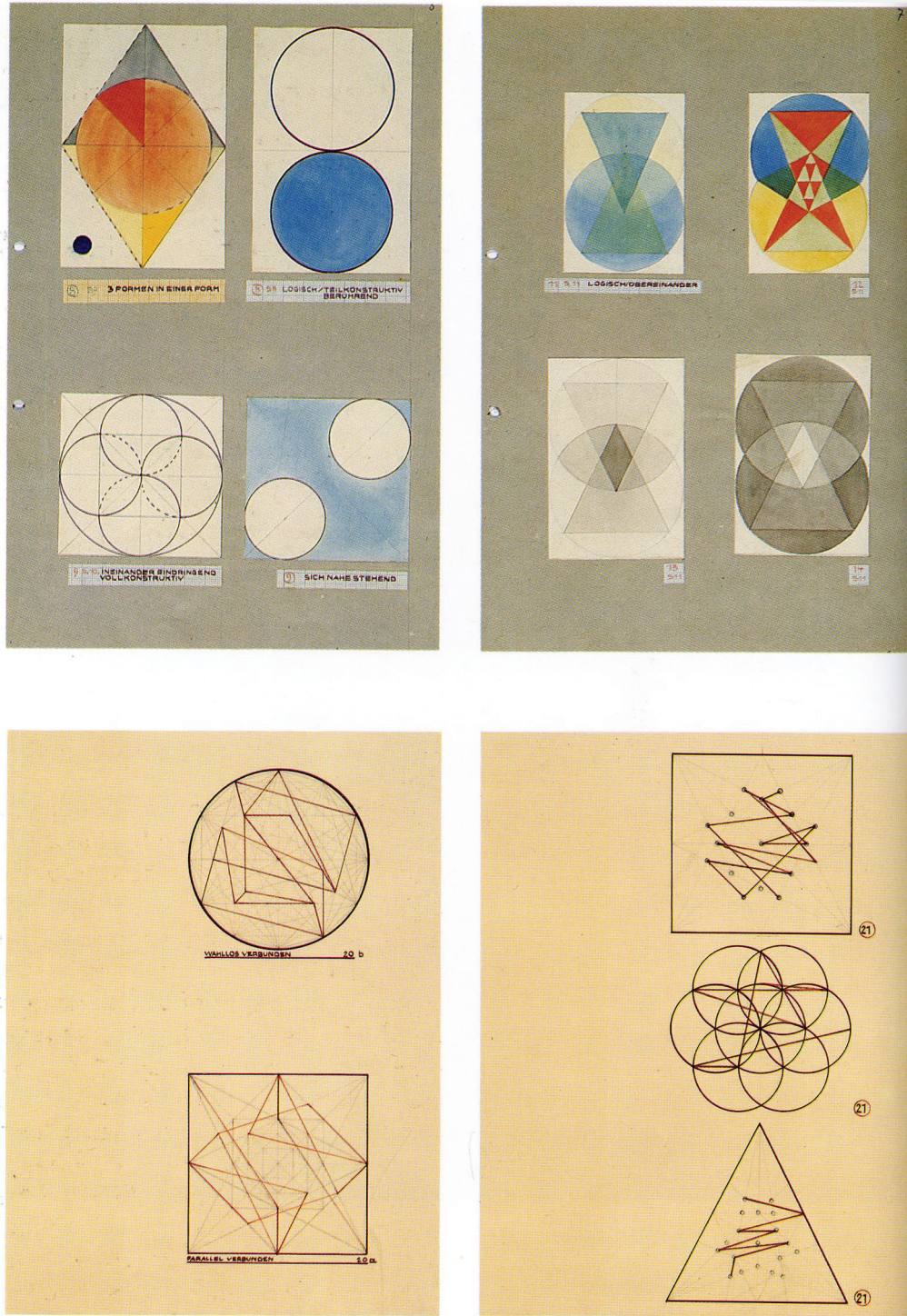


Figure 12. Student studies with elementary geometry from Klee's lessons. In Droste, M. (1990). *Bauhaus*. Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv Museum.

Klee's and Kandinsky's theories regarding the spiritual aspects of artistic expression, what they termed 'inner need', 'inner being and 'cosmic unity', can be likened to the subjective stance of Taoist painters. Kandinsky and Klee "departed from the objective world" (Stratton, 1977, p. viii) and methodically created their own abstract geometric language to convey this subjective spirituality. Itten's interaction with Taoist creativity was more intuitive and spontaneous and focused on the experience of artistic practice and the physical and mental state of the practitioner. The artworks produced using his methods were considered evidence of the natural, unmediated expression or the artist's inner state.

The Abstract Modernists of the Weimar Bauhaus used geometry (Kandinsky and Klee) and spontaneous mark making (Itten) to interpret the spirituality of art. This new spirituality was linked to Eastern philosophy, and, specifically, to Wilhelm's newly translated Taoist texts of *The Tao te Ching* and *I Ching* (referenced by Itten). The interaction between East and West resulted in a new precedent, a new visual language that employed geometry and spontaneous mark making as a means for interpreting this Eastern philosophy. Each of the Bauhaus Masters came up with his own particular way of relating to the newfound ideas present in the Taoist philosophy. Kandinsky and Klee focused on methodology and controlled analysis whereas Itten focused on intuitive practice (Droste, 1990), but in essence it was the coupling of method with intuition that constituted the overall Bauhaus response to Eastern Philosophy.

I realised that in my transition out of illustration I too had "departed from the objective world" (Stratton, 1977, p. viii) and had inadvertently started to use the visual language of the Bauhaus. My transition into this visual language had been unconscious, and not fuelled by a conscious need to express Eastern philosophies like Itten and his contemporaries. Instead, I had switched to the language of Modernism because I found realistic (illustrative) form restrictive. Furthermore, by abandoning illustrative technique and focusing on the random effects of painting I had followed the intuitive creative practice taught at the Bauhaus (originating in Taoist creative practice). With these thoughts I began to piece together the puzzle of my own creative development.

Facing page: Figure 14. Gimblett, M. 2010. (detail) The Silver Chariot – After Kandinsky.
In Jackson, A. ((2011). *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze / Max Gimblett*.
Auckland: Gow Langsford Gallery.

An abstract artwork featuring a black background with dynamic, expressive white brushstrokes. Several large, solid-colored circles are overlaid: a large red circle on the left, a large orange circle on the right, a small red circle at the top, and a small grey circle at the bottom. A green circular shape is partially visible on the left edge. The overall composition is energetic and layered.

NO MIND / ALL MIND: MAX GIMBLETT

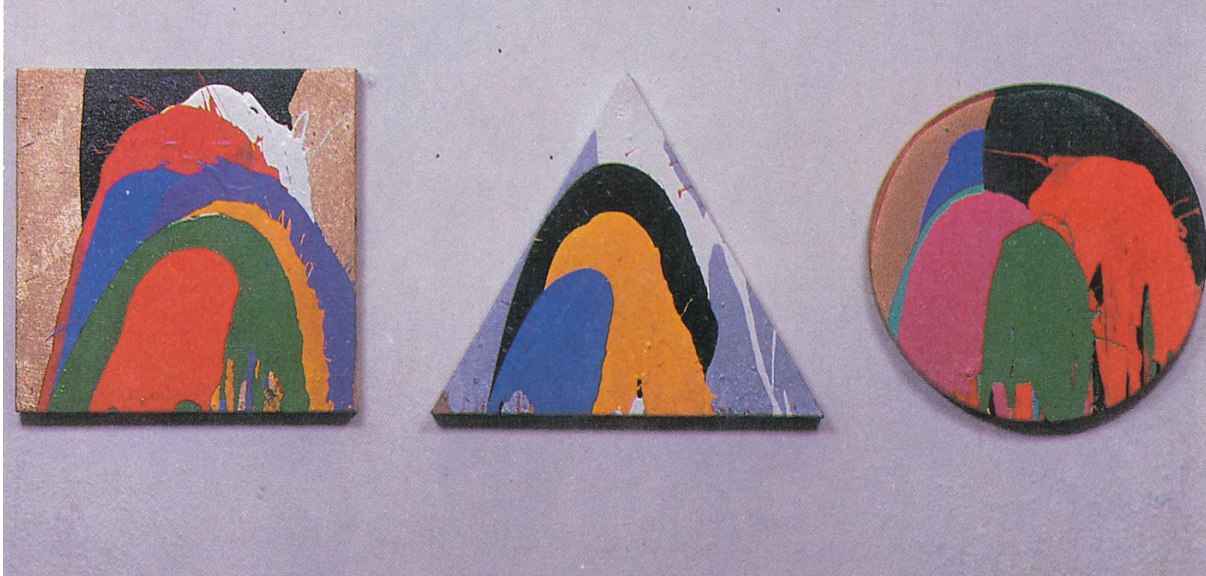


Figure 13. Gimblett, M. 1985-6. Sengai-Eggs.
In McMahon, R. (1986). *Pearls of the Pacific*: Hogarth Galleries.

In a 2011 interview with Radio New Zealand contemporary abstract painter Max Gimblett discussed his understanding of Wassily Kandinsky's approach to art:

What I did know was written by Kandinsky in [Concerning] The Spiritual in Art. Kandinsky wrote that Modernism was to serve the creation of values and change in the community. Modernism wasn't a visual art invention it was to serve spiritual beliefs. (McCarthy, 2011)

Gimblett, an ordained Buddhist monk, claims that "spiritual practice is essential" (McCarthy, 2011). His painting practice is underpinned by a dedication to this philosophy and references to it abound in his work. Zen Buddhism's close relationship to Taoism is also apparent in his work, with references to the I Ching appearing as paintings (see Appendix B). His artwork also references the visual language developed by the Abstract Modernists to interpret and enact Eastern philosophy. The precedent set by the Masters of the Weimar Bauhaus is continued within his own contemporary practice. In his 1985-6 painting, *Sengai-Eggs* (Figure 13) Gimblett references Kandinsky's visual language in a triptych of the primary forms of a square, triangle and circle. In his 2010 painting *Silver Chariot-After Kandinsky* (Figure 14), he uses his signature quatrefoil shape, to pay homage to the Bauhaus master.

In a statement accompanying his exhibition *Transformation* at the Auckland City Art Gallery, Gimblett (1984) described his approach to painting:

A working premise is that at the time of touching paint to surface: no thinking. No mind/all mind. The impulse is to feel. I paint without thinking, in an unselfconscious and free way. I encourage a feeling and flow between the paint, the surface, and myself. When the support is ready and the paint is mixed, I simply step up to the painting and paint. I love to paint. I don't have any ambition other than to let the painting happen to itself. (p. 10)

The term no mind/ all mind describes his state of complete mental absorption while working. It alludes to his shift from a self-consciousness state to an unselfconscious state during the act of creating work. He also describes the connection between art and artist, which he describes as "...a feeling and flow between the paint, the surface, and myself." In this respect, Gimblett's approach to painting follows the Taoist creative principle of non-



Figure 14. Gimblett, M. 2010. The Silver Chariot – After Kandinsky.
In Jackson, A. (2011). *The daring young man on the flying trapeze / Max Gimblett*.
Auckland: Gow Langsford Gallery.

differentiation or *sanmei*.

Although Zen Buddhism forms the mainstay of Gimblett's spiritual reference, his practice draws freely on a number of inter-related philosophies and doctrines, with Jungian philosophy, Hinduism, Presbyterian Christianity, and Japanese Edo aesthetics all featuring in the context of his work. These wide-ranging philosophies and influences find their home and are aligned within his singular practice. When describing his actual painting practice, however, Gimblett asserts, "There's relentless intellectual thinking before and after, but not during" (McCarthy, 2011). His method of working instead relies on a setting aside of these philosophies when engaged in the act of painting. This cycle of thinking and no-thinking, no mind and all mind, is similar to the Taoist notion of being and non-being. Gimblett's creative experience is that of intellectual absence and in this regard his sentiment also follows the Taoist principle of *wu wei*.

Max Gimblett's aesthetic of geometry combined with spontaneous brushwork further develops the visual language established by the Bauhaus Masters. Like Itten, Gimblett is influenced by the spontaneity of Asian calligraphy and ink painting and like Kandinsky and Klee he uses geometric form. He works using the paradoxical practice of no mind/ all mind in line with his own Buddhist faith, a concept similar to the Bauhaus practice of intuition and method- Itten's own interpretation of Taoist paradox.

I began to appreciate that I was operating within an existing visual tradition, a tradition that blended the Modernist language of the Weimar Bauhaus with Eastern spirituality. It was a convention that Max Gimblett continued in his contemporary painting practice. Working from this standpoint, I aimed to understand the ways in which Taoist creative principles had manifested within my particular abstract painting practice. I was in effect working backwards, retracing my route to abstraction through historical and contemporary traditions, with the purpose of understanding the changes in my work and my apparent abandonment of illustration. I also aimed to explore the boundaries of my practice by working with the paradox of intuition and method.

Facing page: Figure 15. Studio space, image by the author, 2012.

CREATIVE RESPONSE



After identifying the visual tradition of the Bauhaus Masters, and that of Max Gimblett, I embarked on my own creative response. My thoughts returned to the Taoist creative approach that had originally inspired them and I began to look for ways to apply its key principles to my own practice in an intuitive way. Therefore, rather than try to depict the specific tenets of the philosophy, I would use them as a starting point to improvise from. This was distinct from the conscious illustrative process where the subject matter has to be explicit in the development of artwork. Instead, I treated my subject matter as an implicit notion, an idea in the background and aimed not to overthink what I was trying to convey.

SKETCHES

I began working in a loose and experimental way, creating a series of three sketches.

The first working sketch in this body of work involved creating a set of cards using a combination of geometric symbols (Figure 16). The cards were painted on paper using egg tempera and raw pigments. The geometry was visually reminiscent of the Bauhaus exploration of primary forms and was suggestive of movement, change, and variations on an undefined theme. These early developments did not illustrate specific principles or include words or titles. Consequently, they remained intentionally ambiguous and open ended.

For the second sketch I changed my usual materials of paint on paper for clay. I did this because I wished to test my ideas in a variety of mediums before committing to a single material. Also, and because I wished to experiment with the property of three-dimensionality, I made a series of painted and stained ceramic tablets (Figure 17). These also featured sets of geometric symbols, predominantly circular and rounded, suggesting something that could be picked up and held. They were reminiscent of religious

objects such as rune stones and rosary beads, items that are used to invoke religious experience or as part of religious rituals, I imagined that the small ceramic pieces could be a kind of personal talisman, embodying a belief system and providing a touchstone for the owner

For the third sketch, I used the format of a book. As with the previous two sketches this work featured sets of shapes, combining circular and angular geometry, each of which was taken through a series of changes. I purchased a small manufactured sketchbook for this exploration and filled the pages with different sequences of these images (Figure 18). As with the other two sketches, the images had no notes or accompanying text to explain them. Further, the book's small format meant that it could be carried around or easily held. This enabled me to reflect on the idea of the work evoking a personal reference to an ideology, much like a pocket bible.

The small scale of the three sketches allowed me to experiment quickly with ideas. Working at a relatively small scale also imbued in the objects a kind of intimacy, their size suggesting something small enough to be kept close at hand. On reflection, initial explorations with form, scale, media and format were about the different ways people relate to the subject of philosophy or religion. More specifically, it was my initial attempt to relate to the Taoist philosophy through my practice. By experimenting with a range of differing formats (and geometric shapes), I was able to see which of the objects best evoked the subject of the Taoist philosophy in me.

When it came to presenting these works to an audience, wanting to demonstrate the tangible results, I exhibited all the pieces in a conventional way. I consequently selected the appropriate pieces and laid them out for inspection. Still holding on to my illustrative training, I attempted to explain and justify the pieces as a designer might describe a product. I attempted to construct a logical argument as to why they existed as they did and what they represented. Describing my work like a product, and presenting it as a logical conclusion was unsuccessful and resulted in confusion both for the audience and myself. This was because I had chosen to focus on the created output instead of the creative process. I did not fully understand it at the time, but the peer review taught me that the actual focus of the work was the process by which it came about. Although the sketch works were intrinsic to the process they were really just the physical evidence left behind once the creative process had finished. Much of the real work

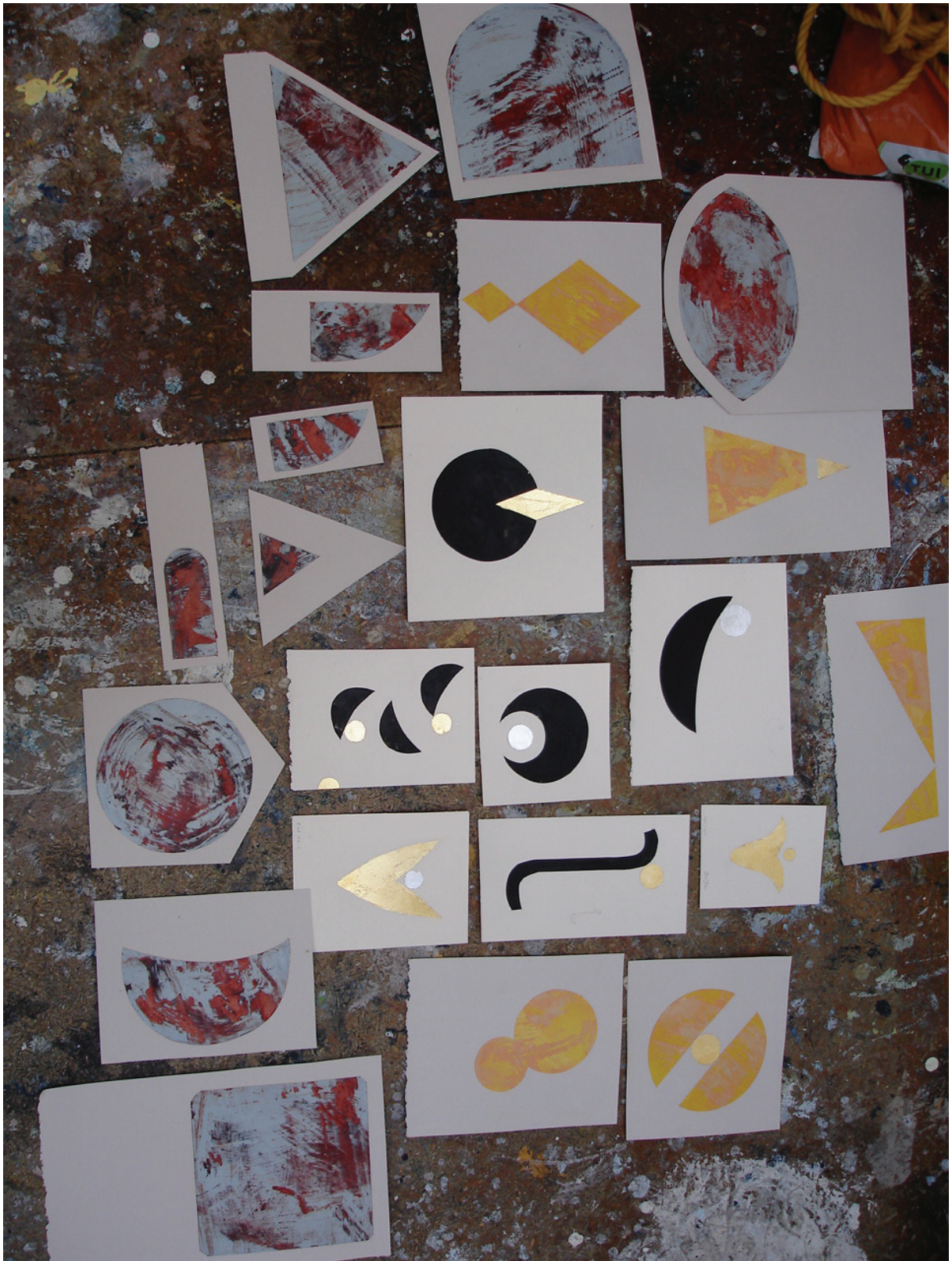




Figure 17. Second sketch-ceramic tablets, image by the author, 2012.



Figure 18. Third sketch-handbook, image by the author, 2012.

Facing page: Figure 19. Paper templates, image by the author, 2012

was an internalized process attached to the time and place of creation, which could not be understood from merely looking at the pieces. I realized that I needed to shift the emphasis of my project in order to accommodate this. To truly embrace Taoist creative principles I needed to focus on the process of creation.

I CHING EMBLEMS

From the first creative response it became clear that it was necessary to communicate the artwork as evidence of process. The purpose of creating the artwork was to provide an opportunity to experience the creative principles of p'o, sanmei, wu wei and shih shih wu ai. In keeping with the subject of Taoism, I decided to create a body of work based on the divinatory text, the I Ching, (see Appendix C) and with each individual piece symbolically representing one of its 64 chapters. The relatively large scope of this task would provide an ample opportunity to experiment with applying the principles of Taoism to my creative process. It would be my individual response to the principles, while working within the abstract tradition of the Weimar Bauhaus.

Over several years and during my postgraduate study, I read several translations of the I Ching. The book is divided into 64 chapters each titled with different scenarios encountered in everyday life. Working with my familiarity of the text, I began by creating a number of symbolic shapes for representing the chapters of the I Ching. I did not attempt to sequentially illustrate each chapter, nor did I consider which shape would represent which chapter. Instead, and working quickly with paper templates (Figure 19), I cut a variety of geometric shapes evocative of the different attitudes



and sentiments pertaining to the chapters of the I Ching. I then masked out each shape on paper in preparation for painting. (Figure 20) This was a repetitive and lengthy task, but the monotonous craftwork allowed me to mentally switch off and work automatically, as if I was preparing my materials and my mind at the same time. The collection of shapes produced from this process supplied a pool of options for the next phase in which I committed to painting the shapes on paper.

For painting I used egg tempera, an old fashioned and labour intensive process of hand mixing raw pigments with egg yolk. This technique meant that the paint was subject to changeability with visible grains, streaks of pigment and variable colours. While these variables were technically imperfections, they lent interesting qualities of texture, vibrancy, and rawness to the paint and created effects that could not be anticipated or executed intentionally. The imperfections could rightly be called 'incidentals', however, in this instance these incidental occurrences became the main focus of the work. This lengthy process of trial and error provided many opportunities to experience the creative process. (Figures 21-23)

When undertaking the painting of the shapes, I wanted it to look like the marks had happened naturally: that is, they had not been made by hand. Rather than this being an affectation, my aim was to take the actual intention out of the act of painting. For the painting to look unintentional I needed to make it in an unintentional state. Ironically, I used a range of techniques to help me achieve this, including using my left (non-dominant) hand, turning the piece upside down, and using rags, old brushes, and equipment that I had little control over (Figure 24). Most importantly, I did not actively think about what I was doing, thus allowing each piece to uncover itself. In this respect, creating each piece was an experiment and the end result a surprise.

Once the collection of abstract shapes had been painted, I proceeded to select and match each of the 64 principles of the I Ching to a corresponding shape. I re-read the text, considered each chapter in turn, and selected the shape that best evoked the chapter for me. It

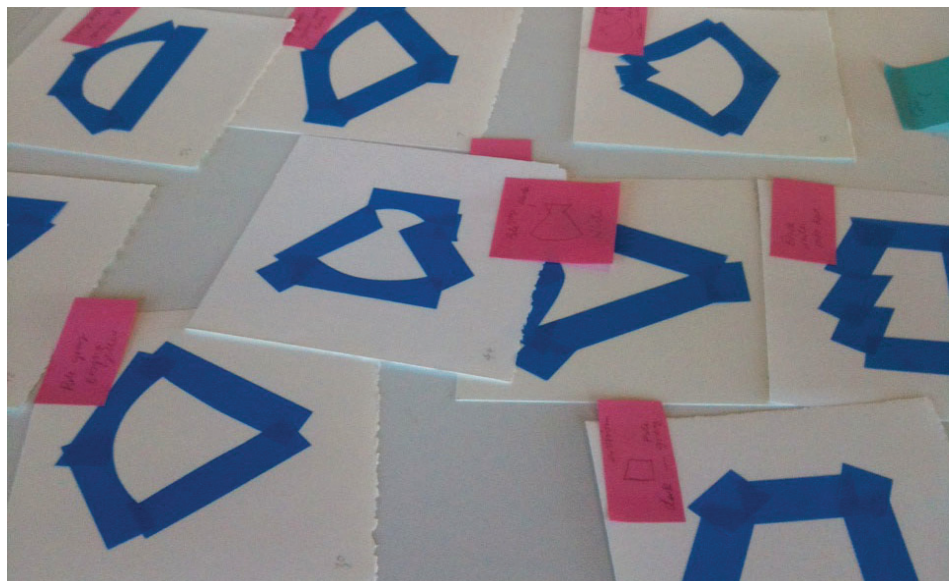
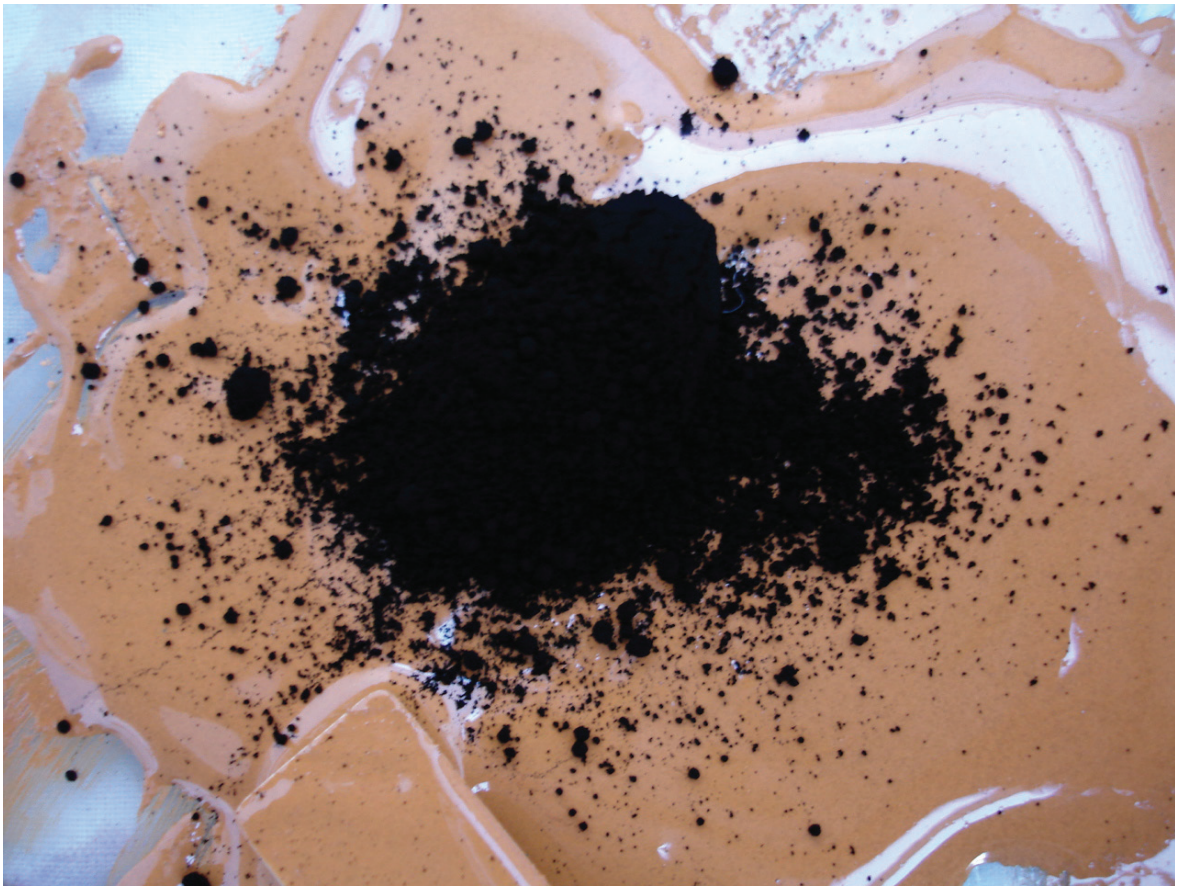
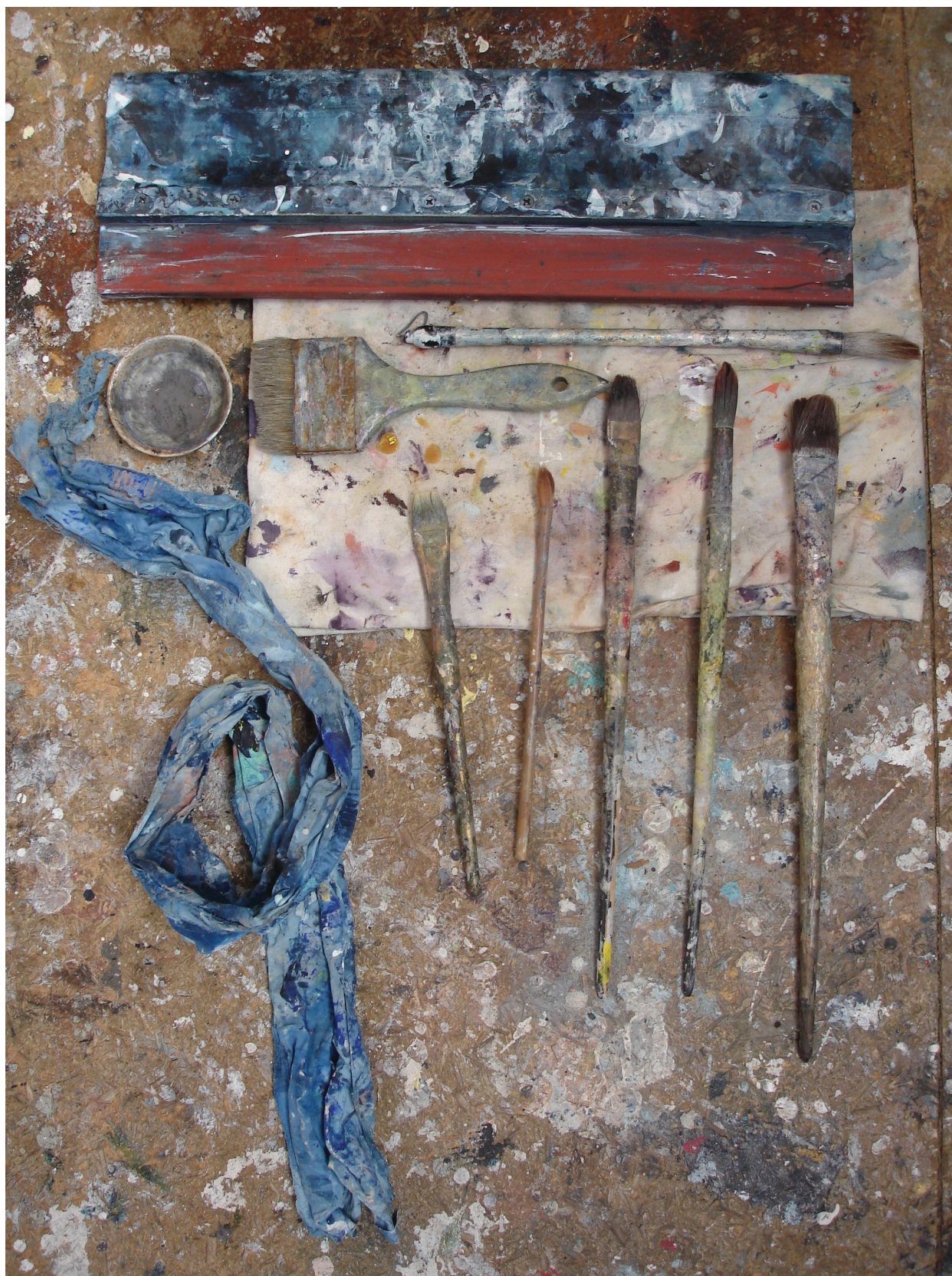




Figure 21. Mixing egg yolk with raw pigment, image by the author, 2012.

Facing page: Figure 20. Masking the templates with tape, image by the author, 2012.





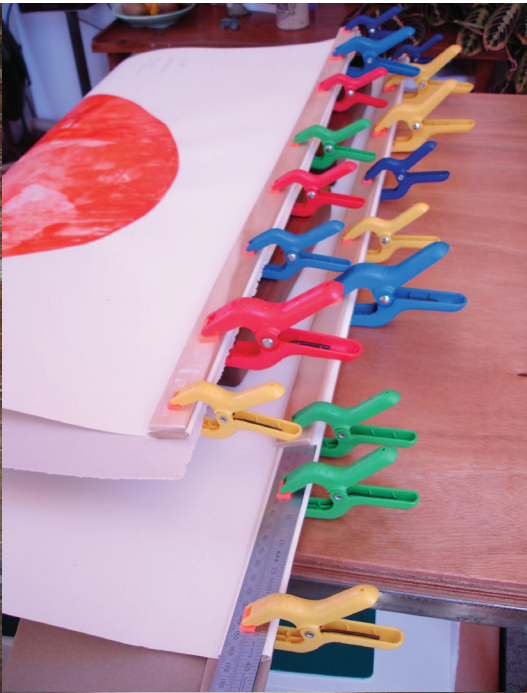
Facing page: (Above) Figure 22. Mixing egg yolk with raw pigment, image by the author, 2012.

(Below) Figure 23. Prepared tempera paint, image by the author, 2012.

This page: Figure 24. Painting equipment, image by the author, 2012.

Following page: Figure 26. Various stages of intuitive creative practice, images by the author, 2012.





was an intuitive course of action and not a logical decision-making process. My choices were completely specific to my experience and interpretation of the I Ching. Some of my decision-making involved incorporating discussions I had had with my peers. These informal discussions regarding the personal meaning of certain chapters allowed me to reflect on the subject matter in a relaxed fashion and further allowed the chance comments and observations to play a role in settling on a choice.

At every stage of this process I tried to avoid actively thinking about what I was doing, allowing myself to become immersed in the act of cutting, masking, mixing, and painting. By acting without intention and allowing incidental occurrences to happen unimpeded, I found I was engaging in a continuous series of intuitive acts. (Figure 26) Taken collectively, these numerous intuitive acts became my method. This method then supported further intuitive acts. I was discovering the way in which Taoist creative principles manifested within my specific practice - unconsciously, naturally and spontaneously, in a manner that was subjective and unique to me.

This was not a difficult task and was akin to relaxation and a form of play. I was able to indulge my curiosity and experiment with the materials even though I was mindful that I was carrying out a specific and important part of my project: The process was free of mental constraints and imperatives. Likewise, although I was practicing Taoist creative principles, I did not think of these principles while working. Paradoxically, to engage with Taoist creative precepts also means to disregard them.

Words are used to explain emblems. When the emblem is understood, words are forgotten. Emblems are used to convey ideas. When ideas are grasped, emblems are forgotten. This is the same as when we say that the snare serves to catch the rabbit. When the rabbit is obtained, the snare is forgotten. The net serves to catch the fish. When the fish is obtained, the net is forgotten. Taoist sage Wang Pi

The above passage (Chang, 1963, p.14) expresses the idea that artworks or 'emblems' are relevant only until they have conveyed an idea, after which time they become redundant. My purpose in creating a self-authored set of I Ching emblems was to facilitate greater understanding within myself of my own creative process. The paintings of the 64 chapters had served their purpose in providing a context in which to carry out an investigation into the creative principles of Tao.

Though the works had, in a sense, served their purpose after the creative process had finished, I did not consider the paintings completely forgotten as they remained as a testament to process. The paintings became a personal record of my enactment of Taoist creative principles. They were significant because they embodied my relationship to Taoist creativity, and acted as a reference point for future practice.



The I Ching emblems, rendered in a repetitive and almost ritualistic way, functioned as interlinking parts of a greater whole. The resulting paintings, methods and materials I used represented a stilled moment in time and reflected my practice, as it existed during my course of study. Once the I Ching series was complete I envisioned that my practice would continue to evolve using new materials and methods, and that I would continue to incorporate all that I had learnt from Taoist creative principles.

Figure 27. I Ching 'emblems', image by the author, 2012.

CONCLUSION



In the course of this study I became familiar with the Taoist creative principles of p'o (simplicity); sanmei (non differentiation); wu wei (non action); shih shih wu ai (the interfusion of events); and the interplay between opposites represented by yin and yang. (Chang, 1963) I observed the ways in which these principles have manifested within the practice of traditional Chinese painting.

I followed the development of these Taoist principles in the West, observing the way the Masters of the Weimar Bauhaus interpreted them in their teaching. The collision of Modernist sensibilities with Taoist philosophy manifested as a new visual language precedent that used primary geometric form and colour to convey the spiritual aspects of art and combined intuition with method (Droste, 1990) within the creative process.

I reflected on the ways that the visual language precedent of the Bauhaus has been reinterpreted by contemporary artist Max Gimblett, who uses geometric form and painting to convey his own spiritual practice of Zen Buddhism. His no mind/ all mind painting technique is analogous to the intuition and method of the Weimar Bauhaus that originated with Taoist creative principles.

Recognising that I was working within a visual tradition established at the Weimar Bauhaus, I sought to understand the unique ways in which Taoist creative principles manifested within my particular abstract painting practice. In keeping with the paradoxical nature of Taoist philosophy, I developed my own method of working intuitively. In the course of this exploration I found that Taoist creative principles manifest within a specific creative practice unconsciously, naturally and spontaneously, in a manner that is subjective and unique to the individual.

This study into the workings of my own creative process required introspection, personal reflection and held the attendant challenges of observing oneself. It was an investigation that led me to question my existing perceptions and definitions regarding artistic and design processes. A further challenging aspect of this study was the involuted and elliptical nature of the Taoist philosophy and its paradoxical themes. These challenges however, ultimately allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of my own creative practice. I concluded that I had ceased to work illustratively when I had begun to work intuitively. This was the reason for the change in my work. By applying the lens of Taoism to my creative process, I came to perceive my illustrative work as a complementary precursor to my abstract work and by pursuing everything that my previous work was not, in some strange way I had found the negative space within my practice. Just as form relies upon formlessness, this new abstract practice rested on the illustrative style now absent from my work. This meant that it was not necessary to abandon my prior practice. Instead, it would remain implicit in my new way of working. The correspondence between abstract and illustrative had become a Taoist union of opposites.

APPENDIX A.

The two main texts associated with Taoism are the *Tao te Ching* and the *I Ching*.

The *Tao te Ching*, is the collected aphorisms of Taoism in the form of a series of poetical verses. The verses express the sentiments of the Taoist philosophy in an allegorical and lyrical way. Although there is some dispute over the true authorship of the *Tao te Ching*, with some scholars contending that it is the work of several authors, the most common attribution is to the sage Lao Tzu or the 'Old Master' between the 4th and 3rd Centuries BC. (Chang, 1963)

APPENDIX B.

In the 1st Century A.D., Buddhism was introduced to China from India where it merged with Taoism to become Ch'an or Zen Buddhism. Chang (1963) explains that Indian Buddhism blended with Chinese Taoism and became Zen Buddhism in its present form. Due to these shared origins Zen Buddhism and Taoism have many interchangeable concepts in relation to creativity.

APPENDIX C.

The *I Ching* deals with the Taoist concept of change. Following the concept of yin and yang, it suggests that when a situation reaches its maximal state, it turns to become its opposite (Hua, 1983). The *I Ching* consists of a collection of 64 interrelated principles (not to be confused with the Taoist creative principles identified in this study) that people may encounter in the course of everyday life. The book functions as a form of oracle through which people gain insight into the constantly changing events of life. Its origins date back as early as the Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 B.C) when it existed as a work of allegorical poetry. Its current form dates from the Zhou dynasty (112-221 B.C) when it was reinterpreted by King Wen and clarified by the philosopher Confucius (Huang, 1998). This version, divided into 64 chapters, remains relevant to this day.

Figure 1. Untitled illustrative work, image by the author, 2007.

Figure 2. Untitled abstract work, image by the author, 2011.

Figure 3. Yin and Yang symbol

In Anthony, C.K. (1982). *A Guide to the I Ching*. Massachusetts: Anthony Publishing Company.

Figure 4. [Detail of untitled work by Unknown artist]. (c. 1910). Ink on paper scroll. Work property of the author.

Figure 5. Pa-ta Shan-Jen. (1626 - 1701). Flower in Vase. Ink on silk
In Chang, C.Y. (1963). *Creativity and Taoism*. New York: Harper and Row.

Figure 6. Mi Fei. (1051-1107). Misty Landscape: Round Mountain Peaks and Trees. Ink on silk.
In Chang, C.Y. (1963). *Creativity and Taoism*. New York: Harper and Row.

Figure 7. Wu Wei (1459-1508). Branch of Plum Blossoms. Ink on silk
In Chang, C.Y. (1963). *Creativity and Taoism*. New York: Harper and Row.

Figure 8. Itten's Theory of Contrasts

In Itten, J. (1963). *Design and Form* (J. Maass, Trans.). London: Thames and Hudson.

Figure 9. Itten's Morning exercises (at the Itten School, Berlin, 1931)

In Itten, J. (1963). *Design and Form* (J. Maass, Trans.). London: Thames and Hudson.

Figure 10. Spontaneous painting made in 1920 by W. Graeff, a student in Itten's class at the Weimar Bauhaus.

In Itten, J. (1963). *Design and Form* (J. Maass, Trans.). London: Thames and Hudson.

Figure 11. Kandinsky's Abstract internally harmonious paintings

In Droste, M. (1990). *Bauhaus*. Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv Museum.

Figure 12. Student studies with elementary geometry from Klee's lessons.

In Droste, M. (1990). *Bauhaus*. Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv Museum.

Figure 13. Gimblett, M. 1985-6. Sengai-Eggs.

In McMahon, R. (1986). *Pearls of the Pacific*: Hogarth Galleries.

Figure 14. Gimblett, M. 2011. The Silver Chariot – After Kandinsky.

In Jackson, A. (2011). *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze / Max Gimblett*. Auckland: Gow Langsford Gallery.

Figure 15. Studio space, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 16. First sketch-cards, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 17. Second sketch-ceramic tablets, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 18. Third sketch-handbook, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 19. Paper templates, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 20. Masking the templates with tape, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 21. Mixing egg yolk with raw pigment, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 22. Mixing egg yolk with raw pigment, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 23. Prepared tempera paint, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 24. Painting equipment, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 25. Painting process, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 26. Various stages of intuitive creative practice, images by the author, 2012.

Figure 27. I Ching ‘emblems’, image by the author, 2012.

Figure 28. (Endpaper). Exhibition work, image by the author, 2014

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