

HALF AN OPTIMIST, HALF A PESSIMIST



HALF AN OPTIMIST, HALF A PEESIMIST

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ABSTRACT

Half an Optimist, Half a Pessimist explores the idea of life as a resource of both positive and negative moods. As an artist, I use oil painting to tell stories about how I face life. In half of my paintings, I was an optimist. I created an ideal world in my heart to show my pursuit of a beautiful dream. I painted the portraits of my wife in order to express my harmonious life. In the other half of my paintings, I turned into a pessimist. I described human negative emotions, such as panic, restlessness or anxiety through creating a frightening world and a group of insane portraits. Optimism and pessimism coexist in my artworks. These complex emotions make my style to be subtle. Sometimes I am an optimist and sometimes I am a pessimist. I am trying to keep a balance between these two mentalities when facing my life. This balance is my attitude in life.

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DEDICATION

To my families, I could not have made it this far as an artist without your support and trust.

Thank you!

EPIGRAPH

*When did the bright moon first appear?
One raises a cup and asks the blue sky.
One does not know, in the celestial palaces,
what year it is this evening.
I wish to ride the wind and return there,
yet fear the jade towers;
in a high dwelling one cannot bear the cold.
Starting to dance with one's clear shadow,
what else resembles the mortal world?
Revolving around the red pavilion,
lowering to a silk-work door,
it shines upon the sleepless.
It should not have resentment;
why is it always full at times of separation?
People have sorrows, joys, parting and reunions,
the moon is dark, bright, waxes or wanes;
these problems have been this way since ancient times.
Yet one hopes for longevity;
a thousand miles apart, together the moon's beauty.*

____ *Su Shi*

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HALF AN OPTIMIST, HALF A PESSIMIST

As an artist, I have the capacity to build a haven for my spiritual world through my painting so as to escape the troubles and pressures from reality. This is an ideal world which is so serene and peaceful, and I know that I could return to this place whenever I wish, this is my place of peace. When I am immersed in painting, I feel like I am as free as flying in the sky. This piece of beautiful land in my painting enables me to keep a positive mentality. At this moment, I am an optimist. Conversely, as an artist, I can also vent all my negative emotions, such as panic, restlessness or anxiety on the canvas. In the deep of night, silence stimulates my imagination. I always think of something related to death. The fear of death and the unknown mix with stress and troubles from reality become elements of my creation. Under this state of mind, I become a pessimist.

Optimist and pessimist are coexisting in my body. This makes my creative mood to be conflicted, sometimes gloomy and sometimes to be delighted. However, I never force myself to have to keep a positive or negative mentality. Whether it is joyful or sad, it is worth experiencing. Life is complicated, like a cocktail, colored bright-colored the missing clue, there are many difficult to distinguish the taste. So, for me, my paintings record all kinds of tastes of my life.

DESCRIPTION

Life is complicated. It has real and imaginary components. People like building dreams for themselves to treat as a goal. When they suffer from many difficulties in life, their good dreams may fall apart. However, when people are on the verge of collapse, they could gain the strength from their beloved and have a glimmer of hope in their hearts. Then they try to rebuild their dreams again. Life is a good subject matter. I use oil painting to tell stories

about how I face life. Life is building, destroying and reorganizing. As an artist, I apply this process in my thesis paintings with a surrealist and expressionist style. My thesis paintings are divided into three parts. In the first part, I described my beautiful dreams through painting a surrealist world with multiple female figures. In the second part, I painted a group of portraits of my wife. Painting her is a way for me to record my life, from which I can gain strength from. The last part is a group of self-portraits to show how I looked when I faced difficulties.

The group of paintings, *The Ideal World* (2019-2020), made up the first part of my thesis work (Figure 1). In order to facilitate transportation, I divided a large painting into six parts. The size of each part is 40 by 30 inches. In this large project, I described the ideal world from my mind and heartily showed my yearning for a joyful life through a surrealist style. This painting could reflect my positive side as an optimist. I present the positive words of beauty, harmony and eternity on the canvas through painting imagined beautiful fairies and creating a surreal dream world. *The Ideal World* is the paradise of my spiritual world. When I am immersed in this painting, I can release all my pressure. It is like a refuge in the real world. When I have no place to relieve stress in my life, I go into my studio and spend some time alone with it. I took half a year to finish this work. From the composition to every detail, I have worked hard to show the appearance of the paradise closest to my heart.



Figure 1. Xiangwen Wu, *The Ideal World*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 40 x 180 in, Private Collection.

I am satisfied with the composition of this painting. First, the form of this painting is

like an unfolded scroll. To create a composition that best suits this form, I put the contents in the painting flowing from left to right like a stream. This flow of the composition represents harmony in my heart. When I look at this flowing composition every time, I feel relax. This composition will bring my mind back to a positive state. The inspiration coming from the outline of a ridge in nature. The ups and downs of a mountain often attract my attention, so I applied this form into my paintings. Looking at the paintings from far to near, multiple female figures are flying in the sky above the traditional Chinese architecture. Some are thinking, and some are dancing, some are talking to each other. They are holding their musical instruments in their hands and dancing to a rhythm. On the horizontal line in the middle of the painting from left to right, I connect all the female figures with clouds and a huge moon throughout the painting. The purpose of this is to avoid making the art look too unorganized because the clouds could fill in the gap between figures and build a connection between them. Figures, clouds, the moon, architecture — all these elements constitute a flowing composition. This composition enables me to feel pleasure because this flow is like a melody in the painting, which can stimulate my nerves.

In order to enhance the surrealist atmosphere of *The Ideal World*, I created a fictional environment. This painting is not based on a scene in reality. The giant moon, the architectures, and the thick clouds are all from my fantasy life. I let all the elements in this painting float in the sky, because in my heart, flying represents dream and freedom. In this painting, I did not think too much about where the light was coming from and the issues with perspective and scale. These objective factors will let the viewer associate with a place from reality. I do not want to mislead the viewer that this is somewhere in China. I want to indicate this painting is a product of my dreams.

In the process of creating my dream place, the giant moon plays a key role in this painting. Like a device that receives and transmits signals, I believe this moon could connect the viewer and me. I hope they could feel a beautiful, harmonious and joyful world. It is an ideal world in my heart, and I want to share my emotions with others through this giant moon. In our hometown culture, people can talk to the moon. If people have something they want to say in their hearts, the moon will become the listener. Moon is a good secret keeper because she never speaks. In the old society, when communications were underdeveloped, people kept in touch or convey their blessings by writing letters. In addition, people could convey their blessings through the moon. This is a subjective psychological mentality of ancient Chinese. They always placed their yearnings or blessings with the moon because they thought if their relatives saw the moon at the same time, they would receive those emotions. Therefore, it has become a custom to convey emotions with the help of the moon in my culture. In nature, the moon is my favorite thing. When I feel pressure in my life, I often pour out my feelings to the moon. The moon is a good listener. No matter what kind of negatives feelings I vent on her, she always listens quietly and shines with reassuring light. As an artist, I have certain deficiency in explaining the meaning of my painting to the viewer. I rarely talk about what kind of emotions I want to convey or the concept about each part of the painting. I guess the moon is the one who knows me best. When I place a moon in my painting, it is because I want the moon to say something to the viewer instead of me. I put a giant moon in *The Ideal World* in order to express my feelings and ideas without too much interpretation from me.

The concept of *The Ideal World* is to express the beauty. The fairies in the painting are the embodiment of human beauty. Therefore, I paint multiple Eastern traditional female

figures in this painting to express beauty. Because I have a background in Eastern culture, I am good at expressing the characteristics of Eastern beauty. The female figures in this painting are based on the image of fairies in classical Chinese mythology. They represent the seven virtues: faith, hope, charity, justice, fortitude, temperance and prudence. These are the most beautiful characteristics in the world. In traditional Chinese culture, Chinese artisans always painted the fairies on the murals or made them into reliefs in order to let the beauty spread for centuries. Therefore, murals or reliefs are a way to preserve beauty forever. I love this way to produce a feeling of everlasting beauty, so I applied the textures and colors from the Chinese traditional reliefs and murals in my painting. I used sandpaper and a pallet knife to polish the surface repeatedly and repainted it again and again to produce the textures. Now, I have achieved this visual effect. Painting these multiple fairies with beautiful textures becomes a way for me to pursue my ideal world.

I showed my optimistic side in *The Ideal World* through depicting these beautiful fairies. I painted glossy dresses and silk streamers for them with the bright colors. Also, I painted the shiny hairpins and necklaces to decorate them. The purpose of these descriptions is to show my positive mood. I finished this painting under a relaxed and delighted mood so that the scene of this painting is joyful. When I depicted these fairies, I became a simple optimism. I tended to put all my intentions on exploring the most beautiful state of this painting. Once I tried to paint myself into this painting in order to let me participate in this beautiful dream. However, I thought that was too weird to put male figure with these fairies. I decided to paint myself as a female figure in the middle part of the painting. There is a fairy wearing blue a dress and holding a brush in her hand. The brush could be taken as a clue to tell the viewer that this fairy represents me who is the creator of this painting.

In the process of *The Ideal World*, I had an idea and I did not express it enough. I want to add some imperfect elements in my painting. As an optimist, I am not a person who thinks that everything has to go well. I can accept imperfection. In this painting, I broke most faces of the figures into pieces. In this way, I made the fairies look imperfect and to indicate that I could accept this imperfect. I tried to break the perfection into imperfection, then recombined the imperfection back to a new form. Through this way, I want to explore the relationship between perfection and imperfection and what is the real beauty in my heart. The title of my painting is *The Ideal World*. I do not know if the words ideal and imperfection seem to contradict each other or not. In fact, I cannot define the standard of ideal, so I kept breaking and rebuilding the faces of the fairies in order to find an optimal state in my mind. In my opinion, a long time of creation led to a change in my mind and caused the contradictoriness of my idea.

The second part of my thesis paintings are about my wife. Sometimes life is a mess, but there are always some warm things that will encourage me. I get a lot of encouragement from my wife. The two of us now are living together in a strange country. We became each other's only dependence. When we share our joys, we also share our pressures. Therefore, my wife came into the second part of my thesis paintings.

I like to capture the casual state of my wife in daily life. Usually, I choose to take a photograph of her because she hates to sit somewhere for more than six hours as a model. In my thesis works, I painted with the intention to express my thoughts through those paintings and develop conceptually to earn money or fame. However, with paintings of my wife, I simply wanted to record her and to capture what I see in her. My motivation is straightforward. Painting is a way for me to express my love. Sometimes, she is tired of

being a model, so I often joke about it with her. I told her that now the two of us were on a



Figure 2. Xiangwen Wu, *The Contemplation*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in, Private Collection.

desert island, I have no choice but to draw her.

When I paint my wife, my style is always very careful, I guess it is hard for me to paint her into a broken form because no matter how I look at her, she is beautiful in my heart. Therefore, I always painted her in a realistic style. I did not apply too much expressionist art language on her. I almost copied what she looked like in real life onto the canvas. She is a quiet girl, so I never let her make some movement posture. In order to ensure her temperament is captured accurately. I always let her just stay there, close

the mouth and do not think about anything. If I use cooking as a metaphor for painting, then the process of painting my wife is like cooking a light dish. I like to use a limited palette because I think the softer, pastel colors are the most suitable colors.

I have painted two favorite portraits for her during my graduate study. These are *Contemplation* (2018) and *Chinese Girl* (2019) (Figure 2) (Figure 3). I painted *Contemplation* in the fall of 2018. The scene at that moment was harmonious. She was basking in a warm sunlight beside the window and waiting for me to put the



Figure 3. Xiangwen Wu, *Chinese Girl*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, Private Collection.

food on her plate. She was staring at the empty plate, and I did not know what she was thinking about. I immediately took a photograph of her because I felt the interest of her state at that moment. I thought this moment is worth being recorded through my painting. The inspiration from life is interesting. In fact, I still did not know why I was impressed by that moment, but it really stimulated my creative nerves.

I removed the environment elements such as the window, the light source and the real background because I did not want to make a narrative painting. A narrative painting has a lot of information so that the viewer will be distracted. I want the viewer to focus on the figure in my painting, so I only keep the figure and the plate. The plate in the painting is important because the moment of my wife staring at the plate gives me the painting inspiration. I guess that plate was full of her thoughts although it was an empty plate. In my memories, that autumn sunlight was very warm and quiet. In order to create this atmosphere, I applied a high-key warm color tone for this painting. I reduced the saturation of the bright color such as red and yellow and mixed with gray on her face and background. I tried to convey a harmonious scene to the viewer through this color tone. My wife has black hair. In this painting, I put Naples Yellow texture on her hair in order to depict a scene she was basking in a warm sunlight. I consider that I have an optimistic side not because I write down some words like *I am an optimism* on the canvas. I am an optimism because I keep trying to find the good moments and painting them on the canvas, even though sometimes my life does not go well. The painting, *Contemplation*, shows that I am good at observing the life around me and capturing the beautiful scene from life. Of course, my wife is the subject matter of all these beautiful moments in my paintings.

The painting, *Chinese Girl*, is the most meticulous one of my portraits. I put a lot of

time and energy into this painting because I told myself that I wanted to make a perfect portrait I had never done before. I started this painting in the spring of 2019. At that time, I bought myself a traditional Chinese style coat. When my wife tried on this coat, I found this coat fitted her well. Therefore, an idea of a portrait came out from my mind. I want to paint a Chinese girl with a unique Eastern charm. The same as the painting *Contemplation*, I removed all the environment elements from the background. In my opinion, I always believe that a clean background will bring a deep imagination space to the viewer. I think I created a quiet and deep environment successfully through this clean background. The stacking of red coat and black hair became the main theme of this painting. I like to use black and red together because these two colors always bring a strong and secret visual effect to the viewer. Also, I reduced the saturation of the red in the painting because the viewer will be tired if they look at the pure red for a long time. In the later process of this painting, I focused on the details of her face and hands a lot and tried to depict the details as vivid as I could. While painting a satisfied portrait, I could also improve my painting technique. I always evaluate myself whether my technique is good enough to depict the subject matter accurately. My wife is a simple and lovely young woman. When I finished *Chinese Girl*, I could say I make it. I believe the viewer can feel her character through this detailed painting.

I can gain strength through painting my wife. It reminds me that she is always with me. We are now far away from home, and this power of companionship enables me to pursue my dream of art. I find that my art has a lot of connections with my psychology. In a sense, I have become my own psychiatrist. In the *Ideal World* series, I could release my pressure and look at this series paintings as a refuge for me to escape from reality. Also, in my real life, I can capture the good moments of my wife and record them on the canvas in order to keep a

positive mentality. All of these paintings show that I have an optimistic side. However, I also show my pessimistic side through the third part of my paintings. If I feel too stressful in my life, I will vent my negative emotions, such as panic, restlessness or anxiety through painting to release my pressure. I always change my mood between positive and negative in my paintings. That is why I consider myself as a half optimistic and half pessimistic artist.

In the third part of my thesis works, I describe myself in a negative, pessimistic state of the present in the real world. Most painting of this type is self-portraits. These self-portraits are not realistic representational paintings. These are conceptual expressionist paintings. I express more of my inner world than I tell a specific story from reality. I created eight pieces of self-portraits during my study time. I put them in a series that I call, *The Broken World*.

In *The Broken World*, I expressed a lot of my negative emotions by making elongated heads. This image is common in the third part of the work. Just like in the work, *Untitled No.1* (2018), a person is isolate into a confined space, leaving only a little connection between the top of the head and the outside world (Figure 4). The elongated head represents an isolated form for humans. I want to express the phenomenon of self-isolation through this form. Initially, humans are closely related to nature of the world. With the development of society, people gradually choose to isolate themselves. This phenomenon is widespread in life. For example, building a house is an act of separating people from nature. Maybe making



Figure 4. Xiangwen Wu, *Untitled No.1*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, Private Collection.

a house is just a subconscious act of humans to protect themselves. However, in reality, many people consciously separate themselves from others under particular circumstances. For example, when people are attacked by a virus, the first thing on their minds is not to help others but to isolate themselves to protect themselves. Similarly, people will also isolate themselves to protect themselves because of a variety of emotional problems and for their benefit. This behavior makes the world colder and impersonal. In my paintings, these negative issues became my motivations and stimulated me to develop the idea of *The Broken World*.

In the summer of 2019, I started four self-portraits together and finished them at the same time with the same composition in order to express changing emotions in my body. Later I put them together and looked at them as one painting. I named it, *Four Emotions of Me* (2019) (Figure 5). This painting contains my confusion, anxiety, restlessness and depression. These emotions are evoked when I face difficulties and unpredictable future. In the composition of this painting, four elongated head facing the viewer with the same angle and the same level. The purpose of this composition is that I want to convey my emotions face to face to the viewer. The heads are all elongated to the top of the canvas. Their shoulders are straightened perpendicular to the head and form a cross. This cross represents suffering. It means I am going through some hardships.



Figure 5. Xiangwen Wu, *Four Emotions of Me*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 40 x 120 in, Private Collection.

Through *Four Emotions of Me*, I express that when I face difficulties, I cannot help but fall into a state of self-isolation with four negative emotions. This state of self-isolation has something to do with my personal experience. I am not an autistic person. However, I came to a strange place. Communication has become my biggest problem because English is not my mother language. Sometimes I feel I am like a croaking frog. Others do not understand me well. Gradually, I put myself in a bottle to isolate myself. I did not put the cap on the bottle. My head was stretched out of the bottle and still connected with the outside world. In this painting, I express I have a more vibrant inner world and hope to share with others. The stacking of the textures and brush strokes on each face with the bright color and dark color in the painting represent my deepest emotions. That means I cannot articulate what I want to say in my mind so that listeners always feel confused and unapprehensive. When I am misunderstood, I guess my face looks very tangled. Therefore, I used lots of textures and big brush strokes to show my state. Also, I apply pure colors like cadmium red light, jade green and ultramarine blue on the body of these portraits to emphasize my rich inner world. However, the mouths on the faces are all closed. It means I cannot talk. The closed mouth will convey to the audience a message that I am always in a state of isolation. This part of my thesis paintings shows my pessimistic mood. When I go through some hardships in my life, I

record my feelings through this way of painting.

I showed both of my optimistic and pessimistic side through my thesis paintings. I can be able to choose to paint each type works in different moods to satisfy myself. Because I always think about how I can paint invisible human emotions to visible images, I feel like I am both a painter and a psychologist. The exploring of emotions is of great help to me in forming my own style and I am able to get many creative ideas from it. During my study time, I did some research about western modern art and philosophical ideas. I think the research could help me to convey my optimistic and pessimistic views with quality through my paintings.

RESEARCH

Changes in human moods are of great interest to me. As a fine artist, I use oil paint to record the complex emotions of human beings and explore their inner worlds on canvas. I produce figurative art and portraits because body language and facial expressions are the most direct ways for people to convey non-verbal information. My style combines the freedom of Surrealism with the strength of Expressionism to create the most suitable atmosphere to show people's inner world. My process of painting is very similar to that of studying psychology because I explore and attempt explain the deep thoughts of people. I consider myself a psychological painter.

My creative advantage is that I am good at observation and analysis. It has something to do with my experiences from my youth. My father is an artist, and I played in his studio when I was very young. I looked at his works as if they were fairy tales. Always immersed in his world, my father seldom communicated with me. When I was puzzled by those strange painting of his, I could not get answers from him. I could only think about them by myself. I

spent most of my childhood in that studio. It was a quiet time. My father and I were each doing our own things. This experience helped make me a person who does not talk much but love to think.

My environment and the place where I live are constantly changing. I am far from my home in China and living abroad. I have made a lot of friends and met a lot of people. I have felt the joy of getting together and the sadness of parting. I understand the emotions that human beings show in different mental states. When I became an artist, human emotions became the focus of my creation. I observe people in their daily lives, how they can change from ecstasy to extreme sadness in only a minute. Although this change is very fast, the process is complicated. The state of people's emotions at different stages gives me a lot of inspiration. When people are happy, they seem to fly in the sky with wings. When they hear bad news, their hearts will be as heavy as a boulder. When people show such vivid emotional changes, their body language, and facial expressions become the clues for me to explore their inner world. I have created a body of painting to show my interest in the rich emotions of people.

My ideas are deeply influenced by western philosophical concepts. The first is Humanism. In 1808, Bavarian education commissioner, Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer coined the term, Humanism (Celenza 295). "Humanism is a philosophical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human being, individually and collectively" (Walter 95). From learning Humanism, I have a deeper understanding of human beings. It helps me explore emotions in a profound way. "Generally, humanism refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress. It views humans as solely responsible for the promotion and development of individuals and emphasizes a concern for man in

relation to the world" (Marbaniang 474). I ponder the meaning of human existence repeatedly in my paintings. I focus on expressing people's thoughts and feelings. Whether the emotions I describe are positive or negative, my theme never waivers from man's relationship to the world.

My paintings do not serve politics or religion. The meaning of these paintings is only to express people's feelings when they are thinking about their relationship to the world. I always have some philosophical questions. For example, I ask myself *who am I? Is there another world after death? What is the purpose of my existence?* These questions can bring people a variety of feeling, such as panic, restlessness or anxiety. Similarly, these questions can prove that human beings are thoughtful and emotional creatures. In my thesis work, I record people's doubts about the world and themselves.

I depict a world full of freedom, beauty, and happiness in my group of paintings *The Ideal World*. This is a fictional place that I created in my mind influenced by another western concept, Utopia. "Utopia is an imagined community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities for its citizens" (Henry 91). I wanted to create a paradise for my spirit. Utopia can only exist in the ideal, but I have the right and the ability to create my utopia. I aim to make people aware of the imperfections of the status quo and to urge people to transform the status quo through utopian ideals. Man must fight for the impossible again and again, otherwise, it will be impossible for him to achieve the possible (Webber). I produced this surreal multi-figure painting to convey the idea that an ideal world does not have to be realized, but we must not lose the ability to imagine it.

I grew up in China. My cultural background is Eastern culture. However, my painting skills and style are deeply influenced by Western art. I have studied and been inspired by the

styles of many western oil painting masters. Expressionism and Surrealism are my favorite art styles. They help me freely evoke my moods and ideas. While I like expressing human emotions, I cannot find any reference for a human's inner world in a photograph or on the street. I have to filter the people I see from life, mix them in my brain with my concept, and then produce them on canvas. This is like a chemical reaction. Expressionism and Surrealism are like catalysts to me. They accelerate the chemical reactions in my brain. When I expressively paint a portrait and create a surreal atmosphere, I feel I am best able to convey my ideas.

In my opinion, Expressionism endows art with great vitality. It was an important movement in the world and I am interested in making art through expressionist art language. “Expressionism is a modernist movement, initially in poetry and painting, originating in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century” (Tejera 85). The typical trait of expressionism is to present the world solely from a subjective perspective, distorting it radically for an emotional effect to evoke moods or ideas (Gombrich 563). I am this kind of painter. I always try to express the meaning of emotional experience rather than depicting physical reality. Most expressionist works are used to express negative or fearful emotions. “The term of expressionism is sometimes suggestive angst” (Garzanti). Knowing this, I usually employ an expressionistic style to express dark human emotions, such as anxiety,



Figure 6. Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat*, 1954, Oil on canvas, 51 x 48 in, The Art Institute of Chicago Harriett A. Fox Fund.

fear or confusion in my portrait paintings.

The 20th century British Expressionist, Francis Bacon, is one of my favorite artists. He embodied the relationship between the people and the space in his artworks and was considered a great



Figure 7. Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944, Oil and pastel on Sundeala board, 37 x 29 in (ea), Tate Britain, London.

expressionist artist in modern art history (Bragg). From his works, I learned how to evoke the extreme negative moods of people. “His works are famous for their ruggedness, sharpness, intense violence, and nightmarish images” (Bragg). In his middle and later periods, the main body of work focused on an abstract male portrait in a glass or metal geometric cage, in a narrow space with an extremely flat background (Blackwood). *Figure with Meat* (1954) is a work that reflects the state in which the human spirit and soul are disturbed (Figure 6). Prime minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher, described Bacon as “the man who paints those dreadful pictures.” The painting, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944), is his representative work (Figure 7).

From this painting, I learned a unique expressive art language that combine the disturbing figure and the flat background with an intense color to show the relationship between the people and the space. Based on this, I painted an emotional piece, *Who Am I* (2019), to



Figure 8, Xiangwen Wu, *Who Am I*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in, Private Collection.

explore how to apply the expressive language that I learned from Bacon on my own work (Figure 8).

Most of Bacon's painting are very expressive. The twisted limbs and broken faces in the painting are as unforgettable as nightmares. This visual effect is exactly what I want to apply in the third part of my thesis painting series, *The Broken World*. When I express the negative emotions of the characters in my paintings, I always use colors and forms learned from studying from Bacon's works. While heavily influenced by Bacon's style, I am exploring a new path of self-expressions. Norwegian Expressionist painter, Edward Munch, is another of my favorite artist. *The Scream* (1893) is the popular name given to a composition created by Munch in 1893 (Figure 9). “The Norwegian title is *Skrik* or *Shriek*. The painful face has become one of the most iconic images in art, seen as a symbol of the anxiety of the human condition” (Sooke). Both Bacon and Munch have their strength in expressing people's painful, negative emotions. Studying the paintings of these masters is a great help to me. From their creative experience, I can enrich the human emotions in my paintings.

I learned how to express the human emotions and man's relationship to the world in an intense way from following expressionist art style. Based on the benefits I gained, I conveyed a pessimistic view successfully through the third part of my thesis work, *The Broken World*. I have a pessimistic side, also I have an optimistic side. Most expressionist

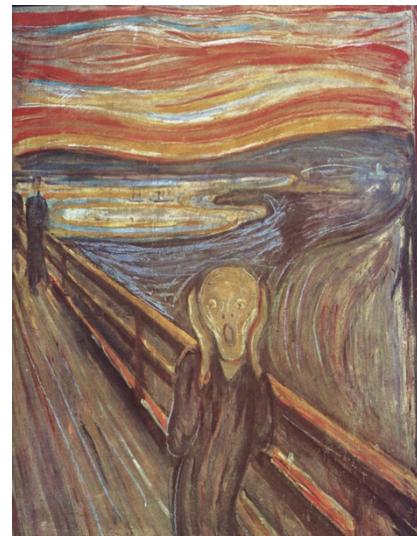


Figure 9. Edvard Munch, *Scream*, 1893, Oil casein and pastel on cardboard, 29 x 35 in, National Gallery and Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway.

works are used to express negative or fearful emotions. When I need to show my optimistic views, I always apply the surrealist art language to make illogical, mystery and fantasy paintings.

In my series painting, *The Ideal World*, the juxtaposition of uncommon imagery, illogical scenes and mystery atmosphere are three important elements that shows a beautiful dream place to the viewer. Creating things boldly from everyday objects in my painting is the experience I learned from Western Surrealism in 20th century. For example:



Figure 10. René Magritte, *Golconda*, 1953, Oil on canvas, 31.5 x 39.5 in, The Menil Collection.

Surrealism is a culture movement that started in 1917, best known for its visual artworks and writings and the juxtaposition of uncommon imagery. Artists painted unnerving, illogical scenes, sometimes with photographic precision, creating strange creatures from everyday objects, and developing painting techniques that allowed the unconscious to express itself. (Barnes)

The surreal artistic style is a such suitable way for me to build a fantasy dream place through



Figure 11. René Magritte, *The Light of Coincidences*, 1933, Oil on canvas, 23 x 28 in, Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Jake L. Hamon.

my paintings. René Magritte was a famous Belgian Surrealist in the 20th century. Magritte's works often give familiar objects new meaning or merge irrelevant things to give people a sense of absurdity and humor (Barnes). His paintings give me a feeling of dreaming while I am wide awake. The painting, *Golconda* (1953) and the painting *The Light of Coincidences* (1933), show a very mystery dreamy atmosphere (Figure 10) (Figure 11). He used a very simple form, allowing the details to make the whole painting look

unified. The spatial relationship in the painting is chaotic, and all the elements exist in the picture form an illogical form. Magritte's painting inspired me lot to finish my painting *The Ideal World*. Because most of the elements in *The Ideal World* are from imagination, I learned from Magritte to let the subject floating on the sky or make the spatial relationship chaotically in order to create a surreal space.

The road to becoming an artist is bumpy. One of the largest challenges I face is how to deal with self-doubt. Friends are too polite to ask sharp questions, so that leaves it up to me. *As an artist coming from China, why do I always delve into the Western culture but abandon the Eastern culture?* I have no in-depth understanding of the genre and style of Chinese painting. I cannot accurately explain the ideas expressed by Eastern philosophy. My brain has been invaded by Western culture on a subconscious level. Sometimes I feel I am an uprooted tree. I am gradually moving away from the soil where I lived before. I have tried to combine Eastern and Western cultures in my works before without realizing that I first need to have an in-depth understanding of the two cultures. My knowledge is so lacking that I cannot make a satisfactory synthesis. All I can do is keep studying. One day I will become an artist who is proficient in both Eastern and Western styles and conquer my self-doubts.



Figure 12. Xiangwen Wu, *Quan Fei*, 2016, Granite, 59 x 50 x 50 in, Private Collection.

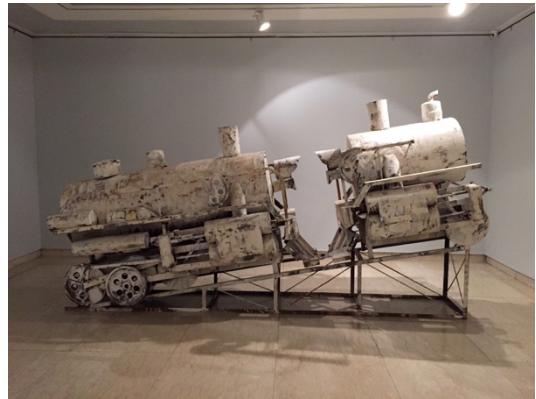


Figure 13. Xiangwen Wu, *A Piece of Cloud*, 2014, Iron, 157 x 82 x 40 in, LAFA Collection.

Another concern is *why did I give up making sculptures?* I have been an artist for ten

years. I spent five years sculpting and then five years painting. Sculpture has become an old friend I lost track of. Today, I introduce myself as an oil painter, but I have some achievements in the field of sculpture. My sculptures have been exhibited in galleries and won awards. The sculptures, *Quai Fei* (2016) and *A Piece of Could* (2014), are the works that I am proud of (Figure 12) (Figure 13). The high cost of making and transporting sculpture has caused me to give it up for now. What a pity! I do not want to give it up. So, I have tried to apply the artistic language of sculpture to painting, primarily through the use of texture.

Though I have set sculpture aside, for now, the experience of learning sculpture is still very important to me. Most of the time I do not even realize what that training is influencing my painting because it happens in the subconscious. In my five years as an oil painter, I have been building my creative ideas and find my style through my research. I learned to use the appropriate subject to form my body of thesis paintings. I combined the Surrealist and Expressionist art styles to free the mind and create a strong visual effect. When I talk to people, I confidently call myself an oil painter, but I know a sculptor is living in my soul. It affects my painting method all the time.

I call myself as a *psychological painter* because I am good at observation and analysis of people's inner world. In daily life, I like observing people on the street and sometimes I like looking at myself in the mirror. I always think about what information I can get through their eyes or how I can go into their inner world. All these thoughts became my creative ideas. Based on the experience of learning sculpture and painting, I have learned how to produce these ideas to impressive artworks in a best way. Sometimes, it is difficult to describe complex human nature by relying on one art form. Combining different kinds of art forms might help me to achieve that goal.

METHODOLOGY

As an oil painter, I have five years of experience in making sculptures. The advantage of sculpture is that it gives people a sense of the physical and the feeling of the power. The advantage of oil painting is that it can create an overall environment and can have vibrant colors. In my painting, I combine the benefits of both sculpture and painting. This combination is my painting method. Because I have learned these two majors, I found a consistent painting habit. Before I paint, I usually make sculptures thumbnails to help me understand the relationship between the painting object and the environment. Next, I will paint with my understanding of the thumbnails. Sometimes I need not make sculpture thumbnails, but the process of this method is already in my head. Studying sculpture has become an advantage for me as an oil painter.

When I am painting, I am full of enthusiasm. This is an enthusiasm necessary condition for a sculptor. Now I apply this condition to my painting process. I keep moving forward and stepping back to get a more comprehensive view of every step of my painting. Sometimes I stand on the stool to draw, sometimes I kneel on the ground to draw, and sometimes I even paint in a posture that is indescribable. I continuously adjust my posture to maintain my passionate, creative state. Sometimes when I am painting, I still feel like I am making a sculpture. The brush and the pallet knife in my hand look like the carving knife and the color is like the clay. I used additive and subtractive techniques to create when I was a sculptor. Now, I still could add pigment and scrape it away from the canvas. Through this creating method and condition, I could gain beautiful textures and a strong visual effect on the canvas.

In terms of art language, I like to apply the texture of the sculpture surface to the painting language to enhance the visual effect of the painting. I enjoy this method because it applies the advantages of three-dimensional art to two-dimensional art. I am obsessed with the rough textures and the intense physical feelings from the sculpture because these can express my tactile experience. I enjoy strong visual effects. I do not like paintings which just looks like a copy from a photograph. That is too insipid. I am trying to paint everything that looks like a sculpture with the rough textures in my painting. If I have extra time, I might take out some clay to make a rough draft of the objects. Therefore, when I observe people or objects, they have already formed a sculpture in my mind. The kind of appearance a sculpture will show, the object in my painting will show as well. I usually produce figurative and portrait art, so all the figures in my paintings look like they are made of clay or stone. A figure or a portrait with pale colors and rough textures is prevalent in my paintings.

The method of transforming between three dimensions to two dimensions helps me finish most of the thesis work. Before I paint, the most essential part is conceiving a sculpture form through observing the objects. Usually, it is too difficult to figure out the sculpture form just by thinking about it. I will take out some clay and make a study for my painting. The painting, *Motherland* (2018), was my first painting in Master of Fine Arts program (Figure 14). This painting reflects my painting method and painting process well.



Figure 14. Xiangwen Wu, *Motherland*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, Private Collection.

First, I conceived the sculpture of several soldiers in my mind. Over time, the memory in my mind would be blurred, so I had to make it out. In the beginning, I drew drafts on my sketchbook, but that was still not enough. Next, I took out some clay and made the first soldier figure (2018) (Figure 15). At this process, I did not make too many details for the draft because the shape of the figure might change depending on my mood. The next step was the composition. I made not only the pose of the figure, I could also make out the composition for the painting through the sculpture (2018) (Figure 16).



Figure 15. Xiangwen Wu,
Sculpture Draft, 2018, Clay, 3 x
3 x 9 in, Private Collection.

When I finished the sculpture studies, I could begin my painting. This painting has a very silent atmosphere, so I did not paint the realistic soldiers from life. I turned all the soldiers into stone sculpture because the sculptures could not move or make a sound. This could help me to convey a silent context. To enhance this



Figure 16. Xiangwen Wu, *Sculpture Draft*, 2018,
Clay, 3 x 10 x 5 in, Private Collection.

feeling, I put a horse sculpture beside the soldiers. When I got into detail, I applied all the sculpture elements such as textures, structures and the dark pale color into my paintings. To apply the sense of physical and power on the canvas, I used my brush and my pallet knife as my sculpture tools to add and scrape the colors. At this moment, my mood

could be described as I am making sculptures in the two-dimensional world. This is the method of how I build connections between paintings and sculptures. Through this method, I

could paint fast because I have understood the relationship between the painting object and the environment through my sculpture studies. Most of my paintings in my thesis work are finished with this method of building a connection between sculpture and painting. I did not make clay studies for all of my thesis work, but this a good habit and it is worth keeping.

This method has been upgraded because this method had a weakness before. There was a weakness in my method during my early studies in the MFA program. There was a lack of colors in my paintings. I do not know what the effect different colors in the painting would be. I lack knowledge, because I never use a complex color match for making sculptures. Usually, when the oil painting prepares to paint, the first thing is observing the color temperature and the color saturation of the object. I do not do that first. My first step is looking at the object as a sculpture. Artist build the value depending on the light, colors and edges (Benedict). I pay great attention to the structure and the anatomy more than colors. A lot my paintings look very pale. I could consider this is a unique style, but I could not consider a weakness as a style. Therefore, the weakness of my method is using color. I need to update my method and make it perfect.

I build a connection between sculpture and painting. However, when I apply the advantage of sculpture into painting, I lost the advantage the painting should have had. I lost the color! If I want to update my method, I have to get the color back. The MFA chairman, Peter Zokosky, once pointed out my weakness during a mentor meeting. He mentioned that most of the sculptor felt fear to use colors and he hoped I could step forward. I have the same opinion as he did. I should try to pay more attention to using colors. Peter suggested that I did not need to change too much. What I needed to do was just add pure colors somewhere in the final stages of a painting. Pure color is like cooking seasoning. Put it properly in the dishes,

and sometimes the taste will be more delicious. He thought that would bring an effective change.

The suggestion given by Peter was very helpful. When I was painting with the updating method, I found just a little bit of pure color on the pale object would bring an effective change. For example, I only put a little green on a pale apple. The apple looked fresher. I only put a little red on the lips of the portrait of my wife. She looked more vivid than before. Put different pure colors in any pale parts would bring a significant difference. It seemed like I found an excellent way to update my method. Also, I did not need to change my previous method. I still could make a sculpture in my mind. What I needed to do is put some pure color properly on the canvas at the last step of the painting.

Now my painting method is becoming more and more mature. I understand how to build a better connection between painting and sculpture. I apply both the characteristics of sculpture and painting on the canvas. The updating method makes my thesis works look better. Adding colors in the final stages of painting brings me great enjoyment. When I add a color to the key part of the painting, it forms a chemical reaction-like change. I am always adding and changing colors. Sometimes I might take out an old painting and add some color on it to see what will happen. First part of my painting, *Four Emotions of Me* (2019), is what I played with for a long time (Figure 17). I added some pure green on the head and pure red on the lips. Later, I felt I was not satisfied with that color. I used white pigment to cover them



Figure 17. Xiangwen Wu, *Four Emotions of Me* (Part 1), 2019, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in, Private Collection.

and scrape off some. I was constantly adding color and scraping them off. It seemed like I was sculpting a face with pigments. Then, the exciting thing happened. The look turned into a jade color and the mouth turned into a red agate color. That was a beautiful coincidence and was unexpected. Things like this happened everywhere in this painting. I feel have more enjoyment from painting with the updating method.

I am satisfied with the updated method of building a connection between sculpture and painting. However, this method still has space to improve. I found an artist had a similar method. He is modern Swiss artist, Alberto Giacometti. He regarded painting as important as sculpture. Each of his painting corresponded to a complete sculpture. He could use his sculpture skill to help him finish a painting. Also, he could use his painting skills to help him build a sculpture. This is like a warrior, not only with a sword in his right hand but also with a shield in his left hand. I only have a thesis work of paintings, but I do not have a group of sculptures to inform my thesis work. Being an expert both in painting and sculpture fields might be a way to continue upgrading my method. If I could do this, my method will not be only a painting method. It will be called the creating method.

I like both painting and sculpture. I enjoy playing across between the three dimensions' world and two dimensions' world. Although I have not created a sculpture for a long time, making sculpture is always in my mind. I apply the texture and physical feeling of sculpture in my painting to form my method. Having two skills simultaneously can make me become a comprehensive artist. I will not be limited to the field of painting. I might go back to the area of sculpture and continue to explore something about a technique I have not mastered yet. Art is like a vast land. As an artist, the more I sow, the more I reap. I will spend my whole life running this land of my own and have a bumper harvest.

CONCLUSION

As we all know, time goes by very quickly. Two years of study in Laguna College of Art and Design are fleeting. I am about to enter society. I have a lot of confusion about what happens after leaving the school program. I know I will face different challenges from life and nobody will send me a syllabus to teach me how to live in the world. In the past two years, I kept introducing myself with some high-sounding titles such as a surrealist artist, an expressionist artist or psychological artist to people. However, I will not be a student soon. In the future, when we face the pressure of life, can I still call myself as an artist so proudly? I cannot answer it, but I ensure that the process of learning art as a student is the happiest time in my life. From the experience of painting as a half optimism and half pessimism, I learned about myself that painting is a good way for me release my pressure and help me keep a positive mentality to face my life. Now, painting has become a way of life for me. I understand that painting will not make a huge different to my material life, but my spiritual world will be very rich as an artist.

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APPENDIX

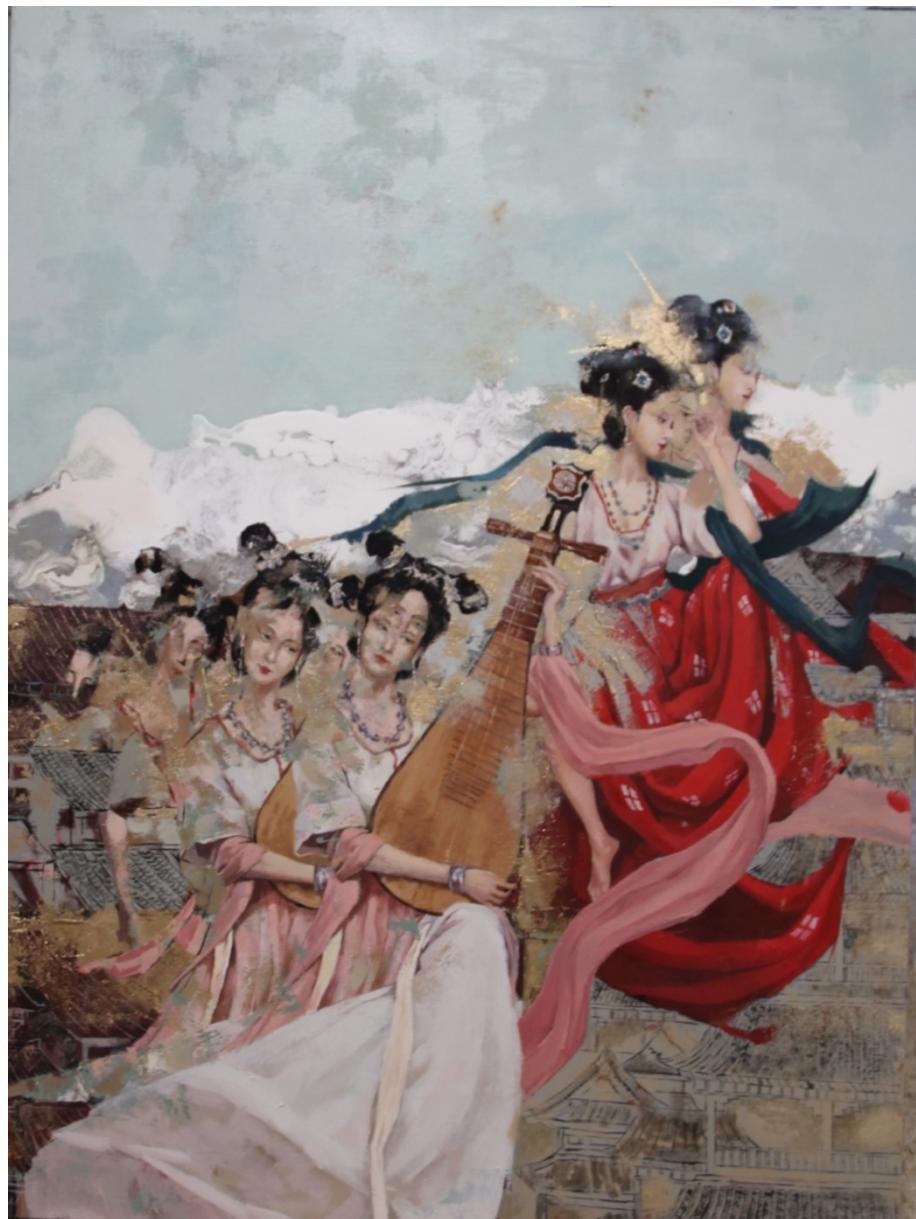


Plate 1: Xiangwen Wu, *The Ideal World* (Part 1), 2020, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in, Private Collection.



Plate 2: Xiangwen Wu, *The Ideal World* (Part 2), 2020, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in,
Private Collection.



Plate 3: Xiangwen Wu, *The Ideal World* (Part 3), 2020, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in,
Private Collection.

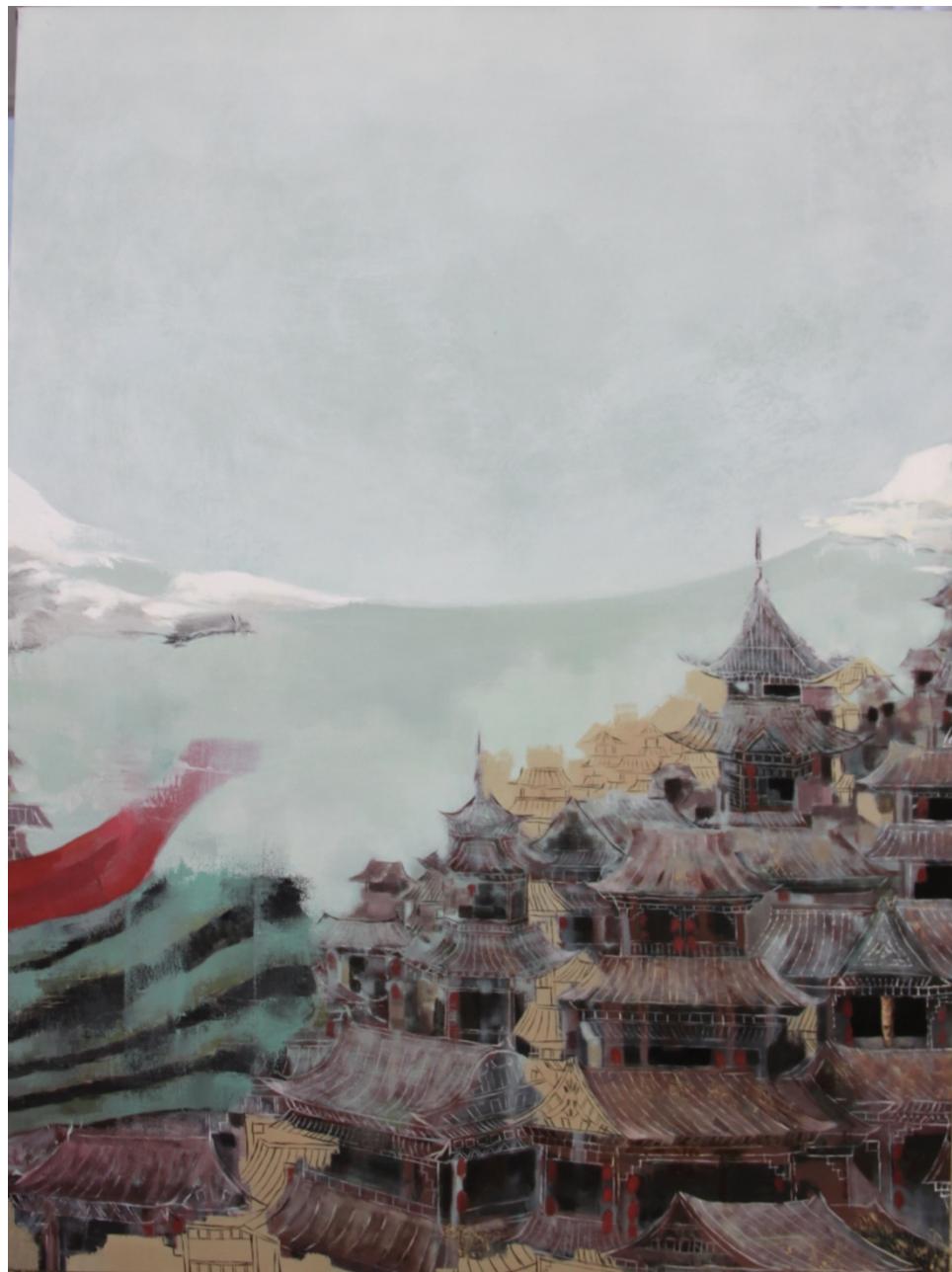


Plate 4: Xiangwen Wu, *The Ideal World* (Part 4), 2020, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in, Private Collection.



Plate 5: Xiangwen Wu, *The Ideal World* (Part 5), 2020, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in, Private Collection.



Plate 6: Xiangwen Wu, *The Ideal World* (Part 6), 2020, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in, Private Collection.



Plate 7: Xiangwen Wu, *Chinese Girl*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, Private Collection.



Plate 8: Xiangwen Wu, *The Contemplation*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in,
Private Collection.



Plate 9: Xiangwen Wu, *Two Pounds of Humanity*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, Private Collection.



Plate 10: Xiangwen Wu, *Prisoner*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, Private Collection.

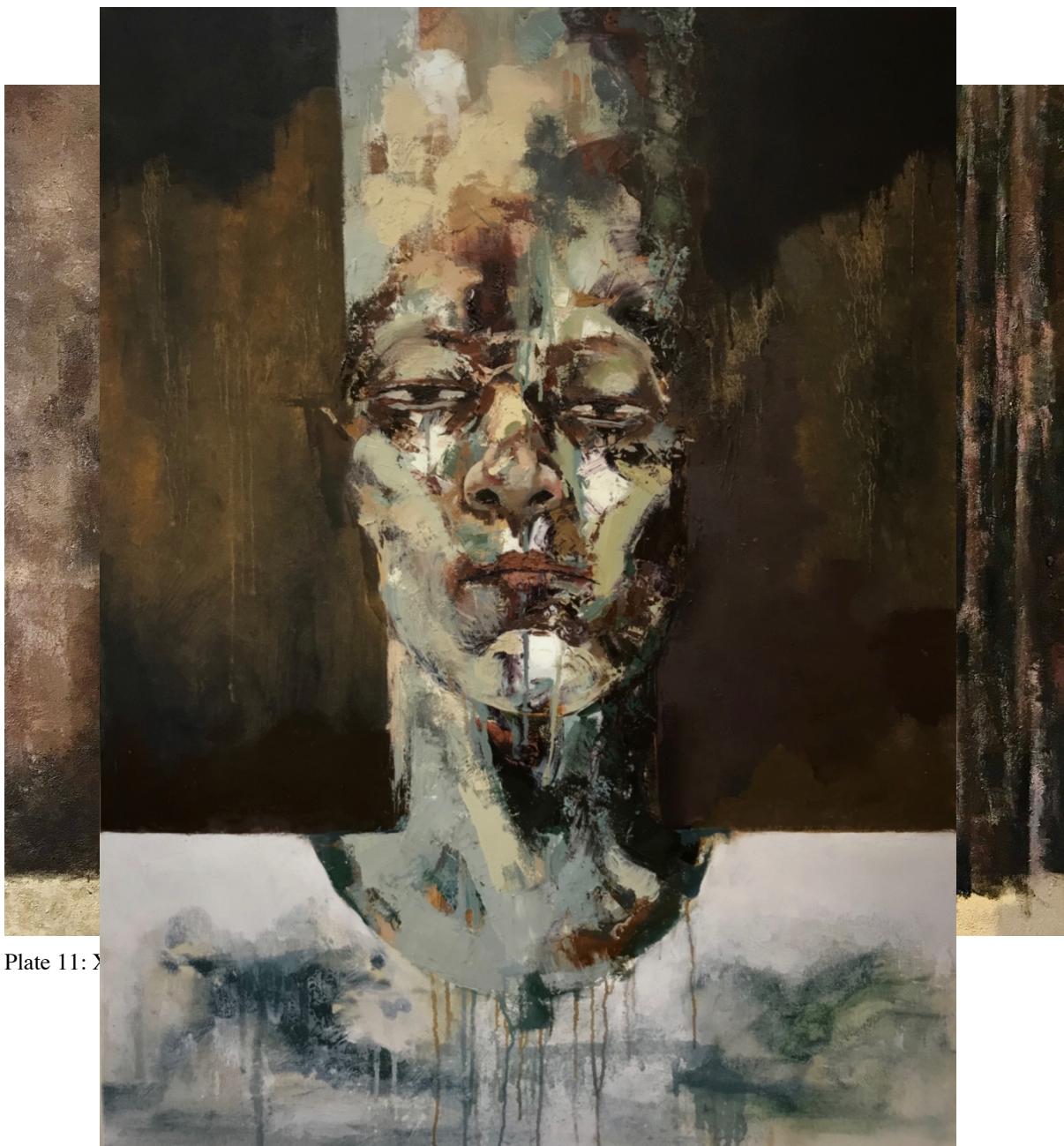


Plate 11: X

Plate 12: Xiangwen Wu, *Four Emotions of Me* (Part 1), 2019, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in,
Private Collection.

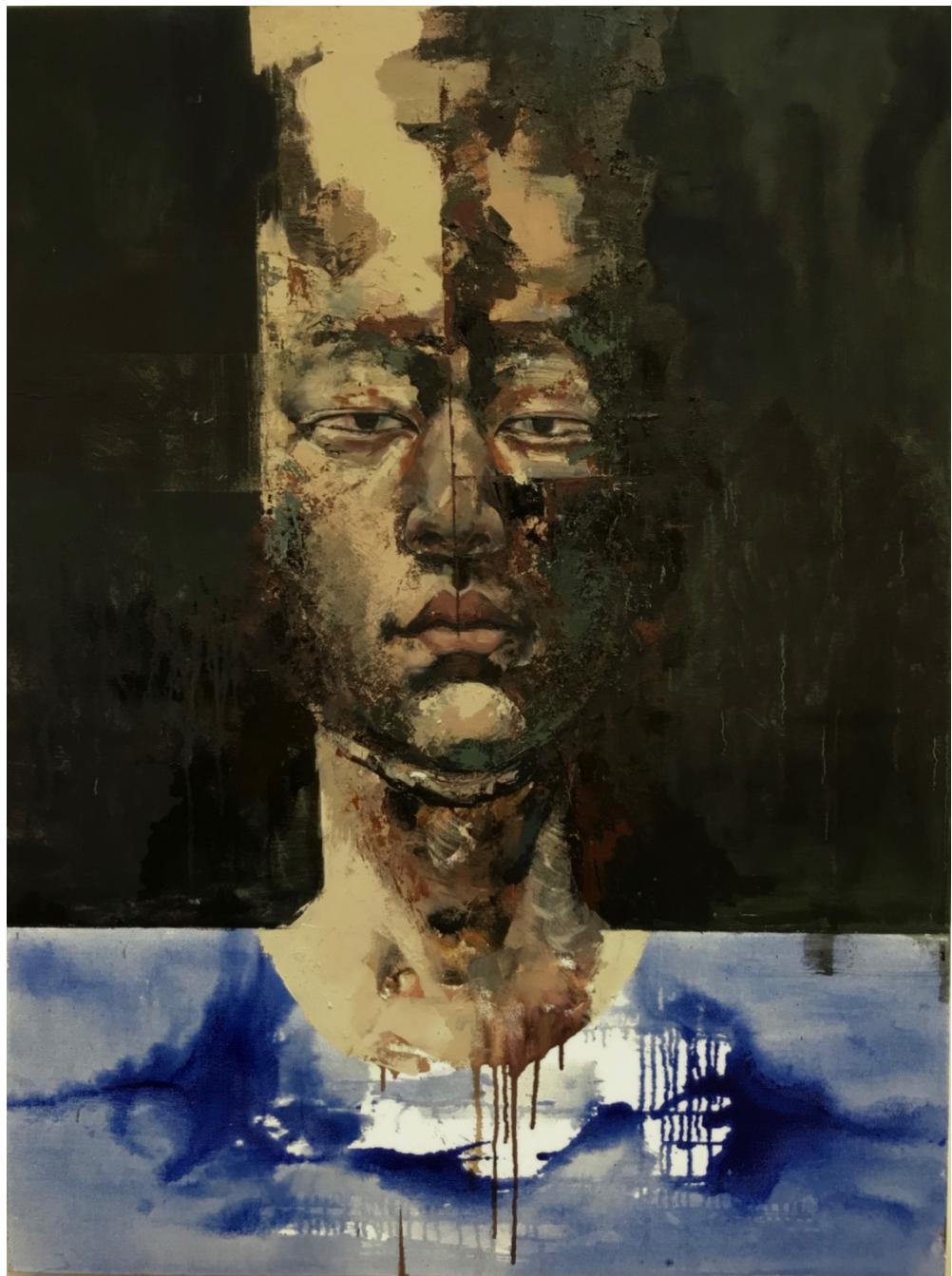


Plate 13: Xiangwen Wu, *Four Emotions of Me* (Part 2), 2019, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in,
Private Collection.



Plate 14: Xiangwen Wu, *Four Emotions of Me* (Part 3), 2019, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in, Private Collection.



Plate 15: Xiangwen Wu, *Four Emotions of Me* (Part 4), 2019, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in,
Private Collection.



Plate 16: Xiangwen Wu, *A Place We want to Go*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 20 x 110 in, Private Collection.



Plate 17: Xiangwen Wu, *Motherland*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in, Private Collection.

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