

*Transfiguration of Space: Practice-Based Research in Painting and Digital Art by
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I. Timeless Moments

Transfiguration of Space, a multimedia studio-based art research project, is about new sensory experiences mingled with memories of familiar old one. It's about sharing the experience of transition, which is an experience that everyone is familiar with. In this paper I will examine the events of my latest solo exhibition at the National Institute of Education Art Gallery, May 2012, in Singapore. I consider this paper to be the final conclusion and reflection on a body of work built on the concept of spiritual and physical transitions. While my artwork for my exhibition took much of its cue from a sense of the bitter-sweet—of the time in-between—a feeling of the loss for the old environment in Pennsylvania, U.S.A. that I left behind, and the excitement of the new world when I came to Brunei Darussalam to start a new phase in my life in July 2011, other aspects of my work did not fully come to my mind until I wrote this paper.

As a teaching artist I try to be sensitive and “in-tune” with my environment. I remember the moment when I first truly began to internalize the special sense of place that is Brunei Darussalam. It happened on July 17, 2011, and as I was leaving the hotel apartments in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, the starting point of my new journey in life, and a place some 6,700 miles away from my hometown, Bradford, Pennsylvania. I noticed that while watching the golden-yellow sunset that I was encountering a moment of timeless being that came from feeling that I was a person of the world and a creature of nature. I share the idea of influence from nature towards the creation of a work of art with Jacquelyn Baas (2005) noted in her introduction in her book *Smile of the Buddha*:

Human beings are social animals, creatures of their culture as well as of their own histories. Works of art are complex products of complex minds, and this makes the search for the sources of inspiration that lie behind them cumulative and endless. (p. 9)

This is the kind of transcendental feeling that comes from feeling lost in the enormity of nature. According to Baas (2005), "Buddhism challenges thinking as a path to knowing. And what both the creation and the perception of art share with Buddhist mediation practice is that they allow us to forget ourselves and thus realize ourselves. They are parallel practices." (p. 11) This sort of experience has led me to try and capture the sublime and over-whelming nature of the elements that make up the patterns of nature unconsciously. Even though I have relocated to many places during the past 20 years: from humid Hong Kong to dry Texas; hot Texas to cold Pennsylvania; and from snowy Pennsylvania to sunny Brunei, the way the sky looks when the sun sets with its peaceful sunbeams, is the one thing that feels the same and familiar to me.

The golden-yellow clouds against the ultramarine blue backdrop of the sky, shown in Figure 1, on that particular evening might have been familiar; there were some aspects about it that were unique. I took several photographs of that unique moment with my cell phone camera. After that, I started taking photographs of the sky, beach, flowers, trees, landscape and cityscape around my new tropical environment seriously with my 10 megapixels digital camera. Later, I used imaging software, Adobe Photoshop, to merge and transform some of the Borneo images as well as the images I took displaying wooded scenery from around my home in Pennsylvania. In a further effort to fold and blend my old memories of "self" with who I was becoming in

Brunei, I also used cityscape images from my childhood in Hong Kong to work into digital art. Other types of digital images include panoramic photographs and dissolving motion videos. Looking back on the work that I produced for the exhibition along with works that I did not show, I can see that these digital images carry a common thread, a growing nostalgia for the past and/or a Romantic attitude toward life.

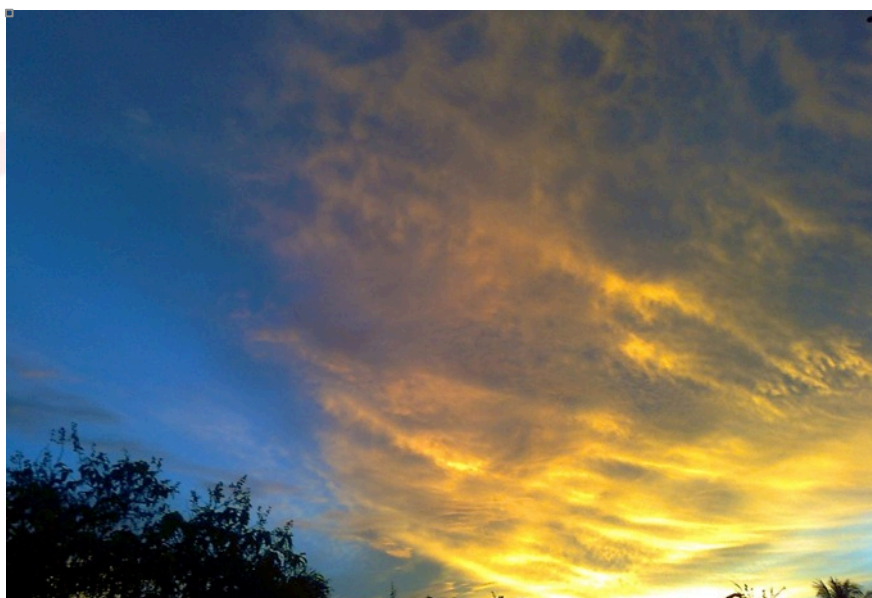


Figure 1: Kong Ho. *Bandar Seri Bagawan Sunset*, 2011. Digital print, 15"H x 20"W

The visually attractive golden sunset digital image resembles the "picturesque" style of the late eighteenth century's Romanticism, a carefully orchestrated casualness of composition. The colourful and sweet appearance of this golden cloud-spun photo is not the content of my art but instead it embodies the transitory nature of life revealed as an expression of nature. Two years ago, when I was fifty my life was impacted by more than the change in my teaching career and my relocation from West to East, it was also impacted by the loss of my mother in Hong Kong. The loss of my mother in November 2011 occurred after I had settled down in Brunei for five months. Further adding to my emotional milieu was my separation from my wife who only was able to join me as part of the Art and Creative Technology programme at UBD in July of 2012.

I believe that before I can make art, whether it is a photograph or a painting, that certain elements must present, including a good mix of emotions. According to the Taoist/Buddhist perspective, the transient nature of life can be seen in natural phenomena, such as cyclical nature of a rose or the night flight of a winged ant. The beauty of a short-lived sunset or flower evokes a melancholic sense of the transience of life. Those digital images taken in different places where I have lived before still feel timeless to me, but they take on a slightly intangible almost ethereal quality when I transfigure them.

II. Stretching Out the Transient Experience or the "Moment-of-the-in-Between"

When measured against the visual styles of my complex digital art series based on

spiraling forms, or the nostalgic quality of my "memoiristic" digital photographs or even the almost hyper-real quality of my temporal symbolic paintings that the Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, an Impressionist masterwork depicting his water garden in Oregon in 1914, that my artwork would not have a lot in common except the depiction of a few water lilies. However, the poetic and time-shifting feeling of this painting as described by Baas (2005) echoes the qualities that I am seeking in my art:

The painting seems to contain a moment or—better—a totality of moments in deep summer, when the greens go dark and the water reflects a bottomless sky. The sensation of a moment I wasn't even aware of losing is suddenly mine again. Or maybe what the painting embodies is change itself, and the awareness is an awareness of time and the losses that time brings. (p. 19)

Psychologically, the motivation behind my transfigurations of digital image is to hold on to the essence of the transitional image, feeling, time and space of a fleeting moment. It may seem contradictory to try to rematerialize that which is already gone, but a part of the large historical list behind humankind's reasons for making art seems to gone into this endeavor. In my last solo exhibition brochure, I wrote: "Five months after the loss of my beloved mother I am amazed at how much I still miss her. I miss her a lot everyday. I would like to dedicate this exhibition brochure to my mother, Lau Mei Fong." (Ho, 2012, p. 1) The sadness of losing my dear mother who brought me into the world and stood by me in good times and bad will never disappear. While it is true to say that the passing of time may help to ease the pain, however the full sense of the loss remains and the nostalgia is always there. Human life is full of contradictions and so is art. I try to capture those timeless moments or impermanent endurances in my life through my art.

Because we are living in a globalized world where the notion of Pluralistic art has become the new mainstream norm, artists like myself who are not part of some specialized group must seek out their reasons and beliefs for making art that unless reported by the artist would perhaps go unnoticed in the competitive art world. For the several past decades I have been cultivating a relationship between the concepts of Zen Buddhism and my art. I transform my digital images using the motifs of flowers, leaves and seashells in a Zen Buddhist intuitive manner. This means that on some level, my complete understanding of how or why the final composition was arrived at. Sometimes I have to just let go and trust my instincts.

The process by which artworks are created along with the media used in the works is a very important part of the final statement or content of the work. For example, in my digital art pieces that rely on the spiral effect, I intend to articulate a meditative state of mind through the process of creating the image. Digital imaging can create layers, colors, textures, dimensions, repetitions, rotations and transformations, which are different from hand-painted or hand-drawn artworks. I cannot visualize the final images but they always remind me of my free-floating memory with no defined space or time. When I start out to make an image I know that I am only creating an illusion. Through the use of manipulated and often humble subjects like common seashells and skink lizards I begin to enhance that object's most outstanding feature. This coupled with my recollection of having found the seashell on a great day or spotted the skink on a special trip adds to my desire to work my subject into an image that can engage others into seeing the fabulous world around us. The composition of the work is created in a transcendental kind of space which may turn out to include spiral,

panoramic, elongated, or overlapping elements. The picture plane may end up resembling a place with no beginning or end, or it may be more like the interweaving of time and space. *Yellow Heliconia*, one of my digital photos generated by Adobe Photoshop, shown in Figure 2, reveals the transfiguration of a simple yellow Heliconia. Taken on UBD's campus, it expresses my passion with the nature and the Fibonacci Sequence and my delight with seeing one of Brunei's lovely flowers up close.

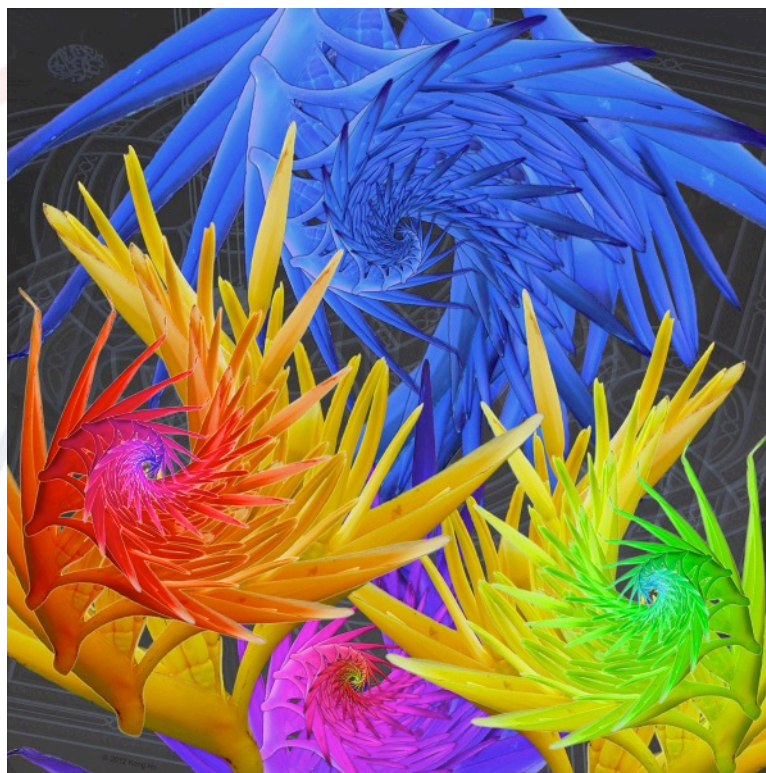


Figure 2: Kong Ho. *Yellow Heliconia*. 2012. Digital print, 16"H x 16"W

I am not too sure how to depict those timeless moments. However, repeatedly I transfigure those moments into digital images. In a way, the digital medium allows me the luxury of working in a manner that is not only original and bold in its outcome, but digital art is also practical because it is so transportable and printable. This new method of working has come to affect almost every aspect of my art and life. My latest work with focus on impermanence or timeless moments resonate the writing of French art historian Hippolyte Taine in his essay titled "Le Bouddhisme" published in 1865:

Nature is ... an infinite chain of causes from effects and effects from causes, an infinite progeny into the past and the future of decompositions and recompositions with no beginning and no end. Such is the view of the whole to which [Buddhists] are led, on the one hand, by their main theme of nothingness and, on the other, by the spectacle of things incessantly changing. Having suppressed fixed causes, there remains only the series of changing effects. Thereupon, the imagination comes alive. (Taine, 1886 [1865], p. 291)

My art is about the timeless moments I experience in my life and daily environment. *Muara Sunset*, falls into the category of an eternal moment photograph, shown in Figure 3. In this work I am presenting a very universal theme of a perfect vision of

one moment in a day. For me this image offers solace against the other realities of my daily life. It is very true that with the Internet connection, photographic images and human imagination, I can cognitively almost exist in several places at once. These places include my physical desk in my office in Brunei, and connections to virtual places too. I can even reach people in Pennsylvania through FaceTime or Skype. At the same time, my photographs, digital art and videos define not only the time and space which I have traveled but also myself and my psyche. My adoration of timeless moments also reveals itself through my Taoist/Buddhist contemplation: I pursue my existence through personal experience of forms, colours and space in my art.

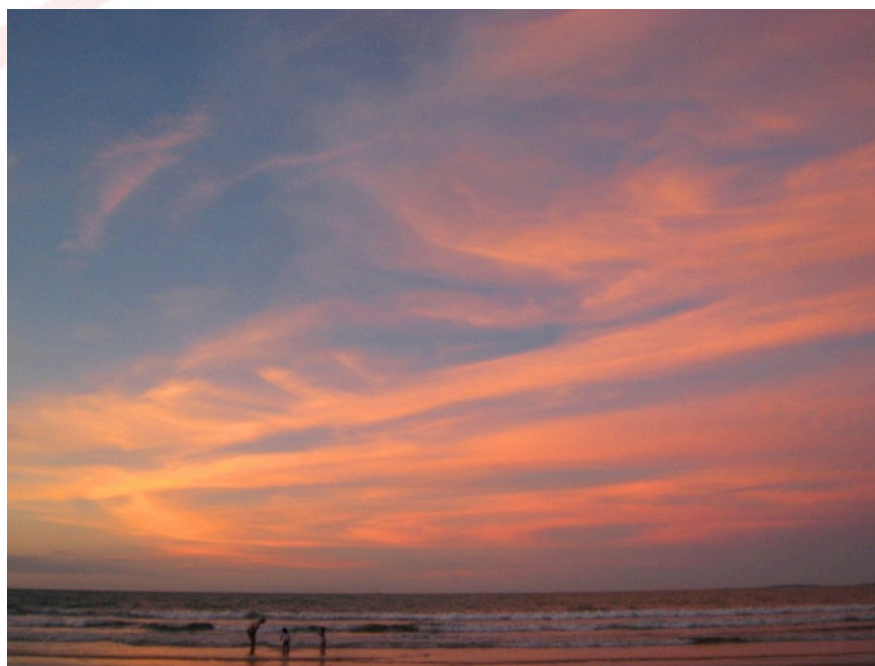


Figure 3: Kong Ho. *Muara Sunset*, 2012. Digital print, 15"H x 20"W

III. Infinite Space

In addition to my complex spiral digital art, memoiristic digital photographs and dissolving motion video installation, I also have continued to work on my paintings in my ongoing "Cycle Series". This series evolved out of my 2002 transitional painting entitled *Beauty of Complexity*, shown in Figure 4, which exemplifies the theme of the interconnectedness of nature. The work is painted in a semi-abstract symbolic style. Sumptuously painted in a technique consisting of painterly drips, splatters and collages held in check by subtly controlled washes of glaze and exacting trompe l'oeil objects, this painting shows the importance of the acrylic media as a means for exploring both concepts and process. The spiral compositions and imagery in this series of paintings are meant to not only be striking in their color schemes and textural interplay, but also to be practical in the sense that my imagery can help to guide me through my life experiences.



Figure 4: Kong Ho. *Beauty of Complexity*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 50"H x 50"W

Although I used the image of bisected nautilus shells with mathematical beauty, along with Chinese ancient jade discs with a Taoist sense of harmony in my early paintings, I have revived my use of these objects and given them a more contemporary feel though my use of a contrasting color schemes and the introduction of other symbolic images, such as Buddhist lotus and leaves, the scientific icon of DNA double helix, smiling Buddha faces, floating marbles, flying ribbons, burning flames, drifting clouds, and wafting, petal-like boat hulls, and Chinese numbers in a square format and dark shallow escaping holes. In my 2008 meditative symbolic painting, *Lapping Expansion of Blue Life*, shown in Figure 5, I intended to express my pursuit of impermanence and infinite space through the use of lotus flowers. These flowers are a Buddhist symbol of clarity and they express consciousness arising from the mud of ignorance. In a sense, lotus and other symbols enable me to create art that hopefully serves the dual purposes of assisting myself and the viewers to simultaneously better understand both the natural and human made world, and our position in it.



Figure 5: Kong Ho. *Lapping Expansion of Blue Life*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 30"H x 30"W

When I look at my work more deeply, I realize that I have internalized the influences of Chinese traditional art and the Taoist-Buddhist philosophy as a means for understanding the world around me. After I began my "Cycle Series," I became more comfortable about incorporating Chinese pictorial devices and Taoist-Buddhist symbols in my work. *Golden Nautilus Roams with Smiling Buddha*, one of my 2008 spiritual paintings, shown in Figure 6, represented a synthesis of three symbolic images, including a Buddha portrait, a bisected nautilus shell and a blossoming lotus. Interestingly, the use of these symbols has brought me tranquility while painting, and I think my calmer state of mind has helped me to create paintings that are very energetic in expression, but at the same time are also harmonious. The Buddha's smile revealed in this painting suggests a kind of self-awakening from our egotism. I share Robert Thurman's interpretation of Buddha's smile in his foreword of Baas's book *Smile of the Buddha*: "He cannot force us to awaken, or inject us with Buddhahood, so to speak; he can only stimulate our imagination so that we may become inspired to employ appropriate methods of wisdom and compassion to accelerate our evolution toward enlightenment." (Thurman, 2005, p. xiii)



Figure 6: Kong Ho. *Golden Nautilus Roams with Smiling Buddha*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 30"H x 30"W

Another feature of the "Cycle Series," are the works asymmetrical compositions. I have manipulated the composition by offsetting the symbolic motifs, including the bisected nautilus shell, the Chinese jade disc, the blossoming lotus and/or enlightening Buddha portrait against the angular edges of the squared off canvas. It is my intention to create some tension in my other wise harmonious work by playing contrasting forms against a rigid or formally balanced square format. It has long been recognized that culture influences the development of language, pattern recognition, and concept of numbers. The use of a square format in my recent work is meant to correspond to the notion of Chinese characters, which are square in structure. The Chinese characters appeared in my 2011 painting, *True Nature of Philosophy*, shown in Figure 7, symbolize the rational and intuitive understanding of the world around us. In any numerical order, there is always a constant pattern, which we can count on. We depend on our rational mind to explain natural phenomenon. However, nature is more than the sum of infinite causes and effects. Sometimes, there is a certain unknown order in chaos, which our rational minds cannot comprehend. At the same time, our intuitive minds can figure out the truth without conscious reasoning. The cyclic order of flux may not be obvious in the first gaze. However, if viewers contemplate my work as a whole, then they may be aware of the hidden pattern behind the complex pictorial space.



Figure 7: Kong Ho. *True Nature of Philosophy*, 2011. Acrylic & collage on canvas, 19.5"H x 19.5"W

Besides the Chinese numerical characters, I have also chosen the blossoming lotus as one of my significant symbols in my recent work because of its spectacular shape and color as well as its sophisticated symbolic meaning of purity and enlightenment in Buddhism. The beauty of a blossoming lotus has always been admired in Chinese culture and it is the most popular subject matter in traditional Chinese ink paintings. Its lustrous quality represents the striving and inspiring virtues of an individual away from the earthly environment, especially under the Confucian norms. I am attracted to blossoming lotus because of their unique aesthetic forms and association with Buddhist transcendental meaning. It brings beauty and pure out from the muddy darkness at the bottom of the pond. By merging the blossoming lotus with bisected nautilus shell, I create a unique form to reveal the essential subtlety of Chinese art as well as the transcendental thought of Taoist/Buddhist philosophy with a more contemporary context.

The Taoist principle of yin and yang and Buddhist eightfold path of wisdom may not be manifested in the surface of my work, and viewers without a Chinese background or Buddhist understanding may not understand the meaning of Chinese characters or Buddhist symbols in my work. However, the dissolving imagery of the bisected nautilus shell, blossoming lotus, Buddhist leaf and unknown Chinese characters always suggests the transitory nature and constant change within my work.

Further interest is added to the composition through the articulation of the segments of the bisected nautilus shell, the carving pattern of jade disc and/or the linear texture of lotus petals. Rhythmic movement is created from a simultaneous growth and dissolution of nautilus shell, jade disc and lotus with the background. A sense of fundamental transformation for which no beginning and end can be discovered

evolves from this body of work. Contrasting colors with spontaneous splashing marks and precisely rendered symbolic images or collages as well as improvised random patterns and orders, add to the feeling of engagement with, rather than separation from, my lived experience of Eastern and Western cultures and transcendental belief in Buddhist/Taoist thought.

IV. Conclusion

Just as with everything else in life, the images in my art appear to have fluid meanings and even to take on different physical characteristics when one looks carefully at the structure of the work and contemplates the image as a whole. *Transfigured Innocence*, one of my 2012 paintings, shown in Figure 8, reveals the synthesis of double Heliconias, bisected nautilus shell and a hidden map of Brunei. The new local typical floral image and map combined with my previous symbols, and bisected nautilus shell, provide a new dimension or meaning to my current living environment. On one level, my paintings, photographs, digital art and videos can also be considered as visual interpretations of the Taoist order of nature and Buddhist spiritual enlightenment because my art reflects the spirit or essence of the Buddhist/Taoist philosophy. This belief states that there exists a harmonious wholeness and eternal order that connects human beings to nature and to the Yin and Yang forces that govern the cosmos, which is beyond time and space.



Figure 8: Kong Ho. *Transfigured Innocence*, 2012. Acrylic & collage on canvas, 19.5"H x 19.5"W

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