

**NATURAL SINGULARITY: AN EXPLORATION IN DAOIST PHILOSOPHY
AND PAINTING TO REPRESENT THE FABRIC OF THE UNIVERSE**

by
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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Fine Arts with Distinction.

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ABSTRACT

This body of work, like the world, is the result of an additive process with infinite possibilities. It is a continuous effort to translate abstract ideas into visual images, thus opening an environment of conceptual landscapes beyond the tangible world. The work primarily relates to string theory, Daoist philosophy, and forms found in the natural world. The spiritual half, Daoist philosophy, believes that all beings influence each other, creating an ever-changing balance. String theory, the scientific half, proposes that all matter is composed of the same material: immeasurable vibrating strings. In order to express these ideas, the oil the paintings are built from abstract line, form, and color referencing aspects of nature, movements, as well as the interconnectivity of all things and events. Together these core ideas allow the process and the work to be both spiritual and scientific in nature.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

I am inviting you on a journey through the mindsets and processes I have been exploring for the past year. It all started with the awakening of various abstract ideas: cycle, fundamentality, elements, rebirth, causation, interconnectivity, singularity, and motion. Mediating on these ideas resulted in a new way of visualizing the world around me: the breaking down of form, expressive color, the disintegration of reality, linear paths, and, to put it simply, abstraction.

Using these points, I began to establish an idea of the world; it is an enormous and beautiful living landscape that is constantly moving, breathing, and in flux. Each part of the world, from trees to oceans to microbes to humans, is drastically different yet made of the same basic structures to form a seamless, infinite reality. If you look closely enough, you can see and feel objects in motion such that they become events. For example, when a star shoots across the sky or when the sun rises and sets. All of this exists within infinite motion on a macrocosmic and microcosmic scale, as beings interact with each other to share space and time.

The work is primarily consists of oil paintings that talk about process, movement, and the materiality of paint. By meditating on the themes mentioned above, the work

naturally developed a certain flow and energy. I am using the flow of energy as a vehicle to think about the whys and hows of the world in order to help answer questions about existence. The process involved with creating these paintings has been very spontaneous: they are rarely planned but instead fall into place. The process is instinctual as I built up the material in each piece. I am exploring and creating my own landscapes of what I image the fundamental make-up of the universe to look like.

Chapter 2

IDEAS

“Everything in the universe follows certain patterns and processes that escape precise definition: imprecisely, the is called Dao (the Way).” –Laozi

The Spiritual: Daoist Philosophy and Eliadic Theory

Dao, which can be translated as ‘path’ or ‘way’, is a concept that is difficult to define. As stated in the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, “The tao that can be told/is not the eternal Tao./The name that can be named/is not the eternal Name.”¹ In other words, to explain it is to distort its meaning. It must be experienced in order to be truly understood. Dao can best be described as ‘process’ or ‘the way in which things proceed’. Each entity in the universe can be seen as an event that moves through time and space, proceeding in a manner that is unique to it. Each entity has a way in which it can exist perfectly, without inference from other entities. However, considering that nothing can exist in a vacuum, entities have no choice but to interfere with each other. Therefore, creating an infinitely spanning web of actions and reactions, causes and effects, etc.

The concept of yin yang also plays an important role in my work. This Daoist model is represented by the circular symbol shown below. The symbol is a mirror image of itself where the sides are polar opposites. The curved line that separates them expresses that the sides are constantly in flux, while the complementary dots convey that neither side can exist without the other. When something reaches one extreme it is immediately counteracted by its complement to achieve balance. This notion supports that everything is in constant motion and that each moment is connected.

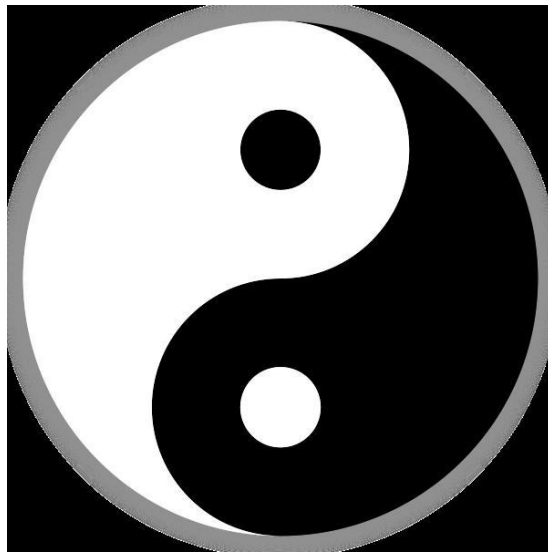


Figure 2.1 Yin Yang²

The writings of Mircea Eliade represent another branch of philosophical thought that I have incorporated in my work. In his book, *The Sacred and The Profane*, he outlines the criteria for religion, or spirituality, such that it can be differentiated from the non-religious world. The sacred “founds the world in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the work “³ to separate it from the profane, or chaos. This distinction begins by establishing the center of the world, also known as the axis mundi.

At this point, earth and the ethereal are connected and supported. It is what organizes the world and removes it from chaos.

In my work, I was able to draw visual connections through these two ideas. As previously mentioned, each Dao can be thought of as an individual event or being. The interaction of two or more beings produces many results and therefore, affects other beings. Each event or being can be seen as a node in a web. Each node, or moment of interaction, is at the center of these causal relationships. It is the origin point, as defined by Elide, where all other things come into being. The strands that hold the web together represent a series of causal relationships that emerge from the nodes. The line work and forms in the paintings represent the strands and the energy that comes from them. This energy also supports the concept of yin yang in that events are connected and constantly in motion.

The Scientific: String Theory and Fractal Geometry

Even though my research is heavily focused on spiritual and philosophical characteristics, I still recognize that science and logic play an important role in the makeup of the universe. While studying nature, it was easy to come across examples of the Golden Ratio or fractal geometry that appears in everything from flowers to tree branches to seashells.

As I dove further into the scientific research, I stumbled across string theory. String theory, also known as the Theory of Everything, proposes that all matter in the universe is comprised of tiny, one-dimensional oscillating strings. Strings vibrate at various frequencies such that their collective movement unifies to create different forms of matter.⁴ If true, this theory opens up infinite possibilities, including the unification of general relativity and quantum mechanics. Considering that we do not have any way of empirically testing string theory, it remains as just that: a theory. However, the similarities between Daoist philosophy, string theory, and my personal worldviews make exploring their connection relevant to my research.

I also draw visual inspiration from fractal geometry. A fractal is “a rough or fragmented geometric shape that can be split into parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole”.⁵ With each part reproducing and dividing off, this process creates a pattern of infinite growth. I am especially interested in fractals that can be found in nature. On a finite scale, it is easy to observe the self-similar nature in river networks, broccoli, snowflakes, and systems of blood vessels. I use the idea of finite fractals when creating the line work in my paintings: each line typically steams from a large line and the composition grows outwards from there. Fractals can also be seen in a digital environment with the aid of computer simulations. Through these simulations we can experience its growth and movement.

The Artistic: Line, Form, and Color

While drawing conclusions between the Spiritual and the Scientific sides of my research, I began solving biggest problem of all: how does one express this in a purely visual format? Abstraction became an obvious choice for several reasons. Daoism, string theory, etc., can be abstracted and interpreted in many different ways. Even though the artist still has specific ideas that he or she would like to communicate, abstract art allows the viewer to draw their own conclusions about the work. Looking back in history to Modernism, most abstract artists choose to boil down elements of design to create clearer yet more conceptual and universal meanings. Throughout this body of work, I have focused on utilizing three elements of design: line, form, and color.

Line is defined as the path from a point and provides a sense of form with its width and length, but does not represent depth. It is typically the first element of design that is taught in beginning art classes and provides a foundation for all other elements that follow. For this reason, line is one of the most effective ways to display interconnectivities. The line work can represent the scientific strings, as they move throughout the composition and change in sizes and shapes depending on which part of the image the viewer is looking at. Because the line work often fills the composition, it can be seen as the building blocks of the image.

To put this element in Daoist terms, the lines can also represent the energy of the events taking place. As the lines flow, they intersect with other lines to form new moments. From those moments new paths of being arise. Like events in the real world,

the interference experienced from intersecting lines impacts its nature of being: an intersection may cause a change in direction or a shift in color. Although each individual brush stroke possesses its own characteristics, it would be impossible for it to exist without the others. In a sense, the line represents the world in a microcosmically: if we look deep into the larger forms of the world, it is these processes that make them possible.

Form is the representation of a three dimensional object. Line is what makes form possible; yet form also gives line context in that it provides depth through its use of light and dark values. Form also lends itself well to painting in that brush strokes easily create larger areas of value. My work deals with form in a variety of ways, all of which produce organic forms that are meant to mimic natural environments. The forms in these paintings are the result of the line: they are produced from events or from being. It is what the naked eye sees when it looks out onto a landscape or up into the sky. To complement the line, form is the macrocosm and represents matter.

Color is the “the essence of light”⁶ as it is the way light reflects off a surface. Throughout art history, color has been used as a way of communicating raw emotion, therefore is the most expressive of the design elements. It carries great weight, as some colors recede into the background and others move forward, depending on their combination. Colors can invoke a variety of emotions and “produce [a] corresponding spiritual vibration”⁷. According to Kandisky, “it is necessary for the artist to know the starting point for the exercise of his spirit. The starting point is the study of colour and its effects on men”⁷.

If one were to sort through my tubes of paint, he or she would find that I own mostly primary colors: red, blue, and yellow, in addition to white and black. These colors are the basis of all other color; from them, one can mix orange, purple, and green. And from those colors, one can mix countless tones of those colors as well as numerous brown tones. Each color also has a complement: red versus green, blue versus orange, or yellow versus purple. In each combination is a warm hue, which moves towards the viewer, and cool hue, which retreats. This results in two equal yet opposite movements that when combined properly, create a balance.

Chapter 3

THE WORK

Summer: Line, Color, and Establishing a Studio Practice

My investigation of these ideas began over the summer through my participation in the Undergraduate Research Summer Scholars program. For the summer, I focused much of my conceptual energy towards studying Daoism and string theory. In the studio, I worked on establishing my studio practice while experimenting with paint and composition. Color and line were the two design elements that I focused on the most. *Earth Lines* was the first large painting I completed over the summer. The primary goal of this piece was to create several layers of line work and thin washes of color such that each layer would subtly interact with the one below it.

In *Earth Lines*, I was striving to create ties to the tangible, natural environment while still creating an abstract work. The painting began with a layer of thin washes in various neutral earth tones. After allowing the wash to fully dry, I began to work in a thin pattern of abstract line work in white. The white was intended to pick up the color and densities of the next wash, which was in blue, in order to create a greater sense of depth.



Figure 3.1 *Earth Lines* oil on canvas 34"x37"

About half way through the piece, I decided to revive the bright, primary colors I had been using in previous paintings. If these lines were meant to represent the basis for all matter or all living things, then the colors should also represent color in its most basic form. Therefore, the second, thicker layer of line work was done in a light blue and then covered with a very thin yellow wash. I applied thicker red lines and then wiped them from the surface, creating a fog over the image that actually assisted the two layers of lines to better merge together. This painting achieves a surprising sense of depth as well as a strong use of color, making it a transitional cornerstone piece for my summer work.

As my studio practice progressed, I found myself jumping from one painting to another and often working on three to five canvases at once. Some of my smaller experiments, which I later called *Atmoscapes*, became an important practice that would inform later, larger works. I was looking for a greater connection to my work, something that would be directly influenced by the energy that I felt within myself. With an abundance of paint on hand, I began applying large amounts raw paint onto the canvas and moving it around with my hands: smearing, throwing, and scratching it to create form. These forms began to represent abstract motion: what the atmosphere or wind currents would look like. They also resemble landscapes: mountains and rolling hills over flat lands. These paintings also consist of primary colors alone, although they occasionally mix to produce secondary colors, expressing the most basic way to break down understanding.



Figure 3.2 *Atmoscape III* oil on board 38''x18''

Blue Skies was the most successful painting of the summer and undoubtedly informed paintings in the semester to come. For this piece, I began to think more specifically about nature and hoped to depict an aspect of it in a more traditional, realistic way. The forms and movement of clouds directly inspired this painting. The under painting began with French ultramarine, cobalt blue, and white: colors that can be observed in the actual sky by a passive viewer. To create a greater sense of depth, cadmium red and cadmium yellow were thrown into the mix. These additions also allowed for a wider range of value and tone, thus creating a wider range of hues. By the end, I had established a bright white center surrounded by darker areas.

When the under painting had dried, I began the line work. The placement and direction of the lines was influenced by the organic brushstrokes and colors in the under painting. The line work represents the interconnectivity of the clouds, sky, and air and water that they are comprised of. The colors of the lines were made to be slightly darker

or richer than the color underneath. They remain somewhat subtle but still draw a clear path. In this painting, everything converges at the center and falls into brilliant white light.



Figure 3.3 *Blue Skies* oil on board 48"x32"

Fall: Material and Energy

During the fall semester, my goals were to continue working with the ideas and techniques I had been using over the summer. I was also working to refine them in order

to gain a more specific understanding of what painting can do and why it is the most effective medium to express my ideas.

Through the beginning of the fall, I continued making more small experiments, much like the *Atmoscape* paintings. In these *Experiments*, I continued using straight, thick paint and applied it with my hands. However, the color and compositions of these paintings changed. These paintings were not limited to the primary colors, but instead included a variety of colors and tones including green, white, and brown.

Compositionally, they no longer resembled landscapes or atmospheres at all. Rather, they are swirling circular forms, converging and diverging at the center of the frame. It became apparent that the techniques I was using in these small paintings needed to move into the large pieces.



Figure 3.4 *Experiment II* oil on board 12"x16"



Figure 3.5 *Experiment III* oil on board 12"x16"

The first large-scale painting I completed this fall is entitled *Black Holes/Dark Matter*. For this piece, I decided to focus on more specific subject matter. Considering that much of my inspiration comes from telescopic images of the universe, this painting focuses on depicting the structure of dark matter and its relationship to black and white holes. Thinking back to the bright center in *Blue Skies*, I decided to entertain the idea of multiple centers as a way of representing a variety of origin points of energy. The hypothetical concepts surrounding black and white holes became pertinent, as they are both points at which matter is either attracted or repulsed.

The red line work that surrounds the holes is based on a computer-simulated image of what dark matter may look like. In theory, dark matter is the black space that the universe is made of. It is everything that does not emit some sort of light. Although it appears to be nothing, it is still some form of matter that everything is suspended in. The image I was basing my line work from represents dark matter as a dense, complex web that extends infinity into space.



Figure 3.6 *Black Holes Dark/Matter* oil on canvas 56"x56"

Although the image portrays this web as sharp and jagged, my line work took on a more organic form. Even though it was a somewhat subconscious decision, the formation of the line work mimics the shape and arrangement of the orbs, causing them to be unquestionably related. As the lines start to disappear they enter the orbs and reappear on the way out. Energy is established, bringing the viewer in and out of the painting while also moving the eye continuously around the frame. Although a successful piece overall, I was starting to feel that I needed something more out of painting as a medium and that I needed to push my levels of experimentation.

Air was the second large scale painting I completed and not only does it continue to speak to ideas of nature, process, and energy, it also resolves issues surrounding the materiality of paint and gravity. Creating this painting became a personal struggle. I continued to ask myself why these ideas were important and why expressing them through painting was important while questioning whether my current methods were remaining effective. Of all the pieces in this body of work, this painting went through the most amount of change.

Starting was difficult, it became a push and pull of applying thick paint for texture while working in washes of primary colors and attempting to establish some line work. Even with all of these stylistic elements piling up, the composition was falling flat. While creating this painting, I finally felt myself removed from it in that I stopped thinking about every color or brushstroke, but instead simply acted upon the canvas:

Therefore the Master/acts without doing anything/and teaches without saying anything./Things arise and she lets them come;/things disappear and she lets them go./She has but doesn't possess,/acts but doesn't expect./When her work is done, she forgets it./That is way it lasts forever.¹

Energy and gravity took hold of this painting. I applied layer upon layer of dark colors, black, brown, blue, purple, and light colors: red, white, yellow. The only goal was to maintain the light center, as it was the establishing point of the piece. Due to the built up energy I felt during the process, the act of making the painting fell into an intense, raw energy that was effectively translated in the final product.



Figure 3.7 *Air* oil on canvas 57"x51.5"

The colors that blend throughout the background remain lighter at the top and fall into darkness towards the bottom, allowing the piece to weigh the viewer down with it. These colors represent the atmosphere that surrounds us; constantly changing to become something new at every moment. The overlying line work represents this energy, weaving in and out of each other as they are pulled into the middle. At the center, there is a white light representing the origin point or the perfect Dao. Through the white, reds and blues can be seen underneath and yellow overtop: the presence of these colors communicate that this is a point at which all energy converges.

Air undoubtedly set the tone for paintings to come and flowed almost seamlessly into my next painting: *Origin*. Instead of building the composition as I went, I solidified it in the first step by carving it out of modeling paste on the surface of the canvas. The main focus was to create an energy that mimicked an explosion, evoking that of volcanic eruption. By applying the modeling paste with my hands, I was able to create several different textures and forms. Towards the bottom, there are more sweeping, curved forms that repulse each other while a denser, chopper texture raise from them at the top.

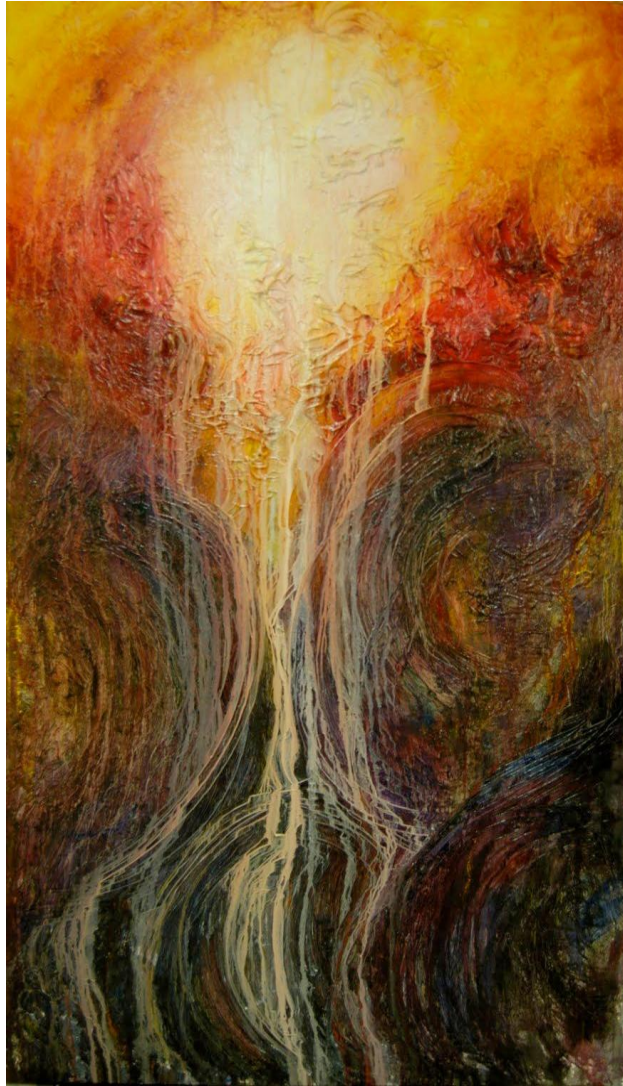


Figure 3.8 *Origin* oil on canvas

With the painting standing upright, I began to paint into the surface with thin washes of color. Building one layer at a time, I allowed the paint to drip down the surface. The paint flowed in certain paths that were determined by the modeling paste. The liquid sometimes pooled on top of thicker areas or flowed through areas, as if it were a river flowing along a canal. My goal was to use color as a way of creating conflicting yet complementing energy between the light and dark areas. In the final piece, there is a white circle surrounded by yellows and reds. The white drips down the center of the painting, bringing the viewers eye down into the darker portion of the

image: layers of red, purple, blue, and black. The white paint flows through a curved opening bringing the eye back up into the piece. This effect expresses the dualistic nature of the piece, it seems that the light is flowing down into the darkness as well as emerging from it.

Winter: Mountain Ranges and Reflections

Over winter session, I completed one large-scale painting, *Water*, and started *Mountain Waves*. I was also awarded to opportunity to display my work in my first solo show at Homegrown Café on Main Street. Not only was it an excellent way to gain some exposure but also allowed me to reflect on my work, piece by piece, as I prepared it for the show.

While working on *Water*, I used techniques similar to my last few paintings from the fall. I established the composition with a thick layer of modeling paste by moving it around the canvas with my hands. Because the canvas was square, the composition became circular in the center with a sweeping, spiraling form surrounding it. This spiral resembled an ocean wave. Considering I was working with very thin paint, I began thinking about the fluidity of energy. I constantly changed the position of the canvas during the process: sometimes it was lying down on the floor to create pools of liquid and sometimes it was standing to allow gravity to pull the paint down.



Figure 3.9 *Water* oil on canvas 48"x48"

Similar to *Origin*, the bottom of the piece is dark blue and black, representing water. The top of the piece is light, mostly yellow and red. However, in this piece the center began the lightest, white point. This white center gives the viewer a place to orient him or herself. From there, one can follow the spiral towards the sky, back down into the water, and then back up into the sky again. The flow of energy in this piece expresses

dualist values as a cycle. Within the cycle are two extremes that constantly feed into one another to maintain balance.

Simultaneously, I was working on a very large painting that is about eleven feet long and five feet tall, *Mountain Waves*. This piece not only represents the culmination of my body of work you have seen but what I am also hoping to be a new chapter in my work. The preliminary modeling paste work was loosely based on satellite images of mountain ranges.

I spent a great portion of the winter preparing my work for the show at Homegrown. This was not only an educational experience in making my work presentable, but also looking at everything as a full body of work. Even the work in that show that pre-dates this thesis revealed ideas and techniques I still find myself using. While looking at two pieces from my junior year, one informed how I am using form and thinking about the flow of energy in my current work. Meanwhile, a separate piece served as a starting point for my line work and was also the largest painting I had completed at that point. The most striking similarity I came across was between *Blue Skies* and *Air*. Although drastically different in many ways, they are almost identical in others. Both were comprised of similar compositions, with the central light point, and indistinguishable line work.

By looking at my work as a whole, I realized that I was successfully creating a cohesive body of work. Moving forward, I knew what aspects to take with me, what aspects to leave behind, and what aspects to further explore.

Spring: Tying The Loose Strings

For the spring semester, I began to outline the final objectives of this thesis. With the year coming to a close, it was time to focus on completing my final paintings and writing the thesis. As you can see, the writing portion was successful. Over the course of the remaining semester, I focused most of my energy on one piece, *Mountain Waves*.

Like with my last few paintings, I started by applying modeling paste and forming it into mountain-like ranges and peaks. These forms create curved paths that drop off into flatness and then link back up with each other over the landscape. Once the modeling paste dried, I applied numerous layers of color washes: starting with the primary colors, then secondary colors, then back to primary colors. By layering the color this way, they mix on the canvas and result in a greater range of tones. Considering that this piece spent most of its life hanging on the wall, gravity took hold of the painting causing it to drip in and around the texture.



Figure 3.10 *Mountain Waves* oil and modeling paste on canvas 11'x5'

Before applying the last few layer of wash, I removed the canvas from the wall and laid it on the floor. Once on the floor, I cut the canvas so that it was no longer a rectangle, but an organic form outlining the motion of the textured forms. By doing this, the painting begins to step out of the realm of “painting” and becomes an “object”. This formation allows the viewer to, literally, see outside the box, so to speak. Instead of being restricted to four corners, it is possible that something exists beyond the image.

Another important detail to note about this piece is the lack of organic line work. The usual line work was also not included in *Origin*. However, I feel that this is an important corner that my work in turning. Although the line work very clearly expressed my ideas, the precision they require does not lend itself as well to painting as it would to drawing. Instead, the thick texture and the flowing color act as a way to imply the movement that the line work would be expressing. The ideas of movement and energy are still there but are articulated in a more expressive, painterly manner.



Figure 3.11 *Mountain Waves* alternate angles

I feel that this final painting serves as a satisfying conclusion to this body of work while simultaneously opening a new door for future work. After spending a great deal of time contemplating what painting is and how best to use it, removing the painting from its traditional home on the wall gives it new meaning. The work is now in the viewer's space and allows for a more direct experience. It is no longer a distant, ethereal void on the wall but an object that interacts with the world it exists in.

Chapter 4

EVERYTHING IS A PROCESS

Over the course of the year, I feel I have fulfilled the goals I set out for myself. I have created a cohesive body of work that speaks to my personal ideals and values. Each piece is distinctly different yet relates to each other piece within the body of work. However, the body of work is just a representation of all the skills I have learned by composing it. By placing a great deal of importance on my process, I learned how to establish and modify a studio practice to fit my needs. Through this studio practice, I discovered several paint mediums and various techniques in handling them.

The paintings themselves took a variety of interesting turns. With each semester, my work reached a new threshold. Technically, I achieved my goal of merging the thin washes and delicate line work with the more aggressive thick material. Once this merger was achieved, I learned that paint was not the best medium for such precise line work. Allowing gravity to control the liquid paint suggests the energy the lines once represented. Moving the canvas off the wall is another very important progression in how the work is displayed. I produced large-scale paintings to create a more all-encompassing experience for the viewer by using thick material to move the painting out of the two dimensional realm. Taking the painting off the wall allows it to truly enter the viewer's space resulting in a more personal experience.

While creating this body of work, I have also opened my mind up to many new ideas. By exploring the philosophical and scientific theories my research covered, I became aware of an array of other concepts I hope to explore in future work. For instance, my interest in Daoism has rekindled my curiosity for other spiritualities, such as Buddhism, Paganism, and other ancient religions. By studying string theory, I have transcended out of my comfort zone and hope to explore more areas of science and mathematics as they relate to my work.

I do not see the completion of this thesis as the end, but as one more step into my artistic exploration of the world. In the future, I hope to continue exploring these ideas and techniques as well as inviting new ones into my practice. Everything is a process, constantly moving, constantly changing, and never ending.

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APPENDIX A: SUPPORTING IMAGES



Figure A.1 *Empty Vessel* oil on canvas



Figure A.2 *Breathe* oil on canvas 7'9"x4'2"



Figure A.3 *Natural Lines*: Blue oil on canvas



Figure A.4 *Fire oil on board*



Figure A.5 *Experiment I* oil on board 12"x16"



Figure A.6 *Experiment: Photography oil on canvas 20"x16"*

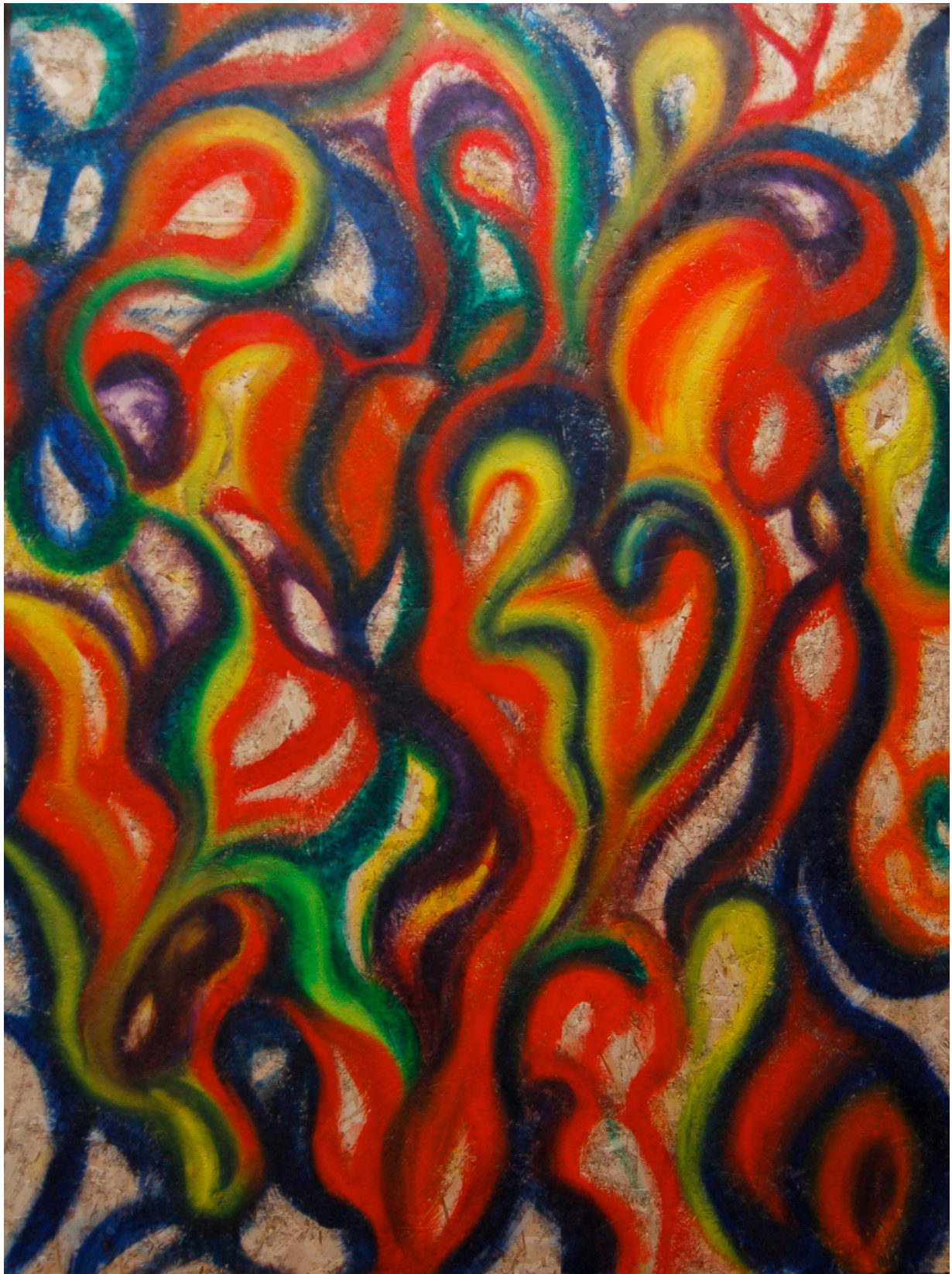


Figure A.7 *Particle Board Universe II* oil board 3'x4'



Figure A.8 *Experiment: Crayons oil on canvas*

APPENDIX B: SENIOR THESIS SHOW

The following images serve as documentation of the 2010 Senior Thesis Showing featuring work by Anne Yoncha and myself. The show took place in the Recitation Hall Gallery on Friday, May 7, 2010. Anne Yoncha's thesis, *The Universal Story: A Painted Investigation of Figures Within Their Surroundings Based Daoism and Native American Philosophy*, is very similar yet distinctly different to my thesis in terms of concept and imagery. Combining our work in one space created an interesting representation of how two artists can share analogous philosophies but still produce diverse results.







