

The Archaeology of Being

An Exploration of Emergence

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“It is easy to appreciate the idea of Tao, but quite another matter to give it form,” Li Yu.

“Consciousness is, indeed, the true event of any exhibition,” - Rene Denizot.

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Abstract

The Archaeology of Being explores the nature of emergence—depicting the way being materializes from non-being (literally and metaphorically) through paint, print, and digital techniques. Drawing from philosophy, science and visual art, I attempt to unpack the point at which something takes form, in conversation with the semiotics of anthropology and Taoism. By carefully arranging visual components in layers, each piece offers a glimpse into the ethereal connection between form and the spark which initiates and combines. Through the layers themselves, I open dialogue with the nature of interconnection, analyzing the originating space where all substance takes root.

Visual elements in the show can be viewed in their entirety, yet allow the viewer to peel back individual moments, offering a virtual archaeological dig of the combination and recombination of elements. As scholar Robert Wenger says, “Archaeological excavators and visual artists are involved in a process of image formation. They not only document and replicate the appearance of things, but also make ideas, concepts, and experiences visible” (Wenger 35). Moving beyond mimetic representation, the esoteric becomes visible within a new visual vocabulary.

Being from Non-being (Introduction)

Taoist and Buddhist monks were traditionally taught to paint as a form of internal cultivation. The sensitivity and awareness required for careful, balanced work invited enlightenment—a perfect, integrated awareness and understanding of all things. Brush strokes were more than ink applied to rice paper. They contained the very elements of living form: bone, nerve, flesh, blood, and Qi (vital breath or spirit), generating a wholly realized organism with ground pigment and mindful intent: forming being from non-being (Da-Wei 63). Painting became a conduit of creation, generating matter from non-matter through carefully delivered marks and conscious arrangement. As living lines combined to generate a complete thought, the thought itself was infused with life, activated within painted marks and the viewer's eye.

Painting and printmaking were formal methods of cultivating body and mind, while expressing emotion through a symbolic vocabulary. The Chinese literati of the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE) made no distinction between poetry, calligraphy and painting. All were outward manifestations of the same internal force—ways of exploring and revealing the subtle, the indescribable, the extraordinary. All mediums had the potential to create from nothingness—a concept not limited to the sacred arts of Asia, though rarely explored in the West. Expressionists like Paul Klee, heavily influenced by the arts of China and Japan, worked with these concepts, using art to make the invisible *visible*. Klee discarded realistic representation in order to access spiritual (and even scientific) subtlety (Klee 2), a point of determination for my own body of work. When the focus on replicating the visible is released, the artist can develop new ways of expressing the infinite, simultaneously cultivating inner landscape and outer connection.

Since the very nature of creating line can result in “living” forms, line can also describe the idea of oneness (Dai-Wei 63). The religious philosophy of Taoism is partially focused on the idea of the One—the notion that all things are one, we only perceive there to be more than one *thing* in the world.

Lao Tzu says of this relationship, “non-being gives birth to the oneness. The oneness gives birth to yin and yang. Yin and Yang give birth to heaven, earth, and beings. Heaven, earth, and beings give birth to everything in existence” (Walker 42). We identify our *self* as singular, and everything which is not us as separate, yet all things are literally composed of the same atomic particles. Elephants, desks, coffee mugs, mayflies, rocks, you and I—we are shaped from the same palette of atoms and elements, composed from the same finite chains. Only the outward expression of form is different; the natural arrangement that decides which collection of bits becomes an apple and which a tiger: “The world is formed from the void, like utensils from a block of wood” (Mitchell 28). The way atoms, elements, and strings of elements combine is what determines the external form, in science and in art.

By recognizing significant patterns of existence, from the smallest repetitions to the grandest landscapes, even the supposedly trivial events and objects we encounter everyday become steles marking the sacred and numinous, evidence that being is always emerging from a state of non-being, taking form, and eventually dissolving back into component parts. When this idea is applied to visual art, it invites a unity of the visible (literal marks and materials) with the invisible (the spiritual concept behind each mark, the generational spark). Art becomes philosophy and microscope in one motion.

The generation of visual art is remarkably similar to the generation of form. The physical ingredients (paper, canvas, ink, paint, plate, clay) are arranged, combined, and layered like periodic elements. The artist literally uses the various “atomic elements” of art to make new. Each material is itself literally composed of the very real atomic associations that also create other components (and the artist his or herself). Chains and elements become new outward expressions as the artist arranges being in space, the way patterning in nature results in particular *things*.

Humans have attempted to explain this spark, this collective emergence of forms, through religion, philosophy and science—though a final, complete manifestation of truth eludes us. The method of cataloging the conceptual (yet very real) phenomena of formation from non-matter is mostly

abstract. Science provides blueprints, mathematical patterns of creation and matter, but visual representation of the single point where a thing becomes a thing, an idea an idea, where matter emerges from non-matter, is challenging. How do we analyze a moment? How do we visualize the whole and its minutia—each part itself a whole containing more parts? To see the parts and the whole, all things tied together simultaneously, is where a marriage of science, art and the humanities might be useful.

Contemporary interdisciplinary science is working toward a “Theory of Everything” a way of describing the subtleties of existence and the web that unites all moments (Capra xviii, 4) (Hawking 119) . While this approach is new to the Western sciences, it's essentially a reiteration of the “oneness” expressed in Eastern philosophy (and Eastern art). Systems Thinking reverses the antique idea that the whole is the sum of its parts. Instead, it embraces the holistic (vs. mechanistic) view that the whole is *more* than the sum of its parts—that the very fiber of our physical and non-physical world is interdependent (Capra 29). We inhabit a giant network that spans all things, making all things accessible. There is a Taoist saying that relates to this pulling back of the great camera: “if you only look at a square inch of an ox, you won't know it's bigger than a goat,” and in fact, you may not even be able to identify it as an ox at all (Masters 71). If you look only at the parts, you focus too closely and miss the entirety of our universal community.

The emergence of Systems Thinking allowed scientists and philosophers to approach (and answer) some of the most elusive questions of all time: “how did complex structures evolve out of a random collection of molecules?... what is consciousness?” (Capra i). Recognizing the “vital, integrative actions of organisms” (whether biological, social, or conceptual) is primary to this approach, where inter-connectivity, layers, and interrelations between elements are paramount (Capra i-ii). As Lao Tzu says of the universal issuing of form, “to find the origin, trace back the manifestations” (Mitchell 52); the connective movement and tissue can lead to the original spark. Whether part or whole, the understanding that all things are interdependent allows for new methods of interdisciplinary

consideration, the mixed media of the sciences!

Through the creation of *The Archaeology of Being*, I have embraced the idea of network dynamics and Taoist thought. You can view the whole, see the connections and parts within the whole, and see the ever-spiraling wholes contained in each part through a visual paradigm. Using a synthesis of layers, I have attempted to create a virtual network of all things, a codification of being. My goal is to reveal the point at which something takes form, to discuss the way things are connected, how they emerge from the same atomic soup, and how they fall back to return to the recipe. This process of revealing the subtle (and the whole) through visual art is what I call *The Excavation*.

The Excavation (Methodology)

In addition to my research in art and philosophy, archaeology has played a role in my critical development. The very nature of archaeological inquiry is centered on analysis of arrangement, visual and physical elements, whole-part relationships, and context. Through careful examination of visual elements, the origin, lifespan, conceptual development and relative truth of a site is revealed through the analysis of clues: “artifacts by themselves may be beautiful or interesting, but it's when they are viewed in context with the whole that they are important” (Ember 26). Individual artifacts at a dig contain qualities inherent to themselves, though made of the same atomic particles as all other elements, also describing in some way the larger picture. However, as with Systems Thinking, the individual artifact does not recall the mystery of the whole. It functions as an independent element, itself containing importance, while opening a dialogue with its interconnected parts.

Visual artist and scholar Robert Wenger's pivotal essay, “Visual Art, Archaeology and Gestalt” touches some important factors described in *The Archaeology of Being*. He says of discovery, “The artifact at the moment of discovery is like a stone thrown into a quiet pond. Although the striking of stone against water appears to be an isolated event, it creates a sphere of influence that expands

outward to affect the entire pool. The continuum of experience cannot be adequately represented by a static event or object isolated in time and space. It is best understood as a whole that is different from the sum of its parts” (Wenger 35). Like Systems Thinking, the archaeological clue is part of a larger association of elements. The whole is not the sum of its parts, but the result of many associated, connected, and interlaced moments—a community of form. For Wenger, “visual ways of thinking and learning move across, between, and through disciplinary commitments,” becoming a synthesis of all possible approaches (Wenger 35).

Excavation is centered on finding every scrap of evidence at a site, which itself may contain a range from a single moment to the course of centuries, outlined in artifacts and connected chains. The anthropologist becomes aware of the horizontal and vertical location of evidence (Ember 20), reminiscent of elements on the picture plane. The materiality of forms, their relationship in various layers, and the way they are revealed by peeling back the strata can be echoed in formal features within a composition. In this sense, the artist generates the site and the viewer completes the dig.

My work explores the nature of the interconnectedness of matter and form as an expression of being. While embodying living strokes, each composition becomes a visual organism, a complex ruin of data and a living form created from nothing. Through what could be called an archaeological dig of connection, I recognize the ordinary as extraordinary and consider the hidden and esoteric—a shared existence and curious journey through the inner, outer, real and illusionary. I provide visual access to the invisible, allowing the viewer to decipher and process the nature of existence through abstraction. By creating pieces that behave as artifacts with a story to share, I make the viewer a necessary component—the archaeologist who brushes dust from the microscopic elements. Without the viewer, the mysteries remain hidden.

I am interested in ways of expressing the inexpressible, approximating, abstracting, and calling attention to the point of origination, to the intertwined layers that make up body and experience, and to

plant them firmly in the present moment, where the viewer activates the work. What it means to “be” is to experience, to be a whole unit, connected to the rest of the whole. Even within our own bodies, individual cells are made up of smaller units, though they themselves make up larger organs, then a larger being, then a being who interacts with those on the outside. In Taoism, Qi (vital energy) emerges from non-essence and stillness. The state of non-being is associated with quiet and stillness. As yin and yang unite, movement takes over. Since Qi emerges from stillness, stillness is the inherent nature of non-being and movement is the inherent nature of being (Wong 124-125). The use of activity and rest in every part of the exhibit describes this idea, relating it to the whole-part association.

I refer to the pieces as “artifacts.” An artifact for an archaeologist is evidence, or “anything made or modified by humans,” as opposed to things naturally found (Ember, 17). I am expanding the idea of an artifact beyond the limits of human touch, to represent a souvenir of sorts, evidence of the unseen instead of the seen—whether made by human or nature. In a discussion of emergent aesthetics in computer arts, Mihai Nadin describes a related, transformed view of the artifact, “artistic work, more than any other, is probably a projection of the experiential structure of the act of producing artifacts (or events) with qualities socially acknowledged as artistic and values culturally celebrated as aesthetic” (Nadin 43).

Historical Context (Influences)

I have studied traditional Chinese painting for a number of years, and this has provided me with a solid foundation in Taoist and Buddhist sacred arts, and the associated consciousness of art-making. I have also incorporated other non-Western forms of spiritual process, including the traditions of Japan, Egypt, Tibet, India, and Mesopotamia. By exploring practices that emphasize abstraction over realism, I have synthesized ways of describing the philosophical and otherworldly in detail, using methods of abbreviation. A few specific artists I've studied include Shitao, Shen Zhou, Dai Jin, and Ni Tsuan, all of

whom focus on line and energy over mimesis.

German Expressionism also naturally ties into my work, where distillation of form is necessary to visually relate an inner reality. The invisible is more vital than the concrete for artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc and Paul Klee, as they use abstraction to express that which cannot be described through realistic representation. Likewise, Abstract Expressionism, especially the works of Franz Kline, Hans Hoffman and William de Kooning, offer inquiry into the active line. The influence of Asian art (especially the desire to capture the essence, or spirit of the subject over mimetic replication of its form) on their work relates to my studies as an American Expressionist (Monroe 21-23).

Contemporary artists of interest include Shiko Munakata and Brice Marden, generally associated with Minimalism, though also Abstract Expressionism. Munakata's works unite Zen with a living, dynamic line. I have employed versions of his urazaishiki back-painting technique, which itself relates to Chinese painting. For Marden, the strength of mark and movement reveal a specific moment, a vitality I have applied to my approach to depicting motion in space.

Method

Layers are vital to the structure of *The Archaeology of Being*. Through them, I provide a literal expression of the association between part and whole—and printmaking is an excellent vehicle for layered compositions. Printmaking itself can express connectivity through interactive moments. It captures the memory of the original printing plate surface, transforming it through physical connection. As an indirect process, the resulting image is always a trace, or memory, of the original surface—adding a layer of distance and abstraction. The processes can become a form of moving meditation or ritual, allowing the artist to imbue elements with living energy.

Through this project, I attempt to embrace the materiality of paint and the printed mark.

Combining printmaking techniques and brush painting, each piece cultivates and reveals the hidden, providing external access to an inner landscape. Printmaking's ability to thrive in multiplicity also adds connective tissue that forms each "artifact." Since multiplicity can reference the sheer variety of forms that can be generated through the combination of atomic particles, the repetitious use of shapes is meant to echo the diversity of life. Since print is also used to disseminate information, especially sacred texts, the very nature of the plate-to-paper impression carries a fragile sense of importance, the conveyance of vital information. This preciousness is carried over in the use of rice paper throughout the installation, as rice paper is traditional, fragile, and seems transitory even when long lasting.

The direct process of adding brush-painted elements to my prints reinforces individual creative strength, providing textural and conceptual variation. I have tried to develop a certain rhythm with this pairing. The translucence of ink and rice paper, the multiple plates used to generate full pieces, and the combination of direct and indirect mark-making creates internal spaces that are independent, yet behave as a finished whole. Each painted mark provides a force of impact that blends movement of the arm with print's ethereal nature as color and motif are repeated across many surfaces.

Since activity is associated with being and stillness with non-being, I have given each piece moving passages and moments of air, underscoring the necessity of both. In some, the white space is vast, as in *The Importance of Non-Matter* (2012), where elements seem quieter, surrounded by void. The negative space (and negative mark, or reductive technique) is incredibly important, especially in works like *The Emperors of Three Worlds* (2012), where a balance of density and looseness evokes the image of a basic cell. In others, the action is almost frantic, with little breathing room, indicating the intensity of formation, as in *Talisman of Creation* (2012), where nothingness is represented in rare moments. This play of action and air suggests the beginning of form.

While it is likely impossible to reveal the subtle, amazing ways in which atomic particles form (and at a smaller level, dissolve into waves of moving energy), as an artist I have chosen a visual

language that conveys concept as clearly as possible. With this in mind, I went to originating points of human civilization—various ancient sites with landmark contributions to human development. By analyzing ruins where important milestones have been revealed by peeling back layers, like the pivotal urban centers of Mohenjo Daro, I have taken shapes and abstracted them into connective layers. This approach combines a representative physical environment which is recognized as the origination point of an activity or concept (like the beginning of agriculture at Gobekli Tepe) with layers of non-physical detail, or the implied activity of creation itself. Even important artifacts like the Treaty of Kadesh can be broken into detailed expressions. While this may seem a humanocentric way of describing creative energies, it is simply one angle of analyzing and representing origins. It creates a dictionary of symbols recognizable by the viewer—in this case, humans, but is not intended to indicate human superiority.

Building a visual lexicon from the very blocks that compose these archaeological sites allows me to recombine their elements into new experiences, mimicking the way particles emerge from nothingness. Drawing on the way Chinese brush painting is intended to allow access to internal awareness, shapes used in the series echo each other and are reminiscent of ancient architecture.

I deconstructed images of ruins, stones, lintels, caves, voids, caverns, ladders—even steles and ditches. From the mountain of enlightenment to the Primeval Hill of Egypt, shapes became re-invented and re-contextualized. The smallest part of the shape might evoke the larger form, but the real connectivity comes from individual parts making up a new whole, which then resonates as part of a larger network. The network itself is the physical world outside, the atomic world within, even the social network. Some viewers have said they “see Stonehenge” in works like *The Specificity of Atoms* and *The Infinite Possibilities of the Void*, which is an excellent example of how the refrain of almost-familiar stone shapes triggers referential recognition in the gallery space. None of the works are actually based upon imagery from Stonehenge, yet the viewer finding such an association fits beautifully with the overall purpose.

In Taoism, the physics of creation lies within the Tao itself, that invisible celestial glue that creates and regurgitates all things: “the Tao is hidden, but always present,” (Mitchell 4). Here, the Primal Energy takes form. The Primal Beginning is where yin and yang unite to produce specific things (Wong 9). We are all made up of the same materials, yet our outward appearance changes based upon how atomic strings come together. The difference between particular *things* is only in the arrangement of the “visual elements” of creation. Viewing the whole is to see how it is all made from the same forge. Primal Substance, where forms assume qualities and defining characteristic, is the final stage—in this case, a finished print installed in the gallery.

Printmaking and mixed media have allowed me to experiment with this originating combination, mixing layers and elements to form new expressions. My previous studies in Chinese painting have forced me to pay attention to the subtle play of ink and water on paper, to understand how the molecules behave, how to touch lightly or heavily. By producing layers, I combine different iterations into new form. This method and technique inherently echo the reasoning behind the creation. My goal is to avoid the illustrative in favor of the emulative, to use influence rather than imitation. I allow my movements, even in the thickness of cut wood, to be unrestrained, yet carefully aware, a balance of image and color. In the way a poem reveals only tantalizing clues, each piece is intended to contain mystery because the story phenomenologically includes the viewer. Without the viewer, the experience neither exists, nor is complete. The movement of the living network must be present.

I incorporate relief, collagraphy, lithography, intaglio, serigraphy, image transfer, monotype, digital printing and painting, uniting traditional and contemporary techniques. My color palette is focused and contextually important. By analyzing colors used across Eastern (and ancient) sacred imagery, I found commonalities in pigment. Finding the pigments which exist in multiplicity, I built a palette of sacred tones. I create a kernel color which is then modified dozens of times, with each iteration manipulated using only the few colors in the shared sacred range. Each manipulation is used,

extending the core color for hundreds of applications, across many prints, resulting in an amazing range of tone from only a few starting hues. Most of the shades of pink and yellow, for example, are extrapolated from the narrow range of hues used to depict the lotus flower cross-culturally.

For most pieces, the paper shape is reminiscent of sacred scrolls. For others, smaller, quieter shapes reinvent the single archaeological artifact, discovered, revealed, and cataloged as a unique unit, meant to inform a whole experience. In shape and arrangement, they also reference Taoist talismans, used to invite health, blessings, and protection. Since “Taoist talismans and charms produce whatever condition they express,” (Laszlo 29) each work may inherently project a sense of creation through the very lines on its surface.

It has been my goal, therefore, to develop a unique vocabulary that tackles the invisible and indescribable—the point at which non-matter assembles its component parts into emergent matter. Using printmaking and painting techniques, I have assembled a virtual dig of creation itself, embracing science and philosophy as expository components of the same approach to process. Shapes emerge from negative space, taking form temporarily in a frenzy of living activity, only to fall back away into the stillness of non-being, a circular process of existence. The viewer is necessary to activate an awareness of movement within the picture plane, peeling away layers to reveal a complete story—themselves a part of the same creative pool that generates art and form.

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