A Cosmopolitan Landscape: Development of a body of paintings that explore and expand upon the shared tropes of figuration in the work of Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou

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A Cosmopolitan Landscape:
Development of a body of paintings that explore and expand upon the shared
tropes of figuration in the work of Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou

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Bachelor of Arts, (Visual Arts)

This exegesis is presented in partial fulfilment for the Bachelor of Arts Honours

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

This creative honours project is a practice-led investigation into the painted figural landscape, particularly with the aim of identifying and exploring mutuality within the enduring artistic traditions of Chinese and Western painting. Informing this cross-cultural analysis is a deep engagement with the ‘figure in the landscape’ artworks of Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou; both painters chosen to represent their respective artistic traditions’. To support this search for mutuality this project was equipped with a Stoic Cosmopolitan perspective designed to facilitate cross-cultural understanding. Using this theoretical perspective and an informed understanding of these two artists practices’, a series of painted studies was produced for contemporary Western and Chinese audiences. The key theme of these studies revealed itself in the form of a common narrative that was found to exist within both artistic traditions. This narrative talked of a universal tension experienced by individuals when caught between physical and spiritual spaces.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

i. incorporate without acknowledgement any materials previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

iii. contain any defamatory material.

Signature: ____________________________

Date: 31st of October, 2016
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Introduction

Cross-cultural comparisons have a strong history of being founded on a historiographical perspective “grounded on division and separation,” creating a dichotomous understanding between cultural histories (Rüsen, 2002, pp. 341-342). This tradition encourages an exclusive approach of splitting cultures into groups based on differences, which can then exclude any analysis of mutuality. This in turn reduces any opportunity to discover similarities that might by shared between two communities (Rüsen, 2002, p. 342). This practice-led research project adopts a contrary position and aims to explore mutuality beyond culture; specifically, between two historical art practices that on the surface, consist of contrasting conceptual, material and aesthetic traditions. A series of paintings will accompany this exegesis further exploring this position of cross-cultural mutuality.

The Self and the Other

One of the most embedded examples of a culturally dichotomous approach within modern thinking is the relationship between Eastern and Western cultural histories; where the East (or Orient) is viewed as the cultural opposite to the West (or Occident). The negative effects of this East-West dichotomy have been discussed throughout modern literature, perhaps most notably in the seminal text, Orientalism (Said, 1979). Said (1979) discusses his theories on Orientalist thought, which he describes as the study of the East by the West through a perspective of bias and inferiorization that generates false understandings about Asian culture. Said (1979) links his ideas heavily to the concepts of self and the other, suggesting that the way people develop their understandings of the world is determined by the exclusive assignment of cultural information to one of these dichotomous terms. To define these concepts it should be known that both exist to inform the other, where the self represents everything that we understand as normal and natural, and the other sits in opposition representing everything else (Mountz, 2009, p. 328). This relationship between self and other is how people form their cultural and social identities, as we cannot define our sense of self without knowing what constitutes the other, and vice versa (Mountz, 2009, p. 329). The problem with this polar system of classification is that it positions cultural practices as either alongside or in opposition to oneself. This way of seeing by its very nature encourages a focus on
difference and eliminates the need for any middleground that might provide the opportunity for cultural understanding.

This dichotomous approach can also be seen within the study of visual art, as it is a field that inherently involves the examination of cultural identities and therefore explores the self and the other. An example of such an analysis can be found in the book, *The Impossible Nude*, by François Jullien (2007). This text is a comparison between Eastern and Western fine art traditions with an emphasis on the representation of the human figure in painting. Jullien’s (2007) discussion is deeply founded on the perspective that China’s visual art traditions are in direct contrast to that of Western Europe’s. Jullien (2007) conducts a parallel analysis, exploring in depth the differences between each culture’s approach to painting in a way that encourages an emphasis on difference, lessening the focus on mutuality. If an investigation could be carried out that explored two cultural groups while emphasising mutuality, could it encourage those audiences to reach a common understanding of the subject in focus?

**An Alternative Perspective**

One author that has already explored different historical groups through a scope of mutuality beyond cultural difference is Joseph Campbell. Campbell (1949, p. 390) writes about ‘mankind’s’ common “inherited religious formulae” as he examines common mythological archetypes that appear over a variety of cultural traditions. At the heart of his literature lies what Campbell calls the “monomyth”, where he theorises that all mythology shares universal traits sourced from core human motivations (Cousineau, 1990, p. xvi).

Campbell’s comparative historical approach to mythology, religion, and literature, in contrast to a conventional scholar’s emphasis on cultural differences, concentrated on similarities. He was convinced that the common themes or archetypes in our sacred stories and images transcended the variations of cultural manifestations. Moreover he believed that a re-vieweing of such primordial images in mythology… could reveal our common psychological roots. (Cousineau, 1990, p. xi-xii)

The notion of searching for core similarities that transcend cultural difference to “reveal our common psychological roots”, aligns itself very well with *Stoic Cosmopolitan* ideals; and despite
not writing under the banner of *Cosmopolitanism*, Campbell seems to reflect the aims of this theoretical perspective.

Having a *Stoic Cosmopolitan* perspective can be defined as an individual who places more significance on their shared membership to humanity, while placing less importance on their connection to other smaller social and/or cultural sub-groups (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 9). A *Stoic Cosmopolitan* would navigate the world with the perspective that they are part of a single inclusive community, who cooperate collectively towards the aim of global peace and prosperity. *Stoic Cosmopolitans* believe that this outcome would only be achievable if the sub-groups of this world-wide community also take on this common perspective, prioritising their needs after those of the individual (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 9).

**Research Aims and Questions**

This creative research project was carried out with the intention of producing two components, the first is a series of painted studies, and the second is this accompanying exegesis. Both components have been informed by *Stoic Cosmopolitanism*, and an investigation into paintings by Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou that feature the figure within a landscape. These sources have informed the work’s ability to cross cultural boundaries between contemporary Chinese and Western viewers who are able to identify culturally distinctive artistic influences and traditions. The aim of this research was to investigate how a body of paintings may be executed that dissolve seemingly impenetrable cultural differences between culturally diverse audiences, to reveal a deeper shared mutuality.

**Main Question:** How can a body of figurative paintings be informed to allow contemporary Chinese and Western audiences to identify deeper mutuality beyond cultural difference, rather than focussing on culturally specific elements inherent in the work?

**Sub Question:** How can an analysis of the ‘figure in the landscape’ artworks of Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou inform a contemporary approach to painting?
Chapter One: A Cosmopolitan search for mutuality

This Chapter discusses the concept of Stoic Cosmopolitanism, including the advantages of such a perspective when applied to cross-cultural understanding. Said’s (1979) ideas of self and other are also revisited, specifically with reference to the viewing of visual art within a contemporary global context.

Stoic-Cosmopolitanism

A Stoic Cosmopolitan perspective encourages individuals to recognise their shared membership to the human race above their connections to any sub-divisions of humanity, such as social status, nationality, location or gender (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 5). The goal of such a perspective is to generate equal consideration for all humanity rather than restricting consideration to natural and/or man-made borders; which would in theory create global equality (Tan, 2004, p. 1). To provide a theoretical counterpoint, it could be argued that the ideas of Cosmopolitanism sit in opposition to that of Patriotism, which is an ideology that encourages an individual’s consideration to be invested within their national borders above all other countries (Tan, 2004, pp. 157-158).

Nussbaum (1997, p. 8) explains that generally each person belongs to two main communities: the first is their local population (or nation-state) they are born into, and the second is that of the human race (or humanity). The second community stretches beyond national borders making us all “Citizens of the World” who operate under social and moral obligations to put the needs of humanity over the needs of individual states. However, Nussbaum (1997, p. 9) stresses that being a cosmopolitan does not require sacrificing an individual’s local identity; in fact, the preservation of the first community is encouraged. It is only required that our allegiance to our nation (or other sub-divisions) does not result in the making of decisions that purely benefit our local community, while negatively impacting the rest of humanity. The benefit of having a Stoic Cosmopolitan approach is to maintain and improve human welfare and “dignity” by placing a focus on our shared humanity, rather than differences between groups within the human race (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 7). One of the key advantages of this perspective is that it acts as a catalyst for empathy between different groups, specifically encouraging cross-cultural understanding (Nussbaum, 1994).
Viewing Foreign Visual Culture in a Contemporary Context

When an individual attempts to make sense of a new piece of information, they do so by using their own ideas as a point of reference. These referenced ideas have become naturalised by those that consider them familiar through the experience of living within their socio-cultural environment (Said, 1979). It is through this process that enables an audience to compare and assign new ideas to either the self (familiar), or the other (foreign). The issue with this process is that once this identification has been made, a foreign idea and its source will be viewed through the lens of the other; which carries with it a strong emphasis on difference often resulting in the unfamiliar being considered inferior and unnatural (Said, 1979, pp. 7-8). This could then lead to those having had encounters with unfamiliar ideas beginning to construct fictional understandings internally, without practicing fair and accurate methods of assessment (Mountz, 2009; Said, 1979).

This scenario is often the case when an individual tries to read a piece of visual art that sits outside of their culture, as the viewer may misinterpret it due to the bias and emphasis created by their own cultural familiarity (Sax, 1998, pp. 292-293). This results in an interpretation of the artwork based around how foreign and different it is, which by extension, suggests how foreign and different its cultural origin must be as well. This perception can also prevent any further dialogues with the artwork that concern aesthetics, materials, or even the artist’s conceptual intentions. Despite contemporary art practices being homogenised though the cultural effects of globalisation (Green, 1999; Godfrey, 2009), even new artworks are not safe from the lens of the other, as viewers will often still recognise if an artwork is of noticeable Western origin or influence (Fig. 1.1), or of Eastern origin or influence (Fig. 1.2). This means that audiences are still able to identify contemporary art as coming from the other or the self, which can create barriers for cross-cultural understanding.

When an artist attempts to produce and share new visual culture they must be aware that their practice operates within a modern global environment (Harris, 2011; Smith & Mathur, 2014). Embedded in this contemporary context are processes that can impact the way audiences interpret visual culture, making it even easier for foreign ideas to be identified as the other. One such process is Globalisation, which can be described as an obligatory cultural, social and economic exchange that facilitates a forced connection to new ideas (Melluish 2014, p. 539; Lord, 2011, pp. 56-57). Examples of this exchange, such as immigration and the over exposure to foreign media,
can lead to fears and anxieties within populations; as a direct result of the insurgence of foreign ideas followed by the obligation to accommodate them (Papastergiadis, 2012). These fears and anxieties can lead to the rejection of new cultures as the channels that introduced them are not conducive to facilitating understanding or empathy (Papastergiadis, 2012). Therefore, if an artist attempts to produce artwork for this global contemporary context, they must be informed, to avoid contributing to processes that discourage cross-cultural understanding.

Fig. 1.1:
Neo Rauch (2006), Der Rückzug [The Retreat] (detail), oil on canvas, 118 x 165cm.
(Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

Fig. 1.2:
Li Xubau (2010), 早春图 [Early Spring] (detail), ink and colour on paper, 243 x 247 cm.
(Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)
Application of Stoic-Cosmopolitanism as a Theoretical Perspective

As discussions about East and West, or self and other will invariably accompany cross-cultural exchange between contemporary Chinese and Western audiences, the qualitative (or evaluative) connection between foreign and inferior needs to be severed. Sax (1998) suggest that this can be achieved if an unfamiliar culture can be experienced through an informed understanding, and while acknowledging that the lens of the other exists, he maintains that this does not always lead to discrimination. As a Cosmopolitan perspective creates an opportunity for increased cross-cultural empathy and understanding (Connel, 2009, p. 15; Nussbaum, 1994), it seems appropriate to use it to dissolve the cultural differences that exist between Chinese and Western historical painting traditions. Therefore, to lessen the effects of visual culture being classified as the other, this research project has been equipped with a Stoic Cosmopolitanism perspective to help develop paintings that inform viewers about similarities that exists beyond culture.

Cosmopolitanism has been utilised within this project predominantly through my analysis of the paintings of Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou. In this analysis I aimed to identify shared elements found in composition, narrative and context within these two diverse artistic cultures, which could be more universally communicated to contemporary audiences. In identifying these elements, I wanted to demonstrate to viewers that beneath the layers of cultural and stylistic divergence, these two artists shared much more than what might have been initially apparent. These pictorial and conceptual elements have then been used to inform a body of figurative paintings that aim to hold their meaning and communicative clarity over these two different cultural perspectives.

It is important to note that even though Cosmopolitan theory does align itself with the ideal of world peace, this aim always existed as part of a duality opposed by conflict. The inherent tension between these two states was understood by the Stoics who were very aware that conflict was inevitable, as differing cultural ideologies would always end up encouraging individuals to think of others as alien or hostile (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 11). Even though my focus will be to emphasise cross-cultural similarity, it is for this reason that I will maintain an awareness of this tension as I look for artistic links and convergences and endeavour to conceptually embed them in my work.
Chapter Two: Chinese and Western Painting Traditions

This chapter discusses some of the central ideas associated with Western and Chinese historical fine art traditions, including an overview of the specific historical periods associated with the artists Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou. This will be followed by introductions to the work of these two artists.

Comparison Between Chinese and Western Figurative Painting Traditions

A stoic cosmopolitan appreciates that it is necessary to recognise cultural differences when attempting to seek common ground, as dismissing cultural difference is not encouraging of cultural understanding and empathy (Nussbaum, 1997). Therefore, before mutual ground can be explored, informing oneself about each cultural group is an important component of having a stoic cosmopolitan perspective. As my investigation focusses on Chinese and Western historical traditions that feature the figure within the landscape, I will begin by defining some terms.

The use of the word Western in this case, is when I refer to the enduring traditions of Western-European art born out of Classical or Neo-Classical (rediscovery of ancient Greco-Roman Classicism) ideals. The paintings that emerged from that period (Fig. 2.1) favoured anatomical realism, a mathematical approach to space and perspective, and the use of powerful lighting and tonal manipulations such as chiaroscuro. Chinese artistic traditions, refer to the equally enduring styles of the many ancient dynasties of China, the most pertinent to my study being the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties. These traditions are characterised by ink paintings that attempt to capture the life energy (or ‘qi’) of their subjects (Fig. 2.2). Figurative art, (or art depicting the figure), can be described as any art that represents the human body through the means of figure, symbol or likeness (Clarke, 2010, p. 99).

The canons of both Western and Chinese art contain historical traditions of figure painting; however, both are approached in fundamentally different ways (Jullien, 2007). The Western artistic traditions are born out of ancient Platonic ideas of understanding life through form and matter, which evolved over time into the concept of idealised form and beauty (Jullien, 2007, pp. 63-64). This philosophical perspective further developed into the mathematical study of anatomy with the
aim of realism (Fig. 2.3), which can be seen in the enduring classical artistic traditions still studied today (Jullien, 2007, p. 83). Jullien (2007) contrasts this classical tradition to the equally enduring Chinese ink paintings, commenting that their philosophical origins lacked this platonistic interest in physical form.

Confucian and Taoist perspectives have been the central tenets in moulding Chinese figurative traditions. These philosophical origins are concerned with universal harmony and an approach to life that acknowledges that there is a flow of energy that runs through all living and non-living things (Jullien, 2007, p. 35-36; Wei & Li, 2013, p. 61). This fundamental contrast with Western Renaissance where “the body is viewed from the standpoint of ‘energy,’ not its anatomy” (Jullien, 2007, p. 35), aims to capture representation beyond physical appearance; to reveal “inner essence” through the articulation of life force or spirit (Hearn, 2008, para. 3) (Fig. 2.4). Chinese painters’ techniques were often inseparable from those of calligraphy, choosing to suggest form through the minimal and indelible marks of brush and ink (Hearn, 2008). Artists rejected the varying qualities of light and shadow as a tool for modelling, and regarded colour as a distraction, almost exclusively using black ink on lightly toned paper or fabric (Hearn, 2008, para. 3). Chinese painting traditions were considered to be a deep philosophical and spiritual practice that was regarded with reverence as a profession and as a skill. Artists also did not separate the written from the visual, as is often the case in Western painting traditions, which is evident by the frequent inclusion of poetry and other colophons within Chinese painted works (Hearn, 2008).

Through the analysis of these two artistic traditions I searched for similarities between how the painted figure was represented, what sort of environments or context the figure is placed in, and what actions or gestures the figure undertakes. I have specifically chosen to investigate the works of Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou for two reasons; firstly, their oeuvre overlaps chronologically, as Bellini was born in the early 1430’s and died in 1516 (Goffen, 1989, p. vii), and Shen Zhou lived between 1427-1509 (Hearn, 2002, p. 11). Secondly, both painters’ responded extensively to their own enduring artistic traditions, assimilating the work of previous painters into new approaches and styles of artistic expression. Both artists in this way are acknowledged as significant bridges between the old and the new.
Fig. 2.1: Raphael [Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino] (ca. 1509-1511), School of Athens (detail), fresco, 500 x 770 cm.

Fig. 2.2: Qu Ding (Attributed) (ca. 1050), 夏山圖 [Summer Mountains] (detail), Handscroll; ink and colour on silk, 45.4 x 115.3 cm.
Fig. 2.3: Andrea Mantegna (ca. 1490), *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (detail), tempera on canvas, 68 x 81 cm.

Fig. 2.4: Zhang Lu (ca. 1500-50), *To Play the Zither for a Friend* (detail), ink on silk, 31.4 x 61 cm.
Italian Early Renaissance

The Italian artists of the Early Renaissance looked to the past for inspiration through a rediscovered interest in ancient Greco-Roman Humanist ideals (Vaughn & Dacey, 2003, p. 14). The Renaissance was a time of cultural expansion that saw an intellectual and literary rebirth born out of the re-insurgence of classical learning (Vaughn & Dacey, 2003, p. 14). This period that occurred between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, represented a bridge from the Dark Ages of Europe to the rest of modern history (Paoletti & Radke, 2005).

These classical ideas encouraged sculptors and painters to study the human form in space through a scientific approach, creating a new standard of representation where patrons “came to expect such anatomical mastery” (Bambach, 2002, para. 2). Two of the most famous artists of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and Michelangelo (1475–1564), were known to have personally undertaken comprehensive anatomical dissections (Fig. 2.5) throughout their careers (Bambach, 2002, para. 2). This period of painting is also known for the shift in patronage form the church to the secular and the influence this had on painting commissions (Kuiper, 2013). This could be seen in the inclusion of secular portraiture alongside saints and other biblical figures, which began to introduce a much greater range of subject matter to be depicted by artists.
The Chinese Ming Dynasty

The Chinese Ming Dynasty (明朝) [1368-1644] is viewed by many historians as an era of cultural expansion. It is a period that witnessed a steady population growth as well as a significant increase in the literacy rates and education of the “sub-elite” classes (Mote, 1988, p. 1). The Ming Dynasty saw the restoration of an indigenous Chinese government and marked the end of the Mongolian ruled Yuan Dynasty (元朝) [1279-1644]; an era of oppression for Chinese natives (Zhao, 2015, p. 85). In an effort to re-establish the indigenous traditions of China, the Ming Dynasty’s court recruited painters and instructed them to emulate the earlier styles of the (pre-Yuan) Song Dynasty (宋朝) [1127-1279] (Department of Asian Art, 2002, para. 1). This government appointed style attempted to “glorify the new dynasty and convey its benevolence” by encouraging the depiction of majestic floral compositions, large-scale landscapes and figural narratives (Department of Asian Art, 2002, para. 1). Lü Ji (呂紀) [ca. 1439-1505] represented an official artist who excelled at painting such subjects (Fig. 2.6), while also being highly regarded by the Ming Court (Huang, 2011, p. 92).

Fig. 2.6: Lü Ji (ca. 1439-1505), 秋鷺芙蓉圖 [Autumnal Egrets and Hibiscus], ink and colour on silk, 192.6 x 111.9 cm.

Despite the oppression that occurred during the Yuan dynasty, it is still thought of by many art historians as a period of cultural innovation and expansion, as it introduced the richly eclectic styles of the Mongolian empire to Chinese artists (Watt, 2010, pp. 4-6). It is for this reason that many literary (non-government) artists disagreed with the complete rejection of the Yuan style, resulting in them moving away from large cities to live and work at their own leisure. This generated major creative hubs in small towns where painters were free to cultivate their own scholarly mix of styles (Liscomb, 1992, pp. 215-216). Shen Zhou was one of these artists seeking more artistic independence away from the Ming government.
Giovanni Bellini

Giovanni Bellini [ca. 1435-1516] was a dominant artistic figure and prolific painter active for almost seven decades, running a busy workshop that produced hundreds of paintings over his lifetime (Goffen, 1989, p. 3; Yang, 1998, p. 10). Giovanni was born into a wealthy family, the son of a painter, Jacopo Bellini, and he “enjoyed all the advantages of the Bellini family’s status as members of the cittadinarza originaria (Italian native), the class only second to the patriciate in dignity and privileges” (Goffen, 1989, p. 3). Bellini’s exposure to his father’s workshop gave him the opportunity to paint from a very early age. By the time he was twenty he already had a growing reputation within Venice, which was reflected by his many commissions for both private works, as well as much larger altarpieces (Goffen, 1989, p. 13).

Bellini’s output was broad and varied, covering most of the subject matter to have emerged from the Venetian Renaissance. Although he painted many secular works, he was more renowned as a painter of private devotional images (Goffen, 1989, p. 13). It was through these works that Bellini mastered the “symbolic” or “moral landscape”, an approach to religious scenes that placed as much focus on the environment as the characters inhabiting it (Christiansen, 2013, p. 11). This changed the landscape from a static backdrop for figures, to a tool that enhanced the emotionality of the narrative (Fig. 2.7) (Goffen, 1989, pp. 106). Bellini consciously chose to paint specific religious figures outside in an open landscape, as opposed to previous depictions that placed key figures indoors. This contrast can be observed in Messina’s rendition of Saint Jerome reading in his study (Fig. 2.8), compared to Bellini’s slightly later painting of the same Saint (Fig. 2.9).

Bellini lived and worked in Venice for his entire life, and in spite of eventually being surpassed by his Venetian successors, Giorgione (Giorgio Bararelli da Castelfranco) and Titian (Tiziano...
Harrison See, 2017

Vecellio, he continued to exemplify the Venetian Renaissance style until his death in November, 1516 (Belting, 2014, p. 5). It was even famously recorded that in 1506, Albrecht Durer referred to Bellini in his old age, as ‘still the best painter’ in Venice (Bätschmann, 2008, p. 7). Bellini is known for his success in assimilating many artistic traditions (Brown, 2006, p. 17) and using them to help bridge the gap between the pious Byzantine style and the humanist artistic achievements of the late Renaissance (Goffen, 1989, p. vii).

Fig. 2.8: Antonello da Messina (ca. 1475), Saint Jerome in his Study (detail), oil on lime, 45.7 x 36.2cm.

Fig. 2.9: Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1480-85), Saint Jerome Reading in the Landscape (detail), tempera and oil on wood, 47 x 33.7 cm.
Shen Zhou

Shen Zhou (沈周) [1427-1509], famously referred to as the “father of the Wu school of painting”, is renowned for his refinement of a new style of calligraphic abstraction; a result of his methodical study of many earlier masters (Fong, 1996, p. 374). Although he did not begin painting until around the age of forty, Shen is recognised as one of the “Four Great Masters of the Ming Dynasty” (明四家) and contributed greatly to the enduring traditions of Chinese painting, calligraphy and poetry (Yu, 2008, p. 45). Shen Zhou was born into a wealthy family (similar to Bellini) giving him the opportunity to practice the Chinese fine arts as a means of self-cultivation. This exemplified the ideal of the literary artist, unlike many others in his social class who instead chose to pursue a career as a Ming official (Yu, 2008, p. 45).

Shen Zhou’s eclectic approach represented a departure from the Ming government’s appointed style (Fong, 1996, p. 377), instead drawing on a wide range of artistic influences, including the previous Mongol Yuan Dynasty. Shen Zhou explored these styles through “intense dialogues with many masters”, involving copying and reinterpreting their paintings (Liscomb, 1992, pp. 216). To accomplish this Shen chose to live and work for his entire life far away from the Ming capital in the town of Wu, now called Suzhou (苏州), where he had creative freedom away from the government’s persecution of non-official artists (Yibo, 2016). Shen Zhou’s visual reminiscence of earlier masters combined with the introduction of his own artistic adaptations, lead to the creation of paintings and poetry that encapsulated the subtle “nuances which are at the core of Chinese literati aesthetics” (Jacobson-Leong, 1977, p. 298). One can observe an artistic diversion when comparing his work (Fig. 2.10), to that of Lü Ji, an ‘official’ painter of the same dynasty (Fig. 2.11). Where Lü Ji has employed a ‘technical’ approach to illustrate the iconography encouraged by the Ming government, Shen Zhou has instead chosen to depict a scene of scholarly interest through his eclectically developed looser and more minimal style. This innovative approach of reinterpretation, as opposed to replication, helped bridge two eras of Chinese painting.
Fig. 2.10:  
Shen Zhou.  
(ca. 1427-1509),  
載鶴泛湖  
[Scholar and Crane Returning Home]  
(aka. Returning Home from the Land of the Immortals),  
ink on paper,  
38.74 x 60.33 cm.

Fig. 2.11:  
Lü Ji (ca. 1439-1505),  
秋鷺芙蓉圖  
[Autumnal Egrets and Hibiscus] (detail),  
ink and colour on silk,  
192.6 x 111.9 cm.
Chapter Three: Approaches and Processes of investigation

This chapter describes the overarching methodological approach, and the specific research methods, employed by this creative project. In particular, this chapter defines the methodology of Practice-led Research, why it was a suitable choice for this project, and how it has been utilised to reach this project’s aims. The ‘selection of key paintings’ chosen to represent the artists, Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou, is then introduced.

Methodological Approach

This project employs the medium of oil painting to aid its exploration of a cross-cultural dialog that encourages mutuality. “Painting knows texture […] It can still render the idea of touch” (Valli, 2014, pp. 6). It also is a considered medium that produces physical objects and can offer the “antidote” to a world polluted with pictures (Valli, 2014, pp. 8). In the modern global environment of visual culture, people are overwhelmed with digital imagery and internet advertising. This has left readers of visual media “culturally shipwrecked, adrift in a sea of information”, unable to determine the value of still meaningful modes of visual communication (Valli, 2014, p. 8). Often digital imagery is not sought after, but an irritation one must endure when navigating the internet; which is why slowly constructed physical images, such as paintings, still have a role in modern society (Valli, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, if paintings can offer an ‘antidote’ to an excess of modern imagery, while encouraging a renewed appreciation of visual culture; it seems a suitable medium to assist this project’s aims of cross-cultural understanding.

To best explore the goals of this research project through the act of painting, the methodological approach of practice-led research has been applied. Unlike other traditional methodologies, practice-led research can be defined as a form of inquiry that uses creative practice as a substantial factor in its investigation (Rust, Mottram, & Till, 2007, p. 11). This approach has been informed by McNamara (2012, p. 2) who composes a “set of guidelines for practice-led research”, as well as Barrett and Bolt’s text that is “aimed at extending understandings of the process methodologies of artistic research as a production of knowledge” (Barrett, 2007, p. 1).
The advantage of this type of inquiry is that it reveals types of knowledge that a researcher can only obtain through the handling of materials and processes surrounding their project (Bolt, 2007, p. 29). Materiality cannot be explored purely through theoretical observation, whereas the combination of both practice and theory can uncover new types of understandings (Bolt, 2007, p. 29). As this project aims to explore the act of painting and its outcomes, it was appropriate to apply this methodology throughout my investigation; otherwise I may have only revealed a portion of the knowledge available. Bolt (2007, pp. 28-30) also discusses that when a research question explores a subjective experience, then an artist should be encouraged to practice that experience to truly understand it; as is done in practice-led research. As I aimed to investigate how to make figurative paintings that would provide a subjective experience for a viewer, this methodology offered an ideal studio structure for this project.

**Methods and Processes of Inquiry**

To meet the aims of this creative research project, it has been divided up into two methods of inquiry; the first being a *textual analysis*, and the second, a *reflexive painting praxis*. It is important to note, however, that despite these methods being discussed successively, they were generally carried out concurrently to ensure that each would guide and inform the other. It is important to note that a *textual analysis* is often seen as a supplementary process that on its own will not produce a complete understanding of meaning (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 15-16). By comparison, a praxical approach requires an arts practice to be born out of an informed understanding of ideas and theories (Barrett, 2007, p. 6). Therefore, to supply my *praxis* with a theoretical foundation, and to provide my *textual analysis* with another supporting method, these two approaches were paired together.

These two methods operated in tandem and allowed me to alternate between two different research spaces, which helped to maintain momentum, as well keep my investigation fresh and motivating. My textual analysis has not occurred in one fixed setting, but rather in any location where I could set up my laptop. The second space was the painting studio where I carried out my *reflexive painting praxis*. Although the physical location of my studio never changed, the space itself remained dynamic as I frequently adjusted the positioning of easels, tables and reference imagery,
which allowed for a work space that adapted to my processes rather than the other way around (Fig. 3.1 & Fig. 3.2).

**Textual analysis:** The use of a *textual analysis* helped construct a collection of written and pictorial source material to better inform this project’s research aims. This material was gathered from a variety of journal articles and scholarly texts, as well as reputable academic websites and books that discussed the artists Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou. Being located in China also gave me the opportunity to view some of Shen Zhou’s paintings in person at museums in and around Shanghai. By examining texts and making observations about their artworks, I developed a better historical, philosophical, contextual and technical appreciation of each artists’ painting practice. Once this information was obtained I organised it into a data table so I could easily cross-reference and compare nominated categories for either mutuality or difference. The outcome was a resource of compatible cross-cultural elements that I was then able to explore in my studio works.

**Reflexive Painting Praxis:** A *reflexive painting praxis* has been used to physically test and expand upon the ideas from my *textual analysis*, as well as ultimately produce my creative outcomes. Painting an image requires an artist to create their own visual representation of what they are attempting to communicate. If these painted representations then go on to be viewed by an audience, that image will interpreted through that audience’s cultural context (Bolt, 2010, p. 12). Therefore, when creating work that attempts to communicate cross-culturally, it is especially important that the artist is informed about both their audiences’ and their own cultural context. For this reason, a *praxis* that drew on the cultural understandings gained from my *textual analysis* was chosen to produce my studio outcomes. A *reflexive* approach was used as it encourages a cyclical relationship between the researcher and their findings, which is especially important when exploring cultural interpretations, as the artist is encouraged to maintain an awareness of their own presence within their research (Crouch, 2007; Sullivan, 2010). This *reflexive painting praxis* was used to generate several groups of informed studies, which became larger and more detailed as the project progressed, reflecting the development of my findings.
Fig. 3.1: Photo 1 of my on-campus studio space in Shanghai, China

Fig. 3.2: Photo 2 of my on-campus studio space in Shanghai, China
Technical Approaches and Considerations

For this project I specifically chose to use oil paint to create my studies. I felt that this medium’s ability to exhibit either an opaque, or a luminous and translucent appearance, made it an adaptable tool appropriate for my investigation. My studio development was articulated through the creation of painted studies that varied in size and proportion depending on the subject I chose to investigate. These studies also varied in complexity, some were quickly executed, requiring only a rough impression (Fig. 3.3 & Fig. 3.4), while others were more considered, and were explored through greater detail (Fig. 3.5 & Fig. 3.6). In general, however, as my studio work progressed, my studies gradually became larger and more detailed.

The only technical limitation that significantly shaped the creative outcome of this project was the need to transport my paintings internationally after completion. As my research was undertaken in Shanghai and my examination was in Perth, it was more practical to paint on loose canvas that could be rolled up for transport. As I was unable to pin or nail into my studio walls, this decision determined the general sizes of my studies. Each piece of canvas either had to be small enough so it could be fixed to a board (Fig. 3.7), or large enough that I could clamp the top of the canvas to a length of timber that ran along the top of my studio’s walls (Fig. 3.8).

Fig. 3.3: Harrison See, (2016), Study of Figures Collecting Materials (detail), oil on canvas, 28 x 45 cm.

Fig. 3.4: Harrison See, (2016), Study of Figure and Water II (detail), oil on canvas, 45 x 45 cm.
Fig. 3.5:
Harrison See, (2016),
*Watching the Sunrise* (detail),
oil on canvas,
45 x 45 cm.

Fig. 3.6:
Harrison See, (2016),
*Valley of Stone and Water* (detail),
oil on canvas,
175 x 88 cm.
Fig. 3.7: Photo of smaller loose canvas pieces clamped to boards

Fig. 3.8: Photo of larger loose canvas pieces clamped against wall
Selection of Key Paintings

Due to this project’s time constraints, it was impractical to make my frames of reference too broad. Alternatively, if too few works were examined it might form a poor representation of each artists’ practice and not support my argument. Therefore, it was decided early on that a more effective comparison would be achieved if I focussed my attention on a selection of key paintings. I specifically chose the below works (Fig. 3.9 – Fig. 3.19) as I believed they represented, as close as possible, the full range of each artists’ creative practice. In addition, these works were selected, as they were determined to provide the best examples of mutuality between the artists that I could respond to in my own creative praxis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Selection of Key Paintings’</th>
<th>Giovanni Bellini</th>
<th>Shen Zhou</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.9</td>
<td>Crucifixion, (ca. 1455)</td>
<td>Fig. 3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.10</td>
<td>Agony in the Garden, (ca. 1465)</td>
<td>Fig. 3.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.11</td>
<td>Saint Francis in Ecstasy, (ca. 1476-78)</td>
<td>Fig. 3.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.12</td>
<td>Saint Jerome Reading in a Landscape, (ca. 1480-85)</td>
<td>Fig. 3.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.13</td>
<td>Madonna of the Pear, (ca. 1485-87)</td>
<td>Fig. 3.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 3.9:
Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1455),
*Crucifixion*, tempera on panel,
55 x 30 cm.
Fig. 3.10:  
Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1465), Agony in the Garden, tempera on wood, 81.3 x 127 cm.

Fig. 3.11:  
Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1476–78), Saint Francis in Ecstasy, oil on panel, 124.1 x 140.5 cm.
Fig. 3.12:
Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1480-85), *Saint Jerome Reading in the Landscape*, tempera and oil on wood, 47 x 33.7 cm.
Fig. 3.13:
Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1485-87),
*Madonna of the Pear*,
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84.3 x 65.5cm.
Fig. 3.14:
Shen Zhou (ca. 1427-1509),
灞橋風雪圖
[Wind and Snow at the Ba Bridge],
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Fig. 3.15:  
Shen Zhou. (ca. 1427-1509),  
[Lofty Mount Lu],  
ink on paper, 193.8 x 98.1 cm.
Fig. 3.16: Shen Zhou. (ca. 1427-1509), 虎丘餞別圖 [Bidding Farewell at Tiger Hill], ink on paper, 32 x 30 cm.

Fig. 3.17: Shen Zhou. (ca. 1427-1509), 虎丘餞別圖 (detail) [Bidding Farewell at Tiger Hill] (detail), ink on paper, 32 x 30 cm.
Fig. 3.18:
Shen Zhou.
(ca. 1427-1509),
載鶴泛湖
[Scholar and Crane Returning Home]
(aka. Returning Home from the Land of the Immortals), ink on paper,
38.74 x 60.33 cm.

Fig. 3.19:
Shen Zhou.
(ca. 1500),
杖藜遠眺
[Poet on a Mountain Top], ink on paper,
55 x 30 cm.
Chapter Four: Three sites of mutuality

This chapter discusses the mutuality that I have identified and explored within Giovanni Bellini’s and Shen Zhou’s spatial themes. I have used the term ‘space’ (or ‘spatial’) here to describe both the pictorial and conceptual sites that appear within the works chosen for analysis (Fig. 3.9 – Fig. 3.19). As I explored the idea of these spaces in my praxis, I noticed that each has its own themes, aesthetics and narratives. These locations divide up the painted landscape and contribute their spatial qualities to reflect or enhance the actions of the figures housed within them. While exploring common ground between the work of Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou, I focussed my praxis on the relationship between three key sites that I observed in both artists’ works. I refer to these spaces as: the ‘societal’, the ‘transcendent’, and the ‘intermediate’.

The Societal Space

The first site I observed, which I refer to as the societal space, encapsulates the values of a corporal existence within a structured physical environment. This site is characterised through the articulation of collectivist activities such as agriculture, building and recreation. These societal activities are sometimes illustrated by the artist, where figures are seen conversing in groups (Fig. 3.9 & Fig. 3.16), or directly engaging with their physical environment. This can be seen in the form of hunting (Fig. 3.13), animal husbandry (Fig. 3.13), transportation (Fig. 3.18), or simply in the shifting of materials (Fig. 3.16). In other works, these activities are implied through the presence of buildings or farmland, often positioned in the background (Fig. 4.1), or off to the side of compositions (Fig. 4.2). These sites act as suggestions of the societal, as they could not exist without the presence of such collectivist activities that created them.

This space also at times assumes a fragmentary form, which can be seen in the rendering of bridges, pathways, farmland or small structures (Fig. 3.9 & Fig. 3.16). Although I did explore man-made structures in my paintings (Fig. 4.3 & Fig. 4.4), I felt that these elements served my landscapes better when in the distance, as they were still identifiable as buildings yet did not require a level of detail that would generate cultural specificity; which might in turn divide cross-cultural audiences. I also found that the ‘breaking down’ of man-made elements into debris created a more ambiguous reference to their societal source. I pursued this ambiguity by continuing to
depict the *societal* in its ‘fragmentary form’, as these remnants contributed to narratives that were more open, rather than a more compete and culturally specific *societal* space. As my praxis developed I reduced the inclusion of man-made elements to the point where they were often omitted altogether. I felt that even the presence of grouped figures was enough to suggest the *societal* (*Fig. 4.5*), which then left most of the composition free for me to investigate other sites of mutuality.

I believe that the fundamental feature of this corporal space is its position of contrast to the intangible. This is visible in Bellini’s work where *societal* locations are thematically detached from spiritual events (Goffen, 1989, pp. 12), while in Shen Zhou’s there is a clear distinction between the static appearance of man-made elements compared to his dynamic brushwork used in the rendering of mist and fog (Fong, 1996, p. 374). This contrast to the intangible is a concept that became heavily embedded within my praxis, where I maintained a distinction between the *societal* and other sites. This distinction became most predominant in studies where I intentionally illuminated the *societal* with a different coloured light source than other locations (*Fig. 4.6*).

I explored the idea of the *societal* space through an engagement with elements such as fire, as I felt that this exemplified a man-made impact on the natural environment. I introduced this into my praxis by placing small groups of figures around campfires for warmth or cooking (*Fig. 4.5*). However, this eventually developed into more complex narratives such as the crafting of tools (*Fig. 4.6*); which I felt demonstrated the adaptation of natural resources to fit *societal* needs, signifying an even greater level of engagement with the physical environment.
Fig. 4.1: Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1480-85), Saint Jerome Reading in the Landscape (detail), tempera and oil on wood, 47 x 33.7 cm.

Fig. 4.2: Shen Zhou. (ca. 1500), 杖藜遠眺 [Poet on a Mountain Top] (detail), ink on paper, 55 x 30 cm.
Fig. 4.3: Harrison See, (2016), *Bridge Crossing I* (detail), oil on canvas, 70 x 60 cm.

Fig. 4.4: Harrison See, (2016), *Two Opposing Towns* (detail), oil on canvas, 44 x 45 cm.
Fig. 4.5: Harrison See, (2016), Watching the Sunrise (detail), oil on canvas, 45 x 45 cm.

Fig. 4.6: Harrison See, (2016), Lake Gazer, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 cm.
The Transcendent Space

What I refer to as the transcendent space exemplifies the intangible values of a spiritualistic existence, while embodying the thematic qualities of immortality or otherworldliness. Campbell (1949) discusses these values as being a universal preoccupation amongst most cultures. I believe this space acts as a counterpart to the societal, representing an enlightened experience that transcends the corporal. However, unlike the material physicality of societal locations, the ephemerality of the transcendent site is alluded to rather than illustrated in the work of these two artists. This site exists as an expression of spiritual or religious experience. Therefore, unlike the societal, the transcendent is never depicted as a literal space, its existence is only ever referenced through the actions of figures, the inclusion of spiritual objects, or the use of atmospheric effects. This can be seen when examining the works, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* (Fig. 3.11) and *Poet on a Mountain Top* (Fig. 3.19), where it is evident in both that the lone figure stands still, staring beyond the limits of the composition. Each figure is depicted gazing out towards the sky as if responding to something beyond their own physical plane. This is in direct contrast to figures within societal spaces who can be seen interacting directly with their surroundings.

I adopted the notion of a figure ‘staring beyond the limits of the composition’ in my works (Fig. 4.7) as I felt it was an effective yet simple device that had the ability to resonate across cultural audiences. I enhanced this idea in several studies by illuminating the figure with a colour of light different to that of the rest of the composition (as discussed above). This idea developed from an observation made in Bellini’s work, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* (Fig. 3.11), where he clearly renders “two [light] sources and two kinds of light”, one tasked with illuminating the Saint, while the other lights the city and farmland in the background (Christiansen, 2013, p. 17). Goffen (1989, p. 111) even comments that the light that illuminates the Saint acts as a confirmation of God’s presence. I often chose blue light for this allusion to the transcendent, as it was a colour used by both artists for the sky and water; elements shown to be less ‘attached’ to the physical world. The use of blue also contributed to the distinction between spaces, as it contrasted with the yellow fire I often used to illuminate the societal. This resulted in many of my works using a blue and yellow-brown colour palette, and although I also experimented with other complementary colour schemes, I found these colours to be the most visually compelling when portraying the contrasting nature of these two spaces.
The reference to a distant *transcendent* space is also articulated through the inclusion of objects that hold either Christian or Taoist spiritualist significance. An example of this can be seen in Shen Zhou’s work, *Scholar and Crane Returning Home* (Fig. 3.18), where the scholar sits next to a crane that symbolises “Taoist immortals […] whose spirits attain enlightenment” (Werness, 2004, p. 114). As well as *Lofty Mount Lu* (Fig. 3.15), which depicts in the bottom right “the scholar Ch’en K’uan, wearing a Taoist cap” (Fong, 1996, p. 374). As many of Bellini’s works were commissioned as Christian devotional images, his references to the *transcendent* are much more overt, often through the presence of prominent religious figures (*Fig. 3.9 & Fig. 3.13*).

Just as the Italian Renaissance grew from the medieval authority of the Christian church (Prosperi, 2014, p. 276), the Ming Dynasty was shaped by Taoist philosophical and religious thought (Lee, 2009, p. 92). I believe the *transcendent* space is strongly associated with the spiritual context in the work of both artists, which is evident through the inclusion of either Taoist or Christian references. To avoid creating culturally specific references I mainly explored the mutual connection between the *transcendent* and the ephemerality of air and water (sky, clouds, fog and mist). This can also be seen in Shen Zhou’s use of mist and water in his work, *Lofty Mount Lu* (Fig. 3.15), where he uses these elements to create an atmosphere of “otherworldly charisma” (Lee, 2009, p. 159). While in Bellini’s works (*Fig. 3.9 & Fig. 3.10*) this connection is evident as angels (or putti) occupy the richly clouded skies; skies that are then reflected by the water below.

With the exclusion of the culturally specific angels in Bellini’s work, the general use of such atmospheric elements feature significantly in the work of these two artists’. Therefore, I have explored these intangible forms in my praxis, often positioning them in contrast to the corporeal world. To encourage this contrast, I found that building up layers with techniques suited to oil painting, such as dry-brushing, glazing and scumbling, were most effective at generating these atmospheric elements. While I used more of an illustrative approach for tangible forms, where the presence of line becomes more prominent when depicting geographical features. I felt that the juxtaposition of these two techniques became an effective methodology for aesthetically enhancing the distinction between physical and intangible (*Fig. 4.7*).
The Intermediate Space

The third location, which I refer to as the intermediate space, represents a bridge between the societal and the transcendent. It is a transitional space that allows a thematic shift from the physical into the ephemeral; a notion that I tested directly in a study of stones becoming smoke (Fig. 4.8 & Fig. 4.9). This transitional state is also evident in the transient expression of time within this space. This can be seen in Shen Zhou’s “indication of temporal instability” in the depiction of changing seasons (Jacobson-Leong, 1977, p. 299). Bellini, who similarly indicates the “recurring seasonal cycle” (Belting, 2014, p. 6), also chooses to depict the transition from night to day in the painting Agony in the Garden (Fig. 3.10) (Goffen, 1989, pp. 107). I felt that this work possessed a strong sense of change and transformation. For this reason, in several of my paintings I depicted a time just before sunrise to emphasise a state of change.

As part of this concept of transformation, the intermediate space is also a location where societal dominance over nature diminishes and the presence of man-made structures dissipates, often only appearing as remnants or detritus of past activity. This can be seen in the rudimentary man-made elements in the foregrounds of Saint Francis in Ecstasy (Fig. 3.11) and Wind and Snow at the Ba Bridge (Fig. 3.14). As my paintings leaned more towards an exploration of this space, I often
rendered societal elements in this ‘rudimentary’ form or with minimal detail. I felt that by simplifying these structures it reduced cultural specificity while still allowing them to function as an acknowledgment the societal. I also noticed that in this intermediate space animal husbandry transformed into animal companionship, as seen with the lion in *Jerome Reading in the Landscape* (Fig. 3.12), and the crane in *Scholar and Crane Returning Home* (Fig. 3.18). I explored this idea in my work using a dog, as it is a common pet in both the West and in China.

In both artist’s work this space places a strong emphasis on isolation. This is once again evident in Bellini’s paintings of saints, which portray the “contrast between the social world and a life in solitude” (Belting, 2014, p. 14). As well as Shen Zhou’s works, *Lofty Mount Lu* (Fig. 3.15) and *Wind and Snow at the Ba Bridge* (Fig. 3.14), which both depict a figure dwarfed by an imposing landscape. Even in works that feature multiple figures within such an intermediate site, there are often single figures within the assembly who seem to be drawn outwards, towards unoccupied space, rather than engaging in any societal human discourse (Fig. 4.10 & Fig. 4.11).

These ideas evolved through my praxis into a narrative of a single figure’s isolation within a large landscape. I felt that the further away I depicted a figure from the societal, the stronger their connection to the transcendent became. This can be seen specifically in two of my works (Fig. 4.12 & Fig. 4.13) that borrow heavily from Shen Zhou’s use of scale and proportion in *Lofty Mount Lu* (Fig. 3.15). In this work particularly, Shen Zhou depicts a minuscule figure who stands cut off from the small societal elements scattered around the composition, while being completely immersed in their surroundings. I appropriated this idea into my works, but instead removed all evidence of the societal, which I felt placed the figure even closer to the transcendent.

The intermediate site is also often connected to rocky mountainous terrain, an environment that does not lend itself readily to human activity. However, perhaps most importantly, this terrain is a place associated with the transcendent for both Taoism (Pas, 2006, p. 151) and Christianity (Belting, 2014, p. 11). Within the Christian canonical narrative exists a relationship between mountainous sites and “spiritual refinement” (Christiansen, 2013, p. 14). This can be observed in Bellini’s paintings of Saint Jerome (Fig. 3.12) and Saint Francis (Fig. 3.11) who are both depicted in such environments. This is also visible in the works *Crucifixion* (Fig. 3.9) and *Agony in the Garden* (Fig. 3.10), where Jesus and his devotees are placed amongst rocky foregrounds. This “connection between immortals and mountains” is also present within the Taoist tradition (Lee,
2009, p. 150). “For the Chinese all mountains are sacred and religious, a tradition related to the belief that the mist-enveloped peak is connected to heaven, thus forming a bridge between men and gods” (Lee, 2009, p. 149). Although most of Shen Zhou’s works feature mountainous terrain, the greatest example of the connection between verticality and an escape from the mundanity of an earthly existence can be seen in the painting, *Poet on a Mountain Top* (Fig. 3.19). It is this space more than others that holds the most potential to explore a site of cross-cultural understanding. Therefore, this culturally mutual connection between the transcendent and a mountainous location has become the main site of exploration within my praxis; through the articulation of environments that feature only stone, water and air (sky).

I often used stone and earth to illustrate an intermediate space still tethered to, yet partly removed from the societal, while air and sky were used to refer to the distant presence of the transcendent. I also found that this elevation of mountainous terrain creates a visual form that engages both heaven and earth. An exploration of these visual forms developed into the notion of a vertical separation between the lower physical space and the upper intangible space (Fig. 4.16). I felt that this vertical relationship encouraged a portrait oriented composition that placed the intermediate
space in the middle of the frame; with the societal space depicted below, and the transcendent space alluded to above. I felt this placement of the intermediate space in the centre also contributed to a narrative of tension between the physical and the intangible worlds.

Fig. 4.10: Shen Zhou. (ca. 1427-1509), 虎丘餞別圖 [Bidding Farewell at Tiger Hill] (detail), ink on paper, 32 x 30 cm. [note: red marks used to indicate figures not engaging in any societal human discourse].

Fig. 4.11: Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1465), Agony in the Garden (detail), tempera on wood, 81.3 x 127 cm. [note: red marks used to indicate figure not engaging in any societal human discourse]
Fig. 4.12: Harrison See, (2016), *Valley of Air and Light*, oil on canvas, 175 x 88 cm.

Fig. 4.13: Harrison See, (2016), *Valley of Stone and Water*, oil on canvas, 175 x 88 cm.

Fig. 4.14: Harrison See, (2016), *Valley of Air and Light* (detail), oil on canvas, 175 x 88 cm.

Fig. 4.15: Harrison See, (2016), *Valley of Stone and Water* (detail), oil on canvas, 175 x 88 cm.
Relationship Between Sites

Although the dynamic between these three sites varies slightly from painting to painting, the visual hierarchy in each work remains quite consistent. In terms of perspectival space or scale this hierarchy places the intermediate above the societal. The societal space is often visible as a large site that has been reduced by perspective and relegated into the distant background (Fig. 4.17), or as smaller suggestive elements closer to the foreground (Fig. 4.18); in both cases it takes up less compositional area than the intermediate site. Within this project’s selection of key paintings, Bellini’s works often confine the societal to the compositionally smaller background, while the intermediate occupies the larger foreground (Fig. 4.17). By contrast, often in Shen Zhou’s works most of the compositional space is occupied by the intermediate (Fig. 4.18). For both artists, the transcendent space is predominately implied as existing beyond the compositional area and indeed, beyond clear representational elements. As discussed above, it is in the mist, water, and especially the sky, that we get a sense of the transcendent (Fig. 3.10 & Fig. 3.19).

Between the intermediate and societal there consistently exists some sort of liminal device that successfully divides these spaces, while at the same time softens their gradation. Bellini often uses distance, taking advantage of the area between the societal background and intermediate foreground. This can be seen in the painting, Saint Jerome Reading in the Landscape (Fig. 3.12) where the middleground “appears as a zone of transition between two places that represent two different worlds” (Belting, 2014, p. 9). Shen Zhou can be seen separating the societal through the use of strong natural elements, in works such as Lofty Mount Lu (Fig. 3.15) and Poet on a Mountain Top (Fig. 3.19), which both feature manmade structures cut off from the intermediate space by taller surrounding trees. This ‘liminal device’ was explored in my studies in the form of stone and water, as well as smoke or mist.

In paintings where the societal and the intermediate are much closer together, Bellini can be seen creating two grounds that are “discontinuous both compositionally and thematically, establishing two distinct areas of meditation” (Christiansen, 2013, p. 11). These ‘distinct areas of meditation’ refer to the juxtaposition of two simultaneous, yet contrasting narratives. An example can be seen in Bellini’s work, Crucifixion (Fig. 3.9), where Christ’s death [the transitional narrative] is juxtaposed in front of the many figures going about their business [the societal narrative] (Christiansen, 2013, p. 11). As the distinction between the physical and the intangible became
more and more woven into my praxis, I incorporated this idea of juxtaposing a *societal* narrative concurrently with an *intermediate* narrative (Fig. 4.6), as I felt it emphasised the contrast between them. I also discovered that this thematic juxtaposition still came through in my other works simply by showing *societal* actions alongside *intermediate* actions (Fig. 4.5).

**Fig. 4.17:**
Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1476–78),
*Saint Francis in Ecstasy* (detail), oil on panel, 124.1 x 140.5 cm

[note: *red marks* are used to indicate the division between the societal and the intermediate]

**Fig. 4.18:**
Shen Zhou (ca. 1500),
杖藜遠眺 [*Poet on a Mountain Top*] (detail), ink on paper, 55 x 30 cm.

[note: *red marks* are used to indicate the division between the societal and the intermediate]
Chapter Five: The cosmopolitan figure

This chapter extends on the concepts of spatial mutuality by discussing the figures that operate within the aforementioned spaces. I have suggested that the societal and the intermediate sites each have their own figural archetypes assigned to them that reflect the thematic qualities of the locations they inhabit. I have referred to these figural archetypes as the materialist, which occupies the societal space, and the spiritualist, which dwells within the intermediate space.

The Materialist and the Spiritualist

The materialist mirrors the thematic qualities of the societal through a direct engagement with the physical world. These figures are most often seen in groups conversing (see Fig. 3.9 & Fig. 3.16), or performing collective actions (Fig. 3.13). Alternatively, the spiritualist, who exists within the intermediate space, carries out internal actions of the mind. By ‘acts of the mind’ I refer to figures shown disengaged from their physical surroundings and in a state of deep contemplation; such as those in Poet on a Mountain Top (Fig. 3.19) or Saint Jerome Reading in the Landscape (Fig. 3.12). I investigated these two figural archetypes throughout my praxis, often using their contrasting natures to emphasise the difference between their respective spaces (Fig. 4.6).

As mentioned above, the intermediate space is a place of transformation, where objects become less defined while shifting from the societal to the transcendent. In some cases this is also evident with the appearance of these figural archetypes. Garments change from the functional clothing of the materialist, like that of the ferryman in Scholar and Crane Returning Home (Fig. 3.18) and the Roman soldiers in Agony in the Garden (Fig. 3.10) or Crucifixion (Fig. 3.9), into the loose formless robes worn by spiritualist monks and scholars. I found that robes represented a culturally compatible garment that aesthetically emphasised the transitional nature of the intermediate space, and it is for this reason that I consistently painted my spiritualist figures in robes.

I discovered that this garment could be either rendered in the foreground or silhouetted in the background and still appear to have ephemeral qualities. Therefore, robes offered the greatest opportunity for the spiritualist to reflect their shift away from the physical realm. I extended on this notion by rendering this garment with the same painting techniques used to reference the
transcendent. This can be seen in one of my studies (Fig. 5.1) where the parts of the robe closest to the transcendent became indistinguishable from the ephemeral. While I explored the materialist in somewhat looser clothing also, their garments were intentionally rendered more statically and with a greater use of line. I also found that if materialist figures were shown carrying out societal actions in groups, they would consistently appear disconnected from the lone spiritualist (Fig. 4.5). In a reference to Bellini’s anatomical forms, I did explore the materialist as a partially nude figure (Fig. 4.6); however, I decided this type of approach provided little opportunity for mutuality; which is consistent with Jullien’s (2007) assertions in his aforementioned text.

I observed that the spiritualist is often positioned so they are partially shielded from the societal in a location that offers the most exposure to the transcendent. This can be seen where the mountainous terrain that houses the spiritualist also forms a physical barrier from the societal. Both of Bellini’s paintings of saints (Fig. 3.11 & Fig. 312) use this device, as do Shen Zhou’s Poet on a Mountain Top (Fig. 3.19) and Lofty Mount Lu (Fig. 3.15). This exposure to the transcendent is most notable in Bellini’s paintings, Crucifixion (Fig. 3.9) and Agony in the Garden (Fig. 3.10), where the spiritualist figures look up at angels (or putti) descending from the heavens. However, the most compatible example exists when comparing Bellini’s Saint Francis in Ecstasy (Fig. 3.11) and Shen Zhou’s Poet on a Mountain Top (Fig. 3.19), which both depict the spiritualist staring into the sky unobstructed by any societal elements.

I believe that this shielding from the societal represents this figure’s choice to pursue the transcendent. In my praxis I explored such a ‘shield’ in many of my studies with barriers of smoke, water or stone. In most cases this separated the spiritualist from the societal and directed their attention towards the transcendent. I also explored this as a barrier that blocked the materialists from the transcendent, creating an obstacle to be overcome in order to reach this space (Fig. 4.7 & Fig. 4.16). This developed into the idea of a journey (or pilgrimage) for the spiritualist to undertake in order to reach this space beyond. To remain consistent with my ‘spatial’ findings, and emphasise the shift from the lower societal to the upper transcendent, this was explored as a vertical journey.

Although the spiritualists were identifiable figures in Bellini’s biblical paintings, as well as in Shen Zhou’s work Lofty Mount Lu (Fig. 3.15), I chose to keep my spiritualist’s identity anonymous. As well as being more in keeping with cosmopolitan ideals, I felt that not specifying
the culture, age or gender of this figure would create more opportunity for a cross-cultural exchange. I initially explored the idea of a mask to remove identity, however, I quickly discovered that masked figures were ‘loaded’ symbols in both Chinese and Western culture. I also found difficulty in deciding how to portray such an object, as any stylistic choices began to introduce cultural specificity. I discovered slightly more success when suggesting the human face without defining any distinguishable features (Fig. 4.6 & Fig. 5.1). Though discerning which features to omit or include became quite challenging, and even when slowly introducing detail to a face, I found figures very quickly developed traits suggestive of either a male or female, or a Western or Chinese appearance.

I found the most success in hiding the figures identity when positioning them looking away from the audience (Fig. 4.7). However, when pursuing this solution I could not help but to find a visual connection between my spiritualist and the ‘Rückenfigur’ of German Romanticism. This device can be seen most notably in Casper David Friedrich’s landscape painting, Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog (Fig. 5.2), where it is used to portray the immersion of an anonymous character as they experience a space beyond the ‘natural’ (Prettejohn, 2005, p. 56). I felt that my spiritualist and the Rückenfigur both shared a common narrative, as Friedrich’s lone ‘wanderer’ had also journeyed away from his world “to perceive something limitless or infinite” (Prettejohn, 2005, p. 56).
Fig. 5.2: Casper David Friedrich (ca. 1818), Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 74.8 cm.
A Lone Journey

I believe that the *intermediate* space is used to show the *spiritualist* figure in a state of mid-journey, as they are engaged with the *transcendent* yet still tethered to the physical, as suggested by the presence of the *societal*. Bellini shares this concept with his audiences by using his mastery of the devotional image to remind his viewers of their “fragile [physical] existence” and that they “too are ephemera” (Goffen, 1989, pp. 107). Where Shen Zhou drew on Taoist thought to discuss the “ideal of transcendental spirit, and a religious salvation of human mortality” (Lee, 2009, p. 15). This in-between state experienced by the *spiritualist* creates tension between the two spaces, and I believe that it is this tension that acts as a mutual narrative between both artists’ audiences.

As mentioned above, the *spiritualists* within the works of these two artists, are heavily associated with isolation. This isolation seems to represent the figure’s choice to shift mentally, spiritually and physically closer to the *transcendent*. As the site of the *materialist* is positioned as being thematically and spatially separated from the *transcendent*, I believe this change requires some sort of journey or pilgrimage. This lone journey is invoked through both the direction the figure is facing, as well as the presence of physical pathways (*Fig. 3.9 & Fig. 3.15*). I explored this throughout my praxis, both through the presence of *societal* bridges and staircases (*Fig. 5.3 & Fig. 5.4*), as well as through more transient pathways like water (*Fig. 4.13*). I felt that a staircase’s association with vertical ascension made it more appropriate for suggesting a move towards the heavens. In addition, when I depicted a figure at the top of the staircase, I felt it represented the *spiritualist* reaching the limits’ of the physical world to continue their journey upwards. This creates a point of tension between spaces and contributes to this mutual narrative.

It can be seen in the works of both Giovanni Bellini and Shen Zhou that their respective Christian or Taoist audiences had a preoccupation with the idea of a world beyond the physical; in fact this is a significant preoccupation in many cultures according to Campbell (1949). Therefore, I believe that a cross-cultural contemporary audience would universally recognise and relate to the idea of living within an established society, while at the same time being conscious of the possibility of another spiritual realm. It is this tension between the *societal* space and the *transcendent* space that I identified as a source of cross-cultural mutuality; and despite these artists’ obviously contrasting techniques and styles, I found that this narrative formed the key concept in my figural landscape studies.
As I concluded my studies I felt that the more I removed the *spiritualist* from the *societal*, the closer they appeared to the *transcendent* strengthening this narrative. When I reached the point that I had stripped all *societal* elements from my work, leaving only this solitary *spiritualist* exposed to the allusions to the *transcendent*, I once again noticed a link to Friedrich’s work. However, on this occasion I particularly saw a connection to his painting *Monk by the Sea* (Fig. 5.5). For it is in this painting that a robed figure faces away from the audience out towards the vastness of the ocean. This tiny figure’s only link to the physical is the bare earth he stands upon, while he is enveloped by the endless sky and water beyond him. While in the absence of human activity this figure stands in deep thought as he contemplates the “insignificance” of mankind’s corporal existence (Siegel, 1980, pp. 72-73).

![Fig. 5.3: Harrison See, (2016), Bridge Crossing I (detail), oil on canvas, 70 x 60 cm.](image-url)
Fig. 5.4:
Harrison See, (2016), *Tunnel of Stone and Light* (detail), oil on canvas, 87 x 60 cm.
Fig. 5.5: Casper David Friedrich (ca. 1809), *Monk by the Sea*, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm.

Fig. 5.6: Casper David Friedrich (ca. 1809), *Monk by the Sea* (detail), oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm.
Conclusion

Despite the dichotomous positioning of Chinese and Western painting seen in traditional historiographical studies, this research project aimed to identify and explore deeper mutuality beyond cultural difference. Through the analysis of two artists that arguably represent the enduring qualities of their respective Chinese or Western approaches to painting, I explored an informed common ground in my own studio practice. This ‘site of mutuality’ was then articulated through a series of painterly studies in a contemporary praxis that would hold compatible meanings across diverse cultural audiences. Though the aesthetic and stylistic divergences between Chinese and Western painting cannot be denied, I employed a Stoic-Cosmopolitan perspective to address cross-cultural empathy and understanding. This allowed me to extend my consideration beyond my own experiences, encouraging a strong engagement with both traditions, while reducing the ‘lens of the other’. At the centre of the engagement was the identification of a common narrative of tension between the material and spiritual realms.

A Cosmopolitan Landscape

Through a painting praxis informed by my textual analysis, I identified and explored this tension through the study of three key spaces and the relationship that existed between them. Each space had assigned to it its own thematic qualities and aesthetics, while housing its own figural archetypes. I observed that the societal space and the transcendent space operated as counterpoints, emphasising the difference between the material and spiritual values held by the figures within them. The intermediate space became the bridge between, a place of transformation that represented a journey beyond the physical world. Although the intermediate space represented a choice available to these figures to undertake a journey of transformation, this location is still tethered to the corporal, which subsequently added conceptual and pictorial tension.

It was in the intermediate space that I used painting to create studies that explored this tension experienced by the lone spiritualist figure, and I believe this offered the greatest opportunity to demonstrate cross-cultural mutuality. By breaking down my painting to more minimal components that feature basic elements such as stone, water, air and fire, I found this stripped the work of
further cultural specificity, creating a universally familiar landscape for both contemporary Chinese and Western audiences.
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*Fig. 1.2* Li Xubau (2010), 早春图 [Early Spring] (detail), ink and colour on paper, 243 x 247 cm. (Exception to copyright. Section: ss40, 103C. Exception: Research or study.)

**Chapter Two**

*Fig. 2.1* Raphael [Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino] (ca. 1509-1511), *School of Athens* (detail), fresco, 500 x 770 cm.

*Fig. 2.2* Qu Ding (Attributed) (ca. 1050), 夏山圖 [Summer Mountains] (detail), Handscroll; ink and colour on silk, 45.4 x 115.3 cm.

*Fig. 2.3* Andrea Mantegna (ca. 1490), *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (detail), tempera on canvas, 68 x 81 cm.

*Fig. 2.4* Zhang Lu (ca. 1500-1550), *To Play the Zither for a Friend*, ink on silk, 31.4 x 61 cm.

*Fig. 2.5* Leonardo da Vinci (1510-11), *Anatomical studies of the Shoulder*, pen and ink on paper, 28.9 x 19.9 cm.

*Fig. 2.6* Lü Ji (ca. 1439-1505), 秋鷺芙蓉圖 [Autumnal Egrets and Hibiscus] (detail), ink and colour on silk, 192.6 x 111.9 cm.

*Fig. 2.7* Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1465), *Agony in the Garden* (detail), tempera on wood, 81.3 x 127 cm.

*Fig. 2.8* Antonello da Messina (ca. 1475), *Saint Jerome in his Study* (detail), oil on lime, 45.7 x 36.2 cm.

*Fig. 2.9* Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1480-85), *Saint Jerome Reading in the Landscape* (detail), tempera and oil on wood, 47 x 33.7 cm.

*Fig. 2.10* Shen Zhou. (ca. 1427-1509), 載鶴泛湖 [Scholar and Crane Returning Home] (aka. *Returning Home from the Land of the Immortals*), ink on paper, 38.74 x 60.33 cm

*Fig. 2.11* Lü Ji (ca. 1439-1505), 秋鷺芙蓉圖 [Autumnal Egrets and Hibiscus] (detail), ink and colour on silk, 192.6 x 111.9 cm.

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*Fig. 3.2* Photo 2 of my on-campus studio space in Shanghai, China

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*Fig. 3.4* Harrison See, (2016), *Study of Figure and Water II*, oil on canvas, 45 x 45 cm.

*Fig. 3.5* Harrison See, (2016), *Watching the Sunrise* (detail), oil on canvas, 45 x 45 cm.

*Fig. 3.6* Harrison See, (2016), *Valley of Stone and Water* (detail), oil on canvas, 175 x 88 cm.
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