

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

SCHOOL OF VISUAL ART

THE SPIRITUAL LAND

SHAOHUA CHI  
Spring 2012

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in Science  
with honors in Art

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Paul Chidester  
Associate Professor of Art  
Thesis Supervisor

Jerrold W. Maddox  
Professor of Art  
Honors Adviser

\* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

## **ABSTRACT**

Through the painting thesis “The Spiritual Land”, correlations between nature and spiritual themes (that can be found in landscape painting) are explored. Through the study of relevant paintings, and my creation (and exhibition) of 10 paintings of my own, “The Spiritual Land” has taken shape. Some of the paintings are reproductions of selected artists, and others are inspired from my own heart and past experience. All of the paintings are carried out in acrylic on canvas with varying sizes. Pictures included in the PowerPoint were taken inside the Patterson Building studio. The scheduled exhibition will take place at the second week of May 2012 in the Patterson Gallery.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Images.....	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 Methods.....	3
Chapter 3 Results.....	4
Images.....	See Attached PDF document
Chapter 4 Conclusion.....	7
Reference.....	8

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Paul Chidester, my Honors Supervisor, for his endless help and support while I conducting my Honors Thesis Project. He is not only teaching me how to paint well, but also helping me to develop my potential in the field of painting. He has challenged my mind and my original way of painting, and has encouraged me to work outside of my comfort zone.

Professor Chidester also helped me to know how to live a joyful life and paint for myself. As a Chinese student, cultural background usually confined my mind. Paul has helped me develop a unique way for me to combine my Chinese background and American experience, and then transfer them into painting. He is a great teacher, mentor and friend. I really appreciated all his time and effort guiding me through this process.

I would like to also thank Matty Zhang, who provided photographic assistance in the production of the PowerPoint document.

## LIST OF IMAGES

All images are in the attached PowerPoint Presentation named “The Spiritual Land”

Image 1: First Encounter.....	S2
Image 2: Pure Heart .....	S3
Image 3: From Inside Out.....	S4
Image 4: Break Every Chain.....	S5
Image 5: You Uphold .....	S6
Image 6: Though I am Dark, You See My Beauty .....	S7
Image 7: Rest in Him .....	S8
Image 8: His Embrace.....	S9

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Nature and spirit seem, at first, quite different. But they have been characterized by artists throughout history as deeply interrelated. It probably first started when human beings started to think fundamental questions such as “who we are, why do we exist in this world.” When we behold the creatures in this magnificent world, we can become ponderous, lost in deep thought. Artists are especially interested in this specific topic. In the twentieth century, much innovative American art has been considered nature-based. The study of nature by American landscape painters is often related to their quest for the underlying mystical qualities understood to reside in nature<sup>1</sup>.

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind.” Later he reiterated, “A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. A leaf, a sunbeam, a landscape, the ocean, makes an analogous impression on the mind.”<sup>1</sup> Such attitudes prefigure the ideas of correspondences that can be traced back to much earlier painters like Alfred Pinkham Ryder and Ferdinand Hodler. Georgia O’Keeffe is one of my favorite artists, and her painting influenced me since I began to step into the area of painting. She also strongly correlates natural and spiritual states of being, “I found I could say things with colors and shapes that I couldn’t say in any other way – things that I had no words for.” Similarly, when I see my paintings, every single one of them has its own emotions and feeling associated with my spiritual field while I was painting. People who see my pieces will have their own spiritual interactions. It is truly a significant theme that draws my attention and this is the reason that I want to paint in my way and explore nature as well as the spiritual

land.

I believe colors have magical powers. People can see happiness and sadness through different colors, even when no specific shapes are related to them. Red or orange can make us feel warm, but in other contexts, they may seem to evoke passionate feelings, even unpleasantly violent ones. Not only the viewer, but also the painter co-determines these color-associated feelings. Two spirited beings thus initiate sympathetic responses without words. For example, in the paintings of Leonid Afremov, the particular combinations of vibrant colors have a particularly mesmerizing effect. In his paintings, I sense the crying out of souls. We all have words that never become spoken; the canvas is the place I can release and speak out loudly.

Every art piece is an *abstraction*, whether it described as representational or abstract. Artists transfer real life experiences onto canvas through inspiration and painting technique. If we divide a painting into many small squares, within each square there is only simple color and shape. As a whole we may see a flower, a sun, or crowd of people. Becoming aware of this fact made me no longer afraid to paint on my own, because even with the reference to nature, I am still painting something of myself. The same landscape - though painted by different people - will end up with many different unique interpretations. As I begin to find my identity as a painter, I assert my uniqueness as my paintings assert theirs. In much the same way, God has created me, and the paintings are made by me.

## **Chapter 2: Method**

As a way of engaging these themes, I have created and will exhibit ten paintings in acrylic on canvas. Some of them are interpretations of other artists' works. At times, I have adopted various artists' painting styles. At other times, I have begun to create my own painting style, along with my own interpretations of nature. Usually initiated from my photographs of the natural world, I seek to represent my spiritual awareness from (and through) their reassembly in painted form.

### Chapter 3: Result

As a Christian, love of God is part of my life. God also puts a strong, heartfelt interest in drawing and painting. The main reason that I want to pursue my Honors Research Project in the art of painting is to capture and convey my inspiration from God. My project is also a record of my growth not only in painting technique, but also in my intellectual development. As we know, landscape painting historically (across many cultures and eras) has been used as a vehicle to express spiritual, philosophical and other important states of being.

In the process of completing my Honors Research Project, I have developed the abilities to express a profound spiritual awareness through the depiction of landscapes. Below, I will introduce some of my best paintings individually.

1. *First Encounter*, (Acrylic on canvas, 28"x 24", Sep 2011)

This painting described my experience when I first knew God's love. He is a Holy God, I felt so guilty when I noticed all my sins in the past. I am represented by the little girl in this painting - who cannot look directly at Him. The dove with scattered light denotes the Holy Spirit. It wakes in my heart and starts to know who Jesus is. The background is like heaven, and I employ the technique of glazing to show an imaginary feeling. The little girl stands in front of gate of heaven. She sees the most cherished present of her life – eternal life. *First Encounter* is the first of this series, and it records how I first received eternal life.

2. *From Inside Out*, (Acrylic on canvas, 20"x 18", Nov 2011)

Georgia O'Keeffe is one of my favorite artists. Every time I see her painting my heart is

refreshed. She also likes to paint based on nature and turn her painting into spiritual fact. Her painting teaches me a lot, especially how to express those unspoken words deeply inside my heart. *From Inside Out* is an interpretation of Georgia O'Keeffe's *Music Pink and Blue II*. In this painting, I explored the technique of glazing and blending. Layer after layer, I began to explore the indirect application of colors.

### 3. ***Break Every Chain***, (Acrylic on canvas, 20"x 18", Dec 2011)

*Break Every Chain* is not only the turning point of my series, but also a turning point in my life. At that moment, I was extremely depressed due to graduate school applications and also pressure from a growing fear for my future. My supervisor, Professor Chidester, provided me with an abandoned student painting which looked dismal and incomplete. Paul asked me to fix it (not a small challenge for me at the time). I never paint abstractly and also it was the first time I started a painting not from a blank canvas. In the beginning, I felt afraid to make a mistake. Without a point of reference I had no idea what to paint. Professor Chidester introduced a new concept to me. That is that every painting is an abstraction. No matter how similar it looks like the original reference, it is not a mirror image. The artist creates an image of some subject onto a canvas, but it's never the same thing as that which is seen. This concept opened my eyes, and it was the first time I tried to paint directly from my mind. Surprisingly I realized there is much in my brain to paint.

Also, I tried to paint out my feelings while completing this piece. Later I realized it was also a healing process. I put all my struggles and negative thoughts into *Break Every Chain*. The bird in the middle is a symbol of me; it is crowned by the chain. The background is composed of two-hemisphere shape. These represent my spiritual world, one positive and one negative, two

extremes. The sky is a predominantly red color, representing fire that can destroy everything. That fire melts my negative world, and breaks all my chains, setting me free.

From this painting, I determined my strong interest in bright colors. I love to experiment with colors. Each color has its own spirit, and all together they give me a sense of hope. As people respond to light the bright colors are like light in my paint and light in my heart. After this, almost all of my paintings are carried out with bright colors, although in various techniques.

#### 4. *Rest in Him* (Acrylic on canvas, 20"x 18", Feb 2012)

This is another interesting trail. I never used thick paint in my painting before, so I decided to give myself a new challenge. The best way to start learning a new way of painting is by reproducing some mature artists' pieces. This is exactly what I did in *Rest in Him*. Leonid Afremov is the artist I was interested in at that time; his paintings are full of bright and joyful colors. He is good at using a palette knife to apply oil on canvas. I still used acrylic at this time, but imitated his way of painting. Although acrylic paint shrinks as it dries, the painting turned out beautifully. *Rest in Him* built up my confidence, and as a result, I became less afraid of moving out of my comfort zone and of taking on new challenges.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

In the process of completing my series of paintings, I can see my growth continuously. I learned something new from each of the paintings, and turned new inspiration (as well as technical advancement) into each painting that followed. It has been a cumulative process and one full of surprises. Through continuous painting, I developed my unique way of painting – characterized by the use of bright color with big strokes freely applied, (in combination with glazing). More surprisingly, I have become *happier* one painting after the next. I began to enjoy painting from and through my style, not being afraid of making mistakes, or other people's potential criticisms. I find my identity in my painting, each of them is part of my internal world. There is happiness, and of course a more complex range of emotions. However, these emotions reflect my whole person. Painting makes me feel complete and I want to continue painting until the day I can no longer hold my brush.

## Reference

1. Tuchman, M., Freeman, J., Blotkamp, C., Los Angeles County Museum of Art.,  
Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, I., & Haags Gemeentemuseum. (1986) , *The  
Spiritual in Art: Abstract painting 1890-1985*. New York: Abbeville Press.

## ACADEMIC VITA of Shaohua Chi

Shaohua Chi  
801C07 West Aaron Drive  
State College, PA, 16803  
shaohuachi123@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor of Science – Life science option, Penn State University, Spring 2012  
Honors in Art  
Thesis Title: The Spiritual Land  
Thesis Supervisor: Paul Chidester

### Related Experience:

Internship with Qingdao Hiser Hospital, Ophthalmology Department  
Supervisor: Dr. Jianjun Liu  
Summer 2009

Longtime Volunteer at Advanced Eye Care Services, State College, PA  
Supervisor: Dr. Daniel Anderson  
Spring of 2011

### Awards:

President's Freshman Award  
Dean's List  
Golden Key National Honors Society

### Research

Independent Research Analyst, Department of Chemistry, Penn State  
University  
Wage Payroll Research Assistant, Department of Microbiology, Penn  
State University