See through the dark -- Reincarnation

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--Reincarnation

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I. INTRODUCTION

I came here two years ago, and I missed my parents and friends very badly. When I was excitedly planning for a vacation to Taiwan at the summer break of 1995, my father died suddenly. I was shocked by my father's sudden death. The funerary ceremonies occupied a week, during the mourning period, I began thinking about death. I am not a Buddhist, but the doctrine of reincarnation has become part of the mythology and folklore of the Taiwanese people, therefore, I believe in reincarnation and karma.

I made a series of paintings, using canvas and oil paints, in remembrance of my father. Most people fear death, but death comes to all. I intend to express my opinions about life and death and present the story behind every painting to show how this work reflects my concerns about reincarnation.
I-1 Development

Sometimes, walking in a crowded group of people who were strangers to me, I felt at a loss as to where I was, who I was, and what to do. I was so helpless because it is not easy for me to communicate with people in English. A foreigner in America will adapt herself to her new life, but it takes time. In the beginning, I felt lonely and found it hard to express myself exactly because of the different language and culture. This difficulty in communicating may lead to feelings of depression and alienation. Therefore, my painting is often riddled with melancholy and uneasiness.

We must recognize that many artists create works about their life and surroundings. When I create my paintings, the one thing I always think about is my feelings about my living and my environment. I have to pay attention to whatever happens in my surroundings and respond to my feelings at all times. I then paint down what I feel on the canvas and expect the viewers to appreciate my painting.

I titled my thesis, "See Through The dark--Reincarnation." I try to investigate the object, because of
my father's death. The word reincarnation means to incarnate again, to re-embody in flesh, to return after death to the world in another physical body. In Manly Palmer Hall's *Reincarnation: The Cycle of Necessity*, he made an annotation about reincarnation and karma, he wrote:

The law of reincarnation as revealed by Buddha teaches that all living things, animate and inanimate, must pass through innumerable re-embodiments until imperfections have been removed by experience.¹

Karma means compensation, and is the application of the law of cause and effect to the moral lives of personalized creatures. The law of karma motivates rebirth. Reincarnation is made necessary by the accumulation of good and evil actions brought forward from previous existences. Rebirth must continue as long as karma remains.²

In my opinion, one's nationality and the cultural environments that one has lived in have great influence on one's mind, feelings, and behavior. The melodious style of my painting is connected to my culture and my native character. The motifs of the paintings came from my imagination about the reincarnation of human beings. The Chinese characters,  


selected from Buddhist scripture, are the background of the paintings.

In general, the more realistic the picture according to the viewer’s expectation, the more the viewer will understand what it means. If a picture is abstract, then it’s hard for the viewer to examine the intention of the painter. Therefore, I draw a concrete figure as the subject matter, not an abstract one. In my painting, the color is significant and diversified. Our sensation with colors is instantaneous and intense, linking our total experience and emotion. Blue to us is sad, lonely, shady, and cool, but red gives us an enthusiastic, perilous feeling. I use colors to evoke the viewer’s sentiment, and my brush strokes convey my impulsive feelings to present a vivid and visible emotion. A style of painting is not only a technique, but also my thrill and agony.

I believe in reincarnation, but rebirth can not revive my father to live with me again. Therefore, my paintings conceal a disquieting atmosphere and hint at the probability of an explosion of rage.
I-2 Historical influence--Vincent van Gogh

After my father's funeral, I couldn't sleep at night. The truth made me crazy, and a picture emerged from my mind; a flock of crows flying on a golden wheatfield flying into the blue-black threatening sky.

"Wheatfield with crows" was painted by Vincent van Gogh just about two weeks before he shot himself in 1890. It was supposed to be his last oil painting. A atmosphere of depression forms the picture. Vincent van Gogh described the picture in a letter to his brother. He wrote:

There are vast stretches of corn under troubled skies, and I did not need to go out of my way to try to express sadness and the extreme of loneliness.\(^3\)

I was deeply impressed with the painting, and I felt despondency and indignation.

My paintings, the squiggles, the high saturated colors, and the overlapped color texture, were built like van Gogh's paintings. Vincent van Gogh, who is a great painter to imitate and pursue, is one of my favorite artists. His

painting style has been described as writhing, chaotic, art of the insane because of the intense movement and abstraction of all elements. Vincent van Gogh had always seen things with both mind and eyes, he had a genius for seeing magnificent color visions. Seeing his paintings, you will be excited by their terrible beauty and vigor. Rober Hughes made the best annotation of Vincent van Gogh, he wrote:

As a draftsman, van Gogh was obsessively interested in stylistic coherence. Just as one can see the very movements of his brush imitating the microforms of nature— the crawling striations of a gnarled olive trunk, the "Chinese" contortions of weathered limestone— so the drawings break down the pattern of landscape and reestablish it in terms of a varied, but still codified system of marks: dot, dash, stroke, slash.⁴

Throughout his brief life, Vincent van Gogh imitated to learn. He is a man of sentiment, and his art is riddled with grief and solitude because he lived far away from his native country, but he had a shrewd eye for his surroundings. Vincent van Gogh liked to live his own way and insist on his own credos about art. He wrote in a letter to his brother:

As far as I am concerned I devote myself to my canvases with all my attention; I try to do as well as certain painters whom I have much loved and admired.⁵

I hope I can insist on art, like him.

Reflecting on my paintings, I realized that Vincent van Gogh has been a great influence on me. The melodious style of my painting is also connected to my native character. I am fascinated with the chaotic strokes of my native character and create works about my life and being a foreigner in America. An artist has to sense the hidden beauty of her surroundings. My rich imagination and feelings are the source of my art. I try to express myself vividly and expect that the viewer may experience similar feelings.

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5Vincent van Gogh, Vincent van Gogh; paintings and drawings (Zaandam, Netherlands, Printing: C. Huig, 1969), 58
II. EXPLANATION OF INDIVIDUAL PIECES

1. Reincarnation I

The image for this painting came from the idea that birth and death is a continual cycle; we are reborn again and again until the very end of time mingles with eternity. This end Buddhists call nirvana.

In the central image of the painting, the birth and death wreathes themselves around a tall, slim human figure from the figure’s right hand to the figure’s left hand. The skull, tinted black, symbolized the death and the fetus, tinted ivory symbolized the birth. The cable of death is thicker than the rope of birth because I believe that the power of the death is stronger than the vitality of birth.

The basic colors used for this painting are red, yolk-yellow and black. Each of these colors has a meaning. Red is an auspicious color to Taiwanese. People usually dress themselves in red colors in honor of happy occasions; the bereaved family will dress in white during the mourning period. In my memory, having a deep respect for my father, we
covered him with a yolk-yellow-colored robe, as the color of an imperial robe. Chinese characters, colored with red and yolk-yellow, form this painting against a background of black.

Therefore, the use of red and the human figure imply the birth and the use of yolk-yellow and the background imply the death. Birth, colored red, and death, colored yolk-yellow, interact in this painting and strengthen a mysterious emotion so as to find an echo in the viewer's heart.
2. Death

None of us can boss around life and death. There is a certain boundary between life and death, and I am not prepared, as no one can be. We can't make the dead person stop being dead.

In the central image of the painting, a red-colored Death with a black-colored rope sling emerges from an eyeball. The smiling skull seems to be awaiting someone's death. Horizontal broken lines, which look like tadpoles running amuck, form the eyeball. In the eyeball, red, blue, and green, these layers of colors elicit a deep space and build a fighting atmosphere against the red Death.

In the background, red-colored Chinese characters, selecting from Buddhist scripture, overlap blues and the turquoise, ultramarine, indigo, sky-blue, and jade-green swirly strokes writhe in building up the texture of the background. The crawling striations and the jumping lines display the background, a death world, that is mysterious and anxious.
Between the eyeball and the background, red-colored Chinese characters emerge from oranges against the dark background. Colors admix on the canvas, but not the painter's palette; thus, red dissolves into oranges and the colors are animate and diversified. The use of oranges, cheerful colors, symbolize a world that is full of life and remind us that while there is life, there is hope.
3. Reincarnation II

The image for this piece came from the belief that those who love one another are drawn together life after life in the various possible relationships: parent and child, brother and sister, lover and sweetheart, and so on. In Geoffrey Hodson’s book *Reincarnation, Fact or Fallacy*, he wrote:

Neither birth nor death nor rebirth can ever completely or finally separate those between whom a deep spiritual, intellectual or physical bond has been formed.⁶

Furthermore, the very fact of the existence of so close a bond will cause them repeatedly to descend into incarnation at about the same time, and under conditions in which they are likely to meet, being drawn together by their affinity and the law of cause and effect.⁷

A sorrowful, pregnant woman figure, whose head is held with both hands covering the face, divides the painting into two sections, life and death.

The father died and reincarnated into his daughter’s abdomen to continue the relationship. A red skeleton sitting


astride on the father symbolizes the father's death and the prussian-blue background shows the mystery of the dead world.
The scratchy prussian-blue slashes, which break up the Chinese characters, imply the power of the death.

Outside of the dead world, various red-colored Chinese characters emerge from a yellow, green, sky-blue background. These exaggerated brilliant colors build a complex, animated world which is colorful against a dull, uncertain dead world.
4. Reincarnation III

In The central image of this painting, a pregnant woman and a man embrace each other and stand on a flower which symbolizes the fetus's karma. The gesture and attitude of the pistils and stamens, which struggle unnaturally, are fidgety and anguished. In the petals of the flower, the ugly pistils and stamens, wreathing the human bodies, show us that there is no escaping the results of action. The child must be ready to face the world and acknowledge that all the misfortunes which occur are the results of his own mistakes. In Manly Palmer Hall's *Reincarnation: The Cycle of Necessity*, he wrote:

It is karma which makes reincarnation necessary in order that compensation may justly be administered. Man is eternally suffering, and misfortune is a constant goad impelling him forward toward a more perfect state.8

The basic colors in this painting are reds and greens. Color effects become more powerful when I put these complementary colors near to one another. In the background, reds and greens, these layers of frantic Chinese characters fight each other and present an atmosphere indicating that it

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is not easy to accept the responsibility for what we did and to grow up during each incarnation.
5. New Life

The image for this piece came from the belief that "A Buddha does not die. He passes into nirvana. His causal nature is disseminated through time and space, and he ceases forever to exist as a being." 9 Most people who believe in reincarnation and karma hope to achieve Buddhahood, and seek nirvana, the ultimate state of man. In Manly Palmer Hall's Reincarnation: The Cycle of Necessity, he tried to describe what is nirvana and he wrote:

The laws of rebirth and karma are not ends in themselves but means toward the accomplishment of the supreme end, nirvana. 10

Nor is nirvana the end of evolution; it is merely the end of evolution as we know it, but not the end of growth. The entity will send forth no more personalities, but in the next great cycle of life the entity will create another type of extension and achieve growth by other means. Nirvana, then, is the end of the personality-forming attribute of the entity. 11

In the central image of this painting, a fetus, who is held by two human hands, comes out of the flower. The flower symbolizes our complex world, and the fetus comes out of the flower and that means the personality has fulfilled his

9, 10, & 11 Manly Palmer Hall, Reincarnation: The Cycle of Necessity (Los Angeles, California: The Philosophical Research Society, INC., 1967), 19, 197, & 199
various destinies, so the cycle of life ends. I use a fetus form because I am not sure what form will we be when we pass into nirvana. In the background, layers of frantic Chinese characters provide a contrast with the innocence of a fetus.
III. CONCLUSION

In my paintings, the display of space is a two-dimensional space which attaches importance to the flatness of the picture plane, but not the depth of a three-dimensional space. I used a lot of Chinese characters to be the background of my paintings. I drew various styles of writing, and tried to show the beauty of Chinese characters. From layers of Chinese characters, people who can not read Chinese characters can view the beauty of calligraphic art.

In my opinion, a painting can convey its purpose without modeling, lines, or composition, but not without colors. Colors can build a shape, space, and volume on a canvas. No color means no oil painting. In my painting, the color is significant and diversified. The basic colors of my paintings are red and black. In my mind, red, the color of blood, which can symbolize life and death is an inconsistent color. People live with blood and die without blood, so red is an important color in my paintings. Black, my favorite color, is a symbol of death.
The high saturated colors and thick texture are the characteristics of my oil paintings. I also like to use complementary colors because I believe that color effects become more powerful when I put the complementary colors near to one another (red-green, orange-blue, yellow-violet), or when I use the three primary colors (red, yellow, and blue) side by side.

As long as I can remember, I have always ruminated on what is the meaning of life. I feel a great interest in the dark side of humanity, such as loneliness, unhappiness, and the sufferings of human beings. In this thesis, I intend to express my opinion about life and death. As I reflect on my paintings, although I believe in reincarnation, on closer inspection a funeral atmosphere fills my paintings because death remains inscrutable to me. I know the world where I live, but I am not sure the world after death. That is why I believe that the power of death is stronger than the vitality of birth.

After my thesis show, I understand that the field of painting is quite broad. There is much still waiting for me to explore. In terms of art, my life has just begun. What I
have presently experienced and understand is just a small part. I desire to learn more and pursue a lifetime of devotion to the arts.
IV. LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

These paintings were in the thesis show at RIT Bevier Gallery during

April 29- May 8, 1996

A. Reincarnation I, 1995   (50"x36")
B. Death, 1995   (40"x52")
C. Reincarnation II, 1996   (39"x50")
D. Reincarnation III, 1996   (50"x40")
E. New Life, 1996   (50"x28")
c.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


