

The Power of Natural Spirit: Water as Visual Language and Philosophical Conduit in Contemporary Art — Toward a Theoretical Framework for Water School Art

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Abstract

This study presents a theoretical vacuum by creating Water School Art, A unique modern visual art movement based on the philosophical imagery, material dynamics, and ecological aspects of water. Using a practice-led research methodology, the study incorporated four interconnected phases: field-based observational research across major Chinese water environments, including Chagan Lake, the Yangtze River basin, and the Yellow River; documentary analysis of Eastern philosophical texts and Western aesthetic theory; systematic material experimentation with water-based media on Xuan paper; and a five-stage creation process formalizing the relationship between natural The theoretical framework integrates Daoist and Confucian water philosophy, phenomenological aesthetics, ecological aesthetics, and material agency theory to establish water as subject matter, creative approach, and philosophical principle. Ten large-scale mixed-media pieces were created and interpreted using semiotic and philosophical research. The results demonstrate that the "water-based generation" approach, which is defined by semi-controlled interaction with natural processes such as diffusion, sedimentation, and evaporation, consistently creates visual forms with true philosophical resonance. The research adds a unique theoretical framework, a formalized creative approach, and a considerable body of artwork to the current visual art conversation. Implications include visual art practice, art education, and ecological aesthetics, proving that Eastern philosophical traditions are still valuable intellectual tools for tackling modern cultural and environmental concerns.

Keywords: Water School Art · Ecological Aesthetics · Practice-Led Research · Daoist Philosophy · Contemporary Visual Art

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary visual art is increasingly challenged with concerns about humanity's relationship with nature. While technical advancement and digital media have extended creative possibilities, many researchers suggest that modern civilization is suffering a rising feeling of ecological alienation and spiritual estrangement from nature (Abram, 1996; Saito, 2007). As environmental problems grow in importance and cultural identities shift in a globalized society, artists and academics have sought new conceptual frameworks that might reconcile creative practice with ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and lived experience.

Within this setting, nature has resurfaced as a significant source of creative research. Water is one of the most important natural phenomena due to its physical, metaphorical, and philosophical properties. Water is both active and static, visible and unseen, material and symbolic. Water has traditionally been viewed in Eastern philosophical traditions as a symbol of knowledge, harmony, adaptability, and persistence. Water, according to Daoist philosophy, embodies the ultimate virtue due to its ability to benefit all creatures without competition (Laozi, 1963), but Confucian traditions equate water with intellectual cultivation and moral development (Ames & Hall, 2003). Similarly, Zen aesthetics uses water imagery to express clarity, emptiness, and spiritual awareness. Despite water's long-standing cultural relevance, modern visual art study has generally examined it

as a representational topic, symbolic theme, or material medium. Water has been studied in relation to landscape painting, environmental art, ecological activism, and installation practices; however, few studies have investigated water as a comprehensive philosophical and artistic system capable of producing its own visual language and creative methodology (Berleant, 1992; Carlson, 2000). As a result, there is still a significant theoretical vacuum in understanding how the philosophical characteristics and material behaviors of water might inspire the construction of a distinct modern art framework.

To address this gap, the current study offers Water School Art as a modern creative movement based on philosophical imagery, material dynamics, and ecological connotations of water. Rather from treating water just as a visual topic, Water School Art views it as both a philosophical basis and a methodological principle for creative creativity. This study aims to create a coherent theoretical framework capable of expanding current understandings of artistic creativity, environmental consciousness, and human-nature relationships by combining Eastern philosophy, ecological aesthetics, material experimentation, and contemporary visual practice. Although ecological aesthetics, environmental humanities, and contemporary art theory have produced significant literature on the link between art and nature, there is still little theoretical consideration paid to water as an autonomous conceptual framework for creative creativity. Existing literature treats water primarily as a representational object, a symbolic element, or a technical medium, rather than as a fundamental principle capable of determining creative process, visual language, and aesthetic theory.

The first difficulty is conceptual fragmentation. Water has been widely addressed in Daoist, Confucian, and Zen traditions as a metaphor for metamorphosis, adaptation, harmony, and wisdom (Laozi, 1963; Ames & Hall, 2003). However, these philosophical concepts have seldom been thoroughly integrated into current visual art theory. As a result, artists influenced by Eastern water philosophy frequently lack an integrated conceptual framework for interpreting, communicating, and developing their creative practices within modern academic discourse. The second concern is related to creative approach. Contemporary artistic creation usually focuses on control, intentionality, and premeditated consequences. In contrast, water-based artistic processes entail unpredictability, fluidity, diffusion, sedimentation, and the interaction of human purpose with natural forces. While process art and material-based practices recognise the relevance of material agency (Ingold, 2013), there is still a lack of study on how the natural behaviour of water might work as a generative mechanism for artistic production rather than just a technical tool. The third issue addresses the larger cultural and ecological environment. Rapid urbanisation, technology reliance, and environmental deterioration have exacerbated the divide between humans and natural settings. According to scholars, art may promote ecological consciousness and environmental responsibility by encouraging experience linkages between people and nature (Berleant, 1992; Saito, 2007).

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the philosophical and aesthetic meanings of water in Eastern philosophical traditions and contemporary art theory.
2. To develop a theoretical framework for Water School Art based on the integration of Eastern water philosophy, ecological aesthetics, and contemporary visual art practice.
3. To formulate a creative methodology for Water School Art through systematic experimentation with water-based materials and natural processes.
4. To create a body of original artworks that embody the theoretical and methodological principles of Water School Art.
5. To evaluate the artistic, cultural, and ecological significance of Water School Art as a contemporary approach for strengthening human-nature relationships and ecological consciousness.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Water in Eastern Philosophy and Aesthetic Thought

Water has played an important role in Eastern philosophical traditions for ages, functioning as both a physical reality and a deep metaphor for comprehending life, transformation, and harmony. Among East Asia's main philosophical traditions, Daoism may have the most significant view of water. In the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi

regards water as the highest kind of virtue since it serves everyone without seeking praise or supremacy. Water adapts to changing conditions, flows past obstructions, and shows strength via flexibility rather than force (Laozi, 1963). This viewpoint has made substantial contributions to Chinese aesthetic theory, where natural processes are frequently used as models for creative production and spiritual development.

Beyond Daoism, Confucian thought links water to moral development and intellectual refinement. Classical Confucian literature commonly connect the movement of water to the growth of knowledge and character, emphasizing lifelong learning and self-improvement. Similarly, Zen Buddhist aesthetics use water imagery to represent emptiness, impermanence, mindfulness, and direct experience. These traditions together show that water is more than just a natural resource; it is a dynamic principle capable of affecting human perception and creative expression (Ames and Hall, 2003). Although Eastern philosophies offer rich intellectual frameworks for comprehending water, its use in contemporary visual art is restricted. Existing research has mostly looked at water as a symbolic element in traditional painting, poetry, and cultural rituals. Few studies have investigated how water philosophy might serve as a complete theoretical foundation for current creative output. This constraint highlights the need for more research into the connection between water-based philosophical conceptions and modern visual innovation.

2.2 Ecological Aesthetics and Human–Nature Relationships

The rise of ecological aesthetics has greatly broadened debates about the role of nature in modern art and cultural creation. Ecological aesthetics rejects traditional techniques that isolate individuals from their surroundings, instead emphasizing interconnectivity, environmental awareness, and embodied experience (Berleant 1992). Rather than considering nature as a passive object of observation, ecological aesthetics sees aesthetic experience as an active process by which people interact with the living world. According to Carlson (2000), comprehending ecological linkages is more important than focusing merely on visual appearance in order to appreciate nature meaningfully. Similarly, Saito (2007) argues that aesthetic experiences shape ethical views toward environmental stewardship. These viewpoints have prompted artists and academics to explore the social and environmental implications of creative work. Contemporary environmental art aims to raise awareness of environmental challenges while also developing emotional and intellectual links between humans and natural systems.

2.3 Material Agency and Process-Based Art

Materiality and process have become increasingly important in contemporary art theory. Since the birth of Process Art in the 1960s, artists have challenged the notion that creative production should be entirely controlled by human purpose. Instead, process-oriented techniques emphasize flux, unpredictability, transformation, and the active involvement of materials in generating creative products. Ingold (2013) contends that creativity develops from interactions between humans and materials rather than the imposition of fixed concepts on passive matter. From this perspective, artistic elements have their own agency, which influences the creation of creative work. Water-based media are an especially interesting example since they constantly alter shape, movement, and appearance in response to environmental circumstances. Processes like diffusion, evaporation, sedimentation, and absorption, and flow generate visual effects that often exceed the artist's direct control.

2.4 Contemporary Art, Spirituality, and Environmental Consciousness

Spirituality, identity, and environmental responsibility are increasingly central themes in contemporary art. Gablik (1991) contends that modern art's emphasis on autonomy and formal experimentation has frequently led to a divergence between artistic activity and wider societal issues. As a result, many modern artists have sought alternative ways that reconnect creativity with community, environment, and personal experience. According to Abram (1996) and Channuwong et al. (2026), modern civilizations have become increasingly divorced from direct sensory connection with nature. This disconnect has prompted artists to adopt techniques that prioritize embodied sensibility and environmental awareness. Spirituality is increasingly recognized in contemporary art discourse as a way of understanding the links between self, nature, and life, rather than a religious ideology. Such ideas have aided the development of ecologically conscious art practices that combine aesthetic inquiry with ecological contemplation. Despite these advancements, only a few modern creative groups have successfully merged Eastern water philosophy, ecological aesthetics, material experimentation, and spiritual awareness into a cohesive framework. Existing techniques frequently emphasize one feature while overlooking others. As a result, there is still a theoretical and practical gap in developing a modern visual art process based on water's philosophical, ecological, and material properties.

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This project used a practice-led research technique to look at how the philosophical and material properties of water may be transferred into a modern visual art framework called Water School Art. Practice-led research is especially useful for artistic inquiry because it acknowledges creative practice as a genuine technique of knowledge generation rather than just an illustration of theoretical principles (Sullivan, 2005). Within this method, creative creativity serves as both the object of investigation, the research process, and the result of inquiry. The research integrated qualitative methods and creative practice through four interconnected phases: (1) field-based observation, (2) documentary and archival research, (3) material experimentation, and (4) artwork creation and interpretive analysis. These phases were not implemented sequentially but operated as a recursive cycle in which observation informed experimentation, experimentation generated artistic insights, and creative outcomes contributed to theoretical understanding.

3.2 Phase One: Field-Based Observational Research

The first methodological phase built the study's perceptual and empirical foundation through rigorous field research conducted in diverse water habitats across China between 2020 and 2025. The sites chosen—Chagan Lake in Jilin Province, the Yangtze River basin, and the Yellow River including the Hukou Waterfall site in Shanxi Province—were chosen not arbitrarily, but because they represent three distinct structural and symbolic archetypes of water that, together, constitute what this study terms the "dual genetic structure" of Water School Art: the stillness and seasonal rhythmicity of northern lake water; the deep, continuous generativity of China's. Each site's field research consisted of three synchronized activities. First, systematic photographic recording was carried out to capture the visual properties of water under various lighting, season, temperature, and weather circumstances. This documentation attended not only to macroscopic compositional relationships—the way a river's bend organizes the surrounding landscape—but also to the microscopic textures and patterns that water generates over time: the crack networks formed by receding lake ice, the sedimentation lines left by tidal recession, the foam patterns produced by turbulence, and the light-refracting properties of different water surfaces under varying atmospheric conditions. These photographic recordings served as the major source of visual data for the study's formal vocabulary.

Second, on-site sketching and observational drawing were done in addition to photographic evidence. Photography records visual information with greater comprehensiveness and precision than sketching, but it does so by reducing the observer to a passive recorder of surface appearance. Drawing, on the other hand, necessitates active perceptual engagement: the sketcher must constantly decide what to focus on, how to simplify, and which relationships between pieces are visually and structurally significant. Drawing practice's active, selective quality made it an essential complement to photography, generating not only visual records but also perceptual syntheses — condensed, decision-laden representations of water's essential character as experienced by a situated, embodied observer. Early sketches, as shown in Figures 35, reflect this quality: they are not transcriptions of visual reality but interpretive encounters with it, in which the hand's movement across paper begins the process of translation from natural phenomenon to visual language that will continue throughout the subsequent phases of the research.

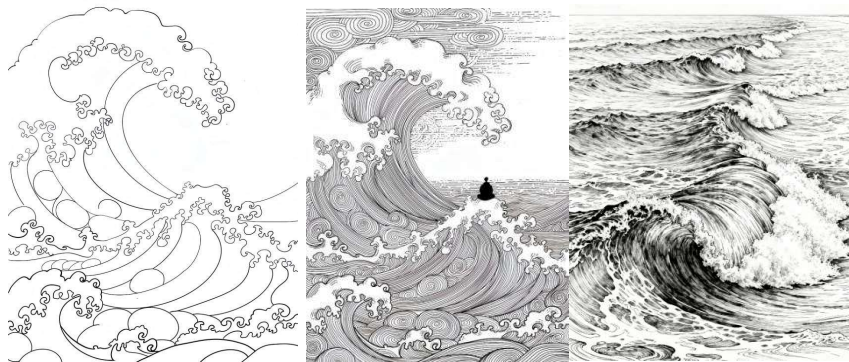




Figure 1 Schematic

Third, at the Shanxi Art Museum, field research was expanded to include examination of exhibition materials, curatorial documentation, and artist publications pertaining to Yellow River-themed artworks, with a focus on Xu Huijun's Roaring Yellow River collection. During his October 2025 exhibition, Xu Huijun gave a personal interview in which he elaborated on his understanding of the Yellow River as a "force, a spirit, and an eternal symbol of vitality" and described his creative process as a form of "life dialogue with nature" (Li, 2025). This testimony provided not only contextual information about a significant artistic precedent, but also a methodological comparison: Xu Huijun's commitment to direct engagement with natural force as the generative source of artistic energy is philosophically consistent with the current study's own creative stance, despite differences in specific material strategies and compositional language.

The field research phase produced three types of data that informed all subsequent stages of the study: a photographic archive documenting water's visual characteristics across diverse environments and conditions; a body of observational sketches capturing the structural and rhythmic qualities of water as perceived by an engaged, embodied observer; and a set of contextual materials — interview transcripts, exhibition documentation, and artist publications — providing insight into contemporary artistic engagements with water as a subject of cultural and spiritual significance.

3.3 Phase Two: Documentary and Archival Research

In parallel with the field research, a rigorous assessment of philosophical, aesthetic, and art-theoretical literature was carried out to provide the conceptual framework for the study's creative and analytical work. This phase of the methodology adhered to Bowen's (2009) interpretive document analysis principles, treating textual sources as sites of meaning-making rather than repositories of fixed, extractable facts, and requiring careful, contextually sensitive reading to actively construct significance. The documentary research was organized into four key domains. Eastern philosophical texts on water, most notably Laozi's *Dao De Jing*, relevant passages of the Confucian *Analects*, and Zen Buddhist writings on contemplative awareness, were read not as historical artefacts, but as living intellectual resources capable of generating genuine insight into the current study's questions about the relationship between water, spirit, and artistic form. Western phenomenological works, notably Bachelard's *Water and Dreams* (1942) and Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), were analyzed for their depictions of water's function in human imagination and the body's involvement in aesthetic perception.

Ecological aesthetic theory, including the works of Berleant (1992), Naess (1973), and Morton (2013), was examined for their implications for the link between creative activity and environmental consciousness. Finally, as described in the preceding literature review chapter, the art-historical and critical literature on the portrayal of water in both Eastern and Western visual traditions was studied. This documentary investigation provided two different methodological functions. At the theoretical level, it offered a philosophical and aesthetic framework — a language of concepts, differences, and arguments — for the study's creative effort to be communicated and understood. At the practical level, it influenced specific creative decisions: the theoretical understanding gained from engaging with this literature drove the selection of certain compositional procedures, material combinations, and interpretative framing.

3.4 Phase Three: Material Experimentation

The third methodological step proceeded from observation and documentation to the studio laboratory, where rigorous experimentation with water-based materials was carried out in order to build Water School Art's

particular material language. This phase was guided by the principles of what Ingold (2007) refers to as "following the material" — approaching creative experimentation as a process of attentive inquiry into the generative potential of materials rather than the imposition of predetermined formal intentions on passive substances.

The material system created during this experimental phase is divided into three basic categories, each of which contributes unique elements to the visual and textural nature of the finished pieces.

The first group includes water-based fluid materials such as watercolor pigments, diluted ink, and thinned acrylic paint. These materials have the fundamental property of being carried and shaped by water movement, resulting in visual effects such as diffusion, bleeding, pooling, and flow patterns caused by the interaction of the liquid medium and the surface on which it is applied, rather than deliberate mark-making. Experiments with these materials on various supports, including oil canvas and Xuan paper (shown in Figures 49 and 50), revealed that the choice of ground has a fundamental impact on the character of water's behavior: Xuan paper's high absorbency produces rapid, spreading diffusion with soft, indeterminate edges, whereas oil canvas resists absorption, causing pigments to pool and flow across the surface in more defined, dynamic patterns.



Figure 2 Ink painting experiment on oil canvas



Figure 3 Watercolor painting experiment on xuan paper

The second category includes natural mineral and powder materials such as stone powder, mineral pigments, and various natural powders whose granular texture creates what this study refers to as a "geological sense of time" — the visual depth and layered accumulation associated with natural sedimentation and deposition processes. When coupled with water, these materials act quite differently than fluid pigments: instead of flowing freely, they settle and aggregate in patterns governed by gravity, surface tension, and the support's micro-topography. The resultant textures recall geological layers, sedimentary rock surfaces, and tidal deposit patterns, bringing temporal depth to the visual surface that solely fluid materials cannot provide.

The third category includes composite materials and application tools used to extend and complicate the behavior of the primary materials, such as spatulas for controlled spreading and scraping, sponges for absorption and texture transfer, water spray bottles for controlled moisture addition at specific stages of the drying process, and laundry detergent and hand soap as surfactants that change the surface tension of water and produce distinctive foam and bubble textures (shown in Each of these tools and additives was tested methodically using various combinations of raw materials, and the results were photographed to generate a comparative visual record of material behaviors and aesthetic possibilities.

A particularly significant series of experiments involved the addition of salt to wet pigment layers — a technique that draws mineral pigments toward the salt crystals as the surface dries, resulting in radiating,

crystalline texture patterns that resemble snowflake structures, ice crystal formations, and river delta branching. This approach formed an important part of the study's fourth creative stage, as explained in the section on the creation process below. This phase also included experiments with AI-generative technologies as a complementing component of the creative process. Text-to-image AI algorithms were used as a fast ideation tool, investigating compositional possibilities, color connections, and formal configurations before committing to the time-consuming process of actual painting (Figures 53–55). The AI-generated pictures created during this experimental phase served as visual references and compositional starting points, which were then altered manually to provide material aspects such as texture, depth, and unpredictability that digital production cannot offer. This hybrid method represents the study's overall dedication to blending old and contemporary technology to achieve a unified creative vision.



Figure 4 Experimental results of water generation using hybrid AI cultivation



Figure 5 Hybrid AI Cultivation and Generation of Cow Water Experiment



Figure 6 AI-generated China Water School Artistic Martial Arts Creation

3.5 Phase Four: The Five-Stage Creation Process

The fourth step of the process involved creating three large-scale mixed-media works on Xuan paper, measuring 240cm 98cm, to synthesize knowledge gained from field observation, documentation research, and material experimentation. The production process was based on a five-stage model created expressly for this project, which formalizes the interplay between purpose, material behavior, and reflective intervention that distinguishes Water School Art's generative method.

Stage 1: Contemplation and Initial Conception. Before any material was placed to the support, a period of prolonged thoughtful engagement with the work's planned themes was carried out. Drawing on field photography, observational sketches, and philosophical comments gathered in previous rounds, the artist established the work's core compositional direction, color temperature, and emotional register. This stage relates to what the Chinese painting tradition refers to as *yi zai bi xian* (the idea comes before the brush) — the developed ability to maintain a clear inner vision before beginning to externalize it. This step resulted in an orientation rather than a permanent plan: a broad feeling of direction that would guide following decisions without predetermination (Figure 58).



Figure 7 Work of Step 1

Stage 2: Foundation Construction and Structure Preset. The earliest physical contact with the support entailed building the key structural routes via which water-based compounds would flow and interact. Working with diluted watercolor and ink on dampened Xuan paper, the artist established the work's overall compositional architecture — the general distribution of light and dark, the primary directional flows, and the locations of key visual focal points — while allowing the materials' natural behavior to shape the work's emerging texture and rhythm. At this point, the most important methodological concept was to maintain real openness to material behavior: the predefined structure was viewed as an invitation to the materials rather than a limitation on them (Figure 59).

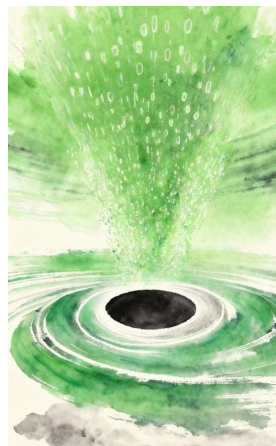


Figure 8 Work of Step 2

Stage 3: Flow Surrender and Natural Generation. The third level included intentionally reducing direct creative intervention, enabling water-based colors to travel, spread, merge, and interact according to their inherent material logic. The support was slanted at various angles to guide flow patterns, and moisture levels were closely monitored to extend the time of material activity. At this point, the artist's function evolved from active creator to attentive observer, observing the materials' behavior, making modest environmental modifications, and avoiding the urge to interfere prematurely. This stage incorporates the Daoist idea of *wu wei* (non-coercive action) at the level of creative practice. The most significant generative activity is exactly the activity of not-doing, of setting the conditions for natural processes to continue according to their own intrinsic inclinations (Figure 60).

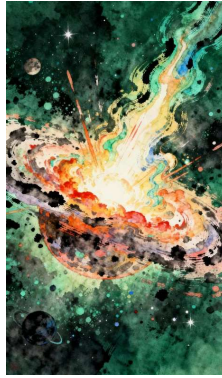


Figure 9 Work of Step 3

Stage 4: Rhetorical Reversal and Structural Enrichment. After allowing the materials to naturally generate the work's fundamental textural and compositional character, the artist used conscious mark-making to add structure, directionality, and visual complexity. Spray bottles were utilized to deliver regulated wetness to certain regions, causing more material movement in those areas. Watercolor and natural pigments were used to enhance color relationships and tonal contrast. Salt was put into specific moist places to create crystalline texture patterns. Linear elements were included to provide compositional rhythm and visual cohesion. This step involves the most active use of artistic judgement in the whole production process, necessitating a continual assessment of the balance between spontaneous genesis and artistic aim (Figure 61).



Figure 10 Work of Step 4

Stage 5: Nurturing and Refinement. The last stage required applying transparent color glazes in several thin layers, which added brightness and depth while combining the different parts created in previous phases into a cohesive visual whole. Within the study's theoretical framework, this layering process is analogous to the temporal accumulation of natural processes, such as how geological strata, tidal deposits, and weathering patterns build complexity and depth over time by patiently accumulating thin, successive layers. This stage saw final modifications to color balance, tonal relationships, and compositional emphasis, bringing the piece from a natural process to a resolved artistic statement.

3.6 Semiotic and Interpretive Analysis Framework

The completed works were submitted to a rigorous interpretative examination using a semiotic framework based on the theories of Peirce (1931-1958) and Saussure (1916). Peirce's triadic model of sign relations, which distinguishes between the icon (a sign that resembles its object), the index (a sign that is causally connected to its object), and the symbol (a sign whose relationship to its object is conventionally established), proved especially useful in analysing the various registers of meaning operating concurrently within the works. The textures produced by water-based materials serve primarily as indices: they bear direct causal traces of water's actual behaviour during creation, and this indexical quality — the sense that the visual surface preserves the literal record of a natural process — is critical to their expressive character. At the same time, these textures serve as icons by replicating natural formations (geological strata, tidal patterns, ice crystal structures), as well

as symbols by participating in the culturally formed system of meanings surrounding water in Eastern philosophical tradition.

Saussure's (1916) structural linguistics, adapted for visual analysis by subsequent semioticians including Barthes (1977), provided a complementary framework for analysing the conventional and cultural dimensions of the works' visual language — the ways in which specific color choices, compositional strategies, and formal relationships carry meanings that are not inherent in their physical properties but established through cultural convention and artist tradition. This dual semiotic framework, which combined Peirce's attention to the material and causal dimensions of signs with Saussure's attention to their conventional and systemic dimensions, allowed for an analysis of the works that recognized both their natural origins and their participation in a larger cultural and philosophical tradition.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Pre-Thesis Works: Establishing the Experimental Foundation

4.1.1 Pre-Thesis Work 1 — Water Power (240 × 120 cm, China ink wash, mineral pigments, watercolor on Xuan paper)

The first piece in the pre-thesis series outlines the project's overall visual and philosophical perspective. *Water Power* was created in direct reaction to the Daoist notion of *shang shan ruo shui* — "the highest good is like water" — and is the first persistent effort to transfer this philosophical tenet into massive visual form. The work's panoramic horizontal composition, inspired by the unfolding visual narrative of the Chinese handscroll tradition, immerses the viewer in a continuous ocean surface that extends beyond the frame in both directions, refusing to close a conventionally bounded image and instead emphasizing water's inexhaustibility as both physical reality and philosophical symbol.

The formal triumph of this piece is its mastery of the deep indigo and bright white color dialectic. The successive layers of mineral blue pigment and charcoal that form the work's deep tonal base reveal for the first time the geological aspect of depth — the sensation that the surface is accumulated rather than painted — which becomes a distinctive feature of the series. The uncolored white areas, which follow the Chinese ink painting principle of *liu bai* (negative space), have equal visual weight as the colored passages, creating a rhythm between presence and absence that embodies the philosophical interplay between form and formlessness central to Daoist water philosophy (Laozi, 4th century BCE).

The jury's evaluation of this work noted both its strengths and developmental shortcomings. Its successful integration of Eastern ink painting aesthetics with contemporary visual scale was recognised as a genuine achievement, while the recommendation to pursue greater compositional diversity in future works provided a productive challenge that shaped the pre-thesis series' subsequent development. This input was creative rather than corrective: the shortcoming it recognised — a preference for visual uniformity over dynamic diversity — became the productive challenge that the subsequent works addressed methodically (see Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.11 *Water Power*

4.1.2 Pre-Thesis Work 2 — Ocean Waves: Large-Scale Study I (240 × 130 cm, China ink wash, mineral pigments, watercolor on Xuan paper)

The second pre-thesis piece transfers the compositional attention from the vast expanse of the open ocean to the dynamic mid-water zone, where wave forces interact, crash, and create the most visually intricate natural structures. This shift was motivated by the study's engagement with the Chinese aesthetic concept of *shi* — the latent momentum or accumulated force that exists in both natural forms and human actions — which finds its most concentrated visual expression in the turbulent zone of wave formation and breaking rather than the expanse of open water.

The diagonal compositional axes used in this piece mark a substantial formal departure from *Water Power*'s basically horizontal arrangement. These diagonal motions create what may be defined as visual kinetics — the sensation that the energy displayed in the work is enacted rather than just recorded, and that

the painting surface is a location of dynamic tension rather than a stable ground on which pictures are set. The color gradient from deep sea blue and Prussian blue in shadowy depths to bright white at wave crests is achieved using transparent mineral pigment layering, anticipating the more complicated atmospheric effects created in following works (see Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2 Ocean Waves – Large-Scale Study I (Full-page format)

The committee's response to this work praised its wide tonal range and convincing spatial depth, but noted that the wave imagery remained primarily descriptive — more a record of natural forms than an exploration of the philosophical and emotional dimensions those forms can convey. This discovery was essential for the series' growth since it revealed a contradiction between the work's tremendous formal success and a lingering realism that prevented it from completely inhabiting the philosophical register that Water School Art strives to. This conflict became the main production obstacle addressed in the third pre-thesis work.

4.1.3 Pre-Thesis Work 3 — Ocean Waves: Large-Scale Study II (240 × 130 cm, China ink wash, mineral pigments, watercolor on Xuan paper)

The third pre-thesis work is the most important conceptual progress in the preliminary series. Whereas its predecessor excelled at depicting water's physical dynamics, this work aspires to something more elusive: what the artist refers to as the "breath of the sea" — the atmospheric quality of diffused light, shifting mist, and temporal depth that makes oceanic space feel inhabited by an intelligence or vitality that cannot be reduced to its physical properties. This aspiration is directly related to the classical Chinese painting concept of *qi yun* (spiritual resonance or life force), the most revered quality in the Chinese critical tradition precisely because it cannot be achieved solely through technical skill but also requires a genuine attunement between the artist's consciousness and the vital energy of the subject (Guo Xi, 11th century).

The formal solution to this problem entails introducing a bright sky zone in the work's higher register, resulting in an atmospheric transition between the dense wave-forms below and the open, light-filled region above. This transition zone, achieved through careful gradation from dark turbulent blue in the work's center to brighter mineral blue and white at its upper edge, introduces a vertical dimension missing from previous works, implying the ocean's extension into atmospheric space, temporal duration, and horizontal expanse. The multidirectional wave patterns seen throughout the piece produce a three-dimensional depth sense, indicating a significant increase in spatial complexity over previous works.

The pre-thesis series had fulfilled its main goal, which was to identify and validate the aesthetic principles—the centrality of *qi yun*, the significance of atmospheric depth, and the generative role of negative space—that would underpin the thesis works themselves. This was confirmed by the committee's full endorsement of this work's successful exploration of atmospheric depth and their recommendation that it serve as a solid foundation for the thesis body (see Figure 4.3).

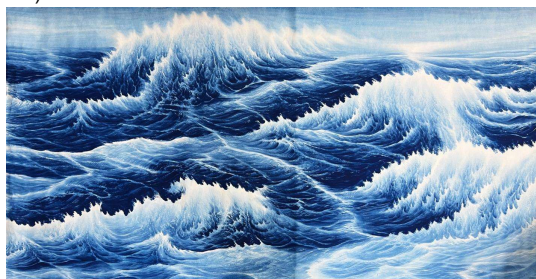


Figure 4.3 Sea Waves – Large Format Study II (Eight-Foot Sheet)

4.2 Core Thesis Works: Full Realization of the Water School Art Framework

4.2.1 Thesis Work 1 — Triptych: Tidal Birth — Boundless Waters Series

Panel 1a: Tide Rising (240 × 96 cm, China ink wash, mineral pigments, watercolor on Xuan paper)

The central triptych's opening panel introduces the philosophical concept of wu (non-being or latent potential) as the generative source of visible form, reflecting the Taoist belief that the most powerful creative force exists as pure potential before condensing into actuality. The work's asymmetrical composition, in which heavy undulating wave forms surge from the left toward a central climax before transitioning rightward into brighter atmospheric passages, embodies rather than simply depicts this philosophical movement: the viewer witnesses, in the temporal experience of scanning the work from left to right, something analogous to the process by which latent force accumulates and begins to externalize itself.

The S-shaped curved wave structure that organizes the work's compositional flow is a formal synthesis of the diagonal energetics generated in the pre-thesis series and the atmospheric depth established in Study 2. This S-curve generates what traditional Chinese landscape theory refers to as shi jing — temporal depth, or the characteristic of a composition that develops over time rather than appearing as a single instantaneous whole. The luminous halos bursting from the wave forms, achieved through fine brushwork with diluted pigments over the mineral pigment base, serve as visual metaphors for de (inner virtue or inherent strength), implying that the work's most powerful elements are those that radiate light from within rather than receive it from without (see Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4 *Tidal Growth – Boundless Water Series (Tidal Growth · Boundless Water Series)*

The jury emphasized this work's effective transfer of philosophical abstraction into visual experience, describing it as a qualitative improvement over the pre-thesis series in terms of the depth of its integration of conceptual aim and formal realization. This assessment confirms one of the study's central methodological claims: that sustained practice-led research, in which theoretical reflection and creative experimentation inform each other recursively, is capable of producing works with philosophical depth that neither purely theoretical nor purely intuitive approaches can achieve in isolation.

Panel 1b: Tidal Convergence — Surge of Myriad Forms (360 × 140 cm, China ink, mineral pigments, watercolors, and acrylics on Xuan paper)

The triptych's center and biggest panel, measuring 360 × 140 cm, represents convergence as both a physical phenomenon and a philosophical ideal, achieving the series' overall goal. The work's conceptual framework is based on the classical Chinese concept of wan xiang (myriad phenomena or the totality of all things): the converging waves depicted here are understood not only as a natural spectacle, but also as a symbol of how countless individual forces, each following its own path according to its own nature, unite without coercion to express overwhelming collective power.

This work's formal intricacy surpasses that of the other works in the series. The multi-directional wave patterns, which progressed from each quadrant of the piece toward a tumultuous center convergence zone, necessitated a level of compositional forethought and technical control that was not needed by the more linearly organized earlier works. The tonal range achieved across the work's surface, extending from near-black in the deepest shadow areas through fifteen or more distinct gradation stages to the extreme luminosity of undiluted mineral pigment highlights at wave crests, creates a chromatic depth that functions as a visual analogue for the philosophical notion of complexity emerging from simplicity—the way in which water, composed of a single molecular substance, generates the infinite variety of forms.

The introduction of clearly differentiated near, mid, and far wavefronts responds to the committee's recommendation for more refined spatial treatment while also expanding the series' compositional vocabulary in a direction that is critical to the thesis works' overall achievement. The jury's selection of this work as the most accomplished and philosophically profound in the entire series demonstrates that the Water School Art framework is not only adequate to the challenge of large-scale, compositionally complex work, but also generative of it — that the framework's philosophical and formal demands push the work toward greater rather than lesser complexity and depth (see Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5 Current Convergence – Diverse Movements of Currents (Tidal Convergence)

Panel 1c: Silent Tides – Realm of Return (240 × 96 cm, China ink wash, mineral pigments, watercolor on Xuan paper)

The last panel of the triptych completes the conceptual cycle begun in Panel 1a by the Taoist notion of *gui* gen, or returning to the root or origin. Whereas the first panel depicted the emergence of force from latent potential and the second depicted its convergence into overwhelming collective expression, the third depicts its return to stillness — not as diminishment or defeat, but as fulfilment, the completion of a natural cycle that necessitates dissolution as much as generation.

The formal tactics used in this work intentionally undermine the compositional logic established by its predecessors. Whereas *Tide Rising* progresses from left to right and *Tidal Convergence* builds to a central climax, *Silent Tides* descends from a bright upper horizon line into progressively refined ripples below, enacting energy dispersal and subsidence through the very organization of the viewing experience. The palette—the most ethereal of the three panels, replacing the prior works' strong indigos and blacks with richer mid-range blues, greyish blues, and warm-toned light bands—communicates the afterglow of dispersed power rather than its active presence.

The significant use of *liu bai* (negative space) in this work surpasses that of any previous piece, resulting in zones of dazzling nothingness on the paper surface that resemble a vast sky above a tranquil ocean. These empty spaces are not devoid of significance, but rather, as Zen aesthetics stresses, active presences — regions of potential from which new forms may arise, symbolising the triptych's overall cyclical concept of natural energy. The committee accepted the triptych's completion as the definitive declaration of the Water School Art philosophical and aesthetic framework, confirming that the three-panel format had successfully accommodated a truly complex philosophical narrative without sacrificing visual coherence or emotional impact (see Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6 Tidal Silence – Realm of Regression (Tidal Tranquility · Realm of Unity)

4.2.2 Thesis Work 2 – Vortex (240 × 120 cm, China ink, mineral pigments, Xuan paper, acrylic)

Vortex is the most formally daring work in the thesis series, adopting a compositional logic — centered, circular, centripetal that contrasts sharply with the horizontal wave-and-flow arrangement of all previous works. This formal rupture is philosophically motivated: the vortex, as a natural event, represents a distinct sort of water power than the tidal and oceanic forms represented elsewhere in the series. Whereas waves represent force by horizontal velocity and vertical rising, vortices express it through rotational accumulation, which is the collection of distributed energy into an increasing spiral that concentrates power at a void center.

The work's conceptual foundation is based on the Taoist notion of *zhonghe* (core harmony), which states that all natural systems retain their dynamic stability through the balance of forces rotating around a central point. The void at the vortex's center, visually rendered through the progressive deepening of tone from the composition's luminous periphery toward its near-black core, embodies the paradox identified in classical Chinese thought: that the greatest concentrations of power organize themselves around an empty center, just as the strength of a wheel derives from the void at its hub (Laozi, 4th century BCE).

The ecological dimension introduced in this work — the vortex as a symbol not only of natural energy but also of the destructive potential of self-reinforcing cyclic systems, such as pollution vortices accumulating in the world's oceans — is the thesis's first explicit engagement with the study's broader cultural and ethical concerns. This ecological inflection enhances rather than detracts from the work's philosophical relevance, implying that the force of the natural spirit is more than just an artistic concept, but a reality with important ethical consequences for modern human behavior (Morton, 2013). The formal breakthrough of the circular composition revealed new spatial and psychological elements, enriching the remaining thesis pieces (see Figure 4.7).

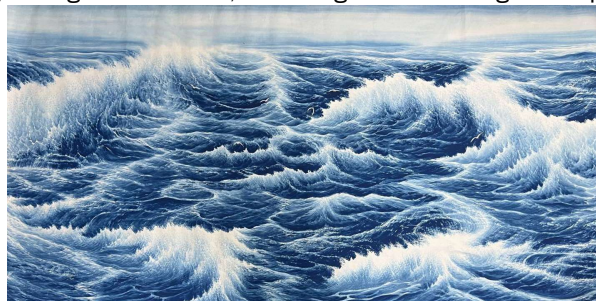


Figure 4.7 (Vortex)

4.2.3 Thesis Work 3 — The Sea's Requiem (240 × 120 cm, China ink wash, mineral pigments, watercolor on Xuan paper)

The Sea's Requiem stands out as the series' most clearly ecological piece, a meditation on loss, grieving, and the ethical obligations that come with aesthetic enjoyment of natural beauty. The title's reference to the Western musical requiem tradition, combined with the work's roots in Eastern philosophical resources such as Taoist ecology and Buddhist *bei* (compassionate awareness of suffering), creates the cross-cultural synthesis that is one of Water School Art's defining goals.

The restrained formal character of this work, with its elongated waves moving at a deliberate, meditative pace rather than surging with the explosive energy of the triptych's central panel, communicates a quality of stillness that is understood within the work's philosophical framework not as a lack of power, but as a different, more inward mode of it. The cool palette of deep sky blue and cyan, with its cold luminosity contrasting sharply with the warm brilliance of adjacent works in the series, creates an atmosphere of profound melancholy that invites rather than overwhelms the viewer, allowing for contemplation rather than asserting a spectacular presence.

The addition of seabird figurines, which are initially barely visible but progressively show themselves to alert viewers, constitutes a considerable extension of the work's visual language. These birds serve as scale references that emphasize the ocean's vastness, symbols of life's resilience in the midst of ecological mourning, and metaphors for the artist's own creative practice: the act of creating beauty through sustained contemplation of natural forces (Gibson, 1979). The successful incorporation of this figurative element into the work's primarily abstract visual language demonstrates the Water School Art framework's compositional flexibility — its ability to accommodate representational elements while maintaining the primacy of material process and atmospheric depth that define the movement's aesthetic (see Figure 4.8).



Figure 4.8 "Requiem for the Sea"

4.2.4 Thesis Work 4 — Love Like a Tide (240 × 120 cm, China ink wash, mineral pigments, watercolor on Xuan paper)

Love Like a Tide introduces an emotional register that is overtly joyous, warm, and externally orientated, providing an important counterweight to the triptych's philosophical austerity and the ecological sadness of The Sea's Requiem. The work's philosophical foundation is based on a synthesis of Confucian *ren* (benevolence and

genuine compassion toward others) and the Taoist understanding of water as the supreme symbol of virtue and power, arguing that love, properly understood, is a natural force of the same order as tidal energy — pervasive, cyclical, nourishing, and ultimately irresistible.

This work's formal character — surging waves that advance toward the viewer with an outward bursting energy that differs fundamentally from Vortex's centripetal pull or Sea's Requiem's meditative stillness — enacts its philosophical content through composition and material behavior. The bright cobalt and sky-blue highlights woven across the deep ultramarine foundation add a chromatic warmth that is missing from the series' colder pieces, establishing the emotional register of happy contact with nature. The seabird imagery, which returns from The Sea's Requiem in a more prominent and dynamically positioned form, now evokes feelings of liberation and soaring vigor rather than robust endurance (Figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9 Love as Tide

The committee's recognition that this work successfully integrated emotional resonance and visual subtlety, contributing significantly to the thesis's overall balance and tonal diversity, confirms that the Water School Art framework can accommodate affirmative emotional content without sacrificing philosophical seriousness. This is a noteworthy conclusion because it shows that Eastern water philosophy's emphasis on water as nourishing, inclusive, and life-sustaining — rather than just powerful or majestic — can be given actual visual shape using the aesthetic tactics explored in this research.

4.2.5 Thesis Work 5 — Low Water Forms the Sea (240 × 120 cm, China ink wash, mineral pigments, watercolor on Xuan paper)

The fifth thesis paper explores the philosophical premise most closely linked to the study's fundamental concern: the connection between little, prolonged, humble activity and the production of tremendous collective power. The work's title and philosophical core are based on the ancient Confucian and Taoist principle that "water flows to low places, thus gathering to form the sea" — the wisdom that genuine greatness is achieved through patient accumulation and consistent orientation toward what is essential rather than self-assertion.

The formal decision to structure the composition around elongated, forceful parallel ripples that cover the entire canvas width, rather than rising to a dramatic climax as in previous works, is a formal realization of the philosophical substance. The piece uses rhythmic repetition rather than dramatic climax to reflect the cumulative logic of patient, prolonged activity through its compositional structure. This is one of the study's most successful examples of formal and philosophical integration, in which the visual organization of the work is inextricably linked to its mental meaning.

Technically, this work represents the most refined application of the multi-layer transparent watercolor method developed across the series, with dozens of successive transparent glazes building a luminous depth that is understood within the study's theoretical framework as a visual analogue for temporal accumulation—the way in which the patient layering of thin, translucent strata over extended time creates depth and richness unavailable to any single gesture. The seabird imagery finds arguably its most profound symbolic resonance here: images of individual awareness traversing the immense rhythms of natural time, gladly participating in processes they did not begin and will not complete (Figure 4.10).

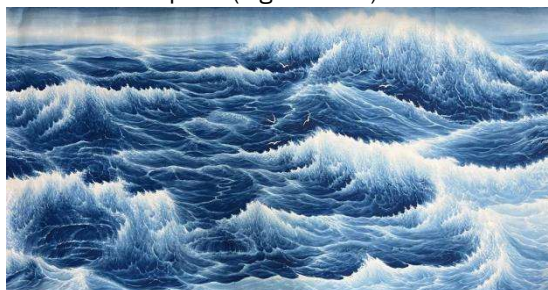


Figure 4.10 Formation of sea from low water levels

4.2.6 Thesis Work 6 — Heartbeat of Emotion (210 × 600 cm, China ink, mineral pigments, Xuan paper, acrylic)

The concluding and most monumental work of the thesis series functions, as its conceptual framework proposes, as a summative synthesis — not a conclusion in the argumentative sense but an integration, gathering into a single extended visual field the formal discoveries, philosophical propositions, and emotional registers explored across the entire series. At 210 × 600 cm, the work's extraordinary scale demands a physical relationship from the viewer that the smaller works cannot — the body must move along the surface, experiencing the composition as a temporal journey rather than a simultaneous whole, enacting in the viewing experience something analogous to the ocean's inexhaustibility that the work depicts.

The layered wave system combines formal elements from across the series, including the majestic wave formations of Tidal Convergence, the delicate foam textures of Tide Rising, the cosmic atmosphere of Sea's Requiem, the surging energy of Love Like a Tide, and the rhythmic accumulation of Low Water Forms the Sea. This synthesis is not collage; the pieces are not juxtaposed, but truly merged, with each flowing into the next via compositional transitions that formalize the philosophical idea of convergence investigated throughout the inquiry. The seabird imagery achieves its highest density and expressive range in this piece, with flocks spread across the whole surface in formations that symbolize both the freedom of natural flight and the impression of guided movement towards a destination (see Figure 4.11).

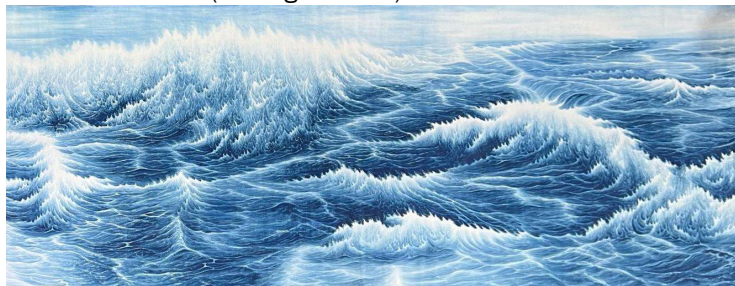


Figure 4.11 Heart-pounding excitement

The Water School Art framework, when applied with sustained commitment and philosophical seriousness over an extended creative research process, can produce works of genuine artistic achievement—works that not only demonstrate the theoretical propositions of the research but also embody them in a form that is immediately accessible to aesthetic experience without requiring prior knowledge of the philosophical frameworks that informed their creation. This is confirmed by the committee's unanimous recognition of this work as a groundbreaking and profoundly moving conclusion to the thesis body.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study developed and examined Water School Art as a contemporary artistic framework grounded in the philosophical, aesthetic, and ecological meanings of water. Through the integration of Eastern philosophy, ecological aesthetics, phenomenology, and practice-led artistic research, the study demonstrated that water can function simultaneously as subject matter, creative methodology, and philosophical foundation for contemporary visual art. The findings suggest that water is not merely a visual motif but a dynamic conceptual system capable of generating new forms of artistic knowledge, aesthetic experience, and ecological awareness.

The theoretical findings reveal that water occupies a unique position within Eastern intellectual traditions. Daoist philosophy views water as an embodiment of adaptability, humility, and non-coercive action, while Confucian and Zen traditions associate water with self-cultivation, wisdom, and contemplative awareness (Ames & Hall, 2003; Laozi, 1963). By integrating these perspectives with phenomenological and ecological theories, including the works of Merleau-Ponty (1964), Berleant (1992), and Morton (2013), the study established a conceptual framework in which nature is understood not as an object to be represented but as an active force that participates in artistic creation. This finding extends existing ecological aesthetics by proposing a water-centered artistic paradigm that emphasizes relationality, interdependence, and embodied engagement with natural processes.

The creative process created via this research reinforces the importance of material agency in artistic activity. The five-stage technique of introspection, foundation building, flow surrender, rhetorical reversal, and nurturing refining converted intuitive studio practice into a methodical creative approach. According to Ingold's (2013) concept that creativity originates from interactions between makers and materials, the study discovered

that diffusion, evaporation, sedimentation, and fluid movement produced visual outputs that outperformed direct creative control. Rather of addressing these processes as technical factors, Water School Art views them as active participants in the creative effort. This approach adds to current ideas of new materialism and process-based art by highlighting how natural forces may collaborate in creative production.

The creative outcomes provide further evidence for the viability of Water School Art as a distinctive contemporary visual language. The ten large-scale mixed-media artworks successfully translated philosophical concepts into visual forms through the integration of traditional Chinese aesthetics, water-based media, and contemporary compositional strategies. While the works maintain affinities with Chinese ink painting traditions through concepts such as *qi yun* and *liu bai*, they also engage with broader contemporary artistic concerns regarding abstraction, materiality, and environmental awareness (Andrews & Shen, 1998). At the same time, the framework differs from both Western Romantic sublime traditions and Abstract Expressionism because it emphasizes participation within nature rather than confrontation with nature, and philosophical grounding rather than purely subjective expression.

From an epistemological standpoint, the study supports the rising acknowledgement of practice-led inquiry as a viable method of knowledge generation (Sullivan, 2005; Haseman, 2006). The findings show that certain types of understanding may only arise through embodied creative involvement. The experience of giving up some control to water-based elements provides practical insight into Daoist notions like *wu wei* that could not have been obtained just via textual examination. In this view, creative activity served not just as an exposition of theory, but also as a means of producing philosophical and aesthetic understanding.

The study's larger cultural relevance stems from its contributions to modern ecological discourse. As environmental degradation and ecological disconnection worsen globally, the findings indicate that artistic engagement with natural phenomena can foster forms of attentiveness, empathy, and environmental awareness that complement scientific and policy-based approaches (Berleant, 1992; Rifkin, 2009). The artworks made as a result of this study challenge viewers to reevaluate their connection with water, and by extension, with the larger ecological systems on which human life is based. This is consistent with recent environmental humanities work, which emphasizes the role of aesthetic experience in developing ecological consciousness (Morton, 2013; Saito, 2007; Channuwong & Ruksat, 2022).

Finally, the work adds to contemporary art debate by proving that Eastern philosophical traditions are still useful intellectual resources for tackling modern cultural and environmental concerns. Rather than viewing Daoist and Confucian philosophy as historical artefacts, Water School Art sees them as alive frameworks capable of developing novel artistic approaches and relevant environmental viewpoints. As a result, the research provides not only a new artistic framework, but also a cross-cultural paradigm for integrating philosophy, ecology, and contemporary creative activity into the setting of twenty-first-century visual art.

6. Implications

The findings of this study generate important implications for contemporary visual art practice, art education, and ecological aesthetics. Beyond establishing Water School Art as a new artistic framework, the research demonstrates how philosophical inquiry, material experimentation, and ecological awareness can be integrated into a coherent creative methodology.

Implications for Contemporary Visual Art Practice

The most direct impact of this study is the establishment of Water School Art as a viable paradigm for contemporary creative production. The research shows that water may serve not only as a visual topic, but also as a philosophical concept and a creative approach. The research formalizes the water-based generation technique and the five-stage creative process, providing artists with a systematic framework that can be changed, expanded, and critically understood in a variety of creative circumstances.

More broadly, the findings indicate that incorporating philosophical traditions into creative practice can result in more conceptual depth and formal coherence than methods focused exclusively on technical exploration or aesthetic novelty. The visual language produced in this work demonstrates how artistic judgements may be directly influenced by philosophical ideas such as Daoist conceptions of *wu wei* (non-coercive action), relationality, and harmony with natural processes (Ames and Hall, 2003). This integration increases the link between artistic form and conceptual meaning, adding to current conversations about culturally grounded and philosophically informed art practices.

Furthermore, Water School Art provides an effective paradigm for artists working in traditional Chinese painting and water-based media. Rather than repeating historical conventions or abandoning cultural traditions in favor of global artistic trends, the framework shows how traditional philosophical resources can generate

innovative visual languages capable of participating in international contemporary art discourse (Andrews & Shen, 1998).

Implications for Art Education

The findings have substantial implications for contemporary art education. The Water School Art framework presents an educational methodology that incorporates philosophical contemplation, field observations, material experimentation, and artistic practice. Such an approach goes beyond the traditional distinction between technical skill development and conceptual learning, viewing both as mutually reinforcing aspects of creative evolution.

The study implies that direct interaction with natural areas might be an essential part of creative education. Field observations allow students to become sensitive to natural processes, whereas material experimentation fosters an awareness of ambiguity, process, and collaboration with materials. These experiences contribute to the development of both technical skill and introspective awareness.

Furthermore, the incorporation of Eastern philosophical traditions into studio-based instruction offers students new conceptual frameworks for comprehending creativity, nature, and creative responsibility. Consistent with Sullivan's (2005) notion that creative activity is a type of inquiry, the Water School Art framework encourages students to engage with art-making as a process of knowledge generation rather than skill development. This instructional approach may help to generate more critically engaged, culturally knowledgeable, and ecologically conscientious artists.

Implications for Ecological Aesthetics and Environmental Art

The study adds to the emerging subject of ecological aesthetics by illustrating how conventional creative media may promote meaningful ecological participation. Unlike methods that depend largely on technical intervention or explicit environmental advocacy, Water School Art prioritizes natural processes and experiential interactions with the environment.

The findings back up Berleant's (1992) idea of participatory aesthetics, which emphasizes direct interaction between individuals and their surroundings, as well as Carlson's (2000) claim that aesthetic enjoyment may promote environmental responsibility. Allowing water to serve as medium, topic, and co-creator at the same time transforms the artistic process into an ecological interaction rather than just a depiction of ecological problems. Moreover, the study highlights the relevance of Eastern philosophical traditions to contemporary environmental discourse. Concepts derived from Daoist and Confucian thought emphasize interdependence, balance, and respect for natural systems, offering valuable perspectives for ecological aesthetics in the twenty-first century. The findings therefore suggest that greater engagement with non-Western intellectual traditions may enrich contemporary environmental art and contribute to more culturally diverse approaches to ecological sustainability.

Overall, the implications of this study extend beyond the specific context of Water School Art. The research demonstrates how artistic practice can function simultaneously as creative production, philosophical inquiry, educational methodology, and ecological engagement, thereby contributing to broader discussions concerning the role of art in addressing contemporary cultural and environmental challenges.

7. Limitations and Future Studies

Despite the theoretical and creative contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations not only define the scope of the present research but also identify opportunities for future investigation within the evolving framework of Water School Art.

First, the material technique used in this work mixes traditional Chinese ink, mineral pigments, watercolor, acrylic media, and experimental additions on Xuan paper. Although these pairings produced rich visual effects and fit the study's philosophical aims, their long-term durability and conservation qualities are unknown. The interplay of old and contemporary materials under various environmental circumstances has not been thoroughly investigated. Previous research in art conservation indicates that mixed-media artworks frequently provide difficult preservation issues because various materials age at different rates and react differently to environmental conditions (Ashley-Smith, 1999; Fei et al., 2026). Future study should focus on the archival stability, pigment behavior, and conservation needs of Water School Art in partnership with conservation scientists and materials experts.

Second, the study employs a practice-led paradigm in which the researcher concurrently acts as an artist, maker, and interpretation. While practice-led inquiry acknowledges creative experience as a viable source of knowledge (Sullivan, 2005), the results invariably reflect the researcher's cultural background, philosophical perspective, and artistic experiences. As Finlay (2002) points out, reflective research is always shaped by the

researcher's viewpoint. As a result, viewers with diverse cultural, social, and philosophical views may provide varied interpretations of the artworks. Future study should include audience reception research to investigate how different groups perceive the visual, ecological, and philosophical features of Water School Art.

Third, the creative research was predominantly focused on two-dimensional painting. Although large-scale painting has been helpful in investigating the symbolic and material features of water, it cannot adequately capture its multisensory qualities, such as sound, movement, tactility, and temporal change. Contemporary environmental art research emphasizes immersive and interactive experiences that engage several senses at once (Bishop, 2012). Future creative research might expand Water School Art to include installation, sound art, moving-image practice, virtual reality, and interactive digital settings. Such advancements would enable water to be seen not just visually, but also spatially, acoustically, and physically.

Fourth, the biological focus of the research was focused on marine ecosystems and oceanic photography. While the ocean is a great metaphor for magnitude, metamorphosis, and connection, it only reflects a portion of water's ecological and cultural importance. Other aquatic ecosystems, such as rivers, lakes, glaciers, wetlands, rainfall systems, and groundwater networks, have unique biological traits and symbolic interpretations that were not completely explored in the current study. Future research might look at how these distinct water ecosystems generate different artistic forms, ecological narratives, and philosophical interpretations.

Finally, Water School Art's overall academic orientation is still in its early stages of development. Although the framework is based on Eastern philosophy, ecological aesthetics, phenomenology, and current creative practice, its link to worldwide movements such as Environmental Art, Land Art, Eco-Art, and posthumanist aesthetics warrants more scrutiny. Comparative investigations with artists, academics, and researchers from other cultural traditions would help to gain a better understanding of Water School Art's uniqueness, significance, and possible contribution to global contemporary art debate (Morton, 2013).

In addition to scholarly examination, future research should look into Water School Art's instructional potential. The combination of philosophical research, ecological awareness, field observation, material experimentation, and artistic practice offers a potential pedagogical paradigm for contemporary art courses. Empirical research in undergraduate and graduate art programs might assess the success of this strategy in fostering technical competence, ecological literacy, critical thinking, and creative innovation in students. Taken together, these constraints and future potential indicate that Water School Art should be viewed as a growing framework rather than a complete creative system. Future research in conservation science, audience studies, immersive media, ecological diversity, comparative aesthetics, and art education will enhance and build upon the theoretical and practical contributions made by this work.

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