

Gray as Language: Advanced Gray Color Strategy, Emotional Atmosphere, and Cross-Cultural Expression in Contemporary Mixed-Media Painting

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Abstract

Contemporary visual culture has become increasingly dominated by high-saturation, high-contrast imagery—a condition that provokes sensory fatigue rather than meaningful aesthetic engagement. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the independent expressive capacity of advanced gray, moving beyond its conventional classification as a neutral or auxiliary tone. Drawing on three months of field research conducted in Ngari, Tibet (June–August 2024), the sustained influence of Giorgio Morandi's gray-toned still-life practice, and a systematic program of mixed-media creation completed between September 2024 and April 2025, this paper constructs a comprehensive gray color strategy organized around three interrelated dimensions: material texture, emotional transmission, and cultural symbolism. The theoretical framework synthesizes Johannes Itten's color harmony principles, Josef Albers' relativity of perception, Roland Barthes' semiotics, and the aesthetic traditions of Chinese implicit culture—particularly Confucian restraint and Taoist harmony—alongside Western existentialist thought and minimalist philosophy. Four original works constituting the Distant Light Series were produced on heavy linen canvas using acrylic, Chinese ink, oil color, natural mineral pigments, plateau sand sourced in Ngari, and gold leaf. Empirical and creative analysis confirms that advanced gray is fully capable of conveying nuanced affective states—tranquility, ambiguity, quiet hope, and existential depth—without recourse to chromatic intensity. The study fills a recognized gap in systematic gray research within contemporary color theory and offers replicable technical strategies for artists seeking a low-saturation response to widespread visual overload.

Keywords: *advanced gray color; emotional atmosphere; mixed-media painting; Chinese implicit aesthetics; cross-cultural artistic expression*

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem of Visual Overload and the Place of Gray

The proliferation of digital media platforms over the past two decades has produced a visual landscape characterized by relentless chromatic intensity. Social media feeds, short-video applications, and commercial design ecosystems compete for attention through ever-escalating saturation and contrast, and the cumulative effect on viewers is well-documented: a progressive dulling of aesthetic sensitivity commonly described as visual fatigue or sensory overload (Lynch, 1960; Wang, 2020). Where once a vivid hue commanded genuine notice, it now merges into an undifferentiated wall of stimulation. Paradoxically, this saturation of the saturated creates renewed perceptual space for the quiet, the understated, and the low-key.

Gray occupies precisely that space. Yet despite its perceptual relevance to contemporary viewing conditions, gray has long been treated as a problem to be solved rather than a resource to be cultivated. Traditional color pedagogy casts it as a neutral mediator, useful for toning down neighboring hues but incapable of carrying independent expressive or cultural weight (Itten, 1970). This dismissal is empirically unjustified and aesthetically impoverishing. The present study takes issue with it directly.

1.2 Founding Inspirations

The intellectual and creative impetus for this research arose from two distinct but converging sources. The first was an encounter in 2021 with Giorgio Morandi's *Natura Morta* series at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. Morandi's still-life canvases are executed in tones that resist easy categorization: neither warm nor cold, neither light nor dark, they occupy an intermediate territory that initially appears modest and then reveals itself as extraordinarily precise. The artist routinely blended titanium white, ivory black, and yellow ochre in calibrated proportions, producing grays that carry faint but legible temperature biases—a breath of warmth here, a residue

of coolness there. Prolonged attention to these works produces something rarely generated by highly saturated color: a quality of inner stillness that accumulates rather than dissipates (Morandi, 1948).

The second source was immersive field research conducted in Ngari Prefecture, Tibet, at altitudes reaching 4,500 meters, during the summer of 2024. The Tibetan plateau presents a gray that is not the gray of urban overcast or industrial obsolescence. It is a geological and meteorological gray—the gray of ancient stone formations scoured by millennia of wind, the gray of early-morning mist dissolving above sacred lakes, the gray of yak-wool tents that have been weathered into harmony with their surroundings. This is gray as testimony: evidence of endurance, of slow transformation, of life persisting under conditions of considerable harshness. Conversations with twelve artists affiliated with the Lhasa Art Academy and twenty students from Tibet University confirmed that younger Tibetan practitioners actively embrace gray as a connective tissue between their ancestral visual culture and the demands of contemporary art-making (Li, 2017).

Taken together, these two sources suggested a research question that is simultaneously formal and philosophical: by what mechanisms can low-saturation gray tones—so often relegated to the margins of color discourse—achieve independent, multi-layered emotional and cultural expression in contemporary art practice?

1.3 Research Purposes

This study pursues three interlocking objectives. The first is theoretical: to articulate a comprehensive framework for advanced gray that integrates its physical properties (light reflectance, surface texture, pigment composition) with its affective capacities and its cross-cultural symbolic registers. The second is practical: to produce a body of mixed-media paintings—the Distant Light Series—that tests and instantiates this framework through genuine creative work. The third is methodological: to derive from the creation process a set of replicable technical strategies that other practitioners can adapt for gray-centered artistic production, particularly in response to increasingly complex visual environments and contemporary viewing conditions (Itten, 1970; Albers, 1963; Youthao et al., 2026).

1.4 Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual architecture positions advanced gray as a mediating term between apparent opposites: between light and dark, emptiness and fullness, tradition and modernity, the legible and the ambiguous. Rather than resolving these tensions, gray holds them in productive suspension—a capacity that aligns it with the aesthetic values of restraint and implication that characterize both the Chinese literati tradition and the phenomenological strand of Western existentialist thought (Barthes, 1957; Peirce, 1903). The framework draws on color theory, semiotics, and art criticism as co-equal theoretical pillars, and grounds them in field-derived material and cultural data. Creative practice is not merely an illustration of this framework but its primary testing ground.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Color Theory: Harmony, Relativity, and Emotional Register

Johannes Itten's foundational work on color harmony establishes gray as a neutralizer within chromatic compositions—a tone capable of absorbing visual aggression and restoring compositional equilibrium (Itten, 1970). Itten distinguishes warm gray (tending toward yellow, orange, or red) from cool gray (inflected toward blue or violet) and assigns to each a distinct affective signature: warm grays produce sensations of nearness and comfort; cool grays evoke distance, sobriety, and contemplative detachment. These distinctions, while not absolute, provide a working vocabulary for the deliberate emotional calibration of gray-dominant work.

Josef Albers's research into the relational nature of color perception complicates Itten's taxonomy productively (Albers, 1963). For Albers, no color exists in isolation: every hue, value, and chroma is experienced in relation to its neighbors, and gray is particularly susceptible to this contextual influence. Placed adjacent to white, a mid-value gray reads as darker; positioned beside deep charcoal, the same tone appears luminous. This relativity is not a limitation but a generative property: it means that the emotional character of a gray passage is partly constituted by the artist's control of its surroundings. Albers's framework guided the careful management of gray adjacencies throughout the Distant Light Series, enabling systematic variation in emotional register across works that share a broadly similar tonal range.

2.2 Semiotics: Gray as Cultural Sign

Roland Barthes' analysis of cultural mythology provides the conceptual tools necessary for moving beyond gray's perceptual properties toward its symbolic dimensions (Barthes, 1957). Barthes demonstrates that objects and visual phenomena accrue layers of secondary meaning through cultural use—meanings that are historically contingent, ideologically inflected, and often invisible to participants within the culture that generates them. In the context of this study, gray carries markedly different connotations depending on the cultural tradition through which it is read.

Within the dominant strands of Western modernism, gray has absorbed the existentialist preoccupations of Sartre and Camus: it signals ambiguity, unresolved questioning, and the absence of consolatory certainties (Richter, 2002). In Chinese aesthetic culture, the same chromatic territory activates quite different associations. The gray tiles and white-washed walls of classical Jiangnan architecture embody the principle of harmonious integration between human construction and natural environment. The graduated ink tones of Song-dynasty landscape painting—the so-called “five shades of ink”—deploy gray as a primary expressive medium rather than a secondary filler, achieving through tonal modulation alone the representation of fog, distance, atmospheric depth, and inner stillness (Li, 2018). Confucian moral philosophy reinforces these associations through its endorsement of modesty, restraint, and the avoidance of ostentation, while Taoist cosmology frames gray as the color of undifferentiated potential—the state of possibility that precedes and encompasses all distinctions (Barthes, 1957). Charles Sanders Peirce's tripartite semiotic framework—icon, index, symbol—allows a further analytical refinement (Peirce, 1903). As an indexical sign, gray records the passage of time: weathered stone, aged wood, faded cloth. As a symbolic sign, gray conveys culturally assigned meanings that vary across traditions. Both dimensions are active in the works examined here, and their interplay is one of the series' sustained generative tensions.

2.3 Related Artistic Practices

Several contemporary practitioners have developed gray-centered bodies of work that informed the present study. Chinese landscape painter Wang Ming integrates the implicit tonal logic of ink-wash aesthetics into oil-painting practice, using gray as a primary structural tone to suggest atmospheric recession and emotional quietude. American figurative painter Ron Hicks employs warm gray as a medium for exploring ordinary urban solitude—the small, private emotions of people in cafes, parks, and street corners—demonstrating that gray can function as a vehicle for intimate human observation rather than merely for grand existential statement. Most consequential for the material dimensions of this research is the work of German artist Anselm Kiefer, whose large-scale mixed-media canvases incorporate ash, straw, lead, and industrial detritus into painterly surfaces of extraordinary textural complexity (Kiefer, 1987–1989). Kiefer's practice demonstrates that material choice is never neutral: what a work is made of participates in what it means. His use of non-conventional materials to carry historical and philosophical weight directly informed the decision to incorporate plateau sand and gold leaf into the Distant Light Series, where these materials perform analogous functions—grounding the work in specific geographic and cultural memory while opening toward symbolic resonance.

3. Research Methods and Creation Process

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a practice-based research (PBR) design in which creative production and theoretical inquiry developed through a continuous process of reflection, experimentation, and artistic creation. Practice-based research recognizes artistic practice as a legitimate mode of knowledge production and positions creative outcomes as both research processes and research outputs (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Sullivan, 2010). The methodological framework combined field observation, semi-structured interviews, systematic literature analysis, and controlled material experimentation. This integrated approach reflects the assumption that understanding the expressive potential of gray requires both empirical engagement with cultural and environmental contexts and systematic investigation of material properties and artistic techniques (Smith & Dean, 2009).

3.2 Field Research in Ngari, Tibet

Fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period from June to August 2024 in Ngari Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region, at elevations ranging from 4,200 to 4,800 meters above sea level. The primary objective was to collect visual, material, and cultural data that could not be obtained through secondary sources. During the fieldwork period, more than 200 photographic records were documented, approximately 50,000 words of observational notes were compiled, and fifteen categories of visual references were identified for subsequent artistic development.

Observations focused on three categories of gray phenomena: geological gray (rock formations, glacial deposits, and mountain surfaces), meteorological gray (mist, atmospheric haze, and changing light conditions), and cultural gray (yak-wool tents, stone architecture, and ritual materials). Such observational approaches are consistent with ethnographically informed artistic research, which emphasizes direct engagement with place, material culture, and lived experience as sources of artistic knowledge (Pink, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve visual artists affiliated with the Lhasa Art Academy and twenty art students from Tibet University. Interview topics included cultural symbolism of color, perceptions of gray in Tibetan visual culture, and the relationship between traditional aesthetics and contemporary artistic practice. Following thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2022), eight recurring themes were identified.

These themes consistently suggested that gray functions as a symbol of endurance, integration, spirituality, and continuity rather than absence or deprivation within contemporary Tibetan artistic consciousness.

3.3 Material Experimentation

Prior to the creation of the four major artworks, more than thirty controlled material experiments were conducted to examine the interaction among natural mineral gray pigments, Chinese ink, acrylic medium, 24-karat gold leaf, and Ngari plateau sand on linen canvas substrates. Material experimentation is widely recognized as a critical component of practice-based artistic inquiry because it allows artists to generate tacit and embodied knowledge through direct engagement with artistic materials (Bolt, 2016; Channuwong & Kantatian 2012).

The experiments focused on four principal dimensions: material compatibility, physical stability, adhesion performance, and perceptual effects. Particular attention was paid to the interaction between water-based and oil-based media, pigment permanence under ultraviolet exposure, adhesion of particulate materials, and differences between naturally sourced and synthetic gray pigments.

A major technical challenge emerged from the porous characteristics of unprimed linen canvas. Excessive absorption resulted in uncontrolled pigment diffusion and reduced tonal precision. Consistent with previous studies on canvas preparation and painting surfaces (Chen, 2019), a series of preparatory treatments were tested. The results indicated that a five-percent food-grade gelatin solution heated to approximately 60 °C provided the optimal balance between absorbency control and surface texture preservation. This preparation method was subsequently adopted for all artworks within the series.

3.4 Creation Stages

The creative process was conducted over an eight-month period and consisted of two major phases. The exploratory phase, conducted between September and November 2024, involved the production of four preliminary works measuring 50 × 50 cm. These studies served as experimental platforms for testing compositional structures, material combinations, and tonal relationships.

The principal creation phase occurred between December 2024 and April 2025 and resulted in the production of four major artworks collectively entitled *The Distant Light Series*. Each artwork required approximately one month to complete and followed a systematic sequence of creative procedures: preliminary conceptual sketching, tonal planning, surface preparation, application of mineral pigment and plateau sand base layers, multi-layer glazing, integration of gold leaf elements, and final tonal refinement.

The predominance of circular canvas formats in three of the four works was informed by symbolic associations of wholeness, continuity, and cyclical harmony commonly found in both Chinese aesthetic traditions and Tibetan cosmological thought (Barthes, 1957; Li, 2018). Throughout the creative process, reflective documentation was maintained to record artistic decisions, material responses, and conceptual developments, consistent with established methodologies in reflective practice research (Schön, 1983).

4. Analysis of the Distant Light Series

4.1 Distant Light Series 1 (100 × 100 cm)

Medium: Acrylic, natural mineral gray pigments, Chinese ink, plateau sand on linen canvas.

This inaugural work takes as its visual point of departure the gray-mist landscape of the Ngari plateau in the hour before dawn—a moment the author observed repeatedly during fieldwork and found to be among the most affectively charged of the natural phenomena encountered. At this hour, light does not arrive dramatically; it accumulates, a gradual brightening at the horizon that gains definition slowly and then, almost without announcement, transforms the character of the air. The work attempts to render this quality of emergence: not revelation, but patient becoming.

The circular canvas establishes an encompassing spatial field rather than a directional view. Cool gray predominates in the outer regions of the composition, mixed with a trace of blue to suggest the lingering coolness of night and high-altitude altitude; toward the center, this cool tone transitions through a carefully managed gradient to warm gray inflected with a faint presence of yellow—warmth arriving as the light arrives, understated and steady. The base layer incorporates plateau sand collected on-site in Ngari, its particulate surface holding light in ways that differ fundamentally from smooth paint film and producing a quality of materiality that connects the work physically to the landscape it evokes. The distant dawn light is rendered with transparent warm gray pigments containing gold leaf powder in solution, producing a luminance that is perceptible rather than insistent—present as conviction rather than announcement. The work was recognized with an Excellent Work Award at the 2025 Southeast Asian Contemporary Art Exhibition.

4.2 Advanced Gray Landscape No. 2 (100 × 100 cm)

Medium: Acrylic, oil color, natural mineral gray pigments, gold leaf, plateau sand on linen canvas.

Where the first work attends to landscape, the second turns toward human practice—specifically, the daily ritual rhythms of Tibetan communities observed during fieldwork. Prayer-wheel turning, butter-lamp lighting, the repetitive recitation of mantras: these acts are individually modest, collectively profound, and cumulatively constitutive of a whole way of being in the world. Their beauty, if the word applies, is entirely a function of persistence and repetition rather than singularity or spectacle. Chinese aesthetic thought has long been attentive to this kind of beauty: the Confucian valorization of sustained practice over brilliant gesture, the literary and artistic tradition's preference for suggestion over statement, both resonate with what these Tibetan rituals embody.

The work employs a warm gray dominant, built from a plateau-sand base that creates surface irregularity analogous to well-worn stone. Dynamic, gently curved brushstrokes in the middle layer introduce a rhythmic quality without disturbing the prevailing quietude—movement that feels habitual rather than agitated. Scattered fragments of gold leaf, each approximately half to one centimeter in dimension, are embedded within the gray field at irregular intervals, functioning as concentrated points of latent luminance: hope that is present without being assertive. The circular format continues from the first work, sustaining the visual logic of cyclical return.

4.3 Advanced Gray Mountain Peak (120 × 120 cm)

Medium: Acrylic, Chinese ink, natural mineral gray pigments, gold leaf on linen canvas.

The largest work in the series takes Mount Kailash and the surrounding peaks of the western Tibetan range as its creative reference—mountains that carry immense sacred weight across Hindu, Buddhist, and Bon traditions and that present, to the physically present observer, an overwhelming combination of scale and silence. The mountain is not soft; it does not console. But it endures with a completeness that the human observer can only register as a form of power.

This work makes the most systematic use of the traditional Chinese ink-wash technique of "five shades of ink" (dry, wet, concentrated, dilute, and broken ink), translating this vocabulary into the mixed-media context and achieving fifteen distinct tonal gradations across the picture surface—a range that moves from deep gray at the mountain base through intermediate registers of considerable complexity to a light, near-white tone at the summit. The graduated effect produces both visual depth and a sense of gravitational consequence: the mountain is heavy where it should be heavy and weightless, almost atmospheric, where it rises toward sky. Gold leaf elements at the summit region are applied in minimal quantities, their function less decorative than symbolic—the barely visible gleam of persistence at the highest, coldest point. This work has entered the permanent collection of the Mahasarakham University Art Museum.

4.4 Gray Firmament's Silent Arc (70 × 180 cm)

Medium: Acrylic, natural mineral gray pigments, Chinese ink, gold leaf on linen canvas.

The closing work of the series departs from the circular format of its predecessors, adopting a horizontal rectangular canvas whose proportions echo the spatial logic of the traditional Chinese handscroll—a format designed not for the single, fixed viewing position but for lateral traversal, the eye moving across a continuous field of time and space. The Tibetan plateau horizon, encountered repeatedly during fieldwork as a line of almost geometrical clarity separating earth's gray mass from a sky of shifting tonal complexity, provides the visual premise.

The color structure moves from deep gray with a residual purple cast at the upper edge through a sustained middle register of balanced neutral gray to a lighter, more luminous zone at the horizon. A soft orb of warm light sits just above the horizon line—the "distant light" of the series title made literal and symbolic simultaneously, produced from transparent acrylic medium with gold-leaf powder in suspension and possessing a glow that is perceptible rather than visible, felt rather than seen. The background atmosphere is achieved through thin successive applications of Chinese ink and acrylic, building a hazy, layered quality that suggests both meteorological conditions and the progressive recession of memory. This work participated in the 2025 International Mixed-Media Art Exhibition and received significant critical attention for its integration of spatial economy with emotional depth.

5. Discussion

5.1 Advanced Gray as Independent Aesthetic Language

The four works of the Distant Light Series collectively demonstrate that advanced gray is fully capable of sustaining independent expressive weight across a range of emotional registers and cultural references without recourse to chromatic contrast or saturation. This finding directly challenges the traditional subordination of gray to auxiliary status in color theory and artistic pedagogy. While Itten (1970) described gray primarily as a balancing or neutralizing element within chromatic compositions, the present study suggests that gray can function as an autonomous visual language capable of generating emotional depth and symbolic meaning (Itten, 1970).

The concept of gray as a mediating term between opposites, proposed in the conceptual framework, receives consistent support from the creative work. Each painting holds apparent contradictions in suspension: the desolate and the hopeful, the static and the dynamic, the ancient and the contemporary, the material and the immaterial. This holding function is not a compromise between extremes but a genuine third position—a quality

that resonates strongly with Barthes' (1957) notion of layered cultural meanings and with Taoist philosophical understandings of productive ambiguity and relational balance (Barthes, 1957).

5.2 Cross-Cultural Dimensions

One of the study's more significant findings concerns the convergence, across apparently dissimilar cultural traditions, of gray's affective and symbolic registers. Chinese literati aesthetics, Tibetan material culture, and Western existentialist traditions each arrive at gray through different routes but share a recognition of its capacity to hold complexity without resolving it. This observation aligns with Barthes' (1957) semiotic perspective that visual forms accumulate culturally specific yet transferable layers of meaning.

Furthermore, Richter (2002) argued that contemporary art often embraces ambiguity as a means of representing reality beyond simplistic binaries. The present findings extend this argument by suggesting that advanced gray serves as a visual embodiment of ambiguity, continuity, and reflective contemplation across cultural contexts (Richter, 2002).

The interviews conducted during Tibetan fieldwork provided particularly compelling evidence of gray's cross-generational vitality. Younger Tibetan artists described gray as a medium through which inherited cultural traditions could be translated into contemporary artistic practice. This finding supports Li's (2017) observation that gray increasingly functions as a narrative and cultural connector within contemporary visual art (Li, 2017).

5.3 Technical Contributions

Beyond the conceptual and expressive dimensions of the research, the study makes a practical contribution to mixed-media technique. The gelatin-ground preparation developed during the experimentation phase successfully addressed issues of uncontrolled pigment diffusion on porous linen surfaces. This finding complements previous technical observations regarding the importance of substrate preparation for achieving tonal precision and surface stability in contemporary painting practice (Chen, 2019).

The systematic development of fifteen tonal gradations through layered glazing also extends established principles of color interaction proposed by Albers (1963), demonstrating how subtle variations within a restricted chromatic range can produce substantial perceptual and emotional differences (Albers, 1963).

Furthermore, the integration of plateau sand, mineral pigments, and gold leaf reflects broader trends in contemporary mixed-media practice, particularly those exemplified by Kiefer's material-based approach to meaning construction (Kiefer, 1987–1989). The results suggest that material specificity can significantly enhance both the symbolic and sensory dimensions of gray-centered artistic expression.

6. Conclusion

This study has constructed a systematic framework for advanced gray color strategy across three mutually reinforcing dimensions—material texture, emotional transmission, and cultural symbolism—and has tested this framework through the creation of four mixed-media works constituting the Distant Light Series. The findings confirm that gray, rigorously understood and carefully executed, is not merely a neutral background condition but a fully developed expressive language capable of communicating emotional complexity and cultural meaning.

The study further supports established theories of color relativity and contextual perception proposed by Albers (1963), while simultaneously extending Itten's (1970) conception of gray beyond its traditional role as a neutralizing element. Through the integration of semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1957), cultural symbolism, and artistic practice, advanced gray emerges as a powerful medium for mediating oppositional concepts and fostering reflective engagement.

Gray's capacity to sustain ambiguity without demanding resolution aligns closely with enduring principles found in both Eastern and Western intellectual traditions. The findings therefore contribute not only to color theory and contemporary art practice but also to broader discussions concerning visual culture, perception, and intercultural aesthetics (Barthes, 1957; Richter, 2002).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted over a single research cycle, focused on four artworks, and concentrated primarily on one geographic and cultural context. Future research should explore the application of advanced gray strategies in installation art, digital media, visual communication design, and immersive environments. Additional audience-based studies involving diverse cultural groups would further strengthen understanding of gray's perceptual and symbolic reception.

Moreover, future investigations may examine the integration of advanced gray with traditional artistic practices such as Chinese lacquer painting, Tibetan Thangka art, and regional textile traditions. Comparative and collaborative international projects may also provide valuable opportunities to test the cross-cultural applicability of the framework developed in this study.

Ultimately, the Distant Light Series demonstrates that gray is not the absence of color but a sophisticated visual language capable of conveying endurance, ambiguity, memory, contemplation, and hope. In an era increasingly characterized by visual excess and sensory saturation, advanced gray offers an alternative aesthetic pathway grounded in subtlety, reflection, and cultural depth.

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