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Canvas and Silk/Bushwick and Beijing: The Art of Eric Jiaju Lee

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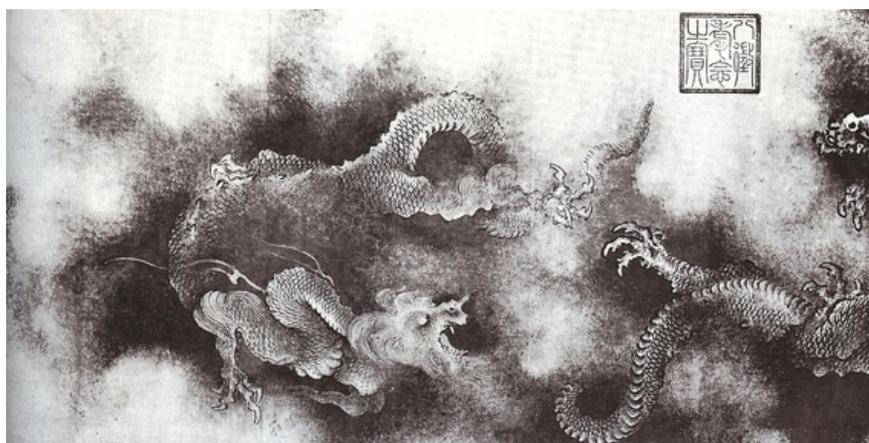


Photo Credit: Chen Rong's Nine Dragons, 1244, ink on paper, collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, via Wikimedia Commons, CC-PD-Mark.

Soaring through clouds and mist, the [Chinese dragon](#) dives into rivers, flying through the heavens and bringing life-giving rains to fields below. This mythical creature is considered to be one of the most difficult subjects to paint -- the artist must capture the likeness and spirit of a creature that is unseen by human eyes. Just so, the formless takes form in the art of [Eric Jiaju Lee](#). He describes his work as "the intersection of contemporary abstraction and traditional Chinese painting."

At EXP, his most recent [solo exhibition](#) on view at the [Michael Florio](#)

[Gallery](#) in Greenwich, CT, Eric Jiaju Lee presents work that incorporates a combination of materials, techniques, practices and philosophies spanning East and West. The title of the exhibition is borrowed from the title of the Jimi Hendrix song EXP, from Hendrix's debut album *Are You Experienced?* Explains the artist: "I would like to think that people consider viewing my work as an experience, just as it was for me during my creation of the works themselves. I see my works as the result of an inspired experience, ultimately a point of intersection, more than just an image to behold."

At EXP, Lee offers a series of highly chromatic works that are richly textured, incorporating the pouring and puddling paint, paired with the skills of the brush. Indeed, the EXP viewer can consider the paintings a unique experience shared with the artist.

Double Up is painted in acrylic on silk and satin in formatted frames reminiscent of a silk weaving loom. Lee's textural interlacing of color, motifs and technique produces a compelling surface that is reminiscent of [early silk textiles in China](#).



Photo Credit: Courtesy maryannerussell.com



Photo Credit: Silk banner from tomb of Lady Dai (c. 168 BC) at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Provincial Museum, via Wikimedia Commons CC-PD-China.

The artist himself appears to be made of the same colorful materials and complex techniques as his paintings. In a photograph taken at the gallery, his blue hair and red trousers echo the palette of his works. His boldly colored shoes laced with orange ties, and the textured faux fur throw on which he sits, reflect the complexity and sensuality of the art and the man himself.

Lee spent the years 2004-2008 elevating his artistic formation and establishing an art practice in Beijing. There, in 2006, he attended the Red Gate Residency, joining other artists in the exploding art scene in the Chinese capital city. His studio was located in the famous 798 Art District in Beijing. A 50-year-old decommissioned military complex of factory buildings, complete with leftover Mao slogans on the walls, 798 is named after Factory #798, just one of the former factories in the complex that now houses a thriving artistic community. The art of 798 alumni is now found at some of the world's major museums.



Photo Credit: 798 Art Zone Beijing, China, via Wikimedia Commons, GNU Free Documentation License Version 1.2.

Lee's years in Beijing coincided with a powerful release of artistic intention in Chinese art, and an experiment testing the country's taste for new freedom, new taste, new prosperity and new technology. No longer viewed as decadent or illegal, Chinese art broke free from concepts and methods of Western art during these years. At the same time, Lee was free to explore his own artistic identity as a Chinese-American in China, a cultural heir to both Western and Eastern traditions. Lee found the Beijing art scene a place to develop the art of identity in his work, to perfect his craft and explore his Chinese artistic heritage. Some of his pieces can be linked to an exploration of conspicuous indicators of Chinese culture.



Photo Credit: Courtesy Maryannerussell.com

In his current solo exhibition, the painting *Red Pi*, is a mottled ring of red pigment on the background of raw canvas. This is Lee's contemplation of jade, a rare semi-precious hardstone, laboriously worked with abrasives. A passion for jade has been an enduring hallmark of Chinese civilization for millennia.

The round, flat jade disk that emerged during China's Neolithic era, the *pi* represents heaven, which Lee credits as the source of his artistic inspiration. For the early Chinese, jade had inherent supernatural properties. The earliest jade objects, such as the *pi* disk, were tools for shaman wizards that they used to perform magic and spiritual rites. The earliest jade acted as a medium of communication with the gods and ancestors, while later jade was valued as an indicator of social status.

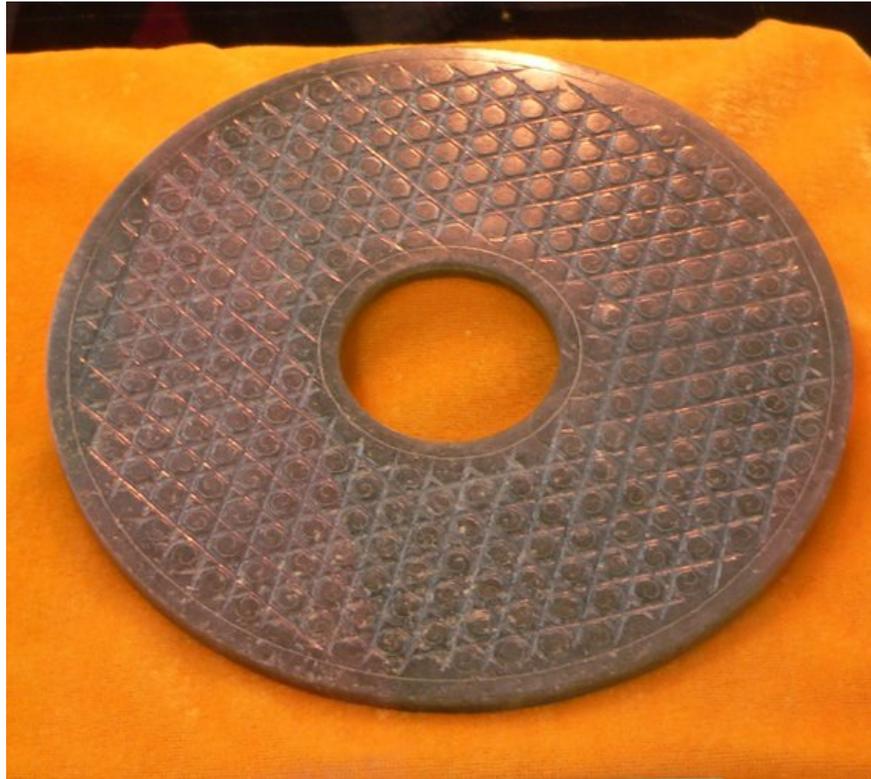


Photo Credit: Jade bi disk, Western Han dynasty, via Yongxing, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA-3.0.

Lee consciously selects his material, techniques and motifs to span two cultures and millennia in a single work. Lee translates the round form of the *pi* disk onto a perfect square, the Chinese motif used to represent the earth, thus conflating heaven and earth in a single artistic form. But Lee employs not precious Chinese jade, but common acrylic and canvas, the tools of the Western painter. He chooses not the rock and sand of Neolithic jade-working abrasives, but the power of water to add surface adornment by dispersing the pigments of his painted *pi* disk.

Eric Jiaju Lee



Coinciding with the birth of his first child, Lee returned stateside in 2007, while maintaining his Beijing studio for another year. His experience at 798 in Beijing, and the cross-fertilization of artistic ideas and exchanges, led him to seek a similar artistic community on his home turf. Lee's quest brought him to Bushwick, then a gritty area of Brooklyn that had the basic ingredients needed to build an artistic

community: large spaces and cheap rents; access to New York's cultural institutions and numbers of like-minded individuals willing to work together in a grass roots effort.

In Bushwick, Lee participated in numerous group shows and events to promote and publicize the area, including [Bushwick Open Studios](#). He also began teaching in the well-regarded [Hunter College Department of Art and Art History](#), where he had received his MFA in 1999. His growing reputation began to garner solo exhibitions, high-profile corporate and private commissions and other artistic residencies.

Last year, during a summer residency at Lake George in upstate New York sponsored by [Openings Artist Residency](#), Lee experimented with new forms, techniques and materials, while continuing to take inspiration from masters of traditional Chinese art and modern, abstract painters. Lee used both paper and canvas to unite the bold impressionistic brushstrokes of the monk painter [Shitao](#) and the kinesthetic movement of [Jackson Pollock](#).

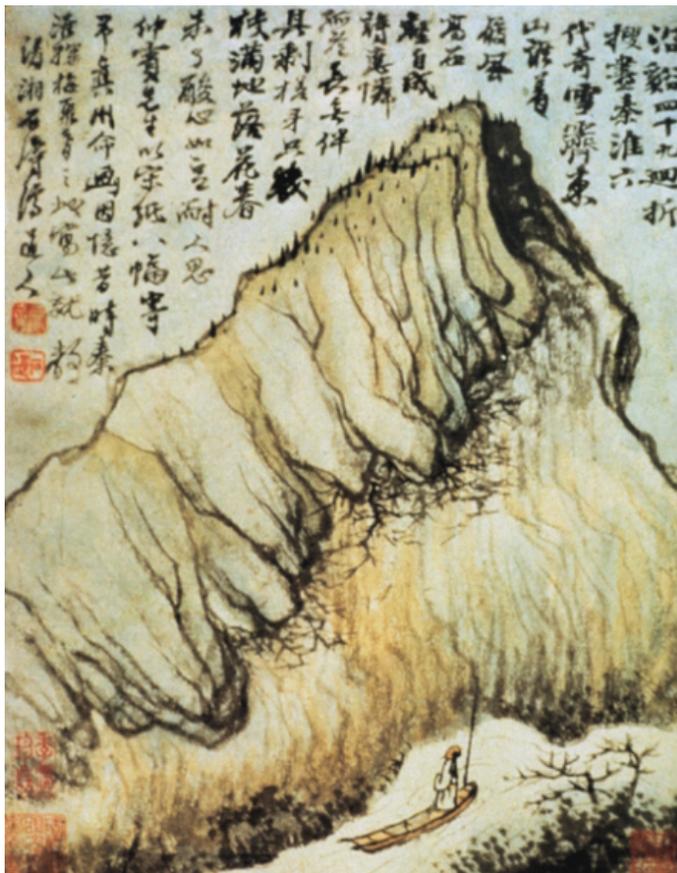


Photo Credit: Shitao's Reminiscences of Qinhuai, Qing dynasty, ink and colors on paper, collection of the Cleveland Museum, via Vassar College Slide Library, Wikimedia Commons, PD-art.

Much of his work is gestural, evoking a sort of performance art of brush and paint on paper without ever actually using a brush. Lee adopted *tai chi* gestures when applying his paint by pouring while tilting the surface of the painting. The work is premeditated, but improvisational. "Water is the most powerful element of nature," explains Lee as he gestures towards bottles of paint prepared on his work table. "Fluid paint will find its own way, a path of least resistance, like water." There's a natural way to paint when the artist adheres to the movements of *tai chi*, just as *tai chi* is fashioned after the movements of nature. In this way, by substituting a pouring method in place of the brush, Lee preserves but employs an innovative approach to the calligraphic form and spirit of line.



Photo Credit: Courtesy of the artist.

During one of his residencies, Lee abandoned paints all together. He began experimenting with charcoal, likely the medium used by the earliest artists of all cultures.



Photo Credit: Courtesy of the artist.

Then, Lee cast aside his brushes for a more direct, literally hands-on approach.



Photo Credit: Courtesy of the artist.

The resulting monochrome work shows the form of the artist's hands blurred by the artistic process. The mark making has resulted in an intricate and nuanced interplay between the mode of production and the medium that is highly reminiscent of Chinese landscape painting master, Gong Xian, whose picture of the tall, serene mountains of northern Chinese, is translated by the hand of a 21st-century master in New York.



Photo Credit: Courtesy of the artist.



Photo Credit: Gong Xian's A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines, Qing dynasty, ink on paper, collection of Museum Rietberg via Wikimedia Commons, CC-PD-Mark.

Chinese landscape is known as *shanshui*, literally mountain/water, a balance of *yin*/water, clouds, empty space and *yang*/stone, mountains, land. Lee acknowledges the influence of Taoist philosophy in these works, citing a great-grandfather who was a Taoist practitioner and heeded the rules of nature in his own painting practice. Yet as an artist, he readily admits that breaking rules and reinventing forms and techniques, reinterpreting media and motifs is the essence of his art.

"As an artist, you create the game and you create the rules. Then you master the game, break the rules and create a new game," Lee says. "There is a saying, 'The journey is the reward.' I believe that each of my works can act as a meeting place for contemplation between myself and a viewer, enabling us to share an experience of a more profound and beautiful nature."



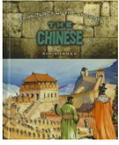
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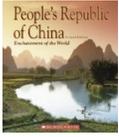
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