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SHANSHUI

Traces of Rain - The Direct
Approach in One Painting

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By: Efstathia Milaraki

Each drop of rain is a unique micro cell of energy. Could fluidity itself reveal more about the creative process and bear new meanings for the creation in our times?

For a Chinese artist, or anyone who explores Chinese painting, water is the primary medium. As Ball mentions, the medium is the message, since with so fluid a substance can capture the energy/the vitality¹, the *qi*- the 1st principle of the six canon in Chinese painting- that gives life to the depicted theme.² However to truly understand how water operates as a spiritual and material carrier, it must be examined within the broader cosmological framework of elemental interactions. This necessity shifts our focus toward tension and balance between water and its primal opposite – fire.

The opposites, Fire and Water and the Way (Daoism)

Daoism and even earlier Chinese Philosophy could help us understand extremes in nature and how basic elements like water involved with weather phenomena and metaphysical expressions.

A balance of complementary cosmic opposite forces like yin and yang in China promoted universal harmony in the past. As yin and yang join, they form life. One interpretation identifies yin and yang with the states of water. Yin while in its highest form is freezing, Yang in its highest form is boiling. This interplay and the states of water vividly captured in the Chinese language itself. If we look at the characters for weather (*tianqi* 天气), it translates to “Heaven’s breath”. The first character *tian*

天 represents heaven (a man stretching up high with hands open) while the character for *qi* 气 signifies clouds in heaven. Even further back in the traditional character for *tianqi* 天氣, *qi* represents clouds in the upper part resulting from the lower part, where *mi* (rice) is cooking in a pot.³ Through these characters, we notice how the metaphysical blends with the practical in daily life. Instead of maintaining a strict dualism, however, some early philosophical texts shifted the focus toward a single, primary element to represent this cosmic energy. For instance, according to *Guanzi* 管子 (4th century BCE), only water has the fluidity of *qi*⁴:

Water is the blood and qi of the earth; it resembles what courses through the veins and arteries. Water is the potential for everything.

Yet looking at the historical development of these concepts, water’s significance was tightly bound to another primary source. Before the yin and yang dualism, around the end of the Warring States period there was a simpler distinction between the opposites, that of Fire and Water, which are featured among the Five Classical Chinese Elements along with Wood, Earth and Metal. Fire and water share fundamental similarities and were later linked with Yang representing fire and Yin water. Although these two elements are non-living entities, they are inherently characterized by continuous motion, being imbued with *qi* (the vital, animating force). Both ele-

³ Ball, *The Water Kingdom*, 77.

⁴ For a detailed philosophical analysis of the text linking fluidity of water to the movement of *qi*, see W. Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 101; for a broader discussion on the concept of *qi* as cosmic and vital energy, see also Jana S. Rošker, “The Concept of Qi in Chinese Philosophy: A Vital Force of Cosmic and Human Breath,” in *Atmospheres of Breathing*, ed. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 127–140.

¹ Philip Ball, *The Water Kingdom: A Secret History of China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 267.

² Xie He, *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters*, see translation in Bush & Shih, 1985, 29.

ments show a distinct fluid nature and are vital for sustaining life, yet in their most extreme manifestations, they transform into the most destructive forces of nature. This shared energetic behavior is also reflected visually; a closer look at the Chinese characters for fire (*huo* 火) and water (*shui* 水) reveal an aesthetic similarity. As mentioned in the *Zhuangzi* (4th century BCE), when this foundational pair is linked, lightning is described as the mixture of water (yin) and fire (yang).

*When wood is rubbed against wood, it causes fire. When metal is held together with fire, then it flows. When yin and yang are mixed together, heaven and earth are startled; there is thunder and rumbling thereupon and fire in the middle of water.*⁵

This dualism extends far beyond the physical world, deeply permeating human life and social structures. We see that opposite forces attract each other, leading to creation or destruction in an ongoing spiral, much like life itself. Confucius and subsequent philosophers later developed these related principles further. As Allan states, these principles became 'applicable to human society in the behavior of water and other natural phenomena'.⁶ This perspective directly echoes the teachings of Laozi, the founding philosopher of Daoism, who recognized the deceptive power of water—a substance seemingly weak yet fundamentally unstoppable: of water.

*Water is not insubstantial; It is soft but it can strike down mountains and pierce rocks. Water creates structure; it is the nourishing ingredient of all that exists.*⁷

We sense how water acts as an intrinsic source of renewal. Because it is complete-

ly devoid of intention (*wuwei* 无为), it flows downward naturally – not because it is forced, but because it perfectly embodies the spontaneous order (*ziran* 自然) of the cosmos.

Prior to beginning the rain project, an unconventional question arose: how would water interact with other materials and human agents, yet retain its identity and remain the main theme? In painting water is commonly used to dilute paint, instead I tried to trace the water itself, understand its materiality and spiritual carrier and highlight it as a flowing pattern of the moment and place which was an essential experimentation for my artistic growth. Could interaction and collaboration with nature foster self-knowledge during the creative process? If this is beneficial for human exploration, how does it impact nature and what trace does it leave behind? Could this process ultimately elevate awareness and inspire more ecological choices in both art and daily life?

Part 1. Outdoor action - Non-action **(wuwei 无为)**

The painting *Rain* which I propose to reflect upon, belongs to a series created during my decade-long stay in China. Within this body of work, I focused primarily on spray paint, capturing the silhouettes of objects on canvas to create a black and white negative space reminiscent of old photography and its instantaneous speed. Following the outdoor creation, I returned to my studio to further process these ideas. Working rapidly outdoors allowed for a more direct, personal understanding that aligned with the dynamic rhythm of China, a defining characteristic of this artistic exploration.

Although the paintings in these series are neither directly related, nor visibly similar – given that each theme carries a distinct

5 Guo Qingfan, ed., *Zhuangzi jishi* (Taipei: Heluo tushu chubanshe, 1974), chap. "Wai Wu" (IX Shang, 26), 920.

6 Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 61.

7 Laozi, *Daodejing*, chap. 78, quoted in Allan, *The Way of Water*, 61.

context and texture - the element of speed remained central. In the context of Daoist practice, this rapid execution in my earlier work was not an attempt to dominate the surface with human intent. Rather, the instantaneous speed of the spray paint functioned as a method of spontaneous responsiveness. This process forced the artistic ego to transcend calculated planning, intertwining the creative act with the immediate, unpredictable rhythm of the environment.⁸

Based on the foundation of spontaneous speed, the work *Rain* emerges to depict an almost celestial, orchestrated dance with nature that might seem like a rain ritual. While spraying with black paint, the water drops touching the Earth ultimately leaving a trace of the human and nature merging into one. The toxic medium of the spray was a deliberate choice, capable of gently touching the raindrops without interfering with natural laws, thereby leaving the least human mark possible. Expanding on my previous use of the stencil technique, the falling water droplets here serve as a dynamic living mask. As explored by Philip Ball,⁹ complex natural designs are often products of self-organization, emerging from simple, local physical interactions rather than a master plan. In *Rain* this self-creation of form manifests on the canvas surface: the raindrops do not merely block the pigment; their surface tension creates localized liquid barriers that physically repel the airborne spray. The pressurized mist settles and aggregates strictly along the boundaries of these moisture pools, allowing a patterned negative space to organize itself organically.

The challenging process of this outdoor ritual took place on the CAFA campus during summer, where the large-scale canvas

was laid flat on the ground and entirely surrendered to the elements. Through this horizontal orientation, the workspace physically conformed to water's natural tendency to seek the lowest path, establishing a site-specific realm of non-contention (*buzheng* 不争).¹⁰

As the Beijing downpour struck the horizontal surface, the falling rainwater collided and merged with the fresh spray paint, washing away calculated edges and leaving behind a chaotic, organic map of fluid marks (fig. 1). Such material responsiveness transformed the ground itself into a collaborative space where human mark-making and cosmic spontaneity (*ziran*) became completely indistinguishable.

A rapid tempo was unfolding from feeling deeply attuned to the downpour, which was faster than usual, throughout a painting process carried out under variable rain conditions that lasted a few hours. The raindrops constantly rushed me, guiding every movement with their coolness, reacting to the complementary heat of my body and activating all parts of it, in an effortless performance that consisted of an outdoor action with rain.

Can we really picture the complete process, including the preparation beforehand and everything in-between? Was it truly possible to achieve a state of *wuwei* (effortless action) during a heavy downpour? This pursuit may sound idealistic to many, but it approaches reality the moment the artist ceases to resist the chaotic momentum of the storm. In a heavy downpour, *wuwei* is not an experience of passive stillness; rather, it is a state of hyper-adaptive resonance.

As the raindrops rushed the body and

8 Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 200–215.

9 Philip Ball, *The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern in Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–10.

10 The concept of *buzheng* (non-contention) is a foundational Daoist virtue directly linked with the imagery of water, which naturally flows to the lowest places without conflict. See Laozi, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 64; see also Karyn Lai, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 101–103.



Fig. 1. Process detail capturing the raw, unwashed paint surface immediately following exposure to rain.



Fig. 2. Process detail showing the unwashed paint surface.

the canvas with relentless speed, any attempt to intellectually plan the next mark was instantly subverted. The urgency of the weather conditions forced a transition from forced, intentional action (*youwei* 有为) to spontaneous, unhindered responsiveness (*ziran*). By matching the fast, unpredictable rhythm of the Beijing rain with the instantaneous speed of the spray paint, the creative act became entirely unself-conscious. In this sense, *wuwei* was achieved not through quiet isolation, but through a total, physical surrender to the environment, proving that the highest form of human agency is found when we allow ourselves to be moved by the world rather than attempting to dominate it.

Part 2. Indoor Process: Meditative Refinement

Following the intense outdoor performance, the canvas was brought into the controlled environment of the studio to begin a phase of slow processing. This transition represented a crucial shift from the dynamic, expansive energy of the storm to a state of meditative, inner refinement. Once the painting had completely dried,

the physical interaction with the canvas shifted from rapid spraying to meticulous care. At this stage, a detailed close-up reveals the temporal duration of the work, where the paint had been sprayed multiple times to capture the evolving, distinct states of the rainfall (fig. 2).The painted surface was gently washed with a sponge to remove excess paint, allowing the raw, organic traces left by the rain to finally appear clearly. During this phase, a fine Chinese brush was used, employing delicate touches to conceal a large black mark that had accidentally occurred in a central area due to a prior mishandling of the spray. (fig. 3)

What ultimately emerged on the canvas was the result of the initial half hour exposure, a period when the falling rain registered pure, ordered relationships. This prolonged environmental interaction left behind analogous patterns reminiscent of structures found throughout the cosmos, evoking the visual beauty of a starry night or a cracked soil of a dry pond. These organic formations not consciously drawn by human hand, were instead allowed to solidify as a permanent trace of the

Table.1: Materials used during the outdoor and indoor creative process.

Part 1: Outdoor action painting	Part 2: Indoor process
Materials	
Spray paint (lightness/speed)	Acrylic paint (black, white)
Protective gear (mask, goggles, gloves)	Sponge (excess paint removal)
Canvas	Chinese brush (minimal usage for concealment)
Masking paper (to block excess spray)	Chinese silk (as a layering element, organic glue)
Rainwater (environmental medium)	Frame assembly (wood, nails, organic glue)

Fig. 3. Process detail at a half-washed stage, capturing the partial removal of excess black paint.



storm's own rhythm. Washing the canvas reveals the underlying water formations of this complex tonal layering - which was created by spraying paint multiple times as raindrops fell-transforming the surface into a material *wuwei* testament. (fig. 4)

The next days, this dialogue between control and spontaneity was further developed through the creation of a simple wooden frame and the application of Chi-

nese silk (see Table 1). Positioned at a strict distance of a few centimeters from the canvas the silk layer served just enough to slightly blur the underlying image. This delicate textile layer acted as an intentional filter, veiling and softening the "roughness" of the outcome. Such a nuanced refinement, which unfolded over three days, introduced a softer, dimension to the painting. Through this structural layering, the final artwork began to resemble the



meticulous sensitivity of the traditional Chinese painting technique *gongbi* 工笔 — ultimately achieving a harmonious equilibrium that balanced the raw spontaneity of nature and the meditative composure of Chinese artistic tradition (fig. 5).

Reinterpreting *Gongbi* through Contem-

porary Eco-Philosophy

The artwork *Rain* challenges and expands the classical boundaries of the *gongbi* tradition by transferring the root of precision from human execution to natural processes. Historically, *gongbi* relies on rigid human control—where the artist applies ultra-fine contour lines and layer-by-layer pigment washes to achieve precise, realistic rendering. In this experimental ap-

proach, however, the rigour and delicate layer-by-layer complexity are not dictated by the artist's hand, but is instead generated by the chaotic, microscopic traces of the rainfall itself. By positioning a screen of Chinese silk directly over these raw, literal markings, the harsh atmospheric 'roughness' is optically softened into a subtle, serene composition. This unique arrangement upholds the soft, meditative, and sophisticated aesthetic features of traditional *gongbi*, yet achieves them through a contemporary, eco-philosophical subversion: human control yields to natural spontaneity (*wu wei*), redefining fine-line realism as a direct, unmediated depiction of ecological reality.

By reinterpreting the *gongbi* aesthetic, *Rain* provides a significant eco-philosophical response to the contemporary ecological crisis. Traditional Chinese mountain-and-water painting historically depicted nature as an idealized, timeless realm of cosmic harmony. However, in our era of heightened ecological instability, nature can no longer be viewed separate from human impact and environmental transformation. The 'roughness' captured on the raw canvas—imprinted by the actual rainfall of Beijing—carries traces of modern atmospheric pollution and ecological shifts.¹¹

Herein lies the critical contribution of the 'new *gongbi*' approach: instead of turning away from this ecological distress, the approach engages with it through the Daoist philosophy of *wuwei*. The act of layering Chinese silk over this fluid tracery does not merely mask the environmental roughness; it conceptually metabolizes it. The floating silk functions as a site of artistic and ecological healing, filtering the chaotic and toxic realities of our time into an everlasting moment of calmness and meditative beauty. Consequently, this

contemporary evolution of *gongbi* transcends passive representation. It becomes an active, creative ritual of ecological interconnectivity, proposing that through a harmonious, fluid surrender to nature's agency, humanity can find pathways toward holistic renewal and spiritual reconciliation with the Earth.

Ultimately, *Rain* demonstrates how allowing the formless, fluid nature of water to disrupt human-centered control can foster new formal and aesthetic dimensions for contemporary creation. By surrendering the raw canvas to environmental agency through *wuwei*, the artistic practice moves beyond passive documentation, turning the canvas into a live vessel of vital energy (*qi*) and ecological transformation. The final synthesis—where the ephemeral tracery of atmospheric pollution and ecological shifts is filtered through the serene structure of floating Chinese silk—establishes a profound reinterpretation of the contemporary *gongbi* aesthetic. In an era marked by heightened ecological vulnerability and fractured elemental interactions, this collaborative process offers a powerful model of creative resistance. It proposes that by attuning human mastery to a natural spontaneity, art can metabolize environmental crises, transforming localized climate realities into an everlasting space of meditative healing, cosmic interconnectivity, and systemic renewal.

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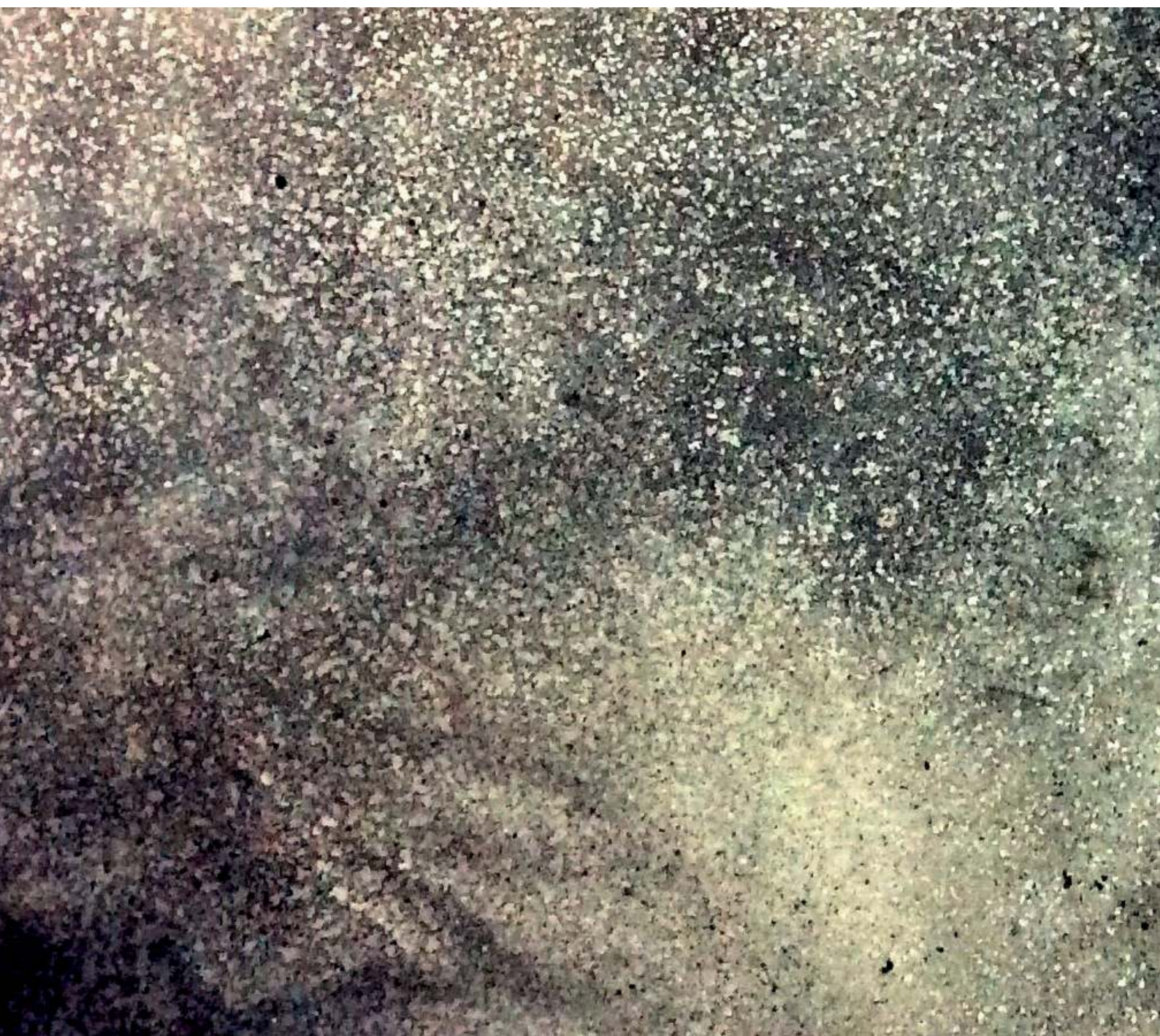


Fig. 5. Full view of *Rain* (2019), spray paint on canvas layered with Chinese silk, 131 x 151 cm. (Photograph by the author)

