

RUSO ▲ LEE GALLERY

CHRIS RUSSELL – ARTIST STATEMENT, 2023

Give and Take

From the flat light of a mountain blizzard to the gloam of a deep forest - can paint capture the breadth of that visual experience, the different qualities of light experienced outside? This visual exploration of dark and light led me to think of the Yin Yang sign, something I was only really familiar with through its' adoption into pop culture. So I started looking at where this came from, and scratching the surface of Taoism. The Taoist cosmology of interconnected dualities provided a framework for this new group of paintings, and became an entry point for me to look deeper into Asian art history, where landscape painting and appreciation for nature has a longer history than the Western art I am more familiar with. In addition to the visual explorations of painting, the canvas provides a space where ideas can interplay, and the tidbits of information that interest me can interact in a fluid manner. Outside of the constraints of my vocabulary, I can interpret and connect ideas that I don't fully understand. My understanding of Taoism is crude, as is my understanding of other topics that fascinate me, such as quantum mechanics, microbiology or psychology. Taoism is a philosophy and religion that is foreign to me and my dive into it's concepts presents the pitfalls of appropriation that riddle the tattered tapestry of western new age spiritualism. This continues a theme in my art, a recurring dilemma, balancing my earnest sense of wonder with cynicism. So I find myself here, writing a long-winded disclaimer - I hope to expose some of the influences on these paintings, while maintaining that I am no authority. As I interpret a multitude of ideas, I feel skepticism similar to when I venture outdoors to paint from sublimity; my relationship is not symbiotic.

Chinese landscape paintings, particularly paintings from the Song Dynasty, communicate Taoist concepts through a sophisticated mélange of visual devices and symbolism. By balancing negative and positive space, a rhythm of similar visual forms and the interplay of water and mountains, the polarity of Yin and Yang are presented in harmony. In my understating of Taoist cosmology, the polar forces of Yin and Yang came out of an undifferentiated chaos of energy, called the Wuji. The Yin is the receptive, female, dark, force and the Yang is the active, male, bright, force. Instead of stating that one is bad and one is good, the two polar forces are portrayed in a dynamic cycle, called the Taiji or Tai Chi, where the dual poles gradate into each other. The things of the world are not static but a process of cyclical flux of production and destruction. Within this concept, I find a useful lens to view the many intricacies of the world. While working on this show, the complementary relationship between the Yin and Yang caused me to think of lichens; lichens teach us of mutualism - a symbiotic relationship where all species involved benefit from their interactions, which challenges Darwin's idea that everything is in competition. Lichens defy classification because they are composite organisms of fungi, algae and bacteria in a mutualistic relationship. They are like miniature ecosystems, and their cooperative relationship allows them to live in the most extreme environments

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on earth. By zooming in on lichens, biology - the study of living organisms, in the micro - becomes the study of relationships *between* living organisms otherwise known as Ecology.

Correlation between micro and macro views has influenced my approach to landscape painting for a long time, and this theme relates to Taoism as well. Atoms, the smallest units of matter, are composed of positively charged protons and neutrons surrounded by negatively charged electrons. By diving deeper into the micro, theoretical physicists propose that the world is fundamentally made up of relationships rather than substances, an idea relatable to how the interplay of Yin and Yang birthed the Wan Wu, the myriad things of the universe. Again, with my primitive understanding, I am grabbing at tidbits of information that spark wonder. I relate the personal sense of wonder I feel walking in the wild to my interest in scientific frontiers that occupy a realm where science and magic seem fluid such as mycology and quantum physics.

The boundaries we create to define ourselves are, by definition, artificial, and create the delineations that polarize us: science verse religion, human versus nature. Can these boundaries be fluid? In a recent study on psychedelics use in therapy, researchers found that activity in the specific parts of the brain that create the boundaries of our conscious reality, is reduced by the use of psychedelics. As barriers that separate us break down, a sense of oneness with everything is often felt. By breaking down the mental boundaries we have constructed to delineate ourselves from everything that is not ourselves, psychologists are finding that people can break free from addiction, depression, and anxiety over death. I read that Taoist meditation aims to break free of Wan Wu, or myriad things, to identify oneself with the natural order of the universe - aspiring to deconstruct the body and mind from actuality back to the fluidity of potential. To me this route bears similarity to psychedelic therapy, and perhaps can be related back to our biology. Humans, akin to lichen are not discrete. We are holobiont, an assemblage of a host and the many other species living in and around it, which together form a distinct ecological unit through symbiosis. When I consider this, the microbiome within me, the human and nature duality breaks down. In a Taoist view, humanity is the same as nature, which helps explain the spiritual importance placed on the landscape.

The spiritual importance for humans to connect to nature lead to the development of Chinese gardens which act as microcosms of landscape, providing a way to commune with nature even while living an urban life. Rocks are an important feature of the garden, representing a vital element of the landscape, the mountains and Yang force, in a compact form. Foreshadowing Einstein's famous theory, ancient Taoists believed that matter and energy called Qi were fundamentally the same. With their forms thrusting up toward the heavens, mountains are the most visible examples of energy converted into matter. As objects, rocks are a great embodiment of the micro to macro relationship. I find painting a small rock similar to painting a large mountain. Rocks are a witness to the expansiveness of time. Developing out of their use in gardens, a long tradition of stone appreciation developed, which spread to and was reinterpreted in

Korea and Japan. In Korea, there is a tradition of collecting Suseok - viewing stones, or scholar's stones. A Suseok is a representation of landscape that you can hold in your hand. I am an avid rock collector so when I saw these small, beautifully weathered rocks atop their hand carved stands I was infatuated. Only after I purchased a modest stone did I look into what I had acquired and find the term Suseok. Predating photography, Suseok often acted as a souvenir of a trip to mountains, a reminder of the grandness of nature. I read that collecting Suseok gained popularity again amongst the newly prosperous young business class of 1980's Korea. In a rapidly developing country, more because of its connection to tradition than to nature, Suseok became a symbol of culture that could be purchased. Reading this resonated with something I observed while visiting Korea: the primary place I saw Suseok displayed, was in a real estate office selling high-end urban units. In learning about Suseok, I also learned of Chaekgeori, which translated to "books and things" a Korean genre of still life paintings of shelves predominantly displaying books. This style of painting was popular in the 18th and 19th century as a sign of the virtue of learning. Of the few "things" that accompany the many books in these paintings, Suseok is common, which can help explain the "scholar's stone" definition. Paintings for my previous show at Russo Lee Gallery were in dialogue with 17th century Dutch still life Vanitas painting. This genre flourished with the financial support of an increasingly wealthy merchant class. There is moral symbolism in Dutch Vanitas, and there is also the cultural status that commissioning these paintings symbolize. I immediately knew I wanted to paint the Suseok I acquired, long before I had made the connections to previous paintings; it was a rock and I have a thing for rocks. Because this rock has a stand, it is no longer just a rock; it has been taken out of nature into the world of artifacts, which are subjects of still life not landscape.

In addition to collecting rocks, I enjoy collecting and arranging plants and flowers. In 2019 I started painting these arrangements, which are aesthetically influenced by Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging. Following a painting of a landscape, I would paint a still life derived from that landscape. The plants in each arrangement correlate specifically to the other painting so there is a symbiosis between the pairs of paintings. In new paintings for this show, I wanted to study the long-standing artistic tradition of Ikebana in more depth. I tried to learn and follow the rules and guiding principals of a traditional form of Ikebana called Rikka. As I looked deeper into the tradition of Ikebana, an art I was first attracted to on a visual level, I found it connected closely to other themes of the paintings for this show. While Ikebana's history is rooted in the flower offerings of Buddhism, not Taoism, I found there are parallels. I read that a key element of Ikebana arrangement is the positive and negative - the part of the plant facing the sun is the Yô, which can be compared to the Yang while the part of the plant facing the darkness of the earth is the In, which compares to the Yin. The balance of a positive and negative is fundamental to flower arranging. Once again, positive and negative do not translate to good and bad, as the dark earth is as essential to the plant's growth as the light to which they grow towards. The Rikka arrangement is a balanced, complex form of interrelated parts. I also read that the Taoist influenced landscape paintings from China's Song period did indeed influence Rikka arrangements.

Plants were chosen to represent enduring elements of the landscape, with a consideration for the essence of each plant which is imbued with symbolism. Highlighting a specific plant in the landscape resonated with me and is an idea I find less pursued in Western Landscape painting. I often prefer to paint select leaves, branches or mushrooms in sharp detail, omitting much of the foliage as I focus on the expressive character of particular elements.

In Ikebana, the arranger, usually through subtraction of leaves and twigs, modifies a branch in order to enhance the natural design. In this process I find a give and take relationship between art and nature. The branch is taken from a tree and the design is what is given to it. This is akin to the hand carved stands of scholar's stones; the stone is formed through natural forces but it is not art until it is given a stand. When I paint interiors, I am drawn to the interplay of geometric architecture and furniture, with the ornate patterns of the stone and wood used to make it. As someone whose primary pursuit is to create objects, I have long been interested in the materials used in art, and on a broader scale the materials used to make stuff in general. Ground minerals are mixed with oil to make the colors I use to paint an image of a stone and linen is stretched over a wood frame so that I can paint a forest on it. There is a dichotomy between my use of materials and my reverence for the undisturbed landscape. From these enduring traditions that speak to our relationship with nature, I am learning that balance can be found within dichotomy.