

Beibei Chen and Leilei Chen
Professor: Margaret Vega
04/11/2017

Thesis statement

About us

Being Chinese artists residing and studying in the United States, our work is influenced heavily by Chinese culture, aesthetics, and philosophy. We have always been interested in engaging with the environmental and cultural issues through ceramics and painting.

We were born in a coastal city in the northeast of China. The city has an important petroleum refinery which was first built by the Japanese when the Japanese invaded China. Later it was converted into one of China's major refineries. My grandfather managed this factory. There are favorable benefits and the worker's salary is good with this factory. The factory releases harmful gases every day, but the productivity is not particularly high, so the pollution was not viewed very serious. Everyone ignored the pollution. In my memory of my home, the sky is so blue, the water is so clear. Humans and animals, natural and harmonious, live in coexistence. We remember going to the beach in the summer where when we tossed a stone, crabs would run out. There is a wonder of the world in the sea where we play every day. Not far from the mainland, there is a small island in the sea called "Penholder Hill". When sea tides are falling low, a natural cobblestone path appears. It connects the land and the island. We called the path "Bridge to Heaven." Only three places in the world have such a spectacle. Another one is Mont. Saint Michel in France, but is just an artificial embankment not a natural path. The other path is in Jindo Island of Korea, which is natural path, but this path only appears once a year. In my hometown the path of "Bridge to Heaven" is a natural cobblestone path which appears twice a day. Ancient myth record that the path is made by angel flying with a ribbon (Figure 1). We

appreciated our carefree childhood, and enjoyed the beauty of nature as a gift. We deeply believe that the world is full of wonder and miracles. Humans are a part of nature.



Figure 1

However, gradually our hometown becomes different. Tons of cement and steel were shipped here; and the refining of petroleum was shipped out. Gradually cars on the road increased, people now have abundant food, and larger houses than before, but seeing a beautiful blue sky becomes rare.

Five years ago we went back to our hometown. We could not find the crabs and fish near the sea, because the harbor is now too close to Penholder Hill. Perhaps in another few years, the Moses-like wonder of separating the sea will be gone.

We eventually went to college, found jobs in Beijing, got married, and have children. Beijing's pollution became increasingly more serious. Air pollution is a hot topic in China. The most frightening thing is that once the smog occurs, there is nothing that can be done. The only hope is to wait for a strong wind blowing from the northwest to move the gray dome that the Chinese people now live beneath. China's air pollution has led to a daily average of 4,000 deaths,

accounting for 17 percent of China's total mortality. According to US standards, 38% of Chinese people breathe air that is unhealthy (Berkeley Earth Organization, 2015).

Although Beijing's air pollution did not directly lead to death, the smog is known to contribute to a variety of diseases, including infertility. However, a lot of people have slowly become used to living in such conditions; even walking the streets without a particle mask.

In fact, the most terrible thing is to endure this unhealthy environment, rather than thinking of ways to change it. Who was responsible for the air pollution in Beijing? This is not only the responsibility of the Chinese people, but also the whole of humanity. For example, many US factories were moved to China in order to produce cheap goods using China's resources and cheap labor. We only have one Earth and we believe that everyone has a responsibility to protect it.

Haze

Recently, air pollution “has become” a hot topic in China. This issue came to our attention five years ago. We observed that the once blue sky became less and less blue. The most frightening thing is that once the air pollution, with its haze and smog sets in, there is no measures that can be done in order to reverse it. The only hope to disperse it would be from a strong wind blowing from the northwest. As a result, Chinese people live constantly under a gray dome. People had to wear masks to shopping and working in office, children wear masks play in playground and study in classroom. Usually people use gas masks during the war, we exaggerated general masks to form of gas makes in order to warn people air pollution is as dangerous as war.

China is one of the world oldest civilizations with a recorded history of five thousand years, rich with an impressive traditional culture. Porcelain is a synonym for “China” in the

English language, and a large number of Chinese porcelain was exported to Europe since the 17th century. The blue and white porcelain represent the ultimate in Chinese porcelain. High quality blue and white Chinese porcelain is worth more than gold.

As people know in many industrialized countries, such as France, Belgium, and the United States, this haze has appeared. The 1948, Donora smog event occurred in Pennsylvania, killing 20 people and has affected the health of 7,000 more. London's Fog has led to twelve thousand deaths in 1952. Although Beijing's haze did not directly lead to death, this haze has caused a variety of diseases, and even led to the birth of disabled children. However, many people become gradually used to living in this polluted air. There are even several people walking in the streets without a mask. In fact, the most terrible thing is to passively endure living in this terrible environment, rather than thinking of ways to change it.

Haze is a series gas masks made of traditional Chinese blue and white porcelain. We use under glaze color to paint the landscape on the gas masks. The beauty of the traditional destruction of the real world form the distinct contrast, which is displayed together in any piece of ceramic work. What other want of express is not only the concern for the environment, but also the implied meaning that probably the key to solving the environmental problems is just the Chinese culture. Is an integral part of nature on the relationship between human being, heaven, and the Earth. China's environmental problems are not only from the outside world, but also from the realm of spirit. If the wisdom of Chinese traditional culture can give all the modern People a warning of living in harmony with the nature and observing the natural law, there is no doubt that it is an important part of environmental governance.

Therefore, in this artwork series, blue and white porcelain represent Chinese traditional culture. We made nine gas masks, which are made out of porcelain. We created a series of ceramics related to the disappearance of traditional culture and damage to the natural

environment. We are trying to express our thoughts on this matter from the perspective of Chinese traditional culture. The series of gas masks are made of white porcelain painted in a traditional Chinese blue. On their surface, the unique Chinese ink and free hand painting style from the Song dynasty is presented. All of these art elements, full of Chinese features, are combined to be a series of contemporary artwork. We did this through a mold system consisting in: repair mold, kiln, and painting under colored glaze, kiln again, painting over colored glaze, and a third kiln. These seven complex steps are necessary to create a porcelain gas mask. We painted landscapes, butterflies and flowers on the gas masks using Chinese traditional painting techniques. We redesign old pattern, and turn them into modern style. Through our artworks, we hope to warn Chinese people about the importance of the environment and raise their consciousness regarding these issues. We would like to stress by means of that creative way, that the environment is more important than culture and economy.

Who was responsible for the Beijing haze? Not only the Chinese people, but also the human race as a whole. For example, lots of factories were moved from the United States to China in order to produce cheaper goods with China's resources and cheap labor. We only have one Earth, and everyone holds his share of responsibility.

As for the other series of Characters, white unglazed ceramic is used to present the melted Chinese characters. The characters compose a poem written by Wei Wang, a famous poet from 1,400 years ago. In this poem, Wei Wang describes the tranquil and beautiful environment, as well as a peaceful and broad state of mind. We used the font from Xizhi Wang, the most famous calligrapher of 2,000 years ago. This series of work will hang on white walls and the ground is white as well. These melted characters would be very subtle and silent. Similar to this, the unobtrusively diminishing Chinese culture hasn't received much public attention. The Chinese character is the only hieroglyphic character currently being used in the world. They are

the same as a mysterious picture. Chinese civilization is one of the world's oldest civilizations, and is the world's longest civilization. However, Chinese traditional culture is gradually disappearing. Modern Chinese people do not understand Chinese traditional culture, and the people of the world have gradually forgotten the traditional Chinese culture with globalization. Chinese people of young generation do not recognize Chinese calligraphy. The natural environment and human inner mind in the description of poetry has disappeared. Through my work, I hope to invite the viewer to travel beyond the porcelain surface to ponder a real sense of spiritual embodiment, to reflect on the place of the individual from the perspective of Chinese embodiment, to see that in Chinese philosophy man is an integral part of nature.

Malignant Landscape

We continue to explore the relationship to culture and natural environment. We already painted a series of 13 watercolors. Our works are trying to tell the stories of life and death, science and art, religion and politics that are all one in the same. We hope to create contemporary art works by combining Eastern aesthetics and Western painting ideas. We used the flying apsaras (angel flying) in Chinese Dunhuang culture and the abstract lung cancer cells depicted as under the microscope to create a series of contemporary artwork. The flying apsaras swim in the colorful cancer cells. The flying apsara is a symbol of integrated Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are three different Chinese cultures and religion, but they have the same core idea that the human is an integral part of nature.

Air pollution is caused by human activities, but air pollution is an important cause of lung cancer. When humans destroy nature it is a means of hurting our own body as cancer cells are part of nature and now the smog is part of the human body.

When seeing the world, a Chinese Philosopher states, “the harmony between human and nature.” This comment asserts integration of all natural things. What needs to be mentioned is that “the harmony between man and nature” doesn’t mean a mechanic equal relation between human and nature, but in the premise of sufficient respect towards the laws of nature presents human’s subjective conscience in an integral thinking pattern (Hu 173).

The Chinese traditional painters are “literati”. This means they are firstly poets and authors; they make paintings for leisure. So when we learn Chinese painting, we have a deeper understanding of Chinese philosophy. This becomes important when experiencing our work, as we approach our art with this unity.

Specifically, in our opinion, Chinese environmental issues are more than issues about industry, economy, and politics. As a matter of fact, its roots reside in Chinese culture. That is to say, only Chinese culture can solve the series of problems faced by the Chinese currently. We hope to draw attention to this through Chinese Philosophy by examining the belief that man should be in harmony with nature and follow nature's course which has been consistently valued in Chinese culture. In other words, human consumption should always stay within the renewable limit of nature. Overconsumption needs to be regulated and a circular economy ought to be advocated. This perception should be applied in every aspect of human life, especially in industry.

We hope that our work will bring attention to these issues and the difficulties that we face in the Contemporary world. It is vital to remember in my presentation that extinction of culture is related directly to destruction of natural environment.

On painting techniques, we combine Western watercolor painting and Chinese traditional method. We also use compositional white space, or empty space, with virtual and real Chinese painting composition to create our artworks. Empty space is an important artistic method of

Chinese painting. Literally, empty space means to keep a space for imagination. Empty space can let viewers have an imaginary space associated with aesthetics and imagination. It comes from the Taoism of China. It applies the traditional aesthetic mind-set, the observation method and the artistic expressional form, full of national characteristics. “Beauty is at the none-painting space” is an aesthetic point that Chinese painting upholds. This blank composition, in Chinese painting, is not a void or nihilism of visual perspective, but an improved enrichment of artistic performance (Jiang, 94).

Through our series of art works, you can see the process of our thinking. We would like Chinese traditional patterns to intersect with slices of cancer cells. We utilized free hand painting to paint slices of cancer cells. For comparing, we used fine brushwork drawing that is traditional in Chinese realistic painting in order to draw attention to pattern and details. Therefore, the abstract contrasts the realism, and dynamic contrasts static in the same piece.

We painted some traditional Chinese patterns such as dragons, flowers, clouds, flying apsarases, hands of Buddha, and ribbons. These images could represent any meaning. For example, Buddha hands could mean culture, religion, or make a political reference. Patterns in this work gradually became more abstract and intersections numerous. We decided to use the Buddha hands instead of figures to represent all humans with the ribbons instead of flying apsarases, which is more cultural specific.

We found inspiration from an artist, Wangechi Mutu. Her “Tumors” series comprised of inked-in armatures punctuated with collage elements taken from glossy magazines such as Vogue and National Geographic. The form of her work series is as a valuable reference for us. We appreciate that her works shuttle between abstraction and figuration with dizzying ease. My professor, Margaret Vega, gave us a reference artist Kim McCarty. Her works inspired us by some elements to be painted inside part without destroying the shape of overall. Her work is

talking about an interesting story when the audiences examine the details. This way of expression is a good reference for us.

We are trying many directions to express our themes, both macro and micro, to represent cancer in landscape as a global issue. Cancer caused by pollution, is not only inside our cells, but also now a part of the earth. On a macro scale, air pollution can be considered to be cancer in landscape, and on a micro scale, this disease is in the cells of our bodies. We hope our work reflects both of these issues.

Gaia

Gaia series show the over-consumption of natural resources by the human being. The figure in the painting represents mankind, whose inflated ambitions are shown through the corpulent bodies. Nature is filled inside the figure's body. In order to fulfill her abnormal material desire, this figure excessively consume natural resources, which leads to irreversible damages to nature and humans.

Gaia series is inspired by the Gaia hypothesis proposed by James Lovelock in 1972, “organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth and they form a complex self-regulating system. Simply speaking, Gaia hypothesis means that under the interaction between organisms and environment, the earth becomes a suitable place for the continual existence and development of organisms.” This view is exactly the same as the theory that man is an integral part of nature, the key philosophy of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in China. According to this philosophy, man is part of nature. Thus damaging nature is damaging themselves.

The theme in the first painting is forest. Inside the figure's body are animals and plants in the forest. The somber green color conveys the moisture and gloom of the forest. In such a poisonous world, animals and plants are unhappy, and uncomfortable. The orange and crimson

mushrooms are toxic. The motions of swans, cows, frogs, and eagles all show their pain and their struggle on the verge of death. The inner parts of the figure are interwoven by chrysanthemum's sere stems and her hair is the petals. In oriental culture, chrysanthemum represents death and transmigration. The second painting manifests marine organisms. The gray blue color is the contaminated seawater. The marine organisms with their heavy-breathing mouths symbolize social issues such as overfishing. The theme in the third painting is birds and sky. Gray background represents pollution air, and different angles of bird twisted body look like uncomfortable. Meanwhile, this figure can be depicted as "Earth Mother," whose facial expression is sad and desperate. Human's consumption of nature is damaging the balance of self-regulation of this life entity. Due to the loss of balance, her body surface breaks apart. In one of series "Earth Mother" is squeezing her breast so human is not only fight with naturel beings but also fight with themselves. We are taking reference from ancient Dunhuang Mogao cave mural, such as the color palette, and animal eye style also from Buddha figures on this mural. This series painting style combines Chinese meticulous painting, surrealism, graphic design, to make contemporary painting style of traditional and consumerism.

Artists influences:

Kim McCarty

Wangechi Mutu

Giuseppe Aricimboldo

Walton Ford

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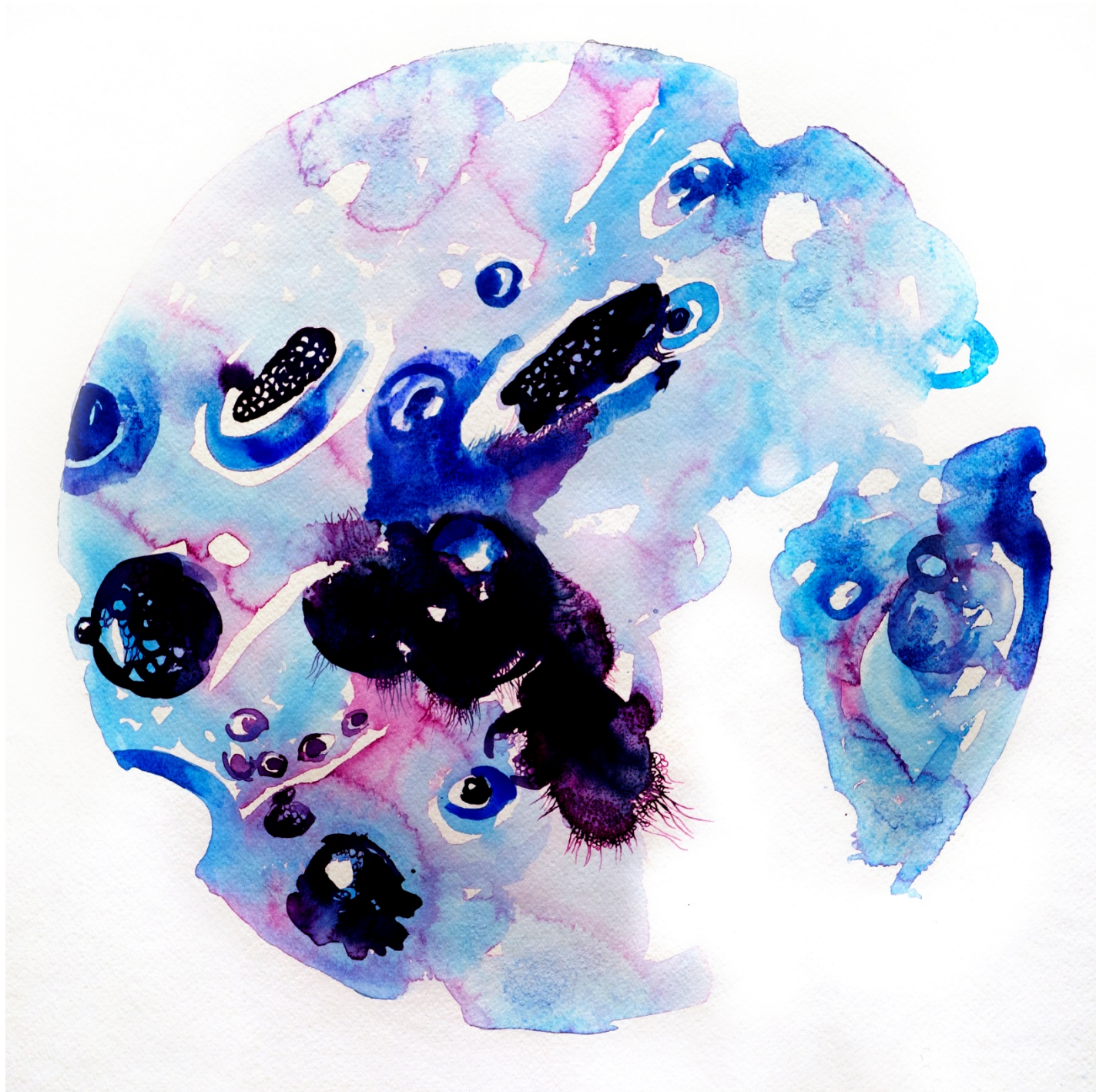
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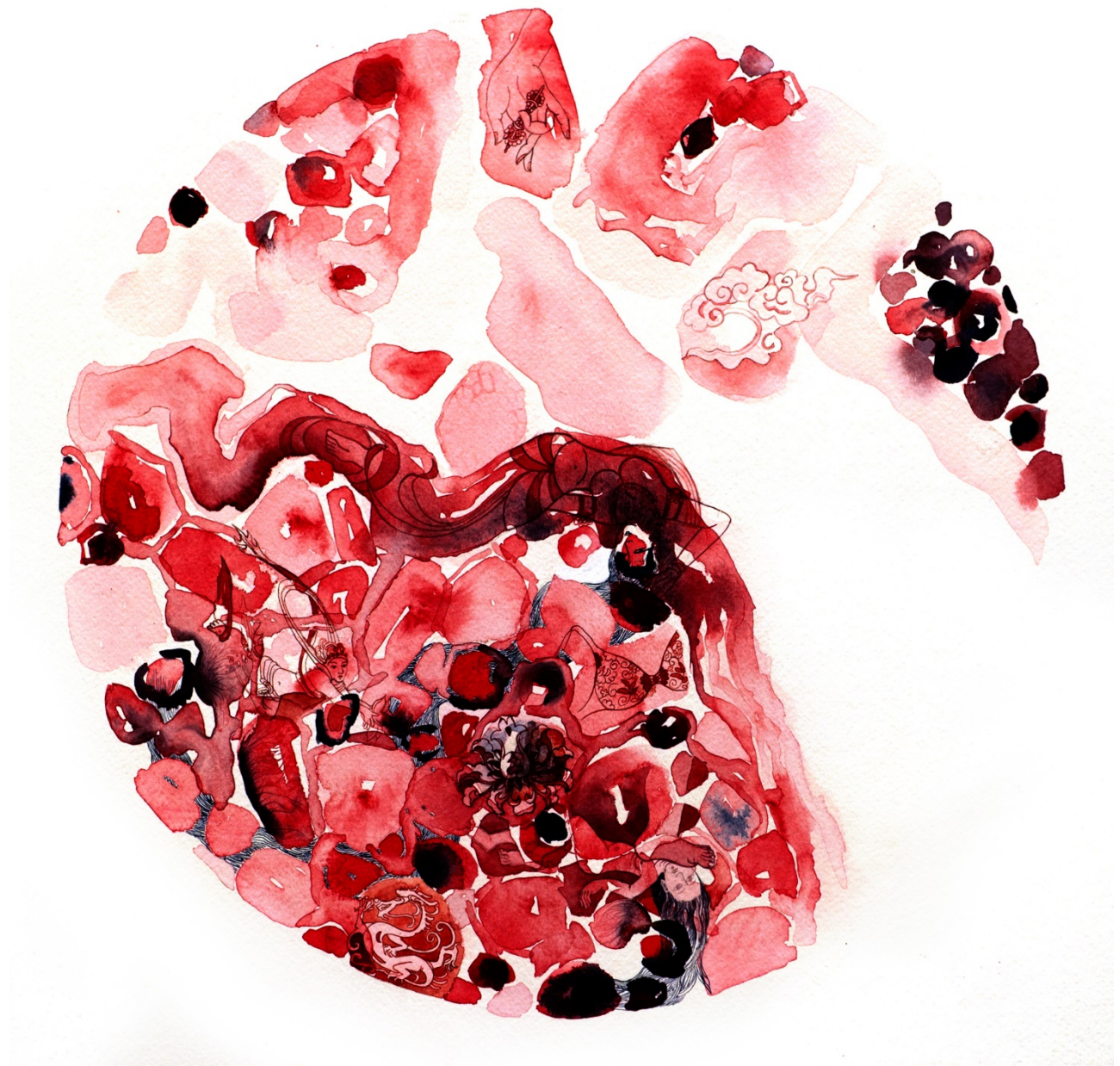
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Media: Watercolor and ink
Size: 22 x 22 inches
Artists: Leibei Chen & Beibei Chen



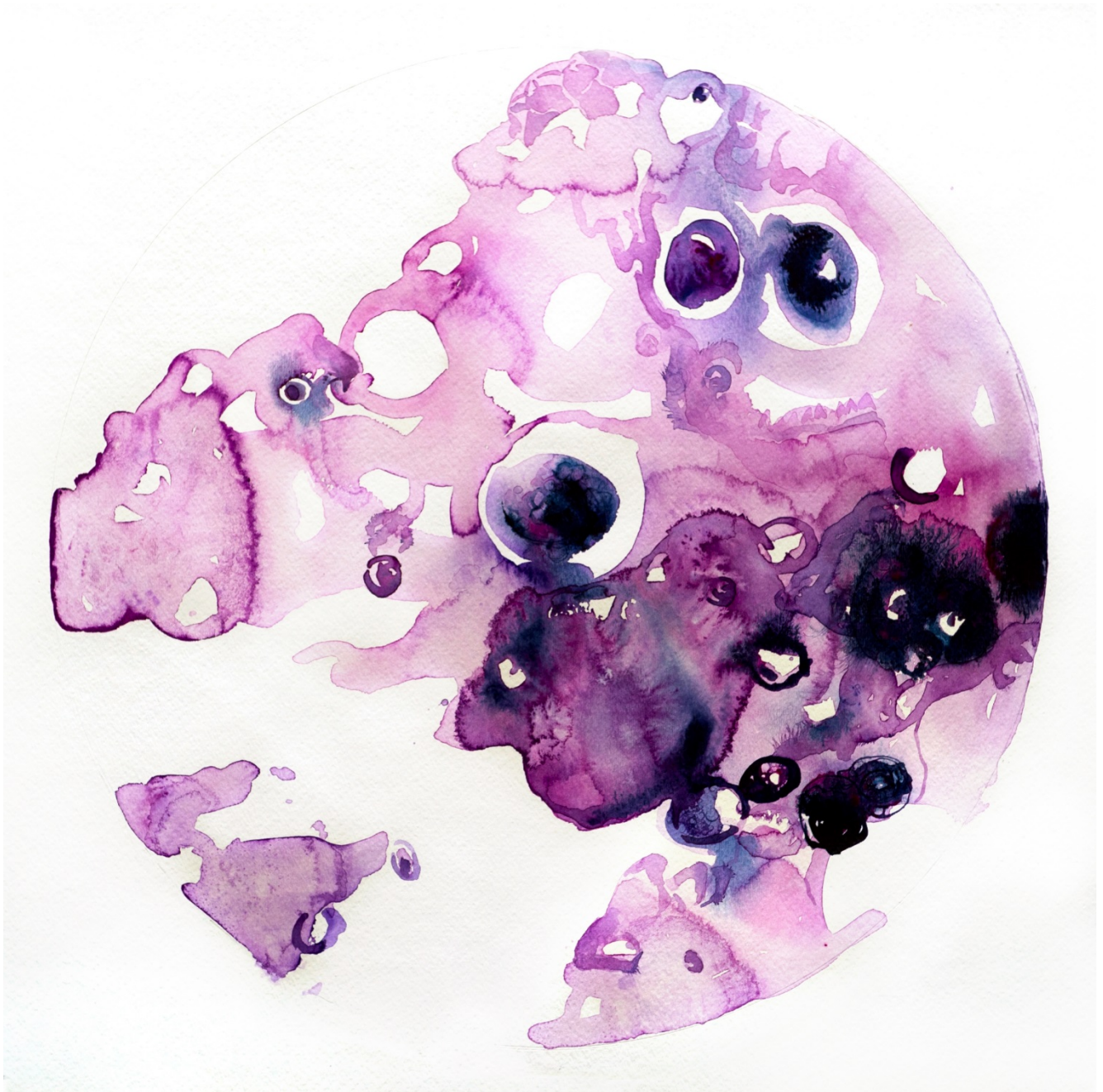
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Title: Haze Series
Media: Ceramic
Size: 15 x 8 inches
Artists: Leibei Chen & Beibei Chen



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Media: Ceramic
Size: 15 x 8 inches
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Media: Ceramic

Size: 15 x 8 inches

Artists: Leibei Chen & Beibei Chen



Title: Gaia I
Media: Acrylic
Size: 66.5 x 45.5 inches
Artists: Leibe Chen & Beibei Chen



Title: Gaia II
Media: Acrylic
Size: 66.5 x 45.5 inches
Artists: Leibei Chen & Beibei Chen