

**Photography, yin-yang and Negative Space**

by

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**Abstract**

Three minimalist cyanotypes – a large-sized cyanotype, a cyanotype diptych, and an installation of 81 cyanotype semicircles – form my exhibition *Three Begat All Things*. I draw inspiration from the traditional Chinese Taoist philosophy of yin-yang and incorporate my thoughts on the nature of photography and the idea of negative space in my work. From the perspective of Chinese aesthetics, I visually present the phenomenon of yin-yang and its philosophy to the audience. The audience interacts with the piece and wanders into the cyan and white. Eventually the works evoke the audience a part of their thinking about the nature of the universe. This article concludes my research in the past two years, in which I further describe the relationship between yin-yang, photography, and negative space and how my works present the combination of these three.

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## Table of Contents

Contents.....	4
List of Figures.....	5
Positioning of my artwork in the art history.....	6
Theories and phenomena of yin-yang philosophy.....	9
Yin-yang in Chinese Art.....	13
The connection between yin-yang and photography.....	16
The difference between yin-yang and photography.....	18
Why Cyanotype?.....	21
Execution of the exhibition.....	23
All from Nothing - Nothing from All.....	24
Smooth and Striated.....	27
Ecliptic.....	30
Bibliography.....	33

**List of Figures**

2.1 Yin-yang diagram.....	9
3.1 Ma Yuan, Angler on a Wintry Lake, 141 x 36cm, 1195.....	14
5.1 Hiroshi Sugimoto, Ohio theatre, 42 x 54.3cm, 1980.....	19
8.1 Yuncheng Cai, All from Nothing - Nothing from All, Cyanotype and wooden base, 48x42”, 2023.....	24
9.1 Yuncheng Cai, Smooth and Striated, Cyanotype, 36X92”, 2023.....	27
10.1 Yuncheng Cai, Ecliptic, Cyanotype, 210x42”, 2023.....	30

## Positioning of my artwork in the art history

Art is an ever-expanding field. However, if we imagine that all art fits within a circle, then the creation of each artwork is like adding a new dot in the circle that is art. As more and more dots are added to this circle, the circle expands, broadening our perception of what art is. The dots that are added to both the edge and the outside of the circle are artworks that push the boundaries of what art is and create new artistic genres. As an artist, where to situate your dot within the circle of art and determining your place in art history is an essential part of being an artist.

In the process of conceptualizing and creating my artwork, abstraction heavily influenced my ideas. This has presented itself within my work in the form of a circle. Presenting my work in this shape is greatly inspired by the abstract painter Kandinsky. Most of his paintings include circles in different forms and colors. “If ... in recent years I have preferred to use the circle so often and passionately, the reason (or cause) for this was not the ‘geometric’ form of the circle, or its geometric characteristics, but rather my strong feeling of the inner forces of the circle in its countless variations”<sup>1</sup>. Kandinsky’s interpretation of the circle is similar to the modulation found within the concept of yin-yang, which I want to showcase within my art. Another major element within my work is the stripes shape created using the cyanotype process. This was inspired by Ellsworth Kelly’s piece *Spectrum IX*; therefor, the final presentation of my artwork is more reminiscent of minimalism. Despite this, my practice does not entirely align with the conceptual realm of traditional minimalism. My work largely embraces minimalism's focus on the audience's body and perception. However, on the other hand, the hand-craftiness contained in my practice is a major departure from minimalism's use of fabrication. I believe that artwork shaped by the artist's hands resonates more deeply with

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<sup>1</sup> Baas, Jacquelynn. *Smile of the Buddha : Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Page 61

the audience, particularly when the artist seeks to convey thoughts and emotions through the pieces.

While attempting to situate my work within the circle of art, I came across the work of Agnes Martin. Martin's works are reminiscent of my own as they were often considered minimalist and were hung among works by artists including Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, and Donald Judd. But she preferred to identify herself as an abstract expressionist. Moreover, her paintings, statements, and influential writings often reflected an interest in Eastern philosophy, especially Taoism. Her works display the rational and restrained gestures of Eastern philosophical thought while also containing the intense emotions of abstract expressionism. She once stated, "My paintings are about merging, about formlessness."<sup>2</sup>; these concepts are interwoven with the idea of yin-yang. Martin is not alone with her associations of Eastern philosophy, Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism have all been strongly influenced by Eastern culture and philosophy. Duchamp, Kandinsky, and John Cage all incorporate the idea of Zen into their work.

As an artist whose background is in photography, my practice has been influenced by Hiroshi Sugimoto. His photography is both philosophical and artistic and is always interwoven with the concept of Zen. Interpreting his works is a critical part of my understanding and research into conceptual art. However, unlike Hiroshi Sugimoto's use of the camera as a medium for taking representational photographs, I am exploring the more abstract form of the photogram in my practice.

My work also fits within the realm of semiotics. Instead of using representational images to signify abstract concepts, my work embraces the abstract. This may lead to a lack of clarity between the signifier and the signified, but at the same time, it liberates the limitations of the signified, leaving more room for interpretation. *One and Three Chairs*,

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<sup>2</sup> "Agnes Martin (American/Canadian, 1912–2004)," Artnet.com, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.artnet.com/artists/agnes-martin/>.

1965, by Joseph Kosuth, is a great example of semiotics within art. In my work, I push semiotics further, using the abstract form as a signifier to signify Eastern philosophical views. Kandinsky also stated in his book “*On the Spiritual in Art*”<sup>3</sup> that he believed that art should not merely depict present reality but express the spirit and inner influences. Abstract painting is a subjective form of expression that is broader, unrestrained, and more connotative.

My work builds upon the history of abstraction and the visual style of minimalism. I explored a new field of traditional photography through the vision of Chinese aesthetics. My artworks interpret my understanding of Eastern philosophy, continuing and building upon previous artists, trying to broaden the circle of art with my artistic practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* (New York: H. Rebay, 1946).

## Theories and phenomena of yin-yang philosophy

In the natural world, forces that seem to be obviously opposite or contrary may in fact be interdependent, interconnected and complementary<sup>4</sup>. This can be explained by the concept of yin-yang, which lies at the basis of the philosophy of Taoism. The concept has three main characteristics: unification, opposition, and harmony. This concept has had a profound influence within Eastern culture. Ancient Chinese astronomy, meteorology, chemistry, mathematics, music, and medicine were all developed with the assistance of the theory of yin-yang<sup>5</sup>. The theory and its logic are still relevant today and continue to influence the way many Chinese people and others think.



Figure 2.1 Yin-yang diagram

Yin can be translated as dark or negative, with yang being light or positive. The

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<sup>4</sup> “Yin and Yang.” Wikipedia, June 3, 2023.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yin\\_and\\_yang#:~:text=Yin%20and%20yang%20is%20a,they%20interrelate%20to%20one%20another](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yin_and_yang#:~:text=Yin%20and%20yang%20is%20a,they%20interrelate%20to%20one%20another).

<sup>5</sup> Harper, Donald, *Science in Ancient China*, in Iwan Rhys Morus (ed.), *The Oxford History of Science* (Oxford, 2023; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Feb. 2023)

phenomena like water and fire, softness and hardness, life and death are all physical manifestations of yin and yang. The well-known yin-yang diagram provides a good visual representation of what yin-yang is. Black and white signify two opposing but complementary forces; although displayed separately, they both carry a part of one another. This constant mutual attraction and repulsion causes the constant change of everything in the universe, which also shapes the nature of all things. Taoists believe you will be able to grasp some comprehension over the law of the changing universe by understanding the modulation of yin-yang.

Chinese civilization began in an agrarian society that originated in the Yellow River Basin. The ancient Chinese relied on the seasons, climate, and rivers to cultivate the land and harvest crops. A method of collaboration between human and nature was developed through the long-term practical experience of agricultural civilization. This profound comprehension of the laws of nature laid the foundation for the concept of yin-yang. Therefore, the concept of yin-yang embodies the Chinese view of the universe and the unique perception of natural laws, and is deeply influenced by the landscape. This final point is important for my artistic research, as my cyanotypes strongly reference landscapes.

Throughout the thousands of years of historical evolution, the concept of yin-yang has been constantly mentioned and applied in various schools of thought and religions and has gradually turned into a complex and huge system. Here I will analyze the original meaning of yin-yang in two parts: the theory and the phenomenon.

The word yin-yang first appeared in the I Ching: The yin and the yang make up the Tao. This phrase points out that yin-yang theory is essentially very abstract. Furthermore, another phrase, “What is metaphysically called Tao, what is not called physics”<sup>6</sup> explains the category of yin-yang as well as Tao. What is noteworthy is the use of Aristotle’s words *metaphysics* and *physics*, as their definitions may help us to better

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<sup>6</sup> Unknown Author. *I ching*. New York: New American Library, 1971.

understand what yin-yang and Tao are. These words help us to understand the ethereal nature of yin-yang and Tao.

After *I Ching*, the *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi is another important work referencing and deepening the concept of yin-yang. "Tao begat one; One begat two; Two begat three; Three begat all things. All things carry yin on their backs and embrace yang in their arms; The blending of the two results in harmony"<sup>7</sup>. Laozi's underlying meaning is that yin-yang exists above all things; its existence precedes our words about it, and thus, its existence is one. Because of its existence, we can use words to describe this abstract concept, which is two. These words affirm the existence of yin-yang because of the phenomena it manifests, which is three. These three points give birth to all things. At the same time, everything that grows carries both yin and yang. The universe reaches a dynamic balance and harmonious state through the opposition, modulation, and alteration of yin and yang. At this point, we have a general and vague idea of yin and yang; that is, a philosophical concept that exists in metaphysics and contains the characteristics of all things and the laws of the world's operation.

Opposition, modulation, and alternation are the phenomena of yin-yang, which occur not only between things but also within individuals. The alternation of yin-yang expresses the incomparable beauty of living. This vitality is like a living heart beating strongly, in rhythm, moment by moment. The essence and foundation of this vitality stems from change and movement. The tide of the ocean, the alternation of day and night, the changing of the cold and warm of the four seasons are the most common natural phenomena that reflect the relationship between the alternation of yin-yang and the vitality it evokes.

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<sup>7</sup> Laozi, Zhiming Yuan, Daniel Baida Su, and Shangyu Chen. *Tao Te Ching: Original text and a modern interpretation*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010.

However, from another perspective, all life is destined to die from the very first moment of its birth. The seemingly eternal alternation of yin-yang is also destined to stop in the future, just like all hearts are destined to stop beating. Each pump of the heart during its lifetime is a minor alternation of yin-yang, and the whole journey, from its first beat to its final, is also a transition from yang to yin. If we take a wider perspective, the death of an individual is also the beginning of a larger yin-yang cycle. Chinese people describe the greater cycle of life with a metaphor of leaves returning to their roots. The destiny of a planet is also the same; even if it has suffered destruction, when all the dust settles a new life will be born from the ashes.

The variations and modulations of yin-yang seem more random from a smaller perspective, while seeming inevitable and structured from a broader perspective. The balance and harmony pursued in the Taoist philosophy of yin-yang were analyzed from a relatively wide perspective. However, I also believe that randomness plays a very important part of yin-yang, giving life infinite possibilities.

## Yin-yang in Chinese Art

Yin and yang are both a cosmological and an artistic view. In traditional Chinese artworks, we can very often see the harmony of yin and yang coexisting from different perspectives. This is also an important difference that distinguishes Chinese art from Western art.

Ancient Chinese artists emphasized the philosophy of yin-yang and applied the concept to their artworks to the extreme. The supreme state of Chinese culture is “和” (harmony), where yin and yang oppose and complement each other, eventually forming an optimal state of harmony where there is yin in yang and yang in yin. Masculine and feminine may be antonyms, but they are not complete opposites in art. Chinese calligraphy is an excellent example of this. When writing, calligraphers pursue both partial lines and overall composition, the lines sometimes as straight and masculine as a pine tree and sometimes as feminine and curved as flowing water. The ancient Chinese calligrapher Wang Xizhi was given the word “雄秀” (graceful and majestic) in praise of the beauty of the yin-yang harmony in his calligraphy.

Furthermore, Chinese ceramics also contain the same philosophy of yin-yang harmony. The Song Dynasty as one of the most pinnacle period in the Chinese art history, Song kiln is regarded as the representation and exemplary of ancient Chinese ceramics. Japanese art critic and philosopher Yanagi Soetsu, in his book “The Beauty of Everyday Things”, mentions that he particularly admired the Chinese Song kilns, which he considered as an expression of “和” (harmony): the fusion of rigidity and softness, the blending of motion and stillness, and also the combination of light and darkness in color. He think Song kiln works bring out the underlying philosophical ideas that are deeply rooted in Chinese culture without pretense<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Yanagi, Soetsu. The beauty of Everyday Things. PENGUIN Books, 2019.



Figure 3.1 Ma Yuan, *Angler on a Wintry Lake*, 141 x 36cm, 1195

Among all the yin-yang interactions that characterize Chinese aesthetics, the Chinese emphasis on negative space and positive space is the most prominent; we can find examples in almost all forms of art. *Angler on a Wintry Lake* is a painting made by the Chinese painter Ma Yuan in 1195. The artist used thin brush strokes in the center of the painting to depict an old man, sitting alone on the bow of a boat, fishing. Except for a few ripples on the water around the boat, there are no more lines around the painting. The negative space in the picture can be the lake, the sky, the fog, or a state of mind where everything around is silent. The artist depicts the old man's insignificance in nature through a large amount of negative space, which also allows the viewer to focus on the old man. Around the boat there is no color, line, or texture, only negative space for the audience to give infinite reverie. Ma Yuan combines motion and stillness, blending the positive space and the negative space in his painting. Through that, the painting shows the old man's insignificance in nature, as well as his leisurely merging with nature.

The modern Chinese aesthetician and philosopher Zong Baihua mentioned his thoughts on negative space being used in overall Chinese art in his thesis “An Exploration Into Some Important Issues of Chinese Aesthetics History”. He said: “The positive space is what creates the art image, whereas the negative space is what creates the image in our imagination. The level of imagery generated by the image is decided by the interaction between the positive and negative spaces. An artwork without the participation of the imagination of the audience is not alive. A good painting can make the audience wonder”<sup>9</sup>.

The artist's attention to the negative space and its effect on the meaning has long been one of the most important aspects of traditional Chinese art. The focus on negative space was later transferred from China to Japan and greatly influenced Japanese folk art and Zen culture, which in turn became the foundation of the development of modern minimalism, the roots of which go back to yin-yang.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the deep influence of the concept of yin-yang on Chinese civilization, the Chinese view of art is also influenced by this same perspective of opposites, unity, and harmony. The Chinese have made the philosophy of yin-yang compatible with art, and it has become part of the mainstream and typical Chinese definition of what beauty is.

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<sup>9</sup> Zong, Baihua. “Preliminary Exploration of Important Questions in the History of Chinese Aesthetics.” Essay. In *Mei Xue San Bu (aesthetics of Rambling Style)*. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha Eastern Philosophy and Western Art, from Monet to Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

## **The connection between yin-yang and photography**

Photography is a medium that is extremely closely related to yin-yang. The entire process of film photography consists of a series of continuous transformations of positive and negative images. The positive image enters the camera in the form of light and leaves a negative image on the film, then the negative image is projected onto photo paper through the exposing process of the enlarger to eventually reproduce the positive image that initially entered the camera lens. Let us analyze the principle of exposure alone: the ISO in the exposure triangle is generally fixed, then the shutter speed and aperture size are opposing and mutual roots, which mirrors the concept of yin-yang.

There is also the relationship of yin-yang between the photographer, the subject, and the audience to consider. If we see everything that is active as yang, and everything passive as yin, then anything that is visible is yang and anything hidden is yin. Many people create a fake self in front of the camera, a better self that they want others to see and believe. For example, smiling and posing are ways to embellish ourselves. The figure of the person being photographed is visible, but because the person reworks their self-image and hides their true self, their self-identity becomes invisible<sup>11</sup>. Photographers must be the active character in the process of shooting. They take the initiative to compose the picture, adjust the exposure, and finally press the shutter. However, in the final photo image, the photographer becomes the mysterious character who hides behind the camera embodying yin. Of course, except for selfies, where the yin-yang relationship is more complex, which I will not address here. Finally, the audience views the photo as a passive process of receiving information, but when the audience interprets the photo, it

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<sup>11</sup> Benia, Amel, Abdullah Dagamseh, and Fadia Suyoufie. "The Camera Lens: Representation, Authenticity, and Manipulation in Penelope Lively's *The Photograph* and J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*." *College literature* 48, no. 1 (2021): 143–171.

becomes an active act. Through the analysis of yin and yang, the photographer, the photographed subject, and the audience form an interesting relationship.

The more I study photography, the more I realize that photography is inextricably linked to the concept of yin and yang, both technically and as art.

## **The difference between yin-yang and photography**

One of the advantages of photography is its realism, but at the same time, this strength has also become a limitation. Photographs are so realistic in their depiction and reproduction that they far surpass the limitation of words. Therefore, when the audience looks at a photo, they would usually bring in a part of their habitual thought about the realistic nature of the photograph<sup>12</sup>. It is acceptable in documentary photography, but when the subject matter or the photographer's intention is abstract and conceptual, realism creates a discrepancy in the conveyed message. I would like to introduce my thoughts on ekphrasis<sup>13</sup>. The word ekphrasis comes from the Greek. It is a literary form of artistic expression in which a written description or vivid narration is used to portray or interpret a visual image vividly. Ekphrastic writing aims to bring visual images to life in readers' minds and bridges the gap between visual and verbal forms. But I believe even the most clever and vivid descriptions cannot fully draw the image flawlessly in the minds of the audience. The first thing we must take into consideration is that there is a difference in medium, and it is impossible to completely translate between language and image. The person describing the image also holds subjective opinions about the image, which makes it impossible to describe something entirely objectively. On the other hand, the listener could also get lost in the game of signifier and signified by the language, generating imaginations that have nothing to do with images. At this point, it seems that photography can completely compensate for the lack of capacity of ekphrasis.

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<sup>12</sup> Wells, Liz. *Photography : a Critical Introduction*. 4th ed. London ;: Routledge, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Squire, Michael. "Ekphrasis at the Forge and the Forging of Ekphrasis: The 'Shield of Achilles' in Graeco-Roman Word and Image." *Word & image* (London. 1985) 29, no. 2 (2013): 157–191.



Figure 5.1 Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Ohio theatre*, 42 x 54.3cm, 1980

However, this "real" "objective" limits the subjective intention of the photographer as well. For example, in Hiroshi Sugimoto's work *Theaters*, he exposed the length of a movie with a large format film camera in the theater. The long-time exposure makes the bright movie screen overexposed and also reveals the dark theater's interior. The visual result of the photo is a depiction of the inside of the theater, with a blank white projection screen centralized. By comparing the overexposure of the movie images' motion with the correct exposure of the theater's interior stillness, he expresses his thoughts on the idea of time. But this is based on the audience's understanding of the photographic technique. Some audiences might think that it is a photograph of the interior and decoration of a cinema and that a movie hadnot been playing during the photo's exposure. As in Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum, the image not only reproduces the reality but also becomes a reality<sup>14</sup>. For example, people who have never been to Paris would still know

<sup>14</sup> BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

what the Eiffel Tower looks like because they've at least seen pictures of it in newspapers or on the Internet. That makes the image itself become a reality.

I believe photography may require more negative space when it comes to abstract concepts, not only in the image but also in the photographic process itself. Perhaps we need to minimize photography, like in Chinese ink painting, to leave room for the audience's imagination. The aim is to reduce the realistic nature that the photograph carries, and draw the audience's attention from the image to the idea that the artist wants to convey, as in the case of Ma Yuan's *Angler on a Wintry Lake* and Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Theatre*, which allows the viewer to enter the work through the negative space and raise the realm of the work from the imagination of the audience. This idea has informed my artistic process.

## Why Cyanotype?

Cyanotype is one of the oldest wet plate photography techniques and holds a very important place in the history of photography. The beautiful cyan color is produced by light-sensitive chemicals reacting with UV light, which is then developed using water. Cyanotype was first used to copy and reproduce engineering blueprints but has since been used within creative photography, and it is still a popular medium used by many photographers today.

Like all photographic papers, cyanotype is affected by the exposure triangle of exposure intensity, exposure time, and sensitivity of the chemical, which is one of the reasons it could be used as a photographic process. In addition, its exposure time is longer than with regular photo paper and only reacts to UV light, which means that photographers would usually expose cyanotype outside rather than in a darkroom and often use the sunniest noon times to expose cyanotype to ensure the print gets enough UV light and reacts. The reliance on sunlight and shadows in the use of cyanotype technology perfectly embodies the literal meaning of yin-yang, which the direct translation of yin-yang, from Chinese to English, is "sun" and "shadow".

The cyanotype process is more unpredictable in comparison to the darkroom process, as the daily UV intensity, the uniformity of the cyanotype coating on the paper, and even the watermark left by the final rinse, are all less controllable variables. The only thing the artist can control fully is the exposure time, which makes each cyanotype unique. Although the photographer knows that under the correct exposure the cyanotype will turn blue, they cannot accurately determine the shade of blue, or the resulting water marks. This embodies the concept of randomness present in yin-yang. The more macroscopic the concept of yin and yang is, the more inevitable it seems, and the more microscopic, the

more random it seems. To borrow the concept of “Aura<sup>15</sup>” from Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, each cyanotype is particularly unique compared to digital photography, which can be reproduced quickly and in large quantities. In a way, cyanotypes present a more sensual and artistic aura due to the handcrafted nature of the process.

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1935.

## Execution of the exhibition

My exhibition *Three Begat All Things* consists of three minimalist cyanotype works, each of which presents the mystery of yin-yang to the audience from two aspects: the phenomenon of yin-yang and the theory of yin-yang. As Laozi wrote in the Tao Te Ching, the reason why we can understand the existence of yin-yang and name it is due to the observable nature of the phenomenon of yin-yang<sup>16</sup>. To visually represent this phenomenon, some of the key foci of my work are the characteristics of yin-yang such as opposition, unification and harmony. Although I employ photographic techniques, it differs from traditional photography, which focuses on the content of images. My choice of a minimalist style is based on the concept of negative space in traditional Chinese art, where I minimize the image, leaving only the contrast of blue and white colors and the geometry of these two colors. Within the negative space, I leave the audience space for reverie. It is through this reverie that the audience is encouraged to consider philosophical reflection about the theory of yin-yang. This mindfulness is also in line with the Chinese concept that the truth of the universe is often pure and simple, beyond description with words or symbols.

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<sup>16</sup> Laozi, Zhiming Yuan, Daniel Baida Su, and Shangyu Chen. *Tao Te Ching: Original text and a modern interpretation*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010.

*All from Nothing - Nothing from All*



Figure 8.1 Yuncheng Cai, *All from Nothing - Nothing from All*, Cyanotype and wooden base, 48x42", 2023

My photo installation *All from Nothing - Nothing from All* reflects my understanding of yin-yang from a visual art perspective. In the work I vertically arranged 81 semi-circular cyanotypes around a surface in a circle, these semi-circles have cyanotype on one side and white on the other. The circle seems to rotate as the viewer moves around the piece, creating a dynamic balance between the two opposing colors. This reflects the relationship between yin and yang. The dividing line is always towards the viewer, which means that the viewer can, and will only, see the yin and yang sides equally. The nature

of yin-yang can be found within the contrast in color between the two sides of each cyanotype. These smaller pieces come together to form a larger circle which also conveys this message. The idea of the circle in the piece references the Buddhist concept of the circle of life, which I will elaborate on below.

Through the interaction with the audience, *All from Nothing - Nothing from All* evokes another layer of my understanding of yin-yang: wu-wei. This is a concept within yin-yang theory that refers to the principle of non-action or effortless action. It is the state of being in harmony with the natural order of things, allowing events to unfold without force or resistance. This concept is closely related to the idea of balance and harmony between the complementary forces of yin and yang.<sup>17</sup> When engaging with the artwork, due to the height of the piece, the audience cannot see both sides of the semi-circles at once. As result, they come to the realization that they cannot alter the relationship between yin and yang through their movements. Despite attempting to increase or decrease yin or yang by adjusting their viewing angle, the opposing side will correspondingly increase or decrease. The artwork embodies an ideal and unbreakable yin-yang balance, allowing the audience to let go of their desire for control and embrace the gradual acceptance, feeling, and appreciation of this balance during their interaction with the piece. In yin-yang theory, the ideal state of existence is one in which yin and yang are in perfect balance, and the natural flow of energy is unimpeded. To achieve this state, one must practice wu-wei by letting go of the desire to control events and allowing things to happen naturally. This does not mean being passive or inactive but rather acting in a way that is in alignment with the flow of energy at the moment.<sup>18</sup> As humans we often desire control of our lives, we may expend lots of energy with a specific goal in mind. However, we may get further from this goal the more energy we spend, as such intentional actions with the desire of control is not in accordance with the natural flow of

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<sup>17</sup> Laozi, "Chapter #37," in *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> Slingerland, Edward. "Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of Wu-Wei." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2000): 293–327. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465924>.

energy. My work *All from Nothing - Nothing from All* precisely reflects this aspect.

The arrangement of the 81 cyanotype semi-circles in a circular pattern serves as a visual metaphor for reincarnation, and any of the pieces can be the beginning or the ending of the reincarnation. In Buddhism, the circle of life is characterized by four stages: formation, existence, decay, and emptiness. Formation refers to the process of coming into existence, existence refers to the state of being alive and experiencing the world, decay refers to the process of aging and decline, and emptiness refers to the death and the beginning of a new cycle of everything. As the title of this work describes, all lives originate from nothingness and eventually return to nothingness. Life and death are opposites but also a circulation. Since there is no eternal life, then death should not be the eternal ending. All opposing things can only be given their definitions precisely by the existence of their opposites. Because of circulation, this opposition between yin and yang is not static but is always in modulation. In the process, yin and yang achieve a dynamic balance and eventually achieve a relatively stable and harmonious state.

This piece is presented on a cylindrical plinth. I intentionally set its height and used visual illusions to entice the audience into interactive exploration. As they move around the artwork, they are inspired to contemplate the significance of the movement itself. Gradually, a sense of serenity enables them to discern the cycle of reincarnation within.

## Smooth and Striated

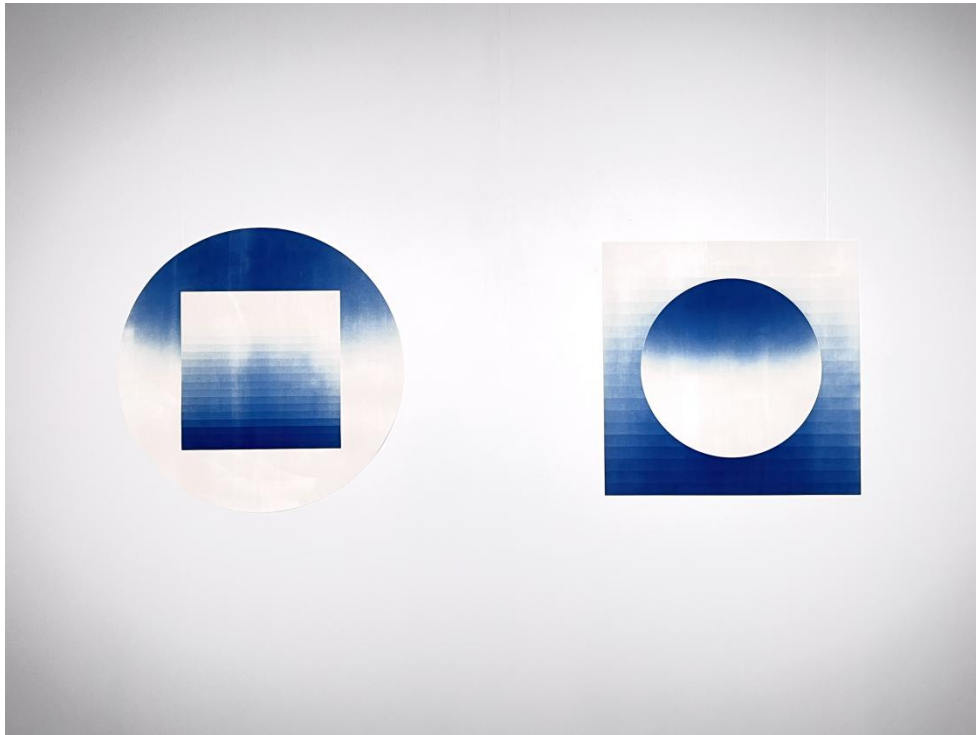


Figure 9.1 Yuncheng Cai, *Smooth and Striated*, Cyanotype, 36X92”, 2023

The concept of modulation within yin-yang is also manifested in another article by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari : *The smooth and the striated*<sup>19</sup>. It describes two opposite modes of space. The smooth space is characterized by openness, continuity, and flexibility. It lacks clear boundaries or fixed forms, allowing for movement and change. In contrast, the striated space is characterized by boundaries, divisions, and structures that impose order, stability and measurements. It is associated with physical objects such as

<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Guattari Felix, “The Smooth and the Striated,” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

buildings, walls, and roads. Like yin and yang, these two spaces also exist in a dynamic relationship with each other. For instance, smooth space may become striated when it is structured for a particular use, while striated space may be disrupted and transformed into a smooth space by all kinds of forces such as bombing, flooding, earthquakes eruptions of vulcanos etc.

In my diptych, *Smooth and Striated*, I have delved into the concept of smooth and striated space theory. This piece is comprised of two cyanotype works 36x36” (2023), a square and a circle, both encompassed by larger geometric shapes of the opposite kind. The square is formed by visual strips of cyanotype, arranged in a gradient of light to dark colors, while the circle is a solid sheet of cyanotype with the same gradient effect. The two shapes within each piece of the artwork possess gradients that flow in opposing directions. From the Chinese perspective, squares and circles are an example of the opposites of yin and yang. Squares and circles were first used to describe the sky and the ground, which is why these two geometric shapes have been incorporated into many Chinese designs, such as ancient Chinese coins, porches, or altars. Squares and circles can also be described as a person's character. For example, many Chinese people pursue a way of behaving in which they project a circle outside but maintain a square inside; in other words, a person may be outwardly smooth and accommodating, but inside, their heart has its own insistence, stable like a square, and will not be easily changed.

The circle and the square are visually opposed to each other, but at the same time, they exist within each other. The striated and the smooth are opposed, but as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari stated, the yin-yang relationship between the two models leads to their interchangeability. Visually, if the striations are thin and numerous enough, the audience will see a smooth space when viewing from a distance, and vice versa. I have tried to achieve this in my diptych.

It is worth mentioning that this diptych shows the sense of striated space and smooth space not only in the final presentation but also in the production process. I used two

photographic darkroom techniques for the production of the striated and smooth color gradations: striations are produced in a way similar to the production of test strips, with strict and precise control of time and movement, while smooth gradations are formed by constantly shaking the masking paper to create an effect similar to dodging and burning under the enlarger, which is more random and uncontrollable in terms of control.

Through this work, I try to visually represent the opposition and fusion of striated space and smooth space, creating simple patterns through two geometric figures, leading the audience to think about the relationship between shape and space and the interplay between order and chaos through negative space.

## Ecliptic



Figure 10.1 Yuncheng Cai, *Ecliptic*, Cyanotype, 210x42", 2023

Perhaps the most obvious example of the alternation of yin-yang in our life is the change of sunlight. From sunrise to sunset, the sun draws a track in the sky, which is the path of the alternation of yin-yang. This alternation has existed on Earth for over 4.5 billion years. It is beyond time and beyond human knowledge. It is also the origin of all things. It is one of the most significant phenomena supporting the formation of the yin-yang theory. Inspired by this, I created the work *Ecliptic*, a minimalist image of the sun's movement. By exposing different areas of a large cyanotype at different times, I left a blue gradation from light to dark and then dark to light on the image. The change in

color symbolizes the change in the intensity of UV light. From left to right, it represents the sun from sunrise to noon to sunset, mirroring the changing intensity of the sun throughout the day.

Through meticulous measurement and calculation, I have evenly divided the image into 19 zones corresponding to 10 different shades of cyan. This orderly and precise division serves as a symbolic reflection of how we formulate and structure time. The work might seem tightly controlled, yet the artist's hand is apparent in the random brush strokes and watermarks that appear in the images. This is where the cyanotype is most attractive, where the artistic aura is most prominent. Simultaneously, these random, disorderly marks also symbolize time itself, which is inherently natural and unstructured. Furthermore, the brush strokes smoothly interconnect the 19 clearly delineated zones, creating a visual effect of striated patterns containing smooth elements and vice versa. This aspect of my work is another manifestation that aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "smooth space and striated space."

The size of this piece is 210"x 42", and it exceeds the limits of what the human eye can naturally encompass. This expansive scale allows the work to envelop the audience and immerse them completely, inducing a state of wandering. This state of wandering is exactly what Zong Baihua mentioned in his thesis, referring to it as a fully immersive engagement. This is also the reason why I chose to create this cyanotype in such a large size. As the audience walks in front of the image, they will find themselves immersed in the midst of cyan while temporarily disengaging from the reality of the world. They will experience the transformation of yin-yang as they observe the changing color gradations in the image. The brush strokes and watermarks in the image inspire the audience's imagination, transforming into rivers, clouds, mountains, or waterfalls, among other endless possibilities. With each contemplative moment, the image shifts and morphs, each audience could find a personal journey of yin-yang within the image.

I have forged a connection between photography and the concept of yin-yang, reviewing ancient Chinese philosophical thought with a contemporary perspective and translating them into minimalism artwork imbued with hand craftiness. In my work, I use cyanotype in cooperation with natural sunlight to express the phenomenon of yin-yang, which originated from nature. This encourages the audience to think about the philosophical thoughts behind the phenomenon of yin-yang in the resonance between the works.

My creations carry the Chinese notion of beauty. This beauty is understated, restrained, and calm, yet it has the power to transform all things encompassing the sky and the ground; this beauty is the culmination of China's 5,000 years of culture and exists in all Chinese thought.

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