

# Art as a Vehicle for Compassion

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**Abstract:** I address the range of human experience and emotion in watercolor paintings. Watercolor, much like emotions, is unpredictable and requires special care to harness its infinitely varied and nuanced complexities. Creating such works requires forgiveness in how water and pigment interact, as well as the physical manifestation of subjective experience. These emotional paintings express topics ranging from gender and cultural identity, to mundane life experience. Vulnerability and empathy are required to portray hardship and loss in a manner that honors humanity's lived experience. Working beyond the boundaries codified by narrative realism, this work seeks to offer a glimpse into the realm of the unknown. My primary themes focus on aspirations, secrets, and dreamlike qualities. For this reason, I call my work ethereal realism. These fleeting moments of inspiration, while difficult to grasp and attuned to distant memories, are fortified through an improvisational painting process. Using subtle symbolism in relation to nature and soft feminine figures, I invite the audience into an alternate space where trauma can be healed, and compassion takes hold. The paintings also make use of negative space, so that viewers can insert themselves in the paintings and infer what might lie beyond humanity. This work does not merely paint a picture of melancholy but opens a window to the divine.

**Keywords:** watercolor, compassion, empathy, feminine, biography, complexity

## 1. Description

In my painting practice, watercolor itself plays a clear role in how my expression unfolds. For me, painting is about evoking thoughts, emotions, and abstract senses. My work begins from an emotional experience, often rooted in a single event. Based on the event, I set up a composition to begin developing. I am linked to my paintings — they evoke emotions in me, as I express emotions within them. Therefore, there is a sense of unity and unison between me and the work. Although it might be impossible to precisely express emotions in a painting, I broadly want my viewers to feel something when they see my work. My work does not try to inform my viewers or make them believe in a certain point of view. Instead, viewers access their own reservoir of emotional experience and history as they fall under the spell of my work.

I aspire to induce particular emotions, especially compassion, in my viewers. My paintings show people engaged in certain actions, which are then abstracted or made more emotional through stylistic choices. Each of us share universal human experiences. I am trying to show my viewers that we have more that unites us than divides us. I seek to spread compassion for others whom people may see as different from themselves, whether in terms of gender, cultural identity, or other life circumstance. With each brushstroke, I ask the questions, "What is feminine?" and "How we might experience more fragility?" Layer after layer, I infuse my own fragility, compassion, and empathy into each painting. In a world where compassion is sometimes lacking, my art returns to the calm, slow, thoughtful, and loving aspects of a generous soul.

I paint characters and settings that are accessible to any viewer, while adding a twist of abstraction and emotional weight, or even a dream-like weightlessness. My work can thus be defined loosely as lyrical: the viewer remains in the present reality, but dips their toe into the world of dreams, hidden feelings, secrets, and other magical and unknown realms. Specifically, I am interested in seeing my subjects in the middle of an activity or moment and ask for the audience to make up their own narrative. I add visual metaphors and symbolism in subtle ways to move the work beyond the norms of narrative realism (i.e., a traditional painting of a battle scene, a simple portrait of a beautiful naked woman, or a president or famous military general). I use color and imagery to provoke a trance-like state in my viewers. Showing how I personally felt in a precise moment, I seek to share my internal world. Some of my paintings like *Her in the Middle*, Figure 1, are imagined memories, in which I make the truth of my biography tangible and visible, even if the memory is not real. It feels real and speaks to the truth of my life. Since every artist brings their own history to their viewers, the outcome is always unexpected. The viewer will excavate and project their own meanings into my work, adding to its magic and complexity. People have often come up to tell me that they have seen something in my work that I never could have imagined. When this happens, I feel that my work has been incredibly successful, because it conjures shared universal experiences and realities in a way that is beautiful and cathartic.



Figure 1. Nora Xu, *Her in the Middle*, 2020, Watercolor on cold press, 54 cm. × 39 cm.

I am interested in watercolors because of how they provide many layers of subtlety. The power of colors, built layer after layer, comes through and exemplifies how much time was dedicated to a single painting. This layering also reflects the way that emotions and memories operate. Layers upon layers of feelings are built up, which means that a memory never remains the same. Thus, I include visions of memories and imaginative compositions anew from my mind. My watercolors reflect fresh emotions and new perspectives on a single point in time. Time is transient. Watercolors also allow for accidents, spontaneity, and a generally improvised approach to creating my work.

I do not draw the works out beforehand, nor do I plan out my compositions in a traditional fine art manner. I have found that this kills my creative jubilation and ability to fully express myself. Having a pre-designed drawing and executing the idea greatly reduces, if not eliminates, the magic of the art itself and the strong emotional power of my work. I strongly believe that art which is overly formal and academic kills spirituality and empathy—two of my key themes. Instead, randomness, flow, and the fluidity of water play an essential role in my painting, which begins with an improvised pencil sketch on paper before I destroy all of the solid lines through expressive brushstrokes. In this way, my creative process has Buddhist characteristics, as it is a meditation on impermanence. Each mark I make is gone just a moment later. This transformation and emptiness happen again and again as I work, until there is no more transformation within the seed of my feelings or the piece of paper. When my painting is done, I feel a sense of catharsis and a new understanding of myself. As if a window has been opened into another world, viewers can look into me as they reflect on their own inner worlds. Viewing my watercolors, our worlds might meet in a spiritual plane.

Releasing trauma and personal pain associated with memories is a key part of this process. With empathy for my past self and people who I have known, I reach out to the audience, welcoming them to join this dialogue and enter into a different time and space. My work conjures an open space, which resembles an empty vessel of symbolism, that holds potential narrative power. Hopefully this provides an opportunity to heal and resolve some underlying issues for viewers. I have found the essential power of art is to discover something inside of us that we cannot articulate or address in another form. For example, even if someone is in therapy and talking about past trauma, there may be some part of their life that is so buried within their experience that they cannot verbalize it at all. Art has the power to bring this to the surface, as a catharsis, and release this hidden emotion.

My identity has influenced my approach to my paintings. As a young woman who grew up in Southern China, I am inspired by nature and use a rather “feminine” color palette in the traditional sense, including deep indigo, natural brown, fragile purple, quiet gray and pure white. I also include a strong formal contrast. Bright colors, or white blank spaces, are often contrasted by thick dark lines or entirely blackened zones of composition. With this contrast, I hope viewers might see the shadows of a memory, or feel darkness within themselves, as they take in an otherwise calm, dreamy, and bucolic scene. These dark zones are also accompanied by empty zones, where the watercolor is intentionally unfinished, allowing the viewer to sense my process and my presence as an artist, but also enabling them to finish the work in their mind. This allows their emotions to breathe within a small void of time and space through my art.

My primary subject matter includes female figures, my hometown, nature and natural imagery, such as flowers and fish. Women in historical paintings have almost frequently been viewed as sexual objects by male artists. Those paintings were bought for the same reason by male patrons. Women in my paintings are beautiful, but they are so deeply humanized, not sexualized, that the audience cannot ignore the emotions of the female subjects. Images of my hometown and its accompanying natural imagery are critical to creating empathy through my work. In our world today, humanity has a need to return to the simplicity of nature and appreciate it, because we are negatively impacting our environment. Being from China, I have become acutely aware of this negative impact. The inclusion of nature in my paintings, as it is in my hometown, is geared towards drawing the viewer back to the simplicity that is characteristic of the natural environment. I grew up in a small southern city in China, the Yangtze River passes through my hometown. With the development of industry, the city gets better and better, but the impact and harm of industry and modernization on the environment comes after. As an artist from the country, I feel that it is my responsibility to draw people's focus towards the beauty of nature, reminding them of the need to preserve it. The consciousness that is drawn towards its beauty also serves to remind them that life is temporary and fragile. Humanity needs to tread lightly and treat even the most delicate flower with respect and tenderness. Using flowers in my art also returns to my interest in Buddhism, because the flower represents the impermanence of life. Healing and liberation can come through encounters with great art. By using universal yet personal subject matter, I can speak volumes about my memories of the past and my hopes for humanity's future during this period of great uncertainty.

Seeing reality through fresh eyes emphasizes our human imaginative capacity in a healing way. Flowers are a key part of my work because of this idea of empathy, as we are each fragile and temporary, like flowers, and we must bloom just as we must fade. Through a Buddhist understanding, we can feel deep empathy and compassion for one another and appreciate our moments together, focusing on their temporary nature. Unfortunately, I feel that too much art is focused on aggression and competition that pulls humans apart, instead of deep contemplation that brings us together. With art that elevates the beauty and depth of the human soul, there is a chance to find light in the world's darkness and to increase our circle of compassion, gentleness, and mindfulness.

## 2. Research

My recent work *Joy*, Figure 2, elicits a birth narrative. It also has an element of magical realism for me. This painting is a personal story. The baby depicted is the daughter of my mother's friend. She was born through in-vitro fertilization (IVF) after their son had passed away from a heart attack at the young age of 25. Despite the fact that he was immediately rushed to the hospital, he did not make it. After this painful experience, my mother played an essential role in her good friend's life. Specifically, my mother convinced her friend of the potential to bring a new life into her home through IVF. Happily, the family was able to complete the procedure in the United States, and a healthy baby girl was born. However, the story has taken another turn, as the baby and mother are currently separated due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. Once again, my mother played a critical role in this story by taking care of this baby in the interim at our home.



Figure 2. Nora Xu, *Joy*, 2020, Watercolor on cold press, 14.5 in. × 14.5 in.

Therefore, this painting represents the traumatic pain of separation as well as a deep hope for new life that goes beyond a simple birth story. It is a story of life and survival beyond all odds. Universally, we were all born to a mother, and we were all babies once. Although we cannot remember the moment of our own birth, we may have the privilege to witness our own children come into this world. Although this experience is virtually indescribable, the depth of meaning it provides is



applicable to all people, regardless of cultural, socioeconomic, or national background.

There is something eternal and personal about the image presented in *Joy*, which made it absolutely essential to create. In addition to the personal story elements, one of the most important themes in this piece is Buddhism's spiritual focus on how impermanent human life is—how we go from being babies and children to parents and grandparents. This unity and gentleness, instead of division, is the highest calling for art and is the reason why I dedicate my art to our similarities as people. Too much anger, aggression, competition and brutality have been a part of this world and part of art history too. Life itself remains so fragile, fleeting, and sacred. As human beings, we all need protection. In this painting, this protection is shown in a maternal form. However, the essence of such protection is applicable to a much wider range of human relationships.

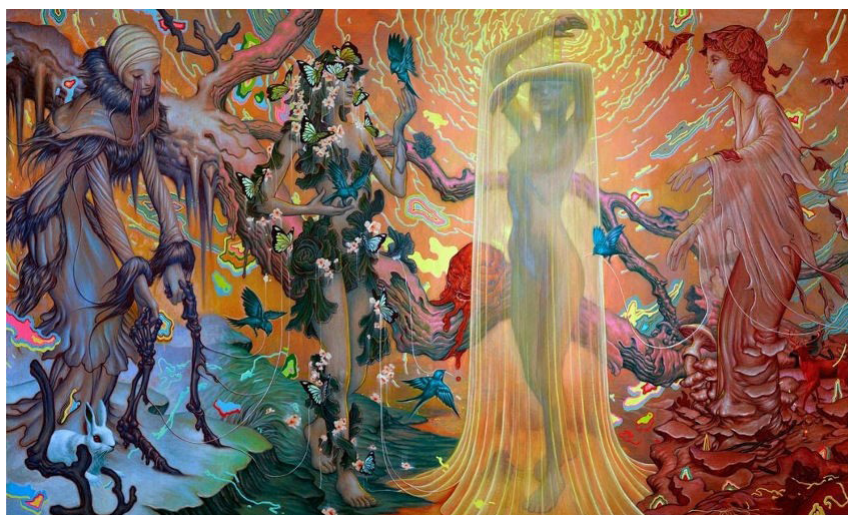


Figure 3. James Jean, *Seasons*, 2014, Ink on cotton-rag paper, 26 in. × 37 in., Private Collection

Although aesthetically its style is very different from my own, the painting *Seasons*, Figure 3, by James Jean reflects similar conceptual content to my watercolor *Joy*. Jean's painting depicts four female figures that appear to be goddesses. Each one represents a different season, and, taken together, the goddesses symbolize the nature of the year. In other words, it evokes the concept of cyclical time, rooted in impermanence. Like my own painting *Joy*, Jean's *Seasons* resonates with the Buddhist idea of constant change and regeneration. Although my painting of a newborn baby communicates this idea in a very different way—i.e., through a portrayal of a specific moment in time which implicitly suggests the entire birth-aging-death-decay cycle—the emotional allusions are essentially the same.

Complementing the universality of *Joy*, my watercolor *Orange*, Figure 4, deals directly with my personal history. The painting is a self-portrait, with a strong red and orange color palette. The subject matter is from my own experience. When I was a baby, I had an angioma, or a benign tumor located in the blood vessels under my left eye. For my treatment, my mother had to bring me to a special hospital in Shanghai on a regular basis. Eventually, I was cured, but the result was a permanent scar due to this experience, causing me to be bullied later in life. This emotional pain helped to fuel the creation of the painting.

However, this scar has a positive meaning as well. Specifically, it reminds me of my mother's love and dedication, because she was able to take such good care of me at any cost. When I painted *Orange*, I included some important universal truths within it. For example, it is a portrait of myself, a woman, looking mild and attractive in a traditional sense, perhaps, but there is also an extreme degree of fragility. Because of the visible scar and the watercolor paint, layer after layer, there is a ghost-like element to my skin. With the red colors, I evoke a feeling of blood and the hidden biological elements inside of us that make it possible daily survival. My face is turned away in this self-portrait, and I am looking away and thinking back to



Figure 4. Nora Xu, *Orange*, 2020, Watercolor on cold press, 14.5 in. × 14.5 in.

my time pre surgery. The audience only sees what looks like a bruise on my left eye; the viewer is not privy to the personal details of my angioma story.

Although, as I have just explained, there is a personal narrative embedded in this painting, viewers might only see the bruise and simply feel compassion for an injured female figure. Since I was bullied for this scar, I now show it proudly as a symbol of survival and motherly love. To me, this watercolor is about conjuring the fragility of life through my own mortality, while sending out the message that it is important to be kind and compassionate to others. Life is short, and this watercolor is a reminder that beauty and health should never be taken for granted.

The way I sought to depict my relationship with my mother was influenced by the work of Edmund Charles Tarbell, the nineteenth-century impressionist painter who often painted mothers and children. My painting *Orange* was inspired by the way Tarbell was able to capture the mother-child relationship. For example, in Tarbell's 1892 painting *Mother and Child in a Boat* (Figure 5) a mother and her toddler sit in a canoe on a lake. The child is looking straight ahead, and the mother gazes at the child. Both mother and child are holding onto the boat, and the mother is holding onto the child as well.

What I find striking about this painting is the way Tarbell was able to balance a sense of safety with a sense of precariousness. The child is safe in the mother's arms, but it would not take much to upset their boat and knock them into the water. This tenuousness can be perceived in the way both subjects are holding on. The child in particular looks close to the edge of the boat, with one foot up on the boat's side. Although the child does not seem on the brink of falling out, the viewer understands how easy it would be for the child to drown if the protective mother figure were not there. Given this, the mother-child relationship can be appreciated on a deeper level. The balance between safety and protection on the one hand, and precariousness and danger on the other, is similar to the balance between firmness and fragility that I sought to communicate in *Orange*.



Figure 5. Edmund Charles Tarbell, *Mother and Child in a Boat*, 1892, Oil on canvas, 76.52 cm × 88.9 cm, Museum of Fine Arts Boston



Figure 6. Nora Xu, *Autumn and Balcony*, 2020, Watercolor on cold press, 13 in. × 13 in.

*Autumn and Balcony*, Figure 6, is another key work of mine that shows my artistic style and identity. The painting is part of a series depicting my hometown, which represents my childhood growing up in a rural setting. In the composition, a woman sits with her back facing the audience, looking out at psychedelic-colored garden in a backyard.

A strange and dream-like quality in the trees and plants contrasts with the colder blue of the buildings that surround it. The subject matter in this work is universal in that viewers are invited to step into the experience of the woman, projecting their own memories of backyards and daydreams onto her vantage point. Unlike the previously described works, this watercolor creates more mystery and less of a clear message for the audience, returning to mystical spirituality. The audience might wonder who the woman is, what she is looking at, how her face looks, and how her body moves in space, given she is turned away from us. I am interested in this mystery and beauty that holds space, attention, and emotion. With her arms crossed and leaning on a fence, a sense of melancholy is established.



In my mind, she is certainly daydreaming, as life swirls all around her, with dancing and evocative colors.

*Autumn and Balcony* reminds me of a favorite Mary Cassatt painting, entitled *On a Balcony*, Figure 7. It depicts a young woman with a colorful garden of flowers behind her. Wearing a lacy dress with flowers, she almost blends into the background, becoming a part of the garden herself. The subject sits comfortably in a chair and reads a book or newspaper. Because of the impressionist style, no text is defined, so we do not know what she is reading. However, the subject's gaze is fixed on her text, as if, through the act of reading, she is transcendently transporting herself to another world and not totally present in her surroundings.

Similarly, in my painting *Autumn and Balcony*, a young woman is also surrounded by a garden, but her wardrobe and the background present a more contemplative scene. Although my subject's face is not visible to the audience like the face of Cassatt's figure, the woman in *Autumn and Balcony* leans forward to convey that she is deep in thought. Both paintings suggest that young women often daydream about what the world is like beyond the confines of their immediate home environments. It is up to each viewer to imagine the emotional content of these daydreams.

My watercolor titled *Her in the Middle* also evokes emotion and memory-based mystery. Like my other paintings, this watercolor touches on my personal history, by representing the stiff and traditional business dinners my father would have celebrated on many occasions. Within this kind of setting, among other Chinese businessmen, there is a strong masculine identity and value system. This system does not value the feminine, the fragile, the empathetic, or the compassionate. In this circle, they pay more attention to woman's appearance, whether she graduated from a famous school, whether she is married or not, whether her husband's family is prominent or not. No one care about her thoughts and the real self.

In response to this culture, I created *Her in the Middle*. The painting displays an almost nude woman in the middle of a dinner table set for a business meeting. It is as if the businessmen will consume her as the meal. Her head faces away from the audience, she grabs her shoulders in anguish and to cover herself. Overall, this work evokes the shiny polish of the Chinese business world, with undertones of vulgarity. It also shows a lack of compassion that business, especially in China, often leads to, especially for those who cannot defend themselves. A viewer who does not understand Chinese business practices can still understand the importance of protecting a fragile feminine figure in this falsely civilized setting or in a similar boardroom. The universal symbolism of the glossy table set for dinner and the woman curled up in the middle speaks to how the world is organized in terms of power, money, and excessive cruelty (on both a global and personal scale simultaneously). This stands in stark contrast to the gentle nature of compassion.



Figure 7. Mary Cassatt, *On a Balcony*, 1879, Oil on canvas, 89.9 cm × 65.2 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 8. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, c 1974-1979, Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 in. × 576 in., Brooklyn Museum

One of the inspirations for *Her in the Middle* was Judy Chicago's seminal 1979 art installation *The Dinner Party*, Figure 8. This mixed media exhibition consists of a large triangular table set with 39 place settings, each designated for an important figure in feminist history. There are embroidered runners on the table, each of which contains a gold chalice and set of silverware. Each plate is uniquely designed to reflect the particular woman being honored. It is an epic feminist tribute.

What I find most interesting about *The Dinner Party* is its juxtaposition of male and female imagery to make a statement about power. To me, the large table in the black room, the sharp angles of the setup and the mysterious nature of the triangular table, the runners, and the gold chalices come together at first glance to evoke the aesthetics of an all-male fraternity, secret society, or knight order. However, the details of the installation, from the embroidery to the painted plates, are extremely feminine. In addition, the nature of "setting a table" is itself

traditionally considered a woman's domain, adding another dimension to address power and labor in the context of gender. My painting *Her in the Middle* is an updated Chinese version of *the Dinner Party*'s themes. However, instead of naming feminist heroines, I have chosen to feature an unnamed young woman whose feelings of objectification and exploitation speak for the entire female gender.



Figure 9. Nora Xu, *Her Embrace*, 2020, Watercolor on paper, 14.5 in. x 23 in.

*Her Embrace* (2020) (Figure 9) is another watercolor that I painted to reflect the contradictory range of emotions experienced by many young women throughout the world. This emotional contradiction could be encapsulated in the Yin and Yang from ancient Chinese culture. I depict a woman sitting nude in a closet full of clothing, her arms wrapped around her knees, clutching one foot and looking down with a wistful expression. Being surrounded by clothes that are rich in texture seems to highlight and deepen her loneliness. The clothes around her show the emptiness or lack of bodies to inhabit them, even as she is nude, perfectly representing her profound solitude. With the melancholic lavender and purple color palette, sadness and the mysteries associated with isolation emerge.

Especially during this time of coronavirus, being alone has never been so universal or required so much empathy. As more people around the world feel isolated from their normal social routines. Vulnerability is a main part of this work and makes this woman seem human. She seems to be hiding in this claustrophobic closet space, full of dark melancholy. At the same time, the subject of the painting seems to be focused on self-care, because she is taking herself out of the context of the outside world. The viewer has a window into her internal world in this closet. In this way, the audience is able to sink into her subjective experience, allowing us to observe her secret inner world from the outside.

*Her Embrace* is a modern tribute to *Before the Bath*, a 1900 painting by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (Figure 10). The painting depicts a young girl sitting on steps in a field. She is removing her socks as if she about to bathe or wash. The first time I saw this painting, I was struck by a sense of barren solitude. The girl appears so young, beautiful, and innocent, yet her countenance evokes sadness and seclusion—maybe even bitterness about the world. The look in her eyes is one of calm resignation, not the exuberance and joy one might expect to see from someone her age. Because of the frontal view, her clothing, which she is in the process of removing, stands out. This suggests that in just a few moments, she will be even more vulnerable, without the protective covering of her clothes. It also suggests a sense of sadness that her closest relationship is to her clothing, not another person. This is exactly what I intended to express in *Her Embrace* as well. Although both paintings portray and appreciate natural female beauty, their real subjects are not the bodies themselves, but rather the deeper emotions that are suggested in the subjects and evoked in the viewers.

### 3. Methodology

Water is an indispensable element of my creative process. I often have dreams of floating in water, yet I never feel threatened. On the contrary, it feels like I have been gently enveloped, as if I am in my mother's womb. I have always had an inseparable connection with water. My hometown is surrounded by the tributaries of the Yangtze River, and the rains there fall year-round. This is one of the reasons I have chosen to use watercolor as my medium. One of the most important factors for my paintings is choosing the right paper quality and size. My recent painting *Initiation and Journey*, Figure 11, depicting a curled up female body occupies 80% to 90% of the paper. For impact, I decided to paint the figure to be life sized, so I ordered a 40 x 40 sheet of watercolor paper. Because I do not sketch or make repeated drafts, my creative process tends to be different from that of many other artists. Often, I get inspiration from my past experiences and memories regarding myself and the people I have known, which remain vivid in my mind. As an infant, when I had angiomas and



Figure 10. William Adolphe Bouguereau, *Before the Bath*, 1900, Oil on canvas, 134.5 cm x 75 cm, Private Collection



almost died, the local hospital where I was taken did not have the technology to cure me, but my mother refused give up. Instead, she lugged her weary body, after just having given birth to me a week before, the two-hour trip to Shanghai by train. The Shanghai hospital could treat my disease with isotope therapy. Because of my mother's love and sheer determination, I survived. Although the treatment left a scar on the left side of my face, I have always seen it as my mother's talisman to me. When I summoned the courage to turn this story into a creative expression, I envisioned myself in a suitcase as an adult (representing travel and movement) wrapped in my mother's favorite plush coat in the fetal position. That said, the picture I had in mind is my first draft. Typically, after I have been inspired, I look for photographs of relevant experiences, select usable portions, and then seek details from additional images, such as the posture of a figure. For this piece, I took detail photos of a suitcase as shown in Figure 12.

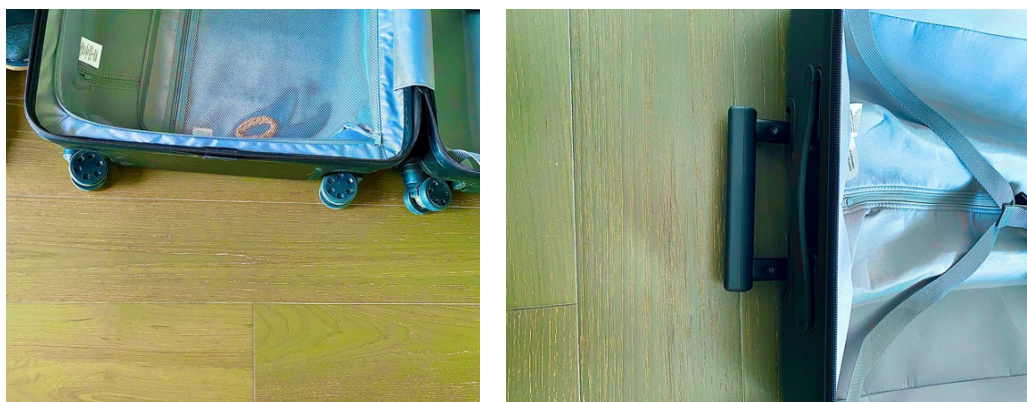


Figure 12. Nora Xu, Wheel and Handle Reference for *Initiation and Journey*, 2020, photographs



Figure 13. Nora Xu, Progress photo of first layers for *Initiation and Journey*, 2020, Photograph

As for *Initiation and Journey*, these images came from my imagination. Since I was a baby at time and cannot remember the experience, I created reference images as I had seen them in my mind. Generally, I do not use Photoshop to alter the hue or contrast of my references but will use it to adjust the angle and composition of them. My requirements and intuition regarding composition come from my background as an illustrator. With enough references, I work directly on watercolor paper of my choosing. In this case, I have used a 300 g/m<sup>2</sup> sheet of Arches cotton rough. I prefer to use a silverpoint since it is more easily controllable as its qualities are like an HB pencil — light, uniform, clean, and easy to wipe away. I require that my paper remain neat, since stains can affect the subsequent coloring of my watercolor. I prefer working wet-on wet and evenly brush the entirety of my paper with water. Once it is about to dry, I lay down the background and body color to set the basic tone of the image.

I seldom determine the palette

before painting. Instead, I choose my colors during the painting process depending on the mood of the work. As watercolor is by its nature full of unexpected surprises, my approach is similarly malleable. When I began working on the fur coat, I realized that continuing with layers of watercolor may have been a more cautious approach but would have been too unitary within the image. The technique I found to give more depth to the texture was mixing the watercolor paint with an opaque white acrylic ink. After drying, I applied lights and darks as I normally would with a dryer brush and watercolor paint to create the fur texture on the resultant cream-colored base of the acrylic ink.

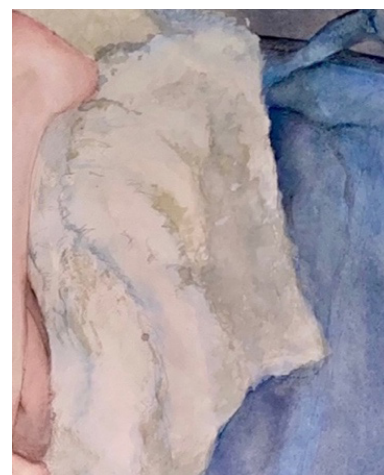


Figure 14. Nora Xu, Close-up photo of *Initiation and Journey*, 2020, Photograph



what transpires is a happy accident or mistake. Once the figure was saturated with color for this watercolor, I began to paint the background, suitcase, and hair since they are all relatively dark. Since their hue needed to remain in harmony with the focal point, I kept mixing color with the water to tone the complexion. This is a trick that works well for me. From the beginning to the end of a work, I keep the water that becomes toned in the process and as well as container of clean water. I do this because the toned water used in the coloring helps me keep the approximate tone throughout the work. Additionally, in many of my watercolors I use pigment in conjunction with ink pen for finer details and watercolor pencils for contours in conservative amounts.

Once the work is near completion, I let it rest for a few days. During this time, I avoid looking at the work. Facing the same painting for an extended duration can produce aesthetic fatigue by focusing too much on defects that need to be supplemented. After final modifications, my paper generally has some bulges and uneven folds. Many watercolorists have different methods to address this. I lay the painting face down on a wooden board, spray a light even coat of water on the back, and spread the water evenly with a big mop brush. This watercolor's paper was thicker and required three mopping sessions. Once the water has soaked the paper, I carefully sandwich it with another piece of wood and store it in a safe place. After a day, the paper will be as flat as a new sheet.



Figure 11. Nora Xu, *Initiation and Journey*, 2020, *Watercolor on paper*, 40 in. × 40 in.

Wet-on-wet and wet-on-dry are the most common techniques I use when painting. My pieces are finished by layering again and again; a process which allows me to learn more about my art and myself. As my creative process is all about improvisation, thumbnails and sketches are not good preparation for my painting. Actually, the more I think about my ideas, the more my inspiration for a painting fades away. There are no plans for progress since much like the medium I use; I tend to work well by going with the flow and make my decisions alongside my creations. As a watercolorist, I love water and enjoy the unique qualities that it possesses. Watercolor works well with my improvisational technique because of the very indeterminate natures of water and the media itself. I appreciate this unpredictable and frequent change while working with watercolor.

I derive most of my paintings from personal experiences, memories, and history. I use layering to attain the intended image and achieve a mystical and realistic figure. Compassion is the major element of all my drawings as mentioned, and I am attracted to this given that it creates a feeling of oneness in humanity resulting from empathy and kindness. This is an essential aspect of my religion, Buddhism, which echoes the importance of these attributes in humanity. The use of nature is influenced by both my religion and my history having grown up around an area where there was abundant nature and realizing the danger that faces it as a grown up. My work is intended to create awareness on this issue and in the issue of compassion. I hope that my paintings evoke the viewers in a way that returns them to humanity.

## 4. Conclusion

Before studying fine art, I was a design major. In the process of creating this series of works, I experienced many difficulties. This body of work transformed my thinking about art. When I do illustrations and design work, I need intuitive ideas and stories. Fine art is different in that I need to dig out what is deep inside my heart. The presentation of the final work is more about the pursuit of resonance than the statement of facts. In creating this series of watercolors, I found that I am interested in and good at mining human emotion. In the future, I hope to complete more paintings around this theme. At this

stage, a lot of my inspiration comes from my own experience and understanding. In the future, I may seek more stories from other people and create new works by transforming their emotions.

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## Appendix



Plate 1. Nora Xu, *The Rumble Fish*, 2019, Watercolor on cold press, 13 in. × 13 in.



Plate 2. Nora Xu, *Vase*, 2020, Watercolor on cold press, 22.5 in. × 30.5 in.

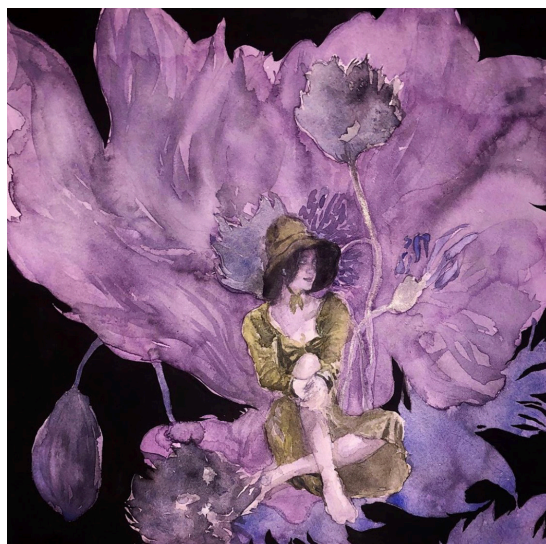


Plate 3. Nora Xu, *Poppy 1*, 2019, Watercolor on paper, 13 in. × 13 in.



Plate 4. Nora Xu, *The Pathway*, 2020, Watercolor on paper, 13 in. × 13 in.



Plate 5. Nora Xu, *The Cross*, 2020, Watercolor on paper, 14.5 in. × 14.5 in.



Plate 6. Nora Xu, *Hits of Green*, 2020, Watercolor on paper, 6 in. × 4.5 in.





Plate 7. Nora Xu, *Navy Sunset*, 2020, Watercolor and ink pen on cold press, 22.5 in. × 30.5 in.



Plate 8. Nora Xu, *Warm Links*, 2020, Watercolor on cold press, 14.5 in. × 14.5 in.



Plate 9. Nora Xu, *With Each Passing Day*, 2020, Watercolor on cold press, 14.5 in. × 23 in.



Plate 10. Nora Xu, *"Sh"*, 2021, Watercolor on cold press, 14.5 in. × 23 in.





Plate 11. Nora Xu, *Indigo*, 2021, Watercolor on cold press, 14.5 in. × 14.5 in.