Shanhai Mountains and Seas

Mythopoetic Approaches to Environmental Art from a Daoist Perspective

by Alicia Tian

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Abstract

This research explores how Daoist philosophy can support alternative approaches to environmental art beyond crisis-driven narratives. Through practice-based research in painting and illustration, the project asks how mythopoetic visual storytelling can sustain ecological attention through quiet, reflective engagement rather than shock or urgency. Drawing on Daoist ideas of relationality, non-interference, and cyclical change, the research situates humans as participants within dynamic ecological processes rather than as autonomous agents acting upon nature. The project engages *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing*) as a source of relational imagination, approaching its mythic figures and landscapes as frameworks for thinking ecological interdependence rather than as symbolic illustrations. Painting and illustration function as research methods through which material choices, visual structure, and narrative openness shape ethical and ecological understanding over time. By working with organic pigments and upcycled materials, the project emphasizes attentiveness, coexistence, and responsibility within a shared and continually changing ecological world.

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I have often found myself reserved in both speech and writing, yet I wish to express my most sincere appreciation to everyone who has supported me along the way.

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Introduction

This research examines whether Daoist principles can inform alternative approaches to environmental art that move beyond crisis-driven narratives. It asks how visual storytelling in painting might hold attention through quieter, more sustained forms of engagement rather than shock or urgency. Drawing on Daoist ideas of humility, non-interference, and cyclical change, the project situates humans as participants within ecological systems rather than as external agents acting upon them. Rather than treating Daoism as a fixed environmental doctrine, this research approaches it as a relational framework that can support reflective, practice-based painting focused on interdependence and care.

This approach is reflected in the material choices of the work, which combine organic pigments with upcycled industrial materials such as holographic vinyl, balancing environmental awareness with creative experimentation and acknowledging both natural processes and contemporary material conditions. The research is developed across interconnected forms, including painting, exhibition, a graphic book, and writing, where each component extends the others, allowing meaning to emerge through visual, spatial, and textual engagement over time.

This research is articulated through three interconnected forms: the written thesis, a body of paintings presented as an exhibition, and a graphic book that extends the work through narrative and sequencing. These components function together as a unified research framework, where the exhibition offers a spatial and material encounter, the book supports sustained and personal engagement over time, and the written thesis reflects on the conceptual, methodological, and theoretical foundations of the project.

Daoism Theme: Reading and Translating with Care

This project engages Daoist philosophy as a conceptual and ethical resource for rethinking human relationships with the more-than-human world. Rather than treating the *Daodejing* as a fixed doctrinal text, I approach it as a body of thought whose meanings emerge through translation and interpretive care.

Translation as Interpretive Practice

When selecting an English translation of the *Daodejing*, accuracy alone is insufficient. As Huawen Liu explains, Daoist concepts such as "Dao", "Ziran", and "Wu" do not have exact equivalents in English and function more as open-ended processes than fixed ideas (96). Translation therefore always involves interpretation, shaped by linguistic limits and cultural assumptions.

For this reason, I evaluate translations not only for fidelity, but also for readability, philosophical nuance, and cross-cultural resonance. Based on these criteria, I selected Edmund Ryden's translation as best suited to a study situated between Daoist philosophy and environmental art.

Choosing Ryden's Translation

Ryden's translation combines historical rigour with philosophical sensitivity. Drawing on manuscript discoveries such as the Mawangdui silk texts and the Guodian bamboo slips, it reflects early textual variations while remaining accessible. As Xiaojiao Cui notes in her analysis of "Xuan De", a term that can be understood literally as "dark" or "mysterious virtue," Ryden's rendering as "an abstruse life force" preserves Daoist emphasis on generative potency rather than reducing "De" to moral virtue (7). This interpretive choice resonates with my interest in ecological vitality as an immanent and dynamic force.

Ryden's clarity matters as much as his fidelity; his English maintains the *Daodejing*'s terseness while remaining readable. In Chapter 81, the term "Mei", often rendered literally as

"beautiful words," is translated by Ryden as "embellished", a choice that conveys the critique of ornamental rhetoric without extensive explanation. In this sense, translation becomes part of the project's ethical stance: working with ambiguity while resisting reductive equivalence.

Ryden's use of feminine pronouns for the Dao further supports this stance. Rather than an aesthetic flourish, it preserves the Dao's nurturing and generative qualities within Daoist cosmology and resists default masculine or impersonal framing. This choice supports an ecological imagination in which nature is understood as living and relational rather than inert matter.

Daoist Metaphors and Ethical Orientation

The *Daodejing* reflects on how humans might orient themselves in relation to natural processes, offering a worldview that resonates with contemporary environmental concerns without articulating them explicitly. Across its eighty-one chapters, metaphors such as water, the valley, and the womb, together with principles of non-interference, humility, and cyclical reversal, frame nature as an ethical guide rather than an object of control. Chapter 25 states, "Humans imitate the earth; earth imitates heaven; Heaven imitates the Way; the Way imitates her natural self" (Laozi, trans. Ryden 53), presenting ethical action as emulation rather than mastery. Likewise, "the highest goodness is like water" (Laozi, trans. Ryden 19) emphasizes softness and adaptability as forms of strength.

This orientation carries an implicit environmental sensibility by discouraging domination and excess. The world is described as "a spiritual vessel that cannot be run" (Laozi, trans. Ryden 61), cautioning against forceful intervention, while the principle of reversal, "Reversal is the moving of the Way; Weakness is the using of the Way" (Laozi, trans. Ryden 85), underscores cyclical change, restraint, and the limits of human control. These ideas suggest an ethical posture toward the more-than-human world grounded in attentiveness and balance rather than extraction or mastery.

Limits of Environmental Readings

At the same time, scholars have cautioned against equating Daoism with environmentalism. Paul R. Goldin argues that the *Daodejing* contains no discussion of pollution, extinction, or ecological mismanagement, and that projecting modern environmental concerns onto the text risks anachronism (82). Such readings, he warns, can result in "a self-serving appropriation of the past for purposes grounded in the present" (76). From this perspective, ecological interpretations reflect contemporary adaptations rather than the text's historical intent.

I hold both positions together: while the *Daodejing* is not environmentalism in a doctrinal sense, its metaphors of water, valley, womb, and reversal remain generative for contemporary ecological imagination. As Eric Nelson observes, Daoist philosophy promotes "modelling humanity upon and according to natural tendencies" rather than imposing human will (32). This interpretive balance depends on reading and translating with care.

Reconstructing the Shanhaijing (Classic of Mountains and Seas)

Building on the Daoist emphasis on careful reading and translation, this project turns to the *Shanhaijing* as a narrative extension of Daoist relational thinking. Compiled between the fourth and first centuries BCE, the text presents an animistic cosmography of mountains, rivers, and hybrid beings, mapping the world through relationships rather than human-centered causality. Its emphasis on interdependence, transformation, and cyclical processes aligns closely with Daoist values such as spontaneity, non-forcing, and return, making it especially suited to ecological art that seeks alternatives to crisis-driven narratives.

The *Shanhaijing* is used here not as a fixed mythological source but as a flexible mythopoetic framework. Its beings are neither purely demons nor distant gods, but participants in shifting ecological balances. This openness allows the project to reframe mythic figures as partners and teachers rather than threats to be controlled, supporting a

post-anthropocentric approach to environmental storytelling grounded in reciprocity and coexistence.

To engage the text responsibly, the project draws on multiple English translations rather than a single authoritative version. This follows the same methodological logic applied to the Daodejing: translation is understood as an interpretive and ethical practice. Anne Birrell's translation provides narrative clarity and structural coherence; Sun, Chen, and Goldblatt's illustrated edition offers visual and affective insight; and Richard Strassberg's work restores cultural specificity through original names and scholarly commentary. Used together, these translations form a layered interpretive process that balances accessibility, visual imagination, and cultural depth, allowing the Shanhaijing to function as both a scholarly source and a generative foundation for contemporary ecological art.

Translation	Advantages	Disadvantages	Role in Process	Complements Others
Birrell (2001)	Full English text; smooth, clear prose	Loses cultural nuance by translating names	Provides narrative structure	Gains depth from Strassberg, and visual energy from Sun et al.
Sun, Chen & Goldblatt (2021)	Vivid two-colour illustrations; engaging excerpts	Partial text; little analysis	Offers visual inspiration for early-stage sketches	Brings life to Birrell's clarity; lightens Strassberg's density
Strassberg (2002)	Keeps Chinese names; adds commentary and historical illustrations	Fragmented by analysis; less continuous	Gives cultural authenticity and precise symbolism	Restores nuance missing in Birrell; balances Sun et al.'s modern style

Table 1: Advantages and Disadvantages of the Popular Shanhaijing English Translations

Literature Review: From Crisis Narratives to Relational Ethics

The question then becomes how Daoist values can enter contemporary environmental art without functioning as decorative philosophy. By "decorative philosophy," the term does not imply that ornament is superficial or devoid of meaning. In many traditions, ornament operates as a structured expression of cosmology and ethical order rather than mere embellishment. The concern instead lies in the uncritical aestheticization of Daoist thought. As Goldin notes, proponents of "Eastern wisdom" often circulate ideas that "have little to do with the Eastern traditions they invoke" (76). When Daoism is reduced to atmospheric motifs such as flowing forms or generalized harmony without engagement with its ontological and ethical commitments, it becomes detached from its historical and philosophical grounding. In this sense, "decorative philosophy" names a mode of superficial appropriation rather than a critique of ornament itself.

One critical entry point is visual storytelling itself. Crisis-driven narratives continue to dominate climate communication, particularly within visual culture, where catastrophe and urgency are frequently mobilized to provoke attention and moral response. However, recent scholarship has increasingly questioned the long-term effectiveness of this approach.

From Shock to Sustained Attention

Christian A. Klöckner and Laura K. Sommer's empirical study of audience reactions to 37 climate-themed artworks presented at the 21st UN Climate Summit in Paris provides a useful framework for understanding both the power and the limitations of crisis-oriented art. Their findings suggest that audience response tends to move from "emotional activation" toward "cognitive processing," and can correlate (at least short-term) with increased support for climate policy. Yet they also note that fear and anxiety can "at times block constructive engagement with climate change," which helps explain why repeated shock can slide into disengagement rather than durable commitment. In their discussion, they emphasize

interpretive openness: it is “vital to give people the chance to discover their own meaning within the art and climate change.” This supports a shift from singular, prescribed affect toward forms that hold complexity and invite longer attention.

A similar critique appears in Saffron O’Neill and Sophie Nicholson Cole, who critique the dominance of fear-based messaging in climate communication. They argue that while fear can momentarily capture attention, it rarely cultivates long-term environmental engagement. Instead, representations that emphasize care, agency, and imaginative possibility are more effective in supporting sustained involvement (O’Neill and Cole 372). Together, these studies point toward the need for alternative narrative strategies that move beyond shock without abandoning ecological seriousness.

Relational Ethics and Daoist Thought

Daoist philosophy offers an alternative to crisis-driven environmental art by framing ethical engagement not as reaction alone, but as an ongoing relational orientation grounded in cosmology, value, and practice. In “Daoism’s Threefold Defense of Ecocentrism”, Xian Li and Haoran Jia argue that ecocentrism requires conceptual reinforcement against claims that it is “eco-authoritarianism,” “anti-human,” or “utopian,” and they propose Daoism as a defence through a “three-dimensional framework encompassing ontology, value theory, and practice theory” (Li and Jia).

At the level of ontology, Li and Jia foreground the Daoist concept of “living together (bingsheng 並生),” grounded in “Dao as one,” which “deconstructs the ontological foundations of anthropocentrism” (Li and Jia). This relational ontology does not simply add nonhuman beings into an existing moral scene; it reframes the scene itself as co-arising, interdependent life. In the context of visual storytelling, this supports a mode of ecological attention oriented toward cyclical transformation, seasonal rhythm, and non-coercive presence rather than spectacle or alarm.

At the level of value, their emphasis on "valuing life (guisheng 貴生)" provides a clear ethical basis for extending care beyond human interests without collapsing into abstraction (Li and Jia). Ethical action becomes less about heroic intervention and more about recognizing shared vitality and reciprocal dependence as the condition of living. This resonates with the Daoist language of alignment rather than mastery. For example, "Humans follow the earth; the earth follows heaven; heaven follows the Way; the Way follows what is naturally so" (Laozi, trans. Ryden 53). In this framing, urgency is not denied, but transformed into sustained care and responsibility within a shared field of life.

Finally, at the level of practice, Li and Jia identify Daoist practical philosophy, especially "nurturing life (yangsheng 養生)," as a means of demonstrating "harmonious coexistence of heaven, earth, and humanity" through a balanced integration of instrumental and value rationality (Li and Jia). Daoist ethics is therefore not only interpretive, but enacted through restraint, attentiveness, and forms of intervention that assist rather than dominate. This supports environmental storytelling that emphasizes co-flourishing, humility, and long-term ethical orientation, an approach that complements deep ecological thinking around relational responsibility (Naess et al. 38) without relying on theory-heavy terminology.

Deep ecological perspectives further support this shift toward a relational understanding of ecological responsibility. Arne Naess's formulation of deep ecology similarly advances a "relational, total field image" of the world, in which ecological responsibility emerges through identification with the more-than-human rather than through instrumental concern alone (Naess et al. 38). Such a perspective resists narratives that center exclusively on human vulnerability or technological solutions and instead foregrounds complexity, interdependence, and long-term ethical orientation.

Together, these two sources provide a philosophical and ethical basis for moving beyond crisis-driven environmental storytelling. Crisis narratives often rely on fear, urgency,

and spectacle, which can provoke short-term attention but risk emotional fatigue or disengagement. Relational and ecocentric approaches instead promote humility, attentiveness, and shared responsibility within a more-than-human ecological field. Such approaches support environmental narratives that encourage reflective engagement over time, aligning with artistic strategies that foreground connection, transformation, and coexistence rather than shock or resolution.

Toward a New Environmentalism: Daoist Imagination

Timothy Morton's critique of "nature" as an external or stable object further sharpens this argument. In *Being Ecological*, Morton contends that imagining nature as singular, pristine, and separate obstructs ecological thinking, noting that "the idea of nature as something 'over there,' something pristine and untouched, is precisely what prevents us from thinking ecologically" (19). When nature is treated as external to human entanglement, ethical responsibility becomes abstract or deferred. Ecology, for Morton, is therefore not only a scientific condition but an imaginative and ethical practice grounded in coexistence, since "ecological awareness is not about getting outside things and looking at them; it is about being inside them" (81). This emphasis on entanglement resonates strongly with the *Daodejing*'s warning that the world cannot be grasped or governed through force.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that environmental art must attend not only to what is represented, but to how attention itself is structured. If forceful intervention and extractive thinking have contributed to the ecological crisis, then an ethical response may require forms of visual practice that emphasize restraint, receptivity, and return. At this point, the literature review becomes an argument about form. The question is no longer whether art should address the ecological crisis, but how visual language can cultivate forms of attention capable of enduring beyond shock. It is here that my practice-based analysis enters as a critical positioning within the field rather than as an illustrative supplement.

Critical Positioning: Artists I Diverge From and Build Upon

Points of Divergence

I engage artists whose practices I ultimately diverge from as a way of clarifying the assumptions this project seeks to rework within environmental art. These artists share a strong commitment to ecological awareness, yet their approaches often rely on crisis-centered strategies that mobilize urgency through spectacle, confrontation, or proximity to risk. My divergence is not a rejection of ecological concern, but a response to the affective saturation such strategies can produce. Drawing on Daoist principles, I question whether force, shock, and immediacy are the most effective ways to sustain ecological attention over time. By examining these approaches closely, I am able to articulate why a relational and receptive mode of engagement may cultivate care differently.

Analysis of Crisis-Driven Approaches

This divergence becomes clearer when examining how crisis-driven strategies operate in specific works. Alexis Rockman's large-scale panoramic painting *Manifest Destiny* visualizes ecological collapse through density, accumulation, and dramatic scale. The composition presses outward toward the viewer, using visual excess to generate moral urgency. While powerful, this approach prioritizes intensity over return, and from a Daoist perspective risks sidelining softness, yielding, and cyclical balance.

Figure 1. Alexis Rockman. *Manifest Destiny*. 2004. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

A similar emphasis on confrontation appears in Michael Pinsky's immersive installation *Pollution Pods*, which translates environmental data into bodily experience by recreating polluted atmospheres from different cities. Here, awareness is produced through controlled shock. Although effective in making pollution tangible, the work narrows interpretation into a single affective channel and keeps the viewer's body at the center of meaning-making, rather than allowing relationships to unfold more diffusely.

Figure 2. Outdoor installation of Michael Pinsky, *Pollution Pods*, 2017, Somerset House, London. Image courtesy of the artist's website.

Sean Yoro's paintings on ice and water, such as *What Lies Beneath*, shift crisis engagement into sites of visible vulnerability. The ethical clarity of working directly on fragile environments is compelling, yet the gesture often recenters human presence as the axis of meaning. From a Daoist lens, this emphasis on heroic intervention can overshadow the emulation of natural rhythms and the balancing force of reversal. Across these practices, I diverge from the reliance on spectacle, immediacy, and confrontation as primary ethical tools.

Figure 3. Tidal mural of Sean Yoro (Hula), *What Lies Beneath*, 2015, Bay of Fundy, Canada. Image courtesy of the artist's website.

Points of Alignment

In contrast to these strategies, I align with artists whose practices emphasize attentiveness, receptivity, and sustained engagement. Rather than pressing urgency upon the viewer, these artists cultivate awareness through duration, repetition, and relational form. Their approaches resonate with Daoist principles such as harmony with the Way, softness overcoming hardness, and the generative capacity of the valley spirit. By extending these modes of working, I position my practice within a lineage that values listening, holding, and renewal as ethical acts.

Analysis of Relational Practices

Solange Pessoa's *Série Botânica* establishes this orientation through an intimate engagement with plant life treated as an active presence rather than a symbol. Growth and decay appear as a continuous process, aligning with Daoist understandings of transformation and non-separation. Her quiet attentiveness demonstrates how gentleness can carry ethical weight, an approach I extend through mythopoetic and symbolic structures.

Figure 4. Organic material installation of Solange Pessoa, *Série Botânica*, 2018. Image courtesy of Mendes Wood DM.

Where Pessoa emphasizes material intimacy, Roni Horn shifts attention toward duration and repetition. In *You Are the Weather*, meaning unfolds through serial engagement across changing conditions. Rather than delivering a single statement, the work invites sustained looking, allowing subtle variation to accumulate significance over time. This practice exemplifies emulation of natural processes and soft action, principles I adapt through layered painting methods that permit forms to return, shift, and remain unresolved.

Figure 5. Exhibition view Roni Horn, *You Are the Weather*, 2024. Image courtesy of Museum Brandhorst.

Hilma af Klint further expands this relational logic by introducing symbolic systems grounded in correspondence and rhythm. Her organic geometries propose an order in which nature functions as mentor rather than material. Building on Horn's temporal sensitivity, af Klint's work demonstrates how symbolic abstraction can support ecological thinking without relying on depiction. I draw from this approach by adapting symbolic structures to contemporary ecological questions, using reversal and softness to unsettle hierarchy.

Figure 6. Exhibition view *Hilma af Klin: Painting the Unseen*, 2016. Image courtesy of Serpentine Galleries.

Finally, Maruja Mallo's compositional synthesis brings these concerns into dialogue with social observation. Her work integrates natural patterns and human structures in forms that feel grown rather than imposed. Composition itself becomes a mode of listening, suggesting that relational balance can be embedded in visual structure. This insight informs my own approach to environmental painting, where surfaces are organized to invite pause, continuity, and renewal rather than resolution.

Positioning Painting as Relational Ecology

Taken together, these comparisons clarify that the distinction at stake is not between urgency and inaction, but between force and attunement. Crisis-driven strategies often depend on spectacle and confrontation, while Daoist principles point toward emulation of the

earth, receptivity, and cyclical return. By choosing painting and graphic narrative, and by working through layered procedures and imagery, this project tests how ecological attention might endure through receptivity rather than shock. The aim is not to deny ecological urgency, but to explore how care can be sustained through relational and mythopoetic forms that gather attention over time. In this way, my practice contributes an ethic of attunement that complements science, policy, and activism, offering painting as a site where ecological relationships are not only represented, but enacted.

Methodology: Research Creation and Painting as Ecological Inquiry

The preceding artwork analysis demonstrates how ecological meaning in this project emerges through material decisions, visual structure, and narrative construction rather than through representation alone. This methodology section articulates how those artistic choices function as a form of inquiry, situating painting not as an outcome of research but as a site where research is actively generated. Method, material, and reflection therefore operate together as a continuous process of thinking through making.

From Research-Creation to an Emerging Artistic Language

This research uses a research-creation methodology, in which artistic practice is treated as a central way of thinking and producing knowledge. Rather than separating theory from making, the project develops through an ongoing process in which reading, story-making, painting, and reflection constantly inform one another. I understand research-creation as the process of developing a new artistic language, one that can respond to contemporary ecological conditions through material choices, visual storytelling, and ethical attention. As Natalie Loveless describes, research-creation operates through conceptual "knots" that "name sites of productive dissent and dissonance" and serve as "an invitation to join the debate" (303). Artistic decisions are therefore not treated as final results that follow research, but as active moments where research takes place.

Within this framework, the methodology does not aim to reach a single, fixed conclusion. Instead, it remains open and adaptable, recognizing that ecological thinking must stay flexible in response to a changing world. Each stage of the process feeds into the next, creating a chain of inquiry that grows through careful observation, revision, and return. I approach this openness as a necessary condition for working with ecological themes, since the systems being examined are themselves unstable and evolving. Research-creation

becomes a way of working with uncertainty, allowing the artistic language to develop gradually through sustained engagement rather than through predetermined outcomes.

Material Choice as Ecological Method

At the center of this methodology is a material practice that deliberately combines organic colour pigments with upcycled holographic vinyl. The painted surface becomes a site where organic matter and manufactured residue meet, registering ecological, industrial, and temporal processes simultaneously.

This approach is informed by Veronica Waechter's material methodology, which emphasizes adapting to available materials while maintaining relational accountability to land and process. Waechter describes the incorporation of industrial materials alongside traditionally harvested substances as a response to altered land relations rather than an ethical rupture (40–42). Similarly, the use of upcycled holographic vinyl in my practice does not negate environmental responsibility but acknowledges industrial byproducts as part of lived ecological reality.

Organic pigments behave unpredictably, responding sensitively to water, layering, and time, while holographic vinyl introduces optical instability, shifting with light and viewer movement. Rather than asserting full control, I work responsively with these behaviours, allowing material interaction to shape compositional decisions. This method rejects ideals of material purity or a return to an imagined pre-industrial state. Instead, it treats entanglement as both condition and method, positioning material practice itself as ecological inquiry and ethical reflection.

Within this framework, the instability and environmental implications of holographic material are not treated as limitations but as active components of the research process. Their shifting and unpredictable behaviour requires ongoing adjustment, enacting a mode of thinking through making in which decisions emerge through interaction with material

conditions. In this way, material engagement does not simply support the work, but participates in the generation of knowledge, where ecological awareness and artistic decision-making are developed simultaneously through practice.

Visual Storytelling and Ecological Imagination

This project's material practice is supported by a Daoist orientation toward relationality, transformation, and responsiveness, translated into visual and narrative structures rather than philosophical exposition. Drawing from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing*), story-making functions as a speculative and relational method rather than as illustration or historical retelling. Mythic figures and landscapes are reconfigured into contemporary visual forms that allow ecological relationships to be experienced visually, through spatial arrangement, material tension, and perceptual shift.

Within this methodology, myth does not operate as a symbolic decoration or moral instruction. Figures drawn from the *Shanhaijing* act as relational agents that register movement, imbalance, and transformation. By avoiding linear narrative and resolved endings, the paintings resist closure and leave space for interpretation. Meaning emerges through proximity, scale, and material interaction rather than through explanation, inviting viewers to engage through sustained attention.

This approach aligns with Steve Shann's concept of mythopoetic methodology, which emphasizes experience, affect, and relational meaning as ways of engaging complexity beyond analytical language alone (131). It also draws on Timothy Morton's understanding of ecological imagination as grounded in coexistence within entangled systems rather than separation from them (Morton 4–6, 81–83). Accordingly, the paintings resist fixed interpretation through layered surfaces, shifting light, and reflective or light-sensitive materials. As viewers move, perception changes, making meaning contingent on encounter and duration. This slower, participatory mode of engagement positions visual storytelling as

an ethical practice of attentiveness, allowing ecological relationships to be felt rather than declared.

Narrative Formation in Practice

An example of story construction within this research-creation methodology appears in my reworking of Yinglong, the rain dragon from the *Shanhaijing*. The narrative centers on Yinglong's descent to earth, where his precipitation enables agriculture, and where cultivated landscapes in turn offer protection for his wounded body. This reciprocal relationship was developed through material and compositional decisions rather than illustration.

The painting builds an ecological field through organic patterns and natural landscape forms. Yinglong's presence is introduced using abstract shapes made from holographic vinyl that respond to light and viewer movement. From certain angles, the figure blends into the landscape (see Fig. 3). While under specific lighting, it briefly becomes visible. This material instability reflects Yinglong's diminished state and frames him not as a monster or dominant figure, but as an embedded, guiding presence within the environment. Through this process, the story is constructed through making, as relationships between rainfall, cultivation, landscape, and perception emerge through sustained engagement rather than a fixed narrative.

Reflection and Writing as an Iterative Return

Reflection and writing function as ongoing returns rather than final documentation. Revisiting earlier works and texts makes patterns in material behaviour, visual structure, and narrative strategy more visible over time, allowing new questions to emerge from the making process. Writing articulates ideas that remain implicit in visual form, situating individual works within broader philosophical and ecological conversations without forcing resolution.

Rather than closing uncertainty, reflection keeps it productive. Each cycle feeds back into material choices, storytelling, and conceptual direction, maintaining continuity while allowing the project to evolve. Overall, this research-creation methodology treats material

entanglement as both subject and method. By combining organic and inorganic materials, engaging Daoist principles, and employing mythopoetic storytelling, the project develops an artistic language grounded in attentiveness, coexistence, and ethical engagement within an irreversibly altered ecological world.

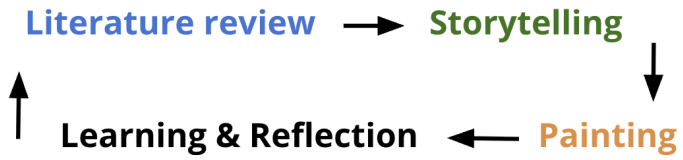

Figure 7. Alicia Tian, defence presentation page 10, 2026

The research unfolds across multiple forms, where painting, exhibition, and the graphic book operate alongside writing as interconnected methods of inquiry. Rather than documenting the work, the written thesis, visual works, and book each contribute to the development and communication of knowledge through different modes of engagement.

Discussion of Final Artworks

The final artworks are presented as part of a broader system that includes the exhibition and the graphic book. Together, these components structure how the work is encountered, extending meaning across visual, spatial, and narrative forms.

Paintings: Motifs and Spatial Structure

The paintings combine visual inspirations from Chinese watercolour landscape painting, ornamental motifs, and architectural framing devices. These references are not used simply to reproduce historical styles. Instead, they help move the project away from directly illustrating the stories of the *Shanhaijing*. Rather than retelling the myths as narrative scenes, the paintings treat the text as a framework for imagining an ecosystem composed of interconnected landscapes, beings, and natural forces.

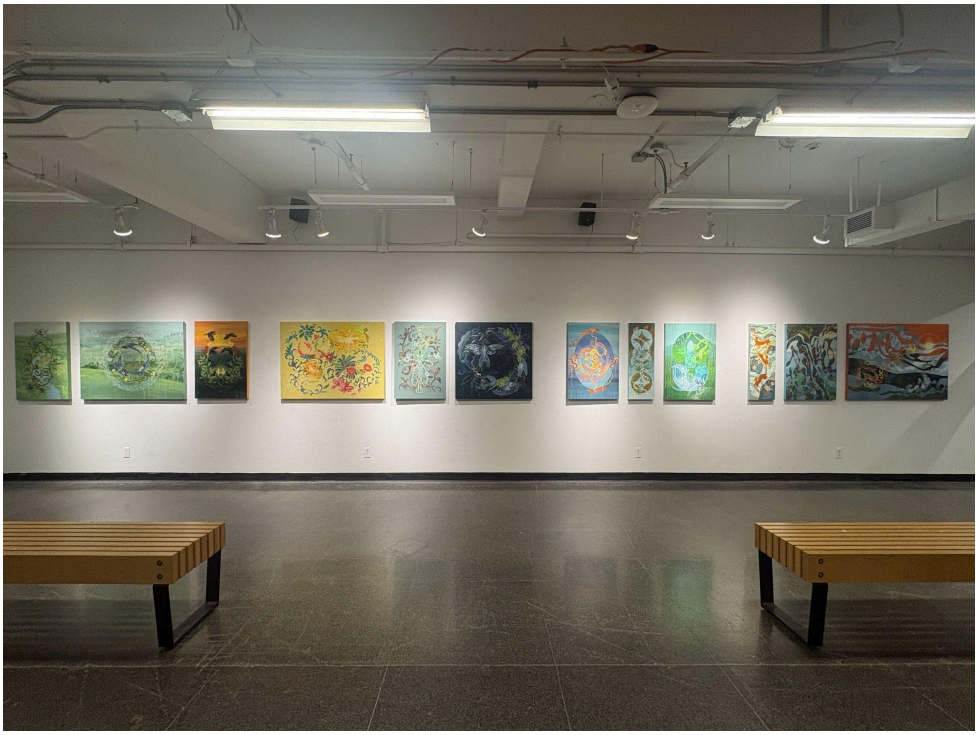

Figure 8. Alicia Tian, Ada Slaight Hallway installation, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas*, 2026

Patterns of Meaning

This approach draws on ideas from classical Chinese landscape painting, where artists did not aim for literal representation but for a deeper understanding of nature. The aesthetic goal of Chinese painting has been described as not pursuing external imitation but instead seeking "the inner essence of things" (Chu et al. 3). Following this principle, the paintings expand the world suggested in the Shanhaijing rather than reconstructing individual mythological events. Patterns and ornamental motifs, therefore, function as structural elements that organize spatial relationships within the imagined landscape. Many traditional Chinese motifs originate from natural forms and gradually develop into symbolic visual languages that convey cultural meanings and relationships between humans and nature. Traditional motifs often emerge from "various forms of daily life and nature" and accumulate layered cultural significance over time (Zhao and Sahari 140). In this project, such motifs do not simply decorate the paintings but help structure the landscape by representing natural forces, environmental rhythms, and cultural interpretations of nature, creating connections between mythological narratives and visual traditions rooted in human experience.

Figure 9. Alicia Tian, *Kui*, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas*, 2026

In the *Shanhaijing*, Kui is a creature whose voice brings thunder. In the painting, a stylized Kui motif occupies the center of a circular structure, surrounded by overlapping rings

of cloud, fire, and water patterns. Repetition and rotation of these motifs create a visual rhythm that moves outward from the center, allowing atmospheric forces and living forms—birds, plants, and insects—to appear within the same circulating field. By organizing elemental and biological motifs into interlocking circles, the composition demonstrates co-flourishing through patterned circulation, a strategy consistent with traditional Chinese motif systems that structure relationships between natural forces and life forms (Zhao and Sahari 2).

Figure 10. Alicia Tian, *Penglai*, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas*, 2026

Penglai, the mythical island of immortals, is constructed through a system of cultural motifs that signal distance and transcendence. Cloud patterns and a sun motif mark the island as distant and celestial, visually separating it from ordinary terrain. The deer appear as symbolic motifs. In Chinese, deer (lu) sounds like path, implying a route toward the island. Their running forms suggest eagerness and pursuit, reinforcing the idea of moving toward the distant realm of Penglai. By organizing the scene through these motifs, the painting evokes Penglai as a culturally constructed realm, where distance and transcendence emerge through recognizable symbolic forms.

Structures of Seeing:

Architectural framing devices further support this spatial interpretation. In classical Chinese gardens, perforated windows and similar architectural openings structure how landscapes are perceived. These openings create layered visual relationships in which the framed view becomes "real within the virtual" (Wu and Shao 2). By revealing only partial views of a larger environment, such frames connect separate spaces and increase the depth of the landscape experience. A similar strategy is used in the paintings: framing structures organize animals, plants, water, and terrain into layered environments that suggest a broader landscape beyond what is immediately visible. This partial framing emphasizes that landscapes cannot be fully perceived from a single viewpoint. Instead, nature appears as an evolving network of relationships that extends beyond what can be immediately seen. Daoist thought similarly describes the world as a dynamic interaction of multiple forces, where "life and death, desire and restraint, conflict and peace, construction and destruction all coexist" (Kim). This perspective highlights that natural systems are not fixed or completely knowable but are constantly shifting through the interaction of different elements.

Figure 11. Alicia Tian, *Zhuyin*, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas*, 2026

Zhuyin is described in the *Shanhaijing* as a mountain spirit whose opening and closing eyes mark the passage of day and night, making the figure a symbol of cyclical time. In the painting, a layered lattice-like structure surrounds Zhuyin, forming an architectural threshold that separates the figure from the viewer's familiar world. This framing emphasizes the idea expressed in the story that time moves through the world while the world also moves within time, as each moment both consumes and is consumed. This understanding of cyclical transformation reflects a broader Daoist view in which space and time operate as interconnected dimensions within a single natural order.

Figure 12. Alicia Tian, *Goumang*, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas*, 2026

The composition in the painting of Goumang swaps the shapes of land and sky, creating an ambiguous spatial structure where solid forms and open space continuously shift. This spatial strategy echoes Chinese architectural and garden design, where the interplay of "virtual and real" elements generates layered depth and changing perspectives. The creatures are rendered in a paper-cut style, flattening them into symbolic silhouettes that emphasize decorative rhythm rather than naturalistic detail, consistent with the planar aesthetic of traditional Chinese motifs. Together, these elements construct an ecological scene where life emerges through coexistence and competition within a shared spatial field.

Variation and Gesture as Visual Language

While this project is presented through two-dimensional painting, the work extends beyond image-making into gesture, where meaning is carried not only by what is depicted but by how forms are arranged, repeated, and transformed across surfaces. As scholars of painting have noted, pictorial space does not simply represent the world but "records acts of making" that remain visible within the final image (Bryson 94). In this sense, each painting holds traces of movement, decision, and variation that operate alongside representation, allowing expression to exceed fixed imagery.

The use of consistent symbols and materials across a series of three paintings supports this expanded understanding of gesture. Rather than producing repetition, the series allows symbols and visual elements to shift in scale, position, and relation, creating multiple readings across works. This approach makes the visual language more flexible, as meaning does not reside in a single image but emerges through comparison, variation, and accumulation. The material qualities, such as reflective surfaces, layering, and 3-dimensional texture, further intensify this effect by changing with light and viewing position, allowing the work to remain open rather than resolved.

Figure 13. three paintings in progress in the series Season

Figure 14. three material reflection closeups in the series Cosmos

This method creates room for exploration across different visual expressions. Instead of presenting a fixed or singular style, the paintings test how symbols and materials can operate across multiple configurations, generating different visual rhythms and atmospheres. As a result, viewers may experience each work differently, depending on their movement, attention, and interpretation.

While a consistent and recognizable style is often considered essential for a mature artistic practice, within this project style is understood primarily as a visual language rather than a fixed identity. It functions as a means of communication that can shift depending on the ideas being explored. Allowing variation in visual style therefore becomes a way of working with different expressive possibilities, enabling the work to respond more precisely to specific concepts and contexts. In this sense, developing multiple visual approaches is not a departure from coherence, but an expansion of the languages through which meaning can be communicated.

Chronology and Installation as Visual Narrative

The installation of the paintings further extends this approach by presenting the works in chronological order, following the sequence in which they were completed. Rather than arranging the paintings based on thematic grouping or visual similarity, this decision foregrounds the process of making as part of the viewer's experience. Moving from the first to the final work, viewers encounter shifts in artistic decisions, including changes in

rendering style, development of texture, and variation in the use of collage and reflective materials. These differences do not indicate inconsistency, but instead reveal how visual language evolves in response to different narrative and conceptual needs.

By making this progression visible, the installation emphasizes that environmental storytelling and mythopoetic interpretation are not confined to a single visual style. Instead, they emerge through a series of artistic decisions that construct a flexible visual language. Each painting explores a different way of communicating relationships between figures, landscapes, and materials, allowing multiple approaches to coexist within the same body of work. This openness creates space for experimentation, where variation becomes part of the meaning rather than a deviation from it.

As a result, viewers are invited to read the works not as fixed representations, but as an unfolding process of visual thinking. The chronological arrangement highlights how meaning is developed over time, reinforcing the idea that coherence in this project is not based on uniform appearance, but on the continuity of inquiry across changing forms.

Through these visual strategies, the paintings interpret the *Shanhaijing* as a continuous network of landscapes rather than a sequence of isolated mythological scenes. The known and the unknown coexist within this expanded environment, reflecting a Daoist perspective in which understanding the world involves perceiving relationships within a larger natural system.

From Image to Story: Language and Mythic Interpretation

Following the discussion of visual references in the paintings, the written stories accompanying the final artworks introduce another layer of interpretation. These narratives are not intended as translations of the *Shanhaijing* but as contemporary retellings written in English, the language through which I currently read, analyze, and structure my understanding of these myths. Writing in English reflects the conditions in which this project

was developed rather than a claim that English provides a more accurate or authoritative account of the original text. Any attempt to retell ancient myths inevitably involves interpretation. The meaning of such texts cannot be recovered in a pure or original form, whether the retelling occurs in Chinese, English, or any other language.

Figure 15. Interaction between the graphic book and the paintings in the exhibition.

Translation theory today treats translation as an interpretive, even subjective, process. For example, Lydia Liu's notion of translingual practice treats translation metaphorically as cultural coauthorship. In this view, retelling Chinese myths in English is an act of cross-cultural creation rather than appropriation (Liu 26). The decision to write only in English rather than producing a bilingual edition reflects that the focus is on expressing meaning, not on demonstrating equivalence between Chinese and English texts. In practical terms, the project employs narrative and visual imagery to convey culturally embedded meanings. As Levi-Strauss has noted, "Myth is language functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at taking off from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling" (209). This observation suggests that myth already operates as a complex

language system capable of conveying layered cultural ideas, allowing meanings to develop and transform over time through narrative structures rather than through fixed wording. Roland Barthes similarly describes myth as a "second-order semiological system," in which an existing language becomes the material for another level of meaning (Barthes 113). In this sense, myth functions as a "second language" that speaks through the first. This means that myth carries deep social values through metaphor and image, not through literal wording. The use of English words and pictures in this project, *Shanhai,* aims to evoke the same cultural motifs and ethics that the original Chinese myths encode, rather than to produce a word-for-word translation.

Figure 16. Alicia Tian, *Xihe*, spread page from *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas*, 2026

For this reason, the narratives are presented only in English rather than in a bilingual Chinese–English format. Presenting the stories in two languages side by side could suggest that their value lies in comparing languages or in equating individual words, which would shift attention toward linguistic accuracy rather than toward the symbolic and ethical meanings embedded in the stories themselves. The project instead prioritizes the cultural motifs, ecological relationships, and narrative structures that appear across both the images

and the texts. The myths referenced in the paintings often describe landscapes, creatures, and forces of nature whose meanings emerge through visual and spatial imagination rather than through linguistic precision alone.

This approach is further supported by the inclusion of graphic decorations derived from Chinese characters, which are altered through liquify and distortion tools and combined with hand-lettering. These elements do not function as readable text, but as visual forms that carry cultural reference while remaining open to interpretation, reinforcing the emphasis on image-based and material meaning rather than direct linguistic translation.

Figure 17. Chinese letters “山海” (Mountains and Seas) altered into illustrative graphic

Ultimately, the purpose of these rewritten stories is not to evaluate or compare cultural traditions but to contribute to a broader conversation about ecological imagination. The myths referenced in the paintings offer ways of thinking about relationships between humans, landscapes, and nonhuman life that remain open to reinterpretation. By presenting these narratives within a contemporary artistic framework, the project participates in an ongoing dialogue about how myth, environment, and cultural knowledge continue to inform one another across time and place.

Title and Cosmographic Structure of the Book

While constructing the graphic book component of this project, I initially questioned why the *Shanhaijing* is organized through geographically defined chapters, such as the "Southern Mountains" or the "Northern Lands Beyond the Seas". At first, these divisions appeared to function only as descriptive categories. Through closer engagement, however, I came to understand that geography in the *Shanhaijing* operates as a cosmographic framework that shapes how beings, relationships, and stories are understood. Scholar of early Chinese cosmography Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann explains that the text "conveys an ideal organization of terrestrial space characterized by a quite complex, yet remarkably regular structure," in which spatial divisions reflect systems of meaning rather than purely physical measurement (218). She further describes this as a "spiritual landscape," where terrestrial space expresses cosmological and cultural relationships as part of "a single complexly interrelated whole" (221).

The diversity of worldviews emerges from the diversity of geographical knowledge. It is through movement across terrain that one builds a framework for seeing the world. What it means to "reach" a place is not simply to locate it on a map, but to encounter its material and ecological conditions directly, to recognize whether it is mountainous or coastal, fertile or arid, and to understand the forms of life that arise there. Such situated knowledge shifts perception from abstraction to relational awareness. Once these geographical contexts are understood through encounter rather than distance, they can be approached on equal terms, no longer evaluated through hierarchical assumptions of higher or lower civilizations. Instead, ways of life and systems of value become legible as expressions of specific ecological and cultural environments. Geography, therefore, functions not as a neutral backdrop but as an epistemological structure through which cultural meaning, ecological relationships, and mythic imagination are formed.

This realization directly informed the structure and design of the graphic book. Rather than representing physical directions or linear narratives, these sections correspond to ecological and temporal orientations that shape how the world is experienced. Weather reflects immediate atmospheric conditions that situate the body within its environment, while cosmos expands perception beyond the human scale toward celestial and cosmological relationships. Seasons mark cyclical temporal movement, emphasizing change and return, and renewal represents transformation and continuation within ecological systems. Like the *Shanhaijing*'s directional structure, these divisions organize experience relationally rather than hierarchically, allowing meaning to emerge through movement between conditions. This approach positions the book not as a linear narrative but as an ecological framework, where readers navigate shifting environmental states in a way that reflects Daoist understandings of cyclical change, interdependence, and orientation within a larger cosmological whole. This approach parallels the *Shanhaijing*'s organization as a " cardinally-oriented" scheme representing the entire terrestrial space, in which meaning emerges through movement across distinct regions rather than through a single central storyline (Dorofeeva-Lichtmann 224).

Figure 18. Alicia Tian, Table of Content, spread page from *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas*, 2026

The title *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas* reinforces this spatial and ecological framework. Mountains suggest grounded presence and lived, material experience, while seas evoke distance, transition, and the unknown. Together, they reflect how human understanding

of the world emerges through the constant interaction between what is familiar and what remains beyond direct knowledge. Retaining the transliterated term *Shanhai* acknowledges its cultural specificity, while the translated phrase *Mountains and Seas* clarifies the ecological and spatial foundation of the work, making visible the geographic framework that structures both the original text and this contemporary reinterpretation. By presenting both the transliteration and the translation, the title preserves cultural specificity while allowing the environmental and relational meaning of *Shanhai* to remain accessible to a wider audience.

The technical construction of the book further supports this relational approach. It adopts a butterfly binding method, in which folded pages are bound back-to-back, creating a sequence of spreads that open gently and continuously. Originating in early Chinese bookmaking practices during the Song dynasty, butterfly binding (hudie zhuang) is documented as a format that allows pages to be folded and pasted along the inner margin, producing wide, uninterrupted openings while protecting the printed surface (Song). This structure emphasizes practical readability and preservation rather than symbolic meaning, allowing images and text to extend across the spread without interruption. The format is particularly suited to works that rely on visual continuity, as it minimizes gutter loss and supports the display of full compositions across facing pages. The binding also foregrounds the page as a surface that holds both image and text without hierarchy, allowing visual and narrative elements to coexist within a shared field.

Positioned alongside the paintings in the exhibition, the book functions as an extension rather than a supplement. While the exhibition invites slow, spatial engagement, the book allows viewers to carry the narratives beyond the gallery, taking the stories into their own time and space. In this way, the project continues through reading and reflection, extending the exhibition's relational experience beyond its physical duration.

Discussion of Installation Method

Environmental art is defined less by medium than by ethical orientation. As Linda Weintraub states in her introduction to *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*, environmental art "seeks to improve relationships between humans and the natural world" rather than to depict nature as passive scenery (Weintraub 3). This framing positions environmental art as a practice concerned with responsibility, care, and modes of relating, rather than with specific formats such as outdoor installation or large-scale display. From this perspective, the effectiveness of environmental art depends on how it structures ecological attention and ethical reflection over time, not on whether it physically occupies natural space.

Despite this broader understanding, installation and outdoor display are frequently assumed to be the most effective forms of environmental art. This assumption is reinforced by major exhibitions and interdisciplinary practices, where immersive installations, land-based works, and participatory projects dominate environmental art discourse (Weintraub 6–7; Kagan 4–5). In my experience presenting this project through exhibitions and artist talks, questions often arise about why the work is not installed outdoors or expanded into a site-specific intervention, reflecting an expectation that environmental art should physically occupy natural or public space. Works such as Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2015) and Mel Chin's *Revival Field* (1990-91)are often cited in these discussions because they exemplify how installation can make ecological issues materially present, either by translating climate change into direct sensory experience or by intervening in damaged environments through collaboration with scientific processes. These projects help explain why installation has become a dominant reference point in environmental art, even as they also raise questions about scale, temporality, and modes of engagement.

However, this assumption has clear limits. Installation-based environmental art often relies on temporary infrastructure, transportation, and fabrication, which can introduce

additional environmental and institutional costs. More importantly, research in cultural policy and sustainability suggests that the effectiveness of cultural and artistic practices should not be measured solely by immediacy or visibility. In *Cultural Policies for Sustainable Development*, Sari Kangas, Nancy Duxbury, and Justin O'Connor De Beukelaer caution against treating culture as a single instrumental tool for sustainability, noting that cultural practices operate through "multiple paths" and require forms of engagement that unfold over time rather than through singular moments of impact (130). They emphasize that culture contributes to sustainable development by shaping values, meanings, and ways of living together, rather than by producing immediate behavioural change (130–31). From this perspective, environmental art is effective not simply when it creates strong sensory encounters, but when it structures conditions for reflection, interpretation, and continuity. As the authors argue, culture plays a role in sustainability by "giving meaning to our existence" and by supporting long-term shifts in how ecological responsibility is understood and practiced (130).

This framework supports the use of painting and the graphic book as viable environmental art forms. When a project prioritizes sustained attention, relational ethics, and mythopoetic storytelling, these media allow ecological ideas to emerge gradually through repetition, narrative sequencing, and return, rather than relying on immediacy or spectacle alone. In this context, painting and the graphic book can be well-suited to environmental art. Painting allows for slow looking and layered meaning, while the graphic book extends this process through sequence and repetition. Unlike a single exhibition visit, a book can be returned to, reread, and shared, supporting a quieter and more durable form of ecological attention.

This approach is further reinforced through the use of materials within the paintings. The combination of organic pigments and upcycled holographic vinyl acknowledges both

natural processes and industrial residue, situating the work within contemporary ecological conditions. The instability of holographic material, its shifting appearance with light and movement, extends into the exhibition context, shaping how the work is perceived over time. In this way, material behaviour contributes directly to the viewing experience, supporting a slower and more attentive mode of engagement rather than immediate impact.

Figure 19. Graphic book displayed alongside a corresponding painting in the exhibition.

Installation should therefore be understood as one possible curatorial method rather than a medium. Artists such as Agnes Denes and Natalie Jeremijenko demonstrate that the effectiveness of environmental art depends on artistic voice and careful context. This distinction becomes clearer when considering works that have informed my thinking about installation. Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, planted on landfill in lower Manhattan near Wall Street, derived its force not simply from being land-based, but from its

deliberate placement within a financial district, juxtaposing agriculture and global capital (Benham). Similarly, Natalie Jeremijenko's *OneTrees* (2000), installed across multiple sites in the San Francisco Bay Area, revealed environmental variation by planting genetically identical trees in different urban contexts. In both cases, installation functions less as a medium in itself than as a curatorial structuring of context, where site, duration, and framing generate meaning. The works demonstrate that what matters is not installation as format, but how conditions of encounter are orchestrated.

For this project, installation strategies can support the work without replacing the painting and the book. These include reading spaces, seating, controlled lighting, or guided ways of handling the book, which shape how materials and narratives are encountered. By structuring conditions for slow engagement, installation supports mythopoetic storytelling and Daoist relational ethics, enabling meaning to unfold through sustained contact with images, texts, and materials rather than through immediate immersion.

Figure 20. A viewer engaging with the exhibition through reading and observation

Discussion of Environmental Ethics

Environmental art also raises practical ethical questions about material use and waste, especially when common studio materials become part of larger pollution pathways. Acrylic paint is a plastic polymer, and recent microplastics research increasingly treats paint particles as a significant and under-recognized source of microplastic contamination in aquatic environments (Turner; Diana et al.). This matters for studio practice because paint residues can move from sinks and drains into wastewater systems, where small particles may persist even when other solids are removed (Diana et al.). Rather than treating "water-based" as environmentally neutral, this project treats rinse water as a site of responsibility.

In my process, acrylic rinse water is not flushed into the drain. Instead, it is treated to separate solids from liquid using a simple coagulation and settling method. Aluminum sulphate (alum) is widely used in water and wastewater treatment to form particulate "floc," and alkalinity control is a standard requirement because alum treatment affects pH and the formation of aluminum hydroxide floc (EPA Ireland 5). Studies of coagulation–flocculation processes commonly pair aluminum sulphate with alkaline agents such as calcium hydroxide to support removal performance in wastewater contexts (Joaquin and Nirmala 91). While my method is scaled for a studio rather than a plant, it follows the same logic: bind dispersed particles into settleable solids, then remove the solids as waste. This aligns with professional studio guidance written by that emphasizes drying or solidifying acrylic residues and disposing of them as solid waste rather than washing them down the drain (Golden Artist Colors).

The use of metallic industrial paint and plastic sheets is also intentional, and the ethical question is approached through accountability rather than material "purity." These materials are upcycled where possible, but the project does not claim that environmental art must be limited to recycled or biodegradable matter. Contemporary environmental conditions

are already interwoven with polymers, coatings, packaging, and industrial infrastructures, and paint itself is part of this reality (Diana et al.). Working directly with these materials becomes a way to stay close to the world as it is: not to celebrate industrial systems, but to understand their everyday presence, risks, and afterlives, and to make disposal and handling decisions visible and deliberate.

This approach also avoids weakening Daoist philosophy by treating it as if it were already a modern environmental theory. As David Chai, a scholar of Chinese philosophy at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, observes, "It has become fashionable in recent years to turn to the 'wisdom of the East' when speaking of issues related to ecology and the environment. The danger with this approach, especially when it comes to Daoism, is the risk of misconstruing or distorting its tenets" (Chai 259). Daoism does not automatically function as an ecological principle, nor should it be used as a convenient philosophical validation for environmental claims. In this project, Daoist ideas operate at the level of practice rather than ideology. They inform decisions about story-making, careful material handling, and reducing unnecessary discharge in the studio. The connection is therefore procedural rather than symbolic. Rather than claiming that Daoism "proves" eco-art, the project adopts a Daoist orientation to frame how attentiveness, non-excess, and accountability can shape artistic work within contemporary industrial conditions.

At an institutional level, responsibility cannot rest on individual artists alone, because disposal and emissions depend on shared infrastructure, policies, and purchasing systems. The Gallery Climate Coalition frames near-zero waste and materials planning as organizational work, not just personal virtue, and its institutional guidance includes concrete operational changes (Gallery Climate Coalition 6–7). One practical example is GCC's case study of Thomas Dane Gallery, which documents measurable emissions reductions through shipping decisions and workflow changes that reduce waste and transport impacts (Gallery

Climate Coalition 12). Similarly, Julie's Bicycle worked with Tate to establish an organization-wide carbon baseline, supporting accountability through measurement and policy-level planning rather than placing the burden on individual makers (Tate and Julie's Bicycle 18). These cases matter to my project because they show what artists cannot do alone: provide compliant disposal routes, filtration and collection systems, material handling guidance, and procurement structures that reduce harm upstream.

Within this framework, the project defends its material choices by combining responsible handling, transparent engagement with industrial materials as part of contemporary life, and an ethical stance grounded in restraint, attention, and accountability rather than purity claims. The goal is not to present a perfect solution, but to model a workable method for reducing avoidable release, while keeping the artwork's mythopoetic storytelling anchored in the material conditions that shape the present.

Conclusion: Toward an Ecological Dialogue Across Cultures

Engaging Chinese mythological literature within a contemporary Western context raises the question of whether cultural traditions should travel beyond their original geographical and linguistic environments. This project suggests that such movement is not only possible but valuable. When myths, philosophical ideas, and artistic practices cross cultural boundaries, they contribute to a broader dialogue about how humans understand their relationship with the world. Rather than functioning as isolated traditions, cultural narratives can become part of a shared intellectual landscape through which ecological ethics and artistic practices develop collectively.

In this research, the *Shanhaijing* is approached not as a fixed historical document but as a mythopoetic framework that supports ecological imagination. The text describes a world composed of mountains, rivers, and hybrid beings whose relationships unfold across shifting landscapes. These narratives emphasize interdependence and transformation, presenting ecological systems as dynamic processes rather than static environments. Such perspectives resonate with Daoist philosophical ideas that understand humans as participants within natural cycles rather than external agents acting upon them.

Within the visual component of this project, these ideas are explored through painting, illustration, and narrative experimentation. Rather than illustrating myths literally, the artworks reinterpret their symbolic structures as ways of thinking about ecological relationships. The graphic book and exhibition *Shanhai | Mountains and Seas* frame mythic stories through themes of relational awareness, landscape encounter, and cyclical change. By translating both language and imagery into a contemporary context, the project seeks to make these mythic ideas accessible while maintaining their cultural specificity.

Personal Reflection: Retelling Myth Across Cultures

On a more personal level, sharing these stories with audiences outside China has changed how I understand my relationship to this cultural tradition. When I speak publicly about figures from the *Shanhaijing* or explain Daoist ideas about nature, I am not only interpreting ancient texts but also participating in the continuation of their meanings. Each retelling becomes an act of translation across languages, cultures, and experiences.

Public conversations about the work have been particularly meaningful. Explaining these myths to viewers requires me to rethink them repeatedly, clarifying what aspects of the stories still resonate and why they matter in a contemporary environmental context. In this sense, speaking about the work does not simply present finished research. It actively shapes my understanding of the complexity of the world that these myths describe.

These conversations also open space for others to respond with their own cultural references. Viewers often share stories, beliefs, or environmental traditions from their own backgrounds that overlap with or diverge from the ideas in the project. Through these exchanges, the myths of the *Shanhaijing* begin to function less as distant historical narratives and more as starting points for dialogue. Recognizing both differences and unexpected parallels across cultures reveals how ecological imagination is shaped by many local experiences yet connected through shared concerns for the Earth.

Encountering different lands, whether physical landscapes or the imaginative landscapes of myth, expands how we understand the world. Every cultural perspective adds another thread to a complex network of stories and experiences that shape human relationships with the Earth. By bringing Chinese mythological imagination into dialogue with contemporary environmental art, this project contributes to a wider conversation about ecological responsibility. The goal is not to present a single cultural answer, but to participate in a collective effort to imagine more balanced ways of living within the world.

Future Directions for Ecological Dialogue and Network

These exchanges also suggest a possible future direction for environmental art. If conversations about ecological imagination emerge so naturally through exhibitions and public talks, they could also be extended into shared digital spaces that document how different cultures understand environmental relationships. Existing platforms already point toward this possibility. Networks such as the EcoArt Network bring together artists from many regions to exchange ideas about ecological practices and sustainable futures, functioning as an international forum for discussion and collaboration. Earlier initiatives, such as the online museum Greenmuseum, similarly attempted to document environmental artworks, exhibitions, and educational resources from around the world, creating one of the first digital archives dedicated to ecological art. More recent repositories like EcoArts Nexus continue this effort by mapping artistic projects, funding programs, and cultural initiatives that address environmental challenges across disciplines.

While these initiatives provide valuable resources, they often focus either on networks, institutional resources, or documentation of artworks. A future platform could extend these models by bringing together cultural narratives, philosophical traditions, studio practices, and material experiments within a single living archive. Such a space could collect environmental perspectives from artists and researchers across cultures, allowing local stories, myths, and ecological knowledge to coexist while remaining in dialogue with one another. In this way, the conversations that begin in exhibitions and public talks could continue through a growing global network of voices. Environmental art would then function not only as individual artistic expression, but as a collaborative field of cultural exchange, where diverse traditions contribute to a shared effort to imagine more balanced ways of living within the Earth's complex ecological systems.

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Appendix

The twelve stories are organized into four thematic sections: Weather, Cosmos, Season, and Renewal, each exploring ecological relationships through mythological figures and cycles.

Weather

1. Nüba (女魃): Nüba descends as a force of heat and drought, disrupting ecological balance. Through collective care and patience, humans respond not by resisting but by restoring balance, allowing cycles to return.

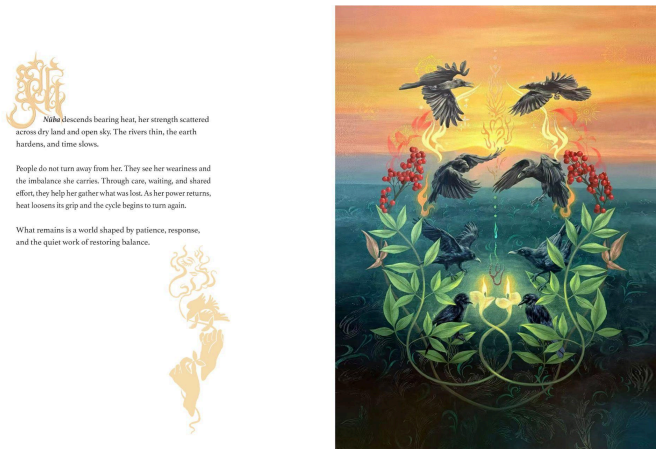

Figure 21. Alicia Tian, book page 6-7, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

2. Yinglong (应龙): Once a powerful rain-bringing dragon, Yinglong loses authority and lives among the land. Human respond with care rather than control, suggesting the coexistence with natural power.

Figure 22. Alicia Tian, book page 8-9, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

3. Kui (夔): Kui embodies rhythm and vibration, moving through land, bodies, and air. Sound becomes a connective force, linking all beings through shared movement and resonance.

Figure 23. Alicia Tian, book page 10-13, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

Cosmos

4. Xihe (羲和): Xihe tends the suns, guiding their passage across the sky. Her role reflects cyclical order, where light nurtures life through measured rhythm rather than excess.

Figure 24. Alicia Tian, book page 14-17, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

5. Zhuyin (烛阴): Zhuyin governs time through breath, where day and night emerge from opening and closing eyes. Time is not linear but circulatory, embedded in all living processes.

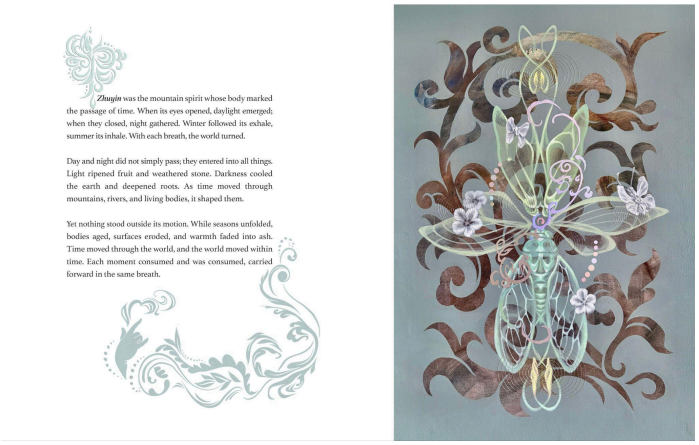

Figure 25. Alicia Tian, book page 18-19, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

6. Changxi (常羲)

Changxi gives birth to the moons, shaping time through cycles of light and darkness. Her presence emphasizes quiet transformation and the continuity of change.

Figure 26. Alicia Tian, book page 20-21, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

Season

7. Zhurong (祝融): Zhurong governs fire and summer, where heat intensifies and expands. His presence reflects both growth and strain, showing how excess transforms into renewal.

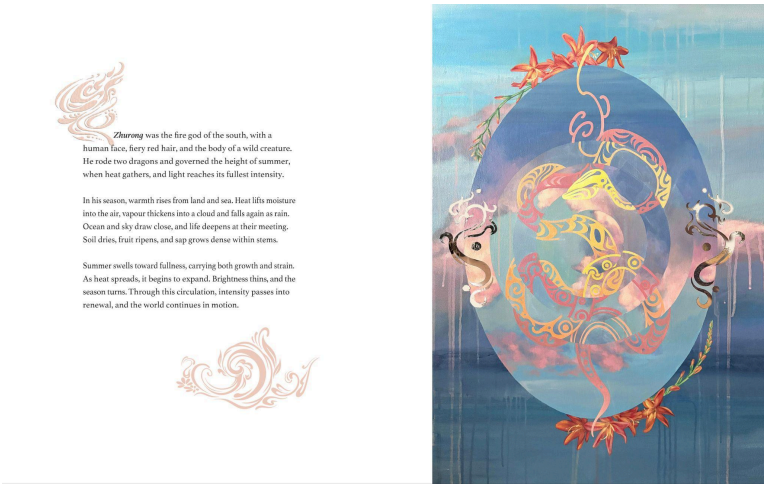

Figure 27. Alicia Tian, book page 22-23, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

8. Rushou (蓐收): Rushou embodies autumn, where energy turns inward. Decay and release are not endings but transitions that prepare the ground for future growth.

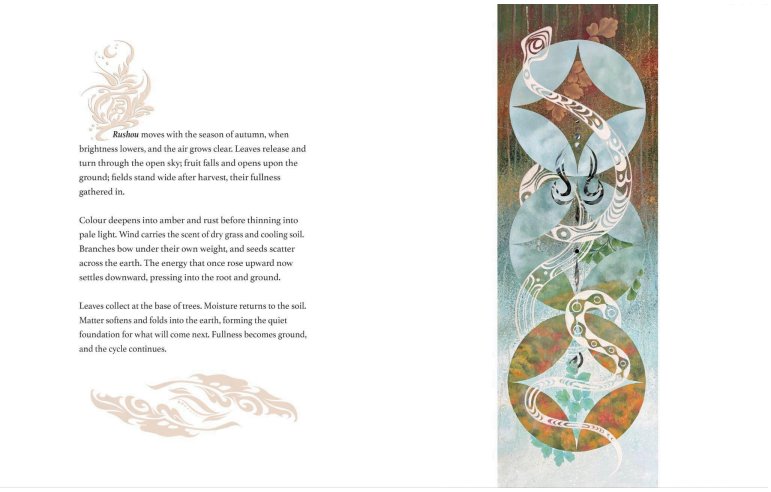

Figure 28. Alicia Tian, book page 24-25, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

9. Goumang (句芒): Goumang marks the arrival of spring, where life emerges through tension between cold and warmth. Growth unfolds through interaction rather than sudden transformation.

Figure 29. Alicia Tian, book page 26-27, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

Renewal

10. Gun (鯀): Gun attempts to control flooding through force, but fails. Water resists control, suggesting that adaptation rather than domination enables ecological balance.

Figure 30. Alicia Tian, book page 28-29, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

11. Buzhou Shan (不周山): The broken mountain represents rupture and imbalance. Rather than restoring wholeness, the world adapts, allowing transformation to continue through fracture.

Figure 31. Alicia Tian, book page 30-31, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026

12. Penglai (蓬莱): Penglai exists as a distant, shifting island of longing. It represents an unreachable ideal, where meaning lies in pursuit and imagination rather than arrival.

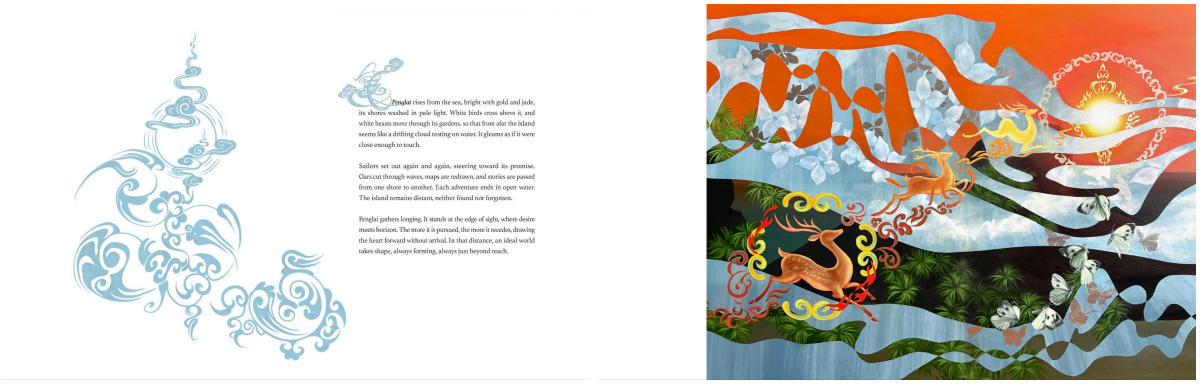

Figure 32. Alicia Tian, book page 32-35, *Shanhai: Mountains and Seas,* 2026