

Not predetermined: 'Fusion-Image' and Multicultural Art Education Based on Sino-US Portrait Painting Project Practice

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Article abstract

Students from three universities in China and the United States worked together on a portrait painting project called 'Fusion-Image'. It is meant to get youths trading photos of their peers who live on different continents to make art. In addition to portraiture's ability to shed light on the human, emotional, and spiritual, 'Fusion-Image' goes beyond this to pique and address students' interest in various materials and techniques, including digital painting. At the study's conclusion, many participants expressed gratitude for allowing them to question and trouble previously held biases. The project is a practical experiment on artistic creation that may spark respect and tolerance, it illuminates art education in the context of social responsibility for cultural diversity. This has ramifications for the development of art curricula, for we believe that an attitude free of stereotypes in the classroom will produce more engaging and versatile pedagogical and scholastic outputs. The purpose of this article is to examine how art education for students of different cultures, ethnicities, and regions can help confront cross-cultural issues and, on this basis, enhance thinking about core issues in art, such as tradition, ideas, spirituality, times, and many other matters, based on the work of two art teachers in China and the USA.

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Lei Chen

Lei Chen, a scholar/artist/ educator from Beijing, China, is a new Ph.D. student in Curriculum & Pedagogy/Art Education at UBC and will start her new life in Vancouver. She conducts a comparative, cross-cultural study of art education in the East and West, particularly combining Western scholarly research and Eastern perceptual understanding. Meanwhile, she considers the multi-layers of collaboration between social forces in art education, including schools, communities, and museums. As an artist with a wide range of academic interests, she makes art from painting to fabric, regarding them as the role of bridging her heart with this world.



Miguel Carter-Fisher

Miguel Carter-Fisher is currently based in his hometown, Richmond, Virginia. His interest in the arts began as a child and was nurtured by his father, the late painter Bill Fisher. At 18 he moved to Connecticut, where he studied both painting and philosophy at the University of Hartford. After graduating, Miguel moved to Brooklyn to attend the New York Academy of Art. There he studied traditional drawing, painting, and composition techniques. After graduate school, he worked at Soho Art Materials, where he educated artists, collectors, and galleries on diverse methods and materials of painting. While maintaining an active artistic practice, Miguel is currently an assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Students from three universities in China and the United States worked together on a portrait painting project called 'Fusion-Image'. It is meant to get youths trading photos of their peers who live on different continents to make art. In addition to portraiture's ability to shed light on the human, emotional, and spiritual, 'Fusion-Image' goes beyond this to pique and address students' interest in various materials and techniques, including digital painting. At the study's conclusion, many participants expressed gratitude for allowing them to question and trouble previously held biases. The project is a practical experiment on artistic creation that may spark respect and tolerance, it illuminates art education in the context of social responsibility for cultural diversity. This has ramifications for the development of art curricula, for we believe that an attitude free of stereotypes in the classroom will produce more engaging and versatile pedagogical and scholastic outputs. The purpose of this article is to examine how art education for students of different cultures, ethnicities, and regions can help confront cross-cultural issues and, on this basis, enhance thinking about core issues in art, such as tradition, ideas, spirituality, times, and many other matters, based on the work of two art teachers in China and the USA.

Keywords: *Multicultural, Art Education, Portrait Painting, Curriculum Design*

The Basic Project Profile

Chen and Carter-Fisher's idea for the project was conceived during a Facebook conversation. Chen said, "I had intended to participate in portrait artist Carter-Fisher's drawing project because he enjoys painting people in general, whether they are friends or strangers to him. One day, when he asked to paint my portrait, I enthusiastically obliged and similarly requested a photo of himself so I could do the same." Then we reasoned, "Why not have more people join in? We are both art teachers, and it would be great if our classes participated." We were so enamored with the concept that we immediately planned to implement it. In 2021, when it was still difficult for people to converse in person due to the Covid pandemic, students from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Virginia State University (VSU), which is a historically black university, and Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology (BIFT) collaborated on our portrait painting project called 'Fusion-Image'. We received 32 submissions from China and the United States

and 26 art and art design majors (13 each from the United States and China, respectively) were invited to participate in a collaborative project lasting over three months. It was great because the young people could converse and exchange ideas through art even though they did not know each other. It was beneficial during the Covid pandemic when it was inconvenient for people to talk to each other in person. They did not need to communicate using language or text, nor did they meet and talk on social media. As we seek to demonstrate in this article, the two instructors regarded this project as addressing multicultural education whose primary goal is to reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups experience educational quality (Banks, 1993).

Teaching art to students from various cultural backgrounds poses many challenges. In this project, we asked the students to exchange photographs of one another and to create a portrait of the other person, instead of

"Art is no longer only a static display in a museum; the internet, social media's vast user base, and artificial intelligence (AI) present new issues.."

conversing with language and words across two continents. Except for Miguel Carter-Fisher and Lei Chen, the two educators, none of the participants from the three universities had previously met individually. Drawing and painting were encouraged with various materials and techniques, as well as digital painting and image editing. In the meantime, the two instructors also created portraits as part of their involvement.

Participation in the project was optional, and its initial structure revealed striking differences between the approaches to education taken by Chinese and American academics. Assistant Carter-Fisher gave more freedom to students who registered early, allowing them to choose the most intriguing photographs to paint first. Artist-educator Chen took a different approach, assigning students photos randomly to make one portrait and giving them a second chance to choose and create their own. Chinese students were not outraged, although every one of them needed to finish two works while their Western peers only made one because they could have more opportunities to create compared to one work. Different teaching styles informed each method, yet both successfully inspired students' desire to create. Students at VCU, VSU, and BIFT all receive a well-rounded education and enjoy solid regional and national reputations, so they have solid foundational abilities in the arts. They are well-versed in traditional media such as pencil drawing, oil painting, and watercolor. At the same time, their Chinese counterparts are primarily graduate students from the illustration department who are accustomed to computer-based painting approaches. And thus, since the 26 students working on the project come from various fine art and art design programs, this contributed significantly to the wide range of painting styles used.

Insights and Debates Based on The Project

In this section and the rest of the article, I/Lei Chen reflect on the pedagogical and artistic possibilities of a project such as 'Fusion-Image'. Some of the pieces stood out to me; for example, Evan McGrady sketched (Figure 1) a Chinese girl named Kaijing who does not appear 'beautiful' in the conventional sense because she appears to have just gotten out of the shower, is wearing a mask, and has wet hair. Her face is somewhat sluggish and unmotivated. However, I find a profound spirituality in Evan's work; it is not a particular persona or mode of expression but rather a universal truth — a depiction of the eye reminiscent of the last section of Rembrandt's famous self-portraits. Nothing beats a heartfelt and uncomplicated conversation with a soul when depicting a person. Black hair is generally rendered flat, creating a realistic piece with an abstract quality. I get the impression that Evan is searching for authenticity at the heart of art, which lies beyond its surface appearance. He sketches it out in its most basic form and gives it to us.

The other thing I want to talk about is technology. The term 'portrait painting' typically conjures images of oil portraits, but this is not what art is all about. Art is no longer only a static display in a museum; the internet, social media's vast user base, and artificial intelligence (AI) present new issues. The BIFT, VCU, and VSU students mostly come from an illustration background but receive diverse educational approaches. Some students gravitate toward traditional media, while others use new media. Often traditionalists and modernists are mistakenly seen as oppositional and are constantly at odds with one another, but in reality, they only reflect the varied means of artistic expression. In 'Fusion-Image,' students are given a forum to consider



Figure 1. Evan McGrady's sketch of Kaijing

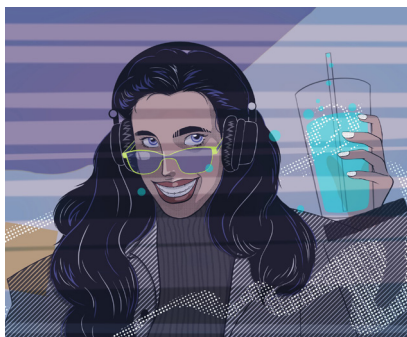


Figure 2. Tingyi's digital painting of Cecilia Ford

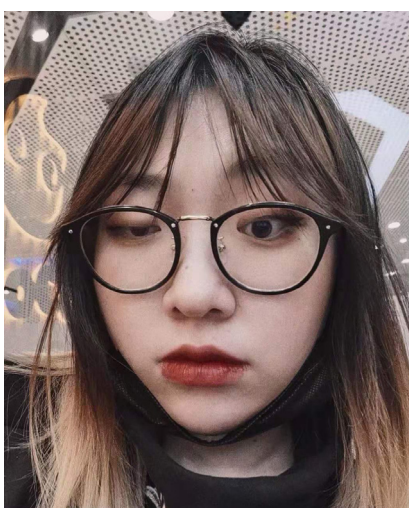


Figure 3. Alyx Ward's digital painting of Zanfei Ren

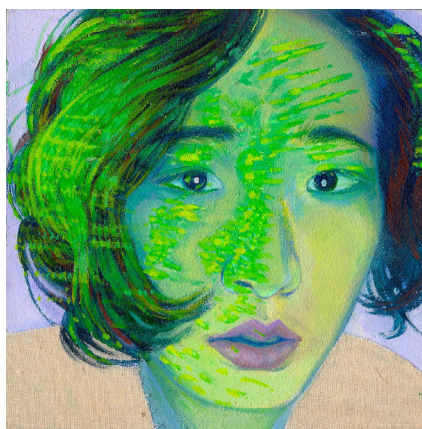


Figure 4. Isabelle Roque and her portrait of Mohan

the form of artistic reflection on the times and cultures we live in, where people may learn from one another and challenge themselves to perceive the world in new ways by trying out methods they are not used to. Tingyi, the Chinese girl, adopted a digital painting style (Figure 2), taking cues from pop art and generalizing with blocks of color that tend to be flat. Indeed, the character's inner selves are not emphasized, but this does not prevent it from being an outstanding work. This approach is highly beneficial, primarily when interacting with fine art and design. Digital painting, which Alyx, an American girl, also employed, leans towards a design approach with a hint of comic book fun (Figure 3). The use of contrasting red and green hues is deliberate, and the overall effect suggests a video game, especially in the close-ups that feature what could be considered 'equipment.' This is not a portrait painting in the classical sense, but it reflects today's youth's aesthetic interests. The transition from art to design and life is a fascinating occurrence in the evolution of technology and symbolizes a cultural need for many people.

Interviewing the students in China, I noted that they expressed their feelings from a different perspective. Mohan said,

In a time when digital painting is more accessible, I much appreciate the vast green face that Isabelle Roque did for me (Figure 4). You can tell how much effort she put into the photo from the other side of the world because of the patchwork fabric she used on the clothing and how she used different materials for the skin and the light. Having observed the Japanese and Chinese postcard exchange initiative honoring the 20th anniversary of the giant panda's visit to Japan¹, I found that both countries' artists managed to produce works for their counterparts that were aesthetically pleasing to the other. My classmates and I had wondered beforehand if we would all wind up with the same results, yet our projects avoided falling into the trap of stereotyping each other. Many different mediums were employed, from the more commonplace gouache, watercolor, crayon, and oil to the more out-of-the-ordinary Risograph used by some. When expressing

themselves through painting, some artists embellished the photograph's original composition, while others dismantled and rebuilt it without any constraints. (Email from Mohan Guo to Lei Chen, April 3, 2023)

Not only did Mohan talk about the emotion of 'surprise', but so did the Chinese student Kaijing:

The American student's image of me, in which he utilized a drawing and realistic approach, was the most dramatic and impressive work I saw. When I asked my acquaintances who had studied overseas about the preferred painting styles of Chinese and foreign art students, they told me that the former were more realistic since they had spent their entire lives immersed in the arts and had a firm grasp of drawing, color theory, and composition. I was surprised to see that Evan McGrady was using sketches. I had always assumed that foreigners, especially artists from Europe and the United States, were better at painting with abstract, imaginative thinking. Did he think Chinese students would like it better if he showed it this way? Alternatively, perhaps he was trying to impress Chinese students with a strong background in realistic art with his drawing prowess. If they saw the portraits we Chinese students drew, would they be as startled as I was to see that Chinese students' abstract thinking and creativity can be so fascinating? This is one of the activity's most interesting and meaningful aspects. It involves using a photograph to communicate between strangers separated by thousands of miles and unfamiliar with each other's backgrounds, cultures, and characters. Over two months, we look at each other's faces and expressions in photos hundreds of times, and during that time, we will speculate, imagine, and draw. (Email from Kaijing Zhang on April 3, 2023)

Just as Kaijing was surprised by the emphasis on technical skills demonstrated by the American students, Assistant Professor Carter-Fisher reported that many of his American students were surprised by the Chinese students' creativity, independence, and imagination. The assumption that Chinese artists would

lack individuality was proven false by the diversity of thought and technique the students demonstrated. The Chinese are generally portrayed as unimaginative and uncreative, and their education is often referred to as "individuality-erasing and uniform" in Western cultural propaganda of the past and present, such as books, films, and television shows. The crisis is likely to worsen; additional Asian nations are already involved. Through the arts, the students had to trouble stereotypes, they realized that the other's culture differed from their previous impressions. This, we argue, may lead to curiosity, and perhaps help the students explore and understand more. 'Interculturalism' refers to this openness to and appreciation of cultural differences. Ultimately, the students from both nations discovered a collection of individuals, not stereotypes.

People tend to have certain stereotypical assumptions about others from unfamiliar cultures, which can easily lead to cultural splits, gaps, conflicts, and steadily developing tensions. What is so remarkable about the 'Fusion-Image' project is that it breaks down certain tendencies in the participants' art and allows the students to approach diverse cultures and skills more openly and welcomingly. This pattern differs from the tendentious and explicit descriptions of language and words. Instead, they are expressed in a more abstract, dynamic, and pictorial style that has the potential to bypass preconceived conceptual frameworks. This is the unique appeal of aesthetic art and art education. This project inspires the students to explore parts of other cultures that are different from their own and their similarities. Cultural diversity should be based first and foremost on respect, which presupposes the acceptance of the existence of differences and the acknowledgment of their validity, thus allowing oneself to involve in other cultures and even to become a part of them, which makes each part of the culture more confident and assertive. Art education imparted to students on cultural variety should have this quality.

Thus many students in "Fusion-Image" have expressed their love for the project; like Mohan said; "Students from China and the United States

¹The event which took place in Sino-Japan folk in July 2022, included creating gardens and postcards to commemorate the end of the Chinese panda's 20-year stay at Kobe Oji Zoo in Japan.

took advantage of the chance to share what makes them unique. This gave me a glimpse into these young people's vibrant creativity. This event has gained popularity within the alum community, and I look forward to future opportunities to participate in gatherings of a similar nature" (email from Mohan Guo to Lei Chen, April 3, 2023).

Project-Based Curricular Reflection in The Framework of Social Responsibility

As stated in his address at Stanford University, the American poet Michael Dana Gioia (2007) remarked about the nature of art pedagogy; "The purpose of arts education is not to produce more artists, though that is a byproduct. The real purpose of arts education is to create complete human beings capable of leading successful and productive lives in a free society". From this perspective, it is worth analyzing what is meant by complete human beings, what is meant by productive lives, and what is meant by a free society. Ancient Chinese and Greek philosophy both examined the educational concept of these issues. More than 2000 years ago, the Chinese Confucian thinkers in the book *The Rites of Zhou (in Confucianism)* explained that "the purposes of education should include four aspects, namely, literature, conduct, loyalty, and faith" (Xu et al., 2014, p. 112). According to Aristotle, a good education should help students grow morally. Therefore, it is essential that, in addition to academics and practical skills, young people develop an appreciation for moral and social values and a strong moral character as part of their education (Kristjánsson, 2017). In *Moral education: Beyond the teaching of right and wrong*, Colin Wringe (2007) writes, "In addition to performing outwardly approved actions, young people must be brought to see the point and value of such conduct and act as they do out of a conviction that it is a right and admirable thing to do" (p.7).

While teaching art techniques and materials is essential, teaching students about ideas, concepts, beliefs, and cultural values is more crucial. This means that the worth of an artwork is represented not only in its exterior form as a visual art, but it also prompts people to consider culture - the nature of art, the educational relevance of art, and the social traits and values of art. In our globalized world, cultural diversity needs to manifest itself through love, respect,

and tolerance. Lessons should be intriguing and motivate students to investigate and experiment with art. Balancing the two in curriculum design is challenging, particularly at the higher level.

It was not intended to have any bearing on moral norms, but "Fusion-Image" had that same result. Two Chinese students interviewed said the study forced them to reevaluate their assumptions about a foreign culture. They gained insights into one another's inner lives. They reflected on their own and one another's strengths and weaknesses, undiscovered cultural differences, and unconscious biases they had previously been blind to. The project's most salient feature is breaking bias in cultural understanding. There could be more room for growth in education if the curriculum in university art programs was conceptually designed to preserve more opportunities for students to explore the world through their craft. Michael Dana Gioia's definition of a free society can be understood in this way, which is crucial.

An art education conceived in a free society gives students the freedom to learn by doing, allowing them to see, perceive, and experience the world uniquely. This highlights the significance of an open curriculum design. Inspiration for works of art can be found in modern design principles. In the field of modern art and design, simplicity and a minimalist approach is often loved and sought after. If applied to art education at the university level, as Chen and Carter-Fisher did in 'Fusion-Image', a minimalist pedagogical approach would remove some of the authority and excess supervision on the part of instructors. This would allow the students to have a more true and personal experience rather than one that stems from the teacher's prior experience, and it might prompt a self-directed independent engagement with the world. The artist-instructor plans the class without making assumptions about the students' performance beyond the course's overall pedagogical direction. For students to develop their artistic understanding, unlock their creative potential, and benefit from an education that aims to produce complete human beings, they must be allowed to take more autonomous actions in their practice. At the same time, teacher guidance focuses more on the subject's collaborative, culturally



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inclusive nature. In place of the more traditional 'designated' forms of cultural exchange—such as, symposia, presentations, seminars—the project took on a more organic and freewheeling approach, encouraging students to learn about and appreciate other cultures by simply observing and painting them as they exist in the real world.

Conclusion

Some of the works in this project show that artists have succeeded in pursuing spiritual expression through the visual arts, which is a heartening aspect of fine art teaching because it allows students to gain a more profound comprehension of the world's essential core. At the same time, students are investigating another dimension of artistic creation by employing various materials and techniques that are more fashionable and accessible to the general public in fields like illustration, which is at the junction of fine art and design art. This project brings together and finds common ground between these two schools of thought in art education.

Thinking with and studying the interviews through multicultural arts education yielded the most significant findings for the project. Students are more likely to grasp the importance and significance of interculturalism if the curriculum is designed and taught in a way that is not predefined, but rather natural, uncomplicated, and comfortable for them. As merely conceptual narratives, love and respect are not 'informative' either; however, cultural bias can be significantly mitigated by making students conscious of them in their learning practices.

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