

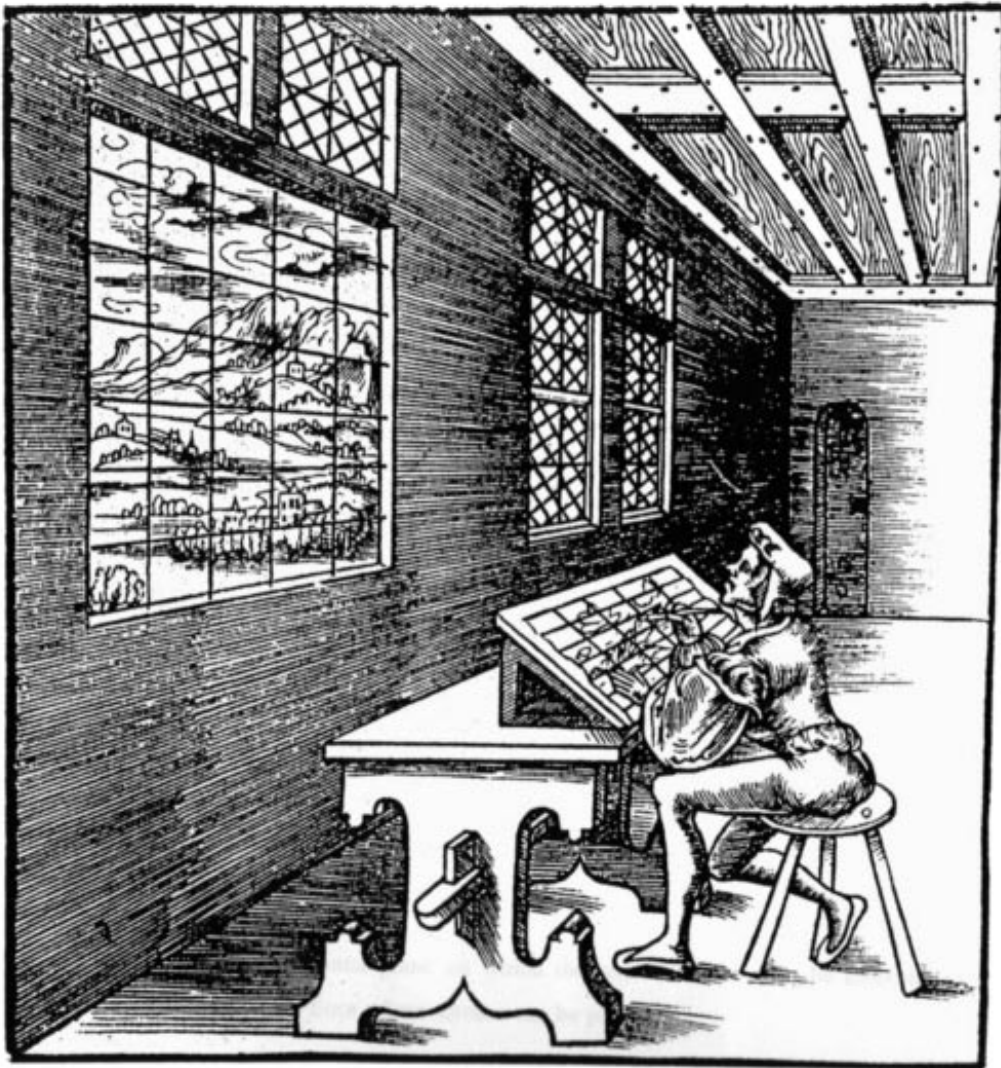
# MY DANCING SHADOWS

By Dr Fan Dongwang

I rise and dance; with my shadow, I play.

Su Shi, *Tune: "Prelude to Water Melody"* (203).<sup>1</sup>

After the previous inquiry of western and Chinese shifting perspectives, this chapter clarifies how I combine different space rendering systems by using my techniques of *Sculptural Painting* and *Shadow Perspective*. My drawing *The Ten Diagrams* presents detailed examinations of my methods of combining different perspectives that conclude in *A Visual Solution—Shadow Perspective*.



1. Johann II. von Pfalz-Simmeren. Illustration of Renaissance perspective. "Renaissance Perspectives."

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<sup>1</sup> Su Shi (1037-1101) is a Chinese poet.

Perspectives are the art of creating the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface to give the viewer the impression that a painting has a third dimension. There are a number of ways to suggest receding space, no concepts of space and depth are constant in all cultures, and many different vocabularies of perspective exist. All attempts to give depth to a flat surface rely to some extent on cultural and artistic conventions.

## The Ten Diagrams

Always there is a black spot in our sunshine: it is even as I said, the Shadow of Ourselves.

Thomas Carlyle.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of my artwork is to use the object (body) and the positioning of its cast shadow to mix the different cultural conventions to form a multiple perspective system. This chapter is intended to be a comprehensive technical analysis of this system based on the perspectives I have discussed previously. I draw ten diagrams to help illustrate the subtlety of these different methods of space representation, and to describe the way in which I mix these systems to create paintings with a new shifting perspective.<sup>3</sup>

Some basic concepts used in the diagrams are *window*, *picture plane*, *ground plane* and *background plane*.

**Window** is defined by Krauss as an architectural form, a matrix of ambi- or multivalence that is being experienced as simultaneously *transparent*, *reflective* and *opaque*. When it is transparent, a world beyond it can be seen. This is the “beyond-the-frame attitude”—Receding 3D. When its outside is darker than its inside, it reflects an image of the observer. When it is opaque, it becomes a picture plane, on which objects can be cemented. This is the “within-the-frame attitude”—Ascending 3D (“Grids” The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths 16).<sup>4</sup>

**Picture plane** is a transparent plane in front of the spectator on which the objects are assumed to be projected, as a Renaissance’s illustration shows (illus. 1). Note the difference between *picture plane* and *screen*. Sometimes *picture plane* is a *screen without frame*. Therefore, a *screen* is a *framed picture plane*. In the Chinese painting Double Screen (illus. 2) the multiple screens can lead to *multiple picture plane*, while in a western Renaissance painting there is only one *picture plane* that is often referred to as *painting surface* (or canvas’ surface). This can be seen in two drawings from a book on perspective used by students at the Academy in Brussels where Magritte had been a student (illus. 3). However, there are two aspects of *picture plane*. A picture plane is regarded as a transparent plane that sometime is *physical* (like a screen with or without a frame), and which was used in ancient Chinese bamboo painting as an observing device. However, in most cases it is *imaginative*, as a window frame existed in artist’s mind, and the world is displayed beyond this window. The distance between *picture plane* and *objects* can be adjusted according to the need of

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) is a Scottish essayist, historian.

<sup>3</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> diagram in the *Conclusion* is also a continuation of these ten diagrams.

the artist. This is very important for the artist to determine the scale and depth of the painting. If one could associate *picture plane* with *screen*, all the preceding discussions of *screen* could open the door of a far more imaginative concept: a *multiple and broken picture plane* which would enable the vision to shift among them freely.



2. Zhou Wenju, Double Screen

**Ground plane** is a horizontal plane on which the object viewed may be assumed to rest. *Ground plane* is also the floor where screens can be placed.

**Background plane** is a vertical plane on which the object viewed may be assumed to hang. There is an open background as in landscape and closed background as in interior. If an object or a figure has a *screen* placed behind it, the screen becomes its *background plane*. Thus multiple screens can become multiple background planes, and a background plane could occasionally come before picture plane to reverse the common situation that a picture plane is always situated in front of a background plane.

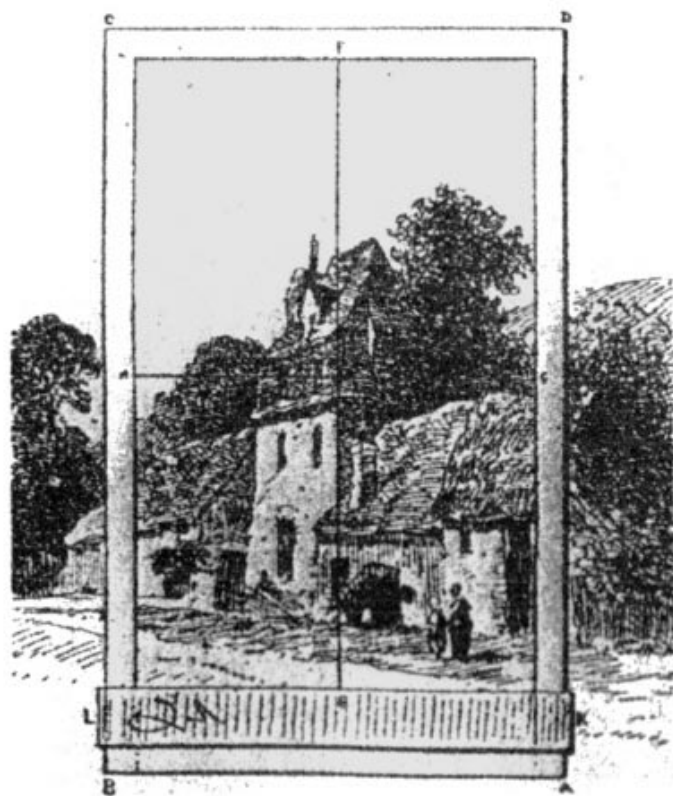
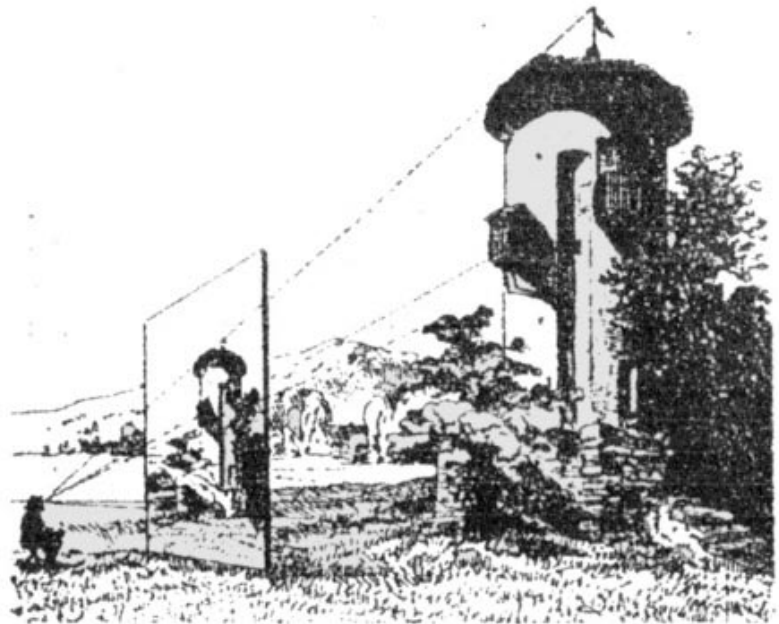
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<sup>4</sup> The window mullions of the Christian church are examples of this opaque window. Chinese people also past white paper sheets onto the surface of the window and decorated them with flower patterns.

**Shadow** is, in Filippo Baldinucci's term, "the darkness created by opaque bodies on the opposite side of the illuminated part. In the language of a painter, it is generally understood to refer to the more or less dark colour that serves in painting to give relief to the representation by gradually becoming lightened. It is divided in three degrees called shadow, half-shadow and cast shadow (Gombrich Shadows 6).

1. **Shadow** (or **shade**) is the dark part that an opaque body creates on itself.
2. **Half-shadow** is the area that is between light and the shadow through which the one passes to the other, gradually diminishing little by little according to the roundness of the object.
3. **Cast shadow** is the shadow that is caused on the ground or elsewhere by the depicted object. (Gombrich Shadows 6)"

My study is not about 1 *shadow (or shade)* and 2 *half-shadow*. Only **Cast Shadow** is dealt with great importance in my painting.



3. A. Cassagne. Two drawings from a book on perspective. 1873.

## DIAGRAM 1

This diagram shows how linear perspective works: the artists imagine that there exists a picture plane (or a window frame) in front of them. They perceive through this frame (or screen) a scene with a descending dimension (*Receding 3D*) beyond. Then they try to reproduce this illusion on their painting surface. If there is a light source above, they observe a free-standing object in an open space. They will also recognise a shadow casting on the *ground plane*. If this



object is hanging on an enclosed background, they will see a shadow casting on that background plane immediately beneath that object. That casting shadow is significant in suggesting the space occupation of the object.

The aim of Western art, as seen in Renaissance painting, is to represent objects with the illusion of having three dimensions as in Botticelli's painting Pallas and the Centaur (illus. 4). The *picture plane* is a flat window intersecting a cone that extends indefinitely into space from its apex at the viewer's eye. It represents three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional plane (the surface of a picture). An object represented in these two dimensions, width and height, may give the impression of having depth as well. The painting portrays an illusion of distance (receding third dimension) beyond the painting's surface (*picture plane*). It starts from *picture plane* and recedes towards the *background plane*.



4. Botticelli. Pallas and the Centaur.

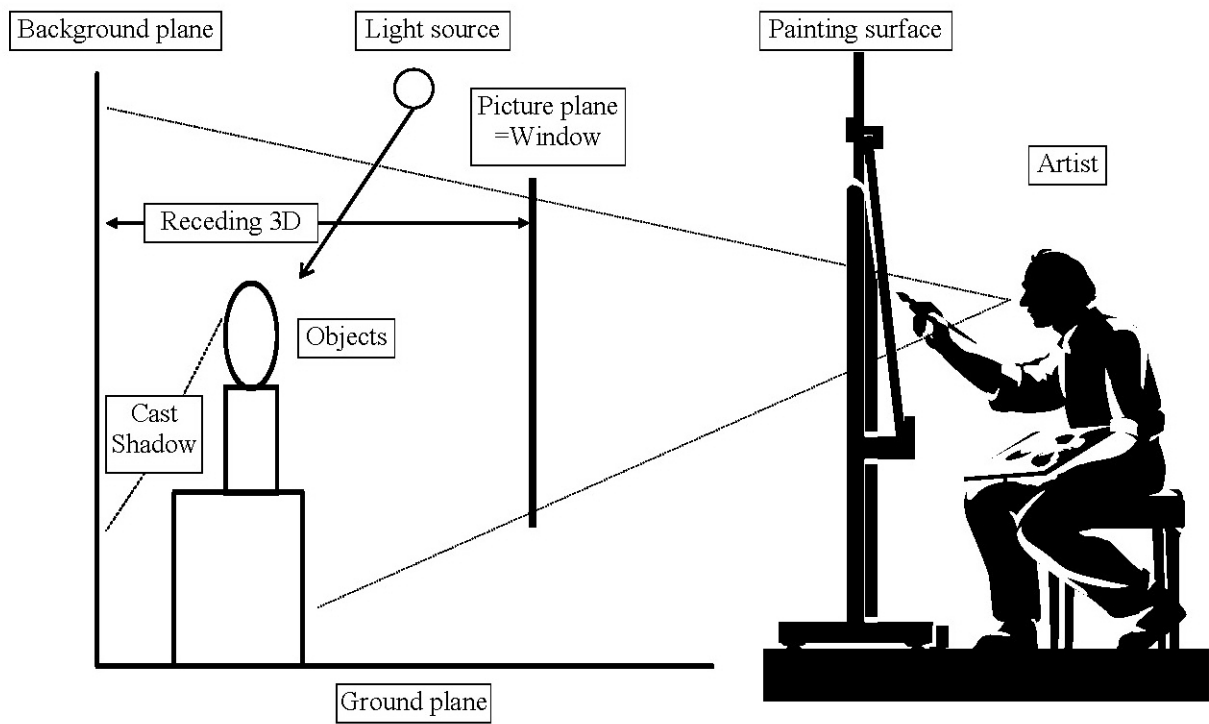


Diagram 1.

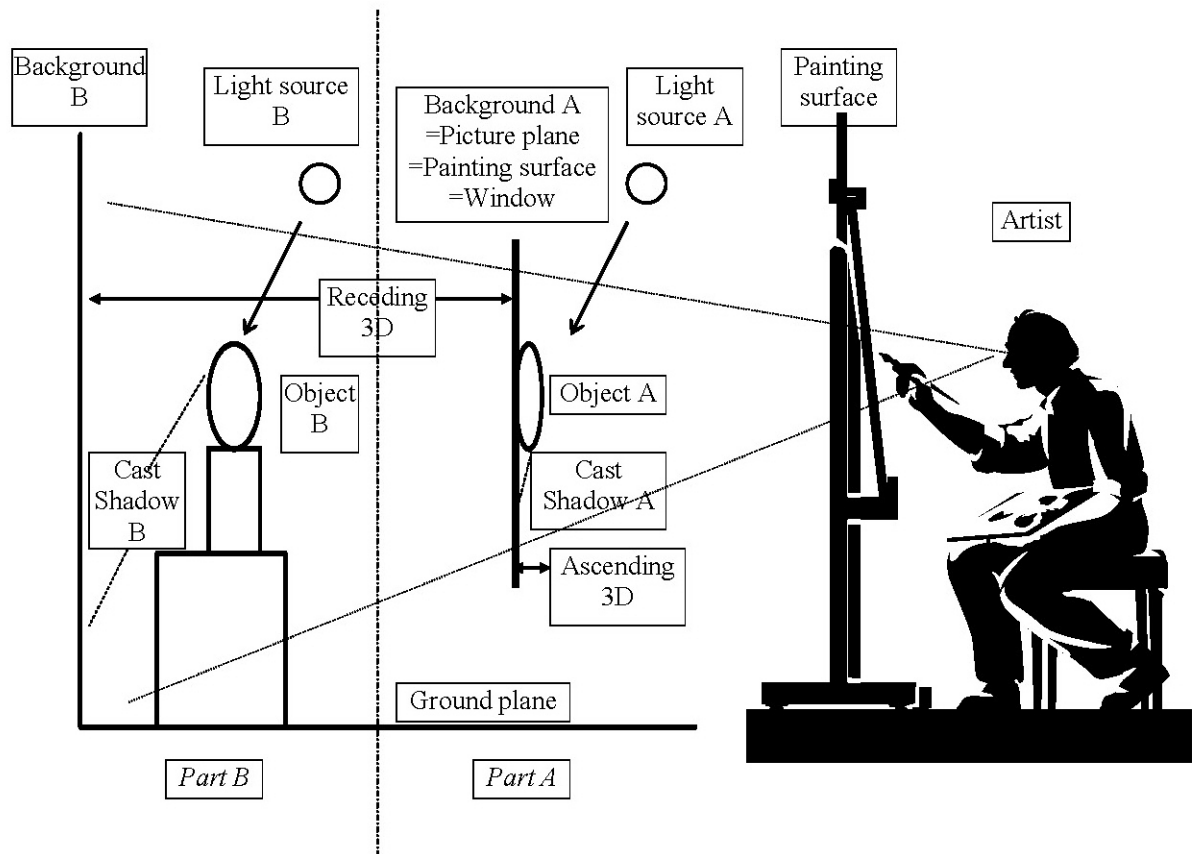


Diagram 2.

## DIAGRAM 2

This diagram is critical in showing my notion of mixing different systems of space representation. In *part A* of this diagram, I imagine there is a thing (*object A*) hanging on the *picture plane* (or the window frame). A light source (*A*) comes from the top of it producing a cast shadow (*A*) on this plane. This object has an illusion of a forward dimension, which I call *Ascending 3D*. However, we still can see a receding third dimensional world with its own light source (*B*) beyond this picture plane as shown in *part B*. Therefore the existence of *object A* and its cast shadow (*A*) shows the existence of the picture plane by effectively converting a three-dimensional world (shown in *part B*) into a two-dimensional flat surface as shown in picture plane. This becomes the background of *object A* (*background A*).

Note that the *object A* and *B* may be different, or sometimes indeed identical (as shown in Rene Magritte's painting The Human Condition, (illus. 5), their cast shadows are different due to the different position of their light sources. The *cast shadow A* is immediately underneath the *object A*, suggesting it is directly against the *background A*. The *shadow B* is, however, casting on the *ground plane*, suggesting *object B* is a free standing object. Therefore, a viewer will be able to tell the spatial circumstances of an object by mainly observing the shape and position of its *cast shadow*. If an object has two different cast shadows, it will be difficult to state which environment it sits in. It will also have an ambiguous space occupation: if it is *object A*, it will show an ascending third dimension; if it is *object B*, a receding third dimension.

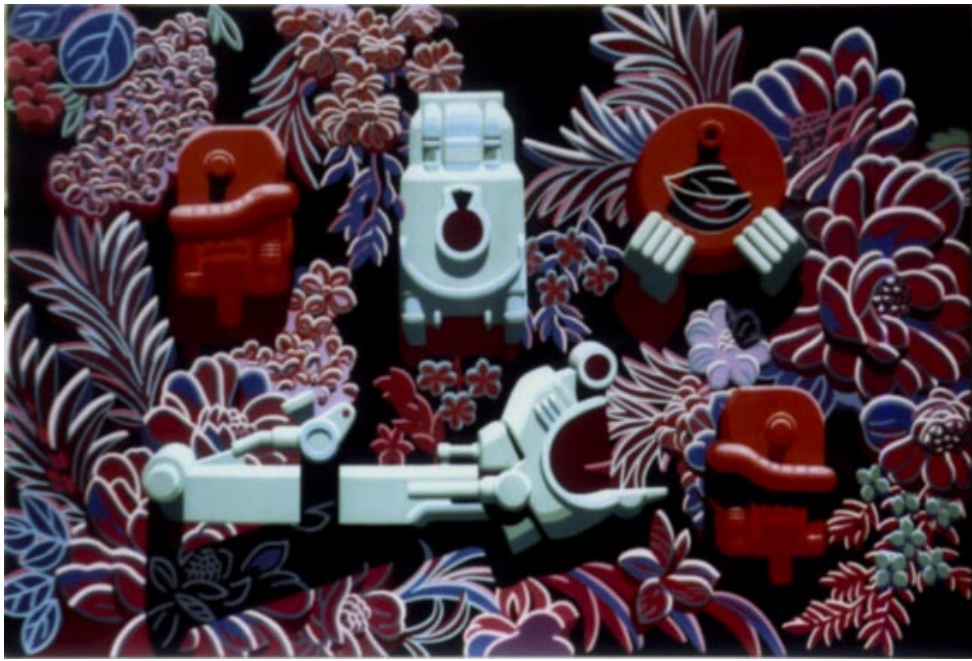


5. Rene Magritte: The Human Condition.

Nevertheless, the method used by the artist here is of no fundamental difference to the method used in diagram 1, that is to copy the reality—what the artist sees—faithfully.

The emphasis of the status of a cast shadow can sometimes go one step further: to change the *cast shadow* of an object. The playfulness of the cast shadow can be seen in my painting Descendants #2—A Shout In The Dark (illus. 6). I manipulate the cast shadows of the objects and background patterns in this painting to attract and irritate the viewer with the ambiguous effects innate to the work's simplicity. I transform the cast shadow into an object by changing its position, colour, density and shape. I also dramatise the mechanical figure, employing an anthropomorphic appearance to express human emotions.





6. Fan Dongwang, Descendants #2—A Shout In the Dark.

### DIAGRAM 3

This diagram goes one step further from diagram 2 by moving the *picture plane* backwards to the same position of the object. The object thus is half above the *picture plane* and half beyond, like an object floating on a water surface, emerging and submerging. The object has two cast shadows and both receding third dimension and ascending third dimension. Therefore the images of the body parts in my painting Descendants Bodies #1 (Blue) (illus. 7) are objects with space ambiguity.



7. Fan Dongwang, Descendant Bodies #1 (Blue)



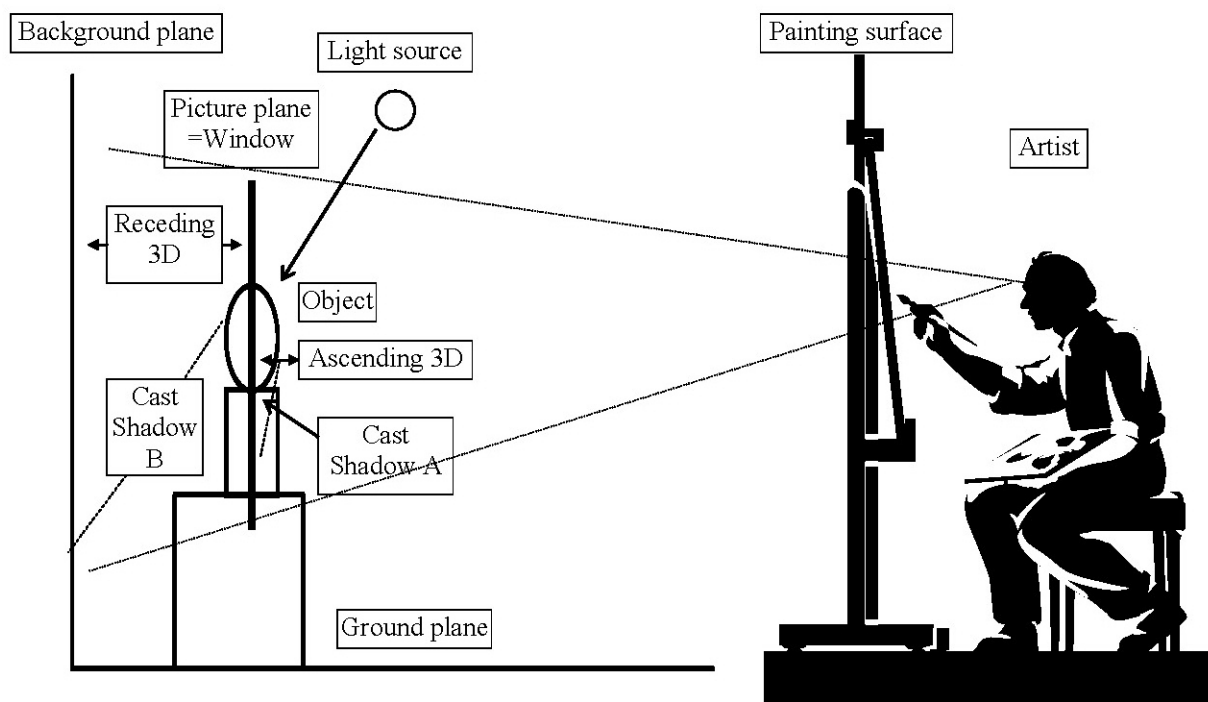


Diagram 3.

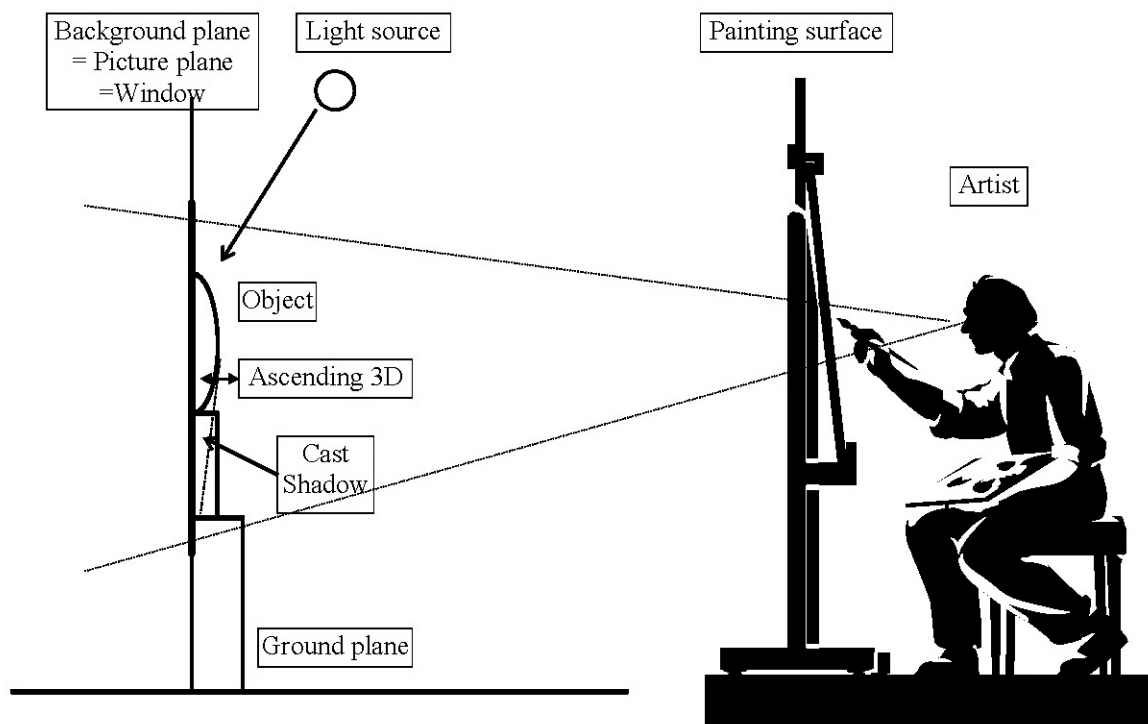


Diagram 4.

#### DIAGRAM 4

This diagram goes another step further from diagram 3: the *background plane* comes forward to the position of the *picture plane*. There is nothing with a descending dimension (*Receding 3D*) which can be seen beyond this flat plane. The window frame turns into an enclosed background and may have decorative patterns on it. The whole picture is thus a flat surface of two-dimensions with the object embodying only a very limited ascending third dimension that is very similar to a lacquer or a wood relief carving. This effect can be seen in my painting Black Face (illus. 8).



8. Fan Dongwang. Black Face.

#### DIAGRAM 5

This diagram is based on diagram 2. The difference is that the *picture plane* is moving backwards to the same position of the *object B*, leaving the *object A* to pop up in front of the viewer, embodying a strong ascending third dimension. Note that it will have no *cast shadow A* showing in the painting because it is casting on the *ground plane* beyond the reach of the viewer's vision. On the other hand, the *object B* is floating half above the *picture plane* and half beyond with its two cast shadows (*B* and *C*) and has both a receding third dimension and a limited ascending third dimension showing.

## DIAGRAM 6

This diagram shows how the Chinese lacquer work or relief carving can be viewed with shifting perspective. If we assume the position of the *picture plane* is on the surface of the carving, then we can see the object becomes a two-dimensional flat surface with a slightly receding third dimension. Because the *picture plane* is very close to the *background plane*, that receding third dimension is very limited especially when the carving is illuminated from above and has small cast shadows on its rough surface.

If the picture plane is moving towards the position of the background, the receding third dimension will change into a limited ascending third dimension, as showing in diagram 7.

What is remarkable about this system (for example see a picture of a Chinese Ching jade carving, illus. 9) is that the consideration of receding third dimension and ascending third dimension simultaneously comes into play. The image's structure had to convey two kinds of third dimensions. One was a traditional Chinese shifting perspective similar to that of the Chinese landscape painting (if in a case of Renaissance painting it was a receding third dimension) showing in the composition of the work. The other was the ascending third dimension, showing how to arrange layers of different images according to their space positions—with the nearest at the top (surface) and the most distanced at the bottom (underneath). Because the whole thing was flat, there was not enough space (layers) for everything, this arrangement must be very effective and volume must be kept compact. In my opinion, it had a very limited ascending third dimension. Hence sometimes clouds could be seen closer to the viewer (more accurately to the picture plane) than a human figure, but it still suggested the clouds were further away than the figure.



9. Chinese Ching dynasty carved Jade brush pot. Eighteenth century.



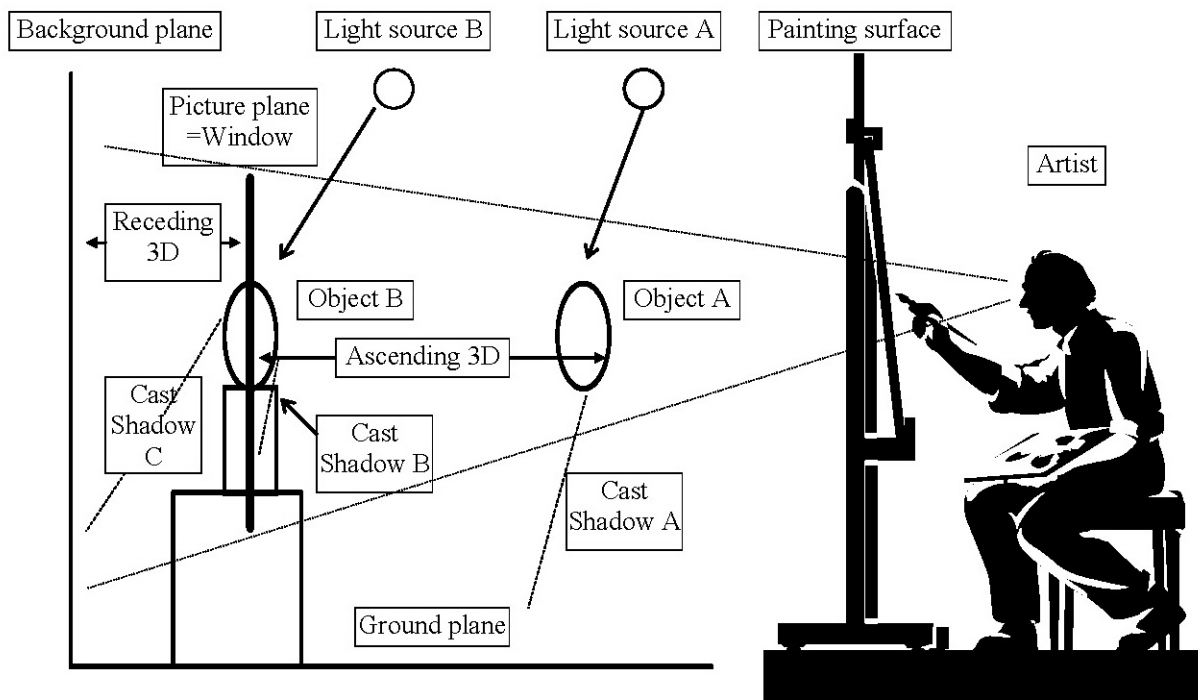


Diagram 5.

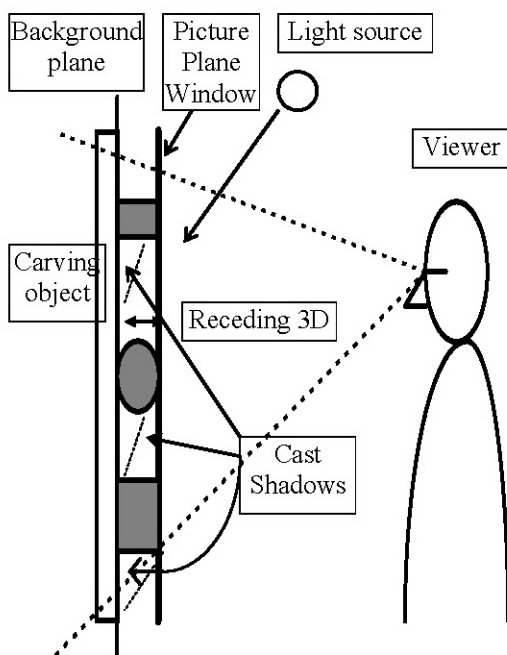


Diagram 6.

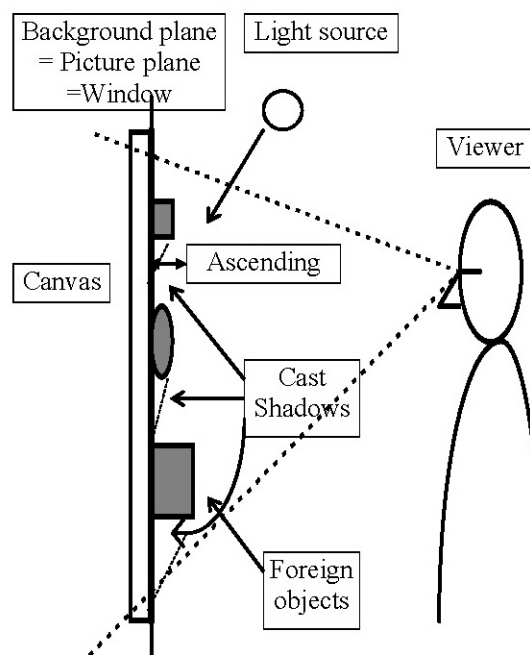


Diagram 7.

## DIAGRAM 7

This diagram can be used to explain some of the Cubist oil painting that incorporated foreign objects into flat canvas surface. Collage was formed by attaching foreign materials (ropes, papers, etc.) onto the picture in combination (synthesis) with painted surfaces. Although the works remained fragmented and flat, a limited ascending third dimension was introduced.

My work Descendants #4—Sculptural Painting (illus. 10) is such a construction identical to the Cubist oil painting. This work is a kind of *Sculptural Painting*—wood sculptures being placed on top of a painted background. It forms the basic notion of my painting: *a painting is a flat surface with 3D objects on top of it*. When a light source comes above it, a cast shadow of the sculptural object will appear on the flat painted surface (background) underneath the object. Because the work is sometimes also a painting with painted cast shadows, the real cast shadow and false cast shadow form the object's ambiguous identities. However, in my other paintings there are no actual 3D objects on the canvas, the object itself is a *painted object*. Therefore, the cast shadow of that object is a *painted cast shadow*.



10. Fan Dongwang. Descendants #3—Sculptural Painting.

## DIAGRAM 8

In painting, structures that are even more complex can be achieved by exploring the rich potentials of this method of mixing different systems of space representation. It is the partial and tilted *background plane A* in this diagram that makes its structure looks far more complex than that of the others. The *object A, B, and C* are identical in shape but different in space appearance due to their different positions. The *light source A* makes the cast shadows of all these

three objects different. Because the *background plane A* is incomplete, the *object A* has no cast shadow showing within the picture frame and it pops up in front of the viewer embodying a strong ascending third dimension. *Object B* rests both on the top of *picture plane* and *background plane A*. It is floating half above the picture plane and half beyond with its shadow casts on the top of the picture plane and immediately underneath the object itself. It has only a limited ascending third dimension. *Object C* is resting on an inclined *background plane A* and has *shadow C* casts on the top of the *background plane A* that is immediately underneath the object itself. From this point of view, it may have a limited ascending third dimension. It is also behind the picture plane, therefore it is in the area of receding third dimension. This shows its space uncertainty and ambiguity. Moreover, *object D* is far away in the area of receding third dimension. The comparison between it and the *object A* is very indeterminate. These complex visual effects can be seen in my painting Shifting Perspective and Bodies #—Bardi Madonna (illus. 11).



11. Fan Dongwang. Shifting Perspective and Bodies #—Bardi Madonna.



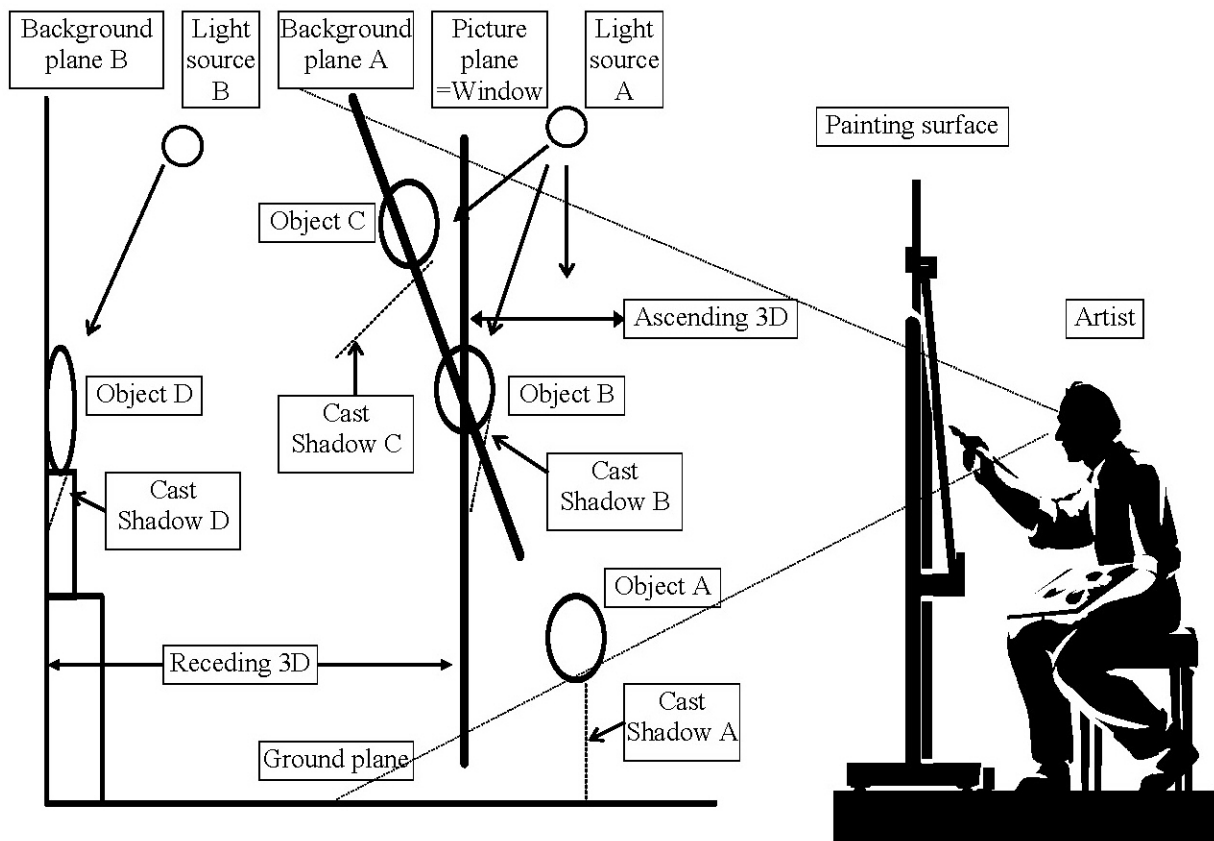


Diagram 8.

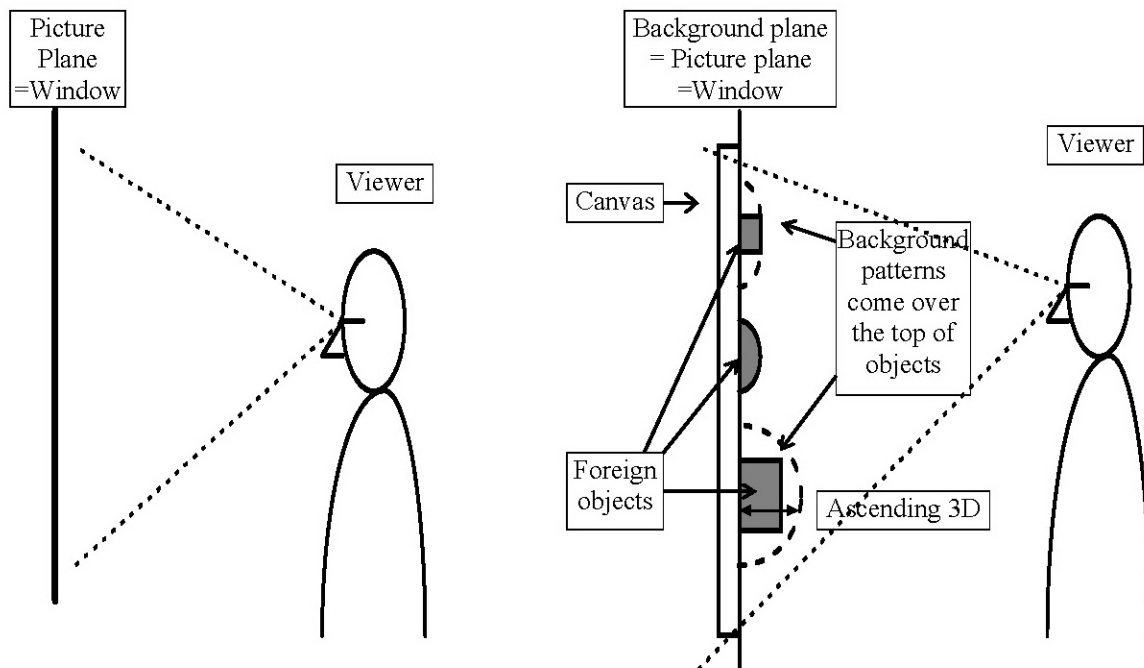


Diagram 9.

Diagram 10.

## DIAGRAM 9

This diagram shows the simple two-dimensional perspective system in Chinese painting as well as the modernist western abstract painting and Photorealism. Here a painting is simply viewed as a two-dimensional flat surface disregarding whatever images or perspective it portrays. This is true with all paintings without three-dimensional objects sticking on top of them. As I discussed early in relation to Photorealism, artists may “copy” photos exactly onto the canvases with little regard of the contents. The idea is that a painting is a painting, that is, a flat surface filled with paint. *How to copy*, to fill this surface, is more important than *what to copy*. This surface also can be filled with any collage of *ready-made* images regardless of their social contents. In sum, to paint a picture is simply to “copy” whatever we “see or made” onto a flat surface using the paint.

## DIAGRAM 10

This diagram comes from diagram 4. It shows how the background patterns change into objects and the objects to background. Suppose a two-dimensional decorative or abstract painting has no perspective, and its image (pattern) stays on the painting surface. Consequently the *background plane* equals its *picture plane*, and there is no space between them. If we then put a three-dimensional object on top of the *painting surface*, as if it is hanging on top of the *background plane*, we have a *two-dimensional picture plane* with a *three-dimensional object* above it. This object would show an ascending third dimension and display a sculptural volumetric character, while the background embodies a pictorial illusion of the surrounding space.

When the background patterns (either decorative or abstract imagery) become alive (being painted) over the top of objects, the patterns themselves become objects and the objects underneath them become backgrounds. At that moment there is another background created beneath the objects. This phenomenon is described by Krauss as the *fourfold visual field* (*The Optical Unconscious* 14).<sup>5</sup> This effect can be seen in my work *Descendants #1—Red Environment* (illus. 12). There are several contrasting aspects to the work, especially in the relationship between the objects and background. Two techniques are integrated to narrate various cultural characters. The objects in *Descendants* reflect the new high technology of Western culture, while the red brocade used as the background reflects the traditional eastern culture. The cultural interference is also represented by the flowers that come alive over the top of the objects. Thus the background becomes object, object becomes background, and a second background is created underneath, suggesting a diverse cultural environment.

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 1—*The Western Vision, A Modernist Return, The Shifting Perspective of Objects and Background*.



12. Fan Dongwang. Descendants #1—Red Environment

## A Visual Solution—Shadow Perspective

*Painting and sculpture are but images,  
Are merely shadows cast by outward things  
On stone or canvas, having in themselves  
No separate existence.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82), U.S. poet.

The *Shadow Perspective* is the result of the shifting perspective I explored in my paintings. It is based on the notion of *Sculptural Painting*—that is to look at the painting as if it is a combination of a painted two-dimensional background and three-dimensional objects sticking onto its surface. Painting and sculpture are the two aspects manipulated in my *sculptural paintings*. Painting is a branch of the visual arts in which colour is applied to various surfaces to create a representational or abstract picture or design. Meanwhile, sculpture (Latin *sculpere*, “to carve”) is a three-dimensional art concerned with the formation and organisation of masses and volumes. These two types of art forms, *painting* and *sculpture*, have been combined in the traditional Chinese relief carving which can be said was the precedent of my *sculptural painting*.



The importance attached to depth as a pictorial element is highly valued in my art, because depth is used as a tool to enhance the poetic quality of a painting. In producing these paintings, I am interested in the rendering of three-dimensional space, but also the concern in painting is for surface relationships, the pure decorative elegance. In my work, the spatial relationships are of great importance, but are comparatively elementary, a diffused perspective. In representing depth, the distance is only suggested. The figures, having their volumetric character, are contained within cogent spatial void areas, which is accomplished by emphasising the distinctness of the background plane and by placing decorative flowers in the front of the scene as reference points. I represent the background in flat colour and pattern to formulate a conceptual idea of space, which was depicted as an ambiguous background that normally does not extend beyond the picture plane. However, in some circumstances it does extend beyond or even above the painting surface.

While engaged in exploring the full potential of rendering space and volume to create a comprehensive perspective system, this method is not mathematical and is not devised as an exercise in abstract geometrical rationality. Rather, it serves aesthetic and symbolic purposes. It allows for the clear presentation of the space ambiguity resulting in the rendering of the effects of light and cast shadow.

My images thus are made up of two parts: the *objects* (figures) on the top of their *background* (the painting surface). In the painting, the objects have the illusion that they are simultaneously inside space, and on the top of, or even above the painting surface. Likewise, the background patterns have the illusion that they are both the patterns on the painting surface and the objects inside space. This is achieved by creating a *conceptual cast shadow* along with the objects. In these paintings, the objects (figures) have two cast shadows. One is the *traditional shadow* casting on the ground, suggesting the position of the object beyond painting surface (inside the receding third dimensional space). The other is a created *conceptual shadow* casting on the top of the flat surface (or *picture plane*) and beside the object, suggesting the position of the object on or above the top of the painting surface. Thus, by changing the characteristic result of the cast shadows of the objects I created a double character of the spatiality of the painting's objects and their background. The ambiguous spatiality is made up of recognisable common readings of individual elements in conjunction with their contradicting occupation of the level of the space. This provides viewers with the possibility to switch their perception between the different readings. In doing so they become entangled in the puzzle, with something real that is not possible. The manipulation of the perceptual readings provides the elements of the painting with a flatness along with extra dimension or depth (either receding or ascending third dimension), and a spatiality with ambiguity. This extends and develops the idea that a painting is either a representation of three-dimensional perspective (the traditional notion of a painting), or a purely two-dimensional surface structure without perspective (abstract painting). I establish my visual language through the manipulation of the image's interrelationship with its environment. This visual language is crucial in dealing with the body image, and the manipulation of spatial structures becomes an aesthetic statement of my artwork. My painting After Botticelli (Pallas And The Centaur) #1 (illus. 13) is an example of such a visual play.



13. Fan Dongwang. After Botticelli (Pallas And The Centaur) #1

John Updike said, “We live down here among shadows, shadows among shadows”.<sup>6</sup> As an object, the body image includes its cast shadow. Cast shadow is thus becoming an important part of the body image, a reference point for the body, and a tool to explain the status of the body. Li Bai’s poem *Drinking Alone under Moonlight* (172-3) reinforced this assumption. However, cast shadow had been ignored by Chinese painters, because firstly, they regarded cast shadow as transitory and insignificant. Secondly, the shifting perspective did not permit cast shadow to have its fixed position. In my painting, however, different ways of cast shadow are the results of shifting perspectives, are the different ways to depict space and body.<sup>7</sup> We can change our background by projecting shadows (images) differently. To some extent, background is controlled by the cast shadow of the body. The background also controls the cast shadow of the body, and thus controls the whole body image. Body image itself is not complete and we can judge the body by its cast

<sup>6</sup> John Updike (b. 1932), U.S. author, critic. “The Statesman Buchanan,” in *Buchanan Dying*, act 1 (1974).

<sup>7</sup> My painting is thus a combination of west and east art.

shadow to see its social status. A new way of thinking the body is to watch its shadow or shadows. Every body has a shadow, and some bodies have a *double shadow*, a double and ambiguous identity.

Hence, this is my viewing system that can be called a *shadow perspective*—a perspective that is determined by the cast shadows of the objects. An object represented in a painting's two dimensions, width and height, may give the impression of having depth as well. This impression is an optical illusion, an imitation of certain visual phenomena. The factors affecting depth are largely variable. An object in the space is represented by its outline, areas of light and shade, colour and cast shadow. This last consideration is the most defined aspect of space in my work. The effect of light upon the position of the cast shadow constitutes the position of the object in the space. The different positions of the cast shadows show the relationship between objects and their background. The observer combines what is known with what is observed, and with reasoning the position of objects within a scene may be cogently and accurately rendered.

The great appeal of this shadow perspective system is that it enables me to present an assemblage of divergent perspective systems to produce an incomplete and irrational microcosm of the universe, where different forms could be shown together without mathematical exactitude in relation to their surroundings. Since my depicted scene is not intended to convey universal truth, but only a few aspects of that truth, it is incumbent upon me to indicate that space continued infinitely beyond the pictured scene. My painting thus becomes the reflection of a universal truth, which is only partially completed to achieve an illusion of depth and volume.

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