

Two Sides of the Story

Helena Hadala · Deng Ming-Dao



2019—2021

Look, it cannot be seen—it is beyond form.
Listen, it cannot be heard—it is beyond sound.
Grasp, it cannot be held—it is intangible.

—Lao-tzu

“Two Sides of the Story”

The twenty-four oil paintings in this series created over a three-year period, are numbered in chronological order and are intentionally untitled. In this body of work, each individual composition elicits my perceptual world and at the same time permits contemplation to become visible and take on tangible form. The paintings, a type of visual haiku, are individual expressions of my inner life and reflect an attempt to understand the physical world as spiritual awareness. My colleague, Taoist poet and author, Deng Ming-Dao, has written a poetic response to each painting. The synergy of my images paired with Ming-Dao's text generates alchemy and the composite of disciplines add a second layer to the story.

*Helena Hadala
April 2022*

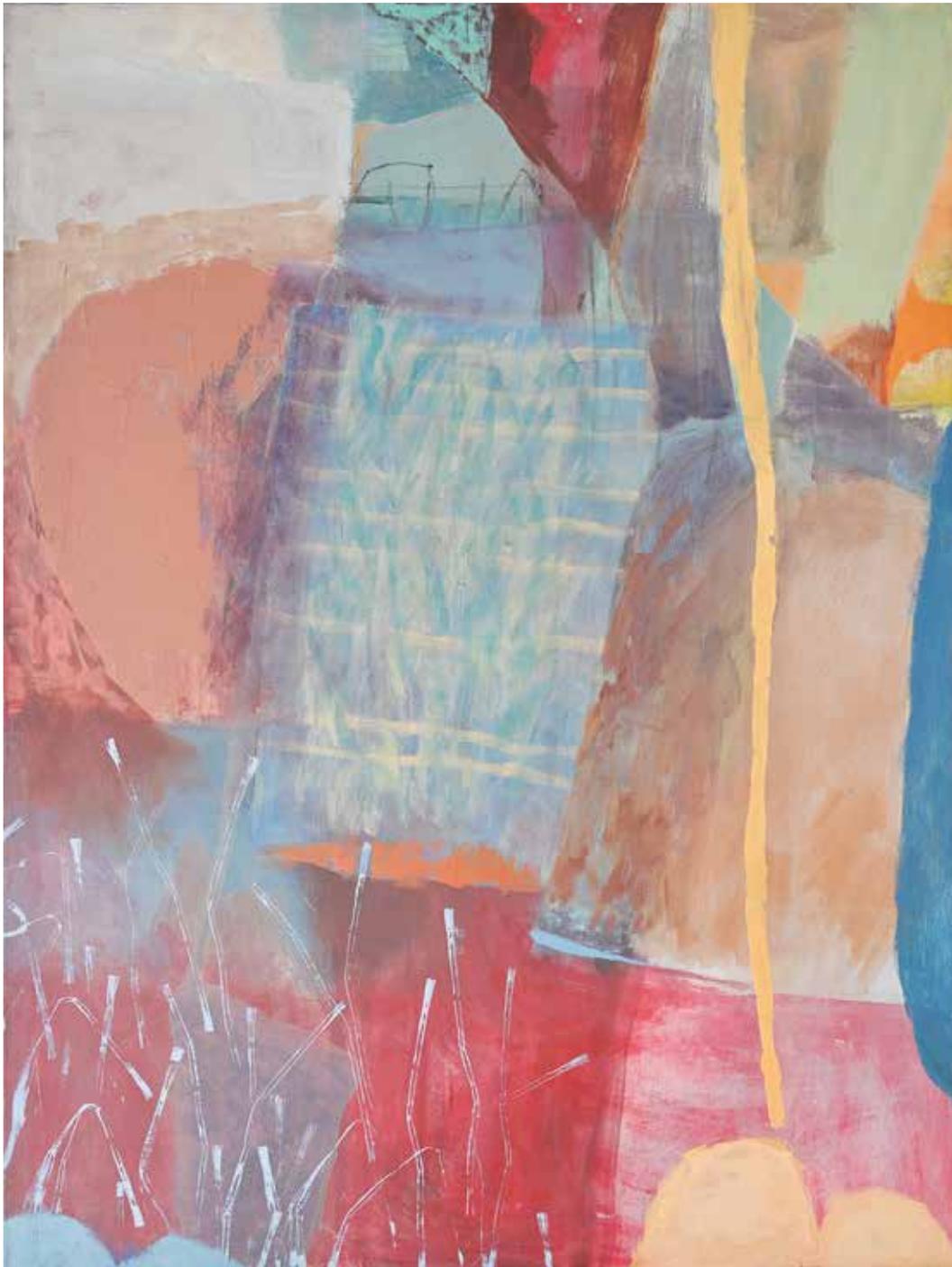


Two Sides of the Story #3 ©2019 32" x 24" (81 cm x 61 cm)

A hiss. A gurgle. A sigh like the approach of a distant army. The water boils and you lift the lid. Bubbles rise from the bottom. You squint but you cannot see where they begin. They roil the surface, set the once clear water into a frenzy. You chopped bamboo and made this dipper. How many summers ago was that? Time is like the wake of a ship. Pick up the dipper now, and let it into the water.

How the bubbles always rise. The unseen has its own direction, pressure, and moves because it's round. One stream of bubbles divides left and right.

—*Deng Ming-Dao*



Two Sides of the Story #6 ©2019 48" x 36" (122 cm x 92 cm)

Drink. Your thirst is more than animal. It's the need of an empty throat. It's the yearning of a weary heart. Open your hands. They have done decades of labor. They have caressed lovers. They have buried your parents. They have held your newborn child. They have been pressed in prayer. They have planted seeds. Let them be open now. Let them go slack. Unless they open, how can they close later around your prayer book?

How we strive to open and close our fingers, even when our blue fingers scratch in the dark.

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #7 ©2019 22" x 30" (56 cm x 76 cm)

The bronze incense burner stands on three legs. Its belly is round and full. It's topped with a crouching lion. And yet, without the interior to hold the ash and incense and the holes in the top, the censer would have no function. Match sputters, the tip smolders. You close the lid and smoke rises into the air. You feel no breeze and yet the patterns are like writhing dragons. Do they reveal patterns you can't see? Or do they have volition? The scent is supposed to carry your prayers to heaven—yes, that dark underside of mystery. What will tomorrow bring? What will your future be?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #2 ©2019 22" x 30" (56 cm x 76 cm)

Strike a match. The flame flares. The sunset wind shakes the windows, but you look up and cannot see it. You shiver, your reaction is without thought. Shielding your right hand with your left, you light the tinder in the black hearth, fill the iron kettle, and wait with eyes closed. Memory shimmers up from your gut into your heart and head, colors vivid as a summer's day, but when you open your eyes, the room is nearly black.

Tomorrow, the sun will rise again. Between then and now, what is behind the screen?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #15 ©2020 28" x 24" (71 cm x 61 cm)

When you were young, you felt that you roamed the world as a hero. By old age, glory lost all its meaning. You thought that you could fit into the world like a key. You thought that all the puzzles in the world could be unlocked and recomposed into a supreme sutra. You thought that you would build your own golden pavilion, surrounded by a garden that was an ideal version of the whole world—with you the lord in the clouds. Now you don't care if you have less than a beggar who sleeps under a bridge. You bypass the king's palace and meditate by graves. Instead of putting gold into your own coffers, you toss offerings to ghosts.

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #8 ©2019 18" x 24" (46 cm x 61 cm)

Rain. A whisper builds until the roof tiles rattle from the onslaught. You huddle closer to the hearth and drag a table closer. You unwrap the silk, careful not to touch what's inside. You were entrusted with this prayer book. It should have gone into storage with all the other treasures, but before he died, your teacher somehow ordered it lent to you. Others objected. You were a householder. But he silenced them with a look and they bowed. Too precious to be sullied by your fingers, you turn the pages with tweezers. The pages are already altered: involuntary tear stains from previous readers pucker the paper. You are old, and yet these lofty words have yet to release all their wisdom. You have to go back to them daily. Each time you receive a glimmer of meaning—and afterward, the book's mystery still stretches to every direction.

Outside, the rain soaks the earth, yet in your heart, how does a fire still burn?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #9 ©2019 24" x 26" (61 cm x 66 cm)

The name of a past master heads the page. You've always read it without thinking of its meaning. The name combines two pictograms: "no" and "door." Tonight, you stop, and you look at your own door: framed in wood at perfect right angles. A simple rectangle you've never considered either. What does the name mean? Does it mean that there isn't a door? Or that it's a door to what is not? Or that the door is the "not" of the wall? Or does it mean that the emptiness of the door is different from the emptiness of the room? Tonight, meaning after meaning passes through your mind.

As you go in and out of doors, you ask whether you're always the same.

—Deng Ming-Dao

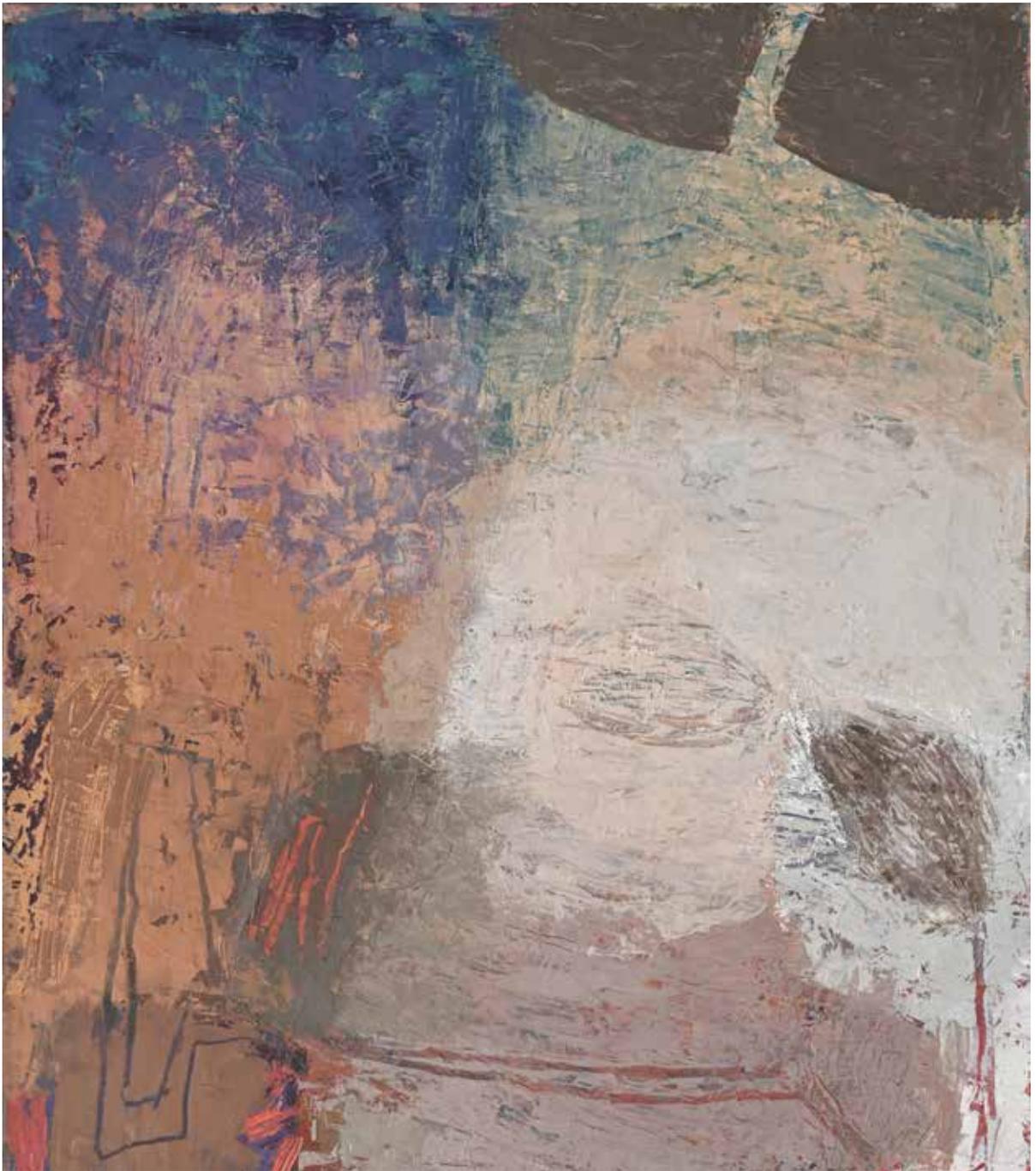


Two Sides of the Story #1 ©2019 45" x 72" (114 cm x 183 cm)

Blue sky: empty. No one on the road: the earth seems empty. Cold water splashes on stone: look in the bucket and nothing seems to be there. Look into the well and it is black. Walk up the steps alone. Walk down the veranda where nothing blocks your way. Enter the room, and bow to no person.

Behind you, one blade of grass sprouts where yesterday there was none. How the blue moves with us.

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #5 ©2019 24" x 20" (61 cm x 51 cm)

Green tea. Well water. Whisked into a froth in a clean bowl. How wonderfully the whisk does its job. Not a single tine asks anything in return. Not a single motion traps the liquid. None of the tea is absorbed. And yet the whisk does its job admirably as no other implement could do. Why? It is hollow.

Since even a mosquito's wings can stir a typhoon, we must live without disturbing even a gnat.

—*Deng Ming-Dao*



Two Sides of the Story #10 ©2020 48" x 36" (122 cm x 92 cm)

You take up your prayer beads. As soon as you touch them, you feel their dark color spreading into your fingers. Your hand slips through the loop as you've done countless times. You pause to feel the beads instead of rushing on to your prayers. Maybe the point is not the finishing of the cycles. Maybe it's to turn with that cycle. A loop enclosing nothing. You check the cord because you dread breaking that circle. Then you notice: without a hole through each bead, nothing could be strung.

Don't you need an opening to be strung on divine breath?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #4 ©2019 24" x 36" (61 cm x 92 cm)

Pour boiling water into the bowl you prepared. The pottery has been chipped and mended. It rubs its grit against your skin. It's as old and rough as you feel now. Youth is even more distant than the furthest mountain on the hazy horizon, and yet, to your astonishment, anger can still flare faster than the match and hotter than the steaming water. How much farther do you have to go? Look at the other horizon, equally smeared in the dimming light.

The world is endless. Who stands at the center?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #11 ©2020 24" x 32" (61 cm x 81 cm)

An urge rises inside you. Images from your past rise as drawings in your heart. Alarmed, you try to press them down, but they keep bursting upward. This isn't right. You're aiming for serenity. Something breaks. Tears stream down your face. You push the book aside, fearful of soiling it. The ducts of your eyes burn. Your chest heaves. Your lungs ache. Something is leaving you.

We must empty ourselves before anything else can enter.

—*Deng Ming-Dao*



Two Sides of the Story #17 ©2020 42" x 48" (107 cm x 122 cm)

Several graves of famous people are within the temple's walls. Over the centuries, their families endowed their memorials, some even commissioning massive chapels and leaving funds for prayers and services in perpetuity. The walls of the temple were first raised seven centuries ago. You marvel at the sense of time and the faith in the future held by past generations. They saw time stretching well beyond their own deaths. You finish sweeping and bow. You ask for no blessing in return. You only serve.

When we bend our backs for others, we ask for nothing in return. And yet, are we are different afterward.

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #16 ©2020 34" x 45" (86 cm x 114 cm)

Yesterday, you met an old woman on the road. You bowed to each other. She asked where you were going. You pointed to this place. She nodded, and gave you a rice ball wrapped in a lotus leaf. You bowed again and blessed her. Her smile was like being dusted in sugar. You wondered who knew more about holiness.

If a householder could best a deity in debate, what does status matter? When feet trod the muddy path, what importance is there in the name of their owner?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #19 ©2021 52" x 71" (132 cm x 180 cm)

Drizzle. A shaft of light from one of the buildings falls across your path. The drops fly at you. Some strike your face. You came here for solitude. Even in a community, there are many hours to be by yourself. Are you lonely? When you talk in your heart, it's as if there are two. There are so many drops running down your face that you couldn't count them. What will it be if there are no footsteps left to disturb the earth? You can feel the shaking from feet, cars, even the wind. Your heart never stops beating. The hollows of your lungs never cease to fill and empty. The impulses of your mind prick time. Your face is damp—covered by a liquid mask.

How many are you? And do you really want to know what it is to be one

—Deng Ming-Dao

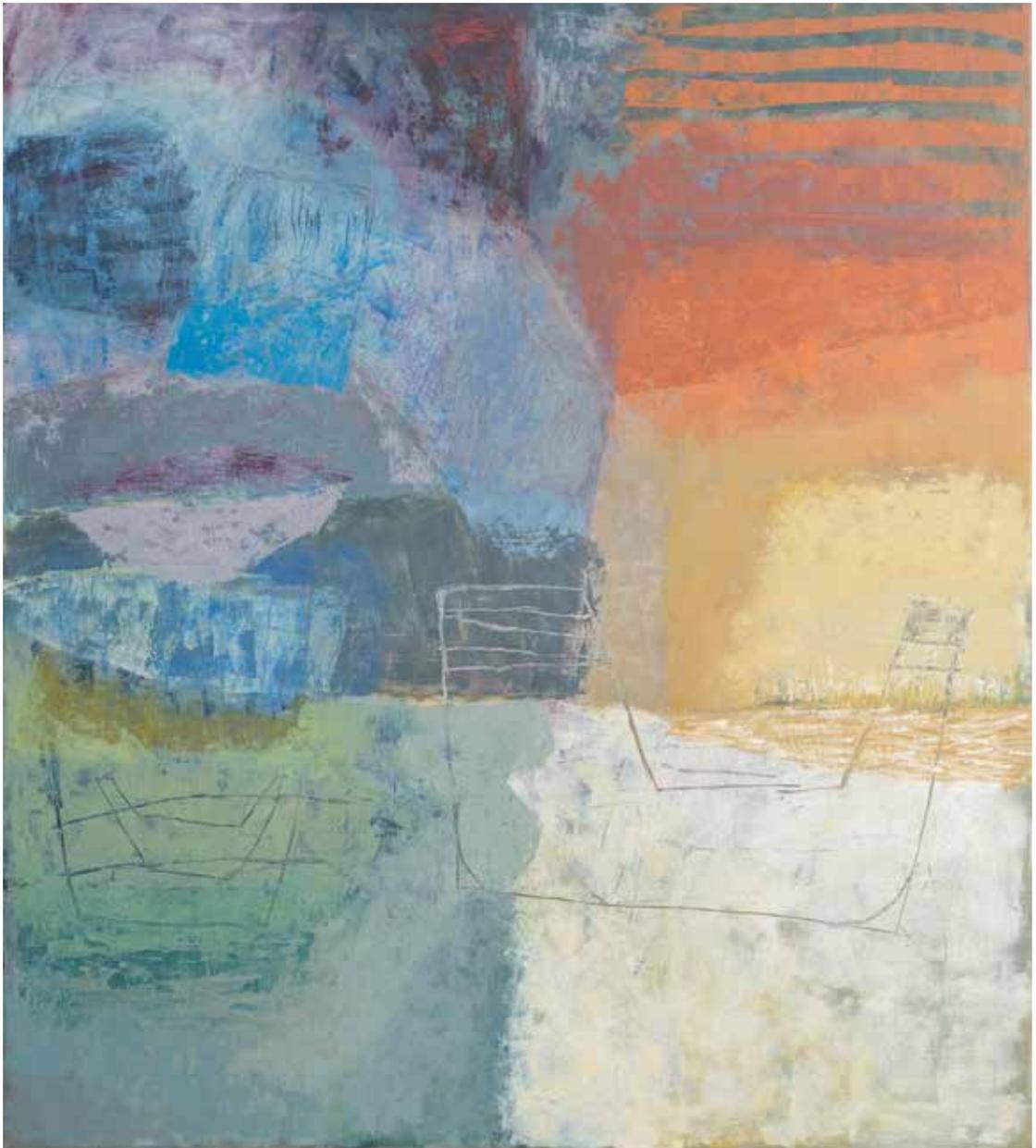


Two Sides of the Story #13 ©2019 24" x 22" (61 cm x 81 cm)

For some reason, you think of zero. You use beads so you can complete a cycle without counting mentally. You don't usually notice that you use only positive numbers. No one counts beads backward. But tonight, you stop to consider the idea of numbers in your spirituality. When you put your beads away, will they keep counting? No. You are the counter. Whenever the beads lie unused as an empty loop —is that zero? You go on with the rest of your life without the option of ever waking up to yesterday.

The rest of your life counts.

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #21 ©2021 48" x 42" (122 cm x 107 cm)

One of your teacher's attendants finds you. The teacher wants you to find someone up in the mountains above the city. The student gives you an envelope, advises you to get food from the kitchen, and gives you a crudely drawn map. You're astonished. You had all sorts of plans. Aren't there phones? Isn't there email? Wherever you look, there is the beauty of the temple grounds—but not a single person in sight. No one seems to be there to give you any guidance. You trudge out the back gate, through the streets, and in an hour, reach the edge of the city. A granite post is carved with the words, "Lion's Peak Trail." You look up the deserted path.

When the path has no tracks, how forlorn the prospects. How do you tread a way without knowing what you're doing?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #12 ©2020 20" x 24" (51 cm x 61 cm)

An hour later, you pick your beads again. You feel the first one in your fingers. It's rubbed smooth. You want to keep this strand for the rest of your life. But then, you linger on that first bead. It's round. It matches all the others. But its place on the circle is always the same. Same size, same position, but unique. That's a lesson you hold in your open hand. Are you supposed to keep going on your path, through all the turns and distances? Or are you supposed to feel the world move around you?

We turn the circle and yet, do we need to go anywhere?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #20 ©2021 52" x 71.5" (132 cm x 182 cm)

Broken sunlight the next morning. The clouds still have gray underbellies. They will gather again. That is good. Without rain, there can be no rice, and without rice, there could be no civilization. You see your shadow and are brought up short. Without trying, you have created another. Some childish thought comes to you: but this “friend” disappears at night. The adult retorts: that’s why it takes the brilliance of knowledge to reveal the truth. You halt. Even in your mind, you have just created another who debates you. You sigh. Here’s a problem to bring to your teacher. But then, isn’t he another too?

How can two ever make one?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #14 ©2020 24" x 26" (61 cm x 66 cm)

There are several stones nearby, placed there centuries ago. When the imperial palace was sacked by a warlord, somehow the stones were set here. Was it to save material? Was it a defiant preservation of the murdered lord? Was it because they were cursed by violence, impervious to blood but sponges to hatred? Were they put here to bring peace in a world poisoned by turmoil? Tomorrow, you will sweep the leaves from their surface. Day after day, they will remain hard and radioactive. After you have returned to the earth, another will sweep them, and another, and another.

In undoing the foundations of conflict, don't we have endless ambition but scant days?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #23 ©2021 52" x 71.5" (132 cm x 182 cm)

Inside the cypress box, it was dark. Inside the temple walls, it is dark. Inside the bronze bell, it is dark. Now the city is covered in darkness, which even the street lights can do no more than hold their circumference. About 1.5 million people live in the surrounding city. Each of their lives is like a silk scarf in the wind. They overlap. Some lives are seen through others. The colors blend.

Every movement causes something else to move. But inside, we can look at what doesn't move.

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #18 ©2020 42" x 48" (107 cm x 122 cm)

A gray heron lands. It regards you briefly, then doesn't bother to look again. You go on weeding. It seems not to blink. It is poised perfectly. You quiet your work, shifting on your knees. Your joints are stiffer than past years, but you're determined to go on. Every time you reach this spot, new weeds have sprouted. The crane darts its beak. Raising its head, it swallows. Then it looks at you before leaping upward, its wings magnificently spread against the dawning sky.

A myriad of possibilities are before us. We forge a chain by our choices.

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #22 ©2021 54" x 69" (132 cm x 183 cm)

You find this strange man with white hair and beard in a small hut surrounded by a sparse garden and bamboo fence. There's a temple in the distance. You wonder whether they support him somehow, but otherwise, he seems to be alone. When you see him, he's bent over a well, drawing up water. Bowing, you give him your letter of introduction. As you enter the one-room hut, you see and smell the wafting incense. It seems to be the only luxury in the nearly unfurnished room. He takes out a long box of cypress wood. Untying it he shows you a rolled-up scroll. It's calligraphy: One Day, One Chance. By the time you bring it to your teacher, night is falling.

Everything comes back, ripples reach the shore and return, swallows find their nests at dusk. If all returns, then where is the center?

—Deng Ming-Dao



Two Sides of the Story #22 ©2021 52" x 71" (52 cm x 182 cm)

The moon glows in the dark heavens. You go into the garden. The pine needles tremble in the breeze. You can hear the faint sound of cars over the temple wall. The bell drowns out the noise for a while, as if to call souls back into their bodies when they've been scattered by all the concerns of the city. You walk down the pathway, past the grave of a notable patron of the temple. A painter, someone told you, from two centuries before. The body may not last, but spirit and art do. When the time comes, you will be content to go to ash. You don't care if anyone saves your dust and prays over them for centuries. You've already seen darkness every day of your existence.

In the dark, you always know that the light will return, don't you?

—Deng Ming-Dao