WHY MUST STRENGTH BE HARD?

Softness, Relation, and the Practice of Painting

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Expert Insight submission · Curatone Art & Research Journal · 30 August 2026

Abstract

In contemporary culture, strength is often imagined through hardness: resistance, control, rupture, speed, certainty, and the capacity to impose form. My studio practice has led me toward a different question. Can strength also consist in the ability to remain responsive without becoming passive, to sustain relation under pressure, and to transform without surrendering judgment? This essay develops "softness" as a disciplined relational capacity emerging from painting rather than as a metaphor for gentleness. Watercolor provided the initial laboratory because water, pigment, paper, time, gravity, and the artist's decisions continuously alter one another. The painter cannot command this field absolutely, but neither can she abandon responsibility for selection, correction, stopping, and form. I connect this material experience to a broader philosophy developed across my writing: art as a relation with life; softness as the capacity of relations to continue and transform without depending on permanent confrontation; and the artist as one participant within a field she affects and for which she remains responsible. The argument is not against resistance. It asks what becomes possible after resistance, when creation must continue.

Keywords: softness; painting; relational agency; material process; watercolor; resilience

1. The problem with hardness

Strength has a visual vocabulary. It is frequently pictured as the straight line, the wall, the weapon, the monument, the decisive gesture, the body that does not bend. Even when the political content changes, the underlying grammar can remain surprisingly stable: to be strong is to withstand, defeat, occupy, master, or refuse.

Resistance has historical and ethical necessity. There are conditions in which refusal is indispensable. My question begins somewhere else: what happens when resistance becomes the only form through which strength can be recognized? A life cannot remain permanently at the pitch of confrontation. Nor can a studio practice. Creation requires duration. It requires the capacity to continue after a boundary has been asserted, after a rupture has exposed what was hidden, after the first decisive gesture has been made.

This problem became concrete for me through painting. Earlier in my practice, technical correctness could become a form of pressure. I could keep correcting an image, sharpening an edge, reinforcing a detail, trying to remove uncertainty. The result might become more accurate and less alive. In my book The Primacy of Softness, I use an earlier painting, Enthusiasm Fishing Port, to describe this paradox: the more completely uncertainty was controlled, the more the painting seemed to lose breath. The lesson was not that skill was unnecessary. It was that control had exceeded its useful boundary.

That distinction matters. Softness is not the absence of structure. It is not vagueness, weakness, compliance, or an aesthetic preference for delicacy. It is a way of maintaining structure without requiring total domination of everything that enters the relation.

2. Painting as a field of relation

Watercolor made this problem impossible for me to treat only as theory. Water moves. Pigment settles. Paper absorbs at different speeds. Humidity changes drying time. A wash can cross a boundary before a decision is complete. A mark that looked wrong at one moment can become structurally necessary after another layer arrives.

The artist is therefore neither sovereign controller nor passive spectator. She intervenes inside a field already in motion. She chooses the paper, mixture, pressure, sequence, scale, interval, and moment of stopping. Yet every choice enters conditions that answer back.

This is why I have come to think of the studio as a relational field. Artistic form does not arise from the artist alone, nor does it arise automatically from material. It emerges through repeated encounters among intention, matter, time, perception, accident, memory, and judgment.

The practical consequence is demanding. If I attempt to dominate every event, the work can become rigid. If I romanticize accident and accept everything the material produces, authorship disappears into arbitrariness. The difficult position lies between these extremes: remain open enough to receive what was not planned, but responsible enough to decide what belongs.

This is one reason I use the word “participant.” A participant is inside the event. Participation means being affected and producing effects. But participation does not erase responsibility. In a finished work, I remain responsible for what I retain, what I remove, what I integrate, what I correct, and where I stop.

3. Softness as disciplined agency

From this studio experience I began to formulate softness as a form of agency. Its strength is not measured by how completely it suppresses other forces. It is measured by whether a relation can bear difference, pressure, interruption, and change without simply collapsing or converting every difference into a battle.

In The Primacy of Softness I organize this thinking through five movements: Pause, Receive, Generate, Permeate, and Light. They are not a recipe for making a watercolor. They describe capacities I first encountered materially.

To pause is not to surrender action; it is to prevent reaction from becoming automatic. To receive is not to accept everything; it is to register what is actually present before imposing a predetermined answer. To generate is the point at which relation produces something that did not exist in either side alone. To permeate is to allow boundaries to become sites of exchange without pretending boundaries have disappeared. Light, for me, is both material and structural: it makes relations perceptible.

These operations also explain why I resist equating softness with femininity in a simplistic sense. My thinking grew partly from questions about women's creative experience, but softness cannot be reduced to a gendered personality trait. Calling women naturally soft would merely repeat an old stereotype. The concept becomes useful only when softness is understood as a capacity that can be practiced, tested, strengthened, and refused by anyone.

Nor does non-confrontation mean that conflict should be avoided at all costs. A boundary sometimes requires confrontation. The important distinction is whether opposition becomes a permanent ontology—whether the self needs an enemy in order to know that it has force. I am interested in forms of strength that can survive after the enemy disappears.

4. From representation toward vitality

This thinking has also changed the visual language of my work. I have not abandoned representation, and I do not describe the change simply as a move from realism to abstraction. That binary is too coarse for what happened.

My earlier paintings often began from observable environments: construction sites, landscape, infrastructure, ordinary encounters. Works such as Qianhai Green Curtain are rooted in specific places, but the subject is never only what the eye identifies. The green construction covering in Qianhai became interesting because it occupied several perceptual states at once: artificial protection, concealment, surface, terrain, almost vegetation. The painting records a built environment, but it also asks how material intervention changes what a place can look and feel like.

In newer works I allow recognizable form to recede further so that material behavior, boundary, pressure, bodily association, and relation can carry more of the experience. Mountain Body, for example, hovers between terrain and flesh. Facing Each Other organizes a relation between forms without resolving that relation into a single narrative. These works are not attempts to become "abstract" for stylistic reasons. They emerged because highly controlled representation was no longer sufficient for some of the experiences I wanted painting to hold.

The word I use more often is vitality. I am interested in whether a work can retain the sense that something is still taking place inside it—whether the viewer encounters not only a completed image but evidence of forces, decisions, resistances, intervals, and transformations that have not been flattened into a perfect surface.

5. Why process matters now

This question has become sharper in an era of rapidly generated images. I do not oppose artificial intelligence as a technology, and I do not think human painting gains value merely because a machine can also produce images. The more useful distinction concerns what kind of event an image allows us to encounter.

A generated image can present an extraordinarily persuasive result while much of its production remains inaccessible to the viewer. A physical painting can operate differently. Revision can remain visible. A covered mark can alter the surface even when it is no longer legible as an image. The edge of a wash records timing. A scraped or reinforced area records a decision. Scale records

bodily reach. Drying imposes intervals that cannot always be accelerated without changing the work.

None of these qualities automatically makes a painting good. Human labor is not a guarantee of artistic value. But these traces create a particular kind of evidence: the work can carry the history of its own becoming.

For me, that history is not secondary documentation. It belongs to the meaning of the work. A life cannot be understood only through its final state. If we judged a life only by its end, every biography would arrive at the same conclusion. Meaning accumulates through the path: choices, errors, relations, losses, revisions, continuities. Painting can embody an analogous temporal density.

This is why “slowness” in painting interests me less as nostalgia than as resistance to the reduction of value to output. A painting may require dozens of hours, repeated returns, waiting, failure, and decisions that produce no immediately visible improvement. Such inefficiency can be meaningful because the work is not only an image delivered at the end of a process. The process has entered the object.

6. The artist as one participant

The three parts of my current philosophical project can therefore be read as one sequence. Life Art Theory begins from the proposition that art is one way human beings establish a relation with life. The Primacy of Softness asks how relations can remain generative under pressure without depending on continuous confrontation. A Participant asks what position the artist occupies once she no longer imagines herself as the sole center of the world.

The word “one” matters. To say that the artist is one participant is to limit her centrality without cancelling her agency. Materials participate differently. Environments participate differently. Viewers enter at another stage and under other conditions. Institutions affect what becomes visible and how it circulates. None of these participants is interchangeable.

This prevents relational thinking from dissolving into the claim that “everything is equal” or “no one is responsible.” In art, differences of role matter. Water can redirect a wash, but water does not sign the painting. A viewer can transform interpretation, but the viewer did not make the artist’s sequence of studio decisions. Participation names involvement; authorship names a particular structure of judgment and responsibility.

For me this has ethical consequences. If I am outside the world, I can imagine that I merely depict it. If I am its master, I can imagine that everything exists as material for my intention. But if I am a participant, my work changes the relations it enters. I must therefore ask not only what I can make, but how I enter, what I alter, what I preserve, what I obscure, and what I ask others to see.

7. Another kind of strength

Softness, then, is not a retreat from strength. It is an attempt to enlarge the category.

A hard structure can be powerful because it resists deformation. A resilient structure may be powerful because it can deform without losing continuity. These are different capacities. Human relations, ecological systems, artistic practices, and individual lives often require the second as much as the first.

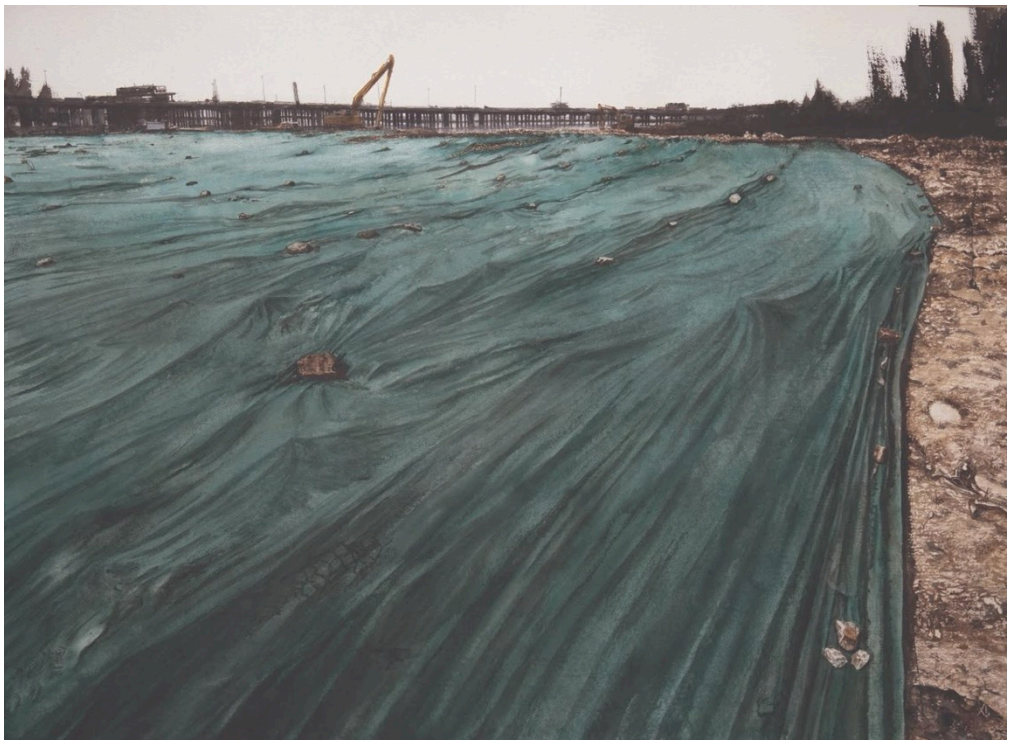
Painting taught me this before I had a philosophical vocabulary for it. Water could not simply be commanded, yet the work did not have to surrender to water. Uncertainty did not have to be eliminated, yet judgment remained necessary. A boundary could be permeable without ceasing to be a boundary.

The broader question is therefore not whether confrontation is good or bad. It is whether we have confused one historically necessary form of strength with strength itself.

After resistance, can we continue? After rupture, can relation generate something more than another rupture? Can an artist remain receptive without becoming passive, decisive without becoming dominating, and responsible without pretending to stand outside the world she affects?

These questions remain open in my work. I do not treat The Primacy of Softness as a manifesto with a final answer. It is a direction that emerged from practice: strength can also be the capacity to bear, adjust, permeate, transform, and continue.

Selected works referenced



Qianhai Green Curtain, 2022, watercolor on paper.

Mountain Body, 2026, watercolor on paper, 28.5 × 38.3 cm.

Facing Each Other, 2026, watercolor on paper.

Enthusiasm Fishing Port, earlier work discussed in The Primacy of Softness.

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Author bio

KAIXUAN WANG is a Shenzhen-based contemporary visual artist and writer working across painting, works on paper, printmaking, and writing. Her practice develops through sustained attention to lived environments, material behavior, relation, resilience, and the visible traces of human making. Her current writing project links Life Art Theory, The Primacy of Softness, and A Participant: The Philosophical Construction of Life Art Theory.

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