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The twain meet in 'waterfall' paintings

By Edward J. Sozanski
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Perfect marriages are rare, but in her "waterfall" paintings at the Locks Gallery, New York artist Pat Steir offers an exquisitely balanced interplay between Eastern — specifically Chinese — and Western visual representations of landscape.

Steir's method for these 10 paintings, most made during the 1990s, combines the aleatory effects associated with gestural abstract expressionism and the spiritual suggestiveness of traditional Chinese landscapes.

The method couldn't be simpler. Steir loads a wide industrial brush with thinned oil pigment, slaps it against the top of a canvas, and lets gravity take over. The resulting cascade of drippy filaments — the "waterfall" — looks like a Portuguese man-of-war or a common wet mop.

On some canvases, Steir adds a horizontally deployed "landscape" across the bottom, apparently by flicking paint against the canvas. This is usually carried out in black and white and in a vertical format, both evocative of Chinese landscape.

While the severe palette is intrinsic to this effect, the largest and most spectacular canvas in the show, *Middle Lhamo Waterfall*, achieves that distinction with a bold explosion of color — red and yellow on jade green.

Steir's strategy works best when the black ground can assert itself against the white drips and splatters. When the "waterfall" obscures the ground, as it does in *Sweet Suite*, the magic dissipates.



Pat Steir's "Middle Lhamo Waterfall," evocative of Chinese landscape, is the largest canvas in her East-meets-West show at the Locks Gallery.