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Artist Features: Cai Guo-Qiang, Li Huasheng,
Li Huayi, Taca Sui, Lin Yan, Hong Kong Exile,
Milton Lim

Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World

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Tansy Xiao

Lin Yan: A Negotiation with Space

Lin Yan, *All the Best!*, 2016, ink and *xuan* paper, 75 x 23 x 23 cm. © 2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



Tansy Xiao: In a previous interview you mentioned that you wanted to study architecture when you were young. As an artist you are very good at embodying the relationship between people and architecture. If you were to use a type of architecture to represent your own personality, what would that be?

Lin Yan: It might be those grand ancient wooden Buddhist temples that were built with complicated techniques, like the ones I saw in Nara, Japan in the architectural style of the Tang and Sui dynasties—spacious and ventilated, with winding corridors and sliding doors for dividing the space that are flexible to suit different occasions. I have one of those in my small

apartment in Brooklyn, too. What I aspire is the sense of being spiritually centred and free as if I was in a temple. The materials in these wooden buildings without concrete and metal all came from nature, coexisting with the natural ecosystem and eventually will return to nature, as we all do.

Tansy Xiao: You were professionally trained as an oil painter but now work exclusively with *xuan* paper. Please talk about this material that you're using.



Lin Yan: *Xuan* paper, a traditional Chinese handmade paper, has been the major medium of my work for more than a decade. Despite the long history of its usage by Chinese ink painters and calligraphers, which requires the precise control of the absorbing of ink and water and the choice of varying kinds of *xuan* paper accordingly, I paid attention to the paper itself. There

Lin Yan, *Between Day and Night #1*, 2014–17, *xuan* paper and mirror in Plexiglas box, 87 x 87 x 20 cm. Photo: Peichao Lin. © 2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

are various kinds of *xuan* paper, and I use them in fragmented pieces to make paper collages with traditional mounting methods. It is the same as when a painter paints in oils with a brush. I like to use *xuan* paper in slightly different shades of white and maintain its natural textures to create a painterly quality on the surface, or use it in combination with a sculptural form. Although the final look of the installations is minimal and clean, the details perhaps are messy with freehand markings. The paper has a certain degree of transparency, yet it is ambiguous and reserved, fragile and delicate, yet very flexible and versatile. It can become very solid as well when I cast it with many layers. To have an intimate dialogue with paper is just like speaking a native language for me. It is exciting to rediscover an old art medium and to celebrate its loaded cultural history, and then to endow it with contemporary means.

Tansy Xiao: Aside from air and space, light is another essential element in your work. What role does light play when you make art?



Lin Yan: Regardless of the multiple layers that I add on, they still have a kind of weightlessness. If a bright light source is placed behind the artwork, every part of the fragments would appear to the viewers. The amount of light that I allow to show through the paper depends on how it looks if the concealed layers underneath are revealed.

Lin Yan, *Sparse Dream in Brooklyn*, 2015, *xuan* paper, ink, and string lights, 30 x 23 x 23 cm. © 2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

Sometimes it is unavoidable for site-specific installations to adapt to the existing elements in the

Lin Yan, *Borrowed Scenery*,
2017, *xuan* paper, 231 x 123
cm. © 2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy
of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



space; I find ways to embrace it. Daylight also often plays an important role in my work. Therefore, the appearance of the artwork varies as time passes throughout the day. At times, it really comes alive like a plant. This kind of organic feeling is magical.

Tansy Xiao: The majority of your oeuvre is site-specific yet flexible in scale. Through such an organic nature, and as they change each time they are shown, different viewers might have varying experiences depending on the circumstances of the installation. Of all the exhibitions you've had, which one do you think fits best in the space?

Lin Yan: I have had all kinds of experiences at previous shows. Each exhibition is a new challenge for me, an unknown adventure. After turning a few accidents into some pleasant surprises, I have learned that an inspirational flash for the solution will appear as long as I wait in patience. There's no need to rush.

Checking out the space first certainly helps me to choose the right works for the show. In 2013, when I increasingly began to develop installations, I paid closer attention to the architectonics and history of the exhibition space. For my recent solo show *Gateway* at Fou Gallery, Brooklyn (December 2, 2017 to February 10, 2018), I cast the existing shapes—doors, windows, fireplace, and decorative motifs—within the space, a more than one-hundred-year-old brownstone house. The installation for me felt just like plants had sprung up in the space naturally. This was quite distinct from my previous work, and I think the whole space per se became an artwork.

Tansy Xiao: Your works made from paper also take on the appearance of mundane objects. The distressed nature of them adds the sense that they are the remains and echos of such objects—rather than the objects per se



Lin Yan: *Gateway*, 2017, installation view, Fou Gallery. Photo: Peichao Lin. © 2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



—functioning as a way to capture life through death or to capture a dynamic through stillness. The vulnerability of *xuan* paper, on the other hand, reminds me of the tradition of Tibetan Buddhist sand mandalas and the transitory nature of material life that it represents.

Lin Yan, *Return Home 3*, 2015, *xuan* paper, ink, and mixed media, 34 x 45 x 3 cm. © 2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

Lin Yan: As I mentioned earlier, I enjoy using the existing elements on site, the air and natural light, the objects and architectural elements, even the white walls can be included in my work. The background and history of old buildings also contribute their unique narrative and atmosphere to the show. The shape and scale of my work may adapt to different exhibition venues; it has no fixed, permanent, or perfect form. These site-specific works leave you with just an ephemeral moment of revelation: you wouldn't encounter the same thing in another place, or another time. I make freestanding and wall hanging pieces as well, of course.



Lin Yan, *Jetlag*, 2017, ink, *xuan* paper, and cotton thread, 57 x 83 x 8 cm. Photo: Peichao Lin. © 2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, New York.

Tansy Xiao: What is the life expectancy of your work? How does the lifespan of an artwork affect the way it's read over time?

Lin Yan, *Gateway*, 2017, ink and *xuan* paper, 310 x 190 cm. Photo: Eugene Neduv. ©2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

Lin Yan: It's possible for paper to last for a thousand years depending on the quality and how it is preserved. Because the handmade paper is acid free, the colours on it remain even longer than those on ancient silk paintings. I've had my own unframed paper sculpture work hang on the wall for ten years, now it's just as good as new. However, it doesn't necessarily mean that paper as a material is eternal. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. They will eventually return to nature.



Tansy Xiao: I've heard before that you are resistant to describing your work through language, as well as about your preference for classical Eastern paintings over contemporary work because of their broader possibilities of interpretation. On the other hand, your artworks are often titled with simple and delicate ancient words. I wonder if it was the visual that came first as you created these works, or the words?

Lin Yan: Visual and literary languages are two entirely different tracks in my mind, and I don't bother to combine or transfer between them. I observe, think, and express myself through visual languages consistently, naturally, and more comfortably as part of my whole life. In daily life, when I get to know someone, I prefer to do so through seeing their work rather than only having a conversation. A piece of artwork can be like a mirror that reflects the artist's life, and that also allows the viewer to see in it their own reflection.

For me, writing about art is like turning on a different device. I barely think about the concept when I create an artwork. I simply follow my instincts and focus on what's in my hands. Sometimes the sparks just happen spontaneously. I hold great respect for the material that I'm using, the space that I'm occupying, and the viewers of my work.

Although a lot of my titles were influenced by classical poetry and traditional Chinese culture, the meanings behind the works are far beyond their titles. The almost abstract nature of ancient Chinese language actually allows more room for the imagination. The concept is enriched with the viewer's presence and their own interpretations of the work.

Tansy Xiao: In a previous interview you talked about the process of making art as a process of reduction—"Using the minimum to express the most." Could you please describe a bit of the process? In order to decide which parts stay and which are to be removed, is it a rational decision or an emotional one?

Lin Yan: It's actually a reclusive and complex process. For instance, *Phecda* (2017), in order to be able to invite people to walk through inside



of the artwork, I made detailed calculations for hanging paper along side of a row of skylights. Since I wasn't going to be able to make the work on site, for the first time I had to adjust the plan on site. I took extra effort to think through all details ahead of time. The museum team at Wanying Art Museum,

Lin Yan, *Phedca*, 2017, *xuan* paper, installation view, Wanying Art Museum. ©2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Wanying Art Museum, Shijiazhuang, and Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.

Shijiazhuang, Hebei province, did a fantastic job to make and install the piece according to my complicated guidelines and messy sketches. To make the work look the way I want, I also need to find a way to hide some of the unwanted existing details in the space.

Silent Song (2014–17), a piece shown at Fou Gallery is very long. Initially I thought that the ceiling might not be tall enough to present it. But after many failed attempts, I finally figured out that I could incorporate an existing ceiling mold to install this piece. It's important to be flexible and dare to let go of preconceived ideas in search of the best solution through the course of negation.

Lin Yan, *Silent Song*, 2014–17, *xuan* paper and ink, 443 x 117 x 30 cm. Photo: Peichao Lin. ©2017 Lin Yan. Courtesy of Fou Gallery, Brooklyn.



Tansy Xiao: This is a personal question. I've noticed that those who were born into artist families tend to be more gentle and reserved toward their own work, while those who lack such a background often appear to be more aggressive in their artistic expressions. What's your opinion as someone who belongs to the former?

Lin Yan: Well, what makes the art world intriguing and what I value a lot as an artist is that there is art in so many different places; and it brings people from different backgrounds together.

I grew up among the faculty members of Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. My neighbours were all painters and sculptors. I saw them painting and sketching as a daily activity all the time, just like cooking and cleaning. What is so special about art? I didn't ever think about developing it as a career. Although I love art passionately, I wish I knew how to be more aggressive and jump at the opportunities that come my way. I make art whenever I have an urgent call inside me that pushes me to let it all out without any strategies, and this places me on an edge where it feels like I am walking on a string all the time. Intense ideas and emotions constantly occur in my mind, transforming themselves into the inner power of my work. I cope with it, go with it, and enjoy it.