

Perspectives On Art And Nature

The three Chinese women artists Lin Yan, Song Xin, and Cui Fei each deals uniquely with paradox in their work. They reference nature in making their own singular vision.

Each vision possesses a feminine viewpoint that moves the experience of their art-making, nature, and the natural world to fresh levels of literary and artistic engagement.

By Robert C. Morgan

The three women included in an exhibition, titled *In Perspective: Lin Yan, Song Xin, and Cui Fei*, opened at Chambers Fine Arts in Manhattan on November 17, 2016. For many art-world attendees, it was a major cultural event. Although these artists had appeared together in previous group shows in New York, it was the first occasion to see a representation of each of their works in full concentration. Of further importance was the fact that each of these artists had graduated with an undergraduate degree from prestigious art academies in China—Lin Yan and Song Xin from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and Cui Fei from the China National Academy of Art in Hangzhou—before moving to New York to continue their pursuit of artistic excellence in the context of New York City.

Artistic excellence would appear to be the fundamental concern here. Each artist has taken a theme or borrowed a fragment of a form or opened another view of a massive structure and brought it down to scale: in the work of Cui Fei, for example, always to the scale of nature, nature as the natural or nature as the living contiguity of all things posited together in a richly interwoven new idea, the source of language, perhaps, as many have attested to on seeing her work. The theme in her work is built upon and given a new harness, a tethering status within

the form despite the delicacy of the grape tendrils on which her linear forms are built, neither obtuse nor predictable, but to the point of giving nature back to the larger concept of a universal origin.

Any truly committed artist must do this in order to allow the forms to unreal

since the intervention of automobile culture. In addition, she has painted a realist version of a racing cheetah in ink, charcoal, and paper collage on silk. An earlier version of this elongated, highly poised animal was first shown in a storefront gallery window in 2013; it was then re-configured for the recent exhibition at Chambers.

The tension one senses between Lin Yan's forms—whether realist or abstract, or more correctly, metaphysical (in the Taoist sense)—is inexorable. Her works are identified as having the kind of energy (*qi*) that brings new life into a static space, forms that transfigure the way things appear when they don't really become evident to our senses, when they relinquish their ability to stand out and assume a delicate, strident velocity, an often fierce momentum as they do in the sculptural forms and painting's imagery, often combined as one, as seen in *GO* (2015) by Lin Yan. Here a simple, yet powerful English word dominates the centrality of a crumpled quadrilateral space, touched



Lin Yan, *Go*, 2014, ink, xuan paper and wax, 33 x 35 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artists and Chambers Fine Art, New York/Beijing.

and become more than what is strictly visible. Lin Yan has worked for years in the interstices between structure and lyricism. She has cast bricks in hand-made *xuan* paper and folded large section of *xuan* paper to appear as crumbled masses, which she then saturates in ink, thus creating the affect of massive air pollution as made evident in her hometown of Beijing

by ink and embossed as if to question the word's authority in the presence of public movement—in spaces where one is expected to pulsate automatically through time in an unconscious daze.

I recall the first visit to a private gallery in midtown to view the collage works of Song Xin and how I was taken by the transformation of various porno-

graphic images, cut errantly from magazines and applied to the surface of various collage works as if they had been laced into some kind of Rococo furniture design or Ming dynasty ceramic vase. I was so taken by these, given that I had never seen or felt this kind of porno-transformation. Yet mysteriously, even if on an intentional level, these works held a certain energy that functioned on the level of great calligraphy or stupendous jaunts employed in the martial arts. It would be hard to articulate this further; but what I did notice upon entering the gallery space at Chambers Fine Arts was that Song Xin's recent cut flower collages, titled collectively, *Life in Full Bloom*, adorn her mysterious/intentional spaces so as to reek with festive undulation. I refer here to a kind of elegant rapture, a wholesome tingling, a sensation clamoring, yet indelibly fraught with indeterminacy suggestive of the Taoist path, subtly instigating a slow release of energy (*qi yun*).

The positive positioning of these cut paper flowers, haunted by a paper fence of shadowy black shapes added another layer to Song Xin's discourse. We are told that she is politically concerned with the current refuge problems confronting Central Europe and other nation states in the Middle East, and even Western



Lin Yan, *A Long Ride*, 2013–2016, ink, charcoal, and paper collage on linen, 213 x 427 cm.

Europe. This has given the EU a run for its money and thus far no one has found a solution that consistently works, perhaps because the number of refugees is so large and often varies and that the timing of these drastic events cannot be entirely predicted.

This being the case, there is a certain irony infused in Song Xin's recent collages and even in *Life in Full Bloom*. Evidently, as this relatively large-scale collage installation makes clear, life is clearly not in full bloom for everyone: ordinary people continue to be threatened and murdered because of their religion or their resistance to maniacal power.

Ultimately, it would seem that art has no other choice but simply to be art. I mean that anything presented in a gallery where the pricing implications are huge cannot separate itself from that fact; and that fact is as much the issue as the construction of a narrative on some other level.

This is not meant as either a confrontational criticism of the artist's work or of the gallery where it is being shown. It is merely to suggest that the manner in which a narrative achieves its political birthright needs to be carefully considered to the point where art becomes the issue and the message remains part of it without overstating the case. Put another

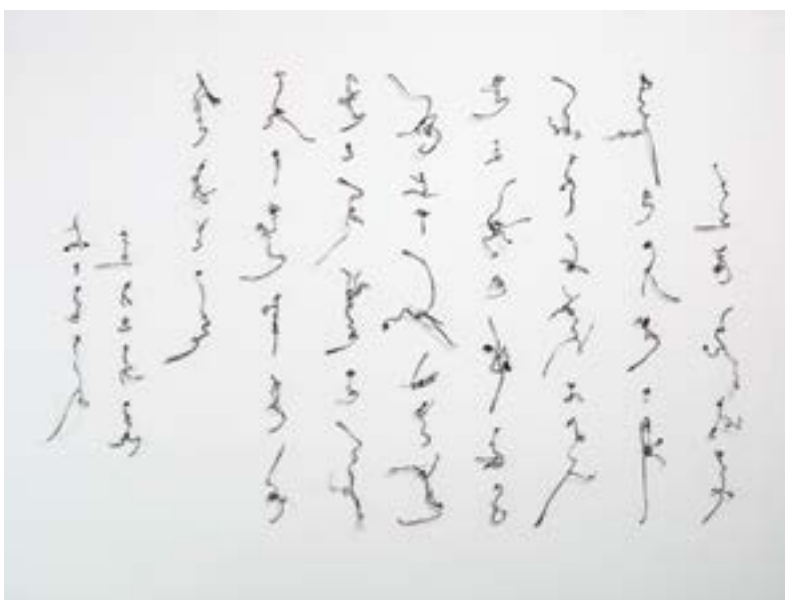


Song Xin, *Life in Full Bloom Series 01*, 2016, magazine collage on wood panel 119 x 185 cm.

er way, if the message becomes greater than the art, everyone loses, unless the message augments the ability of the art to shine—then all the more credit should be given to it. This is one of the most formidable paradoxes in the manner that art is conceived and shown in the present-day environment, as we have come to know it.

Having said this, the three women in this exemplary exhibition deal with paradox, internally within the work, one way or another. In the work of Cui Fei, the system of the literary is at once visual even though it suggests a reading on some systemic or theoretical level that is scarcely present. What I find enticing in works within the series *Tracing the Origin*—particularly *Number XVIII* (2016) where the paper-ground and dried-grape tendrils are uniformly painted over with a dull metallic pigment—is the question of the origin itself.

What is the origin—language? Perhaps, but then we must account for what kind of language is being referenced. It is certainly not phonetic and, although it may coincidentally appear ideographic, the various tendrils have no direct referents other than the general-



Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin XVI_001*, 2013, installation, metal wires, pins, 91 x 121 cm.

ized notion of their origin in nature. This would further suggest—as Sartre once stated on behalf of the imprisoned playwright Jean Genet—that the imagination carries its own retribution as a form of language, perhaps, a meta-language, by which creativity flourishes. The impetus to find meaning in forms emanating from nature, such as paper pulp and durable vines, harmonize in ways not unrelated to language. This could be seen as the premise that gives Cui Fei's work its sense of origin and its perpetual openness toward replenishment and self-discovery.

The sense of a paradoxical approach to form continues in recent works by Lin Yan and Song Xin as well. Within the work of Lin Yan, the sensuous Cheetah

remains unabashedly still as if caught between the seams of the silk, and the sign *GO* cast into the paper pulp clearly means to stop, to look, to think, and to feel. Lin Yan proposes action through observation and stillness. In Song Xin, the cut images of flowers are off-set by an undulating shadowy barrier that unleashes the vibrancy of forms taken from nature and somehow given back to nature through perception and thought and the ability to reconsider the ground on which we stand, the air that we breath, the water we

drink, and the light we discover through partial negation.

What these three artists share is a triadic understanding not only in reference to seeing nature, but also our ability to take what is seen or borrowed and to follow its course in terms of human thought from a feminine point of view. Rather than eco-feminism, we are given forms that exceed the limits of representation. We are instilled with the ongoing transitory phenomenon of language whereby nature intertwines with the natural. Δ

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Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin XVIII*, 2016, etched copper, set of 5, each 25 x 12 cm.