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Artist of the Week | Yin Xiuzhen

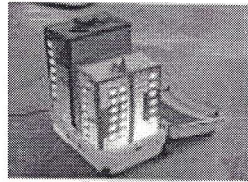
by Karen Smith

Yin Xiuzhen has been creating assemblage and installation art works for a number of years, beginning in the mid-1990s. In that time, she has taken part in group exhibitions of her own and friends' instigation, been awarded several solo shows, participated in site-specific and thematic group activities, been given the chance to show her work abroad and invited to take up a number of artist-in-residency programmes. She has achieved much activity in a relatively short space of time, and her approach has frequently demonstrated a devotion to producing works however challenging it might be to find space and materials. It is this committed exploration more than any new 'Chinese' or 'feminist', formal or visual phenomena, manifest in her art works that accords her work its intensity and which continues to draw both an audience appreciation of and opportunities for developing her work.

In the first few years of creative activity, Yin Xiuzhen's approach evinced no specific characteristic, form or style running through her works, which might identify them to the viewer as being 'by Yin Xiuzhen'. If there was any one noticeable characteristic linking the works she produced in the mid-1990s, that was present from her earliest pieces, it might be described as an inclination towards contrast and balance in the elements that comprise each installation. Works from these years employed fine lines (string) and solid forms (buckets, bowls), weight (water, concrete) and fragility (broken glass, mirror glass and well-used, second-hand objects). In addition, viewers could sense a minimalist approach to the number of elements brought together in any one artwork. It was a period of exploration and learning, how to handle materials as well as space.

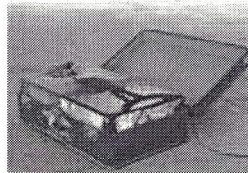
But with hindsight, it has become clear that Yin Xiuzhen's individual works contain a similar feeling and a consistent sensitivity to her use of materials.

New photographs (2001)
courtesy of Asian Fine Arts Berlin/Pruess & Ochs Gallery



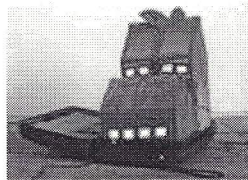
Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases, clothes, light, video



Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases, clothes, light, video



Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases, clothes, light, video

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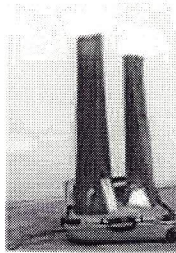
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The works further evoke an aura of a cool, measured plotting of the form and its placing in a space. There is no passionate spontaneity about her work, but an absolute precision about the way they are formulated and structured. That is as general about Yin Xiuzhen's oeuvre as it is possible to be.

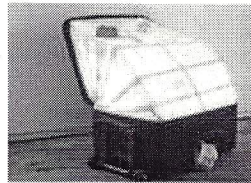
Across the span of years that Yin Xiuzhen has been creating installations, her work has changed quite dramatically. The change that has taken place is not so much in the theme or content of the work but how the artist selects and manipulates materials and creates the forms with which she expresses her concepts. Her first piece was created in October 1994, and shown in the studio of artist Zhu Jinshi in Beijing. It was entitled 'Door', and was composed of an ordinary household door, with a human body outlined on either side, one male and the other female. Setting the door in the space, at right angles to a wall, she removed the sense of 'inside' or 'outside', and therefore any inference that either sex held dominance over the other. The door, although serving as a division between two beings, denoted the barriers that exist between people - male and female being two varieties of humankind - rather than offering a comment on the relationship between the sexes. Yin Xiuzhen was concerned to express the difficulties that people experience in trying to find common ground. Communication is frequently complicated by invisible obstacles (the glass panes in the door) but at the same time the door also served as the connecting point for the two figures: in life, as in art, that which divides is often the only point of common contact, which brings people together at all.

This piece was followed by 'Time Bomb' created for the exhibition 'Twelve/Twelve' in November 1994, which was developed the theme of connection and simultaneous division. Yin Xiuzhen made use of the narrow angled space behind the door of the exhibition room. Here for the second time she used what for a while became a characteristic element of her work, threads of string or rope, linking parts of the work together. In a site-specific work she produced in the countryside beyond Beijing at the end of 1994, the threads were lain as a web-like structure on the ground beneath a tree, indicating the complex weave of roots beneath the surface. The ends of the strings, or the points of intersection, met in china bowls filled with water and sunk into the earth lying flush with the surface; tap roots in search of the water that gives the tree life. The threads appeared again in 'Time Bomb', this time more firmly linking elements, weaving paths through the broken fragments of mirror stuck on a wall, simultaneously binding them together. These pieces of mirrored



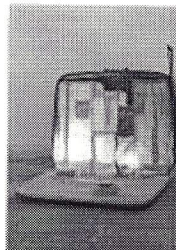
Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases,
clothes, light, video



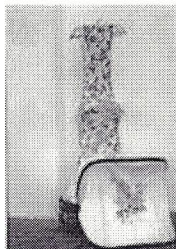
Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases,
clothes, light, video



Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases,
clothes, light, video



Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases,
clothes, light, video

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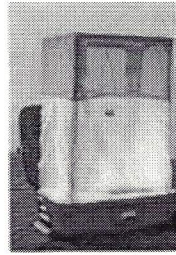
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glass were placed over maps of North America, the world, China and Beijing. They reminded viewers of abstract route plans drawn for modern convenience - the illustrations of flight paths in airline magazines.

'Time Bomb' was not about the flow of motion between these countries and cities but about the fixed, almost immovable perception of them in the minds of people looking at them from outside. In particular, how America is seen, with New York considered the art centre of the world. Once such an idea is fixed it is hard to dislodge even when the actual facts of a situation begin to change - like the economic growth of Asia, and the strengthening of Asian countries in the hierarchy of world power. Due to the positioning of 'Time Bomb' in the space, its use of the angle of the door, the image of China could be imposed upon that of America and vice versa, creating a confusion of territory and nation, and questioning the notion of centre and periphery. The threads were united in a final point of convergence off to one side - the time bomb of the title - and referred to the fragile nature of the positions of these nations, the perceptions of them and the relationships between them. Here, too, reference was made to the sphere of influence of one nation over another within the history of art. Unlike other ideas which Yin has developed, this is not a theme she has pursued.

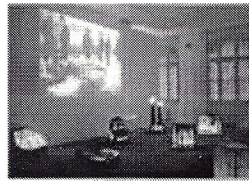
Like many other female artists, Yin Xiuzhen has been bracketed as a 'women artist' rather than just 'artist'. Whilst this has provided opportunities for exhibition, in regard of her approach and themes, she does not wholly belong to a 'women's approach' or feminist analysis. She is as reserved in speech as she is methodical in her approach to art, to the extent of being dogmatic, but she is always clear as to what it is she seeks to achieve and nothing gets in her way. In this respect, it is perhaps her solo works that have been among the most successful in demonstrating the breadth and range of her work.

In 1995, in the Contemporary Art museum in Beijing, she held a first solo show comprising three separate works. She made fine use of the space and in doing so the concerns that underlie her work were subtly demonstrated. The most striking piece was 'Clothes Chest', which comprised thirty-three personal garments that Yin Xiuzhen had owned and worn since her childhood - the earliest being that in which she was dressed at birth. The retaining of these garments is an unusual feat that few people could achieve and is an indication of nature of the artist herself, of her family circumstances - the



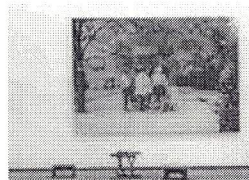
Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases,
clothes, light, video



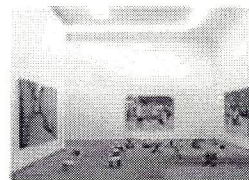
Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2001

installation: suitcases,
clothes, light, video



Yin Xiuzhen
'Beijing Opera'
2000

installation: digital print
on silk, edition of 3, 145 x
210 cm, sound, stools



Yin Xiuzhen
'Beijing Opera'
2000

installation: digital print
on silk, edition of 3, 145 x
210 cm, sound, stools

unavoidable necessity of hand-me-downs and preserving what might be useful even though outgrown - and the age in which she grew up. We all have clothes that are special in some way and that we hold onto for reasons of which we are not always logically aware - sentimentally yes - but that inadvertently reveal part of our character.

In 'Clothes Chest', specific memories seemed to rise from the texture of fabrics, their form and colour, like a personal odour that lingers on clothes and which can never be completely washed out. Yin Xiuzhen has a story for each individual garment; the family hand-me-down, the blouse for which she selected fabric, the first one she herself made, the unconventional red garment that she chose to wear for her wedding... Each piece was neatly folded and stitched in place - the measured lengths of white thread firmly fixing them - and then these were evenly spaced across the floor, somehow suggestive of headstones in a cemetery marking out the memories.

Amidst these treasures was a wooden chest in which a further series of garments were placed in layers - one for each year of her life - and incarcerated in concrete. A video monitor standing behind the chest relayed the ritual process of filling the chest, the process of embalming the past. 'Clothes Chest', and the second work (also called 'Door'), both documented a process; the first a physical measure of growth, the second a social, material and spiritual passage.

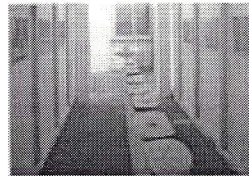
'Door' comprised thirty-two wooden blocks (10 x 15 x 5 cm) fixed end-on to the wall at eye-level. Covering each face of each block was a series of photographs taken by the artist representing either the inner or outer aspects of doors/gates which were linked to events in her life. These range from the house in which she was born to the schools at which she studied, from those necessitated by daily life (work, shops, hospital, and friends homes) to the gallery itself. It was a simple yet profound act of expressing the forms of containment and exclusion of which doors are a primary symbol, and which we often fail to notice.

In 1995, Yin Xiuzhen's solo show, like the several others that followed, was one of those rare exhibition's in Beijing to consist entirely of 'objects' as installation. She also managed to present her work in a recognised gallery space and reach, while not a huge audience of passers-by, one that would not normally come into contact with contemporary art work of this kind. The success of her works was



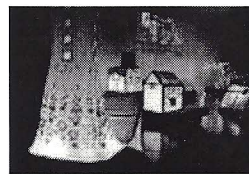
Yin Xiuzhen
'Sink'
2001

installation: sink,
concrete, hair



Yin Xiuzhen
'Sink'
2000

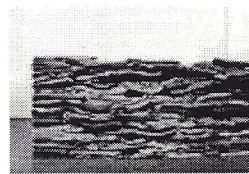
installation: mixed media,
concrete, personal
objects



Yin Xiuzhen
'Suitcases'
2000

installation: suitcases,
clothes, light, video

'Text and Subtext'
exhibition, Earl Lu gallery,
Singapore



Yin Xiuzhen
'Building Materials'
March 2000

installation: 600 kilos of
old clothes

Solo exhibition, 200
Gertrude Street, Australia

their ability to communicate her message simply and effectively.

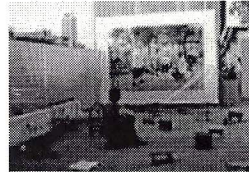
The third work, placed in the space separating the two main gallery areas, was about symmetry and balance, opposites that are inextricably linked, and was an apt pivotal point for the exhibition. The assemblage comprised two piles of sweaters, separated by a series of knitting needles stuck into each stack of jumpers: holding them together or holding them apart? The two piles were distinguished by colours and patterns on the left, and sombre tones on the right, all folded with great precision. The top sweater on each pile was half-unravelling, the miscreant threads pulled forward where they disappeared into two tangles of woollen yarn. From out the crinkled mass two strands emerged, vibrant red and pale grey, linked and blended together by the process of knitting, thus completing a cycle of motion and meaning. Looking back, the seeds of her subsequent approach and preferred materials were embedded in this exhibition.

Equally, Yin Xiuzhen demonstrated herself to be a keen observer of the world around her. This was a clear theme of her second solo installation in August 1996. 'Ruined City', shown at the museum of Capital Normal University, utilised the entire space to evoke the fragments of a city that one might expect to find at an archaeological excavation site. The floor of the exhibition space has that timeworn, uncared for look like unearthed Roman mosaics. The colour of the whole work was dust grey, or dust covered hues of wood that would have been much richer in the past. These pieces of furniture she brought into the space were either found on the street or borrowed for the show. Some were pieces that belonged to families with which they were unwilling to part with them but space being tight in their house they had placed on the street outside. The theme here was the developing nature of Beijing, the constant round of demolition, new growth and the by-products of this; piles of bricks and roof tiles lining hutongs, and the air thick with the odour and haze of cement dust which the city's population has to negotiate everyday.

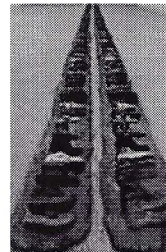
Arranged like a cobbled street 'Ruined City' was a central aisle of these tiles traditionally used to cap hutong houses. At one end they overlapped as they would on roofs, being spread wider and wider at the other where they disappeared under a bed laden with cement powder. This is what the city breathes everyday. The rank odour and scenes of decay are the price that society pays for advance. Yin Xiuzhen



Yin Xiuzhen
'Building Materials'
March 2000
installation: 600 kilos of
old clothes



Yin Xiuzhen
'Beijing Opera'
July 2000
installation: photographs,
sound, stools
Pescara, Italy



Yin Xiuzhen
'A Thousand Layers of
Soles'
2000
installation: cement and
worn shoes
'Door of the Century'
exhibition, Chengdu



Yin Xiuzhen
'A Thousand Layers of
Soles'
2000
installation: cement and
worn shoes
'Door of the Century'
exhibition, Chengdu

contrived to evoke change and motion in the powdery dead weight of concrete and reflect the fragile relationship between the two.

This was the beginning of a concern for life in relation to environment, which was to become a strong element in her work. The opportunity to take part in the 'Healing the Waters' projects of American artists Betsy Damon provided a timely vehicle. The first group activity took place in Chengdu, Sichuan province, in the summer of 1995. Here Yin Xiuzhen created 'Washing the River'; ten cubic metres of foul water drawn from the polluted Funan River turned into ice and placed on the promenade in the stifling heat of the Sichuan summer. Here, the blocks melted with the help of passers-by who 'washed' them clean in a symbolic baptism with pure water. The message was succinct; if it were really possible to wash away the sins of pollution, life would be so simple, the planet a better, as least, cleaner place.

'Washing the River' was a further development of an action work carried out in the Beijing suburbs in 1994. Here, she washed an old stone bridge, clearing away the debris of the passage of time, the side effects of development, advance to restore things to their proper nature. It is this notion that lies at the heart of Yin Xiuzhen's work rather than comment on the act of 'cleaning' so much ascribed as women's work. Unlike American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who cleaned New York streets to highlight 'women's work' by taking it out of the context of the home into the absurdity of the streets, Yin Xiuzhen's work has little relation to comment on the female, feminine, feminist or otherwise. The curious piece 'Unit' she produced for the exhibition Beijing-Berlin in November, 1995, may have suggested woman in the red balloon wombs contained in the crotch of nylon tights that were suspended from the ceiling and growing out of black plastic tubs, but their scale and number implied masculine strength and power. It was not a statement in praise of life/birth as the domain of women/mother, but of life as a law unto itself.

The second water project took place in Tibet in September 1996. Here, Yin Xiuzhen produced two works. The first was on a mud bank rising out of the broad swathe of the Lhasa River where she planted two thousand pairs of chopsticks in the bank each topped with a plastic bag containing the pure water from the river. Looking a the work from a low angle across the flat plane extending towards a mountain, it suggests the vast areas of land in America where windmills harness the power of the wind to generate electricity, the oil fields pumping the land. The title 'Living Water' referred to water as the source of all life. Unlike the water in Funan River, the water in



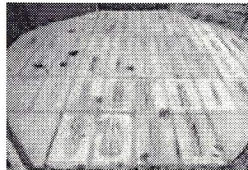
Yin Xiuzhen
'Beijing Tiles'
1999

installation: wood, roof tiles, photographs.
Third Asia-Pacific Triennial, Australia

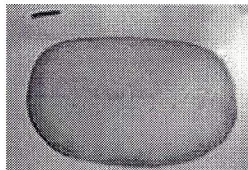


Yin Xiuzhen
'Newspaper Kiosk'
1999, Germany

installation: old kiosk, newspapers, concrete



Yin Xiuzhen
'Newspaper Kiosk'
1999, Germany
installation: old kiosk, newspapers, concrete



Yin Xiuzhen
'Sink'

1999, Germany
installation: sink, nail clippings

Tibet is considered pure. The local people drink it, but like the Ganges in India, people also wash in it, themselves and clothes, creating myriad potential problems.

The second work 'Yak Butter Shoes' was a reworked version of a piece shown at Capital Normal University in September 1995. This time, she used fifty pairs of shoes rather than twenty-five pairs in the first work and, where those were all taken from friends and family, in Tibet the shoes were simply found, or bought if necessary. These shoes were placed on, in and by the water, and filled not with concrete but with yak butter, an essential staple of life in Tibet where it is used in tea, eaten raw and cheaper varieties as oil for lamps. The 'weight' or gravity of the shoes in this work was different but the idea of using shoes to suggest stories, motion and a passage through life was the same. Placed by the river, they draw a parallel with the nature of water, which like history runs on regardless. Shoes are punctuations, indicating the lives of people that pass through history, each going in their own direction at different points in time.

By 1997, within the space of a few years, Yin Xiuzhen had arrived at a clear and distinctive style. She had filled a second space with concrete - the old German Embassy in Beijing - and was clearly in control of the material when she produced a third concrete installation for the exhibition Another Long March in Breda, the Netherlands, in 1997.

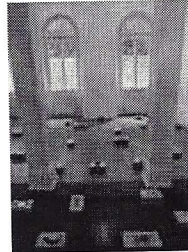
The exhibition was housed in the Chasse-Karerne, a former army barracks and the interior space demonstrated intrinsic empathy for Yin Xiuzhen's work. The broad, stark buildings, the clean-cut solemnity demanded by army barracks, and subsequent partial use of Chasse-Kazerne as a refugee centre, provided the perfect atmospheric texture within which to juxtapose the art of a nation steeped in military mystique. In the refugee end of the complex, Yin Xiuzhen coated mattresses on dormitory beds with a skin of concrete that made allusions to the cold nature of interrogation and treatment of potential undesirables. Areas of exploded concrete - deliberately caused by small explosives placed in the mattresses - emphasised the wretched tearing of souls and spirit to which these rooms had been witness.

In recent years, Yin Xiuzhen has spent much more time abroad. She has participated in artist-in-residency programmes in upstate New York in the US, in Manchester in England, in Germany and Australia. She has upheld her integrity in her use of materials - a recent work comprises garments sewn into suitcases, which become stretched across the



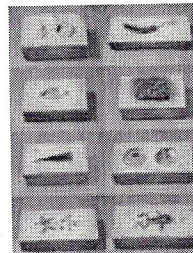
Yin Xiuzhen
'Sink'

1999, Germany
installations: sinks,
various personal objects



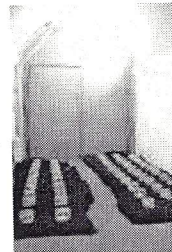
Yin Xiuzhen
'Landscape'

1999, Germany
installation: concrete,
mixed media



Yin Xiuzhen
'Landscape'

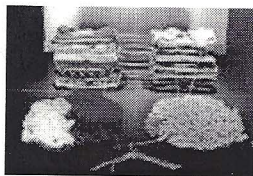
1999, Germany
installation: concrete,
mixed media



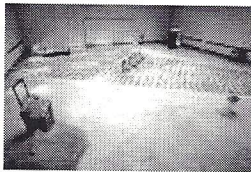
Yin Xiuzhen
'Rabbit Hunt'

1999, Berlin
installation: earth, roof

open cases and are supported by poles holding them taut from inside. Lit from within they appear like strange and ghostly cloth dingies adrift across gallery floors. One might suggest that they suggest the artist's more recent transitory status, but if they can be read as voyagers then they should also infer Yin Xiuzhen's continued journey towards new discoveries.



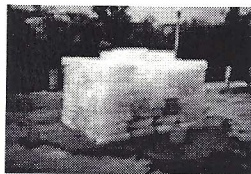
Yin Xiuzhen
'Untitled'
1998
installation: wool and sweaters



Yin Xiuzhen
'Ruins of the City'
1997
installation: cement, roof tiles and old furniture

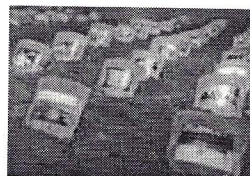


Yin Xiuzhen
'Shoes with Butter - Tibet'
1996
Photographic Print



Yin Xiuzhen
'Washing the River'
1995
performance

tiles, photographs



Yin Xiuzhen
'Rabbit Hunt'
1999, Berlin
installation: earth, roof tiles, photographs



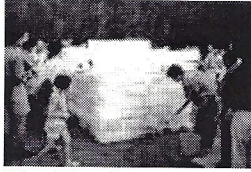
Yin Xiuzhen
'Yin Xiuzhen'
1998
installation: flowerpots, cement, clothes



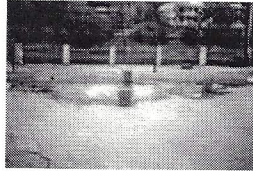
Yin Xiuzhen
'Yin Xiuzhen Married'
1998
mixed media: cotton shoes, thread and color photos



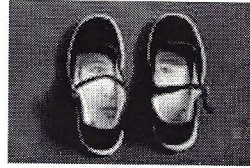
Yin Xiuzhen
'Yin Xiuzhen at the Elementary School'
1998
mixed media: cotton shoes, thread and color photos



Yin Xiuzhen
'Washing the River'
1995
performance



Yin Xiuzhen
'Washing the River'
1995
performance



Yin Xiuzhen
'Yin Xiuzhen at the
University'
1998
mixed media: cotton
shoes, thread and color
photos

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