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INSIDE

Reflection on Artistic Practices Now and Then
in Shanghai

Artist Features: Liu Wei, Huang Yongping,
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Matthew Ryan Smith

Of Clouds and Cocoons: An Interview with Xiaojing Yan

Xiaojing Yan is a Chinese-Canadian artist born in Nanjing, China, who currently lives and works in Toronto, Canada. Xiaojing Yan received a B.F.A in decorative art from Nanjing Art Institute, Jiangsu, in 2000, and an M.F.A in contemporary sculpture from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, in 2007. The central themes running through her work concern immigration, identity, cultural difference, and transmigration. Often using traditional Chinese materials and practices within the contemporary aesthetic, she is known for creating sculptural objects and installations out of fibre, wax, tissue paper, wood, shell, and silk. In this conversation, Xiaojing Yan and I discuss cultural crossovers and the inspiration behind recent projects.

Matthew Ryan Smith: How has your Chinese identity influenced your art-making in Canada?

Xiaojing Yan: Art is my way of telling how I feel about being Chinese-Canadian. When I was in China, I never thought about being Chinese. And I didn't think about what it meant to be Chinese. When I left China to see the outside world, I did not consciously identify myself as Chinese, but my new culture did. All of a sudden, my habits, my personality, my appearance—it was all labeled Chinese. People around me remind me that I am Chinese every day. I often ask myself: What does it mean to be a good foreigner? Chinese culture, training, and traditions inspire my work. Here in Canada, adapting outside of my native culture molds and informs my work as I appreciate the richness of my multicultural background. Fifteen years as an immigrant is quite a long time. This experience has helped me begin to define myself in relation to Canadian culture as well as Chinese culture. My understanding of identity has changed. I am no longer tortured with the anxiety, loneliness, and struggle, and with the conflict of being between two cultures. I have grown from these experiences and have transcended that stage of my life. I now have a broader vision and much more freedom in my artistic imagination. I have lived most of my adulthood in Canada. I may not find the perfect balance between the two cultures; however, I feel we immigrants are creating a new, hybrid culture.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Do you make direct use of Chinese materials, traditions, or rituals in your work?

Xiaojing Yan: Yes. I am drawn to Chinese materials and traditions. I often take traditional Chinese techniques and reinvent them, thereby giving them

a new identity within a contemporary context and presentation. Rituals are intrinsic to the everyday lives of ordinary Chinese people. I haven't explored this topic, but this might be a possible direction in the future.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Would you say that contemporary Chinese art has its own aesthetic?

Xiaoqing Yan: What do you mean by "its own aesthetic"?

Matthew Ryan Smith: What I mean is: Does contemporary Chinese art follow a set of aesthetic criteria?

Xiaoqing Yan: I think contemporary Chinese art has its *aesthetics*, and in recent years the Chinese art scene has grown into the most vibrant scene in the world. There are two major problems Chinese contemporary artists have been dealing with. On the one hand, they have to contend with influences from the outside world, mainly from the West. They may absorb, resist, or both. On the other hand, they have to deal with thousands of years of Chinese tradition. Maybe they deny, digest, adapt, or transform them into the contemporary world. It's not only an issue for China; other countries with long histories, like India, are also facing this situation.

Matthew Ryan Smith: You once said, "I think in Chinese but speak in English." How does this relate to your work?

Xiaoqing Yan: Having been away from China for fourteen years, I now actually think, dream, and feel emotions in both Chinese and English. When I talk with other people who are bilingual in Chinese and English, we may switch between languages because no two languages are identical in meaning, but there is no doubt that Chinese assumes the larger proportion. Chinese takes such an important role in framing my intellectual, emotional, and spiritual world because it remains the most important stage of my life; childhood, too, has left its irrevocable imprint. I use art as the visual manifestation to express my invisible spirit. I see it as a translation process. When I have an idea, I need to find the corresponding material, form, colour, and even display method to express my thoughts. Choosing the material is like choosing the right word from my vocabulary. As well, I am creating works in a different cultural context; in this sense, translation is not only from one language to another, but also from one culture to another.

Matthew Ryan Smith: How did you come to settle in the Toronto area?

Xiaoqing Yan: I have lived in Toronto for almost twelve years. However, if the definition of home is where you feel you belong, the sense of belonging for me is in a constant flux. Slowly I have started to call Toronto "home." Due to my uprooted experience, my feeling of home is different than for people who were born and grew up here. I still have a traveler's curiosity, the continual feeling of freshness, search, surprise, and freedom.

Matthew Ryan Smith: You've talked about having a sense of suspension between what you used to be and what you're becoming, between what was and what is. How does this scenario play out in your work?

Left: Xiaojing Yan, *Guan Yin*, 2009, fabric hardener, Chinese tassel thread, 213.3 x 60.9 x 60.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Xiaojing Yan, *Guan Yin* (detail), 2009, fabric hardener, Chinese tassel thread, 213.3 x 60.9 x 60.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Xiaojing Yan: You are referring to a sentence that I wrote to describe my work *Guan Yin* (2009), a sculpture made of Chinese tassel thread. *Guan Yin* is the Goddess of Compassion in Chinese Buddhism. In Indian Buddhism, Guanyin is male, but when Buddhism arrived in China two thousand years ago, Guanyin became female. That change in itself was a struggle between transformation and adaptation, and, finally, finding the proper sense of belonging. I created a Guanyin statue by applying the fabric hardeners Paverpol and Powertex on red synthetic thread. This type of thread is normally used for creating the dangling tassels on Chinese lanterns and fans. As I have applied it, the thread is in a messy tangle meant to represent struggle. Even though she was touching the floor, I suspended the Guanyin figure by a wire to show how, in my adopted culture, I am suspended between what I used to be and what I am becoming. This metaphor of suspension occurs a lot in my work. I see the act of floating as an aesthetic and conceptual device. Suspension offers the viewer a looming sense of alarm and dangerous beauty in the work. It's levitating life.

Matthew Ryan Smith: I see *Cloud Cell* (2014) as one of your strongest works. There, you've affixed freshwater pearls to monofilament thread on a grand scale in order to provide a semblance of a cloud. What is this work about?

Xiaojing Yan: *Cloud Cell* is my most recent work. It was inspired by the Chinese scholar's stone, which is formed by nature into surprising shapes and textures. Scholars' stones can be any colour, and their size also can be quite varied. Small ones are often placed on desks, while the big ones are installed in traditional Chinese gardens. In either situation, the scholar's stone serves as a meditative tool, something for people to ponder and admire. I wanted to create a scholar's stone that expresses the *yin-yang*

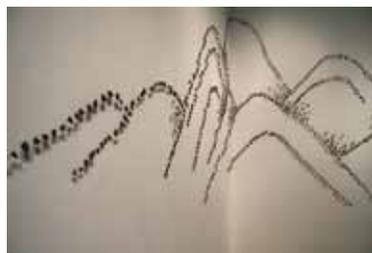


Opposite, top: Xiaojing Yan, *Cloud Cell*, 2014, freshwater pearls, monofilament thread, aluminum. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite, bottom left and right: Xiaojing Yan, *Cloud Cell* (detail), 2014, freshwater pearls, monofilament thread, aluminum. Courtesy of the artist.

Left: Xiaojing Yan, *Star Mountain*, 2012, star anise, metal pins. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Xiaojing Yan, *Star Mountain* (detail), 2012, star anise, metal pins. Courtesy of the artist.

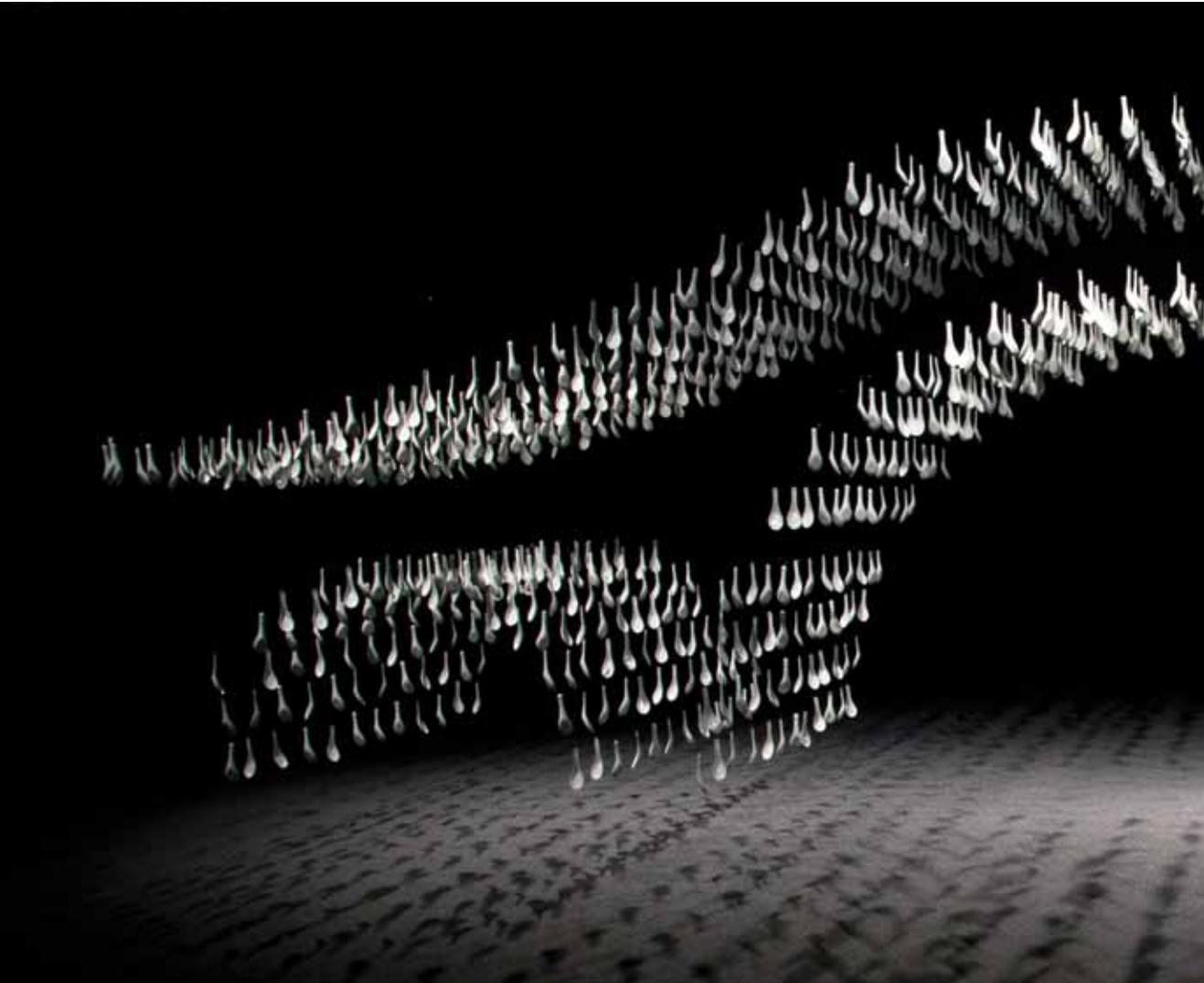


sense of duality and dichotomy. I suspended over 13,000 freshwater pearls in space to form simultaneously both the water-eroded scholar's stone and its horrific antithesis, the mushroom cloud produced by a detonated atom bomb. One, the stone, is slowly formed by natural forces and selected for meditation; the other, the explosion, is the result of man-made tampering with these forces for the purpose of instantaneous destruction. Freshwater pearls are themselves a product of a controlled natural process. China produces more than 92% of the freshwater pearls in the world.

Matthew Ryan Smith: I see *Cloud Cell* as being closely related to another work, *Star Mountain* (2012), which is made from star anise and metal pins. What was the inspiration behind this work, and is there a connection to *Cloud Cell*?

Xiaojing Yan: I did not intentionally create these two works to have a relationship to each other. Like many Chinese artists, I have practiced ink painting since I was very young. Clouds, rocks, mountains, and water have been the most popular motifs in Chinese ink painting and have endured since ancient times. These are at the heart of Chinese aesthetics, philosophy, religion, literature, and art. *Cloud Cell* refers to a Chinese scholar's rock, while *Star Mountain* was inspired by *shanshui* paintings, which use nature as subject matter. Chinese love mountains. Perhaps the most primitive reason for this is the legends and myths of Daoism and Shamanism. These legends speak of sages and immortals who lived forever deep in the mountain wilderness. The mountain areas were also regarded access points to the heavenly realm and the domain of magical spirits and powerful divinities.

Moreover, mountain regions have long been a setting and destination for pilgrimage. People travel to them in order to commune with the concentrated energy and strength there. It's a sacred place for many Chinese and for me. Star anise is a cooking spice very popular in Chinese cuisine. I stuck the star anise pods onto the wall with metal pins to depict the staggered ridge lines and clefts of a barren, eroded mountain range, as many Chinese *shanshui* paintings have depicted before. Some of the pods are whole, and some are in pieces. These pods and their shadows suggest the silhouettes of trees, creatures, people, etcetera. The star anise pods are like the fresh water pearls in that both are individually unique. Both are closely knit to my cultural and personal origin. Another indispensable element of the *Star Mountain* is the aroma. The smell of the star anise is very strong and distinctive. When I had the work installed at the Red Head Gallery in Toronto, people could smell it when they entered the building at the far end



of the hallway, still quite some distance from the gallery. For me, smell and shadow are intangible, yet they offer perfect sensations to create a seductive and alluring atmosphere.

Xiaojing Yan, *Bridge*, 2009, ceramic spoons, monofilament thread, 609.6 x 152.4 x 182.8 cm. Photo: K. Jennifer Bedford. Courtesy of the artist.

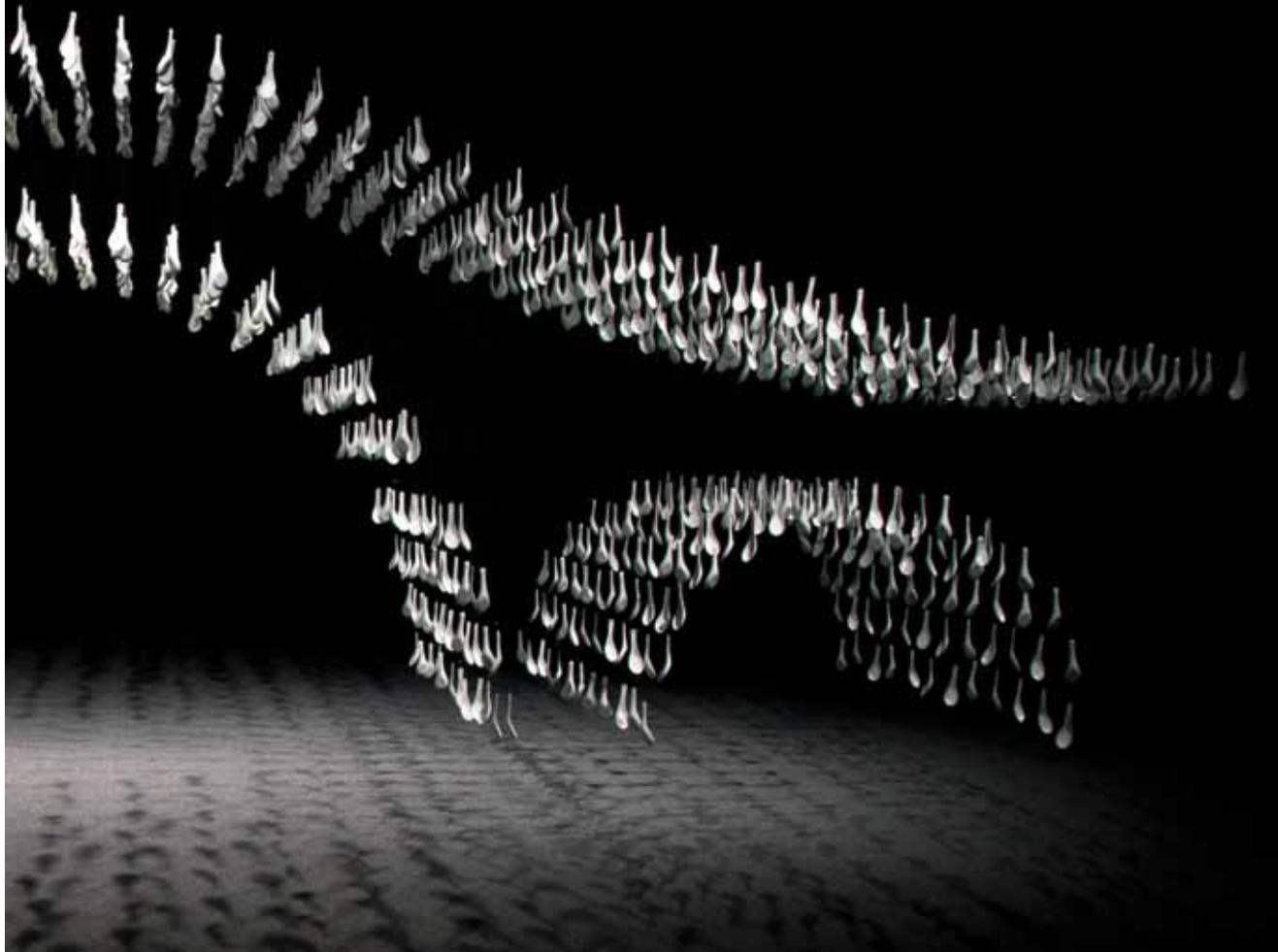
Matthew Ryan Smith: What is the meaning behind *Bridge* (2009) and *Zig Zag Bridge* (2011)?



Xiaojing Yan: *Bridge* is an installation made of 1,364 Chinese ceramic soup spoons suspended in the air to form a floating representation of a typical Chinese three-arched bridge. The symbolism of the bridge is a broad topic that can be explored from many perspectives. The bridge can be actual or abstract; it can

Xiaojing Yan, *Bridge* (detail), 2009, ceramic spoons, monofilament thread, 609.6 x 152.4 x 182.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

function as transit between two worlds, a sentimental link between two communities, a passage of knowing and discovering oneself and the world. A bridge connects two continents, yet it belongs to nowhere. The bridge is a place between worlds, neither one nor the other. Standing on the bridge, one can have a different perspective. It's a place; it's a space beyond. It could represent transformation—you are not the same person who crossed



from the other side. I view myself as a bridge linking two cultures together, forever suspended and never really crossed. The stone-arched bridge is the most common type one sees in China. In formal garden design, an arched bridge is placed so that it is reflected in still water. The zig-zag bridge isn't intended to be functional, but, rather, has a decorative purpose meant to add an interesting, jagged feature to the fluid scenery of lakes and ponds and to enlarge the scope of the sightseer's stroll while he or she is crossing over the water's surface.

Matthew Ryan Smith: More recently, you have moved on to producing video works. What does this offer you that other materials or mediums do not?

Xiaoqing Yan: When I wash my brush, I always enjoy looking at the ink as it dissolves in clean water. It's like a plume of smoke dancing, flying, and transforming. It's utterly captivating. I decided to capture this. I shot a water fountain and edited each frame to show a steady pulse of water that seems to push out against gravity. One of the most important aspects of Chinese aesthetics is suggestion. The water's arcs and undulations recall the scholar's rock; similar forms emerging from different yet fundamentally connected materials. *Ink-Water-Stone* (2014) was exhibited together with *Cloud Cell*. Water is similarly viewed by Chinese as a source of continuous energy, one that is always in the process of making and shaping, always regenerating and never ending. Movement and dynamics in black and white are more interesting than static colour. Canadian author Michael Ondaatje writes

about the scholar's stone in his World War II novel *The English Patient*: "In Asian gardens you could look at a rock and imagine water, you could gaze at a still pool and believe it had the hardness of rock." As I said earlier, I consider materials, colours, techniques, and display methods all parts of my vocabulary. I am learning new words all the time. The more I know, the more articulately my work can express my thoughts.

Xiaojing Yan, *Ink-Water-Stone*, 2014, video, 4 mins., 20 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Matthew Ryan Smith: What is the role of transmigration in your work?

Xiaojing Yan: In the Buddhist tradition, transmigration is a concept related to the reincarnation of the spirit into a new body after death. The new body can be anything alive, such as a flower, an animal, a human, etcetera. Transmigration involves the change of a corporeal being into another. Making art for me is such a process—moving ideas, and through my spirit, from my inside into the physical world.

Matthew Ryan Smith: The titles of some of your recent works include *Cloud Cell*, *Wave* (2014), *Ling-Zhi* (2014), *Cloud* (2013), and *In the Pond* (2012). Can you talk about the connection between your work and the natural world?



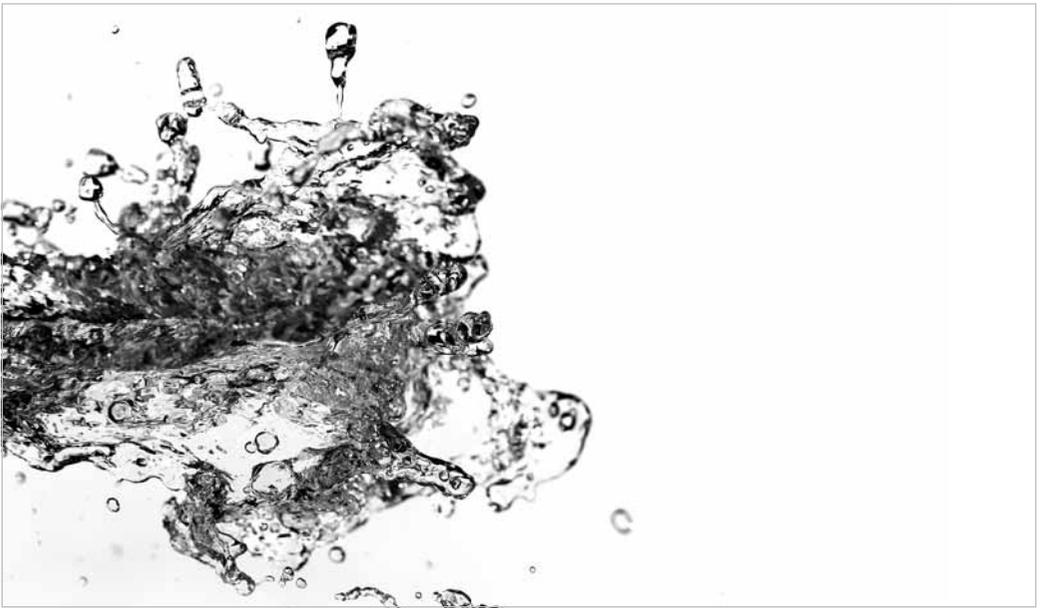
Xiaojing Yan: I haven't treated the natural world as a primary theme in my works. However, the meditated natural world has always permeated Chinese culture, and often the natural world is symbolized or densely coded. I have always been interested in Chinese visual forms, symbols, and traditions, and I have wondered how could I transform these elements into new visual forms that are both contemporary and traditional, with respect to visual form and in the content of the works.

Xiaojing Yan, *Ling-Zhi*, 2014, bronze. Courtesy of the artist and Lonsdale Gallery, Toronto.

Sometimes I play with concepts; sometimes I'm more focused on forms, textures, materials, and their relationship with a potential space. Cloud, rock, wave (elements of Chinese *shanshui* landscape painting) and Ling-Zhi, a type of mushroom that represents immortality in Chinese legend, all have rich, coded meanings in Chinese culture. My works suggest these connections. However, I emphasize more the visual forms that I have transformed. I wish new perceptions and new meaning will come forth from experiencing my works.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Do you see your work as autobiographical?

Xiaojing Yan: I have never thought of my work as autobiographical. But now that you ask, I can look back and do see the autobiographical aspect.



My work ties to my personal experience of being a Chinese immigrant in Canada, embracing the precarious circumstances of living between cultures. It has been a tool for self-expression in dealing with my life situations. Does that count as autobiography?

Matthew Ryan Smith: I would say it does.

Xiaojing Yan: The immigrant's new experience, adjustment, communication, cultural belonging, loss, and cultural identity may not be fully resolved for me, but these are no longer my focal points of interest. I am unsure if, in the next five to ten years, my work will become even less autobiographical, or if the personal points of reference will start to collect more in my adult experience and leave these formative years behind.

Matthew Ryan Smith: What are your major influences?

Xiaojing Yan: I like to look to artists and writers who have a multicultural background, perhaps because we share a similar experience. In a world marked by hybridity and diversity, multiple viewpoints are generated and enrich our lives. I also like to look into artists who are using materials in an inventive way or who explore an idea from a new perspective. But I have never been influenced by a single artist, and I have been more interested in other things from different fields rather than only art. Everyday reality interests me.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Whose work are you most interested in right now, and why?

Xiaojing Yan: There are so many great artists making fantastic works, such as the Venezuelan painter Carlos Cruz-Diez. I was fortunate to experience his work first hand at his solo exhibition at Jiangsu Art Museum, in Nanjing. I admire how he uses light as such an insubstantial material to create an aesthetic universe that submerges the observer in the artist's autonomous reality of colour, time, and space. I also like how Sarah Sze turns everyday humble objects into immense and intricate site-specific works. I like Diana Al-Hadid's sculptures for the array of influences her work brings together, both Eastern and Western and from literature, history, and science. Shea Hembrey makes me wonder how one can be so creative and have such a broad range of ideas. There are too many artists to name here.

Matthew Ryan Smith: Do you have any upcoming projects or exhibitions?

Xiaojing Yan: I am currently installing my solo exhibition, *Hybrid Vigour*, at the Latham Gallery in Stouffville, Ontario. Another solo exhibition at Varley Art Gallery in Markham, Ontario, the city in which I now live, is scheduled for 2017. I am focusing on a new, as yet undetermined, project toward that.