

Artist Statement

## Hybrid Perspectives on Transcendental Matters

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Living in Canada for the past 18 years, thoughts of ancient Chinese culture are often relegated to the dark recesses of my brain. But these ideas and concepts, which remain dormant in my everyday life, have begun to germinate in my artwork, pushing their way up through the complex layers of identity. I am motivated in my practice to find new ways to breathe life into these very specifically Chinese ideas, the traditions, rituals, and materials rich in religion, mythology, and culture. A certain kind of alchemy occurs in my brain where these things are transformed into ideas, which now speak to global situations and concerns and the modern, post-modern, and post-human conditions.

My current body of work focuses on how nature — an inherent force within traditional Chinese art — transcends culture through its references to the eternal and natural geological time. This exploration of the eternal began with the work “Spirit Cloud” — a large oscillating cloud composed of individual freshwater pearls suspended on filaments of fishing wire. Clouds have long been associated with longevity in Chinese culture as the habitat of the immortals, and the undulating surface of the cloud form is often used interchangeably in Chinese iconography with the gnarled shape of the *lingzhi* fungus (pronounced ling-juh). It’s a kind of visual shorthand where cloud references fungus, and fungus cloud, in a relationship of inter-referentiality. An ingredient used in Chinese medicine for over 2,000 years, the fungus is thought to bring about longevity and boost immune function. Sages and doctors also believed it to possess mystical properties, for instance, to “absorb the earthy vapors and to leave a heavenly atmosphere.”

The realms of heaven — expressed through an obsession with longevity and ancestor worship — are inherent aspects of Chinese culture, making for a different temporal framework than that supplied by Western modernity. We are always looking back to the ancestors while simultaneously dealing with the concerns of the present and practicing filial piety to help older generations transition smoothly through the more difficult stages of life.

Confucianism has encoded this perspective into the family structure, with human life framed as a series of phases. (For instance, the age of spiritual maturity, which begins at 50, the age of acceptance (60), age of unification (i.e., with the universe) at 70, and finally, the funerary service. But life is not merely a march from birth to death. Rather it extends beyond, through a link made

between generations through ancestor worship and the authentic role that ancient texts, poetry, and proverbs play in contemporary Chinese life.

Transcendence was not only an intellectual subject of the artistic and philosophical tradition but also a core element of its practice, with the “literati” or scholar painters often retreating into the mountains to disengage from the world or pursue a hermetic existence. When such seclusion was inconvenient, they instead used *bonsai* or landscape paintings as meditation aids in order to voyage to different realms of consciousness. In my work, “Mountain of Pines,” I use pine needles — actual physical materials from nature — woven through sheets of gauze, to not only evoke the misty landscapes painted by China’s most-revered masters but also to convey how the “real” can be a springboard for the mystical, illusionary and spiritual.

In my work “Song of the Cicada,” I use both Western and Chinese imagery to create a platform for the contemplation of transcendental travel and immortality. The installation, made of individual cicada exoskeletons encased in gold paint, uses the transit of the cicada, its metamorphosis, as a metaphor for the human progression through various stages of being and “un-being.” The installation assumes the form of a dramatic, suspended staircase, linking this world and the next — allowing me to transform my existential anxiety and perhaps latent filial guilt into a liminal mediation on the fragility of existence.

Yet, in this age of the Anthropocene, we can no longer afford to live in the realms of eternity and mystery that brought such comfort to our ancestors. Natural systems which have existed for centuries are now under direct threat from human actions. I am both horrified and fascinated by how technological advancement gives humans the “illusion” of power over nature. This fascination has mutated into a new branch of my practice which begins with a man-made situation, tightly-controlled, that, over time, gives way to an organic process.

For instance, my lingzhi sculpture series (“Far from Where you Divined” and “Lingzhi Girl”) starts with a mixture of woodchips mixed with lingzhi spores packed into a mold. The light, temperature, and humidity are controlled to ensure the germination of the spores. The spores then start to produce mycelium — a series of feathery webs — a bacterial colony that actually binds the woodchips together, acting as a binding agent. I then remove the mold and the sculpture — now structurally intact thanks to the activities of the mycelium — and place it in a small greenhouse.

At this point, I step back, and the sculpture sculpts itself. In a few weeks, the roots begin to grow, the arrow-shaped heads of the lingzhi pop up through the mulch, fruiting into lingzhi and producing a coco-powder-like dusting of spores on the surface of the sculpture. This hybrid bio-

art experiment, which relies as much on science as it does on fate, seems to restore some kind of balance, with science and chance playing equal parts and with humans standing, for the most part, at the sidelines. For me, it's important that each side of this equation has a chance to shine.

The development of my artistic practice is also influenced by these two very important elements - chance and intention. My practice is such that I never know where a material or method will lead me. Each project involves experimentations with forms, textures, and materials. Along the way, new ideas and forms spontaneously announce themselves, a process which deepens the mystery of the artistic process that is at once completely subject to my actions and also completely beyond my control. This makes me endlessly curious about how far I can push this dance of human control and organic serendipity. I might describe it with the Chinese proverb “*yi Hua Jie mu*” 移花接木 . . . the process of “stealthily grafting one twig onto another” so that each encounter with the natural world becomes an interaction of mutual change, impact, and transformation.

And finally, in a circular fashion, wend our way back to the top of this statement; it's important to mention that this dance of fate and science and my status as a first-generation immigrant have much in common. Much in the same way that I, as a newcomer to Canada, have adapted to my environment in many obvious yet intangible ways, like any newly introduced organism — I have had a kind of refractory impact on the people around me. I hope that my work succeeds in inserting Chinese concepts into the mainstream artistic discourse. Like a guerilla gardener, I plant seeds in public places, but I also take cuttings and graft them onto the local species. Like an orchid hunter, I seek out rare perspectives, finding ways to integrate them into hybrid narratives, narratives that challenge commonly-held notions about time, transcendence, and scientific progress.