

# XIAOJING YAN

INNOCENCE & EXPERIENCE





Xiaojing Yan  
*Innocence & Experience*

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition  
*Innocence & Experience*

August 21- September 28, 2014

L O N S D A L E **G A L L E R Y**

# Innocence & Experience

By Stanzie Tooth

Xiaojing Yan's work hangs in an intermediary space between innocence and experience. While her work of the past ten years has dealt with her placement, or displacement, between an Eastern and Western existence, her latest exhibition is born from a greater point of impasse. Acting from the perspective of a child as well as a mother, Yan is reflecting on life as well as aging and all of the stages therein. Her new works are meditations on these themes, taking the form of sculpture, installation, drawings, and video. The exhibition centers around two objects of importance: the scholar's stone and the Lingzhi mushroom. These objects are the subject of folklore and superstition in China. Yan takes these symbols and reexamines them from her place as an immigrant in the Western world.

Working in both Toronto and Nanjing, Xiaojing Yan bridges the divergent cultures of Canada and China. A solo exhibition of recent work hinges on an arresting installation titled *Cloud Cell*. *Cloud Cell* is a hanging work made of freshwater pearls suspended in space by hundreds of clear filaments. Like a three dimensional pointillist painting, an image is formed by luminescent dots in space. This curvilinear form is inspired by Chinese garden stones, or scholar's stone. The scholar's stone is an object of reverence in China. Formed by the slow erosion of water, the scholar's stone is seen as a site for contemplation and a symbol of wisdom. The form of the installation also resembles a mushroom cloud, the aftermath of a nuclear explosion. Here, a duality is presented to the viewer. The installation is at once peaceful yet destructive, its form is created out of dense objects, yet is transparent and free floating. The ghost-like sentiment of the work is intentional. While the form is based on nostalgia, there is a looming sense of alarm and dangerous beauty in the work. The exhibition includes ink paintings and a video work informed by *Cloud Cell*, exemplifying the depth of Yan's philosophical engagement with this body of work.

Another focal point of the exhibition is a wall installation based on the Lingzhi mushroom. In China, there is a myth that the Lingzhi mushroom, when sought out by a devoted child, could bring a deceased parent back to life. In these tall tales, children would even perish in their attempts to save their loved ones. Xiaojing Yan's sculptures and drawings based on the mushroom stem from the artist reflecting on her aging parents and how the traditions of the parent-child relationship are challenged living half a world away. As a first generation immigrant separated from her roots geographically, culturally, and linguistically, it has become even more important to Yan to create mementos to maintain a salient connection to these traditions. The artist has cast exquisite renderings of the mushroom in bronze, which ascend the wall like a pathway. By fabricating the mushrooms out of metal it is as though she has made imperishable the link to her family and heritage. The sculptures feature deep grooves in the face of each mushroom, the form of which harkens to water ripples or the growth rings of trees. These indelible marks show the passage of time, fossilization of experience.

The overriding theme of Xiaojing Yan's *Innocence & Experience* is not singularly about the duality of life and death, but rather explores the cyclical nature of life by means of these organic and ritualistic totems. Xiaojing shows us that even in the temporal and passing moments in nature, there is an enduring patterning that connects everything. We live on through the cycle, through memory and by making tradition our own. Her contemporary takes on traditional Chinese forms speaks not only of her history, but also of creating a new hybrid culture as a legacy for generations to come.

*Stanzie Tooth is a painter and curator.*

*Cloud Cell*  
2014  
freshwater pearls  
monofilament thread, aluminum  
96x45x45 inches  
Photo taken at The Red Head Gallery



# Sites of Transformation

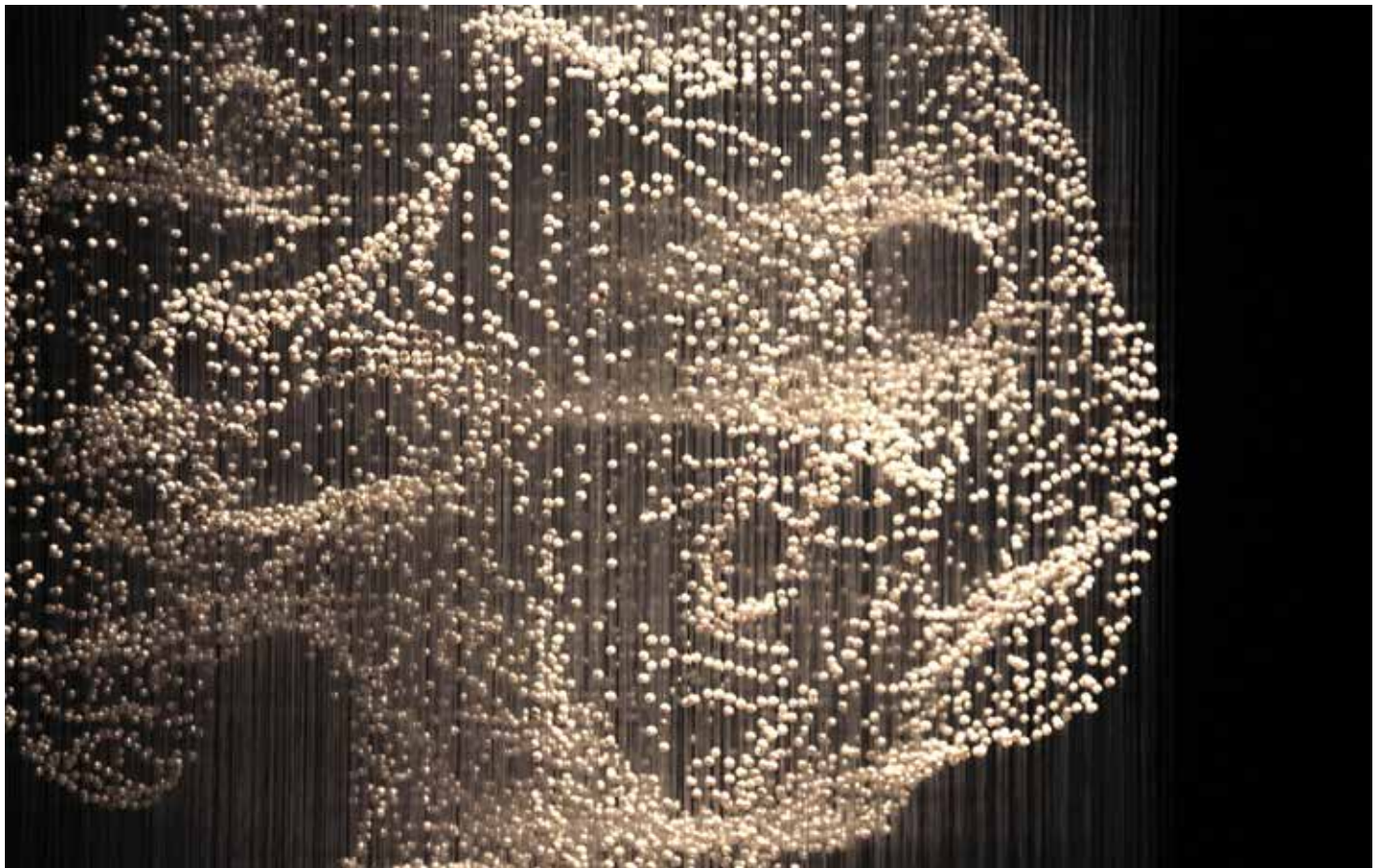
By Shannon Anderson

In Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, the writer considers a question posed in one of Plato's works that asks: "How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?" Solnit considers this a fundamental paradox of life, noting that "the things we want are transformative, and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration—how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?" She goes on to note that the search for such mysterious sites of transformation are the terrain of artists, who are adept at finding and opening doors that extend the self into unfamiliar spaces. Xiaojing Yan's work is no exception. Her artworks explore transformative spaces between nature, culture and the making of identity. She takes familiar objects and, through subtle material shifts, pries open their layers of meaning to reveal complex states of being in suspended possibility. In doing so, she draws from her experience as a Chinese immigrant in Canada, embracing the precarious circumstance of living between two cultures, and broadening that reality to encompass the human condition of perpetual change and growth.

In Yan's *Cloud Cell*, a curiously amorphous form is suspended in space, as though a mirage has been captured and placed on pause. Although the sculpture is technically still, it contains the tension of possible movement, made further palpable by the subtle quivering of the strands holding its form together. Series of pearls have been knotted along each strand, which come together to construct the illusion of a single entity, one which requires active viewing from all angles to perceive as a whole. As the title suggests, its organic curves and undulations resemble a cloud, one that contains all of its interpretive possibilities, suggesting anything from a malignant growth to an intricate sea creature to a plume of smoke. In fact, the shape's origins stem from the Chinese scholars' rock. These limestone objects are historically revered, serving as touchstones for meditation that are further amplified by each stone's unique configurations of asymmetry, and various details of texture, perforations and surface wrinkling, all of which offer suggestive qualities to unlock viewer's minds. Indeed, scholars' rocks are regarded as objects that speak to the transformative potential of nature.

As with much of Yan's work, *Cloud Cell* fuses this element from Chinese cultural history to other object types and interpretations, creating a new manifestation. Here, the scholars' rock is reconstructed through some 13,000 freshwater pearls, generating a pixelated form that glistens as it catches the light, as though it is merely a hallucination. With this material shift, Yan dematerializes the solidity of the scholar's rock, thereby heightening its transformative aspects. This shift draws the object in closer alignment to its cultural identity, reflecting how it appears in the mind's eye of those who meditate on its form. Importantly, such a change allows the energy contained within the scholars' rock to become





*Cloud Cell*, 2014, Detail, freshwater pearls, monofilament thread, aluminum, 96x45x45 inches

manifest, the quivering strands of pearls holding the form in a temporary state while revealing the vibrant forces within matter.<sup>4</sup>

This intricate method of fabrication brings to mind an earlier work of Yan's titled *Bridge* (2009), in which more than 1300 white Chinese soup spoons articulate the shape of a traditional Chinese bridge. They, too, are suspended by translucent strands, breaking down the form's solidity and interpreting the bridge as a metaphor for the precarious state between unknown worlds. In Yan's repurposing of common spoons, such objects are viewed anew, their curves echoing the shape of small fish, especially in their shadows, which subtly dance along the floor and walls surrounding the bridge.

In *Cloud Cell*, the pearls carry a particular set of meanings and metaphors. A pearl can be literally natural or cultured, an object made with or without the interference of the human hand, making it an object that can be perceived as both natural and man-made. As with the spoons in *Bridge*, the large volume of pearls renders them mysterious objects again, as though they've returned to an underwater state, each pearl almost like a bubble in the water from which this curious entity emerges. As a central export from China, pearls reflect a different, economic aspect of the artist's home country.

Other interpretive trajectories are encompassed in *Cloud Cell*. The "cell" that is the flip-side of the title speaks to the insertion of science into nature, and its ever-more microscopic investigation of its cellular makeup. The structural disintegration of *Cloud Cell*, in this light, resonates with imagery from biology and cosmology, referencing other paths of human examination of the universe. Yan notes that the shape might also be seen as a mushroom cloud, evoking an entirely another reference to Asian history, and lending the shape an undercurrent of something much darker.

The artist evokes connections between the natural world and Chinese cultural history again with *Lingzhi*, a series of bronze sculptures in the form of *Lingzhi* mushrooms. This particular type of mushroom, recognizable by its offset, kidney-shaped cap, has been used in Chinese medicine for more than 2000 years, but Yan's purpose for its reproduction here evolves from more symbolic associations. The curved "ruyi" pattern along its surface means "things go well," and it is otherwise known as the "mushroom of immortality." Anyone who eats the mushroom is said to live forever. In a strategy that echoes *Cloud Cell*, Yan focuses on the transformative promise of the mushroom by reproducing it in bronze to render it permanent, complete with a turquoise patina common to historic Chinese bronzes to give it the illusion of an already long existence. And where *Cloud Cell*'s material translates stone into the ethereal matter, removing its heaviness, *Lingzhi*'s natural origins become solidified and timeless, manifesting its legendary attributes. The sculpture is installed as a series of bronzed mushrooms, mounted to the gallery wall as though continuing to grow and multiply. In this, their mystical metamorphosis into a permanent state also appears to come with the ability for self-perpetuation. These objects now hold the magic within, investing their formerly ordinary existence with transcendent potential.

The foundation of Yan's work is closely knit to her cultural and personal origins. Often, the personal aspect is hidden, as

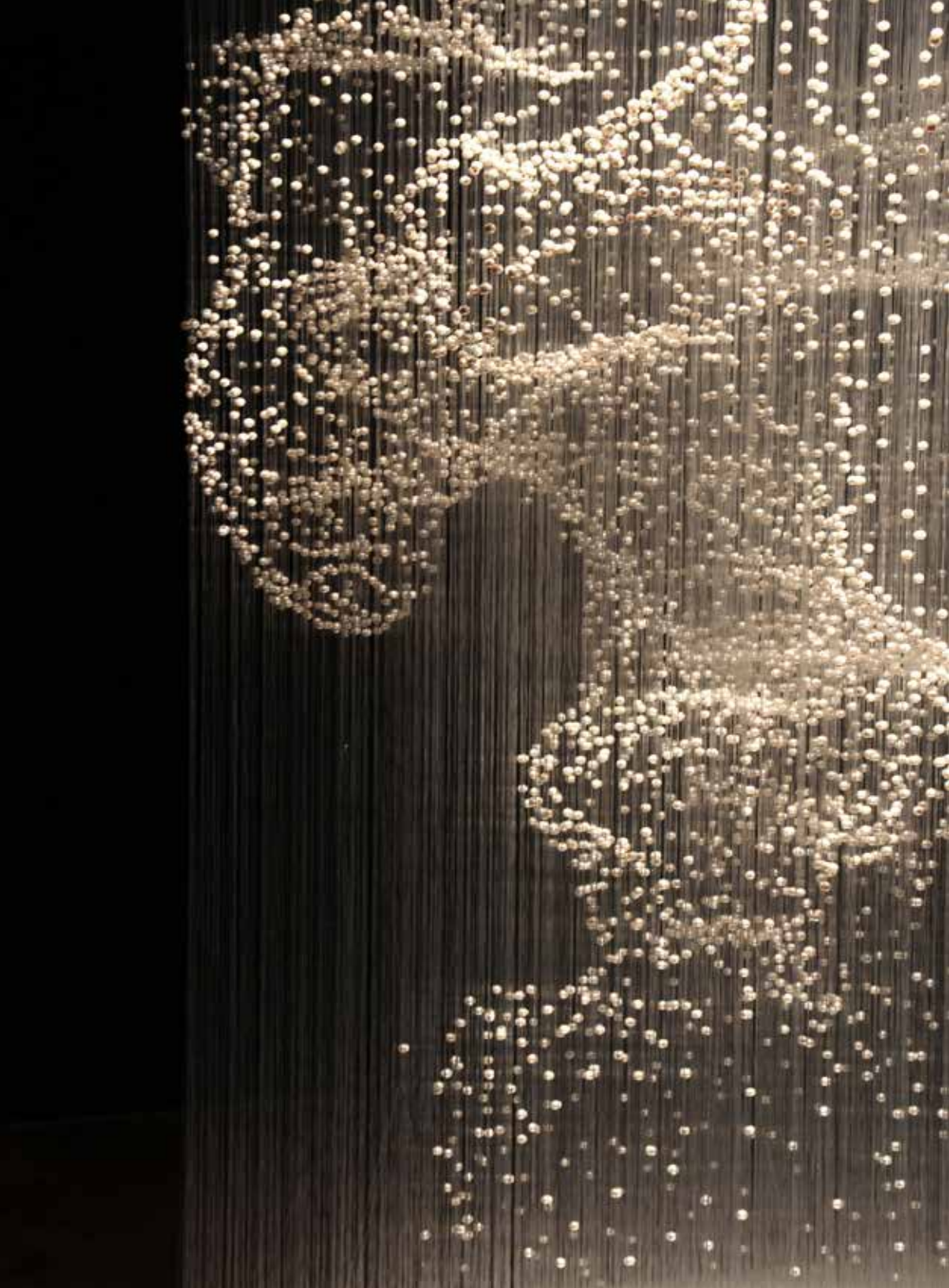


with *Cloud Cell*, whose use of pearls is a nod to her family origins, as her parents live in a place otherwise known as “Pearl City,” once the base of China’s pearl industry. One of the motivations for creating *Lingzhi* was the reality of coming to Canada and building a family while her parents and extended family continue to live in China. While she travels back when she can, the geographical gap is harder to bridge with the need to care for her young child. In discussing this sculpture, she speaks of her responsibility to care for her aging parents in China, one that she feels unable to adequately fulfill while living so far away. *Lingzhi* springs from the artist’s wish to fulfill her duty, by giving something to her parents that would change their inevitable paths of mortality and remove her weight of obligation—a perceived gift that would aid them all. The sculpture, in this aspect, continues the artist’s acknowledgement of living in two worlds, and never being in one without feeling the pull of the other, not to mention the struggle between the two worlds of life and death implied in the mushroom’s temptation. *Lingzhi* proposes the dissolution of such boundaries, opening the door to immortality.

The importance of material choice and their associated meanings plays an essential role in Yan’s practice, and her selections are often seductively beautiful, luring in viewers to contemplate their forms on aesthetic and conceptual levels. The delicate curves and captivating surfaces of the bronze mushrooms, the perfect sphere and soft sheen of the pearls, the elaborate undulations of a scholars’ rock—all are visually arresting, and underscore people’s fascination with objects from the natural world. These interests are sustained in *Ink-Water-Stone*, a video of a steady pulse of water that seems to push out against gravity. Yan transforms a simple water fountain spray into something utterly captivating; the nature of water as a creative force is emphasized as it surges forward, releasing all manner of possible forms. Placed in context with *Cloud Cell*, the water’s arcs and undulations recall the scholars’ rock, similar forms emerging from different, yet fundamentally connected, materials. Yan addresses water as a sculpting material, the title of the piece alluding to the rich interpretive potential of each seemingly random configuration. Water is also viewed as a source of continuous energy, one that is always in the process of making and shaping, always regenerating and never ending.

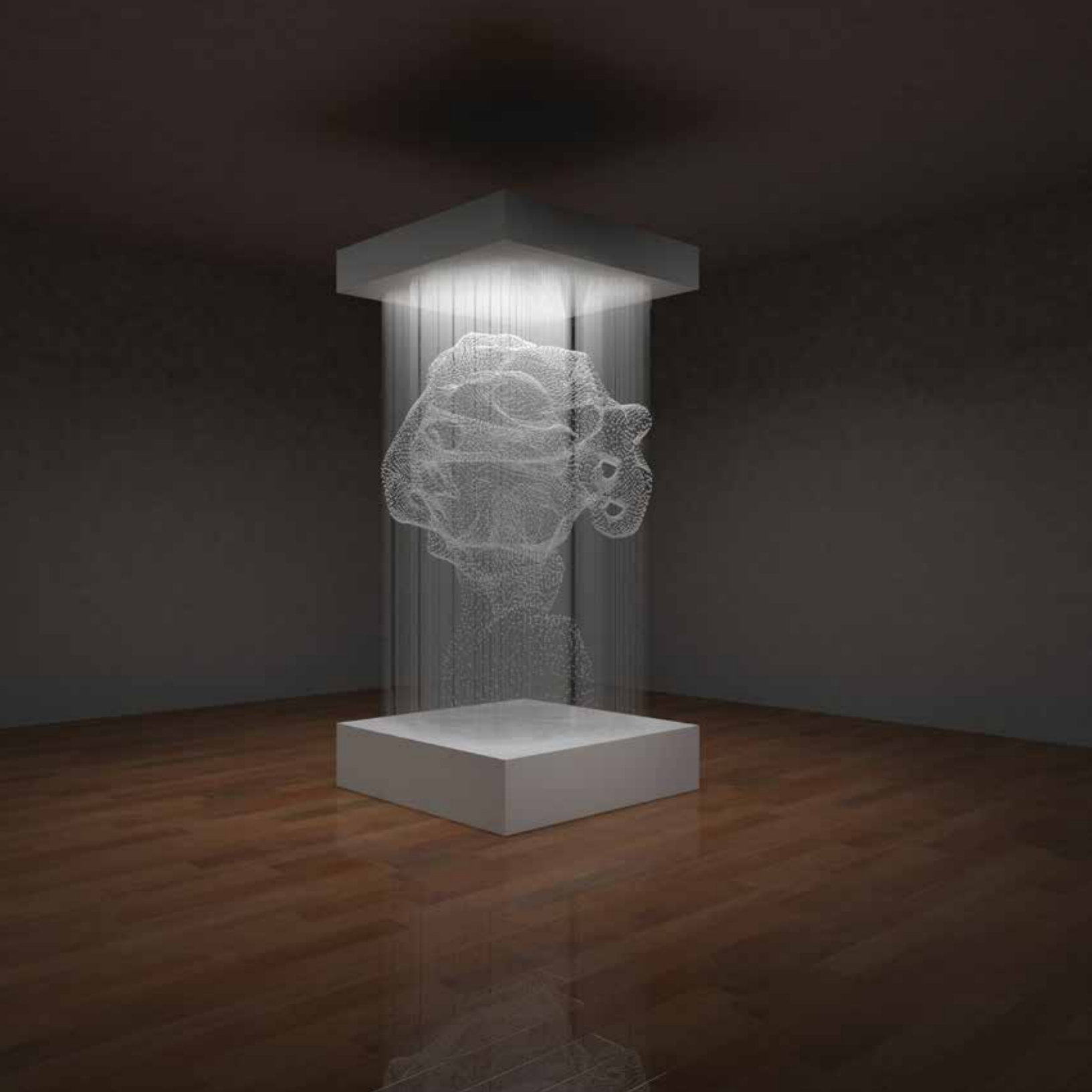
While Xiaojing Yan’s touchstone in her practice is her personal experience, particularly as a Chinese-Canadian, her artworks tap into something universal. The connections suggested here are only a fragment of the possible exploratory paths for a viewer to uncover. Associations to Western culture and history can be equally informative: the use of pearls speaks to the historic cultivation of beauty and adornment, and for many, *Lingzhi* may recall Alice’s encounter with the mushroom in Lewis Carroll’s infamous tale of *Wonderland*, and all of its symbolic and magical associations. Yan’s practice also brushes up against the practice of alchemy, a medieval practice founded in unlocking the transformative

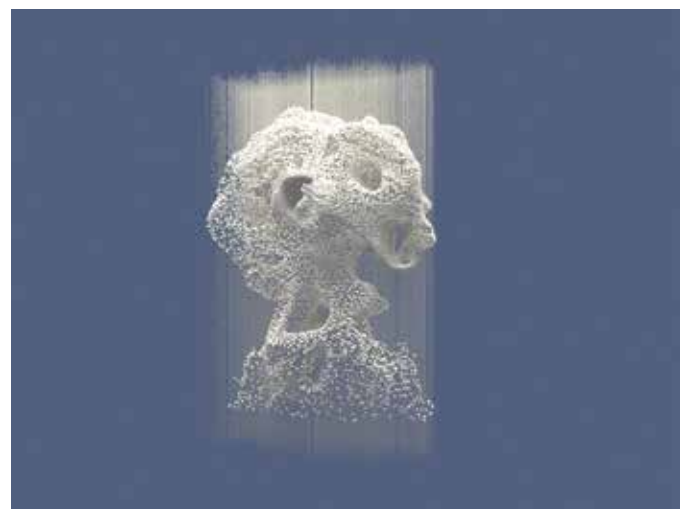
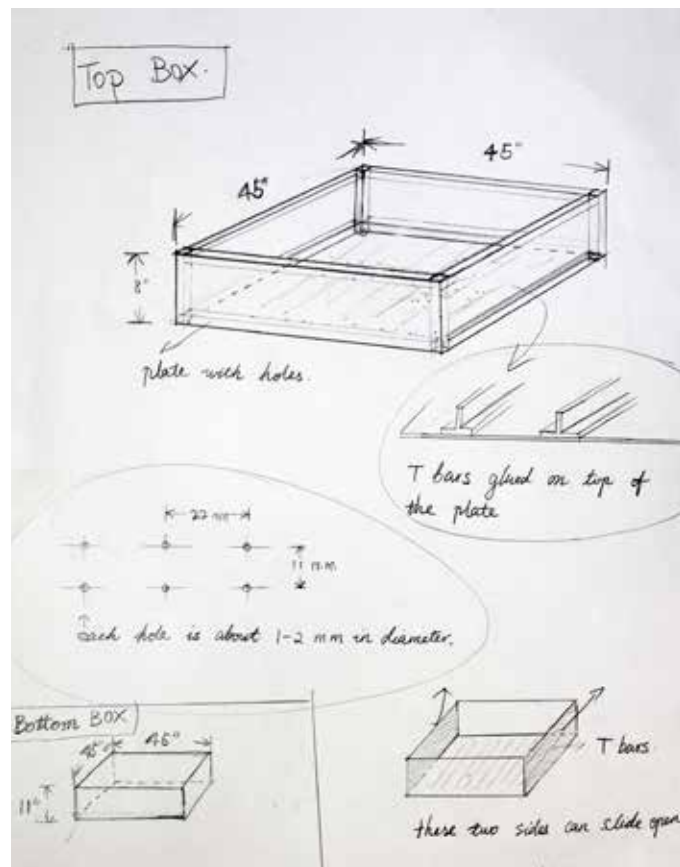
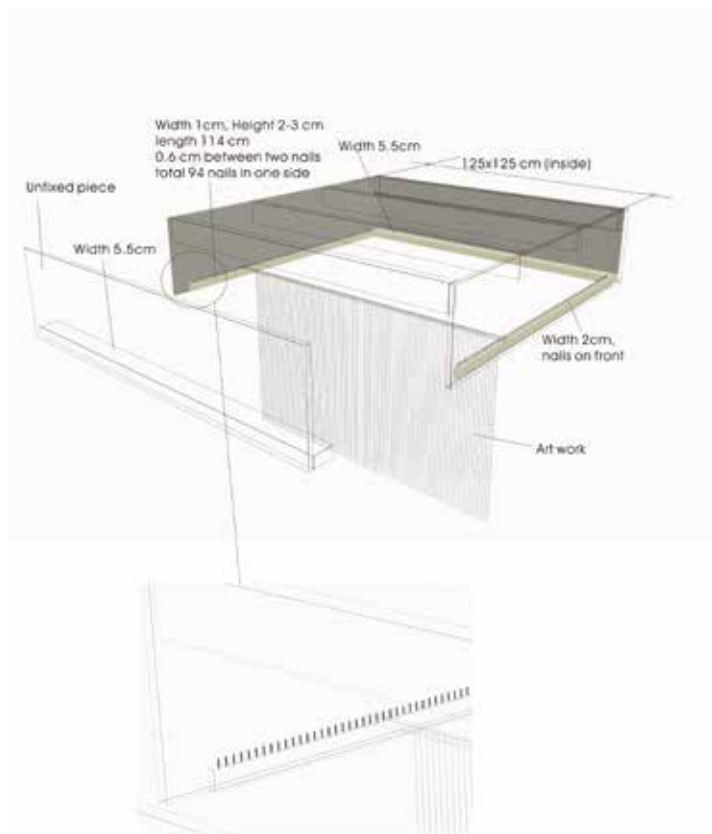
*Shannon Anderson is an independent curator and writer specializing in contemporary art and culture.*



*Cloud Cell*  
2014  
freshwater pearls  
monofilament thread, aluminum  
96 Hx45Wx45D inches  
Photo taken at The Red Head Gallery







Concept development, 2012-2013









*Linghi*, 2014, bronze, dimension variable













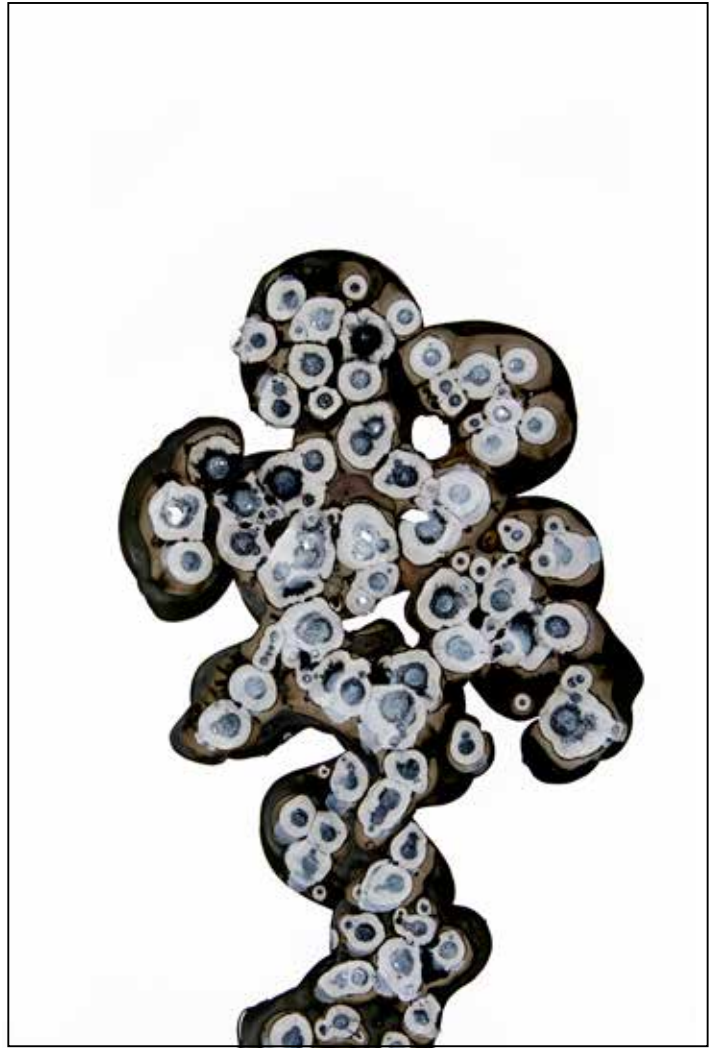
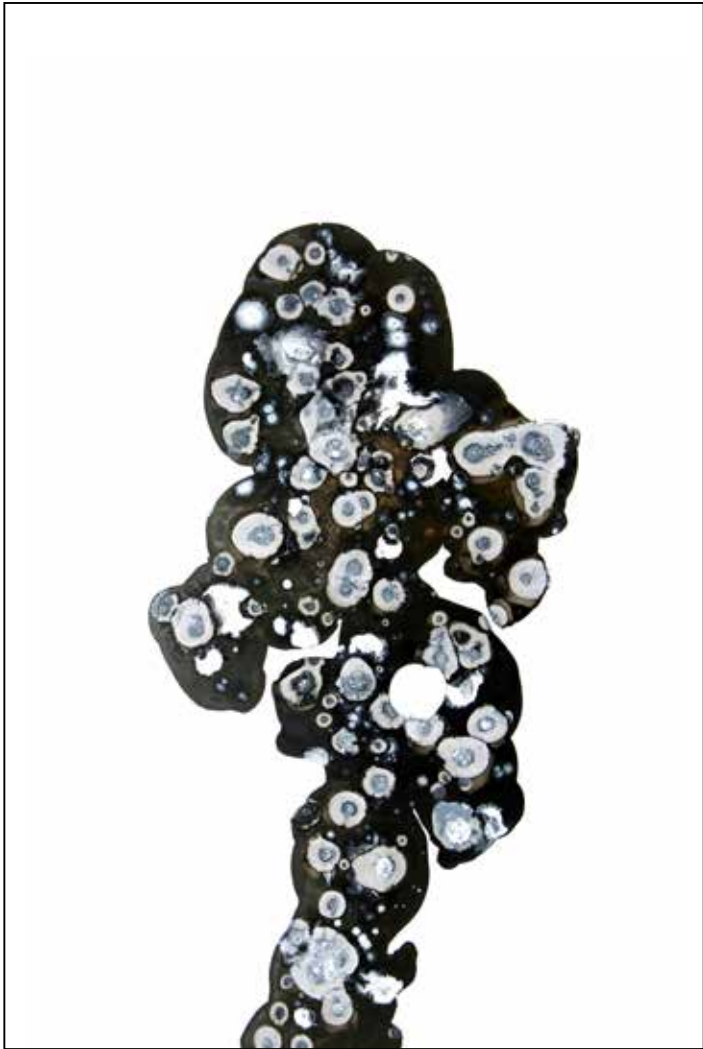
*Ink-Water-Stone*, 2014, video still



*Cloud Cell I, II (scroll)*  
2014  
rice paper & sumi ink  
26.5x89 inches  
framed



*Cloud Cell*, 2014, yupo paper & sumi ink, 27x22 inches framed, set of four





## Artist Biography

Xiaojing Yan, born in China, is a Toronto based artist. She holds an M.F.A in Sculpture from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA and a B.F.A from Nanjing Arts Institute, China.

Important exhibitions have presented work by Xiaojing Yan reprising traditional views of Chinese landscapes. In 2012 Art Toronto featured the special project *Cloudscape*, which is now part of the permanent collection of Seneca College. In 2014 at Art Toronto, her work *Cloud Cell* was showcased as one of five featured artworks. The group exhibition *Da Bao – Take Out* highlighted Yan's hanging installation *Bridge* and has traveled to numerous public galleries around Canada. *Bridge* was also featured in Yan's solo exhibition *Floating*, presented in 2009 by Phoenix Art Gallery in Nanjing, China.

Yan is the recipient of numerous grants including the Project Grant from the Canadian Council for the Arts (2015, 2013, 2009), the Travel Grant from College Art Association, NYC (2012), the Emerging Artist Grant from Ontario Arts Council (2015, 2013, 2011, 2009), Project Grant From Toronto Arts Council (2010, 2008) and numerous Exhibition Assistant Grants from Ontario Arts Council. Yan is also the recipient of the 2014 Outstanding Young Alumni Award from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and the 2013 Mandarin Profile Awards from Fairchild TV.

## Resume

### Awards/Grant:

2015 Project Grant, Canada Council for the Arts  
2015 Emerging Artist Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2014 Young Alumni Achievement Award, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA  
2014 Exhibition Assistant Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2013 Project Grant, Canada Council for the Arts  
2013 Emerging Artist Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2013 Exhibition Assistant Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2013 Mandarin Profile Awards, Fairchild TV, Canada  
2012 Exhibition Assistant Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2011 Best of Show Award, Annual Juried Exhibition, Latcham Gallery, Stouffville, Ontario  
2011 Exhibition Assistant Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2011 Emerging Artist Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2011 CAA International Conference Travel Grant, New York, USA  
2010 Exhibition Assistant Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2010 Project Grant, Toronto Arts Council, Canada  
2010 Exhibition Assistant Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2009 Project Grant, Canada Council for the Arts  
2009 Emerging Artist Grant, Ontario Arts Council, Canada  
2009 Best of Show Award, 135th Annual Open Juried Exhibition, Ontario Society of Artists, Canada  
2008 Project Grant, Toronto Arts Council, Canada  
2006 Graduate Student Research Grant, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA  
2005 University Senate Travel and Research Grant, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA  
2004-2007 Graduate Fellowship, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA  
2004 Merit Scholarship, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA

### **Solo Exhibitions:**

- 2015 Hybrid Vigour, The Latcham Gallery, Stouffville, Ontario, Canada (Jun-Jul)  
New Growth-Breath in Unison, Orleans Gallery, Ottawa School of Art, Ontario, Canada (Mar-Apr)  
Cloud Cell, Red Head Gallery, Toronto, Canada (Jan)
- 2014 Red and White Melody, +15 WINDOW SPACE, Truck Contemporary Art Gallery, Calgary, AB, Canada (Oct-Nov)  
Innocence & Experience, Lonsdale Gallery, Toronto, Canada (Aug-Sep)
- 2012 A Grasp of Shadows, Red Head Gallery, Toronto, Canada (Mar)  
The Language of Life, Fairview Library Gallery, Toronto, Canada (May)
- 2011 Bridge, curated by Fynn Leitchv, Artspace, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada (Feb-Apr)  
New Growth, curated by Kathryn Hogg, Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant, Brantford, Ontario, Canada (Oct-Dec)  
Cloudscape, in corresponding to Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, Todmorden Mills Heritage Museum, Toronto (Oct)
- 2010 Shells, Cocoons and Clouds, IndexG Gallery, Toronto, Canada (Mar-Apr) (Catalog)
- 2009 Floating, Phoenix Art Gallery, Nanjing, China (Nov) (Catalog)
- 2008 The Language of Life, Bluff Gallery, Scarborough Arts Council, Canada (Aug)
- 2006 Transmigration and Spirit, thesis exhibition, Kipp Gallery, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA (Aug)
- 2004 One person exhibition, Miller Gallery, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA (May)

### **Selected Group Exhibitions:**

- 2014: Cloud Cell, Featured project at Art Toronto-Toronto International Art Fair, Toronto, Canada (Oct)  
Out Sourcing, University Museum at Nanjing University of Arts, China (Dec-Jan)  
The Red and the Black- The biennial World of Threads Festival, Queen Elizabeth Park  
Community and Cultural Centre, Joshua Creek, Oakville, Ontario, Canada (Nov)  
Critique - No Vacancy Contemporary Art Event, Village Square, Burlington, Ontario, Canada  
Inside / Outside, ARC Gallery, Chicago, IL USA (June-July)  
Da Bao-Take Out, Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, BC, Canada (Jan-Mar)
- 2013: Dream State - No Vacancy, The Waterfront Hotel, Burlington, Ontario, Canada (Sept)  
Da Bao-Take Out, Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada (Apr-Jun)  
Artist Project - Installation Zone, Better Living Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada (Feb)
- 2012: Focus Asia / Featured exhibition, Art Toronto-Toronto International Art Fair, curated by Zheng Shengtian and Katherine Don, Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada (Oct)  
Material Connections, Lonsdale Gallery, Toronto, Ontario, Canada (Nov-Dec)  
Da Bao-Take Out, Art Gallery of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada (Nov-Jan)  
Da Bao-Take Out, Varley Public Art Gallery, Markham, Ontario, Canada (May - Sep) (Catalog)  
Bridging Cultures, two person show, The Blue Mountain Foundation for the Arts Centre, Collingwood, Ontario, Canada (May)
- 2011: The View from Here: New Landscape, Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, Ontario, Canada (Oct)  
Come Up to My Room, as part of Toronto International Design Festival (TIDF), The Gladstone Hotel, Toronto, Canada (Jan)  
Instruments for Free Space: [TheUser] & Xiaojing Yan, Cambridge Galleries, Cambridge, Ontario, Canada (May-Jul)
- 2010: Critical Mess, Sculptors Society of Canada group exhibition, John B. Aird Gallery, Toronto, Canada (Sep-Oct)  
Biannual Juried Exhibition, Grimsby Public Art Gallery, Grimsby, Ontario, Canada (Aug-Sep)  
City on the Move-Young Artist Festival, Don mill Subway Station, Toronto, Canada (Oct)  
Lust, Canadian Sculpture Centre, Toronto, Canada (Feb-Mar)
- 2009: City on the Move-Young Artist Festival, Kennedy Subway Station, Toronto, Canada (Sep)  
Common Thread 2009, International Fiber Art & Craft Festival, Joshua Creek Heritage Art Centre, Oakville, Canada (Nov)  
10th Annual Emerging Sculptors Exhibition, Sculptors Society of Canada, Toronto, Canada (Aug-Sep)  
Untapped, selected artist, Artist Project Toronto, Canada (Mar)  
The New Hybrids-Juried Exhibition in Mixed Media, The Living Arts Centre, Mississauga, Canada (May-Jun)
- 2008: Surface— Ontario Society of Artists 134th Annual Open Juried Exhibition, John B. Aird Gallery, Toronto, Canada (May)



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LONSDALE **GALLERY**



the **red head** gallery

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