

A Floating Life: The Art of Xiaojing Yan

by: Millie Chen, 2009

As a sound or a scent is carried by the slightest disturbance of air, so the work of Xiaojing Yan floats across our consciousness, lightly, subtly, but undeniably persuasive. The characteristic of her work is lyrical and supple, open to a plethora of interpretations, yet there is a fixed determination in its searching nature.

Having met with Xiaojing Yan for the first time, we sat together sipping tea in her studio, looking at her art, and talking about her journey from a design and decorative arts background to sculpture and installation. During this journey, she experienced the major changes brought on by emigration, from China to Canada, and having a child. These acts are powerfully transformative but unavoidably dislocating in terms of having to repeatedly redefine one's identity. Compounding this situation is her sense of isolation living in a suburban environment disengaged from an active art milieu, and raising a young child while trying to maintain a meticulous studio production. These struggles generate work that expresses the desire for meaningful connections, between herself and the world at large, between her conscious mind and natural cycles, between her daily life and her utopias.

In the creation of her work, Xiaojing Yan builds layers that represent her corpus and her psyche – her heart-mind or *xin*. The Chinese concept of *xin* 心 is based in the assumption that there is no separation between the cognitive sphere of ideas, reason and belief systems and the affective sphere of desires and emotions. Yan's work epitomizes *xin*: the rigor of her building methodology and the ideals that underpin her quest are steeped in an intuitive, empirical contemplation of her emotional life and her desires for human connection.

Equipped with her dexterous, inventive use of materials and her construction of forms that appear always to be in a state of transformation, Yan has set out on this search for connectedness. The earlier nascent forms that she produced recall cocoons or chrysalises, forms from nature that she translates into personal symbols of cultural significance. While they signal a cultural barrier that keeps her safe yet separate from the exterior world, they simultaneously suggest, as in nature, rebirth and a constant state of change. As with much of her recent work, they are constructed of strips of natural reed and tissue paper. These forms are simple in their material restraint yet complex in their geometry, pliable in their porous and translucent delicacy yet possessing of tensile, internal strength. They led to the more recent, larger scale works like *Living in a Bubble*, *Cloudscape*, *Bridge* and *Guanyin*.

Bubble is the newest piece, shaped like a drop of water. It is a departure from the earlier wall-mounted forms in that it is suspended from the ceiling and constructed to be large enough to contain her body. The Interior blue form does in fact depict

Yan's head in profile, formed to appear lathed. Underneath the water drop form are fragments placed on the floor like leavings.

Bubble was preceded by *Cloudscape*, a more elaborate installation of similarly constructed reed and paper forms that float and soar through space. The dramatic formation refers to traditional Chinese landscape painting where natural forms are re-interpreted under the lens of culture. What results are decorative motives, depicting water transforming into cloud, that become a convoluted representation of the natural, speaking volumes more about culture instead.

In the creation of both *Cloudscape* and *Bridge*, Xianjing Yan pushes her installation practice to newly ambitious levels. In *Bridge*, hundreds of Chinese spoons are suspended in the air to form a floating bridge that spans 6 metres and casts on the floor shadows that look like fish in water. Yan envisions this bridge as a connection between two cultures. But this bridge connects nothing, will support nothing, and is located nowhere. This bridge retains its purely symbolic quality by being devoid of all functionality; perhaps this is the only true utopia possible?

One of the most intriguing works for me is *Guanyin*. Through both the innovative material experimentation and its aesthetic outcome, Yan has produced a provocative sculpture installation. She applied fabric hardener to the red synthetic thread normally used for creating the tassels on Chinese lanterns and fans to form the body of the Goddess of Mercy and Compassion. The thread is applied in a messy tangle to represent struggle. This is a constructive struggle where, again, the symbolism of bridge comes into play. *Guanyin* hangs suspended between the earth and sky, between cultures, between genders, in a mutable form that floats with trails of thread falling to the floor in cascades that suggest sartorial extensions of her/his body but also of remnants or traces of her/himself that are being shed or offered. Placed in the role of bridge between different spheres, *Guanyin* represents non-duality and a source of unconditional acceptance.

Xiaoqing Yan convincingly transforms humble materials into visual poetry in the form of sculptural and spatial contemplations. She conjures the illusory act of floating as an aesthetic and conceptual device. This floating act is not comforting or stable. There is a weight to carry; there is the threat of losing buoyancy, of being found out, of disbelieving, the illusion destroyed, of falling to earth. What is one to do with the dilemma of a non-levitating life? Of the reality of living with dualism, disengagement and isolation? Through her work, Yan invites us to enjoy the magic show but gently makes us aware of ungrounded assumptions and comfortable complacencies.