



XIAOJING YAN 闫晓静

Pines, Needles, Mushrooms, Ink, Paint:
A Botanical Rhapsody

松树、松针、灵芝、水墨、颜料:
植物狂想曲

Pines, Needles, Mushrooms, Ink, Paint: A Botanical Rhapsody

By Lilly Wei

Ghostly landscapes wavering on silk, sculpture, and abstract paintings make up Xiaojing Yan's first solo exhibition in New York. It features a site-specific installation, two unusual portrait busts of a young girl, and a few abstract ink paintings on paper, all from 2016-2020. Some of the materials she uses are surprising even if we're accustomed to contemporary artists' idiosyncratic, unfettered choices. Yan (born in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu, China in 1978 and based in Toronto, Canada) straddles two cultures, sourcing both although she is most deeply invested in representations of her native heritage. Her preference is evident in her subject matter, often based on traditional Chinese landscape paintings, aesthetic canons and its ancient folktales, legends, healing treatises, spiritual teachings, and philosophies. Landscape and the concept of place are central to her practice, infused with the émigré's complicated sense of cultural and psychological bifurcation in which the displaced is frequently unable to feel completely at home in either culture. Yan was in her early twenties when she left China after graduating with a BFA from Nanjing University of the Arts in 2000. She then earned an MFA in sculpture in the United States in 2007, afterwards settling in Toronto where she has lived ever since. Even though she spent half her life in China and half in the United States and Canada (at least so far), the impact was not equivalent since the enormous influence, consciously and unconsciously, of our early formative years carried far greater weight.

The installation, *Mountain of Pines* (2017), was inspired by the imagined, impossibly serene landscapes of traditional *shanshui* (mountain sea) paintings, which emerged in the 5th century and are synonymous for many with Chinese painting. In her works, Yan pays homage to literati painting with its mists and idyllic views, a revered genre in China associated with the erudite and cultivated, linking her landscape with those of the scholars of the Southern Song and Yuan dynasty whose practice focused on nature and meditative philosophical and spiritual inquiry. Yan says that some of her primary influences are painters from the Song and Yuan dynasty, such as the celebrated Ma Yuan (1140-1225)

and Huang Gongwang (1269-1354). These landscapes are not intended to be representational; instead, they are lofty conceptualizations of the world and humanity's (humble) place in the scheme of things, derived in large part from Daoism and Confucianism which emphasizes nonaction or noninterference in the natural order of things as well as the cultivation of the self.

Yan fashions a richly imagined realm using scrims of silk organza. Her presentation is variable, contingent on the architectural configuration of the space. She threads dried yellowed pine needles through the sheer organza in patterns that will cast mirage-like mountain ranges mantled in pine trees onto the wall when the fabric is hung and lighted. Choosing its needles because of the symbolism of the pine tree, it is a pervasive motif in Chinese iconography, its hardiness and longevity emblemizing the great revolving cycles of birth, death, and rebirth.

Mountain of Pines contrasts a sequence of oppositions that includes the disparity between her insubstantial picture and the solidity of actual rocks, mountains, and earth. Paramount among them is transiency and immutability, a state of continuity and regeneration within a state of constant flux that ultimately refers to mortality and immortality. While she incorporates these stylistic conventions in her work, it should be noted that they are not simply nostalgic or recuperative. They also point toward our most urgent present concern—that of climate change and the precarity of the future of our ecosystem caused by our own reckless behavior.

Yan innovatively balances the botanical and the artistic in her work, perhaps most strikingly in sculptures made from mushrooms, specifically the *lingzhi* mushroom—not a usual medium but she was struck by its beauty: shaped like a fan and colored a shining lacquer red. It recalled the many Chinese folktales and legends about the *lingzhi* mushroom and its magical properties—that of healing, long life, and even immortality when consumed—that were told to her



In Suspended Silence 悬于寂静, solo exhibition at Richmond Art Gallery, Canada. Photo: Michael Love

as a child and remain fascinating to her to this day. When she visited a mushroom farm in China in 2015 and saw the uniformity of the cultivated fungus, she thought about the more irregular flamboyance of its appearance in the wild. It made her think once more about how environment so strongly determines the fate of living things, including the consequences of human intervention in natural processes—for better and worse—and from that came the idea to use the *lingzhi* as a sculptural material.

The mushroom is worshiped by most indigenous cultures as auspicious, a sign of good fortune. It is also medicinal, used for over two millennia in China to boost the immune system and has become of great interest to Western researchers of late as a defense against cancer and other ailments. Certain psychotropic mushrooms have been much sought after, and the controversial author Carlos Castaneda's 1971 book, *A Separate Reality*, sent intrepid followers of the counterculture and him scrambling through the des-

ert in search of magic mushrooms. It also made me think of Lewis Carroll's Alice who shot up in size when she ate from one side of a mushroom and shrank down to almost nothing when she ate from the other. Yan recounted other stories; one is of Princess Yaoji, a Daoist goddess whose soul clung to the *lingzhi* and infused it with immortality. Another story, known by everyone who is Chinese, according to Yan (there are many versions) is the legend of the White Snake, or the White Lady who became enamored of Xu Xian, a mortal, and transformed itself into a beautiful woman. Their love violated celestial and natural laws and subsequently Xu Xian died but an Immortal took pity on the White Snake, after witnessing her inconsolable grief and gave her a *lingzhi* mushroom to restore him to life. In some (more feminist?) versions, she steals the mushroom herself and saves her lover.

From these facts and fables came Yan's astonishing series, *Lingzhi Girl*, of which there are eighteen, made between

2016-2020, all life-sized. She thinks of her uncanny, haunting portraits as the mythological girls enshrined in these stories, with whom she fiercely identified as a child, considering herself one of them in spirit. They might also be thought of as the female version of the famous Xian terracotta army and Yan credits Maxine Hong Kingston's acclaimed book, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), a memoir about a "girlhood among ghosts," as another powerful influence.

Lingzhi Girl was a painstaking, suspenseful experiment that could fail at any point, and often did, since "all conditions had to be just right," Yan explained. Although using only one mold, each of the eighteen sculptures is unique, due to a process in which chance plays a large part. Her substrate of sterilized woodchips is mixed with lingzhi spores, the blend incubated in a specially constructed mold. Carefully controlling humidity, temperature, and light, a lingzhi mycelium starts to grow if successful. Once it has assumed the proper shape and a viable state that will support the mushrooms' growth, the mold is removed. At this stage, the sculpture is all white, as if made from papier-mâché and put back into the greenhouse. Later, when the mushrooms enter their mature stage and start to sprout spores, the surface becomes brown, seemingly dusted with cocoa powder. The bust is now left to its own devices as the mushrooms ripen, Yan relinquishing control, letting it assume a form determined by external forces and its own constituents in a "collaboration" with chance and nature. At another point, she will halt further growth, re-asserting herself as the artist.

The series *Naturally Natural* is another instance of Yan's exploration of collaboration between artist, materials, and chance, a variant on the theme of *Lingzhi Girl* and made during the same period. In this series on yupo paper, she permits the mediums she uses, Chinese ink and acrylic (ancient and contemporary, Asian and Western, respectively) to interact on their own to form elaborate, unexpected patterns with little directive from her. The process is not unlike the pour or drip paintings of modernist abstractionists, the influence, not noted often enough, going both ways as Western artists adapted Asian practices and Asian artists did the same—as, nothing new, has occurred over the centuries.

Letting the process take its own course, as Yan does, is both an empirical act and metaphoric. Her primary input is the choice of materials and their initial application to the paper. The one-off interaction of the ink and acrylic results in a stunning array of serendipitous fissures, crystalline spears,


and tangled, filigreed and spikey threads that suggest roots and branches, and the speckled ground behind them is more space than solid, an infinite void conjuring details from Chinese landscapes. In the works here, she has added gold, to make them more opulent, luminous. And the series—with its rhythms, subtle details, textures, and landscape intimations—bring the exhibition back full circle to Mountain of Pines.

Yan's investigations, in which metaphoric and physical worlds quietly interpenetrate each other, delve into the meaning of spirituality and metamorphoses, as well as raising other questions about being and becoming through the lens of art and nature, art and science, art and culture and their interconnections. Her project is particularly relevant at this moment as the pandemic forced us to rethink so much that we took for granted. It unequivocally showed us that nature is far mightier than we are (a fact we sometimes forget), and that we must approach it with the proper respect and care or suffer the catastrophic consequences of our hubris.

Xiaoqing Yan's project is exemplary for these disorienting, unprecedented times. It reminds us that we must live in accord with nature and it, in turn, will supply us with curatives, solutions, what we need. Above all, it reminds us, since we are also nature, that it is imperative to strive to restore and maintain the dynamic and delicate balance that ensures cosmic harmony. Nature will survive without us; we will not survive without its sufferance.

Lilly Wei (b. Chengdu, China) is a New York-based independent curator, writer, journalist and critic whose area of interest is global contemporary art, in particular emerging art and artists, writing frequently on international exhibitions and biennials. Her work has appeared in dozens of publications world-wide and she is a longtime contributor to *Art in America*, a contributing editor at *ARTnews*, and a former contributing editor at *Art Asia Pacific* in the United States. The author of numerous catalogues and monographs, she has curated exhibitions in the United States, Europe and Asia. Wei lectures frequently on critical and curatorial practices and sits on the board of several not-for-profit art organizations. She has an MA in art history from Columbia University, New York.

Right: *Mountain of Pines* 松山, pine needles on silk organza. Courtesy of the artist.



松树、松针、灵芝、水墨、颜料：植物狂想曲

By Lilly Wei

如梦似幻的风景在绢纱、雕塑和抽象画上徐徐展开，由此构成了闫晓静在纽约的首次个展。展览包括一个特定场域装置，两座非同寻常的年轻女孩半身像，以及一些纸上抽象水墨画，均创作于2016-2020年之间。即便我们已经习惯于当代艺术家们特立独行、无拘无束的材料选择，仍然会对她在材料上的运用感到惊叹。闫晓静（1978年出生于中国江苏徐州市，现居加拿大多伦多）横跨两种文化，亦同时受到两者的影响，尽管她的创作主要投入在表现中国本土文化上。她的偏好清晰地表现在她的主题选择上，即通常基于传统的中国山水画、美学经典和古老的民间故事、传说、医学典籍、精神教义以及哲学思想。景观和地域概念是她创作的核心，同时又融入了移民群体复杂的文化和心理分岔感，在这样的情绪下，移民往往无法在任何一种文化中感到完全自在。2000年，二十多岁的闫晓静从南京艺术学院获得学士学位后离开中国。后于2007年在美国获得了雕塑艺术硕士学位，此后一直定居于多伦多。尽管她有一半时间居住在中国，一半时间居住在美国和加拿大（至少到目前为止），但每个地方对她的影响并不等同，因为在我们的早期成长过程中，有意识或无意识中受到的影响对我们的人生要重要得多。

装置作品《松山》（2017）的灵感来自于传统山水画中虚无缥缈、极度宁静的风景。山水画出现于公元5世纪，对许多人来说，它就是中国绘画的代名词。闫在她的作品中致敬了描绘云雾缭绕的田园风光的文人画，在中国，这是一种关乎博学和修养的受人尊敬的画种。这将她的作品与南宋和元代的文人画联系起来，后者着重于表现自然和冥想的哲学，以及精神探索。闫晓静表示，宋元时期的画家是她的主要灵感来源之一，如著名的马远（1140-1225）和黄公望（1269-1354）。他们的画作

并非为了再现；相反，它们是对人类和人类社会在万物秩序中的（卑微的）地位的高度概念化，这在很大程度上来自于道教和儒家思想，即强调不作为或不干涉事物的自然秩序，以及自我的修养。

闫晓静用绢纱制成的纱幕营造了一个丰富的想象空间。这件作品可以根据展厅的空间形态作出相应的调整。她将干枯发黄的松针穿过薄薄的绢纱，纱幕被悬挂并打上光，在墙上投下海市蜃楼般的松林覆盖下的山脉。选择松针是因为松树所具有的象征意义，它是中国图像学中的一个普遍主题，其坚韧和长寿象征着出生、死亡和重生的伟大轮回。

《松山》展示了一系列对照物，比如作品中虚幻的图像与真实的岩石、山脉和土地之间的对比。其中最重要的对照是短暂性与永恒性，一种在不断变化的状态下的连续和再生过程，最终指向的是死亡和不朽。虽然她在作品中融入了这些风格传统，但应该注意的是，它们不仅仅是一种怀旧或复刻。它们还指向我们目前最紧迫的问题——气候变化以及因我们自己的鲁莽行为而导致的生态系统的未来的不稳定性。

闫晓静还在她的作品中创造性地平衡了植物学和艺术学，其中最引人注目的作品是一组用菌类——确切地说是灵芝——制作的雕塑。这不是一种常用的材料，但她被其美丽所打动：形状如同扇子，颜色像光泽的红漆。这让她想起了许多关于灵芝的中国民间故事和传说，以及灵芝的神奇功效——食用后可以治病、长寿甚至长生不老——这些儿时听过的故事，至今仍让她着迷。2015年，当她参观中国的一个蘑菇农场，看到人工栽培的整齐划一的蘑菇时，她想到了那些生长在野外的蘑菇不规则



的艳丽外观。这让她再次思考环境如何主宰着生物的命运，以及人类干预自然过程的后果——无论结果好坏——并由此产生了将灵芝作为雕塑材料的想法。

灵芝在许多国家的文化中被奉为吉祥之物，好运的象征。它也可药用，两千多年来在中国一直被用来增强免疫力。最近西方研究人员也对这种防御癌症和其他疾病的药材产生了极大的兴趣。某些致幻类蘑菇一直备受追捧，颇具争议性的作家卡洛斯·卡斯塔尼达 (Carlos Castaneda) 于1971年出版的《解离的真实》 (A Separate Reality) 一书，就描写了反主流文化的无畏追随者和他一起在沙漠中争相寻找神奇蘑菇的情节。这也让我想到了路易斯·卡罗笔下的爱丽丝，她从蘑菇的一边吃下去后体型迅速增大，而从另一边吃下去后则迅速缩小。闫还讲述了其他一些故事；其中一个 是瑶姬的故事，这是一位道教女神，灵魂附在灵芝上，使之不朽。另一个是白蛇的传说，这个故事在中国广为人知，而且有许多版本。白娘子爱上了凡人许仙，并把自己变成了一个美丽的女人。他们的爱情违反了天条和自然法则，后来许仙死去，一位神仙在看到白蛇悲痛欲绝的样子后很同情她，便给了她一个灵芝，令许仙得以还阳。在一些 (更女性主义的？) 版本中，她自己盗取了灵芝，救了她的爱人。

闫晓静的系列作品《灵芝女孩》就是来源于这些历史和传说，该系列共有18件，创作于2016-2020年之间，尺寸为真人大小。她觉得这些不可思议的、令人神魂颠倒的肖像就是那些神话故事中记载的女孩，她从童年时就深深地被她们吸引，认为自己在精神上是她们中的一员。灵芝女孩也可以被看作是著名的西安兵马俑的女性版本，闫晓静认为汤亭亭广受赞誉的著作《女战士》 (The Woman Warrior) (1976年) ——一本关于“鬼魂之中的少女时代”的回忆录——也对她的创作产生了重要的影响。

《灵芝女孩》是一项艰苦的、充满悬念的实验，在任何阶段都可能会失败，而且确实常常失败，因为“所有条件都必须恰到好处”，闫晓静解释说。虽然使用的是同一个模具，但18件雕塑中的每一件都是独一无二的，这是因为在整个过程中，偶然性起了很大作用。她用消毒过的木屑作为基底，与灵芝孢子混合，在一个特制的模具中进行培养。湿度、温度和光线都必须谨慎地控制，如果成功的话，灵芝菌丝就会开始生长。一旦成活并固定成适当的形状，足以支撑灵芝的后续生长时，模具就会被移除。在这个阶段，雕塑是全白的，就像用纸浆做的一样，然后需要将其放回温室。而后，当灵芝进入成熟阶段并开始释放孢子时，表面就会变成棕色，如同沾上了一层可可粉。此时，随着灵芝的成熟，半身像自由生长，艺术家不再进行干预，让它在与偶然性和自然的“合作”中呈现出由外部力量和它自身成分所决定的形态。等到时机成熟，她将阻止灵芝的进一步的生长，重新回到自己的艺术家身份。

《自然而然》系列是闫晓静对艺术家、材料和偶然性之间合作的另一个探索，可以视为《灵芝女孩》主题的变奏，二者创作

于同一时期。在这个系列中，她在合成纸上以中国水墨和丙烯 (分别是古代和当代的，亚洲和西方的) 为媒材，让其自行融合，形成了一种精致的，但出乎意料的图案，艺术家几乎不介入其中。这个过程与现代主义抽象派的流体画或滴画并无二致。几个世纪以来，西方艺术家借鉴了诸多亚洲艺术的技法，反之亦然。这种双向的影响并不新鲜，但却常常被人们所忽略。

像闫晓静这样，让创作过程自行发生，这既是一种经验性的行为，也是一种隐喻。她的主要投入是材料的选择和它们在纸上的最初状态。水墨和丙烯的一次性互动产生了一系列令人惊叹的随机裂缝、透明的叶片，以及缠绕的、丝状的或尖锐的线条，象征着根茎和枝条，而它们背后带有斑点的背景更像是一个空间而非平面，一个让人联想到中国山水画中各种细节的无限空间。她还在这件作品中加入了金色，使之更加富丽堂皇，光彩照人。这个系列作品——以其独特的节奏、微妙的细节、纹理和景观暗示——将展览再次带回到了《松山》。

在闫晓静的作品中，隐喻的和物质的世界悄悄地相互渗透，深入探究了灵性和变形的意义，并通过艺术与自然、艺术与科学、艺术与文化及其相互关联的视角，提出关于存在和生成的问题。这次展览在此时此刻具有特殊的意义，因为这场大流行迫使我们重新思考许多我们认为理所当然的东西。它明确地告诉我们，大自然比我们强大得多 (我们有时会忘记这个事实) ，我们必须以足够的尊重和关怀来对待它，否则将会遭受我们的傲慢所带来的灾难性后果。

闫晓静的作品对于这个彷徨迷失、前所未有的时代来说具有示范意义。它提醒我们必须与自然和谐相处，自然才会为我们提供疗愈和出路，以及我们所需的一切。最重要的是，它提醒我们，我们也是自然的一部分，因此必须努力恢复并保持动态和微妙的平衡，以确保宇宙的和谐。大自然没有我们也能生存，而如果没有大自然的宽容，我们将无法生存。

Lilly Wei (出生于中国成都) 是一位常驻纽约的独立策展人、作家、记者和评论家，她感兴趣的领域是全球当代艺术，特别是新锐艺术和艺术家，并为国际展览和双年展撰写文章。她的作品发表于世界各地的数十种出版物上，她是《美国艺术》的长期撰稿人，《艺术新闻》的特约编辑，也曾担任过美国《亚太艺术》的特约编辑。她是许多展览目录和专著的作者，在美国、欧洲和亚洲都策划过展览。她经常就批评和策展实践发表演讲，并在几个非营利性艺术组织的董事会任职。她拥有纽约哥伦比亚大学的艺术史硕士学位。

Left: *Naturally Natural series* 自然而然系列, Chinese ink and acrylic on yupo paper. 24"x36". Courtesy of the artist

Xiaojing Yan is a Chinese-Canadian artist whose work embraces her sense of having a hybrid identity. Combining her Chinese roots and education at Nanjing Arts Institute (B.F.A., 2000) with higher education at George Brown College in Toronto (2004) and an M.F.A. in sculpture at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (2007,) settling permanently in the Toronto area, her work reflects her journey through these various cultures, arriving at her own personal vocabulary. Her unique point of view brings together the past and the present, encompasses culture and nature, art and science. Yan is a recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the 2014 Outstanding Young Alumni Award from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Project Grants from the Canadian Council for the Arts, the Chalmers Arts Fellowship, Mid-career Grants from Ontario Arts Council, and a 2018 OAAG Exhibition Installation and Design Award and many more.

Most recently, she has had solo shows at Maison Hermès, Shanghai, China, Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg, ON, Canada, Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond, BC, Canada and Suzhou Museum, Suzhou, China, Varley Art Gallery, Markham, ON, Canada. Yan has also completed public art projects and commissions in Canada and China including her 2018 installation Cloudscape at the Royal Ontario Museum and 2019 Window display Into the Dream for Maison Hermès.

闫晓静是一位华裔加拿大艺术家，她的作品包含了她的多元文化身份感。她把她的中国根源和南京艺术学院的教育（2000年，艺术学士）与多伦多乔治布朗学院的高等教育（2004年）和宾夕法尼亚州印第安纳大学的雕塑艺术硕士（2007年）结合起来。现居住于多伦多地区，她的作品反映了她在这些不同的文化中的旅程，达成了她自己的个人词汇表。她独特的观点将过去和现在结合起来，包含了文化和自然，艺术和科学。

闫晓静获得了许多奖项和资助，包括2014年宾夕法尼亚大学的杰出青年校友奖、加拿大艺术委员会的基金项目、查尔姆斯艺术奖学金、安大略省艺术委员会的职业中期艺术家资助，以及2018年OAAG展览安装和设计奖等等。

最近她在中国上海的爱马仕之家、加拿大安大略省科堡的诺森伯兰艺术馆、加拿大哥伦比亚省列治文艺术馆和中国苏州博物馆、加拿大安大略省瓦力艺术馆举办了个展。闫晓静还在加拿大和中国完成了许多公共艺术项目和委托创作，包括她2018年在安大略省皇家博物馆的装置作品《云的景致》和2019年上海爱马仕之家的橱窗展示《寄梦》。

www.yanxiaojing.com

GALLERY 456

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Gallery 456/Chinese American Arts Council

456 Broadway, 3rd Floor

New York, NY 10013

Tel: 212.431.9740

info@caacarts.org

www.caacarts.org

Hours: Mon-Fri 1 to 5 pm

Sat-Sun by appointment only

October 8 - November 5, 2021

Curator: Lilly Wei

Essay translated by Xiong Yuejian

翻译：熊月剑

Cover images:

Lingzhi Girl 灵芝女孩, 2016, cultivated lingzhi mushrooms and woodchips, 18"x19"x16". Courtesy of the artist.



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