

Studio

Craft and Design in Canada

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Ghazaleh Avarzamani, *Romance of Many Dimensions*, 2019: Bamboo Basket and wood, varied dimensions. PHOTO: ALISON POSTMA. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

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Ghazaleh Avarzamani,
Romance of Many Dimensions, 2019.
Bamboo Basket and wood, varied dimensions.

PHOTO: ALISON POSTMA.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

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Focal Point: Xiaojing Yan

by Matthew Ryan Smith

At the University of Waterloo Art Gallery (UWAG), over 33,000 freshwater pearls, suspended from the ceiling by thousands of clear filament lines, move gently in the breeze. Each pearl is satiny, asymmetrical and unique, and collectively, they appear cloud-like. When they move, gently, it is reminiscent of a murmuration of swallows.

The pearls comprise Chinese-Canadian artist Xiaojing Yan's expansive installation, *Spirit Cloud* (2016-2017), a gorgeous piece that hints at different meanings—Chinese mythologies of deities mounting clouds and riding them across the sky and freshwater rainfall from clouds that sustain various ecosystems. Everywhere in Yan's work are threads of symbology and allusions to nature woven into the marrow of her art practice.

Born in Jiangsu, China, and now living in Markham, Ont., Yan's work is deeply informed by her immigrant experience and the bicultural identity she shares between China and Canada. She earned a BFA at Nanjing University of the Arts, specializing in traditional Chinese painting, followed by an MFA from Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

"Growing up in China," she remembers, "I was immersed in traditions that view nature as a source of wisdom, balance and spirituality, a perspective that continues to influence my art."¹ She strategically applies many of these ancient teachings to subject matter found in Canada, such as in her public art installations *Sound of the Rain* (2017) and *Dwelling* (2018), which investigate the diverse flora and fauna found in the deciduous region that encompasses southern Ontario.

Yan's studio is atypical as it functions as both artist atelier and a scientific research laboratory that closely examines the visualities of organic matter. Several years ago, Yan experienced a personal loss that prompted her to embark upon a prolonged exploration of ideas surrounding life and death, transformation and impermanence. She visited a lingzhi mushroom farm in China, an experience that forged a strong impression. Upon returning to Canada, Yan began experimenting with the biological properties of mycelium—which is the collection of hyphae, the fibrous root branches of fungus—by cultivating it in wood chips. As she became more familiar with its cultivation patterns, she began growing the mycelium in synthetic moulds stuffed with wood chips.

OPPOSITE: **Xiaojing Yan**, *Spirit Cloud*, 2017. Freshwater pearl, filament, and aluminum, 112 x 325 x 300 cm.

PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED.



Through trial and error, Yan learned to carefully control light, temperature and humidity to allow the mycelium to flourish. Once the mycelium had taken root, she removed the synthetic mould, allowing the mycelium to propagate into mushrooms. These would drop microscopic spores that covered everything around the installation in a thin layer of brown dust. Eventually, what was first directed by Yan's guiding hand was later appropriated and acted upon by enigmatic forces of nature. This, in turn, prompts her audience to speculate on the ways that nature can reclaim and heal itself from our anthropogenic destruction of the planet.

Yan's *Lingzhi Girl* (2016-2017), *Lingzhi Cat* (2020) and *Lingzhi Baby* (2022) also raise intriguing questions: How do these works restructure our notions of interspecies collaboration? Since mycelia can theoretically live forever, how can we engage with ideas concerning longevity and resistance? Do fungi represent the future of bioremediation? How do the inherent characteristics of mycelia and mushrooms reflect what Yan refers to as the immigrant's experience of "adaptation, growth and renewal?"² What lessons can humble fungi teach us about spirituality and the divine?



ABOVE: **Xiaojing Yan**, *Under the Pines, Over the Clouds*, 2025. Installation. PHOTO: SCOTT LEE. COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO ART GALLERY.

OPPOSITE: **Xiaojing Yan**, *Under the Pines, Over the Clouds* (detail), 2025. Installation. PHOTO: SCOTT LEE. COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO ART GALLERY.



Yan's work is rooted in time-centred approaches of process and creative labour that introduces it to serious conversations surrounding contemporary craft.

"Coming from a culture where craft is highly respected," she writes, "I aim to integrate its values with contemporary art. In doing so, I honour its origins while opening new dialogues about identity, labour and the meaning of making."³

Prodigious installations such as *Nebula* (2019) and *Emergence* (2021), meticulously strung by hand using individual lava and glass beads respectively, are not only meditative in execution but repetitive in method. They harken back to the intuitive, elemental rhythmic systems of nature and the cosmos—the change of seasons, the life cycles of the animal kingdom, or the genesis and supernova of stars. Her base materials evoke the currents of time

by drawing attention to the flight of molten rock from the outer core to the earth's surface, for instance, or the steady maturation of freshwater pearls in a mollusk. These instances of "nature's organic rhythms," as she poetically calls them, invite us to slow down, listen to and consider the interconnectedness of all things, living or otherwise.

In this light, one could argue that she poignantly references Chinese mythology as well as Indigenous worldviews, demonstrating a sophisticated layering of cultural, scientific and spiritual meaning in an expanded field of craft.

Yan's exhibition at UWAG, *Under the Pines, Over the Clouds*, investigates these concepts and more through works including *Spirit Cloud* and *Mountain of Pines* (2017-2018). Additionally, this collection presents a critical departure by featuring a new





OPPOSITE: **Xiaojing Yan**, *Nebula*, 2019. Lava stone beads and golden thread, 600 x 400 x 400 cm. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

ABOVE: **Xiaojing Yan**, *Under the Pines, Over the Clouds*, 2025. Installation. PHOTO: SCOTT LEE. COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO ART GALLERY.

virtual reality (VR) experience that seeks to reinterpret her lingzhi mushroom sculptures. Immersed in the wonder of VR, viewers encounter a kaleidoscopic forest of enchantment where imaginary beings covered in mushrooms symbiotically coexist with deer and lions. Just beneath the forest floor lies a sprawling network of hyphae which signals the communion between life above and below the ground. Derived from the Chinese saga of the mountain goddess Yaoji, her newfound fantastical realm fuses ancient mythology with modern technology, prompting us to consider our shifting influence and effect on the natural world.

Yan's comfort with binaries, tensions and complexity leads to a critical esthetic that scrutinizes our entanglements with the natural world. She amplifies the revelatory interplays between art and science, unlocking possibilities for meaningful conversations

surrounding human-nature relationships, environmental challenges and enchantment. The intensive hours and skill poured into her work, made evident through scale, fragility, repetition and research, often in the presence of other living beings, invite us to pause and take stock of what lives beneath our feet. From there we may better appreciate and understand what we encounter on the surface. This is craft pushed to the peripheries, to places wholly original and unexpected. ■

[1] Xiaojing Yan, email message to the author, December 19, 2024.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.