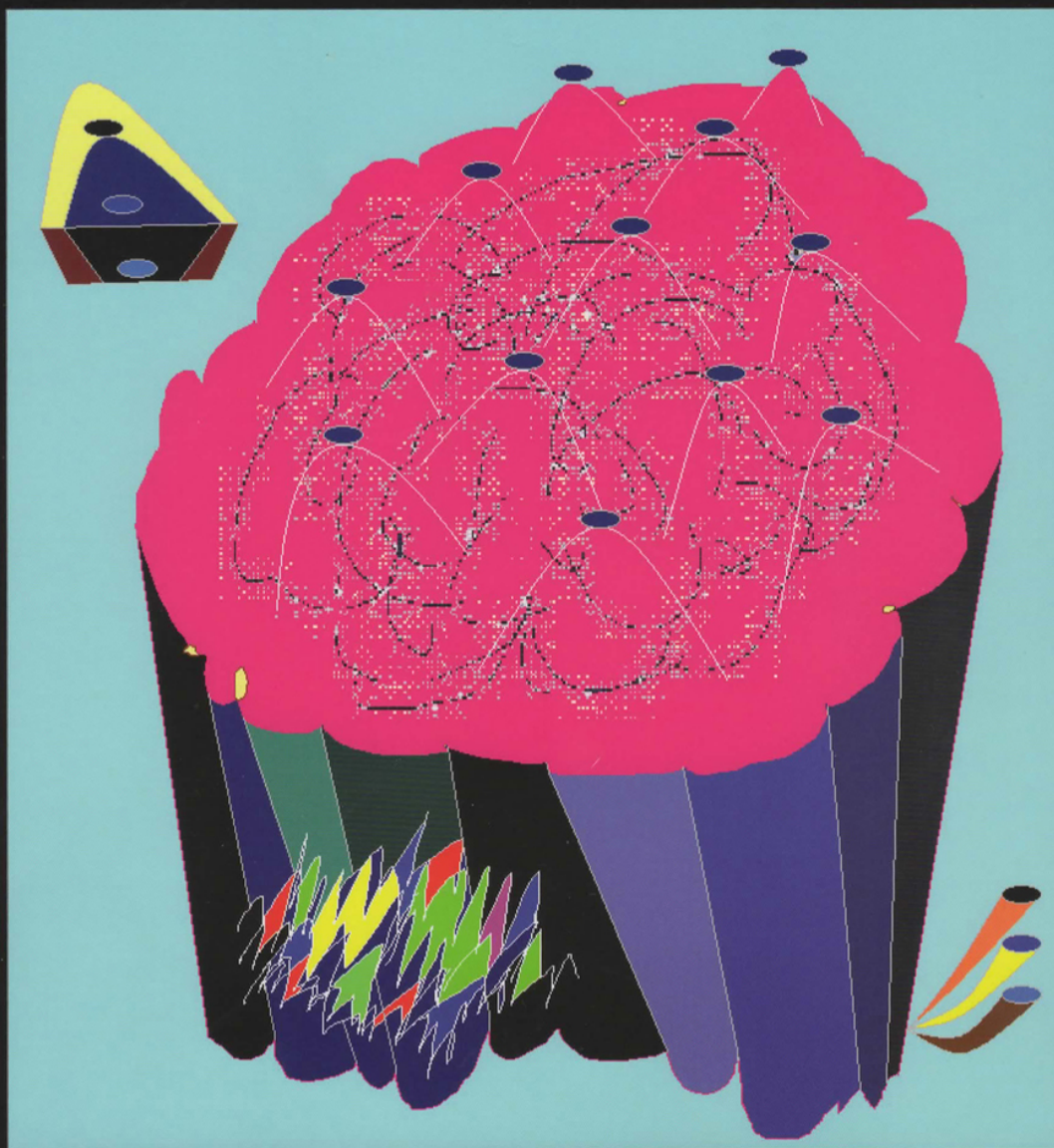


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Imhathai Suwattanasilp * **Suki Chan** * **Lin Yan** * **Lkhagvadorj Enkhbat** * **ArtJog** * **India At dOCUMENTA (13)** * **Art Taipei** * **Reviews**

The Paradox of Xuan



Lin Yan, **Back To Brooklyn No.3**, 2011, xuan paper, 38 x 49 in. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Cheryl McGinnis Gallery, New York.

There is something quite magical about the sense of presence and absence in the xuan paper art of the New York-based Chinese artist Lin Yan. There is also an intensity of emotion and balance running through her startling recent collection. Even in her blackest of works there is a connection with the timeless cosmos that jogs the imagination into life.

By Robert C. Morgan

Much of what has been said or written about the work of Lin Yan has been descriptive in approach, largely focusing on the artist's technical or formal methods. In each case, the work is described differently, which suggests two possibilities: either the actual process or nature of the materials may not be well understood, or, if understood, little is said about the interaction of ideas in relation to the materials. Because of this, some may assume that Lin Yan's work is a form of artisanry, rather than seeing her constructions and castings as sculpture in which the materials constitute a poetic statement about the world that she inhabits.

As a Chinese artist living in New York, Lin Yan functions as an artist on a diurnal basis, meaning she is occupied with her art on a consistent basis every day. In addition to the rewards of those who follow and admire her work and her working process, she may occasionally confront those who are oblivious to the traditions—historical, cultural, and aesthetic—that exist in relation to the kind of work she makes. For example, among those who regard Chinese contemporary art primarily as an investment opportunity, the tendency may be to categorize her work in such a way that simplifies its importance. This generally happens out of ignorance or occasionally through an overt lack of sensitivity.

This aspect of the human condition in today's global environment has become common fare in the circuit of global art fairs where viewers either drift or become consummately disengaged from the process of comprehending advanced art as anything other than an investment. In addition to the omnipresent problem of art as commodity, there are other further inhibiting factors as well. For example, the unrealized barriers of language, culture, protocol, and history are very real. They may stand in the way of opening a dialogue or engendering a spirit of commonality in the exchange of ideas. One should not assume that the readymade solution to these barriers is to indulge in

mindless market talk, particularly with Lin Yan. In the course of my trips to Asia, I have learned that most serious artists I have encountered in China are less interested in the market than in the ideas that stand behind their work. Here again I would include Lin Yan and her husband, the painter Wei Jia, who would rather spend time engaged in a discussion about their work from a Western critical perspective than to discuss the most recent market strategies. In their case, I am convinced this is true. They are passionate in their interest to grasp something more important than passing trends or media hyperbole.

In another way, the Western emphasis on relegating work to some stereotypical category or medium becomes over-determined and is used in a negative way, often preventing a more open, unbounded discourse that pertains to the way artists in China actually feel and think about their work. The struggle to locate a common point of reference by which to begin a discourse on the work of Lin Yan and bring it into a clear focus is a challenge, but it is a challenge worth the effort if only to understand how the reality of difference plays an essential role in how we understand and look at art today.

Enshrouded is the title of a recent exhibition of work by Lin Yan at the new gallery of Cheryl McGinnis in the TriBeCa section of New York. The title is somewhat elusive. What does it mean? Is the artist metaphorically wrapped-up in her work? In the case of Lin Yan, it might refer to the layers of *xuan* paper that project out into the space of the gallery. Is there something being concealed or hidden from view? The term “enshrouded” suggests a wrapping or covering of some sort, as in the chador worn by Islamic women—but the Chinese reference is problematic, particularly in relation to Lin Yan. My image of the artist’s work is somewhat different, less about covering than the process of layering and unlayering as in the Zen Buddhist notion of work that appears insignificant, such as sweeping the pathway to the stone step of the temple. (Of course, this is not really as insignificant as it might appear. Rather it is a form

of mediation used by practitioners in the Rinzaï sect, who adhere to enlightenment by engaging in simple repetitive actions, such as sweeping.)

“Enshrouding” might also have an obverse side as in the process of unknowing what one knows—that is, to engage in giving away what one has enshrouded by learning as in the ritual involved in reciting passages from the sutras that one has spent years in memorizing in original Sanskrit. Thus, enshrouding is a special kind of constructive/deconstructive process, whereby something is learned or acquired only to be given away.

In the art of Lin Yan, involving one layer of thin paper against another, one piece over another (or “step by step,” as quoted by Lin from a speech by President Barack Obama in 2009.) Unlayering is where the truth of the process is shown, the archeology of traces that Lin carefully and fastidiously reassembles. Even so, there is a paradox in all of this. There can be no unlayering without first layering, and nothing can be revealed that was not enshrouded. In either case, the body is implicated, as is the mind, the thoughts of the artist as she engages

in the process of creating density from transparency. *Enshrouded* reflects a state of levity and suspension where the *xuan* paper specters created by Lin Yan reveal their uncanny, dark, inscrutable, seemingly contradictory process. Together her works—whether cast, draped, and stained with the density of black ink—suggest a regal manifestation of the paradox embodied in the ancient Tao—so close in their reckoning to the wandering scribe from the Zhou dynasty (ca.1046 – 221 BCE), who taught “the Way” in southern China—that being and non-being were inextricable, bound to the same phenomenon, the same force, where the milky way confronts a single blade of grass.

To acquire knowledge through ink and paper involves a process that admits a form of heightened sensory cognition on the part of how the artist works with the paper. It is a process in which mind and body are one, inseparable from one another. The force of unity is the basis for the slow release of energy, where the artist projects feeling in relation to material. It is the process of unknowing—to regain knowledge by letting it go, the emptying of the mind. This Taoist paradox is latent within her work. To saturate paper with ink, to bind and sheave the cut-paper together, to assort and fasten the paper in such a way that the free edges flutter gently according to the current of air rising up from the floor—all of this done without effort as if to suggest a simple happening, an impulse, a sensation.

Lin Yan’s choice of archival handmade *xuan* paper began in 2006. Traditionally used by courtly scholars in the Tang dynasty, the composition of this paper is made from finely crushed bark taken from elm and mulberry trees. It is a delicately refined process that produces dense fibers and a tensile strength strong enough to last a millennium. (In contrast, the development of canvas used for oil painting was invented in Europe centuries later and has been used by painters for much less than a millennium. At this moment, it is difficult to project exactly how long Baroque paintings from the early 17th century will survive. Hypothetically—if



Lin Yan, *Me, Going to Brooklyn*, 2011, xuan paper, 78 x 60 in.

left untreated—the oil pigments could rapidly disintegrate the fibers of these works of art. On the other hand, there are ink brush paintings on Chinese *xuan* paper that have already proven to have lasted a thousand years.)

The kind of sensory awakening in Lin's works is precisely located within the process of the making. It is a feeling made manifest through the artist's manipulation of her materials. Art created on this level leaves few distinctions. The artist's process enters into oneness with the materials. The resulting quality happens within and through the process of the work. In some sense, it is held or suspended within the consciousness of feeling. While I recognize this course of thinking may not find acceptance among those bent on standardizing the thoughts and emotions of human beings in a globalized network, the true artist operates on a much different level. The imperative for such an artist as Lin Yan is to liberate thought and emotion from the dulling impact of repetitive slogans proclaimed by media, and to engage in making a work capable of transmitting a tactile sensation. Put another way, Lin Yan makes art that connects with the retina—that will, in turn, connect with the neurons of the brain. Finally the work may be felt—not merely as static information, but through a form of haptic involvement. The texture and ink absorbed into the *xuan* may incite a feeling made possible through the artist's material handling. Concurrently, the layering of the nearly translucent sheaves offer a dimension of light and air, creating a sense of immediacy that the art we are seeing shares a connection with nature. Emptiness of mind literally unfolds as nature retrieves its balance. These are significant works of art that move us—inspires us—to be in the present, to see the world in a fresh way, perhaps, never thought possible before.

As I engage visually and conceptually with the works of Lin Yan, I am fully aware of their tactile sensation—"tactile" in the sense that the works are possessed by a kind of physical presence (as well as a paradoxical absence.) They hold my focus and therefore sustain a feeling of balance

and equilibrium within my consciousness. To transmit a sense of balance in a work of art is a marvelous and rare achievement. In these recent works, there is a feeling of balance, but never completely without tension. While her work may suggest an ecological intention in terms of how they are made and soaked in black ink, offering an intense contrast between the black and white surfaces of the *xuan*, this does not deter from their structure.

It merely adds to the complexity and the overall intensity of the work. This,



Lin Yan, *Peace*, 2011, xuan paper, 60 x 36 x 7 in.

too, is part of its balance. Embedded within her passion to cast details from architectural sites, which she has done frequently in her work over the past six years, one may visually absorb the feeling of the dark ink and billowing ecstasy of her delicately torn paper. The act of tearing these sheaves has evolved into an expression of her connection to eroded surfaces based on how they have evolved and become relics of the past, essentially what they are.

The artist has spoken about her use

of ink: "The richness of blacks is like ink in Chinese painting. Black is a complex and sensitive color. It's very powerful when you handle it well." Generally, from a Chinese perspective, one reads black as having less to do with tragedy than fertility, the place where things grow out of the darkness, which is an essential Taoist teaching. Thus, Lin Yan will cast metal floors and walls of bricks not simply as decorative or textural patterns in the formal sense, but as signifiers of her past and of China's past as well. In addition, the artist further speaks of the contrasting elements of metal as being traces of an industrial past and paper as having a more delicate cultural component directly associated with Eastern aesthetics and philosophy.

Having come from an important artistic family associated with the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing (where she, in fact, was educated and later taught), and having been raised with an acute visual and aesthetic sensibility, the architectural traces of Chinese culture are important to her. She pays attention to the details in architecture and is gratified that her work captures something of her intimate past, not only in China but in Brooklyn as well, where she maintained a studio for many years. In Lin Yan's case, the studio is a place of inspiration and delight: therefore, what she sees on a regular basis in the process of developing and envisioning her work becomes essential to her knowledge as an artist. In Lao-tse, much emphasis is given to what one sees in nature. The Taoist view of nature—in contrast to Western philosophy—is less in opposition to culture than an extension of it. What one senses and what one knows are not equivocal; they are essentially the same. In this regards, the kind of heightened sensory cognition felt by the

artist in the intimacy of her studio is a preeminent aspect of her work. What Lin Yan achieves in her work is a statement on the autonomy of ink on paper as a form of absence in art. This absence reflects the enduring emptiness that all her work represents. Δ

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