

# Lin Yan: The Gateway to the Future

Robert C. Morgan

“Making art is like giving birth. I can’t hold it. There is nothing much to talk about. Because it’s personal and genuine, people see it and feel it deeply.” (1)

-- Lin Yan (2006)

In studying the eloquent paperworks of Lin Yan, it soon becomes apparent that not all artists know what she knows or understand what she understands. By this I mean that the task of knowing is not merely a transmission of information from one point to another – either in terms of word or image. Rather the works of Lin Yan concern what the American poet William Carlos Williams once called “an embodiment of knowledge.” To possess knowledge requires a sense of diligence, focus, and concentration that exceeds the limitations of everyday information. Whereas information scans the human brain on a routine basis giving us trivial data, puerile nonsense, regurgitated forms of propaganda, and seductively programmed advertising, the phenomenon of knowledge goes much deeper.

To acquire knowledge is a process that admits a form of heightened sensory cognition. It is a process received not through the separation of mind from body, but through the unified structure of mind and body. This kind of sensory awakening is precisely located within the process of art – both as something physically created, and something aesthetically received. One might argue that while information represents a normative state of reception where mind and body are forced into separation, knowledge is something more profound. It is a quality that exists within the consciousness of art. While I recognize this course of thinking may not find acceptance among secular theorists bent on standardizing the thoughts and emotions of human beings into a globalized network, the true artist operates on a much different level. The imperative for the artist is to liberate thought and emotion from the dulling impact of repetitive slogans proclaimed by electronic media.

In responding to the paperworks of Lin Yan, I am given an alternative point of reference. In a recent telecommunication, I received the following note from the artist:

“I use paper and ink for their ability to record intricate effects of wear and tear on the cultural and material fabric of our contemporary world, and, at the same time, to restore culture and peace within conflicts. Despite the feeling towards things lost, struggling, or being destroyed, there is also beauty, strength, hope, and persistence in these sculpted paper paintings.” (2)

The transmission of art as a form of knowledge is something rare today, given its competition with the abundance of spectacles and popular entertainment.

Whereas Lin Yan's paperworks do not move, spectacles project a constant flickering, a perennial strobe that keeps us in a sublimated condition of panic and off-balance. As I engage visually with Lin Yan's Gateways and Pathways (2007), cast from metal and brick, using traditional xuan paper and ink, I am aware of their tactile sensation – "tactile" in the sense that these 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 breath of consciousness. To transmit a form of balance in a work of art is a marvelous and rare achievement. In the more recent Monuments (2008), I receive a similar affect. While this recent series suggests an ecological intention in referring to the "grey city" filled with air pollution, this does not deter from the initial structure. Embedded within her joy of casting details from architectural sites she has known while growing-up or in her young adult years as she entered into the world as a mature artist, one may visually absorb the feeling of dark ink and billowing ecstasy of delicately torn sheaves of xuan paper.

The contrast between Monument #8 and Monument #9 is a curious one. Each of these recent works (2008) emphasizes the paper casting of bricks in her backyard in Beijing. Whereas Monument #8 focuses primarily on the whiteness of the xuan paper, the majestic blackness of Monument #9 reveals a vertical separation between the top section of cast bricks in relation to the loose folds of papers underneath. The entire work is covered with ink. Thus, Monument #9 offers a different mood not only due to the all-over blackness in contrast to the predominant whiteness of Monument #8, but also in its extreme vertical format. In her important interview with Liu Libin

(2006), Lin Yan expresses her motivation is her use of black ink: “Although my works are black and blank, I never feel that they are only one color. There is a sufficient vocabulary with blacks and Chinese xuan paper.” (3) Elsewhere, in the interview, she says: “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.” (4) From the perspective of Abstract Expressionism, this recalls the painter Robert Motherwell’s use of black, especially in his series of “Elegies to the Spanish Republic.” While Motherwell emphasized the tragic and somber connotations of black, Lin Yan’s perspective is much different. 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.

On several occasions, Lin Yan has spoken of her relationship to architecture as a symbolic place closely aligned with memory. “The demolition of the old architecture hurts me ... I have painted each of the places where I have lived. Architectural elements are important to me. They related to my home, my culture and express my experiences in different periods.” (5) 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 having an industrial significance and paper as a more delicate cultural component directly associated with Eastern aesthetics, writing, 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 the Tao Te Ching, much emphasis is given to the details of what one sees in nature, and nature – in contrast to Western philosophy – is less in opposition to culture and 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.

One might consider that Lin Yan's work as an artist encompasses three necessary and important components: memory, time, and history. The philosophers Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, whose teachings were established in southern China between the sixth and fourth century B.C (6), focused on the "path" or the "way." Therefore, when we incur memory, time, and history, we consider "the way" in relation these components. Each component is dependent on the other two. For history to exist, time and memory must exist. For memory to exist, time and history must exist, and so on. But as the Tao te Ching makes clear:

That which is called Tao  
is indistinct and ineffable  
Ineffable and indistinct,

yet therein are objects,  
Deep-seated and unseen,  
therein are essences,  
The essence is quite real,  
therein is the vivid Truth (7)

It is always problematic to put such ideas within an outside context and still allow them to resonate with their own special meaning, a task once given to centuries of Chinese scholars who contemplated the application of the “way” in relation to everyday reality. Even so, language is all that we have as a structural means of transmission. It would seem appropriate that a clear understanding of ink and paper in China, over centuries of time, is not at all exempt from the “way” as a form of absence in art. With all the strategies of language given to twentieth century Western philosophy, particularly in recent poststructuralism, it would appear that the distance between language and expression as a fundamental attribute of art has become too distant. Yet when I envision the recent Gateways and Monuments of Lin Yan, I am tempted to relinquish the excessive burden of theory in favor of a more clear and resonant idea: that maybe the future is not so far away. Maybe, in fact, the future is within our grasp, within the silent interludes given to memory, time, and history.

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## NOTES

- 1 Liu Libin, Interview with Lin Yan (2006)
- 2 Telecommunication from Lin Yan to the author (May 13, 2008)

3 Liu Libin, op. cit.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Chang Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism* (NY: Harper, 1963), p. 27

7 *Tao Te Ching* (Ch. XXI) cited in Chang, op. cit., p. 10

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*Robert C. Morgan is an international critic, artist, curator, and lecturer who lives and works primarily in New York City. As a Contributing Editor to Sculpture Magazine, Professor Morgan is focused on the problems of the artist in an era of global transition. In 1999, he received the first Arcale award in Art Criticism from the Municipality in Salamanca (Spain). In 2005, he was awarded a Fulbright senior scholar award to do research on the traditional arts and their influence on the Korean avant-garde. He holds both an advanced degree in Sculpture and a Ph.D. in contemporary art history, and currently lectures at Pratt Institute and the School of Visual Arts in New York. In addition to his many books and essays (with translations in 16 languages), Professor Morgan has curated over 60 exhibitions, including Allan Kaprow (1979), Max Ernst: The Late Prints (1989), No Trends (1990), Logo Non- Logo (with Pierre Restany) (1992), Symbolic Surface (1994), Silent Exile (2006), The Optical Edge (2007), and Semiosis (2008).*