



Xiaojing Yan: A Wanderer's Mind

July 16 – September 15, 2019

"Every portrait...is a portrait of the artist"
- Oscar Wilde

No one can ever truly escape their own limitations; this is the case in all endeavours. In the creative world it is the job of artists to impel themselves to produce—one hopes—work that reveals itself to the viewer through the act of looking and experiencing the work itself. To experience the poetic, finely-constructed sculptures and installations of Chinese-born Canadian artist Xiaojing Yan is to engage with her exploration of beauty, culture, nature, history. And in so doing, a reckoning with her own personal identity. She is someone for whom 'being' Chinese or 'being' Canadian is a nebulous proposition. This exhibition, *A Wanderer's Mind* for the Art Gallery of Northumberland brings together several of Yan's seemingly disparate, but ultimately connected pieces from various points in her career.

Upon entering the exhibition, the viewer encounters *Face to Face* from 2011, an installation of twenty-four double portraits of Chinese women finely hand painted onto small disks of translucent silk. Suspended from the ceiling, the gently coloured portraits depict each woman first as she was in China, and again once she had immigrated to Canada. Each was sourced from a contemporary snapshot and meticulously reproduced using a variation on the ancient Chinese technique of resist-dyeing, in which temporary outlines are used to contain colours of ink and then washed. Not only does the piece feel personal, even intimate (the subjects include the artist herself and her friends), each pair of portraits blends and merges together, collapsing the sense of time between the two distinct moments

in each woman's life and opening a literal space that functions as a question: is the woman the same person now as she was then? How do the two experiences create who she is today? And where, exactly, does her identity lie? *Face to Face*'s vulnerability suggests that it encapsulates a sensation felt by many immigrants, yet it is also about the reassurance that can be found in shared feelings, particularly among women. This work leaves open the possibility for viewers to share in the experience of Yan and her comrades, to recognize the disjuncture in placing oneself in two separate worlds and trying to make a connection. It invites viewers to consider, with empathy, what this experience must feel like. The idea of suspension both physically and metaphorically is a recurring theme throughout Yan's practice, with several of her works occupying the vertical space between floor and ceiling, heaven and earth, life and death. In *Face to Face* this approach seems an attempt to situate herself in the present moment, somewhere between the historical force of traditional China and the potentiality of contemporary life.

A work that may also be seen as a suspension of sorts is *Marking*, a pair of striking wall sculptures from 2016 that cast into bronze some of the ephemeral,



commonplace objects traditionally associated with the domestic realm. Yan took as inspiration the daily lives of her mother and mother-in-law in China, capturing items including lace, leaves and various spices into arrangements which were imprinted onto clay and then cast in pieces using the lost wax process, a convoluted endeavor with such delicate, spidery shapes. *Marking* bestows the permanent quality of bronze, a material whose use in China dates back over three thousand years, onto the fleeting moment. The effect suspends the moment in time and allows the viewer to stop and consider it deeply, an approach that has a long history in both western and Chinese art.



Previous page: Xiaoqing Yan, *Marking*, 2016, bronze, 35" x 25." Courtesy of the artist.

Left and above: Xiaoqing Yan, *Face to Face*, 2011, Silk painting and Plexiglas, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.



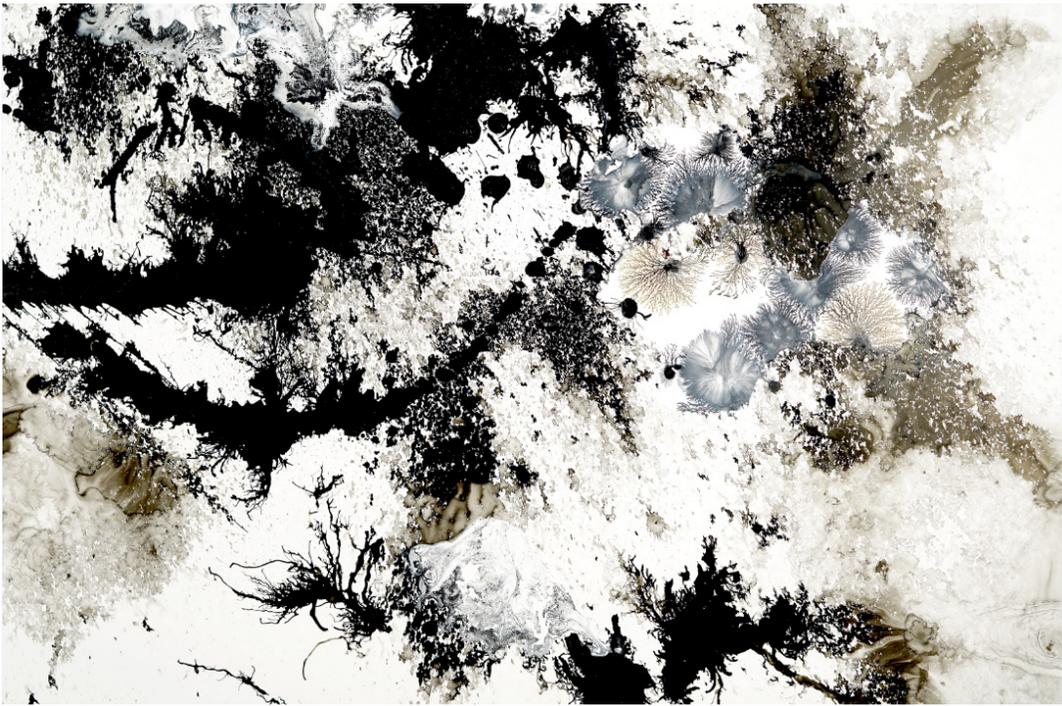
Xiaojing Yan, *Morning Glory*, 2016-2018, Paper, natural reed, plastic tube, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

In the Chinese philosophical concept of Yin and Yang, oppositional forces were viewed as essential to one another in order to maintain wholeness in all things, balancing the inherent characteristics of each in order to bring the two into harmony. Here, the weighty bronze pours itself into the so-called women's realm, which reacts with a vivacious expressiveness. In line with her artistic practice in general however, Yan seems less interested in taking a defined political stance than in promoting a gentler, more thoughtful approach. Here she presents possibilities for a 'whole', a well-balanced resolution between two seemingly opposing forces. By capturing in solid form the transient aspects of life that are otherwise easily forgotten, she gives permanence, and thus power, to the everyday.

The very nature of impermanence—and continuous renewal—is represented in the wall-mounted installation *Morning Glory* (2016-2018). This species of plant, known for its distinctive trumpet-shaped flower that blooms at the morning light and dies by the end of each day, presents a life cycle in miniature. It's a subject common throughout

Chinese painting that Yan interprets in paper and reed. Such materials are traditionally used in lantern making, a practical craft that originated in the Han dynasty and has been an influence on Yan's practice since 2008, taking various sculptural forms from cocoons to clouds. Here, the blooms are suspended in time, triumphant like megaphones in contrast to their supple vines fashioned from voluptuous loops of clear plastic tubing. Their undulating shadows should be seen as part of the work, completing the whole and once again allowing the yin and yang—here light and shadow—to balance one another out. Though seemingly fragile, the morning glory belies a fascinating and contradictory history. Its nutritious leaves are enjoyed in Chinese cuisine as 'water spinach' but its seeds are considered a dangerous hallucinogen; it is accepted in many countries as an annual flowering plant, but has also been labeled a weed in warmer parts where it is an aggressively spreading perennial. In referencing such a complex species of plant whose seeds are some of the most resilient in the plant world, Yan has—perhaps unwittingly—created a multi-layered allegory for the complexities around identity, the resilience of nature, and the un-assumed power that supports the vitality of life.

The final pieces in the exhibition are from Yan's ongoing series of ink paintings, *Naturally Natural* from 2016. Here, she first prepares water-resistant Yupo paper with an acrylic medium, allowing drops of Chinese ink to bloom into evocative, hyper-delicate root-like patterns on its own. Working quickly and intuitively, she then guides the ink with the tip of her brush to flesh out the abstract work into attenuated shapes reminiscent of blood vessels, branches or river systems viewed from above. This duality again suggests a yin-yang relationship between artist and medium that exists throughout both Chinese and Western



Xiaojing Yan, *Naturally Natural*, 2016, ink and acrylic on yupo paper, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

art history. Interestingly, and unintentionally, certain details bear striking similarity to the representational ink landscapes of Song dynasty painters for whom finely detailed branches of trees flow into mist-covered landscapes, creating ideal environments through which to intellectually wander. Within Yan's work, the viewer experiences the essence of traditional Chinese landscape painting and is inclined to 'read' the abstracts as landscapes. It also presents an intriguing dynamic for a Chinese-Canadian artist searching for her cultural identity: boldly pushing her artistic practice forward into abstraction while being pulled, involuntarily, back toward her culture's monumental history.

- Andrea Carson Barker



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Andrea Carson Barker is a writer and expert in contemporary art and architecture. In 2005 she founded one of Canada's most widely read culture blogs, which she published until 2015. Trained as an art critic, in 2011 she was founding curator of the daily online art auction site *Artbombdaily.com*. In 2016, she hosted a web-tv interview show, *Artland*. Recently, Andrea has become a passionate advocate for bringing arts and culture to the City of Markham where she manages her family's commercial real estate company. She is developing multiple ambitious projects there to support artists including an artist-in-residence program. She is a member of the City of Toronto Public Art Commission and believes strongly in the importance of public art.

Xiaojing Yan is a Chinese-Canadian artist based in Markham, Ontario. She received her MFA in Sculpture from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA and BFA from Nanjing Arts Institution, China. As an artist migrating from China to North America, both her identity and her work pass through the complex filters of different countries, languages, and cultural expectations. In an effort to shape herself, she takes traditional Chinese materials and techniques and reinvents them within a contemporary aesthetic and presentation. Yan's sculptures have been exhibited in galleries and museums in China, Canada and the United States. Yan is the recipient of numerous grants including most recently the Chalmers Arts Fellowship from Ontario Arts Council and Project Grant to Visual Artists from Canada Council for the Arts.