

By Weng Ling

Around the turn of the year, together with my friend, Lin Tianmiao, the most excellent, influential, and craziest female artist in contemporary China, we have held her biggest solo exhibition -- The Same, which turned out to be greatly successful. The 14 brand-new productions well reflected the painstaking efforts Lin had made during the past two years, as well as an overall advancement of Lin's 20-year experience, mentality, capability and horizons in regard to art. The exhibition has received a high opinion, which contents us well. Ever since we acquainted in early 1990s, the appearance of Lin's works suffused with a masculine vigor and a feminine nerve has never failed to bring me visual excitement and spiritual shock.

Lin was an exception standing out of all the other artists of her generation in China. Born in an artist family, she was able to get art education and edification from her parents. When she was 24 or 25, she followed her husband Wang Gongxin, an artist too, to New York, where, at first, she had to give up art production and earned a living as a fabric designer. The unexpected new profession allowed her to present her gifts for design, color and visual presentation. It gave her a chance to get immersed in the American artistic circles of the 1980s and 1990s, and half consciously and half unconsciously, she began her most authentic observation and apperception of the world, of materials and of the SELF.

In 1995, the "UN World Conference on Women" was held in Beijing, and gathered experts, scholars and activists from all over the world, who are concerned about women issues in China. Liao Wen cherished this opportunity to plan an exhibition titled Women's Ways in Chinese Contemporary Arts in the previous Beijing Art Museum. It happened that the couple, Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin, had just ended their six years' sojourn in New York and returned to Beijing. Then in her early thirties, Lin wore short hair and white clothes, appearing cool and arrogant. In Liao Wen's exhibition, we saw her work, "Diffused Entanglement", which featured an iron bed thickly covered with 20,000 steel needles, each attached to an end of a white thin cotton thread. The 20,000 threads tensely radiated from the needled iron bed to the ground, on which scattered 20,000 cotton balls of pingpong size that were twined into by the other end of each thread.

In this work, Lin exhibited a keen sensitivity for materials. The visual transformation here was shocking. In contrast to the female artists then, who were enmeshed by tradition and the conventional academic education they had received, Lin's installation art was more indebted to the western influences. She adopted direct, forceful and totally genuine expressions; the cotton threads, steel needles, clews, entanglement and incredible amount of handiwork, became the keywords of her later productions.

In 1997, I hosted Lin's first personal exhibition Bound-Unbound at Central Academy of Fine Arts Gallery. The works represented a special period when Lin had just become a mother. In face of her son, the young mother seemed so much under pressure and vexation that she was even on the verge of

abandoning her art career. Nevertheless, the desire for art haunted her and controlled her daily life, her thought and her action. The passion left her nowhere to hide or evade. Lin began to wind cotton threads around some articles she found at home. Cotton ball winding was what she used to do with her mother in her childhood. In the seemingly vapid effort amid hundreds of daily articles wrapped with white cotton threads, we found an exceptionally quiet and sheer solid vision. And no audience, in front of such a complicated work, the heavily wound threads, huge volume and laborsome windings that they were familiar with in daily life, would be able to maintain a peaceful mind. The ending cut-off design projected upon the screen forced the tightened nerve of the audience to another extreme. Lin has rendered an incisive and vivid picture of the perplexity, chaos, and feebleness of women confronting the outer world.

For many years later, Lin had tried to wind everything she could think of; and obsessed in the art, she was nearly cruel in afflicting herself. But we never knew that she would finally extricate herself from the confused world both outward and inward. Art, for Lin, is intuition, and the finest expression of concepts; art means a respect for and cognition of materials, and a hunt after aesthetic perfection.

Now she has come to the turning point of her career. She started a construction on the essence and identity of females. With a mind to rendering a contemporary expression of Chinese aesthetics, she created a series of installation works, including the famous “Self-portrait”, “Focus”, and “Seeing Shadow”, etc, and some unique copies of print art. The portraits (amplified in size by using soft focus techniques, in order to obscure gender identity) and landscapes (remains of the Hutong in Beijing which were then being demolished) were printed upon white canvas or felts, of which, the rich details can be caught only when one perused carefully enough. And Lin went so far as to add the elements she was most familiar with, like the cotton threads, cotton balls, needles etc., onto the canvas, either by directly fixing the materials upon the picture, or by leaving only print of the elements in it. The whole production was neatly controlled. Lin has displayed preciseness and prudence throughout the process. Every approach was rigorously controlled, every medium was precisely employed, and all materials received a natural usage and transformation. What’s most important, Lin has combined techniques of traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy with those of contemporary arts; and that is exactly the source of the elegance permeating the works. These works, on their publication, became a center of discussion and attention among the international circles of contemporary arts and art collectors. A number of top international museums, such as New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Singapore Art Museum (SAM), National Gallery of Australia, have collected Lin’s works, which turned Lin into one of the hottest Chinese contemporary artists in the world.

In 2008, Lin Tianmiao held a solo exhibition titled Mother’s!!! in Beijing, which afforded a series of installation works made of a kind of new material. Of these, the nude images of females at middle ages were most striking. These headless figures in obesity were of varying gestures; and with the animals and plants, became a strange, abrupt combination. Besides, within their bodies, are a number of

thread-wound balls of different sizes which grow and spread relentlessly, and even pierce the flesh, overflow the body and continue to multiply outside the body. The work, like before, puts on a quiet, pure appearance that would excite an inquietude and fear in the audience's mind. The combination of human body and animals and plants compels the audience to reflect upon the subtle relationship among human, society and nature. With horizon and thoughts expanding deeper into the outer world, Lin has been also improving her ability regarding the selection, application and transformation of materials.

These years, whenever I have a chance, I would invite friends to visit Lin's home, to have tea and a chat. I always commend the couple to everyone there that Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin have created the most comfortable, tasteful and coolest home of today's China. Their design even outperforms some internationally renowned Chinese architects and designers of our time. In this autumn, I witnessed their new production "Black Sameness" at their home, and got a long-lost feeling; and I said to myself that by all means I would hold an exhibition for these works. At my words, Lin was also excited, and she moved out all her valuable works including "Grey Sameness" and two pieces of the "X and the Same" and the then half-completed "The Same for N Times" in which the conflict between man and nature, the entanglement of life and death, all end in a flash of blast. Death, which is already in our prevision, we have to face inevitably. The intuition kindled at the passing away of her mother, turns, at this very moment, into a steadfast conviction. We meet a sign of extravagance everywhere: the either silk-wrapped or goldfoil-covered human and animal skeletons, branches, wood sticks, little tools; the silk-wrapped canvas, the goldfoil-covered picture frames, the satin decorations.....the variety of colors -- black, white, gray, gold, pink, green..... According to Lin's recollection, in September last year, she and the staffs started to produce something in the topic of a great explosion; half a year later, the work was generally completed, but, due to the huge scale, the components were not assembled. And days later, Japan suffered the Fukushima nuclear disaster. It seems that a sensitive artist always plays the prophet of reality. In the coming days of us working together for the exhibition The Same, we were all excited -- it was a painful but enjoyable experience. Both of us wished to bring a spiritual and visual shock to the Chinese contemporary art which were submerged in the stink of money.

I was fortunate to have a profound interview with Lin in 2010 when I was responsible for the production and hosting of an interview TV program Arts China. Not long later, we became close partners and both of our teams have experienced an uncommon trial. Though Lin and I have worked together for six times ever since 1997; the difficulty we faced this time was unprecedented, either in terms of production or on-site presentation. What's more, despite her international fame, Lin, at that time, though widely known, was scarcely understood by domestic audiences. The backward art education, the lack of art gallery system, conservative mainstream of arts, want of critics, blind media coverage.....all these issues having long existed in China have led to a mind of the people that is hardly open to the so-called new art. Therefore, the biggest problem we faced was this -- how to interpret Lin's new art for the public completely blind about conceptual art. In fact, in the dozen of

years of practice, Lin has dealt with a variety of arts forms including installation, video, photography, print art, sculpture, etc. She dislikes to be confined in a single form of art, but would rather strain every nerve to create a perfect expression of artistic beauty and her inner mind.

In Lin's eyes, art is intuition, and the finest expression of concepts; art means a respect for and cognition of materials, and a hunt after aesthetic perfection. Lin displays an unusual experience of and an exceptional respect for materials. She easily catches the characteristics of materials, and is able to effect proper visual transformation. Lin keeps a keen eye on the subtle connection between the inner mind and the outer world, in contrast to the contemporaneous efforts made by the average contemporary artists who excel chiefly in ideological subjects. Too often in Lin's productions do we find a mark of a great deal of handiwork. It is safe to say that, it is Lin's pursuit of details, her precise knowledge of the characteristics of materials used, and pinpoint understanding of the inner mind that lead to one and another production which deliver both beautiful forms and exquisite profound emotions.

Lin resembles some of the most important female artists in history, such as Eva Hess (Jew), Louise Bourgeois (American) and Rebecca Horn (German), in that they are all capable of a precise understanding and perfect rendition of a certain material, and of profoundly delivering the essential relationship between the artists' inner mind and human beings' nature. Their works of art shares the same sense of deep soreness. I think this is the most honorable kind of art. And that is why Lin would be important in the world history of female art.

I quite agree with Lin when she said in a conversation that "in a broad sense, contemporary art has no boundary. That is, in the future we should not be confined by the phrase 'Chinese contemporary art'. Good art has to deliver an international taste and a noble way of cognition." In fact, ever since its establishment, Beijing Center for the Arts has been trying to find and recommending some excellent artists and works of art that have broken all boundaries and spanned multiple disciplines. And only when it unties from the constraint of over-nativism will Chinese contemporary art obtain its vigor and beget artists that may be written into the world history of art.