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LAND ART

WOVEN LABORS

A visit with China's Lin Tianmiao reveals the evolution of her pioneering, enigmatic work—now on view in New York.

BY KAREN SMITH

AMID THE DRY, dusty air of June in Beijing, Lin Tianmiao's studio is a hyper-clean sanctuary. Lin, China's foremost experimental woman artist, keeps anything that is less than pristine firmly locked outside. Especially at this moment, as she pushes to prepare works for imminent shipment to New York for her fall retrospective at the Asia Society. Lin (b. 1961) has exhibited internationally since 1997, but this is the first major survey of her work.

In the studio, the atmosphere is tense. "We're refinishing the surfaces of these sculptural pieces," Lin explains, pointing to the small, rounded figure of a woman's body—resembling a miniature Renoir nude done in polyurea—balanced in the hands of a female assistant who patiently smooths a fringe of threads hanging from one side of the body. Her job is to replace any strand that exhibits the slightest hint of dirt. This work requires infinite patience. "It takes a week to do one piece," Lin says, and the exhibition contains, among many other works, over a dozen of these delicate white sculptures.¹

On any given day, Lin's cavernous 10,000-square-foot studio is a hive of quietly ordered activity. She shares a modern, 28,000-square-foot villa in the outlying "artists village" of Songzhuang with her husband, Wang Gongxin, a leading video artist. The two sometimes collaborate, as in "Here? or There?," an installation of dramatic, if spooky, futuristic costumes presented at the Shanghai Biennale in 2002. Wang's three-channel video *My Sun* (2000), an oblique evocation of the Mao Zedong cult, was presented at the Asia Society for two months (June 6-Aug. 5), just prior to Lin's premiere on Sept. 7.

Wang has several assistants, but this crew is modest compared to the 20 or more helpers who work steadily in Lin's studio in advance of the New York exhibition. Lin has always favored simple materials and unremitting handiwork (undertaken with the help of friends before she could afford assistants). Today, she may have swapped the raw cotton thread of her early career for fine silken strands and a process that involves less compulsive wrapping and more delicate needlework, yet the labor-intensity remains.

Lin received her grounding in hard work during the late 1980s in New York, where in order to support Wang's early career and keep a roof over their heads, she sloughed off her pedestrian art-teacher mindset (she had graduated from Capital Normal University in Beijing) to become a highly successful textile designer. In 1995, when the couple decided to go back to

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Bound Unbound: Lin Tianmiao" at the Asia Society, New York, through Jan. 27, 2013. A Lin Tianmiao solo show is at Galerie Leong, New York, Oct. 25-Dec. 8.



View of Lin Tianmiao's installation *Procreating*, 2004, fiberglass, silk, video and mixed mediums on table, approx. 13 feet in diameter; at the Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art. Photo Wang Chuan.

THOUGH LIN DECLINES THE FEMINIST LABEL, HER WORK OFTEN DEALS WITH THEMES THAT ARE SPECIFIC TO WOMEN—IN PARTICULAR CHILD-BEARING.

Beijing after eight years, Lin's career as an artist had yet to gain momentum. At home, China's tiny, beleaguered avant-garde was just beginning to reemerge after the Tiananmen crackdown. The idea that she would one day present a mid-career survey at a major global institution would have seemed



Above, view of the installation *Badges*, 2009, silk, satin, gold embroidery and stainless steel frames; at the OCT Contemporary Art Centre, Shanghai. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

Opposite, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, 1995, white cotton thread, rice paper, 20,000 needles, bed and monitor; at Open Studio, Baofang Hutong #12, Beijing. Photo Wang Peng.

enchanting but fanciful. Yet, in light of Lin's achievements since her return to the People's Republic, this retrospective is fully deserved and timely—if not, indeed, overdue.

Lin's accomplishments are primarily artistic, but she also helped open the field for women artists in China. Combining innate talent with the tough-minded professionalism she acquired in the design business, Lin earned respect in the overwhelmingly male Chinese art world. Today, as women artists and curators assume prominent places in the PRC with ever greater frequency and assurance, she continues to be a role model. "I realized that to be an artist you must first find your own character and opinions," she told me in 1995. "Being an artist is a state of mind as much as a way of life." That attitude is something she cultivated in New York. She also learned to be proactive in produc-

ing and showing art. Back in Beijing, she and Wang turned their home, then in a central city *hutong* (a commercial-and-residential alleyway), into an open studio. Regularly displaying experimental work by themselves and others, the pair established a much-needed outlet for conceptual practice.

LIN'S DEBUT, IN 1995, featured a set of objects titled *The Temptation of St. Teresa* (1994): wooden carpenter's boxes hung neatly in a row and filled to overflowing with cheap domestic skin moisturizers in vivid shades of strawberry pink and buttery cream. "The tool boxes symbolize male dominance," she explained at the time. "I knew that to reference the relationship between feminine and masculine they ought to contain something possessed of a softness that could overcome the hardness." Balancing hard/masculine and soft/feminine remains a driving impulse of Lin's work.

On view along with *Temptation* was a second installation, which also contained elements that Lin would continue to draw upon in the coming years. Titled *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995), it featured an old bed, its mattress covered with a white sheet punctured by 20,000 industrial steel needles. Threaded through the eye of each needle was a length of raw cotton thread that ended in a neat ball on the floor; the tiny balls fanned out like a bridal mantle. A video monitor inserted into the pillow replayed Lin's hands in the act of endlessly winding the balls of thread. "I started without theory or concept," she revealed during an interview in 2000. "My approach was instinctive and direct, as I responded to the experience of winding thread from my childhood." The installation also appeared five months later in the group exhibition "Women's Approach to Contemporary Chinese Art," mounted at the Beijing Art Museum in conjunction with the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women. Although the show felt like an isolated event at the time,

it marked the first stirrings of interest in women's art in China. *Proliferation*—preceding Lin's 800 thread-wrapped household items (pots, pans, spoons, cups, jugs, tables, carts, even bicycles) produced in 1996-97—was the first of her works to involve intensive labor for its creation. It remains iconic.

Lin was soon much in demand among politically correct Western curators keen to give China's tiny minority of women artists a public profile. "Critics labeled me feminist," Lin said with some degree of irritation in 1997. "I looked in many books and catalogues about female artists to see if this was true but came to the conclusion that it was not. I had always judged life from my own experience as a person, who just happened to be a woman."

Nonetheless, a significant portion of Lin's work deals with themes that are specific to women—in particular, the bodily function of child-bearing. These concerns found powerful





expression in a series of life-size, satin-skinned figures that debuted in the solo “Non Zero” at Beijing Tokyo Art Projects in the 798 art district in 2004. One piece, *Procreating 3*, offered the prototype of a squatting woman, a recurring motif in Lin’s work. The face of this sculpture was replaced with a video monitor that displays a single, unflinching eye. To catch this eye, as the figure strains in her Earth Mother posture, is to feel like an intruder upon her privacy.

Procreating 3 was juxtaposed with *Initiator* (2004)—a hint at the source of conception?—which consists of a fairy-tale frog holding the long, Rapunzel-like hair of a standing nude maiden. Nearby was *Chatting* (2004), a group of female figures, each with a speaker for a head, standing in a circle and “chatting.” Lin said during the show’s run that this sculptural conclave is meant to evoke both female solidarity and the role women play in nurturing a child’s sensibilities, fostering cognitive awareness as well as language skills. She was alerted to this rapport in the course of raising her own son, born in 1996. The threads suspended between the figures link them together like lines of communication but also like strands of DNA passing through the maternal line—a wry allusion to the concept of a mother tongue. Lin also introduced a life-size group of male figures, their “skin” a curiously lurid shade of pink in contrast to the white finish of the women. Collectively titled *Endless* (2004)—perhaps a reference to the recurring life cycle, with the pink skin recalling the Daoist notion that the old, in their wisdom, return to the innocence of children—the male statues represent both the fragility and tenacity of age.

The “skin” with which these figures were finished was created using lengths of flawless silk smoothed over the contours of intimately detailed fibreglass bodies. A single fingerprint or smudge of dust could destroy their aura of perfection—the very aura Lin’s assistants were laboring to preserve in the studio during my visit.

The artist attained even greater finesse in a group of diminutive female forms introduced in 2008 in the solo exhibition “Mother’s!!!” at Beijing’s Long March Space. As graceful as Degas’s little dancer but with rotund fleshy curves beneath their white satin skin, reminiscent of mutton-fat jade, these forms were cast from a synthetic polymer to achieve a soft, yielding consistency like that of flesh itself. Accentuating their flawless surfaces, Lin transformed the space into a realm of whiteness, with

specially constructed niches sheltering the figures. Whiteness is always breathtaking, but here it was all the more so for appearing in gritty, polluted Beijing. In the Chinese capital—overcrowded, visually cacophonous—such purity suggested a calm defiance.

Defiance was not then a new element in Lin’s work. A series she titled “Focus” (2001) began as digital self-portrait photos on canvas that convey, if not defiance per se, certainly a resolute air of independence. Adopting Richard Avedon’s full



Above, *Endless* (detail), 2004, fibreglass, silk and mixed mediums; at Beijing Tokyo Art Project. Photo Wang Chuan.

Opposite, four examples from the “Focus” series, 2001, C-prints with thread, fur, hair and mixed mediums, 66¼ by 54¼ inches each.

frontal style, Lin depicted herself naked and rather shockingly bald. She later extended the approach to facial close-ups of herself and other people. In all the portraits, the hardness of black and white is softened to pale shades of gray, so that the faces dissolve into abstraction as one draws near. Gossamer threads of silk and man-made hair fibers added to (and sometimes extending outward from) the surface tend to obfuscate the features, denying the “focus” of the title. The series marked a significant move toward formal complexity, which is a major characteristic of Lin’s recent work.

ROOTED IN “FOCUS” and her other thread-festooned works, Lin’s latest pieces reflect the pain caused by the 2009 death of her mother (who introduced the young Tianmiao to the

TINY FIGURES, COATED IN GOLD LEAF AND SCATTERED NEAR THE ROOTS OF BONSAI TREE, EVOKE LIN'S SENSE OF "THE PEOPLE" IN A SOCIETY DOMINATED BY COMMERCIALISM.

task of thread-winding, requiring her to stand for hours to help rewind skeins of cotton into manageable balls). Lin's first response to her mother's passing was a small group of what she calls "pictorial" works utilizing baby-soft satin instead of canvas—a sickly pink occasionally contrasting



Above, *All the Same*, 2011, colored silk, synthetic skeletons and metal constructions, approx. 50 feet long overall. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.

Opposite, *Bonsai Tree*, 2012, tree, thread, plastic figures and gold foil, approx. 30¼ by 22 by 39 inches. Courtesy Asia Society, New York. Photo Yang Yuguang.

with a drab hospital green on surfaces laden with all manner of objects. The initial choices—a skull, bones—reference death in obvious ways, but the objects, embroidered or otherwise attached to the flat surface, became more enigmatic as the series progressed. This evolution was revealed near the end of 2011 at the Beijing Center for the Arts in "The Same," a solo exhibition whose title suggests both a shared mortality and a brave endurance after loss. The individual works in the eponymous series are called things like *One and the Same*, *Must Be the Same* and *The Same After All*. "To be 'the same' is the safe choice," Lin explained this June, "one that requires the least effort. But the safe choice of being 'the same' refutes all possibility for real cultural development. The titles of the works, emphasizing unity through being 'the same,' indicate the discomfort one experiences by being different."

These works are strikingly distinct from Lin's previous endeavors. "After a period of mourning, I found myself open again," she said this summer. "I could tackle new

sensations—ones that were less just about me." The artist believes that she has now truly learned to use color, but it is her handling of fabrics that appears most deft in this series. The majority of the works are large, planar, wall-hung assemblages. Many are both thought-provoking and gorgeous, like the newly completed example I saw in the studio, the product of four months of concentrated labor. On its golden surface, squiggled threads of kingfisher blue add flashes of brilliance to the various embroidered motifs and added-on objects that resemble medical instruments.

Also in the studio were a number of broad, flat panels covered with rather bizarre objects wrapped in satin thread. Lin is interested in things that are not quite what they seem: the mundane made art, in the way that pupae metamorphose into butterflies. With an air of studied silence, a technician was carefully manipulating the skull of a Tibetan yak, to which some long unnatural extension had been affixed. Similar alterations were evident in an array of objects lying on a table in the workshop: bones and skulls combined with simple agricultural tools or medical devices. Once conjoined, the bone-tools are then cast in polyurea, so that the resulting forms can be wound in layers of gloriously colored thread.

Like all the objects that Lin has manipulated since she began wrapping things more than 15 years ago, even these somewhat distasteful items are transformed through the process. A good example is *Bonsai Tree* (2012)—a piece to which Lin ascribes sociopolitical import, yet one that is also among her most visually dazzling works. Beneath a surface of luminous, deep sky-blue satin thread is a real bonsai tree. Every bit of its contorted structure, from branch tip to root end, has been carefully wrapped. Near the roots lie multiple tiny plastic figures like those used for architectural scale models. These figures, coated with gold leaf, are strewn around as if unimportant—

thus evoking Lin's sense of "the people" in a society where external pressures and self-imposed goals drive most to a soul-diminishing "sameness," today determined less by political ideology than by commercialism.

"This," the artist says, "is a world in which the individual counts for little." While some critics question her recent foray into brightly colored, luxuriant imagery and surface texture, Lin remains at once empathetic and self-directed, her subtle defiance fused with an extraordinary eye for the disconcerting. ○

¹ All direct quotes are from the author's interviews with Lin Tianmiao in the years indicated.

"Bound Unbound: Lin Tianmiao" travels to the Asia Society, Hong Kong, February-May 2013.

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