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Scissors as Brushes – An Interview with Catherine Lan

ANDREW SHIUE on Monday, September 29th, 2014 at ---



Catherine Lan (藍巧茹 / 蓝巧茹) is reinventing painting. Her recent *Floral* and *Magic Mirror*

series, on view at the Center for Arts Education in Midtown Manhattan through October 10, use faux fur as a medium to create paintings that reveal new textures and presentations of color.

Reflecting Lan's own eclectic background and interests, the works are hybrids of painting, sculpture, and relief carving that are reminiscent of Chinese nature paintings, fairy tales, geoglyphs, crop circles, Asian pop culture, and fashion. At their essence, they are juxtapositions of the natural and synthetic, the ornate and abstract, and the traditional and pop art.

Her recent *Floral* series and *Spirited Trees* take a minimalist approach to the canvassed image by eliminating paint and relying wholly on cutting away colored fur to produce an ink-painting-like fur relief. In developing her craft with this unconventional material, Lan became familiar with different types of faux fur and applied every synonym for the word "cut" as tools with sharp edges became her new paintbrushes.

We interviewed Lan to learn more about these innovative works and her techniques in her first New York solo show.

Tell us about *Floral* and *Magic Mirror*. What inspired the patterns in *Floral*? What do we see in the magic mirrors?

The images are inspired by my everyday life experiences, visiting gardens and parks, and window shopping. Some are from memories of Monet's garden when I was in Paris, or images from the fashion or the design industry. The floral patterns are a mixture of my own imagination and an accumulation of basic elements: points, lines and shapes.

Magic Mirrors originally derived from the idea of making different painting objects from *Snow White* that reflect the sex and violence in fairy tales.

Both series reflect your background in painting, but they occupy a space between painting and sculpture. How do you classify them?

The series also stand between painting and drawing, where erasers are used to draw white lines on a darker base.

Living at a time when new art forms such as installations, performance art, video art or

sculptural works are prevalent, I'm interested in constantly asking myself, "What else can we do with Painting and the Concept of Painting?"

I am interested in experimenting with the material and the concept of painting, treating fur as the canvas, the paint, and the sculptural base to be carved out to become a soft relief-painting.

I am also interested in pushing this art form to the edge by incorporating inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary practices. There's the performative aspect in the subtle interaction between the work and the audience. The cross-disciplinary aspect brings fashion, tapestry, home-décor, architectural ornaments, etc. to the works.

What inspired you to work with fur as a medium? Tell us about finding the right materials and working with different types of fur.

Textures that protrude and experimentation with the tactile material really interest me. "The Princess and her Unicorn" (2008) was my first painting installation that included fur – fur fabric on a painting and two pieces on a wire sculpture that corresponds to the painting. The original idea was to make a wire/fabric sculpture that was an inversed mirroring of the abstract image of the painting. The wire part was like lines in the air, while the Hello Kitty-patterned green fabric and pink fur expressed painting strokes.

Spirited Trees

Was there a learning process involved with working with fur?

It is an on-going self-learning process – experimentation with what the fur and the scissors can do in relation to the ideas of deleting and painting. I started with wrapping objects such as mirrors, fake pearls, and beads with fur. Later, I would wrap canvas with fur and then cut and shear it.

I would like to challenge this soft material with scissors to see how wide can I push the range of different kinds of cut strokes, details, tonalities, layering and craftsmanship.

When I first started using scissors and not using a brush made of animal hair in the fairy tale series, each stroke, each cut insinuated violence. But with the recent *Floral* and *Trees* works, I cut them with much softer, lighter and faster strokes.



Cutting Tools

Is there significance to the fact that the works are soft to the touch? Do you encourage touching of the works?

The softness of the fur symbolizes luxury and pleasure, and thus reflects desire. I am interested in the actions of the viewers and what induces their desire. Some would control themselves, but I noticed an interesting subtle interaction. Some viewers like to secretly touch the work. I never like to announce, “Yes, please come touch it,” but there are always people trying to interact by touching or blowing it.

Viewer Interaction

Will too much touching or exposure to air and dust damage the works? How do you conserve this type of work?

I make art with with the idea of ephemerality in mind, but collectors would be advised to put the work in a plexiglass box to protect it from dust. However, even with oil paintings or stone carvings, in a billion years, everything is difficult to preserve it like it was when freshly created. I guess with oil paintings there are specialists to repaint and clean. With my work,

you can always send it for dry cleaning!

Are you afraid that the “grain” of the fur will be disturbed and image misrepresented?

It is interesting that at any moment the work looks a little different due to the different directions the fur is touched.

In *Magic Mirror* and earlier series, you use both paint and fur. What’s the process like working with both media on one surface? Do you imagine that you’re adding paint to the empty spaces or that the fur has “grown” from the paint?

I was exploring how to beautifully, or at least how to make it work visually, combine and juxtapose the textures and colors of two very different materials from different disciplines. Instead of completely cutting out different pieces and collaging back or like cutting straight through like **Lucio Fantana**’s cut paintings, my goal was to keep the “canvas” as a whole so when translucent paint is poured into the prepared base concave, you can still see the bottom part of the fur, giving it original colored layers.

Your idea that the fur has “grown” is very close to my idea, but I think of it more as the fur reaching out to the audience, grabbing empty space and thus inducing us to touch it.

Sometimes the image is formed by empty space and absence of material. Other times, the material, like a scar, forms the image. What is the difference between having negative space form the images and having positive space form the image?

A famous Chinese instructs us to live or to have an attitude of “the middle way.” Though old, but I try to apply this philosophy to the furry art which I believe is still quite new. The idea of transcending the two-dimensional plane by cutting through a surface to see the white wall, from the Chinese folk paper cuts to Fantana’s canvas cut outs are my historical shoulders to stand upon.

So, then, I do the reverse by applying my self-trained cutting techniques to see the different depths of the dyed fur. The image then becomes at least four colors: 1) the original base color, 2) the dyed color on the top layer, 3) the transition color in between, 4) the colors of the shadows). There’s a vast range of tonalities due to the texture and “cutting strokes”.

This technique of removing material is also similar to the erasing technique in drawing. I “delete” material to form the image. It’s an irreversible process.

The “scars” are like **impasto** in painting, but in a reverse way. It’s like when I meditate, my heart (the awareness) is aware of my body and mind and its activities, and when I keep meditating deeply, sometimes I experience a short moment where I feel my body has disappeared. I cannot feel anything, nor hear anything. So, at that point, I am trying to look for that awareness. Even before that awareness, I ask myself, “What is it?”

This is the same when I cut. The fur is like my physical body, the process of cutting is constantly looking for the intrinsic nature of painting by going in reverse and backwards through the continuous passing of time.

The designs from *Floral* are elegant, reminiscent of Chinese nature paintings. They simplify the earlier fur works that utilized paint to accent certain elements. Now you’ve chosen to leave pure empty space without paint to define the image. Why the change?

The experimentation of the juxtaposition and interplay between fur and paint stopped at a point when I felt there was no need to add anything more to it.



Cutting

Can you talk about the craftsmanship of the images you depict in your work and the working process?

I always have Duchamp's last piece *Étant donnés* (Waterfall) in my mind when we talk about craftsmanship. He abandoned art for 25 years and played chess until his death, but surprised us with this meticulously crafted last piece. No matter how much he announces his opposition to retinal art and abandoning of art, he shows his roots and subconscious beliefs from a traditional painting family. So he strongly believes in craftsmanship and in painting. It's just a newer way by making it a collage.

The perpetual process of cutting builds nature and flower imagery from abstract motifs – a variation of points, lines and shapes, and is a way to express the idea of the craftsmanship in the work.

For me the process of making art is like dancing and **pushing hands** with the furry material. It is improvisational, so there is no previous sketch or draft, and I always don't know what it will look like at the end. I do things by going with the flow at that moment.

Your works are very colorful, and there's a shimmer to the color field. Though the image is defined by the cut space, color stands out as much as the cut image itself. You've chosen loud, unnatural colors – pink, bright yellow, and even the green seems artificial. Why these colors for representation of nature?

Fluorescent, saturated and sweet colors are inspired by 90s Asian/Japanese pop culture, where young girls put on thick make-up and are very dressed up, almost becoming witches or monsters. The unnatural colors come from modern life. We are bombarded with unnatural colors from TV screens, neon lights, computer screens.

The faux fur are ready-mades bought from fabric stores. I looked specifically for brighter toned furs that are rare to see in everyday life.

The depiction of nature or flowers is an experimentation in the accumulation of basic elements: point, line and shape. When I "paint" by cutting, I consider these elements as abstract motifs that form these flowers. For example, a cherry blossom is made of five organic circles, and a few little dots in the middle. The next piece which I am working on now will probably end up more abstract. If I am creating a forest without the branches, then the leaves have no more meaning, they become bunches of circles or dots.

Many viewers of *Floral* may liken works from this series to rugs which may be displayed on walls. Are works from *Floral* always meant to be displayed on a wall? Could they be placed on the ground or placed on a table as a mat for a different perspective?

Traditionally, whatever goes onto the wall is a painting, and whatever is on the ground is more of a sculpture. It is surely possible to put it on the ground or as furniture for people to walk on or to sit on. I want to walk along the edges of what it means to be a painting. Like walking along a cliff, it is dangerous because people may think that it is a carpet – a sculpture. But, these are paintings despite the weird material and the “painting” method.

I noticed only a handful of works use a shaggier fur. Why are there so few?

The shaggy fur available does not have the color effect I want to achieve for the recent series, which is trying to reflect a bright, saturated monochrome color field.

Do you envision further exploration of this medium?

I am still exploring various ways to cut this material to bring out different marks. It’s like exploring the one billion ways to paint with a brush.

You were born in Taiwan, moved to Australia when you were 9, went to college in China, and are now in the United States. Can you talk about how the impact these moves and experiences in these countries affected you as an artist?

I learned the piano and the violin since my childhood. During my teens I was interested in Kandinsky and Paul Klee, simply because their work combines music and art.

When I went to China and visited different cities and historical tomb sites, I was intrigued by paper-cut craft, shadow puppets and stone carvings of the Han Dynasty. In Paris, I was purely investigating on the concept of “the Material” itself. I spent three years making “Salt Paintings”, an installation/performance named “**Salt Musical Garden**”, and “Salt Musical Scores”, paintings or sculptures that can be read by musicians to activate the work itself.

I then came to the States and began making abstract collages with my personal belongings, objects, diary notes, etc. in search of my cultural identity. I also made abstract poured paintings, treating them as calligraphic lines, mixed with different collaged fabric or metallic

papers. At that time, I was studying American avant-garde theatre at Yale and was influenced by the performative and interactive aspect of art. I frequently visited New York and was also influenced by fashion; so, I started making fabric collages. These experiences culminated in five years of working with faux fur materials.

The interview has been edited for clarity.

Floral and *Magic Mirror* are on view at the Center for Arts Education, 266 West 37th Street, 9th Floor, through October 10, 2014. Email Claudia Camacho (claudia@caenyc.org) and copy Catherine Lan (catherinec.lan@gmail.com) and Jerry M. James (jerry@caenyc.org) for available times to visit the gallery.

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