

Auspicious Omens—Xiaojing Yan's Solo Exhibition

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translation: Rebecca Catching

How can one address indigenous traditions when globalization, modernism and progressivism constitute the only the dominant and legitimate ideologies? And how to reinterpret myth in a scientific context? How to rebuild our enchanted relationship with nature? “Auspicious Omens” the solo exhibition of Xiaojing Yan asks a number of probing questions which are both globally relevant and crucial to artistic discourse in China.

After we break through the knowledge systems embodied in specialized scientific disciplines, scaling their fortresses and traversing their plains, crossing from ancient to modern, we eventually meet that lone road that bridges the chasm between eastern and western culture. Xiaojing Yan is a female artist based in Canada and brings both a female and an international stance to the specificities of Chinese traditional culture.

In the exhibition, Yan uses different contemporary art media to create various auspicious symbols, all originating in the realm of nature. In using the word “auspicious” we refer to the auspicious character “福瑞” *“furui”* which was seen by the ancient Chinese as representing Heaven’s will in terms of the serendipitous and randomly occurring natural phenomena which benefited mankind, (including rosy pink clouds, the lingzhi mushroom, fantastical beasts and more). These random phenomena which demonstrated Heaven’s will, are seen as praise from the immortals for human behaviors which conform to the will of Heaven. The belief in natural phenomenon as the manifestation of an anthropomorphic god (in daily religious practice) came under fire in the 20th century with the advent of the scientific revolution. But with the recording of frequencies of gravitational waves and the cracking of the genetic code, we are beginning to see small particles which testify to the existence of the immortals; AI has today passed the Turing Test and now mysteries beyond those of the natural universe are one by one being brought to light. High-dimensional space-time, the mystery of genetic code and the profundity and complexity of AI provide a series of new cognitive lenses—new tools for understanding the world around us. We are still engaged in a gradual process of understanding the world and in the same way that Copernicus’s “heliocentric theory” was replaced by “M-Theory,” truth and fallacy always follow the expansion and constant inversions of our cognitive parameters. All things which we consider to be unshakable and true may, in fact, just be partial theories, mere steps in our cognitive processes. If we look at all of the ancient documents washed up on the banks of the river of time, pummeled by different regimes, cultures, faiths,

migrations, war and chaos, after they are separated off from time and space, the images which appear on the surface, each and every one like a fragment, are testimonies to past ideologies and ideas; revealing to us a different space-time which constitutes a collective understanding of the world according to mankind, which existed at a particular time and place.

Floating backward the long river of history to ancient times: we can see that the term "*xiangrui*" 祥瑞 comes from the theological tradition of the "Han Dynasty Doctrine" implying interactions between the heavenly rulers and mankind and providing a method for categorization and interpretation of the constituent elements of the universe. "wan shi wan wu" 万事万物 or "all the things and creatures under heave," to the concept of "*yin and yang*", and the five elements (metal, wood, fire, water and earth). The Taoist model of the universe was understood according to the principles of trigram: Taichi generates two complementary forces, while the two complementary forces generate eight trigrams and the eight trigrams correspond to the five elements, which can be extended and applied to all things under heaven, mutually intertwined, woven together to form a whole. It also corresponds to the "Najia method" which encompassed the lunar eclipse, phases of the moon, the "*shichen*" (an increment of time consisting of two hours predating western chronology) and the 24 solar terms (agricultural seasons in the Chinese lunar calendar). This was a unification of space-time which is internal and external, mutually redoubling and reinforcing, one which is continually moving and transforming our topological relationship with the universe. North, South, East, West, those four cardinal points, correspond to four mythical beasts: the Azure Dragon, Rose Finch, White Tiger and Black Tortoise. At the same time, they also represent the 12 constellations roving across the sky, forming a taxonomical relationship which spans astronomy and geography. The five elements correspond to internal organs in the human body and the power and circulation of "qi"; they also correspond to different kinds of animals, plants, minerals, "*shicheng*", solar terms and "fengshui" (geomancy). These layered and superimposing theories have been passed on to generations; the most commonly applied being the system of traditional Chinese medicine.

These seemingly unrelated things mutually interact, using an internal or inherent relationship of "*xiang sheng xiang ke*" 相生相克 meaning a "mutual enhancement and inhibition enacted by various elements," or to use another analogy, they establish an intimate and interconnected standpoint. This can be used to interpret both the observations of daily life, the accumulation of human understanding, and to build a complete and all encompassing symbolic system for political rule. The movement of the celestial bodies in the universe and the chance climatic events, the stability and chaos of national politics, and people's social and moral ethics constitute a series of corresponding interpretive relationships. In this system, everything is intimately related to space-time;

people's choices and free will lead to corresponding unfolding phenomena in space-time. In the feudal dynasties, astronomy corresponded to the emperor; if there was some kind of earthquake, drought or randomly-occurring natural disaster it was because the emperor was morally corrupt; a political self-criticism would need to be carried out, otherwise it could spell a folk uprising and a swift change of dynasty. The emperor was the Son of Heaven, and the physical embodiment of the natural laws. Achieving the lofty aspirations of the will of heaven was the foundation of the theory of the "divine right of kings," established by Dong Zhongshu in the Han Dynasty. The saying "*shun tian er xing*" 顺天而行 or to "follow the rule of heaven" has become an escape route for the monarchy to evade the burden of the will of the people. Operating according to the natural functions of natural laws means obeying the rule of heaven and requires us to transcend our individual selves and our desires, to be at one with heaven which is the prescribed path to becoming a fully-realized human being or a saint. In this interpretive system, "*xiangrui*" 祥瑞, comes to represent the randomness of nature, something which creates the tendency for people to invoke these weak and laudatory notions of auspiciousness.

Xiaojing Yan's works do not come from any real sense of inherent or natural serendipity or cosmic logic, rather they possess a focused intentionality. In the studio, she is constantly plotting, nurturing and manipulating; to use a common expression typically used in Chinese historical writing about nature, she practices in the vein of "*yi hua jie mu*" 移花接木 "stealthily grafting one twig onto another." The saying also has the double meaning of "substituting one thing for another" which speaks to her transformation of traditional subjects into contemporary forms.

In ancient times the *lingzhi* (a medicinal bracket fungus) were seen by the common people as a kind of "magical herb" also known as a "triple-flowering herb" it "blooms" or release spores three times a year. The poem "Mountain Ghost" 《九歌·山鬼》 (from the ancient book of poems "The Songs of the South" 《楚辞》 by the poet Chu Yuan 屈原) mentions "Picking '*lingzhi*' in the mountains," perhaps we can call it an investigation of the mysteries of our own history, of antiquity. Myths and legends speak of the "*lingzhi*" as a legendary potion of the immortals and it was thought to not only bring longevity, but also aid in reviving the dead. The detonation of an atomic bomb, and the nuclear power, and particulate matter released, produce a natural mushroom-like form, the result of the billowing gas caused by the powerful explosion. There are certainly similarities between the mushroom cloud and the spores of the "*lingzhi*" dispersing into the air, and Cai Guoqiang's series of explosion works also employed and explored this idea. The cloud symbol even features prominently in the "ruyi" or scepter (used by emperors to dispel evil spirits) along with the flying Apsara (Buddhist cloud spirit), there are also images of "*lingzhi*," clouds

and other totemic symbols.

Yan's long-term method of cultivating "*lingzhi*" inserts into the work a sense of self-replication or reproduction. She implants the seeds into wood pulp which is formed into the shape of human figures, carefully nurturing the growth of the spores with controlled temperature and humidity; the result is a bust of a female figure, an uncanny fusion of nature and woman. This combination of human and flora, brings with it a sense of dirt and dampness, like a spirit from some alternate "plant-rothomorphic" realm. Only when it is quietly decaying can the human body become nourishment for the "*lingzhi*," mutually seeping into and transforming each other. We come from dirt, are sustained by it and so we shall return. Yan's extraordinary life forms, half-human, half-inanimate cause the viewer to enter into a kind of paradox of life and death, horror and auspiciousness. Another "*lingzhi*" is encased in bronze, from the wall of the gallery it meanders and infests yet though it possesses the transience of a wood sprite, it's fixity and its obligatory form become a product of its objectivity. The firmness and durability of the bronze, introduce different formal and conceptual implications to the "*lingzhi*," causing material bifurcation, a divergence of names and appearances, a natural organism becoming a symbolic marker, in the service of a psychological need an object produced and created to serve a conceptual conviction. In essence, it becomes a counterpoint to the randomness and serendipity of auspiciousness, to make the work transcend the concept of auspiciousness.

Xiaojing Yan uses tens of thousands of pearls of different sizes suspended in air to recreate the form of a cloud of vapour, which when viewed from different angles, reorganizes itself as a cloud of smoke, defining the contours of something which seems purely illusory. Water vapor, as part of a natural cycle will circulate in the atmosphere according to temperature differences which causes it to condense. In ancient times, the shape of clouds, color and placement all were linked to a deep moral symbolism. For instance, pink rosy clouds, imperial canopy clouds, dragon-tiger-phoenix clouds, each and every auspicious sign seems flanked by a seemingly unending bank of clouds and gusts of propitious winds. In terms of this kind of heaven-sent fortuity, pictographs (characters) and homophones formed part of a common set of image methodologies. In the process of symbolizing astrology and "fengshui," a linking of conceptual directives and meaning occurs, which is different from the image and meaning in a conceptual painting (in contemporary art); the connecting words and objects; achieving the same goals through different means.

The ancient Taoist text "Xian Shu Yun Zhuan" presents the ancient's observations on the forms of the clouds which were compiled into annals as a means for humans to communicate with the gods. Taoists believed that the clouds possessed different attributes, but this sort of text relied upon both the abilities

of men and deities in order for it to be written and passed down to the mortal world. The particular nature of dispersing water vapour particles is perfectly captured by this “quality of whiteness” which forms the contours of this colorless odorless gas which naturally moves and re-composes itself in different forms. We can say it is the most incohesive form, an entity made of granules, most easily assuming the shape of smoke or gas. It is also the most buoyant liquid when it exists in a completely different state. The Tao functions in a way that is “*zi ran er ran*” 自然而然 meaning naturally or spontaneously. How can one experience nature through the clouds, observing its proclivities towards the serendipitous and the random, to determine the laws and the information encoded in the universe, turning things inside out in search of one particular infinitesimal path of existence; the ancient Taoists used this unique visualization method to interpret the randomness of nature.

In the exhibition, Xiaojing Yan uses “*lingzhi*” and floating clouds, the solid and the flowing, that which is human and that which is nature, to create a series of relationships characterized by interior contradictions and connections. The exhibition also features a series of works employing natural everyday materials, mixing history, folk beliefs and science exploring the visual relationships, stimulating the perceptions, olfactory senses, memories and various sensory organs of the viewer and conjuring up different temporal models of the perception regarding space-time and the universe. The whole exhibition employed a certain subtlety, nuance, and metaphorical visual methods unique to the practice of a female artist; it is a tangled and complex investigation of the relationships between energy and space-time, mathematics and dimensionality, science and the “sacred”.

祥瑞——关于闫晓静个展

文：付晓东

翻译：林白丽

当全球化，现代性，进步主义成为世界唯一的合法性大行其道的时代，如何在全球化的今天面对“土著传统”？如何在科学的语境下重新解读神话？如何恢复自然的魅力？成为突破专门化学科性的知识系统升级之后，穿越学科壁垒，跨越古今，超越东西文化间隔的一条必经之路。闫晓静是一位旅居加拿大的华人女性艺术家，国际化的视野和女性身份的角度，使她以特别的方式更加敏感于中国传统中世界观的特殊之处。闫晓静个展“祥瑞”探索了一系列与中国当代艺术相关的全球性的关键问题。

展览中晓静用当代艺术作为媒介方式，人为的制造出种种来自于自然界的祥瑞。“祥瑞”是指吉祥的征兆，又称“福瑞”，被中国古代传统认为是表达天意的、对人有益的偶然发生的自然现象，如天现彩云，地涌灵芝，奇禽异兽出现等等。这些表达天意的偶然性现象，被认为是对人类做出符合天道顺行的行为的嘉奖。在日常宗教信仰中，将自然现象解读为人格神的显灵，已经成为 20 世纪科学革命之后被普遍批判的伪命题。但是，在引力波记录频繁，基因密码破解，上帝粒子现身，人工智能通过图灵测试的今天，自然宇宙的神秘之处正在被一点一点的揭示。关于高维时空之谜，DNA 编码之秘，人工智能之奥，也使我们对自我和身处的这个世界产生了一系列重新认知的角度。我们依然身处在一个渐进性认识世界的过程之中。与哥白尼的“日心说”被宇宙“膜”的理论所替换一样，真理和谬误总是随着认知范围的扩大而不断翻转，一切我们认为坚固可信的东西依然可能成为认知过程中的局部理论。当我们翻看漫长的时间之河存留下来的古老文献，经过被不同政权、文化、信仰、迁徙、战乱的时空阻隔之后，留下表层显现的图像，如同一个个切片，作为曾经的思想存留过的证据，向我们揭示的是另一个时空中，曾经真实存在过的人类集体性的对世界的认知和解读。

我们穿越历史长河，重返古代。祥瑞来自于“天人感应”的神学思想，将宇宙中的万事万物纳入到阴阳五行系统中来进行分类和阐释。宇宙模型可以理解为太极生两仪，两仪生八卦，而八卦和五行相对应，延展于万事万物，互相套嵌，形成一个整体。“纳甲法”用月亮蚀相将十二时辰和二十四节气也对应其中。这是一个时空一体化，由内及外，互相翻转，连续运动转化的拓扑式的宇宙结构关系。东南西北四个方位，对应着青龙、朱雀、白虎、玄武四种神兽，同时又代表了天象运转的方位二十八星宿的组群，建立了一个从天文到地理的分类关系。五行对应着人的身体不同的内脏器官和能量气体运行，也对应着不同的动物、植物、矿物、时辰、节气，以及风水。这套来自经验层层叠加的理论流传至今，最普遍的应用是中医系统。

看起来毫无关系之物的互相运动，用其内在性质而形成的相生相克的转化关系，

用类比法使一切建立起了一种紧密联接的观点。这些用来解释于日常生活的观察和认识的积累，也用于建构一整套庞大的政治统治的象征体系。宇宙之间的天体运行，自然气候的偶然事件，与国家政治的治与乱，人的社会伦理道德，也建构起一套对应性的解释关系。在这个系统中，一切在时空之中紧密联系，人的自由意志的选择导致相关的时空中发生与之对应的现象。在封建王朝中，天象对应的是天子，如果有什么地震与干旱等偶然性的自然灾害发生，就是皇帝失德，必须进行政治性的自我检讨，或者成为民间起义改朝换代的天兆。皇帝就是“天之子”，则代表的自然规律的化身，秉承至高无上的天的旨意，这是汉代董仲舒建立起来的君权天授的理论。顺天而行，也成为民意承载的限制君权的出口。按照自然运行的规律去行动，既是顺从天意，需要超越个体的自我与欲望，与天相合，使人成为至人和圣贤。祥瑞，在这个解释系统中，就是这种代表自然的偶然性，向人发出的微弱的，嘉奖的吉祥提示。

闫晓静的作品并非来自真实的自然的偶然性，而是有意为之。她在工作室中处心积虑，培育控制，借用了中国历史上对于自然解读的一些约定俗成的说法，移花接木的进行了当代形式的转化。

灵芝，在古代被世人喻为仙草，一年开花三次，又名“三秀草”。

《楚辞·屈原·九歌·山鬼》中说：“采三秀兮于山间”，可谓考自邃古。

神话传说灵芝为仙药，服之可长生，有起死回生之功效。原子弹爆炸后生成的蘑菇云，是一种巨大核能力量释放之后，颗粒状的物质弥散在空气介质中所自然生成的形象，可以看成是一种能量显形的一种气体运动形式。轻飘疏散的灵芝与毁灭性力量的蘑菇云的相似之处，在蔡国强爆炸系列的作品中也进行了研究与借用。中国古代黄帝所制的驱邪如意，飞天升腾的吉祥图腾，也都有灵芝和云气的形象比附。

闫晓静长期培养各种菌类灵芝，以自我繁衍的方式嵌入到作品之中。她将种子埋藏进塑造为人偶形状的木质材料之中，在适当的温度和湿度下精心培育，从而半人为半自然的生长出形象诡异的少女半身像。这种半人半朵的混杂形象，带着潮湿与泥土，如同来自于某种异世界的赋灵。人的身体只有腐朽与沉静，才能成为灵芝的养分，互相渗化结合。假以自然之名，来自于土壤，也必然回归与土壤。这种异乎寻常的半人半物的生命体，使观者陷入一种生与死，恐怖与吉祥的吊诡之中。另外一件用青铜翻制的灵芝，则从美术馆的墙上逶迤蔓延，昙花一现的灵物，以固定化和必然性的形式永恒的成为客观之物。青铜的坚固性与持久性，替换灵芝的形式和概念，使质料与名相脱离，使自然之物转变为象征符号，为了一种心理需要，基于观念上的信仰而生产的制造物，成为了对祥瑞偶然性的抵消，使作品成为了一个对祥瑞概念上的逾越。

闫晓静用数万颗大小不一的珍珠模仿水蒸气的颗粒悬挂于空中，重组巨大的云烟之图，勾勒那些虚无缥缈的轮廓。水蒸气在大气环流中由于温度差异凝结形成的自然现象，在古代，云的形状，颜色和位置，都具有一系列深刻的寓意象征。比如彩云，华盖云，龙虎风云，皆呈祥，可谓祥云绵绵，瑞气滔滔。对于自然偶

然性所进行的象形和谐音的使用，作为一套特殊的图像方法论被广泛使用。在天象和风水的符号化和概念指示的意义链接上，也与当代艺术中观念绘画的图和意的分离，词与物的联接，有着异曲同工之妙。

仙书云篆亦是古人观察天象自然的云形，而写成的道家符篆，用以人与天地之间的沟通。道家认为，云乃三天自然之气结成，此类文字要靠至人天真仰写，方传至下界。水蒸气颗粒松散流动的特质，恰好用白色的性质勾勒出了无色无味的气体自然生成的结构与运动方式。可以说是最松散的颗粒状物质，最易显现的烟状气体，也是最轻飘的液体存在的另一种状态。“自然而然”既是道的运行方式，如何通过云来体察自然，观察偶然性，寻找宇宙的规律和信息，从而内外翻转为一个微小个体的存在之道，便是古代道家的一种独特的图像化的对自然和偶然性的解释方法。

闫晓静在展览中用灵芝—云气，固体—流动，人为—自然，所组织了一系列内在的矛盾而联系的关系。展览中还有另一些作品用来自自然的日常材料，依然搅拌着历史、民间信仰和科学图形之间的关系，调动人的视觉、味觉、记忆等不同器官，猜想不同年代间对宇宙和时空的认知模型。整个展览以女性特有的婉约隐喻化的视觉方式，错综复杂的考察了能量与时空，数学与维度，科学与神圣性之间的关系。