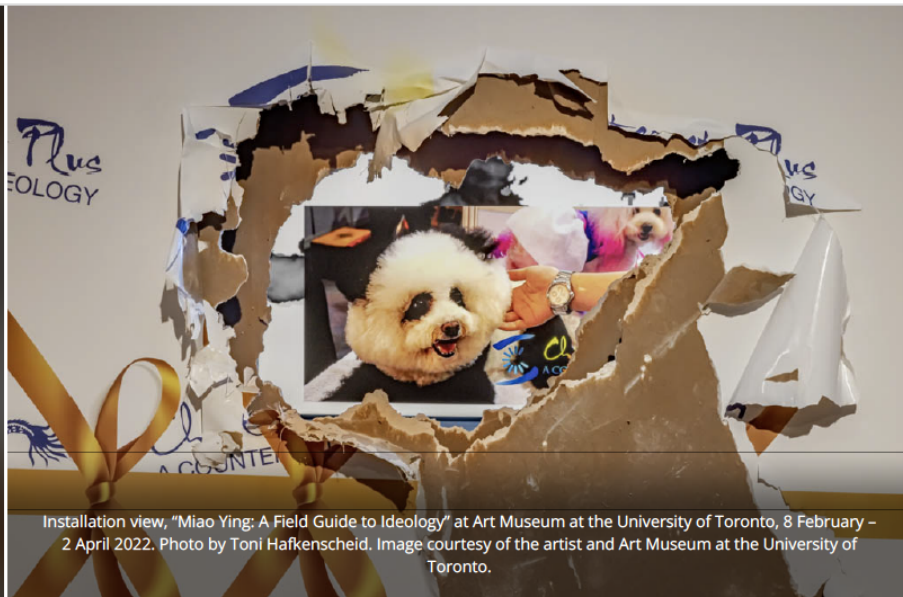




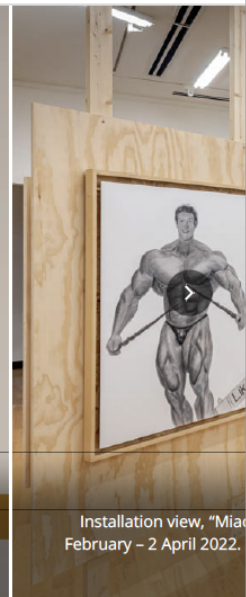
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Past, Present And Future Time In The Works Of Jennifer Wen Ma, Chen Zhe, And Miao Ying



Installation view, "Miao Ying: A Field Guide to Ideology" at Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 8 February – 2 April 2022. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Image courtesy of the artist and Art Museum at the University of Toronto.



Installation view, "Miao Ying: A Field Guide to Ideology" at Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 8 February – 2 April 2022.

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Embodied experiences of time and space, including ancestral and future times, coalesce in the recent multidisciplinary work of Jennifer Wen Ma, Chen Zhe and Miao Ying. They respond to the chaos and confusion of the contemporary world, looking back with a degree of nostalgic longing and forwards with foreboding.

TEXT: Luise Guest
IMAGES: Courtesy of various

"When yin and yang go wrong, heaven and earth are hugely disturbed."
— Zhuangzi ^[1]

The work of three multidisciplinary artists—each Chinese born, but transcultural in their personal histories, and globally exhibited—reveals diverse approaches to our contemporary world, unsettled by a global pandemic and by unfolding geopolitical chaos and conflict. Each of the three artists navigates a nostalgic past, a dangerous present, and an uncertain future in new bodies of work. In early 2020, Jennifer Wen Ma turned to ancient wisdom during an enforced pause in the busy life of a global artist. Chen Zhe examined the relationship between mind, body, and the cosmos, rejecting western binaries. Miao Ying, in contrast, immersed herself in the frenzied digital universe that we all now inhabit.



Luise Guest

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Sydney-based independent researcher, writer and art educator Luise Guest has focused on contemporary art in/from...

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Jennifer Wen Ma, *Threading the Sky*, 2021, laser-cut, flashspun HDPE and pigments. Installation view in He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen, China. Image courtesy of the artist and He Xiangning Art Museum.

Yin And Yang In The Work Of Jennifer Wen Ma

Jennifer Wen Ma, too, has been studying ancient Chinese philosophy. In the first year of the pandemic, isolating in her New York studio with all projects and exhibitions on hold, Ma decided to read the *Book of Rites*. This collection of ancient Confucian texts of uncertain date and provenance outlines rules of social propriety, good government, and the ceremonial rituals necessary for a harmonious society. Ma, who had left China as a child in 1986, was surprised by how much the classic texts resonated.

Known for immersive and theatrical installations, including the design of visual and special effects for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Ma's new work integrates her practice of sculptural forms cut from paper with a contemporary approach to ink painting. *Threading the Sky*, for example, occupied an awkwardly narrow corridor between galleries in Shenzhen's He Xiangning Art Museum in early 2022. Chosen deliberately as a liminal, in-between space, it was filled from floor to ceiling with opposing outgrowths of laser-cut paper forms. Black on one side, white on the other, their foliage-like forms almost touched.

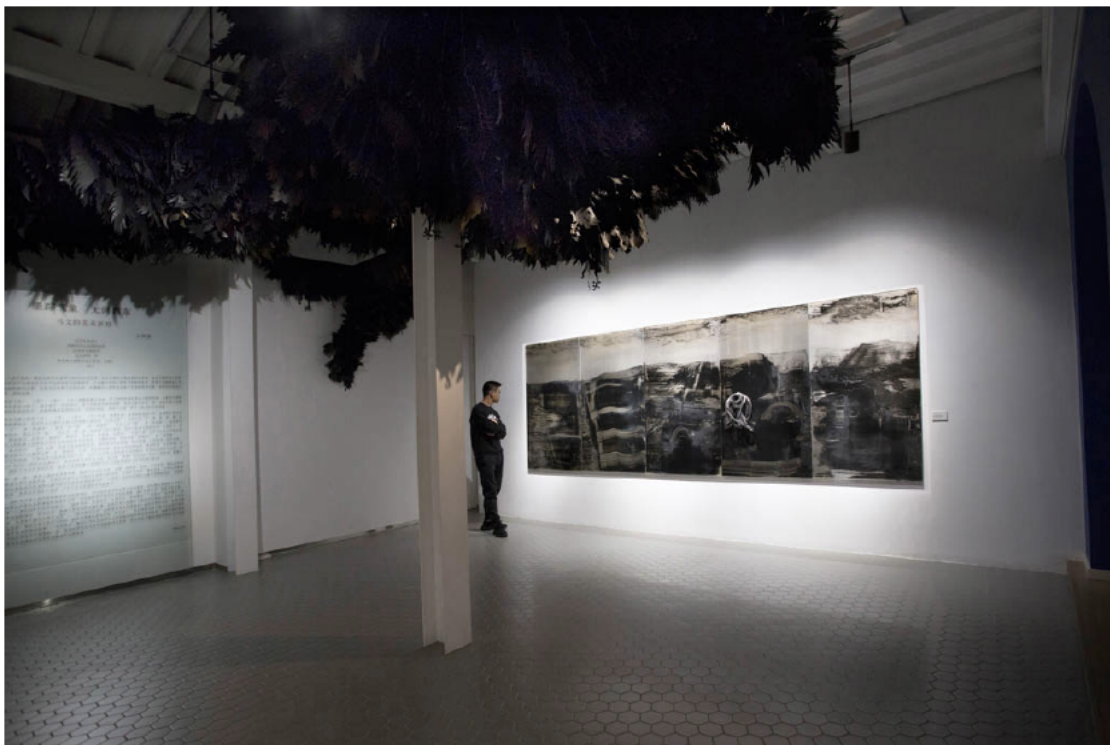
A new body of work, exhibited in the ongoing "Solar Terms Variations" at [1915 Art Space](#) in the ancient port city of Quanzhou, explores the rhythms of the natural world as an antidote to 21st century chaos. Developing from her study of the Confucian insistence upon ceremony, ritual, and the integration of human society with the rhythms of nature, Ma's work integrates monumentality and intimacy, painting with sculptural forms. She tells me in an interview, "I am fascinated, invigorated by space. I always respond to space." She created four ink paintings on acrylic panels and a site-specific "paper" (flashspun HDPE, or Tyvek) installation. Audiences move beneath a canopy of spiky tendrils that curl like vines around the archways and pillars of the old villa. A forest of laser-cut forms casts intricate shadows on the walls, connecting the separate paintings to create a singular installation. Their glossy surfaces reflect the viewer, enhancing their immersive nature and suggesting a *yin-yang* world of oscillating opposites, a visual evocation of seasonal time.

In *Spring: the Change from Hawk to Dove*, fluid, gestural washes of ink and coloured pigments evoke a landscape in transition. A hawk soars, high above a dark horizon in a green-tinged, watery sky. Striations, swirls, and marbled areas activate the surface, and a puddle of vivid yellow on the right suggests dawn light reflecting on water. *Summer: The Virtue of Fire* extends this painterly language with the addition of black laser-cut paper looped across vertical black, red and orange panels like burgeoning foliage wilting under the heat of the sun.

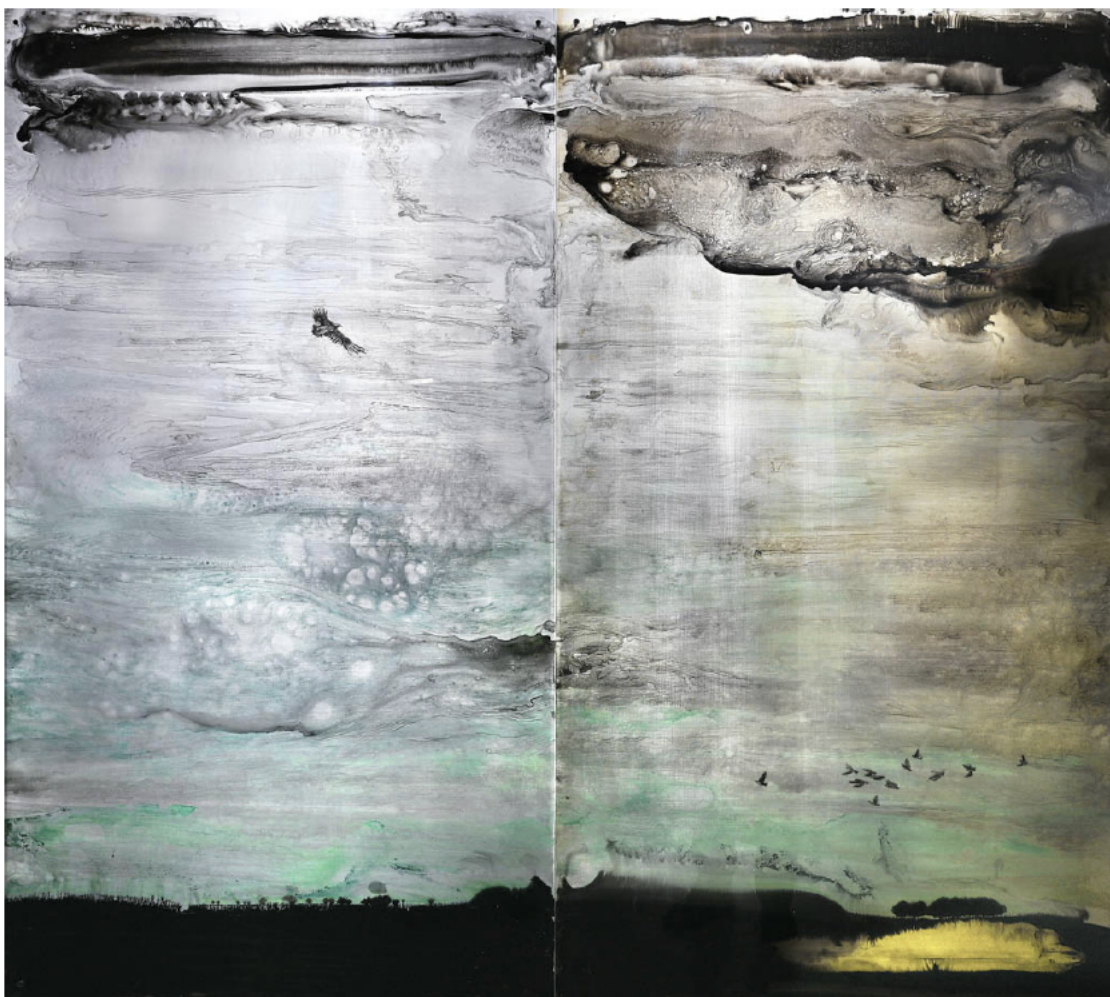
The sombre palette of *Autumn: The Return of Frost and Geese* and *Winter: The Rainbow Ensnared* recalls *shan shui* painting. Unlike traditional painters, Ma applies ink to the back of each acrylic panel and stitches cut paper forms to the front, blurring boundaries between painting and sculpture. Alluding to the work of Anselm Kiefer and Matisse's late cut-outs, as well as to literati *shan shui* painting and folk-art papercutting, Ma's work connects past and present, East and West.

Embodied experiences of time and space, including ancestral and future times, coalesce in the work of the three artists. Whether reinventing traditional visual languages of ink and paper, exploring the material possibilities of resin, marble and tapestry, or dwelling in an interdisciplinary "New Media" landscape they each respond in compelling ways to the constant, noisy chaos of our contemporary world.

[1] From the volume of *Zhuangzi* translated by Martin Palmer, published by Penguin (Chuang 2006, pp. 236–237).



Installation view, "Solar Terms Variations" at 1915 Art Space, Quanzhou, China, 15 February – 15 May 2022. Photo by Ji Xudong. Image courtesy of the artist and 1915 Art Space.



Jennifer Wen Ma, Spring: the Change from Hawk to Dove, 2022, ink, pigments, acrylic panels, 153 x 168 cm. Photo by Huang Yuanqing. Image courtesy of the artist.



Installation view, "Miao Ying: A Field Guide to Ideology" at Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 8 February – 2 April 2022. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Image courtesy of the artist and Art Museum at the University of Toronto.



Installation view, "Miao Ying: A Field Guide to Ideology" at Art Museum at the University of Toronto, 8 February – 2 April 2022. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Image courtesy of the artist and Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

Miao Ying's Digital Detox

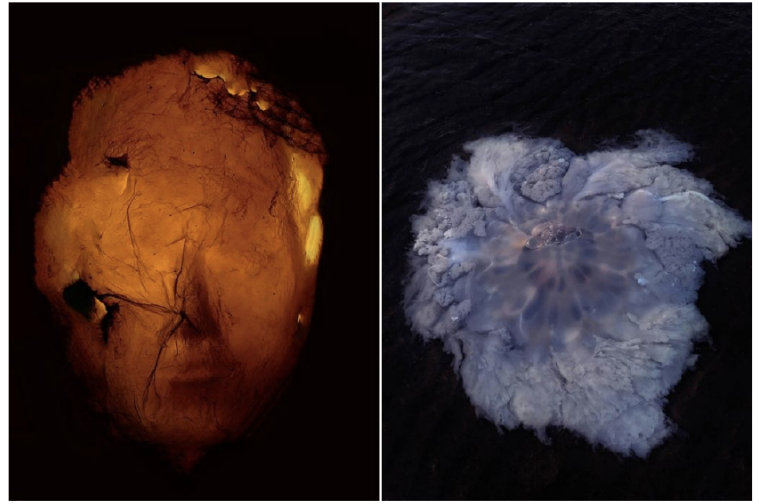
Miao Ying tackles the temporal and spatial complexities of her transcultural experience with a gleefully satirical eye. Living and working between Shanghai and New York, she defines herself as a citizen of the online world rather than of a nation state. Miao celebrates the gaudy, low-fi, dynamic aesthetic of the Chinese Internet (the "Chinternet")—a landscape in which memes, the viral videos of influencers, and the antics of entrepreneurial live streamers become obsolete so fast that the Internet becomes almost instantly nostalgic—and critiques the global control and commodification of digital data.

Miao describes her love-hate relationship with the online environment behind the Great Firewall as a kind of "Stockholm Syndrome": the feeling, she says, is not unlike the way a kidnap victim might come to identify with their captor. Her work celebrates the grassroots creativity and resilience of Chinese netizens shaping a fast-changing digital universe. In an [interview with *Ocula*](#), Miao told Yan Wu, the curator of "[A Field Guide to Ideology](#)", her exhibition at the Art Museum of the University of Toronto, "[...] China's technological environment is much wilder and more interesting than that of the West because of its lack of supervision and frantic change." She is critical of the excesses of global corporate capitalism, the contemporary commodification of "lifestyle", and the performative propaganda of the wellness industry.

"[A Field Guide to Ideology](#)" features new iterations of two bodies of work that she described to Yan as "fictitious ideological strategies". The parodic "Chinternet Plus", commissioned in 2016 by New Museum, New York, and "Hardcore Digital Detox", first commissioned for the "M+ Stories" online platform in 2018, began as online projects before taking physical form. For audiences, the experience of the exhibition is like scrolling through a social media feed. You peer through openings torn in the kitschy, wallpapered cardboard walls of Chinternet Plus for a glimpse of an influencer or a cute panda, or move between apparently random, awkwardly amateurish, hand-drawn images mounted on plywood screens, or displayed on tiny easels in the Hardcore Digital Detox installation. Images of the "unidonk" proliferate. The artist describes this cross between a unicorn and a donkey as the spiritual ambassador of the Digital Detox "brand", a satirical jab at connections between disinformation and the consolatory fantasies of "wellness" advertising. Miao invites us to question our own love-hate relationship to the online universe.



Chen Zhe, *You Are A Circle Expanding (So Below)*, 2021, video, 7 min 40 sec. Installation view in "ON | OFF: Carousel of Progress" at He Art Museum, Shunde, China, 4 February – 17 April 2022. Image courtesy of the artist and He Art Museum.



(Left) Chen Zhe, *Eternal Ephemera: Body Mind I*, 2020, archival inkjet print face-mounted to diasec acrylic; (Right) Chen Zhe, *Eternal Ephemera: Ancestor*, 2020, archival inkjet print face-mounted to diasec acrylic. Images courtesy of the artist.

Chen Zhe's Embodied Knowledge

Best known for two photographic series, "Bees" (2010–2012) and "The Bearable" (2007–2010), which, the artist says, portray "the disquieted souls, the wounded bodies, and the elusive link between the two", Beijing-based **Chen Zhe** examines the indivisible connection between mind and body, and between the individual and the collective.

Researching literary and scientific texts, divination, alchemy, and shamanism in her continuing exploration of bodily experience, Chen says in a recent email interview, "What's beyond this life could be death or samsara, what's beyond a modern Homo Sapiens body could be the intricately designed structure of a jelly fish, what's beyond our consciousness could be our wild and free dreams which often defy language and reasoning."

Chen dwells in the liminal and the in-between. *Towards Evening: Six Chapters* (2012–) is Chen's ongoing study of dusk, that nebulous and melancholy hour—"entre chien et loup" (between dog and wolf) as the French expression goes. From this examination of ambiguity, she developed *You Are a Circle, Expanding (As Above)* and *You Are a Circle, Expanding (So Below)* (both 2021), a lyrical two-part installation whose title comes from "As Above, So Below", the second verse of ancient Hermetic text Emerald Tablet. An outstretched finger points at a softly pulsing circular form that initially suggests the moon but gradually reveals itself as a trembling pool of water. Mesmerising concentric ripples evoke the expansion and contraction of the universe.

The body, in Chen's work, is paradoxically both fragile and resilient. Chen proposes that two maps chart our journey through this world. One is the constellation under which we are born; the other is created by the two fissures on our skulls that gradually fuse the parietal and frontal bones in adulthood. Invisible beneath the layers of muscle and skin that separate us from others, the Coronal and Sagittal Sutures are like a concealed map made of bone. "...But still you know them like knowing one's body under the skin, or an unknown ancestor, or knowledge that one gains in a dream," Chen says. Photographs in the "Eternal Ephemera" series suggest skulls fissured with river-like indentations, veinous optic nerves, or passages of constellations through the cosmos.

In *Reading Old Dreams: Next to You* (2020) a resin skull lit from within sits on a block of roughly carved marble. It glows like a lantern in front of a large tapestry with a design based on photographs of the sutures on animal skulls. In this work and others in "A Slow Remembering of a Long Forgetting", a solo exhibition at Shanghai's BANK in 2021, Chen suggests that skull sutures, like charts studied by astrologers looking for signs determining human destiny, are texts that may be read. Their meanings, however, remain elusive. The installation charts a passage between birth and death, and between the self and the other. Chen says her aim as an artist is, "...to be with the uncertainty, to connect with the most transitory and the most eternal and the endless moments in between."