

# THE POINTER ADVENTURE

## ■ ARTIST OF THE MONTH

### Cui Fei

by Michèle Vicat



Cui Fei photograph © William Dowell 2008

Cui Fei inherited her taste for learning and the creative fields from her father, a painter, and her mother, a school-teacher. She spent her early childhood, in Jinan, a city located between Beijing and Shanghai. Spared some of the turmoil affecting the rest of China during the Cultural Revolution, Jinan managed to hold on to its traditional values anchored in Confucianism.

In 1985, Cui Fei experienced her first great emotional shock, when at the age of 14, she was sent from the comfort of her family to

attend the High School of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. The school was 18 hours by train from Jinan, and the separation forced her to begin an independent analysis of her own life. Over the next several years, she received rigorous training in drawing, painting, calligraphy and Chinese literature.

In 1993, she received an undergraduate degree in oil painting from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (Now China's National Academy of Fine Arts). Although the teaching was strict and formal, both teachers and students found themselves struggling to move beyond the Russian style of realism. For Cui Fei, the process meant finding an anchor, and this involved deconstructing and reconstructing herself.

The search for identity continued when she arrived in the United States in 1996. She concentrated on learning English,

and studied at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she received her Master of Fine Arts in painting in 2001. In contrast to China, where the teaching focuses on technique, her art training in the US taught her to verbalize ideas.

The changes in her life left Cui Fei with a feeling that she no longer had control over herself. Coming from a tradition of oil painting, her daily experiences were making her see life in increasingly three dimensional, sculptural terms.

Today, her work is embedded with the constantly changing questions that she asks herself about culture, nature and human existence.

As a child, she had felt that she had clear answers to right and wrong. There were not many choices in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. But as China opened its door to change and she approached adolescence, she observed the fragmentation of China's unique cultural landscape into a quest for individualism by millions of people.

In *Six Steeds of Zhaoling*, which Cui Fei made in 1999, while studying in the US, she takes inspiration from China's ancient history to make us aware not only of history's implacable weight on the psyche, but also of the fragility of our

*Six Steeds of Zhaoling (detail)* photograph ©Michèle Vicat  
Mixed media on four panels, 24" x 192", 1999



## NOTES FROM XI'AN



The Yishan Stone  
©William Dowell 2009

The notion of destiny often strikes you unexpectedly. In the Forest of Stone Steles Museum on a recent trip to Xi'an, China, my attention was caught by a long, angular and very powerful crack that runs across the Yishan stone. I immediately thought of the same pattern in Cui Fei's painting, "Six Steeds of Zhaoling." I knew that the artist had not taken her inspiration from the Yishan stone, but I was astonished by the similarity in the form of

the crack. I didn't realize at that moment that I was only a short distance away from another building that houses the sculptural stone reliefs of the Six Steeds of Zhaoling, the six horses that had belonged to the emperor Taizong.



The Shifachi Steed © Michèle Vicat 2009

The craftsmanship of the Six Steeds is exquisite, but I was even more affected emotionally because I was physically standing in front of them with Cui Fei's painting in my mind. The stone relief of the steed Shifachi is pierced by a triangular cut that seems to suspend the horse forever in his gallop. It is that fracture which is echoed in her work. Cui Fei focuses on the marks that history imposes on objects that once possessed the power to recount and to pass on the stories of the great figures of the world

Suddenly, my trip to China took on a new meaning. I could see the connection between the material existence of these pieces, which had been made fragile by time, and the internalization of their spirit, which the artist had now fixed onto a canvas. The fact that the same pattern had appeared by chance on two different stones was already quite extraordinary. That these two stones had no obvious connection, and yet were so near to each other was amazing. That an artist had transferred this piercing wound across lands and seas is a reminder of our own fragility.

destiny, and its potential for ultimate destruction. The emperor Taizong (AD 626-49) commissioned the carving of six stone relief sculptures representing his six favorite Persian horses to be placed in his tomb. A poem, written at the time, recounts: "On armored horses, the Emperor won the world under Heaven, and the stone images of the Six Steeds are as distinguished as their achievements in battle." The story of an emperor wanting to commemorate his victories by placing stone reliefs of his horses in his own tomb seems simple enough on the surface, but today, two of the horses are in the museum at the University of Pennsylvania, while the other four are in Shaanxi's provincial museum. The six stone reliefs were damaged by smugglers in 1914, and needed extensive repairs. The voyage of two of them to America involved intrigue and controversy. The US claims that they were rescued, while China insists that they were stolen.

The point of Cui Fei's work is to show that power exists for a moment in time, and then fades. Power can pass from one generation to another, but the control over it can be very limited. Using mixed media to tell the story, she underscores the fragility and the material inconsistency of our destiny.

In her work, leaves become a metaphor for the limitations of the human condition. Their imprint reflects the cultural heritage shared by people and transferred over generations. Their intrinsic composition leads us to question our relationship to nature.

*Manuscript of Nature V* is a personal reflection by Cui Fei on her approach to nature. Chinese philosophy emphasizes the continuity of nature. Nature is linked to the universe. It is organic, and the same rules apply to all its components. There is order, even in chaos.

When Cui Fei arrived in the United States, she traced marks on rocks as

an echo of the marks left on her mind by her past. Her fellow students, who were American, told her that they only saw physical marks on the rocks because they could not see or feel the soul of the rock. Cui Fei realized that Chinese see life in metaphors. For them, everything is connected. "If we are talking about water dripping on a stone," she explains, "we will also look at the holes created

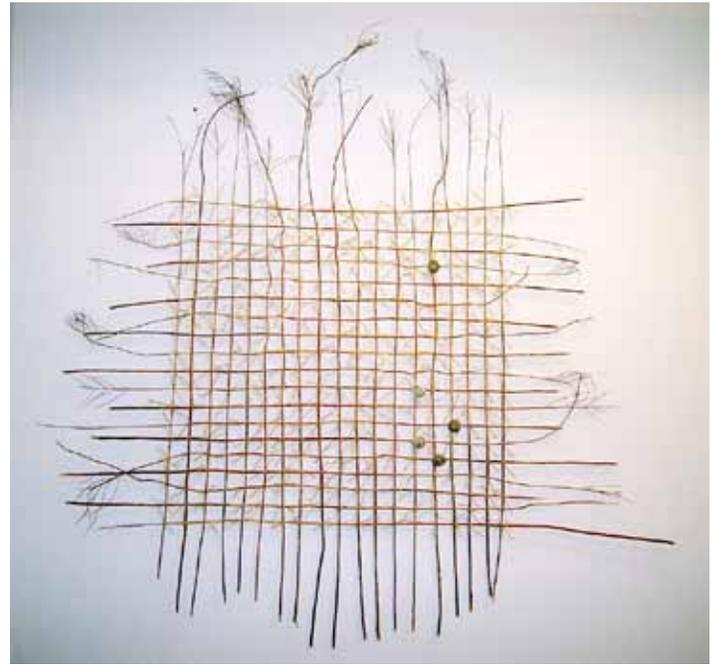
*Manuscript of Nature V (detail)*  
Installation, tendrils and pins, dimension variable,  
2002-present



by the water inside the stone. The Chinese will ask themselves, ‘which is stronger, the water or the stone?’”

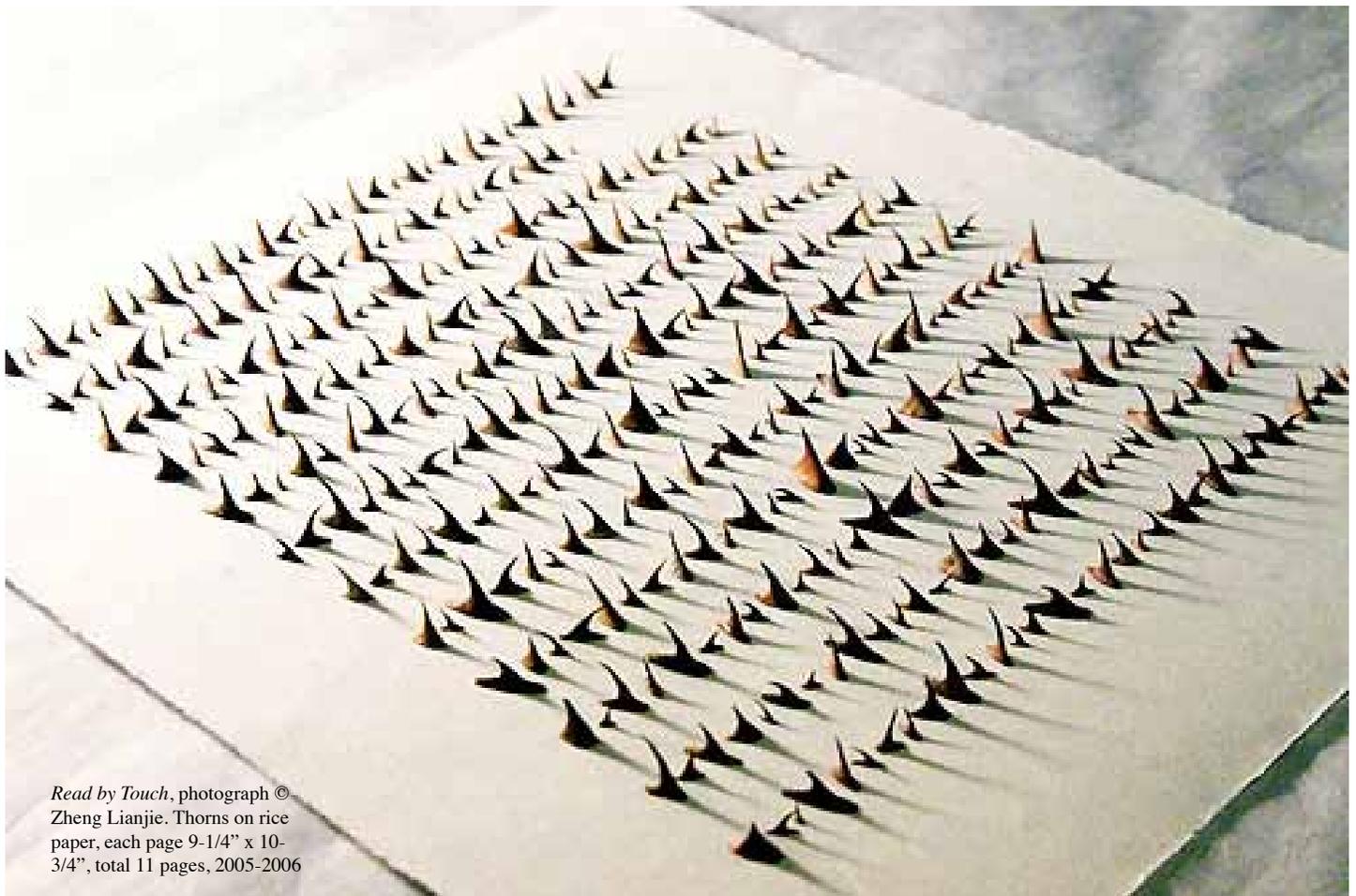
The West, she realized, went from its belief that God created man in his own image to believing that man controls nature. As soon as she understood the difference in approaches, Cui Fei began searching for a way to connect people and culture through nature. Using twigs, tendrils and leaves, she creates a universal language. Tendrils can be found anywhere. They belong to everybody. Writing a manuscript in a Chinese way forces people to look at nature through a Chinese perspective even if neither Chinese nor Westerners can read it, but they can recognize the materials used. The tendrils become letters or ideograms and they can be mounted on any changing background. They are movable, replaceable and ephemeral. The connection is made between people and nature across cultures. Cui Fei has discovered a personal as well as a universal language. She sees life as both a Chinese experiencing cultural diversity in the US and social transformation in China.

It is in that spirit that she created *Wei Qi III*. Wei Qi is an ancient Chinese game that was introduced as “Go” in the West through the Japanese. Cui Fei’s representation is an image of the universe, showing the interconnectedness between East and West, and the artist who created a game in the process. The material used, grass, softens the game, which is normally competitive and strategic. The color of the grass fades gradually to make us aware of the passage of time.



*Wei Qi III*, photograph © Cui Fei.  
Installation, 71” x 73” x 5”, grass and papier maché, 2000

To see more of Cui Fei’s work and life history, you can visit her website at [www.cuifei.net](http://www.cuifei.net)



*Read by Touch*, photograph ©  
Zheng Lianjie. Thorns on rice  
paper, each page 9-1/4” x 10-  
3/4”, total 11 pages, 2005-2006