CUI FEI & TACA SUI Origins

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The idea of an origin is problematic for a number of reasons, one being that it would seem to suggest a starting point without precedent and, of course, that's impossible. An origin envisioned as a transition from one state to another is a definition easier to accept, and in this sense it can become mutable and recurring rather than permanently fixed to a specific place or point in time. The pertinence of this perspective is especially pronounced when one holds the idea of an origin up against images and elements of nature—which is precisely what links the photographic explorations of Taca Sui with the elegant mixed media work of Cui Fei.

Fei, who lives and works in New York, treats seeds, twigs, tendrils, thorns, and scintillating black sand as if they were lexical entities one could use to compose poems, diary entries, or keep a calendar. The largest of her efforts, "Manuscript of Nature V-XXXII" (2012), features dozens of pocketsized sprigs pinned to one wall in a series of columns that suggest the vertical orientation of Asian script. It's tempting to look for pictographic connotations in Fei's twigs. Their formations tend towards the curling and serpentine as often as they emphasize the hard angularity of a branch's nodal point. As is known, the shapes of early Chinese script originated in the artistic interpretation of natural forms. Attempting to read such a "Manuscript" becomes, rather quickly, an exercise as imaginative as looking for the shapes of animals amongst banks of clouds.

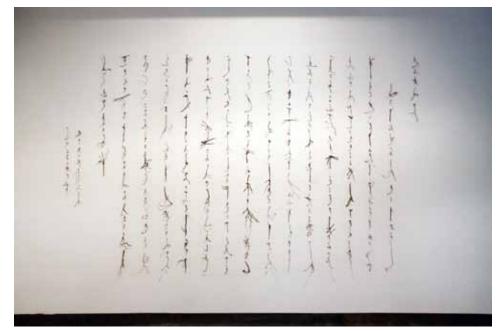
If Fei's touch is one of tenderness, patience, and delicacy, her formal approach might be described as rigorous, linear, and exacting. She embodies that rare and scrupulous practitioner whose work doesn't seem fussy or forced so much as carefully attended to. In her series "Read by Touch," thorns of

varying girth, hook, and point are lined up in neat horizontal rows across a page, while in "Calendar" (2012), Fei attaches little brown seeds to a sheet of paper in tight grids. There is a seed for each day, and more than a decade is accounted for.

All of Fei's work is wall-bound save one piece, "Tracing the Origin VII_VI" (2012), which is situated on the gallery floor. Across the smooth surface of four white rectangular panels, Fei poured black sand into a set of twiggy formations. What is particularly striking about this piece is that one looks down upon it, enacting a relationship between body and space that corresponds to the very way in which Fei seeks out her raw material—i.e., with her eyes on the ground. By simply situating her work at foot level, Fei has created a piece that speaks not only to points of origin between nature and the language of the pictograph but to her own working process as well.

The photography of Taca Sui is enriched by the presence of Fei's lyrical output. Sui is interested in collections of age-old Chinese writing-court poems, popular songs, and hymns—that date back to Confucius. He treks to distant landscapes in China to capture the images one sees reproduced here as platinum and silver gelatin prints. Presumably, his decision to use antiquated photographic techniques is in keeping with his impulse to work in response to ancient texts. Although such a correlation seems a touch contrived, the effect is rather wonderful; the subdued temper of dull-sterling and sepia toned images, all of which have a similar adumbrated appearance, lends itself to reverie and nostalgia.

Sui's subject matter is mundane and quotidian, a celebration of domestic details that champion life's simpler elements. His sense of light—utterly flat—corresponds perfectly



Cui Fei, Manuscript of Nature V_XXXII, 2012 Installation view at Chambers Fine Art.

with the unassuming scenes he presents, such as a lone candlestick, an empty birdcage, or a grazing horse. In terms of conveying the process of his work and carrying forward a sense of the image-driven movement of classical Chinese poetry, the most effective pieces are the trio in the front gallery. In each work four small photographs are matted in a single frame, their juxtaposition creating a sense of dynamism that is absent when the pictures are printed larger and framed individually (as they are in the adjacent room). Primed by efforts at interpreting Fei's "Manuscripts," I read Sui's "Odes of Chen Series I" (2011) thusly: "rising moon / stone ledge / the path through the paddy leads to a pool of spotted carp."

Rather than hold Sui's work against other photographers such as Adou or Hai Bo, who similarly haunt China's countryside with an eye for poetic banalities, one should focus attention on Sui's particular methodology. He isn't seeking to illustrate these old texts so much as to find their equivalents in a contemporary landscape, to locate the reemergence of an origin he's traced back seven to ten centuries. Imagining this journey is what makes Sui's pictures captivating, and



Taca Sui (b. 1984), Odes of Chen Series 3, 2010 Platinum print. Set of 4, 7 7/8 x 7 7/8" each.

it's how Fei's mixed media pieces strengthen them. Conjoined with her sand, thorns, and twigs, one is encouraged to reflect on the creative processes that generated the works' final forms. The act of looking becomes one of reconstructive doing, and the imagination fires along lines both critical and creative. 9

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