

Yida Wang

b.1957, Shanghai, China, lives in Honolulu, O'ahu

exhibited in *Biennial VIII*

left to right

My Land Your Landscape I, 2011

My Land Your Landscape III, 2011

My Land Your Landscape II, 2011

charcoal, color pencil, waterproof glue on paper

YIDA WANG

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Lives and works in Honolulu, O`ahu

The negotiation of an individual's relationship to a mother culture, a literal matrix of life, may be experienced more intensely during periods of intra-national change and political upheaval, or as a result of journeys of migration. The drawings of Yida Wang have often made visible, through the juxtaposition of visual symbols wrapped in the dark atmosphere of recollection, the desire to create a harmonious alignment of past and present, East and West.

Wang experienced the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as a young girl. She was assigned a government job in a jade-carving factory, which she credits with providing both a sense of cultural history and symbolism, as well as fundamental manual skills. She completed high school in 1973, and was able to enter art school in 1981, after institutions of higher education had reopened in 1976. Wang received initial training in both Chinese and western art in her native Shanghai, and left China in the 1980s to pursue further education in the U.S. She experienced a difficult transition, as if connected neither to the past nor the present: "My work was not attached to my bloodline. I had no ready access to or entry into the ever-changing art trends. Even though my work received much attention, I knew in my heart it was not my true self." It is that ongoing search for the true self, one that

many undertake, that continues to inform Wang's work, with the added complexities of also seeking an integration of very different cultural imperatives. Put another way, it is the classic nature vs. nurture debate cast in aesthetic terms.

Wang made her way to the islands in 1987 to study in the Art department at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, and received her MFA in 1994. She is now a tenured faculty member of that department, and Chair of its Drawing and Painting program. Wang's earlier work gained immediate recognition for its bold and innovative approach to drawing, creating compelling visual fusions of line and tone, figurative references and architectural fragments, framed in an ambiguous space in which symbols of Chinese culture often served as anchors. So dense and redolent was the visual atmosphere that one could almost believe it exuded the scent of smoke and incense. Wang's gift for clean-lined representation, also suggestive of the key-lines in woodblock prints, provided the perfect tool for the fluid intermingling of delicately rendered forms and robust passages of scumbled marks of charcoal, graphite and conte crayon. In these drawings, black-and-white was anything but a limited palette.

From these works, and from works included in her solo exhibition at the

Honolulu Academy of Arts in 2002, elements in a personal iconography began to emerge. Sections of doors, gates, tile roofing, drawn from images of Chinese-style residences of the upper class, provided cultural references and intimations of place, but also metaphorical, metaphysical passageways. Drawings of a fetus, still attached to its umbilical cord, and suggestions of a placenta, bearing a strong resemblance to a lotus leaf, introduced a more intimate and gendered aspect to the work, one that has persisted in Wang's more recent mixed-media series.

On the occasion of another major solo exhibition in her home city of Shanghai, Wang moved out of the zone of assurance that her mastery of drawing provided in order to explore different combinations of media in both two and three dimensions. *Red Scarf* and *Exoderm* retain a foundation of charcoal, graphite and conte, but are enlivened with the addition of passages of colored pencil and free-form veils of transparent water-proof glue. These drawings represent a point of continuity, a zone of transition from earlier work, employing as they do the language of drawing that is so much part of Wang's artistic persona. They also use some symbols of an earlier time of childhood, as with the red scarf that served as a kind of mark of allegiance during the Cultural Revolution. Wang has also made use of a foundation of

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drawing in *Nerve*, which uses a diagram of the brain and central nervous system such as one would find in a medical text, but employs a substrate of Plexiglas rather than paper.

Wang found another potent symbol to suggest the tensions engendered by the political dislocations in China—the tiles used in the traditional game of mahjong. During the Cultural Revolution the game was forbidden due to its feudal origins, a symptom of an outmoded culture. Its reemergence after the relaxation of cultural and political strictures revealed new attitudes toward traditional culture, as an older generation once again took up the game. But the renewal of interest in mahjong and its burgeoning popularity also served to make more evident the separation of generations, as younger members of society ignored the game in favor of the attractions of the internet. Wang uses the complex patterns on the tiles in two key works: a large hanging paper panel comprised of a dense grid of color transfers heightened with pencil, and *Infiltrating • Propagating*, a sculptural installation created in 2006. The title itself suggests a kind of cultural hybridity; the triangular forms, deployed around the gallery floor like tents in bivouac, also conjure up a vision of cultural nomadism.

Shaped like prisms, and comprised of transparent and reflective layers, each unit of the installation serves as a paradigm of refraction, separating a single beam of cultural experience into its diverse components. The work also reveals Wang's ability to fuse and intermingle layers of imagery and information, now translated into the distinctly more technologically current tools of color transfers and auto filler. The latter material is applied to the Plexiglas and sanded down, creating random opaque areas that disturb the pristine clarity of the plastic. The color transfers of rows of individual mahjong tiles are also adhered and abraded. Close inspection of these fragmented patterns reveal that some characters from a computer keyboard, like the ampersand that is the universal indicator of a virtual "address," have replaced some of the traditional markings.

A third major strand in Wang's recent work is evident in *Infiltrating • Propagating II*, created between 2006-2008. Here Wang is concerned with the relationship between contemporary life and the human body, particularly as the conditions of that life may create an adverse environment for the body. When a family member recently suffered a stroke, and others close to her were diagnosed with breast cancer, Wang sought to

understand and visualize these disruptions in the body. Thus the concepts of infiltration and propagation, considered earlier in the macro-context of cultural transmission, are now examined in the micro-context of pathology. Wang's research created a sense of ambivalence; she notes that images of tumors and cancers possess a strange beauty, but that such beauty is ultimately suspect. That ambivalence is carried over to *Infiltrating • Propagating II*, which uses some of the same materials as the first with that title. Here nine elements, each comprised of two separated layers of material, are arranged in a grid. The Plexiglas above, again worked with auto filler and color transfers, is reflected on a mirrored surface below. The color transfers here are CT scans of various forms of cancer, blooming in colored patches reminiscent of the efflorescence in a Petri dish. This work, like the earlier drawings that used images of the fetus as well as the recent video project *Expiring, Seeking Transforming*, makes more evident the emergent corporeal and gendered dimensions of Wang's vision.