



Wu Jian'an: "Omens" at Beijing Minsheng Art Museum – artist profile

"Omens", an installation of paper-cuts and "mythical beasts" by Wu Jian-an, is on at Beijing Minsheng Art Museum.

"Omens: Recent Works by Wu Jian'an" is the first comprehensive solo museum exhibition of paper-cut artist Wu Jian'an's work, open from 4 November to 11 December 2016.



Wu jian'an, "Omens", 2016. Installation view of "Omens" at Beijing Minsheng Art Museum. Image courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

Traditional techniques applied to explore contemporary social phenomena

Paper cutting is a traditional technique associated with shadow puppetry and small scale delicate and often decorative works of earlier centuries, yet Wu Jian'an (b. 1980, Beijing) has been using the medium to negotiate a series of questions about the human body and virus, society and the media, and common existential experiences of fear, boredom and anxiety. In his first exhibition of paper cuts at **Chambers Fine Art Gallery** in 2006 entitled "**Daydreams**", Wu Jian'an took the opportunity to respond to the SARS crisis and the curious intersection of global health, the media, the body, as well as the policing of the social body in urban centres that the disease brought to the fore in the mid-2000s.

Since then, the artist has been using his chosen technique, paper cutting, in increasingly complex and multi-layered compositions and installations. Simultaneously, the repertoire of references in his works has also grown enormously over the last ten years, revealing the intensification of the artist's research practice that embraces data and histories from a multitude of fields, from the mythological, biological or esoteric, to the industrial and pharmaceutical.

Pushing the paper-cut to the limit

In recent work the medium of paper cutting has been pushed to the point that the traditional technique is hardly recognisable. The artist has sliced into ox hide, brass and stainless steel, used paper-cut techniques on a large scale to make huge shadow puppets and layered multiple cuttings. Wu Jian'Ju has pushed the medium to such an extent that the incisions are no longer visible, molding together to form what appears to be a thick oil painting.



Wu, Jian'Ju, *The Head of Chiyou*, 2008, carved ox-hide, ox-hide glue, pigments, mounted on LED light box, 54 7/8 x 50 7/8 x 5 1/8 in. Image courtesy Chamber Fine Arts.

His paper-cuts thus become sculptural in dimension: for example, *Fuxi, Gazing at the Moon* (2011) and *Fused in Desire* (2011) – two pieces inspired by the Chinese legends of creator-beings Fuxi and Nuwa, the moon goddess Chang E, and her beloved Houyi the Archer – are made up of more than 2200 writhing, lace-like figures, piled in thick layers creating the effect of weight and three-dimensionality. The masses of coloured layers look like feathers, perhaps an allusion to the figure of the phoenix, important in the religious tradition of Daoism, whose followers are still referred to as *yuren* or “feathered men”. These feral landscapes overrun with divinities and human figures darting, fighting and flying, also invoke associations with the laboratory: viruses battling with antibodies; bacteria swimming in body fluids; cells that contain, in genetic form, the ghosts or codes of ancestral knowledges.



Wu Jian'an, 'Ten Thousand Things', 2016. Exhibition view of "Ten Thousand Things New Works by Wu Jian'an". Image courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

Later works, such as the large-scale triptych *Ten Thousand Things* (2016) also consisted of thousands of small figures cut from paper dipped in wax. The tension produced between the scale and detail of the individual figure and the mass of the figures together seems to be at the core of Wu's practice, which questions the relationship between "the individual and society".



Wu Jian'an, 'Ten Thousand Things', 2016. Detail in exhibition view of "Ten Thousand Things New Works by Wu Jian'an". Image courtesy Chambers Fine Art.



Wu Jian'an and the work "Seven Layers of Shell", 2015. Image from CAFA ART INFO.

"Omens"

In Wu Jian'an's current exhibition "**Omens**", the Beijing Minsheng Art Museum presents many paper cut works accompanied by a series of sculptures of "mythical beasts". The curator **Wu Hung** commented in a statement:

Wu Jian'an's imagination has always operated simultaneously in multiple dimensions. Likewise, his works simultaneously expand the viewer's artistic imagination in various directions. He travels between words and images while adding a layer of storytelling above figuration and abstraction. He introduces sound and performance to break away from mere visuals and viewing. He freely traverses temporal divides, instantaneously taking viewers from today's world back to mysterious primeval times. His art spans various media and styles: painting, sculpture, paper cut, and installation, all of which provide him with a varied vocabulary yet also arouse his desire to cross boundaries – to integrate, transgress and disarrange.



Wu jian'an, 'Mountain Range', 2016. Installation view of "Omens", Beijing Minsheng Art Museum. Image courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

In describing the overall theme of the exhibition, Wu Hung stated in the same press release:

Omens are mythical. They are occurrences of strange phenomena that portend major events, either natural disaster or dynastic change, or even the end of humankind and the earth. The concept and logic of omens transcend cultural and geographical spheres; their language is that of ancient scientific theory and political philosophy. In all such cases, omens involve the imagination of the unknown and the future. From this perspective, it is worth considering the relationship between omens and art, especially contemporary art, because art is always related to imagination, and true contemporary art always aims to create a trajectory to the unknown and the future.



Wu jian'an, "Omens", Beijing Minsheng Art Museum, 2016. Installation view, Beijing Minsheng Art Museum. Image courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

Mythical figures

The exhibition is organised into four themes, each rooted in a different ancient Chinese legend. The first is centred around the headless giant Xingtian, who fought against the "Supreme Divinity", a grotesque animal famous and feared for the strange sounds it makes. The second focus of the exhibition is related to the catastrophic ending of the boy assassin Mei Jianchi, and the Money Trees of the Han dynasty that have inspired Wu Jian'an's work *Daydream Forest* (2016).



Wu jian'an, "Omens", 2016. Installation view of "Omens" at Beijing Minsheng Art Museum. Image courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

The exhibition explores how much of our current modes of relating are defined by biological information coded in our genes and alternatively how much is down to the transmission of cultural information embedded in mythical stories. As the title suggests, "Omens" also explores the fears and anxieties reflected in certain narratives of invasion and beasts.



Wu jian'an, "Omens", Beijing Minsheng Art Museum, 2016. Installation view, Beijing Minsheng Art Museum. Image courtesy Chambers Fine Art.

With "Omens" the curator Wu Hung reinforces previous readings of the artist's practice as one in which scale, material and technique are important in as far as they establish and help to frame the themes that Wu Jian'an explores at the level of content: cell and world, body and city, mythical narrative and history, DNA and story-telling.