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Time and Love¹: Cai Jin's New Works

Cai Jin is a leading feminist artist whose work relates to women's biological and physiological experiences as well as their mental vulnerabilities. Her paintings have evoked passionate responses from exhibition reviewers and catalogue essayists with animated descriptions of the single iconographical subject that has dominated her compositions for over twenty years—the leaves of a dead banana plant. Cai Jin's engagement with this subject began with an epiphany she experienced in her hometown, Tun Xi in Anhui province, China from which she drew the inspiration for a series that has evolved into hundreds of works. She was enthralled by the scene of a dead banana plant.

The huge leaves enclosed the pod of the banana plant, with flesh as red as blood. The original green of the plant was long faded. The shape and colour of this withered tree completely transfixed me: it was a strange and inexpressible sensation; and somehow it seemed that inside its trunk and its leaves the tree was still breathing. After a few days I was still completely enveloped in the atmosphere of that plant. One day I took a 100 x 100 cm canvas and began to paint. As my brush moved automatically across the canvas, I experienced a great feeling of pleasure, as though I were painting something that was already familiar to me. The viscous plant was like sperm spreading and wriggling all over the canvas.²

At this time, Cai Jin took two rolls of photographs of the banana plant that subsequently served as the inspiration for over two hundred paintings. These works of art are distinctive for their consistency in presenting the motif of a dying plant, which she usually depicts close up, as well as for her use of a brilliant red palette, an expressive application of paint, and the employment of media other than canvas. The banana plant is often referred to in her titles as “beautiful woman banana plant,” or canna plant (*meirenjiao*). In either case, it is the dry stalks and leaves that occupied most of her large-scale canvases, but, as she revealed in her statement, they are not quite dead.

From the beginning of her painting career, in 1992, Cai Jin has used red as the primary colour of her canvases, and in the oversized ones its impact is nearly overwhelming. Usually used sparingly, especially in Asia, red is an explosive colour that elicits numerous layers of meaning. Most obviously, it's the colour of blood. Many people have perceived splashes of blood in



Cai Jin, *Banana No. 19*, 1993,
oil on canvas, 120 x 110 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Cai Jin's paintings, among them Francesca Dal Lago, who states, "They remind one of a wound that does not heal or hint to . . . a recently consumed act of violence . . . or a descent into the deep realms of the soul."³ Another reviewer warned, "This is not a show for the faint of heart, though. For those to whom the sight of flesh and blood is best kept away in aseptic chambers overseen by anonymous figures clad in plastic garments, this might be a difficult visual experience."⁴

Cai Jin explains: "The colour red drives me crazy. In its colour field my paintbrush becomes especially sensitive. The paint brush gets driven by inner need and it totally controls my sensations."⁵ Early on, the sexual nature of Cai Jin's manner of treatment and subject were heralded. Li Xianting found, "This is a psychology that goes beyond sex, or perhaps it is a feeling related to sex: affection and hatred, passion and self-abuse, expressing the strong conflict between the expansiveness of life and the repression of self."⁶

In China, the meaning of red is embedded in ancient pictographs; it is the suggestion of danger and, by extension, social entanglements—whether conjugal or political. For this reason, perhaps, the pillars on government buildings are traditionally painted red. In the China of Cai Jin's youth, red was omnipresent; it was the colour of the flag, the red army, the little red book, and then, as now, the colour of large public slogans painted on walls and boards. Wu Hung cites the writer Chen Lei on the meaning of red for those who grew up during the Cultural Revolution: "It is the colour of authority and subjectivity: it transcends the things that bear it and evokes intuitive responses in us."⁷ Wu Hung concludes that red represented the Communist future, and although the era of the Cultural Revolution and its propagandist use of red had ended, this colour still has a strong hold on that generation. In contrast, it is also a primary colour that denotes good luck, and adorns New Year's posters, gift envelopes, marriage decorations, and more. As Cai Jin has explained, it is a colour with which she has been familiar since her childhood, aside from the Cultural Revolution, as her father was the leader of an opera troupe whose costumes were often fashioned from bright red fabrics.⁸ It is possible that all of these meanings—sex, violence, social entanglement, and joy—inform her paintings.

But red, despite its many symbolic associations within Chinese culture, may be also understood in purely aesthetic terms; that is, as a meditation on red akin to the colour field painting practiced in New York during the 1960s and afterward. Mark Rothko's large rectangles of red come to mind, especially those that were on display at the Tate Modern in London.⁹

In addition to monochrome compositions with red backgrounds, Cai Jin has occasionally incorporated various other hues—blue or green or ochre—that contrast with the warm red tones. She renders the strands of the dying leaves with a multicolour palette and applies the paint as dots, dashes, and squiggles, thus the oil paint, combined with the irregular highlighting of the surface of the leaves that twist and turn in space, imparts a glossy,



almost viscous quality. Cai Jin's technique of using pigment in this way also links her to the Abstract Expressionists; she explores the textural possibilities of the buildup of oil paint to create incrustations and passages of impasto. Moreover, the rich modeling of the forms and the thick swaths of paint give the impression of decaying organic matter, a tactile quality that contributes to the overall sensuality of the paintings.

Cai Jin, installation view
at Bronx Museum, 1997.
Courtesy of the artist and
Chambers Fine Art.

The third distinctive element of Cai Jin's works, in addition to the theme of bananas and the use of red, is the way she used different media. Inspired perhaps by the Surrealists, Cai Jin began experimenting with applying her paint to a number of unusual surfaces. In 1995, she painted the banana motif on bicycle seats, bed mattresses, chairs, bathtubs, and high-heeled silk shoes. The choice of these various mediums introduced another form of narrative that went beyond the colour red. For example, when Cai Jin applies the design to silk high-heel pumps that are then hung as a mobile or arranged on the floor, the composition elicits tales of sexual violence, of a party turned nightmarish—the leaf pattern now resembling blood stains.¹⁰ When she executes it on a large-sized mattress, there are again red stains that could suggest a narrative of a miscarriage or a sexual encounter gone wrong, perhaps of murderous intent. A painted bathtub conjures the same type of scenario, but this object also hints of self-mutilation. Such imagery contrasts with the meaning inherent in the materials—the party



Cai Jin, *Banana No. 284*, 2007,
oil paint on bathtub, 70 x 60 x
284 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

shoes imply festivities, the bed restfulness, and the bathtub cleansing and soothing, but, treated in this fashion, they become vehicles of agitation and distress. Moreover, the expressive manner of applying the paint—splashed, dripped, and layered dots—also calls to mind the image of blood and gore, spilt in such a way that it oozes over and covers surfaces. The materials—mattress, bathtub, etc.—are witness to violence acted upon an unseen person, and because of the associations of these domestic objects and the red palette, the works seem to refer to women. On the other hand, one



Cai Jin, *Shoe Mobile*, 2008,
oil paint on silk shoes.
Courtesy of the artist.

might also be tempted to imagine in these works the murderous hand of a woman acting out of rage.

Cai Jin's choice of subject—a dead banana plant—is distinct, but flowers in China traditionally were associated with feminine beauty, and Chinese women artists, few though they historically may have been, almost always specialized in the subject, from Ma Shouzhen (1548–1604)¹¹ to Ma Quan of the eighteenth century.¹² Although Cai Jin's focus on the banana plant may be considered within this traditional context, showing dead flowers was taboo, thus dead flowers were an inauspicious subject in China. Yet Cai Jin's desiccated plants convey the fleeting and passing period of youthful female beauty in particular and of nature in general. However, at the same time, Cai Jin's dry leaves are reinvigorated with red and intimate that their decomposition gives birth to new forms of organic growth and affirms the cycle of life. Women who paint flowers are also common in the West, the most germane example here being the work of American artist Georgia O'Keeffe, whose large-scale close up renderings of flowers serve as a symbol of the self, both physical and psychological.¹³ Cai Jin's efforts share more with O'Keeffe's self-exploratory art than with the work of her Chinese predecessors.

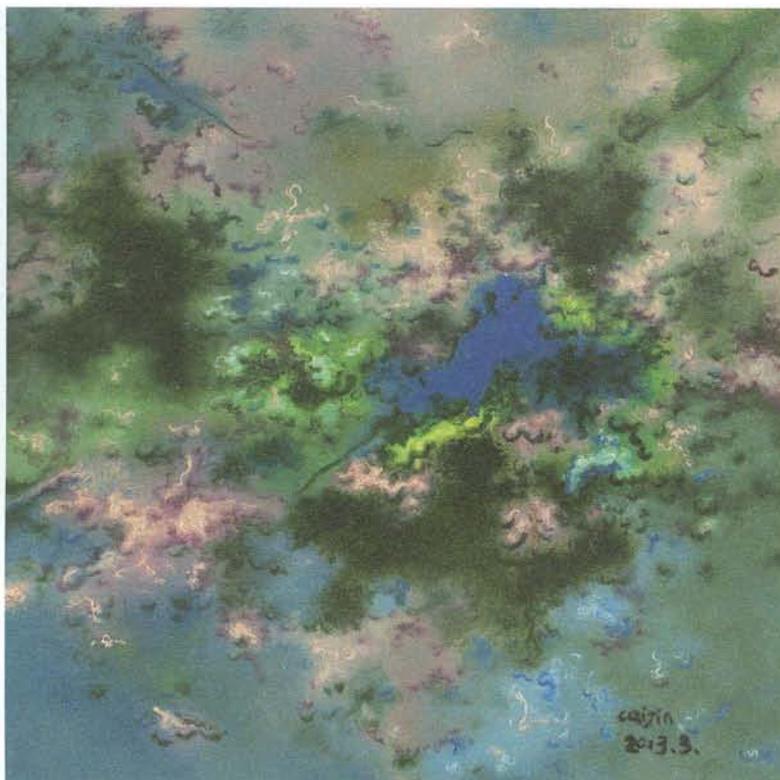
What is rarely mentioned in the critical writings on Cai Jin is her expert draughtsmanship: she minutely observes and skillfully draws the leaves, effectively applying highlighting and shading to create the illusion of three-dimensional forms. The way they twist, turn, and overlap in a shallow space has a calligraphic quality. In addition, in Chinese fashion, the staccato rhythms of the brush, elongated delicate contours of the outline, and downward angles of the bent leaves convey strong, lyrical emotions. These skills are the product of Cai Jin's training in the fine arts, which began in her childhood. She started to draw as an elementary school student, at first copying illustrations in children's periodicals such as *Young Red Soldier*. In 1982, after high school, she wanted to pursue a career in art, and she entered the Fine Art Department of Anhui University. Having graduated from there in 1986, she began teaching at the Fourth Engineering Middle School of the Hefei Railway Department. In 1989 she entered the Fifth Advanced Studies class, in the Oil Painting Department of the Central Art Academy of Art in Beijing, graduating in 1991. Two years later she was employed at the Teachers' College in Tianjin. This is when the *Banana Plant* series began.¹⁴ In 1997, Cai Jin travelled to the United States, visiting Seattle, Chicago, San Francisco, and then she settled in New York, where, in 1999, she gave birth to a daughter. For two years she stopped working.¹⁵ In 2007 she returned to China, where she now lives and works.

A visit to her studio during the summer of 2013 revealed that Cai Jin still persists in rendering her beloved banana leaves, but increasingly she is experimenting with a more muted colour scheme than her signature red. The four canvases assembled to make a single composition in *Meirjenjiao Nos. 329, 330, 332, 334*, completed in 2012, have a light cocoa coloured background of unpainted canvas that appears luminous against the black, white, and grey tones. But there is a richer contrast in the modeling of the



Cai Jin, *Meirjenjiao Nos. 329, 330, 332, 334*, 2012, oil on canvas, 380 x 400 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Cai Jin, *Landscape No. 42*, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.

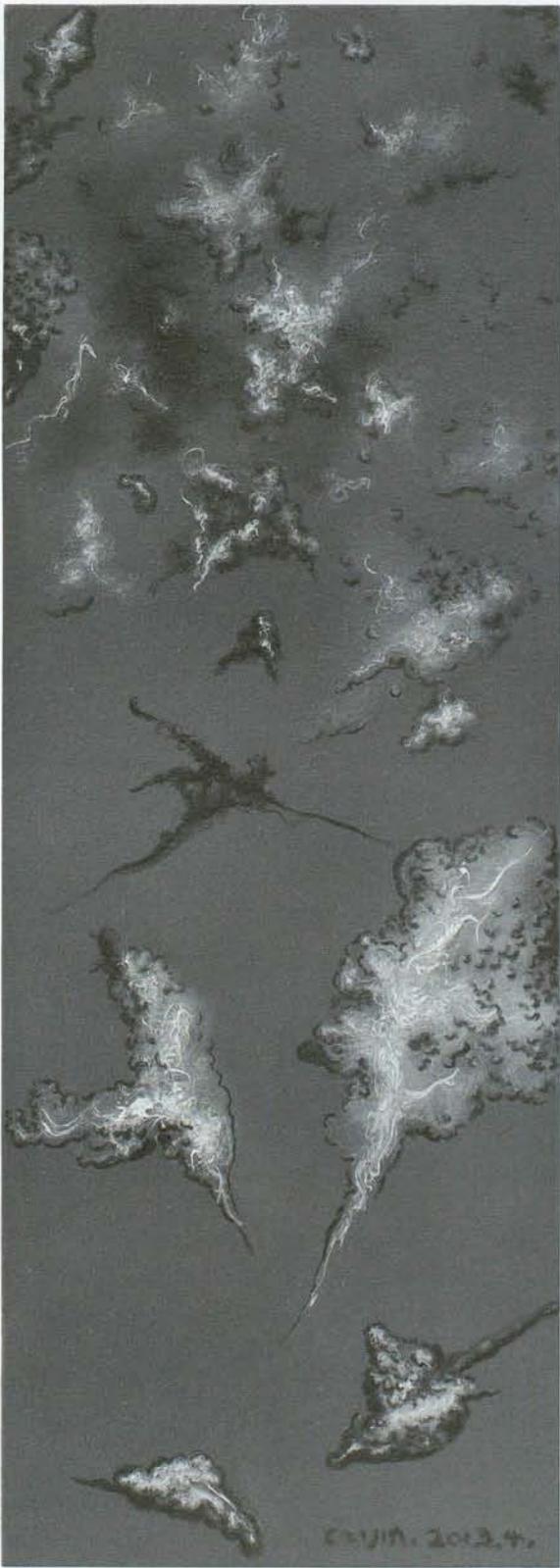


Cai Jin, Installation view at Chambers Fine Art. Left: *Landscape No. 45*, 2013, oil on canvas, triptych, 300 x 150 cm each. Right: *Landscape No. 37*, 2013, oil on canvas, triptych, 300 x 150 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.



highly detailed stalks and leaves, now illuminated by a strong light coming from above that creates dark shadows and brilliant highlights. The muted grey shades, despite the large size of the canvases, impart the intimacy of a drawing.

The strokes are freely applied and at times aggregate to create the forms without reliance on the drawing of outlines. A new calmness is evident in her work through the return to focusing on canvas as a medium rather than using other domestic objects as in her earlier work, the restriction of colour, and a more tempered application of paint. Other examples of her new work, a series of canvases titled *Landscapes*, were recently exhibited at Chambers Fine Art in Beijing.¹⁶ Compared to *Meirenjiao*, these depictions differ in palette, technique, and theme. Covering the oil and canvas paintings are a number of irregular organic shaped motifs rendered as areas of pigment against a neutral ground. The dynamic of the composition is no longer centripetal, as in the banana paintings, but centrifugal: the forms seem to randomly adhere to the canvas in collusion with some magnetic force.





Cai Jin, *Landscape Nos. 51, 48, 49, 50*, 2013, oil on canvas, 70 x 25 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.



Cai Jin, *Landscape No. 54*, 2012, oil on canvas, diptych, 200 x 250 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art



Cai Jin, installation view at Chambers Fine Art, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art.

Freed from the confines of contours, the accumulation of brush strokes resemble cellular matter with large and small masses of variously sized and multicoloured dots creating seemingly random patterns that convey a sense of tranquility—at times the paintings look like a cloud filled sky. The more abstract nature of these canvases displays a new confidence in Cai Jin's painting process and a new freedom from the pressure to create a representational likeness.

The paintings in this exhibition vary in size and shape. Some are large-scale rectangles, others are two or four large canvases combined; a few are oval-shaped with one a series being four narrow rectangles. A single chromatic theme with incidental dots of colour dominates the canvases. For example, *Landscape 42* has various tones of blue with sparingly applied passages of yellow and minute but potent additions of magenta. Other canvases have bright pastel hues that recall floral bouquets in the way the dots of pigment aggregate into clusters of colour.

At the other end of the scale are monochromatic compositions. Layers of irregular shapes rendered in grey paint cover the surface of the untreated beige canvas, which makes the background appear like a source of diffused light. Similarly, on a canvas with a grey-toned ground, the abstract forms, modeled in white or grey with black accents, are more readily evident—they float in an undefined space. These organic forms resemble some sort of matter that might be seen through a microscope or stellar bodies that fill a night sky. As in her earlier work, Cai Jin still uses large areas of a single shade, much like a colour field artist would, and applies the paint in an

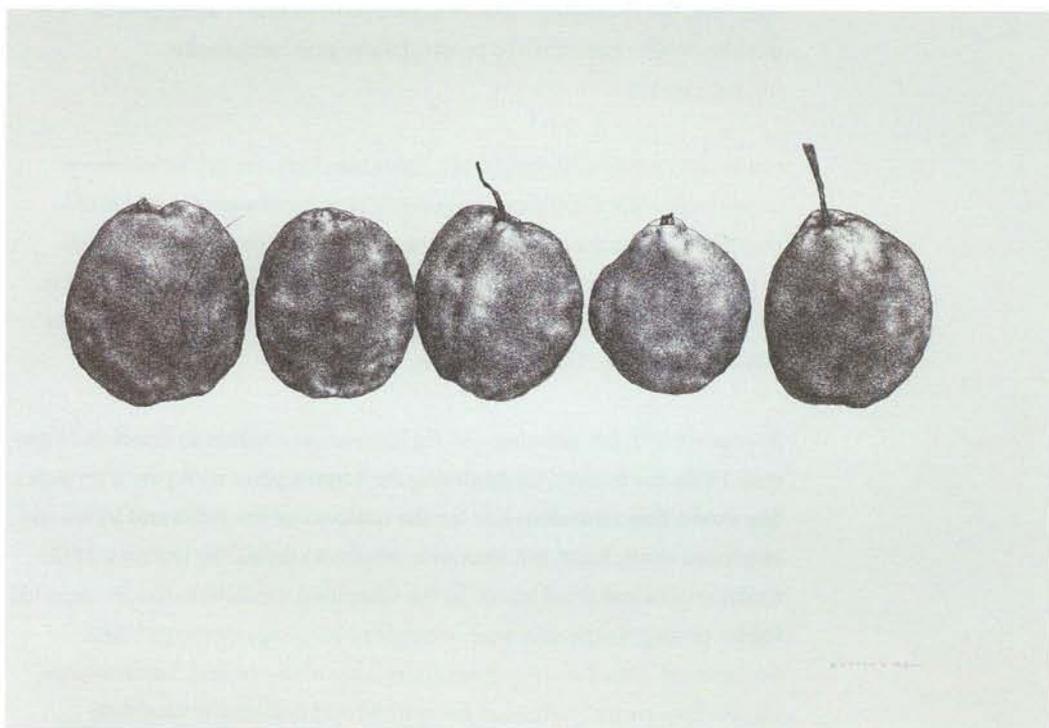
expressive way, but gone are the twisting and turnings of the earlier banana leaves, the heavy impasto, and the three-dimensional build-up of forms. In some works, Cai Jin continues to offer a narrative, but a more generalized and abstract one that is suggested by the placement, size, and distribution of colour on the surface, as exemplified in the four-part vertical set of canvases titled *Landscape No. 51* (2013). Against the grey ground, light-hued forms in the first panel, suggesting animal or human shapes, descend among clouds and seem to be moving to the right. In the second panel the forms, now growing larger and darker, seem somewhat more stable as they settle in the lower part of the composition. Luminous light grey shapes fill most of the third panel, with diffuse accents of aqua, and in the last panel one witnesses a rising miasma of blue in the lower area and grey figures that drift to the top. Perhaps this is a portrayal of a confrontation between opposing forces that is peacefully resolved, like oil and water, or an oblique reference to a Daoist creation myth such as one in the fourth-century-BC Daoist scripture, the *Daodejing*: “The Way gave birth to unity; unity gave birth to duality; duality gave birth to trinity; trinity gave birth to the myriad creatures.”¹⁷

Cai Jin still paints with red. In the Chambers Fine Art exhibition there is one large-scale double canvas composition, *Landscape No. 54* (2012), that has red shapes on a pink background relieved by passages of small brushstrokes using various colours, among them accents of teal. There is a lyrical quality to this painting that frees her use of red from the violent associations present in earlier work.

In concert with her painting, Cai Jin has been continuously drawing. In the mid-1990s she focused on rendering the banana plant with pencil on paper. She used a thin tremulous line for the contours of the stalks and leaves and employed short, fuzzy, but muscular, strokes to define the interiors of the broken stalks and dried leaves. In the Chambers exhibition, Cai Jin depicted fruit—pomegranates and pears—singly or in groups against a blank background. Based on her close observation of the subject, her drawings, like the banana leaf series, are naturalistic and realistically modeled; the fruits rub up against one another, bounce in space, or settle on an invisible ground. They are beautifully drawn with special attention paid to the minute variations of the contours of the fruit, the subtle changes in the bumps and depressions of its surface, and imperfections in the skin. One can see they are ripe, a traditional representation of fecundity and the cycle of nature. When I look at her drawing of five fruits lined up in single file across the paper, I can’t help but remember the mystical Zen painting *Five Persimmons*, from the thirteenth century, by Mu Qi of the southern Song dynasty, accomplished with a seemingly simple execution of broad washes of various tones of ink.¹⁸ In contrast, one can see that Cai Jin’s spirit is not entirely at ease, and the churning of her ballpoint strokes are restive and nearly manic.

In conclusion, viewing the paintings in the current exhibition in the context of Cai Jin’s art over the last few decades, one can see continuity of style as

well as change. Using the banana plant as the focus of her early works, she invested it with a number of narrative scenarios. In the new compositions, instead of confining energetic polychrome organic shapes within the contours of the deteriorating leaves, she applies small passages of varied colour all across the canvas. In these, Cai Jin seems relieved of her earlier angst, as if she has found a degree of peace at midlife, both with her hard won success as an artist and her return to China, where she is surrounded by her mother and her teenage daughter with whom she shares a love of art. In retrospect, the banana leaf works seem to represent the creative energies of a young artist finding her way into the international arena, absorbing the styles of art practices in the West and the passions of a young, single woman living far from home. The struggle between the contours of the forms and the interior strokes has come to an end, and a serene floating vision now greets the viewer.



Cai Jin, *Pear No. 5*, 2012,
ballpoint pen on paper, 54 x
78 cm. Courtesy of the artist
and Chambers Fine Art.

Notes

- ¹ Laura Nyro, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2solL_0ICE/.
- ² Li Xianting, "The Image of Obsession: Caijin's 'Banana Plant Series'," trans. Valerie C. Doran, in *Cai Jin* (Beijing: Peoples Fine Arts Publishing House, 1995), 6.
- ³ Francesca Da Lago, "Embroidered with Paint," in *Cai Jin* (Beijing: Courtyard Gallery, 1999), 6.
- ⁴ Stephanie Tasch Zehdenicker, "Cai Jin at Asian Fine Arts Berlin, October 15–November 13, 1999," Chineseart.com, <http://www.chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2i,sue6/Caijin.htm/>.
- ⁵ Kang Hong, "Unveiling Her Self," *Critical Essays About Artist*, May 2004. http://caijin.artron.net/main.php?pFlag=news_2&newid=43088&aid=A0006804&columnid=3/.
- ⁶ Li Xianting, "The Image of Obsession," 6.
- ⁷ Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 63.
- ⁸ Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, "Beijingnuren: Five Women Artists from Beijing, Five Different Styles," *Journal of Women's Art* 23, no. 2 (2003), 28–33.
- ⁹ Jonathan Jones, "The Tate's Mark Rothko Exhibit: A Room With a View of the Subconscious," *Jonathan Jones on Art Blog*, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2011/mar/30/tate-modern-mark-rothko-room/>. See also markrothko.com, <http://www.rothko.com/art.shtml>.
- ¹⁰ Patricia Karetzky, *Femininity in Contemporary Asian Art . . . If the Shoe Fits and Vernal Visions 2002–2003*, Lehman College Art Gallery, The City University of New York (CUNY).
- ¹¹ Attributed to Ma Shouzhen (Chinese, 1548–1604), *Orchid and Rock* (1572), accession number 1982.1.7, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <http://www.metmuseum.org/search-results?ft=Ma+Shouzhen+%281548-1604%29&x=6&y=2/>.
- ¹² Shu Jianhua, *Ma Quan: Paintings of Flowers*, Chinese ed.) (Hangzhou: Hangzhou China Academy of Art Press, 2012).
- ¹³ "Natural and Still Life Forms," Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico, <http://www.okeeffemuseum.org/natural-and-still-life-forms.html/>.
- ¹⁴ For biographical material see Kang Hong, "Unveiling Her Self," *Critical Essays About Artist*, 2004 http://caijin.artron.net/main.php?pFlag=news_2&newid=43088&aid=A0006804&columnid=3/.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Return to the Source: Cai Jin, May 25–July 7, 2013, Chambers Fine Art, Beijing, http://chambersfineart.com/artists/Cai%20Jin/CJ_Landscape_42.shtml/.
- ¹⁷ Victor H. Mair, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*, by Lao Tzu (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 9.
- ¹⁸ Richard Barnhart, "Thinking about Muqi," December 23, 1985, keynote in "Dynastic Renaissance: Art and Culture of the Southern Song" held at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, www.npm.gov.tw/hotnews/9910seminar/download/all/A02.pdf/.