

LETTER ARTS REVIEW 27:1 · Cui Fei interprets the natural world · Larry Thomas explores the power of a Buddhist mantra  
Lawrence Wheeler goes to a conference and reflects on the nature of calligraphy today

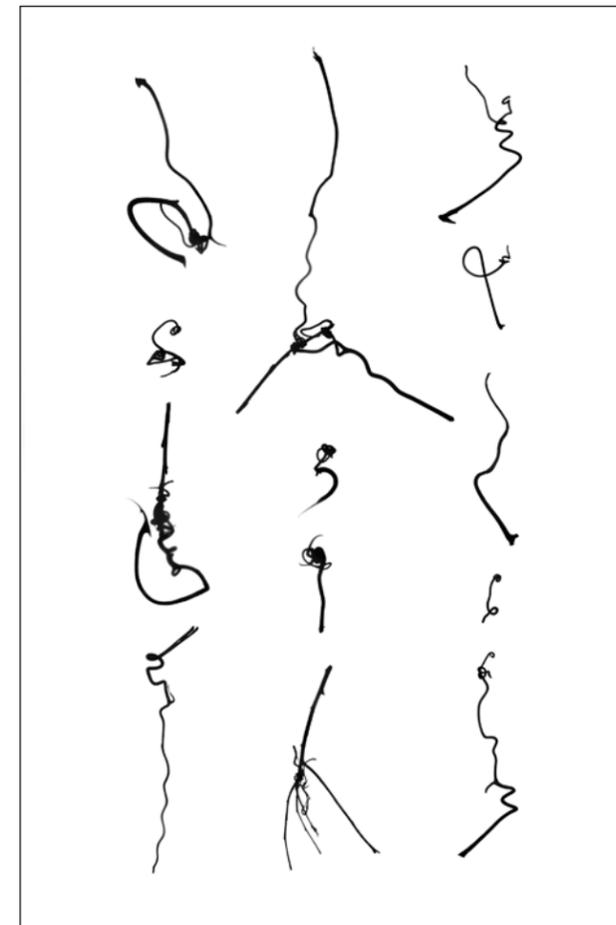


QUOTATION FROM HORACE · Georgina Artigas

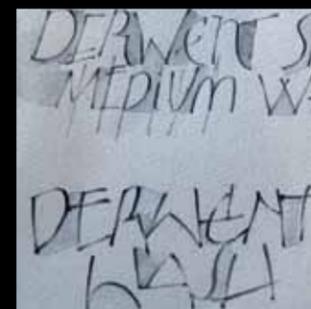
## Letter Arts Review

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Left:  
Cui Fei  
Tracing the Origin IX\_I\_i  
Gelatin silver print photogram.  
24 x 16 inches.  
2012.



# CUI FEI



By Christopher Calderhead · At the end of last summer I went to Socrates Sculpture Park, an experimental outdoor art venue in New York that overlooks the East River. The work at Socrates is incredibly varied. That's the nature of a place that highlights new talent and gives artists room to explore fresh ideas.

On the day I visited, a team of artists was trying—in vain—to inflate a full-scale hot air balloon using a giant industrial fan. I wandered across the park and came across a huge statue of the Virgin Mary made of birdseed. A crowd of sparrows was showing its appreciation by slowly dismantling the sculpture, seed by seed. And then I spotted something stunning: an angled stone plinth that supported rows of three-dimensional bronze figures. I walked over to have a look.

As I drew closer, I could see that the bronze figures were arranged on the surface of their support in a way that suggested a Chinese manuscript. The figures themselves could have been Chinese cursive, but they also looked like stout tendrils of vine. They were not flat; they curled in space. As I examined the piece, I kept wondering: Is this writing?

Looking at the metal display label near the sculpture, I saw it was entitled *Tracing the Origin XVII*, and it was made by an artist named Cui Fei. Interesting. But my question remained unanswered.

The bronze vine tendrils certainly looked like writing. The way the forms created loops echoed the movement of the brush, while the directions of the “strokes” seemed to mimic many of the

structural properties of Chinese cursive. Even the variations of large and small characters reminded me of scrolls I had seen. If I could read Chinese, would I see that the artist had carefully selected vine tendrils that had the shape of actual characters? Or would I see that this was a purely abstract composition that made a visual riff on the structure of a Chinese manuscript?

I went home and looked up Cui Fei online and discovered that she lives and works in New York City. So I contacted her and she agreed to let me come to her studio and do an interview.

On a warm day in August I took the subway to Times Square and walked several blocks west, to the edge of the old Garment District. Cui Fei's studio is in a large building just down the street from the New York Times building and a block from the Port Authority Bus Terminal. It's a busy part of midtown, retaining just a bit of the gritty urban quality that is rapidly disappearing from the city. The building is one of those tall structures from the early twentieth century that were once filled with light industry. Now, more and more, they are filled with creative industry offices and work spaces.

I went up the elevator and found myself on an upper floor. I walked around a corner and found her door. I knocked.

Cui opened the door and ushered me into her small studio. Her appearance and demeanor matched her work: slim and precise. She smiled and asked if I would like a cup of Chinese green tea.

Her studio was not very large. It occupied a single, open room with a tall ceiling. The walls



Detail from  
*Tracing the Origin  
VI\_III*  
Archival pigment print.  
76 x 35 inches.  
2008.

Opposite:  
Details from  
*Not Yet Titled  
Thorns and twine.*  
Dimensions variable.  
2009.



were painted white. Although there were no windows—the studio is in the middle of the building—the room was brightly lit and clean. Boxes and files were neatly stacked around the perimeters of the room.

The walls were covered with small selections of existing pieces and works in progress. Her tidily-stacked boxes contained her raw material: vine tendrils, thorns, and twisted copper wire. As I drank my tea, we chatted about her work. Her tea went cold as she kept pulling out things to show me.

I asked her whether her work could be read—was the text legible? No, she answered. The tendrils evoked writing, but they had no lexigraphic significance. But then she put my question back to me: what do we mean when we say we are “reading” something? We read the look on someone’s face, or the structure of clouds in the sky. There is more to our reading than just deciphering the conventional signs that make up human writing.

The titles Cui chooses echo this double meaning. She uses a small number of actual

titles, grouping her work by certain themes that she explores in different media. Her titles suggest the act of reading or writing: *Tracing the Origin*, *Manuscript of Nature*, *Manuscript from Chinese History*, and *Read by Touch*. She differentiates individual pieces by giving them Roman numeral designations, carefully cataloging the various iterations of each concept. Indeed, the precision of her titles suggests the detailed archiving of evidence gathered from the natural world.

The piece I had seen at Socrates Park, *Tracing the Origin XVII*, was made at the Excalibur Foundry in Brooklyn. The characters were based directly on vine tendrils, but were executed by the artist in wax. “A friend suggested I cast directly from my fronds,” the artist said. “But that wouldn’t work: they would burn.” As a result, she modeled the tendrils using long strands of wax. The workers at the foundry showed her how to vary the weight of her forms by dipping thin lengths in melted wax to gradually build them up to the thickness she wanted. The process was not easy, but she gradually mastered it. The final wax



*Tracing the Origin XVII*  
Bronze castings (unique).  
96 x 72 x 28 inches.  
2012.  
Commissioned by  
Socrates Sculpture Park,  
New York City.

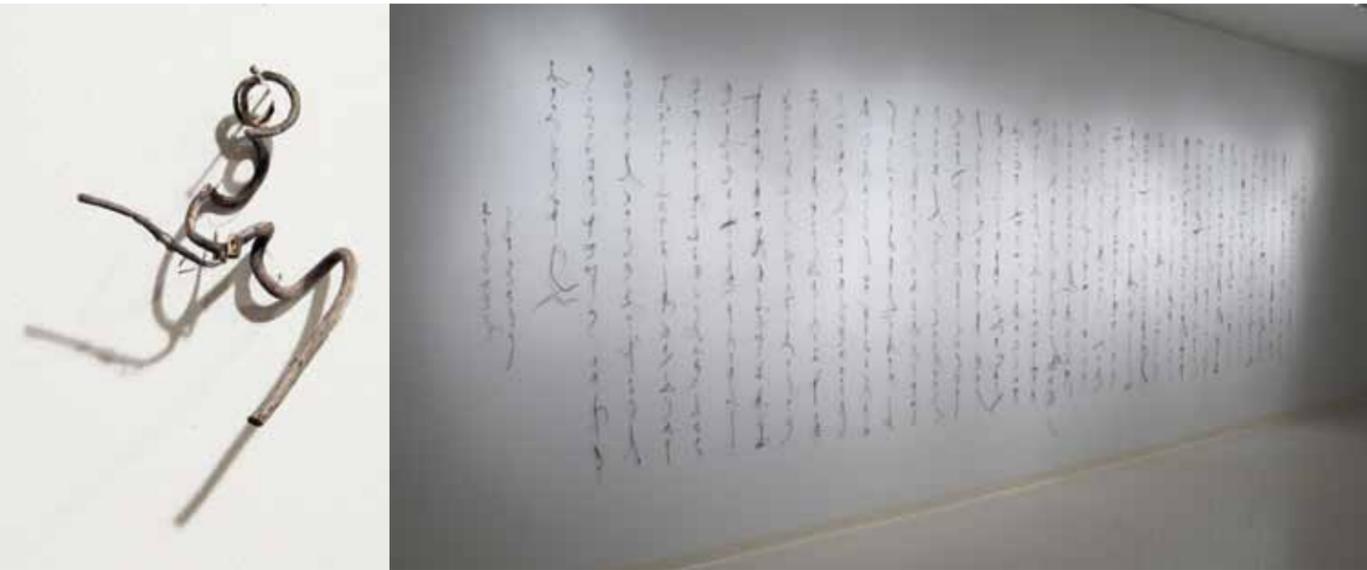


*Lengths of red wax of varying widths in Cui Fei’s studio.*



Manuscript of Nature V  
Installation: tendrils attached to wall.  
Dimensions variable.  
2002-present.  
This view shows the piece installed at the  
New Britain Museum of American Art in 2007.

Manuscript of Nature V  
Installation: tendrils attached to wall.  
Dimensions variable.  
2002-present.  
This view shows the piece installed at the  
New Britain Museum of American Art in 2007.



Manuscript of Nature V  
Installation: tendrils attached to wall.  
Dimensions variable.  
2002-present.

At each exhibition venue the piece is reconfigured to match the space, expanding or contracting to fill a wall. The detail at left shows how each tendril hangs delicately from a pin.

Opposite:  
Cui Fei's New York  
studio.

figures were then cast individually and attached to their stone support.

Tracing the Origin XVII is the latest of many manifestations of Cui's work with natural forms and materials. Born in Jinan, China, she was trained at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (it is now called the China National Academy of Fine Arts). She received a BFA in painting. For three years, she taught as an assistant professor at the Shandong Academy of Fine Arts. In 1996, she moved to the United States, and two years later she entered the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she continued her painting studies. She received her MFA in 2001.

The early paintings she executed in China were representational and were rendered in a very precise, highly detailed style. She gravitated to a restrained palette of off-whites, ochres, and umbers, anticipating, perhaps, the nearly monochrome palette that characterizes her current work.

Several paintings from 1999 reflect a new turn in her work. In Manuscript From Chinese History I, she used several irregular panels to create a painting that suggests the archaeological heritage of China. Like fragments of a long-

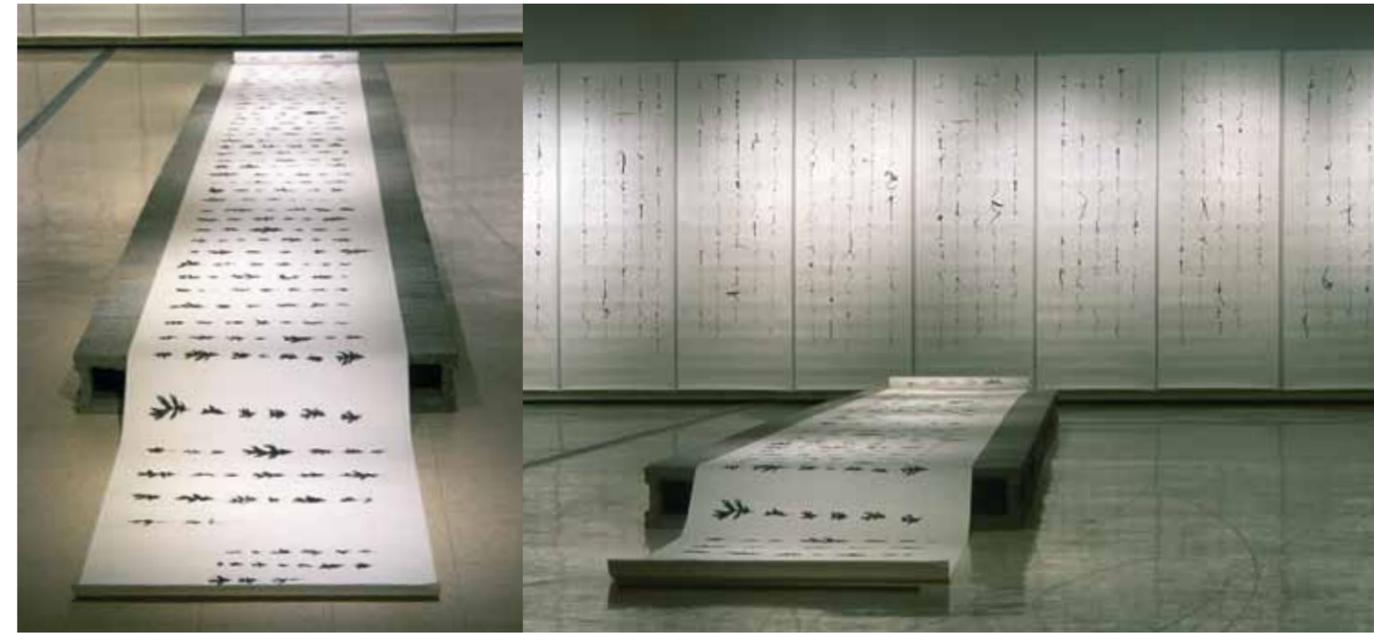
buried wall painting, the panels have varied, distressed surfaces. Patterns evoking writing are made with sharp-lobed leaves arranged in columns. Decorative abstract bands divide the fragments into strips. In her painting Manuscript of Nature I, Cui pushes this further: the all-black painting, rectangular in shape, seems to have been reconstructed from broken fragments. Leaves are once again used to evoke writing, this time unaccompanied by decorative elements. The effect is starkly beautiful.

These two paintings are indicative of a decisive shift that was taking place in Cui's artistic practice. Actual leaves were impressed into the paint, leaving traces of their shapes. Instead of representing nature by drawing or painting plant forms, she was using actual plants in the production of her images.

Her work in the last twelve years has pushed this process even further. Working directly with found plant materials, she has been exploring a direct reading of nature. In many of her recent works, plant forms are selected and arranged to make installations. This is not to say that she has abandoned representation entirely—as her bonze work suggests, she continues to reinterpret natural forms in other media. But her starting point is to work directly with natural materials.



Manuscript of Nature I  
Mixed media on panel.  
96 x 48 inches.  
1999.



Tracing the Origin I & II  
Installation: phototransfer on paper.  
Dimensions variable.  
2000.

One piece that I consider seminal is her Manuscript of Nature V. First created in 2002, it has been displayed many times since, and it continues to evolve. The installation is composed of delicate tendrils of desiccated grape vine. These are pinned directly to a wall using tiny pins. The composition, which varies depending on the size and proportions of the wall, follows the pattern of a Chinese manuscript. Long vertical rows of tendrils suggest columns of text; shorter vertical rows to the right and left of the composition suggest a title and a signature, respectively. Like her bronze piece, this installation is not decipherable as writing.

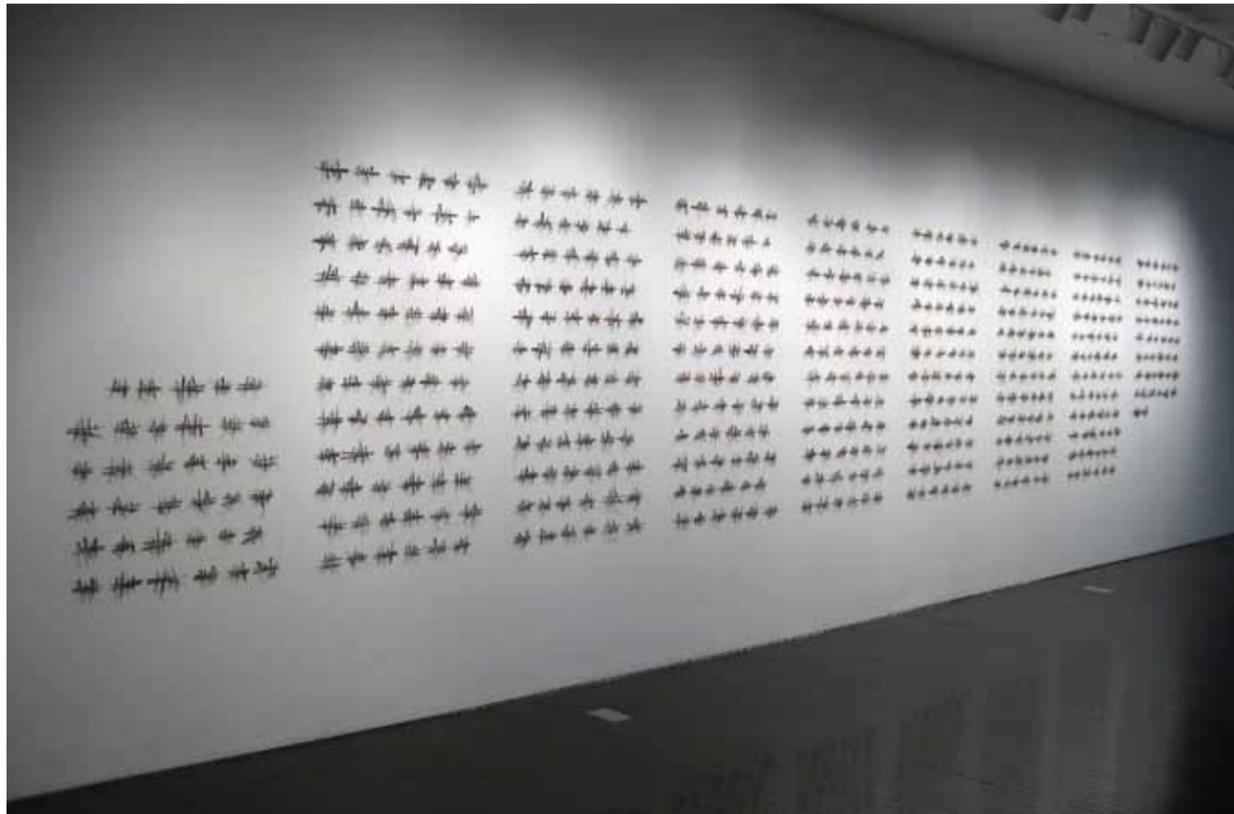
In the studio, Cui and I looked at pictures of Manuscript of Nature V on her computer. She gestured at a box nearby. "It's all in there," she said. It was surprising that a piece that could dominate an entire room could be packed away so efficiently. She remarked, "A piece twelve by fifteen feet, dismantled, can fit into one box."

I asked how she went about collecting her plant materials.

"I live near Forest Park in Queens," she said. Forest Park is hilly, forested, and largely unmanicured. "There are lots of wild grape vines in the park. I knew it was a weed, so I didn't feel guilty about collecting tendrils in the park."

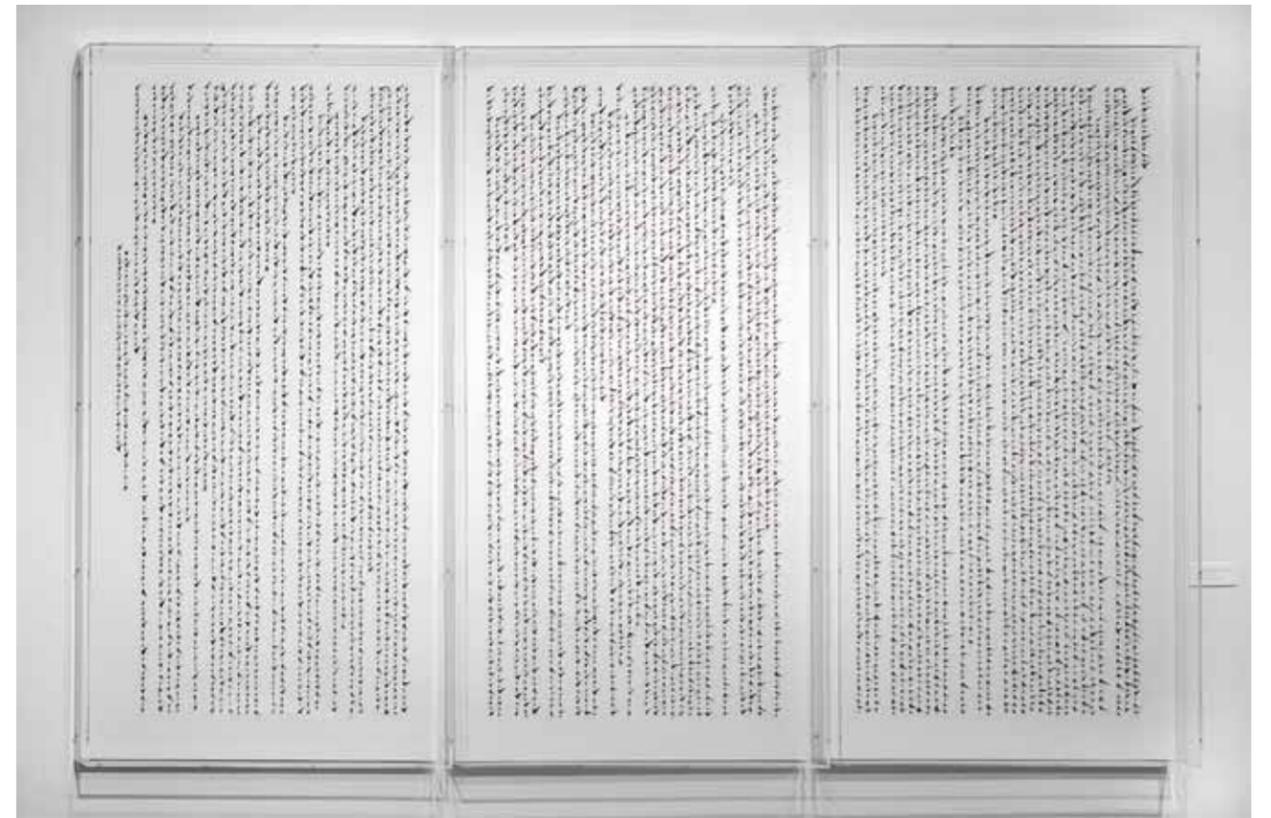
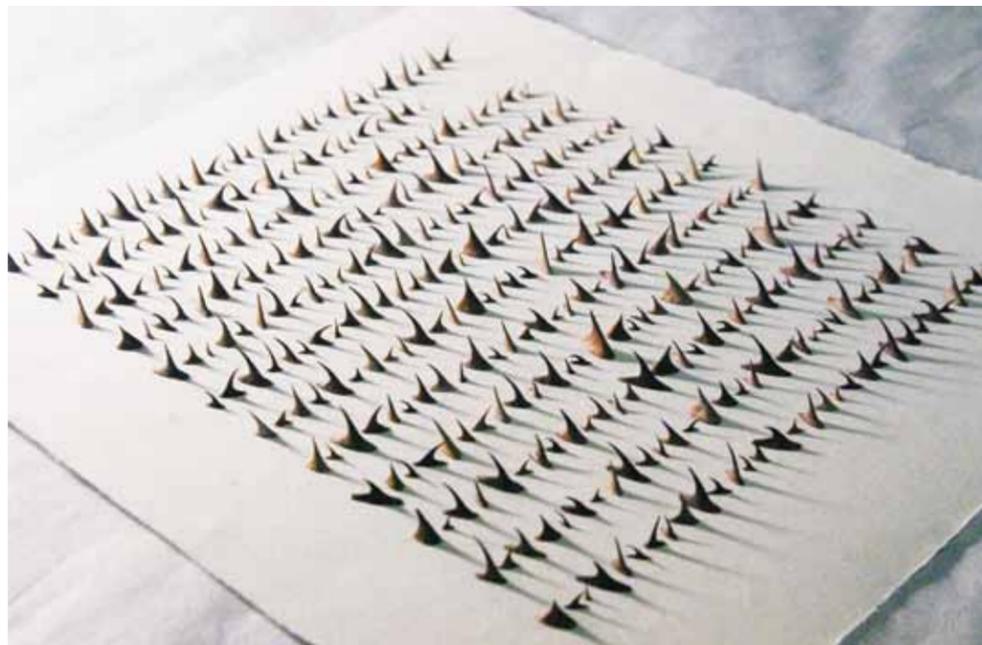


Manuscript from Chinese History I  
Mixed media on panels.  
42 x 70 inches.  
1999.



Not Yet Titled  
 Installation: thorns and twine.  
 Dimensions variable.  
 2009.  
 Installation view from the Arario Gallery New York.

Read by Touch  
 Thorns on rice paper.  
 Eleven pages,  
 9.25 x 10.75 inches each.  
 2005-2006.



Manuscript of  
 Nature VIII  
 Thorns on panels.  
 Three panels,  
 57 x 33 inches each.  
 2010.  
 Photos: David Broda.  
 Full view above;  
 detail at left.



One day when she was collecting, she noticed a woman watching her.

“She asked me what I was doing.”

Cui explained what she was up to, and the woman told her she had to register as a park volunteer if she wanted to collect any plant materials.

“So I registered, and now I can gather all the vine tendrils I want.”

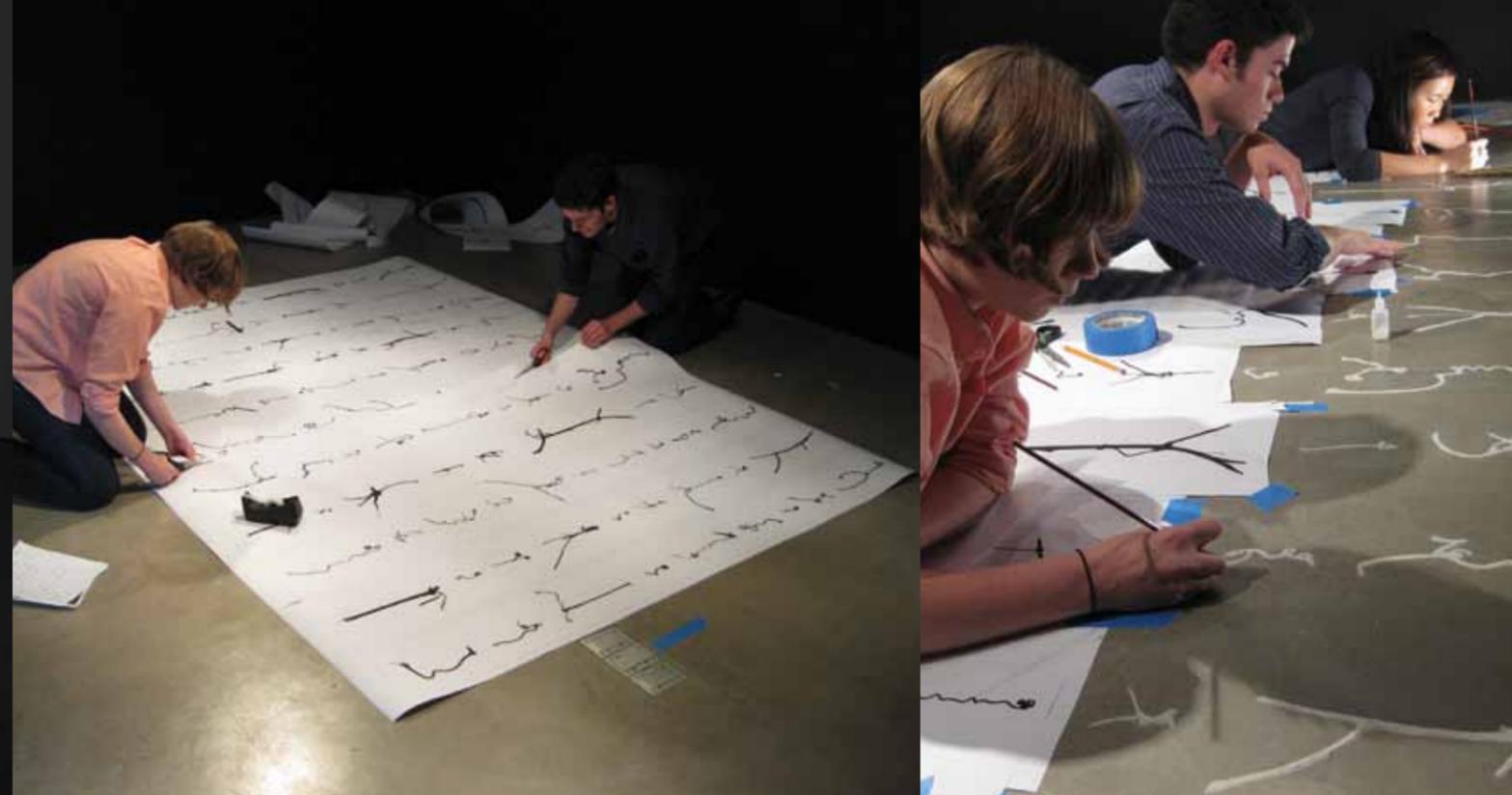
In the eyes of New York City, she’s a volunteer helping to keep the park clean by removing invasive plants. For the artist, it’s an opportunity to collect the raw material for her art.

Collecting her tendrils in the field focuses her attention and begins the process of reading nature.

“The whole process of gathering teaches me about nature,” she said. “You have to work with nature, not against it.” She laughed and added, “Whatever I use turns out to be invasive!”

People idealize nature, she explained. Many of us—especially city-dwellers—like to think of nature as benign and beautiful; we discount how tough it can be to actually work in a natural environment.

“Working in nature, you can never be very comfortable,” Cui said. “I went to collect vine tendrils at a vineyard about an hour and a



Above, foreground: Manuscript of Nature V\_Syracuse Installation: tendrils, salt. Dimensions variable. 2010. In the background, another piece, Not Yet Titled, is installed on two walls.

half north of the City, in Hudson, New York. I collected the vines in January or February, before the vineyards pruned the previous year's vines." It was hard, cold work.

As she gathered vines upstate, she observed that the cultivated vines were stronger than the wild ones.

Reflecting on her practice of collecting tendrils, she commented, "Whatever I use is not that precious. You see [wild grape vines] everywhere." But as ubiquitous as the vines may be, Cui has to search widely to find precisely the shapes that she needs for her compositions.

Sometimes using natural materials can be problematic, as when Cui shows overseas. She said, "I had a show in Germany, and it got very complicated because I was bringing in natural materials. There was lots of paperwork."

Another time, when she was showing in China, she decided it would simply be easier to collect new material there.

Vine tendrils are not the only natural materials Cui collects. Many of her pieces have been constructed of thorns. These come from black locust and honey locust trees, as well as from rose bushes.

The locust trees have long, sharp thorns when they are young. As they age, the thorns become less prominent. In cultivars, the thorns are usually absent. Once, she signed up for a thorn removal project at a nature preserve near Albany, New York.

"It was a hot summer," she said. "We worked

from six to eleven in the morning, and then again from five until eight or nine in the evening in order to avoid the hottest part of the day."

She gathered about four or five large bags of thorny branches, which she took back to her hotel to sort. The thorns she gathered on that outing were enough to finish about three large panels.

Her works made of thorns engage the feeling of pain in a very direct, visceral way. Her piece Read by Touch both invites and repels the hand. The thorns are smooth, sculptural, and attractive, yet they are obviously sharp and dangerous.

Cui's installation Not Yet Titled explores the theme of pain very directly. Here, she created individual sets of thorns tied together with twine. Each set consists of five thorns—four uprights and one diagonal—that read as a kind of tally, like the marks a prisoner might make on the wall of his cell. Unlike her other works, this one can literally be read; the tallies count off actual numbers.

The tallies in Not Yet Titled are arranged in horizontal rows divided into columns. Each thorn represents one day, and the rows represent months. Each column is a year, or part of a year. Not Yet Titled counts out the duration of the Second Sino-Japanese War, which lasted from 1937 until 1945. Every thorn represents another day of suffering. Looking at the tallies spread across the wall, one begins to take in how long that suffering lasted.

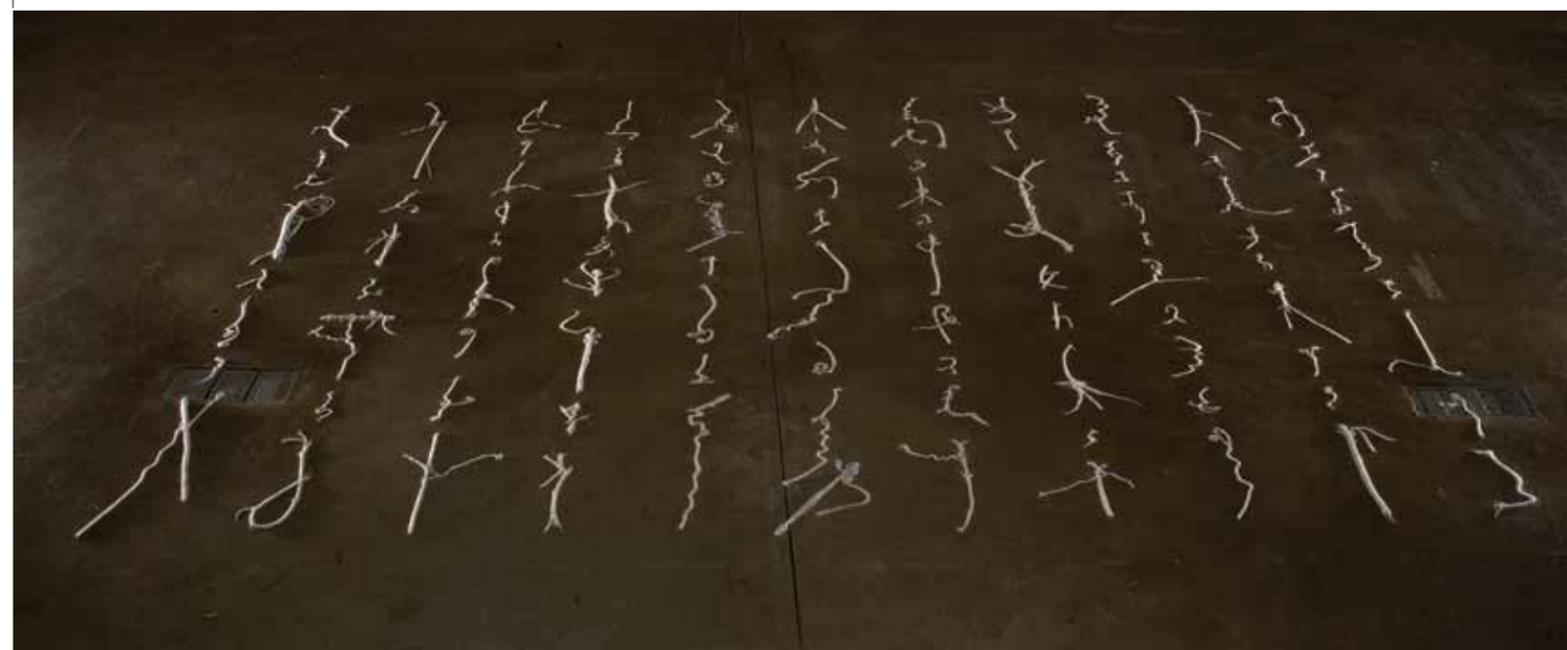
I had a strong sense while we discussed Not Yet Titled that Cui found this piece personally

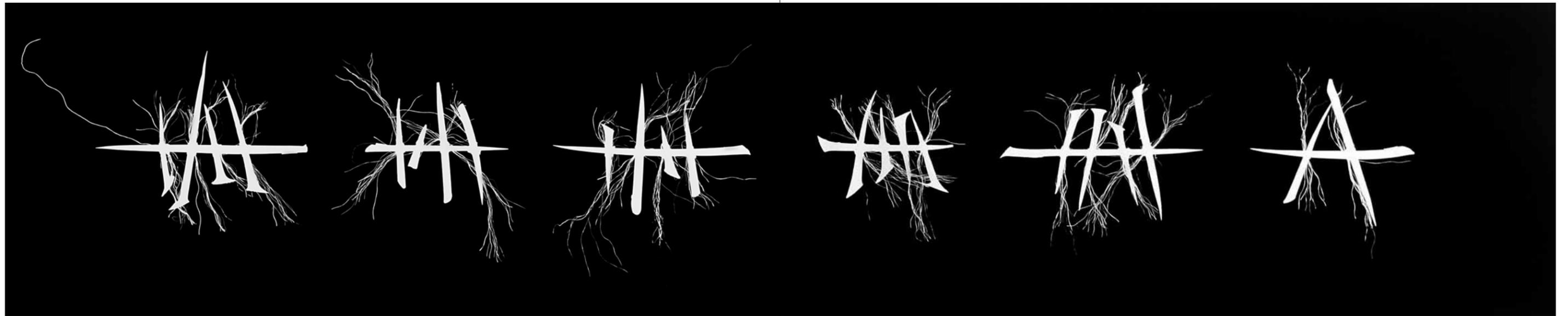
Tracing the Origin VIII Sand drawing. Dimensions variable. 2010. Installation view from The Warehouse Gallery. Photo: David Broda.

Above: Student volunteers trace out the figures on the floor and render them in sand.

Left: Metal tubes were used to deposit fine sand lines on the floor.

Below: The finished composition.





Above:  
Untitled\_III  
Gelatin silver print.  
Photogram.  
8 x 40 inches.  
2011.

Opposite:  
Tracing the Origin XV  
Installation: copper wire.  
Dimensions variable.  
2010.



Carefully looped copper wire studies hanging on the wall of Cui Fei's studio.





Tracing the Origin VII  
Wall drawing:  
dimensions variable.  
2010.  
Installation view from  
Hillwood Art Museum,  
with a detail of one figure  
shown at left.

Opposite:  
Tracing the Origin VI\_I  
Archival pigment print.  
76 x 35 inches.  
2008.  
The image shown here  
has been cropped at the  
top and bottom.



painful. The title itself suggests the inability to fully express the implications of the piece, while that word *yet* suggests the time might still come to verbalize the experience of suffering.

Of rose thorns Cui said, “The flower lasts a short time. What lasts is the thorn.”

The pieces Cui Fei makes directly from natural materials inspire works in many media. “Nature is the origin of our culture,” she said to me. “The original object—I take this and transform it in various ways, and experiment with new media.” She likens this process to the way Chinese writing developed: “It’s like how ideograms transformed and became more abstract.”

For an installation at the Warehouse Gallery at Syracuse University, she transformed Manuscript of Nature V. The original tendrils were used in a new configuration. Instead of being pinned to the wall, they were placed on a flat bed of salt arranged on the floor. This made reference to the salt mining industry that is an important part of Syracuse’s history. A rectangular bed of salt was laid down, and the top was rendered perfectly smooth. Each tendril had to be perfectly positioned on the first try; any movement would leave a mark in the surface. She used a laser level to make sure her rows were straight.

In the same show, she created Tracing the Origin VIII. This was a sand drawing made directly on the floor. Student volunteers helped her create this piece, tracing patterns derived from her tendril installations onto the floor and then painstakingly laying down fine tracks of sand to render the figures.

Cui’s Tracing the Origin VII is a drawing on a wall. Once again, she worked from the forms of her tendrils, but this time she rendered them in ink. This creates a delightful reversal. Her compositions with plants have been inspired by the traditional format and aesthetic of classical Chinese calligraphy; here she renders the composition in the way a calligrapher might.

As she has continued to work, she has explored other transformations. She has photographed her tendrils to compose limited edition prints, she has used photograms and transfer techniques, and she has rendered tendrils in wire.

In all, Cui Fei’s elegant, exquisitely constructed work invites us to read nature and our surroundings in a new way. She has used the graphic conventions of Chinese calligraphy as a foundation for work that transcends cultural lines and communicates to an international audience. ♦

