

Jonathan Goodman

Cui Fei at The Warehouse Gallery, Syracuse University

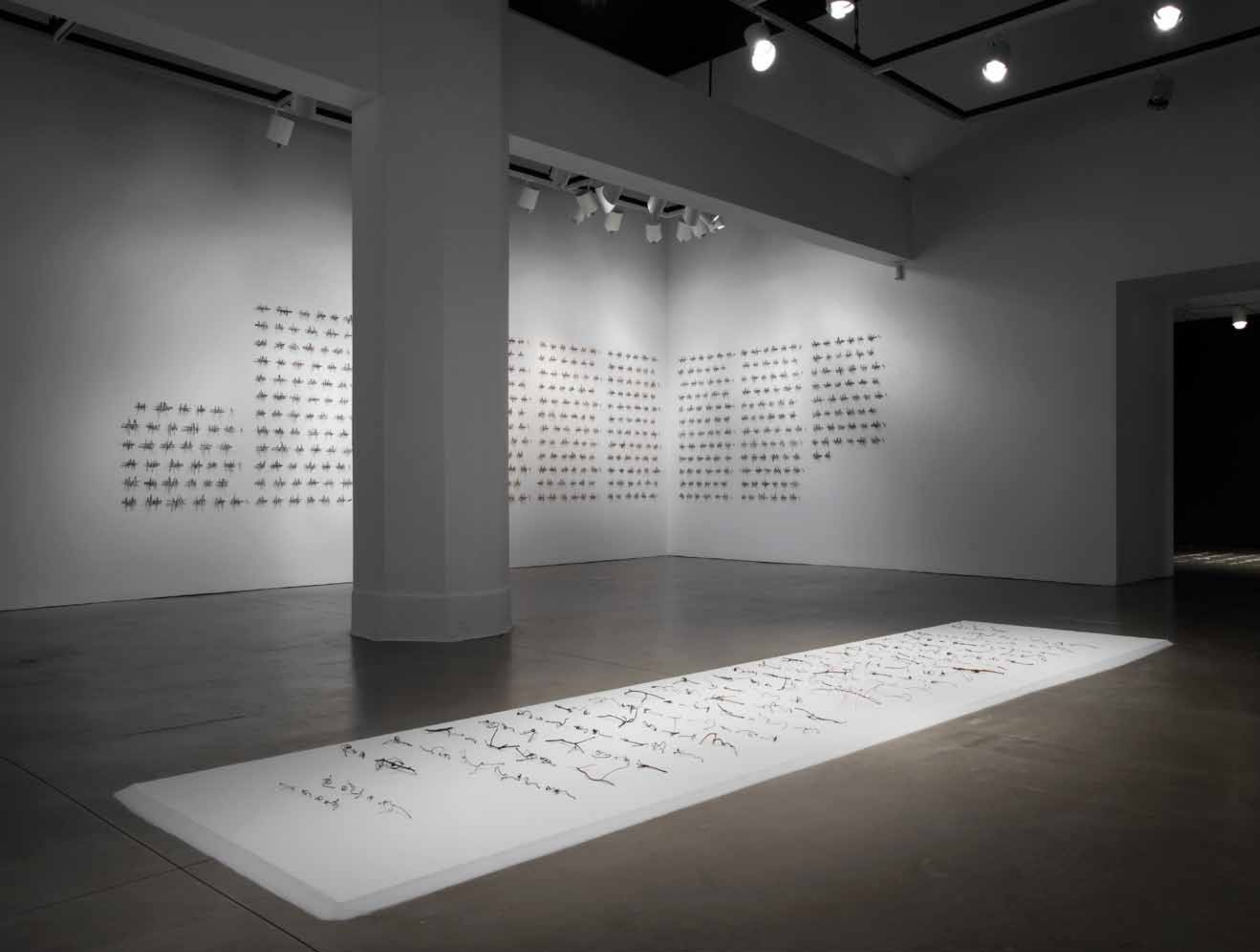
September 17–November 6, 2010

Next page: Cui Fei, installation view at the Warehouse Gallery, Syracuse University, New York. Photo: David Broda. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.

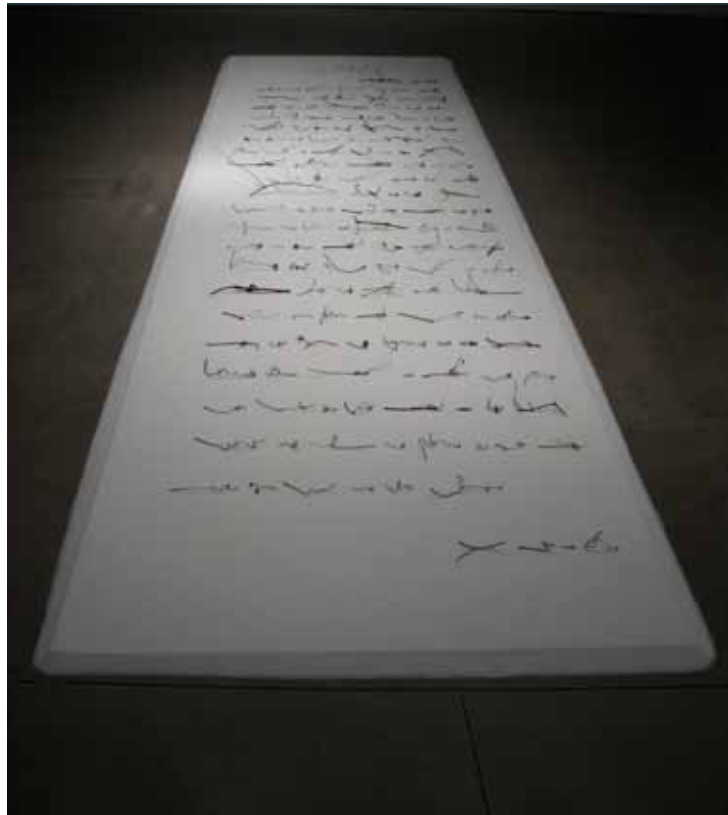
Cui Fei is a Chinese-born artist who has lived in the U.S. for fourteen years now. She has worked in New York City for ten years, and it is fair to say that she has assimilated the city's art culture to the point where she might be better described as a New York artist. Yet her art remains resolutely Chinese and is even classical in its influences and implications. Is it possible to reconcile the surging, ahistorical, continuously intense energy of a major American metropolis with the muted nature and long tradition of Chinese classicism? Cui Fei's work, with its close ties to nature and to manuscripts and calligraphy, conveys a love of the past. At the same time, it is clear that she remains aware of current art movements, which regularly make their presence known in New York. In her show at Syracuse University's Warehouse Gallery, installed by Anya Chavez, the space's curator, Cui Fei offers her audience works that are beautifully presented—to the point where the entire exhibition feels more like an installation than an exhibition of individual works. Composed of materials taken from nature—twigs, thorns, salt, and sand—her pieces straddle the gap between two and three dimensions and assume a poetic gracefulness.

Chavez, early on in her essay "Tracing the Origin" in The Warehouse Gallery's brochure on Cui Fei, mentions the artist's "modesty and humility." The elegant lyricism of the artist's works defines Cui Fei as a sensitive interpreter of nature, as exemplified in the work itself as well as in its titles, for example, *Manuscript of Nature*, the title of a series of works. Working intuitively, but also with rigour, Cui Fei creates art whose poetry exists as a statement of the imagination, in a matrix where Chinese characters, rendered in the form of curled sprigs, emulate a manuscript's contents. We are asked, then, to read nature itself as hard copy whose meaning dwells in the metaphorical possibility of twigs developing into words: nature becomes inspired script, which attains a homely status as small branches and thorns. Among current mid-career Chinese artists, there are several who have worked with language; one can cite the installations of seal script by Gu Wenda and *Tianshu*, the outstanding installation of imaginary characters created by Xu Bing. Cui Fei's own art exists within the context established by these and other artists; unlike Gu Wenda and Xu Bing, however, she has opted for a lyrical rather than epic style. There is an intimacy, and even a vulnerability, that arises from the fragile nature of her art.

The Chinese language is central to Cui Fei's lyricism. As is often remarked, China maintains its literacy as an ink brush culture, in which reading and



calligraphy are closely intertwined. Indeed, Chinese writing is learned by using a brush, whose elegant variants seen in the rendering of characters are as numerous as those who practice the writing. Because the Chinese language is partially visual—the American poet Ezra Pound claimed that French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was so gifted visually he could read Chinese based upon his on-the-spot understanding of individual characters—it has lent itself to various projects in the arts, as noted above. In classical times, and even now, painting has stayed close to poetry; colophons written on paintings often take the form of poetry, in which a literary tradition asserts a tradition closely aligned to visual art. So when Cui Fei creates a piece such as *Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse* (2010), in which the sprigs of wood are arranged in rows upon a long, narrow rectangle of salt placed on the floor, she is quoting the enduring history of Chinese writing, which began thousands of years ago as ideographs. At the same time, she is detailing the fertile relationship between writing and art, even if the connections in her case are abstract.



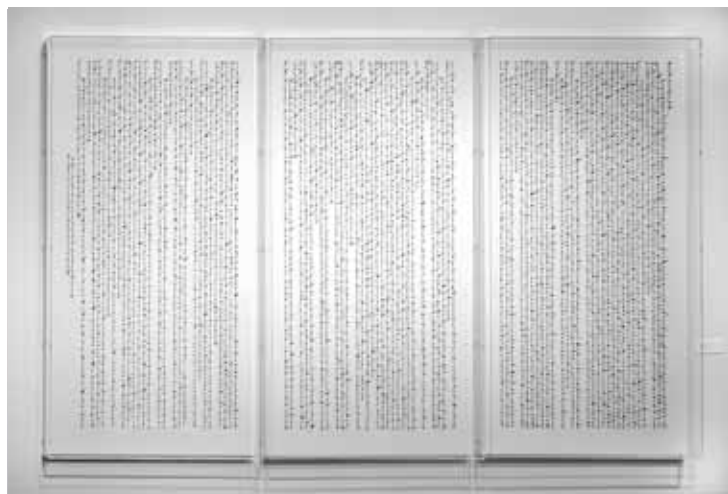
Cui Fei plays on the wish to read the script but does not allow it to happen; the experience is oriented towards the visual and is, finally, nonlinguistic. Indeed, there is a desire to read the individual twigs, but they refuse to yield any literal meaning and demonstrate instead that the experience of writing in Cui Fei's case remains inherently abstract and nonobjective. The general context may suggest a literary orientation; however, it exists purely as a conceptual framework for the visual experience of her art. As someone acutely aware of the implications of her representations, Cui Fei

Opposite page: Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse* (detail), 2010, tendrils and salt on floor. Photo: David Broda. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.

Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse*, 2010, tendrils and salt on floor. Photo: Cui Fei. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.



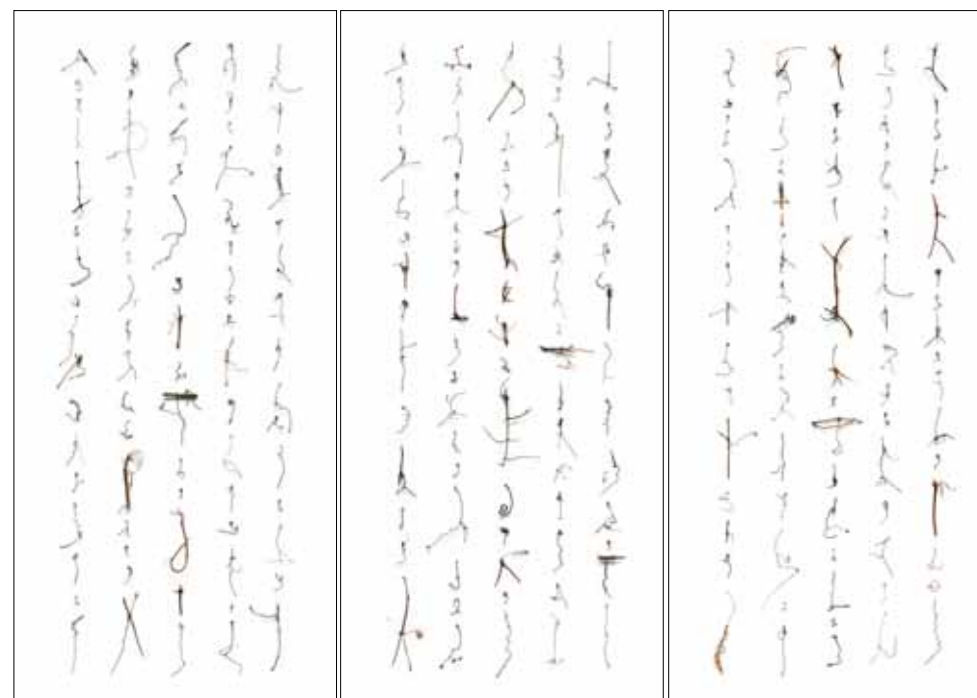
gives the nod, for example, to other traditions, such as the Tibetan use of sand in the painting of Buddhist mandalas. Yet the deliberate inclusion of other cultural referents only strengthens the implications of her art, which resolutely support the abstract visual beauty of a written language divorced from any actual comprehension. Thus the tension between the legible and the illegible stems from Chinese characters that are reduced to pure form. This does not mean that the desire to make sense of the tendrils dissipates; in fact, there remains a tendency to see the lyrical shapes of thorns and tendrils, gracefully set on salt or photographed in a triptych of pigment prints, as verging on the legible.



Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature VIII*, 2010, thorns on panels, 144.7 x 83.8 cm each. Photo: David Broda. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.



Left: Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature VIII* (detail), 2010, thorns on panels, 144.7 x 83.8 cm. Photo: David Broda. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.



Top right: Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin VI_I*, 2008, pigment print, 193 x 88.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.

Top middle: Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin VI_II*, 2008, pigment print, 193 x 88.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.

Top left: Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin VI_III*, 2008, pigment print, 193 x 88.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.

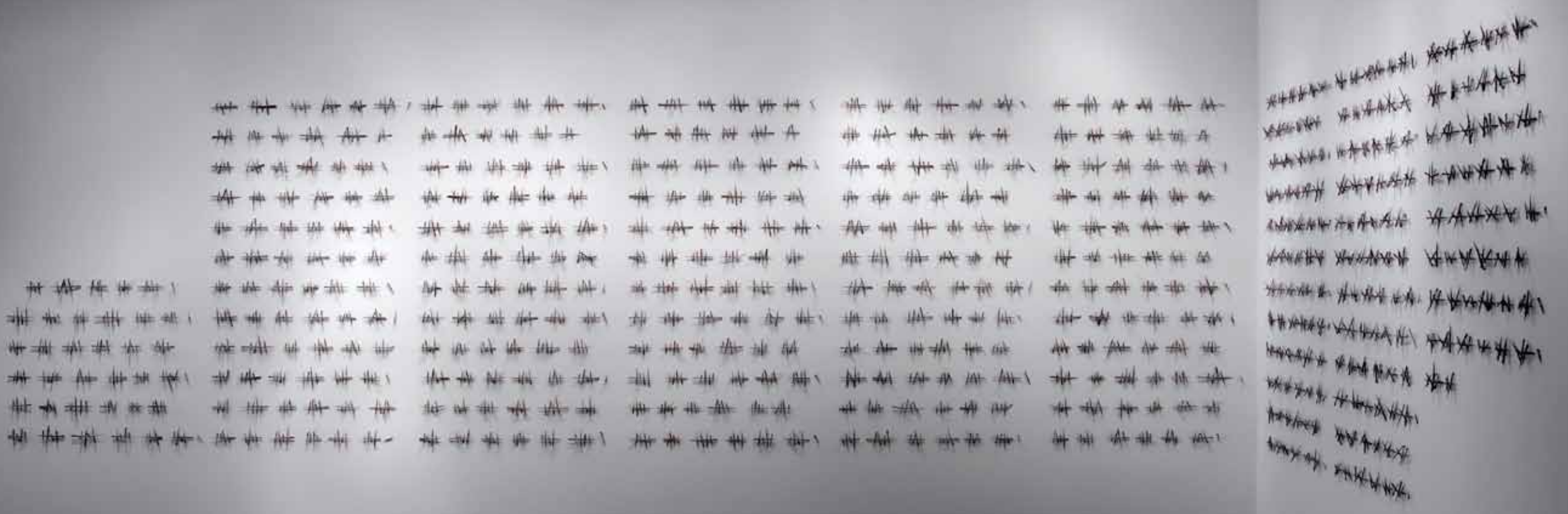
Bottom: Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin VI_I-III*, 2008, three pigment prints, 193 x 88.9 cm each. Photo: David Broda. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.



The three large wall mounted panels in *Manuscript of Nature VIII* (2010) consist of thorns taken from black locust trees that are laid out in vertical lines meant to be read as a Chinese book might, from right to left and top to bottom. Austerly beautiful, the

panels continue Cui Fei's ongoing dialogue between imagery and writing. From a distance, the arrangement of the thorns mimics writing so closely, the viewer might at first assume that actual pages from a large manuscript are being presented. Of course, one again quickly sees that the characters are thorns that resist legibility; this brings no disappointment, but rather a sense of wonder in nature imitating culture. Perhaps this is the goal of the artist: to transform written meaning into visual surprise. The leap of comprehension is accomplished effortlessly, in a way that enables us to value all the more Cui Fei's creativity. Indeed, the implication of *Manuscript of Nature VIII* raises the question: What if we were able to read the thorns as if they were a text? Or, approached from another perspective: What if a text's individual characters and overall placement constitute a visual statement equivalent to an imagery deriving not from culture but from nature itself? The relationship between these two worlds, nature and culture, are deftly investigated in this work.

In *Tracing the Origin VI_I-III* (2008), Cui once again addresses the interstices between writing, a human endeavour, and twigs, a product of nature. The three vertical pigment prints form a poetic statement so perfectly realized that the photo-imaged twigs at first appear to be three-dimensional. Each panel is composed of five vertical rows of the twigs, whose loops and bends and forks and slight curves make for a visionary replication of nature—it is as if nature could be adequately expressed and experienced by a cultural



construction. *Tracing the Origin VI_I-III* serves as the first of an axis of three works, which is continued in *Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse* (2010), placed on the floor, and by *Tracing the Origin VIII* (2010), installed in the gallery vault, and offers proof of Cui Fei's meticulous craft. The seeming physicality of the twigs is intensified by the presence of shadows represented in the photos, which gives substance to the idea that a running script (a Chinese calligraphic style) has been actually realized.

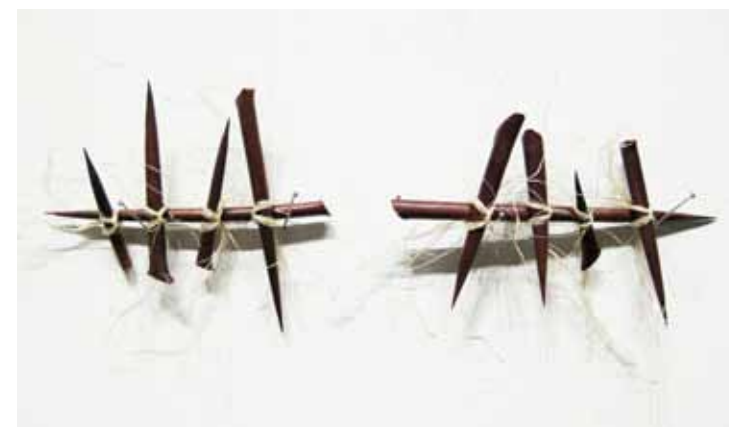
What happens when art imitates nature to the point where the two appear to merge? If it is true that our experience of nature is a cultural construct, then we can accept the idea not only that the history of Chinese art is filtered through Cui Fei's expressive works, but also that its tradition serves as the true explanation for their effectiveness as images; the tradition shows us how to see nature in light of centuries of viewing and rendering the landscape. Thus, the work cunningly makes its assertion that our reading of it tells us more about ourselves than nature itself, primarily because the works are art and therefore artifacts of the mind. It may be that we have arrived at a point where culture has crowded out nature so thoroughly we can rely only on past versions of nature, which are recorded in the history of Chinese painting, to make sense of what we see. But that is an argument after the fact; the universe existed before we made sense of it according to our imagination, and it will exist after humanity is gone. This is not to say that art is always or only descriptive of itself; in Cui Fei's case, she wants to highlight nature's beauty on its own terms as well as give it a human dimension.

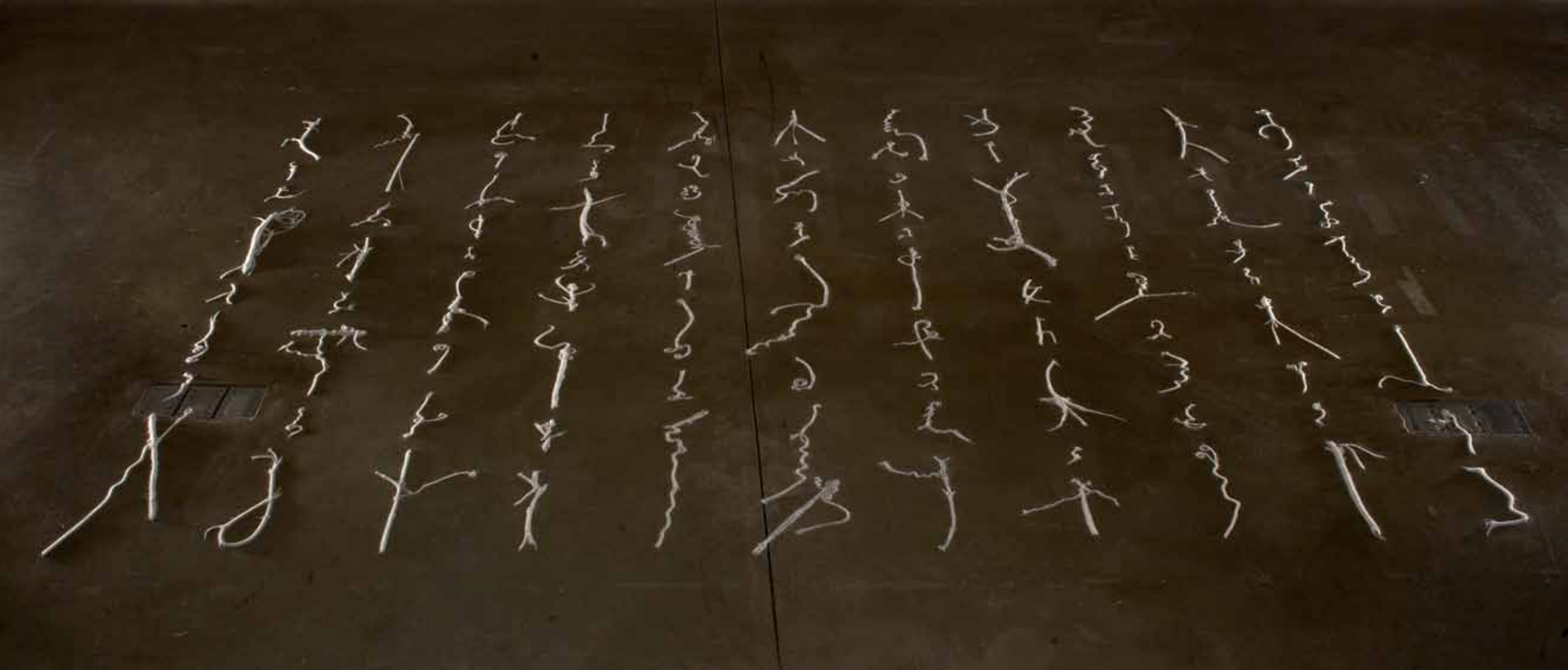
In light of nature's vulnerability, Cui's effort appears all the more earnest in her attempt to facilitate an understanding between the innate beauty of nature and our increasingly distanced response to it. But her view is

Cui Fei, *Not Yet Titled*, 2009, thorns and pins. Photo: David Broda. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.

not entirely imaginary; she also has chosen to make reference to actual occurrences—in *Not Yet Titled* (2009), Cui Fei uses the historical event of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) as the context of her piece. *Not Yet Titled* consists of groups of five thorns tied by twine and attached by pins to the gallery wall. According to Chavez's brochure text, each thorn corresponds to a day, with each row of thorns representing a month. The columns—consisting of two partial ones, one at the beginning and the end of the piece, and seven in between—stand for the years of conflict. Row upon row of thorns, marking days as a prisoner would until his release, stand as symbols for the war's actual duration. Here the large thorns, whose points would be clearly painful to touch, dramatize the tragic circumstances of the hostilities. *Not Yet Titled* particularly engages our interest by using nature to draw attention to human activity, not the other way around. Once we understand the context of the piece, we are moved for historical reasons, not natural ones.

Cui Fei, *Not Yet Titled* (detail), 2009, thorns and pins. Photo: Cui Fei. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.





Tracing the Origin VIII (2010) consists of eleven rows of twig forms rendered in sand on the floor. For this particular piece, Cui Fei worked with three Syracuse University students; in accordance with the artist's directions, they traced the images of individual twigs (photographed by Cui Fei) from large-scale prints (printed at the school's print lab), and laid them onto the floor. Then sand was used to fill in the shapes of the forms. Part of the impact of Cui Fei's work is its connection to the ephemeral, with the result that the work is delicate and subject to change, and in *Tracing the Origin VIII*, the transience of both art and nature is literally written into the installation's materials. Indeed, the fragility of much of her art intimates that our best efforts in memorializing culture will be swept like sand into oblivion. The artist is inclined to make metaphysical statements, yet the combined effect of her art supports a philosophical understanding of creativity in both a human and a natural sense.

Cui Fei's art is imbued with a subtle beauty that is at some remove from contemporary art practice in America; her art is both poetic and graceful, rather than provocative, as evidenced in the artist's new use of a throw-away methodology. Yet that is the strength of her art: its ability to take delight in the world, both as natural and manmade construct. In a time when

Top: Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin VIII*, 2010, sand. Photo: David Broda. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.

Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin VIII* (detail), 2010, sand. Photo: David Broda. Courtesy of the artist and Warehouse Gallery.



her style demonstrates a relatively narrow range. Yet the elegance of her sensibility remains true to her audience of new art viewers, who understand that the serial examination of an idea stands as an accepted practice in contemporary art. Additionally, the forms and conceptual basis of her art are quite accessible, in the sense that she makes beautiful works, as opposed to alienating ones, to express her vision. The transcendent beauty of her art exists as an elevated vision, one that establishes, quite literally, the book of nature as a version of the sublime.

ecological awareness seems urgent, Cui Fei makes work that gently reminds us to remain alert in the face of environmental loss. As time goes on, and as this loss proliferates and becomes more permanent as a reality, her work will intensify in relevance. My only apprehension with Cui Fei's art is that it is inspired by a single notion—the interpretation of nature via culture—to the point where some concern about repetition occurs;