

A Conversation with Wu Jian'an

John Tancock: Rather than write an essay on your development as an artist, I am going to ask you a series of questions so that you can speak for yourself. I hope we can clarify what you believe are the defining characteristics of your growth as an artist over the last decade. From looking at your biography, I know that you were born in Beijing in 1980 and graduated with a B.A. from the Beijing Institute of Broadcasting in 2002. I would like to know what happened in the first twenty-two years of your life to make you the artist that you are today. Could you please fill in that very large gap in our knowledge? Firstly, please tell me something about your family background and your interests as a child and teenager?

Wu Jian'an: Thank you, John. My parents are from a background in the sciences; they are both mechanical engineers, and my father was outstanding in his field. They are both very clear thinkers and have a sincere belief in science. Even today, they still discuss mechanical engineering problems, many of which involve theoretical physics that I've never understood. Nevertheless, it has always fascinated me. Each time my father discusses these topics, he starts from simple phenomena that lead to abstract theory. I was always fascinated by simple things, precisely because I never thought such simple things could be queried, but when the discussion moved on to abstract theory, I was usually lost.

Looking back, I was interested in a lot of things when I was young, but animals were always a major interest. In summer, my friends and I often went out on expeditions to catch snakes and frogs in small streams. Big frogs are often brilliantly coloured, so we were always excited when we saw them, but they can jump very far, which made them difficult to catch. Whenever I was lucky enough to catch one, I used to keep it in a large glass jar. Catching ants and mantises was a lot of fun, too. Sometimes we even fed mantises to the ants, but the ants refused to eat them.

The concept of "art" only began to intrigue me when I started studying for my master's degree at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), in Beijing. Before then, I had a vague idea that art was simply "drawing." I had done a great deal of drawing, ever since I was a child; it was just like playing games. I would draw all kinds of animals, monsters, and ghosts, which made me happy. When I started elementary school, I was often requested by my classmates to draw images from the video game Transformers, and I

used to get a lot of envious looks for the way in which I was able to satisfy everybody's needs through my drawing. That pleased me a lot as well.

John Tancock: Looking back, is there anything you can point to that looks forward to your current preoccupations as an artist? Did you gain anything from the three years you spent at the Broadcasting Institute?

Wu Jian'an: It seems to me now that most of my work is derived from books I've read and things I saw and experienced as a child. My passion for mythology is the most obvious. As a child I was shocked when I read about mythic characters such as Xingtian and Chiyu, but at the same time I was excited.

I majored in advertising at the Broadcasting Institute. The main thing I learned there is how to understand and evaluate other people's thought processes, which can be seen most clearly in market analysis and media studies. It is a unique approach, using data analysis to reveal unconscious desires; sometimes this can even be applied to analyzing the desires of a mass audience. When hidden desires are displayed as data charts, it feels really good, just like performing a highly skilled anatomical procedure. Another important thing the Broadcasting Institute offered me was free time. As long as I passed all my exams, I had total control over my time. I could do anything I liked as long as it was within the regulations, and no one cared what you were doing. That turned out to be very significant for me, as at that time, I was not sure what I wanted to do. I spent most of my time working out or painting, which I enjoyed a lot. Still, I did not have a clear goal, so I simply painted and enjoyed my freedom.

John Tancock: In 2002 you entered the graduate school at CAFA, Beijing, and studied under paper cut artist Lu Shengzhong. As I understand it, the Folk Art Program and the Art History Department at the academy were merging. Your research topic, for which you made four field trips, was the continuation and transformation of *piyingxi* (Chinese shadow puppets) since the founding of the People's Republic of China. This is a two-part question. First, for a Western audience, would you please comment on the status of folk art in twentieth-century China and the role it plays in art schools? Second, as a young man born in Beijing whose life style was entirely urban, why did you decide to focus on folk art?

Wu Jian'an: I think there are three important facts to consider in understanding the role of folk art in twentieth-century China.

First, folk art was deployed as a government propaganda tactic when the nation was established, which led to a tremendous increase in its production and public awareness of it. The most iconic manifestation was the poster propaganda movement in the 1950s. To the leadership of the Communist government and cultural officials, art existed primarily to serve the workers, farmers, and soldiers. Most of them were not interested in the humanities

or Western art, perhaps they simply do not understand it. As a result, this kind of art lacks an audience base in China. Yet many political concepts and ideologies needed to be conveyed to those people in the form of art, so from the beginning of the Cultural Revolution folk art has been popular with the general public; this is natural. This is precisely the reason that many well-known ink artists participated in creating revolution themed posters during this period.

Second, some parts of the political and cultural elite made use of folk art as a means to establish cultural identity and confidence. In the twentieth century, China has undergone many defeats and endured much suffering. During the in-depth encounter with modern Western civilization, a considerable number of Chinese intellectuals lost faith in traditional Chinese culture and blamed it for the series of disastrous events that occurred in modern China. During the process of blaming and searching for a scapegoat, China stood in the way of its own modernization.

In society the old and the new don't evolve in a linear form. New developments can encounter bottlenecks; this creates an opportunity for a renaissance of old things. In China, folk art has deeper roots and a much wider audience than for traditional literati art. When the enthusiasm for Western culture endangered Chinese self-identity, some intellectuals were alarmed. They started searching for a means to avoid such a loss. Folk art came to their attention during this time and became an important factor for Chinese cultural identity. In the Republican era, Lu Xun and Cai Yuanpei encouraged the archiving of folk songs, which worked in a similar way to visual art.

Third, is the practice of using folk art as a language to be incorporated with Western contemporary art concepts. This has been an important approach in contemporary Chinese art since the 1990s as seen in the works of Chen Zhen, Lu Shengzhong, and Huang Yongping. In today's fine art academies, folk art remains part of the curriculum.

Personally, my initial interaction with folk art was not proactive. Until I went to college, I was very involved in Western culture. I liked Rock n' Roll, admired Western masters, and had very limited experience with traditional Chinese art and was not that interested in it. Because of my interest in Western culture, I liked making foreign friends and listening to their stories. The more I encountered foreigners, the more I realized that the principal reason they came to China was their interest in Chinese culture. It made me feel embarrassed that part of my initial awareness and appreciation of traditional Chinese culture came from foreigners. However, it was through experiences such as these that I started paying attention to folk culture and became increasingly interested.

John Tancock: What caused the apparent switch from your academic pursuits to becoming an artist?

Wu Jian'an, *The Way of ExPELLING Ghosts*, 2003, papercut, 135.5 x 76.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



Wu Jian'an: I was never an admirer of “academic disciplines,” yet being an academic is not something you can abandon. In many long academic essays, the main thesis consists of a few sentences, then why spend so much time saying other things, instead of getting to the point. That is the major limitation of academic disciplines. In order to support such small discoveries, you have to pad it with lots of useless information. I think it is a total waste of time.

John Tancock: The paper cuts exhibited as *Daydreams* (2006) seem to have been the breakthrough for you. Would you please tell me more about your state of mind at the time?

Wu Jian'an: Although the worst of the SARS crisis was over by then, I was still very afraid of it. During SARS, I hid by myself in my apartment most of the time. I did not dare to leave home. Whenever I had to, I wore multiple protective masks, I was so afraid of being infected. Everyday there were ambulances rushing by my door, there was hardly anyone on the street. Even now, we still don't know what caused SARS. Some say that it was a virus from the masked palm civet, which can be transmitted through the air; it can even penetrate the blood system through one's eyes. Every infected person had to be isolated, as well as their families and neighbours. It was very frightening, and I was afraid of being quarantined along with other infected patients.

I had started experimenting with paper cuts right before SARS and was especially interested in witchcraft. People always need some spiritual sustenance during a time of fear. That is why I created a lot of paper cut figures to keep me company when I was hiding out in my apartment. That way, I was not alone and they quelled my fear. And so one by one I cut out many paper figures. A few days later, I assembled them in a circle, and I sat in the centre, which made me feel safe.

Later, when the weather became warmer, SARS seemed to have disappeared, as if by a miracle. When I returned to school, I showed the paper cut figures to my advisor. He recommended that I make some bigger paper cuts. The process was thrilling. I had turned all my fears, excitement, and hopes generated during SARS into characters and gave form to them in the language of paper cuts. That was the origin of the *Daydream* series.

John Tancock: Why did you decide to concentrate on paper cuts? In the West, over a hundred years ago, artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele



Wu Jian'an, *Calmly Observing*, 2003, papercut, 135.5 x 76.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

Münter, and Paul Klee, who were associated with the Blue Rider Group, were inspired by folk art in their early work, but this was a phase that they went through. You persisted. Viewed in the context of international contemporary art, this might seem to limit the range of possibilities, but for you this is clearly not the case. Can you comment?

Wu Jian'an: I think that the kind of art we pursue is not determined by some strong inclination that makes us select it. Instead, I believe that a specific art form selects us. The art is the master, and we are the servants. From my point of view, all those techniques that have been passed down from ancient times to today are living entities. They have a longer lifespan than a single generation of humans. These techniques have been passed down from generation to generation, mothers to daughters, fathers to sons. Through some indescribable emotional drive—sometimes we might even call it inspiration—we become intrigued by certain techniques. In such a situation, I think shadow puppets, paper cuts, and oil painting are similar in motivation; they are all carefully looking for their new inhabitants. I don't think any medium should become a limitation on creation. It is only when we don't fully understand the language of different media that limitations will be generated.

Wu Jian'an, *Execute Chiyou by Lingchi*, 2007, stainless steel, 362 x 230 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



John Tancock: *Daydreams* was exhibited at Chambers Fine Art in New York in 2006, and the following year the mythological figure Chiyou appeared in *Execute Chiyou by Lingchi*. Made from stainless steel, this was your first large-scale work, and it was also the first appearance of a figure from ancient Chinese mythology. How did this come about? What attracted you to the grotesque subject of Chiyou's excruciating death?

Wu Jian'an: *Lingchi*, or death by a thousand cuts, is a most ancient torture; it's very frightening. Chiyou was the character I most feared when I read mythological stories as a child. Using *lingchi* on Chiyou was a simple tactic to disperse childhood fears, fighting one fear with another. It seems quite selfish today, expressing my own fears without paying respect to the mythological hero.

To give visual emphasis to strength and tension, I chose a massive sheet of stainless steel for this piece. The laser-cut metal edges of the hanging sheet of steel feel very dangerous when viewers move close to it, and they feel as if they are absorbed by it. The audience feels as if it is captured in a net made of countless sharp blades.

John Tancock: This would be a good point to ask you to introduce some of your other favourites such as Xingtian and the Emperor Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor). They may be familiar to a Chinese audience, but only specialists are likely to be aware of them in the West.

Wu Jian'an: In China, everyone knows about Huangdi. Along with Yandi (Yan Emperor), they are regarded as the ancestors of Han Chinese; consequently the Chinese are also referred to as Descendants of Yan and Huang. Xingtian and Huangdi both originated in classical Chinese texts. *Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhaijing)* is the most representative text among many others, and it's an extremely mysterious volume. It records many prehistoric legends and descriptions of landscapes from all over the world; many of them are quite magical.

Classic of Mountains and Seas is like a huge container for the imagination. Many academic commentaries have been published, but whatever approach is taken, there are still many inexplicable aspects, such as the character Xingtian. It's a story without a clear beginning or end, an aberrant episode, so we have to use our imagination to fill in the origins and the later development of the story.

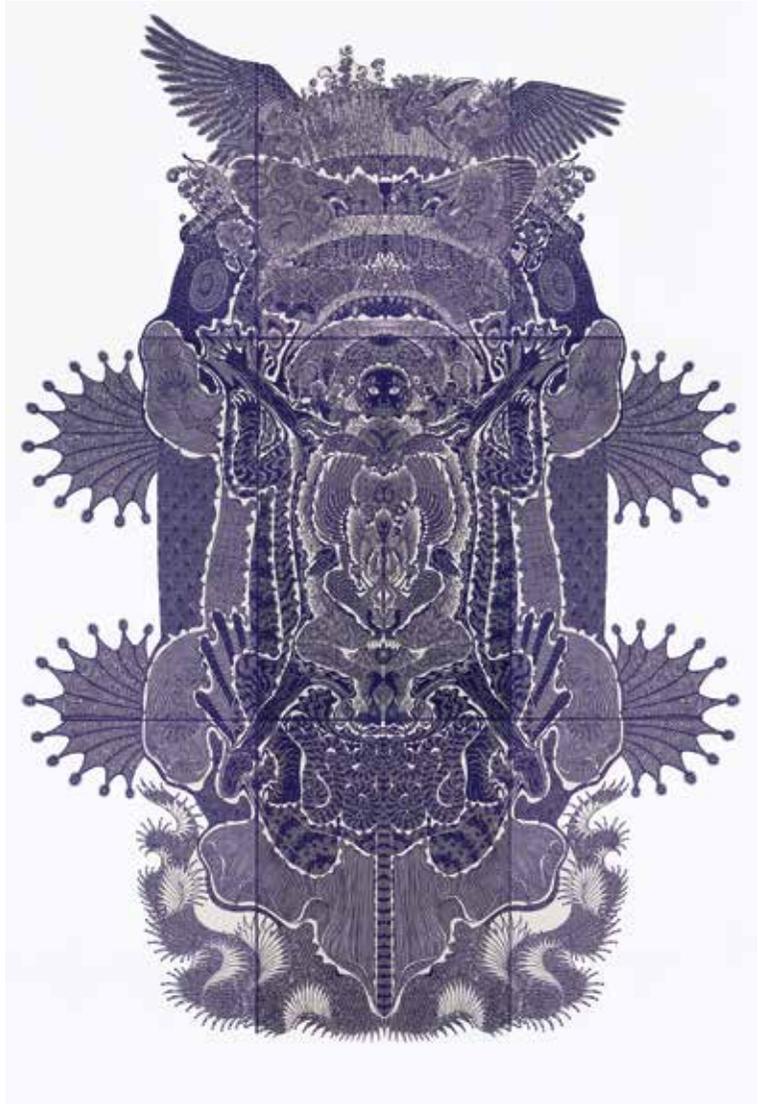
There probably is a barrier for Western audiences in comprehending the specifics of these legends. Stories familiar to Chinese are not necessarily familiar to a Western audience and vice versa (e.g., Homeric hymns). Nevertheless, each civilization has its own mythological stories, and there are similarities between the supernatural creatures and heroes within all cultures. They are all connected to the origins of humankind and share basic concepts concerning the future state of humanity and how humans exist in this world.

John Tancock: The period leading up to your next major exhibition *The Heaven of Nine Levels* (2008) saw remarkable developments in your work. The range of references in your iconography expanded dramatically, and you began to explore new technical procedures. You have referred to your growing enthusiasm for anything related to old China. Would you please elaborate?

Wu Jian'an: Like human beings, culture also has a life expectancy. Ancient cultures that still exist today are considered long-lived and have experienced a very long journey. In China, there is a saying that living creatures or cultural treasures that have survived so long turn into a spirit and must possess mysterious powers. To some extent, we may even say that it is not humans who created culture. Instead, cultures are constantly searching for new generations of hosts. Culture embodies wisdom beyond human comprehension, and imbues human flesh and blood with the desire to last in perpetuity.

John Tancock: Why are you so interested in ghosts and spirits? Do you really believe in them? Have you had personal experience?

Wu Jian'an, *The Heaven of Nine Levels*, 2008, laser-cut paper, 250 x 180 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



Wu Jian'an: Not exactly. Even if I have encountered them, they are embedded in my memory and have become something perfectly normal for me. I cannot answer the question regarding the original source of my interest; it is just like asking why fear exists, or if collective fear can cause illness in an individual, or whether our fate has already been written. Where do we come from, and where will we go? There must be an alternative world. We could be ghosts from a previous world.

Beginning with the Renaissance, modern science has flourished for over five hundred years. Yet the closer the research is to new frontiers, the more similar it is to ancient mythology. It seems like a predestined circular journey, during which technology returns to the origins of civilization. Once it has returned to the source, people might reach the profound realization that all quixotic myths and preposterous legends are actually real. It was language that obscured the outlook, making them appear fictitious.

John Tancock: I have another question along the same lines. In a discussion of *The Heaven of Nine Levels* you referred to “the infinitely circulating

and contradictory dominant-subordinate relationship” of its design. You continued by saying that “it’s like issuing a passport to rebel against a mature and rational world. At the same time my childhood memories and feelings are crystallized and disguised in it.” What’s the connection between your childhood memories and your work?



Wu Jian'an: *The Heaven of Nine Levels* tells a story of power play through a two-dimensional composition, namely “big fish swallows small fish.” There are nine animals, from fish in the water to birds in the sky. Their identities symbolize their position in the vertical dimension of the realm. They form a kind of target—circle enveloping circle—to form a nine-level structure. In the innermost circle a tiny bird bites a tiny fish, and they are enclosed within a bird with a human face biting a salamander; the third level is a bird with a

Wu Jian'an, *Xingtian*, 2006–07, laser-cut brass, 190 x 97 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

human head biting a frog; the fourth level is a human with wings biting a tiger; the fifth level is a human biting a human; then from the sixth level onwards the power relationships are reversed, the tiger is biting the human; the seventh level is a frog biting a bird with a human head; the eighth level is a salamander biting a bird with a human face; and the final level is a large fish biting a large bird. In this world there is no definitive food chain and no stable hierarchy of strength and weakness, of predators and prey. The strong and the weak constantly switch roles. *The Heaven of Nine Levels* is a chapter in a limitless circulation. In the future, I would like to continue this series of animals chasing/hunting each other in a larger dimension.

I spent a rather long time giving a title to this work. At first I named it *Evolution*, but later changed it to *The Heaven of Nine Levels*. As a child I read a manga magazine titled *The Master of Animate*. In one of its episodes, there is a story about Sudhana (The Child of Wealth in Chinese translation). Sudhana is a follower of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin, who later asked Sudhana to serve the Jade Emperor, the ruler of the heavens. After he arrived in the heavens, Sudhana learned that heaven has nine levels, and different gods lived in different levels. However, there were many conflicts between the levels. For example, when Daode Tianzun practices alchemy, the fumes of his furnace rise to the level above, causing the Jade Emperor living above him to sneeze.

Similarly, when Sudhana went to the residence of the Weaving Maiden to watch her weave, a spark fell from the level above onto the textile, burning

a hole in it. Sudhana learned that the Fire God lives on the level above, and was the cause of the sparks. After traveling through each of the nine levels, Sudhana learned that the ordering of the levels was inconvenient to almost everyone, but because it was tradition, it was difficult to change. Eventually, Sudhana was able to convince the gods to rearrange the levels they lived in by falsely claiming that it was the order of the Jade Emperor. After the reordering was complete, Sudhana went to the Jade Emperor and told him what he had done, and that all the other gods were satisfied with the result. The Jade Emperor agreed to adopt the new ordering, and thus what had seemed to be an impossible task was accomplished.

I vividly remember what Sudhana said to the gods. It was like a nursery rhyme: “The Jade Emperor has given the order, the nine levels of heaven will be rearranged!” Although it was a simple sentence, I have never been able to forget it—it is such a powerful expression of revolutionary emotions. Looking back at the story today, I can see that it resonates with China’s Reform and Opening in the 80s, with the voice that calls for political reform. When I created this work, the phrase “Heaven of Nine Levels” came to me repeatedly; at first I did not pay much attention, but later I realized that it was my act of creating it that reawakened this memory.

John Tancock: This was the period when you began using materials other than paper in your work. You had met the shadow puppet maker Wang Tianwen in 2004, I believe, when you were doing research for your MA thesis but it was not until 2006 that you began working with him. Please tell me more about this experience.

Wu Jian’an: I met Wang Tianwen during my graduate school years. I was doing field research in Xi’an for my thesis on shadow puppet performances, for which I interviewed him. Wang Tianwen has a strong accent, very friendly and laconic, and he answered all my questions. He talked about events decades ago as if they happened yesterday. We had an absorbing conversation, and he showed me a series of exquisite puppet show cutters, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, very elegant. Those tools—a short polished wooden stick used to dress the leather, and the leather plates that are as smooth as jade—filled me with admiration for the passion and dedication of the workers. I admired Wang Tianwen’s dedication to his work, so after the initial meeting I decided I would like to work with him, and to use traditional shadow puppet materials and techniques to create something new.

John Tancock: As your works grew in scale and complexity, you found it necessary to start using a laser to cut the many thousands of individual components required. Please describe the process. How does it differ from doing everything by hand?

Wu Jian’an: Usually, I draw the outlines first and then scan the drawing into the computer, using vector graphics software to create the image. We

get files that can be adjusted to different sizes for engraving. Afterward, we choose the material and the proper laser cut machine to create the work. Laser cut increases speed, which makes possible the creation of vast quantities—many thousands—of the individual units that can be used in larger compositions. In a way, it facilitates the creation of a much more complex artistic language.

John Tancock: I think your admirers would like to know more about your working methods, from the initial concept to the finished work. By now, I suppose, you needed assistants to help you with different aspects of the production. How many are there and what is their background?

Wu Jian'an: I have three permanent staff, all of whom graduated from CAFA, Beijing, majoring in oil painting and Chinese painting. They are very intelligent and straightforward people. When I work on larger projects, I assemble groups of students and friends to help, and sometimes I hire women from villages around the area. The studio is always very interesting at such times. People communicate and solve problems in their own dialect, which makes everything feel very lively.

John Tancock: Although you participated in many exhibitions between 2008 and 2012, it was not until 2011 that you exhibited your next major installation, *Mountain Ranges*, exhibited at the inaugural exhibition at ART HK 11. Would you please describe your concept?



Wu Jian'an, *Mountain Ranges*, 2011, papercut, 250 x 2000 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

Wu Jian'an: I do not know when I started to feel a strong frustration with contemporary Chinese culture. The sense of disappointment was almost synchronous with the increase in interest for traditional Chinese culture. I always feel contemporary Chinese culture is like a beheaded man, without confidence and dashing here and there without a purpose. There are so many incredible things in our tradition and why would we submit to contemporary Western culture and even to the pop culture of Hong Kong and Taiwan?

I felt lost at the moment when the authorities tried to convey their point of view in either subtle or cynical ways. The authorities systematically persuade us to move in certain directions, but in spite of this they are basically just a group of blind people fighting for power. Somehow, my confusion awakened something deep inside my heart: a figure has no head, but his mind is still full of determination—Xingtian! He became a primary inspiration with various meanings for me, and his image was later incorporated in *Mountain Ranges*. In this piece, surrounded by mountains numerous Xingtians are fighting each other in search of their heads. There are also many other deities from *Classics from Mountain and Seas*, dancing and searching for their lost heads.

Wu Jian'an, *Gazing at the Moon*, 2011, papercut, 250 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



John Tancock: Talking about *Mountain Ranges*, you have said that you regard it as a critique of the current state of Chinese society. In what sense is that true? How would you describe the current state of Chinese society? You have also said that you feel that China has lost its way and respect for tradition. That sounds rather like Yukio Mishima's laments that modern Japan had lost its way and needed to return

to the heroic values of ancient Japan. You know what happened to Yukio Mishima—his suicide—when he could no longer deal with the situation he had diagnosed! What would you like to see happen?

Wu Jian'an: There are barely any heroes in China today. We lack the warriors of ancient times as well as the very act of calling upon a hero. People live too realistically and are too cowardly. From the perspective of individual culture, gritty heroes and warriors are important figures in balancing unjust society. Social structures are not able to defend justice and equality forever, with the result that individuals might well experience the lack of protection and be wrongly accused. This requires heroic individuals to challenge the existing structure, and restore justice and equality on an individual level. From the perspective of national culture, without the fortitude of heroes, culture will become submissive and we will eventually lose or forget our identity, and become lonely and unidentified ghosts. Xingtian represents the most valiant figure documented in Han Chinese civilization. Although he was beheaded, his valorous and bloodthirsty spirit drove him to fight his enemy. The revenge of Xingtian was a lonely voyage. He had no family or friends to help him, and not even his mind, since he had been beheaded. All he had was his dead body.

His story is metaphorical in the sense that he represents the spirit of an unstoppable force. It implies that there is a deeply buried boundary line in our culture and that we should fight like Xingtian when we suffer from the worst humiliations. Various forms of ritual ceremonies dedicated to "Xingtian" remind people of what an indomitable figure he is, and of what we should learn from these old tales. Perhaps China needs this kind courage and uprightness today.

John Tancock: By now, you had traveled extensively in Europe and the United States and had been exposed to many different aspects of international contemporary art. What impressed you most? Was your own practice affected by anything you saw or artists you met?

Wu Jian'an: I was most impressed by Dia Beacon. It was on my first visit to New York, in 2008. Chris Mao took me to Dia Beacon to see its amazing



Left: Wu Jian'an, *Hand in Hand*, 2011, hand-dyed and waxed papercut, cotton thread, *xuan* paper, and silk, 520 x 450 cm, from *Seven Layered Shell*. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

Right: Wu Jian'an, *Six-Eared Macaque*, 2012, hand-dyed and waxed papercut, cotton thread, *xuan* paper, and silk, from *Seven Layered Shell*. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

collection of art of the 1960s and 1970s. I was too impressed to talk afterward. I was amazed at the way that generation of artists could adopt such different approaches in their work. I also went to see the retrospective exhibition of Louise Bourgeois and John Chamberlain at the Guggenheim. Previously, I did not have very strong feelings about either of them, but after seeing the exhibitions, I was greatly moved. The experience of taking photos in the galleries of ancient art at the Metropolitan Museum was also important for me. I used to stay there with my camera until the museum closed, and then I began to realize that this approach distanced the works from me and I could not appreciate them with my senses. On subsequent visits to museums, I took very few photos as I preferred to see everything with my own eyes.

John Tancock: *Seven Layered Shell* (2012) was even grander in scale than *Mountain Ranges*. Each of the very large hanging panels—*Standing on One's Own*, *Nine Headed Serpent*, *Ship of Fools*, *Tower of Babel*, *Hand in Hand*, *Six Fingers*, *Six-Eared Macaque*—consists of different arrangements of 186 hand-dyed and waxed papercut elements. On different occasions you have made an analogy between the individual papercut units and the complete image in your works and the human individual and society. What was going on in your mind as you began considering how to grapple with the sheer abundance of material available now that you were working with a small number of assistants?

Wu Jian'an: The creation of *Seven Layered Shell* combines the efforts of almost twenty friends and students. Initially, I was planning to use leather, but later I found out that using leather to cut or carve 2,520 figures would take a whole year to finish. Since I had a deadline to meet, I had to find another way of creating the forms—paper soaked in different hues of watercolour. At first they were created to imitate the texture of leather, but the watercolour paper soon developed its own characteristic texture.

Seven Layered Shell makes me think of the spiritual world of human beings. I imagine the spiritual world as a floating heptahedron. It has seven large faces that can enclose viewers inside, revealing the seven aspects of

the spiritual world. When the viewer stares at the faces from inside the heptahedron, they see the reflection of their own spiritual realm. I was in a state of enchantment while recreating this vision.

John Tancock: By 2014 the exhibition *Transformation* marked a moment in your career when you decided it was time to look beyond paper cut, at least for the time being. Strikingly, the nucleus of the exhibition was a painting in encaustic (coloured wax) on wood, *Nirvana of the White Monkey*, which was your own idiosyncratic fusion of classic images of the parinirvana of Buddha Shakyamuni and the legend of the White Monkey. In the same exhibition you contrasted your own skills in *6,000 Painted Faces*, each one different although losing its individuality among the others, with *1,000 Sprites Drawn by Qingdao Art Students*. Would you please elaborate on what your thought processes were when you were getting ready for this exhibition?

Wu Jian'an, *1,000 Sprites Drawn by Qingdao Art Students*, 2014, installation. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



Wu Jian'an: At the time I was extremely confident in my handling of paper cut and collage and was trying to create even more complex works with multiple layers. But the more skillful you become in one technique, the more limited you become when you are trying to create something new. Confused but ambitious, I hoped to create something that transcends literature, by which I mean that I wanted to enrich the iconographic content as much as I could. That being the case, new materials and a new visual language become essential. I tried to diversify my practice through the use of handicrafts without compromising their functionality since they are the most distinctive characteristic of the creation. I hope to strengthen the rhetoric of the artworks and to create diverse narratives.

The most exciting part for me when I created the series of *Nirvana of the White Ape* was that I felt as if I were writing a novel or poem. I was aware that I wanted to tell a story related to the birth of the Monkey King, but I wasn't sure how to expand the story. At that time, I noticed that the different kinds of materials around me were all capable of conveying the ideas I wanted to express so I included all of them in my seven works, each material



Wu Jian'an, *Nirvana of the White Monkey*, 2014, coloured wax on wood, 180 x 250 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

leading to one part of the story. The story begins with the birth of the stone monkey who later grows into a white ape. Then the plot is split into two chains: one depicts enlarged human faces, the other depicts enlarged coloured dots. Although this plot delayed the narrative of the Monkey King, I felt relieved since I was finally able to see where the story was heading. I was guided by materials and techniques. Seeing the works gradually take shape, I suddenly realized what the story was about.

John Tancock: Most surprising was the appearance of a series of non-figurative works in watercolour and acrylic on board. You had previously shown no interest in abstract art, none at least that is visible in your work. I would be interested to know if this is the case, and why you decided to create your first abstract paintings at this stage in your career?

Wu Jian'an: Of course, I am interested in abstract art, but it was not my intention to start working in an abstract style. I find it rather difficult to describe my working process in detail. The abstract compositions in *Nirvana of the White Ape* did not evolve out of a desire on my part to explore abstraction. They emerged gradually as my mind wandered and I was beginning to test some new materials.

When I first started working on *Nirvana of the White Ape* I was mentally exhausted although I could not understand why. It was only when I figured out what form the work should take that I realized why I was so tired. It could all be traced back to the time when I created *Seven Layered Shell*. Each of the seven giant figures represented in the group of works was constructed from different combinations of 360 individual units, none of which could

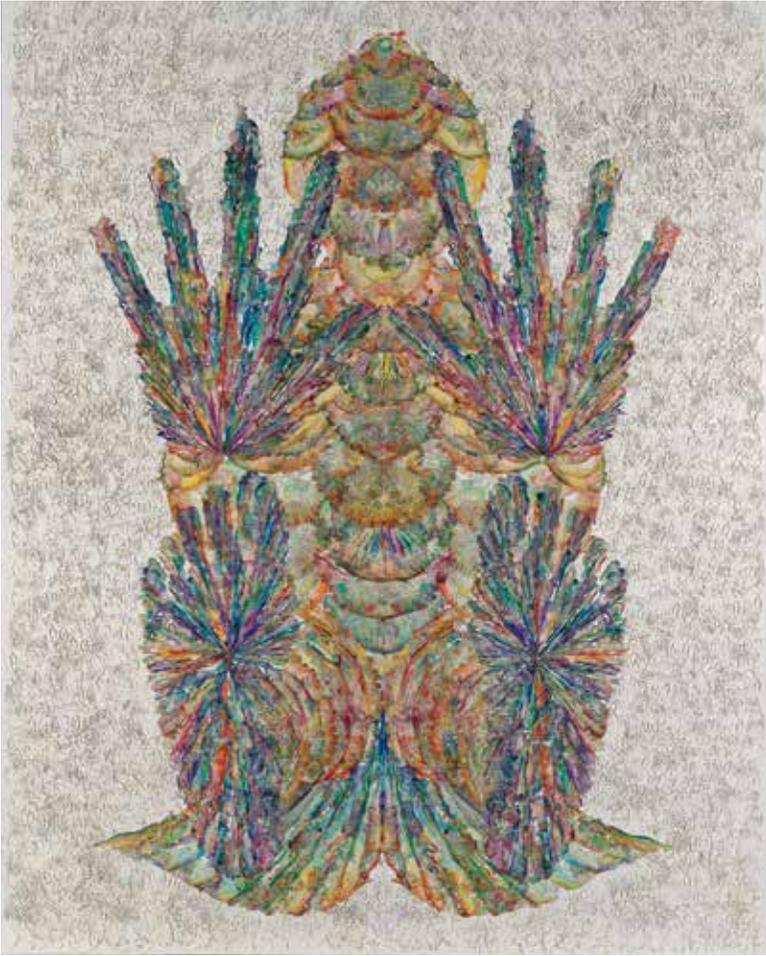
be duplicated. I needed to adjust each unit individually, trying to find the perfect composition. The whole process made me very tired, and it seemed impossible for me to escape from that situation.

As the storyline of *Nirvana of the White Ape* became clearer, I was reminded of the development of *Seven Layered Shell*. I suddenly realized that my desire to create perfect images from different arrangements of the 360 units, no matter how exhausted I became in the process, was my own subconscious limitation. Since I was working under the assumption that the majority takes precedence over the minority, it was plausible for me to sacrifice the individual for the benefit of the group. I was trying to find a way to use the 360 individual figures for the benefit of the seven giant figures. Until then I had never questioned the power of the majority over the minority, so I was never able to find a way to avoid the tedious process that made me so exhausted.

I was shocked by the realization that my subconscious attitude regarding the relationship between the whole and parts had been changing. Perhaps I over adjusted by rejecting the notion of the preeminence of the whole in favour of the equal value of all the constituent parts. I recognized myself as a brand new person! When I started emphasizing the role of individual consciousness in *Nirvana of the White Ape*, I was trying to make each brush stroke compete with all the others, resulting in an extraordinarily dynamic composition. That feeling made me really excited. It is not necessary to consider the whole, consider only the individuals. I believe this kind of mindset is at the origin of abstract art—the artist conveys the idea that the part is more important than the whole. Of course, the idea evolved and developed different connotations in the different kinds of work that conveyed the story of the Monkey King.

John Tancock: Looking at what has happened since 2015, there seem to be two basic tendencies that were foreshadowed in the contrasting approaches first seen in *Transformation*. Let's start with the continuation and deepening of your interest in folk art and traditional crafts. In 2015, you participated in *Transformation: A Tale of Contemporary Art and Intangible Cultural Heritage* held at Prince Gong's Palace Museum, Beijing. More recently there has been the exhibition held at the Ancestral Temple, Beijing. How did these exhibitions come about and how does your close identification with the notion of intangible cultural heritage co-exist with your position as a contemporary artist and as Associate Professor in the School of Experimental Art at CAFA? Is there a conflict?

Wu Jian'an: Although modern China tried to break the connection with tradition, appearances to the contrary it is undeniable that modern China is still firmly bonded with traditional ways of thinking. As China has been making an effort to protect Intangible Cultural Heritage in recent years, the desire to preserve history is gaining strength. As a Chinese artist, I'm



Wu Jian'an, *Herring Acquires Human Form and Becomes Nearly Immortal*, 2015, hand-dyed and waxed papercut, cotton thread, paper, 245 x 195 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

absorbed by tradition and I gain sustenance from it. I am distressed that so many fantastic handicraft techniques have disappeared forever. Now the government is finally making an effort to preserve it and present it in major cities. I am happy to see that. I don't care whether it is called "Cultural Heritage" or not. It is the same to me.

In the exhibition *Transformation: A Tale of Contemporary Art and Intangible Cultural Heritage*, I promoted the cooperation of artists and traditional artisans. It's a win-win situation since the conventional "Shadow Play" provides inspiration for contemporary Chinese artists who give new meaning to it, making it newly relevant for the contemporary world. Many handicrafts do survive in isolated locations, but what is lacking are target audiences. These exist primarily in big cities whereas traditional artisans are mostly located in rural areas. Artists and designers are their primary spokespersons since they understand the commercial system in big cities. They can efficiently transform handicrafts into a new form that is suitable for the current situation.

After *Transformation*, the relationship between traditional and contemporary was the focus of the exhibition *Echo of Civilization: Crossing Dunhuang* at the Imperial Ancestral Temple, also curated by Fan Di'an.

Wu Jian'an, *Herring Attempts to transform into Garuda, Revealing a Mix of Human, Fish and Bird Forms*, 2015, hand-dyed and waxed papercut, cotton thread, paper, 194 x 245 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



Wu Jian'an, *Ten Thousand Things*, 2016, hand-dyed and waxed papercut, cotton thread, paper, 280 x 600 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



John Tancock: Each of your exhibitions demonstrates a strong desire to widen the scope of your activities, none more so than your most recent exhibitions *Ten Thousand Things* at Chambers Fine Art and *Omens* at the Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum in 2016. The title *Ten Thousand Things* was inspired by the influential book by the German art historian Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*. In addition to *Shallow Mountain*, an installation consisting of 1184 individually carved bricks, and *Big Skeleton* in which you used hundreds of polished conch shells, you exhibited a series of collages titled *500 Brushstrokes*. These very ambitious papercuts show a continuation of your interest in a more abstract approach first seen in *Transformation*. What led to this sudden change of direction and can we expect further variations?

Wu Jian'an: The works in *Ten Thousand Things* are responses to questions first raised in *Nirvana of the White Ape*. Although I was satisfied with *Nirvana of the White Ape*, it left me feeling rather empty after it was over. I sacrificed the whole in order to emphasize the value of the individual parts; however, it was closer to a reversal of the original notion since it represents majority rule. The idea remains the same whichever way you look at it. The conclusion troubled me. I wanted to escape from the original dimensions into a broader realm.



Three aspects need to be considered when analyzing the relationship between the individual and society: society is more important than the individual; the individual is greater than society; both should be treated equally. These three modes represent the three basic systems in human society. People are not fully aware of the nature of the society in which they live, yet the influence is generally apparent in what they create or produce, especially artists. My goal is to represent a fourth relationship through the practice of art if I succeed in identifying it correctly. The motivation for these ideas probably comes out of analysis of human society rather than reflections on aesthetic questions. I dislike the three relationships I have attempted to describe because they are not ideal. I aspire to practice a kind of art that goes beyond rational analysis. In fact, it is entirely possible that as we attempt to create a blueprint for an ideal society in the real world, we are identifying new possibilities in the world of art.

Wu Jian'an, *Big Skeleton*, 2016, polished conch shells, 580 x 870 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

My exploration of the fourth relationship in *Ten Thousand Things* was reminiscent of the spirit of Don Quixote and had unanticipated results in the works I created. Although I did not achieve my ultimate goal, the process inspired me. It is too soon for me to say whether they show signs of progress, or setbacks that prevent me from progressing.

500 Brushstrokes series is the most iconic aspect of *Ten Thousand Things*. Each of the brushstrokes in the compositions is an abstraction, which could be interpreted as the equivalent of an individual in human society, or the cells that compose our body. Extracting each one of them from the original sheet of paper resembles the wake of an individual; the assembled collage represents one's fate. Chinese Literati calligraphies and paintings

Left: Wu Jian'an, *500 Brushstrokes #13*, 2016, ink, watercolour, papercut, and collage on *xuan* paper, 200 x 250 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

Right: Wu Jian'an, *500 Brushstrokes #7*, 2016, ink, watercolour, papercut, and collage on *xuan* paper, 190 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



are political deductions on paper—they aim to create blueprints for an idealized world. As a consequence, they reject “failed brushstroke,” just as society rejects failures. At a time in the development of a society when creativity is the domain of a minority, the pursuit of perfection is prestigious and highly desirable.

Today, however, when technology allows high-speed exchange of information, traditional literati culture seems like a beautiful but unrealistic utopia. These days people are able to express themselves freely on the internet, making casual comments and gestures, which ancient scholars would probably have regarded as “bad remarks.” As no one tries to delete the “failures,” both sides need to live together.

Wu Jian'an, *The Birth of the Galaxy—Pursue*, 2016, colour papercut and collage on *xuan* paper, 250 x 180 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



In *500 Brushstrokes* there are no good or bad brushstrokes. Individual brushstrokes blend together as a whole, competing for uniqueness to verify their existence. They are represented clearly and vividly in the same way that individuals are born with different characteristics. As the creator, I felt like an administrator in a social situation who is in charge of resource allocation, allowing each individual to shine despite his/her position in the hierarchy or size.

But as I explored further, I realized that resource allocation should not be determined by the whole, since individuals are hard to unify. This situation left me feeling thoroughly confused, as was also the case when my work on *Nirvana of the White Ape* forced me to move beyond the restrictions of the whole-part relationship to explore an unfamiliar space.

John Tancock: In *Omens* at the Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum, the major components were a twelve panel paper cut *The Birth of the Galaxy*, nine animals with physical abnormalities that doubled as musical instruments (*Omens*), and seventeen tree-shaped brass sculptures (*Daydream Forest*) that are based on your first series of paper cuts, *Daydreams*. How do they relate to each other?



Wu Jian'an: It was a mystical exhibition. At the centre of the installation, nine animals with physical abnormalities were conceived as musical instruments. I invited Xiao He and his group of musicians to play the instruments and improvise, turning the venue into the recreation of an ancient ritual. Thus, the show became an energy field in which to receive ancient energy where people could encounter different artworks and get drawn into a mysterious world.

For me the exhibition *Omens* represented the dawn of civilization. The reason behind it might be because I'm confused regarding the real complicated world in which we live. I want to start afresh. I'm not sure

Top: Wu Jian'an, *Omens*, 2016, installation view at Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

Bottom: Wu Jian'an, *Omens*, 2016, installation view at Shanghai Minsheng Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

what I saw, or heard, nor what it is, but I sense that something important is about to happen. Perhaps humans will achieve immortality through technological advances; perhaps it is the encounter of humans and aliens. Human civilization will be fundamentally changed. Omens portend future events. The deformed animals in the exhibition are not recreations of those mentioned in ancient records, so in fact they are closed for interpretation. By saying that, it means that before something really happens, people would not know what the omen is really about, or trying to tell. They are the maze that we are trying to understand.

John Tancock: Two final questions! How would you describe your position as an artist within China?

Wu Jian'an: Undeniably I recognize myself as part of a cultural elite, yet this identity brings me unease. Many people try to achieve elite status but most will not. Regardless of whether they exist in the political, business, or art field, members of elite groups come together because they share similar living and profit beliefs. Nowadays, the gap between different elites and the general public is unprecedentedly large. The public gradually loses patience with elite groups as they fall from the top of the pyramid. Privileged members of different categories of elite groups despise and deceive the public, and the results have been apparent throughout history. After the Reform and Opening policy, the Chinese elite has been looking towards Western elite culture and making strenuous efforts to identify with it in all respects. The situation that currently prevails in China needs to be analyzed with great precision so that we can redefine the essential characteristics of the cultural elite and the general public, eliminating the gap between two groups.

John Tancock: How would you describe your position as an artist in a worldwide context?

Wu Jian'an: Today every artist is part of the globalizing art community. Each artist is an element in this global art scene. They try to differentiate themselves as individuals within this global, loosely linked community, using all the resources, material, concepts, or techniques available to them. Maybe we will figure out a fourth relationship so that individual artists and the entire art community can establish a new balance. This stabilization will spread beyond the art world to society at large, bringing new wisdom to the world.

There seems to be a worldwide “stream of feelings” in the field of artistic creation and expression, by which I mean that many artists would unanimously express similar responses at some point. Although the form of expression varies, the internal feelings are similar. Many artists I have spoken to share my belief that we are part of the same “stream of feelings.” I think, for example, of Matthew Barney and Marcos Lutyens. We all believe that the past with all its traditions could be compatible with the future, at which time mythology and science fiction could unite as one.