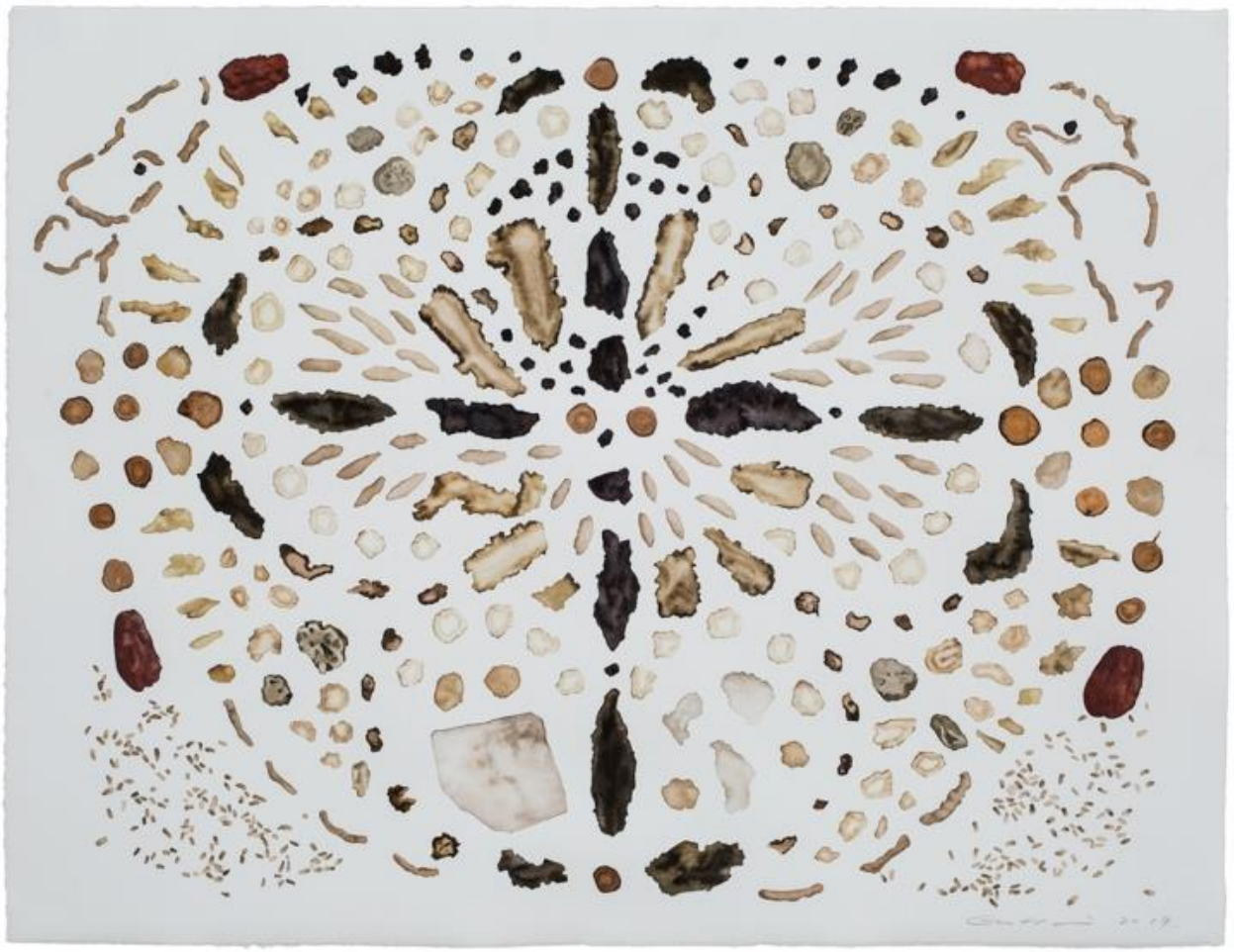
HYPERALLERGIC

The Art of Perception

In a new exhibition, the Chinese artist Guo Hongwei uses watercolor to vividly depict nature's forms — and gently tease the eye.

Edward M. Gómez March 14, 2020



Guo Hongwei, "Remedies for Sorrow Diagram No. 4 – Spirit-Healing Tea" (2019), watercolor on paper, 19.5 x 25.5 inches (all images courtesy Chambers Fine Art, New York)

Traditionally, in the West, serious art history likes its art made from durable stuff that withstands — or defies — the passage of time. Stone, bronze, oil on canvas, or even Corten steel — such materials often command attention, while certain kinds of drawings or works on paper may be regarded, however unfairly, as somehow possessing less heft.

Consider watercolors: With their inherently delicate, even fugitive-feeling wisps of color and strange luminosity, which sometimes seems to radiate out from pigment-soaked washes, works made with watercolor on paper can feel lightweight to viewers who favor the meat-and-potatoes solidness of oil painting. Never mind that, in the hands of such disparate artists as J.M.W. Turner, John Marin, or Yayoi Kusama, watercolor can become a remarkably expressive, potent, imagination-expanding medium.

The contemporary Chinese artist Guo Hongwei was born in Sichuan in 1982 and studied oil painting at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, from which he graduated in 2004. Over the course of his career, beyond his specialized training, he has explored very different media, from video to watercolor; now, he is focusing on the latter medium in *Guo Hongwei: Pareidolia*, an exhibition on view through April 4 at Chambers Fine Art's new location on the Lower East Side.

Guo Hongwei, "Painting is Collecting – Stones No. 16" (2017), watercolor on paper, 26.25 x 40.25 inches

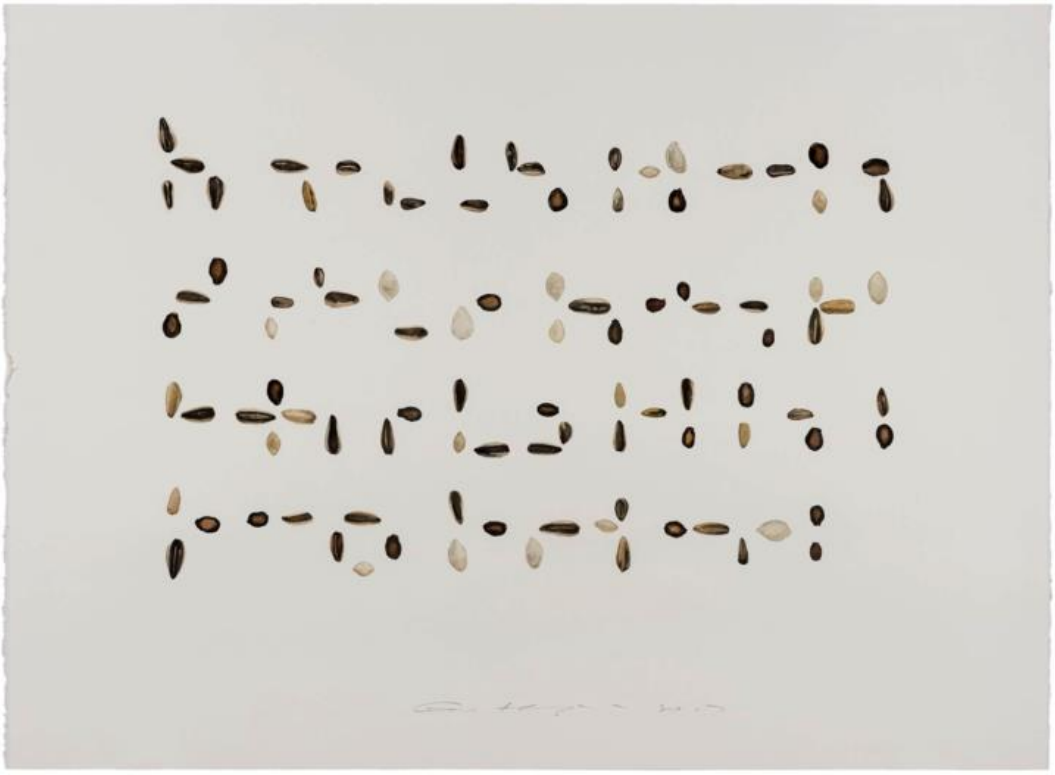
For more than a decade, watercolor's properties and expressive potential have been a mainstay of Guo's art. The works on display in this new presentation offer a concentrated, illuminating look at just how far this Beijing-based artist has pushed his investigation of watercolor in the service of a distinctive vision.

As the exhibition's title suggests — "pareidolia" refers to the detection of meaningful images in ambiguous or random patterns (think Rorschach inkblot tests) — the act of seeing and how images are perceived are as much Guo's subjects as the stones, birds, and seeds that he so deftly depicts.

In a recent e-mail exchange, the artist told me (his Chinese comments were translated by Ying Zhou, Chambers Fine Art's associate director):

> I first became interested in watercolor in the third and fourth years of college. I didn't want to be an ink artist but I was very interested in various marks created by water. When the binder — water or oil — reaches a certain amount, the process of painting then becomes half-controllable and half-out-of-control, which involves a lot of natural factors.

Like experienced ink-wash painters, skilled watercolorists like Guo understand the inextricable relationship between the basic elements of their art — the proportion of pigment and water on a brush and its effect in creating certain tones; the absorbency of the paper; and the essential role of time: how long it can or should take to make a stroke, or for paint to soak into a paper's surface, or for single strokes or passages of color-rich liquid to dry.



Guo Hongwei, "Letter" (2017), watercolor on paper, 22.5 x 30 inches

Remarkably, Guo, whose father was a calligrapher, and whose mother was a maker of Chinese ink-wash and mineral-pigment paintings, never formally studied watercolor technique. Instead, he explained, he experimented and taught himself how to manipulate a medium whose characteristics are considerably different from those of oil paint.

During his childhood, he recalled, “I lived in my father’s study.” There, he noted, he examined “all kinds of catalogues of ancient Chinese artists’ works, as well as ink stones and the seals of different dynasties my father had collected.” The paintings that impressed him when he was young were those that had been made with, as he noted, “large amounts of water or oil.” Such pictures became his favorites.

Guo never formally studied traditional Chinese painting either, but indicated, “I have been studying Western art since I was a child, including pencil, gouache, and sketching [techniques].” Later, he learned about Edgar Degas’ painted fans, made with watercolor, ink, and metallic colors, and Anselm Kiefer’s watercolor seascapes. During a trip to Europe, he had an opportunity to examine what he calls “Turner’s various daubing methods” in the 19th-century Romantic painter’s watercolors on view at Tate Britain, in London.

Several years ago, Guo began developing an ongoing series of watercolors titled “Painting is Collecting,” in which he has depicted groupings of mushrooms, birds, colored stones, plant leaves, and other subjects from nature. (Typically, he sets them all against plain, unpainted white backgrounds.)

Guo Hongwei, “Bird No. 4” (2011), watercolor on paper, triptych, each sheet: 39.5 x 26.25 inches

Some of these works are several feet wide; they all show tidy arrangements of varied specimens, evoking the look and feel of illustrated natural-history books from the 19th century, with their preoccupation with the minute details of different genuses and species.

In them, delicate applications of watery pigment give recognizable form to Guo's subjects, but what looks like scientific precision in his luminous images is not always self-conscious verisimilitude. Instead, Guo allows himself plenty of room in which to interpret his stones and other subjects — to propose the *idea* of representing such objects even while depicting them with what looks like scientific accuracy. (One of the signature details of his pictures — his use of chalk to outline a form — serves to hold a meniscus of pigment-filled water as it soaks down into his thick, absorbent paper, depositing a dollop of color on its surface.)

"I've always liked natural science," Guo explained in his e-mail, referring to its ability to "physicalize the very mysterious experience [of nature]." Additionally, he noted, pursuing the different fields of natural science can lead to an even "more mysterious experience" of their respective subjects, because "there are always more secrets behind the scientific explanations."

Guo Hongwei, "Cosmic Candies No. 2" (2018), watercolor on paper, 26.25 x 40.25 inches

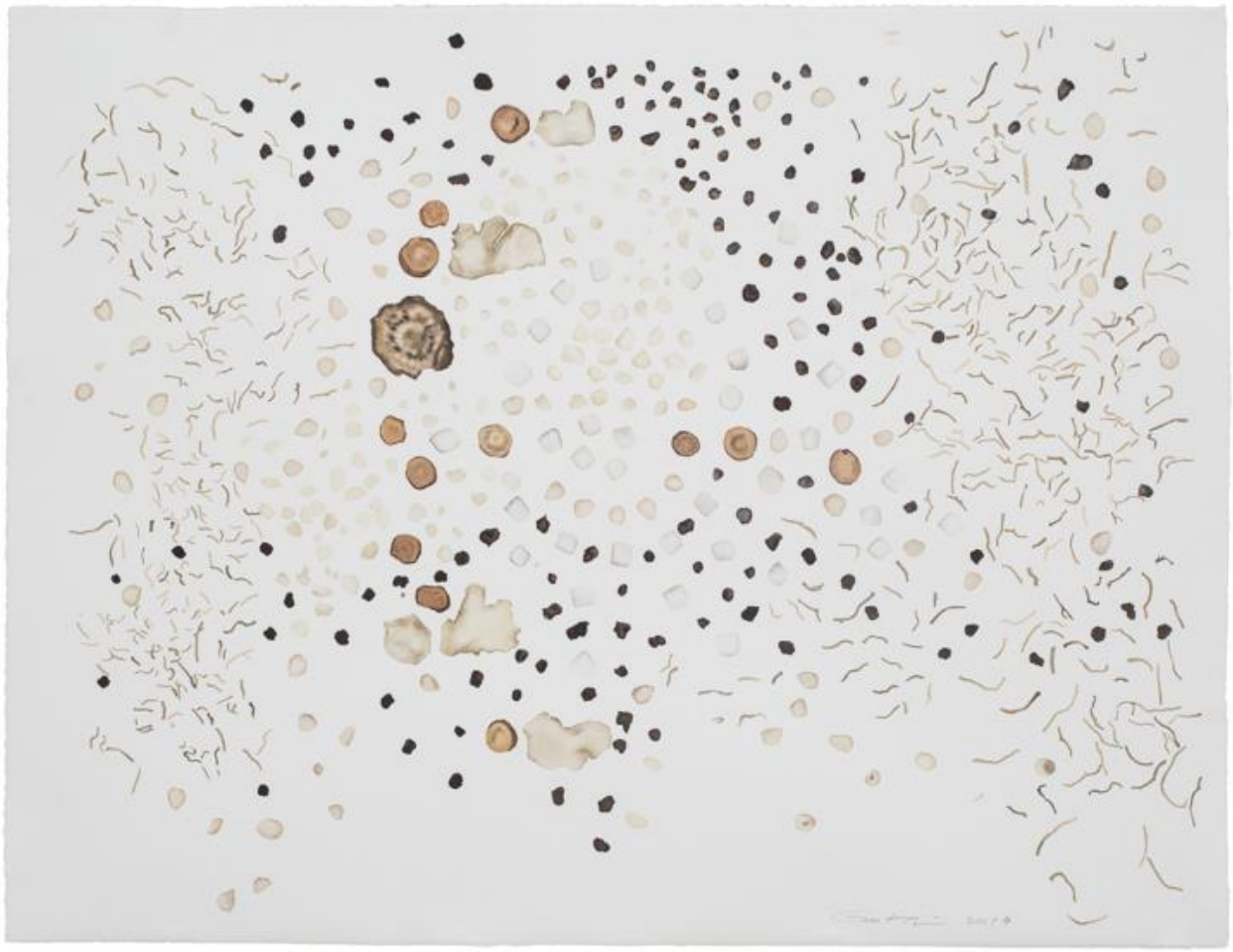
The works on view in *Pareidolia* invite viewers to discern meaningful shapes or patterns in compositions featuring depictions of real or imaginary stones, or seeds, or dried leaves and other ingredients of traditional Chinese herbal remedies. Sometimes, as in "Cosmic Candies No. 2" (2018), Guo lines up his precious subjects — dozens of translucent, colored, glassy stones — in neat, horizontal rows. Elsewhere, as in "Remedies for Sorrow Diagram No. 4 — Spirit-Healing Tea" (2019), a voluminous cloud of colorful flecks representing brown-toned seed pods and other dried ingredients of a curative potion creates an image that can be appreciated as much for its abstraction as for its specific cultural and historical references.

I asked Guo about the status of watercolors in China's art scene today. He replied:

> In Chinese contemporary art, the most common media [and genres] are installation, video, and conceptual, new-media, and online art. Ancient-method painting is at the bottom of the art-medium "discrimination ladder" […], let alone watercolor. Painting is still the most commonly used medium, although we often joke that a new medium always "laughs" at the old media, because they are not "contemporary" enough.

Still, as Guo explained, in Asia, the use of paper as a support for painting has had a long history, so Asian viewers might be "more receptive" than Westerners "to the various textures" artists can produce on paper. He wrote:

> At the beginning, many people called my watercolors "ink works," and I didn't like that. But then I discovered that I was influenced by too many traditional Chinese paintings in my childhood, and my painting style grew from this. Although they share many common traits — leaving blank space and transparency, blending and fluidity produced by using water as a medium — watercolor and ink also have many differences.



Guo Hongwei, “Remedies for Sorrow Diagram No. 3 – Cough Remedy” (2019), watercolor on paper, 19.5 x 25.5 inches

The artist noted that the “Western color system” is reflected in and expressed through watercolor’s varied hues. He added, “Because watercolor was not a major medium in the history of Western art history, it aroused my curiosity and my desire to use it.”

The big themes of Guo’s art — nature’s rich diversity and power, the mysteries of visual perception, and even longevity and the passage of time — belie the supposed delicateness of his medium. It is a technique he has harnessed and developed for his own purposes, placing him in a league that includes such artists as the late Belgian watercolorist Jean-Michel Folon (1934-2005), whose gently humorous fantasy images are imbued with a deep sense of humanism; David Levine (1926-2009), who was best known for his clever caricatures of literary figures in the *New York Review of Books* but who also painted exquisite watercolor views of Coney Island, Venice, and Rome; and Gabriel Garbow, a Minnesota-born, California-based contemporary artist whose homoerotic images of men and water revel in watercolor’s transparency and its ability to convey emotion evoked by light. (Check out Garbow’s Instagram feed.)

Guo has been thinking expansively about watercolor's expressive potential — and appears committed to his ongoing experimentation with it. As he noted in his recent e-mail message, "Using painting to study natural forms has opened up the distance between man and nature." At the same time, his approach has allowed him to "merge man and nature together."

About the inherent ambiguity that characterizes the partly realistic, partly abstract images he often creates, Guo observed, "Maybe I am also eager to use art to understand 'a logic of the imagination.'"

Guo Hongwei: Pareidolia *continues at Chambers Fine Art (1 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 4.*