
Art Review

LIN TIANMIAO: A CONTEMPORARY CHINESE WOMAN ARTIST Solo Exhibition at Asia Society Museum New York City

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A large scale installation of Lin Tianmiao, a leading contemporary Chinese female artist, filled the entire space of the Asia Society Museum in New York City from September 2012 through January 2013. This exhibition, entitled *Bound Unbound*, was her retrospective and first solo show in New York City. Most of works were produced after 1995 and also included her latest efforts. Ten years of Lin's artistic creativity was well selected and displayed by the Asia Society Museum Director and curator of the show, Ms. Melissa Chiu. This exhibition gave a large audience a five month window into Lin's impressive work.



The Proliferation of Thread Winding
(1995)

Lin Tianmiao was born in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, China, in 1961. She received a BFA in 1984 from Capital Normal University in Beijing and in 1989 studied at the Art Students League in NYC. From 1986 to 1995 she and her husband Wang Gongxin, a video artist, lived in the United States until they returned to Beijing to continue their work. In 1995, Lin began to create art seriously and is recognized as one of the few female Chinese artists active in the international art world.

Art of Lin Tianmiao

Lin's exhibition contains hundreds of common household objects, tools, sewing apparatuses, bones, and female and male figures that were wrapped, wound and bound with silk and cotton

thread and satin fabric. Her thin threads form a fashionable cloth cover which blurs the skin and outlines of real objects. The blend of loose lines and tight bindings outlines objects, melting hard and soft edges into the core of her artistic language. Childhood memories of helping her mother sew and make clothes for the family inspired Lin's artistic creative technique she calls *thread winding*. She began to use the winding method in her first major work entitled *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995), an installation of a bed filled with 20,000 stainless steel needles linked by threads to 20,000 raw cotton balls, and a television screen, and video player. This work shows the demanding requirements of making thread into cloth. The use of textile materials evokes an overwhelming feeling and understanding of the hard labor exerted by the workers in this time-consuming process. The mood of the work creates a meditative space.

In this large multi-media installation entitled *Bound and Unbound* (1997) Lin applies her winding technique by using unbleached white cotton thread to bind more than 600 ordinary household objects. Through her choice of objects Lin constructs a woman's home environment. Each object is tightly bound so its original function and colors are no longer visible or functional but symbolized. The objects



Sewing (1997)

become colorless and monochromatic so the viewer can contemplate their real significance. Women's domestic work is represented as a concealed duty. A large screen displays a video with a sound track of a pair of scissors in a woman's hand cutting hanging threads. The images and sounds create a didactic mood to contemplate the meaning of work or the meaningless of creating

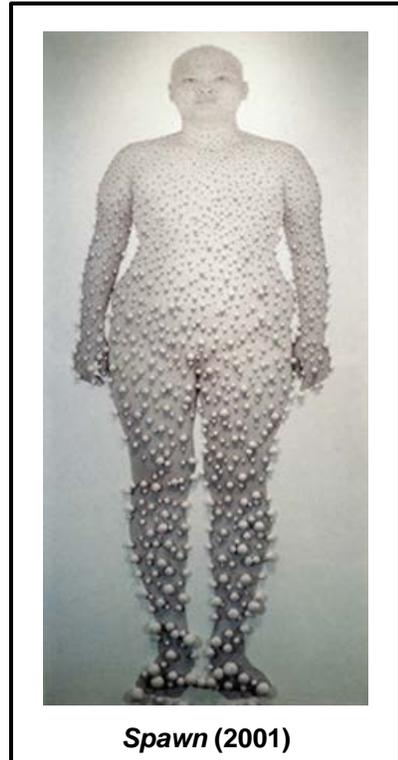


Focus (2001)

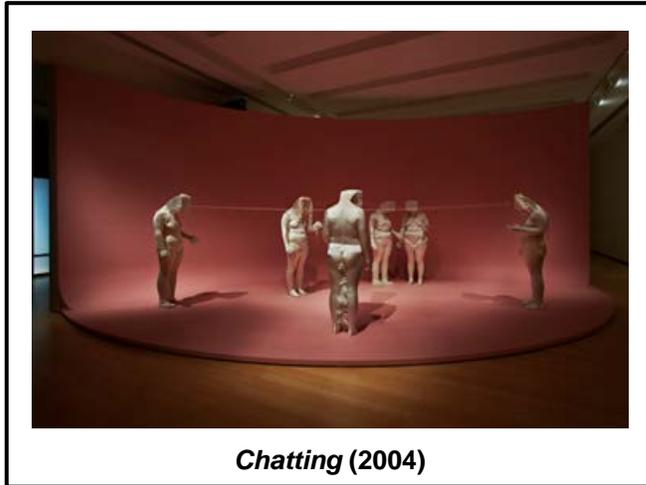
thread and the repetitive act of cutting it. Woman's domestic work is endless and repetitive. Lin gives a voice to the silent exploited women of China. This work questions the laborious task of sewing and other demanding domestic tasks assigned to Chinese women at home and in the textile industry. Another related object in the exhibit was a solitary sewing machine entitled *Sewing* (1997) completely wrapped in white cotton thread which represented women's connections to the textile industry and domestic sewing.

In 2000, Lin began to use images of her face and body as subject matters in her artworks. One of her best-known series is *Focus* (2001), in

which a Digital C-Type black and white image of herself is printed on canvas and reinterpreted by using sewing, embroidery, and interwoven human hair. This self-portrait evolved into a full figure image. *Spawn* (2001) is a full figure nude two times larger than real life. The black and gray digital print looks like a delicate drawing from a distance. Upon closer inspection the work is composed of tiny balls wrapped in cotton threads sewn into the canvas surface like water drops or soap bubbles. This adds a gentle tactile texture to the two dimensional work. This female body represents the artist's self-portrait. Lin shaved her head, so at first glance the person looks like a male. Shaving her hair in this image blurs the gender lines between female and male. Lin presented herself in this frontal view as a strong willed, confident, physically imposing woman, contradicting the stereotype of a diminutive Asian female. Her hair was removed because in a woman's appearance hair style is a decorative tool of beauty.



Spawn (2001)



Chatting (2004)

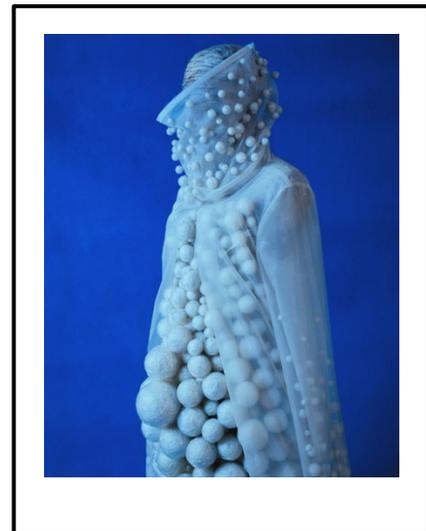
The installation entitled *Chatting* (2004) shows six females chatting with each other. The chat is extenuated by the audio installation of their conversations. The six female fiberglass body images wrapped in white silk satin are clones of Lin's body. A middle age female body type is represented by their full figures. The women are standing in a circle and connected by thin threads which represent a tenuous relationship

between women. Are their low audible conversations of substance or just friendly social talk in a sewing party? Their heads are made of audio speakers covered with fabric, and the sound of voices chatting is convincing.

This ambitious installation entitled *Here? Or There?* (2002), completed with her husband Wang Gongxin, contains nine larger than life-sized fiberglass figures and six video screen projectors with disturbingly loud audio tracks. The figures are dressed in Lin's embroidery and thread-winding techniques.



Here? Or There? (2002)



The gaudy complex costumes provide us with a new understanding of fashion and the garment industry in China's booming cities. The figures are posed in a flamboyant fashion show and are connected to the textile industry in which Lin worked. The background video images and loud sounds, created by her husband, are from construction projects that tore down traditional neighborhoods to erect high rise apartment complexes and shopping malls in Shanghai and Beijing. These malls are intended to display and sell the elaborate

clothing worn by Lin's fashionable figures. This work comments on the impact of rapid change in contemporary Chinese life. The noise, dust, debris, and pollution are the result of demolishing neighborhoods in Beijing to erect structures for the 2008 summer Olympic Games. Is this an indication of China's future: that to obtain a better life the past must be obliterated and populations displaced? The nine figures blur the boundaries between our emotional and physical presence, casting doubt on the meaning of our own existence.

In her 2011 work entitled *More or Less the Same*, Lin randomly displays synthetic human bones and farming and household tools such as a hammer, pliers, shovel, rake, hatchet, wrench, knife, fork, and spoon on a raised platform. Every bone and tool is wound with delicate, stainless steel, silk, and cotton threads in a gray color. Lin gave the human bones the function of body tools. For her the bones mean more than a basic internal human structure; they have social and mechanical functions like tools and parts of machines which may replace humans.



More or Less the Same (2011)

Lin is concerned that robotics and automation will replace and dislocate millions of Chinese farmers and workers.

In *All The Same (2011)* Lin horizontally arranged 200+ synthetic human bones from large to small on a wall. Each bone glistened after being wound with thin, delicate, shiny silk threads and organized by different color graduations.



All The Same (2011)

bones. They represent a social-political cultural concept of commonality of both

earlier artworks Lin limited her color choices, but in this work she uses a full range of colors. At the end of each bone, the silk thread hangs down to the floor and makes a pile. Lin said bones were the only perfect object left in the world. Bones do not have any difference in hierarchy, culture, classes, politics or social status. Bones represent a universal common element in each human who has an identical set and number of

genders and all races. The winding and binding of bones has another antecedent of gender disparity in Chinese history. This work evokes a memory of the cultural practice of binding and deforming the feet of wealthy women beginning in the Song Dynasty (960 -1276 A.D.). A woman with bound feet was tied to home life, as she could not leave the house without the assistance of family members or servants. The human foot, a functional representation of mobility, became erotic and dysfunctional after binding, in a manner similar to Lin's bound bones, tools, and household utensils.

Conclusion

Lin Tianmiao's artistic journey is based on her life experiences as a Chinese woman and textile designer who has lived in America and China. Her works of art represent traditional thread and cloth making combined with current fashionable fabrics. Using thin threads, Lin interweaves the past and present social issues of China in a critical feminist perspective about gender awareness and self-examination. Her work contains a profound message about gender equity, industrialization, and population displacement in China, concealed within images about the traditional female occupation of sewing and working with thread and fabrics. Her art objects and subjects are a metaphor of an evolving political system that lauds the achievements of the working class while concealing their plight. The soft, subtle, and clean silk threads hide the harsh realities of working and living conditions in rapidly developing contemporary China.

List of Artworks

1. *Bound and Unbound* (1997), floor installation of 600+ objects wrapped in white cotton thread, video projection on screen and sound track. Dimensions vary.
2. *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995), floor installation of 20,000 raw cotton thread balls, 20,000 stainless steel sewing needles and rice paper in a bed with multimedia. Dimensions vary.
3. *Sewing* (1997), sewing machine, white cotton thread, video projection, sound track. 35 ½ x 15 ¾ x 39 ¼ in.
4. *Focus* (2001), Digital C-Type print on canvas, hair, silk threads, and cotton threads. 95 ¼ x 5 x 69 ¾ in.
5. *Spawn* (2001), Digital C-Type black & white photo on canvas with cotton balls.

6. *Chatting* (2004), floor installation of six life-sized female fiberglass bodies, with silk threads and audio soundtrack. Dimensions vary.
7. *Here? Or There?* (2002), floor installation of nine life sized fiberglass figures, fabric, thread, mixed media and six video screen projectors with audio soundtracks. Dimensions vary.
8. One female figure from *Here? Or There?* (2002), floor installation of nine life sized fiberglass figures, fabric, thread, mixed media and six video screen projectors with audio soundtracks. Dimensions vary.
9. *More or Less the Same* (2011), platform installation of synthetic human bones, farming implements, tools and household utensils wrapped in stainless steel, silk and cotton threads. Dimensions vary.
10. *All the Same* (2011), wall installation of synthetic human bones wrapped with colored silk threads.

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The Asia Society – <http://asiasociety.org/>

Hong Kong Museum of Art – <http://hk.art.museum/>

Michael Bodycomb - <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/michael-bodycomb/11/637/6aa>

Galerie LeLong - <http://www.galerielelong.com/>

Lin Tianmiao and Wang Gongxin - <http://www.lintianmiao.com/>