

## Hua Jin: Conversing in the Passing of Time

FOFA Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal, February 24 –  
March 28, 2014

Tai van Toorn

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un peu comme la personnalité de William Lee que William S. Burroughs s'est inventée pour écrire son premier livre semi-autobiographique *Junkie* (1953). Au début, Nelson utilisait la mentalité du groupe de motards pour élaborer ses œuvres, mais suite au décès de son ami Erlend Williamson, qui était aussi son partenaire dans la création des œuvres par les *Amnesiacs*, le groupe de motards est devenu une bande qui construisait des sanctuaires à la mémoire du défunt.

Une autre œuvre, aussi inspirée par le paysage canadien, reprend les idées et les formes retrouvées dans la première série du projet *The Amnesiacs. Eighty Circles Through Canada (the Last Possession of an Orcadian Mountain Man)* (2013) est une nouvelle pièce réalisée pour le Power Plant. Bloquant l'entrée d'une des galeries, une étagère, construite dans le même bois récupéré que pour *Gang of 7*, obstrue l'entrée d'une salle d'où provient le son de diapositives qui défilent. Sur cette étagère sont déposés des caméras, des rouleaux de film, des cordes d'escalade, des vêtements. Lorsque les visiteurs la contournent, un écran projette des photographies du paysage prises sur la route entre Banff et Vancouver. Sur chacune des vues, on voit des cercles de pierre dans lesquels des feux de camp sont éteints. Assis devant l'écran, les visiteurs peuvent voir leur ombre apparaître dans les photographies. Ils font maintenant autant partie de l'œuvre que le spectre d'Erlend Williamson lui-même, à qui les effets personnels sur l'étagère appartiennent.

L'exposition *Amnesiac Hide* est une métaphore sur le départ des êtres chers. Autant ceux-ci quittent un environnement tangible et leur présence concrète disparaît, autant ils sont à la fois présents, posés non loin de ceux qui leur donnent un second souffle. Avec ses installations, Mike Nelson présente également les chapitres d'un roman d'aventures qui évolue avec les lecteurs, même des années après son écriture; les structures narratives proposées par l'artiste britannique permettent aux lecteurs d'adapter l'histoire à leur convenance. La génération Beat a beau être histoire du passé, on peut tout de même avoir cette envie du voyage relaté dans ses récits. Nelson ainsi que ses *Amnesiacs* servent d'interprètes qui décryptent les indices et les souvenirs laissés dans le passé; ils les reconstituent dans le but de clarifier cette frontière entre la présence et l'absence.

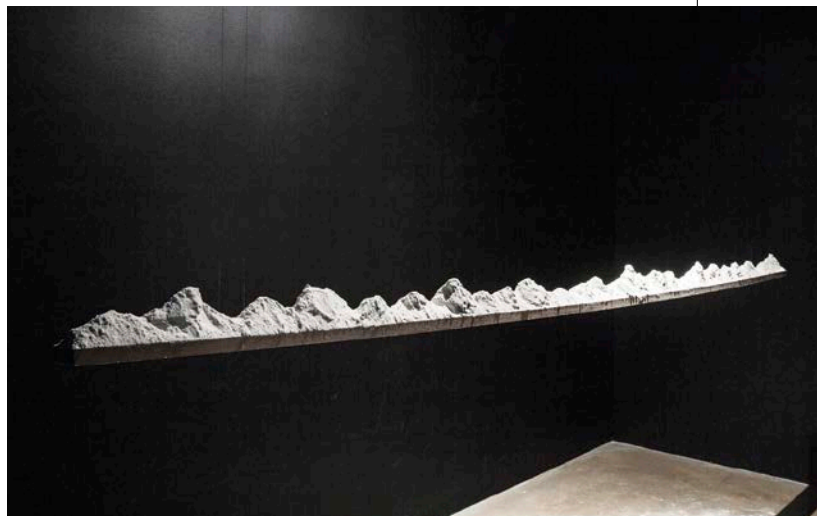
1. Avant d'être présentée au Power Plant, cette œuvre avait auparavant été vue à la galerie 303 de New York qui est l'une des galeries représentant l'artiste. Lorsqu'elle n'est pas montrée au public, l'installation est déposée sur un terrain dans le nord de l'État de New York, un environnement semblant parfait pour ces véhicules à l'esthétique surannée.
2. Traduction libre des mots de Mike Nelson : [t]he Amnesiacs started off as a way of coping with all the heavy theoretical stuff that I had absorbed in the Eighties; Sean O'Hagan, "Lost in Space", *The Observer*, 23 septembre 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/sep/23/art>

Eunice Bélidor est une commissaire émergente et une auteure. Elle est candidate à la maîtrise en histoire de l'art, avec cheminement particulier en pratique commissariale à l'Université York à Toronto (2014). Elle détient également un Baccalauréat en histoire de l'art de l'Université Concordia (2012). Elle se spécialise en art performatif, en design ainsi qu'en art contemporain haïtien. Ses écrits ont été publiés dans le *Journal of Curatorial Studies* et dans *Invitation* de la galerie Art Mûr.

## Hua Jin: Conversing in the Passing of Time

Tai van Toorn

**FOFA GALLERY, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY  
MONTREAL  
FEBRUARY 24 –  
MARCH 28, 2014**



Artistic depictions of mountains usually conjure visions of enormity. However, Chinese artist Hua Jin privileges the small over the sublime in her solo exhibition of two vividly contrasting, mixed-media mountain landscapes, *Conversing in the Passing of Time*, at Concordia University's FOFA (Faculty of Fine Arts) Gallery, dedicated to artworks by university students and faculty. Jin constructs intricate topographies that "create a mind-landscape" to explore temporality.<sup>1</sup>

Before exploring these works, I point out details—perhaps beyond the artist’s control or not of her choosing—marring the exhibition. There were no wall texts—whether signs, cards or arrows—to indicate the exhibition title, the artist’s name or the location of the display tucked in an elusive corner room. Although this cramped setting produced intriguing spatiotemporal effects to be discussed below, a larger room may have better suited Jin’s stated intent to explore the mental detachment espoused by Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Locational dilemmas yielded interpretive problems. The exhibition lacked captions specifying the titles and materials of the artworks, facts that would have enriched the visitor’s interaction with Jin’s subtle creations.

This omission of documentation might be justifiable if it were a deliberate aesthetic strategy of the artist or gallery. However, this interpretation is unlikely as the gallery provided information about the exhibition on its website and in two printed brochures. Unfortunately, these documents were easy to overlook on the gallery’s cluttered counter. The texts, by Jin and curator Sally Lee, are somewhat difficult to follow, particularly the English translation, which contains some awkward passages and grammatical errors. Jin’s numerous references to French critical theorists, psychoanalysis and Buddhism risk alienating audiences unversed in these subjects.<sup>3</sup> Although one welcomes her intercultural, interdisciplinary thinking, readers would benefit from further elaborations upon the interconnections between the authors she cites and her artworks.

The first of the two works on display, *Traditional Chinese Medicine* (2012), layers different forms of passing time. On a wall, a black-and-white photograph is ensconced in a white box evoking a niche, alcove or other architectural recess. *Traditional Chinese Medicine* heightens one’s consciousness of unfolding durational time by inviting an extended visual perusal of the crisp minutiae of what appears to be vegetation on a craggy cliff, mountain face or tree bark. In fact, this is a magnified image of a small medicinal herb. This plant is triply preserved in time through being dried, immortalized in a photograph and enshrined as a botanical specimen in an aseptic, white, open cabinet. Yet, the actual plant may escape atemporality upon intervening in the body’s variable cycles of illness, recuperation and vitality.

Meanwhile, *Traditional Chinese Medicine* strategically marks an abrupt spatiotemporal transition in the exhibition. To the left of the white box, a doorway leads to a long, narrow, high-ceilinged black chamber housing the striking installation, *Mountain* (2013). The artist used fishing line to suspend a brown plank—about ten feet long and four inches wide—from the ceiling. The wood functions as a shelf or elongated pedestal for a diminutive white, mountain chain of manually arranged flour.<sup>4</sup> Jin shrinks weighty, massive landforms to airy, delicate masses of a few inches tall that float surreally from nearly invisible strings at about four feet above ground. Bright lighting casts a dramatic shadow on the floor and heightens the work’s otherworldliness.

*Mountain* induces multiple registers of temporality in relation to space, embodiment, materials and vision. The constrained, almost claustrophobic, black room intensifies viewers’ awareness of embodied, durational time as they attempt to cautiously navigate the space without bumping into the delicate work and adding to the powder dusting on the floor. One is nonetheless tempted to gently push the plank to see it swing through

the air. Whereas *Traditional Chinese Medicine* addresses the restoring of spiritual equilibrium and physical vigour, *Mountain* emphasizes instability, disintegration and discomfort. For Jin, the suspension of fragile materials signals the ephemerality and “instability” of existence.<sup>5</sup> *Mountain* hangs literally and figuratively in the balance of time.

The constricted exhibition space encourages a prolonged, close inspection of the work’s irregular, grooved surfaces, peaks and dips. *Mountain* is an imaginary topography rather than a model. Upon gazing slowly, eyes and mind discover not only mountains and ravines but also waterfalls, icebergs, sand dunes, stalagmites, lunar craters, clouds, cake icing, dust bunnies, animal-like forms and excavated bones. The flour piles incite continuous mental shifts in scale as beholders imaginatively project themselves into the diminutive scenery. Viewers also transition between glancing at vertical segments and sequentially scrutinizing horizontal panoramas.

In *Mountain*, the beholder’s lived temporality intersects with allusions to distant eras and sudden upheavals in geological history. Mountains appear eroded and powder evokes deposits of ash from a volcanic eruption, while the tenuously suspended plank suggests a tectonic plate on the verge of seismic activity. Meanwhile, flour and wood integrate the cyclical time of plant growth and the seasonal time of human labour, such as sowing, harvesting, threshing, hewing and processing raw materials. Similarly, *Traditional Chinese Medicine* refers to traditional practices of cultivating and preparing herbs. Flour, bearing traces of the artist’s touch, is a poignant indexical record of artistic labour.

Her works are also timeless and placeless. These landforms are both individualized and anonymous, even alien, as they do not correlate with specific geographical locations. The floating flour island speaks of Montreal, an island whose name refers to a small mountain; however, Jin’s jagged forms also recall much loftier, far-off summits. The title *Traditional Chinese Medicine* makes reference to Chinese culture yet the work appears as a decontextualized, enigmatic fragment. *Mountain* could be multiple forms existing simultaneously or a single form metamorphosing over time. *Traditional Chinese Medicine* is an ephemeral plant eerily resembling an ancient landform. Jin proposes a thoughtful monument to the miniature and temporalizes topography.

1. Hua Jin and Sally Lee, “Conversing in the Passing of Time,” FOFA Gallery, Concordia University, accessed February 27, 2014, <http://fofagallery.concordia.ca/upcoming/620-2/>.
2. Jin and Lee, “Conversing,” accessed February 27, 2014.
3. Hua Jin and Sally Lee, “Hua Jin: *Conversing in the Passing of Time*”, 2014, FOFA Gallery (Montreal), n.p.; Hua Jin, [Untitled], interview by Sally Lee, 2014, FOFA Gallery (Montreal), n.p.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*

Tai van Toorn has a doctoral degree from the Department of Art History and Communications Studies of McGill University, Montreal, and is currently working on a book manuscript on issues of perception, site specificity and Canadian culture in land art made by Canadian artists during the 1960s and 1970s.