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Serving Tea and Filling-water-up, Neither Sculpturing Nor Modeling: Zhang Yu's Artistic Expansion After "Fingerprints"

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Abstract

The creative art of contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Yu, from the ink wash experiments in the 1980s to today's contemporary experiments, has been developed for nearly forty years, and now it has entered a period of summary. This article focuses on Zhang Yu's second decade of the new century, and that is the latest phase of his artistic expansion. Since 2013, the series of up-works that Zhang Yu has published—Ink, Tea, and Water—also started thinking about the up-philosophy. With the expansion of Zhang Yu's art, it is obviously to see the transformation which is gradually from the daily to the extraordinary, from the behavior to the nature, and finally it ascends to the spirit!

Key Words

Zhang Yu, *Fingerprints*, *Serving Tea*, *Filling-water-up*, *Flesh Entering Mud*

The creative art of contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Yu, from the ink wash experiments in the 1980s to today's contemporary experiments, has been developed for nearly forty years, and now it has entered a period of summary. This article focuses on Zhang Yu's second decade of the new century, and that is the latest phase of his artistic expansion.

1. After *Fingerprints*

Zhang Yu's *Fingerprints* are known to many; in my opinion, fingerprints are imprints of the heart. Interestingly, I found a limited edition of *The Heart Sutra* lying around in Zhang's studio. I opened the book and found it to be filled with blank pages, leaving traces of *Fingerprints* as imprints of the heart.

It is a consensus in ancient China that paintings are reflections of the soul. This saying comes from Song artist Kuo Jo Hsu, who stated that: "Imprints of the heart comes from the will of the heart, that which takes form and leaves an imprint the aligns with the heart."

However, since the *Fingerprints* series, Zhang has boldly detoured from painting and opened up a new path.

These works were already on the fingertips of Zhang Yu; even skills and techniques were not required since the artist already understood that breakthroughs



Figure 1. Zhang Yu. *Fingerprints*. Acts, Glass, Nail Polish, 2010.

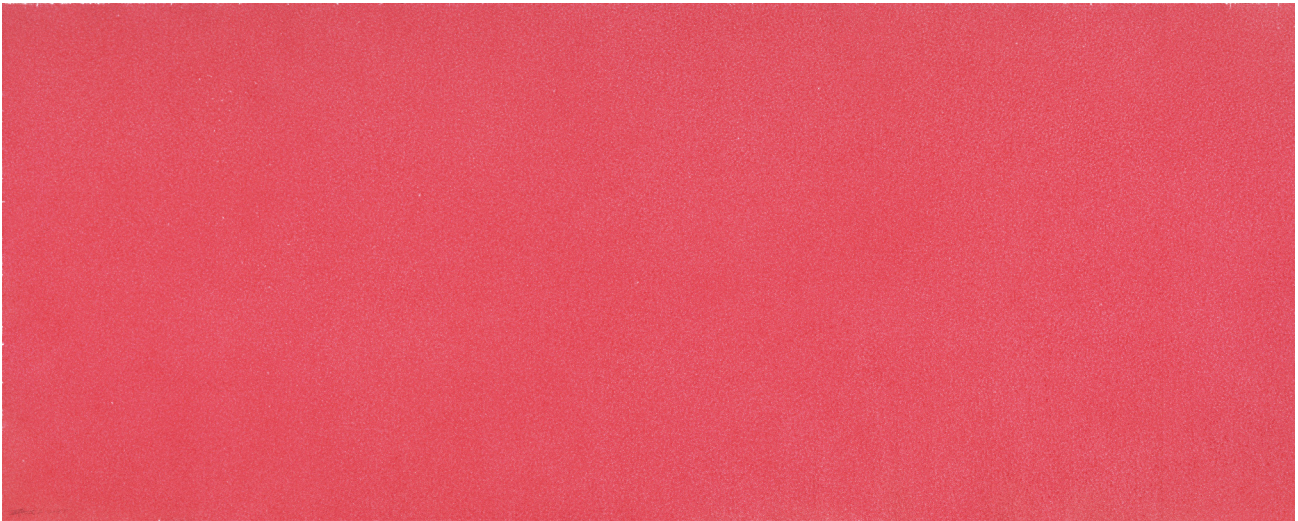


Figure 2. Zhang Yu. *Fingerprints*. Xuan paper and vegetable pigments, 230×560 cm, 2006-2007.

in ink paintings were not at the tip of the pen, but take form through contemporary methods. The moment Zhang Yu begins his work on the xuan paper, rather than subjectively trying to create form, Zhang adopts a method that operates without form, combining the heart, the heavens, and the artwork as one. *Fingerprints* was born in the essence of the heart, unlike artists who follow a fixed form even before the movement of the paintbrush. Zhang Yu strives to break through the boundaries of painting through *Fingerprints*. Although most art critics still view these works as paintings, Zhang Yu is in truth attempting to fight graphic arts in every instant the wet fingers touch the xuan paper.

Personally, I am more attracted to the Zhang's unique *Series of Ups*, which was created after *Fingerprints* and includes works such as *Ink Feeding*, *Filling-water-up*, and *Serving Tea*. The displays of these works are expressed in a much purer form, abandoning human contact with paper altogether. Zhang Yu's series of up-works provides a peek into the inner world of the artists. My favorite is *Serving Tea*. The emergence of this new series marks the birth a new artistic dialogue and breakthrough in artistic concepts.

A good artist is one with the ability of thought, and one who is capable of expressing thought through artistic language. Zhang Yu is undoubtedly a contemporary artist "with the ability of thought". Not only is this manifested through his success in "experimental ink art", but also in his continuing innovation. Dissatisfied with the status quo, Zhang repeatedly tries to break boundaries. These endeavors are seen through Zhang's abandonment and adoption of artistic ideas, which then form new philosophies and concepts that finally translated into cutting-edge languages of art.

2. The Art of *Serving Tea*

Zhang Yu's new exhibition, titled "Beyond Ordinary", is presented in the ethereal land of Hsinchu. What does this exhibition refer to as *beyond ordinary*? The extraordinary is in contrast with the daily and mundane. At Innoart Gallery, Zhang Yu once again presents us with his "tea ceremony". To pour tea into a cup is an



Figure 3. Zhang Yu. *Serving Tea*. Art Initiative Gallery, Hong Kong, 2016.

extremely ordinary act in daily life. However, the xuan paper under the tea bowls is *beyond ordinary* and includes an artistic possibility. Because of this, *Serving Tea* lies in between the ordinary and extraordinary.

However, what *Serving Tea* expresses is more than the material aspect of Eastern aesthetics. At the opening of the exhibition, a speaker mentioned the art of Cai Guo-Qiang and commented that there are similarities between Cai Guo-Qiang and Zhang Yu. If the works of Cai Guo-Qiang are categorized as the “ink of fire”, perhaps the works of Zhang Yu are the “ink of tea”. The art of Zhang Yu is more than breakthroughs in material; what Zhang wishes to achieve is to “surpass painting”. Zhang does not aim to return to images, but rather, strives to create graphic works through xuan paper. Adopting a methodology of “Naturalness-Embodimentalism”, Zhang goes through the three stages of performance, installation, and graphic art, displaying the power of natural transformations of art in central China.

Abstract Expressionism, led by artists in the US, distinctively highlights the “subjectivity” of human beings; each painting includes the “self” of the artist. However, the Naturalness-Embodimentalism of Central China involves innovative and contemporary methods

that mimic nature. Naturalness-Embodimentalism, or Embodimentalism Art with Naturalness¹, are terms coined by me in the attempt of separating it from the European concept of Abstract Expressionism. Zhang Yu is one of the representing figures of Naturalness-Embodimentalism.

In the following sections, I will explain Naturalness-Embodimentalism through Zhang Yu’s *Serving Tea*. From a macro viewpoint, the *Serving Series* is an attempt of breaking from contemporary Chinese art; from a micro viewpoint, these works are also manifestations of a “New Chineseness” in contemporary ink paintings.²

The English title of this work is translated into *Serving Tea*; however, in my opinion, *Doing Tea Up* is the better translation. *Doing Tea Up* brings out the Chinese meaning of 上 (*shang*, the Chinese translation for “up”), which is the essence of Zhang Yu’s works.

At the exhibition held in Changjiang Museum of Contemporary Art in Chongqing, Zhang’s *Serving Tea* was presented with 32 rows of white bowls, each row with six pieces, 192 pieces in total. The display in Hsinchu, however, is much simpler, with four rows of glass bowls, each row with four pieces, 16 pieces in total. Interestingly enough, the artist always uses local materials as a connection to the community. In



Figure 4. Zhang Yu. *Serving Tea* (now finished), porcelain bowl, pu-erh tea and water. Yizheng Gallery, 2016.

Chongqing, Zhang used the local Tuocha, which has deeper colors, while Oriental Beauty Tea was used in Hsinchu, and the glass bowls of the Hsinchu exhibition were created using local glass crafting techniques; even the water was collected within the area. A change to local materials led to surprisingly new and unexpected quality.

Zhang Yu's *Serving Tea* series expresses his philosophy of upward mobility through five aspects:

First, Doing "Tea" Up

In Chinese culture, the act of pouring tea into a tea bowl is expressed with the Chinese character for up: 上 (*shang*), a concept that spreads throughout this series. Regardless of Tuocha or Oriental Beauty Tea, the tea is always poured in small amounts into the bowl; this act of pouring is called *shang* in Chinese: doing tea "up". Attention should be paid to the action and state of mind during the act of pouring tea. The pourer controls the tea so that it flows slowly, and stops abruptly once the tea forms Surface Tension. The action is complete once the tea reaches the ideal level, since the following process involves natural and instinctive forces. The process of "serving tea" requires certain procedures and does not end with one serving. Rather, the entire process depends on the different conditions of the climate and the humidity of the environment. The number of servings is determined by the extent of completion of the work.

Second, the "Upward" Motion of Evaporating Tea

What happens after the tea is served? During the following month or longer, the tea will gradually evaporate in a slow upward motion, or, "up and up". This is the most central meaning of this work. According to Daoist philosophy in Chinese culture, this has a hint of the notion "the highest virtue is to have the temperament of water". Furthermore, the word "highest" also entails the meaning of "up". Why is this the most central and important aspect of this notion? Both the tea residue on the tea bowl and stain of tea on the paper require the evaporation of tea. The same principle of evaporation goes to works *Filling-water-up* and *Ink Feeding*. We witness how water falls from the sky into the bowls and evaporates back into the air of Mount Wutai. This echoes Confucius's teaching: "When have the heavens and earth said anything? The four seasons and living beings of this world all operate naturally. What is there to say?" This is the manifestation of the "localness" of Zhang Yu's art, a quality that prompts his art to form a close dependence on the climate and environment of the site of exhibition. The temperature and barometric pressure make each session of *Serving Tea* an incident unique to the local surroundings.

Next is the coloring of the bowls

The third is the coloring of the tea bowls. After the

tea evaporates, it stains the outer and inner parts of the bowl, transforming the tea bowls into exquisite artworks through the natural coloring process. The latest experiment in Hsinchu brought forth new results and effects, since this time, rather than using traditional white ceramic bowls, Zhang Yu chose Hsinchu's famous glassware as material. These transparent glass bowls allow viewers to see the process of tea being poured into the bowls, a view that downward vision does not enable. What's even more surprising, is the colorful and near-divine arched semi-circle of light projected onto the xuan paper underneath the tea bowls in the dim light of dusk.

Fourth, the serving of tea on paper

This fourth step is also significant; the "upward" concept involved in this process is perhaps at the core of graphic art. Zhang Yu placed five or six layers of xuan paper under the bowls, the water and tea creating unique visuals, ultimately concluding the act and installation of this work as graphic art. Through the five different hues of tea, the beverage acts as ink. Chinese traditional paintings and calligraphy stresses the natural outlook of brushstrokes and even compare ink color with the water stain left by leakage. Art master Leonardo da Vinci also wrote in his notes that artists should discover the movements of the human body and the clouds through the patterns of marble; in other words, artists should seek for art within traces of nature. Zhang Yu, a believer of theoretical thinking, expressed that this is another method of expression related with Chinese ink art. For ink paintings to cultivate modernity and contemporary qualities, ink paintings must break through the boundaries of ink as the sole media and transform on a grander level. That being said, what are the practical methods that might allow ink paintings to become more modern? In the works of Zhang Yu, tea replaces ink, blooming into the final work in slow motion. This is a process of "Naturalness-Embodimentalism", distinct from the artificial natural quality of abstract expressionism. This work gives birth to six pieces of works on xuan paper, works that exclude the artificial control of human beings and still manage to harbor the essence of ink.

Finally, installing the artwork-on-paper onto the wall

The final stage is when the works are installed on the wall. The mixture of water, tea, and paper create six unique works that are slightly indifferent in the intensity of color. These works differ from traditional Chinese ink paintings; although Zhang Yu's method abandons the use of ink in *Serving Tea*, it nevertheless embodies the spirit of Chinese ink paintings.

What is the meaning of *Serving Tea*, *Ink Feeding*, and *Filling-water-up*?



Figure 5. Zhang Yu. *Serving Tea* (installation). Act of serving tea, xuan paper, porcelain bowl, pu-erh tea, water. Art Initiative Gallery. Hong Kong, 2016.

When tea, ink, or water, evaporates with each session, the repeated pouring and evaporation process is like the comings and goings of life, an ongoing and endless cycle. To put the idea in more philosophical terms, each container goes through the process of fulfillment and emptiness. The works of Zhang Yu are filled with an existential consciousness, a quality that may even be seen as the “existential art” of contemporary Chinese culture since this series not only manifests ideas through natural methods but ultimately present the existence of human beings.

Zhang Yu inspires the Chinese contemporary art world that only profound contemplation brings forth breakthroughs. Zhang’s “existential art” is an embodiment of his philosophy through nature.

3. Philosophy of *Filling-water-up*

Since 2013, the series of up-works that Zhang Yu has published—Ink, Tea, and Water—also started thinking about the up-philosophy. With the expansion of Zhang Yu’s art, it is obvious to see the transformation which is gradually from the daily to the extraordinary, from the behavior to nature, and finally it ascends to the spirit!

Therefore, Zhang Yu filmed in Wutai Mountain in the expression of his artistic philosophy so that he could convey the up-philosophy through images in the videos. This series of works revolves around the thinking of the

up-art, opening up the relationship between many of his works, and also opening up ways of thinking in light of contemporary art.

In the subtitles of the promotion clip, it is easy to trace the artist’s ways of thinking:

Filling-water-up is both ordinary and not ordinary.

Filling-water-up is a mode, a concept, a text.

Filling-water-up is a motion based in time.

Filling-water-up is a reconstitution of nature, history, reality and civilization.

It looks a daily behavior to pour water into the Luohan bowl, but in this artistic context, filling-water-up has become an extraordinary behavior.

How does the daily behavior turn into an extraordinary one? The artist filling up the bowl with water and the water evaporating upward in the bowl are two different ups. The English for the action of pouring is filling water, but I strongly recommend to interpret it into *Filling-water-up*. The key is the word “up”.

The tea will gradually evaporate in a slow upward motion, or, “up and up”. This is the most central meaning of this work.

According to Chinese Taoism, this is the conception of “the highest virtue is to have the temperament of water”. Water can eventually be attributed to the way of heaven, and because of its virtue, it can cultivate the world. Laozi’s *Tao Te Ching* first advocated the highest virtue is to have the temperament of water, “Water is good for all things and does not fight...so it is almost like

Tao, and water is close to Tao”. The so-called “human impermanence exists, the heart is impermanent, the best kindness is like water, and it depends on the state of mind of humanity”. It is also mentioned by Taoism, “There is no talk about the great beauty of heaven and earth, no talk about the clear laws of the four seasons, and no talk about the truth of all existence!”

The *Series of Ups* requires the evaporation of water. We witness how water falls from the sky into the bowls and evaporates back into the air of Jade Rock Peak in Mount Wutai. This echoes Confucius’s teaching, “When have the heavens and earth said anything? The four seasons and living beings of this world all operate naturally. What is there to say?” It is also mentioned by Taoism, “There is no talk about the great beauty of heaven and earth, no talk about the clear laws of the four seasons, and no talk about the truth of all existence!”

Interestingly, Zhang Yu divides his creation made in *Mount Wutai* into two parts, which are presented respectively in the Buddhist space and in the natural time and space. The following is the statement quoted from Zhang:

“There are two main threads connecting Filling-water-up in Mount Wutai: one is the contextual relationship between Filling-water-up and temple culture, which is also the contextual relationship between people and temple culture; the other is the cosmic relationship between Filling-water-up and nature, which is also the cosmic relationship between human-kind and nature. In the contextual relationship between ‘Filling-water-up and temple culture’, I chose Yuguo Temple, a Nanshan Temple with dense crowds, special architectural specifications, and an aura that connects the inside and the outside. That is to say, Filling-water-up in Yuguo Temple mainly focuses on ‘the relationship between Filling-water-up and temple culture’, ‘the relationship between Filling-water-up and life’, and ‘the relationship between

Filling-water-up and nature in the universe’. However, the presentation of ‘the cosmic relationship between Filling-water-up and nature’ in Yuguo Temple is limited, because the uninterrupted movement of the crowds will obscure the details of expression. In order to present the whole spirit of Filling-water-up in this work, I also chose Cuiyan Peak in Zhongtai, which is relatively far away from temples, sparsely populated, surrounded by clouds and mist, and has a wide view, so that Filling-water-up can directly relate to the ‘cosmic relationship between humans and nature’. Hence, without the thought of offering incense and worshipping Buddha, the viewers can only focus on my act of filling water up, and can only face a kettle, thousands of porcelain bowls, our lives, heaven and earth, wind and rain, clouds, and temperature.”

When Zhang Yu arranged the white bowls filled with clear water in an extremely orderly array on the third-floor platforms of Yuguo Temple, it, therefore highlighted the “relationship between *Filling-water-up* and temple culture”. Every person who entered the temple was shocked by the scene because it was unprecedented, so every person was tiptoeing, and as a result, awe was aroused in the heart, which was in stark contrast to the Chinese people who see and worship Buddha in temples.

When Zhang Yu moved *Filling-water-up* to Cuiyan Peak, the whole context was completely transformed. The artist placed the bowls, and he placed them freely because the way of nature is free. Consequently, “the cosmic relationship between *Filling-water-up* and nature” became the theme. Fewer people were visiting, so nature and freedom filled people’s minds. When scattered cattle and sheep occasionally walked leisurely through Zhang Yu’s art, there came a Zen world of “white cattle are always in the white clouds, and people have no intention of being the same as cattle”. When there are no humans or cattle, you will enter the Buddhist realm



Figure 6. Zhang Yu. *Filling-water-up*. Yuguo Temple (performance installation). 10000 bowls, streams, rainwater. Wutai Mountain, 2016.



Figure 7. Zhang Yu. *Filling-water-up*. Yuguo Temple (performance installation). 10000 bowls, streams, rainwater. Wutai Mountain, 2016.



Figure 8. Zhang Yu. *Shang Shui. Cuiyan Peak* (performance, installation), 10,000 white Luohan bowls, spring water, rainwater and dew, Zhongtai, Wutai Mountain, 2016.

of “there is no trace of humans and cattle, and the bright moonlight leaves emptiness”.

Filling-water-up is such a way of artistic breakthrough. It is obvious that *Filling-water-up* is a land art of performance installations. The whole process conveys various occurrences and connections, taking more conceptual issues into people’s consideration. Therefore, *Filling-water-up* is impregnated with concepts, and finally turns into texts. In this way, both textual concepts and conceptualized texts can be achieved. Those who complete the *Series of Ups* are not only people and water, but also “time”. *Filling-water-up* is a dynamic of time.

The core connection, “the relationship between *Filling-water-up* and life”, lies in Youguo Temple’s focus on “the relationship between *Filling-water-up* and temple culture” along with Cuiyan Peak’s focus on “the cosmic relationship between *Filling-water-up* and nature”. In my opinion, paying attention to the relationship between water and life is the coexistence in both Youguo Temple and Cuiyan Peak. For this reason, I would rather not name Zhang Yu’s art a kind of “existential art”. This artistic tendency has started from the *Fingerprint* series, and it has become more and more unrestrained in the *Series of Ups*.

The clear water from rivers and mountain springs, in every round of filling and evaporation, is like life coming and going, the circle of life. To speak in a more philosophical way, the water in each container will go from full to empty, and eventually return to nothing.

From this point of view, Zhang Yu’s art is full of presence. It seems to be presented naturally, what ultimately presents is the existence of human beings.

Zhang Yu’s “existential art” is a kind of Naturalness-Embodimentalism Art!

Naturalness-Embodimentalism of Central China involves innovative and contemporary methods that mimic nature. Zhang Yu is one of the representing figures of Naturalness-Embodimentalism.

4. Mud, Water, Earth and Mirror

Zhang Yu had an “encounter” with Tunghai University in Taiwan! There is a church that can be written into the history of world architecture, that is, Lu-Siyi Church. Originally, the architect master IM Pei planned to build a Gothic styled church with bricks, but it was canceled due to the numerous earthquakes in Taiwan. Later, Qikuan Chen employed the hexagonal shapes resembling the

bottom of the ship to form the current hyperboloid architectural pattern.

How does contemporary art encounter this great building? Zhang Yu answered this difficult question with his wisdom. Because of the perfection of this building, how to make it flexible and change the current situation has become a massive challenge.

In the beginning, Zhang Yu would like to present *Filling-water-up* around the church like the way he did on Mount Wutai. The most critical breakthrough was that he wanted to place white Luohan bowls around the church, each bowl was close next to each other. The bowls formed a water surface like a lake. It would also reflect the white clouds of the sky like a mirror, thereby pulling the sky to the surface of the water in the bowl on the ground; meanwhile, it looked as if the church had been lifted into the sky. Zen Buddhism talks about “the cloud in the blue sky as to the water in the bottle”, while Zhang Yu would like to display “the cloud on the ground as to the church in the sky”! Furthermore, the other plan of his was that he planned to place more than 200 cloud-like mirrors on the ground around the church to reflect the image of white clouds, so as to draw the sky to the ground and therefore the church to the sky.

Unfortunately, in order to protect the environment,

both plans failed, which brought greater challenges, so Zhang Yu created the work “Meet—Walking Landscape”. Zhang invited eight guests who were asked to hold a two-sided round mirror walking around the church...

This is Zhang Yu’s another new exhibition “Meet” in Taiwan.

In Chinese language, “Meet” is made of two words, “meet” and “see”. The scenery of walking is a way of encounter. The eight mirrors withdraw the sceneries to form encounters continuously. In the meantime, each viewer see and meet the images in and out from the mirrors, integrating themselves with the church, and even seeing themselves in the mirror.

As a consequence, “Meet—Walking Landscape” has become a kind of touring contemporary art.

As we all know, Chinese classical paintings, especially long scrolls of mountains and rivers, are basically appreciated and analyzed in the way of touring. As the scrolls are slowly unfolded, the horizontal landscapes are drawn out in depth. With the unique Chinese-style perspective, viewers can appreciate the paintings from right to left, and furthermore they may see the paintings “differing from near to far and from high to low”; in other words, it is free for viewers to



Figure 9. Zhang Yu. *Cheers at Martell: Ink and Wash*. Installation, 888 Martell glasses, cognac water, Yidaku ink, 2013. Martell Cognac Rose Manor.



Figure 10. Zhang Yu. *Flesh Entering Mud* 201507-2 (sculpture). Sculpting Clay, 2015.



Figure 11. Zhang Yu. *Flesh Entering Mud* 201810-3 (sculpture). White clay, electric kiln fired, 2018.

appreciate a painting in any ways they feel pleased.

Considering the scattered perspective may jump everywhere above and below the horizontal line, the space therefore may appear distortions and deviations different from linear perspective. The time and space seen from this perspective differs from the Egyptians laying trees flat around the pond, because the Egyptians wanted to paint what they knew, and it was also unlike the three-dimensional images they saw in the ancient Greek sculpture paintings. With the unique Chinese-style perspective, it is believed that viewers are connected to nature at that moment, and from there they are enlightened with epiphanies and satisfaction. This is so-called "Tao" in Chinese culture.

Zhang Yu's walking also constitutes a moving landscape, and its essence is this kind of traveling wisdom, so that people can "travel and observe the world"! Compared with the mainstream Western tradition, Chinese way of art is dynamic. This music-like awareness of time makes "Chinese people not pursue unlimited pursuit of boundless space, but 'stay boundless', wandering, pondering, turning it into music".³ It is the awareness of time that contemporary artists use unconsciously in their creations. The eight moving mirrors are the scattered perspective of walking around the church.

Art master David Hockney also made videos which were shot with multiple cameras in Beijing. When shooting the same scene in the British countryside, he used multiple cameras simultaneously. The lenses from each angle slowly advance forward and are arranged like a nine-square grid, forming a multi-unit visual effect.

Based on David Hockney, this is also influenced by the perspective method of classical Chinese painting. The mirrors in Zhang Yu's "Walking Landscape" are moving and diverse. The scenery reflected by the mirror held by each person is different from the other mirrors. This is another kind of scattered perspective.

Zhang Yu seldom used mirrors in his past creations, but this time in Taiwan, the charm of mirrors was vividly presented. Especially in the Art Museum of the Department of Fine Arts of Tunghai University, an array of mirrors is deliberately arranged to create a wonderful atmosphere of contemporary art. There is even a piece of mud that is reflected like an Avatar holy mountain suspended in the air. In Europe and the United States, there are quite many artists who have used mirrors to reflect the sky and the surroundings, but most of them use non-moving mirrors to refract. Such a dynamic use of mirroring has not yet been found in the West yet. What Zhang Yu wants to form is a combination of moving mirror images, which is fundamentally apart from the mirroring of Western style.

Zhang Yu's breakthrough at Tunghai University lies in the use of reflection, that is, the flexible use of mirrors. If the original plan were to be implemented, what kind of artistic presentation would it be? The water surface composed of water bowls on the ground, the mirrors covering the ground, the floating sky and clouds would return to the ground, and the sky and the ground were united vertically. Alternatively, we could also see it up-side down. The sky fell, so the church and people were in the sky. However, unfortunately all this can only be imagined.

Zhang Yu's Series of Ups, including tea, water and ink, displays this kind of wisdom. The tea color, water color and ink color are all developed by going upwards. This artistic expression is also contextualized, including the communication between human and nature, from performances, and installations to graphic works are all internally connected. Likewise, similar functions can be obtained through the ingenious use of water surfaces or mirrors. When the water is upward, the sky seems downward in the reflection of mirrors. What's more, there is also holy water inside the Lu-Siyi Church, which constitutes an interactive contextual relationship.

When I photographed the artist's creation at Tunghai University, the work of Zhang Yu's background was reflected in the mirror, and I was also in the mirror: I was photographing Zhang Yu's creation, Zhang Yu was communicating with me, and we were together becoming part of the work. This reminds me of one of Diego Velázquez's important works *Las Meninas* in which not only the emperor and empress but also the painter himself are reflected in the image. In Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, he analyzes the connection of "multiple reflections", which is said to be related to the construction of modernity.

In this exhibition, Zhang Yu's use of clay is another breakthrough, which may be nutrient to the artist himself. If the artistic use of mirrors has both "shadow" and "image", then the artistic use of clay is neither "sculpturing" nor "modeling". Zhang Yu's innovation is "beyond sculpturing"!

So, what is sculpturing? I pointed out that the essence is in the distinction between sculpturing and modeling. As early as 1876, the Japanese Academy of Fine Arts opened the course of oil painting and sculpture. The word painting can be traced back in China, but the word sculpture comes obviously from Japan, which is a combination of carving and modeling: In 1894, the Japanese art historian Nishiya Omura first proposed the distinction between carving and modeling in the 29th issue of *Journal of the Kyoto Art Association* (October 27, Meiji).⁴ The reason is simple, carving is subtraction, modeling is addition, and the combination is sculpture. There is no such concept in Chinese tradition, nor the tradition of this two-in-one kind.

However, this concept, which came from the West and was transformed by the "Japanese Bridge", is in urgent need of a breakthrough a hundred years later. How to achieve it is a big problem. First of all, we must cross the line, not only that but also have a real conceptual breakthrough, which starts with the fundamental methodology.

The piece of clay in Zhang Yu's hand is just one piece of clay. He does not do subtraction for carving,

nor does addition for modeling. To be more precise, it is neither carving nor sculpting but just pressing the mud. Speaking of this, at the seminar site of Tunghai University, some Taiwanese critics recalled the eighth consciousness in *Heart Sutra* that says, "neither arises nor perishes, neither dirt nor clean, neither increase nor decrease". The artist's choice is based on his heart. When Zhang Yu holds the mud, he abandons the imagery in his heart, abandons the main idea before the sculpture, and strives to keep his heart in an invisible state. This is also a kind of breakthrough within the artist.

Needless to say, in the East culture, the unity of body and mind has been emphasized. Zhang Yu's *Flesh Entering Mud* is also a form of fingerprints, in the medium of mud. This presents a kind of aesthetics through the body.⁵ The focus of this series is not on the final shape, but on the whole dynamic process of "immersing" the art into the flesh. The traces of the artist's action slowly melt into the mud, just like calligraphy is the traces of movement, and the mud is the traces of Zhang Yu's physical body.

In the end, what is turned out is a form of chaos. It will turn into something different from what it is originally named. This is between the tangible and the intangible. From the viewpoint of creation, Zhang Yu's heart is amorphous during the process of modeling the mud, and he is walking with nature.

This reminds me of the story about the death of Chaos in *Zhuangzi*. "*The Ruler of the Southern Ocean was Shu, the Ruler of the Northern Ocean was Hu, and the Ruler of the Centre was Chaos. Shu and Hu were continually meeting in the land of Chaos, who treated them very well. They consulted together how they might repay his kindness, and said, 'Men all have seven orifices for the purpose of seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing, while this Ruler alone has not one. Let us try and make them for him.'* Accordingly they dug one orifice in him every day; and at the end of seven days Chaos died." This means that Chaos has no shape at all. If you forcibly carve out seven orifices for the shape and artificially structure it, then death will come with Chaos.

Zhang Yu's real breakthrough lies in his return to his physical body, in his sculpture, he goes through an overall reflection—from mud, water to soil, and also from "into the mud" to "the flesh"!

When the artist left the traces of his flesh in the mud, he rethought the contemporary relationship between soil, mud and water in art. By doing so, he returns to the most primitive state of art, that is, the original state of primitive people when they had a piece of soil. This is where art originates. As a matter of fact, the difference between soil and mud lies in water! When water is added to the soil, mud is formed. The three elements are

actually intrinsically related, but the key lies in how to control and to make use of both water and flesh in the light of contemporary art.

Zhang Yu has made the best use of his body to conduct a "full dialogue" through his fingers and also to feel the nature of the mud. I witnessed the last two of the artist's twenty-nine pieces of clay. I saw the artist probe the clay with his hand and fingers. Zhang Yu believes that pressing into the mud is like the stroking method of traditional Chinese paintings, which presents the texture of soil and stone. However, from tradition to contemporary art, no one realizes the great value of "earth in the mud". This can be an accidental "discovery" in the creation process of Zhang.

Below is a quote from Zhang Yu's statement of the creation process:

"Firstly, I remove the specific image; secondly, I take away the subtraction of carving as well as the addition of modeling, and furthermore I walk directly into the work without turning the mold. When I hold a piece of mud, I do not change its volume, and only use my fingers, especially the index finger. I use my own fingerprinting method to press the mud feeling its nature. The key is to send my flesh into the mud, and the whole creation

process is completed at once."

When inspecting these twenty-nine pieces of mud, I found that their dryness and wetness are quite different. Due to the long drying time, the clay shaped on the opening day cracked, just like the cracks on ceramics. This also implies Zhang Yu's "up-philosophy". No matter whether it is water, ink or tea, it is all achieved through the evaporation of water. In his clay works, the water is also upward. The water is pulled away, and the muddy nature gradually gives way to the earthy nature. Starting from a pile of soil, it eventually returns to the soil, but it is no longer the original soil. The so-called "seeing a mountain is still a mountain, seeing water is still water"!

Zhang Yu's "breakthrough" realized a methodological "transcendence". Traditionally, from the West to Japan, from past sculptures to the sculpturing concept proposed by Japanese, it is still limited by the norms and structures of traditional sculpturing. Now it can be deconstructed by reducing it to soil, water and mud. This is actually the incarnation of fingerprints, and it is an attempt to achieve a breakthrough in the methodology of sculpturing.

Flesh Entering Mud can be concluded in Zhang Yu's own words:



Figure 12. Zhang Yu. *Ink Feeding*. 20140712-20150724. Dialogue with Guo Xi (installation) partial. Ice paper, water, ink, acrylic, steel wire, video, Guandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei, 2015.



Figure 13. Zhang Yu. *Water + Ink =?*. (Performance installation). 230×80×70 cm, acrylic box, acrylic mirror, xuan paper, water, ink, Wuhan Art Museum, 2017.

“It intends to break the understanding and judgment of the ancient concept of sculpturing in art history, and endow it with a new recognition after that... Without setting concrete objects, my physical body can fully experience properties in the water, mud, and earth during the creation process, and further I am able to express in the inevitable and unexpected experience.”

As far as I am concerned, this is what artistic innovation truly means, and this fundamental creativity and

creative nature are long-desired in every contemporary artist!

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ENDNOTES

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3. Zong Baihua. *The Complete Works of Zong Baihua*, Volume 2. Anhui: Anhui

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4. Liu Yuedi. (2011). Textual Research on the Origin and Development of Modern Chinese Artistic Views: on the Historical Intermediary Function of the “Japan Bridge”. *Literature & Art Studies*. Vol. 11.

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上茶與上水，不雕與不塑：張羽《指印》之後的藝術拓展

劉悅笛

摘要：當代中國藝術家張羽的藝術創作，從上世紀 80 年代的水墨實驗，到如今的當代實驗，綿延了近四十年的發展，如今更是進入到總結時期，本文關注就是張羽新世紀第二個十年最新階段的藝術拓展。自 2013 年以來，張羽兄開始了“上”的系列作品——上墨、上茶、上水——也就開啟了對“上”的思考。隨著張羽藝術的拓展，逐步地，從“上”的日常“上”到非日常，從“上”的動作上到自然，最終上升到“上”的精神。

關鍵詞：張羽；指印；上茶；上水；入泥的肉身