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Han Mengyun in front of her video installation *Panchatantra*

Han Mengyun

“Ultimately, Translation is the Politics of Love”

(Interview by Lai Fei. The original Chinese text was published in the Winter 2023 issue of ArtReview.)

Through this long and arduous process of learning different cultures, I have developed a new paradigm of perceiving and conceiving the world. This decolonized way of thinking consciously leaves behind the Western gaze and its definition of Chinese artists. I understand the image of China based on different periods and perspectives that themselves are a kind of imaginary.

Talking with Mengyun was serendipitous. Our conversations lasted from sunset to nightfall. Within a few hours, we traveled from Shenzhen to the East Coast of the United States, from Kyoto to Oxford in England, and to the East Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula. It must be acknowledged that Mengyun is a person deeply versed in the magic of languages. In her teenage years she studied Japanese, English, French, and German. Later, she learned Sanskrit, Farsi, and Arabic. As with the borderlessness of language itself, the multilingual speaker seems to see no end in her own language-learning journey. Through her experiences across various cultures and languages, Mengyun has found the grammar of her painting and a language of herself that is both decisive and tender. This decisiveness comes from the intellectual accumulation built through years of study, and the tenderness from embracing difference and all that is unknowable and unspeakable. This tenderness is reminiscent of what Indian literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak — who Mengyun is deeply influenced by — calls the love of the translator, a “love that permits fraying” between the original and its shadow. Mengyun considers all her practices as acts of translation — among language families, past into present, books into paintings, experiences into poetry. While there is no perfect translation between the self and the Other, the boundaries between cultures are not unbridgeable. Just as Mengyun believes, the world is and has always been an integral whole made of differences. It is the mission of a translator to evoke this love for difference

Window to the World

Lai Fei: What triggered you to study different languages and cultures?

Han Mengyun: I grew up during China’s economic reform and opening up in the 1980s. I was born in Wuhan and moved to Shenzhen with my parents when I was four. Shenzhen is rightly called the “Window to the World”: the city faces Hong Kong, through which it connects to the outside world. The once barren land provided the possibility of liberation from the shackles of history, allowing us to imagine a future no longer constrained by the past.

My first encounter with the world was through imagining Japan via Hong Kong’s television channels, and I was deeply fascinated by it. To watch more anime, I told my father that I wanted to learn Japanese. Since my father acquired several foreign languages during his PhD studies, including Japanese, French, and Russian, I have believed since childhood that people could master multiple languages, read a variety of books, and engage with diverse cultures. Toward the end of middle school, I met a very special teacher, Mr. Miyazaki. He had spent his early years studying advanced mathematics in France, traveling the world, and teaching Japanese before settling in Shenzhen. His Japanese class had a profound impact on my life; it became a second family to me. The cohort was consisted of impoverished workers from across the country who had come to Shenzhen to seek professional opportunities. They varied widely in age, including individuals in their

The Unending Rose III
2023, oil and acrylic on canvas
2 panels, each: 210(H) x 140 x 2.5cm

twenties and thirties, as well as younger workers from rural areas. Learning Japanese at the age of 14 alongside workers from a lower economic background made me acutely aware of the differences between social classes, as well as their remarkable learning abilities. Studying in such an environment has exposed me to a completely different community within Shenzhen — a wonderful experience brought about by the collision between China and the world under the economic reform and opening-up policy.

Lai: Why did these workers learn Japanese in Shenzhen?

Han: At that time, there were many Japanese companies in Shenzhen and Dongguan. Instead of relying on textbooks, Mr. Miyazaki would talk in Japanese about social issues in Japan and around the world, as well as science and math. In round-table discussions, we not only learned Japanese, but also learned to think in Japanese. It was in a Japanese class, in a small, shabby room in Shenzhen, that I found my window to the outside world. I learned about Mr. Miyazaki's views of Japan, cultural differences between countries, and possibilities for communication.

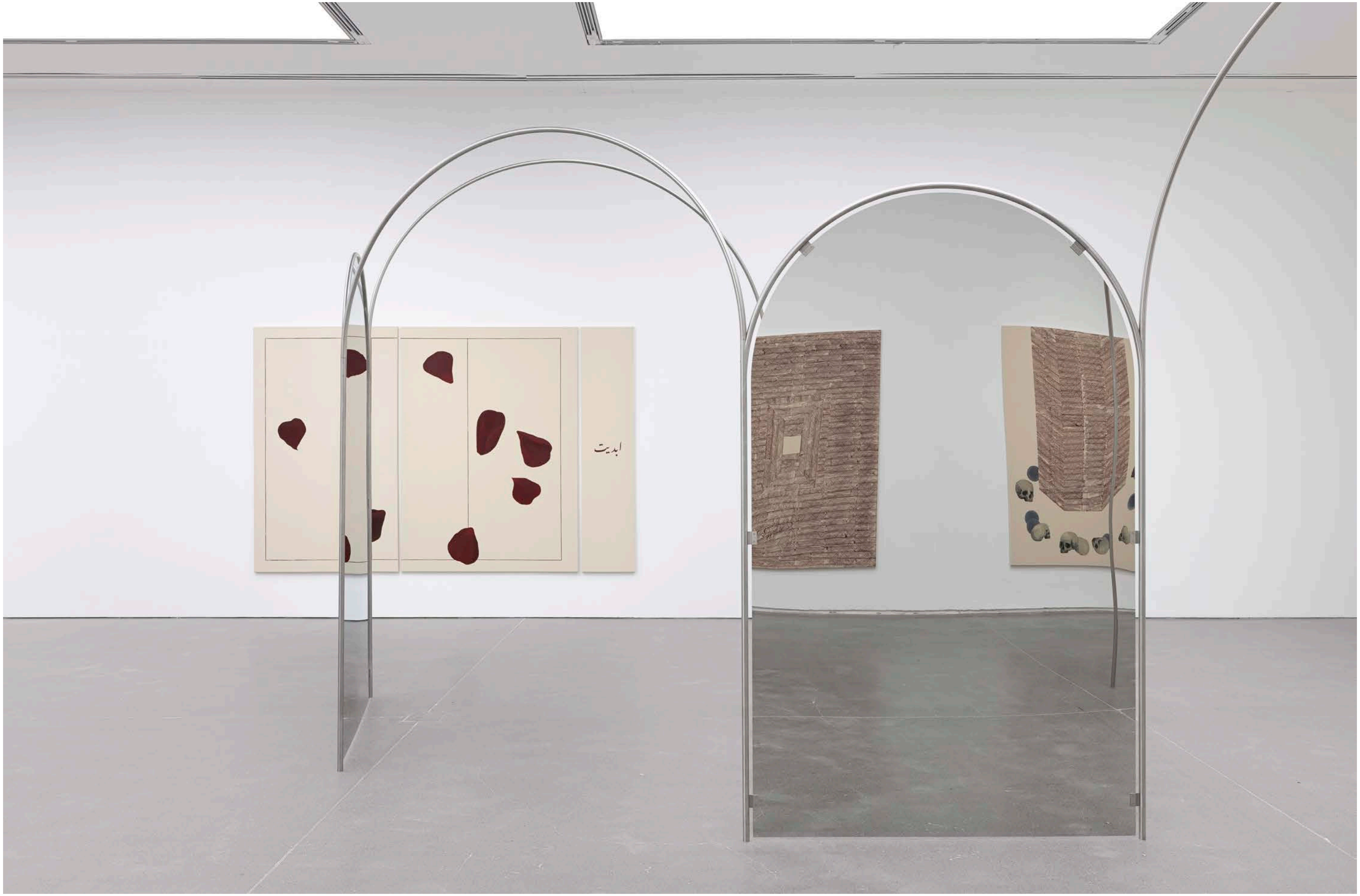
These childhood experiences laid the foundation for my imagination of a pluralistic world and a borderless utopia. In Mr. Miyazaki class, there seemed to be no boundaries or class divisions, only the encounter between individuals, the inevitable conflicts and the attempts at reconciliation between us. When we discussed social issues, I would confront completely different opinions and positions, which made me more aware of my own positionality and privilege. What's also worth noting is that Mr. Miyazaki only charged these migrant workers a nominal fee in the hope that they would learn Japanese well and have a better future. I learned from him the importance of ethical responsibility and fair education. He had a profound impact on me both intellectually and humanly. He also taught me French. Since he had lived in France for 10 years, he was very fluent in French. Therefore, I learned French through Japanese. The exam-oriented education system in China was far from able to quench my insatiable thirst for knowledge, so I made use of my weekends to create the alternative curriculum I craved. I applied this to the study of other disciplines in later life.

Learning Painting

Lai: Can you describe your initial experiences in painting? How did you unfold learning different cultures and languages in painting?

Han: I began taking extracurricular art classes in primary school. Training in painting in China is intensive and academically rigorous. Around the first year of high school, I decided to become an artist. The following year, I transferred to Shenzhen Arts School, where I started to follow the school's curriculum in sketching. It was then that I developed a strong aversion to exam-oriented painting techniques. Choosing to study at Bard College, a liberal arts college in the United

Installation view, "Han Mengyun: The Unending Rose," 2023, ShanghART, Shanghai



Installation view, “Han Mengyun: The Unending Rose,” 2023, ShanghART, Shanghai

Installation view, "Han Mengyun: The Unending Rose," 2023
ShanghART, Shanghai

States, fulfilled my rebellious desire as you can paint freely without too many constraints. Abstract painting was still dominant on the East Coast then, especially in New York. Consequently, I developed a strong interest in abstract art, both in research and practice. One must try making abstract paintings to understand what it truly is. Once you start to engage in abstraction, you begin to comprehend the relationship between colors, the movement of the eyes, the language of forms, and so on. For me, at that time, making abstract painting was a huge liberation.

At the end of my senior year, my own abstract painting style gradually took shape. I also began to think about what it means to imitate postwar American art as a Chinese person. It became clear that my classmates and I had distinct differences in personalities, interests, and aesthetic tendencies. I was also taking courses in East Asian Studies and found that I had a strong connection with Eastern cultures. When I tried to discuss these issues with my fellow American teachers and classmates, I found it difficult to establish a common understanding. It made me feel isolated, but it also pointed me in the right direction. I realized that my different cultural background demanded that my work assume a different form and seek different meanings. I was looking for a form of abstract painting that would be appropriate to express myself as a person with a multicultural background and experience. For this purpose, I started to study Chinese art history and Buddhism. In order to learn Chinese painting, I needed to understand Taoist and Buddhist thinking, which have deeply influenced the form and ideology of Chinese ink painting. Despite all the knowledge I had gained, there was still an inescapable confusion: there always seemed to be a strange exoticism about the Sinology classics written by Westerners, with a kind of gaze that I could not understand. This indefinable discomfort made me ponder the problems within.

Lai: Has this phase of your studies always been centered around painting?

Han: Yes, although I took many courses on different media, painting was my main focus. When I did my MFA at Oxford in 2017, I developed a multimedia practice, which foreshadowed my future trajectory. After graduating from Bard, I was enrolled in an MFA program in the United States, but I soon dropped out because I found it futile to discuss what I was interested in with my Western classmates and teachers. I also had strong doubts about American and Western cultures in general at that time, and as a result, I decided to drop out and return to China to dive into the study of Chinese painting and calligraphy.

Lai: Did you study Chinese painting before you went abroad?

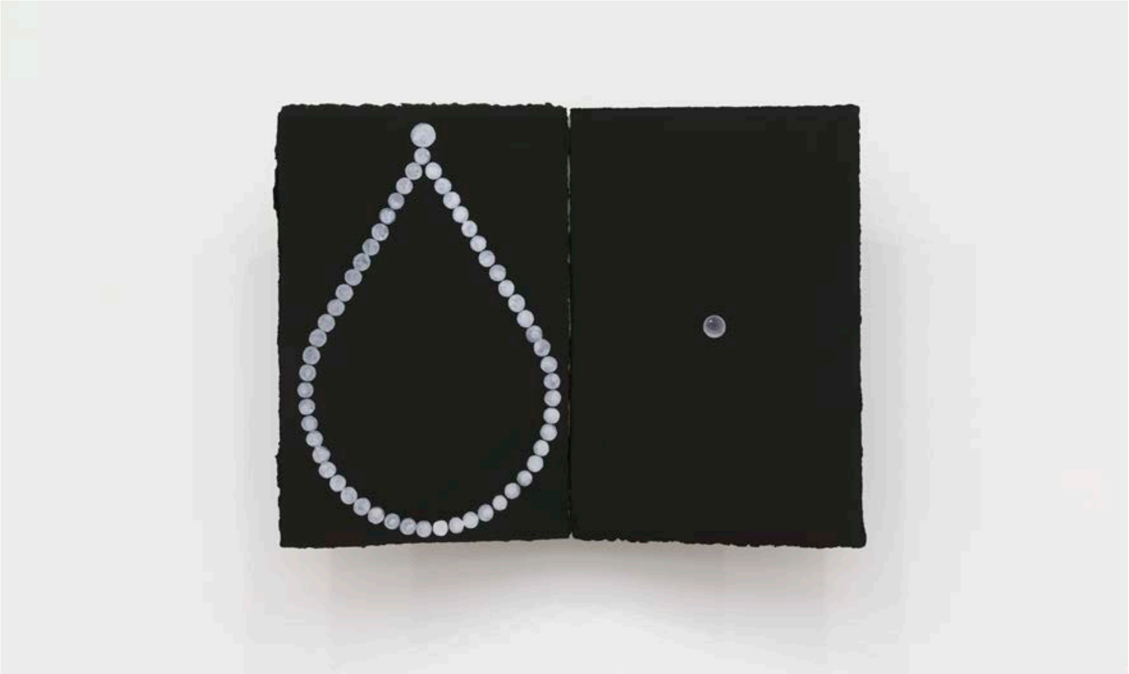
Han: I had never engaged with Chinese painting before in school in China. It was only when I started to study traditional Chinese painting in my adulthood that I began to reflect on this entirely overlooked social reality: why had I, as a Chinese person, only learned Western painting and been exposed to Western art? This realization only came to me in hindsight. One can hardly gain a sense of the whole picture of what we learn and why we learn in the process of it. Only in gaining enough experience, going to another country, is it possible to look back at one's identity and experience from another perspective, and finally discover the paradoxes that have been normalized. To resolve these, both sides of the conflict need to be understood.

Like learning a new language, I began to study calligraphy and Chinese painting. I came to realize that the principles of Chinese painting are completely different from those of Western art: Chinese painting is about the state of the muscles when using the brush, the state of the body and the mind, and how to mobilize the breath in the body, etc. The differences between cultures can be understood dialectically through painting. While my interest in Buddhism has always been strong, I found many Buddhist classics difficult to understand, especially those on Chinese Buddhism by Westerners. It occurred to me then that it was necessary to study the original language of Buddhism to understand its essence.

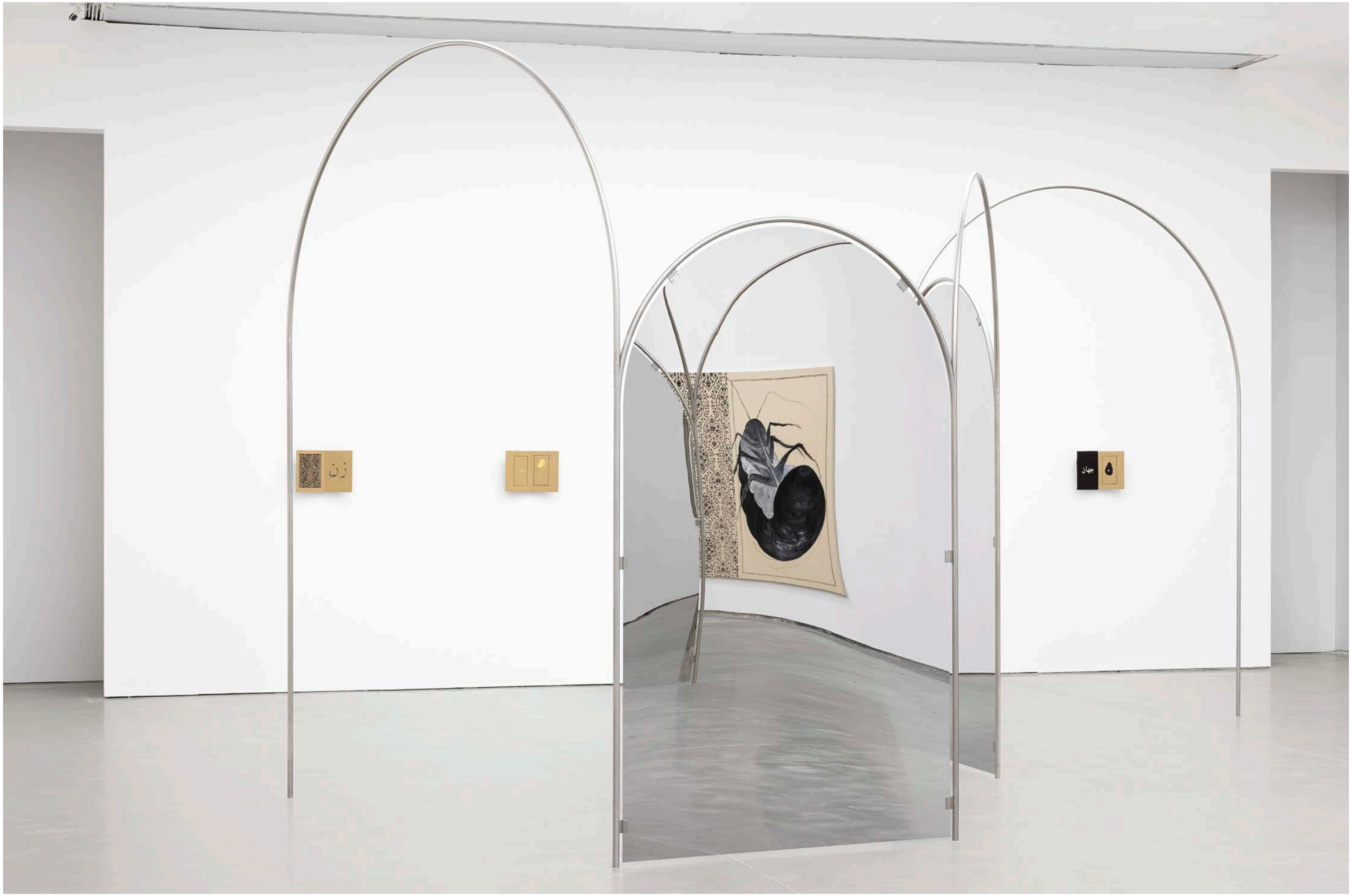
Having studied many languages, I came to the understanding that every language provides a lens to perceive a reality of its own and reality is in many ways linguistically constructed. Out of a naive curiosity, I began to study Sanskrit, training at different institutions in Germany, Japan, and Oxford. Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, is used in the writing of philosophical and religious texts as it enables the linguistic manifestation and elaboration of extremely profound and nuanced concepts. Buddhist scriptures were first recorded in Pali and later in Sanskrit, thus Pali and Sanskrit are the two main languages in which the Buddhist classics are documented. Years of intensive study not only deepened my understanding of Buddhism, but also opened up the entire cultural sphere of the Indian subcontinent to me. Studying Indian culture sparked my interest in Islamic culture, especially in India; Persian and Arabic literature and art also fascinated me, especially the manuscripts.

Through this long and arduous process of learning different cultures, I have developed a new paradigm of perceiving and conceiving the world. This decolonized way of thinking consciously leaves behind the Western gaze and its definition of Chinese artists. I understand the image of China based on different periods and perspectives that themselves are a kind of imaginary. There is no such thing as an absolute truth to China; once we start to define it, it becomes abstract and imprecise. That abstraction often stems from the limitations of language, preventing us from capturing what transcends words.

Lai: This makes me recall something you wrote: "China is a synonym for the unknown, the distant, the mysterious, the utopia brimming with wisdom and miraculous creations. The word can and does mean everything and/or nothing. It can become what it is not. It can be what I wish it to be. That emptiness



Scattered Pearls: Tasbih
2023, ink and mineral pigment on papar, artist designed stainless steel wall mount
Diptych, each: 28.5(H) x 19cm ;Overall: 28.5(H) x 38cm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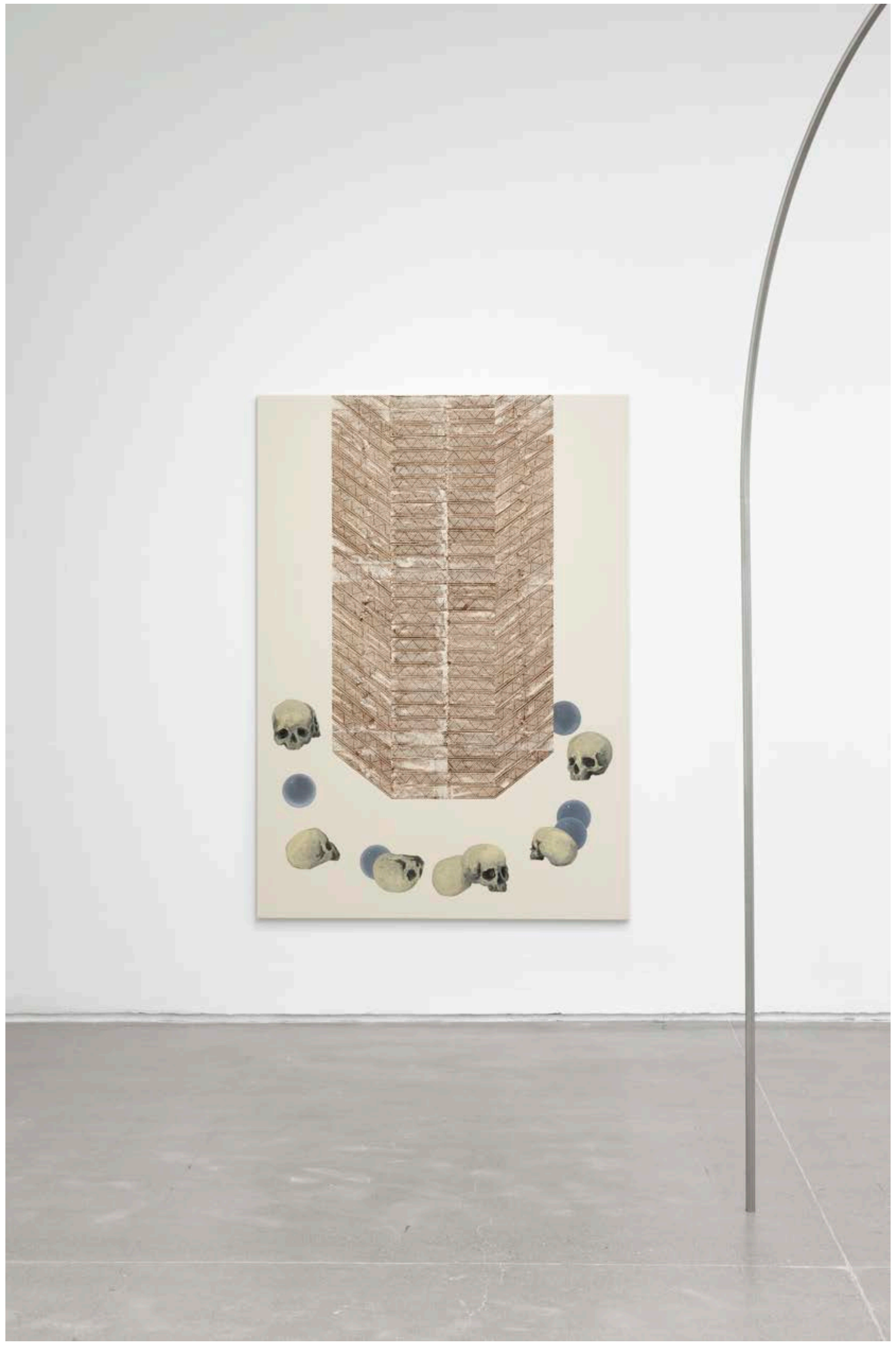


The Interpretation of Dreams II
2022, oil and acrylic on canvas
210(H) x 150 x 2.5cm

and futility of definition and language freed me.”

Han: I learned more about Islam in India, and the early fusion between the native religions of India and Islam, becoming interested in Persian and Arabic literature and paintings. I learned about another China no longer under the Western gaze. The beautiful imagery of China has developed over a long history of cultural exchange, as revealed in ancient classics. In ancient India, Central Asia, and the Islamic world, discussions of art usually came from mythology and were closely related to their religious beliefs and culture. The images in that context are not “art” in today’s contemporary context. The art discourse of pre-modernity did not pursue so-called art history, which was a colonial product of eighteenth-century Europe. A large number of Indian and Islamic myths and poems discussed the significance and transcendental power of images. The openness of mythology challenges the hegemony of reality: they can be constantly reinterpreted, especially since folktales usually have no original author. The power of interpretation rests entirely with the reader, who acts as both interpreter and author. The text becomes a field of inter-temporal exchanges and conversations between all the authors. I think this is a crucial way of interpreting and thinking about art originating from the non-Western premodern world. Instead of going all-in on a so-called historical event about art (after all, history itself is an ideological construct), I embrace the polysemic potential of all art and literature, the longevity of which relies exactly on our endless retelling, reinterpretation and reenactment.

My work *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* (2021) is based on an old Persian folktale. The oldest version of this story cannot be confirmed, but it has been passed down orally, starting from around the twelfth century, it was retold by some famous poets, such as Niẓāmī Ganjavī and Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī. Well known across Central Asia, the story opened my eyes to a new China, a China in mythology, beyond Western definition and gaze. To me, this story is both novel and profound. For a long time we have been indoctrinated with Western art history, a discipline that only emerged in the eighteenth century, and the explanations and definitions of various so-called “non-Western” art produced from a Eurocentric perspective, including the so-called history of Chinese art. This China is both real and not. Because of the close cultural exchanges that took place in pre-modern Central Asia, China was indeed included among the cultures of Rome, all of Central Asia, Persia, and the Arab world. However, in this story, China is not really China; it is just a trope and device to drive the narrative.

The China of Central Asian mythology is distinct from the China of Western interpretation. In this myth, China has a certain degree of openness, but it can be said without a doubt that the people of Central Asia regarded China as an imaginary. This is because there were no channels to understand the “real” China at the time. Many Arabic and Persian texts described China and Chinese art. Trade exchanges like the Silk Road enhanced cultural exchanges. People were able to get goods like porcelain from China, which strengthened their imagination of it as a place that produces all the exquisite things, with Chinese painters as the most distinguished. Although being an imagination, these imaginings indeed shaped local art and culture. For example, images of cranes, lotus flowers, dragons, and phoenixes in Persian miniatures derive from Chinese paintings and artifacts, and their expressions are heavily influenced by the Chinese Gongbi technique. Amid such exchange and fusion, how can we possibly distinguish each other? The concept of isolated individuals and cultures loses validity.

Great and Little Traditions

Lai: After a long time training in Western painting, how did you absorb the influences and epistemologies of these different cultures, Indian and Islamic, in the language of your own painting?

Han: This is one of the essential challenges of my practice: how to identify these multicultural influences and combine them. It has been a long process. My study has traversed multiple fields, from Japanese language and culture to academic training in painting under the Soviet educational system. I then went to the United States and studied postwar American art, especially abstract painting. With discontent and a critical eye, I used to try to find the so-called root of my culture. Then, my obsession with the definition of root was completely dissolved by the study of Sanskrit and Buddhism. In the last few years, I have started to learn Persian and Arabic. These ancient languages have opened up an infinitely vast and deeply interconnected world for me, a space of thought where there would be no narrow-minded discussion about whether, for instance, “painting is dead.”

In addition to learning languages, I have explored alternative art histories and creative practices and attended various courses. There is a very special place in London called the Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts, which is sponsored by the King’s Foundation. It teaches a wide range of ancient crafts and traditional painting techniques from all over the world. The teachers come from a variety of different cultural backgrounds, including Chinese, Japanese, Arab, Persian, Pakistani, Turkish, Indian, and so on. The school’s existence is particularly intriguing in the current postcolonial era. Despite its controversial establishment, it is the only place in the world where one can learn all the ancient ways of creating art. I took courses in Indian and Persian miniatures painting, the preparatory processes of bookmaking, how to polish a manuscript page, bookbinding, woodcutting, ornamental carvings of the Qur’an bookstand, Indian botanical printing and textile dyeing, and more ancient Western painting techniques such as tempera. As I learnt these new techniques, I tried to expand on them through the forms of painting with which I am more familiar. Western painting, including the related education I received in China, is an influence I have no way to get rid of.

Lai: Modern art education in China might be a translation of Western modernism. On a practical level, its most direct manifestation in these decades has been the deeply ingrained painting paradigm of domestic painters.

Han: When I was in America, I tried to break away from this paradigm by painting abstraction. But if you give me a pencil and ask for a sketch, I will be able to do it right away. There is no way to get rid of this muscle memory, much like how riding a bike becomes second nature. After years of struggle, I decided to accept these influences within me. Embracing these influences wholeheartedly, I began to think about how they could merge. I attempted to merge features of Indian and Persian painting, such as decorative motifs, with Western oil painting, the medium in which I have been trained for decades. Yet, as I delved deeper, I discovered significant conflicts between these painting traditions and visualities.

Lai: Because their theories of knowledge, or epistemologies, are inherently different.

Han: Yes, I find it both challenging and fascinating. The scope of my comparison is no longer between the Western and Chinese. It has welcomed the Indian and Islamic perceptions to participate in the comparative scheme. From the so-called configuration of paintings, we can uncover vast differences in our epistemologies. This conflict attracts me; its irreconcilability inspires me to constantly seek reconciliation.

If the normative tradition of painting implies the rejection of heterogeneity (of class, taste, gender etc), can images, not traditionally considered paintings, have the potential to embrace the Other? Pursuing this thought, I reestablished my painting practice from the art of the manuscripts, books, and the images within them. Indian and Persian miniatures are usually found in manuscripts, closely related to the written text and inseparable from the book form. To call them simply illustrations is to dismiss their equal importance to their textual counterpart. These images aren't meant to be hung on the wall like contemporary Western paintings. To trace the origins of these images, I delved into various ancient texts from digital archives online and physical collections in art galleries, museums, and private collections worldwide. My search covered ancient Indian palm-leaf manuscripts, Indian miniatures, the Qur'an, Perso-Islamic manuscripts, European medieval illuminated manuscripts, thread-bound books and woodblock printed books in China and Japan, and even Mesopotamian clay tablets, among others. Throughout the global manifestation of the book, the diversity of its forms has been absorbed into a single meta-media, and the Tower of Babel of humankind seems less unattainable. The book form was a revolutionary medium in the ancient world. Beginning with the invention of papermaking and movable-type printing in China, the configuration of the book we employ most commonly till this day was born; countless images and words were recorded and disseminated as a result, and this was one of the most important phenomena of globalization in ancient times. The book got me thinking about whether the experience of globalization in ancient times could provide some answers and solutions to the failures of globalization today.

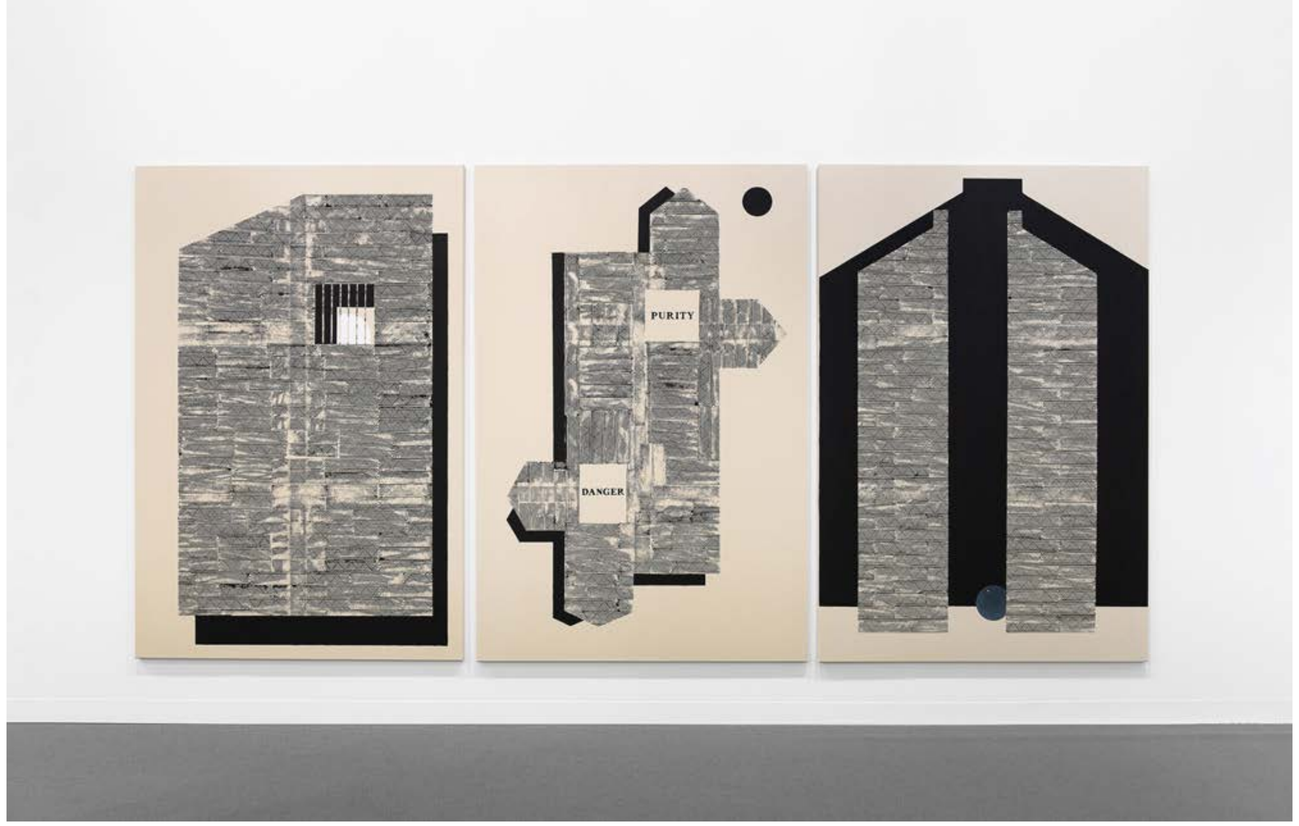
Moreover, what makes the book so appealing to me is that it belongs to the people in the broadest sense, serving as the earliest medium of democracy. The book differs from Chinese literati painting in that it was made, used, circulated across classes and for all kinds of usage, beyond the royal and elite. While literati painting was quite exclusive in terms of social class, it nonetheless had a wider impact and gained recognition in Western academic circles, eventually becoming a representative form of Chinese art.

Lai: The fact that literati painting is considered "Artwork" is similar to the case of Western oil painting.

Han: I believe this is also an issue that needs to be addressed. If Chinese art is not limited to just Chinese ink painting, then what else can be included? As such, we must also pay attention to those "little traditions." Indian-American scholar A.K. Ramanujan's article, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" (1989) offers us many new dimensions of thinking about the weighty issue of tradition. He insightfully analyzes the many possibilities of this question: Is there an exclusively Indian way of thinking? Is there only one Indian thought? Are Indians capable of thinking? The multiple readings of a single question made the complexities of cultural definition manifest. He also talks about the rich diversity of Indian culture, with hundreds of languages, each officially recognized, not merely as dialects. In India, there are many "great" traditions and many "little" traditions, all of which together constitute what is considered the Indian way of thinking, the complexity, richness and even ambiguity of which is often inadequately acknowledge at the convenience of definition by the Western Eurocentric academia. Inspired by this essay, I began to employ the same methodology to question whether there is only one Chinese way of thinking or painting. The answer is: not really. China has its "great traditions" like literati painting, but also many "little traditions." In his study of Chinese art history, sinologist and art historian Craig Clunas completely overturned the essentialist definition of Chinese art. Instead of focusing on an "essential" Chinese art, Clunas argues that we should consider all art creations that took place in China as Chinese art. This viewpoint breaks the Eurocentric framework. Thus, he titles his work not "History of Chinese Art" but "Art in China." To support this view, he studied many folk arts and crafts, especially book making and the imagery within books. These can all be considered part of Chinese art.

I chose to do my MFA at the University of Oxford because I needed a program where I could study art alongside other disciplines. I don't believe in the idea of "Art for art's sake", which denies the larger cultural contexts that gave birth to the form of art. Additionally, my Sanskrit professor from Kyoto University had taken a position at Oxford, so I decided to follow him there. He is Nepalese and was the first non-white scholar in the Oxford Sanskrit department in a long time. During our weekly one-on-one tutorial, I learned to read, analyze and translate ancient Sanskrit texts on art and aesthetic theories under his tutelage, which established a foundation of an alternative epistemology on art. Moreover, I was incredibly fortunate to catch Professor Craig Cluna's last year of teaching before his retirement. Reading his works, I began to think about art history anew, especially about what lies beyond the "great" traditions of Chinese art. I began to think about how to understand these art forms that lie outside these "great" traditions or mainstream. Once I started to engage with these non-normative art forms, I was stunned by their richness in heterogeneity or "Otherness." acknowledging their existence dissolves the boundaries between the self and the Other, as the totality of global culture is indisputable. The heterogeneity is difficult to find or less obvious within the traditional literati class, where social status and discourse are considerably fixed. The situation is different in the larger society beyond a certain elite social clique. Mobility happened not only via the voluntary movement of people but also via the exchange of trade, religion, culture, art, and thought. The history of movement and exchange between cultures and peoples are so openly reflected in crafts. The book is one of the best mediums for absorbing, carrying and disseminating a medley of content. For example, the Chinese Qur'an blends Chinese painting and Islamic styles. Artistic traditions and craftsmanship from India, Nepal, and other places can be found in many Chinese translations of Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures; the formal hybridity they display is fascinating.

Most of these books are unattributed as they were collaboratively produced in workshops by craftsmen. Some were responsible for making paper, others polishing, some for copying scriptures, some for creating illustrations, and others for binding, etc. A book is the crystallization of collective wisdom and labor, an open-source code where everything converges and can then be dispersed to flow again. This ever enriching and open space of the book inspires rethinking about the dichotomy between the self and the Other, between different religions, cultures and ethnicities. It is where I see new possibilities for image-making can emerge. I extensively reference book forms from around the world, analyzing how their visual and textual information is compiled, organized, and presented, before translating them into my paintings. On top of that, I still need to integrate oil painting techniques and the expressiveness of modern and contemporary Western painting because these movements of



Purity and Danger
2022, oil and acrylics on canvas
3 panels, each 210x140cm, total 210x420cm

les flammes bon marché des gloires du passé

Panchatantra: Le Désir
2023, film still in installation
3’20”

making that once flowed through my body cannot be discarded, just as no memory can be manually erased.
For these paintings, which I treat as books and pages, I do not use the glaring white gesso primer on the canvases. Left in their original color, the canvases mimic the unbleached, beige hue of ancient handmade paper. I aim to highlight the gentle visual experience of the paper so that viewers can look at the painting as if reading a book. A book is also a carrier of text; on these endless pages, I can create various relationships between images and text, establishing a layered relationship among images from different cultural systems and languages.

This versatile, inclusive, and tolerant space of the book seems to be a feasible path toward alleviating the conflicts of cultural understandings. The blank spaces on the pages are not only the result of *liubai* (leaving white) of Chinese painting, but also imply a potential space for communication, change and integration. However, integration does not mean eliminating all differences; sometimes, we need to emphasize the differences. My work incorporates many architectural elements, which serve as my starting point for contemplating deeply the conflicts in perspective between different painting traditions. Perspectives vary significantly across the painting traditions of China, India, Islam, and Europe, among others: Western painting employs the one-point perspective, Chinese painting the isometric perspective, a term given by the West, while Indian and Persian miniature manuscripts adopt the omniscient God’s perspective, similar to the bird’s eye view. Since it is impossible to integrate these perspectives due to their fundamental differences, I decided to embrace their differences by presenting spatial and temporal conflicts in my paintings. The multiplicity of visual perceptions that appears in my paintings is an inevitable outcome of such experimentation.

Lai: I noticed that this triptych, *Purity and Danger* (2022), from the series “The Glass Bead Game” (2022) shows three different perspectives.

Han: Yes, exactly. This triptych, on one hand, presents a flat layout of urban and architectural structures like a map, but on the other hand, the flat structures cast shadows that offer a sense of three-dimensionality. The building façade on the far left rests above shadows, while the moon lurks behind the shadows. These works were created during the pandemic and they represent the enclosed spatial experience that we all suffered from during lockdowns. The illogical and unscientific configuration of space and perspective was intentionally conceived to generate a sense of absurdity and incomprehensibility. The middle panel is derived from a map-like, flattened architectural form in an Ottoman miniature painting of Mecca and Medina. By replacing the domed building with a modern pointed roof, I intended to evoke a more universal symbol and experience of contemporary household. The block-printed sections in the paintings were made using the woodblocks I collected during my research trip in India in early 2020, right before the pandemic. I selected a brick-like woodblock to construct the heavily textured and patterned architectural façade and space, while incorporating elements rendered in the style of Western painting, such as my most commonly used motif — the glass bead — which evokes the lushness of oil and refinement of detail in Flemish still life paintings.

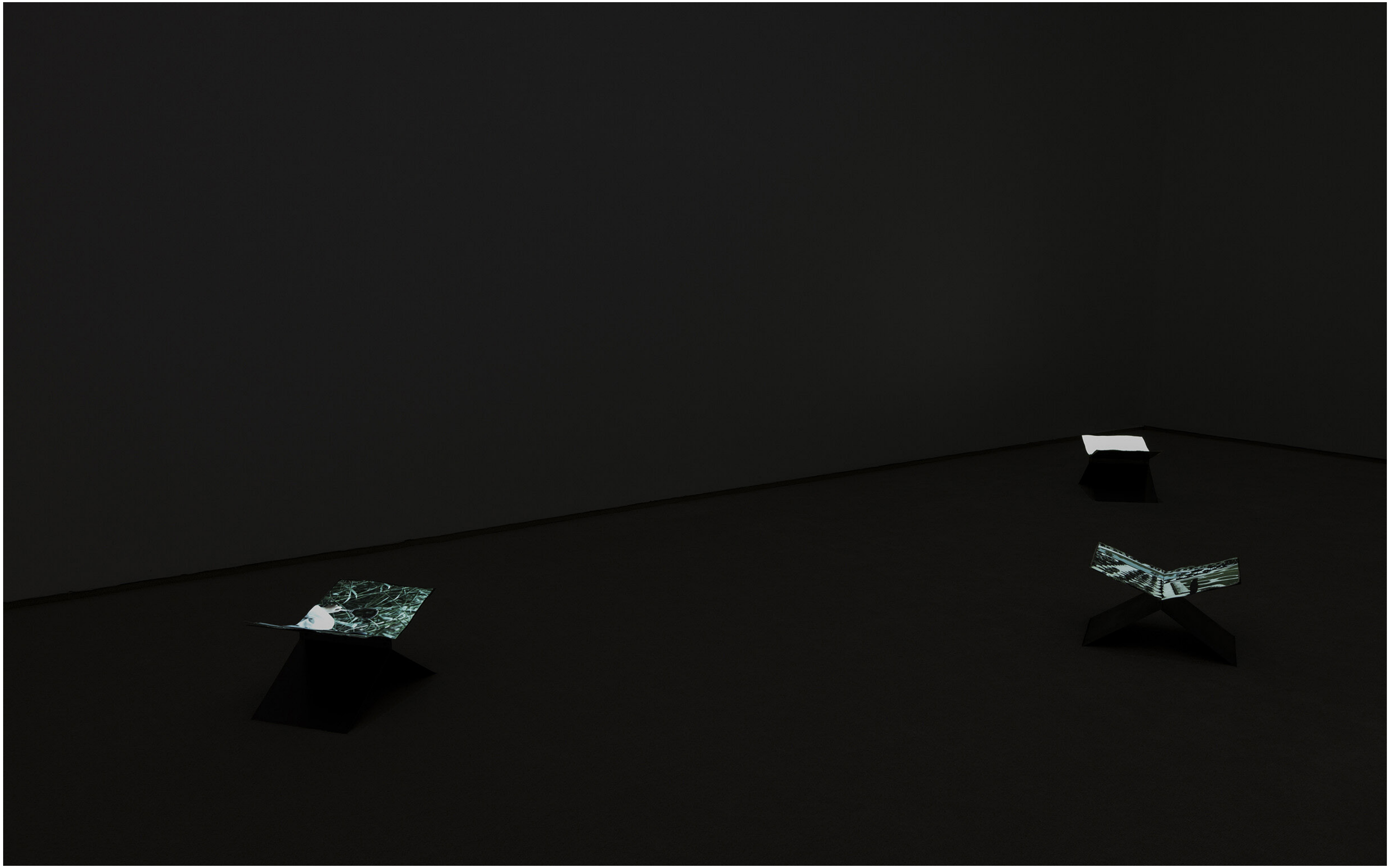
It is in this way that I conceived an interplay of different perspectival schemes, various image-making methods and materiality, and the integration of craft on painting. The juxtaposition of two- and three-dimensionality maintains a tension of difference across the panels that are composed with the formal characteristics of the manuscript. My diptychs are more than painting panels — they are the left and right pages of a book. The assemblage of multiple panels is a more thorough deconstruction and reorganization of the book’s pages on this basis. Thus, these canvas pages echo the temporal and spatial extension of the narrative of the book, creating a dynamic of back-and-forth viewing between the left and right pages, reminiscent of a Chinese scroll painting.

Beyond the Tower of Babel

Lai: In addition to the installation work *Mirror Pavilion* and the paintings in your solo exhibition ‘The Unending Rose’ at ShanghART Shanghai, you will also display a newly created video installations.

Han: Yes, although painting is my primary medium, I don’t see myself solely as a painter. I chose painting as my main means and focus of expression because it is particularly well-suited for comparing different cultural perceptions and visualities. This approach helps me contemplate the differences between civilizations and achieve multicultural coexistence on the canvas. It is not the first time that multimedia and video have appeared in my practice, but this video installation Panchatantra specifically deals with and challenges conventional ways of viewing moving image work. If books can adopt various forms, not just the conventional structure of a thread-bound book but also a wide array of unconventional shapes and sizes, large and small, all distinct — then why is the screen, which serves as a window to the mind, so monotonous in its form and ratio aspect?

Panchatantra seeks to disrupt this monotony and the paradigm of screen viewing. First, my goal was to create a sense of spiritual space devoid of gravity. Hence a white carpet in the space was installed to obscure the boundary between the wall and floor; five bookstands are scattered throughout the space, attempting to simulate the reading of ancient scriptures, with two sheets of rough Indian handmade Khadi paper placed on each stand. Projectors mounted on the ceiling project the moving images onto the handmade paper on the stands from above. Viewers are encouraged to sit on the carpet to “read” the moving image. The meaning of the images resides not only within the images themselves, but also in the way they are presented and in the physical experience of the viewer, which influences the interpretation and is part of the narrative. Moreover, the pixels of the video, when project-



Panchatantra
2023, 5-channel colour, silent, loop video installation,
artist stainless steel book stand, Indian Khadi Paper
Dimensions variable

ed onto paper, transform into grains of fiber texture, blurring the line between video and book.

For me, the form of image presentation is very important. For instance, to display my small-scale paper works *Scattered Pearls*, I designed a paper diptych mount in the form of an open book suspended on the wall to accentuate the reference to the book. The presentation of an image has to do with cultural perceptions and customs. The white cube spaces of galleries and museum displays as products of colonization, erase the uniqueness of cultural contexts. Therefore, I want to restore cultural perceptions and epistemological memories by enriching forms of viewing, evoking bodily and spiritual sensations forced into oblivion by the violence of colonization. My future projects will also involve many mediums and formal experimentation on the basis of traditional presentation of images, though my concern is not so much with the novelty as with the cultural specificity of the medium and how to bridge the new medium with the ancient, rather than distinguishing them and denying the possibility of continuity.

Lai: How much does it matter that people see the ideas behind these works?

Han: This question is complex. My personal intentions are only an inducing factor in reaching an understanding. The more I think about it, the more I realize that the distance between people is actually quite vast. To a certain extent, there is not just a Tower of Babel between us, but each of us stands as an independent tower. Whether or not the ideas behind my works can be seen, or how important that is, is something I can hardly affirm, predict, or fully control.

But such difficulty and impossibility is beautiful in itself. This beauty is closely related to issues of translation that I'm deeply concerned with. The ethical foundation of my visual and writing practice is enlightened and informed by the Indian feminist literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's politics on translation. She reflects on the situation of the double bind experienced by Third World women, both beyond and within their nation states. In various double binds, the voices of subaltern women are forced to disappear. For this reason, she declares, "translation is impossible but necessary." The impossibility of translation is first and foremost reflected in the fact that existence is a product of language, and a Third World subaltern woman would not exist in world constructed in Victorian English. Translation, then, is inherently and inevitably violent. How can such violence be mitigated? How can translation with ethical concerns be achieved? I was struck by Spivak's suggestion that "The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying." It is the difference that causes this fraying. In a world situation as complex as today's, a good translation is no longer simply a matter of Xin Da Ya (faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance, the crux of modern Chinese translation theory). The practice of translation must assume a political acuity and awareness. Not only should translation allow for difference, it shall also fall in love with difference, leading to love and bonding between the reader and author. It should be a dialogue between subject and subject, rather than the consumption of the translated Other as an object by the dominance of the translator-Subject. The difficulty and impossibility shouldered by the contemporary translator is precisely the fuel of this endeavor. Art and literature across the world have always been able to evolve, develop, hybridize, travel, and expand because the attempts to translate have never ceased due to difficulties and failure. In every translator's mind, translation is impossible and our failure is destined, but it comes with a certain Sisyphean romance.

I do not look for my identity in the clichéd image of the bohemian, white Western artist. Instead, I view myself as a translator, in tandem with all the great translators throughout history, such as Kumārajīva, who translated Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, as well as all the outstanding women translators around the world. Without these translation movements in history and in the present, there would be no world of peaceful coexistence; the history of peaceful coexistence is just as present as the history of conflict, but the former is often overlooked.

Back to your question, despite being fully aware of the challenges and impossibilities of translation and communication, I still pursue exchange and translation. Reaching an understanding takes a lot of effort, and I am committed to making that effort. I also hope that my translations can evoke and foster love for the Other and difference, and I wish for such love to bring about more change. Ultimately, translation is the politics of love.

Lai: Do you often get asked, why, as a Chinese person, you want to explore the cultures of other countries in your practice?

Han Mengyun: Whether at home or abroad, I have been frequently asked why I, as a Chinese person, would study Indian and Islamic culture. Questions like this always infuriate me. As a Chinese person, am I only supposed to study Chinese culture? The best response to this question is to question the question itself. But as this question has come up too often, I have begun to realize the importance of what it may imply. We need to understand how this monolithic perception of national identity is created and disseminated, and grasp the mechanisms behind it and the history of its formation. Deconstruction begins with deep understanding. It seems to me that this problem also offers the possibility of dissolving itself. If a Chinese person can only do Chinese things is already a normalized status quo, then the solution to it is to aggressively go against the grain and break the shackles that have been imposed on us more radically; like the branches that stretch beyond the ornamented frame and the birds that spiral inside and outside of it in Persian miniatures, we grapple with all the boundaries that confine us in every dimensions of our life's journey. But the very first step is to identify that frame, to recognize what binds us.

The Poet's Devotion
诗人的信仰

Panchatantra: In Praise of the Moon
2023, film still in installation
8'10"