

Exhibition: *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*

On View: June 2, 2019–January 5, 2020

Location: BCAM, Level 2, and the Resnick Pavilion



Image captions on page 6

(Los Angeles—March 19, 2019) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is pleased to present *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, bringing together 35 works from the past four decades, in which conscious material choice has become a symbol of the artists' expression. *The Allure of Matter* features 21 of the most important and influential Chinese artists working today, including Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang, Lin Tianmiao, Song Dong, Xu Bing, Yin Xiuzhen, Zhan Wang, Zhang Huan, and more.

The Allure of Matter is organized by Wu Hung, Adjunct Curator at the Smart Museum of Art and Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, with Orianna Cacchione, Curator of Global Contemporary Art, Smart Museum of Art; the presentation at LACMA is co-curated by Stephen Little, Florence & Harry Sloan Curator of Chinese Art and Head of Chinese, Korean, and South and Southeast Asian Art Departments and Susanna Ferrell, Curatorial Assistant, Chinese and Korean Art. After premiering at LACMA, the exhibition will travel to exhibition co-organizers the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago and Wrightwood 659, Chicago, Illinois (February 4–May 3, 2020); the Seattle Art Museum, Washington (June 25–September 13, 2020); and the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts (November 14, 2020–February 21, 2021).

"*The Allure of Matter* is an opportunity to see some of the leading works of art coming from China today," says Stephen Little. Wu Hung continues, "While most of the exhibition's featured artists are well known in the Chinese contemporary art world,

they are still little-known in the U.S. It is our hope that this show will help audiences understand the context of these artists as “material artists” within the greater scope of Chinese contemporary art history.”

“This exhibition is a part of LACMA’s growing effort to become a center of Chinese contemporary art,” says LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director Michael Govan. “Recently, we received a promised gift from Gérard and Dora Cognié of 400 works of contemporary art focused around Chinese ink painting, which will be presented in an exhibition in fall 2021. Additionally, LACMA is growing its partnership with the Yuz Museum in Shanghai, which houses works of contemporary Chinese and global art.”

About the Exhibition

Since the 1980s, Chinese contemporary artists have cultivated intimate relationships with their materials, establishing a framework of interpretation revolving around materiality. Their media range from the commonplace to the unconventional, the natural to the synthetic, the elemental to the composite: from plastic, water, and wood to hair, gunpowder, and Coca-Cola. Artists continue to explore and develop this creative mode, with some devoting decades of their practice to experiments with a single material. *The Allure of Matter* coins the term “material art” to denote this trend in contemporary Chinese artmaking.

The concept of Material Art is related not only to the general term “materiality” in contemporary art, but also refers more specifically to artworks with the goal of making “matter” the primary vehicle of philosophical, political, sociological, emotional, and aesthetic expression. Some of these works reject constructed forms altogether, but most reverse or problematize the conventional relationship between medium and representation. In either case the material (and related technology) becomes the message. The conditions of contemporary Chinese art offer reasons for the prevalence of Material Art and its continuous relevance, which has been developed to fulfill two simultaneous objectives of disavowing established art forms and inventing new artistic languages.

Exhibition Organization

The Allure of Matter features 35 works based on their historical importance, representativeness, and visual quality. Created from the late-1980s to the present day, the works include two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and new media works that are complementary in form, material, and visual effect. Highlights from the exhibition include:

Xu Bing's Tobacco Project, a personal and historic multi-part exploration of tobacco. Four elements of this work are featured in the exhibition: *Tobacco Book* (2011), *Traveling Down the River* (2004), a series of sketches (all completed between 1999 and 2000), and a larger-than-life tiger skin carpet made entirely of cigarettes, *1st Class* (1999–2011). The project stems from a residency Xu undertook at Duke University in 2000, where he took interest in the history of the Duke family, who made much of their fortune manufacturing and marketing cigarettes in the late 19th century. During this residency, Xu learned about all aspects of tobacco production, from historical to contemporary, and began this series of works made of and about the tobacco trade. The artist took a particular interest in the introduction of American tobacco businesses in China in the late 19th century, and their lasting effect on his home country, both socially and economically.

In 1509, Leonardo da Vinci drew one of the first recorded images of a truncated icosahedron (a 3-D shape with 12 regular pentagonal faces and 20 regular hexagonal faces, similar to a buckyball molecule or a soccer ball), entitled *De Divine Proportione*. Despite their shared title, **Ai Weiwei's Untitled, Divine Proportion** (2006) was not initially inspired by this drawing, and instead came from Ai's fascination with one of his cats' play toys. Ai playfully subverts the structure, enlarging it to a larger-than-human scale and forming it from valuable *huanghuali* (yellow rosewood) using traditional Chinese nailless joinery techniques. This work came to LACMA's permanent collection in 2011 as a Collectors Committee acquisition.

Day-Dreamer (2000) is the product of a decades-long enamored with cotton thread, which began in **Lin Tianmiao's** early childhood. In a frugal and tedious act of preservation, Lin's mother would unravel the thread of her old white cotton gloves, given to workers in state-owned factories. Lin herself was taught to wind the thread into skeins to be used in future domestic projects, and eventually transitioned this process into her art. In *Day-Dreamer*, a wooden mattress is wrapped with a piece of white cloth and placed on the floor. Above hangs a canvas with an image of a nude figure staring down at the mattress. Numerous white cotton threads that mark the contours of the body hang straight down with their ends fixed onto the mattress, lightly tugging a white cloth that covers the surface of the mattress, mirroring the shape of the figure above.

Yin Xiuzhen utilizes old building tiles, rescued from the demolition sites of traditional houses in Beijing, to create her installation **Transformation** (1997). Atop each tile lies a black-and-white photograph taken at its collection site, memorializing the rubble

that has colored Beijing's streets since the 1990s, born from the demolition of thousands of *siheyuan* (traditional courtyard) homes. Beijing's widespread project to raze these historic neighborhoods and construct new modern buildings in their place has caused the displacement of countless local families. Yin's work preserves the memory of these demolished buildings, both through images at their original sites and physical artifacts of the buildings themselves. In *Transformation*, Yin rescues these historic artifacts from further razing, and elevates the found objects by repurposing them as artistic materials, drawing attention to Beijing's *siheyuan* demolition and creating important documentation of the rubble left in the wake of this destruction.

In addition to the works installed in BCAM, **Zhu Jinshi's *Wave of Materials*** (2007/2009) will be on view in the Resnick Pavilion from March 16 through September 15, 2019. Xuan paper, often erroneously equated with rice paper, is traditionally made from a mixture of hemp, mulberry, and other natural plant fibers. It is the most commonly-used ground for classical Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, and continues to be used by many Chinese artists today. *Wave of Materials* employs xuan paper as a symbol of Chinese art history, and presents it at a monumental level—8,000 sheets of crumpled xuan paper compose the work. The piece shows us a powerful suspended moment: the paper wave frozen in time as it crests. Although an individual sheet of paper is light and fragile, the gigantic wave form is menacing, as if it could crash down upon the gallery floor at any moment. Despite the ominous quality of this moment, the xuan paper that composes *Wave of Materials* creates a sense of calm before the storm, by diffusing the overhead lighting. The suspended wave creates a wall between the viewer and the surrounding gallery, isolating the viewer within the work and establishing its overwhelming presence.

Featured Artists

Ai Weiwei (b. 1957)
Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957)
Chen Zhen (1955–2000)
Gu Dexin (b. 1961)
Gu Wenda (b. 1955)
He Xiangyu (b. 1986)
Hu Xiaoyuan (b. 1977)
Jin Shan (b. 1977)
Liang Shaoji (b. 1977)
Lin Tianmiao (b. 1961)
Liu Jianhua (b. 1962)

Ma Qiusha (b. 1982)
Peng Yu (b. 1974)
Song Dong (b. 1966)
Sui Jianguo (b. 1956)
Wang Jin (b. 1962)
Xu Bing (b. 1955)
Yin Xiuzhen (b. 1963)
Zhan Wang (b. 1962)
Zhang Huan (b. 1965)
Zhu Jinshi (b. 1954)

Exhibition Catalogue

The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China

By Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione, with essays by Christine Mehring, and Trevor Smith
256 pages, case bound, 12" (H) x 9.5" (W)
200 full-color illustrations (approximately)

Related Programming

Material Is the Message: Exploring an Overlooked Aspect of Contemporary Chinese Art
Saturday, June 8, 2019 | 2–3 pm

Bing Theater, LACMA | Free, tickets required

Since the 1980s, many Chinese artists undertook wide-ranging experiments with unconventional materials. These experiments were serious and enduring: it is not rare for an artist to have developed his or her repertoire around one or more specific “personal” materials, while in this process exploring the materials’ artistic potential and devising individualized visual languages. This lecture explores the historical development and major characteristics of this artistic trend, featured in *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*. By focusing on some leading contemporary Chinese artists’ creative use of non-conventional materials in art making, the talk will introduce a body of exciting and less familiar works to the Western audience and interpret contemporary Chinese art from a fresh angle. Wu Hung is the Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor of Art History and Director of the Center for the Art of East Asia at The University of Chicago. He teaches and publishes in the areas of traditional, modernist, and contemporary Chinese art and architecture. He is also an Adjunct Curator at the Smart Museum of Art.

Credit: This exhibition is co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Smart Museum with Wrightwood 659, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Peabody Essex Museum.

This exhibition is presented by



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About LACMA

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of nearly 140,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90036. lacma.org

Image captions: Gu Dexin, *Untitled* (detail), 1989, melted and adjoined plastic, Musee d'art contemporain de Lyon, © Gu Dexin; Lin Tianmiao, *Day-Dreamer*, 2000, white cotton threads, white fabric, digital photograph, height adjustable on actual site: 196 13/16 × 86 5/8 × 59 in., courtesy of the artist, © Lin Tianmiao; Ai Weiwei, *Untitled, Divine Proportion*, 2006, huanghuali wood, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the 2011 Collectors Committee, © Ai Weiwei, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

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