LACMA

EXHIBITION DIDACTICS

The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China

Whether unusual or generic, natural or artificial, elements such as gunpowder, water, plastic, used clothes, and human hair have been adopted by Chinese contemporary artists as their preferred mediums over time. In his conceptualization of this exhibition, art historian and curator Wu Hung develops the notion of "material art"—a mode of expression in Chinese contemporary art spanning nearly four decades—around these unique practices, brought together for the first time in *The Allure of Matter*.

Materialism has become inseparably intertwined with contemporary life, often thought of as the antithesis of spirit. However, within the context of material art, these two seemingly disparate qualities find harmony—objective matter becomes essential in portraying the subject. Elevating medium over image and object, material art generates tension and conflict with conventional art forms. Used in painting, sculpture, installation, and performance, these signature materials transcend standard art forms to function as superagents that hold particular significance and strongly convey meaning.

Material art emerged in China in the 1980s and flourished in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the beginning, defiant young artists gravitated to this kind of art making for its radicalism and cosmopolitanism. Gradually, the distinct languages and aesthetics of this practice became the shared property of contemporary Chinese artists and continue to influence younger generations today.

Ai Weiwei
Chinese, b. 1957

Tables at Right Angles, 1998
Tables from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
Contemporary Art Council Fund
Stockamp Tsai Collection
Tables at Right Angles exemplifies Ai Weiwei's strategy of altering, transforming, and often destroying cultural relics and historic antiques. Part of his Furniture series, this work invokes technical expertise to consider the cultural value of antiques and artworks in contemporary society. The juncture of these two tables is deceptively simple, yet the process is not. Ai employed a team of craftsmen who used sixteenth-century woodworking techniques to join the tables without any glue or nails. Balancing them at a perfectly perpendicular angle, the work demonstrates the technical possibilities of the joinery with which the tables were originally constructed. Nonetheless, this reconfiguration deprives the pieces of furniture of their functionality by turning them into objects of sheer craftsmanship. The work ultimately raises questions about the utility of

traditional woodworking within contemporary art and the value society places on original objects.

Untitled, Divine Proportion, 2006
Huanghuali wood
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the 2011 Collectors Committee
This geometric work is made of highly precious *huanghuali* wood, a yellow rosewood that has been used by furniture makers in China for centuries. It was constructed using traditional mortice–and–tenon joints, without any nails, but the many-sided sphere has no precedent in furniture-making. The title references Leonardo da Vinci's illustrations of this form for mathematician Luca Pacioli's 1509 treatise *The Divine Proportion*. However, the shape was initially inspired by Ai Weiwei's fascination with
one of his cats' toys. Following more than a year of deliberation and planning, the artist's craftsmen translated the ball's shape into wood. Lacking any conventional function, the monumental ball highlights the exquisite detail of its craftsmanship.

Cai Guo-Qiang

Chinese, b. 1957

Ignition of gunpowder drawing, 2018, photo by Kazuo Ono, courtesy of Cai Studio

Mountain Range, 2006
Gunpowder on paper, mounted on wood as six-panel screen
Collection of the artist
Invented by the ancient Chinese in their search for elixirs of immortality, gunpowder now powers the destructive explosions of dynamite, bombs, and bullets. Intrigued by this complex history and its political implications, Cai Guo-Qiang has manipulated gunpowder to make explosion images since the late 1980s. After many experiments, Cai innovated a novel method to control and contain these explosions to create gunpowder paintings. He first applies different types of gunpowder and loose explosive powders according to an original sketch, and then adds fuses and weighted cover sheets to control the explosions. Channeling the violence inherent within the materials used, the images he produces, like this landscape of mountains, are at once powerful and delicate. Dense, blackened areas

indicate the magnitude of the artist's explosion; the veins of gunpowder that radiate across the image demonstrate his careful control and calculations.

Chen Zhen
Chinese, 1955–2000

Crystal Landscape of Inner Body, 2000
Crystal, metal, and glass
Private collection, Paris, courtesy of GALLERIA CONTINUA,
San Gimignano/Beijing/Les Moulins/Habana
This assortment of crystal organs evokes the centuries-old Daoist concept of Internal Alchemy—physical, mental, and spiritual practices used to prolong life and reach immortality—by visualizing the human body as a series of microcosms. A meditation like this one, on the body's inner landscape, would initiate a process of purification and healing. Chen Zhen once mused, "When one's body becomes a kind of laboratory, a source of imagination and experiment, the process of life transforms itself into art." *Crystal Landscape* is representative of the artist's fascination with medicine, channeling his personal battle with cancer as a creative force and artistic inspiration. It is one of the last pieces Chen created before his death at age forty-five.

Gu Dexin
Chinese, b. 1961

Untitled, 1989
Plastic
Collection of Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon
While working in a plastics factory in Beijing, Gu Dexin took scrap pieces of plastic home and melted them into abstracted compositions. These unconventional materials were some of the earliest in contemporary art production in China. For Gu, plastic "was a new material and it was everywhere. Everything in the house was plastic: shoes, tablecloths, bowls, and utensils." He was fascinated by its texture and versatility—it was malleable or hard, soft or brittle, and made in many different colors. When invited to participate in an exhibition of global contemporary art in Paris, Gu made *Untitled*, his first large-scale installation, on site, sourcing materials throughout the city. He even incorporated Chanel perfume bottles into the plastic tubing, adding a sweet fragrance to the work. Gu refuses to assign meaning to his artworks, instead insisting on the primacy of a viewer's experience of the piece over its interpretation.

gu wenda

Chinese, b. 1955

Braids coiled into balls in preparation for *american code*, courtesy of gu wenda's studio

united nations: american code, 1995–19
Human and synthetic hair
Commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Seattle Art Museum, and Peabody Essex Museum
For *american code*, gu wenda was driven by a utopian vision of the world, focused on creating harmony through the mixing of different cultures. The work incorporates hair from all over the world in its center flag, representing the U.S. as a nation of immigrants and mixed ethnic identities. Hair has been a primary material in gu's artistic practice since the early 1990s, woven and glued into monumental installations. His *united nations* series is an ongoing project, inspired by the politics and histories of different countries; the artist has created more than thirty works for this series, in and about countries such as Australia, Poland, Taiwan, Canada, Israel, and South Africa.

He Xiangyu

Chinese, b. 1986

An assistant stirs boiling *Coca-Cola* for Cola Project, Dandong, Liaoning Province, December 2010, courtesy of the artist, © He Xiangyu

A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola, 2009–15
Coca-Cola resin, metal, and glass
Rubell Family Collection, Miami

Cola, 9 Sketches, 2010
Ink, watercolor, barcodes, printed invoices, and photographs on paper
Rubell Family Collection, Miami
He Xiangyu began *Cola Project* in 2009 by boiling down bottle after bottle of soda in his kitchen. When the process proved too slow, he hired a team of migrant workers to continue the work; they reduced a total of 127 tons of soda into black cola ash. An iconic brand of soda in both China and the West, Coca-Cola is unrecognizable in its desiccated state. Exploring the chemical and material transformation of the drink, this act of destruction encourages us to consider the changing status of this commercial icon in a Chinese context. Originally marketed solely in the United States, Coca-Cola is now sold and consumed around the world. Following these paths of transnational circulation and consumption, he offers cola as an allegorical artistic material fit for the contemporary art market.

Hu Xiaoyuan

Chinese, b. 1977

Hu Xiaoyuan working with raw silk on a sculpture from her Ant Bone series, November 2015, image courtesy of the artist

Ant Bone IV, 2015
Chinese catalpa wood, ink, raw silk, latex paint, and iron nails
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Beijing Commune and the artist
For her Ant Bone series, Hu Xiaoyuan employs mortise-and-tenon joints used in traditional Chinese woodworking and architecture to construct geometric sculptures without using a single nail. On the form's interior, Hu carefully covers the wood with her signature ink paintings on silk. Using a process she developed in 2008, Hu meticulously traces the wood's grain on a piece of raw silk (*xiao*) to make a deceptive copy. After covering the surface of the wood with latex paint to obscure the real grain, she affixes the silk tracing with tiny nails. The silk both conceals and displays, hinting at the fine distinction between the copy and the original.

Jin Shan

Chinese, b. 1977

Jin Shan pouring plastic into a mold, August 2018, courtesy of the artist

Mistaken, 2015
Wood and plastic
Collection of the artist, courtesy of the artist and BANK/MABSOCIETY
The top of this sculpture is a plastic bust of a heroic Communist worker. Fists punch out from the face of the bust and the plastic appears to melt away in fine strings. The sculpture's lower part is made up of an aggressive arrangement of wood slats with dangerous points at their ends. The wooden pieces, chopped by Jin Shan himself, are from the doors of old demolished houses on the outskirts of Shanghai. Combining the relics of old buildings with Cultural Revolution imagery, Jin suggests that the memory of China's past is both nostalgic and fragmented. The dramatic contrast of the two materials—the plastic and the wood—makes the sculpture appear to writhe with a complex and contradictory energy as if pulling itself apart.

Liang Shaoji

Chinese, b. 1977

Liang Shaoji examining the silkworm activity on one of his chains, 2003, courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery

Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79, 2002–07
Polyurethane colophony, iron powder, silk, and cocoons
Collection of the artist, courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery
These hollow metal chains are covered in the delicate, raw, white silk of silkworms, active participants in the creation of this artwork. For more than 25 years, Liang Shaoji has used

live silkworms to spin silk onto different objects in his Nature Series. Liang himself has said, “I am a silkworm,” underscoring his interest in the interconnectedness between humans, animals, and nature. His fascination with silk is rooted in the Chinese psyche: legends connect the invention of silk-making with the creation of Chinese civilization.

Lin Tianmiao

Chinese, b. 1961

Lin Tianmiao working with her signature white thread, 2012, courtesy of the artist

Day–Dreamer, 2000
White cotton threads, white fabric, and digital photograph
Collection of the artist
For *Day-Dreamer*, hundreds of cotton threads were stitched through Lin Tianmiao’s colorless self-portrait, suspended from the ceiling. Since her early childhood, Lin has been fascinated with cotton thread. Her mother would tediously unravel the thread of her white cotton gloves, which were worn by workers in state-owned factories. Lin herself was taught to wind the thread into skeins, used later to make and mend clothing. The artist began appropriating this domestic practice in her artwork in the early 1990s, and cotton thread has consistently been a part of her work ever since. The repeated punctures through her haunting silhouette suggest the impact of domes-tic labor on her body.

Liu Jianhua

Chinese, b. 1962

Liu Jianhua working on a piece from his Blank Paper series, October 2010, courtesy of Liu Jianhua Studio

Blank Paper, 2009–12
Porcelain
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Pace Gallery
Blank Paper mimics a sheet of paper but is actually made of porcelain, one of the most delicate and difficult clays to work with. As a teenager, Liu Jianhua was introduced to porcelain by his uncle, a ceramist in the famous porcelain-making city of Jingdezhen. This early exposure was influential; since then the artist has used the pure white clay to produce all of his work. Liu leaves his *Blank Paper* pieces unglazed—fully exposed, they invite viewers to fill the empty space with their thoughts.

Black Flame, 2016–17
Porcelain
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Pace Gallery
These 8,000 black porcelain flames suggest the possibility of a rapidly spreading fire flickering across the gallery floor. The glaze is a key element of this work, the slightest hint of fiery gold showing through layers of matte blackness. The pool of sharp flames is imposing, in stark contrast to the calming quality of *Blank Paper*. As a pair, these two works show us the range of emotions that porcelain can elicit, through two very different manipulations of the material.

Ma Qiusha

Chinese, b. 1982

Ma Qiusha examining stockings in preparation for her Wonderland series, 2018, courtesy of the artist

Wonderland: Black Square, 2016
Cement, nylon stockings, plywood, iron, and resin
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Beijing Commune and the artist
Hidden beneath the stretched nylon skin of *Wonderland: Black Square* lie thick shards of rough gray cement. They fit together to create something between a mosaic and a tapestry, both fabric and stone, in varying shades and sheens of black. A sense of tension—created by stretching the fabric over the cement pieces—is a major component in much of Ma Qiusha's work. The artist uses panty-hose of different colors to allude to the succession of generations of women in China: the thick, flesh- colored hose that her mother and grandmother wore were succeeded in the early 2000s by inexpensive black

pantyhose of differing deniers as part of the “fast fashion” movement, easily discarded and replaced when torn, and later by brightly colored fabrics. The title of the series is derived from the name of the massive Wonderland Amusement Park, which was once located on the outskirts of Ma’s hometown of Beijing. Begun during Ma’s childhood in the 1990s, the park was never completed and ultimately was abandoned in 1998. It was quietly demolished more than a decade later, sinking into obscurity like the thick tan nylons of her mother’s generation.

Peng Yu

Chinese, b. 1974

Peng Yu working with human fat for a work with her collaborator Sun Yuan, 2001, courtesy of the artist

Exile, 2000
Single-channel video, Betacam SP; 3 minutes, 20 seconds
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp–M HKA
This work documents a performance in which Peng Yu poured seven liters of oil extracted from human cadavers into a polluted Beijing river. The video focuses on the water’s oil-coated surface, capturing the forms that appeared in its reflections. For Peng, the human fat is an initially pure substance that is diluted with water in her performance. By dissolving human fat into the river’s other pollutants, Peng’s performance alludes to the unbridled human impact on the environment. Throughout her artistic career, Peng has used materials such as flesh, bone, and oil in ways that challenge cultural proscriptions that elevate and fetishize the human body; her works deliberately and provocatively appropriate bodily matter as artistic material.

Song Dong

Chinese, b. 1966

The artist painting in water on his *Traceless Stele*, 2016, courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, photo © 2019 Song Dong

Traceless Stele, 2016
Metal stele and heating device
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Pace Gallery
Used as memorials in China for centuries, steles feature carved inscriptions to relay important information about the people or events they were meant to commemorate. Here, Song Dong invites viewers to write their own messages on the stone using brush and water to create a fleeting memorial that contrasts with the stele's traditional function. Fascinated by Daoist notions of impermanence, Song employs water's translucency and formlessness to explore what cannot be seen or said. When this work was shown in China, viewers were encouraged to write freely, since their text would immediately disappear.

Water Records, 2010
Four-channel video projection; various durations
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Pace Gallery
Four videos document Song Dong drawing figures in water. Before the artist can complete each drawing, the brushstrokes begin to evaporate and disappear. According to Song, these ephemeral water drawings are meant to be "random fragments of memory—imprecise, incorrect, incomprehensive, and incomplete." By not rendering any concrete, permanent representation, Song's performance explores the transience of water, a material that leaves no record behind.

Sui Jianguo

Chinese, b. 1956

The artist working on Kill in Jiuxianqiao, Beijing, 1996, courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, photo © 2019 Sui Jianguo

Kill, 1996
Rubber and iron nails
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Pace Gallery
A single sheet of rubber with 300,000 nails driven through it, *Kill* both exposes the incredible resilience of rubber as a material and demonstrates how abstracted forms can manifest broader political significance. Sui himself described it this way:

"It surprised me that even a small piece of rubber can bear a great many nails without altering its shape and qualities. What is more, by incorporating so many nails into its own body the rubber sheet has changed from a passive and receptive object to an active and aggressive one. This makes me think about our nation and myself. All throughout this century—since the establishment of the PRC [People's Republic of China], the opening up after the Cultural Revolution, and the June Fourth Movement [1989 Tiananmen Square Protests]—the Chinese people have shown great strength of endurance. But pliability also means alienation; we all have this ability to survive."

Wang Jin

Chinese, b. 1962

Wang Jin performing in one of his PVC dragon robes, 1998, photo © Wang Jin, courtesy of Pékin Fine Arts

A Chinese Dream, 2006
PVC and fishing line
Private Collection, New York

Chinese Dream, 2006
PVC and fishing line
Pizzuti Collection

The Dream of China: Dragon Robe, 1997
PVC and fishing line
The Farber Collection

Wang Jin's imperial robes and theatrical costumes levitate like specters of a bygone age. Such garments traditionally bear encoded symbols, such as five-clawed dragons representing the imperial house, or the multicolored waves, rocks, and clouds that present the universe under the ruler's sway. Here, rich silks, golden threads, and opulent brocades are replaced with a common industrial material, polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic. Wang's choice to reproduce both imperial and theatrical attire underscores the dichotomy of the authentic and fake; the vague, orientalizing title, *Chinese Dream*, alludes to the commercialization of tradition. Suspended like a memory or a dream, these plastic robes are shadows of the original garments, their symbols now difficult to decipher.

Xu Bing

Chinese, b. 1955

Xu Bing emptying a jar of tobacco-eating pests onto his *Tobacco Book*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 2000, courtesy of Xu Bing Studio

Tobacco Book, 2011
Tobacco leaves, paper, and cardboard
Collection of the artist
Using tobacco as both material and subject, Xu Bing explores the history and production of the cigarette, global trade, and marketing in his long-term *Tobacco Project*. In 2000, Xu was invited to participate in a residency at Duke University, where he first started to research tobacco, its consumption, and its global circulation. Tobacco was one of the first products from the United States to enter the Chinese market. Fascinated by this U.S.-China connection, Xu transformed different aspects of raw tobacco leaves, cigarettes, cigarette packaging, and other marketing materials to explore the interwoven histories of the global economy, commodities, and Chinese art history. The pages of *Tobacco Book* are printed with a passage from *A True Discourse on the Present State of Virginia*, written by Ralph Hamor in 1615. *A True Discourse* is a firsthand account of life in the British colony. It was the first published account of the marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, and it tells of Rolfe's cultivation of tobacco.

1st Class, 1999–2011
Cigarettes, adhesive, and carpet
Collection of the artist
1st Class was inspired by a photograph of a tiger-skin rug in a colonial home in Shanghai. Configured in the shape of this luxury item, the cigarettes are presented as a lifestyle product that is both glamorous and dangerous to people's health.

Traveling Down the River, 2011
Burned cigarette and scroll
Collection of the artist
The subject of the Song dynasty handscroll *Along the River during the Qingming Festival*, originally painted by Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145) but copied by many later painters, is reproduced in Xu's *Traveling Down the River*. Because of their length, handscrolls like this

were traditionally viewed in segments, necessitating a gradual viewing process. Similarly, the elongated cigarette laid over Xu's reproduction indicates a slow burn, gradually but persistently damaging the scroll below.

Study for Tobacco Project, 1999–2000
Pencil and collage on paper
Collection of the artist

Study for Chinese Spirit, 1999
Pencil and collage on paper
Collection of the artist

Study for Chinese Spirit, 1999
Pencil and collage on paper
Collection of the artist

Study for Tobacco Book, 1999
Tobacco leaves, pencil, and ink on paper
Collection of the artist

Yin Xiuzhen

Chinese, b. 1963

Yin Xiuzhen installing her work in the courtyard of the Beijing Contemporary Art Museum, 1998, courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, photo © 2019 Yin Xiuzhen

Transformation, 1997
Black-and-white photographs mounted on tiles
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Pace Gallery
Transformation incorporates 108 cement roof tiles that Yin Xiuzhen collected from the demolition sites of traditional houses in her hometown of Beijing. Each tile is affixed with a black-and-white photograph taken at its collection site, memorializing the rubble that has colored the streets of Beijing since the 1990s. Born from the demolition of thousands of *siheyuan* (traditional courtyard) homes, Beijing's widespread project to raze these

historical neighborhoods and construct new mod-ern buildings in their place has caused the displacement of countless local families. Yin explains how this process allows the Beijing wreckage to tell its own story: “When you bring the rubble directly into the works, these materials, with their experiences and histories, speak for themselves. They have individual and collective memories, as well as many traces of life. When these materials emerge in a different environment, a vein between true reality and the artwork forms. It formalizes real life and allows objects to speak, to have their own voice.”

Zhan Wang

Chinese, b. 1962

Zhan Wang working at the studio of Tongzhou, 2000, courtesy of Zhan Wang Studio

Gold Mountain, 2007
Stone and stainless steel
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Haines Gallery

Beyond 12 Nautical Miles Floating Rock Drifts on the Open Sea, 2000
Single-channel video; 25 minutes, 52 seconds
Collection of the artist

Scholar’s rocks, or *gongshi*, have historically been objects of deep contemplation. Zhan Wang first came into contact with these stones as a child, in the Beijing *siheyuan*, or courtyard home, of his grandfather. He recalls playing hide-and-seek among scholar’s rocks in Beijing parks—he knew them then less as works of art and more as a playground. As Beijing neighborhoods were redeveloped in the 1990s, scholar’s rocks became an indispensable landscape feature in new residential compounds. Zhan is interested in representing these forms using a modern material—shiny, industrial stainless steel—to reflect their deployment in service of urban development. In *Gold Mountain*, the artist pairs his stainless steel rock with its natural counterpart, a mold around which he pounded sheets of stainless steel before meticulously welding and polishing the metal. In *Beyond 12 Nautical Miles*, Zhan set another hollow stainless steel rock adrift in international waters, allowing it to move freely in the currents. The work’s title refers to the point beyond which any country can claim open water as its territory.

Zhang Huan

Chinese, b. 1965

Zhang Huan applying incense ash to a panel, 2008, courtesy of the artist

Untitled No. 5, 2006
Incense ashes and adhesive
Ms. Pearl Lam Private Collection

Seeds, 2007
Incense ash, charcoal, and resin on canvas
Faurschou Collection
Zhang Huan first began working with ash after a visit to the Longhua Temple in Shanghai, where he observed the ritual significance of ash from burned joss sticks, or incense used in prayer rituals. While the ash is a byproduct of the spiritual process, Zhang finds meaning in its connection to the people who visit the temple. As he described the experience, "The temple floor was covered with ash which leaked from the giant incense burner… These ash remains speak to the fulfillment of millions of hopes, dreams, and blessings." To create these paintings, studio assistants meticulously sorted the ash by shade and coarseness before applying and adhering it to a canvas. Later, they added large flakes of ash and pieces of joss sticks.

Zhu Jinshi

Beijing, b. 1954

Wave of Materials, 2007/2019
Cotton, bamboo, stone, and xuan paper
Gift of Zhu Jinshi and Pearl Lam Galleries in honor of Wu Hung, jointly acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago
Although paper has been present in the Western world as an artistic material for nearly a millennium, Chinese papermaking dates back even further, to the second century BCE. Xuan paper is traditionally made from a mixture of hemp, mulberry, and other natural plant fibers. It is the ground most commonly used for classical Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, and continues to be used by many Chinese artists today. *Wave of Materials*

employs xuan paper not as a ground, but as a sculptural material and symbol of Chinese art history. The paper is presented at a monumental level—eight thousand individual crumpled sheets comprise the work. The paper wave appears frozen in time as it crests and creates a calming effect, diffusing the overhead lighting. Suspended in the air, it shelters viewers from the surrounding gallery, isolating them within the work and establishing the overwhelming presence of Eastern art within a Western space.