

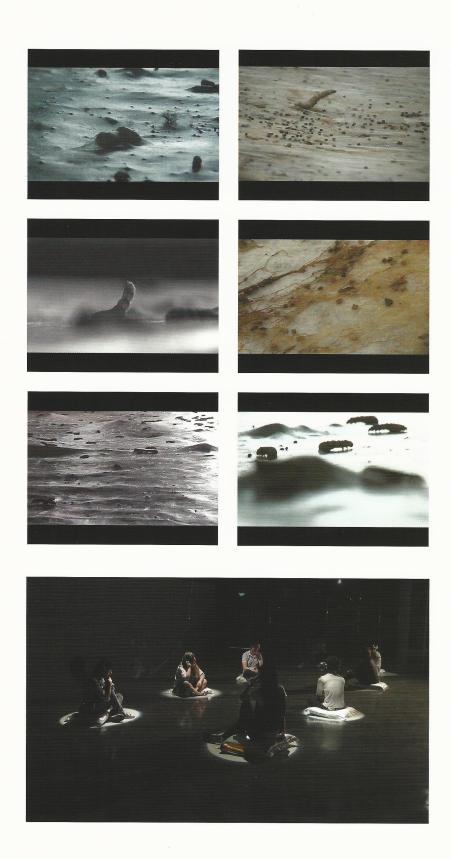
When Liang Shaoji said "I am a silkworm," he could not have used a simpler, more concise statement to summarize his decades of artistic pursuit and his ideals about art and artists. Liang became obsessed with the materiality of silk and the technology of sericulture, and over the past twenty-five years, he has been using live silkworms and raw silk to make large-scale works. His *Nature Series*, consisting of more than one hundred projects, has the goal of transgressing the boundary between art and nature. For this purpose he spent a long time studying the habits of silkworms, and used them to spin silk on any surface when they mature. His exhibitions have displayed such things as old newspapers and books, miners' helmets, rusty metal chains, covered by shiny raw silk, which purifies these mundane objects by bestowing them with a magical luster (fig. 1). He also recorded the slight noise that silkworms make as they eat mulberry leaves and spin cocoons, and then made sound installations with the recordings.

Liang was born in Shanghai in 1945. Older than most artists in this exhibition, he studied in a professional art school prior to the Cultural Revolution, and then worked in a textile factory that manufactured fabrics, carpets, and tapestries. During a short trade-delegation trip to Europe and the United States in the early 1980s. he visited museums like Centre Pompidou and was elated by what he saw there. Determined to become a contemporary artist, he returned to school at age forty and entered a tapestry studio founded by the Bulgarian artist Marin Varbanov [1932-1989] in the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Fine Arts) in Hangzhou. A visionary textile artist, Varbanov considered tapestry to be contemporary "soft sculpture" and trained a generation of contemporary Chinese artists, including—in this exhibition—gu wenda, Shi Hui, and Liang Shaoji. Under Varbanov's influence, Liang Shaoji created his first major contemporary art piece in 1988. Titled Yi Series—Magic Cube, it incorporated raw silk, dry silkworm cocoons, and xuan paper. Shown in the China/Avant-Garde exhibition in 1989, this work initiated an important direction of Material Art in exploring traditional Chinese material culture and technology.

Many catalogues refer to Liang Shaoji's work as "installations," a characterless term that does nothing to illuminate the work, but instead distorts its nature. In fact, if we compare Liang's work with the conventional definition of "installation art," we can see that it in fact constitutes its antithesis and instead expands the concept of contemporary art. A typical dictionary explanation of installation art is "an artist's artistic selection, application, and compilation of consumed and un-consumed material objects in daily human life." Liang, however, neither uses ready-made objects as his primary material nor reconstructs and reorganizes them to express his ideas. Like the Creator, he is an image-maker and is similar in this respect to the classical masters. Yet his creations have entered the realm of contemporary art by interrogating and remaking the concepts of "artist" and "artifact."

An interesting question arises from his art: who actually created this work: Liang Shaoji or the insect larva known to humanity as the silkworm? Some say that the ultimate goal of art is for the artists to express their life experiences and emotions. Then what we see here is the life of a silkworm, first as an egg that's a black dot, then as a tiny creature, feeble and writhing, and then as a white larva greedily nibbling away at mulberry leaves. What follows is a mysterious transformation: the silkworm gradually turns transparent and produces a pure silver thread. To the rhythm of its rocking head, it wraps itself into a cocoon—or glosses the surface of any object it rests on. In the end, after "the silk is all spun," it leaves behind a black pupa.





Above, Figure 2 Liang Shaoji, *Can Chanchan (Silkworm Spinning)*, 2011. Two-channel video, 12:32 min. running time.

Below, Figure 3 Liang Shaoji, *Listen to the Silkworms*, *Nature Series No. 96*, 2006. Sound installation: living silkworms, mulberry leaves, microphone, earphones, recorder, baskets, and stands.



We can imagine the struggle, pain, and sublimation of a life in transformation that makes up the emotional and philosophical underpinnings of Liang's work (see fig. 2).

Thus, says Liang, "I am a silkworm." It is because his artistic creations, as well as what he feels and thinks about art, have fused seamlessly into a silkworm's creation and its sublimation. This fusion was not a sudden event but rather a culmination of nearly forty years of the artist's life experience. Of the hundreds of projects since his Nature Series No. 1 in 1988 (see p. 48), each and every one is a realization of his idea with his collaborators, the silkworms. The visual effects have become more and more complex, and the scope of his thinking, philosophy, and aesthetics also continue to expand and layer. These works include the shocking Destiny; Listen to the Silkworms (2006, fig. 3), which sounds like a misty rain; Cloud Mirror (2007, fig. 4), a cosmic retrospection (fig. 4); and the poignant Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being in this exhibition (2002–7, pl. 1, 2). In these works, people can feel the encounter between the primal world and civilization; they present the interaction and acclimation of humanity and nature, rethinking life from a religious and philosophical perspective, and considering the eternal tension between power politics and individual desires. In one sense, "I am a silkworm" personifies and identifies with the famous verse of Tang-dynasty poet Shangyin Li (813–858): "Till the end of life do silkworms keep spinning silk." In another sense, "I am a silkworm" is a visual development of Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) philosophical statement that poetry is a kind of homecoming. Liang has used Heidegger's phrase, expressing his quest in the Nature Series as "looking up toward 'poetry.'" Regardless of the specific theme of his work, whether cosmic philosophy or international politics, it is indeed poetry, written by the artist and nature together.

Further reading

Paul Gladston, Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists (Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher, 2011). Liang Shaoji, Back to Origin (Shanghai: ShanghART Gallery, 2015). Liang Shaoji and Marianne Brouwer, Liang Shaoji: Cloud (Shanghai: ShanghART Gallery, 2007).



