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Han Qin: Ethereal Evolution at Fou Gallery



Han Qin, The Age of Migration 1, 2018. Cyanotype, watercolor, inkjet print on silk, 28 x 56 inch ©Han Qin, courtesy Fou Gallery

Han Qin: Ethereal Evolution at Fou Gallery

Curated by Hai Liang

March 30 - May 12, 2019

By **JONATHAN GOODMAN**, June 2019

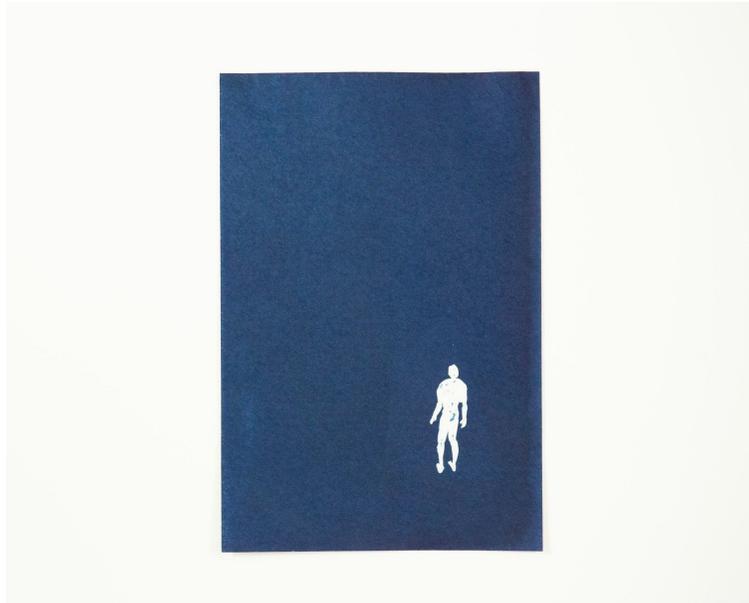
Han Qin, who studied art in Hangzhou, is now firmly established in the suburbs of Long Island, a bit more than an hour from New York City. Her show at Fou Gallery, curated by Hai Liang, encompassed a group of cyanotype works, large and small, that have been created by people or papercut objects pressing upon the treated blue paper--under light exposure and with further digital manipulation. On the Saturday I came to see the show, I saw a performance in which two dancers, dressed in black leotards, express their experiences in America, interacting with each other and with a group of flashlights they used to illuminate their movements. The treated paper they lay down on became a new cyanotype, made real by their activities during the course of the performance. The exhibition included several large works, as well as a wall of smaller ones --all of them cyanotypes--and one or two drawings. Han Qin, just over thirty, and

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with several years of life in the States, including a graduate degree in digital art from an American school, here demonstrates a keen awareness of Western avant-garde practice and performance art.



Han Qin, Single Shadow 4, 2018. Cyanotype on paper, 10 x 6 ½ inches ©Han Qin, courtesy Fou Gallery

The artist's thorough understanding of modernist and contemporary art practices in the West has enabled her to produce a body of work that cannot be called Asian. Rather, its bias can, at least now, best be described as international. The cyanotype was developed in the early 1840s in England, and the performance art the two dancers engaged in resulted from new ideas that came to the fore in New York City in the 1950s and '60s. (Perhaps the generation of Mainland Chinese artists who came of age in the 1980s can be considered original in working with an active amalgam of Asian and Western thinking, but this combination has been in use for two generations and has been internalized to the point where such notions are ordinary.) Han Qin's show, then, must be seen as a record of the extent to which she has taken into account the previous enterprises of a historical avant-garde, whose events have provided her with both a viable theme and a technical process.



Han Qin, Ethereal Evolution 8, 2018. Cyanotype on paper, 82 x 47 inch ©Han Qin, courtesy Fou Gallery

Han Qin's work, at least to some extent the result of processes beyond her control, nonetheless provides us with a visual imagery that we read as well-regulated despite the informality of her procedures. The work is regularly, entirely, figurative, being based on either an actual body or a real object--both are needed to throw their form onto the blue-treated paper. The forms and shapes that are captured in Han Qin's work are not completely exact but contain enough specificity to portray something recognizable. Her realism, highly poetic, results from a close interaction between Han Qin and the dancers; additionally, she controls the lighting to produce different degrees of blue. The tension between the uncontrollable and the consciously governed becomes taut with art historical, emotional, even visionary implications. This means that Han Qin's art occupies a space between intention and freedom, between performance and object. It is no longer appropriate to see much new art as belonging to one particular culture or the other.



Han Qin, Ethereal Evolution 1, 2018. Cyanotype on paper, 82 x 47 inch ©Han Qin, courtesy Fou Gallery

Much of the visual internationalism we observe does in fact stem from Western advances achieved at least two or three generations ago, many of the ideas or procedures originating in New York. Han Qin, as a China-born artist, may be coming a bit late to these developments, but her recent entry into the art world here shows no signs of being archaic. Instead, she has skillfully worked what she has seen and experienced in America. In *Ethereal Evolving 1* (2018), the outlines of hands and hair are sharply described, while the body shape is experienced as a single white mass. Three hands--two in the upper middle register and one in the very bottom left of the image--along with finely detailed strands of hair in the middle right offer a contrast with the larger, mostly amorphous shapes occurring in the center of the cyanotype. This is the key to the work's attraction: the contrast between close detail and general mass. Indeed, the difference between the two kinds of representation can be seen in most of Han Qin's work, including the impressive *Ethereal Evolving 8* (2018), in which one bright image of a woman exists above a dimmer image of a body, whose hand covers the left buttock of the female.



Han Qin: Ethereal Evolution installation view, photograph by Nadia Peichao Lin ©Han Qin, courtesy Fou Gallery

The wall of sixteen smaller cyanotypes--four rows of four images--is completely devoted to the human figure: singly, in duos, or in larger groups with bodies massed together. In one way, it can be said that Han Qin's art is profoundly conservative, in that it almost always references the human body. As we have noted, her control over the final image, while highly influential, is also slightly limited--as the overseer of these works of art, she may have decided who went where on the cyanotype, but the final image is not something she can have arranged. It is important to remember that a lot of art in recent years yields to image-making beyond the control of the artist responsible for the work, which may be determined by chance or mechanical action. Indeed, such an approach has become a staple of the avant-garde internationally. It is useful to remember, though, that this kind of thinking now has more than a bit of history to it, which means that it too needs to be renewed. By merging performance with the cyanotype procedure, Han Qin shows that she is willing to locate her creativity in two methodologies--one quite recent and one not. The combined results work startlingly well. **WM**

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