

# Cloud (on Liang Shaoji's work)

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Liang Shaoji is well known for working with animals and nature in his art. But to understand his work, we must understand something of the Chinese traditions he is referring to when he lovingly rescues fragments of China's architectural past from destruction, wraps references to the sadness and the strife of human life in raw silk thread, and atones for the unrest and the competition of the floating world by sitting on top of the sacred mountain of his village watching in a mirror how the clouds go by. We must know at least a little about the all-encompassing importance nature holds in Chinese thought, and the ancient poetry that has canonized the images of silk and bamboo, candles and clouds, as symbols of fleeting life, of suffering and generosity. But even while referring to Chinese tradition and associative philosophy, Liang targets the here and now, transforming those well-known references into thoroughly contemporary installations and performances.

Cloud is Liang Shaoji's first solo exhibition in China. It brings together a selection of works that deal with the uniquely redemptive aspects of his oeuvre. Throughout the years, Liang has stubbornly refused to let the attraction of fame and quick money stand in the way of his work. Demanding unusual expertise and extraordinary techniques, his works are slow in the making and difficult to interpret. His installations don't easily submit to commodification—they should be treated as the residue of actions and thought processes, indeed, as markers of a chosen path of life, rather than mere objects.

Liang Shaoji was born in Shanghai in 1945 and studied at the Varbanov Institute of Tapestry at the Zhejiang Art Academy. His early work consisted of serenely abstract hangings and installations made from textiles, often including bamboo as well. They made him a well-known figure in international exhibitions of arts and crafts. Then he reached a point where he felt that this was not enough.

"Weft and warp constitute the basic framework of textile weaving," says Liang, "but they also constitute a mental framework that I felt was too limited for the making of art. I had to overcome the attraction of rich surfaces and decorative textures in order to find that deeper desire which was at the origin of my research for a new kind of fabric and form. I wanted to discover some kind of critical point where science and nature, biology and bio-ecology, weaving and sculpture, and installation and action might meet."

Having used industrial silk for his textile works, Liang started experimenting in 1988 with making his own silk. Breeding silkworms and using them as a living component within his work, became the starting point of a whole new oeuvre, beginning with an installation for the China/Avant-Garde exhibition at the China Art Museum in Beijing in 1989. Since then he has created installations and performances using live silkworms, as well as objects (often *objets trouvés*) wrapped in raw silk thread he has his silkworms spin around them. Some of these works he keeps in his studio and will never sell, like a series of large screens made of raw silk thread. Most of these works are entitled *Nature Series*, followed by a number and a date. Each *Nature Series* may start



Liang Shaoji's studio at Tiantai Mountain, Zhejiang, China. Courtesy of ShanghART, Shanghai.

with one initial work and continue to multiply over a number of years, ultimately comprising several works made at different dates.

Another important part of Liang's work centers around traditional Chinese architecture. At the Shanghai Biennial of 2006, he showed *Extreme of Wood*, a photo and video installation of ancient wooden beams which he rescued from a Confucian temple. For the *Azian House Project* he collected parts of an old Shanghai building that had been demolished to make room for a high rise apartment block.

Although Liang also has a studio in Shanghai, he spends most of his time in his village in Zhejiang province to personally tend to the breeding of his silkworms. The works exhibited in *Cloud* are all from the *Nature Series* with one exception—*Investigating Piao*, a series of black-and-white photographs Liang made of a day at the lottery in a town nearby his home village. *Piao* means “floating” or “lightness of being,” but also “movement without order.” The photos show the poverty and desperation of the lottery participants, the exhilaration of the winners, and the wasteland that remains after an event that is a way of life for so many poverty-stricken Chinese.

*Metal Factory* (*Nature Series* No. 25) is a video made in 1999 showing Liang walking through a scrapyards full of metal shavings, his bare feet increasingly bleeding from multiple wounds. *Candles* (*Nature Series* No. 87) is a pathway of approximately 1.60 metres wide and 7.50 metres long, consisting of bamboo stems partially filled with candlewax and/or wrapped in raw silk thread. *Miner's Helmets* (*Nature Series* No. 99) from 2004–2007 is an installation of some thirty miners' helmets wrapped in silk thread, their headlights shining from beneath the silk. They were created as a memento for the miners who perished during the numerous mining accidents in China in recent years. *Chains* (*Nature Series* No. 98), consists of big, rusty metal chains hanging from the ceiling and wrapped in silk thread. Liang started making them in 2001 after reading



Liang Shaoji, *Candles (Nature Series No. 87)*, silk, bamboo, wax, 800 x 130 cm. Courtesy of ShanghART, Shanghai.

Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Biao (Nature Series No. 103)*, from 2004–2007, consists of stacks of newspapers with silk thread spun around them to symbolically soften and ease the violence, wars and accidents reported in the daily news. *Cloud Mirror (Nature Series No. 101)*, finally, is the most recent work; a photograph of a big, square mirror laying on top of a mountain. The big mirror consists of several small square mirrors reflecting drifting clouds crossing a blue sky.

“For almost twenty years now,” Liang says, “I have been working hard at my experiments, carefully

watching how silkworms live and breed and change; how they respond to metal, grease, dirt, or the smooth surface of glass. I often make use of their activities to finish my works, so that one can perhaps speak of my work as a type of modern silk weaving or an art that tries to explore the secrets of the perpetual motion between the universe and the human race.”

Liang continues:

We live in a complicated era, nowadays. It is an era of sharp competition; people want to climb the social ladder as fast as they can, but they also want to free themselves from the slavery of fast living and return to nature and a simple life. So there are all these conflicting ambitions of conquering nature and feeling lost at the same time. The works of my *Nature Series* address these feelings.

The first time I started using actual silkworms in my work was in 1989 for an installation I did for the China/Avant-Garde exhibition. I pinned live cocoons of silkworms on a big piece of silk fabric installed under a special kind of lighting. The lighting was an important part of the work, because under a certain light silk still seems to move, to be alive. I wanted to reveal a sense of stillness or emptiness, and of a certain blurriness that is inherent in the quality of silk. *Xu* in Chinese means both emptiness and blurriness and the work therefore presented a typically Chinese state of mind.

Choosing, understanding, and mastering a material gives you some insight into nature, society, history, and the human mind. By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 90s, people in China were psychologically experiencing a rupture. That was reflected in my work, particularly those using rusted iron and other industrial waste. To me, metal has come to mean industrialization, cruelty, and violence. When the First Gulf War started in 1991, I took a small desk globe and wrapped it in barbed wire. I attached bits of silk to the barbed wire and I let live silk worms cover it with their threads. When warm, delicate silk threads are wrapped around cold metal, it affects you. In China, the silkworm represents generosity, warmth, life, and endurance. And because silk threads are so very long—a single silkworm may give out from its mouth a thread of up to a kilometer in length—the thread of the silkworm represents human life and history.

Then I discovered that there was a problem with that work: silkworms don't like metal. While I was experimenting with silkworms on metal, the experts in the field scoffed at me for wasting my efforts. But I succeeded in the end, rediscovering some almost forgotten qualities of those little animals. The experts look at production research from a purely commercial point of view, while I look at it differently, from an artistic angle.

In 1992 I started to research how to make silkworms weave on metal shavings. The local factory dump in my village is always full of them and I wanted to use them for a work. In 1999, I made a video of myself walking barefoot on metal shavings. I wanted to feel what the silkworms felt as they were crawling over them. I got a full truckload of shavings and spread them in the factory's courtyard. The factory workers were my public. I didn't expect it to be



Liang Shaoji, *Candles, Nature Series No. 87* (detail), installation. Courtesy of ShanghART, Shanghai.

so incredibly painful. The smaller the shavings, the more painful they were. There was no way out, no way to escape the pain except to go forward until I reached the end of the courtyard. I had to go to the hospital afterwards. During that performance I felt like any human being in distress who has no way to give up or to get out of the situation he is in, and still you have to go on living. . . . I showed the bloody shavings, the ones that I had walked on, in the Millennium show in Chengdu on 31 December 1999.

*Candles* is made of bamboo pieces that are grouped together like a pathway of candles. Bamboo in China is like a person. It represents integrity and righteousness. Chinese intellectuals have always loved bamboo. Candle and bamboo have the same sound in Chinese, and I decided to use that association in this work. The pathway resembles the way candles are put in front of an altar or on graves to commemorate the dead. I filled some of them with wax, but I also had some of them covered in silk thread as a reference to the famous poem by Li Shangyin (813–853) which compares the last drop of the candle to the last breath of the silkworm. It is referred to as “The Tears of the Candle” because of these two lines:

The thread of the silkworm will only end when the spring silkworm dies  
And not until the candle has burnt to ashes, will the tears begin to dry.

The candle provides warmth and light while it is itself consumed. The silkworm spits silk until it dies. Both represent giving and generosity until the exhaustion of one’s very life. So there is an almost natural association between bamboo, candles, and silk. There are even further possible associations with the *Mahayana*, or “big vehicle,” in Buddhism, whose purpose it is to bring the spirit of giving to the sentient beings. So you could also say that this work is like an altar to pay homage to the lost spirit of giving.

The first *Mirror* piece I did was in 1993. It was actually a small piece of glass on which I put some silkworms to cover it with their threads. In 1995, I used a real mirror instead, and had the silkworms cover it with silk almost entirely, with only a little bit of the mirror showing through. If you put a silkworm on a mirror it will automatically start to go in circles. In the end the silk looks like a cloud which is again reflected in the mirror. For quite some time I planned to make a new work based on the association of clouds and mirrors. My home town is Tiantai in Zhejiang province. It is a very small town. I live near the Tiantai Hills. The Tiantai hills are sacred ground; they are the source of one of the four most important Buddhist sects, and equally of a sect of Daoism. To make this work I hauled the mirrors up to the top of the Tiantai Mountain and photographed the reflection of the drifting clouds bearing in mind the poem “Riverside Pavilion” by Du Fu (712–770):

Water flows and my heart is quieting down  
A cloud lingers as the mind tarries.

This is close to a Zen state of mind. It means to empty yourself of pain and sadness, competition and unrest; to separate yourself from urban strife in solitude and tranquility, free and elegant like the clouds. Like the thread of the silkworm, clouds are considered a life force. Nature is not only our living environment but our cultural environment as well. The entire *Nature Series* is a sculpture of time, life and nature, and a recording of the fourth dimension.

This is a revised version of the catalogue text for the exhibition Liang Shaoji: Cloud, H-space, ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, September 4 – October 15, 2007.