

Peggy Wang

## Thread and Bone: An Interview with Lin Tianmiao

November 27, 2011

In this interview, Lin Tianmiao discusses the ideas explored in her new series *The Same* (2011) and how they relate to her previous work. From the use of trees and thread to her feelings on death and rebirth, Lin Tianmiao addresses the material, conceptual, and visual ideas that underpin her work.

**Peggy Wang:** In your new work, you use materials such as skeletons and tree branches. While this is the first time that you've used bones, in going all the way back to *Tree* (1998), you've incorporated withered branches in your art. Do you see this as a continuous motif in your work?

**Lin Tianmiao:** When I made *Tree*, I was interested in Chinese views on death. In 1998, we moved to Songzhuang, which was considered the countryside at that time. I saw how farmers living in these rural areas treated the circumstances surrounding death. They weren't very sentimental or distressed about it. Instead, they would invite musical bands or theatre troupes to perform operas and sing for three days and three nights at a time.

This was fascinating to me. It wasn't sorrowful. Instead, through a process of excitement and joy, people were able to get through a difficult period and achieve a form of commemoration. It really didn't seem to be for the dead, but rather for the living. This way of handling difficulties is very interesting. I think it's very different from how Westerners confront the terminally ill or the deceased. I wanted to really emphasize this concept of reincarnation: you can reincarnate into the body of a human, an animal, or even a plant.

People have said that my work is pessimistic, but I don't think that is the case. I think there is still something of the Chinese philosophical idea about transformation and rebirth in my work. People think of all of these things as terrifying, but I don't think my emotional state is that pessimistic. But, at the same time, I'm not consciously trying to show that I'm *not* pessimistic. This is just what I've expressed.



Lin Tianmiao, *Tree*, 1998, cotton thread, feathers, dead tree, audio of birds chirping. Courtesy of the artist.



Lin Tianmiao, *Mother's!!!—Tree*, 2008, Polyurea, silk cloth, silk thread, cotton thread. Courtesy of the artist.

**Peggy Wang:** How do these concepts of rebirth and transformation operate in your new work?

**Lin Tianmiao:** The materials that I used this time are very costly and luxurious, but within this context of extreme expense, extravagance, and waste, there is a sense of rebuilding. In terms of waste, I think it's occurring on a global scale. For example, the incessant demand for money and the infinite pursuit of materialistic things. This is a kind of waste. I think that this is very important. In this extreme state—where there is a lack of respect for materials, for manual labour, and for material resources—perhaps there is a chance for rearrangement or reorganization.

I've been conscious of this issue of waste ever since I came back from the United States around 1995 or so, but now it is even more serious. Actually, I felt this early on when I was in the United States, too. When a house was built, I thought it was especially inefficient as they would throw away a lot of materials and wasted a lot of space. It was unnecessary and it wasn't economical. But now, in China, I think it's even more so. They are now tearing down homes and buildings built in the 1980s and 1990s.

**Peggy Wang:** This relationship between people and their ecological environment seems to figure heavily in your work. In some cases, people are even intertwined with trees, such as in your 2008 series *Mother's!!!*

**Lin Tianmiao:** The reason I liked the tree from *Mother's!!!* is that the base of it was from a bonsai tree. Bonsai is a tradition found primarily in East Asia, but it was invented here in China. You can see it as an organic tree, as a



Opposite page top: Lin Tianmiao, *Mother's!!!—Tree* (detail), 2008, Polyurea, silk cloth, silk thread, cotton thread. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite page bottom: Lin Tianmiao, installation view of *The same*, 2011, Beijing Center for the Arts, Beijing. Courtesy of the Artist.

culture, or as a tradition. The sculpture was cast from the trunk of a bonsai tree that I had grown but that had already withered away. When it died, I found it really interesting, so I didn't throw it out. I think you can see it as a social thing because all bonsai are products of a system. They have all been pruned according to specific aesthetic traditions and represent a kind of cultural force or social power.

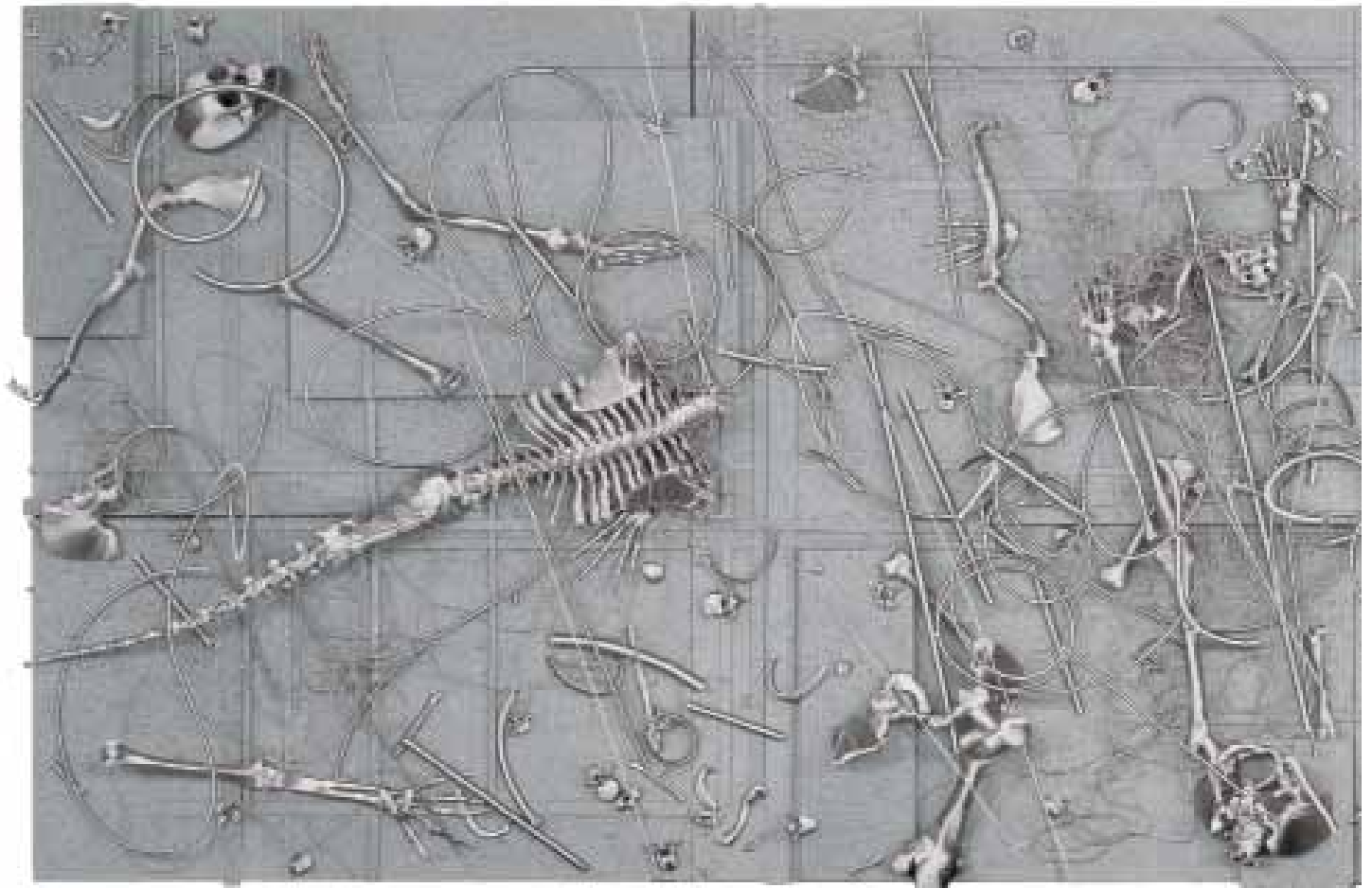
All of the twigs I use in the present series are from dead tree limbs I collected in my yard. In these works, these are the real twigs, not casts of them. This makes the work very fragile, and over time it will decay. But all things decay, even people. I find this process very interesting. Even though I apply chemical preservatives to the artworks every year, they will inevitably wither. If you look at murals and paintings over time they all reach the same fate.



Lin Tianmiao, *The same* (*The black sameness*), 2011, black cashmere, linen cloth, cotton cloth, tree branches, animal skeletons, gold leaf, 160 x 475 x 86 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In the present work, I wrap twigs in thread such as in *The Black Sameness* (2011). It's on a black cashmere background with skeletons of small animals such as birds, frogs, snakes, bats, etc. These animal skeletons were all purchased on the Internet. The bones used in this work are especially small, only a few centimeters each. They are so delicate that they would sometimes break when we were handling them. So this work is already extremely fragile. On the black cashmere, there are also a lot of small balls of thread similar to those found in my previous work. I think these balls of thread lend the work a sense of movement and liveliness. Even though the things in the work aren't living, it still exudes a feeling of being alive. I selected cashmere because of the colour it is able to achieve. I searched through a lot of different materials and could not find one as black as this. Also, it doesn't reflect light, whereas the threads wrapping the tree branches do. So, the variations in some of the materials are very interesting. I think overall the form is very romantic. There is a kind of Chinese romanticism in its illusory nature.

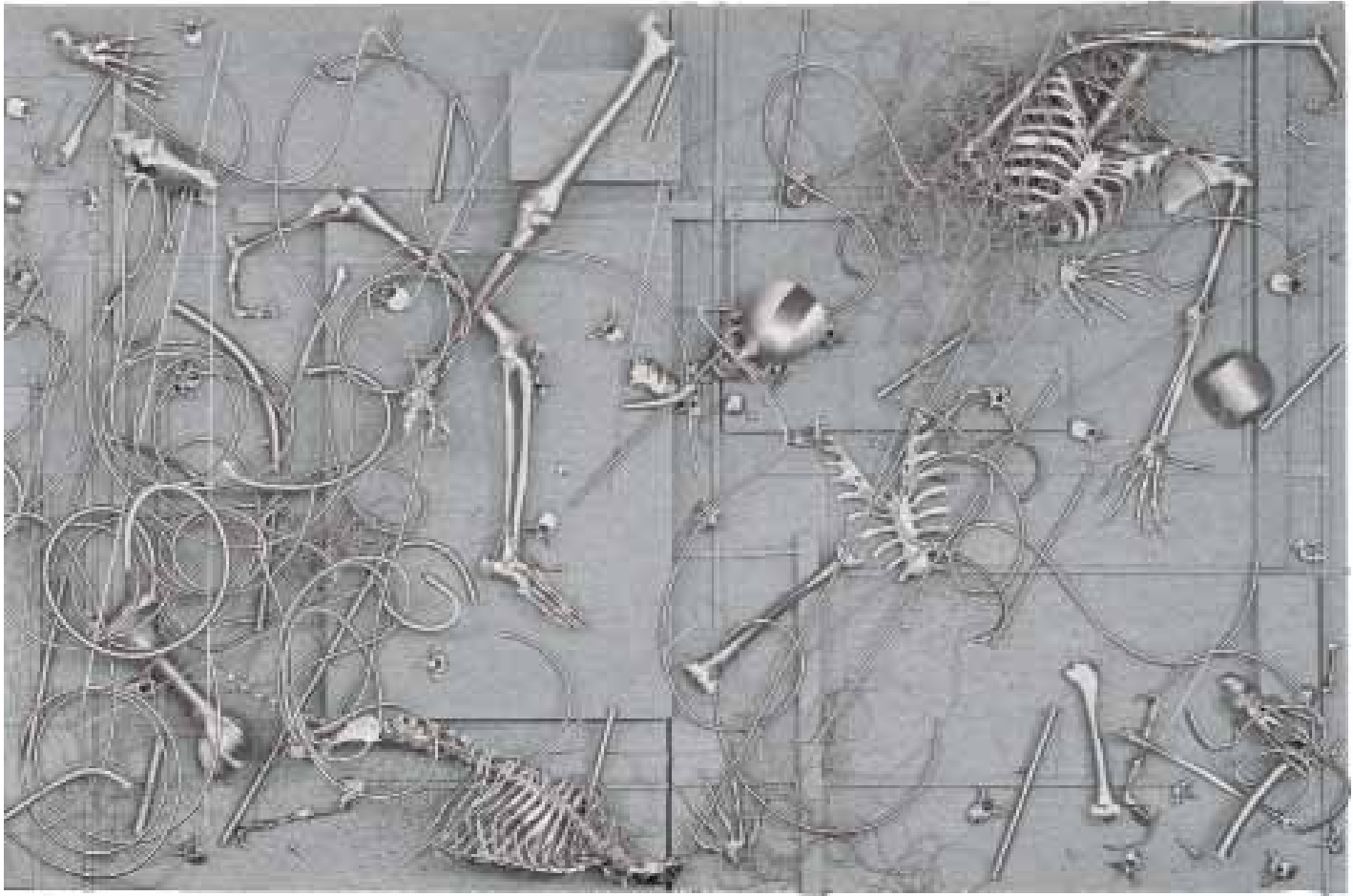
But once you get to the work *The Grey Sameness* (2011), this is absent. The grey one has an industrial feeling in its mass of electrical wires and straight lines. In the installation for the exhibition, I deliberately left a good deal of



Lin Tianmiao, *The same (The grey sameness)*, 2011, grey cashmere, linen cloth, silk thread, synthetic skeletons, copper, aluminum, electric wires, furfural, 161 x 478 x 45 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Lin Tianmiao, *The same (The gold sameness)*, 2011, embroidery, silk cloth, silk threads, synthetic skeletons, 160 x 475 x 17 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



distance between the black and grey works in an attempt to see if there was a contrasting relationship between the two.



I installed *The black sameness* and *The grey sameness* in proximity to *The gold sameness* (2011). *The gold sameness* uses embroidery to show human skeletons growing out of trees. The workload for this was tremendous since it entailed all

traditional embroidery. In the embroidery, there are plants and flowers that blossom into bones, leaves that turn into skeleton hands and feet, and tree joints that slowly transform into bones. It's a very romantic thing. But this romanticism doesn't convey optimism. I used this exceedingly beautiful form of expression to show something people don't normally see. On the surface of the work, I have also attached bones that have been covered in gold silk thread. The reason I used these colours is that in our society, they don't really count as colours. They don't have specific emotional dispositions attached to them.

Lin Tianmiao, *Non-zero—Procreating*, 2011, video installation with fiberglass, silk, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.



Lin Tianmiao, installation view of *The same*, 2011, Beijing Center for the Arts, Beijing. Courtesy of the Artist.

**Peggy Wang:** This exploration in colour has occurred in your work before, in particular, the use of pink in the series *Non-Zero* (2004). In your current work, you've returned to this colour again. Given your attention to colour in the present body of work, what do you see as the role of the colour pink?

**Lin Tianmiao:** I find pink very difficult to bear. Pink and gold are especially hard to control. Pink is an uncomfortable colour, but I ended up using it because it achieves certain effects that other colours cannot. For one, pink has a dual nature: men view it one way, women see it in another way. It seems very

lively, but it is actually quite unstable. It can be nauseating, but also playful. I considered using other colours, but in the end, only the colour pink could achieve this.

Lin Tianmiao, *The same (Four and the same?)* (detail), 2011, linen cloth, cotton cloth, silk cloth, silk threads, wood frame, synthetic skeletons, 182 x 101 x 17 cm.



Lin Tianmiao, *The same (Four and the same?)*, 2011, linen cloth, cotton cloth, silk cloth, silk threads, wood frame, synthetic skeletons, 182 x 101 x 17 cm.



In *Four and the same?* (2011) I used pink and green together because they're complementary colours and visually emphasize the feeling of the work. On the canvas, I positioned human bones underneath a dog's bones because I wanted to underscore the contrast between the two. This makes the dog bones more prominent, and I think that it shows a kind of respect for the animal or at least reorganizes the hierarchy. On the surface there are also a lot of balls of thread, which you can perceive however you want. The best way would be to think of them as possessing a sense of life.

**Peggy Wang:** In the past, you've addressed the relationship between man and animal as a way of eliciting a sense of unease. In your recent use of human and animal bones, have your ideas about this changed?

**Lin Tianmiao:** In the beginning, I was very scared. But now I'm not scared at all. I find them exceedingly beautiful. When you touch, feel, or rearrange them, you can sense that they actually have a great deal of life to them. You won't be frightened. Instead you'll feel how powerful nature is. I had an interesting experience when I was making these works. I couldn't buy a cattle skeleton on-line because they are too large. So I went to the slaughterhouse and bought a carcass there. When I brought it home, I removed the meat from the bones and tried to give a bone to our dog. But the dog wouldn't eat it. It was very strange. When I put the bone next to the dog, the dog let out a terrifying sound. After I boiled the bone, I gave it to the dog again. This time was slightly better, but the dog still hesitated for a long time. I think this is very similar to how people react: when faced with something huge and uncontrollable, when we don't know its power, our reaction is the same.

I've always been interested in this because it refers to our instincts. When the dog saw the cattle bones, it made me think of an experience from my childhood. When I was in third grade, I remember some of my classmates would go home at lunchtime. They were probably just returning home to help around the house, but some would say: "I'm going home to lay eggs." They were just making up a story, but at the time it terrified me. It scared me for a long time. I can still conjure up that sense of dread now. Perhaps there's a fear of becoming a different kind of animal, or maybe a fear of seeing oneself regress, or perhaps just a fear of change. I think this sense of fear is present in humanity. When faced with animals or the outside world or things in society, there can be a sense of terror. And it's only when one has killed it or used some kind of brutal method that one is able to allay that fear.

**Peggy Wang:** Balls of thread and eggs feature prominently in your work. Looking through your oeuvre, I see that these share similarities in form. Do you see these two forms as connected either conceptually or visually?

**Lin Tianmiao:** I think that the most basic thing in life is the egg. It is a ball. They are the same: an egg, a ball, a human cell. When I first started working with these skeletons, a lot of the thread balls I used looked like the forms from my earlier works. But reflecting back on it now, I think that it must have had something to do with my mother passing away [in June 2011]. She died of cancer. At the time, I saw a lot of hospital photographs of the cancer inside the body. So, this became a very realistic way of describing the fear in my heart, or you could say it was a kind of commemoration. Just ten days ago or so, I went to Hangzhou to see a friend who has liver cancer. My friend's liver was actually removed, and when I saw it in person, it looked exactly like what I had depicted. It was so strange. It looked just like those balls of thread. It

Next page: Lin Tianmiao, *The same (More or less the same)*, 2011, Polyurea, silk threads, stainless steel stands. Courtesy of the artist.

was so similar that it was frightening. I've only recently started thinking about these forms in this way. I find these balls very interesting: they have a sense of life to them, a sense of velocity, speed, and creation.

I also think that the *edge* of the ball is very interesting. Everything has a climax. When something has accumulated and reached a certain point, or when it has attained a perfect state, it will inevitably fall into a rapid decline. Around 2000 or so, I started to realize this concept of the edge or boundary in my work. For example, in *Non-Zero*, I highlighted the boundaries of the materials and colours I was using. The term "non-zero" points precisely to this: it's not the concept of zero, but rather a connection from one edge to another. Also, it's not a zero: it's a sphere.

In my present work, I'm exploring more of an emotional boundary. I'm taking something to its limit and then seeing its descent. That sense of eruption, such as in the extravagance of the material, collects and builds into a climax until it ultimately drops off. This peak—this edge or boundary—is what I pursue the most. This is the most sensitive point, not the build up to the peak, but the actual point at the top.

**Peggy Wang:** How has the process of thread-winding changed for you? In the past, you've discussed thread-winding as an activity extending from your own childhood. Do you feel like this process still references these early memories?

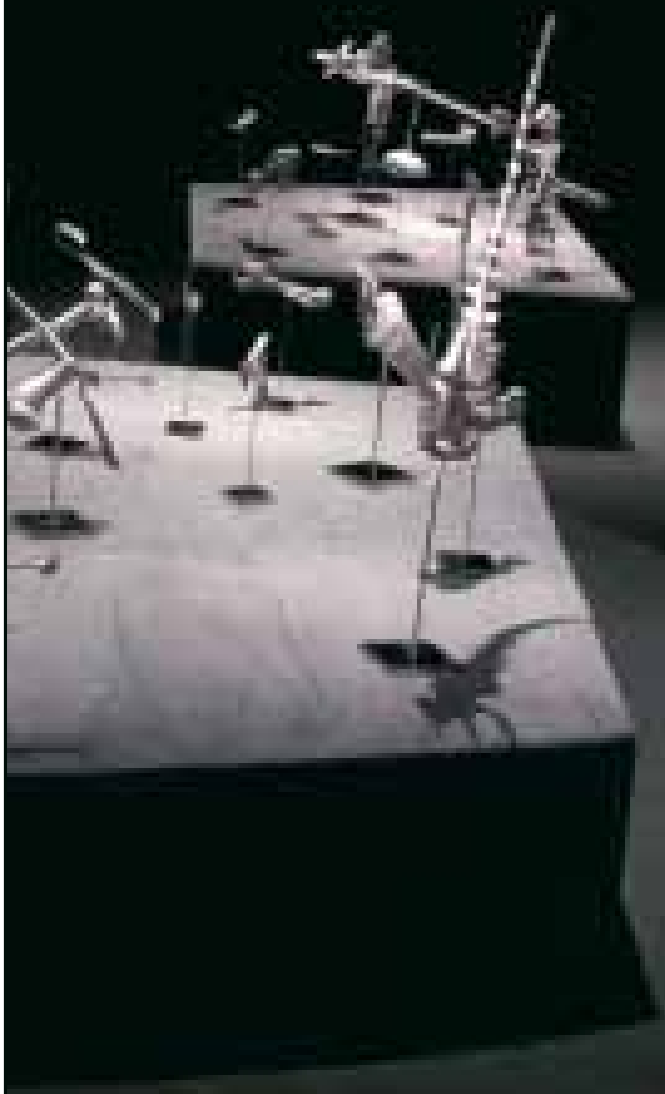
**Lin Tianmiao:** No, not at all. Now, I hope that within such a tedious and taxing process, I can push something to its ultimate and most extreme point. Without this process, there is no way of reaching this point. If you employ a simple process, you can't attain the same result. For example, instead of gold leaf, we could be lazy and just use paint. Then, in one day, we could gild dozens of small animal bones. With the gold leaf, meanwhile, you can't even finish gilding a bone in one day. Since it's such a sensitive material to handle, using real gold is an incredibly arduous process. But, afterwards, the significance of the object has changed. It's no longer a small animal bone. It's been transformed through manual work and the nature of the gold material. Without this process, this transformation could not occur.

**Peggy Wang:** From these transformative processes to the title of the series *The same*, you seem to be posing questions about sameness and difference. Can you elaborate on this more?

**Lin Tianmiao:** I think that sameness (*yi yang*) allows for differences. Nothing is identical (*tong yang*). To me, to call something identical indicates that it has been manipulated by man to make it that way.

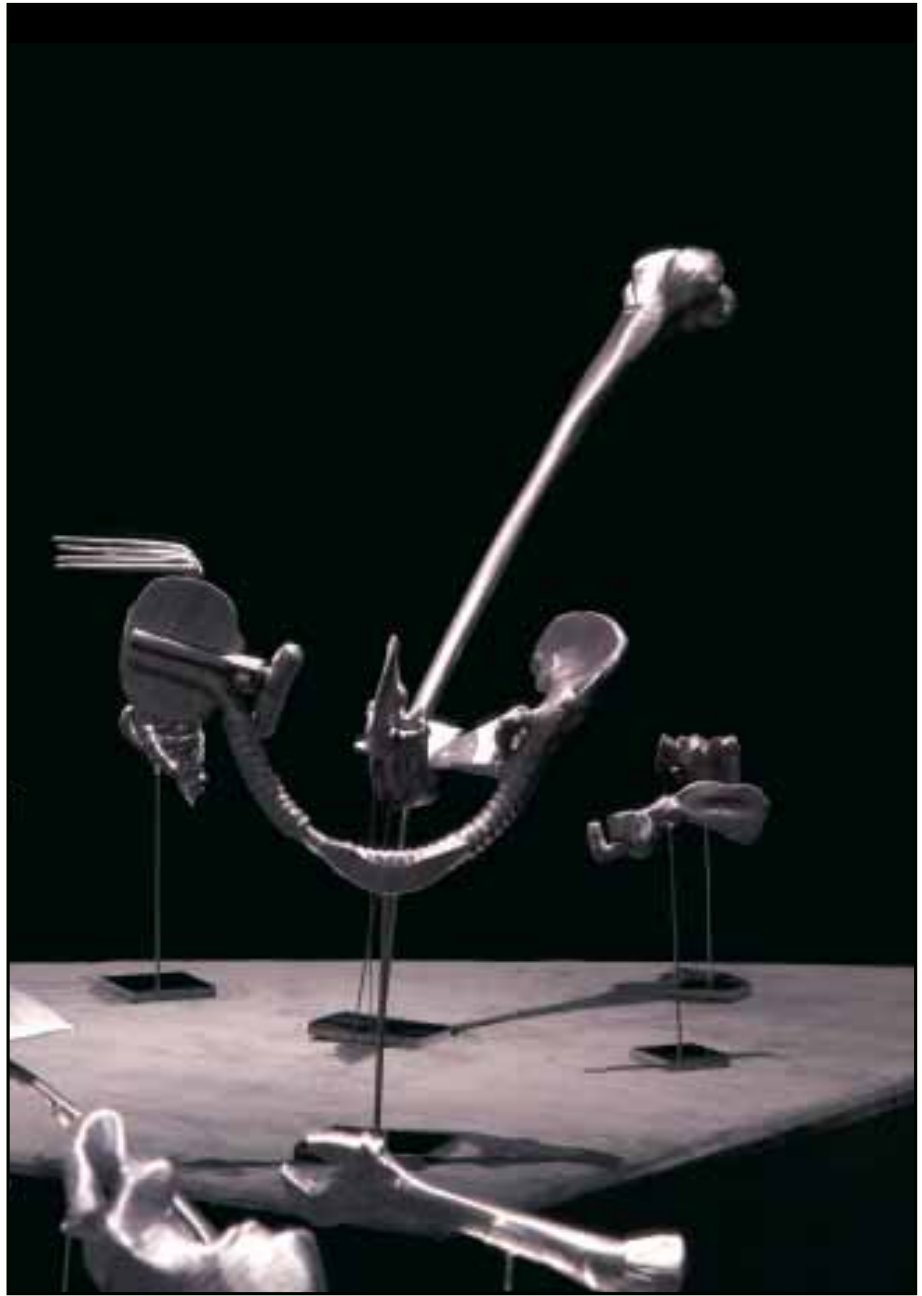
In *More or less the same* (2011), I combined bones and tools. I normally use a lot of tools when I'm making artwork, so I really value their utility and







Opposite page and right: Lin Tianmiao, *The same (More or less the same)* (detail), 2011, Polyurea, silk threads, stainless steel stands. Courtesy of the artist.



usefulness. I've also always been drawn to their different shapes. Every time period, class, country, and region produces many different types of tools. And just as instruments from years ago have died out, we have created new ones. In this work, I joined them together with bones. After being connected together, they have a new function. While this may replace its old purpose, it has also been rebuilt with a new vitality.

A tool's value in life is related to its function and related to social developments. For example, I've been looking for some old tools that were used during my childhood, but I can't find them anymore. And, when I lived in New York City, I would see tools in the flea markets that we don't have in China. These have to do with standards in systems and their stipulations for tools. Maybe in the future, all of our tools will be the same. Nowadays, we can't even leave the computer or Internet. This is cultural homogenization. You no longer need to have different ways of thinking.

*Translated from Mandarin by the interviewer.*