

# From the material properties of boulders to the materialized landscape: the Pluralistic World of Yuan Hui Li

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I first encountered Yuan Hui-Li's work *The visionary world of JingTing (scroll)* (2007) in December of 2010. At the time, I gained an appreciation for her work through a catalog entitled "*Element Rhyme*" which featured a number of single scroll landscape works using colored ink and an element of gilded paste. Afterwards, I had an opportunity in 2011 to see her work firsthand when I visited her Jinshan studio. My first impression of Yuan Hui-Li's work is of her unique painting style that is established on a foundation of traditional painting styles. Each time I have encountered her work since, I find them increasingly intriguing because in her work, I begin to see the original botanical forms of trees, and basic mineral forms that exist in the universe emerge from the strange rock formations. Even when we see the exterior image of mountains and rock formations in her paintings, the space of "visual illusions", from which she creates these external forms, remain within. Just as Yuan Hui-Li herself has described, her paintings "create different textures by combining elemental points and lines that weave together to constitute surrealism." (*Ambiguous World (Taixu series)*, "Element Rhyme", 2010.)<sup>1</sup>For the audience, this expands a new meaningful space for landscape paintings. The concept of "element" as a basic notion of material existence is a path toward interpreting her paintings.



*Hyperreality of Jingting Scroll*, 2007, Color ink and golden glue on sprinkle gold-leaf Chinese handmade paper, 50x720cm

Through the two series of work in *Ambiguous World (Taixu series)* (2007-2013), and *Embroider landscape* (2009), we can deduce her effort to isolate the body of an object through an expression of landscapes and rock formations. This element of physical body can be expressed through the visual illusion of landscape paintings. This is why Yuan Hui-Li refers to her own work as "surrealist" worlds. This illusionary world, to borrow from Friedrich Wilhem Nietzsche (1844-1900), is "a value laden world;" a world where "perspectivalism (**das Perspektivische**) suppresses the character of 'appearance'."

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<sup>1</sup> Yuan Shu, *Taixu series "Element Rhyme"*, Han House Museum, 2010



*Ambiguous world no.04, 2008, color ink and golden glue on sprinkle gold-leaf Chinese handmade paper, 50x228cm*



*Embroider Landscape no.01, 2009 , color ink and golden glue on sprinkle gold-leaf Chinese handmade paper, 50x228cm*

The objective body of the rocks is, on the one hand a materiality, and on the other hand within the nature of the universe and are therefore objects that are universal and beyond theory. Yuan Hui-Li's observation of the material character of rocks in this way isn't an attempt statement to distinguish or explain between appearances and illusions, etc. in the true world of a multifarious universe, but a metamorphosis that attempts to depart from these concepts of established materiality.

This metamorphosis can only reach fruition if it begins from her subjective consciousness. From this perspective, Yuan Hui-Li's landscapes not only express the individualistic illusionary world she establishes in her paintings of landscapes and rock formations, but they also establish a world in which the materialism of mountains and rocks transcend preexisting interpretations. This creative concept has been present since she began her work on the 2007 series, *Ambiguous World (Taixu series)*. To date, she continues to pursue and question that fundamental materiality in her search and creation from the world of her own consciousness.

After graduating from university, getting married and having children, Yuan Hui-Li entered into her creative period. She devoted herself to her art in the decade from 1998 to 2007. The work she unveiled in 2007 can be seen as a new turning point in her work, and her reflection on her previous work. A further observation on the works from this turning point, a major characteristic is her exploration of the conscious world of rocks.

Her landscape painting *Walking in the mountain* (1985) completed in art school, applied the traditional wash of cunfa techniques, but in the *Dwell amidst the Mountain and Inhale from the Valley series* which she began in 1998, the independent character of the materiality of rocks become isolated and pronounced, and responds to the perspectivism of an objective body from the subjective viewpoint of a subject. During this period, Yuan Hui-Li's work also attempts a dialogue and exchange with traditional landscapes. For instance, her works such as *Gobi Impressions*, and *Homage Zhao Meng-fu* (1999) juxtapose her own subjective understanding of landscapes with the objective understanding of "level distance" landscapes. This is especially evident in the depictions of trees and rocks in the landscape work *Eternity (diptych)* (1999), where she deliberately eliminated images of trees to enhance the theme of "rocks" among the mountain boulders, and by highlighting the "rocks" within this landscape painting, she creates the landscape world of her visible space.



*Walking in the Mountain, 1985, ink on Chinese handmade paper, 90x150cm*



*My Impressions of Gobi Desert, 1999, color on cotton, 140x47cm*

In a state of anonymous existence, rocks relate to human beings in the “ambiguous mode of communication” as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). Any communication and exchange with the human world is a conscious phenomenological concept within the stone. But while Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, the world of human existence is interpreted through a foundation of human consciousness, Yuan Hui-Li uses the basic materiality of rocks to illuminate the face of human existence. Through mutual communication with the human-body, these rocks are transformed from their original state of anonymity to become transcendental rocks that transcend mere materiality.



*Homage to Zhao Mengfu no.01, 1999, color ink on cotton, 40x120cm*

In her work *Eternity (diptych)*, she uses a delicate pastel technique on a foundation of cotton canvas to express the hard rigidity of stone – this could be said to transform the subject matter of the stone’s existence. We could rephrase Marshall McLuhan’s (1911-1980) concept of the “point of view” from his work *Understanding Media* to “point of being” to describe this method of transforming the subject matter. The rocks that represent the painting’s focal point have become a different subjective body through the medium of soft cotton fabric, but this subjective body has not vanished but remains within the function of the medium, in a state of transformation. The stones that exist in this moment are in dialogue with the artist and with other subjective bodies. There will be conflict within dialogue, which will ironically bring forth a new reality.



*Eternity*(diptych), 1999, color on cotton, 185x200cm

Similar to *Eternity* (diptych), her landscape pair on cotton linen, entitled *Go up the mountain* and *Go Downhill* (2004), alters the materiality of rocks offer a glimpse into a new expression of dialogue and exchange. The medium of cotton linen raises the historicity of these blue green landscapes of mountains and rock formations to a new realm. This is indicative of the aforementioned effort to transform “point of view” into “point of being”. And in this cyclical process, we finally witness in her *Landscapes of the consciousness* series in 2005, how this subjectivized materiality of landscapes and rock forms has been liberated from the physical definition of previous landscape paintings, and has materialized its subjective self to attain a new reality.



*Go up the Mountain*, 2004, color on cotton, 180x40cm

*Go Downhill*, 2004, color on cotton, 180x40cm

Subsequently in the *Clumps Landscape* series (2003-2014), and the *Bland Landscapes* series (2007), we can see how the theme of transforming the subjective body of rocks has been ongoing in Yuan Hui-Li’s self-dialogue. In addition, she attempts to explore the materiality of rocks as the fundamental element of existence for materializing the landscape concept. The target “object” here doesn’t refer to a special, individual matter, but an ordinary object in the daily lives of humans that can be perceived and contemplated. This sort of “object” is

removed from its concrete existence, does not have the inherently human thought processes. It is an object with the nature of rocks, and a target (object) of experience that exists in time, as well as an object of time and space.



*Clumps Landscape series no.01, color ink on Chinese handmade paper, 34x34.5cm*



*Bland Landscape series no.02, color ink on Chinese handmade paper, 34x35cm*

The “objects” named in the Japanese Mono-ha (ものば) literary movement of the 1960s refer to natural themes such as trees and rocks, which is to point out that an “object” relationship is freely exchanged between the objective body and the subjective body when nature is left untouched by mankind. The unique artistry of the Mono-ha movement was its rejection of “symbolic effect” and “illusion”. But in Yuan Hui-Li’s work, we can see that she diverges from the ideals of the Mono-ha movement because she explores the singular materiality of rocks directly, and expresses the transformations in the representational world after the conversion process. The Mono-ha as well as the American minimalist movement reject “illusion” and exclude objects from art; objects are treated as neutralized items, but in Yuan Hui-Li’s *Clumps Landscape* series, rocks are an embodiment of illusion, and are a “specific object” (in the words of Donald Judd (1928-1994)). Between itself and the world, there is a natural and unobtrusive reflection herein. In Yuan Hui-Li’s 2010 series *The Megalith of Spirit*, her illusionary rocks move a step further into a liberated object nature, transcending and in mutual exchange with the conscious world of humans. The mineral colors on xuan paper in this specific work tacitly reflects the material nature of the rocks, but transcends the material representation and illusionary form of the rock, enabling the rock to contain a reading with increased possibilities, and extending the interpretive space for the concept of rocks, elevating and transforming the realm of landscapes to a brand new territory.



*The Megalith of Spirit no.01-07, pigment color on Chinese handmade paper, installation, 232x50cmx7pieces*

What are the rocks in the realm of Yuan Hui-Li's works? From the discussion above, it is clear that the theme of her work is external to the cognitive "objects" of painting. For the artist, "objects" carry subjective connotations beyond their objective meaning. The surrealistic "object" appears in front of us through the brush after it is digested and cross-examined through the artist's subjective consciousness. The rocks that are the subjects of a painting can be said to be another sort of heaven and earth as one (the subjective and objective as one) in the subjective consciousness of the artist, which is to say that what Yuan Hui-Li refers to as "a unity of difference" presents a visual world, an objective world, that seemingly conceptualizes the rocks in landscape paintings, actually implies a "Plural World" of multiple layers of interchanging thought tangled and reverberating between the objective and subjective, the object and the subject, the external and internal. Yuan Hui-Li's rocks seem to seek a mutually paradoxical, oppositional, yet mutually related world of "self-unified absolute paradox" (Kitaro Nishida's (1870-1945) "Bansho") between the representational and the abstract. But Nishida's "bansho" concept is a distant, idealized philosophical space, whereas the objects in Yuan Hui-Li's landscape work are transformations that originate in the experiences in the realm of daily life. These transformations are what I call "materialization."