

## Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes and Her Writings

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### Foreword

Yuan Hui-Li graduated from the National Institute of the Arts (now the Taipei National University of the Arts, TNUA) in 1987, and subsequently attended graduate school at the TNUA before completing her doctorate in art creation and theory at the Tainan National University of the Arts (TNNUA) in 2016. During her time at university and at graduate school, she studied under ink artists Ho Huai-Shuo and Lee Yi-Hong. Whereas one stressed “an ascetic aesthetic and artistic conception,” the other emphasized “precise brush, dexterous ink, and stylization;” both had a hand in forging an important foundation for Yuan's ink painting.

I visited Yuan's Jinshan studio in New Taipei City a number of times while working on the *Taiwan Contemporary Art Series — Materials of Art: Ink Painting and Calligraphy* (台灣當代美術大系 — 媒材篇：水墨與書法) in 2002. As an ink artist, Yuan is especially devoted to the research of art history and art theory. A look back on her creative path to date, specifically since 2010, her exhibitions — including *Maternal Landscape* (2011), *Plural Landscape* (2014), *Moist and Burnt: As Ink Breathes* (2017) — all reveal an attempt to expand ink painting through art history and theory. Yuan's artistry has a distinctive leaning toward academic rational dialectics and analysis.

As a female artist who has experienced divorce and is raising her children on her own, Yuan has acknowledged that she began her doctoral program in art creation and theory at the TNNUA in 2009 in an effort to “reorganize the self and move beyond sorrow.” Compared to the damp cold sea air of Taiwan's northern shores, the southern Taiwan sun and the change of surroundings must have been a salve for self-healing. At the same time, the requisite theoretical readings for her doctorate have enabled her to systematically analyze and organize her own creative practice. Here, we may query whether art theory has played a propelling or fettering role in her creativity over the past three decades.

### The feminine subject in the *THEY Shanshui* series

Yuan began developing the *THEY Shanshui* series in 2007, culminating in the *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes* in 2019. In the epilogue for *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes*, she wrote: “*THEY (Ambiguous World)* is a new interpretation of the formal vocabulary of wrinkle texturization through a discourse of feminine subjectivity. It involves a cultural reflection on the differential constructs of subject identity.” The discourse of feminine subjectivity mentioned above highlights Yuan's observation that, whether in the monumental landscape of the Northern Song dynasty (AD 960–1127) or in the modernist ink development of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese *shanshui* painting since the Northern Song dynasty has almost always been based on a style of masculine subjectivity with an emphasis on grandeur in composition and on rigor in line. In response, she aspires toward a malleable softness in line, and often creates pocket-like spaces in her composition, notably in her 2015 works. (Image 1:

*THEY Shanshui No. 47*). Similar pocket-like or cell-like spaces can often be seen in *shanshui* paintings from the Wei and Jin dynasties (AD 266–589) to the Sui and Tang dynasties (AD 581–907), where main figures or architectural elements would be enveloped by mountain ranges or forests, but here, Yuan has created pocket spaces that serve as a vessel, a metaphor for the womb. During our interview she points out that her studio in Jinshan is also located within a valley-like space. That being said, Yuan’s work does not directly deal with real-world landscapes, and these pockets of space not only recur in her work, but also conform to her argument for a feminine subjective discourse.

### **Deconstruction and reconstruction in the *Manual of Yuan’s Texturizing Strokes***

In form, the *Manual of Yuan’s Texturizing Strokes* emulates the “Manual on Rocks” from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century publication *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden*. A typical entry in the “Manual on Rocks” in the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* includes an inscription explaining illustrations of stones. An example is the entry on “Wang Meng’s rock techniques”: “The raveling rope texturizing is unique to Wang Meng. Wang Meng is the nephew of Zhao Mengfu. This painting emulates the style of Zhao Mengfu, but the depiction of stones far surpasses that of the original.” Similarly, in the entry on the “Single Stroke” in the *Manual of Yuan’s Texturizing Strokes*, the inscription reads, “Spare the unnecessary words, save the redundant phrases: No flowery language, but a single truthful sentence.” There have been many revised editions of the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* since it was first published during the early Qing dynasty. Though many art historians believe this book has contributed to the stylization and standardization of Chinese painting, many painters, such as Qi Baishi (1864–1957), also benefited from the inspiration of the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden*.

From another perspective, in an era when art education was not accessible to the masses, the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* provided an opportunity for the self-study of Chinese painting — to begin by imitating partial elements, then gradually collaging these into a complete work.

In contrast, the process of the *Manual of Yuan’s Texturizing Strokes* and *THEY Shanshui* series is one of dismantling. She has identified and compiled some 32 texturizing strokes (with some additions) from the styles of stone and texturizing techniques in her early *shanshui* paintings, and provided names and meanings for these texturizing strokes. For instance, the Empty Stroke, the Color-Void Stroke, the Nail-Tip Stroke, the Chaos Stroke, among others. On one hand, the nomenclature of these texturizing techniques references the artist’s own sentimental journey; on the other, it is a response to a line from the first chapter of *Dream of the Red Chamber*: “Pages full of silly litter / tears a handful sour and bitter; all a fool the author hold / but their zest who can unfold?” Yuan pairs a number of the 32 strokes listed in the *Manual of Yuan’s Texturizing Strokes* with private sentimental annotations. For instance, the entry for the Chop-Brush Stroke notes, “Attempting to sever entanglements, only multiplies them all the more.” The notation for the Fiery Stroke reads, “The wildfires of emotions burn without end, reducing all erstwhile certainties to ashes. Passion has been smothered by apathy time and again. The inner flame is extinguished, the face aged.” (Image 2: The Fiery Stroke and The Chop-Brush Stroke.)

In terms of text, these interpretations of the 32 styles in the *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes* are inarguably full of emotion and resentment. But an analysis of the forms and lines reveals a foundation based on 30 years of ink practice. The draw and contradiction herein create a perfect tension between the text and imagery in the *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes*.

Analyzed from a different angle, the various texturizing strokes compiled from the early *THEY Shanshui* series, which comprise the *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes*, are inextricably related to the analysis of Chinese art by German scholar Lothar Ledderose in his book *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*. Specifically, the parallel between the component analysis in the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* and the production of the terracotta soldiers, the dougong in wooden architecture, the Taotie pattern on bronzeware, the mass production of export porcelain, as well as the character radicals in Chinese movable type. Ledderose's research on the production process of the terracotta soldiers during the Qin dynasty, reveals that these were not produced as an integrated single form. Rather, the head, body, legs, and arms were created as parts in different workshops for final assembly. Ledderose also notes that many Chinese arts and crafts rely on this type of modular production, which enabled large-scale production long before the age of industrialization.

Yuan encountered Ledderose's work during her doctoral studies at the TNNUA. While Ledderose intends to answer how systematized mass production appeared in China before the industrial revolution in the West, Yuan grapples with the challenge of piecing back the scattered fragments of life in the aftermath of emotional upheaval. In this sense, the *Manual of Yuan's Texturizing Strokes* highlights the profound act of dismantling for the purpose of reconstruction. Is it necessary for an artist to make such an effort to construct her own creative theory? Judging from Yuan's explorations over the past three decades, I think the answer is a resounding yes. Ink painting artists of various styles and characteristics certainly have their own artistic response, but Yuan Hui-Li has completed a body of work that satisfies both theory and practice through her astounding will and diligence.

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