

Han Qin at Fou Gallery: Ethereal Evolution

Exhibition Review by Peiyue Wu



Han Qin, *The Age of Migration 1*, 2018, cyanotype, watercolor, inkjet print on silk, 28x 56 inches



Sebastião Salgado, *Untitled*, 1995, a photograph taken at a terminus station in Bombay, India.

"They set off with the belongings they can carry, aboard rickety boats, strapped onto trains, squeezed into trucks, or on foot; they travel alone, with families, or in groups. Some know where they are going, confident that a better life awaits them. Others are just fleeing, relieved to be alive. Many never make it." — Sebastião Salgado, *Migrations: Humanity in Transition*

Mimicking a shoal of fish roaring past, the momentum in Han Qin's *The Age of Migration 1* immediately reminds me of the moving crowds in a train station photographed by Sebastião Salgado in Bombay. In *Migrations: Humanity in Transition*, Salgado reveals the brutal aspects of the growing immigration flow from third world countries to Europe and the United States at the turn of the millennium. As a critique of globalization, Salgado sees such a constant and infinitely moving pattern as an outcome of the individual survival instinct triggered by the ever-increasing wealth gap, which is often expressed as hate, violence, and greed, eventually leading the human race to self-destruction.

Aiming to evoke a silent and poetic underwater experience, Han's recent solo exhibition at Fou Gallery, titled *Ethereal Evolution*, deliberately hides the pessimistic side of the immigration story. Instead, the venue mainly serves as a meditative realm for viewers to escape from the highly urbanized city, New York. Yet, the uplifting mood is merely one dimension of Han's practice. As a young artist who had relocated to New York from China in the hopes of fulfilling her artistic goals, Han was forced to engage with feelings of disappointment and depression when the move did not initially turn out as expected. Han went through this transition period by throwing herself into an endless exploration of new techniques. Within the sophisticated layering of what she has learned, a sense of struggle is delivered in *Disorder as Drinking Sweet Wine*, where a kneeling figure bends backward, arms outstretched. The stretching gesture can be seen as a desire for the body to accommodate more possibilities, but can also be read as an attempt to disengage from all the replicas of self-images.

Unlike Salgado's mourning for those who died along their immigration journey, Han decides to focus on those who manage to reach their destination but suffer from the invisible violence tied to their dislocation. Instead of indulging in a melancholic and cynical attitude, Han diverts her energy into alleviating trauma experienced by those uprooting themselves from their original land. This simultaneously reassures them that they are not alone in their experiences and rescues them from the feelings of loneliness that can manifest in the isolated environment of urban living.



Han Qin, Disorder as of Drinking Sweet Wine 6, cyanotype on paper, 10x 6 ½ inches

Tracking the White Shadow performance at Fou Gallery, dancers: Izumi Ashizawa, Zhiwei Wu, photograph by JojoZhong, courtesy Fou Gallery

Han Qin, Ethereal Evolving 1, 2018, Cyanotype on paper, 82 x47 inches

The therapeutic power characterizing Han's paintings recently attained a new form of expression which could affect a much broader domain. Once she earned herself a bigger exhibition venue, dance-like movements of her figures, which had been limited to small-scale works, finally got the chance to break through the pictorial surface and occupy a physical space. This is when the immersive performance, Tracking the White Shadow, took place. Inviting immigrant performers to participate in this project, Han documents each performer's bodily memory about their immigration stories on a large piece of paper by incorporating choreography with the cyanotype technique. Such a divergence from individual to social concerns is partly a result of adaptation to a more spacious exhibition venue. More importantly, it is informed by her dual identity as both an art educator and artist.

As the exhibition title Ethereal Evolution suggests, the reflection of the genealogy of self, the destination of human history, and the meaning lies in the primitive act of painting propels the evolution of Han's art. Alongside these philosophical questions, Han's particular attention towards the image of hands rises gradually from the sea of subconscious towards the pictorial surface. In Falling 2, the interaction between the two lowermost figures in the image is almost a playful reinterpretation of Michelangelo's Creation of Adam. Whether or not a conscious

decision, the inclusion of this religious iconography brings in a new perspective, in which the group of figures roaming in the sea becomes a contemporary reinterpretation of celestials surrounding their god in Renaissance frescoes. In *Ethereal Evolution 1*, a direct way to record the shape of hands brings us back to the starting point of painting in human history, when painted hands in caves originated from humankind's desire to touch and leave marks, a parallel to their survival instinct.



Han Qin, *Falling 2*, 2018,
Cyanotype on paper, 10 x 6
½ inches



Cueva de las Manos located Perito Moreno, Argentina, the art in the cave is dated between 13,000–9,000 BP

While the series of *The Age of Migration* captures the sublime embedded in massive migration spectacle, *Falling 2* tells a different story: as soon as a strong momentum toward one direction is taken away, the effects of gravity finally come into play. Here, the whole group starts to descend into the deep sea. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for the stagnancy faced by the younger generation of Chinese artists who followed in the footsteps of eminent predecessors such as Xu Bing. Xu Bing was lucky enough to catch international attention since his debut in New York. His enthusiastic experimentation based on the cultural opacity between the East and the West was a delayed response to the discontinuity of Chinese history, rooted in the experience of the Cultural Revolution. Without such a social turmoil to lend their work monumental quality, however, the new generation has been struggling to make a conceptual turn related to their own dislocation experience. As today's art market and institutions are craving either the shock of the 'new' or the trauma of political turmoil, it requires a great amount of courage for a young Chinese artist to take seriously the delicate qualities embedded in his or her cultural roots. Instead of being haunted by modernist precedent and thus eradicating historical references for its own sake, Han considers her crafting skills developed in China an essential part of her artistic identity. A sensuous elegance presented by the precise, vivid depiction of each figure and the subtle variation in tonal quality. Moreover, the monochromatic execution of her work evokes a



sense of nostalgia that has been long expressed by Chinese paintings of mountains and rivers. To some extent, the kinesthetic memory of sensation in Han's work has the potential to be a prescription for global anxiety in the age of immigration. Therefore, the next question might be how to extend such a civilizing influence by redefining the delicacy that persists in Han's work as a way of being.

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