



ABOVE:
Tracing the Origin VIII (installation view; vault), 2010
Sand on floor
Dimensions variable
Photo credit: David Broda

COVER:
Manuscript of Nature VIII (detail), 2010
Thorns on panels
33 x 57 inches (each panel)
Photo credit: David Broda

CUI FEI

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Notes: height precedes width. All artworks are by Cui Fei unless noted otherwise. All artworks have been made available courtesy of the artist.

MAIN GALLERY:

Manuscript of Nature VIII, 2010
Thorns on panels
33 x 57 inches (each panel)

Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse, 2010
Tendrils and salt on floor
Dimensions variable

Not Yet Titled, 2009
Thorns, twines, and pins on wall
Dimensions variable

Tracing the Origin VI_I–III, 2008
Pigment prints, selection from series of three
76 x 35 inches (each print)
Edition: 7/12

VAULT:

Tracing the Origin VIII, 2010
Sand on floor
Dimensions variable

THE WAREHOUSE GALLERY

Syracuse University
350 West Fayette Street
Syracuse, NY 13202

The Warehouse Gallery is an international contemporary art venue of the SUArt Galleries at Syracuse University. The gallery's mission is to present exhibitions and programs by artists whose work engages the community in a dialogue regarding the role the arts can play in illuminating critical issues of our life and times.

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Nature is a recurring theme in Cui Fei's drawings, prints, photographs, and installations that evoke Chinese calligraphy through the use of twigs and thorns. For The Warehouse Gallery, Cui has collected nine thousand thorns for her drawing *Manuscript of Nature VIII* and she has created new site-specific wall drawings and installations: one consisting of salt, as a reference to Syracuse's history, and another as a healing piece using sand as a reference to the tradition of sand painting in the arts. Her work comments on the central role of nature, her Chinese origins, as well as Eastern and Western art practices. Though widely exhibited, this is Cui's first solo museum exhibition.



CUI FEI

16 SEPTEMBER–6 NOVEMBER 2010

THE WAREHOUSE GALLERY
GUIDE#12



Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse (detail), 2010
Tendrils and salt on floor
Photo credit: David Broda



Tracing the Origin VI_I-III (back), 2008
Pigment prints, selection from series of three
76 x 35 inches (each print)
Edition: 7/12
Photo credit: David Broda

Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse (front), 2010
Tendrils and salt on floor
Photo credit: David Broda

TRACING THE ORIGIN¹

BY ANJA CHÁVEZ

DEAR BEAUTIFUL ARTIST,
THANK YOU FOR SPRING AND FALL, AND WINTER—SO
MUCH TENDERNESS AND SUFFERING—NO COMPLAINING—
ADMIRATION, GRATITUDE, LIBERATION—GRACE.

(Peter Sellars, Visitor's Comment Book, during his visit to The Warehouse Gallery's opening reception of Cui Fei, September 16, 2010)

At first glance, Cui's work seems the expression of fragility and, as such, also the expression of nature and natural life in general. This impression is due in part to the choice of ephemeral installations and delicate material (salt, sand, twigs, thorns, and twines) where, for instance, dried twigs and twines are, as all organic material, subject to deterioration unless they are preserved.² Large thorns from black and honey locust trees radiate the beauty, vividness, and power of nature. It almost goes without saying that Cui's work is poetic, stunningly beautiful, and that it touches us through its modesty and humility. Yet, in Cui's work nature's simultaneous fragility and power is equally the metaphor for human struggle and striving.

Cui developed five works for this exhibition, ranging from drawings using thorn on panel or sand directly on the gallery floor, to photography (a triptych of pigment prints), to installations including thorns and twines. The series *Manuscript of Nature* and *Tracing the Origin*, as well as *Not Yet Titled*, forcefully convey both the relevance of nature, Cui's cultural and national origins, and they are, above all, a testimony to her sensibility.

Nature has been a source of inspiration for Chinese artists for centuries, whether it is eighth-century "calligraphic naturalism"³ where the brush stroke mimics the traces of animals in the dirt or snow or ephemeral calligraphy with a brush dipped in water rather than ink, and traced on the pavement in today's public parks in Beijing. Most of Cui's series also reveal the central role of nature through both her choice of materials and their titles. The painterly aspect of such series as *Tracing the Origin* is equally related to her formal training as a painter in China. The triptych of pigment prints in the main gallery (*Tracing the Origin VI_I-III*) conveys painterly elements through the drastic contrast of the dark brown tendrils on the white paper, and their appearance as scrolls. The sand drawing in the vault (*Tracing the Origin VIII*) turns the entire room into a large canvas where the concrete floor of the gallery becomes the background for the tendrils rendered in sand. Cui considered this work a healing piece, openly referring to the rich tradition of sand drawing by Tibetan monks, or the sand or dry paintings by the North American Indians and Australian Aborigines. Three Syracuse University students realized the sand drawing on site following the artist's instructions. For the process Cui manipulated the images of the twigs (she previously obtained with her camera) using her computer and printed them at SU's Print lab at the Warehouse. The students unrolled the large prints, cut the images, placed transfer paper underneath them,



Manuscript of Nature VIII, 2010, Thorns on panels, 33 x 57 inches (each panel)

Photo credit: David Broda

and traced each of the selected images onto the floor. The resulting outline of the twigs on the Warehouse Gallery's floor was filled in with sand through the use of chakpurs and brushes.

The artist obtains variations on a theme by translating her found objects from one medium to another: for instance from photography (pigment prints) to installations and sand drawings to enact the struggle and estrangement between nature, culture, and technology. As Cui stated: "In the *Tracing the Origin* series, I use Chinese characters to explore the relationship between nature and culture. Nature has long supplied art with subject matter and metaphors for states of being. With the development of technology, however, nature has lost its preeminence in human experience, and it has often been replaced by manufactured objects and synthesized sensations [...]. In my work, I try to emphasize the importance of nature in our culture and lives. The found grape tendrils resemble Chinese characters which are written in the grass style. In my work these elements are meant to represent nature. The images of the tendrils realized in different art making methods, transform the three dimensional objects into two dimensional images of different colors and scales. Their origin, the tendrils, may no longer be recognized in the finished artwork. The different ways of art making symbolize the steps of detaching from the origin—nature. To carry out this idea, I have experimented in different media, such as painting,

photographs, photo transfer, and Photo-lithography."⁴ Through this experimentation, Cui thus evokes three-dimensionality on pigment prints (*Tracing the Origin VI_I-III*), the allusion of paper through a smooth surface of table salt (*Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse*), and the effect of written characters on the gallery's floor through the use of sand (*Tracing the Origin VIII*).

Beyond the natural aspects of Cui's work, in following with Chinese calligraphic composition, the reading order for most of the exhibited works is from right to left, and top to bottom, though Cui has noted that the chance of being able to "read" her work is slim at best.⁵ Some of the tendrils do nevertheless seem to allude to specific words. In this hesitation between the legible and the non-legible, Cui's work is reminiscent of that of her fellow émigrés: Xu Bing, Wenda Gu, and Qiu Zhijie, who work to subvert existing Chinese traditions through linguistic distortion. By gathering objects from nature and often composing them in calligraphic fashion, Cui also points to the natural "roots" of Chinese linguistic and artistic traditions. As she notes: "Nature not only provides the subject matter and inspiration for my work, but also is a major factor in leading me to comprehend my Chinese identity at a deeper level."⁶ This link to cultural identity is certainly evident in the exceptional *Not Yet Titled*. As the artist has indicated it is a form of calendar. Each thorn represents a day, each row marks a month, each column a year. In reference to the Second Sino-Japanese War

(1937–1945), Cui uses a prisoner's way of recording time. *Not Yet Titled* is equally linked to *Manuscript of Nature VIII*. Both are made from thorns from locust trees (honey and black locust trees), and the latter is a visual poem for which Cui used approximately 9000 thorns that she collected in the vicinity of her home in New York City and in Albany. It is comprised of a beginning (right panel), ending (left panel), and again a vertical reading order that she repeated in her salt installation *Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse*.

The Warehouse Gallery is an international project space that offers contemporary artists such as Cui the possibility of conducting new experiments and exploring new avenues. She developed the idea of working with salt as a means to connect with Syracuse's history of salt production and suggested creating a sand drawing. Cui graciously accepted to work with approximately ten Syracuse University students who assisted her with her new site-specific works (*Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse* and *Tracing the Origin VIII*) and allowed the visit of ten eighth-grade students from the Syracuse Edward Smith Elementary School who came during the installation.⁷

This exhibition at The Warehouse Gallery offers an overview of Cui's recent experimental works. Both the sand drawing and salt installation are extensions of her existing vocabulary; yet they point to a new direction in her own oeuvre. This is her first solo museum exhibition.

Additional support for the lecture is provided in part by the program of Chinese Studies and the Department of Art.

Special thanks to my colleagues at CMAC (Jeff Hoone; Stephen Mahan); Community Folk Art Center (Christopher Paul Battaglia); Light Work (Jessica Reed; John Wesley Mannion); SUArt Galleries (Domenic Iacono; David Lake Prince; Joan Recuparo; Andrew Saluti; Emily Dittman; and Laura Wellner), SU Faculty (Edward Anselm Aiken; Gareth Fisher; Bradley J. Hudson; Sam Van Aken; Errol Willett); and all of the SU students, work-study students, and interns who assisted Cui during the installation (Ashley Marie Braunecker; Ellen Amelie Burke; John Cardone; Emily Lynda Jade Ellis; Alex Gu; Matthew Lax; Kari Alissa O'Mara; Kiri Marissa Rowan; Maria Elizabeth Sonico; Merlin R. Valdez) and worked on the educational outreach program with Syracuse public schools (Laura Reeder). A very special thank you to the former preparator and designer Frank T. Olive for his help in getting the exhibition started, to David Lake Prince, and last but not least to Cui Fei.



Not Yet Titled (detail), 2009
Thorns, twines, and pins on wall
Dimensions variable
Photo credit: Courtesy of Cui Fei



SU students assisting the artist (*Tracing the Origin VIII*; vault)
Sand on floor
Dimensions variable
Photo credit: Cui Fei

¹ This is the title of one of Cui's series in The Warehouse Gallery's exhibition.

² Conversation with Bradley J. Hudson and Allison McCloskey, assistant conservator of textiles and objects, Williamstown Art Conservation Center, October 7, 2010.

³ Quoted after Jerome Silbergeld, "Double-Vision: Art out of Joint", in: *Asian Art News*, September/October 2008, p. 69.

⁴ Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origin*, 2008. The document was provided by the artist.

⁵ Cui Fei, Conversation with the artist, September 14, 2010.

⁶ Cui Fei, *Beyond the East and the West: Seeking the Truth in Nature* (Indiana University of Pennsylvania: 2000, n.p.).

⁷ The children's visual response to Cui's exhibition was presented in the Link Gallery; as part of the Photography and Literacy Project (CMAC), directed by Stephen Mahan.