ARTnews
OCTOBER 2012

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China's Lin Tianmiao

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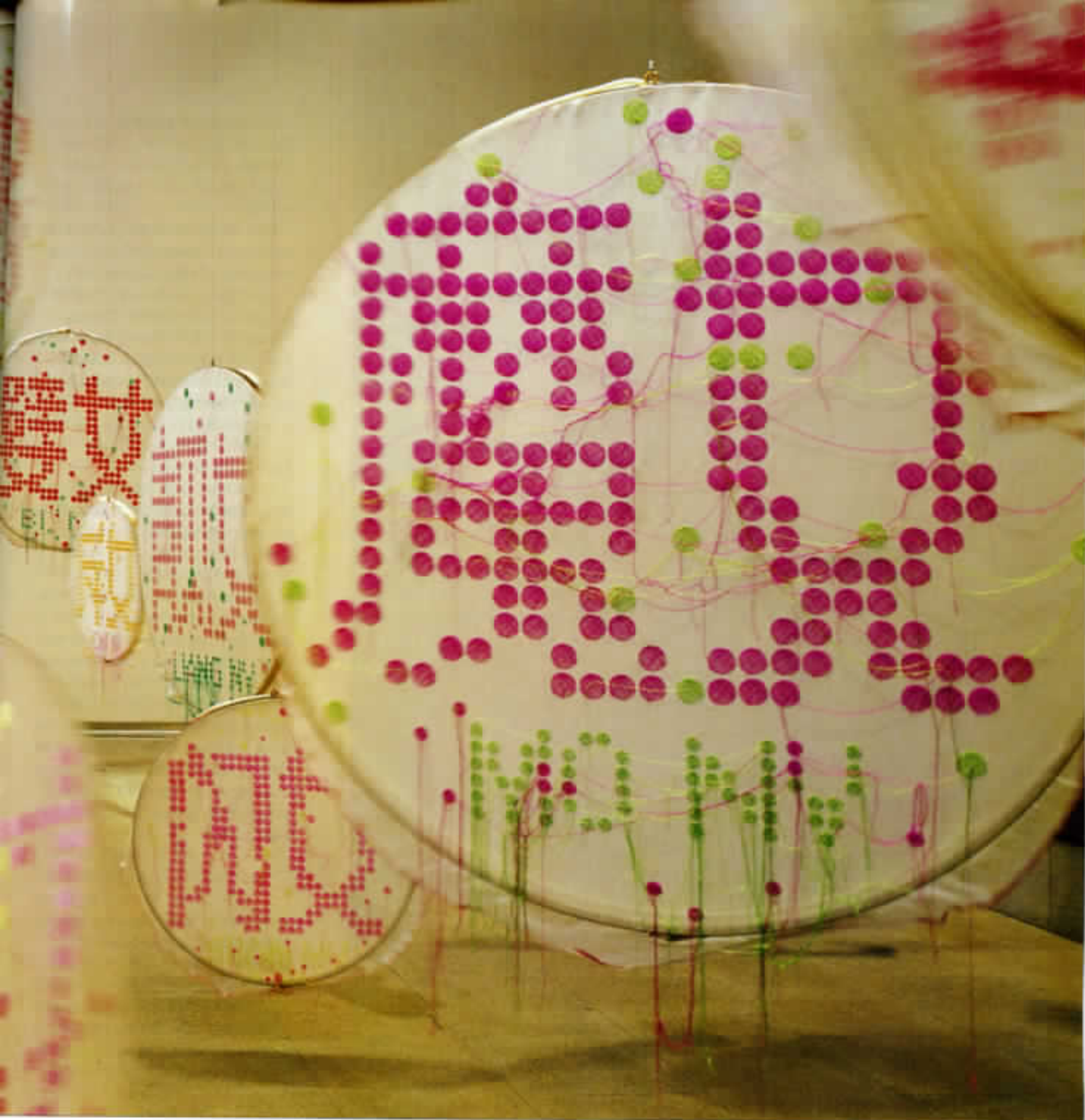
Pollack, Barbara. "Wrap Artist." ARTnews, October 2012.

Lin Tianmiao's *Badges*, 2009, installed in the OCT Contemporary Art Center in Shanghai. As a child, she helped her mother wind balls of thread.

WRAP ARTIST

Binding, winding, and knotting, China's Lin Tianmiao creates vivid installations shimmering with emotion

BY BARBARA POLLACK



The Chinese installation artist Lin Tianmiao delicately balances tradition and innovation in her works. So it is perfect that a visit to Lin's studio on the outskirts of Beijing starts with an elaborate tea ceremony on her patio, overlooking a garden filled with koi ponds, fruit trees, turtles, and two mammoth dogs. In this very Chinese setting, the artist gracefully handles fresh tea leaves with bamboo tools and carefully pours water from an electric kettle into a porcelain teapot and then again into a copper decanter. Only when the tea has cooled to the right temperature does she pour the faint green brew into miniature tea cups, offering her visitors a mere taste.

Lin Tianmiao, 51, is China's most famous female artist, having risen to the ranks of the male art stars who have dominated auction records in recent years. Though her prices have never reached their level—her top sales results are in the hundreds of thousands, while male artists reach the millions—her work has been included in every major museum show of Chinese contemporary art internationally since the outset of her career in the mid-1990s. Her fame in the United States will surely be solidified with the current

Lin Tianmiao posing in her "Mother's!!!" installation in the Long March Space in Beijing, 2008.

retrospective at the Asia Society Museum in New York that runs through January 20 and a solo show at Galerie Lelong this month.

"Lin Tianmiao is one of the most influential Chinese artists coming out of the 1990s," says Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society Museum. And, Chiu continues, "she is one of the few women who has been able to forge a practice that is gender-based but also has a kind of universality."

"I am terrified," Lin says about her New York shows. "I have never had such a big stress in my life."

Lin, whose face is framed by short cropped hair and accented by patterned eyeglasses, lives with her husband, video artist Wang Gongxin, and her son, Sean, in a huge mansion the artists designed themselves to include two large below-ground studios. In Lin's studio, a crew of female assistants has painstakingly wrapped thread around dozens of tools and bones for her newest works. It is a far cry from her beginnings as an artist in Beijing in 1995, when she took on this tedious process of art-making, accomplishing all aspects of the task herself.

Born in Shanxi Province in 1961, Lin Tianmiao was already in her 30s when she became an artist. Her father is a painter and an acknowledged master calligrapher, and her mother was a dance instructor; both taught at an art academy run for military personnel. With the country convulsed by the Cultural Revolution, Lin had little formal education, but her father had a stash of Western art catalogues that exposed his daughter to both traditional ink-and-brush painting and such modernists as Kandinsky and Käthe Kollwitz. As a child, Lin assisted her mother in winding balls of thread for sewing projects. It was a task she hated, but she has returned to this process over and over again as an artist.

By the time Lin was 15 years old, the Cultural Revolution was over and the family was ruined economically. Lin had to leave school and worked for two years as a puppet-maker in a theater company before returning. After graduation, however, she didn't apply to Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts because her father didn't want her to become an

artist. He thought the life would be too hard.

Instead, Lin took a short course in drawing at Beijing Normal University, a teachers college, where she met her husband. When she was 23, her father encouraged her to go into business for herself, and she started a check-cashing business, a necessary service in the days when people were often paid by check but banks weren't allowed to deal with individuals. "It would have been quite easy for me to find a job because my dad had a lot of connections, but he didn't think that would match my personality," Lin says.

Running her own company proved to be a useful experience when she moved to New York in 1988 to join Wang, who had been appointed artist-in-residence at SUNY Albany. The couple soon moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and immersed themselves in the East Village scene. Wang earned money drawing portraits on the street and Lin, although she spoke little English, began to reinvent herself as a textile designer.

"When I first came to New York, the Metropolitan was my favorite museum, but by the time I left, in 1994, my favorites were Exit Art and the New Museum," Lin says. She and Wang went to galleries every weekend and spent their evenings hanging out with other artists in their loft building. They knew Ai Weiwei, who was also living in the East Village. Lin says that Cindy Sherman was her favorite artist at the time, but it was the Minimalists who influenced her most, as well as Eva Hesse. Of Minimalism she says, "It is really simple but has deep feeling underlying it, and that influenced my work. Minimalism is about respect, not just between human beings, but for material as well."

***Braiding*, 1998.**
The 50-foot-long coil leads to a video of the artist braiding the cotton threads.

In 1994 Lin was pregnant and she and Wang moved back to Beijing, where they took up residence in an old courtyard house in the *hutong* neighborhood near Houhai Lake. They brought with them lots of ideas from New York—about new media and alternative exhibition spaces—that were perfectly suited to a city with thousands of artists but no commercial galleries. The couple set up their home as a salon and created installations

that were open by invitation. In this setting, as a young mother, Lin began to make her first artworks, which combined her interest in textiles with her affinity for Minimalism. The true inspiration, however, came not from her knowledge of art movements but from a very basic memory of helping her mother sort and wind thread.

The Proliferation of Thread Winding (1995), her earliest work, was created on the occasion of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing that year. Lin swathed a bed in white sheets and pierced it with thousands of needles, each holding the end of a ball of thread. The threads spread to the floor and pooled in thousands of individual balls. From a monitor resting on a pillow, a video shows Lin winding each ball of thread. The work relates to the tediousness of domestic labor, while adding up to a frightening scene of visceral violence: a bed covered in needles, like a body pierced and stabbed.

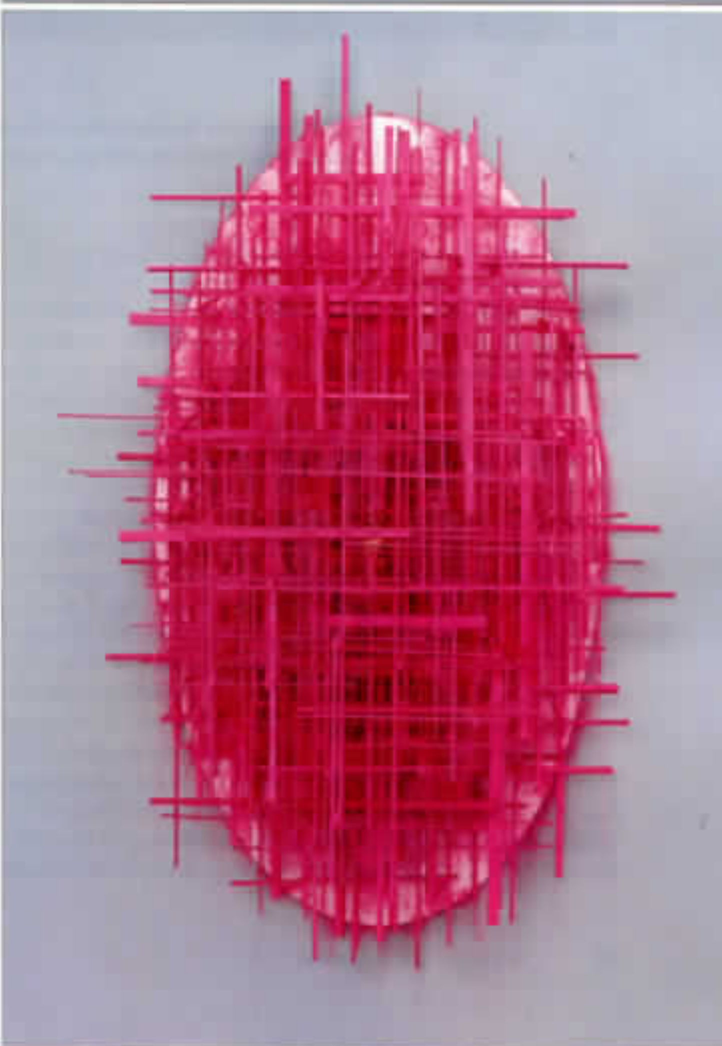
For the next two years, Lin mummified ordinary household objects—chopsticks, pots and pans, teapots, even bicycles—in yards and yards of cotton thread. In 1997, she created an installation called *Bound Unbound* in the gallery at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, with a crowd of wrapped objects filling the exhibition space. Above the works, on a screen formed by thousands of cut threads hanging from the ceiling, she projected a video of a scissor cutting threads.

"She told me at one point that she was choosing objects that she thought would be obsolete or out of use in the next ten years," says Christopher Phillips, curator at the International Center of Photography in New York, who included Lin's work in "Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China" in 2004. "I remember just being astonished that at the time she imagined that no one would be riding bicycles in Beijing in ten years, because at that point you would see traffic jams of people on bicycles in central Beijing. But it turned out she had accurate radar and, of course, all those bicycles are gone now."

Just as she had inserted a video component into the *Bound Unbound* installation, she soon began incorporating photographic representations into her textile-based projects, often using images of herself with her head shaven, looking androgynous. In *Braiding* (1998), she printed a monumental self-portrait on a 12-foot-high transparent cloth hanging from the ceiling. The face is perforated with hundreds of tied knots, but when you walk behind the cloth, you see that the knots are attached to strings cascading from the cloth and pooling on the floor in a 50-foot-long braid, leading to a video of the artist winding the string.

"I think *Braiding* is one of her strongest works," says Phillips, who featured it prominently in his exhibition. "It can attract anyone, no matter how little knowledge they have of Chinese culture and Chinese history. But the more you look into it, the more multilayered it becomes."

In addition to the gender ambiguity evident in the work,



OPPOSITE ***The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, 1995, was Lin's earliest work. The bed is pierced by 20,000 needles.**

RIGHT ***Four and the same* (top) and *One and the same*, both from the series "The Same?," 2011.**

Lin androgynized her own face in *Focus* (detail), 2001. "If one's identity is stripped of specific references to gender, age, culture, religion, then who are we?" she asks.

there is also an encapsulation of Chinese history, ranging from the Manchu takeover in the 17th century, when the new rulers decreed that all Chinese men must wear pigtails as a sign of subservience, to the contemporary textile trade in China, in which women play a leading role.

"Throughout her career, Lin Tianmiao has addressed the ambivalence of women in contemporary China toward age-old patriarchal traditions," says Maura Reilly, former curator at the Brooklyn Museum, who selected the artist for the exhibition "Global Feminisms" in 2007. But it is not clear whether the artist herself would call her work feminist. As she said most recently, "A lot of people would say my work is feminist, but I would say that in China we don't have that tradition. I only got that notion from New York. But for me, no matter how you look at it in terms of politics or in terms of feminist art, it is better to have respect in mind and equality in mind."

The rapid industrialization of China has been another important subject for Lin. Her first approach to landscape came in a rare collaboration with her husband in an installation called *Here? Or There?*, made for the 2002 Shanghai Biennale. For this project, Lin made garments of white thread and shrouded models who posed as ghostly apparitions, digitally inserted into photographs and videos made by Wang of Beijing's old *hutong* neighborhoods.

This device of using landscape to evoke both past and present pushed viewers into a consideration of the psychological implications of an impending future. The resulting installation shimmered with emotions: loss, sorrow, regret, and love for the past. It was acclaimed as one of the strongest works in the exhibition.

Since then, Lin has returned to landscapes in her series "Seeing Shadow" (2008), in which she applied ethereal strands of thread and bulging balls of embroidery to photographic images printed on stretched canvas.

But her predominant theme has always been the body and the way it encapsulates various stages of life. In her 2001 series "Focus," Lin closes in on her face, as if it were a mugshot or a passport photograph. She is androgynized, with all considerations of sexual allure removed, as in images of Buddha or Mao. "For our generation, there is a great deal of political meaning imbued in large-format facial portraits, and official portraits automatically had intrinsic value and strength," she said in an interview at the time. "But if we take a portrait out

In *All the same*, 2011, synthetic bones are wrapped in bright neon-colored silk threads.

of this Maoist interpretation, what identity remains? If one's identity is stripped of specific references to gender, age, culture, religion, then who are we? Perhaps we are left with a purer form of identity/self."

More recently Lin has created sculptures that emphasize the fragility of the body. In her exhibition "Mother's!!!," shown at the Long March Space in Beijing in 2008, she turned the gallery into a gory cavern that seemed to be tumor-filled, with bulbous forms cropping up from the floor and sprouting from the walls. Inside, she installed 18 sculptures of women with frightening appendages in prone and abject positions. In "Gazing Back," a 2009 installation series at the public office complex for Shanghai Pujiang OCT, she replaced the head of a mannequin in a crouching position with a television monitor. Another mannequin with a concave form for a face stared into a full-length mirror. Just as she had made some of her earlier photographic works look like ancient scrolls, these new works look like dioramas of a dystopic future.

The Asia Society show concludes with Lin Tianmiao's most recent installations, created in the past two years and first shown at the Beijing Center for the Arts last year. In these, Lin uses bones, both artificial and real, wrapped in bright neon-colored silk threads. She has named the series "The Same," because she wants to say that we are all the same underneath and should be treated equally. In one work, *One and the same* (2011), Lin wrapped bright pink silk thread around sticks, forming a Mondrianlike grid around a tiny gold skull. It is a reference to the death of her mother, who died a year ago. "I did it unconsciously, but my sister said, 'This must be how you felt when our mother was cremated,'" Lin says. It is one of the few works she has made that is specifically biographical.

"I don't think Lin Tianmiao's works are overtly Chinese, in fact. I think the value in Lin Tianmiao's artworks is that they tend to cut across any attempt to represent nationalism," says the Asia Society Museum's Chiu. "That's why I was very interested in presenting the work at a time when definitions of what it means to be a contemporary Chinese artist seem to be rather set.

"The stereotype is that a Chinese artist is a painter and a Chinese artist represents certain Chinese iconography. Here is an artist who defies those definitions." ■