"Only in the process of working slowly can I eventually express myself."

Pi Li: Apart from the materials and the actual making, what are the links between the works in the exhibition and previous ones?

Lin Tianmiao: I begin projects only when I have ideas: no ideas and I do nothing. Each stage has its own distinct difference in the way I think about it and the continuum that flows from it. If, for instance, I used similar materials to explain the origin and relations in a work before, I may use them to express something else now.

Pi Li: You have been talking about yourself as not being the type of artist comfortable with "participating" in an exhibition with a project. Instead, you prefer your finished work to be used. Does that mean that you always have a very clear and specific direction for your own development?

Lin Tianmiao: I am not the kind of artist that can be added to each dish to flavour it or spice it up. Only in the process of working slowly can I eventually express myself. My situation is like drinking tea: you understand how and what it is only after drinking it.

Pi Li: As a viewer, I don't feel your work has much of that kind of speculativeness about it; rather it has a specific sense of handwork, an extreme visual effect achieved through great labor. Earlier, your work 'The Proliferation of Thread-Winding', in which tens of thousands of needles were arranged tightly together, had that feature. Also, works employing the cotton threads. Where do you think this feature comes from?

Lin Tianmiao: The art I appreciate most is that expressed through a new and unique visual way, after much mental effort in thinking. What I don't like are those only with an idea and no substance. Society seems to be developing faster and faster, resulting in more and more mechanical elements. Less and less do we see objects or forms that reflect and project our thought and philosophy through handwork. These things sometimes give you an unexpected new feeling, and may lead you in a new direction during the making process. These subtle ways also embody an oriental aesthetic taste. It is a pity that mankind has abandoned many things during the last hundred years. Like the feeling you get from sitting on
antique furniture, the idea and spirit of the craftsmen, as well as the traces of the time passed, these are very valuable. Handwork has a randomness while work produced by machine is accurate at the cost of that unexpected randomness. The randomness of handwork, where controlled by the human hand, can be added to, reduced, maneuvered and used at any time. This is a very important means of demonstrating the ability of the craftsman or the artist.

“I exert tremendous effort to construct something extremely beautiful, but I feel at the same time that it is very vulnerable ...”

Pi Li: In your works the materials and the visual sense that extends from the materials are striking. Silk and thread are materials you have been using, and the twining and reeling, as techniques, have become a language through your handwork. Is the use of these materials and techniques, especially the use of soft materials, associated with your education in America, or with your experience of life? Or are they the personal ways you choose when you face the development of contemporary art?

Lin Tianmiao: I don’t know why I chose these materials. The materials used for the sculpted figures in the work are so white, clean and beautiful – expensive too. I stress the aspect of vulnerability in many projects, which is somewhat a feeling of destiny. I exerted tremendous effort to construct something extremely beautiful, but I feel at the same time that it is very vulnerable. It is easy to make me happy, but happiness is always accompanied by a sense of sadness. I pursued this feeling in works shown in “Non Zero”. The lace of ancient Chinese costume is very beautiful, and these beautiful things are embroidered on the side. But they are easily worn out. The most beautiful thing is actually the side, the edge. I think all good things are vulnerable, or that it’s only a matter of time before they become so. These materials suit my feelings towards vulnerability, transience and fleetingness. This is what I want to express, which is also very subtle. When I started making these works, I was at a loss as to how to handle the join in the silk. Later, I discovered that the seam was the easiest to deal with and it was easiest to impress one with the edges and the seams, or some holes or a crown. These are places that give me feelings, as well as the most vulnerable parts. I have been
asked whether I had thought of how long I could preserve things. How long to preserve? I think I don’t care about that, so long as it has expressed my inspiration.

Pi Li: It is a strange phenomenon that the image of the people you choose in your works does not conform to our usual understanding of beauty. Instead, you seem to emphasize the power of the human body and a neutral color, therefore most of the figures are middle-aged women. I wonder what are the visual and conceptual criteria in choosing these images?

Lin Tianmiao: At first, I must feel that the female I choose as a model is a tangible human, an ordinary woman around us. Sometimes, among a dozen assistants working for me, I might find one woman who did not attract the eyes to be pretty. This is amazing. It’s not about the education she received. Sometimes I communicated that feeling to Wang Gongxin, but every time after I talked, he would be puzzled and say after a while, “perhaps?” Maybe that feeling is not for him or a man. I am very good at controlling the language of woman. But when I face a man’s body, I would feel something not right, very hesitant and unsure. I think the situation and social experience of a middle-aged woman are richer than those of a young girl. The life of the middle-aged woman, after all that time, after her own beauty, after her pursuit of the other sex, and after having children, is very rich. This richness may not be the kind of beauty that conforms to social standards, but it has its own content.

Pi Li: I feel that your works are more relevant to physiology. Compared with younger artists, you do not seem to have as much social content. For instance, your female images always remind me of the sculpture of the Austrian goddess which is said to be the first female figure in art.

Lin Tianmiao: Everything concerning human essence draws my attention. I had an experience which gave me a tremendous shock. I went to the countryside where an 80-year-old grandma said to me, abruptly, “It is his luck to have married you. You’ll have many kids because you have a big ass.” She meant that I wouldn’t have pain during birth so I could have many children. This is one criterion, a criterion based on birth, also a capability. If that criterion were used in judging women today, it would be hard to have one child. That was quite a shock to me.
I still remember, after more than twenty years, that a woman with a big ass is productive. Her sense of value is really interesting.

Pi Li: When it comes to the image of woman, one is reminded of the use of your own image in your works. You mentioned just now that you have a good control of the image of woman, then why did you use your own image to make these works? This is the first question. The second one is what is the difference between handling yourself and handling other female images?

Lin Tianmiao: I have 4 or 5 works in which I used my own image, like ‘Dreamer’, and ‘Spawn’, which I made in Fukuoka Art Museum. I made these works because I felt I was speaking of my own story, including the nude in ‘Non Zero’, which is actually telling my own narrative. If I am not sure of speaking of others, I will speak of myself, which I am quite certain of. When I handle myself, I can arbitrarily delete, or arbitrarily do whatever I like to do. To be frank, it is pretty hard to find a figure like mine. Perhaps every artist is self-centered, and one symptom of the egoism is the emphasis of me being the standard.

“I enjoy a lot the epic and the magnificent, after which I will be immersed in such an air, or an extreme situation.”

Pi Li: In fact, from ‘Here? Or There?’, I feel this new tendency taking shape in your work. You seemed to begin to pursue the ultimate limit of vision and a somewhat neurotic feeling. That ultimate limit, as you said, is shown in the details of the works. It might be the feeling extended from a rim, or a thread. These works tend to give us an intuitive and physical disturbance. You also mentioned several times the relationship between extravagance and beauty. What do you think is the significance of the relationship between extravagance and the ultimate limit of vision in your life? Or what do you think leads to your pursuit of extravagance and the ultimate limit of vision?

Lin Tianmiao: I always believe there is only a piece of paper between extravagance and beauty, and that beauty at its extreme is extravagance. We used to
think extravagance was something bad. Yet, extravagance comes from the extremes in culture. Look at the things of ancient China, look at the things of ancient Rome, and you will feel that. From ‘Here? Or There?’ to ‘Non Zero’, I was pursuing the edge between beauty and extravagance, and beyond that edge will be decadence. I was pursuing the threshold, the critical point. I don’t know how I get to this stage. I enjoy a lot the epic and the magnificent, after which I will be immersed in such an air, or an extreme situation.

If in the work the physical restlessness and unreasonableness could be exaggerated, intuitively I would be excited and stirred, and feel quite satisfied. I hope I would accurately present it with the visual language.

Pi Li: Let’s come back to the works in the exhibition. I have been surprised that several male images appeared in the work of ‘Endless’. Except for your early
works in which trousers were used to symbolize man, and the presence of man in the photography of 'Go?', it appears you seldom use male images.

Lin Tianmiao: It was quite accidental this time. I had another idea. I was told that when a man felt himself losing power, he would prove, by way of sex, whether he could still handle and control the world around him. This was the starting point of the project. One day, I changed my mind all of a sudden. I saw that pink silk on the body of a man, and I felt quite touched, and so the work was made. I thought it was quite a good realization after I finished it. This was something I had never tried. In the past half a year, I experienced many things. I discovered that old people, their demand for life and for material things, their pursuit of love and their longing for life, are exactly the same as young ones. They have dreams too. I think they are eager and naive. I was wondering whether I could add something for them, so that they get something again.
Material: White cotton thread, nails
Description: The installation was located in a passageway, through which it was necessary for the viewers who came to the exhibition to pass. The passageway was 10 meters in length and 1.62 meters in height. The walls on both sides were covered densely by white cotton thread.
Production Time: 2003
Exhibition Place: Lijiang International Artist Workshop, Lijiang, China

“Only when you pick up the tea cup and drink it, can you taste it is good or bad. This is a superior way, but not communicable. I am trying to go that direction. Maybe I will turn to another way at a certain extent.”

Pi Li: Of the five works in the exhibition of ‘Non Zero’, is there a specific relationship among them?

Lin Tianmiao: Certainly. But they can be independent too. After all, they represent issues I pondered at the same time.

Pi Li: The female image in ‘Initiatot’ is very special. It is almost perfect, conforming to the standards of man and contemporary society, a very slim, pretty woman. You used to use the robust and primitive types.

Lin Tianmiao: A 40, 50 or 60-year-old female would have lived whatever she should experience. Only during growing up or sprouting will one be attracted and seduced by things of the external world. That’s why that image must be used in the work.

Pi Li: Several elements in these works are very interesting. First of all, the edges, whether of the cloth or of the wall, are very impressive and strong. Did you have
any special thought on that kind of edge? Because, as you said just now, you think beauty and decadence are at one edge.

Lin Tianmiao: In fact, I was looking for that kind of inspiration, which is easily available in music; but what excites you is not one area, one plane, but a point. Take the example of listening to traditional Chinese opera. For the whole story, the highlight is a thread, a very narrow one, a very small but sensational point, which can promote the whole story. Once, I used three different teacups during drinking tea, the first being with a very thick rim and a thick wall, which totally ruined the subtlety of the tea. The second one had a very thin rim and a thin wall, which gave only a superficial feeling of the tea. The third one was a cup with a thin rim but a gradually thickened wall, which produced a plump feeling, which is what I want to grasp in my work. It is quite vulnerable, and if you don’t catch it, the whole piece will be flat. It is one’s potency to have the ability to promote the whole work, very accurately. It is accumulation as well as experience. That’s why I do my work seriously.

I read some books on Chinese gardens, tea ceremonies and Peking Opera recently. Much in the books may be used by us, for further contemplation and feeling. Only when you pick up the tea cup and drink it, can you taste if it is good or bad. This is a superior way, but not communicable. I am trying to go that direction. Maybe I will turn to another way at a certain extent.

“There is a confrontation. But I have my way of confronting. My way is not one of quarrelling. Compromise and concession is two directional.”

Pi Li: May I summarize as such: usually artists of your age might choose radical means for making works, because of their maturity, but you, because of your feeling of uneasiness, choose a more radical way to do the exhibition.

Lin Tianmiao: Right. Actually it is uneasiness. Ease results in a standstill. The younger generation, whether in terms of design, fashion or costume, have found many new visions, perspectives and semantics that we did not have. I feel stimulated and pressured. On the other hand, woman is very flexible in the social space; she can either advance or retreat. Often, I would play this for some time
and that for some time, never thinking of myself as a complete artist. I have my husband and my family, and most importantly, I have my child. I can find much pleasure in these. But for a man, he needs public image and his face, and he cannot retreat. Woman has never been the protagonist; she has many options. Thinking of that makes me a lot more at peace. So the sense of crisis coexists with peace.

Pi Li: I have encountered a dilemma. I cannot put you in the context of feminism, which, as I believe, will suppress the richness of yourself. I also think there is no gender difference in the vision, and it is hard to say that gender difference has led to a rather good or bad work of yours. But I still want to ask how you perceive the relationship between your identity and your art production?

Lin Tianmiao: In fact, I really don’t have a very good understanding of feminism, which I think is a movement active in the west, developed from within women themselves, a movement against the whole male society. I am particularly afraid of doing such a thing and I don’t have the ability to take part in or lead such a group movement. But I do live in this patriarchal society. Like between me and my family, there is a confrontation, but I have my way of confronting. My way is not one of quarrelling. Compromise and concession is two directional. I started making art when I was already mentally mature. I love Chinese culture and I worked as a designer for fifteen years, which is my advantage, which I surely will use when I make my works. ‘Female’ or ‘China’ is only a sign, a way of understanding, and a status of operation. Other people can say whatever they like to say.