

DAN JIAN

THE BOW WHISPERS TO THE ARROW



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JULY 15 - SEPTEMBER 7, 2023

AUSTIN, TEXAS

THE WHISPERING BOW

When Dan Jian says she is diving in the darker part of the sea for an image that is yet unknown, she means she is searching for adventure and discernment. At an undiscovered depth she will recognize something potentially visible, and she will reveal it. Whether the darker part of the sea is in her own mind or in some lost tradition, Jian mines the territory as a source of fresh meaning.

The new images may be hard for us to identify, but working on them wakes us up. Her drawings ask poetic questions: are the mountains turned upside down, clouds? Walls – do they keep secrets or hold wells? Can ponds float like clouds? Does a ladder imply a story?

A grain of dust is both material and image

in Jian's work. She quotes the writer Fang Fang, translating for us: "A grain of dust from our time, when landing on a person, is as heavy as a mountain."¹ The grains must be like boulders carried in a stream—terrifying because they are hitting us. The tiny and precise seem gentle until they strike. Dan Jian's translucent, falling curtains of ash often seem to act as gray panels, formal devices. Most of them in *The Bow Whispers to the Arrow* look like streaks of rain. But one, a great curl of wind, makes a path for hundreds of arrows. Are these the arrows remembering their freedom, a freedom that belongs to the bow?²

Dust or ash is Jian's chief medium in clouds, shadows, escarpments, curtains, paths, ponds, and hills (as in *Hand Tree*), and as itself.³ Sharp edges and value shifts give shape to this dust. Stencils confine it;

erasure segments it. Because her forms are all translucent, her space is less side-to-side than it is out-to-in. All forms are translucent and can be seen through. To ask which form is closer is to begin a story.

All the open spaces in Dan Jian's work, and most of the translucent spaces, depend on the color of her paper. Almost unmentioned, but not unnoticed, it has a tawny openness, like the surface of a good lithography stone. This open space, solid as pale sand, shows through the translucent grays, uniting the surfaces.

In *The Gossips*, we find a small world where a mother kisses her child in its safety vest. A dark gesture, like a bundle of black blankets, covers their legs as they lie in a stand of bamboo. Behind them, veils of ash make a waterfall that fills a pool. One wonders if the white square in the waterfall is an irrigation



The Gossips (detail), 2023

Charcoal dust, charcoal pencil, color pencil and tracing paper cutouts on parchment paper,
29.5 x 38.25"



Boundless, 2023

Charcoal dust, charcoal pencil and tracing paper cutouts on parchment paper, 35.5 x 27.5"

Mural, 2023

Paint, dimensions variable

Cover Panel: *The Bow Whispers to the Arrow, 2023*

Charcoal dust, charcoal pencil and tracing paper cutouts on parchment paper, 39.5 x 108"

gate or a mirror. Nearby, poised on its own chair, a rabbit listens to what is happening, and woody grasses, like little bridges, cling to the ground. Scattered evenly on all the foreground hills are tiny trumpet flowers—line drawings. Atop the hills, three rabbits gather. Are they discussing what the rabbit on the chair has overheard? The three rabbits examine a banner of pennants — yellow, green, blue, red and orange. Perhaps they will string them through the bamboo grove behind them to send messages. From behind the handsome rock in the bamboo grove there leaps one of those remarkable Jian horses, sliced through its torso like a log, with a ghost of its internal organs still connecting its halves. It may escape gossip or it may be the gossip.

In Dan Jian's work, one may find echoes of and admiration for other artists. The great Ni Zan (1301 to 1374), whose *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu* are treasured by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, loves those

ashy grays we see in Dan Jian. An even more recent artist in the Chinese tradition is Zu Da (Bada Shanren) (1626 to 1705). Twelve breathtaking leaves from his *Landscape Album* are in the Metropolitan collection, too. He knew the work of Ni Zan, and improvised upon it in ways that would be of salient interest to Dan Jian. Zu Da's dry brush leaves marks very close to dust and ash. He appears reckless but is instead witty and touching.

Dan Jian is also an admirer of Jockum Nordstrom (Swedish, born 1963). His work, like Jian's, depends on the color of a unifying ground. The ground supports collage and its characteristic crisp edges. Enigmatic and suggestive narratives arise in his work. One can even find a few forms like these in Dan Jian's drawings. The most interesting similarity between Nordstrom and Jian, however, is the sense of narrative.

In Dan Jian's *The Room*, a leopard seems to curl up near us to guard the long and narrow

enclosure. Ashlar construction allows a space tall enough for a bear. A tree has been cruelly cut, reduced to a log; but it breaks out in white flowers. A bird in line drawing peeks downstairs to some lower space. Above, the darkening sky rains down its dust. The potted plants, dracaena and monstera, suggest that someone is domesticating this room — it is clean with a crispness that suggests newness. Leopard and bear, domestic partners, seem to know what they need: shelves and flowers, blankets and basements.

All of this must have its roots in Lichuan, in Hubei Province, in Southern China, the place of Dan Jian's childhood. She recalls golden mornings, and loudspeakers playing Mao-era songs; her sea of treasured images expanding every day. And there's always a dive to find the darker part.

Mary Vernon is a painter and scholar, and Professor Emerita at Southern Methodist University.

1. Dan Jian is translating from Chinese. An English translation in print is: Fang Fang and Michael Berry, *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City*, (New York: HarperVia), 2020.
2. "The bow whispers to the arrow before it speeds forth — 'Your freedom is mine'", Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*, (New York: Macmillan Co.), 1916, #191.
3. In *And Dust to Mountains*, 2021, on her website danjian.info.



Hand Tree, 2023

Charcoal dust, charcoal pencil, color pencil and tracing paper cutouts on parchment paper, 38 x 29.75"



The Room, 2023

Charcoal dust, charcoal pencil and tracing paper cutouts on parchment paper, 36.5 x 30"



Winter's Landing, 2023

Charcoal dust, charcoal pencil and tracing paper cutouts on parchment paper, 36.5 x 30"

Dan Jian

EDUCATION

- 2016 MFA Painting, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH
2012 BFA Painting and Drawing, Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA

SOLO & TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Nascent Terrain*, Cris Worley Fine Arts, Dallas, TX
2022 *Dan Jian*, Kansas City Artists Coalition, Kansas City, MO
The Waves Not Yet High, Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts, Lubbock, TX
2021 *And Dust to Mountains*, Moudy Gallery, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX
Edge of a Story, Fort Worth Community Arts Center, Fort Worth, TX
2020 *Dan Jian and Kalee Appleton*, Coburn Gallery, Ashland University, Ashland, OH, curated by Cynthia Petry
Off To Dream, Sean Christopher Gallery, Columbus, OH
Remembering While Looking, 934 Gallery, Columbus, OH
2019 *Feeling Forward*, Portmanteau Project Space, Dayton, OH
Lobby, Planned Parenthood, Columbus, OH, curated by Middle Child
2018 *Déjà vu*, Organhaus Art Space, Chongqing, China, curated by Kun Ni

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Into View: Bernice Bing*, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, CA
More Than This..., Arts Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX, curated by Anne Allen
2022 *Members Virtual Exhibition*, in conjunction with Mid-America College Art Association Virtual Conference, juried by Matt Roberts
2021 *10th Annual National Juried Exhibition*, Marshall University, Charles W. and Norma C. Carroll Gallery, Huntington, WV
Contemporary Landscape 2021, CICA Museum, Gyeonggi-do, Korea
Direct Messages, The Wrong Biennale, virtual exhibition, curated by Tess Elliot
Interpreting Renditions of Nature, Community, and Self: selected works by TCU, Moudy Gallery, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX
Microcinema: "MILOTT", Rhizome DC, virtual exhibition
School of Art Faculty, Moudy Gallery, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX
2020 *934 5: A Fifth Anniversary Retrospective Exhibition*, 934 Gallery, Columbus, OH
Texas Now 2020, Artspace 111, Fort Worth, TX
2018 *ROY Spectrum IV*, Roy G Biv Gallery, Columbus, OH
Shift, Roy G Biv Gallery, Columbus, OH
2017 *Come Along With Me*, Riffe Gallery, Columbus, OH, curated by Richard Fletcher
Petit Deux: A Group Exhibition of Smaller Sized Art, Emerge Gallery & Art Space, Saugerties, NY

- Retellings*, The Art Center of Western Colorado, Grand Junction, CO
2016 *notitleanytitle**, Urban Arts Space, Columbus, OH
Petit: A Group Exhibition of Smaller Sized Art, Emerge Gallery & Art Space, Saugerties, NY, juried by Robert Langdon
Studio Open, The Carnegie, Covington, KY, curated by Matt Distel

RESIDENCIES

- 2018 器, Organhaus Art Space, Chongqing, China
Ragdale Foundation, Lake Forest, IL
2017 Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts, Nebraska City, NE
Virginia Center for the Creative Arts Residency, Amherst, VA
2016 Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT
2014 OHIO 8550 Artist Residency, Chesterhill, OH

PRESS

- 2023 Fuentes, Jessica. "Depictions of Nature, Memory, and Home at Arts Fort Worth" *Glasstire*, January 16, 2023.
2022 Padilla, Michelle. "A Chat with the 2022 Carter Community Artists" *Carter ARTicles*, March 1, 2022.
Ortiz, Mónica Teresa. "Memories Remade With Charcoal and Ash" *Hyperallergic*, May 19, 2022.
2021 Brown, Carl. "Dan Jian - Landscape as a Motif" *Fort Worth Scene*, May 2021.
"Amon Carter Museum Announces 2022 Carter Community Artists" *Glasstire*, November 26, 2021.
"Meet the Amon Carter Museum's new community artists" *Art&Seek, KERA*, November 29, 2021.
2020 Downing, Andy. "East meets West in duo shows opening at 934 and Sean Christopher galleries" *Columbus Alive*, June 5, 2020.
2017 Gray, Mary. "Connected Through the Human Experience, Artist Interviews - Dan Jian" *Ohio Arts Council News*, March 2017.



回 To Return I (detail), 2023

Charcoal dust, charcoal pencil and tracing paper cutouts on warm white parchment paper, 23.75 x 29.75"



The Departure, 2022

Charcoal dust, charcoal pencil, color pencil and tracing paper cutouts on parchment paper, 30 x 41"

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Photographs by Hector Tednoir Martinez and Dan Jian

This project is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. Since 1978, Women & Their Work has created significant opportunities for artists and audiences to experience contemporary art through ambitious exhibitions, commissions of new work, performances and programs that inform audiences of all ages. We have actively developed the careers of more than 2,000 women artists, presenting 338 visual art exhibitions, 164 music, dance and theater events, 30 spoken word and literary performances, 16 film festivals and 833 programs & education workshops with the goal of ensuring that diverse women artists are equitably represented in all forms of art. Women & Their Work helps meet an important need in Texas providing exhibition and performance opportunities and helping to attract critical attention to the work produced here; it is the only organization of its kind in the region and one of the few organizations in

the United States that dedicates itself to the work of women artists. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *ArtForum*, and on *National Public Radio* and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2020, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art acquired the 42-year archive of Women & Their Work ensuring that our entire history of the work of women artists and our website will be preserved in perpetuity.



1311 E. Cesar Chavez St.
 Austin, Texas 78702
 (512) 477-1064
info@womenandtheirwork.org
womenandtheirwork.org



Andy Warhol

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