

Guo Fengyi

by Johanna Fateman



View of “Guo Fengyi,” 2015–16.

This holiday season, the art world’s best Father Christmas is feathery and vibrant, roughly vertically symmetrical (wearing a pom-pommed hat at both top and bottom), and Buddhist. Guo Fengyi’s Santa Claus, 2007, looks like a vaporous rust-colored ghost from a distance. Up close, he’s mesmerizing, his airy Chewbacca texture composed of rhythmic, multicolored ink strokes. Santa’s top face has an electric-green muzzle and eyebrows, and there are about five more faces of various sizes and personalities tucked into his elongated form. Some of Guo’s intricate, many-faced drawings are so tall they’re installed spilling onto the floor, bent to continue off the wall onto white platforms. The artist, who died in 2010, drew at a small table, unscrolling lengths of rice paper or cloth to work a section at a time, a process that lends the pieces an exquisite-corpse quality even as it’s unified by her signature meditative mark-making.

Born in 1942 in China’s Shaanxi province, Guo began making art in her late forties. After severe arthritic pain forced her from her manufacturing job, she devoted herself to the spiritual healing practice of qigong, which, through its techniques of breathing and movement, eased her suffering. Qigong also informed her subsequent drawing methods and imagery: Her oeuvre includes bright, instructive representations of the body’s meridians, as well as wild, intuitive depictions—like process-art portraits or mapped energy fields—of subjects ranging from the aforementioned Santa to the Statue of Liberty to ancient Chinese mythological figures and personal acquaintances. Towering together in the small gallery, the drawings have a talismanic calming effect that’s amplified by their grouping, forming a beautiful and awe-inspiring contemplative architectural space.

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