



Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance

Guo Fengyi:
To See from a Distance

Drawing Papers 142

The Drawing Center

Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance

Essays by

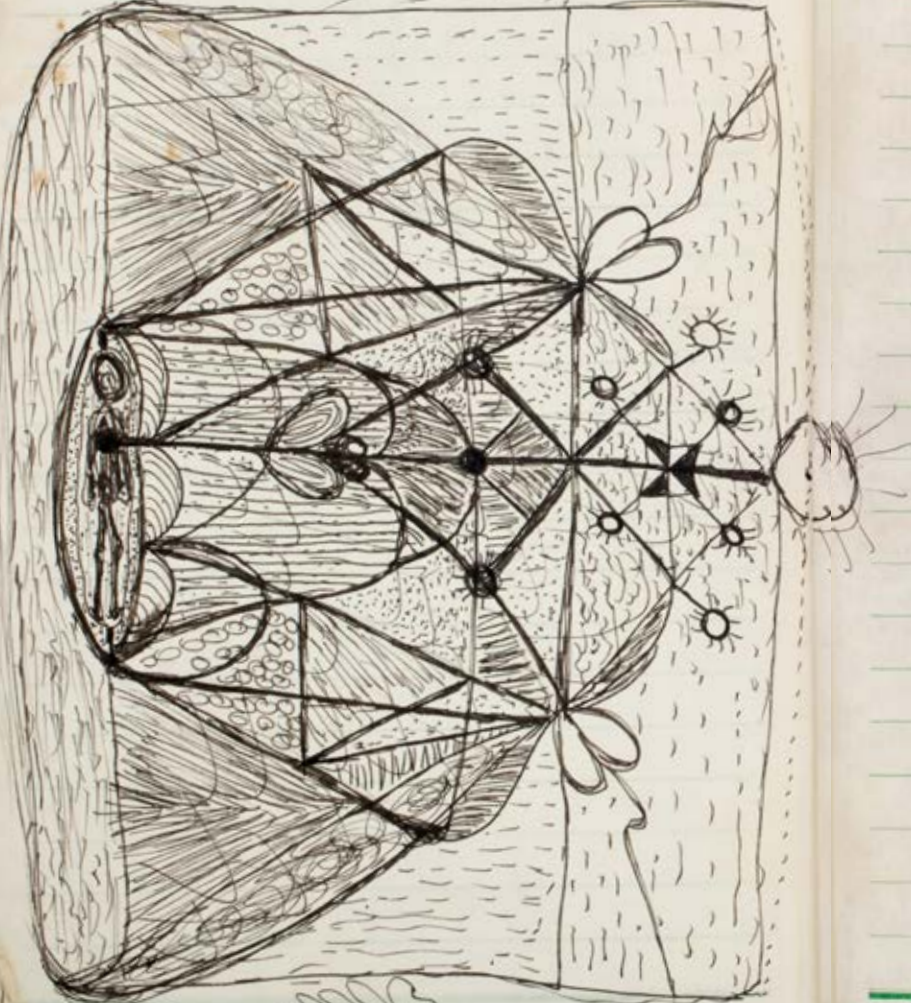
Rosario Güiraldes

Laura Hoptman

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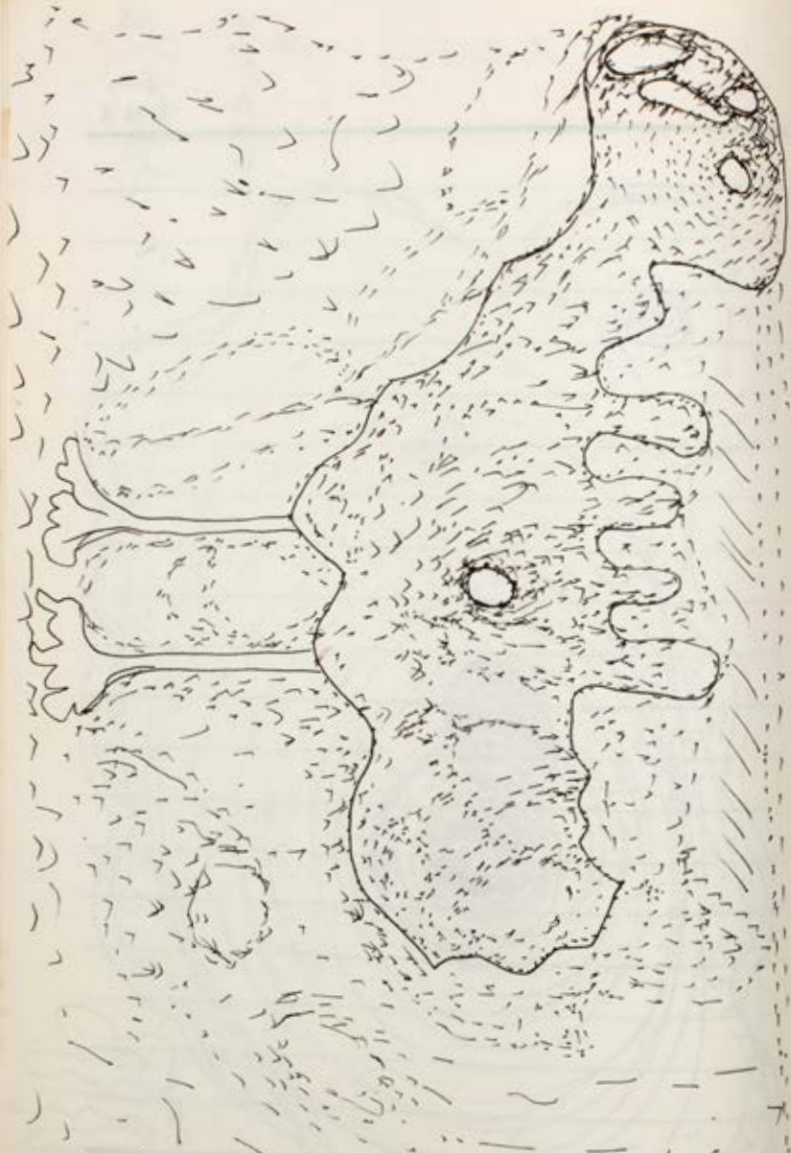
Xu Tan

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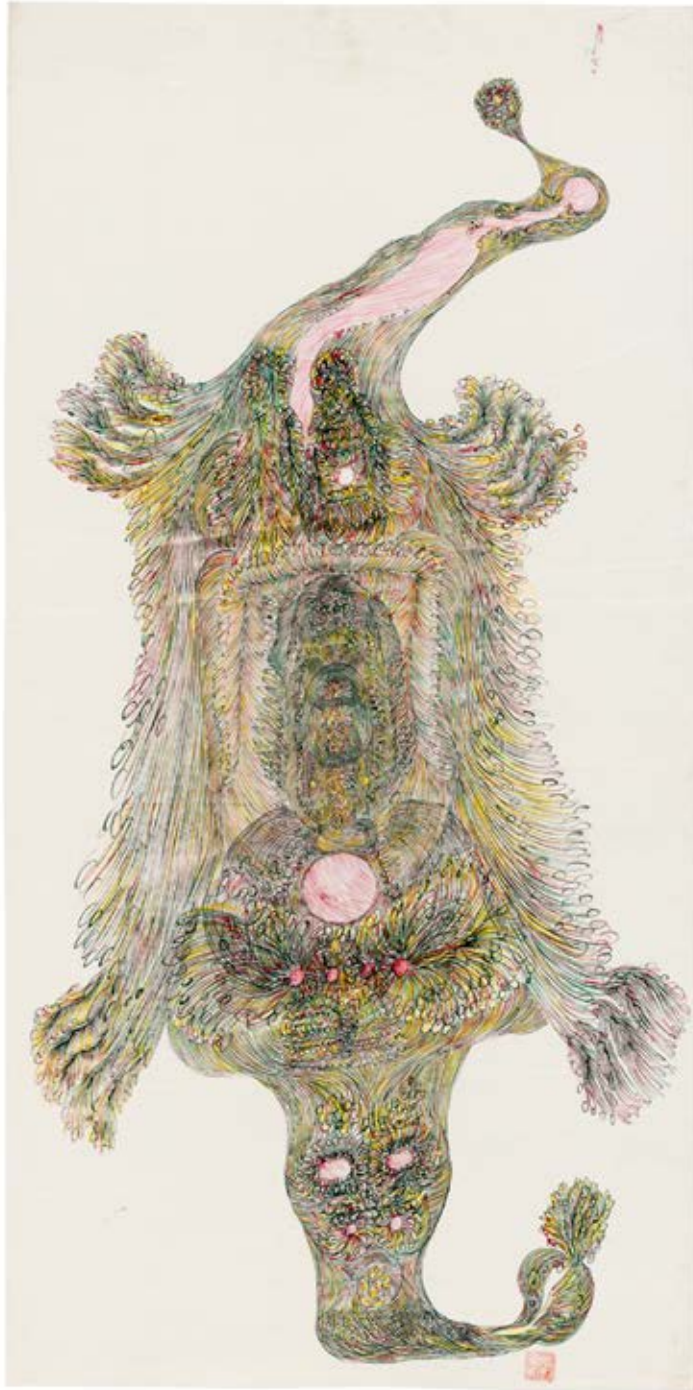




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PL. 3
How is Guo Fengyi's Head, 1995

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To See from a Distance Is Still to Be Seen: Guo Fengyi at The Drawing Center

Laura Hoptman

10 Over the past forty-two years, The Drawing Center has presented exhibitions of masterful drawings that define both drawing and mastery in the broadest possible sense of both terms. Shows ranging from an overview of Shaker gift drawings to the first public display of Kara Walker’s cut-paper murals, by artists who run the gamut from great modernists like Eva Hesse to Hindu Tantrism practitioners from northeastern India, have redefined graphic virtuosity and blown wide open the parameters of conventional connoisseurship. Over the decades, drawings by known and unknown artists, academicians, and the self-taught have mingled on the walls of The Drawing Center, brought together by the commonality of medium but also by the clear necessity for their works of art to be introduced into the general cultural discussion.

The Drawing Center was founded as a venue focused on the relationship between drawing and contemporary ideas, and time and again our institution has employed the historical along with the new with the goal of illuminating our cultural moment. Our fall 2019 show, *The Pencil Is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists*, included drawings made in the Bastille during the French Revolution as well as those created in the Angola penitentiary in twentieth-century Louisiana. However separated by chronology, both groups of work are equally pertinent to the present moment, where forty years of “tough on crime” policies have given the United States the highest incarceration rate in the world.

Drawings that astonish and illuminate, that bring to the discourse unique and urgent points of view, are quintessential to The Drawing Center. The Chinese artist Guo Fengyi created just such a body of work. Although she practiced for a scant two decades until her death in 2010 at age sixty-eight, Guo’s drawings reveal universes both

internal and external, with points of view that zoom from the micro to the macroscopic, and subjects that range from ancient burial chambers to contemporary political figures. As Kathleen Ryor, a professor of classical Chinese art, observes in her essay in this volume, Guo, “sought to make manifest a deeply rooted understanding of the relationship between human beings and the universe in Chinese culture that still informs various disciplines today.”¹

Begun as an outgrowth of the artist’s qigong practice and interest in Chinese medicine, Guo’s artistic language started with careful diagrams incorporating numbers and text, and matured into compositions dominated by expansive lines drawn with big gestures, but also with control. Taking advantage of the verticality of paper scrolls in her later work, Guo filled the surfaces of her supports so that her figures seem to hover in their own groundless atmosphere—weightless, almost spectral, their size notwithstanding.

The artist emphasized that her drawings did not derive from observation, but were the results of internal visioning processes as well as the discoveries that come through the artistic act. “Before I draw, I do not know what [the drawing] will become,” she stated in an oft-cited quote. “It is only after I finish drawing that I know.”² She described the process of making her works in some detail in a number of interviews with curators and fellow artists in the mid-2000s during a period when her work began to enjoy a measure of international recognition. “Whatever I want to draw, I write it in the middle of the paper,” she explained in an interview published in 2005. “Afterwards, it is through energy that I draw stroke by stroke.”

Although there is not a great deal of scholarship concerning Guo’s work, what writing there is—from Chinese, European, and American critics, curators, and fellow artists—invariably emphasizes the visionary element of her practice. This emphasis is not misguided, as the bulk of Guo’s subjects are of a kind of “spiritual reality,” the term that art historian Tracey Bashkoff recently coined to describe the work of the turn-of-the-century mystic painter Hilma af Klint.³ Many of Guo’s works depict subjects that she didn’t observe, but envisioned through the practice of qigong

1 See page 65 of the present volume.

2 All quotations in this paragraph from Lu Jie, “Who is Guo Fengyi?” in Lu Jie, ed., *Who is Guo Fengyi* (Beijing: 25000 Cultural Transmission Center and Long March Foundation, 2005), 93.

3 Tracey Bashkoff, ed., *Hilma Af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018), 17.

and meditation. These visions, coupled with her familiarity with the broad principles of Chinese medicine, inspired Guo to draw diagrams of what she described as channels for the body's energy, and which resemble the human circulatory system. Meditation during qigong practice also engendered visions that revealed to the artist the contents of imperial funeral chambers located deep underground and sealed for eternity. A number of her works from the mid-1990s incorporate this imagery.

The practice of recording visions rather than reality by female artists like af Klint and Guo has been considered harshly—even pathologized—by modern art pundits. As the forced obscurity of af Klint, as opposed to the fame of the mystically minded Vasily Kandinsky or Piet Mondrian, has made manifest, female mystics have historically been disallowed as proper artists and treated in an almost anthropological fashion.⁴ Art aficionados see avowed spiritualist artists who use their visions as subject matter, at worst, as channeling more than creating. At best, the work of female artists inspired by spiritual experimentation is seen as an illustration of belief, and thus somehow at odds with artistic creativity.⁵ Even a recent, very positive description of Guo's work, written by the critic Gao Shiming, emphasizes that Guo's "supernatural and furtive drawings," inspire awe, only when "the outrageousness subsides."⁶

Guo's drawings were introduced to a Chinese and subsequently international contemporary art public through the artist and gallerist Lu Jie, who for more than twenty years has championed her work in the context of other major post-1989 Chinese artists. Despite Lu Jie's efforts, because Guo never attended art school, and because the subjects of her drawings come from visioning rather than seeing, in the international arena her work has been designated "Outsider Art," and relegated to that corner of the art world that contains a grab bag of self-taught, accidental, and psychologically or physically impaired artists who are lumped together regardless of background or even historical period. Even though her work was included in major institutional exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art, and international biennials like the 2013 Venice Biennale,

critical discourse has continued its abdication of responsibility to contextualize it. According to Gao, critics have "no words" to describe Guo's work. He writes: "She resides outside art history and does not belong to the art world."⁷

This designation of Guo's work as that of an outsider, especially as it stands in contrast to the work of Chinese artists of her generation, is understandable to an extent. A number of Chinese critics have mentioned that the calligraphic quality of Guo's drawing, her sometimes national historical subject matter, and her choice of scrolls as supports give her work an "indigenous" quality.⁸ Even Guo herself, upon being asked to participate in a 2007 international exhibition of contemporary art alongside Ai Weiwei, Huang Yong Ping, Cai Guo-Qiang, Chen Zhen, and other leaders of late-century Chinese conceptualism, clearly acknowledged that her work stood out among theirs. In an interview with the contemporary artist Xu Tan, she stated, "I'm different from you guys," going on to explain that, "you people paint after you understood, and yet, I understand only after I paint."⁹ But given Guo's own description of how and why she works, how different is she really from other late-century conceptualists? To understand artmaking as a form of research and investigation, and ultimately, knowledge production is a basic tenet of conceptual art, most of which is itself research-based. From the endurance experiments of Zhang Huan to the chemical ones of Anicka Yi, twenty-first-century conceptualism has adopted an inductive, rather than deductive, research model that has more than a little to do with Guo's methodology.

As it has been pointed out by several of Guo's strongest advocates, the project to contextualize her work within the international contemporary art discourse is an urgent one, as it challenges received cultural tropes of gender, social class, ethnicity, and geopolitics. But there is also an argument for embracing Guo's "indigenous" status, as it too might serve to question static and blinkered notions of artistic contemporaneity. The critic Chang Tsong-zung, who adamantly calls Guo's work an example of "indigenous Chinese art," describes with admiration its "superstitious" and "outdated character," claiming that

4 Bashkoff, *Hilma Af Klint*, 35-36.

5 Chang Tsong-zung, "Another Universe: The Art of Guo Fengyi," in Lu, *Who is Guo Fengyi*, 7-8.

6 Gao Shiming, "The Politics of Images by Guo Fengyi," in Lu, *Who is Guo Fengyi*, 9.

7 Gao, "The Politics of Images," 10.

8 Chang, "Another Universe," 7.

9 Guo Fengyi, interview by Xu Tan, January 27, 2007, unpublished transcript prepared in conjunction with the exhibition *China Welcomes You...Desires, Struggles, New Identities* at Kunsthau Graz, Austria, in 2007.

these qualities make it subversive. He explains that because indigeneity is marginalized in contemporary China, the very act of bringing indigenous artworks into the red hot center of the Chinese contemporary discourse is a radical act. “To re-discover a superstitious, outdated and subversive character such as Guo, and provide a role for her in modern society as ‘artist,’” he writes, “is an encouragingly positive move, bracing in its open attitude towards alternative culture.”¹⁰ Gao also advocates for this strategy of weaponizing Guo’s indigeneity, arguing that inserting it into the contemporary discourse confounds the “progressivist and linear historical development” of modern art history.¹¹ And it does. That contemporary criticism has no words to describe art that does not come from that self-same criticism makes the limitations of its vocabulary all the more evident. More importantly perhaps, the discomfort with calling the product of visions by women, by the untutored, the decentralized, the marginalized, or the strange “contemporary art” illuminates the artistic discourse’s poverty of imagination, and ultimately, its weakness as an effective vehicle for societal change. It is interesting to note that however laudatory the interpretation of Guo’s work as indigenous is, the designation was roundly rejected by the artist herself, who proclaimed decisively in 2007, well before her work was included in prestigious international exhibitions, that, “What I paint is contemporary painting,” adding, “I’m not playing with feudalistic superstition.”¹²

With no position in the ruling teleology of contemporary art, which still remains divided by issues of gender, class, and geography, this magnificent oeuvre comprising over five hundred works on paper made over the span of a little more than twenty years remains lesser known both inside and outside of China, despite its support and promotion by major voices in the Chinese contemporary art community, and more recently, attention paid to it by curators and contemporary artists outside of China. As Chang Tsong-zung has ruefully written, “Modern cultural institutions cannot find a suitable place for a phenomenon such as hers.”¹³ But The Drawing Center can, and has so done with this first survey exhibition. “I draw because I do not know,” Guo said in an interview. “I draw to know.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Chang, “Another Universe,” 8.

¹¹ Gao, “The Politics of Images,” 11.

¹² Guo Fengyi, interview by Xu Tan, Jan 27, 2007.

¹³ Chang, “Another Universe,” 8.

¹⁴ Guo Fengyi, interview by Xu Tan, Jan 27, 2007.

And now, through this exhibition, and above all, the magic of her drawings, we can know too.

Acknowledgments

This exhibition could not have been possible without the diligence of my colleague, Drawing Center Assistant Curator, Rosario Güiraldes, who enthusiastically joined, and subsequently led, this exhibition project to completion. With energy and a sense of intelligent curiosity, Rosario traveled to Beijing where she became The Drawing Center’s chief representative, working with Lu Jie and Aimee Lin of Long March Space, to sift through works stored at their gallery. Rosario has a passionate interest in international contemporary art, and over the year she has devoted to this project, she has added to her expertise in new art in Latin America and the United States a working knowledge of Chinese art after 1989. It has been a joy to collaborate with her.

Lu Jie is the second major figure without whom this exhibition could not have been possible. Lu Jie “discovered” Guo Fengyi’s work in 2002 during the “The Long March: A Walking Visual Display,” a year-long performative project in which he and an ever-changing group of artists and like-minded cultural workers retraced Mao Zedong’s Long March of 1934-35, making exhibitions and staging performances as they went. Now, as the founder of Long March Space, one of the most important galleries in China, Lu Jie continues to promote the work of culturally significant Chinese artists. He also represents the estate of Guo Fengyi, and in that capacity, he has provided The Drawing Center with invaluable resources and advice, served as a bridge between us and Guo’s generous family, and perhaps most importantly, shared his deep knowledge and expertise on Guo’s oeuvre with us. Although asked, he preferred not to be involved with the organization of the exhibition, nor the contents of our publication. His point of view however, and his admiration for Guo’s work is apparent in both. We are grateful also to Lu Jie’s colleagues at Long March Space and their extended team of researchers, including Zhou Xin; Zijin Cao; Xiaoying Zhang; Brida Du; Baohua Qiao; Xing’er Wang; Boqun Zhou; Mesh Wang; and in particular, Aimee Lin, Director. Thanks also to Jane DeBevoise of Asia Art Archive for her guidance. We must also mention the very kind and generous participation of the Guo Fengyi family and estate.

We express our thanks and our pleasure in collaborating with the esteemed art historian Kathleen Ryor, Tanaka Memorial

Professor of International Understanding and Art History in the Department of Art and Art History at Carleton College. I am proud to call Katie a personal friend of over thirty years, and her contribution to this volume is essential reading for anyone interested in Guo's work. Similarly, we were honored that Xu Tan, who knew Guo and interviewed her during her lifetime, has contributed an illuminating essay that elaborates on her place in the contemporary Chinese art discourse from the all-important point of view of a contemporary artist. We are grateful also to Xin Wang for her careful translation of Xu Tan's essay.

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The Drawing Center is a nonprofit institution and we rely on the generous donations of our friends and the art community to make our exhibitions happen. Without the support of the Long March Space, Beijing, The Drawing Center could not have developed the comprehensive exhibition that Guo's work deserves. Their partnership throughout the process of creating the show has been essential. Sarah Peter, whose steadfast and passionate support of art by women has changed the way that museums collect and curators program, provided crucial support for this exhibition as well, and it is our honor to have her vote of confidence for this and other exhibitions in our program. We also acknowledge Andrew Edlin of Andrew Edlin Gallery, who very generously shared information about Guo at the beginning of our research.

At The Drawing Center, Rosario and I would like to thank Deputy Director Olga Valle Tetkowski for her diligent and selfless work in realizing this exhibition. Our thanks also to Rebecca Brickman, Director of Development; Allison Underwood, Director of Communications; Kate Robinson, our redoubtable Registrar; Rebecca DiGiovanna for her assistance; and Dan Gillespie, our Operations Manager. This catalog has benefited from the diligence of our longtime Managing Editor, Joanna Ahlberg, and its beautiful design is thanks to Peter Ahlberg. Thanks also to Peter Muscato, our indomitable framer, and Jessica Pierce and Nicole B. Sclair of U.S. Art.

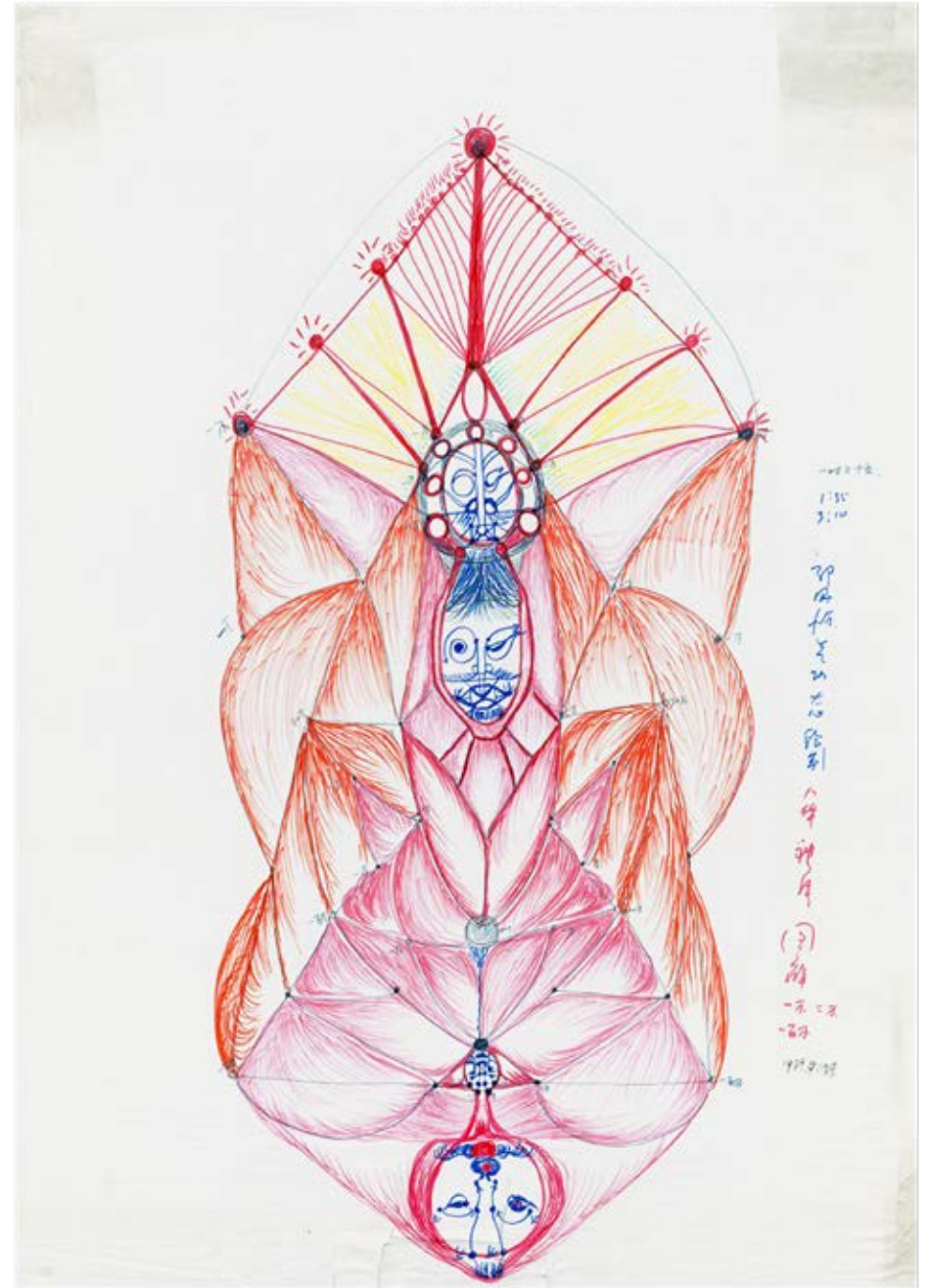
Lastly, we have organized this exhibition in collaboration with esteemed colleagues from the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia. All of us at The Drawing Center thank Kari Herron, Executive Director, and Megan Tatom, Director of Exhibition Production, SCAD Museums and Exhibitions; and Humberto Moro, Adjunct Curator, Rebecca Chadwick, Exhibitions Coordinator, and Summer Orndorf, Head Registrar, at SCAD Museum of Art, for their enthusiasm and collegial help in organizing the show in Savannah.



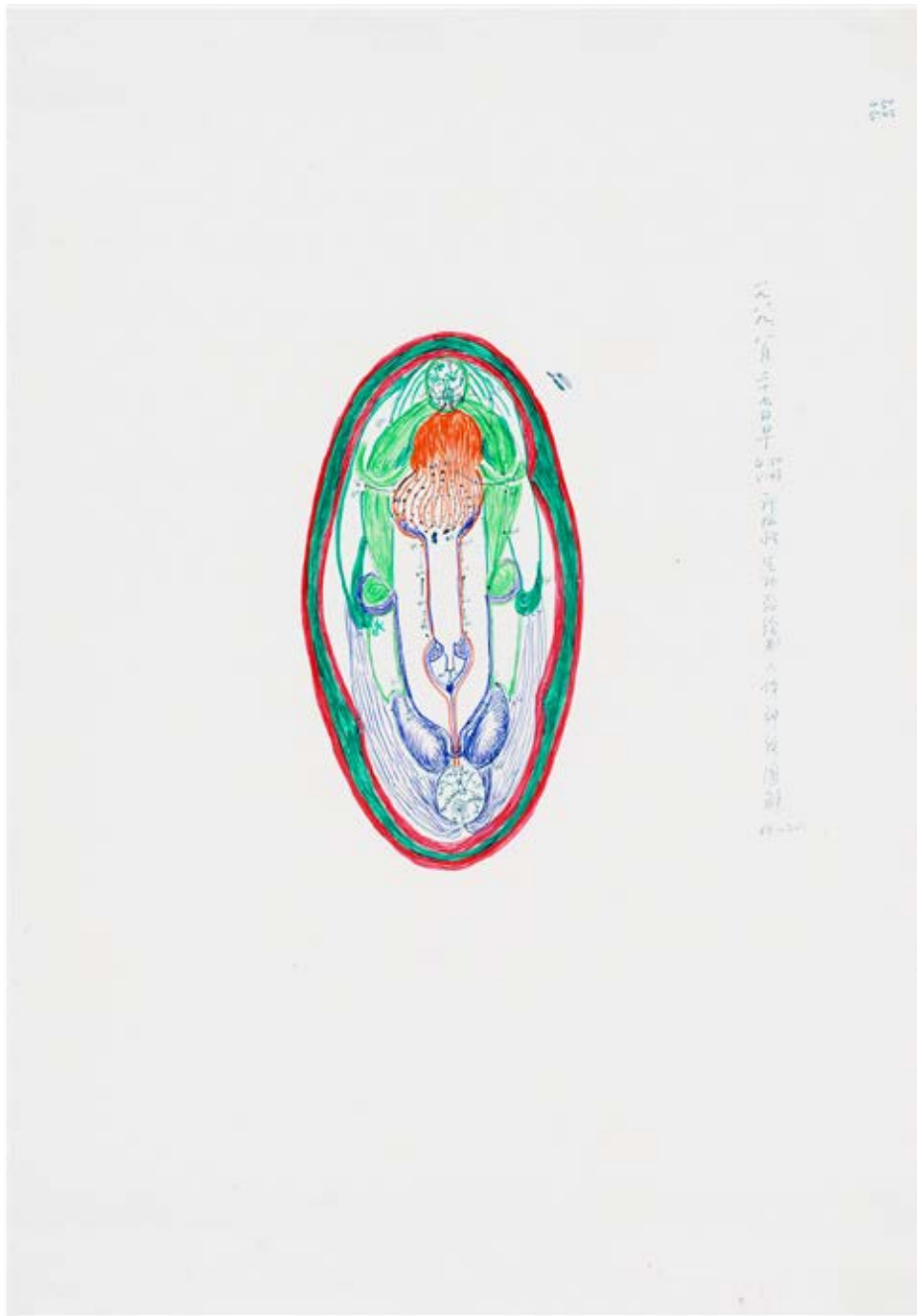
PL. 4
Shouxing (God of Longevity), 1990



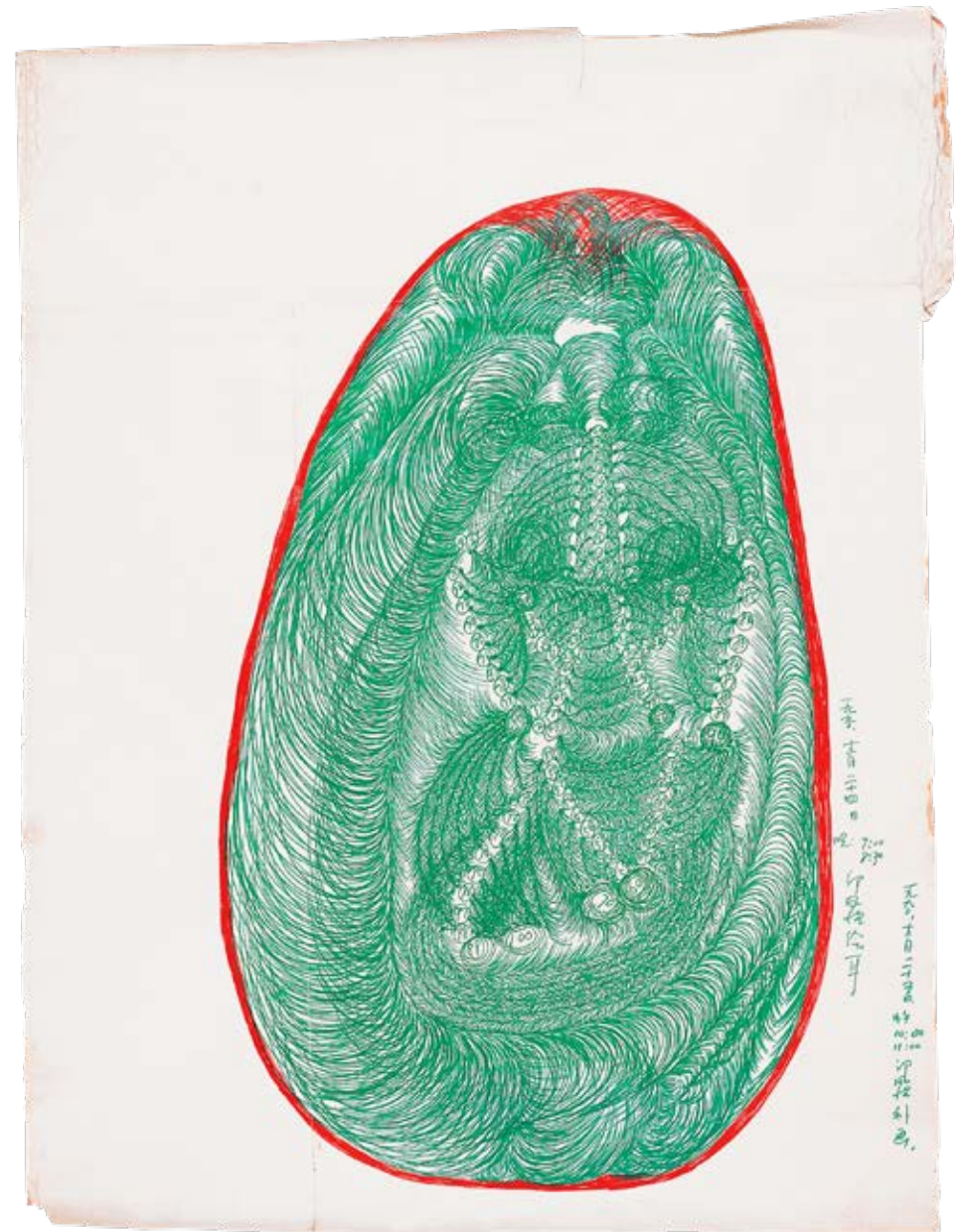
PL. 5
Male Female, 1989



PL. 6
Diagram of the Human Nerves Ten Thousand Twenty Thousand
One Hundred Thousand, 1989



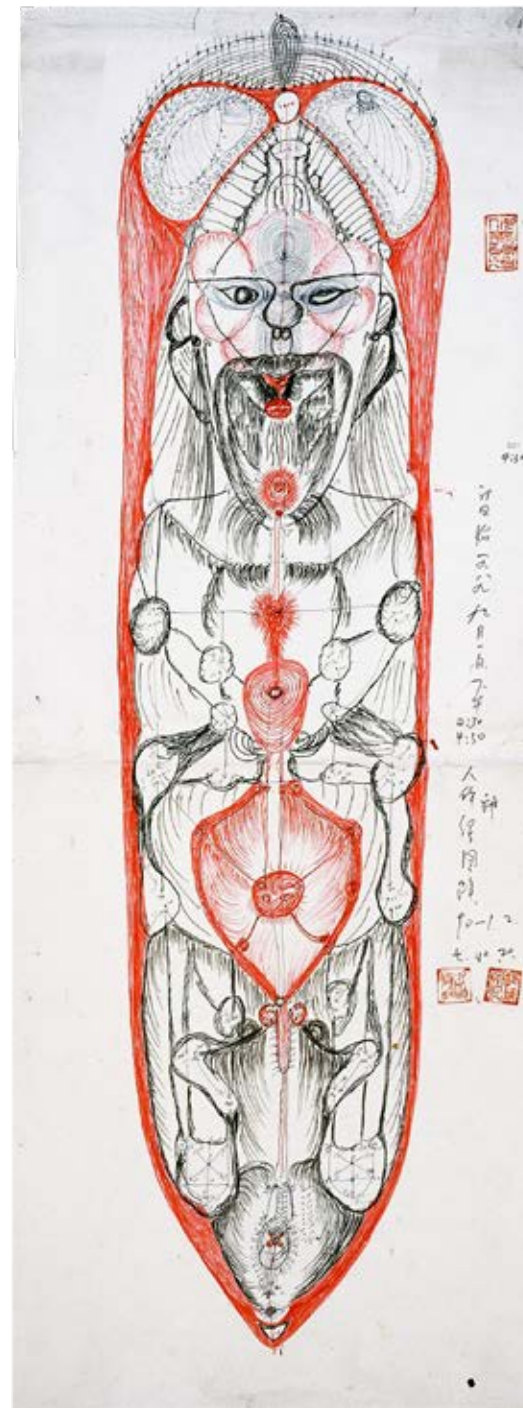
PL. 7
Diagram of the Human Nervous System, 1989



PL. 8
Ear, 1990



PL. 9
 Natural Superpower Black Mudra, 1990



PL. 10
 Little Old Man, 1989

The Ungovernable Images of Guo Fengyi

Rosario Güiraldes

I

25

On the morning of June 4, 1989, while meditating, Guo Fengyi had a vision and, without knowing what it would become, wrote the name of what she saw on the back side of an old calendar. With a few more strokes of a black ballpoint pen, an image appeared: a Buddha meditating on a lotus throne. As the drawing's title indicates, Guo believed that this particular Buddha is among a collection of treasures kept in the Underground Palace below the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, built in 625 in southern Xi'an to store sutra scrolls and other treasures brought from ancient India by the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang [PL. 11].

While Guo drew the Shakyamuni Buddha—an enlightened teacher who helped sentient beings end rebirth and suffering—in her small kitchen at home in Xi'an, elsewhere in Chinese cities and in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, one of the most significant uprisings in modern Chinese history was taking place, as pro-democracy protestors calling for greater accountability, constitutional due process, and freedom of expression were suppressed by the government. What followed in China was a period of profound socioeconomic shifts—a seismic transformation that impacted all aspects of society, including the field of art. The new chapter that began in Chinese art history after 1989 was imbued with a sense of artistic autonomy, experimentation, and gradual international recognition and exposure for artists, who made an “increasing effort to free artistic creation from collective activities motivated by sociopolitical goals,” and instead, “relocate the meaning of art in the



PL. 11

The Buddha in the Underground Palace of the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, 1989

creative process and experience.”¹ This new chapter was an extension of a period in Chinese art history that began in the early 1970s when some Chinese artists started to question the meaning of the Cultural Revolution, developing a critical artistic language that dramatically departed from the dogmatic vocabulary of revolutionary art, and encompassed a thirty-year period of profound changes in the arts that led to the professionalization of the field and what is now more broadly known as contemporary Chinese art.²

I relate this chance convergence of events—the beginning of Guo’s artistic practice with the establishment of a new period in Chinese art history characterized by the realization of artistic self-determination—to situate the artist in her cultural moment and to emphasize the fact that, against any interpretation that has attempted to place Guo in an art historical cul-de-sac as an example of an “Outsider,” self-taught, or amateur artist, she was a contemporary artist, living and working at a crucial time in the development of contemporary Chinese art and the professionalization of the field.³

II

Born seven years before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Guo Fengyi (b. 1942, Kaifeng, Henan; d. 2010, Xi’an, Shaanxi) lived her entire life in Xi’an, China’s ancient seat of dynastic power and cultural capital and, today, capital of the Shaanxi Province. Guo, who never received a formal artistic education, held various positions in factories as a chemical analyst until 1989, when she was

1 Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 99. This volume contains a wide-range of carefully selected, translated, and contextualized primary documents from the 1970s through the 2000s, alongside historical introductions, and was an invaluable resource in researching the development of contemporary Chinese art.

2 Wu and Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 99.

3 Alexandra Munroe, “A Test Site,” in Alexandra Munroe, Philip Tinari, and Hou Hanrou, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2017). This essay, which led me to focus on 1989 as a climactic year in the development of contemporary Chinese art, is included in the publication that accompanied the exhibition of the same name (shown at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2017-18; the Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain, 2018; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2018-19). It presented the history of contemporary Chinese art from 1989 through 2008 with a rigorous examination of how the implementation of Western capitalism in mainland China radically transformed the arts.

forced to retire because of a chronic illness that was exacerbated by the nature of her work. As a way to ease her pain, she began to practice qigong, a traditional Chinese healing and wellness technique that involves coordinated movements, breathing, and meditation to cultivate and balance one’s life force or energy (*qi*).

Over the next twenty years, Guo, a wife, mother, and grandmother, devoted herself to this practice, which she credited with unleashing an artistic energy that produced a large and astonishing body of drawings. Guo developed a highly personal genre of qigong, which she called *qi’e gong* (the gong of the penguin). Guo’s *qi’e gong* reached its peak in the late 1990s when she was recognized by thousands of apprentices and followers as someone who possessed special powers to divine fortunes and diagnose illnesses.⁴ During that period, Guo traveled beyond Xi’an to Shandong, Henan, Hunan, and even Beijing to give lectures, teach, and preside over healings. However, when Chinese authorities began to control the qigong fever during the 1980s and ’90s, Guo adopted a low profile and privately educated her apprentices.

Guo understood qigong not as a superstition but as a science through which she could analyze and heal her own body, as well as those of others. She kept a journal in which she recorded her activities, including the dates and times of her self-healing sessions, the acupoints (the particular parts of the body’s surface for infusing or diffusing *qi*) involved, as well as detailed written descriptions of how her body, mind, and spirit moved together as she practiced. On the first page of a journal from March of 1989, she encouraged herself: “You have to have a strong will and endurance. Through sustained practice, you will achieve enlightenment. If you hold on to the [qigong] practice, naturally, everything will be achieved through real practice.”⁵

Only a few days after she began to record her experiences, Guo—at age forty-seven—began to see images, colors, and shapes during her meditations. Her journals reveal that her first vision, a yellow Buddha, occurred on March 12, 1989. She quickly shifted from writing detailed descriptions of her bodily response to meditation to recounting the powerful visions she experienced,

4 Chang Tsong-zung, “Another Universe: The Art of Guo Fengyi,” in Lu Jie, ed., *Who is Guo Fengyi* (Beijing: 25000 Cultural Transmission Center and Long March Foundation, 2005), 7-8.

5 Guo Fengyi, personal journal entry, translated by Lu Jie, April 2, 2019, Long March Space, Beijing.

and how, through adjusting her body posture and movements, she could direct them: “When I practice qigong I see a very bright Buddha in yellow color,” she wrote. “The third time I moved my finger, I saw a little Buddha standing in front of me, and when I moved my finger again, the Buddha became smaller.”⁶ Within two months, Guo transitioned from describing her visions in written script, which she had occasionally punctuated with small drawings, to using language—a word or a phrase—only as a starting point, instead filling the pages of her journal with larger images [FIG. 1].

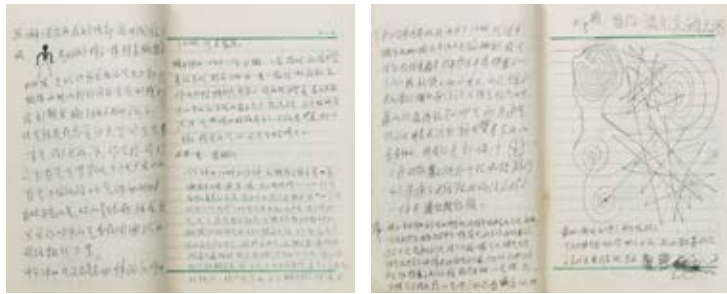


FIG. 1
Pages from *Journal Vol. 1, 1989* (left) and *Journal Vol. 2, 1989* (right)

The fluidity of this shift perhaps resulted in part from Guo’s comfort with the brush, China’s traditional writing tool, and with the calligraphic practice of composing and directing energy with the motion of each stroke.

Guo began to practice qigong not as an artistic pursuit, but because she wanted to heal herself. The positive impact of her sustained qigong practice improved her health, and gave her the energy to treat others. But as someone who didn’t have any academic art training, qigong also provided her a very specific opportunity to develop a deeply personal and symbolically charged visual language. Guo’s early journal writings reveal that the visions she experienced became so powerful that she couldn’t prevent herself from drawing them. Drawing appeared quite naturally to Guo as a mode of inquiry, and she drew to interrogate the meaning of what she saw as if, she wrote, “from afar.”⁷

Guo began drawing sites and subjects that she couldn’t physically visit, or that she didn’t know about. “Whatever you want me to paint, I can do it; the less I know about something, the better I can



6 Guo Fengyi, personal journal entry, translated by Lu Jie, April 2, 2019, Long March Space, Beijing.

7 Gao Shiming, “The Politics of Images by Guo Fengyi,” in Lu, *Who is Guo Fengyi*, 9.



PL. 13
Fengshui Diagram of the Moon Seen from a Distance, 1989

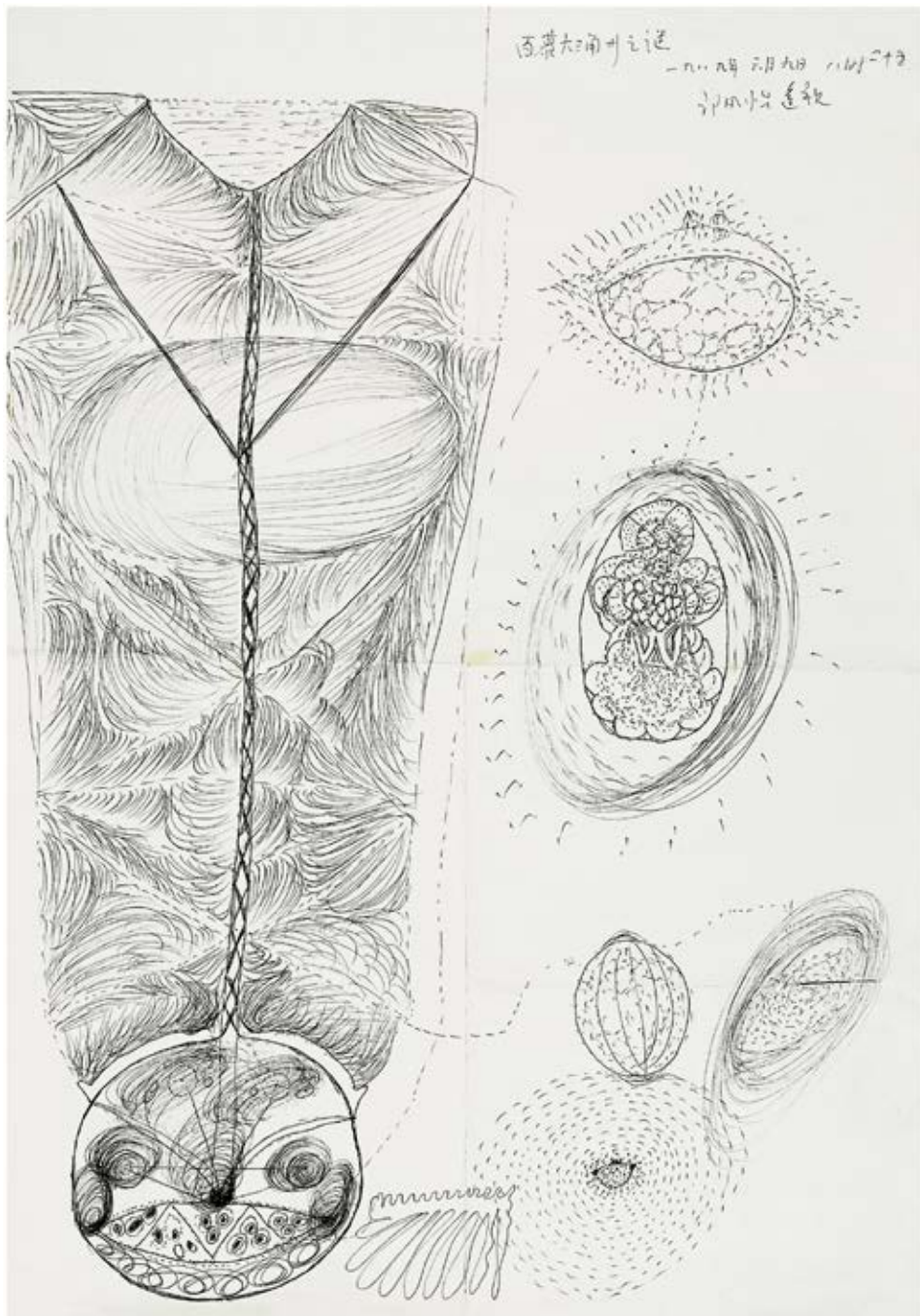
paint it,” she told fellow artist Xu Tan.⁸ Guo travelled with her mind to the underground world, drawing ancient sites and monuments from Xi’an. In an early series of drawings in her journal, she drew the underground archeological site in Lintong County, outside Xi’an, where in 1974 local farmers found the famous Terracotta Army, a collection of sculptures depicting the first emperor of a unified China, Qin Shi Huang, that were buried with him in 210-209 BCE to offer protection in the afterlife. Drawing places and subjects that will likely never be seen, such as dynastic gravesites, gods, and fictional characters from Chinese folk tales, perhaps gave Guo freedom to draw them however she wanted, without regard for achieving an exact likeness. But more importantly, drawing allowed her to understand, and to see, what she didn’t know.

The wide range of information that became available, through the news media and especially through television, during China’s “opening to the West” throughout the 1970s and ’80s visually and intellectually stimulated Guo.⁹ Within a few months in 1989, she went from drawing human organs, dynastic gravesites, and subjects related to traditional Chinese systems of thought, to making drawings of international and national monuments physically inaccessible to her, such as the Egyptian pyramids of Giza, the Eiffel Tower, and the Statue of Liberty. “I analyze these things with energy from a distance,” she said.¹⁰ As Guo’s curiosity about things and places removed from her own experience increased, so did her drawing practice. Later in 1989, she abandoned her journal and made her first stand-alone work, a black ballpoint-pen drawing titled *Mystery of the Bermuda Triangle* [PL. 14]. The Bermuda Triangle, in which a number of airplanes and ships were said to have disappeared without a trace, drew significant attention in the international news media during the 1980s, and especially in China, and Guo had taken notice. She was no longer solely focused on recording her subjective experiences through meditation, and turned outward to embrace new subject matter and explore new modes of artistic expression like the other contemporary Chinese artists of her generation. By the end of 1989 she had amassed

⁸ Guo Fengyi, interview by Xu Tan, January 27, 2007, unpublished transcript prepared in conjunction with the exhibition *China Welcomes You...Desires, Struggles, New Identities* at Kunsthaus Graz, Austria, in 2007.

⁹ Wu and Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 35.

¹⁰ Guo Fengyi, personal journal entry, translated by Lu Jie, April 2, 2019, Long March Space, Beijing.



PL. 14
Mystery of the Bermuda Triangle, 1989

more than seventy drawings that were made on the backs of old calendars and on rice-paper scrolls measuring up to six-meters long.

III

Guo continued making drawings in relative isolation until 2002, when Beijing-based curator Lu Jie saw her drawings for the first time in a group exhibition curated by students at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts. Immediately struck by the quality and the distinctiveness of Guo's work, amidst what he remembers as an otherwise "extremely parochial and conservative art scene in Xi'an," Lu Jie invited Guo to join his Long March Project, an ambitious, year-long series of curatorial events with local villagers and artists, critics, and curators occurring along the historical route of Mao Zedong's Long March (1934-35).¹¹ Guo joined the Long March Project at its fifth site in Lijiang, Yunnan Province, in Southwest China, where she met American feminist artist Judy Chicago and made the piece *Lugu Lake on June 5th* (2002), which was later included in the Long March Project's sixth site at Lugu Lake [PL. 15]. Guo herself wasn't present at the show, as she left Lijiang after perceiving a "disharmonized energy field" while practicing qigong.¹²

The definitive internationalization of Guo's work began in 2010 with her work's inclusion in *10,000 Lives: The 8th Gwangju Biennale* in South Korea, immediately following a period in the international contemporary art discourse during which, "Chinese contemporary art was on its way to official acceptance, both inside China and abroad, in a trajectory of legitimization (*hefahua*) that had begun with the Shanghai Biennale in 2000...and culminated in the first presentation of an official Chinese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005."¹³ Subsequently, in 2013, Guo's work was included in the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh; the group exhibition *The Alternative Guide to the Universe* at the Hayward Gallery in London; and, finally, in the most legitimizing international group show of all, the 55th Venice Biennale. Even in these instances of renowned global contemporary art exhibitions, Guo's artwork was firmly contextualized as self-taught art. As a result, significant

¹¹ Lu Jie, in conversation with the author, April 2, 2019, at Long March Space, Beijing.

¹² Long March Space, unpublished research document, 2019.

¹³ Philip Tinari, "Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of 'Chinese Contemporary Art,'" in Alexandra Munroe, et al., *Art and China after 1989*, 64.



PL. 15
Lugu Lake on June 5th, 2002



PL. 16
Huangdi Mausoleum, 1996

opportunities to frame her as a contemporary Chinese artist were missed, and her absence from international contemporary art discourse reinforced. For example, the Hayward Gallery exhibition surveyed work of artists identified as “mavericks, visionaries, and outsiders,” who produced their work “outside of established institutions and disciplines.” That Guo’s work is not precisely contemporary art is emphasized by the exhibition’s catalog, which describes Guo as an artist whose “use of diagram-like renderings conjures a background of ongoing research and theory as well as the practical application of new ideas...with the same aesthetic intrigue and playfulness that characterize all compelling visual art.”¹⁴ For the curators, Guo’s work shared aesthetic qualities with “all compelling visual art,” but was clearly something else.

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These instances of international recognition notwithstanding, Guo’s place in contemporary Chinese art remains unclear, with a surprising lack of attention paid to her work in China. She is dismissed by some who believe her interest and background in traditional spiritual healing practices is at odds with her legitimacy as an artist. Other narratives written by Chinese critics—even positive ones—share a skepticism of her artwork’s relevance to contemporary Chinese art. The critic Chang Tsong-zung advocated for Guo, but with the perhaps limited perspective that her contribution to the modern world was not located within the progressive character of her images, but in a nostalgia for lost values and traditions. To date, the project to introduce her work into the contemporary Chinese art discourse has not identified the subversive character of Guo’s images vis-à-vis their resistance to a single interpretation (i.e., as contemporary). Instead, it indicates the merit of Guo’s drawings only inasmuch as they are able to preserve an eroded culture and history. As Chang wrote: “An alternative such as Guo, who has preserved cultural memories hidden in the depth of Chinese society, represents an especially valuable resource for the modern world, and deserves to be brought forward in the context of new cultural research.”¹⁵ In another text, Peng De, a professor at Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts, failed entirely to consider the excellence of Guo’s work and questioned her legitimacy as an artist (let alone a contemporary artist) when her artwork was included in major

14 Ralph Rugoff, “The Universe That Fell to Earth,” in Ralph Rugoff and Roger Cardinal, *The Alternative Guide to the Universe* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2013), 7. Italics added for emphasis.

15 Chang Tsong-zung, “Another Universe,” 8.

international art exhibitions in the West.¹⁶ He argued that [Lu Jie’s] tactic for introducing Guo to the international contemporary art discourse was “to bypass the stylized and academicized Chinese art world,” and that this curatorial strategy should be read as a wake-up call for contemporary Chinese art, which he defined as art that either borrows from tradition or from the West.¹⁷ Peng De concluded by rejecting Guo’s artwork altogether because he determined it was opaque to a general public; specific to the artist herself; and the result of a personal quest for healing that wasn’t substantiated by traditional Chinese medicine.

Guo herself didn’t fit the criteria for a “contemporary Chinese artist” inasmuch as she was a middle-aged woman without any arts education in a field dominated by men. This issue, and more specifically Peng De’s criticism, can be considered in light of arguments brought forth by Chinese artist, curator, and critic Xu Hong in her 1994 article “Walking out of the Abyss: My Feminist Critique.” In this essay, which is highly critical of the state of contemporary Chinese art, Xu describes it as a “narcissistic abyss of ‘homogenous magnetism,’” where female artists have been continually underrepresented.¹⁸ She argues that because all institutional criteria are in accordance with rules set by gender, “women’s own language and patterns of thought have involuntarily conformed to [the] standards [of men].” But as Xu proclaims, if they hope to emerge from the “abyss” they have created for themselves, China’s male artists and critics must strive alongside women because “[modern] art, without sober and self-knowledgeable feminist art, can only be a half-baked modern art.” It is clear that those Chinese critics who attempted to read and to interpret Guo’s work were likely unequipped to understand her highly personal “language and patterns of thought.” Rather than admitting their inability to do so, or understanding that this very condition of her artwork attests to its contemporaneity, they used those very same arguments to dismiss her voice.

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16 Peng De, “The Guo Fengyi Phenomenon,” July 9, 2013, <http://collection.sina.com.cn/plfx/20130709/0956119460.shtml>. In an e-mail exchange, former Long March Space curator Xin Zhou brought this essay to my attention, translating and interpreting it for me as an example of Chinese criticism that questioned Guo Fengyi’s legitimacy as an artist.

17 Peng, “The Guo Fengyi Phenomenon.” Quotation translated from the original Chinese by Aimee Lin, Long March Space.

18 All quotations in this paragraph from Xu Hong, “Walking out of the Abyss: My Feminist Critique” (1994), in Wu and Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 194.

The fact that she was a living artist at that time should suffice to grant Guo a place within contemporary Chinese art and global contemporary art. Beyond that, her language—mysterious, obscure, and opaque—fits well within the prerogative of semantic indetermination that is inherent to global contemporary art. The dramatic shift that contemporary Chinese art underwent in the late 1980s is not only signaled by the post-1989 awakening of educated artists who swiftly but surely integrated with Western culture, but by the creation of a discursive apparatus—which is by no means limited to China—that seems to have reduced the definition of contemporary art to a useful, communicable, and self-regulating entity; in other words, an art system that correlates the concept of “art” to “work.” If Guo’s drawings don’t necessarily read as contemporary art, it is not because she isn’t a contemporary artist, but because of the professionalization of the Chinese art field and its impact on contemporary Chinese art—a global condition that reduces artistic production to protocols mediated by research and communicability methodologies.¹⁹ In order to be deemed valuable in certain international art world precincts, art might require a statement of intention or purpose

¹⁹ Claudio Iglesias, “Una lectura de Tao del Arte,” in *Falsa Conciencia* (Santiago de Chile: Metales Pesados, 2014), 74. The relationship between art and creative work and the professionalization of the field has been widely explored in scholarship from the Global North, however I owe this take on the subject to Argentine critic Claudio Iglesias. In his reading of the foreword to the exhibition catalog *El Tao del Arte* [The Tao of art] by artist and curator Jorge Gumier Maier (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural Recoleta, 1997), Iglesias argues against previous interpretations that misread Gumier Maier’s curatorial program, as stated in the foreword, as one concerned with the conundrum of politically motivated artists versus uncommitted or “frivolous” ones. Iglesias posits that it was rather concerned with what he refers to as the “discursive situation of contemporary art”—a shift that, similar to the case of China explored in this essay, took place in the Argentine art world in the late 1980s during the professionalization of the field—and “the way in which contemporary art can be placed institutionally through a network of discourses capable of re-signifying art’s relationship with society and art’s self-perception.” Gumier Maier, instead, advocated for an arts program that rejected internationalism and professionalism, and that recuperated the importance of the notion of uncertainty as an inherent category for any valuable work of art: “Motion in art is escape. Concepts such as ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ are foreign to it because all art is fiction...That art, just as life, does not lead anywhere, is the reason for our freedom, the possibility of our salvation...with the phosphorescence of rapture, it empties us of understanding...and the logic of thought is suspended. Our line of reasoning becomes overwhelmed.” Gumier Maier, *El Tao del Art*, quoted in *Documents of 20th-century Latin American and Latino Art* Digital Archive (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), icaadocs.mfah.org.

by the makers who identify themselves as “professional artists” as well as a CV endowed with evidence of approval from legitimizing institutions (art schools, museums and galleries, publications). Guo’s artwork, on the contrary, is of a completely different order. Guo’s images are unique because of their autonomy, their low degree of precise communicability, and their manifestation of the concept of biopolitics—a politics of the body, realized in the personal act of self-healing, endurance, and resilience. Guo’s drawings express the mysteriousness and the elusiveness of meaning, or purpose, that might well be one of the characteristics inherent in art in its truest sense. The bright, elusive, persistent, ungovernable images of Guo Fengyi remind me of what Argentine artist, critic, and curator Jorge Gumier Maier once said: “Art... often appears where it isn’t called upon.”²⁰

²⁰ Jorge Gumier Maier, “El porvenir del arte,” *Vox Virtual*, no. 1, July 2001, http://www.proyectolux.com.ar/virtual_1.htm. My translation from the original Spanish.



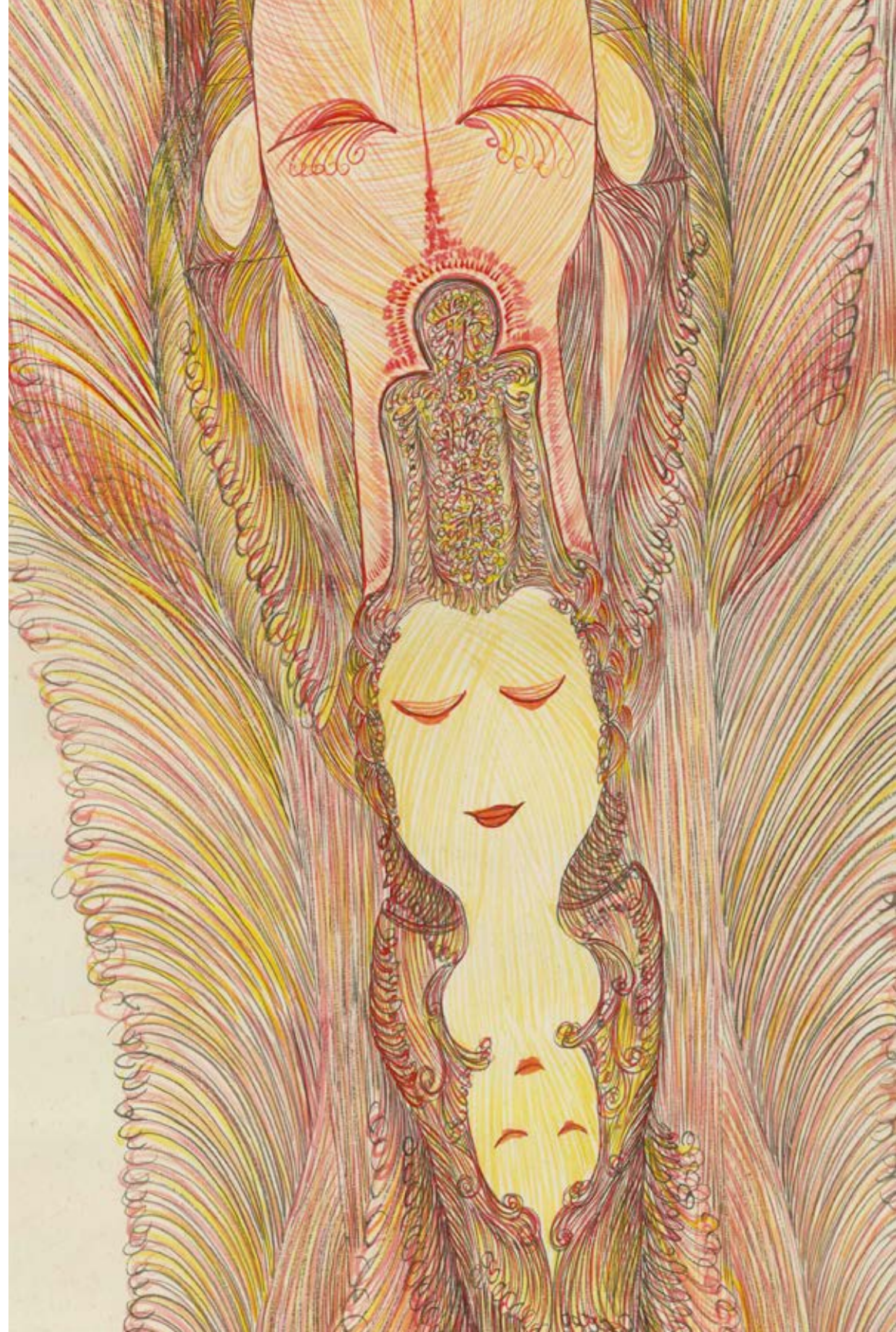
PL. 17
Caishen (God of Wealth), 2001

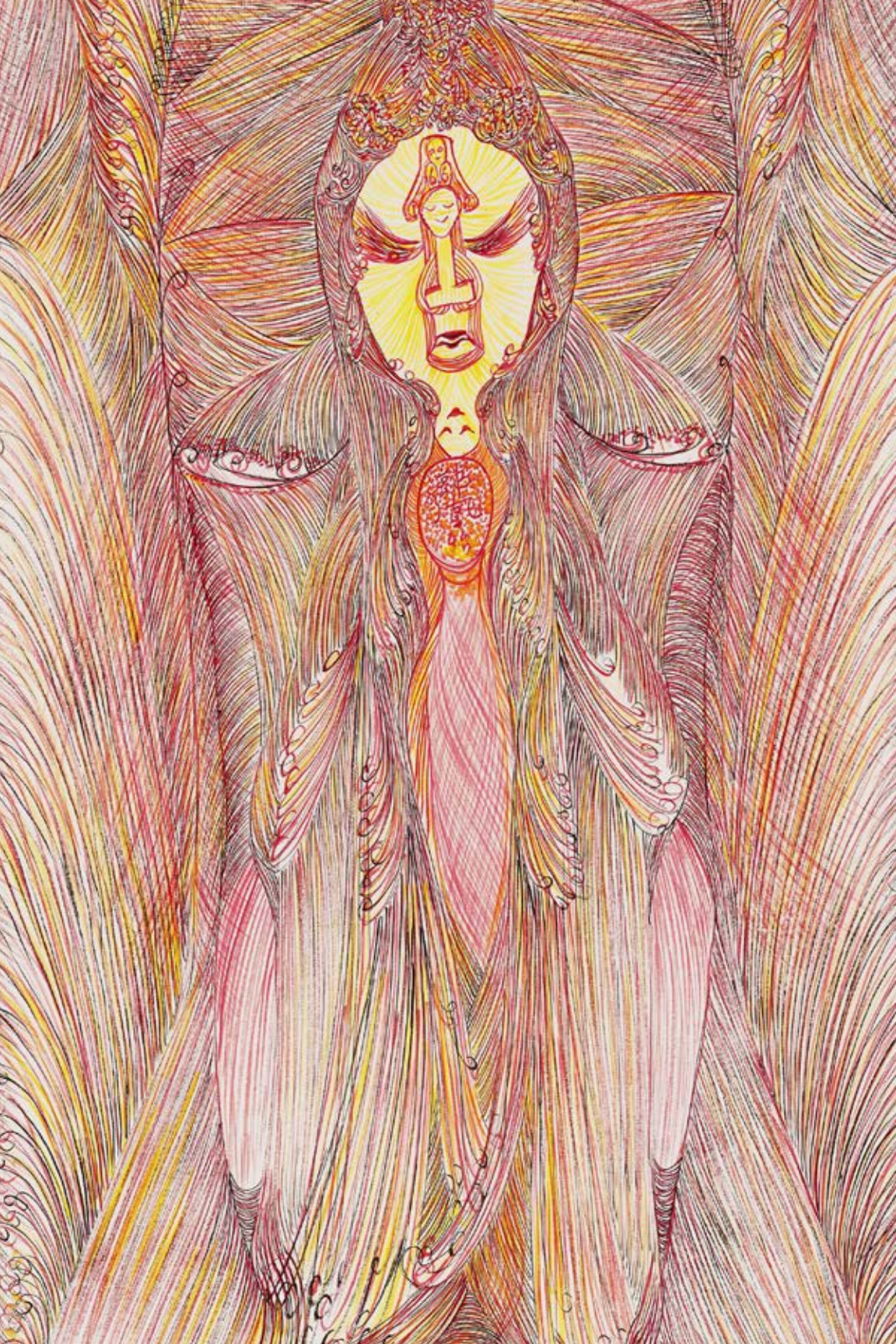


PL. 18
The Sixth Anniversary of Guo Fengyi's Qigong Practice, 1995



PL. 19
Who is Guo Fengyi, 1993





PL. 20
How to Do It, 1994

Guo Fengyi and the Embodied Cosmos

Kathleen M. Ryor

46 Guo Fengyi's artistic career has always been understood as a part of her quest for physical healing and spiritual cultivation. Guo herself said that after taking up the practice of qigong to alleviate her severe rheumatoid arthritis, she began having visions that she felt compelled to give form through drawing. She explained that:

*Before I draw, I do not know what it will become. It is only after I finish drawing that I know. Looking at the work afterwards, I am able to see several other things. I draw because I do not know. I draw to know.*¹

While this context might suggest that her work is one part art therapy and one part mystical performance, the relationship between the human body and the cosmos and the role that artistic practice plays in manifesting profound concepts about the workings of the universe have a very long tradition in China. Because Guo would begin a new work by first writing some type of text, written language is her origin point (“Whatever I want to draw, I first write it in the middle of the paper.”²). A survey of the titles of individual drawings, which she inscribed on each work, indicates Guo was not only an advanced qigong practitioner, but delved into a deep and thorough study of various Daoist texts and practices that aim at abolishing the boundaries between the physical body and the cosmos.

In China, the fundamental concept of the human body as a replica of the macrocosm is shared by medical and religious

1 Guo Fengyi, quoted in Lu Jie, “Who is Guo Fengyi?,” in Lu Jie, ed., *Who is Guo Fengyi* (Beijing: 25000 Cultural Transmission Center and Long March Foundation, 2005), 93.

2 Guo, quoted in Lu, “Who is Guo Fengyi?,” 93.

cultures.³ Guo's drawings engage not only the origins and manifestations of early cosmological theory, but are also evidence of its continued relevance to artmaking practices. From the beginning, visual symbols, images based on nature, graphic mark marking, and the written script have been linked with intellectual systems that seek to reveal the workings of the universe. According to tradition, Chinese civilization emerged when signs on the back of the divine tortoise from the Luo River and drawings on the body of the celestial dragon of the Yellow River were first revealed to the sage kings of antiquity [FIG. 1]. Later, Cang Jie, minister to the

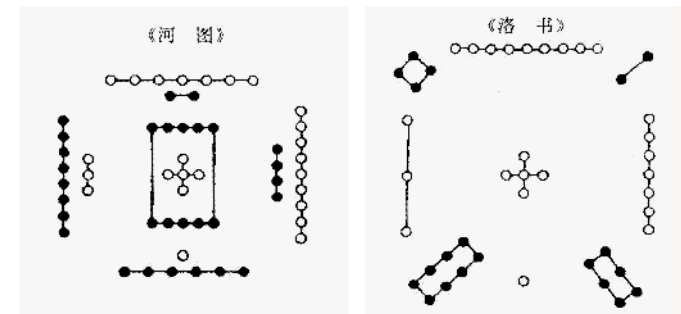


FIG. 1
Yellow River Map diagram (left) and Luo River Writing diagram (right)

legendary Yellow Emperor, was said to have invented a system for written script inspired by patterns in nature, such as the footprints of birds and constellations of stars. In Guo's *Ancient River* (1993), thin, multicolored lines are rendered in parallel and form a huge, elongated rectangle in which faces and organic shapes emerge. Embedded within this dense composition of fine brushstrokes are circles with the Chinese characters for fire and the phrase “ancient [Yellow] River map” (*gu he tu* 古河图) inscribed in the exact center of the drawing. Guo's use of this phrase is a direct reference to this most ancient visualization of the Chinese cosmos.⁴ The two diagrams of the Yellow River Map and Luo River Writing are also connected numerologically with the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经), the classic of divination that describes the eight trigrams (*bagua* 八卦), which

3 Patrice Fava, “The Body of Laozi and the Course of a Daoist Journey through the Heavens,” in Vivienne Lo, Penelope Barrett, David Dear, Lu Di, Lois Reynolds, and Dolly Yang, eds., *Imagining Chinese Medicine* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 358.

4 The Yellow River Map is referenced in texts as early as the seventh century BCE, and along with the Luo River Writing, formed the basis for all later cosmological theories.

represent the fundamental principles of reality, and the sixty-four permutations of the trigrams, known as hexagrams, which are figures of six stacked broken or unbroken horizontal lines.⁵ The trigrams are related to two other cosmology theories, Yin/Yang Theory and Five Phase (*wuxing* 五行) Theory, and served to explain the correlation of the hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* with the universe and human life. The eight trigrams, the number systems of the Yellow River Map and the Luo River Writing, as well as Yin-Yang/ Five Phase Theory correlations, figure into Chinese traditions of healing that remain vital to this day.⁶ A comparison of Guo's *Ancient River* [PL. 21] with a twelfth-century illustration of the relationship between the original (and ultimate) unity of the cosmos (*taiji* 太極), its division into two (*yin/yang* 陰陽), and its intersection with the five phases (*wuxing* 五行) shows striking similarities in its compositional schema [FIG. 2].

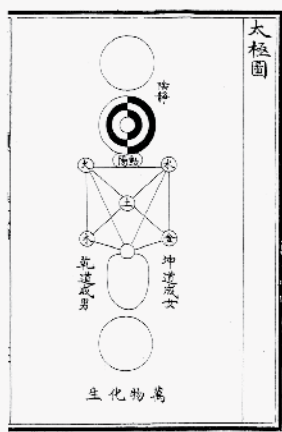


FIG. 2
Zhu Zhen (1072–1138), *Memorial on a Yijing Commentary Based on the Han [School] – trigram illustrations (Han shang yi zhuan – ba tu)*

Throughout her oeuvre, Guo invokes aspects of the *Book of Changes*. In *Diagram of the Primordial Positioning of the 64 Hexagrams* (1990), she put the number “1” in a circle in the center of the

- 5 For translations of the *Book of Changes*, see Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching: or Book of Changes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) and Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 6 Richard J. Smith, *The I Ching: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 220.



PL. 21
Ancient River, 1993





PL. 22
Diagram of the Primordial Positioning of the 64 Hexagrams, 1990

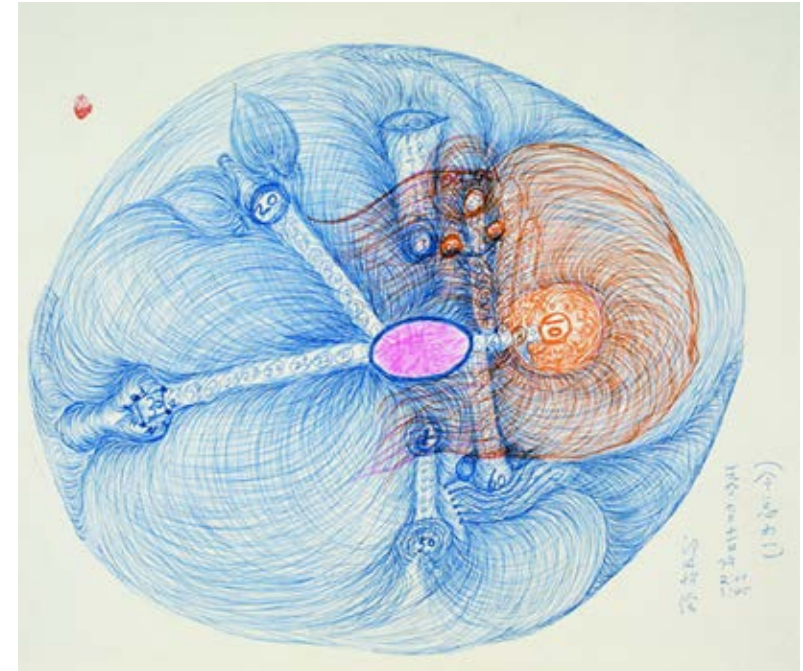
composition surrounded by arrowheads pointing towards numbers contained in the circle [PL. 22]. Connecting outward from the center, odd numbers (which represent *yang*) are written on the left and even numbers (which represent *yin*) on the right. The meaning of these numbers remains unclear, just as there is no obvious visual reference to the hexagrams themselves. It is significant that Guo inscribed the picture with a statement that she executed the drawing while practicing qigong and that she also indicated the precise time and date of her performance. She inscribed another drawing related to the hexagrams, *Diagram of God Coming Forth from the Trigram Zhen (Thunder)* (1990), in a similar manner. The title is from the first sentence in the chapter for this trigram in the *Book of Changes*. It explains that thunder represents arousing and shaking, and is a trigger for change. Again, there is no overt visual reference to the symbol for thunder, but the overall structure of the composition is clear and bilaterally symmetrical like the trigrams themselves. The pink internal structure emerges as a figure-like form from the outer cage of blue lines, perhaps suggesting a god coming forth from its abstract environment. Guo's inscription says that she drew the work from 2:42-3:41pm on April 12, 1990; since the trigrams have correlations with various aspects of the natural world and thunder is temporally associated with the third lunar month of spring when the positive *yang* energy is gaining strength, she may be aligning the image produced with the specific temporal moment of its production (the third lunar month is April in the solar calendar).

We have already seen that numbers are ubiquitous in Guo's drawings. In *Diagram of the Complete Numerology in Shao Yong's The August and Supreme Way of Governing the World* (1990), Guo refers to a seminal text on cosmology by the Song dynasty philosopher Shao Yong (1011-1077). Shao used numerology to construct a metaphysical system, and his numerology was largely based on his study of the *Book of Changes*.⁷ In *The August and Supreme Way of Governing the World*, the philosopher stressed that there are supreme principles governing the universe, and that these principles can be determined in term of numbers. In particular, Shao believed in a natural tendency for events and things to clump together, especially in groups of two and four, with four being the most important number by which he classified all phenomenal things. His cosmology was

7 Hsu Kuang-tai, "Four Elements as Ti and Five Phases as Yong: The Historical Development from Shao Yong's *Huangji jingshi* to Matteo Ricci's *Qiankun tiyi*," *East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine*, no. 27 (2007): 18.

also influenced by the Buddhist concept that every cycle went through four ever-recurring sequences of *kalpas*: formation, existence, destruction, and non-existence.⁸ In *Diagram of the Complete Numerology...*, Guo created a large cocoon shape of dense masses of blue lines with symmetrical appendages that read as a two-legged figure. The interior of the cocoon suggests different levels of tension through the density and lightness of the lines. The relatively lighter upper part forms a big circle that contains a smaller circle with the character *jing* (精) written in pink, which contrasts with the surrounding blue. *Jing* means essence and is a key concept in Chinese medicine. It is the fundamental material of living organisms, and its essence can be transformed into *qi* (energy), helping to maintain life activity.⁹ The line density gradually increases downward and forms an oval inside the cocoon. A red human-shaped figure filled with numbers that are contained in circles and arranged in order inhabits this womb-like cocoon. The entire drawing integrates text, numbers, abstract pattern, and images into a biomorphic whole.

A similar combination of pinkish-red and blue areas filled with a human-like form and numbers can be seen in *Four Diagrams of the Divination Procedures in Zhu Xi's The Basics of I Ching* (1990) [PL. 23]. For the great Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes* was critical to his thought. Unlike earlier commentators on the *Book of Changes*, Zhu emphasized the “original” version of the text thought to date to the Western Zhou period (1045-771 BCE) and did not see the text as a progressive evolution from graphic representation to moral-metaphysical philosophy. Instead, Zhu viewed the sixty-four hexagrams as the foundation of the *Book of Changes* because they are visual representations of the constant changes in the natural and human worlds. By privileging the hexagrams over the later Confucian commentaries, he underscored the importance of divination as a method of self-cultivation.¹⁰ In *The Basics of the Book of Changes*, Zhu provided specialized exposition of the method of yarrow stalk divination, accompanied by additional diagram analysis. In the middle of Guo's drawing, the Chinese character for yarrow stalk (*she* 爻) emerges between and is structured by the dense pink lines,



PL. 23
Four Diagrams of the Divination Procedures in Zhu Xi's *The Basics of I Ching*, 1990

8 Hsu, “Four Elements as Ti and Five Phases as Yong,” 19-20.

9 Liu Yanchi, *The Essential Book of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Vol. I - Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 69.

10 Geoffrey Redmond and Tze-ki Hon, *Teaching the I Ching (Book of Changes)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 178-79.

surrounded by a closed blue circle at the center of the ellipse. The bands and circles filled with numbers appear as both a stick-figure form and as stalks of yarrow thrown in the divination process.

Yin-Yang Theory states that the universe created itself out of a primary chaos of energy, organized into the cycles of *yin* and *yang*, which then formed into the myriad phenomena of the universe. The energy out of which the universe created itself is called *qi* (氣). *Yin* and *yang* can be thought of as complementary, rather than opposing, forces that interact to form a dynamic system in which the whole is greater than the assembled parts. Closely related to this way of understanding the universe is Five Phase Theory, a fivefold conceptual scheme that is used to explain a wide variety of phenomena, from cosmic cycles to the interactions between internal organs of the human body, to the properties of food and medicinal drugs. Five Phase Theory articulates a correlative cosmology that describes a process of change within a system and between the system and its environment.¹¹ All schools of traditional Chinese medicine are based on these theories and gave rise to other techniques for both physical and spiritual cultivation. Building on the Yin-Yang and Five Phase Theories, texts such as *The Yellow Emperor's Classic (Huangdi Neijing)* (c. 100 BCE) systematically interpreted the physiology and pathology of the internal organs and the channels of the body. It introduced the concept of using acupuncture to manipulate the flow of life energy (*qi*) in a network of meridians (channels) in the body.¹² The network concept was made up of acupoints, such as a line down the arms, where acupoints that tapped into a meridian were located. Alongside such texts dealing with specific diagnoses and treatments, there also evolved a body of Daoist literature that focused on breathing exercises aimed at cultivating physical health and ultimately the attainment of immortality. This is the context out of which qigong developed as a set of breathing and meditation exercises. An array of physical, mental, and spiritual practices used to prolong life and create an immortal spiritual body came to be known as Inner Alchemy (*Neidan* 内丹). In Inner Alchemy, the human body becomes a cauldron in which essence (*jing*), energy/breath (*qi*), and spirit (*shen* 神) are cultivated in order to ultimately return to the primordial unity of the *Dao* (道).¹³

11 Liu, *The Essential Book of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, 48-51.

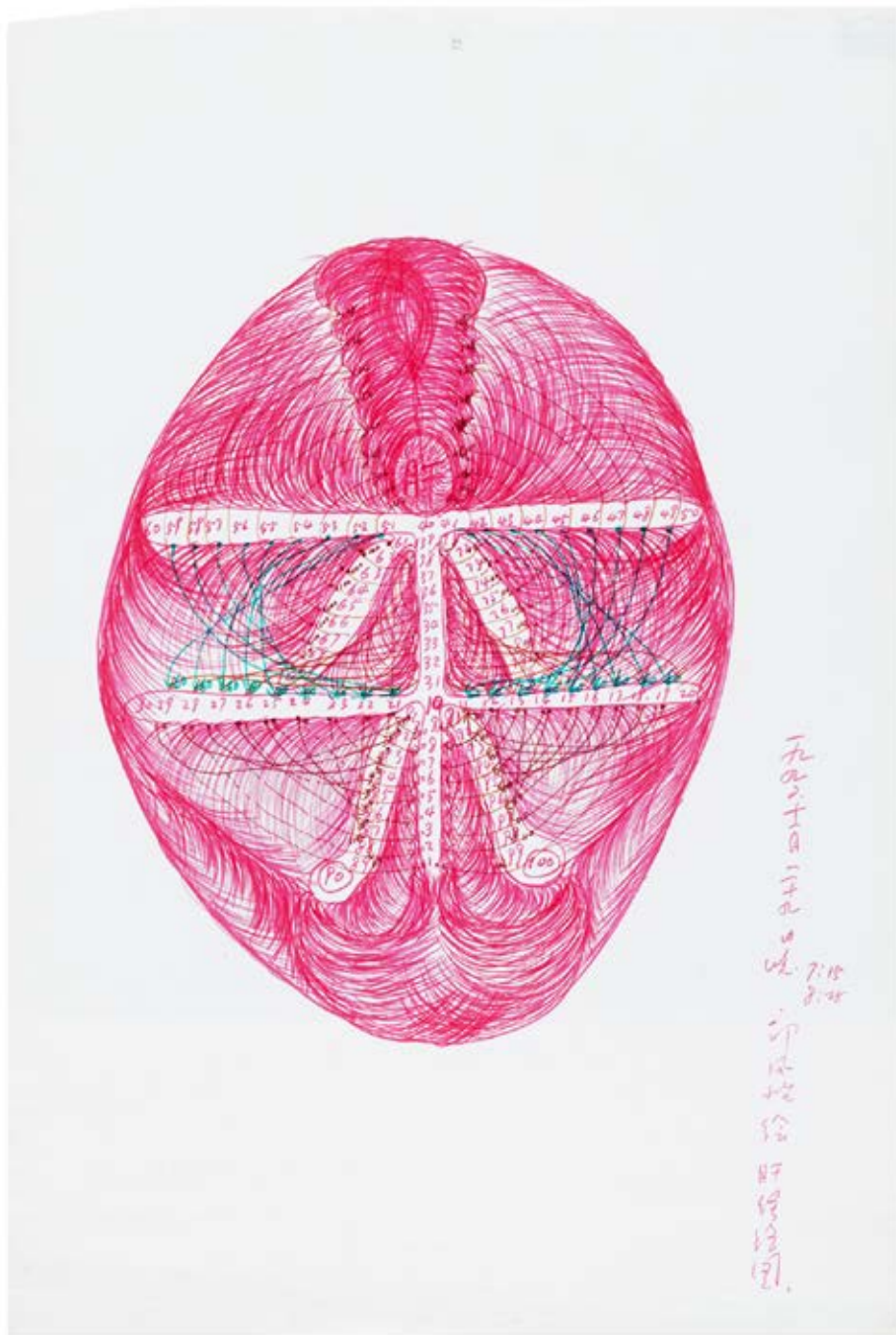
12 Liu, 2.

13 The *Dao* has many meanings but in cosmology theory refers to the fundamental principle that governs the workings of the universe.

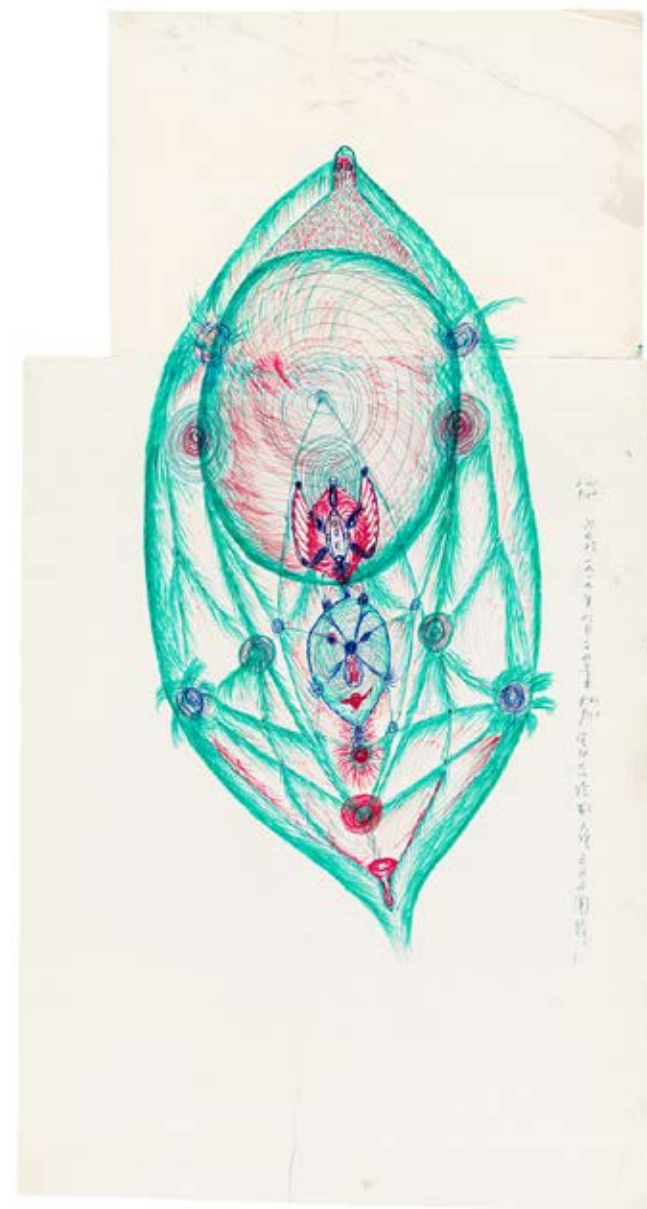
Both of these types of therapeutic practices were implemented by Guo and are referenced in numerous works. *Xuanguan Acupoint* (1989), *Diagram of Tianmu Acupoint* (1989), and *The Diagram of the Liver Meridian* (1990) identify places within the channel system of acupuncture, but it is only *The Diagram of the Liver Meridian* [PL. 24] that is directly related to acupuncture. The liver meridian is one of the twelve meridians within human body in the theory of traditional Chinese medicine, and has fourteen acupuncture points dispersed on it. Guo incorporated her own numerology once again, as the horizontal, the vertical, and the oblique bands extending out from the center form two identical patterns that are interconnected with each other, with numbers from 1 to 100 listed within. In *Xuanguan Acupoint* and *Diagram of Tianmu Acupoint*, the connection between physical and spiritual discipline is made [PL. 25]. According to Daoist Inner Alchemy, *xuanguan* is believed to be the first spot that *qi* passes when it goes through the whole body. Therefore, the *xuanguan* acupoint is not an actual human acupoint, but a key to start real practice. The *tianmu* acupoint is located at the midpoint of one's eyebrow line and literally means "eye of Heaven." Qigong practitioners believe that qigong exercises may activate the *tianmu* acupoint, enabling them to see unusual things that ordinary people cannot. Both of these drawings are comprised of overlapping ovoid forms filled with concentric lines that suggest a vortex into another realm. In *Fetus* (1989), the connections with Inner Alchemy practices are also apparent [PL. 26]. Early Daoist texts describe the human being as host to a pantheon of gods, the innermost of which is called the Red Child, who resides in the stomach. It is a transformation of the breath of the *Dao* and represents one's own true self. This principle is later conceptualized as an embryo that the adept generates and nourishes by means of their practices. In order to nourish this and the other bodily gods, practitioners are instructed to visualize and circulate a "yellow essence" and a "red breath" within their bodies.¹⁴ Guo created a womb-like ellipse of mostly blue-purple ink that contains at its core a red ellipse with the fetus figure. The schematization of the overall image resonates with illustrations for the visualization and nourishment of the Red Child/Embryo in Daoist manuals such as the *Wisdom Life Classic* [FIG. 3].

Guo's practice of qigong involved not only a sequence of bodily exercises, but also required precise timing. Because there is a

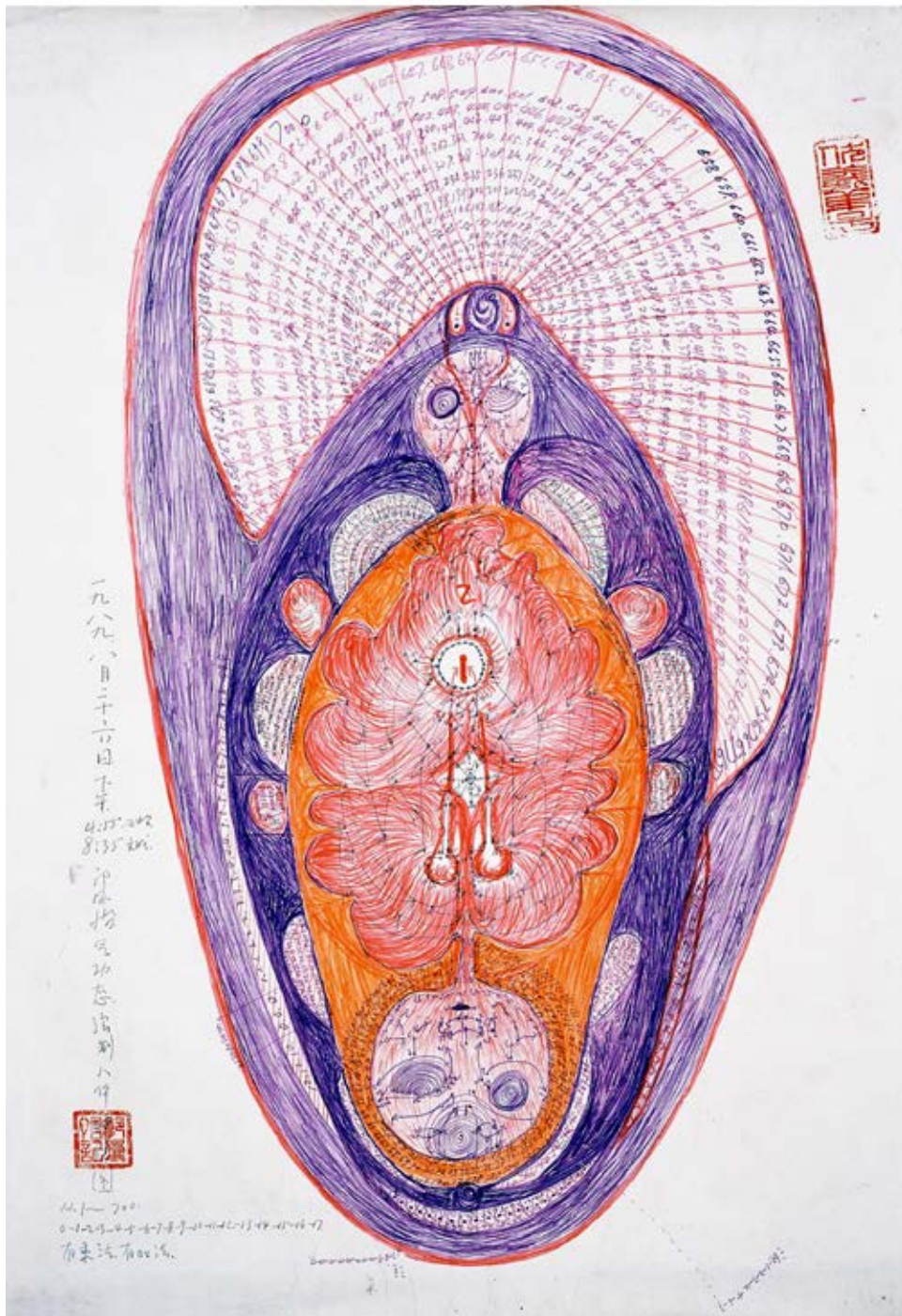
14 Fabrizio Pregadio, *The Way of the Golden Elixir: An Introduction to Taoist Alchemy* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2019), 14-16.



PL. 24
The Diagram of the Liver Meridian, 1990



PL. 25
Diagram of Tianmu Acupoint, 1989



PL. 26
Fetus, 1989



FIG. 3
Liu Huayang (1736–unknown), *Diagram of the Daoist Embryo*, from the *Wisdom Life Classic* (*Huiming jing*)

system of correspondence between the hours of the day and the four directions and the center, the absorption of the *qi* of the five viscera should be performed at certain times of day. There is even a method for regulating the daily breathing exercises according to the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Book of Changes*.¹⁵ The daily preparatory exercises of qigong constitute an entrance into the cosmic rhythm, a way of participating in the spontaneous evolution of nature. The ordering of the inner world demands that one submits to the rules of time, which entails a “cosmologization” of the individual.¹⁶ It is therefore significant that the majority of Guo’s drawings include not only the specific date, but also the precise time of execution. Her inscriptions are like diary entries, documenting the specific time when the drawing was begun and completed. This is similar to the divination practices outlined in the *Book of Changes*, where the recording of the precise inquiry and the date and time of the divine response were part of the process. After a while, the qigong exercises and discipline become spontaneous, and the integration into the cosmic rhythm is achieved with less and less effort, while the individual’s spiritual strength increases.¹⁷

Some aspects of the complex relationship between qigong breathing exercises, the circulatory system of meridians in

¹⁵ Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 138.

¹⁶ Schipper, 138.

¹⁷ Schipper, 138-39.

acupuncture, and the visualization and nourishment of inner gods (including the primordial embryo) are present in all of Guo's work. However the two drawings from 2006 entitled *Organization Diagram of Human Numeric* and *Organization Method of Human Numeric* [PLS. 27, 28] feature all of these elements explicitly contained within a body. In *Organization Diagram...*, the outline of a standing male is constructed from red and blue arrows that are connected to each other from top to bottom with numbers. The structure of the human body can be clearly seen, as the image has a distinct head, knot-shaped spine, male genitalia, and human limbs. Most of the numbers follow the direction of the arrows and the value of the numbers increase gradually. In the center of the drawing, Guo wrote "organization diagram" and "human numbers." This work bears striking similarities to the *Chart of the Skeleton of Lord Lao* [FIG. 4], which was used for the Daoist ritual of Thunder Magic.

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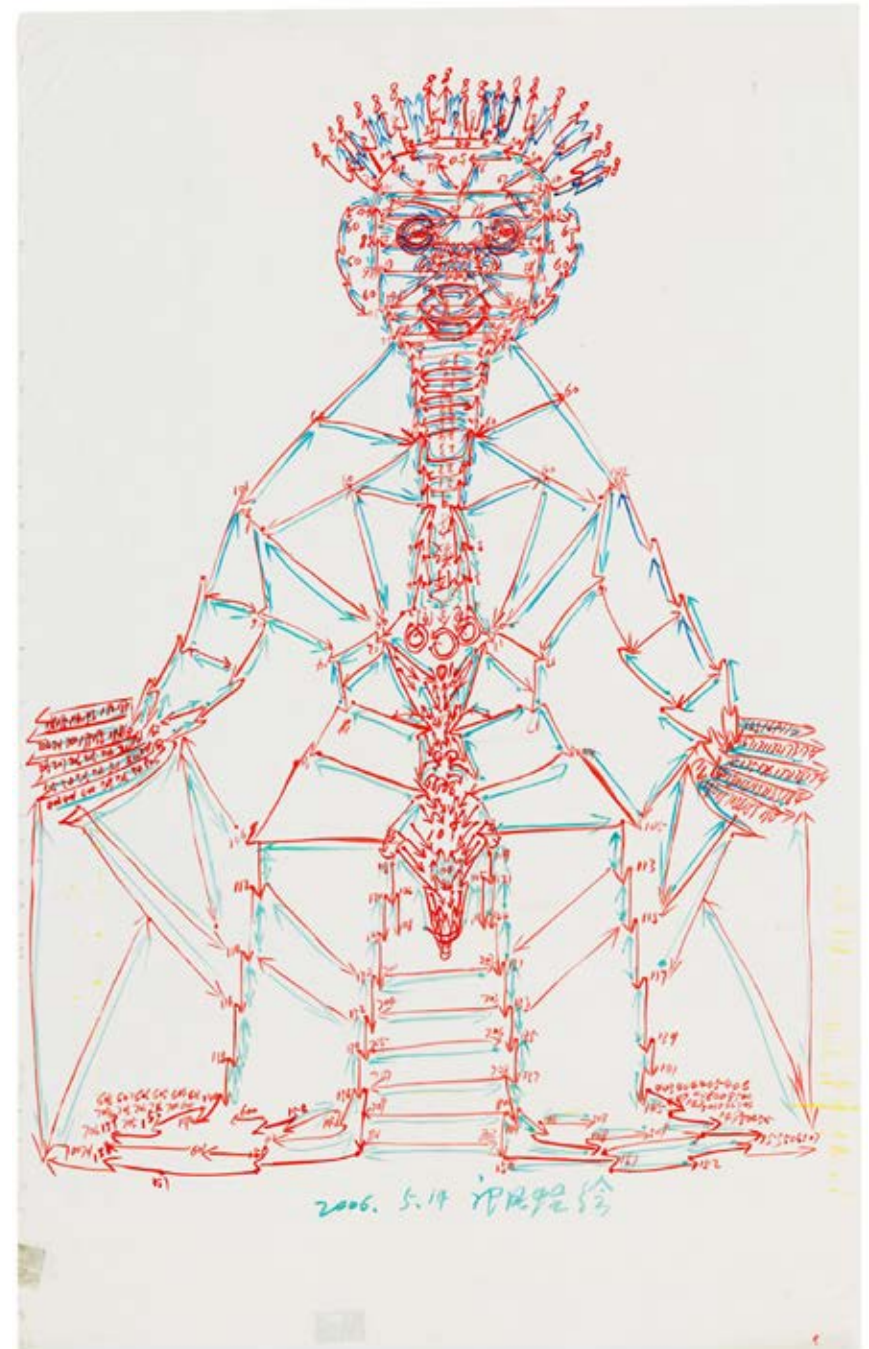


FIG. 4
Chart of the Skeleton of Lord Lao, c. nineteenth century

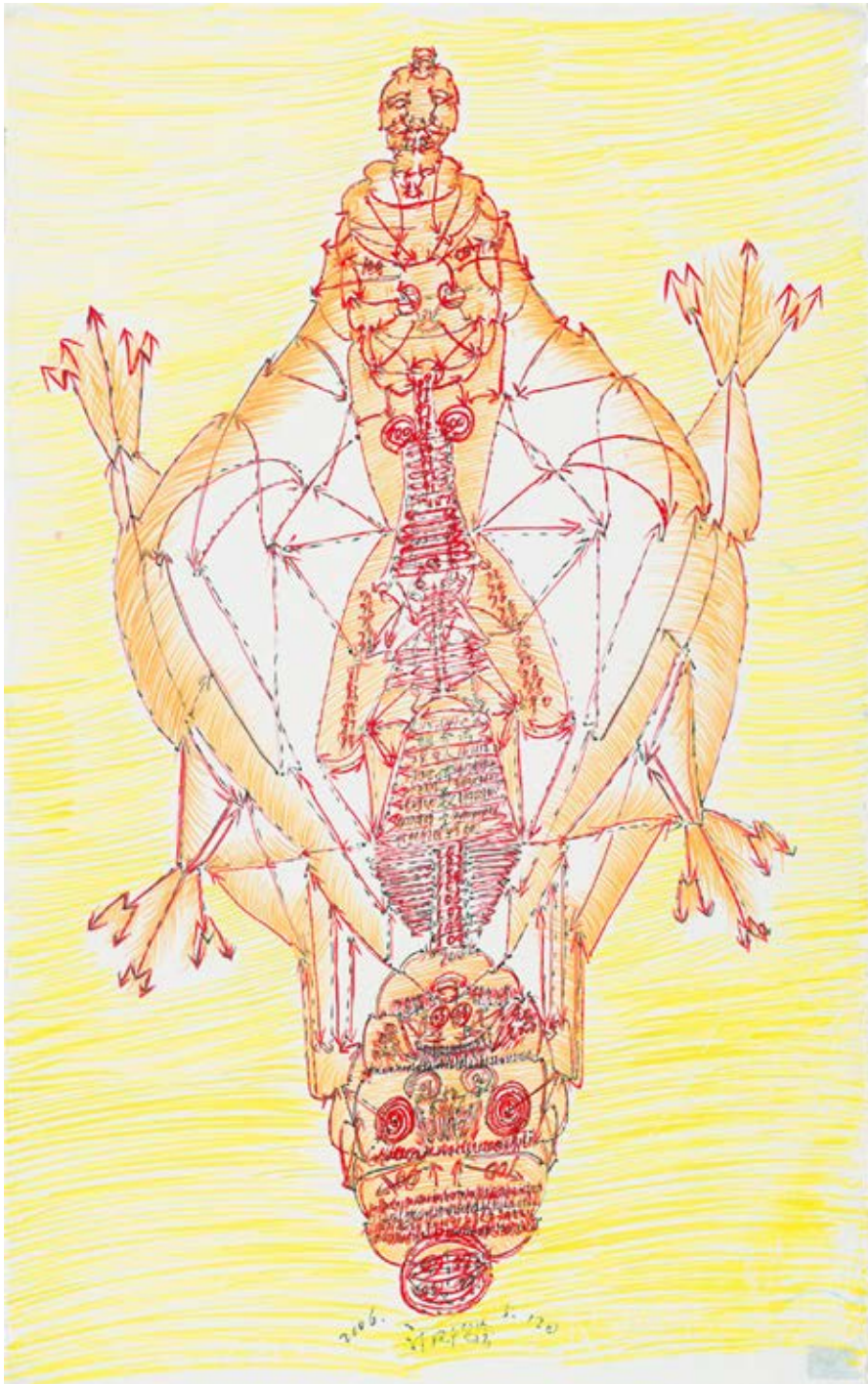
In this liturgy, methods designed to appropriate the powers of thunder for vitalizing the body were integrated into its meditative rituals.¹⁸ The chart is an image of the cosmic body of Laozi,¹⁹ which is a replica of the macrocosm and also recalls cosmic diagrams and lists of deities that constitute a vital part of the alliance between an initiate and the transcendent powers established during

¹⁸ Fava, "The Body of Laozi and the Course of a Daoist Journey," 351.

¹⁹ Laozi is the fifth-century BCE figure who is the putative founder of Daoism and author of the *Daode jing*.



PL. 27
Organization Diagram of Human Numeric, 2006



PL. 28
Organization Method of Human Numeric, 2006

ordination.²⁰ *Organization Method...* is also a symmetrical image composed of arrows, numbers, and line segments. Consecutive numbers and one-way arrows surround the text, and the successive numbers construct a compact and complex center axis. The network of lines in both of these drawings also bears a resemblance to charts of the acupuncture meridians [FIG. 5].



FIG. 5
 Qing dynasty, nineteenth century, *Diagram of Acupuncture Meridians (Ming tang tu)*

Guo was clear that her artistic practice was an integral part of her qigong practice. The monumental *The Sixth Anniversary of Guo Fengyi's Qigong Practice* (1995) presents the gargantuan shape of a figure, with a recognizable head and body at the top and the shape of a fishtail or a webbed foot at the bottom [PL. 18]. Humanoid forms morph into zoomorphic ones, with multiple human faces appearing in different parts of the body as a whole. The warm pastel colors, the curves, and circles form a texture similar to human muscles, and the delicate quality of the lines themselves simultaneously creates a sense of solid and ethereal form. Guo's relationship to Chinese cultural traditions was not one of subject matter or artistic style, rather she sought to make manifest a deeply rooted understanding of the relationship between human beings

20 Fava, "The Body of Laozi and the Course of a Daoist Journey," 354-55.

and the universe in Chinese culture that still informs various disciplines today. According to traditional cosmology, the signifying practice of all graphic conventions originates in both the physical body and the psychological state of the artist as a sign creator.²¹ Guo's works do not employ any type of traditional artistic practice in their imagery and style; her drawings are her unique external manifestations of a deeper and more mystical reality. Formally her work is nothing like traditional ink painting or calligraphy, but her process brings to mind the close connection between embodying the cosmos and the creative act that is widely discussed in traditional art criticism in China. The painting of various masters was often evaluated in terms that talk about the end product not as a painting or a drawing but as the very Dao itself.²² The words used by the poet Bai Juyi (772-846) to describe the work of the artist Chang Tun-chien—Bai's contemporary—could be aptly applied to the oeuvre of Guo Fengyi:

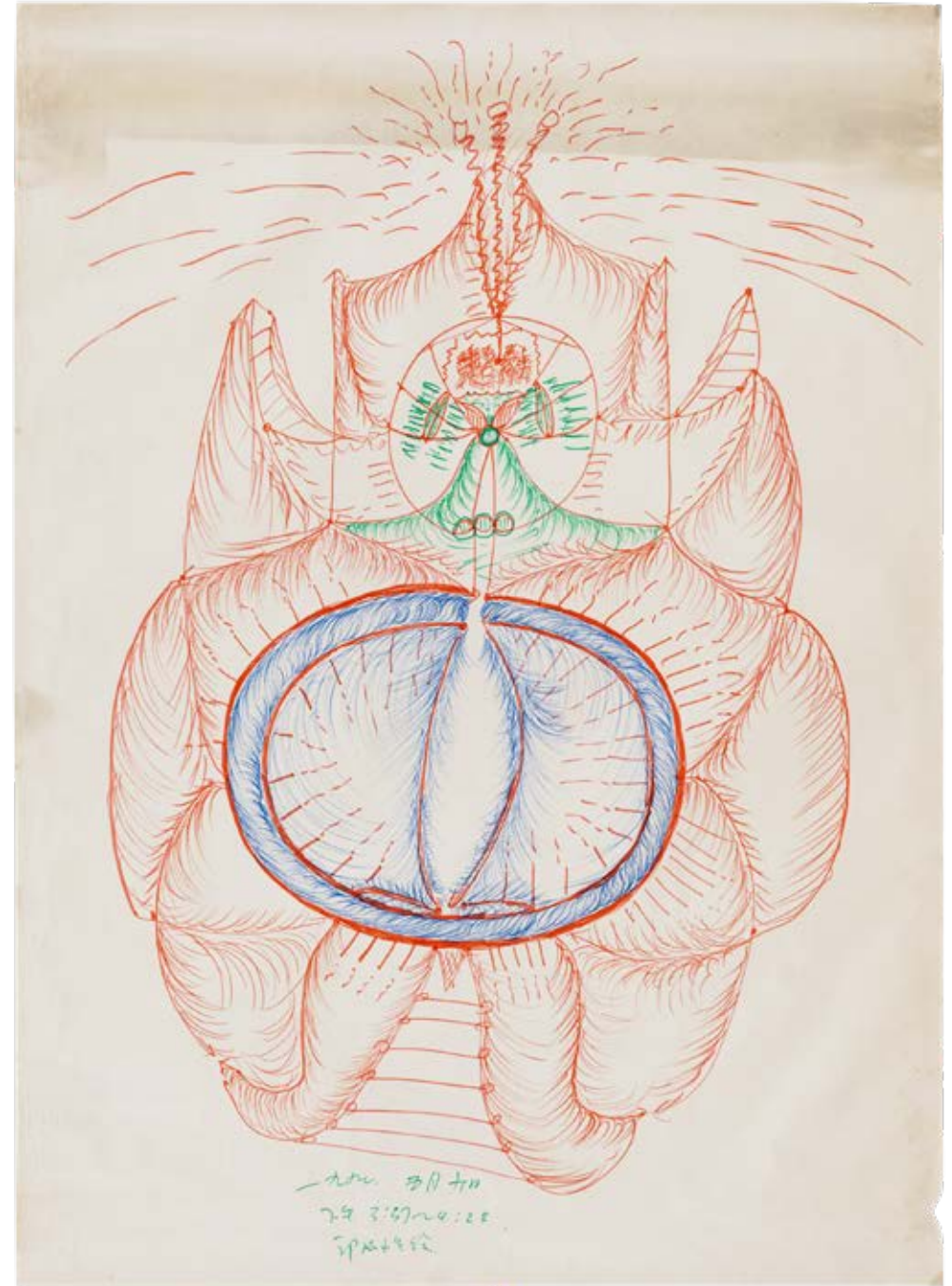
*[She] achieved the harmony of nature and the art of the mind, which accumulated to become action and emerged as art....in sketching an idea or forming a thing, usually what has been turned over in the mind is like a spiritual insight...[Guo] merely received from [her] mind and transmitted to [her] hand, and it was so without her being conscious of it being so...As for what I perceive, I merely see that the forms are true and complete, and the spirit harmonious and whole, brilliantly and awesomely, they seem to emerge in front of the painting.*²³

When revealed to the ancient sages, pictorial and pictographic representations, like the hexagrams of the *Book of Changes*, were believed to be functionally real, imbued with powerful cosmic forces. Guo Fengyi's drawings embody those cosmic forces, unifying the artist and the universe in her dynamic visual imagery.

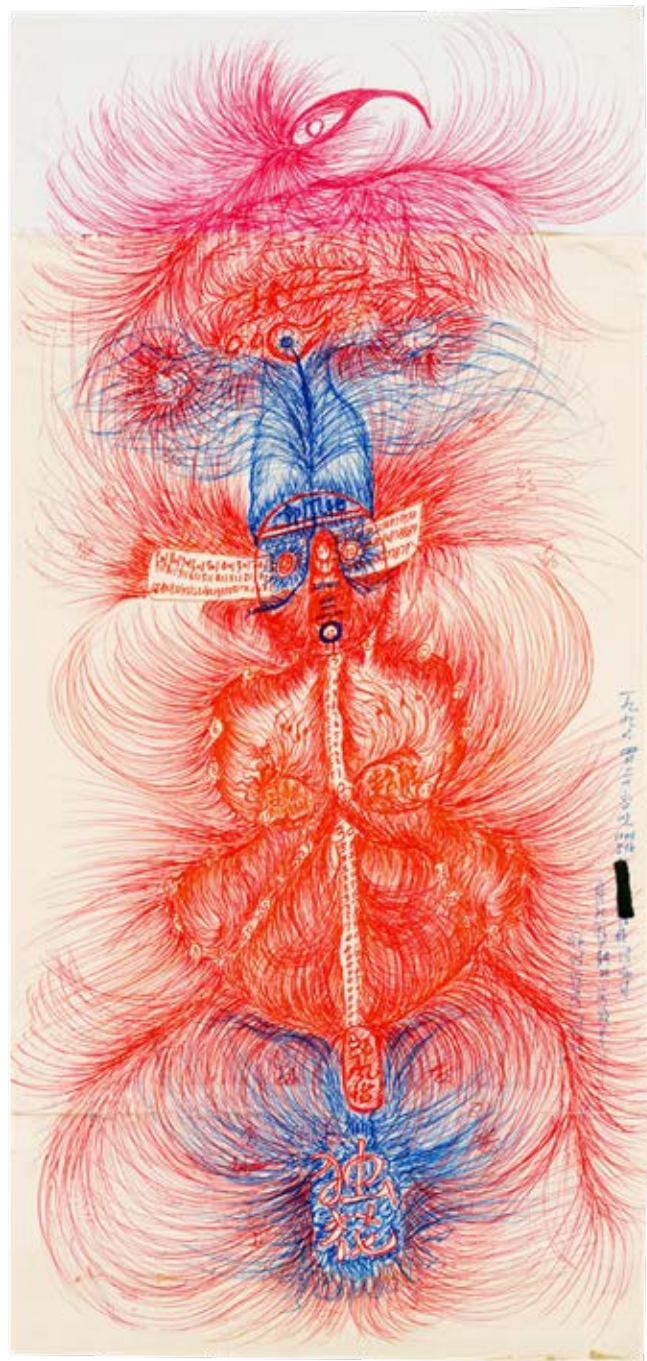
21 Wen C. Fong, "Chinese Calligraphy: History and Theory," in Robert E. Harrist, Jr., *The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection* (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1999), 29-30.

22 Fu Zai (d. 813), "Preface on Observing Secretary Zhang Painting Pines and Rocks," excerpted and translated in Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, comps. and eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1985), 85.

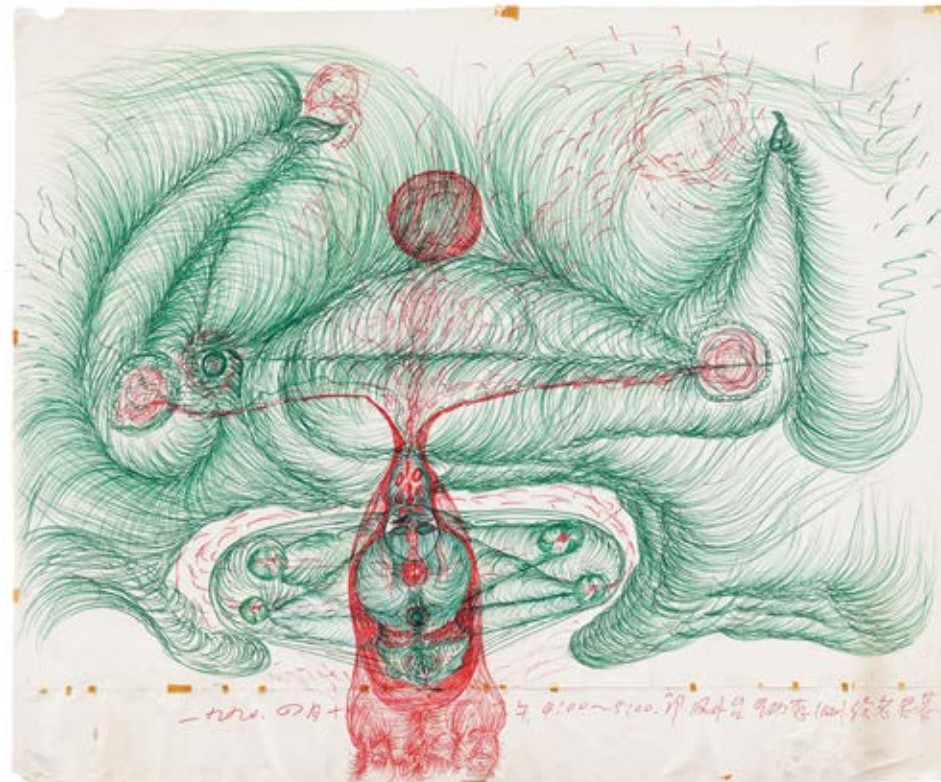
23 Bai Juyi (772-846), "Record on Painting," translated in Bush and Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 71. Bracketed references to Guo Fengyi inserted by the author.



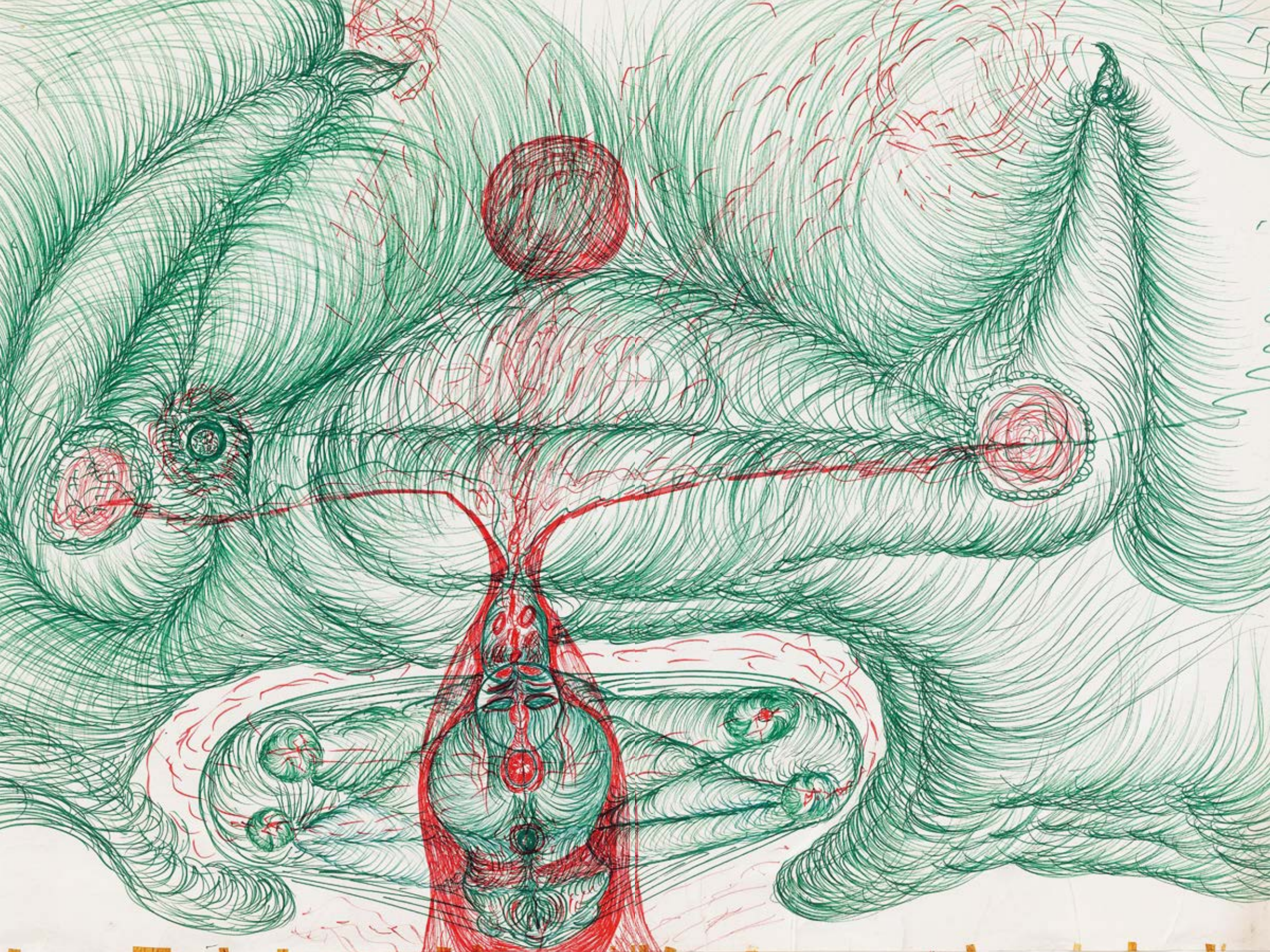
PL. 29
Superpower, 1990



PL. 30
Asking the Master How Many People Have Natural Superpower, 1990



PL. 31
The Grave of Lao Jun (Lao Zi), 1990



The Story of Guo Fengyi

Xu Tan

72 I first met Guo Fengyi on a winter day in 2007, when the artist Wang Jing and I paid a visit to her place on the outskirts of Xi'an. I had been commissioned by the Kunsthaus Graz in Austria—then preparing for a large-scale exhibition on contemporary Chinese art—to conduct studio visits and research projects with all participating artists. The lineup featured famous Chinese artists, including Ai Weiwei, Wang Jianwei, Cao Fei, and Xu Zhen; Guo Fengyi was the exception. I'd never heard the name, nor had I seen her work. I flew from Shanghai to Xi'an with great curiosity.

We began our conversation upon arrival. She showed us some of her most representative works (in her opinion), which left me in awe. I sensed an intense dynamism in her drawings, conveyed through consecutive, compelling lines—evidence of the author's swift, circular, and non-stop mark-making (I reckoned that these lines were drawn during some psychic experience). I was struck by the imagery and the lines, which seemed to reverberate rhythmically in my body. As long as the image held my gaze, the sense of movement and vibration persisted, though I was standing still. It occurred to me that for contemporary artists like me, the lines she had achieved in these drawings—lines that compel bodily resonance—are simply unattainable.

Guo explained her way of drawing to me. Certain themes were set before each attempt, usually in the form of a few words—a noun, a person's name, "Taiwan," "Japan," or "the human body." Then the act of drawing ensued. She told us that once begun, her conscious self was not in control of what happened in the drawing, nor did she have any knowledge about the final product during the process of creation:

For instance, when I draw someone, I would write their name down, and the drawing just emerges; a few simple strokes of facial features can achieve a kind of uncanny likeness, whether I have seen this individual or not. I may even be able to infer a thing or two about this person upon finishing the drawing, for instance: some happy occasions they recently encountered, health conditions, setbacks while growing up. I can name all of them, and I can sense them in my drawing.¹

In making a portrait, Guo inferred personal information about those being depicted, even strangers, from their names and from information "sensed" while drawing. Judging from her descriptions, she did not control how these drawings developed, but was led by the subjects themselves. Her drawing extended naturally alongside her subject matter, all without her conscious control. Speaking to me as a contemporary artist she said:

Because of the way I draw, which begins with ignorance and slowly gains clarity as the drawing appears, I am different from you. You start drawing after you have understood the subject. When I communicate with someone, they might not know my thought processes. When you start a drawing, you have thought it through, or have designed it thoroughly, but I have no idea when I'm drawing—I know my subject only after completing the drawing....I particularly excel at subjects I know very little of.

Here an interesting idea emerges, which is that the creative process not only generates drawings, but also knowledge. In this way, Guo's approach to art-making resembles *wu*, an ancient spiritual practice and belief system that has historically prevailed in vernacular culture in Chinese society. *Wu* practitioners are those who either possess innate special healing abilities or have acquired them through training. The public's faith in the healing abilities of the *wu* has persisted since ancient times, and remains in some rural areas of China today. Despite advances in modern medical science, many still search for complementary treatments within this tradition—particularly when modern medicine has failed.

¹ This and all subsequent block quotations are by Guo Fengyi and excerpted from an interview I conducted on January 27, 2007, in association with the 2007 Kunsthaus Graz exhibition *China Welcomes You...Desires, Struggles, New Identities*.

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One type of treatment involves the *wu* practitioner identifying the patient, and then entering a trance state, which is understood as the result of some god, spirit, or ghost entering the *wu* practitioner's body. He or she would then write, draw, speak, or engage in other activities—all part of diagnosis and treatment. It is believed that the *wu* practitioner can only gain clarity on the patient's condition in this state of "possession." Therefore, the acts of writing, drawing, and articulating are equated with understanding, diagnosing, and treating the disease. Often the *wu* practitioner only realizes what has happened upon "waking."

This process seems to me to resemble Guo's drawing process. The artist began with ignorance, acted upon a theme or a name, and gained a certain result and knowledge—including the image itself—only when the work was completed. Even when she might to a certain extent understand her subject matter, the result evaded her preconception and control. Indeed, from Guo's idiosyncratically rendered, continuous lines, I sensed a certain automatic tendency in her movements—as if operating not in a lucid state, or without the control of human hands.

We cannot simply interpret the dynamism and energy in Guo's drawings as stemming from the "subconscious," because the subconscious always accompanies conscious human activity; it is present in every artist's practice. Instead, Guo's images seem to me to have developed from some special condition of consciousness. During my interviews with the artist there was never any indication that she was "possessed by spirits" while drawing. It is nonetheless important to note that by her own admission what first compelled Guo to draw was the wish to heal herself. She recalled that:

I began drawing on May 21, 1989. Before that I was frequently ill, and my health wasn't optimal. I heard that even those who cannot write can prescribe medicine, which to me sounds quite magical, so I decided to try drawing—that's how I began. What I drew was mostly about treating illness: How to treat leukemia? How to treat toothache? How to treat depression? I then drew accordingly.

I don't believe that Guo's drawing activities could actually heal; I can say, however, that she attempted, through the activity of drawing, to access a power analogous to that of the mysterious, traditional *wu* medicine in the hope of restoring her health, and subsequently the health of others. In the beginning, for Guo, drawing was not an end,



PL. 32
Shifu (Master), 1993

but a means to transport herself into a state of transcendence from which she hoped to obtain both knowledge and healing.

Guo's qigong practice was another fundamental part of her healing quest:

I have practiced qigong, which I believe to be a wonderful Chinese tradition: it develops your intelligence. Not everybody can learn to practice it, because to practice qigong is to train your brain. I'm indeed capable [of that].

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In the 1980s, I practiced and observed qigong myself. The continuous, swirling, spoke-like lines, rich in dynamic tension, that convene in Guo's drawings remind me of the experience of learning and practicing qigong—powered by *qi*, a continuously impactful, circular, and innate bodily energy. Practitioners of the popular Flying Crane posture, for example, stand with their eyes closed, and calm their thoughts to channel *qi*. This practice can be deployed to heal oneself; masters of qigong can sometimes direct this ability to heal others—some even claim to put out forest fires, though I have no idea how anyone can believe this. The “activating of practice” phase of qigong is one characterized by involuntary, grounded bodily movements that last about fifteen minutes. Normally the movements stop automatically within that time frame, and the masters will help correct those who continue to move involuntarily beyond the time limit. Qigong practitioners can enter these states of “delirium,” and have the ability to return to “normalcy” after a set period of time. Might it be the case that the act of drawing for Guo was a similar technique for entering a delirious state of mind? Did she use the medium to eradicate all social constructs to unveil a “true” world imagination in the same way that countless artists have sought the supernatural or resorted to alcohol and drugs to transport themselves into another state?

Though in the beginning of her drawing practice, Guo's work was tied to healing concepts, her open-mindedness allowed her to transcend this initial purpose. She was quite obsessed with the act of drawing itself, for its own sake, and this allowed her practice to change. Over the course of her career, she extended from, in her words, “drawing to heal” to an exploration of new subjects, widening her horizon to include the world around her, reporting that she followed the scientific news closely, as well as other fields of contemporary knowledge. She placed heavy emphasis on

“research,” which meant that she was not trapped in traditional methodology or mentality. She explained:

For instance, I would draw the tombs in Xi'an, including that of (Empress Consort) Wu Zetian; I draw everything that Xi'an offers, and I would then analyze my subject matter. Though I have completed the drawing, there's still much to explore and research inherently....I think there's a lot to parse out, and it's not just limited to this drawing; there is just a lot to explore. In these works I came to realize many things; there are aspects that collide with traditional culture, which I don't care to explain. I'm simultaneously researching many things, from astronomy and geography to anatomical science—I'm interested in them all. Sometimes I'm too busy to read even at home; in these moments I tune in to scientific matters over the radio, such as the launch of Shenzhou 6.² I would then draw the launch of Shenzhou 6.

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I believe the mesmerizing power of Guo's drawings comes precisely from the confluence of the traditional and the contemporary culture that Guo described, and I disagree with those in the Chinese art world who dismiss her drawings as crude or vulgar, lacking in cultural value, or derived from superstition. Guo's drawing activates the tense, interim space between the legacy of ancient Chinese *wu* traditions and contemporary drawing, creating a bridge between the two. In my opinion, even if her work does in fact exemplify “superstition,” that would be an equally interesting achievement—there's exploratory value in establishing connections between an obscure ancient culture and contemporary art. Furthermore, her creative process was unsullied by the market. Her work was drawn free from the constraints of the professionalized art industry.

The images in Guo's drawings bear no resemblance to traditional Chinese painting—neither the art of the literati, nor vernacular folk art. To me, the determining factor for folk art lies not only in professionalization, or lack thereof, but also in partaking in the discourse of local folk culture. Guo's work markedly departs from the auspicious, celebratory, and revolutionary ideology that characterizes folk art in the Xi'an region, and the sensitivity in her

2 Shenzhou 6 was the second human spaceflight of the Chinese space program, launched on October 12, 2005, on a Long March 2F rocket from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in the Gobi desert, Inner Mongolia.

imagery makes the difference even more apparent. There are no familiar, established formulas inherited from local folk culture in her images. Her drawings share more common ground with artworks that emphasize the transcendental, irrational, the automatic, and the surreal as understood as terms of twentieth-century European Modernism. There are in fact some similarities between Guo's drawing process and certain modernist painting in the West, which mobilizes the impactful energy of the human subconscious.

Guo's drawings have never been accepted by China's elite, high art discourse. Even in ancient times, Chinese cultural elites maintained their distance from spiritual healing practices; they pursued orthodox religions like Buddhism and Taoism instead. That said, traditional *wu* practices were widespread among the lower classes, and were intimately tied to their lives. In that same first conversation, Guo noted that:

Everyone comes from different cultural and intellectual backgrounds. Some claim that only the highly cultured can understand my work, but that's not necessarily the case: there was a peasant who saw my drawing in Xi'an and praised it as a superb, divine image, whereas a professor from an art academy [name omitted] criticized my drawings as worthless. He scolded me and refused to allow a "witch" to participate in an art exhibition, arguing that no witch was known to be capable of drawing throughout the thousands of years of Chinese history; but I don't care to argue with him. Many people from lower educational backgrounds can understand my work, whereas those with higher levels of cultural education fail to do so.

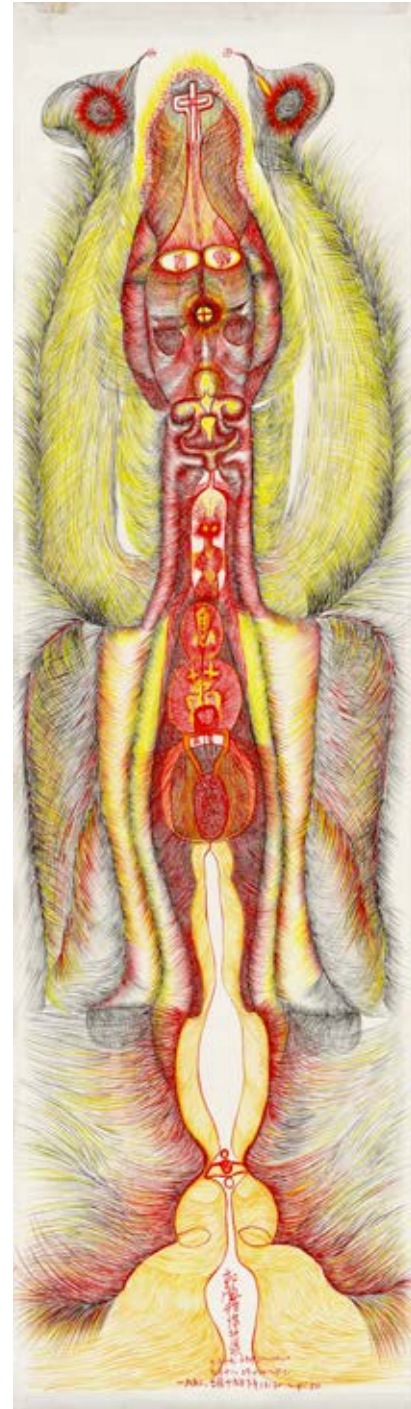
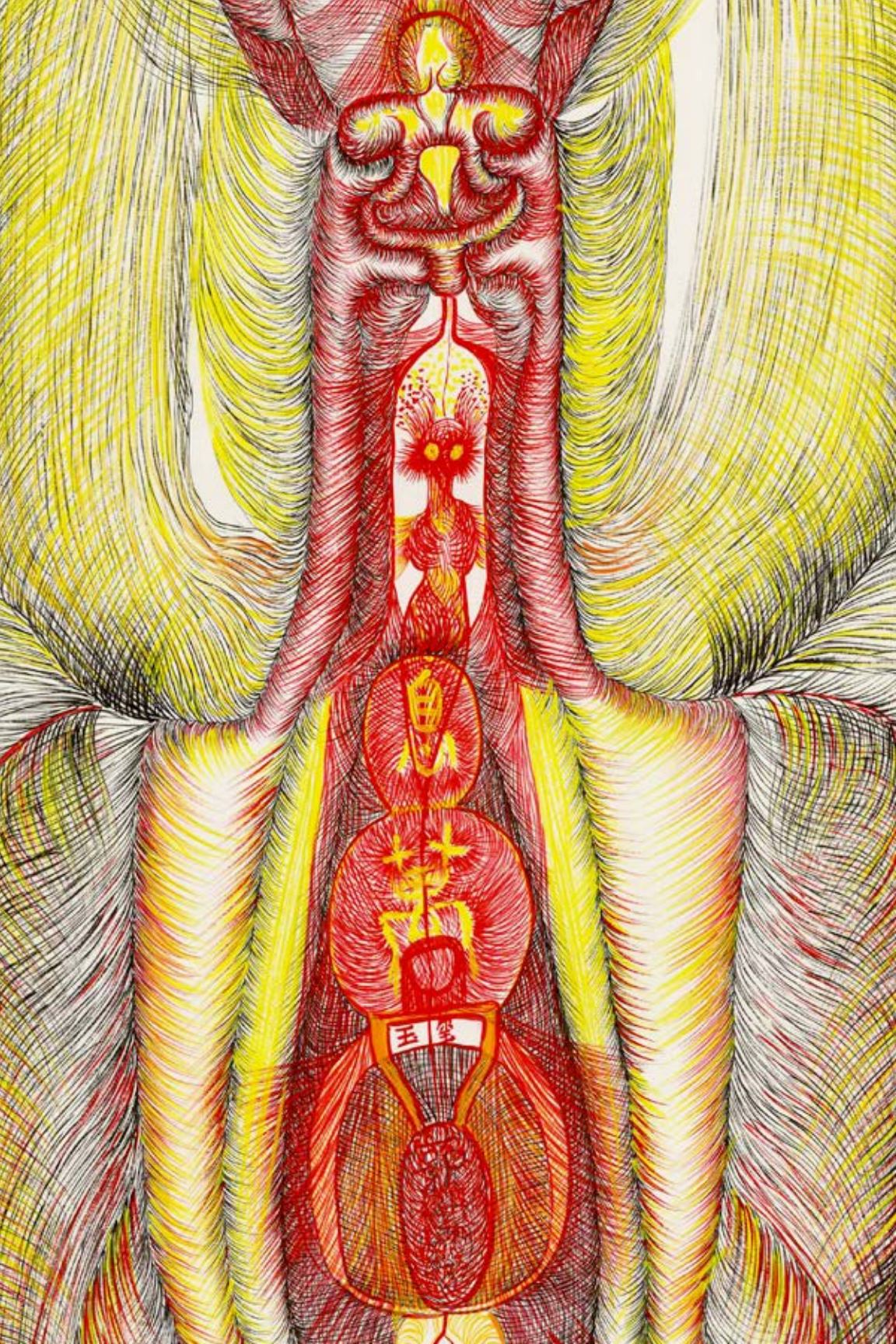
Mainstream society also rejects the practice of *wu* and has maintained its distance from it over the years. However, that which I would describe as "sub-faiths/beliefs" remain, and their impact can be far reaching. Secular society in China subscribes more or less to these regional sub-beliefs for guidance in everyday life matters: fortune, harm, auspice. The Beijing Olympics opening ceremony started precisely at 8pm on August 8, 2008, as "eight" reads phonetically as "fortune," and thus is considered auspicious. This is hardly informed by any widely-held religious doctrine; rather, using auspicious numbers is an example of the way traditional belief systems and practices persist in contemporary culture.

•••

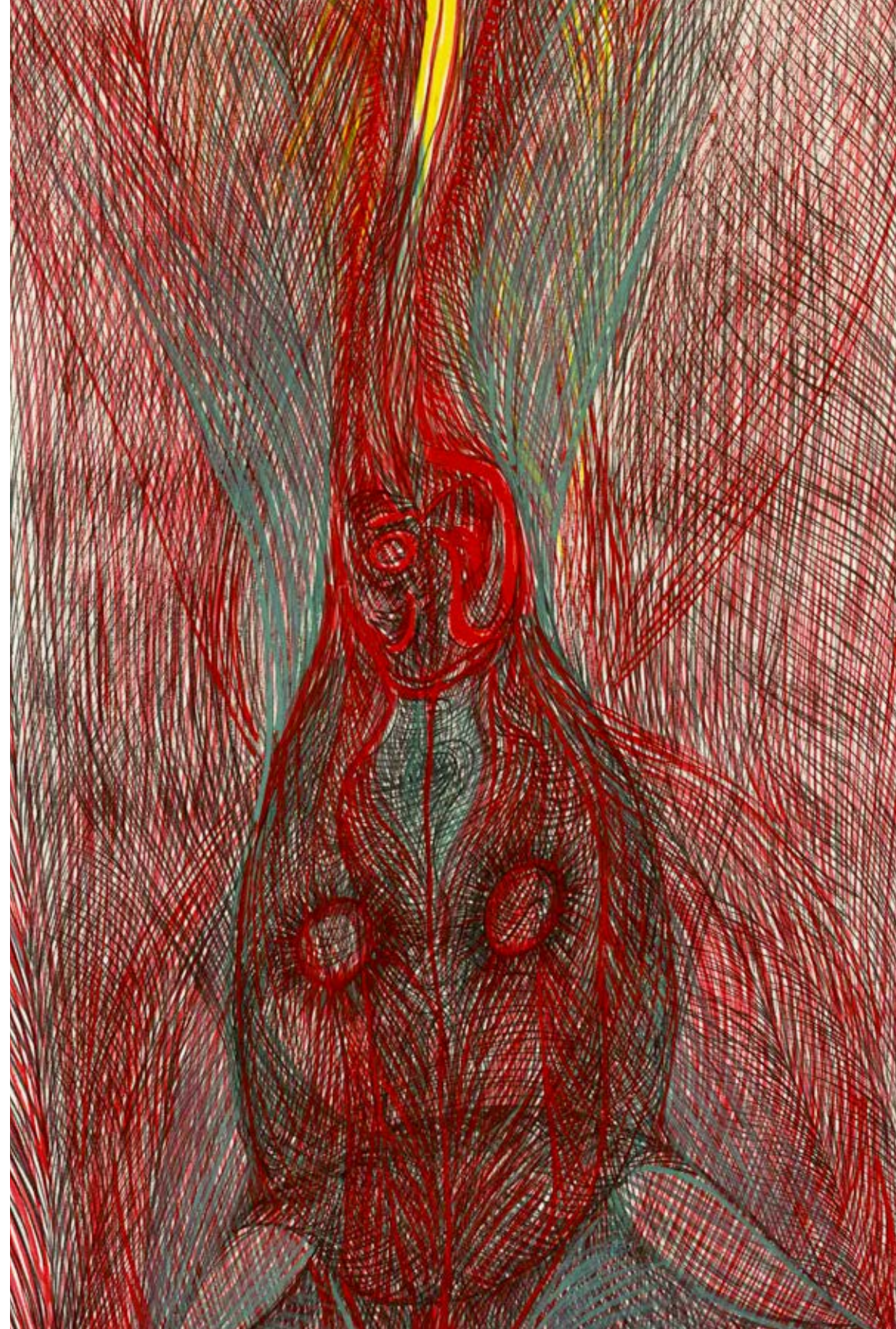
I have always considered myself a product of modern culture, someone non-superstitious. In the summer of 2006, my close friend and colleague Liang Juhui passed away suddenly, which dealt a heavy blow to my psyche. For a whole year I trudged through depressing thoughts and reflected on the meaning of life and death. In the summer of 2007, I met Guo Fengyi once again in Venice, and her gallerist Lu Jie asked me to accompany her on the flight back to Beijing via Munich. We sat next to one another in the cabin, and spoke very little. That day happened to be the one-year anniversary of the death of my friend, and the sadness from losing him invaded my mind more aggressively than ever, leaving me almost breathless. As the plane approached Beijing, Guo Fengyi smiled and asked me to cherish my life rather than focus only on work. In that moment, I felt that the sky had suddenly cleared and the clouds dissipated—so did a year of depression and pain.

I'm very grateful to her for that.

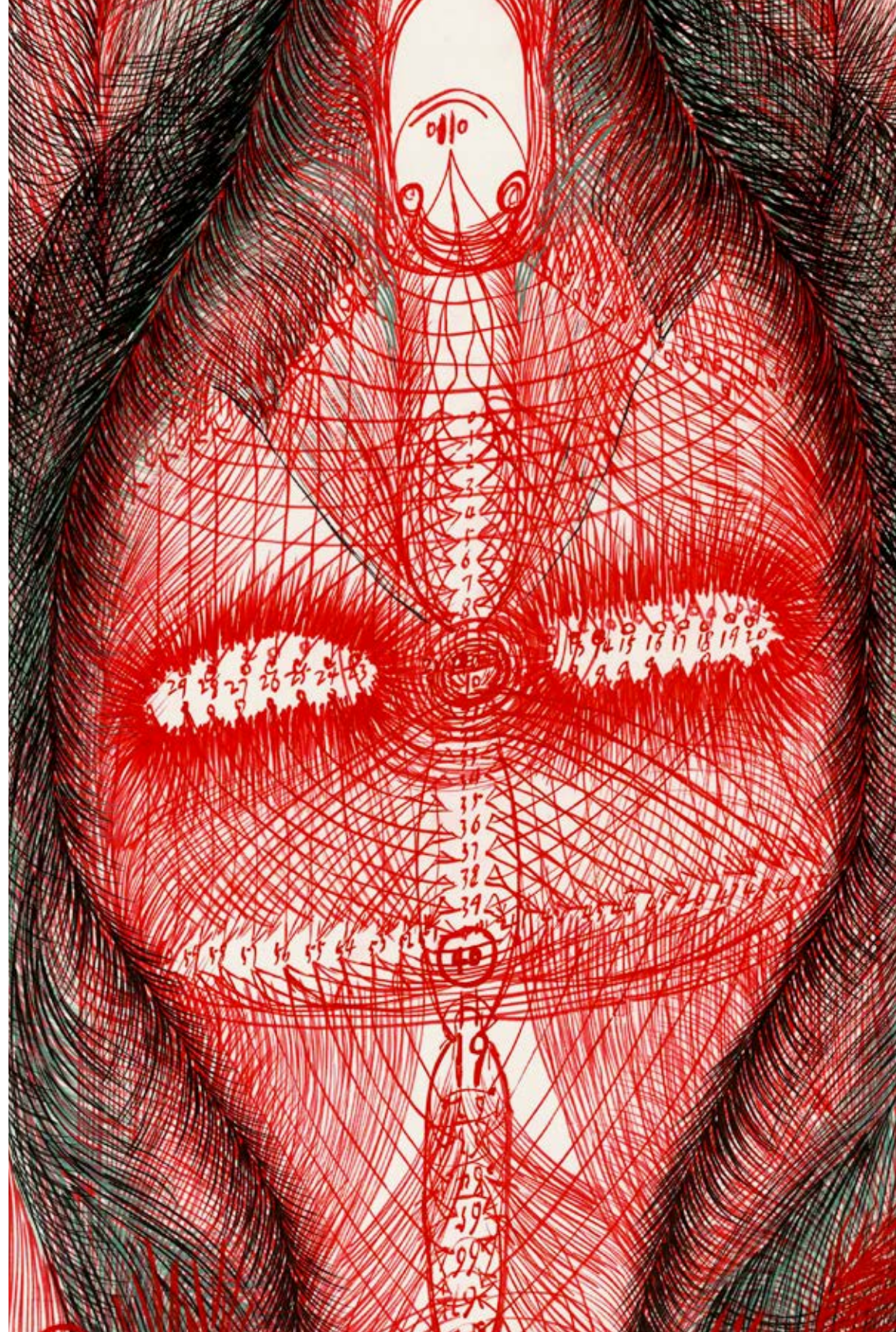
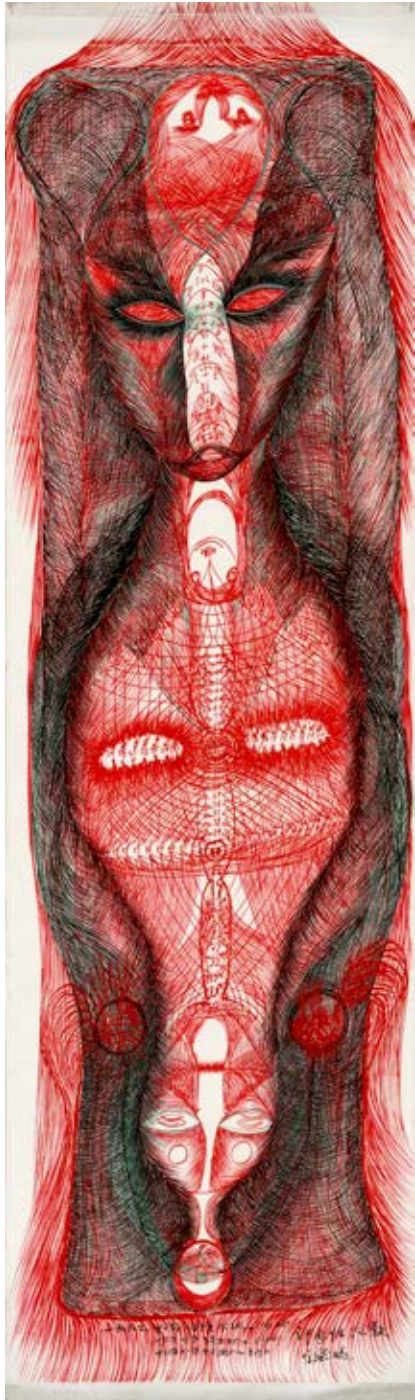
—TRANSLATED BY XIN WANG



PL. 33
Level of Guo Fengyi's Qigong Practice, 1992



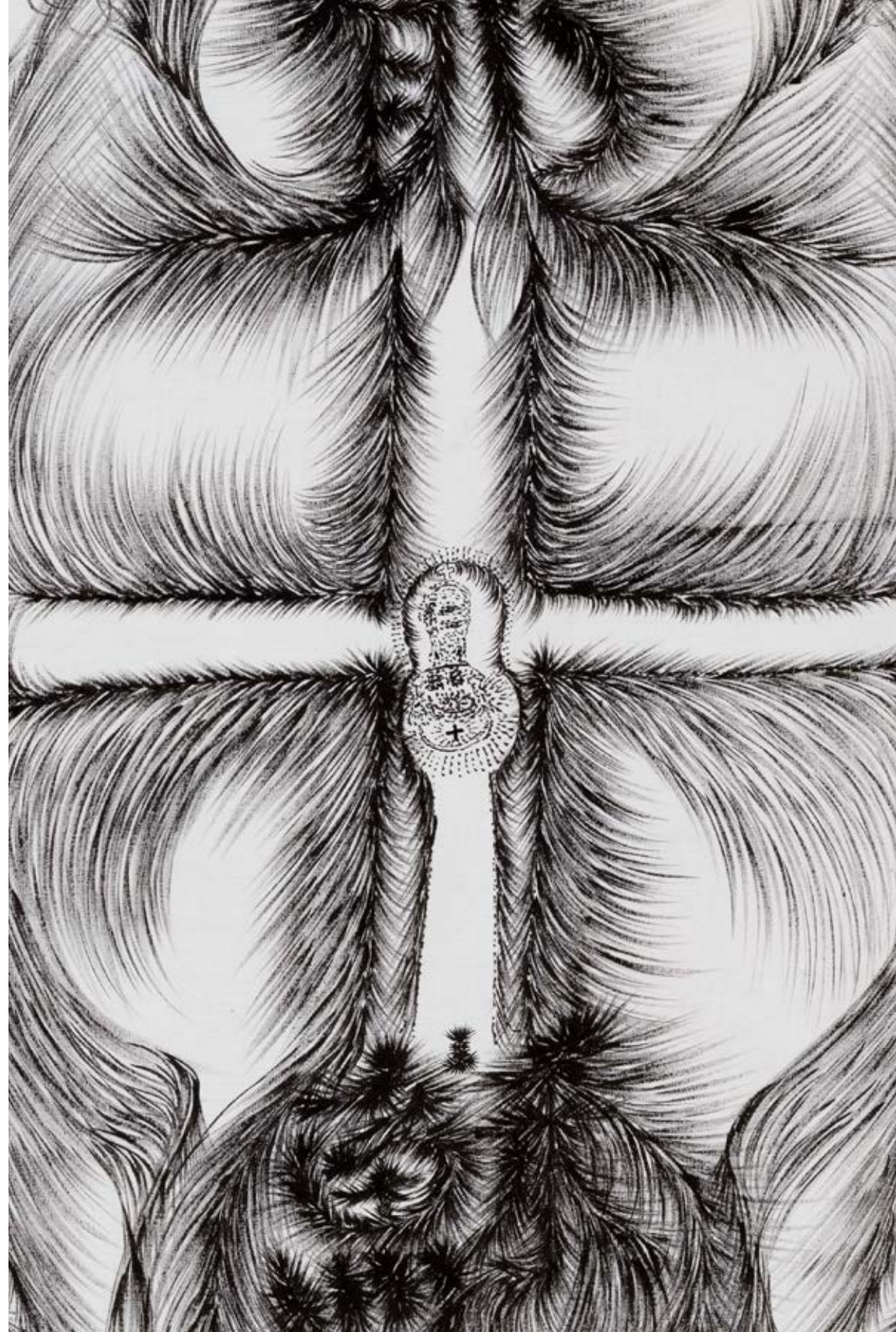
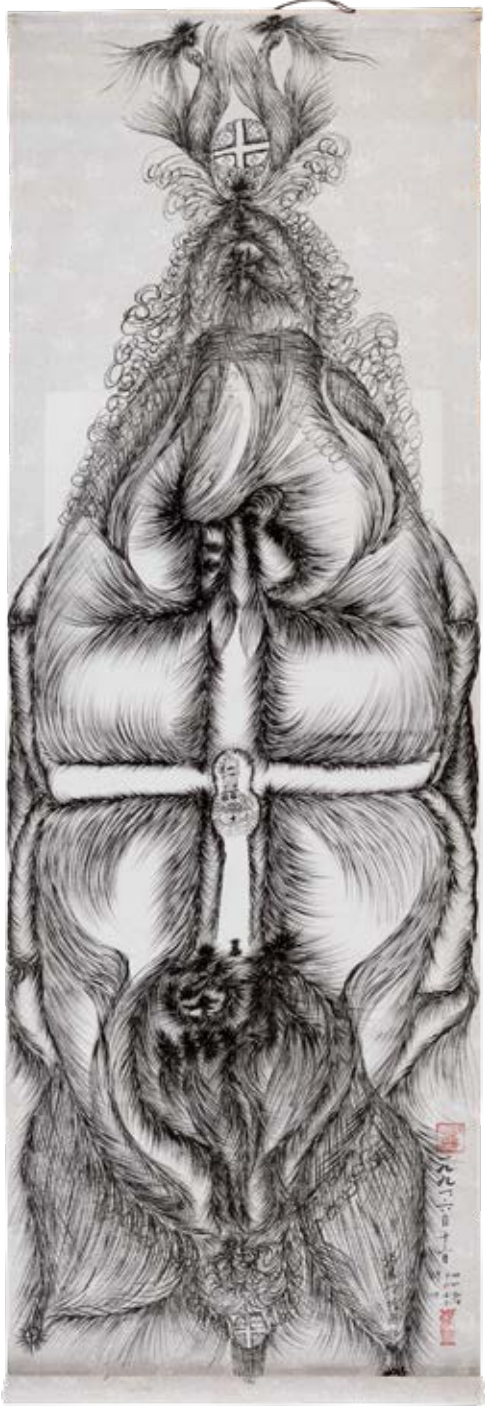
PL. 34
What is Guo Fengyi's Painting Called, 1992



PL. 35
Numeric Code, 1992



PL. 36
Virgin Mary, 1991



PL. 37
Jesus, 1991



PL. 38
Fengshui of Yan'an, 2006

Works in the Exhibition

All works and images courtesy of Long March Space, Beijing, unless noted otherwise.

PL. 1
Journal Vol. 3 (Provincial Qigong Practice Workshop), 1989
Notebook
10 1/2 x 7 1/4 inches (26.5 x 18.8 cm)

PL. 2
Journal Vol. 6 (A Collection of Empress Wu Zetian), 1989
Notebook
10 1/2 x 7 1/4 inches (26.5 x 18.8 cm)

PL. 3
How is Guo Fengyi's Head, 1995
Color ink on rice paper
53 1/2 x 27 1/4 inches (136.5 x 69 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy

PL. 4
Shouxing (God of Longevity), 1990
Color ink on calendar paper
41 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches (106 x 52.4 cm)

PL. 5
Male Female, 1989
Color ink on glazed printing paper
30 1/2 x 21 1/4 inches (78 x 54.2 cm)

PL. 6
Diagram of the Human Nerves Ten Thousand Twenty Thousand One Hundred Thousand, 1989
Color ink on blueprint paper
36 1/2 x 25 1/2 inches (93 x 65 cm)

PL. 7
Diagram of the Human Nervous System, 1989
Color ink on glazed printing paper
30 1/2 x 21 1/4 inches (78 x 54 cm)

PL. 8
Ear, 1990
Color ink on calendar paper
39 1/4 x 30 inches (99.5 x 75 cm)

PL. 9
Natural Superpower Black Mudra, 1990
Ink on rice paper mounted on cloth
43 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches (110.8 x 70.4 cm)

PL. 10
Little Old Man, 1989
Color ink on calendar paper
58 1/2 x 21 1/4 inches (149 x 54 cm)

PL. 11
The Buddha in the Underground Palace of the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, 1989
Ink on calendar paper
29 x 20 inches (73.4 x 50.6 cm)

PL. 12
Bagua Diagram of the Sun Seen from a Distance, 1989
Color ink on paper
59 x 41 inches (149.5 x 103.7 cm)

PL. 13
Fengshui Diagram of the Moon Seen from a Distance, 1989
Color ink on calendar paper
Polygonal work measured counterclockwise: 85 1/4 x 60 1/4 x 19 1/4 x 37 1/4 x 54 x 25 1/2 inches (216.4 x 152.8 x 49 x 94.5 x 137 x 65 cm)

PL. 14
Mystery of the Bermuda Triangle, 1989
Ink on glazed printing paper
27 1/2 x 20 inches (70 x 50.5 cm)

PL. 15
Lugu Lake on June 5th, 2002
Color ink on rice paper mounted on cloth
105 1/2 x 26 1/2 inches (268 x 67.5 cm)

- PL. 16
Huangdi Mausoleum, 1996
Color ink on rice paper
100 1/4 x 26 inches (254.4 x 66 cm)
- PL. 17
Caishen (God of Wealth), 2001
Color ink on rice paper
108 1/4 x 27 1/2 inches (275 x 70 cm)
- PL. 18
The Sixth Anniversary of Guo Fengyi's Qigong Practice, 1995
Color ink on rice paper
102 x 27 1/2 inches (259 x 69.5 cm)
- PL. 19
Who is Guo Fengyi, 1993
Color ink on hanging rice-paper scroll
60 1/2 x 17 inches (154 x 43 cm)
- PL. 20 AND COVER DETAIL
How to Do It, 1994
Ink on hanging rice-paper scroll
61 x 17 inches (154.5 x 43 cm)
- PL. 21
Ancient River, 1993
Color ink on hanging rice-paper scroll
61 1/2 x 17 inches (156 x 43 cm)
Private collection, New York
- PL. 22
Diagram of the Primordial Positioning of the 64 Hexagrams, 1990
Color ink on glazed printing paper
15 1/2 x 21 1/4 inches (39 x 54 cm)
- PL. 23
Four Diagrams of the Divination Procedures in Zhu Xi's The Basics of I Ching, 1990
Color ink on rice paper
48 x 35 inches (122 x 89 cm)
- PL. 24
The Diagram of the Liver Meridian, 1990
Color ink on paper
30 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches (77.3 x 52.3 cm)

- PL. 25
Diagram of Tianmu Acupoint, 1989
Color ink on blueprint paper
Composed of two sheets:
34 x 25 1/2; 13 1/2 x 21 1/4 inches
(86.5 x 64.8 cm; 34.5 x 54 cm)
- PL. 26
Fetus, 1989
Color ink on calendar paper
31 1/2 x 21 inches (79.7 x 53.5 cm)
- PL. 27
Organization Diagram of Human Numeric, 2006
Color ink on blueprint paper
55 x 34 1/2 inches (140 x 87.8 cm)
- PL. 28
Organization Method of Human Numeric, 2006
Color ink on blueprint paper
55 x 34 1/2 inches (140 x 87.8 cm)
- PL. 29
Superpower, 1990
Color ink on glazed printing paper
43 x 31 inches (109 x 79 cm)
- PL. 30
Asking the Master How Many People Have Natural Superpower, 1990
Color ink on calendar paper
74 x 34 1/2 inches (187.5 x 88.2 cm)
- PL. 31
The Grave of Lao Jun (Lao Zi), 1990
Color ink on glazed printing paper
39 1/2 x 48 inches (100.5 x 121.4 cm)
Collection of Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy
- PL. 32
Shifu (Master), 1993
Color ink on hanging rice-paper scroll
58 x 18 inches (147 x 45.4 cm)
- PL. 33
Level of Guo Fengyi's Qigong Practice, 1992
Color ink on hanging rice-paper scroll
62 x 17 1/4 inches (157.4 x 44 cm)

- PL. 34
What is Guo Fengyi's Painting Called, 1992
Color ink on hanging rice-paper scroll
60 1/2 x 17 1/2 inches (154 x 44.2 cm)
- PL. 35
Numeric Code, 1992
Color ink on hanging rice-paper scroll
61 x 17 1/2 inches (155.2 x 44.3 cm)
- PL. 36
Jesus, 1991
Ink on hanging cloth scroll
65 x 22 1/4 inches (165 x 56.8 cm)
- PL. 37
Virgin Mary, 1991
Ink on hanging cloth scroll
65 x 22 1/2 inches (165.5 x 56.8 cm)
- PL. 38
Fengshui of Yan'an, 2006
Color ink on blueprint paper
55 x 34 1/2 inches (139.5 x 87.7 cm)

Contributors

Rosario Güiraldes is Assistant Curator at The Drawing Center.

Laura Hoptman is Executive Director at The Drawing Center.

Kathleen M. Ryor is the Tanaka Memorial Professor of International Understanding and Art History at Carleton College, where she teaches courses on East Asian art history and cultural studies. Her research focuses on the arts of the Ming and early Qing dynasties in China. Professor Ryor has published on the painting of the artist Xu Wei (1521-1593), military patronage of the arts, Ming painting theory, and lay Buddhist artistic practice, as well as the relationship between art, garden culture, medicine, and food in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In addition to her work on the early modern period, she has curated several exhibitions of modern and contemporary Chinese ink painting.

Xu Tan is an artist who currently lives and works in Shenzhen, China, and New Jersey, United States. In 1993, Xu became a member of the Big Tail Elephant Group, an artist collective founded by Lin Yilin, Chen Shaoxiong, and Liang Juhui in Guangzhou, China, with an interest in the rapid transformation of modern cities. Xu was a recipient of fellowships from the Asian Cultural Council (Rockefeller Foundation), New York, in 2002, and DAAD in Berlin, Germany, in 2004. His solo exhibitions include those at Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm (2008); Location One, New York City (2007-08); Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2009); and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou (2013). His work was also included in the Venice Biennale (2003, 2009); the Guangzhou Triennial (2005); the Shanghai Biennale (2014); and the Sharjah Biennial (2015).

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Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance* at The Drawing Center

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The Drawing Center
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August 15–December 20, 2020

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Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance

From the late 1980s until her death in 2010, Guo Fengyi (1942-2010, Xi'an, China) created more than five hundred intricate ink drawings on subjects ranging from Chinese mythology and traditional Chinese medicine to people and places in the news. Published on the occasion of the first major museum exhibition of Guo's work, this volume features nearly forty selections—many previously unpublished—from her astounding body of work, as well as important new scholarship that sheds light on her unique drawing practice, ultimately situating the artist in the center of contemporary discourse.

Essays by
Rosario Güiraldes
Laura Hoptman
Kathleen M. Ryor
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