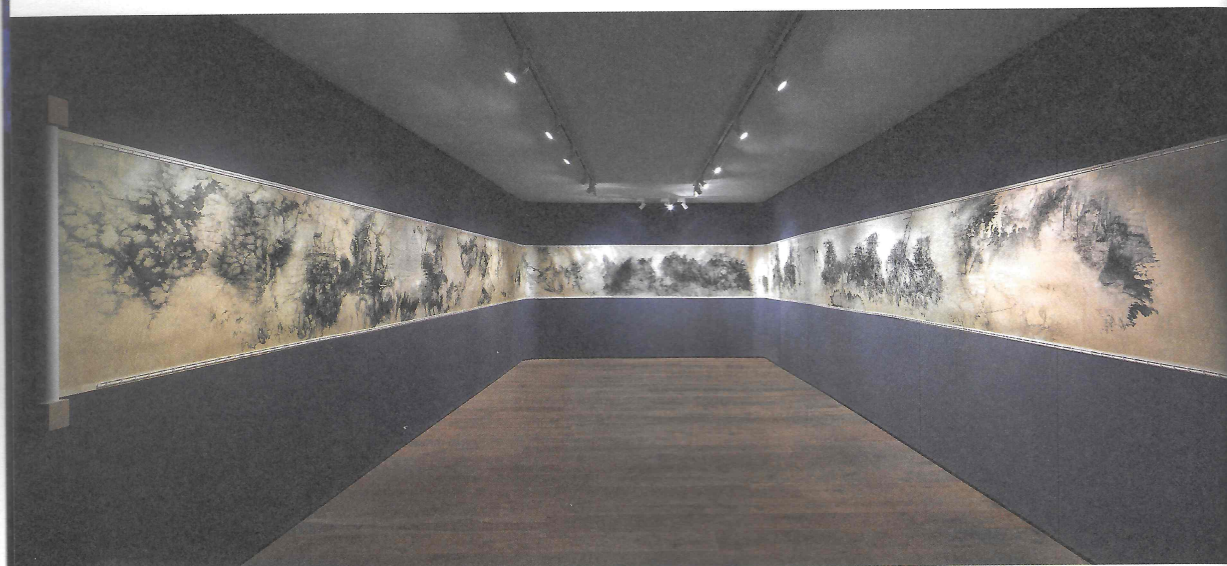


Amjad Majid

## Seeing the Unseen World: The Art of Bingyi

Bingyi, Wanwu: *Metamorphosis*, 2013, ink on paper, six pieces, 2200 x 260 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.



Bingyi, *Luminaries*, 2013–15, ink on paper, installation view, 48 x 48 cm each piece. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

“Painting tells us that the material world is finite, and that the world unseen by us is eternal. Painting is the most direct way to access this unseen world.”<sup>1</sup>

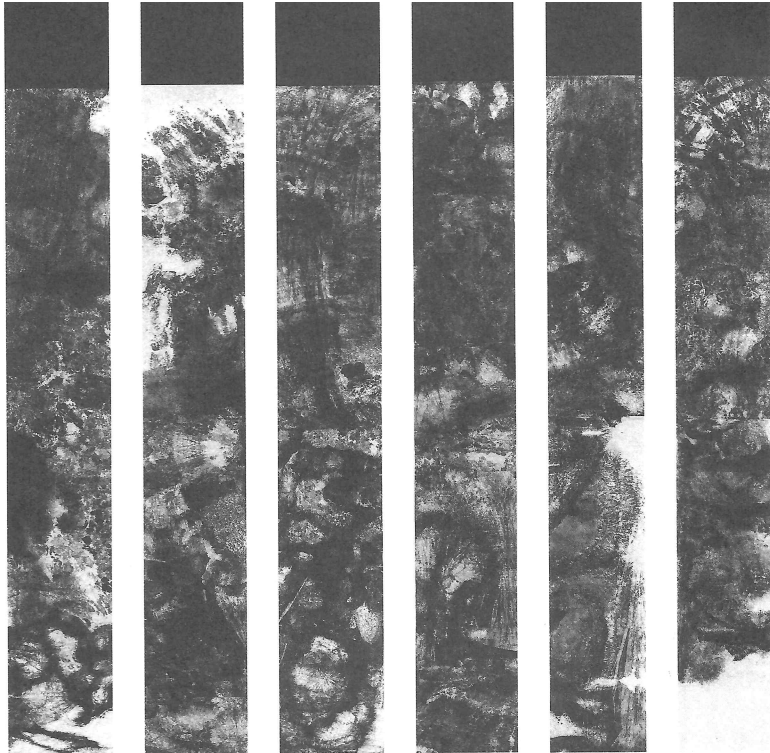
—Bingyi

Bingyi, *Apocalypse*, 2011–15, ink on silk, 96 x 2000 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

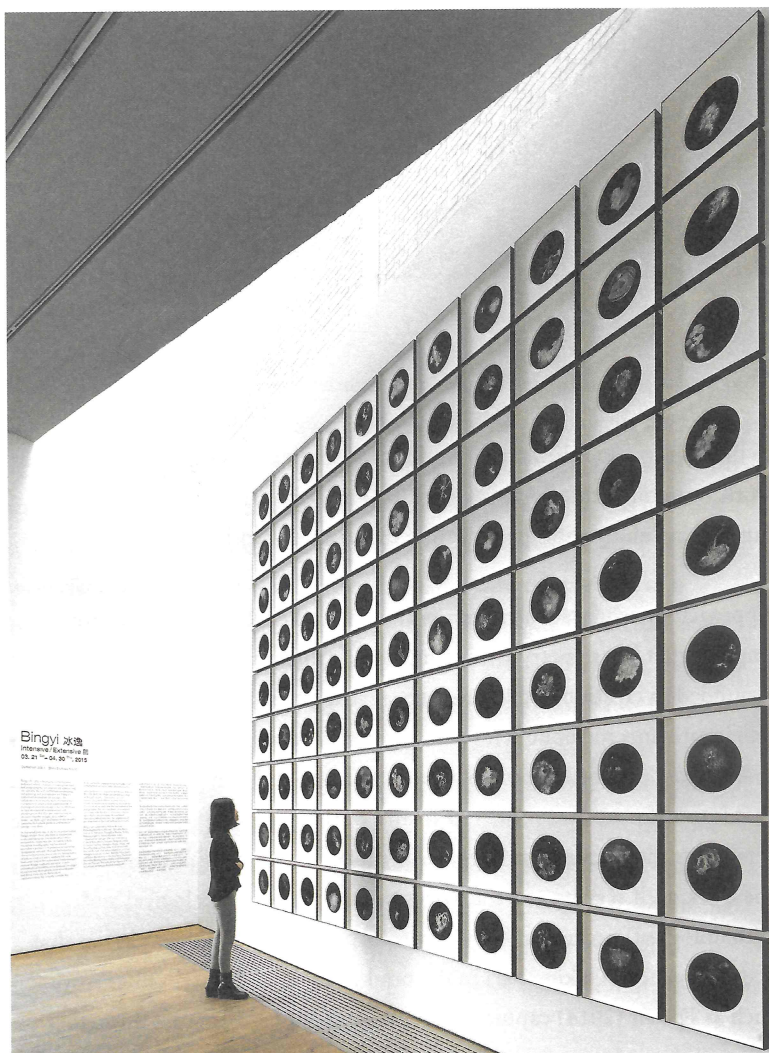
Bingyi, an artist who considers painting a means to make the eternal and unseen finite and known through a process of materialization and art-making, has created a body of work unified by preoccupations about the nature of the universe—its diverse systems, hierarchies, and forces operating in our natural, climatological, and geological world—of which we humans are but a tiny part. Exploring her anxieties about humanity and her enchantment with the secrets of an unknown universe, it is thus befitting that Bingyi’s varied artistic practice branches out from numerous interests in ecology, philosophy, history, aesthetics, and science, blossoming into a body of work that ranges from land art, environmental art, and installation to performance art, musical and literary improvisation, and ink painting.<sup>2</sup> With a diverse set of interests and talents, aside from being an artist, Bingyi is also a scholar, cultural critic, curator, poet, and social activist.

One might anticipate a lack of continuity across such vast diversity, but an examination of her artwork reveals a deep connective tissue within her scope of inquiry. Works such as *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* (2013) explore the nature

Bingyi, *Wanwu*:  
*Metamorphosis*, 2013, ink  
on paper, six pieces, 2200  
x 260 cm each. © Bingyi.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ink  
Studio, Beijing.



Bingyi, *Luminaries*, 2013–15,  
ink on paper, installation  
view, 49 x 49 cm each piece.  
© Bingyi. Courtesy of the  
artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.



Bingyi, *Apocalypse*, 2011–  
15, ink on silk, 96 x 2000 cm.  
© Bingyi. Courtesy of the  
artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

of the material universe and the matter that composes it and that shapes its inner mechanisms. Other works such as the *Luminaries* (2013–15) and *Fairies* (2012–15) series explore the materialization of imagined life at a microcosmic level. Her deep concern for the state of humanity in its relation



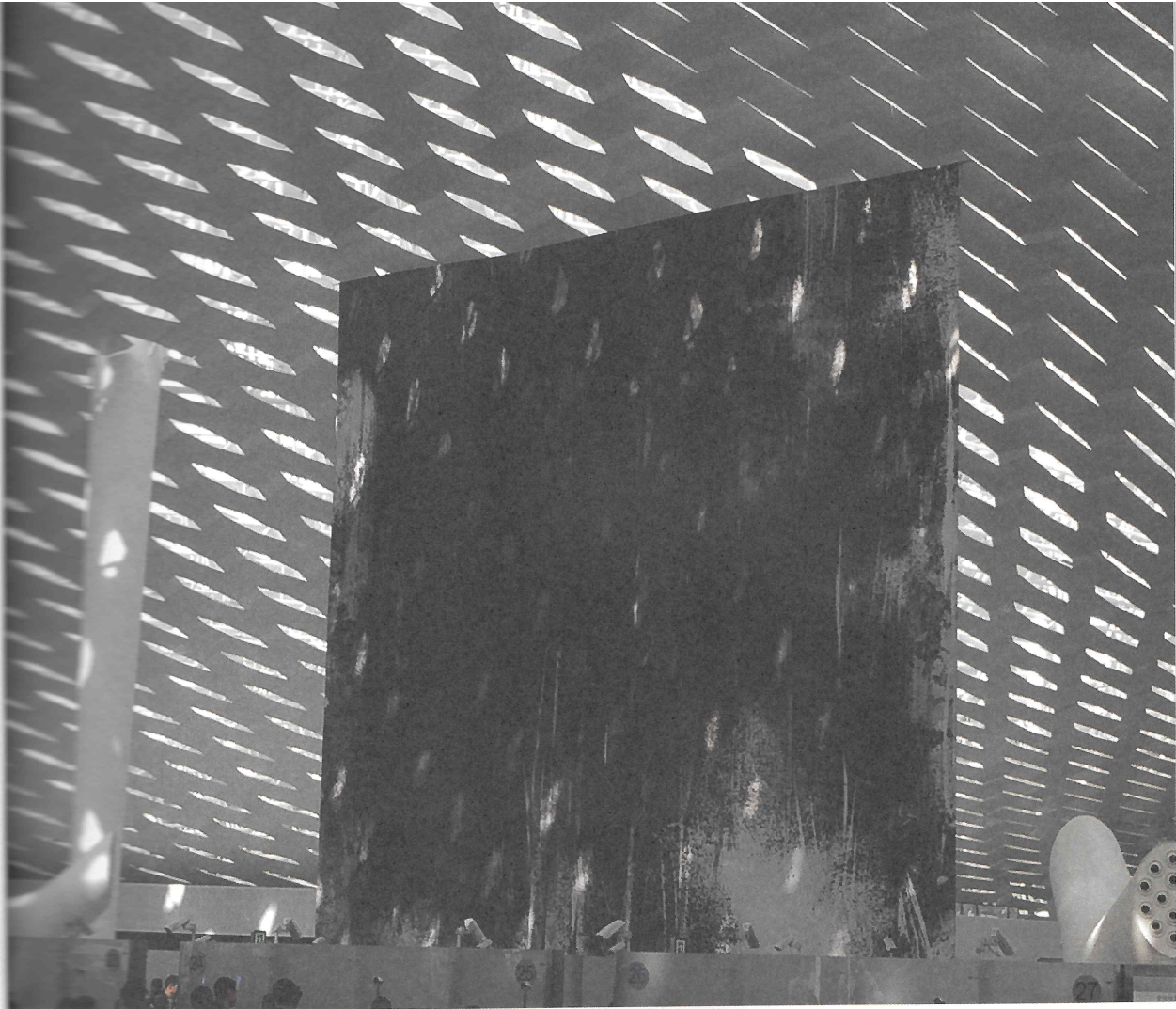


Bingyi, *Fairies*, 2012–15, ink on paper, 100 pieces, 34 x 34 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

to the universe and the natural world is especially apparent in her new major work, ominously titled *Apocalypse* (2011–15), which considers the end of humankind along with the rebirth of the natural world.

Approaching works such as *Luminaries* involves exploring the creative impetus that joins poetry with imagined life forms in the sense that both are grounded in creation and both materialize from fiction. Similarly, the series *Fairies* presents metaphors for ideation and creation expressed through very fine and detailed brushwork, with each fairy embodying the creative instinct that is transformed into concrete forms. Meanwhile, *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* represents the vastness of the material universe in a tangible manner, with the work itself serving as a trace or residue of natural (geological and climatological) processes that we would not otherwise see—processes that acquire agency in taking part in the production of the work. Other works such as *Epoché* (2014) capture the performance of creating art through a physical state of suspension that reminds of phenomenological bracketing (as the title of the work suggests), with the artist “bombarding” paper with ink from mid-air via a helicopter. Finally, Bingyi’s work also includes a series of interdisciplinary performances that combine improvisation with music, poetry, and dance.

Bingyi, *Fairies*, 2012–15, ink on paper, 100 pieces, 34 x 34 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.



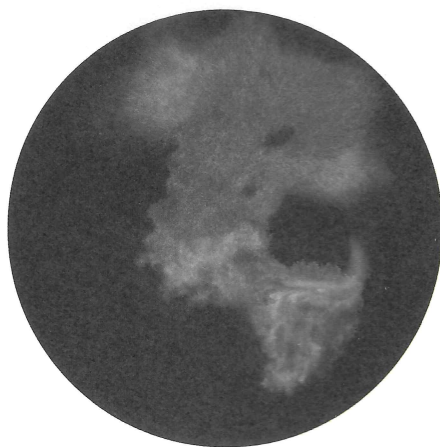
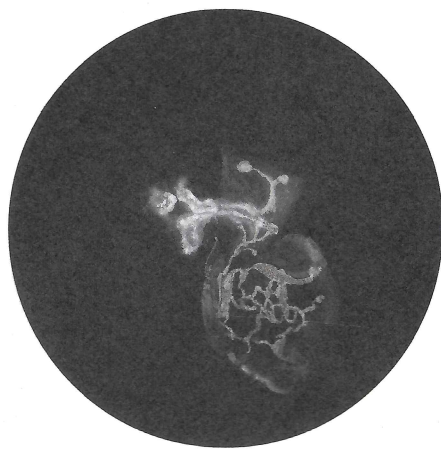
Bingyi, *Epoché*, 2014, ink on canvas, 2200 x 2000 cm. Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

### The Poetic Sense of Life Forms

In *Luminaries*, Bingyi inverts the traditional relationship in ink painting between the black of the foreground (ink) and the white of the background (paper) by using a highly diluted white acrylic paint on black paper. This inversion emphasizes the interplay between light and darkness to reveal a luminous creature at the centre of each work. The works are shaped as perfect circles that evoke a sense of looking through the lens of a microscope, and one encounters imagined microbiotic life forms painted with refined brushwork, lines, and dots. While in traditional ink painting one is able to understand the way in which an artist paints a work by studying the brushstrokes, this is difficult to discern in *Luminaries*, given the microscopic scale of each brushstroke, and an inability to decipher the manner in which these creatures of light take shape might lead one to wonder if they have been produced by some natural process. From a distance, one sees flaming ethereal organic forms emerging from the black of the paper. Upon closer inspection, one notices the finesse and highly precise brushwork technique employed to achieve these biomorphic forms.

There are several hundred works in this series, and each work is accompanied by a poem written on the back. Bingyi wrote these poems within a poetry slam setting while interacting with an audience, with a poem written spontaneously for each audience member, which she then matched to the life forms depicted in each of the paintings. Furthermore,





Top: Bingyi, 2015, ink on paper, 49 x 49 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Middle: Bingyi, 2015, ink on paper, 49 x 49 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Bottom: Bingyi, 2015, ink on paper, 49 x 49 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Top: Bingyi, 意 (Yi), 2015, ink on paper, 49 x 49 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Middle: Bingyi, 滢 (Ming), 2015, ink on paper, 49 x 49 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Bottom: Bingyi, 滢 (Se), 2015, ink on paper, 49 x 49 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

each of these life forms has been given a title in Chinese—represented by a Chinese character—and each one of these characters has within it the water radical (*shui*). While each work stands on its own, the entire series can be approached as a single work united by a long poem that ties each of them together as a macro-assemblage.

### Metaphors for Ideation and Creation

In *Fairies*, each of the paintings, depicted in a fan format, is a reflection of imagined life forms that are sentient. Drawing upon a classical form of the fan format, Bingyi compiles an album or a catalogue in a contemporary manner, revitalizing both fan and album formats in the process. The series is broken into sets of one hundred, with a total of nine hundred to one thousand paintings, and serves as a metaphor for ideation and creation, with each idea presented in the work represented by a singular fairy resembling a multicellular creature. Among these are the *Fairy of Adamancy*, *Fairy of Pupil*, *Fairy of Shadow*, *Fairy of Ink*, *Fairy of Abnormality*, *Fairy of Season*, *Fairy of Withering*, *Fairy of Fragrance*, and hundreds more.

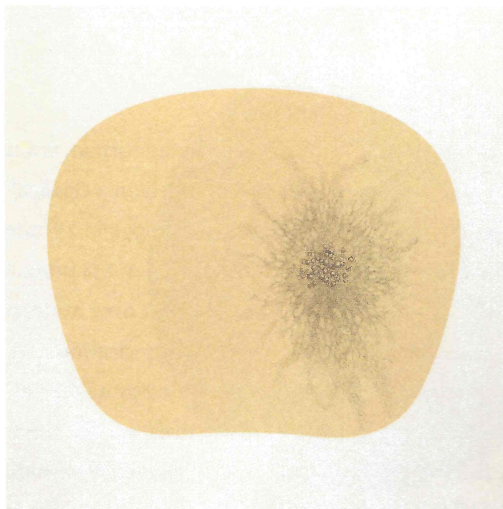
In the *Fairies* series, the intricate language of lines and dots offers viewers a dual perspective that changes with one's physical proximity to each artwork. From afar one sees the creatures as organic wholes, but the forms are rendered with such refinement that a new level of experience is made possible by using a magnifying glass made available to the viewer when the works are exhibited that allows one to see the infinitesimally tiny yet decisive individual brushstrokes. Bingyi has explained that she can paint at such a microscopic level only by touch. Although she cannot necessarily see the minute details with precision by using only the naked eye, her brushwork becomes a bodily operation in which she explores a touch-based form of feedback in using the brush instead of the usual visual methods of assessment.

*Fairies*, apart from representing the shift from exploring the macro to the micro in Bingyi's practice, also reflects the potential of new life to take a creative form. Even though these creatures are created in the artist's imagination, they seem to be part of the microbiotic world. As viewers, we are introduced to the inner mechanics of these creatures as we get to see the many ways in which life can find expression. It appears as if these creatures have been produced by some form of genetic encoding and cell division, yet they are named after abstract and concrete things such as a shadow, ink, fragrance, abnormality, season, and adamancy, which are not normally seen as biotic.

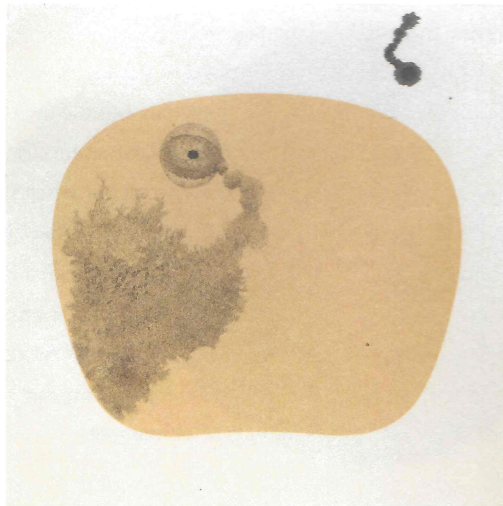
### The Nature of the Material Universe

*Wanwu: Metamorphosis* was made in Mount Longhu in 2013, and it is part of a series of works that Bingyi has been making since 2010. The concept of *Wanwu* in Chinese combines the number 10,000 and the character for matter. It denotes the uncountable, much like infinity, and it represents the material universe and all the things and matter that are contained within it. Covering twenty-two metres, the work *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* stretches across the room.<sup>3</sup> Viewers can walk around the work and above it on a clear glass

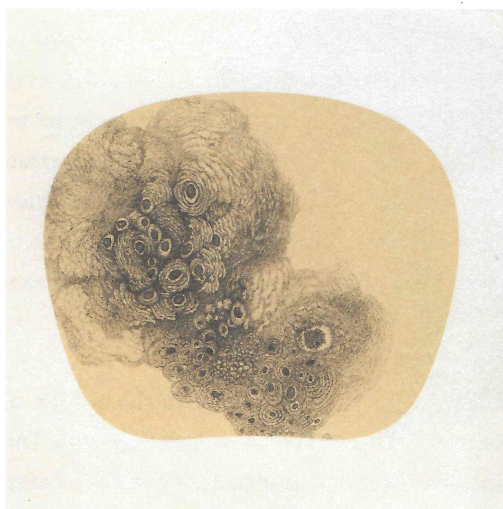




Top: Bingyi, *Fairies (Fairy of Bead)*, 2012–15, ink on paper, 34 x 34 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.



Middle: Bingyi, *Fairies (Fairy of Pupil)*, 2012–15, ink on paper, 34 x 34 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

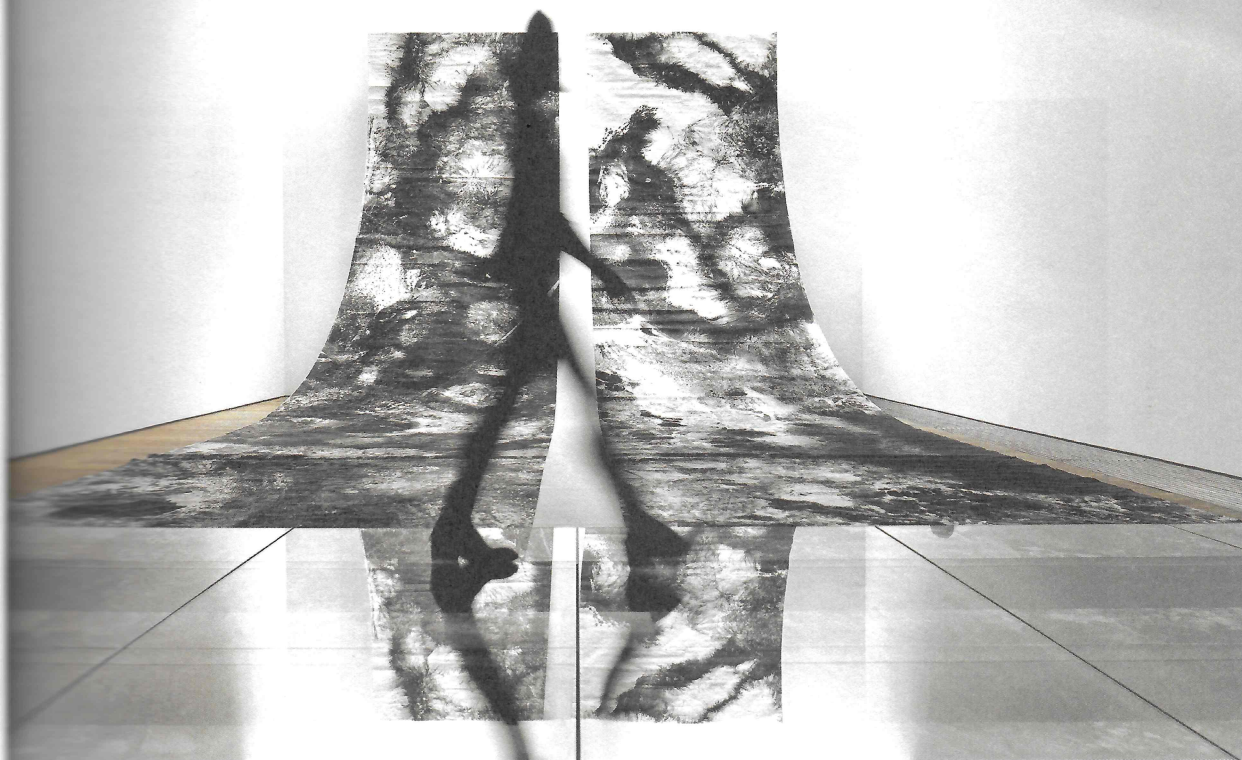


Bottom: Bingyi, *Fairies (Fairy of Vortex)*, 2012–15, ink on paper, 34 x 34 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Top: Bingyi, *Fairies (Fairy of Bead)*, 2012–15, ink on paper, 34 x 34 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Middle: Bingyi, *Fairies (Fairy of Pupil)*, 2012–15, ink on paper, 34 x 34 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Bottom: Bingyi, *Fairies (Fairy of Vortex)*, 2012–15, ink on paper, 34 x 34 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.



Bingyi, *Wanwu: Metamorphosis*, 2012, ink on paper, six pieces, 2290 x 260 cm each. Installation view at Ink Studio, Beijing. Photo: Jonathan Leijonhufvud. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

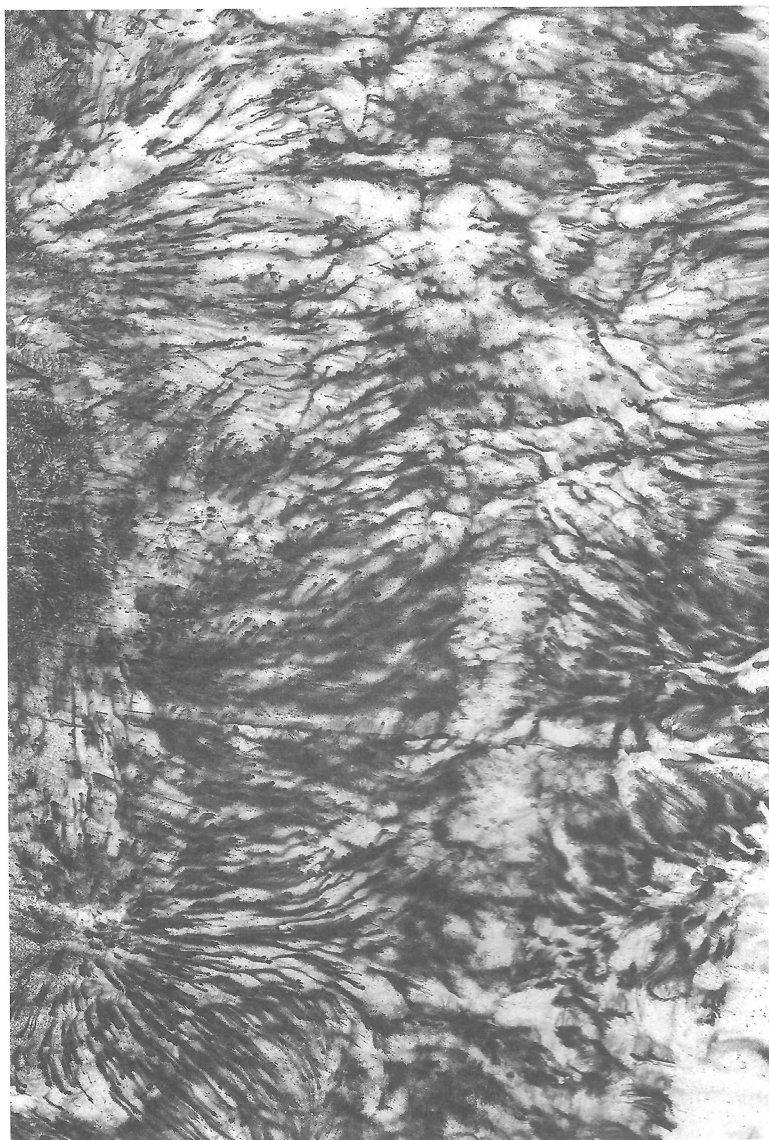
platform, allowing them to see patterns in the work that have emerged from various climatological and geological processes that it was exposed to.

To make this work, Bingyi went to Mount Longhu, a mountain located in Jiangxi province, which has traditionally been associated with Daoist spirituality. There she studied for months the geography and the weather conditions, recording precipitation, humidity, wind direction, the amount of solar exposure, and other variables that she then analyzed along with the topography of the landscape. Covering portions of the actual landscape with large lengths of paper that followed its topography, and using ink, water, and a secret ingredient, Bingyi optimized the interaction of these materials with the environment.

Ink is an amorphous agent that allows for layering and natural absorption of light. Sensitized to this quality, Bingyi worked with the ink at a molecular level, taking advantage of the natural attributes of the carbon that is found within it. In its interaction with various forces, ink leaves a record on paper through the movement of water that dissolves and dilutes the carbon, resulting in the gradations that we see in the work. The behaviour of this interaction of materials is modulated by geological and environmental forces. Factors such as gravity, wind direction, evaporation, humidity, air pressure, condensation, rain, sunlight, and the terrain of the landscape all shape the work. Thus, *Wanwu* is a work that represents a collaboration of the artist with natural forces and liquid systems, which are reflected in the traces of these processes and elements on the surface of the paper.

Through *Wanwu*, we are able to see intensive processes like flow, speed, pressure and diffusion with differences in density, saturation, pressure, and temperature that drive our weather systems. These processes are present throughout the world but often seem invisible to us. We see only their





Bingyi, Wanwu: *Metamorphosis* (detail), 2013, ink on paper, six pieces, 2200 x 260 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.




Left: Bingyi, Wanwu: *Metamorphosis* (detail), 2013, ink on paper, six pieces, 2200 x 260 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Right: Bingyi, Wanwu: *Metamorphosis* (detail), 2013, ink on paper, six pieces, 2200 x 260 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

effects, especially when we consider factors such as wind, air pressure, and humidity. Regarding this invisibility of sorts, in *Difference and Repetition* Gilles Deleuze introduces the distinction between the scientific concepts of intensive and extensive properties. Extensive properties include “length, area, or volume,” which are “intrinsically divisible. A volume of matter divided into two equal halves produces two volumes, each having half the extent of the original one.”<sup>4</sup> Intensive properties include indivisible, or invisible, properties such as temperature and pressure. For example, if a bucket of water boiling at one hundred degrees is divided in two equal halves, each half will not be at fifty degrees but will be at the original one hundred degrees.<sup>5</sup> In her work, Bingyi reveals the dynamics of intensive



Bingyi, *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* (detail), 2013, ink on paper, six pieces, 2200 x 260 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.



Left: Bingyi, *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* (detail), 2013, ink on paper, six pieces, 2200 x 260 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Right: Bingyi, *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* (detail), 2013, ink on paper, six pieces, 2200 x 260 cm each. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

properties, in liquid systems, by creating a situation in which ink interacts with the natural world in ways that the work of art becomes the intersection point for the expression of intensive and extensive properties.

*Wanwu* represents these intersections of intensive processes and systems as a metaphor for all the forms and matter in the universe that emerge from the intensive properties that we experience through the weather system, the Big Bang, entropy (in thermodynamics, the idea that energy in the universe moves from order to disorder, with entropy itself being a measurement of that shift), the flow of energy (from one body to another), and through the cooling of the universe (since the Big Bang, as the universe expands, it cools as energy spreads out due to this expansion). While *Luminaries* reflects intensities leading to the extensive forms we see on the dark paper Bingyi employs for that series, *Wanwu* is directly about the intensities themselves and particularly about the traces they leave behind. According to Craig Yee, the work points to complexity theory, systems theory, chaos theory, entropy, the intensive and extensive, all of which are made apparent and visible through the work itself.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, the work makes these concepts tangible to the viewer, who can internalize these concepts through direct experience of the work.

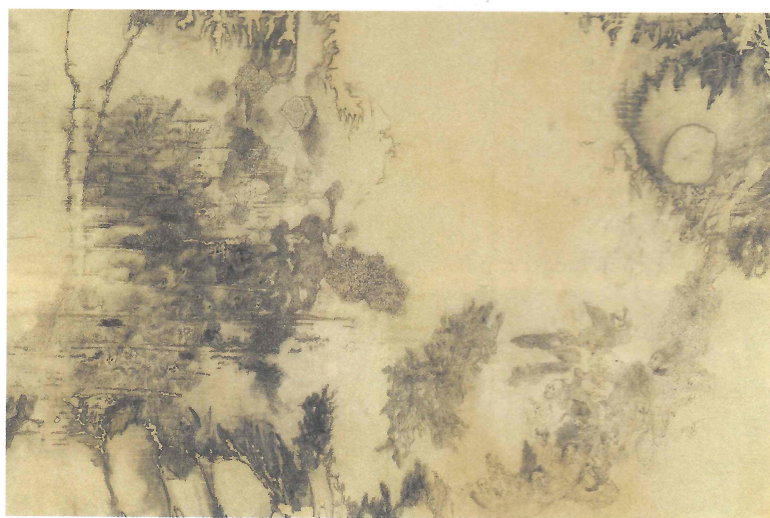
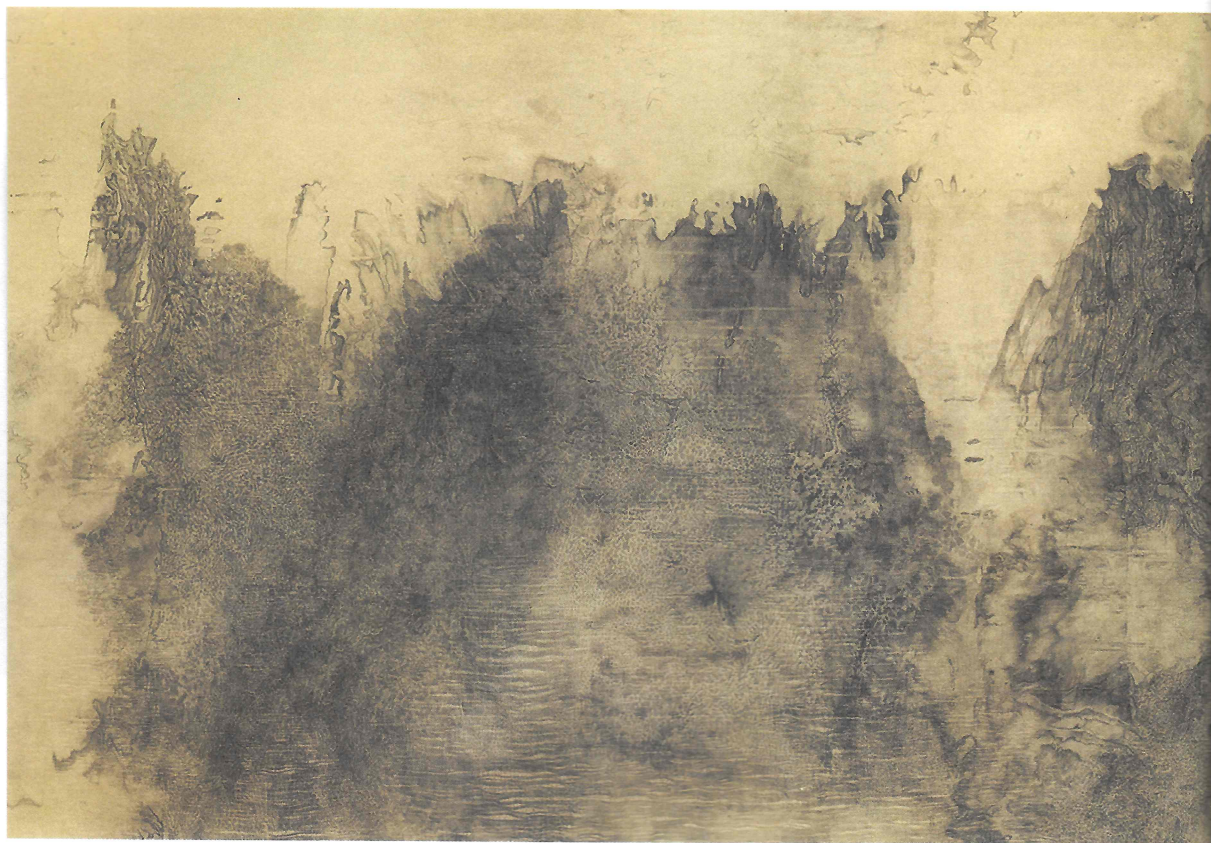
### The Death of Humankind / The Rebirth of Nature

In *Apocalypse*, the artist emulates styles and techniques of representing landscape, mountains, water, and mist from the northern Song genre of monumental landscape painting. It seems as if climactic forces have taken their toll on the painting, and again we see the residue of the process of interaction between these climactic forces and the original work. The work is done on silk, and from the individualized expressive gestural kind of brushwork that Bingyi applies, one can find in it affinities with Song dynasty painting.

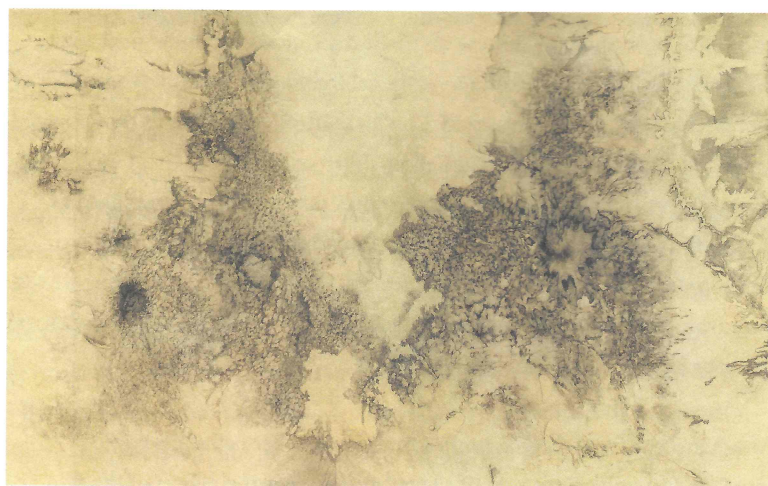
In this work, as the title suggests, the subject matter involves the demise of the human species. The painting depicts eight different scenes accompanied by eight short poems. Each scene and poem reflects a particular period and tells of a stage in the apocalypse. Most prominent in the work is the depiction of the flood, which can be understood through the perspective of biblical metaphor or Chinese myth. In the Chinese mythological sense, the work recalls Yu the Great, the mythical founder of the Xia dynasty (seventeenth–fifteenth century BCE) who controlled the floods that plagued mainland China, specifically the Yellow River valley. Yu the Great developed a massive project of dredging river channels that were to be employed as outlets for overflowing water; once this impediment to socioeconomic development was removed, Chinese society flourished. In *Apocalypse* we see a returning of the floods; they are threatening and have the power to destroy the very foundation of human civilization.

Another scene from *Apocalypse* is a mass grave where all souls come together and unite. This part of the painting shows the effects of the flood,





Left: Bingyi, *Apocalypse* (detail), 2011–15, ink on silk, 96 x 2000 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.



Bingyi, *Apocalypse* (detail), 2011–15, ink on silk, 96 x 2000 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.





Left: Bingyi, *Apocalypse* (detail), 2011–15, ink on silk, 96 x 2000 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

Bingyi, *Apocalypse* (detail), 2011–15, ink on silk, 96 x 2000 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

with debris and rubble floating on the water, reflecting the manner in which nature has decimated our human-made structures. As such, the painting represents a meditation on our own demise. Although the majority of the painting is invested in documenting and representing the destruction of our human world through natural forces, one part also shows the rebirth of the natural world without human presence. While *Luminaries* and *Fairies* are primarily focused on life, *Apocalypse* is mainly about death.

Aside from showing the collective decay and disappearance of the human species on the planet, the work in its last scene shows a “secret garden” in which nature has taken over from the ruins of humanity. *Apocalypse* serves as a reflection of the momentous impact we as a species have had on the planet during the Anthropocene (the current geological age, which has resulted from extensive damage to the climate and environment because of human activity). It is apparent that the natural world has primarily been defined by the effect humans have had on it. As a result, human extinction leads to the rise of the natural world and its re-encountered equilibrium. Another particularly interesting aspect of this painting is that Bingyi, in her study of natural disasters, painted parts of the work at these sites; for example, the secret garden scene is from Bingyi’s visit to sites following the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. One is able to detect the holes, wear, and tear on the silk of the painting that are the outcome of this process.

### The Performance of Suspended Creation

*Epoché* is a performance piece done in Shenzhen and commissioned by the Shenzhen International Airport. For this piece, Bingyi worked with



the owner of the airport, who is also the pilot of the helicopter she is performing from. *Epoché* derives its title from phenomenology, in which the French word *epoché* means the suspension of any assumptions that we have about the existence and reality of the external world we are a part of. The concept was made popular by Edmund Husserl in *Ideas I*, which refers to phenomenological *epoché*, also called bracketing or phenomenological reduction.<sup>7</sup> In this work, Bingyi ascends in midair in a helicopter with five hundred kilograms of ink in twenty-kilogram bags, which she then, in collaboration with gravity, drops upon the paper laid out on the ground below. According to Yee, the work, like its title, “serves as a metaphor for the state of mind found in meditation especially in the Buddhist tradition that involves decoupling oneself from the habituated way of interacting with the world.”<sup>8</sup> As soon as the video of this performance was posted on the Internet, viewers gave it the Chinese title *modan*, meaning ink bomb.

From Bingyi’s perspective in the helicopter, there is a feeling of detachment, and ultimately a feeling of *epoché*. In this work, she engages with the natural properties of ink in combination with the performative aspects of art making. As a result, she develops a connection between ink and performance in which ink is used to record phenomena in the natural world, which, like *Wanwu*, captures the behaviour of the natural world and its forces, in particular wind and gravity. Nowhere do we see the involvement of the brush, which in traditional Chinese ink painting creates the connection between body and mind through the physical recording of the calligraphic line. This becomes particularly important when we consider that the result of the performance is a record of its process and its residue, preserved as the ink lands on the paper.

Bingyi, *Epoché*, 2014,  
helicopter with bag of ink.  
© Bingyi. Courtesy of the  
artist.



Bingyi, *Epoché*, 2014,  
helicopter with bag of ink.  
© Bingyi. Courtesy of the  
artist.

Bingyi, *Epoché*, 2014,  
canvas on ground. © Bingyi.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Bingyi, *Epoché*, 2014,  
canvas on ground receiving  
ink. © Bingyi. Courtesy of  
the artist.



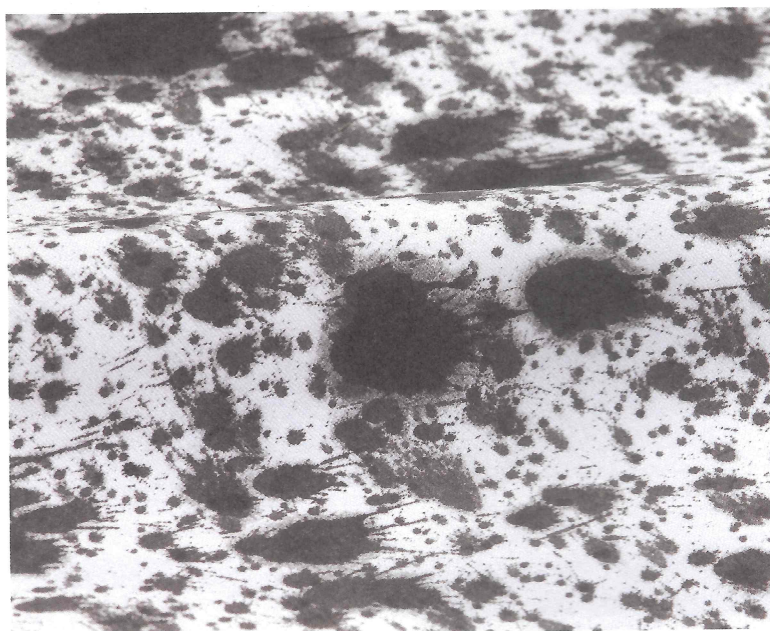
Bingyi, *Epoché*, 2014, artist  
with canvas on ground.  
© Bingyi. Courtesy of the  
artist.



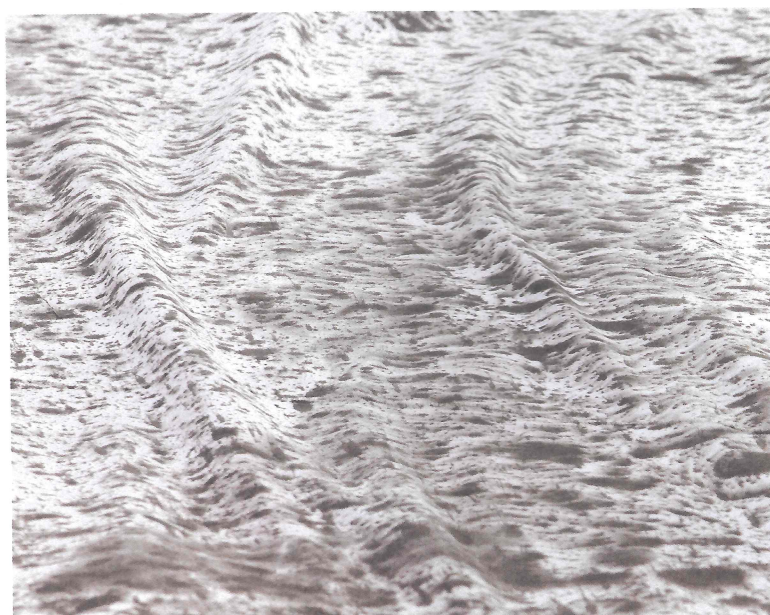




Bingyi, *Epoché* (detail),  
2014, ink on canvas, 2200 x  
2000 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy  
of the artist and Ink Studio,  
Beijing.



Bingyi, *Epoché* (detail),  
2014, ink on canvas, 2200 x  
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Bingyi, *Epoché* (detail), 2014, ink on canvas, 2200 x 2000 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.



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Bingyi, *Epoché* (detail), 2014, ink on canvas, 2200 x 2000 cm. © Bingyi. Courtesy of the artist and Ink Studio, Beijing.

## Interdisciplinary Performance

In addition to her art practice, Bingyi is also an experimental performance artist. She works in a collaborative setting with classically trained musicians and performers, offering musical, literary, and theatrical themes around which multiple performers improvise. This kind of collaborative artistic creation resembles that of the Six Dynasties period, during which counter-cultural figures participated in calligraphic and musical performances and in painting and poetry recitation. In these performances there is a mutual and synesthetic appreciation of different forms of expression. She invokes a syncretic, performing art form in mixing music, poetic composition, dance, and artistic production. Through this aspect of her artwork, she finds further equilibrium between her contemporary experimental performing practice and a deep historical awareness.

## Conclusion

Bingyi's art explores the properties that define our universe and that go beyond our immediate perception. She explores notions of time that are outside the traditional definitions with works that are read as events rather than just objects of aesthetic production. In this way, Bingyi's art practice lends power to the intervention that nature, climate, and environment can have in the development of her work. The works themselves become residues of a spatial and temporal relationship, metonymically instantiating the existence of the universe and the processes and matter that compose it, serving as extensions of this universe. Moreover, the works create a shift in the perception of the viewer to accommodate an understanding of the multiplicity of the universe, which finds expression in macrocosms (galaxies, constellations, clusters) and microcosms (microbiotic organisms, cellular life forms, subatomic and molecular structures). By interacting with Bingyi's body of work, one is reminded of the universe as living and breathing, an organism governed by its own forces, energy, and processes that give it life and momentum.

## Notes

1. Bingyi, "Painting is a Flood and a Wild Beast," Ink Studio website, <http://www.inkstudio.com.cn/press/17/>.
2. Overview of Bingyi's *Intensive/Extensive* exhibition, "INTENSIVE/EXTENSIVE—March 21–May 3, 2015," Ink Studio website, <http://www.inkstudio.com.cn/exhibitions/14/overview/>.
3. As presented in Bingyi's *Intensive/Extensive* exhibition at Ink Studio, Beijing, March 25–May 3, 2015.
4. "Gilles Deleuze," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/deleuze/>.
5. Ibid.
6. Craig Yee (Co-founder of Ink Studio), interview with the author, Ink Studio, Beijing, March 24, 2015.
7. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy—First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (1913; The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982).
8. Craig Yee (Co-founder of Ink Studio), unpublished interview with the author, Ink Studio, Beijing, March 24, 2015.