

## Cui Xiuwen

Cui Xiuwen won the distinguished commission of the Dame Jillian Sackler International Arts Exhibition Program for a solo exhibition at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University. Miguel A. Benavides curated the exhibition, which was on view from May 27 to August 27, 2016. This annual competition encourages international artists from a multitude of countries to apply.<sup>1</sup>

Cui Xiuwen's work, *Angel's Light*, is a multi-part installation situated in four different areas of the museum, and although each installation is different in several important ways, they are also related.<sup>2</sup> One of the immediate impressions is how the exhibition winds its way from the entrance to the museum, through to the inner courtyard, back into the ancient art galleries, and finally to the main space. Though the sprawling expanse of the building is great, the works manage to fill it. Cui Xiuwen's overall theme is light, which manifests in different ways in each part of the exhibition. Each gallery has a different light source with the last incorporating the most modern adaptation of light technology. The works, at first sight, seem conventional both in style and media; yet the themes embedded in them are unconventional and make reference to the history of art. There are several threads of unity in addition to light, and there are many possible levels of interpretation.

### Part 1: Body

Upon entering the museum, one is confronted by an assortment of soft rectangular sculptures covered in velour of various colours that nearly take up the entire space, which measures 13.41 by 7.73 meters. The audience, whose participation is essential to each part of this exhibition, is encouraged to walk among the sculptures, sit on them, and use them like furniture.



Cui Xiuwen, *Body*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

In this first part, called *The Body*, the physical presence of the “furniture” feels intrusive. It is not clear at first what guides the choice of shape and colours—red, blue, golden yellow, and green. But in an interview, Cui Xiuwen explained that she has been reconsidering the history of art, both Western and Chinese, and that these particular colours are found in what



Top and bottom: Cui Xiuwen, *Body*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

she identifies as the oldest Chinese painting, *Loshen Fu*, an illustration of a poem by Cao Zhi (192–232) written in 222 AD, by renowned artist Gu Kaizhi (c. 344–406).<sup>3</sup> In this respect, she grounds her efforts within the history of Chinese art, but the composition of the sculptural shapes and use of textiles clearly relate to the work of minimalist artists of the 1960s, such as Joseph Beuys’s square piles of grey felt,<sup>4</sup> Robert Morris’s felt sculptures,<sup>5</sup> and Donald Judd’s arrangements of boxes.<sup>6</sup> With these two cultural references embedded in the work, Cui Xiuwen merges disparate aesthetic sensibilities and historical eras. In respect to the lighting, in this first room it is artificial, diffuse, and subtle.



## Part 2: The Heart

Through a set of traditional Chinese garden doors, the viewer approaches Part 2, *The Heart*, which is located in an adjacent courtyard measuring 21 by 34.38 meters. Dominating this space is a huge ancient rock whose origins can be traced to the great eleventh-century literati painter and court official of the Song dynasty, Mi Fu.<sup>7</sup> Mi Fu revered garden rocks, especially those with tortured sculptural shapes and complex convex and concave surfaces, the result of natural erosion, that represent the *yang* of



Top and left: Cui Xiuwen, *Heart*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

the eternal *yin-yang* duality—that is, the adamantine, unchanging, eternal aspect of the universe. Cui Xiuwen explained to me that it was impossible to move the rock, so she built a cage of thin metal rectangular shapes around it. Repeating the palette of Part 1, she transformed the previous three-dimensional solid forms into open linear boxes of similar geometric configurations. The multi-coloured and variously sized metal bars surround the sculpture as if in an embrace, respectful but all-encompassing. Here, as well, an allusion to the minimalist sculptures of the sixties is evident, in particular the open box-like structures of Sol Lewitt.<sup>8</sup> But it is important to note that Cui Xiuwen's linear metal designs embrace the stone, again proposing a contrast between the ancient and modern, Chinese and Western. Here the unifying aspect of light is that of the sun, and it floods the sculpture.

Cui Xiuwen, *Heart*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.



### Part 3: Spirit

After a meandering walk through a series of museum rooms displaying ancient Chinese pottery, one reaches Part 3, *Spirit*. Filling a long but narrow corridor measuring 27.36 by 5 meters is a light installation: a series of thin, upright red metal rectangular forms that comprise a kind of tunnel. Toward the middle of the structure some of the rectangles are tilted to the left and then to the right. Opaque plastic panels filled with fluorescent lights illuminate the red rectangles as well as the footpath. Walking through the passage provides a sense of travel, but, the tilting rectangles, the zigzag path, and the intense light is disorienting, like a walk through a fun house. The physical experience is that of light-headedness, of spirit without form, an out of body sensation. Here, too, allusions to ancient Chinese art can be cited—the jagged tunnel path is reminiscent of the layout of ancient Chinese scholars' gardens, which avoid straight lines to enhance the sense of distance and allow for multiple and diverse views of the garden. As for references to modern minimalist art, this time it is Dan Flavin's neon installations that come to mind.



Cui Xiuwen, *Spirit*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

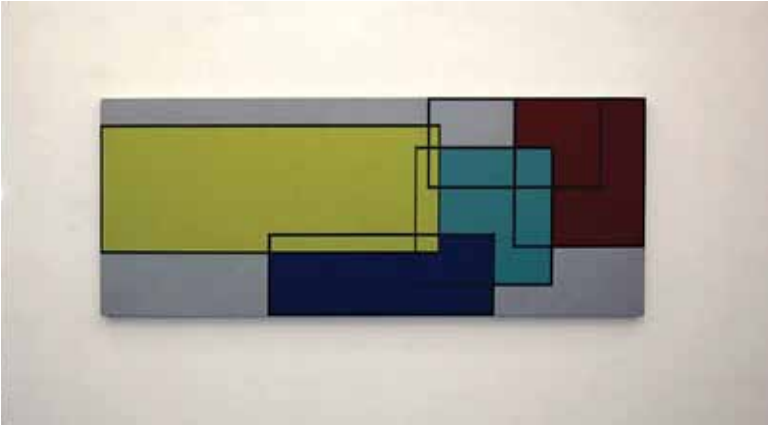
Cui Xiuwen, *Spirit*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.



Cui Xiuwen, *Spirit*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

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installation. Courtesy of the  
artist.





Cui Xiuwen, *Fate*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

#### Part 4 Destiny

The clue to the designs of the previous compositions becomes apparent in the last room and its closet alcove. Mounted on the wall of the large darkened rectangular main exhibition hall that measures 7.28 by 14.31 meters is a painting with an austere composition of four linear shapes mirroring the same palette and shapes as the first two parts. One immediately senses that it may have been this composition that was deconstructed and reworked—taking the flat abstract arrangement of coloured shapes and making them into sculptural forms of the body in the first chamber and into the open rectangular coloured metal composition in the courtyard. Projected on the wall opposite the painting is an ever-changing representation of the painting using coloured light to render variations of the painting's structure. A special computer program provides sets of varying hues that culminate in a monochrome design; then this sequencing set of colours is repeated. After the bombast of the light-filled passage, one encounters this clue to the various artistic manifestations of the painting, but it perpetually disappears and reappears before the viewers' eyes.



Cui Xiuwen, *Fate*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Cui Xiuwen, *Fate*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.



To the left is a small curtained closet that measures 2 by 3 meters. On the floor of its black interior, coloured shapes corresponding to the design of the painting appear as patterns of light. Stepping on a shape causes it to vanish, so as one walks about the enclosed area, one shape disappears and another emerges. Walking on them recalls the children's game of hopscotch, which Cui Xiuwen avers was the original idea for the work. While the painting in previous room is palpable and has a solid presence, the shapes in this room are ephemeral and elusive.

### Interpretations

In conversation, Cui Xiuwen admits to no clear interpretation of the work, saying she relied on intuition in her choices. But it is clear from her recent reexamination of art history that this work presents a temporal progression of the arts through time, in its allusion to both Western art (from the soft sculptures of the first space to the linear sculptures of the second and the light-filled displays of the last three rooms) and Eastern art: Gu Kaizhi's palette and the Mi Fu's garden rock. There are also transitional sequences in the materials she has employed—beginning with textiles and iron bars, projected light, and digital media, the materials span historical eras from the rock age to the digital.

The light transitions from the initial diffuse artificial light of the first chamber to the natural daylight in the second to the bright concentrated fluorescent light of the third and ending in the darker, intermittent light in the main area and its enclosed alcove. Cui Xiuwen says that she hopes the audience will be spiritually affected by the light displays and playfully interact with the colour and forms in the third and fourth room. She explains in the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition:

Through the theme of the exhibition, Light, we hope people can experience changes at visual, psychological and spiritual



levels, from tangible to intangible forms, by interactions in the space and the visuals presented by the exhibition, which is also the journey of experiencing tangible feelings to psychological and spiritual feelings then to the life experience of the totally intangible world beyond spirit. Light is the guide and direction for our lives.<sup>9</sup>

Using the medium of light to interact with and affect the mood of the audience recalls the light works of James Turrell in his 2013 exhibition at the Guggenheim, New York<sup>10</sup> and Olafur Eliasson at Tate Modern, London in 2004,<sup>11</sup> but her scale is human and intimate, and in contrast to their overwhelming polychrome illumination, the light in her tunnel is pure white.



Cui Xiuwen, *Fate*, 2016, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Cui Xiuwen says her intention was also that the audience would participate and intermingle with the different parts of the installation—walking among the sculptured forms, around the metal cage surrounding the rock, through the lighted passage, and into the dynamic light shows of the last two rooms. Thus, aside from the light, there are other unifying elements throughout the entire exhibition that include the palette, the geometric shapes, and the invitation

for interactivity. Finally, it is important to consider the suggestive titles of each part; they evoke the cycle of life from the first embodiment of form, heart, and spirit, to destiny. In the last darkened chamber, the light-filled shapes shift from one possibility to another, and I think of Zhuangzi, the fourth-century Daoist sage:<sup>12</sup>

In the beginning we lack not only life but form. Not form only, but spirit. We are blended into the one great featureless indistinguishable mass. Then a time came when mass evolved spirit, spirit evolved form, form evolved life.

Cui Xiuwen's recent creation differs greatly from her early work. Her artistic career, which spans decades, was first noted for her constructed photographs of young girls in school uniforms.<sup>13</sup> The plight of women in China follows the trajectory of the developmental progress of this child to adolescence, though the models change at intervals. The series, with various titles—*One Day* (2004), and *Angel* (2006), addresses the disparities between men and women in China; despite Mao's dictum "women uphold half the sky," it is a story of physical and emotional abuse, lack of opportunity, and limited resources.<sup>14</sup> The pregnant teenager who appears in the last stage

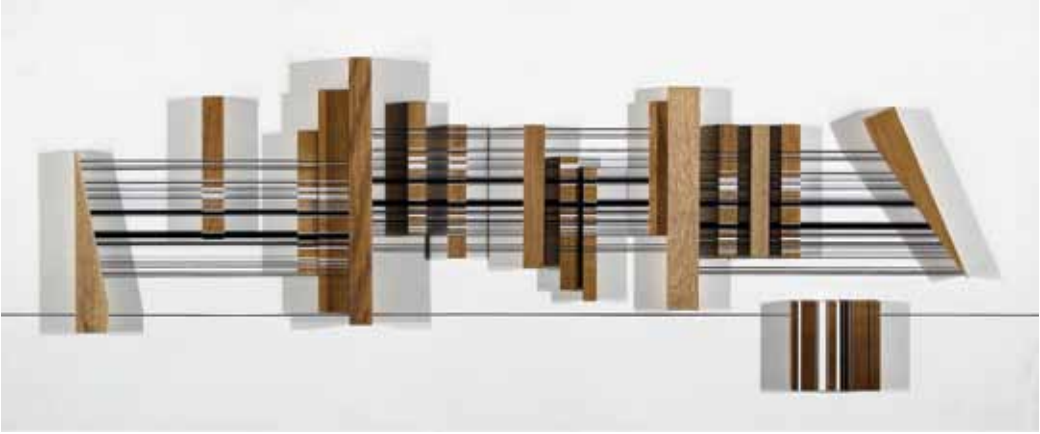


Cui Xiuwen, *Angel No. 13*, 2006, photograph, 100 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

of the series represents the problems of rape, enforced abortions, and social opprobrium. In the final phase of this part of her career, in 2009, Cui Xiuwen employed a life-sized doll, an exact duplicate of the young girl, as a second version of the artist herself and placed the two figures in the barren snowscape of her native Harbin. The pairing drew thoughtful confrontations between fake and real, live and inanimate, body and soul, and more. Cui Xiuwen has also made videos, beginning with *Ladies* (2000), in which she secreted a video camera in the ladies' room of a Beijing nightclub and recorded the stashing of money earned in the dark corners of the club, threats to husbands promising to reveal his doings with the girls to his wife, and primping. Several other videos ensued, and the most recent, *Spiritual Realm* of 2010, does relate to her work at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art, Beijing. In the video, naked migrant workers were asked to imagine the heavenly realms, moving slowly to music.<sup>15</sup> In these works, Cui Xiuwen searched for a way to express the spiritual world, the relationship between body and soul, life and death. In another dramatic reversal of art production, around 2012, she began to make abstract works,

Cui Xiuwen, *Existential Emptiness Nos. 4-6*, 2009, photograph, 114 x 450 cm. Courtesy of the artist.





Cui Xiuwen, *Qin-Se No. 1*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 120 cm. Photo: Phoebe Bournel. Courtesy of the artist.



Cui Xiuwen, *Qin-se No. 7*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 60 cm. Photo: Phoebe Bournel. Courtesy of the artist.

striped acrylic paintings with wood embellishments, and video installations. Here she explored the expression of a new kind of deep space, audience participation, and the effects of light and shape on the viewer.<sup>16</sup> In the context of her oeuvre, the work on view at the Sackler is the culmination of the exploratory efforts that marked the last five years as well as her earlier career. Cui Xiuwen is fearless in her ceaseless exploration of herself and her art. “This puzzle about life that will never be finished or thoroughly solved until we become truly enlightened. That is the destination for life and it is where all human beings will ultimately go. But for now we can only walk . . . or jump . . . step by step.”<sup>17</sup>

#### Notes

1. Often a group of artists is selected; it may be that another Chinese artist will not be chosen for ten years, as one of the goals of the award is to recognize artists from a broad spectrum of cultures. See <http://www.sackler.org/arts/beijing>.
2. Cui Xiuwen, *Light*, <http://www.sackler.org/cui-xiuwen-angels-light>.
3. The earliest extant version is attributed to the twelfth century. Three copies dating to the Southern Song dynasty have survived: one in the Palace Museum, Beijing; another in the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; and a third in the Liaoning Museum, Shenyang.
4. On display at Dia Beacon, New York. See Joseph Beuys: *Fond sculptures, Codices Madrid drawings (1974), and 7000 Oaks, a permanent installation furthering Beuys' Documenta 7 project*, October 9, 1987–June 19, 1988, <http://www.diaart.org/exhibitions/main/75/>.
5. Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1969, 459.2 x 184.1 x 2.5 cm, see [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/robert-morris-untitled-1969/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/robert-morris-untitled-1969/).
6. See Donald Judd, *untitled*, 1971, anodized aluminum. Collection of the Walker Art Center, Gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation, 1971, see <http://www.walkerart.org/press/browse/press-releases/2008/new-walker-art-center-collection-exhibition-f/>.
7. Mi Fu (米芾 or 米黻; 1051–1107) was a famous Song dynasty official, poet, painter, and calligrapher known for his extraordinary admiration of rocks. For the symbolism of ancient rocks see Jing Wang, *The Story of Stone: Intertextuality, Ancient Chinese Stone Lore, and the Stone Symbolism in Dream of the Red Chamber, Water Margin, and The Journey to the West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 178.
8. Sol LeWitt, *Two Open Modular Cubes/Half-Off*, 1972, enamel on aluminum, 160 x 30.5 x 23.3 cm. Collection Tate Museum, purchased 1974. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/le Witt-two-open-modular-cubes-half-off-t01865/>. Dan Flavin, *Untitled (to Don Judd, colorist 1-5)*, 1987, collection Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. See <http://www.artfund.org/what-to-see/exhibitions/2014/08/16/dan-flavin-exhibition/>.
9. *Cui Xiuwen: Light*, a solo exhibition at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University, May 27 to August 27, 2016, pamphlet, 6.
10. James Turrell, solo show at the Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York, 2013, see <http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/turrell/>.
11. Olafur Eliasson, *Take Your Time, One-way colour tunnel*, 2007, see [http://archv.sfmoma.org/exhib\\_events/exhibitions/232/](http://archv.sfmoma.org/exhib_events/exhibitions/232/). Alternatively, see the 2004 The Weather Project in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, London, see <http://www.olafureliasson.net/>.
12. Cyril Birch, *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press 1994), 82.
13. Patricia Karetzky, “Cui Xiuwen, Walking on Broken Glass,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 9, no. 3 (2010), 18–33.
14. See [cuixiuwen.com](http://cuixiuwen.com).
15. Patricia Karetzky, “Cui Xiuwen’s Recent Work: Spiritual Realms in the Material World,” *n.paradoxa* 29 (January 2012), 62–65.
16. [Cuixiuwen.com](http://cuixiuwen.com).
17. *Cui Xiuwen: Light*, a solo exhibition at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University, May 27 to August 27, 2016, pamphlet, 6.