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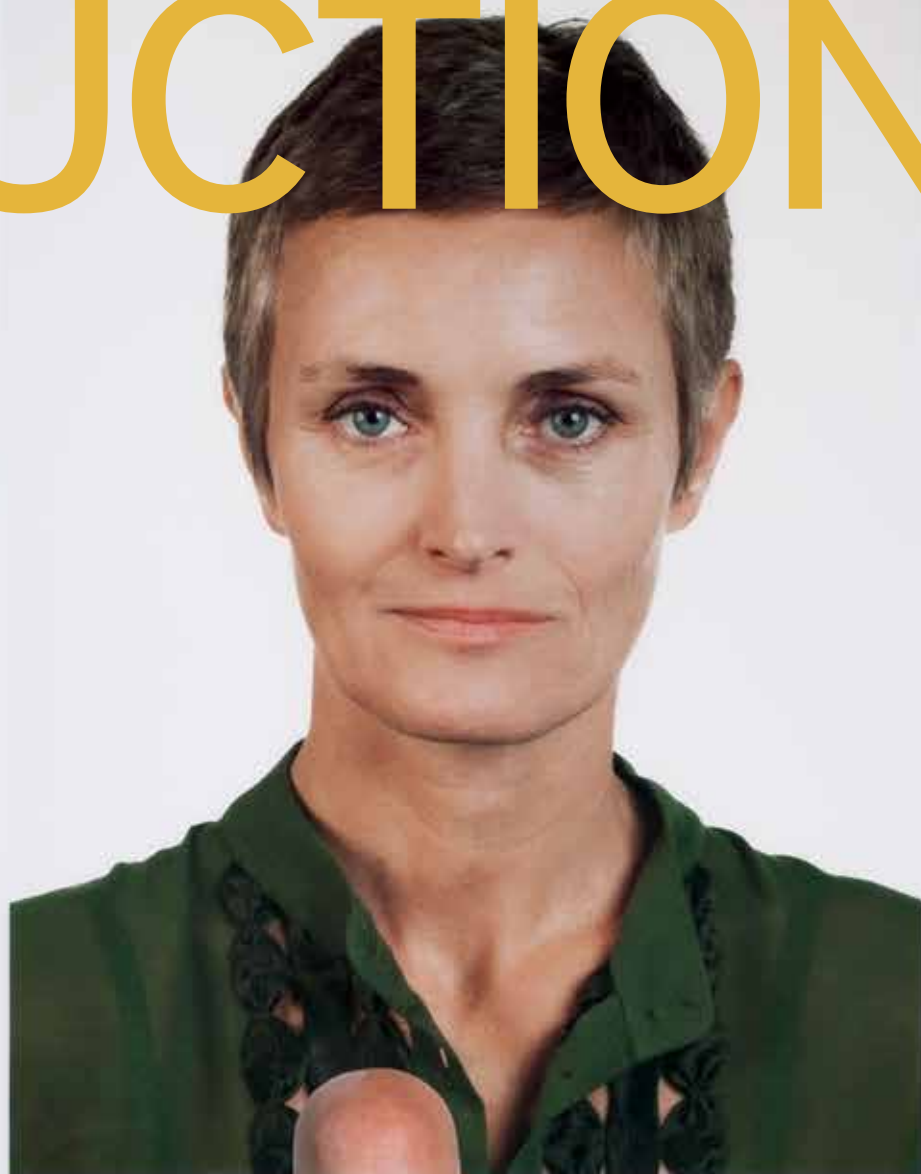
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# LIN TIANMIAO

WITH A RETROSPECTIVE AT THE ASIA SOCIETY AND A CHELSEA GALLERY DEBUT, ONE OF CHINA'S LEADING ARTISTS RETURNS IN TRIUMPH TO NEW YORK, THE CITY THAT FIRST NURTURED HER ART

BY MADELEINE O'DEA  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUDY ZHAO

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I ARRIVE AT LIN TIANMIAO'S Beijing studio to the whine of power tools and encounter a scene of ordered chaos in the courtyard. Works from the past 17 years are being packed for shipment to New York, where Lin's first museum retrospective in the United States will be presented at the Asia Society Museum from September 7 through January 27. Everywhere are wooden crates in different stages of construction, the completed ones off to the side, hammered shut, and emblazoned with a photograph of the work within.

It seems wrong to see Lin's art confined to these slab-sided boxes. Hers are emotionally powerful pieces, tactile and dramatic, created over weeks of handwork reflecting the artist's particular focus and intensity. Some embody a female nude exploding into cascades of wound thread and hair. Others are synthetic bones or tools encased in so many layers of silky thread that they have become fetishes. Still others look like garments for the denizens of a mutated world. Many serve as components of large-scale installations, which often incorporate video or sound and demand space to be experienced properly. Yet for all this variety, the works evince a remarkable conceptual unity that derives from the basic craft at the heart of Lin's practice: the act of winding thread.

Before machines took over, cotton thread didn't come on spools but in skeins that had to be wound by hand into balls before work could begin. Lin learned to do this from her mother. She learned, too, the precarious nature of this seemingly simple process: Only if the thread is wound correctly can it be unwound again for use. Even as



Lin Tianmiao with a work in progress in her Beijing studio.



From Lin's *Badges*, 2009, right, one of several large embroidery hoops with words that contain the Chinese character for "woman" and signify a stereotypical female role. *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, 1995, below, comprises 20,000 threaded sewing needles that converge on a mattress along with a video monitor in the pillowcase that shows the artist's hands winding balls of thread.

you are winding up the thread, you are establishing how it will be unwound again. Each ball is the product of labor expended and the promise of labor to come. A central element of Lin's practice since her earliest days as an artist, these balls of thread have become emblems of the relentless concentration that her work demands.

Fundamental to the power of Lin's work is the sheer perseverance that brings them into being. The British curator and critic Karen Smith, who has written frequently about Lin, observed in a 2003 commentary that "the mind-boggling effort involved is simply commensurate with the mesmerizing effect." The first work Lin showed publicly, in an open studio at her courtyard home in Beijing in 1995, gives some idea of the painstaking process her art entails. Titled *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, the installation centers on a bed. The mattress is pierced by 20,000 sewing needles, so many that from a distance they look like the fur of



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a startled animal. Around the bed are scattered an equal number of balls of thread. From each, a thread has been drawn and passed through the eye of one needle. The thousands of needles stand as if poised to begin sewing, while at the head of the bed, beneath a sheer pillowcase, lies a video monitor playing a tape of Lin's hands winding ball after ball of thread.

It was a remarkable debut, not just for the power of the work itself but also, in retrospect, for how clearly it pointed to the work that would follow. Perhaps that was because of Lin's maturity (she was 34) and the time she had spent contemplating the kind of artist she wanted to be. Born in 1961, Lin studied oil painting at Capital Normal University in Beijing in the early 1980s. One of her professors was the now-acclaimed video artist Wang Gongxin. By 1986 they were married and living in an old courtyard house in the center of the city. While Wang kept his university job, Lin joined China's new breed of independent entrepreneurs who were exploiting every fingerhold of opportunity created by the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping. Lin and Wang quickly became part of Beijing's burgeoning bohemia, with their home a popular meeting place for artists. Lin laughs when she recalls that she once fed 20 sittings of their artist friends in a single day.

In 1987 the couple journeyed to New York. Wang had been offered a one-year stint as a visiting scholar at the State University of New York in Cortland and Albany. They ended up staying in the U.S. for nearly eight years, settling in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where they rented a loft in an artists' complex. Wang devoted himself to art, and Lin soon found her métier as a textile designer. By the time they returned to Beijing in 1995, Lin had established »





Lin's assistants at work in her studio packing *The Golden Mean*, 2012, for shipment to the Asia Society in New York. The fourth panel of the piece is in the background. The detail below shows synthetic bones and implements wrapped in gold thread and applied to golden fabric embroidered with skulls, bones, and flowers to suggest a memento mori.

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a successful design business, with more work than she could handle. She also had developed a deep understanding of textiles, refining the eye and feel for materials that distinguish her work today.

I sit with Lin in her lounge room as she grinds through the paperwork involved in shipping her art to New York. Twenty-nine pieces have been reduced to data—dimensions, condition, weight, and value—and she signs off on each. Lin and Wang designed every detail of their home, from the garden and pond to the large studios in which they work. Wang's studio has a soundstage where he shoots increasingly elaborate videos; Lin's includes a spacious, window-lined area where she works with her assistants and a separate room for storing the bones, tools, and other objects destined to play a role in her art.

Lin tells me that the physical activity of making art is vital to bringing her ideas to the surface. She never starts with a plan. "It is in the process," she explains, "that little by little my idea becomes clear." She begins a piece in solitude and finds her way instinctively. Once the course is clear, she works with a group of women, sometimes as many as 30 but routinely around 10. Lin describes how peaceful she finds this cooperative labor. In fact, the sense of artist and assistants working in harmony is one of the things she likes most about her practice.

When she moved back to Beijing from New York, Lin was struck by how rapidly daily life was changing in China,



and how objects once treasured were being thrown away in pursuit of the new. She set out to memorialize these castoffs by binding them in layers of thread. Starting with simple domestic objects (800 of which populate the 1997 installation *Bound and Unbound*), Lin moved on to discarded machines. She covered old bicycles, and then, sensitive to the degradation of the urban environment, she bound up the trunk and branches of a fallen tree.

When she began this work in the late 1990s, Lin used white thread, giving the objects a ghostly, shrouded appearance, as with the bicycles in her 2002 exhibition "Focus" at the Courtyard Gallery in Beijing. Since then she has introduced strong colors and luxurious gold thread. In a bravura four-panel piece of 2011, *The Gold Sameness*, »





shown in a major exhibition at the Beijing Center for the Arts, Lin scattered synthetic bones bound in gold thread across a golden ground embroidered with plants and skeletons. Lengths of lapis-colored thread placed across the bones accentuate the sensation of looking into an ancient tomb. A second four-panel work, *The Golden Mean*, 2012, has been created for the Asia Society exhibition.

Even on a day as hectic as this one, quiet prevails inside the studio. Here, everyone is engaged in completing the pieces for Lin's first show at Galerie Lelong in New York (October 25–December 8). Thus far, her most significant solo shows have been in China, though Lin has appeared in important group shows elsewhere in Asia as well as in the U.S. and Europe. Some of the assistants meticulously wind colored thread around strange hybrid objects—one appears to be a bone in the process of becoming a propeller. The women encase each one until all are mummified. They seem to be conjuring artifacts for a future inventory of the present day.

Elsewhere in the studio, an assistant sits quietly embroidering. She is working on the latest iteration of the “Badges” series. Lin rejects the label of feminist artist, but this series engages quite directly with the position of women in Chinese culture. Three years ago Lin began to list all the Chinese words she could think of that contained the ideogram for “woman.” In the process she created a menu of what—in the Chinese language, at least—are deemed intrinsically female roles. Lin embroidered the words in pastel hues on

white satin stretched in large stainless steel embroidery hoops. Suspended from the ceiling and turning freely, the hoops became the installation *Badges*, 2009. There is something wonderfully absurd about the ensemble, which presents neutral words and insults alike as gigantic samplers and reveals the sense of humor lurking behind the artist's intense demeanor.

In 2010 Lin printed the words on metal badges, which she heaped on a table and presented in the group show “Jungle: A Close-up Focus on Chinese Contemporary Art Trends” at Beijing's Platform China gallery. On opening day a scrum of women quickly formed when they realized the badges could be taken away. The only challenge was choosing which role to wear: Witch or courtesan? Weaver or taxi dancer? Virgin or goddess? In the current installation of *Badges* at Lelong, Lin has inserted embroidered English words among the hoops with Chinese characters.

Lin tells me she believes art is the most powerful form of expression, and that by working instinctively one can develop a practice capable of conveying any idea or emotion. “Sometimes,” she says, “I fear that my feelings will dry up, will die. I need to be careful of this, because I always want to be sure that my work comes from my own experience, that it is authentic.” Perhaps it is the desire to be certain of her authenticity that makes Lin return repeatedly to the techniques that are most basic to her art, to wind and unwind, to catch at the thread of life. ▣

*Here? Or There?*, 2002, created in collaboration with the artist Wang Gongxin, Lin's husband, as shown at the Shanghai Art Museum during the Fourth Shanghai Biennial, 2002–03. The piece incorporates nine figures draped in fabric and thread, with audio and projections.