

CONNIE LI



H2O Project: Connie Li's Exploration of the Contingency of Chance Operations

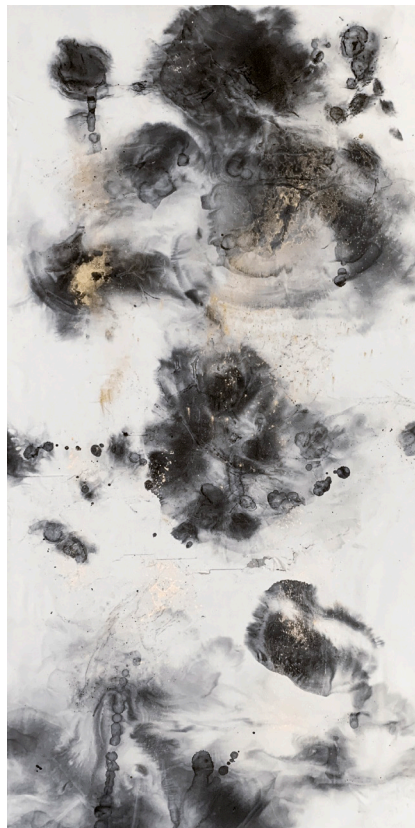
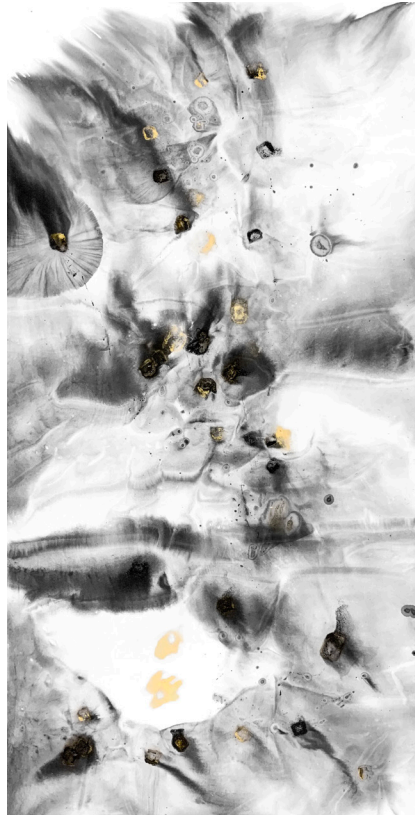
“Art is like the fish in the ocean, and the fisherman is the artist,” says artist Connie Li as we begin our interview. She believes that the task of the artist is to find the art that already exists as an essence of nature and render it visible or accessible for viewership. She works to mobilize the natural process of chance, automatism, and physics, to become the engine for production within this particular series of “paintings.” Li goes on to say that she is “water’s assistant within *H2O Project*.” This assertion sets Li on a journey that enlists the forces of nature throughout the very process of her art-making. Water is the subject matter of *H2O Project*, but also the medium, material, and carrier of the contingent message that Li hopes to uncover.

Water is often referred to as the universal solvent, because it can dissolve more substances than any other liquid. For Li, water becomes the glue that adheres her artistic practice together. She recalls moments from a trip to Iceland when she realized the genuine and irrefutable power of water: glaciers carve the landscape by means of their sheer mass just as waves craft beaches along the ocean. Lakes and streams permeate the land like veins in the body and water travels effortlessly from sea to sky to sea in the form of clouds and rain. The literal and metaphoric fluidity of water resonates largely with Li, in relation to her position as an artist in the world today.

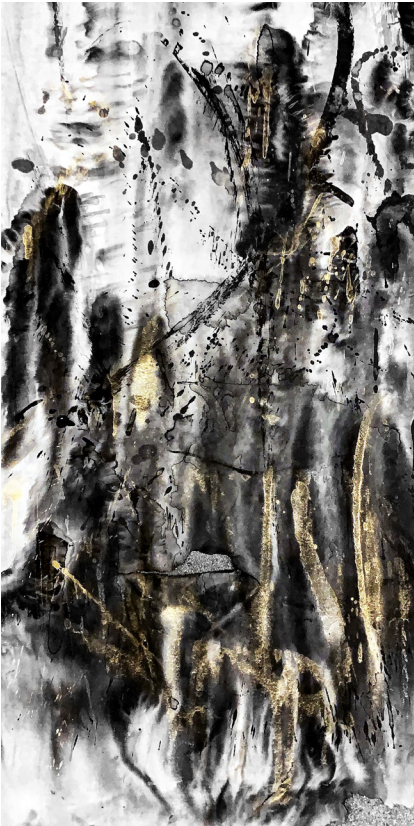
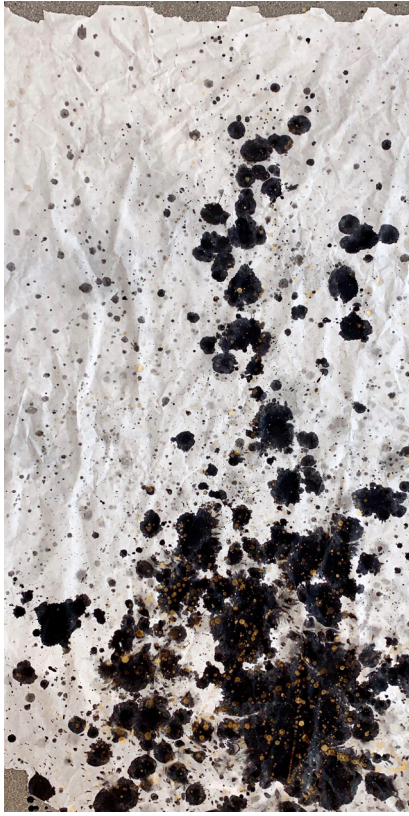
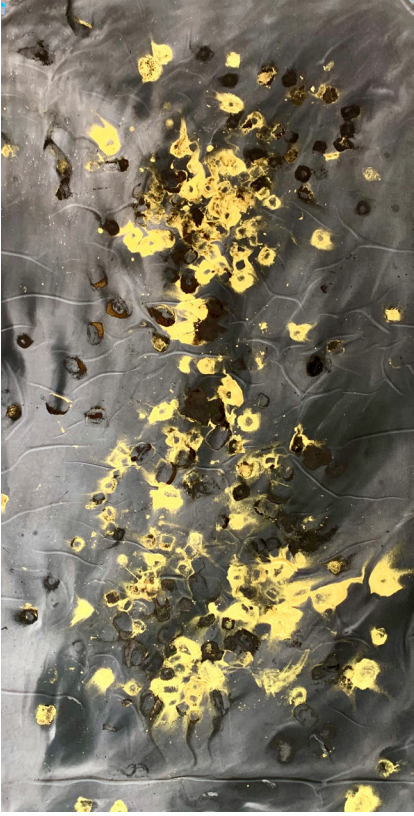
In researching other theoretical applications that water may hold within her practice, Li looks to Taoist philosophies. “Taoism admires water because of water’s *Wu Wei*, the leading ethical concept in Taoism meaning ‘non-action,’ ‘effortless action,’ or ‘action without intent’; sometimes even, ‘action without action.’” This concept, which is ripe with philosophical contradictions, resonates with the questions posed by inserting the artist’s subjectivity into their practice or a work of art.

Li sees a connection between *Wu Wei* and Nietzsche’s conception of *Nibilism*, while also acknowledging that these philosophical concepts are more easily seen as completely opposite or contradictory in their aim. According to Li, “*Nibilism* denies any inherent meaning and/or purpose to life. As religions (such as Taoism) generally provide people with meaning for life, *Nibilism* can be seen as anti-religious and therefore could stand on the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum to Taoism. Acknowledging this contradiction, I am calling upon *Wu Wei* and *Nibilism* to be considered both with and against each other. This exploration becomes a methodology that I use for the purpose of art-making. I focus my practice on the exploration of the materiality and physicality of my chosen materials.” Li focuses on water as her material in this case, removing a degree of control in order to let her experiments become the “artist” that makes the “art.” “My materials,” she comments, “have no aim to make art—they just make art.”

I draw various connections between other artistic movements throughout history that resonate with Li’s practice—in particular, the works of Jackson Pollock, which attempt to remove his artistic subjectivity by letting gravity become the engine that creates the composition of his paintings. Pollock follows after the lineage of the Surrealist artists, who also worked with chance operations and automatism in order to unlock the subconscious potential of the human mind. Evidently, these artists failed to acknowledge that art becomes a political tool the moment it is realized into the form of an object for which to look upon. The work of Pollock is a particularly good example of how the act of de-politicizing one’s own artistic practice or subjectivity is, in itself, a political action. Similarly, I find pressingly political and environmentalist undertones to the work performed by Li in *H2O Project*.



ARTIST PROFILES



H2O Project, 2019.

During our interview, I discovered that Li set up very specific rules, limitations, and parameters for the creation of the series. Setting up these conditions is always necessary when making a series in order to determine which works will and will not be included. Li decided that she would designate four large sheets of rice paper to the experimentation of water in its three physical states (solid, liquid, and gas). This means that *H2O Project* would arbitrarily consist of precisely twelve works. Whatever happened (or ceased to happen) would be presented as the final product.

In order for any degree of automatism to take place, the artist must create the conditions under which these chance operations may occur. Instead of removing the artist's hand from the composition of the artwork, Li actually relocates where the hand intervenes. Her intervention as an artist functions more like the "controlled variables" of an experiment. The "art" is born from the results of her preliminary actions. Placing these variables and limitations onto the conditions of the artwork is Li's way to have as little control over the outcome as possible. Even though she has removed herself as the creator of the formal elements, the artist's hand is still present in the fact that the piece even exists.

The first round of experimentations involved making ice cubes with black ink and gold pigment frozen inside of them. Li then placed the cubes onto various parts of the rice paper. As the ice slowly melted, a composition was created from the process of the paper gradually absorbing the water and then drying out. Interestingly, the paper itself becomes a skin-like membrane that swells and relaxes as it reacts to the melting ice.

For the liquid water phase, Li used different methods to produce the works. She primarily hung the rice paper up with a clothing rack and let the bottom dip slightly into a vat of water. As the paper absorbed the water upwards, she dripped ink onto the paper, letting the ink get carried up. In another instance, she spilled water with ink onto the floor and let the ink interact with the water to form a fluid pattern. She then placed rice paper onto the wet floor and made a "print" from the ground itself. This idea came to Li when she noticed that the vats were leaking water onto the floor and were forming natural patterns that could be

documented. She comments that this was a funny way to clean up the mess on her studio floor.

Li also used the ever-present Vancouver rain to create one of the panels by taking the rice paper outside while it was raining, and dripping ink onto it in a "Pollock-ian" fashion. However, since the wind was so fierce, the rice paper ripped. Even though the panel was ripped by the forces of nature, it was ultimately welcomed warmly into the final series that formulated *H2O Project*. This inclusion enforces the conditions that Li placed on the project from its conception, and demonstrates a dedication to having an assisting role to the forces of nature as well as chance operations.

The four compositions involving steam were the most difficult for Li to work out. First, she attempted to use the steam produced by a hot pot to infuse the ink into the rice paper, but it simply did not work as she had intended it to. She then decided to use the steam produced by a clothing iron, which worked better for her purposes. However, due to overuse of the machine, it malfunctioned halfway through the third composition. Because of the conditions that she placed on the project from the very beginning of the production process, she exhibited a half-finished panel and one that was completely empty. This action demonstrates her devotion to the seriality of her artistic rationale. The parameters of the artwork (in this case the requirement that there must be four compositions made from each state of water) are strictly adhered to. This outcome is yet another by-product of enlisting a chance operation to act as the engine of artistic production.

By enlisting the natural processes that water engages in with the air and room temperature, as well as the materiality of the rice paper, Li gives up some of her artistic autonomy to the forces of nature. But giving up artistic control to the laws of thermodynamics raises plenty of questions pertaining to the role of the artist within society. In this line of questioning, I am reminded of the anecdote that Li gave us at the beginning of the interview: artists are merely fishermen and the fish are their art. This mental image places me on the high seas, braving the great natural force of the ocean tides in order to grasp at some greater meaning within my own actions.



The process of the work follows a linear path, one that is constantly and exponentially warming—exploring the states of ice, water, and steam. The temperature of each process is incrementally heating until all visual composition ceases to appear (the emptiness of the last sheet of rice paper). *H2O Project* could also be interpreted as enacting collective anxiety around the threat of climate change to the beauty of the natural world. Water, then, is the protagonist of the battle between the processes that humans have engaged in and the counter-processes that our Earth's equilibrium provides. It is interesting that this interpretation was completely unintended by the artist, but it was—in a way—a natural by-product of the process in art making. By supporting this interpretation of the artwork, Li again reinforces her devotion to chance operations.

What began as the desire to erase artistic subjectivity in art-making practices, inspired by the Taoist philosophy of *Wu Wei* and Nietzsche's *Nibilism*, became a highly political comment on the impact of human subjectivity over that of Mother Nature. Li now welcomes this interpretation, stating that during her process, she

continues to discover new meanings and implications for her ir/rational actions. Like water herself, Li is open to the contingency that an artwork has depending on its viewership. In this sense, she succeeded in erasing the authoritative dominance of authorship within her practice.

As a final question, I asked Li about her colour palette. The black and white aesthetic from the rice paper and ink became self-evident throughout our conversation as it clearly highlights the formal interaction between the materials. However, I was a bit stumped by the presence of the gold ink. Why gold? Li explains that gold entices—it makes people want to look. It's a *seduction*. I begin to think about the *politics of looking*. What deserves to be looked at? What deserves the attention of the viewer? Neither Li, nor I, have the perfect answer, but it is undeniable that to be seen is the ultimate power of the image. ■

WRITTEN BY

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