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New Art Perspectives: “Lanterns From the Unreturned - A Melancholy Tribute”

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Translated from original Chinese



In artist Cici Wu's inaugural institutional solo exhibition, "Lanterns from the Unreturned," she creates a tender sanctuary bathed in warm yellow light through projections and lantern installations. Soft glows filter through feather-thin bamboo or the edges of handmade paper, yet alongside this translucent delicacy lies the weighty historical memory the artist evokes across multiple mediums. "The transformation of consciousness should not resort to dogma, but rather analyze mystical consciousness—that which remains obscure even to the self," the artist quotes the young Marx in the exhibition's preface. "Then it will become clear that what the world has long awaited is something it can grasp merely by becoming conscious of it."

The calf lanterns presented in the artist's 2019 solo exhibition "Unfinished Return" at Empty Gallery deeply moved me. At the time, preoccupied with themes of 'diaspora' and 'identity,' I interpreted the lanterns solely as cultural symbols or expressions of nationalism. It wasn't until this conversation that I truly recognized the pivotal role of light—as the "smallest unit of image production"—in her practice. The artist's stated interest in the film industry and "expanded cinema" manifested in "Unfinished Return" through a deftly critical application of both: neither resisting the former's violent appropriation of memory through



mechanical replication, nor attempting to escape linear history via experimental film. In the installation *Rainbow Bridge* (2023), suspended high above the exhibition hall, the artist's collected family photographs evoke Roland Barthes' notion of death confirmed by the photographic apparatus's reproduction of "that-has-been." Juxtaposed and reconfigured alongside these private images are propagandistic images of Communist Realism sourced from the 1962 edition of *People's Pictorial*. The rich folk art forms stark contrast with the historical backdrop of the Great Famine. Utopian imagery imbued with socialist aesthetics transforms, in a moment of self-awareness, into mourning for history. In the stairwell space on the east side of the gallery, *Lanterns from the Unreturned 02* (2025)—a newly commissioned site-specific installation—elevates this mourning to another climax.

Using physically fragile bamboo and handmade paper, the artist employs the ethereal form of “book lamps” to ghostly revisit historical archives. “For instance, this sealed stairwell space (viewable only from above) resonates with the historical context of book censorship,” the artist explains regarding the site's significance.



Initially, the work's inaccessible nature left me perplexed. However, when considered alongside the artist's reference to Derrida's notion of the ghost as a “neither living nor dead being,” it seems to offer a complete explanation for her exploration of the visible yet unreachable state of historical trauma itself. If someone stood on Huqiu Road at dusk, gazing up at the faint light within the stairwell, would they sense a gaze directed toward collective trauma? The artist paused briefly on this question, admitting her stance remains ambiguous regarding this sense of distance and the spatial arrangement where light becomes visible only after closing hours, emerging from complete darkness. Can this aesthetic approach, through the complexity of the viewing experience, offer a distant glimpse into the political and social structures reflected in the work?

In the series *Moth Light* (2024), Wu employs meticulous ink wash painting to recreate the natural collages—such as moth wings and flower petals—frequently seen in Stan Brakhage's experimental films. She precisely aligns the width of the bamboo-textured rice paper with 16mm film stock dimensions, using ink's tonal gradations to mimic the flickering light and shadow of celluloid. This condenses cinematic duration into suspended moments within reality. Tracing back to Brakhage—whom the artist frequently references—one finds he famously reconstructed visual order through “retinal logic.” For instance, in *Dog Star Man* (1961–1964), rapidly cut solid color blocks and biological micrographs simulate neural impulses in the human eye under extreme conditions, evoking an “experiencing vision” grounded in bodily flesh —Brakhage's

assertion that “heartbeat and breath are cinema's primal montage” focuses precisely on biological rhythm. This also explains Wu's choice to inscribe moving images as brushstrokes on rice paper, as the artist confesses: “to establish a kinship between the physical process of tracing film perforations and the editing syntax of traditional film.”



From the perspective of media ontology, Wu clearly champions such declarations: “Once cinema spills beyond the projector and breaks free from linear narrative, it becomes a political tool for restructuring time and space—the projector is a weapon, and light is the particle of insurrection.” Wu not only pays homage to direct cinema—represented by Brakhage and characterized by physical interventions on film stock—but also positions her work at the critical juncture between craftsmanship and mechanization, inviting historical specters to reclaim their right to be retold through this material resonance. Returning to the main exhibition hall bathed in light, *Subtitle 01 (Justice and Hope)* (2019) extends the sculptural dimension of the video work *The Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon* (2019), continuing the aforementioned creative logic of translating material substances through a ghostly lens. The artist explains, “I transformed prop lights authentically used in films from the golden age into miniature lanterns. The inscriptions on their backs are not without meaning—they serve as narrative annotations from the mother of the film's protagonist, Yu Wenhan.”

The Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon, based on the 2000 disappearance of Hong Kong teenager Yu Wenhan, who had autism, the artist invited actor Zhang Yangyang (who appeared in Edward Yang's *Yi Yi*) to portray the adult Yu Wenhan and speculate on his possible return route. The film alternates between everyday settings (subway stations/markets) and surreal spaces (snowfields/empty houses), using a visual gradient from blurred to clear to simulate the sluggish process of memory restoration. Within the film, paper lanterns—symbols of emotional return—echo the prop lights indispensable to the dream-making machinery of cinema off-screen. The distinction lies in the latter piercing the veil of fiction with its artificiality.



“This is an attempt to materialize subtitles,” the artist explains, “and also my response to the core tenet of structural cinema—making the medium’s materiality a new language.” As Aijaz Ahmad observes, “Translation never occurs in an equal linguistic field; it invariably positions Third World texts as ‘to be interpreted’ objects, while Western texts retain their ‘self-evident’ subjectivity.” Wu also notes that “subtitles are often overlooked in the eyes of some Western scholars.” Indeed, within Western film studies, subtitles are regarded as “constrained translation.” Yet these very constraints—temporal and spatial compression, cultural conversion—precisely mirror the reality faced by viewers in colonized regions. Thus, as the structural skeleton of film, subtitles to some extent expose the hierarchies within the global knowledge production system. Wu liberates subtitles from their cinematic orbit, transforming them into tangible objects. Elevating them from subservient texts to autonomous cultural-technological apparatuses, she enables them to narrate diaspora family histories within postcolonial contexts while simultaneously inspiring them to genuinely occupy physical space.



In *Yi Yi*, the young actor Zhang Yangyang whispers at his grandmother's funeral: "Perhaps one day, I'll discover where you've been"—this original soundtrack fragment reappears in Wu's imagery. The uncanny interweaving of fiction and nonfiction, first glimpsed in 2019, unfolds into more complex connections in the present exhibition: the faint glow seeping from the paper and the "untouchable" displays collectively reject any attempt to discern or repair illusions. Behind this refusal lies the artist's inquiry into the essence of trauma through diverse media: trauma is the perpetually deferred return. As bamboo paper lanterns keep vigil for history within colonial architecture, they promise that unpaid debts shall haunt and return in spectral form.



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在艺术家武雨濛（Cici Wu）的首次机构个展“来自未归还的灵灯”中，她借由投影与灯笼布置了一处暖黄色的温柔乡，各处散出的微光纷纷从薄如羽翼的竹材或是手工纸张的边缘穿过，而伴随这份剔透与轻盈的，是艺术家从多种媒介中唤起的、滞重的历史记忆。“意识的变革不应诉诸教条，而要分析神秘意识——对自我都显得晦暗不明的意识，”艺术家在展览前言中引用了年轻的马克思，“届时就可以看出，世界长久以来所期盼之物，是一种它只需意识到就能掌握之物。”

2019年艺术家在Empty Gallery的个展“未完成的归途”中呈现的小牛灯曾令我深受触动，当时出于对“离散”与“身份认同”议题的关注，我只将灯笼理解为一种文化符号或民族主义表征，直到此次

对话，我才真正认识到光作为“影像制作的最小单位”在她创作中的关键作用。艺术家所述的对电影工业及“扩展影像”（expanded cinema）的关注[2]在“未完成的归途”中体现为对二者巧妙的批判性运用：既不反抗前者在机械复刻中对记忆的征用暴力，也不尝试以实验电影挣脱线性历史。

在“来自未归还的灵灯”中展出的她十年间的重要创作，虽形成独特的“旧日美学”，却绝非单纯怀旧，而是旨在发掘光学媒介固有的哲学潜能。譬如，她创造出的“竹纸灯笼”作为光学媒介亦是悼念的仪器，不仅揭露历史叙事中真实与虚构间的朦胧状态，更作为反思历史认识框架的思想实验装置——既生产幻象，又通过自我暴露机械本质来消解幻象。难以言说的情感与意识，由此在艺术家对光学媒介的探索中逐步显影。

在倒悬于展厅高处的装置《彩云桥》（2023）中，艺术家收集来的家庭照片，唤起罗兰·巴特所言的，被摄影机械对“此曾在”（that-has-been）的复现确证过的死亡[3]。与私人照片并置重组的，是艺术家取自1962年的《人民画报》中的共产主义现实主义的宣传图像。丰饶的民间艺术（folk art）与大饥荒的历史背景形成剧烈反差，富含社会主义美学的乌托邦意象，也在瞬间的自我觉察中转为对历史的哀悼。在美术馆东侧的楼梯空间中，《来自未归还的灵灯02》（2025）作为艺术家被全新委任的特定场域装置作品，则引发了这场悼念中的又一次高潮。艺术家使用物理意义上脆弱的竹材与手工纸，以轻盈的“书灯”形式，对历史档案进行幽灵化的回溯。“比如这个被封锁的楼道空间（观者只能从高处远观），呼应了和查禁书籍相关的历史时空，”艺术家谈及场域意涵时说道。

起初，该作品不可接近的设定令我困惑，不过，结合艺术家引用德里达所言的作为“非生非死的存在”的幽灵，似乎就可以完满解释她对于历史创伤本身可见却不可及的状态的钩沉。若有人在暮色中，立于虎丘路的街面仰望楼梯间里的微光，是否会感受到投向集体创伤的目光？艺术家在这个问题上停滞了片刻，她坦言，对这种距离感，以及只有在闭馆的时间后，才能从漆黑一片里看见亮光的场域设定的立场仍是模糊的。这能否在美学的层面，借观看行为中的复杂性，去遥望作品所映射的政治社会格局？

在《飞蛾之光》（2024）系列中，武雨濛用工笔水墨复现斯坦·布拉哈格（Stan Brakhage）的实验电影里常见的自然物拼贴（如飞蛾翅膀与花瓣）。她将宣纸竹纹的宽度严格对应16毫米的电影胶片规格，并用水墨的墨色层次去模拟胶片的光影闪烁，将银幕时长坍塌为现实中悬停的瞬间。若回溯艺术家多次援引的布拉哈格，不难发现后者正是以视网膜逻辑（retinal logic）重构视觉的秩序为名。譬如在《狗星人》（Dog Star Man, 1961-1964）中，快速切割的纯色块与生物显微影像模拟了人眼在极限状态下的神经脉冲，唤起以躯体肉身为基础的“体验视觉”（experiencing vision）[4]——布拉哈格所言之“心跳与呼吸才是电影的原始蒙太奇”着眼的正是生物的原始节奏（biological rhythm）[5]。这也解释了武雨濛选择将动态影像铭刻为宣纸上的笔触的原因，即“让描摹胶片齿孔的物理过程，和传统胶片的剪辑语法共享某种亲缘性”，艺术家坦言。

从媒介本体论的层面来看，武雨濛显然是此类宣言的拥护者：“在电影溢出放映机并挣脱线性叙事之后，它就成为重组时空的政治工具——投影仪是武器，光线是起义的粒子”[6]。武雨濛不仅对以布拉哈格为代表的、对胶片进行物理性干预的直接电影（direct cinema）进行致敬，更是让她的作品悬置在手工性与机械性间的临界点上，邀请历史的幽灵在这种物质共振中获得重述权。回到

光线氤氲的主展厅中，《字幕01（公义与希望）》（2019）作为影像《庾文翰未完成的归途》（2019）在雕塑维度的扩延，延续了上述对物质材料进行幽灵学转译的创作逻辑。艺术家介绍道，“我将曾在黄金时代的电影中被真实使用过的道具灯，转化成为小型灯笼，而灯笼背面的字迹也并非无迹可寻，它们是影像中的主角庾文翰的母亲的叙事注脚。”

《庾文翰未完成的归途》基于2000年香港自闭症少年庾文翰的失踪事件展开，艺术家邀请演员张洋洋（曾出演杨德昌《一一》）扮演成年的庾文翰，并推测其可能的回归路径。影片交替呈现日常场景（地铁站/市集）与超现实空间（雪原/空屋），用画面从模糊到清晰的渐变过程，模拟记忆修复的迟滞过程。影片中，作为情感复归符号的纸灯笼，和荧幕外在机械电影的造梦工序中不可或缺的道具灯遥相呼应，区别在于，后者以人造性（artificiality）刺穿虚构的帷幕。

“这是一次将字幕物质化的尝试”，艺术家介绍道，“也是我对结构电影的核心主张——让媒介的物质性成为新的语言——，的一次回应”。如阿赫默德（Aijaz Ahmad）所言，“翻译行为从不发生在平等的语言场域中，它总是将第三世界文本置于‘被解释’的客体位置，而西方文本则保持‘自明’的主体性。”[1]武雨濛亦指出，“字幕在部分西方学者眼中是被漠视的”。诚然，在西方电影研究中，字幕被视为“受限翻译”（constrained translation），但所谓“限制”——时空压缩、文化转换——，正是被殖民的地域的观者普遍面对的现实。因此，字幕作为电影的结构性的骨骼，在某种程度上揭露了全球知识生产体系里的等级制。武雨濛让字幕脱离影像轨道成为可触物（tangible object），让它从服务性的文本，升格为自主的文化技术装置，一方面让它们书写后殖民语境下的离散家史，另一方面，也激发它们真正地占据物理空间。

在《一一》中，演员张洋洋饰演的少年曾在祖母葬礼上低语：“也许有一天，我会发现你去过哪里”——这段原声带以碎片形式重现于武雨濛的影像。2019年已初现的这种虚构与非虚构的诡譎交织，在当下的展览中延伸出更复杂的关联：纸张渗出的微光与“不可近观”的展陈，共同拒绝任何辨别或修复幻觉的尝试。在这种拒绝背后，是艺术家借多元媒介对创伤本质的叩问：创伤即永远延期的归还。当竹纸灯笼在殖民建筑中为历史守夜，它允诺那些未偿之债以幽灵之姿游荡与复归。