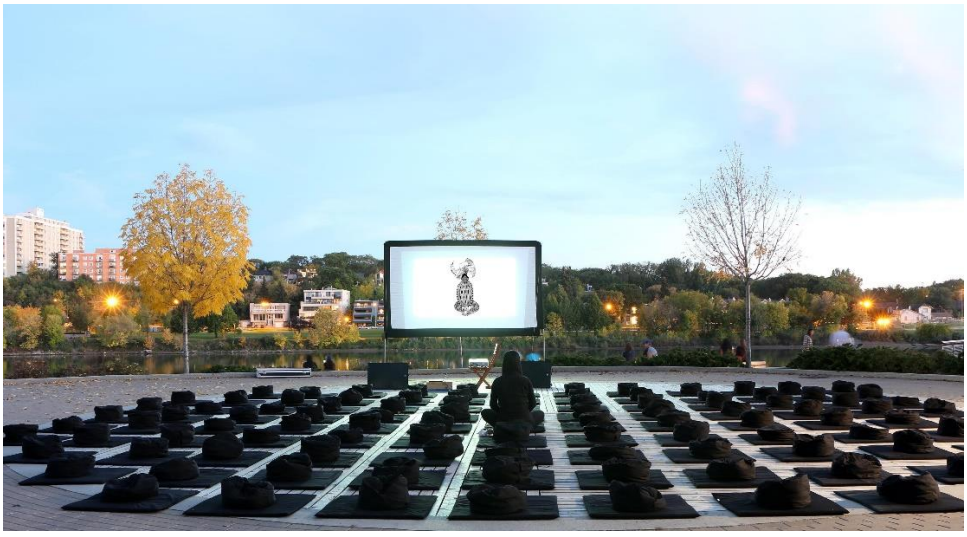
# Reviews of Cui Jinzhe's 100 Immortals

By Fusan Ryushin, Zen priest in the tradition of Soto Zen Buddhism
New York,
September, 2016

When Jinzhe Cui first sketched for me the scope of her calligraphy art project and showed me a sample of the paintings that were to be included in the installation, it was both the boldness and the primordial feel of the images, as well as the radical and invitational context of their presentation, that captured my attention and stirred my imagination. Some historians of world religions claim that the appearance of Buddhism as embodied by a single person's quest to discover through meditation the nature of human awareness and mind, the basis of each and every experience, was the only revolutionary event so far in our human evolution. Everything else we have accomplished, be it in the field of science, art, social studies, philosophy, varied personal achievements, is rehashing and reframing of content. It is the same old story of dualisms near and far. We can get very sophisticated, but we keep turning away from the central mystery of our presence, the substance of a momentary event. The mystery of awareness itself, not so much as a problem to be solved through refined neuro-scientific research and elaborations, but as a discovery of the direct intimacy with the ground of our being accessible to us all the time. Jinzhe's effort to show her art in contemplative setting, to invite and encourage the viewer to formally take the meditative posture and settle into the stillness and quiet, letting the process unfold not just in different rhythms, but in different attentional space, is radical. It is radical and it is desperately needed as the act of seeing ourselves clearly—in the act of attempting to see our seeing, and of attempting to see ourselves in the other. The other of hundreds, if not infinity, of immortals. I hope that it comes to past that sometime in near future, hundred seated figures on meditation cushions will counterpoint and soothe the bustle of Times Square in New York City, as images of our loves and fears, despairs and joys slowly metamorphose on the glowing screens above the crowd. It is not that this art presentation will slow time down. It will simply give people access to a time that is already here. The time of the immortals. Our true time.



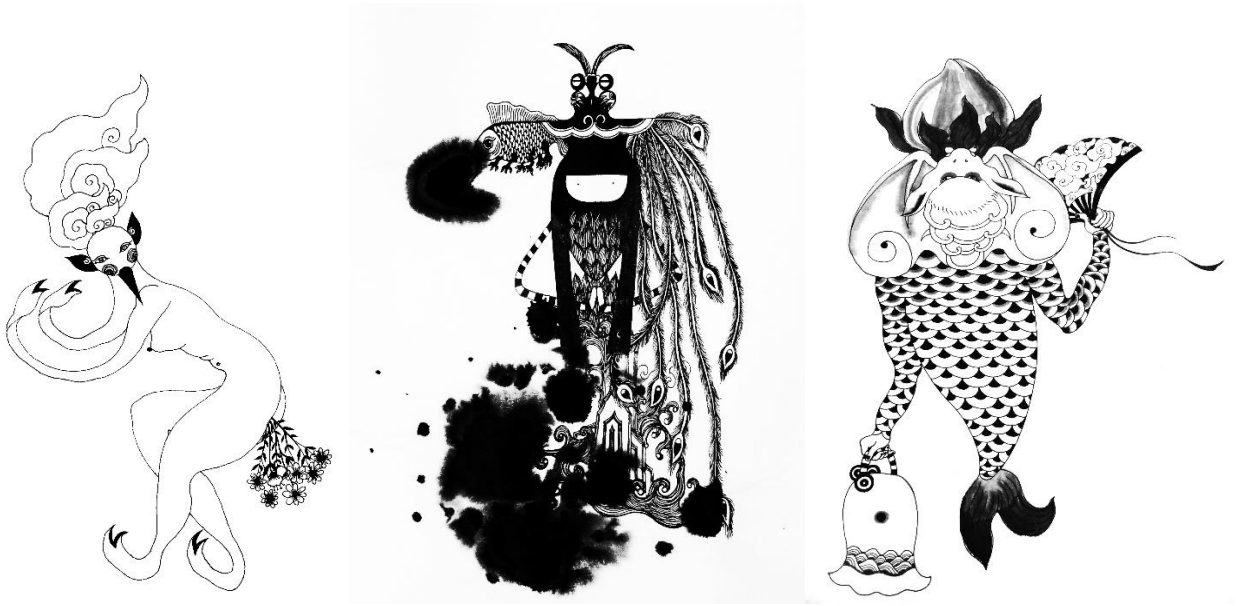
*100 Immortals*
video installation of 100 original figures created by ink with 100 meditation seats , by the river of Saskatoon , 2016

**A Contemporary Tarot of Desire**

By Ernesto Pujol, site-specific performance artist, social choreographer, and educator with an interdisciplinary practice
New York,
September 2016

One of the delusions of modernity is that humans can live without the desire for transcendence, and that whatever lingers of that desire can be fully contained and satisfied by technology. Yet field experience has taught me that humans continue to need inspiring symbols to help them transcend the fact of mortality. This is not because of a residual, primitive need for cave ritual, but because much of our life is processed in the unconscious and in the deep body through a seemingly chaotic inventory of visuals relating nonsensically to each other, sometimes glimpsed at in dreams as symbolic language. The symbolic is the language of the human animal, one of the practices (the crafting of encoded symbol) that made us human. Jinzhe unapologetically creates her 100 immortals as a contemporary Tarot, daring to release them into the world not as someone confessing her secrets but as an artist inviting us to bring our own secret, existential metaphors into the mix. Who are my imaginary friends and protectors as extensions who remind me who I am and what I wish to become? In doing so, Jinzhe also revitalizes the practice of drawing and gives it a public art dimension while retaining its ephemeral qualities.

*100 Immortals*
public interaction scene with the video installation , by the river of Saskatoon , 2016



100 Immortals , ink and pen on 11 in x 60 feet scroll rice paper , 2015

**By Sky Goodden, the founding publisher and editor of Momus, affiliate assistant professor with Concordia University's Faculty of Fine Arts**
**Montreal**
**August, 2016**

*Buddhism's call to be present in the moment is also the artist's call.*

- Mary Jane Jacob, "In the Space of Art," *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*

On Saskatoon's main drag, a round silence as the snow descends in mid-winter, a storm moving me through a glass door and following me into the depths of a Chinese grocery. Around the corner, past stacks of green tea and oranges, and back toward a bank of front windows buffeted by the ice and high wind, I found the trim, print-lined alcove of Jinzhe Cui. Her little space heater was whirring, her kettle steaming, and, as my eyes blinked away the sleet, I found her. She was the still center of the universe, of memory and time. I'd never known such stillness. Even now, as I write this eighteen months later, in the dead heat of August, the cicadas harvesting a field of noise, I am moved, as I was almost instantly upon that visit, the beads of sweat, now, as they were beads of snow, then, mixing with my salt. I try to squint and see, or recapture what I saw: the quiet center of a many-personed wonder.

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I'm told that the Sanskrit title Buddha means, "one who is awake." The Buddha, through

a “great chain of interdependence and mutual arising,” posits a perspective characterized by “seamlessness and wholeness.” “Life and art perfectly joined.” In Buddhism there is a chain of interdependence that eschews chains of command; power is dispersed and democratic. “Action that extends throughout time and space (like the Buddha), as an expression of the mind’s inherent freedom.” I read: “The alienated self effortlessly healed.”

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A woman with scales and a flamingo carries a round torso like a reflective opal, and stares out at me, heavy-lidded. 100 Immortals unspools, measure by measure – through a scroll but also a video – characters that mirror our many-peopled selves, the variousness within, the fractured and interrupted physiognomies that comprise our round and fixed countenances. Jinzhe tells me she’s thinking about suffering; about her first formal and intense Zen practice at Zen Mountain Monastery, in New York State, in 2014; she’s thinking about transforming pain. She wants to slow people down; to bring meditation to art. (“This process could be implemented both within stillness and movement,” she says.) Cushions are laid out in exacting rows for people to sit on, to stare inward or outward. Every fifteen minutes a screen before them slowly shutters and rotates its picture. Now a figure with utters and inverted hands and feet, her head multiplied, reduced to three eyes.

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Marcel Duchamp, long associated with Buddhism and Zen practices, and widely considered to be the first conceptual artist, defined art as making. The “making” was not process-related in the sense of the studio, but in the viewer’s mind. He pulled from the root of the Sanskrit term ara, symbolized by a wheel’s spoke or radius, which, in Buddhism, is associated with the Dharma’s turning wheel – “the liberating truth set in motion.” He made Bicycle Wheel in 1951, an assisted readymade that resulted from “a happy idea” born of simply wanting to “watch it turn.” Near the end of his life, he reflected, “If you wish, my art would be that of living: each second, each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral. It’s a sort of constant euphoria.”

John Cage (who said in one of his last interviews, “I literally believe that Duchamp made it possible for us to live as we do”) was more directly linked to Buddhist practices, a student of Zen, and his 4’33 (1952) embodied this association profoundly. A pianist sat at the keyboard, Cage’s composition laid out before him, and opened and shut his lid to signal each of its three movements. The ambient noise of an attentive and attendant

audience became the music, as it were; the space between the everyday and art was pushed a little closer. “It is not a question of decisions and the willingness or fear to make them,” said Cage. “It is that we are impermanently part and parcel of all. We are involved in a life that passes understanding and our highest business is our daily life.” This iconic work, in both streams of Conceptual art and Buddhism, would be echoed a decade later by Yoko Ono’s Secret Piece:

Decide on one note that you want to play.

Play it with the following accompaniment:

The woods from 5 a.m. to 8 a.m.

in summer

Duchamp and Cage spoke of the “gap” between art and life, a rift they sought to close or make redundant through Conceptualism and practices informed by Zen. In the transmutation of 20th-century China, a similar current flowed beneath the reflective surface of the popular aesthetic. There was “a consistent rhythm of experimentation by ink painters and calligraphers whose diverse output has provided opportunities for a cultivated minority to enjoy not only the subtle connection with the literati past but also the artists’ engagement with the realities of contemporary life,” observes Michael Goedhuis in his foreword to Chinese Ink Painting Now (2010). Similarly, Jason C. Kuo, in his significant essay for this same text, reminds us, “China has the longest continuous development of any artistic tradition in the world.” He notes how, throughout its history and evolution, there has been a “well-researched phenomenon called the ‘untrammeled style’ (yipin or i-p’in).” From the middle of the Tang period, through the Song dynasty to the “wild and unrestrained” Zhe School of the mid-Ming dynasty, and down to the “eccentrics” of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, the i-p’in style was emancipatory painting, Kuo writes. As Shimada Shujiro concluded in his celebrated essay “Concerning the i-p’in Style of Painting,” written more than a half-century ago: “Whenever there arose a dissatisfaction with orthodoxy in painting, whenever something new was sought outside its pale, in whatever period, something of an i-p’in nature was apt to be born.”

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Carl Jung wrote in his introduction to the 1950 edition of the I Ching, “Since I am not a Sinologue, a foreword to the Book of Changes from my hand must be a testimonial of my individual experience with this great and singular book.” I feel similarly outside, and yet honored to be writing about the work of Jinzhe Cui. My individual experience with her paintings left a deep impression on me, as did her uncanny presence, which was the

epitome of stillness, presence, and, dare I say it, love.

With 100 Immortals, Jinzhe is attempting something at once traditionalist and daring. She is moving the scroll to the screen – a platform we associate with distraction – but inviting us to exist quietly with it, in whatever form that takes, to be inwardly still, to stare out and stare in. She is daring us not to be impatient with silence, or seek the turning of the slide, but rather to breathe with the world.

I don't know if these images, or this format, could be perceived as i-p'in in nature. But I think about Jinzhe in her snow-buffeted studio, stacks of produce – the everyday – behind her; before her a wall of windows, the dancing snow. Is Jinzhe responding to her own disruption, a recent immigrant to the middle of this vast and infrequently-peopled landscape, the loneliness and difficulty of a cultural assimilation taking place in such quietude? Or is she reflecting on the broader themes at play in a culture that does not rest, that flits from screen to screen, whose fragmentation of mind and spirit is encouraged by an environment of same – perhaps something she's observed since she arrived, seven years ago? Jinzhe's slow rotation of fantastical selfhoods (at 15-minute intervals per image, her cache of 100 immortals takes a full 24-hour period to fulfill its cycle) mirrors the spinning bicycle wheel atop its stool, what Duchamp crafted in order to see it turn. In Jinzhe's project, too, unlikely things are married (a screen with a scroll; mediation with video; and then the characters, who perform all nature of perverse pairings within themselves). And like Duchamp's wheel on a stem, a contemplative current undergirds its stranger dynamics.

In thinking about artists' desire to hold the center among the fray. I am reminded of Bill Viola's The Crossing (1996), an immersive environment rooted in a two-channel video that emblematized his "conviction that advanced media technologies have the capacity to channel direct experience of spiritual phenomena." He walks through a torrent of water, he walks through fire; he transcends and recedes. I also return to John Cage. Would we not, sitting on Jinzhe's putuan (sewn cushioned seats), become alert to our very capacity for alertness? Would the presence of each other, and the ambient, accidental world around us, not heighten our ability to hear, to see, and feel, and, whether or not we were able to meditate, give way to a sense of the whole? Would that awareness, and its observations, not in turn become the work?

"Buddhism's call to be present in the moment is also the artist's call," writes Mary Jane Jacob. The bicycle wheel, released from its utility, spins freely. The crowd rustles as the piano lid lifts. A snowfall, the sound on the tape of a fullest quiet. The thousand-armed bodhisattva Kuan Yin reaches wide. The gap softens, the barrier's released. Now an evening light. The screen holds its image, our heart rate slows. Where were you last, that you could hear the world breathe? That you realized: "I'm awake."