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## THE MISSING INK

Lin Xue, the reclusive artist with works showcased at the Venice Biennale, prefers to let his drawings do his talking, writes Janice Leung

Exhibiting at the Venice Biennale is the dream of many artists. But when Lin Xue was informed he would be one of about 160 artists whose works were chosen for display in the main show of the 55th biennale curated by Massimiliano Gioni, the news barely raised his pulse rate.

Lin is the second Hongkonger to be featured in the primary biennale exhibition (graffiti artist Tsang Tsou-choi, aka the "King of Kowloon", became the first in 2003).

Other artists, especially those new to the global art scene like Lin, might have immediately secured air tickets to Venice and booked an overpriced hotel room to join the hubbub of the opening on June 1. After all, it's a precious opportunity to meet all the major players in the art world in one place and is, for many participants, a once-in-a-lifetime occasion.

Lin preferred to go on his regular hikes in the hills. But then, Lin is an eccentric even by the less conventional standards of artists. He lives in seclusion in the New Territories, seldom attends his own exhibitions and rarely accepts face-to-face or even phone interviews. In fact, he only feels comfortable

communicating with the media at a distance. The interview for this story was conducted via e-mail.

At 45, an age when an artist is usually at his or her peak, Lin's profile is as slim as that of a recent art graduate: he has only had a handful of exhibitions, few of which he has attended, and has never won an award. Famously reclusive, he is rumoured to have declared that he would rather cut off his tongue than be required to speak to the public.

"It's true that I don't really like to speak," the low-profile Lin responds. "I hope I can work in a hermitage as [the American Catholic writer] Thomas Merton did."

Merton became a Trappist monk, an order that abhors idle speech, but he continued to express himself in his writing, publishing more than 70 books of poetry and prose on spirituality, contemplation and social justice until he died in 1968.

Likewise, the taciturn Lin prefers to let his work speak for him – densely imagined natural worlds, carefully rendered in ink with a sharpened bamboo twig. (The fact that a twig, unlike a brush, cannot hold



An untitled ink-on-paper work by Lin Xue done last year.

much ink makes the creative process even more painstaking.)

His ultimate dream, Lin explains, is to "draw a landscape that one cannot finish looking at".

From a distance, many of Lin's detailed works resemble Chinese landscape paintings of rugged mountains or ornamental scholars' rocks, drawn in the meticulous *gongbi* style. On closer inspection, however, the stipples and strokes reveal themselves as fantastical little worlds. Birds, insects and other tiny creatures fly, swim or weave through assorted vegetation growing out of rocky clusters, often intercut with paths, lakes and streams. Lin orchestrates this curious mix of elements into an otherworldly order that is at once complex and innocent, poetic and lively.

"I like to view them gradually from a distance. It's like how we get to know a stranger," Lin says of his drawings.

"I feel like I'm a copyist, as I just transfer what I've seen in the mountains onto a piece of paper," he says. "I use drawing as a way to listen and to tell."

Fujian-born Lin has long loved the outdoors. Since settling in Hong Kong with his family at the age of five, he has made countless excursions into Shing Mun Country Park near his home, immersing

himself in the green world. More than a playground that he enjoys, he says nature gives him an ineffable feeling that he misses as soon as he leaves that environment. So in a sense, his drawings are a way to record those feelings.

"Perception is fleeting. Those [works] are after-images of a quick glance," he says. "I'm just gleaming scattered fragments ... But I still need to put down [the images] because I would miss them, just like we never tire of writing letters to lovers."

Thirteen of his love letters to nature are on display at the Arsenal, one of the two main venues of the Venice Biennale, until November 24. Many of the untitled works were inspired by peach pits that he picked up while walking in the mountains. Seeing "infinite unknown possibilities" in the pitted surfaces, he spent more than a year creating imaginary ecosystems out of the seeds.

Lin regards this new series of ink works as inheritors of the magnificent landscapes created by Song dynasty artists such as Fan Kuan and Guo Xi. However, it was the personal, oddly perplexing naive work of Hung Tung, a self-taught Taiwanese folk artist who began to paint when he was 50, that ignited in Lin a desire to draw.

He was viewing a retrospective of Hung's paintings at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1990, Lin recalls,

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LIN XUE

when he heard an inner voice tell him: "You're born to draw."

Then 22 and lacking any art training, Lin started to sketch what he had carefully observed in his wildlife haven. Later that inner mystic urged him to quit his job and leave home to live in the remote wilderness of the mainland, as many Chinese literati did in the past when they sought solitude and inspiration.

As he roamed those no-man's lands, Lin sometimes felt as if he was in the depths of the world. One summer evening, while rambling on an isolated mountain, puffs of smoke rising from hillside huts caught his eye. It left him "speechless and in tears", he recalls. The sight reminded him how transient and ephemeral life was: "Isn't our world a wreath of smoke?" he says. "I'd come to realise, that no matter how far I had

gone, I was just being lost."

Lin returned to Hong Kong in 1994 and, at a loss over how to support himself while pursuing art, consulted Oscar Ho Hing-kay, then exhibition director of the Arts Centre. He showed Ho one of his intricate renderings, an enormous 4.5-metre scroll, asking if there was a way he could keep drawing. Ho had no advice for him then, but a year later, he called to ask if Lin would like to include that monochrome (now also being displayed in Venice) in an Arts Centre show.

"The exhibition helped eased the tension between my family and me," says Lin.

After taking part in a second exhibition in the 1998 Hong Kong Art Biennial, however, he "came under tremendous pressure in the face of life conflicts".

The stress caused him to stop making art for a full decade. During that time, Lin renamed himself "Xue", meaning "cave of death", a grave. "It's a symbol of all things that happened in that period," he says.

It wasn't until he met composer Aenon Loo, a co-owner of Gallery Exit, that he felt encouraged to return to his art.

"He made me draw again," Lin says. "The first time [Loo] saw my work, he said: 'I'm getting goose pimples.' I was

paying attention to his eyes and was convinced that this person was moved by what he was looking at."

Exit has since mounted four solo shows for Lin, including one at Art Fair Tokyo in 2010. His ink drawings caught the attention of Miami Kataoka, chief curator of the Mori Art Museum, who selected his work for her show, "Phantoms of Asia", at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. Then, Gioni discovered his intricate inks during a research trip to the Asia Art Archive last year and tapped his talent for Venice.

Lin remains unmoved by attention from such powerful art world figures. "I've passed everything to Aenon," he says.

When not hiking or drawing, Lin prefers to observe the bustling city on leisurely tram rides or sit in a cafe, reading (usually philosophical works by writers from Roland Barthes to Soren Kierkegaard) and daydreaming.

A recent dream Lin had perhaps illuminates his psyche: "One night, a person and I were discussing how to help my friend from a faraway land – a polar bear – get settled. He proposed taking the bear shopping in Causeway Bay, and then book him a hotel room. But I insisted the only suitable place was a mountain; there were rivers there where the bear could catch fish." [life@scmp.com](mailto:life@scmp.com)

