



OPENINGS

## EVELYN TAOCHENG WANG

KAREN ARCHEY





Above: Evelyn Taocheng Wang, *Booklet of Bachmann\_Lost Leather Shoulder Bag Refund*, 2020, ink, ink-jet print, glue, acrylic, and pencil on raw rice paper, 17 1/2" x 26 3/4".

Opposite page, bottom: Evelyn Taocheng Wang, *Reflection Paper* no. 3, 2013–14, HD video, color, sound, 7 minutes 31 seconds.

Below: Evelyn Taocheng Wang, *So You Were Also There*, 2019, ink and mineral color on raw rice paper, 18 1/2" x 37 3/4".



**THERE IS NO ONE THING** that we could call the “immigrant experience,” but certainly everyone who has immigrated is familiar with how mundane misunderstandings can reveal cultural tectonics, of how humor can sometimes be mobilized to leaven pain. What’s the correct time of day to introduce yourself to a new neighbor? How earnestly should you respond to the question “How are you?” Will you come off as suspicious to the neighbors if your curtains remain drawn? The answers to these questions might seem relative or merely dependent on personal proclivity, yet one’s approach to these everyday situations constitutes, in part, the *je ne sais quoi* of national belonging. And while learning a new culture can be refined into a science, other qualities will still mark us as different, factors comprising who we are, where we come from, and our appearance.

China-born, Netherlands-based artist Evelyn Taocheng Wang takes the subject of authenticity, and how we go about performing it, as fodder for a sprawling practice that includes installation, performance, video, sculpture, and a range of painting and drawing styles. Her work often touches on Dutchness and Germanness, pairing observations on immigration and

belonging with reflections on other aspects crucial to our understanding of the self, such as our gender and class presentation or our sense of style. Yet she eschews a confrontational approach to these hot-button topics, broaching themes such as cultural assimilation and gender expression with a healthy sense of humor and poetry, making references in her work to art history, language acquisition, literature (she has a fondness for Virginia Woolf, American-born Chinese modernist Eileen Chang, and the Brothers Grimm’s “The Frog Prince”), and embodied experience (such as the way in which daylight filters through the seventeenth-century windows of the Amsterdam Hermitage). Wang knowingly emphasizes personal appearance and material possessions—her work frequently invokes clothing brands and makes use of garments and textiles—in ways that fly in the face of so much European and American art of the past fifty years, with its grounding in supposedly objective and neutral Conceptualism and cerebral claims to criticality. When speaking of her instructors at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, she expresses surprise at their analytic approach, saying, with wry bewilderment, of one (white male) teacher, “He can even explain what beauty is.”



For Wang, the conditions that create beauty are, by nature, ineffable, and when they are stated, the spell is broken.

One recent work, *Spreading Elegance*, 2019, is entirely based on Wang's affection for the brand agnès b. On Facebook, the artist offered items from her lovingly acquired collection of the label's clothing to her friends in exchange for a handwritten letter. Wang presents these notes in tabletop vitrines, placing them alongside her own photos and drawings of the corresponding articles of clothing. Lit by a small tabletop lamp and furnished with a simple stool, each table is dedicated to an individual garment set free from the artist's collection. agnès b.'s simple, understated femininity epitomizes a modern European sophistication to which many women outside Europe—and, according to Wang, Asian women in particular—aspire. The key to the work lies in one of the letters, in which a confidante describes her initial reservations about the project. "Isn't this Agnès B. thing a bit superficial?" the friend writes. "It's fashion, clothes, capitalism—I'm missing substance, a critical perspective." But then she comes around. "When I went to see the show at the gallery, everything changed. . . . It's all about the question: How can I be someone? How can anyone be someone?" Being someone, Wang suggests, is less about the expression of some authentic interiority or self and more a process of rediscovery and play, of pleasurably pretending or putting on airs.

**BORN IN 1981** in the Sichuan capital city of Chengdu, Wang learned about Soviet Realism, the Russian avant-garde, and European modernism in high school. At Nanjing Normal University, she studied Chinese classical literature, calligraphy, and landscape painting, as well as mathematics and English. In 2007, Wang, who had been living in Shanghai, departed China for a residency in Germany, where she met artist Monika Baer, who advised her to enroll at the renowned Städelschule.

After graduating, Wang became a resident at the De Ateliers in Amsterdam and relocated to the Netherlands, where she has lived since 2012. As any newcomer will attest, learning to speak Dutch is a monumental task, not only because of the complex grammar and the throat acrobatics required, but because of the frustratingly friendly insistence of all Dutch people on speaking English to anyone who looks or sounds remotely foreign. In fact, it wasn't until Wang had lived in the country for several years that she found herself "immersed" in Dutch for the first time. While attending a concert at Luther Museum Amsterdam, Wang encountered a group of Dutch senior citizens who spoke the language exclusively and did not revert to English; she found that the experience made her feel integrated into Dutch society. Shortly thereafter, Wang announced via email that she had embarked upon a performance in which she would only speak Dutch or German for one year, and that friends and curators collaborating on institutional exhibitions who did not speak those languages would have to hire a translator to work with her. Communication hiccups, mistakes, and delays in exhibition preparation followed, underscoring the dominance of English as the art world's lingua franca. But more than that, Wang's action subtly challenged an institutional system that rewards artists for simultaneously occupying two irreconcilable positions: that of the outsider gazing inward at society and that of the insider able to conscientiously administer her own creative pontifications.

Wang has a long-standing interest in bureaucratic insignia of authentication. In Chinese painting and calligraphy, a finished piece received a stamp to certify its authority, indicating that it was made according to strict customs and principles of composition. Wang wondered if she could simply make the stamp herself, bypassing all the fuss of the compositional rulebook—traditional Chinese landscape painters would laugh at this ruse, she



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says. The resulting drawings, which form the cornerstone of her practice, combine Chinese landscape-painting techniques with elements, such as rice-paper scrolls, her "fake" Chinese authenticity stamps, collage, and calligraphy. For the artist's 2020 Hermitage exhibition, "*Het bloemblaadje, dat tijdens het ochtendkrieken was gevallen, pakte ik op in de avond-schemering*" (the title, which intentionally includes a Dutch grammatical error, translates to "I picked up the flower petal which had fallen in dawn in the evening twilight"), she created numerous such pieces, combining artifacts from her integration into the Netherlands, like Dutch-language homework, with paintings of everyday Dutch items: architectural elements including ornate cast-iron railings and the iconic Dutch gable; the Dutch delicacy *oliebollen* (fried dough); and the flashy faux chandeliers found in

the oliebolen trucks that serve them. Made with Chinese watercolors designed for rice paper, the paintings are further detailed with oliebolle-munching animals copied from Qing-dynasty paintings, all rendered in red, yellow, and blue in tribute to Piet Mondrian. Wang's authenticity stamps appear throughout—including one with her initials and another featuring a turtle above the word MOVE.

**WANG PRESENTED** additional rice-scroll pieces in "Reflection Paper," her recent exhibition at Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, including the twenty-six-foot long *Booklet of Bachmann\_Lost Leather Shoulder Bag Refund*, 2020, which recounts the story of a lost handbag. While Wang was doing a residency in Mönchengladbach, Germany, she left her Longchamp purse behind in a café. A good citizen found it and turned it over to the police, who then returned the bag to Wang with a five-page report. Wang collaged the report and a photo of the returned bag onto a rice-paper scroll that she also painted with a pastoral scene of sheep grazing in a Rhineland meadow. As in many such works, Wang's line drawings appear almost like virtuoso drypoint etchings, emerging and disappearing from the picture plane with spectral indifference. This effect carries over to her replicas of Agnes Martin paintings, an abundance of which here encircled the gallery and even lay on the floor; these are at once dutiful copies, with the original title noted on a placard, and playful riffs, marked with authentication stamps and referred to by the artist as "posters."

Like most of her exhibitions, Wang's Düsseldorf show invited the viewer to literally sit and reflect. The show included four videos inspired by writer Eileen Chang. Wang has long been attracted to female modernists, particularly the tragic mood they sometimes evoke, and these works, dated 2013–14 and shot in a self-consciously amateurish, impressionistic way, combine Chang's texts as scripts with fleeting scenes caught on video. *Reflection Paper no. 4*, which was filmed in a zoo, derives from Chang's writing on marriage, child-rearing, and feelings of captivity: She was not a bird in a cage, which has the ability to escape should the door be opened, but rather a bird embroidered onto a beautiful scarf, never to be able to move again.

The rest of the show comprised a litany of other media: architectural elements such as sunshades; a gigantic, bloody papier-mâché womb laid on the ground; a set of drying racks festooned with gargantuan granny panties that double as dresses (also depicted in the drawings *Granny!*, both dated 2020). Wang installed the ersatz Martin paintings around a series of moon gates, intersecting arches in the shape of an O found in upper-class Chinese gardens. Wang has described the exhibition itself as a garden, a closed-off space for reflection—a metaphorical womb able to produce life inside of itself. The lives we envision for ourselves—be it in a faraway land, transformed like the Frog Prince, having faked it till we've made it—are, to Wang, a matter of continual becoming. □

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Opposite page, top: Evelyn Taocheng Wang, *Spreading Elegance* (detail), 2019, watercolor, acrylic, and ink on rice paper, envelopes, ink on paper, twenty wooden tables, twenty desk lights, twenty stools, Plexiglas, dimensions variable.

Opposite page, bottom: View of "In the Presence of Absence," 2020–21, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Foreground: Evelyn Taocheng Wang, *Spreading Elegance*, 2019. Wall: Evelyn Taocheng Wang, *Quoted Elegance* Nos. 1–5, all 2019. Photo: Peter Tjhuis.

Left: View of "Evelyn Taocheng Wang: Reflection Paper," 2021, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf. Floor: *Thoughtless Garden*, 2020. Foreground, from left: *Clinic Agnes Martin*, 2020; *Clinic Agnes Martin*, OP. 8, 2020; *Clinic Agnes Martin*, 2020. Photo: Katja Illner.