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Beili Liu's "Aliment."

Hang on

Beili Liu suspends our
pleasure

by **Nick Sousanis**
1/18/2006



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Last summer at Detroit's Gallery 4731, artist Beili Liu created a "Great Wall" of toast, 40 slices high and 20 feet across the floor. Liu's ambitiously obsessive installation in white bread made for an engaging synthesis of American and Chinese cultures. In *Aline*, a show of three distinct yet conceptually linked pieces on display at the Ann Arbor Art Center, Liu once again uses a range of materials while continuing to invoke the aesthetic sensibilities of her heritage — in this case, to transform our perspective of destruction into something beautiful.

"Aliment" is a spiraled paper coil wound like a fire hose, brightly colored on one side and burned black on the other. Laid flat, it would directly resemble the rings on a cross section of a tree, but suspended from the ceiling, its lower half sags under its weight, giving it an ovalar form like the whorls on a fingerprint. Liu has constructed the work by folding and joining together thousands of decorative bills known as Chinese "spirit money," currency traditionally burned in rituals to provide for one's ancestors and other spirits in the afterlife. The title alludes to nourishment as much for the living as the deceased, and the dual purpose of Liu's burnt offering is reinforced by the visual contrast between its opposite sides, making it a sort of three-dimensional yin and yang, and a truly beautiful and engaging object. The viewer can take it in by walking around or standing still, watching the work slowly rotate.

If "Aliment" can be understood visually as a section of a tree, "Ashen" then is the bark — quite literally. This installation consists of a string of vertical screens that are hung in two semicircles and separated by a doorway-sized gap, so as to create a curved interior space between them. Onto the screens' surfaces, Liu has drawn meandering, calligraphic-looking lines, which are actually tracings on tree bark from the trails left by emerald ash borers. She makes great effort to capture the marks of this destructive pest in a manner resembling imagery on traditional Chinese screens, and to align the trails as they hop screens, maintaining continuity across the entire installation. To make the markings, she's dipped nylon mesh into soft wax, creating a surface that could be drawn into without pigment.

On the surface of one side of the installation, Liu projects video taken of trees gently swaying in the wind. Because the screens are translucent, the projected imagery can be seen on their backsides as well. In fact, occasional holes left in the nylon mesh allow pinpoints of light to shine through the entire installation, much like sunlight passing through a canopy of leaves. The tree branches in the video interact with the drawn patterns, and the screens themselves sway like the leaves in the projection, making the whole piece extremely expressive.

In "Inverse," Liu again uses wax to record a destructive path — this time, a bullet passing through six rectangular wax blocks suspended from the ceiling. Each block sits on a transparent shelf. The bullet follows a downward path through the blocks, but the artist has flipped each block, so that the trails from the exit wounds are more visible to the viewer. The bullet itself nearly emerges in the bottom block, where it finally rests. The trail of holes offers a narrative similar to Peter Newell's children's classic *The Rocket Book*. Each page documents the

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path of a rocket through the floors of an apartment building and the lives of its inhabitants.


Although "Inverse" offers a narrative, it is somewhat less poetic than Liu's other pieces in the show, simply because the blocks aren't as visually compelling as other forms her work takes on. However, the spidery trails made by the impact of the bullet in wax share a strong conceptual link with the other works, and the mere presence of a bullet is powerful enough. Because the wax also has a bit of the translucence, like skin, and is somewhat the color of bone, the material is an unsettling stand-in for our own bodies. Overall, Liu has once again created work that will leave audiences contemplating it for quite some time.

Through Feb. 18 at the Ann Arbor Art Center, 117 W. Liberty St., Ann Arbor; 734-994-8004.

Nick Sousanis is the arts editor of thedetroit.com. Send comments to letters@metrotimes.com.

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