

RAG

RICHMOND ART GALLERY  
School Art Program



## Teacher Guide

Wen Li Chen: *To My Unborn Child*

XiaoJing Yan: *In Suspended Silence*

September 14 – November 10, 2018

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# Program Overview

Dear Teachers,

This guide contains information about the exhibition, the artists, and some classroom activities that will help you to prepare your students for their visit to the Richmond Art Gallery. Please review this package with your students to get the most out of your gallery visit. The suggested activities require a minimum of materials and are adaptable to the needs of different grade levels.

Throughout the guide you will find art vocabulary words in bold that are defined in the vocabulary section, and resource links have been included for further topic explorations.

## Program Goals

The goals of the gallery tour and art workshop are to encourage students to:

- Describe and respond to works of art and explore artists' intent
- Observe and share how artists use processes, materials, and techniques to express ideas
- Explore personal experience, community, and culture through art making
- Examine the relationship between art and the wider world
- Create artworks using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play

## Big Ideas explored

- People create art to express who they are as individuals and as a community
- People connect to others and share ideas through the arts
- Exploring works of art exposes us to diverse values, knowledge, and perspectives
- Works of art influence and are influenced by the world around us
- Artistic expressions differ across time and place
- Experiencing art challenges our point of view and expands our understanding of others

# Before Your Visit

## Discussion: Cultural symbols

Cultural belonging is an idea that unites the exhibitions created by both artists. In the gallery will be examining the ways artists use cultural symbols and metaphors to represent ideas, traditions, and values from their culture. While we will discuss the theme of cultural symbols in the exhibition tour and workshop, you may want to give students time to explore this topic ahead of time in class. The following are questions of varying levels that can be used to prepare students for the works that they will interpret:

What is culture?

What are some examples of things we associate with culture?

How does culture affect us?

How might we define Canadian culture?

Can a person belong to more than one culture?

What are symbols?

Why do we use symbols?

What symbols represent Canada?

What symbols do you use in everyday life?

## At the Gallery

Your visit will start with a gallery tour of our current exhibitions. During the tour we will look at various artworks in depth, and discuss the overall themes of the exhibition.

Ideas explored:

- Stories and traditions about ourselves and our families reflect who we are and where we are from, and how artists incorporate these elements to explore identity and cultural belonging
- How symbolism and metaphor can be used by artists to represent meaning and to explore ideas and perspectives
- How artists use processes, materials, technologies, techniques, and environments to create and communicate, specifically looking at non-traditional **sculptural** materials and **installation art**.

After the tour, we will go into the gallery classroom and students will reflect on their own cultural backgrounds and family traditions and stories, and think about how their personal understanding of cultural identity can be expressed through a symbol. Using air-dry modeling clay students will be guided through how to create 3-D forms such as spheres, cones, and cylinders, and how to combine forms to create a sculpture of their chosen cultural symbol.

## About The Exhibitions

These two poetic and deeply personal exhibitions explore the notion of cultural belonging in an increasingly globalized world. Xiaojing Yan's installations create hybrid realities, rooted in traditional Chinese culture but growing in new and unexpected directions, reflecting her experience as a first generation Canadian. Wen-Li Chen's work considers personal identity and the future of the Indigenous Taiwanese Kavalan peoples through a mix of diaries, memory, history, and family stories.



### ***In Suspended Silence***

In this meditative **installation**, Xiaojing Yan navigates natural and cultural realms deeply grounded in Chinese philosophies, myths and folklore. Yan draws on personal experience from her earlier life in China and eventual immigration to Canada in reimagining these traditional visual languages through a contemporary perspective. She utilizes her art as way to explore the experience of being caught between identities. Growing up as a Chinese immigrant to Canada, she was torn between feelings of belonging to and exclusion from the two cultures, before deciding to celebrate the in-between space she occupies. This is reflected in her work that “blends Chinese and Western ways of thinking” as she uses a wide range of materials and images symbolic of Chinese cultural values, ideas, and stories, but places these within a Western context. As she states:

*“As an immigrant artist, both my identity and my work pass through the complex filters of different countries, languages, and cultural expectations. In my art, every idea travels through the intricate passageway of how I think in Chinese, but speak in English. In an effort to shape myself, I take traditional Chinese materials and techniques and reinvent them within a Western aesthetic and presentation.”*



To create this exhibition, Xiaojing Yan combined two bodies of work, *Mountain of Pines* and *Lingzhi Girl*, to create an **installation** in the gallery. **Installation art** involves the creation of an immersive environment that can be experienced by the viewer and that transforms a space. In *Mountain of Pines*, Yan has recreated the mountain ranges of traditional Chinese Shan Shui landscape paintings by hanging overlapping sheets of silk organza from the ceiling into which are embedded thousands of pine needles, creating the outlines of mountain peaks emerging from the mist. The subtlety of **Chinese brush paintings** is evoked by the shadows cast on the white gallery walls, as well as the shading effects created by using a range of colours of the needles themselves, greens from fresh needles harvested from her own trees, shifting to yellow and brown from needles already weathered by the sun. The effect of these panels is to create a contemplative landscape charged with symbolism. Mountains are traditionally places of pilgrimages, contemplation, spirituality, and transformation in Chinese culture, and are the home to forests of pine trees, symbols of longevity for their ability to remain green year round.

Xiaojing Yan continues to explore the theme of longevity in *Lingzhi Girls*. True to her practice of using materials that are rich with symbolic significance, Yan explores the theme of longevity through the use of the lingzhi mushroom as a sculptural material. Known as the mushroom of immortality in Chinese art, folklore and literature, it is also used in Traditional Chinese Medicine to promote long life. Growing on trees in the forest, often in mountainous regions, lingzhi mushrooms were considered rare and valuable, as they needed to be sought out in remote areas. Once dried, the mushrooms can last an extremely long time, which is presumably why they initially gained the associations with longevity. Currently lingzhi mushrooms are cultivated in farms, and on discovering this fact, Yan was intrigued to explore the possibility of



incorporating them into a work of art and embracing the natural growing process to create unique sculptures.

The sculptures themselves are in the form of eight busts modeled on a young female hero from Chinese folklore. A **bust** is a type of sculpture that features the head, neck, and shoulders of a human figure. A popular form of Western sculpture dating back to classical Roman times, busts were created to depict important citizens, leaders, artists, and thinkers and acted to immortalize their subjects, symbolizing the longevity of their cultural contributions. Yan is combining this Western

form of art with traditional Chinese references. The eight figures are inspired by the Eight Immortals of Chinese legends, who were ordinary people living in ancient times who attained immortality through performing good deeds and selfless acts. By combining both Eastern and Western influences, Yan is reflecting on her own identity as a Chinese Canadian, with roots in traditional Chinese culture, but adopting and incorporating the culture of her new home.

### ***To My Unborn Child***

Presented by Centre A in partnership with the Richmond Art Gallery, *To My Unborn Child* is artist Wen-Li Chen's first exhibition in Canada. Chen's artistic practice is influenced by her Indigenous Kavalan identity, and in the case of this exhibition, the imminent birth of her first child. Wen-Li Chen grew up in Taiwan, a country that shares many similarities to Canada. Like Canada, Taiwan has a population made up of Indigenous groups (such as the Kavalan) who have lived there for thousands of years, and peoples from different cultures who colonized the island at much later points in history, and who now greatly outnumber the original inhabitants. At the age of 12, Chen discovered that she was in fact of Kavalan descent, and it was not until she was 30 years old that she began to acquire some knowledge of Kavalan traditions.

Reflecting on her own personal research into her family through archives, conversations with family and friends, official government documents, and historical texts, she began to wonder how this cultural knowledge would then be passed down to the next generation. In this exhibition Chen presents her findings as a conversation with her unborn child, using experimental image-making processes that, in her words, imagine "how the child is going to experience life as her mother did, learning something lost and missed in fragments and blurry pieces. When the baby is inside the womb, she can only experience the world through blurry light and sound through the fetal membrane. This resembles the way I have grasped, collected, and gathered fragments of memory and history from personal experience and everyday life in order to understand and learn about what Kavalan means."

The **installation** features digital and analog projections that overlap with heat-transferred images on cotton sheets. “The result,” Chen states, “was to project and, in projecting, catch onto the myriad concerns I have about how future generations of Indigenous descendants will cope with the unstoppable changes that make the continuity and perseverance of culture and identity complex.”



*To My Unborn Child* also collects Chen’s research in a handmade book, inspired by the traditional Zu Pu, or genealogy book, to be passed on to her unborn child. The Zu Pu, a kind of formal record keeping, is a nod to the Han Chinese side of the artist’s family tree.

In this personal and yet universal story, sharing the ambivalence of many across the world who grow up in one culture with ties to another, Chen explores a mother’s hopes for her unborn child. In Canada in the era of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, perhaps this is a world in which our complex identities can all be explored and brought into the light.

## About The Artists

**Wen-Li Chen** is an artist based in Taiwan and the United States. She holds a Masters of Design in Photography from the Glasgow School of Art and has exhibited her work in Singapore, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. She is founder and executive director of FOGSTAND Gallery & Studio (立霧工作坊), based in Hualien, Taiwan and St. Paul, Minnesota.

**Wen-Li Chen's website:** <https://www.wenlitesar.com/works.html>

Born in Jiangsu, China, **Xiaojing Yan** works and lives in Markham, ON. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally including: Suzhou Museum, China; Varley Art Gallery, Markham; Katzman Contemporary, Toronto; Mississauga Art Gallery, Mississauga; Lonsdale Gallery, Toronto; TRUCK Contemporary Art, Calgary; Plug In Contemporary, Winnipeg; and Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey. Public art projects include: Cloudscape in collection for Seneca College at Newnham Campus, Toronto; Moon Gate, commissioned by Jinji Lake Art Museum, Suzhou, China; and Sound of the Rain, recently commissioned by Elora Centre for the Arts. Yan holds an MFA from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA.

**Xiaojing Yan's Website:** <http://yanxiaojing.com/>

**Video Interview with Xiaojing Yan:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=YThLismec8A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=YThLismec8A)

**Articles about Xiaojing Yan:**

<https://canadianart.ca/reviews/recent-work-by-xiaojing-yan/>

<http://www.markhamartscouncil.com/2013/06/05/xiaojing-yan/>

## After Your Visit

### Activity: Finish your Sculptures

The sculptures are made of Crayola Model Magic, which is an air dry clay that typically takes 24-48 hours to dry. It is a very sticky material, so when you return to the classroom, please check to see if any of the sculptures have accidentally stuck together, and gently separate them. Set them aside to dry overnight on the wax paper, or other smooth surface like formica countertops. The material will stick to paper or cardboard, so do not dry them on materials such as these.

Some larger sculptures may need a bit more time to dry. Check them in the morning, and if necessary, gently turn them on their sides or flip them over, exposing the base to the air so the underside can dry as well.

CRACKING – it is likely that a few sculptures will develop cracks or have a piece or two that might be loose or fall off. This is common with air dry clay, and can be easily fixed by using white glue to repair the piece once it's completely dried.

To add colour to the sculptures, they can be painted with watercolour, tempera or acrylic paint, and/or coloured with markers.

Optional: To give your sculptures a glossy finish, once the paint has dried, coat them with gloss acrylic medium to seal the sculptures.

### Reflection & Extension Activity: Sculptural Materials

Instead of using traditional art materials such as clay or marble to make her sculptures, Xiaojing Yan has used items with culturally symbolic meanings, such as Lingzhi mushrooms and pine needles.

As a class, brainstorm what materials could you use to make a “Canadian” Sculpture. (hockey pucks, maple leaves, loonies, etc.)

Reflecting on the sculpture you made at the gallery, is there a non-traditional material you could use to make the same sculpture with, but that would add to the meaning?

# Resources

## Picture Books

*I Read Signs* by Tana Hoban

*Auntie Tigress and Other Favorite Chinese folk Tales*, by Gia-Zhen Wang, Illustrated by Eva Wang

*The Magic Brush: A Story of Love, Family, and Chinese Characters*, by Kat Yeh, Illustrated by Huy Voun Lee

## Chinese Brush Painting

[http://www.asia-art.net/chinese\\_brush.html](http://www.asia-art.net/chinese_brush.html)

<http://www.comuseum.com/painting/landscape-painting/>

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/imperial-china/song-dynasty/a/chinese-landscape-painting>

## Lingzhi Mushrooms (*Ganoderma lucidum*)

Fun and informative video showing harvesting wild *Ganoderma* (lingzhi) mushrooms

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdGd9ifEQgY>

[http://www.mushroomexpert.com/ganoderma\\_lucidum.html](http://www.mushroomexpert.com/ganoderma_lucidum.html)

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-stamets/reishi-mushrooms\\_b\\_2200808.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-stamets/reishi-mushrooms_b_2200808.html)

## The Eight Immortals

Tales of the Eight Immortals for Teachers

<http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/bashian/bs0Intro.html>

## Taiwanese History

<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/first-nations-taiwan-special-report-taiwans-indigenous>

<https://www.taichung.guide/taiwanese-aborigines/>

# Glossary

<b>Bust</b>	A sculpture of a person's head and shoulders.
<b>Chinese Brush Painting</b>	Painting in the traditional Chinese style is done with a brush dipped in black or colored inks, or watercolours. In traditional Chinese paintings, the purpose was not to reproduce exactly the appearance of nature but rather to grasp an emotion or atmosphere so as to catch the "rhythm" of nature.
<b>Contemporary Art</b>	Artwork that is produced in this current time, generally considered to be artworks made from 1970 to the present. Contemporary art is a very broad term, including artworks made in almost any medium and incorporating many different themes and ideas.
<b>Culture</b>	The beliefs, institutions, arts, customs, and other aspects shared by a particular group of people.
<b>Installation Art</b>	An art form that creates an immersive environment for the viewer to experience that is installed in a gallery or specific site, and that can use almost any media (video, sound, light, sculpture, paint, etc.).
<b>Landscape</b>	A genre of art that depicts the natural environment.
<b>Medium</b>	The material or technique used by the artist to make an artwork. For example, paint is the medium used in a painting.
<b>Mould</b>	Container into which liquid is poured to create a given shape when it hardens.
<b>Sculpture</b>	A sculpture is a three-dimensional work of art. Sculptures may be a carved, modeled, constructed or cast object that can be made of many different materials.
<b>Symbol</b>	A form, image or subject that represents something else, such as an idea, place, feeling, or concept.

## Image Credits

Cover Page : XiaoJing Yan, *Lingzhi Girl*, lingzhi mushrooms and wood chips, 2016-2017  
Page 5, 6, 7: XiaoJing Yan, *Mountain of Pines*, silk organza and pine needles, 2017-2018, and  
*Lingzhi Girl*, lingzhi mushrooms and wood chips, 2016-2017  
Page 8: Wen-Li Chen, *To My Unborn Child*, installation view, 2018

## School Program Supporters and Partners



The Richmond Art Gallery School Art Program is one of many gallery programs made possible by the Richmond Art Gallery Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to extending the reach of our gallery exhibitions through community programming.



[www.islbus.com](http://www.islbus.com)

International Stage Lines is making it possible for more schools to visit by donating free bus travel to and from the gallery. Enter to win a free bus trip at <http://www.richmondartgallery.org/learn-and-create/schools/elementary>



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