



Culture & Creativity in Asia

The Color of Distance

July 17, 2020



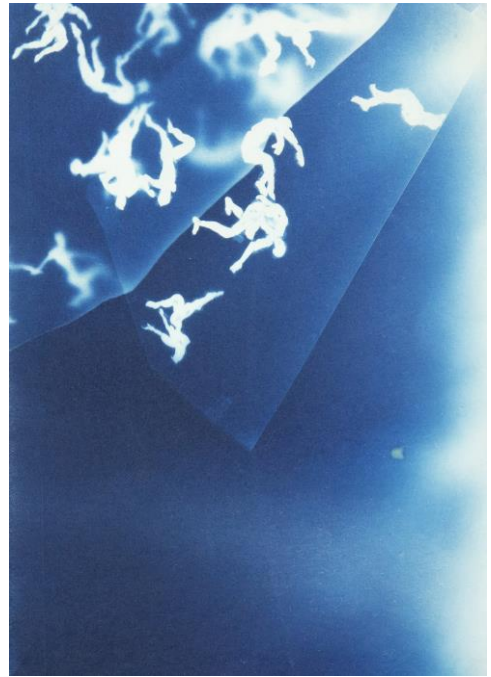
The Age of Migration 1 (2018) 71.2 x 144.2 cm / Cyanotype, watercolor, inkjet print on silk

Sapphires, ocean tides, twilight skies, and the murky depths of a jumbled dream—these were the visuals that came to mind when I first saw the cyanotype prints of Chinese artist [Han Qin](#). Her use of blue, which seemed to rove through every possible shade of the color, forms azure expanses swarmed by swimmers in white. These figures, some with arms interlocked, move with pressing urgency as if ready to surface from the paper. Han's works are as mystifying as they are riveting.

With blue occupying nearly every inch of her prints, some may ask, "What's the significance of the color?"



Lover 1 (2018) 25.4 x 16.8 cm / Cyanotype on paper



Falling 2 (2018) 25.4 x 16.8 cm / Cyanotype on paper

Han explains that blue can establish a sense of distance and calm. It's a color of mystery, divinity, and regality that carries a certain timelessness. The mere mention of blue brings to mind unclouded skies and the boundless seas. It feels close, yet out of reach, like the sliver of cerulean where the sky meets the ocean on the far-off horizon. "Even when you look at my prints up close, they still feel distant," she says. "It also represents the spirit of exploration—the exploration of the unknown, of life's uncertainties."



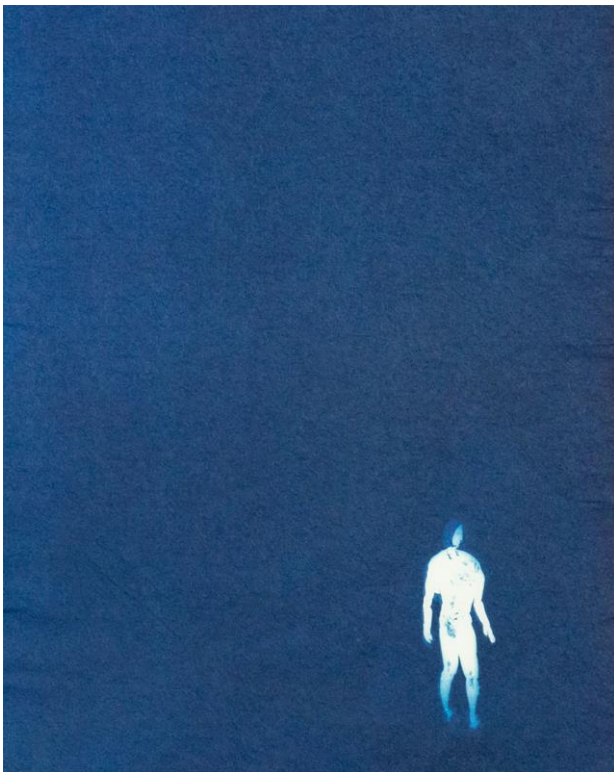
Pattern of Movement (series) (2016) 23 x 30 cm / Cyanotype on paper

Han's experimentation with cyanotype printing began in 2017. In these earlier works, she staggered paper cutouts atop a sheet of parchment paper coated with a light-sensitive solution and exposed it to sunlight, which turned the uncovered areas to cyan-blue. "There's an element of unpredictability with the medium,

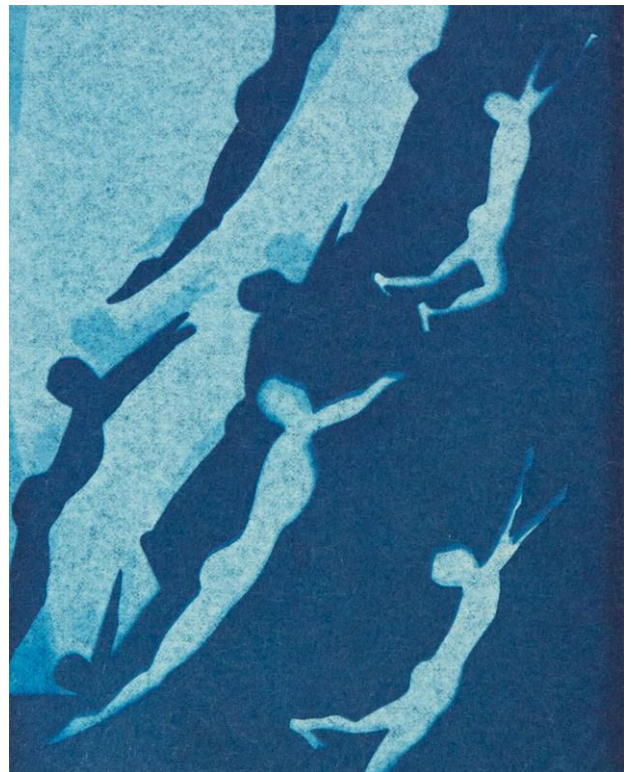
whether it's the angle that the sunlight is reaching the surface or maybe the solution was mixed differently," she says. "The intense blues and the hazy lines produced by the method make each work unique." The fickleness of the medium itself seems suitable for the theme of uncertainty that's often deliberated on in her works.



Pattern of Movement (series) (2018) 23 x 30 cm / Cyanotype on paper



Single Shadow 2 (2018) 25.4 x 16.8 cm / Cyanotype on paper



On the Way 1 (2018) 25.4 x 16.8 cm / Cyanotype on paper

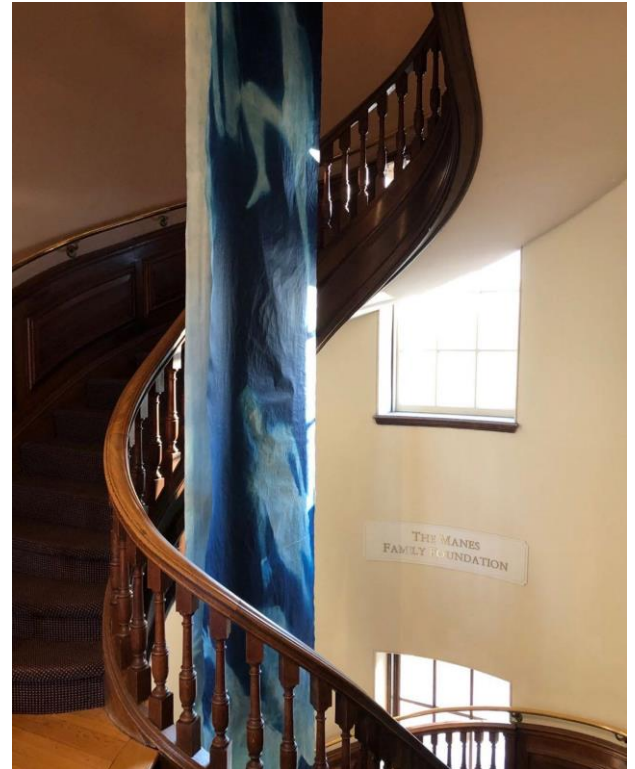
Han recently showcased ten prints at the Nassau County Museum of Art, each a different meditation on departure, memories, uncertainties, transformation, and—morbidity enough—drowning. Of these pieces, one of the most notable is *The Direction of Migration*, a large-scale piece that examines human migration. Han

invited over twenty individuals to share their experiences of making a new home in a foreign city through a static pose—their bodies formed the white silhouettes that cover the piece. All of the participants were people who moved from China’s countryside to Hangzhou in search of better opportunities. “One of the participating artists was an older individual,” Han recalls. “She described her pose as a show of strength, a way of capturing the hardships she’s had to endure to stay in Hangzhou.”

From a distance, the silhouettes are hazy; encased within the swaths of blue, they’re like bits of sea foam being relentlessly being tugged, pulled, and set adrift by forces outside of their control. But Han believes there’s plenty of meaning to be found in the riptides of life, and she converts these diverse experiences into a visual format. In the series of *Age of Migration*, she even looks inwards, using her own immigration experiences to better understand the complexities of human migration.



The Direction of Migration (Diptych) (2019) 84 x 2.4 m /
Cyanotype on paper



The Direction of Migration (Diptych) (2019) 84 x 2.4 m /
Cyanotype on paper

Two of the paintings from *Age of Migration* were inspired by her move to the U.S., specifically the 16-hour flight from Shanghai to New York. “After the landing gears leave the ground and the engine begins to roar, you’re given a God’s-eye view of the world; you feel above everything,” she recalls. “With the sky filling my field of view, I found myself lost in thought. I looked around the cabin, observing the passengers. Some were focused, some were weary, some were anxious, and some were frustrated. But they were all looking out of the window, gazing into the sea of clouds. I suppose that’s why we travel—we’re all in search of bluer skies that we can call our own.”

Memories of this trip have stuck with her, and in 2017, she finally turned them into a series of cyanotype prints populated by tiny swimmers. These water-bound figures would serve as the basis for the paintings of *Age of Migration*, which saw the same swimmers navigating much larger expanses of blue. “They are passengers on their own journeys,” Han says. “Depending on where they are in life, some may be floating while others may be sinking. With the advent of travel, mass migrations are commonplace now. The travelers are not happy, but nor are they sad. They’re content.”



The Age of Migration Tryptic (2018) 71.2 x 144.2 cm / Cyanotype, watercolor, inkjet print on silk

From Hangzhou to New York, Han's art has been showcased in as many places as she's lived, and the evolution of her work directly reflects all that she's experienced in these places over the years. She moved out of China at the age of 24, and in the decade since, she's completed college, built a home abroad, and gotten married. These transitional moments have enriched her art, pushing her to create even more ambitious works.

In 2019, for her exhibition at New York's [Fou Gallery](#), *Ethereal Evolution*, Han decided to incorporate a performative aspect to her works with the inclusion of live dancing. In continuing her exploration of migration and displacement, the invited dancers were all either non-American or exchange students. "The curator Hai Liang and I discussed how performance art could be included in the show," she recalls. "The creation process and the performative dance could be one and the same. We envisioned it as something dynamic, capturing the sense of uncertainty that is inherent to migration. This would give additional dimensionality to the show."

In the series, the dancers' movements are rendered as blurry silhouettes against the deep-blue backdrops. The lack of definition is a deliberate feature of the series. These ill-defined forms visualize the struggle of the immigrant experience in their search for identity—for outsiders, these experiences can often be difficult to see and understand, but for the individuals experiencing them, the hardships are as clear as day.



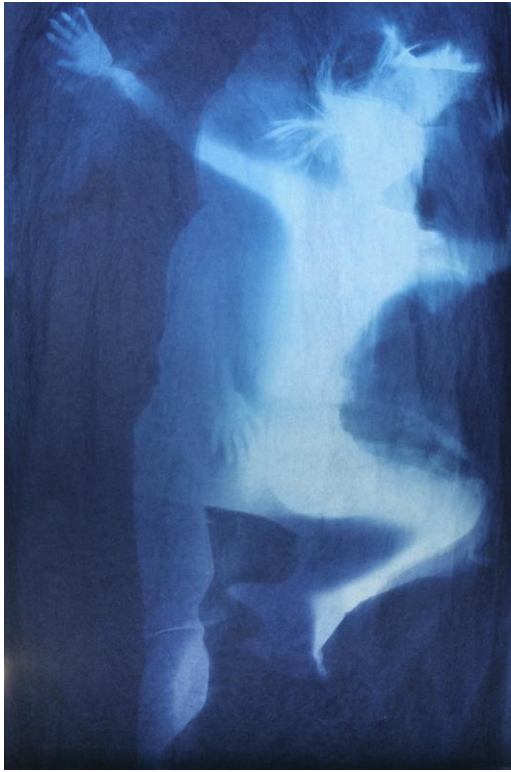
Ethereal Evolving 2 (2018) 208.3 x 119.4 cm / Cyanotype
on paper



Ethereal Evolving 4 (2018) 208.3 x 119.4 cm / Cyanotype
on paper



Tracking the White Shadow Performance Premier (2019)
Performers: Izumi Ashizawa and Zhiwei Wu / ©Han Qin, Photographed by JoJo Zhong



Ethereal Evolving 8 (2018) 208.3 x 119.4 cm / Cyanotype
on paper



Ethereal Evolving 2 (2018) 208.3 x 119.4 cm / Cyanotype
on paper

In recent months of lockdowns and border closures, relocation and travel haven't exactly been relevant topics for Han. She says this is the longest that she's stayed in one place in recent memory. Her full-time job as a professor means she's mostly stayed at home, teaching online. Traveling has been the furthest thing from her mind. She isn't starved for inspiration though; the internet and global politics have provided plenty of creative fodder.

Outside of her artistic endeavors, she's also eager to do her part in fighting the pandemic. When Covid-19 was at its worst in China, Han worked with Chinese art institutions and media platforms to organize donations. When the virus reached New York, she helped exchange students figure out ways of returning home and even offered free counseling. "Every day was a new crash course on how to navigate the pandemic-stricken world," she recalls.

As for the future, Han reveals that she plans to turn her focus toward the changing relationship between people and the place they call home. She also plans on merging together performance art and visual art again. An eagerness to further her art keeps her motivated and optimistic. "Nowadays, I'm often reminded of Henry Matisse's work, and one specific quote by him," Han says. "Each of us must find his own way to limit the moral shock of this catastrophe . . . For myself, in order to prevent an avalanche overwhelming me, I'm trying to distract myself from it as far as possible by clinging to the idea of the future work I could still do, if I don't let myself be destroyed. ' This quote motivates me to keep making art."



Han Qin: Ethereal Evolution installation view / Photographer: Nadia Peichao Lin



Han Qin: Ethereal Evolution installation view / Photographer: Nadia Peichao Lin

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Images Courtesy of Han Qin, Fou Gallery, ART33 & NCMA