

STARS

Taking Another Look

**KATHERINE
RUSHWORTH**

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

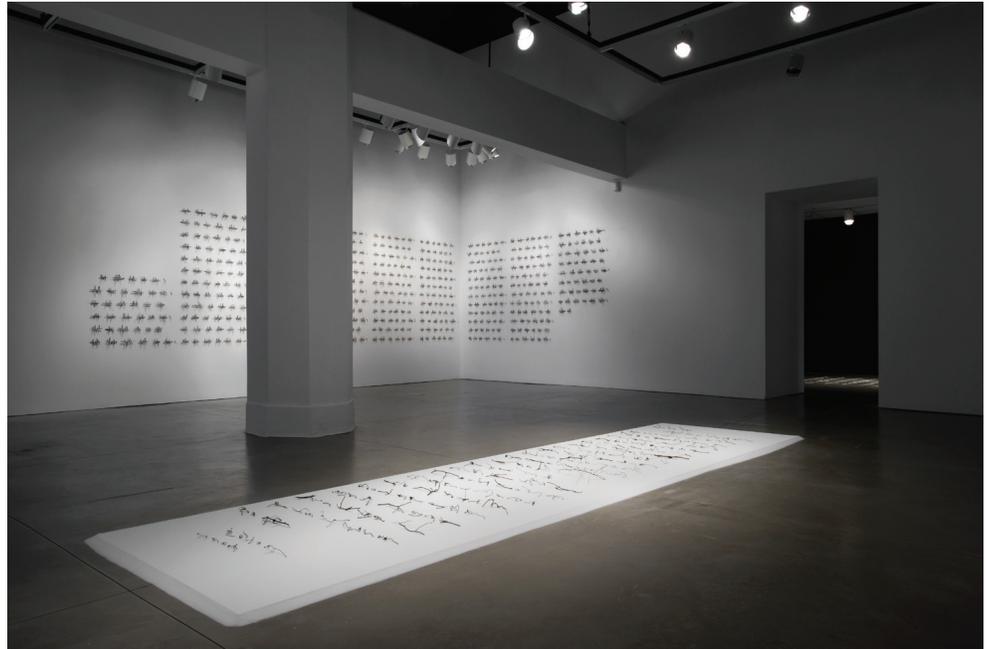
Artists — good artists — help us look at the world around us in new and unexpected ways. They see beauty in the overlooked, turning unconventional materials into new media.

They see beyond what lies before them.

Such is the work by the Chinese-born, New York City-based artist Cui Fei, whose installations and wall drawings remain on view at the Warehouse Gallery through Nov. 6. Fei employs twigs, tendrils, thorns, sand and salt to explore the traditions and history of her Chinese heritage, but she goes beyond the personal to probe more universal ideas pertaining to nature's beauty, endurance and its persistent influence across cultures.

At the heart of Fei's work is the mark and the act of making the mark; but what makes her approach so compelling is her choice of media. No pencils, brushes, paints or pastels in Fei's toolbox. She picks up broken, discarded and neglected pieces of nature; twisted vine tendrils, spindled limbs, snapped twigs and pointed thorns, which she melds into calligraphic forms that somehow speak to you like words on a printed page. From afar, Fei's marks look like Chinese lettering; but up close, they read like poetic curiosities.

In the piece titled "Manuscript of Nature VIII," 2010, Fei arranged 9,000 blackish thorns on three sheets of white board, creating a triptych of points and shadows that draw your eye down, across and back up; reading left to right or right to left in the tradition of old Chinese manuscripts. She takes a similar approach in the visually lyrical piece titled "Tracing the Origin VI_I—III," 2008. On three long scrolls of



Courtesy of Cui Fei

THIS VIEW OF THE Warehouse Gallery captures two pieces, included in Cui Fei's exhibition. The floor piece titled "Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse," is comprised of salt and vine tendrils. The wall piece titled "Not Yet Titled," a 2009 references calendar pages and is comprised of thorns and thread.

white paper, Fei arrays individually photographed images of the twigs and twined tendrils, implying some sort of cryptic narrative.

In a specific nod to Syracuse's legacy as the Salt City, Fei created "Manuscript of Nature V_Syracuse," 2010. The exhibition checklist describes the piece as "tendrils and salt on floor" with varying dimensions. The installation seems to broaden the two-dimensional narrative begun on the gallery's south wall ("Tracing the Origin IV_I—III") into a three-dimensional idea installed and completed on the gallery floor. The concepts and the specific sitings of the two pieces strongly complement one another and keep Fei's idea fresh.

The final piece in the main gallery, titled "Not Yet Titled," 2009, is comprised of thorns, twine and needles, which Fei coalesces into columns of individual forms, which she then attaches to the wall with stick pins. I'm told the piece references the

Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s and '40s, with the blocks of media representing individual pages in a calendar. The piece evokes the visual effect of a calendar grid but seems to exist in a timeless void.

Located in the adjoining vault area of the gallery is the ephemeral piece titled "Tracing the Origin VIII," 2010. The floor installation, comprised of nothing more than sand on the floor, captures the calligraphic marks Fei so adeptly creates using twigs and tendrils, but the soft edges of the sand imbue the piece with a transience not felt in the other works. This piece addresses the meditative nature of sand painting and its place in Native American, Tibetan, Indian and other cultures.

Fei embraces nature as a cross-cultural constant and stabilizing force. The media she uses is specific to no one, yet accessible to all. She engages a universal force to which we are all tied, even if we don't speak the same language.