

## NEW.YORK ART.CRIT

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in New York City**

### 1.21.08 — WAVES OF GRAIN

It must be art's oldest dream, to let nature write itself. Like most dreams, however, it keeps shifting in the mind of the dreamer. Painting may have begun as a ritual encounter, with nature at once source, subject, and product. One can think of cave painting as a recycling of mud and ashes into humans, gods, and horses. Later, nature supposedly left its impress through the fidelity of the artist or more directly, in the artist's imagination, in photography, or in data-driven new media.

Like most dreams, too, this one has a certain distance from reality. In each case, nature leaves the dreamer with plenty of work to do and with responsibility for the outcome. Cui Fei calls her show "Manuscript of Nature," at Cheryl McGinnis through February 2, but Mother Nature would call it a creative collaboration. What looks like calligraphy may have multiple sources, sometimes within a single work. She might have drawn it freehand, fashioned it from plant tendrils, or let them cast their own shadow. What could pass for pottery shards amounts to gunk from the hardware store laid over wood.

Cui Fei's *Manuscript of Nature V* (Cheryl McGinnis, 2007) increasingly, she does take her materials from nature. The imagined archaeological dig already bears real oak leaves. Later work becomes more

open and more given over to plants alone, like the tendrils affixed to the wall in regular columns. Bare stalks of wheat like twigs form one grid, blackened rose petals another. Stripping the branches recalls the



making of a reed pen, the grid assemblage the preparation of handmade paper. They maintain the illusion of writing and their place between the two dimensions of the support and the three dimensions of the materials.

The allusion to writing appears in the shapes, but also in their near regularity. She began as an abstract painter, and she still relies on formal structure and free gestures. One might get up close to see what Chinese looks like, only to find the artist's own patterns. She makes use of how Chinese runs from top

to bottom, right to left. Along with the interplay between the artist's process and nature's, she draws on the contrast between ancient writing and transitory materials, China and New York. She says that she finds her materials in Central Park.

I cannot swear that Manhattan holds enough amber waves of grain to sustain human life. Maybe it does not have to. The work suggests a rich cultural tradition or the possibility of organic growth, but it also makes plain nature's habit of drying out. The wheat has lost its bounty, and the roses could prick. Craft and vegetation may have particular meaning for feminist art, but these materials do not offer themselves to the touch. Crossing continents comes with its own promise of rebirth, but also its own risks of alienation.

Critical theory has developed the idea of art as text and philosophy as a kind of writing, but neither as easy to translate. In deconstruction, writing initiates an unending chain of signs and associations. Another woman artist, Michal Rovner, has similarly displayed what looks at first like archeology and alphabets but up close might resemble naked bodies, oil rigs, or the genetic code. Cui Fei's work seems less grandiose and more personal. It depends more on a sense of humor than on sudden surprises. It also allows formalism and the illusion of nature's writing to get along just fine.