Jan-Ru Wan

A Magical Journey

BY S. PORTICO BOWMAN

A mile or more of hand-dyed, waxed thread, perhaps an acre of silkscreened, printed, and dyed silk organza and other fabrics, hundreds of bells, rusted razor blades, brain scans on magnetized rubber disks, small round candle mirrors, miniature Buddhas, the Heart Sutra, and a myriad of other symbolic objects mark the artistic journey traveled by Jan-Ru Wan as she searches for ways to express the essential elements of the human experience. Born in Taipei, Taiwan, Wan has spent the past 19 years in America, discovering how to suspend matter in space so that her sculptural installations embody both at once. The two domains are locked in an interdependent embrace balanced by the laws of physics and the aesthetic of the sublime so that Wan can explore and express what she understands about herself and what she considers to be the true nature of being.

Without self-conscious posturing or projection, Wan directs introspective observations of her home and adopted cultures (she studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for her BFA and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee for her MFA) into work that forcibly demands attention. Her large-scale pieces typically consist of countless numbers of alluring small details brought dramatically to life by symbolic associations and images that she silkscreens onto surfaces with the dynamic urgency of Jackson Pollock. Wan demonstrates an acute awareness of the differences between East and West, an interest in the relationship of body and mind, and a fluid exploration of the relationship between scientific objectivity and the subjective dance of the imagination.

The recent *Equilibrium* continues her investigation into the notion of balance by means of suspending matter in space. Dozens of hand-dyed threads are wrapped around a rusted razor blade that clings to an array of magnetized disks arranged in an infinity sign on the ceiling. Each disk carries an image of Wan's MRI brain scan. The thread travels from the ceiling down to the fabric, which is screened with images of hip bones and animal deities from the "spiritual money" that relatives buy and burn to ease the afterlife journey of their departed loved ones. The fabric delineates a plane of space that seems to levitate within tension and balance, even though the dyed threads holding it in place are visible.

Wan often does not see a piece completed until she installs it for the first time. She creates each work in stages—dying the thread, screening the fabric with layers of images (including infant feet and a textbook image of the proportions of the human body as represented over one life span—an image that she has kept on her screen and used for 12 years), or printing the mirrors with the prayerful hands of her beloved Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion. In this way, she opens herself to undercurrents of meaning. Wan says that she often intuits the next step without necessarily knowing how it will fit into the whole picture. Her process and the resulting work come to represent the experience of life—we usually cannot see or understand the entire context of what is happening to us, only the segment we experience, which is like a continual trace of the present moment.

Between the Cloud and the Smoke swings in space, a delicate organza crescent of blue, gray, and teal screened with tigers scanned from spiritual money and a pattern that looks like braided

Opposite: *Equilibrium*, 2010. Printed and dyed silk organza, dyed cotton yarn, rusted razor blades, magnetic disks, and mirrors, 8 x 20 x 6 ft. Above: *Between the Cloud and the Smoke,* 1997–2010. Dyed and silkscreened silk organza, string, bells, salt, printed mirrors, spiritual money, and bags filled with cloves, 9 x 40 x 3 ft.

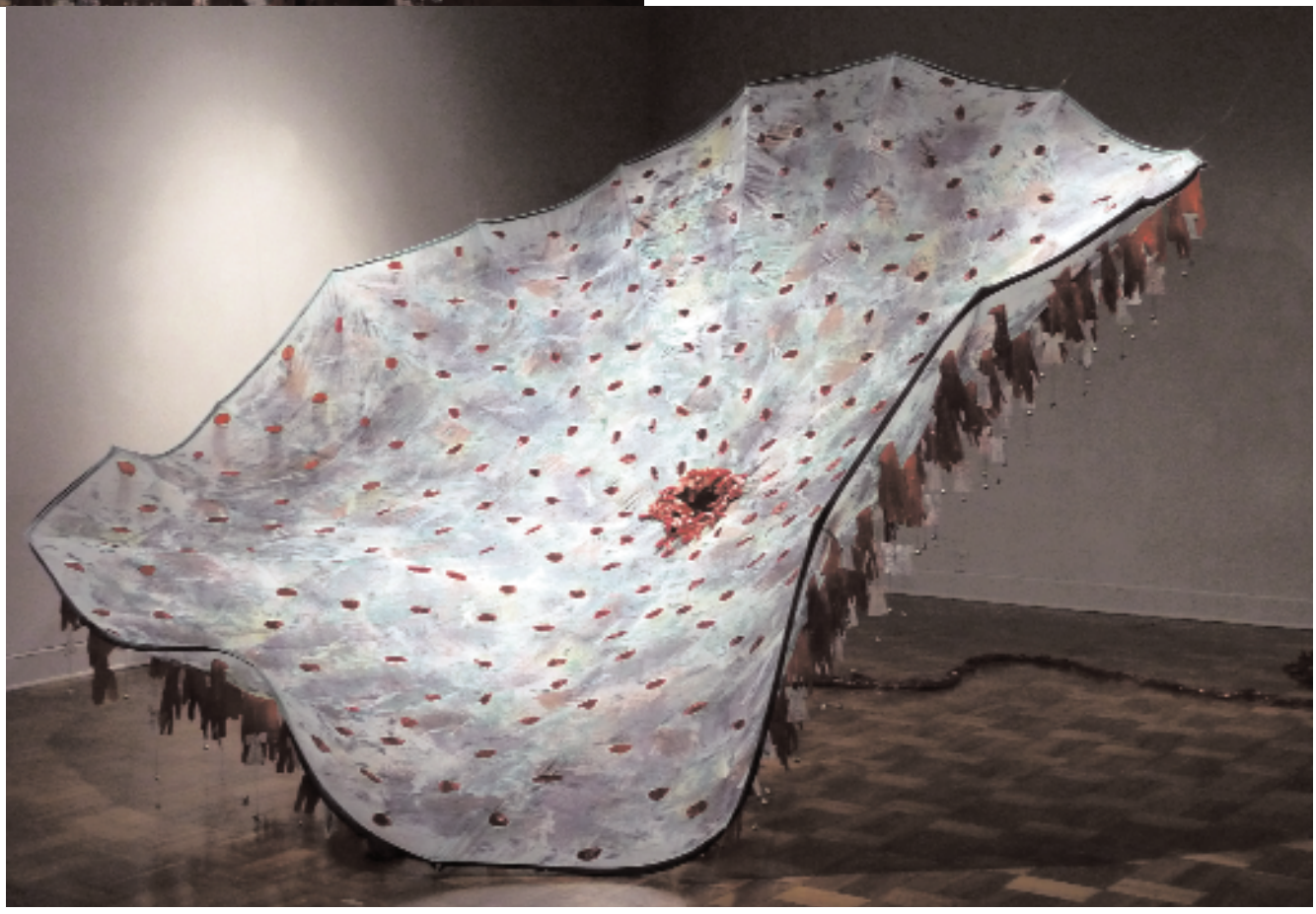
hair. The crescent has a 10-inch, table-like top at its widest point, with panels that hang down the sides. A chain of origami swallows covered with leaf and petal forms travels the length of the entire form. Below, waxed bells and organza bundles of cloves are suspended by thread, dropping down to almost touch a salt "shadow" pierced with round mirrors. Wan suggests that this piece represents the moment when the spirit leaves the body at death. Before the spirit escapes (as smoke to become clouds), there is a brief period when sensations, such as the scent of cloves, might be remembered. She also offers a more sublime interpretation: as we behold the organic form suspended across 40 feet of space,

Bottom and detail: *When the Bells Ring*, 1996–2010. Dyed latex gloves, cloth, and bells, 8 x 13 x 13 ft.

we do not see the full circle that it represents; we see only one small part. Here again, she wants to remind us that it is only a small portion of our lives that we see or know at any one time, yet we have an interdependent connection with all experience and each other. According to Wan, this unseen relationship with the spiritual and physical fills life with possibility. She refers not to the personal ego, but to the Buddhist concept of universal interdependence and the ideal of compassion, when she states, "I am everything."

Wan has asked herself, "Why do I make these big, complicated things?" Reflecting on her childhood in Taiwan, she realized that her first conduit to the sublime took the form of life-size "puppets" made from mundane fabric and wood that could transform into magical talismans. Swinging overhead as they passed through the Taipei streets on festival days, they commanded privilege and power because, as Wan recounts, "they forced you to let go of your rational thought and surrender." Wan seeks to bestow this power of the sublime on viewers by imbuing the thread and fabric, metal and paper, of her own towering forms with a magical life.

The poise and equipoise of Wan's work extend beyond the masterful balance of space and material into conceptual and emotional entanglements like death and desire, yet never once does she terrify us with overbearing confrontation; instead, she delicately guides us thread by thread, detail by detail into the thick



of the matter. In *When the Bells Ring*, she explores the dual nature of desire by creating a form both intensely beautiful and acutely disturbing. Silkscreened spider webs and baby footprints cover the surface of a parachute, which is slit open to reveal lips made of gloves dyed blood-red. These orifices gape "like baby birds," Wan says, gulping for air and desperate with a heightened awareness of their dependence on another for food. Beneath the surface, the gloves dribble out, the fingers sticking together as they attempt to grasp at something. Shirts smaller than the gloves hang next to them, along with waxed and silenced bells. Wan typically uses the garment form as a metaphor for the body. In *Things We Carried*, she examines the struggle between the spiritual and mundane aspects of the body (including how it is constructed and experienced through culture). In *When the Bells Ring*, Wan reminds us that desire can turn in on itself, just as the center of the parachute is stretched 10 inches wide and a girdle of gloves backs into the void and then trails out behind the fanning form, like the tail of a manta ray.

Wan's elementary school teachers muttered that this child was "no artist," shaking disapproving heads as her expressive gestures roamed outside the traditional calligraphic canon. Her parents, however, nurtured her proclivity to communicate an almost mute childhood through her creations. On arriving in America as a young woman in her 20s, Wan found her artistic voice confirmed when she encountered Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*. Here, she says, "was an artistic voice that helped her understand that her artistic journey could continue" and that art-making was not just about skill, but also about the energy of creativity.

S. Portico Bowman is an associate professor of art and the gallery director at Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas.

***Things We Carried*, 2009. Found clothing with reverse Applica pockets filled with dry chili peppers and rice, and metal ear pickers, installation view.**