

Dan Jian



Dan Jian is a visual artist who works across painting, drawing, animation, and video
Assistant Professor - TCU



Dan Jian
A Mountain Is Not a Mountain
2020
Oil on paper
24 x 27 inches



Dan Jian
Untitled
2020
Oil on Paper
23 x 27 inches



Dan Jian
Death of A Horse
2020
Oil on paper
28 x 35 inches



Dan Jian
Untitled
2020
Oil on paper
30 x 40 inches

Dan Jian - *Landscape As A Motif*

Dan Jian is a visual artist who works across painting, drawing, and project-based installation. She received her BFA from the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, and from the Ohio State University, she gained her MFA with a minor in Comparative Study.

Dan is a residency alumnus of Ragdale Foundation, Vermont Studio Center, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts. She currently lives in Fort Worth, Texas, where she is an assistant professor of Art at Texas Christian University and maintains an on-going studio practice.

Jian's work explores landscape as a motif and metaphor that conveys a depth of meaning through the reductive representation of form. As an immigrant, she finds the landscape acquires meaning through memories; as we dwell, we are the subjects overwriting a landscape's original narrative through our reflections and recollections, while holding the potential of all future memory. Drawing and painting have been the constants on which she relies on to investigate this process. Each work is an open-ended formal search that examines how culture builds myths, defines what's ordinary, and incites emotion.

ABOUT DAN'S ART

In *A Mountain Is Not a Mountain*, Dan Jian, assistant professor of art at Texas Christian University, explores the change from merely perceiving objects to understanding them as metaphors and the reversal back to being simply an object. The title references a Chinese Zen saying that states that before studying Zen, a mountain is just a mountain, but while studying Zen, a mountain is not a mountain, and finally, when enlightenment is achieved, a mountain is again a mountain.¹

Born and raised in China, Jian uses her creative practice to explore motifs from her cultural landscape and their metamorphosis from object to symbol. By flattening the forms of the tomb guardian, the woman riding the phoenix, and the pagoda, Jian liberates them from their physical form and generates a new experience for herself and the viewer.² The lion form recalls a kind of tomb guardian that Jian would pass on the street in China. To the artist, it represents a piece of the past tenuously held onto that has lapsed into disrepair.³ In *A Mountain*

¹ Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), 126.

² 934 Gallery, "Remembering While Looking," accessed October 20, 2020, <https://934gallery.org/remembering-while-looking/#:~:text=Remembering%20While%20Looking%20is%20a,Dan%20Jian%20and%20Diana%20Abells.&text=Through%20a%20process%20of%20collage,objects%2C%20places%2C%20and%20narrative.>

³ Dan Jian, interview by Emma Thompson, Zoom call, October 5, 2020

In *Untitled*, as in *A Mountain Is Not a Mountain*, Dan Jian uses the landscape and natural motifs as personal and cultural symbols. In the center, a bird perches on a single branch, staring with wide eyes away from the arrow forms piercing the work from the right. Jian is deliberate in her visual sources, drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese art but making the symbols her own (Jian, interview, October 5, 2020). The painting's color and flattened forms recall the Mogao cave paintings in Dunhuang, a city in Western China. The bird in her painting references a print of a bird found in the earliest Chinese book printed using the technique of polychrome xylography, also called douban, which uses multiple blocks with different colored inks to produce a watercolor effect ("Chinese Works: Shi Zhu Zhai Shu Hua Pu," University of Cambridge Digital Library, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PR-FH-00910-00083-00098>). The bird's personality, communicated through its visible eye, recalls the work of the seventeenth-century artist Bada Shanren, who painted watercolors of animals, anthropomorphized by their enigmatic facial expressions. By placing the bird at the center but threatening it with arrows and archer windows, Jian shifts the subject to the bird and suggests its vulnerability to forces inside and outside the painting. Because nature carries less symbolic baggage than the

Is Not a Mountain, landscape acts as a motif and a carrier of pictorial signifiers; it speaks to Jian's personal imagined symbols as well as symbols that reflect reality, such as the sociopolitical and cultural landscape. Through the process of making the work, Jian spurs an exploration of these symbols, using large and expressive gestural marks to navigate her history and process memory. ET

human form, by making the bird the subject, Jian opens up the work to a plethora of narrative possibilities, continuing her exploration of personal perception and its relationship with cultural symbolism. ET