

Guo Tiantian: Philosophy of Concealment
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As a contemporary artist who has consciously chosen lacquer as her medium, Guo Tiantian has recognized the divergence between the two art worlds—the world of traditional Chinese craftsmanship and global contemporary art—and has been prepared to embrace the inertia of art history. Lacquer has been stereotyped and mainstreamed from China's Warring States period (c. 475–221 BC) onward. Its captivating, sleek, amber-like surface provides an aura for the vessel, yet seals the potential of the art form into the classic formats of traditional art. Since the beginning of the 20th century, lacquer art has been further limited by the practicality and ornamental value of vessels and reduced to an icon of folk art and craft. The process is also accompanied by the structural exclusion of traditional material within the discourse of the contemporary art system and the standardization and alienation of non-Western art under the narrative of Modernity.

However, Guo Tiantian's practice responds to the situation with a new methodology. It is not about bridging the two separate art worlds, nor about embedding the concept of “contemporary art” into her lacquer practice or striving to liberate it from the shackles of tradition. Instead, it is about breaking away from this existing art map and abandoning this highly simplified and practical-oriented positioning tool. The boundary is set by modernity, while the real world is more complex than the “map”. Some unsolvable knots no longer need to be regarded as the premise of work. Therefore, her works do not present the anxiety of the dichotomy of “tradition/contemporary.” Their approach is characterized by a confident lightness and freedom of movement, while their temperament is marked by classical contemplation and timelessness.

As Tiantian discovered the inconsistency of the raw lacquer she purchased commercially, she soon realized that we are still dwelling in an ancient format of workshops—perhaps “we have never been modern.” The raw lacquer embodies both stubbornness and mutability. Its colour and fluidity can be easily affected by the place of origin, the age of the tree, and the season; variety can even be observed within the same batch under different climates. The stages of making, mixing, and applying lacquer highly demand the worker's intuition and experience to understand various uncertainties in the material, rather than achieving certainty in this complex process. Tiantian's practice of lacquer is not a revival of traditional material, but a confirmation of the reality that we are still living in a non-purified world, a hybrid of nature, society, and techniques. It challenges the industrialized and abstract understanding of materials and art by modernity on an ontological level.

If we look at her “String/Line” series of works, we will be captivated by those moving, seemingly effortless traces. These lines transcend mere concept or technique, revealing an honest simplicity that lays bare varying inner thoughts and expressions (e.g., *Pranayama*, 2024; *Stillness*, 2025). They are lifelines recording their own trajectories, akin to EKGs that reflect the artist's state—moments of vigour or frailty, calm or turmoil. In this circumstance, brushwork recedes, yielding to the guidance of state and material. Line after line offers chance after chance, awaiting the artist's intuitive understanding and arrival at an ineffable point of agreement. For Guo Tiantian, working with lacquer is a process of continuous negotiation with the material and acknowledgment of its agency. The material is not a passive medium but a co-author.

Some works employ techniques entirely dissimilar to “traditional” lacquer, not seeking the polished, translucent surface typically used to finish a piece. The pursuit of lacquer's exquisite sheen began during the Song and Yuan dynasties; before the time, ancient Chinese lacquer paintings were not polished. Thus, “tradition” becomes not monolithic but highly specific in her practice; technique is liberated from temporal linearity and becomes universally accessible. The work *An Unreadable Manuscript* (2025) abandons not only surface polishing but even the final filming. Renouncing the smooth lacquer surface means relinquishing the most familiar and readily rhetorical associations with lacquer art; the possession of consummate skill coupled with its refusal of display suggests an intentional concealment. However, “rhetoric establishes sincerity”. Beyond narrower temptations, this work addresses weightier concerns: modern civilization, despite its cultivated refinement, still finds itself struck into impactfulness

and speechlessness in front of the unpolished remnants of ancient cultures. If what remains are illegible manuscripts and a human civilization difficult to perpetuate, where does tradition go, and whence comes the contemporary? The chaotic hues and the unadorned texture of *An Unreadable Manuscript* evoke archaeological sites covered in the dust of history, their primal and mysterious quality echoing the unreadable text/score within the image.

We have encountered several instances of “tradition” in quotation marks. It is a question posed by Guo Tiantian: What do we mean when we speak of “tradition”? T.S. Eliot wrote in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “Tradition... cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it by great labour.” Tiantian’s practice unfolds precisely through this belief and labour. For her, tradition is not a ready-made object, an immutable heritage awaiting inheritance, but a dynamic process requiring rediscovery, re-archaeology, and reinterpretation. This process of archaeological engagement reflects the medieval palimpsest. Old text was scraped from parchment manuscripts, and new text was written over it. New traces covered the old, yet vestiges of the past remained visible. The palimpsest has become, in contemporary thought, a methodology for analysing historical phenomena as recursive movements of inscription, erasure, and reinscription, wherein old and new histories persist in polyphonic dialogue.

Unsurprisingly, the concept of the “palimpsest” resonates with the operational logic of lacquer art. Lacquer work is a spatio-temporal practice based on “layering—coating—erasing—polishing.” A lacquer painting involves an inverted process of generation, a constant movement between concealment and revelation; prolonged overwriting gives lacquer art its unique thickness and depth. Polishing the surface would erase the distance between spatial layers and devastate the original spatial structure. Therefore, lacquer possesses no sense of territory, the lacquer artist’s work is to dissolve boundaries. Every stage of polishing uncovers anew the colours and materials embedded below, even as it simultaneously conceals, in the manner of geological strata, the deep-time architecture of history. A two-dimensional lacquer work is never flat, it is a topographic map of contour lines, whose uneven elevations are known intimately only to its coworker. The process obliges the experienced artist to renounce the seduction of immediacy, working instead under the horizon of future retrospection, where intuition, curiosity, and chance serve as guides. Therefore, Guo Tiantian’s work is a form of future archaeology. It dissects and reflects on the history of lacquer art across vast stretches of time, while grounding itself in deep emotional and physical experience—a continuous rediscovery of the unity between mind and hand.

Her practice unfolds as a philosophy of concealment. The work’s culmination is not located on the surface, as is commonly prized in lacquer painting, but within the underlying layers—within the shadowed depths of entangled and energy-charged material residues. It is thus registered more faithfully through touch than through vision. It begins with tactility rather than vision, with concealment rather than revelation, with abstraction rather than representation, with form rather than narrative. The true lacquer artist concerns herself with the internal order of things, not their surface appearance. This creative thinking, based on intuition and association, aligns with the motif of “synaesthesia” that Guo Tiantian has long explored (see her “Script” and “Music” series). Indeed, “synaesthesia” is almost a metaphor for lacquer art. Lacquer, with its distinctive scent, its ever-changing chromatic shifts, and its tactile variability, demands of the artist a total engagement of body and mind, an activation of all the senses—sight, touch, smell, time, and memory—so that creation becomes a response of the entire being.

The work *Correspondence* (2024–2025) draws from Baudelaire’s same-titled poem, depicting the synaesthesia of everything. Interestingly, “correspondences” in French also means “communications” and “connections” (as in transfer points), and synaesthesia involves constant transfers between several channels to achieve “communication”. In her “Script” and “Music” series, poetry swells into waves (*Silence is waves breaking against the boat’s bow*, 2024–2025), tonal rhythms chart the weather (*Weather Map*, 2025), musical notes fall like cool rain (*The Cool Descends*, 2025), a score plucks stars from the sky (*Picking the Stars*, 2025), and spoken words chime like bells (*The Speaking Bell*, 2025). Synaesthesia is more than a playful sensory crossover; it rejects the fragmentation of the world into isolated senses, disciplines, or mediums, and defies the linguistic structures that seek to predetermine the boundaries of meaning. Here, synaesthesia is a call to reclaim the whole human being. This raises a profound concern in Guo’s work: When perception transcends singular, fixed channels, our systems of categorising knowledge begin to loosen. In the resulting gaps—where things slip out of place—art creates that which resists classification and defies certainty.

In Guo Tiantian’s hands, lacquer is both ancient and new. It is not bound to any specific era; rather, it establishes its own tempo with each layer that is applied and each stroke that is wiped away. To touch these surfaces is to encounter the latent: the unspoken histories and futures still taking shape.

Time here is not linear but recursive, folding back and forth between the material and the maker, the hand and the mind. Simultaneously, lacquer is both tangible and intangible. Translucence is born from opacity, veil upon veil. The artist stands at the confluence of near and far, revealed and concealed, exploring things that exert a gravitational pull precisely because they are unseen, much like the blue in *The Deep Blue is a Silent Chest* (2025), which causes the gaze to lose focus.