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Huidi Xiang Unveils the Subtle Dynamics of Labor at YveYANG

Drawing inspiration from Disney's *Cinderella*, the Chinese artist investigates the political and societal tension between creative intuition and machine production embedded in familiar objects.

By Elisa Carollo • 01/29/25 2:15pm



An installation view of Huidi Xiang's "goes around in circles, til very, very, dizzy" at YveYANG. Yve YANG

Disney cartoons have a way of searing themselves into our collective childhoods, their bright, bouncy scenes shaping our value system and behaviors—often without us even realizing it. But taking a second look with a grown-up's critical eye can reveal new layers of meaning, hidden messages, and social dynamics that might not have been so obvious the first time around. For her debut solo with YveYANG, rising Chinese artist Huidi Xiang staged a site-specific choreography of sculptural presences—what she calls “object language”—to probe the intersections of power, labor and care.

Her starting point is a near-saccharine scene from *Cinderella*, where Jaq, Gus and a chorus of fluttering bluebirds swoop in to fashion a gown for the heartbroken heroine after her wicked stepmother rips her mother's old dress to shreds to keep her from attending the Prince's ball. The moment, set to the buoyant optimism of *A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes*, is meant to reinforce the fairytale's central message—even in the direst of circumstances, hope and kindness can prevail. But here, Xiang examines the more subtle message, unveiling a subtle allegory of marginalized labor hidden in the original story's glossy, magical facade.

At the exhibition's opening, Xiang told Observer she began the project knowing it would be installed in a gallery's back room in a space that once housed a sewing machine factory. "I wanted my work to resonate with the history of the space," she said. "I was working on a body of work around the labor of cleaning, with my research expanding into care and domestic labor. This led me to realize that the exhibition would be the perfect site to explore another form of domestic care labor—the labor of sewing—which has also significantly shaped labor reform in the U.S." That's when she recalled one of her favorite scenes from childhood cartoons, and the memory set the concept in motion.

Most of Xiang's visual vocabulary draws heavily from American cartoons, particularly Disney's, where allegories and stereotypes abound—replicating many of the dynamics between humans and the material world, as well as the interpersonal interactions between those two. Growing up in 1990s Chengdu, she absorbed English and an entire set of Western cultural values through bootleg DVDs of Disney classics. "As a child, the golden age of American animation, including Disney cartoons, represented worlds far beyond my own. They spoke a language different from mine—not just in dialogue but in visual style, gestures, and everything else," she said. Her sculptures are deeply informed by the joyous playfulness and typification that characterize cartoons and popular culture, often looking more like toys and figurines originally designed for kids. "Now, practicing in the U.S., where these cartoons originated, I feel that part of my brain has been reactivated. It's as if a language system I learned long ago can finally be used but on my own terms," Xiang explained. "Revisiting these cartoons today, I approach them with a more critical lens. I see them as a set of vocabularies I once learned, but now I aim to use them to craft new stories that are challenging and disruptive."



Huidi Xiang, three sisters, 2024; 3D-printed aluminum alloy, epoxy clay, 15 x 32 x 17 ¾ in. Courtesy of the artist and YveYANG

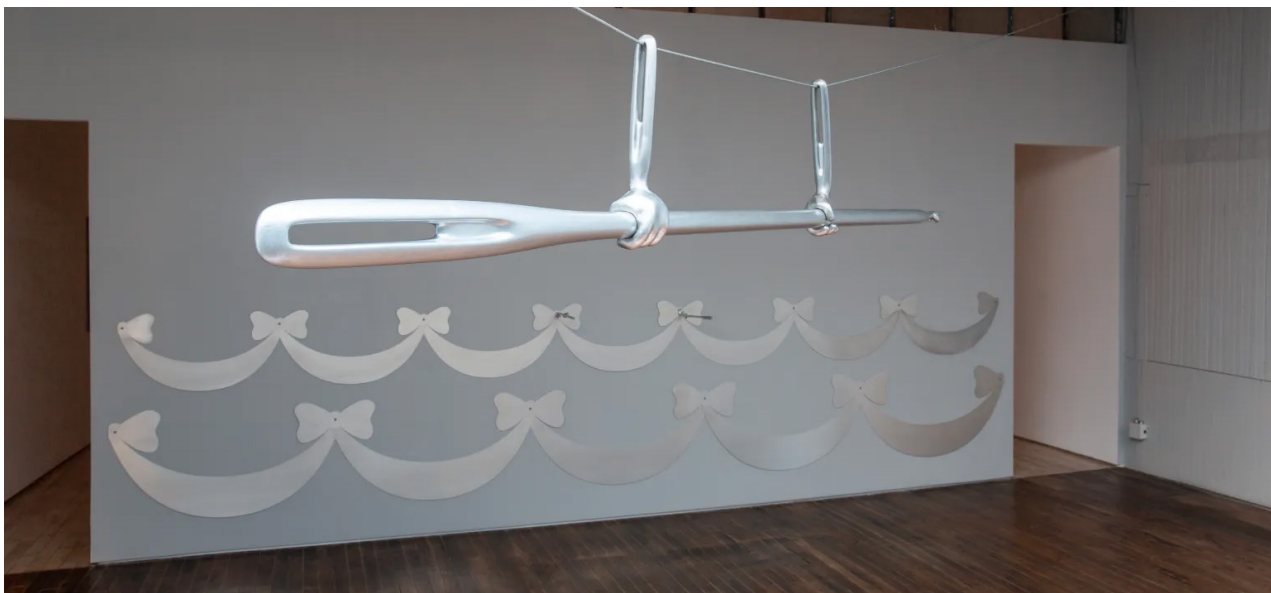
Xiang's sculptures may seem innocuous—familiar, playful, even entertaining—but they serve as catalysts for staging imaginary scenarios where power structures quietly unfold. “With my work, I intend to create narratives that exist afterward or beforehand,” she said. “My work refers to those familiar images but points to different times or spaces.”

Often resembling prototypes engineered for functionality—part of a societal machine designed for human efficiency—Xiang's sculptures probe and disrupt notions of labor and production at multiple levels. They explore the tense interdependent relationship between machines and humans, which she brings to life through objects that, while appearing functional, are deliberately not. Their presence invites speculation, while their materiality and fabrication process reveal deeper layers of meaning.

With a background in architecture, Xiang fully embraces the dance between creative intuition and mechanized production. She begins by digitally rendering her sculptures and then collaborates with outside specialists for fabrication—an intentional process of interaction and exchange. Growing up in China during the country's rise as the world's factory, she witnessed firsthand the illusion of economic progress built on relentless production, overproduction and the false promise that endless consumption equals prosperity.

“When I was young, my father, a polymer scientist, often took me on tours of the production lines he worked on, sparking my early curiosity about how things are designed and produced; reflecting on these experiences now, I realize they also deepened my understanding of how human labor intersects with machines,” Xiang said.

The works in this show, with their evocative titles, raise essential questions: Who designed these objects? Who physically produced them? And who benefits from their existence? Xiang deftly cuts through the depersonalization, instrumentalization and alienation that define contemporary overconsumption.



Xiang's installation in YveYANG's rear gallery, which is unfinished, evokes Tribeca's industrial soul. Courtesy of the artist and YveYANG

“As my practice has evolved, I now recognize that the tensions you mentioned in my work certainly stem from the surge in mass production, the embrace of technological development and their pervasive representation in mass media,” she considered. “Part of my practice, I think, is about exploring where I fit within these tensions.”

Xiang’s gift for world-building allows her to transform fantastical scenarios into a testing ground, where she probes the evolving relationships between humans, materiality and production. She raises urgent questions about where direct human creativity—the intimate connection between hand and brain—still fits in a world of people increasingly reliant on machine labor. And this isn’t just about making objects; it extends to the generation of ideas themselves—a reality playing out in the ongoing debate over A.I.

“As an artist working with digital modeling and fabrication, I constantly navigate the shifting boundaries between human agency and mechanization,” Xiang said when asked about how this fast-growing technology further complicates the human-machine dynamic. However, she remains convinced that creative input is still firmly in human hands. “The digital labor I engage with—and am curious about—is still centered around human input. It’s about the actions and labor of a person within a digital context rather than A.I. gradually taking over.”



In “goes around in circles, til very, very, dizzy,” Xiang works at an ambitious scale, creating a deconstructed, human-scale version of the dressmaking scene in Cinderella. Courtesy of the artist and YveYANG

Operating within this continuous creative interplay between the physical and digital realms, Xiang’s work explores a potential coexistence between the two—one that isn’t adversarial but symbiotic, where each medium enhances, informs and strengthens the other: “I’m attempting to make sense of our moment, caught between these two

realms.” The distinctiveness of Xiang’s practice lies in her ability to engage with both simultaneously, treating digital fabrication and hand-making as a dialectical process rather than separate modes of production. As she sculpts in the physical world, she continuously updates the digital model, creating a fluid exchange between data and materials, digital input and manual touch, the personal and the disembodied—an approach that mirrors our increasingly hybrid relationship with reality. “This approach allows the digital and physical objects to evolve together without a strict before-and-after relationship, growing in tandem as the sculpting progresses,” she said.

Xiang isn’t interested in resolving this tension or offering solutions, but rather, she wants to continue probing, experiencing, and continuously challenging the endless nuances of this creative and existential paradox we navigate every day. “The language of sculpture and installation helps me to bring out nuances,” she said. “Recreating pop culture imagery and scenarios through sculptures, or perhaps we should say object language, allows familiarity to be experienced in different timeframes and modes of engagement.”

She deliberately plays with the unsettling sense of estrangement that arises when familiar objects are recontextualized, using this orchestrated fiction to trigger mnemonic links and challenge assumptions about the symbols embedded in our material world. By subtly tweaking recognizable forms, she urges a more critical examination of the anthropological, political, and economic forces at play in the production, circulation, and consumption of objects. What appears neutral or objective is anything but—every material presence is already coded with power dynamics, hidden histories and societal constructs. “As viewers move around the works in a specific site, they are given time and space to notice something is off, prompting reflection on the subtle twists and layers beneath the surface,” she says. “The formal familiarity becomes an invitation for the viewers into a new space, where an alternative narrative begins to unfold.”

Huidi Xiang’s “goes around in circles, til very, very dizzy” is at YveYANG through March 1.



Huidi Xiang, who made it, 2024; Wood, 3D-printed resin 5 5/8 x 5 5/8 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist and YveYANG