

Press Release

Han Mengyun  
*The Unending Rose*

ShanghART Shanghai  
5 November 2023-7 January 2024



"Greek and Chinese Painter Competition"  
folio from a manuscript of the *Masnavi-i Ma'navi* (*The Spiritual Couplets*)  
by Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273)  
Tabriz, Iran, 1530  
Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper  
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ShanghART is pleased to present the artist Han Mengyun's first solo exhibition with the gallery, *The Unending Rose*, which opens on November 5, 2023. Borrowing its title from the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges' eponymous poem, the exhibition will bring together the artist's most recent paintings, works on paper, as well as architectural and video installations.

In the poem, through the Sufi poet Attar of Nishapur who gazes at the rose, a symbol trapped in the finitude of human language, Borges discovers the literary infinity of the rose, which perennially accrues meaning via the course of migration and the collective act of retelling. Inspired by transcultural literary traditions and the subsequent semantic transformation, Han Mengyun shares with Borges such belief in the potential of infinity represented by the rose.

At the heart of the exhibition lies the *Mirror Pavilion*, an architectural installation inspired by an ancient tale of "The competition between Chinese and Rum artists" retold by poets such as Nizami Ganjavi in his *Khamasa* and Jalal al-Din Rumi in his *Masnavi*. The story goes that Alexander the Great, hearing that both the Romans and the Chinese were famous for their painting, wanted to see who in the world was the best. He then summoned a Roman and a Chinese painter to compete in the royal hall on two opposing walls. By the end of the competition, two identical paintings emerged. The Roman painting was splendid in its incredible realism and vividness while the Chinese painter did not paint but simply polished the wall into a mirror, through which the Roman's painting across the room and the world were reflected.

First shown in the inaugural Diriyah Biennale (2021), *The Pavilion of Three Mirrors* aims to render an abstract and poetic representation of this ancient story, which provides many insights into the different conceptions of visual representations between cultures. The work also sheds light on the premodern history of cultural exchange that goes unnoticed in our present time, while offering an alternative paradigm of image-making through the rediscovery of a shared legacy across cultures. In the second iteration *The Unending Rose*, the vaulted mirror installation not only represents the Chinese painter that polishes a mirror in the story but also a Borgesian mirror labyrinth, in which the path forks at every possibility of interpretation of the viewer.

Inspired by the visual configuration of book art – an early form of global media that forged trans-regional connections and shaped cross-cultural contacts – Han Mengyun's paintings merge the formal characteristics of Buddhist and Islamicate manuscripts with elements drawn from Chinese and Japanese woodblock-printed books. This amalgamation of diverse influences is set against the backdrop of the material basis of the Western painting tradition, resulting in a rich transcultural visual hybridity. The eponymous painting series embodies such hybridity and the woodblock-printed ornamental borders suggest that the paintings are at the same time books. On the page that is the canvas, the rose is conceived as a signifier that forges a semantic connection between symbolic construction and the signified. As a product of language, the rose is bound to be reconfigured, the objectifying gaze displaced.

Beyond traditional media such as painting and drawing, Han attempts to extend the word-image interplay peculiar to the book to contemporary media that provides a synesthetic experience. Her video installation, *Panchatantra*, explores disparate definitions of the mirror through five captivating videos, including *The Origin, Dream, Book*), *In Praise of the Moon* and *Le Désir*; which are projected onto a book stand designed by the artist, blurring the boundary between seeing and reading, language and (moving) image.

In the poet's endless incantation, the rose becomes infinite, like the repetition of prayer beads that render the shape of eternity. Following the footsteps of ancient poets, Han Mengyun returns to pre-modern pictorial, literary, philosophical and material manifestations of multicultural cross-pollinations, and by doing so, establishes the basis of a new paradigm of aesthetic pluralism that is necessary for imagining the coexistence of differences.

### Artist Biography

Han Mengyun (b. 1989, Wuhan) is a visual artist, comparatist, multilingual writer and a mother currently based in London. Her practice addresses the decolonisation of the phenomena of Eurasian transcultural hybridisations that occurred across vast landscapes of time and space from the dominative mediation of the Western conceptual gaze. Initially trained in the Western tradition of oil painting, she diverted from the singular viewpoint of art production towards the complexity of historical ties in the profoundly intercultural context of the continent's history and present. The broad focus of her research covers interdisciplinary manifestations of cultural dialogue and polyvocal aesthetic conversation — from religion, philosophy, and mythologies to trade, vernacular craftsmanship, and bookmaking. Recently, she has been working on Indian and Persian manuscript traditions and woodblock printing in China and Japan.

The subjects of intersectionality and the legacies of imperialism are another significant recurring trope in my practice. Weaving the personal and collective experiences of the female subaltern into an alternative space of solidarity, she engages with the struggle for visibility of the subaltern and for their equal access in shaping planetary cultural discourse. The ruptures caused by neoliberal globalisation, cultural hegemony, and geopolitical or religious conflicts are reflected through the multimedia character of her work, which ranges from painting, installation and architectural interventions to filmmaking and writing. As a transdisciplinary inquirer, she attempts to challenge the Aristotelian hierarchisation of knowledge categories and Eurocentric aesthetic criteria. In the emerging, post-Western domination era, her practice highlights the necessity to rethink the conceptual boundaries between what is known, to be learned and unknowable. By doing so she returns to and questions the potentiality of inter-faith, inter-racial and multi-lingual Pan-Asianism.

Han received BA in Studio Art from Bard College and has pursued the study of Sanskrit at various institutions such as Kyoto University before she completed her MFA at the University of Oxford with a research focus on Classical Indology and Indian aesthetic theories. Her recent solo exhibitions include "Night" (ISA Gallery, Shanghai, 2022); "The Glass Bead Game" (ShanghART Gallery booth, Art Basel, 2022); "Splinters of Jade" (A Thousand Plateaus Art Space, Chengdu, China, 2019); "In Between Islands" (Today Art Museum, Beijing, 2013). Recent group exhibitions include "Bordercrossing: Possibilities and Interactions" (Yuz Museum, Shanghai, 2023); "Painting Unsettled" (UCCA Edge, Shanghai, 2023); "Chinese Contemporary Art from the Uli Sigg Collection" (SONGEUN, Seoul, Korea, 2023); "A Place for Concealment" (Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing, 2022); "The Dwelling Place of the Other in Me" (Power Station of Art, Shanghai, 2021); and the Diriyah Biennale (Saudi Arabia, 2021) etc.