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Barbara Edelstein

Christian Duvernois

Landscape/Gallery

Barbara Edelstein has spent the last few years living in Shanghai, where she teaches American and Chinese students and shares a studio with her husband, artist Jian-Jun Zhang. She has acclimated quite well and is now known as a Shanghai artist, if not a Chinese one. Coming from America to China, she reverses the familiar direction of movement in the international art world; we are used to Chinese artists attending school in the U.S. and often establishing careers in New York. Though Edelstein has made a successful go of building a career in a foreign country with a markedly different aesthetic, she is influenced to some extent by her contact with Chinese culture. For instance, a major public piece in Shanghai (2010)—a fountain of tangled steel tubes spouting water, along with a towering leaf—looks

Asian in its organic intricacies and is highly appreciated by park visitors.

Edelstein's recent exhibition "Leaf in the Air" featured three sculptures of the same name. All three take the form of large silicone leaves: a yellow ginkgo leaf, a reddish, maple-looking leaf, and a tall green leaf that, according to the artist, originated not so much in nature as in her imagination. They are supported by steel tubes that come out of metal boxes placed on pedestals of varying heights. The silicone, a rubber-like, tactile material, lends these pieces a material weight that caused them to stand out in a room hung with subtle drawings paired with photographs. The two-dimensional works reference a conjoined understanding of Western and Chinese cultures, while the sculptures feel almost Pop—playful, fun renderings of nature that are meant to be enjoyed simply as they are. Edelstein's leaves offer a resilient vision of nature, their forms and unusual colors asserting a vibrancy

that refuses to succumb to harsh predictions of ecological disaster, however true they may be.

The major issue in Edelstein's work can be described as a question of the extent to which we can see her leaves and images of trees as holistic and benign. The feeling of the sculptures is forceful and optimistic. Some might wish for a more realistic view of our current environmental state, but perhaps Edelstein's work presents the natural world as it has been and as we would like it to be again. Artists have always used landscape elements as metaphors for imagination and as beautiful objects in their own right. The care with which Edelstein renders her subject matter, whose details are found mostly in the real world, serves as a gesture of respect. But it is not only a matter of realism; the work is mediated by cultural legacies that enliven our perception and surprise us with their beneficial implications.

—Jonathan Goodman

JIAN JUN ZHANG, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CHRISTIAN DUVERNOIS GALLERY

