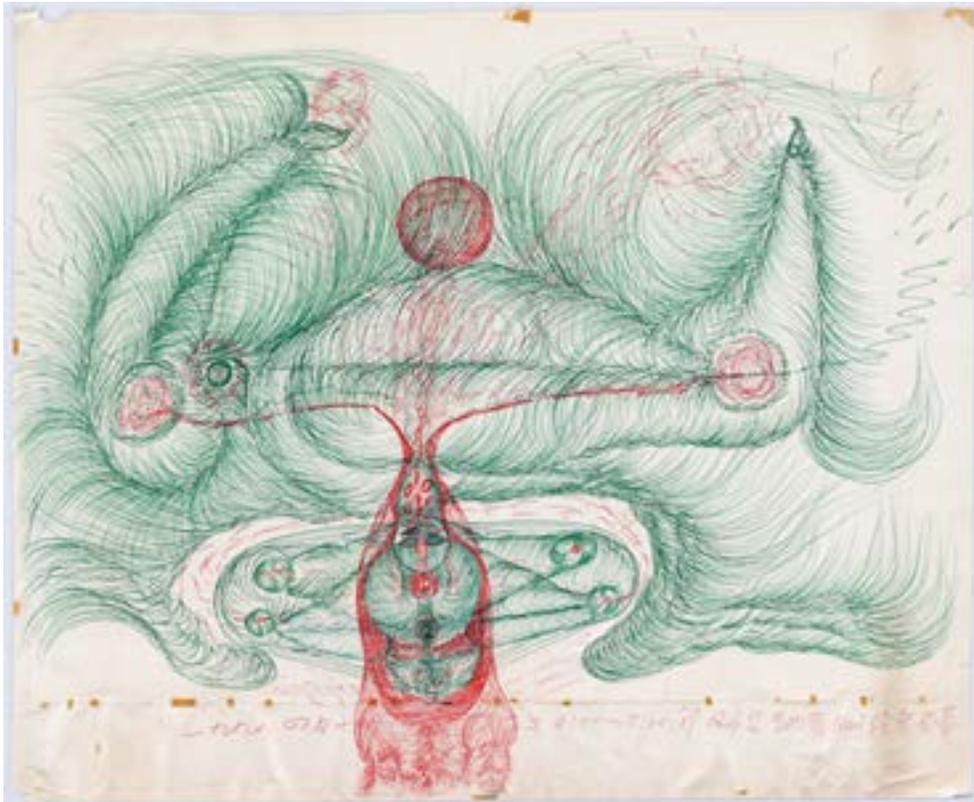


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Barbara Pollack, "Outsider Artist No More: Why We Should Pay Attention to Chinese Artist Guo Fengyi," *Cobosocial*, March 11, 2020



## Outsider Artist No More: Why We Should Pay Attention to Chinese Artist Guo Fengyi



Guo Fengyi, *The Grave of Lao Jun (Lao Zi)*, 1990, colored ink on glazed printing paper, 100.3 x 121.4 cm. Image courtesy of Amy Gold and Brett Gory.

The first major institutional show in New York of the late Chinese artist Guo Fengyi (1942–2010) reveals the historical roots of her totemic pictures. Barbara

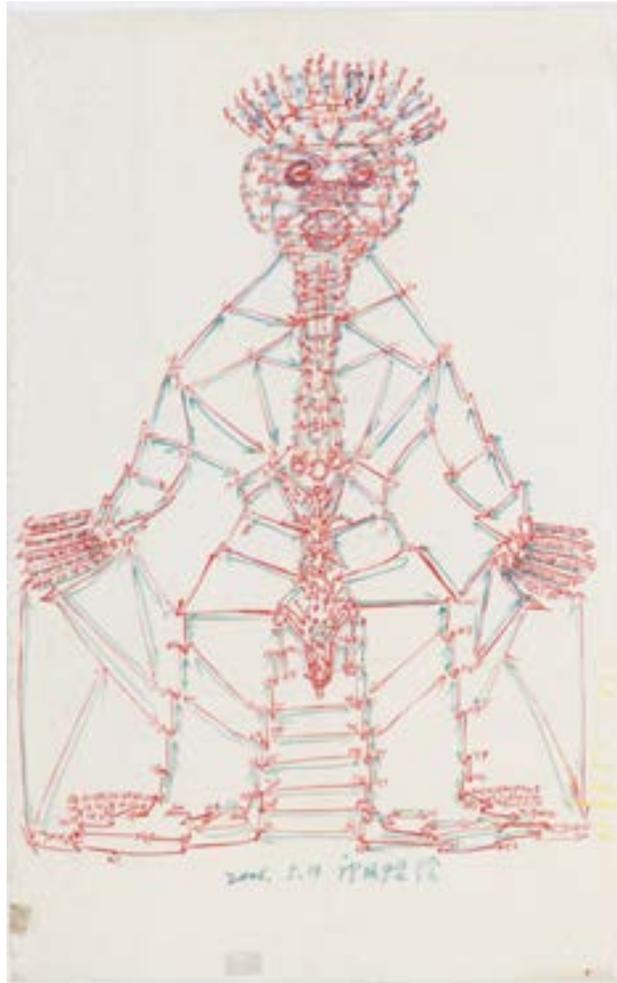
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Pollack looks at why the artist may be placed alongside Hilma af Klint, Mondrian and Kandinsky.

Chinese artist Guo Fengyi is a puzzlement. At the beginning of her career, she was labeled an “outsider artist” because she was self-taught, used cheap materials such as backs of calendars and ballpoint pens, and most importantly, created her drawings as a healing practice. But in the last five years of her life, she had solo shows worldwide at prestigious galleries and was posthumously featured in the Gwangju Biennale, the Venice Biennale and the Carnegie International. Now, this solo show, “To See From a Distance” at The Drawing Center in New York has thoroughly researched the techniques and the historical roots of her totemic pictures, proving that Guo had a sophisticated knowledge of Chinese iconography even though she had never gone to art school.

Retiring early from her position as chemical analyst at a fertilizer factory due to crippling arthritis, Guo began making art in her mid-forties to deal with the pain. She devoted herself to *qi gong*, a spiritual practice that combines movement, breath and meditation. She claimed that *qi gong* not only improved her health, but also brought out visions deeply embedded in the body and mind that led to the creation of over 500 drawings in her lifetime. In this way, Guo could be called a visionary, rooted in an ancient form of spirituality that was once considered in opposition to the supposed modernity of contemporary art.

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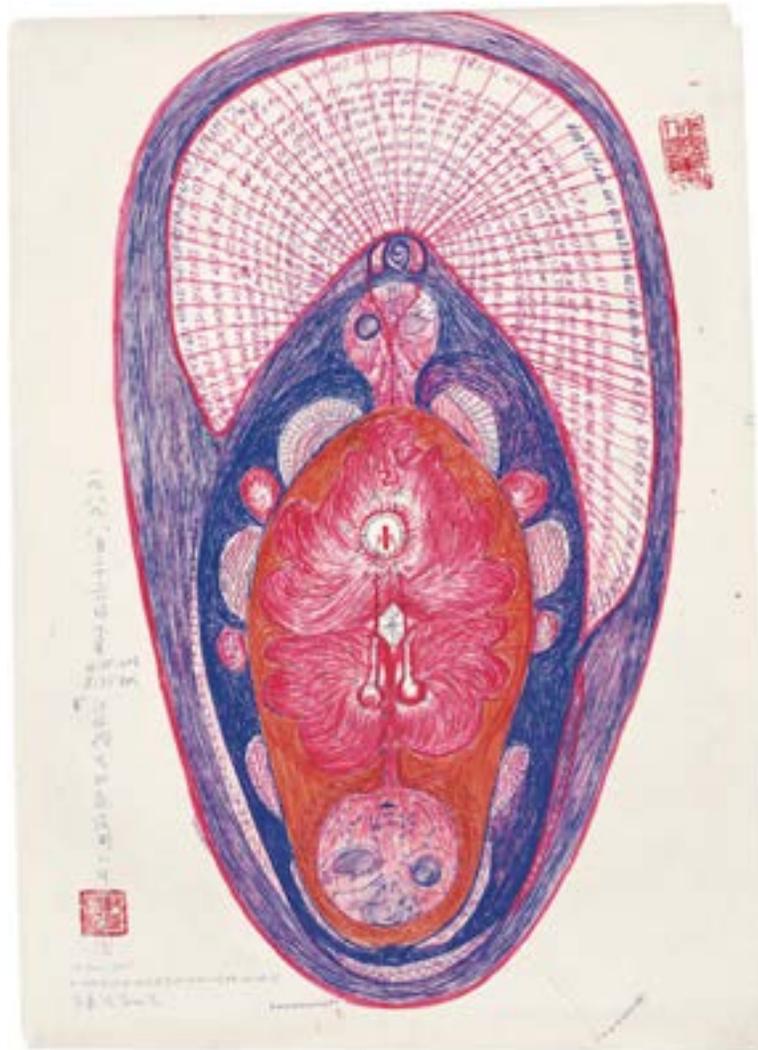


Guo Fengyi, Organization Diagram of Human Numeric, 2006, colored ink on blueprint paper, 139.7 x 87.6 cm. Image courtesy of Long March Space.

Guo's resulting drawings depict Buddhas and babies, fetuses and acupuncture charts, creatures and gods, self-portraits and Daoism. They are all drawn with swerving elongated ink strokes in a spectrum of color that reveals the multi-layers of each work. Guo started this exploration in May 1989—just weeks before the Tiananmen Square protests came to a violent end—with a vision of a yellow Buddha on a lotus leaf that she felt compelled to put down on paper. Subsequently, she seemed insulated from the great changes going on in China

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while her peers felt compelled to reinvent Chinese art. Instead of joining painters in Political Pop or Cynical Realism, two art movements of the 1990s, Guo made colourful scrolls of indeterminate meanings such as *Numeric Code* (1992), a vertical progression of heads emerging from heads in bright red ink with numerology incorporated in the schematics.



Guo Fengyi, *Fetus*, 1989, colored ink on calendar paper, 79.8 x 53.3 cm. Image courtesy of Long March Space.

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Guo Fengyi, Diagram of the Primordial Positioning of the 64 Hexagrams, 1990, colored ink on glazed printing paper, 38.9 x 54 cm. Image courtesy of Long March Space.

Recently, art critics have begun to object to the label “outsider artist,” proving that their oeuvre was not an accident of biography or insanity. Instead these critics ground the work in historic precedence demonstrating the artist’s formidable knowledge base and theories. Here, The Drawing Center director Laura Hoptman, curator Rosario Güiraldes and scholar Kathleen M. Ryor in their catalogue essays do an impressive job rooting Guo’s drawings in ancient texts, such as the *I Ching*’s use of hexagrams to explain humanity’s relationship to the cosmos. In this way, Guo can be placed alongside of Hilma af Klint, Mondrian and Kandinsky—all artists whose spirituality must be included to understand the influences on the work. As this show proves, over and over again, Guo Fengyi is a complicated figure whose biography and philosophy are only part of what is needed to appreciate her work.