

LiQin Tan: Uniting Nature and Technology to Uncover the Tao of Digital Life

譚力勤：融自然與科技，探討道式數碼生涯

One of the more fertile frontiers in recent art is the merger of modern computer technology and ancient philosophy as it occurs in the work of LiQin Tan, a professor of art at Rutgers University, New Jersey, who has garnered considerable critical acclaim for his "Digital-Natural Art."

Born in China, now residing in New Jersey, Tan has been exhibiting his work widely throughout the world since the 1970s, but his major breakthrough seems to have been his exhibition at Rutgers' Stedman Art Gallery in 2004. For this was the show in which he unveiled the first installment of his synthesis of Taoism and digital 3-D animation, an innovation that may yet prove as influential to future generations as the work of the pioneering video artist Nam June Paik. A second exhibition followed at Philadelphia's innovative Union 237 Gallery in December of 2004, and the third installment of Tan's ongoing project, *Burl + 4*, can be seen in another prestigious Philadelphia venue at the Da Vinci Art Alliance.

Although Tan, who has taught computer animation and graphics for over a decade and employed state of the art technology for even longer as an art director, graphic designer, and animator, he places primary importance on the ancient underpinnings of his work, as indicated by his statement, "I believe that all modern technology can be changed or replaced; however, the primitive systems of signification retain their significance. As the ideologies and technologies of society change, today's state-of-the-art technology will be tomorrow's primitive skills."

Indeed, although much of Tan's recent work involves digital 3-D films and prints, as well as multimedia installations, he has a thorough grounding in traditional Asian brush and ink painting as well as Western figure painting. This background is especially evident in works such as "*BurlBody*," Tan's powerful assemblage dominated by four partial figures within a long, horizontal natural wood shadow box. These imposing torsos, created through a technique that Tan

invented for this show, in which three-dimensional computer-generated animation and modeled images are printed on natural wood surfaces and shapes, have a presence akin to the darkly evocative figure drawings of the late Rico Lebrun. The process of mixing natural surfaces and new technologies is carried even further in a work called "*BurlNuts*," in which four burls frontally arranged on a natural wood backing with four flat video screens mounted above them, showing other facets of the same objects, providing us with a fascinating interplay of actuality and imagery.

These works, inspired by the natural wood shapes of the burls that Tan selects for use, as well as by primitive sculpture, folk art, nature, and contemporary art, are the most recent development of Tan's work. However, the present show also includes what he calls "digital parchment prints" and "digital parchment projections." In the former, 3-D animation/modeling images are printed on a rawhide surface by a digital ink jet printer, while in the latter 3-D animation is projected on both sides of parchments simultaneously, the semi-transparent material providing a perfect surface for a variety of unique coloristic and animation effects, bringing the composition alive with light and movement.

In creating these works, LiQin Tan was obliged to overcome formidable technical challenges, particularly in the process of printing on different parchment qualities, thicknesses and hygroscopicity. While going forward technologically, he was also obliged to go back in time, approximating the arduous processes by which ancient peoples made vellum and parchment, starting with the skins of calves, deer, and

當今最前衛藝術之一是融合現代電腦科技和遠古哲理於一體，其表現形式亦於力勤的藝術創作。現為新澤西州羅格斯大學電腦動畫教授，力勤研製和開創了具有重要意義的“數碼自然藝術”系列作品。

中國出生，現居新澤西州的力勤，從70年代晚期至今他已參加了各種世界藝術展覽。但他的重要突破是2004年2月在羅格斯大學Stedman畫廊的個展，該展覽第一次展現他對數碼三維動畫和道教的探索。正如世界著名前衛影視藝術家 Nam June Paik一樣，力勤的創作明顯地將對下一代藝術家產生影響。緊隨後的是2004年12月在費城 Union 237畫廊的個展。在費城藝術聯盟畫廊展出的“樹結 + 4”（*Burl + 4*）系列是他“數碼自然藝術”的第三部份，此展覽成為費城具有聲望和影響的重要展覽之一。加拿大、上海、倫敦和土耳其的展覽則是此探索的延伸。

力勤在大學電腦藝術領域有十多年的歷史，他曾任藝術總監，美術執編和動畫師。他的藝術理念是把遠古哲理、原始材料和電腦科技作為發展的整體和根基，他認為“就數碼藝術與原始技術關聯而言，其表達方式可闡述為‘Digital ∞ and Primitive BurlBody+4）中清晰可見，作品為四個樹結人體和自然投影的木盒集成，其

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goats, which had to be washed and stripped of hair or wool, then stretched on a frame to be scraped free of further traces of flesh, and finally whitened with chalk and flattened with pumice. In Tan's case, too, the backs of the skins had to be sanded down for the digital printing and projection.

The laborious process seems more than justified by the resulting prints and projections with their luminous surfaces, which are mounted like ancient artifacts on strings stretched tautly between beautifully finished natural tree limbs, lending them a striking sculptural dimension. At the same time, LiQin Tan's more traditional skills as draftsman and painter also come into play as a prominent element of these works, seen in the piece titled "Horse and Sun," where equine figures stylized in a manner resembling cave paintings are limed in brilliant red and yellow hues, as well as in "Digital Queen," where the piece de resistance is a feminine figure in an elaborate, apparently tribal, costume which itself seems to incorporate the old and the new in terms of being at once ancient-looking and neo-figurative.

Perhaps the most sensational work in the exhibition is the installation piece called "Digital Dancing," in which the figure of a beautiful virtual woman, created by Tan on the computer is projected in three dimensions onto an animal skin stretched on an aluminum frame made to resemble a large tree limb. However, all of the pieces in the show function as a whole to unite the five fundamental elements of Chinese Taoist philosophy (metal, wind, earth, water, and fire), which serve as metaphors for the interrelationship of all things, with state of the art computer technology in a seamless synthesis, at once poetic and profound. Asserting that "Taoism is one of the most important philosophies of my personal life," LiQin Tan goes on to say, "As an artist, it is essential to overcome the reasoning that nature and technology oppose each other. Instead, technology undergoes an evolution that is tied into its relation with nature. Ultimately the evolution of technology may lead digital media to become one of an extension of our own natures; I call this the Tao behind digital life."

His point is well made.

2/3/2005

具三維立體感的人體樹結被數碼印制于自然木板的表層上，呈現的效果如同 Rico Lebrun 晚期深暗的人物素描。在“BurlNuts + 4”（樹核）中，更深沉地融合了自然表層肌理和數碼科技，四個自然樹結核三維圖像與四部液晶電視機相視相融。電視機展現水、金、火、木、土的三維動畫，釋透着一種迷人的、多層次的、現實的與虛幻的重疊。

看他的藝術我們除了被作品自然樹結肌理、結構熏陶外，同時也可深切地感受到力勤受原始雕塑、民間藝術和現代藝術的影響。他近作同時包括“數碼獸皮印制系列”和“數碼獸皮投影系列”。前者將三維立體動畫形象印制于獸皮上，後者為三維動畫影像從前後兩側同時投影於半透明的獸皮上，產生一種特殊的、多肌理的、透明的、濕潤的、變化的、黃金光般的效果，從而把光、動畫肌理恰到好處的互相柔和滲透。

為創制該系列新作，力勤面對沒有前人經驗，難於克服的科技難題，諸如數碼印制技術中怎樣根據獸皮、原木和岩石的表面質地調整水墨濕度和色度，怎樣把超巨幅尺寸成像（Rendering）於Soft-image三維軟件等。同時，力勤懷有濃厚興趣返回原始技術時代，象我們遠古祖先一樣採用沙磨、鹽腐、溫烤、綑扯等技術制造各種小牛、鹿、山羊書畫專用皮子。制造過程中，必須反復手工石磨皮子表面，以求達到相當平滑效果，便于數碼印刷機順利過紙和投影反射效應。顯而易見，除了克服印制質量的難題外，人工體能工序更呈現多層重要性。例如：雪鬆木組合、皮子綑扯、媒體裝置等。在“數碼太陽與馬”作品中，清楚可見力勤的傳統繪畫和手工藝功底在創作中起着一定的輔助功能。其動物造型為原始洞窟的壁畫和現代造型的綜合，并浸透於椴樹般的橙黃色基調中。“數碼女王”是另一重要作品，精心制造的原始部落皇後，呈現新與舊、原始與現代造型風格。

也許，更美妙和引人激勵的作品是“數碼舞蹈”。在此作品中，電腦創造的三維健美女人體和奔跑的國王被投影於半透明的獸皮中，其皮子綑扯于手工制造的鋁制樹枝上。總而言之，展覽中所有作品以一種整體形式融合和展現中國道教的陰陽和五行原理，隱喻天地之道，萬物之行。當此原理與電腦數碼科技完美結合之際，她將是深沉的、詩般的動人之作。力勤堅定而自信地認為“道教為我生命中最重要的一種生存哲理。作為一名藝術家，需在數碼生命中探索自然與科技的協調、和諧，協助科技本身尋找與自然的最佳關聯。最終科技的革命和發展將導致我們自然生命的延伸——‘數碼自然’。我稱其為道式數碼生涯”。

他的觀念闡述得強而有力。

二零零五年二月於紐約市