

Hu Xiaoyuan

The Mayfly has Untied the Lilac Knot 蝶蝶已解丁香结

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Bennet Street, SW1

Modern Art is pleased to present *The Mayfly has Untied the Lilac Knot*, the first solo show by Hu Xiaoyuan at Modern Art and outside of Asia, following her solo exhibition *Veering* at Tai Kwun, Hong Kong (2025). The installations, paintings and sculptures explore complex family dynamics through the transience of raw silk, and durability of wood and aerospace aluminium. Hu sources both organic and inorganic materials which are considered waste products, such as baby teeth, scrap pieces from urban demolitions and obsolete domestic objects. These overlooked, defunct materials each have their own lifespan and are revived through her sensitive arrangements. Hu contextualises this temporal collapse through the title of the show in bringing together two Ancient Chinese symbols: the Mayfly – a short-lived insect representing impermanence – and the Lilac Knot – a cold-weather resistant flower, native to the artist's hometown of Harbin, signifying endurance and the perplexity of human desire.

The titular sculpture in the central room is formed of homemade infant bicycle seats, agricultural tools, and rebar steel salvaged from residential areas in Harbin. Transparent bodily organs are stitched in xiao, a raw silk native to China, and suspended around the totem. Xiao is central to Hu's practice for its material contradiction. Its violent method of extraction produces a soft, delicate gauze. By steaming silk moth cocoons, the silkworms are killed before they can snap the protein fibres as they come out of the shells. The threads are softened in hot water, unreeled, and twisted into individual strands that are woven. The pure material is a vehicle to examine life and death, enabling her creative distortions of time. Its warp and weft pattern echoes the deep intertwinement between parent and child. The viewer is brought close to this relationship through the collection of teeth of the artist and her child in a crystal basin, placed on the wall like a votive offering. Sewn forms hang from robust found objects, like a child relies on an adult for survival. Suspended drapes of transparent silk compartmentalise the gallery. These create nooks for the viewer to contemplate their interiority within the sanctums, aided by darkened light effects. Haptic tensions between the opacity, temperature and strength of materials show the artist locating boundaries between the two generations.

Hu first began working with wood as a painterly ground after finding a stained bed board in a junk market in 2008. Transfixed by the rings of the stains (coined river ripple marks in Northern China); she was touched by how it held the traces of a wandering, turbulent, unstable existence. Instinctively wrapping it in gauze, she discovered the peripheral state in which the two materials created when bound together, as wood grain and stains interact with the artist's ink markings. Presented within the darkened areas of the gallery, these works depict landscapes and interiors bathed in light. Hu's aerospace-grade aluminium sculptures repurpose a material which has declined in use value. From captivating the human imagination during the Space Age, to its common use in contemporary industrial construction, she transforms the plates into a platform displaying objects of curiosity. Balancing on rods of steel at a low height, the installation creates an aerial view to inspect a collection of treasures laid out on the desk of an archaeological laboratory. Or at higher vantage points, borderlands of intersecting countries and planets orbiting a solar system. Displays such as this restore the aluminium with its visionary quality and potential for quantum entanglement. The shrunken wild berries and fossilised seeds placed on the polished metal are sourced from both China and the UK. Encased in xiao, their negative space shows the passage of time from when the fruits were ripe, whilst also nodding to the lost silkworms.

Hu Xiaoyuan (b. 1977, Harbin) graduated from the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, and currently lives and works in Beijing. Hu's works have been shown internationally including The 15th Shanghai Biennale (2025); *M+ Opening Exhibition* (Hong Kong, 2021); *The Great Acceleration: Taipei Biennial* (Taipei, 2014); *The Ungovernables: New Museum Triennial* (New York, 2012); and *Documenta 12* (Kassel, 2007). Her works have also been shown in numerous museums and institutions such as Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Tank Shanghai, Shanghai; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Mingsheng Art Museum, Beijing; Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing; K11 Art Museum, Shenyang, China; Orange County Museum of Art, Orange County; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa; Bildmuseet, Bildmuseet Umeå University, Sweden; Musée d'Art Moderne dela Ville de Paris, Paris; M+ Hong Kong, Hong Kong; Taikang Space, Beijing; M Woods Museum, Beijing; Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai; Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing; Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern; Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona; Power Station of Art, Shanghai; Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai; Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing and Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel. Her works have been collected by the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; M+ Museum, Hong Kong, and Power Station of Art, Shanghai to name a few. In 2019, she was nominated for the first Sigg Prize by M+ Museum, Hong Kong.

For more information, please contact Sam Talbot (sam@sam-talbot.com).

Central Gallery



The Mayfly has Untied the Lilac Knot II, 2025
 old crystal conch Shankha, old bone Xi bodkin, xiao (raw silk), ink, tibia fusus shell spine, Dentalium aprium shell, mother-of-pearl inlay, Chinese black carp stone (a keratinous growth from the throat of the black carp, developed for crushing hard shells of mollusks), yak teeth, thread, epoxy clay
 32 x 21 x 21 cm
 12 5/8 x 8 1/4 x 8 1/4 in



The Mayfly has Untied the Lilac Knot I, 2025
 discarded self-made child seat on bicycles sourced from various families in different eras, hand-forged farming tools for individual farmers, wooden rod, carrying poles made from scrap wood, scrap rebar, xiao (raw silk), iron wire, thread, PLA, iron, plastic
 362 x 119 x 102 cm
 142 1/2 x 46 7/8 x 40 1/8 in



Carpel IV, 2025
 marble, rosewood, xiao (raw silk), steel rod, iron wire, thread
 95 x 190 x 85 cm
 37 3/8 x 74 3/4 x 33 1/2 in



Wood / Time Branch VIII, 2025
 wood, ink, xiao (raw silk), paint, iron nail
 260 x 70 x 4.5 cm
 102 3/8 x 27 1/2 x 1 3/4 in

West Gallery



Spheres of Doubt IV, 2025
 aerospace aluminium, discarded rebar, wild butterfly tree seed, wild jujube, wild mushroom, wild pomegranate, wild tangerine, wild raspberry, wild rosehip, coprolite, fossilised pine cone, reef (coral stone), xiao (raw silk), ink, thread
 128 x 256 x 460 cm
 50 3/8 x 100 3/4 x 181 1/8 in



Forgotten Object I, 2026
 a paragraph of text (written by the artist to her child), gourd, ink, silk gauze, white lacquer, Chinese redbud leaf veins, iron wire, epoxy clay, thread
 78 x 40 x 46 cm
 30 3/4 x 15 3/4 x 18 1/8 in

East Gallery



Hidden Emanation I, 2026
 mixed media on wood
 17 x 25 x 3.8 cm
 6 3/4 x 9 7/8 x 1 1/2 in



Inside the Cone of Light I, 2025
 mixed media on wood
 14.6 x 15 x 3.8 cm
 5 3/4 x 5 7/8 x 1 1/2 in



Wood / Time Branch VII, 2025
 wood, ink, xiao (raw silk), lacquer, iron nails
 155 x 110 x 3.8 cm
 61 x 43 1/4 x 1 1/2 in



Scan QR code for further artwork information, including artist statements and translations.