

## An Artist Statement On *Water Piece*

Liu Xia's friend Liao Yiwu described her as 'changing from a bird into a tree'<sup>1</sup>. It is a metaphor for how her freedom-desiring heart was ruined by the burden from the imprisonment of her husband Liu Xiaobo and her political detention. In her poem *A Soul Made of Paper*, Liu Xia said:

They are turning into animals.  
Ha ha! The human soul  
is made of paper.<sup>2</sup>

Could this stanza show her vision of setting a soul free? If a soul is made of paper, might it fold itself into an animal and escape to freedom?

Liu Xiaobo's ash was scattered into the sea. Might water now embody his unyielding endurance in the struggle for justice and freedom under authoritarian rule? What form of water might water take if it embodies the being of Liu Xiaobo's spirit? What about tears shed by Liu Xia? Might water carry her emotions in tears and poems? Might this couple meet in the essence of water?

The Platonic water molecule is an icosahedron composed of 20 equilateral triangles<sup>3</sup>. Might this represent a rigid formation of an ideal? Could a rearrangement of the formation open up space for embracing diversity and freedom? Would the idea of free soul, an animal form, and water as a meeting place coexist in paper as a material for soul, as in Liu Xia's poem?

Each *Water Piece* contains 20 equilateral triangles arranged to resemble an animal form. Each triangle is folded from a rectangular sheet of Chinese Xuan paper in such a way that an equilateral triangle and an isosceles triangle share the same crease as one of their sides. Might it reflect an aspect of nature of personal and social dilemmas that both sides of argument could rely on the same principle?

The Chinese ideographs in *A Soul Made of Paper* are transformed into lines and dots so that her emotional energy in her words could echo with waves stirred by the passing winds. Powder of black pigment representing Liu Xiaobo's ash is scattered onto the same type of paper. I hold each folded paper sheet with my hands underneath it to show a gestural respect, place the paper close to the powder, gently rub the paper against the pigment like gentle ebb and flow of water. I imagine a sea water molecule travelling with a molecule of his ash like a friendly companion. After the pigment stained water triangles are arranged like an animal, I copy the transformed line-texts onto their bodies.

Though this series simply illustrates a literary idea based on the material mentioned in the poem—paper, the actual working process allows me to discover another aspect of drawing — the transformation of the body, the paper sheet itself, before I execute the movement of the pen. There is also the movement of the folded paper sheet which makes mark. It is the unity of marks made from both movements which suggests the reunion of the couple's spirits.

---

<sup>1</sup> Liu Xia, *Empty Chairs*, trans. Ming Di and Jennifer Stern (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), xi-xiv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. Jeffery Henderson, trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library 234 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 133.