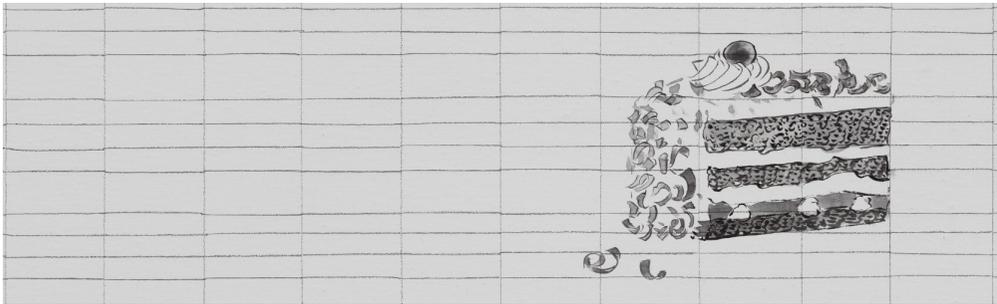


## Evelyn Taocheng Wang Doesn't Play by Tradition

By reprising the works of Agnes Martin, the artist rewrites the rules that govern authority and authenticity

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Main image: Evelyn Taocheng Wang, *Cakes and One of Twelfth of Agnes Martin Imitation* – October, 2025, acrylic, pencil, pencil fixative, paper on linens, 70 × 65 cm. Courtesy: Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Photograph: Andong Zheng

Much of the literature dedicated to Evelyn Taocheng Wang's work has either focused on her wordplay or framed her art as a looking glass, offering a view of the world 'from the estranged place of an outsider', as Christina Li wrote of her practice in 2017. But that misses the big picture. Wang's work examines shifting bodies of context: who defines it and moves through it with ease. Her work continually renegotiates the dynamics of power and her latest act of redistribution is to give the late, great Agnes Martin her due in Cologne – a city that hasn't formally celebrated her output since 1994 – with 'Friendship', her exhibition at Museum Ludwig as part of her 2025 Wolfgang Hahn Prize win.

'Museum Ludwig is famous for its collection of American art, but they don't have Martin,' Wang tells me two weeks before the opening. 'So I'd like to donate – I wouldn't say [a] fake, but an imitation.' It's an unsurprising



Portrait of Evelyn Taocheng Wang, 2024. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Sol Archer

statement from Wang: part sincerity, part ploy. This show continues her recent preoccupation with recreating Martin's geometric paintings from memory, after having only encountered them in catalogues or online. The centrepiece, *Cream Cake and Imitation of Agnes Martin* (2025), is a 2 × 2 metre replica of Martin's *Leaves* (1966), with its white acrylic surface marked by intersecting graphite lines. 'She says her work has no narrative. I don't agree with her,' Wang says of Martin, who often dismissed biographical readings of her art. 'I don't trust her sometimes.' It sounds as if Martin is a flatmate Wang stays up all night arguing with, teasing and, as in all long-term relationships, eventually undermining. Wang's main intervention is in the bottom right corner of *Cream Cake*, where a drawing of a tempting slice of peach melba gateau sits.

Twelve smaller paintings, each representing a section of *Cream Cake*, feature



Evelyn Taocheng Wang, *Cream Cake and Imitation of Agnes Martin*, 2025, acrylic, pencil, pencil fixative, paper on lines, 185 × 185 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Museum Ludwig, Cologne; photograph: Andong Zheng

traditional desserts from different German-speaking regions, rendered in the delicate bai miao technique of Chinese ink painting. This method does not emphasis colour, which it eschews, but the elegant simplicity of a line bending around empty space to express figuration. ‘If the painter wants to

paint a lake, he or she will paint the rocks, mountain or field and leave the lake empty,’ Wang explains. Finally, a fictitious conversation between friends plays out across the canvases in calligraphic script. In the series, Wang gently unpicks Martin’s claim to neutrality, creating narrative where she insisted there was none. At the 2024 Venice Biennale, Wang presented works from ‘Do Not Agree with Agnes Martin All the Time’ (2022–23), a series that appropriates Martin while subverting motifs from classical Chinese painting. A floral study in the corner of one canvas replaces the lotus flower with pink Dutch tulips (*Tulip in Whisky and Imitation of Agnes Martin*); in another, what appear to be the ubiquitous powder-white blossoms of China’s plum trees are actually the blooms of the Arabica coffee plant (*Blossom of Coffee Arabica and Imitation of Agnes Martin*); and where one might expect a gliding koi, Wang inserts the owl from a Meryl Streep-fronted romantic drama (*Pearl-spotted Owlet from Out of Africa (1985) and Imitation of Agnes Martin*, all 2023). She concedes that some of her works are ‘kind of like a souvenir from China’ – cultural and technical ideas reduced to internationally portable motifs. Yet these tacit acts reveal an artist wresting power from tradition.

Born in China, educated in Germany and now based in Rotterdam, Wang has mapped how language, custom and culture shape identity. Spanning painting, performance, calligraphy and fashion, her practice might appear to accommodate easy narratives around displacement and assimilation, but by pairing the meticulous brushwork of classical Chinese painting with the conceptual play of European postmodernism, she treats identity not as a fixed inheritance but something to be tried on and tailored for leverage. For instance, as part of her winning contribution to the 2016 Dorothea von Stetten Art Award exhibition at Kunstmuseum Bonn, the artist drew on her experience as a masseuse in Amsterdam to open a massage parlour in the gallery (*Massage Parlour*, 2016). By transposing a site of intimacy to a space of spectatorship, she tested what could still be considered performance, given that her parlour’s operations were commercially indistinguishable from any other: she rented the space from the museum and charged visitors for her service. A year later, at Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, she displayed a selection of dresses from her personal wardrobe to interrogate constructions of gender (*Four Season of Women Tragedy*). In it, she also exhibited



Evelyn Taocheng Wang, 'Do Not Agree with Agnes Martin All the Time', 2022–23, 'Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere', 2024, exhibition view. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia; photograph: Matteo de Mayda

*Photosynthesis* (2017), a set of 50 photographs showing the artist dressed elegantly in a variety of locations: sporting a smart blouse while at lunch; dangling a handbag before the Palace of Versailles; wearing a ruby red dress while seated in front of Cologne Cathedral. The casual polish of these images recalls an Instagram grid, encouraging onlookers to make assumptions about the subject from what is carefully arranged within the frame.

I might go so far as to say that everything in Wang's work relates to performance, if we understand it as the manipulation of the stage on which meaning cavorts. She tells me she first turned to performance art not out of conviction but necessity: fearing her paintings might not be deemed 'contemporary' enough to secure a Dutch artist visa, she aligned herself with institutional powers, namely the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and



Evelyn Taocheng Wang, 'Four Season of Women Tragedy', 2017, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam; photograph: Gert Jan van Rooij

quite literally performed to meet the system's definition of legitimacy by presenting *Kaguya: Two Sights of the Elegant Mysterious Unearthly Princess Kaguya & Her Beggarly Nurtured Aristocratic Life Before She Flies Away With a Shining Ship* (2015). Over time, her brushes with performance art have evolved into breathwork, vocalizations, non-sequitur spoken word and song.

I would contend that this era of Wang's multifaceted practice, which she quickly dismissed in our conversation as sharing the aesthetic value of 'a rehearsal for a school play', in fact embodies her attitude to her work: 'I see technique as a physical body. I can use really good-quality make-up or cheap make-up to make it look how I want. Today it can be a little bit trashy, the next day a high-class man, woman, whatever. I want to check how people will react to my "make-up", [or rather, my version] of a Song dynasty door.'

This playful experimentation mirrors how Wang approaches her many artistic influences and how treatment of context decides meaning. At Museum Ludwig, she wants visitors to feel as if ‘they are in a newly opened, minimalist cafe’; the show should also give viewers the impression that, rather than looking at paintings in a museum, they are ‘reading a book inside a library’. This overlapping imagery is meant to feel disorientating. Whoever manipulates the context wields the power. This sensibility also defines how Wang engages with the masters of traditional Chinese painting and Agnes Martin. She appropriates them not to idolize, but to dissect what makes them ‘great artists’ and to show how authority and meaning circulate through context. Her work suggests that what we call rules are simply stories that are fossilized by repetition. In her hands, the notion to determine what counts as authentic, contemporary or even Chinese is quickly dispelled.

Evelyn Taocheng Wang’s ‘Friendship’ runs until 18 January 2026 at Museum Ludwig, Cologne.



Evelyn Taocheng Wang at the opening of her exhibition 'Friendship', 2025, Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Courtesy: the artist and Museum Ludwig, Cologne; photograph: Frank Schöpgens