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Studio

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At the Source: Material Knowledge and Embodied Practice in Natural Lacquer Harvesting



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A small patch of transparent liquid slowly seeped from a cut in the bark. I reached out and dipped my finger in it, then put it to my mouth: the taste was fresh, carrying the scent of the plant, unlike any lacquer I had encountered before in the studio. This was 'bitter water' (kushui), the first liquid the tree releases before the lacquer sap begins to flow. Its sweet, clean taste suddenly made me realise that this was what it truly meant to be alive, carrying the dampness of the earth, the warmth of this particular season, and the faint sweat of my palm pressed against the trunk in that moment.

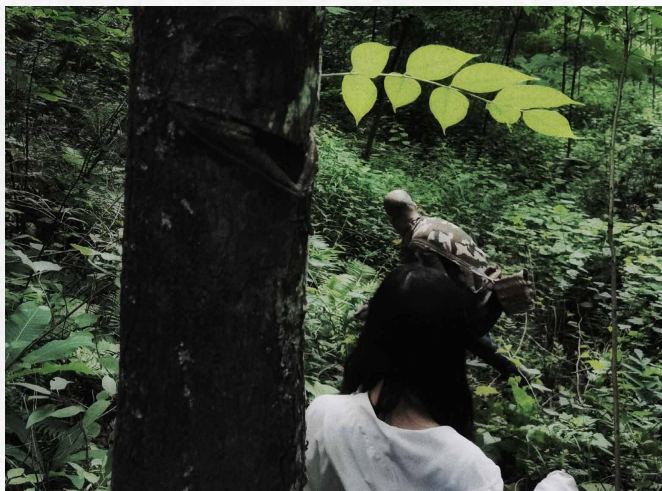
This experience took place at the very start of this year's lacquer season, when I travelled with French contemporary lacquer artist Vincent Cazeneuve to the lacquer tree groves in Chengkou, Chongqing, to observe and take part in the opening ritual (开山仪式) of the annual lacquer-tapping cycle: 'releasing the water' (放水).

This field visit is part of my ongoing research into natural lacquer, both as a material and as a cultural practice. The process of tapping lacquer has already been documented in a fair amount of literature, but the extensive preparatory work that precedes the tapping itself is rarely mentioned. This stage, known as 'releasing the water', includes preparing tools, clearing mountain paths, installing climbing spikes, stripping bark, and making the first incision that allows the sap to begin seeping out.



Leaf of a lacquer tree
(*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*).

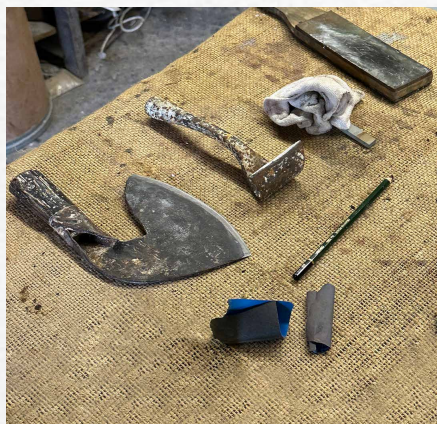
For artists who work with natural lacquer as their creative medium, encountering this material at its source brings an understanding entirely different from working with refined lacquer in the studio. This process reveals the physical labour, the natural environment, and the embodied experience that underlie the very existence of this material.



Miao Tan and Vincent Cazeneuve entering the lacquer forest.

Preparation: Before Heading into the Mountain

Before entering the forest, an astonishing number of specialised tools need to be prepared. A machete is used to clear away weeds and branches along the path: the mountain trail is not a well-maintained footpath but a narrow track reclaimed by vegetation, where snakes and thorny plants often lie hidden. Long iron nails are hammered into the trunk to serve as temporary footholds. A hammer drives them firmly into place, allowing the climber to ascend safely while pressing close against the trunk for support.



Tools used for harvesting natural lacquer sap.



Wrapping the calves with protective cloth to prevent snake bites.

A slightly curved scraper is used to strip the bark [1]. Unlike most cutting tools, it does not need to be extremely sharp; rather, it must retain a certain roughness in order to catch and lift the bark effectively.

The most emblematic tool of all is the lacquer knife itself [2], designed specifically

for tapping. Its shape allows it to sit firmly in the web of the hand [3], so that no extra grip is needed while climbing, leaving both hands free to hold the trunk. The blade is used to cut a small V-shaped incision, from which the sap will eventually flow.



[1]



[3]



[4]

[1] Curved bark scraper used to remove the outer bark before tapping.

[2] Traditional lacquer knife used for tapping lacquer trees.

[3] The lacquer knife fits securely in the web of the hand.

[4] Woven bamboo basket for carrying tapping tools.

Other equipment includes woven bamboo baskets for carrying tools [4], as well as plastic collectors shaped roughly like leaves, which can be folded and fixed to the trunk to gather the sap. Protective gear is equally important: long sleeves, long trousers and hiking boots are essential, while the calves must be tightly wrapped in several metres of cloth to guard against snake bites and stings.

[2]

Thick arm guards and cut-resistant gloves provide additional protection while climbing and handling sharp tools. As this was the first trip into the forest that year, the preparations were carried out with particular care. Before setting off, Vincent spent a great deal of time in the courtyard and studio checking and organising the tools. Drawing on more than twenty years' experience working with natural lacquer, he sharpened each blade in turn, using sandpaper, whetstones, a polishing wheel and leather strops.

Watching this process, I came to realise that lacquer tapping, in fact, begins long before one enters the forest. It begins with maintenance, with preparation, with an almost exacting familiarity with every single tool. Before long, we set off up the mountain.





Heading up the Mountain

The terrain in the mountains was far more rugged than any hiking trail I had walked before. Months without a single footstep meant the dense vegetation had already reclaimed the path, and every step forward was slow and laborious. Dian carried a bucket holding nearly fifteen kilograms of lacquer nails [5], I carried two machetes and a hammer, while Vincent, walking at the front, carried a bamboo basket full of tapping tools and used a machete to cut away the undergrowth blocking the way.

It was only once we had truly entered the forest that I began to understand just how much physical strength lacquer tapping demands: a great deal of labour takes place long before the first drop of sap is ever collected.



[5]

The first tree stood on a slope, and Vincent began to demonstrate for us. The metallic ringing of nails being driven into the trunk carried through the woods.

ding ding ding

Then came the coarse, grating sound of bark being scraped away.

kua kua kua

[5] Iron climbing spikes used to ascend lacquer trees.
Left: Scars left by previous seasons of lacquer harvesting.

Kua Kua Kua —

Between these sounds, Vincent occasionally murmured about the signs he could see beneath the bark, searching for indications of healthy lacquer-producing tissue. The forest itself seemed to answer in kind: the rustling of leaves, insects hidden among the shrubs, and small animals whose shapes kept vanishing into the undergrowth.

By the time we reached the second tree, the original climbing spikes were still in place, so we were able to climb the trunk directly. It was here that I began to understand that the preparatory stage might in fact be the most arduous part of the whole process. Before any sap can be collected, every tree must first be climbed, stripped of bark and carefully incised, and it is only through repeated visits afterwards that these incisions gradually deepen, allowing the sap to flow continuously.

Ding Ding Ding —



Removing the outer bark before making the first incision.



Hammering climbing spikes into the trunk to create temporary footholds.

Releasing the Water

The third tree stood right before us. The rhythm of hammering echoed through the woods, the leaves swaying gently overhead, and in the distance a bamboo rat vanished into the undergrowth. This was the moment of 'releasing the water' [放水].

Vincent stripped away a small patch of bark a little further from last year's cut. As the surface layer was scraped off, faint dark red traces appeared beneath, which, he told me, were precisely the mark of a healthy lacquer source. Once the bark had been cleared, a small V-shaped incision was cut into the trunk.

A small patch of transparent liquid slowly seeped out from the tree. Vincent explained that this was known as 'bitter water', the first liquid the tree releases before the true sap begins to flow.

Curious about this material in its most original state, I reached out, dipped my finger in a little, and tasted it. The flavour was unexpectedly fresh and fragrant, unlike anything I had encountered before. It was a rare sensory encounter with lacquer in its truest form, before it becomes a processed artistic medium.



The process of carving the V-shaped incision.

Climbing

It was precisely in this moment that lacquer ceased to be merely a material I used in the studio. It became something living, bound up with the landscape, the season, the climate and the body. This feeling confirmed a simple yet profound truth: the lacquer used in the studio has long since become a 'domesticated substance', repeatedly filtered, aged and blended until its viscosity, scent and reactivity have all been disciplined into something predictable and controllable. The drop that had just seeped out before me, by contrast, remained in its original form, prior to domestication, carrying a wildness that no processed material could ever reproduce.

This tree ultimately required around five nails and five incisions, extending gradually up the trunk. Vincent told me that many traditional lacquer farmers continue tapping much higher into the crown, often using wooden pegs, which they drive into the trunk with astonishing force and precision.

By the fourth tree, Vincent encouraged me to try it myself. Once he had prepared the trunk, he stepped aside and gestured for me to go ahead. With the nails to support me, the climb proved unexpectedly steady. Within moments I was standing among the layered, overlapping leaves, looking out over the forest from an entirely different angle.

The leaves above were densely interwoven, and the sunlight fell in scattered, broken patches across the trunk and my arms. I paused beside the incision he had just cut and could not resist dipping my finger into the 'bitter water' once more, tasting it a second time. The flavour was still that same crisp, sweet aftertaste, though it seemed even more vivid than the first time, as if my body had already remembered it and longed to confirm it again. There was almost something addictive about the feeling, and it made me understand that a material's pull on the body sometimes needs no complicated explanation.

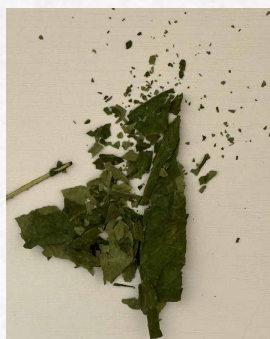


Looking down from that height, I felt not that I was taking something, but that I was engaged in a negotiation, together with the tree and the tool in my hand.

We did not venture very far into the mountains that day, but many lacquer farmers often walk for nearly two hours to reach more remote stands of trees, and a single tapping session frequently lasts more than five hours. Vincent told me that he often prefers to work between midnight and dawn, while many experienced lacquer farmers begin before sunrise and continue working through the morning.

Listening to these accounts, I gradually came to realise that behind every jar of lacquer lies an almost unimaginable amount of labour.

Vincent climbing the lacquer tree.



Freshly picked lacquer tree leaves became surprisingly brittle within hours.

Epilogue: Material as an Active Participant

This experience in the forest fundamentally changed my understanding of natural lacquer. In the studio, lacquer is usually encountered as an already refined substance, sealed within a container. In the mountains, however, lacquer revealed its true face: it is part of an ecological and cultural system far larger than 'material' alone, entangled with trees, weather, terrain, labour, tools, and knowledge accumulated across generations.

Taking part in the opening of this lacquer season deepened my understanding of the complexity of lacquer production, and further confirmed a position that has long underpinned my research: material is never a passive medium, but an active participant in artistic practice. This field visit allowed the idea of the 'pre-domesticated state' to be confirmed, for the first time, through the most direct sensory and bodily experience, and it continues to shape how I think about the agency of materials, the creative process itself, and the relationship between 'making' and the environment in which materials come into being.

Miao Tan

Miao Tan ARWS is a London-based mixed-media artist working across sculpture and painting.

Her practice is driven by exploring materials and perceiving their intrinsic qualities. She believes that close observation of material behaviours offers a new way of understanding the relationship between the body, time, and social structure.

Natural lacquer lies at the core of Miao's practice. She is drawn to its slow, layered, and irreversible transformation: a material that resists, responds, and deforms as it dries, yet becomes impenetrable once cured, allowing fluidity and permanence to coexist within the same substance. Its behaviour guides each stage of making, with every layer introducing new responses, constraints, and possibilities. This paradox has become central to her practice, offering a way to reflect on how bodies, gender, and identity are gradually formed, negotiated, and stabilised through lived and social experience.

Her work has been exhibited at Mall Galleries, OXO Gallery, Bankside Gallery and featured in Aesthetica and The Cold Magazine. She is an Associate Member of the Royal Watercolour Society (ARWS), elected in 2025, and a recipient of the RWS New Graduate Award 2023.

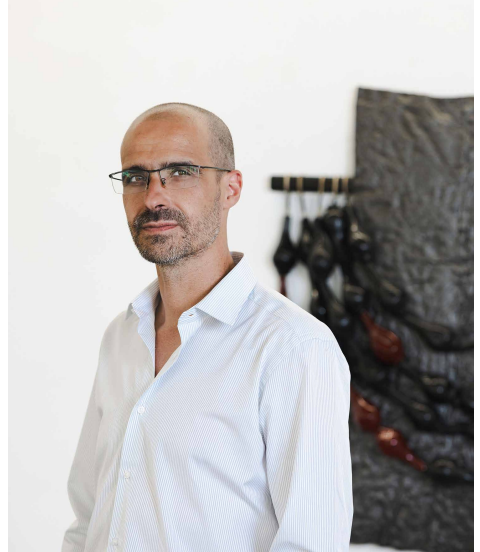


About Vincent Cazeneuve

Vincent Cazeneuve (b.1977) is a French artist who primarily works with Chinese lacquer.

After completing his studies in France, he established a studio specialising in the restoration of both Western and Asian lacquerware. Since 2009, he has lived in Chongqing, China, to uncover the secrets of lacquer and the traditional craftsmanship involved.

Cazeneuve's practice embodies a philosophy of continuous evolution, rooted in his ongoing research into lacquer culture, challenging and redefining concepts of tradition and innovation. He incorporates unconventional materials such as jute rice bags, wool felt, and leather, alongside traditional crafts like crocheting and bamboo weaving. He also integrates various art forms, including lithography, relief carving, and collage. His work embraces personal experiences and cultural memories in a language that is deceptively simple yet rich in complexity.



Research Background

This field research was carried out in Chengkou, Chongqing, at the very start of the annual lacquer harvesting season, and was conducted jointly by Miao Tan and the French contemporary lacquer artist Vincent Cazeneuve. The study focused on tapping techniques, the transmission of material knowledge, and the relationship between traditional lacquer production and contemporary artistic practice. Vincent Cazeneuve's more than twenty years of experience working with natural lacquer provided essential expertise and field support for this research.

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