

FINANCIAL TIMES

A Beautiful Disorder, Cass Sculpture Foundation, West Sussex, UK — review

A sedate country estate is the setting for Chinese art that addresses displacement and transience

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Wang Yuyang's 'Identity'

In 2009, the Chinese-American artist Jennifer Wen Ma took over a pottery kiln in Japan's Niigata prefecture. For her piece "You Can't Always See Where You Are Going, But Can You See Where You've Been?", she flooded the sloping chambers of the kiln with black ink, and then drenched the surrounding vegetation in the pigment. Since then Ma, who began her career as an oil painter but soon found the discipline of ink wash increasingly attractive, has repeatedly revisited a vision of the world as an ink painting, allowing the pigment to flow from the rice paper into the natural landscape itself.

Ink is used to fill reflective pools in Ma's latest installation, "Molar", which lies at the heart of the Cass Sculpture Foundation's *A Beautiful Disorder* exhibition.

From the ground up, an inky landscape takes shape: the pitch-black liquid coalesces in wells, whose surfaces acquire a strange, impure sheen as the ink's mineral-rich content floats to the surface. Even the air takes on the fragrance of the pigment.



Jennifer Wen Ma's 'Molar'

Ma places glowing glass orbs in the ink pools, and then marks the enclosure with glass panels bearing ink paintings of the surrounding West Sussex countryside. From the ceiling, a tree bursts through, its foliage coated black with ink, sprouting cancerous, crystalline fruit. These 400 hand-blown glass pieces contain teardrop-shaped, sperm-like structures, as well as voluptuous fertility symbols, while others have mutated into malignant cell-like forms. As in traditional Daoist thought, the internal workings of the human body here become a microcosm of the wider natural world.

For this exhibition, Cass has invited young artists from the Greater China region to create installation pieces across its extensive grounds, covering light woodland and open fields, as well as indoor gallery space. In doing so, it has recorded a search for what the French Jesuit painter Jean Denis Attiret, a missionary to China in the 18th century, called the "beautiful disorder" of Chinese landscape

aesthetics. His description was echoed by another western visitor to China at the time, the architect William Chambers, for whom the Chinese garden created “violent or opposing sensations”: a container for the pleasing, the terrible and the surprising.

A Beautiful Disorder makes extensive use of the principle of *jiejing*, or the “borrowed view”, in which the extended landscape is brought into view to create a provocative framing for each sculpture, from the micro-level in Zhang Ruyi’s “Pause”, where a stretch of woodland is studded with tiny electrical sockets, through to Cui Jie’s “Pigeon’s House”, in which the artist builds a tower out of architectural motifs from Beijing’s urban landscape, overlooking an English pastoral expanse.



Cui Jie’s “Pigeon’s House”

It also traces the ways in which Chinese sculpture and installation art often revolve around a sensation of boundaries becoming corrupted and twisted. For the artist Cheng Ran, for example, the sculpture park’s patches of woodland offer possibilities for probing the edges of psychological states. Born in Inner Mongolia in 1981, Cheng is better known for his trance-like video art, where he remixes Hollywood film and Korean soap operas. Yet he has always been fascinated by the natural world’s capacity for provoking hypnagogia — a state between dreaming and waking.

In his surreal 2009 video *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Cheng portrayed a midnight forest, which he then interrupted with explosions of colour using suspended mirrored spheres and disco balls. In his piece “Crossroads” here, Cheng has reversed the idea, after studying the pattern of sunlight and shade in

the woodland. He uses scaffolding to hoist up a light which perpetually bathes the trees in artificial, dappled sunlight, creating another kind of dream-space.

The development of contemporary art in mainland China can be distinguished from that of the west through what the University of Chicago art historian Wu Hung has called a “pattern of rupture”. He suggests that Chinese history has been subject to a series of violent political and ideological fractures, with the result that artists are in a state of constant reorientation.

The potential of past ideologies to become strange and alien is taken up in Wang Yuyang’s “Identity”. Wang has converted Karl Marx’s *Capital* into binary code, and then fed it into 3D rendering software which produced construction and material calculations for the artist. From that, Wang has produced a colossal fungus-like column of brass, steel and marble.

Song Ta’s performance-installation work “Why do they never take colour photos?” reflects even further on the mercurial qualities of China’s past. An enormous white bust of Chairman Mao (modelled after a famous sculpture that has become ubiquitous on the mainland) has been placed in a seemingly post-apocalyptic grove of trees coated in lime-wash grey, in which students from a local theatre school skulk and dance. The effect is of a profound rupture between past and present: gone are the images of workers and soldiers striding out from beneath the Chairman’s radiant gaze that used to adorn propaganda of the Maoist era.

Until the turn of the millennium, the kinds of installation pieces hosted at Cass would have been relegated to the periphery by mainland China’s state-art system, and would have had only brief showings at underground exhibitions. The art scene is now vastly different, and a surging generation of Chinese artists is seeking a globalised, cosmopolitan identity for itself, in contrast with the dominant national allegories of the past.

But Chinese installation art has always carried the traces of impermanence. In a combination of shifting ink wash, the contours of the natural setting, and blockbuster installation artworks, *A Beautiful Disorder* teaches us to see these markers of displacement and transience even within the sedate confines of an English country estate.

To November 6, sculpture.org.uk