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River Deep, Mountain High

In the face of China's urbanization and widespread environmental degradation, the enduring influence of the country's classical landscape tradition on its art

BY EN LIANG KHONG

A phantom mountainscape floats into view, flanked by monochrome peaks, grey skies and a strangely quiet waterfall. There is no one else, only sweeping black and white vistas and my own disembodied presence. But, when I lift off the virtual-reality headset, I am back in the studio of artist Yang Yongliang, nestled in the packed high-rises and dissonant traffic of Shanghai's Huangpu district. *Eternal Landscape* (2017–ongoing) is the latest attempt in Yang's long mission to bridge the gap between the 21st century and the landscapes of classical Chinese painting, using digital manipulation to refract a tradition that dates back more than a millennium.

How is *shanshui hua* – literally, the art of mountains and water, which reached maturity under the 10th-century Song dynasty – being interpreted in Chinese contemporary art? In essence, *shanshui* involves applying a brush

loaded with ink to rice paper (xuan) in order to trace a landscape. Yet, to study its technical gestures hardly does justice to its intense visuality, in which voids and multiple perspectives describe the natural world as physicality and philosophy. Whether depicting existing scenery or imagined landscape, shanshui works are never simply objects: the method is a vehicle through which to reflect on humans' relationship with the world. Historically a practice of the literati elite, shanshui offered a means for expressing moments of political dissent and escapism.



Yang Yongliang, *Eternal Landscape*, 2017, VR video still. Courtesy: the artist

But what happens – as has occurred in China at a feverish rate over the past 30 years – when the aesthetic and intellectual connection to the rural is undone and urbanization becomes the primary principle of cultural production? Yang profoundly experienced this disjuncture. Born in 1980, in the county of Jiading, he watched as it was gradually swallowed up by the Shanghai metropolis, its historical spaces and landscape destroyed to create new tourist and commercial spots. In a 2010 interview with researcher and curator Mikala Tai, the artist lamented: 'A country that carries a long civilization and is full of traces of history shall have been replaced by a new, soulless kingdom littered with concrete!' Yang's response has been to meet China's disenchantment with the modern world with re-enchantment: reshuffling the disordered fragments of urban China into cunning mimics of shanshui.

Yang takes thousands of digital photographs of cityscapes and then arranges them into an archive comprising factories, motorways and skyscrapers. In Photoshop, he pulls these images together into vast collages, emulating the structure, shading and brushwork of landscape painting. His 2010 work *Artificial Wonderland 1*, which is eight

metres in length, traces the contours of *Pavilions and Mansions by the River* by the 11th-century Northern Song painter Yan Wengui. Land, water and empty space melt into each other, mountain ranges wreathed in mist recede into the distance and miniscule signs of human activity – villages, boats – are visible in the foreground.

Yao Lu, *Passing Spring at the Ancient Docks*, 2006, chromogenic print, diameter: 80 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie du Monde, Hong Kong



But the closer we get to the image, the less it makes sense. The landscape has been stitched together using photographs of Shanghai: pine forests become voltage lines and cranes; villages are revealed to be construction sites; a giant Ferris wheel sits next to Ancient Greek ruins. It is, as art historian Meiqin Wang puts it, 'a space where old and new, Eastern and Western, fictional and real randomly co-exist without any inner logic'.¹ As fog turns to smog and mountains morph into sprawling highways, Yang's illusions critique the ways in which the landscape is now something to be manufactured, its inhabitants alienated from the reformulation of their environment. But the high levels of artifice in these blockbuster dystopias and the bricolage-like nature of actual Chinese construction mean that there is always an ambiguity between what is being ruined or renewed, what is being demolished or constructed.

A vital element in shanshui is the means by which height, depth and distance are intended to induce the sensation of travelling, whereby the material painting metamorphoses into a landscape of the mind. 'Unrolling paintings in solitude, I sit pondering the ends of the earth,' wrote Zong Bing in his seminal, early-fifth-century text *Preface on Landscape Painting*. Likewise, Yang explains: 'The reason why virtual reality excited me from the first moment is that it is a technical breakthrough and [...] an extension of the philosophy of shanshui itself.' The experience of

Eternal Landscape seems like the logical contemporary extension of shanshui's philosophy of mind-drift – both in the sensation of utter dislocation created by virtual reality and in the ways its field of vision draws attention to the strangeness of the idea of the environment itself.



Gu Wenda, *A Story of Qinglu Shanshui*, 2016, performance documentation at Shenzhen Convention and Exhibition Centre. Courtesy: the artist

From the utopian apparitions of Ma Yansong's 2015 architectural manifesto *Shanshui City* to the ruined landscapes of filmmaker Jia Zhangke, this is a moment in which *shanshui* is being remixed in all corners of Chinese contemporary cultural production.² As I travelled through mainland China this spring, *shanshui* was a constant presence: from Hu Liu's 'Dark Wave' exhibition at Shanghai's ShanghART, where her pencil-on-paper works retained the rhythms and rich timbres of ink-wash landscapes, to the joyful video performances of Zhuang Hui's 'Qilian Range' show at Beijing's Galleria Continua, where the artist stands in front of the mountainscapes of his childhood and flicks his brush or points a spray-paint can at them. Wandering through the capital's 798 art district, I caught Qiu Anxiong's *New Classic of Mountains and Seas III* at Boers-Li Gallery: the final part of an animated trilogy inspired by the wild mythology of the fourth-century text *Shan Hai Jing* (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*). Steampunk cityscapes crawling with cyborg CCTV cameras and bulldozers are spliced with flickering ink-wash mountains and water, all set to the slow intonations of a reverberating bell.



Zhuang Hui, *Qilian Range 04*, 2014, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Galleria Continua, Beijing, Havana, Les Moulins and San Gimignano

If *shanshui* has proved a rich resource for contemporary Chinese artists, its corollary is an anxiety that the genre has become a burden. For some, deftly packaging-up a work in the iconography of classical landscape painting is a cynical signifier for Orientalist fantasies abroad and ethno-nationalist dreamers at home. 'We need to create our own culture,' blogger and new media artist aaajiao asserted as he led me around his studio near the industrial docks of Shanghai's Fuxing Island. The Beijing-based painter Cui Jie concurred, telling me: 'We have no responsibility for tradition. We need to face the future.' Yang, on the other hand, attempts to balance out the militancy, claiming: 'It depends on sincerity and authenticity.' The relationships between contemporary *shanshui*, self-Orientalization and an identity politics of Chineseness are endlessly slippery.

For American photographer Michael Cherney, also known as Qiu Mai, who has been based in Beijing since the early 1990s, *shanshui* serves as a record of deep reverence for historical practice and, inadvertently, ecological crisis. For over a decade, Cherney has travelled across China to capture sites of significance to the landscape painting tradition on black and white 35mm film. Back in the studio, he enlarges the grain and removes slices of the slides until suggestions of geography, time, objectivity and perspective are degraded in a painterly fashion. The artist prints these images on untreated xuan paper and then mounts them as handscrolls. If photography eliminates the calligraphic line, then Cherney flips the process.



Jennifer Wen Ma, 'Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted', 2017, installation view at Sandra Gering Inc., New York. Courtesy: the artist and Sandra Gering Inc., New York; photograph: Daniel Terna

The artist never intended his curious blend of photojournalism and *shanshui* to become infused with melancholy or environmentalism but, ultimately, it was unavoidable. For his series '10,000 Li of the Yangtze River' (2010–13), Cherney set out to rediscover ancient sights along the river with the help of a Southern Song-dynasty hand-scroll map. The resulting photographs document how towns have become cities, mountains have been mined out of existence and the dredging of the riverbed for sand for cement has become a perpetual water feature.

The road taken by post-Mao China has been a story of dismal, sustained environmental degradation, accelerating under the neoliberal shift of the 1980s with its constant refrain of 'first development, then environment'. Apocalyptic images of ecological crisis – thousands of dead pigs floating down the Huangpu river; Beijing covered in a blanket of smog – have become stock representations of the tragedy of China's development. In turn, the ways in which cultural production has engaged with ecological consciousness have consistently drawn on the gestures of *shanshui*. In Yao Lu's *Passing Spring at the Ancient Docks* (2006–08), stepping closer to a *shanshui* landscape reveals mountains composed of green nylon netting and rubbish, while in Xu Bing's *Background Story: Ten Thousand Li of Mountains and Rivers* (2014), the artist re-creates a famous scene by Southern Song painter Zhao Fu using debris lit behind a frosted pane. Meanwhile, Gu Wenda's performance of *A Story of Qinglu Shanshui* in Shenzhen's Convention and Exhibition Centre last year was influenced by algae overstimulation caused by chemical fertilizers in Chinese lakes and rivers. The artist asked local schoolchildren to paint algae pigment onto

vast scrolls of rice paper while, in the centre, Gu created a calligraphic work, *Verdant Mountains, Emerald Waters* (2016), using the same paint, filling the air with its rotting stench.



Yang Yongliang, *Artificial Wonderland I - No. 1 (part 1)*, Giclée print, 1.5 × 2.8 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Paris

If eco-art has become a major theme in contemporary *shanshui*, artist Jennifer Wen Ma, who splits her time between Beijing and New York, sets out a vision that seeks to go beyond dystopias of environmental degradation and brash, corrupting urbanism. For her 2012 project *Hanging Garden in Ink*, at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, Ma suspended an inky landscape across the gallery space, hand-painting 1,500 live plants with 400 kilos of traditional Chinese ink. In her landscapes, time is foregrounded as a complex, precarious element: some of the plants submitted to the stress of the ink's violent inhibition of photosynthesis, while others continued to grow, splashes of green appearing between caked black pigment. Ma seeks to draw out the strong ecological dimensions inherent to *mo* (ink). For her 2016 installation *Molar*, at the CASS Sculpture Foundation in the British countryside, she created a reflecting pool of ink: the mineral content of the pigment floated to the surface, filling the air with its oily odour, suggestive of poisoned water resources. In its own carbon materiality, ink is also deeply symbolic of the death of organic matter.

In her current exhibition, 'Eight Views of Paradise Interrupted', at New York's Sandra Gering Inc., Ma has drawn on the classical trope of the 'Eight Views of Xiaoxiang', a region in southern China where, since the Southern Song dynasty, exiled officials and scholars would use the landscape as a source of lamentation and dissent in poetry and painting. Her three-dimensional *shanshui* comes to life in a flat paper book that is then pulled open into an accordion-like structure, creating a physical garden inspired by the mobility of scroll painting.

It is ironic to think that, as the US moves away from action on climate change under President Donald Trump (at the time of writing, Washington is dragging its heels over its promises to the 2016 Paris Agreement) China remains clear about its commitments. The world's greatest authoritarian one-party state – and its largest polluter – is cast as unlikely environmental defender. It was Ma's own feeling of helplessness, lost in the maelstrom of these geopolitical ruptures, which sent her mind wandering back to ancient descriptions of loss. In her quietly radical record of inner landscapes, the contemporary encounter with shanshui again becomes a point of resilience. Its capacity for ecstatic affect and the discipline of its inky gestures can help us look critically upon the world without sliding into nihilism, searching for the hidden sources of renewal within.

Main image: Qiu Anxiong, *New Classic of Mountains and Seas III*, 2013–17, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Boers-Li Gallery, Beijing

1 Meiqin Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, Routledge, New York, 2016, p. 122

2 Annabella Mei Massey, 'Urban Mind-Travel: The Shanshui Aesthetic in Contemporary China', paper delivered at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference, Toronto, 18 March 2017

EN LIANG KHONG

En Liang Khong is assistant digital editor at *frieze*. His writing on politics and art has been published in *Prospect*, *Financial Times*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The New Statesman*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The New Inquiry*.



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London
1 Montclare Street
London
E2 7EU, UK
+44 (0)203 372 6111

New York
247 Centre St
5th Floor

New York, NY 10013
+1 212 463 7488

Berlin
Zehdenicker Str. 28
D-10119 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 2362 6506

