



ARTASIAPACIFIC
OUT OF THE PAST: PROFILE OF YANG YONGLIANG

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Portrait of **YANG YONGLIANG**. Photograph taken by Michael Young for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

I first met Chinese contemporary artist Yang Yongliang on a freezing winter's day a couple of years ago, when I visited his Shanghai studio in a heritage building one block back from the Bund, just a stone's throw from the sluggish Huangpu River. He had only used the studio—his first—for a year; prior to this, he worked from a room at home. He was neatly dressed, with close-cropped hair, and peered out at the world through owlish spectacles. In keeping with his appearance, the studio was similarly tidy, with several computers spread across a large desk—a common sight now for an artist whose practice involves photography, video and moving image. In stark contrast to this high-tech set-up, calligraphy brushes, pens and ink blocks were fastidiously arranged on a smaller desk, and a calligraphy sampler done by Yang when he was 12 years old was mounted on the opposite wall.

Yang and I met again in May this year, in Sydney, where he was installing his first solo exhibition at Sullivan + Strumpf gallery. There were twelve recent works, all featuring his signature black-and-white landscape photographic collages, including small lightbox wall pieces, large-format digital prints, and an animated photographic landscape titled *Journey to the Dark* (2017), a three-channel video presenting a

modern take on traditional Song Dynasty Chinese landscape painting. What appears at first to be classical Chinese artistic tropes of mountains, trees and misty water proved to be actual photographs of apartment blocks, electricity pylons and city scenes. Step back from *Journey to the Dark* and one sees a utopian idyll; up close, however, the work takes on the aura of a sinister nightmare, where the lyricism of traditional Chinese landscape painting is subsumed beneath the poured concrete of the country's rampaging development.



YANG YONGLIANG, *Journey to the Dark* (still), 2017, three-channel 4k looped video. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney/Singapore.

Born in 1980 in Shanghai, Yang has gradually built a reputation for his densely layered and mainly black-and-white photographic collages constructed from thousands of his photographs, which appropriate and subvert classical Chinese landscape painting to explore the impacts of the rapid, uncontrolled urbanization and industrialization that has swept through the country over the past 30 years. This transformation is especially evident in wealthier, urban centers such as Shanghai, the artist's hometown: "I was born and raised in Shanghai, and the changes over the years have been dramatic," he noted critically.



For over a decade, Yang has been refining and experimenting with ever more complex collages, eventually utilizing video and clever trompe l'oeil editing to create surreal and temporally overlapping scenes that seem caught at the intersection of myth and reality. Since 2010, video has become a major component in his work, transforming what were static, eclectic pieces into evocative animations that allow him to add roaring waterfalls among sharp-edged tower-blocks and lugubriously moving traffic jams. As the artist explained, "I learned to use the newest techniques to work with one of the oldest art forms."

However, Yang's take on contemporaneity is steeped in the traditional Chinese values of Taoism, of living in harmony with nature—values propagated by *shan shui* artists which, he argues, have endured for thousands of years, but which are under extreme assault, as the tranquil motifs of classical landscape paintings disappear beneath the smog and construction of urban development.

For all the mystical allure exhibited in his fantastical, hybrid landscapes, Yang's cities are imbued with a sense of soullessness. The fragmentary locations consist of anonymous architectural edifices, backdrops for a populace that remains largely unseen, evoking a ghost town.

Indeed, it seems the artist has had enough of the smoggy Chinese cities that have informed his artistic practice. In August, he will uproot his life in Shanghai and make a permanent move to New York, taking his family with him.



YANG YONGLIANG, *The Rock* (still), 2016, film and lightbox installation, 29 × 24 × 18.5 cm (lightbox). Courtesy the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney/Singapore

Curious about whether this will lead to new directions in his art as well, I'm reminded of another work at his Sullivan + Strumpf show: a six-minute virtual reality (VR) film, *Eternal Landscape* (2017), that adheres to his typical technique of blending the style of classical Chinese painting with contemporary imagery—albeit sans photographs—and features passive animals such as a deer, tiger and tortoise wandering among a misty, ink-washed landscape. I asked if this shift in his practice means the landscape collages that established his reputation have run their course.

He was equivocal on the latter, but adamant that his future in New York was all about VR, something that has preoccupied him since he incorporated computer generated imagery (CGI) into his 50-minute film, *Fall into Oblivion* (2015), which follows the story of a man dressed as a traditional Japanese swordsman who lives in an unidentified Japanese city (Tokyo, the viewer can surmise). The man drifts between reality and his mental space; a flock of CGI ravens pour from his mask at the denouement, signifying his total disconnection from life. The film had limited exposure, proving to be too short for a feature film and too long for a short film, Yang said with a touch of melancholy, adding, "It has always been my dream to be a filmmaker."



CHEN RONG, *Nine Dragons* (detail), 1244, ink and color on paper, 1,496.5 × 46.8 cm. Courtesy Francis Gardner Curtis Fund and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston

Undeterred, Yang is already conceptualizing his first New York VR piece, which will be based on the Southern Song Dynasty ink artist Chen Rong's *Nine Dragons* (1244), a scroll painting in which dragons soar among clouds, mountains and fire. Constructing these elements digitally will undoubtedly be time-consuming and expensive. Yang is confident he'll make this work: "I will find a team to help me; not one based in New York, but in Shanghai. Nothing is painted—everything is virtual and created on the computer, [through] 3D modeling, animation and CGI." He will commute between the two cities.

"When I first came across this technology, I felt that [the effect] in Chinese landscape paintings, which encourage the viewer to leave their mind and walk with the ancients, can be the same in VR. You lie down and let your mind [enter] into the image, traveling in the mountains in your mind. VR can do this. The idea is very similar to Chen Rong's painting. I will try this. It allows you to live inside a Song Dynasty painting," he explained.

"My plan for New York is a big challenge for me. It is very exciting—totally different from China. Language. Everything is so different from Shanghai," he told me. It is as though he were always destined to grow beyond China, and to seek out new ways to walk the dreamscapes of his mind, as portrayed by the masters who came before him.